

The Napoleon Series

An Interview with John Hussey: Part IV

By [Robert Burnham](#)

Question 16: Up to the night of 16 June 1815, what was Napoleon's biggest military mistake?

John: Up to the night of 16 June I believe that the single biggest and potentially disastrous mistake that Napoleon made was on the morning of 16 June after he first realised that the Prussians were not retreating, 'the old fox' was not budging.

He could not be sure of how many Prussians there were, almost certainly half their army, possibly three quarters or even all four corps, 125,000 men. He had given Grouchy command of the right wing comprising up to 50,000 men, Ney with about 30,000 was away to the left and expected to hold a position between Quatre Bras and Genappe and wait for the Emperor's next moves. Napoleon himself held Lobau's small corps [11,000] and his Garde [20,000]. At 8-9 a.m. he had spoken of sweeping away the Prussians to the extent that they could not affect a French march on Brussels, where he planned to be by 7 a.m. on the 17th [he also spoke of taking Antwerp by 21 June]; Ney was to join in the march on Brussels, and Napoleon told him to expect no more than 'a scuffle' with Wellington, who seemed still to be far distant.

Yet as he had decided to crush the Prussians beyond recovery, Napoleon's margin at Fleurus / Ligny was too small: his 80,000 versus a force that might be anything between say 60,000 and 125,000 men led by a man who did not fear him. Gérard's 4e Corps [Napoleon's right wing] had first to reach the field before any general action could start; even with Gérard he would have only 80,000 Frenchmen. That would not give any local superiority, so Napoleon should at once have ordered Ney to stay on the strict defensive and to detach a strong force [the numbers were for Napoleon to judge: one corps, one corps plus additional divisions] and place it directly under Napoleon himself to deploy as he wished.

D'Erlon's 1er Corps, given clear commands and told that it was henceforth under Napoleon himself, could have been sent by Ney by late morning and been close to the battlefield not long after Gérard's 4e Corps reached the field [which Gérard did at around 1 p.m.] .But no such order was given by Napoleon. Ney thought that he himself could use 1er Corps as he wished, **and** in a message at 1 p.m. Ney was merely told to attack at once **anything found** at Quatre Bras and only after that to swing his force away from the north to come eastwards and take the Prussians in the flank. Once Ligny began, some time after 2 p.m., additional force was recognised as clearly needed [this was recognised by 3.15 p.m.]. Then at 3.15 or a little later, an order was indeed sent to Ney to send 1er Corps to help at Ligny, and the way that the instruction was handled was poor. That led to d'Erlon getting conflicting messages from Napoleon and Ney, and thus

wandering around and failing to influence the battle at either Quatre Bras or Ligny. The afternoon mistake, the d'Erlon fiasco, was bad, but it stemmed from a failure to give absolute priority entirely to beating the Prussians decisively, to relegating the western wing to a holding operation - and to ensure this was all in hand by mid-morning on 16 June.

Time was wasted, orders were poorly drafted and executed, and a small but veteran army was given two separate tasks for one day, against enemies who might prove considerably stronger numerically. It proved too great a challenge. Ligny was a victory on points, Quatre Bras a defeat on points, and Foy said that two such victories as Ligny would wear out the army. And both allies were still in a position to fight another day.

Question 17: We have discussed Napoleon and Wellington quite a bit, so let's move on to the Prussians. Up until the retreat from Ligny on the night of 16 June, what was Blücher's biggest mistake?

John: Early in March the Powers at Vienna had intended that the Allied force in Belgium should be under Wellington, with the main Prussian force functioning as a separate reserve army behind some part of the long front from the sea to Switzerland. That soon changed to the placement of two independent Allied armies in Belgium, one watching western and south-central, the other eastern Belgium. Each adopted its own dispositions, and in defensive terms Wellington planned a deep defence at least one day back from the frontier and with fortified advance posts [Courtrai, Mons, etc] to slow any French advance; the Prussians preferred to remain forward [at and south of Charleroi] while still dispersed.

One can see that the opening days of the campaign for the Allies were dominated by a mistaken assumption, that Napoleon was unlikely to attack and that it would be the Allies who launched an invasion. Plans would thus be offensive and not defensive. That is not to say that the Allies had not mulled over defensive plans: they certainly had – at the end of April and early May, when they did fear a Napoleonic incursion. But by the end of May those plans seemed no longer required because the Allied commanders were convinced by then that the Emperor would not risk a thrust, and that it would be the Allies who would attack. And of course until the day when the Allies concentrated for the march into France, the armies had to remain dispersed for logistical reasons.

Granted that dispersion was necessary, it meant that if Napoleon despite everything did something unexpected [and on 7 June Wellington issued precautionary orders to governors of strong places in his sector, against just a case] a satisfactory defensive concentration should be based upon a time assumption of a day or more.

The biggest mistake the Prussians made was, while remaining dispersed, to place I Corps [Ziethen] right up against the frontier. Part was north of the river Sambre but an equally large part was spread south of the river in a long cordon close to the border, everywhere weak and far distant from the shelter behind the bridges. Within minutes this portion would be pinned down in a series of engagements, it could not escape mauling and might not

be able to get back to the river. It could scarcely be left unsupported to face a massacre, so the Prussian army would be drawn forward in its support and by the end of Day 1 might be assembling close to Charleroi for a full-scale battle.

During the early days of spring a battle site had been surveyed near Charleroi, at Sombreffe ["Ligny"] and this was the assembly point chosen by the Prussian high command on 15 June. But orders had been issued too belatedly, so that at dawn on Day 2 only half the army [a battered I Corps, and II Corps] was there, with the small III Corps arriving at midday and a distant IV Corps not arriving at all.

Meanwhile Napoleon had reached the villages on the south edge of "Ligny", so close that it would be a delicate matter for any further undisturbed Prussian retirement to be envisaged – even if the pugnacious old C-in-C agreed to that. [This leads to a second question that we can discuss next in a separate answer.]

Thus, while Wellington assembled in his sector in positions that the French could scarcely reach before Day 2, by which time their main line of advance could be identified, the Prussians were already committed to a forward battle by the end of Day 1 while still unsure of how their concentration was working. On Day 2 they had only about 70% of their army to hand, with a military genius facing them only two miles away with a veteran force possibly larger than theirs.

Had the Prussians instead adopted a deep defensive, an assembly well north of the Sambre, closer to Genappe or even Wavre would have granted them time. Battle would then have been deferred to Day 3 [17 June], by which time IV Corps, and for that matter Prussia's ally, could have been alongside and fully within 'the information loop'.

The forward defence was the biggest Prussian mistake in the first days of the campaign.

Question 18: Should the Prussians have fought at Ligny?

John: Each Ally was approximately equal to the French army under Napoleon, and together they would have a vast superiority. Militarily the best plan would have been to concentrate well back, link-up, and offer battle in front of Brussels or Louvain, or Wavre or Genappe, as the two Commanders-in-Chief might jointly decide.

Yet Ligny was fought without the presence of one quarter of the Prussian army and without the direct support of Wellington, who was forced to handle Ney at Quatre Bras [thus indirectly helping by stopping Ney from marching against the Prussians]. Why? Rather than offering fresh arguments I prefer to quote two great historians whom I admire enormously and to rest on their conclusions.

In a well-known passage the American J C Ropes long ago made the point that Ligny was fought because the Prussians had already taken the decision unilaterally. He was discussing the conference at Brye windmill at 1 p.m. on the day of Ligny:

“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.”¹

Ropes based this conclusion on Gneisenau’s noon 15 June letter to Brussels and on the other documents extant for the period 15 June and up to mid-morning on 16 June, and I find him conclusive.

But to that *military* answer we can add a *political* reason why the Prussians so decided? Here the archivist of the Prussian war archives, the great Julius von Pflugk-Harttung supplied an answer in 1903, an answer that I have concluded to be so probable as to be right.

“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

¹ J C Ropes, The Campaign of Waterloo, 1892, pp.146-7

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."²

Question 19: What do you think was Blücher's greatest strengths?

John: His personality: his qualities of animal magnetism, courage, optimism, a certain charm [the ladies of London adored him in 1814, and Wellington said to Dörnberg after the Brye meeting on 16 June 'What a splendid fellow he is'], no little common sense [his remark at the beautiful St Cloud palace that I have quoted previously in these discussions about Napoleon being a regular fool to have all this and go running after Moscow], and frequent kindness. At his demand men would be ready to die for him. Soldiers used to say in World War 2 that Monty they would fight for, Alexander they would die for - which is why Winston absolutely worshipped Alex as *Preux chevalier*. [But it was on the whole much better to be with Monty.]

I cannot believe that the levies who served in the Prussian army in 1815 would have pulled out the stops as willingly for anyone else; they would have been hardy, patient, obedient, but they would not have been as *stimulated* by any other general.

In the 1814 campaign, as well as in 1815, looking at Blücher and Gneisenau as a sort of twin-person, his is the flame that burns brightly while Gneisenau cautions, hesitates, doubts. At Laon in 1814 when Marmont reels back, the old man collapses with exhaustion, and at once the drive slackens when Gneisenau takes over. In 1815 on 18 June Blücher promises his whole army in support, and Gneisenau promptly insists on a postscript whittling down that undertaking.

Question 20: What do you think were Blücher's biggest weaknesses?

John: I think that his greatest weakness was his inability to judge clearly when to release reserves and when to deny their deployment. Foch has always seemed to me extraordinarily good in this respect by 1918, because by then he had learned this essential truth; by contrast he had wasted and worn down French armies in 1915 quite recklessly. Wellington was another excellent judge in these matters, always with a

² J von Pflugk-Hartung, Vorgeschichte der Schlacht bei Belle Alliance - Wellington, 1903, pp.65-6

battalion under his hand to place in the one weak place in the line at precisely the right moment. Blücher acting like a colonel and at a crisis leading in person a desperate cavalry charge in which he might be killed is not too serious a fault: if it turns the tide and brings victory or even relief that could be reward enough, and Blücher was sure of posthumous honour and glory [cf Nelson's 'Victory or Westminster Abbey']. But Blücher leading his reserves into battle an hour too soon, an hour before the climax or crisis, is a failure in 'reading' a battle. And against a general as clever and as ruthless as Napoleon, that was not merely a serious weakness but a Big Fault.

In theory perhaps, another weakness lay in Blücher's inability to plan strategically, but as his masters saw to it that he was given a good Chief-of-Staff, that weakness was compensated for. He knew how much he owed to these two Chiefs-of-Staff, first Scharnhorst and then Gneisenau, and spoke publicly praising them for their guidance, and indeed in the 'higher' matters they did know many things, but perhaps 'smaller' things, that were beyond Blücher. So in practice that weakness was compensated for, because in war, even if he was of limited grasp of such matters, he always knew one big thing, that victory comes by total commitment to it.

Question 21: What do you think were Wellington's greatest strengths?

John: It would be easy to say that he was omni-competent, but that of course would be an exaggeration, though not a great one. Put another way, there is yet to be written a serious work that concludes he was not much good, just lucky. He grew into his jobs, learned from them, benefited from his success both militarily, politically and socially. By the time he was 40 he was plainly an Alpha male. He became a man whom Prince Regent, Tsar, sovereigns, politicians and other military men recognised as a great man.

After years of reading the *Despatches* and *Supplementary Despatches* and also the *Mahratta War Papers*, Alex Gordon's letters, Larpent's *Journal*, etc, and then tracing the campaigns I retain a profound admiration for Wellington and a thankfulness that Britain had him at the right time. So I begin with a feeling already in his favour, rather as I do, for different reasons, with Blücher.

Extraordinary cool sense, a detailed grasp of fact, application: these seem the qualities that made him something special. It is already visible in 1797 when in India he is asked to consider an expedition to take Penang, and he compiles what is virtually a book on the place, its trade etc, and its value to the British Empire, climate, the force needed to take it and much more. In Mysore he becomes master of Indian exchange rates, habits and methods of the grain traders who supply the troops, how to build bullock carts with how much wood, in what time and at what cost, on the cultural and material factors needed to rule efficiently an Indian city, and so forth. This gave him a remarkable knowledge of how an army could work successfully in administration and on campaign. Stephen Petty has shown from the General Orders how Wellington formulated and insisted upon rules for marching, bivouacking and all sorts of matters. I often think that his remarks to Charles

Stuart in Portugal about a biscuit [that I have mentioned previously] are a miniature summation of his grasp of military administration.

Also he went everywhere to see for himself, he went to the outposts, he rode long distances at considerable speed to visit detached formations, summed up what he observed with great celerity and then gave orders that must have been of real help to those detached commanders like Hill or Beresford. He could do this for years on end because he remained always so fit mentally and physically. And so he was respected and trusted by his men, turned to when everything was otherwise going wrong. I see that dash to Sorrauren, the ride up the steep hill and the Portuguese shouting 'Douro' as they spotted him, a perfect instance of this. And the shout and its implication affected the French likewise, and disturbed Soult in his plan.

Moreover Wellington mastered the secrets of his various opponents' systems. In the Peninsula he studied the minds and attitudes of the marshals, the factors of time and distance that would rule their any cooperation, the organisation and tactics of the French. I think it was, again, Stephen Petty who said that he got inside the French mind. What I find amazing is how little the French got into his mind even after many years of defeat and ill-success. You have only to read General Pelet's postwar analysis of the 1811 campaign, where every French setback is despite Wellington's 'tactical and strategic ignorance', his inability to fight battles, blind chance, extraordinary luck, to see this. Not all Frenchmen of course: by 1815 Foy certainly, Reille, possibly the somewhat unreflecting and combat-fatigued Ney, are distinctly nervous of him and his [to them] mysterious system, but they are the servants of a man who does not like 'croaking' and anyway does not hold his commanders in much esteem.

Question 22: What do you think were Wellington's biggest weaknesses?

John: Wellington was fortunate that his era imposed limits to time, speed, manpower, productive capacity, that all suited his way of working. The Industrial Revolution provided the financial and productive advantage to Britain that her competitors did not possess; an army was still limited by manpower constraints so that one man could control it effectively; time and speed were still dominated by a horse's speed and the power of sail. Coal, steam, iron, a rising birth-rate would transform war within a further half-century so that vast armies could be railed at speed to the desired concentration-point, command had to be delegated from the single C-in-C to staffs and junior generals. The age of Napoleon and Wellington changed into the age of the Elder Moltke, a very different age.

Still, I can see that one of Wellington's strengths - his ability to handle swiftly and with a grasp of the vital elements in a hundred-and-one different problems - could turn into a weakness. The Peninsular army, that perfect machine when fully operational, was ideally suited by size to his style of command, but by the war's end even it was becoming rather too large and he was experimenting with a 'corps' idea that must have resulted in some delegation. He had for perhaps different reasons [international politics and royal protocol] to adopt a corps system in 1815 and it did not really suit him. While ostensibly retaining

the organisation he shredded the rash and meddlesome Dutch crown prince's corps into his old familiar divisional structure on 18 June. But that Prince was a British full general outranking Uxbridge and Hill, Picton, Alten, Clinton and Colville; consequently there must be no official '2 i.c.'. But even so, some succession plan was necessary 'just in case', and when the most senior Lt-General, Uxbridge, asked about the Duke's battle plan he was given an answer that at one level was blinding common sense, at another totally unhelpful: 'suck it and see' as Tommy Atkins might have said. A good succession plan is an essential in modern corporate life, and at no time could the British government, whether in 1812 or 1815, get one from 'The Peer'. His remarks to them about his subordinates in the Peninsula were acute and reliable judgements, and his 1814 views on commanders for the ongoing American war [Niddry, formerly Hope; Hill] were shrewd. I can only conclude that he thought none of them up to replacing him, the Duke - and according to several who fought at Waterloo, nor could they.

Moreover, while in the Peninsula he had brothers Marquess Richard and young Henry to help in dealing with London and with those delights his wayward allies, in 1815 he was alone. The masses of varied logistical, financial, political matters he handled was remarkable, but no man has more than 24 hours in a day and these problems took up all too much of his time week after week. On the whole he handled them well, but they took his mind off uninterrupted consideration of Napoleon. There was no complete answer to this. Had he been given [and accepted] a subordinate to deal with the diplomatic side [think of Harold Macmillan skilfully placed as a British adviser to Eisenhower in Algiers in WW2], would that subordinate have had the status/character to deal eyeball to eyeball with Dutch King Willem, or the Bourbons, and at the same time to satisfy the Duke? Possibly a great nobleman like the Duke of Richmond might have helped, an ex Viceroy of Ireland now in retirement in Brussels [a lifelong friend to whom Arthur Wellesley had once been a chief secretary], or even better Lord Castlereagh if he could absent himself from the Foreign Office and Leadership of the House of Commons, for he was Wellington's closest and longest political friend and they always were in harmony.

But just as I can see acute stresses between the Duke as C-in-C above a mulish and suspicious Gneisenau as his Chief-of-Staff in a single united Anglo-Dutch-Prussian army, so I can see potential strains in an 1815 version of the Ike-Macmillan relationship, for Ike was a general of very different [if equally valuable] gifts from Wellington. Who shall say?

A second weakness was his speed to criticise and slowness to praise. He was swift to remark when his own services were inadequately recognised, as witness his discontent with his elder brother Governor General of India, when he felt the latter did not praise him sufficiently, and the rewards that he did receive for his [very considerable] services did not make him more generous towards other deserving cases. It is evident from *Despatches* that his thanks to his soldiers for the latest victory was generalised, cool and almost perfunctory but that his pen came to life when he turned to criticise savagely and at length the misdemeanours of those same soldiers: to read such phrases is not an uplifting experience. We remember his fine praise for the troops' discipline on the doomed *Birkenhead*, but overlook his bleak attitude to suggestions of rewards for Hardinge and Gough for their performance against the Sikhs in 1846 - he implied that

they had done no more than their duty - his attitude was adversely commented upon by *Punch* as 'The Greedy Boy'.

Wellington himself later admitted that he should have given praise more generously, but by then it was too late. Grattan's [of the 88th, Connaught Rangers] bitter comment in his memoirs was all too justified. By contrast that fine and modest man 'Uncle' Bill Slim, the outstanding general who led the 14th Army in Burma from defeat to victory in WW2, when describing that hard and splendid campaign, never used 'I did' nor even 'we'; it was always 'you did' and his men adored him for it.

As to society, if Oman is too harsh in flatly saying that Wellington had a social contempt for his intellectual equals and an intellectual one for his social equals, yet there is indeed a trace visible. And in more personal matters Jane Wellesley has shown that it was Arthur who pressed ahead with his disastrous marriage when Kitty would have accepted his withdrawal, which makes his treatment of his poor simple and adoring wife all the more reprehensible.

So much for what I see as his greatest weaknesses. But I must add this. It was said of another and equally great soldier and far from flawless character, Marlborough, by a remarkable man who had known and differed violently from him politically: 'He was so great a man that I forget his faults'. For me it is the same with Wellington.

Question 23: What were Napoleon's greatest strengths during the Waterloo Campaign?

John: Bob, you have the knack of asking really difficult questions, but this is the most problematical yet. If I were to give it in a sentence I would say 'his *daemon* or self belief was always his greatest strength'. He lived at a time when France, though terribly disorganised by revolution was the most populous and the second most homogenous Power in Europe, in a world of war where crowns were for the taking. His *daemon* had taken him in four years from a little-known general to First Consul, to Emperor by the age of 35, to ruler of half Europe within another three years [Tilsit]. Perhaps if he had then been content the Bonapartist regimes might have sunk roots into their territories and given the family a generation's time to consolidate their [or in truth, his] hold on the Continent. But his *daemon* sought war, enjoyed war, and he did not stop, and while the island kingdom would not accept his supremacy he would not abandon the struggle: hence the Continental System, and hence the covert and not so covert opposition of the vassal states, and the hostility of Russia. From there it is but a step to 1812 and then the 1813 war of German liberation, the refusal to compromise for a peace, the invasion of France and the collapse of the First Empire. His *daemon* had led to all this as well.

Tsar Alexander's offer of Elba was a terrible mistake. How long, really, could this driven man be content to play toy soldiers, virtually in sight of Italy and with France so close? We can add up all the insults and cruelties, the failure to honour the treaty of Fontainebleau and the resultant financial hardship, the imprisonment in Vienna of his wife and son, the follies of the restored Bourbons and the plots of Talleyrand and Fouché against Napoleon,

but the French historian Houssaye was surely right to attribute the Return to the simple fact that the person in question was called Napoleon and he was aged only 45.

The Return taught him, day after day, that the old glamour had been lost. Peace, no restoration of the hated conscription, social and financial stability, were what most people wanted. Where Jacobinism and the spirit of 1793 emerged there was a corresponding shudder, what was sought was quiet: 'They let me come, just as they let the others go'. Europe's response was clear, and when his attempts to placate the sovereigns with fine words failed, the 'Funds' sank and never recovered until after Waterloo.

But for his intense and almost superhuman energy the French war effort in mid-1815 would have been poor; even with his energy and Davout's loyalty it was insufficient. Money was running out. The ordinary soldiers adored him, and the Bonapartists who were a minority in the French parliamentary system, but many who were socially or militarily important were undecided or pessimistic. So much turned on this one miracle-worker. Almost everything in France in 1815 seemed to act as a drag to deny him success.

His assessment of the options open to him in mid-1815 came down to little more than an option of difficulties, and behind him a domestic political situation of not so concealed hostility.

He did have one other piece of good fortune. In the dark days of 1814-18 old 'Tiger' Clemenceau remarked, 'My opinion of Napoleon has fallen since this war started; he only had to fight Allies'. And Napoleon was the very man to divide and smash his allied opponents; he might well expect the feeble Austrian Marshal Schwarzenberg to lose courage and for some allied sovereigns to temporise if a first defeat could be inflicted on them on the Rhine or in the most important sector, Belgium. Even in Belgium the two armies there, under the most dangerous commanders, might pull in different directions if all did not go well with them.

So, he placed his remaining strength in a continuing trust in his *daemon*, in allied irresolution, and finally in an army whose lower ranks were fanatically devoted to him. Few men have ever been more faithfully served by the common soldiers whom they led. But it was simply not enough to overcome the setbacks that are an inherent part of war.

Question 24: What were Napoleon's greatest weakness during the Waterloo Campaign? Not his army's but his.

John: Napoleon always had a cynical view of mankind. His blistering opinion of the French as expressed to Miot de Melito in a famous interview in 1797 emphasised their vanity and love of glory, by which means a skilful actor could lead them by the nose. He was also a born centraliser who believed in control from above. Moreover he had an amazing capacity for thinking about many matters simultaneously and arriving instantly at his conclusions. Consequently he worked his teams of secretaries into the ground

unceasingly. With his absolute domination of the life of France after 1799, the dangers inherent in all this became clearer and clearer. Institutions were brought to conform with his demands: debate, scrutiny, second opinions were successively abandoned by the institutions that should have upheld them. All turned on the master's will, and even whim. So the result is what one might expect: when something happened to Napoleon, the structure of the Napoleonic state collapsed.

The habits of power made him impatient with men for the men were almost always less gifted or less intelligent than he. He bullied, insulted, dressed-down, then enriched and praised these servants in a stream of statements and orders that never ceased. He loved very few: perhaps Duroc and Lannes, but the list is not long; for the most part he enjoyed keeping them twitching, watching them jump to his changing moods, upbraiding them for not obeying his orders, or for obeying them, or for not knowing which to obey and which not, since his orders could overtake each other. There is an instance that I quote from near the collapse of 1814: a reinforcement was needed at Mainz and Napoleon ordered one to be sent there, but his Chief-of-Staff humbly pointed out that this force had been ordered by Napoleon himself to go to Metz instead, and then the War Minister pointed out that Napoleon had ordered him to send it in part to Metz but in part to Paris. Order, counter-order, disorder.

This contemptuous opinion of men had its other side: he did not really expect loyalty in his servants for they were 'machines to do will' [as he said to Fleury de Chaboulon, a junior secretary], which is why he put up for years with schemers like Talleyrand and Fouché. Both these men came to see him as a menace to France and to themselves and worked to master him; he recognised this but left them untouched, in Fouché's case even in 1815. It seems to me that it was not very different with his army: the higher a man rose the less Napoleon respected him, the more he set one against the other. Soult he thought disloyal, Ney someone to treat with little respect, the efficient and faithful Davout with something like dislike. Astonishingly, despite objections from Davout and Soult, he personally gave the slippery Bourmont a divisional command in 1815, though for years he had personally declared him an unsafe man - and Bourmont duly played the traitor.

When we examine his appointments in 1815 we see a surprising number of commanders sent to the main army who strongly disliked and distrusted each other, which did nothing for the morale of the lower ranks. The treatment of Ney - rusticated and ignored through the spring after his adhesion to the cause, ordered up only on 11 June and given the most cursory instructions on how to operate his semi-independent wing - was a case of very bad man management that for a man of Napoleon's calibre almost suggests he simply would not take the trouble to think about Ney and his [by now] shaky condition.

The campaign plan relied on concentration, speed and the best use of a very short sequence of time. The campaign should have opened on 14 June [but had to be deferred by 24 hours due to Soult's muddling of orders], and Napoleon had a proclamation printed for distribution in Brussels on 17 June; he hoped to have captured Antwerp by 21 June. His opening day went well and he could expect on 16 June to score a decisive victory over the Prussians. That morning he told Ney to reach Brussels by the morning of

17 June. It was Ney's fault that the morning of 16 June was wasted at Quatre Bras, but Napoleon with widely separated wings, no overall numerical superiority and seeking an overwhelming success on one wing should have imposed an absolute defensive on the other. He let Ney muddle on, and when he needed his assistance to ensure that Ligny was a victory, Ney was not there.

Given that Ligny was only a victory on points, an instant start should have been ordered for dawn on 17 June. Yet **valuable hours all through the morning** were wasted in touring the field and talking Parisian politics. Then came the dramatic surge in activity and the belated pursuit of Wellington's isolated army. Overnight 17/18 as the army camped facing Wellington there were various orders and messages between Napoleon and the detached Grouchy, but they were based on a picture that was fairly far from reality and Grouchy was left with a confused grasp of what was required, and thought he should march after the Prussians rather than closing upon his master. And it was far from clear where the Prussians were, in what numbers, and in which directions they might go.

Thus once the day came the battle would be fought by the French according to a concept that was flawed: they need not consider the Prussians and they could win a decisive victory in some eight hours. The plan was sound: Napoleon's left would draw Wellington ever deeper into holding Hougoumont thus weakening his own centre; that centre would be pounded to ruin meanwhile by the Grand Battery; then a hard thrust at the centre, the Mont St Jean crossroads, would wreck Wellington's army; then the cavalry would complete the ruin. In part it worked: Wellington was drawn deeply into Hougoumont. But the Grand Battery was ineffective; the little central bastion of La Haye Sainte was overlooked and thus survived, and the central attack did not ultimately succeed. In not succeeding it brought about its own ruin and that part of Napoleon's army was henceforth of little use. But by his time, some 3 to 4 hours into the battle, the Prussians had to be considered as they were impinging, albeit at some distance; Lobau's force supporting Napoleon's central attack had to be diverted east and was thereafter in need of constant reinforcement against the Prussians. The plan for Mont St Jean had to be redrawn.

Ney was handed cavalry to do what infantry had failed to do; how many cavalry units he should be given was a choice for Napoleon [who seems to have concealed matters in his accounts]. Ney wasted the cavalry, but Napoleon was complicit. The capture of La Haye Sainte was given too low a priority. By the time that Wellington's centre was starting to crumble Napoleon's resources were very few, as the Prussian attacks drew away reserves. A withdrawal at 5 pm, saving the guns, pulling back in reasonable order to regroup and fight another day, that might have been best for Napoleon. But that raised the fear that at the news of a setback the politicians in Paris might seize control [that certainly was Fouché's plan]. So Napoleon made his final decision and the Garde went in. Once that failed and the false news issued by Napoleon that Grouchy was approaching was seen to be false, the army collapsed. In all this I believe that Napoleon had miscalculated the strength, skill, and positioning of Wellington and Blücher, judged against his own resources and against time. He had let Grouchy stray too far, in consequence. And in the battle he did not control Ney satisfactorily and left him to do things that later Napoleon blamed him for - instead of controlling him at the time. The

description of the battle that Napoleon wrote on 20 June was an odd one, of defeat snatched from the jaws of victory; it may have been deliberate propaganda, but what if he really believed it?

Robert: Well John, it has been a pleasure and of course quite informative! I wish you the best of luck with *Waterloo: the Campaign of 1815* and know it be a best-seller! Hopefully we will not have to wait too long for Part II of the book.

John: Thanks, Bob. You have kept me on my toes and it has been great fun. I had only one question bowled at me by a reader of the Forum and managed a sort of answer, so got away very lightly. As a piece of book production the first volume looks really handsome, but somehow unlikely to rival sales of 'Two and a Half Shades of Grey', let alone 'Fifty'; nine chapters 31 to 52 of volume 2, have so far been copy-edited, all the 22 maps are drawn, and at some date in May the text will go to the writer of the Foreword and to me for the index, so you should see the second book out this autumn.

Placed on the Napoleon Series: April 2017