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Alexander and Napoleon: How Small Decisions in the Largest Battles Changed the Course of History

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ALEXANDER AND NAPOLEON:
HOW SMALL DECISIONS IN
THE LARGEST BATTLES
CHANGED THE COURSE
OF HISTORY

by

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ALEXANDER AND NAPOLEON:
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History is often directed by small decisions made in the heat of battle. Alexander the Great and Napoleon Bonaparte grew up in two different worlds. Alexander was the son of royalty, while Napoleon was an outcast. Yet, both were able to lead his empire to unparalleled growth by advanced military tactics. Despite all of the success each had in his military career, small decisions in one battle cemented each legacy. Alexander defeated a foe many times his size at Gaugamela with quick thinking and great tactics. Napoleon's final battle was his undoing; poor decisions when the battle was on the line tainted his legacy forever.

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Chapter I: Introduction, what if things had turned out differently?

What if...

The Persian king, Darius, looked over his army of nearly half a million of the world's best fighters and silently praised himself for constructing such an invincible force. Just a few years prior, Alexander of Macedon had lured Darius' army into a bottleneck, negating his numerical advantage; Alexander's fortunes would not be the same today. Darius handpicked the location of this battle to his benefit--a large, clear plain just outside of the city of Gaugamela. Alexander could not use his tricks here. He would have to face the full fury of the Persian force.

The Persians quickly surrounded the Macedonian front, which prevented Alexander from moving his cavalry to flank the Persians. After the Macedonians were surrounded, a fierce hand-to-hand battle for survival ensued. Alexander searched desperately for a weak point in the line, but such an opening never materialized. Darius drove his army tighter around the Macedonians, like a python strangling its prey.

Arrows began to rain down on the Macedonians. Several arrows scored direct hits on the fearless Alexander. He fell off his mount and slowly bled to death. News of the fallen Alexander spread through the Persian and Macedonian armies.

Alexander's generals tried to keep the men focused on defeating Darius, but their cries went unheard. The Macedonians panicked; the man who had convinced them he was invincible and immortal has fallen. They tried frantically to escape the ever-enclosing circle of Persians, but their efforts went for naught.

When Darius received news of Alexander's demise, he ordered the annihilation of the Macedonian force. His army gladly obliged. The Persians tightened their grip around the terrified Macedonians, leaving a carpet of dead and dying in their wake. Just a few hours after the battle began; Darius and his army devastated the Macedonian front, while receiving few casualties of their own.

Darius neutralized the last obstacle that stood between him and conquering the West. He immediately mobilized his forces to recapture the territory lost previously to Alexander. The sheer size of Darius' force, coupled with the confidence that came with defeating the once mighty Alexander, made the Persians an unstoppable force. In under a year, Darius recaptured all of the territory Alexander gained, and moved onto Macedon.

By the end of his reign, Darius's Persian Empire spanned from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean. Persian forces destroyed dozens of Greek libraries, which wiped out centuries of Greek knowledge, erasing any hint of Western culture.

Persian culture replaced the void and became the new foundation for global societies.

Early in the morning, Napoleon Bonaparte woke and gazed over the battlefield near Waterloo, Belgium. He took the early time alone to work through the battle in his mind. It had been years since his last victory, and he could afford no mistakes today. He trusted General Grouchy to hold off the Prussians long enough to allow the rest of his army to defeat the Duke of Wellington. This battlefield would see his greatest victory.

To his left he saw La Hougomont, a stone farmhouse that, if held by the British, would be a speed bump in his progress across the plain. To his right stood La Haye Sainte, another farmhouse, this posed similar problems as Hougomont. In the early morning light, he roused his Young Guard and Cavalry and led a surprise attack at Hougomont. The British had a small garrison of troops stationed there. The fighting was spirited, but after just an hour of fighting, Napoleon's surprise attack led to the capture of Hougomont with limited casualties. To hold the position, Napoleon ordered 1,500 Young Guard and a half dozen artillery pieces to the farmhouse.

It was nearing 8:00 a.m. when Duke Wellington heard of the loss of Hougomont, and he sent 1,000 men to reinforce La Haye Sainte, a position he could ill-afford to lose.

At 9:00 a.m., the ground was still wet from an overnight rain, and Napoleon chose to begin artillery bombardment of the British line and La Haye Sainte. As the bombardment commenced, Napoleon ordered General Ney to take his cavalry and 5,000 infantry to the far left of the French lines.

After an hour of heavy artillery fire on the center of the British lines, Ney was ordered forward. Napoleon concentrated the French artillery on La Haye Sainte and ordered the artillery in Hougoumont to focus on the center of the British lines. This concentration of fire forced Wellington to prepare for a frontal assault by the French, and he moved men from his right to the middle of the British line.

As the allied forces began to move, Ney's force charged down the ridge into the weakened British right, and Wellington quickly turned the entire British force to defend from the French attack. When Napoleon saw the British turning, he ordered the bulk of his men across the field into the newly exposed center of the British line. Napoleon intended to divide the British army in half and conquer each half separately. As the French army charged across the open plain, a detachment of nearly 10,000 men attacked La Haye Sainte and easily overran the forces stationed there.

Napoleon led the charge down the backside of the ridge and split the British in half. Panic ensued as half of the British

army was sandwiched between Ney and Napoleon, while the other half fled desperately from the field. Napoleon left his infantry to finish off the trapped British force and ordered his cavalry to follow the retreating British army.

When the cavalry reached the British, Duke Wellington surrendered to Napoleon. Wellington sent a courier to Blucher to inform him the British surrendered, and Blucher followed suit. In the Treaty agreement, Napoleon was granted his throne in France along with the territory he lost when conquered. The Continental System was reinstated, and Great Britain was forced to participate with the rest of the French allies.

The new money flowing into the French treasury allowed Napoleon to create the greatest naval force ever assembled and take his fight across the Atlantic to the United States of America. The French forces easily defeated the infant nation. Napoleon continued his conquests around the world for more than a decade. By the time of his death, Napoleon's empire spanned the bulk of the Northern hemisphere, and France was solidified as the most powerful empire the world had ever known. The great empire lasted another century, before unrest from the farthest reaches of the empire led to its collapse near the mid 20th century.

These counterfactual narratives demonstrate the "what ifs" of history. In order to understand fully the importance of the

battles to be discussed, one must consider what *may* have occurred had the battles ended differently than the history books describe. The battles of Gaugamela and Waterloo are undoubtedly key battles in history. The outcome of each battle saw a previous world power destroyed and a new story begin with a new cast of characters. And a few small, but very important decisions on the part of the leaders were crucial in making each event and the events to follow possible.

The story of history is just that, a story. A winding narrative tells the story of humanity. Tales of kingdoms, conquests, battles, and men are grander than fiction. It is the grandness of history that is remembered. As the old adage proclaims, "history belongs to the victor," and the stories told by the voices of triumphant generals and crowned heads of state reverberate throughout the pages of history. The assassination of a leader or the results of a great battle are events that seem to alter history. Nevertheless, those large events are often the effects of several small decisions and choices. One split-second decision in the heat of battle can mean the difference between victory and defeat. It is the small items that have the greatest impact, and it is the small items that are often lost to history.

Alexander the Great and Napoleon Bonaparte are two leaders whose grand accomplishments speak for themselves. Both came to

power at a young age during a time of political upheaval in their respective countries. Each was able to expand his empire and influence to borders never reached before, and the magnificent careers of both men can be broken down into a handful of seemingly insignificant split-second decisions.

They are two of the most powerful individuals in western history. The results of their reign changed the course of history.

Alexander the Great held a spotless military record. Never did an enemy pose too great a threat to his military prowess to cause him pause. He was the son of the respected Philip II, who constructed the most advanced military of his time. Aristotle tutored him and his mother programmed him to believing he was the son of Zeus. He became king at age 20 and conquered the mighty Persian Empire before he turned 30. His life is one of grandeur, power, and prestige.

Napoleon was the son of a Corsican nobleman who used back channels to get Napoleon into French military school. Napoleon quickly showed an impressive military and mathematical mind. He re-wrote artillery tactics for the whole of the French military at age 16 and taught his tactics to the army. During the French Revolution, he became First Consul of France at age 30 and quickly moved to create a French Empire. For more than a decade, he was undefeated and feared worldwide. In 1812, he

allowed his pride to cloud his judgment and he met crushing defeat in Russia and Leipzig. His enemies exiled him, but he found his way back to France and served for 100 more days as the French emperor. During that 100 days, Napoleon met defeat for the last time.

Two men, two careers never equaled in Western history. These careers are known for the extraordinary accomplishments and major victories of the two men, and rightfully so. However, is it wise that we should only acknowledge the grand, or should we pause to consider the details that made each victory possible? It is in the details that we will discover the most telling information about these two emperors. Furthermore, it is the small, split-second decisions made in the heat of battle that shaped these careers. Gaugamela and Waterloo were the marquee battles for Alexander and Napoleon respectively. These battles were won and lost because of decisions made by the generals; those decisions were made not simply because of events on the battlefield, but because of events throughout the lives of those men that shaped their thinking.

Chapter II: Forming foundations for successful leadership

Alexander was born sometime around July 20, 354 B.C. His father was the conquering Macedonian king Philip II, a supposed descendant of Hercules. Alexander's mother was Olympias, a princess from the kingdom of Molossia. Throughout Alexander's childhood, he performed several astonishing acts. The taming of Bucephalus at age 12 is one of the more remarkable feats of his youth.¹

According to Plutarch, Philip was provided opportunity to purchase the stallion for thirteen talents. Philip requested a show of the horse and was disappointed when several handlers were unable to control the beast. After studying the mannerisms of the horse, Alexander wagered the cost of the horse that he would be able to tame it. Philip accepted his deal and Alexander went about taming the horse. He turned the horse to the sun, spoke gently to it and quickly mounted the horse. He brought the horse up to a gallop away from the astonished onlookers who feared Alexander would be unable to turn the horse back. Alexander soon turned the horse and hurried to the onlookers where cheers met him along with a weeping father who exclaimed that Macedon was too small a kingdom for Alexander.²

¹ Cartledge, Paul. *Alexander the Great: The Hunt for a New Past*. New York: The Overlook Press, 2004. 83

² Langhorne, John & William. *Plutarch's Lives of Romulus, Lycurgus, Solon, Pericles, Cato, Pompey, Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Demosthenes,*

Although Alexander spent much of his time with his mother, Philip found the best tutors to educate Alexander. The most heralded of these teachers was Aristotle, the best student from Plato's academy. Philip rebuilt Aristotle's hometown to convince the scholar to help his son.³

Philip was as concerned with refining Alexander's leadership abilities as he was with his education. During 340-39 B.C., Philip went on a military campaign and appointed the 16 year-old Alexander as regent of Macedon. Alexander took this opportunity to flex his muscles and set out to quash a revolt in Thrace. Alexander easily defeated the Thracians and built a new Greek-style capital in the polis, which he named Alexandroupolis.⁴

Early military successes in Alexander's life proved he was capable of higher command and greater challenges. Philip provided Alexander a greater opportunity to prove his skill when he appointed him overall commander of Macedon's elite Companion Cavalry at age 18. Alexander quickly proved his worth by leading the key charge against the Greeks at Chaeronea, a battle that strengthened the bond between Macedon and Greece. His father chose to honor Alexander by giving him the responsibility

Cicero, Mark Antony, Brutus and Others with his Comparisons. New York: John B. Alden, 1890. 312

³ Cartledge, *New Past*, 84.

⁴ Cartledge, *New Past*, 85.

of leading the guard carrying the ashes of the fallen Athenian soldiers back to Athens.⁵

After the battle of Chaeronea, Philip organized a league of leaders within his empire to mount a force against the Persian Empire. This attack on Persia would be in retaliation for the attack by Xerxes a century before. Philip again appointed Alexander to serve as regent while he was on campaign. Before Philip met with the rest of the attacking army, he married Cleopatra of Macedon (also known as Eurydice) and was assassinated at the wedding.⁶

Alexander proved to gain the most from the assassination of his father. He seized the opportunity to use the murder as pretext to destroy potential rivals to the throne as well as political opponents. Alexander also formed an alliance with the noble Antipater who, along with the army appointed Alexander as king of Macedon.⁷

While Alexander saw the death of his father as a chance for him to come to power, others in the Greek alliance saw it as an opportunity to rid them of Macedon's control. Beginning in 335 B.C. Alexander led an operation to end Greek uprisings beginning with Thrace. He defeated them at the high Triballi pass. From there he moved to expand his empire north while still ensuring

⁵ Cartledge, *New Past*, 85-6.

⁶ Cartledge, *New Past*, 86.

⁷ Cartledge, *New past*, 88-9.

his rear was safe from attack. He then defeated the Illyrians and, like Napoleon, demonstrated the importance morale played in warfare.⁸

Word began to spread that Alexander had been killed. Upon hearing this news, Thebes began a revolt. Alexander was infuriated when he heard of Thebes's dissension and moved to crush the city. In only twelve days, Alexander covered 300 miles (very fast by the standard of the day). His speed and his appearance at the head of the attacking force caught the Thebans totally by surprise and the city fell quickly. As a deterrent to any other city with illusions of dissent, Alexander ordered Thebes destroyed.⁹

Alexander was the recipient of a revolutionized military machine his father created. Vastly improved weapons and the combination of cavalry and infantry placed the Macedonian military apart from its contemporaries. Alexander's brashness and tactics with his war machine made him nearly invincible. After he crushed rebellions throughout his kingdom, Greek cities pledged their armies to Alexander. He decided to carry on his father's plan to attack Persia. In 334 B.C., twenty-year-old Alexander crossed the Hellespont and began one of the most impressive military campaigns in Western history.

⁸ Cartledge, *New Past*, 89.

⁹ Cartledge, *New Past*, 89-90.

Unlike Alexander, Napoleon Bonaparte was a man from humble beginnings who used his intelligence and fighting spirit to claw his way to the top of the world.

Napoleon Bonaparte was born to Charles Buonaparte and Latizia Ramolio on the island of Corsica on August 15, 1769. Corsica is an island that has historically been Italian. However, in 1769, the French military captured and executed Paoli, who was portrayed as the would-be savior of Corsica, and would become a hero for young Napoleon. In fact, after Paoli's death Napoleon's father was one of the nobles responsible for allowing the French to add Corsica as a territory. Napoleon never forgave his father.

Napoleon was one of 14 children Latizia gave birth to and one of eight who survived past infancy. At a young age, he decided on a career in the military and began working diligently toward that goal. The first step in that process came when he entered the French Royal Military School in Brienne in May 1779, at the age of nine. Napoleon quickly demonstrated an impressive mind for mathematics and built an extraordinary reading list, which included Rousseau, Homer, Plato, Voltaire, Locke and dozens of others. He took notes on everything he read because he believed reading without taking notes was simply daydreaming.

Not everything came as easily to him as mathematics and reading. He was often the subject of ridicule by his peers and

teachers. His schoolmates, who were all sons of noble Frenchmen, did not understand why the son of a Corsican could be enrolled in such an institution. He had few friends, but did not seem to care. In his memoirs, his secretary, Louis Antoine Fauvelet De Bourrienne, observed that Napoleon was not very amiable at the school. De Bourrienne believes it is because he felt animosity towards the French after they conquered his country.¹⁰ Therefore, he poured all of himself into his schoolwork. The quality of the work he did at Brienne continued for the rest of his life and kept him far above his friends, allies, and enemies.

When his time at Brienne ended, an inspector from the Paris Military Academy came to review the accomplishments of the students and recommend those he saw fit to move on to the military academy. Of Napoleon, the inspector wrote that he was excellent in math, passable in history and geography and would be an excellent sailor.¹¹ In October 1784, at the age of 15, Napoleon began his schooling at the Paris Military Academy. The program at Paris was designed for students to complete it in two years. Napoleon was able to further demonstrate his brilliance by finishing in one year. He was awarded the epaulettes of

¹⁰ Bourreinne, Louis Antione Fauvelet. *Memoirs of Napoleon Bonaparte*. 1, R.W. Phipps. New York: Charles Scribners' sons, 1895.6

¹¹ Bourreinne, *Memoirs* 10.

artillery lieutenant and was assigned to the La Fère regiment when he was 16 and began commanding men twice his age.

In 1788, Napoleon moved to the Garrison at Auxonne. It was here that he used his impressive knowledge to improve ways of employing artillery in battle. His work caught the attention of the camp marshal, Baron Jean-Pierre du Teil, and he became responsible for teaching his curriculum to the other officers in camp. Many of these officers were of a higher rank than Napoleon. He continued his rise through the military ranks and by 1791, he was promoted to lieutenant colonel of the Battalion of National Volunteers. The next year the army appointed him captain at the age of 22.

Prior to 1798, Bonaparte was a highly recognizable figure in the French army. The work he accomplished spoke for itself and he continued to make his rapid ascent through the military ranks. That summer Napoleon was given command of a force that was to annex Egypt and Sinai for France. Napoleon brought with him a great armada and played cat and mouse with the British in the Mediterranean Sea for most of the expedition. This mission would become one of the trademark victories of Napoleon's early career.

His naval force needed to capture Malta in order to keep communication between the general and France open. Napoleon knew the capture of Malta needed to be swift to avoid a long

siege with the fortified island, which would allow the Maltese to call on the British for help and indefinitely, if not permanently, delay Napoleon's mission to Egypt.

In order to avoid appearing as the conqueror Napoleon asked the port officers if his fleet could enter and resupply their fresh water, but the port officers denied him entry. Napoleon provided warning to the Grand Master of Malta, Ferdinand de Himpech, but still was denied access to the port. Napoleon then gave the signal to attack Malta.¹² Himpech stood by his resolve for the first 24 hours of conflict, but realized his defiance was futile and gave the island over to Napoleon and his army.

Immediately, Napoleon began drafting a new constitution for the island of Malta. It became a six-chapter document with the first line of the first chapter stating that all inhabitants on the island of Malta were French citizens. Malta had captured and enslaved 2000 Muslims; when Napoleon found out, he directly freed all of them. He also commanded all cavalymen either to join his force or to leave Malta; many joined with Napoleon. In June, after Napoleon finished with Malta, he set sail again for Egypt.

He arrived in Egypt at the end of June and earnestly began marching his men towards Cairo. On the morning of July 2, Napoleon's army began their first battle at the fortified city

¹² Schon, Alan. *Napoleon Bonaparte: A Life*. New York: HarperCollins, 1998. 104

of Alexandria (named for Alexander the Great). Even after their long night of marching, Napoleon's force was able capture the city by noon of that day. To gain the support of the people of Alexandria, he wrote an address declaring that the French did not come to make war on the Egyptians. Napoleon expressed respect to the Muslim god Allah and promised to rid the area of the Mamelouks in order to restore liberty, prosperity and happiness to the region. The French immediately started toward Cairo.

Murad Bey, the sultan of Egypt and head of the Mamelouks, raised a force of 4000 cavalry to head off Napoleon and keep the French from reaching Cairo. On July 13, the two forces met at the banks of the Nile River. Napoleon arranged his army in hollow blocks. Each of the four sides faced outwards, preventing the enemy from attacking a flank because there was not one. He then moved his artillery pieces inside the blocks so they were protected and would be able to fire unopposed at close range. Murad Bey sustained heavy casualties and was unable to break through Napoleon's ranks, so he sounded the retreat.

After the battle Napoleon regrouped and continued towards Cairo. Murad Bey also took the opportunity to regroup. He increased his cavalry force to 6000 horsemen, added 1500 infantrymen from the nearby fort of Embubeth and recruited

Ibrahim Bey's gunboats to attack from the Nile. On July 21, Napoleon's army met the reinforced military of Murad Bey near the plateau of Giza.

Napoleon's army quickly formed the hollow battalion squares, which proved to be effective a week prior. He then organized the battalion squares in a broad circle. Murad Bey was the first to strike. He focused his attack on two of Napoleon's squares and lost several hundred men. While Murad Bey was focusing the bulk of his force on the squares, Napoleon sent two battalions to capture the fort of Embubeth. The French troops quickly over-powered the Mamelouk force and captured the fort.

The remainder of Napoleon's forces turned the tide against Murad Bey and began pushing him and his cavalry to the Nile. Many of Murad Bey's soldiers jumped or were pushed into the river and were carried away by the current. The remainder of Murad Bey's force was able to escape certain death to Upper Egypt. Ibrahim's gunboats were not used in the battle and they fled to Sinai. The Mamelouks sustained 2000 deaths and, more importantly, lost their stronghold in Egypt.

On July 24, as a sign of victory, Napoleon took up residence in what was Murad Bey's palace. He was exalted as the great and magnanimous sultan by the Egyptian people. Word of his successes spread quickly to France where his reputation had

been growing for most of his life. This status would soon provide Napoleon the opportunity to rule over the people of France and would provide him the opportunity to accomplish his mission to provide liberty under one government for all of Europe.

Napoleon returned to a France in the midst of turmoil and revolution in 1799. Director Barras gave Napoleon command of the French army. The next day he stormed into the Council of the Ancients to accuse Directors Barras and Moulins of having put him the head of a party whose object was to oppose all men with liberal ideas. When pushed to explain further what he meant, what Napoleon was saying became incoherent. Throughout this confused speech, he addressed himself, his soldiers outside who could not hear him and once spoke of the thunderbolts of war. His secretary suggested he leave. He did, but he would be back soon.

The next day, Napoleon rode with a guard of grenadiers to the Council of 500. The Council had just received the resignation of Director Barras and was in an uproar. When Napoleon walked in, the commotion rose with shouts of "Down with the tyrant!—down with Cromwell!—Down with the Dictator"¹³. Napoleon's guard rushed in to save the general who feared for his life. The president of the Council (Napoleon's brother

¹³ Bourrienne, *Memoirs*, 276.

Lucien Bonaparte) tried to bring order back to the Council chamber.

Despite Lucien's attempts to ease the Council's commotion, they drowned out his voice with cries of "Outlaw Bonaparte! Outlaw him!" From the back of his horse, Lucien addressed the followers of Napoleon, urging them to join the cause and overthrow the tyranny in the Council of 500:

"Citizens! Soldiers!—The President of the Council of Five Hundred declares to you that the majority of that Council is at this moment held in terror by a few representatives of the people, who are armed with stilettoes and who surround the tribune, threatening their colleagues with death, and maintaining most atrocious discussions.

I declare to you that these madmen have outlawed themselves by their attempts upon the liberty of the council (sic)...I consign to you the charge of rescuing the majority representatives; so that, delivered from stilettoes by bayonets, they may deliberate on the fate of the Republic. General, and you, soldiers, and you, citizens, you will not acknowledge, as legislators of France, any but those who rally around me...Let force expel them [the "madmen" in the Council]. They are not representatives of the people but representatives of the poniard...

Viva la République!"¹⁴

After a moment of uncertainty among those gathered, Lucien drew his sword and exclaimed, "I swear that I will stab my own brother to the heart if he ever attempt anything against the liberty of Frenchmen."¹⁵ With that, all hesitation disappeared and the crowd rushed the hall and drove out all of the representatives. Later, Napoleon dictated to his secretary a letter to the French people in order to recruit more to his cause.¹⁶

Lucien set out to recruit as many of the 500 members of the Council of Ancients as he could to return to help frame a new government, which would take the place of the one just destroyed. He was only able to find 30 men, a skeleton of the original council, but they were to represent the whole Council. The new Council of 500 (read 30) quickly passed a decree. The first article exclaimed that the Directory was no longer and contained list of 61 names that were no longer representatives of the nation due to the illegal acts they constantly committed.¹⁷

The Council instituted a provisional commission which would consist of three members whose title would be Consuls. The

¹⁴ Bourrienne, *Memoirs*, 278.

¹⁵ Bourrienne, *Memoirs*, 279.

¹⁶ Bourrienne, *Memoirs*, 280.

¹⁷ Bourrienne, *Memoirs*, 282.

Council nominated three men to fill these roles: Siéyés, Roger Ducos, and Napoleon, who was appointed First Consul. Thus, General Bonaparte began his executive career at the age of 30.¹⁸

He rose through the ranks of the military at an astounding rate, was already one of the most successful generals of the era, and helped to ensure a successful coup, which helped him come to power in France. He was not satisfied with the heights he had attained so early in his life and would soon leap to a new plateau, which would put him among the most successful leaders in history.

Napoleon spent the majority of his life on a meteoric rise through the ranks of the military, which would eventually end after two crushing defeats. His meager beginnings as the son of a rebel Corsican did not provide evidence to his accomplishments. Yet he spent his childhood and adolescent years working hard in order to gain the tools to finish what his hero, Paoli, died trying to accomplish. He quickly made a name for himself and was given command of an artillery force by age 16 and continued to quickly progress through the military ranks.

¹⁸ Bourrienne, *Memiors* 284.

Chapter III: On the road to battle

After Alexander repressed unrest in his kingdom, he set out to spread his empire and Greek culture into Asia, and to defeat the empire who had twice tried to conquer Greece. He followed the path of Achilles across the Hellespont to Troy. Before reaching shore, Alexander threw a spear onto the beach and exclaimed "Asia will be conquered by the spear!" Throughout his journey in Asia, Alexander was concerned about the morale¹⁹ of his troops. He made military judgments based on the presumed effect it would have on the morale of his men. Two battles in particular helped to give his men the confidence they needed as they worked to defeat the most powerful empire of the time.

Alexander's first encounter with the Persian army came at the Granicus River. The Persian army, led by Memnon, positioned themselves at a point in the river where the current was swift and the banks were steep and muddy. Memnon positioned his cavalry on the banks of the river and his infantry of Greek mercenaries on a cliff behind them. The mercenaries' position was such that Alexander's army would be unable to turn it from either flank and it blocked the gates to Asia. The Persian army

¹⁹ Cartledge, *New Past*, 138

numbered close to 40,000 cavalry and infantry, which was more than twice the size of Alexander's.²⁰

Alexander's advisors told him it would be better to wait to attack the Persians until they found a better place to cross. Alexander declined remarking that the Hellespont would blush if they could not cross the Granicus. He began organizing his army for a full frontal assault before the sun set that evening. Alexander and his men were on the western bank of the river and had sun at their back; if they waited until morning, the sun would have been in their eyes. Alexander stretched his line to match the width of the Persian line. He and his Companion Cavalry were the far right of the line, the Thessalian cavalry made up the far left, and the rest of the army stretched in between.

Alexander sounded the charge across the river. A squadron of Companion Cavalry, led by Socrates, was the first across the river and began pushing back the Persian cavalry. Alexander, in his white plumes, moved farther up river so the archers would flank the Persian cavalry. The Macedonian infantry used their long sarissa to fight back the Persian cavalry from the bank as they were crossing.

²⁰ Hammond, N.G.L.. *The Genius of Alexander the Great*. (Chapel Hill N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 66.

As the infantry was advancing, Socrates' squadron was taking heavy casualties and the Persians were driving them back. Alexander saw this, and he and his royal squadron attacked the center of the line where Socrates was losing ground. The cavalry was in no formation during this fighting. Alexander looked up and saw a Persian troop forming a wedge and he rode out and dismounted the head of the wedge with a blow to the face. It was in this skirmish that Alexander received two wounds from Persian spears and would have met his death by a Persian sword had one of his men not cut the right arm off his assailant. The Persians were losing ground.

The archers on the right of the Macedonian line were rolling up the Persian left. Alexander and his cavalry forced their way through the Persian middle to the higher ground. When Alexander breached the center of the line, the Persian cavalry on both ends fled the field.²¹

Next, Alexander and his army surrounded the Greek mercenaries. His infantry made a frontal attack, while the cavalry and light infantry attacked the rear and the flanks. The Greeks offered surrender, but Alexander refused. The Macedonians charged into the Greek lines and Alexander, fighting with more passion than reason, had his horse killed under him by a sword. The Macedonians nearly destroyed the entire corps;

²¹ Hammond, *Genius*, 67

Alexander accepted the surrender of just 2000 men. In all Alexander lost less than 200 men, many of whom were part of the initial charge by Socrates. Estimates of Persian losses were well into the thousands.²²

In his first battle against the Persians Alexander led his men to route the enemy despite having smaller numbers and a river to cross. Alexander's men no doubt were encouraged by their success and likely marveled at Alexander's ability to continue fighting even after sustaining wounds. The morale of the Macedonians was very high after the success at Granicus, and continued to grow throughout the campaign. The men felt invincible.

Alexander's success was not limited to frontal assaults on the enemy. He was a student of war and used revolutionary tactics across all levels of warfare. He proved his knowledge of siege tactics at the battle of Tyre.

Alexander needed to capture Tyre so his rear would be safe from attack from Persian naval forces. Tyre was two cities, Old Tyre, which was on the coast, and New Tyre located on an island half a mile from the coast. New Tyre was a walled city with only two ports. The walls reached as high as 120 feet. Tyre also

²² Hammond, *Genius*, 68.

had large boulders positioned around the base of the island, making it all but unconquerable from land and sea.²³

Alexander would not allow such a strong enemy foothold to be behind him as he advanced into Asia. Tyre had to be defeated; Alexander undertook an engineering feat to reach the city. His men constructed a 200-foot wide mole that extended from the mainland to the island. This mole was strong enough to hold all of Alexander's men plus tall towers that catapulted rocks at the Persian military and at the walls of Tyre. In order to make the mole strong enough, the Macedonians had to drive pillars deep into the sea floor and support them with rocks taken from old Tyre. The Tyrians sent divers to try to destroy the mole, but Alexander had his archers kill them so his men could keep working.

Originally, Alexander had two towers built. The infantry moved the towers down the mole as they constructed it. The Tyrian navy combated this by lighting flammable materials that high winds carried across the water, which destroyed both towers and cracked part of the mole.²⁴

Alexander's leading engineers quickly made plans to make a larger mole capable of carrying more towers while Alexander went to Sidon to recruit a naval force. Before long, he had ships

²³ Savill, *Time*, 36.

²⁴ Savill, *Time*, 36.

coming to his aid from all around Asia Minor. This influx of naval power included a Persian fleet that joined the Macedonians after discovering Alexander conquered their homeland. Alexander found himself in charge of more than 220 battle ships.

Alexander returned to Tyre with a large navy and a group of Greek mercenaries he encountered on his way back from Sidon.²⁵

Alexander sent his fleet to different parts of the wall to find a weak spot to breach. The boulders around the base of the island made it impossible for the ships to get close enough to puncture the wall. The men had to forge chains that Tyrian divers would be unable to destroy. They wrapped the chains around the rocks so the ships could haul them away from the island permitting ships better access to the city walls.²⁶

When the mole was just a few yards from the wall the Tyrians would send down fishing nets to capture workers and would execute them in front of the Macedonians. These actions only fueled the hatred both sides had for one another.

Finally, the Macedonians were able to break a hole in the southern wall of Tyre. Alexander made several frontal attacks on the breach only to be pushed back by the concentrated Tyrian force. Alexander then decided to attack all sides of the city at the same time so his army could enter the city. He split his

²⁵ Weigall, Arthur. *Alexander the Great*. (New York & London: G.P. Putnam's sons, 1933.)181

²⁶ Weigall, *Alexander*, 182.

fleet into four groups, two attacked the harbors, the third would be looking to attack any weak spots along the wall, and the fourth would attack the breached wall.

Alexander was the first to charge through the wall and he and his army quickly burst through the crowd of Tyrian soldiers, slaughtering men as they headed for the royal palace. Soon after, the two fleets attacking the harbors broke through the enemy lines and headed toward the palace as well.²⁷ The man said to be invincible defeated the city considered impregnable.

All told, the Macedonians killed 8000 men in the battle. Alexander marched 2000 others to the sea and hanged them there. The Macedonians sold 30,000 more into slavery. The only Tyrians who survived the attack were those who took refuge in the temple of Hercules because Alexander believed Hercules was his ancestor. The siege of Tyre took seven months. Death toll for the Macedonians was approximately 400 men; this figure did not include non-Macedonians who fought along-side Alexander.²⁸

After the battle of Tyre Alexander spent time in Egypt where he set the location for Alexandria to be constructed, and was even crowned Pharaoh. The time spent in Egypt offered Alexander and his men opportunity to rest. While in Egypt, Alexander visited the oracle of Ammon at the Siwah oasis near

²⁷ Weigall, *Alexander*, 182-83.

²⁸ Weigall, *Alexander*, 184-85.

the Lybian border in western Egypt. This was a risky trip because it allowed the Persian king, Darius to regroup and prepare for a new battle with the Macedonians.²⁹

Napoleon's road to Waterloo was not filled with the success Alexander enjoyed prior to Gaugamela.

In 1812, Emperor Napoleon discovered the Russian Tsar Alexander was allowing some subjects to trade with England a practice Napoleon tried to extinguish with the creation of the Continental System half a decade earlier. Napoleon saw this disobedience as an opportunity for him to cement France as the unquestionable military and economic power in Europe. He set out to create one of the largest forces ever to march through Europe.

Napoleon's army consisted of nearly 650,000 soldiers. Most of them were French, but many were from Prussia and other countries allied with Napoleon. This massive human force was known as the "Grand Army." In support of this colossal army, Napoleon brought 1000 cannons and 150,000 horses. The horses were used to carry officers and haul supply wagons and cannons. Napoleon supplied 50 days worth of provisions for 400,000 men. Prussia supplied an additional 20 days worth of provisions. Napoleon did not bring along enough provisions to support his

²⁹ Cartledge, *New Past* 151

army for the entirety of the campaign because he planned to live off the land (as he did in each of his previous campaigns).³⁰

Napoleon's army was anticipating a conventional war with Russia. Napoleon and his generals were expecting to encounter the Russians in a series of head-to-head battles and quickly dispose of the enemy forces. The Russians knew that if they were to fight a conventional war against the superior numbers and training of Napoleon's Grand Army that they would face certain and bloody defeat. The Russian military strategy would be to avoid full-scaled conflict as much as possible. The Russians would meet the French troops in small skirmishes and then quickly retreat before a large-scale French attack could commence. This strategy was probably not planned, but happened because of the overwhelming fear and respect the Russians had for the French military.³¹ The Russians also adopted a "scorched earth" strategy. As the Russians retreated, they destroyed large areas of land and shelter so the French and ally forces would not be able to live off the Russian land. Napoleon praised the Portuguese leader Wellington for his scorched earth plan, which was much more extensive than the Russian strategy. Napoleon was less impressed with what the Russians were doing;

³⁰ Moore, Richard. "1812 Invasion of Russia." 2006. http://www.napoleonguide.com/campaign_russia.htm (accessed June 29, 2009).

³¹ Herold, J. Christopher. *The Age of Napoleon*. New York: Dell Publishing Co. Inc, 1963. 310

he called them an "Army of Tartars," and called them plainly uncivilized.³²

The constant retreating by the Russian military frustrated Napoleon. He was so anxious for battle that he forced his army forward with "all his energy and all the brilliance of his genius."³³ Unfortunately for Napoleon, these forced marches cost him scores of horses and drove his men to exhaustion. On August 17, 1812 Napoleon's army reached the city of Smolensk, Russia. Napoleon quickly formed a siege around the fortified city and rejoiced as smoke billowed from the streets of Smolensk. The enemy could be seen off in the distance retreating, but the French continued bombarding the city. When evening fell, it became obvious that the Russians were in a full retreat and Smolensk was Napoleon's. When Napoleon and his generals reconnoitered the town it became obvious that the smoke rising from the streets of Smolensk was from fires set by the Russians. The fire continued to worsen as night came. Napoleon came to a grouping of officers in front of his tent and said, "An eruption of Vesuvius, isn't that a fine sight...Gentlemen, remember the words of a Roman Emperor: 'A dead enemy always smells sweet!'"³⁴

³² Herold, *Age*, 310.

³³ Caulaincourt, Armando De. *With Napoleon in Russia: The Memiors of General de Caulaincourt, Duke of Vicenza*. J .Hanoteau. New York: William Morrow and Company, 1935. 60

³⁴ Caulaincourt, *With Napoleon*, 76-7.

It is in Smolensk that Napoleon decided it was time to let his troops rest and recuperate. The troops had only a few days to recover before they encountered a full-scaled battle with the Russian army. On August 19, Russian General Barclay de Tolly and his army stumbled onto a portion of the French army near Smolensk. The battle was fierce and bloody. Napoleon, thinking it was a rear guard battle, did not show up until the next day. He witnessed a demoralizing mass of dead and dying men. To boost morale he handed out medals and promotions to the wounded on the spot, but he could not stop the seemingly eternal train of ambulances coming from the front lines.³⁵ This battle provided Napoleon a taste of what he was looking for in Russia, and it would be almost three weeks later before he experienced another large-scale battle.

The Russians began setting up strong defenses outside of Moscow at Borodino. Under the command of General Mikhail Kutusov, 120,000 Russian troops worked at a fever pitch to prepare their defenses before the numerically superior French force reached them. On September 6, Napoleon's army had reached the battlegrounds and prepared to attack Kutusov the next morning. Napoleon unveiled a portrait of his one year old son (the King of Rome) expecting his officers to be inspired by it.³⁶

³⁵ Herold, *Age*, 311-12.

³⁶ Herold, *Age*, 313.

The next morning the battle commenced. Napoleon had a severe headache and had to coordinate the battle from the trench he occupied while the battle was raging. Most of the French army was lost and confused, but was still able to take the field. By nightfall the battle had subsided. The Russian army lost 45,000 men and the French lost 30,000. The French were also able to capture just 800 Russian prisoners.³⁷ Kutusov led a stealthy retreat that night and by morning the Russian army had disappeared. Napoleon believed that peace would be found in Moscow, and he and his army headed to the capital city.³⁸

On September 15, 1812, Napoleon arrived in Moscow. He found it to be empty of all but a few French tutors and some of the lower members of Russian society. His army had full reign of the city for a few hours. Napoleon set up his headquarters at the Kremlin in the middle of town and took a tour of the city. At eight o'clock that evening, a fire began in the suburbs. Many of the French ignored it, thinking it was too far off to be a threat. By ten o'clock, the fire had spread to the outskirts of Moscow and was quickly consuming much of the city. The French army headed for the safety of the Kremlin. More fires were set around the city. In the morning, Russian police officers were found setting fire to buildings, explaining that

³⁷ Herold, *Age*, 313.

³⁸ Caulaincourt, *With Napoleon*, 105.

their commanders had told them to burn everything³⁹. The fire continued to burn throughout the day, and continued to burn until September 18, after most of the city was destroyed⁴⁰.

Napoleon stayed in Moscow until the middle of October. Winter was coming, his supplies were all but gone and morale among the troops was dreadfully low. Napoleon marched his army of 100,000 soldiers from Moscow and headed to Smolensk. Napoleon's army was devastated by the biting cold, harassed by Russian peasants and hassled by small garrisons of Russian mercenaries called Cossacks. Only half of the original 100,000 men reached Smolensk in early November. Napoleon stayed in Smolensk for less than a week as he had three large Russian armies closing in on his rear.

On November 25, Napoleon's army met a Russian force in Borisov near the Berezina River. Napoleon's men moved north to a narrow part of the river and built a temporary bridge. For the next two days, while under attack from four Russian armies, Napoleon's men crossed the bridges to safety. Before all of the French were able to cross the bridge, the Russian military was making an advance and the bridge was set aflame to deter the Russians. Thousands of French soldiers were stranded and slaughtered in Borisov. Napoleon's Grand Army was reduced to

³⁹ Caulaincourt, *With Napoleon*, 122-3.

⁴⁰ Herold, *Age*, 314.

less than 10,000 soldiers, a fraction of the more than 600,000 men he started with six months earlier.⁴¹

In December, Napoleon received word that a coup had been unsuccessfully carried out in France because many thought he was killed in Russia. He quickly left his army and returned to Paris to undo some of the damage created by the coup, and to raise another army. While Napoleon was regrouping in Paris, Russia, Prussia, Britain, Austria, and a handful of other countries signed a treaty in opposition to Napoleon.⁴²

Napoleon was able to raise an army of 200,000 men by the spring. The quality of this army was inferior to the army of 600,000 he brought with him to Russia the previous year, but Napoleon had faith in his skills as a general and knew he could win with this army. In October 1813, the French and Allies met in a powerful three-day battle in the German city of Leipzig. Napoleon's army had suffered both heavy losses and many victories during their campaigns through the early portion of 1813. By the time Napoleon decided to concentrate his forces around the city of Leipzig, his men were exhausted.

The Allies attacked Napoleon's forces midmorning on October 18. They pushed the French forces slowly through the city. The French army had men on every street, defending the city

⁴¹ Herold, *Age*, 320-4.

⁴² Moore, *Invasion of Russia*

valiantly, even as they were running low on ammunition. As the battle wore on, the French troops began evacuating Leipzig across the bridge over the Elster River. The plan was to blow the bridge after the French army had retreated across it, and before the Allies could follow. Those who were charged to blow the bridge panicked and destroyed the bridge far too soon, trapping some 20,000, French troops inside the city with the allied army. Napoleon marched the remnants of his army back to Paris. At the Battle of Leipzig 70,000 of Napoleon's men were killed and an additional 30,000 men captured by the allies.⁴³ Napoleon would remain the ruler of France for one more year, but never again would he be the invincible general and fearsome ruler he once was.

After devastating losses in Russia and Leipzig, Napoleon was exiled to the Italian island of Elba—the third largest in Italy—in May 1814. He traveled there with an army of 1000 soldiers. The Allies made him emperor over the island's 110,000 residents, and gave him a 2,000,000 Franc pension for any expenses he may have while on the island. He set up his government but soon set his eyes on a return to Paris. Napoleon spent a brief nine months as Emperor of Elba and on February 26,

⁴³ Dugdale-Pointon, T. "Battle of Leipzig ('The Battle of Nations'), 16-18 October 1813." March 23, 2001.http://www.historyofwar.org/articles/battles_leipzig.html (accessed June 30, 2009).

1815, Napoleon set out for Paris and the 100 Days Campaign began.⁴⁴

The escaped Napoleon marched into France with a detail of 600 men and immediately set out for Paris. At Grenoble Napoleon encountered the French fifth, which was sent to stop his advances. Napoleon looked at the men and stated, "Those of you who wish to fire on your Emperor may do so;" none did.⁴⁵ Instead, they ran and embraced Napoleon and many wept for the returning of their King. Many soldiers joined Napoleon and continued with him to Paris.

Throughout France, men joined Napoleon's ever-increasing army; many were soldiers, and many were ordinary men who hoped for his return to power. Napoleon's army grew at such an astonishing rate that he sent a letter to King Louis stating that the Bourbon did not need to send any more troops; Napoleon had enough.⁴⁶ Louis XVIII fled Paris before Napoleon arrived, and after General Ney promised to bring Napoleon to the monarch "In a steel cage." Ney would later change his loyalties after receiving a letter from Napoleon. Napoleon arrived in Paris

⁴⁴ Moore, Richard. "Elba." 2006.<http://www.napoleonguide.com/elba.htm> (accessed June 29, 2009).

⁴⁵ Stolrarov II, G.. "The History and Deeds of Napoleon Bonaparte: The Hundred Days and the Belgian Campaign." June 8, 2007.http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/272136/the_history_and_deeds_of_napoleon_bonaparte.html?cat=37 (accessed June 30, 2009).

⁴⁶ Moore, Richard. "100 Days Campaign." 2006.http://www.napoleonguide.com/campaign_100days.htm (accessed July 1, 2009).

with his army in mid-march 1815, and the citizens received him with a mixture of jubilation and apprehension.⁴⁷

Quickly, Napoleon began recruiting a strong army so he could regain what was taken from him in the Treaty of Paris. He had approximately 280,000 men at his disposal but only half were combat ready. In mid June, Napoleon discovered English General Wellington and Prussian General Blucher were meeting in Belgium to attack Napoleon. The combined armies would total 220,000 men, almost 100,000 more than Napoleon had. Napoleon decided the best course of action would be to divide and conquer. He needed to split the British and Prussian armies and defeat each quickly in order to survive.⁴⁸

Napoleon first attacked the Prussian army. His attack was so quick that by the time Wellington got word of it, he was unable to provide assistance. Ney was charged with holding off the English advance. Both Napoleon and Ney were successful. Napoleon drove Blucher's army from the field with both sides sustaining heavy losses. Ney kept the British army from providing the Prussians any support. When Wellington heard of the Prussian defeat, he retreated north to regroup. The Prussians limped southward.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Herold, *Age*, 357.

⁴⁸ Herold, *Age*, 360.

⁴⁹ Herold, *Age*, 361.

On June 17, Napoleon sent a detachment of 30,000 men with Marshal Grouchy to pursue the Prussian forces and prevent them from meeting up with Wellington. The rest of Napoleon's army followed the British forces, and after a slow march through heavy thunderstorms they caught up with the British outside of the city of Waterloo. Grouchy caught up with what he thought was the main body of the Prussian army late on June 17. He sent misleading information to Napoleon that a small detachment was headed to Brussels but the main force was well south of Wellington's army and Grouchy would prevent them from joining the British the next day. The next morning the majority of the Prussian force headed for Brussels and rear-guard action prevented Grouchy from preventing Blucher from reinforcing Wellington that day.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Herold, *Age*, 361.

Chapter IV: Defining moments in battle

Still stinging from his defeat at Issus two years before, Darius III set out to prepare a battlefield that would prevent Alexander from using his tricks to defeat the Persians. Weeks before the battle, Darius handpicked the spot where he believed his greatest victory would occur. A large open plain near the city of Gaugamela was the ideal location. It was large, flat and provided little cover for Alexander's Companion Cavalry to hide. Darius had his men comb through the field, picking up stray stones and other objects that could prove hazardous to his army. He then had the entire field tilled and smoothed so his scythed chariots would have the perfect surface for reaching optimal speed. The stage was set for the battle that would determine who would control Asia.

As he gazed across the perfectly smooth battlefield at an army almost five times larger than his own, Alexander the Great must have reviewed his battle plan one last time before the attack began. One wonders what thoughts were going through the heads of his generals and soldiers at the time. The Macedonian army looked out and saw the enormous Persian army. Darius III led 200,000 soldiers, his infamous scythed chariots (which had never been defeated, and daunting Indian elephants. It must have been a truly awesome and terrible sight for Alexander's army of less than 40,000, including cavalry.

Darius' force overlapped the Macedonian front by nearly a kilometer on both sides. He was confident that this battle could only end in victory for Persia. Alexander had embarrassed him just two years earlier, but Darius blamed that loss on the terrain. Alexander had forced the Persian army into a bottleneck, negating its numerical advantage. With that loss still fresh in his mind, Darius prepared the battlefield to provide him the utmost advantage.

The battlefield was finished and Alexander's army was coming near. This battle would decide the shape of the world for generations to come. If Darius won, there would be nothing preventing him from expanding the Persian Empire far into the European continent. If Alexander won, the reign of the powerful Persians would come to a swift end and Alexander would be free to expand through Asia. This battle would prove to be one of the most important battles in world history. The King of Asia would be determined at Gaugamela. This was an honor Alexander the Great was born to win, and a title Darius would not easily relinquish.

All of the advantage was stacked in Darius' favor. He chose the land, he had the numbers, and he knew the territory better than Alexander. He also possessed some of the best cavalry in the world and his infantry consisted of the finest soldiers in Asia. Darius even had a corps of Greek mercenaries,

experts in the phalanx used by the Macedonians. Alexander's force was paltry by comparison. The outcome looked bleak, but Alexander spent his career constructing the most skilled military force the world had ever seen. His strategic skills were unparalleled, and his insatiable thirst to be the greatest warrior the world had ever known would prove to be more valuable than all the men in the Persian army.

Three decisions made by Alexander at the battle of Gaugamela would affect the outcome of the battle. The first was a decision not to attack. The second was abandoning his infantry by taking his cavalry parallel to the Persian line and away from the fighting. The most important though, was giving up on his personal gain to save his army from certain defeat.

Alexander usually used the fighting tactic called hammer and anvil. His phalanx served as the anvil, an unmovable object. His highly skilled cavalry acted as the hammer. The cavalry would flank his opponents, attempting to get to the rear of the army. His cavalry would then force the enemy into the waiting sarissa blades of his strong phalanx. Alexander used this tactic with deadly efficiency. However, the sheer size of the Persian army at Gaugamela meant that Alexander would not be able to use his hammer and anvil tactic. He would instead have to use his superb strategic mind to create a way to defeat his Persian foe.

The battlefield was located in a valley surrounded by tall hills. Several days before the battle, Alexander and his army set up their headquarters in those hills. Here, The Macedonians had full view of the Persian movements. This made It possible for the generals to begin generating their battle plan based on first-hand knowledge of the Persian movements.⁵¹

Alexander and his army spent three days recuperating in the hills around Gaugamela. On the fourth day, Alexander moved his army into battle position. One of his most trusted generals, Parmenio, petitioned Alexander to allow the army to rest for one more day. Alexander obliged his request. During the night, Alexander and his generals had one last meeting before beginning the battle. Parmenio demanded the Macedonians attack under cover of darkness so they could take the numerically superior Persians by surprise. Alexander refused Parmenio's request, stating that he would never demean himself by stealing victory "like a thief."⁵²

This was the first great decision made by Alexander during the battle of Gaugamela. Waiting through the night and attacking in the morning meant Alexander's army would be fighting the battle well rested. Conversely, Darius, expecting a surprise attack by the Macedonians as it was customary for a

⁵¹ Porter, Barry. "Battle of Gaugamela: Alexander Versus Darius." <http://www.historynet.com/battle-of-gaugamela-alexander-versus-darius.htm/3> (accessed November 12, 2009).

⁵² Porter, *Battle of Gaugamela*

smaller army to attack under the cover of darkness, kept his men awake and alert for an attack throughout the night. That attack never came and his men were tired when the battle began the next morning.

When Alexander approached the Persian army, he had his men oriented in a left echelon formation.⁵³ The left side of the Macedonian line fell back from the front of the line, forming a diagonal. The men then faced out, in preparation for a flank attack. This was the first time the Persians had seen the echelon formation, and therefore were confused how to attack the formation.

The Macedonian front began its march toward the Immortals of the Persian army. The Immortals received their name because of the sheer number of men involved. If one were to die, another would immediately take his place. This allowed the Immortals to have always 10,000 of the best-trained Persian soldiers fighting.⁵⁴

As the Macedonians advanced, the receded left of their line provided the Persian cavalry with open ground. The accepted military strategy of the time was that, if provided with open

⁵³ "Alexander and Gaugamela Battle." Art of War, Discovery Channel

⁵⁴ Discovery

ground, a cavalry will charge.⁵⁵ The Persian Cavalry immediately charged at the Macedonian left, which Parmenio commanded.⁵⁶

As the Persians advanced, Alexander put into action his second key decision on the field of Gaugamela. His Companion Cavalry, situated on the right of the Macedonian line, began moving parallel to the Persian line, away from the battle. When Darius saw the Companion Cavalry shifting, he feared that it would either move off the prepared fighting surface, or turn the Persian left. He ordered his cavalry general, Festes, to take the remainder of the cavalry and ride parallel with Alexander.⁵⁷ Hidden behind Alexander's cavalry ran a large battalion of peltasts. Peltasts were soldiers who used throwing devices to disrupt and frustrate the enemy. They used either short throwing spears, or slings.⁵⁸

While Alexander was moving away from the battle, his phalanx pushed through the Immortals. This forced the Persians to pull men from other sides of their line to compensate for the loss in the middle.⁵⁹ In an attempt to end the Macedonian attack, Darius sent in his scythed chariots directly into the awaiting phalanx. Scythed chariots were equipped with large metal blades jutting from both wheels, which were designed to

⁵⁵ Discovery

⁵⁶ Discovery

⁵⁷ Discovery

⁵⁸ Discovery

⁵⁹ Discovery

slice the unshielded part of the opposing army. The chariots also had large spikes on the front, designed to impale anyone who stepped in front of the chariots.⁶⁰

Alexander, knowing the scythed chariots were an important piece of the Persian army, designed a strategy to defeat the chariots. As the chariots approached the Macedonian phalanx, the men moved out of the way, creating runways for the chariots to pass through. As the chariots moved through the lines, the Macedonians killed the drivers and the horses. This simple tactic not only negated Darius' ultimate weapon for this battle, but also illustrated the weakness of the scythed chariots and forever ended the use of the weapon.⁶¹

While the middle of the Macedonian line continued to hold against the Persians, Parmenio's line began to collapse under the Persian cavalry. Success of the battle hinged on Parmenio being able to hold his line.

Instead of turning and providing help to Parmenio, Alexander continued to ride away from the battle. Darius sent more of his cavalry in an attempt to prevent the Companions from outflanking his line. As both cavalries moved farther away from the battle, the Persians could not shift men over to fill the void created when the cavalry moved.

⁶⁰ Woodworth, Brian. "Alexander the Great and the Art of War."

⁶¹ Discovery

A hole also opened in the Macedonian line. Darius sent two battalions of soldiers to attack the Macedonian camp.⁶² If those two battalions had attacked the rear of the Macedonian phalanx instead of raiding the camp, the outcome of the battle may have been considerably different.

Even as the Persian army attacked the gap in the Macedonian line, Alexander saw the seam opening in the Persian lines. When it became large enough, Alexander turned his cavalry 160 degrees. He went directly for the hole in a wedge formation, and straight for Darius.⁶³

When the Companion Cavalry turned to attack the hole, the peltasts (who had been running behind the Macedonians) attacked the Persian cavalry. Peltasts used slings and spears in their attack. By themselves, the weapons the peltasts used were not lethal, nor would one Peltast be able to occupy one infantry or cavalryman on his own. Alexander did not need his peltasts to battle the Persian cavalry, but merely to occupy them as he attacked the hole in their line. Hundreds of peltasts were able to create enough of a distraction to provide Alexander a chance to reach the Persian weak point.⁶⁴

⁶² Maciek. "Battle of Gaugamela: Alexander Versus Darius."
http://www.allempires.com/article/index.php?q=battle_gaugamela (accessed November 15, 2009).

⁶³ Discovery

⁶⁴ Discovery

When Darius witnessed Alexander leading his cavalry, which was penetrating his line, he fled. Alexander followed Darius, knowing that for him to become king of Asia he would have to kill Darius. When the Persian army realized their king fled the battlefield, they began to retreat. Before Alexander was able to reach Darius, he made the third important decision that led to victory. Instead of chasing down Darius and killing him at the battlefield of Gaugamela, Alexander turned his cavalry to help Parmenio, who was quickly losing ground and men.⁶⁵ Had Alexander chosen not to reinforce Parmenio, he may have defeated Darius, but he would not have had an infantry left to sustain his power.

After Darius' retreat, the battlefield lost all order. Many in the Persian army were in full retreat, while others were still fighting with the same vigor as they had earlier in the day. This confusion made Alexander's return to Parmenio the bloodiest part of the battle. His Companion Cavalry had to fight through the thousands of retreating Persians, each fighting for his life.⁶⁶

Alexander was able to reach Parmenio in time to save his army and win the battle. Unfortunately, he was unable to catch

⁶⁵ Discovery

⁶⁶ Discovery

Darius. In spite of that, Alexander did not hesitate to crown himself King of Persia.⁶⁷

Alexander's wisdom and strategic expertise were essential to the success of one of the greatest battles in world history. When facing seemingly impossible odds, Alexander remained calm and was able to use his adversary's tendencies against him. First, Alexander rested his men the night before the battle instead of fighting. While attacking the night before was an accepted strategy for an army greatly outnumbered, Alexander's decision to wait allowed his men to get rest for the battle the next day. It also led to Darius keeping his army alert for the entire night, waiting for the attack that would never come.

Secondly, approaching the field of battle in the left echelon formation, one never before seen, confused the Persian army. This formation also protected the Macedonian flank from a Persian attack. Alexander had his cavalry execute an unconventional maneuver, resulting in Darius sending his cavalry to counter the movement. The hole that opened allowed Alexander to split the Persian line and drive Darius from the field. That maneuver caused the Persian army to scatter. As they were retreating, Alexander's decision to help Parmenio instead of pursuing Darius, ensured victory for Macedon at the Battle of Gaugamela.

⁶⁷ Discovery

Historians have analyzed the decisions made by Alexander at Gaugamela for centuries. His ability to analyze a battle before it began, and create strategies that always resulted in a victory for his army, is unparalleled. Gaugamela is considered Alexander's premier victory. In it, all of his skills were showcased: fearless leadership, cutting-edge strategies and the ability to earn the love and respect of his soldiers. This set Alexander the Great far above anyone before or since.

The Battle of Waterloo had far reaching implications similar to the Battle of Gaugamela, but Napoleon was unable to enjoy the success of Alexander.

Napoleon awoke early on June 18, 1815, on the battlefield near the Belgian city of Waterloo. He took the early morning hours to survey the battlefield set before him; a long east-west running valley with a ridgeline to the north, and his troops on the southern side. The field was muddy after days of rain had soaked the area. Napoleon originally planned beginning the attack around 9 a.m., but instead opted to postpone his initial attack until later in the day to allow the ground to dry. The wet ground would have made cavalry and artillery movements difficult and would have limited the rebound of the cannonballs. This was an unusual delay for the historically aggressive

Napoleon.⁶⁸ Unlike Alexander (who waited an extra day before fighting so his men could rest, and the enemy overwrought after a sleepless night), Napoleon's delay allowed the enemy to become better organized, and his men to question his resolve.

Napoleon had approximately 74,000 men at his disposal, including more than 15,000 horsemen and 246 artillery pieces.⁶⁹ These forces were packed into two and a half miles of land. Napoleon set up his forces in three "W" shaped lines. Reille's II corps, located between the roads Nivelles and Charleroi, headed the first line. East of Charleroi road was D'Erlon's I corps, flanked to the right by light cavalry. Immediately behind Reille was Kellerman's French Cuirassiers, while Milhaud's Cuirassiers were positioned behind d'Erlon. On the West Charleroi road was the incomplete IV infantry led by Lobau; two divisions of light cavalry under Domon and Suberrie formed on the east of the road. Napoleon positioned the elite of his cavalry and infantry in the third line. The heavy cavalry of the Guard led by Guyot positioned themselves behind Kellerman;

⁶⁸ There are two differing opinions as to why Napoleon was less aggressive at Waterloo than he had been in his earlier battles. Some historians believe that, with this being his first major battle since returning from his exile on Elba, he was tentative as he reacquainted himself with leading an army. Others attribute it to a cocktail of physical illnesses, which included hemorrhoids and possibly syphilis. These illnesses could have kept him awake through the night and clouded his judgment on the battlefield.

⁶⁹ General Grouchy had 25,000 men and instructions to prevent the Prussians from reinforcing the British.

next to Guyot were the light horse of the Guard, led by Lefebvre and Desonettes.⁷⁰

Behind the cavalry and artillery, in one large mass straddling Charleroi road, were the three levels of Napoleon's invincible guard. The first line was the Young Guard, commanded by Duhesme. The Young Guard comprised of promising soldiers who were new to Napoleon's force. Morand commanded the Middle Guard, situated behind the Young Guard. The Middle Guard were men who served for at least five years and had proven their expertise and fearlessness many times over. In the rear of the mass was the Old Guard, led by Friant. The Old Guard was made of the finest and most seasoned men in Napoleon's army. The Old Guard had never been defeated.⁷¹

Wellington led an allied army of just under 75,000 men. He positioned the whole of his army behind a ridge, some 1000 yards from Napoleon's forces. Wellington was also depending on the appearance of Prussian general Blucher and his army of nearly 100,000 men to reinforce the allies sometime during the battle. Napoleon separated The Prussians from the rest of the Allies a few days prior to the battle, and Blucher was quickly attempting to reach the British while evading the small French contingent attempting to stop him.

⁷⁰ Becke, Archibald F.. *Napoleon and Waterloo: The Emeror's Campaign with the Armeé Du Nord, 1815, A strategic and tactical study.* II, New York: Bookes for Libraries Press, 1914.

⁷¹ Becke, *Napoleon And Waterloo*

We will focus on three decisions made by Napoleon, which ultimately led to his defeat: the assault of Hougoumont, Ney's cavalry charge, and Napoleon leading the Old Guard over the ridge into the center of the British forces. Each of these decisions played a pivotal role in the outcome of the battle. They each also highlight major mistakes made by Napoleon and his generals which led to the eventual failure of Napoleon's Empire.

Just after eleven o'clock, Napoleon began the battle, leading with heavy cannonading by the French artillery. The goal of the morning was to capture the Chateau La Hougoumont, which was a stone farm house situated to the left of the French lines. La Hougoumont was located between the British and French lines and, along with the farm La Haye Sainte, acted as breakwaters. The British occupied these fortresses and prevented the French army from marching across the valley unopposed. Wellington placed sharpshooters in each location, hoping they would do some damage to the French as they advanced across the valley.⁷²

If Napoleon captured Hougoumont, the entire left flank of the Allied forces would be exposed. The Allies had approximately 1100 soldiers holding the chateau, making the task of capturing it appear simple. Despite having more than 13,000

⁷² Video "Waterloo"

men attacking the chateau, the French were unable to force the allies from the position.⁷³

Capturing Hougoumont was of highest importance at the early stages of the battle of Waterloo. It was imperative that Napoleon utilize whatever resources necessary to force the British from the stronghold. The failure of Napoleon to capture Hougoumont early in the battle limited his ability to creatively attack the British and ultimately caused him to make more poor decisions as the battle wore on through the day.

It is important to note that Napoleon spent little time observing the battle of Waterloo. Illnesses and fatigue forced Napoleon to remain in his headquarters and rely on information from his general throughout the day. Napoleon had spent his military career on the front lines making split decisions as the battle happened, however, his inability to feel and see the battlefield would attribute to the unfortunate decisions made throughout the day.

While the clash at Hougoumont was raging, Napoleon sent General d'Erlon and a full battalion of men to the center of the British line. D'Erlon waited until after a violent volley of 12-pound cannon shot that, while impressive, was not very effective; Wellington wisely had his men behind the crest of the

⁷³ Crompton, Samuel W.. *Battles that Changed the World: Waterloo*. Philadelphia: Chelsea House , 2002. 55

ridge where the cannonballs could not strike them directly. When the bombardment ended, d'Erlon led his men into the heart of the Allied army. This attack used men who would have been better served taking Hougoumont than marching a suicide attack into the British line.

The French utilized a phalanx-like column when attacking an enemy, which is similar to what Alexander used at Guagamela. The column spanned 150 men long and 24 men deep. This formation was designed to intimidate and demoralize the enemy, and it had proven to be effective in that task in previous battles. The weakness of this formation is that only the first two lines of the column could fire. The British formed a long line that was several thousand men long but only two or three men deep. The short columns brought all British arms to bear. That, accompanied by The British refusal to allow the French to intimidate them, led to overwhelming French losses.⁷⁴

As the French column came over the crest of the ridge, the British opened fire on the front lines and resisted the initial French charge. With the French troops dazed, Wellington sent his cavalry over the ridge and drove d'Erlon's division across the valley and back to the French lines. In response to the

⁷⁴ Waterloo documentary

charge by the British, Napoleon sent 30,000 of his reserve infantry to drive the enemy cavalry back to the British lines.⁷⁵

As the French drove the British back across the valley, a third army was seen in the distance. It was initially unclear if the new army was the 25,000 French led by General Grouchy or the large Prussian force led by Marshal Blucher. The incoming army will prove to be a key in the outcome of the battle.

After the French counter-attack, French general Ney ordered an artillery attack on the British lines. During the artillery barrage, Wellington rotated his lines to ensure fresh troops would meet the next French attack. Wellington historically rotated his troops after an attack by the enemy. Ney observed this movement by the British and mistook it for a retreat. Ney ordered a cavalry charge to drive the British from the field.⁷⁶

Ney led 5000 French Cuirassiers and Polish lancers after the supposed retreating British. The practice of leading cavalry after a retreating army was standard operating procedure, and a practice Alexander followed at Gaugamela. Napoleon was irate when he discovered Ney led a cavalry assault on the British because it came far too early in the battle.⁷⁷ While Napoleon's frustration was warranted, his absence from the battlefield made his opposition too little and too late.

⁷⁵ Crompton, *Battles...World* 67

⁷⁶ Crompton, *Battles...World* 71

⁷⁷ Crompton, *Battles...World* 73

As Ney charged over the ridge and into the British lines, he quickly discovered the British were not retreating. Wellington ordered his men into infantry squares, a practice developed by Napoleon. Ney's men met heavy artillery and infantry fire. After a fierce ten-minute conflict with heavy losses on both sides, Ney retreated just long enough to regroup and then he plunged his cavalry into the British squares again. Ney repeated this pattern a dozen times, each time sustaining heavy losses. After the repeated attacks, Ney's men were too tired to continue.⁷⁸

As this part of the battle was winding down, it became apparent which army was off in the distance. General Blucher's Prussian army reinforced the British lines and began to threaten the French right.

While the decision to send the cavalry into the British lines was not made by Napoleon, he was responsible for the attack occurring. Ney was irritated with Napoleon's absence and hesitant decision-making, and chose to take matters into his own hands. Napoleon's hesitance may have been born out of his previous two battles, the disaster in Russia, and the defeat at Leipzig. Napoleon's aggression played a role in those defeats, and his confidence as a leader may have been shaken. That, along with his time in Elba and his illnesses, contributed to a

⁷⁸ Crompton, *Battles...World* 75

different Napoleon Bonaparte at Waterloo than the one who led the French for more than a decade.

The arrival of the Prussian army to the battlefield provoked a new set of problems for the French. The allied force outnumbered the French almost three to one; and the Prussian half of the allies were fresh. Napoleon was left with two options: attack the allied force with his Imperial guard, drive a wedge between them and defeat the two armies separately; or retreat into France to regroup and mount a counter-attack later. Napoleon, in typical fashion, chose the former.

The first task was to stabilize the French right, where the Prussians were advancing. Napoleon sent his Middle Guard to force the Prussians from his flank, and the elite guard did so quickly. As the Middle Guard was repelling the Prussians, Ney, who was still in the midst of the British lines, requested more troops from Napoleon. Napoleon asked where he expected to find more troops and denied Ney his request.⁷⁹

Nearly an hour later, the French lines stabilized, and Napoleon, now on his horse watching the battle, led nine Old Guard battalions across the valley into the British lines. Those nine battalions consisted of approximately 4500 men, but the phalanx style of advance meant only 300 guns could fire at a time.

⁷⁹ Crompton, *Battles...World* 78

As the French advanced, Wellington ordered General Peregrine Maitland and the 3000 men he controlled to lie down behind the crest of the hill. As the French reached the crest of the hill, General Maitland ordered his men to stand and fire. Three thousand British muskets came to bear and unleashed a fury of led into the front lines of the Imperial Guard. For five minutes, the previously undefeated guard received the most devastating losses in history. After the barrage the Old Guard did something it had never done before, it fled.

As the French charged down the ridge to the presumed safety of their line, Wellington waved his hat into the air, signaling the full advance of the allied forces. The full fury of the allied force crested the hill and crashed upon the French retreat amidst cries of "Le Guard recule!" and "Save qui peut!"⁸⁰

This final attack was the last decision made by Napoleon as a general and emperor. To send a small number of men into the middle of a strong enemy, who proved fearless throughout the day, was an irrational mistake. Wellington and the allies proved throughout the day that they would not be intimidated by French aggression. Wellington's calm, confident demeanor during the battle caused his men to have full confidence in his leadership, and they withstood numerous frontal attacks by the

⁸⁰ Meaning "The Guard retreats" and "every man for himself."

French. Conversely, Napoleon's absence and timidity forced his generals and men to question his leadership.

Had Napoleon been present on the battlefield during the majority of the battle, he would have been better able to assess the opposing force and see that an attack on the British flank would have been much more successful than a frontal assault. Furthermore, at the point in the battle when Napoleon opted to lead his Old Guard into the allied middle, the battle was already all but lost. Napoleon would have been better served if he retreated that day and took the time to regroup. The decision to attack cost thousands of French lives and ended the career of one of the greatest military leaders in history.

As the French retreated, the three Old Guard battalions not involved in the attack on the Allied forces, formed infantry squares and valiantly held off the attack for more than an hour. Their bravery likely saved 40,000 additional French lives that day. Decisions by men other than Napoleon saved the French army that day.

Chapter V: Conclusions

Alexander the Great and Napoleon Bonaparte are considered by many to be two of the most powerful leaders in Western histories. Each maintained an impressive military record, and both expanded their empires reach beyond expectations. Yet both men had very different childhoods. Alexander was the son of a king with grand military plans. He gave his son every opportunity to learn and grow at a young age. Napoleon was an outcast among his classmates who had to make his own path to greatness.

Like Alexander, who came to power after his father died, Napoleon was able to take advantage of the political and social unrest of the French Revolution, and with the help of his brother, became First Consul of France. After Alexander and Napoleon came to power, they quickly set out to tame the world, and expand their power and influence. The two emperors lead several successful military campaigns as they each forged unknowingly into what would be their greatest battle.

Throughout Alexander's life, he was hailed as the son of Zeus by his mother and provided with anything he could want by his father. He had grown men following his command as a military leader, and defeated armies led by much more experienced generals. The idea that he was invincible permeated throughout his existence. He charged into Persia with the

foundational belief that he could not be defeated. That belief spread from him to his troops, and his army marched over the Persian military with no fear because they knew Alexander would be leading the charge.

Gaugamela is the perfect personification of that thought. Alexander fought his greatest battle against a force more than four times larger than his own because he knew he could not be defeated. During the heat of battle, Alexander made three key decisions which led his army to victory. The decision to let his men rest one more day caused Darius to keep his men up during the night in preparation for a surprise attack. Trusting his army to hold during the initial onslaught of the Persian foe, Alexander led his prized Companion Cavalry away from the battle, forcing Darius to send his cavalry alongside Alexander to prevent the Macedonians from turning his flank. The movement of such a great number of Persians opened a hole in the middle of his line, which Alexander attacked with the ferocity and fearlessness of an immortal deity driving the Persian king from the battlefield. Finally, when Darius was in his sight, and with him, the title of King of Asia, Alexander halted his pursuit in order to double back and reinforce his army, which was faltering under pressure from the remaining Persians.

These three decisions were keys to victory on the field of Gaugamela. If Alexander had not rested the day before they may

not have been prepared to face the massive task before them. If Alexander did not trust Parmenio to hold the Persian line and he kept his cavalry in the midst of the fighting, the Persian line may not have split and likely would have collapsed around the Macedonians, choking the life from the army. Finally, if Alexander allowed his desire to be king of Asia to override his discretion, he may have killed Darius, but he would not have had any army with which to control the land.

The battle of Gaugamela was relatively early in Alexander's conquest of Asia. Alexander eventually discovered Darius' murdered body and crowned himself king of Asia. He is remembered for a spotless military record, which began at a young age and continued until an illness took his life on his return to Macedon. The decisions made at Gaugamela solidified the addition to Alexander's name, solidified the sustaining and expansion of Greek and Western culture, and proved to the world and to Alexander himself, that he was the immortal son of Zeus.

Napoleon experienced a much different path as he headed into the most important and what would prove to be the final battle of his life. Beginning with his childhood Napoleon was the outcast and looked down upon by his peers. He had to prove his worth at every level and fought for everything he gained as a young man. His success as a military general and emperor

helped to cover up the scars of his past, but it became apparent that the salve of success was only temporary.

The scars of his childhood were reopened after devastating losses in Russia and Liepzig, accompanied with an extended exile on St. Elba his confidence in his leadership ability was shaken. An important factor leading to Napoleon's poor decision making was his conspicuous absence from the battlefield do to a severe digestive tract illness. Being unable to observe action as it was taking place made Napoleon's decisions too little too late.

Hougoumont was an important speed bump on the battlefield that the French needed to control. When Napoleon decided to delay attack on the British and send only a small contingency of men to take the farm house, he allowed the British to hold the fortress for much of the battle, which prevented the French from utilizing flanking maneuvers, or crossing the field unopposed. The delay was uncharacteristic of the aggressive style of Napoleon; possibly evidence of a scarred man taking the helm of an army who needed strength.

Napoleon's absence and uncertainty also prevented him from controlling his generals. Ney's decision to attack repeatedly the center of the British lines led to hundreds of casualties the French could ill-afford. If Napoleon was not suffering physical and psychological strife at the time of the battle, he would have been able to stop the foolish attack by Ney. As a

final point, when Napoleon emerged from his headquarters to lead a charge on the British, his army was exhausted, and the Prussians reinforced the British, nearly doubling the size of the allies. The charge of the Old Guard into the British lines was a suicide mission that led to the first retreat in the history of the French Old Guard.

Poor planning and poor understanding of the battlefield and his opponent led Napoleon to make thoughtless decisions in the heat of battle. Those decisions led to an overwhelming defeat and the end of Napoleon's leadership career. It is apparent through these decisions that Napoleon and his generals were unprepared for the battle of Waterloo.

Capturing Hougoumont early in the battle would have opened up many more options for Napoleon during the battle. His presence on the field of battle would have allowed him to observe British maneuvers and his experience in battle may have helped him recognize that the British were rotating their lines, not retreating and he may not have ordered a frontal cavalry assault. If the previous actions had been taken, Napoleon would have saved the assault by the Old Guard until the British morale had been shaken and they were ready to collapse. Unfortunately, Napoleon had to use the Old Guard in a desperation attack, which led in tragedy.

Two of history's greatest leaders met very different fates in their greatest battles. Few key decisions were the difference for the two men. Not only did those key decisions shape the battle, but they shaped the world.

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