

The action at Frasnes.

After Gosselies had fallen into French hands around 5 p.m., the French cavalry of Lefebvre Desnottes (2000 men) was heading for Frasnes over the Brussels road. It had been ordered by Ney to do so.¹

The distance between Gosselies and the Cabaret de l'empereur (at 750 meters east from the church of Frasnes) is seven kilometers, so it must have been towards 6.30 p.m. that the cavalry approached the village.²

Just south of Frasnes the red lancers of the French guard met a post of the 2nd battalion Nassau under the command of major Von Normann (885 men) of the brigade of Saksen Weimar.

This battalion was assembled in the very early morning as a daily practice in front of the village of Frasnes, west of the Brussels road, between the Bois de Blathay and the Bois de Sauci. As a distant gunfire could be heard, the battalion kept its position and did so as the gunfire seemed to be approaching.

Von Normann informed his superiors at regimental headquarters at Hautain-le-Val about the situation and just as the battalion was ordered to return to its daily quarters, information dropped in through a wounded prussian hussar that French forces were very near, towards Gosselies.

Normann now decided to pull his battalion through the village towards the other part of it which lies on both sides of the Brussels road and took up a position immediately south-west of it, in rear of a hollow road. From there he was able to see the road as well as a picket (consisting of a sergeant, a corporal and twelve men) which he had posted further in front.

The battalion was then also accompanied by the guns of the horse artillery of captain Bijleveld. As a matter of fact, Von Normann was responsible for Bijleveld at that moment.

As the French cavalry approached and dispersed the picket (of which the members later returned to the battalion), Von Normann pulled his unit, plus the artillery, further through the village.³

As he pulled through, Von Normann left his 1st flankers-company, led by captain Muller, plus 80 volunteer chasseurs led by lieutenant Hoelschen, as skirmishers in and in front of the village.

As soon as he came out its other side, Bijleveld posted his battery about 300 meters north of the village, just north of the place where the road is cut deep into the ridge. Both howitzers were posted on the road itself, while Bijleveld divided his other guns evenly over the flanks, in the fields. Both flanks were covered by the remaining companies of the 2nd battalion Nassau.

Soon after they had taken up this position, the Nassau flankers-company came out from the village, pursued by the French red lancers.

They, in their turn, were now bombarded by Bijleveld with canister and as a result, halted their advance. Now, the French fell back towards the village and started to reconnoitre the area. As by these movements, Bijleveld and Von Normann felt they could be turned and cut off from their assembly point, Quatre Bras, Bijleveld now started a slow retreat in sections on foot over and along the road, giving some volleys now and then, thereby keeping the French on a distance.⁴

At the same time, the French lancers would have been swarming around the Nassau infantry, but not with any success.⁵

It was about halfway between Frasnes and Quatre Bras, about 300 meters south of the farm of Gémioncourt, that Bijleveld halted his unit on and near the road, while on his right covered by

the 2nd battalion Nassau.⁶

Meanwhile, the remainder of the brigade was concentrated in and around Quatre Bras. As far as the enemy was concerned, it became clear that the French limited themselves to hold Frasnes only.⁷

Skirmishing came to an end around 8 p.m.⁸ After that, both parties sent out vedettes. In this, the French seem to have done so with an emphasis on their right, towards Sart-Dames-Avelines⁹

Lefebvre Desnouettes concentrated his men at Frasnes, with his advanced posts near the most northward houses of the village.

Around 8.30-8.45 p.m., a battalion of infantry arrived.¹⁰ This battalion, one of the 2nd regiment light infantry of the division of Bachelu (¹¹) took up its positions north of Frasnes.

Marshal Ney.

Before entering into Ney's whereabouts, I here cite Lefebvre Desnouettes' report to Ney of the evening of the 15th of June.

Frasnes, le 15 juin 9 heures du soir

Monseigneur,

En arrivant à Frasne suivant vos ordres nous l'avons trouvé occupé par un régiment de Nassau infanterie d'environ 1500 hommes et 8 pièces d'artillerie. Comme ils se sont aperçus que nous manoeuvrions pour les tourner, ils sont sortis du village ; là nous les avons, en effet, enveloppés de nos escadrons. Le général Colbert a même été à une portée de fusil des 4 Bras sur la grande-route; mais comme le terrain était difficile et que l'ennemi s'est appuyé au bois de Bossu et qu'il a fait un feu très vif de ses 8 pièces de canon, il nous a été impossible de l'entamer. Cette troupe que nous avons trouvée à Frasne ne s'est pas portée ce matin en avant et ne s'est pas battue à Gosselies; elle est sous les ordres de Lord Wellington et semble vouloir se retirer vers Nivelles; ils ont allumé un fanal aux Quatre Bras et ont beaucoup tiré de leur canon. Aucunes des troupes qui se sont battues ce matin à Gosselies n'ont passé par ici; elles ont marché vers Fleurus. Les paysans ne peuvent pas me donner de renseignements sur un grand rassemblement de troupes dans ces environs, seulement, il y a un parc d'artillerie à Tubise composé de 100 caissons et 12 pièces d'artillerie. On dit que l'armée Belge est dans les environs de Mons et que le quartier général du jeune prince Frédéric d'Orange est à Brenne-le-Comte. [sic] Nous avons fait une quinzaine de prisonniers et nous avons eu une dizaine d'hommes tués ou blessés. Demain à la pointe du jour j'enverrai aux Quatre Bras une reconnaissance qui l'occupera s'il est possible, car je pense que les troupes de Nassau sont parties.

Il vient de m'arriver un bataillon d'infanterie que j'ai placé en avant du village. Mon artillerie ne m'ayant pas rejoint, je lui ai envoyé l'ordre de bivouaquer avec la division Bachelu; elle me rejoindra demain matin. Je n'écris pas à l'empereur n'ayant pas de choses plus importantes à lui dire que ce que je dis à votre Excellence.

J'ai l'honneur d'être avec respect, Monseigneur, votre très humble et très dévoué serviteur,

Lefebvre Desnouettes

*Je vous envoie un maréchal-des-logis qui prendra les ordres de Votre Excellence. J'ai l'honneur d'observer à Votre Excellence que l'ennemi n'a point montré de cavalerie devant nous, mais l'artillerie et de l'artillerie légère.*¹²

Some historians claim that Ney was present at the action of Frasnes.¹³ However, if Ney had been there around 7.30- 8 p.m. then Lefebvre Desnouettes would not have written a report to him. In this report, Lefebvre Desnouettes makes no allusion to Ney's presence.

In addition, Ney doesn't refer to his presence at Frasnes that night in his report to Napoleon. He mentions Gosselies as his goal, adds the report of Lefebvre Desnouettes without any comments and doesn't refer to his presence at Frasnes. The only conclusion can be that Ney went to Gosselies, and perhaps a bit further north, but certainly not as far as Frasnes.¹⁴

Ney established his headquarters in Gosselies, in the house of the steal-merchant Melchior Joseph Dumont, at the rue Saint Roch nr.2 (nowadays the rue Joseph Stranard).¹⁵ When he did so is not known, but it was in this house Ney wrote his report that night to Soult. By then, it was 11 p.m.:

Gosselies, 15 juin, 11 heures du soir

Monsieur le maréchal, j'ai l'honneur de rendre compte à Votre Excellence que, conformément aux ordres de l'Empereur, je me suis rendu cet après-midi sur Gosselies pour en déloger l'ennemi avec la cavalerie du général Piré et l'infanterie du général Bachelu. La résistance de l'ennemi a été peu opiniâtre; on a échangé de part et d'autre vint-cinq à trente coups de canon; il s'est replié par Heppignies sur Fleurus.

Nous avons fait 5 à 600 prisonniers prussiens du corps du général Zieten. Voici l'emplacement des troupes:

Le général Lefebvre Desnouettes avec les lanciers et les chasseurs de la garde à Frasne. Le général Bachelu avec la 5e division à Mellet. Le général Foy avec la 9e division à Gosselies. La cavalerie légère du général Piré à Heppignies. Je ne sais où se trouve le général en chef Reille. Le général comte d'Erlon me mande qu'il est à Jumet avec la plus grande partie de son corps d'armée. Je viens de lui transmettre les dispositions prescrites par la lettre de V.E. en date de ce jour.

Je joins à ma lettre un rapport du général Lefebvre Desnouettes.

Agréé, Monsieur le maréchal, l'assurance de ma haute considération,

*Le maréchal Prince de la Moskowa, Ney*¹⁶

It must have arrived at the chateau Puissant around 1.00 a.m. the next morning.¹⁷

In the report Ney refers to Soult's instructions for d'Erlon. In fact, the order to d'Erlon states: "*..l'intention de l'empereur est que vous ralliez votre corps sur la rive gauche de la Sambre pour joindre le 2e corps à Gosselies, d'après les ordres que vous donnera à ce sujet M.le Maréchal prince de la Moskowa*".

If Ney has written down these orders for d'Erlon at all, then these have not been preserved for prosperity.

Ney speaks about the information he got from d'Erlon that the majority of the 1st corps was at Jumet. Here he clearly exaggerates. D'Erlon wrote to Soult around 9 p.m.

If he reported to Ney as well then he couldn't have said that the majority of his corps was at Jumet, as from his report to Soult a much more extended position of the corps can be concluded.
18

That evening also the duke of Saksen Weimar's wrote his report, for Perponcher. It reads:

Sr. Excellenz dem Herrn General-Lieutenant Von Perponcher zu Nivelles. Quatre Bras den 15ten. Juny Abds 9 Uhr.

Euer Excellenz habe ich die Ehre zu melden dass der Feind gegen 1/2 7 Uhr die Vorposten bei Frasnés mit Cavallerie und Infanterie angegriffen hat. Das 2te Bataillon Nassau und die Batterie Bijleveldt mussten bis halben Weges Quatre Bras retiriren. Die Brigade versammelte sich sogleich bey quatre bras. Ich detachirte demnächst das 3te Bon Nassau in Colonne auf der Strasse nach Frasnés vorwärts, das 1ste Bon zu Vertheidigung des Waldes rechts von Hautain le Val, und zur Unterstützung des 2ten Bataillons und den Rest Quatre bras und an die Strasse von Marbais. Die Artillerie, die sich äusserst gut und brav hielt, hat den Feind abgehalten, weiter als Frasné [sic] vorzudringen. Die äussersten feindlichen Cavallerie Vorposten stehen an den ersten diesseitigen Häusern von Frasné. Feindliche Cavallerie hat sich in die Gegend von Sart à Mavelines gezogen, und bedrohet meine linke Flanke. Da keine Preuss. Truppen sich hieher zurückgezogen haben, so kann ich nicht wissen, in welcher Verbindung ich mit andern Corps stehe, und riskirte von Brüssel abgeschnitten zu werden.

Die Anzahl der feindlichen Truppen kann ich nicht bestimmen wegen der vielen Wälder und Anhöhen und wegen des hohen Kornes, das vor mir liegt. Von feindlichen Artillerie habe ich nichts entdecken können. Alle Massregeln sind getroffen worden um uns für diese Nacht zu sichern.

Euer Excellenz muss ich gestehen dass ich zu schwach bin, um mich lange hier zu halten. Das 2te Bon Oranien-Nassau hat französische Gewehre und jeder Mann nur 10 Stück Patronen. Die freywilligen Jäger haben Büchsen von 4erlei Caliber und nur 10 Patronen auf die Büchse. Den mir anvertrauten Posten werde [ich-sic] so gut und so lange als möglich vertheidigen. Mit Tagesanbruch erwarte ich einen feindlichen Angriff. Die Truppen sind von besten Geiste beseelt. Als Parole und Contresigne habe ich gegeben Wisbaden, Wilhelm.

eiligst der Colonel Br. zu Saksen Weimar

*Bey der Batterie befinden sich keine Infanterie-Patronen*¹⁹

Revised: 30th November 2010 - Copyright © Pierre de Wit

1. Cf. Report of Lefebvre Desnouettes of the evening of the 15th of June (see below).
General Foy. In: Vie militaire etc. p.270
Captain L.Wirths (2nd battalion 2nd regiment Nassau) In: Aus der Schlacht bei Waterloo. In: Nassovia 1905 p.142-143
Some historians erroneously claim it was Piré, but Lefebvre Desnouettes' report proves otherwise. Cf. Charras. Histoire de la campagne de 1815. Vol.I p.108
Siborne, W. History of the war etc. Vol.I.p.74

2.Cf. the report van prince Bernard van Saksen Weimars of 9 p.m. (below).
For 5 p.m. cf. the report of the prince of Orange to his father of 2 a.m. of the 17th June In: Supplementary Despatches p. 497
Major Sattler even claims it was 4 p.m. In: HHA, Abt.202, inv.nr.1015 p.336
Houssaye tries to make up the difference by stating that the cavalry arrived around 5 p.m. but that it had to wait for the infantry to arrive, which took place around 6.30 p.m. Cf. Houssaye,H. 1815.Waterloo. p.130
For 6.30 p.m.: Navez, L. La campagne de 1815 Vol.I p.96

³ It may have been even before the red lancers dispersed the picket, that French infantry of the 2nd regiment of light infantry (division of Bachelu) may have been in touch with the Nassau troops, but this is not certain.

Trefcon claims it did, while prince van Saksen Weimar also mentions the presence of infantry, but here also lancers, dismounted to fire with their carbines, may have been taken for infantry.

In: Trefcon, T.J. Carnet de campagne etc. p.

Van Saksen Weimar in his report. In: NA, 2.13.52 Inventaris etc. nr.1098

Henry Houssaye claims a bataillon of the same regiment had gone forward from Gosselies in a forced march as to support Lefebvre Desnouettes. As sources he uses the report from Ney of the 16th of June of 7 a.m. in which Ney mentions the presence of such a bataillon there then. Though I do not have this report (see below), I believe this is only a indication of its presence there: it is the battalion as referred to by Lefebvre Desnouettes as having arrived after the action.

Houssaye also cites a report of chef d'escadron De Stuers, but I do not have this report either and it is not sure whether he mentions any infantry.

In: 1815.Waterloo p.130

⁴ Here, the version of colonel Van Zuylen van Nijeveld and the one of captain Bijleveld are contradictory: while the first one claims that the French threat came from the east, Bijleveld indicates it came from the right (see below).

⁵ Cf. Captain Wirths (2nd battalion Nassau). In: Aus der Schlacht bei Waterloo. In: Nassovia 1905 p.142-143

It is in this connection that Lefebvre Desnouettes mentions the fact that Colbert would have

pushed as far as “à un portée de fusil” from Quatre Bras over the road, but that he had to fall back because of the enemy’s position and fire.

Yet, 1600 meters south of this crossroads is not what I would like to call “à un portée de fusil” (cf.his report).

In this connection, Houssaye claims Colbert – in a reconnaissance - pushed as far as Quatre Bras itself and bases himself upon a letter which was written by Colbert to the duke of Elchingen on the 15th of may 1829 (but which was not published in the Document inédits). As I have no access to this letter, the claim cannot be properly researched, but I have the impression that the reconnaissance mentioned is the action referred to here.

In: 1815.Waterloo p.131

A similar claim is done by the chief of staff of the division of Foy, chef d’escadron Lemonnier-Delafosse in his account. He goes even further by stating that Colbert would have pushed as far as Quatre Bras itself. Here he found two British brigades and some cavalry. In: Souvenirs militaires p.204-205

⁶ Cf. Captain Wirths (2nd battalion Nassau). In: Aus der Schlacht bei Waterloo. In: Nassovia 1905 p.142-143

Captain Bijleveld in his diary. In: Hoek, W. van den & Hoek, J.W. van den De geschiedenis van de rijdende artillerie p.88

Colonel van Zuylen van Nijeveld. In: Historisch verhaal etc. In: Bas, F.de La campagne de 1815 Vol.III p.290-294

Report of prince Bernard van Saksen Weimar of the evening of the 15th of June (below)

Report of general Lefebvre Desnouettes of the evening of the 15th of June (below).

2nd lieutenant Koopman (battery Bijleveld). In: VLS, II nr.4.9

Colonel Von Sattler (regiment Nassau). In: Pflugk Harttung, J.von Belle Alliance etc. nr.18

Major general Von Kruse. In: In: Pflugk Harttung, J.von Belle Alliance etc. nr.17

Prince Bernard van Saksen Weimar. Diary. In: HHA, Grossherzogliches Hausarchiv A, XXIV 30, p.193

⁷ Major Sattler (commander of the 2nd regiment Nassau). In: HHA, Abt.202 inv.nr.1015 p.337

8.Report of the prince of Orange to his father, from the 17th of June. In: In: Supplementary Despatches p. 497

Captain F.von Jeckeln (2nd battalion Orange-Nassau). In: www.1815.ltd.uk Original in: HSD, nr.1041 nr.1

According to Starklof it was around 9 p.m. C.f Starklof, R. Das Leben etc. p.183

The casualties of the artillery and the infantry would have been one officer and 39 men, but I have found no confirmation for this number. Cf. Bas, F.de. La campagne de 1815 aux Pays Bas etc. Vol.I.p.

Additionally, Aerts mentions a loss of 30 horses. Cf. Aerts, W. Etudes relatives etc.p.315

Aerts gives 30 men in stead of 39.

Vels Heijn splits the losses : infantry 35 and artillery 5. Cf. Glorie zonder helden. p.107
H.de Mauduit clearly exaggerates in his statement of 300-400 Nassau prisoners. Cf. Mauduit,
H.de. Les derniers jours de la Grande Armée. Vol.II p.21
French losses would have been 10. Cf. report of Lefebvre Desnouettes (below). He counts 15
Nassau prisoners.

⁹ Bijleveld in his diary. In: Hoek, W.van den & Hoek, J.W.van den. De geschiedenis van de
rijdende artillerie p. 88
Cf. Diary of Van Saksen Weimar. In: HHA, Grossherzogliches Hausarchiv A,XXIV 30, p.192-
193

10.Cf. report of Lefebvre Desnouettes (below)
Major general Von Kruse. In: Pflugk Harttung, J.von. Belle Alliance etc. Nr.17

¹¹ Trefcon, T.J. Carnet de campagne du colonel Trefcon. p.179

12. Copy in: SHAT, C15, nr.5. In his last sentence it should probably read “mais l'artillerie et
de l'infanterie légère” in stead of “mais l'artillerie et de l'artillerie légère.” Cf.Bas, F.de. La
campagne de 1815 aux Pays Bas.Vol.III.p.253
Koolemans Beijnen, G.J.W. Op welk tijdstip heeft etc.Bijlage I.
Lachouque, H. Le secret de Waterloo.p.103-104.
Aerts, W. Etudes relatives à la campagne etc.p.275-276

It still remains a mystery why the units of Van Saksen Weimar lit a beacon at Quatre Bras, as
referred to by Lefebvre Desnouettes.

13.Houssaye, H. 1815.Waterloo p.131

Chef d'escadron Lemonnier-Delafosse (division Foy) states he saw Ney rode towards Frasnes at
2 p.m, but then he was still south of Charleroi. In: Souvenirs militaires p.204

14.Bas, F.de. Henry Houssaye.1815.Waterloo. In: Museum.Nr.3.Mei-juni 1900.p.124
D.Hamilton-Williams erroneously thinks that Ney, having read Lefebvre Desnouettes' report at
9.45 p.m., rode over to Quatre Bras to size up the situation. In: Waterloo, new perspectives.
p.168

15. Delloye, S. La maison Dumont à Gosselies en 1815. In: Bulletin of the SBEN (1992), nr.17
p.37-51

Laudy, L. La maison Dumont à Gosselies. In: Revue des études Napoléoniennes.1932
This man called Dumont was married to Suzanne Monseu and had a daughter, Marie Françoise
Camille, the later called Mme.Françoise Drion (born 1806). She mentions a meal which Ney
would have taken here. According to her recollections Ney arrived that night around 9.30 p.m.
In 1815 the house was the most important house in Gosselies. It consisted in two parts: the

actual residence and a store (on the right) for nails. In the residence there was a wide corridor which split it in two. In this corridor there was a monumental staircase. To the left of the corridor was at ground level a dining room and to the right a drawing-room. At the end of the corridor there was a large room where a glass door gave access to the park. This park sloped down towards the gardens of the houses of the rue des Tanneurs and had an entrance to the road which leads to Courcelles.

The house decayed during the first few decennia of the 20th century because of the subsidences of the soil which was due to the mining of charcoal. In 1937 the house was in a very bad condition. Cf. the Times of 25th October 1937.

In 1951 only the facade of the house remained and not long after the whole ruin was demolished. Noeyen, J. van Une halte de Napoléon après Waterloo. La maison historique de la rue Saint Roch à Gosselies.” In: Bulletin de la Société belge d’Etudes Napoléoniennes (1951), nr.3 p.18-23

Delloye, S. La maison Dumont à Gosselies en 1815. In: Bulletin of the SBEN (1992), nr.17 p.37-51

16. Copy in SHAT, C15, nr.5

It is bizarre that Ney did not know where Reille himself was, while this general must have been at Gosselies as well. Cf. Pollio, A – Waterloo p.144

17. Houssaye thinks it was around midnight. In: 1815.Waterloo. p.136

18.If d’Erlon’s report to Soult came from Jumet, then it is very probable that d’Erlon must have spoken with Ney that night as their respective headquarters were a mere two kilometers apart.

19. In: NA, 2.13.52 Inventaris etc. nr.1098

Cf. Starklof, R. Das Leben etc. p.185-186 His version is in some details quite different.

Löben Sels, E.van. Bijdragen tot de krijgsgeschiedenis etc. Vol.IV. p.461-462

The fact that Van Saksen Weimar himself spent the night at Quatre Bras is confirmed by Van Saksen Weimar himself. Cf. Diary of Van Saksen Weimar. In: HHA, Grossherzogliches Hausarchiv A, XXIV 30, p.193

Saksen Weimar mentions French cavalry penetrating as far as Sart-à-Mavelines. In this connection I would like to mention the fact that general Colbert (of the lancers of the Imperial Guard) would have told captain Van Omphal (a former member of this unit) claims he told later to Van Omphal that he was able – on the morning of the 16th of June – to penetrate on the road between Quatre Bras and Genappe without encountering any enemy troops, but that he had to go back due to a lack of support.

In my view this is incorrect as at that time it was simply impossible to get there without encountering any allied units. It might refer to a patrol which Saksen Weimar refers to in his report of the evening of the 15th of June.

Cf. Autobiographical notes of captain Von Omphal, 6th regiment of hussars. In: NIMH, nr.104/7