

CONVENTION OF THE ELBE

Christian, Freiherr von Ompteda (1765–1815) to his brother, Louis

Cantonment of Juliusburg, 8 AM, 17 July 1803

It is all up! Yet even now, at this moment, everything perhaps *could* be re-established. I am in too great a state of excitement to give a coherent account.

The main points are these:

You know how things were at the time of your departure, in the direction of Artlenburg. The collection of boats from above and below, to the number of fifty-two, seemed to suggest that the French intended their main attack to be at this point. During the night of the 3rd to 4th they had, by a (rather *overdone*) disturbance with pontoons, guns, trenching tools, and timber, given rise to the opinion among us (and even in hitherto incredulous me) that there would be an attack from Artlenburg in the morning. Our regiment, and all the other available troops, were placed by daybreak in cover of the heights and ravines on this side in *determined* readiness to receive it. Yet the enemy remained quiet, and the negotiation business went on again. So passed away the 4th, and the next night we again waited vainly for an attempt on the part of the enemy to cross. On the 5th an interview was arranged to take place between the Field Marshal and Mortier, at first to be on this side, but finally in the middle of the Elbe. I stood that day with my battalion as extreme outpost above and below the ravine leading towards Artlenburg. Towards midday Wallmoden appeared with Löw. The Field Marshal was about to embark, when on a sudden two cannon-shots from one of our distant batteries, which could not be prevented, first informed us that Mortier, and all his generals, were already in the middle of the Elbe, in a big barge, waiting for the Field Marshal. They had forgotten to signal a truce, and so drawn fire upon themselves, but the balls fortunately—or unfortunately—only grazed the boat without hitting. By shouting and signaling we stopped any further firing. The other batteries were on the point of discharging, and would have simply sunk the barge. The Field Marshal rowed out with a guard, and the French, understanding the mistake, did not make any reply with their artillery. We now became spectators of a scene of a kind which does not happen twice. It had been (hitherto) most beautiful weather. Just as if the wrath of heaven were being pronounced, there burst forth, as the Field Marshal reached Mortier, a most violent storm, so that the boat could not remain on the Elbe, and we ultimately saw the Field Marshal and the French generals, who received him with marked courtesy, go over to Artlenburg. And there a second *Convention* was brought into existence, with which the Field Marshal came back to us, just as our Retreat was being sounded in proud rivalry with that of the enemy!

What we know up to now is approximately as follows:

There is to be a cessation of hostilities. We are not to lay down our arms, but to march to a place where we are to deposit them, and then give the men a year's furlough, while the officers will receive half-pay by way of pension. The cavalry are to give over their horses to the local civil authorities, who will deliver them to the French. The same will probably be the case with the artillery. Yesterday morning I had to give over my post below, by the water, to General Drouet in person. The items of the Convention are to be carried out in four days. I do not believe that to be possible, on account of the details.

As far as we hear, there is still nothing from England or Russia. *Can* it be that the whole world is deserting us? Here I close—and say nothing of those individual conclusions which circumstances only can decide. Embrace all yours from me; make the best of things if you still can; but what you do, do *quickly*, and very quickly!

Baron Ompteda. *In the King's German Legion. Memoirs of Baron Ompteda* (1894):163–165.