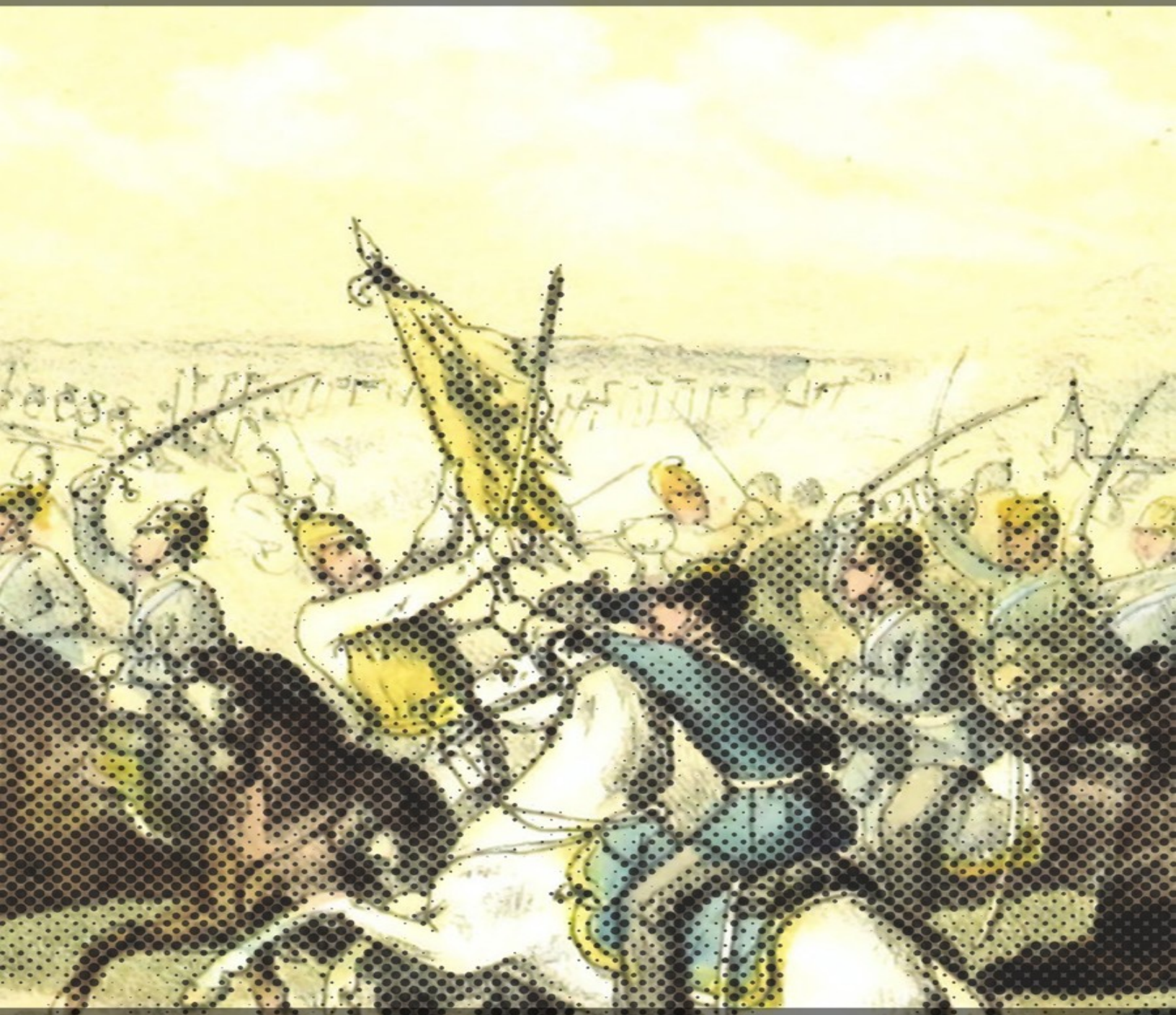
Stephen Crane



Great Battles of the World

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But as the whole aspect of affairs was revealed, and as Wellington coolly stated his plans for a new campaign, public opinion changed.

It was a critical juncture: Napoleon had arranged an armistice with Russia, Prussia, and Austria, which was to last until August 16, 1813, and it became known that this armistice might end in peace. Peace on the Continent would mean that Napoleon's unemployed troops might be poured into Spain in such enormous numbers as to overwhelm the Allies. So, to ensure Wellington's striking a decisive blow before this could happen, both the English Ministry and the Opposition united in supporting him, and for the first time during the war he felt sure of receiving the supplies for which he had asked.

After the French Defeat—Vittoria

The winter and spring were spent by Wellington in preparing for his campaign: his troops needed severe discipline after the disorder into which they had fallen during the retreat from Burgos, and the great chief entered into the matter of their equipment with most painstaking attention to detail, removing unnecessary weight from them, and supplying each infantry soldier with three extra pairs of shoes, besides heels and soles for repairs. He drew large reinforcements from England, and all were drilled to a high state of efficiency.

It is well to quote here from the letter published by Wellington on the 28th of December 1812. It was addressed to the commanders of divisions and brigades. It created a very pretty storm, as one may readily see. I quote at length, since surely no document could be more illuminative of Wellington's character, and it seems certain that this fearless letter saved the army from the happy-go-lucky feeling, very common in British field forces, that a man is a thorough soldier so long as he is willing at all times to go into action and charge, if ordered, at even the brass gates of Inferno. But Wellington knew that this was not enough. He wrote as follows:

"Gentlemen—I have ordered the army into cantonments, in which I hope that circumstances will enable me to keep them for some time, during which the troops will receive their clothing, necessaries, etc., which are already in progress by different lines of communication to the several divisions and brigades.

"But besides these objects, I must draw your attention in a very particular manner to the state of discipline of the troops. The discipline of every army, after a long and active

campaign, becomes in some degree relaxed, and requires the utmost attention on the part of general and other officers to bring it back to the state in which it ought to be for service; but I am concerned to have to observe that the army under my command has fallen off in this respect in the late campaign to a greater degree than any army with which I have ever served, or of which I have ever read.

. . . . .

"It must be obvious, however, to every officer, that from the moment the troops commenced their retreat from the neighbourhood of Burgos on the one hand, and from Madrid on the other, the officers lost all command over their men.

. . . . .

"I have no hesitation in attributing these evils to the habitual inattention of the officers of the regiments to their duty as prescribed by the standing regulations of the service and by the orders of this army.

"I am far from questioning the zeal, still less the gallantry and spirit, of the officers of the army; I am quite certain that if their minds can be convinced of the necessity of minute and constant attention to understand, recollect, and carry into execution the orders which have been issued for the performance of their duty, and that the strict performance of this duty is necessary to enable the army to serve the country as it ought to be served, they will in future give their attention to these points.

"Unfortunately, the experience of the officers of the army has induced many to consider that the period during which an army is on service is one of relaxation from all rule, instead of being, as it is, the period during which of all others every rule for the regulation and control of the conduct of the soldier, for the inspection and care of his arms, ammunition, accoutrements, necessaries, and field equipments, and his horse and horse appointments, for the receipt and issue and care of his provisions and the regulation of all that belongs to his food and the forage for his horse, must be most strictly attended to by the officer of his company or troop, if it is intended that an army—a British army in particular—shall be brought into the field of battle in a state of efficiency to meet the enemy on the day of trial.

"These are points, then, to which I most earnestly entreat you to turn your attention, and the attention of the officers of the regiments under your command, Portuguese as well as English, during the period in which it may be in my power to leave the troops in their cantonments.

. . . . .

"In regard to the food of the soldier, I have frequently observed and lamented in the late campaign the facility and celerity with which the French soldiers cooked in comparison with those of our army.

"The cause of this disadvantage is the same with that of every other description—the want of attention of the officers to the

orders of the army and the conduct of their men, and the consequent want of authority over their conduct.

. . . . .

"But I repeat that the great object of the attention of the general and field officers must be to get the captains and subalterns of the regiments to understand and perform the duties required from them, as the only mode by which the discipline and efficiency of the army can be restored and maintained during the next campaign."

The British general never refrained from speaking his mind, even if his ideas were certain to be contrary to the spirit of the army. I will quote from *Victories of the British Armies* as follows:

"Colborne marched with the infantry on the right; Head, with the Thirteenth Light Dragoons and two squadrons of Portuguese, on the left, and the heavy cavalry formed a reserve. Perceiving that their battering train was endangered, the French cavalry, as the ground over which they were retiring was favourable for the movement, charged the Thirteenth. But they were vigorously repulsed; and, failing in breaking the British, the whole, consisting of four regiments, drew up in front, forming an imposing line. The Thirteenth instantly formed and galloped forward—and nothing could have been more splendid than their charge. They rode fairly through the French, overtook and cut down many of the gunners, and at last entirely headed the line of march, keeping up a fierce and straggling encounter with the broken horsemen of the enemy, until some of the English dragoons actually reached the gates of Badajoz."

And now I quote from Wellington's comment to Colborne:

"I wish you would call together the officers of the dragoons and point out to them the mischiefs which must result from the disorder of the troops in action. The undisciplined ardour of the Thirteenth Dragoons and First Regiment of Portuguese cavalry is not of the description of the determined bravery and steadiness of soldiers confident in their discipline and in their officers. Their conduct was that of a rabble, galloping as fast as their horses could carry them over a plain, after an enemy to whom they could do no mischief when they were broken and the pursuit had continued for a limited distance, and sacrificing substantial advantages and all the objects of your operation by their want of discipline. To this description of their conduct I add my entire conviction, that if the enemy could have thrown out of Badajoz only one hundred men regularly formed, they would have driven back these two regiments in equal haste and disorder, and would probably have taken many whose horses would have been knocked up. If the Thirteenth Dragoons are again guilty of this conduct I shall take their horses from them, and send the officers and men to do duty at Lisbon."

The incident of the dragoons' charge happened early in 1811, but it shows how Wellington dealt with the firebrands in the army. However, imagine the feelings of the Thirteenth Dragoons!

As for the Allies, they were for a long time considered quite hopeless by British officers; the Portuguese were commonly known in the ranks as the "Vamosses," from *vamos,* "let us be off," which they shouted before they ran away. (The American slang "vamoose" may have had its origin in the Mexican War.)

The Spanish and Portuguese hated each other so cordially that it was with the greatest difficulty that they could be induced to co-operate: they were continually plotting to betray each other, and, incidentally, the English. Wellington had a sufficiently hard task in keeping his English army in order and directing the civil administration of Portugal, which would otherwise have tumbled to pieces from the corruption of its government; but hardest of all was the military training of the Spanish and Portuguese. He was now in supreme command of the Spanish army, concerning which he had written:

"There is not in the whole Kingdom of Spain a depot of provisions for the support of a single battalion in operation for one day. Not a shilling of money in any military chest. To move them forward at any point now would be to ensure their certain destruction."

After that was written, however, he had been able to equip them with some degree of effectiveness, and had worked them up to a certain standard of discipline: they were brave and patient, and susceptible to improvement under systematic training. Beresford had also accomplished wonders with the Portuguese, and Wellington's army now numbered seventy thousand men, of whom forty thousand were British.

Wellington, with his lean, sharp-featured face, and dry, cold manner, was not the typical Englishman at all. He was more like the genuine Yankee of New England. He made his successes by his resourcefulness, his inability to be overpowered by circumstances. As he said: "The French plan their campaigns just as you might make a splendid set of harness. It answers very well until it gets broken, and then you are done for! Now I made my campaign of ropes; if anything went wrong I tied a knot and went on."

He was always ready, when anything broke or failed him, to "tie a knot and go on." That is the suppleness and adroitness of a great chieftain, whereas the typical English general was too magnificent for the little things; he liked to hurl his men boldly into the abyss—and then, if they perished, it had been magnificently done, at any rate. But Wellington was always practical and ready to take advantage of any opportunity that offered. He had no illusions about the grandeur of getting men killed for nothing.

There were still two hundred and thirty thousand French troops in Spain, but they were scattered across the Peninsula from Asturias to Valencia. To the extreme east was Marshal Suchet with sixty-five thou: sand men, and an expedition under General Murray was sent against him which kept him there. Clausel was prevented from leaving Biscay with his forty thousand men by the great guerilla warfare with which Wellington enveloped his forces. There remained, then, for Wellington to deal with the centre of the army under Joseph Bonaparte, whose jealous suspicions had been the means of driving from Spain Marshal Soult, a really fine and capable commander. The weak Joseph was now the head of an immense and magnificently equipped army of men and officers in the finest condition for fighting, but who were to prove of how little effect fine soldiers can be when they lack the right chief.

The army of Joseph lay in a curve from Toledo to Zamora, guarding the central valley of the Douro, and covering the great road from Madrid through Burgos and Vittoria to France. Wellington's plan was to move the left wing of his army across the Douro within the Portuguese frontier, to march it up the right bank of the Douro as far as Zamora, and then, crossing

the Elsa, to unite it to the Galician forces; while the centre and right, advancing from Agueda by Salamanca, were to force the passage of the Tormes and drive the French entirely from the line of the Douro towards the Carrion.

By constantly threatening them on the flank with the left wing, which was to be always kept in advance, he thus hoped to drive the French back by Burgos into Biscay. He himself expected to establish there a new basis for the war among the numerous and well-fortified seaports on the coast. In this way, forcing the enemy back to his frontier, he would at once better his own position and intercept the whole communication of the enemy. The plan had the obvious objection that in separating his army into two forces, with great mountain ranges and impassable rivers between them, each was exposed to the risk of an attack by the whole force of the enemy.

But Wellington had resolved to take this risk. Sir Thomas Graham, in spite of his sixty-eight years, had the vigour and clear-headedness of youth, and the very genius for the difficult command given him—that of leading the left wing through virgin forests, over rugged mountains, and across deep rivers.

The march of Wellington began May 22, and an exalted spirit of enthusiasm pervaded the entire army. Even Wellington became expressive, and as he passed the stream that marks the frontier of Spain he arose in his stirrups, and, waving his hand, exclaimed, "Farewell, Portugal!"

Meanwhile Graham, on May 16, with forty thousand men, had crossed the Douro and pushed ahead, turning the French right and striking at their communications. Within ten days forty thousand men were transported through two hundred miles of the most broken and rugged country in the Peninsula, with all their artillery and baggage. Soon they were in

possession of the whole crest of mountains between the Ebro and the sea. On the 31st Graham reached the Elsa. The French were astounded when Graham appeared upon their flank; they abandoned their strong position on the Douro; then they abandoned Madrid; after that, they hurried out of Burgos and Valladolid.

Wellington had crossed the Douro at Miranda on May 25, in advance of his troops, by means of a basket slung on a rope from precipice to precipice, at an immense height above the foaming torrent. The rivers were all swollen by floods.

Graham, with the left wing of the Allies, kept up his eager march. Many men were lost while fording the Elsa on May 31. The water was almost chin-deep and the bottom was covered with shifting stones. Graham hastened with fierce speed to the Ebro, eager to cross it before Joseph and break his communications with France. Joseph had wished to stop his retreat at Burgos and give battle there, but he had been told that incredible numbers of guerillas had joined the English forces, and so he pushed on, leaving the castle at Burgos heavily mined. It was calculated that the explosion would take place just as the English entered the town, but the fuses were too quick—three thousand French soldiers, the last to leave, were crushed by the falling ruins. The allied troops marched triumphantly through the scene of their earlier struggle and defeat.

On abandoning Burgos Joseph took the road to Vittoria and sent pressing orders to Clausel to join him there, but this junction of forces was not effected—Clausel was too late.

Wellington's strategy of turning the French right has been called "the most masterly movement made during the Peninsular War." Its chief merit was that it gave Wellington the

advantage of victory with hardly any loss of life. It swept the French back to the Spanish frontier. And Joseph, whose train comprised an incredible number of chariots, carriages, and waggons, bearing a helpless multitude of people of both sexes from Madrid (including the civil functionaries and officers of his court), as well as enormous stores of spoil, began to perceive that this precipitate retreat was his ruin, and that he must risk the chance of a great battle to escape being driven in hopeless confusion through the passes of the Pyrenees.

The sweep of the Allies under Graham around the French right had taken them through the wildest and most enchantingly beautiful regions. At times a hundred men had been needed to drag up one piece of artillery. Again, the guns would be lowered down a precipice by ropes, or forced up the rugged goat-paths. At length, to quote Napier, "the scarlet uniforms were to be seen in every valley, and the stream of war, descending with impetuous force down all the clefts of the mountains, burst in a hundred foaming torrents into the basin of Vittoria."

So accurately had Graham done his work in accordance with Wellington's plans, that he reached the valley just as Joseph's dejected troops were forming themselves in front of Vittoria.

The basin or valley of Vittoria, with the town in its eastern extremity, is a small plain about eight miles by six miles in extent, situated in an elevated plateau among the mountains and guarded on all sides by rugged hills.

The great road from Madrid enters the valley at the Puebla Pass, where too the river Zadora flows through a narrow mountain gorge. This road then runs up the left bank of the

Zadora to Vittoria, and from there it goes on towards Bayonne and the Pyrenees. This road was Joseph's line of retreat.

King Joseph, burdened by his treasure, which included the plunder of five years of French occupation in the Peninsula, and consisted largely of priceless works of art, selected with most excellent taste by himself and other French connoisseurs, had despatched to France two great convoys, a small part of the whole treasure, along the Bayonne road. As these had to be heavily guarded against the Biscay guerillas, some thousands of troops had gone with them. Joseph's remaining forces were estimated at from sixty thousand to sixty-five thousand men.

The French were anxious above all things to keep the road open—the road to Bayonne: there are several rough mountain roads intersecting each other at Vittoria, particularly those to Pampeluna, Bilboa, and Galicia; but the great Bayonne road was the only one capable of receiving the huge train of lumbering carriages without which the army was not to move.

On the afternoon of the 20th Wellington, whose effective force was now sixty-five thousand men, surveyed the place and the enemy from the hill ranges and saw that they were making a stand. He decided then on his tactics. Instead of pushing on his combined forces to a frontal attack, he made up his mind to divide his troops; he would send Graham with the left wing, consisting of eighteen thousand men and twenty guns, around by the northern hills to the rear of the French army, there to seize the road to Bayonne. Sir Rowland Hill with twenty thousand men, including General Murillo with his Spaniards, was to move with the right wing, break through the Puebla Pass, and attack the French left.

The right centre under Wellington himself was to cross the ridges forming the southern boundary of the basin and then move straight forward to the Zadora River and attack the bridges, while the left centre was to move across the bridge of Mendoza in the direction of the town.

The French right, which Graham was to attack, occupied the heights in front of the Zadora River above the village of Abechucho, and covered Vittoria from approach by the Bilboa road; the centre extended along the left bank of the Zadora, cornmanding the bridges in front of it, and blocking up the great road from Madrid. The left occupied the space from Ariniz to the ridges of Puebla de Arlauzon, and guarded the Pass of Puebla, by which Hill was to enter the valley.

The early morning of June 21 was, according to one historian, "rainy and heavy with vapour," while an observer (Leith Hay) said: "The morning was extremely brilliant; a clearer or more beautiful atmosphere never favoured the progress of a gigantic conflict."

The valley, occupied by the French army, with the rich uniforms of its officers, was a superb spectacle. Marshal Jourdan, the commander, could be seen riding slowly along the line of his troops. The positions they occupied rose in steps from the centre of the valley, so that all could be seen by the English from the crest of the Morillas as they stood ready for battle. In his *Events of Military Life* Henry says:

"The dark and formidable masses of the French were prepared at all points to repel the meditated attack—the infantry in column with loaded arms, or ambushed thickly in the low woods at the base of their position, the cavalry in lines with drawn swords, and the artillery frowning from the eminences with lighted matches; while on our side all was yet