

## **The mission of colonel Marbot.**

The 7<sup>th</sup> regiment of hussars led by colonel Marbot was a member of the cavalry division of general Jacquinot. On the morning of the 18th of June, this division had its position opposite the chateau of Fichermont, on the extreme right flank of the French army.

Marbot himself has written about his activities on the 18th of June in two letters, one dated 26<sup>th</sup> June 1815 and the other dated 1830, to Grouchy. <sup>1</sup> Both versions differ considerably.

In the first one Marbot says his regiment was almost all day on the right flank of the army, south-west of Fichermont, and that he was attacked there by the Prussians. This version is corroborated by a conversation Marbot had with colonel Bro, commander of the 4<sup>th</sup> regiment of lancers (division of Jacquinot) on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July 1815. <sup>2</sup>

Marbot gave another description of the events of his regiment in his version of 1830. That morning, he got the imperial instruction through colonel Labédoyère and another staff-officer to establish a contact with Grouchy's force, as this would come up from the Dyle. <sup>3</sup> For his mission Marbot was allotted one battalion of the 13<sup>th</sup> regiment of light infantry (Schmitz' brigade, division of Donzelot - total 625 man) plus three guns. <sup>4</sup> Marbot took up with his detachment (composed of the 3 squadrons of his regiment, the battalion of light infantry and the three guns) a position facing east immediately south of the small wood which is situated south of Fichermont.

In doing so, Marbot met the instruction he had got, to keep the main part of his regiment within sight of the battlefield. With 200 men of infantry he had to occupy the Bois de Fichermont, immediately south of Fichermont. <sup>5</sup> One squadron was sent to Lasne, with outposts as far as Chapelle Saint Lambert. Of another squadron, half went towards Couture, the other half towards Beaumont, with patrols stretching out as far as the bridges of Mousty and Ottignies.

In order to get the information of the outposts as soon as possible, Marbot had set out a chain of posts so that information could be transmitted to Napoleon as soon as possible. The detachment which went as far as the bridges at Mousty and Ottignies was led by captain Eloy. It would have reached the Dyle by 1 p.m.

Eloy soon found out that there were no French forces; local inhabitants told Eloy that the French were crossing the Dyle at Limale, Limelette and Wavre. <sup>6</sup> Eloy sent this information immediately to Marbot who in his turn forwarded it through captain Kouhn to the imperial headquarters. Sometime later, Kouhn returned. He was accompanied by an officer of the general headquarters and Marbot was now ordered to maintain the communication line with Mousty. On the other hand, the detachment which Marbot had in Lasne (with posts towards Chapelle Saint Lambert) was to cross this valley and go as far as Limale, Limelette and Wavre.

Marbot immediately issued his instructions to comply with these orders. According to Marbot one of his platoons found a platoon of Prussian hussars about one kilometre on the other side of Chapelle Saint Lambert. A skirmishing took place between Marbot's hussars and those of the Prussian platoon (<sup>7</sup>) in which some men were taken prisoner, one of whom was an officer. He was led to colonel Marbot and he learned Prussian forces were approaching further to the rear. Marbot now sent him to imperial headquarters and then went with the squadron he had left on the battlefield to Lasne. As the Prussians were entering the valley, covered by their cavalry,

Marbot tried to gain as much as time as possible by checking this cavalry twice but then had to fall back.

Though Marbot is very detailed in this version, most of his details are impossible to match with the Prussian version of the events and with other circumstances. First of all, Marbot claims he had a post east of Chapelle Saint Lambert where he first saw the Prussians and where he charged them twice in order to slow down their advance. Yet, the Prussian sources say nothing about such a presence of French cavalry. Also in case Marbot was detached around 11 a.m. as he writes, then he would have arrived at Chapelle Saint Lambert after that time but that was impossible as the Prussian advanced guard got there around 10.30 a.m.

Marbot would also have had a post at the village of Lasne, with a chain towards the battlefield. Yet, all missions sent out by the general Prussian headquarters after 11 a.m. towards the west reported that neither the village and the valley of Lasne, nor the Bois de Paris were occupied.

The mission given by Marbot to captain Eloy is also one which can't have taken place as Marbot describes it. In case Eloy would have sent his report back to Marbot then this could not have reached him before 2 p.m. The result was that Marbot sent out a squadron towards Chapelle Saint Lambert, a village since long occupied by Von Bülow. Yet, by the time this so-called squadron would have reached this place, the Prussians were actually crossing the valley of the Lasne. Marbot also claims Eloy returned to the battlefield around 7 p.m. but by that time it was impossible for Eloy to do this, having been cut off from there by the Prussian presence at Maransart. Other than that, the post at Couture would have been in contact with the 2<sup>nd</sup> regiment of Silesian hussars which would probably would have captured it, and thereby rolling up the communication line towards Mousty.<sup>8</sup>

Also, presuming the Prussian officer taken prisoner by Marbot was the same as the one written about by Soult in his order to Grouchy at 1 p.m., then Marbot is erroneous as in his interpretation this officer could not have been brought to general headquarters before 4 p.m.<sup>9</sup>

After careful reading the description of the area as given by Marbot in his account of 1830, one could think Marbot confuses Chapelle Saint Lambert with the village of Lasne: what he calls Chapelle Saint Lambert could actually be Lasne. However, as he mentions both places explicitly this cannot be the case. Even in considering that Marbot could be mixing up the times completely by putting his mission much later as it actually took place, the whole version falls apart as the Prussian sources are unanimous about the absence of any fighting east of Chapelle Saint Lambert and on French absence at Lasne, the low grounds of the Lasne stream and the Bois de Paris.

More importantly, by the time Prussian forces were approaching Chapelle Saint Lambert, there was no need for Napoleon to call in Grouchy to get in touch with the main army: this only came up at 10 a.m. so Marbot could never have been sent out before that time.

Last but not least, Marbot refers to several cases in which he got feedback from imperial headquarters what to do. However, there is no reference at all in any French source to such instructions.

All this leads to the inevitable conclusion that Marbot 's account of 1830 about his role is highly misleading as he simply highly exaggerates the scope of his mission, which in reality was restricted to secure the extreme right flank of the army, south of Fichermont.<sup>10</sup>

- <sup>1</sup> Cf. Mémoires du général baron de Marbot Vol.III p.375-380  
Marbot refers in his letter to Grouchy dated 1830 to a formal report he would have written late in 1815 for Davout about his role in the campaign, but this is unavailable.
- <sup>2</sup> Cf. Colonel Bro - Mémoires p.153
3. Gérard - Dernières observations p.44
- <sup>4</sup> The *13th léger* was the only regiment of light infantry in the 1st corps. The guns came from the horse battery which was attached to the cavalry division of Jacquinot.
5. Aerts says Marbot makes a mistake here and claims he meant the Bois de Paris. However, this wood was never occupied by any French troops at all. In: La mission des majors de Falckenhausen et de Wittowski. La mission de Marbot p.18
6. This is not correct: the Prussians only started to cross the Dyle at Limale in the evening and didn't cross at Limelette at all.
7. These were men of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Silesian regiment of hussars, which preceded the 4<sup>th</sup> corps.
- <sup>8</sup> Prussian sources do not mention such a contact. The only contact there seems to have been was one between a French patrol and the detachment by Von Wittowski at Maransart. It remains unclear which French troops this could have been.
- <sup>9</sup> Cf. Coppens, B & P.Courcelle. La Papelotte etc. p.39
- <sup>10</sup> In his letter dated 26<sup>th</sup> June 1815, Marbot also writes about the sudden presence of the enemy in his rear; this would have been impossible in case he would have been detached so far to the east as he claims he was.