CHAPTER 2

# THE BATTLES OF LIGNY AND QUATRE BRAS

## Napoleon's Lost Opportunities

JULIAN SPILSBURY

PREVIOUS
The 7th Hussars were heavily engaged with the French, covering Wellington's retreat on 17 June. (Anne S. K. Brown)

> For this campaign I have adopted the following general principle – to divide my army into two wings and a reserve… The Guard will form the reserve, and I shall bring it into action on either wing as circumstances dictate… Also, according to circumstances I shall draw troops from one wing to strengthen my reserve.

Thus, in his orders to Marshal Michel Ney written at 6 a.m. on 16 June, Napoleon summarised his plan of operations.

The emperor had spent the night at Charleroi. Ney had joined him at midnight and there they had discussed the situation until 2 a.m. when Ney had returned to Gosselies. Napoleon was working on the reasonable assumption that the two Allied commanders would withdraw in order to concentrate their forces. His plan for the 16th, therefore, was to operate against Wellington with Ney's wing of the *Grande Armée* and the reserve and either destroy the Allied Army or at least drive it in the direction of Antwerp, away from Field Marshal Gebhard Leberecht von Blücher's Prussian Army. In order to ensure that Blücher could not move to assist Wellington it would be necessary to sever the communications between them by driving Lieutenant General Hans Ernst Carl von Ziethen's I Prussian Corps beyond Gembloux and Sombreffe and the Namur–Wavre–Brussels road.

Field Marshal Gebhard Leberecht von Blücher, the Prussian general who was engaged in a life-or-death struggle at Ligny. (Anne S. K. Brown)

Accordingly at 6 a.m. on the morning of the 16th Napoleon prepared two important despatches. Marshal Emmanuel de Grouchy – commanding the right wing of the Army of the North – he ordered to advance against Gembloux–Sombreffe and engage any Prussians he encountered there – Napoleon estimated them to be 40,000 strong. 'My intention,' the order stated, 'is to operate with my left wing, which is commanded by Marshal Ney, against the English.'[1] Later in the day – at some unspecified time – Grouchy was to dispatch part of his force along the lateral Namur–Nivelles road to operate against Wellington's left and rear. The despatch to Ney re-iterated this plan – thus making it clear to both commanders that Ney's advance would be the main axis for the Army of the North that day. Ney's instructions also told him to hold himself in readiness to advance on Brussels once the reserve reached



This view of Ligny provides an idea of the topography that the French and Prussians had to contend with. (akg-images)

him. In the meantime he was to place one division 8 kilometres north-west of Quatre Bras, retain six on the crossroads itself, and send one to Marbais to maintain contact with Grouchy.

It may be that a certain vagueness in these orders caused Ney to waste six crucial hours that morning before moving on Quatre Bras. The masterful Marshal Nicolas Soult was ill-equipped, in many ways, for the role of chief of staff and the bad blood between him and Ney – dating back to Spain – did not encourage discussion and explanation. Here, the absence of Marshal Louis-Alexandre Berthier, Napoleon's previous very competent chief of staff, made itself felt.[2]

Napoleon's orders to Ney and Grouchy had hardly been dispatched when a message arrived from Grouchy at about 8 a.m., reporting large numbers of Prussian troops approaching Sombreffe from the direction of Namur. At first it seemed inconceivable that Blücher – even given what Napoleon called his 'hussar habits' – could be thinking of making a stand at St Amand and Ligny, while Wellington surely intended to withdraw towards Brussels. Believing the report to be false, he rode forward to Fleurus – which had always been his intention – intending to see for himself.

By 11 a.m. Napoleon and his forward Headquarters were with Lieutenant General Vandamme's III Corps looking towards Ziethen's positions around St Amand. From there Napoleon saw enough to convince him that – far from

## THE SITUATION ON THE EVENING, 14 JUNE 1815

Lieutenant General Pajol, commander of I Cavalry Corps at Ligny. (Anne S. K. Brown)

being a rearguard as he had at first assumed – Ziethen's Corps was in fact an *advance* guard covering a general deployment in the area Gembloux–Sombreffe, as well as guarding the Namur–Nivelles road, the main road by which Wellington could approach. So it was that the whole French plan was now reversed – Grouchy's would be the main operation of the day and Ney – when the time was right – would swing part of *his* force *down* the lateral road to envelop Blücher's right and rear. The ability to switch axes like this shows the beautiful simplicity of Napoleon's 'two wings and a reserve' system – but it depended on good staff work, good communications and good understanding between commanders and staff. All of these were to prove wanting as the day progressed.

It was not possible for Napoleon to launch an immediate attack. Lieutenant General Gerard's IV Corps had not yet arrived, largely due to poor staff work, and although the Imperial Guard – having been on the march since 4 a.m. – were now approaching Fleurus, Count Lobau's VI Corps was still in Charleroi, awaiting orders. Three hours were passed in concentrating the force that was to attack Blücher: Vandamme's III Corps, Gerard's IV Corps, and the I and II Cavalry Corps of Lieutenant Generals Pajol and Exelmanns – a total of 68,000 infantry, 12,500 cavalry and 210 guns.

Blücher's position at Ligny was, at first sight, a strong one, well suited for defence. Ziethen's I Corps occupied a salient along the line of the Ligne Brook, with Wagnelée at its right, St Amand at its centre and the village of Ligny at its left. To his left, between Sombreffe and Mazy, was Lieutenant General Johann von Thielmann's III Corps (numbering 29,500). The hill behind the Ligny salient – a good artillery platform – was occupied by Major General von Pirch's





II Corps (32,000 men). In total, by 3 p.m. Blücher had in place 84,000 men, of whom 8,000 were cavalry, and 224 guns, arrayed along an 11-kilometre front, to which the Ligne Brook acted as a moat.

This front contained ten hamlets and villages – each one a strong point – and the Ligne Brook was crossed by only four bridges, each in turn covered by a village. The villages were in hollows and surrounded by marshy ground, hedges and ditches which the Prussians had spent the morning fortifying. The one flaw in this deployment was that the Ligny position was – like all salients – vulnerable to crossfire from enemy artillery. This was exacerbated by the Prussian tendency to mass infantry on forward slopes. In the fighting Blücher's reserves would take severe punishment from French artillery without being able to aid – by musketry – the efforts of Ziethen's men in the front line.

If the Prussians were a little thinly spread – by the standards of the time – for a front of 11 kilometres, Blücher had reason to hope for reinforcement both from General Friedrich Wilhelm Freiherr Count von Bülow with his IV Corps and from Wellington proceeding down the Namur–Nivelles road. Blücher's plan, if attacked, was for two corps (Ziethen's I Corps and Pirch's II Corps) to hold the French, while two others (Thielmann's III Corps and Bülow's IV Corps), together with Wellington, would attack their flanks.

At 1 p.m. Wellington joined Blücher and his staff at the windmill at Bussy from which – according to Ziethen's chief of staff – both commanders could see Napoleon making a tour of the front-line units. For his part, Wellington had his

Napoleon and his staff survey the field of Ligny, 16 June 1815. (Painting by G. Weiss)

## THE BATTLES OF QUATRE BRAS AND LIGNY, 16 JUNE 1815

reservations about the Prussian position, observing that the Prussian infantry could not attack the French but could themselves be exposed to a severe cannonade, after which the French could attack them over the bridges. It was Wellington's opinion that the Prussians would do better to deploy their reserves behind the shelter of the rising ground. 'Our troops like to see the enemy,' was the curt response of Lieutenant General August Neithardt von Gneisenau, Blücher's Anglophobe chief of staff. Commenting to Lieutenant Colonel Sir Henry Hardinge, the British liaison officer with Blücher, that if the Prussians fought here they would be 'damnably mauled', Wellington rode off in the direction of Quatre Bras telling Blücher that 'I will come; provided I am not attacked myself.'

While this conference was taking place Lieutenant General Gerard's IV Corps had been arriving on the battlefield and forming up in front of Ligny, with one detached division – Lieutenant General Girard's 7th, from Lieutenant General Honoré Reille's Corps – on its left. Gerard himself detached one of his divisions – Hulot's – to join Exelmanns' cavalry on his right. By 2 p.m. the French deployment was complete. Napoleon's plan was for Pajol's and Exelmanns' cavalry to contain Thielmann's Corps on the right, while Vandamme's and Gerard's infantry attacked St Amand and Ligny respectively. Once Blücher had been compelled to commit all his reserves to the fighting on his centre and right – at about 6 p.m. by his calculation – Napoleon would summon Ney from Quatre Bras to fall on Blücher's right and rear, while the Guard delivered the *coup de grace* in the centre. Thus, two thirds of the Prussian Army – Ziethen's and Pirch's Corps – would be destroyed and the remaining third – Thielmann's – driven off in the direction of Liège and away from Wellington. As Napoleon remarked to Gerard, 'It is possible that three hours hence the fate of the war may be decided. If Ney carries out his orders thoroughly, not a gun of the Prussian army will get away.'[3]

At 2 p.m. Napoleon told Soult to inform Ney that Grouchy's wing would attack the enemy between Sombreffe and Brye at 2.30 p.m. The order continues:

> His Majesty's intention is that you also will attack whatever force is in front of you, and after having vigorously pushed it back, you will turn in our direction, so as to bring about the envelopment of that body of the enemy's troops whom I have just mentioned to you. If the latter is overthrown first, then His Majesty will manoeuvre in your direction, so as to assist your operation in a similar way.[4]

At 2.30 p.m. three cannon shots from the Imperial Guard artillery heralded the French assault. Grouchy's cavalry advanced to engage the Prussian left, while





Vandamme attacked St Amand with his 8th, 10th and 11th Divisions – with Girard's detached division in reserve while Gerard's Corps simultaneously advanced on Ligny.

The fighting for the villages along the line of the Ligne was bitter and bloody – a succession of attacks and counter-attacks with no quarter given. After a brief resistance at St Amand, the Prussians fell back but held onto the farm there and the village of St Amand la Haye, while their artillery on the heights subjected the French in the village to a hail of canister. At the same time Prussian reserves – as Wellington had foreseen – suffered heavy casualties from French artillery fire without being able to support their comrades in the front line with musket fire. Unable to advance beyond St Amand, Vandamme brought up more artillery and pushed Girard's Division towards St Amand la Haye. Slowly but surely – despite Prussians from Pirch's Corps being fed into the fight – French numbers began to tell; Steinmetz's Brigade (equivalent to a French division) were engaged with a full four French divisions.

Meanwhile at Ligny the men of Gerard's Corps – attacking in three columns – had to battle through hedges, felled trees and man-made obstacles under intense artillery fire and musketry from hordes of skirmishers. When they fought their way into the village they found every building loopholed and every wall and rooftop defended. As at St Amand, the Prussian plan was to retire slowly towards a main position further back, inflicting casualties all the way. Captain Charles François, attached to a brigade of Gerard's Corps, described the casualties suffered by his regiment – the 30th Line – as they fought their way into Ligny:

> In a moment, Major Hervieux, commanding the Regiment, and two battalion commanders, Richard and Lafolie had been killed; another battalion commander, Blain by name, was slightly wounded and had his horse killed under him; five captains were killed, and three wounded, two adjutants and nine lieutenants and sub-lieutenants were killed, seven wounded, and close on seven hundred rank and file killed and wounded.[5]

As at St Amand, however, despite heavy losses, French numbers slowly started to tell.

Although the Prussians outnumbered the French overall, Napoleon's tactic of attacking all along the Prussian line – preventing Blücher from redeploying troops in his front line, and forcing him to make good casualties there from his reserves – as well as Grouchy's highly economic pinning of Thielmann's Corps with a force only one third as strong (Hulot's Division and 3,390 cavalry), had enabled the French to deploy superior numbers at the 'critical point'. By 3.15 p.m., having pinned Blücher's 84,000 men with 58,000 of his own, Napoleon

French I Corps commander, d'Erlon. His men spent 16 June marching between Ligny and Quatre Bras without participating in either attack. (akg-images)

still had 10,000 fresh, uncommitted troops – Clausewitz, present at the battle as a staff officer with Thielmann's Corps, would have been impressed.

As Vandamme's and Gerard's men battled their way into St Amand and Ligny, at 3.15 p.m. Napoleon ordered Soult to send a message to Ney:

> Marshal, I wrote to you an hour ago to inform you that, at 2.30 p.m. the Emperor would attack the position taken up by the enemy between the villages of St. Amand and Brye. At this moment the action is in full swing. His Majesty desires me to tell you that you are to manoeuvre immediately in such a manner as to envelop the enemy's right and fall upon his rear; the fate of France is in your hands.

Almost as soon as this message had been dispatched, a message arrived from Ney informing the emperor that he was heavily engaged at Quatre Bras against 20,000 men under Wellington. Clearly Ney could not now be expected to come down the Nivelles road and attack Blücher's right. It was at this point that Napoleon took a pencil and scribbled the controversial 'Third Directive' instructing Ney to send General Jean-Baptiste Drouet, Count d'Erlon's Corps to perform the same task. The controversy arose when certain historians asserted that the Third Directive – which has not survived – was not in fact written by Napoleon at all, but improvised, even forged, by his aide, General Charles de La Bédoyère, when he arrived near Quatre Bras. This is a minority view; most historians ascribe the confusion this directive caused to Napoleon's notoriously illegible handwriting. Either way this directive began a process which saw d'Erlon's Corps marching and counter-marching between both battlefields and intervening in neither. Having written – or not – the Third Directive, Napoleon seems suddenly to have remembered Lobau's VI Corps still waiting at Charleroi (Clausewitz would have been less impressed) and sent a messenger to call that force forward too.

The fighting in St Amand and Ligny had degenerated into a series of brutal close-quarter fights for every house, barn, building and garden with both sides bringing up artillery and feeding in reinforcements. Both villages – or parts of them – changed hands several times. By 5 p.m., however, Vandamme's Corps had captured Wagnelée, St Amand and St Amand la Haye with General Girard himself being killed during a Prussian counter-attack. In Ligny only the chateau and a corner of the village remained in Prussian hands.

Calculating that by 6 p.m. d'Erlon would be approaching Blücher's right from the direction of Quatre Bras, Napoleon now ordered up the Guard to





deliver the final assault against the Prussians at Ligny.

As the Guard began to deploy, however, at about 5.30 p.m. Vandamme rode up to the emperor to report that an unidentified column – some 20,000 or 30,000 strong – was approaching his left flank at Wangenies. Initial reports that this was a hostile column had already caused near panic among Vandamme's men and seemingly unnerved even the general himself. Deciding that this was no time to take risks, Napoleon at once sent his own scouts to investigate, moved Duhesme's Division of the Young Guard to support Vandamme's wavering troops, and postponed the Guard's planned attack. It was 6.30 p.m. before the true situation was made clear. The unknown column was d'Erlon's Corps – the scrappily written Third Directive seemed to him to order him to take his corps to 'Wangenies', rather than the intended Wagnelée. As he had neglected to send orderlies forward to warn Vandamme's Corps of his approach, d'Erlon's arrival had unsettled them to the extent that one of Vandamme's divisional commanders, Lieutenant General Lefol, had been forced to turn his artillery on some of his own men, who were quitting the line of battle.

Napoleon gives the order for the final advance at Ligny. (akg-images)


In the closing stages of the battle, Blücher is trapped beneath his horse. (Anne S. K. Brown)

CONVERT TO MONO



Having dispatched an orderly to direct d'Erlon onto his correct line of march – on Wagnelée, to outflank Blücher – Napoleon was astonished to learn on the orderly's return that d'Erlon had already marched off in the direction of Quatre Bras, leaving only Durutte's Division behind. Napoleon's final assault had already been delayed by an hour, darkness was falling and his outflanking corps had inexplicably left the battlefield (d'Erlon had in fact been summoned back to Quatre Bras by Ney, though the emperor had no way of knowing this). Worst of all Blücher chose this moment to launch a counter-attack.

Blücher had spent most of the day riding along the heights to the rear of the battlefront feeding in reserves wherever his line looked threatened. Since about 4 p.m. he had been aware that Wellington was heavily engaged at Quatre Bras, and would not be able to come to his assistance. This news confirmed all Gneisenau's suspicions: 'The Duke of Wellington had promised to attack the enemy in the rear…' he was to write later, 'but he did not come, because his army, Heaven knows why, could not concentrate.'[6] Blücher's aim now was to hold his position on the Ligne until nightfall and hope that Bülow and Wellington would be able to join him on the 17th. The confusion caused on the French left by d'Erlon's Corps' arrival had granted him a respite and he had not wasted it.

'Forward! Forward my children!' Blücher leads the counter-attack at Ligny. (akg-images)



Gathering together six battalions and some stragglers, he led them forward personally – under a darkening, smoke-filled sky – against St Amand and Ligny. The initial onslaught took the French by surprise and hustled Vandamme's still-shaken men almost out of St Amand. However, the French forces rallied outside the village and the Young Guard advanced to retake it. With no further reserves the Prussians fell back once more.

Blücher's last effort had fatally weakened his centre – by 7.30 p.m. all was ready for Napoleon's *coup de grace*. Lead elements of Lobau's VI Corps were beginning to arrive on the scene as – in thunder and heavy rain – the Guard began its advance, half to the east of Ligny and half to the west, supported by 60 guns, with Milhaud's heavy cavalry and the cavalry of the Guard in support. General Roguet's command to his Old Guard – 'Warn the grenadiers that the first man who brings me a prisoner will be shot!' – was superfluous; for both sides this was a fight to the death.

The Guard columns swept into Ligny – driving before them the remaining Prussian defenders. As the emperor entered the village from the west and took up his position on a low mound, the Guard pressed on through the carnage and debris and onto the open ground beyond. The Battle of Ligny was all but won – but Blücher wasn't finished yet. To buy time for his infantry to get clear of the field, Blücher, reverting to his old hussar habits, rode over to where Major General von Roeder's 32 cavalry squadrons – Ziethen's last cavalry reserve – were forming into line. Placing himself at their head and with a cry of 'Forward! Forward, my children!' he led them headlong at the Guard.

Forming square, the Guard met the Prussian cavalry with a succession of disciplined volleys at close range. Blücher's own horse – a splendid grey given to him by the British Prince Regent – was hit and collapsed, pinning the field marshal, unconscious, beneath it. His aide de camp, Major Count Nostitz, dismounted to protect his chief as French cuirassiers – oblivious to the prize that lay at their feet – galloped past. A Prussian counter-charge soon brought *Uhlans* (Prussian lancers) to the scene, with whose help Nostitz was able to drag the old man clear, throw him over a saddle and carry him from the field.

As the Prussians streamed away from the battlefield, the expected pursuit did not materialise. The French who had fought all day – first in sweltering heat and later in violent thunderstorms – bivouacked among their own dead and dying on the left bank of the Ligne Brook. To Napoleon it must have seemed that the Prussians were finished as a fighting force. To launch a pursuit in darkness with the whereabouts of Bülow's Corps still unknown was risky and besides he had heard nothing from Ney. Ordering Grouchy to begin the pursuit in the morning, he retired to Fleurus for the night – the Prussians were to be allowed a clean break.

While the French and Prussian armies had been engaged in a life-or-death struggle at Ligny, a very different kind of battle – smaller in scale but every bit as crucial to the outcome of the campaign and no less epic, had been going on all through the afternoon and evening, just 8 miles away at Quatre Bras.

Ney had returned from his late-night visit to Napoleon at Charleroi and spent the night at Gosselies. He issued no orders. There is no record of what had passed between Napoleon and Ney during their two-hour conference. Most historians agree, however, that Napoleon must have stressed to Ney the importance of the crossroads at Quatre Bras, standing as it did astride Ney's axis of advance towards Brussels *and* the lateral road connecting his wing of the *Grand Armée* with Grouchy's (or Wellington's army with Blücher's, depending who held it). Ney has been much blamed for failing to take Quatre Bras early on the 16th, not least by Napoleon, talking of the battle when on St Helena. On the other hand Marshal Soult told Ney's son in 1829 that the 'Emperor had not

The Prince of Orange surveys the battlefield. (Anne S. K. Brown)





the slightest idea of occupying Quatre Bras on the evening of the 15th, and gave no orders to that effect.'[7]

Wherever the truth lies, Ney is surely open to criticism for his actions on the morning of the 16th – for not starting to concentrate his force, which was bivouacked along the line of march, for not sending Reille forward to seize Quatre Bras, and for not calling up d'Erlon in support. Whether he was waiting for written confirmation of the previous night's instructions or whether – as some historians have suggested – he was suffering from some form of 'shell-shock' from his exertions in 1812, there can be no doubt that Ney's failure to seize the all-important crossroads early in the day was in great measure responsible for the failure of the Ligny–Quatre Bras operation. Ney's lack of initiative in this instance is in sharp contrast to that of his opponent, Lieutenant General Perponcher, commanding the 2nd Netherlands Division in the Prince of Orange's I Corps; for without Perponcher's display of initiative Quatre Bras – now only thinly held by the Netherlanders – would not have been defended at all.

Perponcher had been joined at 6 a.m. by his corps commander, the Prince of Orange, and at 10 a.m. by Wellington himself. Wellington had approved the prince's dispositions and, finding all quiet in front of him, Wellington rode off towards Ligny to confer with Blücher. By now reinforcements were on their way to Quatre Bras; the Brunswickers from Genappe, the 1st and 3rd Divisions from Nivelles; and the reserve – set in motion by Wellington – from Mont Saint Jean. Even so, the odds at this point were greatly in favour of Ney – with 19,000 infantry, supported by 3,000 cavalry and 60 guns (and d'Erlon's 20,000 coming on behind them) against just 7,800 infantry, 50 cavalry and 16 guns.

Ney's seeming lethargy that morning was matched by Napoleon's, whose orders to Ney were only dispatched from Charleroi at 8 a.m. instead of the more usual 2 a.m. These orders which Ney received at 10 a.m. told Ney to 'hold yourself in readiness for an immediate advance on Brussels once the reserve reaches you'.[8] It was not until 11 a.m. that Ney issued his own orders – commanding Reille's II Corps to concentrate on Quatre Bras, which was at this stage held only by Perponcher's 8,000. By then of course Napoleon was with Vandamme in front of Ligny – changing Grouchy's pinning action against Blücher into the main French effort of the day. Of this, Ney was unaware – and would remain so until 6.30 p.m. Much of what was to follow – including his recall of d'Erlon from what would surely have been a decisive intervention at Ligny – would stem from Ney's mistaken belief that *his* was still the main operation.

Reille's subordinate, Foy. Another Peninsula veteran, he was a divisional commander in the Waterloo campaign. (Anne S. K. Brown)

Lieutenant General Honoré Reille. A Peninsula veteran, he was of aware of Wellington's tactics and advanced cautiously. (akg-images)

At 11.45 a.m. Reille began moving his troops through Frasnes towards Quatre Bras, with General Piré's cavalry leading – followed by General Foy's 9th and General Bachelu's 5th Divisions, with Prince Jérôme Bonaparte's 6th Division bringing up the rear. At 2 p.m. a French battery of 14 guns opening fire on an Allied battery heralded the opening of Reille's assault. His advance was over a landscape of undulating ground with farms, woods and fields of head-high rye. To his left Bossu Wood offered an enemy an excellent position from which to deliver flanking fire. Moreover, like his commander Ney, and his subordinate Foy, Reille was an old Peninsula hand and knew from experience Wellington's tactic of concealing his men until almost the last moment before delivering a devastating volley and charge. Unwilling to be drawn into another 'Spanish battle', Reille proceeded with caution.

The French advance was steady and relentless, driving before it Perponcher's skirmishers – Major General Willem Frederik Bylandt's 27th Jägers. Bachelu's 5th Division took Piraumont, on Perponcher's left; shortly afterwards Foy's 9th Division captured Gemioncourt, in the centre, after a hard fight with Nassauers and Netherlands militia. Pierrepoint Farm, to the left of Bossu Wood, proved a harder nut to crack and Foy's second brigade was checked there, until joined by Jérôme's 8,000 men and a further eight guns. With Pierrepoint in French hands, Jérôme began clearing the Nassauers out of Bossu Wood.

For the best part of an hour Bylandt's 2.5-kilometre-long skirmish line had been retiring in good order, but a charge by Piré's cavalry now broke the 27th Jägers and pushed on towards the Allied centre sweeping aside some Dutch light cavalry as they did so. It was at this moment – about 3 p.m. – that Wellington returned from his meeting with Blücher, to find the Allied line, which had fought well against superior numbers, about to crumple under the combined attacks of three French divisions. Ney with 17,500 infantry, 4,700 cavalry and 62 guns was now in a position to advance on the farm of Quatre Bras itself.

It was fortunate for the Allied cause that at almost the same moment the first reinforcements arrived: General Van Merlen's 2nd Netherlands Light Cavalry Brigade from Nivelles, and the eight battalions of General Thomas Picton's 5th Division from Brussels. Van Merlen's cavalry – exhausted as they were, having not unsaddled in 24 hours – were deployed south of the lateral road to plug the gap created by Piré's charge. Picton's Division was placed to the Allies' left rear. These troops – some 8,000 infantry and 1,000 cavalry – reduced the odds to 2–1 in Ney's favour. More than that, they put new heart into the wavering Allied line.





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'Black Brunswickers', Hussar and infantry of the Duke of Brunswick's Corps. (National Army Museum)

In order to give his newly arrived troops time to deploy Wellington now ordered a counter-attack. Pushing Picton's leading battalion, the 1st/95th, to Thyle to secure his left flank, he ordered the Dutch-Belgians to retake Gemioncourt, supported by the newly arrived 1st/28th, and Prince Bernhard of Saxe-Weimar to retake Bossu Wood on his left.

At first all went well. The French were driven out of that part of Bossu Wood that they had recently taken, Gemioncourt was re-occupied and two French cavalry charges were driven off. When the Prince of Orange tried to advance south of the farm, however, his entire force was overthrown by a regiment of French chasseurs, who scattered his cavalry, sabred his gunners and drove his infantry helter-skelter before them. With more of Piré's squadrons in support they pursued the Netherlanders almost to the Namur road before being halted by the fire of a battalion of Nassauers. Piré's cavalry were halted in their turn by Highlanders of Major General Sir Denis Pack's Brigade, lining the ditches at the roadside.

It was a critical moment for Wellington – who had almost been caught up in the rout himself – but by now Picton's Division was deploying in line of battle from Quatre Bras south-eastwards along the Namur road. At almost the same time further reinforcements arrived for Wellington – in the form of five battalions of Brunswickers, led by their duke. These took up a position between Quatre Bras and Bossu Wood. They were just in time, as Ney made another attempt to seize the crossroads – ordering Bachelu's Division forward against the Allied left, Foy's Division along and to the east of the Brussels road, supported by one of Jérôme's brigades, and Jérôme's remaining brigade back into Bossu Wood.

On the Allied right Ney had some success driving the Netherlanders out of Bossu Wood and forcing the Brunswickers back in some confusion. While trying to rally one of his battalions the Duke of Brunswick was mortally wounded – dying, like his father before him, in action against the French. On the Allied left it was a different story. Bachelu's Division, disordered by the broken ground, were first halted by volley fire from Picton's Division, then

The Duke of Brunswick leads his 'avant-guard' forward. (Anne S. K. Brown)

driven back by a bayonet charge. Only the intervention of Piré's lancers and chasseurs halted the British pursuit, before the fire of Bachelu's 42 guns drove them back. As they withdrew Piré's cavalry followed up – and after bloody clashes with the half-formed squares of the 42nd Highlanders and the 44th Foot – rode down a Hanoverian battalion before racing towards the Namur road. Here, once again, they were driven back – by the fire of two British battalions that had taken cover in the ditches.

By now it was 4 p.m. For Wellington the latest crisis had been averted – and the arrival of the Brunswickers had brought his force up to 21,000 men, further tilting the balance of numbers in his favour. It was at this moment that Ney received Napoleon's message of 2 p.m. In this, the enemy facing Napoleon at Ligny is described as '*un corps de troupes*' and there is nothing to suggest that his (Ney's) battle is now a secondary action. The 2 p.m. order even suggests that Napoleon – apparently facing one Prussian corps with two French corps, the entire Guard and three corps of reserve cavalry – might well manoeuvre so as to attack Wellington's rear. It was clear to Ney at this point that he could not take the crossroads with Reille's Corps alone. Accordingly he sent an aide galloping back down the Charleroi road to hurry d'Erlon up to the front.





Since approximately midday d'Erlon had been marching his I Corps towards Frasnes – following up Ney's advance. By 4 p.m. his column was just crossing the Roman road to the south of Frasnes – d'Erlon himself had ridden forward to examine the Quatre Bras position before deploying. It was at this point that there arrived on the scene one of Napoleon's aides – General de La Bédoyère – bearing the infamous 'Third Directive'. Whether this note was actually scribbled in Napoleon's notoriously illegible handwriting or was written by La Bédoyère himself, acting on his own initiative, its effect was the same. D'Erlon's column was first halted, and then dispatched in the direction of Ligny. La Bédoyère rode forward to inform d'Erlon of his new mission; d'Erlon then rode off to join his corps on the march towards Ligny – sending his chief of staff – General Delacambre – to show the note to Ney.

On hearing that his much-needed reinforcement had been diverted, and was now marching *away* from his battlefield to join Napoleon at Ligny, Ney characteristically lost his temper. His state of mind was not improved by the arrival, a few minutes later, of Colonel Forbin-Janson, bearing Napoleon's 3.15 p.m. dispatch ordering him to 'manoeuvre immediately so as to envelop the enemy's [i.e. the Prussians'] right' informing him that 'the fate of France is now in your hands'. It must have seemed to Ney that the quickest way to achieve Napoleon's aim was to seize the crossroads, drive Wellington off towards Nivelles and Genappe and *then* send d'Erlon down the Namur road. Ney had no way of knowing that the battle at Ligny was at a crucial stage, and that the arrival of

The death of Brunswick at the Battle of Quatre Bras. (Anne S. K. Brown)

d'Erlon – as directed by La Bédoyère – would clinch victory there and bring about the destruction of Blücher's Army. Deciding to ignore the emperor's order, Ney immediately sent a series of aides galloping after d'Erlon to recall him. D'Erlon was almost in sight of the battlefield of Ligny – having, as we have seen, caused near panic in Vandamme's Corps, and delayed the Guard's attack by an hour – before he received Ney's orders. At once he turned his corps about and began marching back towards Quatre Bras. Thus d'Erlon's 20,000 men spent the entire afternoon and evening marching and counter-marching between two battlefields – on either of which their intervention would have been decisive – without actually participating in either. This crucial failure of communication and understanding between Ney and Napoleon was to rob Napoleon of decisive victory on 16 June.

At Quatre Bras, Ney now set-to to capture the crossroads with the troops he had. In fact the arrival, on Wellington's side, of Lieutenant General Alten's Division had brought his strength up to 24,000 infantry, 1,900 cavalry and 42 guns. By 5 p.m. Ney's only fresh reserve consisted of Major General François-Étienne Kellermann's heavy cavalry. 'General, a supreme effort is necessary', Ney told him. 'That mass of hostile infantry must be overthrown. The fate of France is in your hands' – an unconscious echo of Napoleon's words in the 3.15 p.m. order. When Kellermann pointed out to Ney that he only had one brigade present (out of four) Ney replied to him in terms which Kellermann felt questioned his courage.

The Prince of Orange on the battlefield of Quatre Bras. (Anne S. K. Brown)

At a gallop – in order that his men might not have time to see the dangers that faced them, and in order to achieve a measure of surprise – Kellermann led his two regiments forward. The 69th Foot, caught in line owing to a mistaken order by the Prince of Orange, was cut to pieces, losing the King's Colour. A square of the 30th Foot – mostly new recruits – held firm but the 33rd, also composed of young soldiers, was driven in confusion into the nearby woods. For a few moments the triumphant cuirassiers were actually in possession of the crossroads, but cavalry alone cannot hold ground, and Ney's supporting infantry – battling up through Bossu Wood once more – could not support them. The fire of the King's German Legion battery and volleys from the British 30th and 73rd Foot soon had the cuirassiers fleeing in disorder. Kellermann, unhorsed himself, only escaped by clinging to the bridles of two of his men.

At 6.30 p.m. another of Napoleon's aides arrived at Ney's Headquarters. This time Major Baudas brought another copy of the 3.15 p.m. order and a verbal order to send d'Erlon immediately to Ligny. Now at last it was made clear to Ney that his assault on Quatre Bras was only of secondary importance to the dispatching of d'Erlon against Blücher at Ligny – but by now it was too late. With another outburst of rage, Ney stormed off to re-organise his infantry for yet another attempt. In fact the situation was worse than he knew. All day this battle had been a race against time – for Ney, to capture the crossroads while it was still weakly held; for Wellington, to hold it until reinforcements could arrive and shift the odds in his favour. The Allied troops now arriving on the field – which included the leading elements of 1st Division, Major General Sir Peregrine Maitland's Guards Brigade and two horse batteries – brought Wellington's numbers up to 36,000 men and 70 guns. With the advantage of numbers at last, Wellington ordered a counter-attack at 6.30 p.m.

By now both sides were equally exhausted, but a great part of the Allied troops, though fatigued from force-marching, were fresh to the battle. On the Allied right, Maitland's Guards drove Jérôme's troops southwards back through Bossu Wood – until they were halted by the fire of Ney's guns and the threat of his cavalry. In the centre Pack's and General Sir Colin Halkett's Brigades, together with the Netherlanders, Nassauers and Brunswickers, drove the French – who retired, according to one witness, 'with parade ground precision' – back towards Gemioncourt, and on the right Picton forced Bachelu back toward Piraumont. By nightfall the Allies were occupying most of the ground held by Perponcher that morning.

Overall, though – and considering the two battles as one – the day had gone well for Napoleon. The Allied armies had been kept apart and Blücher had been beaten, with the loss of some 16,000 killed and wounded, as well as some 10,000 deserters, and 21 guns. The French had lost between 11 and 12,000 but Lobau's and d'Erlon's Corps were still untouched; so – apart from 1,000 casualties in Ligny village – were the Guard. At Quatre Bras, Ney had lost 4,000 to the Allies' 4,800 (2,400 of the casualties British) and had prevented Wellington from coming to Blücher's assistance – further souring relations between him and Gneisenau, now in command of the Prussian Army. Yet Ligny was an incomplete victory. The Prussian centre was shattered but the wings were intact and had been allowed to break contact and disappear into the night. If Ney had held Wellington in check, the reverse was also true. Intervention by Ney, or d'Erlon, or even Lobau would have turned the Prussian reverse into a catastrophe – but a combination of bad staff work, poor communications and errors on the part of both Napoleon and Ney (amongst others) prevented this.

Napoleon's ill-health, compounded by exhaustion, was surely a factor in the seeming lethargy that overtook him at times. Whether or not Ney was suffering from what we would now recognise as combat stress is debatable but there can be no doubt that having betrayed both Napoleon and later the Bourbons, he was a troubled man – hence, perhaps, his volcanic outburst of rage which prevented a crucial instruction from being delivered at 3.15 p.m. What we can say with certainty is that he was not the man he had been ten years earlier. If, as chief of staff, Soult was no Berthier, that was hardly his fault, but that of the man who appointed him; similarly, both Ney and Grouchy – both destined to be scapegoats – were also Napoleon's choices. It is fruitless, but almost irresistible, to imagine the outcome of the campaign with, say, Marshal Louis-Gabriel Suchet as chief of staff and Soult and Marshal Louis-Nicolas Davout, currently minister of war, commanding the wings of the Army of the North.

Marshal Michel Ney. (Anne S. K. Brown)

The battles of Ligny and Quatre Bras had offered Napoleon the opportunity to effectively end the campaign on 16 June, with the destruction of the Prussian Army. Although this opportunity had slipped away – or been squandered – there was still reason to believe that the following day Napoleon would be able to join Ney with the whole reserve and destroy Wellington, while Grouchy kept Blücher out of play. With Blücher currently missing – lying unconscious at a field hospital at Mellery, where Nostitz





had taken him – much would now depend on what his chief of staff, the Anglophobe Gneisenau, would now decide.

By 9 p.m. Gneisenau – himself shaken by a fall from a horse – stood beside the Roman road at the inn of Aux Trois Burretes, together with Ziethen and Pirch and their staffs. Along the road a disorderly mob of soldiers – infantry, cavalry and guns – streamed away to the north-east. Thielmann had made a stand with the remains of his corps along the heights at Brye; Blücher was still unaccounted for. Gneisenau was now nominal as well as actual commander of the Prussian Army. He had a decision to make on which would depend the outcome of the campaign – possibly of the war – and he had to make it quickly. Which way should the Prussian Army retreat?

The logical line of retreat was towards Liège and Bülow's IV Corps – which was already *en route* to Baudaset, north of Gembloux. Bülow could then cover the army's retreat to Liège and on towards the Rhine, beyond which Field Marshal Schwarzenberg was approaching with an Austrian Army. However, the Prussians had already been driven off the Nivelles–Namur road – the shortest route to Liège – so an initial move north towards Louvain, to regroup, seemed in order. Moreover, to retreat to Liège and on to the Rhine would involve abandoning Wellington and his Anglo-Dutch Army. Distrustful of the British and still seething over what he saw as Wellington's failure to support the Prussians earlier in the day, Gneisenau nevertheless realised that uniting the two Allied armies offered the only chance of victory. A retreat north offered the perfect compromise; if the British – as he half-suspected they would – ran for their ships, he could still take his re-ordered army towards Liège. If – as he knew Blücher believed – Wellington intended to stand and fight, the Prussians would be near enough to go to his aid. North it would be then, but crowding round their maps in the half-light none of the Prussian generals could agree on a destination that they could all identify – until someone mentioned Wavre. Almost by accident, then, in what Wellington was later to designate 'the decisive moment of the century', Wavre was settled on as the destination for the night's retreat and at once staff officers were dispatched to block the road to Gembloux and start herding fugitives towards Tilly and Mellery. In this they were only partially successful – some 8,000 men were already heading towards Namur. Although these men took no further part in any fighting, their flight towards Liège – observed by French scouts – was to have a crucial impact on Napoleon's decision-making the following day.

At about 10 p.m. Gneisenau received news that Blücher was alive, and hurried to join him. The field marshal was conscious and lying on a camp-bed, his injuries having been treated with his preferred remedy – applications of gin,

Lieutenant General August Neithardt von Gneisenau, Blücher's chief of staff, orders the retreat to Wavre during the Battle of Ligny. (akg-images)

rhubarb and garlic (external) and a magnum of champagne (internal). Blücher ordered beer to be brought in stable buckets and a debate ensued which lasted most of the night. Gneisenau was still in favour of a retreat towards Liège; Blücher – supported by General Carl von Grolmann, the Prussian quartermaster general – was insistent that the Prussian Army should march so as to support Wellington. Lieutenant Colonel Sir Henry Hardinge, the British commissioner at Prussian Headquarters – who had spent the night in Blücher's ante-room recovering from the amputation of his left hand – was summoned by Blücher early the next morning. Blücher, still reeking from the treatment of his bruises, embraced Hardinge with the words, 'Ich stinke etwas!' and went on to tell him that '… he should be glad if in conjunction with the Duke of Wellington he was able now to defeat his old enemy'.[9] His aides told Hardinge that Blücher would have had himself tied in the saddle rather than resign his command through injury and that 'a thirst for bloody vengeance had taken possession of his will and of his intelligence'.





The Prussian withdrawal began at dawn. Covered by Thielmann's Corps, Ziethen and Pirch managed to extract their corps unobserved by the enemy. To inspire a beaten, disorganised army on a rainy night retreat requires leadership of the highest order, and Blücher was the very man to provide it. 'He had had his bruised limbs bathed in brandy…' wrote a Westphalian officer, 'and had helped himself to a large *schnapps*, and now, although riding must have been very painful, he rode alongside the troops, exchanging jokes and banter with many of them, and his good humour spread like wildfire down the columns.'

Once they were clear, Thielmann withdrew towards Gembloux, met up with Bülow's Corps and placed himself under his command. As soon as Ziethen and Pirch's Corps were established in positions around Wavre, Bülow and Thielmann marched to join them. The march was exhausting, conducted for the most part in torrential rain, which at least discouraged the French cavalry – who were slowly following the rearguard – from attacking. By 8 p.m. Thielmann was safely across the River Dyle, and deploying north of Wavre – two hours later Bülow's last elements had joined them. The Prussian Army had regrouped and its commanders were rapidly restoring order.

Napoleon spent the night of the 17th at the Chateau of Fleurus. As far as he was aware everything was going according to plan – Blücher was retreating

**GNMX1043_045 [LOW RES FOR PLACEMENT - HI-RES TO COME]**
The 1st Life Guards charging French lancers near Genappe on 17 June. (National Army Museum)

down the Namur road towards Liège, while Wellington was presumably retreating towards Brussels. While he breakfasted a report came in from Count Pajol – whom Grouchy had sent out at 2.30 a.m. – of masses of Prussians on the move down the Namur road. What Pajol had actually seen was the mass of deserters who had escaped the Prussian staff officers before Gembloux and were fleeing in confusion towards Liège, but their presence on the Namur road – combined with a touch of wishful thinking – convinced Napoleon that Blücher was retreating away from the British. Next came Count Flahaut, from Quatre Bras, with the news that Ney had in front of him a large force of British, Dutch and German troops.

Accordingly he wrote to Ney instructing him to take up a position at Quatre Bras, driving off what must surely be Wellington's rearguard. If this should prove impossible – if in other words, Wellington was foolish enough to be holding Quatre Bras with his entire army – then the emperor would operate up the Nivelles road to attack Wellington's left and complete the destruction of his army. Soult's dispatch ended, 'Today it is necessary to end this operation, and complete the military stores, to rally scattered soldiers and summon back all detachments.'

It is clear from this dispatch that Napoleon was still unsure whether Wellington was at Quatre Bras with his whole army or not. With the Prussian Army in retreat – whichever way they were retreating – now was surely the time to move rapidly against Wellington. However, instead of sending Lobau with his VI Corps and General Antoine Drouot with the Guard in the direction of Quatre Bras to support any attack by Ney, Napoleon contented himself with sending a reconnaissance patrol towards Quatre Bras before visiting Grouchy's Headquarters and dragging that officer on a tour of the Ligny battlefield. When Grouchy finally asked him 'What are my orders, Sire?' Napoleon replied brusquely, 'I will give you your orders when it suits me.' It seems that Napoleon's main concern at this point was to rest his army and sort out some of the administrative chaos that had set in since the Army of the North had crossed the River Sambre into Belgium.

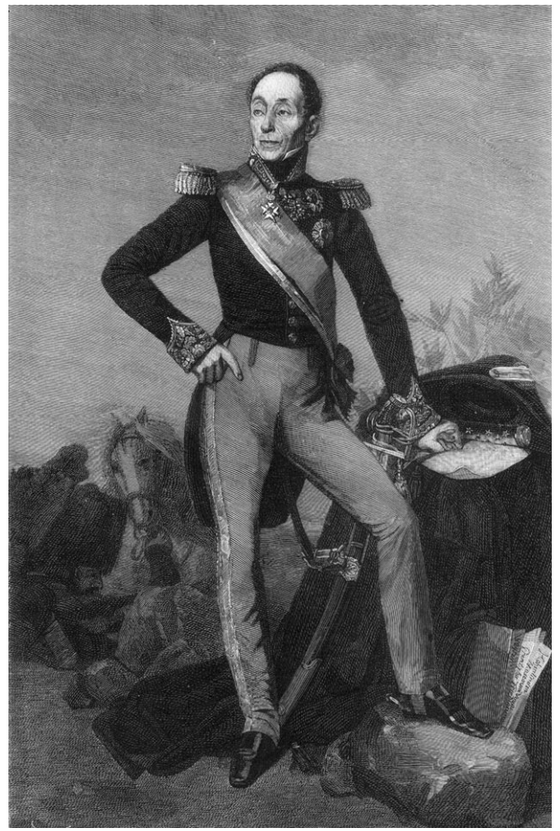
During his tour of inspection news came in from Exelmanns that his leading brigade had encountered a large force of Prussians at Gembloux. At about the same time an entire Prussian battery arrived under escort, which had been captured by Pajol on the Namur road – but this battery seemed to have lost its way and the road beyond it – in the direction of Namur – was reported to be empty. General Lutzow, captured in the final charges of the previous evening, had been heard lamenting the destruction of the Prussian Army, but was this in fact true? Was it possible that the Prussian Army had split, with part of it falling back towards Liège, and another part marching so as to join Wellington?





With the situation still not clear, Napoleon considered his options. He could launch a vigorous pursuit towards Liège – to which he was still inclined to believe the Prussians were retreating – but that would divert him from his main objective, Brussels, as well as robbing him of the chance to destroy Wellington. He could send Grouchy with a small force to keep his 'sword in Blücher's back', and attack Wellington in overwhelming force with the rest of the army, or he could play safe and detach Grouchy with a substantial force so as to guard against any possibility of Blücher – or any part of his army – joining Wellington. This would still leave him enough men to deal with Wellington. He took the third option, sending a written order to Grouchy:

> Proceed to Gembloux with the cavalry … and the III and IV Corps of infantry… You will explore in the directions of Namur and Maastricht and you will pursue the enemy… It is important to penetrate what the enemy is intending to do; whether they are separating themselves from the English, or whether they are intending still to unite, to cover Brussels or Liège, in trying the fate of another battle.[10]



An accomplished cavalry commander, Marshal Emmanuel de Grouchy was less well suited to the role of corps commander. (Topfoto)

By ordering Grouchy to explore to the south-east and the north-east of Sombreffe, Napoleon was looking for the Prussians in the wrong direction; the area between Tilly and Wavre was not scouted.

Grouchy rode off to meet Vandamme (with whom he had quarrelled on the 15th) and Gerard (who believed he should have been created marshal for the previous day's work) and ordered them to advance on Gembloux, III Corps leading. As Vandamme's lead elements passed through Pont du Jour – on the Namur road – the heavens opened.

Having previously dispatched Lobau and Drouot with VI Corps and the Guard to Marbais, Napoleon had, at about midday, written to Ney instructing him to '… attack the enemy at Quatre Bras and drive him from his position … the force which is at Marbais will second your operation. His Majesty is about to proceed to Marbais, and awaits your reports with impatience.'

It was 1 p.m. before Napoleon reached Marbais – perturbed at having heard no cannonading as he

approached. Finding Ney's troops still eating their midday meal he ordered all troops to fall in, but it was another hour before the leading elements – of d'Erlon's Corps – were ready to move. Seeing this priceless opportunity to destroy Wellington slipping from his grasp, Napoleon said to d'Erlon, 'France has been ruined. Go, my dear general, and place yourself at the head of the cavalry and pursue the rear guard vigorously.' Thus – in torrential rain, which confined the cavalry to the roads – began the French pursuit.

Wellington had spent the night of the 16th at Genappe, but was at Quatre Bras early on the 17th. There appeared to be no French activity to his front, and he had had no word from Blücher. Still unaware of the result of the fighting at Ligny he sent his senior aide de camp, Lieutenant Colonel Sir Alexander Gordon, with a squadron of the 10th Hussars out towards the east. By 7.30 a.m. Gordon was back bearing news: he had contacted Ziethen; the Prussians had sustained a defeat and were now retiring on Wavre. At 9 a.m. a Prussian staff officer arrived confirming the news – the first communication Wellington had received from Prussian Headquarters since 2 p.m. the previous day. In fact Gneisenau had dispatched a messenger informing him of the Prussian defeat and withdrawal almost as soon as he had assumed command, at 9 p.m. the previous evening, but that messenger had been captured.

Wellington had with him at Quatre Bras two Dutch-Belgian divisions, four Anglo-Hanoverian divisions, the Brunswickers, Van Merlen's cavalry and Lord Henry William Uxbridge's Cavalry Corps (who had arrived the evening before, too late to participate in the battle): 50,000 men in all, with more on the way. Exposed as he now was, he was in danger of being attacked by almost the entire Army of the North. His first instinct was to order an immediate withdrawal – but Baron Carl von Müffling, the Prussian commissioner on Wellington's staff, knew from his own experience in Germany that Napoleon liked to let his men rest and cook a meal on the day after a battle. He suggested that Wellington's exhausted troops would benefit from the same.

With Uxbridge's cavalry available to cover his withdrawal it was worth a slight delay to allow his men to start their march in better condition. After ordering the infantry to start 'thinning out' and be clear of Quatre Bras by 10 a.m. Wellington sent a messenger to Blücher informing him that he was falling back on Quatre Bras to a position at Mont Saint Jean, where he would stand and fight, provided Blücher could assist him with one or two corps.

At Mont Saint Jean, where the Nivelles–Brussels road and the Charleroi–Brussels road met, a series of ridges ran east to west and Wellington, who had ridden over the ground some months earlier, was confident he could fight there with the Forest of Soignes at his back. His only other option – to retire north





of Brussels – would mean abandoning his line of communication to Ostend. The road around his right flank – from Mons to Brussels – still represented a threat, so he ordered General Rowland Hill, with two brigades of 4th Division, Prince Frederick's Dutch-Belgian Division and Anthing's Brigade to block that road at Halle.

Covering his rear with a strong screen of Lord Uxbridge's cavalry, as well as guns and Congreve rockets, Wellington waited until the last of his infantry were through Genappe (about 2 p.m.) before remarking to Uxbridge, 'No use waiting. The sooner you get away the better. No time to be lost.' Only moments later French cavalry – lancers and cuirassiers – could be discerned advancing up the Namur road; the French pursuit had begun.

Observing the French with his horse-artillery troop, Captain Alexander Cavalié Mercer suddenly recognised Napoleon – who, irritated at Ney's delay, had placed himself at the head of some light cavalry. 'I had often longed to see Napoleon, that mighty man of war – that astonishing genius who had filled the world with his renown. Now I saw him – and there was a degree of sublimity in the interview rarely equalled.'[11] Mercer is referring to the fact that heavy dark clouds now hung over the heads of the British while the French – and Napoleon – were still momentarily standing in brilliant sunshine. With the opening salvo from the British guns the clouds burst – turning the ground on either side of the road into a girth-deep quagmire.

Despite the British fire the French cavalry were coming on fast. Crying to Mercer 'Make haste, make haste! For God's sake gallop, or you will be taken!'[12] Uxbridge followed his own advice. Minutes later he, the 7th Hussars and Mercer's guns – confined, like their pursuers to the road – were galloping pell-

Lady Butler's picture of the 28th (North Gloucestershire) Regiment at the Battle of Quatre Bras, 16 June 1815. (Soldiers of Gloucestershire Museum www.glosters.org.uk)

mell in the lashing rain, over the bridge and through the main street of Genappe. 'We lost sight of our pursuers altogether…,' wrote Mercer, 'and the shouts and halloos, and even laughter, they had at first sent forth were either silenced or drowned in the uproar of the elements and the noise of our too rapid retreat.'[13] Once through Genappe the 7th Hussars turned, reformed and charged the French lancers, who were already emerging from the village. The Hussars – unable to make headway against the levelled lances – fell back. After a salvo of canister from a British battery, the Blues and Lifeguards charged the lancers – Captain Kelly of the Lifeguards killing their colonel – and drove them back into the village, where in the confined streets their lances were an encumbrance.

After that bloody encounter in the slippery streets of Genappe – where the French were in Mercer's phrase 'taught a little modesty'[14] – the pursuit was hardly pressed at all. The remainder of the retreat was conducted at a walk, with the French content to follow up and observe. At a cost of 93 killed, wounded and missing, Wellington had extricated his army and established himself on the ridge of Mont Saint Jean. It had been a well-conducted retreat, if a close-run thing, and the weather had been on Wellington's side. 'What would I not have given to have had Joshua's power to slow down the sun's movement by two hours,' mused Napoleon later on St Helena.[15]

As the emperor approached the inn of La Belle Alliance, still in driving rain, his advance guard came under fire from guns deployed across the Charleroi road where it crossed the ridge of Mont Saint Jean – about 60 of them by Napoleon's calculation. Clearly this was no rearguard – Wellington was going to stand and fight here. Later that evening at his Headquarters at the farmhouse of Le Caillou, as his army attempted to find shelter from the rain in the sodden fields all around, Napoleon received a dispatch from Grouchy. After a muddy and wearisome march Grouchy's two corps were settled for the night around Gembloux. Grouchy reported that his dragoons had encountered a Prussian rearguard at Tourinnes 8 kilometres north of Gembloux and 13 kilometres short of Wavre. A second column had been seen further east at Perwez. He wrote:

> We may perhaps infer that one column is going to join Wellington and that the centre which is Blücher's arm is retiring towards Liege … if I find the mass of Prussians is retiring on Wavre I shall follow them, so as to prevent them gaining Brussels, and to separate them from Wellington.

Napoleon was content. Even if the bulk of Blücher's Army *had* gone to Wavre they would surely be in no condition to fight for several days yet – and Grouchy had more than enough men to keep them occupied *and* away from Wellington.





The following day with the rest of the *Armée* he would decide the issue of the whole campaign by the destruction of Wellington's Army. It does not seem to have occurred to Napoleon – who considered Wellington a cautious commander – to wonder why he had been so bold as to make a stand at Mont Saint Jean.

Since early that day Wellington had been relying on Blücher's verbal assurance – transmitted by Baron Müffling – that if he stood before Brussels the Prussians would come to his aid with at least one corps. By 11 p.m., as Wellington was conferring with Uxbridge in a cottage in the village of Waterloo, the Prussian high command had reached a final decision. Blücher emerged from the room where the meeting had been held and declared to Hardinge, 'Gneisenau has given in. We are going to join the Duke.' (The phrase 'given in' is significant; it indicates Gneisenau's mindset at the time.) He then showed Hardinge the draft of his dispatch to Wellington: 'Bülow's (IVth) Corps will set off marching tomorrow at daybreak in your direction. It will be immediately followed by the (IInd) Corps of Pirch. The Ist and IIIrd Corps will also hold themselves in readiness to proceed towards you.'

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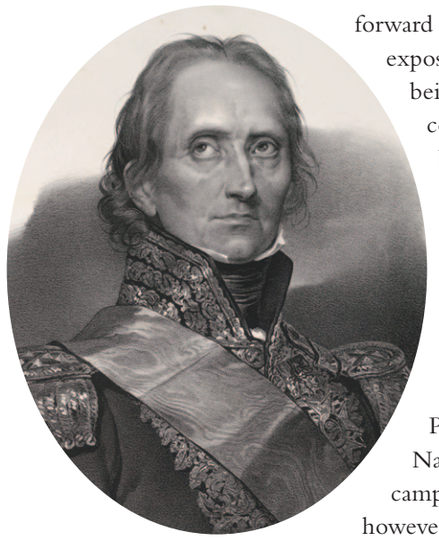
Lieutenant Colonel Sir Henry Hardinge, the British liaison officer with Blücher, was wounded at Ligny. (National Army Museum)

At whatever time – and it is still uncertain – Wellington received this dispatch, it merely confirmed the faith he had already placed in Blücher. Tomorrow, for the first time in this campaign, the Allied armies would combine against Napoleon. As Blücher – refusing to allow fresh ointment to be applied to his bruises – commented to his doctor early the next morning, 'If things go well today, we shall soon be washing and bathing in Paris!'

## ANALYSIS

By the evening of 17 June everything was still in place for a French victory – but the odds had lengthened. Wellington, having been initially wrong-footed by Napoleon, had fought a masterly battle at Quatre Bras, feeding in reserves at the right moments until the balance tipped in his favour and getting his army away on the 17th to a previously reconnoitred position at Mont Saint Jean. Perponcher's 'intelligent disobedience' – in taking his division to Quatre Bras, and the performance of the much-maligned (in some British accounts) Dutch-Belgian troops were crucial to the outcome of the campaign. It was Blücher's 'hussar habits' (Napoleon's phrase, describing the Prussian commander) that had induced him to concentrate at Ligny – too far

Napoleon, the night before the Battle of Waterloo. (akg-images)



Marshal Nicolas Soult, Napoleon's chief of staff and an accomplished field commander. (Anne S. K. Brown)

forward for a concentration of the two Allied armies. Prussian tactics – exposing troops on the hillside behind the Ligne – led to their army being (as Wellington had predicted) 'damnably mauled'. If their centre had been broken, however, the wings had made a clean break from contact, for which credit must go to Gneisenau, as well as for his decision to concentrate at Wavre, thus keeping his army's options open. The rapid recovery and regrouping of the Prussian forces was another major factor in the campaign's outcome. Nor should we discount another element – one on which Napoleon himself famously laid great emphasis – luck. Blücher's survival, revival and return to command was near-miraculous, and it was his 'hussar' mindset that would send the Prussian Army marching to support Wellington on the 18th. Napoleon's apologists over the years have placed the blame for the campaign's ultimate failure on his subordinates. These subordinates, however, were men he had appointed. Ney was a political choice – a prominent defector from the Bourbons and popular with the army. If he failed to act with speed on the morning of the 16th and seize the crossroads at Quatre Bras, he subsequently neutralised Wellington's Army with only one understrength corps and a heavy cavalry brigade.

'Order, counter-order – disorder!' is a well-known military maxim. Much has been made of the march and counter-march of d'Erlon – with Ney generally getting the blame. These things, however, happen in war (for example at Leipzig in 1813) and less has been made of Napoleon's failure – earlier in the day – to bring Lobau's Corps forward at least to a point where it could have intervened in either battle. If Lobau – whom Napoleon seems to have almost forgotten – had been at hand at the crucial moment at Ligny, he could have intervened just as effectively as d'Erlon. It is clear that after the initial concentration at Beaumont – a considerable feat – there were failures in staff work. Much of this can be attributed to what Clausewitz called the 'friction' of war – messengers get lost or killed, hastily scribbled orders are misread (luck again) – and to the poor communications of the time. It is difficult to resist the conclusion, however, that things would have gone more smoothly had Berthier been present as chief of staff. Soult (nicknamed 'King Nicolas' in Spain), an accomplished field commander, would have been arguably better suited to commanding one of the army's wings than to the 'chief clerk's' job of issuing another man's orders. Indeed, he had never done the job, even at corps level. Marshal Davout – left behind in Paris because of his political reliability – could have brought his considerable battlefield skills to the other





wing. A better choice for chief of staff might have been Marshal Suchet, a formidable administrator, who was guarding the admittedly important eastern frontier. A gallant and spirited leader of cavalry, Grouchy had never before commanded even a corps, let alone a wing of the army, though he performed well at Ligny, keeping Thielmann's Corps out of play. That he failed to pursue the Prussians as vigorously as Marshal Murat (refused a command because of his double-dealing with the Allies) might have done, was as much Napoleon's fault as his own. Uncertain of Ney's fate (or Bülow's whereabouts) on the night of the 16th, Napoleon was reluctant to send Grouchy on the kind of helter-skelter pursuit that might have destroyed the Prussian Army. The following morning we see Grouchy impatiently asking Napoleon for orders only to be angrily rebuffed. Nor can Grouchy be blamed for the foul weather that hampered his operations later in the day. From the French point of view the story of the Battle of Ligny–Quatre Bras is one of lost opportunities. Waterloo was the battle that need never have happened.