

The Battle of Lanhoso (Braga) 1809

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The early parts of Marshal Soult's invasion of Portugal in 1809 are little known in Britain. Hopefully this article will go some way towards changing this with a description of one of the earlier actions of this ill fated campaign.

Background

When Soult crossed the border into Portugal in March 1809 with 22,000 men he found himself faced by General Francisco Silveira who commanded the 12th and 24th Infantry regiments, the militia battalions of Chaves, Villareal, Miranda and Braganza, two very weak cavalry regiments and the local ordenanza, basically an armed mob, while a further Portuguese force, consisting mostly of ordenanza with a sprinkling of regulars, was around Braga under General Bernardino Freire. The first combats with Silveira's troops ended in French victories and that general decided to retreat from his position at Chaves. A revolt broke out among the local levies, who refused to leave the town, so he was forced to leave many of them behind to be captured by Soult.

From Chaves to Oporto, Soult had a choice of two roads; one led through difficult country and was considerably longer than the alternative which went through Braga. This second route also had the advantage that it bypassed several Portuguese fortresses and would allow communications to be reopened with the French garrison of Galicia. However, the first part of this route was through easily defensible terrain where Freire could have held up the French advance for a considerable time; fortunately for Soult and fatally for himself, Freire resolved to stay put at Braga, where he had 700 men of the Lusitanian Legion under Baron Eben, part of the 9th Line Regiment, the local militia and 23,000 ordenanza, of whom 11,000 were armed with pikes, 7,000 with agricultural implements and only 5,000 with firearms of one sort or another. In addition, he possessed about 18 guns.

Soult's column set out from Chaves on March 14th; Franceschi's and Delaborde's commands led the column, followed by Mermet and Lahoussaye who left the town on the 15th, then Heudelet who marched on the 16th and finally Merle who set out on the 17th, having just arrived in Chaves. This force, despite considerable harassment from Silveira's forces, soon overran the few outposts that Freire had placed in the narrow passes and the desperate peasants who attempted to defend their villages.

On the 17th, when the tail of the column was still setting out from Chaves, Franceschi and Delaborde arrived before the Monte Vallongo and the Monte Adaufe, which barred

the road to Braga and Oporto; the terrain is shown on the map and it should be noted that the Monte Vallongo was wooded and considerably higher than the Monte Adaufe. The whole line of hills was crowned with a multitude of men and Franceschi decided that it would not be prudent to attack such a position with his limited force so he sent an urgent message to Soult and prepared to take up a position of observation. However, his attention was drawn to the spur of high land that runs out from the Monte Adaufe to Carvalho d'Este and the convent so Foy's brigade was sent forward to occupy this important feature.

Strange Events in Braga

During the time that it took for Soult's Corps (except Merle) to arrive, calamitous events were taking place in the Portuguese camp. The agony of waiting for the coming action and the realisation that Freire had failed to assist the local peasantry in their desperate defence of their homes had led to an upsurge of emotion among the ordenanza. Freire, who had been planning to retire on Oporto, decided that it would be more than his life was worth to do so and began building artillery emplacements and barricades on the Monte Adaufe. However, by the 17th, feelings against him were running so strongly that Freire decided that he would be far safer in Oporto. His flight was interrupted at Tobossa where he was recognised and seized by the ordenanza, who sent him back to Braga as a prisoner. Baron Eben, who was no friend of Freire's, took over command of the army and imprisoned his unfortunate predecessor. However, worse was to follow for the wretched Freire; once Eben had departed for the front line, a group of ordenanza dragged him into the street and speared him to death along with his chief engineer, Major Villasboas, and some of his aides. A number of other people, suspected of pro-French sympathies, were arrested and thrown into jail.

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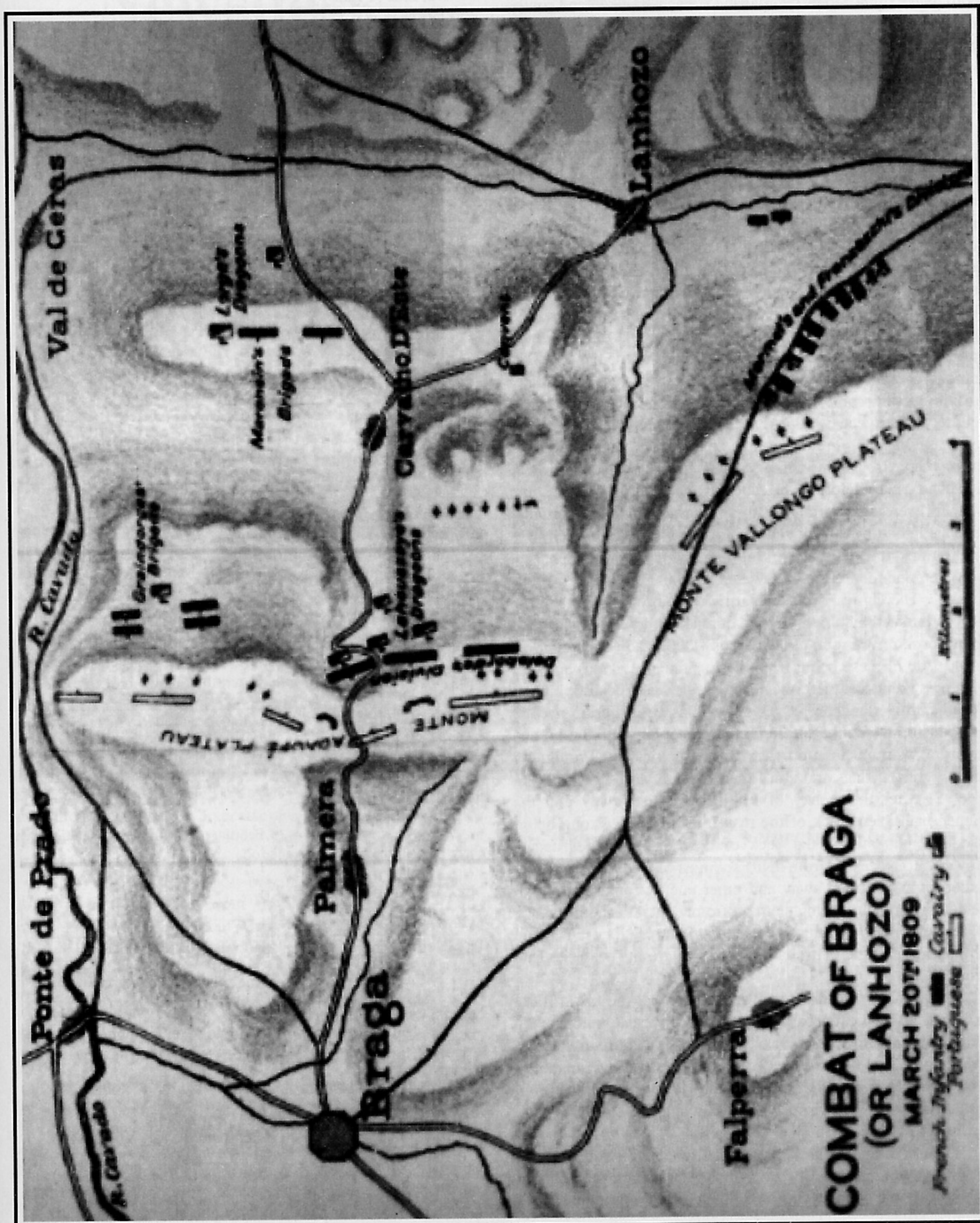
To Eben's credit, it must be said that he did his best to prepare his unruly command for the coming trial; the entrenchments were strengthened and extreme measures were taken in order to provide enough cartridges for those who had firearms, these being in short supply mostly due to the fact that the ordenanza were prone to bouts of long range firing at the French outposts.

Early on the 19th of March, Eben attempted to extend his right wing towards Lanhoso, sending 2,000 men in an attempt to encircle the French troops which were in position and isolate them from those that were still marching up. The French reacted rapidly, Mermet's regiments chasing the Portuguese out of the village and back onto the Monte Vallongo, capturing two guns and about twenty prisoners. Soult gave these men copies of a proclamation that he had issued offering a pardon to everyone who laid down their arms and sent them back to their own lines. Their colleagues read the documents with growing anger and promptly murdered the unfortunate ex-prisoners.

By the 20th of March, Soult's forces were finally assembled and he laid his plans for the attack on the Portuguese position. Due to his lack of heavy artillery (it had been left far behind with the heavy baggage), there was to be no long bombardment of the enemy. Instead, the plan was brutally simple; Mermet's infantry regiments and Franceschi's light

cavalry were to attack the Monte Vallongo while Delaborde's division of infantry and Lahoussaye's dragoon regiments were to assault the position on the Monte Adaufe via the road from Carvalho d'Este to Palmera. On the right, Graindorge's brigade

of Heudelet's division was to attack the Portuguese left while Maransin's brigade and Lorge's dragoons were held in reserve. It was believed that the Portuguese defence would collapse before being contacted by this force of 13,000 infantry and 3,000



cavalry.

Soult's expectations were not to be disappointed; on the left the French troops had to struggle through the woods before they arrived at the enemy position. However, once they had cleared that natural obstacle, their troubles ceased. The Portuguese right fled as soon as the French attacked and routed towards Falperra with Franceschi's cavalry in bloody pursuit. Just outside Falperra some of the militia, supported by four guns, bravely attempted to make a stand; the cavalry pinned them into position until the 31st Light Infantry arrived whereupon the French attacked and wiped them out.

In the centre, Delaborde's infantry columns came under a heavy fire; however, due to the extreme range at which this was opened, it was almost totally ineffective. The Portuguese managed to hold their positions until the French arrived immediately before their position, whereupon they began to head for the rear. Eben claimed that this retrograde movement commenced when a gun burst, causing a stampede which turned into a rout but French accounts make no mention of this event. As the defenders broke Lahoussaye launched his dragoons, who had followed behind the infantry, after them and pursued them for many miles, capturing most of the guns, all the baggage, the military chest and many flags and standards. Despite the ferocity of this pursuit, some of the fleeing rabble still found time to murder the suspected Francophiles imprisoned in the jail.

On the French right, the attack succeeded as everywhere else and the defenders duly broke when approached; however, as Graindorge's brigade lacked cavalry support, some of them were able to rally at the Ponte do Prado and actually managed to throw back the Hanoverian Legion, which was leading the attack. The 26th Line soon came to their assistance, however, and the Portuguese again broke and ran for their lives.

The entire Portuguese army was now in flight and the French pursued avidly, giving no quarter to those who were not in uniform, resulting in casualties of 4,000 dead (Eben claimed 1,000, 200 of these being from the Lusitanian Legion) and 400 prisoners as against their own losses of 40 dead and 160 injured. Whether this slaughter was justified has been questioned by some historians but it was certainly in keeping with the French theory of warfare. In addition to the casualties, the Portuguese lost 17 guns, 5 flags and all of their meagre stores.

After the frenzy of killing had died away and the French had taken stock of the result, there was a strong belief that they had broken the back of the Portuguese resistance. However, this was far from being so; most of the defeated troops rallied only 12 miles away and other enemy forces moved in behind the French, cutting them off from Galicia. In addition, the Bishop of Oporto had raised considerable forces for the defence of that city and the entire country was swarming with partisan groups.

Soult spent three days at Braga, repairing his artillery and distributing the few cartridges that had been captured. On the 23rd, he set out for Oporto, leaving Heudelet's entire division in Braga as well as 600 sick and wounded. He was, of course, to take Oporto but his great advance into Portugal was to go no further than that city from where he would be ejected by the British in May.

As in Spain, the French had discovered that they could beat the Portuguese army as many times as they liked, but subjugating the country was a completely different matter.

French Order of Battle

2nd CORPS (Marshal Soult)

Division (Mermet) 5459 men

1st Brigade

31st Light (4 Bttns)

47th Line (4 Bttns)

2nd Brigade

122nd Line (4 Bttns)

2nd Swiss (1 Bttn)

3rd Swiss (1 Bttn)

4th Swiss (1 Bttn)

3rd Division (Delaborde) 4954 men

Foy's Brigade

17th Line (3 Bttns)*

70th Line (3 Bttns)

2nd Brigade

86th Line (3 Bttns)

* from 6th Corps (exchanged for 15th and 25th dragoons)

4th Division (Heudelet) 3158 men

2 Brigades (Graindorge & Maransin)

15th Light (1 Bttn)

32nd Light (1 Bttn)

26th Line (2 Bttns)

66th Line (2 Bttns)

82nd Line (1 Bttn)

Hanoverian Legion

Legion du Midi

Garde de Paris

Corps Cavalry (Franceschi) 1340 men

1st Brigade

1st Hussars

22nd Chasseurs

2nd Brigade

8th Dragoons

Hanoverian Chevaux-Legers

Lahoussaye's Division 1335 men

2 Brigades

17th Dragoons

18th Dragoons

19th Dragoons

27th Dragoons

Lorges' Division c.650 men

1 Brigade

13th Dragoons

22nd Dragoons

Artillery

20 four pounders.

Note: All strengths are as of February 1st although casualties were fairly light in the intervening period.

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