

**THE BRITISH  
HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
OF PORTUGAL**

**TWENTY THIRD ANNUAL REPORT  
AND REVIEW 1996**

**13, Rua da Arriaga  
1200 LISBON**

## COLONEL GEORGE LAKE AND THE BATTLE OF ROLIÇA

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The first battle of Wellington's Peninsular War seldom receives much attention. One stresses the words 'Wellington's Peninsular War' because the conflict at Roliça was waged amid the 1808 uprisings in which various assortments of regular and irregular forces had harassed the French since May in Spain and since June in Portugal, as Raul Brandão's fascinating study *El-Rei Junot* perforce reminds us.<sup>1</sup> The battle of Roliça was fought on 17 August, after the confidence of the Napoleonic occupation had been rocked a month earlier by Castanos's extraordinary walkover — one could hardly call it a battle — when 18,000 corralled French troops surrendered at Bailén in Andalusia. By contrast, at Roliça, Wellesley, outnumbering his adversary Laborde by three or even four to one, pushed him out of a 'formidable position' on high ground.<sup>2</sup> The battle is often portrayed as a mere, even unnecessary, curtain-raiser for the major armed clash at Vimeiro and its one oddity was an apparent misunderstanding when a British colonel prematurely, rashly, heroically and fatally led his battalion uphill into the French position and suffered heavy losses. But let us look more closely.

The first British landings had taken place at Lavos, just to the south of the Mondego estuary and across the bay from Figueira da Foz. The small fort there had already been wrested from its handful of French defenders by a group of forty Portuguese from Coimbra, led by a university student, and then reinforced by Admiral Cotton's marines. The disembarkation lasted the entire first week of August and involved well over 13,000 troops; some 8,800 had been

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<sup>1</sup> Raul Brandão, *El-Rei Junot* (Lisbon: Imprensa Nacional-Casa da Moeda, 1982), especially pp. 172-73, 199-201, 217-30. First published in 1912, Brandão's somewhat unorthodox study is a treasure-house of primary material.

<sup>2</sup> *Dispatches of the Duke of Wellington*, 8 vols (London: Murray, 1844), 111, 82.

embarked by Wellesley at Cork in mid-July and a further 5,000 arrived under his second-in-command Sir Brent Spencer. This latter force had sailed earlier from Portsmouth aboard the *Dominica* and five other transports in December of 1807, and had been deployed to rather little effect at Gibraltar and off Cadiz and around the mouth of the Guadiana until the call came. Among its number were Lieutenant-Colonel Lake and his first battalion of the 29th Foot. It should be stressed here that the numerical strengths of the various corps, whether British, French or Portuguese, are subject to no little variation in the sundry available sources.<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile, the Portuguese army had been reconstituting itself under General Bernardim Freire, whom Wellesley went to see at Leiria, to which point Freire had been persuaded to advance, with 6,000 men, from Oporto. Freire, however, served willingly under the orders of the Bishop of Oporto and his forces existed, notionally, for protecting the north. Only after hard bargaining did he release some 1,700 men to Wellesley, of whom some 230 were cavalry. In return, Wellesley gave Freire's remaining troops some 5,000 muskets, to make up for their 'varapaus e fouces', their cudgels and scythes, as Raul Brandao puts it.<sup>4</sup> Freire stayed behind in Leiria, leadenfooted and irresolute, while the Anglo-Portuguese army advanced south on a route close to the coast, and therefore close to the supply ships and, if need be, to the transports. The march followed the historic trajectory of Leiria, Batalha, Aljubarrota, Alcobaca and Caldas, with good augury completing the Batalha-Aljubarrota section on 14 August, the 423rd anniversary of a glorious Anglo-Portuguese victory there over Castile. Soon the first skirmish with the French, what Wellesley called 'a little affair of advanced posts',<sup>5</sup> took place on 15 August, between the aqueduct at Óbidos and the windmill at Dagorda.<sup>6</sup> Afterwards Wellesley's corps bivouacked on the north side of Óbidos on the night of the sixteenth, aware that Laborde's force lay just three miles to the south at Roliça.

<sup>3</sup> Apart from the *Dispatches* and *El-Rei Junot*, one need only consult Thiébauld's *Relation de l'expédition du Portugal*, Fortescue's *History of the British Army* and Oman's *History of the Peninsular War* to recognize that many figures quoted are approximations, and not necessarily impartial.

<sup>4</sup> Brandão, p. 2.38.

<sup>5</sup> *Dispatches*, 111, 80.

<sup>6</sup> George Landmann, *Recollections of my Military Life*, 2 vols (London: Hurst and Blackett 1854), 11, 12.3-24; Dieudonné Adrien Paul Thiébauld, *Relation de l'expédition du Portugal* (Paris: Margimel, Anselin et Pochard, 1817), p. 178. The windmill is by certain authorities unaccountably referred to as the 'Brilos' windmill (e.g. Fortescue, VI, 206) and as the 'Arrifos' windmill (Brandão, p. 240).

Junot had arranged that two French corps should manoeuvre to block Wellesley's advance on Lisbon. Across the more westerly route was that under General Laborde, the size of whose force, even in Wellesley's own account, seems to have been uncertain, but was no more than 6,000 and possibly as few as 4,400. Covering the more easterly approach was the army of General Loison, 'o Maneta' (the one-armed man) whose troops may have numbered anything from 6,000 to 9,000. The variation in numbers quoted by both primary and secondary sources may be explained by the unquestionable fact that as they manoeuvred to block the AngloPortuguese advance, the two French forces were augmented by the garrisons that were withdrawn en route. Laborde thus picked up men from the garrisons at Óbidos and Peniche after he tactically backed away from Batalha, Alcobaca, and Caldas on 12 August, in order to prepare his position at Roliça, where he arrived on the 14th.<sup>7</sup> Similarly the hated Loison, who had butchered 900 men, women, and children at Évora on 29 July, had made his way northwards then westwards via the garrisons of Abrantes, Santarém, and Rio Maior. The only remaining garrisons left to Junot were those at Almeida and at Elvas on the Spanish frontier; if one allows for the losses of well over 1,000 soldiers to guerrilla attacks, approximately one-third of Junot's original force of 26,000 was consequently kept busy holding down Lisbon.<sup>8</sup>

It may seem odd, even cowardly, that once at Rio Maior, Loison did not proceed due west to link up with Laborde at Roliça. The most likely explanations are that he still had to cover the more easterly access to Lisbon and that if he moved west inopportunistly he might miss Laborde and meet Wellesley on unfavourable ground before he could join his colleague. The more circumspect tactic of going south-west to Alcoentre in order to converge, on the slant, with Laborde on 17 August at Roliça seems very reasonable. Unfortunately for the French, his path, via Cercal, Cadaval and Bombarral, was fifteen kilometres too long and would have made him three hours too late.<sup>9</sup> Yet, but for Colonel Lake, it need not have been.

The Honourable George Augustus Frederick Lake was born in 1780, the second son of Lieutenant-Colonel Gerard Lake who in due course became a full

<sup>7</sup> Brandão, p. 239; Elizabeth Longford, *Wellington. The Years of the Sword* (London: Panther, 1971), p. 191; Thiébauld, p. 177.

<sup>8</sup> Brandão, pp. 48 49, 145, 219, 266-30, 239.

<sup>9</sup> To effect the junction Laborde had urgently dispatched three companies in Loison's direction one to Bombarral and two to Cadaval, but Loison's main force had advanced no further than Cercal by the time of Laborde's retreat (Thiébauld, pp. 177-78), for all that Wellesley's intelligence was that Loison was a mere five miles away. If Laborde could have held out till darkness fell, Loison could in any case have easily effected the junction early the next day, with the now advancing Junot not far behind.

general and Viscount Lake of Delhi. The younger Lake joined the army as a cornet in 1796, became a lieutenant the following year and served as ADC to his father throughout the Irish Rebellion and the expulsion of the French expedition from Ireland in 1797-98. He served again as ADC and Military Secretary to his father in India from 1801 to 1807. He was made Lieutenant-Colonel of the 29th Foot in 1803 but was on half pay of the Regiment while in India, where latterly he was also Deputy Quarter-Master General.

The context of all this is best served by our examining the character and prowess of Lake's father. Certain subsequent events may then become clearer. Lake senior served in various war theatres but came to prominence at the siege of Valenciennes on 18 August 1793 when by sheer dogged thrust he led three battalions of footguards in driving out, at bayonet point, no less than twelve admittedly fairly raw French battalions. It was described at the time as 'the most brilliant affair of the year'.<sup>10</sup> Lake was then invalided home with a dangerous illness in October 1793 'to the regret of the whole army, in which he was universally respected and beloved'.<sup>11</sup> In Ireland, however, the severity with which he put down the Rebellion, especially in Wexford, tarnished his reputation despite his own expression of deep regret at what he saw as the necessity to make examples. Lady Longford is particularly scathing about what she describes as Lake's 'ham-handed and mail-fisted disarming of Ulster', but rarely if ever do the British gain military credit in the Emerald Isle.<sup>12</sup>

General Lake was transferred to India as commander-in-chief in July 1801 and greatly distinguished himself in the campaign against the Mahratta Confederacy in 1803. From August to October Lake won a series of battles and sieges, especially at Delhi and Agra, against severe and powerful opposition, by dint of his 'boldness and swiftness in striking' and in which he personally and constantly led the cavalry charges.<sup>13</sup> On 1 November his daring carried the day in his final and resoundingly decisive victory at Laswaree. The conduct of this battle in particular must have considerable relevance in the context of his son's performance at Roliça.

The only eye-witness reports known to me are General Lake's own laconic letters,<sup>14</sup> Major Thorn's stirring account in his *War in In-*

<sup>10</sup> *Dictionary of National Biography*, XI, 412.

<sup>11</sup> Frederick W. Hamilton, *History of the Grenadier Guards*, 3 vols (London: Murray, 1874), 11, 176.

<sup>12</sup> Longford, p 84.

<sup>13</sup> *Dictionary of National Biography*, XI, 413.

<sup>14</sup> *The Indian Dispatches of the Marquess Wellesley*, 5 vols (London, Murray, 1836), 111, 439-47, 449.

*dia*<sup>15</sup> and an unpublished letter by Colonel Henry Clinton, later Adjutant General to Sir John Moore in the Iberian Peninsula.<sup>16</sup> Against superior numbers and no less than seventy-two guns, Lake attacked at the head of his 2,500 cavalry and 6,000 infantry, but with his own artillery still far to the rear. The approach to the village of Laswaree was extremely steep and the enemy's entire front was obscured both by high grass and by huge clouds of dust churned up by all the cavalry movements. These were extra advantages to Lake's adversaries. Major Thorn continues as follows:

These obstacles, however, which would have deterred an ordinary mind from attempting a desirable object till the prospect of success became more decided, had no other effect on the commander-in-chief than that of leading him to the prompt execution of his *original* plan [. . .]. (Thorn, p. 213)

With his son at his side, General Lake led his cavalry in charge after charge, intent on over-running and capturing the enemy guns. The two Lakes were constantly in the thick of the fire and unremitting in their daring. Twice Lake senior had his horse killed under him. On the second occasion his son dismounted and, despite his father's protests, got him to mount his charger. The younger Lake then swung himself into the saddle of a trooper's horse and was immediately severely wounded in the knee by grapeshot. For moments Lake senior gazed in anguish at his son then renewed the onslaught at the head of the 76th Dragoons. Thorn again continues:

This touching incident had a sympathetic effect upon the minds of all that witnessed it and diffused an enthusiastic fervour among the troops, who appeared to be inspired by it with more than an ordinary portion of heroic ardour. (Thorn, p. 220)

Despite heavy losses to the 76th (Clinton says they were reduced to a mere 300) the day was carried and the enemy utterly devastated. Thorn's ensuing panegyric of Lake senior greatly stresses his warm and generous qualities, his capacity for inspiring total trust and dedication in all who served under him, his self-reliance and great calm in moments of danger, and especially his astonish-

<sup>15</sup> William Thorn, *Memoir of the Late War in India* (London: Egerton, TX 18).

<sup>16</sup> Henry Clinton to his brother, General William Henry Clinton, 3 November 1803, Clinton Papers, John Rylands University Library of Manchester.

ing daring.<sup>17</sup> He seems to have known only one way of dealing with either French or Indian troops, that of hurtling straight at them, resorting to cold steel, until a result came; and luck had it that the result was always favourable.

When General Lake finally left India in February 1807 with his son alongside him he received a glorious farewell from Europeans and Indians alike, and apparently without parallel in the history of India. He was created a viscount and died a year later in February 1808, his son George having already embarked with Sir Brent Spencer two months earlier for service in the Peninsula, no doubt bent on maintaining the family tradition. The general view was that the younger Lake's conduct during the Second Mahratta War was 'particularly distinguished',<sup>18</sup> indeed the Governor-General, Marquis Wellesley, stresses this point, underlining that his 'gallantry and activity in executing his father's orders had been conspicuous in every service of difficulty and danger'.<sup>19</sup>

This popular young man took command of his regiment, the 29th Foot, on 7 December 1807, at Cosham just outside Portsmouth. He immediately made a good first impression by inviting all his officers to a fine breakfast and giving all his men a substantial meal. On the eve of Roliça, after a drumhead court-martial, he ordered a flogging for two of his men caught drunk in the streets of Óbidos. Lake announced to the assembled regiment that the flogging would ensue forthwith, not only to deprive the two miscreants of the great honour of fighting the next day, but also in order not to prevent their erstwhile guard from participating. This decision was very favourably discussed by his men all evening.<sup>20</sup>

Next morning Wellesley viewed Laborde's disposition at Roliça from a forward position at the Dagorda windmill or from Raposa Hill, now identifiable by its triangulation post. He would certainly have seen nothing from the battlements of Óbidos, despite what is usually claimed.<sup>21</sup> He then dispatched Colonel Trant with 1,300 Portuguese around the plain to the far right and ordered Major-General Ferguson, with 4,500 men and three of his eighteen guns, to march over to the far left, partly in order to parry Loison's expected arrival from the direction of Bombarral. Three companies of riflemen were used

<sup>17</sup>Thorn, pp. 510-11.

<sup>18</sup>*European Magazine*, 54 (September 1808), 163, see also p. 164.

<sup>19</sup> Richard Wellesley, *Notes Relative to the Late Transactions in the Marhatta [sic] Empire* (London: Debrett, 1804), p. 67; see also p. 68.

<sup>20</sup> H. Everard, *History of Thomas Farrington's Regiment, 1694 to 1891* (Worcester: Littlebury, 1891), p. 277.

<sup>21</sup> For example Longford, p. 192. Not only is the view from Óbidos partly obscured by the hill at Dagorda but also even modern field-glasses give no clear view of the plain at Roliça.

to fill the gap between the centre and Ferguson's far left. The residue was a main force of 9,000 with fifteen guns against Laborde's four to six thousand with five guns, still very superior odds. This centre then advanced in three columns, with Lake's 29th Foot on the right of the middle column. Surgeon Guthrie takes up the story:

Colonel Lake [...] now turned round, and called out, 'Gentlemen, display the colours' the colours flew, and shortly afterwards he again turned round and addressed the line thus, 'Soldiers, I shall remain in front of you, and remember that the bayonet is the only weapon for a British soldier!' (Everard, p. 278)

Laborde, meanwhile, had both assessed the size of Wellesley's force and was unwilling to fall an easy victim of a pincer movement. Accordingly, he set in motion an orderly withdrawal from Roliça and through the next village of Columbeira to an obviously pre-established position on the heights of Columbeira, half a mile to the rear. Here he had had three days to prepare his 'formidable position'. The hills stand three hundred feet above the plain, have an average gradient of one in ten and some parts are even steeper. These heights are approached by several gullies (what Wellesley incongruously calls 'passes');<sup>22</sup> these gullies are uneven, at times tight, are overhung with rocks and trees and strewn with boulders. In some places it is possible for only two or three men to ascend abreast.

Middy came. Jonathan Leach reports on the 'intense and suffocating heat' and that to breathe was 'like inhaling air from a bread oven'.<sup>23</sup> Colonel Landmann of the Royal Engineers now continues:

The 29th Regiment was [...] coming up with Lieutenant-Colonel Lake at their head, the band playing a country dance. Lake was mounted on a complete charger, nearly seventeen hands high, with a famous long tail, and was dressed in an entire new suit, even his leathers, boots, hat, feather, epaulettes, sash etc., being all new, and his hair powdered and queued, his cocked hat placed on his head square to the front, and, in fact, accoutred in the strictest accordance

<sup>22</sup> Dispatches, 111, 82-83.

<sup>23</sup> Jonathan Leach, *Rough Sketches of the Life of an Old Soldier* (London: Longmans, Rees, Orme, Brown and Green, 1831), p. 22; the 'suffocating heat' was likewise hampering Loison's advance from Alcoentre (Thiébault, p. 192).

with King's Regulations. I was so struck with the marked distinction between the 29th Regiment and all others, [...] that I could not refrain from observing to Lake, 'Well, colonel, you are dressed as if you were going to be received by the King'. Lake smiled and replied with a dignified air, 'Egad, sir, if I am killed today, I mean to die like a gentleman'. (Landmann, II, 137-38).

Wellesley was now in difficulties; he could not dislodge the French *tirailleurs* from the lower slopes, while Laborde's main force had the protection of drystone walling. Viewed either from the base of the hill or from the top, the position is arguably more 'formidable' than many positions in the subsequent Lines of Torres Vedras. Having tramped regularly over both these heights and the celebrated Lines during the past ten years, I have no doubts about this! Loison, meanwhile, was doggedly approaching from the south-east with a corps that would level the odds numerically and indeed weigh heavily in the French favour if one includes the considerable advantage of terrain. If and when Loison arrived, the best Wellesley could hope for would be stalemate; he also knew already that Sir Hew Dalrymple and Sir Harry Burrard were to supersede him within days. His advantage in pounders was of little effect in such terrain, nor was his slight advantage in cavalry (470 raw troopers, half of them Portuguese, against 300 experienced French light cavalry).

The order came from Wellesley for the infantry to 'make a demonstration' against the gullies and the inevitable criss-cross firing; it was Wellesley's only hope.<sup>24</sup> The Light company of the 29th, with others from the 5th and 82nd, was detached with the objective of making a demonstration against a gully on the right. Some of the old grenadiers cried out to Lake, 'We can do it as well as them, colonel!' but he replied 'Never mind, my lads. Let the "light bobs" lather them first, we will shave them afterwards.'<sup>25</sup> Though it is unclear from the primary sources what happened next, the antecedents clarify everything! Instead of supporting the demonstration against the right-hand gully, Lake now found the four right-wing companies of his regiment at the foot of the next gully to the left, which lies further to the east of the Cruz Alta (High Cross);<sup>26</sup> just like a chip off the old block, he interpreted 'making a demonstration' in the only way he had ever known, a headlong charge, with himself at the head of his grenadiers. Up they went, bayonets at the ready, under heavy fire, in a column, two or three

<sup>24</sup> Everard, pp. 279 and 293.

<sup>25</sup> Everard, p. 279.

<sup>26</sup> Landmann, I, 144.

abreast, slithering, sometimes on all fours.<sup>27</sup> Half way up, Lake had his horse shot under him; he had had the foresight to lend his charger 'Black Jack' to one Major Gregory Way, who now dismounted and gave him back his steed.<sup>28</sup> Depleted by very heavy casualties, the grenadiers, led by their inspired and inspiring young colonel, burst their way up and round to the rear of the enemy position, to an area of cooks, commissaries and camp-followers.

Lake set about forming his men into a line, fire now coming from General Brenier's battalion that had to detach itself from the main French force to deal with the problem to its rear. The colonel called out, 'Don't fire, men; don't fire; wait a little, we shall soon charge!' As he was supervising the prolongation of the line, he was hit by skirmisher shots, firstly and slightly in the back of the neck, but the ball that killed him passed through from side to side beneath the arms. The now riderless 'Black Jack' galloped into the French lines and became the property of Laborde; the general, however, generously returned the charger at the time of the Sintra Convention in answer to a plea from Lake's regiment.<sup>29</sup>

The wounded of the 29th were now calling to the surgeons to save their colonel first rather than them, but it was already too late. Now, however, the left-wing companies arrived, along with the 9th Foot that had been alongside. In the mêlée, forty of the 29th were taken prisoner, including six officers, as a result of the vigorous efforts of General Brenier's troops; but the rest fought on tenaciously against heavy odds. By now Wellesley had sounded a general advance. The remnants of the 29th, plus the 9th, surged backwards and forwards, attacking repeatedly and in Wellesley's words 'with the utmost impetuosity'.<sup>30</sup> Three times they thrust upwards as columns and then redeployed as lines. Wellesley adds that he 'never saw such fighting as in the pass by the 29th and 9th, or in the three attacks made by the French in the mountains'.<sup>31</sup> Only when General Hill's troops saw the opportunity created for them to converge on the French left did Laborde sound the retreat, which ensued at first in orderly fashion, covered by the cavalry, and then pell-mell to the south, with the abandonment of three of the five guns. It was around 4.30 pm; four hours of daylight remained and Loison was still on his way, three hours away at Cercal.

In his dispatch to Castlereagh, Wellesley simply lamented Lake's loss as of a gallant officer who had 'distinguished himself'.<sup>32</sup> But in his letter to Lake's

<sup>27</sup> William Warre, *Letters from the Peninsula, 1808-12* (London: Murray, 1909), p. 25.

<sup>28</sup> Everard, p. 280.

<sup>29</sup> Everard, pp. 280, 289.

<sup>30</sup> *Dispatches*, III, 82.

<sup>31</sup> *Dispatches*, III, 86.

<sup>32</sup> *Dispatches*, III, 82.

brother-in-law his praise was of a kind he seldom if ever equalled, even in writing of the glory of Picton at Waterloo:

I do not recollect the occasion upon which I have written with more pain to myself than I do at present, to communicate to you the death of your gallant brother-in-law. He fell in the attack of a pass in the mountains, at the head of his regiment, the admiration of the whole army; [...] his death [...] has deprived the public of the services of an officer who would have been an ornament to his profession, and an honour to his country. [...] he deserved and enjoyed the respect and affection of the world at large, and particularly of the profession to which he belonged [...] Colonel Lake [...] was respected and loved by the whole army, and [...] fell, alas! with many others, in the achievement of one of the most heroic actions that have been performed by the British army. (*Dispatches*, III, 86)

Roliça was the first battle honour won by the 29th Foot.<sup>33</sup> A seven-foot cross and plinth, movingly inscribed by the regiment, stand on the spot where Lake fell and was buried, though the base is crumbling and the railings continue to be bashed by passing tractors. A monument also stands to Lake in the north-west (or Belfry) tower of Westminster Abbey, whereas Lake's father achieved *no* public monument, though Castlereagh contemplated it.<sup>34</sup> Further mementoes, including the fatal bullet, are to be seen in the Worcester City Museum; the regimental archives are located at the nearby Norton Barracks.

Michael Glover has called the battle of Roliça 'unnecessary',<sup>35</sup> Sir John Moore and the French thought Wellesley's action 'rash',<sup>36</sup> Raul Brandão describes both Roliça and Vimeiro as 'meras insignificâncias' (irrelevant trivia),<sup>37</sup> though there is surely special pleading in his view that the French were already virtually defeated by guerrilla activity. Only the Anglo-Portuguese

<sup>33</sup> By an error of a copying clerk in Lord Bathurst's office, the name of the battle was miswritten 'Roleia' and appears as such on the regimental insignia. The 29th suffered 193 of the total British losses of 479; 34 were killed, 119 wounded and 40 captured (Everard, pp. 278, 283, 286, 332-33); the 9th lost 72.

<sup>34</sup> *Parliamentary Debates*, X, 871; a bust portrait of Viscount Lake, formerly housed in the Oriental Club, is nowadays located in the Durbar Court of the India Office. A cameo of his son George may be seen at the Worcester Museum.

<sup>35</sup> Michael Glover, *Britannia Sickness...* (London: Cooper, 1970), p. 83.

<sup>36</sup> *The Diary of Sir John Moore*, 2 vols (London: Arnold, 1809), II, 267.

<sup>37</sup> Brandão, p. 243.

joint force could have prised Junot out of Lisbon. Moore's comment reads ironically when one reflects on the missed chances of his own campaign. In answer to Glover, one should point out that Laborde by his three-to-four-day wait at Roliça made the battle very necessary or at least ensured that sooner or later there had to be a confrontation on terms less favourable to the British. If Wellesley had held off even for a few days then he would have been superseded by Dalrymple and Burrard, both of them far less experienced and far less competent, not to mention by five other lieutenant-generals, all senior to Wellesley, who were also on their way.<sup>38</sup>

To Wellesley's career Roliça was very necessary; yet its outcome he owed to the first hero of his Peninsular War, George Lake, who broke the tactical deadlock at Columbeira and bought Wellesley vital hours. Roliça permitted the Porto Novo landings plus victory at Vimeiro before the supersession took full effect. If one bears in mind that Moore's subsequent campaign was a hiccup that removed Wellesley's only competent rival, it becomes clear that Wellesley had been enabled at Roliça to demonstrate that he was the only British general capable of defeating Napoleonic armies;<sup>39</sup> his long sequence of triumphs that led to Waterloo is arguably improbable without the victory at Roliça and the heroism of George Lake.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Longford, pp. 189-90.

<sup>39</sup> The legend of French invincibility on land was, however, first broken by Major-General Sir John Stuart at Maida in Sicily on 2 September 1806, even though the effects were shortlived. See, for example, Arthur Bryant, *Years of Victory* (London: Collins, 1944), pp. 226-27, 234.

<sup>40</sup> I wish to acknowledge the considerable help of my good friend Peter Gilbert for accompanying me over the years in detailed examination of the battle site at Roliça and for his many helpful suggestions. I must also thank Lieutenant-Colonel Ken Allen of Norton Barracks, Worcester, for allowing me access to regimental records.

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