

The battle of Quatre Bras: observations.

Wellington's army.

By the time Wellington wrote to Blücher on the morning of the 16th of June, he was still in the dark about the precise intentions of the enemy. Obviously, he was aware of some French presence at Frasnes and an enemy's absence in front Mons and Binche, but where Napoleon would strike with his main force was unknown to him.

At the same time, he was busy concentrating his forces at Nivelles, Braine le Comte, Genappe and his expectation to complete this operation that day.

In that expectation and this lack of information he left for Blücher some time after. In leaving the prince there is no doubt that he discussed with him the possibility to pull in more forces if needed in his absence.

And this is what he did, the moment Ney attacked the forces of the Netherlands. For the prince of Orange, as the first having to deal with the French coming from Frasnes, his primary concern was the protection of his line of retreat (which ran to Nivelles). Therefore, before the battle started, the orientation of his frontline was south-west / north-east, along the Bois de Bossu, having the majority of his infantry at its flanks. At the same time, any threat north towards Genappe and beyond could be met with by the battalions near the crossroads, at the left flank of the Bois de Bossu. Clearly, the communication with the Prussians was no priority in the way the prince arranged his troops.

Additionally, he had thrown his left wing far forward so as to slow down any French advance coming from Frasnes and the Bois Delhütte. The prince may have tried to mislead the enemy about his strength by stretching out a line from Piraumont to the Bois de Bossu, but at the same time he had no garrisons in the outposts in front of his of this line, such as the farms of Gémioncourt and Grand Pierrepont.

The Bois de Bossu screened the advance of forces coming from Nivelles. In that sense it afforded the prince the chance to collect his forces from unnoticed before committing them into an action east of it. On a higher level, the chain of forests extending all the way from the Bois de Bossu beyond Nivelles also acted as a screen, allowing the assembling of major forces in and around Nivelles virtually unnoticed. Any major passages through it to the south and south-east (towards Beuzet, Rêves, Arquennes and Petit Reux) were also guarded by patrols.¹

From the orientation of the French attack, the prince was forced to adapt his frontline and in the act to block the French advance on a defence line which stretched from the Etang Materne, along the low ground of the stream running towards the farm of Gémioncourt and from there in a more or less straight line to the Bois de Bossu.

In inspecting the prince of Orange's positions that morning, there is no doubt that the duke formed some idea how to meet an enemy's attack in case this would develop. What this may have been is unclear, but in the situation Wellington clearly had to improvise, as the position –unlike the one at Mont Saint Jean – was not one he had studied in detail before.

Theoretically, the line stretching from the farm of Grand-Pierrepont in the west towards Piraumont in the east would have been one for a prolonged defense, but this was simply no option as by the time Wellington had arrived, this line was taken by the French.

North of this line, the low ground and of the stream running between the farm of Gémioncourt and the Etang Materne (thereby linking this line up further west to the tip of the Bois de Bossu), offered possibilities for a defence. The front-line in that case could have been just north of the low ground, on the slopes of the heights and upon these heights themselves, thereby using the farm of Gémioncourt as an outpost.

In general, the access to the plateau of Quatre Bras from the south was restricted: to the east by the low ground of the stream running between Gémioncourt and the Etang Materne, as well as by the Bois de Censes. Though in the centre the *chaussée* cut right through, it was dominated by the heights to the north. And to the west of the road, the area was restricted because of the presence of the Bois de Bossu. By the use of the Namur-road to the east and the Bois de Bossu to the west as a second defence line, a kind of *cul-de-sac* was formed.

Quatre Bras itself was not a dominating position. Though it was on a higher point, it was dominated by heights further west, south-west, as well as those north of Frasnes and these offered favourable positions for enemy artillery.

The Bois de Bossu afforded very little possibilities for a strong advance towards Quatre Bras west of the Brussels-road, while the wood itself screened the advance of forces coming from Nivelles. In that sense it afforded the defender the chance to collect his forces from there before committing them into an action east of it. On a higher level, the chain of forests extending all the way from the Bois de Bossu beyond Nivelles acting as a screen also allowed assembling forces in and around Nivelles virtually unnoticed. Any major passages through it to the south and south-east (towards Beuzet, Rêves, Arquennes and Petit Reux) were also guarded by patrols.²

From the north, the Brussels-road of course also gave ample possibilities for the arrival of reinforcements from that side of the field of action as well. To the east, the presence of the Etang Materne on the south side and the Bois des Censes on the north side of the Namur road offered the chance to block access towards the crossroads of Quatre Bras from the east.³

The sudden appearance of the French at Frasnes and the initial concentration of Wellington's army further west and north forced Wellington to a staged concentration at Quatre Bras, while a confrontation there was taking place. In itself, it placed the army in a highly exposed situation. Yet, this was neutralized by a lack of energy and coordination in the French attacks, as well as by the skilful way Wellington established his defence during the battle.

The attempt of the prince to fight the French on the line Etang Materne – Gémioncourt – Bois de Bossu eventually failed due to the French superiority. Having the French now in this line, Wellington established one further north.

Initially, Wellington deployed his 5th division along the Namur road in order to consolidate his left wing in order to keep open the communication with the Prussian army. For this last element he also gave a priority to the occupation of Piraumont and the area north of it, so at least to keep the *chaussée* open. Yet, by keeping the division there, Wellington would draw his defence line back to the most northern line he had for the protection of the crossroads. By doing so he took a high risk in case of a French success as this would not only probably throw him back upon Genappe, it would also cut him off from his direct communication line towards Blücher's army.

For that reason he brought his defence line forward the moment Bachelu's division was approaching, pivoting on the 79th to the left and to a point at about ; the higher ground here allowed him to await the French, coming up the slopes.

He extended the line all the way down to and into the Bois de Bossu by bringing up the Brunswickers in the centre up to a point at about 500 metres south of Quatre Bras up to the edge of the Bois de Bossu, at about 800 metres from Quatre Bras.

It was this line of defence which Wellington tried to keep up at all costs for the remainder of the day. This was also the reason for Wellington to make a successful and vigorous effort with the 92nd regiment to prevent the enemy from getting a foothold around the Bergerie right in front of Quatre Bras, after the Brunswickers had evacuated their sector. Shortly after, this same sector was re-occupied by the units of Colin Halkett's brigade without meeting any French resistance whatsoever.

The small size of the battlefield and the fact that he was fighting a defensive battle allowed Wellington to keep a tight control in a hands-on leadership, giving his orders either personally or via a staff officer to whoever he felt needed them. There is no doubt that the duke did so at Quatre Bras, but in this case he probably remained very close to Quatre Bras itself during most of the battle.⁴

At least during the first hour of the battle, the prince of Orange was hands-on with his forces in the centre of the front-line along the Brussels road. He might have spent most of his time in the immediate vicinity of Wellington, though later day he supervised the arrival of Alten's and Cooke's division on the battlefield; he also engaged battalions of the 2nd division in their advance from Quatre Bras along the Bois de Bossu. While the duke of Saxe-Weimar had a sector of his own in the Bois de Bossu, De Perponcher and count Van Bijlandt are virtually invisible when it comes down to their personal role in the action.⁵

Lieutenant general Alten's contribution was probably limited to leading his brigade of Kielmansegge on the left of the front-line. In his absence, his other brigade, the one of Colin Halkett, was guided by orders of sir Thomas Picton, general Pack, his own discretion and eventually by sir Edward Barnes.⁶ Picton's formal command was unambiguous: he led his division in person and was with his troops all the time.

Due to his misjudgement of the direction of the French offensive, Wellington was forced to fight an improvised action at Quatre Bras and this prevented him from using his defensive principles to their full extent. He had to fight in a position which he had not studied before, and in this particular case, masking his forces and the use of outposts in front of them was impossible. Apart from that, an insufficient number of forces of all weapons right from the start – cavalry in particular - prevented Wellington to make maximal use of them.

As at Waterloo, the artillery was used in single units within the frontline, with a clear priority in the centre of the line.⁷

Despite the presence of the Brunswick cavalry and the brigade of Van Merlen, Wellington had virtually no cavalry at his disposal. This seriously weakened his system of defence, making a cooperation of all weapons impossible. Although Van Merlen gave the allies some of a breather, its presence on the battlefield was short lived, and with the Brunswick cavalry it was no different. Luckily, the Bois de Bossu and the presence of very numerous French skirmishers during the battle neutralized Wellington's lack of cavalry to some extent.

A major feature in Wellington's defensive tactics was the search for a sharp decisive combat at close range, preferably in a combination of the sudden appearance of infantry, firepower and the shock of a charge. This approach found its culmination in the confrontation of Picton's and Bachelu's battalions. The British powerful counter gained a maximal success, despite the absence of cavalry, reducing the French division to a mere mass of skirmishers for the remainder of the day.

Although the shape of the southern part of the Bois de Bossu offered possibilities for a prolonged defence, these were soon rendered useless by the flank actions of the French and the transfer of allied forces to Quatre Bras. As the French occupied it with skirmishers, it proved not be of the highest priority to the French and this saved Wellington precious manpower. Faced with a staged concentration in front of the enemy, he was forced to use virtually all his forces right away; any reserves present were short-lived.⁸ Although it had been his intention to use his Foot Guards as a support in his centre, the French presence had reached such a state that it apparently threatened his defence line and therefore he engaged it there.⁹

In conclusion, having to fight a battle in a position he hadn't chosen himself, while having to concentrate his forces piecemeal right in front of the enemy and while having almost no cavalry at hand, Wellington did a very good job in improvising his defence all the way

through, but it has to be stressed that it was also thanks to the deficiencies on the way the action was fought from the French side that he was eventually able to force them back into their starting positions.

Ney's left wing.

The moment Ney attacked the enemy around Quatre Bras at 2 p.m, his goal was to occupy this crossroads, as well as a few scattered positions around it (Frasnes, Banterlez, Genappe, Marbais), all as a stage for a march towards Brussels.

The Netherlanders were swiftly brushed aside from the fields north of Frasnes by the French, yet the French advance grounded to a halt in front of the low ground of the Etang Materne's stream and the farm of Gémioncourt and wasn't pushed through.

What may have caused this hesitation remains unclear, although Ney would have been under the impression that it would be possible to take the position with light infantry only. There might have been a concern for what might come out from the Bois de Bossu, but Reille had been instructed not to pay any attention to this wood on his left and did so accordingly.

At the same time, Gauthier's brigade was kept to the rear to link up with Jérôme Bonaparte's division which was by then still heading for the battlefield. In advancing beyond the low ground and the farm, Ney might have felt a risk of stretching out his forces too far.

Whatever it might have been, the momentum passed and further reinforcements of Jérôme Bonaparte's division strengthened Ney's ranks further not long after. Part of it was used to threaten the Bois de Bossu after all, but for the moment there was a bit of a lull in the fighting between about 3 and 4 p.m.

Awaiting his reinforcements and pondering what would be his next move, Ney's task changed around 3.45 p.m. In stead of using Quatre Bras as a stage for a march towards Brussels, it now became the basis for a manoeuvre to his right in order to assist in annihilating the Prussian army at Ligny.

On the short term this didn't change much: the primary goal still was the occupation of the crossroads and therefore Ney ordered a second attack by 4 p.m.

While the Netherlanders on the French left were easily outmanoeuvred from the wood and the action there was then restricted to a slow advance of the French skirmishers, the utter defeat of Bachelu against Picton's battalions paralyzed the French centre opposite the Brunswickers. Here, the actions of Piré against Picton also proved to be too isolated to be of any value.

By 4.30 p.m. the situation had developed into a kind of stalemate for the French: to the right Picton's battalions were forced by Piré's horsemen to remain in squares, while being pounded by the French superior artillery and Bachelu's numerous skirmishers. To the left, the French pressure within the Bois de Bossu was still of a low priority, and the skirmishers there still hung around the low ground in it.

Though in the centre the French pressure was increased, it was due to a lack of strong support and the fact that Jérôme's and Foy's battalions were basically acting in a *cul-de-sac* that any local success couldn't be exploited.

And this despite the fact that the French artillery during the battle was superior to its counterpart.¹⁰ Though not all batteries can be individually identified, it is clear that Bachelu's battery kept a position in front of Piraumont during the whole action.¹¹ Foy's battery was during the initial stages of the battle in the centre near Le Balcan; it may have been that Piré's artillery was there as well. From here, shots were aimed at Wellington's centre as well as the Bois de Bossu.¹²

By the time the French centre was well consolidated in and around Gémioncourt, these guns advanced up to the height south-west of Gémioncourt, on the west side of the Brussels road and south of the track which leads to the farm of Grand-Pierrepont.¹³ Later, by 5 p.m., these

French guns were positioned further in front, at about 750 metres south of Quatre Bras. Here, they were supported to their further left by other guns (possibly of Jérôme Bonaparte's division) which advanced along the outer perimeter of the Bois de Bossu.¹⁴

All in all, the stalemate the French were in after the unsuccessful attack carried out at 4 p.m. resulted in a series of attacks which lacked cohesion, power and direction; they seemed to stem more from contingencies, as from a bigger plan.¹⁵

The deadlock lingered on until about 5.45, the moment Ney was instructed again to assist Napoleon in his struggle against Blücher and that he was aware of the diversion of the 1st corps.¹⁶ Realizing, due to the nature of the ground in front of Picton's division, it would be hard to use cavalry, Ney decided to break Wellington's centre along the Brussels road by using Guiton's brigade of heavy cavalry.

That morning, Ney had been instructed by the emperor not to use the cavalry of the imperial guard, but to use the one of the line instead and this is what he did.¹⁷ This meant he had to fall back upon Piré's division and Guiton's brigade (which arrived near Frasnes about 2.30 p.m.). Yet, Ney did not have this last brigade at his full disposal as its use depended upon Napoleon's decisions further in the day and these were dependent upon how events would unfold.

As Ney eventually committed Guiton, he did so without any apparent support of infantry in particular.¹⁸ This is bizarre, the more as the brigade of Gauthier and parts of Jérôme Bonaparte's division were still available and appear to have been virtually unused during the battle.¹⁹⁻²⁰

On top of that, it was just then that the allied centre had received a considerable support with the arrival of Colin Halkett's brigade, strengthening the allied centre between Picton's division and the Bois de Bossu. Faced with a numerical inferiority and lacking substantial support, dashing into the cul-de-sac meant a defeat was inevitable.

Ney was faced with a growing allied force and this element is sometimes given as a cause of the lack of success of the French.²¹ However, as has been shown, this superiority as such cannot be disconnected from the way Ney handled the battle.

In this situation, Ney kept part of his forces as a reserve, initially to link up with Jérôme Bonaparte's division as long as it hadn't arrived, and later, of this same division a major part was used in the same way as long as the first division of the 1st corps hadn't reached Frasnes.

At the same time, Ney was severely restricted in the use of the majority of cavalry present at Frasnes during the action. Taking this all together, it never allowed him to actually drive Wellington away from the crossroads. In hindsight, if there was a chance at all, it might have been in the very first offensive against the Netherlanders, by 2 p.m. But this would then have necessitated the involvement of the whole of the 2nd corps, as well as Guiton's cuirassiers and (part of) the light cavalry of the imperial guard. The , while having the 1st corps as a reserve to consolidate²² T

¹ Cf. Muilwijk, E. – Quatre Bras, Perponcher's gamble p.48, 53

² Cf. Muilwijk, E. – Quatre Bras, Perponcher's gamble p.48, 53

³ Cf. 1st lieutenant Backer Seest. In: Ophelderingen etc. In: NA, 2.13.13.09 nr.185

⁴ At least there are no accounts in which Wellington is mentioned as having been anywhere else, as near the crossroads.

Cf. Report about the brigade of Kielmansegge. In: VPH, nr.6

Report captain Cleeves. In: VPH-LBA, nr.15

Both reports the duke was there at 6 p.m.

Lieutenant Winchester (92nd regiment). In: BL, Add.ms.34.706 p.242-247

Sergeant Robertson (92nd regiment) In: The journal of sergeant D.Robertson p.146

Private Kay (92nd regiment) Cf. his plan, in: BL.Add.ms.34706 p.216-223

All these confirm his presence near Quatre Bras around 3 p.m.

By 7 p.m., Wellington was also in the vicinity of the crossroads. See the account of lieutenant Von Wussow, member of Blücher's staff. In: Ollech, Von Geschichte etc. p.139-140

⁵ Major general van Bijlandt only received two orders the whole day, i.e. to advance two battalions (probably the 5th and the 8th battalions of militia). In: NL-ZuRAZ, Van Löben Sels, 0302, inv.nr.265

⁶ Cf. Report of Alten himself. In: The battle of Waterloo, also of Ligny and Quatre Bras etc. Vol.I p.192

Letter of Sir Colin Halkett. In: BL, Add.ms.34.706 p.276-279

⁷ The ammunition spent by the Anglo-Netherlands-German units was:

Rogers: 11 grenades and 90 balls.

Von Rettberg: 24 grenades and 270 balls.

Lloyd: 30 grenades and 94 balls.

Cleeves: 17 grenades and 205 balls.

Von Kühlmann: 31 grenades and 130 balls.

Sandham: 8 balls.

⁸ Of Best's brigade only its battalions Verden and Lüneburg became involved in the fighting; of the ones of Osterode and Münden only the skirmishers were engaged.

Cf. Major general Best. In: VPH-LBA , nr.7 and 8

Ensign Oppermann (battalion Münden). In a letter to his parents dated 23rd June 1815. In: Kannicht, J. Und alles wegen Napoleon p.203-204

⁹ Cf. lord FitzRoy Somerse. In: NAM, nr.6507-1

¹⁰ Reille. In his report dated 17th June 1815. In: SHD, nr.C15.22

Colonel van Zuylen van Nijvelt. In: NL-ZuRAZ, Van Löben Sels, 0302, inv.nr.265

Wellington in his official despatch. In: Bas, F.de La campagne de 1815 Vol.III p.440

Colonel Van Zuylen van Nijvelt. In: Historisch verhaal etc. In: Bas, F.de La campagne de 1815 Vol.III p.316

¹¹ Trefcon, colonel. Carnet de campagne p.183

Captain Rogers (battery Rogers). In: BL, Add.ms.34.706 p.240-241

¹² Cf. accounts of Bernard van Saxen Weimar and members of the Foot Guards (see above).

¹³ Plan of Von Wachholz. In: Geschichte etc.

¹⁴ Captain Von Cleeves (Cleeves' battery). In: VPH-LBA, nr.15

Captain Von Kühlmann (Von Kühlmann's battery). In: VPH-LBA, nr.14

Captain Von Rettberg (Von Rettberg's battery). In: VPH-LBA, nr.16

Aerts, W. Etudes etc. p.441

Major general Best claims artillery advanced with Kellermann to the front, but that his brigade took one of the guns. I have no further proof for this. In: VPH-LBA, nr.8

¹⁵ Cf. Count Flahaut in two letters, dated 1857 and 1861 to A.H.Brialmont and F.Lavalette respectively. In: The first Napoleon etc. p.314-315 and in Bernardy, F. - Charles de Flahaut p.113

Lieutenant Henckens (6th regiment of chasseurs à cheval). In: Mémoires p.225, 229

Chef de bataillon Jolyet (1st regiment of light infantry). In: Souvenirs et correspondance p.76

Lieutenant Puvis (93rd de ligne). In: Souvenirs p.116

General Foy. In: Vie militaire p.271-272

Major general Best. In: VPH-LBA, nr.8

Pollio, though, describes the battle as one in which the three weapons were well combined and as a result he regards it as “une des plus belles actions tactiques que l’histoire militaire nous rappelle, tant en ce qui concerne la direction que l’exécution.” In: Waterloo p.254

¹⁶ In case d’Erlon reported to both Soult *and* Ney by 2 p.m., it should not be ruled that Ney was aware of d’Erlon’s changed direction by 3.30 p.m., so around the same time as he received Soult’s order to assist at Ligny. This would only have enforced him to attack Wellington towards 4 p.m.

¹⁷ Cf. Colbert’s letter dated

Napoleon’s order of the morning of the 16th June. In: SHD. C15, nr.5

Ney’s report of the evening of the 16th of June. In: SHD. C15, nr.5

Colonel Heymès. Relation de la campagne etc. In: Relation etc. In: Documents inédits etc.p.7

Houssaye cites the notes of chef d’escadron De Stuers of the Red lancers stating that the regiment lost on the 16th of June 50 men, without De Stuers specifying how, however. This may correspond to the 2nd regiment of lancers which somehow suffered two casualties in officers, but how this could have happened remains unclear. Cf. Martinien, A. Officiers tués et blessés p.101

¹⁸ Kellermann himself in his account. In: SHD. Observations sur la bataille de Waterloo etc. In: SHD, Mémoires et reconnaissances, no.719

Heymès claims all the infantry was “sérieusement occupées” Cf. Relation de la campagne etc. In: Documents inédits etc. p.9

Mauduit, H. de - Les derniers jours etc. Vol.II p.162-163

Aerts, W. - Etudes etc. p.459

¹⁹ Foy himself specifies the role of the regiments of Jamin’s brigade in the battle in the centre of the frontline, but of the other brigade (Gauthier’s) he merely mentions that it was formed

on the plateau in front of the farm of Lairalle and doesn't refer to it again. Cf. Foy. In: Girod de l'Ain. Vie militaire etc. p.272

This is all corroborated by Reille himself who gives the impression that one brigade was actually involved and the other not (without mentioning names though). In: Notice historique etc. In: Documents inédits p.59

The chief of staff of Foy, chef d'escadron Lemonnier-Delafosse, situates the division in the centre and on the right wing, without specifying the brigades. In: Souvenirs militaires p.206

Of the 93rd de ligne, sergent major Larreguy de Civrieux says nothing about his own role while lieutenant Puvis just speaks of some skirmishing. In: Souvenirs d'un cadet p.162-177
Souvenirs p.116

Losses in officers of Jamin's brigade were also much higher as the ones of Gauthier: 4th léger – 29 men. 100th de ligne: 15 men. 92nd and 93rd de ligne: 2 and 6 men respectively.

In: Martinien, A. Officiers tués et blessés

²⁰ Reille, in his report dated 17th of June, remains silent about the role of his 6th division as it didn't fall under his command during the battle.

Jérôme himself also remains virtually silent about the participation of his division at Quatre Bras; he restricts himself to stating that his division "s'est couvert de gloire" and that he had got wounded himself by two bullets. In: His letter dated 15th July 1815. In: Mémoires et correspondance du roi Jérôme etc.

The 1st de ligne suffered much more in officers as all other regiments (27 versus 3,5 and 6); this might have been the regiment which fought in the Bois de Bossu for a prolonged period of time. Cf. Martinien, A. Officiers tués et blessés p.117

²¹ Reille. In: Notice historique etc. In: Documents inédits p.59

In his report dated the 17th of June Reille claims the enemy had a force which was three times stronger as the French. This is not correct. In fact, Wellington ultimately had about 34.000 men while Ney had almost 19.000 men. In: SHD C15, nr.22

²² The serious lack of cavalry is most probably the reason why Ney had the direct command over the division of Piré. It is also applied to the division of Jérôme Bonaparte; the reason for this command is not clear. Cf. Reille's report of the 17th of June.