

The corps of d'Erlon.

Introduction.

On the 16th of June, the corps moved between the battlefields of Ligny and Quatre Bras without taking actually a part in either of them. The central question is: by whose authority was the 1st corps wheeled towards the right wing in the way it did and later back again to the left wing ?

No other subject in the campaign of 1815 is so much debated and discussed about, at least in French historiography, as the movements of the corps of d'Erlon on the 16th of June. ¹

Bernard pessimistically wrote in 1954 about the issue: "Jamais on ne percera la mystérieuse "affaire d'Erlon"; tous ceux qui ont donné un avis ex-cathedra à ce sujet se sont basés sur des hypothèses invérifiable ou sur les déclarations (certaines faites trente ans plus tard) de personnages qui étaient directement intéressés à ce que l'une ou l'autre version devienne fait établi pour la postérité." ²

The very importance of the issue around the 1st corps has both wittingly and unwittingly coloured its eye-witness accounts. In this situation, what is even worse is that actual correct representations are often blurred by inconsistencies, projections, simple inaccuracies or pure fantasies. As if this is not enough, based upon these accounts, historiography of the issue has also contributed one's mite in the often uncritical acceptance of sources and a lack of simple common sense in the approach of the subject.

This has led to numerous assumptions which lack solid proof, the unconditional acceptance of certain leading eye-witness accounts (the one of d'Erlon in particular), imaginative theories to prove things which are simply impossible, incorrect chronologies, a lack of use of contemporary documents, the twisting of facts into the shackle of a theory, attempts to exculpate oneself and the neglect of the preambles of the events. ³

The very bone of the most probable scenario of the subject should therefore for the greater part be sought in the (few) original, authentic documents available, in the hierarchical military lines within the *armée du Nord*, as well as in the grand strategic situation of the moment.

Documents written during the campaign itself.

First of all, in the sequence of the orders as registered in the official correspondence of general French headquarters and as they were issued by Soult on the 16th of June, no direct order to d'Erlon is mentioned. ⁴ Napoleons orders of 2 p.m. and 3.15 p.m. to Ney, as well as a copy of this last one, were registered into the register of staff. If Napoleon would have sent a direct order to d'Erlon at 3.30 at the latest, how could he then ask d'Erlon to come over at the same time as asking Ney to force Wellington out of Quatre Bras and encircle the Prussians by turning to the right ? This would mean Napoleon would order to Ney a specific action, while he distracted him a full army-corps at the same time.

At 3.30 p.m. an order was sent to Lobau to advance to Fleurus. It would be very strange indeed that of three orders of 3.15 / 3.30 p.m. the most significant would have been omitted in the register, apart from the highly contradictory content.

Additionally, a letter of the 17th of June written by Soult states: "L'empereur a vu avec peine qu'hier vous n'avez pas réussi: les divisions ont agi isolément; ainsi, vous avez éprouvé des

pertes. Si les corps des comtes d'Erlon et Reille avaient été ensemble, il ne réchappait pas un Anglais du corps qui est venu vous attaquer. Si le comte d'Erlon avait exécuté le mouvement sur Saint Amand que l'empereur a ordonné, l'armée Prussienne aurait été totalement détruite, et nous aurions fait peut-être 30.000 prisonniers. Les corps des généraux Gérard, Vandamme et la garde impériale ont toujours été réunis; l'on s'expose à des revers lorsque des détachements sont compromis." ⁵ Here, Soult doesn't mention a direct order to d'Erlon, but discusses two hypotheses which were automatically linked to each other:

1. If Ney would have kept both his corps together he would have destroyed Wellington.
 2. If then d'Erlon would have carried out the movement over the Namur-road on Saint Amand, which was ordered by Napoleon, the Prussian army would have been destroyed.
- Ney didn't have to detach d'Erlon as long as he hadn't destroyed Wellington, but for not having done so by not concentrating his forces enough, it is that Soult criticizes Ney. The passage which follows again stresses the importance of the concentration of the troops. ⁶ The manoeuvre Soult refers to is the one which was referred to in the orders of 2 p.m. and 3.15 p.m.

Additionally, by using the phrase "... l'on s'expose à des revers lorsque des détachements sont compromis ", Soult distances from the fact as if the general headquarters would have given the order to d'Erlon and brings it back to Ney, who he thinks, would have detached the 1st corps from his wing (which, of course, he didn't) as being the one in the rear and thus move easily available for the manoeuvre as the 2nd corps could be.

Napoleon and Soult both knew on the 17th of June that d'Erlon hadn't done anything on the 16th as they had seen it near Villers Perwin and because of the information they had got from Baudus and Flahaut. In his letter of the 17th of June to Davout, Soult writes: "Le 6e et le 1er corps n'ont pas donné, le comte d'Erlon a eu de fausses directions, car s'il eut exécuté l'ordre de mouvement que l'empereur avait prescrit, l'armée prussienne était entièrement perdue." ⁷

The explanation given above can also be applied to this text; in addition, Soult again writes about a "prescribed" movement, a word which indicates that there was no direct order given from Napoleon to d'Erlon. ⁸ Last, and certainly not least: it is Soult himself who characterizes the movements of d'Erlon as *incorrect*. This simply implies that the way d'Erlon moved was *not* in accordance to Napoleon's wishes, and therefore he could never have ordered it this way. The sole and obvious reason for writing this was that it had to come from the Namur road towards rear of the Prussian army, and it would have been the most logical to suppose that it would be the 1st corps being in rear of the 2nd and more easily available to carry out this manoeuvre. Assessing the documents written during the campaign itself it becomes unambiguously clear that Napoleon did *not* send any orders to d'Erlon directly.

Eye-witness accounts.

Napoleon and his staff.

Crucial in the discussion is the fact that in his memoirs Napoleon makes not the slightest allusion whatsoever to an order given by him to d'Erlon, either in writing or orally. He simply states the marches of the corps as facts, and in such a way as if they were the initiative of

d'Erlon himself.⁹

In another source he is more explicit in putting the responsibility at d'Erlon's shoulders. In fact he would have said on the 8th of May 1816: "Le mouvement de Drouet d'Erlon m'a fait bien du tort; on croyait autour de moi que c'était l'ennemi. D'Erlon est un bon chef d'état major, a de l'ordre, mais voilà tout. Il aurait dû, le 15, m'envoyer dire qu'il était à Marchiennes."¹⁰

It is a typical way of reasoning in hindsight: apart from the fact that Napoleon makes clear it wasn't him who ordered d'Erlon to come to Ligny, he suggests an easy point of having d'Erlon available at Marchienne-au-Pont (where he wasn't that afternoon) as some kind of general reserve for use at Ligny.

It is also Gourgaud who doesn't make any reference to an order from Napoleon to d'Erlon. In fact he writes after Napoleon learned that it was d'Erlon who showed up on the French rear left flank at Ligny: "Napoleon ne put se rendre raison d'un tel mouvement." And a bit further: "Les mouvements du 1er corps sont difficiles à expliquer: il était à tort resté, la nuit du 15 au 16, échelonné entre Marchiennes et Julmet [sic], et il s'était ensuite dirigé, de la route de Charleroi à Bruxelles, sur Fleurus. Le maréchal Ney avait-il mal compris l'ordre de faire, une fois maître des Quatre Bras, une diversion sur les derrières de l'armée Prussienne ? Ou bien, le comte d'Erlong [sic], arrivé entre Gosselies et Frasnès, entendant une forte canonnade sur la droite, et n'entendant rien dans la direction des Quatre Bras, a-t-il alors jugé devoir se diriger sur la canonnade qu'il eût laissé derrière lui en continuant à suivre la grand-route ?"¹¹

There is considerable agreement on the fact that if Napoleon would have disposed of the 1st corps at Ligny, he would have gained a decisive victory. Ney in his turn is heavily accused by the admirers of Napoleon for having called the corps back to Quatre Bras.

How is it possible that Napoleon makes no allusion to this order whatsoever, while this order could have made up for the failures on the 16th of June ? By proving he had given it, he could have shown for prosperity how he had planned everything in advance.

Why does Napoleon refuse to admit that he had called for the 1st corps ? In remaining silent about the order, he writes with contempt about the corps and describes its appearance on the battlefield of Ligny as almost something futile. He didn't understand a thing about the march of the corps in writing " La manoeuvre de cette colonne parut inexplicable ".¹² He sent one of his aide de camps there - Dejean or somebody else – to determine its strength and intentions.

And that for a corps he would have called for himself ! The division of Girard and the corps of Vandamme retook their positions. The column just slipped away again and vanished without the emperor interfering whatsoever, while at 6.30 p.m. Napoleon could easily have moved the 1st corps to the Prussian right flank by manoeuvring it on Wagnelée and Brye.

Though it is known that Napoleon often pleads for himself despite of the truth, it is unacceptable that he has thought and acted against his own interest, in pleading guilty for prosperity. There is no need here to be more pro-Napoleon as he was himself.¹³

The account of general Petiet, staff officer of Soult, is of a late date and not very explicit. He writes: " L'empereur [...] envoye en toute hâte chercher le 1er corps, et le maréchal Ney ne l'apprend que lorsqu'il est en marche." ¹⁴

Colonel Baudus was a member of the staff of Soult and he claims to have been a messenger of an order to Ney. He writes in his "Études sur Napoleon": " Personne ne connaît mieux que moi les circonstances qui firent que le 1er corps d'armée ne fut utile dans la journée du 16, ni au

maréchal Ney, ni à l'empereur." Further, he writes: " Au moment où l'affaire était fortement engagée sur toute la ligne, Napoléon m'appela et me dit: " J'ai envoyé l'ordre au comte d'Erlon de se diriger avec tout son corps d'armée en arrière de la droite de l'armée Prussienne. Vous allez porter au maréchal Ney le duplicata de cet ordre, qui a du lui être communiqué. Vous lui direz que, quelle que soit la situation où il se trouve, il faut absolument que cette disposition soit exécutée; que je n'attache pas une grande importance à ce qui se passera aujourd'hui de son côté; que l'affaire est toute où je suis, parce que je veux en finir avec l'armée Prussienne. Quant à lui, il doit, s'il ne peut faire mieux, se borner à contenir l'armée Anglaise " Lorsque l'empereur eut fini de me donner ses instructions, le major général me recommanda, dans les termes les plus énergiques, d'insister avec force près du duc d'Elchingen pour que de sa part, rien ne vint entraver l'exécution du mouvement prescrit au comte d'Erlon." After almost being carried away by the cuirassiers which got back from their charge at Quatre Bras and after having joined Ney, Baudus writes: " Je lui fis part des ordres de l'empereur; mais il était dans un tel état d'exaspération qu'il me parut d'abord fort peu à les exécuter. Au fait, il avait de bonnes raisons pour être vivement irrité; car, dans son attaque sur les Quatre Bras, s'il avait point hésité à engager les trois divisions du deuxième corps, commandé par le général Reille, c'est qu'il comptait sur la coopération du premier corps, aux ordres du comte d'Erlon, qui avait dû, d'après les instructions du maréchal, se placer en seconde ligne à Frasne. Mais lorsqu'il avait voulu le faire avancer, on n'avait plus trouvé personne, parce que le comte d'Erlon, ayant reçu directement l'ordre de l'empereur, qui lui prescrivait de se porter sur les derrières de l'armée Prussienne, s'était mis en marche sur-le-champ pour s'y conformer, ce dont le maréchal n'avait point été prévenu; au moins m'assura-t-il formellement n'avoir reçu d'autre avis officiel de cette disposition que celui dont je venais de lui faire part. La parole de l'illustre maréchal m'aurait assurément convaincu de l'exactitude de ce fait, quand bien même la colère qu'il éprouvait de se voir compromis par cette fausse manoeuvre ne m'en eût pas fourni une preuve irrécusable. Je dois faire observer d'un autre côté que le comte d'Erlon, auquel je parlais il y a quelques années de cet incident, m'a affirmé avoir fait prévenir son général en chef de la nouvelle direction donnée par l'empereur à ses troupes. L'officier chargé de cette mission aura probablement été blessé ou tué avant d'arriver à sa destination. Le maréchal, au désespoir de n'avoir plus aucun renfort à porter au secours des divisions qu'il n'avait engagées que parce qu'il croyait avoir vingt mille hommes à sa disposition pour les soutenir, venait, lorsque j'arrivai près de lui, de faire sommer impérativement le comte d'Erlon de revenir à la position qu'il lui avait assignée.[..]"¹⁵ Baudus' "Quelques notes sur la campagne de 1815" are highly similar to his "Études" yet in these he states that he was initially sent out accompanied by colonel Forbin Janson to convey the same order. As Forbin Janson had a better horse, he rode out ahead of Baudus, but yet reached Ney some 90 minutes later as Baudus did. In this version, Baudus clearly puts himself away from Forbin Janson, as clearly the inferior officer compared to himself and doesn't understand why Napoleon Forbin Janson to do this in the first place.¹⁶ Colonel Forbin Janson himself wrote about his experiences during the campaign of 1815 in December 1817. In reading this account, it becomes clear that Forbin Janson was sent to Ney the moment the French superiority at Ligny became apparent, to use Forbin Janson's words, with "l'ordre d'enlever les positions défendues par les anglais, de s'emparer des Quatre Bras et de s'y établir." Additionally, Napoleon said: " Vous lui direz que tout va bien ici, allez, ne soyes qu'une demi heure, dites lui que le sort de la France est entre ses mains."

Forbin Janson then rode over the Brussels road in order to reach Ney, but here he got carried along in a retreat of a regiment of cuirassiers. This was at about 2.25 kilometres from the front. Finally, Forbin Janson found Ney to the left of the road. Ney, in the middle of heavy fire, would have said to Forbin Janson having delivered the order: "Et que puis-je ? Ces gens ... se battent comme des diables. Vous avez dû rencontrer des cuirassiers qui reviennent de charger. Je ne puis pas avoir mon infanterie. J'ai envoyé au général d'Erlon l'ordre d'avancer, il n'arrive pas. Je viens d'y renvoyer. Vous le voyez je n'ai pas un seul aide de camp auprès de moi " Then, Forbin Janson decided to stay with Ney.

After a period of about two and half hours, Ney gave Forbin Janson the order to bring a prisoner, a British staff-officer, to Napoleon. Initially, Forbin Janson tried to reach Fleurus by the Bois Delhütte but this proved to be impossible. Later he reached Fleurus over the Brussels road.

Forbin Janson, now back at Fleurus, was sent back again to Ney to repeat the order he already had given before. It was then 6 p.m. The moment Forbin Janson delivered the order to Ney, he would have raged in anger and would have asked Forbin Janson to bring the corps back to Frasnes, by saying: " Voyez vous ces boulets, je voudrais qu'ils m'entrassent dans le ventre." About half an hour later Ney said to Forbin Janson: " C'est celle de d'Erlon, depuis ce matin, je lui envoyé l'ordre d'avancer, et il ne m'arrive pas, il a été trouver l'empereur, et on ne sait où le joindre, son inaction nous perd, rendez moi un service, retournez sur vos pas, ordonnez de ma part au général commandant la première division d'infanterie que vous rencontrez de venir me joindre, vous en imposerez plus que mes aide de camps. Vous lui direz que vous venez de la part de l'empereur, répétez lui tout ce qu'il vous a chargé de me dire ajoutez y tout ce que vous croirez capable de le déterminer, amenez moi une division d'infanterie, amenez la moi, nous chargerons avec elle." Forbin Janson now rode to the foremost division and could convince the commander to join him. By then, it was 8 p.m.¹⁷

Both Baudus' and Forbin Janson's versions of the events are highly confusing. First of all, Baudus has written two versions of which it is not clear when they were written and how they relate to each other. This is further complicated by the fact that Forbin Janson does not speak of Baudus altogether, if there would have been a relation at all, as suggested by Baudus.

Other than that, the way both men describe their missions are not clear. Baudus' claim as if Ney had not yet heard of d'Erlon's manoeuvre by the time he reached him is simply incorrect. For this reason the words which he cites from Napoleon are doubtful; in addition, it wasn't Napoleons habit to explain extensively to a messenger what he was ought to convey.¹⁸ And, more importantly, as has been shown here, Napoleon did *not* order d'Erlon directly to come to his aid. And if Napoleon would really have realised the situation the way Baudus describes it, he certainly would have taken other measures the moment the 1st corps appeared at the horizon near Villers Peruin.

Forbin Janson describes two, apparently oral, missions from Napoleon to Ney to take Quatre Bras at all costst, but he doesn't bind it to an encirclement of the Prussian army through Marbais, even though he uses the melodramatic words from the 3.15 p.m. order "Le sort de la France est dans vos mains."

Chronology in both versions is also simply impossible. If Baudus would have met the cuirassiers of Guiton streaming back from Quatre Bras, this would have been after 7 p.m. and by that time the delivery of the order he would have carried would have been of no use. Apart from that, Baudus left the imperial headquarters *before* the moment Napoleon saw the 1st corps

near Viller Peruin, otherwise he probably would have given Baudus a different mission as he had now. With Forbin Janson, chronology is simply absurd: he claims having covered the distance Fleurus – Frasnes twice that day (including some senseless mission to bring a British prisoner to imperial headquarters), which in reality would have taken him about eight hours. And this does not include the time he would have spent with Ney at Balcan.

Despite all their deficiencies it cannot be fully ruled out that both men somehow were involved in missions from imperial headquarters to Ney on the 16th of June. Though it is mere speculating, it might be that Baudus carried the copy of the 3.15 p.m. order to Ney (dated 3.30 p.m.), while Forbin Janson might have been involved in some other mission which brought him to Ney later in the evening.¹⁹

Marshal Ney and his staff.

In his report written on the evening of the 16th of June for Soult, Ney blames d'Erlon for the marches of his corps; he doesn't give the impression that it would have been called for by Napoleon. He writes: " ...un malentendu de la part du Comte d'Erlon m'a privé de l'espérance d'une belle victoire, car au moment les 5^e et 9^e division du général Reille avaient tout culbuté, le 1er corps a marché sur Saint Amand pour appuyer la gauche de S.M. " It should be borne in mind that by the time he wrote this, Ney had not yet received d'Erlon's report.

In his letter to the duke of Otrante of 26th of June 1815, Ney writes:

" Le 16 Juin je recus l'ordre d'attaquer les anglais dans leur position des Quatre Bras. [...] La bataille devenait générale et la victoire n'était pas douteuse, lorsque, au moment où j'allais faire avancer le premier corps d'infanterie, qui jusque-là, avait été laissé par moi en réserve à Frasnes, j'appris que l'empereur en avait disposé, sans m'en prévenir, ainsi que de la division Girard du deuxième corps, pour les diriger sur St.Amand et appuyer son aile gauche qui était fortement engagée contre les prussiens. Le coup que me porta cette nouvelle fut terrible; n'ayant plus sous mes ordres que trois divisions au lieu de huit sur lesquelles je comptais, je fus obligé de laisser échapper la victoire. Vers neuf heures du soir le 1er corps me fut renvoyé par l'empereur auquel il n'avait été d'aucune utilité." ²⁰

The difference between the report and the account contained in the letter to Fouché can be accounted for by the fact that Ney wanted to oppose to Napoleon in order to save his life. For this reason, Ney's report of the evening of the 16th of June is more reliable, not having been influenced by the outcome of the campaign yet.

Moreover, Napoleon did not claim the 1st corps for the battle of Ligny, and if he would have done so, he would have informed Ney about it. Ney's statement that Napoleon sent d'Erlon back to him is therefore impossible to maintain, let alone the fact that the emperor would have seen no use in its presence upon his extreme left flank, while having summoned it himself.

Two members of Ney's staff have briefly written on the subject: colonel Heymès and chef de bataillon Levavasseur. After having described the action of Quatre Bras in some detail, Heymès writes: "C'est à cet instant que le colonel Laurent envoyé du grand quartier impérial, vint informer le maréchal que le 1er corps par un ordre de l'empereur, qu'il avait transmis au général d'Erlon, avait traversé la route de Bruxelles au lieu de la suivre et se portait dans la direction de St.Amand. Le général Delcambre, chef d'état major de ce corps arriva bientôt après pour annoncer le mouvement qui s'exécutait. [...] L'empereur ayant trouvé partout une grande

résistance avait attiré à lui, comme on l'a vu, le 1er corps dans la direction de Saint-Amand. L'apparition de ce corps sur les derrières des Français engagés à Ligny fit craindre un moment qu'il ne fût ennemi. L'erreur fut bientôt reconnue: mais on perdit un temps précieux, et les troupes envoyés à sa rencontre furent rappelées." ²¹

Heymès account contains a serious contradiction: if Napoleon would have called for d'Erlon to move towards Saint-Amand, why was it considered to be an incorrect movement after all ? This makes Heymès account unreliable.

Levasseur, in his turn, would have learned on the morning of the 17th of June that "pendant la bataille qu'il [Ney] livra la veille, un des officiers de l'empereur s'était porté en toute hâte vers le corps de Drouet d'Erlon, fort de 20.000 hommes; que celui-ci avait reçu et exécuté l'ordre de marcher vers Fleurus, sans que le maréchal en fut instruit." ²²

The 1st corps. ²³

In view of the importance of the testimony of d'Erlon himself, what follows here is the text of his version of the events as written by him in 1829: " Vers onze heures ou midi, M.le maréchal Ney m'envoya l'ordre de faire prendre les armes à mon corps d'armée et de le diriger sur Frasnes et les Quatre Bras, où je recevrais des ordres ultérieurs. Mon armée se mit donc immédiatement en marche.

Après avoir donné l'ordre au général qui commandait la tête de colonne de faire diligence, je pris l'avance pour voir ce qui se passait aux Quatre Bras, où le corps d'armée du général Reille me semblait engagé. Je m'arrêtai au delà de Frasnes avec des généraux de la garde, et j'y fus joint par le général Labédoyère, qui me fit voir une note au crayon qu'il portait au maréchal Ney, et qui enjoignait à ce maréchal de diriger mon corps d'armée sur Ligny. Le général Labédoyère me prévint qu'il avait déjà donné l'ordre pour ce mouvement en faisant changer de direction à ma colonne, et m'indiqua où je pourrais la rejoindre. Je pris aussitôt cette route et j'envoyai au maréchal mon chef d'état major, le général Delcambre, pour le prévenir de ma nouvelle destination[..]" ²⁴

In another account d'Erlon writes: " Le 1er [corps] marchait en deuxième ligne et était destiné (d'après ce qu'on a pu savoir depuis) à agir selon les circonstances, soit sur les Quatre Bras soit sur l'aile droite de l'armée prussienne.

L'empereur, engagé fortement à Ligny, envoya un officier d'ordonnance au maréchal Ney, pour lui dire de diriger le premier corps sur Ligny, afin de tourner l'aile droite de l'armée prussienne. Cet officier rencontra la tête de la colonne du premier corps qui arrivait à Frane [sic], et, avant d'avoir transmis les ordres de l'Empereur au maréchal Ney fit prendre à cette colonne la direction de Ligny.

Vers les quatre heures, m'étant porté en avant, sans aucune connaissance de la nouvelle direction que venait de recevoir (²⁵) mon corps d'armée, et l'ayant ensuite appris indirectement, tout aussitôt je m'empressai d'aller le rejoindre et j'envoyai mon chef d'état major au maréchal Ney pour lui annoncer mon mouvement. [..]" ²⁶

As the division of Durutte was d'Erlon's vanguard, the account of its commander is of a vital importance as well. Durutte says: "[...] Tandis qu'on exécutait ce mouvement, on reçut l'ordre de marcher vers les Quatre-Bras: la droite se battait fortement vers Fleurus. L'empereur fit donner l'ordre au comte d'Erlon d'attaquer la gauche [sic] des Prussiens et de tâcher de s'emparer

de Bry [sic]. Le 1er corps passa près de Villers Peruin pour exécuter ce mouvement.[...] " ²⁷

First of all, this account makes clear that there was no meeting between Durutte, as commander of the leading division, and an imperial messenger as mentioned by d'Erlon, and the resulting turn of the division, without d'Erlon's presence.

Durutte is pretty straightforward on what he thinks d'Erlon was asked to do: to attack the Prussian army at its right flank and to take position at Brye. ²⁸ Yet, this is not what Napoleon had ever in mind, and therefore it is highly unlogical to suppose that Durutte ever saw the original order which d'Erlon has seen. What Durutte states is most probably what d'Erlon told him to do.

One of Durutte's brigade-commanders, general Brue, writes in his letter to captain Chapuis (85th regiment line infantry, division Durutte) about the situation: " C'est sur le village de Wagenlé [sic] que nous reçûmes l'ordre de nous porter. Ce premier ordre fut transmis au 1er corps d'armée au moment où il débouchait de Marchiennes-au-Pont, par le colonel d'artillerie Laurent, attaché à l'état-major de l'Empereur ou à celui du major général." ²⁹

And captain Chapuis himself writes: " Le 85^e, marchant à la tête de sa division, laquelle suivait le mouvement des autres divisions du premier corps, se trouva, le matin du 16 Juin, former tête de colonne dans le changement de direction à droite, qui, sur l'ordre de l'Empereur, apporté par le colonel Laurent, attaché au quartier général de l'armée, fut fait lorsque nous marchions vers les Quatre Bras." ³⁰

Basically, both these men state the same as Durutte does, except for the fact that they add the identity of the messenger of the order in question: colonel Laurent of the general staff.

General De Salle, as commander of the artillery of the 1st corps, might have been near d'Erlon when he was involved in the situation where his corps turned. He writes: " Pendant que nous serrions lentement sur le 2e corps, arriva par un sous-officier de la garde une lettre de l'empereur ainsi conçue: " Monsieur le comte d'Erlon, l'ennemi tombe tête baissée dans le piège que je lui ai tendu. Portez-vous sur-le-champ avec toutes vos quatre divisions d'infanterie, votre division de cavalerie, toute votre artillerie, et les deux divisions de grosse cavalerie que je mets à votre disposition, portez-vous, dis-je, avec toutes ces forces à la hauteur de Ligny et fondez sur Saint Amand (ou vice-versa, c'est ce que je ne sais pas bien). Monsieur le comte d'Erlon, vous allez sauver la France et vous couvrir de gloire. Napoleon." De Salle adds in a footnote: " N'ayant pas la carte de Belgique sous les yeux, il est possible que je transpose les noms des villages, je crois même que c'est Saint-Amand pour fondre sur Ligny. A cela près, je suis certain de ne pas me tromper tant cette lettre me frappa par la justesse de la combinaison tactique. " ³¹

De Salle claims Napoleon would have set up a trap. However, at least until the beginning of the afternoon Napoleon kept to his idea of his march to Brussels. Up to 2 p.m. Napoleon convinced himself of the fact that the Prussians assembled their forces in front of him, not because he had forced them to do so, but because Blücher had already planned to oppose Napoleon there.

Having no map of the country available and mixing up names of places does not do De Salle's account any good as far as its reliability is concerned. Additionally, passages like "vous allez sauver la France et vous couvrir de gloire" are very similar to the order of 3.15 pm. ³² On the contrary, what happened was that when the 1st corps appeared on the extreme French left flank it was kept for an enemy column by Vandamme and Napoleon had it - the "sauveur de France " - investigated. When it became clear that it was d'Erlon, Napoleon continued the battle as if d'Erlon had never been there, even if the column would have taken the wrong direction, with

the intelligence of Napoleon. Napoleon also never allotted the corps of Kellermann to d'Erlon. De Salle's account is also conflicting with that of d'Erlon himself as d'Erlon mentions colonel de la Bedoyère as messenger of the order, while De Salle says it was an officer of the Imperial guard.

Apart from that fact that it is highly improbable that De Salle would have had the opportunity to read the order itself at all, the text of the order itself is too much of a mix of his own ideas and statements he has seen somewhere else. This makes De Salle not a reliable eye-witness, even in case he may have been there when the actual order was delivered to d'Erlon.

The 2nd corps.

General Reille, in his account, supports the idea that no direct order had been given by Napoleon to d'Erlon, or to Ney to detach the 1st corps. It reads: "On a vu que Napoleon avait avec lui la division Girard: il paraît que le comte d'Erlon, commandant le 1er corps d'armée recut entre Gosselies et Frasnes communication d'une dépêche au maréchal Ney, par laquelle l'empereur demandait la marche d'un corps de troupes sur la droite de l'armée Prussienne, et qu'en conséquence, le comte d'Erlon crut devoir prendre cette direction, mais que le maréchal, qui était fortement engagé, rappela à lui ce général. Il n'arriva en avant de Frasnes qu'à 9 heures du soir pour relever aux avant-postes les troupes du 2e corps qui passèrent en seconde ligne." ³³ Reille refers to one of the orders issued by the French headquarters, either at 2 p.m. or 3.15 p.m. The words " ..crut devoir prendre.. " indicate the role assigned by Reille to general d'Erlon himself.

One of the divisional commanders of the 2nd corps, general Foy, notes in his journal of the 18th of June: "L'empereur a fait des reproches au comte d'Erlon de ce que son corps ne s'est pas porté entier sur Marbais dans la journée du 16. S.M. a dit qu'elle aurait pris la moitié de l'armée Prussienne, si le mouvement de ce corps avait eu lieu conformément aux ordres quelle a donnés." ³⁴ Apart from the fact that Foy could never have seen the order involved, here he refers to the manoeuvre which was meant to be carried out, in conformity to the orders of 2 p.m. and 3.15 p.m. through Marbais and his version doesn't lead to a direct order of Napoleon to d'Erlon. The same applies to the account of colonel Lemonnier (member of the staff of the division Foy). He states: "L'empereur ayant donné une destination particulière au corps d'Erlon, laissait le maréchal Ney, le 15, avec le deuxième, Reille; c'était assez pour attaquer le 15, sans doute, mais non le 16. [...] Ce fut cette offensive [de Wellington] qui décida le maréchal Ney, n'ayant que son deuxième corps, à rappeler le premier, d'Erlon, dirigé par ordre de l'empereur sur Brye, droite des Prussiens, ce rappel tardif fut inutile, car le temps d'aller et de venir et de venir [sic], tout était décidé aux Quatre Bras: seulement, il priva l'empereur de l'action de ce premier corps, dont une seule brigade arriva sur Brye, où déjà, impatienté de ne pas voir déboucher, il avait, à son défaut, envoyé le général Girard." ³⁵

The decision to move the 1st corps towards the battlefield of Ligny.

As has been stated before in the beginning of this chapter, the capital question is: by whose authority was the 1st corps wheeled towards the right wing and later back again to the left wing. The answer to the first part of the question is a matter of rational deduction. First of all, it is

obvious that Ney wasn't the person to send the 1st corps towards the battlefield of Ligny as he was supposed to keep it in close vicinity to his other infantry corps, so as to be able to meet any possible action. Secondly, Ney was ordered – with all his forces - to take Quatre Bras first and then to manoeuvre along the Namur-road to fall upon the Prussian rear.

As has been shown above, Napoleon could never have been the one to have ordered d'Erlon himself to move the way he did. Additionally, if Napoleon would have ever given such an order to d'Erlon at all, this general would never have left his position on the French left wing at Ligny to move towards Frasnes. Napoleon's orders and instructions would overrule all others and this is something of decisive importance which should be kept in mind in this particular subject. If Napoleon would actually have ordered d'Erlon directly to move towards him, for d'Erlon to move towards Frasnes after all would have been in blunt contradiction to his imperial orders. Also, in a similar case, it would then have been both d'Erlon and Soult who would have informed Ney about the new situation and there would have been no reason for any confusion.

36

It is d'Erlon himself who claims as if it had been an imperial messenger who had, with the aid of some imperial order he carried – the famous "*note au crayon*" – wheeled his advance guard towards the battlefield of Ligny without consulting d'Erlon first.

If this would have been the case, the messenger – according to d'Erlon it was colonel De la Bedoyère [³⁷] – would have been in touch with the commander of the vanguard, Durutte. Yet, Durutte himself doesn't mention such an encounter.

Formally, Durutte could never wheel his division to the right and certainly not as a precedent for the whole corps without d'Erlon's consent. When it comes down to the responsibility of the decision, Durutte could in his account of the events easily have referred to the powers of the imperial messenger if he had seen him, but he doesn't. He simply refers to a direct order of Napoleon to his superior, but this order has never existed.

From this point of view, the sole candidate for the responsibility to move the corps to the right was d'Erlon himself. D'Erlon clearly lays the responsibility at Durutte's and De la Bedoyère's door, but – again – in the lines of military structure of command these men could never decide without his permission.

D'Erlon may have been ahead of his corps by the time he decided to move his corps towards Napoleon, but this doesn't change the fact that he was the one who did so. Yet, upon what order did he do so ? He certainly did not do so after the receipt of some undefined pencilled note, about which so much debate has been going for so long now.

In all probability, reality has been less prosaic. First of all, it had just been a few hours before that d'Erlon had been in touch with central headquarters (again) about his situation. This ambivalent situation in the functional lines of command between central headquarters and the left wing has been highlighted before.

Secondly, it should be made very clear that when d'Erlon moved his column on the Brussels road, his target was Frasnes, no more. Those were the orders he had. Obviously, from 2 / 2.30 p.m. onwards - from the distant gunfire - d'Erlon was well aware of battles raging at his right and in his front, but further details were unavailable. A manoeuvre as was expected from Ney and as expressed for the first time in the order of 2 p.m. could of course impossibly have come to the knowledge of d'Erlon by then.

In the chronology of the march of the 1st corps along the Brussels road towards Frasnes and of

the delivery of the order of central headquarters issued at 3.15 p.m. there is a parallel which makes it highly probable that its messenger met d'Erlon at some location between the point where the Roman road crosses the Brussel road and the "cabaret l'Empereur". By then it was somewhere between 4.30 and 5 p.m.

In their meeting, d'Erlon was shown the order for Ney and here d'Erlon read about the very urgent need for Ney *"de manoeuvrer sur-le-champ de manière à envelopper la droite de l'ennemi et à tomber à bras raccourcis sur ses derrières. Cette armée est perdue si vous agissez vigoureusement. Le sort de la France est dans vos mains. Ainsi n'hésitez pas un instant à faire le mouvement que l'empereur vous ordonne, et dirigez-vous sur les hauteurs de Bry et de Saint Amand pour concourir à une victoire peut-être décisive."*

It might very well be possible that the bearer of the order gave d'Erlon some more clarification about the situation at Ligny and the urgency of what was expected of Ney. Though d'Erlon must have realized that Ney, from his mere position, was expected to fall upon Blücher's rear from along the Namur road, he must have seen an opportunity for himself to use a short-cut along the village of Villers-Perwin and to encircle the Prussian right flank from there.³⁸

And this is what he decided to do. At that moment, d'Erlon for himself felt he had very good reasons to step beyond the command structure and to move this way. It was a moment in which his situation as sketched above and the very urgency of the order fused for d'Erlon into an extremely favourable opportunity to assist Napoleon in what he was planning to accomplish.³⁹

After that, he sent his chief of staff, baron Delcambre, to Ney to inform him about his decision.⁴⁰ In his turn, the imperial messenger also rode to Ney to complete his mission.⁴¹

In short: the version of the events as described by d'Erlon in later years is incorrect and the document referred by him as the "note au crayon" was either (a copy of) the order of 3.15 p.m. or some fabrication of d'Erlon for his later version of the events in order to mask his own responsibility in the issue.⁴²

The decision to move the 1st corps towards the battlefield of Quatre Bras.

Ney wrote about the march of the 1st corps towards Frasnes on the evening of the 16th of June: "[...] Le 1er corps a marché sur St.Amand pour appuyer la gauche de S.M., et ce qu'il y a de fatal, c'est que ce corps ayant rétrogradé ensuite pour me rejoindre, n'a pu ainsi être utile à personne.[...]"⁴³

In his letter to Fouché, however, Ney suggests as if Napoleon would have sent back the corps, as he writes: "[...] Vers 9 heures du soir, le 1er corps me fut renvoyé par l'Empereur, auquel il n'avait été d'aucune utilité.[...]"⁴⁴

In his letter of 1829 to the son of marshal Ney, d'Erlon wrote about the subject: "[...] M. le maréchal Ney me renvoya mon chef d'état major (le général Delcambre), en me prescrivant impérativement de revenir sur les Quatre Bras, où il s'était fortement engagé, comptant sur la coopération de mon corps d'armée. Je devais donc supposer qu'il y avait d'urgence, puisque le maréchal prenait sur lui de me rappeler, quoiqu'il eut reçu la note dont j'ai parlé plus haut. J'ordonnai, en conséquence, à la colonne de faire contre-marche; mais, malgré toute la diligence qu'on a pu mettre dans ce mouvement, ma colonne n'a pu paraître en arrière des Quatre Bras

qu'à l'approche de la nuit. Le général Labédoyère avait-il mission pour faire changer la direction de ma colonne, avant que d'avoir vu le maréchal Ney ? Je ne le pense pas. Dans tous les cas, cette circonstance a été cause de toutes les marches et contre-marches qui ont paralysé mon corps d'armée pendant la journée du 16. " ⁴⁵

In his second account d'Erlon writes: " [...] Le maréchal Ney, étant au moment d'être forcé aux Quatre Bras, ne tint pas compte des ordres envoyés par l'empereur et rappela à lui mon corps d'armée.[..]" ⁴⁶

Colonel Heymès says the same as Ney does in his second account, as he writes: "[...] le 1er corps fut renvoyé à sa première destination sans avoir été utile d'aucun côté. Le général d'Erlon vint de sa personne, à 9 heures du soir, rendre compte de sa journée au maréchal et recevoir ses ordres. Ce corps prit ses bivouacs en arrière de Frasnes, ayant encore à marcher une partie de la nuit pour se rallier. On est à même de juger maintenant que sans qu'il y ait de la faute du comte d'Erlon, encore moins du maréchal Ney, le premier corps n'avait pas été utile à l'empereur, et que son absence de Frasnes fit perdre une journée qui pourrait amener de très grands résultats.

Il n'est pas besoin de démontrer par d'autres raisonnements que le mouvement du 1er corps de gauche à droite et de droite à gauche, à l'occasion duquel on a si injustement incriminé le maréchal, ne lui appartient pas; il avait trop besoin de cette troupe pour l'avoir cédée sans ordres supérieurs. Le changement de direction de ce corps n'a été fait que sur un ordre émané directement de l'empereur. Que pouvait faire le maréchal ? Il n'a connu ce mouvement que quand il était déjà exécuté, et d'ailleurs, en eût-il été informé à l'avance, il se serait bien gardé de s'y opposer puisque l'empereur l'avait ordonné." ⁴⁷

And general Durutte writes on the situation: "[...] Tandis qu'il était en marche [towards Brye], plusieurs ordonnances du maréchal Ney arrivèrent à la hâte pour arrêter le 1er corps et le faire marcher sur les Quatre-Bras. Les officiers qui apportaient ces ordres disaient que le maréchal Ney avait trouvé aux Quatre-Bras des forces supérieures, et qu'il était repoussé. Ce second ordre embarrassa beaucoup le comte d'Erlon, car il recevait en même temps de nouvelles instances de la droite pour marcher sur Bry. Il se décida néanmoins à retourner vers le maréchal Ney; mais, comme il observait, avec le général Durutte, que l'ennemi pouvait faire déboucher une colonne dans la plaine qui se trouve entre Bry et les bois de Delhutte, ce qui aurait totalement coupé la partie de l'armée commandée par l'empereur, d'avec celle commandée par le maréchal Ney, il se décida à laisser le général Durutte dans cette plaine, en laissant sous ses ordres, outre sa division, trois régiments de cavalerie commandés par le général Jaquinot.[..]" ⁴⁸

Finally, it is Gourgaud who writes: "[...] Ce fut encore un faux mouvement de ce corps, le 16 au soir, lorsqu'instruit que le village de St.Amand était enlevé, il fit une seconde marche de flanc pour retourner près du maréchal Ney, qu'il ne joignit qu'à neuf heures du soir. Ainsi ce corps d'armée entier ne fut utile nulle part." ⁴⁹

Summarizing, there is a clear contradiction here: on the one hand d'Erlon and Durutte claim that it was Ney who summoned d'Erlon to move towards Frasnes to assist him in finishing off with Wellington, while on the other there are Ney (in his second account) and his aide de camp Heymès who claim that the corps was actually sent back. There is no doubt, this could then only have been by Napoleon, although this is not stated in so many words.

The key to the solution of the issue lies in one contemporary document: the report of Ney of the evening of the 16th of June. In case Ney had actually called the corps towards Frasnes and he

would have remained silent about it, this would then at some point of time have turned against him. More importantly, if Ney attached so much importance to d'Erlon's presence at Quatre Bras, he could have called d'Erlon to him, but just here he criticizes d'Erlon for having come to him. Apart from this, in case Ney would have called for him, it would be extremely unfair of Ney to blame d'Erlon for coming to him. So, the only inevitable conclusion can be that Ney did *not* summon d'Erlon to come to Frasnès.⁵⁰ Nor was he sent back by Napoleon, simply as he had no direct orders of Napoleon to come to his aid through an interior route in the first place.

However, this does not exclude that Ney *did* send someone on a mission to d'Erlon after he had heard about his turn, and this was most probably baron Delcambre.

Essentially, the most probable scenario is that Ney informed d'Erlon about his own serious situation at Quatre Bras, but that Ney at the same realised that d'Erlon could play some role of importance at Ligny, as a result of d'Erlon's initiative. In this pragmatic approach, in which Ney saw some use in the initiative d'Erlon had taken, Ney probably put the definitive choice into the hands of d'Erlon to decide what he deemed best to do.

As Delcambre reached d'Erlon, he - in turn - was plunged into a serious dilemma what to do. On the one hand there was this unexpected absence of any coordination whatsoever from Napoleon towards d'Erlon what to do at Ligny, while on the other he was faced with his immediate superior, suffering apparent setbacks at Quatre Bras.

In observing the battle of Ligny probably from a position on the heights south of the *arbre de la Bruyère*, d'Erlon on the one hand developed a feeling that Blücher might cut between Ney and Napoleon by moving around the French left flank at Ligny, while on the other he feared Wellington might move in Napoleon's rear by pushing Ney vigorously back towards Gosselies.⁵¹ After a consultation of members of his staff, d'Erlon chose for a compromise: he split up his corps. Accordingly, he left the division of Durutte and the majority of his cavalry at the outskirts of the battlefield of Ligny opposite Wagnelée, while he moved with the remainder of his corps, headed by the division of Quiot, towards Frasnès.⁵²

Concluding observations.

The situation of the 1st French corps during the afternoon of the 16th of June was in fact a distortion of Napoleon's concept of the *manoeuvre sur les derrières*, applied within the strategy of the central position.

This distortion stemmed from the fact that it was not initiated by Napoleon and that it was directed along another route to the heights of Brye as it should have been: it took an interior route thereby initially extending the French left wing in stead of coming from the Namur road, in the Prussian rear.

Given this situation, the key question is how its three leading figures should be assessed when it comes down to the margins they were functioning in. Within these margins, the main criterium for this assessment is the question to what extent they realised that the decisive battle was the one of Ligny, while the one of Quatre Bras was of secondary importance.

First of all, Napoleon. Of course, he was more than anybody else aware of the fact that the decisive battle was raging in front of him. From this line of thinking, what Napoleon should have done the moment he realized he had his 1st corps on his far left was to establish a firm contact with d'Erlon so as to lead him with clear and pressing instructions where he wanted to

have him.

It meant that he should at least have attempted to try to wheel d'Erlon around the Prussian right flank, while at the same time clearly informing Ney about the situation of the 1st corps and that all priority lay at Ligny and that he was fighting a secondary action.⁵³

Even when taking into consideration that Napoleon did *not* order the 1st corps to come to the battlefield of Ligny, it is incomprehensible why he didn't take the effort as it appeared on the horizon, especially considering the time which was left to perform the original *manoeuvre sur les derrières*.

By the time Napoleon learned the force on his left was the 1st corps, it was 6.30 p.m. and in the attempt it could have meant that d'Erlon could have started a manoeuvre from his position between Villers Peruin and Wagnelée towards Trois Burettes and beyond towards 8 p.m, at the same time as that the imperial guard had moved through the Prussian centre. It may not have had the results he had expected from his original idea, but it would have had far more effect as it had now. The sheer appearance of d'Erlon beyond Wagnelée undoubtedly had an impact upon the Prussian forces already.

Marshal Ney halts between two opinions in relation to the issue. His initial task was to take up a position at Quatre Bras as a stage towards a march towards Brussels, while some time later this occupation became a condition for the *manoeuvre sur les derrières* as Napoleon had planned it. In this way, Ney became very much focused upon the crossroads as his first priority and in reading Ney's report of the evening of the 16th of June, it seems as if he almost disregarded the clear distinction of the primary and the secondary action that day.

Yet, it also learns us that he did see the difference, resulting from the two orders he had received that afternoon. Even though his frustration about his lack of success at Quatre Bras prevails, he does show a pragmatism in the way he handles the issue of the 1st corps. What he blames d'Erlon for is his *absence* at Quatre Bras, thereby depriving him of a victory there and not so much his movement towards Napoleon *as such* for the benefit at Ligny. Despite his own situation, Ney's reasoning was that d'Erlon's initiative - erroneous as it was - could have contributed at least in some way to Napoleon's victory over Blücher, thoughbeit from some other position.⁵⁴

But at the same time, it doesn't plea for Ney, as using a simple explanation – d'Erlon's absence at Quatre Bras - of clearing his own responsibility in the way he led the action of Quatre Bras.

Additionally, Ney, didn't report back to Napoleon in the afternoon about his situation and intentions, which is a grave omission and which could only make matters worse. In fact, Sault asked Ney in his order dated 2 p.m. for a report for the emperor about the situation in his front.

Despite the fact that d'Erlon had assigned himself an important mission, his march towards Wagnelée was not one of great speed and conviction. This was caused by the fact that d'Erlon's initiative eventually stranded on the absence of instructions on the battlefield of Ligny on the one hand, while he was confronted with Ney's situation on the other. At this very moment, this absence of a mutual communication between d'Erlon and Napoleon paralyzed d'Erlon even further. Ultimately, d'Erlon weighed an allied threat upon Napoleon's rear as more significant as his full participation in the battle Napoleon was involved in. So, in the concept of the strategy of the central position, d'Erlon chose for the secondary action. He clearly lays the responsibility of the marches of his corps in the hands of the messenger and Ney.

He also believes "d'après ce qu'on a pu savoir depuis" that his corps was presumed to act

according to the circumstances, either on the left or the right wing. Yet, the fact was of course that the 1st corps formed an integral part of the left wing and that in that capacity it was to act in close cooperation with the 2nd corps. It formed no part of the reserve to be used in either the right or the left wing. This reasoning of d'Erlon is an easy way of assigning himself the flexibility needed to make some kind of narrow escape from the whole issue, while in real life this flexibility never existed.⁵⁵

In the strategical sense of the word, the *manoeuvre sur les derrières* as originally planned by Napoleon is considered as a capital one in the development of the battle of Ligny as it would most probably have annihilated half of the Prussian army.

The interest in the events around the 1st corps is linked to the results which could be expected from the initiative taken by d'Erlon.⁵⁶ Taking it all together, in all its limitations and conjectures, this initiative – in all d'Erlon's sincerity of the moment – would contradictory enough have procured a higher chance of success for Napoleon at Ligny as he had it now.

First version: 31st October 2010 - Last revised: 10th April 2015 - Copyright © Pierre de Wit

¹ Those historians having dealt with the subject the most extensive are (in chronological order):

Colonel Charras - Histoire de la campagne de 1815 Vol.I p.216-221, Vol.II p.242-243, 245-246

Houssaye, H. - 1815. Waterloo p.205-211, 218-222, 534-539

Lenient, E. - La solution des énigmes de Waterloo p.244-288

Aerts, W. - Etudes etc. p.472-492

T'Sas, F. - Les mouvements du 1er corps de D.d'Erlon au cours des batailles de Ligny et des Quatre Bras, le 16 Juin 1815

Uffindell, A. - The eagle's last triumph p.153-158

² In: La campagne de 1815 etc. p.33

³ There are numerous examples, but some striking of them are:

Charras:

-his claim that Napoleon, having learned about the situation at Quatre Bras through the aide de camp who had reconnoitred the column and who had in his turn had been in contact with d'Erlon, allowed d'Erlon to leave for Ney again.

-his connecting the division which Ney was supposed to place at Marbais and the movements of d'Erlon towards the Namur road

Houssaye:

-the existence of the so-called "*traverse de Mellet*"

-the fact that d'Erlon would have read in the pencil note "à la hauteur de Saint Amand" instead of "sur la hauteur de Saint Amand"

-the fact that Napoleon gave d'Erlon at 6 p.m. the order to attack the Prussian army

-the simultaneous issuing of the 3.15 p.m. order to Ney and a direct order to d'Erlon to come to his aid at Ligny

-the fact that the column of the 1st corps was split in two while moving towards the battlefield of Ligny (part along Villers-Peruin and part along the Roman road).

-as a result of his erroneous conclusions, Houssaye's problem in explaining Ney's words about the 1st corps in his report of the evening of the 16th of June (a report which he degrades to a footnote, p.224)

Lenient:

-the fact that the "*note au crayon*" was written by the messenger himself

Other historians have in some cases taken over one or more of these items, or combinations thereof.

Cf. T'Sas, F. - Les mouvements du 1er corps de D.d'Erlon au cours des batailles de Ligny et des Quatre Bras, le 16 Juin 1815

Uffindell, A. - The eagle's last triumph p.153-158

⁴ In: BNP, FR.Nouv.acq.4366

⁵ Houssaye cites from this letter in the wrong way: " Si le comte d'Erlon avait exécuté le mouvement sur Saint Amand que l'empereur a ordonné, l'armée prussienne était entièrement perdue. " In: 1815.Waterloo p.206

6. Cf. T'Sas, F. - Les mouvements du 1er corps etc. p.293

⁷ Houssaye distorts the text in citing: " Le comte d'Erlon a eu de fausses directions, car, s'il eut exécuté l'ordre de mouvement que l'empereur avait prescrit, l'armée prussienne était totalement détruite. " In: 1815. Waterloo p.206

8. Germain (like Houssaye) uses the letter involved to show that Napoleon did give an order to d'Erlon (but through Ney) . In: J.B.Drouet d'Erlon p.162

9. Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de France etc. p.97

¹⁰ Gourgaud - Journal de Sainte Hélène Vol.I p.133

¹¹ Gourgaud - La campagne de 1815 p.50, 56-57

¹² Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de France etc. p.96

¹³ It is in this context interesting to quote general Bertrand, one of the intimates of Napoleon. After he had returned from Saint-Hélène, where he had accompanied Napoleon, he said to the duke of Elchingen, Ney's son, in relation to the campaign: "Pourquoi le maréchal nous-a-t-il envoyé d'Érlon sur Saint Amand ?" In: Documents inédits etc. p.51-52

14. Petiet, A. - Souvenirs militaires p.199

15. Baudus - Etudes sur Napoleon p.210-213

¹⁶ In: Quelques notes sur la campagne de 1815, as communicated by lieutenant De Montenon to H.Houssaye. De Montenon was the grandson of Baudus. These notes are now to be found in the Bibliothèque Thiers (Paris), Fonds Houssaye Ms.T.2605 nr.597

17. Sir R.Wilson. Correspondence. In: BL, Department of manuscripts, nr.30.147 p.15-18

¹⁸ Cf. Aerts, W. - Etudes etc. p.481

¹⁹ According to captain Bourdon de Vatry, aide de camp of Jérôme Bonaparte, Forbin Janson arrived after dark. In: Mémoires de Grouchy. Vol.IV p.103

Batty, however, publishes a copy of the of the order dated 3.15 p.m. with the French note stating: "Cet ordre fut remis à 6 heures par M.Forbin Janson." From where he got this text is not clear.

²⁰ In: LMB, As.1301

21. Heymès. Relation etc. In: Documents inédits p.10-11

²² In: Souvenirs militaires etc. p. 291-292

²³ Ney, in his report of the evening of the 16th of June, refers to reports of both d'Erlon and Reille which he expected that same evening. The one of Reille has been handed over to posterity, but just the one of d'Erlon – of which the existence can be assumed – hasn't. This authentic document would have had a profound importance for the issue in question.

24. In his letter to the son of Ney, dated 9th February 1829. In: Documents inédits etc. p.64-65
Colonel Forbin Janson wrote to Sir R.Wilson in December 1817 that d'Erlon had told him after the campaign: " ... quand il [d'Erlon] recut les premiers ordres du maréchal Ney,il se disposait à les exécuter, lorsque un aide de camp de l'empereur (Labédoyère) vint lui porter celui de quitter sa position et de se jeter sur l'extrême droite de l'armée prussienne. Labédoyère luit dit qu'il avait mis dans cette direction toutes ses colonnes qu'il avait rencontrées. Le comte d'Erlon se mit donc en marche et allait charger l'ennemi ... etc."

In: Sir R.Wilson, Correspondence. In: BL, Department of manuscripts, nr.30.147 p.15-18

25. Houssaye here uses the word "prendre" and leaves out some minor parts here and there.
In: 1815.Waterloo. p.208

26. D'Erlon, D. Le maréchal Drouet, comte d'Erlon p.95
Here is cited from the manuscript of this book. In AN, nr.28AP 3.1

27. Durutte. Account in the Sentinelle de l'armée p.77

²⁸ Durutte erroneously mentions the Prussian *left* flank.

29. Cf. A letter of 3rd November 1837, published in the Sentinelle de l'armée of 24th February 1838. In: Chapuis. Waterloo.Notice etc. p.54

30. His letter to H.de Mauduit, in the Sentinelle de l'armée of 24th February 1838. In: Waterloo. Notice etc. p.26

31. Salle, De - Souvenirs et correspondance etc. p.50

32. Aerts, W. - Etudes relatives etc. p.478

33.Reille. In: Notice historique In: Documents inédits p.60

34. Cahier de notes journalières du général Foy. In: Girod de l'Ain, M. - Vie militaire du général Foy p.275

35. Lemonnier-Delafosse, J.B. - Campagnes de 1810 à 1815 p.206-207

³⁶ In this context it is Napoleon who wrote that morning to Ney: " Le major général donne les ordres les plus précis pour qu'il n'y ait aucune difficulté sur l'obéissance à vos ordres lorsque vous serez détaché, les commandants de corps devant prendre mes ordres directement quand je me trouve présent. " So, also in this connection this would mean that the order could never have been written to d'Erlon directly.

As a consequence, the "*nouvelles instances*" as coming from the right, as mentioned by Durutte, can't possibly have taken place because if they would have been there, d'Erlon would have complied with them. In: Durutte. Account in the Sentinelle de l'armée p.77-78

Apart from that, d'Erlon himself also doesn't mention any pressure from the right.

³⁷ That it was colonel Labédoyère may well have been the case.

It should be borne in mind that this colonel, being accused of treason to the Bourbons, was shot on 29th of June 1815. Additionally, Durutte had died in 1827, so by the time d'Erlon wrote his first account of the events (in 1829), both men to whom he had blamed the turn of his corps were dead.

³⁸ It should be take into account that the order of 3.15 p.m. did *not* explicitly describe the basis of the manoeuvre (Quatre Bras) as Napoleon planned it as he had already phrased it in his previous order of 2 p.m. but of course this was easily understood from the situation on the ground and a possible explanation by the bearer of the order.

³⁹ It is De Pontécoulant who comes to the same conclusion (i.e. that d'Erlon complied with the order of 3.15 p.m.), but without giving any extensive evidence for this claim. In: Souvenirs militaires p.136

Even in case the imperial messenger might have made any objections to d'Erlon's decision, d'Erlon then most probably told him he would take the full responsibility for what he intended to do. Cf. the confrontation of captain Von Scharnhorst of general headquarters and the general staff of the 1st Prussian corps in its approach of the field of battle at Waterloo on the 18th of June.

⁴⁰ It should be noted here that the only contemporary document mentioning the situation of the 1st corps on 16th of June, the report of Ney of the very same evening, states that the absence of d'Erlon at Quatre Bras was due to an "malentendu de la part du comte d'Erlon." By the time he wrote this, he had not spoken to d'Erlon himself yet, but obviously he had knowledge of what Delcambre told him.

⁴¹ Both men had a responsibility of their own: for d'Erlon to inform Ney and for the imperial messenger to accomplish his mission.

⁴² It is rather singular to note that in one of his two accounts, d'Erlon claims that the truth needs to be told about what happened on the 16th of June with his corps. In: Le maréchal Drouet comte d'Erlon. Notice sur la vie militaire etc. p.95

⁴³ And this statement is taken over by most historians of the campaign. Cf. for instance: The duke of Elchingen in his correspondence with Jomini. In: Souvenirs et correspondance p.127

⁴⁴ Ney in his letter to Fouché, of 26th June 1815. In: LMB, nr.AS1301

45. In: Documents inédits etc. p.64-65

46. D'Erlon, D. Le maréchal Drouet, comte d'Erlon p.95
Here is cited from the manuscript itself of this book. In AN, nr.28AP 3.1

⁴⁷ Heymès - Relation etc. In: Documents inédits p.11-12

⁴⁸ Durutte. Account in the Sentinelle de l'armée p.77

⁴⁹ Gourgaud - La campagne de 1815 p.50, 56-57

⁵⁰ With this conclusion, the criticism as expressed by several historians that Ney shouldn't have called back d'Erlon to Frasnes falls through. Cf. Répécaud. Napoleon à Ligny etc. p.35, 44, 46

⁵¹ This is the principle of the "*fourches caudines*." Cf. the evaluation of the cooperation of Wellington and Blücher on the 15th and 16th of June (below).
For d'Erlon's reflections, cf. Durutte. Account in the Sentinelle de l'armée, p.77-78

⁵² Cf. Durutte. Account in the Sentinelle de l'armée, p.77-78
In these discussions, general De Salle (commander of the artillery) and Garbé (commander of the engineers) would have advised d'Erlon to continue his march towards the battlefield of Ligny. In: Salle, de – Souvenirs et correspondance p.51

⁵³ Grouard - La critique de la campagne de 1815

⁵⁴ It is of interest to point out here as well that Ney - from his side - did not get in touch with Napoleon about the situation with the 1st corps the moment he had learned about it. This may plea for his pragmatism, i.e. his assumption that d'Erlon and Napoleon would sort out their

cooperation in further detail.

⁵⁵ D'Erlon. In his letter dated 1829. In: Documents inédits p.64-65
And in: Le maréchal Drouet, come d'Erlon (1844) p.95-96

⁵⁶ Some historians who claim the 1st corps could have been decisive are:
T'Sas, F. - Les mouvements du 1er corps etc. In: Revue Belge d'histoire militaire. Dec.1967.
XVII-4.p.
Aerts, W. - Etudes etc. p.484-485
Berthézène - Souvenirs militaires p.373-374
Bas, F.de - La campagne de 1815 aux Pays Bas. Vol.I p.537
Thiers, A. - Histoire du consulat et de l'empire. Vol.VI p.462
Logie, J. - Waterloo, l'évitable défaite p.69