

Grouchy and the Waterloo Campaign

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The reputation of Sir Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington, as a great soldier rests primarily in his role in the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo. It is true that he had had a successful career in India and the Iberian Peninsula. However, it could be argued that it was not until June 1815 that he came up against the greatest military leader of his generation. In Spain and Portugal, Wellington did match wits, and successfully, with some of France's best generals. But the André Masséna of 1810/11 was not the Masséna of the Battle of Zurick or Italy. And by the Battle of Vitoria in 1813, fine victory that it was the French army in Spain was not the Grande Armée of Austerlitz or Jena/Auerstadt. But at Waterloo, Wellington faced Napoleon, and as Owen Connelly put it in his *Blundering to Glory*, "Waterloo made Wellington a British legend."¹

Most historians agree that the Battle of Waterloo was in doubt until the late afternoon of 18 June. Although the lead Prussian units of General Friedrich Wilhelm von Bülow came into sight off to the east in the early afternoon, perhaps as early as 1:30 p.m., it was not until after 4:00 p.m. that Napoleon had to begin to dispatch troops to his exposed right flank to meet the Prussians. Without the arrival of the Prussian corps, Napoleon would not

have been defeated. It is still argued amongst military historians that without the Prussians, the allied army might well have been defeated at Waterloo. The Duke of Wellington would not, with only the forces he commanded, have defeated the French. Indeed, it was the promise on the part of Field Marshal Blücher that he would march to the support of his ally that led the Duke to give battle on 18 June. Thus it is generally argued that the arrival of two Prussian army corps on the afternoon of the battle was the decisive factor that led to the Allied victory.

This leads directly to the questions of why and how several Prussian corps reached the battlefield at Waterloo, and Marshal Emmanuel Grouchy, with two French corps, did not. Or to frame the question in another way: why was the Prussian army allowed to reach the battlefield at Waterloo, after Napoleon had defeated that army at Ligny on 16 June, and turned a stalemate, or perhaps even an Anglo-Dutch-German defeat, into an Allied victory?

Over the past 193 years authors and historians who have written of the Waterloo Campaign have, with few exceptions, placed all or most of the blame for Napoleon's defeat on Marshal Grouchy. Beginning with the Emperor himself, according to General G. Gourgaud: Napoleon declared, "If I had had Suchet in place of Grouchy, I

¹ Owen Connelly, *Blundering to Glory: Napoleon's Military Campaigns*, (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1992), 201.

would not have lost at Waterloo;² and again “the battle was lost because Grouchy did not arrive.”³ Napoleon’s lead was taken up through the 19th and 20th centuries. To give but a few examples: W. Hyde Kelly, writing at the turn of the century in his *The Battle of Wavre and Grouchy’s Retreat*, concludes that “Grouchy should never have allowed it [Blücher’s arrival at Waterloo] to be carried out.”⁴ A. F. Becke, writing in the 1930s, criticizes Grouchy’s entire handling of the right wing of the army on 17 and 18 June, concluding that he should have prevented the Prussians from reaching Waterloo.⁵ And in David Chandler’s *Napoleon’s Marshals*, James D. Lunt, who wrote the chapter on the Marshal, finds that “Grouchy certainly failed at Waterloo.”⁶ To answer such charges it is necessary to examine and to evaluate, not only the actions and intentions of the principal figures of the campaign, but also to understand what it was that they knew, or thought they knew, as the events of the four days of that crucial campaign unfolded.

² Gourgaud, Général Baron, *Sainte-Hélène: Journal inédit de 1815 · 1818*. (Paris, Ernest Flammarion, no date), II, 424.

³ *Ibid.* 370. This might be a true statement, but the important question is whose fault was it that Grouchy was not at Waterloo.

⁴ W. Hyde Kelly, *The Battle of Wavre and Grouchy’s Retreat*. (Felling: Worley, 1993), 107.

⁵ A. F. Becke, *Napoleon and Waterloo: the Emperor’s Campaign with the Armée du Nord 1815*. (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1939), 143-47.

⁶ James D. Lunt, “The Odd man out: Grouchy”, in *Napoleon’s Marshals*, David G. Chandler, Editor. (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 149.

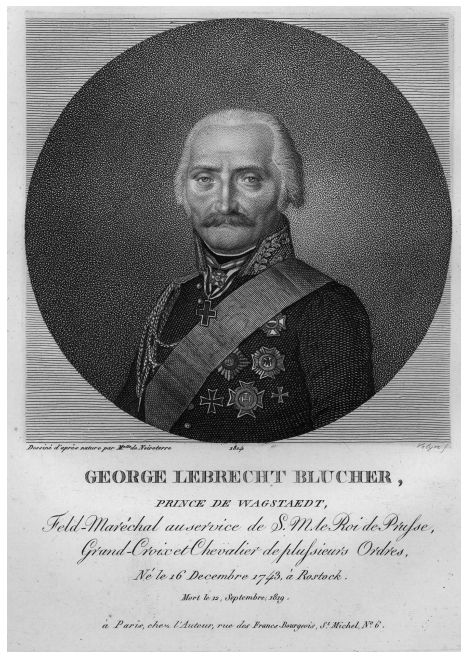
The campaign opened on 15 June with a French army of 128,000 men, led by General Dominique Vandamme, advancing into Belgium. The allied forces consisted of two armies; the Duke of Wellington with a force of 106,000 British, Dutch, and Germans, and Blücher with 123,000 Prussians.⁷ Wellington’s army was spread over a wide area south and southwest of Brussels, while Blücher’s four corps were southeast of Brussels more or less between Charleroi, Namur and Liege.

It was Napoleon’s intention to advance in three basic formations, a Right Wing, a Left Wing, and a reserve in between the two wings. He would move north in between the two Allied armies and attack the Prussians first, as they were closest at hand. After defeating the Prussians, they would be pressed to the east along their lines of supply and communications toward the Rhine; that is, away from Brussels and the Anglo-Dutch-German army. Napoleon would then turn on Wellington, defeat him and drive him to the sea.⁸ These two victories would reestablish Napoleon’s military reputation, demoralize the Allies, and re-unite Belgium to the French Empire. All of this before the Austrians and the Russians arrived on

⁷ These figures are taken from Vincent J. Esposito and John R. Elting, *A Military History and Atlas of the Napoleonic Wars*, (New York: Praeger, 1964), 156.

⁸ On Napoleon’s plans for the opening of the campaign see his letter to Marshal Ney dated 16 June. Napoléon I, *Correspondance de Napoléon Ier*, (Paris: Imprimerie Impériale, 1869), no. 22058, XXVIII, 334-336; and David G. Chandler, *The Campaigns of Napoleon*, (New York: Macmillan, 1966), 1015-17.

the Rhine in any strength to intervene. It was in fact, a good plan, and it almost worked.



Allied strategy, on the other hand, was not as complex, nor was there much agreement on the details, and there was no supreme commander. But in general, if the French invaded Belgium, Wellington and Blücher would concentrate their scattered forces and join together to present a united front to Napoleon which would be superior in numbers of troops, of cavalry, and of artillery. This Allied army, with numerical superiority, would then give battle with the expectation of victory. If the French did not advance, the Allies would wait until the Russians and Austrians were on the Rhine and the Alps. Then they would invade France from Belgium, from Luxembourg, from the Rhine, and from Italy. Once again, a good plan, but one that was never put into use.⁹

⁹ On the Allied plan see Chandler, *The Campaigns of Napoleon*, p. 1015; and Andrew Uffindell, *The*

As the French advanced on 15 June, Blücher decided to concentrate his army in the vicinity of Ligny and give battle with, he hoped, support from the Anglo-Dutch-German army.¹⁰ Once again it should be noted that each Allied army commander was independent, and free to do as he pleased. Napoleon moved his Right wing to engage the Prussians, while his Left wing under Marshal Michel Ney moved north to engage and hold Wellington in the vicinity of Quatre-Bras. Between these two wings the reserve, with the Emperor personally in command, moved forward. When it became clear on the morning of the 16th that Blücher would make a stand at Ligny, Napoleon moved his reserve to join the Right Wing creating an army of 76,800 men to do battle with 83,000 Prussians.¹¹ Blücher hoped to be reinforced by Bülow's IV Corps which was in the vicinity of Liege, but he was not, while Napoleon hoped that General J. B. d'Erlon would arrive from Ney's Left Wing, but he did not.¹²

Eagle's Last Triumph: Napoleon's Victory at Ligny, June 1815, (London: Greenhill Books, 1994), 47.

¹⁰ Kelly sums-up in five points why Blücher gave battle at Ligny. See *The Battle of Waivre*, 44.

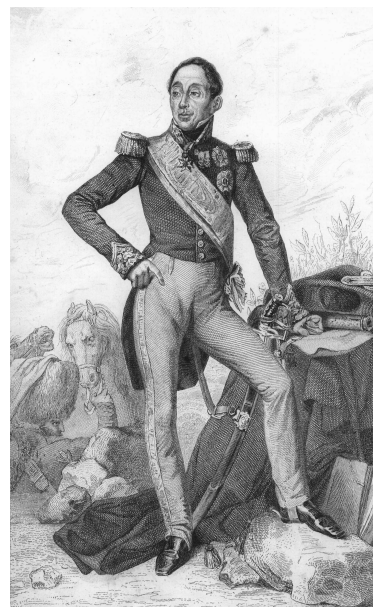
¹¹ Troop strength is taken from Esposito and Elting, *A Military History and Atlas of the Napoleonic War*, 159. Uffindell, in his *The Eagle's Last Triumph*, gives the strength of the French at 79,000, and the Prussians at 83,000, 84-89.

¹² D'Erlon was marching east to the support of Napoleon in the late afternoon of 16 June. However, as he had no direct contact with the Emperor, or direct orders from him, when he received direct orders from Marshal Ney, his immediate superior, he reversed his direction and marched to Quatre-Bras, where Ney was fully engaged with Wellington. Arriving too late to help Ney, d'Erlon's corps did not take part in either of the two battles that were fought on 16

The Battle of Ligny was fought hard on both sides through the afternoon and early evening with the numbers fairly equal; Blücher being somewhat superior. However, by 9:00 p.m. the French broke the Prussian center, and Blücher was forced to begin a general retreat. Napoleon won a major victory over the Prussian army, but it was not a crushing victory. Blücher was allowed to retreat under cover of darkness at his leisure without an aggressive French pursuit. The failure of d'Erlon to reach the battlefield and the absence of a night pursuit of the enemy mark the decisive turning point of the campaign. Late on the afternoon of 16 June, d'Erlon was marching to the battlefield with 20,000 men when he received orders from Marshal Ney, his immediate superior, to reverse his direction and march back to support him at Quatre-Bras, where he was engaged with a portion of Wellington's army. As a result, General d'Erlon's corps did not fire a shot while Ney fought at Quatre-Bras and Napoleon at Ligny.¹³ Had he arrived on Blücher's flank at 6:30 p.m., he could have turned the victory into the destruction of the Prussian army and prevented its retreat to the north along the Brussels road.

June. See Le Marquis de Grouchy, *Mémoires du Maréchal de Grouchy*, (Paris: E. Dentu, 1873-1874), IV, 12-14.

¹³ See Grouchy, *Mémoires*, IV, 12-14 and 30-33. See also Kelly, *The Battle of Wavre*, 48-51.



Marshal Emmanuel Grouchy

The failure of Napoleon to order an immediate and aggressive pursuit was the other failure on the 16th.¹⁴ The reason would seem to be that he was waiting to hear of the outcome of Marshal Ney's combat at Quatre-Bras. If Ney was driven back, Napoleon's left flank would be exposed and the Emperor would have to divert a major portion of his immediate command to cover his flank and to support Ney. It is also said that he was tired and ill, and the battle having been won, he retired to Fleurus at 10.00 p.m., for a good night's sleep. But whatever the situation, he could have ordered a pursuit before leaving the battlefield. At about 11:00 p.m. Grouchy, who had commanded the right wing during the battle, went to headquarters to receive orders and was told that he would receive his orders in the morning. The Marshal returned to headquarters early on the morning of the 17th and was told

¹⁴ Grouchy, *Mémoires*, IV, 14-15.

that the Emperor could not be awakened. At 8:00 a.m. Napoleon received Grouchy and insisted that he accompany him to review the battlefield of Ligny. After riding over the sight of the previous days fighting, which was not completed until almost noon, Napoleon received news from Ney of the favorable situation at Quatre-Bras and immediately ordered Marshal Grouchy to pursue the enemy actively and vigorously so as to prevent the Prussians from joining forces with Wellington.¹⁵ Napoleon then informed the Marshal that he, with the reserve, would march west to join Marshal Ney and engage the Anglo-Dutch-German army, which he believed, as the result of Ney's letter, was still in the vicinity of Quatre-Bras. However, by noon on 17 June it was already too late for Grouchy to prevent at least a major portion of Blücher's army from reaching Waterloo in time to take part in the battle on the afternoon of 18 June. The Prussians had withdrawn to the north towards Brussels by way of Wavre, and had been joined by General Bülow and his IV corps of 30,000 men. At the same time, that is on the morning of the 17th, Wellington, after hearing of Blücher's defeat, was also withdrawing to the north. Thus, the Prussian army was already closer to Wellington than was Grouchy.

It was not until about 11:30 a.m. on the 17th that Grouchy was given oral orders to take command of the right wing of the army and ordered to pursue the Prussians and attack them immediately upon making contact. This

¹⁵ See Grouchy, *Mémoires*, IV, 35-36.



command included the 3rd Corps commanded by General Dominique-Joseph Vandamme, the 4th Corps commanded by General Maurice-Etienne Gérard, and the cavalry divisions of Generals Rémy-Joseph Exelmans and Claude-Pierre Pajol. Written orders to this effect were drawn up by General Henri-Gatien Bertrand (and known as the "Bertrand Orders")¹⁶ were sent out within an hour, for neither Vandamme nor Gérard were likely to place themselves under Grouchy without direct orders from the Emperor.¹⁷ Having received his orders, Grouchy explained to the Emperor that the Prussians had begun their retreat shortly after the battle had ended at 9:00 p.m. the night before and had a 15 to 16-hour head start, with little

¹⁶ The entire order is quoted in Kelly, *The Battle of Wavre*, 83-84.

¹⁷ On how Vandamme did not like Grouchy and why, see A. Du Casse, *Le général Vandamme et sa Correspondance* (Paris: Didier et Cte., 1870, 2v.) II, 567.

interference, as no pursuit had been ordered. Furthermore, neither he, Grouchy, nor Napoleon knew in which direction the enemy had retreated.¹⁸ Napoleon was convinced that Blücher had retreated to the east or the northeast, along his lines of communication towards the Rhine. Furthermore, Grouchy had sent General Claude-Pierre Pajol's cavalry division in the direction of Namur [east] early on the 17th and he had reported the capture of several pieces of Prussian artillery. Although this was only a small isolated Prussian unit cut off from the main army, it seemed to confirm Napoleon's belief that the enemy was moving away east from Wellington, not to the north and the west.

The Marshal also pointed out to the emperor at noon on the 17th that his new command was scattered over the plains of Ligny; that they were cooking lunch and cleaning their muskets, and that it would take several hours to put the two corps on the road. But even more disturbing, Grouchy pointed out to Napoleon that he did not know which way the enemy had retreated. Unless the Emperor gave specific orders as to the direction, he would move to the east, which was away from the rest of the French army. As he put it in his *Mémoires*, "I would find myself isolated, separated from him [Napoleon], and out of the circle of his operations."¹⁹ Nevertheless, Napoleon

¹⁸ Grouchy, *Mémoires*, IV, 45-46. See also Grouchy, *Observations sur . . . la Campagne de 1815*. (Paris: chez Chaumerot, 1819), 12.

¹⁹ Grouchy, *Observation sur . . . la Campagne de 1815*, 12.

received Grouchy's observations coolly and repeated the orders that he had given. The Emperor then added "that it was for me [Grouchy] to discover the route taken by Marshal Blücher."²⁰ Even before Grouchy's army began the pursuit, it was too late to prevent at least a major portion of Blücher's army from reaching the Battlefield of Waterloo the afternoon of June 18. The Prussian 1st and 2nd Corps had marched directly from Ligny to Wavre, during the night of the 16th and early morning of 17th. The 3rd Corp, that of General Thielemann, which covered the retreat of the 1st and 2nd, then marched off in the early hours of the 17th to Gembloux where it joined General Bülow's 4th Corps, which had taken no part in the Battle of Ligny, and together they withdrew northward to Wavre.



General Bülow

Once Grouchy had his orders to take command of the Right Wing of the army and to pursue the enemy, he immediately gave marching orders to

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

Vandamme, Gérard, and Exelmans. Thus, on the afternoon of 17 June, while Napoleon marched west to Quatre-Bras, Grouchy's two corps marched northeast to Gembloux.²¹ Vandamme and Gérard were slow to get underway, and did not move rapidly. It is true that the roads were bad and the march difficult, yet they did not reach Gembloux until evening, and then they stopped for the night. If, as they believed, the Prussia army was retreating east toward the Rhine, the did not seem to be any urgency Exelmans' cavalry, which Grouchy had sent out in search of the Prussian army, finally made contact with the enemy so as to be able to determine that Blücher's main force was retiring not to the east, but to the north on the Brussels-Namur road.²² At 10:00 p.m. on the night of 17 June, Grouchy informed Napoleon of his location, and that Blücher had retired to the north to Wavre. He then declared that he would march on Wavre in the morning.²³ In the late hours of 17 June, Grouchy issued orders to Vandamme and to Gérard to march on Wavry.²⁴ The former to begin at 6:00 a.m. and the latter at 8:00 a.m. In mid June it is light between 3:30 and 4:00 a.m. in Belgium. Yet Vandamme was not on the road until 8:00 a.m., and Gérard followed him on the same road. General Exelman's cavalry made firm contact with the Prussian rear guard

²¹ Ibid., 14-15.

²² Ibid., 14. See also Grouchy to Napoleon as quoted in Kelly, 90-91.

²³ Grouchy, *Observations sur . . . la campagne de 1815*, 14-15.

²⁴ See Grouchy to Vandamme, 17 June 1815, at Gembloux, Service Historique de l'Armée [War Archives], Chateau de Vincennes, C15 23.

about 10:30 a.m. on the 18th and serious fighting began almost immediately. Gradually Vandamme's lead division came on to the scene and the Prussians retired to Wavre with the French on their heels. In heavy fighting, Vandamme drove the enemy out of that portion of the town, which was on the Right Bank [i.e. the south bank] of river Dyle. The battle line soon was drawn along the stream, and as Vandamme's other divisions arrived, he quickly committed his entire army Corps in an attempt to cross the river and capture Wavre. But General Johann Adolf von Thielemann's 3rd Corps, about 17,000 men, had taken up a strong defensive position in Wavre and along the Dyle. Grouchy found himself committed to battle. Despite Napoleon's orders to pursue the enemy and engage them so as to hold them fixed, Grouchy would later complain that Vandamme had committed him to battle without his knowledge or his orders.²⁵ With the arrival of Gérard's corps and Pajol's cavalry, Grouchy was at last able to push a major portion of his force across the Dyle. However, it was too late in the day to completely route Thielemann's forces. Darkness found Grouchy in a very advantageous position to destroy the Prussian 3rd Corps on 19 June.²⁶

When Wellington heard of Blücher's defeat at Ligny, he had withdrawn from Quatre-Bras, although he had stopped Ney's advance on the 16th. With his left flank completely exposed, he fell back to an excellent defensive position a few miles south of Waterloo. When Blücher

²⁵ Grouchy, *Mémoires*, IV, 41.

²⁶ See Kelly, *The Battle of Wavre*, 115-33.

assured him that a major portion of the Prussian army would arrive to assist him on the afternoon of 18 June, Wellington decided to stand and fight. The Prussian army was assembled, some 95,000 men strong, at Wavre on the night of 17/18 June, and in keeping his word to the Duke, he put General Bülow's 4th Corps on the road west early on the morning of the 18th. The Prussian Field Marshal left one Corps, the 3rd, reinforced by a division from one of the other Corps, to detain Grouchy and sent the other three to join Wellington. Thus, before Vandamme's lead division had even reached Wavre, Bülow was almost in sight of the battlefield with General Zieten's 1st Corps close behind.

At approximately 11:30 on the morning of 18 June, Napoleon began the Battle of Waterloo. Some 12 miles east (as the crow flies) Grouchy could hear the opening artillery bombardment. General Gérard strongly suggested to Grouchy that he march his force to the sound of the guns. But the Marshal first believed that the sounds were Wellington's rear guard retreating towards Brussels. When it persisted, he realized that Napoleon and Wellington were engaged in a full-scale battle. Even so Grouchy decided not to march west to the battle. Gérard even suggested that he should be allowed to take his 4th Corps to Waterloo while Grouchy and Vandamme continued the battle of Wavre. Again Grouchy refused.

In retrospect, Gérard is frequently credited with having given the correct advice and Grouchy with having made



a major wrong decision. But consider the situation at noon on the 18th. Grouchy believed that the entire Prussian army was north of the river Dyle,²⁷ and even if part of that number was marching toward Brussels – as he believed – to divide his force of 32,000 men, that is to allow Gérard to take his army corps to Waterloo, would have left him vulnerable to attack and destruction by the Prussian army. Furthermore, Vandamme and Exelmans were already engaged. To extract them from the battle would invite the Prussians to cross the Dyle and attack the retreating French. This would cause Grouchy to fight a rear guard action against a major force while trying to march to the battlefield as quickly as possible. Yet another problem was that there was no direct road for him to use. The Prussians were already using the

²⁷ Grouchy states in his *Observations sur . . . la campagne de 1815* that it was difficult to estimate the exact strength of the enemy force because of the terrain on the north side of the river, 17.

most direct roads from Wavre to the battlefield, which were on the right bank of the Dyle, while Grouchy was on the left and unable to force a crossing until late in the afternoon. He would have had to march south and then west on rain soaked roads, a distance of perhaps 15 to 18 miles, and with an entire Prussian army corps of 17,000 men (and he thought that there was more) attacking him from the rear. Finally, Grouchy had direct orders from Napoleon to pursue the enemy and engage them. He had no knowledge of the fact that Blücher was marching several corps to Waterloo. Knowing that Napoleon had defeated the Prussians without the aid of Marshal Ney's Left Wing on the 16th, he had every reason to believe that the Emperor would defeat the Anglo-Dutch-German army on the 18th without his aid. Thus, he saw his duty to engage the Prussian army at Wavre to prevent it from joining Wellington.

Again, in retrospect, one might say that Grouchy should have marched to the sound of the guns; but there is little indication that he could have arrived in time to have made any difference in the outcome of the battle. After all, the Prussians, who would have had more than a six-hour head start on Grouchy, were marching on the only direct road. Yet they were not a factor in the battle until 4:00 o'clock in the afternoon. Grouchy, marching a longer distance could not have arrived before 10:00 p.m., by which time the battle had been lost and the French army was in full retreat. He simply would have been caught-up in the disaster and rolled

back into France with the rest of the army. As it was, he skillfully extracted his undefeated army from a very dangerous position and brought it to the defense of Paris in good condition.

In conclusion, I would argue that it was not Grouchy who lost the Battle of Waterloo for Napoleon; rather it was Blücher who won it for Wellington. Could Grouchy have been more active and aggressive: certainly. Could he have prevented two of Blücher's corps from reaching the battlefield of Waterloo: I think not. Even if he had caught up with the Prussian rear guard the night of the 17th, as he did on the 18th, Thielemann's 3rd Corps of 17,000 men would have held him at bay, perhaps with the aid of a second Prussian corps, while the other two marched on west to become the decisive factor in the Battle of Waterloo.