To quote directly from Jac Weller:

Majestically, the Tagus flows between Alcantara and Toledo through arid, but fertile plains. The river is difficult to approach, for it lies in a gorge and runs wide and deep. It is crossed by bridges at Toledo and Alcantara and at three other points between: Talavera, Arzobispo and Almaraz. There were also several ferries and, when the river was low in summer, a few fords.

In Napier's *History of the War in the Peninsula*, book XVII, Chapter 1, when describing the Surprise of Almaraz, there is an interesting map of the Middle Tagus. Moving up the river from Alcantara he notes the Barca de Alconeta and the Puente del Cardenal, before coming to Almaraz. Interestingly, he shows roads coming down to the river from the north but none actually crossing and entering the Sierra de Guadalupe to the south.

As usual, Fortescue has excellent maps, but it is difficult to reconcile these with Napier’s. On the Map 7 accompanying Volume VII, it shows the following:

1. A crossing on the road leading SSW from Coria
2. A crossing further upstream on the road SW from Plasencia to Caceres
3. A bridge on the road due south between Plasencia and Truxillo
4. A ford just downstream from the Bridge at Almaraz, although this could well be the site of the French bridge of boats

On the maps 22 & 23 accompanying Volume VIII it shows the same, but in these maps he differentiates between major and minor roads.
Again referring to the contemporary map in *Wyld’s Atlas*, various crossings are identified:

1. **Barca de Concejo**, just upriver, on the road SW from Caclavin possibly the ford mentioned by Dickson (not in Fortescue)
2. **Barca de Aceuche** (probably No. 1 above)
3. & **Barca de la Lieria**, (not in Fortescue) both of these with only access roads on the south bank
4. **Puente ruinada**, **Barca de Alconeta**, linking Galisteo, west of Placencia, with Caceres to the south (probably No. 2 above)
5. **Puente de Cardenal**, due south of Placencia but only continuing south to Torrejon el Rubio then SW, but not going south to Truxillo (No. 3 above)

*Wyld’s Atlas does not show a ford below Almaraz, only the bridge.*

**Almaraz**

The great King Charles Bridge at Almaraz was the main passage over the Tagus to the west of Toledo. The other places where the French could have crossed the river, such as Talavera and Arzobispo, led to almost impassable roads south of the Tagus. Just when it was destroyed, and how, would seem to be a point of confusion.*Jac Weller*, in a footnote to page 110 states that it was destroyed by Cuesta in December 1808 ‘by blowing up the principal arches’ based on the diary of *De Rocca*. De Rocca states

> We proceeded to occupy Talavera, Arzobispo and Almarez on the right bank of the Tagus, in the face of the Spanish army of Estremadura. That army had been dispersed on the 24th of December by Marshal Lefevre at Arzobispo and opposite Almarez; it had since recovered itself and been reinforced under the command of General Cuesta; it had retaken the bridge of Almarez from the French, and had blown up the principal arches*, which completely arrested the march of our troops …

* interesting, since this bridge only has two arches.*
The French cavalry retired behind the river to Oropesa, abandoning the great Bridge of Almaraz, the main passage of the Tagus, on 29th January. Thereupon Cuesta broke the bridge, a difficult task, for his mines failed and the work had to be completed with the pick. It was so badly managed that when the key-stone at last gave way, an engineer officer and twenty-six sappers were still on the arch and were precipitated into the river however they were every one drowned.

However, based on the source: *Les Allemands sous les Aigles Françaises* by Lt Colonel Sauzey, the account is somewhat different.

In the middle of January 1809, Leval’s German Division joined Victor’s 1st Corps and was sent, under General Lasalle, to guard the bridges over the Tagus. The four battalions of Baden and Holland were posted at Talavera; the 1/2nd Nassau and Frankfurt Battalion, with three guns of the Baden Artillery, were posted at the bridge at d’Arzobispo, whilst the 2/2nd Nassau, also with three guns of the Baden Artillery, accompanied Lasalle’s four regiments of light cavalry to the bridge at Almaraz; the Hessians were held in reserve at Montalban and Cebollia.
The cavalry of General Lasalle stirred up the Spaniards on the south of the river. On 24th January they captured the village of Puerto de Miravete which was retaken by an audacious attack by the Nassau voltigeur company – “J'ai même beaucoup d'éloges à donner au capitaine de cette compagnie” reported Lesalle. General Cuesta then advanced in strength on 26th January, forcing Lasalle to fall back to the north of the river and palisade the bridge. Realising that he was facing an army of 20,000 men, they withdrew during the night of 27/28th (or 29th) January to Navalmoral.

On 6th February, King Joseph instructed Marshal Victor to open operations against Cuesta on the Tagus. On 10th February the Germans dislodged the enemy from the village of Almaraz and advanced towards the bridge. The advance guard of six voltigeur companies, commanded by Major Grolmann of Baden, found the bridge and the two hills which dominate it solidly occupied and fortified by the Spaniards. It was decided to delay the attack until the 15th February.

On this day Grolmann lead the attack of the German Division at the head of his voltigeurs. The enemy fell back before him and abandoned all their posts north
of the river. As he arrived near to the bridge he distinguished, what he described in his memoirs as, *l'uniforme rouge d'un officier du corps des ingénieurs anglais*. This officer, accompanied by a small number of Spaniards who he appeared to be leading, swiftly remounted their horses and made off at the approach of the Germans. At the moment that the voltigeurs launched their assault, a large explosion blew one of the arches of the bridge.

So, according to this book, the action took place even later, on 15th February, and it was actually blown up rather than reduced by pick.

The following month Marshal Victor turned the line of the Tagus by the Talavera and Arzobispo bridges forcing Henestrosa to withdraw. The cavalry of Latour-Maubourg and Beaumont, guarding the artillery and baggage-train of the 1st Corps, crossed on the rafts which had been prepared long before, and joined the infantry and the Marshal. The passage presented more difficulties than had been expected, for it was impossible to construct a permanent bridge; the stream was very fierce, and the anchors by which the floats were moored found no hold in the smooth rocky bottom. The guns passed either by being sent over on rafts of by means of rope ferry, which was with some difficulty rigged-up. It was not until some time later that a solid bridge of boats was built at this most important passage.
Following the Battle of Talavera on 28th July 1809, Wellington’s army crossed the Tagus by the Bridge of Arzobispo and headed west towards the border with Portugal. Divining that Soult would probably make a dash at Almaraz as well as Arzobispo, Wellesley sent on ahead of his main body the brigade of Robert Craufurd, to which he attached Donkin’s much depleted regiments, in order to make up a small division. They reached Almaraz on 6th August, after a fifteen hours forced march, and took over the broken bridge and the ford in the neighbourhood.

About the same time in 1812 that Wellington ordered Colonel Sturgeon to repair the Bridge at Alcantara, he ordered General Hill to destroy the French pontoon bridge at Almaraz. By destroying this bridge he would force the French to use the bridge at Toledo and effectively add another 650 kilometres to their march.
When the completion of the repairs of Alcantara and the destruction of the French bridge of Almaraz are taken together, it must be concluded that Wellington’s work in May 1812 gave him an advantage over the French of at least ten or twelve marches in moving troops from north to south or vice versa.

By the middle of July 1812 this advantage became apparent. Wellington had driven Marmont north to the line of the River Duero and Hill, in the south, was still holding the attention of D’Erlon and Soult. In a despatch to Hill from Rueda on 11 July, Wellington wrote “if Drouet is making for the Tagus in full force you must take all the cavalry except one English regiment and Campbell’s Portuguese, along with Byng’s
and Howard’s brigades of the 2nd Division, and Hamilton’s division, and send orders to have all preparations made at Alcantara to lay down the bridge.”

Now that Sturgeon had found a viable temporary solution to the problem of the broken bridges it would be possible to re-establish the crossing at Almaraz. From the contemporary drawing taken from Leith Hay’s Narrative, Vol II, p 69, the distance here to be spanned was 143 feet!
In mid-June the previous year the rudiments of a Pontoon Train had arrived in Lisbon. Apart from repairing the bridge at Alamaraz, the British also built a pontoon bridge, however it needed to be removed from the river several times because rough water was threatening to swamp the pontoons. It seems that they had a serious flaw, in that instead of being an enclosed box, the top of the pontoon was open, so that in a fast-flowing river with heavy swells, they tended to fill with water and then be in danger of sinking.

So, if Soult had obeyed Kong Joseph’s orders to send Drouet to Toledo, Hill moving via Alcantara would have joined the main allied army many days before the King and Drouet would be able to link up with Marmont.

By the middle of August, Marshal Soult was starting to actually evacuate Andalusia, soon to be followed by Drouet. Hill was ordered to march on Madrid. His progress to and along the Tagus was slow owing to the difficulty of procuring food. On 13th September came the order to cross the river at Almaraz. This was done on the 20th and from there, his main force marched to Talavera on 27th September, and was only concentrated about and behind Toledo at the end of the month.

Placed on the Napoleon Series: May 2019

1 If it were a British officer, the Royal Engineers at this time were still in blue uniforms; they did not change over to scarlet until 1812.