

The Napoleon Series

The Bailen Enquiry: the Campaign

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I am not proposing to attempt a detailed analysis of the documents relating to the Capitulation of Bailen; instead, this is only intended as a rough summary of the events, as derived from the documents, with an emphasis on the matters brought before the Enquiry.

The campaign opened in May 1808 when Dupont was ordered to march to Cadiz and occupy it, and also to occupy Seville. The orders he was given (May 15th) and Napoleon's correspondence make it clear that this was expected to be straightforward; it was assumed that the Spanish military and civil authorities would be co-operating with him. He was sent out with only his first division and a few extra units since it was believed that he would be reinforced by the Swiss regiments in the Spanish service. As far as Andujar all went well and Dupont wrote confidently from there on June 2nd that he expected to be able to deal with the band of rebels in the area; he also asked for his second division to be sent to join him. He met the rebels outside Cordova on June 7th, defeated them and drove them back through the town. (What happened during the taking and occupation of the town will be discussed in a future article) The news gathered at Cordova was not good, Dupont wrote to Madrid on June 9th that Seville and Cadiz were in the hands of the insurgents, Spanish regular troops were joining them, along with at least some of the Swiss. He asked for reinforcements and ordered Vedel, with the second division, to join him. These letters did not get through, because of insurgent bands in his rear areas. On the same date, Napoleon wrote to Talleyrand that Dupont's entry into Seville had pacified Andalusia and that the little local disturbances would be resolved by the time of Joseph's arrival at Madrid. After 10 days with no news from Madrid and reports of a Spanish army moving towards him, Dupont evacuated Cordova on the evening of June 16th and pulled back to Andujar on the right bank of the river Guadalquivir.

In Madrid, Savary was now in charge and on June 15th Vedel was ordered forwards from Toledo to re-establish contact with Dupont. He had to fight his way through the Sierra-Morena and it was June 27th before he reached Ste Helene and got in touch with Dupont. An order from Napoleon at Bayonne, directing Vedel to remain in La Mancha until it was pacified and only then to cross the Sierra Morena, failed to reach him in time. The orders Dupont received were to not advance further until Santander, Saragossa, and Valencia had been occupied; he was given to understand that this was imminent and this was why he held on at Andujar. It does not appear from his correspondence that retreating further was ever considered; instead, he was expecting to receive reinforcements which would enable him to go on the offensive.

Vedel had moved forward to Bailen; on June 29th he wrote that he did not know whether the dispatches would get through since La Mancha was disturbed and there were no troops there and that they were hoping for reinforcements from France. This might have given Dupont cause for second thoughts but a letter from Madrid on July 2nd reassured him that he would be fully supported once Saragossa and Valencia were taken, this was likely to happen within a few days and in the meantime Gobert's division was being sent to him in place of his third division which was employed at

Madrid. Dupont acknowledged this letter on July 6th and said that he had ordered Gobert to cross the Sierra Morena and join him but that he would have to leave troops to guard the rear and that it was urgent that these should be replaced so that they could take the offensive. He considered that he could deal with the Spanish forces and occupy Cadiz and Seville in three weeks. On July 9th, Savary heard that Moncey had been forced to retreat from Valencia and orders were sent to Dupont to hold his position at Andujar until further orders. Savary also wrote to Berthier at Bayonne and received a rebuke for sending Gobert to join Dupont, since it was more important to reinforce Bessieres. This triggered a strong response from Savary with the phrase "One cannot see that from Bayonne": he insisted that Dupont needed all the troops he could get and that the returns of the Spanish minister of war showed that there were likely to be more troops opposed to Dupont than to Bessieres. At the same time, Joseph, who had reached Vittoria, wrote to Napoleon that he needed to know the truth: that he had no support in Spain other than the few members of the junta travelling with him. Napoleon continued to insist that everything was going well, especially after Bessieres beat Cuesta at Medina de Rio Seco on July 14th. The news of this battle did not reach Savary till the 19th and on the 17th he began to lose his nerve and wrote to Dupont that, with no news of Bessieres and with Moncey retreating on Madrid, it might be necessary to recall Dupont and that in the meantime he should send Gobert back across the mountains and hold the defensive while keeping in contact with Gobert. If Gobert had to be recalled to Madrid then Dupont should also retreat to La Mancha. However, Dupont never received this letter.

Back in Andalusia, Gobert had arrived at La Carolina and established his HQ at Guarroman on July 13th. That same day, the enemy began making threatening movements and Liger-Belair, guarding the ford at Mengibar, came under attack, his advance guard was driven back and the enemy occupied the village. On the 15th Vedel moved out of Bailen to support him, calling Gobert forward to cover Bailen; he estimated the enemy forces at around 3,500, according to his letter at the time. Also on the 15th, Dupont was attacked at Andujar and sent an ADC to Vedel asking him to send a battalion, or a brigade if the enemy was not in force at Mengibar: Vedel decided to reinforce Liger-Belair with four companies and go to Andujar himself with the rest of his forces. This was the first point of controversy: he wrote describing his actions to Dupont and afterwards said Dupont could have ordered him to return if he did not approve; Vedel claimed that his ADC had reached Bailen at 7pm, Dupont, in his final statement at the Enquiry, stated that he had only been informed of this two hours before Vedel's arrival at Andujar, that Vedel had left Mengibar at 6pm on the 15th and reached Andujar at 2pm on the 16th, by which time it was already too late for counter-orders to halt him. Vedel had taken 18 hours on the march. Dupont had to assume that Vedel had not left any enemies at Mengibar, he only learned of the events there two hours after Vedel's arrival. Vedel said he had left Mengibar at 5pm on the 15th and, delayed by bad roads, had reached Andujar at 10am on the 16th. There does not seem to be any evidence to decide between these statements but it is probably true that at whichever time Dupont heard that Vedel was bringing his whole division it would have been too late to send a counter-order which would only have led to Vedel not being present at either point of danger. By the time the Enquiry was held, Dupont had been brooding on Vedel's faults for four years and his recollections had been remodelled accordingly, the same applies to Vedel's protestations of innocence so it is probably best to judge them by their earlier statements. In either case, Vedel did not reach Andujar in time to take part in the day's skirmishing.

On the 16th, Reding attacked Liger-Belair, Gobert came to his support and received a fatal head wound, brigade-general Dufour took command and the French were forced back to Bailen. At 3.30pm, Dufour wrote to Dupont that if the enemy attacked again he would be obliged to retreat to Guarroman, since he had heard that a force of 7,000 was moving in that direction. Dupont received this letter and wrote to Vedel at 6pm to return to Bailen in haste "I hope that the enemy will be thrown back on Mengibar tomorrow, beyond the river, and that the posts of Guarroman and La Carolina will remain in security: they are of great importance. When you have obtained this success, I want you to send part of your forces to Andujar in order to fight the enemy in front of us. You will leave at Bailen only what is necessary for its defence." Dupont stated that he had given the instructions to Vedel in person, using the map to explain his intentions. Vedel, in his first interrogation, said "The order to leave was given to me in writing by the general in chief at his dinner-time, which was usually very late and I left at 9pm. My instructions were to join General Dufour, to repulse the enemy to Mengibar and to make him recross the river, to attack the enemy if he was at Baeza, to return to Bailen and from there to Andujar, leaving posts at Bailen to guard this point." Vedel was given reinforcements which included the troops under general Lefranc's orders, these belonged to Gobert's division but had been detached to Andujar; Lefranc was senior to Dufour and took over the command when they rejoined.

At 10pm on the evening of the 16th, Dufour ordered a withdrawal to Guarroman without apparently notifying anyone. It is easy to see why Dufour considered Guarroman as the important post since that was where Gobert's division had been stationed and Gobert's correspondence shows how anxious he was about leaving it: what is harder to understand is why Liger-Belair, whose post was at Mengibar and who was attached to Vedel's division, went with him: this was Poinot's opinion. Neither Dufour nor Liger-Belair were interrogated so we have no answers.

Vedel reached Bailen on the morning of the 17th and found no-one there. At 8.30am he wrote to Dupont that the rumour was that the enemy division which had attacked them yesterday was moving towards Ste Helene and the gorges and that, as soon as his troops were rested, he would try to catch them. In his first statement he claimed that he had sent out reconnaissances towards Mengibar and had found nothing, but this letter does not support that, neither does the letter written by Baste to Dupont at the same time; Poinot only stated that he had reconnoitred Bailen. Since Reding was still at Mengibar, a competent reconnaissance should have found him and since the troops did not leave till around 4pm there would have been time for one. D'Affry's statement was that Dufour (d'Affry was with Liger-Belair) took up position at Guarroman at daybreak on the 17th and that at noon a peasant brought news from Vedel that he was marching to join them. When Dupont received Vedel's letter he approved both Vedel's movement and that of Dufour, a fact he managed to forget later which was to be held against him by the Prosecutor. This may have been a genuine memory lapse given everything else that had happened, since although Dupont had lost his correspondence he must have been aware that Vedel could produce the letters. When challenged on this during his February 9th interrogation, he seemed genuinely surprised. This was where Dupont made his big mistake: he assumed that Dufour and Vedel were acting on sound information, if the enemy had been moving toward Ste Helene it would have been important to get there before him, he never asked whether they had checked Mengibar or whether anyone had been left to protect Bailen. He may not even have realized that Liger-Belair had left with

Dufour. In fact, Vedel had left only a small force occupying the strong point of the Hermitage outside Bailen.

Vedel reached Guarroman late at night on the 17th, Dufour repeated the information he had received and Vedel sent him on to Ste Helene which he reached at 11am on the 18th, leaving four companies at La Carolina as he passed through. Vedel reported to Dupont at 10.30pm on the 17th; in this letter he mentioned that he had withdrawn General Cavrois from Bailen to join him. Dupont replied to this letter at 7 am on the 18th, he encouraged Vedel to attack the enemy and to return as soon as possible since the enemy was making movements in front of him. A point persistently made by the Prosecutor was that Dupont had given orders to raise the camp at Andujar on the 17th and had countermanded the order; this idea came from Marescot's original statement and seems to be completely unsupported. Dupont had written to Vedel on the 17th that if the enemy at Ste Helene was too strong he would raise the camp and come to his support, possibly some garbled version of this had reached Marescot. Legendre, his chief of staff, said that at that time they were still waiting for news from Vedel. Dupont seemed very confused about the timings of these days, he gave various versions of when he heard that Bailen was evacuated or occupied by the Spanish. It was actually on the morning of the 17th that he wrote to Vedel that he was sending two companies to the post-house on the Andujar-Bailen road since some enemy troops had shown themselves and he was not sure if his last letter had got through. A letter from Barbou to Chabert written on the morning of the 18th said that the officer commanding this detachment had orders to send him reports twice daily and to communicate with Vedel. It would seem from this that Dupont believed Vedel had left troops at Bailen, though he knew at 7am on the 18th that Cavrois had been withdrawn.

Vedel reached La Carolina on the morning of the 18th and there he received news from Dufour that there were no large bodies of enemy troops in the area of Ste Helene: at this point he realised that they had been acting on false information and recalled Dufour. He wrote to Dupont at 9am on the 18th, "In consequence I am taking position here today and will return tomorrow to Bailen. I am told that the enemy occupies Baeza, Ubeda, Linares and Mengibar; that Reding is in the latter place" Even though he knew that Reding was at Mengibar and there were no French troops in Bailen, Vedel waited all day at La Carolina for Dufour. Reding, reinforced by Coupigny, entered Bailen at the same time that Vedel was writing this. On the evening of the 18th, according to Vedel's letter of the following day, the messengers he had sent to Dupont returned, having been unable to pass Bailen.

At some point on the 18th, the troops Dupont had posted on the Bailen road became aware that the enemy was now holding Bailen and Dupont gave orders to raise the camp. He did not leave till nightfall because he could not risk Castanos seeing his movement and for the same reason he blocked the bridge instead of blowing it up. The order of the march was to become a point of contention, the most reliable information is probably that given by Daugier, of the Sailors of the Guard, in his report to Mortier in 1808. "The troops placed on the Madrid side set out first with the baggage and main artillery park. They were followed by those that occupied the bridgehead. The Paris Guard and the Sailors of the Imperial Guard were placed as a rear guard, the general in chief having grounds for believing that the army would be harassed in its retreat by the part of the insurgent army which was besieging it by the right bank of the river and whose posts were not far from our main guard posts. Happily, and as a result of measures taken in the town to engage the inhabitants not

to leave their houses, the enemy did not know of our movement till daybreak so that the march of the army was only delayed by some accidents that happened to the guns and caissons on the road and by the necessity of keeping constantly assembled.”

Chabert's advance guard met the enemy at the Rumbler bridge at around 3.30 am on the 19th and drove them back, as more troops came forward they joined the action. At daybreak Vedel and Lefranc left La Carolina; from Guarroman Vedel wrote to Dupont, "From 4am I have heard quite a lively firing of cannon and, at intervals, of musketry. I presume that it is between Andujar and Bailen. The firing ceased at my arrival at Guarroman. I went to the heights in front of the village, a great cloud of dust appearing above the Andujar road made me think that YE had decided to leave that town to go to Bailen and that you had been disturbed by the enemy. I do not know if my conjectures are well-founded; in any case I count on rejoining YE this evening at Bailen" Vedel still did not see the importance of taking his full strength to Bailen, to Lefranc he sent orders to cover the Sierra-Morena with the troops of Dufour and Lagrange. Vedel's troops, exhausted and half-starved, took a long lunch-break at Guarroman which was the subject of much criticism particularly since his generals alleged afterwards that they had pressed him to march to the sound of the guns. His delay in leaving La Carolina, though less excusable, did not receive the same attention.

Dupont's troops attacked the Spanish troops throughout the morning but they were outnumbered and outgunned. Reding's after-battle report stated, "Everywhere he was repulsed and even pursued, in spite of the force of his attacks which he repeated without any interruption other than that necessary to fall back and to form new columns. Towards 12.30pm, fatigued without having been able to gain ground, although he had several times broken our lines of defence with the intrepidity of troops accustomed to conquering, he came almost to our batteries, which were served that day in an astonishing manner, and he was repulsed. General Dupont commenced the last attack by putting himself and the other generals at the lead of his columns under the fire of our artillery and continued it with a really admirable firmness, but without better success. According to what the enemy has reported he had 14 guns dismounted, 2,000 dead and a great number wounded, among them Dupont and two other generals."

By this time the French troops, many of them suffering from dysentery, were exhausted and desperately thirsty; they began to disband to try and find water. This was a July day, now past noon, in the south of Spain and even the Spanish complained of the heat. Dupont said that he did not have 2,000 men under arms and that he was expecting Castanos to arrive on his rear at any time so, probably 1-2pm, he decided to ask Reding for a truce and for permission to pass Bailen to evacuate Andalusia.

He sent Captain Villoutreys, one of his staff-officers and equerry to the Emperor, to Reding. Reding was prepared to grant the truce but sent Villoutreys to Castanos, "As I had no authority to treat and had never had to occupy myself with such a matter I am sending you this same Villoutreys so that he can tell you all that is needed. During this time we will be at rest and I will send some water to the enemy in case of necessity. I cannot extend myself further. General Pena has my advice to stay in the same position in which he finds himself which I believe to be half a league from the French army." General Lapena's division had now reached the Rumbler bridge, it was

consistently overlooked by the Enquiry that this put him in a position to attack Dupont's defenceless troops at any time during the next three days; Dupont's actions cannot be explained without remembering that he was very much aware of this.

While Villoutreys was on his way to Castanos, who was still at Andujar, Vedel finally arrived at Bailen at 4-5pm. Reding sent an officer to tell him that there was a truce; Vedel, quite correctly, refused to believe this and sent one of his ADCs to Dupont. When the ADC did not return promptly he gave the order to attack: his troops were successful at first and took prisoners, guns and flags from Spanish troops who put up little resistance but his attack on the Hermitage was repulsed and before he could make a new attack an ADC arrived from Dupont ordering him to cease fighting. Vedel claimed that the ADC did not explain the circumstances and that he believed the French had been successful. It is hard to see how he could have believed this, when the Spanish were still occupying Bailen and Dupont was still on the wrong side of the town. Dupont was blamed at the Enquiry for stopping a successful attack and for not having taken the opportunity to break through but this was to ignore both the exhaustion of his troops and the presence of Lapena on his rear; this makes it difficult to argue with Dupont's explanation that breaking the truce at that point would have led to the massacre of his troops.

It was argued that Dupont had no right to give orders to Vedel at this point, since he was not free to act, and that Vedel should not have obeyed him, and that Vedel was not bound by the truce since he was not present when it was agreed. Those are arguments for lawyers sitting in a courtroom: they do not reflect the situation the generals found themselves in at the time. Since Lapena, who was not under Reding's command, had halted at his request on account of the truce; Dupont had no other option but to apply it to Vedel or see the truce broken completely. Much was made of Vedel having been stopped in the middle of a successful attack but in reality his success was limited and was unlikely to continue once Reding organised a defence and once Lapena marched over the debris of the division Barbou to join him. Without clear knowledge of the situation, Vedel could not reasonably have been expected to disobey a direct order.

That was the end of the fighting. The discussion of the capitulation occupied the next few days and I will deal with this next time.

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