

The Napoleon Series

‘A Desperate Combat’: The French Defence of Plancenoit

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Many nineteenth-century sources cited below use archaic or unfamiliar forms of English. Therefore, in order to clarify several passages, a small degree of editing was required. Main ideas, however, remain intact. It should also be noted Prussian infantry brigades were about the same size as French divisions; this may explain why many older sources incorrectly refer to Prussian brigades as ‘divisions’.

“... the roads were so narrow, and so deep in mud, that the rate of marching was so slow, and the toils excessive. The guns sunk axle-deep in the mire and the tired horses could not extricate them. The men took their places, ‘We cannot get on,’ they exclaimed, as they tugged in vain at the traces. ‘But you *must* get on,’ said loyal old Blucher, riding alongside the labouring teams, ‘I have pledged my word to Wellington, you will not let me break it. Courage my lads! Yet a few hours’ effort and we shall gain a glorious victory!’¹

“Meanwhile, Lobau, who altogether had 16,000 men placed under him that day, held his own in the village manfully. Not even amid the burning ruins by the Danube, where he first won Napoleon’s praise, and saved the Grand Army from an earlier Waterloo, had this brave general shown a more undaunted courage. Honoured be the man who, by his devotion, not only gave his falling chief that last desperate chance, but the time for escape when it to was lost, and the Empire overthrown!”²

“As the Army of the Netherlands pursued the enemy, they were joined in the great road, on the heights near Plancenoit, by the advance of Bulow’s corps, which had fought its way through that village to the great road, augmenting greatly the dismay of the enemy in its retreat, now rendered more precarious from the Prussians having got so far in their rear. The 1st Corps of the Prussian army, under General Ziethen, had been advancing through Ohain, and it now joined the corps of Bulow.”³

Less than 1,000 yards from the inn of La Belle Alliance, Emperor Napoleon’s field-headquarters at the Battle of Waterloo, lies the village of Plancenoit. On 18 June 1815, this small village was the centre of a bloody fight; the French 6th Corps, Young Guard and units of the Old Guard struggled to halt the advancing brigades of the Prussian I and IV Corps. The French corps commander, General de Division (GdD) Georges Mouton, Count of Lobau, had the crucial task of protecting the Emperor’s right flank and rear from assaults from an increasing number of Prussian troops. From late afternoon

¹ Hutchinson: 43.

² Chesney: 191.

³ Batty: 111-2.

until the French army's collapse in the early evening, Mouton's men fought a vicious 'back and forth' battle in, and around, Plancenoit.

Defeat in this sector of the Emperor's *Armee du Nord* would spell disaster for his entire army. The main road from Charleroi to Brussels – the road for the communication and retreat of every soldier fighting the Allied Army at Mont-Saint-Jean – lay perilously close to Plancenoit:

"The village of Plancenoit was situated in the rear of La Belle Alliance, near the source of the Lasne stream, that is, on our right and rear. If the enemy advancing along the ravine should enter the village which lay at its extremity, our position would be turned and we should lose the Charleroi road, our only line of retreat."⁴

Whether the *Armee du Nord* won or lost, Mouton's sole objective in the late afternoon was to keep the Prussians out of Plancenoit, and away from the Charleroi road, at any cost. But the true cost to the Emperor that day – that the Prussian Army would arrive in the Plancenoit sector and tie up most of his available reserves – would contribute greatly to him losing the Battle of Waterloo.

'A severe attack'

After the Battle of Ligny on 16th June, the composition of Mouton's 6th Corps was changed. The five battalions and eight guns of its 21st Infantry Division (GdD Francois-Antoine, Baron Teste) were given to Marshal Emmanuel, Marquis de Grouchy. In return, 6th Corps was given the 11 squadrons and six guns of the 5th Cavalry Division (GdD Jacques-Gervais, Baron Subervie), detached from GdD Claude-Pierre, Count Pajol's 1st Cavalry Corps. A six-gun auxiliary horse artillery company was also sent from the Imperial Guard. On the day of the Battle of Waterloo, 6th Corps had 13 battalions of infantry, 11 squadrons of cavalry and 36 guns under his command; effective strength was about 10,000 men.

GdD Jean-Simon, Baron Domon's 3rd Cavalry Division would also be placed under Mouton's command in the early afternoon of 18 June. Domon had been detached from GdD Dominique-Rene Vandamme's 3rd Corps; his division fielded nine squadrons of Chasseurs-a-Cheval.

Opposite Mouton was General der Infanterie (GdI) Friedrich-Wilhelm, Count Bulow von Dennewitz, the highly-experienced, 60-year-old commander of Prussian IV Corps. Bulow's superior, Generalfeldmarschall (GFM) Gebhard-Leberecht von Blucher, was also present during the fighting. At the start of the Waterloo Campaign, IV Corps' effective strength was 25,381 infantry in four brigades, 3,081 cavalymen in three brigades, 11 artillery batteries with 1,866 gunners – for a total of 30,328 men and 88 guns.⁵

⁴ Thiers: 129-30.

⁵ Siborne: 793.

Mouton's three divisions – commanded by GdD Francois-Martin-Valentin, Baron Simmier, GdD Jean-Baptiste, Baron Jeanin and GdD Jacques-Gervais, Baron Subervie – were initially deployed in reserve behind La Belle Alliance. In the early afternoon, the Emperor discovered the Prussians' advance on the French flank and ordered 6th Corps to advance to a position in front of Plancenot. Mouton's troops deployed in open ground across the road leading to the village and waited for the oncoming Prussians. As Bulow's advance guard was already in Chapelle St. Lambert, it is unlikely that 6th Corps had enough time to deploy in better defensive positions at the Lasne defile (or in the Bois de Paris).

The first Prussian attack against 6th Corps came in the late afternoon. Bulow's two leading brigades, Generalmajor (GM) Michael-Heinrich von Losthin's 15th Infantry Brigade and Oberst (OB) Johann-Freidrich, Baron Hiller von Gartringen's 16th Infantry Brigade, advanced on either side of the Plancenot road:

"It was now half-past four, and our right wing, formed *en potence*, was exposed to a severe attack from Bulow. The Prussian troops, issuing from the wooded depths between the Smohain and Lasne streams, were mounting the slope, having Losthin's division on their right, and Hiller's on their left."⁶

The attack had been ordered by Blucher even though Bulow's remaining two brigades – Generalleutnant (GL) Albrecht-Georg-Ernst-Karl von Hake's 13th Infantry Brigade and GM Xaver-Reinhold-Gustav von Ryssel's 14th Infantry Brigade – were still coming up:

"Half the corps of Bulow was still far in rear, but urged by the cannonade and the importunate messages from the English lines, the Marshal decided to advance. Two infantry divisions debouched from the wood to the left and right of the Plancenot road, covered by two cavalry regiments and three batteries. On the open rising ground in front were deployed two divisions of Lobau's corps with two brigades of cavalry – a force some 10,000 strong."⁷

Wellington's messages spurred Blucher onward towards 6th Corps' positions in front of Plancenot. The first Prussian attack was composed only Bulow's advanced guard and five battalions, supported by some cavalry and guns:

"It was not Blucher's intention to have debouched from the Wood of Paris until Bulow's and Pirch's corps were up; but now he determined to do so with even the small force which had reached it, as he was aware, from the messages which he had received from Wellington, and from what he now saw of the field of battle, that the attack upon the Allied line had become very serious. With the view, therefore, of relieving Wellington, so far as was within his power, although a considerable risk to himself, Blucher debouched

⁶ Houssaye: 120. *En potence* is a term in tactics and used when either wing of an army is thrown back, receding from the line direct and forming an angle upon the right or left centre. Gore: 55.

⁷ Pratt: 175.

at half-past four o'clock p.m. from the Wood of Paris, with the advanced guard, the 15th and 16th brigades of infantry, the reserve cavalry, and artillery; two battalions from the 16th Brigade marched to the left of the valley of the Lasne, and three battalions of the 15th Brigade marched to Fischermont and Smohain."⁸

'Unable to maintain its position'

Mouton faced an increasing number of Prussian troops throughout the late afternoon and early evening. As Bulow fed more and more of his regiments into the fight, 6th Corps became seriously outnumbered:

"... and now began an affair which, waxing continually more fierce, ended at last in a desperate struggle. To the Prussians engaged, reinforcements arrived continuously. At five o'clock, they fought with three brigades of infantry, two regiments of cavalry and a few guns; at six, they had brought thirty battalions, twenty-seven squadrons and sixty-four guns into action."⁹

The outnumbered French regiments were gradually forced to yield ground. Bulow pressed his advantage, deploying the rest of his corps as it arrived on the battlefield:

"Opening fire and pressing on, Bulow extended his left nearly as far as the Lasne, and continually gained ground on that side. In an hour, his two remaining divisions, those of Hake and Ryssel, with the rest of the guns and cavalry, came into line. He now disposed of 29,000 men and 86 guns."¹⁰

Plancenoit itself soon became the focus of Blucher's bloody efforts to cut the Charleroi road. About 6.30 pm, "having [been] given orders to seize Plancenoit, Hiller formed six battalions into column, and having nearly demolished the village a fire of musketry and howitzers, sought to force it at the point of the bayonet."¹¹ When Hiller von Gartringen's assault failed, Blucher refused to accept defeat and ordered him to renew the 16th Infantry Brigade's effort:

"Blucher then repeated his absolute order to his lieutenants to take Plancenoit, and Hiller, in the presence of his commander, rallied his battalions, having given them a few moments to rest, and adding eight more, he, with the entire fourteen battalions, returned to the charge, determined to carry a post so vigorously disputed. These fourteen battalions descended into the ravine which was lined on each side by the French, and advanced into the midst of an actual fiery gulf. Hundreds fell; but the survivors closed their ranks, marched over the dead bodies of their comrades, and urging each other

⁸ Kennedy: 136.

⁹ Gleig: 232-33.

¹⁰ Hooper: 224.

¹¹ Thiers: 130.

forward, succeeded at length in entering Plancenoit and reaching the termination of the ravine. Another step they would be on the Charleroi road.”¹²

Mouton’s hard-pressed soldiers had been unable to contain the Prussian assaults and the defenders of Plancenoit relinquished their grip on the village:

“Lobau, fearing to be turned, recoiled until abreast of the village, which he caused to be occupied by a brigade. Assailed on three points, this brigade was unable to maintain its position. The enemy forced it out of Plancenoit, in which he established and entrenched himself. On his front, Blucher cannonaded the other three brigades of Lobau with eight batteries, whose balls fell upon the route of Brussels, in the midst of the battalions of the Guard and even in the Emperor’s staff.”¹³

The Emperor now turned to GdD Philbert-Guillaume, Count Duhesme to restore the situation. Duhesme commanded GdD Pierre, Count Barrois’ four regiments of the Young Guard: the 1st and 3rd Tirailleurs and the 1st and 3rd Voltigeurs. Barrois’ 4,000 soldiers were now ordered to recapture Plancenoit and stabilize 6th Corps’ position:

“With the enemy in possession of Plancenoit, Napoleon was outflanked and his line of retreat threatened. He ordered Duhesme, commanding the division of the Young Guard, to retake the village. The eight battalions, four of voltigeurs and four of tirailleurs, advanced at the charging step. The Prussians were dislodged from the houses and the cemetery of which they had formed a *reduit*.”¹⁴

Duhesme’s men first blunted, then rolled back, the Prussian attack. In hand-to-hand fighting, the Young Guard regiments forced out Hiller von Gartringen’s men:

“He [Napoleon] saw Duhesme throw himself into the village; and by and by a warm skirmishing fire told that the action was begun; it was a fierce assault, and it was met as bravely as it was given. The Prussians forced their way into the churchyard, and lined its walls; they were swept from the roofs and windows of the houses which overlooked it, and, after sustaining a heavy loss, were driven out again.”¹⁵

The Young Guard Division’s success however, masked a growing tactical problem for 6th Corps: their positions in, and around, Plancenoit would soon be untenable:

“In this action, the fighting on both sides was very obstinate. The French troops were superior in point of experience to those of Bulow, those of the 6th Corps were led by a very able officer, Lobau, and the regiments of the Guard were the *elite* of the army. Hence, though much inferior in numbers, they obtained this success, which under other

¹² Thiers: 130.

¹³ Houssaye: 194.

¹⁴ Houssaye: 194-5. A *reduit* is a fortified structure (such as a citadel) into which defending troops can retreat when the outer walls have been breached.

¹⁵ Gleig: 233.

circumstances, would have been decisive. But, in this case, their enemies had reinforcements at hand. Pirch I, at the head of II Corps, was only two miles in rear.”¹⁶

The struggle around Plancenoit would eventually cost Duhesme his life. He was later mortally-wounded in the head and would die two days after the battle.

‘In serried columns of companies’

Unfortunately for the French, the Young Guard Division’s success proved to be temporary. Bulow, now fighting with all of his four infantry brigades, gradually pushed the whole of IV Corps forward:

“Under a third surge of Bulow’s entire corps, Lobau fell back, and the Young Guard, after an obstinate resistance, yielded Plancenoit. Once more, the balls from the Prussian batteries labored the ground near La Belle Alliance. Napoleon, already outflanked, was threatened by an irruption of the Prussians in the rear of his line of battle. He formed eleven battalions of the Guard in as many squares and stationed them in front of Plancenoit, along the route to Brussels, from La Belle Alliance to Rossomme. The 1st Battalion of the 1st Chasseurs was maintained at Caillou. Generals Morand and Pelet received the order to retake Plancenoit with the 1st Battalion of the 2nd Grenadiers and the 1st of the 2nd Chasseurs.”¹⁷

In hindsight, this two-battalion attack might seem unusually small. But GdD Charles-Antoine-Louis-Alexis, Count Morand and GdB Jean-Jacques-Germain, Chevalier Pelet-Clozeau, possessed two advantages: they commanded battle-hardened soldiers with a fearful reputation and, by contrast, Bulow’s regiments were largely conscripts. The subsequent French assault, launched at double-time, was one of the First Empire’s most famous military scenes:

“With drums beating, these old soldiers marched at the double-quick, in serried columns of companies. They passed the Young Guard, which was being rallied by Duhesme, attacked Plancenoit at two points, penetrated into the village without deigning to fire a shot, overturned, ground to pieces, and drove out the Prussians. The attack was so impetuous that in twenty minutes the village was cleared. The grumblers, with their bayonets dripping blood, debouched at the backs of the fugitives, pursued them 600 yards, and drove them back upon the opposite hill, even behind the batteries of Hiller, which were, for an instant, abandoned. The Young Guard seconded this movement; it occupied Plancenoit once more, and Lobau, fighting with the divisions of Losthin and Hacke, recovered the ground that he had lost.”¹⁸

¹⁶ Ropes: 312

¹⁷ Houssaye: 201.

¹⁸ Houssaye: 201.

The result of the Old Guard assault against Plancenoit showed what the Emperor's veterans could achieve in a crisis. The success of 'the grumblers' breathed new life into 6th Corps:

"After a struggle lasting not half an hour, Plancenoit was retaken and the defeated men of Bulow were driven backwards nearly into the defiles of the Lasne. Bulow seemed to be completely – nay, irretrievably – repulsed; Napoleon's flank was for the present secure; Lobau, Subervie and Domon distinctly gained ground, and even approached the Bois de Paris."¹⁹

But quality would soon to be overwhelmed by quantity. Brigades from two additional corps of Blucher's army – GL Hans-Ernst-Karl, Count von Ziethen's I Corps and GM Georg von Pirch I's II Corps – had arrived on the Emperor's flank:

"At this moment, Bulow had been repulsed; but Wellington had for some time been in communication with his loyal and aged colleague, and he had been informed that the attack would soon be renewed by the reinforcements already at hand. These reinforcements were part of the corps of Pirch. This body of men, we have seen, had been greatly delayed having been entangled as they advanced, with the corps of Bulow; half, we have said, had not crossed the Dyle until two in the afternoon; the other half had, in some degree, been held in check by a detachment of Grouchy's army; and the march to St. Lambert and the Lasne had been very slow and difficult. But two of its divisions and its cavalry were now close to Bulow, and these, with the whole of Bulow's remaining forces, were about to make once more the attack on Napoleon's flank and rear which had not only paralyzed the French army, but had placed it for a time in no doubtful peril."²⁰

The Prussian Commissioner at Wellington's headquarters, Friedrich-Karl-Ferdinand, Baron von Muffling, now played a vital role in the Prussian advance. When Ziethen, in the midst of deploying I Corps, was mistakenly told by a staff officer that the Allied Army was collapsing, Muffling stepped in and advised Ziethen to continue to support Wellington's left flank:

"The Duke, had dispatched an aide-de-camp to urge Ziethen to come to his aid 'were it only with 3,000 men'; but Ziethen refused, and even refused for a time – 'he would not advance until he had all of his troops at hand.' In truth, with one exception of Blucher, every Prussian general was cautious – nay, timid – on this memorable day. Ziethen sent a staff officer to observe the course of the battle, his messenger was on the scene just at the moment when the attacks around La Haye Sainte had become most dangerous. He reported to his superior that Wellington's centre was giving way, and that the Allied Army was about to retreat in a disastrous flight, preceded by a horde of terrified fugitives. The Prussian commander, afraid of being involved in a rout that might be fatal, turned his men to Frischermont and the Bois de Paris, in order to get into line with

¹⁹ Morris: 277.

²⁰ Morris, 283-4.

Bulow. The movement would have drawn him away from Wellington, and might have left the Duke and his hard-pressed army in the gravest straits. Most fortunately, however, for the Allied cause, Muffling, the Prussian Commissioner, was on the spot. He told Ziethen that Wellington was still holding his ground, but adjured him to march at once to support the Duke's left. The battle was in a most critical state; a moment's delay, and it might be lost. Ziethen, persuaded by this wise and timely counsel, pushed forward with one division and a part of his cavalry from Ohain towards Papelotte and Smohain."²¹

'Survivors flying in disorder'

Despite these overwhelming odds, Mouton's men continued to fight hand-to-hand in Plancenoit until French resistance completely collapsed in the early evening. The gradual, but steady, accumulation of Prussian reinforcements had finally broken the morale of 6th Corps:

"The first corps of the Prussian army, having formed a junction with the right of the corps, already engaged, Prince Blucher caused a third and decisive attack to be made on the French position, in order to cut off that part of the army which defended it. The 16th Brigade, having succeeded in turning the village, the other brigade rushed on with such impetuosity, that further resistance was impossible."²²

As the survivors of 6th Corps retreated from the Plancenoit area, Prussian soldiers finally conquered the final few houses in the burning village in house-to-house fighting:

"Meanwhile, a desperate conflict was taking place at Plancenoit. The troops of Bulow, which had been driven out of the village at the point of the bayonet, were reinforced at half-past seven o'clock by the two remaining divisions of his corps and the cavalry of Pirch's corps. The Prussian artillery had set many of the houses on fire when the assault took place...The church and the cemetery were the scene of a hand-to-hand fight, and it was only one by one that the houses fell into the hands of the assailants."²³

Joining the mob of survivors streaming southward, Mouton's battered regiments scrambled to gain the Charleroi road before Prussian troops cut the vital artery:

"... on the prolongation of the village, the infantry of Lobau and the cavalry of Doman and Subervie fell back before the 15,000 men of Hacke, Losthin and Prince William; they were overthrown when the division of Steinmetz and the cavalry of Rohr, debouching from Smohain in pursuit of Durutte, attacked them in flank. The French masses, stationed a quarter of an hour before from the route of Nivelles to the ravines of Papelotte and Plancenoit, inundated the plateau around La Belle Alliance."²⁴

²¹ Morris: 285.

²² Gore: 43-4.

²³ Pratt: 182-3.

²⁴ Houssaye: 213.

The evening of the Battle of Waterloo was chaos for 6th Corps; in the midst of the confusion, Mouton himself was captured. Waterloo was one of history's most decisive battles and the official Prussian bulletin summed up the desperate fighting around Plancenoit:

"It was half an hour past seven, and the issue of the battle was still uncertain. The whole of the 4th Corps, and part of the 2nd, under Gen. Pirch, had successively come up. The French troops fought with desperate fury; however, some uncertainty was perceived in their movements, and it was observed that some pieces of cannon were retreating. At this moment, the first columns of the corps of Gen. Ziethen arrived on the points of attack near the village of Smohain, on the enemy's right flank, and instantly charged. This moment decided the defeat of the enemy. His right flank was broken in three places; he abandoned his position. Our troops rushed forward at the *pas de charge*, and attacked him on all sides, while at the same time, the whole English line advanced ... The enemy, however, still preserved means to retreat, till the village of Plancenoit, which he had on his rear, and which was defended by the Guard, was, after several bloody attacks, carried by storm."²⁵

The Duke of Wellington, the great British hero of the battle, had no doubts of the importance of Blucher's role in the latter stages of the great victory:

"I should not do justice to my own feelings, or to Marshal Blucher and the Prussian Army, if I did not attribute the successful result of this arduous day to the cordial and timely assistance I received from them. The operation of General Bulow upon the enemy flank was a most decisive one; and, even if I did not find myself in a situation to make the attack which produced the final result, it would have forced the enemy to retire if his attacks should have failed, and would have prevented him from taking advantage of them if they should unfortunately have succeeded."²⁶

A British contemporary account says this about the importance of Mouton's efforts in the dreadful evening of Waterloo:

"The roar of cannon in the rear at Plancenoit, the cavalry panic-struck, or destroyed, the Middle Guard defeated, and the survivors flying in disorder, altogether contributed to spread terror and confusion throughout the French army. Although the victory was decided in the centre, 6th Corps, supported by the Young and two battalions of the Old Guard, still continued to defend Plancenoit, with the solitary hope of securing the retreat."²⁷

²⁵ Burrell: 20.

²⁶ Siborne: 598.

²⁷ Gore: 43.

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