

A case of confusion.

Due to the erroneous representation of the farm of Mont Saint Jean in the map of Capitaine - as supposedly being used by Napoleon and his staff at Waterloo - to the west of the Brussels road, Bernard Coppens concludes that Napoleon and his staff accordingly considered the farm of La Haye Sainte to be the one of Mont Saint Jean and the crossroads of the Brussels-road and the Ohain-road as the one at the village of Mont Saint Jean.

According to Coppens, this idea would first of all be reflected in the order as it was issued at 11 a.m. and some time later in the official French bulletin (dated 20th of June) and Drouot's speech (dated 23rd June).

Coppens' argumentation for explaining the order this way is composed of three elements. First of all, in case the actual village of Mont Saint Jean was really the target of the first step of the attack, then this could never be so far in rear of the enemy's army.

Secondly, the range of the French guns would be insufficient to reach this target and lastly, the engineers could only really contribute to the attack in case of an immediate occupation of the village.¹

However, Coppens' way of representing Napoleon's idea of the configuration of the situation should be rejected in the strongest terms.

First of all, the theory overlooks numerous very distinct details. To start with, the order of 11 a.m. uses the word *routes* which denotes major roads, and not *chemins*, as in the crossing of the Ohain-road with the Brussels road. Second, if this crossroads would really represent the village, and the farm of La Haye Sainte would be the same for the one of Mont Saint Jean, then the idea of a village would merely be a crossing of roads with virtually no buildings at all (except for the Maison Valette).

When it comes down to actual buildings, what Napoleon saw right in front of Wellington's centre was one major farm, the one of La Haye Sainte, no more.

Further, in the map of Capitaine, the *chaussée* bends in an angular way east so as to turn the farm of Mont Saint Jean, this in strong contrast to the farm of La Haye Sainte where it passes along its front in a straight line. Moreover, by shifting the position of both the village and the farm of Mont Saint Jean further south, one runs into serious trouble in explaining what the other buildings along the *chaussée* would be. What is La Belle Alliance, and does Trimotion become La Haye Sainte and does Rossomme become Le Caillou? Even if the so-called incorrect interpretation could have taken place, it is simply impossible in the total context of the other features of the area, let alone the fact that there is no reason to doubt the ability of Napoleon and his staff in reading a map.²

Whatever way the imperial staff may have regarded the value of the *carte Capitaine*, the actual physical structure of what they saw didn't change when it came down to Wellington's centre: a range of heights, cut through by a high road, and of which the access was protected by a farm on its left flank and a small sandpit and a covering knoll on its right flank. By looking straight across this road, one could – about 1100 meters in the rear - distinguish some buildings.

This design, as having a strong outpost in front of a covered defence line, was one typical for Wellington and there is no doubt that this was obvious to the French. It is in this context that the theory also neglects a deeper understanding of how Napoleon saw the situation and accordingly drafted his plan for the attack in relation to the way Wellington had built up his position.

The way Napoleon wanted to deal with Wellington was by smashing hard through his centre in a massive strike, penetrate deep into his position and consolidate it by entrenching its target, the hamlet of Mont Saint Jean. Having the enemy's army cut in two, this very act

would prevent Wellington from gaining the *chaussée* to Brussels. At the same time, the thrust into the centre would allow Napoleon to use his cavalry and his reserves to roll up the two parts of Wellington's army.

From what Napoleon could actually see in front of him (as has been described above), a preceding bombardment carried out by a grand battery and a subsequent attack of one full army corps, supported by a second and a mass of cavalry would be highly disproportional in the case as Coppens describes it.

So far for the order of 11 a.m. The other main evidence for the theory referred to by Coppens are the official French bulletin dated 20th of June and the speech of Drouot, dated 23rd of June. In both these accounts, wherever the farm of La Haye Sainte is meant, the *village* of Mont Saint Jean is mentioned.

In itself, this description is obviously incorrect, but what matters is the reason why the name is used like this and not in its proper way. A possible key could be found in the combination of the accounts of Gourgaud. In one of them he writes that Wellington's centre was "[...] en avant du village de Mont Saint Jean, où se réunissent les deux chaussées de Nivelles et de Charleroi [...]"³ Here, the situation is described as it was. And in the other: "Leur centre sur la grande route était soutenu par le village de Mont Saint Jean où ils avaient établi une mauvaise traverse."⁴

In considering the *traverse* as the great road cut through the ridge of Mont Saint Jean, this second version hints towards the theory alluded to, but the conclusion is that Gourgaud has conflicting statements.

In his memoirs, Napoleon writes: "Elles [dix divisions de artillerie] étaient destinées à soutenir l'attaque de La Haye Sainte, que devaient faire deux divisions du 1er corps et les deux divisions du 6^e, dans le temps que les deux autres divisions du 1er corps se porteraient sur La Haye. Par ce moyen, toute la gauche de l'ennemi serait tournée. La division de cavalerie légère du 6^e corps, en colonne serrée, et celle du 1er corps qui était sur ses ailes, devaient participer à cette attaque, que les 2^e et 3^e lignes de cavalerie soutiendraient, ainsi que toute la garde à pied et à cheval. L'armée Française, maîtresse de La Haye et de Mont Saint Jean, couperait la chaussée de Bruxelles à toute la droite de l'armée anglaise, où étaient ses principaux forces."⁵

This version is equally confusing as first La Haye Sainte is mentioned, while the hamlet of Mont Saint Jean is meant as can be taken from the last sentence. And this conformed to Napoleon's grand plan which has been described extensively.

Coppens' theory also fails to understand the fact it was just the farm of La Haye Sainte which had to be neutralized first before the grand attack of the 1st corps would start.

In relation to what has been stated above, the way both the bulletin and Drouot use the name Mont Saint Jean can only be mere carelessness and has no deeper meaning, other than possibly making things larger as they really were so as to ease the pain of defeat.

¹ In: Waterloo. Les mensonges etc. p.145, 147, 151-159

A propos d'une explication nouvelle de la défaite de Waterloo. In: Bulletin of SBEN, nr.38 (2001) p.49-51

² Whatever value one could adhere to the guidance of Decoster, if there would have been a shred of doubt about the identity of certain buildings, he would have known and been able to inform Napoleon about them.

³ In: La campagne de 1815 p.73

⁴ Manuscript account. In: AN, Fonds Gourgaud. 314 AP 30

⁵ In: Mémoires pour servir etc. p.134-135