



The heights of La Serna, at Garcihernández (Photograph by Ian Fletcher Battlefield Tours).

Scissors, Paper, Rock

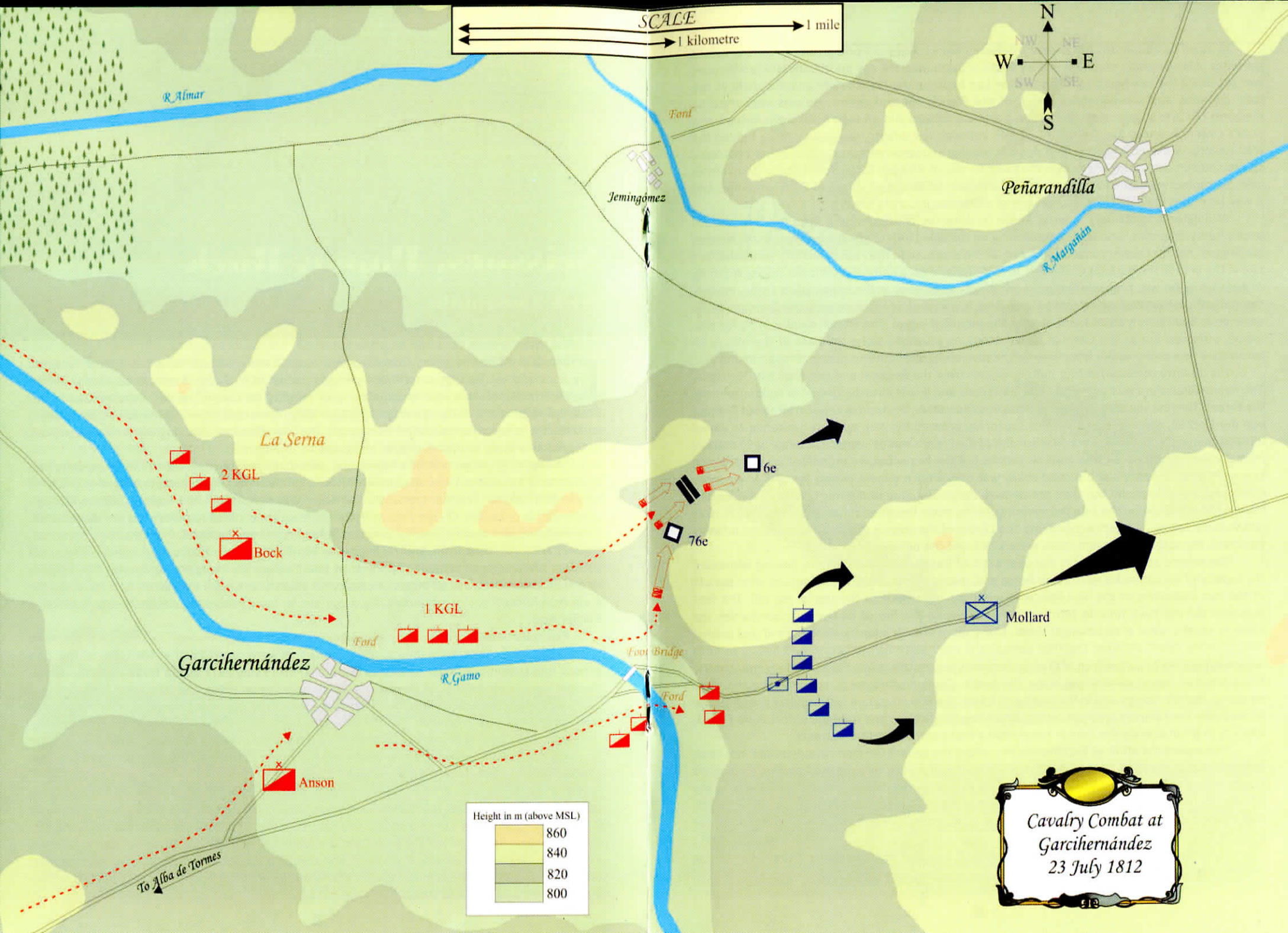
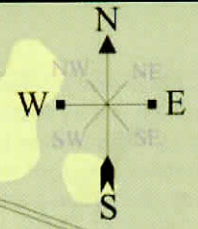
Nick Lipscombe

In the ancient Chinese game, scissors, paper, rock, Scissors defeats Paper but is itself defeated by Rock and yet Rock is, surprisingly perhaps, defeated by Paper. A simple analogy could be applied to Napoleonic cavalry on infantry, or infantry on cavalry, tactics. Scissors, clearly the flashing sabres of the charging cavalry, engage Paper, representing the infantry in line (or column) and inflict a heavy toll on the latter. Conversely, the same Scissors attacking the same infantry but deployed as a Rock, in square, results in repulse for the former.

The fighting component of a Napoleonic army consisted of the triad of infantry, cavalry and artillery and the mark of a good general was how he delivered those components of the field of battle. The release of a component in isolation was rare, but it did happen, either through circumstance or design. On the field at Waterloo it was mid afternoon when the cry went round, 'Prepare to receive cavalry'. Twelve thousand splendid, but unsupported, French cavalry advanced, then attacked by squadrons and regiments in echelon. For two hours they assailed the allied squares; some squares receiving upwards of twenty separate charges. To no avail, the squares remained intact. This was an attack of cavalry on infantry by design not, as we now know, by the great man himself but by his undeniably brave but far less capable deputy (on the day), Marshal Michel Ney.

Examples of cavalry on infantry engagements, which evolved through circumstance, are more widespread. This condition tended to occur if one side were surprised or at the start, or end, of a general engagement. At Villar de Peurco (Barquilla) on 11 July 1811 where three separate cavalry charges were made by the 1st Hussars King's German Legion (KGL), the 16th Light Dragoons and 14th Light Dragoons against a hastily ordered square of the 22e Ligne. Again, six months later, at Membrillo when three companies of the 88e Ligne were charged by the 2nd Hussars KGL and the 13th Light Dragoons. Admittedly, the French infantry were assisted by a low stone wall at Villar and a cork wood at Membrillo, but nevertheless the infantry remained inviolate on both occasions and so too does the scissors-stone analogy.

During the transition from paper to stone or open order to square, the infantry are very vulnerable. At Quatre Bras the 2/69th Foot, for example, suffered terrible casualties whilst in the act of doing so. However, once a square was formed it was impossible for the cavalry to break it. Captain William Tomkinson of the 16th Light Dragoons was quite clear that 'breaking a square is a thing never heard of...if steady, it is almost impossible to succeed against the infantry'. However, on 23 July 1812 at Garcihernández, the invincibility of the infantry square to attacking cavalry was, quite literally, turned on its head.



Cavalry Combat at Garcihernández
23 July 1812

At dawn on 23 July 1812 Marmont's defeated French Army of Portugal was streaming east in the wake of Wellington's emphatic victory south of Salamanca the day prior. General Foy's Division was providing the rearguard as his formation had been on the French right and not party to the total collapse, and subsequent disorder, of the French left and centre. He was supported by elements of Curto's light cavalry and a horse artillery battery. Hot on their heels were Anson's and Bock's cavalry brigades and the Light Division; although the infantry were some miles behind the lead cavalry. Wellington was up with Anson's leading squadron of light dragoons and ordered a spirited pursuit across the bridge over the River Tormes at Alba (de Tormes) and the fords on either side. Six kilometres to the east, on the Valladolid road, lay the small village of Garcihernández and it was here that the allies first caught sight of elements of Curto's cavalry.

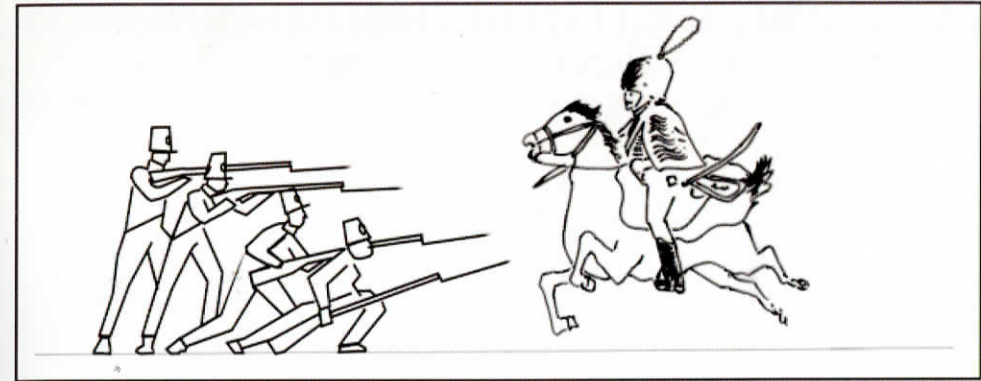
Wellington immediately ordered Anson to drive the chasseurs back from the ford and for Bock's heavy dragoons, who were approaching on the allied left, to get around their flank. Neither Wellington, nor his cavalry commanders had, at this stage, seen the French infantry concealed in a fold in the land to the north of the village. In fact, General Bock had great difficulty seeing anything at distance as he was probably the most short-sighted general in the entire allied army. Indeed, the staff officer that Wellington sent to issue Bock his orders had to accompany the Germans in the advance as Bock simply could not make out the intended target. The French cavalry, in no fighting mood, withdrew but as the German heavy dragoons advanced along the base of the hills of La Serna they received a volley from their left, delivered by the hitherto unseen French infantry.

The infantry consisted of four battalions; two from the 6e Léger and two from the 76e Ligne. The nearest battalion was one of the line battalions and it was already formed in square to meet the threat. The first squadron of German dragoons was taken by surprise and scattered but Captain von der Decken, commanding the third squadron, ordered his men without hesitating to wheel left and charge the French square. The first fire of the French was delivered at a range of 80 meters, mortally wounding Decken who kept his saddle, but the heavy cavalry thundered on towards the ranks of French infantry and a second volley was delivered at a mere twenty metres. Many more riders and horses were hit but their momentum continued. One of the mortally wounded horses reared and collapsed on the side the square scything down the three ranks and carving a gap over which many following riders jumped into the centre of the square. Thus penetrated, the infantry panicked, the square broke and many were killed and the balance captured.

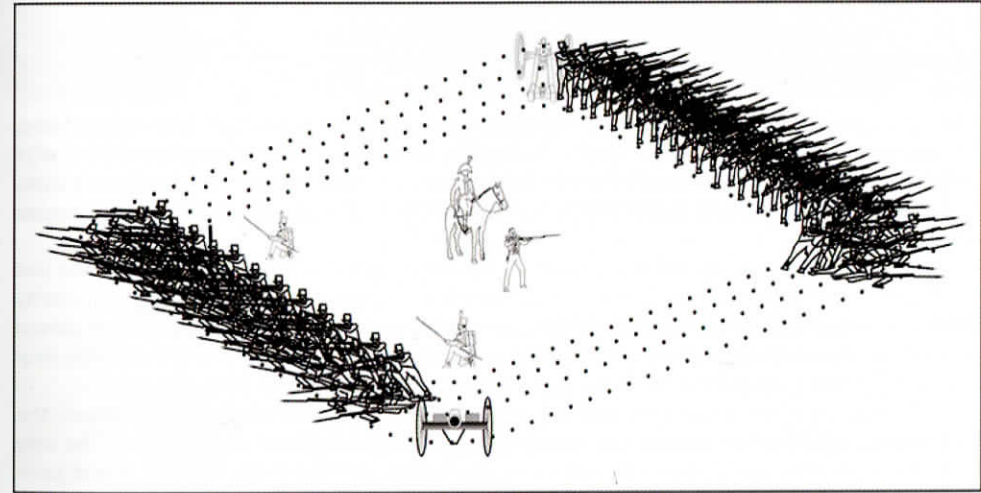
The second squadron, under the command of Captain von Reitzenstein, having witnessed the success of his comrades spurred his horse and, bidding his squadron to follow, set off in pursuit of the two battalions of the 6e Léger who were moving swiftly to the top of the hill. The first battalion did not have time to form square and despite the fire of its two rear companies the German cavalry were soon amongst them. Many more French infantry were hacked and sabred and yet more taken prisoner. The final battalion of the French light infantry tried hastily to form square supported by a squadron of French chasseurs but, by this stage, the second regiment of the King's German legion cavalry was upon the scene. Captain Marschalck, commanding the third squadron, led the charge and in the panic and haste, the French square lack regularity, and for the second time the rampant German cavalry broke the fortification and rode the unfortunate French infantry to ground while the French horse beat a hasty and undignified retreat.

Thus ended the affair at Garcihernández where the gallant German cavalry defied, not once but twice, the invincibility of the infantry square against attacking, unsupported cavalry. Wellington was to write that he had 'never witnessed a more gallant charge than was made upon the enemy's infantry by the heavy brigade of the King's German legion under major-general von Bock, which was completely successful, and the whole body of infantry, consisting of three battalions of the enemy's first division, were made prisoners'.

So Rock can indeed be defeated by Scissors; it can also be defeated by Paper - but that is another story.



Four ranks of soldiers, shoulder to shoulder, produced a formidable obstacle. The front two ranks concentrated on fending off an attack with their bayonets while the rear two ranks used the fire of the muskets.



A typical square for a British battalion had about 30 soldiers in four ranks on each side (although this might vary in numbers or a rectangular formation may have been adopted). Guns might have been located at the corners, which were the weakest part of the square. Each face, thus presented, could only be assailed by 15-18 cavalry.



Colonel Nick Lipscombe was born in 1958 in Angers, France. He was commissioned into the Royal Artillery in 1980. He has seen considerable operational service with the British and American armies, as well as with NATO and the UN. Nick is Chairman of Peninsular War 200, the UK official organisation for the commemoration of the bicentenary of the Peninsular War. He is the author of *Atlas and Concise History of the Peninsular War*.