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Source: *Military Affairs*, Vol. 44, No. 4 (Dec., 1980), pp. 163-170
Published by: Society for Military History
Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1987282>
Accessed: 01/12/2009 03:30

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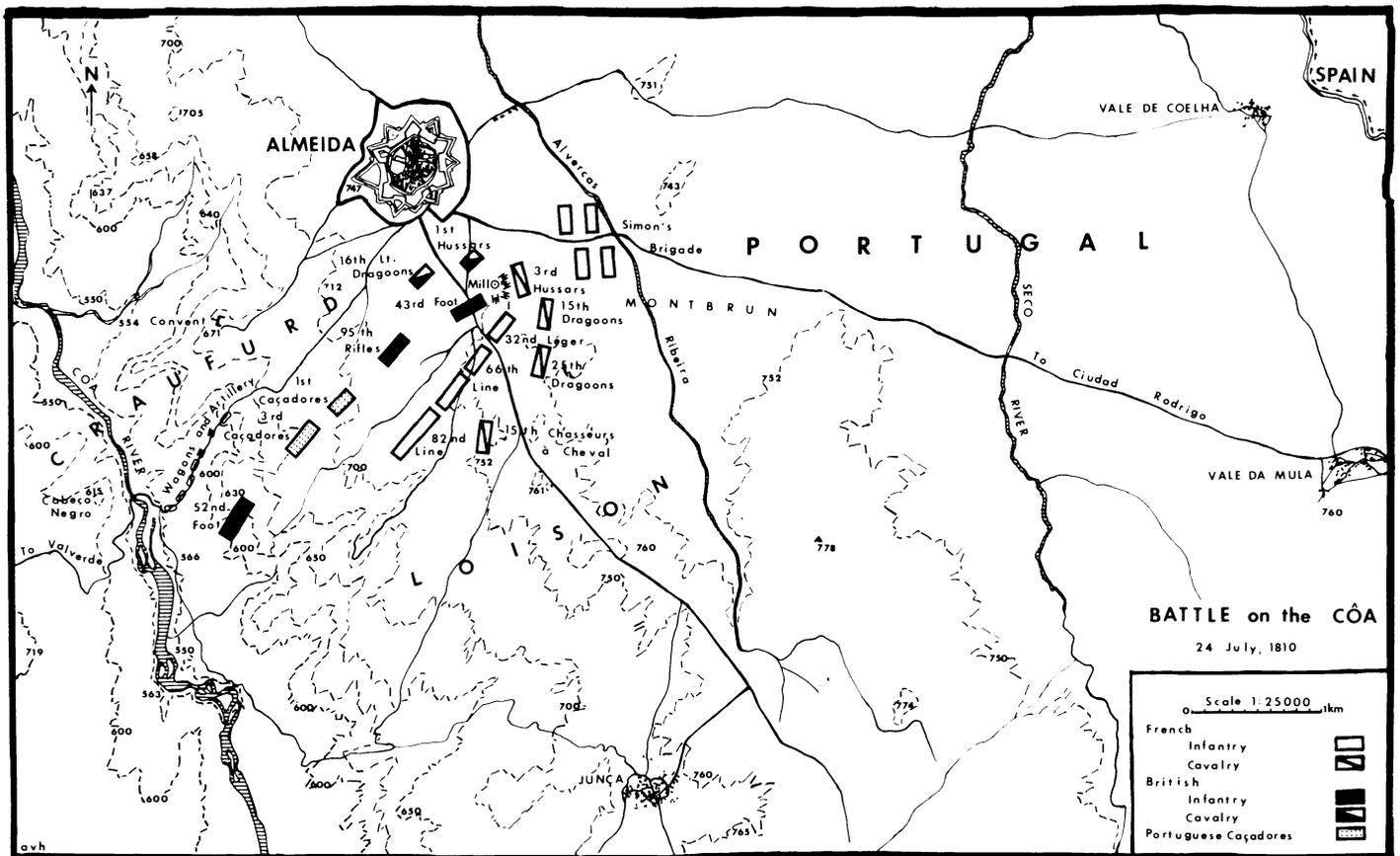
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Battle on the Côa, 24 July 1810. Map courtesy of the author.

“The Dreadful Day”: Wellington and Massena on the Côa, 1810

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THERE were many bloody and desperate battles during the Peninsular War but none more bitterly contested than the struggle on the Côa River below the walls of Almeida, 24 July 1810. This encounter, ignored or minimized by historians as a “combat,” an “action,” or an “outpost skirmish” of little significance, had serious consequences for the belligerents, the ramifications of which reached to the halls of the Tuileries and Windsor Castle. Nominally fought between the forces of Marshal André Masséna and the Duke of Wellington, the battle was actually conducted by Marshal Michel Ney, commanding the famous 6th Corps of the *Grande Armée*, and Brigadier General Robert Craufurd with the Light Division, created by the fallen hero—Sir John Moore.

Masséna’s army of some 65,000 men, destined for the third invasion of Portugal, spent 43 days besieging the Spanish garrison at Ciudad Rodrigo. The Anglo-Lusitanian Army of almost 50,000 men was posted along the Portuguese frontier to observe the siege, but Wellington refused to commit his troops to raise the siege, aware they would be needed for the defense of Portugal. When the governor of Ciudad Rodrigo capitulated, Masséna, in accordance with Napoleon’s orders, began preparations to besiege the Portuguese fortress of Almeida 30 kilometers away, rather than advance on Lisbon.

Following the surrender of Ciudad Rodrigo, probes of Ney’s 6th

Corps forced Craufurd’s pickets back toward the Portuguese frontier. With the mounting French pressure not only did rumors circulate that Wellington had decided to withdraw his army, but French reconnaissance reports gathered in the south confirmed them.¹ Accordingly, Masséna ordered Ney to “direct a strong reconnaissance on Almeida without engaging in a general affair. In seeing you arrive leading a column perhaps they will believe the entire army is marching and decide to surrender the fortress to us.”² Ney ordered the commander of his lead division, General Louis Henri Loison, to march with some 5,000 infantry and cavalry at 2:00 a.m. on 21 July toward the formidable Spanish fortress of La Concepción on the frontier, less than nine kilometers from Almeida.³

A company of British 95th Rifles and a squadron of Craufurd’s 14th Light Dragoons contested the French advance, but Loison’s 25th Dragoons and 3rd Hussars drove them back toward La Concepción; nevertheless, Captain John Burgoyne of the Royal Engineers had time to fire the mines blowing up two bastions and four demilunes of the fortress. Once the plateau of La Concepción had been secured, Loison’s troops scurried 400 meters down the gentle slope toward the Turones River on the road to Almeida. Although Craufurd’s light infantry and cavalry turned several times to contest the French advance, the French 3rd Hussars swept the flanks of the village of Vale do Mula and advanced

toward Almeida. Finally, Craufurd withdrew his troops to the glacis of Almeida where the fortress guns could be brought to bear.⁴ Thus, as 21 July ended, Loison had successfully fulfilled Ney's orders and reached a point within six kilometers of Almeida.

Nevertheless, Wellington seemed unconcerned about Ney's movements. In a letter to Charles Stuart, England's representative on the Portuguese Regency Council, he casually observed, "There is nothing new here. The enemy has made no movements of importance within these few days, excepting a strong reconnaissance on the 21st, which induced General Craufurd to blow up La Concepción, and to collect his advance guard near Almeida."⁵ Perhaps if Wellington had taken time to consider the implications of Ney's advance and the strength of Loison's "strong reconnaissance" which was, in fact, a drive of 16 kilometers and an advance of the French lines of 10 kilometers, he might have made more stringent arrangements to reinforce, or preferably to withdraw, the Light Division behind the Cõa River. Craufurd seemed even less concerned than his commander-in-chief although his patrols sent continual reports of the concentration of French troops opposite their positions.⁶

The French continued their reconnaissances of the Allied posts on 23 July. Coupled with the information of a spy who obtained news from Padre Luis at Almeida, Loison wrote to Ney, "The current rumor is that Almeida would have opened its gates if the reconnaissance of the 21st had been a direct attack on the place." Similarly, gossip mentioned a letter from the Governor of Almeida, William Cox, to Wellington cautioning that if the army did not march to support Almeida, "it would open its gates without firing a shot." In consequence, Masséna wrote to Ney on 22 July, "No doubt, if you press near the English, they will abandon Almeida or blow it up as La Concepción. Therefore, I desire that you support General Loison with other troops in order to push the enemy firmly on Almeida. I have no doubt that we will have a propitious success."⁷

Ney responded immediately, "I have put the troops in movement to invest Almeida and learn if the English wish to defend this fortress." He also requested support from other units of the army to cover his flanks during the operation. Loison, meanwhile, preparing for the advance, noted the lack of activity along the enemy line. Similarly, the English were encouraged by the inaction of the French posts on 23 July. Craufurd's aide-de-camp, Lieutenant-Colonel James Shaw-Kennedy, recalled, "Everything remained quiet at our outposts this morning."⁸

Craufurd's regiments were deployed eastward, beyond the glacis of Almeida, with their northern flank posted by an old stone windmill tower. These positions were held despite Wellington's admonition to Craufurd, "I do not wish to risk anything beyond the Coa, and indeed . . . I do not see why you should remain any longer at such a distance in front of Almeida. It is desirable that the communications with Almeida should be kept open as long as possible . . . and therefore, I would not wish you to fall back beyond that place, unless it should be necessary." Craufurd, however, retained his position before Almeida and only withdrew when the pressure of the French reconnaissance columns made it necessary. Once La Concepción had been seized by Loison on 21 July, Wellington became both concerned and agitated about Craufurd's vulnerable position and wrote, "I have ordered two battalions to support your flanks; but I am not desirous of engaging in an affair beyond the Coa. Under these circumstances, if you are not covered from the sun where you are, would it not be better that you should come to this side with your infantry at least?"⁹ Nevertheless, the stubborn Craufurd retained his precarious position beyond the Cõa; on his front was an ever-increasing enemy army, and to his rear was a steep and rocky road running some three kilometers through uneven crevices to the gorge on the Cõa — crossed by one narrow bridge that spelled the difference between capture and safety.

The atmospheric conditions on the night of 23 July were unusual and produced an extraordinarily violent storm that left a distinct impression on the English troops who were exposed to its full fury. The French soldiers were equally affected by the "extremely heavy" storm that thundered across the heavens before dawn as they prepared for the attack. It was indeed appropriate for this most violent of storms to be followed the next morning by one of the most violent and bitterly fought battles of the Peninsular War.¹⁰

At one o'clock on the morning of 24 July the various regiments of Loison's division marched to a staging area in the valley of the Dos Cases River below La Concepción. Despite the memorable rain and wind storm, the soldiers picked their way slowly along the muddy roads, aided by the flashing lightning. After some five hours the water-soaked men had reached their destination where they were organized into attack columns. At 6:00 a.m. orders were issued for the advance, and General Auguste Lamotte led the 3rd Hussars and 15th *Chasseurs à cheval* forward, followed by the *tirailleurs de siège*,¹¹ the 15th and 25th Dragoons, and the two infantry brigades of Loison's division, marching in two great columns. To support the attack the other infantry divisions of Ney's Corps and the 10th Dragoons were deployed. The French infantry, preceded and followed by cavalry, crossed the plateau of La Concepción and began to descend the slope toward the Turones River. Once this rivulet had been crossed, squadrons of the 3rd Hussars, commanded by Colonel Laferrière, swept around the flanks of Vale do Mula while others advanced through the village supporting the *tirailleurs de siège*; they drove in the outposts of the 95th Rifles which fell back immediately along the road toward Almeida, covered by the 14th Light Dragoons and the 1st Hussars of the King's German Legion. As the gunfire reverberated across the plain, the startled infantry of the Light Division, some cleaning their weapons after the terrible weather of the preceding night, sprang into action.¹²

The 3rd Hussars and the *tirailleurs de siège* pushed down the road from Vale do Mula driving the pickets and horsemen before them. When Laferrière neared the streamlet of Alvercas, he found a company of the 95th Rifles and two pieces of horse artillery, commanded by Captain Keith Stewart, formed along its west bank. They were broken immediately, but, once beyond the Alvercas, Montbrun momentarily delayed the advance until his four cavalry regiments, the horse artillery, and the infantry brigades of Generals Claude Ferey and Edouard Simon could be brought forward and deployed for the attack. Stewart's company fell back quickly toward an ancient stone windmill, located less than 900 yards from Almeida, which had been fortified with two cannons, manned by a half company of the 52nd Foot under Lieutenant Henry Dawson,¹³ and supported by two pieces of Ross' Horse Artillery. Although Lieutenant J. C. McCollough and perhaps 12 of his men were overtaken and captured during this retreat, the other men of Stewart's company, in danger of being cut off, fled before Montbrun's advancing cavalry. To distract the French, Captain O'Hare was ordered forward to support Stewart's men with a company of the 95th Rifles. His men raced forward to an old wall of fieldstone to await the French. Nevertheless, the situation was becoming critical. An officer of the 95th Rifles, observing the French advance, recorded, "The whole plain in our front was covered with horse and foot advancing toward us. The enemy infantry formed line and, with an innumerable multitude of skirmishers, attacked us fiercely."¹⁴

O'Hare's men opened a "very heavy fire" on Ferey's infantry as they neared the wall. There seemed to be some hesitation in the movements of the *tirailleurs de siège* as they approached the wall and the British behind it, so Ferey ordered *chef de bataillon* Alban Martinel to charge the 95th Rifles with his *voltigeurs* of the 32nd *Léger*, supported by the 4th battalion of the 66th Line under Captain Pelat. The French advanced rapidly in "close column"

without firing a shot as Montbrun's artillery fire plowed into the wall. The *voltigeurs* hurdled the wall with mounted bayonet and engaged in close combat with the waiting English riflemen. "The movement was executed with as much intrepidity as precision, and the enemy, startled by such a sharp attack, found his only escape in immediate flight."¹⁵ As O'Hare's company retreated toward the 43rd Foot, deployed 100 yards to the rear to take advantage of the topography, the Portuguese artillerymen on the ramparts of Almeida, mistaking the riflemen's green uniforms for the French, concentrated their fire on them, claiming more casualties. O'Hare withdrew his company in two sections to cover his retreat, but the one led by Lieutenant Johnson was out-flanked by Colonel Leferrière's 3rd Hussars as they swept across his left flank. Despite the concentrated fire of Johnson's riflemen at almost point blank range, the French hussars, apparently taken by some Englishmen for the 1st Hussars of the King's German Legion, galloped into the 95th Rifles where "our men were trampled down and sabred, on every side."¹⁶ As the 15th and 25th Dragoons of Montbrun maneuvered to support the 3rd Hussars, contingents of the 43rd Foot, with Captain Wells' company in the lead, advanced to support O'Hare's 95th Rifles but not before he had 11 men killed and 45 taken prisoner. In fact, only one officer and 11 men of this company escaped the onslaught of the French cavalry. Meanwhile, the 15th *Chasseurs à cheval* led by *chef de bataillon* Valmabelle galloped down the road from Vale do Mula to Junca to attack and turn the right wing of Craufurd's line held by the 52nd Foot. Preceded by a swarm of skirmishers, Ferey's infantry formed into four columns and continued their rapid advance while Simon's infantry brigade swung north to invest Almeida.¹⁷

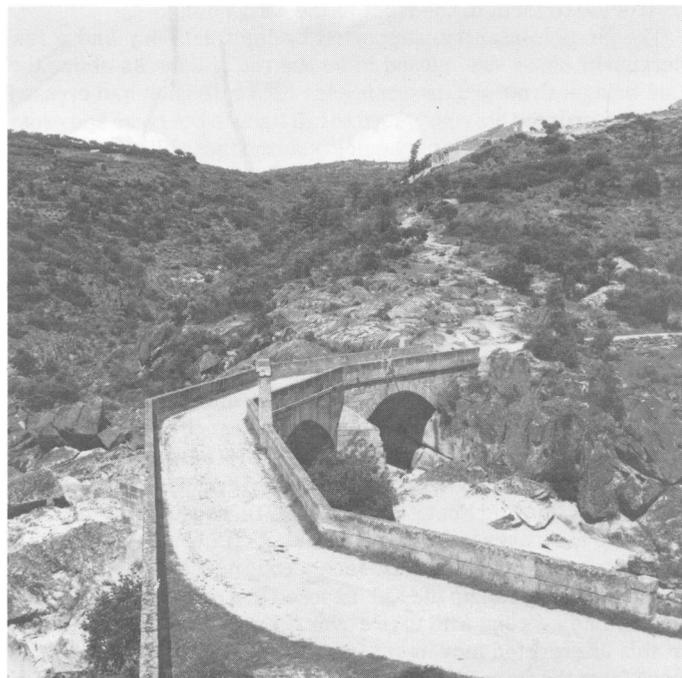
In the ensuing two hours in which the French attack was developing and the French infantry and cavalry were deploying, Craufurd, who "might have retired across the Coa twice over," was busy organizing his defenses to resist the French attack. Instead of grasping the magnitude of the French attack and following Wellington's instructions not "to risk anything beyond the Coa,"¹⁸ Craufurd resolved to maintain the Light Division which included some 2,000 English and 1,219 Portuguese soldiers, an artillery battery of six pieces, and perhaps 800 cavalry against Ney's disposable force of some 20,000 men. Fortunately for Craufurd, only one of Loison's brigades totaling 3,773 infantry and 2,279 horsemen of Montbrun's cavalry corps were employed in the attack. Following current British tactics, Craufurd posted his regiments in irregular lines in order to capitalize upon the defensive topography before Almeida. The 43rd Foot held a line extending from the windmill on the north to the 95th Rifles deployed behind some field walls directly to the south. The 1st and 3rd Portuguese Cacadores held the center of the line, and the 52nd Foot occupied the southern flank bordering the rugged and steep ravines which extended down to the gorge of the Coa — swollen by the raging water from the deluge the previous night.¹⁹

It is inconceivable that Craufurd expected to maintain the Light Division thinly strung out along a line of three kilometers against the formidable French attack. His left was quickly turned by cavalry near the windmill, and his right was seriously threatened by the 15th *Chasseurs à cheval* in the direction of Junca. Ferey's infantry, the *tirailleurs de siège*, the 32nd Lèger, and the 66th and 82nd Line were advanced rapidly in four columns on Craufurd's line despite the fire of Almeida's guns exploding around them and the Light Divisions' murderous fire thinning the ranks. It soon became obvious that Ney had achieved his goal "to cut the enemy off from the fortress and maneuver simultaneously to cut their retreat on the Coa"; he expressed surprise at Craufurd's foolhardy deployment. "Craufurd, after concentrating his entire division under the cannons of the fortress, probably believed that we would take a position without daring to attack him in this favourable position."²⁰

With the advancing French infantry, the sweeping movements

of their cavalry, and the lively fire of their horse artillery, Craufurd's position had become untenable. He sent Captain Charles Napier to instruct Colonel Sidney Beckwith of the 52nd Foot, Major Charles McLeod of the 43rd, and Lieutenant-Colonel Robert Barclay of the 95th Rifles to hold their positions in the rocks and behind the field walls until Ross' horse artillery and the supply wagons could withdraw down the narrow rocky road, threading its way between the stone walls and defiles to the gorge of the Coa.²¹ The 1st Cacadores, commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Jorge d'Avillez Zuzarte, and the 3rd Cacadores, under Colonel George Elder and Antonio Correia Leitão, held their positions in the center of Craufurd's lines, although not under major attack by the enemy, until ordered to withdraw by Colonel Beckwith. The 1st Cacadores, despite the efforts of Zuzarte, retired across the rugged terrain and "fell back upon the bridge at an accelerated pace."²² When they neared the ridge on the hill overlooking the gorge, they sighted the bridge over the Coa, clogged with retreating artillery, baggage, and cavalry. Apparently a wagon, after descending the long, very steep hill to the Coa, failed to negotiate the sharp curve at the bottom where the road turned parallel to the river, causing the delay. While some companies of the 1st Cacadores took up positions on the hill above the river to cover the approaches to the bridge, other companies rushed down to the bridge and began to crowd across since they had not been instructed to remain on the right bank of the river. Nevertheless, the appearance of the 1st Cacadores pushing through the cavalry and artillery on the bridge created an "unfortunate impression," which was corrected following an official inquiry.²³

AS Ferey's attacks increased in intensity, it became obvious that the Light Division would be outflanked and cut off from the bridge on the Coa if they did not retreat immediately. Belatedly, Craufurd ordered most of his infantry to withdraw, echeloned from the left, through the vineyards and across the irregular terrain while the 52nd Foot was instructed to hold the extreme right as long as possible "in order to prevent the enemy approaching the bridge, by a road coming from Junça."²⁴ However, his regiments were "hotly engaged and could no longer keep their ground, lest the enemy should turn their flanks and



The Coa River Valley and bridge. Photo courtesy of the author.

reach the bridge before them." Charles Napier of Craufurd's staff recalled, "The fire was hot and the ground very difficult for us," so the Allied infantry broke and retreated down through the tortuous rock formations and vineyards, over field walls, "owing to the murderous position which kept us in fear of being cut off from the bridge."²⁵

As the French infantry pursued Craufurd's retreating infantry, the chain of command broke down, "part of the troops were advanced, others drawn back," and each regimental or company commander assumed command of his force and attempted to extricate his men from their critical position. Any formal rear-guard action was out of the question as each unit fought for its own escape, joining and cooperating with other fleeing companies, ignoring regimental organization, while Craufurd seemed overwhelmed by the impending catastrophe. A half battalion of the 43rd Foot, seeking cover or hoping to execute a delaying action, took refuge in the ruins of an old building with walls some 10 feet in height. With limited egress and Ferey's men advancing steadily all around them, the men of the 43rd dislodged some stones and with "a powerful effort burst the inclosure." Each tree, wall, or boulder became a refuge for the fleeing Allied infantrymen, but Sprunglin's *tirailleurs de siège* and Martinel's 32nd Léger, supported by Colonel Bechaud's 66th Line and *chef de bataillon* Rocheron's 82nd Line, overwhelmed all opposition charging down the hill toward the Cõa. Even the less heavily mounted 15th *Chasseurs à cheval* took part in the pursuit, riding in among the stone walls to take or saber Craufurd's retreating men. "The French troops attacked vigorously and in the best order; the enemy opposed them with stubborn resistance." According to Ney, "The enemy defended his terrain well and fired swiftly with musket and field artillery, but he was chased successively from his posts, by an intrepid charge."²⁶

By the time the 95th Rifles, the left wing of the 43rd Foot under Captain Chris Patrickson, now intermixed with each other and elements of Elder's 3rd Caçadores, reached the hill overlooking the bridge on the Cõa, a large part of the Light Division had already crossed the river and were busy lodging themselves on the hills immediately above the Cõa. Craufurd ordered a number of companies of the 43rd Foot to hold there while the remainder of the regiment filed across the bridge. When several companies of the 95th Rifles and the 3rd Caçadores, who performed "exactly the same as the British troops,"²⁷ reached the hill, they were instructed to form to the right of the 43rd Foot.

The French infantry, supported by light artillery and a few persistent chasseurs, closed in on the rocky hillocks above the Cõa bridge. Craufurd, assuming his entire division had crossed the Cõa, ordered his rear guard to fall back to the river and cross the bridge. Ferey's infantry quickly seized these hills and opened fire on the bridge while their light artillery was unlimbered and commenced fire. At this crucial juncture it was learned that several companies of the 52nd Foot, on the extreme right toward Junça, had apparently withdrawn so deliberately that they were now in danger of being cut off from the bridge and captured. Charles Napier galloped off to the 52nd Foot to order their immediate withdrawal. Brigade-major Rowan with a detachment of the 43rd Foot, as well as some companies of the 95th Rifles and 3rd Caçadores, tried to recapture the hills immediately above the bridge; Beckwith, also aware of the importance of the hills if the 52nd were to be saved, ordered units of the 95th Rifles to reoccupy them. Simultaneously, Major McLeon also grasped the desperate situation of the 52nd Foot, "immediately turned his horse around, called to his troops to follow, and taking off his cap, rode with a shout toward the enemy." He took a contingent of the 43rd Foot forward; they "ran up the hill, exposed to a desperate fire as the enemy had a strong wall to fire over." Ferey's men, "astonished at this unexpected movement, stopped short"; they were forced back from the stone wall until the 52nd Foot withdrew and slipped across the Cõa. Once this delicate operation had been completed,

the rear guard began its final retreat. The 43rd Foot, 95th Rifles, and the Caçadores pulled back, followed by three companies of the 43rd Foot under Captains Dalyel, Lloyd, and William Napier.²⁸

On the bridge over the Cõa two disabled artillery tumbrels slowed the passage of the rear guard and might have been captured by the advancing French, but an artillery officer appealed to the riflemen who then "lined the battlements of the bridge keeping up a constant fire whilst he got his horse harnessed and got clear off."²⁹ With the Light Division across the Cõa, both George and William Napier posted their companies of the 52nd and 43rd Foot respectively among the boulders along the river to watch the fords and turn back any daring Frenchmen while most of the 95th Rifles and Caçadores lodged themselves among the rocks of Cabeco Negro which formed an amphitheater above the bridge. The French "opened a biting fire, which was returned as bitterly," and the artillery on both sides of the Cõa echoed down the valley amidst the din of musket and rifle fire, the beat of the drummers, and the shouts of the men.³⁰

When the French reached the banks of the Cõa, the last remnants of Craufurd's rear guard had just passed the bridge. Loison ordered Ferey to cross the bridge and pursue the enemy. Two companies of the 66th Line led by Captain Bonamaison and a company of elite under Captain Ninon³¹ approached the bridge at double-quick time with a drummer and at least one officer leading the column. The French were almost across the bridge before the British and Portuguese could gauge their range. Initially the approaches to the bridge had been left unprotected by the flustered Craufurd, but William Napier halted two companies of the 43rd Foot near the end of the bridge. Captain Alister Cameron of the 95th Rifles also posted a company in the ruins of a house near the bridge approaches. Thus, when Ferey's infantry raced across the bridge, the concentrated fire of the Light Division above the bridge had a devastating effect on the French. Apparently Ninon and four of his elite succeeded in crossing the bridge; they lodged themselves below the structure or along the base of Cabeco Negro, but the remainder of the 66th and 82nd Lines were cut down, line by line, as they ran cheering across the bridge. The attack continued until the wounded and dying "rose nearly even with the parapets [of the bridge] and the living mass behind melted away rather than gave back."³² With the repulse of the first attack, Ney intervened personally, ordering his aide-de-camp, Sprunglin, to storm the bridge with some 300 men. Between two and three o'clock, two battalions of the 66th Line charged across the bridge in a column to shouts of "Vive l'Empereur"; Sprunglin saw a dozen of his men reach the other side of the bridge only to be driven among the boulders below the bridge to escape the withering fire of the Light Division. According to an officer of the 95th Rifles, "The bridge was literally piled with the dead and they made breastworks of the bodies."³³

Although Sprunglin claimed his losses were 90 dead and 147 wounded in this misdirected attack, Ferey's entire brigade had 80 dead and 272 wounded; of this number 68 dead and 140 wounded came from the 66th Line while the *tirailleurs de siège*, erroneously given credit by later historians for this attack, suffered no fatalities.³⁴ A third assault, delivered with less enthusiasm, was also beaten back. In his report to Ney, Loison explained that his failure was a result of "the vigorous resistance of the enemy, his superiority of numbers, and the advantage of his position [which] did not permit our brave men from making themselves master of [the bridge]." Some of Ferey's men also sought to cross the river by a ford above the bridge, but the raging waters were too deep and swift and any Frenchman who approached the ford was shot by English sharpshooters.³⁵

FOLLOWING the assaults on the bridge the troops of both armies continued their heavy fusillade until approximately 4:00 p.m. when another torrential rain drenched the exhausted

soldiers and ended one of the most vigorously fought battles of the Peninsular War. A French officer with white handkerchief in hand approached the bridge, asking for permission to carry off the dead and wounded. As soon as this request had been granted by Major Stuart of the 95th Rifles, a party of unarmed Frenchmen came onto the bridge and began to administer to the wounded and dying, carrying them back to the right bank of the Cõa. The British wounded, meanwhile, were taken up the steep mud road to the top of the hill overlooking the river where a chapel had been transformed into a temporary hospital. Their wounds were dressed "with great dispatch" and they were sent on to Pinhel via Valverde, either walking or in bullock wagons.³⁶ A sergeant of the 74th Foot, Robert Grant, at Pinhel described the distressing scene:

About 1½ hour after the action, all that was wounded and some not quite dead was brought in here. The numbers upward of 500 wounded. They were the most shocking spectacle ever I beheld — many without arms, hands, legs, and wounded in the head, body, and every other part. They were the most piercing syte I ever saw — colonels, officers, and privates. They were carried on carts and conveyed from the field in all possible haste. The cries of them would pierce the heart of a slave. There was upward of 47 officers, in all 24 of whom was killed on the spot. The rest I saw carried in here in a shocking state. . . . [The following morning Grant went to an unroofed convent where the wounded had been laid] and there I beheld a sad scene — officers and men lying on their wet and bloody clothes. Clothed the same way as they were carried from the field and the ground on which they were lying without straw or any covering whatsoever, many of them dead of their wounds and lying almost naked. Even when they were coming in, in numbers notwithstanding the loss on our side being very great, yet General Craufurd swears he will never give up when he has a British soldier left. Heaven only knows the issue of this dreadful carnage. I send this by express. The moment I have time I will acquaint you of the events of the Dreadful Day.³⁷

Both armies retained their positions until late into the night. At 11:00 p. m. the Light Division withdrew up the winding road to the hills overlooking the Cõa and then followed the narrow route due west along the plateau toward Valverde. At 4:00 a. m., Loison moved two infantry companies across the bridge and up the road to the ridge of hills above the river valley to observe the roads to Valverde and Guarda. The rain, meanwhile, had stopped early in the morning, and after daybreak parties of Loison's men picked through the bodies littering the bridge searching for wounded. Even before the casualty list had been completed, it was obvious that Frey's brigade had carried the brunt of the attack and suffered proportionally. His losses totaled 80 dead and 272 wounded of which the 66th Line, leading the attack, had suffered drastically. Simon's brigade, disengaged from the main action in order to invest Almeida, had five men wounded. Montbrun's cavalry were not so fortunate; 53 men and 90 horses were lost in the attack. As a result Ney, who initially reported losses of approximately 50 men at 2:00 p. m., was forced to revise his casualty list upwards, to between 400 and 500 men, by the end of the battle.³⁸

The British losses in the battle were also considerable. According to two detailed letters from Loison to Ney, parties of French infantry had begun to bury the enemy dead even before dusk on the day of the battle. The bodies of 80 men of the Light Division were buried or thrown directly into the Cõa from the right bank. The following morning, 25 July, 40 bodies were heaved into the river from the left bank; 57 were buried where they had fallen on the heights of Cabeco Negro that evening, while 24 enemy bodies were laid to rest in a vineyard behind Frey's position. On 26 July the remains of approximately 100 more enemy were interred, the majority wearing the uniforms of light infantry interspersed with cavalrymen; they were buried in a ravine



Aerial view of Almeida and the terrain where the battle began. Photo taken in 1958 by Joseph Evans.

perhaps 800 meters from the fortress. Based on the actual number of bodies interred or thrown into the Cõa, Loison placed the dead at 301, the wounded at 500, and those captured at about 100, plus the capture of two guns at the windmill. The Allies, on the contrary, acknowledged 36 dead, 273 wounded, 83 missing as well as the loss of the two guns — one Spanish and the other Portuguese.³⁹

The casualty list of the participants has been the object of passionate partisanship over the past 160 years. In fact, two distinguished historians, Sir Charles Oman and Sir John Fortescue, have attacked Masséna's honesty and integrity in reporting his losses to Paris. Oman declared that Masséna's report of Allied losses was "a work of fancy" and the information "an invention of Masséna's own." He declared Masséna reduced French losses from 500 to 300, increased the number of prisoners taken from 100 to 400, and "added foolish gossip" about the loss of "sixty officers, of whom they buried 24 on the battlefield, about 400 dead and 700 wounded." Furthermore, Oman claimed that Ney had provided accurate information in his report "which Masséna deliberately cut down" or altered. Unfortunately, Oman condemned Masséna after examining a draft of Masséna's dispatch at the *Archive de la Guerre* in Paris. He observed, "We actually catch him in the act of falsifying returns." Similarly, Fortescue charged, "Masséna thereupon garbled the report, multiplying the British prisoners taken by four, adding to this the capture of a colour, and reducing the French casualties from five hundred to three hundred. To this he added some invention, purporting to be taken from intercepted dispatches, which stated the British losses at sixty officers and eleven hundred killed and wounded." It is a pity that Oman and Fortescue, rather than examining Loison's actual report at the *Archive de la Guerre* or Masséna's letter registry, assumed the worst and defamed Masséna's character for generations to come. In each instance they would have found that Masséna repeated the exact figures provided by Loison and Ney. In his report to Paris, Masséna announced the capture of 100 prisoners; he placed the French losses at 400 to 500, as indicated in the actual reports of Ney and Loison, and the "foolish gossip" referred to by Oman was, in fact, actual quotes contained in two captured letters written by English soldiers. Regarding the

casualty figures of the battle printed in the government newspaper, *Le Moniteur*, and denounced by Oman, it is obvious that the figures in Masséna's written and published reports were altered in Paris for national consumption and can in no way be attributed to him.⁴⁰ Moreover, Masséna's claim of a captured flag was based directly on a letter from Ney, who wrote, "I also send to Your Excellency an English flag that was taken in pursuit of the fugitives on the 24th by M. Domel, drummer of the 25th *Léger*. General Mermet has failed to appraise me of this fact until now."⁴¹

In the midst of the battle, after Craufurd had transferred his headquarters to the left bank of the Cóa, a curious incident occurred before his disbelieving staff. Lieutenant-General Thomas Picton, commanding the Third Division at Pinhel, perhaps 15 kilometers away, rode up to the hills overlooking the Cóa. When Craufurd was informed of his approach, he went forward to meet him. According to Colonel William Campbell of Craufurd's staff, "Slight was the converse, short the interview, for upon Craufurd's asking inquiringly, whether General Picton did not consider it advisable to move out something from Pinhel in demonstration of support, or to cover the Light Division in terms not bland, the general made it understood that 'he should do no such thing.'" Before returning to his division Picton rode further to the front "to take a peep at the bridge."⁴² Craufurd was obviously stunned by Picton's action, especially since Wellington had issued orders four months earlier to insure the safety of the Light Division. As early as 8 March 1810, Wellington wrote to Craufurd reassuring him: "I intend that the divisions of General Cole and General Picton should support you on the Cóa, without waiting for orders from me, if it should be necessary; and they shall be directed accordingly." In May and again in early July this order was reiterated. In fact, on 4 July Picton wrote to Craufurd about establishing a post of dragoons at Valverde so "I may be enabled to co-operate with them [Light Division]."⁴³ However, when the Light Division was fighting for its life on the banks of the Cóa, that promised aid was not forthcoming.

IN the battle on the Cóa the commanders-in-chief of both armies, Wellington and Masséna, had issued strict orders to their subordinates to avoid any serious engagement. Wellington had continually cautioned Craufurd and ordered him to retire behind the Cóa and certainly not to engage in any action on the east bank of the Cóa. In private correspondence with his brother, William Pole, Wellington complained bitterly: "I had positively desired him not to engage in any affair on the other side of the Cóa; and as soon as La Concepción was blown up on the 21st, I had expressed my wish that he should withdraw his infantry to the left of the river; and I repeated my injunction that he should not engage in an affair on the right of the river." Similarly, many officers in Craufurd's command were disturbed by his ill-conceived decision to fight on the Cóa. Charles Napier wrote, "It was a fierce and obstinate battle for the existence with the light division, and only Moore's regiments could . . . have extricated themselves from the danger into which they were so recklessly cast."⁴⁴

The battle also became a topic of discussion among the highest circles of the British army. The Military Secretary at the Horse Guards, Lieutenant-Colonel Henry Torrens, wrote to Lieutenant-Colonel James Bathurst, Wellington's military secretary, upon learning of the battle: "I fully agree with you that Craufurd ought not to waste lives we can ill spare in a *petite guerre* which can have no effect, one way or other, in the ultimate success of your operations. . . . I shall only add that it appears to me to have been *badly executed* and *ill told*." He also admitted to Colonel Gordon: "I think our friend Craufurd made a bungling business of it." As more details of the battle reached England, Torrens wrote to Wellington's brother: "Lord W is between ourselves much dissatisfied with Craufurd, who, let his talents be

what they may, certainly does not possess either temper or genius to conduct the details of an outpost." Writing again to Bathurst, Torrens condemned Craufurd, declaring, "I confess I am distressed and disappointed upon the occasion, as I had a very favourable opinion of Craufurd's talents. But he appears to me to allow the violence of his passions and the impetuosity of his disposition to overthrow the exercise of his judgment upon occasions where discretion is no less essential than firmness to the efficient performance of the duties of a partizan." He concluded, "This subject is much talked of and I fear Craufurd's reputation as a general has received a shock which it will be difficult for him to recover." Similarly, Lord Liverpool, Secretary for War and the Colonies, reflecting the King's concerns, wrote, "His Majesty . . . laments the loss of those brave men who have fallen in the affair of the 24th."⁴⁵

Masséna, meanwhile, was strongly opposed to any major engagement with the Allied army. Although he had ordered Ney to push a large force on Almeida, invest the fortress, and summon the governor, he apparently became apprehensive, fearing Ney might become engaged in a general action. When his artillery commander, General Jean-Baptiste Eblé, informed him on 23 July that Ney had abruptly left Ciudad Rodrigo at midday to join the 6th Corps, Masséna sent an ordinance officer, Pierron, from Salamanca with instructions for Ney "not to undertake anything important before his arrival which would be very soon." Shortly thereafter, Masséna sent his trusted first aide-de-camp, Pelet, with instructions to join the 6th Corps and await his arrival. Pelet left Masséna's headquarters on the night of 24 July amidst the "extremely heavy" rain, and when he finally reached Ciudad Rodrigo early the next morning he learned that a battle had taken place, that the 6th Corps had occupied the east bank of the Cóa, and that Almeida had been invested. According to Eblé, Ney had announced "that he was going to besiege and take the fortress and at the same time defeat the enemy." When Masséna arrived at Ciudad Rodrigo later in the day, "he was very angry," but his staff officers dissuaded him from going directly to the 6th Corps. Instead he sent Pelet and his Chief of Staff, General François Fririon, to talk with Ney. When they reached Ney's quarters at Aldea del Obispo early on the morning of 26 July the Marshal was still in bed. Fririon queried politely, but Ney felt this form of questioning implied criticism of his action and declared "that he had followed his orders but that nobody appreciated what he was doing for the others, that the enemy had resisted him, [and] that he had fought an excellent battle." Pelet expressed Masséna's concerns "by saying that after finding forty thousand enemy before him . . . he had, without warning the Prince, advanced with his whole corps instead of making a simple reconnaissance." Pelet explained, "It was not surprising that the Prince had been worried about an unexpected movement."⁴⁶ This disagreement became one in a long series of controversies which continued, although with some remission, until March 1811, when Masséna relieved Ney for insubordination and sent him in disgrace to Spain.

In addition to the losses, both in manpower and material, the friction created between the commanders and their subordinates, especially Masséna and Ney, and the lost opportunities in the final outcome of the battle, left the combatants exhausted and disgusted. The French had brutally mauled the Light Division and driven it back across the Cóa with considerable loss, but Craufurd's unit had not been destroyed as an effective fighting force. The French troops had effectively demonstrated their courage and determination as "the finest infantry in the world" in the first major engagement of the campaign. According to the divisional commander, Loison, "A very important advantage resulted from this success [and] it is that the combat of the 24th will prove to the English that he has no position that our infantry can not seize, and to our soldiers that the English army is no more difficult to conquer than the Spanish and the Portuguese."⁴⁷

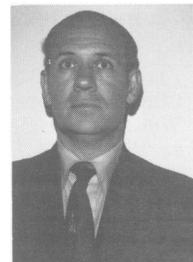
The Light Division, deployed in their characteristic line to maximize firepower against French columns, experienced little success in repulsing Loison. The French had successfully occupied several thousand acres of farm land covered with maturing grain and captured many wagons laden with wheat that the Allies had been unable to withdraw or destroy because of Ney's rapid advance. Moreover, the fortress of Almeida had been invested, and Massena now had a strong defensive line behind the C6a which would prevent enemy probes or a surprise attack to raise the siege. Nevertheless, the disappointed French commanders had hoped for a decisive victory culminating in the destruction or capture of the Light Division. In a letter to Massena, Montbrun apologized: "I regret that the overwhelming topographic difficulties that we encountered deprived us of the results that would have demonstrated to His Majesty how much his cavalry, by their conduct, merited his favor."⁴⁶ Indeed, if Marshal Ney or any of the French generals had been familiar with the terrain between Almeida and the C6a, they would certainly have realized the critical nature of Craufurd's predicament and acted accordingly, but fortune served British arms well that day.

MEANWHILE, the Allies had little to applaud. Despite their fortuitous escape from Ney's Corps under the most trying circumstances, many had been killed or wounded, and their confidence in their commander had been shaken. Their pride had been bruised, their communications had been cut with Almeida, now surrounded by French troops, and their enthusiasm for the forthcoming campaign had suffered a serious blow. Yet they had demonstrated their courage and poise against a formidable foe commanded by highly competent officers. Even in defeat the Light Division reflected glory on its founder, Sir John Moore, and from that day forward it would never again suffer defeat at the hands of the French. Indeed, Liverpool, after expressing satisfaction at "the brilliant gallantry" displayed by the English troops, noted, "The King has been gratified in observing that the courage and discipline of the troops in this contest with very superior numbers, not only enabled them to frustrate every effort of the enemy to cut off the Light Division, but ultimately to repel successfully and repeatedly the desperate attempts of the enemy, to force the bridge over the Coa."⁴⁷ Craufurd also praised the stand of his Light Division in exaggerated terms, declaring, "A corps of 4,000 men remained, during a whole day, in the presence of an army of 24,000 men [sic]; it performed, in the presence of so superior a force, one of the most difficult operations of war, namely, a retreat from a very broken

and extensive position, over one narrow defile. . . . We did not lose a gun, a trophy, or a single article of field equipage."⁵⁰ Also of prime importance to the British was the realization that the recently trained Portuguese troops possessed the qualities of first-rate soldiers. Elder's Caçadores, in the midst of the fighting, throughout the day performed as bravely and effectively as the British regiments of the Light Division. The importance of this information was noted with satisfaction in the highest levels of the British army as well as by the King who commended "the steadiness of the 3rd regiment of Portuguese chasseurs."⁵¹

Thus ended the savagely-fought struggle on the C6a which left nagging doubts in the minds of both commanders and their men. Line deployment and skillful use of defensive topography had failed to stem the French attack, but the fierce determination of Ney's experienced troops had not destroyed the Light Division. The first battle became characteristic of the ensuing campaign; each engagement, from a minor skirmish at Alcoentre to the pitched battle of Bussaco, reflected the extremes to which the men of each army would go to achieve victory. Ultimately, Massena invaded Portugal and drove to within 30 kilometers of Lisbon. Unable to breach the Lines, Massena and his suffering army waited 108 days in vain for promised supplies and reinforcements while Wellington's army increased daily and the hostile Portuguese population took its toll. Finally, on 5 March 1811, Massena began his retreat, and despite several desperate rearguard actions, Wellington's army pursued him to the Spanish frontier. Ending as violently as it had begun, the last battle of the campaign was fought at Fuentes de Oñoro in May 1811, less than 15 kilometers from where it began on the C6a ten months earlier, ending Napoleon's dream of Iberian domination.

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The author would like to acknowledge the support of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation of Lisbon, Portugal in completing his research for this paper, as well as Victor André-Massena, the 7th Prince d'Essling, for permission to use his family archives.

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3. Corresp., Loison to Ney (22 July 1810), C 7²⁰; Arch., Ney to Massena (1:00 a.m., 23 July 1810), LV, 184-185 and 188-189.
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6. George Simmons, *A British Rifle Man; The Journals and Correspondence of Major George Simmons*, ed. Willoughby Verner (London, 1899), 75.
7. Corresp., Loison to Ney (23 July 1810), C 7²⁰; Arch., Massena to Ney (22 July 1810), LI, 145-146.
8. *Ibid.*, Ney to Massena (10:00 a.m., 23 July 1810), LV, 181; Shaw-Kennedy, 232.
9. Wellington to Craufurd (7:30 p.m., 11, 16, and 22 July 1810), in *Wellington's Despatches* VI, 258-259, 275, and 285-286.
10. Edward Costello, *The Peninsular and Waterloo Campaigns*, ed. Antony Brett-James (London, 1967), 33; Simmons, 76; Donald D. Horward, ed., *The French Campaign in Portugal: An Account by Jean Jacques Pelet* (Minneapolis, 1973), 87.
11. The *tirailleurs de siège* (*chasseurs du siège*) was an elite infantry unit organized by Ney to carry out daring raids against

Ciudad Rodrigo and lead the final assault.

12. Arch., Ney to Masséna (2:00 p.m., 24 July 1810), LV, 198-199; Corresp., Loison to Ney (morning, 26 July 1810), C 7²⁰. See also Craufurd, "Action near Almeida," in *The Royal Military Chronicle or, The British Officer's Monthly Register, Chronicle and Military Mentor* (London, 1812), 196-199.

13. Corresp., Loison to Ney (morning, 26 July 1810), C 7²⁰; Arch., Montbrun to Masséna (25 July 1810); Ney to Masséna (2:00 p.m., 24 July 1810), LV, 212-213 and 198-199; *Royal Military Chronicle*, 196-199; Charles Napier, *The Life and Opinions of General Sir Charles James Napier*, ed. William Napier (London, 1857), II, 137; William F. Napier, *History of the War in the Peninsula and in the South of France, from the Year 1807 to the Year 1814* (London, 1876), II, 180; Willoughby Verner, *History and Campaigns of the Rifle Brigade* (London, 1919), 112-113; William S. Moorsom, *Historical Record of the Fifty-Second Regiment (Oxfordshire Light Infantry) from the Year 1755 to the Year 1858* (London, 1858), 120.

14. Costello, 32; Simmons, 77.

15. Corresp., Loison to Ney (morning, 26 July 1810), C 7²⁰.

16. Costello, 32-33; Simmons, 77; Verner, II, 122-123.

17. Arch., Montbrun to Masséna (26 July 1810), LV, 212-213; Corresp., Loison to Ney (morning, 25 July 1810), C 7²⁰; Simmons, 77.

18. Wellington to Pole (31 July 1810), in Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington, *Supplementary Despatches and Memoranda of Field Marshal Arthur Duke of Wellington*, ed. by his son (London, 1858-1872), VI, 561-563.

19. *Royal Military Chronicle*, 196-199; Simão José da Luz Soriano, *Historia da Guerra Civil e do Estabelecimento do Governo Parlamentar em Portugal . . . desde 1777 ate 1834* (Lisbon, 1866-1892), Segunda Epoca, III, 56-58; Howard, 518-520; Moorsom, 122. Ney and Montbrun estimated the Light Division at almost 10,000 infantry and cavalry which is contrary to Oman's charges that Masséna doubled the size of Craufurd's force in his report to Berthier. Arch., Ney to Masséna (2:00 p.m., 24 July 1810); Montbrun to Masséna (25 July 1810), LV, 198-199 and 212-213; Masséna to Berthier (29 July 1810), LI, 55-56; Charles W. Oman, *A History of the Peninsular War* (Oxford, 1902-1930), III, 264.

20. Arch., Ney to Masséna (2:00 p.m., 24 July 1810), LV, 198-199.

21. Charles Napier, I, 137; *Royal Military Chronicle*, 196-199.

22. Wellington to Beresford (29 July 1810), in *Wellington's Despatches*, VI, 306-307; Luz Soriano, III, 58; William Warre, *Letters from the Peninsula 1808-1812*, ed. Edmond Warre (London, 1909), 154-155.

23. Captain William Warre, sent to investigate charges of questionable conduct by the 1st Caçadores, wrote to his father before beginning his inquiry: "I am sorry I cannot add as much for the 1st [Caçadores] who did not behave so well [as the 3rd Caçadores] and ran off at the very beginning." However, once Warre's investigation had been completed, Wellington wrote that their conduct "had been the cause of the unfortunate impression . . . but they had no orders to halt on the right of the Coa when they were ordered to retire, and they saw the cavalry and artillery crossing." See Wellington to Beresford (29 July 1810), in *Wellington's Despatches*, VI, 306-307; William Carr Beresford, *Collecção das Ordens do Dia, Anno 1810* (Lisbon, 1810), "Ordens do Dia" (3 Aug. 1810), 139-140.

24. *Royal Military Chronicle*, 196-199.

25. Charles Napier, I, 138. Notes made by author on Coa, 1960, 1967, 1972, 1976, and 1978.

26. William Napier, II, 378; *Royal Military Chronicle*, 196-199; and Arch., Ney to Masséna (2:00 p.m., 24 July 1810), LV, 198-199.

27. Beresford, 139-140; *Royal Military Chronicle*, 196-199.

28. William Napier, II, 379; Jonathan Leach, *Rough Sketches of the Life of an Old Solider . . . from 1808 to 1814* (London, 1831), 149-150; Charles Napier, I, 138-139; Simmons, 93; Corresp., Loison to Ney (morning, 26 July 1810), C 7²⁰.

29. Verner, II, 125. Verner cited Leach's *MS Journal* which is somewhat different from his *Rough Sketches*.

30. William Napier, II, 379; Corresp., Loison to Ney (morning, 26 July 1810), C 7²⁰; George T. Napier, *Early Military Life of General Sir George Napier*, ed. W.E.C. Napier (London, 1886), 115.

31. Corresp., Loison to Ney (morning, 26 July 1810), C 7²⁰

32. William Napier, II, 380. See also *Ibid.*; Simmons, 79; Harry

George Smith, *The Autobiography of Lieutenant General Sir Harry Smith*, ed. G. C. Moore Smith (London, 1901), I, 31; and Charles Napier, I, 138-139.

33. Smith, I, 31; William Napier, II, 380.

34. Emmanuel Frédéric Sprunglin, *Souvenirs*, published by G. Desdevises du Dezert, extracted from *Revue Hispanique* (Paris, 1904), 145-146. Oman relies upon Sprunglin's *Souvenirs* which are unreliable here and incorrect in listing his losses, in indicating the time of the attack as "midi," in the claim that he succeeded in capturing the bridge, etc.

35. Corresp., Loison to Ney (morning, 26 July 1810), C 7²⁰; Burgoyne, I, 95; George Napier, 115-116.

36. Simmons, 80; William Napier, II, 380; Burgoyne, I, 96. Loison claimed an English officer proposed the truce, Corresp., Loison to Ney (morning, 26 July 1810), C 7²⁰; Costello, 34.

37. Arch., Sergeant Robert Grant to John Gordon, soldier, in care of Peter Stuart, West Elchies, Aberdeur by Nortlach, Great Britain (11:00 a.m., 25 July 1810), LV, 222-223. This manuscript has been left unedited, as Grant apologized in a postscript, "I have not time to correct the errors therefore correct them yourself."

38. *Ibid.*; Ney to Masséna (2:00 p.m. 24 and 25 July 1810), LV, 198-199 and 224-225; Corresp., Loison to Ney (morning, 26 July 1810), C 7²⁰.

39. Corresp., Loison to Ney (morning and evening, 26 July 1810), c 7²⁰; Arch., Montbrun to Masséna (25 July 1810), Ney to Masséna (2:00 p.m., 24 July 1810), LV, 212-213 and 198-199. Public Record Office, War Office (hereafter cited as P.R.O., W.O.), "Return of the number of Killed, Wounded, and Missing, . . . near Almeida, on the 24th July, 1810," pp. 189-190; Wellington to Liverpool (25 July 1810), in *Wellington's Despatches*, VI, 294-295; Wellington placed his casualties at 317 but Oman increased this figure to 332, adding 15 wounded from the 52nd Foot. See Oman, III, 544 and 265.

40. Oman, III, 264-266 and n. 485-487; John W. Fortescue, *A History of the British Army* (London, 1910-1930), VII, 485; Corresp., Loison to Ney (morning and evening, 26 July 1810), C 7²⁰; Arch., Ney to Masséna (2:00 p.m., 24, 25, 26, 27 July 1810), LV, 198-199, 224, 242, 254-255; Montbrun to Masséna (25 July 1810), LV, 212-213; Grant to Gordon (25 July 1810); James M. Milne to his father (11:00 a.m., 25 July 1810), LV, 220-223; Masséna to Berthier (29 July 1810), LI, 55-56; *Le Moniteur*, cited in Jacques Belmas, *Journaux de sièges . . . dans la peninsule de 1807 à 1814* (Paris, 1836-1837); Masséna to Berthier (29 July 1810), III, 375-380.

41. Arch., Ney to Masséna (29 July 1810), LV, 291-292.

42. Campbell to Napier (13 Nov. 1835), Shaw-Kennedy to Napier (7 Nov. 1835), in William Napier, V, 416.

43. Wellington to Craufurd (8 March 1810), Wellington to Picton, Cole, and Craufurd (28 May 1810), Wellington to Picton, Cole, Slade, Campbell, and Craufurd (2 July 1810), Wellington to Craufurd (7:30 p.m., 11 July 1810), in *Wellington's Despatches*, V, 553-554; VI, 123-150, 238-240, and 258-259. Picton to Craufurd (4 July 1810), in Alexander Craufurd, *General Craufurd and his Light Division with many anecdotes, a paper and letter by Sir John Moore . . .* (London, 1891), 121.

44. Wellington to Pole (31 July 1810), in *Wellington's Supplementary Despatches*, VI, 561-564; Charles Napier, I, 136-137. See also Leach, 152-153; Warre, 154; Smith, I, 30-31.

45. Torrens to Bathurst (3 Aug. 1810); Torrens to Gordon (4 Aug. 1810), Torrens to Pole (11 Aug. 1810), Torrens to Bathurst (14 Aug. 1810), P.R.O., W.O., 3/597, pp. 174-177, 183, 199-200, 209-211; Liverpool to Wellington (21 Aug. 1810), P.R.O., W.O., 6/50, pp. 119-120.

46. Howard, 86-87 and 90-91.

47. Corresp., Loison to Ney (morning, 26 July 1810), C 7²⁰.

48. Arch., Montbrun to Masséna (25 July 1810), LV, 212-213. Both Napier and Sprunglin claimed that Montbrun refused to fulfill Ney's orders since Masséna was not present or had not sanctioned the battle. In fact, Montbrun's cavalry were heavily committed in the battle, suffered heavy casualties, sabring 810 men and taking 200 prisoners. See William Napier, II, 387; Sprunglin, 145.

49. Liverpool to Wellington (21 Aug. 1810), P.R.O., W.O., 6/50, pp. 119-120.

50. *Royal Military Chronicle*, 196-199.

51. Torrens to Beresford (30 Aug. 1810), P.R.O., W.O., 3/597, pp. 269-272; Liverpool to Wellington (21 Aug. 1810), P.R.O., W.O., 6/50, pp. 119-120.