

Talavera

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Following the death of Sir John Moore at Corunna Sir Arthur Wellesley took command of the British army at Lisbon at the beginning of May, 1809. The situation he faced was a difficult one. The Spanish had been soundly thrashed and he faced two French armies commanded by Marshals Soult and Victor. Deciding to attack Soult whilst leaving an observation force on Victor, Wellesley drove him out of Northern Portugal by the end of the month receiving permission from Horse Guards to press his campaign into Spain.

Soult easily outdistanced the British in his retreat into Galicia and rather than risk a disorganised headlong pursuit Wellesley decided to concentrate at Abrantes whilst coordinating with the Spanish under General Don Gregoria de Cuesta. Sir Arthur also took the opportunity of reforming his army away from the old brigade structure and into a more up to date divisional one. With all these delays Wellesley finally entered Spain on the 3rd of July. He was bombarded by suggestions by Cuesta on how to attack Victor, most of which were unsound and the Spaniard continually behaved in an obstructive manner. What he kept from Wellesley was that he wanted the post of commander in chief of all the allied forces and he feared the Englishman might get the job instead.

All this was interrupted when Victor had the bad grace to actually move his position following news of Soult's defeat. In retiring Victor inadvertently closed the distance between himself and the British. Wellesley urged Cuesta to immediately attack frontally whilst the British turned the French flank and outnumbering the 25000 Frenchmen 2:1 in the process. Cuesta meanwhile had his own problems with General Venegas who commanded the Army of Andalusia and considered himself Cuesta's equal. He refused to manoeuvre in conjunction with anybody and before anyone could stop him he had contrived to be chased off to the south of the Guadiana River by General Sebastiani.

On the 10th of July, Wellesley rode to Cuesta's camp at Almaraz to speak in person, but the meeting went badly. Cuesta resented Wellesley more and more and was consequently at his most unhelpful. The British officers with Wellesley were impressed by the potential of the Spanish recruits but appalled at their officers who were either young bucks or old fools, Cuesta himself needing to be strapped onto his horse!

Discussions the following day fared no better with Cuesta secretly assuming that all Wellesley was interested in was the top job. After hours of farcical negotiations it was decided to advance jointly against Victor leaving Venegas to tie down Sebastiani. The meeting adjourned and on the 20th the two armies joined at Oropesa, then moving on Talavera. On the 22nd the Spanish advance guard was mauled by Latour-Maubourg's Dragoon Division and only the advance of General Anson and the Light Brigade forced them back. Incredibly this was the first time the French realised that they were facing British troops.

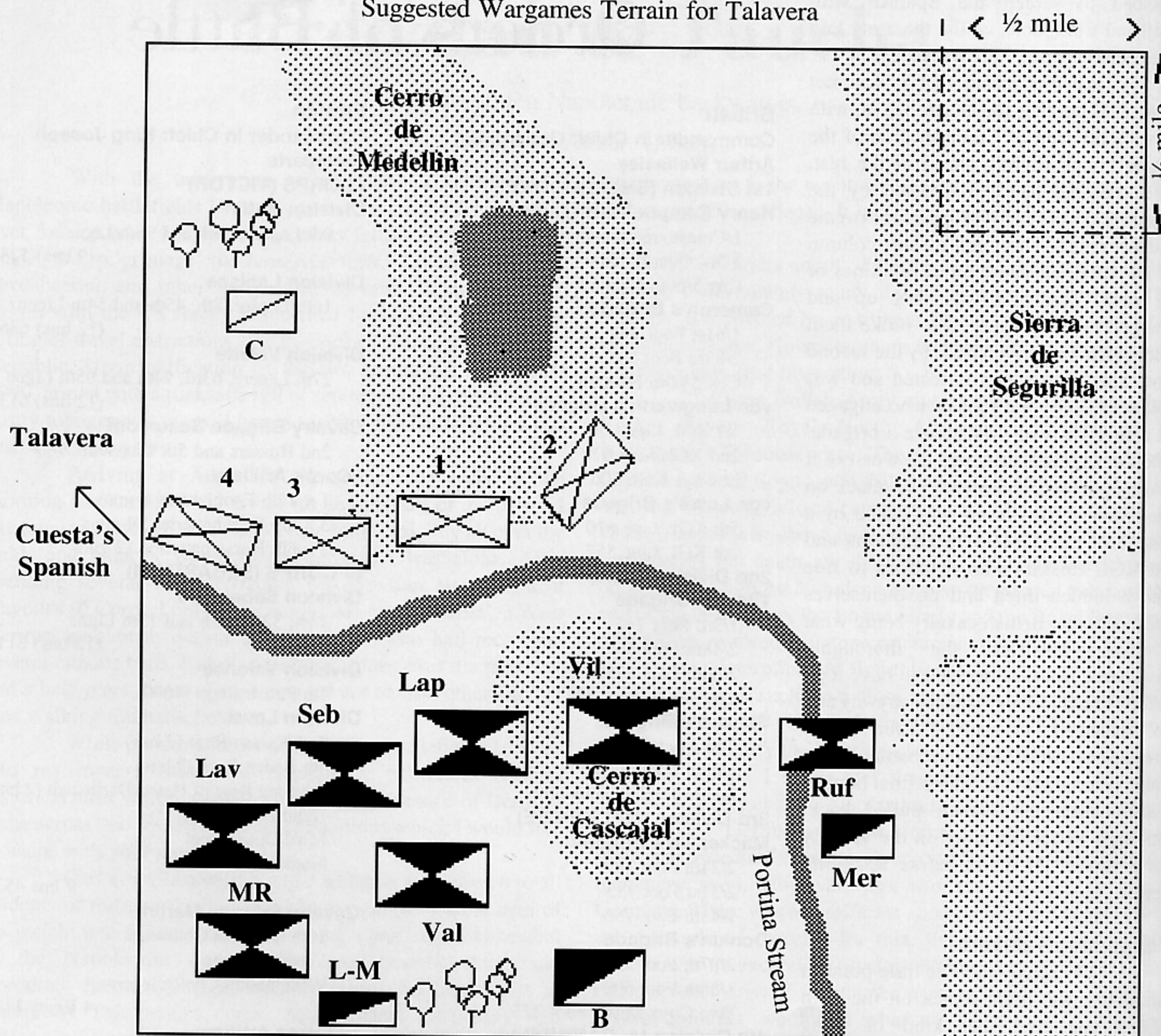
It seemed to the Allied generals that their plan had been a resounding success, in as much as that they had forced the French into an engagement outnumbered now by 3:2. The plan conceived was for a British frontal assault across the Alberche

River whilst Cuesta turned the French left. However the following morning Wellesley was enraged to discover that Cuesta had changed his mind and was proposing a day of rest instead. Even the sight of the French withdrawing had no effect on him, although Cuesta suddenly found the lion within him and promptly proposed that both armies pursued immediately. Wellesley steadfastly refused having had to put his troops on half rations and told Cuesta that the best on offer was that the British would remain in position and await the Spaniard's return. It may be that the irony in this was lost on Cuesta, however he moved out on the 24th believing Victor to be headed for Toledo to join Sebastiani, who no doubt was being menaced by Venegas. This theory lasted less than 24 hours when Cuesta discovered that Victor had been reinforced by Sebastiani and King Joseph and was up to a strength of nearly 50,000. He retreated at once.

On the 26th Cuesta retreated on Wellesley's position harassed by French cavalry who were badly handled by Victor. Despite their tiredness the French could have repeated Corunna on the Spanish and entirely destroyed them. No doubt feeling emboldened by the lack of French aggression Cuesta halted at the Alberche and camped on the French side! Following an embarrassing argument with Wellesley Cuesta grudgingly agreed to retire to Talavera. Encouraged by the apparent incompetence facing him, Victor decided on a night attack to improve his tactical position. A brigade-strength attack on the British left caused several hundred casualties before it was driven back and gave both sides little sleep.

With the arrival of dawn on July 28th it was seen that Victor was deployed very close to the Allies across the Portina River which straddled the battlefield. He proposed a right hook with Ruffin's division to be followed up by the divisions of Villatte and Lapisse. At 5:00 am the 30 gun French battery on the Cascajal hill opened fire. Under cover of the ensuing smoke Wellesley allowed Tilson and Stewart to pull their brigades behind the crest of the Medellin. Ruffin's division advanced onto the apparently deserted Medellin to be greeted by Hill's advancing division which moved up until at point blank range and simply blew the heads off the French columns and then followed up with the bayonet. This was too much for the French who fled under cover of the Cascajal grand battery. Not for the first or last time in this strange war did the British and French rest up for a spot of fraternisation and the two sides cleared up their dead and stopped to chat across the Portina. Whilst this was going on Wellesley took the opportunity to move his cavalry to the left flank where the threat seemed greatest. On the French side Joseph and his advisor Marshal Jourdan began criticising Victor on his performance to date and suggested they now pull off and await the arrival of Soult who was marching on the British exposed rear. This was opposed by Victor who put the result down to a lack of proper support. He then insisted that Joseph allow Sebastiani to properly bolster him. Two messages arriving in Joseph's possession at about this time effectively forced the course of action. The first informed him that the dilatory Venegas was approaching Toledo and the other that Soult would be delayed beyond the beginning of August. It was

Suggested Wargames Terrain for Talavera



- 1 Sherbourne
- 2 Hill
- 3 Mackenzie
- 4 Campbell
- C Cavalry

- Ruf:** Ruffin
- Mer** Merlin
- B** Beaumont
- L-M** Latour-Maubourg
- Vil** Vilatte
- Lap** Lapisse
- Seb** Sebastiani
- Val** Valence
- MR** Mardrid Reserves
- Lav** Laval

French & British Infantry take a break to drink at the Portina Stream during a lull in the fighting

decided to screen the Spanish with Milhaud's dragoons whilst the army laid the decisive strike into Wellesley.

All this meant that it was not until 2:00 pm that the attack began, with Leval's division of Confederation of the Rhine troops slightly ahead of the rest. They became badly disordered by the terrain and were easily stopped at extreme musket range. The main assault column of 24 battalions came on in two lines of 12 each. The first was shot up and charged by Sherbrooke who broke them but in turn was driven back by the second line. Sherbrooke then retreated and was followed up by the French who engaged in a firefight with Mackenzie's brigade. The French eventually had the worst of it and withdrew unmolested. The attack on the extreme British left was halted by a charge of the 23rd Light Dragoons and 1st KGL Hussars who managed to ride into a hidden ditch and do themselves great damage. British cavalry being what it was, however, the thoroughly disordered troopers decided to have a go at the French infantry squares anyway and so managed to suffer even more casualties. After this the battle pretty much petered out and after a final bout of recrimination the French pulled back, although Victor remained in the vicinity for a further 24 hours before accepting defeat.

Wargaming Talavera

Obviously there is little point in simulating the night attack on the 27th unless you find that kind of thing amusing. There is also little point in putting the Spanish on the table as their part in the battle is negligible. If you write off Milhaud's dragoons to cover them then that should suffice.

Terrain

The Portina should be easily fordable except between the Medellin and the Cascajal where it ran through a gully. The rest of the terrain is relatively clear and open.

Objectives

This is a fairly straight forward attack and defence battle. If the French fail to break the British they will lose whilst conversely all the British really need to do is stand firm. Obviously the more casualties you can inflict the better - isn't war wonderful?

Orders of Battle

British

Commander in Chief: General Sir Arthur Wellesley

1st Division (SHERBROOKE)

Henry Campbell's Brigade

1/Coldstream Guards 970

1/3rd Guards 1019

Coy 5/60th Foot 63

Cameron's Brigade

1/61st Foot 778

2/83rd Foot 535

Coy 5/60th Foot 63

von Langwerth's Brigade

1st KGL Line 604

2nd KGL Line 678

Lt Coys KGL 106

von Lowe's Brigade

5th KGL Line 610

7th KGL Line 557

2nd Division (HILL)

Tilson's Brigade

1/3rd Foot 746

2/48th Foot 567

2/66th Foot 526

Coy 5/60th Foot 52

Stewart's Brigade

29th Foot 598

1/48th Foot 807

1st Bn Detachments 609

3rd Division (MACKENZIE)

Mackenzie's Brigade

2/24th Foot 787

2/31st Foot 733

1/45th Foot 756

Donkin's Brigade

2/87th Foot 599

1/88th Foot 599

Five Coys 5/60th Foot 273

4th Division (A. CAMPBELL)

Campbell's Brigade

2/7th Foot 431

2/53rd Foot 537

Coy 5/60th Foot 64

Kemmis' Brigade

9th Foot 502

1/40th Foot 745

2nd Bn of Detachments 625

Coy 5/60th Foot 56

Heavy Cavalry Brigade (FANE)

3rd Dragoon Guards 525

4th Dragoons 545

Cotton's Light Brigade

14th Light Dragoons 464

16th Light Dragoons 525

Anson's Light Brigade

23rd Light Dragoons 459

1st Light Dragoons KGL 451

Artillery:

30 guns comprising 5 batteries of 6lb Foot artillery and one battery of 3lb Foot artillery (each 6 guns)

French

Commander in Chief: King Joseph Bonaparte

I CORPS (VICTOR)

Division Ruffin

9th Legere, 24th and 96th Ligne

(9 bns) 5286

Division Lapisse

16th Legere, 8th, 45th and 54th Ligne

(12 bns) 6862

Division Villatte

27th Legere, 63rd, 94th and 95th Ligne

(12 bns) 6135

Cavalry Brigade Beaumont

2nd Hussars and 5th Chasseurs 980

I Corps Artillery

1 x 12lb Foot battery 8 guns

3 x 6lb Foot batteries 24 guns

2 x 6lb Horse batteries 12 guns

IV CORPS (SEBASTIANI)

Division Sebastiani

28th, 32nd, 58th and 75th Ligne

(12 bns) 8118

Division Valence

4th Polish Regt. (1600)

Division Leval

2nd Nassau Regt (2 bns)

4th Baden Regt (2 bns)

Erbprinz Regt of Hesse-Darmstadt (2 bns)

1/2nd Dutch Regt

1/3rd Dutch Regt

Frankfurt Bn

9 bns 4537

Cavalry Brigade Merlin

10th and 26th Chasseurs

Vistula Lancers

Westphalian Chevaulegers

4 Regts 1188

IV Corps Artillery

1 x 8lb Dutch Foot battery 8 guns

1 x 6lb Hesse Foot battery 8 guns

1 x 4lb Baden Foot battery 8 guns

Reserve Cavalry

1st Dragoon Division

(Latour-Maubourg)

1st, 2nd, 4th, 9th, 14th and 26th Dragoons 3279

Madrid Garrison Contingent

12th Legere and 51st Ligne (6 bns) 3337

King's Guard Infantry (3 bns) 1800

King's Guard Cavalry 350

part 27th Chasseurs 250

1 x 6lb Foot battery 8 guns

1 x 6 lb Horse battery 6 guns