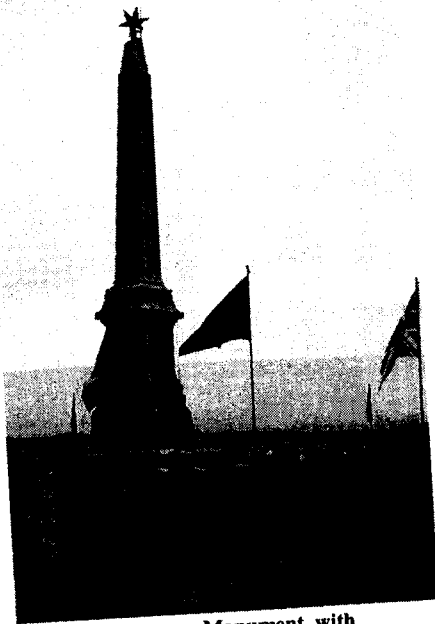


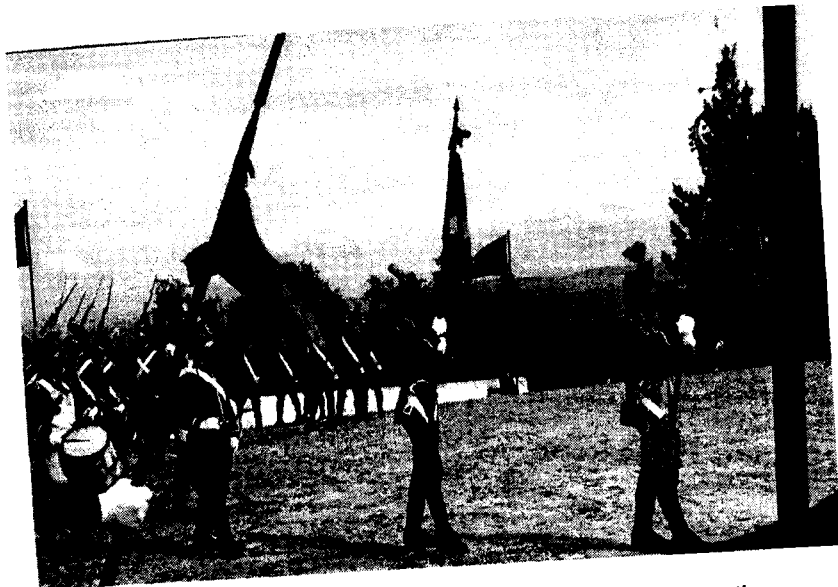
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The Bussaco Monument, with Portuguese soldiers in 1810 infantry uniform



Portuguese soldiers in 1810 uniforms march past at the commemoration ceremony at bussaco on 27 th September 1997

BATTLES AND BOTTLES IN THE PENINSULA

By John Paget

In the autumn of 1997 I took a party of 36 British Army officers and wives on an eight-day tour (25 September – 3 October) of some of the battlefields of the Peninsular War. I had planned originally on a party of 16, but as word got round, the numbers grew steadily and a halt had to be called when they reached 36.

I always think a Battlefield Tour is much more fun if one can also make a point of enjoying the wines of the area as well. The Duke of Wellington obligingly fought the Peninsular War in excellent wine country, so our route from Oporto to Madrid fitted in nicely with my chosen title of “Battles and Bottles”, and provided plenty of scope for our studies.

The tour was organised for me by VEGA Turismo Internacional in Lisbon and we also had invaluable help from Michael Stilwell, who served with me in the Coldstream Guards and now lives in Sintra.

We flew from Gatwick to Oporto on 25th September, and started off on the right lines with a tasting of Portuguese wines in our hotel that evening.

The Crossing of the Douro

Oporto is, to my mind, ideal for a “Battles and Bottles” outing, for one can view the scene of the Crossing of the Douro from the Monastery Serra da Pilar on the South bank of the river and then move only a few yards to the port lodges of Vila Nova da Gaia.

From the Monastery, which was also used by Sir Arthur Wellesley (as he then was) as his observation post, it is easy to

envisage the whole operation on 12th May 1809. It was an incredibly bold undertaking to launch a mere 120 men in four wine barges across the 300 yard wide river in broad daylight against a city held by 10,000 Frenchmen. But that is what Wellesley did, and it worked. Let no one ever call him a purely defensive general!

“Well. Let the men cross,” was his laconic order, and the first four boats pushed off. The French were taken completely by surprise, and eight hours later they had been routed. That evening Wellesley sat down in the Palacio das Carrancas to enjoy the supper prepared for Marshall Soult, who was by then fleeing into the mountains to the North of Oporto.

In order to make a thorough study of the crossing; one should also cross to the North bank of the Douro and go to the Seminary, which was the site of the original assault. But that does take at least an hour, and in our case the temptations of Vila Nova da Gaia were calling strongly and we could not resist.

Under the guidance of Huyshe Bowyer (who had already shown us around the Factory House earlier that morning) we toured Taylor’s lodge, and then enjoyed an excellent lunch and a tasting, after which we were content to slumber our way southwards to Bussaco.

Bussaco

Bussaco is another excellent battlefield for sightseeing, for it is easily accessible by road and the best viewpoint is just by the war memorial erected in 1876. From there one can see the steep slopes from Mura up which Marshal Massena’s French troops scrambled so confidently on 27th September 1810, only to be totally repulsed by the British Light Division and the Portuguese brigades holding the crest of the ridge.

A few hundred yards behind the monument is an excellent museum that well portrays the battle, while nearby in the forest is the famous Palace Hotel, renowned for its luxury, its fine gardens and

trees and also its fine wines. So where better for a day of “Battles and Bottles”?

By great good fortune we arrived at Bussaco on 27th September, which was, of course, the anniversary of the battle. The Portuguese Army very rightly celebrates the Battle of Bussaco in particular, for it was the first engagement of the Peninsular War in which they played a major part. They formed half Wellington’s army by then, and they distinguished themselves, suffering exactly as many casualties as their British Allies.

Our party included representatives of several British regiments that fought in Bussaco, and when told of this, the Portuguese military authorities most generously gave us all seats on the VIP stand, which was greatly appreciated. We were first shown round the museum, and then watched the very impressive parade and a march-past by detachments of Portuguese cavalry and infantry wearing uniforms of 1810. After a look at the actual battlefield, we adjourned for an excellent lunch in the grandeur of the Palace Hotel including, of course, a sampling of their wines.

After lunch we visited the cell in the adjoining Monastery where Wellington stayed before the battle, and noted with interest that he apparently insisted on having one with an “escape route” – perhaps with memories in his mind of his near capture the year before at the Casa de Salinas before the Battle of Talavera?

The next day, Sunday, was devoted entirely to “Bottles”, with a visit to Vargellas, the superb quinta in the Douro valley belonging to Taylor’s Port. It was a glorious sunny day and the dramatic scenery was looking its best with the autumn colours. Our party, together with an Australian television crew, were magnificently entertained by Alistair and Gillyane Robertson, and it was very late afternoon before we set off for Guarda, once again slumbering contentedly.

Fuentes do Onoro

The following morning we drove across the Spanish frontier to Fuentes de Onoro, the scene of a hard-fought two-day battle in May 1811. Wellington was on the defensive at this time, facing a superior French force under Marshal Massena which was advancing on him from Ciudad Rodrigo. He held a line running North and South through Fuentes, in order to block what was the main road into Portugal, but it was not a particularly strong position, especially as he was out-numbered.

On 3rd May the French attacked Fuentes head on and there was bitter hand-to-hand fighting in the village all day, with the British just managing to hold on to this key point. There was a lull on the 4th, but on the next day Massena attacked again and this time successfully outflanked the Duke by swinging round to the South of Fuentes. But he again failed to capture the village and was thus thwarted once more over his hopes of invading Portugal.

The village of Fuentes de Onoro is little changed from 1811 and is still a cluster of small, stone one-storey houses, high walls and narrow streets. We walked through it to the church, and it was easy to envisage the carnage of those two days when it changed hands six times. The country to the South and West of the village is open and undulating, and was the scene of predominantly cavalry action on 5th May, in which the Allies were forced to withdraw, but still held their line.

Ciudad Rodrigo

We did not have time to study the details of the second day's fighting at Fuentes, but pressed on to the fortress town of Ciudad Rodrigo, which was looking magnificent in the autumn sun. It is outwardly unchanged from 19th January 1812, when Wellington declared "Ciudad Rodrigo must be stormed tonight" - which it was with complete success. We walked round the ramparts and could identify with no difficulty all the key points of the siege and assault.

The two most prominent features are the Cathedral (still scarred by artillery fire) and the Castle, the scene of Colonel O'Toole's great exploit in crossing the Roman Bridge (still in use) and silencing two vital enemy guns. The Castle is now a Parador and offers an appropriate spot for refreshment or accommodation.

Salamanca

It is an easy hour's drive from Ciudad Rodrigo to Salamanca, and we arrived that evening in time for a tasting of Spanish wines in our hotel before dinner.

We woke next day to another lovely sunny morning, and drove a mere six miles South from Salamanca to the village of Los Arapiles, set in bare undulating farmland dominated by the saddle back hill called the Greater Arapile.

In 1812 Wellington was at last in a position to take the offensive in the Peninsular, for Napoleon had withdrawn 27,000 troops from Spain to reinforce his army for the invasion of Russia. The Duke promptly took advantage of this and advanced into Spain, liberating the city of Salamanca on 17th June 1812. He was opposed by Marshal Marmont, and, as each of them had around 49,000 men, the two commanders manoeuvred cautiously for several weeks each seeking an advantage over the other.

On the morning of 22nd July 1812 the clash came. The two armies were both marching westwards either side of the village of Los Arapiles with the French just South of it and the Allies about a mile away to the North. Wellington was watching the French column closely the whole time and the moment came early in the afternoon when there was a gap of about a mile between the two leading French divisions and their whole force of six divisions was strung out over four miles. He, on the other hand, had almost the whole of his army concentrated just behind him. For a fleeting moment he had the chance to launch 34,000 men against 18,000 enemy.

Snapping his telescope shut, he exclaimed "By God. That will do," and galloped off to give orders personally to his divisional commanders to attack immediately, which they did, Marmont was taken completely by surprise, and was routed. It was a magnificent victory, and above all it was an outstanding example of an "opportunist" battle, carried out, as on the Douro, with almost incredible boldness. It is intriguing to consider what other famous military commanders might have acted with such decisiveness in similar circumstances? Picton perhaps in the Peninsular War, Rommel and Patton in World War Two?

The battlefield of Salamanca is quite unchanged, except for a disused railway line across one corner. Wellington was in the village of Los Arapiles when he made his famous decision, but a better viewpoint today is to walk up the low ridge 300 yards to the North of the village. From there one can see the whole battlefield and understand exactly what happened. We all did just that and then climbed the Greater Arapile; it was a glorious autumn day and many of the party said that this was the highlight of the tour because one could so clearly and vividly envisage the whole battle in which "40,000 Frenchmen were defeated in 40 minutes".

Talavera

Our final battle was Talavera, which meant going back mentally from July 1812 (Salamanca) to the summer of 1809, when the future Duke drove the French out of Oporto and out of Portugal. He then turned South and advanced into Spain towards Madrid.

For the first time he now had to cooperate with the Spanish Army and he found it a deeply discouraging experience. There were 35,000 of them in his army of 55,000, but their commander was so uncooperative and they proved so unreliable, that he refused to count on their support. But as a result, he found himself opposing 46,000 French and 86 guns with only 20,000 British and German troops and 16 guns.

The battle took place on 28th July 1809 and in Wellesley's own words "Never was there such a murderous battle." It was indeed a costly and also inconclusive contest, with the Allies losing 25% casualties against 18% French. But at the end of the day, it was the French who withdrew, leaving Wellesley in control of the battlefield. It was a fine achievement by the Peninsular Army and it was proclaimed at home as a great victory. Sir Arthur Wellesley was created Baron Douro of Wellesley and Viscount Wellington of Talavera.

The battlefield is just over two hours drive from Madrid down the motorway, which runs through the middle of it, but does not, in fact, ruin it. When the motorway was being built, the bulldozers unexpectedly turned up a mass grave from 1809 containing bodies from both sides. There was much concern at the desecration, and the Spanish Government not only re-interred the bones but also, in 1990, built a memorial to the 12,500 men killed on both sides. It stands close to the motorway and provides an excellent point from which to start a tour of the battlefield.

The memorial is inscribed with the names of all the regiments that took part in the battle, and there is a helpful map of the ground showing the dispositions of the troops. There is also plenty of parking space.

The best viewpoint of all is the dominant feature just North of the motorway called the Medellin, which was the key position in the Allied line, and was used by Wellesley as his command post. It is, however, private property and cannot be used except with the permission of the owner. We were very fortunate in that we were not only allowed to use the veranda of his house as a viewpoint, but were also given a splendid lunch, helped down with vintage Rioja.

If you are not so lucky, the best alternative is probably the Cascajal, a hill on the French side opposite the Medellin. Talavera is not such an easy battlefield to identify as some, as it has been extensively built over and the Portina Brook dividing the two sides has been dammed to form a reservoir which covers part of the Allied

left front. But it is a very interesting battle to study and is a convenient day's outing from Madrid which, of course, offers so much to see and do.

Conclusion

A tour from Oporto to Madrid along the lines of our undertaking certainly provides a fascinating glimpse of six Peninsular War battlefields together with the chance to sample some of the excellent wines along the route. We thoroughly enjoyed it and I am sure others will too.

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Lt. Col. Sir John Paget, Bt served in the Coldstream Guards from 1940-68 and retired at Lt. Colonel. He is now a Military Historian and author of 10 books including 'Wellington and the Peninsular War'. He conducts battlefield tours on the Peninsular, Crimean Wars and Waterloo.



The author (centre) and two members of the party in front of the Talavera Monument built in 1990 by Spanish Government