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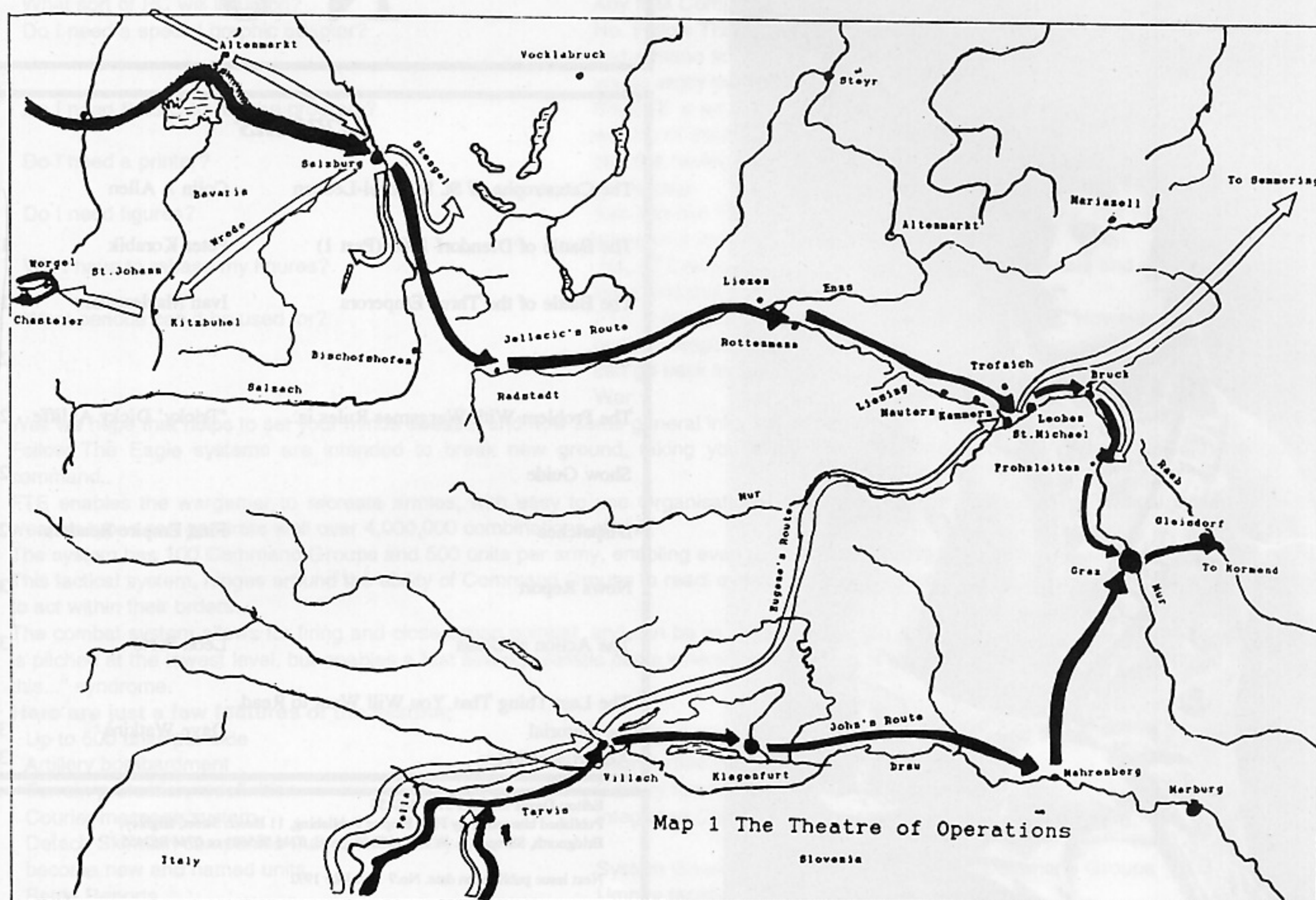
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# THE CATASTROPHE OF ST.MICHAEL-LEOBEN

## MAY 25th 1809

by COLIN J. ALLEN



Map 1 The Theatre of Operations  
Slovenia

As part of the Austrian plan for war against the French Empire in 1809, forces under FML Jean, the Marquis de Chasteler-Corucelle (3 brigades) and FML Franz Freiherr von Jellacic de Buzim (2 brigades) were detached for operations in the Tyrol.

Following the Austrian defeats in Northern Italy, the Archduke John ordered Chasteler and Jellacic to abandon the Tyrol and march to join his army, thus reinforcing it with 10-15,000 extra troops with which, hopefully, to turn the tables on Prince Eugene. However, on May 13th Chasteler was attacked and severely mauled by Lefebvre's forces at Worgel. Jellacic's route was via Salzburg, Radstadt, along the River Enns and then the Liesing to its junction with the Mur at St. Michael, then along this river to Graz, where it was hoped to make contact with John's army, which was retreating from Italy via Klagenfurt, along the River Drau to Mahrenberg and then to Graz. The reason for Jellacic taking this route was that Eugene was believed to be some miles away in the Drau valley, following the Archduke John.

Unfortunately for Jellacic, Eugene was not following John's march, having been ordered by his step-father to travel via Bruck in order to link up with the main French forces operating on the Danube. This meant that the Army of Italy and Jellacic's force were on a collision course.

On the evening of May 24th, Jellacic's troops were positioned as follows: the main body was at Mautern while two battalions of I.R.

Esterhazy were in Kammern with the advanced guard, a battalion of Grenzers, between that place and St. Michael. That evening, Jellacic ordered the vanguard to move towards St. Michael at 03:00, while the main body was to move off at 04:30. The two battalions of I.R. Esterhazy were to await the arrival of the main body and then march off at its head.

As the main body was billeted over a fairly large area, it proved impossible to have them ready for the march by the required time so Jellacic sent a messenger to the Esterhazy Regiment informing them of the delay and ordering them to await the main body before marching off. Unfortunately, the officer charged with this mission exceeded his orders and also passed on this instruction to the Grenz regiment, who were now within five kilometres of St. Michael having set off late. The Grenzers who, like all of the Austrian troops, were suffering from fatigue, sank gratefully to the ground for an unexpected rest.

Jellacic, accompanied by GM Ettinghausen, had left Mautern at 04:30 in order to accompany the advanced guard. On arriving in Kammern he ordered Colonel Eckhardt of I.R. Esterhazy to march immediately on St. Michael with his 2nd battalion. At about this time he also received news from the District Governor in Bruck that the French had entered Knittelfeld the previous day with 5,000 infantry and 400 cavalry with another 5,000 men moving up in support, these troops being from Grenier's Corps. Jellacic, believing that the Grenzers should, by now, be holding St. Michael and that only weak enemy



forces would be in contact during the day, was, apparently, unperturbed.

His illusions began to be shattered when, at 07:00, he came upon the halted Grenz battalion. They were immediately ordered off but, by now, two precious hours had been lost. History, perhaps fortunately, does not record what Jellacic said to Major Zsemey, the commander of the Grenzers.

The Grenzers had now been joined by the O'Reilly Chevauleger Regiment and it was an advanced party from this unit that first encountered the French at around 08:30. The French were already advancing towards St. Michael astride the road north of Brunn. The cavalry and half a battalion of the Grenzers, advancing along the Kohlstrasse, succeeded in driving an enemy detachment from the high ground around St. Walburga, thus securing the slopes of the Fresenberg. Colonel Eckhardt now arrived on the scene with his 2nd battalion and was deployed on the Brunn-St. Michael road in order to cover the latter town and its bridge over the Liesing.

On the French side, General Seras' units were arriving in a steady stream and he was able to build a line stretching from west of St. Michael, via St. Walburga, where 2 cannon were positioned, to the slopes of the Fresenberg. As long as the French maintained this position, Jellacic's baggage train would be unable to proceed through St. Michael so Jellacic resolved to use the main body of his force, which began to arrive at 10:00, to push them further west. In order to carry this out the Austrians were deployed as shown in Map 2. GM Ettinghausen commanded the 3rd battalion of the Esterhazy Regiment and one battalion of the de Vaux regiment, supported by 2 guns positioned by the water mill. To the left Colonel Eckhardt commanded the 2nd battalion of I.R. Esterhazy and another battalion of I.R. de Vaux. The French left was held in play by a battalion of Grenz and the Salzburg Landwehr.

The first Austrian attack was repulsed and Jellacic was forced to reinforce Eckhardt with Ettinghausen's men in order to push the French back off the high ground with the loss of 70 prisoners, this being accomplished by 11:00.

The road now being secure Jellacic ordered his units, which had got into some disorder, to halt at the edge of the high ground, where there was a steep escarpment some 15 metres high, and form a line from the Mur through St. Walburga to the Fresenberg. Jellacic knew that he would have to hold this position until about 14:00 in order for his long baggage train to pass safely over the Liesing and was, therefore, probably somewhat unhappy when he observed Durutte's division advancing along the Poststrasse to join Seras. As more of his units came up he, therefore, fed them into his line deploying them as follows:-

On the extreme right, on the Fresenberg, were the Grenzers and the Salzburg Landwehr, still heavily engaged on the forested slopes with a continually strengthening enemy. To their left, under GM Baron Legisfeld, were III/Esterhazy, III/Reuss-Greiz and the replacement draft for the I.R. Erzherzog Karl. The latter two battalions, being composed of raw conscripts, were positioned in reserve behind the Esterhazy battalion.

The left flank, under Ettinghausen, was composed of II/Esterhazy and the two de Vaux battalions. South of the Mur the road was blocked by three companies of infantry.

The main front covered was 1.5 kilometres which, when it is considered that it was manned by four battalions in the first line with a combined strength of about 3200 men, gives about 2 soldiers per metre. Add to this the fact that the two battalions held in reserve were of

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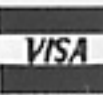
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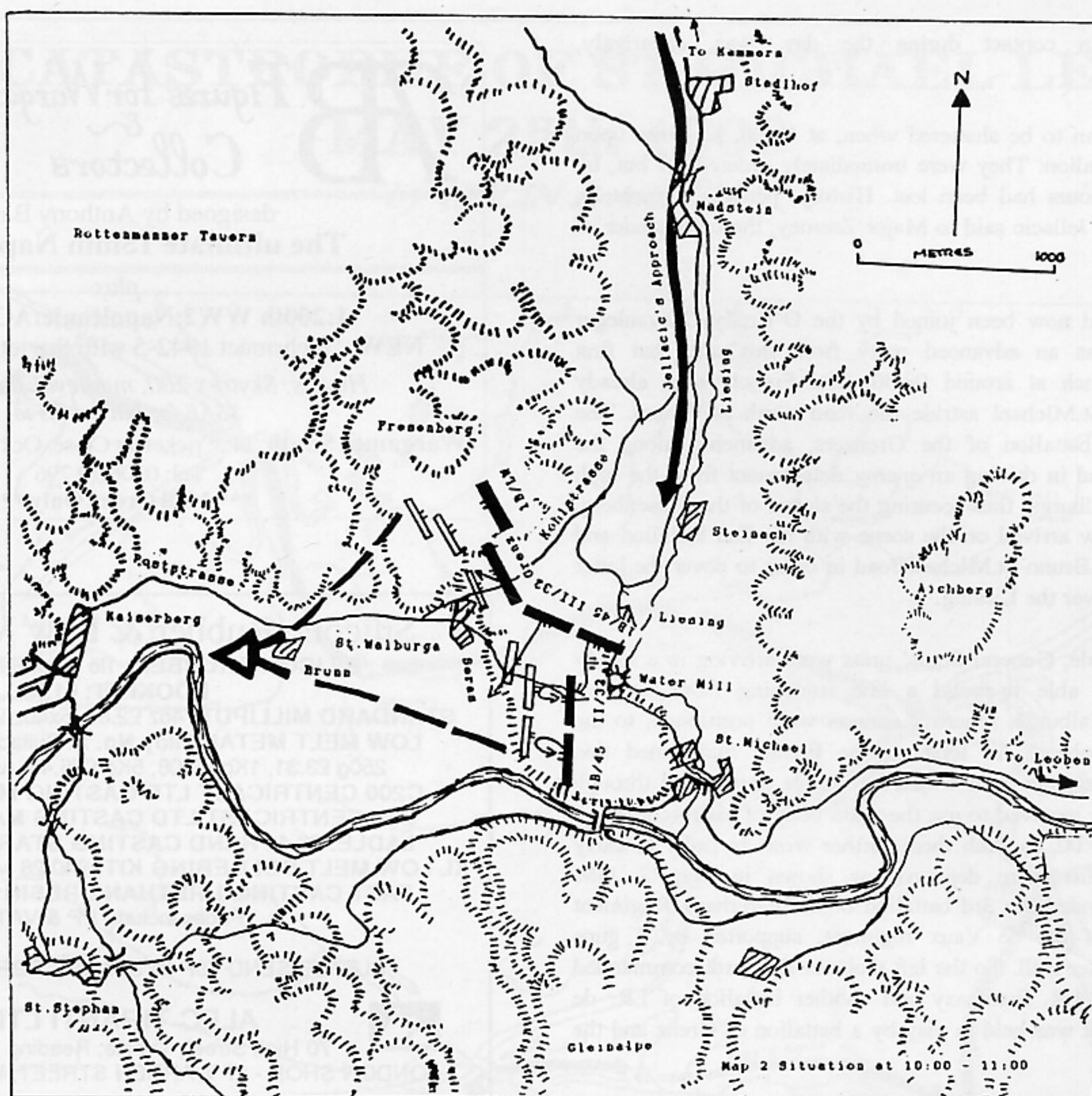
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rather dubious quality and one quickly realises that this position, with only one bridge to its rear over an unfordable stream, and that being crossed by a large convoy, was somewhat less than ideal.

Certainly this must have occurred to Prince Eugene and General Grenier, who had just arrived on the scene having ridden 60 kilometres that morning. As Jellacic obviously intended to stay in his position Eugene was able to bring up Durutte's troops and decide how to launch his attack. The plan that he came up with was to attack both of the Austrian flanks and then to launch an all-out attack in the centre.

Consequently two battalions of the 62nd Line crossed the Mur at Kaiserberg and advanced along the right bank of the river in order to engage the Austrian left flank.

On his own left Eugene sent Roussel with 5 battalions to amuse the enemy forces on the Fresenberg. This force was later supported by a battalion of the 23rd Light from Durutte's division. From this force two battalions, commanded by Grenier's Chief of Staff, Major Forestier, were ordered to work their way around the Austrian right towards the Madstein road. In the centre, the first line, commanded by Seras, consisted of six battalions, these being supported by three battalions of the 23rd Light under Valentin in the second line.

Between these two lines, on the Poststrasse, were the 6th and 9th Chasseur Regiments, two units that had greatly distinguished themselves at the crossing of the Piave on May 8th. In reserve were the remaining two battalions of the 62nd Line and the 102nd Line, these being under General Desaix.

Further to the rear, two battalions of the 22nd Light formed a rearguard in Kaiserberg. This deployment can be seen in Map 3, the

deep formation being forced on Eugene by the narrowness of the valley.

Ettinghausen pointed out the danger of the Austrian position to Jellacic and received the reply that he "was, for this very reason compelled to use all the forces at his disposal to hold the enemy at bay until nightfall, when he would immediately order a withdrawal. If he were to attempt to disengage now, the enemy would do everything he could to cause him the maximum losses". However, unknown to the Austrians, the French were virtually out of ammunition, due to their ammunition train being held up by an Austrian garrison at Predil. Jellacic may have been misled into thinking that Eugene was not going to attack him due to this lack of ammunition restricting the French activity to a very light skirmishing along the front.

However, the ever increasing number of French troops now caused Jellacic to have a change of heart and he ordered the withdrawal to commence, starting with the units on the Fresenberg. This order proved impossible to carry out as the Grenzers and landwehr were being hard pressed by their more numerous opponents and Jellacic was actually forced to reinforce them with III/Esterhazy, the resulting gap in the line being filled by the III/Reuss-Greiz and the draft battalion. In order to form a new reserve, GM Ettinghausen was sent with a few companies to hold the narrows east of St. Michael.

At this time, the two battalions of the 62nd Line south of the Mur assaulted the three Austrian companies defending the Mur bridge. Withdrawal was now impossible.

As the Austrian Staff Officer, Wilhelm Wachtel, wrote in his history of Jellacic's division: "The Viceroy (Eugene), seeing the effect of the flanking groups and the weakening of the enemy centre, now



gave the order for the main attack."

It was now nearly 16:00. At the first attempt Seras' troops smashed through the III/Reuss- Greitz and the draft battalion. Following them, the two chasseur regiments sabred the Austrians and made for the bridge over the Liesing in St.Michael. The Austrian left, its right flank now threatened, attempted to withdraw but the French pressure was too great, the units degenerating into fleeing mobs of men. The colours of II/Esterhazy were saved by Corporal Gregor Horvath and those of I.R. de Vaux by Section Commander Matthias Waldhauser, the former being awarded the Medal of Valour in Gold for his actions.

About half of the Austrian troops of the centre and left flank made it across the bridge before the French cavalry arrived, the rest being sabred or taken prisoner by the enemy.

On the Austrian right, the Grenzers and landwehr had finally been forced off the Fresenberg but found their retreat towards the Liesing blocked by the two battalions of the 62nd Line from Desaix's reserves, these having moved forward in support of their comrades. Attempting to break out northwards along the Madstein road they now ran straight into the arms of the waiting Major Forestier and were forced to lay down their arms.

There is some disagreement as to how long the collapse of the centre and left took. Ettinghausen states that it took only ten minutes, whereas Captain de Lort, writing in Graz two days later, mentions "protracted resistance".

Ettinghausen, who had, it will be remembered, been sent to form a reserve near the bridge, attempted to rally the mob that was streaming towards him but without success and found himself carried along with them.

It was only when a small group of hussars from Regiment No. 9 appeared along the road from Leoben that some semblance of order was re-established in the Austrian ranks. A Corporal Janos of the hussars succeeded in temporarily halting the French pursuit just to the east of St.Michael by blowing up a powder wagon with a single pistol shot!

This gave the defeated troops a little breathing space to pull themselves together and the retreat towards Leoben was carried out in an orderly manner. At that village it was hoped that they would meet up with another 5 companies of the I.R. Esterhazy, who had not been present at St.Michael.

As for the French, General Seras had been sent in pursuit with his division, two battalions of the 62nd Line and the two chasseur regiments, while Eugene and the rest of the Army, who had carried out an arduous march before the action, made camp on the field.

Due to the delay caused by the valiant Corporal Janos, Seras was unable to catch up with the Austrians before they reached the Mur bridge at Leoben. Jellacic left one company of the I.R. Esterhazy as a rearguard at the bridge with orders to hold it until the arrival of the extra companies of their regiment from Trofaich. At 19:00 these missing troops finally arrived. Unfortunately, at the very same moment, the vanguard of Seras' division also came into sight and a running fight developed as the Austrians attempted to withdraw and the French tried to prevent them doing so. The 1st and 6th companies of I.R. Esterhazy held up the French advance while the rest of the companies managed to pull back over the bridge. These two companies, however, paid the price for their heroism, losing 3 officers and 441 men.

The 18th company then destroyed the bridge, albeit incompletely, and the survivors trudged off towards Bruck.

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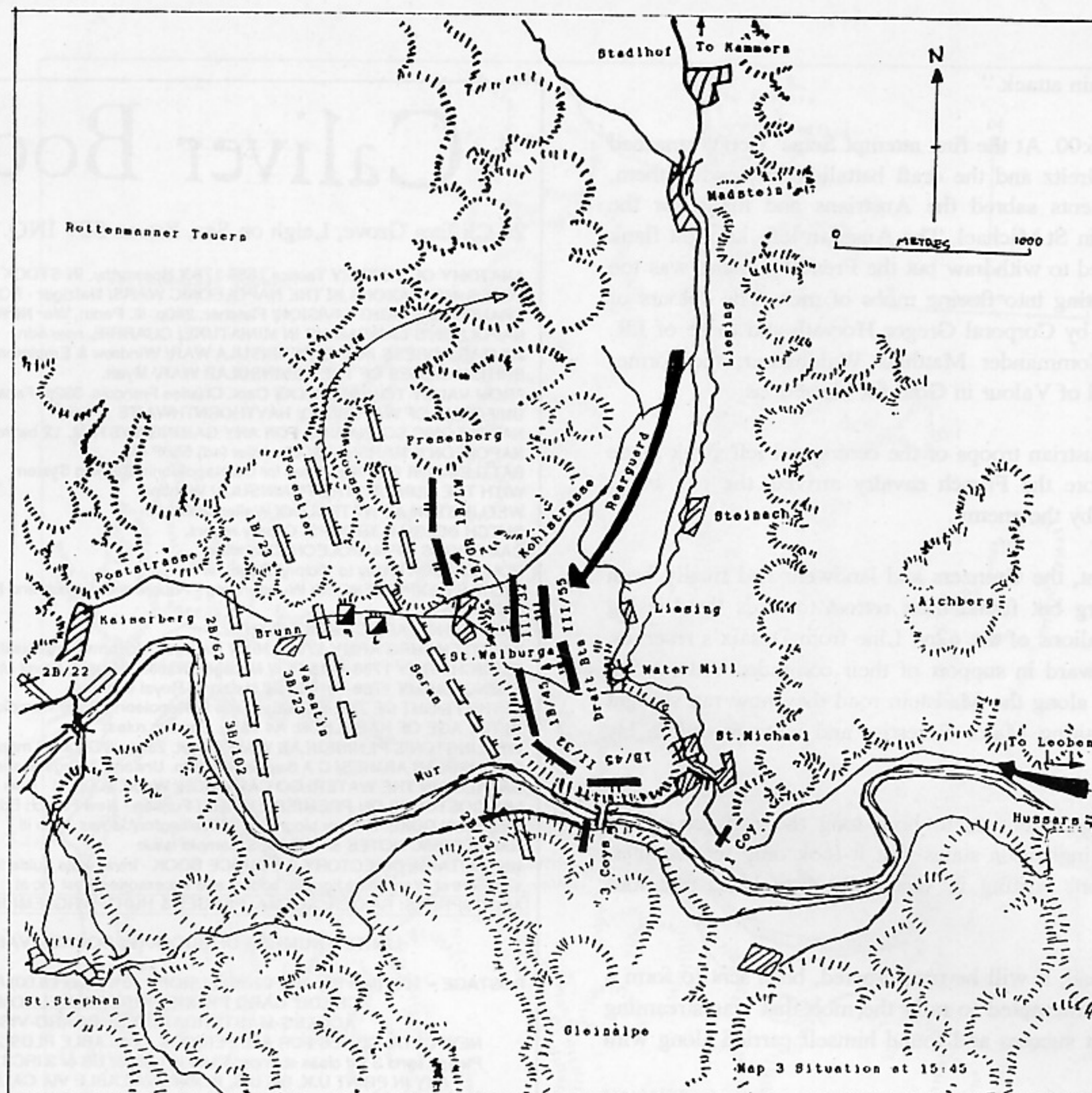
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The French soon repaired the bridge and crossed into Leoben where they captured a large part of the enemy baggage train. Seras now decided to call a halt to the pursuit. His men had marched 48 kilometres and had been in action several times during the course of the day and were now exhausted.

The Austrians continued their retreat throughout the night as far as Peggau, where they met up with elements of Archduke John's forces. The next evening (May 26th) a mere 2000 men arrived in Graz, followed in the next few days by 500-1000 stragglers. In the fighting at St. Michael and Leoben Jellacic's division had lost a total of 6573 men. Of these, 423 were dead, 1137 wounded and 50 listed as missing, leaving 4963 as prisoners. Of these, 1471 were from I.R. Esterhazy, mostly captured in the initial rout or at the Leoben bridge. III/Reuss-Greiz lost 1051 prisoners while the Grenz regiment left 1491 men in enemy hands. The replacement draft for I.R. Erzherzog Karl, 400 strong at the start lost 313 prisoners while a further 700 came from I.R. de Vaux and the Landwehr battalion, who thus emerged relatively unscathed.

Therefore, of the 12000 men who had assembled for the march back from the Tyrol, only about 25% made it to Graz to join up with the Archduke. 3000 landwehr had remained on the line of march to guard the Enns valley while the 1000 men of I/Esterhazy had marched via Trofaiach, giving a total of 8000 men present at St. Michael, where, in addition to 6573 men, the Austrians had lost one cannon and two colours, a major defeat by anyone's standards.

French losses were about 200 dead, 400 wounded and the 70 prisoners taken in the earlier Austrian attack, in other words about 5% of the total force.

### The Consequences of the Defeat.

Archduke John had reached Graz on May 24th with his main body, which was now down to 8600 men, having had to detach forces to Croatia. He was counting on Jellacic's force to rebuild his army to a more respectable strength with which he intended to carry out one of the following options: "I shall either return to the Hungarian Insurrection via Fuerstenfeld and attempt to advance from there, or put a few marches behind us and break out towards Austria, either via Aspang to Neustadt, or across the Semmering, or perhaps even via Mariazell to St. Polten."

Jellacic's disaster and the movements of the French, who reached Bruck and Frohnleiten on May 27th removed most of these options and ensured that Eugene would be able to link up with his step-father's forces near Vienna. John left Graz on May 29th and marched via Gleisdorf and the Raab valley to Kormend, where he linked up with Gyulay's troops, giving him a force of 19000 men in early June. 720 men and 22 guns had been left behind in Graz under the command of Major Franz von Hackher.

In early June, Napoleon ordered Eugene to march his troops from their new base at Wiener Neustadt to prevent John's mixture of regulars and Insurrection troops from joining up with the main Austrian army on the Marchfeld, leading to the Battle of Raab (June 14th) in which John suffered a severe defeat.

The landwehr battalions that Jellacic had left behind in the Enns valley were under the command of Lt. Colonel Count Plunquet. On May 25th a double threat developed to these troops from the Bavarians to the west and the Wurttembergers to the north-east. Plunquet called his units together and, on the 26th, tried to march towards St. Michael and what they thought was safety. They were met on the same day by a French officer bearing news of the disaster. Totally demoralised,



Plunquet began negotiations for a surrender and, on the same day, 2000 landwehr surrendered to a company of grenadiers and 40 dragoons. The rest had simply gone home!

The question just has to be asked as to how Jellacic managed to get so badly beaten as his defeat, it can be argued, was a direct cause of the final Austrian defeat at Wagram, where the Archduke John's presence with a sizable force might have made a difference to the final outcome.

Firstly, Jellacic's judgment of the situation early on the morning of May 25th was somewhat faulty. In spite of the information from locals and from the landwehr he persisted in believing that only weak enemy forces were operating in the Mur valley. His poor reconnaissance compounded this problem as, despite having 75% of a cavalry squadron with him, he failed to send them ahead in the direction of St. Michael and the Mur valley while he was marching down the Liesing.

The confusion over orders described earlier in this article also added to the problem as, if the Austrians had marched on time, they might have been able to clear the St. Michael bridge before the French arrived in sufficient strength to prevent them. Once he was on the battlefield Jellacic's performance didn't improve. He failed to realise the danger of his position, fighting with his back to an unfordable stream crossed by only one bridge, and may have done better by abandoning his baggage and taking up a position in the narrows east of St. Michael, where a small rearguard could have held up the French advance for long enough to enable the main body to escape. Jellacic, however, was fixated by getting his baggage away and thus chose to fight on the plateau west of St. Michael, precisely where Eugene could employ his superior forces to the best possible effect.

## ORDERS OF BATTLE

### Division Jellacic May 25th 1809

Brigade GM Konstantin von Ettinghausen  
I.R. Esterhazy No.32 3 battalions  
I.R. de Vaux No.45 2 battalions  
Brigade GM Ignaz Freiherr von Legisfeld  
Warasdiner-Kreuzer Grenz No.5 2 battalions  
I.R. Reuss-Greiz No.55 1 battalion  
Drafts for I.R. Erzherzog Karl No.3 1/2 battalion  
Salzburg Landwehr 1 battalion  
Chevauleger Regiment O'Reilly No.3 3/4 squadron  
3 pounder Brigade Battery 4 guns

**TOTAL c. 8000 men**

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Other factors, over which Jellacic had little or no control, also contributed to the disaster. His men had made several debilitating marches in the previous month, especially in the few days leading up to the battle, and were exhausted. The French had also been marching hard and had fought several actions en route, but there was one major difference; whereas the Austrians were retreating, the French were advancing into enemy territory and were on a winning streak, having defeated Archduke John and chased him out of Italy and won several small encounters with local forces en route, especially over Gyulay at Tarvis on May 18th, which will be covered in a future article if the so-kind editor agrees.

To finish, a couple of comments on poor Jellacic would seem to be in order. Firstly from Archduke John's memoirs, written in 1853- 1854: "On the 25th of May Captain de Lort arrived in Graz with news from FML Jellacic on the state of his corps (over 9000 reliable troops). I was unhappy to see him there, since as a representative of the General Staff, it was his duty to remain with his general - all the more so since I was well acquainted with Jellacic's indecision and slowness. A brave soldier in the face of the enemy, but not suited to act independently, as he had already shown, first at Feldkirch in 1799 and latterly in 1805. He needed a brave officer with him to guide him and to overcome his wilfulness."

Secondly, again from John, this time in a letter to Archduke Charles dated June 2nd 1809: "...he should only be used in the line. A brave soldier, but limited in his skills."

From these comments (which, interestingly, could also have been written about John himself) it seems incredible that he was ever chosen for an independent role in the first place!

### "Corps" Grenier May 25th 1809

Commander: General de Division Grenier  
Chief of Staff: Major Forestier

#### DIVISION DURUTTE

Brigade Valentin  
22nd Light Infantry Regiment 2 battalions  
23rd Light Infantry Regiment 4 battalions  
Brigade Desaix  
62nd Line Infantry Regiment 4 battalions  
102nd Line Infantry Regiment 3 battalions  
6th Chasseur a Cheval Regiment 4 squadrons  
Artillery 2 guns

#### DIVISION SERAS

Brigade Roussel  
53rd Line Infantry Regiment 4 battalions  
106th Line Infantry Regiment 4 battalions  
Provisional Regiment 3 battalions  
(4th battalions of 1st Light, 35th Line, 42nd Line)  
9th Chasseur a Cheval Regiment 4 squadrons  
Artillery 10 guns

**TOTAL c. 15000 men**