

Encounter at the Crossroads: Quatre  
Bras and Ligny

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I went down to the crossroad, fell down on my knees

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Asked the Lord above "have mercy on me now, save poor Bob if you please".

Robert Johnson, Cross Road Blues

The crossroad is a meeting place. The crossroad is a junction. The crossroad is a starting point. The crossroad is an end. In French, the translation for crossroad is "quatre bras" – literally "four arms".

In June, 1815 it was all of these-meeting place, junction, start and end in the opening of Napoleon's Waterloo campaign at the Belgian village of Quatre Bras.

Before we get to the beginning battles of the Waterloo campaign, here is a brief description of Napoleon Bonaparte's career and what eventually led to his penultimate and simultaneous battles at Quatre Bras and nearby Ligny in Belgium on June 16, 1815.

After the French Revolution in 1789, surrounding monarchies like the United Kingdom and Austria were none too happy. War between the French and other European powers continues, with a few lulls, until Napoleon's final defeat in 1815. Napoleon Bonaparte was born on the island of Corsica, in 1769. He rose in the ranks of the French army beginning as an artillery officer. In 1796-1797 he won a series of battles in Italy, earning a reputation as the best young

commander in Europe. In 1798, he invaded Egypt and won the Battle of the Pyramids. He eventually left his army there and returned to France after Horatio Nelson destroyed the French navy at the Battle of the Nile.

In 1799, upon his return to France, he participated in the overthrow of the French Republican government and was elected first counsel of three, but he was in charge. He defeated the Austrians at the Battle of Marengo in northern Italy in 1800 to secure his position.

In 1803, the most important event in his rule to us Americans happened. France sold to the United States the Louisiana territory. In this purchase the US obtained 875,000 square miles of territory. Napoleon: A Life, Andrew Roberts Viking (2014) at 324. That area now encompasses all or part of 13 states from the Gulf of Mexico to Canada. *Id.* The price at the time: 80 million francs (around 15 million dollars) or less than 4 cents an acre!

On December 2, 1804 Napoleon crowned himself Emperor in the Cathedral of Notre Dame. *Id.* At 353. Pope Pius VII was there and watched. (The Pope's "blessing" by being in attendancc did not secure the favor of the Emperor who later had the Pope arrested in the Vatican in 1809 -after he had excommunicated Napoleon for ordering the expulsion of all British goods and merchants from the Papal States. *Id.* All was later forgiven in 1813 when the Emperor and the Pope made up. The archbishops Napoleon had appointed were recognized by the Pope while the Pope got tax breaks and compensation for land taken by the French. *Id.* At 639.

While it is often difficult to judge another's soul and Napoleon did receive the Sacraments of the Church near his death, he had also once remarked "I like the Muslim religion best, it has fewer incredible things in it than ours." Id at 272. Once a pragmatist, always a pragmatist?

Exactly one year after his coronation, Napoleon won the great victory at Austerlitz (now in the Czech Republic), on December 2, 1805, defeating the Russian, Austrian and Prussian armies. He defeated the Prussians again at Jena on October 14, 1806 (now in Thuringia, Germany). Id. at 418. He won the Battle of Eylau over the Russians and Prussians on February 7, 1807 (in Russian now, then in Prussia).

On July 5, 1809, his Army fought the Austrians at Wagram, in Austria, a pyrrhic victory for Napoleon. A peace treaty was not signed until the following September, after an unsuccessful British attempt to invade the continent failed. 110,000 British troops were sent to Holland, but half of them were felled by dysentery and 10% killed by the disease. Id. At 526.

Napoleon then acted as any Emperor should; he married a princess, Marie Louise of Austria, after divorcing the famed Josephine. He sought an alliance with Austria after this 1810 marriage. Id at 540-541. He later blamed the marriage for his downfall, claiming he never would have invaded Russia without thinking he would have had the support of Austria. Id.

After a costly diversion attacking Spain and Portugal that dragged on for years, he made his most fateful decision, to invade Russia (After WWII, Field

Marshall Montgomery wrote "Rule 1, page 1 of the Book of War – do not march on Moscow").

This was the event from which he never recovered (except for the 100 days before Waterloo). The failure of diplomatic efforts to resolve Russia's concerns about Napoleon's plans for the independence of Polish regions bordering Russia and Napoleon's belief that Russia was violating treaties by trading with Great Britain led to his decision to invade Russia. This, as we all know, was a disaster for the French, in spite of victory at the Battle of Borodino September 7, 1812 and the subsequent capture of Moscow. The burning of that city and the Russians maintaining its army caused the French to have to retreat. The Russians would harass the retreating French as they departed Russia. Napoleon lost, due to death in battle, capture or disease, over 500,000 men.

In 1813 Napoleon's forces were defeated at the Battle of Leipzig, a/k/a the Battle of Nations, on October 16, 18-19, 1813. Over 500,000 soldiers took part on both sides. French, Germans, Swedes, Austrians (and their empire's men) and even British rocketeers. Id at 675.

In 1814 the allied opponents of the French invaded France. After a series of successful defensive battles, Paris surrendered on March 30. Id at 709. Napoleon abdicated after a failed suicide attempt and went into exile on the island of Elba in the Mediterranean. He tried to kill himself using a poison mixture he had worn around his neck ever since he had almost been captured by Cossacks during the retreat in Russia. His doctors induced vomiting.

Learning of the army's continued loyalty to him and of the restored French monarchy's unpopularity, Napoleon returned to France on March 1, 1815 after about a 3 day sea journey. He had about 1,100 men. This began the "100 days" ending in defeat at Waterloo.

Between March 1 and June 15<sup>th</sup>, Napoleon put together an army of 120,000 men the Armee du Nord (Army of the North). It was assembled on the Belgian frontier poised at striking the Anglo-Dutch Army under Arthur Wellesley, the Duke of Wellington and the Prussians under General Blucher, Waterloo: Battle of Three Armies, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., Lord Chalfont Ed. (1979) at 12. Wellington had 100,000 men and Blucher 117,000. So Napoleon was significantly outnumbered. He had to maneuver in the way for which he had become well-known- move fast, strike quickly and surprise each army individually. "The concentration of forces next to the unsuspecting enemy." Id. His plan was to defeat each army in turn.

The French started across the Belgian border early in the morning of June 15<sup>th</sup>. Wellington was in Brussels and originally ordered his troops to the west of the city, not realizing Napoleon would concentrate to the south of the city. Wellington was at a ball in the capital given by the Duchess of Richmond. When he learned the actual location of Napoleon he remarked "Napoleon has humbugged me by God!". Id at 15.

Napoleon's plan so far was working as intended. He had surprised the Allies and caught them divided. He would then need to defeat them in turn.

I refer you to your map for orientation. You can see where the village of Quatre Bras "The Crossroads" is located. It is about 11 miles south of the Waterloo battlefield (which is closer to Mount Saint-Jean village really). It is about 15 miles from Waterloo to Brussels. A further 8.5 miles from Quatre Bras to the east – south-east is the Village of Ligny, where the Prussian Army was concentrating.

Napoleon's forces were divided into three wings. The left, commanded by Marshal Michael Ney, was to head to the Crossroads. This juncture was of importance because if the Anglo-Dutch army was not intercepted, it would allow the Duke of Wellington to come to the aid of the Prussians at Ligny. Napoleon was in the center and Marshal Grouchy commanded the right wing at Ligny.

The Anglo-Dutch forces recognized the importance of the crossroads at Quatre Bras. They had a force of 8,000 in the village the morning of June 16, 1815. Ney had 18,000 but spent his time reconnoitering and did not launch a full assault until around 2:00 p.m. One reason for delay may have been a subordinate officer's experience fighting the British in Spain and Portugal where Wellington was known for concealing troops so the enemy would underestimate what they faced. So the French, who needed to be bold, were too cautious.

About that same time, the French attacked the Prussians in Ligny. Wellington reinforced Quatre Bras with British troops and Germans under the Duke of Brunswick, who was killed there. The allies at Quatre Bras ultimately numbered around 36,000 to the French 24,000. Then to the east of Quatre Bras,

Napoleon's forces , around 60,000, were holding down the 80,000 Prussians at Ligny and were poised to defeat them.

Napoleon envisioned his men under Ney obtaining a quick victory at the Crossroads, so Ney could then move toward Ligny and crush the Prussians with Grouchy. But the Anglo-Dutch-Belgian Army held out. Earlier that day Wellington had promised the Prussian commander he would come to his aid, but he would have to defeat the French at Quatre Bras to accomplish this.

The fighting at Quatre Bras see-sawed back and forth with the French almost taking the Crossroads, but around 5:00 p.m. British reinforcements arrived to tip the scale once again in favor of the Allies, who were now under the direct command of Wellington. By 7:00 p.m. the battle had ended. The French had lost around 4300 compared to the Anglo- Dutch losses of 4700. Waterloo: Battle of Three Armies at 40. But both sides had ended up practically where they had started. The French did not capture Quatre Bras during the battle, so technically this was an Anglo-Dutch-Belgian victory, as they had "held the field."

Here is a description by a soldier of the 79<sup>th</sup> Highlanders about the fighting there:

We had marched about 20 miles from Brussels when we met the French at Quatre Bras. We arrived at the field of battle about 2:00 p.m. The day was exceedingly warm. We were long under the burning heat of the sun and suffered much from thirst. Although the inhabitants of the villages that we came through kindly supplied us with water, we were so warm that we could have taken a



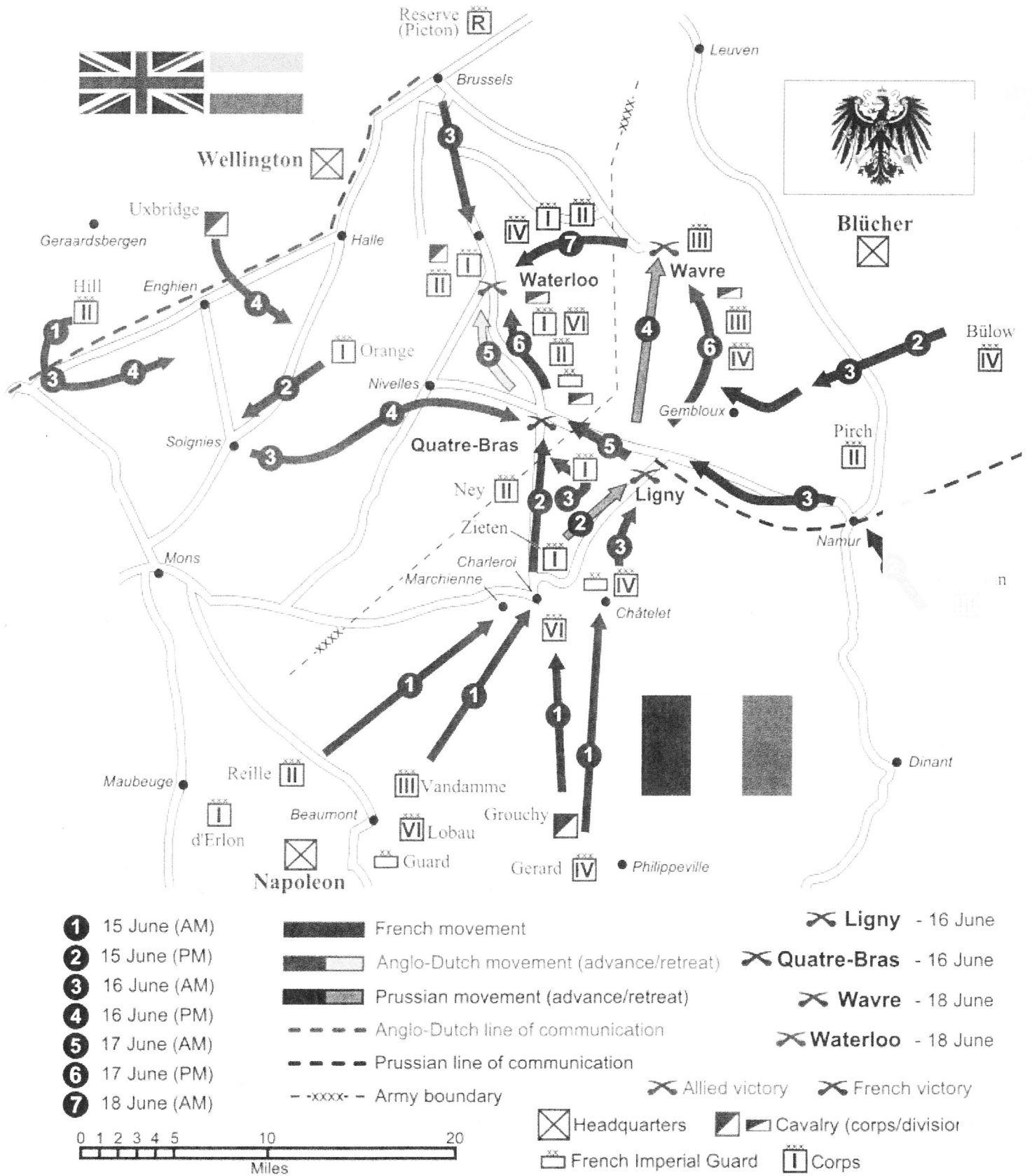
constant supply. When we arrived at Quatre Bras, I felt myself tired and stiff. My knapsack, blanket and camp-kettle and 60 rounds of ball cartridge gun and bayonet and 3 days bread all felt heavier than they did that morning when I left Brussels. As soon as we got orders to fire on the French and charge them, I got into the real spirit of the bloody game- I was no longer tired and stiff-I never felt my knapsack on my back, and every other thing that I carried seemed as light as nothing. When we charged the French and drove them through the hedges with our bayonets I never felt my feet touch the ground; my gun and bayonet seemed as light in my hand as a feather. If the French had made a stand against us at the hedge, we would have thrown them over the hedge from the point of our bayonets like corn sheaves. Our passion of rage and fury had risen to such a height, that we were like madmen all the time that we were engaged; yet we always kept our rage and fury within proper bounds-none of us were so base and cruel as to hurt or insult our fallen foes. The French on the other hand, cruelly tortured and stabbed to death our wounded men whenever they found them. Extract from a Narrative of the Battle of Quatre Bras by a Soldier of the 79<sup>th</sup> Highlanders.

But the fighting prevented Wellington from coming to the aid of the Prussians at Ligny. That battle, Napoleon's last victory, resulted in Prussian losses of around 17,000 compared to the French 11,000. Napoleon: A Life at 754. But a curious incident had helped prevent the French victory over the Prussians from being total and decisive.

While heavily engaged in the fighting at Quatre Bras, Marshal Ney had called up a reserve corps of 20,000 under a General d'Erlon. When Napoleon received word of the heaving fighting at the Crossroads, he sent orders that he needed one corps to come to Ligny to deliver the coup de grace to the Prussians. A General le Bedoyere was sent with that order and came upon General d'Erlon and sent him to Ligny without the prior knowledge or consent of Ney, who became furious when he heard d'Erlon had been dispatched elsewhere. When Ney was sent an order from Napoleon directing him to dipatch a corps to Ligny, Ney upbraided the officer, who failed to deliver the message!

When the Anglo-Dutch counter-attacked, Ney sent orders to d'Erlon to return to Quatre Bras. D'Erlon obeyed even though he was almost at Ligny. So, his 20,000 French soldiers spent the whole of June 16<sup>th</sup> marching to and from both battles without engaging in either one.

The Prussians had been defeated, if not decisively. Napoleon's strategy was working. He had seized the initiative, had kept his foes from linking up, had defeated one (but the Prussians had escaped to fight another day), and now would press the attack against the Anglo-Dutch-Belgians. But that was to be two days later, on ground selected by the Duke of Wellington, between the villages of Mount Saint Jean and La Belle Alliance, HQ Waterloo.



Edit 2 - added flags

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