

The Napoleon Series

The German and Dutch Troops in Spain Chapter 1 Part I: Events of 1808-9

By: [Richard Tennant](#)

Following defeat of Austria at Austerlitz in December 1805, Napoleon remade the map of the German States previously known as the Roman Empire to create a Confederation of the Rhine. At the same time the Batavian Republic was made into a kingdom with his brother Louis as its ruler. With the escalation of the hostilities in Spain during 1808, Napoleon naturally looked to this new source of manpower to swell the ranks of the divisions being sent into the Peninsula. Rather than being spread around the divisions piecemeal like some other regiments, the Germans and Dutch were brigaded together under General Leval in the 4th Corps.

At the end of October 1808 the troops of Marshal Lefebvre were stationed in a defensive position at Durango in Biscay with orders to make no forward movement but simply to occupy the attention of General Blake commanding the army of Galicia. The temptation was however too great for the old Duke of Danzig who, in spite of his many campaigns, had never before had the chance of fighting on his own account a pitched battle of the first class; besides which, the Spanish army in his front was somewhat less than his own total of about 21,000.

On 29th October, covered by dense morning fog, they surprised Blake in his position before the village of Zornoza. The Spanish gave way in the first attack and did not make any attempt to make a stand; they sent their one battery of six guns off early in the action, managed to cover their retreat and though badly beaten lost only some 300 killed and wounded with a similar number of prisoners. This, the first action of 4th Corps, resulted in only about 200 casualties. In the following days there was continued manoeuvring in the mountainous area as the corps of Victor and Lefebvre tried to corner Blake. On 5th November the old Marshal was found wanting for the opposite reason than his previous mistake -he did not attack the Asturian division of Acevedo when the chance presented it. This time however the criticism came from the Emperor himself rather than King Joseph.

On 24th December the 4th Corps duly advanced from Talavera and forced the bridges of Arzobispo and Almaraz as ordered. Lefebvre then set off to march on Old Castile.



Frankfurt Troops 1809 by Richard Knötel
(Courtesy of the Antony Broughton Collection)

Not only was the march in complete contravention of the Emperor's orders but it was also carried out in disobedience to five separate dispatches sent from Madrid by Marshal Jourdan, in the name of King Joseph Lefebvre paid no attention whatever to the "Lieutenant of the Emperor". Much incensed at his disobedience Napoleon deprived him of his command and sent him back to France. "This Marshal" he wrote to the King Joseph "does nothing but make blunders: he cannot seize the meaning of the orders sent him. It is impossible to leave him in command of a corps which is a pity for he is a brave enough fellow on the battle-field".

The command of the 4th Corps was taken over by General Horace Sebastiani who, in November 1808 had returned from Constantinople where he had served as Ambassador, to take command of the 1st Division of the Corps. He was a cavalry veteran of Marengo and Austerlitz. According to Claude Manceron in his book "Austerlitz", Sebastiani was one of the most detested commanders in the army for his vinegary temper that burst out in shrill screechings. On the other hand he was said to be a most attractive officer and his devastating good looks and fascinating manners, as a contemporary put it, had caused an insurrection in the salons and boudoirs of Paris. Partly because he was Corsican and partly because he had rendered useful services in the Coup d'Etat of Brumaire he was one of Napoleon's favourites. This was just as well because apart from an outstanding talent for leading sabre charges his conduct left much to be desired. As Napoleon was to tell him during the 1812 campaign after he made some blunders "General, with you we march from one surprise to the next".

In February 1809 Leval's division was again in action south of the Tagus by the bridge of Arzobispo, this time detached from the main body of 4th Corps and acting in conjunction with the light cavalry division of Lasalle. They had little success in catching Cuesta so that a month later Marshal Victor with two divisions of his 1st Corps was assigned to this task. On 17th March Victor's columns, with the Germans of Leval at their head, arrived before the defiles of Meza de Ibor and found themselves confronted by the division of the Duke del Parque, about 500 strong with 6 guns. They were firmly established on the other side of the ravine, in a fine position with the guns on a projecting rock which enfiladed the high road. Leval's division at this time was reduced to about 3000 since one Hessian battalion was absent being in garrison at Segovia. Victor directed the 8 battalions to cross the ravine and storm the heights on the other side. This they did in very gallant style, but not without heavy losses, for the Esremadurans, confident in the strength of the rugged fighting-ground, made a long and vigorous resistance, till the Germans actually came to close with them and ran in with the bayonet. Del Parque's line crumpled up and dispersed over the hill sides; finding it impossible to bring off his guns, he cast them over the precipice into the ravine below. Leval's division lost seventy killed and 428 wounded whilst climbing the difficult slopes and clearing the road.

The 4th Corps Order-of-Battle 1809

1 st Division, Sebastiani	28 th , 32 nd , 58 th , 75 th Line Regiments	3 battalions each
2 nd Division, Leval	As detailed below	
3 rd Division, Valence	4 th , 7 th , 9 th Vistula	2 battalions each
Corps Cavalry, Brigade Maupetit	5 th Dragoons, 3 rd Dutch Hussars	4 squadrons
	1 st Westphalian Chevaux-Legers	2 squadrons
	Nassau Chasseurs-à-Cheval	2 nd Squadron

Details of General Leval's Division

1st Brigade Oberst von Porbeck (Baden)

2 nd Nassau Regiment Oberstleutenant von Kruse	2 battalions
4 th Baden Regiment Oberst von Porbeck	2 battalions
Company of Baden Foot Artillery, Captain Lassolarge	Six guns plus 2 howitzers

2nd Brigade, General Chassé (Holland)

2 nd Dutch Regiment	1 st Battalion
4 th Dutch Regiment	2 nd Battalion
Company of Sappers and Miners	
3 rd Company Dutch Horse Artillery	4 six pounders plies 2 twenty-four pound iron howitzers

3rd Brigade, General Grandjean (France)

Gross und Erbprinz Hesse-Darmstadt Regiment Oberst von Schaeffer	2 battalions
Infantry Regiment of Frankfurt, Oberst von Welsch	1 battalion
Half company of Hessian Artillery	4 eight pounders

Sources:

Dr Lienhart and R. Humbert (*Holland Vol V pp 59-63*)

J.M. Bueno and H. Achard who have used *Frankfurt -Knotel, Kingdom of Holland Collection Nassbaurn.*

J. Hoyneck van Papendrecht, *De Uniformen van de Nederlandsche Zeeen Land macht.*

1-1. Ringoir, *De Nederlandse Infanterie*.

Otto von Pivka, C. Warner, *Dutch-Belgian Troops of the Napoleonic Wars*. Note that the illustrations on page 13 of the Horse Artillery and 2nd Train are incorrectly stated as being Batavian Republic 1795-1806 and should be the Kingdom of Holland 1808, 2nd Horse Artillery and Train.

Philip Haythornthwaite, B. Fosten, *Napoleon's Line Infantry. Excellent Plate, G 3, of the 4th Dutch Line soon after becoming 125th French Line*.

Otto von Pivka, *The Portuguese Army of the Napoleonic Wars*. Note although a description of a Frankfurt Voltigeur by Weiland, it is difficult to link this accurately as being worn in the Peninsular unless it was another variation of the modification of the Voltigeur uniform mentioned in the text.

T. Wise, *Artillery Equipments of the Napoleonic Wars*.

T. Wise, *Flags and Standards of the Napoleonic Wars*.

Text

Mainly a paraphrasing or precis from "History of the Peninsular War" by Oman for all parts of this series. David Johnson, *Napoleon's Cavalry and its Leaders*. Claude Manceron, *Austerlitz*.

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