

# The Napoleon Series

## The Campaign of 1814: Chapter 19, Part I

By: Maurice Weil

Translated by: [Greg Gorsuch](#)

# THE CAMPAIGN OF 1814

(after the documents of the imperial and royal archives of Vienna)

---

## THE ALLIED CAVALRY

DURING THE CAMPAIGN OF 1814

---

### CHAPTER XIX.

OPERATIONS IN BELGIUM AND NORTHERN FRANCE, FROM 3 MARCH UNTIL THE TERMINATION OF HOSTILITIES.

**5 March. --Measures taken by the Duke of Saxe-Weimar.** --The failure of the undertakings attempted by Colonel Hobe and Major Helwig, the retreat of their detachments on Oudenaarde and Deinze, the resolute attitude of the French troops, the concentration of relatively numerous forces at Kortrijk (Courtrai), and the movements of Maison in the direction Ghent and Oudenaarde, had not been without seriously disturbing the Duke of Saxe-Weimar. As we said in concluding Chapter XII, the Duke had transferred his headquarters from Ath to Tournai on 4 March, and sent the battalion of the Saxon Guard and a half battery of 12 pounders to Leuze. The information reported by the emissaries, the interrogation of the deserters and the people of the country, and finally the events of the last few days, made it clear that, far from being satisfied with holding in Kortrijk, to seek only to aggravate his troops and to want to tatter and to fatigue those of the Duke by offensive reconnaissance or by simple demonstrations, Maison proposed to communicate with Antwerp and to withdraw part of the garrison from it. The Duke of Saxe-Weimar had ordered General von Borstell to immediately reinforce Colonel von Hobe by a few battalions, and Prince Paul of Württemberg to establish himself on the 4<sup>th</sup> of March at Ath, on the 5<sup>th</sup>, at Tournai, with the bulk of the division of Anhalt-Thuringia, replaced at Aalst and Dendermonde by three battalions of the Prussian landwehr coming from Gorcum, and sending its battalion of fusiliers and its jäger to join General von Ryssel on the side of Mons.

**Fight of Oudenaarde.** --The movements of Maison justified the precautionary measures taken by the Duke of Saxe-Weimar. In order to comply with the instructions of the Emperor, contained in the letter which the Minister of War had written to him on 2 March, Maison had begun on 5 March in the morning his movement on Oudenaarde at

the head of about 6,000 men and 1000 horse. He proposed to take this town from Colonel von Hobe, to cross the Schelde (Scheldt or Escaut), to fall back on Ronse (Renaix), to outflank the right of the Duke of Saxe-Weimar, and to give him fears for Brussels, where only two battalions and eighty cavalymen remained. At the same time, in order to facilitate the departure of the Antwerp garrison and the march of the Roguet Division, he had posted on his left at Vive-Saint-Éloy 600 to 700 men, who, under General Penne, had to try to take Ghent by surprise and give a hand to the troops that had left Antwerp.

A little before 11 o'clock in the morning the head of the column of Maison, debouching from Avelgem, met the Prussian cavalry in front of Kerkhove. Too weak to resist the French troops, the latter disputed the land foot by foot and retired slowly to Petegem-aan-de-Schelde where it was collected by a battalion and a section of artillery, which Colonel von Hobe had established there in outpost, in order to spare the time necessary to complete the organization of the defense of Oudenaarde.

While the French cavalry and two pieces of light artillery continued to advance by the road, General Barrois deployed three of his battalions in a column to the right and left of this road, took Petegem, and drove out the battalion which was about to retreat further on to the heights in front of Bevere, and that Colonel von Hobe had occupied with two battalions, six squadrons, 4 cannons, and 2 howitzers; two other battalions and 4 pieces were in reserve at the very gates of Oudenaarde, ready to support the battalions established on the height.

Maison immediately began the attack by placing six pieces in the intervals of his three battalions, which, marching en masse at intervals of deployment on the sides of the road, stood upright against the heights that Colonel von Hobe's battalions, retreating to Oudenaarde, abandoned without giving battle to the infantry of Barrois.

Oudenaarde still had remnants of fortifications and a very deep moat fed by the Schelde, which at that time flooded all the advances of the city. On this side one could enter the city only by a single gate and a bridge established on the former ditch fortifications. Colonel von Hobe had had time to arrange trenches on the salients of the old works behind which his infantry was sheltered. He had also erected a work which covered the gate, and placed his artillery so as to beat the approaches to the bridge which he had destroyed. The part of the town situated on the left bank of the Scheldt was thus a kind of bridgehead very difficult to attack. After having taken it, it would have been necessary first to cross the bridges of the Schelde, then to emerge on the strong position which was on the right bank.

In spite of the difficulties of a strong attack undertaken under such conditions, the possession of Oudenaarde was of such importance that Maison tried, nevertheless, with two attempts from 4 o'clock in the afternoon, intimidating Hobe and persuading him to evacuate the city. Tempted with few people these attacks produced no results.

At 8 o'clock in the evening Maison, stopping his infantry, confined himself to bombarding the town. He had also learned that troops from Tournai sought to join those of Major Hellwig, who had returned to Deinze after his point on Tielt, that 1200 men from the garrison of Brussels had gone to Ghent, on the 5<sup>th</sup>, at 9 o'clock in the morning, 1000 men and 2 cannons had followed in the same direction. Maison, judging that the capture of Oudenaarde would impose upon him sacrifices out of proportion to his strength,<sup>1</sup> renounced his project. He had at first intended to march with all his troops on Ghent. But this movement was not without its serious drawbacks. It sufficed that there were only a few bridges destroyed, that a resistance, which probably would have stopped him 12 hours before Ghent and a movement executed by the Prussian troops of Oudenaarde, to put the column of Maison in a position of the great misfortunate. Moreover, the occupation of Ghent by the Allied troops made it very problematic to join it with the troops leaving Antwerp.

#### **Retreat of Maison on Kortrijk. --Colonel von Hobe evacuates Oudenaarde in the night of 5 to 6 of March.**

--Warned by the Duke of Saxe-Weimar at Oudenaarde and at Ghent, Maison resolved accordingly to retire to Kortrijk, in order to try by another fashion to be joined by a division of the garrison of Antwerp.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Maison to the Minister, Courtrai, 6 March evening. (Correspondence of Maison, *Archives of the War*.)

<sup>2</sup>Maison to the Minister, Courtrai, 6 March evening. (Correspondence of Maison, *Archives of the War*.)

In taking this course, Maison had perhaps acted with an excess of prudence, and yielded to the fear of compromising the fate of the little column which he had so much trouble to form. He was unaware, it is true, of the resolution taken by Colonel von Hobe on the evening of the 5<sup>th</sup>. Fearing that the French might force one of the gates of Oudenaarde, or pass the Schelde upstream of the city to outflank his left, push it back and cut it off from Tournai, knowing more than the three battalions of Anhalt -Thuringia, whom he hoped to be able to recall to him, had left Geraardsbergen, Colonel von Hobe, after consulting his officers, pulled back his artillery and the bulk of his troops on the road of Renaix, and left only his vanguard in Oudenaarde, who informed him on the morning of the 6<sup>th</sup> of the retreat of the French. Farther north, the march of General Penne in the direction of Deinze had revealed the plans of the Maison to Major Hellwig, who at once moved all his people to Ghent.

**Orders given by the Duke of Saxe-Weimar to General von Borstell.** --Though he believed that the corps of Hellwig and that of Hobe strong enough, one to hold out in Ghent and bar General Penne from Antwerp, and the other to outwit the undertakings of Maison at Oudenaarde, the Duke Of Saxe-Weimar resolved nevertheless to put an end to the offensive inclinations of his adversary. Incompletely reassured about the fate of Oudenaarde, of which he wished to remain a master at all costs, he sent on the afternoon of the 5<sup>th</sup> the order to General von Borstell to disengage Colonel von Hobe and to execute for this purpose a vigorous demonstration on Kortrijk and the lines of retreat of Maison.

**6 March. --Demonstration against Kortrijk.** --In order to facilitate the execution of this operation, he sent to Leuze a portion of the troops which he had directed on Condé,<sup>3</sup> and ordered General-Major von Ryssel to push from Mons to Ath two battalions which were to be joined on this point by a half battery coming from Enghien.

On the night of 5 to 6 March, at 4 o'clock in the morning, General Von Borstell had sent from Tournai a flying column under the orders of Colonel von Schon,<sup>4</sup> and ordered General-Major Prince Paul of Würtemberg<sup>5</sup> to go, to establish at Warcoing as a support for the detachment of Colonel von Schon, to cover his right, and to watch the road to Oudenaarde.

Colonel von Schon, carefully scouting his way, had hastened to occupy Bellegem. Leaving two battalions at the crossroads of the Kortrijk road and the road to Zwevegem, he had continued on that city with the rest of his people, and stopped his main body at a little distance from the suburbs. His hussars alone penetrated into the suburbs, drove out a grand guard of French cavalry, and pushed as far as the market-place. Received by fusil shot from a French infantry post, the hussars retreated without being otherwise disturbed. Not believing himself sufficiently strong to take Kortrijk and especially to maintain himself there, knowing moreover that the Prince Paul of Würtemberg, instead of stopping at Warcoing, had followed his movement, fearing to be cut off from Tournai in the case the French had directed one of their columns from Oudenaarde on Avelgem, Espierre, and Warcoing, Colonel von Schon, who had pleaded with Prince Paul of Würtemberg to reoccupy Warcoing as soon as possible, remained for some time in observation a distance from Kortrijk and only left his position when the French artillery opened fire against him.

**Maison falls back from Oudenaarde on Kortrijk.** --At the moment when the Prussian colonel began his retreat, Maison, whose main body was still a league from Kortrijk, sent some squadrons and light artillery to occupy as soon as possible the gate of Tournai, and then directed from Zwevegem to Bellegem a small column of infantry and cavalry, charged to take in the flank and back Colonel von Schon, whom he intended to attack in the front. But the colonel, considering his mission as finished, did not wait for the attack of the French. Continuing his retreat, he

---

<sup>3</sup>A battalion and a half of infantry, a squadron of hussars, and a section of artillery under the command of Colonel Prince Schönberg.

<sup>4</sup> Composition of the flying column of Colonel von Schon: two Prussian battalions, a Saxon battalion, a squadron of Saxon hussars and four cannons.

<sup>5</sup>Composition of the detachment of Prince Paul of Würtemberg at Warcoing: two battalions, a squadron, and four pieces.

reached Warcoing without encumbrance, and effected his junction with Prince Paul of Württemberg, and settled there at the bivouac. The French advance guard stopped at Kooigem. The bulk of the troops of Maison (the Barrois Division) occupied Kortrijk. General Penne, whom Maison had recalled to him as soon as he saw that the coup de main on Ghent had no chance of succeeding, had taken a position at Bellegem, and the General from Oudenaarde to Zwevegem. A portion of the cavalry and two battalions covered Kortrijk to the north, and posts established at Harelbeke, Kuurne, and Heule were guarding the roads of Ghent and Bruges.<sup>6</sup>

**7 March. --Combat of Kortrijk.** --The Duke of Saxe-Weimar, for his part, had directed from Leuze on Tournai, Lieutenant-General Lecoq, who brought with him and pushed on Warcoing the detachment of Colonel Prince Schönberg. General Lecoq had orders to take, on the morning of the 7<sup>th</sup>, the command of the troops to whom they entrusted the care of observing the fortresses of Lille and Condé. As for General von Borstell, who was in charge of operations on Kortrijk, he concentrated for this purpose 12 battalions, 6 squadrons and 28 guns. The bulk of this column, with the exception of one battalion left to guard the pontoon bridge of Hérinnes, went straight from Warcoing to Kortrijk. On his right the detachment of Prince Schönberg was ordered to flank the march of the main body, and to connect with the detachment of Colonel Hobe in motion from Oudenaarde to Kortrijk. To the north of Kortrijk Major Hellwig and Colonel Bihalov I, coming from Ghent and Deinze, moved at the same time on Harelbeke.

Having left Warcoing in the morning, Borstell, having arrived at Kooigem, had already begun to push on Bellegem, where General Penne had only two weak battalions, two pieces and 100 horses, when he received the order to stop and only engaged after receiving notice of the approach of the column of Colonel von Hobe. This column was to be pointed out to him by Colonel von Ziegler whom the Duke of Saxe-Weimar had just sent to Avelgem; but at one o'clock in the afternoon Colonel von Hobe's column had not yet appeared.

**Dispositions taken by the Duke of Saxe-Weimar.** --While not daring to risk an attack on Kortrijk without having all his forces at hand, the Duke of Saxe-Weimar resolved, nevertheless, to take advantage of the few hours of day light which remained for him to take possession of the points which would be indispensable, and should facilitate the enterprise which he thought himself obliged to postpone to the next day. Accordingly, a little after 3 o'clock he gave General von Borstell, who had been skirmishing since the morning with the posts of General Penne, the orders to attack Bellegem, to Colonel von Ziegler to move from Avelgem against Zwevegem.

Too weak to maintain himself at Bellegem, which he had, however, placed in a state of defense, General Penne retired to a height near the village, which he abandoned to the Prussians. Maison, thinking that main attack of Borstell would be made on this point, drew from his small reserve at Kortrijk three battalions, 200 horses, and four pieces, which enabled General Penne to retain his position until the night.<sup>7</sup>

On the side of Zwevegem, Colonel von Ziegler had failed until 5 o'clock in the attacks on the general of Oudenaarde. Reinforced by the detachment of Colonel Prince Schönberg, Ziegler only succeeded in the evening in forcing the defenders of Zwevegem to retreat to Kortrijk.<sup>8</sup>

North of Kortrijk, Hellwig and Bihalov I had not succeeded in flushing out the French posts at Kuurne and Harelbeke, which they occupied only in the night and after the departure of the French.<sup>9</sup>

Determined to capture Kortrijk the next day, the Duke of Saxe-Weimar had charged Borstell with the main attack by the road to Tournai. Colonel von Ziegler, debouching from Zwevegem, had the mission of supporting the operations of the Prussians, while Colonel von Hobe, who had been sent to the right wing, was moved by Lannoy on

---

<sup>6</sup>Maison to the Minister of War, Kortrijk, 6 March evening. (*Archives of the War.*)

<sup>7</sup>Maison to the Minister, Roncq, 8 March. (*Archives of the War.*)

<sup>8</sup>*Id. In ibid.*

<sup>9</sup>LIPPE WEISSENFELS, *Geschichte des Königlich-preussischen 6<sup>ten</sup> Hussaren Regiments (ehedem 2<sup>ten</sup> Schlesischen).*

Roubaix to threaten the lines of retreat of Maison, which, in order to return to Lille, was obliged to make use either of the direct route of Tourcoing, or of going farther north by Menin.

**8 March. - Evacuation of Kortrijk by Maison.** --But the French general had not waited for the attack of the Duke of Saxe Weimar. Outflanked on his right by the Prussians of Borstell, who had occupied since the night before Bellegem and Rollegem, threatened on his front by the Saxons on the side of Zwevegem, on his left by the Cossacks and the corps of Hellwig on the side of Kuurne and Harelbeke, Maison, who had occupied Kortrijk only because this position, "unlikely to be a good defense, seemed to him to be able to serve as the base and point of an invasion of Belgium,"<sup>10</sup> had decided to retreat during the night over Menin and Roncq. One of his columns, passing back to Menin on the right bank of the Lys, guarded the bridge there; the other, taking Lauwe and settling at the Halluin and Roncq, observed in concert with the first the debouchments of Menin and Tourcoing on Lille. These movements were executed without hindrance, and almost without the knowledge of the Prussians and Saxons.

**Observations on the operations of Maison.** --On his arrival at Roncq on the morning of the 8th of March, Maison found a dispatch from Paris on the 4th of March, by which Clarke,<sup>11</sup> returning again to his letter of 2 March, reproached him with disseminating his troops into small columns, and ordered him to march on Antwerp, to leave only 3,000 men in its garrison, to disengage from Brussels, and to threaten the communications of the Allies, "who," said the Minister, "are everywhere but are not in force on any side."

As he pointed out to the Minister, in replying to him from Roncq on March 8<sup>th</sup>,<sup>12</sup> Maison had by no means disseminated his forces. In fact, while he was assembling the troops destined to take action against Menin and Kortrijk, and that he was chasing the Allied detachments, almost as numerous as his small operating corps, he had ordered Carra-Saint-Cyr, senior commander at Condé, Valenciennes, and Bouchain, to unite the garrison of Valenciennes with that of Condé, and to attack, as this general did, the Saxon posts of Péruwelz. Like Carra-Saint-Cyr's demonstration, the Castex movement, which, after having pushed a reconnaissance beyond the Marque, had joined the commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> Corps in Menin in the last days of February, to divert the attention of the Allied generals. In order to constitute a semblance of a corps of operation, Maison had also taken from the towns all that could be brought out without compromising their safety. It was not, however, with 5,000 men, "of whom more than half were children who could barely carry their weapons, and who had every difficulty in leaving from the houses,"<sup>13</sup> that the general could undertake something due to the inferiority of his forces and the measures taken by the Duke of Saxe-Weimar to defend Oudenaarde and Ghent, it was necessary, on the contrary, to show certain boldness to try, at the head of a handful of men, to give their hand to the garrison of Antwerp. Such an operation could succeed only by surprise.

Upon his arrival at Oudenaarde, Maison had made an exact account of the difficulties of his situation. Had he been somewhat delayed in his decision to withdraw to Kortrijk, he would have been cut off from that town by Prussian and Saxon troops, who, coming from Tournai, arrived almost at the same time as he did at Kortrijk. In the impossibility of maintaining it against the superior forces of the Duke of Saxe-Weimar, it might have been possible, instead of filing through the roads of Menin and Lauwe, to march by the road to Tourcoing and try to fall back on the left flank of the Prussian troops. But this operation, quite hazardous in itself, would not have changed the general situation, and would have had less chance of success if the small French corps had in its turn been caught in flank and taken in the rear by the column of Colonel von Hobe, which the Duke of Saxe-Weimar wished to send on Roubaix. Finally, as he said in concluding his dispatch to the Minister,<sup>14</sup> Maison, by reason of the small number and the lack of solidity of his troops, could only cause anxiety to his adversary, to seek to beat him in isolation and to

---

<sup>10</sup>Maison to the Minister, Roncq, 8 March. (*Archives of the War.*)

<sup>11</sup>Clarke to Maison, Paris, 4 March; letter carried by Captain Morel, former aide-de-camp to General Avy. (*Archives of the War.*)

<sup>12</sup>Maison to the Minister of War, Roncq, 8 March. (*Archives of the War.*)

<sup>13</sup>*Id. In ibid.*

<sup>14</sup>Maison to the Minister, Roncq, 8 March. (*Archives of the War.*)

force him to employ, to observe different points, forces superior to his. "I will follow this system," he wrote, "the only one I can adopt, and I will always keep my little corps united and active."

**Occupation of Kortrijk and Menin. --Positions of the troops of the Duke of Saxe-Weimar on the evening of the 8<sup>th</sup> of March.** --On the 8<sup>th</sup> of March, at four o'clock in the morning, the Duke of Saxe-Weimar, informed by his foremost posts of the retreat of the French, resumed the order given to Colonel von Hobe, pushed his advanced guard, first on Kortrijk then Menin, where the rear-guard of Maison evacuated to come and stand at Halluin. In the afternoon the Duke of Saxe-Weimar entered Kortrijk at the head of all his troops. But, as Maison had foreseen,<sup>15</sup> he did not resolve to establish himself there by force. Leaving Kortrijk on the same day with the bulk of his corps to return to Tournai, where Borstell was to rejoin him the next day, he entrusted the guarding of Menin to a party of Cossacks, left only the detachment of Major Hellwig at Kortrijk, and returned to his former positions. The only change he made to the distribution of his troops was to send Prince Paul of Württemberg to Warcoing, who, with five battalions and half a battery, was to serve as a support for Hellwig, and to charge the division of Borstell to provide the advanced posts on the side of Condé.

In short, the Duke of Saxe-Weimar was still far from seeing clearly into his opponent's game. Not wishing to compromise himself, and thinking himself obliged to occupy a disproportionately large front, in the hope of being able to defeat the blows of the detachments of the Maison, he thought himself all the less able to continue the offensive operations which the new arrivals from Antwerp caused him serious anxiety. Now that Maison and Carnot had been able to communicate and combine their operations, the Commander-in-Chief of the III<sup>rd</sup> Corps of the Confederation endeavored, above all, to observe the fortresses of the old frontier, and secure the roads leading to Antwerp.

**Sorties of the garrisons of Antwerp, of Condé, Maubeuge, Philippeville, and Ostend.** --The Duke of Saxe-Weimar had just learned that, while Maison was operating on Kortrijk and on Oudenaarde, the French garrisons of Condé, Maubeuge, Philippeville and Ostend had simultaneously attacked the troops left in front of these places to observe them, and that Carnot had made a sortie with 5,000 men from the garrison out of Antwerp under the command of General Roguet. This general, who had debouched from the Tête-de-Flandre on Beveren and marched on the left bank of the Schelde, had occupied, the 7<sup>th</sup> of March, Sint-Niklaas and Rupelmonde, surprised a party of Cossacks of Bihalov I at Waasmunster, and pushed up to Lokeren, a day's march from Ghent. This movement, which coincided with that of Maison, and which, both from Lokeren and from Waasmunster, could be continued either on Ghent or on Dendermonde, had the Duke of Saxe-Weimar all the more alarmed, whom Colonel Count Lottum had to detach from the garrison of Brussels two companies of jäger volunteers, and some cavalrymen, to re-occupy Dendermonde, evacuated by Major von Klinkowstrom, who had been urgently recalled by Bülow, and had refused to remain there longer.<sup>16</sup>

The demonstration made by the garrison of Antwerp, therefore, had not been useless, though it had taken place a little late, and while Carnot had reminded him of the troops he had brought from the place, he became acquainted

---

<sup>15</sup>House ends, indeed, one of the dispatches he sent on 8 March, from Roncq, to Clarke, by the words: "The enemy, who has attained his objective by dislodging me from Kortrijk, will divide again to resume positions on the Schelde. If he does not do it himself, I will oblige him by passing the Marque towards Tournai, disturbing him by my movements and running over his detachments. That is all I can do with my 4,000 men. Besides, I have attained the objective which I proposed, by drawing upon myself more than double the forces of mine." (*Archives of the War.*)

Two days before, Maison had, moreover, announced to the Minister that, in execution of the orders of the Emperor, he had assembled all that he was likely to hold in the campaign; that there remained at Le Quesnoy and Landrecies only 150 men in garrison. "I think that the Allies, considering the advantages which the possession of Avesnes gives them, are going to besiege of Maubeuge, Condé, Landrecies, and Quesnoy." (*Archives of the War.*)

<sup>16</sup>Recalled to France by an order from Bülow, to whose corps he belonged, Major von Klinkowstrom only consented to delay his departure, and to reoccupy Dendermonde and Aalst, on the 11<sup>th</sup> of March, under a formal order from the Duke of Saxe-Weimar. "A soldier," wrote the Duke of Saxe-Weimar, "has no right to leave his post when the enemy approaches him."

with the retreat of Maison and the movement of concentration of the English on Kalmthout.

**An unsuccessful attempt by the British on Berg-op-Zoom.** --Not believing himself strong enough to attempt anything against Antwerp, General Graham had resolved to take by surprise Berg-op-Zoom, which he had so far blockaded. The English general had prepared for a long time the blow which he wished to execute on the night of the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 9<sup>th</sup> of March, in the hope of "celebrating the anniversary of the birth of the Prince of Orange by a brilliant success." Thanks to the intelligence which he had succeeded in arranging in the fortress, he knew that the garrison, reduced to about 2,700 men by desertions and sicknesses, fatigue and deprivation, was scarcely sufficient to provide guard service. Perfectly informed by his emissaries, he was not ignorant that the corps of the place was hardly clothed, and that the ice, which was still very thick, facilitated the crossing of the ditches on a number of points which had been pointed out to him. On 6 March, in order to better deceive the vigilance of General Bizanet, Graham had ordered his troops to leave the town. But this maneuver had not produced a change in the governor. Far from modifying the precautionary measures he had taken since the beginning of the blockade, General Bizanet, on the contrary, doubled his guards, pickets, posts and sentinels, set up new posts, multiplied the rounds and patrols, established his outer battery at the Place d'Armes, and distributed all the troops in the bastions assigned to them as battle posts in case of alarm. The days of 7 and 8 March passed tranquilly. But on the evening of the 8<sup>th</sup>, 4,800 English,<sup>17</sup> taking advantage of the low tide, advanced in four columns, guided by inhabitants. The first of these columns, with about a thousand troops and responsible for the attack on the left, aimed at the part of the town between the port and the Antwerp gate. The 1200 men of which the second column was composed, were to act in the center and to go to the right of the gate of Breda. The third column (650 men) was only to demonstrate against the gate of Steenburgen and serve as a reserve. The main attack was entrusted to the 1100 men of the fourth column, under the command of Generals Skerret and Goore.

Going towards the Water Gate, this column was ordered to penetrate at low tide in the quarter of the port separated from the rest of the city by houses and walls of fence and communicating with it only by the ramparts and by an old château known as Fausse-Porte. Once it was the master of the harbor, it was to join itself with the first column and push with it into the interior of the city to open the gate of Antwerp to the cavalry of General Graham and that of Breda to the second column .

A little after nine-thirty in the evening the third column suddenly appeared before the gate of Steenburgen, overwhelmed the forward guard, and succeeded in penetrating into the half-moon which served as a point of retreat. Stopped on this point by a small palisaded redoubt raised in front of the drawbridge, and by three pieces which shot at them with grape-shot, the English arrived in spite of the fire of the defenders at the drawbridge. Some men, climbing the escarpment, reached the platform of the rampart, where they were soon taken or killed. The garrison had rushed to arms at the first firing. The artillery of bastions 11 and 12 fired grape-shot. One of the adjutants of the town, who had run from the commencement of the attack to the gate of Steenburgen, directed the infantry fires on the lunette and glacis of the advance.<sup>18</sup> However, as one later learned, the grape shot and the musketry did little harm to the assailants who lay flat on their stomachs at the end of the glacis "waiting for the rising of the moon, low tide and an agreed signal."<sup>19</sup>

At 10:30 in the evening the English attempted to force the drawbridge of the gate of Steenburgen, but without success, and had to give up their enterprise before the murderous fire of two pieces, which riddled them with grape-shot.

The fourth column coming from Halsteren had reached the extremity of the dam of Tholen, near the flood-gate. Along the tail of the glacis opposite Bastion 15, it had descended into the channel without being noticed by the

---

<sup>17</sup>General Bizanet, in his report to the Minister (*Archives of the War*), estimates the total strength of the English troops responsible for the attack at 8,000 men and 1000 horses.

<sup>18</sup> The adjutant captain of town, Barcelle, who directed the defense of the Steenburgen bridge (bastions 11, 12, 13, 14 and 15), says in his report (*Archives of the War*) that he at that time obliged 1 colonel, 15 officers and 170 men to throw themselves into a tunnel and that these men, cut off from their comrades, surrendered a little later.

<sup>19</sup>Report of the Colonel of Engineers Legrand on the surprise of Berg-op-Zoom. Night from 8 to 9 March. (*Archives of the War*.)

sailors of the boats, had turned the cofferdam of the bastion, crossed the abatis which defended the access of the escarpment and debouched on the parapet without firing a fusil. Conducted by General Goore, the English took possession of the Water Gate without firing a shot, to the drawbridge which they could not lower, and towards which General Bizanet directed the greater part of his reserves, the Fausse-Porte.

At the same moment, while General Goore was filing with a part of his column and pushing along the ramparts towards the gates of Antwerp and Breda, the first of the columns of attack, profiting from the low tide between the Schelde and the fortress, was marching against the Orange Bastion, climbing the ramparts, slaughtering the sentinels, penetrating the bastion, and capturing the 3 officers and the 120 men in charge of defending it. This column, repulsing all that was in Bastions 3 and 4, made its junction with the troops of Generals Goore and Skerret, already masters of the bastions 1 and 2 of the Water Gate.

General Goore, whose movement had facilitated the climbing of the first column, penetrated into the bastion 5, and sought to reach the gate of Antwerp, which the cavalry of Graham, posted on the road to Antwerp, awaited the opening for entering the town. Another column, heading for the Breda gate, had taken possession of bastions 6 and 7 and was trying to take hold of bastion 8, while a fourth column, filing at the foot of the glacis, flooded of the front formed by the bastions 9 and 10.

By eleven-thirty in the evening, of the four attacks, one against the Steenburgen Gate, the other against the port, the third against the Orange Bastion and the last one against the gate of Breda, two, those of the port and the Orange Bastion (1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> columns), had completely succeeded and the garrison had only 4 of the 15 bastions of the main defenses of the town.

Despite these initial advantages, the situation of the English became increasingly critical. Their surprise had been thwarted by the vigilance of the besieged. They had not been able to penetrate into the town proper, and had had to leave General Bizanet time to organize his columns of attack. The French post at the Gate of Breda had not been opened, and at the gate of Steenburgen the garrison had not ceased to have the upper hand. Before attempting to retake all the positions occupied by the English, General Bizanet, who, in order to avoid misunderstandings, only wanted to signal the attack at daybreak, ordered Major Hugo de Neufville to retake Bastion 8. After a violent and murderous battle, the English abandoned this bastion to the 3<sup>rd</sup> battalion of the 12<sup>th</sup> Line and retreated to the bastion of Orange.

Shortly before dawn General Bizanet launched his three columns. Two of them were ordered to march by the ramparts, the third to march against the Fausse-Porte, and all three were to meet at the Water Gate. After three quarters of an hour of fighting the French had retaken bastions 5 and 6 and reoccupied the post at the gate of Antwerp. From that moment the outcome of the combat was no longer doubtful. The English held only a few bastions and the quarter of the harbor where they had firmly settled themselves in the houses, but from which it was impossible for them to debouch. Chased successively from bastions 13 and 14, 4 and 3, from the Arsenal, then from bastions 15 and 1, forced to evacuate the quarter of the port, they sought a last refuge in the Bastion 2. Driven onto the rampart, surrounded on all sides, unable, because of the high tide, to try to escape through the channel and by the low-water mark which had facilitated their entry into the town, obliged to escape by jumping ramparts into the ditches whose ice was breaking under the weight of those who had recourse to this means, the English were to be crushed and annihilated, when one of their superior officers was taken prisoner during the night, convinced of the uselessness of the resistance of his brothers in arms, offered himself to the governor to put an end to this slaughter. A few moments later the fire ceased and, at 9 o'clock in the morning, General Skerret and the 2,077 Englishmen who still remained in the place, decided to lay down their arms. This affair had cost General Graham 4 flags and nearly 4,000 men, including 1,800 dead or wounded. Of the three English general officers who had entered Berg-op-Zoom, one of them, a General Goore, had been killed during the battle with Colonel Clifton, Mercer, Macdonald, and Carlton, and the other, General Cooke, who was seriously wounded, died on the day of the 9<sup>th</sup>.

The losses of the garrison amounted to 113 killed, of whom seven were officers; 308 wounded, including 8 officers, and 123 prisoners, captured at the beginning of the surprise.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup>Report of General Bizanet, Berg-op-Zoom, 13 March (*Archives of the War*); report of the adjutant captain of the town, Barcelle (*Ibid.*), and the relating of the Colonel of the Engineers Legrand.



Discouraged by the failure of a coup de main that had so happily begun, General Graham asked, and obtained on 10 March, a three-day suspension of arms to bury his dead, evacuate the wounded and exchange the prisoners.<sup>21</sup>

**9-11 March. --Positions of the Duke of Saxe-Weimar. - Measures taken by Maison.** --The exits of the garrison from Antwerp, the failure of the English of General Graham before Berg-op-Zoom, and lastly, the obligation of covering the communications of the Army of Silesia had completely disconcerted the Duke of Saxe-Weimar. The commander of the III<sup>rd</sup> Corps of the Confederation, renouncing the offensive immediately after the resumption of Oudenaarde, resolved to wait, on the one hand, for news from Blücher, on the other the arrival of the reinforcements that were added to General Von Thielmann and to maintain his troops on the long line which he thought it necessary to occupy in order to be able to supervise the towns of the frontier.

This inaction of the Duke of Saxe-Weimar would enable Maison to comply with the orders which the Emperor had just given him. As early as the 9 March the French general had ordered Generals Brenier-Montmorand and Carra-Saint-Cyr to leave only National Guards in the towns under their command<sup>22</sup>; the next day, March 10<sup>th</sup>, as the Duke of Saxe-Weimar had concentrated everyone at Pecq, Saint-Léger and Dottignies, Maison came to take up a position at Roubaix, while still retaining Tourcoing. His outposts continued to occupy Roncq, Neuville-en-Ferrain, Watrelos and Lannoy.<sup>23</sup> Leaving temporarily the command of his troops on the front line to General Barrois, Maison left Roubaix on the 10<sup>th</sup>, to go and take at Lille the measures of organization prescribed by the Emperor.<sup>24</sup> While conforming to the orders of his sovereign, Maison, even before arriving at Lille, remarked to the Minister that the picture of organization was greatly exaggerated. Indeed, he could not get anything from Ypres, who was asking for reinforcements, or from Ostend, where there were only 900 men. The 4<sup>th</sup> Division of the Guard, which Clarke supposed was 4,334 men, had only 1930 men in its three regiments of tirailleurs, and the 12<sup>th</sup> Voltigeurs had only 800 men. Finally, after the last events, it seemed almost impossible for Maison to succeed in making his junction with the garrisons of Antwerp, Berg-op-Zoom and Maastricht, and he added, in conclusion: "I repeat, I shall consider the success of an operation on Antwerp to be very uncertain."<sup>25</sup>

In short, there was hardly any movement on either side during the days of the 9th and 10th of March. On the side of

---

<sup>21</sup>From that moment the Englishmen limited themselves to blockading Berg-op-Zoom. On 11 April the garrison recognized the government of Louis XVIII and returned to France at the conclusion of the peace.

<sup>22</sup> General Maison, orders to Generals Brenier-Montmorand and Carra-Saint-Cyr, 9 March. (*Archives of the War.*)

<sup>23</sup>Maison to the Minister, Roubaix, 10 March. (*Ibid.*)

<sup>24</sup>On the order of the Emperor, Clarke, by a dispatch of 7 March, had ordered Maison to reorganize his army, to assemble all the available troops of the garrisons in the towns of Flanders, to move upon Antwerp, for reuniting all the troops, with the exception of 3,000 sailors, to dispose of part of the garrison of Berg-op-Zoom, and to march on Brussels to disengage that city, and to disturb the communications of the Duke of Saxe-Weimar. To this dispatch, according to which only the National Guard was to remain in the towns of Flanders, at Antwerp, that the sailors and workmen of the port, at Berg-op-Zoom, that a thousand men were to join a table of formation of the corps of Maison. According to the calculations of the Emperor and the Minister, Maison would then have had 41 battalions representing a strength of 22,487 men and 2,033 horses. Instead of taking a fixed line of operation. Maison was to be continually in motion as soon as his corps was organized, to go sometimes to Antwerp, sometimes to Brussels, sometimes to Condé and Tournai, and sometimes to the Meuse. "The evil you will make to the enemy by this way of operating will be incalculable," wrote the Minister, "and will revive the confidence and energy of the inhabitants when they feel protected by an army corps always in pursuit of enemy parties which desolate the small towns of the country. The Emperor ordered Maison to organize the towns in the Turkish fashion, "that is to say that the same men must remain constantly charged with the defense of the same post and the same bastion, and to sleep there as in a barracks. This method much facilitates the service, since, in order to keep a town, only one-quarter of the men are obliged to employ according to our usual manner." (*Archives of the War.*)

<sup>25</sup>Maison to the Minister, Roubaix, 10 March. (*Ibid.*)

the Allies, on the basis of more or less exact information on the positions occupied by the bulk of the forces of the Maison, and the news of the return to Menin of a French party which had dislodged the Cossacks belonging to the flying corps of Hellwig one had sent to Oudenaarde 2 battalions, half a squadron, and an artillery section, drawn from the Anhalt-Thüringen troops left at Warcoing.

**Affairs of Quiévrain, Solre-le-Château and Vieux-Reng.** --During the whole duration of the operations against Oudenaarde and Ghent, the garrisons of the French towns had also continued their coup de mains. On the 7<sup>th</sup> of March a party of French cavalry, having left Valenciennes, had levied a contribution at Quiévrain, and requisitioned the supplies which the arrival of the Allied cavalry prevented it from bringing back to Valenciennes. The next day, 8 March, a small French column left Maubeuge to take a large convoy of flour that had been known to arrive at Solre-sur-Sambre. Though surprised by the French, who succeeded for a moment in penetrating into the city, the Russian infantry which served as escort to this convoy succeeded, after a rather lively engagement, to repulse the French and to oblige them to take the road to Maubeuge .

The failure of this attempt did not discourage the commander of Maubeuge. Informed that a column of 400 to 500 French prisoners, coming from Soissons, slept on the 10<sup>th</sup> of March at Solre-sur-Sambre, and was to continue on the following day on Mons, he sent out on 11 March, at 4 o'clock in the morning, 400 infantrymen, a trentaine (30) chasseur à cheval and two pieces of cannon under the command of Major Reinhartz, with the order to settle at the village of Vieux-Reng, near the road to be followed by the column of prisoners, to ambush part of its troop in the ravines, and to attack the escort as soon as it would appear. The Major conducted his operation with great skill and circumspection: at the moment when the head of the column came out, he had it charged by his chasseurs à cheval, and followed immediately by a fusillade by 100 of his infantrymen. Only containing 150 men and about 40 horses, the Prussian escort, surprised by this unexpected attack, only put up a feeble resistance and fled as quickly as possible to Rouvrois, abandoning to the French the 500 prisoners among whom the greater part belonged to the grenadiers and the chasseurs of the Guard. A Russian column which Colonel Nasakyn, at the request from General von Ryssel, entrusted with the task of guarding the road from Avesnes to Mons at Solre-sur-Sambre, had arrived too late to reach the little French corps which had resumed as soon as possible the route of Maubeuge.<sup>26</sup> The success of this coup de main persuaded the Duke of Saxe-Weimar and General von Ryssel to reinforce the strength of the infantry and cavalry troops assigned to guard the line of stages between Mons and Avesnes.

**12-15 March. --Point of the French garrison of Ostend on Bruges.** --At about the same time the extreme right of the lines of the Duke of Saxe-Weimar had also been disturbed and held in suspense by the offensive movements of the French. A flying column, drawn from the garrisons of Ostend, Nieuport, and Dunkirk, had been assembled at Ostend by order of General Brenier-Montmorand; making a sortie from this last place, on the 12<sup>th</sup>, at daybreak, it expelled from Bruges the cavalymen of Major Count Pückler, raised a contribution in money and clothes, and returned to Ostend the same evening,<sup>27</sup> bringing with her the mayor and a councilor of the prefecture, who were kept as hostages until the payment of the fifteen thousand francs which this city, struck with a contribution of 40,000 francs, had been unable to pay immediately.<sup>28</sup>

**Briefings and reinforcements received by the Duke of Saxe-Weimar.** --All these undertakings, all these attacks, though of little importance in themselves, contributed to the maintenance of the Duke of Saxe-Weimar's anxieties, and to exerting a real influence on his resolutions. But from the 12<sup>th</sup> of March the position of the Commander-in-Chief of the III<sup>rd</sup> Confederated Corps changed completely. Ignoring up to this point the result of the operations of Blücher, which were particularly concerned with covering the base of operations and lines of communications of the Army of Silesia with the Netherlands, satisfied with the result he had obtained by preventing Maison to make his junction with the troops which the French general wished to get out of Antwerp, obliging him to evacuate

---

<sup>26</sup> Commandant Schouller to General Maison, Maubeuge, 12 March (*Archives of the War*); Maison to the Minister, Roubaix, 13 March (*Ibid.*), and *Geschichte der Entstehung des Kaiser Alexander Grenadier Regiments (Zeitschrift für Kunst, Wissenschaft und Geschichte des Krieges, 1853, III)*.

<sup>27</sup>General Maison to the Minister, Roubaix, 15 March, and General Brenier-Montmorand to the Minister, Lille, 15 March. (*Archives of the War.*)

<sup>28</sup>Commandant of Ostend to the Minister, Ostend, 15 March. (*Ibid.*)

Oudenaarde and Kortrijk and to resume his position in front of Lille; and, on the other hand, wanting to make fronts on all sides and to watch all the towns, he had thought it prudent to renounce the offensive, and had thought it fit to do so by placing his troops in a cordon on a long arc whose circle passes through Brussels, stretching from Antwerp to Beaumont, about 30 kilometers south-east of Mons.

The new arrivals on 12 March at the Duke of Saxe-Weimar's headquarters allowed him to change his attitude and to renounce a system which would have had fatal consequences for him if General Maison had really disposed of a sufficiently large corps to enable him to maintain the campaign, and if he had been able to abandon to himself the strongholds of the old frontier. Until that moment the Duke had not even dared to push the troops of General Borstell from Tournai on Roubaix. He even thought it necessary to keep at Aalst and Dendermonde the detachment of Major von Klinkowstrom, although Bülow had sent to this officer the order to rejoin him, because he was firmly resolved not to undertake anything until he had been informed on the situation of the Army of Silesia.

Placed on the Napoleon Series: March 2017