The Battle of Vittoria on 21 June 1813 has, quite rightly, been the focus of much study by military historians. Perhaps not enough attention has been given to Wellington’s undoubted logistical success of moving his army of around 81,000 officers, men and their equipment\(^1\) from the borders of Portugal, some 500 km / 310 miles,\(^2\) in the 27 days between 24 May and 19 June.

On 27 May King Joseph\(^3\) began to evacuate Madrid and pulled his forces back to Valladolid to hold the line of the Rio Duero. By 3 June Wellington’s entire army was north of the river, forcing the French to further retreat north, back to Burgos. On the 12 June their line of defence was again turned as Hill’s\(^4\) southern column appeared behind Reille’s right flank. They blew up Burgos castle and once again retreated back up the ‘great highway’ to then defend the line of the Rio Ebro.

Wellington now faced the most difficult terrain of the whole advance, the country being mountainous and criss-crossed by gorges and good defensive positions. Indeed, the area to the north of Burgos in unlike any other part of Spain, with wooded plateaux fringed with sheer drops and ravines. It was also the terrain through which the French thought it impossible to bring guns and wagons.\(^5\)

They were still using the same set of López maps that Masséna had used in 1810.\(^6\) Most of the pages of the Atlas were found after the Battle of Vittoria. On the map of Alava (90) and the second part of Laredo (11) there are pencil annotations indicating Joseph’s line of retreat along the ‘great highway’ from Miranda de Ebro to Vittoria. The pages 7 and 9

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\(^1\) Supported by a 15,000 strong mule-train (private and public), Wellington’s commissariat was able to feed the troops – several diarists speak of biscuit being short, but meat was not, even though they lacked enough salt to go with it.
\(^2\) This is the average distance from Ciudad Rodrigo taken by the central column. Graham’s left column started from northern Portugal, whilst Hill’s troops which formed the right column marched from their cantonments by the Tagus.
\(^3\) Joseph Bonaparte (1768-1844) King of Spain. Napoleon’s older brother ruled from 1808 until he was sacked in 1813 following Vittoria. He is generally recognised as being an honest ruler, if clumsy soldier.
\(^4\) General Rowland Hill (11 Aug 1772 – 10 Dec 1842) was Wellington’s most corps commander. This southern column was about 30,000 strong.
\(^5\) Fletcher Vittoria 1813.
\(^6\) The atlas would appear to have belonged to Joseph, and to have been handed over to Massena for the purposes of the campaign in Portugal. On Massena’s disgrace the Atlas passed to Marmont, and remained with the army of Portugal until Souham was deprived of the command on joining Joseph in November 1812, when the atlas returned into Joseph’s possession. Per TJ Andrews The English Historical Review Vol 16, No 63 (July 1901) pp. 472-497.
of the Province of Burgos show, quite clearly, although not that accurately, a network of roads. One can only conclude that the French Staff of Marshal Jourdan\textsuperscript{7} had, quite rightly, come to distrust the López for other than the main routes. It is almost certain that, as a consequence, Joseph and Jourdan placed far too much faith in the impossibility of passing through the mountainous region to the north-west of the ‘great road’.

Wellington’s Quartermaster General, John Murray, will have greatly benefited by the access to the set of the 1810 Nantait maps which showed the roads and, more particularly, the river crossings along the planned route. However, as was his practice, he had also sent out several cavalry staff officers and members of his own QMG staff to examine the practicality of the roads that were planned to be used, thereby combining two sources of intelligence.\textsuperscript{8}

\begin{center}
\textbf{New Map of Spain and Portugal for the Intelligence of Military Operations}
\end{center}

\textsuperscript{7} Marshal Jean Baptiste Jourdan (1762-1833) was Chief-of-Staff to King Joseph and must take a large slice of the blame for the French defeat at Vittoria. Indeed he was sacked soon afterwards.

\textsuperscript{8} Thomas Mitchell (of Wyld’s Atlas) was sent to examine the region north of the Duoro from its junction with the Esla to Benavente. \textit{Wellington’s Headquarters}, p111, by SGP Ward.
The Headquarters divisions and Hill’s column moved, using all available secondary roads, from their position opposite the lower Urbel, by Villadiego and Montorio respectively, on the bridge of Puente Arenas.\(^9\) Graham’s\(^{10}\) left column with six divisions passed the Rio Ebro some fifteen miles higher, over the bridge of San Martin. On the 13\(^{th}\) – 14\(^{th}\) – 15\(^{th}\) all three columns had very hard marches of four long Spanish leagues\(^{11}\) on three successive days, across upland roads where artillery had never been seen before. The move would only have been practicable at mid-summer.\(^{12}\)

\(^{9}\) Whilst Oman states that Hill’s divisions crossed the Ebro behind the HQ column at Puente Arenas, Fortescue states that they crossed at the bridge of Rampalaz.

\(^{10}\) General Thomas Graham (19 Oct 1748 – 18 Dec 1843) had served under Moore and was one of Wellington’s most trusted lieutenants.

\(^{11}\) One Spanish league was equal to four English miles, per Nantiat’s 1810 map scale.

\(^{12}\) Oman *History of the Peninsular War*, vol VI, p361/2.
By maintaining a good pace and keeping to the mountains, Wellington avoided following directly in the footsteps of the retreating French. This latter course would have slowed him down owing to the number of good defensive positions, such as the defile of Pancorbo, along the way. Any delay would inevitably have allowed Clausel\textsuperscript{13} and the Armée du Nord, marching to Joseph’s aid, to join the French and give them a numerical superiority.

On the 15\textsuperscript{th}, from his headquarters at Quintana, near the Bridge of Puente Arenas, Wellington dictated the marching orders for the final stages of the march around the French right flank to strike at their line of communication with Bayonne, as far behind the known position of King Joseph’s army as possible. All three of the original corps now marched in succession along one road which hugged the foothills of the Cantabrian sierras, crossing successively the headwaters of several small rivers running south to the Ebro. The pace was forced and again the marches were long.

It was only on the 18\textsuperscript{th} June, with the two simultaneous combats of Osma and San Milan, that the French realised that they were hopelessly outflanked. The lack of good intelligence on the French side was a great factor in their downfall and it is remarkable that for six days they had no idea of Wellington’s whereabouts.\textsuperscript{14}

Placed on the Napoleon Series: January 2019

\textsuperscript{13} Comte Bertrand Clausel (1772-1842), an experienced and competent general with about 16,000 men. (Oman, p270)

\textsuperscript{14} Fletcher \textit{Vittoria 1813}. 