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## TWO RASH COLONELS: Clive Willis

'Gung-ho' is the modern expression that sums it all up. It was first used in 1942 to refer to raids by United States marines. Its origin was Chinese and denoted a team effort. But the practice of the headlong charge against the enemy, either on horseback or on foot, reaches back into the mists of time. Sometimes it met with success; on other occasions the outcome was total disaster. Oh, there are many expressions for it: 'to ride (or charge) hell for leather', or 'to go at it full tilt', or, as Lancastrians will have it, 'to go for it, muck or nettles', or, indeed, most memorably from the trenches of World War I, 'to go over the top', alternatively expressed as 'Up, lads, and at 'em'. Undoubtedly the most celebrated instance of this impetuous behaviour was the 'wild' Charge of the Light Brigade at the Battle of Balaclava in 1854, duly immortalized in Tennyson's rousing poem of the same year.

This exhilarating form of collective madness frequently took hold of the Duke of Wellington's cavalry, much to his exasperation. Such was his reaction, particularly when his order to charge ended with reckless cross-country steeple-chases beyond the point of first encounter and, fatally, into the 'jaws of death' worked by encircling adversaries.

In our commemoration of the victories at Roliça and Vimeiro in August 1808, there come to mind the respective parts played by two rash lieutenant-colonels, the Honourable George Lake of the 29<sup>th</sup> Foot (the Worcestershire Regiment) and Charles Taylor of the 20th Light Dragoons.

But the symptom of the rush of blood to the head had already occurred two days prior to the Battle of Roliça, namely on the 15<sup>th</sup> of August. The Anglo-Portuguese force was commanded by the man whom we must at this stage still refer to as Sir Arthur Wellesley, rather than by his later title of the Duke of Wellington. The opposing French force was under the command of General Laborde (or Delaborde, to give him the extended version of his surname). Laborde had vacated Óbidos on the 14th in order to prepare a more advantageous position for the inevitable forthcoming clash. The next day, in order to keep a lookout for Wellesley's approach, he had stationed a group of pickets close to the splendid sixteenth-century aqueduct that lies to the southeast of Óbidos. This information we owe to Colonel George Landmann of the Royal Engineers, a member of Wellesley's staff. The pickets were spotted by green-jacketed British skirmishers from the Light companies of the 95th Rifles and 60th Rifles. There ensued the first encounter of Wellesley's troops with the French in the Peninsular War. The French pickets withdrew, firing as they went, with the four British companies in hot pursuit with fixed bayonets. Landmann tells us that the chase was over two miles. The British, commanded by one Major Travers, about whom nothing else is known, led his men into the French rearguard with sickening consequences: one officer, Lieutenant Bunbury, was killed; Captain Hercules Pakenham, Wellesley's brother-in-law, was injured, and a further twenty-seven men were killed or wounded. This 'little affair of advance posts' (as Wellesley called it) would have ended even more catastrophically, had it not been for the swift advance of General Sir Brent Spencer's division in support.

Where exactly did the skirmish end up? Writers in English (for example, Fortescue and Longford) have called it the windmill at 'Brilos'. Raul Brandão calls it 'Arrifos'. The present writer

used to calculate that this hand-to-hand fighting took place near the mill at Dagorda, two kilometres to the southwest of Óbidos. However, recent research by Portuguese historians Tormenta and Fiéis would locate it at the ruined windmill of Senhora da Luz. That structure stands on a rise to the west of the rail track and halfway between Óbidos and Caldas da Rainha. However, General Thiébault of Junot's staff reported that the windmill in question was half a league (or two kilometres) forward of Roliça. This must rule out Senhora da Luz.

*Arrifos or Arrifes* is Portuguese for 'rocky outcrop'. 'Brilos' is not Portuguese at all and must be a case of a scribbled, semi-legible version of 'Arrifos' – a similar case arises with 'Roliça' which underwent sundry distortions before finally appearing amid the battle honours of the 29th Foot as 'Roleia' and in the War Office Gazette as 'Boriça'. Examination of the maps of the Instituto Geográfico e Cadastral reveals that to the west of Dagorda and to the north of the village of Amoreira there stands a ruined windmill. It towers over the River Real. The place name on the map reads 'Arrifes'. If the chase was indeed over two miles (as Landmann says) and ended half a league forward of Roliça (as Thiébault says), then the Dagorda windmill still looks the best bet; the Arrifes windmill is two kilometres further away. And there, without new evidence, we must leave the matter.

The 'gung-ho' folly of Major Travers provides us with a foretaste of the headlong charges of Colonels Lake and Taylor. Before analysing those episodes, we need to set the scene in greater detail.

The first British landings in the Peninsular War had taken place at Lavos, just to the south of the Mondego estuary and

across the bay from Figueira da Foz. Well over 13,000 troops had disembarked from the transports. Since General Junot's invasion at the end of 1807, a somewhat ragbag Portuguese army had been reconstituted under the command of Marshal Bernardim Freire de Andrade. Freire served under the orders of the Bishop of Oporto and notionally protected the unoccupied north from further French incursion. Freire was persuaded to advance south, with 6,000 men, as far as Leiria. There he met Wellesley and only after hard bargaining agreed to release some 1,700 men to Wellesley, of whom some 230 were raw cavalry (including a few dozen mounted police). These Portuguese troops were placed under the command of one Lieutenant-Colonel Nicholas Trant. Trant was Anglo-Irish, like Wellesley; the latter thought him an able officer, though rather too fond of his drink. To his Portuguese we shall have reason to return, for the very good reason that British accounts of the Battles of Roliça and Vimeiro frequently overlook or neglect their presence. In return for the strengthening of his force, Wellesley donated to Freire's remaining troops some 5,000 muskets to replace their 'varapaus e fouces', their cudgels and scythes, as Raul Brandão puts it.

Freire would not at first risk venturing south of Leiria, though he eventually reached Caldas da Rainha on the day after the Battle of Roliça and Óbidos on the day before the Battle of Vimeiro. Wellesley's Anglo-Portuguese army now advanced southwards on a route close to the coast; this was for ease of contact with the supply ships and transports. From Leiria the march followed the historic trajectory of Batalha, Aljubarrota, Alcobaca and Caldas. A good omen was that the Batalha to Aljubarrota section was completed on the 14th of August: that date was the 423<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of the glorious Anglo-Portuguese victory there over the forces of Castile. Major Travers's

skirmish at the windmill ensued on the following day, and, by the night of the 16th, Wellesley's corps was stationed in and around Óbidos, with many troops bivouacking on the north side.

The Honourable George Lake was born in 1780, the son of Lieutenant-Colonel Gerard Lake, who in due course became a full general and Viscount Lake of Delhi. Lake senior particularly distinguished himself in the siege of Valenciennes in 1793, when by sheer dogged thrust he led three battalions of footguards in driving out, at bayonet point, no less than twelve admittedly raw French battalions. In India in 1803, with young George as one of his staff officers, he won a series of conflicts by his bold infantry and cavalry charges, with himself personally and constantly at the head of his men. He believed passionately that the main function of infantry was to charge with fixed bayonets and instilled the same notion into his son. His greatest achievement was his final and resoundingly decisive victory at Laswaree, perhaps the bloodiest battle ever fought by the British in India. Despite heavy losses, his cavalry and infantry charged up a steep slope and overcame the Franco-Indian artillery.

The junior Lake took command of the Worcestershire Regiment, the 29<sup>th</sup> Foot, in December 1807. He made an immediately good 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. The flogging took place at once and, as he announced, for two reasons: to deprive the miscreants of the honour of fighting the next day; and to release their erstwhile guards, precisely so that the latter could participate. This decision was most favourably discussed by his men all evening.

On the morning of the 17<sup>th</sup> of August Wellesley viewed Laborde's disposition at Roliça from a forward position, probably from the Dagorda windmill. He then dispatched Colonel Trant and his Portuguese to the extreme right or west, where in fact they did not participate actively in the conflict. The road from Roliça to Columbeira is, however, duly named the Rua Nicolau Trante. Major-General Ferguson, with 4,500 men, marched over to the far left or east, in order to seek to block General Loison's expected arrival with a second French army from the direction of Bombarral. The residue was a main force of 9,000 against Laborde's force of some 6,000 at the most, though some contend that the French numbered far less than that.

The centre then advanced in three columns, with General Crauford's brigade on the left, Nightingale's in the middle and Hill's on the right. Lake's 29<sup>th</sup> Foot formed part of General Nightingale's middle column.

Laborde, meanwhile, having assessed the size of Wellesley's force, was unwilling to fall an easy victim to a pincer movement. He withdrew his troops in orderly fashion through the villages of Roliça and Columbeira to an obviously pre-established and 'formidable position' on the heights of Columbeira, half a mile to the rear and which he had had three days to prepare. The hills stand 300 feet above the plain and have an average gradient of one in ten. These heights are approached by several gullies (what Wellesley incongruously calls 'passes'). They are uneven, overhung with rocks and trees and strewn with boulders.

Midday came: the heat was intense. Colonel Landmann now-continues:

The 29<sup>th</sup> 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 with King's Regulations. I was so struck with the marked distinction between the 29<sup>th</sup> 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.'

Wellesley was now in difficulties. He could not dislodge the French skirmishers 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' (Wellesley's word for it) than many positions in the subsequent Lines of Torres Vedras. Moreover, his advantage in cannon and cavalry was of little effect in such terrain. General Loison's army, numbering some 9,000, was meanwhile doggedly approaching from the southeast and was only a few hours away. That corps would level the odds numerically and, in view of the territorial advantages, would weigh heavily in the French favour. In such circumstances the best Wellesley could expect was stalemate. He also already knew that the transports were bringing reinforcements and that Sir Hew Dalrymple and Sir Harry Burrard would supersede him within days. Both of them, as he knew, were incompetent. A glorious future career hung in the balance.

Accordingly, the order came from Wellesley for the infantry to 'make a demonstration' against the gullies and the inevitable cross-firing; it was Wellesley's only hope. The Light company of Lake's 29<sup>th</sup>, along with two other Light companies, 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.' Instead of supporting the demonstration against the right-hand gully, Lake now found the right-wing companies of his battalion at the foot of the next gully, which lies further to the left of the Cruz Alta, as Landmann tells us. Disputes rage as to which were the gullies in question. The present writer believes that they were the two gullies immediately to the right of the former road from Columbeira up to Azambujeira, now an overgrown track. The two gullies meet shortly before Lake's Cross.

Just like a chip off the old block, Lake interpreted 'making a demonstration' in the only way that he had ever known, a headlong charge with fixed bayonets, with himself on horseback at the head of his grenadiers. Up they went, under heavy fire, in a column, two or three abreast, slithering, sometimes on all fours. Halfway up, Lake had his horse shot from under him; he had had the foresight to lend his own charger 'Black Jack' to one of his officers, who now dismounted and gave him back his steed. Depleted by very heavy casualties, the grenadiers, led by their inspired and inspiring young colonel, burst their way up and round to an area of cooks, commissars and camp-followers. They also encountered a small group of Swiss, who promptly changed sides.

Lake set about forming his men into a line, fire now coming from General Brenier's battalion, which 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!' Having supervised the prolongation of his line, he was just shouting the word 'Forward!' when he was hit by skirmisher shots. First, he was struck 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 but was returned to the 29<sup>th</sup> at the time of the Convention of Sintra.

The wounded of the 29<sup>th</sup> were now calling on the surgeons to save their colonel first, but it was already too late. A sergeant, who stood astride Lake's corpse, was also killed. Lake's left-wing companies now arrived, accompanied by the 9<sup>th</sup> Foot, the East Norfolks. In the mêlée, forty of the 29<sup>th</sup> were taken prisoner, along with 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 29<sup>th</sup>, plus the 9<sup>th</sup>, surged backwards and forwards, attacking repeatedly and, in Wellington's words 'with the utmost impetuosity'. 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 29<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup>, or in the three attacks made by the French in the mountains'.

However, Ferguson's brigade was now pressing the French right, forcing them from the ridge, and only when General Hill's brigade saw the opportunity created for them to converge on the French left did Laborde sound the retreat. At first it was in orderly fashion but soon became pell-mell to the south. It

was around 4.30 pm: four hours of daylight remained, and the converging Loison was still three hours away at Cercal.

Wellesley recognized his debt to Lake in a letter which he wrote to the young man's brother-in-law, couched in words that he never 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.

The refurbished cross and plinth on the heights of Columbeira now stand as a fitting memorial to Lake's heroic impetuosity. A monument also stands to Lake in the northwest (or belfry) tower of Westminster Abbey. Mementoes in the Worcester City Museum include the now familiar cameo portrait, a belt buckle and the fatal bullet that was later removed from his skeleton.

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. Success at Roliça permitted victory at

Vimeiro before the supersession by the two incompetents, Dalrymple and Burrard, could take full effect. If one recalls that Sir John Moore's subsequent unhappy 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 one British general truly capable of defeating Napoleonic armies. That was underlined by his victory at Vimeiro four days later.

While commemoration of the Anglo-Portuguese victory at Roliça has been a very recent affair, the celebration of the major victory on the 21<sup>st</sup> of August at Vimeiro goes back decades; the event is always recalled in style, particularly on numerically significant anniversaries.

Both parties in the conflict used the intervening days to unite and consolidate their forces. Laborde and Loison fell back towards Lisbon, joining forces with General Junot at Montachique near Torres Vedras. The combined French armies now numbered some 14,000, though reserves still occupied Lisbon. Meanwhile, British reinforcements were arriving by sea: General Anstruther's brigade landed at Paimogo, close to Areia Branca (north of Lourinhã), on the 19<sup>th</sup>; General Acland's disembarked at Porto Novo, near to the villages of Maceira and Vimeiro, on the following day. Most military historians seem to think, inaccurately, that both brigades came ashore at Porto Novo. Paimogo is also of interest not only for its seventeenth-century fort, but even for its cliffs, where dinosaur remains were unearthed in the 1980s. They are now the proud showpiece of the museum at Lourinhã. With the addition of Anstruther's and Acland's troops, Wellesley had close on 19,000 men. In these circumstances Junot gambled on a surprise attack from the east, whereas Wellesley was in readiness for a confrontation from the south.

Nevertheless, by first concealing his troops below the skyline of Vimeiro hill on the celebrated western ridge, Wellesley enabled his lines, directed by Generals Fane and Anstruther, and firing in strict sequence, to repel three powerful attacks by French columns, cutting huge swathes through their ranks. Defeat stared Junot in the face.

At this point we come to the role in the battle of Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Taylor. Aged 36, he was the son of a physician based in Reading in Berkshire. Wellesley now felt that at long last the time had come for a cavalry charge. Whereas Trant's Portuguese infantry was still held in reserve to the northwest of Vimeiro at a position between Ribamar and Marquiteira, the Portuguese cavalry had bivouacked close to the British dragoons at Porto Rio. That spot lies on a bend in the river between Maceira and Vimeiro, very near to where the Hotel Braga now stands. Sensing victory, Sir Arthur raised his cocked hat, just as later at Waterloo. He shouted to Taylor, 'Now, Twentieth, now is the time!' Taylor's great moment had come: he commanded almost 500 men, his own 20<sup>th</sup> Light Dragoons plus the rather raw Portuguese cavalry, in virtually equal numbers. At last the Portuguese had a chance to shine.

Out from behind Vimeiro hill came Taylor's troopers, forming a line, with the British in the centre and the Portuguese on the wings. They charged headlong towards the retreating columns of French grenadiers. However, the columns partly re-formed and fired into the cavalry, causing numerous casualties, including a number of Portuguese. The Portuguese troopers clearly decided that the situation was too dangerous: discretion was the better part of valour. They wheeled and galloped back, taking refuge behind Fane's advancing infantry at the centre of the Allied position at Vimeiro hill. Needless to say, they were loudly

jeered by the British infantrymen. Nevertheless, the fatal gallantry of Commandant Elisiário of the Lisbon police was noted, and the highest praise was won by one Lieutenant Pinto.

Combining military discipline with tactical folly, Colonel Taylor's dragoons surged on till out of control. They burst through French cavalry sent to protect the retreating infantry. That infantry again inflicted casualties, including Taylor, who was shot dead. Yet uphill and to the east the cavalry galloped, heading straight for Junot's command post at Esteveiras. They were halted by a drystone wall and were then charged by overwhelming numbers from General Margaron's two cavalry regiments, held in reserve. Unbelievably, they were not annihilated, and most of the British cavalry fought their way back to Vimeiro hill. Their losses were 21 killed, 24 wounded and eleven taken prisoner; in all, that was one-fifth of their number, not one half, as is sometimes clumsily claimed. Dragoon Captain Eustace was one of the captives: brought before Junot, he was hugely praised for the valour shown by the British troopers. But Taylor's charge could never equal that of Lake.

Refusing to admit defeat, the French now sought to turn the Allied left flank: their Generals Solignac and Brenier made an unavailing assault on the eastern ridge, around the hamlets of Toledo, Ventosa and Fonte de Lima. Again they were repelled, and Brenier was even taken prisoner. The remnants of the 29th Foot, the Worcesters, played again a prominent role. Junot's cause was lost: the following day he sent General Kellerman back to the village of Vimeiro to negotiate an armistice.

We could debate forever the merits of Portuguese discretion in Taylor's cavalry charge – as against the folly of the Brit-



ish dragoons. We could argue endlessly whether Wellesley was wise to order a charge without imposing limits on its trajectory. But at last he had actively involved the Portuguese. Two years later, at the Battle of Buçaco, the Portuguese, superbly trained by Marshal Beresford, constituted one half of the Allied army and shared evenly in its battle honours.

There is a curious postscript: Taylor's son, another Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Taylor, was killed in 1846, leading his infantry at the Battle of Sobraon, the last battle of the Sikh Wars, sometimes described as the 'Waterloo of India'. It was certainly the crowning victory of British arms in that country. Taylor junior earned a memorial in Canterbury Cathedral. By an odd coincidence he was leading the 29<sup>th</sup> Foot, the Worcestershire Regiment, in a headlong charge against the Sikh ramparts.

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