

around the middle of the day, and before long the units of 1st Division were marching again.³⁵

Dörnberg recorded contact with some Prussians – and this cannot have been much before noon: ‘a patrol of Prussian hussars arrived, informing the Duke that Marshal Blücher was at Sombreffe. He said to me that he wanted to ride there and that I should accompany him. Along with several of the Duke’s staff, General von Müffling rode with us.’ (Again one notes the lack of any sign of Brunneck’s existence. And why had the Prussians not sent out many patrols to find Wellington throughout the day?) It was noon. Still, according to Constant, all was peaceful. Then, towards 12.30 p.m. a British horseman was seen approaching. It was Colonel Hardinge, sent specially by Blücher who, at 12 o’clock, had seen French forces forming up for battle. In Hardinge’s own words: ‘Prince Blücher urged me to gallop to Quatre Bras to represent this state of things to the Duke.’³⁶

So the Duke’s party went to meet their ally. Of the two puzzling questions in Wellington’s mind when he wrote his Frasnes letter – about the Prussians, and about the French – the meeting should provide one answer, and possibly the beginnings of the second. The disquietingly empty landscape that Wellington had studied at Frasnes in mid-morning, and found devoid of Prussian and French troops, might soon have Allied forces moving across it, searching out the French. He and Blücher could at last concert a common plan – unless indeed everything should change once more, just as all his assumptions last night had been upset by Webster’s news. Having seen Blücher he could at last decide his operations for the day. And with considerable parts of his forces closing upon Nivelles and those at Nivelles and Mont St Jean soon to be at Quatre Bras, his operations could disrupt the plans of the still silent French.

Once hindsight – and future events like the embarrassment of the defeat at Ligny – are removed from the tale, the Frasnes letter becomes a simple and straightforward – even innocuous – document.

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Appendix: The Reserve’s March to Quatre Bras,

Timings, Rests, Decisions

Until I came to write my account of the events on the Anglo-Allied side for the morning of 16 June, I had assumed that the many divergent statements left by the men who participated in the Reserve’s march from Brussels to Quatre Bras made reconciliation virtually impossible: one should note the

differences and leave them at that. But further reflection has led to a change of mind. Despite some uncertainties a reasonably accurate conclusion is possible; a straightforward narrative can be presented. To explain some aspects of the narrative I have felt it wise to recapitulate some points made elsewhere in my chapters.

First of all, what is certain is the route taken. The distances are exactly known, and moreover it is generally agreed that Stephen Petty's analysis of Wellington's marching practice, and Mark Adkin's of road space needed for columns on the march, may be accepted without question. And then there are several near certainties. There is reasonable certainty as to Wellington's movements that morning, both as to his time of starting from Brussels (around 7 a.m.) and when he reached the front at Frasnès, south of Quatre Bras, a little before 10.30 a.m. There is also general agreement that after the early morning skirmishes near Quatre Bras during the first hours of daylight, from 7 a.m. onwards there was relative quiet save for some 'popping musketry' and the occasional cannon-shot. It was not until around 2 p.m. that Ney began his attack on Quatre Bras, a time that French and Dutch and British sources accept. Furthermore, the sequence of that battle as set out by Siborne in his *History* is a reasonable and acceptable one. Thus I take it as generally accepted that the first files of Picton's 5th Division, marching south from Genappe, reached the battle about 45 minutes after the start, that the remainder came in by succession, and that the whole of Picton's force was in action before Alten's 3rd Division and Cooke's 1st (Guards) Division arrived from the west.

From such a framework it is possible to establish what happened on the march, and to examine the workings of Wellington's mind, and see how he would have arrived at his decisions through the morning. It may be that here is an explanation of yet another of the Waterloo campaign's minor mysteries.

Marching

I begin with Wellington's habitual standards for marching. Mr Petty, basing himself on the collected General Orders, shows that Wellington required his troops to march at 2½ miles per hour, starting early in the day, and seeking bivouacs under trees and near water, and resting off the road. Where defiles were encountered and the march slowed in consequence, he warned against the rear units pressing forward and bunching. In close country, marching columns were spaced at an hour's interval, though in open country this could be reduced to a half-hour interval.³⁷ Major Adkin's calculations indicate that a column of over 12,000 infantry and 28 guns, and about 1,500 cavalry, at starting must have been nearly 4 miles long and taken

90–120 minutes to pass the Namur gate or fall in at the rear of the column beyond the gate.³⁸

The Route and the Timings

From Brussels the great paved road ran through some 9 miles of the relatively open forest of Soignies to the Waterloo barrier at its southern limits. It then continued to the Mont St Jean fork [MSJ], about 2¼ miles further south. At this point, 11½ miles from Brussels, the paved routes diverged, one going to Nivelles, and the other to Genappe and Quatre Bras. Troops taking the Genappe road would descend into the valley and then pass La Belle Alliance, march over the crest beyond and down to Genappe, where the road passed through a long street and over a narrow bridge. Genappe was about 5½ miles from MSJ. The road then continued through open country south for nearly 3 miles to the Quatre Bras crossroads. In total the march from the capital to Quatre Bras was one of 20 miles, the first half in woodland, the remainder in open country, save for the Genappe bottleneck, and the second half would be undertaken in the heat of the middle of the June day, in the knowledge that the troops' remaining energies must be conserved for the severe fighting ahead.

Nothing is recorded about the problem of Genappe on 16 June, but that it was a major problem for bodies of armed men was amply demonstrated by the wedging of French troops in the street on the 17th to the extent that they could not use their weapons, and the choked and disastrous situation there on the evening of the 18th. So it is reasonable to say that Wellington's standing injunction to take all bottlenecks slowly would have applied to Genappe on the 16th.³⁹

Put in terms of hours, the marching time to the southern barrier of the forest at Waterloo would be under four hours, to MSJ fork another hour, from the fork to Genappe something over two hours, and from the exit of Genappe to the crossroads of Quatre Bras rather more than an hour. How long it would take to negotiate the Genappe defile is uncertain. But it would have slowed the march to some extent. To this we must also add the considerable time spent not in marching but resting that morning, just north of the Waterloo barrier.

The Evidence of the Fifth Division

There is abundant evidence from the men of the entire Reserve, but as it was the heads of the 5th Division who marched first and arrived first at Quatre Bras it is sufficient here to take the recollections of men from the two leading brigades, Kempf's and Pack's.

The Reserve comprised Kempt's 8th Brigade of the 5th Division, followed by Pack's 9th Brigade of the same division, and then Best's 4th Hanoverian Brigade of the 6th Division (as Vincke's 5th Hanoverian Brigade of the 5th Division had been detached to Hal). The Brunswick Contingent was seen by Oldfield marching out past headquarters. Best's men joined the march outside Brussels and so did three Nassau battalions, all these formations following Pack. Colonel Sir William Gomm was on the staff of this division. Writing in the summer of 1815 he timed the start of the march as 5 a.m. and wrote that there was a two-hour halt in the forest at Waterloo, adding 'at one o'clock P.M. move on through Genappe to Quatre Bras', arriving at 'about half past three P.M.'⁴⁰

The 32nd Foot were in the leading brigade (Kempt's). Major Calvert recollected in 1837 that they marched 'early', halted for 'two hours' in the forest, and reached Quatre Bras at 2 p.m. That arrival time is certainly too early for that would be at the very start of the battle; by contrast Captain Crowe in 1837 timed the arrival at 3 p.m., which seems more appropriate. Lieutenant Stephens wrote on 19 June 1815 that bugles turned out the battalion at midnight, and they marched at about 4 a.m., went 10 miles and then halted for about 90 minutes; it was not until they were close to Genappe that they began to hear gunfire. Ensign Dallas, writing on 25 June 1815, timed the bugles at midnight, and the start of the march as 2 a.m., which seems altogether too early as he then says that at about 12 noon, while halted (presumably in the forest), 'Lord W. and the whole of his staff passed us': but since we know that the Duke was many miles south, at Frasnes, by 10.30 a.m., Dallas's sketchy though contemporary time-scale seems among the less reliable ones.

Following the 32nd came the 79th Foot. Lieutenant Forbes recollected in 1837 the midnight bugles and the head of the column marching at 4 a.m. The division halted in the forest near Waterloo, and Wellington and some of his staff passed on their way to the front. Cooking then began, but before it was completed orders came for the march to resume, and while he was on the second stage of the march gunfire could be heard. Sergeant Dewar wrote on 5 August 1815 that the division started out at 4 a.m. and had marched 16 miles when it heard firing in the distance (there is no mention of the forest or a halt in it).

Behind the 79th came the 1/95th, whose Lieutenant Simmons, in a long memorandum based on an account written six months after the battle, stated that the column marched at daylight (3 a.m.?), halted under some trees near Waterloo and breakfasted, after which he took a nap. 'Some time after, the Duke of Wellington and Staff passed us to reconnoitre the enemy.' Then they were on the march again.⁴¹

Pack's brigade followed Kempt's. Among the testimonies are two from the 3/1st: one that they marched at 4 a.m., the other that they arrived at 3 p.m. An officer of the 1/42nd recollected halting for a few hours; an officer of 2/44th that they marched at 4, carrying three days' rations, with orders 'to cook on the spot if time permitted', that they arrived at Quatre Bras between 1 and 2 p.m. and were then told to start cooking; and two officers of the 1/92nd that they left either at 'sunrise' or at '4 a.m.', halted in the forest for some two hours, saw Wellington ride forward, and reached Quatre Bras between 2 and 3 p.m. Behind Pack came Best's Hanoverians. They halted in the forest for about an hour.⁴²

There is a consensus at least, that the march began early in the day, that there was a halt in the forest, that Wellington overtook them and went ahead while the troops were resting in quite a prolonged break from marching, that they heard firing when near Genappe and that they reached the fighting in early to mid-afternoon. The individual timings are less satisfactorily recollected and some are definitely wrong. This is not a matter for surprise, given the events that the writers lived through thereafter, but with our later knowledge it means that we may proffer some probable timings. Therefore I suggest that the march of the leading files began at about 4 a.m., that they neared the Waterloo barrier by 8 a.m., then rested for perhaps two hours or so, then resumed the march, negotiating Genappe and arriving on the battlefield at around 2.45 p.m.

Wellington and his Intentions

By 10 p.m. on the night of 15 June Wellington was sufficiently clear in his own mind to order (see After Orders) the Brussels reserve, led by Picton's 5th Division, to march out 'by the road of Namur to the point where the road to Nivelles separates', that is at Mont St Jean.⁴³ But Picton was to halt there, he must not go beyond the fork. Depending on events, the Commander-in-Chief would decide whether the column should move either to strengthen Nivelles (as the Prussian front-line commander Ziethen had originally requested⁴⁴), or take the Genappe–Quatre Bras direction if reports identified that as the appropriate sector (or if the Prussians should request that of Wellington). That was the late evening appreciation.

From Constant's letter, received at midnight, the Duke had for the first time discovered that Quatre Bras was (for reasons unexplained) in imminent danger; on the other hand there was no certainty that Nivelles was safe, and Nivelles was the Anglo-Allied concentration place preferred by the Prussians. Nothing had been heard from the Prussian high command since noon, nor had any requests then been made.

Faced with this uncertainty, Wellington kept the Reserve under his direct control, but he sent from the Richmond Ball the Prince of Orange commanding the central sector's corps (covering Enghien, Braine, Nivelles, Quatre Bras) with oral instructions. From Constant's journal it is plain that, on arriving at 3.30 a.m., Orange was still concerned for Nivelles as well as Quatre Bras,⁴⁵ and it is fair to assume that the young prince was here reflecting what Wellington had said to him at midnight.

The Duke issued various orders to the corps commanders and his DQMG, then went to bed. He was then woken at 4 a.m. by Dörnberg's arrival from Mons – this coinciding with the start of the march of the Reserve infantry.⁴⁶ The words that Dörnberg recorded are a clear recollection, and they are significantly phrased:

He sprang up at once and said to me that there would most probably be [*wahrscheinlich*] a battle that day at Quatre Bras.

Here again, Quatre Bras was to the forefront as 'the most probable' sector of danger, but it was not absolutely certain, it was not the only place to worry about. At this time there was no news from Uxbridge's or Hill's formations, nor any fresh information on Quatre Bras or Nivelles from Orange's HQ. It was not impossible that the French might already be far to the north of the Quatre Bras–Nivelles lateral road and heading for the Waterloo barrier. Hence it was the fork in the road at Mont St Jean that represented for Wellington – *again now at 4 a.m.*, as at 10 p.m. – the key point of decision.

If the Reserve took the fork that later events showed to be the wrong road – if it moved on Genappe when the real threat proved to be at Nivelles – then disaster could ensue. In such circumstances it would be totally unlike Wellington to delegate or otherwise abdicate control of his forces to subordinates except within very tight limits. There were major uncertainties facing the army. Orange had been told to reinforce both Quatre Bras and Nivelles and to hold on at all costs until Wellington should come. Picton for his part could not be expected at the Waterloo barrier before 8 a.m. and would be arriving for some time after that, and the troops would need rest before marching on to a battle in the summer heat. By then Wellington would have come up, and could go forward to see for himself.

That is why I think that in the circumstances of 4 a.m. on 16 June the Duke qualified his terms rather more than Dörnberg later recollected, for the latter said that Wellington 'ordered me to ride immediately to Waterloo and instruct General Picton to march his Division to Quatre Bras forthwith'. That would have been to commit to one option prematurely, and for Wellington to have ceded control. I believe that the instruction was more nuanced: to be



ready to move at a moment's notice from Waterloo or the fork in the direction that Wellington should personally decide – Quatre Bras, or Nivelles – once the Duke had had time to reach a final decision.

In support of my belief I would add this. If Dörnberg's recollection was truly perfect and the Duke *had* used those words, not only would Wellington in Brussels at 4 a.m. have relinquished control, but he would have expected the mounted Dörnberg to have overtaken and reached Picton by, say, 8 a.m. and for the troops to be once more on the way by the time he himself rode up later. He would not expect to find them still resting, eating or asleep – as undoubtedly they were. For such a breach of his express instructions would not Wellington have made some rebuke, some remark? Apparently he asked no question, did not upbraid Dörnberg and continued on amicable and even chatty terms with him during the day. Moreover nobody mentioned or hinted at any remarks exchanged with Picton himself, who, not being a favourite with Wellington, might have expected some remonstrance if he had not acted on Dörnberg's message.⁴⁷

The Duke's Ride South

The Duke left Brussels with some of his staff around 7 a.m. He was inured to riding great distances and he should have reached Picton before 9 a.m. As he was certainly at Frasnes, beyond Quatre Bras and some 12½ miles south of Waterloo barrier by 10.30 a.m. (the time shown on his letter to Blücher), this estimate of when he came up with Picton seems a reasonable one.

The Duke saw the troops resting by the roadside. He needed Picton to re-start the march in order to make up a little time, but not as yet to go beyond the MSJ fork. But the fork was an hour's foot march beyond Waterloo.

We do not know the hour or the place at which Wellington received the Prince of Orange's new report. But as the report was addressed to the Duke and was sent from near Frasnes at 7 a.m. it must have been received somewhere along the great *chaussée*, perhaps at around 9 a.m. The Prince said nothing of any information from or activity by the Prussians, nor anything specific as to the Prince's 2nd and 3rd Netherlands Divisions that were forming the front-line of the Nivelles–Quatre Bras sector. These were serious omissions. But at least the Duke could now see that a massive Anglo-Netherlands force was moving to the defence of Nivelles, and that it was south of Quatre Bras that the French were active. His dilemma was substantially reduced.

Somerset says that on passing Picton in the forest Wellington ordered the march to resume, and Dörnberg's recollection was that as he rejoined the Duke and continued south, he at this moment saw the troops humping on their packs and falling in to march.⁴⁸ Dörnberg adds that, at the MSJ fork 'he



[Wellington] halted for a while, enquiring where the various roads led', but there can be no doubt that he knew exactly where he was (he had surveyed the site in August 1814) but was looking and listening for signs of war. All was still.

Taking Orange's 7 a.m. letter and these two testimonies, I believe that Wellington took the decision to send the Reserve down the Quatre Bras road at some time after 9 a.m., while Picton was either forming up by the Waterloo barrier or starting to move south to MSJ. Ever since midnight the Duke had been acutely aware that he had been humbugged and had lost twenty-four hours to Boney. Now the midnight information was reconfirmed that this morning the French were indeed south of Quatre Bras, but that although Napoleon had had several hours of daylight to use, he was not pressing matters at 7 a.m. He was giving the Duke back some of the lost time. For Wellington to waste it would be unthinkable. He made the decision and rode on south.

Wellington's Messages to Maintain Pressure

Wellington met the Prince of Orange at Quatre Bras and was updated by him on the present situation. Orange confirmed that he (and Constant) had ordered his corps to concentrate on Nivelles and Quatre Bras, and clearly must have told the Duke that it was safe to ride to the very outposts at Frasnes. It is unlikely that this briefing would have taken many minutes. Then Wellington and his party rode on to Frasnes. Frasnes is 10 miles south of the fork.

At 10.30 a.m. the Duke was writing from there to Blücher that, *inter alia*, the Reserve was 'on the march from Waterloo to Genappe, where it will arrive at noon'. That 'will' strongly implies that a definite order had been sent early enough for it to have been acted upon by this time.

The information vacuum in which Wellington found himself applied to his uncertainty over several of his own formations, of the Prussians, of the French. Might he still be attacked, and if so, where? It was a possibility that he did not discount in his talk with Blücher at Brye at 1 p.m. Hence he sent several messengers back to hasten forward his dispersed marching formations.

Starting with the troops marching from the west, Dörnberg mentions the Duke sending 'yet another' message to Uxbridge and the cavalry, which implies an earlier messenger had also gone. An AQMG (very probably Colonel Felton Hervey) was sent to hasten the advance of Cooke's 1st Division, and an officer of the Guards records his arrival at Nivelles at noon, so that Hervey must have started out from Frasnes or Quatre Bras on a journey of 9 or 10 miles some time earlier.⁴⁹

When Did the Reserve Resume Marching?

Wellington additionally sent an AQMG, Lieutenant-Colonel Robert Torrens, to Picton to hurry the Reserve forward: British brigades, Hanoverians, Brunswickers and Nassauers – and the cavalry in rear (not part of Picton's force), and troops in Brussels. Torrens states, not entirely correctly, that Picton's force had earlier received 'orders to halt at Waterloo' (the orders specified the fork, but Picton was wise in resting the men in the shade of the trees), but he is very unclear whether they were still there or where and when he met the leading files.⁵⁰

Torrens timed the instruction as being given him at a time of 'pretty sharp skirmishing'. He timed this as 11 a.m., but this is self-contradictory. At that hour the front was peaceful and all witnesses agree that the calm at the front continued until about 2 p.m., save for a little 'popping'. The troops on the road say much the same. It was 2 p.m. before Ney became active, so that if pretty sharp skirmishing was indeed the cause of his mission, then Torrens's departure could have been at 2 p.m. But that becomes an impossible timing.

If Torrens's departure for Waterloo was towards 11 a.m., as he says, then it followed close upon the writing of the 10.30 a.m. Frasnes letter, which emphasised the absence of enemy activity. His departure coincided then with Hervey's mission to Cooke. But all these missions were urgent, to hasten forward the troops. In the strange quiet of mid-morning a puzzled and uneasy Wellington intended keeping the pressure on the western formations of Uxbridge, Cooke and Alten, and also on Picton and the troops on the Waterloo *chaussée* right back to Brussels and beyond. Given the distance, Torrens would then have met Picton towards noon, and found the heads of the column on the road. His words 'I was sent back to move on the troops at Waterloo, and those at Brussels, also the Cavalry in the rear' may be specific and may mean that he found the troops 'halted at Waterloo barrier', but they may be no more than a generalised directional summary. Indeed if Picton's men were found resting at the barrier at noon it would be difficult for them to be at Quatre Bras before 4 p.m. Hence I take his remark as non-specific. I have no doubt that he found the tail trailing very far behind, but that we already knew.

There is a complication that might support the idea that Picton was still stationary: a remark of FitzRoy Somerset. But that remark creates other problems of its own so that it becomes unsustainable. For Somerset, having said that the order to march was given as Wellington passed the Reserve on his way to the front, then says that the Duke and he arrived at Quatre Bras at 10 a.m. Thus Picton was given the order well before 10 a.m., and Somerset

should know because he was at the Duke's side all day. Confusingly Somerset then says that the march from the Waterloo barrier only resumed 'between twelve and one o'clock'. But at that time Somerset was himself far distant at Brye and not an eyewitness at Waterloo. Next, Somerset states that the fighting began at Quatre Bras at 2.30, that within a few minutes the French charged Orange, 'by which time Picton had come up'. Thus he places the arrival approximately as Siborne does, around 2.45–3 p.m. And as that arrival time is generally accepted as correct, I do not see how Picton could have covered the distance in the time if starting only 'between twelve and one o'clock'.

It thus comes back to a question of distance and marching speeds. Did Picton start from the Waterloo barrier, or had he meanwhile moved up to the MSJ fork as authorised in the previous night's 'After Orders'? From the barrier to Genappe was 7½ miles or three hours' march, from the fork to Genappe 5½ miles: if all went well a force that was at the fork by 10 a.m. could be in Genappe by noon. But from Genappe to Quatre Bras is only 3 miles, so that such a timetable would have Picton's leading files reaching the battlefield by 1.30 p.m., whereas we know they came at about 2.45. It is here that the history of the Genappe defile comes to mind; the notorious congestion on the 17th as the French became wedged in the street and the chaos of the retreat on the evening of Waterloo suggest that Picton's men took a great deal of time to work their way through. Whether it took half an hour or an hour, who shall say?

Thus, if we make some allowance for delays in Genappe, and accept a Quatre Bras arrival at 2.45 p.m.,⁵¹ we may think that Picton started to move from his halting place after 10 a.m. and in the knowledge that the 'After Orders' interdiction to pass the MSJ fork had been replaced by the Duke's fresh decision, reached along the road southwards, and based upon Wellington's receipt of Orange's message and his survey at the fork, a decision taken well before 10 a.m.

The scenario that I have set out here is very different from that of other Waterloo historians, who may think me all the more presumptuous for going my own way. The testimony that I have examined, and the workings of Wellington's mind as I have studied it for almost a lifetime, do however leave me confident that my case fits the evidence and that the thinking and analysis is coherent – perhaps even convincing. Anyway, it is the basis for my narrative of the morning events.