

The Napoleon Series

Crossings of the River Agueda

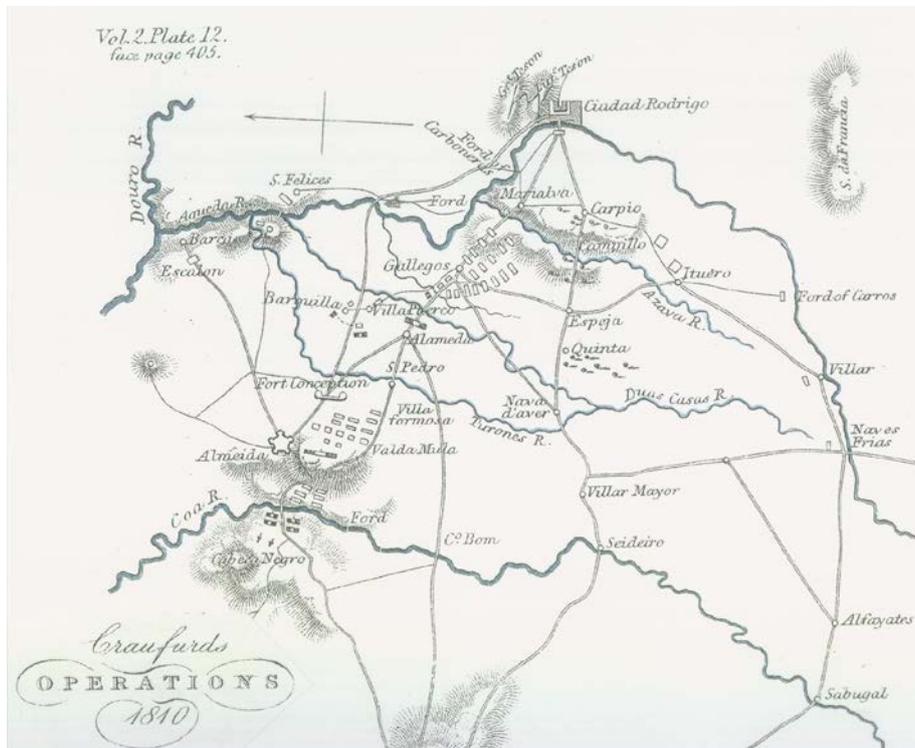
By: [Richard Tennant](#)

Craufurd on the Agueda

Napier describes how, from March to July 1810, Craufurd and the Light Division held the line of the Agueda from Escalhon on his left to Navas Frias on his right. He states this to be only twenty-five miles, when in fact it is the forty miles (as the crow flies) calculated by Oman.

The journal of Craufurd's aide de camp Shaw-Kennedy, giving the daily work of the Light Division during these months, would serve as an illustrative manual of outpost duty. Amongst the many detailed aspects of the *calculation* supporting the whole network is the order that special reports were made of the state of the fords of the Agueda every morning, and the rapidity of its rises were particularly marked¹.

It is not clear however, how Oman arrived at the calculation 'there were some fifteen fords between Ciudad Rodrigo and the mouth of the Agueda, which were practicable in dry weather for all arms, and that several of them could be used even after a day or two of rain.'²



Napier's map of Craufurd's Operations

¹ Oman Vol III, p 237

² Oman Vol III, p 238

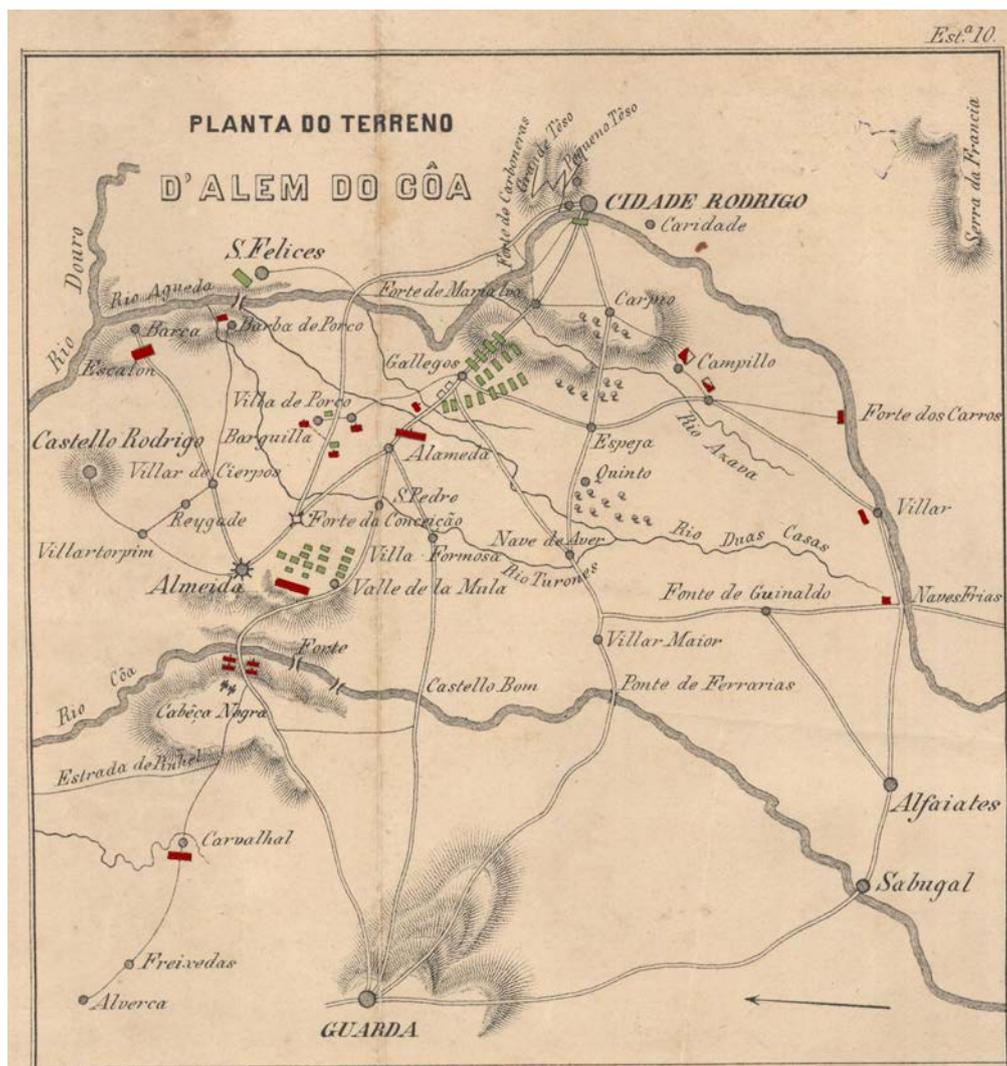
Napier states that 'from Navas Frias to the Duero the river was rendered unfordable by heavy rains; only four bridges crossed it. One was at Navas Frias, another a league below at Villar, one at Ciudad Rodrigo, and one at San Felices, called the Barba del Puerco'. This extent is shown on the maps, however the courses of some of the rivers between the Agueda and the Coa, and the location of some of the villages are not correctly portrayed³. On the 1807 Portuguese map it describes the 'Forte de Marialva'; on the Napier map it makes it clear that the marked village in front of the Azava River is Marialva, whilst the ford is un-named.

Fortescue, quoting page 125 in Leach's 'Rough Sketches', states that there were three fords, at Villa de Ciervo on the right, Almofala and beyond Escalhao (probably at Barco) at the junction of the Agueda and Duero.

On page 132 Leach mentions cavalry pickets at the ford of Val d'Espina.

Comparing the Napier map and Leach we could conclude that the fords were :

- Ford of Carros* = *Villa de Ciervo*
- Almofala* = *Val d'Espina* the present bridge near Serranillo



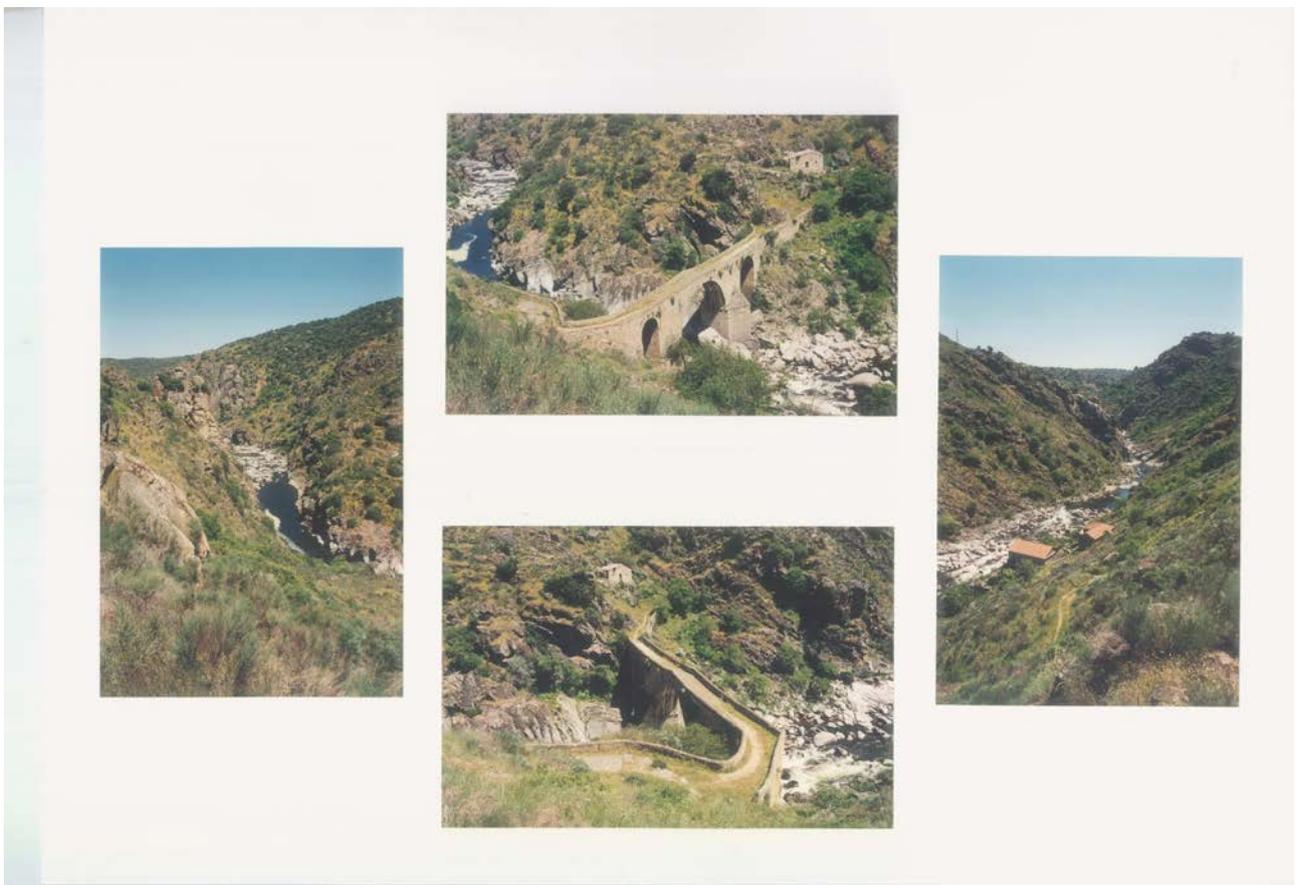
Portuguese map – The Agueda & Coa Rivers – colours corrected

³ This original map is from the Portuguese Archives, whilst Napier's map is from Vol 2, Plate 12, facing page 405
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The Bridge at Barba del Puerco

The road and the bridge were built by the Romans in the 1st century BC, although it is not clear which places it connected. From its proportions it would appear to have designed for foot and mule traffic rather than wagons.

The road on the western side drops down some 230 metres from the level of the plateau above down the ravine to the river. At the final approach down by the bridge the drop appears to be almost vertical; however, according to the maps the drop is 50 metres within 75 metres. The original road surface is largely still in place. The 'road' is generally about 1.5 metres wide and by the superb engineering of the switchbacks the average incline is not above the usual height of lifting ones foot stepping forward. The bridge remains a masterpiece of construction. The bridge is about 50m long, 5 m wide and 20 m high.



To quote Fortescue

on the night of 19th of March (1810) six companies of voltigeurs, leaving a reserve of fifteen hundred men upon the eastern bank of the river, stole upon the bridge of Barba del Puerco, bayoneted the sentries before they could fire, and began rapidly to ascend the defile towards the village. The alarm was at once given by the sergeant's picquet. The outlying picquet came down instantly to meet the enemy, and holding its fire till the French were within fifteen yards, gave them a staggering volley. Then, seeking shelter behind the rocks, this little body of riflemen, though counting fewer than fifty soldiers, contrived by sheer skill and courage to check the advance of the French for half an hour, till Colonel Thomas Beckwith came up at the head of two more companies, and drove the French headlong down the defile

and over the bridge. The loss of the Rifles in this little affair did not exceed twenty-three killed and wounded; that of the French was at least twice as great.

After the Battle of Fuentes de Oñoro had been lost on 5th May 1811, Marshal Massena ordered General Brennier to try to escape with his troops from Almeida.

At about 11.30 on the night of the 10th May, about 1,300 officers and men slipped out and managed to evade the surrounding Allied troops. By daybreak they had reached the defile which leads down to the bridge just as the pursuing 36th Regt arrived.

‘Fired upon and charged on the steep road, the battalion broke, and many men, trying to find short cuts down the precipitous hillside, lost their footing, and fell down the rocks. There were some broken necks and many broken limbs, while other fugitives fell into the river and were drowned. Meanwhile a heavy fire was opened on the pursuers from the opposite bank. Reynier, who (as he has been ordered) kept a good watch on the bridge from San Felices, has sent down three battalions of the 31st Léger and some guns to receive the flying garrison. They had lined the bank, and were ready to defend the defile.’ Brennier stated in his loss in his report at 360 men out of the 1,300, of whom over 200 were prisoners and 150 killed and wounded.

Wellington gave it as his opinion that the escape of the garrison from Almeida was ‘the most disgraceful military event’ that had yet occurred to the British army in the Peninsula, and it was easy to understand his wrath.

The Ford on the Agueda

Both Wyld’s Atlas and Fortescue simply show the main road running north from Ciudad Rodrigo to San Felices el Grande and the bridge at Barba del Puerco. The old Portuguese map / Napier map shows the main road crossing the Agueda at a ford, about two-thirds of the way along, and then sweeping over towards Almeida. These days there is a bridge here, on the minor road from Castillejo de Martin Veijo to Serranillo

The Bridge across the Agueda near Marialva

On 30th May 1810, Marshal Ney arrived before Ciudad Rodrigo with his whole corps. On 1st June they threw a bridge across the Agueda a mile and half above the city and on the 5th a second bridge below it. By this last he sent a division and a half of infantry and a brigade of cavalry over the river, which thrust back Craufurd’s outposts and by the 11th had cut off communications with the garrison⁴.

In the autumn of 1811 Wellington started planning his attack on Ciudad Rodrigo. Advancing from the western side, particularly in winter, would present a difficult challenge. As Wellington wrote:

It is difficult for an army to pass this river at any time; but the only road by which it is practicable for an army to pass to the eastward, when the rains have filled the rivers, is by the bridge at Ciudad Rodrigo; and the torrent of water in the Agueda during the rains is if that description, that it is impossible to overcome this obstacle⁵.

⁴ Fortescue, Book VII, p 470

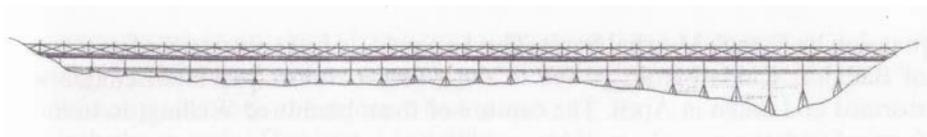
⁵ *Wellington’s Despatches*, John Murray 1938, Vol VIII, page 378

Wellington's army would not acquire a pontoon train until some time later, even so, the Agueda was considered unusable for pontoons and it would be necessary to build a bridge. The ford near Marialva, was chosen as the best site since it gave reasonable access down to the water. The old Portuguese map is not very clear; there is a 'Forte de Marialva' and the 'Forte de Carboneras'. This appears to be clarified on the Napier map which simply shows the ford of Carboneras. On Fortescue's map of the Campaign on the Agueda in August – September 1811, he shows a bridge over the Agueda just above where the Azava River flows into it.⁶

Major Sturgeon of the Royal Staff Corp was assigned to the task and he came up with the design of a trestle bridge⁷. The river at this point is about 400 feet / 122 metres wide⁸, which would require considerable material. The Portuguese governor of Almeida was not forthcoming with support, so that Wellington was forced to write him a letter on 21st October:

'I request that you will let him have from the old carriages, etc, any axletrees or other iron which he may want, brass boxes from wheels, etc, which he may require; like wise the use of grinding stones and smith's forges in Almeida, a certain quantity of timber for the construction of a pile engine, and a trustle⁹.'

A General Order, dated 18th November, required the 3rd, 4th, 5th & 6th Divisions to furnish a workforce of 148 artificers, comprised of carpenters, 'sawyers', wheelers & blacksmiths, with each division also providing a 'steady non-commissioned officer' for supervision.



Cross-Section of the Bridge across the Agueda. *By Major General Howard Douglas*

The bridge was finished by the end of the year and it was so well built that it survived the siege with no serious problems. It was dismantled the day after the city fell in January 1812, and stored back at Almeida.

The Bridge at Ciudad Rodrigo

The town had been conquered by the Romans and renamed *Augustobriga* in honour of Caesar Augustus. In about 1150, King Ferdinand II of León completed the repopulation of the city, walled it and reconstructed the old Roman bridge spanning the River Agueda. As can be appreciated from the photograph, the bridge was totally controlled by the guns on the walls of the city and the castle immediately behind. As such, any besieging army needed to cross the river elsewhere if it hoped to totally isolate the city.

⁶ Fortescue Vol VIII Maps, number 7

⁷ Garwood, *The Royal Staff Corps 1800-1837*, The Royal Engineer Journal 1943, Vol 57, page 90. The details of how this was achieved are described in *Inside Wellington's Peninsular Army 1808-1814*, in the chapter *British Bridging Operations in the Peninsular* by Robert Burnham, pages 240-241.

⁸ Seeing that the width of the river here in winter was 400 feet, it was probably only usable as a ford during the summer months

⁹ *Wellington's Despatches*, John Murray 1938, Vol VIII, page 345-346



On 8th January 1812, the Light Division, moving north, forded the Agueda at La Caridad; this does not appear on Napier's map, but on the Portuguese map is it shown close to Rodrigo, upstream on the right bank.



Whilst Fortescue stresses the hardships from the bitter cold weather,¹⁰ Oman is more explicit stating¹¹ 'the camps of all the divisions, except the 3rd, were on the left bank of the river, and the only bridge was so far off to the north (*the trestle-bridge*) that it was little used, the short cut across the ford to the south of the town (*Ford at La Caridad*) saving hours of time : "and as we were obliged to cross the river with water up to our middles, every man carried a pair of iced breeches into the trenches with him¹²."

¹⁰ Fortescue Book XIV, pp 353

¹¹ Oman Vol V, p 166

¹² Kincaid *Adventures in the Rifle Brigade*, pp104

The Bridge at Marialva

Marialva is shown on the old maps as being where the main paved *chaussée* bridges the little river *Azava / Azara / de Azaba*, a tributary of the *Agueda*.



Leach states that General Craufurd had cavalry pickets at Carpio and Marialva, both on the *Azava*, and supported the cavalry posts on the *Azava* by pickets of infantry. At daybreak of 25 June 1810, the day that the French batteries opened the siege of Ciudad Rodrigo, a large body of their cavalry advanced and drove back the pickets of the 1st KGL Hussars across the *Azava* on those of the infantry. Along the right bank of that river the enemy established a strong chain of cavalry posts, which they held during the remainder of the siege. This movement brought the pickets of the opponents extremely close to each other at the bridge of Marialva.

Warre relates that on 3 July he and Hardinge

arrived about 3 o'clock at Almeida and dined with Gen. Craufurd, with whom after dinner we rode out to look at the French outposts beyond the little river *Azara*, over which there is a bridge of stone leading to the village of Marialva, and about a mile beyond Gallegos. Along this line were about 3 squadrons of the German 1st Hussars doing the outpost duty, their reserves in Gallegos. I went down to the bridge and endeavoured to persuade two French Officers to come down and speak to me. They were, however, very shy, and only came near enough for me to tell them that some friends of theirs, who were taken prisoners near Chaves a year and a half ago, were well. I observed they were constructing a wooden bridge a short distance to the left of the former, They had there and near Carpio about 5 or 6 Regts. of Cavalry and some infantry, 4 to 5000 men I should guess in all.

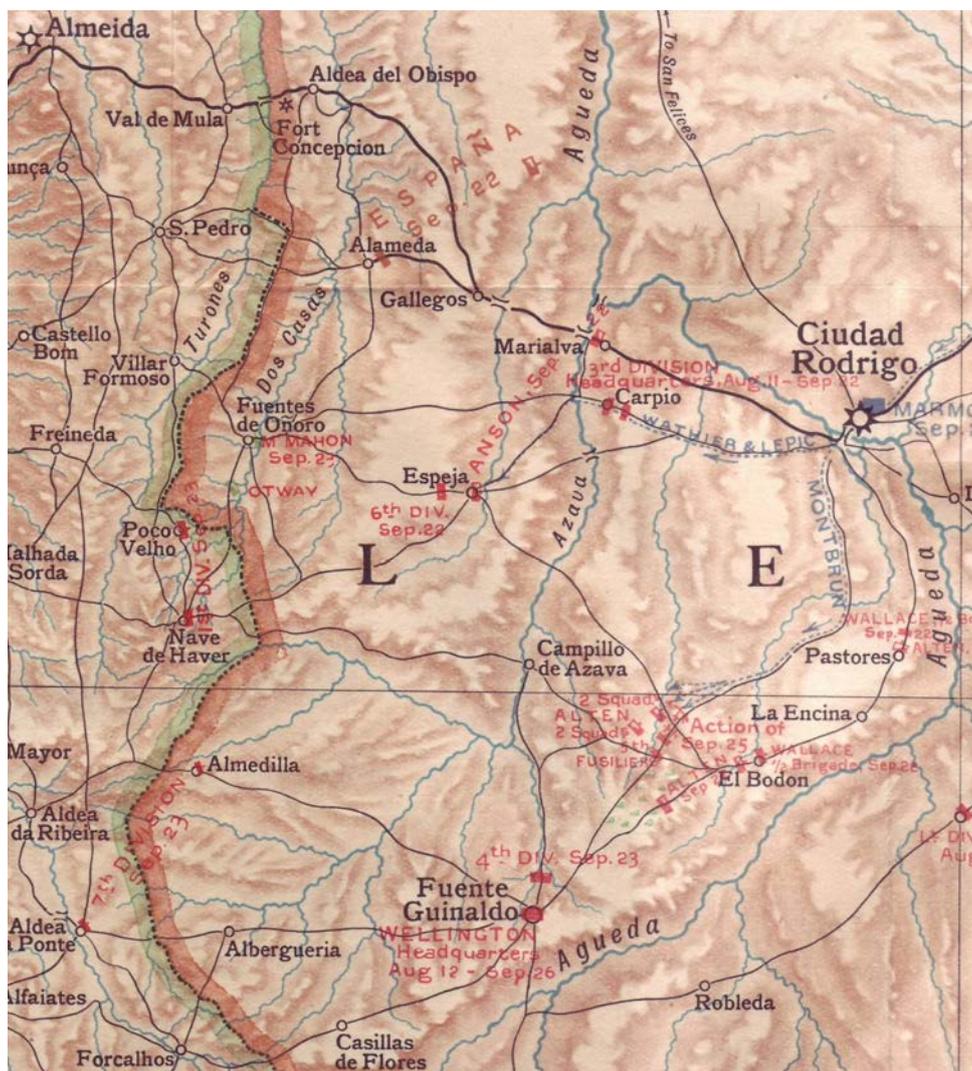
At daybreak they crossed the little river *Azara* over their two bridges, and drove in our picquets. They had 12 squadrons and two Brigades of Infantry.'

Oman details these as being Ste. Croix's division of dragoons, supported however by just one brigade of Junot's infantry.

Tomkinson, on the other hand, recorded that on July 3rd 'mounted piquet this morning at the bridge of Marialva.' Then on July 4th 'the enemy this morning half an hour before daylight passed the ford close to Marialva with two hundred cavalry as an advance, driving in my piquet at a gallop.' Interestingly, the map drawn by Tomkinson spells it as 'Marialba'.

These days the village has disappeared, but now there is a large farmstead called Maria-Alba on the hill to the east of river.

Contemporary maps vary, but it would appear that the old paved chaussée followed the line of Marialva, Gallegos, La Alameda, Barquilla, Castillo de Dos Casas, then past Fort de la Concepcion, into Portugal.



Placed on the Napoleon Series: March 2019