

# The Field Marshall (Ret'd) and The Empress

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Although almost three years into his retirement Sir John Burgoyne found himself playing a small but far from unimportant part in French history.

The British newspapers of September 17th 1870 carried the news that "All classes of French residents in London have established a Committee of National Defence. The committee sit from 9am in the morning until 7pm in the evening at 8 Old Compton Street, Soho."

With France under the rule of Emperor Napoleon III, nominally alongside a National Assembly of restricted power, discontent had been growing across the country particularly among the more socialist minded of the French population.

Elsewhere, as the Prussian Chancellor, Otto von Bismarck, sought to unify the German States, many around the French Emperor, including his wife, the Empress Eugénie, were concerned that success for Bismarck might jeopardise France's status as the dominant power in Europe. Despite various diplomatic demands and discussion, the continuing alliance of

German states significantly strengthened Prussia's military position so much so that France mobilised its army on July 15th 1870, with the North German Confederation responding likewise later that day. On July 16th, the French declared war on Prussia and invaded German territory on August 2nd causing the German coalition to respond accordingly and invade North Eastern France on August 4th. Napoleon chose to lead his troops into battle but on realising his own military limitations, proposed returning to Paris. The Empress subsequently responding by telegraph: "Don't think of coming back unless, you want to unleash a terrible revolution. They will say you quit the army to flee the danger."

One month after the outbreak of hostilities, the Emperor capitulated to the Prussians on September 2nd at The Battle of Sedan and was taken prisoner, effectively leaving France without a government. When news of Napoleon's defeat reached Paris two days later, leading Republicans declared a new government assuming control of all affairs in France, thereby ending the Second Empire and the birth of the Third Republic.



*Napoleon III and Otto von Bismarck speak after the Battle of Sedan*

As hostile crowds formed near the Tuileries Palace in Paris the Empress Eugénie slipped from the palace along with one of her entourage and sought sanctuary at the home of Court Dentist and confidant, American, Thomas W. Evan, who arranged for her to travel to Deauville, from where, on September 7th, so popular reports suggest, "she took the yacht of a British official to England".

The British press of 1870 suggest that Eugénie's escape from Paris was perhaps

not quite so straightforward, reporting that on leaving the Palace she was separated from her associates by the crowd and recognised to cries of "To the guillotine!". However, Eugénie managed to lose herself in the throng and made her way to the house of Thomas Evan who advised that she should not attempt to flee Paris by train but instead secured her passage on a cart returning to Normandy. After three days and two nights travel the fleeing Empress arrived in Trouville near Deauville, south of Le Havre, and only 15kms from Honfleur, and from here the tale is best told by the correspondent for The Times newspaper: "Sir John Burgoyne's yacht was lying off Trouville when a Frenchman came on board asking to be allowed to look over an English yacht. Sir John, half suspecting him to be a French spy, allowed him to look about. Soon after this visitor was gone two French gentlemen came on board with the same request and, after asking many questions as to the sailing powers of 'The Gazelle', begged to be allowed to speak with Sir John alone. They told him the history of the Empress's escape and asked for her to be taken to England. Sir John promised to do so. She came on board privately and the yacht weighed anchor at once and set sail for Ryde.

The Empress was wholly unprovided with luggage, not having even a comb and brush, or a change of linen with her. The crossing was very rough, the sea washing over the deck, and the Empress was wayworn and exhausted when she arrived at Ryde."

The Empress Eugénie was soon ensconced at the Marine Hotel, Hastings while Napoleon III and his entourage of thirteen aides were held in comfortable captivity near Kassel, Germany with Eugénie travelling there incognito to visit him.

While Bonapartist candidates participated in the first elections for the National Assembly of The Republic they won only five seats, and the newly elected assembly officially declared the removal of the emperor from all power. Napoleon was released from captivity once a peace was arranged between France and Germany, the Emperor arriving into exile in England March 1871.

Napoleon, Eugénie, their son Louis and their entourage, having been received by Queen Victoria, settled at Camden Place in Chislehurst, Kent although the deposed Emperor's health soon began to deteriorate; despite surgery he died on the January 9th 1873 and was buried at St Mary's Catholic Church, Chislehurst. However, after Louis, a serving officer with the British Army, was killed in South Africa their bodies were moved to the Imperial Crypt at St Michael's Abbey, Farnborough, Hampshire.

The deposed family's association with the United Kingdom was commemorated in 1887 when Eugénie became the godmother of Victoria Eugénie of Battenberg, Queen Victoria's Granddaughter and later Queen Consort of Alfonso XIII of Spain.

With the outbreak of WWI Eugénie donated her steam yacht Thistle to the British Navy and funded a military hospital at Farnborough Hill as well as making large donations to French hospitals. The former Empress died in July 1920, aged 94, during a visit to Madrid and is also interred in the Imperial Crypt at St Michael's Abbey, Farnborough.

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