

# ***Battle of Flössgarten 23<sup>rd</sup> October 1813***

## **Scenario background**

The idea for this game was given to me by Dave O'Brien who, when we met at Partizan in May of 2005 asked casually "Is the next weekender a continuation from the last game?" I hadn't even considered the possibility and was planning another unrelated 1813 Campaign 'What if?' battle. I thought about Dave's suggestion on the way home and by the next day had the scenario almost written!

## **The strategic situation**

On the 15-16<sup>th</sup> of October the French failed to break through the tightening Coalition cordon drawing around Leipzig. Their attack with four and a half Corps at Hohenbrunn had been held by a mixed force of predominantly Austrians and Russians although the heaviest fighting was undertaken by Prussian, Bavarian and Russian infantry. The strategic situation has since then worsened for the French who found themselves fighting separate corps size actions at various compass points. All initiative was lost and the Emperor decided to bring his disparate forces together once more to regroup. A vital French crossing point on the Tiefelöss was now under threat from advancing Coalition Corps. It became imperative that the bridge near Flössgarten be held so that the French corps still fighting north of the river could gain the safety of the south bank and Napoleon's chosen ground for regrouping.

## **The French position**

Two of the infantry corps heavily engaged at Hohenbrunn (Sebastiani's 2<sup>nd</sup> and Macdonald's 3<sup>rd</sup>) were positioned to protect the approaches to the bridge. Supporting them were reserve elements from two other Corps (1<sup>st</sup> & 6<sup>th</sup>) and Kellerman's 4<sup>th</sup> (Cavalry) Corps. The French were under Marshal Soult and their orders simple; Hold the bridge and its approaches until the rest of the army can disengage and either cross to regroup or counterattack. Soult's position was a strong one. The northern route to the bridge passes in the shadow of a long and steep escarpment called the 'Lange Kante' to the west of which is the impenetrable Grössegrünwald. This is an extremely dense forest the traverse of which would be fraught with numerous problems for formed troops. Any approach from the north would have to pass through the narrow gap between the escarpment and the forest.

To the north west of the bridge beyond the Grössegrünwald stands the village of Adlerhafen, itself overlooked by another steep hill; Der Alte Mann. The area south and east is very difficult marshy ground running directly into the western edge of the Grössegrünwald. Further south from Adlerhafen a road runs due east through the village of Flössgarten and directly on to the bridge. This road is dominated by a dome shaped, extremely steep sided hill, the Kopf des Mönchs just to its north. Upon this and the Lange Kante were some disused earthworks of Seven Years War vintage. These had long fallen into disrepair but during the 20<sup>th</sup> to the 23<sup>rd</sup> received the attentions of French engineers. They managed to rebuild the fortifications to an extent and also arrange for each to accommodate a 12pdr battery from the Army Artillery Reserve. These guns played a significant role during the Battle of Flössgarten.

Soult placed 2<sup>nd</sup> Corps to the north around and on the Lange Kante and west into the fringes of the Grössegrünwald. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Corps covered the north west approach along Der Alte Mann and garrisoned Adlerhafen. The western, refused flank was protected by two cavalry divisions (9<sup>th</sup> & 11<sup>th</sup>) and two batteries of Reserve Artillery. An elite division from the 1<sup>st</sup> Corps including Polish troops was thrown to the north of the Lange Kante. Most were in the fortified village of Küpfernestadt and one battalion held a walled estate known as Sigmundhaus adjacent to and west of the road north from the bridge. Finally, the Reserve Division of the 6<sup>th</sup> Corps was positioned in the dead ground directly to the front of the bridge, south of the Lange Kante and east of Flössgarten. In total the French mustered around 27,000 infantry, 8,000 cavalry and 99 guns.

## **The Allied plan**

On the 22<sup>nd</sup> the Allies possessed a real sense of impending victory and all were hungry to be in on the kill. Although many battles raged to the north and east of the Tiefeflöss it was known that the bridge itself remained firmly in the hands of the enemy and must be taken lest they manage to slip away once more.

The task of attacking the bridge had fallen to several of the commanders who fought so well at Hohenbrünn. Prince Andrei was at the head of a Russian Corps now strengthened by seconded infantry and cavalry units including the famed Pavlovski Grenadiers. The Austrian cavalry Corps under Count Spinetti which threw itself against the Middle Guard at Hohenbrünn was also moving toward the bridge. Both of the extremely strong Austrian infantry divisions present but in reserve on the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> were assigned to the Tiefeflöss attack. The most significant addition was that of a large Prussian corps of several divisions including, 3,000 cavalry and around 20,000 infantry. Overall command of this significant force of about 50,000 infantry, 12,000 cavalry and 120 guns was given to the Habsburg General Freiherr von Augsburg. In concert with his Corps commanders a plan was agreed. On the morning of 23<sup>rd</sup> October the Prussians would attack from the west along the axis of the Flössgarten road and toward Kopf des Mönchs. The Austrian Reserve Infantry Division (2<sup>nd</sup>) would assault Adlerhafen from the west whilst the Russians would press toward the same point and Der Alte Mann from the north west and north. Finally, Spinetti's Austrian Cavalry and the 1<sup>st</sup> Austrian Division would attack from the northern route against the village of Küpfernestadt and the Lange Kante.

## **The Objectives**

The Allies needed to capture the bridge itself and hold all approaches to it from north, north west and west. Their significantly superior numbers would guarantee the position was carried.

The French were to hold all approaches to the bridge and maintain control of the area so that the Emperor and other Marshals might gain access to the southern bank of the Tiefeflöss via the bridge near Flössgarten. The French were also under strict instruction to protect their guns particularly the 12 pdr batteries of the Army Reserve.

## **The Battle**

The battle started amidst a heavy autumn fog which reduced visibility to less than 50 yards. Prussian infantry of their Reserve Division blundered into a regiment of lancers from Kellerman's 9<sup>th</sup> Division, south of Adlerhafen at about 0830. Both units were much discomforted by the experience. The cavalry fell back in disorder and the raw Prussian recruits bolted, not coming under the control of their furious officers until after midday some distance to the west. The fog created terrible problems, particularly for the Russians and Prussians who were attempting to deploy from columns of march in very closed terrain. Not until after 0930 had it begun to clear and by then fighting was already widespread. The first Coalition troops to be heavily engaged were the advanced Prussian cavalry regiments which repeatedly collided in the fog with French squadrons from the 11<sup>th</sup> Division west of Flössgarten. None of these clashes could be described as a charge as the adversaries invariably trotted forward to find their way barred by enemy troopers doing exactly the same but in the opposite direction. Notwithstanding the confusion, both sides persisted in reinforcing the duels which saw the Prussian dragoons steadily pushing closer to the village. At this point there was little between the dragoons of Kürmarck and their objective of the Tiefeflöss Bridge but of course this was not known to them. Kellerman had temporarily lost contact with his 10<sup>th</sup> (Heavy) Division and the village was protected by only a gun battery from the Reserve (This was the soon to be famous 3<sup>rd</sup> Battery who resisted so heroically throughout the

afternoon). However, the gallant sabreurs of the 11<sup>th</sup> Division continued to put up stiff resistance in the face of alarming odds enabling the French to begin the process of reinforcing their vulnerable left which, at that point was totally without infantry of any kind.

As this all cavalry affair unfolded in the west, the Austrians were emerging through the Blossholz to the north and north west of Küpfernestadt. Before them lay a wide open plain access to which the garrison of the village did its best to deny them. Harassing fire from the Polish infantry so enraged the Austrians that they launched a large scale attack on the village. This diverted them away from the advance toward the escarpment and as the fog burned off, the view presented to the French batteries on and below the ridge was of a massed target of deploying columns. The struggle around Küpfernestadt continued for the entire day sucking in more and more Austrian units and although it almost fell twice, the exhausted and greatly thinned ranks of the Poles and the 45 de Ligne clung on until darkness fell and the fighting petered out.

The fog had lifted by the time the Austrian 2<sup>nd</sup> Division and the 23<sup>rd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> Russian Infantry Brigades began their attack on Adlerhafen. This proved to be a mincing machine into which more and more troops poured. Three French regiments distinguished themselves in the defence. The 33 de Ligne repulsed six bayonet charges from front and flank before finally being driven from their positions on the western edge of the village around 1400. The 80 de Ligne, having been pushed from their northern defensive position by relentless Russian fire and bayonet attacks rallied themselves in the village square and proceeded to hang on whilst almost the entire remains of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Corps fled back toward the Grössegrünwald at about 1600. By then the Der Alte Mann had fallen to the Russians who scrambled infantry and cavalry to the summit and drove off the French gunners and their supporting infantry. This tediously slow and painful manoeuvre was wholly necessary but prevented the Russians from getting much beyond the hill even as night descended.

80 de Ligne were repeatedly assailed from both front and flank and when less than half remained and they were surrounded, the senior Russian officer supervising the carnage offered them generous terms which their colonel accepted. They were allowed to keep their Eagle as they marched into captivity. The final outstanding performance around Adlerhafen was given by the veteran 11 de Ligne who, holding the south western part of the village stood in the stubble of harvested cornfields and braved shot, shell and bayonet for nearly four hours until finally breaking under the weight of a brigade size push from Austrian Grenadiers. Adlerhafen broke the rhythm of the Austrian and Russian attack and although it fell at 1600 (about an hour after the Alte Mann was taken by the Russians) the victory was pyrrhic indeed. The attacking forces had taken heavy losses and required substantial reorganization which was further hampered by the fading light.

By that time the Austrians around Küpfernestadt had managed to overrun the gun line of 2<sup>nd</sup> Corps in a bold attack by Hussars but these in turn were driven back by counter attacking French dragoons. Sigmundhaus was abandoned around 1600 by its garrison and the French line began buckling in several places. The attackers did not have enough troops in place to press any advantage and the opportunity window closed. The batteries on the Lange Kante had fired ceaselessly since about 1000 and during the early afternoon it appears that a spark or shell fragment flew into the main powder magazine igniting it in a huge fireball. With their guns silenced or overrun, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Corps became very vulnerable. This seemed to bring renewed vigour to the Austrians but the continuing resistance by the gallant Poles in Küpfernestadt denied any security to the Coalition left flank and thus prevented the gamble of a dash forward. Prudence was ever the watchword of the Austrians who were unlikely to expose an extended flank to a freshly arriving French Corps who would have rolled them up as far as Der Alte Mann. Although strenuous efforts were made to exploit the hard won gains made in this northern part of the field French resistance was still cohesive enough to mean every inch was contested.

The greatest hope of Coalition victory existed in the western approaches before Flössgarten. Four regiments of Prussian cavalry The Kürmarck Dragoons, West Prussian Dragoons, Lithuanian Dragoons and Leib Hussars fought continuous and bloody battles with an equally determined enemy the 9<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Division. The Prussian infantry were far more reluctant to close with the enemy thus their mounted brethren took a disproportionately active role and sustained enormous loss. When finally the 9<sup>th</sup> Division was all but wiped out the Prussian Dragoons charged to the very gates of Flössgarten only to be checked by the 10<sup>th</sup> Cuirassier Division. This elite formation was unable to stem the Blue tide and found itself by 1430 fighting in the streets of the village. The attack had been pressed with great vigour for nearly five hours and although the Prussians were in the ascendant, the French had been able to force march infantry to brace the line. Without their own infantry the Prussians lost the initiative and resorted to gallant but increasingly desperate charges to reinvigorate the attack. Mention must be made at this point of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battery, Army Artillery Reserve who fought doggedly at their gun line against two charges by the Prussians. Even although their close range volleys failed to check the charges the gunners fought with hanger, ramrod and bayonet to repel the Cavalry. Only when Flössgarten's safety was secured by a mass of reinforcing infantry from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Corps did the gunners finally crack. They fell to the sabres of an extremely brave regiment of Bavarian Light Horse who had also distinguished themselves at Hohenbrunn on the 15<sup>th</sup>.

The Black Hussars performed heroically whilst protecting the Prussian and Bavarian guns from dramatic counterattacks by the French 11<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Division. In this piece of role reversal the Prussian Hussars fought a series of ferocious melees which saved their guns but alas saw the entire regiment fall in battle. Not one squadron flinched and they went down fighting to the last. Their sacrifice was in some way diminished by the next victims of the 11<sup>th</sup> Division. After briefly reforming the 5<sup>th</sup> & 6<sup>th</sup> Lanciers smashed into the flank of freshly arriving Landwehr battalions. These had forced marched to the field to exploit the anticipated breakthrough at Flössgarten only to find the enemy very much with all the fight left in it.

The extremely fatigued Landwehr cracked and were pushed south into other columns deploying from the Vögelkirscheholz. Panic spread through the Divisions and in the dying light a Bavarian Division who really did not know what was happening around them turned and fled also. Less than 1,000 Lancers had begun an avalanche which carried nearly 10,000 Prussian and Bavarian infantry off the field to the south.

This extinguished all hope of a breakthrough to the river. Behind Flössgarten and before the bridge, stood a fresh Division from the 6<sup>th</sup> Corps. The way was barred and the day was all but gone. Over the next 30 minutes fighting died out and the armies disengaged. Napoleon and the reinforcements commanded by Berthier never arrived and a resounding defensive victory was credited to Soult and his gallant soldiers. French casualties were estimated at around 7,500 with some 50 guns lost to the enemy. Allied losses were nearer 11,000. Although the Emperor was delighted by the victory he was most displeased with the loss of so many precious and irreplaceable guns.