

The imperial guard.

In Beaumont itself, in the imperial headquarters was the 1st regiment of grenadiers. Just north-east of Beaumont the infantry was in three lines, the young guard in the first line, the chasseurs in the second and the grenadiers in the third. The cavalry of the guard had its positions south of Beaumont.

It was Napoleon's intention that the young guard would leave at 5 a.m., following the track of the corps of Lobau. The chasseurs would follow half an hour later, the grenadiers one hour later. The cavalry of the guard would leave at 8 a.m. However, this plan was not to be.

In fact, that day, the Imperial Guard eventually marched in front of the 3rd and 6th corps as it arrived before these two army-corps in Charleroi, the young guard in front.

The reason was that the 3rd corps was delayed for approximately three hours, until 6 a.m. [¹] and that it arrived in front of Charleroi by 4 p.m.

The sappers and miners of the guard, plus half a unit of pontoons, led by colonel Rogniat, were supposed to advance in the vanguard of the corps of Vandamme. ² It was Rogniat who would have urged Vandamme to leave at the time fixed for the departure, but as Vandamme had no orders to do so, he refused. Rogniat, however, probably not being under Vandamme's orders, would have left anyway, possibly by 3.30 or 4 a.m. ³ Rogniat reached Charleroi towards 11 a.m. so his speed must have been about 3.5 kilometers / hour. The assumption is that at least the young guard passed the Sambre at Charleroi between 1 and 2 p.m. As it had to cover 28 kilometers, it did so in 8.5 hours, which gives it an approximate speed of 3.5 kilometer per hour. The first units of the imperial guard, those of the young guard, were supposed to leave from their positions in front of Beaumont at 5 a.m. However, they soon must have bumped into Lobau's rearguard which was delayed by the delay of the 3rd corps which was supposed to be in front. Napoleon, who was on the road since 4 a.m., must have been informed about the situation right away.

As a matter of fact, however, in stead of launching Vandamme right away to form the vanguard, Napoleon ordered his imperial guard to replace the 3rd corps as the corps to take the lead of the central column by taking an alternative route. By that time, the imperial guard was already moving as it was supposed to do. ⁴ By then it must have been between 5 and 6 a.m. The track it followed probably must have led along Gravelinnes and Marcelle, through the forest, towards Donstienne, where it picked up the road the 3rd and the 6th corps were to take some time later. ⁵ Unfortunately, the actual order for the Guard to take the lead in the central column is not handed over as it probably was an oral one. ⁶

To take the lead and overtake Vandamme, Drouot was ordered to force his march: the order for his men to accelerate was given twice. ⁷

It might be possible that the imperial guard wasn't marching as a whole and that at least the Young Guard had a start on the rest of the Imperial Guard. This could be taken from Napoleon's order of the early afternoon, when he placed the Young Guard in rear of Pajol and had detached one of its regiments to the Brussels road, to wait for the remainder of the guard. ⁸

According to the "ordre de mouvement" the cavalry of the imperial guard would follow the infantry at 8 a.m. and there are no indications that it did not follow it in her track. That morning, however, its commander, general Mortier, being struck by sciatica, was left behind at Beaumont. ⁹

Some time after Napoleon had reached Charleroi and had been informed about the Prussian presence to his front and right, he took the light cavalry of the guard under Lefebvre Desnouettes to the front to advance towards Gosselies. ¹⁰

The infantry was led to positions along the road between Charleroi and Gilly and halted there. The heavy cavalry halted north of Charleroi near the bifurcation of the roads to Fleurus and Gosselies.¹¹

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¹ Cf. Lobau's report of the evening of the 15th of June.

² The fact that there was a unit of pontoons is confirmed by De Mauduit. In: Les derniers jours etc. Vol.II p.10

Cf. Lomier, E.- La bataillon des marins de la garde p.443

³ Mauduit, H.de Les derniers jours etc. Vol.II p.9-10

⁴ Mémoires pour servir etc. p.79

Gourgaud. La campagne de 1815 p.37

Mauduit, H.de Les derniers jours etc. Vol.II p.11

⁵ Gourgaud. Campagne de 1815 p.37

Gourgaud writes, contrary to the 3rd corps: "Napoléon, à la tête de sa garde déboucha sur cette ville [Charleroi] par une autre traverse".

Mauduit, H.de Les derniers jours etc. Vol.II p.11-12

Barral (lieutenant in the imperial guard) claims the guard passed through Nalinnes, which is far to the east – here, he most probably means Les Hayes de Nalinne. In: L'épopée de Waterloo p.118-119

6.Houssaye claims the order only to have been written for the Young Guard but there is no proof for that. It may have been that the Young Guard was taken further to the front in the column of the guard (see below). In: 1815.Waterloo p.119

The fact that the order probably was an oral one is more proof that it was given between 5 and 6 a.m. and not at Jamioulx, as the other ones from there were all in a written form.

⁷ Mauduit, H.de Les derniers jours etc. Vol.II p.11-12

⁸ Gourgaud, La campagne de 1815 p.38

⁹ Mortier himself writes in his diary: "The attacks of gout that began at Strasbourg have increased daily in severity. During the night of the 14th I had violent pains accompanied by chills, and all next day I was confined to bed. M.Percy examined me and warned me that this would continue for forty days. Since I cannot possibly mount a horse, I sent my regrets to the chief of staff for my inability, in this condition, to share the glory and the dangers of the army.

I leave Beaumont the 16th." In: Lachouque, H. - The anatomy of glory, p.475

¹⁰ Gourgaud, La campagne de 1815 p.38

¹¹ Guyot, general. Carnets de campagne p.290