

## The action at Wavre. Observations.

The defence-system as Thielmann had planned it on his front line paid off. At Wavre, after a brief bombardment and an apparent lack of reconnaissance, the French threw themselves into its suburb. This was swiftly taken, but this was not a real gain of French. It was part of the Prussian system of defence to give up the right bank and to concentrate all the effort from behind the Dyle, and to hold the crossings here to the utmost. At Wavre, in this way, the very action came down to these three crossings here.

At the *pont du Christ*, the main street coming from the suburb was at right angles to the Dyle which could have been an advantage for the French. At the same time though, access was most restricted because of the Dyle and its adjoining outbuildings. Just because of this, the French were unable to isolate or turn the bridge. All focused upon this one point, where in the obstinacy of the attacks, a risk of a prolonged fire-fight was lurking.

Unable in each attempt to force a passage, the French retreated into the suburb where they fled into the side streets and the place du Sablon where they were exposed to enemy gun-fire, as well as higher up to the rear. In this way the French were literally sucked into a situation from which they were virtually unable to extricate themselves.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, in the high number of attempts to gain access to the city here all day, large quantities of men were consumed by the alternate use of battalions of the divisions of Habert and Lefol.<sup>2</sup> As battalions were actually engaged in small numbers at the same time, a high proportion of the divisions was passively waiting for instructions further to the rear. Eventually, at Wavre, in this way, two Prussian battalions were able to bind two full French divisions.

The trick to break this deadlock for the French could have been to turn Wavre lower or higher up the Dyle-stream.<sup>3</sup> In fact, both Basse-Wavre and the Bierges-mill were attacked almost simultaneously, but both attempts were not pushed through. In fact, at Basse Wavre, after an initial and unsuccessful attack of the small French, the action was limited to skirmishing mostly for the remainder of the day.

Because of the strength of the position, the attacks upon the mill of Bierges stranded even before the French were able to reach the bridge and mill altogether even though it was just one Prussian company versus one or two French battalions.<sup>4</sup>

The lack of emphasis in the first French actions gave Thielmann the impression of a demonstration of Grouchy to fix him in his position, and not of some action intended to actually drive him out of it.<sup>5</sup>

However, the moment the French made a crossing at Limale, it became evident to Thielmann that he had act to prevent Grouchy from going round his right flank. The detachment originally intended to secure Thielmann's right flank, the one of major Von Stengel, was used to do this. The fact, however, that it failed in doing so by occupying Limale has brought up the basic question why Limale had not been occupied by the Prussians in the first place, and second, as it happened, why Von Stengel did not occupy it right away when he had the chance to do so.<sup>6</sup>

This chance was the moment Von Stengel had a superiority over the French with his skirmishers in parts of the village, while the French hadn't settled there, the more as they only had some cavalry there. Von Stengel from his side did not show the determination though needed for the occupation of a village right then. This asked in this case for a swarm of skirmishers with its supports first, followed up by three battalion columns penetrating into the village from the north and east to exploit the skirmishers' success. This would allow him to consolidate positions in the village and to occupy the bridge from there.

Now, Von Stengel felt uneasy by his own weakness and by his lack of knowledge of the terrain and of the French. As a result, he chose for taking up positions on the heights dominating the village so as to prevent the enemy from coming out of it.<sup>7</sup>

In the end, Von Stengel might not have been able to keep his position at Limale, but at least he should have tried to establish himself there.

On the other hand, the occupation of Limale fitted in a much larger context, i.e. the protection of the left flank of the grand flank-march of the Prussian army as a preventive measure *as such*, so independent of the events as we know them which took place afterwards. It would require a careful coordination between different corps, and this is what now was missing. For Thielmann, Limale was rather isolated. And as for Von Stengel, he might have been the most appropriate detachment, yet his position near Bierges best fitted his mission.<sup>8</sup>

As for Pirch I, though he had a detachment observing the area between Chapelle Saint Lambert and Limale, he only had a small cavalry-post in Limale. To make things worse, communication ran from this post to Von Stülpnagel first and not straight to Von Stengel.

The general result of the French advance on the left bank of the Dyle was that Thielmann pulled back in a position which now had two fronts: one towards the Dyle and one towards to the west, and of which Bierges formed the point where these two lines merged.

On the second front-line, with the departure in the night of Von Stengel's detachment and the fear for his extreme right flank, Thielmann extended his flank along the front of the Bois de Rixensart. This made this front-line way too long for the forces he had available. Therefore, despite the reinforcement with units of Von Kemphen's brigade, it showed gaps.<sup>9</sup>

In his task of binding Grouchy to him, Thielmann ventured upon an offensive movement. In Thielmann's idea, if Napoleon was in retreat, Grouchy had to retreat as well and it would be exceedingly difficult for him to withdraw in good order in face of an attack in force by which he found himself committed by a general engagement.<sup>10</sup> The attempt failed and triggered the French to increase their pressure upon Bierges, the joint of Thielmann's frontlines, to make an irruption from there and cut the Prussian forces in two. To stay in his position after the French would have taken Bierges would therefore have been to court disaster, but to retreat too soon would have ruined Thielmann's chances of rallying again to the attack.<sup>11</sup>

The French attempt to break the joint did not succeed, but Thielmann adjusted his frontline starting from Bierges towards and along the Brussels road. Eventually, it was not the situation at Bierges, but the combination of the good news about the battle at Mont Saint Jean and the French threat upon his own extreme right flank which made Thielmann decide to evacuate his positions, pull them together near Bavette and to retreat from there towards Louvain.

Why this choice for Louvain and not for Brussels ? First of all, it allowed Thielmann to use Wavre as a pivot and flank guard up to the very last moment. Further, a direction north-east would prevent Grouchy of getting into Thielmann's rear. As Thielmann did not expect Grouchy to move in a for him eccentric way, it would also enable him to keep control of his own movements.<sup>12</sup> Eventually, Louvain also allowed Thielmann to link up further to the rear, towards Maastricht, with other allied forces, if need be.

Obviously, Thielmann could not be aware of the fact that Grouchy originally did not intend to move in an north-east direction. That is also why Grouchy halted his forces along the road Wavre – Brussels. For Thielmann it was now a matter of waiting for the moment Grouchy would learn about the emperor's defeat at Mont Saint Jean and his resulting retreat. Thielmann had also been informed that Pirch I was meant to intercept this retreat by moving east.

Yet, by the combination of his retreat towards Ottenbourg without keeping contact – even from afar - with his opponent, and Grouchy's halt at the Brussels-road, Thielmann was unable to detain Grouchy any longer; in fact, it allowed Grouchy to pull off on the 19<sup>th</sup> of June unnoticed.

One can only guess how Grouchy would have started the attack on Wavre in case he would have been there right from the moment Vandamme's first units reached its opposite heights. One could wonder whether it would have been any different from the way Vandamme did it. Fact is that Grouchy, after having arrived around 4.45 p.m. witnessed the fruitless actions there until about 6 p.m. He then decided to see how Gérard fared at the mill of Bierges. Here it was no different. Pondering what to do next, it was just at that moment that Grouchy received further instructions from Napoleon.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Adc Bella. In: Relation succincte, 4me série p.51  
Colonel Le Sénécal. 2<sup>nd</sup> statement, dated 2<sup>nd</sup> June 1830. In: SHAT, nr.C15/5  
Cf. Colonel Stoffel (2<sup>nd</sup> regiment of Swiss infantry ) in his journal. In: “Waterloo” ,  
manuscript file of colonel Eugène Stoffel. In: Collection D.Lérault, France. He states the men  
were “mal engages.”

<sup>2</sup> In the thirteen attempts done within a period of seven hours (from 4 to 11 p.m.), it meant  
that each half hour an attempt was made to dislodge the Prussians from the Dyle here.  
The division of Berthézène was not involved in the actions on the 18<sup>th</sup> of June. Berthézène  
himself remains silent about any actions of his division.  
Casualties, in officers, were low, ranging from 2 to 7. The only regiment which suffered a  
higher number in officers was the 15<sup>th</sup> regiment of light infantry (division Lefol). It remain  
unclear how just this regiment lost so many in relation to the other regiments.  
Cf. Martinien, M - Tableaux par corps et par batailles des officiers tués et blessés pendant les  
guerres de l’empire 1805-1815

<sup>3</sup> Fantin des Odoards - Journal du général Fantin des Odoards. Etapes d’un officier de la  
grande armée, 1800-1830 p.434  
Berthezene - Souvenirs militaires de la République et de l’Empire p.393

<sup>4</sup> This episode has been used by different participants to put Grouchy in an unfavourable  
light, or Gérard in a favourable light alternatively as the hero of the action. From the evidence  
available, however, it becomes clear that Grouchy did not take part in the action. In fact, after  
having witnessed the situation, he ordered to halt it.  
Casualties of the battalions which attacked here are unknown, but striking detail is that no  
officers of the 9<sup>th</sup> regiment of light infantry were killed or wounded that day. Cf. Martinien,  
M. - Tableaux par corps et par batailles des officiers tués et blessés pendant les guerres de  
l’empire 1805-1815 p.412

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Thielmann himself in his report. In: Lettow Vorbeck, O. von – Napoleon’s Untergang  
Vol.III p.452-453

<sup>6</sup> Von Stengel has been criticized for this by Von Clausewitz. Cf. his letter to Gneisenau, dated  
11<sup>th</sup> September 1815. In: Delbrück, H. - Das leben etc. Vol.IV p.629  
Von Pflugk Harttung blames alternately Zieten and Von Stengel. In: Das Gefecht bei Limale  
p.36 And in: GSA, HA VI nr.V.8 p.12

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Pflugk Harttung, J.von - Das Gefecht bei Limale p.62

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Pflugk Harttung, J.von - Das Gefecht bei Limale p.62

<sup>9</sup> Cf. GSA, VPH VI.V.8 p.30

<sup>10</sup> Horsburgh, E.L.S. - Waterloo. A narrative and a criticism p.308

<sup>11</sup> Hyde Kelly, W. - The battle of Wavre and Grouchy’s retreat p.102

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<sup>12</sup> Das Gefecht von Wavre von preussischer Seite angesehen. In: Militärische Zeitschrift 1820, II p.305