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Lieut.-Colonel E. M. Lloyd R. E.

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THE BATTLE OF ALBUERA.

By *Lieut.-Colonel E. M. LLOYD, R.E. (Retired).*

THERE is no battle in which the fighting quality of British infantry, and their ability to pull their general out of a hole, is better shown than that of Albuera, and there is none which has been described in more glowing and soul-stirring language. But the artistic excellence of Napier's picture impairs to some extent its scientific usefulness, and when we study the battle for the sake of the light it throws on the tactical value of line and column, we feel the want of those exact and minute details to which the German histories of the war of 1870 have accustomed us.

Among the "various opponents" brought into the field by Napier's outspokenness, Lord Beresford was the most prominent. He was especially sore at Napier's treatment of him in relation to this battle, and a great many particulars about it are to be gleaned from the controversy between them.¹ The main question at issue, how much praise or blame was due to Beresford, is one which it is not worth while now to meddle with. But Beresford challenged Napier's facts as well as his criticisms, and each of them appealed to prominent actors in the battle. For those who have neither time nor inclination to disinter long-buried quarrels it may be useful to collect here so much of the evidence brought forward as bears upon the main action, and either modifies or supplements Napier's account.

His description suggests bolder features of ground than it actually presents, for, according to D'Urban, "it was of gentle undulation and easy for cavalry throughout." And though he mentions that the battle lasted six hours, and the serious fighting four hours, it requires an effort to remember this as we are carried along by the impetuosity of his style.

The strength of the two armies was a much-debated point, and cannot be determined with any accuracy. Lord Londonderry (who was Wellington's Adjutant-General) had put the total of the allies at 27,000 as a maximum.² Napier put it at more than 32,000, and afterwards thought he had understated it. For the present purpose we need only examine

¹ The following are the pamphlets in which it was carried on:—(1) "Further strictures on those parts of Colonel Napier's 'History of the Peninsular War' which relate to the military opinions and conduct of General Lord Viscount Beresford," 1832. This was anonymous, but Beresford afterwards virtually acknowledged himself to be the author. (2) "Report of the operations . . . under Sir W. C. Beresford . . . during the campaign of 1811, by Major-General Sir Benjamin D'Urban." This had been written much earlier, but was reprinted as an appendix to (1). D'Urban had been Quartermaster-General under Beresford, and was his chief supporter in the controversy. (3) "Colonel Napier's justification of his third volume . . . containing some new and curious facts relative to the battle of Albuera," 1833. (4) "Refutation of Colonel Napier's justification of his third volume by General Lord Viscount Beresford," 1834. (5) "A letter to General Lord Viscount Beresford," in answer to the above, by Colonel Napier, 1834.

² "Narrative of the Peninsular War," ii., 131.

the strength of the British infantry. Napier speaks of this in one place as 6,000,¹ in another place as not exceeding 7,000². In his Justification (p. 21) he gave as his authority Lord Londonderry's estimate of the British as 7,500. But Lord Londonderry says³ that "out of 7,500 British troops engaged, 4,158 were placed *hors de combat*," and the returns in his appendix show that the latter figures included not only the cavalry, but the two battalions of the King's German Legion. The latter numbered 1,100 men, according to Alten, who commanded them;⁴ and the British cavalry (3rd Dragoon Guards, 4th Dragoons, and 13th Light Dragoons) seems to have amounted to at least 300 men.⁵ Deducting these, we have only 5,500 for the British infantry. Confirmation of this is furnished by Napier himself, for he speaks of "1,800 unwounded men, the remnant of 6,000 unconquerable British soldiers." But the loss of the British infantry in killed, wounded, and missing was not 4,200; it was 3,542 if we take rank and file only, or 3,933, including officers.

As regards the French numbers, Napier stated them as 19,000 infantry and 4,000 cavalry. He afterwards found, in a report from Soult to Berthier, 12 days before the battle, what he considered to be positive evidence that he had overrated them by 1,500 men.⁶ However, he left his own figures unchanged in later editions; and they seem as likely to be under the mark as over it. Soult's reports are little to be trusted.

The allies were inferior to the French both in numbers and weight of guns. Out of 38 only 10 (not 18) were 9-pounders;⁷ and at the decisive point they seem to have had only 16 guns to oppose 34.

We need not dwell on the preliminaries of the battle. On the morning of 16th May the allied army was in position, holding about three miles of the ridge which runs north from Almendral, with the Albuera rivulet in its front. The second British division (Stewart's) was in the centre (*bb'*), between the Valverde and Badajoz roads; the Spaniards on the right (*aa'*), and the Portuguese on the left.⁸ The village of Albuera, half-a-mile in front of the right centre, was held as an advanced post. Behind it, at *b*, immediately to the north of the Valverde road, there was a

¹ "English battles and sieges in the Peninsula," p. 117.

² *Idem*, p. 110.

³ *Idem*, p. 138.

⁴ *Refutation*, p. 114.

⁵ Lumley reckoned them at something less; but eight days before the battle the morning state of these three regiments showed 1,109 troopers present under arms (*Letter*, pp. 25 and 32).

⁶ *Letter*, p. 28.

⁷ *Letter*, p. 26.

⁸ The plan is taken, so far as the features of the ground are concerned, from a reconnaissance sketch by Captains Solis and Burriel, of the Spanish staff, published in *La Asamblea del ejército* for 1858. Unfortunately, the contours are not figured. The letters used to mark the position of the troops correspond with those in the plan attached to D'Urban's report. This was prepared by Major (afterwards Sir T. L.) Mitchell, and is from the same original as that published by Faden in August, 1811; though corrected in some points and softened in the hill-shading.

conical hill which was the highest point of the ridge,¹ and was regarded as the key of the position.

The right, *aa'*, was commanded by the height *z*,² which became eventually the battle-ground; but the end, *z'*, of the spur which runs eastward from *z* is described by Beresford³ as a round hill considerably lower than the ridge itself. On this hill three Spanish battalions were placed in the early morning as part of the original order of battle. To the south of the height *z* there was "a deepish valley of about 400 or 500 yards in breadth," separating it from the hill *y*, and the continuation of the ridge, which rises towards Almendral.

At 9 a.m. two brigades—one British and one Portuguese—of the 4th (Cole's) Division reached the field of battle. The French were then just opening their attack. They had hitherto been concealed by the woods, and part of their infantry had only come up in the middle of the night, having marched 8 leagues. Godinot's brigade of 4,000 men⁴, accompanied by ten guns and some light cavalry, and followed by Werlé's brigade of about the same strength, advanced from the south-east upon the village of Albuera (*B*). Soon afterwards the 5th Corps, which was massed behind a spur at *B'*, crossed the stream 2 miles above the village, and mounted the slope of the ridge beyond the right of the allies.

The two divisions of the corps were formed one behind the other in close columns of battalions. They were accompanied by the bulk of the artillery, which was planted on the hill *y*. The heavy cavalry were on their left flank, and were soon joined by some of the light cavalry, making 3,500 horsemen in all. Werlé's brigade, changing its direction, followed after them as a reserve (with the exception of one battalion), and the rest of the guns were brought up, leaving only one battery of horse artillery with Godinot.⁵ In half-an-hour, as Napier says, or nearly an hour, as Beresford reckons it,⁶ the great mass of the French army was established on the ridge upon Beresford's right, and hoped to roll up the allies, to cut off their retreat by the Valverde road, and throw them back on Badajoz.

To meet this flank attack, Beresford, on the first symptoms of it, told the Spanish general, Blake, to form his front line upon *z*, at right angles to his original line, extending his left along the spur towards the river, and drawing men, if need be, from his second line, the remainder of which would take up the ground left by the first line.⁷ Stewart's division was ordered to form the second line of the new position, and was itself replaced by the Portuguese. Cole's division, which was in column on

¹ Further Strictures, p. 115.

² D'Urban, Report, p. 31.

³ Further Strictures, p. 114.

⁴ Justification, p. 23.

⁵ Lapène, "Conquête de l'Andalousie," p. 154-6. He was an artillery officer, and belonged to the 2nd Division of the 5th Corps.

⁶ Further Strictures, p. 131. Thiers speaks of an hour of inaction after the stream was crossed.

⁷ In Beresford's report it was stated by mistake that the new front was to be formed by part of the first and all the second line of Spaniards, and Napier followed this (Refutation, p. 151).

the Badajoz road, was placed obliquely in rear of the right at *d*, to form a reserve for the right and centre, cover the right flank and the Valverde road, and support the cavalry on this flank. This cavalry consisted of about 1,500 men, half British, half Spanish,¹ with four 6-pounders, R.H.A., drawn up behind the Aroya de Valdesevilla, which was dry or nearly so at the time, but had worn a deep channel.

Owing to Blake's delay, Beresford had to form up the Spanish troops himself on the new front "in a much more hurried manner than was desirable," and partly under the fire of the enemy's sharpshooters.² But he denied Napier's statement that he could not get the Spaniards sufficiently forward to make room for Stewart's division to support them. He says the Spanish line was on the very brow of the ridge, and "had it gone another yard to the front, it must have gone down the steep of the hill." The French came fiercely on in three strong columns, but halted immediately below the Spanish line, and nearly at the foot of the steep descent upon which it was placed; and in spite of their fire, and that of the guns on the hill behind them, "the Spanish line stood with great firmness more than an hour-and-a-half." Then the Spaniards, having lost about 1,500 men, began to crowd in groups behind each other, and he ordered up the second line.³ This second line had been formed up in rear for some time, and had by mistake fired upon the first line, while Beresford himself was between the two.⁴

Napier's account, as it originally stood, was that the French attack "put the Spaniards in disorder at all points; in a short time, the latter gave way." In its later form it is rather less definite: "the Spaniards, falling fast, drew back."⁵ In his Justification he said (p. 32): "The story of the Spanish resistance is a Spanish romance."

The evidence for it, confirmed as it is by Inglis, who commanded the 57th, is too good to be dismissed in this summary way, and four hours of hard fighting have somehow to be accounted for. But this evidence applies only to the left or centre of the line, where Beresford himself was. On the right the French were more successful. Lapène says that on the first attack the right of the allies was drawn back in some disorder, and four regiments of cavalry were sent forward to charge it. D'Urban's account is that "the Spaniards made a gallant and obstinate resistance, but were at length obliged to yield their ground upon which the enemy took post," commanding the right of the position.⁶ This was at an early stage of the battle, before Stewart's division had come up. The head of it (Colborne's brigade) arrived immediately afterwards, and at once attacked to recover the ground.

But if the French reached the top of the height, they did not

¹ Refutation, p. 128, and Letter, p. 32.

² Further Strictures, p. 155.

³ Further Strictures, pp. 155-58.

⁴ Refutation, p. 213.

⁵ English Battles, etc., p. 113.

⁶ Report, p. 30. Beresford said the same in his original report, though he afterwards thought otherwise.

remain there. Hardinge says:—"The first brigade (Colborne's) when they had gained the crest of the hill, found it so hot that Stewart ordered a charge, which the Buffs and 48th alone made in line against the enemy's column of at least 10,000 men. Fortunately the 31st, being the left regiment, had not had time to deploy when the two other regiments charged;¹ it therefore held the ground while Houghton's brigade deployed in the rear, and under cover, and moved up to the support of the 31st."² D'Urban attributes the disaster which befel Colborne's brigade (except the 31st), from the sudden charge of the French light cavalry on its right rear, not to its delay in deploying (as Napier does), but to Stewart's refusal of Colborne's request that the right wing of one regiment should be kept in column.³ The result was not only the destruction of the brigade, but the temporary capture of six guns.

Houghton's brigade—the third brigade of Stewart's division—was composed of the 29th, 57th, and 48th (first battalion). Inglis, colonel of the 57th, says:—"The whole division moved from its ground in open column of companies right in front, about a mile, where the line was to be formed on the leading company. At this period the Spaniards were warmly engaged with the enemy, and were behaving most gallantly. General Stewart's division was brought up to support them and to form the second line. After the 29th and the right wing of the 57th formed, a body of French lancers got between the two lines."⁴ These were some of the lancers who had been making havoc with Colborne's brigade, and one of them now assailed Beresford himself. A body of Spaniards who had given way and were being followed by these lancers tried to break through the ranks of the 29th. That regiment was obliged to throw back two companies to guard its right flank and to open fire on Spaniards and lancers alike. The latter were soon driven off, and the Spaniards were then allowed to pass to the rear.⁵ The fire begun upon the right, travelled along the line, and was taken up by the 57th, in front of whom the Spaniards were still holding their ground; but the latter (Inglis says) did not suffer from this fire, as, owing to their position on the hill, the balls passed over their heads.⁶

When the Spaniards gave way here also Houghton's brigade, now fully deployed, was ordered up to relieve the 31st. Abercrombie's brigade (the second), consisting of the 28th, 34th, and 39th regiments came up on the left of it.⁷ Inglis says:—"The Spaniards retired very rapidly, and when our front was clear we were close to the enemy (perhaps) within 100 paces." The regiment then opened a very heavy, well-directed fire, by files from the right of companies. He adds that

¹ He overlooked the 66th, which also belonged to the brigade, and took part in the charge.

² Quoted by Napier (*Justification*, p. 29) as the version which he had adopted.

³ *Further Strictures*, p. 159, footnote.

⁴ *Refutation*, p. 213.

⁵ *Justification*, p. 30, and Everard's "*History of the 29th Regiment*."

⁶ *Refutation*, p. 213.

Beresford says they were in line (*Further Strictures*, p. 177), but Hardinge speaks of their deploying afterwards.

“the French never did ascend the heights or attempt it.” But three-fourths of the “Die-hards,” including Inglis himself, fell where they stood under the French fire.

On the extreme right the state of the battle was even more critical. Many men of the 29th had used up all their ammunition,¹ and “the enemy was enabled to lodge one of his columns, which he had constantly fed from his reserves, rather forwarder than he had hitherto done.”² Beresford, who had by this time gone to the right, “saw how advisable it was that an attack should be made upon that flank of the enemy ; and, finding several Spanish battalions in column to the rear, he exerted every mode of authority and persuasion to induce them to descend the hill and to make the desired charge.” It was here that he seized a Spanish officer and dragged him to the front—an incident which Napier has put earlier in the day. Finding all in vain he sent off for a Portuguese brigade, and as it did not come he went off himself to the rear to bring up what troops he could.³

He was the more impatient for them because he observed that the 4th Division was in movement, and this caused him great anxiety. He had given Cole strict orders not to leave the position in which he had been placed without his special instructions. He relied on this division, in combination with Lumley’s cavalry, to keep the French cavalry in check ; and both at the time and afterwards he considered that its advance was an error which might have proved disastrous,⁴ though he praised it in his report.

Napier ascribes the advance of Cole’s division to Hardinge, who was deputy-quartermaster-general of the Portuguese Army, though only twenty-five years of age. Originally he wrote:—“Colonel Hardinge boldly ordered Cole to advance.” A correspondence took place on the subject in the *United Service Magazine* (1840-1),⁵ and in later editions he said that Hardinge, using Beresford’s name, had *urged* Cole. But even this is not borne out by the correspondence. Sir Henry Hardinge attributed more weight to the advice which he, an officer of Beresford’s staff fresh from the scene of action, vehemently pressed, than Sir Lowry Cole was willing to give it, as affecting the responsibility of the divisional general. But there was no suggestion on either side that Hardinge had represented himself as acting in any sense “by order.” Cole had already sent an aide-de-camp to Beresford for instructions, but he was wounded. At length, getting no orders, and convinced of the desperate state of the battle, he took the responsibility on himself of attacking the French in flank.⁶ “The movement itself,” he says, “was hazardous and difficult

¹ Justification, p. 20.

² D’Urban’s report, p. 32.

³ Further Strictures p. 167.

⁴ Refutation p. 230.

⁵ It consists of eight letters from Colonel Wade (A.D.C. to Cole), Colonel Napier, Sir H. Hardinge, and Sir Lowry Cole. They were afterwards reprinted by Cole for private distribution.

⁶ Hardinge times this as one and a half hours after the disaster to Colborne’s brigade.

to execute without exposing the right flank of the Fusiliers to an acknowledged great superiority of cavalry, ready to take advantage of any error that might occur. In moving forward to the attack the Fusiliers advanced in echelons of battalions from the left, a manœuvre always difficult to perform correctly even in a common field-day; and as the Portuguese brigade in advancing had two objects to effect, namely, to show front to the enemy's cavalry and at the same time to preserve its distance from and cover the right flank of the Fusilier brigade, its movement was even more difficult to effect than the former. Thinking it desirable (with all due confidence in the Portuguese brigade) to have some British troops on the extreme right of the position, I directed the light companies of the Fusilier brigade to form in column on the right of the Portuguese, where I also placed the brigade of guns [Hawker's six 9-pounders], and sent the Lusitanian legion to the left of the Fusiliers."

The Fusilier brigade—7th (1st battalion), 7th (2nd battalion), 23rd (1st battalion), counting from left to right—numbered 1,500 rank and file; the Lusitanian legion about 750 light infantry; and the two regiments of Harvey's Portuguese brigade something over 2,000.¹

Colonel Harvey, in his journal written that day, described the advance²:—"The 23rd and one battalion of the 7th Fusiliers were in line. The other battalion at quarter distance, forming square at every halt, to cover the right which the cavalry continued to menace. Major-General Lumley with the British cavalry was also in column of half-squadrons in rear of our right and moved with us, being too weak to advance against the enemy's cavalry." These precautions explain how the Fusiliers escaped the fate of Colborne's brigade. One attempt the French cavalry did make, and it is said that the right of the Fusiliers was partially broken, but the horsemen were driven off by a volley from the Portuguese.³

Hardinge says:—"The instant Cole's division was in movement and his left brigade approached the right of Houghton's, I went to Abercrombie's brigade, and authorised him to deploy and move past Houghton's left. While Houghton's brigade held the hill, Myers and Abercrombie passed the flanks on the right and left, and made a simultaneous attack on the enemy, who began to waver and then went off to the rear."⁴

How the battle looked from the French side is described by Lapène, who probably watched it from the hill. After mentioning the retirement of the Spaniards on the right and the success of the French cavalry against Colborne's brigade, he says that the right was seen to be forming hastily in squares; alluding, no doubt, to the action of the 29th in throwing back two companies. This convinced both Soult and Girard (who was in temporary command of the 5th corps) that the allies meant to retreat. Girard determined to push on and attack them at once; so,

¹ Refutation, p. 120.

² Letter, p. 31.

³ Cole, "Peninsular Generals," i., 286; and D'Urban, Report, p. 34.

⁴ Life, by his son ("Rulers of India"), p. 22.

without waiting to deploy, he advanced with the 5th corps in close column—a fatal imprudence. This mistake and their own numbers gave the allies an incalculable advantage. Beresford moved up his second line and three reserve brigades. “They calmly open a fire from two ranks, well maintained and well aimed. Not a shot is lost in our close column, and it can only reply with the insufficient and ill-maintained fire of its two front ranks.” The soldiers fell helplessly right and left, and the survivors lost heart. Girard tried to deploy and to take ground to his right, but it could not be done under such a fire—there was neither room nor calmness enough. The result of this desperate position was a pronounced wavering, which soon became a retreat in disorder. First the leading regiment gave way, having lost 600 men, then others followed in succession. The troops soon formed a confused mass, which fell back pell-mell, and only stopped on reaching their original position beyond the stream. Soult ordered up Werlé’s reserve brigade to support Girard, but while the two regiments composing it were deploying they were thrown into some confusion by the fugitives of the 5th corps. Nevertheless it stood for some time, and eventually retired, after losing heavily, in better order than the 5th corps. The artillery and cavalry then retired too.

There is some discrepancy in the accounts as to the French formation. One division of the 5th corps was behind the other, and Lapène says they were *en colonnes serrées par bataillons*. The authors of the “Victoires, Conquêtes, etc., des Français,” whose account in the main agrees closely with Lapène’s, say that each division was *ployée en colonne serrée par régiment*.¹ Home speaks of them as in mass of close columns of double companies,² but that would be described as *serrée par divisions*. The accounts may be best reconciled by assuming that, as was the case with D’Erlon’s corps at Waterloo, each column consisted of deployed battalions one behind another, but that the three battalions of each regiment were side by side, so that there were three contiguous columns. Both Beresford³ and D’Urban⁴ say there were three columns of attack, with 4,000 to 5,000 men in each, according to the latter; while Hardinge speaks of one column of at least 10,000 men. The regiments, as we have seen, gave way in succession from the front; which implies that the whole front was formed by one regiment. The depth of the columns on the above assumption would be twenty-four ranks, and the front of each would be about 100 yards; while the fireline of the three deployed British brigades which ultimately enveloped them would be three-quarters of a mile.

Not much is to be learnt from Soult’s report.⁵ With an audacity almost sublime he tells the emperor: “The enemy left us the position we had taken from him, and did not venture to attack us again.” He

¹ Tome, 20, p. 236, etc.

² “Précis of Modern Tactics,” p. 249.

³ Further Strictures, p. 157.

⁴ Report, p. 32.

⁵ “Wellington Despatches,” supplementary, vol. xiii., p. 651.

says he had 18,000 men, including 3,000 horse. He puts the loss of the French at 2,800, and that of the allies at nearly 10,000. Napier reckoned the French loss at more than 8,000, and there is no reason to think he overstated it. The loss of the allies was under 7,000.

The following is the return of killed, wounded, and missing in the British battalions, officers included :—

		66th	272	
2nd Division (Stewart)	Colborne	48th (2nd batt.)	343	1413
		31st	155	
		Bufs	643	
	Houghton	57th	428	1044
48th (1st batt.)		280		
29th		336		
Abercrombie	28th	164	390	
	34th	128		
	39th	98		
4th Division (Cole)	Myers ..	7th (1st batt.)	357	1045
		7th (2nd batt.)	349	
		23rd	339	
Three companies 60th (5th batt.) and detachments from Kemmis' brigade of the 4th division		41
		Total	3933	

