

ever, all the most reliable evidence it seems established that one of Napoleon's aide-de-camps, probably Labedoyere, was sent with an order from Napoleon to Ney at 3.30, which order urged Ney to strike across and assail the Prussian right, as soon as he should have occupied Quatre Bras. The aide-de-camp, before he reached Ney, met D'Erlon's corps on the road to Frasnes, and upon his own responsibility and in Napoleon's name, turned it off towards Ligny. Ney on hearing this was naturally annoyed at this clear misinterpretation of Napoleon's order, and sent his chief of the staff with a peremptory order to D'Erlon to return at once. The latter had no choice but to obey his immediate senior, and realizing his error, returned to Quatre Bras only to arrive too late to be of any use. Thus 20,000 men had spent the entire afternoon wandering backwards and forwards between the fields of Ligny and Quatre Bras without taking any part in the fighting at either.

Luck was certainly on the side of the allies.

We left Napoleon at Ligny, about to deal his final blow, which had only been delayed by the "D'Erlon incident." A precious hour and more, however, had been wasted and it was not till 7.30 that Napoleon gave the long expected order for the guard to advance. Dense clouds had arisen in the northwest, behind which the sun had sunk, and it was growing dark. The huge column pressed forwards and suddenly became visible to the Prussians in Ligny. They struggled bravely to oppose it, but in vain, and Napoleon's deadly blow was driven swiftly home. Ligny was turned and the Prussian centre broken, and Blucher galloped up in breathless haste to find the battle lost. His only chance was now to retreat and this he did with the greatest steadiness and deliberation, checking the French advance by repeated cavalry charges. Blucher himself led one of these in his fiery zeal, and his grey charger (presented to him by the English prince regent the year before) was shot under him, and rolling upon him, pinned him to the ground. Twice the French cavalry charged over him in the growing darkness and ignorant of the rich prize lying helpless on the ground. A body of Prussian lancers now came to his aid, however, and he was released and assisted off the field so bruised and battered that he had to hand over the chief command temporarily to Gneisenau. It is related that his first words on being picked up were, "Now my lads, let us charge them again!"

At 8 o'clock the French victory was secured, but the Prussians were by no means routed, and when darkness fell and the French had to halt, about 9 p.m., the Prussians still held Bry, Sombrèffe, and the Namur road.

In this desperate and bloody battle the Prussians lost about 15,000 men, and the French about 10,000.

The wearied French bivouacked on the field of battle, and Napoleon returned to spend the night at Fleurus, without giving any orders for the pursuit at all. This extraordinary negligence cost him dear indeed, as the sequel will show.

On the Prussian side, however, Gneisenau wasted no time, and about 1 a.m. commenced to withdraw, with wonderful steadiness and secrecy, the main portion of his army, not towards his base, but through Tilly and Gentinnes due north to Wavre.

This movement was not dreamed of by the French and was absolutely uninterrupted.

Let us now return to Quatre Bras.

As already stated, Wellington reached there on his return from Bry, about 3, and he then found the Prince of Orange hotly engaged with Ney.

Let us examine the scene of action.

The first thing that strikes us is the extreme smallness of the battle-field as compared with the vast extent of Ligny. The wood of Bossu, such an important feature in 1815, is now entirely cleared away. Trees are, however, now planted along both chaussées. To the south of Gomoncourt farm is a ridge which gave the French a good artillery position, and screened their advance. As I have already stated, this position was during the morning held by the Prince of Orange with 7,000 men. His line stretched from the wood of Bossu on the right to the wood of Delhutte on the left, whilst his reserves were at Quatre Bras itself. Ney had long been waiting for orders and for his troops to come up. At 2 p.m. he had 17,000 men in hand, with others close behind, so he vigorously commenced the attack, pushing back the Prince of Orange who, however, held on obstinately to Gomoncourt till finally driven out by overwhelming force.

Now, however, his eyes were gladdened by the sight of red-coated masses advancing from Quatre Bras across the rich cornfields. It was Picton's division of British infantry (chiefly Highlanders) which had left Brussels at daylight that morning and had marched twenty-two miles to the scene of action.

This arrival of Picton had saved the day. Close behind was the Duke of Brunswick's corps of 4,000 men, and from now to the close of the action, Wellington, who had taken over the command, received continuous reinforcements. At this moment he had about 20,000 men in hand.

Ney, fired by the capture of Gomoncourt, was now commencing a general advance against Quatre Bras, but Wellington did not wait to receive it on the defensive. He gave the order for Picton's division to advance, and the broad red masses advanced steadily through the bright green corn, straight at the advancing French. It was a magnificent spectacle and they literally swept the field, driving the French back in disorder behind Gomoncourt. Meanwhile, however, on the British right, the Brunswick troops were being attacked by the French cavalry, and broke, flying in utter disorder towards Quatre Bras. In trying to rally them the gallant Duke of Brunswick was killed.

At this moment an incident occurred that might have altered the result of the whole campaign. Part of the victorious French cavalry dashing forward pursued the Brunswickers up to Quatre Bras itself, and Wellington and his staff were involuntarily swept along by the flying column. He was closely pursued by the French and only escaped by leaping his horse over the 92nd Highlanders, who were lining the ditch of the Namur road. A French officer actually made a dash at him, but was disabled and taken prisoner before he could do any damage.

The French cavalry were now nearly up to Quatre Bras and on the right flank and rear of Picton's victorious division. Seeing this they wheeled to the right, and partly hidden by the high-standing corn, fell with terrific force on the flank regiments of Picton's division, who had scarcely time to form a square to meet them. In this charge the 42nd and 44th regiments suffered very severely, but the French cavalry were eventually driven off. It will be observed that the peculiar feature of this obstinate battle was that Wellington had to fight almost entirely with infantry, whereas Ney did most of his attacking with huge masses of cavalry.

Picton's division now stood in line in the cornfields, in a slight depression of the plateau, with their right on the Charleroi road and their left thrown back to the Namur road. Ney assailed them by a heavy artillery fire, and then hurried charge after charge of cavalry at

them. As the cavalry approached the British formed square and repulsed the French attacks, though the latter were of unparalleled violence. Indeed, Picton's immovable squares have been likened to "Rocks in a flowing tide." Never was British infantry so severely tried, except two days later at Waterloo, and their loss was enormous, but they remained as if rooted to the ground and Ney's cavalry at last withdrew exhausted. (It was at this moment that Ney learned of D'Erlon's departure for Ligny and recalled him.) The French renewed their attacks, but British reinforcements were now coming up fast, and Ney's chances of success were rapidly getting less and less. He resolved, however, on a fresh desperate stroke, and bringing up the cuirassiers of the guard, under Kellerman, and telling the latter that the "fate of France was in his hands," hurled him at the British centre. They dashed along the chaussée and then wheeling to the right fell with fearful suddenness on the British squares. The 69th regiment had not time to form square and was almost cut to pieces. Finding the squares still invincible, Kellerman's cuirassiers dashed straight at the cross roads, but Wellington had posted some artillery there, and poured such a hail of grape into the advancing French that they were hurled back and fled. Ney now made one last effort with his left, and Foy's infantry forced their way through the wood of Bossu, crossed the open space, and seized an isolated house on the Charleroi road only 300 yards from Quatre Bras. This was a daring stroke, but it was frustrated by the 92nd Highlanders, who dashed and drove the French out of the house and back into the wood at the point of the bayonet. The sun was now setting and the British foot-guards arrived with other reinforcements. Wellington was now in superior strength to Ney and at once assumed the offensive. He threw the guards into the woods of Bossu, and they swiftly expelled Foy though not without heavy loss. Wellington then ordered a general advance and re-occupied his position of the morning whilst Ney fell back to Frasnes. Thus ended the hotly contested action of Quatre Bras in which Wellington lost 4,600 men and Ney 4,300. Both armies were exhausted and bivouacked on the field. During the night the British cavalry arrived after their long march of forty miles, but Wellington's army was still very far from being concentrated. He retired to spend the night at Genappe, and had then received no news of the extent of Blucher's defeat.

To sum up the events of the 16th:

Napoleon had defeated the Prussians at Ligny, but was unable to advance beyond that point, whilst Ney had been repulsed at Quatre Bras. Wellington and Blucher had not been separated, but they had lost nearly 20,000 men between them, and the French about 15,000.

The chief features of the day had been:

1. Napoleon's unaccountable waste of the entire morning, thus allowing his enemies to concentrate unmolested.
2. Blucher's gallant decision to retreat to Wavre instead of to his base, so as to support Wellington.
3. Wellington's over cautiousness which kept him from concentrating his army till dangerously late. Even by the evening of the 16th he had only 36,000 men in all at Quatre Bras.
4. The extremely narrow escapes of both Wellington and Blucher from death or capture. A disaster to either of them might have altered the result of the whole campaign, as their compact was largely a personal one.

JUNE 17th.—At daybreak on the 17th Wellington left Genappe and galloped off to Quatre Bras. After inspecting his outposts he sent a patrol to ascertain Blucher's exact whereabouts. This soon discovered that the French were now on