These days the main highway from Spain sweeps directly west from Ciudad Rodrigo on the Agueda, past Fuentes de Onoro on the frontier, to Guarda, before taking a north-westerly direction to join the Mondego River at Celorico. Previously the main highway headed north-west after crossing the Agueda, and passed through the villages of Marialva, Gallegos and Barquilla before passing Fort de la Conception, into Portugal.

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 then 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.\footnote{The Memoir annexed to James Wyld’s Atlas, published in 1840, page 63}

On 24 July 1810 the French had pushed back the Light Division over the River Coa. After the initial defence of the bridge, the Light and 3rd Divisions withdrew back to the valley of the Mondego. The French had consolidated their outpost positions on the west bank of the Coa, south from Pinhel. Nevertheless, the fortress of Almeida still held out, denying them the possibility to move their artillery via the main chausée, over the nearby bridge. Marshal Massena 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.

The plateau between the Turones and the Coa was smooth, rather gentle, and not very rocky. On each side of its elevation or summit were old guard or signal towers. Erected in the time of the Moors, it was said, they were capable of containing some ten men, and most of them were linked together. They were called atalaya. There was a tower in every town, and they were placed about four to six thousand yards apart. The slopes of the valley where the Coa flows were full of rocks, cut by ravines and precipices, and sparsely wooded. From a distance the slopes presented an appearance of an amphitheatre of piled rocks. 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. Castello Bom, a village along the slope on the right bank, was once surrounded by walls, but they had now collapsed in ruins. The bridge was eighty yards long and the river not very deep. The left bank was less steep but no less difficult. The plateau beyond was rather uniform and covered with ripe grain, which was cut by a detachment of a hundred soldiers from the third division. There was not a single man in the village and only a few women.

Towards Almeida the main road, descending to the Coa by endless turnabouts, was no less difficult (\textit{from the continuing text it would appear that this is the left, or west, bank}), and its bridge was built up on rocks. Above the valley, towards Junca, where a few paths ran, the road became wider and more accessible. The road across the right bank was not as poor (\textit{it was supposedly paved, and, for the most part, walled}). Towards the north the valley ended, presenting a heap of rocks strewn about, a picture of true chaos, and we had all kinds of difficulties slipping through with our escort horses.

The following day Captain Cavailher continued the reconnaissance to the Duoro, and he found the Coa less difficult nearer the Douro.
This entire countryside was granite and we saw only diverse variations of granite. There were sometimes immense blocks and at other times the large surfaces were very smooth and slippery.\(^2\)

**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 km due west to another bridge on the Pinhel River, with the town behind. As Marshal Massena retreated out of Portugal in March 1811, he ordered that all the bridges over the Coa were to be destroyed.\(^3\)

Two months later, he advanced from Ciudad Rodrigo to relieve his beleaguered garrison in Almeida. Wellington had drawn up contingency orders on 3\(^{rd}\) May, should it be necessary to pull back from Fuentes de Oñoro, over the Coa; unfortunately these were for a withdrawal to the south-west. On the second day of the battle on 5 May, Massena swung his army south and attacked the right flank of the allied line, effectively cutting off these intended routes. Aware of the potential danger, Wellington ordered Captain Tod and two companies of the Royal Staff Corps to build two bridges in the vicinity of Pinhel, should the British be defeated and have to retreat. Given the volume of men and matériel that would need to cross small bridges in this circumstance, he obviously ordered two.

On their arrival at the spot it was found impracticable to repair the stone bridge, from the shattered state of the remaining part of the piers, and almost total want of materials within a reasonable distance. They found a couple of places about 60 to 70 feet wide where the river narrowed, forming deep rapids. Nothing daunted, they proceeded to cut down 6 poplars and some elms, some 2 miles up-stream, float them down and construct the two bridges.\(^4\)

---

\(^2\) *The French Campaign in Portugal 1810-1811, an Account by Jean Jacques Pelet*, edited, translated and annotated by Prof DD Horward pp 115/16

\(^3\) *Wellington’s Despatches*, John Murray 1938, Vol IV

\(^4\) Garwood, *The Royal Staff Corps 1800-1837*, The Royal Engineer Journal 1943, Vol 57, pages 88-89. 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 235/237

© 1995 – 2019 The Napoleon Series
As it happened, Wellington successfully held off the French and the bridges were not needed after all.

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’\(^5\). On the Lt-Col Bell map in Wyld’s Atlas (reproduced below) it shows a road going down from Almeida to the river, marked as ‘To the Porto de Vieyra’.

On the 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.

![Map of Almeida and vicinity](image)

On the 1939 map the Moinho (Mill) da Veiga is situated about 1,250 metres downstream from the bridge. There was a good track coming down from Almeida, but on the west bank of the river it was not so good.

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 chausée 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.

According to the 1939 map of Carta Militar de Portugal, number 183, published 1939, courtesy Instituto Geografico do Exercito, Portugal, this walled road was still in use and the present new highway has been started to be built parallel to it, slightly to the south.
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 in the spring of 1811. It had
only been hastily repaired by the time of the Battle of Fuentes de Oñoro during the first days of May. Oman infers 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 the guns in Almeida.

The Lt-Col 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, with another road connecting from the west bank (this is also on the 1939 map); this marked as the Ford of Santa Barbara. Oman makes reference to such a ford 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.”

© 1995 – 2019 The Napoleon Series
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. This is about three and a half miles / 5.5 km 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.

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

---

9 Fortescue Vol VIII Maps, no. 3
10 Wyld’s Memoir, Movement Orders dated 3 May 1810, page 66
11 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
12 Napier, Vol II, page 414
The 1939 map shows a bridge, named as Pontão Manuel José, situated 2.5 km 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.
Judging by the tracks approaching from both sides to the river on the modern map\(^\text{13}\), there might also be a ford below the village of Senouras.

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 down.\(^\text{14}\)

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.

\(^\text{13}\) Carta Militar de Portugal, number 194, published 1999, courtesy Instituto Geografico do Exercito, Portugal

\(^\text{14}\) Refer to Fortescue Vol VIII Maps, no. 3
However, none of the contemporary maps even show a road or a bridge at Castello Bom\textsuperscript{15}. 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.\textsuperscript{16} Wyld’s Atlas simply shows a bridge over the Coa, but no connecting roads on either side of the river.\textsuperscript{17} In the Memoir accompanying the Atlas, it states that ‘the bridge at Castello Bom is narrow, and of difficult access’.

As seen above, the French aide-de-camp to Marshal Massena, Pelet, describes it:

> 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 three metres wide. Probably because the French considered the bridge to be impracticable, it was not destroyed during the retreat in March 1811.

\textsuperscript{15} Jeffreys 1790, Lopez 1808, Faden 1809, Stockdale 1811, Eliot’s *Defence of Portugal* 1811

\textsuperscript{16} Napier, Vol III, plate 5, page 147

\textsuperscript{17} Wyld’s *Atlas*, map VI
The Crossings to the South of Castello Bom

While Fortescue’s maps of the Battle Fuentes de Oñoro\textsuperscript{18} show no fords behind Freneda, that of the Campaign on the Agueda in August - September 1811 (the first map of this chapter) shows a road crossing the Coa between Freneda and Castello Mendo, about two and a half miles upstream from the bridge at Castello Bom.\textsuperscript{19} Oman marks the ford of San Miguel about one mile up river from the bridge at Castello Bom. Wyld’s Atlas shows two fords across the Coa in this area linking to Castello Mendo. On the modern map\textsuperscript{20} there is a bridge at Porto de San Miguel. Some 600 metres downstream, at Cabeço d’Agueda, it marks a small barrage which could possibly be the site of the other ford.

[Map image]

Returning to Oman’s considerations about the defects of the Fuentes position, he concludes:

The only real convenient line of retreat from the Fuentes position was that across the bridge of Castello Bom. … It was only wheeled traffic, however, that might become difficult; above and below the Castello Bom bridge are good fords for infantry and cavalry at San Miguel and Algeirenos, besides numerous points where troops could get across at a pinch. …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 order for retreat, was strongly under the impression that he would never have to issue them.\textsuperscript{21} 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:\textsuperscript{22}

\textit{Villa Formosa, 3\textsuperscript{rd} May, 8 am}

\begin{quote}
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\textsuperscript{st} and 7\textsuperscript{th}), will fall back by the road leading by Navé d’Aver to Aldea de Ribeira.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{18} Fortescue Vol VIII Maps, no. 3
\textsuperscript{19} Fortescue Vol VIII Maps, no. 7
\textsuperscript{20} Carta Militar, number 194, published 1999, courtesy Instituto Geografico do Exercito, Portugal
\textsuperscript{21} Oman Vol IV, pages 309/310.
\textsuperscript{22} Wyld’s Memoir, Movement Orders, page 66
The two divisions of the centre (the 3rd 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.

The two divisions of the left (the 5th and 6th), will fall back through San Pedro, Freneda, and Meahlada 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. On the modern map this old road is marked as a track, the ‘Caminho do Carril’ heading south to Malhada Sorda.

Fortescue, who appears to have actually researched these orders, was not so blasé about 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. In the orders given for the possible contingency of a retirement, Wellington proposed to draw off his army by Aldea de Ribeira, Villa Maior, and Malhada Sorda, to south-west and west of Nave de Haver; but, in the event of a flanking attack from the south, this would have been impossible, and he must have been reduced to the solitary bridge of Castello Bom, with grave risk of disaster.23

At the end of September 1811, the French, now under Marshal Marmont and General Dorsenne advanced once more towards the frontier with over 50,000 men. It was not certain whether they simply wished to re-victual Ciudad Rodrigo or had more serious intent against the allied army. Once again, holding the line of the River Coa became imperative.

The Movement Orders of 23rd September 1811 required

The Spanish Troops under Don Carlos d’Espagne to fall back on Frenada and Castello Bom. The Spanish troops will cross the Coa when it becomes necessary to do so, and will occupy Castello Mondo and neighbourhood, and defend the bridge

23 Fortescue Vol VIII, pages 156/157
at Castello Bom. Don Carlos d’Espagne will also detach parties of cavalry to watch the bridge and fords of Almeida and the other intermediate passes of the Coa.

The Movement Orders of 27th September required

Brigadier-General Madden’s brigade of Portuguese cavalry will be at Miusilha and will watch the fords of the Coa in front of that place, and communicate on the left with the Spanish troops at Castello Mondo.

The fourth bridge over the River Coa is about seven miles upstream from Castello Bom at Ponte Sequeiro / Sequeiras; as Oman points out this bridge was ten miles to the right rear of the Fuentes de Oñoro position.

In Chapter 2 ‘Crossings of the River Agueda’ both Napier’s Map of Craufurd’s Operations and the Portuguese equivalent are shown in full. Both show the same bridge as being below Villar Maior / Mayor, however the Portuguese describe it as Ponte Ferrarias and Napier as the village of Seideiro.

According to Fortescue’s account of Massena’s retreat, Loison’s troops were surprised at Guarda on 29th March 1811, and hurriedly crossed the Coa upstream by fords at Vallongo and Rapoula.

---

24 Wyld’s Memoir, Movement Orders, pages 74 & 77
25 Refer to Fortescue Vol VIII Maps, no. 7
26 Fortescue Vol VIII, page 98/99 and Maps, no 20
© 1995 – 2019 The Napoleon Series
Sabugal

The final battle actually fought across the River Coa took place at Sabugal on 3rd April 1811 against the retreating army of Marshal Massena. Wellington described this combat as “one of the most glorious that British troops were ever engaged in.” Oman\textsuperscript{27} describes Sabugal as a little walled place with a ruined Moorish Castle, lying in a projecting bend or hook of the Coa, which turns back above the town at right angles to its original course, which is directly from east to west. The river, at this point, is not far from its source, though its banks are steep its waters are narrow and there are many fords both above and below Sabugal.

The Fortescue map\textsuperscript{28} shows how the flanking action developed with Beckwith’s brigade, the leading one of the Light Division and Drummond with the other, crossing the fords to engage the greater part of the French 2\textsuperscript{nd} Corps.

\textsuperscript{27} Oman Vol IV, pages 189 to 197

\textsuperscript{28} Fortescue Vol VIII Maps, no 2

© 1995 – 2019 The Napoleon Series
The present Carta Militar\textsuperscript{29} shows all the ground and the course of the river as it was in 1998. Sadly, since that time, a dam has been built close to Nossa Senhora da Gracia, where the 3\textsuperscript{rd} Division forded the river and all the low lying ground (and the other fords) upstream has been flooded, almost round to Quadrazaes. Undoubtedly however, the hills above, where the famous actions of the Light Division held its ground, are still accessible.

\textsuperscript{29} Carta Militar, number 226, published 1998, courtesy Instituto Geografico do Exercito, Portugal © 1995 – 2019 The Napoleon Series