

The mission of colonel Marbot.

The 7th regiment of hussars led by colonel Marbot was a member of the cavalry division of general Jacquinot. On the morning of the 18th of June, this division had its position opposite the chateau of Fichermont, on the extreme right flank of the French army.

Marbot himself has written about his activities on the 18th of June in two letters, one dated 26th June 1815 and the other dated 1830. ¹ Both versions differ considerably. In the first one Marbot says his regiment was almost all day on the right flank of the army and that he was attacked there by the Prussians. The position he refers to must have been the one south-west of Fichermont, as described in the order of battle.

This version is corroborated by a conversation Marbot must have had with colonel Bro, commander of the 4th regiment of lancers (division of Jacquinot) on the 4th of July 1815. ²

In his version of 1830, Marbot gives the following description of the events:

That morning, Marbot got the imperial instruction through colonel Labédoyère and another staff-officer to establish a contact with Grouchy's force. ³

For his mission Marbot was allotted one battalion of the 13th regiment of light infantry (Schmitz' brigade, division of Donzelot - total 625 man) plus three guns. ⁴

Marbot must have taken up with his regiment (3 squadrons), the battalion of light infantry and the three guns a position facing east immediately south of the small wood which is situated south of Fichermont.

In doing so, Marbot met the instruction he had got, to keep the main part of his regiment within sight of the battlefield. With 200 men of infantry he had to occupy the Bois de Fichermont, that is the same small wood immediately south of Fichermont. ⁵

One squadron was sent to Lasne, with outposts as far as Chapelle Saint Lambert. Of another squadron, half went towards Couture, the other half towards Beaumont, with patrols stretching out as far as the bridges of Mousty and Ottignies.

In order to get the information of the outposts as soon as possible, Marbot had intermediate posts set out which were linked by hussars which acting as runners; in this way, Marbot hoped to get in touch with Grouchy so that the information could be transmitted to Napoleon as soon as possible.

The detachment which went as far as the bridges at Mousty and Ottignies was led by captain Eloy and it would have got there by 1 p.m.

Eloy soon found out that there were no French forces; local inhabitants told Eloy that the French were crossing the Dyle at Limale, Limelette and Wavre. ⁶ Eloy sent this information immediately to Marbot who in his turn forwarded it through captain Kouhn to the imperial headquarters.

Some time later, Kouhn returned. He was accompanied by an officer of the general headquarters and Marbot was now ordered to maintain the communication line with Mousty. On the other hand, the detachment which Marbot had in Lasne (with posts towards Chapelle Saint Lambert) was to cross this valley and go as far as Limale, Limelette and Wavre.

Marbot immediately issued his instructions to comply with these orders. According to Marbot one of his platoons found a platoon of Prussian hussars about one kilometer on the other side of

Chapelle Saint Lambert. A skirmishing took place between Marbot's hussars and those of the Prussian platoon (7) in which some men were taken prisoner, one of whom was an officer. He was led to colonel Marbot and he learned Prussian forces were approaching further to the rear.⁸ Marbot now sent him to the imperial headquarters and then went with the squadron he had left on the battlefield to Lasne.

As the Prussians were entering the valley, covered by their cavalry, Marbot tried to gain as much as time as possible by checking this cavalry twice but then had to fall back.

Though Marbot is very detailed in this version, most details are impossible to match with the Prussian version of the events and other circumstances.

First of all, Marbot claims he had a post east of Chapelle Saint Lambert where he first saw the Prussians and where he charged them twice in order to slow down their advance; the Prussian sources say nothing about such a presence of French cavalry. Also in case Marbot was detached around 11 a.m. as he writes, then he would have arrived at Chapelle Saint Lambert after that time. However, how could this have been possible having the Prussian advanced guard there since 10.30 a.m. ?

Marbot would also have had a post at the village of Lasne, with a chain towards the battlefield. How could it then be that all missions sent out by the general Prussian headquarters after 11 a.m. towards the west came back reporting that the village and the valley of Lasne were not occupied, as neither was the Bois de Paris ?

The mission given by Marbot to captain Eloy is also one which can't have taken place as Marbot describes it. In case Eloy would have sent his report back to Marbot then this could not have reached him before 2 p.m. The result was that Marbot sent out a squadron towards Chapelle Saint Lambert, a village since long occupied by Von Bülow. By the time this so-called squadron would have reached this place, the Prussians actually were crossing the valley of the Lasne !

Marbot also claims Eloy returned to the battlefield around 7 p.m. but by that time it was impossible for Eloy to do this, having been cut off from there by the Prussian presence at Maransart. By the way the post at Couture would have been in contact with the 2nd regiment of Silesian hussars which would probably would have taken it, and thereby being able to roll up the communication line towards Mousty.⁹

Also, if one presumes that the Prussian officer taken prisoner by Marbot was the same whom is being written about by Soult in his order to Grouchy at 1 p.m., then Marbot is erroneous as in his interpretation this officer could not have been brought to general headquarters before 4 p.m.¹⁰

After careful reading the description of the area as given by Marbot in his account of 1830, one could think Marbot confuses Chapelle Saint Lambert with the village of Lasne: what he calls Chapelle Saint Lambert could actually be Lasne. However, as he mentions both places explicitly this cannot be the case. Even in considering that Marbot is mixing up the times completely by putting his mission much later as it actually took place, the whole version falls apart as the Prussian sources are unanimous about the absence of any fighting east of Chapelle Saint Lambert and on French absence at Lasne, the defile and the Bois de Paris.

Last but not least, Marbot refers to several cases he got feedback from the imperial headquarters what to do. However, there is no reference to such instructions at all in any French source. All this brings me to the conclusion that Marbot 's account of 1830 about his role is highly misleading as here he exaggerates the scope of his mission enormously, and which was in fact restricted to secure the extreme right flank of the army, en potence south of Fichermont. ¹¹

Revised: 24th July 2009

¹ Cf. Mémoires du général baron de Marbot Vol.III p.375-380

Marbot also refers here to a formal report he would have written late in 1815 for Davout about his role in the campaign, but I have not found this report in the archives at Vincennes so far.

² Cf.Colonel Bro. Mémoires p.153

3. Letters of colonel Marbot to Grouchy dated 26th June 1815 and 1830

Gérard. Dernières observations p.44

According to De Mauduit, colonel Bro of the 4th regiment of lancers (division of Jacquinet) would have sent out reconnaissances towards the east. These patrols would have seen Prussian lancers and runners around 11 a.m. but this news would not have reached the emperor. Cf. Mauduit, H.de - Les derniers jours etc. Vol.II p.286

However, there is no reference to these patrols whatsoever in the memoirs of colonel Bro himself, so this mission is extremely unlikely to have taken place.

⁴ The 13th léger was the only regiment of light infantry in the 1st corps. The guns must have come from the horse battery which was attached to the cavalry division of Jacquinet.

5. Aerts says Marbot makes a mistake here and claims he meant the Bois de Paris. However, this wood was never occupied by any French troops at all. In: La mission des majors de Falckenhausen et de Wittowski. La mission de Marbot p.18

6.This is not correct: the Prussians only started to cross the Dyle at Limelette in the evening and didn't cross at Limelette at all.

7.These must have been men of the 2nd Silesian regiment of hussars, which preceded the 4th corps.

8.Marbot doesn't talk here about a letter which was carried by the officer.

⁹ Prussian sources do not mention such a contact. The only contact there seems to have been was one between a French patrol and the detachment by Von Wittowski at Maransart. It remains unclear which French troops this could have been.

¹⁰ Cf. Coppens, B & P.Courcelle. La Papelotte etc. p.39

By the way, Marbot doesn't say a word about a letter which would have been carried by this officer.

¹¹ In his letter dated 26th June 1815 he also writes about the sudden presence of the enemy in his rear; this would have been impossible in case he would have been detached so far to the east as he claims he was.

