

THE LIGHT DIVISION'S FIGHT

(ACCOMPANIED BY PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE AREA TODAY)

By Gareth Glover

During a holiday to Northern Spain this summer, I was lucky enough to spend a day in the valley which holds the City of Vitoria. I retraced the steps of the Light Division on that fateful day for Spain 186 years ago and I was able to take a number of photographs of places mentioned in memoirs of the battle, as outside Vitoria itself (which has grown massively in size), the valley is remarkably unchanged. I hope that these photographs will be of interest.

STAGE ONE — WAITING TO CROSS THE RIVER

Defending the River Zadorra's edge was impossible for the French that day, many points were commanded by higher heights on the opposite bank and therefore vulnerable to artillery fire. Troops in loops of the river could also be cut off and surrounded. What King Joseph, commanding the army should have done, was to break all the bridges, guard all the fords and command the river with artillery placed on the heights. They could then wait out any attack, not letting any troops that crossed to debouch, damaging their formations with artillery fire and having established reserves, used them to attack any attempted bridgehead. There were 11 bridges over the River Zadorra but they were wholly unguarded, Joseph and his staff expected the attack from the south of the river along the valley and through the southern hills.¹ The scene was set for a major victory for Wellington before he ordered the advance. The Spaniards under Morillo and some of Hill's troops attacked the Puebla heights in the south, this perturbed the French, confirming their fear of an attack from the south and they weakened their centre to hold the left. The Light Division awaited orders that sunny morning near the village of Nanclares. General Alten was ordered to move to the left to the bridge of Villodas. There was only a rough road through wooded country leading to the bridge so that the division was able to establish itself only 300 yards from the French line without being noticed.

“Immediately before us ran the river Zadorra, passing from our left and front to our right and rear. In the centre of an extensive plain rose a pretty lofty conical hill, from which extended to their left a sloping plain, through which the great road lay, and terminated by a long range of mountains . . . On the face of the conical hill, and to its very summit, it appeared as thickly set with troops as if they had been bees clustering together; it was also thickly studded with batteries and other field works. On the bank of the river also were three or four villages, most of them on our side, with a bridge at each village. The French army did not extend immediately to the river bank, but was placed at some little distance beyond it. The river was easily fordable. . . . we who had arrived first, were allowed to pile arms and sit down.”²

“At half past eleven o'clock the Duke of Wellington led the way by a hollow road, followed by the light division, which he placed unobserved amongst some trees, exactly opposite the enemy's right centre, and within two hundred yards of the village of Villoses [Villodas], which we understood was to be carried at the point of the bayonet. I felt anxious to obtain a view and walking leisurely between the trees found myself at the edge of the wood, and within a very short distance of the enemy's cannon, planted with lighted matches ready to apply them. Had the attack begun here, the French never could have stood to their guns so near the thicket; otherwise, the riflemen would have

¹ Oman, Sir Charles, *History of the Peninsula War*

² Surtees, William, *Twenty-Five Years in the Rifle Brigade*

annihilated them. The General-in-chief was now most anxiously looking out for the third and seventh divisions to make their appearance.”³

Villodas was covered by a single company of French voltigeurs and a few cannon, Leval’s Division was on the heights of Arinez, the reserves posted behind the village of Arinez.

“ . . . his Lordship, with a numerous staff, went down a little nearer to the river to reconnoitre, the enemy’s position. The enemy, however, did not fail to notice this movement of our General and his staff, and instantly detached a corps of voltigeurs, who, rushing down to the river, dashed across the river at the village of Villoses [Villodas], and immediately took possession of a small woody height on our side of the river, from whence they opened a fire on his lordship and those that were with him. This of course could not be borne; and as my battalion was the leading battalion of the column nearest at hand, we were ordered (with two companies of our 1st battalion, which stood next to us) to take our arms, and drive those fellows across the river again. Thus we had I believe, the high honour of commencing the action on that memorable day. We soon chased the voltigeurs from the woody height, down through the village, and over the bridge, where they took post and remained, we not having orders to pursue them any farther. We took possession of the village, and continued skirmishing with the enemy, a good many men falling on both sides, as the river was not more probably than thirty or forty yards wide . . . ”²



Bridge and village of Villodas as seen from French bank

CROSSING THE RIVER

The Light Brigade remained in this position for a considerable time whilst Hill’s attack developed to the South. Continuous skirmishing with the voltigeurs at the bridge was their only participation in the battle to date. The 2nd battalion 95th had this honour, the remainder kept out of view.

“We had remained some time in the wood, when a Spanish peasant told the Duke of Wellington, that the enemy had left one of the bridges across the Zadora unprotected, and offered his services to lead us over it. Our right brigade instantly moved to it’s left by threes, at a rapid pace, along a very uneven and circuitous path, which was concealed from the observation of the French by high rocks; and reached the narrow bridge which crossed the river to Yruna. The first rifles led the way, and the whole brigade following, passed at a run, with firelocks and rifles ready cocked, and ascended a steep road of fifty yards, at the top of which was an old chapel, which we had no sooner cleared, than we observed a heavy column of French on the principal hill, and commanding a bird’s eye view of us; however, fortunately, a convex bank formed a sort of *tete de pont*, behind which the regiments formed at full speed without any word of command. Two round shots came amongst us; the second severed the head from the body of our bold guide the Spanish peasant. The soldiers were so well concealed, that the enemy ceased firing . . . ”³

³ Maxwell, W. H., *Peninsular Sketches: Journal of Captain Cooke 43rd Reg*

“About twelve o’clock, however, we were moved rapidly to our left, followed by the rest of the division, till we came to an abrupt turn in the river, where we found a bridge, unoccupied by the enemy, which we immediately crossed. . . .”⁴



Bridge of Tres Fuentes looking towards French bank



North side of bridge from British bank

The Brigade of Kempt had marched around the loop of the river along a heavily wooded track, which concealed them completely from the French. The road is still there but obstructed by private property (quarrying). The bridge at the village of Tres Puentes is certainly still there (see pictures above and to right) in it’s original condition as it leads nowhere, Yruna and the old chapel on the hill are no more. The area is extremely wooded and views to the other bridges at Villodas and Mendoza are now severely restricted, one presumes the French bank was less heavily wooded in 1813. Mendoza bridge now carries a modern road and was not photographed as being a modern steel construction, however it’s base is of ancient stone, so it appears the new has been built on the old.



There is a river! The River Zadorra from the bridge

“Major-General Sir James Kempt expressed much wonder at our critical position, without being molested, and sent for the 15th Hussars, who came forward singly and at a gallop up the steep path, and dismounted in rear of our centre. The French dragoons coolly, and at a very slow pace, came within fifty yards, to examine, if possible, the strength of our force, when a few shots from the rifles induced them to decamp. I observed three bridges, within a quarter of a mile of each other, at the elbow of the enemy’s position. We had crossed the centre one, while the other two, right and left, were still occupied by the French artillery; at the latter, the enemy had thrown up an earth entrenchment.”

⁴ Kincaid, Captain John, *Adventures in the Rifle Brigade*

THE ADVANCE

The Brigade now stood on this rocky outcrop, feeling very vulnerable, with one narrow bridge to their rear, and the whole French army to their front. However, support was at hand, the 3rd Div of Picton crossed over the bridge of Mendoza. This bridge was guarded by 500 chasseurs and 3 horse artillery guns. Kempt sent 1/95th against the guns, the cannons moved off opening the passage for Picton. Kempt advanced with the 3rd division and the voltigeur company covering Villodas bridge moved off rapidly. Vandeleurs brigade of the Light Division crossed over Villodas bridge, it was now 3 pm. Levall's division was now attacked in flank and front. Levall rapidly retired from the hills at Arinez, placing a regiment in Arinez to cover his retreat to heights further in the rear. Power's portuguese and Brisbane's brigade advanced, Kempt followed Brisbane. 1/95th were pushed in front to skirmish. The Rifles rushed at the village of Arinez but were ejected by a French battalion charging down the street. The 88th attacked to the right of the village smashing a regiment sent to stop it. Meanwhile, the 74th drove through village, capturing it permanently. After Arinez, the French hardly put up any further major resistance.

"We had not been many seconds there before we observed the bayonets of the third and seventh divisions glittering above the standing corn, and advancing upon another bridge [Mendoza], which stood about a quarter of a mile further to our left, and where, on their arrival, they were warmly opposed by the enemy's light troops, who lined the bank of the river (which we ourselves were now on) in great force, for the defence of the bridge. As soon as this was observed by our division, Colonel Barnard advanced with our battalion, and took them in flank with such a furious fire as quickly dislodged them, and thereby opened a passage for these divisions free of expense, which must otherwise have cost them dearly . . ."4

"We continued in this awkward state of suspense for half an hour, when we observed the centre of the enemy drawing off by degrees towards Vittoria, and also the head of the third division rapidly debouching from some rocks on our left near Mendoza, when the battery at Tres Puentes opened upon them, which was answered by two guns from the horse artillery on the right of the river. Some companies of the rifle corps sprang from the ground, where they lay concealed, and darted forward, opening a galling fire on the left flank of the enemy's gunners, at great risk to themselves of being driven into the water, as the river ran on their immediate left, while the French cavalry hovered on their right; however, so well did this gallant band apply their loose balls, that the enemy limbered up their guns, and hastily retired; and the third division, at a run, crossed the bridge of Tres Puentes [actually Mendoza], cheering, but unopposed . . ."3

"The passage of the river by our division had turned the enemy's outpost, at the bridge, on our right, where we had been engaged in the morning . . ."4

" . . . at this moment old Douro, who never failed to inspire confidence wherever he appeared, came dashing down into our village, and seeing the light troops, which had been opposed to us had retired, instantly ordered us to advance, and join our division on the other side of the river . . ."2

Proceeding forward, the 2/95th pushed aside the obstructions placed on the bridge [Villodas] and joined the rest of the Division, who now advanced together with Brisbane's Brigade of 3rd Division. The remainder of the 3rd and 7th Divisions attacked along the river line. The Light Brigade with Brisbane's brigade now advanced on the commanding heights overlooking Arinez, then proceeded to attack the village which lies in a hollow just to the south east of the hills.

“On a very steep and commanding height on the right of the enemy’s centre, flew a white standard, said to mark the headquarters and the presence of Joseph Bonaparte.”⁵

“We then moved down the hill and formed line and, with a few skirmishers in front, were ordered to attack the hill. A sergeant was in the centre with [one] colour and myself with the other. We were to make for the centre of the middle & highest hill, the 17th Portuguese supporting us. When we were half way up the hill they [the French] disappeared without firing a shot . . . We mov’d onto a hill 100 yards from the village [Arinez], a very heavy fire continuing on our left [the advance of the 3rd and 7th Divisions]. We formed line about 20 yards from the bank (2 yds high). Here we had a very strong fire from a battery of theirs, of balls & shells, whilst the 95th and some other troops [88th foot] were attacking the village which they defended well. We halted there a ¼ of an hour until the village was taken by the 95th, who captured their cannon. We then moved in open column to our right . . .”⁶

“but the French had now begun to retire, and our people to follow them, so that we found it difficult to overtake them, and did not do so till they had passed the conical hill. When we came near that eminence, I rode up to have a peep at the field before us, and never did I witness a more interesting and magnificent sight . . .”²



Heights of Arinez from the north-east

“We moved up the heights to the attack. Johnny was very soon put off them, and took shelter in Arinez, which place he held very obstinately, but ultimately was driven from thence.”⁷

“ . . . our battalion , advanced rapidly upon a formidable hill, in front of the enemy’s centre, which they had neglected to occupy in sufficient force. . . . Our battalion soon cleared the hill in question of the enemy’s light troops; but we were pulled up on the opposite side of it by one of their lines, which occupied a wall at the entrance of a village under us. During the few minutes that we stopped there, while a brigade of the third division was deploying into line, two of our companies lost two officers and thirty men, chiefly from the fire of artillery bearing on the spot from the French position. One of their shells burst immediately under my nose, part of it struck my boot and stirrup-iron, and the rest of it kicked up such a dust about me that my charger refused to obey orders; and, while I was spurring and he capering, I heard a voice behind me, which I knew to be Lord Wellington’s, calling out, in a tone of reproof, ‘Look to keeping your men together, Sir’; and though I had not the remotest idea that he was within a mile of me at the time, yet, so sensible was I that circumstances warranted his supposing that I was a young officer, cutting a caper, by way of bravado, before him, that worlds would not have tempted me to look round at the moment. The French fled from the wall as soon as they received a volley from a part of the third division, and we instantly dashed down the hill, and charged them through the village, capturing three of their gun; the first, I believe, that were taken that day. They received a reinforcement, and drove us back before our supports could come to our assistance; but, in the scramble of the moment, our men were knowing enough to cut the traces, and carry off the horses, so that, when we retook the village, immediately after, the guns still

⁵ Sherer, Moyle, *Recollections of the Peninsular*

⁶ Hennell, George, *An Ensign in the Peninsular War*

⁷ Simmons, George, *A British Rifleman*

remained in our possession. The battle now became general along the whole line, and the cannonade was tremendous. At one period, we held one side of a wall, near the village, whilst the French were on the other, so that any person who chose to put his head over from either side was sure of getting a sword or a bayonet up his nostrils . . .”⁴



Arinez village looking north to the heights

“We were soon joined by the remainder of our Division, and pushed forward up a hill, from the summit of which we could clearly discern the city of Vitoria. . . . Continuing to advance, we arrived at a small village on the main road [Arinez], from which we were annoyed by a furious fire until, rushing in, we drove them out. In the market places, we captured a howitzer, the first that was taken. It was in our possession but a short time: a whole regiment of the enemy came charging upon us and our force, which consisted of only two

companies, had to retreat with precipitation. However, when we turned around, we beheld our favourite 3rd division coming double quick down the main road to our assistance, with Picton, who was never absent in time of need, at their head. This sight encouraged us and, after retiring for about 100 yards, we were at them again . . . and recaptured the howitzer in the village, . . .”⁸

“ . . . we then followed them (3rd Division) through a village near at hand, where our battalion took three pieces of artillery and some prisoners. The French now opened a terrible fire of artillery on the village and the troops about it, under cover of which they re-entered it, and endeavoured to take the guns. but our men had out the traces; and as many of the gunners and artillery-drivers, with their horses, had been shot, the guns remained in our possession.”⁹



Church of Arinez

Lt. John Fitzmaurice, observing that the French artillery, a battery of



Village of Arinez

six guns, was retreating and believing that he could intercept it, Fitzmaurice started with his company, but they being in heavy marching order, were not able to keep up with him. Five guns had passed before he reached the road, but he caught the leading horse of the sixth and stopped them. the driver drew a pistol and fired at him but the bullet passed through his cap. He called on the two men with him to fire, and one of the horses fell, which completely checked the gun. Then the rest of the company came up, cut the traces, and made the three drivers and four gunners prisoners.¹⁰

⁸ Costello, Edward, *True Story of a Peninsular War Veteran*

⁹ Leach, Johnathan, *Rough Sketches of the Life of an Old Soldier*

¹⁰ Verner - *History of the 95th Regiment*

TAKING THE CITY

King Joseph realised they could not win, the train and park was ordered off immediately to Pamplona. He ordered the Army of the Centre to pass north of the town, the Army of Portugal to follow. The Army of the South to go south about. However, all roads converged beyond Vitoria, it was bound to cause confusion. As the French retreated the British Household cavalry was set to protect the town. 151 guns, 415 carriages, 100 artillery waggons and 2000 prisoners were captured, not to mention the mountains of booty captured by the soldiers on the Pamplona road!



Plaza de España built 1791, Costello's square?

“When we arrived close to the barriers of Vitoria, we found then blocked up by a great portion of the French waggons, bearing the ‘materiel’ of the army. We passed the gates. Through the town we were engaged in skirmishing with their rear-guard . . . I went through the square where I saw a wounded French soldier. With the help of his musket, the poor fellow was endeavouring to follow in the route of the French. When he saw me coming up, he dropped his musket and intimated that he surrendered, but he was also observed by a Spanish vagabond brandishing a club, who intended giving the Frenchman the coup de

grace. I knocked the Spaniard down. The Frenchman expressed his gratitude, but I was obliged to leave him and, unless he fell into the hands of our troops who were coming up at the time, probably to the same fate from which I had just rescued him.”⁸

The streets of Vitoria, however, had become so badly blocked by retreating guns, whose horses had dropped, either wounded or exhausted, as they galloped to the rear, that, in order to reach the gate on the far side of the town, the retreating infantry had either to climb over these obstacles or else work their way with the cavalry through narrow side streets, or reach the high road by breaking the garden walls round the place, and thus force their way out. Columns of French troops were brought in and locked up in the churches.¹¹ The road to Pamplona



17th Century buildings in Vitoria

was choked up with many carriages, filled with imploring ladies, wagons loaded with specie, powder and ball, wounded soldiers, inter-mixed with droves of oxen, sheep, goats, mules, horses, asses, milch cows, *filles de chambre*, and officers. In fact, such a jumble surely never was witnessed before . . .”³

¹¹ Schaumann, August, *On the Road with Wellington*