

The Napoleon Series

The Germans under the French Eagles: Volume I

The Regiment of the Saxon Duchies – Chapter 10

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THE
REGIMENT OF THE FRANKFURT

CHAPTER X

WAR OF SPAIN (1813)

Wellington had at the beginning of 1813 an army of 105,000 men, of which were 50,000 Anglo-Germans, 25,000 Portuguese and 30,000 Spaniards.

King Joseph had only 80,000 soldiers (not counting the corps of Suchet immobilized in the province of Valencia). In order to prevent the English army, whose movements threaten the road to Bayonne, from cutting off his line of retreat, he abandons Madrid for the last time in March, and went by way of Segovia to Valladolid. Only the division of Leval remained in Madrid, covering the evacuation of the capital by the convoys and the Spanish Josephists who followed the King in his exodus.

The Army of Portugal, under General Reille, was in front of Palencia, observing the Spanish Army of Galicia.

Gazan, with the Army of Andalusia, was on the Tormes, in front of Wellington; finally, the Army of the Center had one of its divisions at Valladolid, and the other -- the German Division of d'Armagnac -- at Segovia, connecting with the Leval Division left at Madrid.

The Battalion of Frankfurt remains until the spring in Segovia: it had to observe and to contain the numerous bands of guerillas of Mina, Empecinado and Merino.

Lieutenant-Colonel Fritsch, sick and worn, having gone on leave in the South of France, Major Vogt took command of the battalion, about the time of the return to the corps of some Frankfurters, made prisoners in 1809 by the Spaniards. These brave men had managed, after a thousand adventures, to escape from their prison on the peninsula of Cabrera, whence they had gained France on a small boat. A sergeant-major of Nassau, prisoner with them, had joined in this perilous escape ...

When the English began their offensive movement against the French armies, the German Brigade was: Nassau, at Nova-de-Coca; Baden, at Omedo and Valdestillas; and Frankfurt, at Cuellar. Meeting 1 May in Olmedo and Valdestillas, the Germans were led on 11 May with the rest of the d'Armagnac Division in support of General Reille,

while the Leval Division was recalled from Madrid. Forming the rear of Reille who rallied the bulk of the French army for an impending battle, the German Brigade spent the 4th of June in Palencia, the 9th in La Celada, and the 11th in Estepal.

On the 12th, it supported a fight against General Hill on the Rio Hormaza, and retreated to Burgos; this city was evacuated on the 13th by the army, which blew up the castle. After crossing Poncorvo on the 15th of June, and Haro on the 16th, Reille made his junction on the 19th with the rest of the army at Vitoria; Joseph had at last with him the three armies of Portugal, the South, and the Center; in all, 8 divisions of infantry.

He resolved to fight.

Battle of Vitoria (21 June).

The Army of the Center was established in the middle of the French line, straddling the Bayonne road; Reille, with the Army of Portugal, formed our left, and Gazan was on the right with the Army of the South.

The ground on which the army took position was not very favorable to the defense; the placement of the troops could not be made without great difficulty. The congestion was frightful in Vitoria, and the cavalry was very delayed in its movements.



(Fac-simile d'une estampe de l'époque).

(Reproduction of a print of the period).

Joseph had a proclamation read before the troops but it was not worth Wellington's, who merely said to his soldiers:

Remember, my friends, that you are the brothers of the heroes of Trafalgar, and the victors of Salamanca!

While Gazan successfully defended his positions on the right of the French line, Reille, on the left, violently attacked by General Hill, lost his own and could not succeed in retaking them.

After an hour's fighting, Wellington wanted to pierce the French army by its center: there was the German Brigade of Neuenstein, facing south, in a close column, by division, its left leaning on the road to Bayonne, and a little behind a slight movement of ground. A staff officer brought an order at a gallop: at once the brigade faces to the right, and goes forward; it arrives at the crest behind which it was sheltered and is soon in the presence of the enemy: the English had just crossed the Zadora River on the bridges that one had not had the precaution of destroying, and two divisions of infantry British marched on the center of the French army. The 28th and 75th Regiments formed the first line of the d'Armagnac Division: they could not bear the shock and were obliged to yield the ground ...

The red line of the English advanced like an immense wave: their bright tunics, their white equipments shining in the sun... they marched weapons at arm, only stopping to fire when the French wanted to stand up to them...

The German Brigade deployed immediately: Frankfurt was on the right and the battery of Baden between the two battalions of Nassau. Arriving at 150 paces, the English make a general discharge, followed by a bayonet attack: the brigade, decimated, did not wait for the shock, and collapsed in disorder behind a position occupied by the 75th and 22nd: 200 men from Nassau and 80 from Frankfurt remained-on the ground.

General Neuenstein fell under his killed horse: "Who's commanding here?" Exclaimed General d'Armagnac, who came galloping to rally the Germans. -- "No one!" Replied Colonel Kruse, of Nassau. "Well, I give you the command!" Replied the general... But the battle was lost. Cut off from the road to Bayonne, the army entered upon that of Pamplona; it left to the enemy all her artillery; and, to cover its retirement, the Division d'Armagnac in charge of the rear-guard was obliged to make a violent attack with the bayonet to stop the head of column of the English. They did not pursue:

The English mastiffs, -- said Bernays, -- their work finished, thought only of their pie.



Bataille de Vitoria.
(Gravure tirée de la *France militaire*.)

Battle of Vitoria. (Engraving taken from *Military France*.)

After a rearguard battle in Pamplona on 24 June, the Division of d'Armagnac joined the next day in Elizondo the bulk of the army arriving at Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port by the Roncesvalles Valley, the old road that Hannibal used to go to Italy. Wellington having taken the road to Bayonne, the division of d'Armagnac was charged to flank the march of the army on the west, and crossed the frontier on the 6th of July at Sara:

The emotion of the German troops was touching; it seemed to them to be returning to their native soil; soldiers threw themselves on their knees and kissed the ground... many had tears in their eyes...

The army took the following positions:

Reille, under observation on the road to Irun.

Gazan, binding to Reille, and extending to Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port.

Finally, the Army of the Center, with its well-reduced divisions, in the Elizondo Valley.

Joseph and his chief of staff Jourdan having been recalled, Soult took over as commander in chief. He hastened to concentrate the army on the Bidasoa, and reorganized it rapidly. The Germans entered the composition of the reserve, under the orders of General Villatte, with two regiments of French foot gendarmerie, what remained of the Spanish Guard, two regiments of Neapolitan Guards, Royal-Foreigners, the Spanish "Jurados", and two French regiments in march.

General von Neuenstein, recalled to Germany, left the command of the brigade to Colonel Kruse, of Nassau; Major Vogt was also gone, with the cadres of three companies, to support the expected reinforcements. The remains of the Battalion of Frankfurt formed three companies of 100 men, under the orders of Captain Damboer.

While the Villatte Division remained under observation behind the Bidasoa, and the Germans were camping on Mount Croix-de-Bouquet, Clauzel had joined the army. Soult had 55,000 men and beat the English General Cole at Roncesvalles, and his colleague Hill at Puerto de Maya: then he returned to the Bidasoa to prepare a general offensive.

Fights on the Bidasoa (28-31 August).

On 28 August, the Villatte Division was called to the front line at Urrugne: it was in the center of the French line of attack, of which Reille formed the right with three divisions, and Clauzel the left: it was the latter who must execute the decisive move with four divisions.

The English were fortified on the left bank of the Irun stream, from the sea to the heights of San Estevan.

On 29 August, Villatte stood up between Croix-de-Bouquet and Urrugne. The next day Soult made a general reconnaissance of the enemy positions.

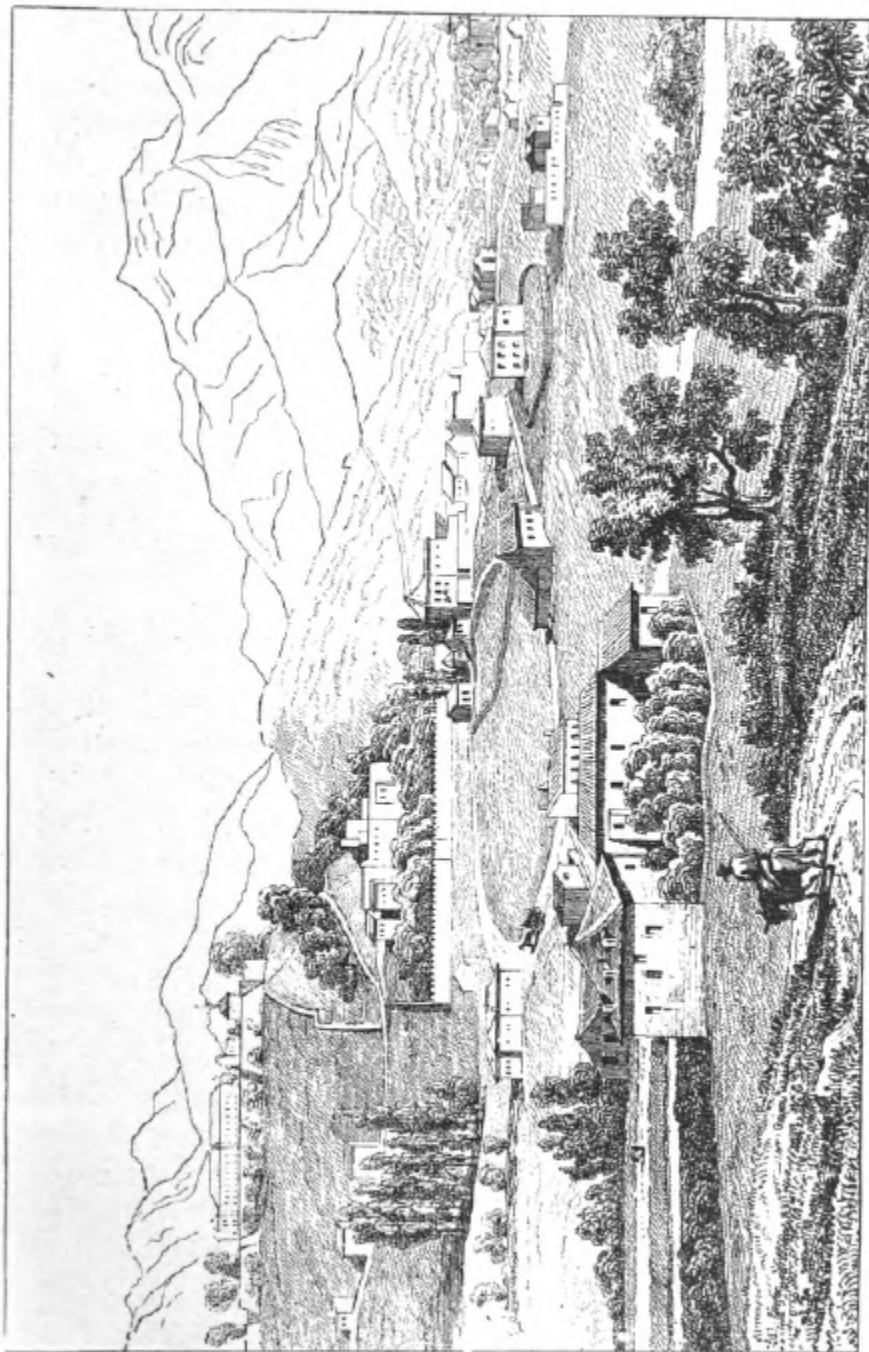
On August 31st, the German Battalion voltigeurs, under the command of Captain Deecken of Frankfurt, crossed the Bidasoa on pontoons to cover the construction of the bridges.

We give the discussion to Captain Damboer, commander of the Frankfurt battalion.

REPORT OF 2 SEPTEMBER.

The fight started at 5 o'clock in the morning on our left wing. Three French divisions crossed the Bidasoa towards Bera, and attacked the enemy on the mountains where it had entrenched itself; this fight was sustained to our advantage. His Excellency the Marshal Duke of Dalmatia, who was standing with us, gave orders at 10 o'clock to the four companies of German voltigeurs to march towards the river to form our vanguard. This was done.

The company of the battalion passed in the lead. Captain Deecken and First Lieutenant Hartmann, who commanded these voltigeurs, held firm on the other side of the river, and attracted the admiration of the Marshal and the troops. The enemy having sent against them a thousand skirmishers, they withdrew in good order, while fighting. During this time, I had been ordered to go forward, to the right, on a height: I began to engage with enemy parties placed on the other side, when all the German grenadiers were launched on the other side of the Bidasoa; the whole brigade followed them immediately under a shower of bullets. General Villatte ordered me to attack the enemy position on the right, to take it, and to keep it there until the bridges over the Bidasoa were completed.



Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port.
(Gravure tirée de la *France militaire*.)

Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port.

(Engraving taken from *Military France*.)

I was at the right wing of the brigade; having rallied my grenadiers and my voltigeurs in front of the enemy's position, I attacked without further delay the Spanish Regiment "Benevento", 1,000 bayonets strong, who I found in front of me.

The enemy did not expect such a hot attack. I was on horseback (there was no other superior officer than Colonel de Kruse), and took myself quickly to the position, to see the terrain. The whole Spanish regiment fired upon me, without touching me: I called all my men and launched them with the bayonet; the drums beating the charge, I took the head of the battalion, rallying my skirmishers, and the whole battalion irresistibly flooded over the enemy, bayonets forward; the Spaniards yielded and turned their backs; I then directed such a fire on them that their English shakos fell en masse... The battalion victoriously occupied the position. The enemy abandoned us the ground covered with its dead and his wounded; we also took 80 prisoners.

Having the formal order not to push further, I remained on the conquered position while we threw up the bridge behind me. A new regiment (Spanish Guard) threw itself on me, releasing half of its force to turn to the right. As soon as I saw the design of the enemy, I warned the colonel, begging him to cover my right flank; the "Royal-Foreigner" Regiment, advancing behind me, fulfilled this mission with great bravery.

I therefore sustained this attack of the Spaniards, which was followed by at least ten more: in short, the battalion remained firm under the most violent fire until 5 o'clock in the evening, when it was relieved by the voltigeurs of the Royal Guard, on the orders of the Marshal. Having received the order to cross the Bidasoa, we forded it, having water up to the waist; the tide was felt and the river was swollen by the rains. I preferred not to cross the bridge because it had already received shells right in the middle of its draw plate. Arriving on the right bank, I learned that the left of the army had not been as happy as we were, and as a result the Marshal had made us turn back.

...Our loss was 55 killed or wounded; the battalion, by its bravery and his intrepidity deservedly won the admiration of the Marshal, General Villatte, and all the generals present; it had justified, but dearly, its old reputation. When, in front of the enemy position, I made the bayonet crossing, beating the charge, and making the assault, the Marshal turned to his staff and said: "Here are the brave Germans! How they take the position with the bayonet" (in French in German text). His Excellency immediately sent an aide-de-camp to the bridge, so that my wounded were the first evacuees, which took place, indeed. All the officers of the battalion, all the officers and soldiers did their the best, in courage, intrepidity and coolness. No man wanted to leave of the ranks, and I had trouble getting the wounded back.

If I was able to attract the attention of the French commander-in-chief and the generals by a rapid and risky maneuver, and if I was able to occupy for seven hours a position attacked by an enemy who was constantly reinforced and was five times superior in number, I owe it to my soldiers, those tried men, who ignored danger, for whom the death in the field of honor was the highest and the most noble reward, and who followed with an unchangeable intrepidity a leader they trust. But the number of these brave men diminished every day. It was with a heart full of deep sorrow that I foresaw, by the small size of the battalion, that this handful of heroes would eventually find their whole tomb on the field of honor.

After this affair, the battalion of the Prince Primate still had 280 men in the rank: General Villatte had the 18 most distinguished soldiers presented to him, and proposed them to the Grand Duke of Frankfurt for the gold medal. or for that of money.

The Germans bivouacked at Ascain and at Sare passing the month of September in absolute tranquility, as if a tacit suspension of arms had been agreed between the belligerents; but this rest did not last: on 8 October, Wellington attacked and took the line of the Bidasoa. Soult retreated behind the Nivelle. The center of his position was at Saint-Jean-de-Luz; the front of the army extended for a length of 20 kilometers, and the Villatte Division, reduced to the first rank, occupied the extreme left with its outposts at Serre; by a dangerous chance, it was the Anglo-German Legion, commanded by General von Alten, which was in the English ranks, in front of the German Brigade of the Confederation of the Rhine.

An English officer entered our lines as a parliamentarian, saw Colonel de Kruse, and told General von Alten, who had formerly had Kruse under his command as battalion commander. Several officers of the legion manifested an imprudent desire to see Colonel von Kruse and to speak to him. Soult was informed of it, and recalled the Germans

whom he returned to the headquarters and placed near him to better supervise them; he made them enter the reserve division, which included an Italian Brigade, the remains of the Spanish Guard, and 1,000 French foot gendarmes.

But the bad grain was sown and was soon to germinate.

On the 4th of November, at 10 o'clock in the evening, Major von Preen, of Nassau, arrived at the camp, where he brought the first news of the Battle of Leipzig, the retreat of the Imperial army, and the defection of Bavaria. The Grand Duke of Frankfurt was on the run, and his states occupied by the Allies. They distributed parcels of German and English newspapers, and handed to Colonel de Kruse a special letter from the Duke of Nassau, where he advised the colonel to seize the first favorable opportunity to pass to the English. Kruse immediately took his side, and decided not to let this moment escape. He then played an undignified comedy, not missing an opportunity, before witnesses, to assert his unshakable fidelity to the Emperor!

It was on 10 November that the Germans of Frankfurt fired their last cartridges for France, at the bridges of Nivelles. Wellington, attacking the line of the Nivelles, carried off the redoubts of Sare and Ainhoa, crossed the river at Saint-Pée, and tried to cut off the right wing of the French army from Bayonne; he did not succeed, and the French withdrew to this place, where the Villatte Division was encamped on the glacis.

Defection of the Frankfurt Battalion (10 December).

Towards the end of November, Colonel von Kruse opened his plan of defection to the commander of the Baden and to Captain Damboer, commander of the Battalion of the Prince Primate; the first, faithful to military duty, indignantly repulsed the proposal of Colonel Nassau, telling him that, besides, not having like him an order from his sovereign, he still considered himself bound by military honor and his oath, and that the Baden troops should not be counted on to commit treason.

Damboer, on the contrary, promised to follow him, and immediately informed the senior officers of the situation; yet it was agreed not to warn the troop, whose Napoleonic sentiments were exalted.

The expected opportunity came on 10 December, the day Soult ordered a general offensive against the Anglo-Spaniards. The Germans, placed at first in support of a French division, receive, at 8 o'clock in the evening, the order to relieve this division. General Villatte, wounded, left the field of battle; Kruse therefore had every facility to accomplish his purpose. He put a stop to the fire; the skirmishers of Brunswick, who were opposed to him, astonished, also arrested theirs, and Kruse sent a Nassau non-commissioned officer to warn the English general that three German battalions will pass through his ranks. Meanwhile, Soult sent the order to return to Bayonne: the decisive moment has arrived ... While the battalion of Baden executed this order, Nassau and Frankfurt start for the side of the English. The French chief of staff arrived at this moment and asked Kruse for an explanation of the strange movement he was carrying out. The Nassau Colonel replied that he had divided his troops into two columns and that he would make a turn with these three battalions to join the battalion of Baden a little further. The French officer, without suspicion, believed him and goes away, when the 3rd Regiment of Infantry, whose chief said he had received the order to join the Germans, appeared. Kruse tells it to look for another road, the one he followed being narrow, and his flow must be long. The Frenchman refuses and waits, but he soon loses patience and takes the main road behind the Battalion of Baden.

The three battalions thus arrived in the English lines; Damboer, on his own initiative, and without orders from his sovereign, had consummated his military crime!

It was in vain that the German writers seek to excuse and even glorify the act of the chief of the battalions of Nassau:

The Emperor, they say, warned by the defection of the Saxons at Leipzig, had decided, by a decree of November 25th, that the German troops of the Spanish army would be disarmed and sent to the interior as prisoners of war; Colonel von Kruse wished to avoid disarmament and captivity to his troops; he was, moreover, under the order of his sovereign...

Costa de Cerda says, for his part:

I am French and deeply attached to the greatness of my country; and yet I cannot, in the very name of the feeling I feel, express blame for those German patriots who, reluctantly serving a cause which they felt was not theirs, returned to the cause they believed to be that of their homeland. That everyone appreciates and judges

The *soldiers* judge as *soldiers*. If Kruse's action can find a semblance of excuse, Damboer's cannot. And there would have been only one degree more in the infamy of their action, it would have been to do like the Saxons, and turn our arms against us on the very ground of the battle!...

The next day, while the battalion of Baden and the small depots of Nassau and Frankfurt were disarmed at Bayonne and taken to Mortagne, the two battalions of Nassau and that from Frankfurt were conveyed by the English to the sea, embarked on 14 December at Passages and conducted to London; from there they were soon directed to Holland, but a horrible storm occurred at the moment of their landing; the Frankfurters, however, managed to land safely, happier than their comrades in Nassau, who saw engulfing 12 officers and 218 soldiers. Only 3 officers and 40 men escaped death.

The battalion of Frankfurt, including reinforcements which had reached it, had counted 1,368 men in Spain; Major Vogt had taken about 300 soldiers back to Germany, and Damboer took about 240 in his defection; the losses of the battalion on the peninsula thus amounted to 800 men.

The 240 men who returned to Frankfurt were immediately commanded by the Allies to join the Grand Duchy's regiment in France, which was fighting against us; those poor wretches, penniless and ragged, had hoped for some rest; perhaps, too, these veterans of the Spanish army reluctantly opted to fight France, which they had served gloriously for six years. They demanded at least their back pay and new uniforms. Finally, exasperated, they mutinied. It took nothing less than the council of war to bring them back into obedience; three of the most compromised, sentenced to death, were shot to death, and thrown into prison; they were still there on the 7th of July, 1814, when their regiment, returning from France, returned to Frankfurt.

Placed on the Napoleon Series: April 2018