

# Carl von Alten

Niedersächsisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, Hannover: Hann.41 XXI, Nr.151. Report, dated 20th June 1815, by Lieutenant-General Count Carl August von Alten, commanding the 3rd British Infantry Division, to His Royal Highness the Duke of Cambridge (translated from German):

Your Royal Highness has already been informed by Lieutenant-General von der Decken of the most fortunate results we attained in the combats of the 16th and 18th of this month against the army under Bonaparte; however, I feel duty bound to submit a detailed report of the events to Your Highness. My 1st Adjutant, Lieutenant Wiegmann, who carries this report to Your Royal Highness, participated in both battles and will be able to provide you with information on any of the points I may have omitted. I therefore recommend this officer, who displays outstanding talent, to you my Royal Highness.

On the evening of the 15th, the whole army marched from its different and widely dispersed cantonments towards Nivelles. On the 16th, 3 divisions of infantry and several cavalry regiments reached this place and advanced towards Quatre Bras, where the roads from Mons to Namur and from Brussels to Charleroi cross. The French had divided their army and simultaneously attacked that of Feldmarschall Blücher and the corps under the Duke of Wellington, which were advancing against them. Our troops moved into a position on the high road from Namur, between Quatre Bras and Sart à Mavelines, so that the right flank occupied the former, and the left flank the latter village. This deployment was undertaken amidst a very heavy enemy cannonade, yet not a single man yielded. The enemy had established himself in a wood on the right of Quatre Bras. This wood was attacked by our side and captured and in turn retaken by the enemy. Both sides commenced a heavy cannonade, while the enemy tried on several occasions to force the left wing, which was formed by my division. I detached the 1st Lüneburg Battalion to drive the enemy from the village of Piermont [Piraumont], which the Brunswick infantry had been forced to abandon. Lieutenant-Colonel von Klenke executed this task with great determination and succeeded not only in taking the village, but also in driving the enemy back into the wood beyond, and he subsequently resisted the repeated attempts made by the enemy to recapture the village. Thereafter, the enemy's infantry advanced in several columns, against which I detached the Grubenhagen, Duke of York and Bremen Battalions. These, with the support of the artillery of the Legion under the command of Captain Cleaves, drove the enemy back. The enemy's cavalry then dared to attack our right flank several times, but the tenacity of our troops prevented them from breaking through. On this occasion the Lüneburg Landwehr Battalion, under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel von Ramdohr, distinguished itself. They allowed the enemy to advance to within 30 paces and delivered such a fusillade that the cavalry was immediately driven back, having sustained considerable losses. We were delighted to have maintained our position, but as the Prussian army, which stood on our left wing, had suffered a heavy defeat, we were forced to withdraw at midday on the 17th. My division formed the rearguard as far as Genappe. We rested there for some hours before continuing our march on the road to Brussels until reaching Mont St. Jean, as the enemy pursued us. The entire army commanded by the Duke of Wellington took a position on the heights in front of this village, so that the left wing was located at the village of Frischermont, and the right on the high road from



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Nivelles to Brussels. The road from Genappe to Brussels intersected the centre of the army, which was formed by my division. The enclosed drawing of the battlefield, undertaken in haste by Major Kuntze, will provide Your Royal Highness with an idea of our position and of the attacks made by the enemy. The farm situated on the said high road, in front of the left wing of my division, was occupied by the 2nd Light Battalion of the King's German Legion, under the command of Major Baring, in accordance with my orders. A company of Hanoverian Jägers and two Light Companies from the British Guards were sent forward to occupy the farm and wood which were situated immediately in front of the right wing. However, it is impossible for me, Your Royal Highness, to provide you with an account of the battle in the manner I did for the first encounter, because the army was extended and I could not see the left wing, and therefore I have to limit my report to that which concerns my division.

The infantry of the army corps under His Royal Highness the Prince of Orange, to which my division belonged, stood in columns *en echequier*, deployed at  $\frac{1}{4}$  distance. with the battalions side by side, the right positioned more to the left, and the left more to the right, in order to be able to deploy or to form in square immediately. There was sufficient distance between the various columns to pass through the interval, which is exactly what the cavalry and the artillery in the third line were able to do. General Lord Hill's Corps was positioned in reserve close to Braine la Leud [sic], while at the same time covering the high road from Nivelles to Brussels. Beyond this high road was a detachment of cavalry, positioned as such in order to observe the enemy's movements.

At 1 o'clock in the afternoon the enemy advanced Tirailleurs towards the wood in front of our right wing, a position which was of the utmost importance for us to maintain, for otherwise the enemy would have secured enough to have threatened our right flank. Thereafter, he deployed strong infantry columns supported by artillery. We advanced our cannon and fired at these columns, but we could not interrupt their advance. The wood was taken and then retaken on a number of occasions. The Guards Division, which was positioned on the extreme right wing, defended this position with intrepid bravery. Meanwhile, the enemy deployed his numerous cannon and a very heavy cannonade commenced. Under the protection of this fire, a column of several thousand men advanced on the high road from Genappe, but they were repelled by the two Light Battalions and by the 8th Line Battalion of the King's German Legion and by the Lüneburg Light Infantry Battalion. Thereafter, our battalions formed squares, because behind the enemy infantry was a numerous cavalry which advanced with impetuosity and charged the infantry *en debandade*, and then encircled the squares which were formed *en echequier* upon the height. These stood impenetrably until the English cavalry passed between the intervals and threw the enemy back. The squares exposed to the greatest danger were those commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel von Wurmb and Major von Schkopp, Lieutenant-Colonel von Langrehr having already been taken to the rear wounded. Now, the enemy cannonade became heavier and the firing on both sides gradually increased to a degree which even the most experienced soldiers had never witnessed. More than 200 cannon acted simultaneously at this time.

The enemy's infantry and cavalry attacks were repeated on a number of occasions and from several sides. Bonaparte was determined to pierce the centre and to force his way to Brussels. One column was repelled by Colonel von Ompteda, who placed himself at the head of his battalion. However, the enemy approached closer and closer with fresh troops and his artillery fired canister at our squares from a distance of only 150 paces, yet not a single man yielded; the dead were moved aside and the ranks closed. The squares advanced against the enemy's cavalry, which had captured part of our position, and forced it to leave the heights in consequence of the well-maintained fire it delivered. But eventually

some of the squares were forced to give way to the enemy, as they had been reduced to almost nothing; yet they withdrew in an orderly manner and advanced immediately when ordered to do so. The Duke of Wellington was an eyewitness to this conduct. This hero was always at the point of the greatest danger, while His Royal Highness the Prince of Orange displayed courage worthy of his great ancestors. It was his corps against which the main force of the enemy was directed, led by Bonaparte in person.

Finally, when we found ourselves in the midst of the worst crisis and were hardly able to resist the strength of the enemy anymore, General von Bülow, who had marched to our support with 30,000 men, attacked the enemy upon his right flank. Now the victory was ours; the enemy fled at all points and abandoned the main part of his artillery. Almost 200 cannon and several Eagles were taken. The number of prisoners taken is unconfirmed, but it will be many thousands. Our army advanced as far as Binche, and the Prussians to Charleroi.

It is with deep regret that I have to inform Your Royal Highness of the high price we have paid during these two days, because the greater part of our most excellent officers have fallen. Among these I include Colonels von Ompteda and du Plat, and Lieutenant-Colonels von Wurmb and von Langrehr. However, we can take comfort from the knowledge that these men have covered themselves with glory, and that the Hanoverians have established a reputation as courageous. As an eyewitness I can judge those battalions which were part of my division, namely the Bremen, Lüneburg, Verden, Grubenhagen and Duke of York, and state that they distinguished themselves and should be hereafter mentioned in our military annals. I have also received very favourable accounts from several commanders of the Landwehr brigades, who were also engaged in the battle. Colonel Halkett gives particular praise to the Osnabrück Battalion. Of our cavalry, only the Duke of Cumberland Regiment was present in the battle, but did not attack. It was exposed to the cannonade for a considerable time and sustained significant losses.

Despite the fact that I had the opportunity to see every officer and soldier carry out his duty with equal merit, I feel obliged to mention several who particularly distinguished themselves during these two hot days; I therefore hope that Your Royal Highness will give them the satisfaction of your approbation, as you are always inclined to reward meritorious conduct, which is the greatest incentive. Major-General Count von Kielmansegge gave the most outstanding example to his brigade throughout by his bravery and intrepidity, and supported me with all his strength throughout. The conduct of the Lieutenant-Colonels von Klenke, von Wurmb and von Langrehr, and of the Majors von Schkopp, von Bülow and von Stockhausen was worthy of the highest respect. I also wish to recommend Major Count von Münster to Your Royal Highness, and enclose the report from Colonel Halkett. I am no less indebted to the officers of my staff, namely Colonel von Berger as the chief of the general staff, who remained with me on the 16th and 18th and acted to my benefit with both words and deeds. Your Royal Highness knows the commendable talents of this officer, and I would like to add that I will not be able to maintain the command of the Hanoverian troops, as I am seriously wounded, if Colonel von Berger's contusion will not allow him to attend to the matters necessary for it.

I should also like to mention and to provide deserved merit to Major Heise of the King's German Legion, who was attached to me as a military secretary by Your Royal Highness; during these two days he showed a fervour and activity which bestow the utmost honour upon him. Majors Kuntze and von Schlütter, who had no special appointment, because I only had the command of a division, seized every opportunity to assist, which is why I cannot leave them unmentioned in my report. Also Lieutenant Count von Kielmansegge has proven to be most useful to me.



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It is impossible for me to mention all the officers namely, those who have distinguished themselves during these days, because I have not received all of the brigade commander's reports. But I will collect them and send Your Royal Highness an extract of each, so that these officers can be acknowledged by Your Royal Highness. In addition, not all of the returns of the killed, wounded and missing men have as yet arrived, because the army advanced immediately. I hope, therefore, that I can forward these in a few days. The returns with names of those who have fallen should follow these.

As public honour is the highest accolade an officer strives to achieve, I dare to suggest to Your Royal Highness, that you might follow this most graciously and accord to those who have distinguished themselves during these days, as high award as the English army is able to provide, because the government cannot bestow decorations. I am persuaded that this would be most effective to the spirit of the army and that beyond doubt, the best consequences would follow such an act.

Assuming, that Your Royal Highness acknowledges this proposal with applause, I will name those of special merit whom I am convinced deserve such a distinction. I feel obliged to call Your Royal Highness' attention to the widows of the fallen officers, corporals and soldiers. Several of these need assistance, and the country could provide no greater honour, in my opinion, to the memory of these men, who sacrificed their lives for their country and for their sovereign, than in according them assistance.

With regards to the command following the losses we have sustained, I reserve the right to deposit my proposals with Your Royal Highness shortly. However, it will hardly be possible to complete all the battalions, and it may be advisable to merge several of them. Above all, there is a lack of suitable officers for the various staff appointments. The wound I received at the end of the battle will not prevent me from maintaining the command of the Hanoverian troops, if Your Royal Highness so wishes under the circumstances, and I hope to be fully recovered within a few weeks. I would also like to inform Your Royal Highness how deeply I feel at the loss Your Royal Highness has suffered within your family from the death of the Duke of Brunswick. He fell close to the Duke of Wellington, and every German mourns the loss of this generous sovereign, who accomplished so much for good and who fought and died for it. C. von Alten.

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