

The sector of the army of the Netherlands on the 15th of June.

The communication towards Braine le Comte and Brussels.

It was at or near St.Symphorien that the prince of Orange heard about the French attack upon the Prussians. Though he probably did so in a more general way, it remains a mystery how he learned it. It may have been through distant gunfire, but if he did hear it there, why didn't then Von Dörnberg and Behr, both in Mons (which is about 5 kilometres further west), hear it as well ? Yet, gunfire as such did not have to prove a French attack, as the Prussians had daily practices with their artillery, but the way it was at least heard at Fontaine l'Evêque and Charleroi gave the impression it was. ¹ This may lead to the presumption that somehow general information about the French offensive seeped through in another way (other as gunfire) as far as St.Symphorien through Von Steinmetz's brigade and through the patrols of Van Merlen. ² Whatever way the prince learned about it, it also remains a mystery why he didn't inform Von Dörnberg and Behr about it as well. Now, Von Dörnberg learned about the hostilities towards 10 a.m., while Behr only did so towards 11.30 a.m. Apparently, both men didn't seem to have a proper communication as well.

Van Merlen, at St.Symphorien, was soon formally informed of the outbreak of the hostilities directly by Von Steinmetz, commander of the 1st brigade of the 1st Prussian army-corps, at Fontaine-l'Evêque. Van Merlen himself, in turn, immediately informed Constant Rebecque at Braine le Comte. His information was more detailed as the one from the prince and from Von Dörnberg, which was coming from Mons by 10 a.m.

Whether Van Merlen also informed Chassé (at Haine St.Pierre) cannot be fully established, but Chassé learned about the offensive towards 11 a.m.

The sequence of all these reports coming in at Braine le Comte that morning and in the early afternoon, gave Constant Rebecque the following picture:

- the French offensive was taking place at the Sambre and seemed to be heading towards Charleroi.
- it was the Prussian intention to take up a position behind the Piéton at Gosselies and, if necessary, later at Fleurus.
- the Prussians had, consequently, evacuated Binche
- the sector at Mons and the one in front of St.Symphorien seemed unthreatened
- the 3rd Netherlands division had been collected near Fayt, while the cavalry brigade of Van Merlen had moved north-east, to cover the Haine and Nivelles, to the right of Binche.

While the reports of the prince, Von Dörnberg and Chassé had a general character, Constant Rebecque waited for more direct and detailed information from the sector further south-east. As this came in through De Paravicini, he then forwarded it to Brussels through Berkeley, as well as through his own line of communication.

In this chain of events, it is understandable that Constant Rebecque waited for more detailed information, before giving any further orders and before forwarding any information to Brussels at all.

The concentration of the units of the army of the Netherlands.

As Chassé had been ordered in the morning by the prince to collect his division at his assembly-point (in front of Fayt), by 3 p.m. (about one hour after the latest news had come in from the front), Constant Rebecque issued the same orders for the remainder of the cavalry and the 2nd division of De Perponcher. Additionally, he alerted the other divisions of the 1st army corps at Soignies and Enghien.

For the Netherlands cavalry these assembly-points were behind Havré and Strépy (for the brigades of De Ghigny and Trip respectively) , while for De Perponcher these were in and near Nivelles (Van Bijlandt's brigade) and Quatre Bras (Saxen Weimar's brigade). These orders were a direct consequence of the information which indicated that the French seemed to be approaching Charleroi.

The fact that the prince, in the morning, had alerted and ordered only the 3rd division of infantry as well as Van Merlen's brigade of cavalry may have had to do with the fact that he only wanted to do so with those units which were nearest to the point where a French threat seemed to come from.

As has been shown before, however, the retreat of both these units in case of a French attack had been drafted in the middle of May by the Dutch leadership. Yet, this plan had been based upon a French attack as coming from Maubeuge towards Mons, and beyond towards Nivelles. Now, the attack seemed to come from much more further south-east, from the Sambre. The plan was complied with, but not in full.

Now, Van Merlen did not collect at Bon Vouloir to pass the Haine at Havré, but he did so further east instead, to cross this river at Haine Saint Paul, Haine Saint Pierre and, possibly, at Maurage. Resulting, the brigade of De Ghigny, collected near Havré, played no role in the retreat of Van Merlen there, nor in the concentration of Chassé's division. The role of three of this division's battalions which were supposed to cover the retreat of Van Merlen remains obscure, but it can be assumed that they played this role. Though the way the plan was carried out in a different way as it was laid out, the ultimate goal of the whole operation was the same: to reach and take up a position in front of Fayt, near Baume so as to cover the chaussée which leads here to Nivelles.

By moving the units of Van Merlen north-east, towards Binche and by pulling Chassé towards the area of Fayt and Haine Saint Pierre, Constant Rebecque broke up the link with Mons, while at the same time he covered the road which leads from Bavay, through Nivelles towards Brussels.

The absence of the prince of Orange at Braine le Comte and the role of Constant Rebecque.

During the early morning of the 15th of June, the prince of Orange was out to the outposts, and Constant Rebecque didn't know when he could be back in Braine le Comte.³

After he had learned about the French offensive and after he had given his orders for Chassé and Van Merlen, the prince of Orange returned to Braine le Comte. Having spent some time with Constant Rebecque there, he left again, but now for Brussels in order to meet Wellington. It has been asserted that he had been invited there by Wellington, but this was not the case.⁴ Of course, he was invited for the ball of Richmond, but this started only late that evening and for that reason he didn't have to leave that early.

Wellington himself says about the meeting: "The first account received by the duke of Wellington was from the prince of Orange, who had come in from the out-posts of the army of the Netherlands to dine with the duke at three o'clock in the afternoon."⁵ This is confirmed by count Van Limburg Stirum who actually confirms that the prince left Braine le Comte to discuss things with the duke.⁶ The way to read this is that it was more the initiative of the prince himself to come over to Wellington.⁷

Also, it was Berkeley who wrote at 2 p.m. that he didn't know then where the prince was; if the prince would have had an appointment in Brussels with Wellington, Berkeley would most probably have known about it.

Later that afternoon, the prince himself wrote from Brussels (probably by 5 p.m.): "Le duc de Wellington désire que je reste ici ce soir. Je ne partirai donc qu'à minuit ou une heure." The prince wrote this letter after having talked with Wellington, who convinced him to stay, and to

await further information about the French offensive before taking any actions. This means that, initially, the prince had planned to leave again for Braine le Comte that same afternoon.⁸ By the time he wrote his letter, at least the prince was not aware yet of the events at the Sambre in more detail. This, coupled with a possible visit to the ball, led him to believe he might leave Brussels by midnight or 1 a.m.

Very soon after, however, the situation changed in Brussels as the information through Berkeley and Zieten came in, which led the duke of Wellington to issue his first orders between 6 and 7 p.m. What remains is the question why the prince left for Brussels to discuss the situation – even though it was probably based upon a rather general information of a French offensive. He could also have done so by sending an officer out to get Wellington's reaction. For some reason, the prince felt the rather general information he had that important that it would be worth-while to ride the 30 kilometres to Brussels himself to discuss it personally with the duke. This need may have come from a kind of uncertainty, while at the same time he may felt the need to be in the very centre of the information-network and to be able to receive any orders Wellington might issue directly. It is yet still very arguable whether he should have left Braine le Comte at all.

It is remarkable, by the time he wrote his letter and forwarded the reports of Von Dörnberg and Behr, that Berkeley didn't know that the prince indeed had come back in at Braine le Comte some time before; he still supposed the prince was in the outposts. On the other hand, Berkeley clearly had been in touch with Constant Rebecque which can be derived from the same letter, and in this context it is all the more striking that, somehow, Constant had not informed him of the prince's short presence at Braine le Comte and departure for Brussels. What may have been the reason for this, we can only guess.

The moment the prince had left Braine le Comte he had taken his measures for the communication between this place and Brussels, while at the same time he gave Constant Rebecque further instructions what to do in case further information would come in. It cannot be fully determined whether Constant Rebecque agreed upon the fact that the prince left, but he may have had his reasons to disagree to this.

The fact that the prince left with him instructions what to do in case further information about the French attack would drop in, can be taken from the orders which were issued on his behalf at 3 p.m. but still it rather strange at least to note that Constant didn't report back to the prince after 3 p.m. about what he had be ordering so far. His first report to Brussels dates from late that evening.

It is in his order of 10.15 p.m. that Constant Rebecque does not act according to the prince's instructions and it is here that Constant himself *recommends* (so not orders) De Perponcher to reinforce his brigade at Quatre Bras by the one of Van Bijlandt, and also – if necessary – by the forces of Chassé and Collaert.

In fact, he gives De Perponcher the option to have his own division be supported by Chassé and Collaert if necessary, or at least to inform them of his situation.

In conclusion, he puts the situation into the hands of De Perponcher, as being the one who was probably in the best position to judge what was necessary against the French threat from the south over the Brussels road and, accordingly, what to do.

At the same time, he is bluffing towards De Perponcher about the prince's arrival in Braine le Comte. On the one hand he states that the prince is in Brussels the moment he writes his lines, while at the same time he writes that the prince "*est attendu à chaque instant de retour.*" How could someone be at Brussels and at the same time be expected back in Braine le Comte "à chaque instant", and this while it would take about three hours to cover the stretch between these places ? Apart from that, Constant Rebecque knew that the prince would not be back in Braine le Comte before midnight. He may have used these words to reassure De Perponcher about the prince's whereabouts.⁹

After he had received Wellington's concentration-orders, however, it is that Constant reverts back to the formal orders "of the prince" (in fact they were Wellington's orders for the prince) to concentrate the 2nd division at Nivelles, and it is then at 00.15 a.m. that he writes as if his order of 10.15 p.m. never existed.

Personally, Constant, on the one hand, may have felt the strong need to reinforce the extreme left wing of the 1st corps (and the army) towards the French threat upon the road coming from Charleroi, while on the other –eventually - he stuck to the formal orders of the prince and left the decision what to do up to De Perponcher. It is a mystery why Constant waited for almost two hours before issuing his new orders for De Perponcher (00.15 a.m.) after having received Wellington's concentration orders (10.30 p.m.), but in view of the situation this is to be regarded as a grave delay.

In relation to the 3rd division, it was the prince who had ordered it during the morning to collect in front of Fayt, where the division stood from about noon onwards. It was not until 6 p.m. that Chassé decided to move his units a bit further south, near Baume. What triggered him to do is unknown; at least he was not ordered to do so by Constant, but it may have been that he did so after having received intelligence of De Perponcher about his situation and the measures he had taken after the information he had got about the French advance over the road coming from Charleroi.¹⁰

It may also have been towards 2 a.m. that Chassé was informed by another officer coming from De Perponcher (as was instructed by Constant Rebecque to De Perponcher in his order of 10.15 p.m.) to at least inform him of the situation of the De Perponcher and this in relation to a possible support of the 3rd division to the 2nd. What this officer told Chassé is not known, but it was around the same time that Chassé received Constant's order (which had come from Brussels) to leave for Nivelles right away, in order to support De Perponcher, if necessary.

The role of Constant towards Chassé was also one of forwarding orders, but these were in this case unambiguous. What Constant did here is linking De Perponcher and Chassé together, to communicate about the situation and to arrange a cooperation if De Perponcher felt this necessary to have, but then steps back as long as he has no strict orders from Brussels.

Towards Collaert it is the same, but at the same time Constant goes a step further in his formal approach. What he does here is issuing basic orders which were mere translations of instructions he had got from the prince (in the order of 3 p.m.), from Wellington (in the order of 10.30 p.m.) and from the prince (in the order of 3 a.m.). Yet, it is in none of these orders that the real cause of them is mentioned: a French offensive.

It can be presumed that in the morning, Van Merlen communicated with his superior at Boussoit-sur-Haine about the French offensive, even though it was in a general way. It is only by 10.15 p.m. that Constant asks De Perponcher to communicate with Chassé, and then Chassé with Collaert about the situation at the Brussels road. It is not known when Collaert learned about what was going on there, but it may have been that Chassé already informed him earlier that day; if not, it would have been deep into the night that he did.

By the time De Perponcher received Constant's order of 3 p.m. to collect his division "met de meeste spoed [...] en een brigade in gereedheid te houden op de straatweg bij Nivelles en de andere bij de 4 bras en zulks tot nader order door Z.K.H. aan U te zenden bevelen", he had already done so. The 2nd brigade had been collected at Quatre Bras in the late afternoon and the early evening while, the 1st brigade was collected around this Nivelles, and not on the chaussée, as was dictated later by Constant Rebecque.

The choice for both Quatre Bras and Nivelles was, first of all, simply one of routine: both brigades had their assembly points there.¹¹ For Saxen Weimar, Quatre Bras was first of all his assembly point and in the second place a point under threat. Therefore he collected his

brigade there and he then did what he had to do, the more as he was guarding the extreme left flank of the 1st corps (and of the Anglo-Netherlands-German army): to resist the enemy.¹²

By the time the French approached the crossroads, information was pretty scarce. Bernard van Saxen Weimar and De Perponcher knew about a French advance over the road coming from Brussels and concluded that this road was evacuated by the Prussians, but that was about it.

As the action at Frasnes died out and Saxen Weimar kept his position north of it, De Perponcher left his 1st brigade where it was as he saw no reason to change his arrangements. In fact, he feared a serious French action over Binche towards Nivelles. Even after receiving Constant's proposal (by 11.30 p.m.) to move his 1st brigade towards Quatre Bras as well, and to seek the support of Chassé and Collaert - if necessary - is something De Perponcher didn't follow, simply because he felt a serious threat still might come from Binche towards Nivelles. It is after he had got Constant's order (of 00.15 a.m.), around 1.45 a.m., that he decided to move two battalions of his 1st brigade from Nivelles towards Quatre Bras. And this while the order stated to collect his division *at Nivelles*. So, while not following Constant's advice earlier that night, it is now that he did, but just at a moment that he got the order to collect his complete division *at Nivelles*.

De Perponcher, now being informed that Chassé had been ordered to Nivelles and the cavalry to a position in rear of Haine Saint Pierre, felt more confident to move some of his forces to Quatre Bras. Yet, the frame of mind where this order came from (from Brussels) was not the same as his: it stemmed from a general concentration of forces, while for De Perponcher it meant that he now was given the possibility to shift some of his forces towards a point where the threat was clearly apparent: Quatre Bras.

The units De Perponcher took for this were those placed in the very centre of Nivelles and the one to the west of it: he left all those which stood south of Nivelles where they were, clearly covering it here against a French threat coming from Binche.

In fact, De Perponcher still reckoned that Nivelles might get under attack and therefore he gave Van Bijlandt strict instructions to defend Nivelles as long as possible and to withdraw, if needed, towards Mont Saint Jean.¹³ Whatever De Perponcher may have thought about this order, what certainly also played a major role in this decision was the information De Perponcher had gathered that Charleroi and part of the Brussels road had been evacuated by the Prussians.¹⁴ Now, De Perponcher also clearly saw the need to cover the road leading from Charleroi to Brussels so as to protect the access towards Brussels from there.¹⁵ Not wishing to leave Nivelles as long as he could not be certain that the enemy would not attack through Binche and that Chassé could relieve him at Nivelles [¹⁶], De Perponcher left three battalions of Van Bijlandt plus a battery of foot artillery in and around Nivelles. So for the 1st brigade of Van Bijlandt, De Perponcher shifted forces towards Quatre Bras in phases, while the march to Quatre Bras of the three remaining battalions and the artillery eventually was not ordered by him, but by the prince of Orange the moment he passed through Nivelles. By that time, De Perponcher himself had good reasons to be at Quatre Bras to see for himself what was happening there. Constant Rebecque informed him of the imminent arrival of the prince there, as well as of his remaining units in the course of the morning.

¹ Cf. De Paravicini's report, which was based upon the one of Von Steinmetz'.

Cf. report of Zieten to Blücher, dated about 4.45 a.m.

Lieutenant Van Wassenaar van St.Pancras (of captain's Gey's battery), at St.Symphorien, however, claims he heard gunfire that morning but didn't realize it was an attack right away, as the Prussians held regular exercises with their artillery. In: NL-ZuRAZ, Van Löben Sels, 0302, inv.nr.262

It is in this context striking that captain Kennedy (18th hussars, brigade Vivian) writes on the 16th of June: "... but the noise of the cannon which we could hear distinctly yesterday evening it being only 11 or 12 leagues off." At that time, Kennedy was in the area between Ninove and Grammont, while the gunfire was that of Gilly / Frasnes, which is indeed more than 50 kilometres away. If this correct, the wind would have blown that day from south-east to north-west. Cf. his letter to his stepfather. In: Hunt, E. Charging against Napoleon p.243

² The 6th regiment of hussars (Van Merlen) had a post at Bonne Espérance which is (in a straight line) about 11 kilometres northwest of Thuin; it may have been this post which was informed of the offensive on Lobbes and Thuin and in its turn informed Van Merlen at St.Symphorien. Cf. Captain Roijen (6th hussars). In: NL-ZuRAZ, Van Löben Sels, 0302, inv.nr.263

³ Cf. Constant's letter to Collaert of that morning.

⁴ Cf. Robinson, M. - The battle of Quatre Bras p.29

⁵ Memorandum. In: SD, p.524

⁶ In: NL-ZuRAZ, Van Löben Sels, 0302, inv.nr.265

⁷ Cf. Koolemans Beijnen, G. - De order etc. p.575

⁸ FitzRoy Somerset claims in his version of the events that the prince got in Brussels late in the evening as to attend the ball of Richmond (and that his message of the afternoon was sent from Braine le Comte) while at the same time he received Berkeley's letter around 5 p.m. which he showed to Wellington. Right then, he learned that the prince actually was in Brussels, either by his presence with the duke, or to have learned about it through him. In: NAM, 6507-1

⁹ Adjutant general Van Der Wijk claims that major Ampt, adjutant of the prince, told him in the evening that the prince would return in Braine le Comte in the very early morning of the 16th of June and that he would then leave for Nivelles and Quatre Bras. Yet, this could not be known at that hour, though it may have been Constant's thoughts Ampt told him. Cf. his report dated 27th of June 1815. In: NA, nr.2.13.13.01 nr.4

¹⁰ Koolemans Beijnen also believes that Chassé moved his division in this position on his own initiative as to have it more concentrated. In: De order etc. p.40

¹¹ Cf. Constant's order to De Perponcher, dated 9th of June. In: NA, 2.13.52. nr.2 nr.1096

¹² Cf. Lenient, E. - La solution etc. p.206

¹³ De Perponcher in his report dated 11th of July 1815. In: Bas, F.de - La campagne de 1815 etc. Vol.III p.280

¹⁴ De Perponcher in his report dated 11th of July 1815. In: Bas, F.de La campagne de 1815 etc. Vol.III p.280 He got this information from Prussian fugitives and French deserters. Cf. Colonel Van Zuylen van Nijvelt. In: Historisch verhaal etc. In: NA, nr.2.13.14.01 nr.8

¹⁵ Cf. Colonel Van Zuylen van Nijvelt. In: Historisch verhaal etc. In: NA, nr.2.13.14.01 nr.8

¹⁶ Cf. Colonel Van Zuylen van Nijvelt. In: Historisch verhaal etc. In: NA, nr.2.13.14.01 nr.8