

The action at Frasnes. ¹

After Gosselies had fallen into French hands around 5 p.m., the French cavalry of Lefebvre Desnouettes (2000 men) was heading for Frasnes over the Brussels road. It had been ordered by Ney to do so. ²

The distance between Gosselies and the *Cabaret de l'empereur* (at 750 metres east from the church of Frasnes) is seven kilometres; it was towards 6.30 p.m. that the cavalry approached the village. ³

Just south of Frasnes the red lancers of the French guard met a post of the 2nd battalion Nassau under the command of major Von Normann (885 men) of the brigade of Saxen Weimar.

This battalion was assembled in the very early morning as a daily practice in front of the village of Frasnes, west of the Brussels road, between the Bois de Blathay and the Bois de Sauci. As a distant gunfire could be heard, the battalion kept its position and did so as the gunfire seemed to be approaching.

Von Normann informed his superiors at regimental headquarters at Hautain-le-Val about the situation and just as the battalion was ordered to return to its daily quarters, information dropped in through a wounded Prussian hussar that French forces were very near, towards Gosselies.

Normann now decided to pull his battalion through the village towards the other part of it which lies on both sides of the Brussels road and took up a position immediately south-west of it, in rear of a hollow road. From there it was able to see the road as well as a picket (consisting of a sergeant, a corporal and twelve men) which Von Normann had posted further in front.

The battalion was then also accompanied by the guns of the horse artillery of captain Bijleveld. As a matter of fact, Von Normann was responsible for Bijleveld at that moment.

As the French cavalry approached and dispersed the picket (of which the members later returned to the battalion), Von Normann pulled his unit, plus the artillery, further through the village. ⁴

As he did so, Von Normann left his 1st flankers-company, led by captain Muller, plus 80 volunteer chasseurs led by lieutenant Hoelschen, as skirmishers in and in front of the village. ⁵

As soon as he came out its other side, Bijleveld posted his battery about 1200 metres north of the village, just north of where the road cuts deep into the ridge. Both howitzers were posted on the road itself, while Bijleveld divided his other guns even on both flanks in the fields. Both flanks were covered by the remaining companies of the 2nd battalion Nassau.

Soon after they had taken up this position, the Nassau flankers-company came out from the village, pursued by the French red lancers. They, in their turn, were now bombarded by Bijleveld with canister and as a result they halted their advance. As the allied units had taken up a new position, Colbert – having discussed the situation with his superior – decided to charge the isolated battalion with one of his squadrons. The action failed, however. Colbert had intended to advance in three columns but the centre one left too early, thereby making any support of the flanking columns impossible.

Though the charge failed, Colbert managed to collect his squadron and to carry out a flanking manoeuvre thereby taking position *en bataille* some 200 metres south of Gémioncourt, facing south, in an attempt to cut off the battalion and battery.

Bijleveld and Von Normann became aware that they could be cut off from Quatre Bras, their assembly point. As a result, Bijleveld now started a slow retreat in sections on foot over and

along the road. At the same time, the Nassau infantry was able to keep the French lancers at bay and soon forced them to fall back towards Frasnes.⁶

It was about halfway between Frasnes and Quatre Bras, about 300 metres south of the farm of Gémioncourt, that Bijleveld halted his unit on and near the road, on his right covered by the 2nd battalion Nassau.⁷ Meanwhile, the remainder of the brigade was concentrated in and around Quatre Bras. As far as the enemy was concerned, it became clear that the French limited themselves to hold Frasnes only.⁸ Skirmishing came to an end around 8 p.m.⁹ After that, both parties sent out vedettes. In this, the French did so with an emphasis on their right, towards Sart-Dames-Avelines.¹⁰ Lefebvre Desnouettes concentrated his men at Frasnes, with his advanced posts near the most northward houses of the village. Around 8.30-8.45 p.m., a battalion of infantry of the 2nd regiment light infantry of the division of Bachelu arrived and took up its positions north of Frasnes.¹¹

That evening, also the duke of Saxe-Weimar's wrote his report, for Perponcher. It reads:

His Excellence Lieutenant general Von Perponcher in Nivelles. Quatre Bras, 15th June 9 p.m.

I have the honour to report to Your Excellency that the enemy has attacked the outposts near Frasnes with cavalry and infantry towards 6.30 p.m. The 2nd battalion Nassau and the battery Bijleveldt were forced to retire halfway to Quatre Bras. The brigade assembles right away near Quatre Bras. I detached the 3rd battalion Nassau in column forward on the road to Frasnes, the 1st battalion to defend the forest to the right of Hautain le Val and for the support of the 2nd battalion, and the remainder to Quatre Bras and along the road to Marbais.

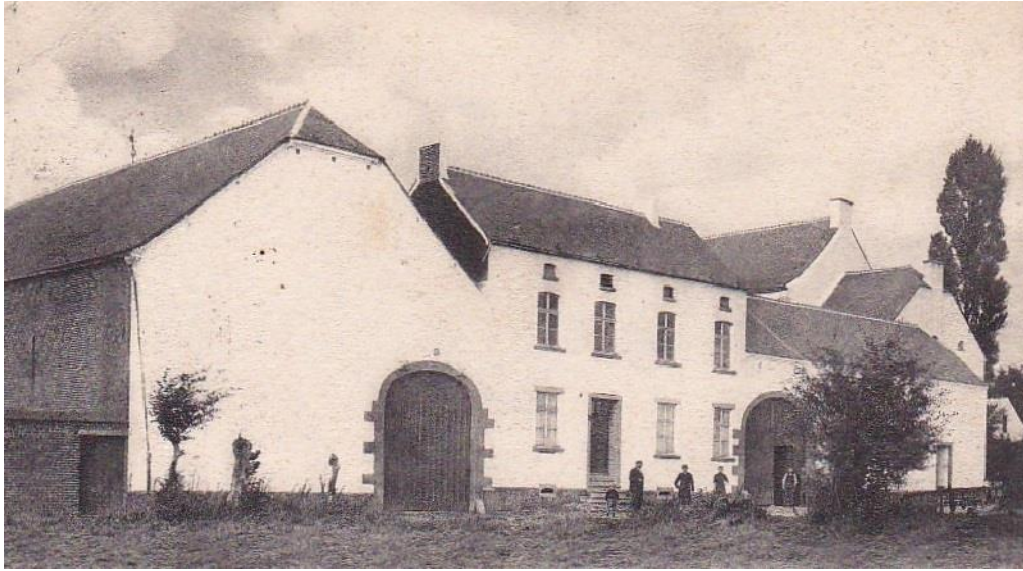
The artillery behaved gallantly and was able to keep the enemy away from advancing beyond Frasnes. The nearest enemy cavalry outposts are near the houses on this side of Frasnes. French cavalry has moved towards the vicinity of Sart à Mavelines and threatened my left flank. As no Prussian forces have retired to me, I am unable to determine in what way I am still connected to other units, and run the risk of being cut off from Brussels.

I am unable to determine the strength of the enemy due to the many forests, heights and the high corn which are in front of me. I have not seen any enemy artillery yet. All necessary measures have been taken for the night.

I have to admit to Your Excellency that I am too weak to hold for a prolonged period of time. The 2nd battalion Orange-Nassau carries French muskets and each man has no more as 10 rounds. The voluntary chasseurs have rifles of four different calibres and ten rounds per rifle. I will defend the post which has been entrusted to me to the utmost. I expect an enemy attack at daybreak. The men are in high spirits. The paroles I have given are Wisbaden, Wilhelm.

In haste, colonel Br. zu Saxe-Weimar

*The battery has no infantry cartridges.*¹²



The farm of Du Try at Frasnes.

Marshal Ney.

That evening, Lefebvre Desnouettes wrote the following report to Ney:

Frasnes, 15th June 9 p.m.

Sir,

In arriving at Frasnes according to your orders we have found it occupied by a regiment of Nassau infantry some 1500 men and 8 guns strong. As they learned that we manoeuvred so as to turn them, they evacuated the village; it was there that we have actually enveloped them with our squadrons. General Colbert has even been at rifle shot distance from 4 Bras on the high road; yet, as the terrain was difficult and the enemy was supported by the Bois de Bossu and gave a strong fire with his 8 guns, we have been unable to break him. The forces we found at Frasnes were neither those who had advanced this morning, nor those which had fought at Gosselies. There are led by Lord Wellington and seem to fall back towards Nivelles; they have lit a beacon at Quatre Bras and have often fired their guns. None of the troops which fought at Gosselies this morning have passed here; they have gone to Fleurus. Peasants are unable to give me any information about a major assembling of forces in these surroundings; there would only be an artillery-park composed of 100 caissons and 12 pieces of artillery at Tubize. It is said the Belgian army is in the vicinity of Mons and that the headquarters of the young prince Frederick of Orange is at Braine le Comte. We have taken 15 prisoners and have some ten men killed or wounded. Tomorrow, at daybreak, I will send to Quatre Bras a reconnaissance which will occupy it, if possible, as I believe the Nassau forces have left.

A battalion has just arrived which I have placed in front of the village. My artillery has not joined and I have sent it the order to bivouac with Bachelu's division; it will rejoin tomorrow

morning. I do not write to the emperor vaing nothing important to tell him, other than what I write Your Excellence.

I have the honour to be with respect, sir, your most humble and devoted servant,

Lefebvre Desnouettes

*I send you a Maréchal-des-logis who will take the orders of Yours Excellence. I have the honour to observe to Your Excellence that the enemy has not shown any cavalry, but artillery and light artillery.*¹³

Ney established his headquarters in Gosselies, in the house of the steel-merchant Melchior Joseph Dumont, at the rue Saint Roch nr.2 (nowadays the rue Joseph Stranard).¹⁴ When he did so is not known, but it was in this house Ney wrote a report to Soult. By then, it was 11 p.m. Ney was probably triggered to do so by the arrival of Soult's letter which he had written to Ney around 9 or 9.30 p.m. and to which Ney refers at the end of his report which reads:

Gosselies, 15 Juin, 11 heures du soir

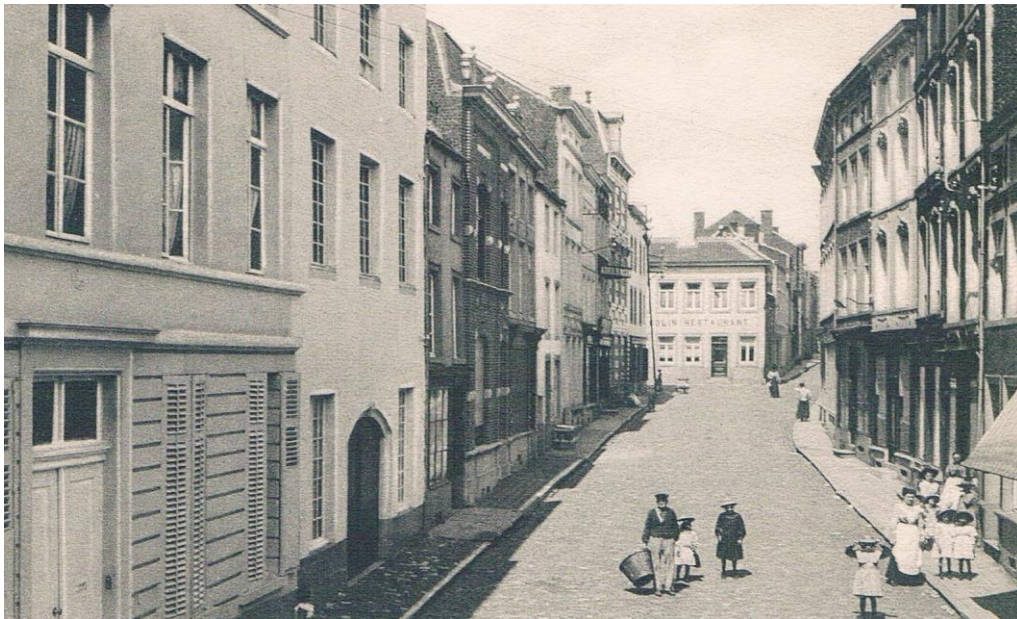
Monsieur le maréchal, j'ai l'honneur de rendre compte à Votre Excellence que, conformément aux ordres de l'Empereur, je me suis rendu cet après-midi sur Gosselies pour en déloger l'ennemi avec la cavalerie du général Piré et l'infanterie du général Bachelu. La résistance de l'ennemi a été peu opiniâtre; on a échangé de part et d'autre vint-cinq à trente coups de canon; il s'est replié par Heppignies sur Fleurus.

Nous avons fait 5 à 600 prisonniers prussiens du corps du général Zieten. Voici l'emplacement des troupes:

Le général Lefebvre Desnouettes avec les lanciers et les chasseurs de la garde à Frasné. Le général Bachelu avec la 5e division à Mellet. Le général Foy avec la 9e division à Gosselies. La cavalerie légère du général Piré à Heppignies. Je ne sais où se trouve le général en chef Reille. Le général comte d'Erlon me mande qu'il est à Jumet avec la plus grande partie de son corps d'armée. Je viens de lui transmettre les dispositions prescrites par la lettre de V.E. en date de ce jour. Je joins à ma lettre un rapport du général Lefebvre Desnouettes.

Agréez, Monsieur le maréchal, l'assurance de ma haute considération,

*Le maréchal Prince de la Moskowa, Ney*¹⁵



The house of Dumont (in front, to the left) at Gosselies, Ney's headquarters on the night of the 15th of June.

It arrived at the chateau Puissant around 1.00 a.m. the next morning.¹⁶ In the report Ney refers to Soult's instructions for d'Erlon. In fact, the order to d'Erlon states: "...l'intention de l'empereur est que vous ralliez votre corps sur la rive gauche de la Sambre pour joindre le 2e corps à Gosselies, d'après les ordres que vous donnera à ce sujet M.le Maréchal prince de la Moskowa ". Ney's orders for d'Erlon of that evening and which he wrote just before his report to Soult have not been preserved for prosperity, but must have been in line with this instruction. Ney also speaks about the information he got from d'Erlon that the majority of his corps was at Jumet, but this was not correct as from d'Erlon's report to Soult a much more extended position of the corps can be concluded and the moment he wrote it he was still awaiting further orders for the further concentration of his forces.

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¹ Also see: Muilwijk, E. – 1815. From mobilisation to war p.211-224

2. Cf. Report of Lefebvre Desnouettes of the evening of the 15th of June (see below).

Edouard de Colbert, commander of the lancers of the guard, confirms he had orders to “marcher sur la route de Bruxelles.” Cf. his letter dated 15th May 1829. In: AN, AF 137 / Fonds Ney f.21
General Foy. In: Vie militaire etc. p.270

Captain L.Wirths (2nd battalion 2nd regiment Nassau) In: Aus der Schlacht bei Waterloo. In: Nassovia 1905 p.142-143

Some historians erroneously claim it was Piré, but Lefebvre Desnouettes’ report proves otherwise. Cf. Charras - Histoire de la campagne de 1815. Vol.I p.108

Siborne, W. - History of the war etc. Vol.I.p.74

3. Cf. the report of prince Bernard van Saxen Weimar of 9 p.m. (below).

For 5 p.m. cf. the report of the prince of Orange to his father of 2 a.m. of the 17th of June In: Supplementary Despatches p. 497

Major Sattler even claims it was 4 p.m. In: HHA, Abt.202, inv.nr.1015 p.336

Edouard de Colbert, commander of the French lancers, erroneously claims he was in front of Frasnes before 3 p.m. Cf. his letter dated 15th May 1829. In: AN, AF 137 / Fonds Ney f.21

Houssaye tries to make up the difference by stating that the cavalry arrived around 5 p.m. but that it had to wait for the infantry to arrive, which took place around 6.30 p.m. Cf. Houssaye, H. - 1815.Waterloo. p.130

For 6.30 p.m.: Navez, L. La campagne de 1815 Vol.I p.96

⁴ It may have been even before the red lancers dispersed the picket, that French infantry of the 2nd regiment of light infantry (division of Bachelu) may have been in touch with the Nassau troops, but this is not certain. Trefcon claims it did, while prince van Saxen Weimar also mentions the presence of infantry, but here also lancers, dismounted to fire with their carbines, may have been taken for infantry.

In: Trefcon, T.J. - Carnet de campagne etc. p.179

Van Saxen Weimar in his report. In: NA, 2.13.52 Inventaris etc. nr.1098

Henry Houssaye claims a battalion of the same regiment had gone forward from Gosselies in a forced march as to support Lefebvre Desnouettes. As source he uses the report from Ney of the 16th of June of 7 a.m. in which Ney mentions the presence of such a battalion there. Though this report is unavailable this is only an indication of its presence there: it is the battalion as referred to by Lefebvre Desnouettes as having arrived after the action.

Houssaye also cites a report of chef d’escadron De Stuers, but this is unavailable and it is not sure whether he mentions any infantry. In: 1815.Waterloo p.130

⁵ According to captain Frensdorf, commander of the 3rd battalion Nassau, all flanker companies of the regiment were involved in the brief action against the French cavalry. Cf. his account dated 10th of August 1815. In private collection

⁶ Cf. Captain Wirths (2nd battalion Nassau). In: Aus der Schlacht bei Waterloo. In: Nassovia 1905 p.142-143

Count E.de Colbert. Cf. his letter dated 15th May 1829. In: AN, AF 137 / Fonds Ney f.21

General Lefebvre Desnouettes, in his report of the evening of the 15th of June, claims Colbert reached a point “à un portée de fusil” [200 metres] from Quatre Bras.

Colbert himself mentions a position “en avant de Quatre Bras” and about which he states that this point was unoccupied. Cf. his letter dated 15th May 1829. In: AN, AF 137 / Fonds Ney f.21
The chief of staff of the division of Foy, chef d’escadron Lemonnier-Delafosse, goes even further by stating that Colbert would have pushed as far as Quatre Bras itself. Here he found two British brigades and some cavalry. In: Souvenirs militaires p.204-205

Colbert states from what he calls Quatre Bras that it was unoccupied. It is simply impossible that it was this crossroads, as by then (it was after 6.30 p.m.) there were several battalions of the brigade of Saxen Weimar. As these did not reach as far as the farm of Gémioncourt at that period of time, the point referred to can only be this farm. In carefully reading Lefebvre Desnouettes’ account, he also makes a distinction between the encirclement of the battalion and the further advance of Colbert.

The most probable scenario is that Colbert from his brief position facing south sent out some scouts towards the Bois de Bossu, Quatre Bras and the Namur road, but that they couldn’t do a lot due to the terrain and the enemy’s presence.

⁷ Cf. Captain Wirths (2nd battalion Nassau). In: Aus der Schlacht bei Waterloo. In: Nassovia 1905 p.142-143

Captain Bijleveld in his diary. In: Hoek, W. van den & Hoek, J.W. van den - De geschiedenis van de rijdende artillerie p.88

Colonel van Zuylen van Nijvelt. In: Historisch verhaal etc. In: NA, nr.2.13.14.01 nr.8

Report of prince Bernard van Saxen Weimar of the evening of the 15th of June (below)

Report of general Lefebvre Desnouettes of the evening of the 15th of June (below).

2nd lieutenant Koopman (battery Bijleveld). In: NL-ZuRAZ, Van Löben Sels, 0302, inv.nr.262

Colonel Von Sattler (regiment Nassau). In: VPH nr.18

Major Von Sattler. Cf. his account In: HHA, Abt.202 inventory nr.1015

Major general Von Kruse. In: In: VPH nr.17

Prince Bernard van Saxen Weimar. Diary. In: HHA, Grossherzogliches Hausarchiv A, XXIV 30, p.193

⁸ Major Sattler (commander of the 2nd regiment Nassau). In: HHA, Abt.202 inv.nr.1015 p.337
He states he put the 1st battalion to the right of the [Brussels] road.

9. Report of the prince of Orange to his father, from the 17th of June. In: WSD Vol.X p. 497

Captain F.von Jeckeln (2nd battalion Orange-Nassau). In: former www.1815.ltd.uk Original

in: HSD, nr.1041 nr.1

According to Starklof it was around 9 p.m. Cf Starklof, R. - Das Leben etc. p.183

The casualties of the artillery and the infantry appear to have been one officer and 39 men, but there is no further confirmation for this number. Cf. Bas, F.de - La campagne de 1815 aux Pays Bas etc. Vol.I p.403

Additionally, Aerts mentions a loss of 30 horses. Cf. Aerts, W. - Etudes relatives etc.p.315
Aerts gives 30 men instead of 39.

Vels Heijn splits the losses : infantry 35 and artillery 5. In: Glorie zonder helden. p.107

H.de Mauduit clearly exaggerates in his statement of 300-400 Nassau prisoners. In: Les derniers jours de la Grande Armée. Vol.II p.21

French losses would have been 10. Cf. report of Lefebvre Desnouettes (below). He counts 15 Nassau prisoners.

¹⁰ Bijleveld in his diary. In: Hoek, W.van den & Hoek, J.W.van den - De geschiedenis van de rijdende artillerie p. 88

Cf. Diary of Van Saxen Weimar. In: HHA, Grossherzogliches Hausarchiv A,XXIV 30, p.192-193

¹¹ Cf. report of Lefebvre Desnouettes (below)

Trefcon, T.J. - de campagne du colonel Trefcon. p.179

Major general Von Kruse. In: VPH nr.17

12. In: NA, 2.13.52 Inventaris etc. nr.1098

Cf. Starklof, R. - Das Leben etc. p.185-186 His version is in some details quite different.

Löben Sels, E.van - Bijdragen tot de krijgsgeschiedenis etc. Vol.IV. p.461-462

The fact that Van Saxen Weimar himself spent the night at Quatre Bras is confirmed by Van Saxen Weimar himself. Cf. Diary of Van Saxen Weimar. In: HHA, Grossherzogliches Hausarchiv A, XXIV 30, p.193

Saxen Weimar mentions French cavalry penetrating as far as Sart-à-Mavelines. It is in this connection that general Colbert (of the lancers of the Imperial Guard) would have told captain Van Omphal (a former member of this unit) that he was able – on the morning of the 16th of June – to penetrate on the road between Quatre Bras and Genappe without encountering any enemy troops, but that he had to go back due to a lack of support.

This is incorrect as at that time it was simply impossible to get there without encountering any allied units. It might refer to a patrol which Saxen Weimar refers to in his report of the evening of the 15th of June.

Cf. Autobiographical notes of captain Von Omphal, 6th regiment of hussars. In: NIMH, nr.104/7 nr.59

13. Copy in: SHD, C15, nr.5. In his last sentence it should probably read light infantry instead of light artillery. Cf. Bas, F.de - La campagne de 1815 aux Pays Bas.Vol.III.p.253

Koolemans Beijnen, G.J.W. - Op welk tijdstip heeft etc. Annex I.

Lachouque, H. - Le secret de Waterloo.p.103-104.

Aerts, W. - Etudes relatives à la campagne etc.p.275-276

It still remains a mystery why the units of Van Saxon Weimar lit a beacon at Quatre Bras, as referred to by Lefebvre Desnouettes.

14. Delloye, S. - La maison Dumont à Gosselies en 1815. In: Bulletin of the SBEN (1992), nr.17 p.37-51

Laudy, L. - La maison Dumont à Gosselies. In: Revue des études Napoléoniennes.1932

This man called Dumont was married to Suzanne Monseu and they had a daughter, Marie Françoise Camille, the later called Mme. Françoise Drion (born 1806). She mentions a meal which Ney would have taken here. According to her recollections Ney arrived that night around 9.30 p.m.

In 1815 the house was the most important house in Gosselies. It consisted in two parts: the actual residence and a store (on the right) for nails. In the residence there was a wide corridor which split it in two. In this corridor there was a monumental staircase. To the left of the corridor was at ground level a dining room and to the right a drawing-room. At the end of the corridor there was a large room where a glass door gave access to the park. This park sloped down towards the gardens of the houses of the rue des Tanneurs and had an entrance to the road which leads to Courcelles.

The house decayed during the first few decennia of the 20th century because of the subsidence of the soil which was due to the mining of charcoal. In 1937 the house was in a very bad condition. Cf. the Times of 25th October 1937.

In 1951 only the facade of the house remained and not long after the whole ruin was demolished. Cf. Noeyen, J.van - Une halte de Napoléon après Waterloo. La maison historique de la rue Saint Roch à Gosselies.” In: Bulletin de la Société belge d’Etudes Napoleoniennes (1951), nr.3 p.18-23

Delloye, S. - La maison Dumont à Gosselies en 1815. In: Bulletin of the SBEN (1992), nr.17 p.37-51

Some claim that Ney was present at the action at Frasnes.

Cf. Houssaye, H. 1815.Waterloo p.131

Chef d’escadron Lemonnier-Delafosse (division Foy) states he saw Ney rode towards Frasnes at 2 p.m, but then he was still south of Charleroi. In: Souvenirs militaires p.204

However, if Ney had been there around 7.30- 8 p.m. then Lefebvre Desnouettes would not have written a report to him. In this report, Lefebvre Desnouettes makes no allusion to Ney’s presence. In addition, Ney doesn’t refer to his presence at Frasnes that night in his report to Napoleon. He mentions Gosselies as his goal, adds the report of Lefebvre Desnouettes without any comments and doesn’t refer to his presence at Frasnes.

15. Copy in SHD, C15, nr.5

It is bizarre that Ney did not know where Reille himself was, while this general was at Gosselies as well, as Ney was. Cf. Pollio, A – Waterloo p.144

16. Houssaye thinks it was around midnight. In: 1815.Waterloo. p.136