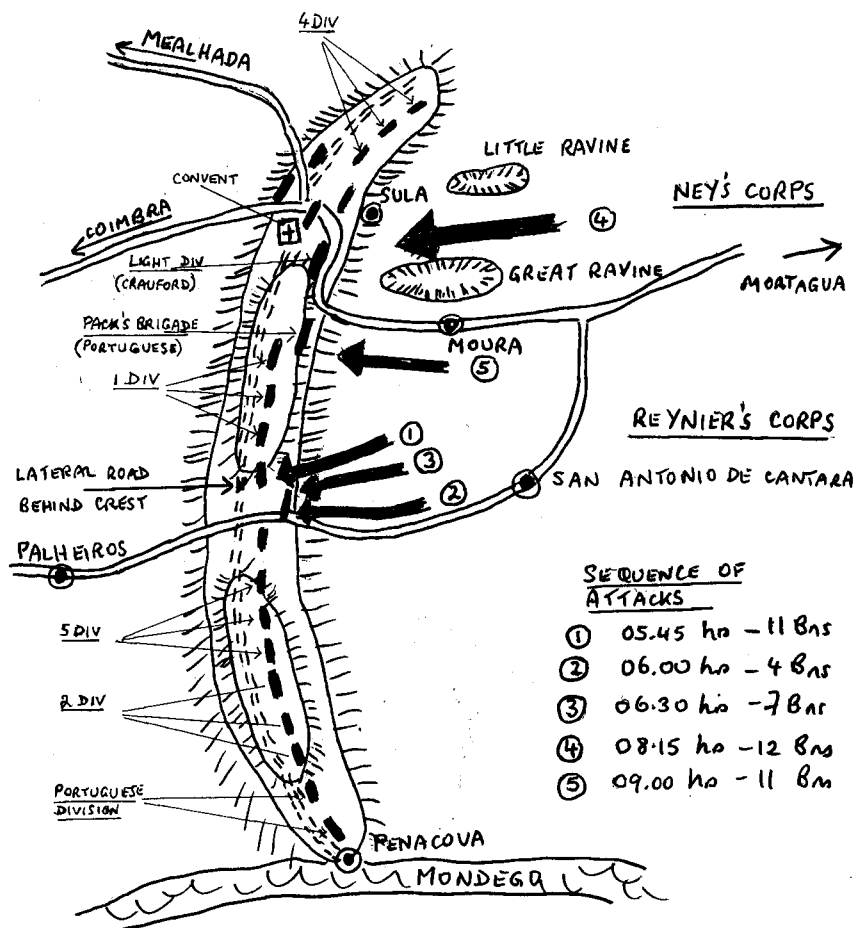


**THE BRITISH
HISTORICAL SOCIETY
OF PORTUGAL**

**NINETEENTH ANNUAL REPORT
AND REVIEW 1992**

**13, Rua da Arriaga,
1200 LISBON**

BUSSACO



SEQUENCE OF ATTACKS

- ① 05.45 hr - 11 Bns
- ② 06.00 hr - 4 Bns
- ③ 06.30 hr - 7 Bns
- ④ 08.15 hr - 12 Bns
- ⑤ 09.00 hr - 11 Bns

NOTE: IN PRINCIPLE EACH BRITISH DIVISION HAD ONE PORTUGUESE BRIGADE BUT THERE WAS AN ALL-PORTUGUESE DIVISION AND A NUMBER OF INDEPENDENT PORTUGUESE BRIGADES

THE BATTLE OF BUSSACO

Lt. Colonel (ret.) F. O. CETRE, M.C.

The battle of Bussaco took place 182 years ago on the 10th of September 1810. I propose to deal with this subject in three parts. First how the battle fits into the rather complex pattern of the Peninsular War, a brief description of the battle itself and its significance in the campaign, and finally a thumbnail sketch of the principal personalities on both sides.

The Peninsular War began in 1807 when Napoleon sent General Junot into Portugal to force her to join the continental blockade of England ('The nation of shopkeepers') and at the same time deposed the King of Spain and placed his brother Joseph on the throne. This produced a popular reaction in both countries and, incredible as it seemed at the time, a whole French Corps under General Dupont surrendered to a ragged and ill-assorted Spanish army at Baylen in July 1808. This gave England an opportunity to intervene, the only country still in the field against Napoleon. Then followed Wellington's early victories in Portugal at Roliça and Vimiero followed by the Convention of Sintra (arranged by two generals senior to Wellington who landed after the battle) which cleared the French from Portugal but shipped them back to France with all their booty in British ships. This gave rise to a popular outcry and a Court of Enquiry in the course of which Wellington was cleared.

The next event was Sir John Moore's efforts to help the Spanish cause in 1809. This got under Napoleon's skin and he himself burst into Spain like a whirlwind with some 200,000 men, scattering all before him, and Sir John Moore had to run for it to Corunna where a Dunkirk type operation took place. Meanwhile Napoleon had handed over the pursuit to Marshal Soult who, after Corunna, turned his attention to Northern Portugal, took Oporto and then started moving South. In the meantime Wellington had returned to Portugal, retaken Oporto after a brilliant operation and drove Soult out of Portugal altogether. Then Wellington turned his army to

Spain and there followed the battle of Talavera in cooperation with a Spanish army, a defensive victory where almost the entire fighting and the very heavy casualties (fully a quarter of his force) fell on the British. He then withdrew into Portugal with a half starved army because the Spaniards could not or would not supply him and with two-thirds of his men looking after the wounded. Wellington vowed never to operate with a Spanish army on equal terms again. There followed 14 months without a battle. The next battle was Bussaco following Napoleon's order to Marshall Massena in 1810 to 'drive the Leopards into the sea'.

In order to control the Iberian Peninsula the French had to destroy the British army or drive it out (as at Corunna) and capture Lisbon where all supplies came in. Wellington, with his strategic insight, got to work. In October 1809 he ordered the construction of the Lines of Torres Vedras a full year before they came into use. He had to reorganise, refit his army after Talavera and increase his manpower to have any real chance of success against the numerically superior French. For this he turned to the Portuguese. It was Marshal Beresford and his team who trained them up to be the magnificent soldiers they became. They proved themselves in their first major engagement at Bussaco where they formed 50% of Wellington's army and from then onwards always formed a substantial portion of the Allied army right up to the end. With the cooperation of the Regency Council in Lisbon, Wellington ordered a 'scorched earth' policy in the path of the advancing French, whose system was to feed on the country, so as to starve them systematically as they advanced deeper into Portugal.

Massena joined his army on 28th May 1810. The first thing the French did was to secure their communications by taking the frontier fortresses. Ciudad Rodrigo fell after a lengthy siege on the 10th July and the French then turned to the corresponding fortress on the Portuguese side. Almeida might have held out for a long time had the main power magazine not blown up killing some 500 of its defenders. This led to its premature surrender. Had it been able to hold out much longer Massena might have been caught in mid-Portugal when the winter rains started before ever reaching the Lines of Torres Vedras. Wellington had deduced Massena's probable line of advance and had previously selected the Bussaco ridge as an ideal place where he could inflict a severe rebuff on the French before luring them on to the Lines, the existence of which Massena was completely ignorant. The Bussaco ridge was an elongated feature, some 10 to 11 miles long, extending from the Mondego river north-

wards with a steep and rugged slope facing the French where their movements could be easily detected whilst affording good rear slope cover for the Allied troops. It must be remembered that, in those days, the ridge and surrounding country were completely bare apart from the odd copse, affording good visibility to the occupier. The main road passed through Moura and Sula hard by the monastery. A very inferior road or cart track existed between St. Antonio de Cantara and Palheiros crossing the ridge, eventually leading to Coimbra. Wellington had a lateral road constructed on the rearward slope of the ridge along which reserves could be moved to any part of the front threatened. This was completely invisible to the enemy. The keynote of his defence was flexibility and mobility. Apart from the lateral road not a spadeful of earth was turned on fieldworks. The ridge was occupied by the Allied Army on 26th September, mostly hidden from view behind the crest. Wellington's army numbered 51,345 of which fifty per cent were Portuguese. Massena had 65,974 having had to detach troops to garrison the fortresses taken. On the Allied side no fires were allowed that night. The troops ate cold food and made the best of a cold night wrapped up in their cloaks. On the other side the French did light fires and their blazing bivouac areas revealed three large Corps concentrations. At 0400 hours on the morning of the 27th the Allied Army was under arms and when battle was joined at the break of day a thick mist lay on the ground.

Before giving a description of the battle, a brief word on the French and British methods of fighting. The French practice was to attack in dense tight columns preceded by their light troops (Voltigeurs or Tirailleurs) whose business it was to clear any opposing light troops and do what they could to disorganise the main defence. The lighter guns moved along the flanks (where ground permitted) indeed sometimes in front of the columns and supported the advance from any position they could by direct fire, tearing great holes in the usually visible lines of their opponents. If that combination could breach the opposing defence, the game was up. The British reply to this was the two-deep line formation which delivered volley after volley into the head of the advancing column at very close range and where possible, the flanks lapping around the head of the column. Only the first two front ranks of the French column could return the fire and the column, already somewhat disorganised after struggling over the uneven terrain and the action of the light troops, could not deploy under this sustained and galling fire. This invariably ended in their withdrawal and rout followed by a short controlled bayonet charge which completed their discomfort. But to produce this crashing, telling volley re-

quired a very high standard of discipline, steadiness and weapon handling. It was noteworthy that the British Army was the only one to practise shooting and weapon training regularly. Strangely the French did not. Also the British light troops and Caçadores were superior in training and marksmanship to their French opposite numbers and were armed with the Baker rifle which was much more accurate and had a longer range than the smooth bore although somewhat complicated to load.

Now to go to the French attack on Bussaco ridge. I do not propose to get involved in (possibly confusing) unit moves but to produce a broad and understandable picture of the battle.

There were two attacks on the Bussaco ridge, the first astride the St. António de Cantara — Palheiros attack and the second in the Moura-Sula area. In the first one three separate attacks were made by Reynier's Divisions in quick succession, beginning at about 0530 and by that time the mist was lifting. The French attacked in the style already described and were received by the British and Portuguese units opposed to them in the same way. The French attacked with determination and spirit and some of the Voltigeurs effected a lodgement in an outcrop of rocks on the ridge only a mere 200 yards from the lateral communication road in the rear but were driven off by counter attack. By about 0830 it was all over.

Twenty-three out of 27 French battalions had been broken by five British and six Portuguese battalions employing the methods already described. The attack in the Moura-Sula area by Ney started a little later, about 0800. Massena's instructions were that Ney should attack as soon as Reynier had gained the crest. Reynier was then to turn north along the ridge towards the Monastery and join up with the second attack. Ney deployed two divisions, one between the Great and Little Ravines and the other south of the Great Ravine. Opposite the first were the 43rd and 52nd regiments of Crawford's elite Light Division lying down behind the crest with Ross's battery right in front of them playing on the French columns advancing in the valley below who were also being harassed by the light companies of the Regiments referred to and by the Caçadores. 'Black Bob' Crawford a short dynamic Scot with a voice of thunder was on the ridge by the guns mounted on a huge bay horse. As the French came within 30 to 40 yards of the guns they let off one last blast and limbered off. 'Black Bob' then roared for the 43rd and 52nd to come forward and 'avenge Moore' from the crest where they had been lying completely hidden from the French. They came forward, formed line and poured a murder-

ous volley into the French columns struggling and panting up the hill and trying to reform. A short sharp bayonet charge finished the job and the French were hurled back down into the valley below.

One battalion which had managed to get down into the Great Ravine in the course of the attack, upon emerging from it, was confronted by the 19th Portuguese Regiment which saw them off in similar style. The attack south of the Great Ravine fared no better and was dealt with in the same way by Pack's Independent Portuguese Brigade. By about 1100 hours Massena called the battle off although he still had a complete Corps (Junot) in hand. However, skirmishing went on for some time.

The French losses were severe, around 6,400 of whom 300 were officers, the highest proportion of officers to troops in the Peninsular War. Allied losses were 1,252, 50% being Portuguese, casualties and laurels of war equally shared with their British comrades. Massena had been over confident accustomed as he was to an unbroken series of victories and still basking in the aura of his successes at Lobau and Wagram (1809) for which he was created Prince of Essling. The battle once more demonstrated the superiority of the British Line over the French Column as well as the efficacy of the British Light troops and Caçadores in delaying and breaking up French formations. Also it was a triumph of Wellington's system of defence, an excellent position enabling concealment of his own troops and thereby effecting surprise together with flexibility and mobility allowing a rapid flow of reinforcements to whichever sector they were required. Additionally the battle showed the splendid performance of the Portuguese. They fought with such valour and steadiness that Junot, who had been accustomed to disperse them at will in an earlier campaign, avowed them to be Englishmen dressed in Portuguese uniforms. The Portuguese Army had 'Come of Age' and from that day on formed a substantial portion of Wellington's army to the end. That is why the anniversary of The Battle of Bussaco is celebrated with such pomp and ceremony.

Bussaco was not a decisive battle in the sense that it did not decide the fate of a campaign (e.g. Waterloo) and Massena found an alternative way round the ridge (not unknown to Wellington) and continued his advance to Lisbon blissfully ignorant of the Lines of Torres Vedras. It was however a battle of great significance in that it amalgamated the newly trained and tried Portuguese troops with their British comrades and forged a battle-winning team which was to carry the Allied Army from success to success until the tide of war moved into France itself.

It is interesting to note the difference in attitude in the warfare of those days with those existing today. In the attack on the Sula position the French general Simon was wounded and taken prisoner. He was taken to the monastery where his wounds were tended and a British officer gave up his room for him. Furthermore word was sent to Massena to have this officer's baggage sent up to him. Towards evening it came, accompanied by a handsome young Spanish lady, the general's mistress whom he had acquired in Madrid and had become part of his 'Establishment'.

According to the historian Napier who together with his two brothers and cousin took part in the battle, at about 0200 p.m. both armies had ceased fighting and mingled together in the valley below carrying off their wounded, burying their dead, filling their water bottles and conversing without animosity or angry feelings. A German officer fighting with a Hanoverian regiment on the French side asked a British officer for news of his brother fighting with the King's German Legion on the British side, only to be told unfortunately, that he had been killed. Finally, bugle calls brought the soldiers scampering back to their own lines and things returned to normal. In Wellington's despatches one not infrequently comes across letters written in French by Wellington to Massena and on other occasions to other commanders, couched in the respectful and courteous style of the age. Letters relating to exchange of prisoners, treatment of wounded, even to the extent of offering the help of British surgeons particularly if there was a 'mixed bag' of prisoners.

Now for a brief description of the principal characters on both sides. We have already touched on Wellington and his strategic insight in ordering the construction of the Lines of Torres Vedras and forestalling Massena's advance on the ridge of Bussaco. He came from aristocratic Anglo-Irish stock from whence came so many of our military leaders, to quote only a few in recent times: Field Marshals Alan-Brooke, Alexander, and Templar and that from the Army alone. His profile, portraits and the sobriquet 'Iron Duke' give a pretty good idea of his personality. To the outside world he showed himself cold, aloof and imperturbable with his own strict code of behaviour although he could and did have his lighter moods. He did not inspire affection and cared little for personal popularity but nobody would have wanted to have any other commander in battle and this went for his Portuguese Allies too. After the battle of Albuera (the one battle where he did not command) which resulted in extraordinarily heavy casualties, he visited a field hospital and 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'.

He combined his strategic insight with down-to-earth tactical flair on the battlefield being at the right place at the right time and making the right decisions as well as taking an immediate advantage of the enemy's false move (e.g. Salamanca). He was also a master of logistics and took a very personal interest in the feeding, equipping and health of his troops. Of his main collaborators Admirals Cotton and then Berkeley gave him invaluable support in the movement of men and stores, guarding the flanks of the Lines of Torres Vedras with gun-boats on the Tagus and with gunners and signallers in the Lines themselves. Colonel Fletcher, his chief engineer, was responsible for the construction of the Lines of Torres Vedras and the formidable result brought Massena's army to a grinding halt forcing its retrograde movement, and this really marked the turn of the tide in the Peninsular War.

The man who figures mostly in the battle of Bussaco, apart from Wellington, is Marshal Beresford, not that he took a personal part. He was another Irishman of the fiery type, an extremely able soldier with a lot of fighting experience in many parts of the world but a very controversial character. His main forte was that he was a supreme organiser and trainer of men. It was due to him that the Portuguese soldiery disarmed and dispersed by Junot in the first French invasion (the best regiments were sent to fight for Napoleon with the Legião de Alorna) were organised and trained to become the equal of their British comrades at Bussaco and subsequent Peninsular battles. They became so good that Wellington wrote in 1810 to the Secretary of War that 'Should an evacuation of Portugal become necessary, the Government ought to endeavour to bring off as large a portion of the Portuguese Army as possible which is becoming so good as to warrant the expense of removing them'. Without this extra trained manpower Wellington could not have carried the peninsular war to a successful conclusion.

Now let us turn to the French side. First of all a word about the French Marshals in general. They were a pretty rough lot. Gone were the former officers of the 'Ancien Regime' all from aristocratic families with a background of education and culture whatever their personal defects. Most of Napoleon's Marshals and Generals had humble beginnings and had lived in rough company and rough circumstances. Massena began life as a ship's cabin boy. They all had the soldier's virtues and vices. They

were glory seeking, rapacious, envious of status and extremely jealous of each other. Napoleon himself said 'Not one of my Marshals has the makings of a Commander-in-Chief' and in an instruction to one of them 'Confine yourself strictly to the orders I shall give you, execute my instructions I shall give you, I alone know what I must do'. Even his Chief of Staff, Marshal Berthier, was described as 'A Secretary of a certain rank'.

Massena, Duke of Rivoli, Prince of Essling was probably the best of Napoleon's Marshals. Wily, bold and tenacious, Wellington said he never had a sound night's sleep while Massena was opposite him. Massena had almost as much battle experience as his master in the course of which he had been loaded with honours, titles and riches. On a personal level he was a barefaced plunderer, a miser and a shameless womaniser. At the time of his appointment he was 52, a not inconsiderable age for high rank at a period in time when the average life span was probably in the late forties. By contrast both Wellington and Napoleon were only 41. He really did not want the job. Loaded with honours and riches he had 'made his pile' and wanted to enjoy the fruits thereof and the barren Iberian Peninsula with no lush pickings did not appeal to his rapacious nature. He tried to wriggle out of the assignment and appealed to the Emperor in person but to no avail. So having been given his marching orders, he made the best of it and packed a few home comforts including his current mistress who followed him around and consoled his idle moments attired as a supernumerary aide-de-camp.

Despite his distaste for the job he was confident that if he could only bring the smaller British Army to battle on even terms he would make an end of them in the same way the Napoleonic armies had crushed all their odd enemies in Europe. Of his subordinate commanders, Ney was the ablest, an outstanding soldier always at his best in the most difficult circumstances. Not for nothing was he later, in the Russian campaign, to earn the sobriquet 'The bravest of the brave'. But he was a very difficult subordinate, often quarrelled violently with his master and finished the campaign under arrest for insubordination and relieved of his command. Of the other two Corps commanders, Junot had commanded the original expedition into Portugal and had failed while General Reynier was in the ordinary run of French generals, competent but with no outstanding qualities. On the French side there was nothing like the harmony and co-operation that reigned in Wellington's Army.

England was fortunate at that critical period in her history to have

two outstanding characters, Nelson at sea and Wellington on land. Nelson died at the hour of Victory, his work was done but Wellington had to soldier on and was miraculously preserved from death or wounds. Never heedful of personal safety he was always where things were critical and hottest. On more than one occasion, out to see for himself, he narrowly escaped capture by French cavalry patrols. Twice at least he was struck by spent bullets on chest and thigh. Had he been prematurely struck down history might have been written differently.

I would like to finish by quoting that great historian Napier who dedicated his *History of the Peninsular War* to the Duke of Wellington in these words 'This history I dedicate to your Grace because I have served long enough under your command to know why the soldiers of the Xth Roman Legion were so devoted to Julius Caesar'.