

Wellington at Waterloo.

There is no information about the circumstances and exact time at which the duke of Wellington reached his new headquarters at Waterloo. There is some evidence, however, that this may have been around 4 p.m.¹

The duke established his headquarters in the inn of Bodenghien.² At that time he was accompanied by his staff, numbering about 40 men. Orders were issued, designating the different bivouacs for the troops.³

Orders were also issued to units not present at Mont Saint Jean, like those to general Colville. These must have been written during the evening and read:

Memorandum for K.G. sir C.Colville

June 17, 1815

The army retired this day from its position at Quatre Bras to its present position in front of Waterloo.

The brigades of the 4th division at Braine le Comte are to retire at daylight tomorrow morning upon Hal.

Major-general Colville must be guided by the intelligence he receives of the enemy's movements in his march to Hal, whether he moves by the direct route or by Enghien.

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.

The army will probably continue in its position in front of Waterloo tomorrow.

Lieutenant colonel Torrens will inform Major-general Sir C. Colville of the position and situation of the armies.

W.de Lancey⁴

A copy of these orders was also issued to prince Frederik.⁵

That evening, the duke of Wellington also visited the frontline on the future battlefield as he was present the moment his extreme rearguard got there.⁶

It was probably around 8.30 p.m. that Von Müffling wrote to Blücher that the duke of Wellington had taken up a defensive position in the position of Braine l'Alleud, Mont Saint Jean and La Haye with the intention to fight Napoleon there with Prussian support. The letter also must have inquired about Blücher's intentions.

In the houses of the village of Waterloo, Wellington's staff officers settled down for the night.⁷ Their names were written on the doors with chalk.⁸

The prince of Orange and his staff spent the night in the old domain of Habbeek, the current farm of Abeiche, one kilometer west of the hamlet of Chênois.⁹

Lord Uxbridge spent the night in the house called Paris, opposite the Bodenghien inn,

Wellington's headquarters.

General Von Hügel, accompanied by general Pozzo di Borgo, went back that evening to Brussels to spread the news about Wellington's new position (and to return to the battlefield probably the next morning).¹⁰

Though there are no reliable data about the time Wellington went to sleep, this sleep must have been very brief as it was at least by 2.30 a.m. that he was awake to receive Blücher's assurance of support.¹¹

By 3 a.m. several letters also were sent out and these must have been written by the duke between 2 and 3 a.m.

One of these letters was for the governor of Antwerp, general Van der Plaet:

à Waterloo, ce 18 juin 1815, à 3 heures du matin.

Monsieur le Gouverneur,

Je recois votre lettre du [is left out, but should be 17th of June]; et je vous prévien que vous devez considérer Anvers comme en état de siège, et que vous devez former les inondations toute de suite. Pour ce qui regarde les provisions des habitants, ce n'est pas nécessaire à présent d'y faire grande attention.

Je vous prie d'observer que, malgré que la place soit en état de siège, vous y laisserez entrer le Roi de France et sa suite s'il se présente; et que vous ferez cantonner sa garde, si elle y vient, auprès de la place.

Vous laisserez aussi entrer et sortir librement toutes les familles, ou Anglaises ou d'autre nation, qui se présenteront, ayant été dans le cas de quitter Bruxelles pour le moment.

Nous avons eu Vendredi une bataille très sanglante auprès de la ferme des Quatre Bras, moi ; et auprès de Sombref, les Prussiens. J'ai repoussé l'ennemi, et ai eu des succès de mon côté; mais les Prussiens ayant beaucoup souffert dans la bataille, ils se sont retirés dans la nuit pour se joindre à leurs renforts; et j'ai donc été dans le cas de faire la même chose hier dans la journée. J'ai vu très peu d'ennemi hier.

J'ai l'honneur d'être, etc.

*Wellington*¹²

Another letter written by the duke was for Lady Frances Carolina Annesley, daughter of Arthur Annesley, first count of Mountnorris. This letter reads:

Waterloo, sunday morning, 3 o'clock

My dear Lady Frances,

As I am sending a messenger to Bruxelles , I write to you one line to tell you that I think you ought to make your preparations, as should Lord Mountnorris, to remove from Bruxelles to Antwerp in case such a measure should be necessary.

We fought a desperate battle on Friday, in which I was successful, though I had but very few troops. The Prussians were very roughly handled and retired in the night, which obliged me to do the same to this place yesterday. The course of the operations may oblige me to uncover Bruxelles for a moment, and may expose that town to the enemy; for which reason I recommend that you and your family should be prepared to move to Antwerp at a moment's notice.

I will give you the earliest intimation of any danger that may come to my knowledge; at present I know of none.

Believe me etc.

Wellington

Present my best compliments to Lord and Lady Mountnorris ¹³

The third letter was written to the duke of Berry, the nephew of Louis XVIII, at Ghent. It reads:

à Waterloo, ce 18 juin 1815, à 3 heures du matin

Monseigneur,

Je n'ai pas écrit à V.A.R., ni à M .le Duc de Feltre , depuis Jeudi, parce que je n'ai rien eu à lui communiquer, ni à V.A.R., et j'ai beaucoup à faire.

Nous avons eu une bataille très sanglante Vendredi, auprès de la ferme des Quatre Bras, moi; et auprès de Sombref, les Prussiens. J'avais très peu de monde avec moi, et point de cavalerie, et cependant j'ai repoussé l'ennemi, été ai eu des succès. Les Prussiens ont souffert beaucoup; et se sont retirés dans la nuit; et j'ai donc été dans le cas de faire la même chose hier dans la journée. J'ai vu très peu de l'ennemi hier, qui nous a suivi mollement, et les Prussiens pas du tout. Ces derniers ont été joint hier par leur 4me corps de plus de 30.000 hommes; et moi, j'ai presque tout mon monde.

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. Si cela arrive, je prie V.A.R. de marcher sur Anvers, et de vous cantonner dans le voisinage, et de faire dire à Sa Majesté que je la prie de passer de Gand à Anvers par la gauche de l'Escaut. Il ne trouvera pas de difficultés au passage de la tête de Flandres. Ayez la bonté d'envoyer cette lettre au duc de Feltre.

J'approuve entièrement ce que S. E. dit à V.A.R. dans sa lettre du 16, à 3 heures de l'après-midi; et je prie V.A.R. d'envoyer par l'Escaut à Anvers tout ce que vous avez à Termonde, ou à Alost, de magasins, qui ne vous sont pas absolument nécessaire dans le moment.

J'espère, plus, j'ai toute raison de croire, que tout ira bien; mais il faut prévoir tout; et on ne veut pas faire de grandes pertes. C'est pour cela que je prie V.A.R. de faire ce qui est écrit dans cette lettre; et à Sa Majesté de partir pour Anvers, non sur des faux bruits, mais sur la nouvelle certaine, que l'ennemi est entré à Bruxelles, malgré moi, en me tournant par Halle. Sa Majesté

en aura toujours le temps en passant par la tête de Flandres.

J'ai l'honneur d'être, etc.

Wellington¹⁴

Finally, Wellington also wrote to Sir Charles Stuart, the British ambassador at Brussels, and this document reads:

Waterloo, 18 June 1815, 3 a.m.

My dear Stuart,

I enclose two letters, which I beg you to peruse and forward without loss of time. You will see in the letter to the Duc de Berri the real state of our case and the only risk we run. The Prussians will be ready again in the morning for any thing.

Pray keep the English quiet if you can. Let them all prepare to move, but neither be in a hurry or a fright as all will yet turn out well.

I have given the directions to the Governor of Antwerp to meet the crotchets which I find in the heads of the King's Governors upon every turn.

Believe me etc.

Wellington

The post horses are embargoed in my name; I conclude, to prevent people from running away with them; but give the man orders to allow any body to have them who goes with an order from you.¹⁵

¹ . According to FitzRoy Somerset the duke arrived in the position of La Belle Alliance at 4 p.m. but his idea about the time Wellington left Quatre Bras is wrong; that is one hour too early. Cf. Account of Lord FitzRoy Somerset. In: NAM, Book of manuscript copies of Waterloo letters. Nr.6507-1

On the other hand, the third bulletin written at 7 p.m. by baron Van der Capellen for the population of Brussels and this was based on information coming from general headquarters at Waterloo. This is another indication that it was well established there at least at 5 p.m. In: Fleischman, Th. & Aerts, W. Bruxelles pendant la bataille de Waterloo p.147

For further details on the village of Waterloo itself, see separate note.

² Cf.P.J.Tellier. Un témoin de Waterloo. In: Bulletin SBEN, no.8 May 1953 p.45

For further details on this building, see separate note.

3.Cf.orders for the 2nd division of the army of the Netherlands and the Foot Guards at Goumont.

4. HL, MS61 WP 8.2.4

WD, Vol.XII p.476

The order was carried by assistant QMG lieutenant colonel Torrens; after he had delivered it, he returned to Brussels. Cf. Recollections of Waterloo p.181

Cf. Sir B.Jackson, Sir B. Notes and remiscences etc. p.36

Colville himself claims he received the order in the very early morning of the 18th of June.

As the distance between Waterloo and Braine le Comte is about 30 kilometers, it might have been sent around 9 p.m.

5.Cf. copy in KHA, nr.A37 VIIb nr.4, which differs in slight details from the above mentioned version.

6.Wellington approved of the action of captain Heyliger (see above) Also see: letter of Lord Uxbridge. BL, Add.Ms. 34.703 p.5-10

According to Lord FitzRoy Somerset it was Wellington himself who put an end to the artillery duel early that evening. In: NAM, Book of manuscript copies of Waterloo letters. Nr.6507-1

On the 15th of March 1852 Uxbridge wrote to Croker: “[..]We [the rearguard] 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

7.During the retreat captain Oldfield of the Royal engineers was sent ahead to Waterloo to find quarters for his superior, colonel Carmichael Smyth. Sir G.Wood, commander of the British artillery, must have spent the night in the same house. Cf. Manuscript notebook

compiled by colonel John Oldfield in December 1844. In: NAM, Nr.7403-147

8.Cotton, E. Une voix de Waterloo p.28-29

9.Major Van Gorkum (memoirs). In private collection.

Scheltema, J. De laatste veldtocht van Napoleon Buonaparte p.125

Journal of Constant Rebecque In: NA, 2.21.008.01 nr.25

¹⁰ Report of general Von Hügel. In: Pfister, A. Aus dem Lager etc. p.367

Count Pozzo di Borgo in a letter to the countess of Castellane in 1835. In: McErlean, J.M.P.

The Russian Waterloo Dispatch Part 2. In: The Waterloo Journal, Vol.28 nr.1 (2006) p.16

11.According to FitzRoy Somerset it was between 2 and 3 a.m. In: NAM, Book of manuscript copies of Waterloo letters. Nr.6507-1

Von Müffling confirms it was during the night. In: Recollections etc. p.136

12.HL, WP 1.470

WSD, Vol.XII p.478

13.HL, WP 1.470

WSD, Vol.XII , p.501

14. HL, WP 1.470

WD, Vol.X p.477

15. HL, WP 1.470

WD, Vol.X p.476

Baron Van der Capellen claims Wellington wrote this report at 4 a.m. Cf. his report to king Willem, dated 18th June, 8 a.m. In: NA, nr.2.02.01 nr.6585