CAUGHT NAPPING:
A Napoleonic Scenario

This was the latest game in a long-running series of Napoleonic games, using 10mm figures and the Napoleonic Command rules. The games are played by a group of dedicated wargamers (to whom I occasionally refer as "The Gentlemen Wargamers", though they have no formal organization or title) who share a passion for military history, fine cigars and quality craft brews and single malts. They are played in a relaxed, old school style we call "ATF" games, since they invariably involve Alcohol (in moderation, of course), Tobacco and (simulated) Firearms. The most remarkable feature of these games is that although each player strives to play well, the object of their efforts is less to "win the game" than it is to contribute to an exercise in collective storytelling. Since I typically avoid putting much effort into play balance, the players' success is judged by how well they fulfilled their missions with the resources available, and the style with which it was executed. (I remember particularly a game in which a Portuguese commander was considered to have succeeded because his force put up such a lengthy and stubborn defense of a village, in spite of eventually being outflanked and crushed. In the same game, a French commander was adjudged to have pulled off a strategic coup by crossing the battlefield with an entire division, without firing a shot or rolling a die and exiting the table into the enemy's rear area, basing his choice of actions entirely on the pre-battle discussion with his superior and with his written orders in his coat pocket, unread.)

My usual method of designing a scenario is to begin with an actual historical situation or action, reproduce the order of battle and geography as closely as is practical, and then tailor it so that each player has an interesting role to play in recreating it on the tabletop. This time, however, some of the group were unable to attend (a rare occurrence) so I set aside the scenario I had original planned on using and created an entirely fictional situation set in 1814 in southern France. I gave each of the four players roughly equal forces, and set up a backstory which established friction between the commanding officers of each side as well as between the opposing forces.

Each player was given two infantry brigades and two cavalry commands (either a large regiment or small brigade), plus a couple artillery batteries. In addition, the British/Portuguese force included a reserve of six cavalry squadrons with a horse battery (for more details, see the appendix). The story was set during the retreat of Marshal Soult's French army from the Pyrenees. The two French commanders, Generals Vieuxtemps and La Rue, were instructed to encamp their forces around the town and village at the northern edge of the battlefield (see photo 1). The Allied commanders, Generals Broadbent and Sterling, were told that they were pursuing the French, executing a night march to enter the vicinity from the south and, hopefully, catch the French unprepared. The two senior commanders, Vieuxtemps and Broadbent, were told that their co-commanders happened to be married to their younger sisters, that family friction had led to strained relations and limited communication between them, and that they were not to be considered entirely trustworthy. The two junior commanders, La Rue and Sterling, were told that a victory by both friendly forces would be the second best outcome for them, personally, and that the best possible result would be their own success coupled with the failure and resulting disgrace of their compatriots.

1. The battlefield, looking east.
The terrain was designed to be fairly typical of the area, without representing any particular place. I used overlapping portions of two different terrain cloths to create the base, one of which was originally made for the battle of White Plains and the other for Gettysburg. A large wooded area on the east and a series of low ridges separated by marshy streams bracketed the battlefield. A hill, and a farm with a few scattered wood lots occupied an area in the center, dividing the field into two open areas. This would tend to compartmentalize the activities of the friendly commanders and force communication and cooperation between them to be deliberate.

2. The town of Oloron, as seen from the southeast, where the Allied forces would enter the table. Except for the mill on the left, all of the buildings are cardstock models.

After the French commanders had established their bivouacs, they were given the option to detail forces to scout for the enemy, which would reduce the chances of being caught by surprise. General Vieuxtemps instructed La Rue to establish his camps around the village of Ste. Marie (while Vieuxtemps himself occupied the much more comfortable quarters at Oloron about a mile and a half to the west) and detach half of his cavalry, consisting of four squadrons of Hussars, to the south and east to forestall such an eventuality. Once the enemy was spotted and the alarm raised, their units would be deployed on the table one at a time, at the location of the bivouac for each command, in a random order. The Allied commanders were to establish their order of march, but the columns would have become somewhat separated during the march so that they would arrive at their designated point of entry at random intervals.

3. The village of Ste. Marie, site of La Rue's encampment.

The intervals for the appearance of the units of both sides was determined by the roll of a six-sided die, with a result of 4 or more indicating success. If the roll was less than four, the die was retained and the result of the succeeding turns' rolls was added to it until a total of 4 or more was attained, at which point the next unit would appear and the process would start again.
The action opened with the early morning reappearance of two of La Rue's hussar squadrons, being driven back from their picket line by four squadrons of British light dragoons. Riders from the hussars raised the alarm in the French camps, triggering the process of deploying the French units on the table much earlier than the Allied commanders would have hoped.


The hussars driven off, the British light dragoons take a moment to reform from their skirmish, while the freshly roused troops of General Vieuxtemps struggle to get themselves in some kind of order.

5. The light dragoons reform their squadrons, in echelon.
Before the British cavalry can take advantage of their opportunity, a handful of French cavalry have managed to mount up and ride out to cover the camps.

6. The French dragoons and lancers scramble to cover the encampments.

The British cavalry, reformed but still fatigued, decide to take on the growing numbers of their French counterparts.

7. The British light dragoons bite off more than they can chew.
After being bested by their fresher and more numberous opponents and taking some casualties, they retire towards the head of the advancing friendly columns.

8. The French dragoons have savaged the British lead squadron, and the regiment retires.

While the cavalry skirmish was raging near Oloron, the remainder of the British and Portuguese forces were struggling to come up after their long and disorganizing night march. General Broadbent had managed to get most of a brigade of infantry up with a supporting battery, but rather than pressing on to the French camps the retreat of the dragoons convinced him to take up a position at a nearby farm and wait for more of his column to arrive.

9. General Broadbent's infantry occupies the farm.
General Vieuxtemps was now free to gather up and organize his forces, and he advanced confidently out of Oloron in the direction of the oncoming British.

Meanwhile, General Sterling was suffering from a disastrous series of die rolls, causing his units to arrive at an agonizingly slow pace. He managed to get a few squadrons of heavy dragoons on the board, and decided to boldly use them to try to preserve some deployment space in the face of the rapidly growing French forces opposing him. General La Rue was experiencing little trouble getting his units out of camp and formed up, and was advancing aggressively to take on the British incursion.
12. General La Rue deploys all his cavalry in the defile south of Ste. Marie to hold up the British dragoons.

All this while the British commanders maintained a phlegmatic silence; no communication passed between them, General Broadbent declining to give direction to his subordinate and General Sterling refusing to recognize even the presence of his brother-in-law on the field.

The French, as one might expect, were more voluble. Vieuxtemps sent a message to La Rue (note the deliberate and insulting misspelling of his name): "General Le Roux, The Emperor expects victory! I am glad to see you are following my explicit orders. See that you do not deviate!" At about the same time that this missive was being read by La Rue, Vieuxtemps was reading a message from his junior: "General Vieuxtemps, I have engaged the British Dogs trying to surprise our position. While you sleep I bring Glory to FRANCE!!" In response to Vieuxtemps' insult, La Rue fired off an angry response; "General, Unless you are inferring that "victory" are the entirety of my orders, I have received nothing from you but a piece of paper this day!!" and he then galloped off to join the lines of cavalry facing the British dragoons.

13. A sanguine General La Rue enjoys a stogie and a pint of oatmeal stout.
14. General Sterling looks over the situation and figures his chances.

15. General Sterling's heavy cavalry blows through the chasseurs a cheval.

General Sterling, trusting in the weight and quality of his horse in spite of begin outnumbered six squadrons to four, charged headlong at the French cavalry and dispersed the four squadrons of chasseurs a cheval forming the first line, causing quite a few casualties but suffering little.
The retreat of the broken chasseurs left only La Rue's two squadrons of hussars (the other two squadrons not having returned from their scouting mission) between his deploying infantry and the onrushing British heavies. La Rue remained attached to one of the squadrons, and urged them into a suicidal countercharge. In the ensuing melee, La Rue was lost in the confusion (he failed his Officer Casualty roll when the squadron to which he was attached took casualties). His exact fate would not be determined until a future turn, but for now his division was leaderless.

Off to the west, General Vieuxtemps' forces were closing in on the position taken by General Broadbent's brigade of infantry. His cavalry, first out of camp and more mobile, arrived first. Not liking their chances against the veteran red-coated infantry, he decided to wait until his infantry came up to sweep them out of their defenses. While awaiting the arrival of his foot, he received news of the cavalry fight to the east, and of his brother-in-law's misfortune. He took a few minutes to compose a congratulatory message to La Rue's second in command and send it off with a messenger.
18. The French commanders make their moves, both of them attempting to get up enough infantry to put an end to the plans of their Allied opponents.

As General Vieuxtemps’ columns approached, General Broadbent struggled to get his second infantry brigade on the field and in position to give him back numerical parity. If he could achieve that, his better quality troops might give him the edge. He figured that by the time they were in position, he would have also finished rallying the light dragoons who had been thoroughly spent after their actions early in the day. All the while, the blue columns continued to close in.

19. The overall situation. In the open ground near Oloron, General Vieuxtemps organizes his counterattack on the British position at the farm, while in the distance the struggle between La Rue and Sterling for control of the defile near Ste. Marie continues.
Somewhere to the east, General Sterling has finally seen the arrival of some help, and the infantry of his elite brigade of highlanders and rifles is deploying in the space won by the bold charges of his heavy dragoons. After clearing out the French cavalry the dragoons found themselves facing a solid line of French infantry across the defile between them and Ste. Marie, and threatened by voltigeurs filtering in through the woods on their flank, they withdrew from the dangerous position in which they found themselves.

About this time, it was determined that General La Rue was neither dead nor wounded, but had simply been lost in the confusion surrounding the rout of the hussars. He resumed command of his division just as the messenger arrived with the congratulatory message for his successor. When the courier inquired for the officer for whom his message was intended, La Rue informed him curtly that he was still in command of the division and snatched the message from the befuddled messenger's glove. Instead of falling into a rage at his brother-in-law's presumption, with an ironic smile he composed a message and handed it to the commander of his battered and broken hussar regiment, reinforced by the two squadrons that had been scouting to the east but now had returned, marching to the sound of the guns. He tells him to place his regiment at the disposal of General Vieuxtemps, but under no circumstances to risk any more losses this day.

The tattered remnants of the hussars move west to join General Vieuxtemps.
The hussars arrived just as General Vieuxtemps' division was about to attack Broadbent's position. He read the message . . . "Mon General, I have dispatched the 3rd hussars to you in my devotion for you to win the field. I will follow up with more once the Anglo Dogs to your flank have been seen off! Le Roux" . . . and uttered a hearty "Merde!" But he wrote in reply "My dearest Brother-in-law, I am so happy to hear you are well! Thank you for the cavalry. In honour of your brush with death I will charge with all my troops. Vive l'Empereur!"

22. General Vieuxtemps' counterattack falls on the British brigade holding the farm.

The leading brigade of Vieuxtemps' infantry pressed on, although severely disordered by artillery fire and then musketry from the steady British line. At less than a hundred yards all but one of his columns hesitated and refused to close. Usually this would spell the end of an assault, but the desperate French commander ordered one more attempt knowing how poor his odds (and his dice rolling!) were, and that the brigade would likely crumble if he failed. On what would have been his last attempt, every unit rolled to close, and the columns went in and over the wall. His elation was short-lived, however, as the stolid British fell back to the next wall, bent but not broken, and his own infantry now had accumulated enough disorder and fatigue to reduce their brigade cohesion by half, rendering them almost useless.

23. The stubborn redcoats fall back to the next position and reform.
Broadbent, while relieved that his troops had held, realized at last that to continue was pointless, as most of his column had not arrived and those that had were severely disordered and fatigued. Moreover, there was no sign of the cavalry reserve that the corps commander had promised him. He set about making dispositions to use his few fresh troops to cover his retreat, but failed to send notice of his intentions to his subordinate, General Sterling.

Meanwhile, a similar stalemate had developed to the east of the farm. Sterling's British infantry was having a tough time holding the French light infantry in check and there was no sign of his Portuguese brigade. An artillery position formed on the hill behind his lines, of a battery of six pounders and a howitzer battery, gave some protection but with the heavy dragoons still blown from their earlier successes, his situation was still precarious.

Finally, a determined charge by the French pushed the entire British brigade back to the line of the guns on the hill, but left them too disordered to mount a timely pursuit. With the rallied and reformed chasseurs as the only unit fresh enough to provide cover, La Rue decided that he had done enough and began to fall back to the protection of the enclosures around Ste. Marie.
Neither British commander could claim to have enough intact units remaining to launch a pursuit, so the game was considered concluded.

In the discussion after the game, it was generally agreed that the French success in avoiding being overwhelmed was due to two important factors: one was their decision to sacrifice a significant proportion of their cavalry strength to gain early intelligence of the enemy's approach (actually, the senior commander's decision to sacrifice a significant portion of his subordinate's cavalry strength), and the other was the relative ease with which they got units onto the table once the alarm was sounded. That said, it was admitted that the British commanders had mounted a credible threat with only a fraction of the force necessary for them to succeed. Congratulations and toasts were shared all around.
Appendix: Order of Battle

THE FRENCH FORCES

Vieuxtemps Division:

6# battery
8# battery

Cavalry Regiment (line)
4 squadrons lancers

Cavalry Brigade (line)
6 squadrons dragoons

2nd Brigade (line)
2 battalions line infantry 2 battalions light infantry

La Rue's Division:

8# battery
6# battery

Cavalry Regiment (veteran)
4 squadrons hussars

Cavalry Regiment (line)
4 squadrons chasseurs a cheval

1st Brigade (line)
4 battalions of line infantry

2nd Brigade (line)
2 battalions line infantry, 2 battalions light infantry

1st Brigade (line)
4 battalions line infantry
THE ALLIED FORCES

Broadbent's Division:

9# battery                                               6# battery
Cavalry Regiment (veteran)        Cavalry Regiment (veteran)                     2nd Brigade (veteran)
4 squadrons light dragoons           4 squadrons light dragoons                   4 battalions line infantry
1st Brigade (veteran)
1st Brigade (veteran)
4 battalions line infantry

Sterling's Division:

6# battery                                     howitzer battery                     6# battery (Portuguese)
Cavalry Regiment (veteran)          Cavalry Regiment (veteran)                  2nd Brigade (Portuguese) (line)
4 squadrons heavy dragoons           4 squadrons heavy dragoons         1 battalion cacadores, 4 battalions line infantry
1st Brigade (veteran)
1st Brigade (veteran)
1 battalion rifles, 2 battalions highland infantry
Cavalry Reserve:

Cavalry Brigade (veteran -1)
6 squadrons heavy dragoons

RHA 9# battery

Figures: 10mm, a mix of AIM and Old Glory
Rules: Napoleonic Command
Terrain: custom. See http://www.flickr.com/photos/war_artisan/sets/72157624371716442/
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