

TAC NEWS

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WATERLOO'S FORGOTTEN FORTRESS Durette's Attack, and the Defense of Papelotte

How could there be a 'forgotten' anything at Waterloo? It is one of the most studied battles in military history. We all know that it ended one era, and launched another. It saw the 'Iron Duke' square off against Napoleon, finally face to face on the same field. Who can hear the names 'Hougoumont' or 'La Haye Saint,' and not think Waterloo, any more than 'Pegasus Bridge' and 'Devil's Den' evoke D-Day and Gettysburg?

British military historians have seen to it that the incredible sacrifice of their army will never be forgotten. It is only well and right that they should do so. But the casual reader might come to the conclusion that there weren't any other troops in the Allied army that Wellington commanded. The only Dutch-Belgian command that gets much coverage is Bijlandt's unfortunate brigade, posted in the exposed ground ahead of Picton's division, which fled in disorder when d'Erlon's French Corps advanced. Picton's men, badly outnumbered, managed to repel the French, who had been very poorly deployed in a formation that precluded any manoeuvre other than 'straight ahead.' At Hougoumont, these historians shower well-deserved laurels upon the Foot Guards for their dogged defense. Rarely do you hear of the 2400 men of the 1st Nassau Regiment, who held the woods, and fought all day defending the famous chateau. The role of Blucher's Prussian army, which endured a grueling march to arrive in great force on the French right, sealed Napoleon's fate, and in so doing saved Wellington's. Most of the Emperor's reserves, including part of his vaunted Old Guard, were siphoned

off to stem the Prussian tide, and therefore not available to deliver a *coup de grace* to Wellington's allied army.

In the decades following the great victory, Captain William Siborne collected extensive battle reports from every British or King's German Legion officer he could contact. His History of the Waterloo Campaign, 585 pages long and published in 1848, has provided a wealth of primary source material from the British perspective. Lamentably, few subsequent english-speaking historians have expanded their scope to foreign language sources, be they Dutch, French, or German. The direct consequence is that most books available fail to properly document the 'whole' story. Some fascinating elements of the Battle of Waterloo have therefore been overlooked.

Wellington made his career in fighting defensive battles, allowing his gallic adversaries to batter themselves before his decisive counterattack. Waterloo was no exception. He famously anchored his right at the

Papelotte today



gibraltar of Hougomont. Less famously, his left was anchored on three closely packed 'chateaus': Frischermont, La Haie, and Papelotte. These formed the 'hinge' between Wellington's Allied Army and Blucher's approaching Prussians. Had the French taken these three fortresses, Napoleon could have split his enemies apart, and provided the opportunity to fight them individually from a superior position.



To anchor the left flank of the Allied Army, Wellington posted H.R.H. Bernhard of Saxe-Weimar's Brigade around the three chateaus. Saxe-Weimar commanded 2 of the 3 battalions of the 2nd Regiment of Nassau, and the 2 battalions of the Regiment of Oranien-Nassau: approx. 3400

infantrymen. And infantry is what was needed, for the terrain in front of the Papelotte positions was heavily broken by a network of ancient roadways. Many of these roads were deeply sunken and lined on both sides with tree-topped

hedgerows. This made cavalry manoeuvre almost impossible, and greatly hindered advancing artillery.

Prince Bernhard posted 4 companies of the 1st Battalion of the Regiment of Oranien-Nassau around Frischermont. The battalion's other 2 companies, and troops of the regiment's 2nd battalion were in the village of Smohain and west from the chateau of La Haie. The light company of the 3/2 Nassau garrisoned Papelotte. 500 meters to the northwest was the main



reserve, the 2nd and 3rd Battalions of the Second Nassau Regiment. Further

back, at least 700 meters further away, were Vivian's hussar brigade & Vandeleur's brigades of light dragoons, flanking Vicke's Hanoverian Landwehr Brigade.

The French Threat

Menacing the Allied left were two large formations of French troops. Holding the flank was Jacquinet's First Cavalry Division: 3rd *Chassuers à Cheval*, 3rd and 4th Lancers (1067 men and officers arrayed in 7 squadrons); Marbot's 7th Hussars scouting toward the east, and the 2nd Company of the *Artillerie à Cheval* Regiment (6 guns). As noted, the ground between the armies augered against a frontal cavalry assault.

Of greater concern were the 8 battalions of 48 year old Major General Count Pierre-Francois-Joseph Durette's 4th Division of d'Erlon's I Corps. The first brigade, commanded by BG Chevalier Pégot, went forward with the rest of the d'Erlon's abortive attack against the Allied center, but Brue's Second Brigade, 2 battalions each of the 95th and 85th *Ligne*, deployed facing Saxe-Weimar's position. Durette therefore had 1700 men supported by 3 horse batteries (1 from Jacquinet & 2 detached from Milhaud's Heavy Cavalry) guns for the attacks on Papelotte: he was outnumbered by the assembled defenders in the area by nearly 2:1!

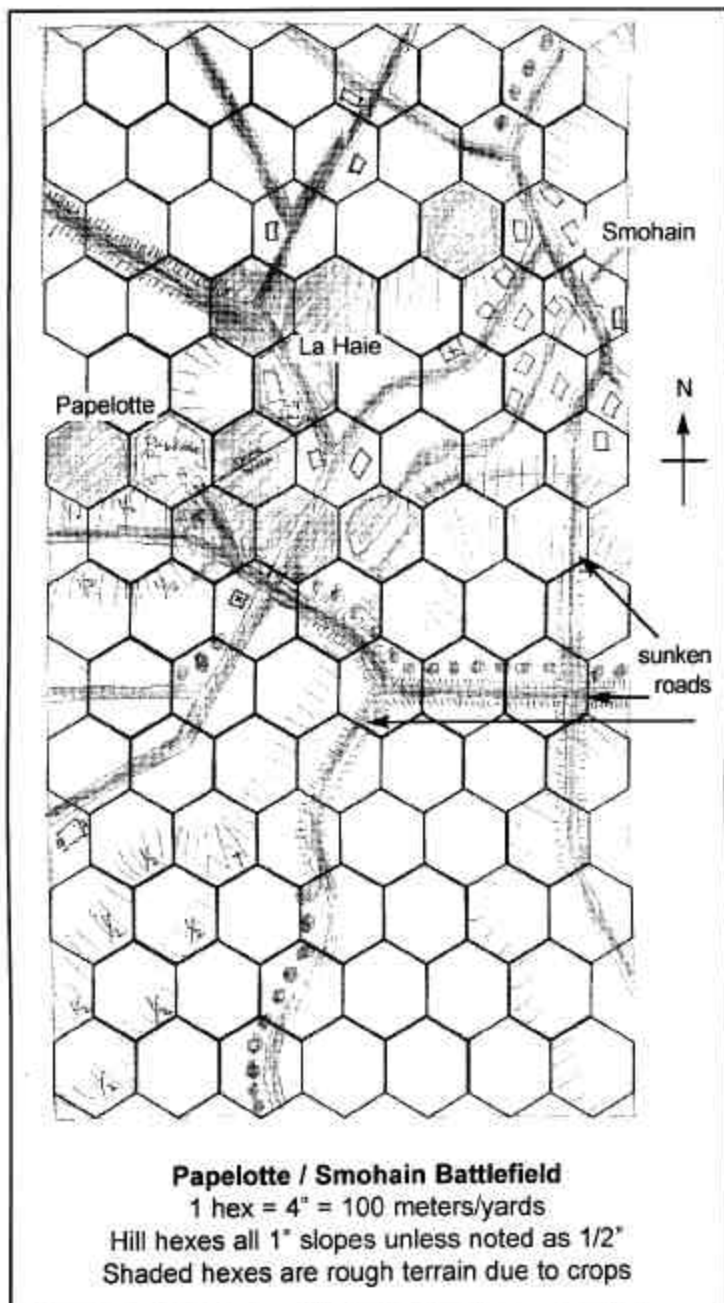
Papelotte was subjected to a 90 minute bombardment from the right end of the 'Grand Battery', preparation for I Corps assault. As the majority of d'Erlon's Corps attacked the Allied center, the skirmishers from Brue's Brigade moved out toward Papelotte. It was 1:30 pm.

The Assault

The *voltegeurs* (light infantrymen) drove back the Dutch skirmishers. The French battalions, presum-

Fusilier, Second Nassau Regiment





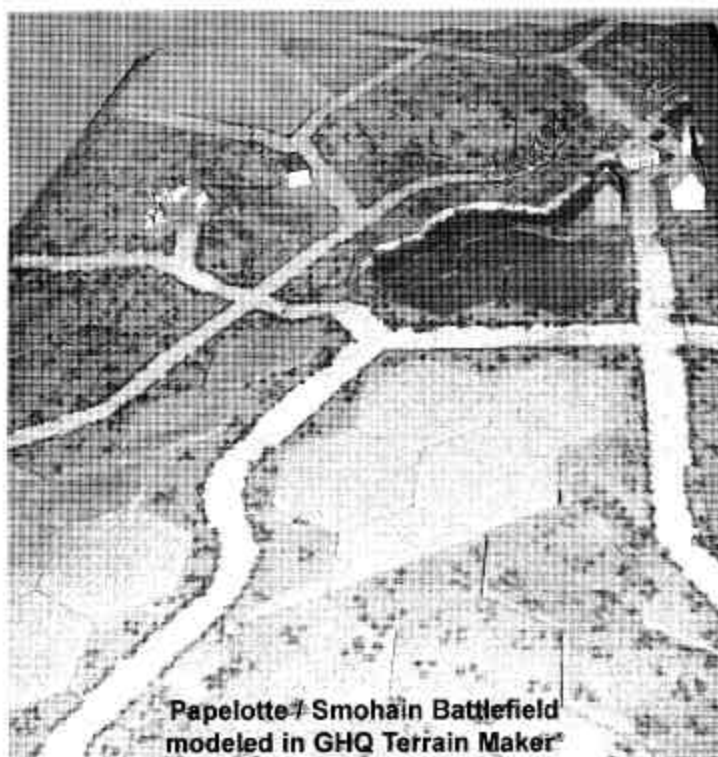
ably advancing in parallel 'attack columns' and then deploying into line, descended into the low ground of the Smohain valley and then climbed the slope to launch a furious assault. The French artillery unlimbered and commenced a plunging fire into the village of Smohain. The French skirmishers were badly outnumbered (each Nassau company had near 200 men!) Soon Brue was sending whole battalions, in open order, into the hedges and broken ground around the hamlet. One French horse battery relocated to the very edge of the village, firing cannister down the lanes.

Eventually, the local Nassau commander, *Hauptmann* von Rettberg, pulled his dispersed troops from the outlying buildings, bolstering the defense of the main chateau. Two French battalions hit Pappelotte, and found one of the gates undefended. Fierce fighting focused on the main farmhouse. The Nassauers were

driven back. This attack, in turn, was flanked when the 10th, 11th, and 12th Companies of the 2nd Nassau came to the rescue. Rallying the retreating garrison, a spirited bayonet charge expelled the French from Pappelotte's walls.

The defeat of d'Erlon's Corps, and its subsequent retreat before the combined Allied cavalry, rendered the advanced position in the Smohain valley untenable. As some of Brue's men fell back to the first sunken road, the Nassauers counterattacked with the bayonet. It struck and shattered one French battalion, whose recoil routed the battalion in close support. Dutch cavalry under de Ghigny threatened this mass of retreating Frenchmen, who took shelter around Lobau's men, over a kilometer from Pappelotte.

This left many French troops holding the town of Smohain and outbuildings around all three fortified farm houses. Durette marshalled his battalions, regrouped, and prepared to resume the fight for Pappelotte. He gathered what remained of his division, as Pégot's brigade was down to only 2 1/2 battalions. Early in the evening, they re-entered the Smohain valley. Supported by 2 foot and 2 horse batteries, he pinned Saxe-Weimar's men around Smohain. Pégot's men attacked Pappelotte, while the 2nd brigade hit Smohain. Cannister swept the Nassauers from the walls of Pappelotte, and the guns shattered the doors. The French poured in, and then fortified the position.



The Nassauers fell back, and reformed in a semi-circle facing the French. Suddenly they were fired on from the rear. Was it Grouchy's French force? No - the Prussian van of Ziethen's Prussian I Corps had arrived on the field, and mistaken Saxe-Weimar's men for Frenchmen. After a brief firefight, the mistake was identified and the lead Prussian brigade, commanded by Steinmetz and supported by Losthin, formed to attack Durette's depleted division.

As the Prussian attack came rolling up the Smohain valley toward the heights of Papelotte, the day was fast waning. Durette withdrew toward the south west, driven by both Allied and Prussian troops. As the

retreat became more disorganized, Prussian cavalry swept in. Durette received two sabre wounds, one across his face. His troops held formation longer than most of the *Armée du Nord*, but in the end the day was lost.

The fate of Napoleon's second bid for empire was sealed elsewhere on the field, when the Old Guard recoiled from the British guns and men, and the massive Prussian juggernaut behind Plancenoit. Had not Hougoumont and Papelotte anchored the Allied flanks, who can say who would have been the master of the day?

by Jim Moffet

THE BATTLE OF MORTAIN - FRANCE -AUGUST 1944

Earlier this year, TACNEWS described the process used to convert a topographic map into a gaming table. The scenario that was depicted was a battlefield from the Normandy campaign, the battlefield near Mortain. GHQ promised to show you how the board came out. Here it is!

