

## **The concentration of the Prussian army in the position of Sombreffe.**

The communication with the Anglo-Netherlands-German army.

Probably not long after midnight it had become clear to Blücher and his staff that Bülow had postponed his march to Hannut to the morning of the 16th of June. To make matters even worse, early on the same morning they also learned that the third order for Bülow had stranded at Hannut.

Wellington most probably wasn't informed about this delay until at the meeting at Bussy. Other than that, there are no indications either that the delays of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> corps to show up near Sombreffe (being announced as by daybreak) were communicated towards the duke before after 1 p.m. as well.

A first signal from Wellington probably arrived at Sombreffe in the early morning hours of the 16<sup>th</sup> of June. It was the letter Von Müffling had written at 7 p.m.<sup>1</sup>

With this letter in their hands, the Prussian leadership knew that Wellington had been informed about the hostilities in the very late afternoon and that he had started the concentration of his army between 6 and 7 p.m.

As it was also well aware of Wellington's cantonments, it could easily calculate that it would take Wellington the 16<sup>th</sup> of June, as a *full* day, to concentrate his *complete* army in the vicinity of Nivelles.<sup>2</sup> Other than that, it informed the Prussians about the duke's fear for his own sector as well and his measures to make sure about its safety before entering into any offensive if Napoleon would appear to turn against the Prussian army.

At 5 a.m. that morning, it was decided to send major Von Brunneck out towards Quatre Bras. Von Brunneck's mission might have been the result of the arrival of Von Müffling's letter, but this is not sure. The way Von Brunneck reports back to his superiors makes clear that he apparently didn't have a task of trying to get in touch with Wellington or his delegates about a possible direct support in the battle of Ligny.

Though he did get some information of the prince of Orange about the imminent arrival of more units at Quatre Bras that day, by far the most part of his first report is an explanation of what had happened the day before and what the situation was on the French front, and, with this, on the Prussian right flank.

It is also in this that he intended to report some time later that morning. In fact in this second report he reported back about the French force in front of Quatre Bras. At that time, this force consisted around Frasnes of the light cavalry of the Imperial Guard and of a very small part of the division of Bachelu.

The main reason for the Prussian staff to send Von Brunneck out was to find out about the situation on the right flank of the Prussian army, a concern which played a vital role in the complete acceptance of a battle near Sombreffe (see above). Obviously, the Prussians had heard gunfire further to their right towards Frasnes, but didn't have a clue what the situation was there on the early morning of the 16<sup>th</sup> of June.

Von Brunneck wrote his second report at 9.45 a.m., just 15 minutes before the duke of Wellington reached Quatre Bras. Von Brunneck knew about this event as he reported about it later the moment he had returned from his mission, but whether Von Brunneck has actually spoken to Wellington remains unclear.

Wellington's personal presence at Quatre Bras confirmed, it led the Prussian staff to send the British liaison, colonel Hardinge, to inform Wellington about the strength of the French forces coming out from Fleurus and about the intelligence they had received from the French colonel Laderiac. It is very well possible that Hardinge also was to inquire about the duke's intentions

and the situation of his army as this information was still lacking due to the fact that lieutenant Wucherer hadn't reached Prussian headquarters. By noon on the 16<sup>th</sup> of June, the latest information from Wellington at Prussian headquarters dated from 7 p.m. on the 15<sup>th</sup> of June.

The concentration of the army near Sombreffe.

Though on the 15<sup>th</sup> of June the Prussians expressed towards Wellington the impression as if Napoleon marched against them and that they had the intention to fight Napoleon near Sombreffe, it should be stressed that in reality it was for the Prussians on the early morning of the 16<sup>th</sup> of June still a question what Napoleon would do that day: either he would turn against them or against Wellington.

This had to do with the knowledge they had from the situation on the side of the French. Though strong French forces had driven the Prussians over the Sambre and beyond to the east, it was Von Steinmetz who had faced French forces near Gosselies and later gunfire was heard from the direction of Frasnes as well. The general presumption was that at least main parts of the French army were massing around Charleroi, as coming from the left and the right bank of the Sambre, and that strong vanguards were pushed from there to the north and to the east.<sup>3</sup>

In fact, it was the representative of the Netherlands at the Prussian general headquarters, baron Van Panhuys who wrote on the morning of the 17<sup>th</sup> of June: “[...] L’ennemi de son côté dans la matinée marchant en différentes directions seulement vers onze heures ne nous laissa plus de doute qu’il nous attaquerait ce jour la même [...]”<sup>4</sup>

Additionally, prince Von Thurn und Taxis wrote about the situation in the Prussian headquarters after the return of major Von Brunneck and before the French started to come out from Fleurus after 11 a.m.: “Das Kleingewehrfeuer war während seines [Brunneck’s] Aufenthalt dort noch soutenierter geworden und, da inzwischen bei uns noch immer alles ganz ruhig geblieben, so kam man auf die Vermutung, dass die Absichten des Feindes für diesen Tag mehr auf die Englische Armee gerichtet sein düften, welcher Vermutung man sich vielleicht zu viel überliess, wodurch, möchte Ich beinahe sagen, manche Massregel zu ergreifen vorabsäumt wurde, die nötig gewesen.”<sup>5</sup>

In the historiography of the campaign it is usually taken for granted that the Prussians knew what Napoleon was up to and that a battle was inevitable and therefore the concentration of the Prussian army near Sombreffe a simple matter of logic for that purpose and no more. Yet, the area around Sombreffe as chosen had a twofold purpose: either to act as a point for a defensive action *or* as a basis for support towards Wellington in case he might bear the brunt of the French offensive. The fact that a certain doubt initially ruled in the defensive measures taken, is also an indication of this double element.

If it was up to the Prussians there would be a battle near Sombreffe. But as has been stated before, all depended on what Napoleon would do and this wasn't so self-evident as is usually represented.

First of all, as has been shown before, the concentration of the Prussian army in the vicinity of Sombreffe was planned in stages and only pushed through the moment the Prussian leadership thought it was well covered by the presence of the complete 1st corps in and around Fleurus and on its right flank.

One of the first things to do on the early morning of the 16<sup>th</sup> of June for the Prussian general staff therefore was to make sure about the right flank of the army. That was the reason to send out major Brunneck to find out about the whereabouts of the French and the situation of Wellington's forces around Quatre Bras. Secondly, what counted was to find out about the French in front of the Prussian forces around Ligny.

For that reason, observation posts had been placed in front of the 1st corps to observe the area around Fleurus (stretching roughly from Heppignies towards Baulet / Velaine) so as to observe and find out what the French were up to in that sector. After some scanty information on enemy's presence and activity had dropped in during most of the morning, the situation changed towards 11 a.m. when French forces (3<sup>rd</sup> infantry corps and the cavalry corps of Pajol and Exelmans) started deploying in front of Fleurus.

By that time, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Prussian corps was moving into positions, while the 3<sup>rd</sup> had been ordered towards Point du Jour about one hour before. At the same time it had become clear that there was a French force at Frasnes but that it was - until then - inactive and opposed by allied forces.

By now, between 11 a.m. and noon, the Prussians became convinced that Napoleon had decided to turn towards them and for that reason colonel Hardinge was sent to Wellington to inform him about the situation and to discuss the way to cooperate. This initiative was soon completed by the one from the duke at the same time (and independent from that of the Prussian leadership), which resulted in the meeting at Bussy. By that time (1 p.m.) more French forces were building up (4<sup>th</sup> corps of infantry).

Theoretically, the Prussian general staff intended to fight Napoleon around Sombreffe or to use the area as starting point for a support towards the Anglo-Netherlands-German army, but in the actual situation different elements developed which shaped the circumstances in which - eventually - the battle of Ligny started.

These were: the need for a proper protection of the concentration of the army near Sombreffe, the delay in the marches of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> corps, the absence of Bülow [<sup>6</sup>], the resulting adaptations to the original plan designed for the position of Point du Jour and the role of Wellington's army. And last, and certainly not least, it was the knowledge on the Prussian side about the direction in which the French advance would develop, up to the very last moment.

This last element is clearly visible in the fact that it was only very briefly before the battle started (about 2 p.m.) that actual fighting positions were taken up. There is a clear parallel here between the Prussian manoeuvres as being a result of the French at that particular hour: the villages of Ligny and Saint-Amand-la-Haye were occupied, while Saint Amand was briefly occupied and evacuated again, and that the 3<sup>rd</sup> corps advanced from its positions along the Namur road – where it stood since noon - the moment Napoleon made a change of front, at 2 p.m. as well.

Additionally, at least for the 1<sup>st</sup> corps it is a fact that units had to familiarize with the terrain, something one would not expect in a position which was well studied long before the 16<sup>th</sup> of June.<sup>7</sup>

In fact, until the moment the French developed in their full range towards 2 p.m. the Prussian three army corps were massed in rear of the villages and along the Namur road, still ready to move off to their right over this road towards Wellington if needed.

In hindsight, all these elements taken together give the impression of an - in a way – improvised, incomplete and hasty concentration. In other words: reality comes down to much more as the mere Prussian intention to fight near Sombreffe, their concentration of forces there and the French doing the same – all resulting in a battle which is often depicted, in hindsight, as an, in all respects, inevitable event.<sup>8</sup>

The fact that Blücher was prepared to concentrate his army around Sombreffe and to accept a battle in the position of Sombreffe in the first place had to do with several factors.

First of all, it was the line of the French offensive (through Charleroi) which led him to do so. Secondly, the Prussians had studied the position long before. In addition, Blücher wasn't the man to start a campaign by retreating.

Yet, from a far more fundamental point of view (as has been shown in the preambles of the campaign), the position around Sombreffe did not only allow Blücher to protect the communication with Namur, Liège and Maastricht, it also afforded Blücher the opportunity to march westward in case Napoleon would move his main army against Wellington through Mons or Tournai.<sup>9-10</sup>

In other words, a position near Sombreffe would not only allow Wellington's army to link up with Blücher, but also the other way around if this would be necessary. It was the basic formula of cooperation: a combination of defensive and offensive of the allied partners so as to converge in a common, decisive battle.

In this connection it is too simple to state that the Prussian army was concentrating for a battle near Sombreffe in order to pin Napoleon as to enable Wellington to concentrate his army at Quatre Bras or Nivelles, as this is reasoning from hindsight, apart from the fact that this theory surpasses the double purpose of the manoeuvre.<sup>11</sup>

This theory of the protection of Wellington's concentration is a contradiction in itself as it would also mean that the Prussians apparently assumed that Wellington could concentrate his forces in time to assist at Ligny; but why would then this protection be needed?<sup>12</sup>

Wagner is a typical and very early exponent of this theory as he states: *Der Entschluss in der genommenen Stellung eine Schlacht zu liefern wurde eigentlich erst jetzt [i.e. between 1 and 2 p.m.] ganz fest, weil der Preussische Feldherr die Überzeugung erhielt, dass ohne dieselbe die Zusammenziehung der Englischen Armee sehr gefährdet sei. Darin aber liegt auch die Ursache warum in den Dörfern so wenig Massregeln für die Vertheidigung getroffen werden konnten.*<sup>13</sup> It is a most unfair way of using Wellington's situation to explain the Prussian lack of occupying the villages of Saint Amand and Ligny, which was caused by a totally different element.

It is Lehmann, although he clearly sees the importance of the alliance between Wellington and Blücher, severely criticizes Blücher for accepting a battle in the position of Sombreffe. First of all because the Prussian army wasn't fully concentrated, secondly because it would have been strategically turned by the French on the right and thirdly because it was a bad position to resist Napoleon.

Indeed it was a great risk Blücher took in accepting a battle so near to the French main army, especially while not having his army completely concentrated but for the reasons as indicated there was no other way. On the other hand, the position of Sombreffe was strategically turned. That it was not a good position may have been true, but it was one which had been thoroughly studied before and chosen for a possible future confrontation.

Lehmann, however, completely ignores the double purpose of the area around Sombreffe in the sense of the support from and to Wellington. Other than that he doesn't take into account the fighting spirit of the Prussians, as well as their optimism about the concentration of the army.

For Lehmann it is unthinkable that the Prussians accepted the battle without having some kind of agreement with Wellington. Here, he binds this too much to a promise as done during the campaign, while this decision also very much had to do with a far more basic promise as done long before the campaign (see below).

Lehmann even suggests it would have been better if Blücher had taken up a position further to the rear.<sup>14</sup> This criticism that Blücher should not have taken up a position at Sombreffe as he could not be sure of Wellington's support there, is not well founded and is, again, a reasoning from hindsight. In fact, there was no other way for the Prussians to do in the context of the arrangements for cooperation as they had been set before the campaign, and which decision was now triggered by the direction of the French attack.

It is not realistic to demand from Blücher to move in such a way that on the 17<sup>th</sup> of June a major battle could be accepted in cooperation with Wellington. First of all, it is not clear where such a battle should then be fought. Secondly, and more importantly, a statement like this surpasses the

defensive arrangements and their underlying defensive concepts which had been set long before the campaign. In this sense, the Prussians put their head on the anvil by concentrating near to the French, with all risks involved.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The distance the letter had to travel was almost 45 kilometres and could therefore have reached Sombreffe between 1 and 2 a.m. taking an average speed of about 10 kilometres per hour.

In an indirect way, Blücher had also learned through Zieten's note of 8.15 a.m. that Wellington would be prepared to concentrate his forces around Nivelles.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Von Pflugk Harttung. In: GSA. VPH-HA, VI, II.12.p.125

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that the Prussians had been confronted by Pajol, Exelmans and one division of the 3rd corps of Vandamme, and that their view on other French forces present was limited by the forests west of Fleurus.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. his report to baron Van der Capellen. In: NA, 2.02.01 nr.6585

<sup>5</sup> Memoirs of prince Von Thurn und Taxis, Bavarian plenipotentiary at the headquarters of Blücher. In: Aus drei Feldzügen etc. p.321-322

<sup>6</sup> Here, it should be remarked that the order of Gneisenau to Bülow to march upon the plateau of Ardenelle should be seen as a correction on the former order pointing to Gembloux and no more.

Gembloux as a stage for Bülow would lead him away from the Roman road, where Ardenelle is, and which was one of the vital connections to the Prussian rear and where the Prussian leadership most probably wanted to have Bülow for flexibility in use, either to the front or as a possible cover in case of a retreat.

<sup>7</sup> Von Pflugk Harttung also points to the fact that French inactivity seemed inexplicable for the Prussian leadership and that it may explain the lack of defensive measures. In: GSA, VPH-HA, VI, nr.III.3.p.7-9

<sup>8</sup> Right from the beginning, the Prussians tended to describe themselves as taking full account of the battle, while in reality they were still in doubt, up to the last moment, whether Napoleon would turn on them with his main force. Obviously, they didn't want to show their uncertainty about the enemy's intentions.

Cf. reports of the 17<sup>th</sup> of June, the Prussian report on the campaign and for instance Gneisenau to consul Gibsone on the 6<sup>th</sup> of August 1815. In: Delbrück, H. - Einiges etc. p.659

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Von Clausewitz – Hinterlassene Werke etc.p.31

<sup>10</sup> Von Plotho believes Blücher also accepted the battle so as to be able to concentrate his army and to be able to defend the field with three quarters of his army until the 17<sup>th</sup> of June, if this would prove necessary. Yet, this reasoning is not only from hindsight, it is also putting the cart before the horse: it was Blücher's intention right from the beginning to have a battle with the complete Prussian army, not with a part of it. In: Der Krieg etc. p.35

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Plotho, Von - De Krieg etc. p.35

Damitz, Von Geschichte des Feldzugs etc. p.117

Ollech even goes that far by stating that the Prussian leadership wanted to prevent Napoleon from taking Quatre Bras. In: Geschichte etc. p.124

<sup>12</sup> Pflugk Harttung, J.von - Vorgeschichte etc. p.245

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<sup>13</sup> In: Wagner - Pläne der Schlachten etc. IV p.29

<sup>14</sup> Lehmann, M. - Zur Geschichte des Jahres 1815 p.279-294

<sup>15</sup> Friedrich von der Marwitz, himself a participant of the campaign, sees the acceptance of the battle as an example of levity while having Napoleon opposing the Prussian army and while lacking the 4th corps; in his idea it would have been wiser to avoid a battle near Sombrefe. Again, these statements not only surpass the very basic arrangements as set by the allied commanders, they also do so with the Prussian mentality. Other than that they stem from hindsight and do not offer an alternative battleground / scenario, as an avoidance of the battle as it took place– all in all, they do not make a very military impression. In: Aus dem Nachlasse Friedrich etc. p.116