

*It is June 20<sup>th</sup>, 1815, two days after the battle of Waterloo and Richard Sharpe is summoned to the Duke of Wellington and ordered to lead his battalion into France on a vital mission. 'Sharpe's no fool,' the Duke had said. 'He's a damned rogue who has the devil's own luck and he wins his fights. Pray God he wins this one, otherwise ...'*

Major Vincent was a tall, rangy man mounted on a powerful black stallion. 'He's called Satan!' Vincent told Sharpe happily. 'Bred in County Meath. He flies over hedgerows and can outgallop any French nag.'

'Let's hope he doesn't have to,' Sharpe hauled himself into his saddle. 'Shall we go?'

'The sooner the better.' Vincent was wearing the gold-laced red coat of the Royal Horse Artillery, though Sharpe suspected the Major had been nowhere near a cannon in the last few years. 'The Duke tells me you're a rogue,' Vincent said cheerfully as they started their southwards journey through Brussels.

'Aye, probably.'

'Tell me about yourself.'

'Not much to tell.'

'Oh come, Sharpe, don't be modest. You took an eagle at Talavera, yes?'

'With the help of a sergeant, yes.'

'And doubtless you'll claim it was just good luck?'

'No, it was bloody hard fighting. But I was angry. A bastard called Henry Simmerson had lost our King's Colour a few weeks earlier, so I wanted to square accounts.'

'Yes, I've met Sir Henry. He works for the excise now. A taxman!'

'Then God help England.'

'You're the one who'll help England, Sharpe, by capturing the citadel at Ham.'

'Which you've seen, Major.'

'I have indeed, not three weeks ago!'

Sharpe looked across at the lean officer. 'You were deep in France.'

'Satan kept me safe. Yes, I was watching Boney's troops. Some of their lancers gave me a run, but Satan saw them off, didn't you, boy?' He patted his stallion's neck. The Major looked as if he might be a year or two older than Sharpe, who thought he was thirty-eight. Like many children raised in the poor-houses he was never entirely sure of his age, nor did he know his birthday, but he reckoned the estimate was close enough and he had long decided that his birthday would be August 1<sup>st</sup> because it was an easy date to remember. Major Vincent, Sharpe thought, would have no such problems. His horse was obviously expensive and he wore the uniform of the Royal Horse Artillery and affected the big moustache that the regiment encouraged. The blue coat was festooned with gold lace, while over his shoulders was a pelisse trimmed with fur.

Sharpe half-smiled. 'When did you last fire a galloper gun, Major?'

Vincent understood the question's real meaning and smiled. 'Thank the good Lord I've never got close to one, Sharpe. Nasty things, cannon. They make far too much noise.'

Vincent was one of Wellington's exploring officers, and that made sense. Sharpe had worked with them before and knew them to be subtle and clever men whose job was to determine the enemy's dispositions and plans. They rode good horses far behind the enemy lines

and always wore uniform so that if they were captured, they could claim they were not spies. ‘So what can you tell me about Ham?’ Sharpe asked.

‘It’s a nice little town in the valley of the Seine, Sharpe, with the citadel in a bend of the river. And the citadel is a bloody great stone fortress. Big corner towers, high walls. You’ve seen the Tower of London?’

‘Many times.’

‘Think of the White Tower only twice the size.’

‘Jesus!’ Sharpe said, ‘and it’s well garrisoned?’

‘Oh, indeed, but usually garrison troops aren’t the best fighting men.’

‘They might have been reinforced,’ Sharpe suggested.

‘Reinforced?’

‘Men fleeing the battle.’

‘I suppose a few, yes, but most of the French will be retreating to the east of Ham, and the Prussians will be on their heels.’

‘The Duke suggested the Prussians might reach Ham before us.’

‘God, I hope not! The prisoners will be scattered across half of France if they do. No, Sharpe, we get there first, we release them and we take our fellow back to the Duke.’

‘Our fellow, Major?’

‘Rather an important man. A pity he was captured.’

‘Who?’

‘No need for you to know who he is until you meet him.’

Sharpe bridled at that curt response but did not argue. ‘The garrison will have learned about the battle soon enough,’ he said, ‘so why wouldn’t they just take the prisoners south out of our way?’

‘Don’t even think about that,’ Vincent said. ‘They should do that, but will the garrison’s commandant be bold enough to act without orders? My guess is that if we hurry, we’ll get there in time.’

‘The Duke should have sent cavalry,’ Sharpe grumbled.

‘Can you imagine cavalry capturing a fortress? The poor darlings wouldn’t know how to begin.’

‘And you think I do?’

‘The Duke has faith in you, Sharpe.’ Vincent sounded amused. ‘Will your fellows be ready to march?’

‘They’d better be,’ Sharpe growled, and then fell silent as the two men journeyed south to the crossroads where the battle had been fought.

The Prince of Wales’s Own Volunteers - with Captain Price and Sergeant Harper in the front - were indeed ready, drawn up in ranks on the farm track which led along the ridge above the shallow valley where the corpse-fires still smoked, the stench of the burned bodies drifting up to the ridge. The wounded were still in their encampment, tended by the bandsmen, all but for the six drummers who would march with the battalion.

‘What about the women, sir?’ Harry Price accosted Sharpe.

‘What about them, Harry?’

‘Can they come?’

‘Of course not!’ Vincent put in brusquely.

Sharpe leaned down. ‘Listen, Harry, we’re going to be marching fast, really fast. The women will have to keep up. If they don’t, we abandon them. Let them know.’

‘Of course, sir.’

‘Is that wise, Sharpe?’ Vincent asked.

Sharpe turned to him. ‘You want these men to fight hard and they’re not going to be happy if their wives are left with the rest of the army. Happy men fight a damn sight better than a battalion of miserable buggers. Besides, the wives will make up their own minds. Some will come, some will stay with the wounded, and some will decide their children can’t stand the pace.’

‘Children!’ Vincent sounded alarmed.

‘They happen when you put men and women together,’ Sharpe said, then spurred his horse to the centre of the battalion’s line. Harper rode with him.

‘Talion!’ the Irishman bellowed, ‘ten’shun!’

‘Stand easy,’ Sharpe called. ‘Now listen, you rogues! The Duke has given us a special task, and he did that because we’re special! He reckons we’re one of his best battalions! So we are marching into France, and we’re going ahead of the rest of the army. We are also going fast! If you can’t keep up, you’ll be left behind, but the Duke trusts you to march hard and we will not let him down!’ It was not much of a speech, but Sharpe had wanted to warn them that they faced a hard slog. ‘Right, Pat, lead them off.’

‘Where to?’ Harper asked amused.

‘Centre of the ridge, then turn right. Drummers!’ Sharpe bellowed, ‘I want to hear you!’

He rode to the head of the column, accompanied by Harper and Vincent. They marched along the ridge, past the corpses of the French horses that had charged so gallantly and been cut down by canister and by the relentless volley fire from the British squares. A little further on Sharpe passed the spot where his rifle bullet had struck the Prince of Orange’s shoulder and he felt a pulse of pleasure in the memory, along with a wish that the bullet had struck a hand’s breadth lower. Then they were at the crossroads where the farm track joined the main road and Sharpe turned right, leading his battalion past Le Haye Sainte where the King’s German Legion had fought and died. Dead horses lined the road and there were still dead men who had not yet been collected for burial or burning. Among them were too many green-jacketed riflemen. ‘God,’ he said to Harper, ‘this was a bloody slaughter.’

‘Worst I’ve been in,’ the Irishman said.

‘Badajoz was worse.’

‘Aye, that was a bitch of a fight too.’

‘You were at Badajoz?’ Vincent asked.

‘Both of us were,’ Sharpe said curtly, remembering the ditch of bloodied dead under the flame light. There were nights when he still woke in a sweat, dreaming of that fight, how he and Harper had clawed their way up the breach and to this day he did not know how they had lived, let alone won. ‘And I hope,’ he continued to Vincent, ‘that we never have to fight again.’

‘Amen to that,’ Harper said.

‘The damned Frogs haven’t surrendered yet, Colonel,’ Vincent said.

‘They’re well beaten though.’

‘Maybe,’ Vincent sounded dubious. ‘But Marshal Grouchy led his Corps south and Davout has at least a hundred thousand men around Paris. And the Emperor don’t give up easy! He’ll fight if he can.’

‘Then we’ll just have to beat him again,’ Sharpe said. They had reached the floor of the valley where there were few corpses, though the foul smoke of the fires still soured the air. They climbed the slope towards the ridge where Napoleon had arrayed his army, where the French

attacks had started only to die under the flail of British musketry. There was a tavern at the top of the slope and not far away a rickety tower made of slender tree trunks lashed together to support a platform reached by a ladder. 'Boney spent much of the battle up that thing,' Vincent said, 'watching us through his glass.'

'And where were you?' Sharpe asked.

'I spent most of the day out there,' Vincent waved eastwards, 'looking for the Prussians.'

Sharpe spurred his horse towards the head of the column. He noticed two or three soldiers wearing new bright redcoats and, as he reached the Light Company, he stopped and dismounted. He beckoned to one of the men wearing a new coat. 'Can you ride a horse, lad?'

'Yes, sir.'

'What's your name?'

'Bee, Sir.'

'First name?'

'Patrick, sir.'

'Here then, Pat Bee,' Sharpe gave the lad the horse's reins, 'look after him for me, but stay close.'

'Yes, sir!'

'How old are you, Bee?'

'Seventeen, sir?' Bee sounded uncertain and, to Sharpe's eyes, looked little more than a boy. He was frail, skinny and pale, no taller than his musket which looked too heavy for him to carry.

'Where are you from, Bee?'

'Shoreditch, sir.'

'I'm from that part of the world,' Sharpe said, 'and when did you get here?'

'Yesterday, sir.'

'With a new draft?'

'Yes, sir.'

'So you missed the battle?'

'We could hear it, sir.'

'You were lucky, lad. It wasn't an easy fight. Here,' Sharpe cupped his hands and heaved the boy into the saddle. 'Just stay close to me, Bee.'

Sharpe strode to the front of the column. He would set the pace and it would be a fast one. They were south of the battlefield now, though the fields on either side of the road were littered with muskets and knapsacks that had been discarded by French soldiers fleeing the carnage. Harry Price caught up with Sharpe and fell into step. 'Showing the men you can march like them, sir?' Price asked, amused.

'Exactly, Harry.'

'So what are we doing, sir?'

'Following orders, Harry.'

'Which are what, sir?'

'Not very much, Harry. Get first into France, capture a fortress, defeat the garrison and then rejoin the army.'

Price marched a few paces in silence. 'I knew you wouldn't tell me.'

'Then you shouldn't have asked, Harry.'

'Capture a fortress!' Price said mockingly and laughed.

The dawn was obscured by clouds and by the time the battalion reached the crossroads called Quatre Bras a light rain was falling. Sharpe turned right at the crossroads, leading the battalion through the unburied corpses of men and horses, The corpses were mostly naked, having been stripped by villagers. He looked left to where the French heavy cavalry had hammered three battalions of good infantry that the Prince of Orange had insisted stay in line despite the warnings that enemy horsemen were lurking in the fields of rye.

They stopped beyond the battlefield to rest for a few minutes and to let the men fill their canteens from a small stream. Major Vincent unfolded a map and tried to protect it from the rain. 'A good start, Sharpe!' he said happily. 'Onto Mons, eh?'

'How far is that, Major?'

Vincent traced the route with a finger, 'Oh, about thirty miles.'

'We'll not make it today,' Sharpe said.

'Then we'd best press on!'

They marched through the fortress town of Mons next morning, assailed by folk wanting news of the battle. Sharpe purchased bread and salt pork in the town and ignored the ale that his men bought. They deserved it after their hard marching. He had marched with them, ignoring his horse that Private Bee still rode.

That afternoon they crossed into France. The road, which was gravel over stone, suddenly deteriorated. 'Boney ordered it ploughed up,' Vincent explained. 'He didn't want to make it easy for an invasion.' Any invasion of France must follow the main roads and while infantry and cavalry could move easily through the fields on either side, the big guns and the supply wagons must stay on the road which the Emperor had ordered turned into a churned mess. They passed through villages where sullen folk watched them. Sharpe had spoken to the battalion the night before, warning them that the Duke had ordered that there was to be no pillage. 'The bloody Frogs aren't going to like us,' he told them, 'but we don't want them angry enough to fight us. If you want bread or beer you pay for it! And not with buttons either.' In Spain the British soldiers had learned to detach their uniform buttons and hammer them flat, then persuade villagers that they were genuine silver coinage. 'I'm not a flogger,' Sharpe had told his men, 'but if you mistreat French civilians, I'll beat the shit out of you myself.'

They marched on. Sharpe had decided to start early each morning, before dawn, and march through the morning and early afternoon, then stop long before sundown to give the men time to make shelters. The rain followed them, but never fell hard. Major Vincent had a hoard of French currency which Sharpe used to buy bread, wine, eggs and meat. A half dozen men, their feet blistered or bleeding, had to drop out of the marching column and Sharpe left them behind. He scribbled a note that listed the mens' names and testified they were not deserters. Vincent countersigned it. 'Find somewhere to hide,' Sharpe told them, 'and wait for the army.'

'How long, sir?' a corporal asked him.

'Two days at most, Sharpe guessed, 'and you have food, so stay hidden.'

That afternoon they passed Condé, a fortress town, and blue-uniformed men watched them from the walls but made no effort to oppose them. 'Valenciennes next,' Vincent said, 'a much bigger garrison.'

The rain had stopped and a weak sun lit the flat countryside and Sharpe kept the column moving. 'We'll stop close to Valenciennes,' he told Vincent. 'You think there'll be trouble there?'

'Garrison troops gone soft,' Vincent said scornfully. 'They'll leave us alone.'

‘How many in the garrison?’

‘Lord knows,’ Vincent said airily, ‘maybe a thousand?’

They skirted Valenciennes, again watched by troops on the town’s ramparts. It was late afternoon and Sharpe wanted to stop, but not so close to an enemy fortress and so they marched on, following field tracks to the west of the town.

Then the enemy opened fire. Two cannons shot from a bulwark, their balls searing across the damp fields to throw up sprays of earth and water some fifty paces to the right of the column. ‘Cold barrels,’ Sharpe said.

‘Cold?’ Vincent asked.

‘Hot gun barrels shoot further,’ Sharpe explained, ‘so the next shots will be closer.’

The next shots screamed overhead, missing the Light Company’s shakoos by less than a yard. Sharpe hurried the pace.

‘Sir?’ Private Bee said nervously.

‘What is it, Bee?’

‘Horsemen, sir, behind us.’ Bee, with the added height of being on Sharpe’s horse, could see farther. Sharpe turned and saw three blue-uniformed horsemen following them. The cannons hammered again, their sound bellowing across the damp fields, but their shots again fell short and were stopped by the soggy ground. The horsemen stayed well back. Sharpe thought of leaving riflemen behind to ambush the followers, but decided it was best not to provoke an enemy that could outnumber them.

He finally stopped some five miles south of Valenciennes in a wood that gave them timber for shelters and fires. The horsemen had left an hour before, going back to the town. ‘I don’t like it,’ Sharpe said, peeling a hard-boiled egg.

‘What?’ Vincent asked.

‘Maybe I should have shot those three. Some ambitious bastard back in the town might be reckoning we’re easy meat.’

‘They’ll have heard of Boney’s defeat,’ the Major said, ‘and won’t want trouble.’

‘And they’ll have counted us as we went past,’ Sharpe insisted, ‘and they’ll know we’re on our own. Harry!’

Price ran to Sharpe’s side. ‘Sir?’

‘Picquets, Harry, strong ones, watching the road back to town.’

At nightfall Sharpe walked the picquet line that was strung between the road and the River Scheldt that ran to the west. The small rain had stopped and the sky was ragged with clearing clouds.

‘You really think they’ll come, sir?’ Price asked him.

‘I’ve no idea, Harry, but we’re a tempting target. One badly understrength battalion all on its own? I’d attack us.’

‘They must know the war’s lost!’

‘Must they? Major Vincent assures me Davout has over a hundred thousand men around Paris, and Marshal Grouchy escaped Waterloo with a whole army corps.’

‘And we’re all alone in France,’ Price said dourly.

‘Don’t worry, Harry, you’ve got me,’ Sharpe clapped him on the shoulder and went back to his bivouac where Harper was making tea.

‘How’s Mister Price?’

‘Nervous.’

‘You think they’ll attack us?’

‘For the glory of France, yes. But get some sleep.’

‘They won’t come, Sharpe,’ Vincent broke in. ‘Their job is to defend the town, not sally out for a fight.’

‘We’re too tempting a target,’ Sharpe said, ‘they’ll come.’

‘Five guineas says you’re wrong. The garrison will be tucked up in their beds by now.’

‘Five guineas,’ Sharpe agreed, drank his tea and went to bed himself.

The sound of musketry woke Sharpe, though it took him a few seconds to realise where he was. Then he swore, rolled out of the cloak that served as a blanket and reached for his rifle. The moon was nearly full and high in the eastern sky, its light filtering through the thick trees where the battalion was camped. He kicked a sleeping lump, ‘Wake up! We’ve got visitors.’

‘God save Ireland,’ Harper groaned.

Another spatter of musketry sounded from the north of the trees and just then one of the picquets came running back. ‘Mister Sharpe! Mister Sharpe!’

‘Calm down, lad, we’re awake.’

The picquet was Rifleman McGurk. ‘There are hundreds of them, sir! Coming up by the river!’

‘Then we’ll just have to send them home,’ Sharpe said. Harper was awake now. ‘Pat, stir the damn lot. I want the battalion at the northern edge of the trees, but in shadow.’

Sharpe plucked McGurk’s elbow. ‘Show me,’ he said, and followed the rifleman through the trees which grew dense at the top of a low hill. He stopped at the northern edge where the land fell very gently away towards the town of Valenciennes. To his left, the west, was the River Scheldt beside which a rutted farm track led towards the woods where the Prince Of Wales’ Own Volunteers had bivouacked, and on that track was what looked like a large battalion of enemy troops. The moon, glowing between two heaps of cloud, was bright enough to show that the advancing men were carrying muskets. ‘About a thousand of them,’ Sharpe grunted, having done a swift count of the approaching ranks. ‘Where’s Captain Price?’ Sharpe asked McGurk.

‘Out there, sir,’ McGurk pointed towards a hedgerow some two hundred yards north.

‘Go find him,’ Sharpe said, ‘and tell him to suck the buggers into us.’

Sharpe’s picquets, all from the battalion’s light company, were firing at the approaching troops from the cover of the hedgerow. The leading French were a hundred paces beyond, advancing in a long dark column. ‘No voltigeurs,’ Pat Harper appeared beside Sharpe.

‘None that I can see, Pat.’

‘So what will they do?’

‘Die,’ Sharpe said nastily. ‘As the men arrive, make them lie down at the wood’s edge and send Captain Jefferson to me.’

Harper vanished in the shadowed trees where men were hurrying. Vincent found Sharpe. ‘What’s happening, Colonel?’

‘You owe me five guineas.’

‘Damn.’ Vincent stared at the approaching column. ‘Why are they bothering?’

Sharpe sighed. ‘There’s a French officer over there, Major, who wants to make a name for himself. He’s been stuck on garrison duty while other men do the fighting, and he knows how many we are and he thinks he’s got an easy victory. He’s a bloody idiot!’ Sharpe saw Captain Jefferson, who commanded the Grenadier Company, coming. ‘Matthew! Take your company out to the right flank. There’s a ditch there. Go halfway down the slope, then hide in the ditch. When we start filleting the buggers, join in, but wait for us to thin them out before you open fire.’

‘With pleasure, sir,’ Jefferson said and turned away.

Major Vincent knelt beside Sharpe. ‘You think the enemy is led by an idiot?’

‘I’ve got a line of skirmishers out there, and they’re hurting the buggers, and the idiot hasn’t thought of putting out his own skirmishers. So the idiot is planning a direct assault on the wood. It’ll fail.’

Vincent looked at Sharpe. ‘You sound confident, Colonel.’

Sharpe grinned. ‘Garrison troops, Major, don’t know their arses from their elbows. We’ll suck them in, kill them, then go back to sleep.’

‘There’s a lot of them,’ Vincent warned.

‘They outnumber us more than two to one,’ Sharpe said, ‘and it isn’t enough. Now excuse me, Major.’

Sharpe walked along the tree line, noting that his men were laying flat at the edge of the trees. ‘It’ll be volley fire, lads,’ he told them as he walked. ‘Wait for my orders. Don’t fire till I tell you! You’ll hear our rifles fire but ignore it! Wait for my order! This is nothing to get excited about!’ The last men were arriving from his encampment where the fires glowed dully. The French could presumably see that faint glow through the trees and would aim for it which meant they must climb the shallow rising field directly in front of Sharpe’s battalion. ‘They’re bloody idiots,’ he grumbled to Harper. ‘Want to be heroes.’

‘I’m not complaining,’ Harper said.

‘It annoys me,’ Sharpe said. ‘The bloody war is over and they want to die? It’s a waste of men.’

‘Frenchmen.’

‘They’re good men, Pat. They deserve better.’ Sharpe took the rifle from his shoulder, eased the cock back, then primed the gun with powder from the horn every rifleman carried. The barrel was already charged with powder and a leather-wrapped ball.

‘But you’ll shoot one of the good men?’ Pat Harper asked, amused.

‘With any luck the bastard who’s leading them,’ Sharpe said.

Harper walked to the edge of the trees and gazed northwards past the approaching enemy. ‘Where’s the rest of our army?’

‘Long way north.’

‘So we’re all alone?’

‘Just us, no-one else,’ Sharpe said. A crackle of muskets and the crisper sound of rifles sounded from the hedgerow where Harry Price’s light company was firing at the leading ranks of the French troops. Men were falling there, but the French kept coming, following the track which curved away from the river and led towards a gated gap in the hedge. From there the track led straight to the woods where Sharpe’s battalion waited with loaded muskets. Sharpe strolled back to join Vincent. ‘You think they know Napoleon lost the battle?’ He asked.

‘They’ll know,’ Vincent said confidently. ‘Some fugitives must have come this way. Not many, maybe, but some.’

‘Then why fight?’

‘Duty?’ Vincent suggested. ‘Honour?’

‘Stupidity.’ Sharpe snarled, pulling back the rifle’s cock. He was tempted to add that what the French were doing was almost as stupid as the orders which had sent his battalion so far ahead of the British pursuit of the defeated French, but he suspected that Major Vincent had been the inspiration for those orders, which left Sharpe only one option; to obey them.

And to obey them he had to end this nonsense. ‘Not long now,’ he said quietly. He was



watching the first French ranks advance towards the gated gap in the hedge. Price's light company was hitting those forward ranks hard, dropping more men as the range decreased and the muskets became more accurate. Then a bugle sounded from the French ranks and the column started to run.

'Now,' Sharpe said, 'now!'

'Now?' Vincent asked.

'We suck them in, Major. Come on, man! Move!' The last words were directed at Captain Price who was far too distant to hear them, but almost immediately the light company began to retreat across the field. An ill-aimed scatter of shots pursued them, the musket balls tearing noisily through the leaves above Sharpe's head. 'They're firing high,' Sharpe said. 'Badly trained troops, Major.'

'Garrison troops?'

'And the *Garde National*,' Sharpe said, meaning the French equivalent of the Militia. 'They've been stuck in that town for years while real soldiers fight. Probably get two days training a month.'

'Then why attack us?'

'Because their damned commanding officer wants to get a *Legion d'Honneur*, or more likely impress his bloody mistress.'

The French had reached the gap, pushed open the big wooden gate and were now filing through.

'Someone's got a lick of sense,' Sharpe commented as he watched the enemy troops spread across the field's lower edge. 'They'll attack in line.'

Harry Price found Sharpe. 'Can my boys keep firing?' he asked. His light company was now back among the trees.

'Your riflemen can pick off the officers, rest of you wait for the battalion volley. And well done.'

'We ran away well?' Price asked, amused.

'Couldn't have done it better myself, Harry. Those idiots think they're winning. Tell your riflemen to look for the officers.'

Price took the redcoats of his company to the left of the line while his green-jacketed riflemen spread along the remainder of the battalion. The riflemen kept firing as the French arranged themselves in three ranks. Sharpe reckoned the field was some two hundred paces deep and he would wait till the enemy was halfway to the trees before he opened fire. Vincent was still at Sharpe's elbow. 'What will we do with our wounded?' the Major asked.

'Put them in the nearest farmhouse, leave some money to pay for their care and let the army deal with them when they get here.'

The French had brought some drummers who now began beating their instruments, provoking the whole line forward. They stumbled on the uneven turf. The bright moonlight glinted from shako badges and the metal furniture of the muskets. No bayonets were fixed. The drumbeats were slow, which meant the advance was slow. Sharpe stepped back into deeper shadow and unslung his rifle. He could see an officer at the centre of the advancing line, a man wearing a bicorne hat with a white plume. The man carried a sword and Sharpe guessed he was the commander of the garrison. He steadied the rifle against the trunk of an oak and peered along the crude sights. He aimed at the officer's moonlit plume, reckoning the ball would drop to hit the man in the chest. He heard the other rifles firing, saw a man stumble and fall, then pulled the trigger.

The flint fell on the striker, ignited the priming and the rifle fired, kicking back into Sharpe's shoulder as a fleck of burning powder landed on his cheek. A billow of smoke hid the enemy and Sharpe moved sideways until he could see again. The officer had vanished, and Sharpe reloaded the rifle.

He had begun his career in the ranks of the 33<sup>rd</sup>, a soldier who had been taught how to fire a musket and, though it was ten years since he had been commissioned as an officer, he still carried a longarm. For Sharpe a rifle was a soldier's proper weapon, even more so than the heavy cavalry sword he wore at his left hip. The sword denoted that he was an officer, but the rifle said he was a soldier, one of the green-jacketed killers who had haunted the French through the long wars. He rammed the leather-wrapped ball hard down the rifled barrel, slotted the ramrod back in place, and saw the French were halfway up the field.

'South Essex!' He bawled, using the battalion's old name. 'Stand!'

The French stopped instantly as they saw the soldiers suddenly appear from the shadows of the wood. The redcoats made a line of two ranks which was almost as wide as the French line. 'Present!' Sharpe bellowed, 'and aim low!'

The muskets came up to the shoulders. A few French muskets fired, the shots whipping overhead.

'Fire!' Sharpe bellowed, and the long line of muskets flamed and belched smoke. 'Reload!'

The last command had been unnecessary because the Prince of Wales' Own Volunteers were as well trained as any battalion in the army. And they could fire at least three shots a minute which, Sharpe guessed, was three or four times the rate of the opposing Frenchmen. 'Platoon fire!' Sharpe bellowed, 'Number Two Company first!'

A small night wind drifted the smoke towards the river and, as it cleared, Sharpe saw his opening volley had struck the French hard. There were gaps in the line and dark shapes heaped on the grass. The attackers, bereft of orders, had not continued their advance, but were now reloading muskets. Sharpe's men began the platoon firing from the right, the half company volleys following each other in a staccato rhythm.

The French, staggered by the initial volley, began advancing again, but unsteadily. Portions of their line came forward, others hesitated. Sharpe saw men still reloading their muskets and just then Jefferson unleashed a volley from the Frenchmen's left flank. Sharpe saw the enemy recoil, but knew he dared not leave his grenadier company exposed too long. The platoon volleys were still firing, hammering musket balls into the moon-shadowed enemy. Sharpe slung his rifle and took a step forward. 'Cease fire!' he shouted, 'and fix swords!'

The command was a rifleman's order, because only riflemen carried the longer sword-bayonet, but the Prince of Wales' Own Volunteers were accustomed to Sharpe's ways and they obediently slotted their bayonets onto their muskets. 'If you're loaded,' Sharpe bellowed, 'present!'

About half of the battalion's muskets were raised to shoulders. 'Fire!' Sharpe paused to let the sound of the volley fade. 'Battalion will advance! March!'

Another volley crashed from the grenadiers as Sharpe drew his sword and took his place between companies four and five. Major Vincent fell into step beside him. 'Careful, Major,' Sharpe growled, 'I'm supposed to keep you alive.'

'They're shooting high,' Vincent said.

'Not all of them.' Sharpe had seen some of his men fall and heard the sound of enemy balls striking musket stocks.

The battalion went forward in line while the enemy's progress stopped entirely. Sharpe could hear their remaining officers urging them forward, but the sight of a long line of bayonets advancing on them had taken away the enemy's resolve. Sharpe still kept the battalion at a walk, and it was not till he had halved the distance that he shouted his next command. 'Charge!'

The Prince of Wales' Own Volunteers let out a cheer as they began to run and the sound, or else the sight of the closing bayonets, decided the enemy. They turned and ran, a mob streaming for the gate in the hedge, some even throwing down their heavy muskets. Sharpe ran ahead of his advancing line and waved them to a stop. 'Let them go!' he bellowed, 'let them go!'

'Talion, halt!' Harper roared, and the Prince of Wales' Own Volunteers came to a stop.

The French nearest the redcoat battalion gate turned and stared at their enemy, apparently puzzled. Sharpe walked towards them, sword in hand. 'Who commands you?' he shouted in French. 'Tell him to come here!'

He shouted it again, then stood amidst the French casualties, waiting. Eventually two officers came from the enemy still crushed about the gate. Sharpe pointedly pushed his sword into its scabbard, then nodded a curt greeting as the two stopped a few paces away. 'You can rescue your wounded,' he said. 'There's a hospital in Valenciennes?'

'*Oui, monsieur,*' one of the two said. Both were young, and both looked nervous.

'Then carry the wounded back. The dead you can bury later. And if you disturb our sleep again you'll have more dead to bury.' He turned away and began to walk towards his men.

'*Monsieur?*' One of the French officers called.

Sharpe turned back. 'Yes?'

'Is it true? The Emperor lost the battle?'

'He lost it,' Sharpe said, 'badly.' He went on walking. 'Back to the bivouac,' he told Harper, 'and we march at first light.'

'That's not long,' Harper said, looking at the eastern sky.

Sharpe beckoned Major Vincent. 'How many miles to Ham now, Major?'

'About sixty, Colonel.'

Sharpe grunted. 'Two days, then.'

'Hard marching,' Harper added grimly.

'The Duke wants us there fast,' Vincent reminded Sharpe, though the reminder was hardly necessary. 'And we'll be on good roads.'

'And doubtless we'll meet more idiots on the way,' Sharpe said. 'We rest till dawn, then go.'

Deeper into France, and still on their own.