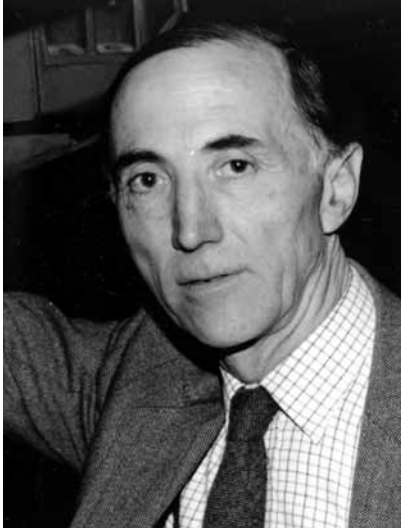


The Lines of Torres Vedras – An Impregnable Citadel?

“It was Wellington who first conceived the design of turning those vast mountains into one stupendous and impregnable citadel, wherein to deposit the independence of the whole Peninsula”^(a)

COLONEL G W A NAPIER INSTITUTION GOLD MEDAL MA MInstRE



Colonel Gerald Napier retired from the Corps in 1985 after 33 years service which took him to Korea, Cyprus, Borneo and Germany with brief appearances in UK. In 1985 he took up post of Institution Secretary. As such he had full responsibility for the Museum which was in process of being set up in the Ravelin Building. He became full-time Director of the Museum three years later when the post was established. He retired to Devon in 1993 but continued part-time work for the Institution including as editor of Volume XII of Corps History. Meanwhile he was researching on his own account for The Sapper VCs which was published in 2000. Recently he was responsible for the text of Follow the Sapper. He has also pursued an interest the Peninsular War, leading many battlefield tours to Spain and Portugal over a period of ten years. As a member of the British Historical Society of Portugal he has recently taken an interest in the Portuguese project to preserve the Lines of Torres Vedras and acts as their representative in the United Kingdom in this matter.

THE FOUNDATIONS OF STRATEGY

WALK in some of the glorious countryside to the north of Lisbon and in many places you will come across the remains of the prodigious works undertaken by our forebears that began the train of events that led to the downfall of Napoleon Bonaparte. This year marks the bicentenary of the defeat of first French invasion of Portugal, the fatal blunder that Napoleon later admitted as his nemesis; “That miserable Spanish affair . . . is what killed me”^(b). Two more attempts were also to fail, the last, in 1810, finally foundering on the Lines of Torres Vedras. Thus the unglamorous graft but consummate skills of the Royal Engineers were behind the eventual victorious outcome of the Peninsular War. But why were the Lines so significant? What were they all about?

It can reasonably be argued that had the Lines never been built, or had they been broken by the French army under Marshal Masséna in the autumn of 1810, the British would have had to evacuate the Iberian peninsula. This would have left the Portuguese and Spanish to their fate; Napoleon’s grasp over Europe would have been complete, his possession of Lisbon and capture of the Portuguese fleet could have shifted the balance of maritime power towards France; Britain could eventually have again been threatened with invasion.

Portugal’s Peril

By the autumn of 1809 the Portuguese were in peril after the two invasions of 1808 and 1809. Both these had been eliminated by small, largely British, armies under the future Duke of Wellington. The British commander had also won a pyrrhic victory at Talavera in July in conjunction with a Spanish army but had had to pull his much weakened force back to Portugal to recover and reconsider his strategy. The political atmosphere in

London was unpromising. Napoleon’s “Continental System” by which Britain was excluded from trading with European countries was beginning to affect the domestic economy. A major British expedition to the Scheldt estuary “ . . . incomparably the greatest armament that had ever left the shores of England . . .”^(c) to occupy Antwerp and thus establish a foothold on the Continent, which coincided with Talavera, became a fiasco when the survivors of 40,000 men and 600 ships limped home in November, riddled with malaria, typhus, typhoid and dysentery. To cap it all, the two principal members of the government, George Canning, the Foreign Secretary, and Viscount Castlereagh, Secretary for War and Wellington’s main backer, quarrelled over the blame for Scheldt expedition; they fought a duel and the government fell in September.

Nor was there any encouragement from the military picture. Far to the east near the border of today’s Slovakia, Napoleon’s victory over the Austrians at the battle of Wagram had removed his principal enemy from the war allowing him to set his divisions marching westwards to reinforce his struggling divisions in Spain. Soon to overtake them was the architect of his victory at Wagram, the veteran Marshal André Masséna. The Emperor was determined to remove the British from the Peninsula. He had earlier proclaimed to his soldiers: “The hideous leopard [the British!] contaminates by its very presence the peninsula of Spain and Portugal. Let us carry our victorious eagles to the Pillars of Hercules”^(d). Masséna was given this task.

For his part, Wellington had faith in the ability of a combined Anglo-Portuguese army being strong enough to save Portugal from its fate and had earlier recommended the British government to take the necessary measures to support their oldest ally. His influence at home did not wane with the



Figure 1 – The Iberian Peninsula.

departure of Castlereagh and a productive relationship grew with his successor, Lord Liverpool. The government had accepted his opinion that Great Britain

. . . ought to organise and pay an army in Portugal, consisting of 30,000 Portuguese troops . . . and 20,000 British including 4,000 or 5,000 cavalry . . . and whatever might be the results of Spanish exertions, Portugal might be saved from the French grasp. . . If you should adopt this plan you should send everything from England – arms, ammunition, clothing and accoutrements, flour, oats, &c.^(c)

The Master Plan

THESE measures were well in hand even as Wellington’s army

was marching back into Spain after Talavera. It was now a matter of time: time for the Portuguese Army to reach the necessary standard and time to prepare the country for its defence against the veteran French “Army of Portugal” that was now to be created under Marshal Masséna. The first of these two measures had been initiated early in 1809 when Major General William Carr Beresford was appointed to mobilise, command and train a revived army from the remnants left after the departure of the French¹. The second came to fruition in the first few weeks of October by means of Wellington’s reconnaissance of the area to the north of Lisbon accompanied by his Quartermaster General (Colonel George Murray), the Quartermaster General of the Portuguese Army (Colonel Benjamin D’Urban), his Chief Engineer (Lieutenant Colonel Richard Fletcher)^(f) and, signifi-



Figures 2 and 3 – The architects of the Lines, the Chief Engineer Lieutenant Colonel Sir Richard Fletcher, Bt, KCH in the familiar portrait in the Chatham Headquarter Mess, against a background of fortifications and his Adjutant, eventually Major General Sir John Jones, Bt, KCB.

¹ He was granted the rank of “Marshal” in the Portuguese Army by which title he was always known, somewhat to the annoyance of more senior officers in the British Army.

THE LINES OF TORRES VEDRAS

cantly the Commander of the Tagus squadron, Admiral Sir George Berkeley by the efficiency of whose seamen the whole enterprise was underwritten.²

Wellington's appreciation for the defence of Portugal sprang from one clear sentence: "The great object in Portugal is the possession of Lisbon and the Tagus, and all our measures must be directed towards this object^(g)." This sentence appears in the preamble to his orders to Fletcher on 20 October 1809. It is followed by an important qualification: "There is another also connected with that first object, to which we must likewise attend, viz – the embarkation of the British troops in case of reverse." The danger of being forced into a withdrawal was the nightmare of British politicians with the debacle of Corunna (La Coruña) fresh in the memory at the time. The orders then set out the Commander's thinking on the defence of Portugal and twenty-one precisely phrased points to cover the detail of the actual Lines which,

though central to the concept, must be seen within the context of the defence of Portugal as a whole.

From the start, there was never any question of taking on the enemy at the border, which offered no clear position in which to hazard his precious but untried troops in a major engagement. He expected a two-pronged attack through the two principal "corridors" formed by the frontier fortified towns of Ciudad Rodrigo and Almeida in the north and Badajoz and Elvas in the south. This would oblige him to split his force with the danger that the enemy would try and cut off part of it from Lisbon. "This can be avoided only by the *retreat of the right, centre, and left of the allies* [author's italics], and their junction at a point at which, from the state of the river, they cannot be turned by the passage of the Tagus by the enemy's left." This is the heart of the concept for the Lines – to prepare defensive lines before Lisbon, to force the enemy to concentrate, and to hold territory only so long as to allow for the preparation of the defences and

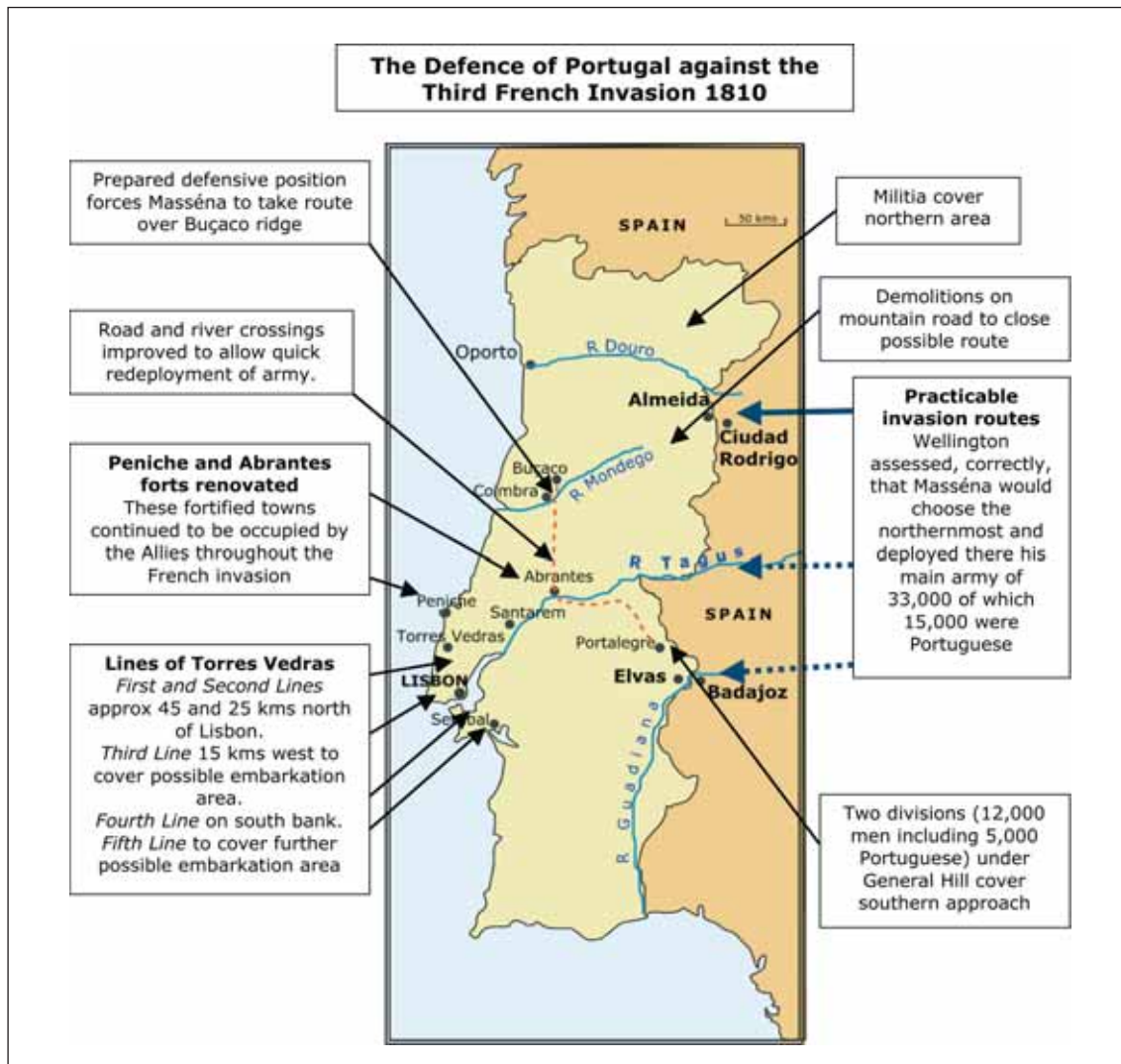


Figure 4 – Wellington's plan for the defence of Portugal had to take account of the possible invasion routes either through one or other of the two "corridors", Ciudad Rodrigo/Almeida and Badajoz/Elvas, or possibly along the line of the Tagus, the route followed with great difficulty in the first French invasion of Portugal in 1807 under General Junot. This map illustrates how the Lines and other essential engineering measures fitted into the overall scheme of defence..

² Wellington once wrote "... if anyone wishes to know the history of this war, I will tell him it is our maritime superiority gives me the power of maintaining my army while the enemy are unable to do so." (Quoted in Professor Tim Blanning's *The Pursuit of Glory. Europe 1648–1815*, Penguin History of Europe 2007, p. 660.



Figure 5 – The Quinta dos Freixos at Pero Negro used by Wellington as his headquarters, somewhat obscured by a recent building site. Part of this building, now the property of the Sobral municipality, is to become a visitor centre..

“ . . . to enable the people of the country to evacuate the towns and villages, carrying with them or destroying all articles of provisions and carriages, not necessary of the allied army . . . ” In other words, to adopt a scorched earth policy, as had been practised in the past against invasions from Spain, and withdraw to ground of his own choosing. This plan with its undeniable military merits was inevitably unpopular with the Portuguese political leaders. Their opposition was yet another of the enormous pressures against which Wellington had to drive his plans.

Lisbon being on the right (north) bank of the Tagus, the most likely approach would be through the northern corridor and thence by two possible routes to the peninsula that lies between the Tagus and the Atlantic Ocean. A demolition plan, some judicious forward defensive lines and careful deployment of the army would canalise and delay the advance. However, the southern corridor could not be ignored; a proportion of the army would have to be despatched to cover that. This called for pre-preparation of a road by which his force could be rapidly concentrated from south to north or, perhaps, vice versa once Masséna’s intentions were clear.

There is one more noteworthy feature of the master plan, other than the Lines themselves. The two fortresses at Abrantes and Peniche with their Portuguese garrisons would be strengthened and denied to the enemy should he succeed in advancing that far. Before that happened, Abrantes would also be a key point on the route by which the army would concentrate and would control the bridge of boats, which could be broken up and maintained under the guns of the fort until needed again. Peniche would remain capable of being sustained by sea to form a base from which operations could be conducted behind enemy lines.

Thus the design for defence was dynamic in which the physical aspects – the geography, the prepared defensive

positions, the demolitions and the roads and bridges – were simply the framework within which the Commander could effect his battle plans, allowing for the variety of options open to his enemy. This dynamism was also reflected in the design of the Lines themselves. They were not a barrier similar to Hadrian’s Wall or Offa’s Dyke which might be rendered ineffective by a single breach. Rather they were continuous lines of tactically sited and mutually supporting artillery redoubts around and between which a network of obstacles would be created such as *trous de loup*, *abbatis*, demolitions and flooding, into which the enemy could be canalised and attacked by manoeuvre forces. The forts were to be manned almost exclusively by Portuguese militia, leaving the infantry divisions free to concentrate by moving along prepared routes to wherever the threat might develop. The lines extended from the Atlantic

to the Tagus, thus covering the peninsula; the sea and river flanks became the responsibility of the Royal and Portuguese navies.

In due course, five lines of forts were to be built under Royal Engineer direction. The two main ones, with which this article is principally concerned, lay some thirty and fifty kilometres to the north of Lisbon and stretched from the Atlantic coast to the Tagus, approximately forty kilometres. Originally the northernmost, centred on Torres Vedras itself, was planned simply to check and identify the enemy advance ahead of the main line. The latter was to be sited along the naturally strong escarpment centred on *Cabeço de Montachique*³.

Essential to the overall plan was the Third Line created to fulfil Wellington’s secondary aim of providing an embarkation point for the army in the event of a reverse. This was to be based on the fortress of *São Julião*⁴ and a ring of new forts protecting Oeiras Bay into which ships might approach to take off the troops. *Peniche* had earlier been proposed by the British government for this purpose but Wellington required a location within the Lines and out of range of any artillery that might have been able to reach the left bank. Jetties would have to be built capable of withstanding the Atlantic storms. This possibility of enemy reaching the south bank either by crossing the Tagus or by an advance through the southern corridor was a serious concern of Wellington’s. To that end a further line of forts was built south of the river and a second embarkation point with its own ring of forts at *Setúbal*.

Thus the safety of Portugal in 1809 hung on the skill of the engineers who were to lay its foundations, the will of the Portuguese government to accept the scorched earth concept, the muscle of the Portuguese artisans and labourers who were to carry out the work and the British exchequer which was to underwrite the costs through the commissariat system.

³ The term “The Lines of Torres Vedras” only came into use long after the war. Even when General Jones wrote the definitive account of the sieges, published in 1846, they were referred to as the “Lines Thrown up to Cover Lisbon in 1810”

⁴ Now a Nato installation.

The Architects

THE principal architect of the Lines was the Commanding Royal Engineer, Lieutenant Colonel Richard Fletcher⁵. He was allocated eleven Royal Engineers, including his assistant, Captain John Jones⁶, two engineers from the King's German Legion and four from the Portuguese Army.^(h) He also had eighteen men of all ranks from the Royal Military Artificers and 150 soldiers of the line, principally artificers to be allocated throughout the works. The labour was provided from two Portuguese regiments of militia and the peasantry of the area. At times as many as 7,000 men could be working on the Lines but normally the figure would be some 3-5,000. The difficulties of recruiting, managing, feeding and paying such a vast multitude can be imagined. The officers had to be authorised as paymasters and account for large sums of silver until eventually this burden was lifted and the commissariat took the task over. When bread became scarce over the winter of 1810/11 they also supplied the labour force was with biscuit.

As well as the Royal Engineers' part in this project the Portuguese contributed much to the whole enterprise. The Portuguese Engineer Major José Maria das Neves Costa, who had worked under the French Chief Engineer during the occupation, actually surveyed the area of the Lines in late 1808 and his proposals were available to Wellington in 1809. As well as the four Portuguese officers that were detached under Fletcher's command, another forty were engaged in various tasks connected with the defence of Lisbon.⁽ⁱ⁾ Their work is not recorded in Jones' *Memoranda*.⁷

Building the Lines

"WELLINGTON, after making one all-embracing survey of the positions in October 1809 and another in February 1810, left all the rest to his subordinate, and refrained from worrying him with matters of detail, being satisfied that his own intentions had been thoroughly well grasped."⁽ⁱ⁾ Thus, on Fletcher's broad shoulders now rested the safety of Lisbon and the fortunes of what many regarded as the final fling of the British Army on continental soil.

There were only four main routes feasible for an army approaching Lisbon from the north. Three diverged from Torres Vedras and passed through gaps, at Mafra, Montachique and Bucelas, in the main escarpment that formed the Second Line. The fourth route followed the left bank of the Tagus and was straightforward going until it reached a natural defile near Alhandra. Not far to the north, at Castanheira, the river is fordable in summer; this determined the northernmost point of the First Line on the Tagus flank. As to the Atlantic side, the river Sizandro running east-west from Torres Vedras to the sea formed an effective natural obstacle capable of being enhanced by inundations and demolitions; it rises further south and in its northward course its valley is flanked by the high ground around Monte Socorro and to the south of Sobral de Monte Agraço, also known as

Alqueidão. In summary the two lines were:

First Line. From the Atlantic coast at the mouth of the River Sizandro eastwards to Torres Vedras and then south east to incorporate Alqueidão, Arruda dos Vinhos and Alhandra.

Second (and principal) Line. From the Atlantic coast at Ribamar and then south-east to Mafra, Montachique and Vialonga, just south of Alverca.

Both lines had forts in depth at key points either forward or behind the main positions.

Once the orders had been received, work started almost at once. Top priority was the evacuation area formed by the Third Line linked to the existing Fort St Julian. Captain Wedekind of the King's German Legion was put in charge there and ground was broken on 3 November. Also in that area was the construction in 1811 by Captain Holloway of four all-weather jetties in the small bay that offered the only shelter in the area. In Jones' words: ". . . notwithstanding every local and nautical opinion being unfavourable to their stability, resisted the most furious gales of wind throughout the war, and rendered an embarkation practicable in all seasons and weather."^(k)

Other high priorities were the two major groups of redoubts at Torres Vedras (Captain Mulcaster⁸) and Monte Agraço (Captain Williams⁹). These under way, work was able to be extended to blocking the gaps and then the intermediate forts along the two lines.

The forts were essentially artillery positions mounting from as few as two or three guns (Portuguese iron 12-, 9- and 6-pounders) up to perhaps twenty-five, manned by from 120 to 2,000 soldiers. They were not standard polygonal fortresses but were shaped to fit the lie of the land. They were provided with magazines, and arrangements for their security that any self-respecting fortress of the day would expect such as controlled access gates and traverses. As a general rule, where the redoubts were likely to be "violently cannonaded", as Jones puts it, the ditches had to be ten feet deep, at least fifteen feet wide at the top, and have a fourteen foot deep parapet with a four-foot three-inch banquette. In certain key locations the ditches and gun embrasures were faced with stone, elsewhere they were simply dug from the natural earth and strengthened with fascines and gabions.

Signal stations were erected on the key high points, to be manned by sailors using standard naval codes. After some anxious early disasters the telegraph equipment, essentially masts with a single yard arm carrying five drop-balls of inflated pigs' bladders proved highly successful.^(l) It was claimed that a message could be passed from one end of the line to the other in seven minutes. Wellington was so concerned by the need for effective communication and the prospect of the seamen being withdrawn from the main signal posts that he ordered that the

⁵ Lieutenant Colonel Sir Richard Fletcher Bt was killed at the siege of San Sebastián in 1813.

⁶ Eventually Major General Sir John T Jones Bt, KCB. He was badly wounded in the siege of Burgos in 1812 but returned to active service after the war when he worked directly under the Duke of Wellington as his inspecting officer for the frontier defences of the new kingdom of the Netherlands.

⁷ A book on the subject by a Portuguese author, Lieutenant Colonel Sousa Lobo is due for publication shortly.

⁸ Killed at the siege of Badajoz, 1812.

⁹ Killed at the siege of Burgos, 1812.

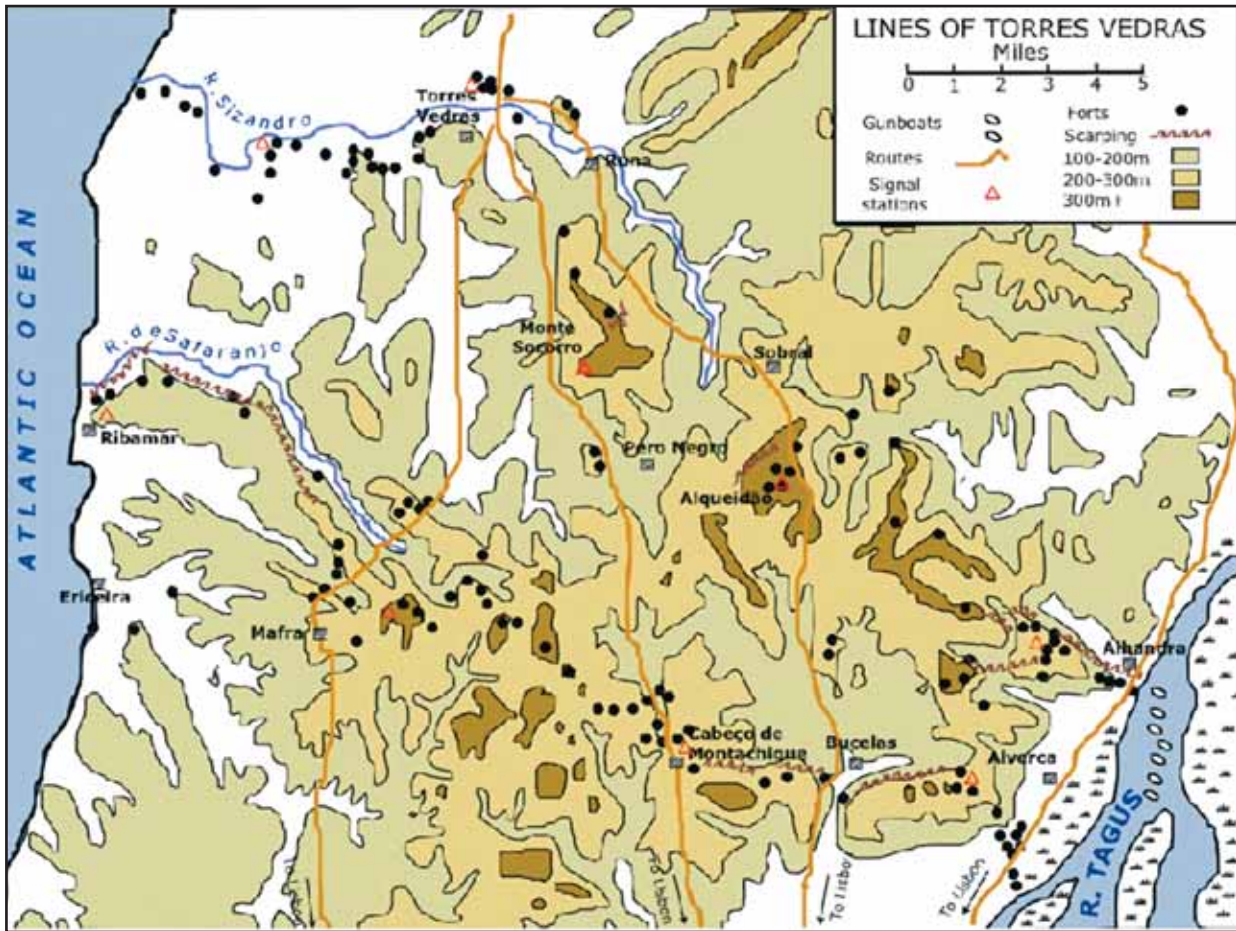
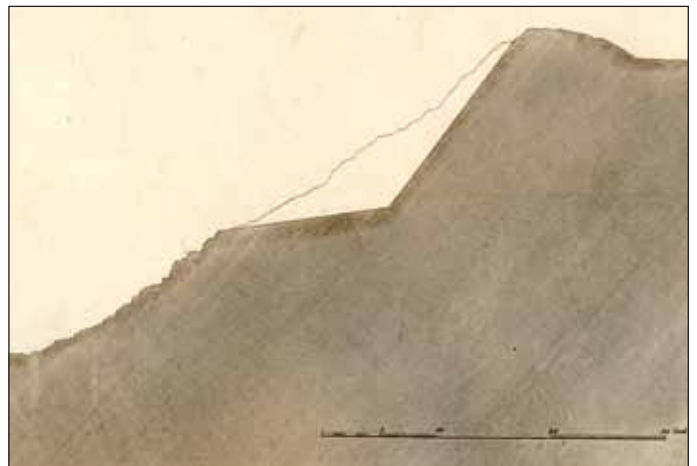


Figure 6 – The First and Second Lines.

The general pattern of the two lines can be seen from this map. The points to note are:

- The concentration of forts at the escarpment crossings, particularly on the Second (southernmost) Line and south of Sobral and alongside the Tagus on the First Line.
- The “scarping” that was extensively carried out to steepen the slopes leading up to and between the forts to slow infantry down; and the importance of the gunboats on the Tagus. Scarping could be stone faced (as in the photo, near Bucelas), or left unfaced, as in the diagram illustrating “ . . . a scarp nearly two miles in length, formed along the summit of Alhandra in August and September 1810.” (Jones, p. 88)
- The importance of the gunboats both to give flanking fire (one leading French general was killed in this way) and to cover against any enemy attempts to cross to the left bank.



THE LINES OF TORRES VEDRAS

system be supplemented by “simple Portuguese telegraph” at each post.^(m)

Work on the Lines continued apace throughout the winter and early spring of 1809/10. Not only was it hard and exacting but all involved longed to be with the main army on more active employment. Captain Edmund Mulcaster, sending New Year greetings to the future Field Marshal, then Captain, John Fox Burgoyne from the great redoubt at Torres Vedras⁽ⁿ⁾:



Figure 7 – The Bucelas gap today. In 1810 it was a clear route through the escarpment and covered by two strong forts.

I trust my dear Burgoyne, you will believe me sincere when I wish you many, many happy returns of this (I think) vile season. I have a note from Goldfinch. He tells me that we are on the eve of a war with America. *Viva!* What you call “properly in for it,” diving as hard as we can. Ministers, at all events, seem determined that the nation shall not pine in

inactivity . . . My intrenchments are getting on, but not so rapidly as I hoped, for I have met with a large proportion of rock and hard gravel, and have a month’s work in store to finish completely and give myself a week over. I wish you could see my intrenchments. Unlucky dogs that ever have to attack them! There are so many redoubts in store that I fear the army will retire upon us before we can advance to it. I, however, sincerely hope that you will come in for all good things going, only think of your less fortunate friends.

Wellington made one visit to inspect the works in progress early in February 1810. Apart from ordering the abandonment of a position at Castanheira, which could be outflanked to the west, he made no major changes and was satisfied with progress.

Meanwhile tension was growing on the frontier where the bulk of the Allied army was deployed to confront the expected invasion through the northern Ciudad Rodrigo–Almeida “corridor”, just as Wellington had assessed. By July the French “Army of Portugal” under Marshal André Masséna had advanced across the border. Wellington needed his Chief Engineer beside him;

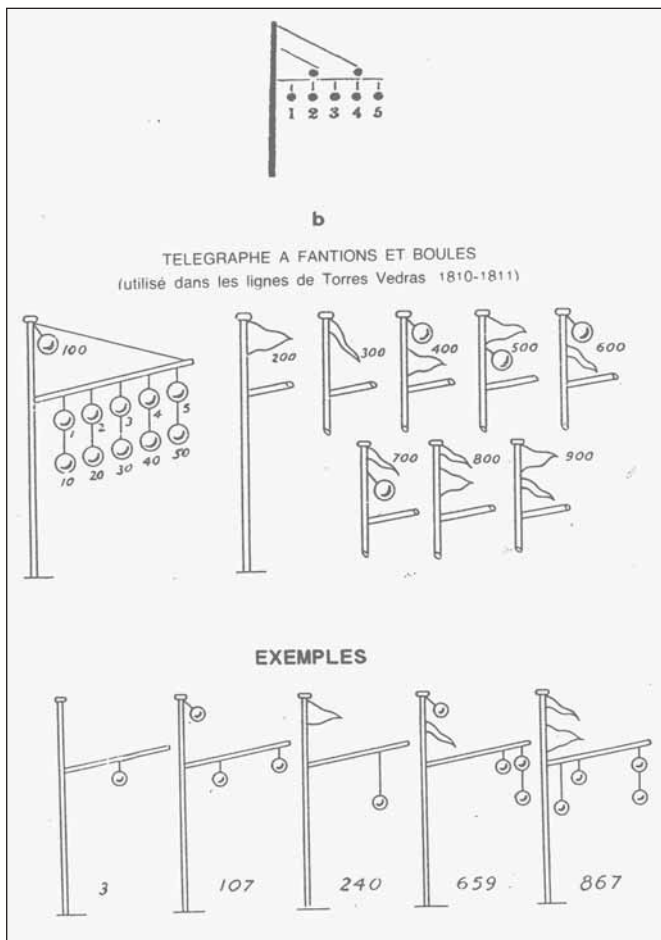


Figure 8 – During the 1810 withdrawal from the border, the existing Portuguese “Folque” network of telegraph stations was destroyed. Wellington’s orders included the requirement for signal posts for communication within the Lines and back to Lisbon. Five were selected for the First Line including the prominent and centrally placed Monte Socorro (shown in the photo), where there was no fort and Forts 14 (Great Redoubt), 20, 30, and 114. Four sites have been identified on the Second Line at Forts 40, 76 and 92 plus the rear link to Lisbon at Montachique. The construction of the masts in such exposed terrain presented great problems, eventually overcome. The main signal stations, comprising inflated pigs’ bladders and pennants were operated by sailors using Home Popham’s *Marine Vocabulary* but supplemented by simpler “arm” telegraphs should the sailors have to be withdrawn. After all was in place, messages could be sent from the Tagus to the sea in seven minutes. (Grehan, p 64.) The diagram of the signal masts is taken from *Les Renseignements, La Reconnaissance et Les Transmissions Militaires* by Charles-Alphonse Rauber, Lisboa, 1993.



Figure 9 – Fort 14, part of the “Great Redoubt” complex at Alqueidão near Sobral de Monte Agraço, recently cleared of scrub. (Courtesy Portuguese Ministry of Defence).

Fletcher and two other officers were called up to join the army in the field leaving the energetic and competent Jones in charge of the Lines. Jones communicated frequently with Fletcher who was able to report directly to Wellington on developments and discuss matters of concern. To him, winning time for the completion of his “impregnable citadel” was critical. Few in his army realised what was in hand behind them, for the project had been deliberately kept secret. They were faced by an army under veteran leadership of soldiers convinced that Lisbon would shortly be in their grasp.

STRATEGY VINDICATED

BY the end of May 1810, dramatic developments were taking shape on the Portuguese–Spanish border. The VIth Corps of Marshal Masséna’s so-called “Army of Portugal” under the distinguished and belligerent Marshal Michel Ney, was advancing on Ciudad Rodrigo from the east. But Napoleon made what may have been a fatal mistake by ordering Masséna to advance in deliberate steps besieging the two frontier fortresses rather than masking them and attacking the Allied army. He believed that time should be allowed for the harvest to be gathered without which the army would be unable to feed either itself or the citizens of Lisbon in due course.

Rodrigo, with its Spanish garrison under Lieutenant General Don Andrés Pérez de Herrasti gallantly held out until 10 July – winning Wellington six valuable weeks. The French juggernaut rolled on to the Portuguese fortress at Almeida. A further delay seemed likely until a chance shot from the besieging French blew up the magazine and destroyed the town. The Allies had to make a smart but orderly retreat. However, everything began to work out much as Wellington had foreseen. The French even chose the worst (for them) route so that the Allied army was able to concentrate and bring them to battle in the highly favourable (for them) position at the ridge of Buçaco, and inflict serious casualties. Masséna’s losses there, 4,600 to the Allies’ 1,200, and the determination of the Portuguese soldiers was a portent that things might not turn out as easy as he had believed. Another was that the discovery that food for men and animals was

extremely hard to find; the scorched earth policy was beginning to bite.

Buçaco was no accident. Engineering had fashioned the course of events. Preparation of routes from the south, including over the Tagus, had guaranteed the timely arrival of the detached part of the Allied army. A strong blocking position was built at Ponte Murcella. This lay on the River Alva where it joins the Mondego about 15kms north-east of Coimbra and may have influenced the French to choose a more northerly and difficult route. On the fifteen-kilometre ridge a road had been constructed below the crest that enabled the rapid redeployments that played a crucial role in the battle. Nevertheless the French eventually found a just feasible route round to the north and Wellington and his army slipped away, their morale high and looking forward to the next opportunity to battle with their enemy. Not that they realised what had been being prepared for them over the previous year, so well had the secret been kept.

Thus was Masséna drawn into the trap that was eventually to defeat his army. However, the other side of the coin was that the Portuguese civil authorities, experiencing the flowing tide of panicking refugees and learning of the horrors that had been inflicted on their population by the advancing enemy, became convinced that the British were intent on abandoning their country to the invaders. Serious rioting broke out in Lisbon and Portuguese politicians even floated the absurd notion that the militia should fight the French in a battle even if the British were not prepared to do so.

It was an intensely anxious time. Even in the army there was still widespread scepticism about the long-term prospects of holding Portugal against the much-respected French veterans who had conquered Europe. The previous year Lord Castlereagh had asserted that “. . . not a mail arrived from Lisbon which did not bring letters . . . from officers of rank and situation in the army avowing their opinions as to the probability and even necessity of a speedy evacuation of that country”. Even General Hill, one of Wellington’s most trusted officers had at this stage written that “to my mind the cause is hopeless”.⁽⁶⁾



Figure 10 – An example of fine stonework in Fort 40 near Alverca.

The “Battle of Sobral”

SUCH attitudes must have faded rapidly when, on 9 October 1810, the first units of the Allied army began to file into their positions within the Lines and they realised what had been going on behind them. Wellington had divided the area into six districts and appointed a Royal Engineer to each with express orders to “. . . arrange the troops in their several stations when they will be sent into the district to occupy the redoubts, to take charge of the mines intended to blow up the roads and bridges, and to carry my orders in the district into execution till an officer to command the troops within it will be appointed.” Only shortly before the army arrived in the Lines was the decision made to strengthen the First Line and make full use of it in the first stages of the defence in which the Second Line would ultimately prevail against any serious break-through. Throughout the area, despite deluging rain, spirits were high; nothing would have pleased the soldiers more than to fight a battle, a second Buçaco, from such an advantageous situation.

It was not to be. First reports suggested an attempted break-through in the Alhandra area but by 12 October the main thrust developed from the VIIIth Corps under General Andoche Junot elements of whose 1st Division (General Clausel) entered Sobral on the 12th. In front of him loomed the high ground of Monte Agraço (Alqueidão), guns and prepared defences clearly visible. By this time Wellington had recognised this as the danger area now that he was committed to treating the First Line as a main defensive area. A colossal effort was made in these last few days to improve the forts and create new batteries to cover it. In Jones’ words:

To strengthen the heights on the left of Monte Agraça consequently became an object of primary interest, and large working parties of the troops...were unceasingly employed to throw up strong redoubts on the commanding points above Ribaldeira and Runa, 128, 129 and 130. The valley in rear of Gosandeira and Zibreira was blocked by a well-flanked abattis, field batteries were established on various flanking points of the same ground, and roads of communication formed to them, so that in a short time this open portion of the front quite changed its face, and appeared little less formidable than the other parts of the line . . . A redoubt, armed with 9-pounders, was also commenced on the ascent of Monte Agraça, on a lower level, and to the right of the main work, more effectually to enfilade and block up the great road from Sobral [152]... and the heights above Portella and Patameira were scarped, and strongly occupied by works 150 and 151.^(p)

Once the enemy’s intentions were clear Wellington ordered the concentration of four divisions (1st, 3rd, 4th and 6th)¹⁰ into this critical ground, with the 5th and two Portuguese

brigades in immediate reserve behind them. On 13 October Junot launched a probing attack to the north-west of Sobral with his 2nd Division under General Solignac. General Lowry Cole’s 4th Division moved forward to meet this manoeuvre and a bitter struggle developed each side feeding in more men until Cole pulled back to his fighting position to the west of the Sizandro valley. The Allies lost some 120 and the French 175 in these exchanges.

Picton’s 3rd Division was moved down from Torres Vedras, where the front was quiet, to increase the numbers covering this gap to 30,000. Meanwhile, on the 14th, Junot made yet another attempt to break through, this time along the high road south of Sobral where General Spencer, commanding the 1st Division had placed the 71st Regiment behind a barricade. The 71st stood firm under bombardment by artillery then charged forward to send their foe back to the village, whence, confronted by the whole of Clausel’s division they prudently withdrew back to their barricade; they were not troubled again and soon retired to join the rest of their division on the main line. Losses were 67 on the British side and at least 120 to the French.¹¹

On the 14th Marshal Masséna came up to assess the situation, arriving while Junot was making his second attempt to find his way through the Monte Agraço redoubts. He could see the impossibility of the situation and rode off further east to the village of Cotovios in the Alhandra area. There, while he was examining the ground through his telescope, “. . . a shot was fired at the party from Fort No 120, which striking a wall whereon the Marshal was resting his telescope, he acknowledged the warning by taking off his hat and moving on.”^(q) Masséna’s influential first aide-de-camp, Lieutenant Colonel Jean-Jacques Pelet’s assessment of the situation was:

On arriving at Sobral, instead of the “undulating accessible plateaux” that we had been told to expect, we saw steeply scarped mountains and deep ravines, a road-passage only a few paces broad, and on each side walls of rock crowned with everything that could be accomplished in the way of field fortifications garnished with artillery; then at last it was plainly demonstrated to us that we could not attack the Lines . . . with the men that still remained of the army. For, even if we had forced some point of the Lines, we should not have had enough men left to seize and occupy Lisbon . . . It was clear that we must wait for reinforcements.^(r)

Masséna was astonished at what they had found and berated his staff for failing to brief him properly. They complained that Wellington had only recently built the daunting fortifications that confronted them; to which he responded “*Diable!* Wellington didn’t build the mountains”. Junot, at least, should have been able to warn him from the experience of his occupation of the country in 1808. Be that as it may, he stayed a month with no serious

¹⁰ Major General Picton’s 3rd Division had originally been allocated the sector along the lower Sizandro centred on Torres Vedras. The French by-passed this sector thus freeing the 3rd Division to strengthen the defence in the Sobral area. The Torres Vedras forts remained fully manned, however, by the Portuguese militia and the whole sector remained under the command of General Sontag of the King’s German Legion.

¹¹ These losses totalling about 180/300 Allied/French between two combats are an approximation based on Oman’s deductions in his *History* vol III, pp. 442 and 444.

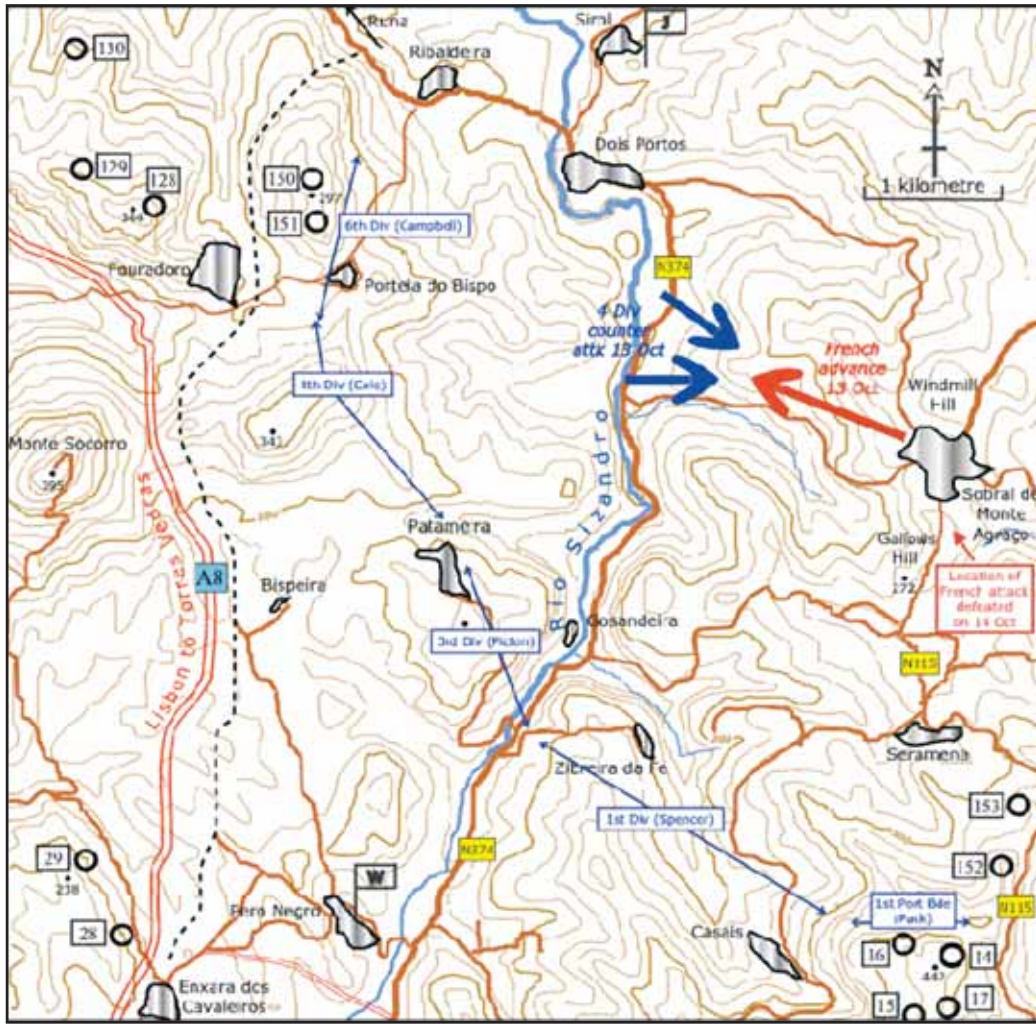


Figure 11 – The key area around Sobral. There is no officially recorded “Battle of Sobral”. However to judge by the casualties and the crucial importance of the combats that took place on 13 and 14 October the events deserve greater recognition than they sometimes receive. “. . . the French never contemplated [attacking the extreme ends of the Lines] . . . the one temptation which Massena felt was to assault, far inland, the gap in front of Sobral between the Monte Agraço and the Serra de Socorro. And there . . . at the critical moment, prudence got the better of ambition, and the invader turned back foiled. The high-water mark of French conquest of Europe was reached on the knoll by Sobral on the wet and gusty 14th of October, 1810.” (Oman, p. 436)

The map indicates the rugged nature of the terrain. The “Great Redoubt” on Monte Agraço is in the bottom right-hand corner of the map comprising forts 14, 15, 16 and 17. The locations of the principal towns and roads are as they are today. Not shown is the railway that runs down the Sizandro valley. Zibreira da Fé did not exist in 1810 but a “Zibreira” features in many accounts and was probably located at the bottom of the valley near Gosandeira. The road system in 1810 was very different from today’s although the N115 running south of Sobral is probably the “high road” referred to by Oman and other sources, albeit realigned. The dotted black line is the rough alignment, based on Jones’ map, of a contemporary paved road. Not shown are the military roads, sections of many of which can be seen today (eg, at the Great Redoubt as illustrated), built to support the forts and to permit rapid troop movement within the Lines. The remains of all the forts shown can be visited today; some can be approached by the service roads to the wind turbines that have sprung up on the high ground in the area.

The flag symbols indicate the locations of Wellington’s and Junot’s headquarters to Pero Negro and Sirol respectively.

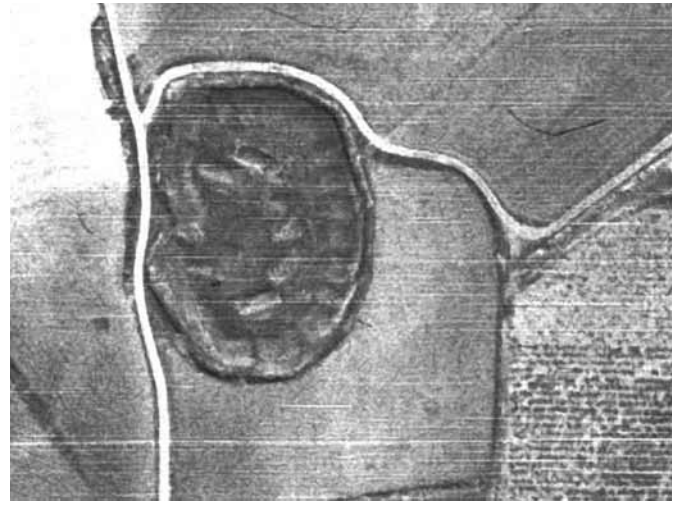
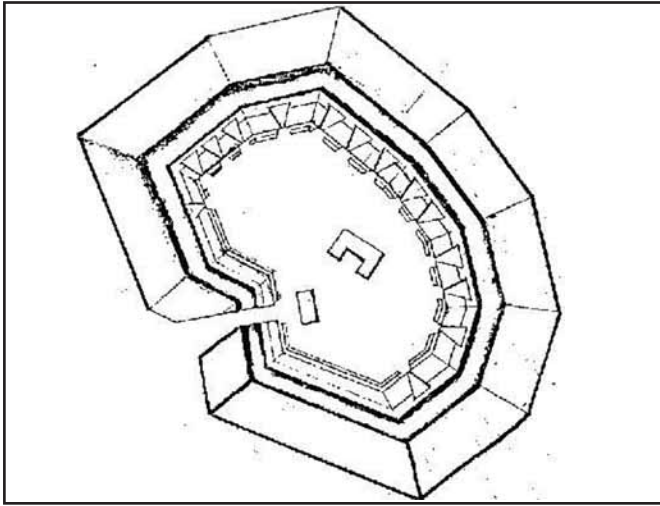


Figure 12 – Many of the first forts were star-shaped to allow for flank defence of the ditches but soon it became preferable to fit the plan to the ground to maximise offensive fire forward. Illustrated is a drawing of Fort 129 with a recent air photo.

attempt to break through, and then pulled back about forty kilometres to a strong position at Santarem. There while his divisions struggled to find food in the almost exhausted countryside he tried to build enough boats to launch a crossing into the Alentejo (the left-bank area) but neither the tools nor the materials existed to give any realistic hope of success. However, a force of Portuguese cavalry, supported by some *çaçadores* (Portuguese light infantry) and artillery was sent across the river to keep a watchful eye against the eventuality. The main hope for Masséna lay in the possibility of reinforcements or of some diversionary attack from Andalusia forcing Wellington to split his force. These options were presented to the Emperor in a despatch that had to be carried to Paris under an escort of 500 infantry and cavalry so as to avoid the guerrilla ambushes that bedevilled the communications of the occupying army throughout the Peninsula. Nothing substantive resulted.

Wellington's anxieties persisted. Political intrigues in Lisbon had been working against him. Despite their earlier full agreement to the scorched earth policy, once the thousands of refugees trailing back to the capital and the reports of the cruelties being inflicted on the remaining populace by the advancing French, the Portuguese Regency found it hard to face up to the realities of their responsibilities. They did little to suppress the belief that the British were going to abandon the country. Even when his strategy became clear Wellington was importuned by the Portuguese leaders, by politicians and armchair strategists at home government and even by some of his senior Commanders to attack Masséna's weary force, particularly in the unenviable position which they found themselves after their withdrawal to Santarem. Aware that time was on his side, he resisted the temptation to give battle. In March Masséna started the long and expensive withdrawal back to the frontier at Almeida. The dramatic story of that episode, his stubborn attempts to rectify his military position, the rebellious attitudes of his subordinate Commanders and his final failed attempt to turn the tables in May before handing over his

command belongs elsewhere. He had entered the country with 65,000 men. He had received some 10,000 in-theatre reinforcements but his strength when he re-crossed the border was only 45,000.⁽⁵⁾ Thus he had lost 30,000 in the venture. In the words of one distinguished modern historian:

There were no great battles or gruelling sieges [as] the armies faced each other across the Lines of Torres Vedras; nevertheless, the survival of Portugal as a free nation and the Anglo-Portuguese army as a viable fighting force were determined by events that took place there. Without the drama enacted in the mud and rain below Monte Agraço in October of 1810, we can only speculate on what might have been the fate of 19th Century Europe.⁽⁶⁾

The Lines had, indeed, proved themselves an "impregnable citadel". But it was Wellington's genius not simply to put his conception into practice through his Engineers but to foresee how, with a little nudging, his distinguished adversary Masséna – the 'cunning fox' as he called him – could be led into such a disastrous predicament.

THE LINES SURVIVE

AFTER contributing so conspicuously to the eventual dramatic events of 1810 the Lines subsided into honourable retirement. They were never occupied again for military purposes although a threat from Spain developed in the 1820s during a serious constitutional crisis that led eventually to civil war. In 1826 a 5,000-strong British force under Sir William Clinton was sent to Portugal in a short-lived attempt to stabilise the situation. No doubt Colonel John Fox Burgoyne, the future Field Marshal, who accompanied Clinton's mission, took a nostalgic professional look at the Lines in case they might be called back into service.¹²

Later in the nineteenth century many efforts were made to

¹² Burgoyne had been a captain at the start of the Peninsular War and lieutenant colonel at the end. He was temporarily Chief Engineer after Fletcher's death being superseded by the more senior Howard Elphinstone. Burgoyne was not involved in the construction of the Lines, being fully engaged with the field army as it withdrew from the frontier but was Regulating Officer for one of the six districts designated by Wellington.

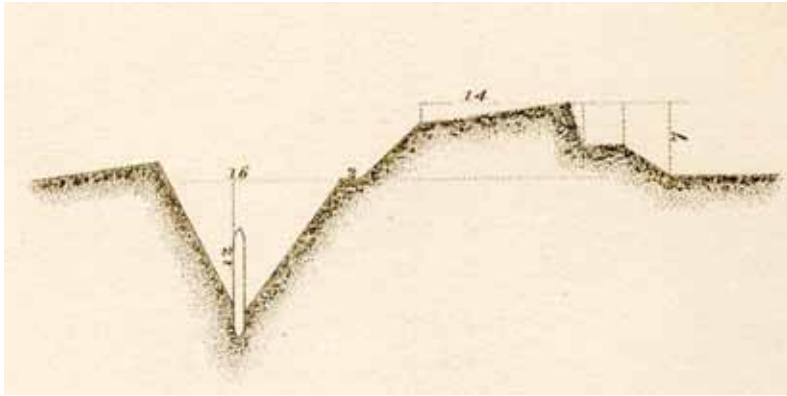


Figure 13 – The ditch profiles varied according to the circumstances. That illustrated is of the design eventually adopted in the Fourth Line south of the Tagus in a situation, as Jones put it, “. . . open to be violently cannonaded . . .” with a 7ft parapet 4ft 3in above the banquette and 14ft thick overlooking a 16ft ditch.

prevent the Lines falling into disrepair, in case they might be needed again. They remained the responsibility of the Portuguese Army although gradually portions were obtained by private landowners and commercial enterprises. In 1874 approval was given by the Minister of War and Prime Minister, the Marquês de Sá da Bandeira for the erection of the memorial column to be known as “Monumento das Linhas de Torres Vedras” to celebrate the construction of the Lines and the part they played in securing the independence of the Peninsula by means of the determined resistance of the Allied armed forces to the French invasion of 1810.

At present, of the 142 redoubts in the First and Second Lines, 111 have survived in various conditions ranging from mere scrub-covered depressions to fully restored sites. Of these about 60 are in private hands.^(u) The situation has been under review since 2001 when a protocol was signed between the Director-



Figure 14 – Fort 152 close to the Great Redoubt near Sobral, illustrating the condition of many of the forts today. The line of the main ditch can clearly be seen. Many of the forts incorporated windmills such as the one shown here, which could be converted into interior blockhouses or rallying points.

General of Monuments and the six municipalities in whose areas the forts lie (Arruda dos Vinhos, Loures, Mafra, Sobral do Monte Agraço, Torres Vedras and Vila Franca de Xira.) The result was a strategic plan for the preservation of the Lines with statutory protection from further encroachment¹³ and the development of the area for tourism and leisure. Funding for the project amounts to only €2.5million of which €1million is to be provided by the Portuguese government and €1.5million from European Union sources; this is a good start but much more will be needed to guarantee its long-term future. The project is being controlled by a coordinating group comprising representatives from each municipality and from the Army which is still responsible for many of the sites.

The survival of the Lines is important if for nothing else than to demonstrate to future generations how such an enterprise changed the course of the history of modern Europe; they remain a symbol of cooperation between allies in deterring aggression. To add to these noble attributes, they are also located in a delightful area to visit offering magnificent scenery within easy reach of Lisbon. A high proportion of the Lines can still be explored by anyone on foot, bicycle, car or, probably best of all on horseback – for which facilities are available locally. Superb local food and wine may be obtained. Any sapper making the journey will not fail to leave without an immense sense of pride and admiration for the achievement of our forebears and their contribution to the downfall of Napoleon Bonaparte.



Figure 15 – The monument on the site of Fort 3, of which no traces remain, commemorating the work of all those who built the Lines and mentioning by name the British Chief Engineer, Lieutenant Colonel Fletcher (unfortunately with the wrong initial, J instead of R!) and the Portuguese surveyor Major José Maria das Neves Costa whose plan was available to Wellington before his reconnaissance in 1809.

¹³ Not yet achieved.



Figure 16 – An aerial view of Forts 20, 21 and 22 comprising the main redoubt at Torres Vedras (São Vicente) which was situated to the north of the town and the River Sizandro. This is the only fully restored redoubt on the Lines. The work was done by the Portuguese Engineers under Colonel Francisco Baptista in the 1960s as recorded in an article in the Royal Engineers Journal (Vol 25, No 4, December 1961). (Courtesy the Portuguese Ministry of Defence)

ENDNOTES

- (a) Napier, General Sir William F P, *History of the War in the Peninsula etc.* . . . New Edition, London 1882, Vol II, p.390.
- (b) Connelly, Owen, *Blundering to Glory. Napoleon's Military Campaigns*, Scholarly Resources Inc., 1987, p. 117.
- (c) Fortescue, The Hon J W, *A History of the British Army*, Vol VII, Naval & Military Press, 2004, p. 56.
- (d) Longford, Elizabeth, *Wellington. The Years of the Sword*, Harper & Row, 1969, p. 176.
- (e) Glover, Michael, *Wellington as Military Commander*, p. 68, quoting *Wellington Despatches*, iv, 1 Aug 08, Penguin, 1968.
- (f) Grehan, John, *The Lines of Torres Vedras*, Spellmount, 2000.
- (g) *Memorandum Wellington to Fletcher* dated 20 October 1809, RE Museum collection.
- (h) Jones, Major General Sir John T, Bt, KCB, *Journals of Sieges . . . in Spain also Memoranda Relative to the Lines Thrown up to Cover Lisbon in 1810*, Vol III, London, 1846, p. 67.
- (i) Chartrand, René and Younghusband, Bill, *The Portuguese Army of the Napoleonic Wars (2)*, Osprey Men-at Arms Series No 346, p. 19.
- (j) Oman, Sir Charles, *A History of the Peninsular War*, Vol III, first published 1908 (Oxford), Greenhill re-print 1996, p.420.
- (k) Jones, Vol 3, p. 5.
- (l) Grehan, *ibid*, p. 64.
- (m) Jones, p.223.
- (n) Porter, Major General Whitworth, *History of the Corps of Royal Engineers Vol I*, London 1889, p. 260.
- (o) Glover, Michael, *Wellington's Peninsular Victories*, Pan books, London, 1963, p. 5.
- (p) Jones, p. 33.
- (q) Jones, p. 35.
- (r) Oman, p. 443.
- (s) Norris A H and Bremner R W, *The Lines of Torres Vedras*, The British Historical Society of Portugal, 1986, p. 5.
- (t) Berkeley, Alice D (ed) *New Lights on the Peninsular War*, Selected papers from the International Congress on the Iberian Peninsula: 'Massena and Wellington on the Lines of Torres Vedras' by Donald D Horward, Florida State University, USA.
- (u) Report produced by the Lisbon Regional Director of Monuments in 2006.