

The French positions.

It must have been shortly after 2 p.m. that the French started their attack.¹ At that moment, the battle of Ligny had not started.

The French must have done so from the area north of Frasnes, east of the Brussels-road, south of Le Balcan and west of the Chapelle de Frasnes.

While Bachelu advanced in columns of battalions towards Piraumont, the Etang Materne and the low ground west of this small lake, Foy supported this advance with his brigade of Gauthier to the left of Bachelu and to the immediate right of the Brussels-road. Jamin's brigade must have followed further to the rear as a reserve, but at the moment of the attack it hadn't yet completely finished its formation; its most rearward regiment waited for the division of Jérôme to arrive.

The formation of Gauthier is not known, but this brigade may have been in columns of battalions as well. In between Bachelu and Gauthier a large swarm of skirmishers must have advanced. To his right, Bachelu was covered by the cavalry of Piré. Where the artillery then had its positions is not known.²

At the same moment, Ney himself and Lefebvre Desnouettes must have been in column on (and maybe on both sides of) the Brussels road immediately to the north of Frasnes.³

At this moment, Ney's force must have counted about 11000 men (of which 1612 cavalry) and 22 guns.⁴

The first French attack in the centre and on the right wing.

While the attack must have been covered by artillery-fire, the French drove back the 1st, 2nd and 6th companies of the 27th battalion of chasseurs towards the centre; here they tried to link up to the 3rd company which was near the horse battery of captain Bijleveld which had gone back over some distance too (see below).⁵

In the confrontation, the mutual skirmishers must have been in very close contact in the high corn.⁶

At the same time, lieutenant colonel Grunebosch, the commander of the 27th battalion of chasseurs, had advanced with his 4th and 5th companies from their position immediately south of the stream of the Etang Materne in order to receive their comrades. While doing so, they extended as skirmishers.⁷

After the retreat of the 27th battalion of chasseurs, the French took Piraumont.⁸ Piré had advanced in this direction with at least all his lancers, but as the terrain here was very much cut up, his division was very soon moved towards the centre of the line.⁹

The French advance also caused the battery of horse artillery led by captain Bijleveld to pull back, and with it the 3rd company of the 27th battalion of chasseurs. They may have taken up a short position near Gémioncourt.

It was at 2 p.m., the moment the French approached, that colonel Westenberg, commander of the 5th battalion of national militia was ordered to bring his battalion forward from its position near Quatre Bras. Apparently, he must have been ordered to advance as far as the first line, as he led his men over the Brussels road in column and in a quick pace. While advancing they must have been suffering from the French artillery fire, which caused some alarm (lieutenant Klein got wounded) but colonel Westenberg restored order by shouting out "Leve de koning !" – which was taken over by the men - and the moment the battalion reached Gémioncourt (which was on its left) it deployed: two companies were sent to cover the farm on its front, while three companies led by captain Mollinger were deployed in front on and near the road; one company

was extended in front as skirmishers.¹⁰

At the same time, the 4th and 5th company of the 27th battalion of chasseurs advanced further to the left of the battalion in extended order. They must have got in touch with the French further to their left; in this confrontation captain Heekeren van Walien must have got wounded.¹¹

Though I do not have any details about the actions of the French, they must have kept a strong skirmishing fire on the Netherlands troops; on top of that, Piré had by now been moved to the centre of the line, and was approaching the Netherlands units.

One of them was the 27th battalion chasseurs of which the 1st, 2nd and 6th companies were retreating north of the farm of Gémioncort and its stream; the 4th and 5th company may also have been in retreat, but probably more slowly and these companies may still have been further north.

The 5th battalion of national militia also made a retrograde movement (after taking back its skirmishers) as its three companies to the front suffered heavy losses by French fire as the men didn't keep up their distances (one of these losses was captain Mollinger). Eventually, the battalion formed a column "en masse" on the Brussels road slightly north of the farm.¹²

About the exact whereabouts of the battery of Bijleveld at that particular time there is no information, but what we do know is that Piré had by now moved to the front. What units of Piré must have been here is not known (at least the 6th regiment of chasseurs à cheval was there), but they now charged Westenberg's battalion. The militia had formed front on all sides and succeeded in repelling the French horsemen four times.¹³

The foot battery led by captain Stevenart had six of its guns to the right rear of Bijleveld, west of the Brussels road. The moment the French advanced to his left he started his fire, but not long after he must have been ordered by the prince of Orange (through one of his British aides), to pull back and get a new position further to his right rear, near the Bois de Bossu. Accordingly, Stevenart pulled his six guns towards the edge of the wood to his rear. While doing so, however, his right section (led by lieutenant Van de Wall) got further to his right, probably due to the nature of the ground and got temporarily separated from the other four guns. While Van der Wall moved back through the wood itself, Stevenart took up a second position on the edge of the wood, when he was killed by a grenade. As if this was not enough, a limber of one of the guns was damaged and the crew was forced to leave the gun behind. After that, the battery got further to the rear as far as Quatre Bras, where both groups rejoined, now forming a total of five guns, now led by lieutenant Van der Wall.¹⁴

Meanwhile, the three guns led by 2nd lieutenant Koopman must have been firing on the French.¹⁵

The situation on the French left wing.

In this stage of the action it not clear which French units may have been involved in front of the Bois de Bossu.¹⁶

Clearly, De Perponcher and the prince of Orange must have felt some threat here as the units of the brigade of Saksen Weimar already present here were now reinforced by two battalions: the 7th and the 8th battalion of national militia. Both must have advanced from their positions near Quatre Bras to the right wing around the time the French advance started, by 2 p.m.

Having received his orders through major Van Amerongen, colonel De Jongh had his 8th battalion take up a position in line in a hollow road, some distance in front of the south side of the Bois de Bossu, to the left of the 1st battalion of Orange-Nassau.

Both battalions here must have come under some French artillery-fire of three guns, after which

the battalion Orange-Nassau retired in some confusion to the edge of the wood, thereby carrying along the right hand company of the 8th battalion of national militia. Colonel De Jongh and captain Sijbers of the battalion soon led it back to its former position, but soon after De Jongh was also ordered to lead his men back to the edge of the Bois de Bossu in his rear. He did so, but here the battalion suffered from the French artillery fire. It was here that De Jongh was ordered by the prince (through major count Van Limburg Stirum) to detach two companies to his left front. For this he used his 5th and 6th company plus their skirmishers and at that the same time Van Limburg Stirum asked De Jongh to occupy the wood with his remaining four companies. De Jongh said he rather charged the guns in his front and Van Limburg Stirum left with this request, but soon after Lord Somerset (aide of the prince of Orange) returned with the order to cross the wood and to attack French units on the other side of it. While leaving behind his two companies, De Jongh now pulled his men through the wood.¹⁷

Meanwhile, the 7th battalion of national militia also took up a position in a line near a ditch further to the north on the east edge of the wood, there where it protrudes towards the farm of Gémioncourt. Here it must have been under attack of units of Foy which were attacking the Anglo-Netherlands-German centre; as a result they fled back further into the wood, but the situation here was restored by Bernard van Saksen Weimar with some of his troops.¹⁸

Another battalion which had come reinforcing the Netherlands right wing was the 7th battalion of the line. It had approached the wood coming from the Namur-road in column, then to turn to the right, switch into a line, cross the wood and to emerge on the other side in skirmishing order and flank the edge of the wood. The result was that by 3 p.m colonel Vandensande had his battalion extending to the right of the 5th battalion of national militia.¹⁹

The situation was that this battalion, after beating off the French cavalry, was led forward by the prince of Orange towards a French infantry column which advanced to cover the retreat of Piré. By doing so it got into a position near Gémioncourt, where it deployed into line; at the same time, the 1st, 2nd and 6th companies of the 27th battalion of chasseurs did the same. The situation was that this battalion had been ordered by the prince of Orange north of Gémioncourt to recollect; the result was that at least the 1st, the 2nd and the 6th company advanced again just south of the stream of Gémioncourt to support the 5th battalion of national militia to its left; the 4th and 5th companies of the 27th battalion of chasseurs must have been further to the rear, north of the stream.

To the right of the 5th battalion of national militia was the 7th battalion of the line – all battalions threw out skirmishers.²⁰

The 7th battalion of the line was now also reinforced in its turn by the 8th battalion of national militia which now also emerged from the Bois de Bossu.

The Netherlands line must have kept up its position for about half an hour, when Piré advanced again.²¹

Meanwhile, the units of Picton's division were dropping in and slowly taking up their positions. Also, van Merlen's brigade did so (see below). Very shortly after their arrival, however, the hussars of this brigade were ordered to charge Piré who was now menacing the Netherlands line which was drawn up in the vicinity of Gémioncourt and to its east and west (see below).

Before the collision of both bodies of cavalry, Piré charged the companies of the 27th battalion of chasseurs near Gémioncourt and scattered them; in this action captain Eichholtz, captain De Nave, 2nd lieutenant Hylckema and lieutenant colonel Grunebosch himself were wounded. Many prisoners were also taken, amongst them were the lieutenant Hylckema and captain De Nave. The command of the battalion devolved upon captain De Crassier.²²

As the Netherlands cavalry later charged, the remains of the battalion must have got away further to the rear, in rear of Quatre Bras or the Bois de Bossu (except for the 3rd company, which kept its position near the 5th battalion of national militia, see below).²³

The 7th battalion of the line must have suffered in some degree as well of the French cavalry, but was able to fall back into the Bois de Bossu.²⁴

The 8th battalion of national militia must have been too far west for Piré to reach; this battalion eventually also retired into the wood as the French got, by now, reinforced here by the division of Jérôme Bonaparte (see below).²⁵

Though its 5th company must have suffered from the French cavalry (lieutenant Boltjens was killed) as well, the 5th battalion of national militia was initially able to pull back to the Brussels-road where it formed column and marched further to the rear as well.²⁶

As a result, Piré now advanced further north of Gémioncourt, where it came in sight of Quatre Bras.

However, here the 5th battalion of national militia now got in a most unfortunate situation: though it must have moved back over the Brussels-road in a relatively good order. By now, also the battalion had lost all its company commanders. The result was that the battalion, while retreating, lost its order and this was used by the French cavalry: they scattered the battalion and its remains must also have been collected north of Quatre Bras.²⁷ Near it was the 3rd company of the 27th battalion of chasseurs; at least it shared the bivouac of the 5th battalion and must have gone back with the militia.²⁸

The situation in front of Quatre Bras was now a tumult and it was in this situation that the prince of Orange barely escaped being taken prisoner; one aide de camp of the prince, count Van Limburg Stirum, was forced to dismount due to the fatigue of his horse and it was then that he got sabred by French cavalry. He became a prisoner, but not for long: some time later he was somehow rescued by some Netherlands hussars (see below) and carried off the field.²⁹ At the same time, the staff of the artillery of the 2nd Netherlands division must have been with the prince and they also had a narrow escape.³⁰

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1. For 2 p.m., cf.

Constant Rebecque. In his account. In: NA, 2.21.008.01 nr.25 It was around that time that he returned from Nivelles to Quatre Bras.

The prince of Orange. In his letter dated 17th June 1815. In: Bas, F. de la campagne de 1815 Vol.III p.432

Captain Von Gagern. In: VLS. nr.II.3.nr.3

Cadet sergeant Welter (27th battalion of chasseurs). In: Letter dated 1st July written at Péronne. In: family archive Volkersz

Reille in his report dated 17th of June 1815. In: SHAT. C15 nr.22

Colonel Heymès believes it was before 2 p.m. Cf. Heymès, colonel In: Relation etc. In: Documents inédits p.8

Captain Van Toll (5th battalion of national militia) claims it was between 1 and 2 p.m. In: Knoop, W. Quatre Bras en Waterloo p.144

According to major Sattler (2nd regiment of Nassau troops) the first actions started towards 1 p.m. Cf. His report. In: HHA, Abt.202, Inv.nr.1015 p.337

Lieutenant colonel Grunebosch believes it was 2.30 p.m. In: VLS. Nr.II.3.nr.7

De Mauduit believes that at 2 p.m. the skirmishing started. In: Les derniers jours Vol.I p.144

² Report of Reille. In: SHAT. C15 nr.22

Account of Reille. In: Documents inédits etc.p.58

Foy. In: Girod de l'Ain. Vie militaire etc. p.271

Lieutenant colonel Grunebosch. In: VLS nr.II.3.nr.7

Chef de bataillon Puvis of the 93rd regiment of the line (Foy's division) confirms at least his regiment left the Brussels road to the right the moment the enemy's artillery started to fire from the right [?] and that the regiment later deployed. In: Souvenirs p.115-116

All kind of versions about the French formations go round, but they have not been founded on solid evidence as far as I have been able to check.

One of the elements in this is the assertion that the brigade which was in reserve would have detached a swarm of skirmishers to the left, towards the Bois de Bosu. Cf. Aerts, W. p. Etudes etc. p.432

According the lieutenant Backersloot (not present in the action) French artillery was posted on the height which extends from the inn of Le Balcan towards Lairalle. Here, he may have founded his claim upon a local tradition. In: Ophelderingen van het terrein etc., dated 24th December 1815. In: NA, nr.2.13.13.09 nr.185

3. Reille. In: Notice historique etc. In: Documents inédits etc. p.58

⁴ In this figure, the divisions of Lefebvre Desnouettes, Kellerman, Girard and Jérôme Bonaparte have not been included, while those of Bachelu, Foy and Piré as well as the losses of the division Bachelu on the 15th of June (about 150) have been.

There is no certainty about the presence of the reserve-artillery of the corps (8 guns); this battery is not included.

⁵ Lieutenant colonel Grunebosch. In: VLS nr.II.3.nr.7

Colonel Van Zuylen van Nijeveld. In: Historisch verhaal etc. In: Bas, F.de La campagne de 1815 Vol.III p.312

⁶ Cadet-sergeant Welter (27th battalion of chasseurs). In his letter dated 1st July 1815. In: family archive Volkersz

⁷ Lieutenant colonel Grunebosch. In: VLS nr.II.3.nr.7

⁸ Colonel Trefcon. Carnets de campagne p.181

⁹ Colonel Trefcon. Carnets de campagne p.181
Report of Reille to Ney, dated 17th June 1815. In: SHAT. C15 nr.22

¹⁰ 1st lieutenant Barre (5th battalion of national militia). In: VLS nr.II.3.nr.10
Captain Mollinger (5th battalion of national militia). In: VLS nr.II.3.nr.8
Captain Van Toll (5th battalion of national militia). In: Knoop, W.J. Quatre Bras en Waterloo p.145
Lieutenant colonel Westenberg in a letter to J.Scheltema, dated 7th February 1816. In: UB Amsterdam, nr.Ay112
Captain Mollinger states the battalion advanced *after* the arrival of the British, but this is incorrect.

¹¹ Lieutenant colonel Grunebosch. In: VLS nr.II.3.nr.7

¹² Captain Van Toll. In: Knoop, W.J. Quatre Bras en Waterloo p.145
1st lieutenant Barre. In: VLS nr.II.3.nr.10
Captain Mollinger (5th battalion of national militia). In: VLS nr.II.3.nr.8

¹³ Captain Van Toll (5th battalion of national militia). In: Knoop, W.J. Quatre Bras en Waterloo p.145
Houssaye erroneously claims the battalion had been driven to the west of the Brussels road by Jamin and that it was charged there by Piré. Cf. Houssaye, H. 1815. Waterloo p.199-200

14. Major Von Opstall. In: VLS nr.II.4.nr.1
Lieutenant Van der Wall (battery Stevenart). In: VLS nr.II.4.nr.2
The passage through the Bois de Bossu must have been hard due to the presence of fallen trees over the roads in the wood. Cf. Lieutenant Van der Wall. In: VLS nr.II.4.2

¹⁵ 2nd lieutenant Koopman. In: VLS nr.II.4.9

¹⁶ It may have been those of Jamin (division of Foy), but this is not sure.

¹⁷ Colonel De Jongh. In: Nagelaten papieren etc. 1866
Colonel van Zuylen van Nijeveld. In: Historisch verhaal etc. In: Bas, F.de la campagne de 1815 Vol.III p.312

¹⁸ Account of R.Rentenaar (7th battalion of national militia). In: private collection
Captain Van Bronkhorst (same battalion) in his letter dated 9th July 1815. In: Ons leger

(1983) nr.6 p.32-38

Van Saksen Weimar mentions the retaking of this piece of the wood in all his three accounts, but thereby mentioning different units:

The Nassau Voluntary Chasseurs and two companies of national militia. In: His letter dated 19th June. In: Bas, F.de La campagne de 1815 Vol.III.p.564

With men of a battalion of Orange-Nassau and one of national militia. In: Diary. In: THW. Grossherzogliches Hausarchiv. A.XXIV 30 p.193

With the 1st battalion of Orange-Nassau. In: VLS nr.II.3.nr.5

In this action, while cutting away some branches, the prince wounded himself very slightly by cutting in his right thigh.

I believe that this is the successful action which is meant by colonel Van Zuylen van Nijvelt in his account as being initiated by the prince of Orange, and ordered to him, to retake the part of the wood with the 2nd battalion of Nassau (extended as skirmishers), supported en echelon by the 1st battalion of Orange-Nassau, while the 7th battalion national militia was kept in reserve. In: Colonel van Zuylen van Nijvelt. In: Historisch verhaal etc. In: Bas, F.de La campagne de 1815 etc. Vol.III p.320

This attack is incorrectly taken by Van Löben Sels, Jonxis, F.de Bas and Aerts as having taken place the moment the division Cooke (see below) entered the wood, and take this probably from van Zuylen van Nijvelt, but this colonel – even though his report is confusing – places this action not long after the charge of Van Merlen and before the arrival of Alten (see below).

Van Löben Sels. In: Bijdragen etc. Vol.IV p.535

Jonxis. In: Quatre Bras p.100

Aerts, W. Etudes etc. p.466

Bas, F.de La campagne de 1815 Vol.I p.526

¹⁹ 1st lieutenant Scheltens. In: Souvenirs etc. p.198 He adds that the 12th platoon formed a reserve while marching up to its position.

Although the report is rather confusing now and then, colonel van Zuylen van Nijvelt reports that it took up a position in column in the plain out of the wood. In: Historisch verhaal etc. In: Bas, F.de La campagne de 1815 Vol.III p.310

²⁰ Captain Van Toll (5th battalion of national militia). In: Knoop, W.J. Quatre Bras en Waterloo p.145

Lieutenant colonel Grunebosch. In: VLS nr.II.3.nr.7

There are sources which claim that the prince of Orange led the 5th battalion of national militia several times, but I have not been able to confirm this by accounts of members of the battalion itself. Cf. Historisch verhaal etc. In: Bas, F.de la campagne de 1815 Vol.III p.316

Report of De Perponcher. In: Bas, F.de La campagne de 1815 Vol.III p.282

Cf. Van Löben Sels, E. Bijdragen etc. Vol.IV p.523

Van Löben Sels admits he hasn't been able to draw strong conclusion on the exact share here of the 5th battalion of national militia.

It has also been claimed that the prince led the 5th battalion of national militia forward against artillery, while using his hat as a signal. Cf. Count Van Limburg Stirum. In: VLS

nr.II.3.nr.4

There is a mentioning of this use, but not in relation to this particular battalion. Cf. Colonel Van Zuylen van Nijvelt. In: Archive VLS, II.3.11a

It is Lord FitzRoy Somerset who praises the prince in these words: "The prince of Orange exerted himself greatly. He was at one time surrounded by the enemy but was rescued by the gallantry of the Belgians. It was on this occasion he took off the insignia of his order and threw it among the men saying "You have deserved it". They fastened it to their colours and with one voice cried "Long live our prince" and swore to defend it till death." In: NAM, nr.6507-1

If this rather heroic event has taken place, it might be that this occurred in the stage of the action described here.

²¹ Captain Van Toll (5th battalion of national militia). In: Knoop, W.J. Quatre Bras en Waterloo p.145 He states both his battalion plus the 7th battalion of the line were in a two-deep line.

²² Lieutenant colonel Grunebosch. In: VLS nr.II.3.nr.7 He got sabre-cuts on his head and arm and was escorted back to Brussels that day and the day after by sergeant Welter. Welter himself had a slight wound on his neck. Cf. Cadet-sergeant Welter (27th battalion of chasseurs). In his letter dated 1st July 1815. In: family archive Volkensz
Colonel van Zuylen van Nijvelt mentions lancers of the guard (plus the 6th regiment of chasseurs à cheval), but means the lancers of Piré. In: Historisch verhaal etc. In: Bas, F.de La campagne de 1815 Vol..III p.316

Lieutenant Van Hylckema to W.Eekhoff, dated 8th July 1865. In: Provincial Library of Friesland, Leeuwarden. Correspondence of W.Eekhoff, no.1229 and 1229a. Hylckema states he got back when the French cavalry was pushed back by the British.
The fact that captain De Crassier succeeded Grunebosch is confirmed by De Crassier himself. Cf. his letter dated 4th July 1815 to the commissary-general of the war-department. In: NA, nr.2.13.01 inv.177

²³ Major general Van Bylandt. In: VLS nr.II.3.nr.6

Captain De Crassier. He explicitly states the major part of the battalion was taken prisoner but that it was rescued by "een onzer regimenten" and here he must refer to the cavalry. After that the men were collected. Cf. his letter dated 4th July 1815 to the commissary-general. In: NA, nr.2.13.01 inv.177

At least some must have gone back into the Bois de Bossu. Cf. Cadet-sergeant Welter (27th battalion of chasseurs). In his letter dated 1st July 1815. In: family archive Volkensz

²⁴ 1st lieutenant Scheltens. In: Souvenirs etc. p.198

Scheltens is very incomplete as he only mentions the arrival of his battalion, plus its situation immediately after taking up its position to the east of the Bois de Bossu. Here, he mentions the charge of cuirassiers, but obviously means the cavalry of Piré.

Houssaye uses this mention of this type of cavalry literally and places the battalion around 8 p.m.north-west of Gémioncourt ! Cf. Houssaye, H. 1815.Waterloo p.218

²⁵ Colonel De Jongh. In: Nagelaten papieren etc. 1866 De Jongh got wounded by a howitzer grenade.

²⁶ Captain Van Toll (5th battalion of national militia). In: Knoop, W.J. Quatre Bras en Waterloo p.145

Being on the Brussels road immediately north of Quatre Bras (before turning left to the Namur-road), lieutenant Forbes (79th regiment) saw a Netherlands battalion move slowly to the north in front of the French who were about 750 meters away. This battalion may very well have been the 5th battalion of national militia. In: BL, Add.ms.34.703 p.1-2

²⁷ Lieutenant colonel Grunebosch. In: VLS nr.II.3.nr.7

Major general van Bylandt. In: VLS nr.II.3.nr.6

Captain Mollinger (5th battalion of national militia). In: VLS nr.II.3.nr.8

Captain Van Toll (5th battalion of national militia). In: Knoop, W.J. Quatre Bras en Waterloo p.145

1st lieutenant Barre (5th battalion of national militia). In: VLS nr.II.3.nr.10

Lieutenant Henckens (6th regiment chasseurs à cheval). In: Mémoires etc. p.225

Houssaye erroneously believes the battalion was run over by the French cavalry when these came back from their charge. In: 1815.Waterloo p.201

In his turn, Dellevoet erroneously links the charge of Piré upon Van Merlen's brigade and the resulting French advance to the fate of the 5th battalion of national militia as being overwhelmed by the French (and Netherlands) horsemen, but in my opinion there were two separate actions as carried out by Piré. In: The Dutch-Belgian cavalry etc. p.111

²⁸ Lieutenant colonel Grunebosch. In: VLS nr.II.3.nr.7

29.Account of Van Limburg Stirum. In: VLS nr.II.3.nr.4

Van Limburg Stirum had two sabre-cuts on his head and one on his left hand. Cf. his file. In: Kanselarij der Nederlandse Orden, the Hague.

Captain Osten. In: VLS nr.II.no.4.4

Van Limburg Stirum believes it was about 2.30 p.m. but it must have been much later.

The fact that Van Limburg Stirum tells that Netherlands hussars brought him back indicates that the group was threatened by the French cavalry *before* Boreel charged.

Henckens believes van Limburg Stirum escaped from being a prisoner of war. Cf. Mémoires p.226-227

The fact that Van Limburg Stirum was wounded is confirmed by Constant Rebecque in his account. In: NA, 2.21.008.01 nr.25

³⁰ Captain Osten. In: VLS nr.II.4.nr.4