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A Quick Primer on that darn Peninsular Campaign

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July 1808 to June 1814. The Duke of Wellington was still just plain old Arthur Wellesley. He had been given a force of 9,000 men to train before embarking on an invasion of Spanish American in July 1808 when he was politely informed by the authorities that Britain was no longer at war with Spain - even better they were now alliance. A treaty had been signed in June 1808.

It all stemmed from 1807 - you see there had been a bit of fighting amongst the Spanish Royals. There were two main factions in bitter opposition to each other accusations were running rampant. They appealed to Napoleon independently of each other for his help - obviously a devious plan to get the backing of the French to overthrow their opponent. Napoleon had his own cunning plan. He duly sent forces - essentially staging a coup while the spanish public were in riot against the royals and setting his own brother Joseph on the throne. He then sent his forces, headed by Junot, to chase Queen Marie (she was mad anyway) the Portuguese Queen out of her country along with her son the Prince Regent and so dominating the Iberian Peninsula.

This was ideal timing for Napoleon. He had been having great successes in the Eastern Europe

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and decided - since he was asked, it was time to sort out the thorny Iberian problem. You see he had effectively managed to blockade English goods from Europe except those that trickled in through Portugal and from there through Spain into Europe. He wasn't greatly enamoured of the English, they were the only country left that held out against him.

It is probably pertinent to mention here that while we talk about Napoleon he didn't actually personally direct the Peninsula war. In the entire 6 years of the war from 1808-1814 he only spent 77 days in Spain. The rest he left to his able generals such as Junot, Ney, Soult, and Massena. (Ney turns up again at Waterloo)

So the stage was set for a bitter battle. Napoleon had the manpower, the money and the arrogance. The English had desperation. Iberia was their last toehold left into Europe, to lose that was unthinkable for their exports. And then there was the pressing question - where would their arch-enemy look next? England?

Back to Sir Arthur for whom I will refer to from now on as Wellington for continuity and simplicity although he was not created Viscount Wellington until 1809 and Duke of Wellington in 1814.

There was every expectation in his mind that he should be appointed to lead this campaign to Portugal, he was the first to set sail on July 12th 1808 with the expeditionary force of his 9,000 men plus another 5,000 quickly added. Another possible candidate to lead the force was Sir John Moore who was sent on to Portugal a few days later. Both men were young, dynamic and battle hardened, apparently not enough for the war office which shilly-shallied around and finally appointed a chain of command of eight men led by Sir Hew Dalrymple and Sir Harry Burrard. Not a particularly good choice, neither men had seen any battle for over a decade and they could not have been said to have been ragingly successful in those either. Sir John Moore was number three on this list and Wellington the eighth and last. Wellington did not find out these orders until he had arrived.

Just one more thing before we get on with the finer details of the campaign. At no time did the Anglo-Portuguese force on the Peninsula number more than 50,000 men. Of course they had help from the Portuguese and Spanish guerilla movements. But with that small band they held off French forces of five times their size - 250,000. It is perhaps this as much as anything that assured Napoleon's downfall for he was

fighting on the Eastern front but was unable to throw all his forces there because of the niggling of the English gnats to his south.

Anyway to cut back to Wellington and at the same time to cut a long story short he got on with things and lead the first battle for the Peninsula against the French, lead by Junot, at Vimiero in August of 1808. Junot was so deep into Portugal he was dangerously cut off from support and supplies and so was beaten. Despite Wellington's repeated efforts to pursue the French Sir Hew Dalrymple refused and when the French called for an Armistice the Convention of Cintra was signed. Wellington hated it but it was ordered by his two superiors.

Basically it meant that the French had to leave Portugal, but the English were to transport them in English ships back to France with all their arms. Hardly a great military coup for the English. It is perhaps pertinent to note that Wellington referred to his two superiors as 'Dowager Dalrymple and Betty Burrard'. All three were recalled to Britain. Both Dalrymple and Burrard resigned, Wellington was forced to kick his heels for a while and Moore was put in charge

Moore, with Junot out of the way set off to penetrate into Spain where the local insurgents were rebelling against the French. Napoleon got antsy and took charge of the French campaign here and soon had Spain back in control. Moore had got over the Portuguese mountains as far as Salamanca and was threatening French communications however he discovered Sout and large body of French forces was in the district, it was December, it was winter and it was bitterly cold. He was left with his only choice which was to withdraw to the coast - Corunna. The retreat began on January 1st, took 15 days and cost over 5,000 lives of his men, and an unknown number of French lives.

Accounts from witnesses make very sobering reading. Many were shoeless with inadequate clothing, all were without food, everywhere were dead and dying. Paths that gave way into gaping abyss's, unrelenting wind, constant sleet and snow storms slurred around them and mud that dragged them down as they battled over mountain passes in the middle of winter with the French harrying them at their backs.

Armies travelled with women, some prostitutes, some wives - they were dying with the men, and their children - giving birth in the snow. There was no food for the horses and the march was at a forced pace, when an animal could not keep up it was up to the cavalryman to kill it, however as

there was an order for silence they could not use their guns. It was carnage, abandoned carts, dead animals and humans and all in the bitter cold mid-winter.

28,000 men reached Corunna however they were not safe yet. Soult had pursued them all the way attempted to prevent them from escaping to the harbour. In the ensuing battle Sir John Moore was fatally wounded. The force made it away safely but it was an ignominious end to the first season of campaigning for the British.

1809 - 1810 Struggling to Make Headway - Building Defences

In April Wellington was finally appointed to lead the campaign. He immediately made an impact advancing to Talavera and defeating the French, including Napoleon's brother the 'King of Spain'. But to maintain that position he would have to rely on the Spanish who were notoriously unreliable and had already created problems for them.

Instead he fell back to a Place called Torres Vedras. Basically this was a position he created to defend Lisbon as a stronghold. From this village he supervised the construction of 108 forts in three lines and linked by a Semaphore system. These proved invaluable in 1810 when the French led by Massena threw everything at them in a counter-offensive determined to retake Portugal.

The British were completely outnumbered and were forced to retreat. Wellington ordered a scorched earth policy as they went, all food, all stores, all mills, anything that could be eaten, crops in the fields, animals, everything had to be destroyed.

The French reached the lines of forts created at Torres Vedras and could go no further but they were determined to retake Portugal so they sat out the winter there without food or supplies, while the British were able to rely on a supply route from Lisbon. In March of 1811 Massena gave up his attempt moved to relieve his forces at the village of Almeida.

1811 - Decisive Battles

At the beginning of 1811 Soult was the master in Andalusia - with the exception of Cadiz which Victor had blockaded In March of that year Soult was ordered to support Massena who was in difficulties trying to retreat from the the lines of Torres Vedras. As Soult left General Graham moved into Cadiz with 4,000 men to raise the seige defeating the French at the Battle of

Barrosa.

In the meantime Massena was unaware that Soult was coming to his aid from the South and Wellington was hot on Massena's heels. It was in Almeida that two important actions of the Peninsular War take place. First of all Wellington's forces prevented Massena from reaching there by engaging and defeating him at Fuentes de Onoro however the French Garrison managed to escape from Almeida by breaking through the British lines during the night in what Wellington called 'the most disgraceful military event that has yet occurred to us.'

There was still another marginal event for the British at Albuera later that year. The British had identified two key points to take if they wanted to secure the Portuguese border - the Spanish cities of Ciudad Rodrigo and Badajoz. They started the siege of Badajoz in 1811, however they heard the Soult was bringing a relief column to the besieged city so a force under Beresford was sent engage the column. He established himself at the village of Albuera which is at the crossing of the Albuera river. Unfortunately the French had forded further south and Beresford's force was almost surrounded. A bitter and bloody battle was fought, conditions worsened a heavy rainstorm and hail. Losses were heavy on both sides, the Light Brigade were almost completely wiped out, however the French finally retreated.

The siege of Badajoz was not successful in 1811 - in 1812 things were different.

1812 - On the Offensive

1812 was the turn around, Wellington went on the offensive. It helped that Napoleon had suffered severe losses in his campaign to defeat Russia and recalled 60,000 of his best troops from Spain. Realising that the French forces were diminished and spread into three widely separated (for supply reasons) armies Wellington decided to press his advantage and undertake a winter campaign.

He besieged first [Ciudad Rodrigo](#) taking it in on January 19th 1812. The soldiers went on a frenzy of carnage. Rape, pillage, murder, thievery drunkenness anything and everthing. While Wellington did not approve of this sort of behaviour there was nothing he could do to stop it except wait for the soldiers to fall down too tired or drunk to do any more. About 50 officers and 650 men fell in the breaches but Ciudad Rodrigo was vital as it gave him a corridor into Spain.

In April of 1812 he took the other 'key' to Spain,

[Badajoz](#). In another terrible siege which ended with similar results to Ciudad Rodrigo. One in eight British forces had been killed or wounded during the assault (60 officers, 700 men and estimated 3,500 killed and wounded), they weren't waiting around for an invitation to take revenge, the army went on a three day rampage in the city.

With the frontier secure Wellington could now project his campaign into the centre of Spain itself. And he fought and won at [Salamanca](#) on July 22nd. Moving forward he got as far as Madrid. However with winter setting in again in October and the failure to take Burgos he decided discretion was the better part of valour and retreated from the centre of Spain.

1813 - Taking the Battle to France

Wellington returned with a vengeance, or at least with a well rested but battle hardened force. The second Allied offensive began in June 1813 - relatively late as Spring when they usually began was long over. They took Burgos in two days and [Vittoria](#) that same month [June 21, 1813] taking the war to the very edge of the Pyrenees and threateningly close to France itself.

It was vitally important that the Fortress of San Sebastian on the Atlantic Coast be taken before attempting to cross into France as it threatened his communications. It was taken in late August, but with heavy losses.

In October Wellington discovered that the Bidossa Estuary was fordable. His troops were guided across into France by local shrimpers, the manoeuvre meant they were outflanking Soult's troops who were crossing the Pyrenees. Meanwhile inland on the Spanish side of the Pyrenees the city of Pamplona was still under siege by the British.

The battles on French soil of Bayonne and Orthez were fought in 1813. But Napoleon was already in retreat from his defeat at Leipzig on the other side of Europe where the Battle of Nations.

The final engagement of the Peninsular War, the Battle of Toulouse was fought in April 1814 - 6 days after Napoleon's first abdication.

He was to abdicate for the second and final time after his defeat at Waterloo.

And these are just a few final odd notes on the campaign. There tended to be a code of honour between the two opposing forces indeed there were some [friendly acts](#) between them during

foraging expeditions - exchanging food, clothing etc. The heat of battle was bloody and vicious but when the engagement was over enemy troops would usually assist wounded back to their own side. That is not to say that there weren't atrocities on either side, there were. Incredible cruelties were inflicted during the campaigning on soldiers, guerilla's and civilians.

It is a grim fact that more men were wounded and maimed from the Peninsular War than there were from the Crimean War 50 years later. It was a terrible cost made even worse by Napoleon's hundred days of freedom which culminated in the brief but bloody engagement at Waterloo in June 1815.

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