

A brief look at the French side of the Peninsular War: Marshal Ney's command during the retreat of 1811

By Miguel Pack Martins

Introduction: the other marshal in Masséna's *Armée du Portugal*

On the 24th July 1810, the French army, led by André Masséna, entered Portuguese territory. Known as “The Sweet Child of Victory”, Masséna was at that time one of the most celebrated of Napoleon's generals and also one of the most rewarded. For his leadership in the French Revolutionary Wars, especially in Italy (1795-97 and 1800) and Zurich (1799), Napoleon had named him a Marshal of the Empire in 1804, and Duke of Rivoli in 1808, to celebrate his command in that battle in 1797.

Even though he was one of the oldest marshals, Masséna was called on to command the IV Corps in the Danube Campaign (1809) and showed the same audacity and ability of his youth at Aspern-Essling, even after breaking a leg falling from a horse, and also at Wagram. For these actions he was made Prince of Essling, an honour shared with Davout, Prince of Eckmühl, and Berthier, Prince of Wagram, the only three marshals to be given honorific principedoms dedicated to military victories¹.



**Marshal Michel Ney,
by François Gérard**

¹ Although Bernadotte was Prince of Ponte-Corvo, this was a Venetian principedom given to him by Napoleon, as was the principedom of Neuchâtel and Valagin, which was given to Berthier, in this case a Swiss principality .

As Masséna was one of the few marshals with experience in commanding an army with forces larger than one army corps, Napoleon nominated him commander-in-chief of the Army of Portugal (*Armée du Portugal*). He was not the only Marshal of the Empire in that army, as the Commander of the VI Corps since its formation at Étaples in 1803 was Michel Ney, from the same class of 1804 as Masséna². Made the Duke of Elchingen after a battle won in 1805 which helped the French close the “Ulm trap”³, Ney was known by various nicknames by the soldiers, the most popular being *Le Rougeaud* (The Redhead) or the “Red Lion”⁴, in recognition of his bravery, red hair, and impetuous character. In 1810, Ney was not as celebrated as Masséna, Davout, Lannes, or Soult, even though he was an experienced and well-known commander who had made important contributions to the Napoleonic campaigns of 1805 to 1807, and had been in Spain since 1808. In a way, he was still on his path to greater glories and an even greater fall.

Ney’s command of the rearguard during the French retreat of 1811

In February 1811, General Foy returned from Paris with new orders and, as usual, these were not suited to the reality of the Peninsular War. After a period of winter quarters in the region of Santarém, the Army of Portugal lacked resources, artillery, and men to march to Lisbon. Furthermore, the possibility of joining forces with Soult were starting to disappear, as Soult had his army pursuing various objectives.

² In 1804 Napoleon nominated 14 active Marshals of the Empire (Augereau, Bernadotte, Bérthier, Bessières, Brune, Davout, Jourdan, Lannes, Masséna, Moncey, Mortier, Murat, Ney and Soult) and 4 senatorial and honorific Marshals of the Empire (Lefebvre, Kellermann, Pérignon and Sérurier).

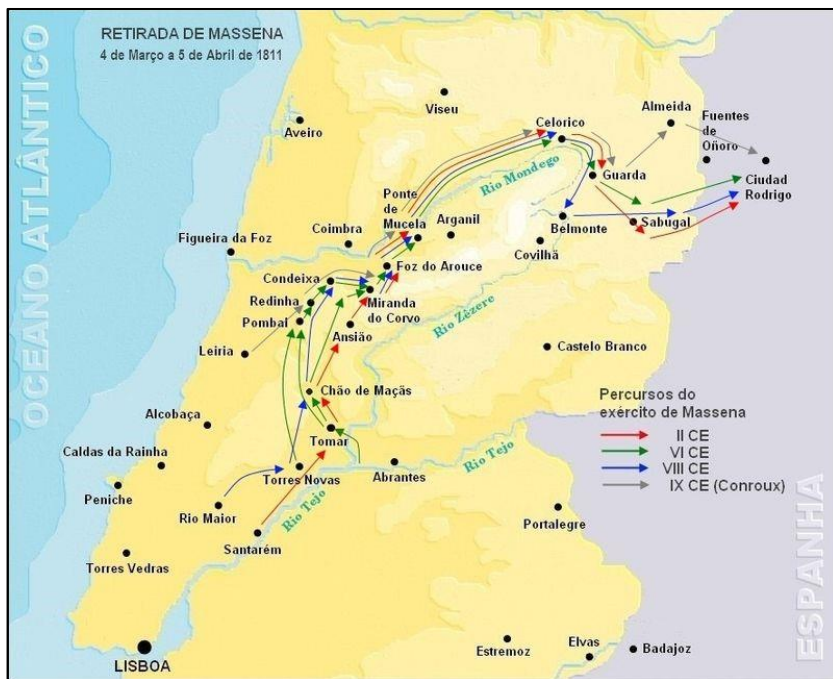
³ Napoleon’s first campaign of the Napoleonic Wars was against General Mack’s Austrian army, positioned in Ulm, near the Danube region of Bavaria, today’s Germany. The Austrian general was surrounded by Napoleon’s army corps, after weeks of quick marches and quick maneuvers on the north and south of the river. But there was gap at Elchingen area, after Murat wrongly ordered Ney to only guard the north bank of that position with just Dupont L’Étang’s division. Napoleon ordered Ney’s VI Corps to close that gap and counter attack any Austrian escape. On 14th October 1805, Ney won the battle of Elchingen against the escaping army corps led by general Riesch.

⁴ Atteridge, *Marshal Ney: The Bravest of the Brave*, 2005, p. 6.

Marshal Victor was tied down with his corps at Cadiz, and the Andalusia region needed to be garrisoned to prevent the loss of the region to insurgents and guerrillas. To do so, Soult could only muster about 25,000 men to campaign and lay siege to the fortresses of Badajoz, Elvas, Juromenha, and Campo Maior and thus the southern campaign became a difficult and sluggish enterprise for the French. For instance, Badajoz only fell on the 11th March, after Soult, together with Mortier's corps, won the battle of Gebora against the Spanish. Meanwhile, Masséna's army had only 30,000 healthy soldiers and many thousands sick. This was a result of the death, disease, and hunger which haunted the French army as a consequence of the scorched-earth policy implemented by the Duke of Wellington and D. Miguel Pereira Forjaz to counter the French strategy of living off the land and the constant raids made by Silveira and Trant against the French communication lines established with Almeida and Ciudad Rodrigo.

Facing this dangerous situation, Masséna arranged a meeting with his corps commanders and members of the high command. They met at Golegã on the 18th February 1811. Ney was present and argued against Masséna's main plan of retreating to the Mondego Valley, where the Prince of Essling hoped to find fertile land and thus maintain the French presence in Portugal and the hope of eventually conquering Lisbon. The VI Corps commander explained to Masséna that the army could be flanked at Rio Maior, because the bad roads in that region would result in a slower march. Instead, Ney supported the idea of crossing the Tagus at Punhete and joining Soult in his efforts to conquer the south of Portugal. However, Loison pointed out that the crossing at Punhete was dangerous and that the army would be an easy target for Beresford's forces. In the end, the retreat to the Mondego region was established as the new objective and a reluctant Ney accepted the task of leading the rearguard of the army with his VI Corps. Ney's forces went to Redinha, following the road to Pombal, to hold back the Anglo-Portuguese forces, and, if possible, support Junot's VIII Corps⁵.

⁵ Koch, 2007, p. 164.



**French retreat of 1811. Green arrows correspond to Ney's VI Corps
(Map drawn by Manuel F. V. G. Mourão)**

On the 3rd of March 1811, Masséna ordered the beginning of the French retreat. Although the objective was initially the Mondego region, it was to eventually become a retreat to Ciudad Rodrigo. To deceive Wellington, Masséna ordered Heudelet's division to maintain its position at Santarém, Clausel's division at Rio Maior, and, from the VI Corps, Loison's division at Punhete - with the mission to destroy the bridge built by Eblé. The rest of Ney's VI Corps was to cover the movements of Reynier's II Corps and Junot's VIII Corps, with the 1st Division at Tomar and the 2nd Division between Barquinha and Golegã.

The march started on the 5th March, with the VIII Corps advancing to Alcanede, while Ney sent a brigade to Molianos to fake a reconnaissance. The die was cast, and the French were able to deceive Wellington, who reacted on the 5th March by sending forces to Cartaxo

(4th Div.), Azambuja (6th Div.), Rio Maior (3rd Div.), and Punhete (2nd Div.)⁶. The lack of movement in Rio Maior raised suspicion and the arrival at the empty city of Santarém confirmed this. Wellington knew what to do. He sent the Light Division and Pack's Portuguese Brigade to pursue Junot's VIII Corps to Pernes, with the 3rd Division acting as reinforcement. Wellington believed that the French were heading for Coimbra with the intention of avoiding a large battle with the Anglo-Portuguese army. It was now up to Ney to stop this offensive and protect his army's retreat. He was going to fight with Wellington for the most precious resource - time. Ney led the rearguard in various skirmishes and combats between the 10th and 15th of March, using the geography to his advantage as well as timely infantry and cavalry attacks and disengagement, burning villages to delay the pursuing Allies.

The first engagement was the Combat of Pombal, on the 10th March. On the 9th of March, Ney was ordered to stay in Pombal with three dragoon regiments and to send Loison to Redinha to reconnoiter the Mondego. However Wellington's pressure was starting to be felt, with Allied troops sighted in Leiria. With this news, Ney informed Masséna that Wellington might pursue Ney's forces with 40,000 soldiers⁷, with the objective of outflanking them. Masséna and Pelet did not believe this, as they thought that the presence of Soult and Mortier in the South would divide the Anglo-Portuguese army. Ney insisted, and reminded them of the presence of Allied soldiers at the River Soure and that Wellington wanted to attack the French at Pombal. After a long debate, Ney convinced Masséna to accept the defence of Pombal from behind the city walls, and not in front. The day of battle marked the first of a series of rearguard actions involving Ney and the Anglo-Portuguese forces. The attack on Pombal was carried out by the Light Division, supported by the divisions of Spencer, Picton, Cole and Campbell, and finally by Pack's and Cotton's brigades. The 6th French Light Regiment acted as a contact force, whose mission was to make contact, delay enemy movement as much as possible, and then disengage.

⁶ Oman, 1902, p. 85.

⁷ Pelet, 1973, p. 435.

After a tough struggle with the 95th Rifles and 3rd Caçadores, the French disengaged and started to retreat in echelon. As the Allied forces occupied Pombal, Ney attacked them with the 69th Line Regiment,



The combat of Pombal, 10th March, 1811

with the purpose of gaining time. The French retreated in safety after the Allies left. This was a short engagement, but it gained time for the French. Ney then ordered the burning of the town to delay the pursuing forces. French casualties numbered 63, against 41 Anglo-Portuguese⁸.

The second action was on the next day - the Combat of Redinha, where Picton praised Ney's command⁹. At Redinha, Ney had the support of Solignac's Division, positioned between the River Soure and Ney's own position, with Junot in reserve in Condeixa. The marshal positioned his divisions in line, with Mermet's division being the closest to the Anglo-Portuguese forces, near a forest. The fighting started with an attack on the French right by forces of the Light Division, but this attack was repelled, thanks to the efforts of the French cavalry and the failure of the Allied artillery to support the initial attack. In response, Ney ordered an artillery bombardment of the positions of Picton and Erskine. Picton ordered the next attack, which was again repelled by the French, whose defence obliged Spencer to intervene to protect Picton. Wellington arrived at 15.00 and maintained the attacks on the French position, but these failed, especially those on Mermet's position. The Anglo-Portuguese finally advanced later that evening, only to find that the French had disappeared and left the town in flames. Ney suffered 250 casualties against the 206 of the Anglo-Portuguese.¹⁰

⁸ Moura, 2012, p. 237.

⁹ Napier, 1873, pp. 333-334.

¹⁰ Moura, 2012, p. 241.

The pursuit continued to Miranda do Corvo, with Picton closing up on Marchand's Division. Ney received the news that he was to receive Solignac's division and Montbrun's cavalry brigade as reinforcements for the next battle, and that Picton was advancing. Casal Novo was then established as the new position to be defended, instead of Condeixa. Ney sent a dispatch requesting this new position, but it failed to reach the French headquarters, which added to more confusion with Masséna. After receiving the news of Ney's changes in leaving Condeixa's hills to secure Casal Novo, Masséna and Pelet saw this as an act of disobedience. However, Ney was right, and on the 14th March a combat occurred at Casal Novo, between French and the Anglo-Portuguese soldiers. Before this fighting, there had been another disagreement between Masséna and Ney. The commander-in-chief wanted Ney to remain at Rabaçal, so he could defend Loison's march, but Ney insisted that defending Casal Novo was a better plan, arguing that the Anglo-Portuguese army was threatening its position. His instinct was correct, as the Light Division and Cole's division were approaching the area. Ney used the high ground as an advantage, establishing his defences around the hills on the right of the town of Casal Novo. He placed Solignac's division to his left, Marchand's at Casal Novo, and Mermet's at Vila Seca. It was a foggy morning and this benefitted the defenders, who successfully defended against Erskine's attack with the 52nd. Ney wanted to retreat in echelon, fighting the Allied forces position by position, but for this to happen, it required timing and audacity for the French success. The English pressure was strengthened with the arrival of Picton and Pack, and in the end, the Allied forces were able to occupy Vila Seca and Casal da Azenha, but they were too exhausted to pursue the French, now moving to Miranda do Corvo. The Allied forces had 155 casualties, while the French had between 40 and 100¹¹.

The string of small successes came to an end on the 15th of March, at Foz de Arouce. While Reynier's troops were protecting the rebuilding of the bridge at Mucela, which had previously been

¹¹ Moura, 2012, 245.



The retreat from Foz de Arouce

destroyed by Trant's soldiers, other French troops advanced to Foz de Arouce. When the rebuilding was complete, the plan was for the II and VIII Corps to be the first to cross the bridge, while the VI Corps defended the area of Foz de Arouce to gain time. Ney left a reserve on the hill that covered the town and in front of these he positioned two line regiments, the 25th and the 39th. Pelet stated that Ney, instead of placing the forces on the hill, moved them to the right bank of the river, in order that he would not be near Masséna. However, Koch, another aide of Masséna, says that it was the commander-in-chief who sent Ney to the right. Either way, the mistake had been made, and, independent of the responsibility, the Anglo-Portuguese forces took advantage of it.

The Light Division attacked the hills defended by Ferrey, while Picton's division, with the support of Cole's and Spencer's troops, attacked the left side of the hills, against Mermet's position. The attack surprised the French and when the Allies noticed Ney's mistake, they attacked the French right. The action resulted in the capture of Colonel Lamour and the consequent rumour that he had been killed in action. This news resulted in panic and loss of moral among the French troops, who ran to cross the river. The artillery was abandoned and the 39th even lost their regimental standard¹² amongst the confusion, while French cavalry mortally trampled their own infantry in their haste to escape.

Fortunately, Ney responded quickly and personally organised the 6th Light Regiment and the 69th Line regiment and send them to re-establish order in crossing the bridge¹³. He even avoided being hit by friendly fire from a still confused 76th line regiment, who thought that the Marshal and his troops were enemy soldiers. After this, Ney was

¹² According to General Koch, the 39th line regiment lost the standard during the chaotic crossing of the river Ceira near Foz de Arouce. They even set divers to search the standard, but they only recover the body of the standard bearer. Koch, 2007, p. 198.
¹³ Pelet, 1973, p. 471.

accompanied by a battalion of the 69th and some light infantry companies (*voltigeurs*) which he ordered to charge the centre and right flank of the Allied forces and then open ranks and fire point blank at them¹⁴. He succeeded, although it also helped that by now the Anglo-Portuguese forces had become an easy target for the remaining French artillery. Ney recovered the lost artillery and delayed the enemy advance, however he lost more than triple the number of soldiers than his Anglo-Portuguese counterparts did, with 200-400 casualties to the Allied 71¹⁵. This would be the last fight between Ney and the British redcoats until 1815, at Quatre Bras, the prelude to Waterloo.

The French proceeded to Celorico, with the VI Corps taking position in the hills of Igreja-a-Nova. Ney, still bothered by the last fight, stayed with Marchand to make sure that everything went well. Later on, at Ceira, Ney ordered his divisions to secure the hills near the Ceira River and left the light infantry of the VI Corps to secure the bridgehead and the left bank of that river. The High Command did not like this position, and Pelet was sent to talk with Ney, only to be surprised by Ney's proposal to defend the crossing of the bridge at Mucela - with just one division, made up by the 6th light infantry and the 38th, 69th, and 76th line regiments¹⁶. Pelet thought this was suicidal, but Masséna accepted it. The bridge was crossed with little opposition – only one small skirmish between some French cavalry and British infantry, the VI Corps being the last to cross. Although there were no more Allied attacks, Ney had information that the Light Division and the 6th Division were on the left bank of the river, while three enemy divisions were crossing the Serra of Quiteira to flank the French at Pombeiro. Threatened by these movements, Ney wrote to Masséna that without orders he must move as soon as possible to save his VI Corps. After sending this letter, Ney went to Galizes and waited. This precaution was ill-received by Masséna, who saw it as another challenge by Ney to his authority, although Ney was right about the Allied threat.

¹⁴ Pelet, cit. Op p. 471.

¹⁵ Moura, 2005, p. 250.

¹⁶ Pelet, 1973, p. 435.

Conclusion and aftermath

The rift between Ney and Masséna increased in Celorico. After passing Chamusca and Guarda, the French forces arrived at Celorico on the 22nd of March, and the High Command had to resolve a new problem: whether to proceed to the Mondego, knowing the threats of Wellington, Trant, and Silveira, or rather to head to Spain. Ney preferred the second option - to go to Salamanca and Valladolid, however, Masséna was still reluctant to abandon Portugal¹⁷. He told his generals that they could rest for two to three days, and that General Pamplona would bring equipment and clothes from Ciudad Rodrigo, Salamanca, and Valladolid. Even knowing this, Ney continued to pressure Masséna about various aspects of the campaign. He first suggested that it was only necessary for one division and one brigade to guard the Cortiço canyon from an Anglo-Portuguese attack and he then complained that his VI Corps was exhausted and needed more food. Masséna responded that the VI Corps was the best-supplied corps and that the position in Celorico had been chosen as there was hope of joining forces with the army being formed by Bessiéres at Valladolid and Salamanca¹⁸. Accordingly, they could not retreat to these regions, neither to Ciudad Rodrigo, due to the risk of supplies running out. Eventually, Masséna proposed that Ney should advance to the Plasencia and Coria area¹⁹.

This started an aggressive exchange of dispatches, which resulted in Ney's dismissal. Ney did not welcome the news that the wounded were to go to Spain and the artillery to Guarda, as this reinforced the idea of staying in Portugal. He also criticised Masséna's idea of crossing the Tagus to go to Plasencia and Coria, whilst leaving Almeida and Ciudad Rodrigo open to Wellington. Ney once again argued that the army should march to Ciudad Rodrigo and Salamanca, due to the fact that were to be supplemented with reinforcements, and would thus be able to fight Wellington. Masséna defended the Plasencia and Coria

¹⁷ Koch, 2007, p. 206.

¹⁸ Koch, 2007, pp.207-208.

¹⁹ Koch, op. cit , p. 209.

option, as, in his opinion, Wellington would not risk suffering sieges of Almeida and Ciudad Rodrigo, as that would divide his forces. Even with this justification, Ney refused to cross the Tagus, and on the 22nd March, by 22.30 Masséna had dismissed Ney for disobeying orders. Ney believed that the VI Corps would mutiny against such a decision, but in the end, its loyalty to Ney was surpassed by its loyalty to the Emperor. Loison eventually replaced Ney to command the VI Corps.

Incongruously, destiny was to ensure that Masséna would see Ney's theory become a reality. After the defeat at Sabugal, Masséna received news that the supplies at Coria and Plasencia had been consumed by the V Corps, and thus Salamanca and Ciudad Rodrigo became the new objective. On the 4th April 1811, the Army of Portugal arrived in Spain and received even more bad news: the IX Corps of Drouet had eaten all the food reserves of Ciudad Rodrigo, the lines with Valladolid were irregular and not sufficient to quickly re-equip and feed the army, and, finally, Almeida was under siege. Masséna tried once more to invade Portugal, however he suffered another defeat at Fuentes de Oñoro, where Loison command of the VI Corps was found to be lacking.

Maybe it would have been better for Masséna to have retained Ney as the commander of the VI Corps, and above all, he should have listened to him. However, Ney's attitude was not the best, as he was overcome with pride and lacked the humility to accept Masséna's authority. Masséna was ordered to hand over the command of the *Armée du Portugal* to Marmont, while Ney was recalled to participate in the 1812 Russian Campaign. It was in Russia that Ney once again led the rearguard in a retreat, gaining the title of 'Bravest of the Brave' from Napoleon. He also became the Prince of Moskva, as a reward for his actions in Borodino and during the retreat.

It is usually said that Ney was the last Frenchman to cross the Niemen after the Russian disaster. By this time Masséna had been forgotten, and Ney became the new "grand figure" of the army, eventually commanding various forces during the campaigns of 1813

and 1814. After Napoleon's defeat in the campaign of 1814, Ney led the group of marshals which forced Napoleon to abdicate, initially in favor of his son Napoleon II. Ney was to accompany Caulaincourt and Macdonald in the negotiations with the Czar, all of whom signed the Treaty of Fontainebleau, on the 11th April 1814. After this, the marshal passed over to the side of the Royalists, and served Louis XVIII until Napoleon's return from Elba, only to serve his old master again during the Waterloo campaign, where he participated in the ill-fated cavalry charge against the British infantry squares.

For his disloyalty to Louis XVIII, Ney was executed on the 7th December 1815. His final request was to give the orders to the firing squad for his own execution. Ney's legacy is a mixture of bravery, victories, and poor military decisions, with his proud, bold, and impetuous character being considered to be responsible for both his ascension, and his downfall.

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