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The True Tactical Significance of the Château of Hougoumont during the Battle of Waterloo



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For many who have read about Waterloo, the name Hougoumont conjures up a picture of a few heroic British guardsmen fighting against overwhelming odds in defence of a vital part of Wellington's line whose capture by the French may well have resulted in the loss of the battle. After all, Wellington is credited with saying, 'The

outcome of the battle of Waterloo rested upon the closing of the gates at Hougoumont.¹ But to what extent is this really true?

I believe that many of us that are interested in the battle and have read numerous accounts of the campaign feel that Hougoumont was a key part of the allied defence, and because Wellington and many histories seem to say so, and perhaps because the French appear to have expended so much effort in attempting to capture it, this remains unchallenged. So why did Wellington see Hougoumont as so important and why did the French apparently try so hard to capture it; was Hougoumont the key to winning the battle, and if not, was it not just a white elephant that the French should have ignored?

The aim of this article is not to recount the detail of the fight for Hougoumont, but to examine the true tactical importance of the complex to the result of the battle by looking at both the allied and French perspectives of this iconic 'battle within a battle'.



Context

Any student of Waterloo will be familiar with the château of Hougoumont; it was located about 300 metres in front of the right (western) end of a ridgeline that marked Wellington's main position, lying in the shallow valley that divided the two sides. Both could look down into the buildings and garden, but it was partially hidden by the wood, kitchen gardens and folds in the ground from the French and by dead ground and hedge lines from the allied ridge. The buildings themselves were strong and surrounded by walls with limited external access. But as an obstacle, it extended far beyond this. To the southeast was a large wood, composed of big, mature trees; to the southwest and west was the kitchen garden bounded by mature trees; to the east was an orchard and in front of this were two fields bounded by high, thick hedges.

¹ Although this is a familiar quote with a number of variations, I am not absolutely sure of its provenance; it is one of those sayings that is often quoted but never referenced, so I am not absolutely convinced of its authenticity.

To the rear (north), although the château's garden was not bounded by a wall, there was a sunken lane that offered a ready-made trench and point of refuge to the defenders. Its total circumference was therefore considerable; including all these features it had a frontage of some 500 metres and a depth of about the same.

Placed as it was, it protected Wellington's right wing from direct attack, insofar as any attack on this end of the line would have to pass either to one side or the other of it before it could come into contact with the allied troops on the ridge. In this respect, it was a large obstacle that would have to be by-passed in clear view of the allied troops, and a manoeuvre by-passing it to the west would entail a very wide outflanking movement which would give the allied commander plenty of time to prepare counter-measures.

At the time of the first French attack, the garrison of Hougoumont consisted of; 800 men of the 1st/2nd Nassau Regiment commanded by Captain Büsgen; the light companies of the 2nd/2nd and 2nd/3rd British Foot Guards, (about 200 men); a company of the Hanoverian Feld-Jäger (about 100 men) and a company of jägers (in total about 200 men) from each of the Lünebourg and Grubenhagen Feld Battalions).²

By the end of the battle, the following had also been drawn into the fighting for this post; the light companies of the 2nd/1st and 3rd/1st Foot Guards, most of the 2nd/2nd and 2nd/3rd Foot Guard Battalions (who retained just a small force back on the ridge to protect the colours) and part of the Brunswick Avant-Garde Battalion; whilst behind Hougoumont and drawn into the fighting in the orchard and the fields, although not permanently deployed there, were the battalions of the brigades of du Plat (1st Kings German Legion Brigade) and Halkett (3rd Hanoverian Brigade).

Contrary to popular belief, and even many recent accounts of the battle, the whole of the French 2nd Corps (Reille) was not committed to the attacks on Hougoumont. The total force involved was three brigades; the two of Prince Jérôme's 6th Division (brigades of Bauduin and Soye) and one brigade (Tissot's: vice Gauthier, wounded at Quatre Bras) of Foy's 9th Division. In total a maximum of 6,000 men and given the casualties suffered at Quatre Bras, almost certainly less (Reille's corps had suffered the brunt of the fighting there). Supporting them were the three divisional 6pdr batteries of 2nd Corps (the corps 12pdr battery had been detached to the grand battery).

Those histories of the battle that have the whole of Reille's 2nd Corps committed to the fighting for Hougoumont have not consulted well-placed and dependable testimony from both General Foy³ and Colonel Trefcon⁴ (chief-of-staff of Bachelu's 5th Division, the other division of Reille's corps), which clearly show that only half of the corps was directly involved in the fighting there. There are no dependable primary sources that contradict this, despite the romantic notion of such overwhelming odds.

² Various sources give slight variations to this list.

³ Girod de l'Ain, *Vie Militaire du Général Foy*, (Paris: Plon, 1900), pp.280-81.

⁴ Trefcon, *Carnet de Campagne du Colonel Trefcon, 1793-1815*, (Paris: Edmond Dubois, 1914, originally published in 1892), pp.187-89.]

According to French eye-witness accounts,⁵ Bachelu's division and Foy's 2nd Brigade took part in an infantry assault on the main allied line at the end of the great cavalry charges and did not take part in the fighting around Hougoumont.



Wellington's Plans

When considering the defensive value of the Mont-Saint-Jean ridge, Wellington considered his right (western) flank the most vulnerable and he was concerned that it was this flank that was in most danger of being outflanked by the French and the whole right wing being enveloped. The position of Hougoumont was well sited to guard against this and to force an outflanking force to have to swing widely out to the west to avoid it. He therefore decided to deploy some of his best troops there, and then to reinforce them continually as the battle progressed.

Hougoumont, and la Haye Sainte in the centre of his position, have often been called 'breakwaters', but might better be described as outworks, as in a siege, where the aim is to break up enemy attacks on the main position, attract fire and manpower away from the main line of defence and to cause attrition on the enemy. It is no military secret that the defence of a strongpoint requires less manpower than to attack one, offering an advantageous economy of force. Artillery support to the garrison of Hougoumont could be provided from the ridge behind, the higher elevation enabling the allied artillery to fire over the heads of the garrison and to dominate the approaches. Indeed, it may be considered that as long as Hougoumont was in allied hands, the ridgeline immediately behind it was almost unassailable.

As if to reinforce the importance Wellington put on the holding of Hougoumont, he directed a considerable effort to improve its defences and even took pioneers from the garrison of la Haye Sainte to ensure there were the resources and manpower to

⁵ See Notes 3 and 4 above.

do this.⁶ In contrast to la Haye Sainte, the work to strengthen it went on throughout the night.

Even putting aside the fact that Hougoumont offered a strongpoint of impressive strength and was a considerable challenge to assault in the days of the manoeuvre of large, close order formations on the battlefield, its position also had another significant advantage to Wellington; apart from guarding his main line on the right, it also blocked the natural route that gave the French the shortest access into the shallow valley that ran around the ridge at the western end which offered them an opportunity to outflank his right wing .

It can therefore be fairly said that Hougoumont would have been an important outpost if Napoleon had chosen to attack or outflank the right of Wellington's line. Once it became clear this was not going to be the case, it was always going to be of secondary importance because even if it was to fall, the integrity of the main line of defence on the ridge would not necessarily be compromised. In the best case, Hougoumont would attract large numbers of French troops whilst offering them little advantage if they were to succeed in capturing it.

We must now look at what the importance of Hougoumont was to the French, what advantages its capture would have offered them and whether there was a need to attack it at all.



Napoleon's Plans

Napoleon's stated plan for the battle was to attack Wellington's centre left with a view to seizing Mont Saint Jean, splitting the allied army into two and cutting the road to Brussels which would have been the allied line of retreat.⁷ In his memoirs, Napoleon

⁶ See Baring's account of the battle published in *Letters from the Battle of Waterloo*, edited by Gareth Glover, (London: Greenhill Books, 2004), p.243.

⁷ *Napoleon's Memoirs*, edited by Somerset de Chair, (London: The Soho Book Company. 1986), p.525.

records that he did not intend to turn Wellington's right as, if successful, this would have pushed the defeated allies into the relative safety of the Prussian army, which he naturally wished to avoid. It can be seen therefore, that he did not intend to make a major attack against Wellington's right, where Hougoumont stood and for this reason alone, Hougoumont cannot be considered of vital importance once the battle began.

Napoleon goes on to describe Jérôme's attack on Hougoumont but does not share what his intentions were when ordering it. However, he gives us a hint when he writes, 'This [Hougoumont] was defended by an English guards division, the enemy's best troops, which I was glad to see on his right, which made the attack on the left all the easier.'⁸ This suggests that his intention was for the attack to be a diversionary attack with the aim of drawing troops away from the point where his main attack was planned to fall; the allied left centre. The fact that the action around Hougoumont gets no further mention in his memoirs suggests that in Napoleon's mind at least, it was of little or no importance; merely a diversionary attack. Hougoumont gets no mention at all in Napoleon's account of the battle that was published in the *Moniteur* on the 21st June.

A number of French histories also describe the attack on Hougoumont as 'diversionary', 'false' or a 'feint'⁹ and even Clausewitz, in his critique of the campaign, concludes, 'It almost seems as if this was only supposed to be a feint...'¹⁰ Even Maxwell, in his biography of Wellington describes the attack as a 'feint'¹¹. However, a number of more modern commentators have questioned this but do not clearly articulate why. Perhaps it was because the French made such efforts to capture it that they conclude that Napoleon must have intended to do so and point out that his orders do not state that it was just a diversionary attack. Whilst the latter is true enough, Napoleon's written orders merely state, 'The 2nd Corps will also advance keeping abreast of the 1st Corps.' Hougoumont gets no mention in his written orders, so the fact that the attack went ahead only confirms that Napoleon must have ordered it and that this must have been a verbal order, as it is inconceivable that such an attack would have been launched without orders. The commander of the 2nd Corps was General Reille; General Bachelu's (commander 5th Division, 2nd Corps) chief of staff reports that Reille had a long conversation with Napoleon before the battle started.¹²

However, convincing confirmation that it was a diversionary attack comes from two primary sources. The first comes from a staff officer to Marshal Soult, Napoleon's chief-of-staff. Colonel Petiet wrote in his souvenirs, 'Marshal Ney would commence the attack on the village of Mont-Saint-Jean, at the cross-roads, suggesting that the Emperor's project was to open up the Brussels road and to make a false attack on

⁸ Ibid., p.526.

⁹ See Houssaye, Quinet and Charras.

¹⁰ Clausewitz's critique is published in Moran and Pedlow, *On Waterloo, Clausewitz, Wellington and the Campaign of 1815*, (USA: Clausewitz.com, 2010), p.142.

¹¹ Maxwell, Sir Herbert, *The Life of Wellington*, (London: Sampson Low, Marston and Company, 1900), Volume 2, p.65.

¹² Trefcon, op. cit., p.184

the left, at the Hougoumont farm, in order to draw English forces there continually ...¹³ But perhaps even more convincing is General Foy, who commanded the 6th Division in the 2nd Corps, who wrote in a letter just five days after the battle, 'the affair of the Hougoumont wood drew the enemy's attention and fire to our left. It was evidently a secondary attack...'¹⁴

Not all British eye-witnesses saw the French attack on Hougoumont as a concerted attack to capture it. Captain James Shaw, later General Sir James Shaw Kennedy, who served in the quartermaster's department of the British 3rd Division, wrote, 'No one can doubt, who knows the field of battle, and who is even tolerably informed of the circumstances, that Napoleon's plan of attack was that of breaking Wellington's centre at la Haye Sainte, overthrowing the left of the Allied line, and thus going far to ensure the defeat of the Anglo-Allied army...Two hours had been lost to Napoleon in the attack of Hougoumont, which attack was *only an auxiliary operation to the main* [my emphasis] one by which he hoped to gain the battle.'¹⁵

It seems undeniable that if Napoleon planned to break through Wellington's line to the east of the main Brussels road, there was absolutely no advantage to be had in committing a large number of troops to an attack on the extreme west against a position that was so strong that it would surely be a meat grinder for the troops taking part and what possible advantage would it offer the main attack in the centre other than as a diversion?



¹³ Petiet, *Mémoires du Général Auguste Petiet, Hussard de l'Empire, Souvenirs Historiques, Militaires et Particuliers, 1784-1815*, (Paris: S.P.M., 1996), p.443.

¹⁴ Girod de l'Ain, *op. cit.*, pp.280-81.

¹⁵ Shaw Kennedy, James, *Notes on the Battle of Waterloo*, reprint by Spellmount, 2003, p.106.

The 2nd Corps d'Armée

But why, if we are to believe that Napoleon had no intention of making a determined effort to capture Hougoumont did the French 2nd Corps uselessly sacrifice so many men in their efforts to capture it?

If we have already absolved Napoleon of blame for the assaults on Hougoumont that continued throughout the battle, then it seems that at least some responsibility must lie with Marshal Ney, who had been delegated the command of the tactical battle by Napoleon and given command of the 1st and 2nd Corps d'Armée and the reserve cavalry corps of Milhaud and Kellerman. Perhaps so pre-occupied with the main attacks in the centre, he appears to have taken no interest in the battle for Hougoumont. As Hougoumont was merely a diversionary attack perhaps he felt that he did not need to be directly involved, but a failure to check all was going well there proved to be a serious failing. Ney's *aide de camp* and acting chief-of-staff, Colonel Hèymes wrote a lengthy account of the battle, but does not mention the fight for Hougoumont except that it was conducted by 2nd Corps. Ney did send one of his junior *aides de camp*, *chef d'escadron* Levavasseur¹⁶ to Prince Jérôme to see how things were progressing, but perhaps not being fully aware of his mission Levavasseur claims he advised the prince to commit his whole division into the wood! This seems to have been the highwater mark of Ney's involvement in the fighting at Hougoumont.¹⁷

We must now look at the contribution of the commander of 2nd Corps; General Reille. Whilst we do not know what orders were given by Reille, did write an account of the campaign, in which he says,

*Towards eleven o'clock, Napoleon gave his instructions for the attack; it was to be made in echelons formed with the right in the lead. The 1st Corps to the right of the main road and the 2nd to the left; in this way, the 1st Corps, which had not previously been engaged with the enemy, was to engage first, whilst the 2nd was to support this movement covering the left to the Hougoumont wood. Prince Jérôme, commanding the 9th Division, was directed on this point, having behind his left Piré's cavalry division; General Foy was to be in the centre and General Bachelu on the right, up to the main road... The 9th Division descended on the Hougoumont wood, its first brigade advanced and wanted to capture the farm of this name, which had been fortified, instead of holding in the low ground behind the wood and maintaining a strong line of skirmishers in front. The order was given several times, but other attacks were uselessly attempted by the other brigade, and this division spent the whole day involved in this operation.*¹⁸

So if Reille is to be believed, he at least understood Napoleon's intent; the main effort was to be the 1st Corps attack on the allied centre left; there was to be no attempt to

¹⁶ Levavasseur, *Souvenirs Militaires d'Octave Levavasseur 1802-1815*, (Paris: Plon, 1914), p.301.

¹⁷ Lieutenant Puvis (see bibliography) claims that he saw Ney, who was alone, near Hougoumont, but he is not mentioned by any other eye-witness.

¹⁸ *Documents inédits sur la Campagne de 1815 publiés par le Duc d'Elchingen*, (Paris: Anselin et G.-Laguionie, 1840.) p.91.

capture Hougoumont, but to threaten it, tie down the troops that garrisoned it and encourage Wellington to reinforce it.

We have therefore established beyond reasonable doubt, that Napoleon planned to attack the centre left of Wellington's line and therefore had no reason to get drawn into a costly fight for a strongpoint that did not support his main effort, but did lend itself, given the importance Wellington put on holding it, for being the ideal target of a diversionary attack. We have also seen that Reille, if his own account is to be believed, seemed to understand Napoleon's intent.



The Importance of possession of Hougoumont to the French

It is now worth exploring the advantages that Hougoumont would have offered the French if they were to have captured it. We have already established that the 500 metres by 500 metres square château and farm complex, with its surrounding woods, orchards, gardens, fields and thick hedges offered an impenetrable obstacle to large formations of close order troops; the kind of formation in which the French inevitably carried out their attacks. It was therefore of no use to the French as a staging point for a heavy infantry attack on the allied ridge behind it. Any formed attack would have to bypass the complex. If the wood was held by the French, as it was for most of the battle, and the buildings were threatened sufficiently to contain the garrison from sallying out; any bypass could therefore be carried out safely without the need to occupy the whole complex, and certainly not the buildings from which the fields of observation and fire were very much restricted by the surrounding trees and hedges.

Any French formation attempting to outflank the allied right therefore, did not need possession of Hougoumont in order to achieve this. The only real advantage the capture of the complex had to offer the French was as a launchpad for large numbers of skirmishers to harass the allied troops on the ridge beyond in much the same way as they were able to do from la Haye-Sainte after its capture. But it was widely

accepted that these skirmishers *en grandes bandes*¹⁹ had insufficient combat power to seize ground from formed bodies of defending troops and were therefore only used to set the conditions for a formal attack by close order columns. But it is inconceivable that the French would have been able to launch such formations from within the close country and building complex of Hougoumont. If on the point of capture, the allied garrison could have fallen back to the main line on the high ground behind and the coordination of a formal attack on the ridge would have had to have started all over again, on a point on the battlefield that offered no advantages to the French and which would have had to bypass Hougoumont as surely as before it was captured. An allied garrison of the complex, given the close country of which it consisted, would have been as unable to interfere with a French attack on the main ridge as it was unable to interfere with the great cavalry attacks and the infantry assault of Bachelu's division and one of Foy's brigades at the end of them.

The truth is that with no attack planned to outflank the west of the allied position, Hougoumont offered little tactical advantage to the French for the heavy casualties that its capture would inevitably cost.



French Orders

So if Hougoumont offered the French no advantages other than being the target of a diversionary attack, why did Reille's corps, and Jérôme in particular, not carry out his orders to merely contain and threaten it?

Unfortunately, we learn little from Jérôme himself about the orders he received; in a letter to his wife written on the 15th July, he merely wrote,

At 12.15pm., I received the order to begin the attack; I marched on the wood of which I occupied the majority after a lively resistance, killing and losing many men. At 2pm.,

¹⁹ 'In large groups', generally a whole battalion fighting as skirmishers; this had been a recognised French tactic since the Revolutionary Wars; see Duhesme and Bressonnet in the bibliography.

I was master of the entire wood and the battle was engaged along the whole line, but the enemy, who realised the importance of this point, rushed forward a reserve and took it from me. I advanced with my whole division and at 3pm., after a bloody fight, I took it again, and from then on, held it to the end of the battle. The enemy left in this wood 6,000 dead and 1 2,000, with one of my generals [Bauduin] and almost all my superior officers...²⁰

It is noteworthy that he does not even mention the château or even any buildings, let alone the detail of his orders (although he was unlikely to go into such tactical detail in a letter to his wife), although the lack of a mention of the buildings may suggest that he understood his attack was merely to capture the wood. One account of the battle for Hougoumont in particular has Napoleon saying to Jérôme, 'If Grouchy does not come up or if you do not carry Hougoumont, the battle is decidedly lost, so go, go and carry Hougoumont, *coûte que coûte* [whatever it costs].' However, there is no reference for this and no French account I can find has any record of such a conversation.²¹ Given the evidence we have already examined, that Napoleon had no intention of attacking the allied right, it seems rather more than unlikely that he would say such a thing and it is almost certainly an invention of someone trying to embellish the facts.

The true numbers of French troops committed to the capture of Hougoumont, half the generally accepted total, suggest that Hougoumont was not as important to them as many Anglo-centric accounts have suggested. Indeed, a number of primary French sources, and the fact the allied right was not to be the target of the French main effort, seem to suggest that there was no intention in the French high command to commit to an all-out assault on Hougoumont. But if this is the case, why did half of 2nd Corps smash itself against the walls of the farm?

To answer this question we need to have an idea of how far down the 2nd Corps chain of command the order not to become decisively engaged in an assault on Hougoumont was disseminated. We have already accepted that we are never likely to know exactly what orders Reille and Jérôme were given, but if we accept that Reille understood there was no need to assault the farm complex then it is reasonable to assume that Jérôme was also told this by Reille. Jérôme initially committed a single brigade which attacked the farm having cleared the wood, but failed to take it. When he committed his second brigade, which then proceeded to make the same futile assault on the walls, we must assume that Jérôme did not emphasise to his brigade commanders that they were not to attack the farm, but to keep it under pressure. The blame seems to lie with the former King of Westphalia, whose military career up to this point had hardly been blemish free and had only continued due to Napoleon's indulgence and patronage.

Prince Jérôme's chief-of-staff was General Guilleminot, a very experienced staff officer who had clearly been appointed to a post far below his seniority and

²⁰ Jérôme Bonaparte, *Mémoires et Correspondance du Roi Jérôme et de la Reine Catherine*, (Paris: Dentu, 1866), Volume Seven, p.23.

²¹ A reference in a different book records that this is taken from Jérôme's memoirs (Ibid.), but I cannot find it there.

experience with the aim of giving Jérôme wise counsel and perhaps keeping him from acting foolishly. In later conversations with a British officer who had been present at Hougoumont²², Guilleminot is reported as saying that whilst he supported the initial attack on the buildings, what could be considered as an attempted *coup de main* to seize the complex by surprise or before the defence had been properly organised, he did not support the following attacks. This suggests that the subsequent attacks were either ordered by Jérôme or were launched either with his tacit agreement or that he lacked the authority or confidence to stop the independent actions of his subordinate commanders.

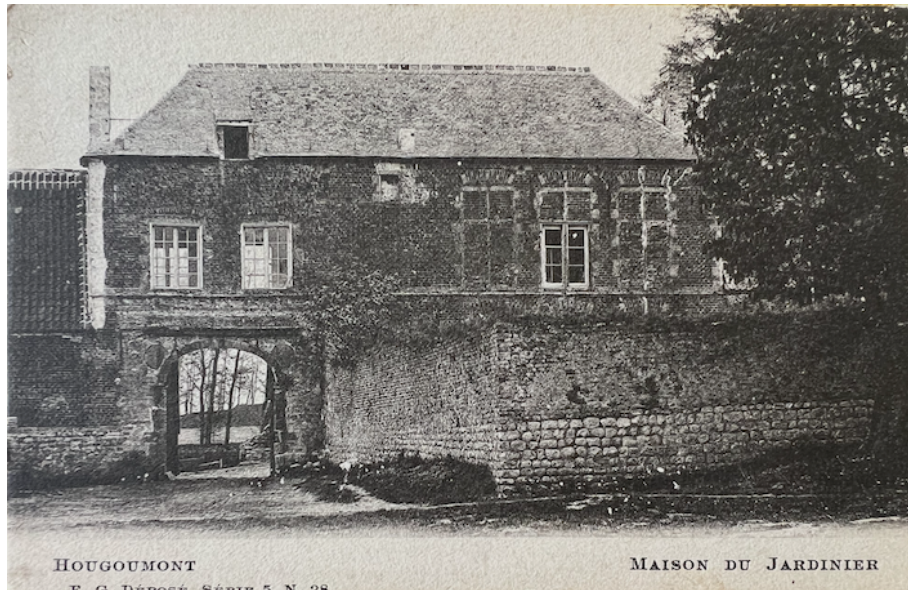
We can feel confident that Napoleon made clear to Reille that the attack on Hougoumont was to be a diversionary attack. Reille's writings seem to show that he understood this. Whilst we can question whether Reille then made this clear to Jérôme who was to launch the attack, given that he clearly disobeyed it, must be in question. However, a clue is given by a battalion commander in Jérôme's division, *chef de bataillon* Jolyet of the 1st *légère*, who wrote, 'Several times our skirmishers, despite the orders that limited them to prevent the enemy from manoeuvring against our left, wanted to seize the house that was in their way.'²³ Here we can see that the avoidance of a deliberate attack on Hougoumont must have been stated and that this had reached battalion command level in Jérôme's division. However, if the battalion commanders had been briefed on this requirement, we don't know how much further this level of detail was passed on down the chain of command, given the difficulty of briefing the junior officers in the days before radio. We have one last eye-witness account which might give us a clue; Lieutenant Théobald Puvis was in the 93rd Line, a regiment in Tissot's brigade; the brigade that was committed from Foy's division. He writes, 'Our senior officers came to tell us 'we are going to attack the English lines with the bayonet, "warn everyone" it was recommended to us.'²⁴ So here we see that Puvis suggests he was given no idea what they were going to attack or what lay in front of them and it can easily be imagined that being confronted with the walls of Hougoumont, and enthusiastic to get involved in the action, that his unit attacked them.

We can therefore see that the evidence suggests that the order not to commit to a determined attack to seize Hougoumont had been disseminated to battalion commander level and therefore it must have been below this level that the important detail became lost and that at these lower command levels the soldiers attacked whatever was in front of them.

²² See Siborne's *The Waterloo Letters*, (London: Arms and Armour reprint, 1983), Letter 114 from Lt Gen Woodford who served with the 2nd/2nd Foot Guards at Waterloo, p.262.

²³ Jean-Baptiste Jolyet, *Souvenirs et correspondance sur la bataille de Waterloo*, (Paris: Teissedre, 2000), p.77.

²⁴ Puvis; *Souvenirs du chef de bataillon Théobald Puvis, du 93^{ème} de ligne (1813-1815)*, reproduced in *Journal de route d'un garde d'honneur (1813-1814)*, Paris: Demi-Solde, 2007), p. 83.



Conclusion

Much myth has grown up around the defence of Hougoumont, but whilst I do not wish to denigrate the exceptional bravery displayed by both sides during what was clearly bloody fighting, many histories have made claims that have not been substantiated by dependable testimony. In his book *Wellington at Waterloo*, Jac Weller wrote that the importance of the fighting at Hougoumont 'can hardly be over-estimated' and that the garrison of Hougoumont, 'kept about 14,000 veteran French infantry busy throughout the day' and 'As many as 10,000 men from both armies are said to have fallen in and around Hougoumont.'²⁵ This has now proven to be a gross exaggeration on all counts.

Before the battle started, for the reasons we have discussed, Hougoumont was not vital ground; the capture or loss of which would have decided the battle. It would have been ground of tactical importance only if the French had chosen to try and outflank Wellington's line to the west. But he did not. As it was, Napoleon's main attacks fell on the centre left (d'Erlon) and the centre right (the great cavalry attacks) of the allied line. Hougoumont played no part in the defeat of these attacks. It was a sideshow where the advantage to one side or the other was unlikely to affect the final result of the battle.

It appears quite evident that each of the two sides put a different emphasis on the tactical importance of Hougoumont. As the defender, Wellington had to set his defence before he could try and draw Napoleon's plan from the deployment of the French army; he therefore had to cover all possible enemy courses of action and had to be concerned about a possible French attempt to outflank his right wing along the shallow valley that led around that part of the battlefield. Napoleon clearly saw this option but identified that Hougoumont would be a major obstacle to its execution and the strength of the post was one reason why he must have ruled it out. But this was not the key reason, Napoleon was clear that he did not want to drive Wellington into

²⁵ Weller, Jac, *Wellington at Waterloo*, (London: Greenhill Books, 1992), p.94.

the security of Blücher's army. Having ruled out an attack on the farm complex, it then suggested itself as an ideal diversionary attack; threatening a part of Wellington's line that the allied commander already had concerns about.

Wellington might have reduced his efforts to maintain the post once he had established where the main French attack was landing, but as long as the French were prepared to throw their manpower away in useless attempts to seize a position whose importance had waned as the battle had progressed, it continued to offer him good value for his investment, albeit at the cost of committing two whole brigades (du Plat's and Halkett's) to behind Hougoumont to support the garrison there. Hougoumont was almost the bait in a trap into which the French rushed. From Wellington's perspective therefore, the defence of Hougoumont was a great success; it drew increasing numbers of French troops away from the truly important points of the battle and inflicted heavy casualties on them; this is absolutely not the same as suggesting the outcome of the battle was decided by a successful defence.

From Napoleon's perspective, Hougoumont was supposed to be the objective of a diversionary attack to draw allied troops away from the critical point and the troops allocated to it were not supposed to get decisively engaged. It is perfectly feasible that even before the battle started that Napoleon had appreciated that Hougoumont was a white elephant; an objective which, if captured, offered little or no advantage to his aim of attacking the allied centre and splitting Wellington's army in two by seizing the main Brussels *chausée*.

The truth is that the number of French soldiers committed to the capture of Hougoumont was half of what most histories tell us. Perhaps some of the hype that has been built up around the fight for Hougoumont, the countless assaults and the commitment of the whole of Reille's corps, is perhaps, more to do with glorifying the men and units that took part in the defence than an examination of the facts drawn from both the allied and French accounts and perspectives of the battle, or a critical assessment of the true tactical significance of the farm complex.

And yet the French did commit large numbers of troops to a fight that would have contributed little to a French success, troops that could have been used to better effect elsewhere on the battlefield. That they did, was down to poor leadership; for Ney, who took no interest in the fighting there, although he was responsible for it; for Reille and Guilleminot, for not intervening and stopping the assaults before too many troops became committed; for Jérôme for being in direct command of the assaulting troops and disastrously failing to implement his superior commander's intent, even though it must have been clear to him that he was doing so; it clearly became a matter of honour for the Emperor's younger brother to capture the farm. And finally, if *chef de bataillon* Jolyet is to be believed, the commanding officers must also take some of the blame for allowing their battalions to be frittered away in fruitless assaults on such a strong position when they should have understood what Napoleon had intended.

The conclusion must be that Hougoumont offered Wellington a number of significant tactical advantages if the French had planned to attack the allied right; but they did not. For the French, given where they did attack, the capture of the complex would

have offered them little. It seems clear that Napoleon fully realised this and therefore had no intention of a costly and lengthy assault on a point on the battlefield that was of secondary importance. He was let down primarily by his own brother (for which reason he seems to have conveniently over-looked the disobedience of orders) and by a corps commander who apparently lacked the determination and moral courage to intervene. The fact that his own attention was elsewhere, and the extent of the fighting was hidden from him by the lie of the ground and the Hougoumont wood, was almost certainly the reason he did not intervene personally, besides the fact, as we have seen, that the tactical command of the 2nd Corps had been delegated to Marshal Ney. The fact that the fight has reached iconic status in the history of the battle is because of the much re-cycled myth of that handful of heroic British guardsmen fighting against the odds against a full corps of French infantry, a myth that perhaps until now has not been adequately analysed and challenged.

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