

The Napoleon Series Reviews

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

By [Kevin F. Kiley](#)

Question 20: Did you find anything in your research that would explain the exceedingly deep, and generally unwieldy, formation d'Erlon and his division commanders formed I Corps into for the main attack on the 18th?

John: Nothing. My hunch is that Napoleon was the decisive factor, just as he had been with Macdonald at Wagram. He could observe the forming up and if he had had concerns he could have intervened. What was his conception for this part of the battle? He had held a large part of Wellington's forces in the Hougoumont sector and west of the sector he now intended to attack. The Grand Battery had pulverised the crest, d'Erlon would march up and occupy the crest relying on a dense mass and a broad front to permit heavy musketry to suppress the line of defenders. Then the cavalry would come up and exploit the victory. Sometimes I think of the plan for the Somme on 1 July 1916: not a fighting advance on intact defences, but the occupation of a trench line already destroyed by the most intense bombardment yet known, leading to exploitation. I say this because in both cases the presumptions were similar, both failed and left the attackers unable to function properly for a time, although in 1815 the attack came remarkably close to success.

Question 21: After Napoleon returned to Paris, was there any possibility of mounting effective resistance to the allies, even if Napoleon did not abdicate?

John: I do not think so. By 20 June the political leaders in Paris were convinced that Napoleon must go and Napoleon's brothers tried and failed to overcome their demands. His decision to abdicate indicated that he was not prepared to resist them by force. Davout would initially have supported him but once the decision to abdicate had been taken, everyone was intent on saving as much as possible from the wreck for the sake of France. The Funds rose on the news for the first time since April. Legitimists, Orleanists, republicans, the supporters of Napoleon II might juggle for position but the first imperative was to turn away Allied wrath, and for that Napoleon I was simply a nuisance. When he asked to return to command the defence of Paris as simple General Bonaparte with a promise afterwards to depart for the USA, the general reaction was to say No and to get him out of the country with the utmost despatch. He went.

Question 22: Lastly, what effect did the British deployment of troops to North America have on the availability of British units being deployed to Belgium in 1815?

John: Plainly the American war had some effect on Wellington's army, in both regiments and generals. The absence of Sir George Murray was unfortunate. But those at Horse Guards like Henry Torrens did their best and kept Wellington fully informed of each convoy from America, from Ireland, and elsewhere. Artillery was also called back and was due to reach a climax by the end of June: with each day and each week of a phoney war in Belgium the old Peninsular regiments were returning, and had the campaign opened at the end of June as Schwarzenberg seemed to promise, then the army would have benefitted accordingly.

Given the time being granted by the phoney war there were clear signs that the Netherlands and German contingents coming to serve under the Duke were also improving. If his contingents resembled marquetry at least they were being given a shine.

In the event, the Duke's infantry comprised sixteen British first battalions at Mont St Jean and Hal, ten second battalions (three being Guards), and three third battalions (one Guards), plus eight KGL battalions. It proved sufficient.

Question 23: What is your overall opinion of the Prussian corps commanders in the campaign?

John: I hope it comes across how greatly I like and admire Blücher, and I am sure that there was scarcely a Prussian soldier who did not warm to him. He was above all a born leader of men, and so although he was no military genius he generally got the best out of his generals, as can be seen in 1813 and 1814 when he had Ziethen and Kleist and Müffling serving under him. On the whole I suspect that Gneisenau did not get the best from the officers round him, and certainly it was he who fumbled the instructions to Bülow von Dennewitz that had a bad effect on the opening of the campaign. So, in thinking about how the five Prussian corps commanders performed, you have to take into account the effect on them of duality in the high command, Blücher and Gneisenau; as well as comparing them against their opposite numbers, the French corps commanders (the British did not function in quite the same way, as we know).

Frederick II had an outstanding cavalry commander in the Great Ziethen. Blücher's Ziethen a generation later does not stand the comparison. I had always considered him a more than adequate front line commander, but when I really got into the details of the campaign I was surprised to find him rather unsteady in the first day's fighting, unclear in his thinking and certainly not seizing his brigade commanders by the scruff of the neck and correcting their divergences on 15 June. For instance, there had been some discussion a week before the campaign actually opened as to where Steinmetz's 1st Brigade should stand, if attacked, and it would seem that Gosselies was to be held, yet on 15 June Steinmetz goes clean beyond Gosselies and nobody checks him, though that exposes the great road to Quatre Bras and Genappe and Brussels, the very Genappe that Gneisenau thinks will be a hub on the inter-allied courier route. Then again, Steinmetz does not move to occupy Ransart midway along the so-called 'Gosselies-Gilly

line' but leaves it open and undefended so that 2nd Brigade has a flank in the air and the French take Ransart unopposed. What is Ziethen doing while this is going on? All this is in my chapter 21.

However, I see nothing amiss at Ligny, and when we reach the critical day of 18 June and suddenly there is some confusion as to where I Corps should go - whether towards Bülow's IV Corps in front of Plancenoit or towards Papelotte-La Haye-Smohain-Frischermont – and Steinmetz is thinking of going to Plancenoit, the staff are quarreling and waving orders at each other and each claiming they represent the high command, then Ziethen rides up and makes the decisive judgement, unaided: Papelotte, which is indeed the better of the two courses. Well done, that general.

Pirch I of II Corps seems a fairly colourless commander, you do not find him coming to mind when recollecting the first three days; he does what his orders require. But on the 19th, when he is ordered to chase after the retreating Grouchy and close upon him from the east while III Corps approaches from the north, Pirch I is lamentable. I explain all this in chapter 46: overnight 18/19 June he rests at Plancenoit, at which time Grouchy is at Wavre. In the morning comes news of Thielemann's defence of Wavre and it is plain that Grouchy is now isolated and at risk. Thielemann's III Corps should hold him there, or chase him if he retreats and Pirch will catch him retreating. At 11 a.m. Pirch reaches Mellery, 9 miles south from Plancenoit at a time when Grouchy is still at Wavre, about 9 miles to his north. Grouchy now retreats and by nightfall on the 19th has reached Gembloux, 5 miles east of Mellery. He is unopposed. On the 20th Grouchy reaches Namur, and from Namur to France is but a short step *and thus he brings the last formed units of the Armée du Nord back to France*. What has Pirch been doing while all this has gone on? He arrives at Gembloux only at 10 a.m. on 20 June. What a prize has been lost. It is said that Pirch and his troops were tired. No doubt they were, just as Blücher was exhausted by the time *he* reached Genappe early on 19 June. But can you for one moment doubt what the old man would have done had he commanded II Corps in search of Grouchy? Within days Pirch was sent home, on account of his 'deafness' it was said officially.

Thielemann of III Corps does not have much of a role at first. His is the smallest corps. He is on a wing at Ligny and not as heavily engaged as I and II Corps, and pulls away in good order at nightfall. The plan for 18 June is that he, on the northern bank of the river Dyle at Wavre, will follow the three other corps on the march to Plancenoit after ensuring that the French troops seen near Wavre do not upset the plan. But Grouchy attacks and in the fighting on the 18th Thielemann does all he can to hold the line of the river, and when he reports his plight is told bluntly that he must simply hold on to the last, come what may, as no help can be sent. He cannot guess at the command problems inside Grouchy's force, but overnight he feels that he has come out on top, and so early on the 19th launches a strong attack just as Grouchy has satisfactorily assembled his own forces. This is Thielemann's misfortune, and he pays for it, loses Wavre and retreats towards Louvain. But as soon as he realizes that Grouchy has called off his attack and turned back, and with news coming of the scale of the Wellington-Blücher victory, then

Thielemann moves forward again and follows Grouchy to Namur. He does not catch him, but taken all in all, he has every right to his honours in those difficult two days at Wavre.

Bülow of IV Corps seems to have found dealing with Gneisenau problematical. He was the senior of the two and a victor in his own right. The successive orders sent by Gneisenau on 14 June were poorly phrased, obsequious, and inferential rather than imperative, but it is hard to see how Bülow could have found them virtually incomprehensible, as he claimed he did. Pettifogging is almost too kind a word for his reaction. So he has a lot to make up for, a deal of explaining to do to his royal master if things go badly, and perhaps it is partly that which leads the high command to put IV Corps in the lead for the march to support Wellington. If they thought that he would 'try harder' still Bülow shows an excessive degree of caution when he reaches the Bois de Paris, and it requires the presence of Blücher himself to make him restart the advance, but thereafter he fights for possession of Plancenoit with a determination and persistence worthy of the Prussian army's great traditions.

Lastly, there is Kleist, whom Müffling so admired and liked. Superseded as C-in-C of the Lower Rhine army by Gneisenau (whom Kleist did not admire), given a mongrel command of the North German Federal Army Corps on the Moselle, this gentlemanly soldier is seen as an auxiliary force that is only belatedly included in the planning for the campaign, and once the victory has been won is swiftly dispensed with. His qualities in 1813 and 1814 surely indicate that had he served with the main army he would have done so with credit.

So, judged against the needs of June 1815, not a very distinguished set of men on the whole. But if you then size up their five opposite numbers as they performed at that time, d'Erlon, Reille, Vandamme, Gérard and Lobau, do these Prussians *as a group* seem so mediocre?

Question 24: Wellington had organized his army into corps for the campaign, but they didn't fight as corps organizations. Why did it happen that way?

John: In the final period of the Peninsular War Wellington had begun to adopt the corps system as his command grew ever greater. I am not sure that he really liked it; his way was to see to as much as possible himself, and there were few of his subordinates who were comfortable above divisional level: Hill was, and so was Beresford, but the list is not a long one.

In 1815 the army that was assembling in Belgium was a bundle of nationalities quite different from the Anglo-Portuguese Peninsular army. It took a deal of organizing to make cohere all the different elements: British and KGL; Hanoverians; Brunswickers; the Netherlanders who included Nassauers; plus the quite separate Nassau contingent under Kruse; and forces that were promised but arrived too late or not at all, such as the 3000 troops of the Hanseatic cities and a Danish contingent, and a Portuguese contribution that never materialized. In management terms, in terms of pay and supply, equipment, discipline, it placed a heavy load on the commander-in-chief. Anything that could lighten the command structure would be helpful, and if the British could be formed in corps that

would ease the stresses of control, though all the other contingents were at best of divisional structure or even of smaller units.

So there were three British corps created, one of cavalry under a very senior Lieutenant-General Lord Uxbridge, and two infantry corps under a full General and a Lieutenant-General: the 22-year-old Prince of Orange, and Rowland, Lord Hill. In parenthesis: had a third infantry corps been formed, Wellington would have wanted Beresford or Edward Paget or Lord Dalhousie for it, and all could have filled the post satisfactorily, given their Peninsular records. But when we look at those who actually were in post we see at once what must have concerned Wellington. Daddy Hill he could and did trust absolutely, but Uxbridge had not been on campaign since 1808 under John Moore, and in that campaign had shown a certain rashness.

As to the Duke's former ADC, the Prince of Orange, the perceptive Judge Advocate Larpen had thought him as a 'lounger' two years earlier, and since 1814 this new British full General and Dutch crown prince commanding British forces in the Low Countries had frightened his principal and highly experienced subordinates Clinton and Lowe and Colborne by his meddling, ignorance, and rashness in hoping to have 'good sport' in fighting Napoleon. Sir John Fortescue pithily wrote of him as a mischievous and meddlesome encumbrance, and it must have drawn upon all the Duke's inherent respect for royalty to stop him from administering one of those devastating rebukes that all knew and few enjoyed. He could not remove a crown prince, but he could limit his span of command. The circumstances of Quatre Bras on 16 June were such that the Prince was in position and the battle starting by the time Wellington returned from his meeting with Blücher at Brye. He had to accept the situation. In planning the day of 18 June he took such steps as he could to render the Prince harmless.

So on Mont St Jean Wellington to some extent shredded the corps system for operational purposes. Uxbridge retained the cavalry corps, but each brigade commander knew that he might receive orders directly from the Duke if need be. Hill commanded British, Hanoverians and Netherlanders on the western flank, where Wellington on 18 June expected the main attack to fall, and Hill's force could cover the western approach roads to Brussels or defend the river line of the Senne (that flows from Tubize and Hal north to the capital) if the army had to fall back westwards towards the coast.

As to Orange, after the shambles that he had wreaked by stupid orders to British infantry at Quatre Bras, the Duke did his utmost to ensure that the Dutch crown prince commanded as few troops as possible on 18 June. Cooke's Guards and Perponcher's Netherlanders were positioned beyond his reach, and only Alten's division in the west-centre remained under the Prince's eye, with Trip's Netherlands cavalry close to him. The record is that even with this residual command Orange was responsible for wild orders that ruined the troops who received them.

The Duke commanded in the old way he liked best. The troops understood that way. It worked.

Question 25: If Girard's French 7e division, left behind because of heavy losses at Ligny, had been deployed before Genappe, do you believe that the French might have rallied on it to stop Gneisenau's pursuit?

John: Your guess is as good as mine. Morale, morale: it can be feather light or strong as steel. Who shall say? But numbers *do* count, as well. The number of casualties 7e Division suffered at Ligny was horrendous, and Martinien's lists of French officers killed and wounded show for that day a divisional total of almost 54 %, and doubtless the rank and file were struck down in similar proportion. It could no longer function as a front-line formation.

I believe personally that it was sheer desperation (rather than any expectation that it could be deemed capable of real fighting) that drove Napoleon to call it forward from Ligny to Quatre Bras during the afternoon of 18 June. Moreover by the time the order had reached Remond, its acting commander, had then been issued to the troops and the march actually begun, it would have been evening. So 7e Division might have reached Quatre Bras by midnight. Genappe, 3 miles to the north, was still well over an hour's night-march distant. But by now the French already were struggling, jammed in the street of Genappe, and the Prussians were closing upon the town. I suspect that, surprised, tired and in the dark, the Division would have been swept away with the rest, well south of Genappe.

Question 26: What is your opinion of the 'White Terror' that followed Waterloo? Napoleon had not pursued any action against the Bourbons when he returned from Elba, so why the vindictiveness of the Bourbons and their followers?

John: Remember that the Revolution had virtually wiped away civil society as it had been known in 1788. The class system had been overturned, land title torn up, the church struck down, the finances ruined with *assignats* adding to the confusion, bitter political divisions leading to denunciations, informers, "people's justice", death, and the Great Terror. There had been civil war. The French people comprised dispossessed and ruined royalists (only some of whom emigrated); those who gained lands and financial advantage; Jacobins who wanted more extreme actions; a new bourgeoisie who wanted nothing of the kind; moderates who were caught between the extremes; the religiously-minded who wanted some return to older ways; the military, who as a caste, had little time for dull peaceable civilians profiting from their martial sufferings; and the mass who wanted to be simply left alone. Many of these groups had scores to pay off against the others.

Bonaparte put a lid on all these tensions: he sent Jacobins wholesale without trial to "the dry guillotine"; he imposed settlements of sorts on the church and society and he let some royalists back within the fold, on terms. He created bastard monarchies and a new set of hereditary nobles. He gave the country glory and for several years great additions of wealth and prestige by "making war pay" through charging it out to other nations; he emasculated state institutions by imposing a monolithic system upon everyone below the imperial throne. In a sense, he froze what he took over, and the strains of his years of

rule did little to effect reconciliation and trust between the elements. France in 1814 and 1815 was still a very divided group of factions and groups.

If *les cosaques* were unwitting agents for Bonapartist sentiment in the east of the country, *chouannerie* in the west was alive (if until recently dormant), and in the mercurial south, when he went to exile and Elba in April 1814, the hatred of Napoleon forced him to ride not as a monarch but as a postilion in disguise so as to escape the mobs.

Louis XVIII's entourage mishandled the Restoration and the country was quickly disenchanted. The social divisions were widening inside France. Napoleon read the signs and acted. But on the road he was told again and again in the south that peace was the one great wish in France. Then in Lyons he came face to face with the old Jacobin movement. You could say that he hoped to win over the gloved classes but he was met by the trouserless rabble, *les sans culottes*. He went to Paris without any wish to be emperor of a rabble mob. He found deep anxiety there, not widespread joy. He had to temporize and issue a new constitution. The things that French people most wanted he could not provide. Elections showed how few Bonapartists there were, judged against royalists, republicans, and moderates (each group watching against the others).

After Waterloo his regime collapsed like a house of cards and *Louis Deux Fois Neuf* (Twice-Nine ie. Eighteen, or Twice New) was brought back guarded by foreign bayonets, but at least with moderate promises (the Cambrai Declaration). But the zealots would not have it and the monarch found himself the temporary prisoner of royalist extremists, so that for a month in the south the White Terror raged against Bonapartists, protestants, and private enemies, until the wave of hatred passed. Probably France had seen nothing like it since the September massacres of 1792, maybe since St Bartholomew in 1572, and nor was it to see such fury again until the Commune of 1871. For once the phase had passed the regime was surprisingly moderate.

Louis had exempted from amnesty 18 soldiers accused of high treason by their acts in March 1815, and a further 38 major officials were to face trial. The remaining 25 million French people could go about their daily business under the constitution. Not a very savage *diktat*. Louis had no wish to capture Ney or Labédoyère or any of the others, he could see what an unenviable duty that would entail. Of course, once they were captured they had to be tried for treason and they paid the penalty. In this they were no different from the failed rebels in *coups* from the days of Rome to the present time: it is the risk rebels always run, and I may add that France knew (if it chose to ask) what had been the deadly fate of the totally inoffensive Duc d'Enghien in 1804, Palm the Nuremberg bookseller, Hofer of the Tyrol, or in lesser degree Pope Pius VII who was abducted and imprisoned for crossing Napoleon.

Moreover the re-Restored government's record over liberty of the Press is outstanding when compared with the Napoleonic period, and if it sometimes forcibly expelled from the Chamber an over-liberal Deputy it did nothing as drastic as *18 Brumaire* or the emasculation of Tribune, Legislature, Senate and Judiciary under the Empire.

In short, the White Terror was the product of something latent but deep and savage inside the France and French society of those days, and it was short and horrible. The weak regime had little control over it while it lasted. But by implication to contrast it with some kindly benign Napoleonic rule seems to me to be slightly off track. On the other hand some may think me too anti-Bonapartist.

Question 27: This study is truly a monumental effort and an excellent contribution to the literature on the campaign. What's next?

John: "What's next?" Well, I am now 84 and deserve some free time after all this. I hope that my story will be thoroughly scrutinized, its mistakes courteously set right, some of its findings confirmed, ready for the next full account whenever someone has the time to undertake one.

Also I hope that it will give lustre to, lift, and prolong the memory of my darling wife, for whom it was written and who did not live to see it.

Kevin: John, thank you very much for the outstanding interview which I have enjoyed immensely. The heartfelt dedication to your late wife is most appropriate and I am sure she would be very proud of your work, as your friends and acquaintances undoubtedly are also. And as I had the distinct honor and pleasure of meeting and sharing a meal with you in London in late June (along with John Lee), that merely enhances the value of this interview. My best wishes on the success of the magnificent work you have produced.

Placed on the Napoleon Series: October 2017