

## The Napoleon Series

### Officers of the Anhalt Duchies who Fought in the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, 1789-1815: Sonnenberg, Albrecht von

By [Daniel Clarke](#)

**Author's Thanks:** I have to thank an Oliver Schmidt of the Napoleon Series, who after reading my initial biography of Sonnenberg provided me with some extra information about this officer, which has enabled me to clear up some gaps in his service history.

Albrecht von Sonnenberg was born on September 14, 1777 in Bernburg, the principle town of the Principality of Anhalt-Bernburg. Beyond this there is little information about his parents or siblings and marriages he may have been part of, apart from that he lived in the family home until he was 15-years old.

When Sonnenberg reached the age of 15 he joined the military forces of the Electorate of Saxony in 1792. He became a trooper in the Saxon Hussar Cavalry Regiment, which had been raised the year before in 1791. He served with this regiment through the campaigns of 1794-1796 against France. In 1798 when a brief peace was reached, Sonnenberg was promoted to 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant and the regimental Adjutant. After the brief campaigns in 1799-1801, Sonnenberg left the service of Saxony in 1802 and became a Kammerjunker (a courtier of a royal family) for the ruling family of Anhalt-Köthen. Serving in this position for only a brief time, he then joined the Electorate of Bavaria's army in 1803 as a Lieutenant in one of the cavalry regiments. When war came in 1805 against Austria, Bavaria sided with France, and Sonnenberg served in the campaign as a Brigade-Adjutant.

After the war against Austria in 1805, Sonnenberg returned to serve the Principality of Anhalt-Bernburg and was given the rank of Captain in early 1806, when he was appointed the commander of the 4th Company of the Anhalt Infantry Battalion in May. This company was recruited exclusively from Anhalt-Bernburg, and was meant to have contained 157 men and three officers. With his company he went with the battalion into Poland at the end of the year, and returned to the Anhalt principalities the next year without becoming engaged with the enemy. In 1808 the battalion was reorganised and a sixth company was added, but Sonnenberg retained command of his company.

At the beginning of 1809 war between France and Austria was becoming increasingly likely, and part of the battalion was sent to Würzburg in April, while the other half was recalled from France where it was possibly being readied to march into Spain. At Würzburg the battalion was paired with another from the two principalities of Lippe-Detmold and Lippe-Schaumberg, and formed the 5th (Anhalt-Lippe) Rheinbund Infantry Regiment. The regiment then marched to Regensburg, and later to the city of Passau

behind the main army confronting the Austrians. Here the officers and men of the regiment were engaged in building fortifications to protect the city from attack until the start of July. At the start of this month the Anhalters joined Maréchal Lefebvre's corps, which had been given the task of entering the Tyrol and putting down the insurgency that was taking place in the region. Marching on the road leading down the Eisack (Isarco) Valley to Brixen (Bressanone) from Sterzing (Vipiteno) on August 4, the leading regiment of the column was continually ambushed by Tyrolean insurgents until it reached the hamlet of Oberau (Franzensfeste). Here the rebels set the small wooden bridge on fire and retired over the Eisack (Isarco) River, and the Saxons in the lead regiment withdrew to reform behind Oberau. The rebels in the hills took this as a sign of retreat and came down to attack them, but the Anhalt Battalion came up in support of the Saxons just in time and both units went forward to counter-attack. This counter punch drove the Tyroleans into their hills where they stayed for the rest of the day. Early the next morning the division retreated back to Sterzing. About a week later Sonnenberg was involved in the skirmishes around Hall (Hall in Tyrol) on August 13 near Innsbruck on the Inn River, before marching to Salzburg. At the beginning of September the division was called to Vienna, where it arrived on the 21st of the month. Two days later on the 23rd, the division was reviewed by Napoleon himself who picked out a number of officers to promote and reward.

The review conducted by Napoleon and his engagements in the Tyrol were Sonnenberg's last actions in the Napoleonic Wars for a number of years. The first reason given for this are in Zeidler's *Der Spanische Feldzug des Bataillons Anhalt im Jahre 1810*, who wrote that Sonnenberg asked for a very long leave of absence from his duties, which he was supposedly granted. However, details about why he was given this leave were not explained. Another source, however, points in the direction that the ruling prince of Anhalt-Bernburg recalled Sonnenberg to the principality to command the Gendarmerie. In this position Sonnenberg would have been tasked with keeping law and order within the principality, while some of the men of military age fought in the 5th (Anhalt-Lippe) Rheinbund Infantry Regiment.

With Napoleon's defeat in Russia during 1812, the alliance between the Anhalt Duchies and France began to weaken. Even though the princes recruited a small cavalry regiment to fight with the French in the spring of 1813, there is evidence that they withheld an infantry unit that had been forming to replace those men besieged in Danzig. Then, when the Russian army reached their capitals, the princes broke the alliance completely with France and began raising men for the Allies. One of the units they raised was commanded by Sonnenberg, who now held the rank of Major, in the city of Frankfurt during mid-1813 from any German volunteers wanting to fight against the French. The unit was later named the Anhalt-Bernburg Jäger Battalion—having first been conceived as a *Freiwilliger* formation—and consisted of four companies, two of regulars and two of landwehr. One can only assume that Sonnenberg was given command of this battalion, because he was the only experienced native Anhalt officer left in the principedoms, even though given his long absence his health may have been in question.

Sonnenberg's Jäger battalion was only ready to take the field in February 1814, and even then the two regular companies were only half uniformed and the Landwehr companies

were still in civilian clothes. Along with the other two Anhalt units formed in early 1814, Sonnenberg and his men were sent to Belgium where he arrived in the same month. Here his battalion became part of the Anhalt-Thüringen Brigade in the 3rd German Corps commanded by Karl August, Grand Duke of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach (1757-1828), which was composed of mostly Saxon Landwehr regiments. During most of the month of March they marched and counter-marched in reaction to the movements of the French corps in the country led by General Maison, who had the bulk of his men near the city of Ghent, until that officer decided it was time to withdraw into France to Lille. Instead of being sent to garrison Tournai with the other Anhalt units, Sonnenberg and his men became part of General Thielemann's large division, which had arrived recently with more regiments of Saxon Landwehr and had a strength of 12,000 men.

On March 30 General Maison withdrew his near 11,000 men from Ghent and started down the two roads leading south to Courtrai (Kortrijk) on both sides of the Scheldt River. Thielemann quickly realised that Maison had departed the city the next morning, and set off from Audenarde (Oudenaarde) with his two brigades in pursuit toward the village of Avelghem. Continuing from Avelghem toward Courtrai, Thielemann's advanced guard met French outposts at Sweveghem (Zwevegem) from General Roguet's division at around 6am. Sonnenberg and his battalion of about 450 men were part of General Paul, Prince of Wurttemberg's (1785-1852) 2nd Brigade, which was halted in the village after contact was made with the enemy outposts. Thielemann, after taking a cursory look at Maison's forces deployed in front of Courtrai—which he did not realise was only the division of Roguet—deployed his 1st Brigade across the main road from Ghent to Lille on his right, and brought Prince Paul's brigade forward to deploy across the road from Sweveghem to Courtrai. Sonnenberg and his men were formed behind the 3rd Saxon Landwehr Regiment, when Maison's other two divisions appeared on the flanks of Thielemann's line: General Barrois from Harlebeke (Harelbeke) to the north, and Solignac from Belleghem (Bellegem) from the south. By the time the French skirmishers began to press the flanks of the Allied line, Prince Paul had already ordered the part of his brigade forming the centre forward to attack Roguet in front of Courtrai, without any orders from his superior. As the pressure on his brigade began to tell, the prince deployed practically his whole force as skirmishers, reinforcing the Saxon Landwehr skirmishers with companies from the Schwarzburg Landwehr Battalion, and two companies from Sonnenberg's battalion. But, the French still advanced and Thielemann was forced to order a retreat. He ordered the Saxon cuirassier cavalry regiment to charge the French attacking the 2nd Brigade, but they were counter-charged by the 2nd Chasseurs-a-Cheval of the Guard, who, after routing the Saxon cavalry, attacked the infantry as well. Sonnenberg and his battalion were caught up in this charge, and like many of the Saxon militiamen were scattered in all directions, although they eventually managed to regroup at Audenarde where they had started from early that same morning. Total losses for the Allies were over 1,000 men, but it is not clear how Sonnenberg and his men fared as they received replacements from Anhalt a few days later that were included in the next strength return.

After Napoleon's abdication some days after the battle, Sonnenberg and his battalion returned to Anhalt where they were demobilised. Only a few short months later, however, Napoleon returned from his exile and the Anhalt Duchies had to quickly reform their

military establishments. But, it seems that Sonnenberg did not take part in the campaign of 1815, because his battalion was reduced to two companies and was led by a captain.

During the 1815 campaign against France the smaller German principalities organised their men into a formation named the Thuringia Brigade. When this brigade was re-organised after the campaign, Sonnenberg became the Brigade-Major, a position he held for an unknown length of time, although possibly until 1821. In 1821 and also 1822 Sonnenberg held commands in both Anhalt-Bernburg and Anhalt-Köthen. Later he was the Military Plenipotentiary representing Anhalt-Bernburg at the commission in Frankfurt, which was tasked with organising the 9<sup>th</sup> Corps of the German Federal Army, to protect the German states from future aggression from France. From 1825 until 1827 Sonnenberg was an advisor to the ruling prince of Anhalt-Bernburg.

The histories of Sonnenberg's life come to a halt in 1827, so at this time it appears he may have died sometime during this year. Throughout his military career Sonnenberg won a number of awards and medals from the states he fought for and with. He received a medal from the Electorate of Saxony for his services during his time serving in the Hussar Regiment, and in 1815 he received the Pour le Mérite from Prussia.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Schmidt, Andreas Gottfried, *Anhalt'sches Schriftsteller-Lexikon, oder Historisch Literarische Nachrichten*, Bernburg, Friedrich Wilhelm Gröning, 1830, Page 403; Nafziger, George F, *The Armies of Germany and the Confederation of the Rhine, 1792-1815*, Volume I, Privately published, 1993, pages, 1-2, 5-7; Rawkins, W. J., *Armies of the Confederation of the Rhine, The Rheinbund Contingents 1806-1813, Part 2: Anhalt, Lippe, Reuss, Schwarzburg, Waldeck, Mecklenburg-Schwerin, Oldenburg & Frankfurt*, <http://www.thehistorybookman.webeden.co.uk>, pages 12-14, 18-20; Gill, John H., *With Eagles to Glory: Napoleon and his German Allies in the 1809 Campaign*, Barnsley, Frontline Books, an imprint of Pen & Sword Books Ltd, 2011, pages 388-394, 397-400, 402-405; Zeidler, L., *Der Spanische Feldzug des Bataillons Anhalt im Jahre 1810*, Zerbst, Germany, Friedrich Romer, 1844, pages 3-18; Hein, Bernhard, "Geschichte des Dessauer Militärs", Dessau Geschichte, [http://www.dessau-geschichte.de/dessau\\_geschichte\\_militaer.php](http://www.dessau-geschichte.de/dessau_geschichte_militaer.php), accessed May 6, 2017; Nafziger, George, *The End of Empire: Napoleon's 1814 Campaign*, Solihull, UK, Helion & Co., 2015, pages 61-62, 365-367; Bucher, Ludwig Ferdinand, *Der Feldzug des Dritten Deutschen Armee-Corps in Flandern*, Leipzig, Hermann Costenoble, 1854, pages 57-58, 77, 176-193; Lehmann, Gustaf, *Die Ritter des Ordens Pour le Merite*, Volume II, Berlin, 1913, page 364