

The movements of the corps of d'Erlon. ¹

The advance guard of the 1st corps was formed by the division of Durutte. ² Durutte was followed by the second division of Donzelot which was followed by the third, the one of Marcognet. Quiot's first division formed d'Erlon's rear-guard. The units of Jacquinet's cavalry most probably flanked and preceded the infantry.

Durutte says the corps "passa près [underlining is mine] de Villers Peruin". Despite the fact that the account of brigade-general Schmitz contains certain errors, he also states: " La division a quitté sa position et a suivi les 1er et 6e corps [?] jusqu'à hauteur de Villers Perwin où on a pris à droite, pour se porter sur un plateau situé au nord du dernier village.. " ³

The junctions south east of Frasnes are located near Villers Perwin. Additionally, Schmitz says the corps arrived on a plateau north of Villers Perwin. As the three last divisions didn't get any further as north-west of Villers-Perwin (see below), then this statement matches the situation of Donzelot's division (marching behind Durutte): it halted north of Villers Perwin for considerable time and to return to the battlefield of Quatre Bras from there.

Captain Duthilt, aide de camp of brigade-general Bourgeois of the 1st division (Quiot) tells about the baggage-column of his division (and possibly of the entire corps): " au lieu de s'arreter avant d'arriver à la hauteur où notre division venait de se mettre en bataille, en entrant dans la plaine où se déployait à notre droite l'armée qui combattait à Ligny, la colonne qui marchait sur la chaussée de Gosselies à Frasne continua à se porter en avant et à nous dépasser, mais sans que nous nous perdissions de vue l'un et l'autre. " ⁴

In this account Duthilt confirms that the column of baggage didn't leave the Brussels road and *that there was no loss of visual contact between this column and the 1st division*. Further, Duthilt confirms how this column of baggages kept the retreating cuirassiers of Guiton for the enemy and then went back in disorder. Having lost no eye-contact over the column of baggages, this means that the division cannot have been near the Roman road (east of the Brussels road) as this point is about four kilometers south of the battlefield of Quatre Bras, and it is highly improbable to suppose that the cuirassiers would have gone back that far. In addition, the 1st division would even have formed square in order to be prepared for this body of cavalry. This is also an indication that the division was still very near to the Brussels road towards 7 p.m. ⁵

Gourgaud states " On pouvait espérer les résultats les plus beaux, lorsque le général Vandamme envoya prévenir qu'à une lieue [4,5 km] sur sa gauche, une colonne ennemie, d'une vingtaine de mille hommes, débouchait des bois et nous tournait ainsi , en ayant l'air de se porter sur Fleurus. " ⁶

This text contains two errors: first of all Gourgaud (or Vandamme) exaggerates the strength of the 1st corps. Whether the corps moved through Chassart or a route north of Villers Perwin, Vandamme could never have seen the strength of the total column at the same time.

Secondly, the column didn't head for Fleurus, but it seemed to be extending the French extreme left flank. ⁷ The fact that the corps seemed to be coming out of the woods was caused by the fact that the Bois Delhütte was, as a screen, in rear of the corps. ⁸

Finally, it should be pointed out that the distance of 4.5 kilometers (one "lieue") does not refer to the distance between the frontline in front of Saint Amand and the point where the road of Chassart crosses the Roman road, but to the distance between this frontline and the point where the road which passes north of Villers Perwin appears.

Taking all these details together, the conclusion is that the corps followed the Brussels road, until its vanguard (Durutte's division) turned to the right at the inn called "Cabaret l'Empereur" towards 5 p.m. (this is about 2100 meters north of the point where the Roman road crosses the Brussel road). ⁹

The corps followed this road, which runs south of Bois Delhütte and to the north of the village of Villers Perwin. North-east of this village the roads splits in two and it was near this point that the corps also split in two later that evening (see below).¹⁰ There it was seen by Vandamme's forces around 5.30 p.m.

At some point of time the 1st corps returned towards the battlefield of Quatre Bras, but as d'Erlon had decided to do so, he left his the 4th division, as well as three regiments of his cavalry division of Jacquinet in position between the height of Saint Hubert north-east of Villers-Perwin. D'Erlon did so because of his fear that the Prussians might fall between Napoleon's and Ney's forces and split them. D'Erlon had no specific instructions for its commander, general Durutte, other than to trust on his own experience and to be careful. Durutte then decided to move the cavalry towards the Roman road, followed by his own infantry.¹¹

Houssaye believes that both these divisions took the road of Chassart.¹² However, the account of Durutte does not corroborate this statement. First of all, Durutte declares that d'Erlon decided to leave the troops on the "plaine qui se trouve entre Bry et les Bois Delhutte [sic]". This is a position northeast of Villers Perwin, and not in the vicinity of Chassart. A simple glimpse on a map will suffice to prove this. In addition, Durutte states that he sent the cavalry of Jacquinet towards the Namur-road "en laissant Wagnée [sic] et Bry et à sa droite, mais en appuyant toujours sur ces deux villages; son infanterie suivait ce mouvement."¹³

It is impossible to leave both these villages to the right in marching to Chassart, while they both are on the left. According to Houssaye the troops of Durutte crossed the road of Chassart and then advanced between Villers Perwin and Wagnelée, a somewhat bizarre manoeuvre while having an instruction to be careful.¹⁴

In marching over the road which connects Villers Perwin to Wagnelée, north of the Roman road, this village, as well as Brye are to the right. Further, the explicit attention given to the Bois Delhütte is an indication for his position near this wood, in stead of a position further to the south. Durutte says: " ..ce qui engageait le général Durutte à bien observer les bois de Delhutte, car au moindre mouvement rétrograde du maréchal Ney, l'ennemi se serait trouvé derrière lui. "¹⁵

It is also general Brue who confirms that the 4th division of Durutte was "placée à une petite distance du hameau de Wagnelée."¹⁶

On the one hand, it must have been around 5.30 p.m. that the column of the 1st corps appeared at the horizon of the battlefield of Ligny. On the other hand, the first division of the 1st corps was near the Brussels road the moment the cuirassiers of Guiton went back after their unsuccessful charge. That must have been towards 7 p.m. Generally being it is also assumed that the 1st corps took up the positions of the 2nd corps at the battlefield of Quatre Bras around 9 p.m.¹⁷

Presuming the infantry marched with an average speed of 3 km / hour and the presence of the corps to the east of the Brussels road, it would have meant that the division of Quiot would have left its position near the Brussels road towards 8 p.m. The distance between this division and the frontline at Quatre Bras was three kilometers.¹⁸

In comparing the events which have happened in the meantime, it becomes clear that there must have been a considerable delay in the march back towards the position of Frasnes. These events probably have to do with the communication between Ney and d'Erlon.

Ney was informed about the turn of the 1st corps by the chief of staff of d'Erlon, Delcambre. At what time Delcambre reached Ney is unknown, but it must not have been long after the conversation of d'Erlon and the imperial messenger.¹⁹

The conversation between d'Erlon and the imperial messenger took place between 4.30 and 5 p.m.

Ney, in his turn, could have been informed about the change of direction of the 1st corps between 5 and 5.30 p.m., by the imperial aide de camp and Delcambre.²⁰

It is not known where Delcambre met d'Erlon again on his return; however, it must have been between 5.30 and 6 p.m. that Delcambre left Ney.²¹ In all probability, Delcambre may have rejoined d'Erlon around 6.30 p.m.²²

In conclusion, it would have been at around 6.30 p.m. that d'Erlon was informed about Ney's situation. On the other hand, his movement back to Frasnes would have started between 7.30 and 8 p.m. This would also mean that from that time on (6.30 p.m.) the majority of the column must have halted in positions along the road north of Villers Peruin, between the plateau of Chapelle Saint-Hubert (Donzelot) and the Brussels road (Quiot), with Marcognet's division in between. At that moment, Durutte and Jacquinet were slowly approaching the Roman road, north-west of Wagnelée.²³

D'Erlon himself writes: " J'ordonnai, en conséquence, à la colonne de faire contre-marche; mais, malgré toute la diligence qu'on a pu mettre dans ce mouvement, ma colonne n'a pu paraître en arrière des Quatre Bras qu'à l'approche de la nuit ".²⁴ Yet, the delay was more than one hour, and this may have primarily been caused by the dilemma d'Erlon was in.

Based on the memoirs of Napoleon and the account of Durutte, Houssaye erroneously believes the 1st corps, or at least half of it, left the Brussels road near the inn of "à l'Empereur", took the road to the south through Villers-Perwin and eventually crossed the Roman road to reach the road of the farm of Chassart.

He thinks it may well have been possible that the two rearmost divisions left the Brussels road more to the south in order to march directly on the Roman road and meet the two foremost divisions near Chassart by waiting for them to come up from the left and let them pass and then to follow in their trail.²⁵

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

¹ The most prominent eye-witness accounts used to reconstruct the marches of the 1st corps are those of:

General Durutte (4th division). In: *Sentinelle de l'armée*, 8th March 1838 p.76-79

General Schmitz (2nd division). In: Brouwet, E. *Mémoires et documents etc.* In: *Revue des études Napoleoniennes*, 1932

Captain Duthilt (1st division). In: *Les mémoires du capitaine Duthilt* p.299-300

Baron Gourgaud. In: *Campagne de dix huit cent quinze etc.* p.49-50

Captain Chapuis of the 85th regiment line doesn't provide any relevant information. He states that the corps turned to the right not far from Marchienne-au-Pont. However, the distance between this village and the inn "à l'Empereur" is about 14 kilometers. In: *Notice sur le 85e de ligne etc.* In: *Journal des sciences militaires* p.26

Chef de bataillon Rullière (95th regiment, division of Durutte) writes extensively about the marches of the 1st corps on the 16th of June, but his chronology, as well as his claims about the movements are impossible to reconcile. Essentially, Rullière claims that the corps made three movements to the right, as coming from the Brussels road, of which the first (starting about 1.30 p.m.) reached as far as about 3.3 kilometers and the second (starting not long after 3 p.m.) of about 2.25 kilometers east. They were all intended to have the 1st corps attack the Prussian extreme right flank, as ordered by Napoleon. Rullière claims that in the two first cases, the counter-order was given by Ney and complied with by d'Erlon's full corps as far as the Brussels road, while in the third, d'Erlon would have refused to comply with it, but that d'Erlon allowed Durutte and the cavalry to do so and which they eventually did (starting by 6.30 p.m.). These assertions are such, that the account as a whole becomes of no value whatsoever in the reconstruction of the marches of the 1st corps during the afternoon of the 16th of June. Rullière wrote his account for colonel Charras, but he did not actually use it, for good reasons. Being written in 1863, when he was 69 years old, Rullière must apparently have been considerably influenced by former versions of the events relating to the corps that day. Cf. his account in: Largeaud, J.M. - *Napoleon et Waterloo* p.371-372

2. According to captain Chapuis the 85th regiment line marched in front. In: *Sentinelle de l'armée*, van 24 feb.1838. p.26

3. Brouwet, E. *Mémoires et documents etc.* In: *Revue des études Napoleoniennes*.1932

4. Duthilt. *Les mémoires du capitaine Duthilt*. p.299

5. Unfortunately, another member of the 1st division, private Canler (28th regiment of line), doesn't go into any details about the marches of the corps on the 16th of June. In: *Mémoires de Canler* p.24

6. Gourgaud. *Campagne de dix huit cent quinze etc.* p.49-50

7. Lieutenant Martin of the 45th regiment line (division Marcognet) confirms in his memoirs that the troops went into the direction of a point between Fleurus and Ligny, that is Saint Amand. He writes: "Vers les 5 ou 6 heures, nous nous trouvons sur le flanc de l'armée prussienne, en vue de St.Amand." In: Martin, J.F. *Souvenirs d'un ex-officier 1812-1815*. p.276-277

8. Houssaye, H. 1815. Waterloo p.209

⁹ The inn of "à l'Empereur" is since long gone; now, there is a sports-complex. The road running down to the southeast is still there, as a mere track. The more southern road is also still there, but asphalted. The road finally leading eastward is also there; it runs north of Villers Perwin and along "Chapelle St.Hubert" further as a track, crosses the railway-line and ends up in a crossing of tracks. From here it leads to the 19th century installations of Chassart, stretched out on the Roman road, one kilometer from Wagnelée.

10.Ch.Vandermaelen calls it Neuf-Bois. In 1815 there were a few isolated houses. Now, it is the site of the Chapelle St.Hubert.

¹¹ Durutte. Account in the Sentinelle de l'armée p.77

12.Houssaye, H. 1815. Waterloo. p.209 (footnote)

13.Durutte. Account in the Sentinelle de l'armée p.77

14.Houssaye, H. 1815. Waterloo p.209

15.Durutte. Account in the Sentinelle de l'armée p.77

¹⁶ General Brue. In: Chapuis, captain - Waterloo. Notice etc. p.26

17.Reille. In: Notice historique etc. In: Documents inédits p.60

Ney in his letter to Fouch of 26th June 1815. In: LMB, nr.AS1301

Drouet d'Érlon. Le maréchal Drouet, comte d'Erlon etc. p.96

Petiet, baron (member of the staff of Soult) Souvenirs militaires p.199

Colonel Heymès informs us that general d'Erlon arrived around 9 p.m. at Frasnes, but that it still took long after until his whole corps had been assembled. In: Relation etc. In: Documents inédits p.11

D'Erlon himself claims his corps arrived near Frasnes "à l'approche de la nuit", that is around 8.30 p.m. In his letter to the duke of Elchingen. In: Documents inédits etc.p.65

Lieutenant Martin (45th regiment line, division Marcognet) mentions a time of 8 p.m. In: Martin, J.F. Souvenirs d'un ex-officier 1812-1815. p.277

Private Canler (28th regiment line, brigade Bourgeois, division Quiot), says the troops arrived a few hours after the action had ended; somewhere later he mentions an advance at 9 p.m., which probably must have been somewhat later.

He places his regiment that night to the right of the Brussels road, in a square of six files deep. Later that night the regiment moved to the left of the road and to a more forward position. In: Canler, L. Mémoires de Canler p.24

18.Captain Duthilt of the brigade Bourgeois of the division of Quiot says about the march to Frasnes: " Nous primes position en avant du terrain sur lequel nous venions de manoeuvrer [that is east of the Brussels road], et nous y établimes nos bivouacs." [that is north of Frasnes]. In: Duthilt. Les mémoires du capitaine Duthilt. p.300

The fact that the three divisions marched over the Brussels road and not some short-cut, is proven by the statement of general Schmitz: " ..elle recut l'ordre de rétrograder et de se porter

sur la grande route de Bruxelles pour appuyer le 2e corps qui était au prises avec l'ennemi en arrière des Quatre Bras. " In: Brouwet, E. Mémoires et documents etc. In: Revue des études Napoléoniennes.1932

19.Here it is clear how near in fact d'Erlon was to Ney, who fought in front of Quatre Bras.

²⁰ D'Erlon confirms the aide de camp (Labédoyère) rode to Ney. Cf. his letter to the duke of Elchingen, dated 1829. In: Documents inédits p.65

21.Houssaye says it was between 5.15 and 5.30 p.m. In: 1815.Waterloo p.219

22.Houssaye claims it was 6 p.m. In: 1815.Waterloo. p.219

²³ This fits into captain Duthilt's mentioning the presence of his division near the Brussels road by the time the cuirassiers streamed back from Quatre Bras (which was toward 7 p.m.).

24.D'Erlon in his letter to the duke of Elchingen, dated 1829. In: Documents inédits p.65

25. Houssaye, H. 1815.Waterloo p.209 (footnote)

Mauduit, H.de Les derniers jours de la grande armée. Vol.II p.

Uffindell, A. The eagle's last triumph. Plan, p.235

Von Müffling shows the movements of the corps on a map. According to Von Müffling the corps was on the Brussels road between " Pont à Migueloup " (two kilometers south of the Roman road) and " Grand Champ " (800 meters north of this road). Then the corps would have left the Brussels road near the cabaret "à l'Empereur" and then to head to the south, to the Roman road, but not through Villers Perwin, but through a road more to the west, that is between this village and the Brusses road.

The advance guard would have gone as far as " La Couronne " at the Roman road, on about 1600 meters east of the Brussels road.

In: CvW. Geschichte des Feldzugs etc. p.

Von Lettow Vorbeck claims the corps moved in four columns and through the Bois Delhütte !

In: Napoleons Untergang p.33

Aerts rightly states that the march was a simple transfer of troops in one column from one point to another and not a flank march like at Mont Saint Jean. In: Etudes etc. p.484