

The Napoleon Series

A Polish Lancer at Albuera 16 May 1811

By 2nd Lieutenant Kajetan Wojciechowski

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This account is by Kajetan Wojciechowski, 2nd Lieutenant in the 1st Lancer Regiment of the Vistula Legion, and it describes the participation of Polish troops in the battle of Albuera. It was published *Pamiętniki moje w Hiszpanii*; first printed in 1845 (Warsaw), reprinted in 1978 (Warsaw).

On the afternoon of 15 May 1811 we came across a huge, dense forest, through which the dragoons advanced as skirmishers whilst we pushed along the road through the middle. On the other side of the forest we saw the village of Albuera, on the right bank of the river of the same name, and with the bridge leading to it. Beyond the river the hills stretched towards a vast range of rocky mountains, and we observed that large numbers of infantry, dark masses of cavalry and artillery and a chain of outposts and pickets had been drawn up waiting. Then the sun began to set, and we, having established our camp, lit our fires. Of all the evils endured by the cavalry the very worst is when the horses are tired of riding and starving of hunger. I was just contemplating such sad realities, staring at the fire, when the order came to be ready at dawn for an inspection by our commanders. Having eaten a piece of rotten meat with my comrades and having drunk a glass of brandy, I fell asleep calmly.

At dawn on 16 May, the trumpets sounded the reveille; I jumped up and was already at the head of my brave boys, when I heard the command: "Platoons, prepare to advance, by the right, walk". While we were parading around the Marshal [Jean-de-Dieu Soult] as he stood in the centre, the sun began to rise. Our Colonel [Jan Konopka] shouted: "Flankers, forwards"! Riding past him, I heard the command: "Lances upright, advance to the left of the bridge, swim the river, attack the enemy"! Our platoons were moving off at a gallop, and I stopped for a while, listening in case of further orders. Then the colonel shouted at me in French, "Are you deaf?" In a flash, I turned my chestnut horse around and was first to throw myself into the river. Near the bridge we saw some enemy engineers.

On the far bank of the river I formed up the platoon which had followed me, whilst [Peter] Rogojski did the same. We were then attacked by a squadron of London [sic, possibly Long's 3rd Dragoon Guards] dragoons and routed them. Two other squadrons came up against us, and we started to withdraw in good order seeing Captain Leszczyński behind us at the head of two platoons of flankers and the regiment attempting to form on the right side the river. So we turned and hit the English again and the two squadrons that had tried to follow us were crushed. It was only when overwhelming force came up against us

that we began to encounter difficulties. Each of us began to fight with a few dragoons, and this uneven duel continued for quite some time when our artillery took up position and began to hit the English. Seeing how many of their corpses begin to litter the battlefield, the enemy dragoons yielded and withdrew.

Seemingly abandoned, and having fought in a protracted melee against overwhelming enemy, I asked Sergeant Rogojski: "Peter, have you anything to drink here?" He grabbed his flask, took a sip, and handed it over to me. Just then, as I was drinking, a cannon ball flew between us, having been poorly aimed by our gunners, missing us by a hair's breadth.

The English saw that no one had arrived to assist us, so they attacked us for a third time. When we noticed that our supporting troops had fallen back and the regiment on the right side of the river was no longer visible, I called on Rogojski to cross the river immediately and open fire from the other bank. To our misfortune, the horse being ridden by the corporal from Rogojski's platoon slipped on the muddy ground by the river bank, and held them up for some time. Meanwhile, surrounded by attacking Englishmen, and having lost 14 men from my platoon, and with a saber in my hand we retraced our steps and throwing ourselves into the river, were glad to reach the other bank.

On that side of the river Piotr Skrobicki, a regimental adjutant, suddenly appeared informing us that he brought orders to cross for a third time, but we did not listen to him. The commander of our squadron [Telesfor] Kostanecki rode up after him and said: "And so, is this the authentic gentry of Poland: waving sabers, cheating death, and ignoring orders?" Having explained to him that we had not yet received any orders, we then followed him until I saw that my horse was lame in the leg. A good creature, which, despite being injured, saved my life. As we trotted along the river to the place our regiment had initially been positioned, we caught sight of a naked corpse. It was our poor [NCO] Jagielski, the first bullet fired had hit him, and thus he found the death he had himself foretold.

We lost Captain Leszczyński in this sad expedition; hit by a bullet, he died few days later and was buried in Llerena.

Having rejoined the regiment, we found the Spaniards, Portuguese and English under the command of Marshal [William Carr] Beresford drawn up in combat formation and ready for the battle. The enemy army rested its left wing on the village of Albuera, stretching its line along some heights which ran from Santa Martha and which began rather steeply before dipping as they neared Olivenza and Badajoz. At the foot of this position was a small river Albuera. The right wing was occupied by the English, whilst the Portuguese and Spanish took up positions in the centre and on the left.

Marshal Soult, having studied the enemy position, concluded that it would be impossible to attack all along the line with his meagre forces. He therefore elected not to divide his forces, but decided instead to launch attacks against selected points. General [Nicolas] Godinot was ordered to seize the village of Albuera, firmly held by the Spaniards, whilst the V Corps, commanded [temporarily] by General [Jean-Baptiste] Girard, was to attack

the English, or the enemy's right. General [Victor] Latour-Maubourg with 3,700 cavalry men was detailed to support him and, after over-running the enemy positions, to pursue the routed Englishmen. All these maneuvers were supposed to take place under the cover of the French artillery commanded by General [Charles] Ruty. A light artillery battery was left however to General Godinot and it was this battery which opened the battle in the morning of May 16th.

General Godinot crossed the river and opened heavy fire on the village of Albuera while General Girard struck the enemy's right with determination and energy and forced the English [2nd Stewart's Division] into a slow and orderly retreat towards the middle of their position, which they sought to strengthen by this movement. Having seen their manoeuvre, Marshal Soult ordered our regiment [the 1st Regiment of Vistula Lancers] to attack them in their flank. We set off in preparation for this attack, but we had a wide ravine to cross, and so had to then form up in sight of the enemy's line before finally striking them in squadron formation. Having scattered three English infantry regiments [Colborne's Brigade], we took 1,000 prisoners and six guns, and after repulsing an attack by London [Long's] Dragoon Regiment, we returned to our former position.

Meanwhile, General Godinot was still engaged against Albuera, and had not managed to drive the Spaniards [actually it was the Portuguese and Germans] from the village; General Girard, however, stormed the British position with bayonets fixed. This initial success was very costly, for we had two generals killed [Werliè and Pepin], and three wounded, and there were battalions in which not a single officer remained. After this first attack, V Corps was on the point of rolling over the second and third enemy lines but lacked the strength to do it and therefore our infantry, quitting the positions they had just occupied, began to withdraw slowly, with the English following them. Then General Ruty, having concentrated all the artillery, opened a murderous fire, which, over the course of several hours, caused a great deal of damage in the enemy ranks. General Godinot retreated from Albuera and Marshal Beresford, having noticed the hesitation in our ranks, wanted to throw all of his infantry against us in order to decide the fate of the battle.

It was then that Marshal Soult appeared in front of our regiment and shouted: "Colonel! Save the honour of France!". So [Colonel Jan] Konopka ordered an attack, we fell on the enemy [Cole's division], whom we stopped in their tracks for some time, winning time for General Latour-Maubourg to move forward and frustrate their intention to do us harm. The English in their reports, described the battle of Albuera, and mentioned our regiment : "The Poles started the battle, continued it and concluded it with the greatest glory."

Later our colonel was promoted to the rank of general. We received 11 crosses of the Legion of Honour for our Regiment, and I finally receive one too for the loss of 3 horses killed under me, and my scabbard cut and the wound from a musket shot which I also received. We lost five officers killed and 11 wounded in our regiment and 200 soldiers wounded and killed at Albuera.

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