

BAYONNE AND TOULOUSE 1813–14

Wellington invades France



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ILLUSTRATED BY PETER DENNIS

CAMPAIGN 266

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Series editor Marcus Cowper

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The area of operations for the invasion, 'The Pyrenees Quadrilateral'



ORIGINS OF THE CAMPAIGN: THE BEGINNING OF THE END OF THE WAR

Beating from the wasted vines
Back to France her banded swarms,
Back to France with countless blows,
Till o'er the hills her eagles flew
Beyond the Pyrenean pines,
Follow'd up in valley and glen
With blare of bugle, clamour of men,
Roll of cannon and clash of arms,
And England pouring on her foes.
Such a war had such a close.

Across the Pyrenees, Alfred Tennyson 1809–92

THE CONSEQUENCES OF VICTORY AT VITORIA

News of Wellington's momentous victory at Vitoria on 21 June 1813 reached London in early July. Celebration spawned an expectation of a rapid conclusion to events in the Peninsula. His Majesty's Government gave authority for Wellington to invade France and made noises and plans for the redeployment of the Peninsular Army in support of Russia and Prussia. Wellington, however, did not see things in quite the same way.

Wellington considered that a rapid curtain call to events in Iberia, followed by a swift pursuit of the *Grande Armée* across the Pyrenees and deep into southern France, an unlikely and unwise immediate course of action. His army, which had advanced over 600 miles in six weeks, often in contact with the enemy, then fought and gained a decisive victory, was exhausted. The troops, particularly those of his Portuguese and Spanish allies, were in a fearful state; many lacking basic equipment and all wanting for sufficient provision. By the end of June the remnants of King Joseph's defeated armies had been driven across the French border; they were followed by Lieutenant-General Clausel's relatively small but nevertheless significant Army of the North a week later. Still remaining in Spain were the French armies of Aragon and Catalonia, under the capable charge of Marshal Suchet. This combined force numbered in excess of 65,000 men and posed a serious threat to Wellington's right flank. However, they were not the only French troops remaining on Spanish

Major John Fremantle, Wellington's ADC, took the Vitoria post-battle dispatch back to the Prince Regent in London. Francis Seymour Larpent, Wellington's Judge Advocate General, recorded on 21 August 1813 that 'Major Freemantle came back just in time for dinner yesterday to amuse us with all your madness in England about the Battle of Vitoria'. (By kind permission of Cdr C. Fremantle)



soil. Two large garrisons were holed-up at the great fortresses of San Sebastian and Pamplona; both had been resupplied and reinforced by the retreating French forces and both represented a serious threat to the Allied lines of communication. Furthermore, Wellington's own lines of communication were now unwieldy and it had long been the plan, once northern Spain and the Cantabrian coast had been cleared, to move the British logistic base from Lisbon to Santander. This would be a time consuming operation and one which needed to be concluded before the invasion could commence.

Wellington was also acutely conscious of the political sensitivity surrounding the continued employment of Britain's main expeditionary army in Iberia and the (hitherto unthinkable) invasion of French soil. The earlier fear that this small British expeditionary army would be destroyed had diminished. Prime Minister Spencer Perceval had been firmly of the view that retaining British soldiers in Iberia kept the Portuguese and Spanish fighting, causing problems in turn for France elsewhere in Europe. However, the boot was now on the other foot and, in the interim, Perceval had been assassinated and replaced by Lord Liverpool (the former Secretary for War) who had been decidedly non-committal on the issue. Furthermore, Napoleon's Russian campaign had solicited charges, from her coalition partners, that Britain was not pulling her weight militarily.

The ruinous defeat of Napoleon's Peninsular armies at Vitoria had changed all that. Beethoven composed his overture on the theme of 'Rule, Britannia!' and even the Russians celebrated by singing a *Te Deum* in thanks and recognition. Moreover, the subsequent withdrawal of the remnants of those defeated armies, back across the Pyrenees, seemed to provide Lord Bathurst (the new Secretary for War) the rationale for Britain 'to throw our whole force as much as possible to co-operate with the Allies in the Netherlands'. He later added, in correspondence to Wellington, 'we could move you, but not your army', a sentiment which solicited an understandably unenthusiastic response from the Allied commander-in-chief. The counter-argument concluded that Wellington's continued presence, coupled with an invasion of France, would be a serious obstacle to Napoleon's attempts at

the regeneration of his *Grande Armée* post-Russia, by tying down the remnants of his Spanish armies in defence of the southern border. Furthermore, Vitoria had changed the political landscape and subsequent outlook of, in particular, Austria who, having pontificated over an armistice extension with France, now threw in her lot with Russia and Prussia.

The scale of Wellington's victory over the combined French armies at Vitoria was spoilt by a bungled pursuit. This was not entirely due to a thirst for plunder; far more credit should be given to the French cavalry for their actions following the collapse. (Anne S. K. Brown Military Collection, Brown University Library)

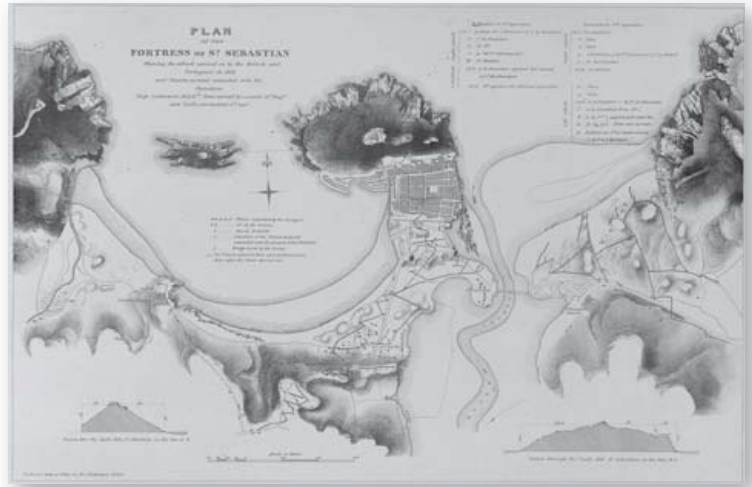


WELLINGTON'S PROBLEMS

Even before Napoleon had signed an extension of the armistice with the eastern powers, Wellington had reached the Pyrenees. Expectations that Wellington would maintain the momentum, invade France and bring the Iberian war to a swift conclusion were high. Reality was, in point of fact, very different. For although 2,000 prisoners and all the French artillery had been captured following the battle at Vitoria, more than 50,000 men had escaped via Pamplona and the Pyrenean passes to their homeland. Wellington's problems were manifest and abundant. His battle-honed army had disintegrated in the immediate aftermath of victory. Wellington wrote to Lord Bathurst at the end of June that 'we started with the army in the highest order, and up to the day of the battle nothing could get on better; but that event has, as usual, totally annihilated all order and discipline'.

The event in question was the haul of treasure, the fruits of six years of plunder, reputedly the greatest ever captured by an army, which had been unavoidably, yet consequentially, strewn across the countryside by the fleeing French. It was undoubtedly a lost opportunity, prompting Wellington, tinged with indignant fury, to pen the often misinterpreted phrase that 'we have in the service the scum of the earth as common soldiers'. His Allied troops too were in a dreadful state, lacking supplies, replacement uniforms, weapons and ammunition. The whole was subjected to living off the land; a logistic policy Wellington abhorred. Even the weather appeared to conspire against his men, as incessant and unseasonably heavy rain fell, prompting widespread sickness. At one stage practically a third of the Allied Army was *hors de combat* for one reason or another.

To make matters worse, relations with the Spanish authorities had degenerated with alarming speed. The Spanish Minister for War had long since clipped Wellington's wings as *Generalissimo* of the Spanish armies, removing without so much as a by-your-leave, and in direct breach of his terms, General Castaños and General Giron from their posts under Wellington's command. His hands were tied and he contented himself with a



The town and castle of San Sebastian stands on a peninsula which projects north into the Bay of Biscay. Approaches are difficult and it was to prove a very difficult 'nut to crack'. Foy reinforced the garrison with 2,500 men before he pulled back into France. (Author's Collection)

Pamplona was a formidable fortress. Joseph and the majority of the defeated French armies had passed through here following the defeat at Vitoria. A total of 3,600 men were left to garrison the fort on their departure. Due to a lack of siege guns, the fort was not attacked, but it was starved into submission in late October 1813. (Author's Photograph)



threat of resignation fully aware that a complete breakdown in relations at this juncture was most unwise. He was less diplomatic in his dealings with the British Admiralty. The War of 1812 with America had broken out the previous summer resulting in a redeployment of Royal Navy assets to blockade the east coast of America and to counter and pursue American privateers. These resources came largely from the North Sea Fleet but the corresponding reallocation of tasks stretched the Mediterranean and Channel fleets, the latter having responsibility for the Bay of Biscay and the north coast of Spain. The result was a reduction of naval ships, patrols and influence, thereby endangering the naval supremacy hitherto enjoyed by the allies at a time when that unquestionable dominance was most required. In addition to merely sustaining the Iberian nations, naval operations were critical to maintain the independent threat created by the existence of the Anglo-Sicilian expeditionary force on Spain's east coast, to move the British logistic base from Lisbon to Santander and to enforce the blockade of the Cantabrian coast.

The geography of the area of operations of the western Pyrenees is complicated and requires a brief mention. It stretched about 25 miles inland (that is to the south-east) from the corner of the Bay of Biscay. The mountains are far less formidable in this area than the central Pyrenees and decrease in height as they approach the sea. On the northern or French side of the watershed the elevations fall quite sharply, perpendicular to the plains below, at a distance of not more than a few miles. On the southern or Spanish side the valleys lie perpendicular to the watershed and a number of east-west ridges run parallel to the main ridge and even at places rival it for some 15–25 miles. Thus, as former major-general and published author of books on the Peninsular War F. C. Beaton describes it, 'a man looking at the Pyrenees from the French towns at their base sees in one complete view a belt of steep rising slopes and a fairly even line of summits against the sky. A man looking at the range from the Spanish plains can only in a few rare places so much as catch sight of the main range.'

There are three main routes through the area. The first is the great road or *Grande Chaussée* running at the western end from Bayonne through Irun to Vitoria and on to Madrid. The two lesser routes pass over the Pyrenees and down to Pamplona; the one in the east through the pass of Ibaneta (north of Roncesvalles) and the other in the centre through the Baztan valley and the pass of Maya. All other crossings were mere mule tracks.

Typical terrain in the western Pyrenees. A view of the Baztan valley looking south from the pass of Maya. This terrain, although not a major obstacle to infantry or cavalry, caused problems for the artillery guns and wagons as well as the baggage carts. There were a number of small tracks, known by local shepherds and Basque smugglers. (Author's Photograph)



CHRONOLOGY

1813

- 13 April The battle of Castalla.
- 22 May Wellington's final offensive in Spain commences.
- 27 May French evacuate Madrid.
- 3 June French evacuate Valladolid.
- 3 June Siege of Tarragona by General Murray commences.
- 12 June King Joseph Bonaparte abandons Burgos and retreats.
- 21 June The battle of Vitoria.
- 25 June Blockade around Pamplona commences.
- 10 July Spanish irregulars under Mina capture Zaragoza.
- 11 July First siege of San Sebastian commences.
- 25 July First siege of San Sebastian ends in failure.
- 25 July–1 August The battle of the Pyrenees.
- 30 July Blockade of Tarragona by General Bentinck commences.
- 1 August Soult and the French Army retreat into France.
- 6 August Second siege of San Sebastian commences.
- 15 August Blockade of Tarragona lifted by General Bentinck.
- 31 August San Sebastian falls to the Allies.
- 31 August The battle of San Marcial.

1–8 September	Citadel of San Sebastian captured.
7–8 October	Wellington invades France, crosses the Bidassoa and the battle of Vera.
31 October	Pamplona falls to the Allies.
10 November	The battle of the Nivelle.
21 November	Wellington sends his Spanish allies back to Spain.
9–11 December	The battles on the Nive.
9 December	Combat at Villefranque and Anglet
10 December	Combat at Arcangues. First combat at Barrouillet.
11 December	Second combat at Barrouillet.
13 December	The battle of St Pierre.
1814	
12 February	Wellington's New Year offensive commences.
15 February	Combat at Garris.
16 February	Combat at Arriverayte.
23 February	Blockade of Bayonne commences.
27 February	St Étienne stormed and captured.
27 February	The battle of Orthez.
2 March	Combat at Aire.
12 March	Insurrection at Bordeaux. French residents welcome the Allies and return of their 'King'.
19 March	Combat at Vic-en-Bigorre.
20 March	Combat at Tarbes.
24 March	King Ferdinand VII re-enters Spain.
31 March	Napoleon abdicates in Paris.
6 April	Combat at Étauliers.
8 April	Combat at Croix D'Orade.