

Von Sohr's cavalry-brigade and major Von Gröben's mission.

During the retreat, lieutenant colonel Von Sohr formed with his cavalry (3rd regiment hussars Brandenburg nr.2 and the 5th regiment hussars Pommeranian nr.1, in all 1100 men) and half a battery of horse artillery (nr.5, about 75 men) the extreme rear-guard of the 1st and 2nd corps. ¹

Von Sohr had got the order to find a covered position between Tilly and Gentinnes, to observe the movements of the enemy and, in case of an attack, to fall back towards Mont Saint Guibert, where the 7th brigade would take a position in support. ²

Von Sohr took up a position near the windmill of Gentinnes on a spot called l'Arbre du Vénérable and from here he launched patrols towards Mellery, Tilly and Marbisoux. ³ One of them, consisting of 20 men led by lieutenant Von Manteuffel, went as far as the battlefield and found no enemy troops until he got there. ⁴

Major count Von Gröben, who was a member of the general staff of the cavalry of the 1st corps, was temporarily attached to Von Sohr's brigade. Initially (around midnight) Von Gröben had taken a position somewhere near the Roman road, but it was shortly before dawn that he took an observation post on a height immediately to the east of Marbijoux. ⁵ There he was accompanied by some hussars of Von Sohr. Additionally, Sohr had patrols in the same area.

In his position, hidden in the high crops and carrying a good telescope, Von Gröben was able to observe the battlefield, except for the area beyond Sombrefe towards Gembloux.

Von Gröben transmitted his experiences through notes which were handed down towards headquarters through a line of dispatch-riders. Though the original notes are not available, their content has been preserved. ⁶

The first one reads:

6 a.m. The enemy is in its position of yesterday evening on the heights of Sombrefe between Ligny and Brye. A battalion of infantry moves back towards the Roman road and [illegible]. Today, there do not seem to be so many troops as yesterday.

7 a.m. The enemy [illegible] appears to be reducing its strength. He divides himself on the heights of Brye and takes up suitable positions. Three masses of infantry with artillery are placed thus: [sketch has faded]. A cavalry regiment has disappeared beyond Brye.

It was around midnight that the Prussian rear-guards at Brye and Sombrefe left their positions, so by the time Von Gröben reported those had already gone. The French had their positions, at least from what Von Gröben could see, near Bussy, Ligny and the road which runs from Fleurus to Point du Jour. Not long after the Prussian departure the French started to search Sombrefe and sometime later French cavalry and other troops were heading towards Point du Jour and then disappeared. ⁷ These were the units of Pajol, Exelmans and Teste, heading towards Namur and Gembloux. Von Gröben was also witness of the excitement during the visit of Napoleon to the battlefield at 9 a.m. For a while nothing happened, until one of the posts of Von Sohr near Marbijoux was driven away by the French patrols. It was at this period of time that Groeben wrote his second note which reads:

17th June 11.30 a.m. With a few squadrons, the enemy has just thrown back our picket which has stood to the left front of Marbijoux. Colonel Von Sohr has main body at the windmill of Gentinnes. Until now, little or no enemy movements there have been observed. The firing coming from the direction of Wellington ceases now and then completely or continues very slightly in isolated shots. To the left, towards Sombreffe, no enemy can be seen.

Gröben

Von Gröben was now forced to leave his position and went back to Von Sohr's position near the windmill of Gentinnes. This was around noon. Soon after his arrival there, he wrote the following notes in the period between 12.30 and 5 p.m.:

12.30 Uhr p.m. Windmill of Gentinnes, 17th June 15.

A strong column of cavalry, coming from Marbais, can be seen passing just beyond Tilly. A patrol reports that the English posts on our right have gone back a little. Other than that, no firing can be heard. Towards Sombreffe nothing is happening. According to a report of the picket, infantry would follow the cavalry.

1 p.m. Cavalry has moved beyond Tilly. I also note, judging from the clouds of dust, that the infantry is strongly increasing in numbers. Everything comes from Bry. Perhaps they move along the left bank of the Dyle against Wellington. A rifleman, who by chance had approached Sombreffe, would have seen a number of French forces between Vieille Maison and this village.

2 p.m. My suspicion is confirmed. Everything is moving beyond Tilly towards Genappe.

*Von Gröben. 5 p.m.*⁸

It was after 5 p.m. that French patrols were moving in rear of Von Sohr through Strychon and Villers la Ville and this triggered him to leave his post and fall back towards Mont Saint Guibert.⁹ In doing so, he left a post of one officer and 60 men at Haute Heuval to observe the French movements and to report back to him. The route which Von Sohr took was the same as did the 1st and 2nd corps earlier that day, that is through Haute Heuval, the farm of Sartage, the Arbre de la Justice, the farm de Chenoy, and then towards Mont Saint Guibert via Hevillers or Le Grand Chêne. Von Gröben preceded Von Sohr in his retreat as he wrote at Mont Saint Guibert his fourth note.

It reads:

*Lieutenant colonel Von Sohr has just reached the position of Mont Saint Guibert with his rear-guard. The enemy had continued his march along the left bank of the **bifurcation** of the Dyle beyond Tilly. In front, he developed a body of cavalry thus:*



Way back to the rear, the infantry followed, as it seems to me in three columns. By the time we were still on the height of Gentinnes, the enemy sent out detachments in our rear through Strychon and Villers la Ville, upon which lieutenant colonel Von Sohr decided for a slow retreat to Mont Saint Guibert. He left an officer with 60 men on the height of Haute Heuval, who was supposed to report about everything, until he was pushed back.

The cannonade with the duke of Wellington commenced towards 4 p.m. I fear that this corps will attack him on his left flank as it can easily slip between us and the duke. Would Your Excellence order to hold the position of Mont Saint Guibert ? Until now, the enemy has not yet attacked the rear-guard. The cannonade with the duke of Wellington continues (near Genappe as it seems to me).

Gröben

N.B. Just now, major Von Ledebur, arrives here from Blanmont with a regiment of cavalry and two battalions infantry, as a detachment of the 4th army-corps.

Gröben.

Von Sohr arrived in Mont Saint Guibert in the evening ⁽¹⁰⁾ and this brigade, as well as Von Gröben, spent the night there undisturbed. Von Gröben himself got to central headquarters the other day between 7 and 8 a.m. ¹¹

First version: 1st June 2005 - Last revised: 5th April 2014 - Copyright © Pierre de Wit

¹ Ardenne, A.von - Geschichte des Zieten'schen Husaren-Regiments p. 490
During the battle of Ligny the 1st and 4th squadron of the Neumark Dragoon regiment n.6 (brigade Von Thümen) were attached to the brigade of Von Sohr.
Whether they were also with the brigade on the 17th of June is unclear. Cf. Hagen, E.von - Geschichte des Neumärkischen Dragoner-Regiments nr.3 p. 279

² Damitz, K. von - Geschichte des Feldzugs von 1815 p.214
Beitzke, H. – Aus dem Leben etc. p.137

³ This windmill, the Moulin Dewez or du Vénérable, built in 1807, no longer exists. It stood on the height 160 southwest of Gentinnes, near a tree. This tree has been cut in 1859 and replaced by the Chapelle Saint Joseph.

⁴ Schöning, K.W. Geschichte etc. p.490

⁵ This a height 165, in 1815 near the Cabaret la Croisette, south of a crossing of five roads. Now, the site is still called la Croix and there a chapel called Depas.

⁶ Lettow Vorbeck, O.von - Napoleons Untergang Vol.III Annex 12. p.529-530 The originals could be found in the former KA, nr.VI.C.3.II p.129-135

⁷ Account of Von Gröben himself. In: Pflugk Hartung, J.von - Belle Alliance. Die Schilderung der Ereignisse vom 16.-18.Juni 1815 durch einen mitbeteiligten Generalstabsoffizier p.10

This account has partly been published by Von Ollech, though with slight changes in the text. In: Geschichte etc.p.168-169

⁸ Apparently, Von Groeben kept his observations of the afternoon with him until 5 p.m, as the notes timed at 12.30, 13.00 and 14.00 hours were written on one sheet of paper.

The British post of cavalry as referred to was one of the 18th regiment of hussars which patrolled the area near the Bois Delhütte.

⁹ According to Von Damitz and Von Nostitz, Sohr fell back at 11 a.m.

Cf. Damitz, K.von Geschichte etc. p.235

Tagebuch p.35

Another publication claims it was at 10 a.m. Cf. Schöning, K.W. - Geschichte etc. p.490

However, the fact that the brigade fell back in the late afternoon is confirmed by a member of the 1st regiment of Pommeranian hussars nr.5 Cf. Count Von Wedel of this regiment. In: Geschichte eines Offiziers etc. p.250

¹⁰ Count Von Wedel of the 1st regiment Pommeranian hussars nr.5 In: Wedel, C.von

Geschichte eines Offiziers etc. p.250

Nostitz, Von Das Tagebuch etc. p.35

¹¹ Ollech, Von – Geschichte des Feldzugs etc. p.188

Pflugk Harttung, Von – In: GSA, VPH HA-VI nr.V.1.p.1