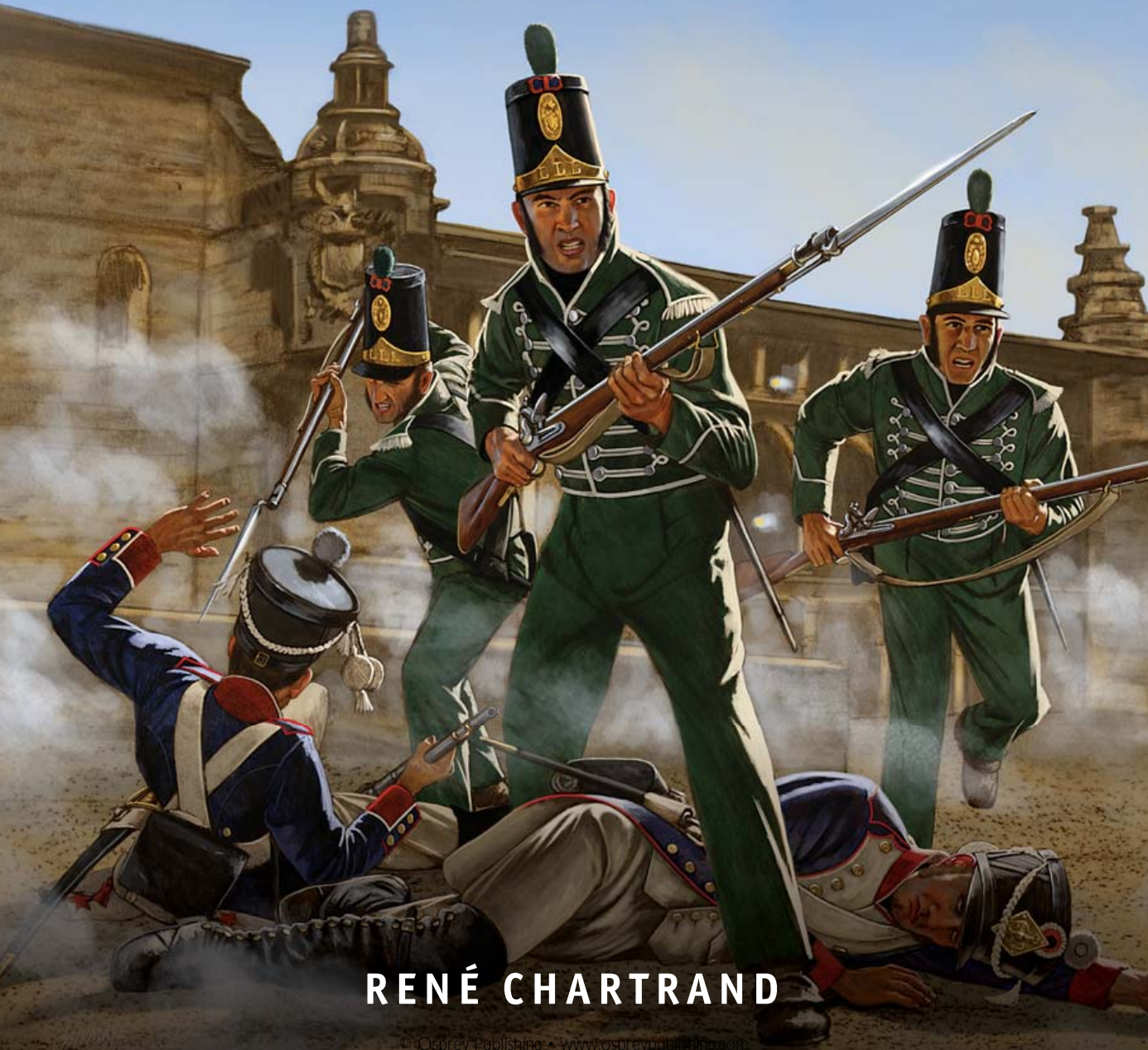


RAID

OLDEST ALLIES

Alcantara 1809



RENÉ CHARTRAND

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INTRODUCTION

Between January 1809, when Gen Sir John Moore's British army evacuated northern Spain at Corunna, and May, when Maj-Gen Sir Arthur Wellesley's campaigns liberated northern Portugal, British and French forces fought many engagements, raids and counter-raids in the area around Alcantara, Spain, and as far north as Ciudad Rodrigo and Salamanca. Outside of Wellesley's recapture of Porto from the French Marshal Soult, this period remains somewhat shrouded into an historical haze. Although no major battles involving tens of thousands of men occurred that drew sustained attention from historians, many engagements of vital strategic and tactical importance occurred, involving only a few hundred or a few thousand men. These actions in western Spain, which succeeded in mobilizing a major part of a French army corps, are the 'missing link' in the chronology of the Peninsular War, and are the subject of our study.

This period of the war, featuring little-known (and often unrecorded) raids and engagements, can be grouped together under one name – Alcantara – for it was here that the largest of these engagements was fought. But because of its strategic situation Alcantara was more than just a place to raid; it was the crossroads of one of the main mountain passes that could become an invasion route by either side. Hence, the engagement at Alcantara on 14 May 1809, which is mainly remembered because it occurred in a most scenic setting complete with a magnificent Roman bridge, was merely the final chapter in a period of raids that had been going on since January 1809. In those months, dozens and perhaps hundreds of raids and minor skirmishes took place; first in the plains of Leon until the action moved south to the isolated countryside of Estremadura.

For the sake of this study, we have tried to keep the narrative down to two main areas of action: northern Portugal and western Spain. There were also epic struggles going on in, for instance, the heroic city of Zaragoza and in eastern Spain. However, although it does not seem evident at first glance, the actions that went on in northern Portugal and western Spain were linked; indeed it could be argued that they were linked closely. They were elements

**CIRCA
AD 105**

**Bridge at
Alcantara built**



of one of the numerous plans and counter-plans that emerged at this time. For the French, it was Napoleon's master plan for subduing Portugal from several directions at once, and its effects, which is discussed in the main and lengthy first three chapters on origins, strategy and planning. It was also where guerrilla warfare was emerging.

As outlined in these pages, the arrival of the largely British-trained and led Loyal Lusitanian Legion that was deployed in raid warfare was crucial; with Spanish and Portuguese levies, it managed to perform not just one, but a myriad of raids big and small while deployed on the plains of Leon and this, in effect, isolated three French army corps (Marshal Victor's 1st, Soult's 2nd and Ney's 6th) by driving a wedge between northern and southern Spain along its mountainous border with Portugal. The important link between the French armies was essentially severed for months; coordination between the French marshals was next to impossible due to cut-off communications, and this was prevalent right up to the final epic battle at Alcantara.

The famous Roman bridge at Alcantara. It was built at the beginning of the 2nd century AD at the behest of Emperor Trajan. It is still in use today. (Author's photo)

ORIGINS

Alcantara

Alcantara is a small frontier town in the Spanish province of Estremadura, lying on the banks of the river Tagus near the border with Portugal. The town was originally founded by the Moors, on account of the convenience of a fine Roman stone bridge. As recorded in an AD 105 inscription over one of its arches, it was built during the reign of the Emperor Trajan (r.98 to 117) at the expense of the people of the Roman province of Lusitania. A Roman army camp is said to have been nearby, probably at the site of the present town. This excellent bridge was undoubtedly a major factor in encouraging trade and commerce in the domains of Hispania and Lusitania, as Spain and Portugal were initially called. The western Roman Empire eventually collapsed in the 5th century at the hands of the barbarian Visigoths, but the sturdy bridge over the Tagus remained. In the 8th century, the Muslim Moors invaded and settled in most of Christian Spain and Portugal. A small town was founded near the bridge, and it became known to the Moors as al-Quantara, which translates simply as 'the bridge'. Soon, the Christians set about winning back the domains lost to the Moors, and for centuries waged a more or less ceaseless war against them that is remembered as the *Reconquista* – the reconquest.

The town of Alcantara was first taken by the Christian army of King Ferdinand II of Leon in 1167, but it was retaken by the Moors five years later. In 1214, the army of King Alfonso IX of Leon captured Alcantara and the custody of the town was first granted to the knights of the Order of Calatrava; however, two years later, the knights of the Order of St Julian del Parero became the keepers of the town. Instituted in 1156, this knightly order soon changed its name to the Order of Alcantara, at the same time assuming a green colour for the cross whose tips ended in lilies, which they wore on their long white cloaks. As with all Christian knightly orders of the time, the Order of Alcantara also bore a religious character. In the following decades and centuries, the knights of Alcantara became a wealthy order thanks to battle successes against the Moors as well as substantial donations from

pious Christians. In 1492, the *Reconquista* came to an end with the fall of Moorish Grenada to the Spanish Christian armies.

Walls had been built around the town in Moorish times and were maintained by the knights during the Middle Ages. They decayed thereafter, but remains can still be seen. During this period Alcantara still had a military role with regard to Portugal which, following the end of the campaigns against the Moors, had become a fiercely independent rival. After the two nations were united by a dynastic arrangement in 1580, the knights assumed a less warlike and more peaceful role, but nevertheless continued to prosper. By the late 16th century, the Order of Alcantara had some 37 'commanderies' of knights and was responsible in one way or another for about 53 castles or small towns in western Spain. It was, at that time, one of the more important knightly orders in the country.

Since the 15th century, the town had become the home of several religious orders besides the knights. The convents of St Francis and of the nuns of San Remedio were built. In 1495, the Knights of Alcantara settled on building their own convent as the seat of their order. This was approved by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella. Construction of the knights' beautiful convent of San Benito de Alcantara began in 1499 and went on for most of the 16th century. Its cloister was built in the Gothic style on the foundations of a Moorish fort, but its most gracious feature was (and is) its three-storey Renaissance arches.

The Portuguese were not content with their union under the Spanish crown and, from 1640, proclaimed the Duke of Braganza as King John IV of Portugal and staged a successful 'war of restoration' (although Spain only formally



The arch on the bridge with the coat of arms of Spain at the top with, below, the inscription left by the Romans in the reign of Emperor Trajan that dates its inauguration to 105 AD. This area was the scene of the heaviest fighting on 14 May 1809. The Loyal Lusitanian Legion was posted at the far end. (Author's photo)

SUMMER
1807

French troops
begin to move
into Spain

accepted Portugal's independence in 1668). While Estremadura often bore the brunt of the border raiding and was impoverished by the depredations caused by the armed forces of both sides, there were no major engagements and Alcantara itself remained basically unscathed during this war.

The War of the Spanish Succession (1702–1714) brought warfare to the area and, in 1706, Alcantara was taken and sacked by Portuguese troops who then retired to their own borders. The next century was a fairly peaceful period for the town and its knights, whose position, by then, was more as noble country gentlemen enjoying a quiet life rather than as ferocious warriors. By the late 18th century, Alcantara had a population of about 5,000 inhabitants. Clouds of political instability appeared with the French Revolution of 1789; before long, most of Europe was engaged in warfare that eventually saw the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte who became Emperor of the French in 1804.

In the 1790s, Spain had first fought the French republicans, then switched sides and allied itself with the French to fight Britain, the common enemy. The loss of most of the Spanish fleet at the disastrous 1805 battle of Trafalgar greatly humbled the Spanish and there were murmurs and resentments about the French alliance. On the other hand, the Emperor of the French had defeated every large power on the continent, so it was out of the question to break the alliance.

As time passed, Napoleon became increasingly displeased with the 'neutral' kingdom of Portugal. That country was well known as 'Britain's oldest ally' with strong ties between these two maritime nations that went back to the Middle Ages. The Spanish and the Portuguese had not evolved a great liking for each other over the centuries, but there was a tolerance of sorts. There had even been, under French pressure, the short and somewhat ridiculous 1801 'War of the Oranges' between the two nations, who clearly did not wish a bloody contest. By 1807, Napoleon had had enough of Spain's inaction regarding Portugal's obvious double-dealing with the British. He wanted his continental blockade to be effective and starve Britain. Yet here was this huge gap: Portugal's coast as well as colonies such as Portuguese Brazil, flaunting the blockade while proclaiming to its adherence.

A view of the monastery of San Benito, built from the late 15th century as the seat of the knightly Order of Alcantara. (Author's photo)



This had to stop. During the summer of 1807, large contingents of French troops moved into Spain and its allied Spanish army was advised to be alert at the Portuguese border.

Invasion of Portugal

The French plan to solve the problem was to invade Portugal. A Spanish army was tasked to occupy Porto and the north of the country while a French army would take Lisbon and hold the south. Both France and Spain agreed to partition Portugal and its colonies to their benefit. However, the sight of thousands of French troops marching southwest across their country filled many ordinary Spaniards with unease. Napoleon had marched his armies into every country in western Europe; now it was Portugal's turn, but some Spaniards wondered whether tomorrow it might be theirs. For now, the Spanish had to submit to France, which was the ally of their own government, but resentment and mistrust rose in their hearts.

Meanwhile, in Lisbon, everyone realized that the game was up and that the French were moving across Spain and being joined by a sizeable Spanish force. It was unlikely that the Portuguese army could resist such an invasion. Although sweeping reforms to the organization of the regular army and the reserves had been decreed since 19 May 1806, they had not been totally implemented. It was theoretically wonderful and the new uniforms looked good, but the old *laissez-faire* habits within the regular army did not vanish and the officer corps, while giving lip service to the reforms, was divided on the wisdom of such measures. The regular army was way below its establishment strength and could muster, at most, 25,000 men. Of these

General Junot's French infantry crossing the mountains along the upper Tagus River from Spain into Portugal, November 1807. The border areas between Spain and Portugal were rife with natural obstacles, such as mountain ranges, which made their crossing very difficult, especially for large armies. (Print after Maurice Orange. Private collection. Author's photo)

