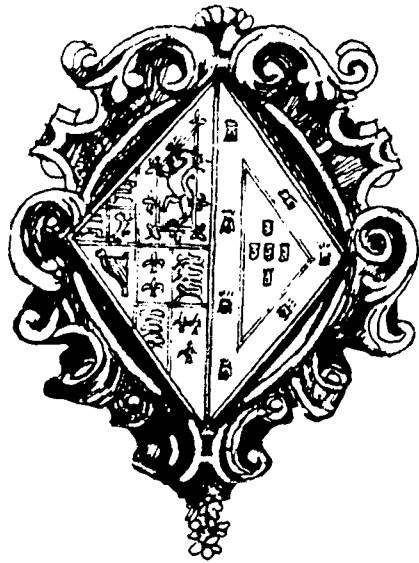


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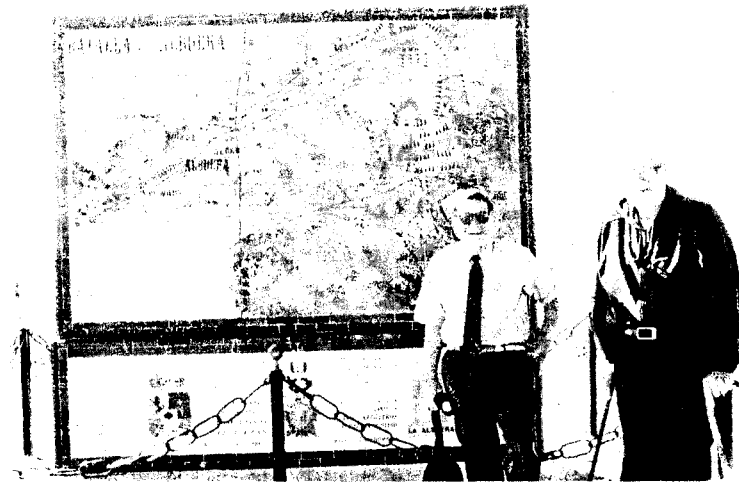
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BERESFORD AT ALBUERA

by Professor H.V. Livermore

The battle of Albuera was fought on May 16th 1811. It lasted four hours, at the end of which the field was strewn with some 11,000 casualties. In this sense it was the greatest battle of the whole war, though it does not figure among the famous victories of Bussaco, Salamanca and Vitória, or the first fight at Toulouse, which is often overlooked since Napoleon had already fled from Paris and it was submerged in the general jubilation. To show the magnitude of Albuera, it may be compared with the first Anglo-Portuguese victory at Bussaco, where the allies numbered about 50,000 men and their casualties were set at less than 1,300, exactly divided between British and Portuguese: the French were said to have lost 4,500 but were



Dr. George Winius and Professor Livermore at the monument outside Albuera

not deterred from continuing to Torres Vedras and Santarém, which was Massena's headquarters from November 1810 until the following February. If Soult had been victorious at Albuera he would have relieved Badajoz and have placed himself in a position to launch a fourth French invasion of Portugal. Instead he beat a retreat and Portugal remained free with the recovery of Campo Maior at the end of March, a fact recognised by the Prince Regent in Brazil when he promoted Beresford from Count of Trancoso to Marquis of Campo Maior.

When I visited the site of Albuera on June 2nd 1999, I was afflicted with nothing worse than an arthritic hip, and TAP kindly provided me with wheelchairs at both ends and delivered me to American friends who pushed me around the Alentejo and Algarve. We reached the Spanish village from Olivença on a bright spring morning. It stands on the brook of the same name, which, like other Spanish streams, dries up for the summer and autumn. It is on level land sloping slightly up towards the village. In 1811 the sparse pines sufficed to cover Soult's approach from the South. We took the Valverde road but did not find the monument and turned back to enquire of the Civil Guard, a polite young man who explained that there were two monuments to the battle: the one we wanted was indeed on the Valverde road. We returned, but we again overshot it. It was not marked though it is only a little way off the road. It is a pleasant spot equipped for picnicking. The monument is a fine large ceramic map showing the disposition of the troops in colour and recording the forces engaged, with a translation of Byron's lines. On that quiet morning we could imagine the scene, as it was 188 years before, blurred by the smoke of battle and a passing rainstorm. Dr George Winius, the eminent historian of the Portuguese in India, took some photographs, and we returned home to Portugal.

A chain surrounding the monument crosses the photograph of the planisphere. It says that the generals were Castaños, Blake and Beresford for the allies and Soult for the French. It gives the casualties as 4,580 for the allies and over 7,000 for the French. The troops engaged were: 31,920 foot and 3,700 horse for the allies, and 19,000 foot and X cavalry for the French. The inscription describes Soult's army as "French and Polish", which is correct, for the Polish lancers gave Soult superiority in mounted men, though they were outnumbered on foot by the allies: the French also had an advantage in artillery. I am not here concerned with the precise numbers involved, but what must strike the non-Spanish visitor is the names of the generals. First Castaños, who was not present (neither was Wellington); then Blake, an Irish Catholic serving Spain; and last Beresford, an Irish Protestant who was Marshal of Portugal, whose rank is not recorded, though Marshal Soult's is. Incidentally, Beresford survived Soult by a few months, to become "senior Marshal of Europe". He is buried in the village church of Kilndown, near Goudhurst in Kent, in a tomb designed by his stepson, Alexander Beresford-Hope, and was in a deplorable state some years ago when I visited it: Mr David Delaforce tells me that this has since been rectified.

W.F.P. Napier, who began to publish his *History of the War of the Pensinsular* with Murray in 1828, made the battle of Albuera contentious. Boone produced his vol. III for the events of 1811 in 1831. He was not at Albuera, but had been engaged in counting the bodies after Wellington's minor victory at Fuentes de Oñoro on May 5th. He noted that the official return was of losses of 1,500, including 300 prisoners, the French losses being put at "near 5,000" (III, 518). He thought the recorded 400 French dead exaggerated – he had not counted more than 130 bodies, a third of them British and observes "all armies make rash estimates in such circumstances". He also says that both sides claimed victory,

but that in the engagement “more errors than skill were observed on both sides”.

In 1828 Napier dedicated his first volume to Wellington, under whose command he had served long enough to understand why the soldiers of the Tenth Legion were attached to Julius Caesar...It is a strange compliment, but in 1828 Wellington was a national monument, not a Tory prime minister. The volume gave such offence that Murray ceased to publish the work. By volume III, or 1833, the radicals were in the ascendant: Wellington’s government had fallen and Portugal had plunged into civil war. The turning point was the French Revolution of July 1830. In volume III Napoleon had become the greatest soldier of his day. In speaking of Albuera, Napier wrote that the French, while superior in cavalry and artillery, had only 19,000 chosen infantry, “yet being of one nation, obedient to discipline and animated by one spirit, their excellent composition amply compensate for the inferiority of numbers, and their general’s talent was immeasurably greater than his adversary’s.” In fact, Soult’s attack was the work of his Polish cavalry, who were certainly not there because they wanted to be; and Beresford had scattered Soult’s force in their retreat up the valley of the Cávado in May 1809. Napier devoted much effort to the quest for information, but what he did with it was to twist it to suit his own inveterate radicalism. His chief victim was Beresford. It is difficult for an ex-marshal to combat the scurrilous allegations of a lieutenant colonel in print, who when challenged withdraws and repeats his allegations in other words. In 1833 Napier chose to print the last of his pamphlets as the introduction to his volume III. His references to the courage of the British soldier and the weakness, stupidity and corruption of practically everyone else, except perhaps Napoleon, kept his work before the British public until the more serious figure of Oman appeared at the end of the century. One is left with the impression that even Julius Caesar might have done better if he had Napier (a

member of the Swedish academy of military science) at his elbow.

This is not the place to discuss what happened on May 16th 1811. In 2001 Mr Mark S. Thompson presented a summary of the many accounts of the battle, or parts of it, but most of the witnesses naturally only see part of what is going on, and even a marshal, when he has done his best to position his troops has only partial control of the battle, which is only a scrimmage writ large. How, we must ask, did it all come about?

When Napoleon appointed his brother Joseph king of Spain in 1809, the imperial muster rolls cited by Napier (app. I) accorded him 369,924 men by August 15th, 1810 with 43,574 horses. How theoretical these numbers are I do not know. Masséna’s army of Portugal is given as 138,304 at its maximum in August 1810. I suspect that these figures have more than a passing resemblance to the “billions”, dear to the brains of macro-economists and minor politicians. In central Spain, small armies get beaten and large armies starve. After the Lines of Torres Vedras Masséna fell back on Santarém and scoured the countryside for provisions: Portugal is not Spain. In February 1810 he began his retreat, pursued by Wellington. Napier says he entered with 65,000, received 10,000 reinforcements at Santarém, and left Portugal with 45,000 having lost, therefore, about 30,000. Napier has “no state of the day” for the British at Fontes de Oñoro, but on April 25th 1811 had 23,613 under arms and over 9,000 sick. Wellington rarely committed his men to battle unless he was reasonably sure of winning: he told Beresford “You are a marshal: you must not be beat.”

There were still ample French forces in Spanish Extremadura and Andalusia where the republican Spanish government held out in Cadiz. The pivot was Badajoz which

underwent three separate sieges. Wellington then detached an Anglo-Portuguese army to recover the upper Alentejo as the French outposts crumbled. He was aware of the presence of Soult in Andalusia, but not of the size of his force. He at first thought of giving Stewart the independent command, but concluded that he was insufficiently prudent, and appointed Beresford who was his closest collaborator and Marshal of the Portuguese army. On March 23rd 1811 his orders were to take Campo Maior, Olivença and Badajoz, which was closely invested, but resisted because of the lack of cannon, munitions and siege equipment, for which Napier blamed the British government. Campo Maior fell quickly on March 27th but Badajoz still resisted and the transport of artillery was impeded by heavy rain that swelled the rivers and delayed the construction of bridges. On April 22nd Wellington himself arrived and rode over the ground, selecting Albuera as the best place to give battle when the French in Andalusia and Extremadura should attempt to relieve Badajoz. Olivença, which was thought vulnerable, had held out from April 9th until April 15th, when six twenty-four pounders were brought up from Elvas and forced it to surrender, but it was now plain that in the event of a pitched battle much support would be required from Spain. Spaniards had never accepted the form of integration with which Beresford had restored the Portuguese army, and Wellington once again expressed his reluctance to command Spaniards without being commander-in-chief. He now asked that Spanish cavalry be posted across the road from Andalusia to Extremadura, that General Castaños send troops for the siege of Badajoz and that Albuera be the point of concentration for the allied forces. The British army would be "second in line". (Napier, III, 504.)

It is here that Napier becomes rather confusing. The Spanish generals did not at once accept Wellington's plan, and Beresford installed himself at Almendralejo, while Colborne did his best to interrupt the communications of the French.

Wellington returned to the north where, Masséna having been repudiated by his fellow generals, he defeated (or partially defeated) Ney at Fuentes de Oñoro on May 5th. On May 7th Wellington informed the prime minister that he had not received the consent of Castaños and Blake to the plan of cooperation that he had proposed and had been obliged to write to Beresford to delay the siege until they positively promised to act as he had specified or until he himself could go with reinforcements. On May 10th Soult left Seville taking the road to Extremadura, which Beresford reported in his letters of the 12th and 13th, and Wellington received on the night of the 15th, the eve of the battle. Soult's strength was still unknown, and he continued to receive contingents as he marched. Beresford was in doubt whether to proceed with the siege of Badajoz or to take up his position. On May 12th his engineers promised to take the place in three days. Napier, in a moment of generosity, concedes that it was ill founded, and if he accepted Soult would have surprised him in the trenches: his firmness therefore saved the army and the arrangements were admirably executed. Beresford met the Spanish generals at Valverde on the 13th when it was agreed to give battle at Albuera: Blake undertook to bring his troops to the village before midday on the 15th. In fact, they did not reach the ground until 11p.m. and the rearguard was not there until three in the morning, a few hours before the French attack began. Not unnaturally they were given their village to defend, and not unnaturally Soult hurled his Polish lancers at them, hoping to find them unready. They fought bravely but were forced back and great carnage was caused among the British regiments called on to redress the balance. The Portuguese were required only to hold their ground and escaped the bloodbath with only 400 casualties.

There is here a mystery that I cannot claim to resolve. Whoever composed the inscription on the monument did not think that Beresford was in overall command, but names him

after Castaños and Blake. Napier and all other writers in English believe that Marshal Beresford was commander on the fateful occasion. If Napier is correct, Wellington had conceded in his plan that the Anglo-Portuguese armies should play second fiddle. According to an anecdote, when the Spaniards were at length dislodged, they could not or would not manoeuvre, and when Beresford sent orders, Blake ignored them until the Marshal in person came to him. In Napier's words; "Beresford galloped to Blake for that general had refused to change his front and with great heat told Colonel Hardinge, the bearer of the order, that the real attack was at the village and bridge. Beresford had sent again to entreat that he would obey, but this message was as fruitless as the former, and when the marshal arrived nothing had been done." (III, 535.) Military punctilio is a force to be reckoned with. Castaños, as a senior captain-general, did not appear at Albuera. Wellington, who was otherwise engaged, decided after some experience that he would not command a Spanish army unless he were commander-in-chief, which he later became. Blake was a general in the Spanish army, but he did not recognise Beresford as marshal of the Portuguese army. To return to Napier, Castaños at Elvas "was in friendly intercourse with Beresford, but had a grudge against Blake. At first, he pretended to the chief command as the elder captain-general, but Blake demanded a like authority over Beresford who was not disposed to admit the claim. Now, Castaños, having little liking for a command under such difficult circumstances and being resolved to thwart Blake, and fearful lest Beresford should in these circumstances refuse to pass the Guadiana, arranged that he who brought the greatest force in the field should be the generalissimo. Thus the youngest officer commanded in chief." I cannot claim to follow Napier's account, but Beresford was born in 1768, Joaquín Blake in 1739 and Francisco Castaños, Duke of Bailén, in 1756. Not only did Beresford not choose the site for the battle but a large part of his army did not recognise his command.

I may here recall that in 1941 the village baker in São Pedro at Sintra used clean sheets torn from Wellington's states of the day to wrap loaves and cakes in!

--ooOoo--

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