

Napoleon's plans for the 16th of June.

Introduction.

The grand framework for the assessment of Napoleon's activities on the 16th of June is the strategy of the central position. As a result of this, the activities of the 15th of June are inseparably linked to those on the 16th of June.

The starting point resulting from this framework for such an assessment is the way Napoleon thought about *what* his opponents would do and *when*. This last item is pivotal as it sets the timeframe in which Napoleon thought he could work in in order to defeat his opponents before they could join their forces.

As has been shown, on the 15th of June it was Napoleon's general aim to establish a central position with his army around Charleroi north of the Sambre, from which he could launch his right and left wing against Blücher and Wellington respectively. This goal wasn't fully achieved as by the end of the 15th of June parts of the French army were still south of the Sambre.

That day, on the left wing, the initial concern for a possible allied irruption across the Sambre on the side of Maubeuge decreased. The target here for both the 1st and 2nd corps became Gosselies, while maintaining a strong screen towards Mons. This wasn't accomplished because parts of the 1st corps were still south of the Sambre by the night of the 15th of June

On the right, shortcomings on the side of the French, as well as the Prussian resistance, had slowed down French progress and here Napoleon's forces stranded in front of Fleurus.

By the end of the 15th of June, the majority of Napoleon's army occupied a central position roughly covering the area marked on its outer boundaries by Frasnes – Fleurus – Châtelet – Mont-sur-Marchienne – Marchienne-au-Pont - Gosselies.

In order to understand the development of Napoleon's ideas and intentions on the 16th of June, it is necessary to have a closer look at the information he had and how he used it. As for the left wing, while having the reports of Ney, Reille, d'Erlon and Lefebvre Desnouettes of the evening of the 15th of June, it must have given the following picture to Napoleon:

- the 2nd corps was in and around Gosselies, Heppignies and Mellet
- the 1st corps was in and around Jumet, at Marchienne-au-Pont and at Thuin
- the enemy had been driven from Gosselies to the east, towards Fleurus and this is where a division of the 2nd corps was pursuing
- Ney himself was in Gosselies
- the corps of Lefebvre Desnouettes was in and around Frasnes, with reconnaissances towards Quatre Bras
- at Frasnes a unit of Wellington's army (not coming from Gosselies) had been driven back and the expectation was that any Anglo-Netherlands-German units present at Quatre Bras would evacuate it the same night; the Belgian army at Mons
- there was no information indicating the presence of important enemy's forces further left or north

On his right, Napoleon had a Prussian force in front of him (between Fleurus and Sombrefe) which he may have estimated to be about 20.000 men strong. ¹

The morning of the 16th of June.

On the 16th of June it was one of the first priorities of Napoleon to bring up those units which were still south of the Sambre so as to complete the central position needed for the strategy to be used. That is why in the very early morning Ney was asked about the positions of his forces and that he was informed about the arrangements for the line-cavalry and the cavalry of the Imperial Guard as well.

In the very early morning Napoleon must have felt that he didn't have enough information about Ney's situation as by 4 a.m. colonel Bussy was sent out to the left wing to inquire.

Around the same time, Soult also inquired with Ney about the positions of his units, about the enemy and what he had learned about it.

The result was that Ney wrote a report to Soult by 7 a.m. Before 7 a.m. Napoleon was also informed by Grouchy about Prussian activity on and in front of the Namur-road; all this, plus the information from the left wing led Napoleon to decide to move with his right wing towards the Prussians (while keeping the Imperial Guard and the corps of Lobau in reserve) and subsequent marching orders were issued by Soult.

As a routine in the strategy of the central position, a reserve was maintained in this case composed of the Imperial Guard and 6th corps.

For this reason Napoleon prescribed Ney not to use the light cavalry of the Imperial Guard. Being part of it, ideally, the emperor wanted it to join the Imperial Guard but he realized that it would not be efficient to have it retrograde first and then to advance again to a direction where it came from. Therefore he instructed Ney to keep this corps to the rear and have it covered with the divisions of cavalry of the line, those of Piré and Jacquinot. The 3rd corps of cavalry, which formed part of Ney's wing, was to be kept by Ney near the crossing of the old Roman road and the Brussels road (3 kilometers south of Frasnes), so that Napoleon could draw it to the right in case he felt the need to do so.

On the morning of the 16th of June, Grouchy was formally appointed as commander of the right wing, but as Napoleon felt the first confrontations would probably with Blücher, he went himself with this right wing first.

The Prussian army was the one he had struck first and as a result of that Napoleon expected some kind of confrontation with it, either smaller or larger. It was of vital importance to make sure that Blücher would not be able to prevent Napoleon from attaining the main goal which he had set for the 16th of June: the preparatory movements for a march upon Brussels on the 17th of June.

These meant that Napoleon— while leaving a detachment to oppose Blücher further east - would move with the remainder of his forces from the right wing (including those of the reserve) towards his left wing. It would be another stage in the application of the strategy of the central position.

In terms of space, Napoleon felt he could be sure about this while having Blücher beyond Gembloux. In terms of time, in case Blücher would not oppose him, Napoleon reckoned he would be able to make his decision by mid-afternoon. If Blücher would oppose him somewhere between Fleurus and Gembloux, then he reckoned he could decide this way on the evening of the 16th of June.

Basically, operations on the left wing were made dependent on those on the right. This, in turn, all had to do with Napoleon's idea about time and space in relation to Wellington's army. In looking at the orders issued by Napoleon to Ney on the 16th of June (at least those issued before 2 p.m.), it becomes clear that for Napoleon Wellington's army was virtually non-existent as a direct threat in any form. Apart from Napoleon's initial idea of Wellington possibly being able to push in rear of the *armée du Nord* (and which idea was dropped later in

the morning), Napoleon most probably must have believed he was slowly concentrating somewhere upon his centre or Mons.

Regardless his own ideas about the enemy armies on the 15th and 16th of June, from a strict military point of view and in relation to the application of the strategy of the central position, Napoleon equipped both the left and right wing of the *armée du Nord* with comparable forces as they – theoretically – both could meet strong enemy forces. At any time, each wing – while being kept together to act as one military force - should have to be ready at any moment to cope with an enemy confrontation. Time would tell where this would be in force and where therefore reinforcements as coming from the French reserve (including forces of the other wing if required) were needed.

In this particular case, for both days mentioned, Napoleon expected on both sides virtually no or some relatively small resistance for a period of at least 30 hours. In this, a Prussian confrontation was more probable as one of Wellington, and also possibly more near to the French army. This is why Napoleon simply parked Ney around Quatre Bras as a stage for a later march upon Brussels, as he expected virtually no enemy resistance there or in its immediate vicinity before Ney could get there. As a result, the orders of the early morning were no orders to *attack*, but only to *advance* to a position at and around Quatre Bras.

The fact that Napoleon thought so lightly about this position was based on the information he had available that morning and which had come from his left wing. This explains why words are used like “...s’il n’y a pas d’inconvénient...” and “...s’il y avait quelque echauffourée avec les Anglais...”, in all an almost total absence of the enemy and as if all movements could be carried out as if they were done without any serious hindrance at all.²

Any resistance which could be expected around Sombreffe could be dealt with by the French forces on the right wing or – if really necessary - by a possible combination with one division from the left wing. It is the principle of the strategy of the central position applied on a small scale, as by 8.30 a.m. Napoleon expected the Prussian force opposed to him could be no stronger as 40.000 men. This, in turn, has to do with the fact that for the afternoon of that day, he expected the Prussians would only be able to carry out a *partial* concentration right in front of him. Because of his own speed, Napoleon thought he could fall upon part of the Prussian army immediately in front of him, while the remainder was still concentrating. That was just the trick of the surprise and speed, just as it was supposed to work towards Wellington.

But, to make sure he would *be able* to fight them on a larger scale as well, he had to make sure that he equipped each of both wings in such a way that it could fight a superior force by involving his reserve, and – if possible and necessary- a part of the other wing.

After having received further information between 9 and 10 a.m that "l'ennemi présentait des masses du côté des Quatre Bras", Soult wrote to Ney: "Blücher était hier à Namur, et il n'est pas vraisemblable qu'il ait porté des troupes vers les Quatre Bras; ainsi, vous n'avez affaire qu'à ce que vient de Bruxelles. Le maréchal Grouchy va faire le mouvement sur Sombreffe, que je vous ai annoncé etc."³ After that, Napoleon left for Fleurus.

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¹ In his report for the emperor of the evening of the 15th of June, Vandamme mentions 12 to 15.000 men and at the same time he states Grouchy said he believed the Prussian force in front of them to be 30.000 strong.

² Répécaud. Napoleon à Ligny etc. p.30

Later that morning, by 11 a.m., Ney would write to Napoleon about his mission to take up positions around Quatre Bras: “Tous les renseignements portent qu'il y a environ 3000 hommes d'infanterie ennemie aux Quatre Bras et fort peu de cavalerie. Je pense que les dispositions de l'Empereur pour la marche ultérieure sur Bruxelles s'exécuteront sans grands obstacles.”

3.Cf. Letter of Sault to Ney, 10 a.m.

Cf. Charras. Histoire de la campagne de 1815 Vol.I p.190