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**WILLIAM WARRE AND THE LIBERATION  
OF PORTUGAL IN THE PENINSULAR WAR  
(1808-1812)**

**Paul Symington**

The history of the Port trade is a long one, characterised by turbulence and drama, a backdrop that is reflected in the deep and complex wines made in the wild and beautiful Douro valley. This broader historical association is perhaps not surprising as the affirmation of Port as one of the world's greatest wines is in part due to the ancient alliance that dates from 1386 between England and Portugal that bound each to defend the other's independence. The consequent friendship of their peoples developed down the ages.

The alliance was never more vital than during the Napoleonic era. The Peninsular War was a part of the gigantic struggle between revolutionary France and the rest of Europe that devastated the continent from Lisbon to Moscow and from Copenhagen to Naples between 1793 and 1815. By 1807 Bonaparte was virtual master of mainland Europe and Portugal was destined to form part of the most powerful Empire since the days of the Romans. Napoleon's armies advanced across Spain with the compliance of the weak Spanish crown and took Lisbon in November 1807. The Portuguese army was destroyed and the Royal Family sailed out of the Tagus at the moment that Junot's troops arrived on the quays of Lisbon.

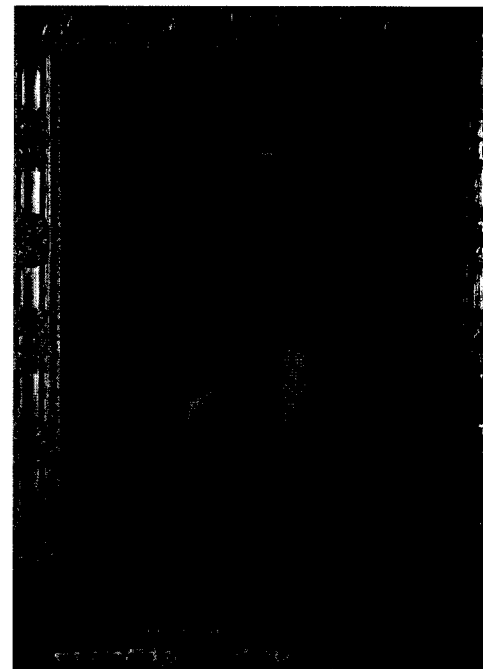
Within a few months Napoleon took Spain, using a subterfuge that still astounds today. The French troops in transit across

Spain surreptitiously left behind sufficient numbers of men at each key fortress of their supposed allies as they marched to Portugal. In February 1808 they seized all these fortresses from the astonished and betrayed Spanish, an act which *'would pass for the most odious of the Emperor's whole career'* wrote the historian Sir Charles Oman. Iberia was Napoleon's.

The long established Port trade was swept up in this whirlwind. The merchants fled and there was little reason to think that Portugal would recover its independence, it was destined to be dismembered or be absorbed into Spain. But events were to develop in an unexpected way and the scion of one of the oldest Port families was to play a significant role in the struggle. No member of the Port trade made such a contribution to the greater cause of Portugal's independence as William Warre. He was born in Porto on 15<sup>th</sup> April 1784 to James and Eleanor Warre. James was the son of another William Warre, who had arrived in Portugal in 1706 to represent his family's interests in the oldest British Port company that had been founded in Portugal in 1670.

After growing up in Porto, the boisterous William was sent to Harrow school in England, after which he returned to join the family firm. However, his Port career was short-lived, largely owing to his rebellious nature. The episode that precipitated his early exit occurred one afternoon when he playfully sealed the pigtails of the Portuguese partner to his desk with sealing wax, while he slept off a fine lunch. This did not amuse his family or the other partners and William was asked to leave.

This suited William well as he was eager to pursue a military career and he joined the British Army in 1803 at the age of 19. As an officer in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Light Dragoons and only just 24, he



sailed to Portugal in 1808 with the Army to combat the invasion of his homeland. On board a troop ship off Oporto on July 25<sup>th</sup> he wrote to his father; *'To express my feelings at seeing the spot of my birth, the place in which I spent some of the happiest days of my life, would be impossible'*.

Within a few weeks he was fighting courageously at the battle of Roliça, the first combat involving the British on August 17<sup>th</sup>. He wrote; *'I have just time to tell you that I am quite well and safe. We had a very sharp action the day before yesterday, at a strong position at Roliça....the French were strongly posted. But who could resist the gallantry of our brave fellows... our army lost about 500 men in killed and wounded.... Hitherto we have had a most harassing march in the sun and suffered much from the heat.'*

A few days later on the 20<sup>th</sup> August he fought again at Vimeiro, the battle that led to the expulsion of the French. Again he wrote to his father: *'We have had a most glorious and memorable day... every soldier seemed a hero. The fire for some time was tremendous, and the field strewn with our brave fellows in charging the guns. My horse, a beautiful nice creature, I had received but a few days before from Porto, which cost me 38 Moidores, was shot in several places and fell dead... when I had the cloak shot away before me, I thought it high time to dismount and join the 36<sup>th</sup>, who were advancing, and with them I had the honour to remain during the rest of the action.'*

In October of that year, Warre was with Sir John Moore in the advance into Spain to help the Spaniards who had risen in revolt. But Moore had just 25,000 troops, and when Napoleon learned that this puny army of his most stubborn foe was within his grasp, he set out to destroy it. The French troops in Spain numbered 290,000. Moore had to retreat or face certain destruction.

The retreat to Corunna is a legend in British military history. Thousands died of hunger and cold in the snow-covered mountains of Galicia. The desperate retreat culminated in a battle and with General Moore's death. The British cavalry had to shoot most of their horses on the beaches, and there are harrowing accounts of some horses swimming out with the boats, frantic to stay with their riders. Between 5,000 and 6,000 men were lost. Warre, in the rear-guard and one of the last officers to embark with the enemy at his heels, wrote in January 1809: *'I have just time to say I am quite well... after our disastrous and most harassing retreat from Lugo... before we could embark the French attacked us on the 16<sup>th</sup>, with all their force, in our most disadvantageous position... our loss*

*in killed and wounded is very great, though not as much as the enemy'*

The Royal Navy ruled the waves after Trafalgar and was able to embark Moore's exhausted army and save it from annihilation. Marshal Soult, who had fought Moore at Corunna, turned south and captured Oporto in March where he settled for a while, thinking that both Portugal and the British were incapable of any further effort. The vain Soult passed his time designing his ermine coronation robes as he hoped to get his master to crown him King of Portugal. But he underestimated both Portugal and Britain. By April 1809 the British were once more in Lisbon and steps were already being taken to reform a Portuguese Army.

Young Captain Warre was seconded into the new Portuguese Army commanded by Marshal Beresford. After Vimiero and Roliça, Warre had written bitterly about the chaotic military and logistical support of the Portuguese and the brutal treatment by the peasantry of the wounded enemy. Neither fact is really surprising: Portugal's entire infrastructure had been destroyed by the invasion.

Napoleon's orders were that his Marshals should tax all conquered territories to pay the troops and to take food from the land and the peasantry to feed his armies. In Spain and Portugal, where most land is poor and food was scarce, the people faced starvation so they fought. There followed an escalation of brutality which resulted in the French being unable to move anywhere in Iberia unless in large numbers. Whole armies would be out of touch for months as the countryside was totally hostile. A small taste of the real horror of the war is captured in another of Warre's letters: *'It was impossible to pass through a country so completely devastated without feelings of*

*horror and pity for the suffering humanity. Nothing can exceed the wanton cruelty and barbarity of those wretches. We passed many formerly fine towns nearly entirely burnt or destroyed... We even at this period saw many people and children absolutely starving and living upon nettles and herbs they gathered in the fields.'*

The tone of Warre's letters towards the local soldiers changes during the training and re-equipping and he wrote in April 1809 *'The Portuguese troops under instruction are coming along very well... we have great hopes of some corps'*. He wrote further; *'I am ready to exert myself for the service of this Country without being any weight or charge to them. They have certainly some claims to my service from the kindness my family has for a long series of years experienced'*. In March he writes again *'There has been very little gaiety, and my time fully employed in compiling a set of regulations for Cavalry (In Portuguese)'*. In September he was still hard at work: *'We are getting the army clothed and disciplined with all diligence during this quiet period'*.

Young Captain Warre was at the liberation of his home city of Porto on 12<sup>th</sup> May 1809 where he tried to cut off the retreat of Soult. At this action, near Salmonde, he stood alone, the only Englishman, side by side with a group of local volunteer soldiers who made a valiant attempt to cut off the retreat of the entire French army. Sir Charles Oman in his seminal work dated 1902 wrote: *'Major Warre had ridden ahead to rouse the peasantry, and had collected several hundred half-armed levies at the Saltador bridge, which he encouraged them to hold... Unfortunately he could not persuade them to destroy the bridge, on which all the cross-communications of the Misarella valley depend. But they had thrown down its parapets, built an*

*abattis across its head, and thrown up earthworks on each side of it so as to command the opposite bank. This, unhappily, was not enough to hold back 20,000 desperate men who saw their only way of salvation on the opposite bank. The rocky bed of the Cavado, says an eye-witness, 'presented an extraordinary spectacle. Men and horses, sumpter animals and baggage, had been precipitated into the river, and literally choked its course'*.

More recently the historian Mark Urban echoes this same brave story: *'A few dozen Portuguese and single English defender (William Warre)..... It was over in moments. The Portuguese farmers could not stand in front of desperate men, skilled in close combat. They were scattered and the last impediment was gone. The legions marching under Bonaparte's eagles were taking the same path out of Lusitania as those under the eagles of Rome.... although he did not know it, it was to be Wellesley's only opportunity of this kind (to annihilate an entire corps of 20,000 Frenchmen) in seven years of Peninsular campaigning'*

After Oporto, Warre's work on re-training the new Portuguese army continued, on December 31<sup>st</sup> 1809 he writes: *'Lord W as well as every British Officer have been very much, though agreeably, surprised at the state of our troops. I am inclined to think that had they had justice done to them in the common comforts... clothing and food, they would make as good soldiers as any in the world. None are more intelligent or willing, or bear hardships and privation more.'*

Warre was not at Bussaco in September 1810 as he was ill, which was ironic, because the new Portuguese army, that he had so much helped to train, came of age. Wellington had 51,345 troops at this great battle, of which 24,649 were

Portuguese, against 65,974 veteran Frenchmen under Massena. The Portuguese faced one of the most determined attacks and acquitted themselves superbly, hurling the French back down the Bussaco ridge. For the next four years of bitter war, Wellington would make no distinction between the British and Portuguese troops in the line of battle and they were to fight shoulder to shoulder until Toulouse in 1814. Young William Warre and a small number of fellow officers had done their jobs well.

Warre was at Torres Vedras and then at the capture of Ciudad Rodrigo in January 1812 where Craufurd, Wellington's most able General, was killed in the breach, and wrote: *'I have only just time to tell you that Ciudad Rodrigo is ours. It was taken by storm yesterday evening at 7 O'clock.... It is quite out of my power to do justice to the heroism and gallantry of our troops both British and Portuguese. It is not easy to express my admiration. They seemed to surpass their wonted bravery and intrepid contempt of danger.'*

In April of that year, Warre was at the brutal siege of Badajoz. William kept his father, as always, informed: *'The enemy kept up a heavy fire of musquetry... as it was only 150 yards from their covered way. We were standing up with Major McLean of the 1<sup>st</sup> Caçadores when they fired at us and hit poor Thomson through the head... I fortunately jumped down in time and escaped, as they hit the sandbag I was leaning against, which did us quite well.. We have lost two very good Portuguese Artillery Officers, Captn. Julio D'Amoral and Barceiros, both very gallant good Officers... The conduct of the Portuguese Troops during the whole Siege, and under very trying circumstances, has been exemplary... it is difficult to say which troops, the British or the Portuguese are the most indifferent to danger.'*

The Oporto-born Warre aged just 27, took the surrender of General Philippon the French Commander of Badajoz, one of France's most able soldiers, and had the honour of accepting his sword.

In July 1812, Warre was at the decisive battle of Salamanca, which many military strategists consider to have been where Wellington demonstrated the greatest strategic skill of his career (more so than even Waterloo). But it was a close run battle as Mark Urban records: *'At first, Wellington's men were driven back towards Los Arapiles in disorder. Marshal Beresford, accompanied by his ADC Major William Warre, rode into the retreating columns, trying to rally them. Beresford was soon shot in the chest and fell from his horse'. Warre wrote, 'I escaped very well with two shots on my sword scabbard and one thro' my holster, which is as near as I ever wish to have them'.*

Marshal Beresford wounds were severe and the young Warre was commanded to escort the Marshal from the battlefield and down the Douro River to Porto for treatment to his wounds. Again he found a moment to write to his father: *'I have the very, very great pleasure in communicating to you one of the most decisive victories that was ever gained by the valour and intrepidity of our brave troops.... The battle continued with unabated fury till late in the evening... they at last broke and fled in all directions in the most complete confusion and dismay, followed by our people... nearly the whole of the enemy's Baggage was taken by the Portuguese 3 Regts. of Cavalry... who behaved very well indeed, and twice charged the enemy's Infantry, and once their Cavalry, with complete success, and the General speaks in the highest terms of them.'*

William Warre's knowledge of the country and his fluency in its language made him an invaluable figure in the reconstruction of the Portuguese Army that was so admired by Wellington, and who were to play such a vital role in his ultimately successful efforts to drive the French from Iberia. But Warre's letters show that his contribution was far more than this alone, he was in the thick of desperate fighting at many of the bloodiest battles.

It is astonishing in retrospect that Wellington was able to defeat the French. The large Spanish armies were poorly led and armed and were systematically destroyed time and again. France had never less than 250,000 experienced fighting men in Iberia, used to victory across Europe. Several factors turned the tide: the superb guerrilla war fought by the Spanish irregulars; Wellington's own brilliant strategy; his own valiant but small British army which was rarely above 30,000 at any engagement; and crucially some 28,000 well trained and brave Portuguese.

But even in the fury of war, Port Wine has its place and Warre wrote on 15<sup>th</sup> May 1810 to his father: *'I have been much flattered lately by Ld Wellington's reception of me.... He has applied to me to procure for him one Hogshead of very fine old Port. He does not care about the price, and wishes me to get you to take care of it for him.'* And again on March 18<sup>th</sup> 1812. *'Lord Wellington will be much obliged to you if you would have the Pipe of wine bottled for him, marked with his name, and taken care of in a good place till his return'*.

William Warre returned to England after four years of war in 1812, having received from the King of Portugal medals for his conduct at Vimeiro, Ciudad Rodrigo and Badajoz. He was made a Knight of the Order of the Tower and Sword, and

of the Order of S. Bento d'Aviz, Portugal's highest and oldest military decoration. From 1813 to 1821 he was Quartermaster General in the Cape of Good Hope. But in 1826-8 he was back in Portugal on the staff of Sir William Clinton who had been sent to Portugal to repel a Spanish threat. Warre eventually rose to the rank of Major General in 1851 having been knighted by Queen Victoria in 1839. He died in York on 26<sup>th</sup> July 1853 at the age of 69.

His family had returned to Oporto and continued their family's Port business. George Warre, nephew of the fighting William Warre, was the first Englishman to buy vineyards in the Upper Douro in 1887 and led the fight against phylloxera. In the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Warres returned to England after two centuries in Portugal, remaining partners with the Symington family of Oporto until the 1950s when they finally sold their partnership. William Warre, born 1926 and editor of his ancestor's 'Letters from the Peninsula' continued to work with the Symingtons in Port until his retirement in 1991.

Today Warre's is one of the few Port companies that remains entirely family owned, maintaining a tradition that dates back to the heroic William Warre and before, as the oldest British Port company in Portugal. The company produces a special brand of Port called Warre's Warrior, a fitting tribute to a soldier who was truly a warrior. There can be few parallels in vinous history where a member of an old wine family has been so closely involved in his country's ultimate destiny.

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*PAUL SYMINGTON was born in Oporto in 1953. He is Partner and Joint Managing Director of Symington Family Estates, the family company that owns Graham's, Dow's and Warre's Ports. He is descended from Andrew James Symington who came to Portugal in 1882 from Scotland and so is a fourth generation Port producer. His great grandfather, Andrew, married Beatrice Atkinson, whose family had been here since 1814 in Port, but through her Portuguese mother she was descended from Walter Maynard, English consul in Oporto in the seventeenth century and who made the second oldest shipment ever recorded of Port by a British merchant in 1652, so on her side his family's involvement in Port goes back fourteen generations. Their partnership with the Warre family dates from 1905; although they are not related to them, the two families have been friends for over 100 years.*