

Grouchy at Walhain

At 10 a.m. Grouchy - with his staff - joined the vanguard of the 3rd corps in front of Walhain. Not long after he entered the village. Right at that moment a man from Perwez was led to Grouchy who would possess some interesting information about the Prussian whereabouts. This man was Jean Joseph Godseels, an ex *maréchal-des-logis* in the 27th regiment *chasseurs à cheval*. He had retired and lived since 1814 in the farm of d'Agnelée, near Perwez. Godseels led Grouchy to the house of a local notary called Joseph Hollertt.



The house of Joseph Hollertt at Walhain, where Grouchy halted.

They were acquainted to one and another and Grouchy established his headquarters in his house. Meanwhile, Godseels provided Grouchy with information about the Prussian whereabouts and movements. ¹ Moreover, it was also Exelmans who provided Grouchy with information he had gathered through his patrols. Having collected this all, Grouchy decided to inform the emperor of his findings. It was 11 a.m. He wrote:

Sart-à-Valhain [sic], le 18 juin 1815 à 11 heures

Sire,

Je ne perds pas un moment à transmettre à Votre Majesté, par son ancien page La Fresnaye, afin qu'elle les ait plus promptement, les renseignements que j'ai sur les Prussiens, renseignements que je regarde comme positifs.

Les 1er, 2e et 3e corps de Blücher marchent dans la direction de Bruxelles. Deux de ces corps

ont passé à Sart-à-Valhain; ils ont défilé en trois colonnes marchant à peu près à même hauteur; le passage a duré six heures sans interruption. Ce qui a défilé par ici peut être estimé à trente mille hommes au moins, et a un matériel de 50 à 60 bouches à feu.

Un corps venu de Liège a joint les deux corps qui ont combattu à Fleurus (Ci-joint une réquisition qui le prouve) [2], et ce que j'ai devant moi se dirige en très grande partie sur la plaine de la Chyse, près la route de Louvain, et à deux lieues et demie de cette ville.

Il semble que les Prussiens veulent se masser à la Chyse, soit pour y combattre, soit pour se réorganiser et ensuite se réunir à Wellington, projet annoncé par leurs officiers, qui, avec leur jactance ordinaire, prétendent avoir conservé leur position, et n'avoir quitté le champ de bataille que pour opérer leur réunion sur Bruxelles.

Je vais être massé ce soir à Wavres, et me trouver ainsi entre Wellington, que je présume en retraite devant Votre Majesté, et l'armée prussienne.

J'ai besoin d'instructions ultérieures sur ce que Votre Majesté ordonne que je fasse. Le pays entre Wavres et la plaine de la Chyse est difficile, coupé et en partie marécageux; par la route de Wilworde, je crois pouvoir être en mesure d'arriver à Bruxelles avant tout ce qui se sera arrêté à la Chyse, si tant il y a qu'ils fassent une halte là. Daignez, Sire, me transmettre vos ordres; je puis les recevoir avant de commencer mon mouvement de demain.

*Je suis avec respect,
Grouchy³*

The report contained an extra text, plus some annexes of which the first one reads:

"La plupart des renseignements que renferme cette lettre me sont fournis par la propriétaire de la maison où je me suis arrêté pour écrire à Votre Majesté; cet officier a servi dans l'armée française, est décoré et paraît entièrement dévoué à nos intérêts. Je les joins à ces lignes." 4

The annexes read:

Premier renseignement recueilli à Sart-à-Valhain, par le maréchal Grouchy.

A Sart-à-Valhain est passé environ entre de trente à quarante mille hommes. Le passage était sur trois colonnes, et a duré depuis neuf heures du matin jusqu'à trois heures après-midi. Il a passé environ soixante bouches à feu.

Le 3e corps de Witgenstein a passé à Sart-à-Valhain. On a des réquisitions signées de ses commissaires. Le prince Auguste était avec cette colonne. Elle venait de Hannut et des environs de Liège. Le passage a fini hier, 17, à trois heures après-midi. La queue de la colonne est à Corroy. Tout se dirige sur Wavres. Les blessés ont été dirigés par la chaussée des Romains sur Liège et Maëstricht. On pense qu'il a passé trois corps, le second et le troisième bien sûrement, et probablement le premier. Le premier et le second ont pris part à la bataille de Fleurus. Ils ont annoncé vouloir livrer bataille près Bruxelles, où ils veulent se masser. Leur artillerie est venue par Grand-Lez. La meilleure route pour aller à Wavres est par Nil-Pierreux, à la chapelle de Corbais, à la Baraque, à Lausel. 5

Second renseignement recueilli à Sart-à-Walhain par le maréchal Grouchy.

*Les blessés filent sur Liège, se dirigeant sur Bomal, Jodoigne et Tirlemont. Les disponibles et ceux venant de Liège et n'ayant pas pris part à l'affaire de Fleurus, marchent sur Wavres, et quelques-uns sur Tirlemont. La masse est campée sur la plaine de la Chyse, près la route de Namur à Louvain, à deux lieues et demie de Louvain et une lieue et demie de Jodoigne. La plaine de la Chyse est à deux lieues et demie de Wavres, sur la droite, près de Goddechins. Ce dernier avis est positif. C'est là où ils paraissent vouloir se masser. Ils disent qu'ils ont conservé le champ de bataille, et qu'ils ne se retirent que pour livrer bataille après leur réunion, qui a été combinée entre Blücher et Wellington.*⁶

According to Grouchy there would also have been a third information added to the report, but this was actually the first one. It reads:

Troisième renseignement recueilli à Gembloux.

*L'ennemi, fort d'environ une trentaine de mille hommes, continue sa retraite assez en désordre. Le général Exelmans leur a saisi un parc de plus de quatre cent bêtes à cornes. L'ennemi se retire dans la direction de Wavres, ce qui semble devoir indiquer qu'il veut reprendre la route de Bruxelles, pour se réunir, s'il le peut, à Wellington, par Sart-à-Walhain, Tourines, etc. Ils ont fait aussi filer beaucoup de monde par Hautes-Baudes, suivant la direction de Sart-à-Walhain. A Sauvenière, ils se sont séparés en deux parties. La plus forte colonne a pris sur Pervez, ce qui indique peut-être qu'une portion des Prussiens va joindre Wellington, et l'autre est à l'armée de Blücher. Tous demandent le chemin de Bruxelles. Cette nuit, Exelmans a dû détacher six escadrons avec le général Bonnemains sur Sart-à-Walhain, trois autres sur Pervez. Les Prussiens qui ont occupé Sauvenière, Hautes et Basses-Baudes, se sont dirigés sur Ouray, passant par Grand-Lez. Ils ont suivi la chaussée des Romains, pour aller du côté de Maëstricht.*⁷

The report was carried by major De la Fresnaye.⁸ It was around 11.30 a.m. he left Grouchy as by then the cannonade at Mont Saint Jean had just started. At that moment Grouchy had a breakfast of strawberries.⁹

Meanwhile, general Gérard had ridden ahead of his corps with his staff; while doing so he had learned that Grouchy had taken his quarters in a house at Walhain. He joined Grouchy the moment he was eating his breakfast.¹⁰ By that time, it was around 11.30 a.m.¹¹ A conversation between Grouchy and Gérard of some 30 minutes took place, while several officers of staff were outdoors in the garden.¹² They were colonel Simon Lorière (he had succeeded colonel Saint Rémy as chief of staff of the 4th corps, baron Denniée (intendant of the same corps), colonel Rumigny (first aide de camp of Gérard), captain Thouvenin (attached to the staff of the artillery of the 4th corps), colonel De Bloqueville (first aide de camp of Grouchy), baron Le Sénécal (chief of staff of Grouchy) and several staff-officers of the different corps and of Grouchy himself (like colonels Tabor and De la Fontaine).

Suddenly, gunfire was heard from a great distance. Initially, the sound was a bit deadened by the

very fine rain which was falling by then.¹³ Several officers laid their ear on the ground in an attempt to judge the distance and direction it came from.¹⁴ Colonel Simon Lorière now informed Grouchy of this situation.¹⁵ Grouchy went out to the garden, accompanied by general Gérard, general Balthus (commander of the artillery of the 4th corps), maréchal de camp Valazé (commander of the engineers of the 4th corps), colonel Simon Lorière and others. The group went to a small green, open-work kiosk built on a small knoll in the garden.¹⁶ Meanwhile, as the rain had stopped and the clouds began to break, the sound of the guns became a little more distinct.¹⁷ Meanwhile, Grouchy asked for Hollertt and he asked him where he thought the cannonade took place.¹⁸ Hollertt indicated it was near the forest of Soignes.¹⁹



The garden of the house of Hollertt.

At that moment, Gérard advised Grouchy to march to the cannonade in an attempt to link up with the emperor; in case he would not be willing to do so, he offered to do this with his 4th corps and Vallin's division.²⁰ Grouchy, clearly irritated to receive such an advice in front of all the other officers, didn't agree and pointed Gérard to the fact that Napoleon had told him he had the intention to fight Wellington and that the confrontation was therefore no surprise. It could very well be a mere front- or rear-guard action. And even in case he might move towards the gunfire, he would most probably arrive too late to join in with the emperor due to the combination of the distance, the late hour and the state of the roads. Last but not least, he did not want to fractionate his force by splitting them up.²¹

General Balthus declared it would be very difficult to move due to the state of the roads and fields.²² General Valazé, however, thought his sappers would be able to take away most of the obstacles.²³ Grouchy, though, clung to his objections. Just at that moment, an aide de camp of Exelmans, d'Estourmel, entered the garden and interrupted the discussion with some important information. He informed Grouchy about the presence of a strong Prussian rear-guard in front of Wavre and that the Prussian army would have crossed the Dyle at Wavre during the night and

morning so as to approach the army of the duke of Wellington. General Exelmans had the intention of crossing the Dyle, but Grouchy said to d'Estourmel that he would personally give his orders to Exelmans and asked for his horse.²⁴ As the conversation had now ended, Grouchy and Gérard and their staff now left Walhain.²⁵ It was between 12.00 and 12.30 o'clock. After that, Gérard was bad tempered and silent. Soon, all members of the staff and troops were talking about the discussion which had taken place.²⁶

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1. Grouchy speaks in his report to the emperor (11 a.m.) of the “propriétaire de la maison où je me suis arrêté pour écrire à Votre Majesté; cet officier a servi dans l'armée française, est décoré et paraît entièrement dévoué à nos intérêts”

It is tempting to consider Hollertt as this person, yet this is not likely as he was never decorated, while Godseels had been. Therefore should be regarded as this person.

These facts have been assembled by Aerts from Mr. Landinois (the owner of the house in 1815) and Mlle.Becquevort, grand-niece of Godseels. In: Etudes etc. (manuscript) V p.205

Thiers is the only historian who makes a reference here to Godseels. He says someone took part in the discussion in the garden, as "un guide qui avait longtemps servi avec les Français". Cf. Thiers, A. Histoire du consulat et de l'empire etc. Vol.VI p.506

2.The document referred to is missing.

3. Cf. copy in SHAT, nr.C15/5

In: Le maréchal de Grouchy du 16 au 19 juin 1815 etc. p.54-58

4. Grouchy, G. de – Mémoires du maréchal Grouchy Vol.IV, p.71

5. Copy in SHAT, nr. C15/5

The document is marked with a question mark on the 17th of June. This means that in all probability the original was not dated. Grouchy erroneously has corrected the word “Lausel” by “Lamelle”. Grouchy also mentions “Nid-le-Pierreux” instead of “Nil-Pierreux”.

6. Copy in SHAT, nr.C15/5

Also this document has been dated on the 17th of June, though with a question mark. Grouchy writes “Beauwal” instead of “Bomal”.

Grouchy dates this information at 10 a.m. 18th of June. This must have been information he got the moment he entered Walhain (from Godseels and others). Cf. Relation succincte p.

Jodoigne is at 17.5 kilometres east of Wavre; Bomal is at 6.5 kilometres south of Jodoigne, while Tirlemont is at 17.5 kilometres southeast of Louvain. “Goddechins” is actually Gottechain, a village about 7.5 kilometres northeast of Wavre.

7. Grouchy, G.de - Mémoires du maréchal de Grouchy. Vol.IV p.71-75

8. Cf. the report itself.

De La Fresnaye himself. In: Mémoires du maréchal de Grouchy Vol.V p.136

Ch. Le Sénécal - Encore Waterloo p.18

Grouchy spells his name as La Frénaies. Cf. Réfutations du maréchal de Grouchy etc. In: Grouchy, G.de - Mémoires du maréchal de Grouchy Vol.V p.120

9. General Gérard. In a letter dated 10th August 1819 to colonel Simon Lorière. In: Gérard - Quelques documents etc. p.11-15 and SHAT, nr.C15/5
Colonel Simon Lorière to general Hulot in a letter dated 16th August 1819. In: SHAT, nr.C15/5
Gérard in a letter to the Constitutionnel, dated 14th January 1820. In: Quelques documents etc. p.22-24

10. General Gérard in a letter dated 10th August 1819 to colonel Simon Lorière. In: SHAT, nr.C15/5
Colonel Simon Lorière to general Hulot in a letter dated 16th August 1819. In: SHAT, nr.C15/5
Colonel De Bloqueville. In: Mémoires du maréchal de Grouchy Vol.V p.146-151
Lieutenant colonel Thouvenin. In: Mémoires du maréchal de Grouchy Vol.V p.137-139

11. Baron Denniée. In: Quelques documents etc. p.19
Lieutenant colonel Thouvenin. In: Mémoires du maréchal de Grouchy Vol.V p.137-139
General Gérard. In: Letter dated 14th January 1820 to the Constitutionnel. In: Grouchy, G.de Mémoires du maréchal de Grouchy. Vol.V p.243
In his letter dated 10th August 1819 to colonel Simon Lorière, Gérard claims it was 10 a.m.
In: SHAT, nr.C15/5

¹² Gérard in a letter to the Constitutionnel, dated 14th January 1820. In: Quelques documents etc. p.22-24

13. Colonel Simon Lorière. In: Quelques documents p.16
In another statement he says the rain was strong. Cf. his letter to general Hulot dated 16th August 1819. In: SHAT, nr.C15/5

14. Baron Denniée. In: Quelques documents p.19
Colonel Rumigny erroneously claims he was the one who was in the garden who heard the gunfire first and informed Grouchy about it. Cf. Souvenirs du général comte de Rumigny p.105

15. Colonel Simon Lorière. In a letter to general Hulot, 16th August 1819. In: SHAT, nr. C15/5
Gérard in a letter to the Constitutionnel, dated 14th January 1820. In: Quelques documents etc. p.22-24

¹⁶ Baron Denniée. In: Quelques documents etc. p.19
Maréchal de camp Valazé. In: Dernières observations p.31

¹⁷ Colonel Simon Lorie re. Cf. his account. In: Quelques documents p.16

The impression of the gunfire made is described in different ways. Le S n cal says: "Nous crumes tous que c' tait celui d'une affaire d'arri re garde seulement". Cf. his statement dated 2nd June 1830. In: SHAT, nr.C15/5

Major De la Fresnaye says the cannonade "n'avait pas l'air d'un engagement g n ral." In: M moires du mar chal de Grouchy Vol.V p.136

De la Fresnaye heard the cannonade as he rode out from Walhain towards the emperor, so he was not there during the conversation.

Captain Thouvenin claims it was a "canonnade assez vive" In: M moires du mar chal de Grouchy Vol.V p.138

Colonel De Bloqueville refers to a "canonnade assez forte." In: M moires du mar chal de Grouchy Vol.IV p.148

Mar chal de camp Valaz  states it was a " pouvantable canonnade." In: Derni res observations p.31

According to general Hulot the cannonade was "extr mement vive." Cf. Hulot, E. – Documents etc. p.42

Valaz  claims smoke could be seen rising up into the sky. Cf. his account. In: Derni res observations p.31

Le S n cal denies this was the case. He claims all those present believed it was gunfire which was caused by a rear-guard action. Cf. his statement dated 2nd June 1830. In: SHAT, nr.C15/5

18. Cf. Colonel Simon Lorie re. In: Quelques documents etc. p.16

Mr.Catoire, owner of the house in 1829, who cites from Hollertt himself. Both in: Quelques documents p.20

¹⁹ Hollertt himself through mr. Catoire. In: Quelques documents p.20

General G rard. In a letter dated 10th August 1819 to colonel Simon Lorie re. In: G rard - Quelques documents etc. p.11-15 and SHAT, nr.C15/5

G rard in a letter to the Constitutionnel, dated 14th January 1820. In: Quelques documents etc. p.22-24

Colonel Simon Lorie re. In: Quelques documents p.16

Mar chal de camp Valaz . In: Derni res observations p.32

20. G rard in a letter dated 14th January 1820 to the Constitutionnel, published in: Grouchy, G.de - M moires du mar chal de Grouchy Vol.V p.244 and in Quelques documents p.23

G rard states here he advised Grouchy "de faire marcher des troupes sur le canon; j'offris d'y conduire mon corps d'arm e."

Colonel Simon Lorie re phrases the advice as: "de manoeuvrer avec un corps d'infanterie et de cavalerie dans la direction du canon de l'empereur; afin de nous mettre en liaison d'op ration avec ses troupes et il s'offrit   l'ex cuter avec les siennes." Cf. his letter to general Hulot,

dated 16th August 1819 . In: SHAT, C15/5

Baron Denniée simply cites Gérard as “Je crois qu’il faut marcher au canon. Je le ferai.” In: Quelques documents p.20

Both Grouchy and De Bloqueville state that Gérard initially asked Grouchy to move with all of his forces, and when he refused to do so, that he offered him to do so with his own forces instead. From Gérard’s own version, this seems not to have been the case though.

Cf. Grouchy. In his questionnaire to Bella. In: Relation succincte 4e série p.45

De Bloqueville. In: Mémoires du maréchal de Grouchy Vol.IV p.148

Colonel Rumigny situates the discussion in a house somewhere between Walhain and Wavre. At that time, only Grouchy and Gérard would have been there, having Rumigny and the aide de camp Pont Bellanger at the door. This version of the events is obviously incorrect. Cf. Souvenirs du général comte de Rumigny p.105

21. Grouchy. In: Relation succincte p.33-34

In: Observations sur la relation de la campagne etc. In: Mémoires du maréchal de Grouchy Vol.V p.143

In: Fragments historiques etc. De l’influence etc. p.26

Account of colonel De Bloqueville. In: Mémoires du maréchal de Grouchy Vol.IV p.146-151

Grouchy himself erroneously states Gérard gave his advice when they were indoors. He also adds that Gérard said that it was basically his duty to move to the gun-fire. As he had expressed his objections, Gérard would have offered to do this with his corps only. From Gérard’s statements, however, it becomes clear that Gérard made this offer at the same time as he gave his advice. Cf. Relation succincte p.33-34

22. Maréchal de camp Valazé. In: Dernières observations p.31-32

Baron Denniée. In: Quelques documents etc. p.20

23. Maréchal de camp Valazé. In: Dernières observations p.32

24. Colonel Le Sénécal. Cf. his statement dated 2nd June 1830. In: SHAT, nr.C15/5

General Exelmans in his letter to Gérard, dated 1st February 1830. In: Dernières observations p.13-14

Grouchy in his questionnaire to adc Bella. In: Relation succincte 4me série p.44

25. General Gérard. In a letter dated 10th August 1819 to colonel Simon Loriane. In: Gérard - Quelques documents etc. p.11-15 and SHAT, nr.C15/5

Account of captain De Thouvenin. In: Mémoires du maréchal de Grouchy Vol.V p.137-139

26. Cf. General Hulot . In: Documents etc. p.43