

Major general Napier on Wellington on the 15th of June.

In the Waterloo letters there is an account of major general Napier, who was not in the campaign of 1815 himself, but who apparently cites from the duke of Wellington in connection to the events on the 15th of June.

Napier writes: "He [Wellington] found the prince of Orange at the duchess of Richmond's ball on the evening of the 15th of June. He was surprised to see him because he had placed him at Binche, an important outpost, for the purpose of observing and giving notice of the movements of the enemy. He went up to him and asked if there was any news? "No! nothing but that the French have crossed the Sambre and had a brush with the Prussians. Have you heard of it?"

This was news. So he told him quietly that he had better go back to his post, and then by degrees he got the principal officers away from the ball and sent them to their troops. This was done, I think he said, about 11 o'clock.

He then went to his quarters and found Müffling there, coming from Blücher with the news; he ought to have arrived long before, but, said the duke to me: "I cannot tell the world that Blücher picked the fattest man in his army to ride with an express to me, and that he took thirty hours to go thirty miles." ¹

In the context of these events one would think this account would have some kind of importance. Yet, it hasn't at all.

First of all, the prince was at Brussels from the afternoon till after midnight of the 15th of June. Napier also suggest as if the prince would have kept vital information for himself, and that Wellington had to ask for it. Further, it was not before 11 p.m. that Wellington sent out his officers.

As for the passage dealing with Von Müffling, Napier suggests as if it was Von Müffling himself who would have gone to Blücher and back again to Wellington to bring him "the news", whatever news this may have been.

Napier claims it took Von Müffling 30 hours to cover 30 miles. First of all, the distance between Namur and Brussels wasn't 45 kilometres but 63 and the 30 hours would have meant that Von Müffling would have left from Namur even before the war had started.

The conclusion of all these statements is that in all its details Napier's account is complete fiction. ²

Major general Napier on major general Von Dörnberg on the 15th of June. ³

In the same letter as referred to above, major general W.Napier wrote the following: "There is, however, a very curious story about the espionage, which I believe no man knows but myself now. My authority (Grant, the chief of the espionage) is dead. General Dörnberg was the real cause of the Duke's being surprised in his cantonments."

Napier doesn't explain this any further, but in 1857 Napier wrote a memorandum on sir Colquhoun Grant and which was published in 1861 in the "Autobiography and services of Sir James McGrigor, Bart."

It contains the claim that an agent at Paris dispatched on the 15th of June to sir Colquhoun Grant a note of which the substance was: "Les routs sont encombrées de troupes et de materiel, les officiers de toutes grades parlent haut que la grande bataille sera livrée avant trois jours." Grant, in his turn, would have sent this information to Von Dörnberg who rejected it as being an unimportant piece of information.

Grant, yet convinced of its importance, conveyed the information to the duke, who received it on the 18th of June, on the battlefield of Waterloo.

Wellington himself would have written on the document, as seen by Napier, “Received from Grant, June the 18th, eleven o’clock.”

It is in this version that Von Dörnberg is accused of withholding vital information from Wellington and thereby delaying Wellington’s reaction to the news of the French hostilities against the Prussians on the 15th of June.⁴

In this particular item, both Peter Hofschröder and John Hussey very justly refute this claim by referring to the contradiction here noting that Von Dörnberg did take the situation on the 15th of June seriously, as he did inform lord FitzRoy Somerset (at 9.30 a.m.) about the French attack upon the Prussians.

Both also refer to the lack of corroborating evidence for the claim, the more as the original document referred to has never shown up. Additionally, if the note was sent from Paris on the 15th of June, the very day that the French offensive against the Prussians was launched (by daybreak), it could never have reached Wellington before that time. The time needed to travel from Paris to Brussels was three days.

Eventually, Von Dörnberg, from the documents available in the Supplementary despatches, comes out as a person who is clearly a conduit, not a filter of information. He didn’t select and adapted it to his own ideas; he simply wrote it down as he got it and forwarded it to Brussels.

All in all, here again, the claim as laid down by Napier is fully unfounded.

First version: 22nd October 2005 - Last revised: 14th June 2009 - Copyright © Pierre de Wit

¹ In: BL, Add.ms.34.707 p.486-488

² Cf. Peter Hofschröder in the introduction of the Memoirs of baron von Müffling, p.xii-xiv

³ This note relies heavily upon:

Hofschröder, P. Grant's Waterloo intelligence p.163-176

Hussey, J. The fog of war and the confusions etc. p.13-18

⁴ Cf. Haswell, J. The first respectable spy etc. p.222

Uffindell, A. The eagle's last triumph p.60

Fletcher, I. A desperate business p.32

Friedman, P.M. Respectable spies p.7

Haswell dates the note on the 13th of June, thereby antedating everything after, which is incorrect.