Wellington’s forgotten flank: The Nassau story at Papelotte, 18 June 1815

I was a private in the 3rd Nassau battalion, which was part of the Allied army at Waterloo. I was born in Wiesbaden, capital of the Duchy of Nassau, and lived there. It was a big day for my comrades and me as we despised the French and we were very unhappy under long years of French occupation, so this was a perfect opportunity for revenge. I was very excited to have the opportunity to fight in the Duke of Wellington’s army as I had heard and read very good things about him. He was a well-known figure and an apparent military genius, evident in his brilliant victories in India and in the Peninsular War.

We had fought alongside Prince Bernhard for the Prussian army, which had been disastrously routed in Napoleon’s invasion of 1806-1807 and in the Saxon army at Wagram in 1809. In 1813 we fought in the bloody battles of Dresden and Leipzig after which our Nassauers defected like many other German states at the time and we fought for revenge for the next year until our enemies’ downfall at Paris but even though we thought that the enemy was finished off, Napoleon would return to fight again after escaping from exile on the island of Elba a year later which was a big shock to all my comrades.

Bernhard was born in Weimar and was the Prince of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach. He was the seventh child of Charles Augustus, Grand Duke of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach.

When our men heard of Napoleon’s return to the throne and the King’s abdication we were shocked. It seemed as if the French defeat the previous year was just a temporary ceasefire. Immediately all of Europe began mobilizing their forces and were advancing to the French border. Our Nassauers were put in the Duke of Wellington’s multi-national army. Many of our Nassauers were actually conscripts but were still willing to put effort and courage into battle. Our men were very loyal to our monarch, Frederick Augustus, Duke of Nassau and he was our inspiration and our driving force. Frederick Augustus, however, was getting old at the age of seventy-six and we knew there was not much left for him, so this would surely be a good send-off for him and the whole Duchy if it was going to be unified with some other larger German state like Baden-Wurttemberg in a new idea called the German Confederation. Another thing is that if we fought well in the campaign then maybe we would be rewarded by holding onto our Duchy, and we would keep our monarch.

Our battalion, under the command of Major Hegmann, was part of Bernhard’s 2nd Brigade of the 2nd Netherlands Infantry Division under the command of the enthusiastic Baron Henri-Georges Perponcher-Sedlnitzky. Many of my comrades thought very highly of Perponcher as he had valuable experience and had fought in Egypt, the Peninsular and Italy, so we respected and trusted him. Our division was actually the first of Wellington’s forces to arrive around Quatre-Bras. An unusual aspect was that the division had three different languages which were French (which the Belgians spoke), German (our men and various other German states spoke it) and Dutch. The division had about 8,000 men and 10 cannon. We held the crossroads with the other brigade under Colonel Bijlandt. The French were on the manoeuvre, we knew, and so we knew we had to do our duty otherwise we might be cut off from the Prussians and even Antwerp. We expected to be joined by the Prussian soldiers but we had seen and heard of no Prussian troops anywhere. We were attacked by enemy cavalry but our artillery held Ney’s troops steadily and his advanced stalled around Frasnes. In fact, the troops fought so hard that several battalions were down to nearly ten cartridges per man. Our men held the position for twenty-four hours, which was a remarkable achievement for the many of us who had hardly any battle experience. Now more of Wellington’s troops could cover our flank but we did have many casualties so we were under strength. Later we realised that our work was significant as if we had not held out many units would have been cut off from the main army and might have capitulated. About eight hundred Nassauers were killed, wounded, missing or captured after the fight and our battalion was really hit hard. At least the Nassau reserve contingent (under Major General von Kruse) did not suffer any losses as it had many battle-hardened and experienced officers but did not take part in the battle like many other units which were still making their way.

On the evening of the 17 June our battalion took up position at Papelotte. The first Brigade under Bijlandt (who was wounded during the battle) was sent to the left centre of the line in front of Sir Thomas Picton’s men so our flank was relatively vulnerable. Our 2nd brigade was spread out around the farms and villages of Papelotte, La Haye, Smohain and Frichermont. I and most Nassauers, however, took up positions around Papelotte. There were approximately 3,000 men defending the area and all were Nassauers apart from the battery, which was Belgian. Unfortunately, our battery was overrun during Quatre-Bras and so we had lost some guns and the battery commander was killed so he had to be replaced. Our 3rd battalion was placed under the command of Major Hegmann and we took up position at Papelotte with Captain Rettburg’s light company occupying the buildings and preparing it for defence. The 1st Nassau battalion, however, was sent to Hougoumont to reinforce this undermanned area.

Papelotte was a square complex built of stone which measured sixty five by fifty yards and was surrounded by sunken roads, hedges and woods that would be suitable for a determined defence. The area had sturdily built farms and somewhat bocage country, like most of what was called the La Belle Alliance ridge, which stretched in a concave line all the way from Hougoumont to Papelotte. It would for us and later in the battle, for Maitland’s brigade, prove a potent obstacle for the enemy and thus a formidable defence for our men.

Between eleven and twelve o’clock, enemy columns of General Brue’s brigade of Durutte’s division with some 1,800 men advanced towards our positions in Papelotte and the smaller detachments of the brigade towards La Haye and Smohain. The enemy batteries deployed and started pounding our positions, which is what the French were famous for. In the barrage our commander Major Hegmann was badly wounded in one of the first cannon shots and so Captain Frensdorf took over his position. Hegmann never recovered properly and unfortunately he would later die of his wounds. Our artillery also fired at the French positions and slowed their advance. The advance was not a success, partly I would say due to the terrain before Papelotte, but the French had committed hardly any manpower to it and were instead preparing their ‘Grand Battery’ for a massive bombardment on Wellington’s right flank. We knew that the enemy would come again and we knew that they would come in even greater force. We were, after all, holding the flank and Napoleon was famous for his victories were he routed the enemy by destroying their flanks. Therefore we had to prepare for another onslaught but we could only hold on for a certain amount of time.

The enemy second corps under Count d’Erlon finally launched their mass offensive just after midday. During the advance one of the Allied good commanders, Sir Thomas Picton, would be shot in the head and die. That must have caused morale depletion for his own men and they had a lot on their hands to stop this massive attack. The French right flank reserve cavalry under Jacquinot moved up to support Durutte’s attack in case of a counter-offensive. We were violently pushed out of Papelotte and we retreated in disarray and disorder. We were in desperate need of reinforcements. Then what for us was a miracle happened. Sir John Vandeleur’s 4th Cavalry Brigade Dragoons counter-attacked Durutte’s men, forcing them out of Papelotte. Other cavalry divisions also had overrun several of d’Erlon’s divisions, basically stopping his advance.

Now that the enemy had been driven out, this allowed our infantry to reform but even though we had retaken Papelotte, Vandeleur’s advance had been stalled by the terrifying lancers of Jacquinot’s 1st Cavalry Division, which made a desperate counter-attack in an attempt to hold their own flank. This counter-attack actually stalled the whole Allied counter-offensive that early afternoon and resulted in the death of Sir William Ponsonby, whose Brigade suffered nearly fifty per cent casualties. The result that the offensive had been stopped meant that Papelotte and our left flank was still under threat even though Durutte’s men had been thrown back in disarray. It was still undermanned and now had decreased morale.

Durutte’s division attacked Papelotte again and won the place but they would not stay there for long, we had to tell ourselves. This time we would seem to have no chance of retaking the place as Vandeleur’s Brigade had been moved to the centre to support Maitland’s division. We had only one hope which was the Prussians. Both sides’ skirmishers spotted movement towards the battlefield but neither could make out whether they were Prussians or Grouchy’s French. Finally the news came that they were Prussians. However, they attacked the French around Plancenoit and so we had to wait, but then they sent two battalions to protect the exposed flank so we were relieved by some reinforcements, although the battle and the fight for Papelotte was far from over. It was actually the first time the Prussians met up with our men so it was a big thing for both armies. Then, however, there was an accidental fire fight in which the Prussians mistook us for the French as we had blue uniforms like the French and so our own Prince Bernhard had to go to the Prussian commander and tell him to stop. The accident only lasted a couple of minutes but still took a psychological and shock toll on our men.

Then two divisions of Ziethen’s corps came to our rescue and finally our men drove out Durutte’s men, who were now close to psychological ruin. Durutte’s division was far from done, however, unlike many other French divisions along the front line. We had a massive advantage over Durutte’s men who could only muster some one thousand men and were not reinforced as the last reinforcements were sent in one last frontal assault against Wellington’s centre. Now our men were going to be on the offensive and we consistently attacked them. Now, though, the enemy were using the terrain to the advantage and they resisted fiercely. Finally, however, we made a breakthrough a few hours later when they were simply overwhelmed by our manpower. The enemy seemed destroyed, unwilling to fight and looked like a well-beaten force that was barely an army any more.

The French would now find no way back and Napoleon had really had it. We marched on Paris and then, in desperation, the French made peace. It was for our men, despite losing many comrades, a triumphant victory. We were jubilant and knowing that Napoleon’s empire would no longer be, thanks partly to our work was, just incredible. The Nassauers, we knew, could never be forgotten for the role that we played not only on the left flank but also in Hougoumont and in the centre where Bijlandt’s men had resisted d’Erlon’s advance.