

## The mission of colonel Belly de Bussy.

Achim de Vaulabelle is the first historian who wrote about a mission carried out by colonel Belly de Bussy on the 16<sup>th</sup> of June.

He writes: “Nous lisons dans une lettre particulière les détails suivants sur l'immobilité du maréchal Ney, dans la première moitié de la journée du 16 ; L'Empereur avait donné l'ordre au prince de la Moskowa d'attaquer et de s'emparer de la position des Quatre-Bras, de très-grand matin ; à huit heures sonnante, n'entendant pas la canonnade, il fit appeler un de ses aides de camp : « Bussy, lui dit-il, le maréchal Ney n'attaque pas; allez savoir pourquoi, et renouvelez-lui mon ordre. » Le colonel se rendit en toute hâte auprès du maréchal, qui lui répondit : « *Mes* dispositions ne sont pas faites; toutes mes troupes ne sont pas arrivées, l'ennemi est en force : je ne peux attaquer. » Le colonel, ne croyant pas pouvoir porter une pareille réponse à l'Empereur sans s'être assuré préalablement de la position de l'ennemi, se rendit auprès du général Colbert et lui demanda un détachement pour aller reconnaître l'ennemi ; Colbert voulut l'accompagner, et tous les deux, dans cette reconnaissance, purent s'assurer que les Quatre-Bras n'étaient occupés que par quelques bataillons alliés. Le colonel Bussy revint auprès du prince de la Moskowa et lui dit, qu'à son avis, rien ne serait plus facile que de s'emparer de la position : « Je vous ai déjà dit, répondit le maréchal, que mes dispositions ne sont pas faites; mon artillerie même n'est pas arrivée; je n'attaquerai pas. » Le colonel Bussy s'éloigna pour venir rejoindre l'Empereur, et trouva, en chemin, le général Flahaut, qui lui dit : « L'Empereur est fort inquiet de ne pas vous voir revenir; il s'impatiente de ce que le maréchal Ney n'attaque pas, et je suis chargé de lui en porter l'ordre de nouveau. » Le colonel fit connaître à M. de Flahaut le résultat de sa propre mission, lui souhaita d'être plus heureux que lui, et reprit sa course vers l'Empereur, qui, en le voyant, s'écria : « Pourquoi Ney n'attaque-t-il pas? » Le colonel lui rendit compte de ce dont il avait été témoin : en entendant les dernières paroles du maréchal, l'Empereur ne put retenir un mouvement d'une grande violence. <sup>1</sup> De Vaulabelle's source for this information remains undisclosed.

The second historian who mentioned Bussy's mission is Henry Houssaye, but he merely does so in a foot-note. He writes: “En outre, dès *quatre heures* [his italics are his], Napoleon avait envoyé son officier d'ordonnance Bussy à Frasnes pour avoir des nouvelles (Lettre de Bussy à Napoleon, Frasnes, 16 Juin, 6 heures du matin, papiers de Gourgaud).” <sup>2</sup>

The trouble with Bussy's mission is that neither the “lettre particulière” from De Vaulabelle, nor Bussy's letter as mentioned by Houssaye are published in their full extent. More than that, the second document, for some reason, is no longer there where Houssaye found it. And what makes it even more complicated is the fact that Houssaye doesn't mention the results of Bussy's mission in any way whatsoever. Yet, presuming Bussy *was* sent on some kind of mission to the left wing, why and when was he sent, and how did he accomplish his mission ? First of all, of the time Houssaye gives as Bussy's hour of departure from Charleroi (4 a.m.) it is not logical to suppose that it comes from Bussy himself. Why would he mention this hour to Napoleon, while he had sent him out himself ?

Under normal circumstances it would indeed take Bussy two hours to reach Frasnes, but why would he write just then ? By that time there was nothing to report about the situation in front of Frasnes, as a survey of it would simply take some time to carry out. And if Bussy was to find out about the situation of the left wing along the Brussels road in general, it would have taken him more time as two hours due to the presence of Ney's forces all along this road. Moreover, in case it came down to a general assessment of the situation on the left wing, Janin – instigated by general headquarters - had already been sent out from Mont-sur-Marchienne at dawn as well.

This all makes it highly improbable that Bussy was despatched from Charleroi at dawn on the 16<sup>th</sup> of June. The chance that Bussy might have been the bearer of Soult's order of 4.30 / 5 a.m. is, due to the distance and the hour of Ney's report (6 a.m.) impossible as well.

De Vaulabelle's account yields some serious objections. First of all, the emperor hadn't ordered Ney to take the crossroads of Quatre Bras at the very early morning of the 16<sup>th</sup> June, and so he did not expect any gunfire there by 8 a.m. Here, chronology runs dead, as in case Bussy would have been sent out to Ney by Napoleon by 8.30 a.m., he could never have met Flahaut at his return to Napoleon, as by then Flahaut had delivered orders for Ney long before.

In general, a mission set in on the early morning to find out about Ney's situation does not, apart from Janin's mission, stand to Soult's enquiry to Ney for information written shortly after dawn either.

It should also be remarked that it would not be logical for Bussy to leave from the left wing shortly after accomplishing his mission and writing his report. For that matter, he could also have made his report orally. Moreover, there is also no trace of his return in the events and / or documentation of general headquarters.

Given all the circumstances, the most probable chain of events is that Bussy was already sent out on the 15<sup>th</sup> of June to the left wing. In that capacity, he might have made the reconnaissance from Frasnes towards Quatre Bras with Colbert - as alluded to by De Vaulabelle - that evening.<sup>3</sup> It is unclear whether Bussy met Ney at or around Frasnes that day, but he may have met him at Frasnes by 8.30 a.m. the day after, as a result of which he returned to general headquarters some time later, thereby possibly meeting Flahaut south of Frasnes. Yet, the actual content of any report he may have written remains a mystery. And if he did write one, he either did so on the evening of the 15<sup>th</sup> of June or on the early morning of the 16<sup>th</sup> of June, and to return to general headquarters long after, otherwise it would have been of no use to put one on paper anyway.

First version: 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2016 - Last revised: 17<sup>th</sup> August 2016 - Copyright © Pierre de Wit

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<sup>1</sup> Vaulabelle, A.de - 1815 Ligny, Waterloo p.30

<sup>2</sup> Houssaye, H. – 1815.Waterloo p.139

<sup>3</sup> Cf. the action at Frasnes etc.