

## Observations. Wellington's retreat.

### Introduction.

During the night of the 16th of June, the latest intelligence Wellington had about the battle at Ligny was that carried by lieutenant Von Wussow. It had told him that Blücher still held his positions in the early evening. This tended to indicate that the battle had ended undecided, but no new information had dropped in since. Therefore, at the very early morning of the 17th of June, the duke was in doubt about the outcome of the battle Ligny. <sup>1</sup> In case of a Prussian defeat, a retreat was the only option for Wellington in order to avoid the chance of being opposed against Napoleon alone. In case the French might have lost the battle or that it was undecided, it was Wellington's intention to advance against Ney and in this way to push against Napoleon's flank and rear. <sup>2</sup> By daybreak, the large majority of the Anglo-Netherlands-German army was in and around Quatre Bras. The only units which weren't there were the 2nd and 4th British division (both west of Nivelles), the corps under prince Frederik (at Enghien), the division of Chassé and two brigades of the division of Collaert (all three at Nivelles).

This intention was according to the concept as both allied commanders had designed it before, but reality proved different. It was the information of the Prussian defeat at Ligny handed in by Gordon (and not that of major Von Masow) which forced Wellington to fall back upon another position. It became the one of Mont Saint Jean, just south of Waterloo.

### The position of Mont Saint Jean.

As has been explained before, the position of Mont Saint Jean had been on Wellington's mind for the defence of Brussels for a long time. As a result it had been surveyed by engineers in the spring of 1815. The position was meant to be used as a last defence south of Brussels in case Napoleon would attack in the between Mons and Charleroi (and beyond). At the same time, Wellington was aware that the Prussians had retreated towards Wavre. This could open the way for a support from their side for a joint battle. The defensive concept now was to be used again, but now it was Wellington who was to be in a defensive position to fix Napoleon while Blücher was to fall upon Napoleon's flank and rear from the east. By the time that Wellington decided to fall back upon Mont Saint Jean, however, he had no assurance of support from the Prussian army whatsoever. It was a decision which initially stood on itself.

What is important to stress here is that Wellington - like Blücher did on the 16th of June - aimed for a confrontation with Napoleon in a position of his own choosing, and not that of Napoleon. Here, he would be able to make use of his defensive abilities to the utmost, while the duke reckoned at the same time that the Prussians would come up to his assistance. In detail, the position of Mont Saint Jean is the one just south of Mont Jean, running along the ridge between the villages of Braine l'Alleud in the west and Smohain in the east. <sup>3</sup> According to lord FitzRoy Somerset, however, it would not have been this ridge the duke had aimed at. He writes: "On arriving near La Belle Alliance he [Wellington] thought it was the position the QMG would have taken up, being the most commanding ground, but [the QMG] had found it too extended to be occupied by our troops so had proceeded further on and marked out a position. This was to the right near Braine l'Allend [sic] thence to the left across the highroad which joined on the rear near Mont St. Jean." <sup>4</sup> From the circumstances as described in the preambles, however, it becomes clear that the position which was taken up by Wellington *was* the one he intended to have. Additionally, he wrote in the summer of 1814: "[...] the entrance to the Forêt de Soignies [sic] by the high road which leads to Brussels from Binch, Charleroi and Namur, would, if worked upon, afford advantageous positions." <sup>5</sup> In his report of the 19th of June it is also Wellington who described the position as the one as used, without having been some kind of compromise for whatever reason.

<sup>6</sup>Additionally, it is captain Oldfield of the royal engineers who wrote in 1844: “The duke then gave directions to sir William Delancey to put the army in position at Waterloo, forming them across the Nivelles and Charleroi chaussées which coming from Bruxelles divided at this point. We were consequently in a line with the Prussians at a distance of about eight miles and eight miles in rear of Quatre Bras.” <sup>7</sup>All this evidence shows more than enough that the position of Mont Saint Jean as it was used was definitely the one of Wellington’s choosing. <sup>8</sup> The remark of Oldfield suggests as if it was colonel De Lancey who was responsible for the placement in detail of the divisions in the position of Mont Saint Jean. This is the more interesting, as most of the divisions were placed that day in this position according to those they would have in the order of battle the next day. However, it remains unclear when and how this detailed arrangement has been designed. But it is hard to believe that the duke played no role in this design and that it was all down to De Lancey to do this, at least in the arrangement of the grand units as the 1st, the 2nd corps, the reserve and the cavalry. For this last arm, however, there seem to have been no specific orders for the different brigades where to spend the night; the bivouacs were assigned at random wherever there was suitable place or opportunity to establish them. <sup>9</sup>A peculiar detail in this context was that major Van Gorkum, officer of the general staff of the army of the Netherlands, assisted colonel De Lancey in the placing of units at Mont saint Jean. He states about the disposition “dat het den wil van den hertog was dat de jongeretroepen door oude geoefenden gedekt en met de Engelschen op de eerste linie gesteld werden, de kavalerie daarachter en tusschen de intervalles; dat de Duitsche oude soldaten de vleugelsen de voorposten bezetten moesten en over de linie tussen de engelschen verdeeld worden[..].” <sup>10</sup>

#### The retreat from Quatre Bras to Mont Saint Jean.

The purpose of the retreat was to lead the majority of the army from both Quatre Bras and Nivelles safely to the position of Mont Saint Jean. The orders as issued by the duke around 8 a.m. were for the most part preparatory orders and no march orders; they were only for the 2nd division of the army of the Netherlands and those units which were not at or around Quatre Bras. They also state the cavalry “to be formed at 1 o'clock in three lines in rear of the position at Quatre Bras, to cover the movement of the infantry to the rear, and the retreat of the rear-guard.” Apparently, Wellington assumed he could have his infantry to evacuate the position of Quatre Bras in a time-frame of about four hours, presuming it started around 9 a.m.

Usually, the retreat and the French pursuit are represented as if it was a logical sequence that Wellington was given the time to carry out this manoeuvre and that the French advanced the moment this was almost accomplished. Obviously, Wellington could not know this beforehand and for that reason he was extremely lucky that the French did not take the chance to fix him at Quatre Bras.

It seems as if Von Müffling played a role in the decision when to start the actual retreat. According to Von Müffling, Wellington would have preferred to start the retreat straight away, but that he considered his decision after Von Müffling had advised him that the French would only move after their troops had used their breakfast and that he therefore could do the same. Whatever role Von Müffling may have played – which is to be doubtful in this particular subject – the actual retreat started before 10 a.m., as this is the hour which is usually claimed as that the manoeuvre started. <sup>11</sup>

There is no hard evidence to establish the reasoning behind the sequence of the infantry divisions which pulled out from Quatre Bras as they did. At least for the division of Alten it could be understood as a cover against the French threat as coming along the Namur road. The fact why it marched off along a by-road and not along the Brussels road may have been caused by the fact that a march along this road might have caused a congestion of troops in front of Genappe. Due to the absence of proper departure and arrival dates the speed at which the infantry divisions marched is hard to assess; this is complicated as well by detours which were necessary during the morning

hours and halts of at least the divisions Picton and Alten north (east) of Genappe. These halts merit a particular attention. In his official report for Lord Bathurst Wellington writes: "I retired from the farm of Quatre Bras upon Genappe, and thence upon Waterloo, the next morning, the 17th, at 10 o'clock."<sup>12</sup> This suggests as if all forces which pulled out from Quatre Bras were first assembled right behind the Dyle near Genappe, before they continued their movement towards the position of Mont Saint Jean. From the evidence available, however, this claim can only be substantiated for the divisions referred to above.<sup>13</sup>

The purpose of these halts is therefore unclear: it could either have been that these divisions acted as a kind of rearguard, in combination with the cavalry, or that they just had to halt before other units had moved enough to the north to make space for the divisions to move further north as well. The detours caused by the presence of baggages, waggons, carts etc. in Genappe itself have been mentioned. It caused a delay, which eventually proved to be not to have any serious consequences. But this is reasoning from hindsight. In reality, it could have, in case Napoleon would have fallen upon Wellington in superior numbers and had driven him back upon the defile of the Dyle here. Now, the obstruction was solved towards the middle of the day, at least on the road which leads from Charleroi to Brussels.

Lord Uxbridge, as commander of the rearguard, had been given the task to occupy the crossroads of Quatre Bras as long as possible, while at the same time he was supposed to avoid getting engaged in a rearguard action. As the infantry outposts had pulled back, Vivian's sentries did the same and apart from a moment of a misunderstanding in the coordination of the movements of both cavalry brigades of Vivian and Vandeleur, the evacuation of Quatre Bras was well executed. Quatre Bras was the first position to delay and cover the retreat along the Brussels road. The second one which would allow to do the same was one just north of Genappe, in rear of the Dyle river. In order to cover the infantry which moved along the Brussels road, Uxbridge had his cavalry – as rearguard – move off in three columns not only to protect the centre column (which consisted of the infantry) from any manoeuvres on its flanks, but also to accelerate the retreat of the cavalry. As a result of the situation, the column on the right moved off parallel with the one in the centre, while the one on the left did so a little later. This was the one of the brigades of Vandeleur and Vivian and which was faced with advance of the enemy along the Namur road. Between Quatre Bras and the Dyle river, Uxbridge was able to evacuate this area at the very last moment and by manoeuvring in such a way that he did not get involved into any action, and this without a general confusion. The Dyle river, in combination with the passage through the village of Genappe in the centre, formed an obstacle for Wellington's army in its retreat, but once on its right bank, it afforded a position to delay the French advance. After Uxbridge had been able to draw back, covered by cavalry and light infantry, on this position it was used in its full extent. North of Genappe, the retreat was continued unmolested and in good order. For the retreat in general there are virtually no indications that order was lost, except for a very few cases which took place at the rearguard between Quatre Bras and Genappe.<sup>14</sup> In general, the cobbled road was used by the artillery and its trains, while the infantry marched to the left of it. The cavalry, wherever applicable, moved to its right.<sup>15</sup>

Siborne describes the retreat as "a perfect model of operations of this nature, performed in the immediate presence of a powerful enemy."<sup>16</sup> As such, Siborne expresses his highest esteem for Lord Uxbridge in particular. There is no doubt that Uxbridge made indeed the most judicious dispositions for the safe withdrawal of the army, and this is quite apparent, but it should be noted as well that these would not have been possible if the French pursuit wasn't carried out in the way it was now.<sup>17</sup> The weather has sometimes been mentioned as an additional factor contributing to the success of the manoeuvre as it slowed down the French pursuit. At the same time, however, the Anglo-Netherlands-German army equally suffered in its retreat so this balanced up the pros.

The retreat from Nivelles to Mont Saint Jean.

The road from Nivelles to Mont Saint Jean was loaded over a great length with wounded, coming from Quatre Bras, as well as baggage of the divisions of Chassé, Alten, the headquarters of the army of the Netherlands and (parts of) the cavalry. <sup>18</sup>As a result, this slowed down the march of the divisions which had to use it.

Additionally, an extra delay had taken place for the 2nd division as it had unnecessarily marched in the direction of Quatre Bras first. This march could not have been avoided anyway as the order to move towards Mont Saint Jean was issued later as the moment the division had turned towards the crossroads.

The cooperation with the Prussians.

As has been indicated before, the basic decision to retire upon Mont Saint Jean was taken by Wellington without having had any contact with the Prussian high command. At the moment he did so, however, he was aware of their presence near Wavre and this opened a renewed perspective for cooperation. At the same time, he did not have any formal promise from their side for support. Not long after, lieutenant Massow reported about the battle of Ligny, that the Prussian army was to be collected around Wavre and that Blücher was asking the duke about his intentions. <sup>19</sup>This information can only have confirmed the duke in his decision to fall back towards Mont Saint Jean, but Von Massow was not the carrier of any Prussian promise for support. I would like to stress this element, in the sense that somehow Wellington must have felt reasonably sure about a cooperation with Blücher and that he took his measures that day without an actual hard promise from their side. More importantly, there was no reason to stay at Quatre Bras as Wellington was very well aware that he should seek the presence of the Prussians to make sure a joint battle was possible as the Prussian army was no longer à portée of Quatre Bras. <sup>20</sup>

It was, again, the defensive concept of the numerical superiority as its main feature, but now applied deeper into Belgium on the line Waterloo – Wavre and this time one in which the roles of Wellington and Blücher were reversed: the first to be in a defensive position and the second to fall upon the French flank and or rear. Again, it is the scenario as caught by Von Müffling in the expression “fourches caudines.” <sup>21</sup>

It remains a matter of speculation of what Wellington would have done if he would have been left in the dark about the Prussian situation in the early morning of the 17th of June. As it has been stated before, Antwerp was Wellington's main line of retreat, but at the same time it should not be forgotten that the very starting point for any success was a joint battle of both him and Blücher against Napoleon. For that reason, it might also have been that Wellington might have fallen back further north east-to make a junction possible towards Tirlemont or Maastricht.

Some time after Wellington had actually assembled his forces in the position of Mont Saint Jean, he must have discussed the cooperation with Blücher with Von Müffling. As a result, Von Müffling wrote Blücher informing him that Wellington had actually taken up a defensive position at Mont Saint Jean in order to fight Napoleon there with Prussian support. Therefore, the letter also must have inquired about Blücher's intentions. This throws light upon the return of Massow to Wavre, in which he probably must have been instructed to tell Blücher that Wellington *intended* to fall back upon Mont Saint Jean to fight Napoleon there. Remains the question for what Prussian support Wellington would have reckoned for taking up a position at Mont saint Jean.

After mentioning the arrival of Von Massow, Von Müffling writes in his first book: “Hierauf wurde ihm von Seiten des Herzogs Wellington der Vorschlag gemacht, sich der Stellung, welche

er bey Mont Saint Jean gewählt hatte, mit 2 Corps zu nähern, um ihn unterstützen zu können; in diesem Fall wolle er daselbst eine Schlacht annehmen.“<sup>22-23</sup>

In another account Von Müffling states Wellington would have said to Von Massow ”er wolle eine Schlacht in der Stellung von Mont Saint Jean annehmen, wenn der Feldmarschall ihm, sei es auch nur mit einem Corps, zu Hülfe zu kommen geneigt sei.“<sup>24</sup>

In another version, Von Müffling states the duke would have said to Von Massow: “Der gestrige Tag hat in meiner Ansicht zu einer vereinten Offensive nichts geändert, ich gehe in das Lager von Mont Saint Jean zurück und wenn ich dort auch nur mit einem preussischen Armeecorps (30.000 M.) unterstützt werde, so nehme ich morgen eine Defensivschlacht an und gehe am 19. In Verbindung mit dem Fürsten zum Angriff über. Kann ich diese Unterstützung nicht erhalten und Napoleon führt Alles, was er hat, gegen mich, dann könnte ich die Schlacht nicht annehmen, sondern müsste auf Brüssel zurück gehen.“<sup>25</sup>

In both Von Müffling’s versions it is suggested as if Wellington was prepared to fight at MontSaint Jean, even if he would be supported by only 30.000 Prussians. The report as written by Gneisenau by 2 p.m. gives a clear clue on what Wellington asked for through Von Massow in the morning as support for him to accept a confrontation at Mont Saint Jean. This was for two army corps. On what this is based remains unclear, but it might have been

influenced by the fact that Massow had told the duke that one of the four corps of the Prussian army was still intact (4th) and that another one had not been suffering too much (3rd), while the other two (1st and 2nd) were badly shaken. The letter as referred to – eventually - was the confirmation of the actual retreat upon Mont Saint Jean and the resulting intention of Wellington for a confrontation there, in conjunction with the Prussians.<sup>26</sup>

The result of Wellington’s request was the formal Prussian promise for support with the whole army for the 18th of June, as expressed by Von Grolmann at 11 p.m. This promise was reiterated personally by Blücher the other day. This double promise must have had to do with the fact that Blücher, bruised and much fatigued, was asleep at that time and that the members of the general staff did not want to wake him.

There is a connection between the Prussian promise of support arriving at Waterloo around 2.30 a.m. and the letters which Wellington wrote shortly after. The very fact that Wellington had by then received this promise can be derived from the words as expressed to Sir Charles Stuart as “The Prussians will be ready again in the morning for any thing.”

Within the context of the cooperation with the Prussian army, three items should be highlighted. First of all, the mission as carried out by lieutenant Von Wucherer, an aide of Von Müffling. In his account as published by Von Hofmann he claims he was sent by Wellington on the early morning towards Wavre, as it was presumed the Prussian headquarters would be there. Wucherer was to inform the Prussian leadership “Er [Wellington] wäre bereit in der Position von Quatre Bras zu verbleiben und eine Schlacht heute anzunehmen, wenn die Preussische Armee heute wieder vorrücken könne. Sollte dies indessen nicht möglich sein, so würde er sich in die Position von Waterloo zurückziehen und daselbst eine Schlacht annehmen, wenn auch nur ein Preussisches Korps zur Unterstützung gewährt würde.

Accordingly, Wucherer would have ridden to Wavre, but he would not have had the chance to meet Blücher, Gneisenau or Von Grolmann in person. In stead, he would have been told on behalf of Blücher, through colonel Von Nostitz: “lassen Sie dem Herzog sagen, heute könne Ich nicht wieder vorkommen, morgen aber komme ich mit dem frischen Korps und den anderen.” However, just before Wucherer got back at Quatre Bras, Wellington had already been informed in the same way by major Von Massow.<sup>27</sup>

As stated before, lieutenant Von Wucherer was an adjudant of Von Müffling. In his turn, Von Müffling states he sent out aide de camp’s around daybreak to find out about the whereabouts and

situation of the Prussian army. At the same time, he doesn't enter into any results of these missions.<sup>28</sup> Lieutenant Von Wucherer might very well have been one of those adjudants. Yet, the way he describes his mission does not correspond in any way whatsoever with the reality of the events of the 17th of June.

First of all, if Wucherer would have been in touch with the Prussian high command at all, this would have transpired in papers of the British or the Prussian headquarters in general, or in those of Von Müffling in particular. This is not the case. Secondly, it is most unlogical to assume that at Wellington's headquarters it was supposed that Blücher would have retired to Wavre right from the beginning. If it did, then the way the mission as formulated by Von Wucherer would not fit to the situation as it was assumed it to be. Also, a common offensive with Wellington at Quatre Bras and Blücher around Wavre is a most unlogical combination. And even if Von Wucherer would have ever dropped in at Wavre with such an important mission, he would never have been treated in such an impersonal way as he describes.<sup>29</sup>

Additionally, Von Wucherer's mission simply doesn't fit with the mission of Gordon as sent out by Wellington.

And last but not least, Von Wucherer suggests as if Von Massow would have done some kind of promise on behalf of Blücher. Yet, how could this be possible if the Prussian high command wasn't aware of Wellington's intentions ?

Resuming, there is no other conclusion that Von Wucherer was never sent out in a mission as he describes it on the 17th of June.

Secondly, the role of Von Müffling in the cooperation between Wellington and Blücher on the 17th of June merits some consideration. If we may believe him, he did attempt to re-establish the communication with the Prussian army during the early morning hours. As Wellington had been informed about the situation through Gordon, Von Müffling – obviously - must have been informed about this. From a formal point of view, his role became evident the moment Von Massow reached Quatre Bras and this again became apparent in the exchange of documents during the evening of the 17th of June. An interesting element in this is the role of Von Müffling assigns himself in the decision of Wellington to fall back upon the position of Mont saint Jean. Von Müffling writes nothing about this in his publication under the pseudonym of C.v.W. (1815). Yet, on the 24th of June 1815, he writes to Von Boyen: “[...] und der Herzog meine Meynung foderte was zu thun sey, da Bonaparte mit allem was er hatte ohnfehlbar auf die englische Armée fallen würde, er augenblicklich einwilligte als ich ihm vorschlug sich am forêt de Soignies [sic] in die Defensive zu stellen und den Preussen die Offensive zu überlassen.

Ich verbarg ihm die Schwierigkeiten seiner Lage im Fall wir geschlagen würden nicht, allein er wollte Brüssel nicht Preis geben. Dann gab es keine andre Stellung als die, die er wählte.”<sup>30</sup>

In his memoirs, Von Müffling writes that he told Wellington: “die Sache könne nicht so ganz schlimm stehen; der Herzog müsse bis auf einen Punkt zurückgehen, welcher mit Wavre in einer Höhe läge, dann würden wir Nachricht von dem Zustand der Blücherschen Armee haben, und früher liesse sich nichts beschliessen. Dies war ganz die Ansicht des Herzogs. Er hatte die Stellung von Mont-Saint-Jean gewählt [...]”

In Von Hofmann's book, Von Müffling, after having mentioned Gordon's arrival, writes: “Hierauf sagte ich ruhig zu Wellington: Ney steht Ihnen hier gegenüber. Napoleon kann nicht mit ihm vereinigen oder gegen Blücher marschiren, gleichviel, Sie können nicht in dieser erbärmlichen Stellung stehen bleiben. Da Blücher, wie es scheint, nicht geschlagen, sondern nur zurückgegangen, um sich mit Bülow zu vereinigen, so kann Napoleon sich nicht mit allen seinen Kräften gegen Sie wenden.” Wellington setzte sich auf die Erde und zog seine Karte heraus. “Sie haben recht”, sagte er, “mein Verweilen hier hat keinen Zweck. Ich werde in mein gewähltes Lager nach Mont Saint Jean zurückgehen.” After then describing the arrival of Von Massow, Von Müffling continues: “Unter vier Augen sagte ich später dem Herzoge: Sie kennen nun des Fürsten

Ansichten, gegründet auf die Übersicht seiner Mittel; dass er hält, was er versprochen hat, darauf können Sie rechnen, aber verabreden lässt sich noch gar nichts, so lange es ungewiss ist, was Napoleon thut. Ney allein wird Sie nach den gestern gemachten Erfahrungen schwerlich angreifen.

Man übersieht von hier aus die Chaussée nach Sombreffe auf 1 ½ Stunden. Kommt Napoleon von dort, so kann zeitig einer Schlacht durch einen Rückzug nach Mont Saint Jean ausgewichen werden. Es hängt dann von Ihnen ab, sich heute zu erklären, ob Sie für morgen eine Defensivschlacht in jener Stellung annehmen wollen, allein oder vereint und mit welchem Beistande von Blücher. Dies ist deshalb nöthig, weil dessen Anerbieten auf eine Voraussetzung gebaut ist, welche so unendlichen Wechselfällen unterliegt. Marschirt Napoleon gegen die Maas

oder zu einer Schlacht gegen Blücher, so kann er nicht zu Ihnen, sondern nur Sie können zu ihm kommen." Ich bat Wellington, er möge selbst mündlich und zwar sehr bestimmt antworten. Dies that er, indem er erklärte: "Der gestrige Tag hat in meiner Ansicht zu einer vereinten Offensive nichts geändert, ich gehe in das Lager von Mont Saint Jean zurück und wenn ich dort auch nur mit einem preussischen Armeecorps (30.000 M.) unterstützt werde, so nehme ich morgen eine Defensivschlacht an und gehe am 19. in Verbindung mit dem Fürsten zum Angriff über.

Kann ich diese Unterstützung nicht erhalten und Napoleon führt Alles, was er hat, gegen mich, dann könnte ich die Schlacht nicht annehmen, sondern müsste auf Brüssel zurück gehen."<sup>31</sup>

After the arrival of the information about the Prussian army through both Gordon and Von Massow, there can be no doubt that Wellington must have spoken about this with Von Müffling. In the presentation of this conversation, it is in his report to Von Boyen that Von Müffling pulls the whole concept as it happened too much towards himself; in a sense, here he suffers from hindsight.

In his other two accounts, however, it is more like a conversation in which Von Müffling made some general comments to be considered, after which Wellington made his decision what to do. The general outline of these comments can be described as: having the Prussian army further to the rear, it would make no sense to maintain the army in the position of Quatre Bras. As such, a position further to the rear, at level with Wavre, would potentially allow both armies to link up, the more as the Prussians were still eager to fight in conjunction with

Wellington in a joint battle. Yet, all would depend upon what the enemy would do: either turn towards Wellington in force or turn to the Prussian army again towards the Meuse. In that case a position just south of Brussels would not serve as a defensive one, but as one from which to move offensively.

There is no doubt either that Wellington was of course well aware of the situation as Von Müffling claims he sketched it. It can be doubted, however, that Von Müffling made his arguments in this way and that it was Wellington who made his decision what to do as a result. This would be too much honour for Von Müffling and this reasoning would also fail to recognize Wellington's analysis of the situation. After all, he had recognized the potential importance of the position of Mont Saint Jean as an ultimate one for the defence of Brussels already in 1814.

The conversation should be seen in a way that the considerations as mentioned must have been discussed in a more dynamic way as Von Müffling describes it, but having Wellington in the dominant role.<sup>32</sup>

Regarding the role of Von Müffling one last element should be touched upon, as mentioned by Von Müffling himself. After Wellington had heard about the Prussian retreat upon Wavre through Gordon, Von Müffling writes: "Wellington sah mich mit grossen Augen an, aus denen Ich las: "Hast du das gewusst und mir diplomatisch verschwiegen ?" Ich fand das natürlich, da wir uns

noch zu wenig in wichtigen Augenblicken gesehen hatten und während Alles durch mich ging, dieser Rückzug ihm zehn Stunden lang ein Geheimnis geblieben war.”<sup>33</sup>

Supposing Von Müffling’s impression was correct, it is impossible to understand what benefit Von Müffling could possibly have had for himself by writing these words. For him, this impression was not unlogical, as if Von Müffling would have known about the retreat and had told nothing about it to the duke – if this were true, this would have been something of the most serious neglect.

Apart from the fact that this in itself was not true, circumstances during the other days of the campaign prove that Von Müffling *was* actually involved in the most important moments when it came down to the cooperation between Wellington and Blücher.

For reasons of completeness, the third item is the claim as if Wellington would have paid a visit to Blücher during the evening / night of the 17th of June. This claim, however, is not taken directly from authentic evidence whatsoever; in fact, the evidence there is points to the contrary. There is no reason to dwell upon this claim, other than to state that it is an absurd one.<sup>34</sup>

Other communications as those between general headquarters of both allied armies on the 17th of June consisted of some mutual patrols.

On the evening of the 16th of June, Vivian brigade’s must have taken up a position in the vicinity of Sart Dame Avelines in order to be able to send out patrols to his left to find out about the situation of the Prussian army. There is no reliable information where they went, but in all probability they apparently did not gather any useful information.<sup>35</sup>

Later, around 3 p.m. a squadron of the 18th regiment of hussars, led by major Kennedy, would have been detached from the heights in rear of the Dyle (near Thy and Ways) towards Wavre, but the result of this mission has not come to our knowledge.<sup>36</sup> From all this, it can be assumed that Sir Hussey Vivian had instructions to reconnoitre towards his left (facing north) to link up with the Prussians. This would also explain his reconnaissance later that day, from Vert Coucou.

Other than that, general Von Zieten, from his side, would also have attempted to get in touch with Wellington’s left flank, but further details are missing.<sup>37</sup>

The position of Halle.

In former chapters, Wellington’s obsession to cover Brussels on the line stretching from Mons towards the capital has been stressed. This had to do with his axioma rather to make no movement as to make a false one, particularly while having Napoleon as opponent. On the 17th of June, his concern for this road and connection in particular continued, but This should be seen within a different context.

It was on the early morning that Wellington ordered general Colville, while being between Nivelles and Braine le Comte, to send the part of his division which was at Nivelles towards Waterloo, while the other part was due to collect and halt at Braine le Comte that day.

Later that day, during the evening, Colville was ordered by the duke to fall back with his units from Braine le Comte to Halle; in this Colville was to be “guided by the intelligence he received of the enemy’s movements in his march to Halle, whether he would move by the direct route or by Enghien.”

Having knowledge of the French main advance towards Fleurus and Quatre Bras, it was for Wellington no longer an issue of any feint attack upon the line Braine le Comte – Halle as coming from the south, but one of a possible advance towards Nivelles and Braine le Comte in an attempt to cut Wellington off from Brussels further north or to encircle him while being involved in a battle in front of Brussels along the road Brussels – Charleroi.<sup>38</sup>

In fact, it is Wellington himself who writes in this sense, as: “It is impossible to close this paper without observing that field marshal the duke of Wellington’s letters, published by colonel Gurwood, afford proofs that he was convinced that the enemy ought to have attacked by other lines rather than by the valleys of the Sambre and the Meuse; and that even up to the last moment previous to the attack of his position at Waterloo, he conceived that they would endeavour to turn it [the position at Waterloo] by a march upon Hal. He states this in his letters to the duc de Feltre on the 15th, and to the duc de Berri and king Louis XVIII dated 3 ½ a.m. 18th June; and there are orders to his patrols of cavalry, on the nights of the 16th and 17th of June, to observe particularly the enemy’s movements towards Nivelles.

It might be a nice question for military discussion whether Buonaparte was right in endeavouring to force the position at Waterloo, or the duke of Wellington right in thinking that, from the evening of the 16th, Buonaparte would have taken a wiser course if he had moved to his left, have reached the high road leading from Mons to Bruxelles, and have turned the right of the position of the allies by Hal. It is obvious that the duke was prepared to resist such a movement.”<sup>39</sup>

The fact that Wellington pulled both Colville and the forces under prince Frederik back from the line Enghien – Braine le Comte much later in the day towards the position of Halle was all meant to cover this sector as long as possible against a possible French line of advance here. In this condition, the orders for the prince were to defend the position as long as possible.<sup>40</sup>

So, while the position of Halle was initially meant to be used as a last defence south of Brussels in case Napoleon would attack in the sector between Tournai and Mons, it now became a protection of Wellington’s extreme right flank, and this of a line on which he expected to bear the brunt of the French offensive.

It has been claimed that the detachment of troops of the Anglo-Netherlands-German army was meant to protect the communication with Ghent and Ostend. In the background of what has been written about the line of retreat of Wellington, this claim is incorrect as this line ran straight to the north, towards Antwerp and – if necessary – further beyond, to the north.<sup>41</sup>

Wellington’s ideas about the French army.

By mid-day on the 16th of June, Wellington realized that the French main force was opposite the Prussian army, and that those French in front his own force at Quatre Bras was a detachment possibly one corps strong. During the action of Quatre Bras Wellington learned about its actual strength and did obviously not know anything about the fact that one French army corps was wandering between both fields of battle.

At dawn on the 17th of June, the impression of the duke hadn’t changed, but the question was whether Napoleon would turn against him with his main army. As Wellington was still at Quatre Bras by 2 p.m. he must have convinced himself of what was drawing near at that time, though this was only a vanguard. It was during the night that Wellington wrote about the weak French pursuit and about the fact that he had seen very few of the enemy during the day.

This could leave the observer in doubt what Wellington actually thought about the strength of the French force in front of him. It is impossible to determine what this might have been, but at the same time it becomes clear from the letters which he wrote that same evening and night that Wellington was of course very well aware of the imminent danger and that he might have to expose Brussels. There is also no doubt that Wellington must have reasoned that at least some part of the Napoleon’s army was at Blücher’s heels.<sup>42</sup>

Above all, all the way deep down into the night of the 17th of June (and beyond), he took into account that a French force could be moving from Nivelles towards his right flank, at Halle, in order to turn his army.<sup>43</sup>

Resuming, on the late evening of the 17th of June the general position of the Anglo-Netherlands-German army covered five roads to Brussels (two at Mont Saint Jean and three at Halle), while having a small detachment far in front, at Braine le Comte.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Colonel F.Hervey, assistant QMG, states that rumours dropped in during the night that the Prussians had lost the battle. In: A contemporary letter etc. p.432

Wellington himself says about his situation: “But although the exact result of the battle [of Ligny] was not known, it was judged that it had not been successful to the Prussian army.” In his memorandum, dated 1842. In: WSD, Vol.X p.526

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Carmichael Smyth in a letter dated 19th of June 1815. In: NAK, nr.WO30 / 35 nr.55 p.108  
Vincent in his letter to Schwarzenberg, 17th of June - 5 p.m. In: GSA, VPH-HA, VI, nr.VIII. nr.3 p.35

Baron Van der Capellen in his two bulletins of the 17th of June. He states: “Nos armées recommenceront d’attaquer l’ennemi aujourd’hui.” And: “Il [Wellington] se préparait à attaquer l’armée française qui se retirait.” And: “L’affaire allait recommencer ce matin, tout fait espérer les plus heureux résultats.” In: Aerts, W. and Th.Fleischman - Bruxelles pendant la bataille de Waterloo p.143-144

Von Müffling adds that the duke initially wanted to make further arrangements with Blücher about the offensive, when he heard about the Prussian retreat. In: C.v.W. Geschichte etc. p.18

Wellington himself says: [...]“he [Wellington] considered that his own position being untouched, and the continued march of the troops under his command giving him an increase of strength at every moment, he felt the utmost confidence in the final result of the operations in progress.” In his memorandum, dated 1842. In: WSD, Vol.X p.526

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Carmichael Smyth in a letter dated 19th of June 1815. In: NAK, nr.WO30 / 35 nr.55 p.109

<sup>4</sup> In: NAM, Book of manuscript copies of Waterloo letters. Nr.6507-1

Lieutenant colonel Gardiner (horse artillery) states that “the heights [of La Belle Alliance] formed an admirable position. I should otherwise have thought the duke would have halted here, in preference to the line he occupied above Waterloo.” In: a letter dated July 1815 to lieutenant general sir Th.Grahm. In: NLS, MS3615

<sup>5</sup> In: Gash, N. Wellington and the Waterloo campaign p.11

<sup>6</sup> In: Bas, F.de & T’Serclaes de Wommersom. La campagne de 1815 Vol.III p.424

<sup>7</sup> Oldfield adds that on the 16th of June both colonel Carmichael Smyth and Sir G.Wood went out south to find out about what was happening; they expected to be back in about two hours time, while Oldfield was supposed to stay in Brussels until further notice.

After Carmichael Smyth had joined general headquarters, he asked Oldfield for the plan drawn of the position of Mont Saint Jean. It doesn’t become clear whether this was Carmichael Smyth’s initiative, or that he did so upon Wellington’s request.

The original map had been drawn in parts by several officers and as a fair copy had not yet been drawn for the duke, Oldfield decided to send over these originals. At Quatre Bras, somehow, these papers had been handed over to lieutenant Waters of the royal engineers who lost them for a moment during the action at Quatre Bras when he was unhorsed, but he had been able to retrieve them.

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That morning, the duke asked colonel Carmichael Smyth for the plan, which was then given to him by captain Oldfield. Cf. account Oldfield in: NAM, nr.7403-147  
Cf. Wellington C Nos. 130-155 Miscellaneous letters and papers. In: Gwent County Record Office, Cwmbran, Wales – Raglan Papers.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Gash, N. Wellington and the Waterloo campaign p.11-12 He concludes the same, while using the same survey of the field as I have mentioned in the preambles.  
On the so-called “Waterloo-map” as referred to in an earlier chapter (cf. preambles), pencil marks can be seen on a line stretching from Ohain, in rear of the farm of La Haye Sainte towards Merbraine. On these, the following note can be read in the margin: “These pencil marks on the original plan are supposed to be those of the duke of Wellington. Oldfield, 16 September 1845.”  
If this would be correct, this would be another indication that Wellington had this position in mind.

In 1839, sir H.Vivian wrote to William Siborne: “[..] That the position of Waterloo is by no means a strong one cannot for a moment be disputed. How far the statement that the duke had the year before selected it is correct I will not pretend to say, but I will mention an anecdote told me by poor Sir.Fredk.Ponsonby after the battle, and what I heard him often repeat. He said “he knew it to be a fact that the duke had himself halted some regiments in position on the Brussels side of Genappe, meaning to have halted his army there, having that town and the small river that runs through it in his front, but that Delancey, his QMG, who had been sent to the rear, came to him and described to him the position of Waterloo, and that the duke determined to retire from that on which he was then halted to take up that on which the battle was fought.”

In: BL, Add.ms.34.707 p.150-158

Miller concludes from both FitzRoy Somerset’s and this account that it was De Lancey who actually selected the position of Mont Saint Jean and not Wellington. Apart from those mentioned, other reasons apply why this conclusion is incorrect.

First of all, the story is described by Sir F.Ponsonby who was not a member of Wellington’s staff so his words should be dealt with with care. More importantly, the fact that Wellington halted part of his forces near Genappe had nothing to do with the position of Mont Saint Jean but with either the protection as a rearguard or with the logistics of the retreat (see above).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. lord Greenock. In: BL, Add.ms.34.704 p.187-189

<sup>10</sup> Cf. his memoirs. In: private collection.

<sup>11</sup> Wellington in his report to lord Bathurst. In: Bas, F.de and T’Serclaes de Wommersom. La campagne de 1815 Vol.III p.442

Von Müffling in a report (probably dated 19th of June 1815) as annex to a letter of count Rechberg to fieldmarshal Wrede. Original in Kgl. Bayerisches Kriegsarchiv at Munich. Published in: Pflugk Harttung, J.von – Archivalische Beiträge etc. p.517

<sup>12</sup> Wellington in his report to lord Bathurst. In: Bas, F.de and T’Serclaes de Wommersom. La campagne de 1815 Vol.III p.442

<sup>13</sup> In this context there is a strange contradiction in the preparatory orders as issued by the duke of Wellington that morning. On the one hand he directs parts of his army towards Mont Saint Jean (also from Quatre Bras), while he wants the reserve artillery and the spare musket ammunition to be parked immediately behind Genappe.

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Initially, it might have been that he yet felt he might need these ammuitions and guns immediately in rear of the Dyle in case he might be forced to take up a position there, but that he changed his mind later.

<sup>14</sup> Lieutenant Pratt (30th regiment) indicates that the march of at least his battalion north of Genappe became somewhat confused and precipitate, due to the affair at Genappe. In: BL, Add.ms.34.705 p.88-94

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Captain Weiz (1st battalion 1st Nassau regiment). In a report dated 12th June 1863. In: Unzer, A. Darstellung etc. In: Nassauische Heimatblätter, nr.1-2 1915 p.3  
Cf. Lieutenant colonel G.von Berckefeldt (Münden battalion, brigade Best). In: Geschichte des Königlich Hannoverschen Landwehr Bataillons Münden p.214

<sup>16</sup> In: History of the war etc. Vol.I p.277

<sup>17</sup> Cf. observations on the French pursuit.

Uxbridge himself qualified the retreat as: “[..] the whole movement, but particularly the movements and manoeuvres of the centre and principal column made one of the prettiest field days upon a large scale that ever occurred.” In: BL, Add.ms.34.707 p.438-439

On the 15th of March 1852 Uxbridge wrote to Croker: “The moment the squadrons of the rear guard halted and fronted, those the enemy invariably avoided a collision, and the retreat was conducted at a walk. The artillery, however, on both sides were occasionally at work, and our congreve rockets were pitched into their squadrons with good effect. We were received by the duke of Wellington upon entering the position of Waterloo having effected the retreat with very trifling loss. Thus ended the prettiest field day of cavalry and horse artillery that I ever witnessed.” In: Anglesey, marquess of - One leg: the life and letters of Henry William Paget etc.p.362

Uxbridge also said (in 1846) about the availability of artillery during the retreat: “I perfectly recollect being very much puzzled with our heavy 9 pounders in the reeat on the 17th June 1815 and longed for the 6’s just for that particular purpose.” In: Anglesey, marquess of, One leg: the life and letters of Henry William Paget etc.p.361

This remark is hard to explain as, apart from Mercer’s troop (9-pounders) at least Whinyates’one was in the central column, and this troop was composed of 6-pounders (as well as rockets).

<sup>18</sup> Cf. the relevant chapter, as well as the account of captain J.Daniel of the 7th regiment of hussars. In: Journal of an officer etc. p.390

<sup>19</sup> Von Müffling states in his first version of the events: “Bereits am 17ten um 9 Uhr Morgens gingen Nachrichten vom Fürsten Blücher aus Wavre ein, welche sehr beruhigend waren. Der Fürst wünschte nur so viel Zeit zu gewinnen, um seine Truppen mit Patronen und Lebensmitteln versehen zu können. In: Geschichte des Feldzugs etc. p.20

<sup>20</sup> For this reason, the suggestion as if Wellington should have kept a position centred around Nivelles and Braine le Comte, and to have attacked the enemy from there in conjunction with the Prussians, as suggested by an anonymous British “officer of the staff” is most unlogical. In: An account of the battle of Waterloo, fought on the 18th of June, by the English and allied forces, commanded by the duke of Wellington etc. p.8

<sup>21</sup> In: The memoirs of baron Von Müffling p.233

Cf. Previous observations on the allied cooperation on the 15th and 16th of June.

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<sup>22</sup> C.v.W. Geschichte des Feldzugs etc. p.20-21

<sup>23</sup> According to Von Damitz - and with him, Siborne - Wellington would have written to Blücher proposing him “den folgende tag eine Schlacht in der Stellung von Mont Saint Jean anzunehmen, im Fall das preussische Heer ihm mit zwei Corps zu Hülfe kommen könne.” There are no indications, however, that Von Massow carried a written document, nor that Wellington would have asked for the support of two corps in particular as a condition to accept the confrontation.

In: Geschichte des Feldzugs von 1815 p.221

History of the war etc. Vol.I p.251

Cf. Aerts, W. Etudes etc. (manuscript) p.108

<sup>24</sup> In: Aus meinem Leben p.241

<sup>25</sup> Hofmann, G.W. , Zur Geschichte des Feldzugs von 1815 etc. p.136

This version is in some different wording essentially taken over by Von Ollech. Here he cites, but from where he doesn't indicate. In: Geschichte des Feldzugs von 1815 p.180

<sup>26</sup> Napoleon criticizes Wellington and Blücher for not pulling back to a position between Brussels and the forest of Soignes. In that case - in his idea - they could have had their rearguards to defend the forest and thereby gaining some days to enable the allies to attract the scattered Prussian forces, as well as forces as coming from “*places fortes*” thereby ensuring and guaranteeing an allied numerical superiority.

This reasoning is too much a product of hindsight and doesn't take into account neither the interest Wellington had in defending Brussels further south in a pre-studied position, nor The Prussian operation line which ran not through Brussels but further north-east, towards Maastricht.

In: Mémoires pour servir etc. p.198-199

<sup>27</sup> Hofmann, G.W. , Zur Geschichte des Feldzugs von 1815 etc. p.139-140

<sup>28</sup> In: Memoirs etc. p.239

<sup>29</sup> Aerts, erroneously, does not exclude that Wellington - after the return of Gordon - may have sent out Von Wucherer. In: Etudes etc. (manuscript) p.108

De Bas makes the claim that he actually did so. In: La campagne de 1815 Vol.II p.4

<sup>30</sup> In: MWB, 1891 nr.100 p.2589

<sup>31</sup> Hofmann, G.W. , Zur Geschichte des Feldzugs von 1815 etc. p.136

This version is in some different wording essentially taken over by Von Ollech. In: Geschichte des Feldzugs von 1815 p.180

<sup>32</sup> Aerts puts it more bluntly by stating that Wellington simply needed no advice from Von Müffling by pointing to old surveys of the position of Mont Saint Jean. In: Etudes etc. (manuscript) p.107

<sup>33</sup> Hofmann, G.W. , Zur Geschichte des Feldzugs von 1815 etc. p.15-136

<sup>34</sup> Ropes and Von Lettow Vorbeck come to the same conclusion.

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In: The Waterloo campaign p.238-242  
Napoleons Untergang p.367-368

<sup>35</sup> Lieutenant Duperier (18th regiment of hussars). In: BL, Add.ms.34708 p.90-91  
He, as well as colonel Murray, both of the same regiment, was a member of these patroles.

<sup>36</sup> Lieutenant Duperier (18th regiment of hussars). In: BL, Add.ms.34.703 p.90-91

<sup>37</sup> Cf. report of Von Zieten, dated 8th July 1815. In: Reiche, L.von – Memoiren etc. p.419  
Also see colonel Von Reiche himself. In: Memoiren etc. p.207

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Von Müffling. In: C.v.W. Geschichte des Feldzugs etc. p.19  
In another account Von Müffling denotes such a French manoeuvre a demonstration. In: Esquisse etc. p.98

Carmichael Smth, J.C. – Chronological epitome etc. p.393  
In fact, at the very early morning of the 18th of June Wellington wrote to the duke De Berry: “[.] Il se peut que l'ennemi nous tourne par Halle, quoique le temps est terrible et les chemins détestables, et malgré que j'ai le corps du Prince Frederic en position entre Halle et Enghien.” Cf. chapter below.

Napoleon, in his turn, appropriates Wellington's reasoning by stating that he sent out 2000 horsemen during the evening in the direction of Halle as a result of which Wellington's posted the detachment there. In: Mémoires etc. p.114

<sup>39</sup> Wellington's memorandum of 1842. In: WSD, Vol.X p.530-531  
The very fact that Wellington ordered his cavalry to watch the area around Nivelles on both nights is a striking detail which is mentioned by no one else and this merits a special attention.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. the letter of Wellington of the evening of the 17th of June to general Colville, in which he writes: “Prince Frederick of Orange is to occupy with his corps the position between Hal and Enghien, and is to defend it as long as possible.”  
It was also on the 21st of June that prince Frederik wrote to his father: “J'avais reçu l'ordre du duc de Wellington de tenir dans ma position aussi longtemps que je pourrais le faire.” In: Bas, F.de and T'Serclaes de Wommersom. La campagne de 1815 Vol.II p.63

<sup>41</sup> In fact, it is colonel Von Estorff of the Hanoverian cavalry and present in the position of Halle who confirms that the detachment was meant “[.] in aller Hinsicht zur Deckung des rechten Flügels, theils während der Schlacht und theils, wenn die Schlacht ungünstig abgelaufen, also ein Rückzug, sey dieser nach Brüssel oder gegen Antwerpen nothwendig geworden [..]” In: Pflugk Hartung, J.von – Belle Alliance p.219

De Bas is one of the authors claiming that Wellington had the detachment near Halle to protect his line of retreat towards Ostende.

For this claim he cites from a letter written on the 8th of December 1825 by Mr.Littleton about lord Hatherlow who – in his turn – reports about a conversation held between the duke and some of his friends during a dinner at Jedderley. In this conversation the duke would have said: “But I never contemplated in a retreat on Brussels. Had I been forced from my position I should have retreated to my right, towards the coast, the shipping and my ressources [..]”

Apart from the fact that this should not necessarily mean a retreat towards Ostend, but that this could also mean that he meant a retreat towards the north, by wheeling to his right around

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Brussels, the other evidence that this was actually his true line of retreat is overwhelming. Additionally, citations like these of what the duke might have said cannot be trusted as they are as they derive from second-hand sources.

In: La campagne de 1815 Vol.II p.61-62

<sup>42</sup> In his official report, Wellington indicates that he thought this was the corps of Vandamme. Whereupon he based this belief is unknown. In: Bas, F.de – La campagne de 1815 Vol.III p.474

<sup>43</sup> Apparently, prince Frederik did not report back to the duke the moment he had reached his positions in front of Halle. This must have been towards 9 p.m. His report could then have contained information about the total absence of any French forces in the area, and could have reached Wellington towards midnight.

There is also no trace of any report of general Colville, who stood with the majority of his division in an isolated and front position in and around Braine le Comte, about French absence there as well.

Last but not least, Wellington would have sent out reconnaissances towards Nivelles on the evening of the 17th of June; what about their reports ?

As far as can be substantiated, French patrols (maybe from Piré) were observed at Nivelles and further north-west of the Nivelles-road, as far as Braine le Chateau.

<sup>44</sup> These roads were:

Charleroi – Mont Saint Jean – Brussels

Nivelles – Mont Saint Jean – Brussels

Enghien – Halle – Brussels

Braine le Comte – Halle – Brussels

Nivelles – Halle – Brussels.

The detachment at Braine le Comte was pulled in on the evening of the 17th of June, and moved off on the early morning of the 18th.

In a later account, by explaining why Wellington took up a position at Mont Saint Jean, Von Müffling not only refers to the importance of covering Brussels, but also that it was a matter of "trouver un terrain convenable pour pouvoir accepter une bataille rangée, et qui ne forcerait pas toute l'armée à assembler dans la même position, mais simplement à tenir en possession un terrain assez spacieux, parce qu'il restait encore à savoir si une bataille aurait lieu ou non."

However, there was no such non-committal character in this position which Von Müffling assigns it, neither in its level of concentration, nor in the question whether there would be a confrontation. First of all, the position as Wellington took it at Mont Saint Jean was dense and furthermore it was not so much a question *whether* Napoleon would advance, but *how*. In: Esquisse etc. p.97