

SIDELIGHTS ON WATERLOO.

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THE late Lord Wolseley in his book on the “Decline and Fall of Napoleon” sums up the Emperor’s downfall in the dramatic words:—

“Since he miscalled the morning star
Nor man nor fiend hath fallen so far.”

Since Lord Wolseley wrote the spirit of partisanship has disappeared. For a decade Waterloo formed the great theme for all military writers, till eventually contemporary critics began to contradict each other in regard to doubtful incidents. Now, in a more enlightened age, Napoleon is no longer regarded as an adventurer ready to sacrifice human lives in the pursuit of his political ambitions. In France his genius has been recognised by the celebration of the centenary of his death. During the Great War when the issue hung in the balance and the French were face to face with defeat, his lucky star inspired tired Generals to emulate his deeds and fight fresh battles on fields on which he had already fought.

The escape of Napoleon from Elba, his march to Paris and the stirring events that followed form an episode in themselves. His defeat at Waterloo tends to impress the uninitiated with the superiority of the strategy of the allied leaders. When, however, this is examined it can be proved that except for an adverse turn of the Wheel of Fortune victory should have lain with the French. The preliminary dispositions of the Allies courted defeat. Holding an area that had a front of 100 and a depth of at least 40 miles, Napoleon reckoned that it would take them two days to concentrate. As a result the Emperor decided to strike at the dividing line, as represented by the Charleroi-Quatre Bras-Brussels road.

The French Army, consisting of five corps, the Imperial Guard and four corps of cavalry, occupied widely dispersed cantonments including Lille, Valenciennes, Laon, Mezieres and Metz, with the Guard at Paris. The order for the concentration of these scattered units was issued on 8th June, and the march to the north then began. By the night of 14th the Imperial Army was assembled at Avesne, where the Emperor issued his historic proclamation to the assembled corps. Commencing with the words:—“Soldats, c’est aujourd’hui l’anniversaire de Marengo et de Friedland, qui deciderent du fois du destin de l’Europe,” the order ended with an appeal to them “to conquer or to die.” At the same time he wrote to his brother Joseph,

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informing him that on the following day (15th) he proposed to march to Charleroi "Where the Prussian Army is." In the meantime, the Allies had been informed of the approach of the French. Uncertainty was converted into certainty. On the night of 13th, Zieten who commanded the 1st Prussian Corps with outposts to the south of the Sambre, reported bivouac fires at Beaumont and Solre. As a result of this information, on the 14th Blucher ordered the IInd, IIIrd. and IVth corps to concentrate about Sombreffe. Wellington, however, decided not to alter his dispositions, though his Headquarters at Brussels were 34 miles from Charleroi, and he had no troops within supporting distance of Blucher.

This decision which has given rise to much comment undoubtedly jeopardised the success of the campaign, and many well-informed critics are of opinion that he should have altered his dispositions on the 13th, when it was ascertained that the French were massing near Maubeuge. The situation can however be appreciated best by the fact that on the afternoon of the 15th, 40,000 French had crossed the Sambre and 70,000 more had entered Charleroi. At the time the only Allied forces within reach were Zieten's Corps, 32,000 strong, and a weak force under the Duke of Saxe-Weimar at Frasnes, 3 miles south of Quatre Bras. Napoleon had he known these details might consequently have congratulated himself on the success of his first move.

Late in the afternoon of the 15th the Duke however at last took alarm, though he still refused to believe that the movement on Charleroi was the main attack. In spite of this he directed 25,000 men to march on Nivelles seven miles to the west of Quatre Bras, on the Namur road. Coinciding with the issue of these orders the 2nd French Corps, followed by the 1st, was advancing on the Charleroi Brussels road towards Quatre Bras. These corps combined numbered about 40,000 men, and by 7 p.m. the advanced guard of the 2nd Corps had driven the weak force under the Duke of Weimar out of Frasnes. Fate had also favoured the French on their right flank. It has been pointed out that on the 14th Blucher ordered the IInd, IIIrd and IVth Corps to concentrate on Sombreffe. The IInd and IIIrd Corps carried out these instructions and reached their rendezvous at 10 a.m. and 11 a.m. respectively on the 16th, the IVth (Bulow) however, did not march till the 16th. Blucher was consequently deprived of the services of 31,000 men, and on the 16th had to rely on three corps, about 87,000 strong.

The evening of the 15th and the morning of the 16th were consequently critical moments for both sides, and much has been written in regard to what ought to have been done and what was not done during this period. Such well-informed critics as Jomini, Clausewitz, Charras and Gourgaud disagree and in suggesting alternatives frequently put forward schemes inferior to those prepared by Napoleon. It is however apparent from what has been said that the plan of campaign had been well thought out, and that the Emperor's preparations were considerably in advance of those of the Allies. A great

advantage had been gained on the 15th, but it is obvious that if the most was to be made of this, no time should have been lost in following it up. It is in this phase, however, that the cycle of contradictory orders and delays began.

In studying a campaign it is impossible to adopt the methodical method and ignore the human element. In the Great War mechanism relieved the individual soldier of many of his former burdens, though he was subjected to greater mental and physical strains. In 1815 the physical factor played a noticeable part, and was forcibly brought forward on the 15th June. The French Army had struck camp at 3 a.m., and marched till 7 p.m., the high water mark of its advance reaching a line that ran approximately through Frasnes and Fleurus. In spite of this great physical effort many critics are of opinion that the movement should have been continued to the Namur-Nivelles road, with a view to seizing Quatre Bras and Sombreffe. Apart from the question of the fitness of the troops for further operations the criticism is interesting, as it was answered by Napoleon from St. Helena as follows: "The Emperor's intention was that his advance guard should occupy Fleurus, keeping his troops concealed behind the wood near this city; he took good care not to let his army be seen and above all not to occupy Sombreffe. This would of itself have caused the failure of all his manoeuvres, for then Marshal Blucher would have been obliged to make Wavre the place for the concentration of his Army, the battle of Ligny would not have taken place" From this it is clear that the Emperor wished to destroy the Prussian Army before it was fully concentrated, and that he did not wish to alarm Blucher by occupying Sombreffe. The same line of reasoning cannot be applied to Quatre Bras, though it is difficult to see what useful purpose would have been achieved by its occupation on the night of the 15th. The French at Frasnes were only three miles from the cross roads, whereas the Allied force at Nivelles had seven miles to march. Under these circumstances Ney gave his tired troops their well-earned rest.

Had the Allies been asked to make forced marches to meet Napoleon's sudden attack, they would have shared the hardships endured by the French. The flaw in their plan of campaign lay in the distribution of their forces and the selection of Quatre Bras and Sombreffe as points of concentration, as only portions of their armies could reach these places in time to oppose a sudden advance. This, as already pointed out, may be proved by the fact that when Wellington was writing his orders on the 15th for the movement of three divisions to Nivelles, Ney with the 2nd Corps was attacking Frasnes. The Duke's indecision continued till 10 p.m. on the 15th, when he heard of the Prussian concentration at Sombreffe, he then issued orders for a general movement towards the left. At midnight, however, he heard from Mons that the French had turned towards Charleroi, he is then supposed to have issued orders for a concentration on Quatre Bras, though the existence of these has never been proved. In fact the only orders issued on the 16th now extant direct the second division and the

cavalry on Braine-le-Comte and the 1st Dutch Belgian division on Enghien. No mention is made of Quatre Bras. Orders for the concentration must however have been issued during the early morning of the 16th, as a "disposition" showing the distribution of the troops was prepared by the Chief of the Staff, and in this Quatre Bras is given as the rendez-vous for all units within marching distance. This "disposition," apart from affording a clue in regard to the nature of the orders issued, deserves consideration on account of its inaccuracies. Wellington believing it to be correct wrote to Blucher from Quatre Bras at 10.30 a.m. on the 16th, and promised him help. This promise could not be carried out, as the troops were not in the positions shown in what maybe called the "field state." In fact the discrepancies were considerable. To take two instances. The 1st division which was shown at Braine le Comte at 7 a.m. (16th) did not reach that place till 9 a.m., and then halted waiting orders till noon; when the G.O.C. continued the advance on his own responsibility. This may seem bad, but the fate of the 2nd division was worse. It was also shown as having reached Braine le Comte at 7 a.m. (16th), whereas in reality the order to march was not received at Ath till 10 a.m. (16th), and the division did not reach Braine le Comte till midnight. These examples prove that putting aside the question of supporting the Prussians, the Duke ran considerable risk of being defeated himself at Quatre Bras by the 1st and 2nd Corps under Ney. This may be emphasised by the fact that on the morning of the 16th Quatre Bras was held by a Dutch Belgian division of Perponcher's corps; which had occupied the position by order of the Corps Commander. This division was the only force that lay between Ney and his objective on the morning of the 16th.

Napoleon on the eve of Jena, when he received definite information in regard to the enemy's movements, summed up the situation in the trite sentence "Enfin le voile est déchiré." History however did not repeat itself at Frasnes on the 15th and 16th June; if it had Ney would have undoubtedly attacked the Dutch Belgian division holding Quatre Bras before it was reinforced. Unfounded speculation cannot, however, be permitted when the safety of an army is held at stake, so that Ney was possibly justified in holding his hand, though the prize, had he known it, was within his reach. The balance held between caution and boldness may, however, easily become unhinged. Ney has been described as "the boldest of the bold", yet we find him contrary to his character hesitating on the 16th. He appears for some unexplained reason to have mistrusted Napoleon's instructions. He is reported to have received verbal orders to seize Quatre Bras On the evening of the 15th, when it was only held by one Dutch Belgian brigade. Delay, however, followed delay. On the night of the 15th—16th, the Marshal rode to Charleroi to see the Emperor, returning to Gosselies about 2 a.m., where he remained till 7 a.m. He then had two infantry divisions, and a cavalry corps within striking distance of Quatre Bras, which at the moment was held by one Dutch Belgian division, one brigade of which had already been roughly handled! The

French had probably never been nearer victory and yet so far from it, as when Ney hesitated south of Frasnes. Every moment's delay gave the Allies time to concentrate whereas an immediate attack would have found them completely unprepared. Ney however waited. At 10 a.m. he received a letter from the Emperor followed by definite orders, directing him to occupy Quatre Bras with the 2nd and 1st Corps and Kellerman's Cavalry Corps. But, in spite of these instructions, further delays occurred, with the result that the attack did not begin till 2 p.m. Even at the eleventh hour he almost snatched success from the vortex into which he had allowed it to drift. Perponcher's Dutch Belgian division still held Quatre Bras. Against this Ney's two divisions made easy headway, till their advance was checked by the arrival of Allied reinforcements, comprising Picton's division and the Duke of Brunswick's Corps, followed later by Alten's division. Ney then found himself outnumbered. The corollary may seem obvious. A great opportunity had been thrown away, an opportunity which if made the most of might possibly have altered the course of the campaign. Napoleon had explained to Ney that when he had beaten Blucher at Ligny he proposed to make Quatre Bras his base for his advance on Brussels. When, however, he had won the battle of Ligny he found that Ney had been beaten at Quatre Bras!

The wish is sometimes considered father to the thought, with the result that those who consider that Wellington should have been beaten at Quatre Bras are frequently accused of partisanship. A brief consideration of the course of events will, however, disprove this. It has been seen that Ney received a formal order from Marshal Soult, the Chief of the Staff, on the morning of the 16th. This order directed him to "unite the corps of the Counts Reille (2nd) and d'Erlon (1st) and that of the Count of Valmy (3rd Cavalry), who has this instant started to join you; with them you ought to be able to beat and destroy any force of the enemy which you may meet." The force referred to had a strength of about 47,000 men, whereas Wellington's detachment did not muster more than 31,000. Under these conditions it is evident that Ney would have had a considerable superiority in numbers had he been in a position to employ all the troops placed at his disposal. He was, however, unfortunate, and cannot be considered wholly to blame, though his failure to use his cavalry has never been fully explained. The 1st Corps (d'Erlon) had been delayed, and when its leading division under Durutte reached Frasnes shortly after 4 p.m. it was directed by one of the Emperor's staff officers, who was carrying a message to Ney, to march on Brye. Durette consequently turned to his right, and was followed by the remainder of the Corps. When Ney heard what had happened he ordered d'Erlon to return, with the result that the 1st Corps marched back, reaching Frasnes about 9 p.m. It is consequently apparent that the services of 20,000 men had been wasted during the day. The loss entailed by this marching and counter-marching may be judged from the fact that the head of the column had reached Frasnes about 4 p.m. Frasnes was only 2 1/2 miles from Quatre

Bras. Consequently, had Durutte's division and the divisions following it been pushed forward they would have reached the scene of action before Wellington's reinforcements had turned the scale in favour of the Allies.

Quatre Bras cannot be considered without Ligny, and in considering Ligny it should be noticed that Napoleon has been severely criticised for not attacking the Prussian position on the morning of the 16th. Many reasons have been given for the supposed delay, one being that the Emperor was suffering from some mysterious malady that prevented him from issuing instructions or exercising any control. That this was not the case may be proved by the fact that he issued orders throughout the morning of the 16th, commencing at 5 a.m. with one to Ney. In addition, when he had completed his preliminary orders for the battle of Ligny he rode to Fleurus, and proceeded to carry out a reconnaissance of the Prussian position on foot. Consequently the reason for the delay must be attributed to some other cause. Several theories have been put forward, but the most likely solution seems to be that the troops were exhausted by their efforts on the 15th, with the result that the columns had not closed tip. This applies especially to Ney's command, portion of which was still to the south of the Sambre on the night of the 15th-16th. The Emperor was aware that the Anglo-Belgians were likely to concentrate at Quatre Bras, he consequently showed a natural disinclination to attack Ligny till he felt assured that Ney could hold Wellington in check. That this fear was genuine is clear from the number of enquiries sent to Ney on the morning of the 16th, in regard to the position of the 1st Corps. The delay involved may consequently be largely attributed to Napoleon's anxiety for the safety of the left flank of his right wing or main army. This loss of time was further accentuated through the fact that the Prussian position at Ligny was not attacked till 2.30 p.m., with the result that the engagement continued till after 9 p.m. Darkness had then set in and put an end to the pursuit. Owing to this, touch was lost with the Prussians, and the way paved for the final drama on the 18th.

The interest of the Waterloo Campaign has generally hinged on the result of the battle that gives it its name. This is however in many respects the least interesting of the events that led up to the final defeat of the French. The 15th and 16th were the decisive days of the campaign—Waterloo was the aftermath in which the result had become a foregone conclusion. Stress has consequently been laid on the failure of the left wing, as many of the advantages gained through the rapid and unexpected concentration of the 15th were lost by the delays of the 16th. Wellington, for instance, was given time in which to collect portion of his scattered Army. Had Ney been in a position to attack this detachment with his two corps, there can be no doubt that the Duke would have been forced to retreat, and it is possible that the retreat might have become a rout, as the heads of the columns concentrating on Quatre Bras would have been cut off by the French. There would then have been no Waterloo.

War is in many respects a matter of contradictions, thus on the 16th and 17th, Napoleon, the greatest leader of the age, was found at his worst when his admirers would like to have seen him at his best. There is no need to moralise over his fall, human nature has its limit of endurance, and the Emperor reached his on the night of the 16th. The spirit was willing, but as the spirit overstepped the limitations of the body, the brain refused to act. Consequently, as the Army looked to Napoleon and no staff officer could take his place, matters were brought to a dead-lock on the morning of the 17th, when the road to Brussels was barred by 45,000 men under Wellington at Quatre Bras. At the moment the French had a preponderating force ready to strike a decisive blow. Ney had the 1st and 2nd Infantry Corps and Kellerman's Cavalry Corps with Desnouette's cavalry division in position at Frasnes, and the Emperor had the 6th Corps, the Guard and Milhaud's Cuirassiers under his own control at Brye. Had these combined forces moved on Quatre Bras early on the 17th, the Anglo-Belgian force holding it would probably have been destroyed. Lethargy, however, seems to have seized the French Staff and held it fast till the moment for action had passed. Ney did not inform Napoleon of his defeat at Quatre Bras and Sout, as Chief of the Staff, forgot to tell Ney the result of the action at Ligny. The morning was consequently spent in picking up information, and Napoleon made no move till 10 a.m., when he ordered the 6th Corps, the Guard and Milhaud's Cuirassiers to Marbais, a point four miles east of Quatre Bras on the Nivelles-Namur road. At noon Ney was ordered to attack Quatre Bras and informed that the Marbais column, under the command of the Emperor was moving to his support. It is clear from this that the advance had been planned at least four hours too late. When Napoleon reached Quatre Bras and found that Wellington had retired, he realised the magnitude of the opportunity he had missed and told d'Erlon in bitter tones that "They (the Staff) have ruined France." The pursuit was then vigorously taken up and continued till it was stopped by torrential rain. The French had consequently lost three opportunities of bringing the campaign to a decisive close, and were now face to face with the possibility of a junction between Wellington and Blucher at Waterloo.

As the situation at Quatre Bras on the morning of the 17th has not been fully understood, its dramatic possibilities have been ignored. The pursuit of the Prussians on the other hand has attracted general attention, this however, appears to be superfluous. The French had already lost their opportunity, so that Grouchy's march plays a minor part in the plan of campaign. Fate had been unkind to Napoleon. The 3rd and 4th Corps had been allotted to Marshal Grouchy's command. As these corps had borne the brunt of the battle on the 16th, they were not in a position to take up the pursuit till 2 p.m. on the 17th. The Prussians had then 18 hours start and there was little prospect of Grouchy intercepting them. Napoleon has been blamed for this delay, but it is obvious that he had to choose between two evils. Had he used his fresh troops, the 1st and 6th Corps or the

Guard, he could not have followed Wellington to Waterloo. In addition, at the time he made his decision he was under the impression that Blucher had retreated on Namur. As, however, it is held that the French had exhausted their vitality on the 15th and the 16th, it is obvious—following the same line of argument—that the moment for strategical combinations had passed. Under these conditions, Grouchy's movements may be ignored. The curtain, so far as French strategy is concerned had been rung down at dawn on the 17th, when it rose again the Emperor was an exile in St. Helena.

