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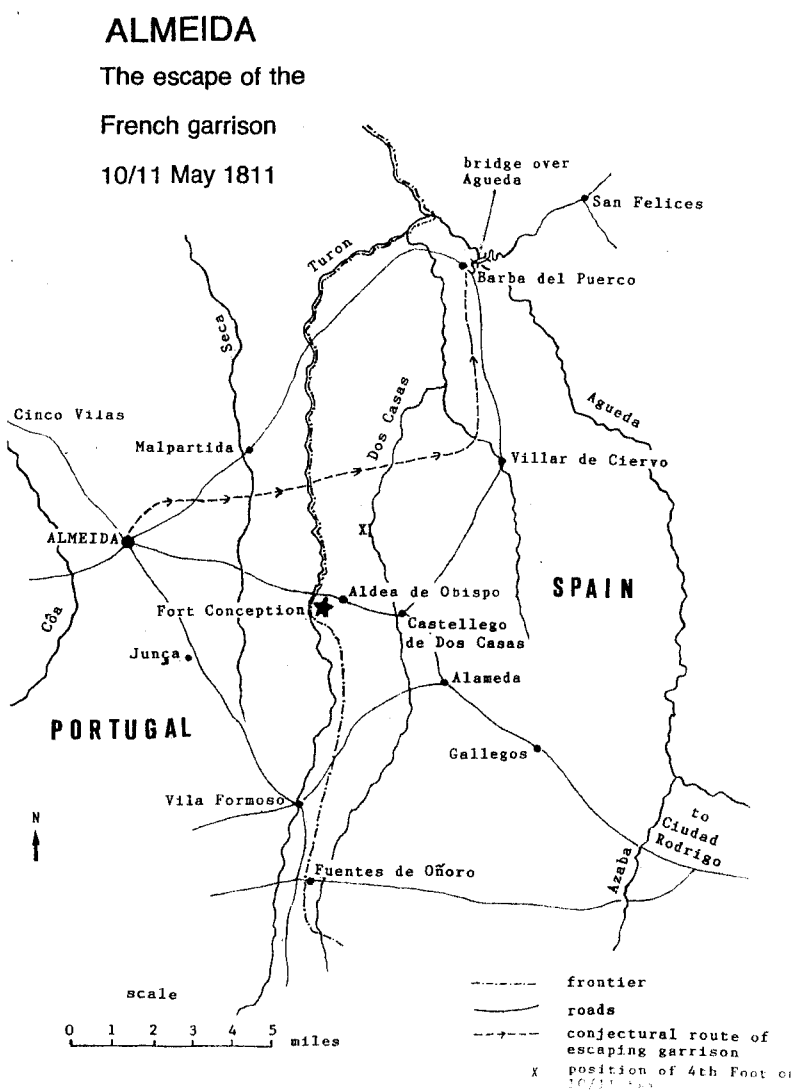
LIEUTENANT-COLONEL CHARLES BEVAN AND THE ESCAPE OF THE ALMEIDA GARRISON

by Archie Hunter

For the 1999 Annual Report William Colfer wrote an article on Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Bevan, an ancestor of his late wife. The article traced Bevan's life and career as a soldier ending with his suicide while on campaign in the Peninsular Wars at Portalegre in July 1811. Bevan had taken his own life because his regiment, the 4th Foot (the King's Own Royal Lancaster Regiment), of which he was the commanding officer, had been, unjustly he believed, blamed by Wellington for allowing the encircled French garrison at Almeida to escape in May that year over the bridge at Barba del Puerco and so rejoin Massena's army. Wellington never wavered in his opinion, repeating to Lord Stanhope in 1836 that the escape was "the fault of our Colonel Bevan".

The garrison's dramatic escape has been referred to often enough by historians who have not, however, been disposed like Wellington to blame Bevan. But, at the same time, they have not dwelt on the role of the 4th Foot during the critical night of 10/11th May. This role merits closer examination.

After the French retreated towards Ciudad Rodrigo following the battle of Fuentes de Oñoro in the first week of May, Wellington charged Major-General Alexander Campbell and his 6th Division with the task of surrounding the beleaguered French garrison of some 1,400 men in the fortress town of Almeida and preventing their escape. Campbell made his arrangements and drew, as he thought, a tight cordon round the town. But many historians agree that he was not as efficient as he should have been, especially since an attempt at a break-out by General Brenier was expected by the allies.



Rather at the last minute Wellington had two particular orders issued to strengthen the position of the encircling forces. Both affected Bevan and his regiment. First, at 6 p.m. on 9th May, Wellington directed Major-General Sir William Erskine, Bart commanding the 5th Division (posted mainly to the east of Fort Conception) to

> "push one Battalion of infantry to your left to the distance of two or three miles beyond Fort Conception. This Battalion should place pickets at the passes over the *Dos Casas* reverlet..."[1]

The battalion chosen was Bevan's 4th Foot. Accordingly Bevan and his men marched to take up their new position, which, as far as we can judge today, was at the spot marked X on the map.

Second, Wellington ordered that this same battalion, in an order issued about 1 p.m. on the afternoon of 10th May, to go to "Barba del Puerco to guard the bridge there"[2] . The commander-in-chief had given this instruction because he had realised, correctly, that the passage to this vital bridge needed to be defended by his forces. It was indeed the obvious place for Brenier to make for from Almeida (the rest of the army had resumed station to the south east of Almeida between the Côa and Azaba rivers). The distance from Bevan's position at X, two to three miles north of Fort Conception, to the bridge at Barba del Puerco was, we calculate, seven to eight miles. Unhappily the 4th never reached the bridge in time to stop the great majority of the French troops from crossing it to safety.

So what went wrong? What caused the 4th not to be at the right place at the right time on the night of 10/11th May? While we will never know the precise reasons for the sequence of events that night we can at least fill in some of the details.

For a start, Wellington's order of the 10th May took three hours to reach Erskine, who received it while dining at 4 p.m. at army headquarters at Vila Formoso (where the order originated). Why the order took so long is a matter that has never been addressed.

One possible explanation is that Erskine was expected to be located with his rather spread out division and, on finding out that he was not, the messenger had to double back to headquarters. All this would have taken time. Next – and there is no room for doubt here – Erskine, a shockingly incompetent commander, sat on the order for many hours. Some say he stuffed it into his pocket and then forgot it. Erskine was a heavy drinker and years later Bevan's brother-in-law declared that Erskine was drunk that evening.

The authorities are agreed that Bevan, at his position on the *Dos Casas* did not receive the order from Erskine until around midnight, which is eleven hours after its issue. Its arrival clearly put him in something of a quandary. On the one hand he had been told to guard the crossings of the *Dos Casas* riverlet, while on the other he was now being ordered to march in darkness through broken country without obvious roads to a very distant bridge over the river Agueda. For about three hours he made no move. On the face of it this appears to be indecisive. At any rate from his own account – given in a letter he wrote on 11th May to his brigade commander (Major-General James Dunlop) – it seems that he initially decided to stay put because

> "although I had ascertained that one party of the enemy's troops had crossed the river I was by no means certain that others were not moving in the same direction. I therefore thought it might be more essential to retain my position at the bridge (i.e. the crossing on the *Dos Casas)* and march in the morning....[3]

The position that night was extremely confused. The French garrison in two columns began leaving Almeida in total silence at about 11.30 p.m. having left behind demolition charges to detonate later. Breaking easily through the too thin allied cordon they headed east making for, as carefully planned by Brenier, Barba del Puerco, a distance of some 13 miles by the route they chose to follow. Soon a detachment of allied troops from the cordon gave chase to the Frenchmen firing at them on and off in the darkness. Bevan must have heard to his front the noise of this firing, perhaps from the

moment that Brenier reached the Turon river; this was probably at 1.45 a.m. or so. Of course he had no idea what exactly was happening and may well have thought the "enemy's troops" were coming towards him. So, rightly or wrongly, he sat tight. Eventually he decided he would move and head for the bridge to which he had been ordered to go. That it was getting lighter as he went would have helped. As we know he reached the bridge at Barba del Puerco, together with some other pursuing allied troops at 6 a.m., but by then it was too late to prevent the first column of Frenchmen from reaching and crossing the bridge. However the second column was caught by the pursuers as it descended the steep path into the gorge made by the river Agueda. There was fierce skirmishing and the enemy, as well as the allies, took casualities. William Colfer has described in his article how the 4th lost some men when joining with the 36th Foot in a vain attempt to storm up the path on the eastern side of the bridge.

It is virtually certain that had Bevan left his post on the *Dos Casas* at, or soon after, midnight as ordered, the 4th would have been in position by the bridge at Barba del Puerco to bar the Frenchmen's way. So, whatever he said in his letter to his brigade commander, could there have been another reason why Bevan delayed his departure? What, for instance, was he doing between midnight and the time he heard of the enemy's troops (which was probably around 1.45 a.m.).

Another reason explaining his delay has been put forward: it was suggested 77 years later by Admiral Sir Edward Fanshawe, who had it on good authority, that Bevan may have been trying to find a guide to take him through the broken country to Barba del Puerco. Fanshawe wrote about the episode with some vigour because he believed Bevan had been unfairly treated by Wellington.[4] It would certainly have made sense to be guided through that terrain at night if a guide could be quickly found. Indeed Lt-Col Douglas of the 8th Portuguese regiment successfully used guides that night to take him from Junça to Barba del Puerco. (Douglas, alerted by the explosions of demolitions in Almeida, hurried off on his own initiative towards

Barba del Puerco. On arrival there he could find no sign of the escaping garrison, and so he left the area to search elsewhere.)

Erskine, in trying to explain to Wellington why the bridge at Barba del Puerco was undefended, said the 4th regiment got lost on the way there. There is, however, no evidence to show that this was the case, and one contemporary diarist took the trouble specifically to contradict Erskine's allegation. Historians, too, have given no credence to what Erskine said. Unhappily Wellington believed the slur and Bevan became the commander-in-chief's scapegoat.

Bevan did not learn that Wellington was blaming him and his regiment for the escape of the French for some weeks, probably not until the arrival in Portugal in June of the *London Gazette* and other newspapers: the former carried Wellington's official despatch to Lord Liverpool, the War Minister, dated 15th May in which he placed the blame for the enemy's escape on the 4th Foot who, he asserted, had "missed their road". He also told Liverpool, with remarkable exaggeration, that had it not been for this error on the part of the 4th Foot the French garrison would have had to "lay down their arms". How, one may ask, were just some 400 men to have stopped 1,400 desperate Frenchmen.....

When Bevan knew about the contents of the despatch he at once requested Wellington to grant him an inquiry. Dismissively, it is said, the request was refused. Wellington apparently took the view that the escape of the garrison was "somebody's fault". He had decided it was Bevan's and that was the end of it.

Bevan, a sensitive and honourable man, had tried as he saw it, to have the stain cast upon his and his regiment's good name removed, and had failed. He now saw no alternative to sacrificing himself. Believing, as he wrote to his soldier brother-in-law, that his military character was "tarnished"[5] he shot himself.

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On 14th October, 2000, a stone was erected to the memory of Charles Bevan in the British military cemetery at Elvas. A simple

ceremony was held to mark the occasion and was attended by representatives of the Portuguese army, the British Embassy at Lisbon, the King's Own Royal Border Regiment, the British Historical Society, the Friends of Elvas Cemetery and by the descendants of Charles Bevan.

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[1] Murray Papers, National Library of Scotland, ADV 46-4-126 and 127
[2] ed. Lt-Col J. Gurwood The Dispatches of Field-Marshal The Duke of Wellington, 1834-8, v.VII 562
[3] Murray Papers ADV, 46-2-12-220
[4] The Army and Navy Gazette, v.29, 15th December, 1888, 996
[5] Bevan Papers, in private custody, J. Dacres to Charles Bevan jnr. 13th July 1843

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Archie Hunter's book on Bevan entitled "Wellington's Scapegoat: The Tragedy of Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Bevan" is published by Pen and Sword Books Ltd, Barnsley, Yorkshire. Tel: 01226 734222