

## The Napoleon Series Reviews

### An Interview with John Hussey about Volume II of His Book *Waterloo the Campaign of 1815: Part III*

By [Kevin F. Kiley](#)

**Question 11:** A little further on Napoleon's choice of subordinates, why do you believe that Ney was employed with the *Armée du Nord* when his performance as an independent commander in 1813 was sub-par and he took part in the Marshals' mutiny in 1814?

**John:** There were not many good reliable senior officers with the main army. D'Erlon was something of a dead-beat who had under-performed in the Pyrenees, and Reille seems to have been prone to moods. Vandamme was good but with a troublesome disposition and he and Gérard were vying against each other for promotion. Would these four work well together? Would it be safer to place them under commanders plainly their senior, who should make them cooperate? I put to one side Drouot of the *Garde*, and the cavalry commanders, and likewise Lobau, who was given a small corps, as he had been a trusted personal ADC to the Emperor, and who might have been held perhaps under Marshal Mortier (had he not gone sick) or more probably under Napoleon himself.

As the concept of two wings and a reserve was in Napoleon's mind, to place each wing under a marshal seemed wise. But then the old problem of resources in relation to means came up. Very few marshals chose to join the Emperor: Davout was ordered to stay in Paris; Suchet was kept in Lyons though perhaps Grouchy could have replaced him there, having won his baton down south in the spring. Soult was chief of staff and could scarcely be switched at this late time. Who else was there of the requisite seniority and experience? So Grouchy on the first day of the offensive (!) was moved from the massed cavalry to command the right wing, and Ney was belatedly called out of rustication and on reaching the front on the afternoon of the first day was handed the left wing virtually without proper instruction. (And of course none of the subordinate commanders were told of the command changes until well afterwards.) What is amazing was the inconsequential and last-minute way in which it was done, and the hopelessly inadequate way in which Ney was briefed on 15 June. Ney was past his best, was smarting under the treatment both Bourbons and Bonapartists had inflicted on him and his wife in 1814 and in this year, and needed very careful handling if he was to give of his best, as I said in an earlier conversation with you.

**Question 12:** Back to the Allies-both Wellington and Blücher were careless of both their troops dispositions and their security, both of which allowed Napoleon to surprise them with his advance to Charleroi. Did they not realize that Napoleon's preferred operational choice was the offensive?

**John:** I do not quite agree with your formulation of the problem. Are you perhaps being a little too sweeping? Dispersal was unavoidable while awaiting the moment of Allied concentration in order to invade France. What bedevilled them was the Schwarzenberg dilly-dallying beyond the Rhine. While the Prussians in early June thought that Napoleon would not attack (Blücher told his wife they could wait a year before Napoleon did so, and were it not for the sea the Prussians could have virtually gone as far as Africa), they began to wake up to the threat on 14 June. Wellington felt that Napoleon would have been wise to defend the Somme-Aisne-Marne line but (as I pointed out in volume 1) on 7 June he was concerned enough to put all his Belgian frontier towns into a state of siege in case of a surprise attack. His army was drawn well back more than a day's march from the frontier and could assemble in time, so that by Day 3 the Allied combined weight could bear down on any French attack; unfortunately the Prussians were not only still dispersed but with one quarter of the army placed slap up against the frontier, a sitting target. It was caught and forced to fight within minutes of Napoleon crossing the frontier, and as I explained earlier, with a long-prepared plan to fight forward on Day 2 irrespective of support, the Prussians got the campaign off on a bad footing.

Certainly they were "surprised". Napoleon decided not to attack Wellington, but to attack Blücher instead, and so it was Blücher and not Wellington who knew what was happening. Only the person attacked could provide the early intelligence needed for a riposte, and the Prussian communications overnight 14/15 and during the day of June 15th left too much to be desired.

The essence of the Allied strategy in Belgium (and hopefully on the Rhine if only Schwarzenberg would bestir himself) was weight of numbers and an ability to outlast Napoleon in the great punching match. Hard pounding finds out who can pound longest. And it worked.

**Question 13:** What do you believe the overall situation was for all three commanders on the morning of 17 June?

**John:** I suggest that I have already answered this in our second conversation. The Prussian high command had to re-establish contact between its four corps, pull back to regroup and to find Wellington to buttress them. Wellington took a wise decision to retire in good time and he was able to execute it. Ney seemed incapable of any decision and did nothing. Napoleon took a firm decision, but took it belatedly and failed to catch Wellington, while remaining unclear of where the Prussians were and what they might do.

**Question 14;** Was it possible that any Belgians, civilian or military, would support the French in their advance into Belgium?

**John:** Undoubtedly some Belgians would have answered Napoleon's call, but the average man and his wife would have shut the house, hidden the chickens and pigs and any money and prayed that the locusts of war would pass them by. That was the feeling in the northern *French* villages as Napoleon's army moved close to the frontier, as the Italian General Pollio's 1906 history made very plain. Why should it have been different in Belgium? 'Napoleon' meant 'war', 'conscription', 'war taxes', and in any case Belgium had not been treated particularly well under the Empire. Had Belgium returned to Austrian rule many inhabitants would have been glad, but that was not desired by any Power, including Austria itself. The problems of the enforced Dutch-Belgian union of 1814 were not yet fully apparent, as they would soon become, and a present calamity was probably much more feared than future discontents.

**Question 15:** Should Napoleon have actually waited to begin the battle on the 18<sup>th</sup> or do you believe that he could have withdrawn and maintained an advantage against the allies?

**John:** He had gambled on a 14 June assault, taking Brussels within three days and Antwerp within seven. With such a prize he would have isolated Britain, and in his mind this would have overthrown the Tory war ministry; without Britain and with Germany's western flank turned, men like Schwarzenberg would have been despondent, and some personal deal might have been sought with either the Tsar or with his son's grandfather Emperor Francis. He had thrown the dice and could not abandon the game after Ligny.

Nor did he use the hours after Ligny to review his options, to judge whether his wastage at Ligny was not at too high a rate to be sustainable (men like Foy thought it so), and he simply wasted the morning of 17 June talking Parisian politics. The minutes and hours were slipping by and nothing was done to ensure that Antwerp would be his very soon. He was "painting pictures". Perhaps his talk of Parisian politics discloses his real problem after Ligny. He might have drawn back into France with a sizeable formed army, reverted to the defensive, and fought as he had done so brilliantly in 1814. But that could not have figured as Victory, and recollections of 1814 were unlikely to enthuse the political classes in Paris: once you stop pedalling the bicycle you eventually do come off. And that clever, utterly realistic oddity Fouché saw this very well. He had told Pasquier in early May that Napoleon would soon launch an attack and that it would be excellent for him to win a couple of battles; "but he will lose the third, and then our time will come, and we shall obtain a good result for ourselves". Fouché saw what Napoleon did not; that the good of France was not the same as Napoleon's good, and that "the game had long been up". A retirement into France would create a revolt inside Paris. Only that third victory could save Napoleon. He had to go on.

**Question 16:** If the Prussians did not arrive on time to support Wellington, for whatever reason, could Wellington have won the battle without them, given that the approximately 16,000 troops Napoleon had to deploy against the Prussians would then be free to face Wellington's army?

**John:** Kevin, the question needs rephrasing. The battle that Wellington accepted was accepted on the clear understanding that "two" Prussian corps would be provided, and confirmed in Blücher's message that at first light the entire Prussian army was coming the ten miles to join him. He never expected to win the battle without them.

Ten miles at one mile per hour ought to have seen the heads of the Prussians closing on the field by, say, 2 p.m., and the reports of their advance would begin to affect Napoleon's plans well before that. Three things certainly affected the march: the sodden hilly terrain; the extraordinary way in which the furthest formations were ordered to move through and across and in front of the nearer formations; and Gneisenau's insistence that Wellington must be seen to be committed to battle before the high command would commit the leading units. That meant that the stop-watch would be released only at noon, long after the dawn time on which the Duke relied in his plans.

Always we come back to that phrase endlessly repeated by the Duke from April till June: Blücher and I united are too strong for Boney. It was intended to be an Allied battle.

Frankly, to change one element in an equation that historically is fixed, so that one and only one variable is allowed and the rest stay unchanged, does not get us very far. For surely, that one variable would induce a second variation that we cannot really guess at. What if Napoleon had detached only a single corps under Grouchy? Might he have attacked Wellington by the western flank? Or what if Wellington's Hal contingent, left unthreatened by Napoleon, had been sent against Napoleon's western flank or rear?

**Question 17:** If Grouchy had pursued the Prussians with more 'vigor' do you believe he could have kept them off Napoleon's flank?

**John:** Grouchy seems all at sea on 17 and 18 June, unable to grasp what Napoleon expects of him or to make sense of the messages Soult transmits to him; unable also to master his subordinate infantry commanders. How different after Waterloo when he is forced to rely on his own wits.

He was certainly too slow in pursuit and so never really grasped where the bulk of the Prussians might be, or whether they might try and link with the Duke. He was foggy: he knew he was miles south of the elusive enemy and yet he wrote of getting beyond them to their north and so stopping them reaching Brussels. How on earth did he expect to do that? But as to your question, Clausewitz as usual says it all: had Grouchy been on the left (west) bank of the Dyle on the morning of 18 June, he could have seriously impeded the Prussian march from Wavre towards the great battle. Perhaps he might have stopped them, certainly he could have delayed them. He only woke up to the idea when it was far, far too late.

But that was *not* what Napoleon's orders actually enjoined Grouchy to do, and *he did not know* what Napoleon's own plans were for that day. There was an information gap. That was his misfortune, but not his fault.

**Question 18:** Why did Gneisenau, who was the senior staff officer of the Prussian army, attempt to lead a pursuit that was largely ineffective in that they generally stayed away from any semblance of formed units and only harassed stragglers and fugitives?

**John:** There are several questions here, so let me try to separate them out a little.

Was the concept of 'pursuit' wrong? Surely not. Manifestly the French army had broken and gone into the night, leaving all its artillery on the field. A field army without artillery will not be not a very daunting opponent for some time to come, but if it is granted time it will begin to pull together. Granted that this was not the great cavalry pursuit that Marlborough drove relentlessly after Ramillies in 1706, but Wellington's army was exhausted, and the Prussians' leading corps Bulow's IV Corps had been through a punishing day. Even a few squadrons and a handful of light infantry might prod the French into a final dissolution (hence the mounted drummer-boy). And in fact even this exiguous little force did the trick. In the dark, in the crowded street and narrow bridge of Genappe, the French became a mob.

I do not recall which were the French "formed units" you refer to and in my mind's eye see small bands of officers with some ordinary soldiers (not always of a single unit) making their way back towards France. Piré's light cavalry might have done much more to shield the defeated army than they actually did, but presumably they were more or less still a formed body at nightfall – were they thereafter? I would say that officers fought and fell, or then retained a semblance of order, much more devotedly than the rank and file who, feeling betrayed, simply slipped away at the end of the battle.

Of course over the following days there was a sort of attempt to regroup, to collect the stragglers and assemble a respectably large force. Napoleon gave instructions for this to his entourage before leaving for Paris, and Grouchy soon made an appearance (though, typically, Vandamme went his own way despite Grouchy – not a good sign). But Soult, a realist in these conditions, saw that the game was up and resigned the chief command as soon as he possibly could. The commandant at Laon, one of the real strongholds in the north, reported that the troops in the fortress city evinced a bad spirit. Grouchy as the new C-in-C tried to deflect the Prussian advance and sent d'Erlon to block the way at Compiègne on the Oise crossing just 50 miles north of Paris. He arrived just as the first Prussians were staggering up. A bold stance and a thrust might have shaken the Prussians, but this was d'Erlon. He turned away south and let the Prussians alone.

In my opinion, the senior French commanders too often were not worthy of their men. When they had some spark, they could affect matters positively, like Exelmans at Versailles on 1 July surprising and thrashing the Prussians and driving them away in flight. But numbers must tell, and with confidence once gone in the leaders, there is one very

likely outcome all too visible. That is why even the tough Davout was convinced by 28 June that France had to accept the Bourbons without delay.

I think that the Prussians were right to order two of their corps to pursue Grouchy on his retreat from Wavre to Namur and I find the performance of Pirch I lamentable in failing to close on him and possibly put a large part of that contingent “in the bag” as the high command had intended. But thereafter I do not see much wrong with what the Prussians decided was their best course. They recognised that there were French units somewhere to the east, but they judged that if the Prussian main forces marched alongside or fairly close to Wellington (who was to their west) and went down towards the Oise and the route to Paris, they were pretty well invincible. Paris controlled France and once in their hands the scattered French forces and outlying garrisons would be of little account.

As to Gneisenau’s decision to lead the 18 June pursuit in person, I suspect that he felt that it was a way of restoring his prestige at royal headquarters, where he was not popular. Immense prestige would accrue to old Blücher, and to the fighting generals Bülow and Ziethen (maybe even Thielemann might be earning credit back at Wavre, for all anyone knew), and Gneisenau had very little fighting with which to credit himself with, as he admitted on 30 June 1815 (as I said previously). Moreover, he hated the French with personal intensity; harassing stragglers and fugitives was better than sitting still. He could ride off his hatred and frustration: it is Gneisenau at his most human.

**Question 19:** What was the condition of Wellington’s army at Waterloo’s ending? Could they have mounted an effective pursuit?

**John:** No, the army was played out, and no wonder. Can you see the 27th Foot dashing along the road to Genappe on the night of 18/19 June? In fact one of the most impressive parts of the saga is the way in which the army came down the slopes of Mont St Jean, through the poached ground covered in dead and dying men and horses and smashed equipment, and reached La Belle Alliance on the far ridge, before drawing a breath. All in all, first a wet night and maybe poor rations, eight hours of ferocious battle and dreadful casualties, many officers and senior NCOs fallen, and at the end as twilight fell a trudge across a mile of broken ground (and then on arrival some friendly fire from Prussian guns at Plancenoit). There is a final thought. Many had wounded comrades back on the ridge a mile back; I suspect that they were uneasy on what might befall them overnight as the human jackals roamed, and that some may have gone back to find and protect the wounded with the tacit approval of their superiors: let the Prussians playing *God Save the King* take on the pursuit.

Placed on the Napoleon Series: October 2017