

Chapter 26

# The Approach to Battle

## *Sombreffe, Morning, 16 June*

I

THE PRUSSIAN HIGH COMMAND had reached Sombreffe in the afternoon of 15 June. The site had been carefully chosen, for the entire position had been thoroughly studied by the army staff in earlier months, although apparently some were doubtful of it as a battleground. Many years later Nostitz, who in 1815 was a major and Blücher's ADC, claimed that,

the danger of accepting battle in the position of Sombreffe had often been put forward by many persons, yet Generals von Gneisenau and von Grolman adhered firmly to the idea. Count Groeben [staff, Reserve Cavalry, I Corps] had carefully reconnoitred and surveyed the chosen battlefield, and had described in such vivid colours its many advantages as to have given rise to an almost fanatical passion for it, which the objections put forward by other members of headquarters, among them myself, could in no way modify.<sup>1</sup>

Blücher intended to give battle there on 16 June – it was to be the decisive day.<sup>2</sup>

The site and the timing highlight clearly the problem of the inter-allied arrangements. Wellington's principles for a defence were: to hold firmly strongpoints like Mons or Ath in order to divert or slow a French advance, to keep the field army well back from the frontier, and to launch a counter-offensive on about the third day of operations, having meanwhile given the two allies time to unite. The Prussians, on the other hand, had placed one quarter of their army close to the frontier, and had chosen a fighting position for their entire force only a few miles behind it, aiming at a battle on the second day. A speedy and effective system of communications was therefore essential, and the evidence from 14 June onwards shows that this system failed the test. A position well north of Charleroi, based on Gembloux or Wavre, would have gone far to offset the damage caused by that failure.

Gneisenau's belated realisation of the effects of this, of having committed the army to battle on the 16th without being certain of the assistance of Bülow and Wellington, in reality reflected upon nobody but himself.

Yet Nostitz's 'chosen' site at Sombrefe that was so passionately preferred, was not the site fought over. The intended battle-line seems to have been tactically superior to the position finally chosen. Clausewitz, who as Chief of Staff of III Corps must have been in a good position to know, seems the only man who has said anything about this.<sup>3</sup> It would have lain roughly east-west along the high ground of the Namur-Nivelles *chaussée*, and overlooking the low plain that stretched towards Fleurus several miles to the south. It would have been 2-3 miles in length, and could have been held by two corps; the other two would have been kept ready for a flanking attack on the advancing French. The position would have given shelter to any part of the army posted north of the *chaussée* and beyond the summit, and would have allowed the Prussian artillery to dominate the plain. The French would have had to advance across the open, ford the stream in the plain and mount the gentle slope, all under intense fire.<sup>4</sup> Against those advantages one must set a weakness: such a position meant that the defending army's line of communications lay parallel to and very close to the front.

However, in the outcome, Blücher and Gneisenau adopted at the last minute a somewhat different position, and one that did present real difficulties. Why this happened must now be explained.

## II

At midnight on 15/16 June there had been a presumption at Prussian headquarters that by dawn I and II Corps would have concentrated at Sombrefe, III would be two hours' march away, and the IV Corps would be well on the 18-mile march from Hannut to Gembloux, so that by afternoon it would be only 6 miles from the rest of the army. On paper the staff-work looked very neat. In reality it was defective to an extraordinary degree. For to write belatedly at 10.30 p.m. to Pirch I some way off at Mazy that his men should be awoken and marched 5 miles in the night so that the whole corps (36 battalions, 8 cavalry regiments, 9 batteries, totalling 30,000 men) should reach Sombrefe by 4 a.m., was to ignore distance, time and darkness, to put an extra strain on already tired troops: it was an instance of staff arrogance or perhaps of incipient panic. On the whole those corps commanders who were Gneisenau's equals or juniors kept silent, but they cannot have found the relationship easy, let alone rewarding; his senior, General Bülow von Dennewitz, certainly let him know it.

Captain von Below arrived at headquarters very early on the 16th, carrying a letter from Bülow in Liège. The General claimed to have found Gneisenau's instructions almost incomprehensible. By the late morning orders of 14 June he had been ordered to hold his corps in readiness to march on Hannut. This he had assumed to mean that the army would form up there in the event of operations beginning. So he had made all preparations for marching, if called upon. Gneisenau's midnight message requesting Bülow to assemble at Hannut 'in close cantonments' on the 15th as operations seemed imminent, had come at 10.30 a.m. on the 16th. Bülow and his chief of staff did not act. Either through stupidity or for reasons of Bülow's own *amour propre*, he considered that as Hannut was to be the army concentration zone there should have been information on the overall plan and some indication of his place among the three other corps. In order to reach Hannut Ziethen would have to march 40 miles, Thielemann about 34 and even Pirch I about 18, and so IV Corps need not march immediately but could rest. If hostilities really were imminent he would have expected prior advice on the concentration plan.

Many will have known instances where people in different places can read one message in two ways: what seems plain in an office in Birmingham may appear curious to someone in London. But the fact that army headquarters was remaining well to the west and forward of any 'Hannut concentration point' ought surely to have raised a question in Bülow's mind about the assumption that everyone was to assemble so far behind Blücher's command post. It does look as though the practical commander, Prussian-born, victor of a famous battle, was out to teach a lesson in order-writing to the upstart Saxon staff officer slightly lower in rank.

Gneisenau had not passed a quiet night. Ziethen's troops were hunkered down in the positions previously agreed, close to Fleurus. Two battalions were actually in Fleurus, and others in the nearby farm of Fayt, but the bulk of the corps was further back in the plain towards Ligny and St Amand; Ziethen himself was camped with a 12-pounder battery of artillery on a conspicuous old mound, the Tombe de Ligny, a little south of Ligny in the direction of Fleurus. The Ligne stream was generally behind his troops, and he was uneasy about this, fearing that if there should be a fresh French assault his soldiers might find themselves trapped by the stream. Moreover there was no sign of II Corps arriving as reinforcement. So during the night he sent his Chief of Staff to ask for permission to fall back behind the brook.<sup>5</sup>

Gneisenau got up. His reply was short, emphatic, and slightly odd. Apparently he said that the troops were too tired to be disturbed unnecessarily, as the French must also be too tired to do anything very soon: yet 'tiredness' had not stopped Gneisenau calling for a weary II Corps to

march overnight. Perhaps he thought Ziethen was showing undue weakness and pessimism. As to a tactical retirement, what Gneisenau did not say was balanced by what he did. He was against any move overnight through the villages and over the stream (say 2¼ miles for the battalions in Fleurus, but less for most other units), though not out of consideration for the corps, which he insisted would just have to stick it out as the covering screen for the general assembly of the rest of the army. His stated reason for not slipping back behind the brook was astonishing:

This would risk the English taking such a movement to be an intention to fall back to the Rhine, and themselves retire to Antwerp and embark in their ships.<sup>6</sup>

To equate a quite small overnight repositioning of between a few hundred or at most a few thousand paces with a full-scale retreat to Germany was ridiculous in itself, but that wild exaggeration was merely the prelude to a paranoid nightmare of British reaction: by crossing the brook Ziethen might permit Wellington to abandon the Continent and leave the Prussian army to its fate. Seldom has a short remark revealed such a curious state of mind. But it does go far to explain decisions that would be made as the Prussian army streamed away from the battlefield overnight on 16/17 June.

Later in the night Gneisenau sent another message to Ziethen, presumably on receiving Pirch I's answer to his 10.30 p.m. march order. It was now improbable that II Corps could arrive by 4 a.m. so I Corps had to hold on to the south of the Ligne stream to give the rest of the army more time to concentrate. Ziethen would be reinforced by a detachment sent to the Fayt farm near Fleurus, and Steinmetz's right wing should 'watch the old Roman road and try to make contact with Dutch forces'. Ziethen obeyed, sending out a patrol of an officer and forty troopers.<sup>7</sup> But at first light the I Corps Chief of Staff had returned to headquarters with a repetition of Ziethen's request to withdraw behind the stream. On this occasion Gneisenau wrote out a withdrawal order timed 5 a.m.: there should be a phased retirement into what may be termed a quadrilateral, having its south and east fronts on the Ligne stream, the Roman road along the high ground to its west, and the slopes of Brye to the north. The zones for each brigade to occupy were specified, 1st to St Amand, 3rd to Brye, and so forth. The villages were to be fortified as quickly as possible.<sup>8</sup> Apparently the troops were over the stream by about 8 a.m., although in the hurry the staff forgot to send orders to the isolated battery at the Tombe (despite the general being there), and it was left unprotected until some belated orders were sent, and it retired upon Ligny.<sup>9</sup>

No further couriers seem to have been sent to Brussels or Nivelles, but Major von Brunneck went to Quatre Bras to investigate the firing heard there the previous evening.

Around first light another message was sent to Bülow, addressed to Hannut, requiring him to advance past Gembloux and then turn south-west along the Roman road to Artelle (Ardenelle, about midway between Gembloux and Tilly).<sup>10</sup> In the light of that order and march route it looked as though the Prussians would in due course be echeloned from Ziethen on the Ligne stream, past Pirch I around Sombreffe, back to Bülow at Ardenelle, with Thielemann expected on the Namur road. But at some time in the morning came the bad news about IV Corps' inability to meet the planned timetable.

What had happened was this. Although we do not have a time of receipt at Sombreffe, there came a disturbing message from Hannut, timed 11.30 p.m. on the 15th, so it seems reasonable, given the distance, to assume that it was received at headquarters around 6 a.m. The message was from Feldjäger Rothe,<sup>11</sup> who had been sent from headquarters with an oral message to Bülow about concentrating with the main army. Arriving in Hannut, he found no sign of IV Corps but only the courier who was carrying the written orders of 11.15 a.m. on that first day of fighting, addressed to Bülow at Hannut. The courier was patiently waiting for the corps to appear. Rothe took the instructions and rode to Liège, where he found corps HQ placidly resting. While still at Hannut he had dashed off a note to headquarters, warning 'As matters stand, it is quite impossible that IV Corps can reach the heights of Gembloux tomorrow (the 16th).' The messages from Bülow (via Below) and from Rothe must have been received fairly close together.

By the time Ziethen moved back across the brook and into the shelter of the villages the overall situation was apparent: if the French should mount a major attack in the morning, they would find just one corps facing them in an only partially prepared position. About half the army (III and IV Corps) would be strung out between Mazy and Liège, a situation unimagined even a few hours earlier.

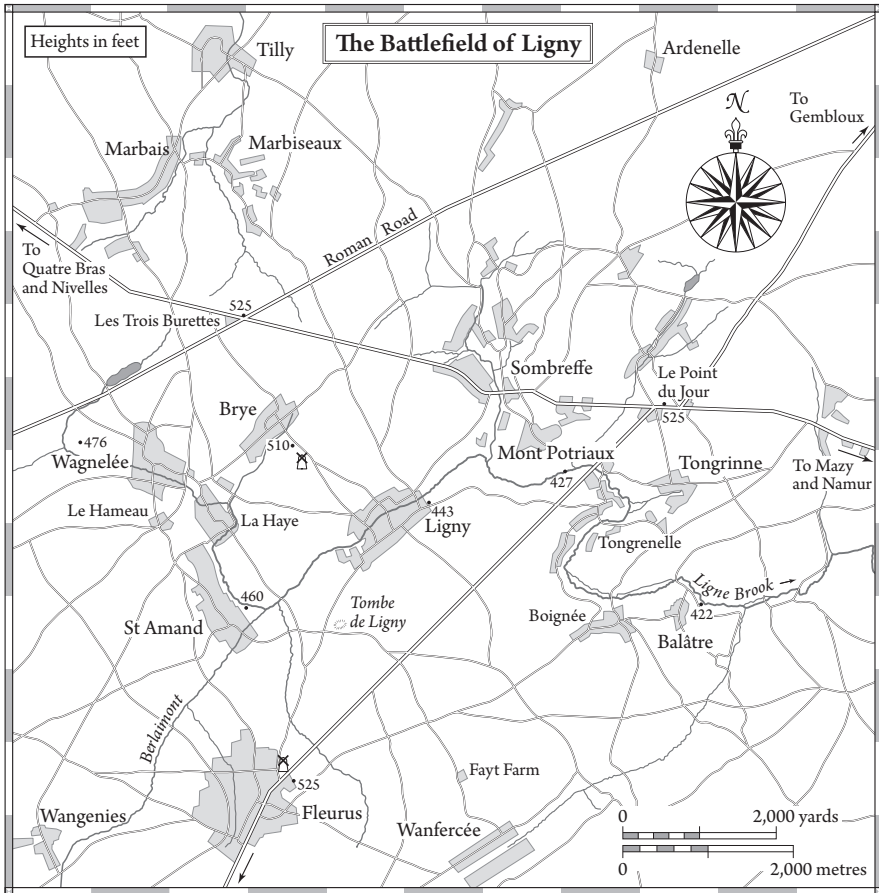
Gneisenau's overnight orders were being followed by I and II Corps and by late morning they should be in the positions planned for them by the high command. Nevertheless the changed circumstances meant that a different battle plan was needed. The plan that had for so long been favoured, the chosen position so passionately advocated, was abandoned at some hour in the early morning of 16 June and instead of an entire army holding prepared ground, part of the army would be packed into a bad position.

## III

The battlefield fought over on 16 June was very extensive – much more so than the intended position, and much more so than at Waterloo. Between the villages of Wagnelée in the extreme west and Balâtre at the eastern edge of the battlefield, the distance was over 5 miles, and from Fleurus in the south-west to Sombreffe in the north-east it was 3 miles. The easy slopes do not culminate in a sharp silhouette and on a dull day the horizon merges imperceptibly into the sky; it resembles the soft countryside where Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire meet. The area is like a vast and shallow oval meat dish, with a little gravy channel down its centre. The higher ground is on the southern, western and northern edges and with the Ligne stream winding a sinuous course from the west, looping back and forth in the centre and flowing away to the east.

The stream, la Ligne, was in 1815 shallow and insignificant, but with steep banks; the fact that it changed direction so much showed that there were small irregularities and humps in the plain that deflected the brook's course hither and thither, and the general flatness made for damp meadows and marshy patches in places, a condition that recent rain must have worsened. The higher ground was with slight slopes down towards the water, except towards the east where the stream cut slightly deeper into the relief, between Tongrenelle and Tongrinne. Writing at the start of the twentieth century and before mechanisation of agriculture and power equipment began to transform the landscape, the Belgian historian Winand Aerts remarked on how much had already changed since 1815: 'the almost total disappearance of the thick ranges of trees that bordered the stream and surrounded the villages, leaving visible from the bottom of the valley [in 1815] only the tops of the church steeples'.<sup>12</sup>

Many of the villages and hamlets that were caught up in the battle can be linked to the course of the Ligne brook: Wagnelée is near the top of the western slopes and close to the source, the stream runs south-east past Beurre and Longpré and the La Haye farm (or St Amand la Haye) on its right (or in Prussian terms, further) bank and through low growth down to the village of St Amand, which is also mainly on the right bank. After that the brook turns north and flows at 90 degrees to its upper course, through the centre of Ligny village. North of Ligny the stream is checked by a rise in the ground (the tiny cluster of habitations at Mont Potriaux) so slowly curves east and then south, running round two sides of Tongrenelle and flowing away south-west before curving again east past Boignée and Balâtre, two villages of the plain and on the right bank. Three other villages, Brye, Sombreffe and Tongrinne, stand



somewhat back from the stream's western and northern bank, on higher ground.

The villages were solidly built and the houses quite crowded together. Aerts, speaking particularly of Ligny, described how 'the houses, farms, and the barns often of immense size, generally built of stone and covered with thatch, created between them many corners, alleys, dead ends, and any spaces left open were cut or bordered by ditches, walls and hedges'. The bridge in the centre of Ligny was built of stone. Taken in conjunction with the defensive advantages of the stream, those groups of buildings that were on the left bank could make bastions which even inexperienced or semi-trained soldiers could be trusted to hold. The disadvantage was that retirement from them would be up a 'forward slope' and subject to artillery bombardment.

Roads form a rough border to three sides of the field, the southern side being totally open. Along the northern edge of the battlefield and running

west-north-west was the highroad from Namur to Quatre Bras and Nivelles, generally just south of the skyline. This was the originally planned position. It was the road by which the Prussian reinforcements came to the battlefield and it relied on Sombreffe and Tongrinne for its security. It was crossed beyond the north-western edge of the field by the old Roman road running east-north-east to Gembloux. The two roads met on the high ground where stood a tavern, *Les Trois Burettes*, north of Brye by about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile. About 3 miles to the east of the Roman road and running more nearly north-east was the road from Fleurus to Gembloux, and this crossed the Namur–Nivelles highroad at a cluster of houses, *Le Point du Jour*. Although some forces were deployed east of the Gembloux road, they served mainly as a distraction and took no great part in the fighting. Minor lanes and tracks linked the various villages to the greater roads.

Looked at from the Prussian side, from Sombreffe on the south-westerly slope down to Ligny in the centre, the distance was  $1\frac{1}{4}$  miles and the gradient very slight. However, there was a better command point further to the west, at the mill of Bussy, just east of Brye and a little over a mile north-west of Ligny and 70 feet higher (a slope of about 1:80). From the mill to St Amand on the brook the distance is a little further but still with a 1:100 slope. French accounts speak of a great ‘amphitheatre’ and emphasise the visibility of the Prussian forces on the northern side of the stream. Although ‘amphitheatre’ seems a strong word, Aerts remarked that, despite the historian Damitz’s denial that the French could see all that passed, ‘a study of the map and a visit to the plain allows us to see that from several French positions there is a good view over the Brye plateau, and that one can see and even dominate the part of this plateau that is to the north-west, north, and north-east of Ligny’ and that from the Naveau mill platform (Napoleon’s command post) the view was even better.<sup>13</sup>

This consideration does not seem to have carried great weight in the minds of the Prussian high command. Wellington did not like the prospect of troops likely to come under artillery fire on a forward slope, but recalled a snubbing riposte from Gneisenau that ‘the Prussians like to see the enemy’. This recollection has been disputed as unreliable, but there is evidence that the Prussians had been careless in the past about cover, and a British eye-witness at Lützen in 1813 had been much struck by their unnecessary exposure.<sup>14</sup>

The positions finally adopted by the Prussians may be likened to the shape of an elongated letter S that has fallen forward with its nose to the ground (*Balâtre*), its upper back in the air (*Sombreffe*), the lower belly also on the ground (*St Amand*), and its heel left in the air (*Wagnelée*). I and II Corps



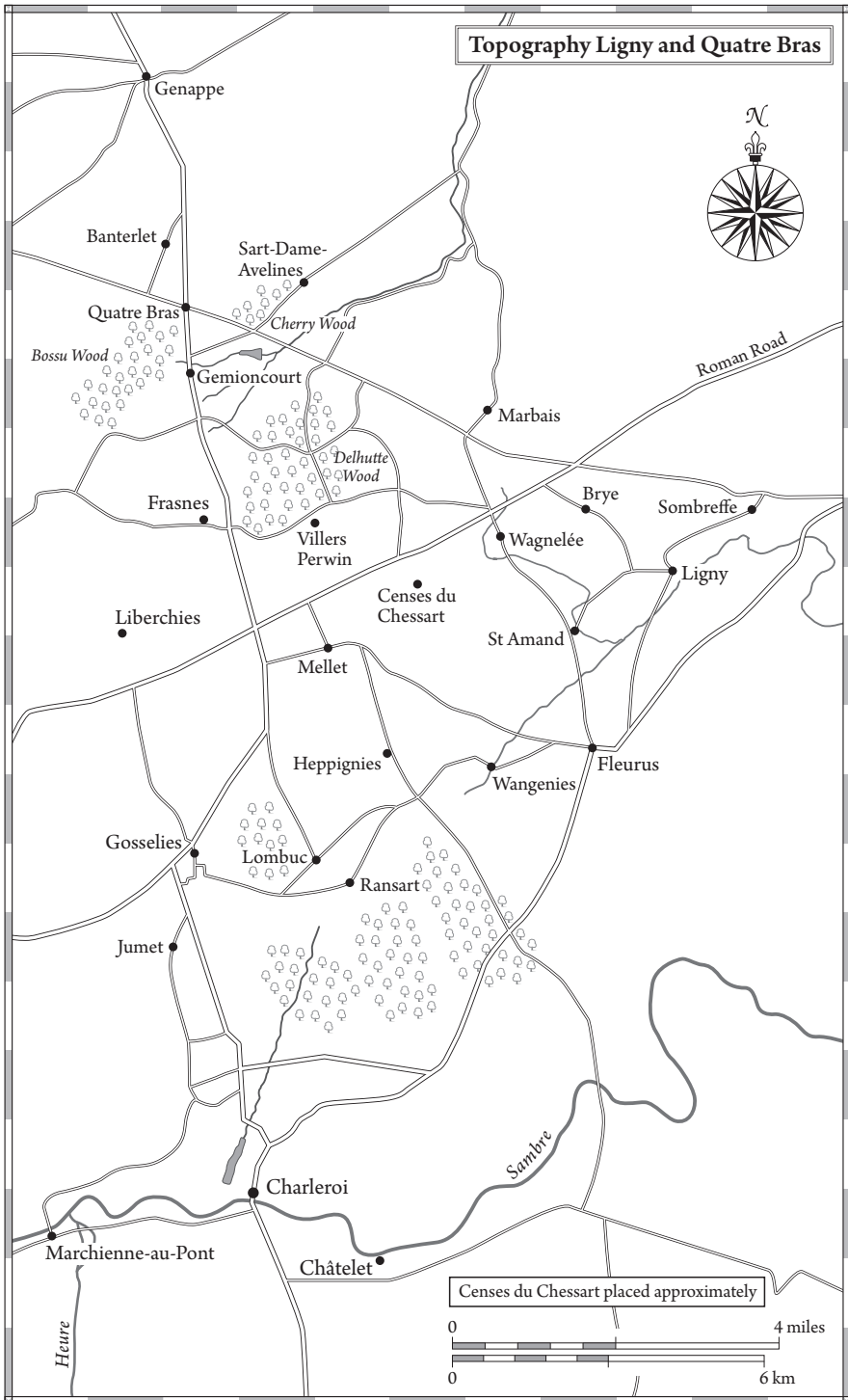
were posted across the western sector and into the Brye–Ligny–St Amand zone, the belly of the S; Wagnelée and the Roman road were on their open western flank. III Corps was further north-east and guarded the Namur–Nivelles highroad. Clausewitz remarked on the abandonment of a single front line for ‘two front lines forming an inward pointing right angle’, by which he seems to have meant Tongrinne–Mont Potriaux and Ligny–St Amand only, and he concluded that the high command ‘must have thought that Bonaparte would attack both Prussian front lines, thus placing himself in a very disadvantageous position’.<sup>15</sup>

#### IV

From the description of the topography of the battleground and from the sequence of reports and orders overnight it is easy to recognise how disturbing were the Prussian prospects. The Prussian line of communication came from the east along high ground and parallel to the French front of attack. At present it was undefended. As reinforcements appeared at different times in the first half of the day they would have to be sent in the first instance to support I Corps. Later arrivals would then protect the Sombreffe–Tongrinne slopes on the road’s south side, simply to keep communications open and to help the arrival of IV Corps. Their line of communication was thus east (Namur) or north (Gembloux, Ardenelle). But more than half the units present on this day would be bunched in a sloping quadrilateral bounded on the east and south by the brook, and on the other two sides by the Nivelles road and the Roman road: their line of communication was thus north-west (towards Quatre Bras and Nivelles).

But the events or reports of the night-time had complicated matters further. West of the open flank of Wagnelée and the Roman road lay the villages of Villers Perwin and Frasnes; north-west of Brye and Les Trois Burettes were Marbais and Sart-Dame-Avelines and Quatre Bras. And by 11.30 p.m. on 15 June the Prussian high command thought that several of these places were in French hands, and that Wellington had been caught up in fighting somewhere around Nivelles. There might be no way to retire westwards; the French might hem them in from the west.<sup>16</sup>

As the morning slowly passed the Prussian high command stayed still. It waited and watched. It trusted that Rothe had forced Bülow to move, and to move fast. Numerical inferiority would decrease as the day wore on and as Pirch and Thielemann took station, but the Prussian position would remain seriously unbalanced. However, they sent no further word to Wellington whether in Brussels or Nivelles. The overnight request that Steinmetz should



‘watch the Roman road’ was of little help in seeking the whereabouts of a French force much further west, and as Steinmetz knew he had left several villages east of the Brussels *chaussée* in French hands he was unlikely to penetrate very far. One staff officer was sent in the direction of the cannonade heard late on the 15th, and Major von Brunneck was at Quatre Bras when he met the Prince of Orange and sent back a message to Sombreffe at 6.30 a.m.

I respectfully wish to inform Your Highness that the Prince of Orange is here with seven battalions. The fighting that could be heard far on our right last evening occurred at Frasnes, which at first was held by Belgian troops. The enemy has taken Frasnes and overnight sent patrols as far as Sant-dam-a-Belines [Sart-Dame-Avelines] and beyond the highroad to Nivelles, so that communication between the two armies has been broken in the night. This is now being maintained by only one officer and thirty troopers, who are maintaining Marbais. The point of Quatre Bras and its nearby woods were held in yesterday’s fighting and are still held this morning by Belgian troops. The occasional cannon and musketry fire that Your Highness heard from time to time is at Frasnes and between French and Belgian troops. Since last evening there have been no important changes in enemy dispositions and he is still quiet. No movement can be discovered.

The Prince of Orange believes that in the space of three hours the entire Belgian army and most of the English army can be concentrated around Nivelles. Seventeen English battalions are marching from Brussels to support the point of Quatre Bras.

I shall remain with the Prince of Orange at the outposts to watch the enemy at this point and will report to Your Highness what I observe.<sup>17</sup>

This report travelled the 6 miles to Sombreffe in 4¼ hours, arriving (according to Grolman’s endorsement) at 10.45 a.m.

We noted in Chapter 24, Section V, that Brunneck himself did not mention giving any information to the Prince of Orange, and this seems confirmed by the strange fact that there was nothing about the Prussians in the 7 a.m. letter that the Prince wrote to Wellington just after seeing Brunneck (nor was the Duke aware of the Prussian situation when he wrote to Blücher from Frasnes at 10.30 a.m.) The information that Orange gave to Brunneck was of course based on his midnight briefing in Brussels and on what Constant could tell him at Braine at 3.30 a.m. The Prince had not ridden out of Brussels on the Nivelles road, but by that to Mons so that he would not know where the Reserve was, but he did know that the 3rd Netherlands and 1st and 3rd British Divisions were directed to or were at Nivelles (10 p.m. After Orders and his own subsequent instructions), so that the seven

battalions at Quatre Bras would soon be strengthened by the rest of 2nd Netherlands Division and some Netherlands cavalry. It was not correct to say that '17 battalions of English' would come from Brussels, for the brigades of Kempt, Pack, Best, and the Duke of Brunswick, comprised eight British, four Hanoverian and eight Brunswick battalions, all under orders to march south. But the distinction seems semantic rather than one of substance: they were at least under British command. If we sum up what Orange could rightly say, it was that all the 'Belgian' forces under his own command and four out of the total six British divisions that were fully formed, plus the Brunswickers, were concentrating on Nivelles (or in Perponcher's case, Quatre Bras), and he *hoped* that this would be complete by mid-morning.<sup>18</sup>

Two morning reports came in, one from the Fleurus front and the other from Quatre Bras. At 9.30 a.m. Gröben of Ziethen's Cavalry Reserve, patrolling beyond the Tombe de Ligny, reported a strong force of infantry, with cavalry on its flank, was marching from Charleroi to Fleurus. Then, in mid-morning, Brunneck wrote a further report, not long prior to Wellington's arrival at Frasnes. Brunneck wrote:

At the Outposts between Quatre Bras and Frasnes, 9.45 a.m. The enemy is still standing at Frasnes, just as he was this morning. His strength cannot be estimated because of the high grain and the bushes covering the terrain. Three battalions, two lancer regiments and a half battery are all that have been shown by him so far and which have kept up the fighting at the outposts. How far this left wing extends and in which direction it runs can also not be seen. Reves [just west of Frasnes] does not seem to have been occupied by him.<sup>19</sup>

The situation did not change in the next hour, since we find the Duke writing from Frasnes: 'I do not see many of the enemy in front of us ... Nothing has appeared in the direction of Binch, nor on your right.' In essence, both Brunneck and Wellington independently were in agreement on the lack of activity by an insignificant French force, and about the emptiness of the land. They cannot have met, since neither mentioned the other. What Brunneck did after this we do not know, but as he wrote out a message to send to Sombreffe he presumably stayed on to watch the front.<sup>20</sup> It seems curiously casual that all through the first half of this day the Prussian high command should have sent out only one single officer to look for Wellington, and that this man, Brunneck, should have somehow not encountered the Duke. However, they did now possess some information, by about midday.

On their western flank the danger so worriedly anticipated overnight had not materialised. A Bavarian observer attached to headquarters, Prince

Thurn und Taxis, may even have over-reacted: 'Since everything was still so quiet for us, we assumed that the enemy's intentions for this day were aimed more at the English army, and because we placed too much emphasis on this assumption I could almost say that some measures were neglected that would have been necessary.'<sup>21</sup> From Brunneck the high command had learned that Wellington's forces were moving on Nivelles and Quatre Bras, and that Brunneck had found no signs of massed French troops around Frasnes. Meanwhile Pirch 1's II Corps had arrived and formed up behind Ziethen, and Thielemann's smaller force was approaching the eastern edge of the battlefield. Even though Bülow's absence was to be deplored, Prussian confidence was rising once more.

At about the time the Duke's Frasnes letter reached the windmill at Brye the French were seen starting to move. Sir Henry Hardinge makes no mention of any couriers going out. However, he recalled:

At 12 o'clock we could perceive the French commander and his staff forming his columns of attack and by deserters we knew that Bonaparte commanded in person. Prince Blücher urged me to gallop to Quatre Bras to represent this state of things to the Duke. About 2 or 3 miles on the Chaussée I met the Duke of W. and his staff coming towards the Prussians.

Dörnberg, who was riding with the Duke, recalled that

a patrol of Prussian hussars arrived [in the vicinity of Quatre Bras], 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. We found Marshal Blücher at the mill of Brye.<sup>22</sup>

## V

The interview at the windmill of Brye (sometimes called the windmill of Bussy) has too often been reported in terms of what happened afterwards, and through assertions by those who were not present to see and hear the discussion. Luckily there are also eyewitness reports. For those who wish to see these statements, they are collected in Appendix 2 to this chapter.

A whole succession of historians from Plötho and Wagner, through Damitz and onwards, complained that at Brye Wellington made unconditional promises that he did not keep, and claimed that these promises, adding to earlier messages, influenced how the battle was planned and fought. There are others, many of them British, but also the American

Ropes and the Prussian Pflugk-Harttung, who found nothing suspicious in the Brye meeting. The dispute among all these angry historians is so involved and tedious that, had it not been admirably addressed by Pflugk-Harttung (but in the German language only) an analysis and verdict on their claims would require a separate chapter.<sup>23</sup> Here I merely set out in summary form my own reading of the evidence of eyewitnesses or those who may have been close to events on 16 June. Where there are discrepancies or gaps, then judgement has to be used, but I believe my conclusions will be found to conform to the evidence.

Wellington's party included FitzRoy Somerset, Dörnberg, Müffling and Alexander Gordon (who was killed two days later, leaving no testimony). With Blücher were Gneisenau and Grolman and the ADC Nostitz, as well as Hardinge. The chief staff officers of I and III Corps also left accounts, but – in view of their pressing duties in the middle of the day – one probably was not, and the other certainly was not, present at the meeting. There was also the Bavarian prince Thurn und Taxis who probably was present, or nearby.

It is generally agreed that the Duke left Quatre Bras a little before noon, riding 5 miles to the Brye windmill, that the meeting began around 1 p.m. and lasted 30 or at most 45 minutes, and that Blücher was sufficiently free of pressing duties to ride some part of the way back with the Duke.<sup>24</sup> It is also generally agreed that up to noon the French had been quiet at Fleurus, but then began openly to prepare to attack and began that attack at 2.30 p.m., and that the minor bickering at Quatre Bras in the morning became intense only after 2 p.m. Finally it is also generally agreed that the discussion was principally between the Duke and Gneisenau who each had the assistance of interpreters.

In the previous twenty-four hours each man had received two letters or written reports from his ally. Wellington had been told by Müffling the contents of Ziethen's report and Gneisenau's noon letter, received in the late evening. Wellington had almost no up-to-date information. Gneisenau was more fortunate in that the two reports he had received were more recent, a letter from Müffling sent at 7 p.m. the previous evening and one from the Duke at Frasnes. But the Duke's letter, received around noon, raised a new uncertainty.

During the morning the impression had grown that the enemy's passivity in front of the Prussian position meant that he might be aiming more at the Anglo-Allied army. But first Brunneck and now Wellington reported that the French were not at Frasnes in strength. Therefore virtually the entire French army must be massed at Fleurus. At noon signs of activity had been observed there, and Hardinge had been sent to find Wellington. And by this

stage it was plain that Bülow would not arrive that afternoon. The estimated numerical inferiority of the Prussians in face of Napoleon (80,000 versus 120,000) meant that assistance was needed sooner rather than later.<sup>25</sup> From the order of battle that Müffling had sent and from the other messages, the Duke's I Corps and Reserve must amount to 20,000 men all marching down the road from Brussels towards Frasnes and Gosselies. If Wellington advanced south against the French flank or rear he would be operating quite independently of the Prussians until quite far into the evening. That might be the more decisive option, but the one taking longer to execute. But if he turned off at Quatre Bras and marched along the Namur *chaussée* to join the Prussians, he would quite soon form an extension of their army some time in the late afternoon.

When we turn to the remarks by the observers we do see the various possibilities mentioned: a deep strike south, alternatively a move to the Prussian rear or their right flank. And we see in almost all of them a concern for time: 'by 4 p.m.' and so on.<sup>26</sup> Müffling goes into the most detail, though his memoirs are too often filled with self-praise to be entirely safe. But he made two particular statements that merit attention.

First, he especially emphasised that during the meeting he personally warned Gneisenau that Wellington's Reserve could not be at Quatre Bras by 4 p.m. That means that by 1.30 at the latest the Prussian high command had a better grasp of the expected arrival times of Wellington's forces than the appreciation they had formed at noon, based on their reading of the Frasnes letter. If Müffling really did so warn, then any misleading effects of the Frasnes letter could not have lasted long (a maximum of a hundred or so minutes). In that case the Frasnes letter information is unlikely to have materially affected Prussian plans.<sup>27</sup>

Secondly, Müffling emphasised that Gneisenau virtually insisted that the 'safest' proposal and the one that most swiftly could be completed was to march from Quatre Bras eastwards to Sombreffe – thus exposing the main roads to Brussels. To this demand, which was to act virtually as a reserve for the Prussians and thus conform to their commands, the Duke, Müffling says, gave a conditional agreement: 'Well! I will come, provided I am not attacked myself.'

Dörnberg, however, put it slightly differently, understanding that Gneisenau wanted Wellington's forces not behind the Prussians but coming up on the Prussian right wing and taking the French army in the left flank, and that Wellington thought the request made sense, provided nothing untoward occurred. But no promise was made:

The Duke replied, 'The reasoning is sound. I will see what is against me and how much of my Army has come up, and shall act accordingly' – without saying anything to indicate one way or the other what his decision was and without giving any promise.

Grolman alone of the other witnesses offered any detail, and his version tended to support the Dörnberg thesis (Wellington coming up on the Prussian right wing), the dominant factor to him being the time it would take. But he made the ducal promise unconditional.

There are two considerations that help to resolve this conundrum: the two allies' concepts of the campaign, and what the protagonists at the Brye meeting thought would be the French manpower situation at Fleurus and at Quatre Bras in the afternoon.

We are back with the debates of April 1815 on the best strategy for Belgium (see Chapter 8): the Rhine versus Brussels. Gneisenau looked to the east, towards Liège and Germany, and that was the direction from which Bülow must come. Hence Thielemann's III Corps was stretched eastwards along the Namur road and had to hold it firmly to let Bülow arrive.<sup>28</sup> The Prussians were not concerned about the great roads from Lille, Valenciennes or Maubeuge. They had never thought that Brussels should be held at all costs. At this present moment they were concerned only with the prospects in a few villages in rural Belgium, from one of which Napoleon's troops were already emerging.

Wellington, as Müffling correctly remarked in his memoirs, held totally different views. Brussels had to be saved, and the great roads had to be garrisoned to achieve that. He was now responsible for the safety of the Charleroi–Brussels *chaussée*. Allied unity was certainly a pre-supposition but it required an open discussion leading to a joint agreement on what to do in the light of circumstances. Wellington did not complain of the Prussian abandonment of Gosselies, but he had had his share of surprises in the past day and there could be more to come. His over-riding duty was not to let Quatre Bras fall. It does not look as though any Prussian except Müffling grasped this.

I therefore think that any promise made to the Prussians must have been conditional, and indeed that Dörnberg's version of the Duke's reply represents exactly what he said: 'I will see what is against me and how much of my Army has come up, and shall act accordingly.' It had to be conditional. For when all is said, in the end Ney at Quatre Bras made the decision for Wellington.



## VI

It remains to ask whether the Prussians committed themselves to a battle on 16 June only after speaking with Wellington at Brye. Hardinge indicates that by noon Blücher knew Napoleon was preparing to attack. FitzRoy Somerset and Müffling state that the French masses were seen to advance while they were at the windmill, and Dörnberg confirms this was unmistakably the case before they broke up to return to Quatre Bras. Damitz (or Grolman) starts by saying that Blücher always intended to give battle, but then claims that he decided only after Wellington's assurances after 1 p.m. Thurn und Taxis thought that the decision was not taken until Wellington was present.

All through the morning while the French lay quiet, Prussian forces were fortifying and barricading houses and lanes, and it was clear to Gneisenau that brigades were becoming mixed up in consequence, as his 5 a.m. orders had noted. In such conditions, changing orders, re-assembling troops in a hurry and getting them away and up the slopes would have added to confusion. Two corps were in the western rectangle by noon, one behind the other, and that would have impeded retirement for at least one of them. Then again, the Prussians were weak in cavalry when compared to the French, and if the French had seen columns of Prussian infantry toiling back up the slopes they could have launched annihilating cavalry attacks on the infantry that the Prussian cavalry could not have stopped. The two armies were simply too close for one side to disengage and escape unscathed.<sup>29</sup> By the time real alarm was felt at the headquarters at the windmill it was already too late. And are we really sure that Blücher was unwilling to fight, even if his first plans and estimates of strength had been shown to be wrong?

The most sensible judgement in all this is, I believe, that of Ropes. Having considered the material put forward by Charras, Damitz, Müffling, Ollech and Delbrück, he concluded:

We are asked to believe that Blücher had not fully decided to await the attack of these French columns, now seen to be advancing, in the position which had been deliberately selected, and on which the troops had been carefully stationed, until the Duke of Wellington had stated himself able to do what Blücher and Gneisenau wished him to do. We are asked to believe that Blücher would have retreated if Wellington had told him that his situation was such that he could not bring him any aid.

We must say that such a contention seems to us hardly to deserve serious consideration. It is surely plain enough that Blücher had chosen a battlefield – had posted his army there – had encouraged his troops to expect a conflict with the French – without taking counsel with the English

general. Had he determined to fight only if he should receive assurance of support from Wellington, would he not have taken some pains to obtain such assurance? Would he have left it entirely to the chance of Wellington's writing him a letter, or riding over to his headquarters? These questions answer themselves.

We conclude, then, that it is a fact beyond controversy that Marshal Blücher decided to accept battle at Ligny although independently of any support or assistance that might be afforded him by the Anglo-Dutch army.<sup>30</sup>

\*

### ***Appendix 1: Did the Prussians Want Wellington to Fight at Ligny?***

This question has never been raised among British or French historians, so far as I am aware, but it was briefly the subject of debate in Germany. Pflugk-Harttung held one view, Lettow-Vorbeck another. I thought it would be sufficient if their views were set out, leaving the reader to judge between them.

Pflugk-Harttung, *Vorgeschichte der Schlacht bei Belle-Alliance: Wellington* (Berlin, 1903), pp. 65–6:

At headquarters [on 15 June 1815] Blücher and Gneisenau were preoccupied with preparing for the next day's battle, which kept their attention on their own army's affairs. One has to note that on the 15th they were determined to stand and give battle even without Wellington, and that they thought that they had Napoleon's entire army in front of them, so that there was no danger for the English. To this must be added another factor, more political than military. The Prussians felt that they had been poorly treated by the Congress of Vienna and had not achieved what their accomplishment had merited. This particularly upset Prussian patriots, above all Gneisenau and Blücher. The only way to improve this could be to fight it out on the battlefield against Napoleon.

The Prussians were eager for a fight, but their allies were cautious. Then Napoleon unexpectedly offered himself to the Prussian bayonets. He offered to give battle against the Prussians alone, and if they took him on alone and won alone, Prussia's position in the world would be very different. It alone would have turned away the danger Europe had faced from the Corsican upstart; now Europe would have to be grateful, whether it wanted to or not. This was a train of thought that lay close to Gneisenau's and Blücher's hearts – bold, gigantic, and decisive. Thus English assistance

was actually not even desirable and was therefore not requested; instead, Wellington was simply asked what he intended to do. He should be in the vicinity, for Prussian headquarters was not completely sure of victory. But if the allied army was in the vicinity, then they could confidently go into battle, for even if they were defeated, Wellington could intervene to protect them from destruction. They would still have faced the enemy head-on and delayed him.

We believe that Gneisenau's entire actions on the 15th and 16th were determined by this point of view. There was no other urgent reason to accept battle at Ligny; a decisive battle could easily have been postponed for one or two days in order to fight it together with the allies, if that had been desired. But this was desired so little that they even stood and fought even though the entire corps of Bülow was not present.

The effect upon Wellington must have been completely different. He had to assume that, because all the reports of the most important events of the time were from the morning [of the 15th], that nothing significant had occurred at midday or in the afternoon, as this would otherwise have been reported to him. In that case it could even have been expected that a senior Prussian officer would have come from Namur to Brussels to discuss measures to be taken for the special occasion. But none of this happened.

Lettow-Vorbeck noted the passage in Pflugk-Harttung, but disagreed with him in a short footnote in *Napoleons Untergang, 1815* (Berlin, 1904), p. 273. He contested the view that Blücher wished to win the battle without Wellington, but all that he put forward against Pflugk-Harttung was a short quotation from Gneisenau's letter to Knesebeck of 9 June 1815:

If we [the Prussians] do not stand arm-in-arm with this [Anglo-Dutch] army it will be completely useless.

From this he concluded that the Prussians always sought co-operation, and therefore must have done so on the morning of Ligny. (A fuller quotation from this letter can be found in Chapter 13, Section VI.)

## ***Appendix 2: First-Hand Accounts of the Meeting at Brye***

### ***1. Accounts by Members of Wellington's Party and his Liaison Officer***

Wellington left no contemporary account of the meeting, although various people in later years wrote down what he said in private conversation. There is a brief passage on the matter in the eighth paragraph of the Waterloo Despatch of 19 June 1815 concerning the battle at Ligny:

The Prussian army maintained their position with their usual gallantry and perseverance against a great disparity of numbers, as the 4th corps of their army, under General Bülow had not joined, and I was not able to assist them as I wished, as I was attacked myself, and the troops, the cavalry in particular, which had a long distance to march, had not arrived.

**In 1851, on reading Müffling's memoirs, the Duke wrote to Lord Ellesmere from Walmer:**

It is true that I went to the Moulin de Bry and saw the Prussian army formed to receive the attack. My observation was, 'We each of us know our own army best! I should not have formed mine in this defensive position as your is! I would have posted them further back, and would have thus protected them from the effect of that powerful artillery.' Gneisenau made some angry answer – I believe, that the Prussians like to see the enemy!<sup>31</sup>

**At some unknown date Lord De Ros, husband of Lady Georgiana Lennox, recorded some comments by Wellington on the same subject. They are not strictly first-hand, but are too interesting to ignore:**

I found them [The Prussians] drawn up on the slope of the ground with their advanced columns close down to the rivulet of Ligny, the banks of which were so marshy that the French could only cross it at the bridges of three or four villages that lie along its course. I told the Prussian officers, in presence of Hardinge, that, according to my judgment, the exposure of the advanced columns, and indeed of the whole army, to cannonade, standing as they did displayed to the aim of the enemy's fire, was not prudent. The marshy banks of the stream made it out of their power to cross and attack the French, while the latter, on the other hand, though they could not attack them, had it in their power to cannonade them, and shatter them to pieces, after which they might fall upon them by the bridges at the villages. I said that if I were in Blücher's place with English troops, I should withdraw all the columns I saw scattered about in front, and get more of the troops under shelter of the rising ground. However, they seemed to think they knew best, so I came away very shortly.<sup>32</sup>

**Late in 1815 Lord FitzRoy Somerset penned an account that has some detail but without attempting to record the actual words exchanged:**

The Duke accompanied by his staff and a small escort of cavalry rode from Quatre Bras between eleven and twelve o'clock to Blücher's positions. The Marshal was at Batti St Croix [this appears on the 1796 Capitaine map, between Brye and Sombreffe]. The Prussian troops were formed in close

column on the heights in rear of St Amand and Ligny, which were occupied, and the left of the Prussian army extended beyond Sombreffe. The Duke and Blücher saw the French in great force advancing towards the Prussians and the Duke observed to Blücher he would soon be attacked. The Duke, expecting that our cavalry, the remainder of the Prince of Orange's Corps, the Guards and Alten's Division [the 1st and 3rd British Divisions] would arrive at Quatre Bras about two o'clock, told Blücher that he would give him all the support in his power and the Duke galloped back to Quatre Bras which he reached about ½ past 2 o'clock. He looked attentively with his spy-glass and observing the movements of the French towards Frasnes told the Prince of Orange he would be attacked directly.<sup>33</sup>

**Dörnberg's memorandum stated:**

We found Marshal Blücher at the mill of Bry. Having spoken a few words the Duke said to General von Gneisenau, 'Will you give me your opinion as to what you wish me to do?' Gneisenau took the map in his hand and said 'If you can push aside what opposition stands before you at Quatre Bras and press forward quickly, that would achieve the greatest result in that you would then come upon the rear of the French Army. However, as there are only narrow roads in that direction, it would be safest if you could pin down the forces standing in front of you and then move leftwards [east] with the rest of your Army, so coming up on our right wing and taking the French Army in the left flank.' The Duke replied, 'The reasoning is sound. I will see what is against me and how much of my Army has come up, and shall act accordingly' – without saying anything to indicate one way or the other what his decision was and without giving any promise. As we rode away, the brave Blücher accompanied us for a short distance and as he left us the Duke said to me, [Dörnberg writes this in English] 'What a fine fellow he is!' From the high ground where we were we could distinctly see the enemy columns advancing [against the Prussians] and also Bonaparte with his entourage. During the ride back we could hear the gunfire at Quatre Bras growing louder. When we arrived there the French cannon-fire was quite intense but there did not appear to be many troops, and while Gneisenau's suggestion 'to overthrow whatever stood in our way and to press into the enemy army's rear' was still in my mind, I said to the Duke that I did not believe that the French were very strong since it seemed to me that they rather wanted to make noise than actually to attack us. The Duke answered [Dörnberg writes in English] 'It may be so, but I don't believe it.' And promptly thereupon he was proved right, because there then began a serious attack.<sup>34</sup>

Müffling presented the world with three accounts. The first was in his campaign *History*, published in January 1816, the second was in his 1844 memoirs, the last was in a letter to General Hofmann in 1849.<sup>35</sup> In 1815 he said:

At eleven o'clock the Duke of Wellington arrived at Quatre-Bras, reconnoitred the enemy, found them weak in the neighbourhood of Frasnes, but received intelligence from Prince Blücher, that considerable masses were moving against him, and that he had taken up a position near Sombreffe, in which he would wait the enemy's attack. The Duke of Wellington having determined to support Prince Blücher to the utmost, directed his whole army upon Nivelles and Quatre-Bras, but finding it could not arrive before four o'clock, repaired in person to the Field-Marshal, whom he found in the Windmill, between Ligny and Bry, just as the enemy developed his mode of attack. [Here follows a description of the Prussian position.] The attack appearing to be directed entirely against Prince Blücher, the question was, how the Duke of Wellington could most effectually support him. The Duke offered to force what the enemy had opposed to him at Frasnes, and to march upon Gosselies. This movement, however decisive its result must have been, it was not likely that the Duke should be able to effect in the course of the day; and Prince Blücher, it was dreaded, might run the risk of being crushed by Bonaparte's whole force, before the flanking movement could be accomplished. It was therefore deemed more expedient that the Duke should direct his army by the high road of Quatre-Bras, to support the prince. With an intention of executing this measure, the Duke of Wellington again proceeded to Quatre-Bras about three, where an action took place . . . The head of the Duke of Wellington's reserve had just arrived [about four] in time to form a line on the high road from Quatre-Bras to Sombreffe . . . to meet the enemy.

**In his 1844 memoirs, he wrote:**

As the enemy remained quiet, and intelligence had meanwhile reached me that the Prussian army was assembling at Ligny, the Duke thought it best to ride over to the Field Marshal, and concert with him by word of mouth, what measures must be taken for a decisive battle with our combined forces. This was immediately put into execution. On the way the Duke said to me, 'If, as seems likely, the division of the enemy's forces posted at Frasnes, opposite Quatre Bras, is inconsiderable, and only intended to mask the English army, I can employ my whole strength in support of the Field Marshal, and will gladly execute all his wishes in regard to a

joint operation.' I had a firm conviction that what the Duke expressed was his real and fixed intention; but I knew General Gneisenau's distrust of him, and was apprehensive that this might have some influence on the impending arrangements . . . The Duke met the Field Marshal at the windmill of Bry. His [Blücher's] corps d'armée had just been placed in their positions, while some officers observed Napoleon's advance from the tombe de Ligny. The Duke looked over the measures taken, and seemed satisfied with them. When the heads of Napoleon's attacking columns shewed themselves moving upon St Amand, the Duke asked the Field Marshal and General von Gneisenau, '*Que voulez vous que je fasse?* [What do you want me to do?]

[Müffling says that he himself had already told Gneisenau of the Duke's best intentions to do everything to help, except to divide his army. Knowing that the British were unlikely to reach Quatre Bras before 4 p.m., Müffling suggested that it would be best for the British to attack south and then encircle the French left wing.]

General von Gneisenau shook his head at this proposition, but I did not know what objection he had to make to it. Now to the Duke's question, he replied that the most desirable plan for the Prussian army would be for the Duke – as soon as his army assembled at Quatre Bras – to march to the left on the chaussée to Namur, and place himself at Bry in rear of the Prussian army as a reserve.

[Müffling next sets out Gneisenau's three pre-suppositions (pp. 234–5) – though he does not say whether they were actually expressed in words – (i) that the Duke's whole army would be at Quatre Bras in a few hours, (ii) that the French would not attack it at Quatre Bras, and (iii) that the army could be on the Ligny field by 6 p.m. before the outcome had been decided, which meant that the Prussians could hold out for five hours – and Müffling gives reasons why he considered (or knew) that these suppositions were incorrect, but that:]

in this case the English army must march off from Quatre Bras at four; and Gneisenau knew *through me* [Müffling's emphasis] that at this hour the reserve could hardly have arrived after a march of five or six (German) miles. This proposition, therefore, was by no means favourable to the Prussian army, since it was based on impossibilities, nor could be accepted by the English leader, who had the Dutch troops under his orders; because in taking a flank march to the left from Quatre Bras he must give up the two roads leading from the enemy to Brussels, and expose the capital of Belgium,

which was quite contrary to his instructions. The Duke looked at his map, and did not answer one word. I saw how much he disliked the proposition, and therefore made the following observations:

[Müffling's observations: Instead of waiting inactive at Quatre Bras, 12,000 paces from the Prussians, until the whole army had come up, why not press south to the intersection with the Roman road (only 6,000 paces from the Prussians) and then deploy to the left to close on the Prussians, this move suiting the forces coming from Nivelles and Ath almost as well.]

In this manner I avoided publicly mentioning the Duke's erroneous calculations as to the time in which his army would be assembled, as well as Gneisenau's incorrect calculations as to the arrival of the English army at Bry; and the Duke caught at my proposal, saying, '*Je culbuterai ce qu'il y a devant moi à Frasnes, me dirigeant sur Gosselies* [I shall overthrow what is in front of me at Frasnes, directing myself on Gosselies].' General Gneisenau refuted all that was said in favour of this movement by these few words: 'It is too long and insecure; the march from Quatre Bras to Bry is, on the contrary, safe and decisive.' The Duke replied: 'Well! I will come, provided *I am not attacked myself* [Müffling's emphasis].' On our return to Quatre Bras we found Marshal Ney fully engaged in the attack ... The first intelligence I sent the Prince, after our return from the windmill, could leave no doubt of the Duke's inability to come to his assistance; nevertheless, by a brave resistance, he had rendered him the great service of keeping back and occupying 30,000 of the enemy ...

**To Hofmann Müffling wrote in 1849:**

We found Prince Blücher at the windmill of Brye, determined to accept battle, although Bülow's corps was still missing. Napoleon was in the process of advancing from Fleurus. Of the [French] left wing, which must have spent the night in the vicinity of Gosselies, one saw and heard nothing. Consequently it remained completely uncertain whether Napoleon would attack the right wing, centre or left wing of the Prussian army. How the Duke saw the matter I do not know. However, he proposed to advance with the English army to Frasnes, and then to link up with the Prussian army in the battle in the direction of the Roman road ... General von Gneisenau, the leading speaker, supported by General von Grolman, countered the Duke with the firm view that Napoleon would attack the Prussian left wing and that the Duke's proposed manoeuvre would take so much time that it would in no way meet the purpose of the Prussian army ... Wellington expressed no opinion, but asked, '*Eh bien, que voulez vous que je fasse?*' and



Gneisenau said, 'March your entire force by the *chaussée* to Sombreffe as far as the Roman road so as to form there a reserve for the Prussian army' – [Wellington:] 'Obviously that can only happen so long as I myself am not attacked at Quatre Bras.' This was answered in the affirmative, and Wellington mounted his horse.

**Hardinge wrote to Gurwood in 1838:**

Prince Blücher urged me to gallop to Quatre Bras to represent this state of things [the French mustering for battle] to the Duke. About 2 or 3 miles on the *Chaussée* I met the Duke of W. and his staff coming towards the Prussians. The Duke after conferring with Blücher and Gneisenau at the windmill promised to support the Prussians towards the evening by a British force. His Grace gave his opinion to Gneisenau as to the defective mode of occupying the position – and he afterwards turned to me predicting that the position wd be forced, and shortly afterwards returned to Quatre Bras where he found his own advanced divisions so hotly engaged with Ney that it was impossible to detach any British reinforcement towards Ligny.<sup>36</sup>

**2. Accounts by Members of Blücher's Party and other Prussian Officers**

Blücher never commented directly on the Blye meeting, but later signed statements saying that, but for the absence of Bülow's IV Corps and Wellington's forces, he could have gained a victory at Ligny. His report addressed to the King of Prussia on 17 June 1815 lamented the inability to get all four corps into the battle. Having said that, his report continued:

Likewise the Duke of Wellington's army, despite expectations [and promises] was not concentrated enough to operate effectively against the enemy.

That report was in fact written by Grolman, but the words 'and promises' [*und Zusage*] were inserted by a different and unrecognised hand.<sup>37</sup>

There is an oblique comment from Gneisenau, written on 17 June 1815 to Knesebeck:

We received from the Duke of Wellington the written promise [*die schriftliche Zusicherung*] that if the enemy should attack us, he would attack them in the rear ... On the morning of 16 June the Duke of Wellington promised to be at Quatre Bras by 10 a.m. with 20,000 men, his cavalry at Nivelles ... Why the Duke of Wellington's concentration took place so late and in such small numbers remains to be clarified by both sides.<sup>38</sup>

**Damitz in 1837 recorded on Grolman's behalf:**

Marshal Blücher was free to refuse battle; he could very well have avoided it and have waited until IV Corps should have joined him. But seeing himself at the head of 80,000 men, it was not in his firm and decided character to turn his back on an adversary. He knew that he could not vanquish Napoleon by skilful manoeuvres, but only by repeated blows. The general and his army felt themselves strong enough; that was of itself a reason for not avoiding a battle . . . It was at this time [1 p.m.] that the Duke of Wellington came to Prince Blücher to hold their last talks. They agreed on the way in which they would support each other, this being a movement of the Duke's available forces, if not his whole army, via Frasnes towards Gosselies to take the enemy in the flank and rear, and that this movement would have to be accomplished by 4 p.m. that afternoon. Movements after 5 p.m. would depend upon circumstances as the battle developed, when a direct intervention would be more advantageous than a distant offensive. The execution of this direct assistance to the Prussian right flank would be left to the Duke to determine according to circumstances and the Duke's judgement. Meanwhile the French army was advancing via Fleurus. This at last made the Duke seem to accept that Napoleon was moving with the bulk of his forces against the Prussians. He waited until 1.45 p.m., by which time the French army had fully developed its deployment, and only then did he return to his army. When the Duke of Wellington made his promise of support, he used the words, 'I am convinced that by 2 p.m. I will have so many troops assembled that I can go over to the offensive immediately thereafter.' After this commitment, the Prussian side finally made the decision to accept battle.<sup>39</sup>

**Nostitz recalled:**

Around 1 p.m. the Duke of Wellington arrived, accompanied by General Müffling. A long discussion took place between him and Generals von Gneisenau and von Grolman in which the Duke repeated [*wiederholt*] his promise of strong support. Around 3 p.m. the Duke took leave in order, so he said, to give his troops the necessary orders for their advance. The Field Marshal accompanied him for a distance. I rode with General Müffling.<sup>40</sup>

**The Bavarian observer Thurn und Taxis, who may have been present, wrote:**

The Duke promised to send 20,000 men from his army by 3 o'clock, and after it was agreed to accept battle, he rode back to Quatre Bras.<sup>41</sup>

Then there is Colonel Reiche. Given the morning orders to I Corps to pull back, take positions and to fortify them, and the haphazard intermingling of units, Reiche as its Chief of Staff cannot have had much spare time. If he went to the windmill for new instructions from the headquarters staff, would Gneisenau (or Ziethen) have let him stay to listen for half an hour or more to discussions over high policy and strategy, when I Corps had so much to do? It seems doubtful, especially as his report of what was actually said is so brief and colourless that it reads like a second-hand version. This impression is strengthened by contrast with the amount of detail (and colour) that he produces for what he clearly did see and note: such as Wellington's dress and accoutrements that he pointed out to the surrounding men. I therefore judge that he was most probably a temporary but close bystander, and that his account of the interview was not first-hand but gathered from someone who was present. Nor was his account written very close to the event (as his remark about plumes in hats shows), but it is so interesting that it cannot be left out:

At one o'clock Blücher appeared on the hill by the mill of Bussy, and not long afterwards the Duke of Wellington rode up. He wore a simple blue overcoat without decorations, an ordinary three-cornered hat with three cockades side by side – one black and two red, the Spanish and Portuguese, with a red and white plume, fastened, as was then the English custom between the two brims of the hat. Otherwise he was very quietly dressed. For this reason none of our troops recognised him for who or what he was; but as I knew him already from the review at Grammont, I was able to tell them, and every man standing near turned to look at the famous war hero.

After some discussion he was convinced that the enemy's main force was directed against us and not against Quatre Bras; moreover there could no longer be any uncertainty about the direction of the enemy's attack.

From the hill Wellington could overlook our positions in every direction, and he enquired what measures had been taken or were in hand. At this moment we noticed in the distance a party of the enemy, and Napoleon was clearly distinguishable in the group. Perhaps the eyes of the three greatest military commanders of the age were directed on one another.

Having promised powerful support and co-operation, Wellington left soon after half past one to return to his own army. The horse which he rode on this occasion attracted a good deal of attention. A small valise had been strapped to the back of the saddle, and according to one of his staff officers this contained a change of clothes; in addition, a portfolio and pen and ink

had been fastened in place of the pistol holster – indications of the way in which English industry knows how to be compendious and practical.

It must have been soon after two o'clock in the afternoon when we saw two enemy columns march out of the wood behind Fleurus.<sup>42</sup>

Clausewitz was not present, being III Corps Chief of Staff and still arriving on the eastern edge of the field. In his *History* of the campaign he wrote:

At 1 p.m. the Duke of Wellington came to Marshal Blücher at the windmill of Bry. The Duke told the Field Marshal that his army was at the moment assembling at Quatre Bras, and that in a few hours he would hasten with it to assist Blücher: 'At four o'clock I will be here' are supposed to have been the Duke's words as he spurred his horse away. It would have been unreasonable to suppose that the Duke could arrive in a few hours with his whole army. Wellington must have meant nothing more than his left wing united with his reserve...<sup>43</sup>