

The Napoleon Series

“. . . Not so bad as some say”: Ney at Quatre Bras

By [Wayne Hanley](#), Ph.D.

Marshal Michel Ney’s performance during the Hundred Days has been hotly debated for nearly two centuries (and probably will not be resolved here). If we are to believe Napoleon and the adherents of what historian Harold Kurtz has termed the “St. Helena school,” during the Waterloo campaign, Ney proved his bungling incompetence once and for all, and he bears a large share of the responsibility for dooming the emperor’s bid to keep his imperial throne. Key examples of his shortcomings include the marshal’s failure to capture the “vital” road junction at Quatre-Bras and his imprudent behavior as tactical field commander at Waterloo. While Ney certainly was not Napoleon’s greatest field commander and while he suffered from the failings of his virtues—namely a penchant for leading from the front—he was most certainly not the incompetent bungler portrayed by the “St. Helena school.” Many factors affecting Ney’s conduct during the campaign and which negatively impacted his generalship were beyond his control, including Napoleon’s own errors in judgment. Ney’s greatest misfortune was that shortly after his untimely death in December 1815 his reputation encountered the efforts of one of history’s greatest propagandists—Napoleon—who was eager to shift the blame for his defeat to anyone, but himself.

The first serious criticism of Marshal Ney’s performance during the Waterloo campaign began on St. Helena when the emperor began the process of rewriting the history of the Empire. In his account of the battles of Quatre-Bras and of Ligny on 16 June, Napoleon notes that “if Marshal Ney had executed his orders and had advanced [on Quatre-Bras] with his 43,000 men at daybreak of 16 June, he would have taken that position . . . and put to rout and scattered the [Prince of Orange’s] division.”¹ With Quatre-Bras secured and “if Ney had followed his orders, not a cannon of the Prussian army [fighting at Ligny] would have escaped.”² In his narrative, Napoleon repeatedly calls attention to orders issued to Ney, and the marshal’s near-insubordinate failure to carry them out promptly. This is even true concerning Ney’s orders to renew his attack on the British positions “at the break of day” on 17 June.³ Detractors note that despite repeated encouragement to maintain pressure on the British forces, Ney’s two corps were still inactive by the time Napoleon reached Quatre-Bras toward midday on 17 June, warranting an imperial rebuke which noted that Ney’s inactivity had cost three precious hours, and forced the emperor personally to issue orders to pursue the Duke of Wellington’s now-retreating forces.⁴ From Napoleon’s account, Ney’s lack of initiative

¹ Campaign of 1815, Œuvres de Napoléon Ier à Sainte-Hélène, Napoleon Bonaparte, Correspondance de Napoléon Ier publiée par ordre de l’Empereur Napoléon III (Paris: Henri Plon, 1858-1869), XXXI, 209.

² Napoleon, “Campaign of 1815,” 206.

³ Napoleon, “Campaign of 1815,” 212.

⁴ Napoleon, “Campaign of 1815,” 213-14.

and failure to execute orders in a timely fashion seriously hampered the Emperor's efforts to trap the Prussian and British armies on the eve of Waterloo.

Even more damning is General Gourgaud's account of the campaign of 1815—published in 1818. This narrative of events is a combination of Gourgaud's recollections and the dictations of Napoleon made during his exile on St. Helena (but it is generally understood to actually be primarily the emperor's interpretations of events). In his preface, Gourgaud notes that the initial published accounts of the campaign were guided "by anger or animosity," but that his account was to be "a simple, but faithful recital of facts."⁵ Gourgaud (and thus one assumes Napoleon) was especially critical of Ney. According to Gourgaud, Napoleon's verbal instructions to Ney on their meeting of 15 June was for Ney to press vigorously any allied forces on the road to Brussels, calling special attention to the strategic importance of Quatre-Bras and suggesting that the position should be secured before midnight.⁶ According to Gourgaud, Ney enthusiastically acknowledged these orders (even supposedly noting that he had previously served in the region and was keenly aware of the importance of the crossroads), but on arriving at his headquarters and hearing skirmishing between Fleurus and Gilly, the marshal ordered General Reille to halt his advance short of the goal. Why? Gourgaud asks: "It would appear, that the recollection of his conduct in 1814, and lastly in March 1815, had occasioned a kind of mental derangement, which manifested itself in all his actions. Though the bravest of men in battle, Marshal Ney frequently committed mistakes in his field dispositions."⁷ General Gourgaud even suggests that Ney falsely reported to the emperor on the evening of the 15 June that his advance guard was in possession of Quatre-Bras to give the impression that he had complied with Napoleon's verbal instructions!

The general's treatment of Ney does not improve in his narrative of the battle at Ligny. According to Gourgaud, on the morning of 16 June, Napoleon sent orders to Ney to press on to Quatre-Bras and be ready to maneuver to aid the emperor should the Prussians decide to offer battle. An aide-de-camp was later dispatched to hurry Ney's progress, followed by an unspecified number of orders for Ney to advance, until by noon, the emperor "expressed his dissatisfaction at the Marshal not having yet taken up arms, and being still in his bivouacs"; new orders instructed Ney to "vigorously attack the position of Quatre-Bras."⁸ Sometime later that afternoon Napoleon sent yet another aide-de-camp to Ney to remind the marshal that "the fate of France is in his hands."⁹ Even as General Gourgaud praises the "intrepidity" of Ney and the "ardor of his troops" once the marshal finally began his battle against Wellington, he continues his litany of Ney's errors, noting that when the marshal finally attacked Quatre-Bras he did so with

⁵ Gaspard Gourgaud, The Campaign of 1815 or a Narrative of the Military Operations which Took Place in France and Belgium during the Hundred Days (London: James Ridgway, 1818), iii-v.

⁶ Gourgaud, 48.

⁷ Gourgaud, 50.

⁸ Gourgaud, 59.

⁹ Gourgaud, 60.

only Reille's corps—apparently forgetting about d'Erlon's—and speculating whether or not Ney had misunderstood his instructions. ¹⁰ Gourgaud concludes his discussion of the less than satisfactory results of 16 June by noting that “several of the Generals, and even Marshal Ney himself, were no longer the same men. They had lost that energy and the spirit of brilliant enterprise, which once distinguished them. . . .”¹¹ One is left with the distinct impression that General Gourgaud believes that had Ney promptly followed his orders and captured Quatre-Bras the entire campaign would have ended with a very different result.

Later historians echo this opinion. Adolphe Thiers, the champion of the “St. Helena School” thought that at Quatre-Bras Ney “allowed the fate of France to slip through his fingers”; J.F.C. Fuller noted that “Ney drove a Prussian detachment out of Gosselies . . . but then ceased to be the Ney of Jena”; and Henri Houssaye commented that on 16 June “Ney gave way to prudence for the first time in his life.”¹² In his masterful Campaigns of Napoleon, David Chandler is likewise critical of Ney's performance during the Hundred Days and devotes an entire chapter to “The Errors of Marshal Ney.” Chandler, for example, harshly assesses Ney's fitness for command on the eve of the campaign as “a totally unsuitable appointment for a soldier who could still be relied upon for courage and *élan* in action, but whose brain was no longer capable of the cool strategic calculations required of a semi-independent commander.”¹³

When examining such criticism, one is struck by the remarkable similarities to the tone and nature of the criticism of Ney as first espoused by General Gourgaud (and, thus, by Napoleon who was attempting to secure his reputation for posterity). The influence of the general (and the emperor) can even be seen in the work of Henri Houssaye, whose 1815 is one of the most thoroughly researched and balanced accounts of the Hundred Days. Houssaye frequently cites Gourgaud whose interpretation of events is sometimes echoed in Houssaye's analysis despite the historian's citation of military records, such as the logbooks of the *major-général*, which suggest other possible interpretations.¹⁴ These pro-Napoleon accounts of the Waterloo campaign and particularly of Ney's performance on 16 June are frequently disingenuous, and alternate interpretations of his actions deserve consideration.

¹⁰ Gourgaud, 64-69.

¹¹ Gourgaud, 70. In the concluding chapter of his narrative, “Campaign of 1815,” Napoleon offers a number of “observations,” including several almost identical to the criticism offered by Gourgaud, including this one. See Napoleon, “Campaign of 1815,” 249-50.

¹² qtd. in Harold Kurtz, The Trial of Marshal Ney (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1957), 148-49; cf. Henri Houssaye, 1815, vol. II (Paris: Librairie Académique, 1921), 133.

¹³ David G. Chandler, The Campaigns of Napoleon (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1966), 1021. David Chandler does present a somewhat less unfavorable view of Ney in his Waterloo: The Hundred Days (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 1997).

¹⁴ See Henri Houssaye, 1815, vol. II (Paris: Librairie Académique, 1921). Houssaye's invaluable work makes extensive and methodical use of documents held in Archives de Guerre, the Archives Nationales, and the Bibliothèque Nationale.

Some context of the events of 15 and 16 June needs to be established. Frequently glossed over is the fact that Marshal Ney only arrived in the area of operations on 14 June and received his command on the afternoon of the 15th. Only four days earlier, Napoleon had instructed Marshal Louis Davout, the minister of war, to “notify Marshal Ney that if he wants to participate in the opening battles of the campaign that he should arrive at my headquarters in Avesnes by the 14th.”¹⁵ Ney had been little used by Napoleon during the Hundred Days and, as a result of the Emperor’s “coldness toward him,” had been in a sort of self-imposed retirement at his estate at Coudreaux.¹⁶ Ney received that invitation at 11:00 p.m. on 11 June, and according to the eyewitness account of his aide-de-camp, Colonel Pierre-Agathe Heymès, he made preparations for a hurried departure within the hour.¹⁷ As Ney himself notes in his open letter to Fouché written in the days immediately after Waterloo, he knew nothing about the coming campaign: “I had no command, and had no information upon the force and composition of the army. Neither the emperor, nor his minister, had given me any previous hint, from which I could anticipate that I should be employed in the present campaign.”¹⁸

Accompanied only by a couple aides-de-camp, the marshal travelled sixty-on leagues and arrived by coach at Laon by evening of the 12 June and at the emperor’s headquarters on the following day. Heymès also notes that Ney arrived at the front without proper mounts for the coming campaign and that it was only on the morning of the 15 June (when Marshal Edouard Mortier took ill) that Ney was able to purchase Mortier’s now-available horses. Thus it was only later that day that the marshal was able to join Napoleon at his new headquarters in Charleroi, accompanied by a single aide-de-camp, but lacking a chief of staff, any ordinance officers, or any of his campaign equipment (which had yet to catch up with the marshal, but was expected in a couple of days).¹⁹

¹⁵ Napoleon to Marshal Davout, 11 June 1815, Napoleon Bonaparte, Correspondance de Napoléon Ier publiée par ordre de l’Empereur Napoléon III (Paris: Henri Plon, 1858-1869), No. 22042, XXVIII, 314-15.

¹⁶ Octave Levassasseur, Souvenirs Militaires d’Octave Levassasseur, officier d’artillery, aide-de-camp du Maréchal Ney (1802-1815) (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1914), 287.

¹⁷ Duc d’Elchingen, Documents inédits sur la Campagne de 1815, publiés par le duc d’Elchingen (Paris: Chez Anslin, 1840), p.2, and Pierre Agathe Heymès, Relations de la Campagne de 1815 dite de Waterloo pour servir a l’histoire du maréchal Ney (Paris: Imprimerie de Gaultier-Laguionie, c. 1830), 5; cf. Marshal Davout to Marshal Ney, 11 June 1815, in Louis Davout, Correspondance du maréchal Davout, prince d’Echmühl, ses commandements, son ministère, 1801-1815 (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1885), 566. According to Octave Levassasseur, Ney’s long-time ADC, the Marshal “did not hesitate for a moment” to make preparations (Levassasseur, 288).

¹⁸ Lettre du maréchal Ney au duc d’Otrante, Journal de l’Empire, 29 June 1815, reprinted in Arthur Benoit, Waterloo: Récits de la campagne de 1815 par le général Drouot et la maréchal Ney (Metz: Typographie Rousseau-Pallez, 1869), 20-25. This letter, Ney’s only written account of the events of the 1815 campaign, is also available on-line at http://www.napoleonguide.com/waterloo_ney.htm.

¹⁹ Heymès, 5-6; Levassasseur, 288; Lettre du maréchal Ney; and Gustave de Pontécoulant, Souvenirs militaires. Napoléon à Waterloo; ou, Précis rectifié de la campagne de 1815, avec des documents nouveaux et des pieces inédites (Paris: J. Dumaine, 1866), 22. Various eyewitnesses place the time between 12:00 and 7:00 p.m. Heymès, for example, places Ney’s meeting with Napoleon at the later time, but Henry Houssaye’s analysis of surviving documents and accounts place Ney’s arrival at Charleroi

That evening Napoleon briefed Ney of the strategic situation and gave him command of the left wing of the Armée du Nord, consisting of General d'Erlon's I Corps and General Reille's II Corps. The exact nature of this briefing is of tremendous importance in the assessment of Ney's conduct of 16 June. Ney's detractors argue that the emperor "must have" specifically ordered Ney to aggressively attack and to defend the crossroads at Quatre-Bras. This is certainly the version of history as later recounted by Napoleon and repeated by General Gourgaud and the "St. Helena school." The written evidence cited for these emphatic orders is Napoleon's 15 June Bulletin of the Army which notes that Marshal Ney had taken command of the army's right wing and had "established his headquarters at Quatre-Chemins [Quatre-Bras] on the road to Brussels this evening."²⁰ Other documents, however, suggest another version of the meeting between Napoleon and Ney, the most important of which are the orders to Ney, written following the meeting in the early hours of 16 June. In them, Napoleon outlines his plans for the coming day: Marshal Emmanuel Grouchy's wing will make for Sombreffe while the Imperial Guard will concentrate around Fleurus, arriving by noon. The emperor will then join Grouchy "perhaps at 3:00 o'clock in the afternoon, perhaps this evening." Napoleon notes his intention is to be in Brussels by the evening of the 17 June and suggests Ney's deployment:

First Division, two leagues in advance of Quatre-Bras, *if it is not inconvenient*, six division of infantry around Quatre-Bras and a division at Marbais which could be detached to me at Sombrelle if I have need of it; it should not, however, retard your march;

Valmy's [Kellermann's Cavalry] Corps of 3,000 elite cuirassiers at the intersection of the Roman Road and the road to Brussels, which could be detached to me if I need it . . .

I desire to have with me the Guard [cavalry] division commanded by General Lefebvre-Desnoëttes, and I will send you the two divisions of the count of Valmy to replace it. But, in my current plans I would prefer to place the count of Valmy in a manner that would enable me to recall him if I have need and there is no point in

as early as noon. Houssaye notes that most compromise on a time between 4:00 and 5:00 p.m. (Houssaye, 121).

²⁰ Bulletin of the Army, 15 June 1815, Napoleon Bonaparte, Correspondance de Napoléon Ier publiée par ordre de l'Empereur Napoléon III (Paris: Henri Plon, 1858-1869), No. 22056, XXVIII, 331-33. In his in his narrative of events, written on St. Helena, however, Napoleon notes that on the night of 15-16 June, Ney established his headquarters at Gosselies, his advance guard at Frasnes and outposts near Quatre-Bras. See Campaign of 1815, Œuvres de Napoléon Ier à Sainte-Hélène, Napoleon Bonaparte, Correspondance de Napoléon Ier publiée par ordre de l'Empereur Napoléon III (Paris: Henri Plon, 1858-1869), XXXI, 202.

having General Lefebvre-Desnoëttes make counter-marches since it is likely that I will decide to march on Brussels this evening with my Guard....”²¹

Clearly these *written* orders contain none of the sense of urgency suggested by the St. Helena school (and why would the written orders differ so dramatically from the potential verbal orders?). When these orders were written, Napoleon seemed unaware that he would be fighting a major battle that afternoon or that Ney would be similarly occupied.²² It is clear that Quatre-Bras was a point of concentration in preparation to the planned march on Brussels, but not a defensive position to prevent Wellington’s linking up with Blücher. Later on, these orders also suggest that Napoleon was anticipating a potential encounter with the British, not the Prussians; and if Napoleon were to encounter the Prussians, the orders imply that as many as one infantry division and three cavalry divisions were subject to recall by the emperor. The orders seem to stress the importance of Ney’s eight divisions being ready to march on Brussels as quickly as possible and that Wellington’s forces were not in position to offer much resistance: In other words the priority was to concentrate Ney’s wing at a lightly defended (at best) Quatre-Bras in preparation for marching on Brussels, not in anticipation of a major battle. If these written orders were any indication of what was actually discussed in Ney’s meeting with Napoleon, they seem to vindicate the marshal.

Another consequence of Ney’s late appointment as commander of the left wing of the Armée du Nord was his lack of familiarity with his key officers and his ignorance of the disposition of his forces. Critics note that Ney should have descended immediately upon Quatre-Bras, but that is ignoring the reality facing Ney at 10:00 p.m. (or, according to Heymès, 2:00 a.m.), when he actually arrived at Frasnes to take command of his wing. Early on 16 June, Ney dispatched Colonel Heymès to visit each of his regiments and to collect the names of their commanders and their strengths, and in his 11:00 p.m. report to Soult, Ney noted that he had yet to find General Reille (the commander of the II Corps).²³ Ney’s forces were quite dispersed as well—in part as a result of orders issued prior to the marshal’s arrival at the front. While scouts had pushed as far north as the

²¹ Napoleon to Marshal Ney, 16 June 1815, Napoleon Bonaparte, Correspondance de Napoléon Ier publiée par ordre de l’Empereur Napoléon III (Paris: Henri Plon, 1858-1869), No. 22058, XXVIII, 334-36. Emphasis added. In his analysis of the Battle of Waterloo Carl von Clausewitz likewise observes the lack of urgency in the emperor’s orders and that Napoleon had no idea he would be fighting a major battle on the 16 June. See Carl von Clausewitz, On Wellington: A Critique of Waterloo, trans. Peter Hofschröer (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2010), 88-94. Napoleon’s orders to Grouchy parallel those given to Ney, but seem to have been written after Ney’s. While the emperor emphasizes that his intention is operate in conjunction with Ney on the march to Brussels, he allows the distinct possibility of contact with the enemy near Sombreffe or Gembloux. See Napoleon to Marshal Grouchy, 16 June 1815, Napoleon Bonaparte, Correspondance de Napoléon Ier publiée par ordre de l’Empereur Napoléon III (Paris: Henri Plon, 1858-1869), No. 22059, XXVIII, 336-37.

²² Levavasseur, 292. This is certainly the opinion of Ney’s ADC, who notes that when Napoleon dictated those orders at 9:00, the Emperor wasn’t anticipating fighting a major battle, nor that Ney would receive much resistance at Quartre Bras.

²³ Heymès, 10; cf. duc d’Elchingen, 5-7; and Field, 63.

outskirts of Quatre-Bras the previous evening,²⁴ Ney only had with him at Frasnes his advance guard, consisting of a single infantry division, Pire's cavalry division, and several detachments of the Guard cavalry. The balance of Reille's corps (minus Girard's division, which had been detached the previous day) was still enroute after a forced march of nearly twenty hours and fighting multiple skirmishes along the way.²⁵ D'Erlon's corps was even farther way (between Jumet and Marchiennes-au-Pont), some units having yet to cross the Sambre River.²⁶ This meant that at daybreak on 16 June, Ney had available to him only a fraction of his forces (ultimately about 20-25,000 men), not his full complement of 40-45,000 men frequently cited by his detractors, and the marshal would have to wait the better part of the day before many of his divisions would be in a position to assist in any attack on Quatre Bras. Colonel Heymès also notes in his narrative that Ney was desperately short of aides-de-camp, which served only to compound his problems by employing line cavalry officers who were inexperienced in staff work: This hindered his ability to communicate with his widely scattered units.²⁷ Indeed in his analysis of the Battle of Quatre Bras, military historian Andrew W. Field comments on Ney's lack of staff officers, noting that Colonel Heymès, Ney's senior aide-de-camp, was forced into temporarily serve as chief of staff for the Left Wing, a role that normally would have been filled by a *général-de-division*.²⁸ In his analysis of the Waterloo campaign, Baron Jomini, Ney's chief of staff until 1813, comments that "had Ney's wing have been under his orders a few days, and had their anterior movements been directed by him, it is probable that he would have reached Quatre-Bras on the night of the 15th."²⁹ Even David Chandler, a historian who questions Ney's competency

²⁴ See Pollio, 143. Pollio reproduces in full General Lefebvre-Desnoëttes's 9:00 p.m. report to Ney, noting that "General Colbert had arrived within musketshot of Quatre-Bras." He also states his intention to send another reconnaissance early the next morning "with the mission to occupy it if possible" (143).

²⁵ Hippolyte de Mauduit, Les Derniers Jours de la Grande Armée ou Souvenirs, Documents et Correspondance Inédite de Napoléon en 1814 et 1815 (Paris: Chez l'Auteur, 1848), 22. In his discussion of the opening phases of the campaign, Mauduit (who is highly critical of Ney's performance) concludes that it would have been virtually impossible for Ney to have captured Quatre-Bras on the evening of the 15th because Reille's corps was exhausted.

²⁶ Heymès, 10-11; cf. duc d'Elchingen, 4-7; and Field, 64-65. See also Antoine Jomini, The Political and Military History of the Campaign of Waterloo, trans. S.V. Benet (New York: Redfield, 1860), 124, and "Campaign of 1815," Œuvres de Napoléon Ier à Sainte-Hélène, Napoleon Bonaparte, Correspondance de Napoléon Ier publiée par ordre de l'Empereur Napoléon III (Paris: Henri Plon, 1858-1869), XXXI, 202.

²⁷ Heymès, 11; cf. duc d'Elchingen, 8. The shortage of trained staff officers would be a chronic problem in Napoleon's armies, particularly after 1812.

²⁸ Andrew W. Field, Prelude to Waterloo: Quatre Bras (Barnsley, UK: Pen and Sword, 2014), 66 and 69. As we shall see, there were even problems with the imperial headquarters staff during this campaign. Field also notes that "immediately after taking command, the right thing for Ney to do was to get forward and start seeing the situation for himself, and this is what he did" (69). Regarding Ney's lacking of a proper staff, one wonders if this might have been the source some of the problems with communications between Ney's headquarters and the Imperial headquarters throughout the day.

²⁹ Jomini, 124-25. Although as Andrew Uffindell notes in his recent book on the Battle of Ligny, "if Ney had occupied Quatre Bras [by the evening of 15 June], his flanks would have been exposed. . . . Ney had to relate his advance to that of the right wing to ensure mutual support. If either wing advanced slowly, it was the right." So, seizing the crossroads as quickly as possible would have been an unsound strategic choice! See Andrew Uffindell, The Eagle's Last Triumph: Napoleon's Victory at Ligny, June 1815

after 1812, notes that “it was a practical mistake to fling him [Ney] straight into his new command so abruptly on the first day of the campaign.”³⁰ These are the circumstance under which Ney assumed command of his forces and confronted Wellington at Quatre-Bras on 16 June, circumstances created not by Ney, but by the Emperor’s decision to employ Ney only on the eve of the campaign.

Much is also made of the fact that the recently-reinforced Prince of Orange only had *8,000 men and 16 guns* under his command at Quatre-Bras on the morning of 16 June and that if Ney had only attacked as soon as possible with his available forces, he would have easily overrun the allied position.³¹ Ney himself even acknowledged the lightness of the British defenses early in the morning in a dispatch to Marshal Nicholas Soult, Napoleon’s chief of staff: “All information in hand tends to show that there are 3,000 hostile infantry at Quatre Bras and very few cavalry. I think that the Emperor’s arrangements . . . will be carried out without great difficulty.”³² But considering the actual content of Ney’s original orders and the disposition of his forces, there seemed to be no reason to launch an immediate attack. The allied forces could be dealt with at leisure once Ney concentrated his forces.³³ Besides, as Jomini notes, Napoleon had previously informed Ney not to expect definitive orders until 3:00 p.m. on 16 June!³⁴ What, of course, neither Ney nor Napoleon knew were the extraordinary measures taken by Wellington (or actually the Prince of Orange) to reinforce the position and that, by the end of the day, the duke would have over 30,000 men to counter any French advance. Ironically, Wellington’s original intention was to abandon Quatre Bras, and it was only the quick thinking of the Prince of Orange, the senior officer on site, who not only ordered his troops to hold their positions, but called for reinforcements to begin concentrating there.³⁵

(London: Greenhill Books, 2006), 53-54. This is also the opinion of a former imperial staff officer who served during the campaign, Colonel Janin. See E.F. Janin, Campagne de Waterloo, ou Rémarques Critique et Historique (Paris: Chaumerot Jeune, 1820).

³⁰ David Chandler, Waterloo: The Hundred Days (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 1997), 57.

³¹ See Albert A. Nofi, The Waterloo Campaign (Conshohocken, PA: Combined Publishing, 1998), 98; Chandler, Campaigns, 1048; Chandler, Waterloo, 83-84; and Owen Connelly, Blundering to Glory: Napoleon’s Military Campaigns (Wilmington: Scholarly Imprints, 1987), 209.

³² qtd. In Uffindell, 124. This report echoes the report made to Ney at 9:00 p.m. on 15 June by General Charles Lefebvre-Desnouëttes that General Édouard Colbert’s cavalry had pushed Nassau regiment out of Frasnes and back to the outskirts of Quatre-Bras before returning to Frasnes (Field, 60-61).

³³ In more recent analysis of the battles of the Waterloo campaign, several historians have reached similar conclusions. See, for example, Bernard Coppens, Waterloo: Récit Critique (Brussels: Editions La Patience, 2004), 14, and Peter Hofschroer, 1815—The Waterloo Campaign: Wellington and his German Allies in the Battles of Ligny and Quatre Bras (London: Greenhill Books, 1998), 255.

³⁴ Jomini, 126-27.

³⁵ Peter Hofschroer, Waterloo 1815—Quatre Bras and Ligny (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2005), 26, 41-42, 55, and 57-58. For Hofschroer, the Prince of Orange is really the hero of Quatre Bras: If not for his quick thinking and issuing marching orders for reinforcements, Wellington would have had nothing to oppose Ney’s advance, altering the course of the campaign significantly.

In preparation of the coming day's march, Ney began dispatching his initial movement orders as early as 3:00 a.m., ordering some brigades in d'Erlon's Corps to set "off immediately in order to reach Gosselies at 6 a.m. or earlier if possible."³⁶ Other units were similarly alerted to be ready to march in the morning. II Corps was ready to march by 7:00 a.m. (as Ney and Reille had discussed the night before), but before setting off Ney was still awaiting definitive orders from the imperial headquarters, which did not arrive until later that morning.³⁷ This delay would have repercussions throughout the day. The challenge for Ney was to concentrate his forces which had been so spread out along the road from Thuin to Marchienne-au-Pont (south of the Sambre River) to Frasnés. As Clausewitz notes in his commentary on the Waterloo campaign, when Ney began his battle for Quatre Bras at noon, his main body was still a three hours' march away at Gosselies.³⁸ Both Heymès and Ney's engineering officer, Colonel Claude-François-Marie Répécaud point out that Ney delayed his advance on Quatre Bras because he first wanted to allow time for I Corps to move into supporting range.³⁹ To complicate matters, both corps of the Ney's wing of the French army advanced along a single road, which, according to one eyewitness, deteriorated because of the weather, and by the evening of the 15 June it "was already ploughed up by the passage of our artillery and that of the enemy army that had retreated along it."⁴⁰ All of this meant that if the lead units were delayed, the following units would be even more delayed. Like Wellington's reinforcements, Ney's troops would enter battle piecemeal, meaning that Ney never had the advantage of overwhelming numbers which is frequently cited by the St. Helena school.

Without a sense of urgency (either from the imperial headquarters or from the situation in the field), Ney allowed his troops time to recover from their series of forced marches on the morning of 16 June (they had been marching after all since 2:00 a.m. until late in the day on the 15th) and made what preparations he could for his advance, including

³⁶ Adjutant-commandant d'Arsonvel to Général Nougues in Pontécoulant, 144; cf. in Field, 75. In fact, d'Erlon had received explicit order from Soult late in the evening on 15 June, that "it is the Emperor's intention that you rally your corps on the right bank of the Sambre, to join up with II Corps at Gosselies. . . ." (Major-général au comte d'Erlon, Charleroi, 15 June 1815, 10:00 p.m., in Pontécoulant, 143). Count d'Erlon, thus received orders from both Ney and Soult to concentrate the forces of the Left Wing and forwarded orders down the line. There is as yet, no good explanation of why d'Erlon's corps was so slow in fulfilling those orders. Soult even inquired of Ney whether or not I Corps was in motion when he requested a deployment update from Ney at 6:00 on 16 June (Major-général au maréchal Ney, Charleroi, 16 June 1815, 10:00 p.m., in Pontécoulant, 145).

³⁷ Duc d'Elchingen, 57; Claude-François-Marie Répécaud, Napoléon à Ligny et le Maréchal Ney à Quatre Bras. Notice historique et critique, par le colonel du génie Répécaud (Arras: Imprimerie de Vve Degeorge, 1849), 16; and Field, 80 and 85.

³⁸ Clausewitz, 93; see also Field, 69.

³⁹ Heymès, 12; and Répécaud, 18-20.

⁴⁰ qtd. in Field, 59. See also Field, 61-62; Pollio, 160-61; and Clausewitz, 113. Clausewitz is especially scathing regarding the logistical problem: "What commander, indeed, has ever been ordered to advance with 40,000 men between two enemy corps on a single road" (113).

dispatching Kellerman's 3rd Cavalry corps on a reconnaissance toward Quatre Bras.⁴¹ Even as these orders were issued, however, Reille reported Prussian troops on his flanks in the direction of Saint-Amand, perhaps accounting for some of the "slowness" with which II Corps concentrated prior to its advance.⁴² It should be noted that while much is made of Ney's alleged lethargy on the morning of 16 June, a similar lack of haste could be witness with the Right Wing of the French Army, the wing under Napoleon's direct command. According to Carl von Clausewitz, "Bonaparte was aware of the situation at Sombrefe [the concentration of Blücher's forces in preparation for battle], so it did not even occur to him to begin the battle before midday. As the situation at Quatre Bras was identical, his [Napoleon's] criticism of Ney for not having seized Quatre Bras with all his forces on the evening of June 15 or the morning of June 16 is both foolish and unjustified."⁴³

That the Emperor was not yet aware of what the day would bring is evident in his first set of orders to Ney, which were written between 8:00 and 9:00 a.m. and probably arrived sometime between 10:30 and 11:00 a.m.:

My cousin,

I am sending the present letter to you via my aide-de-camp General Flahault. The chief of staff should have sent orders as well, but you will receive mine sooner because my officers are faster than his. You will receive movement orders for the day, but I wish to write you in detail because it is of the highest importance.

I am sending Marshal Grouchy with the 3rd and 4th Infantry Corps to Sombrefe; I am moving my Guard to Fleurus, and I will arrive there in person by midday. I will attack the enemy there, if I encounter him, and clear the way as far as Gembloux. There, after seeing what develops, I will decide what to do next,

⁴¹ Rapport du comte de Valmy au au maréchal Ney, près Frasne, 16 June 1815, 10:00 a.m., in Pontécoulant, 157-58; Heymès, 7-8; Pollio, 186-87; Répécaud, 13; and Field, 69.

⁴² Général Reille au maréchal Ney, Gosselies, 16 June 1815, 10:15 a.m., in Pontécoulant, 153-54; duc d'Elchingen, 37-38; and Field, 103. These Prussian troops were concentrating in anticipation of confronting Napoleon at Ligny. Reille also relayed his concerns to D'Erlon. Reille's advance was more cautious than it might have otherwise been because of the presences of the Prussians, which in turn meant that d'Erlon's corps was slowed. As Andrew W. Field notes in his analysis, "however keen he was to join Ney, d'Erlon was prevented moving forward because Reille's corps was blocking his path" (Field, 86).

⁴³ Carl von Clausewitz, *On Wellington: A Critique of Waterloo*, trans. Peter Hofschröer (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2010), 81. See also Hofschröer, *Waterloo Campaign*, 225, and Uffindell, 126. Much has been made of Ney's failure to begin the attack before he did, but as Andrew Uffindell notes, "Ney had begun the Battle of Quatre Bras a full hour before Napoleon commenced that of Ligny" (126). The reason for this was oddly similar to the reason for Ney's delayed start: The concentration of forces was incomplete. In the Emperor's case, he was awaiting the arrival of Gérard's IV Corps, which like d'Erlon's corps, had the farthest to march (Field, 121). Strangely, the St. Helena school does not fault the Emperor the way it does Ney. This is one of several examples of a double standard being applied to Ney and Napoleon.

perhaps about 3:00 p.m. or this evening. Once I have decided what to do, my intention is that you should be ready to march on Brussels: I will support you with my Guard which will either be at Fleurus or Sombreffe, and I expect you to arrive in Brussels tomorrow morning. You will march this evening if I decide early enough for you to be informed, and to march three or four leagues this evening in order to be in Brussels by 7:00 a.m.

You should deploy your troops in this manner: the first division, two leagues beyond Quatre-Chemins (*if it is not inconvenient*); six divisions of infantry about Quatre-Chemins, and one division at Marbais, so that I may call on it if I need them at Sombreffe.

. . . I have adopted the general principle for the duration of this campaign to divide my army into two wings and a reserve. Your wing will comprise the four divisions of I Corps, the four divisions of II Corps, two divisions of light cavalry and two divisions of Count Valmy's [cavalry] corps. This should be approximately 45-50,000 men.

Marshal Grouchy will have approximately the same sized force and command the right wing.

The Guard will form the reserve, and I will place myself with one or the other wing as circumstances warrant.

The chief of staff will give more precise orders so that there is no difficulty in obeying your orders when you detached corps commanders to take my orders directly when I am present.

Depending on the circumstances, I will weaken one or the other wing in order to augment my reserve.

You know the importance attached to taking Brussels. Its capture by a sudden movement will isolate the English army at Mons, Ostende, etc.

I desire that your dispositions should be made so that your eight divisions can march on Brussels as rapidly as possible and without obstacle as soon as they are ordered.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Napoleon Bonaparte to Marshal Ney, the Prince of the Moskova, 16 June 1815, Napoleon Bonaparte, Correspondance de Napoléon Ier publiée par ordre de l'Empereur Napoléon III (Paris: Henri Plon, 1858-1869), No. 22058, XXVIII, 334-5. Emphasis added. A comparable set of orders was sent to Marshal Grouchy which likewise contains no sense of urgency or an inkling that Napoleon was about to fight a major battle (see Correspondance, No. 22059, XXVIII, 336-37). Répécaud notes that General Flahaut had attested to the approximate time of receiving the orders and delivery, and he points out that these orders are based on the assumption that the allies will not offer a major battle (Répécaud, 16 and 28-29). A copy of Soult's detailed orders, referenced above can be found in Pontécoulant, 146-47.

These orders contain no sense of the urgency alleged by the St. Helena school. It is clear that Napoleon was unaware that he would be fighting a major battle and that the Emperor thought Ney's advance would be largely unopposed. The thought that dominates the orders is the rapid descent on Brussels. Ney responded to the imperial headquarters promptly at 11:00 am, noting his own movement orders, the lightness of known Allied forces at Quatre Bras (3,000 infantry and some cavalry), and concluding that "I think that the Emperor's arrangements for the advance on Brussels will be carried out without great difficulty."⁴⁵

Just as Ney was about to begin his advance to Quatre Bras, he received further instructions from Soult, urging him to:

. . . Assemble the Corps of Counts Reille and d'Erlon, and that of the Count of Valmy, which is on its way to join you at this moment [and had, in fact, reached Ney before his advance]. With these you are to attack and destroy all enemy forces that may appear. Blücher is here at Namur, and it is not to be expected that he will send troops toward Quatre Bras, so you have no concerns except for those forces coming from Brussels.

Marshal Grouchy is moving to Sombreffe, as I have told you and the Emperor is going to Fleurus. It is to there that you should send further reports to His Majesty.⁴⁶

Unfortunately these orders did not have the time of issue on them, so it is difficult to know (exactly) when they were issued or received, but as Ney sent Soult a report on his dispositions at 11:00 a.m., it is likely that they arrived a little earlier than that.⁴⁷ Several things stand out in these orders, however: 1) There is no indication at the time they were drafted that Napoleon anticipated a major battle, 2) Ney only had to worry about the Allied forces coming from Brussels; the Prussian forces on his flank no longer would be a concern (which they had been for Reille), and 3) there is still no sense of urgency—Ney simply had to be in position to arrive in Brussels on the morning of 17 June.

⁴⁵ qtd. in Albert Pollio, *Waterloo (1815) avec de Nouveaux Documents*, trans. François Louis Auguste Goiran (Paris: Charles-Lavauzelle, [1908]), 187. Italian General Pollio supplements his analysis of Quatre Bras, Ligny, and Waterloo with the reproduction of numerous documents found in the Archives de Guerre. For a copy of Ney's orders to Reille, see duc d'Elchingen, 38 and Pontécoulant, 155-56.

⁴⁶ Clausewitz, 90; Jomini, 127; and Pollio, 184-85; cf. Houssaye, 139, and Mauduit, 26-29; and Field, 85 and 197. In his examination of Soult's logs, Houssaye concludes that the orders actually left the imperial headquarters between 8:30 and 9:00 a.m.; however, it was likely that Napoleon had issued those orders to Soult much earlier in the morning. Mauduit suggests that these orders were actually those listed in the *Correspondance* discussed above.

⁴⁷ Pierre de Wit, "The morning of the 16th of June and the battle of Quatre Bras: The French Left Wing," *The Campaign of 1815: A Study*, 2. <http://www.waterloo-campaign.nl/bestanden/files/june16/frlinkervleugel.pdf> (accessed 23 March 2015). Andrew Field suggests that Ney probably received them at approximately 11:30 a.m., but clearly he did not access the copy of the orders found in the Service Historique de l'Armée du Terre, C15, #5 (see Field, 85-86 and 197).

With orders already issued, Ney marched his advanced guard toward Quatre Bras perhaps by about noon, and by approximately 2:00 p.m., the marshal's forces began their assault on the crossroads. Having with him only the divisions of Bachelu and Foy, the cavalry of Piré and about thirty guns (plus the cavalry of the Guard under Lefebvre-Desnouettes), a total of approximately 15,000 men, Ney arrayed his forces into columns by battalions along the main road and in the fields to the right (between the Bossu Wood on the French left and the Delhutte Wood to the right). As the marshal launched his attack, Prince Jérôme Bonaparte's division was still moving up in support, and Girard's division had already been detached to join the Emperor's forces near Ligny.⁴⁸ The terrain of rolling hills and especially the swampy stream which flowed across the battlefield near the Gémioncourt farm made the advance "tiresome" according to one participant.⁴⁹

Ney's conduct of the battle at Quatre Bras was methodical, perhaps in part because his (and Reille's) earlier experiences with Wellington's tactics in comparable terrain—something that Napoleon had yet to witness.⁵⁰ Ney's tactical choices certainly reflected those experiences. As the French neared the enemy lines, they deployed in *ordre mixte*, and under the cover of constant and effective artillery fire they advanced with a heavier than normal screen of skirmishers leading the way—all tactics designed to counter standard British deployments. As Andrew Field notes, this was "the most successful and commented upon tactic of the French infantry."⁵¹ The effect of these deployments slowed the French advance, but overwhelmed the inexperienced allied troops then deployed. According to Ney, "we advanced towards the enemy with an enthusiasm difficult to describe. Nothing could resist our impetuosity."⁵² The allied troops gave way under the constant French pressure, but as the situation began to reach a crisis, the arrival of the 7th Belgian Line infantry, deploying between the Bossu Wood and the road near the Gémioncourt farm, temporarily stabilized the allied defenses which ran parallel to the Gémioncourt stream. After three hours of combat, the Allies were on the verge of collapse, but Ney could not know their state of morale.⁵³ All Ney needed to shatter the allied line was the balance of Reille's corps, but Jérôme's division had yet to arrive. According to Wellington, who reached the scene about this time, "By God if I had come up five minutes later the battle was lost."⁵⁴

⁴⁸ duc d'Elchingen, 37-38 and 64; Répécaud, 26; Pollio, 237-38; and Field, 96-100. Répécaud states that Ney began his attack by 1:00 p.m.

⁴⁹ qtd. in Field, 105.

⁵⁰ duc d'Elchingen, 37-38; and Nofi, 99-100; cf. Houssaye, 198.

⁵¹ Field, 175 and 176.

⁵² Lettre du maréchal Ney au duc d'Otrante.

⁵³ Field, 107-08. As Field notes, however, even with Jérôme's division, "Ney did not enjoy an overwhelming superiority of numbers" (109).

⁵⁴ qtd. in Field, 110. Pollio estimates that Jérôme's division entered combat between 4-4:30 p.m. (Pollio, 239).

By 3:00 p.m., Jérôme's division reached the battlefield. Ney sent him to the French left and into the Bossu Wood, which freed up part of Foy's division, and then he renewed his attack in what Field calls "a well-coordinated attack of all arms."⁵⁵ The Allies gave way and fell back, surrendering the potential bastion of Gemioncourt farm to the French. The Prince of Orange sent in his cavalry reserve to stabilize the situation, but Piré's cavalry shattered the allied formations and threatened to turn the situation into a rout as they charged shattered regiments and isolated artillery batteries. The Prince committed his last remaining cavalry, the Belgian 5th Light Dragoons, which interestingly comprised many officers and troopers who had previously served in the French army. By now the fighting had drifted back to the Namur road, where the timely arrival of Scottish 92nd Regiment (part of Picton's division) again stabilized the situation. Elsewhere, Jérôme's division steadily pushed its way through the Bossu Wood threatening to flank the Allied right. It again appeared that Ney was on the verge of victory, but his slight numerical advantage was about to be lost as the balance of Picton's division began to arrive.⁵⁶

It was during this fighting that new orders arrived from the Emperor—the orders selectively remembered by the St. Helena school—which instructed Ney to wrap up the business at Quatre-Bras so that he could complete the entrapment of already begun by Napoleon:

The Emperor orders me to inform you that the enemy has concentrated one corps of troops between Sombreffe and Brye, and that at half past two, Marshal Grouchy will attack it with III and IV Corps. It is His Majesty's intention that you should attack all that is in front of you, and then, after having pressed it vigorously, you should advance towards us to assist in enveloping the force I have just mentioned. If this corps should be crushed prior to this, His Majesty would then maneuver in your direction, to speed your operations as well.

Inform the Emperor of your dispositions and of whatever takes place to your fore.⁵⁷

This was the first mentioning of Napoleon's planned envelopment of the Prussian army, and at the time they were written (2:00 p.m.), the Emperor was unaware that Blücher had managed to concentrate most of his army at Ligny. By mid-afternoon, however, Ney was rapidly losing his numerical advantage, making the taking of the crossroads more difficult. Nonetheless, the marshal prepared to renew his attack with all the forces

⁵⁵ Field, 112.

⁵⁶ Carl von Damitz, Histoire de la campagne de 1815, pour faire suite à l'histoire des guerres des temps modern par le major de Damitz, trans. Léon Griffon (Paris: J. Corréard, 1841), I: 196-97; Répécaud, 28; Field, 110-20; and Uffindell, 125-26.

⁵⁷ qtd. in Clausewitz, 90; and Field, 121 and 197; cf. Uffindell, 126; Houssaye, 190; and Mauduit, 54 and 57-58. According to Field's estimation, these orders "should certainly have reached Ney by 3:30 p.m.," but the exact time of their receipt is of some considerable debate. Some place their arrival much later. See Field, 121 and 197; cf. Uffindell, 126; Houssaye, 190; and Mauduit, 54 and 57-58.

available to him (but apparently did not inform Napoleon of his situation, as per the orders). The swampy, thorny terrain along the Gémioncourt stream slowed the French right which was attacked by newly arrived British reinforcements as it emerged from the thickets, throwing Bachelu's division into some confusion. French artillery broke up the Allied counter-attack, however, and soon the French line resumed its advance. On the French left, Jérôme's division became bogged down in a see-saw struggle for the Bossu Wood. Foy's division (the French center) advanced along the main road, overwhelming Wellington's Bruswickers. The Duke of Brunswick was mortally wounded in the fight, and Wellington himself was nearly captured as the allied center gave way. Only the timely arrival of Best's division saved Wellington and preserved the line. Ney had Wellington on the ropes, but needed fresh troops to finish the job.⁵⁸ Unfortunately d'Erlon's corps had yet to arrive. Every moment of delay meant that Wellington received more reinforcements, slowly tipping the advantage to the British general.

As his advance stalled, Ney received more orders from the Emperor, each more emphatic than the previous, instructing the marshal to

maneuver so as to envelope the enemy right, and throw yourself forcibly on his rear. This army [the Prussian] is lost if you act vigorously. The fate of France is in your hands. So do not hesitate an instant to carry out the movements the Emperor commands and may your way to the heights of Brye and St. Amand to assist in a victory that could be decisive.⁵⁹

These orders, written at 3:30 p.m., did not reach Ney until nearly 5 or 6:00 p.m. despite the relative close proximity of the battlefields (only two and a half leagues separate Ligny from Quatre-Bras). Like many orders sent from the imperial headquarters that day, not all arrived in a timely manner because of a problem that would plague the French throughout the campaign: Too many of the aides-de-camp were poorly mounted and many were inexperienced (as was the chief of staff himself).⁶⁰ When Marshal Berthier served as Napoleon's chief of staff, several copies of orders were sent by multiple riders (sometimes by different routes) to ensure that they arrived at their destination in a timely manner; Soult did not follow that practice, opting instead to send

⁵⁸ Field, 122-33; and Pollio, 240-42.

⁵⁹ qtd. in Clausewitz, 91; and Field, 134 and 197; cf. Uffindell, 126; Houssaye, 190; and Mauduit, 54 and 57-58. According to Colonel Jean-Louis Crabbé, Ney's long-time ADC who was serving in the imperial headquarters during the Waterloo campaign, he was sent three times during the afternoon to urge Ney's taking of Quatre Bras. The marshal's response was subdued and frustrated. That the colonel would have been dispatched three times between Ligny and Quatre Bras that day, however, seems unlikely (although he did note that he was in the saddle for 18 hours that day). Perhaps he meant that three times during the day orders to Ney had been delivered. It does seem likely that Crabbé did deliver at least one set of those orders. See Jean-Louis de Crabbé, Jean-Louis de Crabbé, Colonel d'Empire, Laissé pour Mort à Waterloo, comp. François Hue (Nantes: Bertrand Malvaux, 2006), 277.

⁶⁰ Houssaye, 190; and Uffindell, 153-61. In fact, Uffindell devotes an entire chapter to the intersection of these problems in his discussion of the movements of d'Erlon's corps. See also John R. Elting, Swords around a Throne: Napoleon's Grande Armée (New York: Free Press, 1988), 654-55.

a single copy by a single rider.⁶¹ Indeed Napoleon's 16 June orders to Marshal Grouchy warned that messages from his chief of staff might be slow.⁶² Hippolyte de Mauduit expresses disbelief at the delayed transmission of these orders: "This was the second fatal mistake of the campaign."⁶³ By the time Ney received the emperor's 2:00 p.m. orders (sometime after 3:30 p.m.), for example, the marshal was fully engaged and, in fact, was himself becoming hard-pressed by Wellington's ever increasing numbers. By 4:00 p.m., the numbers began to favor the duke, making it all but impossible for Ney to capture the crossroads, disengage and then envelop the Prussian flank (a three hour march away).⁶⁴ In fact Ney believed that he had engaged the whole of Wellington's army.⁶⁵

By late afternoon and early evening the marshal was in desperate need of reinforcements. He had been anticipating the arrival of d'Erlon's corps for some time, especially since its lead units had been reported at as reaching the Roman road just south of Frasnes.⁶⁶ That I Corps did not arrive in a timely manner on the battlefield of Quatre-Bras (or at Ligny) is, as Andrew Uffindell ably demonstrates, perhaps the greatest example of the bungled staff work seen during the entire campaign.⁶⁷ Indeed, many of the misfortunes that occurred during the course of 16 June were due to faulty staff work within the imperial headquarters, the fog of war, and the circumstances of attempting to wage two battles simultaneously. Napoleon, apparently realizing that Ney could not disengage from Quatre-Bras and fall upon the Prussian flank, decided to redirect d'Erlon's still unengaged corps to Ligny instead.⁶⁸ At approximately 3:30 p.m., these orders (to redirect I Corps) were entrusted to an inexperienced staff officer who

⁶¹ Crabbé, 277; cf. Field, 29-30. Field also notes that the quality of many of the messengers and their mounts was frequently "of mediocre quality," an idea echoed by one of Ney's ADCs, Colonel Jean-Louis de Crabbé: "The atmosphere in the General Headquarters is not that which reigned there when Prince Berthier was found at its head. There was, it seemed, less strictness, less calm and efficiency. There were also less qualified officers." The colonel also noted that there were few ADCs in the imperial headquarters than had been the case under Bertier (Crabbé, 275-76 and 277).

⁶² Napoleon to Marshal Grouchy, 16 June 1815, Correspondance, No. 22059, XXVIII, 336.

⁶³ Mauduit, 58. The first fatal mistake was the defection of General Bourmont in the opening hours of the campaign.

⁶⁴ Nofi, 99-108, and Uffindell, 128.

⁶⁵ Lettre du maréchal Ney au duc d'Otrante. Ney would write on 26 June, "by what fatality . . . did the emperor, instead of directing all his forces against Lord Wellington, who would have been taken unawares, and could not have resisted, consider this as secondary."

⁶⁶ Répécaud, 32.

⁶⁷ See Chapter 7 ("The Fatal Peregrinations of d'Erlon") in Uffindell's The Eagle's Last Triumph. Other historians have likewise been at a loss explaining exactly what went wrong with I Corps that day. In his analysis of Quatre Bras, Andrew Field also devotes a chapter specifically to the topic, suggesting that both d'Erlon and Ney were to blame: Ney for making "a rash and illogical decision," and d'Erlon for making "an equally irrational decision to turn away from the battle where the strategic gain would have been incalculable. . . ." (Field, 165).

⁶⁸ According to Andrew W. Field, while Ney may not have sent a report directly to the Emperor (or Soult), a report was relayed through Count Lobau's deputy chief of staff (VI Corps), informing the Emperor that the marshal had engaged approximately 20,000 troops under Wellington at Quatre Bras. This report would have been dispatched sometime prior to Napoleon's issuing his 3:30 p.m. orders (Field, 135).

was supposed to deliver copies to d'Erlon and to Ney, but after delivering the Emperor's handwritten note to d'Erlon's chief of staff, the messenger promptly returned to the imperial headquarters without delivering Ney's copy. In the meantime, the orders from Soult had arrived, informing Ney that "the fate of France is in your hands" and that he was to take Quatre-Bras at all costs.⁶⁹

The marshal was furious and exclaimed, "would that one of these English bullets strike my chest."⁷⁰ With Reille's corps nearly exhausted from the day's efforts and his only fresh troops being General Kellermann's Cuirassiers (about 800 men), Ney ordered them to charge the British lines. So sudden was the French charge several British units were caught before they could form squares, resulting in horrendous casualties. Surprisingly, the unsupported (and near-suicidal) cavalry charge momentarily seized the crossroads before being driven back by fire of unbroken infantry squares and a British counter-attack. In the resulting disorder, Kellerman, himself, was nearly captured when he lost his mount, only to be rescued by two quick-thinking cuirassiers.⁷¹ Had the marshal possessed any fresh infantry to support the attack, Quatre Bras would have been his, but none were available. It was not until about 7:00 p.m. that Ney learned the reason for d'Erlon's absence when another of Soult's aides-de-camp finally delivered a duplicate set of the infamous 3:30 p.m. orders. Insane with rage and without thinking, Ney sent orders for d'Erlon to reverse his march.⁷² That much celebrated error (and d'Erlon's foolish compliance) ultimately meant that I Corps, which had just arrived within sight of the battlefield at Ligny, would arrive at Quatre-Bras only after the fighting had concluded, failing to participate in either battle where even a portion of its troops might have proven decisive. With no fresh troops available, Ney could do nothing more and was now forced on the defensive as Wellington used the last of his reinforcements (Cooks' and Alten's divisions) to launch a cautious counter-attack. The Allies retook much of the ground lost during the day, including Gémioncourt farm, driving the French back nearly to their starting positions by nightfall.⁷³

That evening at a late dinner with Prince Jérôme, Ney made his report of the day to Soult:

⁶⁹ Houssaye, 210, and Uffindell, 145-46.

⁷⁰ Houssaye, 211.

⁷¹ Field, 134-44; cf. Levavasseur, 290. One of Ney's ADCs, Octave Levavasseur, was just rejoining the marshal at Quatre Bras when he witnessed the disorder following Kellerman's charge. Field offers an interesting analysis of this charge and the tactical innovation employed by the Count of Valmy, who charged all-out on the crossroads rather than the standard French practice of "charging" at a trot, "leaving [his cuirassiers] no time to reflect on what they were being asked to do . . ." (Field 174).

⁷² Pollio, 245. Interestingly, neither in his 16 June report to Soult nor in his letter to Fouché does Ney mention issuing a recall to d'Erlon, but assumes the actions were d'Erlon's alone. Interestingly Clausewitz places the recalling of d'Erlon's corps earlier in the day, coinciding with the committing of Jérôme's division to the renewed attack on the allied line at approximately 3:00 p.m. If this were the case (keeping in mind that we have no written record of when or if the orders were issued or what wording they might have contained), then the fault for d'Erlon's actions would rest solely with d'Erlon, not Ney, who at 3:00 p.m., had no way of knowing that the Emperor had redirected d'Erlon (Clausewitz, 111).

⁷³ Clausewitz, 111-12; and Field, 145-48.

Frasnes, 16 June (10:00 p.m.)

Marshal,

I have attacked the English position at Quatre Bras with the greatest vigor; but an error of Count d'Erlon's deprived me of a fine victory, for at the very moment when the 5th and 9th divisions of General Reille's corps had overthrown everything in front of them, I Corps marched off to St. Amand to support His Majesty's left; but the really fatal thing was that this corps, having then counter-marched to rejoin my wing, gave no useful assistance on either field.

Prince Jérôme's division fought with great valor; His Royal Highness has been slightly wounded.

Actually there have been engaged here only three division of infantry, a brigade of cuirassiers and General Piré's cavalry. The Count of Valmy delivered a fine charge. All have done their duty except I Corps.

The enemy has lost heavily; we have captured some guns and a color.

We have lost only about 2,000 killed and 4,000 wounded. I have called for reports for Generals Reille and d'Erlon and will forward them to Your Excellency.⁷⁴

Several things are interesting about this report. First, according to the St. Helena school, it does not exist, and Ney's failure to produce this report is part of the proof of the marshal's incompetence and failure to comply with Napoleon's orders and keep the Emperor informed. And secondly, Ney makes no reference to his order recalling d'Erlon, suggesting that the commander of I Corps counter-marched on his own accord. In fact, the tone reveals Ney's frustration with d'Erlon's actions and inactions that day. As Field notes, a similar accounting and a similar tone can be found in Ney's only personal account of the Waterloo campaign, his 29 June letter to Fouché, written immediately following the marshal's return to Paris.⁷⁵ According to one of Prince Jérôme's aides-de-camp, it was during that meal that the Emperor's ADC, Colonel Forbin-Janson finally completed his relaying of the Emperor's orders for Ney to move toward Bry to support

⁷⁴ Pollio, 247-48. Pollio reproduces the report and provides the facsimile!

⁷⁵ Field, 170; and Lettre du maréchal Ney au duc d'Otrante, *Journal de l'Empire*, 29 June 1815. In his 17 June communication with Ney, Soult is likewise critical of the fiasco created by d'Erlon's movements: "If the two corps of Reille and d'Erlon had been together, not an English soldier of the corps that attacked you would have escaped. If Count d'Erlon had executed the movement on Saint-Amand as ordered by Emperor, the Prussian army would have been totally destroyed and we would have captured perhaps 30,000 prisoners" (Major général, duc de Dalmatie, au maréchal Ney, prince de la Moscowa, Fleurus, 17 June 1815 (6:00 am) in Pontécoulant, 164-66 and 236).

Napoleon's efforts at Ligny . . . six hours earlier!⁷⁶ No doubt this also contributed the tone of Ney's report to Soult. During the rest of the evening, the marshal issued orders for several companies of sappers to begin constructing defenses at Gosselies in case Wellington resumed his attack in the morning and Ney had to retreat against superior forces. Upon reaching his headquarters Frasnes, however, the marshal rescinded the orders, perhaps because of the impending arrival of I Corps (or of rumors of Napoleon's victory over Blücher had reached him).⁷⁷ When d'Erlon finally arrived from its march-and-counter-march, his corps took over security, allowing the men of Reille's corps to care for their wounded and to find food. Ney meanwhile awaited official news the outcome at Ligny.

Much has been made by the St. Helena school about Ney's failure to communicate with the Imperial headquarters and Ney's apparent lethargy on the morning of 17 June, but not as much attention has been paid to the failure of Soult to keep Ney informed throughout the campaign or of the potential consequences of that poor communication. On the morning following the battle of Quatre Bras, according to his aide-de-camp, Colonel Heymès, Ney "had ordered his soldiers to be under arms early; he was himself at the outposts first thing."⁷⁸ He also received a report from d'Erlon reporting that "I Corps [was] holding a line across the Brussels road" and that d'Erlon's cavalry had captured a number of wagons and prisoners.⁷⁹ In the early morning hours, however, Ney still had no official word regarding the outcome of the previous day's fighting at Ligny nor did he know the intentions of Wellington, whose forces now substantially outnumbered his own (even with the arrival of I Corps) and who might decide to renew his attack at any time. At approximately 8:30 am, Ney dispatched Soult a status report:

The enemy has several columns of infantry and cavalry which seem ready to take the offensive. I will hold position with the infantry of Count d'Erlon and the cavalry of General Roussel to the bitter end and hopefully repulse the enemy until His Majesty informs me of his intentions. I will hold Count Reille in reserve.⁸⁰

For Ney to have rushed foolhardy into another attack on Quatre Bras under those conditions (against superior numbers and with his right flank potentially exposed) was a recipe for disaster. According to Clausewitz:

On the morning of June 17, Wellington had 70,000 men at Quatre Bras and Nivelles. He learned of Blücher's retreat around 7 a.m., allowed his troops to cook their breakfast, and around 10 a.m. began the withdrawal to the position at

⁷⁶ Field, 168.

⁷⁷ Répécaud, 42; cf. Field, 170.

⁷⁸ Heymès, 17.

⁷⁹ Pontécoulant, 238.

⁸⁰ qtd. in Pierre de Wit, "The French Bivouacs," *The Campaign of 1815: A Study*, 2. <http://www.waterloo-campaign.nl/bestanden/files/june17/NEY.pdf> (accessed 23 March 2015). De Wit cites Henry Lachouque's *Napoleon à Waterloo* as his source and cross-reference with orders mentioned cited in Henry Houssaye's *1815: Waterloo*, but he questions its existence.

Mont St. Jean in front of the Soignes Woods, where he found a good position and where he had decided to accept battle, should Blücher be able to come to his aid with two corps, around 50,000 men.

Ney is supposed to have advanced against Wellington's rearguard early that morning, but since Wellington did not leave his position before 10 a.m., Ney could not have done so. As Wellington had his 7-8,000 cavalrymen cover this maneuver, the French did not notice his departure immediately. Ney remained resting in his bivouacs at Frasnes until 1 p.m.⁸¹

While Wellington may have learned of Blücher's fate early in the morning, according to Octave Levassasseur, one of Ney's ADCs, it was not until 9:00 a.m. on 17 June that Ney officially learned of Napoleon's victory at Ligny.⁸² Sult's initial orders—written at 6:00 am—confirm this: "*Monsieur le maréchal*, General Flahaut [one of Napoleon's ADCs attached to Ney] just arrived and informed me that you are unaware of yesterday's results." The chief of staff then summarizes the victory (and criticizes d'Erlon's strange movements) before informing Ney of the Emperor's plans:

. . . The Emperor is going to the mill at Bry where the main road from Namur to Quatre Bras passes. It is possible that the English army will act against you, if this is the case, the Emperor will march directly against it by the main road to Quatre Bras while you attack it with your divisions, which should already be concentrated, and this army will be destroyed in an instant. Thus, inform His Majesty of the exact location of your divisions, and all that is happening along your front.

The Emperor is disappointed that you did not concentrate your divisions yesterday; that they acted individually; and that they suffered additional casualties as a result. . . .

The Emperor hopes and desires that your seven infantry divisions and cavalry will be well concentrated and formed up and that they together do not occupy more than a league in order to have them well in hand and available for use when needed.

The intention of His Majesty is that you take position at Quatre Bras, as soon as the order is given; but if this is not possible, send details immediately and the Emperor will move that as I have mentioned. If, however, there is only a rearguard, attack it and take position there.

⁸¹ Clausewitz, 120. Fields gives Wellington's strength at 42-47,000 men and Ney's effective strength at approximately 35,000 men. Fields's numbers are probably more accurate and Clausewitz was probably basing his estimates on the total number of troops Wellington had in the area, not simply those at Quatre Bras. Even with Field's numbers, Wellington would have enjoyed an approximate 25% advantage over Ney had the marshal renewed his attack (Fields, 183).

⁸² Levassasseur, 293.

It is necessary to finish this operation today and to resupply ammunition, rally isolated soldiers and call in detachments. Give the necessary orders to assure that all your wounded have been bandaged and transported to the rear; there are complaints that the ambulances have not done their duty. . . .⁸³

Nothing in these orders suggests that Ney should have begun an active pursuit of Wellington as soon as possible. On the contrary, Ney was supposed to ensure that his two corps were properly concentrated, to take Quatre Bras (if possible) and to resupply and recover following the previous day's fighting in order to be ready to move as needed. As Wellington chose not to renew his offensive against Ney, the marshal was content to reciprocate in kind, but keeping his troops ready and under arms.⁸⁴ While Ney has been frequently criticized for his inaction, the same lethargy could be seen at Ligny. According to Andrew Field, "Napoleon too is universally accused of wasting the morning. The French emperor had conducted some relentless pursuits in his heyday. . . . Now another was needed. . . . But Napoleon allowed his tired troops to rest whilst he awaited the news on the direction the Prussians had retreated and visited the battlefield of the previous day."⁸⁵ Were Ney's troops not just as fatigued as the Emperor's and was Ney equally as uncertain of Wellington's intentions as the Emperor was of the Prussians?

It was not until sometime after noon that Ney received more specific orders, instructing him to advance on Quatre Bras:

Before Ligny, 17 June (noon)

Monsieur le Maréchal,

The emperor will take position in advance of Marbais with an infantry corps and the Imperial Guard. His Majesty charges me to inform you that his intention is that you are to attack the enemy at Quatre Bras, chase them from their position, and that the corps which is at Marbais will second your operations. His Majesty will move to Marbais and awaits your reports with impatience.⁸⁶

At last Ney had definitive orders and the promise of support to execute them. But as Field notes, if Napoleon wanted to catch and destroy Wellington at Quatre Bras of 17 June, the orders were written "five hours too late."⁸⁷ This was not the fault of Ney. What

⁸³ Major général, duc de Dalmatie, au maréchal Ney, prince de la Moscowa, Fleurus, 17 June 1815 (6:00 a.m.) in Pontécoulant, 164-66 and 236.

⁸⁴ Heymès, 17. According to Field, Wellington was just as relieved that Ney did not renew his attack on the morning of 17 June (Field, 185).

⁸⁵ Field, 185.

⁸⁶ Major-général, duc de Dalmatie, au maréchal Ney, prince de la Moscowa, Fleurus, 17 June 1815 (noon) in Pontécoulant, 237.

⁸⁷ Field, 186.

the marshal apparently was guilty of was his failure to keep the imperial headquarters informed of his tactical situation after receiving Napoleon's initial orders (which, if he had done so, may have prompted Napoleon to action much sooner).

According to the St. Helena school, when Napoleon and Ney met (perhaps about 2:00 p.m.), the Emperor was infuriated by Ney's inaction. According to Gourgaud, "the Emperor was greatly astonished to find that Marshal Ney's corps was still bivouacking before Frasnès. Irritated at this delay, he instantly ordered the troops to march forward and join him. He had to wait upward of an hour for them."⁸⁸ And according to Count d'Erlon, Napoleon confided in him that "France is lost; go my dear general, put yourself at the head of this cavalry and press the English rear-guard hard."⁸⁹ But were these recollections accurate? Was Napoleon truly angry with Ney's (in)actions. As Field points out, according to the Generals Foy and Desalles, it was d'Erlon who attracted the imperial rebuke (for his wanderings of the previous the day), not Ney.⁹⁰ And Colonel Heymès emphatically states that "it is not true that the Emperor showed his discontent with Marshal Ney; it is also not true that the troops were still in their bivouacs when he appeared, for they were under arms at daybreak."⁹¹ Considering General Gourgaud's frequent misstatements and misrepresentations (and his agenda), perhaps Heymès's recollections are more accurate. After all, as Field points out in his analysis of Quatre Bras, "although Ney was complicit in the failings of the day, it was Napoleon's lack of energy and decisiveness that were the key to French failure on the 17th; not Ney's inactivity."⁹²

While Marshal Michel Ney's performance in these opening stages of the campaign of 1815 is not without errors (his failing to keep the imperial headquarters regularly abreast of his situation, his committing of Kellerman's lone division late in the day on 16 June, and his recalling of d'Erlon's corps are good examples of the marshal's tendency to give way to his passions), what he should not be held accountable for (but what he, nevertheless, has been criticized for) are the errors of others and circumstances beyond his control. While some would like to discount the confusion created by his late appointment to command, those miscues hampered his ability to command, especially considering that his widely-scattered troops (whose dispositions were not of Ney's making) were engaged from the moment of his arrival at Frasnès on the evening of 15 June. And the expectation that, on 16 June, Ney should have rushed Quatre-Bras at first light so that he could follow Napoleon's explicit orders to fall on the Prussian flank, ignores the reality of the situation. His various units were not concentrated and exhausted by the previous day's forced marches. These challenges were multiplied by imprecisely written orders and faulty staff work (which were the responsibility of Marshal Soult). Neither Napoleon nor Ney truly appreciated the challenges facing one another

⁸⁸ Gourgaud, 80-81.

⁸⁹ qtd. in Field, 187.

⁹⁰ Field, 187.

⁹¹ Heymès, 17.

⁹² Field, 187.

on 16 June. The emperor believed (based on the marshal's early report) that Ney faced only light forces and should have been able to maneuver to complement Napoleon's efforts at Ligny. The marshal certainly failed to keep the Emperor completely apprised of his status during the actual fighting at Quatre Bras, but the reverse was also true, and as a result, neither Napoleon nor Ney truly appreciated the challenges facing one another that day. That Ney did not rush blindly toward the crossroad, however, speaks to his respect for his opponent (as opposed to Napoleon's contempt for Wellington two days later at Waterloo). And as for Ney's generalship during the Battle of Quatre Bras, at least one military historian, while citing Ney's failure to concentrate II Corps earlier in the morning, lauds Ney's tactical handling of the battle, concluding that:

during the seven hours of combat, Lord Wellington employed almost double the forces of the French and these forces were of excellent quality; and after seven hours, things were at the point where they had started.

It is difficult to find in history a tactical direction more skillful, more masterly, more determined, more energetic, than that exercised by Marshal Ney on 16th June 1815. . . .

It is also difficult to imagine a more perfect unity in action of the three arms, which invigorated this small French force. . . .⁹³

Despite these challenges, the marshal managed to fight Wellington to a standstill with only half of the forces that should have been available to him. As a veteran general who fought at Waterloo pointed out, "the combat at Quatre-Bras was not so bad as some say"—Ney did well with what he had, and he prevented Wellington from joining forces with Blücher (thus achieving his strategic goal, despite failing to secure the crossroads).⁹⁴ Indeed, according to Clausewitz:

Bonaparte's hew and cry against Ney is nothing more than the wish to represent his plans as more brilliant and grand than they really were at the moment of execution. His orders were much simpler and more usual, and Ney could not possibly have acted according to circumstances that only became apparently later on.

Certainly Ney could have driven off Perponcher early in the morning and held Quatre Bras. He could even have sent a whole corps down the Namur highway against the Prussian right without having the events at Quatre Bras turning out

⁹³ Pollio, 254-55. Pollio does exaggerate the accomplishments of the French forces that day. Wellington eventually outnumbered the French *nearly* only by the very end of the day. For most of the day, the force strengths were comparable as reinforcements on both sides rushed to the scene. And the quality of the allied troops is debatable. Certainly the British regulars who arrived on scene as reinforcements were quite good; some of the allied troops were militia, however.

⁹⁴ Souvenirs et correspondance sur la bataille de Waterloo (Paris: Éditions Historiques Teissèdre, 2000), 94-95.

much worse for him, but it is only with the benefit of hindsight, taking into account all of the unforeseeable twists of fate, that all he might have done can be seen.⁹⁵

While perhaps Ney could have shown more initiative in reading the strategic picture on 16 June (and had he been involved in the planning of the campaign, he might have had the opportunity to demonstrate that ability), he was not the insubordinate incompetent his critics have made him out to be. On Ste. Helene, Napoleon rewrote history as he would have liked it to have been (minus, of course, the defeats), making superb use of hindsight to recontextualize his actions and orders and to scapegoat his subordinates. Marshal Michel Ney was an easy scapegoat (dead men tell no tales, after all), and he should be evaluated based on the reality of the situation he faced, not on the wishes of what might have been by those wishing to preserve Napoleon's military reputation, including (and especially) the emperor himself.

Time	French	Anglo-Netherlands
2 p.m.	10,000 infantry, 2,000 cavalry, 42 guns (+ Guard Cavalry 2,000 'not to be used')	8,000 Infantry, 0 cavalry and 16 guns
3 p.m.	16,500 infantry, 2,777 cavalry, 50 guns (+ Guard Cavalry 2,000)	13,000 infantry, 2,000 cavalry, 28 guns
4 p.m.	16,500 infantry, 2,777 cavalry, 50 guns (+ Guard Cavalry 2,000)	17,000 infantry, 2,000 cavalry, 28 guns
5 p.m.	16,500 infantry, 2,777 cavalry, 50 guns (+ Guard Cavalry 2,000)	22,500 infantry, 2,000 cavalry, 40 guns
6 p.m.	16,500 infantry, 2,777 cavalry, 50 guns (+ Guard Cavalry 2,000) (less casualties)	28,000 infantry, 2,000 cavalry, 68 guns (less casualties)
Source: Andrew W. Field, <i>Prelude to Waterloo: Quatre Bras</i> (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2014), 172.		

Brief Biography

Winner of the AHA's Gutenberg-e Prize for 2000, Wayne Hanley is the author of *The Genesis of Napoleonic Propaganda, 1796-1799* (Columbia University Press, 2005; e-book, 2003) and a professor of history at West Chester University. He is currently working on a biography of Marshal Michel Ney.

Placed on the Napoleon Series: April 2017

⁹⁵ Clausewitz, 115. Indeed in his *Napoléon à Ligny et le Maréchal Ney à Quatre Bras*, Claude-François-Marie Répécaud notes that in the *Mémoires de Sainte-Hélène*, the accusations against Ney "seem, for the most part, to be calculated" to discredit Ney in favor of Napoleon (Répécaud, 8).