The Napoleon Series

River Crossings in the Peninsular War: the River Tagus from Vila Velha to Alcantara

By Richard Tennant

Tagus (Latin Tagus, Spanish Tajo, Portuguese Tejo) is the largest river on the Iberian Peninsula. The source of the Tagus is the Fuente de García, in the Albarracín mountains of Aragon. It measures 1,038 kilometers in length, 716 km of which are in Spain, 47 km as border between Portugal and Spain and the remaining 275 km in Portugal. Whilst it drains an area of 80,100 km² (the second largest in the Iberian peninsula after the Douro), the catchment area includes the major mountain ranges of central Spain: the Sierra de Guadarrama, the Sierra de Gredos and the Sierra de Gata to the north and the Montes de Toledo, the Sierra de Guadalupe and the Sierra de San Pedro to the south. Apart from the considerable snow-melt from these mountains in the Spring, sudden surges of high water in the main course of the river could be caused by severe rainfall in any of these mountain regions. This made it fickle in the extreme in its alterations of high and low water.

It follows a very constricted course for much of its length, but after Almorol it enters a vast alluvial valley prone to flooding. In the constricted regions of the river course it could result in very significant increases in the height of the river.

These days this risk has been eliminated by a series of dams throughout its course within Spain.

Vila Velha

Situated in Portugal, just inside the border with Spain, this was a major crossing point of the Tagus. It was situated on the main north/south route linking Guarda and Castelo Branco with Portalegre and Elvas. As such it was critical for the moving men and equipment between the northern and southern theatres of war.

It would appear that, even this far west on the River Tagus, during the dryer periods of the year, it was possible to ford the river. There is an engraving by Major St Clair showing the passage of the Tagus by the division of Major General Fraser. In this, the men are being ferried across in a couple of boats, whilst mounted officers are fording the river.

In normal times such an arrangement would have been perfectly adequate. The east of Portugal was rather sparsely populated, and most traffic flowed towards Lisbon, rather than up and down the eastern border of the country. As the water levels rose, traffic graduated from the ford to the ferry; when it became difficult for the ferries, then one had to wait around a for a few days until the flood surge subsided.

However, such an arrangement would not be suitable to support military operations. For these, it was essential that men, horses, guns and equipment could move at the
most efficient pace, in all seasons, totally unrestricted by the constraints of the water level. Recognising the importance of having a bridge at Vila Velha, early in 1810, Wellington ordered one to be built here.

Through the early summer of 1810 Wellington kept Hill, with one English and one Portuguese division, at Portalegre, south of the Tagus. In mid-July, following the fall of Ciudad Rodrigo, they were pulled back north to join the main army. Colonel Dickson describes the route excellently in his manuscript:¹

"The Portas de Rodão is a remarkable chasm in a lofty mountainous ridge through which the Tagus has its course, immediately below Villa Velha. Village of Fratel is on the right bank of river.

The distance from Niza to Villa Velha is two long leagues,² the first of which to the Ribeiro de Niza is good road. The descent to the ribeiro is considerably steep, the road bad, with one very bad turn in it (therefore not at all easy for his artillery). The ribeiro itself is now not large but in winter I have no doubt is a good stream. It is crossed as a very stony ford and a little below is a wooden bridge on stone piers.

The hill on the other side is of considerable height but the ascent by the road is tolerably easy. A league further is the bridge of Villa Velha³ the descent to which is long, very steep, and with bad road. The banks of the river are here

¹ The Dickson Manuscript, pp 238/239. The diaries are in five volumes covering each of the years 1809 to 1813. They have been published in facsimile by Ken Trotman Publishing in 1987.
² One English league = 3 English miles. Several countries in Europe measured in leagues but these all varied. For instance, ‘Spanish leagues’ equaled 2.72 English miles, whilst ‘German leagues’ equaled 3.20 English miles
³ Villa Velha de Rodao. The gorge of the Tagus at this place is called Portas de Rodao, porta literally meaning a gate, and hence a narrow passage between hills.
excessively high and steep, but the road passes down a hollow which takes off from its abruptness. The bridge is a little way up from this valley and is a very strong and commodious bridge of boats⁴. On the opposite side is situated the town* of Villa Velha and near it on the same side the banks rise up in mountains, the commencement of the serra in which are the passes of Perdigão and Talhada. On one hill above the river is an old watch tower (shown in the sketch of the bridge of boats).

* Villa Velha is a very poor and miserable village.

In November 1810 this excellent bridge was burnt to prevent it being captured by the French.

After the fall of Badajoz in February 1811 and all through 1812, nearly one third of the Anglo-Portuguese army was kept in the Alemtejo in order to guard against the possible stab in the back from the French army in Andalusia. It was essential that, if threatened, this southern right wing of the army could be swiftly re-enforced, without undue delay.

⁴ The sketch of the bridge of boats, with a causeway laid over a series of anchored boats, appears opposite page 421, in the 1811 volume 3.
On 14 May 1811, following the Battle of Fuentes de Onoro, the relief force of the 3rd & 7th Divisions with the artillery attached to them, plus escorting cavalry, headed south. Picton reached Campo Mayor, in the immediate vicinity of Badajoz, on 24th May, having taken ten days only to cross the roughest and most thinly populated corner of Portugal. The average of marching had been fifteen miles day, an excellent rate when the character of the roads is taken into consideration.5

In the late winter of 1811, Lieutenant John Westmacott, Royal Staff Corps,6 was instructed to re-establish a bridge of boats. Limited building material was available, so he used two large country boats to form a ‘flying bridge’. These were lashed together and large timbers were secured from gunnel to gunnel of the two boats. Across these timbers was laid wood flooring. A rail was placed around the sides to prevent animals from panicking and jumping into the water. A ramp was built on each bank to ease the loading and unloading of wheeled vehicles onto the boat. Upstream of the crossing site, an anchor was dropped. A heavy rope was attached to the anchor and then lifted out of the water by placing it on the masts of two small boats. The other end of the rope was attached to a large hoop on the end of the boat. This prevented the bridge from floating downstream. Another rope was stretched between the river banks. The bridge was manned 24 hours a day by twelve sailors, who would use this rope to pull the bridge across the river7.

To use the term ‘flying’ to describe the bridge is perhaps overly optimistic, as it took many hours to ferry men across. A more permanent bridge using 12 boats was built shortly afterwards.

In April 1812 the French made an incursion into Portugal. Concerned about the bridge, Wellington ordered it to be dismantled if they reached as far as Castello Branco. Major John Burgoyne had the twelve boats moved about 2 miles downstream, just below the bold narrow pass of the river within the mountains to a sandy bay. A couple of days later, the French retired and the bridge was immediately re-established.

5 Oman, Vol IV, pp 408.
6 The deficiencies in the engineer service were such that in 1798 the Horse Guards established the Royal Staff Corps to provide engineers who were part of the army rather than under the control of the Master-General of Ordnance. The Staff Corps built or repaired the majority of bridges that were used by Wellington’s Army. The Royal Engineers only had about 35 officers and another 35 enlisted soldiers during much of the war so that much of their efforts were directed at building or repairing fortifications, or conducting sieges.
Villa Velha to Alcantara

Amongst the manuscripts in the PRO is an small interesting description of this part of the river:

‘The Tagus – From Ferreira to Alcantara this river is confined in a narrow channel by steep and (almost every where) inaccessible rocks – in that space it is no where fordable. There are four fords, Barca Ferreira, Barca St Iago, Barca Verdeiga & Barca D’Alcantara – at present the roads down the banks of the river to these ferries are inaccessible for artillery, with a little trouble they might be made so. The river, in consequence of being confined as above mentioned, after heavy rains, or sudden thaws, rises to an incredible perpendicular height. I was shown at Barca St Iago marks of the water upwards of twenty feet above its usual level. There are a great number of mills on both sides which work only when the water is low, the embankments of stone formed across the river to conduct the water to these mills prevent its being navigated.’

( the sequence of the description has been reversed to follow the logic of proceeding up-stream )

Ferreira was a small village, on the southern bank, just over the Spanish border, about 24 km east of Villa Velha. In, what is probably the most definitive contemporary map, Wyld’s Atlas, there is a ford marked at Barca Montalva; this crossing of the Tagus still appears on today’s maps. It also identifies the Barca de Ferreira and the Barca de St Iago but not the Barca Verdeiga & Barca D’Alcantara.

It is interesting that Dickson’s accounts of Alcantara, which follow, makes reference to there being a ford here, in addition to the bridge.

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8 Note that he mixes the terminology of ‘ford’ and ‘ferry’. Barca : boat or ferry
9 Public Record Office, reference GD 43/56
10 Available in the PRO archives under reference WO 78 / 5800