Mark Thompson *Wellington and the Lines of Torres Vedras, the Defence of Portugal during the Peninsular War 1807-1814*, pp 224, Helion 2021, £25.

Review by Andrew Grainger, British Commission for Military History

In October 2022 I attended a tour of the Lines of Torres Vedras organised by the Friends of the Lines of Torres Vedras and a few weeks later Mark Thompson kindly presented me with a copy of his book. Although this was my third or fourth visit to the Lines I wished I had had the chance to read it before the Tour!

I am not a specialist in the subject so this cannot be a formal review but I thought it would be helpful to share some of the insights that the book offered me.

The bulk of the book is a comprehensive description of the construction of the Lines against the backdrop of the operations of the field army between Wellington’s Instruction to his CRE, Richard Fletcher in October 1809 and their occupation twelve months later in face of the third French invasion of Portugal. During this period there was a host of problems - priorities changed, Sapper officers were diverted elsewhere, there were constant discussions – more usually demands followed by complaints - with the local civil and military authorities over labour and the Portuguese engineers and militia, negotiations with the Treasury over money and a remarkable ‘work to rule’ by the Royal Navy regarding pay and allowances for sailors working ashore!

For me however, the most interesting chapters related to the strategic context in which the Lines were built. The Lines are featured in most books about the Peninsular War but usually only in passing. They are mentioned after the campaigns of 1808 and 1809 when Wellesley defeated two French invasions of Portugal despite the ‘Dunkirking’ of Sir John Moore’s army at Corunna. Wellington’s unsuccessful campaign in Spain in 1809 is followed by Massena’s third invasion of Portugal in 1810. But the cunning Wellington, as he now is, has secretly constructed lines of fortifications to defend Lisbon, implemented a Scorched Earth policy and so the French must withdraw back into Spain. The campaigns of 1811 and 1812 follow, the French in Spain are depleted following the invasion of Russia and at the end of 1813 Wellington invades France as part of a massive Allied effort to finish off the Corsican upstart.

Unsurprisingly, it was all rather more complicated than this. Mark explains that right from the start the Lines were the essential cornerstone of Wellington’s strategy. Following Moore’s defeat there was, as one might expect, discussion in London as to whether the defence of Portugal was not just worth further blood and treasure but actually feasible at all. Unlike others, Wellington was convinced that Lisbon with its essential port facilities could be defended *‘even if Spain should have been conquered’* and said so in a Memorandum in March 1809 before he landed there. Portugal could not be defended on its border with Spain but, on the other hand, he felt that the French would need at least 100,000 men to take Lisbon. If they were blocked by fortifications and a scorched earth policy then their Army could not subsist and would have to withdraw. Lisbon would then be the essential base from which further operations could be undertaken.

Mark describes how this strategy evolved and was put into effect. Gaps remain in our knowledge that will never be filled however since Wellington kept his cards very close to his chest. It is not entirely clear, for example, how the construction was financed and whether the retreat to the Lines in 1810 caught Wellington on the hop with the result that the earth was not scorched as effectively as he would have liked.

The Lines were built under the direction of the Royal Engineers. Mark deals at length and sensitively with the involvement of the Portuguese civil and military authorities. Both at the time and now (there is now an annual Lines Day on 20th October celebrated by the districts in which they are located and the French invasions are being given greater prominence in the educational curriculum) the Portuguese felt that their efforts were not receiving the attention that they deserved. The author does not say so but my impression is that the British were determined to run the show and if they drew upon Portuguese surveys of the ground or their already extant signalling system they were certainly not going to give the natives any credit. Manpower (and womanpower) to construct the Lines was a constant problem and the British officers could not understand why this was so when the rates of pay were relatively generous. I was reminded a little of the condescension and incomprehension between the Americans and their allies / clients in South Vietnam.

Misunderstandings did not only exist between British and the Portuguese. Since very few of Wellington’s officers were fully briefed on his strategy there was ample scope for rumour and discussion when construction began in the autumn of 1809. Many officers felt that the idea of defending, let alone building a line of fortifications 40 kms long was ridiculous. Others that the fortifications were being built purely to protect an evacuation – as was indeed one of their functions. During the retreat from Bussaco many assumed that the Army was going to be embarked at Lisbon and taken back to England. It was only when they saw the Lines that, like the French at the same time, they realised that the Army was staying put.

The Lines met their strategic purpose entirely. There were a few skirmishes but the French made no serious attempt to breach the Lines. They did not have 100,000 men but more likely only half that and they were led by a man who had stated at the outset that he would rather not be there. There was a financial cost to Great Britain but arguably the major price for their success was paid by the Portuguese civil population of whom 40,000 may have died from starvation and illness during the retreat and around Lisbon.

For anyone interested in the campaigns in Portugal and the Lines this is essential reading. Helion have provided a service to readers with their high production values at an affordable price.

There are several colour photographs by the author showing a number of the forts today, some of which have been restored and equipped with very good Visitor Centres. Helpful sketch maps show the various phases of planning and construction and there is a very useful coloured topographical map showing each of the 152 forts, the major and minor roads, the scarping, ditches and abatis.

A further review of the book is to be found in the Journal of the Australian Army Research Centre:

[Book review - Wellington and the Lines of Torres Vedras | Australian Army Research Centre (AARC)](https://researchcentre.army.gov.au/library/land-power-forum/book-review-wellington-and-lines-torres-vedras)