

The Napoleon Series

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

By [Kevin F. Kiley](#)

Question 1: John, my first question is probably either redundant or just ill-informed, but whose decision was it to produce your excellent work in two volumes? The subject surely needs it, but the fact remains that it usually isn't done.

John: I did not begin with any particular sense of whether my *Waterloo* would be merely one volume or several. You will remember that Siborne's first edition in 1844 was in two volumes, and the scale of the late 19th Century German General Staff histories for the War of Liberation and Napoleon's Fall meant that they were designed as multi-volume works. Houssaye's famous French history took three volumes to cover from Elba to the final peace. Two of my favourite authors on the subject, J C Ropes and Pflugk-Harttung, wrote only single volumes; but that was because they dealt either very lightly or not at all with the events of 18 June 1815. Had they written detailed accounts of the climactic day I am sure they would have been really magnificent, perhaps rendering impossible some of the later shenanigans. Moreover in recent times Gill on the 1809 campaign, Britten Austin on 1812 and Leggiere on 1813 give themselves ample room for manoeuvre.

And when we came to judge the size of my work we soon recognized that either a drastic pruning was needed to reduce it to a slender volume – and my peer reviewers seemed to oppose paring it down (one actually wrote: 'Don't cut a word') – or we should need to contemplate several volumes. To cut it *three* ways would produce elegant handy volumes - but the first would then finish before 15 June and so contain *no* military operations. That would produce an unsaleable book. So we opted for two bulky volumes, breaking after Ligny/Quatre Bras, and even so with the first volume having to do without orders of battle and source lists (a short term inconvenience until the second volume came out with them a few months later). But I fear the size of the book will discourage an undecided browser. So perhaps I should have dedicated it 'To the Happy Few'.

Question 2: What is your viewpoint of the operational situation at the end of the day of 16 June?

John: Napoleon had set himself a daunting task. He faced allies who were twice as strong numerically than he was - qualitatively the *Armée du Nord* was very fine in its rank and file, but there were equipment shortages and pay would soon become a problem - and without pay discipline suffers – and it was the last remaining army of France. In the past the butcher's bill for a Napoleonic victory had not greatly mattered. This time it would. As General Foy would note of Ligny, 'We killed many enemy; they killed us. In our situation, in losing one soldier to the coalition's two, we lose more'. Two such costly victories as Ligny would wreck the army. The timetable for success was very tight: Brussels by the third day, and Antwerp within seven, were the targets set, within which

time two allied armies totalling perhaps a quarter of a million men would each have to be smashed beyond recovery. And in addition their commanders-in-chief were men who were not fearful of Napoleon's reputation. By snatching the initiative (conceded by squabbles among the allied sovereigns and generals beyond the Rhine) Napoleon should have the balance of advantage on Day 1, and indeed that is roughly what occurred. Some things went wrong, but then they always do; and so in overall terms Napoleon had every right to be pretty content with his first day's operations. His troops did well, his generals less so.

Vandamme's extraordinary 'unawareness' of his task for 15 June threw out the plans for an early crossing of the river Sambre. The last-minute appointment of Ney to command the semi-independent left wing was poorly thought through and inefficiently executed (the two corps commanders on that wing were not told of his appointment until he had arrived to take command), and Ney himself seemed unable to grasp what his task was, thus throwing away the enormous advantage he enjoyed in front of Quatre Bras throughout the first half of 16 June. During that time Napoleon was coming to see that he would after all face a full-scale battle against the Prussians, and by early afternoon knew that he needed Ney's support: whereas he had wanted Ney concentrated around Genappe ready to reach Brussels on 17 June, he now needed him at Ligny to overwhelm the Prussian right wing, but Wellington's arrival at Quatre Bras tied down Ney, and the conflicting orders to d'Erlon's corps denied its use at either battle, denied Ney success at Quatre Bras and denied Napoleon decisive victory at Ligny. By nightfall on 16 June Wellington held the upper hand at the crossroads and the Prussians at Ligny, though badly beaten had not been destroyed.

Whereas on 14 June the two allied armies had been dispersed across a hundred miles in preparation for an advance into France within a few days, and only secondarily contemplating the defensive, on 16 June (after a day of some uncertainty and inadequate communication on 15 June) the two armies were moving very close to each other to create a superior mass. Had Blücher been ready to delay battle until the 17th (Day 3) a major battle might have been fought south of Wavre or close to Genappe. As it was, by nightfall on 16 June and in the belief that the Prussians had not been defeated at Ligny, Wellington was envisaging a combined offensive against the French for the morning of the 17th. In that case perhaps Gosselies would be the decisive battleground?

In sum, Napoleon's timetable was slipping, his losses were worrying, the Prussians had fallen back defeated but not destroyed and in a direction that was not known to the French; Wellington had once again destroyed French confidence by his intervention at Quatre Bras (for Ney and Reille it had proved 'another Spanish battle') to the extent that Ney dared undertake nothing the next morning. All that Napoleon could hope for was that Wellington might not realize that due to the Prussian disappearance he was dangerously isolated and at risk. But that meant an early start for the French army on 17 June, and in the event an invaluable half a day was totally wasted.

Question 3: In other volumes on Waterloo, the point is made that Gneisenau, and not Blücher, made the strategic decision to retreat on Wavre and not Liège. First, is that an accurate assessment, and why did Gneisenau make that decision?

John: We have to go back a little. The Prussians still smarted from a sense that they had been cheated of their laurels in 1814, and so in 1815 they wanted a Prussian victory to guarantee that this time they would not be side-lined. During the spring they chose a battle-site in the Fleurus-Sombreffe-Ligny sector, and when (belatedly) during 14 June they came to believe that Napoleon could attack them, they called in their two outlying corps (III from Ciney and the larger IV from Liège) with the intention that by 16 June all four would be assembled on the chosen site. Napoleon struck at dawn on 15 June. At noon the Prussian high command asked 'what' Wellington intended and 'where' he thought of concentrating, questions that do not suggest that they sought his close participation in the near future. During the 15th their advance guard (I Corps) was driven in, and early on the 16th the Prussian high command discovered that the small III Corps would arrive only at noon and IV Corps could not arrive at all that day. They changed their plans as to the placement of I and II Corps on the chosen battlefield, moving them into the western villages in the valley, and put III Corps on the eastern wing along the road leading from Liège and Namur (the direction from which IV would eventually come) and urgently sought Wellington's assistance. In the continuing absence of IV Corps, henceforth the factor of cooperation with Wellington becomes of great significance, both on this day and the morrow.

The last-minute re-positioning of I and II Corps, the too early and frequent commitment of reserves, threw away Prussian advantages inherent in the original position, and wore down their numerical superiority. Napoleon's intended thrust at the Prussian western flank by using Ney's wing did not take place because Wellington tied down Ney at Quatre Bras. Even the diversion of d'Erlon's corps to perform that task came to nothing due to confused orders. So by evening the French were pressing in from south and east upon the intermixed Prussian I and II Corps while holding in check III Corps along the Namur road. In the final hour of daylight the Garde attack broke the Prussian defences in the valley, Blücher fell while leading a last charge, and Gneisenau took over chief command. I and II Corps, attacked from south and east, disintegrated and went back up the slopes and away to the north. The number of men who were fugitives or who actually deserted is said to have been about 11,000. Opposite III Corps the French troops came up to the Namur road, and III Corps retreated as a formed body, but away to the north-east and not north.

We have no information on what Blücher thought might be a suitable route for retreat. Possibly, being Blücher, it never entered his head. Victory was his consuming passion. Lettow-Vorbeck at the end of the 19th Century credited Gneisenau with choosing the direction of retreat, and praised him very highly for not going east. But this seems to me to be wishful thinking and not borne out by the record. By 8 p.m. as darkness was closing in, the French troops were reaching the main road that runs east to Namur and Liège, the road abandoned by III Corps which moved an hour or two's march back to Gembloux. In effect the road was no longer open to the Prussians; they could not hope to turn east and

escape.

The forces still under Gneisenau were less than half the army. He called for a small retirement on the little village of Tilly but, as that could not be found on maps, he changed the instruction to Mellery that was so marked and a little further north. But Mellery was only four miles from the battlefield. *And moreover the order was of no practical importance since the troops simply ignored it and did not halt.* They continued to trudge away in the night and it was Grolman, the Prussian QMG, and his personal aides who rode along the groups of men and told them to aim for Wavre, *8 miles north of Gneisenau's 'Mellery'*. In so far as any one man directed the retreat of I and II Corps I believe that it was Grolman.

What the commander of III Corps wrote from Gembloux early next morning is instructive in this context: 'I have had no orders from Prince Blücher but imagine that he is going to St Trond'. The statement is significant for three reasons: there was no order issued, just a guess; Gneisenau does not feature at all in this comment; and St Trond is in the direction of Maastricht (and the Rhine and Germany) and is *about 27 miles east of Wavre*. Overnight IV Corps had neared the area, but was without news. Luckily its experienced general Bülow, the victor of Dennewitz, opined that III and IV Corps should move on Wavre. Thus half the army moved to Wavre due to Bülow's independent decision.

And there is a further point. If dawn found defeated remnants of I and II Corps streaming through the countryside towards Germany (half the army – III and IV Corps being somewhere unknown), they would be prey for Napoleon's pursuing cavalry. It was essential to draw close to Wellington's army somewhere to the westward, to seek their cover and combine with them. As I said earlier 'the factor of cooperation with Wellington becomes of great significance'.

But, to answer your question in one sentence: the soldiers' feet, guided by Grolman, chose Wavre.

Question 4: What was the relationship between Gneisenau and the Prussian corps commanders as most of them had not served under Blücher in 1813-1814?

John: The impression that I get is that relations with Lieutenant-General Count Neithardt von Gneisenau were never likely to be easy. He had some of the disadvantages of an outsider, for he was not of Prussian but Saxon birth and was raised in poverty; his title of Gneisenau came from a property formerly but no longer owned by the Neithardt family, perhaps a sign of an inner need for status. He was a man of strong views, quick to criticize and prone to nourishing grudges; he was far more scientifically instructed than Blücher but when the latter fell sick and it was Gneisenau who was faced with a decision the result could be over-cautious to the point of indecision. This was certainly the case at Laon in March 1814 when he countermanded the plan to pursue a beaten Marmont.

Gneisenau had little personal respect for his dithering sovereign (many others felt likewise in this) but his views were so extreme as to be held to be dangerous to the monarchy, as the king's ADC Lieutenant-General Knesebeck maintained. So we find Blücher's Chief of Staff in 1815 muttering about treachery 'slinking through the dark' and lurking 'in Berlin'. This could make for difficulties. Moreover, he had fallen out with Müffling in 1813, whom

he thought clever but vain and 'wobbly' and this meant that when the latter went in 1815 as liaison officer with Wellington (a man whom Gneisenau thought utterly duplicitous, anyway), he carried limited credibility with the Prussian high command and his views were at a discount: if you don't trust your liaison officer's judgement don't appoint him, the position is critical to coalition warfare. At least Major-General Grolman, as QMG, seems to have shared many of Gneisenau's political views, but was (I believe) more positively-minded militarily at critical moments. So much for staff contacts.

Towards Major-General Pirch I, commander of II Corps, Lieutenant-General Gneisenau was curt and demanding, and indeed Pirch seems to have been somewhat lacking in 'push'. To Lieutenant-Generals Ziethen and Thielemann of I and III Corps he was correct but could be peremptory. He and General Kleist, victor of Nollendorff, were on distant terms as Gneisenau superseded him in (temporary) command of the Army of the Lower Rhine and Kleist was sidelined to the (non-Prussian) North German Federal Army Corps that was based on the river Moselle. Müffling, who of course was not impartial, claimed that Kleist disliked the coarse attitudes of Blücher and the ill-temper of Gneisenau. But far more delicate was Gneisenau's relationship with his superior in rank, General Bülow, victor of Dennewitz, a true-born Prussian and now sent to command IV Corps. Bülow seems to have had a high opinion of himself and to expect special consideration from the high command; he found the information he received difficult to credit and probably resorted to obfuscation when judging whether to follow it. This became fully apparent in June 1815 when he chose to misinterpret some perfectly clear topographical dispositions. In these circumstances it would have been wise if all instructions to this full general had been written in the simplest and clearest words as outright orders and signed by the Field-Marshal C-in-C (or by his orders).

And what actually occurred was nearly disastrous. The belated precautionary orders of late morning 14 June and the subsequent movement instruction at midnight (both sent from Namur) for Bülow at Liège to march at once to join the main army, were couched by Gneisenau as humble suggestions and requests, were not stated to be Blücher's own orders, and in consequence were not taken sufficiently seriously by Bülow. As a result, on the morning of Ligny on 16 June, when IV Corps was expected to be reaching the battlefield, it was in reality still stationary over 30 miles away, at Liège. Between Gneisenau's obsequious wording and his senior's possibly deliberate misunderstanding the result was that a quarter of the Prussian army did not reach Ligny for the long-planned 'decisive victory'. One expects more of a Prussian Chief of Staff. It is nice to be able to say that on 18 June at Plancenoit Bülow more than redeemed this error.

How Gneisenau judged all this we know from a letter to a confidant dated 30 June 1815. He had been repeatedly promised and repeatedly denied senior command appointments ever since returning to Prussia from Britain in 1813. He had served as Blücher's chief of staff as a national duty but to no personal benefit (!). Bülow meanwhile had been promoted, was famous, and had the highest class of Iron Cross and the order of the Black Eagle, while Gneisenau received only the Red Eagle. All the corps commanders were younger than himself (of these five, four were in fact older and only one, Kleist, was younger) and some of them by their conduct on campaign had not deserved their promotion or reputation. 'I am placed at the rear, and I do not complain.' He was back at his old duty, 'although the ingratitude of my commander in Berlin has filled my heart with

bitterness'. He was on a reduced salary and was little known by the troops. 'Despite my gay spirit and inner sense of duty, despite all my capacity for resignation I must nonetheless curse and execrate such a fate and I am tempted to make my complaints public.'

To be continued.

Placed on the Napoleon Series: September 2017