The Napoleon Series

Why the Battle of Fuentes de Oñoro Was Wellington’s ‘Worse Scrape’ in 1811

By Richard Tennant

Major, the Hon. Edward Charles Cox wrote in his journal:

‘I heard Lord Wellington say at his table he thought he had never been in a worse scrape’. It had been altogether too close to a disaster and he was angry with himself; he wrote to his brother William that Lord Liverpool was quite right not to move thanks [in Parliament] for the battle at Fuentes, though it was the most difficult one I was ever concerned in.¹

When a general of Wellington’s stature makes this sort of statement, the subject should be worthy of further study. Furthermore, as historians have also pointed out, this was the only time when Wellington had ordered his troops to ‘dig-in’ and erect field works.

The Background Events

Having finally decided to retreat from the Lines of Torres Vedras on 3 March 1811, by the end on the month the French army had withdrawn as far as Celorico and Guarda on the bend of Mondego River. Masséna had initially intended ‘falling back closer to his base of operations on the fortresses’ (Almeida and Rodrigo), but then changed his mind and proposed to swerve aside from his places of strength to turn south-eastward towards the Spanish frontier and the central Tagus. This led to a major confrontation with Marshal Ney, leading to him being formally deposed from the command of 6th Corps. Drouet, with 9th Corps and Conroux’s division, had already gone back towards Almeida with the sick and wounded of the whole army. He was then ordered to destroy the bridges over the Coa, install a garrison in Almeida and take post at Vale-de-Mula on the Turon, between Almeida and Ciudad Rodrigo.

Masséna knew that if could retain control of Almeida, the Anglo-Portuguese army would be unable to threaten the French hold on western Spain whilst leaving such a powerful enemy base uncaptured in their rear.

Almeida had been partially destroyed by a catastrophic explosion on 26 August 1810 which had led to its surrender to the French and opened the route into Portugal. By drafting labourers the French garrison had, eight months later, made enough repairs to once again make the fortress a mighty obstacle. General Antoine-François Brennier, a tough and experienced veteran was left as governor of the fortress with a garrison of about 1,300 troops.² All traces of the great explosion had disappeared; that the town within was still a mass of ruins, with nearly every house cut off sheer at the first story, was of no military importance when the enceinte and the bomb-proofs were in good order. The original, adequate complement of guns had been partially damaged, but were now

¹ Intelligence Officer in the Peninsular, Letter & Diaries of Major The Hon Edward Charles Cocks 1786-1812 by Julia Page, 1986, page 104; cited in Albuera, Wellington’s Fourth Peninsular Campaign, 1811, by Peter Edwards, 2008, page 112. Later, the Siege of Burgos in 1812 became acknowledged as Wellington’s ‘worst scrape’. It would be here, on 8th October 1812, where Cocks was to fall, a loss which was to effect Wellington deeply.
² Fuentes de Onoro, by Rene Charttrand, 2002

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supplemented from the French battering train, which had been returned to Ciudad Rodrigo.

April 1811

Since there were no heavy guns to form a battering-train for a siege of Almeida nearer than Oporto, Abrantes or Lisbon, Wellington intended to reduce it at his leisure, being of the opinion that it would be starved out before Masséna was in a position to take the field to relieve it. His own army had out-marched its supplies and, since all the country about Almeida, Guarda and Sabugal had been thoroughly devastated, was living from hand to mouth on convoys which were only straggling up at irregular intervals from the lower Mondego. The horses especially were in very poor order from want of proper forage. Accordingly, the allied troops were spread broadcast in the villages between the Coa and the Agueda.

In mid-April Wellington went south for two weeks to consult with Beresford in Elvas and survey Badajoz. During his absence the command of the troops in the northern sector was given over to Sir Brent Spencer as the senior division commander present. It is very interesting to note Wellington’s instructions to Spencer covering the contingency that Masséna made a serious effort to relieve Almeida. Only Pack’s Portuguese infantry brigade with Barbaçena’s cavalry brigade of the same nation were to keep up the investment of Almeida till the last moment. Spencer was to concentrate, not in front of Almeida, nor across the road from Rodrigo to that place, but in a defensive position to the south of it, parallel to the French line of advance and threatening it in flank. The designated position was well to the south, in front of Rendo, Alfayates and Aldea Velha.

May 1811

Masséna had reached Ciudad Rodrigo on 26th April, his four corps concentrated there by the 29th, and Bessières came up with his cavalry on the 1st May. On the following day the whole force of about 48,000 men began to pour in an interminable stream across the Agueda by the bridge of Ciudad Rodrigo. If the two marshals had been able to collect some 55,000 men it is certain that Wellington would not have fought and would have allowed Almeida to be revictualled. As it was he had a force of about 37,000 available for general action, not including the detachment blockading Almeida. He made up his mind to fight, even though he had denied Spencer the power to do so in his absence.

The Battlefield

It was almost certain that Masséna’s relief wagon convoy of provisions for Almeida would need to follow the only paved chausée running from Ciudad Rodrigo, through Manzonillo, crossing by the bridges at Marialva and Gallegos to Alameda. However it was unlikely to be able to open up this prime route frontally via Fort Concepcion since the ridge behind the Dos Casas River had rather too great a resemblance to the ridge at Bussaco, and such a choice would invite the British to roll down upon the French flank. What Masséna needed to do was to get the British away from Fort Concepcion so that his convoys could pass through. This could be achieved by attacking further south on easier ground, and either beating them and then turning north, or causing Wellington to shift significant formations from the north into that more southerly action.

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Wellington, correctly surmising that they would attempt to turn the heads of the ravines of the Dos Casas and Turon, had selected as his fighting-ground the line of the Dos Casas, from the ruined Fort Conception to the village of Fuentes de Oñoro. This position, which was about 13 kms/8 miles long, was entirely protected in front by a well-marked ravine. The village, with the ridge behind it, provided a strong defensible anchor for the right flank.

However, no battle-ground that was ever chosen is destitute of some fault. In this case it was the 5 kms/3 miles from Fuentes to Nave de Haver in the south, which he proceeded to take in for defence when the enemy showed signs of turning his right, may be described as open ground, with virtually no protection on its flank.

Fortescue, made the following judgement on the position:

Wellington designed to accept battle, resting his right upon Fuentes de Oñoro and trusting with justifiable confidence to the natural strength of the ground to protect his left. But there was nothing to prevent Massena from making a wide turning movement over the flat ground about Nave de Haver and falling upon the British right flank, in which case retreat over the chasm of the Coa would have been difficult.3

3 Fortescue Vol VIII, pages 156/157
Oman, on the other hand, seems to have believed that all was under control when he stated:

But Wellington did not believe that he could be beaten by the force which Massena was able to bring against him, and though he thought over orders for retreat, was strongly under the impression that he would never have to issue them.\(^4\)

It would appear that he had more than ‘thoughts over orders for retreat’ and that he actually issued them. The actual orders issued were as follows:\(^5\)

Villa Formosa, 3\(^{rd}\) May, 8 am

In the advent of any advantage being obtained by the enemy, which may induce the Commander of the Forces to order the army to retire, it will fall back as follows, unless other instructions are given at the time.

The two divisions on the right (the 1\(^{st}\) and 7\(^{th}\) ), will fall back by the road leading by Navé d’Aver to Aldea de Ribeira.

The two divisions of the centre (the 3\(^{rd}\) and the Light Division ), will fall back by the Caril road to the turn near where the road to Villa Mayor branches off from the Caril road; and, if necessary to retire further, these divisions will pass the rivulet behind them by the fords between Aldea de Ribeira and Villa Mayor.

\(^4\) Oman Vol IV, pages 309/310.
\(^5\) Wyld’s Memoir, Movement Orders, page 66

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The two divisions of the left (the 5th and 6th), will fall back through San Pedro, Freneda, and Mealhada Sorda, to the heights above Villa Mayor, upon this side of the rivulet, and they will cross the rivulet to Villa Mayor, when it becomes necessary to do so.

The cavalry will retire along the Caril road, following the two divisions of the centre, and covering the march of the infantry.

The two brigades of horse artillery will join and move with the cavalry.

Brigadier-General Pack will withdraw the troops under his orders either towards Pinhel, or by the fords of Junça, and the bridge of Castello Bom, as he may find most expedient under the circumstances of the moment.

G. Murray, Q.M.G.

In order to have a clear understanding of the locations of these places one should refer to Fortescue Vol VIII maps, no 7. The ‘Caril road’ is the main road on Fortescue’s map (Vol VIII, no 3) running north to south from Almeida, east of Junça, west behind Villar Formoso, in the direction of Villar Mayor. (It is very clear on the accompanying map from Wyld’s Atlas)

The River Coa and Its Crossings

Whilst the fortress town of Almeida guards the northern gateway on the border of Portugal with Spain, it is the River Coa which provides the first natural barrier.

The river Coa, after rising near the frontier, in the hilly country that connects the Sierra de Gata in Spain with a branch of the Sierra d’Estrella in Portugal, takes its course for several miles in a westerly direction, till it reaches the neighbourhood of Sabugal.

It there gradually bends round to the eastward, and after running for a considerable way to the north-east, it assumes a due north course, and keeps that direction till it ultimately joins the Douro. But as the Coa, after turning to the north, flows generally in a bed greatly below the level of the adjoining country, passing sometimes through an abrupt ravine, sometimes between long and steep slopes, rendered rugged by rocks and large detached blocks of granite, the river is accessible in but few places. The channel itself is also rocky; and in wet weather the stream is soon rendered so deep and rapid that the few fords there are cannot be used.6

The Bridge below Pinhel

The main road north from Almeida goes to Castello Rodrigo; about a third of the way along there was a track branching left through the village of Cinco Villa, keeping to the right bank of the bend in the Coa, to then bridging it towards Pinhel. There is then about 4 kms/2.5 miles due west to another bridge on the Pinhel River, with the town behind. As mentioned earlier, the bridges over the Coa had been destroyed.7

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6 The Memoir annexed to James Wyld’s Atlas, published in 1840, page 63
7 Wellington’s Despatches, John Murray 1938, Vol IV

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On the second day of the battle on 5th May, Massena swung his army south and attacked the right flank of the allied line, effectively cutting off the intended routes for any retreat. From several hours before daylight on 6th May, Wellington had his troops employed entrenching the new front that they had taken up as a result of Masséna’s ‘left hook’. As mentioned above, this was well-nigh the only occasion during the whole Peninsular War when Wellington used field-works on a large scale.

With his originally planned retirement routes now cut off, it could now be essential to be able to access the Pinhel route back into Portugal. So, also early on the same morning of 6th May, he ordered Captain Tod and two companies of the Royal Staff Corps to build two bridges in the vicinity of Pinhel, just in case. Assuming that they started out from somewhere behind Fuentes this would have been a march of about 25 kms/15.5 miles.

On their arrival at the spot it was found impracticable to repair the stone bridge, from the shattered state of the remaining parts of the piers, and almost total want of materials within any reasonable distance. Six poplars and some large elms that grew on the bank about 2 miles upwards, were all that could be procured. These were immediately felled and with very great difficulty floated down the river to two places that had been fixed on to attempt making temporary bridges.8

The report does not state how long it took to build these two bridges but, in any case, they were not needed as, by the morning of 10th May, the French had withdrawn back across the Agueda River.

The Ford at Vieyra

Major William Warre, ADC to Marshal Beresford, wrote home in July 1810 that he ‘crossed the Coa at a very bad ford called Veia, about a mile below the bridge and arrived at Almeida.’ He also describes the road down to the ford on the west side as being ‘an almost impassable path down to the Coa’.9 On the Lieutenant Colonel Bell map in Wyld’s Atlas it shows a road going down from Almeida to the river, marked as ‘To the Porto de Vieyra’.

9 Letters from the Peninsula 1808-1812 by Lieutenant General Sir William Warre, letter July 9, 1810 starts page 139.
On an 1807 Portuguese map it shows the ‘Quinta Veiga’ sited above ‘Ponte Vellia’ (but no ‘ponte’) leading across the river to the ‘Porto de Figueira’ and on to Pinhel.

The Bridge below Almeida

The fortress town of Almeida guarded the access to the main bridge over the River Coa as the main road passed directly under its guns. This was a paved chaussée specifically for large, wheeled transport, as distinct from the more usual roads in Portugal which were more suited to mules. The road from Almeida to the bridge drops down about 200 metres in 3 kilometres. It also follows one spur down which avoids the necessity to switchback over streams. The fact that the side of the road was, for the most part walled, as well as paved, would have made it somewhat easier to descend with guns and wagons.

The bridge had been built of cut stones in 1745, but, as mentioned earlier, it had been broken by the French as they had retreated back into Spain. Oman maintains that it had only been hastily repaired by the time of the Battle of Fuentes de Oñoro during the first days of May. Wellington certainly gave orders for the bridge to be repaired. However, the wording of the above orders for General Pack would not seem to indicate that he expected the repairs to be completed. It could be that the order for the repair was only issued on 2nd or 3rd May, about the same time as the evacuation orders. The description of the repairs by Lieutenant Charles Scott unfortunately does not record how long it took to effect the work.

10 Garwood FS, pages 87-88 and Burnham, Robert Inside Wellington’s Peninsular Army, page 234
11 Recent research has established that the original, damaged, bridge was demolished after 1826/27 and the present structure built some 60 metres downstream from the original bridge

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Oman also comments that these repairs could have made crossing the bridge with baggage and guns hazardous during a possible retreat. However the main problem would appear to have been to get onto the road in the first place, since the French were still able to sweep the access to the road with their guns in Almeida.

The Lieutenant Colonel Bell map in Wyld’s *Atlas* shows the road continuing straight down to the river to a point about a quarter of a mile to the south of the bridge, with another road connecting from the west bank; this is marked as the Ford of Santa Barbara.12

**The Fords below Junça**

The next crossing place on the Coa, according to Fortescue, was the ford to the southwest of the village of Junça.13 This is about 5.5 kms/3.5 miles south of the bridge below Almeida. It should be noted that, on his map, the track down to the Coa from Junça follows the south bank of the stream which starts near this village. The village of Naves (due west from San Pedro) on the crossroads is not marked, but there is a track leading down from this point to join up with the Junça track.

Oman, on the map opposite page 316 of Volume IV, marks it as the Algeirenos Ford, but shows that the track descended to the north of the Junça stream, to a point further downstream. On page 310 he states that it was a good ford for infantry and cavalry. Interestingly, on the map used in his lecture to the Royal Artillery Institution on 5th January 1911, he shows the ‘Ford of Algarenos’ in the same place as Fortescue, however access to it is from the village of Naves.

In one of his despatches, George Murray, the Quartermaster General refers to ‘the fords of Junça’ suggesting that there was more than one at this site.14

On both an old Portuguese map, as well as that in Napier, there are two fords between the bridges of Almeida and Castello Bom.15 When describing the Action on the Coa, Napier

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12 Oman makes reference to such a ford during the Action on the Coa the previous year on page 264 of Vol III – “Ney bade a mounted officer sound for a ford at a spot above the bridge, where the river spreads out into a broad reach. But the horse and the man were killed by a volley from the British side and floated down the swollen stream.” From George Napier’s autobiography, page 131
13 Fortescue Vol VIII Maps, no. 3
14 Wyld’s *Memoir*, Movement Orders dated 3 May 1810, page 66
15 This original map is from the Portuguese Archives; however the colours used to identify certain units was not correct and have here been corrected. The Napier’s map is from Vol 2, Plate 12, facing page 405

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states ‘as the infantry passed over the bridge … the cavalry was disposed on all roads to the right to watch some fords two miles above …’ 16

The 1939 map shows a bridge, named as Pontão Manuel José, situated 2.5 kms/1.6 miles upstream from the bridge below Almeida, on a direct line between Junça and Aldea Nova to the west; at this site there could well have previously been a ford, as there is again today. On the 1939 map there was still a track from Junça, descending to the north of the Junça stream, down to the small island, just to the north of the Quinta do Vale das Figueiras; whilst the map does not actually mark a ford at this site, by the connecting tracks on each side of the river, it is obvious that a crossing was in use here; this is in the first location identified by Oman.

The track and the ford across the larger island, as indicated by Fortescue, were still there in 1939; no ford is marked these days, even though there are corresponding tracks coming down on the west side.

So, as usual, George Murray was well informed about the lay of the land and the routes across it.

**The Bridge below Castello Bom**

The town of Castello Bom, which has old style fortifications, sits on a knoll above the road down to the River Coa. The road drops some 200 metres to the river, crossing several hillside streams as it winds its way down17.

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16 Napier, Vol II, page 414
17 Refer to Fortescue Vol VIII Maps, no. 3

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The present bridge is relatively modern replacement and, these days, the main motorway crosses near here, high above the River Coa, into Portugal by a newer spectacular bridge spanning the whole valley.

On page 309 of Vol IV Oman states,

the only real convenient line of retreat from the Fuentes position was that across the bridge of Castello Bom, a structure of no great breadth, and liable to become congested or blocked in a moment of hurry. It was only wheeled traffic, however, that might be difficult.

However, none of the contemporary maps even show a road or a bridge at Castello Bom.\(^{18}\) The 1839 map included in the *Story of the Peninsular War* by General CW Vane, Marquess of Londonderry, equally does not even show Castello Bom. Napier’s map for the Battle of Fuentes de Oñoro, on the other hand, does mark it.\(^{19}\) Wyld’s *Atlas* simply shows a bridge over the Coa, but no connecting roads on either side of the river.\(^{20}\) In the Memoir accompanying the *Atlas*, it states that ‘the bridge at Castello Bom is narrow, and of difficult access’.

In July 1810, Masséna had ordered his first aide-de camp, Jean Jacques Pelet, with Captain Cavailher, another of his aides, to make a reconnaissance of the Coa in case of an enemy attack. His journal gives an excellent detailed description of the lay of the land:

In this part of the country there was only one difficult road, almost impossible for the artillery to descend; it went through Castello Bom to Mido. It took us half an hour to descend and twenty minutes to climb back up. The bridge was eighty yards long and the river not very deep. The left bank was less steep but no less difficult.

Therefore, the access past Castello Bom down to the narrow bridge was probably a simple mule track, narrow, possibly only about two/three metres wide. Probably because the French considered the bridge to be impracticable, it was not destroyed during the retreat in 1811.

Whilst Oman considered that a withdrawal over the bridge ‘*might be difficult*’, Fortescue, probably more accurately, assessed that it would be ‘*with grave risk of disaster*’.\(^{21}\)

**The Crossings to the South of Castello Bom**

While Fortescue’s maps of the Battle Fuentes de Oñoro\(^{22}\) show no fords behind Freneda, that of the Campaign on the Agueda in August - September 1811 shows a road crossing

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\(^{18}\) Jeffreys 1790, Lopez 1808, Faden 1809, Stockdale 1811, Eliot’s *Defence of Portugal* 1811

\(^{19}\) Napier, Vol III, plate 5, page 147

\(^{20}\) Wyld’s *Atlas*, map VI

\(^{21}\) Fortescue Vol VIII, pages 156/157
the Coa between Freneda and Castello Mendo, about 4 kms/2.5 miles upstream from the bridge at Castello Bom\textsuperscript{23}. Oman marks the ford of San Miguel about 1.6 kms/1 mile up river from the bridge at Castello Bom. Wyld’s Atlas shows two fords across the Coa in this area linking to Castello Mondo.

On the modern map\textsuperscript{24} there is a bridge at Porto de San Miguel. Some 600 metres downstream, at Cabeço d’Aguedê, it marks a small barrage which could possibly be the site of the other ford.

The fourth bridge over the River Coa is about 11 kms/7 miles upstream from Castello Bom at Ponte Sequeiro / Sequeiras; as Oman points out this bridge was 16 kms/10 miles to the right rear of the Fuentes de Oñoro position.\textsuperscript{25}

According to Fortescue’s account\textsuperscript{26} of Massena’s retreat, Loison’s troops were surprised at Guarda on 29\textsuperscript{th} March 1811, and hurriedly crossed the Coa upstream by fords at Vallongo and Rapoul. These fords appear on Wyld’s map although the spelling is ‘Jalonge’.

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{22} Fortescue Vol VIII Maps, no. 3
\bibitem{23} Fortescue Vol VIII Maps, no. 7
\bibitem{24} Carta Militar, number 194, published 1999, courtesy Instituto Geografico do Exercito, Portugal
\bibitem{25} Refer to Fortescue Vol VIII Maps, no. 7
\bibitem{26} Fortescue Vol VIII, page 98/99 and Maps, no 20
\end{thebibliography}
EN MEMORIA DE LAS TROPAS "ANGLO-LUSO-GERMÁNO-ESPAÑOLAS" QUE EN LA BATALLA DEL 5 MAYO 1811 AL MANDO DE LORD WELLINGTON DERROTARON A LAS FRANCÉSAS DE MASSÉNA FUENTES DE ONÒRO A 28-6-1986
Assessments

Based on the above, the most accurate assessment can therefore be found in the entry the then Captain Cox wrote in his journal for 4th May:

The object for which we were contending was the maintenance of the blockade at Almeida, but in our position we had so few communications to the rear and beyond the Coa that Lord Wellington wished to maintain the line of Sabugal. To do this he weakened his position by extending it too much.27

Wellington’s own assessment of the battle was that “If Boney had been there, we should have been beaten.”28

Napier sums it up succinctly by stating “Masséna at first gained great advantages; Napoleon would have made them fatal.”29

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27 Charles Cocks, page 103
28 ibid, page 104
29 Napier, Vol III, page 154