

The mission of colonel Von Pfuel.

Through time, the Von Pfuel mission is one which has deserved very little real attention, in the sense that it has been critically analysed.

The roots for the description of Von Pfuel's mission in the Waterloo literature can be found in the accounts of two Prussian historians: major Wagner (1825) and major Von Damitz (1838)

The one of Wagner reads: "In der Nacht vom 13. Zum 14. bemerkte man von den Vorposten des Generals von Zieten die Lagerfeuer von zwei grossen Lagern, die man bei Baumont [sic] und in der Gegend von Solre-sur-Sambre muthmasste. Den folgenden Tag brachten Ueberläufer die Nachricht von der Ankunft Napoleons und seines Bruders Hieronymus. Von den Vortruppen wurde gemeldet, dass die vor der Front gelegenen Ortschaften stark besetzt wären, und früher schon hatte man durch sehr bestimmte Nachrichten aus Paris erfahren, dass die preussische Armee zuerst angegriffen werden würde. Alles diese machte, dass man auf seiner Huth war; man traf alle Anstalten zum Gefecht, und das schwere Gepäck wurde rückwärts, in der Richtung von Gembloux gesendet. Da der Fürst von Blücher die Absicht hatte, sich hinter Fleurus zu concentriren, so ertheilte er dem 1sten Armeecorps unter General von Zieten Befehl, diesen Ort zu halten, den drei übrigen Corps aber, sich zusammenzuziehen. Diese Befehle wurden in der Nacht vom 14. Zum 15. ausgefertigt. Der Herzog von Wellington sendete Nachricht, dass seine Massregeln alle so getroffen wären, um zwei und zwanzig Stunden nach dem ersten Canonenschusse seine Truppen entweder bei Nivelles oder Quatrebras zu vereinigen. Da indessen bei dieser Berechnung Entfernungen von sieben bis neun Meilen zum Grunde lagen, wie die von Gent und Courtray nach Quatrebras, so gehörte dazu die grösste Genauigkeit in Ausfertigung und Ueberbringung der Befehle, so dass der geringste Aufenthalt, den unvorhergesehene oder nicht vorherzusehende Umstände verursachten, eine allgemeine Störung veranlassen musste." ¹

And the one of Von Damitz reads: "In der ersten Hälfte des Monats Juni nahm man Bewegungen bei der französischen Armee wahr. Es ging aus zuverlässiger Quelle im preussischen Hauptquartier (13ten Juni) die Nachricht von Paris ein, dass Napoleon den 12ten die Hauptstadt verlassen und zur Armee abgehen würde.

Man erkannte hierdurch, so wie auch aus anderen vom rechten Ufer der Maas und aus der Gegend von Laon über die Bewegungen der französischen Truppen eingezogenen sichern Nachrichten, dass der Ausbruch der Feindseligkeiten sehr nahe sei.

Der Feldmarschall Fürst Blücher hielt es daher für nothwendig, die entfernteren Truppentheile seines Heeres näher heranzuziehen.

Dem General Grafen Bülow wurde daher schon am 13ten der Befehl ertheilt, sein Corps auf dem linken Ufer der Maas zusammen zu ziehen, und alle Anstalten zu treffen, um Hannut in einem Marsche erreichen zu können.

Der Oberst v.Pfuel vom Generalstabe des Fürsten Blücher wurde nach Brüssel zum Herzoge v.Wellington gesandt, um mit demselben nochmals die letzten Maassregeln zu verabreden. Der Herzog schien indess nicht die Ueberzeugung gewinnen zu können, dass Napoleon die Preussen mit seiner Hauptmacht zuerst angreifen würde. Der Oberst v.Pfuel kam den 14ten von Brüssel zurück und überbrachte die wiederholte Versicherung, dass der Herzog v.Wellington 22 Stunden nach dem ersten Kanonenschusse seine Armee nach den eintretenden Umständen bei Quatrebras oder Nivelles concentrirt haben würde.

Der englische Feldherr wollte seine Maassregeln so getroffen haben, dass er in 6 Stunden die Meldung von den Vorposten erhalten könne, 8 Stunden die Ertheilung und Ueberbringung der Ordres erforderten, und 8 Stunden hinlänglich wären, um die Truppen auf dem Schlachtfelde vereinigt zu sehen." ²

Though Wagner doesn't explicitly mention colonel Von Pfuel, it is the promise of Wellington to the Prussians which binds both versions as dealing with the same communication.

In his "introduction" to the actual communication referred to, Wagner erroneously claims that "Alle Anstalten zum Gefecht" were made. Whatever these "Anstalten" may have been, it has been shown before that there was no such thing as a general concentration, if it comes down to that only. Apart from that, Wagner suggests as if everything was already focused upon a general assembling of the army in rear of Fleurus, near Sombreffe, and as if Wellington was set for a support there as coming from Nivelles and / or Quatre Bras. Let alone the complete absence of Quatre Bras in any rendez-vous or strategic concept from Wellington's side – and this is something which will be dealt with extensively further – Wellington was certainly not the man to make such a precise promise in time and place as formulated by Wagner.³

In Wagner's version of the events, Wellington's communication to the Prussians suddenly appears out of the blue as if the duke just wrote it, nothing more. Apparently, in Wagner's idea, the Prussians asked for such a kind of promise but there is no further reference to such a type of communication. He even doesn't give it a date, from the sequence of the events as sketched it seems as if Wellington sent it on the 14th of June.

Finally, Wagner believes the calculation of the 22 hours to be most vulnerable for contingencies, thereby already suggesting as if it would be very hard, if not impossible, for the duke of Wellington to comply with his own promise.⁴ Last but not least it remains a mystery what sources Wagner used to make his claims.

Resulting from the apparent threat upon the Prussian army, it is Von Damitz who makes a link here between this threat and the 4th corps of Von Bülow moving over the river Meuse to its left bank and "alle Anstalten zu treffen, um Hannut in einem Marsche erreichen zu können" as ordered on the 13th of June.

First of all, Von Bülow had already been ordered to the left bank of the Meuse by mid-May and the second order was issued on the evening of the 14th of June.

Von Damitz then dates the departure of Von Pfuel to Wellington on the 13th of June "um mit demselben nochmals die letzten Maassregeln zu verabreden." Damitz suggests here as if more detailed defensive arrangements had been made before, but he doesn't specify which these were. This element of reiteration can also be found in "die wiederholte Versicherung" of Wellington, and both these descriptions clearly refer to the version of the Tirlemont-meeting as described by Von Damitz (see above). The only difference here in Von Damitz' version is that on the 3rd of May, Wellington didn't link a time-frame on his assistance to the Prussians.

Additionally, the way the so-called promise as done by Wellington is militarily naive. Apart from the fact that this was not the style of Wellington to express himself, it would be simply naive for a military commander in general to start running to some kind of rendez-vous after hearing of the very first few gunshots, directly or indirectly.

The resemblance of the promise is striking and I am very much inclined to think that Damitz took it from Wagner, thereby extending the promise even further by putting in a very specific time-frame within these 22 hours, i.e. for the conveyance of the message of the hostilities, the distribution of orders and the assembling of the army on the battlefield.

Let alone the feasibility of the scenario, this statement also supposes a battle near Sombreffe and this was something which had yet to be decided upon (see below).

The whole defensive character of Von Pfuel's mission as described by both historians is not corroborated by any other document of the days involved whatsoever, nor of those produced on the 15th of June.⁵ There is not a trace of a Prussian request on the one hand, or of a promise of Wellington to Prussian headquarters on the other and which was somehow linked to Von Pfuel's visit to Brussels.⁶ If the French threat would have been the main issue for the Prussian army right then, it would certainly have transpired in the communication which we have resulting from the mission of Von Pfuel and that is the letter as written by Von Müffling

on the 14th of June and also in this document there is no word referring to anything which could even make the slightest reference to such a request on the one hand or some kind of promise on the other.

An additional element is that by the time Von Pfuel was sent out, on the 13th of June, the potential threat was not upon the Prussians alone, so it would be most unlogical to have a promise as has been stated by Wagner and Von Damitz; Wellington also might have asked the same from Blücher.

All statements of both Wagner and Damitz are so much shadowed by hindsight of the later events that all what matters give way to it: the general concepts of both commanders, their communications before the campaign started and their occupations with the invasion of France. ⁷ William Siborne, in his study, doesn't mention Von Pfuel's mission at all, while other authors, even up to the present time, simply mention it in the way Wagner and Von Damitz did. ⁸

The first exception, in a way, is Von Lettow Vorbeck (1904). He had access to the Prussian war archives and as a result he had the opportunity of consulting the letter which Von Müffling wrote back to Gneisenau on the 14th of June and which shows the background of the mission of colonel Von Pfuel. ⁹

He cites from the letter, thoughbeit not in an integral way. What he did take from the letter was that Von Pfuel had delivered a letter of Gneisenau to which documents of Von der Knesebeck and Schwarzenberg were enclosed.

Using this letter of Von Müffling as a starting point, Von Lettow Vorbeck briefly touches upon the invasion simply by citing from it, but eventually he translates the last sentence of this letter ("Oberst Von Pfuel wird Ew.Excellenz das Weitere sagen.") in the promise as it has been described by Wagner and Von Damitz. ¹⁰ In this way, he also downgrades in what would be the most important of that moment, if this were all true, into a simple remark at the bottom of a letter, while treating the secondary element (the invasion into France) in that case as the main subject of the letter – an absurd interpretation.

¹ Wagner - Plane der Schlachten und Treffen etc. p.11

² Damitz, Von – Geschichte etc. p.70-71

³ Cf. the letter which Wellington wrote to the prince of Orange on the 11th of May. In:

⁴ Hussey regards Wagner's words here in the sense that he believed Wellington's most western units could actually cover 53 to 50 kilometres within 22 hours, but in my view he doesn't; Wagner just wants to suggest that it was not possible, as the calculation as such was too theoretical. In: The shadow of Ligny p.13

⁵ It is also on the 17th of June that Gneisenau, in his report on Ligny, did not refer to such a promise as done on the 13th or 14th of June. Cf. Hussey, J. - The shadow of Ligny etc. p.18

⁶ The promise as done by Wellington through Von Müffling to Zieten and to which Zieten refers on the 15th of June in all probability dates from the 13th of June and did not run through Von Puel straight to Namur.

⁷ Von Damitz' version is the more striking as he had access to general Von Grolmann's papers, and Von Grolmann was the direct superior of colonel Von Puel. As far as Von Damitz account is concerned, as Von Pflug Hartung very justly remarks, it is in general hard to assess where Von Grolmann ends and Von Damitz starts. In: Vorgeschichte etc.p.34

In this context it is Hussey who describes Von Grolmann's role in the meeting for Von Damitz as one of hearsay, but as Von Damitz had access to Von Grolmann's papers he then most probably also had access to the register of staff, a document administered by Von Grolman. As such, it was no hearsay, as the documents involved around the mission could directly be taken from this register by Von Damitz. In: The shadow of Ligny etc. p.14

⁸ Cf. for instance:

Ollech, Von – Geschichte etc. p.90

Aerts, W. - Etudes etc. p.288

Pflug Hartung, J.von – Vorgeschichte etc.p.34

Bas, F.de – La campagne de 1815 Vol.I p.477

The only element Von Pflug Hartung adds is that he doubts about the mentioning of Quatre Bras.

Hofschröer, P. - 1815. The Waterloo campaign. Wellington etc. p.159

In a footnote, Hofschröer adds: "The original documentation was at one time in the Prussian War Archives, and is missing, presumed destroyed in World War Two." However, there is no direct connection between the mission of Von Puel as Hofschröer describes it and this note about the Prussian war archives. Anyway, the way he describes the mission and its result is incorrect as it is based upon Wagner.

⁹ It was filed in the former Kriegsarchiv under VI.C.3.II p.25

¹⁰ Lettow Vorbeck, O.von – Napoleons Untergang p.195

For Hussey, Von Lettow Vorbeck "reduces Wagner and Damitz to nearly nothing" by citing from Von Müffling's letter, but in my view he doesn't. Though he cites from the letter as

mentioned, which is in itself of course a new and important element, he eventually clings to the traditional approach as well. In: *The shadow of Ligny* etc. p.16