

## **Accounts of the French Invasion of Portugal, 1807**

*Across all the battlefields and campaign, the stories that most resonate are often the little jewels in first hand-accounts, away from the major battlefields, bringing the era to life. Having driven through many of these small villages, Rob's latest research really brought them and the realities on campaign to life. This short but fabulous paper won't make the cut in his forthcoming book, but it really deserves a wide audience:*



A paper by Rob Griffith (2023), first published in his 'Daring, Duty, Cunning Plans' blog, image from 'The Life of Napoleon by William Milligan Sloane' (unknown artist)

The following accounts are material that I did not have the room to include in my forthcoming book, **So Just and Glorious a Cause: Britain and the Liberation of Portugal-Rolica and Vimeiro, 1808** (due for release Spring 2024)

In the late summer of 1807, Napoleon began to plan an invasion of Portugal. The ostensible reason was to force the Portuguese to close their ports to British shipping, and so plug a hole in the continent-wide trade embargo he had set up. But in reality, he was more interested in the Portuguese colony of Brazil and extending his sphere of influence to South America.

The Corps d'Observation de la Gironde, commanded by General de division Jean Andoche Junot gathered around Bayonne, in south-west France and, in October, received orders to march across the border with Spain, France's ally, and head for Lisbon. The instructions issued for the march by Junot's chief of staff, General de brigade PauleThiébaud, on 17 October were very detailed and closed with:

*The General-in-chief counts enough on the good spirit which animates the troops to think that he will receive nothing but just praise for their conduct.*

*He who would not meet this expectation, who would not support with honour the reputation of the French name and the glory of our arms, would be doubly guilty, since he would show himself at the same time unworthy of the corps to which he belongs, of the distinguished chiefs who command the army and especially of the honour of marching under our triumphant eagles.*

In Junot's own order, issued on the same day, he wrote:

*Soldiers, we are going to enter foreign territory, but remember that this is not enemy terrain. The Spaniards are the faithful allies of the immortal Napoleon. You know, Soldiers, how much I care about discipline, I have always regarded it as the sure guarantee of victory; it is by discipline that the soldier deserves the esteem of friendly peoples, just as it is by his courage that he conquers the admiration of enemies. You know my attachment to you; you are sure that you will not want for anything, as long as it is in my power to prove it to you. I will severely punish disorders; I will do justice to all with the most rigid impartiality. Observe military regulations exactly; march well in order; may the inhabitants of Spain have no complaints against you; be as wise, as disciplined in crossing their country, as I am sure to find you brave on the day of honour; I ask you to deserve your esteem; also ensure for me that our Emperor can say: 'Soldiers of the army of the Gironde, I am happy with you'.*

The troops crossed the border, marching in 16 columns, and entered Spain. The Spanish were also contributing troops to the invasion and had committed to feeding the French troops. However, the Spanish population were sometimes less welcoming. There were some fights and even a few murders, but generally, the troops maintained their discipline, and the Spanish tolerated them. In Duenas on 11 November, at the end of a long day's march, the ninth column fought for seven hours to put out a fire that threatened to destroy the town. The French troops were thanked by the inhabitants, but that gratitude did not prevent a straggler from being murdered the next day.

Capitaine Jaques Louis Hulot, born in 1773 in Charleville, commanded the artillery of the 1st Division. In his memoirs remembered the welcome of the Spaniards as warm, but complained that the inns and lodgings were not as good as those in France or Germany. The wine was acceptable, though it did smell of the goat skins it came in, and he grumbled about having to buy his own bread and meat.

After Salamanca, the French troops began to march through more difficult terrain. An example of the conditions endured by them can be drawn from four days in the

records of the Legion du Midi, a regiment of Piedmontese troops formed in 1803. The Legion marched from Salamanca at 7:00 a.m. on 17 November with the aim of spending the night at Calzada de don Diego, 15 miles away. Through rain and snow, the troops marched on clay and mud until 1:00 p.m., when they stumbled into their intended stop for the night. However, they were then told they needed to march another 15 miles to San Munoz. They received a ration of wine and continued. Their guides lost their way in the awful weather conditions, and the column marched miles out of its way. The mud sucked the shoes from the feet of the men. Eventually, the head of the column arrived at San Munoz at around 10:00 p.m., but the previous column was still there. The Legion had to wait until midnight for them to march before finding what meagre quarters they could. At 6:30 a.m. the next morning, they left for Ciudad Rodrigo, without having received any food. The roads were no better, and they had to ford several streams, but after another march of 15 miles, they made it to Sancti-Spiritus by 3:00 p.m. They got a meal of bread and wine and marched again an hour later. It was still raining, and many men got lost in the woods and were robbed and murdered by the locals. They arrived at Ciudad Rodrigo in the middle of the night and were quartered in a convent. The Legion had by now left 120 stragglers behind. On the 19th, they had an easier stage to march, but on the 20th, they had to cross the wild and desolate Sierra de Gata, through the Perales gorge. The few small stone houses had been looted by the previous columns, and the men started to pass the mutilated corpses of stragglers. They reached their destination at 10:00 p.m., having lost another 80 men to straggling during the day, including a battalion commander and three officers. The only ration available was a little wine. At 8:30 a.m. on the 21st, they marched for Zarza la Mayor, where they arrived in good order. They were lodged in the houses of the town and, at last, managed to get a decent meal.

Junot outlined how little he knew of the route ahead to Napoleon in a letter on the 19th:

*It has not been possible for me to obtain any information on Portugal here. The Governor of Alcantara does not even know on which side of the hill the frontier of Portugal lies, even though it is only a league away; there is not a single man here who speaks Portuguese, and I have not been able to obtain a guide who has been to the first village; I sent a reconnaissance yesterday to Rosmaninhal. It takes eight hours to get there; the best map is very inaccurate. The inhabitants of the various villages through which my detachment passed welcomed it: they said that they had heard of a French army, but that they believed it to be a long way off; that there had also been talk of war with the English, but that they did not know any more; they are extremely helpless and their country offers almost no resources.*

The terrain once the troops entered Portugal got far worse. Napoleon had insisted on what, from a map in Paris, seemed like the most direct route but which took Junot's corps through one of the most barren and inhospitable regions of Portugal. Capitaine Hulot and his artillery were soon finding the march even more difficult than the infantry:

On the 23rd of November we left Castel-Branco at six o'clock in the morning; barely two hours from this town we found ourselves on the edge of an abyss whose

appearance frightened even the men on foot. At the bottom, a torrent, the Craso or the Gressa, rolled with a roar of water that seemed deep; we could only descend by a narrow path winding along another precipice. At the bottom of this torrent there was a steep hill no less high and no less steep. The crews and baggage of the Generals and regiments were frightened into retreating; the latter were loaded on beasts of burden. We nevertheless set about overcoming this new and difficult obstacle. To give the horses a foothold and to prevent them from slipping and getting lost, it was necessary to cut the rock, and to make some sort of steps in it. When a certain number of horses had descended to the edge of the water, a carriage was lowered with the greatest precautions; it had only the two horses at the back well chosen, and was secured by mooring ropes, which were held by gunners behind and on the side opposite the flanking precipice. Having reached the bottom, this carriage was harnessed to twelve or sixteen horses, crossed the torrent, with gunners on top, and finally climbed the opposite mountain, where the necessary horses were uncoupled and brought back to the edge of the torrent. In the meantime, the supporting cables were brought up from below and reattached to the second carriage, which joined the first with the same care and effort, to which our horses lent themselves meekly and intelligently. The men did not waste a moment, and in spite of the rain, which never ceased, they worked until their forge, which was at the back of the park, was hauled up. The men of the escort (for one had been returned to us), crowded together and electrified by the pace of the charge, threw themselves into the torrent, where more than one of our soldiers died. The drummers passed on our cars.<sup>1</sup>

Capitaine Bleuler of the 4e Regiment Suisse also commented on the numerous river crossings in his diary:

*When we had to wade through the water, which often happened 10 to 20 times a day, the chiefs, even the Generals, got off their horses and set an example for the soldiers. It was customary to march forward and pass with sections. Imfeld, a lieutenant of the voltigeurs, once rode on the back of a voltigeur. General Laborde, who usually waited until everyone had passed when one had to go through deep water, saw it and commented on it to Felber [the battalion commander], who called out with his lion's voice: 'Put him down!' Plop! The Lieutenant lay in the water, and Felber and the General, both in the water themselves, laughed loudly. I gave my horse to this or that sick person or woman, and then I waited until the battalion had passed and everyone was out of the way. It was already late on 15 November when I wanted to follow the battalion and my horse, which I had given to a sick man, through a stream, when Junot, the General in chief, who was always on foot in the mountains and always in his splendid uniform as colonel General of the hussars, came running down the mountain. He already had his foot in the water when I remarked to him that I wanted to fetch my horse from the other side so that he could pass the water on horseback. He accepted, and I followed him on foot through the stream and into the bivouacs.*

For the cavalry, the march into Portugal pushed the men and the horses beyond their limits, as Marechal des logis chef Jean-Auguste Oyon of the 4e regiment de dragons, recalled:

*Here our sufferings redouble; killings are on the rise; hunger and fatigue greatly increase our losses; we are exhausted! In the depths, always torrents to cross; infantry and cavalry leave their men and horses there; the artillery can no longer follow, it has lost its entire train; we are constantly climbing steep mountains, by paths which only goats frequent, and the steepness of which could often be compared to three-quarters of the perpendicular line. When a horse stumbles, it rolls with its rider into abysses from which they can never come out. The tops of the mountains, inordinately high, are almost always shrouded in clouds; we are wet to the bone there, at the same time as in the plain, the weather is calm. Our harshness, caused by the misery that overwhelms us and by the inhumanity of the inhabitants, has ended up being harmful to them to the point of forcing them to flee their homes; the villages and towns are deserted; it is only by breaking down the doors that we find open lodgings. Great disorder is the result; we did not want it, the blame must not fall on us; our excuse is found in the old proverb: Hunger drives the wolf from the wood.*

While crossing a river, Oyon saw a dragoon's mount stumble. Horse and rider were instantly washed away in the torrent, with the heads of each appearing above the water as they were rolled down the river. Oyon noticed a bend in the river ahead. He ran to it and managed to pluck the dragoon off the horse as they passed. The man was bleeding profusely from dozens of abrasions and cuts, and barely breathing with his clothes in tatters, but after some brandy recovered enough to continue.

Again, the diary of the Legion du Midi provides an insight into the privations of the march across the border. They arrived at Zarza la Mayor on 21 November and intended to take time to make repairs to their clothing, especially to their shoes, as most men were now barefoot. However, at 4:00 p.m. the same day, they were given three days' worth of bread and told to march on. They arrived at Piedras Albas at 10:00 p.m., and some of them pillaged the Spanish village for food. The rest of the 3rd Division gathered there, and on 23 November, they marched for Zibreira across the border. The bread they had received had long been eaten, and patrols led by officers had to be formed to try and reduce the plundering. They marched on the next day in the pouring rain and arrived at Castelo Branco at 4:30 p.m. Quarters should have been prepared for them but had not, so the regiment, ignoring their officers, dispersed into the village to take matters into their own hands. Many forced themselves into the houses to take shelter from the rain and find whatever food had not been appropriated by previous columns or hidden by the locals. Those who could not find shelter inside broke down the doors and anything else they could find for firewood. On the 25th, the brigade marched for Sobreira Formosa. It was still raining incessantly, and the guides lost their way, so they arrived instead at Perdigao at nightfall, which was already occupied by another brigade and had been picked clean by other troops. The Legion collapsed under oak trees, and their only meal was the acorns. It was still raining. The next morning they marched on but had to cross the deep Ocreza river. The brigade had only one boat, and many of the soldiers, already exhausted, starving, and cold, could go no further and collapsed. It was with some difficulty that the few veterans and officers managed to get them to carry on. A rope was made of linen and clothes and stretched across the water. Several men got swept away as they waded up to their chests in the frigid water. The water rose, and the rope broke under the strain. Half the Legion was across and half not. The men on

either side of the river found what shelter they could for the night and again had to resort to eating acorns (Iberian acorns are larger and more palatable than those found in Britain). The river level fell during the night, enabling the regiment to be reunited on the 27th. That day they got a small bread ration, and then on 28 November, they finally arrived at Abrantes, where they remained on the 29th, waiting for their 200 stragglers to arrive.

Louis Begos, adjutant major, of the 2nd battalion of the 2e Regiment Suisse in the 2nd Division, recalled how much worse the march got after Castelo Branco. Some days they managed to march only seven or eight miles. There was too little food and forage, and the villages were deserted.

*Only then did the trials and tribulations of our battalion begin. On the first day we went only two and a half leagues, over crumbling and abominable paths, and through mountains where no one had ever seen. We crossed a deep torrent, where we lost two men and a horse, as well as the muskets of several of our number. Finally we arrived in a village abandoned by the inhabitants. The troops and the horses were dying of hunger; everyone was looking for food where he could, so there was General looting. Fortunately I found a chicken coop, where I got hold of everything I could. Without this resource, I and my colonel would have died of hunger. The next day the march was even more difficult. The third day, in spite of our efforts, we walked only three quarters of a league, and we arrived at an almost deserted village where we found some food which was sufficient to sustain us for 48 hours. We had two goats for every three hundred men and twenty-five chestnuts a day for each man, with a quarter of a pound of bread and a pint of wine. The next day we went a little further, and made a stage of three and a half leagues. We came across another large village, which had been pillaged by three hundred stragglers of the army. In General, it is always these fellows who do the most harm. So some of them were shot, to give an example of the severe discipline in a country where we did not enter as enemies.*

Laurent-Francois Troussel, ordonnateur en chef, and responsible for feeding the troops wrote to the Minister of War on 25 November and gave more details about the provisions, or rather the lack of them:

*It is impossible to describe our situation from Salamanca to Abrantes. We have crossed a hundred leagues of desert and terrible mountains, all the carriages and most of the artillery have been left behind, the horses can no longer walk. For eight days it has not been possible to make a complete distribution of bread, and today, after three days of deprivation, each soldier will receive a third of a ration. In addition, the troops will receive rice, vegetables, meat and wine. It seems that from Abrantes to Lisbon we will travel through an abundant country. The army is in great need of this, for it has suffered all that it is possible to suffer.*

Nicolas-Joseph Dejardin of the 58e de ligne wrote a summary of the march into Portugal in a letter to his father:

*I am in a far-away country and have had a hard time on the road. We went through Spain before reaching Portugal. We saw no peasants and their houses were empty.*



*They had all fled and left everything behind. We were left without food and were forced to cross many rivers during the worst season. We slept in the countryside and in the woods and were forced to band together to find food near the camp. Misery and peasants killed many of us on the roads.*

From Abrantes, the route to Lisbon became easier and provisions more plentiful, but many of the troops were exhausted and could barely march. Junot formed a vanguard of the 70e de ligne and voltigeur companies and headed for Lisbon. During the night of 29 November, a proclamation from Junot was posted on Lisbon's streets:

*Inhabitants of Lisbon, my army is about to enter your city. I come to save your port and your Prince from the malignant influence of England. But that Prince, otherwise respectable for his virtues, has let himself be dragged away by the perfidious counsellors who surrounded him, to be by them delivered to his enemies: his subjects were regarded as nothing, and your interests were sacrificed to the cowardice of a few courtiers. People of Lisbon, remain quiet in your houses; fear nothing from my army, nor from me; it is only our enemies and the wicked who ought to fear us. The great Napoleon, my master, sends me for your protection; I will protect you.*

However, the French did not look like the triumphant army that had conquered most of Europe as they marched into the city. As Colonel Maximilien Foy of the artillery wrote:

*They had at last made their entrance, those formidable warriors before whom Europe was dumb and whose looks the Prince Regent had not dared encounter. A people of lively imagination had expected to see heroes of a superior species, colossuses, demigods. The French were nothing but men. A forced march of eighteen days, famine, torrents, inundated valleys, and beating rain, had debilitated their bodies, and destroyed their clothing. They had hardly strength enough left to keep the step to the sound of the drum.*

Their muskets were rusty, their cartridges damp, and their artillery was far behind them. Any show of resistance by the Portuguese would probably have stopped them, as historian Robert Southey wrote: 'The very women of Lisbon might have knocked them on the head.' However, most of those with the will and means to command such resistance had already sailed for Brazil. Junot was too late. Prince Joao, the Portuguese Regent, his court, and thousands more, had sailed for Brazil, escorted by a Royal Navy squadron under Rear Admiral Sir William Sidney Smith. The Portuguese navy, coveted by Napoleon for his South American plans, had escaped. Junot began to occupy the defences of Lisbon and bring the country under his control.

Thiébauld wrote in his memoirs:

*Then, at intervals of one or two days, the shreds of the army's corps followed in an ever more miserable state, the soldiers appearing as living corpses. Elite companies of one hundred and forty men did not have fifteen, and eagles [regiments] arrived with two hundred men instead of two thousand five hundred. All day long, and not counting those who went down the Tagus in boats prepared at Abrantes and Santarem,*

*soldiers arrived carried by peasants and transported on donkeys, without weapons, without clothes, without shoes, and almost moribund; several expired at the gates on arrival.*

The French occupation would be short-lived. In May 1808, the Portuguese began to revolt against their oppressors, and in August, a British army under Lieutenant General Sir Arthur Wellesley landed and defeated the French at Rolica and Vimeiro. Junot then negotiated the withdrawal of his corps back to France.

**Sources:**

C. Sepulveda, *Historia Organica e Politica do Exercito Portugues*

R. Southey, *History of the Peninsular War*

A. Grasset, *La Guerre d'Espagne 1807-1813*

P. Thiébault, *Relation de l'Expedition du Portugal faite en 1807 et 1808*

P. Thiébault, *Memoires du General Baron Thiébault*

J.L. Hulot, *Souvenirs Militaires du Baron Hulot*

Plon, & Dumaine (eds), *Correspondance de Napoleon,*

A. Maag, A., *Geschichte der Schweizertruppen im Kriege Napoleons I in Spanien und Portugal (1807-1814)*

J.A. Oyon, J.A., *Campagnes et Souvenirs de Maréchal de Logis Jean-Auguste Oyon*

L. Begos, *Souvenirs des Campagnes du Lieutenant-Colonel Louis Begos*

N. Griffon de Pleineville, *La Première Invasion du Portugal par l'Armée Napoléonienne (1807-1808)*

B. Wilkin & R. Wilkin, *Fighting the British*

M. Foy, *Junot's Invasion of Portugal*