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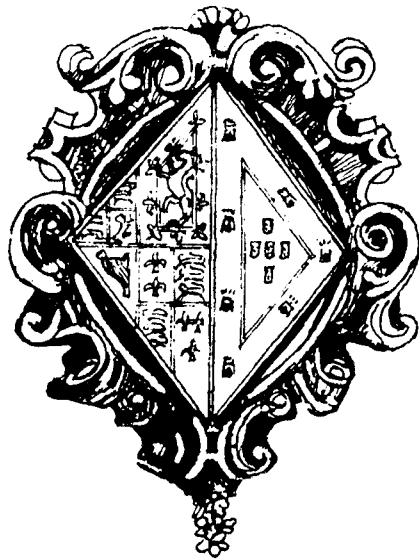
BERESFORD MARSHAL OF PORTUGAL

by Lieut-Colonel (Retd) F.O.Cetre, MC

The Peninsular Campaign is overshadowed by the greatness of Wellington who was the chief architect of its success but he was well served by his many subordinates – amongst them Marshall Beresford whose main contribution was the re-organisation and training of the Portuguese Army, welding it into an effective fighting force to make up the numbers needed by Wellington to counter balance the numerical superiority of the French. This article deals purely with the military aspects of his work and not with his political involvement when the war was over and he was virtually governor of the country until the return of the King from Brazil.

He was born in 1768 in Ireland, natural son of the first Marquis of Waterford. He was educated first in Catterick, and then entered the Military School in Strasbourg from which he was commissioned in 1785 as an ensign in the 6th Regiment of Foot which he accompanied to Nova Scotia where he lost an eye in a hunting accident. On the outbreak of the French revolutionary wars he found himself in Toulon with the 69th Foot. Toulon had invited an English garrison against the revolutionary French but they were forced to evacuate owing to the expertise of a 24 year old French Artillery Captain by the name of Napoleon Bonaparte! Immediately afterwards Beresford went to Corsica where he distinguished himself at the storming of Martello. Subsequent service took him to India in the war against Tipoo Sahib (1800) where he first met Wellington. From there he went on to Egypt after the Battle of the Nile (1800-1803). By then he was a brevet Colonel.

He then took part in the capture of Capetown from the Dutch in 1806 and then in the expedition to Buenos Aires which – owing to a complete surprise – he captured. The Spaniards, however, seeing the small size of the force opposing them (only 1,200 men) rallied and, after fierce fighting, Beresford and his force were forced to



capitulate and he was made prisoner. He escaped after six months and returned to the UK.

On 24th December, 1807 he was sent to Madeira which the British had occupied in the name of the King of Portugal on the latter's departure for Brazil in the face of the first French invasion under General Junot. Beresford was made Governor and C-in-C of the island with the rank of Major-General and now entered the scene of the Peninsular War.

He arrived in Lisbon in August, 1808, after the battle of Vimeiro and was appointed Commandant of Lisbon supervising the evacuation of the Southern fortresses by the French after the Convention of Sintra.

On the arrival of Sir John Moore, Beresford was given command of a Brigade in Fraser's (4th) Division which, during the retreat to Corunna, marched in front of the rearguard being frequently called upon to assist in numerous actions against the French. At Corunna Beresford's Brigade covered the withdrawal and was the last to embark. The Portuguese now asked the British for an English General to re-organise their Army. Beresford was chosen on Wellington's recommendation and, although only a Major-General aged 41, was given the rank of local Lt. General in the British Army and Marshal in the Portuguese Army. This did not go down at all well with the more senior British officers and was to be a constant cause of friction.

At the time of Junot's invasion the Portuguese Army numbered less than 30,000 and was in very poor shape. The Regency Council decreed that no resistance was to be made to Junot's French Army – largely consisting of conscripts who straggled all the way from the frontier to Lisbon which Junot entered on 30th November, 1807, with a mere 1,500 exhausted and famished infantry mostly in rags and with no cavalry support.

Napoleon, wishing to disarm the nation completely, decreed that an expeditionary Portuguese force was to be formed and the

remaining units were to be disbanded. Junot organised a force of 6 infantry and 3 cavalry regiments for service under Napoleon and command was given to the Marquês de Alorna who, in terms of the Second World War, would be termed a "Quisling". He was a career officer – able and ambitious – and not without influence among the nobility, a number of whom he persuaded to join him as unit commanders. The force became known as the "Legion of Alorna" and fought well and valiantly under Napoleon, being especially commended for their conduct in the retreat of Russia in 1812. Of a force of some 9,000 who left Portugal, under 500 returned to their homeland.

Both the British and the Regency commenced recruiting from the scattered remnants and it was on this – at first sight uncompromising material – that Beresford had to work and create, as he did, a first class fighting force.

He was given 24 selected British officers as a hardcore cadre – 4 Majors and 20 Captains who were advanced one rank in the British service and two in the Portuguese Army and drew the pay of rank of both armies! Thus a Captain became a Major in the British Army and a Lt. Colonel in the Portuguese service. This number was not sufficient and a further 30 volunteers were asked for. As time went on, something like 100 British officers were serving with the Portuguese Army at any one time and at the end of the campaign something like 350 British officers had served with the Portuguese, of whom 41 died in battle.

The officer structure was carefully worked out, taking national pride into account. Where a British officer commanded the second-in-command would be Portuguese and vice-versa. The companies were equally divided among British and Portuguese officers to stimulate healthy rivalry – one sub-unit was not going to be shown up as worse than its neighbour! A number of British Drill Sergeants were also employed, some of whom became ensigns in the Portuguese service later on.

With this cadre Beresford got to work. The men were hard and sturdy peasants, patient and amenable to discipline but with a tendency to indolence. The officer promotion structure in the old Portuguese Army for middle and lower rank officers was hardly designed to encourage zeal and efficiency. In one Regiment the senior Captain had 37 years' service, the First Lieutenant 25 and the First Ensign 16. In one Cavalry Regiment the average age of the three senior Cornets was around 60! Pay for all ranks was wretchedly inadequate, rations poor and the supply system erratic.

Beresford began with a weeding out process, pensioning off the more ancient and unfit officers and weeding out other ranks. The fittest he retained to form the first line units of the Regular Army and the remainder were relegated to the Militia or second line units who, with time, were sufficiently trained up to become reliable troops in a static role. It was they, in fact, who, with a nucleus of British gunners and marines, manned the forts in the lines of Torres Vedras, allowing the Field Army to be completely free to manoeuvre against any thrust made by the French.

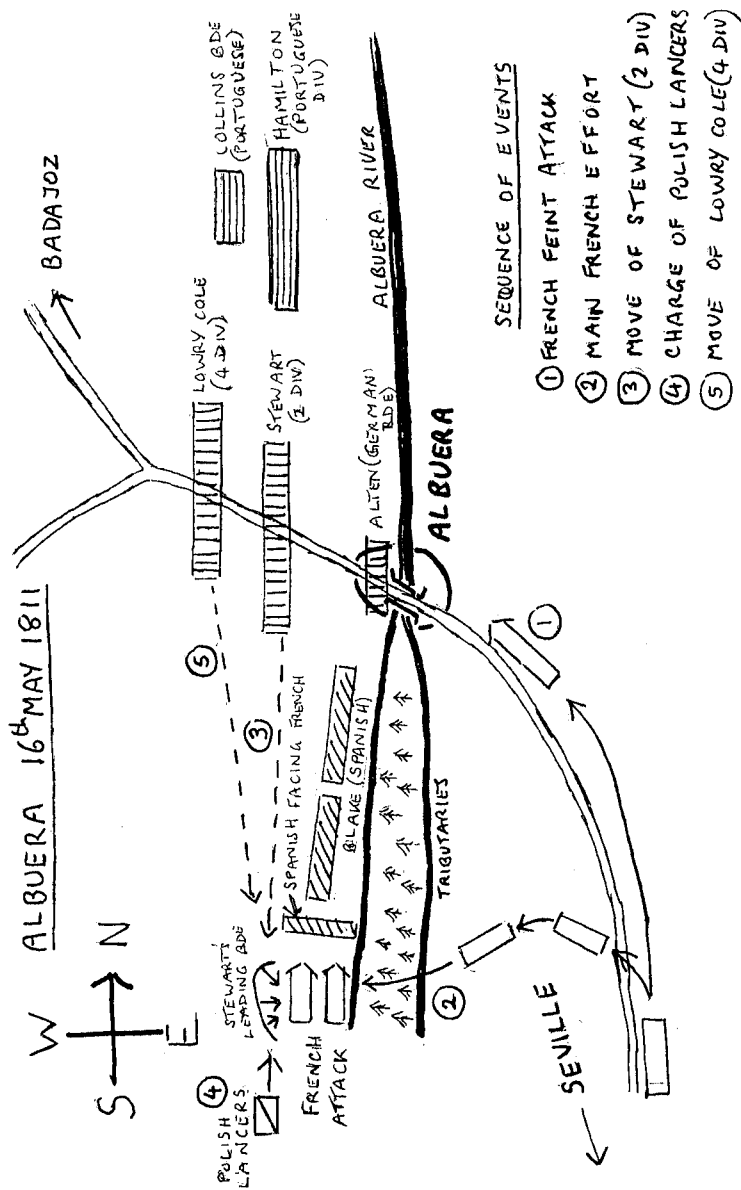
The first fruit of Beresford's training was seen at the Battle of Bussaco on 27th September 1810 where the Allied Army consisted of 50% Portuguese who, in the words of a Hanoverian officer present, fought with such valour and steadiness that the French, accustomed – as they were up till then – to despise the Portuguese soldiery and disperse them at will, believed them to be Englishmen dressed in Portuguese uniforms! The French attack was blunted with a loss, to them, of some 4,600 as against 626 Portuguese and 544 British – casualties and laurels of battle equally shared! The Portuguese Army had “come of age” and the anniversary of this battle is celebrated annually at Bussaco with pomp and ceremony in the presence of the Portuguese Army Chief of Staff and the British Military Attaché. It is beyond question that without this substantial Portuguese contribution and their battle effectiveness, the Battle of Bussaco would have turned out otherwise – if it would have been fought at all. With his own purely British Army, Wellington simply did not have the numbers to contend with the vastly superior French manpower.

From then onwards the Portuguese always formed a substantial part of Wellington's Army and shared in all their subsequent triumphs until the French were finally expelled from the Iberian Peninsula and the battle moved on to the soil of France itself. At the Battle of Albuera there were 8,900 British troops and 17,400 Portuguese, at Salamanca 25,600 British and 17,400 Portuguese, at Vitoria 27,400 British and 27,500 Portuguese, and in the Battles of the Pyrenees 30,000 British, 30,000 Portuguese and 20,000 Spaniards. On the eve of Waterloo, Wellington asked for 25,000 Portuguese “Bantam Cocks” but they were not at that time available. The Portuguese were organised in Brigades incorporated in British Divisions and there was also an entirely Portuguese Division.

No review of Beresford is complete without a mention of the Battle of Albuera which is the only time he had independent command of a considerable force and which gave rise to bitter criticism and controversy over his generalship and conduct of the battle.

In the Spring of 1811, when Wellington's Army was emerging from the Lines of Torres Vedras to follow up Massena's weakened and famished Army, Wellington gave the command of Hill's “Corps” to Beresford (as being the next senior) on the former going home due to illness. The substitution of the quiet Englishman by the fiery Irishman was not altogether popular.

Beresford's brief from Wellington was to invest Badajoz and obstruct a possible attempt by Soult to link up with Massena by an advance towards Lisbon across the Alentejo. The force that Beresford now had at his disposal consisted of the 2nd and 4th British Divisions (with Portuguese Brigades incorporated), the entirely Portuguese Division and two independent Brigades – one German and the other Portuguese. In addition, there was cavalry and artillery. He was joined by the Spanish General Blake with three Divisions. The total allied force numbered some 35,000.



Beresford moved quickly towards Badajoz and his first brush with the enemy was at Campo Mayor where the Light Cavalry Brigade charged the French Cavalry so impetuously that it got completely out of control and 13th Light Dragoons were entirely cut to pieces or taken prisoner.

Beresford then proceeded to invest Badajoz but Soult came from the East to the rescue with an Army of some 25,000 to raise the siege. Beresford then took up position on what he thought was Soult's most likely approach – through Albuera – which rests on the river of that name.

The accompanying sketch shows the dispositions. The ground is virtually flat except for a small elevation between the two tributaries which, at the time, was covered with trees. These brooks were fordable.

On the eve of the battle Beresford sacked his cavalry commander, General Long, whom he considered incompetent and not doing enough to delay the French. In fact Soult was able to make a personal reconnaissance of the position and – in particular – its vulnerable allied right flank. This did not augur well for the coming battle.

Soult's plan was simple – make a feint attack on Albuera, where Beresford expected him – and move with the bulk of his forces across the two tributaries, his movement shielded by the trees, and roll up the Allied right.

Beresford, perceiving this movement, ordered General Blake to face South to contain the French. Blake, however, believing that the main attack would come to his front, did not comply but merely posted four battalions to face the French. They were in no position to confront what was to be a two divisional attack in tight formation. Beresford has also ordered General Stewart to move his 2nd Division behind the Spaniards in support. Again the order was not complied with. Stewart, seizing an opportunity, ordered his leading Brigade to attack the French in flank as they moved against the Spaniards –

commendable but definitely against his orders! At this point the weather, which had been threatening, suddenly broke with a violent thunderstorm, drenching rain rendering the muskets useless. Under cover of the storm, Soult's Polish Cavalry, with massed lances, crashed into the leading Brigade and virtually annihilated it and then moved against the Spaniards. Beresford, who had ridden to this part of the field to "sort things out" was himself caught up in the fighting. Before he could draw his sword he was charged by a lancer. He parried the lance and, with his huge strength, tore the rider from the saddle and knocked him senseless to the ground.

At this critical point he ordered Hamilton's Portuguese Division and Collin's Portuguese Brigade to reinforce the position but, somehow, the order never got through. Now, Colonel Harding (later Field Marshal and C-in-C British Army) who was on Beresford's staff, took the initiative and persuaded General Lowry Cole to move his 4th Division to the threatened point.

Their intervention saved the day. The fighting was intense, both sides locked in mortal conflict -volley and bayonet- in a hot sultry atmosphere, which made the smoke from the powder sling to the ground and created a raging thirst. It was probably the most ferocious man-to-man combat in the whole of the Peninsular War.

A finale, Soult withdrew, covered by his guns and numerous cavalry on the East side of the River. He had been thwarted in his attempt to relieve Badajoz and any dream of linking up with Massena was gone.

It was a defensive victory at unduly heavy cost. The French lost between 7-8,000 and the Allies around 6,000 – the bulk falling on British units. Wellington: "Another such battle would ruin us!" When he visited the wounded in a field hospital a veteran sergeant told him "My Lord, if you had been in command that day you would not be seeing so many of us here now!"

Beresford has been bitterly criticised for his handling of this battle especially by Napier for:

- a) Unfortunate relations with subordinates and lack of control. General Long – in command of the cavalry – was substituted on the eve of the battle. Generals Stewart and Blake did not comply with his orders and the decisive intervention of 4th Division owes nothing to Beresford.
- b) Inadequate measure to secure and watch his right flank. Soult was enabled to concentrate 2/3 of his Army there and might have cut off Beresford completely from Badajoz.
- c) Through personal involvement in fighting temporarily losing overall control of events.

However, Beresford was probably more unfortunate than blameworthy – overshadowed, as he was, by the battlefield genius and tactical eye of Wellington. Had Albuera been fought at any other period in history the victory – albeit costly – would have appeared in better light. There is no point in detailing his subsequent participation in the campaign – suffice to say he never held independent command again except on the one occasion when he marched on Bordeaux with two Divisions in 1814. There was no fighting and the pro-Royalist Mayor handed the city over peacefully.

Beresford was present, but not actively engaged, at the final siege of Badajoz and at Salamanca where he encouraged Pack's and Bradford's Portuguese Brigades in what was one of the most gallant attacks in that great battle. There he was seriously wounded but recovered well enough to take part in the battles of Vitoria, the Pyrenees, Nivelles, Nive and Orthez. He also took part in the last battle of the Peninsular War at Toulouse where, with two divisions, he was instrumental – in hard and bitter fighting – in capturing the key to that city which led to its abandonment by Soult.

To sum up, Beresford was a very able but controversial character with a very strong personality. He possessed immense personal courage and Herculean physical strength. Even before the Peninsular War he had acquired extensive fighting experience in many parts of the world – but mostly involving small forces – the force involved in the expedition to Buenos Aires did not involve more than 1,200 men. In independent command of large forces involving different nationalities (Albuera) he appeared somewhat out of his depth.

His fiery Irish temper did not make for easy relationships with subordinates (especially with the equally fiery Spanish General Blake) and he did not possess the tactical flair for unerring eye for ground of Wellington.

However, as an organiser and trainer of men he was superb and in this lies his greatest contribution to the Peninsular War. Without the manpower provided by his trained Portuguese soldiers it is difficult to see how Wellington could have carried the war to a successful conclusion in the face of immense superiority in quality of troops possessed by the French. So well thought of were the Portuguese soldiers that Wellington wrote in 1810 that should an evacuation of the country become necessary “the Government ought to endeavour to bring off as large a proportion of the Portuguese Army as possible, which is becoming so good as to warrant the expense of moving them”.

It is interesting to note Wellington’s comment in his letter to Lord Bathurst on 2nd December 1812: “All I can tell you is that the ablest man I have yet seen with the Army, and that having the largest views, is Beresford. They tell me that when I am not present he wants decision and he certainly embarrassed me a little when he commanded in Estramadura

but I am quite certain he is the only man capable of conducting a large concern.”

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