

Napoleon divides his forces: the left wing.

The situation until about 2 p.m.

By 10.30 a.m. Napoleon expected Reille, unless he would face resistance, to place his corps astride the Brussels road one or two *lieues* (4.5 or 9 kilometers) to the north. Though Reille's orders where to cross the Sambre had been ambiguous (Marchienne-au-Pont and Charleroi), his target remained the same.

Around the same time, having crossed the Sambre at Marchienne-au-Pont, d'Erlon was directed to take up a position on the road leading from there towards Fontaine-l'Evêque – Binche – Mons, thereby at the same time linking up with Reille in such a way to support him, if needed. There is no clear point up to where d'Erlon was to advance (as it was with Reille), but d'Erlon was also to reconnoitre in the direction of Mons and Nivelles.

It is a first step in the further development of the left wing which would form part of the grand strategy of the central position. It is important to note that d'Erlon was supposed to support Reille, and not vice versa, as it was expected that he could face enemy resistance first. A possible main threat as coming from Wellington was apparently seen from the line Mons – Binche – Fontaine l'Evêque, but not such that it was expected that d'Erlon would need any support from Reille.

The situation after about 2 p.m.

Having been informed about a Prussian presence at Gosselies, Napoleon – at Belle Vue - drew in the front-line of his left wing more to the north-east by ordering both the 2nd and 1st corps to go there. Yet, he kept a small part of the 1st corps on the road which runs from Marchienne-au-Pont to Mons, to make sure about possible danger as coming from Mons. Apparently, the absence of any allied troops to the left of the French army must have been reported to central headquarters. Shortly after these orders were issued (between 2.30 and 3 p.m.), the left wing was formalised by the appointment of marshal Ney as its commander.

Ney's command.

Ney's arrival at Belle Vue is normally being mentioned as a *fait accompli*, as if it was planned right then but obviously it wasn't. It is not known whether Ney met Napoleon on the night of the 14th of June and what they might have agreed upon as far as Ney's presence in the army on the 15th of June was concerned, but in case they hadn't, it is very well probable that Napoleon was expecting him right from the early hours or later in the morning on the 15th of June.¹

Striking in the transfer of command to Ney is the fact that Ney knew so little about the whole situation and about the troops over which he actually had the command.²

It is not always sufficiently clear when and how all corps commanders were informed about the command of Ney. And if they were, functional lines are confusing.

Napoleon had sent out the light cavalry of the Imperial guard towards Gosselies before the moment Ney got his actual command. Coming from Charleroi, Ney must have met Lefebvre Desnouettes somewhere south of Gosselies and must have explained him the situation regarding his command. In the evening, the situation in this relation is unambiguous: Lefebvre Desnouettes reports to Ney.³

In his orders of 2.15 p.m. to Reille, Napoleon doesn't refer to Ney as left wing commander simply because he hadn't met Ney yet. It must have been when Reille was about the attack Gosselies that he actually met Ney.⁴

Strange enough, in his report to Soult of 9 p.m. Reille doesn't mention Ney at all. Ney, in his turn, reported to Soult by 11 p.m. and from this report it becomes clear that he had not received any news from Reille himself; Ney wasn't even aware of the exact position of Reille's headquarters, even though these were in Gosselies, as were his own.⁵

Regarding the 1st corps, the situation was that the moment Ney and Napoleon met at Belle Vue, d'Erlon himself was south of Marchienne-au-Pont. How and when d'Erlon learnt about Ney's command remains unknown.

D'Erlon, in his report of the evening from Jumet, asked for orders from Soult. It is still hard to explain why d'Erlon wrote then to Soult asking for orders, while his superior, Ney, was two kilometers away, at Gosselies and Ney had his command already for a period of about five hours by then. Soult, in his turn, replied – while giving his actual instructions – that he was to receive the orders from Ney. Ney sent them late that evening.

As to d'Erlon, it remains an open question why Ney didn't anticipate in what was expected of d'Erlon to do, at least there is no evidence for this.

On the 15th of June, there are no indications of any formal arrangements made by Soult for the corps commanders about the structure of command as far as Ney was concerned, but on the other hand Ney wasn't anticipating very much towards the corps-commanders as well in what was expected of them.

It is only on the 16th of June in his order to Ney, carried by Flahaut, that an explicit reference is made by Napoleon to the status of Ney as commander of the left wing in relation to central headquarters. This order states:

"[...] le major général donne les ordres les plus précis pour qu'il n'y ait aucune difficulté sur l'obéissance à vos ordres lorsque vous serez détaché, les commandants des corps devant prendre mes ordres directement quand je m'en trouve présent.[...]" In reading this, things would be pretty straightforward: d'Erlon, Reille, Kellerman and Lefebvre Desnouettes were to listen to Ney as long as Napoleon himself was not around.

As for d'Erlon, his hesitations tempted Soult to express the emperor's intention that evening, while referring him back to Ney for the actual orders to comply with it. Formally, this was the only correct way of dealing with d'Erlon's report, but this, in turn, could have received another status if Ney had sent a clear message to d'Erlon about his command. So far, this is what the available evidence tells us.

Ney's advance.

Being ordered to Gosselies, it was from there that Ney sent Lefebvre Desnouettes to Frasnès.⁶

There is no doubt that reconnaissances were sent out to the left, but on how far they must have strayed got can only be speculated.

Having divisions in Mellet and Wangenies that evening, it is striking that Ney placed a strong force on his right, apparently a sign that he didn't feel secure there after the retreat of the Prussians. What may have played a role here is that he may he felt he would run a risk of being isolated from the right wing.⁷

A proper estimation of this can only be determined if one knows which information Ney had about this right wing, as he left Napoleon in the afternoon. Of this information, virtually nothing is known. At least, Ney must have known that Napoleon was planning to move towards Fleurus. In this respect there was a deplorable communication between the two wings on the 15th of June.⁸

The moment Ney joined the advance guard of Reille around 4.30 p.m. near Gosselies, he barely had information about the situation of the 1st and the 2nd corps.

As far as the Prussians was concerned, he knew there was a brigade on the other side of Gosselies, which he was instructed to occupy. For this reason, Napoleon had sent both the 1st

and 2nd corps to Gosselies. After the fall of Gosselies, Ney was not aware of the presence of any enemy troops in front or to the left of him. For this reason, he sent the light cavalry of the guard in reconnaissance. It remains unclear whether he sent Piré's division (or a part of it) in pursuit of Von Steinmetz.⁹

It was around 6 p.m., the moment the light cavalry of the Imperial guard was just south of Frasnes, that gunfire must have been heard coming from the action at Gilly. Shortly after, the cavalry came into close contact with the Nassau outposts. What conclusion could be drawn from this gunfire? The distance between the two advance guards, in a straight line, was then about 12 kilometers. At that moment Ney was about 12 kilometers from Charleroi, and Grouchy 4 kilometers.

Around 6.30 p.m. the Brussels road up to Frasnes was in French hands, the 1st and the 2nd corps were heading for Gosselies, the action of Gilly was taking place and the brigade Von Steinmetz was retreating towards Heppignies. At that time, Von Steinmetz was the only Prussian force which could have threatened Ney's flank.

Due to the numerous undulations of the ground the view to and from Quatre Bras was limited. Additionally, the Bois de Bossu and the trees around the farm of Gémioncourt blocked the view towards Quatre Bras and beyond, so therefore the strength of Wellington's forces here was hard to assess.¹⁰

Another reason for halting the troops at Frasnes would have been their fatigue. It should indeed not be forgotten that the 2nd corps, the division of Bachelu in particular, had marched since 3 a.m. and that it had covered 32 kilometers. It had faced a few actions as well.¹¹

D'Erlon is often being criticized for having unnecessarily delayed his troops.¹² First of all, in his departure, which took place at 4.30 in stead of 3 a.m.

This delay in all probability all had to with the arrangements of the hours of departure of both the 2nd and 1st corps in relation to their positions. As the distance between the vanguard of the 2nd corps (at Leers-Fosteau) and the one of the 1st corps (at Solre-sur-Sambre) was about 8 kilometers, while the march-column of the 2nd corps would develop into a column of almost half that length, the 1st corps simply could not leave in time.¹³

The order issued at 10 a.m. instructed d'Erlon to move his corps over the Sambre and to place it on the road which leads from Charleroi (along Marchienne-au-Pont) towards Mons, but in such a way that it would be *à portée* to the 2nd corps.

Some hours later, at 3 p.m., orders directed d'Erlon further north, to Gosselies, while retaining a strong force at Marchienne-au-Pont to make sure about the left rear flank of the left wing. Even though these orders were unambiguous, it was still at 4.30 p.m. that d'Erlon seems to have been hesitating in what to do with the forces which he had kept further south along the Sambre river (and which was a result of the *ordre de mouvement*).

Central headquarters did not react to this and it was only after d'Erlon's second report that Soult (again) instructed him to bring his complete corps over the Sambre, towards Gosselies while retaining the screen towards Mons.

Taking it all together, d'Erlon did indeed delay the advance of his corps, and this was aggravated by a slow and not vigorous correction of the situation central headquarters; now, basically, virtually the same order was sent to d'Erlon at 3 p.m. and some eight hours later for the second time. It is unsure whether d'Erlon also reported to Ney during the day, as he did to Soult, but at the same time, there is no proof that Ney took any effort to acquaint himself on the situation of d'Erlon and to pull it fully towards Gosselies; it was only late that evening that he did so.

The left wing and the strategy of the central position.

Seen in the context of the strategy of the central position, the left wing was on the 15th of June eventually to be in a position between Gosselies and Marchienne-au-Pont, while securing the road to Mons. At the same time, the left flank of this position was to be reconnoitred towards Mons, Nivelles etc.

Within this position it becomes clear that the 2nd corps, based at Gosselies had a prominent orientation and vigilance to the east towards the Prussian army, while the 1st corps had one to the south-west, to a point where Wellington was expected to be concentrating.

In time, the accent shifted that day from an orientation from Charleroi as a starting point to both north (Brussels road) and west (Mons road) in general, to Gosselies in particular. In this process, the forces put against Wellington's army through Marchienne-au-Pont towards Mons were reduced in strength, while the measures securing the crossings of the Sambre further south were withdrawn.

In looking at the orientation towards Mons and the concern for main passages over the Sambre, Napoleon clearly felt uneasy about a possible irruption of Wellington's army over this river into the French rear on the operation line running back through Beaumont and Laon towards Paris.

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¹ It remains mere conjecture what Napoleon would have done in case Ney had not shown up then as far as the command over the left wing was concerned. He might then have Reille and d'Erlon operate under his own direct orders as they did until 3 p.m., then giving the command of the left wing to Ney later that day. All in all, a most bizarre and non-committal way of handling a command of one of his wings.

² Ney's letter of the 26th June to Fouché. In: LMB, nr.AS1301
Cf. Lenient, E. La solution des énigmes de Waterloo. p.187

³ Cf. Lefebvre Desnouettes' report of the night of the 15th written to Ney.
Yet, Lefebvre Desnouettes also writes: " 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 ".

⁴ Reille doesn't state explicitly that he met Ney, but it is here that he refers to Ney took the command. In: Notice historique etc. In: Documents inédits etc. p.56

⁵ The fact that Ney did not have a report of Reille the moment he wrote his own report for Soult can be taken from the following:

-Ney refers to a report of d'Erlon, while he doesn't do so for one of Reille

-he doesn't know where Reille himself had his headquarters; if he would have had a report, he would have known

-he refers to the whereabouts of only those divisions which he had seen and led himself; about those of Jérôme and Girard he remains silent, while Reille does mention these to Soult. If Reille would have reported to Ney, he would undoubtedly have done in a similar way to Ney.

⁶ Lefebvre Desnouettes' report is another indication that Quatre Bras was no target set for Ney. The report shows the mission Lefebvre Desnouettes had: advancing right unto Frasnes and then to carry out some careful reconnaissances in the area. The reasoning of the report is not directed towards the enemy, but comes from the line Gosselies - Frasnes, the operation-base. Additionally, Lefebvre Desnouettes asks for further orders, an indication that he didn't have any others.

⁷ Damitz, K.von. Geschichte des Feldzugs von 1815 p.98

Siborne, W. History of the war in France etc.Vol.I p.76

Gourgaud, C. Campagne de dix huit cent quinze p.41

Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de France p.82

Charras. Histoire de la campagne de 1815 Vol.I p.109

Clausewitz, Von – Hinterlassene Werke etc. p.41

⁸ Lenient, E. La solution des énigmes de Waterloo p.190Cf. The report of Lefebvre Desnouettes. In: SHAT. C15, nr.5

⁹ Houssaye claims Ney wasn't allowed to use the cavalry of the guard, but this limitation was

issued on the early morning of the 16th of June. In: 1815.Waterloo p.130

¹⁰ Lefebvre Desnouettes states in his report dated 9 p.m. "...comment le terrain était difficile " and prince Bernard van Saksen Weimar writes: " Die Anzahl der feindlichen Truppen kann ich nicht bestimmen wegen der vielen Wälder und Anhöhen und wegen des hohen Kornes das vor mir liegt ".

In: SHAT. C15, nr.5

In: NA, 2.13.52 Inventaris etc. nr.1098

¹¹ Cf. Damitz, Von Geschichte etc. p.98

Charras, Histoire de la campagne de 1815 Vol.I p.109

The battalion of the 2nd regiment light infantry covered a total distance of 37 kilometers. It left at 3.00 a.m. and halted at 20.00 p.m. – this gives an average speed of 2,5 kilometers an hour.

¹² For instance, see: Ropes, J.C. The Waterloo campaign. p.51-52

¹³ Cf. Oosterman, J. T. – De overgang van de Sambre op 15 Juni 1815 p.86

It is unclear upon what strengths Oosterman bases the lengths of the columns, but his argumentation is most plausible. The issue of departures of other units cannot be assessed in the same way as sometimes other factors are valid (3rd corps and 6th corps as a result) or units - though sometimes concentrated in each other's vicinity - took diverging routes (imperial guard in relation to the 3rd and 6th corps) or were scattered (cavalry corps of the reserve; 4th corps in relation to the division of Delort).