

Field Marshal Michael Ney Teaches Us about Fortitude

By Greg Witherow

In 1804 Napoleon appointed 18 Field Marshals in the Grand Armée of the newly inaugurated French Empire. Ney was 35 years old, the son of a barrel maker. Of all the Marshals, Napoleon donned him "The Bravest of the Brave". No one questioned that. *In difficult times we can learn much from Ney.*

Ney had many successes in the field under Napoleon, but nobody endured tests like the Russian Campaign. Napoleon invaded Russia in June 1812 with 600,000 troops and exited six months later with 22,000. At the Battle of Borodino (outside of Moscow), Napoleon began to route the Russian army. Victory was near. But the battle had been especially bloody with exceptional casualties. As Napoleon was about to send in his reserves for the final blow, an officer whispered in his ear, "You are 800 miles from Paris". The order was never given. The Russians would live to fight another day. Ney was furious.



During the Moscow retreat Ney was tasked to protect the rear guard of the army. In crossing the Berezina River the Grand Armée was nearly destroyed. In bitter cold Ney held off the Russians until the French crossed, firing muskets with his men. Ney was the last French soldier to leave Russian soil.

Field Marshal Ney at the Berezina River



After the Russian debacle Ney advised Napoleon to step down as Emperor – for the good of France. The Bourbon King was restored to the throne and Napoleon exiled to Elbe. However, Napoleon escaped and marched on Paris with former soldiers joining him along the way. The King gave Ney orders to capture him. Ney assured him he would bring Napoleon back in a cage.

But Ney had a change of heart. He met Napoleon and fell in behind his former Emperor, helping to restore him to power. Europe declared war. At the conclusion of the 100 Days Campaign, the Allied armies met Napoleon on the battlefield of Waterloo. Ney was one of two Field Marshal's to fight that day. His multiple Cavalry charges were unable to break British General Wellington's ranks. The battle was lost and Napoleon was exiled to St. Helena where he died a few years later.

Ney was court-martialed for treason. However the 1815 Treaty of Paris placed Ney's hometown in Prussia. His lawyer called for a retrial, confident of winning on appeal. But Ney refused, declaring "I am French and I will remain French". At his execution he refused a blindfold and out of respect, Ney was given the right the order to fire. His last words were,

"Soldiers, when I give the command to fire, fire straight at my heart. Wait for the order. It will be my last to you. I protest against my condemnation. I have fought a hundred battles for France, and not one against her ... Soldiers, fire!"

Field Marshal Ney - True to the end

