

Napoleon's plan at Ligny.

It must have been towards 1 p.m. that Ney's report - dated 11 a.m. – reached Napoleon at Fleurus and this report can only have confirmed Napoleon in what he already thought about the situation at Quatre Bras: practically no enemy presence at Quatre Bras and – as a result - the imminent French occupation of the crossroads in the early afternoon.

While more French forces were arriving, the Prussian front developed and gradually it became clear to Napoleon that a major Prussian force was taking up positions between Sombreffe, Ligny, Saint Amand and Brye.

From Fleurus, Napoleon could see that Prussian forces were assembling in a position between Sombreffe, Brye, Saint Amand and Ligny and that more units were arriving in their rear.¹

Napoleon may not have seen them all, as his view must have been limited in the direction of Sombreffe, but it was clear that a major force was concentrating. By then the 3rd French infantry corps and the cavalry of Pajol and Exelmans were arriving but Napoleon must have felt himself not strong enough to attack; it was the 4th infantry-corps which he needed as well, and this only reached Baulet by 1 p.m.²

As Napoleon felt the Prussians had their frontline between Sombreffe and Brye (see below), he carried out a change of his front-line towards 2 p.m. by moving his right wing forward, and thereby using Fleurus as a turning-point.³ As a result, the 3rd corps came in front of Saint Amand, while the 4th corps came in front of Ligny. Further to the right, a part of this corps, plus the cavalry of Pajol and Exelmans, secured the French right wing.

All this had to do with the plan of battle which he by now had developed. It comprised the following: while Napoleon attacked and thereby pinned down the main body of the Prussians in the front of Saint Amand and Ligny - while keeping them occupied further to their left - Ney would wheel from Quatre Bras over the Namur-road and attack them in their rear.

While Ney would do so, Napoleon would pierce the Prussian centre through Ligny with his reserve thereby driving the Prussian forces into Ney's arms; the combination of these two manoeuvres would lead to the destruction of most of the Prussian army.

As a result, Soult wrote to Ney at 2 p.m:

En avant de Fleurus, le 16 juin, à 2 heures

Monsieur le maréchal, l'empereur me charge de vous prévenir que l'ennemi a réuni un corps de troupes entre Sombreffe et Brye, et qu'à deux heures et demie, M.le maréchal Grouchy, avec les 3e et 4e corps, l'attaquera.

L'intention de Sa Majesté est que vous attaquiez aussi ce qui est devant vous et qu'après l'avoir vigoureusement poussé, vous rabattiez sur nous pour concourir à envelopper le corps dont je viens de vous parler. Si ce corps était enfoncé auparavant, alors Sa Majesté ferait manoeuvrer dans votre direction pour hater également vos opérations.

Instruisez de suite l'empereur de vos dispositions et de ce qui se passe sur votre front.

*Le maréchal de l'Empire, major général,
Signé, Duc de Dalmatie*⁴

From this order it can be seen, alternatively, Napoleon did not rule out the possibility that he would be able to beat Blücher himself without Ney's aid and that he would then turn to Ney himself, as he had planned it that morning.

The French order of battle.

All kinds of plans of the french order of battle are figuring in the Waterloo-literature, but proper sources relating to this order are very poor.

The corps of Vandamme had its positions in front of St.Amand, but actual details about the formation of the units and the positions of the brigades are almost non-existent.⁵

The moment the battle started, Vandamme didn't have his artillery completely available. The moment the batteries arrived they must have been placed in front of the divisions.⁶

The division of Girard (corps Reille) was probably in position opposite Saint Amand le Hameau, en potence and to the left of Vandamme.⁷

Sources relating to the 4th corps are equally scarce. The corps must have stood along and west of the road which leads from Fleurus to Point du Jour, opposite Ligny and about 800 meters distant from its boundary. Its position was in an angle to the one of Vandamme, and between them must have been an interval of about 2000 meters.⁸

The division of Hulot was en potence to the right of the two other divisions of the 4th corps, across the road Fleurus - Point du Jour, facing northeast. The division was probably placed two kilometers south of Sombreffe and about one kilometer and a half in front of Tongrenelle. Two of its eight guns must have been aimed at Sombreffe.⁹

During his march to a position in front of Fleurus, Hulot must have received an instruction from Gérard to send one of his battalions immediately to a position in the vicinity of the small wood near Tongrinelle. Accordingly, he sent out the 1st battalion of the 50th regiment line infantry under the command of colonel Lavigne.¹⁰ To the right of Hulot was Maurin's cavalry-division.¹¹

Immediately to the right of the road which leads from Fleurus towards Point du Jour and immediately east of the road which runs from Ligny to Velaine, on a distance of almost 2 kilometers opposite Tongrenelle, Exelmans corps was in position.¹²

The corps of Pajol probably had its position immediately north of the road Fleurus – Onoz and to the right of Exelmans. The regiments may have been spread out over a frontline of about two kilometers east of the l'Arbre de la Croix de Bois and extending by detachments towards the chateau of Balâtre.¹³⁻¹⁴

The cavalry of Milhaud stood 200 to 300 meters north-west of Fleurus and at about 1000 meters in rear of Vandamme.¹⁵

Of the infantry of the Imperial Guard, the chasseurs were to the immediate right of the road which leads from Fleurus to Point du Jour and to the front of the mill of Fleurus. They were in columns of regiments deployed at half battalion-distance. With them there were some guns. To their right, en echelon in rear, were the grenadiers; their front was to the right of the mill.

They were in the same formation and had their artillery in their rear.

The Young Guard was to the left of the said road, en echelon and in front of the chasseurs. They were in a similar formation as the chasseurs and the grenadiers and had their artillery per brigade.

All in all, the infantry was en echelon per divisions (the Young Guard in front) so that they might be able to form squares if needed..

About 40 meters to the right rear of the grenadiers stood the heavy cavalry of the guard., in two columns and in deployed squadrons.

The artillery of the guard - the guns being “à la prolongue” - was in rear of the grenadiers, at several meters distance.¹⁶

As the Imperial Guard had left its position in front of Fleurus after 2 p.m. this corps must have taken up these positions between 2 and 3 p.m.

At Ligny, Napoleon had about 66.600 men to his disposal, as well as 232 guns.¹⁷

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¹ The 2nd corps started to arrive at Sombreffe by 10 a.m., while the 3rd reached Point du Jour by noon and in this way must have still been mostly out of sight on the Namur-road east of Sombreffe. It deployed much later, around 2 p.m.

² Napoleon would have felt very uneasy about the delay of this corps.
Cf. Grouchy. Observations p.43
Grouchy. Relation succincte p.15

3.Cf. the French report written on the 20th of June at Laon. In: Bas, F.de La campagne de 1815 Vol.III p.455 Here, Napoleon mentions a position between Sombreffe and Saint-Amand, while having cavalry forces in front of the Namur-road.

Also see: Grouchy, G.de Mémoires du maréchal de Grouchy. Vol.IV p.9
Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de France etc. p.

Gourgaud. La campagne de 1815 p.47

Gerbet, Ph. Souvenirs etc. p.10

Francois, captain Journal du capitaine Francois etc. p.

Reiche, L.von Memoiren etc. p.183

Die Geschichte des 28.Regiments. In: Special ABN, nr.65 p.20

4. Original and copy in: AN, fonds Ney 137 AP18 On the backside is written:

" à M.le maréchal Prince de la Moskowa, à Gosselies, sur la route de Bruxelles. In pencil: Wagnée - Bois de Lombuc ". On the back of the copy is written:

" à M.le maréchal Prince de la Moskowa à Gosselies, sur la route de Bruxelles. In pencil: Wagnée - Ransart ".

The words written in pencil indicate the route taken by the transmitters. Both ways, through Wagnée [=Wangenies] – Bois de Lomuc and the one through Ransart to Frasnes measure approximately 18 to 19 kilometers.

Cf. Documents inédits sur la campagne de 1815, p.40

Copies of 3.15 and 3.30 p.m. in register of staff. In: BNP, FR.Nouv.acq.4366 and in SHAT. C15, nr.5

Also in:

Duc d'Elchingen. Documents inédits p.40

Aerts, W. Etudes relatives etc. p.367

Pollio, A. Waterloo p.626.

From Gourgaud's description of the events it could be taken that it was colonel Forbin Janson who carried this order. In: La campagne de 1815 p.48

⁵ Taking the later positions in the battle further, it might have been that the divisions were distributed as follows: Habert opposite Saint Amand, to the right and the one of Berthézène to the left, with Habert possibly in the rear.

Captain Gerbet (37th regiment of the line, division Lefol) remarks about his division: “nous étions ployés en colonnes serrées en masse par division.” In: Souvenirs etc. p.10
Another source claims the corps was “à deux portées de canon de Saint-Amand”. Taking this from several plans (like the ones from Siborne and Charras), this would mean this distance was about 800 meters.

In: Mémoires pour servir etc. p.93

Cf. Mauduit, H.de Les derniers jours etc. Vol.II p.56

According to De Mauduit the corps stood “en bataille”. In: Les derniers jours etc. Vol.II p.63

The cavalry of Domon was to the left of Girard’s division.

Cf. Mauduit, H.de Les derniers jours etc. Vol.II p.63

Aerts, W. Etudes etc. p.368

Siborne, W. History of the war in France etc. Vol.I p.181

However, in his mémoires, captain Aubry (12th regiment chasseurs à cheval) states that his regiment was in reserve behind the infantry for most of the day. In: Souvenirs du 12e chasseurs p.

6. See below.

7. Mémoires pour servir etc. p.93

Gourgaud sees the division as the extreme right flank of Ney’s forces, and, as such, as the link between both parts of the army while in fact the distance in a straight line was about 6 kilometers ! In: La campagne de 1815 p.47

⁸ Mémoires pour servir etc. p.93

Aerts, W. Etudes etc. p.368

For the distance of about 800 meters (“deux portées de canon”), see De Mauduit. In: Les derniers jours etc. Vol.II p.56

According to De Mauduit the corps stood “en bataille”. In: Les derniers jours etc. Vol.II p.62

9.Hulot. Documents militaires etc. p.22

The memoirs of Napoleon claim the division stood about 800 meters south of Sombreffe, but this is not right. In: Mémoires pour servir etc. p.93

10.Hulot. Documents militaires etc. p.22

Letter of Hulot to colonel Simon Lorière, dated 7th february 1820. In: SHAT. C15

This battalion must have had a position northeast of the division, but its exact position cannot be traced.

According to Berton the battalion was in position in a wood on a height between Tongrenelle

and Tongrines, but this height is in the prussian position. In: Berton, J.B. Précis de la campagne de etc. p.28

11. Aerts, W. Etudes etc. p.369

According to De Mauduit Maurin was attached to Exelmans corps. In: Les derniers jours etc. Vol.II p.52

12. Berton, J.B. Précis historique etc. p.28

The brigade Bonnemains must have been in the first line. Cf. report of Bonnemains himself. In: SHAT.

According to H.de Mauduit the brigade of Burthe must have been at the right of the first line (the 5th dragoons to the right and the 15th dragoons to the left of it); this would mean that Bonnemains had his position to the left of the first line. Mauduit, H.de Les derniers jours de la grande armée Vol.II p.

13. Cf. Mauduit, H.de Les derniers jours etc. Vol.II p.52

The 1st regiment of hussars must have rejoined the corps on the 16th as it was relieved on the left by squadrons of Piré. Cf. Biot, H.F. Campagnes et garnisons etc. p.240, 244

On the other hand, it is very well probable that the division of Subervie was detached to the extreme left flank of the army in the early stages of the battle (see below).

14. Most part of the old road running from Fleurus to Onoz is still there, though the Arbre de Charlemagne and the Arbre de la Croix de Bois have disappeared, as is the Chapelle Sainte Barbe and the farm called Les fonds des Veaux (the site is still called Grand Vau).

In 1860 the Arbre de la Croix de Bois, the Arbre de Charlemagne, the Chapelle Sainte Barbe and the farm of Grand Veaux were still in existence.

15. Colonel Michel Ordener (commander of the 7th regiment of cuirassiers). In papers in the family-archive. In: Lot, H. Les deux généraux Ordener p.90

Gourgaud, baron. In: Campagne de dix huit cent quinze etc. p.47

De Mauduit puts Milhaud, in columns per squadrons, to the left of the artillery of the Imperial guard, which is approximately the same is my conclusion. In: Les derniers jours etc. Vol.II p.49

Another sources situates the cuirassiers “en deuxième ligne, à six cents toises, derrière le 3^e et le 4^e corps.” In: Mémoires pour servir etc. p.93

Usually, the corps of Milhaud is depicted immediately to the east of Fleurus, but this would not be the right position after the change of positions which took place around 2 p.m.

Siborne, W. History of the war in France etc. Atlas, plan nr.4

¹⁶ Mauduit, H.de Les derniers jours etc. Vol.II p.48-49

General Petit. In: The English historical review 18 (1903), p.323

Colonel Duuring (1st regiment of chasseurs). In: L'infanterie de la garde à Waterloo p.115

¹⁷ This figure is composed as follows:

3rd corps: 17.379, 4th corps 15.249, division Girard 3890, Pajol 2830, Exelmans 2973 (includes the casualties of the 15th of June), Milhaud 3516 and the Imperial Guards 20.826. It totals 43.998 infantry, 14.573 cavalry, 6405 artillery, 885 engineers and 802 of other services, like workmen, medical departments and équipages.

It does not include units of Lobau and D'Erlon. Cf. SHAT. C15, nrs.34 and 35

The Prussian general report on the battle gives with 130.000 men a grossly exaggerated strength of the French army. In: Bas, F.de and T'Serclaes de Wommersom, J.de , La campagne de 1815 aux Pays Bas Vol.III p.446

Napoleon himself gives 60.250 men with 202 guns (this is exclusive of the 6th corps). In: Mémoires etc. p.94

According to Gourgaud the total (excluding the 6th corps) was 58.280 men. In: La campagne de 1815 p.46

Charras and H.de Mauduit come to totals of 78.252 (plus 242 guns) and 65.241 (plus 202 guns) respectively.

In: Histoire de la campagne etc. Vol.I p.155

Les derniers jours de la grande armée Vol.II p.53