

## ALTERNATE HISTORY

**What-If Colli Had Rushed Toward Montenotte?**

Kevin Zucker

*In the campaign, we have placed no limits on the movements of the Piedmontese Army. The Army commander, Michelangelo Alessandro Colli-Marchi, was not aware of Bonaparte's moves until the afternoon of 12 April. So it would be reasonable for players who want a more historical campaign to place a restriction on the movement of the Piedmontese Army until late on the 12<sup>th</sup> or early on the 13<sup>th</sup>. (However, there was no excuse for this lapse in intelligence, even though Voltri and Montenotte were within the territory of Genoa.)*



At the outset of the Piedmont campaign, the Piedmontese Army was on a defensive footing, as their positions on 11 and 12 April show. The natural inclination of troops in such a position is to maintain the line, as they had been doing in the mountain passes successfully for years.

The Piedmontese army was not of the character of the French. Its initiative—a necessary ingredient of victory—was low. Training in brigade level maneuvers (I surmise) was nil. They used Frederick's drill-book and had a Prussian drill master. This method still places reliance on the firing line as opposed to a free maneuver of regiments. It's really the broadside effect of massed muskets they are looking for, and not maneuver on the battlefield—the old dialectic of maneuver versus firepower. This



*Feldmarschal-Leutnant  
Michelangelo  
Alessandro  
Colli-Marchi*

campaign would shatter the Frederickian system.

News of the French offensive reached the Piedmontese during the afternoon (12 April), but Colli was remarkably untroubled by it. He issued an order to the combined grenadier battalion under Colonel del Carretto, ... to advance to Cosseria and occupy the heights there at daybreak, and instructed them to defend to the last extremity. However, he also wrote to Provera in the evening saying, 'I do not think the enemy will advance very far along the Bormidas.' Nevertheless, he promised him more reinforcements if necessary and said that he would try to turn the enemy's attention to the south. Late on the 12<sup>th</sup> he left for Montezemolo himself with four battalions of grenadiers to await the next French move.<sup>1</sup>

In the game there are no limits on the Piedmontese, and nothing keeping them in their positions where they remained historically. Colli did take a small force toward Montezemolo, but for whatever

<sup>1</sup> Boycott-Brown, p. 233

reason he didn't put his entire force into action. It was probably a combination of:

- 1) Lack of clarity about the intentions of Bonaparte
- 2) His troops were not ready to march<sup>2</sup>
- 3) His supplies were not mobile.

While the Austrian Commander Beaulieu was focused on defending Genoa and Voltri, General Provera, the commander of the Austrian auxiliary corps, was to establish an outpost line between Colli and Beaulieu.

Provera had arrived in the Bormida valley on 6 April with four battalions and two companies (2,000 men) of his Auxiliary Corps. With these meagre resources he had proceeded to form an (outpost line) that stretched from the Austrian army on his left and ran through Dego, Santa Giulia, Monesiglio and Mombarcaro down to Ceva, where he linked with the Piedmontese on his right. It was about 22 miles of hills, valleys, woods, rivers and snow-covered mountains.<sup>3</sup>

This line was too far west to provide any advance warning. Part of the problem was in the lack of staff cooperation over plans of campaign. Colli did present a plan for an offensive in a meeting with Beaulieu on 6 April.

It suggested a vigorous thrust to the sea towards Savona and Finale to cut off part of the French army and defeat it in detail. Its preparation involved attracting the attention of the French towards Genoa. For the main movement it stated, "At least 16,000 men of Colli's Army and an equal number of Beaulieu's must be employed in this expedition. The former will concentrate before Ceva and the others around Cairo." On the day of the attack, feints were to be

made on the heights of Voltri and Ormea, while the best troops would take Montenotte and Monte Negino. On the right, Settepani would be attacked, and the troops would then descend to the sea. Another force would similarly advance from the area of Garessio towards Loano.<sup>4</sup>

This indicates that each army was believed to have the capacity to move at least 16,000 men in an offensive. However, neither the offensive nor a proposed defensive plan was adopted.



Beaulieu rejected both of the Piedmontese plans, and it was no doubt fortunate for Bonaparte that he did, because the adoption of either of them would have made the French task much more difficult.<sup>5</sup>

The Piedmontese Army, for its part, remained on the defensive as ordered. Colli would probably have been reluctant to move much in any case, as he had become worried by French activity to the south of Ceva, which seemed to him to presage an attack on his positions. He informed Beaulieu of this, but of course the latter had already made up his own mind that Genoa was the goal of French ambitions.<sup>6</sup>

Sérurier's men had also been involved in some minor actions with the Piedmontese, and ... must have looked to Colli suspiciously like a preparation to outflank Ceva and try to cut his line of retreat to Mondovi. *This almost certainly helped to discourage the Piedmontese from moving forward* into a position where they would be better placed to support the Austrians. But an even greater incentive to stay where they were was provided by Beaulieu himself, who ... assigned Colli a largely

<sup>2</sup> "They were kept in a state of semi-readiness in case the enemy made any unusual moves." B-B p. 139.

<sup>3</sup> Boycott-Brown, p. 186

<sup>4</sup> Boycott-Brown, pp. 148-49.

<sup>5</sup> Boycott-Brown, p. 150

<sup>6</sup> Boycott-Brown, p. 186. The troops of Sérurier's French division arrived south of Ceva on the 16<sup>th</sup>

defensive role, only asking him to ‘watch the two valleys of the Bormida and Tanaro, and make demonstrations against the enemy by ably advancing his outposts.’ Given that Bonaparte was hoping to separate the armies of his two enemies so

that he could fight each of them in turn, he could hardly have asked for more.<sup>7</sup>

This decision automatically ensured that Bonaparte would succeed, but in the game other outcomes should be possible.

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<sup>7</sup> Boycott-Brown, p. 177.