

TALavera—July 27-28, 1809

From the London Times

Of all the battles of the Peninsular War, Talavera was—with the possible exception of Albuera—the most bitterly contested and the most bloody in proportion to the numbers engaged. It is probable that the stress on the combatants was even more intense at Talavera, and it is certain that the greater battle left on the British troops there present as deep an impression of desperate uphill fighting, and of disaster barely avoided, as did the less. Albuera, terrible as were its losses, was but a sudden clash lasting for under two hours on a stormy May morning. Talavera was a long-drawn contest, when the army lay in line of battle for two days under a blazing July sun, with weary hours of starvation and sunstroke between its earlier episodes and the fierce final assault on the second afternoon. Of the diarists who described it, many speak of the time of waiting as no less trying than the moments of actual conflict.

Historians often write of Talavera as a victory without results, a useless waste of blood. This is to misconceive its meaning entirely. In one sense it was the battle which settled the whole after-course of the Peninsular War. It was Sir Arthur Wellesley's first and last experiment in the way of co-operating on equal terms with a Spanish colleague and a Spanish army. Had his experiences been different in July, 1809, he would have fought out the rest of the war on another scheme—with what results who can say? But the experiment was one that he was absolutely forced to make. Having chased Soult out of Portugal in May, he found himself with a free hand and an army flushed with victory and yearning for greater triumphs. It was little over 20,000 strong, but such a force (as he and every other Englishman then opined) might be enough to turn the course of the Peninsular struggle. The French had been thrown upon the defensive by the outbreak of the Austrian war, which cut off all their reinforcements and compelled the Emperor to order his marshals in Spain to "mark time" until the pressing danger on the Danube was over. Like every one else, Wellesley undervalued the numbers of the French troops in Spain; he had no means of contradicting the fallacious but plausible estimates of the strength of the enemy which were sent to him by his allies. They promised him the co-operation of two large and enthusiastic armies if he would consent to join them in a concentric march on Madrid. He could not refuse, for he shared, in a measure, the misconception of the situation which was general. Those readers of *The Times* who follow day by day the cuttings from its issues of 1809 will notice that public opinion in England believed that the French were few in numbers and disheartened in spirit. It was openly said that, if the least pressure were applied, they would evacuate Madrid and retire to take up a defensive position behind the Ebro. At the same time the strength and still more the efficiency of the Spanish armies of Estremadura and La Mancha were exaggerated. It was said that they would almost suffice by themselves to expel King Joseph from Madrid, and that Great Britain would be shamed forever if Wellesley's army did not join them in the forward march. *The Times'* extracts are full of such matter, and till the moment when the news that the British army had advanced from Portugal came to hand injurious comments on the supposed lethargy of its commanders were rife.

The Spanish Generals

Wellesley knew that he was making an experiment when he consented to join the army of Cuesta in the march on Madrid. But experiments have to be made in war, and this one was well worth trying. If the Spanish generals were as capable as they were hopeful, if their troops were as eminent as they were patriotic, the numbers brought to bear upon the enemy ought to have sufficed for the task undertaken. By July 24, however, Wellesley was already a wiser and a sadder man. The Spanish colleague whom he had met was already a source of terror to him. Cuesta was patriotic enough, and his courage was well proved, but his want of capacity was only equalled by his want of confidence in his ally. The English officers who studied his conduct during the Talavera campaign attributed his irrational movements and his hopeless impracticability to a mere mixture of arrogance and stupidity. They were wrong: he had formed a theory that Wellesley was intriguing with the Junta in order to get the command over the Spanish armies transferred to himself, and his actions were really the result of jealousy and suspicion. This was why he refused to listen to any suggestion made to him, however reasonable, and invariably discovered reasons for taking some opposite course. Meanwhile there were grave reasons for believing that the co-operation of the other Spanish army, that of Venegas from La Mancha, was not being managed in the way that had been settled. Cuesta was as jealous of Venegas as he was of Wellesley, and Venegas had plans of his own, to which he sacrificed the general welfare of the campaign. A further point, most important of all, remained to be discovered: What was the fighting value of the Spanish armies? Wellesley hoped for the best. Their troops are ill-clothed, but well armed; the officers seem to take pains with their discipline; some of the corps of infantry are certainly good, and the horses of the cavalry are in good condition." But fighting value is only discovered on the field.

The incidents of the three days which preceded the 27th had been full of evil omens.

On the 24th Cuesta had marched forward alone, despite of all the entreaties made to him to halt till the British army had collected food supplies for a few days. The Junta had promised to provide for Wellesley's commissariat arrangements, and had so managed affairs that it was already starving on half-rations: even so, there was not bread enough in its magazines to carry it forward for the 80 miles of road that lie between Talavera de la Reina and Madrid. Two days later the army of Estremadura had fallen back headlong upon Wellesley's camp, with the whole of the French troops that lay in New Castile in pursuit. For Venegas, Cuesta's untrustworthy colleague in command of the other Spanish army, that of La Mancha, had by persistent disobedience of orders allowed the corps of Sebastiani to escape from his neighborhood unnoticed, though the one role that he had been told off to play was that of detaining this force in his front. The French commanders with whom the allies had to do, Victor, Jourdan, and Sebastiani, were none of them great generals, but they were high-spirited, fighting men, and when the advance of Wellesley and Cuesta had pronounced itself, their one thought had been to collect every available man and fight a pitched battle for the defence of Madrid. They would not even stop to allow of the arrival on the scene of Soult, with the army evicted two months before from Portugal, who had written to say that he was concentrating at Salamanca, and would descend on to the rear of the Anglo-Spanish army via Plasencia on July 27. Having left Venegas utterly unopposed, and drawn out the last available man from the garrison of Madrid, the French had come down upon Cuesta with a force of 47,000 men, and driven him back in disorder upon his colleague; the state of disarray in which the Spanish army arrived at Talavera caused gloomy forebodings as to their conduct in the oncoming battle.

The Position of the Allies

For Wellesley had determined to fight, and had chosen his ground. The position was less well marked than most of those which he selected for his later battles. It is about three miles long from end to end; the southern flank of it was protected by the Tagus and the town of Talavera, with olive groves and enclosures set thickly around it. The northern end was formed by a steep hill, the Cerro de Medellin; but between the town and the hill was a mile and a half of open level field, whose front was defined rather than covered by the Postina brook, a miserable runlet which had dried up under the summer sun into a series of stagnant pools. In this vulnerable part of the line the only obstacle opposed to the enemy was a hastily constructed earthwork thrown up in front of a farm named the Pajar de Vergena, in which six British and six Spanish guns had been placed. But for half a mile on each side of the redoubt there was no obstacle, natural or artificial, opposed to the enemy. The Spanish army—about 28,000 foot and 6,000 horse—formed the right wing of the allied army; it was strongly posted in the town and in the walled gardens north of it, and only the battalions just to the right of the redoubt were destitute of cover. The British on the left held the Cerro de Medellin and the open ground to the south of it, as far as the redoubt. Wellesley had just over 20,000 men in line, of which 3,000 were cavalry. He and Cuesta, therefore, when joined outnumbered the 47,000 French by some 7,000 men—a sufficient balance to make victory sure if the whole allied army had been equal in efficiency.

The ruling mind in the French camp was the fierce and headstrong Marshal Victor, who persistently overruled both his nominal commander, King Joseph, and Marshal Jourdan, Joseph's cautious chief of the staff. Victor had never met the British troops before, and was determined to strike hard against an enemy whom he despised. He was set upon bringing on a decisive battle, for if it were delayed Venegas and the army of La Mancha, who had no "containing force" whatever opposed to them, might seize Madrid within a few days. Hence came the haste and reckless fury of the French attack. Its opening phase was not discouraging to him; coming suddenly upon Mackenzie's British division, which was lying in observation at the farm of Casa de Salinas, three miles in front of Wellesley's chosen position, he turned it on both flanks with superior numbers and drove it back, in some disorder and with severe loss, into its place in the line. This skirmish happened in the early afternoon of the 27th; for the rest of the day the French columns were clearly visible, as they arrived in succession and drew up in front of the allies. Their artillery pushed to the front and commenced a heavy fire, to cover the deployment of the army, while their cavalry felt the allied front closely. Then came the incident which was of all the events of those two days the one which impressed itself most strongly on Wellesley's mind. Though the French advance was merely a demonstration, a Spanish brigade to the right of the central redoubt began firing wildly, and a moment later broke and fled to the rear, crying "Treason!" If the enemy had not been too far off to take advantage of this causeless panic, the most disastrous results might have followed. Fortunately, the troops to right and left kept steady. The gap in the line was filled up from the reserve, and no evil consequences followed. But the fugitives fled broadcast to the rear; some plundered the British camp, and others did not stop till

they had reached Oropesa, 20 miles from the field. There were 1,500 men short when the brigade was with difficulty rallied. The troops were the rawest battalions in Cuesta's army—but what could Wellesley expect next day, if any part of the allied force could so behave?

The Night Attack

Victor had hastily surveyed the hostile position as the dusk fell, and had made up his mind as to his tactics. The centre of the Anglo-Spanish line, in the open plain, was the weakest and most accessible part of the ground that he had to assail. But the Cerro de Medellin, the steep, bald hill on its extreme left, was the key to the whole. If this were captured the entire line could be rolled up, from left to right, without difficulty. Talavera town, with its outer ring of walled gardens and olive groves, at the other end of the position, looked a much more formidable obstacle. The Marshal resolved to leave it severely alone. So, under cover of the dark, he drew out one of the three divisions of his corps, that of Ruffin, and at 9 o'clock ordered it to storm the Cerro. So great was his contempt for King Joseph that he does not appear to have thought it worth while to inform his chief of his determination.

There followed the first of the three combats which form the battle of Talavera—a wild melee in the night between troops which soon lost their bearings and got wildly intermixed. At the foot of the Cerro Wellesley's first line was formed by Lowe's brigade of the King's German Legion. Its outposts were badly placed, and an attack in the darkness had not been expected. Ruffin's columns ran right over the German brigade, which was sleeping in line of battle, rushed it to right and left, and took many prisoners. They then ascended the slope above, and the leading regiment actually crowned it before Richard Stewart's brigade of Hill's division, the garrison of the hill-top, was ready to meet them. But many of the French columns lost their way in the dark; some never came into action; and when Hill led on his two nearest battalions against those of the enemy who had reached the crest, he was able to cast them down by a supreme effort. The rest melted away as they saw the fiery line that marked the British front roll down the black hill side, and the assault had failed. It had cost each side about 400 men.

The rest of the night was wakeful; it was supposed that this partial attack was but the prelude to a general advance on the part of the French, and the whole allied army stood to arms. Several times heavy firing was opened from one point or another, but it was aimed at imaginary enemies, for Victor had learnt his lesson, and did not stir again. But at dawn it was clear that the real battle was at hand: on all sides the French had drawn up close to the British line, and just at the foot of the Cerro de Medellin one heavy column of nine battalions was already on the move. A formidable line of batteries crowned the Cerro de Cascajal, a lower ridge which faced the Cerro de Medellin from the other side of the Postina brook. The second phase of the action was about to begin: both King Joseph and Marshal Jourdan were doubtful about the policy of risking a general action, but Victor had taken the initiative out of their hands by placing his corps so close to the British line that it could not easily be withdrawn without an engagement. He told them that he asked no more than that, when his own divisions had carried the key to the enemy's position, they should strike in on his left with the rest of the army. Jourdan says in his memoirs that if the King had refused Victor leave to advance, he and his chief of the staff would have been delayed to Napoleon as cowards by the excited marshal.

The Second Day's Fighting

At 5 in the morning Victor flung the nine battalions of Ruffin's division at the Cerro for the second time, telling them that they were given the opportunity of repairing the shame of their repulse on the previous night. But he had misjudged his enemy; what had been possible in the dark was impossible in the daylight, when the British could see their assailants. There followed one of those engagements which were typical of the Peninsular War—an assault by columns on a well-ordered line—with its inevitable result. Hill allowed the French division to ascend the slope for some distance, and then bade his six battalions advance and open fire. The first volley brought the enemy to a standstill and swept away his whole front rank. The second made the columns stagger and reel. A bayonet charge cast them down the slope with a loss of 1,200 men, about a fourth of their strength. The second combat was over.

But the third and the most formidable assault was yet to come. Hitherto there had been only two partial attacks; in the next phase the whole French army flung itself upon the entire front of the British line. The fiery Victor had battled down the opposition of Joseph and Jourdan for a second time. The fault hitherto had been, he said, that he had been left unsupported; if the King would send Sebastiani and the 4th Corps against the allied centre, he would use his own three divisions not only against the front of the all-important Cerro, but also to turn it by the valley on its left. If such an attack did not succeed "il faudrait renoncer a faire la guerre." The Spanish army in the olive groves about Talavera was left unobserved save by a single cavalry regiment of 2,500 sabres. Thirty-five thousand men were flung against Wellington's

20,000, which formed the left wing only of the allied army.

The French Artillery

The whole morning passed away as the French columns were shifting their positions, but long ere the infantry attack began a fearful artillery fire was opened against the British line. All the diarists who tell of the battle describe this part of the day as its most trying time. The allied artillery was absolutely outnumbered and mastered; the infantry had to lie down for hours on the bare slope of the Cerro, or the open ground south of it, unable to fire a shot, since no enemy was within musket range, yet suffering heavy losses. The sun was blazing overhead; the troops had been awake all night, and had received no rations in the morning. It was 2 o'clock before the general advance came, and when it did develop it was felt to be almost a relief after the intolerable waiting. This time all the French infantry save three brigades were sent forward: Sebastiani's two divisions attacked the southern and Victor's three divisions the northern section of the British front. The fortunes of the attack varied at different points. On the extreme right Leval's German division came against Campbell's two brigades in and about the redoubt at the Pajar de Vergena. Here the attack never made any headway: the enemy, advancing through vines and scattered olive groves, reached the front in a confused mass, faltered when the fire of the British line began, and was twice repulsed with heavy loss. Finally, the German division quitted the field in disorder, leaving nearly all its artillery—17 guns—behind it. Some of these were captured by a Spanish cavalry regiment which made a handsome charge on the enemy's flank in the crisis of the attack.

Far other was the fight in the centre. Here the divisions of Sebastiani and Lapisse assailed the British first division, that of Sherbrooke, with a numerical superiority of about 16,000 to 6,000. Yet the first clash was favorable to the smaller force: the ground was open and level, the fire of the line could play with full effect upon the gross masses that surged up against it. After a long exchange of musketry the French front broke and began to fall back. Wellesley's troops had not yet fully learnt the steadiness that was to be their glory in later campaigns. When the enemy wavered Sherbrooke's division not only charged and drove them over the Postina brook, but pursued them wildly into the plain beyond, entirely without orders, and contrary to their chief's desire. Some of the advancing battalions outstripped others, great gaps appeared in the line, and suddenly the French reserves came down to the rescue of their routed front line. The result was inevitable: Sherbrooke's three brigades were hurled in disorder back across the stream and on to their old position. This was the crisis of the battle: Wellesley had hardly any reserves, and though he used every available man, the route was only just repaired. The main stress fell on Mackenzie's brigade of the third division, which received in line the attack of Sebastiani's men, who outnumbered them by more than three to one, and turned them back after a furious musketry duel which cost the three battalions engaged (the 2-24th, 2-31st, 1-45th) 600 men out of 2,000 in the field. Further to the left the advance of Lapisse's division was stayed by a flank attack made by the 1-48th, a battalion which Wellesley brought down in haste from the Cerro de Medellin. When Sebastiani's columns broke up, Lapisse's regiments followed suit. They had just lost their general and 1,700 men in half an hour, and had no heart to hold on when their comrades to the left gave way. The battle was saved, but at fearful expense of life and after the most terrible risk. The honors of the day should go to the four battalions whose numbers have just been cited; it was they who struck the decisive stroke. Yet Wellesley made no mention of Mackenzie's brigade in his despatch—its commander had been killed, no formal report of its doings had been sent in, and they were unaccountably ignored.

The real danger was over, yet one more episode of the battle had still to come. On the extreme right of the French line Victor had directed Ruffin's rallied division and a brigade of Villatte's to turn the Cerro de Medellin by a circular march, and so outflank the extreme left of Wellesley's position. The movement was made a little too late to synchronize with the main fight in the centre, and the fighting began just after the attack on the centre had failed. The advancing columns found themselves heavily cannonaded by the British guns on the Cerro de Medellin, and faced by Wellesley's flank guard of two brigades of British cavalry. To support these there came up a little later one division of Spanish infantry and one of Spanish cavalry lent by Cuesta. But these succors were little used; the fight in this quarter was settled by a wild and bloody cavalry charge—a Balacava in miniature. The French ordered Anson's cavalry brigade—the 23rd Light Dragoons and the 1st Hussars of the King's German Legion—to attack the advancing column. They advanced, but were thrown into disorder by a hidden ravine which lay across their path. Nevertheless, while the Hussars charged one French square and were repulsed, the Dragoons, after falling to break another, swept furiously through the French intervals, cut through two lines of cavalry in support, and carried disorder to the rear of the hostile wing. They were surrounded and cut to pieces—nearly half the regiment perished. But they

had stopped the attack for a precious half-hour, and when Ruffin heard that the divisions further down the line had been beaten, he halted and retired.

Victor would gladly have attacked once more; he was literally foaming with rage. But this time King Joseph refused to be overruled. He had lost over 7,000 men; there were only three intact infantry brigades remaining, and he refused to risk them in a last attack. But the retreat of the army was covered by a furious cannonade, which brought about a gristly incident long remembered by those who saw the close of this bloody day. A large area of long dry grass on the slope below the Cerro de Medellin took fire, from smouldering wadding fanned by the wind, and as the wounded of both sides lay thick among it, many were scorched or smothered to death by the short but fierce conflagration that ran along the hillside.

So ended the day. It was not a very encouraging one for Wellesley: he was victorious, but at fearful cost—of his 20,000 men no fewer than 5,300 were killed, wounded, or missing. The troops had fought gloriously, yet the battle had nearly been lost, and that because no adequate support had been given by the allied army—far outnumbering Wellesley's own—which lay beside him in line of battle. Twenty-five thousand Spaniards had not fired a shot; they had been "contained" all day by 2,500 French dragoons. And the reason for their immobility was simply that Cuesta could not trust his raw troops in the open; if he had tried to disentangle them from the olive groves in which they stuck fast, they would have fallen into disorder. Wellesley realized precisely the situation, and he swore that he would never again give battle with a Spanish colleague in equal command at his side, nor subordinate his movements to the needs of Spanish strategy. The war for the next two years meant for him the defence of Portugal; as far as he was concerned the Spaniards must shift for themselves. It was a hard resolve, but a most justifiable one.

CHINESE SUPERSTITION

The Chinese are invariably courteous and considerate if you take them the right way. Superstition, of course, is deeply engrained in their natures, and a kind of kismet policy, after the manner of the Turks, takes possession of them, so that whatever is going to happen will happen, and there the matter ends.

Battling against fate for a Chinaman is sheer waste of time, and he simply bows his head to the inevitable. Take, for example, says the Shanghai Mercury, the strict attention, or rather the devotion, that is paid to feng-shui on the Yangtze. Feng-shui is the superstition that determines good site or locality, and if a town on the Yangtze has not a good feng-shui trade will not come to it, and it will be ruined.

A town named Pei-Shih had its pagoda in the wrong place not far enough down the river. The result was that all traffic which should have come to it was swept past, and Pei-Shih was left out in the cold. All the talk in the world would not convince the Pei-Shih folk that the depression could arise from any other cause than that of a bad feng-shui, so they pulled the pagoda down and built another one in the supposed right spot. So far prosperity has not returned to Pei-Shih, though the inhabitants live in hope.

The city of Wanshien, on the other hand, has a perfect feng-shui, two fine pagodas, one a thousand feet high, below the town, while Wanshien itself is very prosperous. The fact that Wanshien is situated in a most fertile valley where wheat, barley and the poppy flourish abundantly, while Pei-Shih is barren and miserable, does not concern the inhabitants of these places so much as the feng-shui site. This absurd idea in the Chinese mind is only one of thousands like it.

WOULD BE AN IMPROVEMENT

During a big Presbyterian convention in 1865 a rhetorical Scotsman from Ohio got the floor. His speech was replete with mingled humor and sarcasm. In the course of it, says the Rev. Galusha Anderson, in a book entitled "A Border City During the Civil War," he made this remark about his own eloquence:

"The speech of the brother from this city brought to my mind an experience of my schooldays. I wrote an oration and handed it to my teacher for correction."

When he had examined it he called me to him, and said:

"Taylor, if you would only pluck a few feathers from the wings of your imagination and stick them into the tail of your judgment, you would write a good deal better."

IT WAS A BLESSING

An English gentleman went to Killin for a week's fishing on Loch Tay. He was very unlucky, having got nothing for the first five days. Of course, his hotel bill and the fact that he had a boatman to pay made his fishing rather expensive. On the last day, however, he killed a nice salmon. "Hamish," said the gentleman to the boatman, "do you know that fish has cost me about £20?" (alluding to the expense.) "Aweel, sir," quote Hamish, "A' things are mixed wi' mercy; it's a heaven's blessing ye didna catch any mair."

HU A SUDDEN RISE ON MC

(By Richard L. Po
McNab's Creek, situated up Howe Sound, some few sections in the writer's mind, concerning good fish caught in which there can be few good anglers. Among the fine basket it yielded, from the light it seemed to ture and character of the kind stream of which McNab's is ample.

There has been many a ten of the bigger and better this British Columbia coast been perhaps too little said of fishing of which McNab's The great drawback to fish pure and simple to some of world-wide repute is that, are numerous and the making is comparatively easy, there culty about the disposal of the angler is bound to either mittedly or else return the of his catch.

All along the coast the creeks fed from the mountain short distance from the through comparatively level, sequently afford a pleasing and rifles and the sort of trout and their human enemies. The coast mountains, variably steep and abrupt, the water varies very considerably fall and the time of year. A torrent down the mountain side is a nearly dry channel the versa. The fishable water of course limited to the short mouth, which varies in different few miles to a few hundred creek that enters the sea on the time or other there is a possibility of so abrupt a descent from salt-chuck that there will be pools just near the mouth and be caught by the fly and a few casts may exhaust Others again will have enough to last a party of anglers for period at a stretch.

McNab's is one of the large creeks; though not big enough with the name of river, it yet hold a lot of nice fish at times reaches are fishable for several the angler hits the canon, where cession of falls.

One day, a good many y enthusiastic fishing friend of Nab's and imparted his writer, with much mystery and crecy. Being out on a cruise he had chanced to anchor at this creek, and, as a matter the fishy look of the location the test, with the result the Vancouver with a splendid fresh-run trout; as soon as offered he took the writer to preserve with the repeated there was sure to be a good suit of our joint efforts.

The anchor was dropped, age from Vancouver with a on a warm summer's day in a land-locked bay at the mouth a comfortable camp made ash morning a start was made bed of the stream, and pool searched and covered with men and "various" without sult, much to the chagrin of oosopher and friend who had ciple to the chosen spot. planations were numerous, mained that, if the fish were not bite, and for all we co water was clear as glass) there. The true explanation vious to anyone who knows these coast creeks and is by fisherman. In the interval covery of the stream and thereto there had been a speer, which had gradually become it was sultry, to say the creek had fallen to a very creeks will in a very short time water ceases to be a factor clear as gin and, if the fish could see at a distance the our artificial flies and the insect which might have the lazy enjoyment of dolce discoverer insisted that if the canon were we were bound the pools below the falls. "the pool below the falls," cient to entice any fisherman fort at any time, and we due of hope and empty of fish.

Eventually we reached pool below them, and duly flies to no purpose. Disc small spoon, and, at the treated to the interesting streat swimming up to the it casually, and then retreat "contempt and a provoking cool retreat he had chosen neath the shadow of the There was nothing for and lunch and then a pipe