

Napoleon and French imperial headquarters on the 15th of June.

According to the “ordre de mouvement” Napoleon would be “à l'avant-garde, sur la route de Charleroi ”. And looking to the facts, this is what he did.

At 3 a.m. the emperor must have been in Beaumont as at that time he wrote the following letter to his brother Joseph: ¹

Beaumont, 15 juin 1815, trois heures du matin

Mon Frère, l'ennemi faisant des mouvements pour nous attaquer, je marche à sa rencontre. Les hostilités vont donc commencer aujourd'hui; ainsi je désire que l'on fasse les communications qui ont été préparées. Informez-en le duc de Vicence.

Napoléon ²

It must have been towards 4 a.m. that Napoleon left Beaumont. ³ Then he rode towards the border which he crossed near Strée. It was from there that he passed on towards Donstiennes and Thuillies. Being there, the road towards Ham sur Heure was choked with troops of the central column and now Napoleon went slightly to the left in order to follow a parallel road. It was the one passing the farm of Marbioseul which led him to Marbais which he turned on its east side, at the point where the road to the north is crossed by the one reaching from Marbais to Ham sur Heure. ⁴

At this crossing, called Les quatre chemins or Champia, the emperor must have halted for a short time in a chair at the roadside. By then, it must have been before 7 a.m. ⁵

At the crossing was a house of a local called Demanet. Napoleon would have eaten a small breakfast composed of eggs. Just north of Marbais was the chateau of la Pasture, which was then owned by a former member of the garde d'honneur, L.J. du Woz de Lisbonne (1786-1861). According to the local tradition he would have had a short meeting with Napoleon in which Napoleon would have tried to convince him to re-enter the army. ⁶

Now, Napoleon retook the road towards Jamioulx at Les trois arbres [⁷]; it must have been around 7.30 a.m. After passing Beignée, he reached Jamioulx around 8.00 or 8.30. ⁸

Following the vanguard of his central column, imperial headquarters were forced to take up a bivouac here while the army was approaching Charleroi.

The emperor dismounted near the rectory of Jamioulx. This building was situated in a large garden which was part of a plain. Here he was received by the local priest, Mr. Jean Nicolas Jénicot. While the emperor was given a small meal, several local dignitaries met him, under whom a few former members of the French army. ⁹

At the bivouac here, the emperor issued the following order to d'Erlon at 10 a.m.

A.M. le comte d'Erlon. Bivouac de Jumignon, 15 juin, 10 heures du matin.

Monsieur le comte, l'empereur m'ordonne de vous écrire que M. le comte Reille recoit ordre de

passer la Sambre à Charleroi, et de se former sur plusieurs lignes à une ou deux lieues en avant, à cheval sur la grande route de Bruxelles.

L'intention de Sa Majesté est aussi que vous passiez la Sambre à Marchienne, ou à Ham, pour vous porter sur la grande route de Mons à Charleroi, où vous vous formerez sur plusieurs lignes, et prendrez des positions qui vous rapprocheront de M. le comte Reille, liant vos communications et envoyant des partis dans toutes les directions: Mons, Nivelles, etc. Ce mouvement aurait également lieu si M.le comte Reille était obligé d'effectuer son passage par Marchiennes. Rendez-moi compte de suite de vos opérations et de ce qui passe devant vous. L'empereur sera devant Charleroi.

Le maréchal de l'Empire, major général,

*Duc de Dalmatie*¹⁰

Some time later, he also sent one to Reille. This reads:

À Monsieur le comte Reille, commandant le 2me corps d'armée

Monsieur le Comte Reille,

L'empereur m'ordonne de vous écrire de passer la Sambre, si vous n'avez pas de forces supérieurs devant vous, et de vous former sur plusieurs lignes, à une ou deux lieues en avant, de manière à être cheval sur la grande route de Bruxelles, en vous éclairant fortement dans la direction de Fleurus. M.le Comte d'Erlon passera à Marchiennes et se formera en bataille sur la route de Mons à Charleroi, où il sera à portée de vous soutenir au besoin..

Si vous êtes encore à Marchiennes lorsque le présent ordre vous parviendra et que le mouvement par Charleroi ne put avoir lieu, vous l'opérez toujours par Marchiennes, mais toujours pour remplir les dispositions ci-dessus.

L'empereur se rend devant Charleroi. Rendez compte immédiatement à Sa Majesté de vos opérations et de ce qui se passe devant vous.

Le maréchal d'empire, major général,

Duc de Dalmatie

*Au bivouac de Jumignon [sic], le 15 juin 1815, à 10 h. ½ du matin*¹¹

Napoleon left for Marcinelle with his staff, escorte and the sappers and miners under Rogniat; it was now about 11 a.m.

Having been cleared from Prussian troops, Napoleon entered Marcinelle, where he would have been offered a drink by a Mme.Cordier, at the rue des Haies nr.43. In 1815 this house was the place where the municipality of Marcinelle was established.¹²

Soon after that, Napoleon entered the lower town of Charleroi where the sappers and miners of the guard were taking the bridge over the Sambre river.¹³ After that, Napoleon entered Charleroi under loud acclamations of the local people.¹⁴

He was led to the former headquarters of general Zieten, the chateau of the family of Ferdinand Puissant, a rich family of forgers.¹⁵ The chateau stood in the lower part of Charleroi, against three bastions of the former line of defence.

Napoleon would have used a lunch and later established his headquarters there. The building itself was a square and elegant building with one floor; it was on this floor that Napoleon slept that night.

It was also here that a local guide was assigned to him, called Germain Thévenier. Being a messenger of all kinds in the region he was well aware of all the ins and outs of the area. The emperor would have kept him around until he reached Fleurus, where Thévenier's role was taken over by a surveyor called Simon.¹⁶

Around 1.30 p.m. Napoleon left the lower part of Charleroi to enter the upper part and observe from its western boundary the slopes which descended towards Damprémy, Marchienne-au-Pont and the Brussels-road. Then he returned to the central square and went from there to the inn of Belle Vue, immediately north of Charleroi, where the roads to Gosselies and Fleurus diverged.¹⁷ After Napoleon had spoken with the owner, Schmydt, on the courtyard, he offered the emperor a chair at the roadside.¹⁸ It was from here that he took a look at the troops who were passing by, acclaiming him loudly.¹⁹ By now, it was about 2 p.m.²⁰

Despite the enthusiasm of the troops, Napoleon must have dozed off for a short while.²¹

By now, Gourgaud returned to the emperor informing him that Prussian units could be observed in and around Gosselies.

As a result, Napoleon sent Reille an order to march up to Gosselies and attack the enemy there.²² For Lefebvre Desnouettes with his light cavalry of the guard (who was still further to the rear) he must have given a similar order. By then, it must have been around 2.30 p.m.

The Young Guard was also ordered to send one regiment to the north to take up a position halfway between Charleroi and Gosselies as a reserve for Lefebvre Desnouettes.²³ To this regiment two guns of a horse battery were assigned.²⁴

The remainder of the Young Guard was to follow the main body of Pajol towards Gilly.

By 3 p.m. Napoleon also sent an order to d'Erlon to go to Gosselies to support Reille in his operations, and about half an hour later Gérard was suggested to cross the Sambre at Châtelet and support the troops which were about to attack Prussian units which had halted in front of the wood of Lambusart (cf. march of that corps).

Napoleon's meeting with Ney.

It was near Belle Vue, just north of Charleroi, that Ney joined Napoleon; by then it must have been somewhere between 3 and 3.30 p.m.²⁵

Ney now received from Napoleon the command over the French left wing, consisting of the 1st and the 2nd corps and the corps of Kellerman. This heavy cavalry would be at his disposal only the following day. At the same time, the light cavalry of the guard was assigned to his command.²⁶

Napoleon must have informed Ney about the general situation and, as far as the situation to the left was concerned, that the enemy was at Gosselies and that he had just sent the 1st and 2nd corps to take positions there and that Ney was supposed to go there as well. Additionally, Napoleon most probably instructed Ney to send reconnaissances out from Gosselies in all directions and to await further instructions which would follow later that day or the next morning.²⁷

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1. Baron Fain mentions 3 a.m. as time of departure to his report to Joseph. In: Correspondance. Nr.22055

2. Correspondance, nr.22054

³ H.de Mauduit claims it was after 2 a.m. Cf. Mauduit, H.de. Les derniers jours de la grande armée etc. Vol.II p.8

Aerts says it was 3.30 or 4.00 a.m. Cf. Aerts, W. Etudes etc. p.253

Delloye states it was 3 a.m. too. Cf. Delloye, S. Napoleon dans sa dernière campagne. Special number of the Bulletin of the SBEN.1997. p.35

⁴ Route Napoléon 1815 p.16

⁵ Delloye, S. Napoleon dans sa dernière campagne. Special edition of the bulletin of the SBEN, 1997 p.35

A publication called Route Napoléon 1815 (p.17) states it was 9.30 a.m. ! Also Debrakeleer thinks it was 9 am. Cf. Debrakeleer, L. Napoleon à Nalinnes le 15 juin 1815 p.12

⁶ Having done local research, this local tradition comes from Mr. T'Serstévens, mayor of Thuin towards 1890. Cf. Conreur, M. De Thuin à Waterloo. p.19-20

Colonel Biot, the aide de camp of Pajol, also mentions the meeting but erroneously situates this at Thy-le-Chateau. He states at the same time he saw Napoleon at about 9 kilometers from where he started his march, which must have been somewhere around Walcourt. Marbaix is at this approximate distance from Walcourt, so it could not have been Thy-le-Château, also for this simple reason. Cf. Mémoires p.234

⁷ The fact that the emperor passed very close to Ham-sur-Heure is supported by the fact that he would have been guided here by Joseph Horemans, a former member of the grenadiers of the 23rd regiment of the line, who was coming from this village. Cf.

Memoirs of Horemans, cited by S.Delloye. In: Les guides etc. In: Bulletin of the SBEN (1991) p.34

⁸ Some state that Napoleon followed a far more eastern track, through Silenrioux, Walcourt, Thy-le-Chateau and Nalinnes, but this is wrong Cf. Fleischman, Th. Campagne de 1815.

Itinéraire de Napoleon. In: Bulletin SBEN, no. 19 1956 p.30-31

Cf. Aubertin, G. - Campagne de 1815 etc.

Prunier, P.J. - Notice sur la ville de Charleroi p.17

These assertions are most probably based on the memoirs of colonel Biot, who claims to have met the emperor at Thy-le-Chateau, but this is a mistake. Cf. Debrakeleer, L. Napoleon à Nalinnes le 15 juin 1815 ? p.12

Debrakeleer claims Biot mixes up Thy-le-Chateau with Marbaix-la-Tour, as this place had an old tower, belonging to a chateau.

L.Clause initially claimed the version of Biot to be incorrect but later rejected this idea. Cf. Aperçue historique sur la commune de Marcinelle. In: Debrakeleer, L. Napoleon à Nalines le 15 juin 1815 ? p.6

According to Debrakeleer, Napoleon entered Jamioulx at 10 a.m. Cf. Debrakeleer, L. Napoleon à Nalines le 15 juin 1815 ? p.6

⁹ One of them would have been an old relation of the emperor, Pierre Théodore Norga from Pétria, Nalines. He would have met the emperor at Jamioulx and shortly after at Nalines, but this meeting has never taken place. Cf. Debrakeleer, L. Napoleon à Nalines le 15 juin 1815 ?

¹⁰ In: SHAT. C15, nr.5

In register of staff. In: BNP, FR.Nouv.acq.4366

11. Original in: AN, fonds Ney. 137 AP18

Copy in register of staff. In: BNP, FR.Nouv.acq.4366

Other sources date the order at 8.30 a.m.. They are:

Documents inédits, p.22

Ropes, J.C. The Waterloo campaign, annex nr.3

Grouchy, E.de Mémoires Vol.IV p.161-162. Grouchy leaves out the sentence "et que le mouvement par Charleroi ne put avoir lieu"

¹² Delloye, S. Napoleon dans sa dernière campagne. Special issue of the bulletin of the SBEN. 1996 p.35

¹³ According to captain Vaillant, aide de camp of general Haxo, it was then 4 or 5 p.m. but this is incorrect. In: Deux notes autobiographiques etc. p.246

14. Local tradition. It must have been around noon. Cf. Lieutenant Chevalier (regiment chasseurs à cheval of the light cavalry of the guard). In: Souvenirs p.319

Also see: Delloye, S. Napoleon dans sa dernière campagne. Special number of the bulletin of the SBEN. 1996 p.35

Pflugk Harttung, J.von In: GSA.VPH-HA VI.nr.II.12.p.38

Marchand believes it was 10 a.m. In: Mémoires p.161

15. Piérart, Z.J. Le pays de Charleroi p.59

Couquébau. La Belle Alliance. Notes p.14

Cf. separate note.

¹⁶ Bastelaer, D. van Le vieux Charleroi p.14

17. Houssaye, H. 1815. Waterloo p.120 He probably bases himself here on a local tradition.

Delloye even describes the route Napoleon took: via the rue Neuve Eglise [now the rue Puissant], along the east-side of the Place Verte [now the place Albert 1er], the slope of Deux Villes [now the rue de la Montagne], over the Sambre, along the Place de la Ville Haute [now the place Charles II] and via the rue Dauphin to the bifurcation norther of Charleroi. In: Napoleon dans sa dernière campagne. Special number of the bulletin of the SBEN. 1996. p.37
Weggant confirms Napoleon entered Charleroi by 1.30 p.m. In: Bastelaer, D.A. van - Charleroi, Gilly, Fleurus et Waterloo p.3

¹⁸ Libioulle, A. Napoleon à Beaumont et à Charleroi. In: Bulletin of the SBEN, no.45 1964 p.15

19.The troops involved must have been those of the Young Guard.

20.Cf. Aerts, W. Etudes etc. p.264

²¹ Baudus. Etudes sur Napoleon p.210

22.The order itself has not been handed over, but its content can be taken from the one sent out to d'Erlon.

23.Mémoires pour servir etc. p.80
Gourgaud. La campagne de 1815 p.38

24.Gourgaud. La campagne de 1815 p.38

The artillery involved may have been that of Lefebvre Desnouettes as he writes that he is lacking his guns that evening. Cf. his report to Ney of the evening of the 15th June. In: SHAT, C15 nr.5

25. At 3 p.m. an order was sent to d'Erlon without mentioning any command of Ney at all, while the one to Gérard of 3.30 p.m. mentions the fact that Napoleon would be heading for Gilly, a decision he might well have taken after Ney arrived and Grouchy had reported about the Prussian presence there.

Houssaye thinks it was shortly after 3 p.m. In: 1815.Waterloo. p.121

Others claim it to have been at 3 p.m.

Cf. Delloye, S. Napoleon dans sa dernière campagne. Special of the bulletin of the SBEN. 1996 p.37

Clausewitz mentions 4 p.m. In: Campagne de 1815 p.60

Also in: Prunieu, P.J. Notice sur la ville de Charleroi p.19

Heymès mentions 7 p.m. ! In: Relation etc. In: Documents inédits. p.4

Cf. Répécaud, Napoleon à Ligny etc. p.14

For 2.30 p.m. see: Pontécoulant, F.G. de - Souvenirs militaires p.22

26.Gourgaud mentions a brigade of the corps of Pajol, but what he actually means here is the 1st regiment of hussars under Clary, which was temporarily detached to Ney on the 15th. This

regiment returned to its corps on the 16th. In: Campagne de 1815 p.38-39

²⁷ Aerts, W. Etudes etc. p.274