

The Napoleon Series Reviews

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

By [Kevin F. Kiley](#)

Question 1: Now on to the aftermath of Quatre Bras...How do you think that the Anglo-Allied army handled their withdrawal from Quatre Bras, especially the rear guard?

John: Overnight 16/17 June Wellington had his Reserve, the Brunswick and Nassau contingents, the Netherlands 2nd and 3rd Divisions and van Merlen's light cavalry, the British 1st and 3rd Divisions and Uxbridge's cavalry bivouacking around Quatre Bras. Hill's forces were approaching and Hill himself was there by 9 a.m.. So it was a fairly strong force that Wellington intended to deploy offensively that morning, with the Prussians coming forward on his eastern flank. The dawn discovery of the Prussian defeat and disappearance changed the prospect, and by 10 a.m. the orders were for a general retirement on 'Waterloo' in front of Soignies forest. The wounded were gathered in and the retirement then began in several columns and was deemed quite leisurely by Wellington's military secretary. The main body reached the Mont St Jean position by evening and set about preparations for the morrow.

Before starting Wellington had exchanged messages with Gneisenau through Müffling's and Gneisenau's staff officers, the essential point being whether he could stand and give battle at 'Mont St Jean'. He would do this if the Prussians could send him 'two corps' and to this Gneisenau agreed. Wellington had no wish to involve himself in a scrap while marching north and he told his rearguard commander Lord Uxbridge to avoid a general action.

Once the main body was safely away Uxbridge sent off his cavalry brigades in three columns but stayed with the final rearguard watching the crossroads, with Mercer's horse artillery battery in support. Uxbridge was a very senior lieutenant-general, a dandy, a very enthusiastic colonel of his regiment (the 7th Hussars), and a commander who in Moore's Corunna campaign had led cavalry in some dashing attacks. But he had not been on campaign for over five years. Moreover he tended to think like a cornet rather than a commander.

Some cavalry came into view and Uxbridge had the notion that they were Prussians. He did not send an ADC but galloped off himself, then found they were French and shouted to his men and to Mercer to ride for their lives. This headlong flight, with Uxbridge and his men, the guns and limbers bouncing and crashing, bursting through fences and hedges, has been rendered immortal by Mercer's memoirs. The French cavalry dashed after them in pursuit and Mercer implies that they were nearly trapped. It reads like a fox hunt, as Mercer says. What saved the day was the freak thunderstorm and deluge that

turned everything into a quagmire very swiftly, and the French began to fall behind. This was so much so that an artillery horse having cast a shoe, there was time for it to be replaced before the French caught up. All the same it was ignominious and quite unnecessary.

Uxbridge not being there, a dispute regarding who should pass a bridge first, broke out between Vandeleur and Vivian, a minor matter that Uxbridge's presence could have regulated if he had not been acting as a flying scout. Nevertheless all the cavalry reached the river Dyle and got through the bottleneck there at Genappe, and began to draw up the long slope to the north of the town.

The French lancers followed them into the narrow streets and as the leading files emerged Uxbridge turned and formed up the 7th Hussars, the 23rd Light Dragoons and backed them with the heavy 1st Life Guards. He sent his own 7th Hussars to the attack. Those cavalymen with Peninsular experience, like Dörnberg and Tomkinson and O'Grady, judged it folly to attack levelled lances with sabres and with no open flanks among the French. The Hussars duly paid for their colonel's whim, the Light Dragoons then seemed unwilling to move, and it was only as the French emerged from the town that the lancers received retribution, being set upon by the Life Guards. Jammed back into the narrow street the lances were unusable and the crush from the rear created a total blockage. Uxbridge was pleased with the outcome; the two regiments had suffered 11% casualties (the leading lancer regiment's figure was nearer 38%), and he called it 'the prettiest field day'. The cavalry took another view of his tactical skill.

That action did permit the bedraggled cavalry to continue to Mont St Jean unopposed and so the retreat came to an end. The Duke's two most senior subordinates holding British rank, both commanders of corps, General the Prince of Orange and Lieutenant-General Lord Uxbridge, had in the past 36 hours shown how much they still had to learn of high command in battle. Many must have asked: would they improve tomorrow?

Question 6: Why did Ney 'sit on his hands' on the 17th and fail to press the Anglo-Allied withdrawal?

John: The marshals were a quarrelsome lot, prone to pettish behaviour and insubordination: Ney and Soult loathed each other for years, Ney was troublesome when placed under Massena in 1810-11, Marmont sulked when placed under Ney in 1813. But in the years of high Empire Ney was a splendid paladin and gave fine service to his Emperor. When it all began to go wrong is hard to say. Did the horrors of Russia do something? Was he becoming battle fatigued? Were the repeated instances of receiving orders – and not always clear orders at that - that changed overnight (and for which he was then blamed) leave him increasingly angry and resentful? He was not naturally suited to independent command, and semi-independent command in 1813 and 1815 also showed his limitations.

He had seen clearly enough in March 1814 that the game was up, and even forced Napoleon to admit it and to abdicate. The Bourbons should have been grateful for that,

but he was largely ignored, the Fontainebleau treaty which he personally had signed and that guaranteed an income for the imperial family was dishonoured by Louis XVIII. His wife was snubbed at court. Yet in March 1815 he had judged that Napoleon's return was not in France's interest and he promised to cage the rash intruder.

But then Ney found that the provinces seemed not to think Napoleon rash, the troops were for him, and when the personal appeal came: 'I shall receive you as on the morrow of the Moskova' it was all too much. He, the ageing pugilist of simple ideals, told Napoleon, master of the ring, that he must in future be a different kind of ruler, and the returned ruler, smiled, nodded, and packed him off on a military mission and then left him outside the court circle from 20 March to 11 June. One court (in exile) now detested him, the other despised him.

Even when he was casually called up, not by a direct message but one relayed through Davout, and he dashed to the front, he was greeted inconsequentially, given no staff, received vague and verbal instructions and arrived at the front to find his subordinates were not aware of his new role. And both d'Erlon and Reille seemed to lose energy as soon as he took over, and carried out his orders very slackly. His actions on the afternoon and evening of 15 June were as much as could be expected in the circumstances, but on the next morning he seems to have left all initiative to Napoleon, and waited for orders when the morning objective must have been utterly clear.

Men in a quandary do what they *want* to do more often than what they *ought* to do. Ney spent the morning of the 16th up among the outpost commanders, gazing at the thin line of Netherlanders standing across the road to Quatre Bras. His duty was to hustle his two corps forward and sweep through towards Genappe. He did nothing until a sharp written reprimand from Napoleon in the middle of the day shook him up. The decision was taken for him and he only had simply to obey an order. Thus he became over-confident, brushed aside Reille's warning of another 'battle in Spain', and then declared that they 'only had to do with a handful of Germans who were sabred yesterday'; they would sweep away this rabble in front of them. He launched his attack around 2 p.m. and by 2.45 was almost at the Quatre Bras crossroads and the road to Brye and Namur. But Wellington had got back from meeting the Prussians at Brye, and Picton came up at 2.45. Competent judges among the French judged that Ney repeatedly mishandled the infantry and cavalry in this battle and ended the day thoroughly worsted. Then the fiasco over d'Erlon, the orders and counter-orders and the consequences (without any judging here of the rights and wrongs of the case), must have left Ney with a monumental sense of ill-usage. By the morning of the 17th he had had the stuffing knocked out of him. He then had to endure a lecture from the detested Soult and a dressing down by Napoleon. This, as I see it, was a man in mental crisis. If Napoleon was to get anything worthwhile out of him it would need careful nursing and a watchful supervision of his intentions. Neither was forthcoming on 17 June, and nor were they on the 18th.

Question 7: Wellington got the army away and concentrated at Mont St Jean. Was it masterful or was he lucky, or both?

John: Neither Napoleon at Ligny nor Wellington at Quatre Bras until some hours into the morning of 17 June knew of the outcome on the other field of battle. Napoleon knew that his army at Ligny needed rest and that the most that he could do immediately was to send out his cavalry to find out where the Prussians had gone. He presumed that Ney had had some success at Quatre Bras, until the morning reports came in. Wellington was ready to resume the offensive at Quatre Bras until the news reached him of the Prussian retirement. Then he knew that he must retreat in good time, and as Ney was silent he did not expect much activity from him. Nor was there any. Ney was morally beaten, having been worsted yesterday in another 'Spanish battle'.

Napoleon wasted the morning talking to his generals and discussing Parisian politics. Why, with his tight timetable, he did this is not entirely clear: perhaps he was 'painting pictures' in his own mind and unconsciously frittering time. But he had not expected Ney to be supinely inactive. When he learned the truth he was furious and he did as much as he could to revive and direct the attack on Wellington, but the half day's delay was too much. His galvanic energy drove the pursuit through Genappe, but try as he would he could not pin down and overwhelm the retreating Anglo-Allied army.

Wellington took a wise decision 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. Whether he would have been wiser to continue to look for the Prussians as his primary target and not leave it to Grouchy's detachment, must be an open question.

Question 8: This is a hypothetical, but what difference do you believe Marshal Berthier as Major General and Chief of Staff in 1815 in Belgium might have made?

John: Years ago having enjoyed A G Macdonell's hilarious and sentimental inter-war account *England, their England*, I went on to his *Napoleon and his Marshals*, a 1934 retelling of the wars through the twenty-six. What splendid stories (heavily reliant on Marbot). Yet when I came to review his account against, say, FL Petre, or F N Maude, or Fortescue and Oman, or the writers of the French General Staff, I soon saw why Wellington told Creevey in 1815 that while the French soldier would fight very hard, the marshals leading them were "not worth a damn".

In a country of 25 millions where domestic life is pretty chancy, it should not surprise anyone if 26 outstanding soldiers emerge, men like Hoche, Joubert, Moreau, and others who were potential rivals to Bonaparte (or whom he judged so to be). But really were many of the marshals so very good? I do not think so. Masséna, Lannes and Davout, certainly could and did handle desperate crises and independent commands very well, and probably Suchet (though Jourdan perceptively qualified his stature by remarking that he never faced Wellington). I have mixed views on Murat, Ney and Soult. But Augereau,

Bessières, Victor, Macdonald, Oudinot, never seem to me to offer anything 'special' in the way Masséna, Lannes and Davout are sure to do. And by the way he handled them Napoleon did not trust their abilities too far: he handled them like a very irritable master with a squabbling bunch of not very bright pupils, whom he might spoil, rebuke, insult and praise as he might feel inclined. And the senior marshal, even above Murat in the list, was Berthier, whom he treated as a chief clerk.

I do not believe that Berthier as a general was very much good. His performance in 1809 was indifferent to poor, depending on your view, and this after a decade standing watching (and apparently not learning) at the master's side. Davout tried to knock some sense into him, but in vain: the reports of Austrian moves sent by Davout from close to the Austrian border were not in conformity with Napoleon's notions in Paris and Berthier stuck to his master's notions through thick and thin.

As the chief of staff he was merely the mouthpiece of his master. If you study the opening of the 1813 campaign, for instance, and plot day by day from the *Correspondance* Napoleon's instructions to Berthier (and the Emperor's direct communications to Ney, Marmont, Eugene, Bertrand), and follow the retransmission of the orders through Berthier's *Register* (published in 1909 by a certain X), the "additional value" discernible in Berthier's work is minimal. I am not a specialist on Lützen, but this is when the Emperor, sadly lacking in light cavalry to seek out and report on enemy intentions, is obliged to advance half blind. In such circumstances the orders need to go beyond mere march routes and bivouac places, they need to alert the commanders to various possibilities, to set the scene: if *this*, then *that*. But the orders given to the several strung-out corps do not really prepare them for a coming battle, they are told simply to go to such a named place and take post (the cases of Bertrand and Lauriston), and nothing else reaches them apparently except the sound of guns to the south, and in the light of their earlier orders they stand firm. I think it was the French military commentator Camon who complained that Eugene, Ney, Marmont, Lauriston, Bertrand fell short of the Emperor's requirements, and we may think that *in part* that is true (Marmont fell very below par). But *All*, *all* experienced generals and *All* at fault ! Doesn't that suggest something strange, perhaps something significant in the method of command and communication?

So it does seem to me that the Emperor and his mouthpiece may have failed in their task of making quite clear what each was required to do, so that everyone waited to be told what to do. And this raises another question: if they had gone off on a frolic of their own devising and marched towards the gunfire without Napoleon's express orders, where could they be found if not at the place Napoleon had told them to be? Might not the entire army collapse into a series of isolated and uncoordinated combats across twenty miles, with Cossacks swirling round them and killing any French messengers?

I do not find Berthier's role an inspiring one in all that, and I see no reason why he should have been any better in 1815. But I am not a specialist on the subject, and although these are answers that our conversation obliges me to give as promised, I would not think

them sufficiently judged to appear in my book. You must understand that I am, after all, just a grumpy opinionated old man.

Question 9: As a background question, how instrumental do you believe Marshal Davout was in getting the *Armée du Nord* ready for the campaign in Belgium?

John: What a splendid servant to a not very generous master. Davout is straight as a ramrod, invaluable. Insofar as there were means to hand he made the most of them. But again and again the rearmament programme runs up against shortages, of muskets, ammunition, time, and money; the conscription is so contentious a matter that Napoleon has to go on tip-toe so as to conciliate the Council of State. The Napoleonic state is running out of cash. If victory is not won by the autumn the army will not be paid, and an unpaid army - and its peasant relatives unpaid for their harvest - will pose fresh domestic challenges. They are trying to square a circle; the limited means do not match the vast objective. Reading Napoleon and Davout's volumes of correspondence side by side does the marshal great credit, and I am not at all sure that the Emperor ever really wished to give Davout the credit that was his due, year after year.

Question 10: General Bourmont deserted to the enemy early in the campaign and his appointment as a division commander was opposed by Marshal Davout, although other senior French generals supported Bourmont. Why was Davout's advice ignored by Napoleon?

John: Isn't it strange? Bourmont was such a charming, ingratiating but unsafe man, inherently of the *Ancien régime* and of his particular ultra-royalist province, apparently reconciled to the changes brought about by the Consulate, but an intriguer and a dangerous partisan. What a contrast to Davout. And to go a step further, doesn't it illustrate the quality of Davout's judgement when compared with his colleagues and even of Napoleon himself? But then Napoleon himself was often in two minds about Bourmont. He plainly said in 1810 that he did not want him commanding French troops and relegated him to Italy, but then that insidious man worked his way into Eugene's good books and got to Russia, and covered himself with glory in 1813 so that Napoleon made him a *général de brigade* and in 1814 personally promoted him *général de division*. Ney (so Houssaye maintains) spoke for him in March 1815 and so did Gérard on the basis of his 1813-14 services; and Davout was snubbed when he warned against him. And so Bourmont fatefully assumed command of *14e Division* under Gérard, and on 15 June played the traitor. Probably nobody has ever really understood what passed through Bourmont's mind – maybe Bourmont himself did not – but I tried to set out a few pointers in one of my appendices in volume 1.