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Defeating Napoleon's Designs: Littoral Operations in Galicia, 1809

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When the Royal Navy evacuated the broken army of Lieutenant General Sir John Moore from Corunna in January 1809, it appeared Napoleon might again overrun Iberia and drive the British from their Lisbon base. By mid-June, however, the situation had changed completely, with the French driven out of both northern Portugal and Galicia in Spain's northwest corner. The Royal Navy's operations in this January to September campaign, especially those of Vice Admiral George Berkeley's Tagus squadron, proved critical to the allied success. For much of the campaign there were no British Army units in position to fight the French. It fell to a few Spanish regular troops, and a mass of Spanish and Portuguese *partidas*, all actively supported and supplied by the Royal Navy, to shape the campaign so that the re-entry of a large British force, capably led by Lieutenant General Sir Arthur Wellesley, could drive the French out.

In this campaign, numerous British naval captains and lieutenants operated under instructions, sometimes specific but usually general, to cooperate with, and support and supply the insurgents. Their initiative and resolution in vigorously prosecuting this effort

was a significant factor in the campaign's success. Without a British Army force readily available for operations, the naval officers did not hesitate to put battalions of seamen and Royal Marines on shore to assist in the fight, as well as execute close, in-shore work with their frigates, sloops, schooners and gun-boats. By the end of the summer, Portugal had been saved, the French driven from Galicia, and a powerful Spanish naval squadron secured and moved from Galicia to Cadiz. ¹

Marshal Nicolas Soult had driven Moore's army from Corunna in the middle of January, and by the end of the month occupied the key naval base at Ferrol. On the 28th the Marshal received Napoleon's order for the conquest of Galicia and the invasion of Portugal. The Emperor's strategy called for a two-pronged attack to capture Lisbon. Soult's 2nd Corps, the primary effort, would march south to Oporto and then on to the capital. Marshal Michel Ney's 6th Corps would protect his rear and complete the pacification of northwest Spain. Meanwhile, Marshal Claude Victor Perrin's 1st Corps, the secondary effort, would drive on Lisbon from the east along the Tagus. ²

Soult began his advance on 30 January and, despite the difficult terrain and season, and harassment by Portuguese and Spanish forces throughout the march, the French inexorably advanced on Oporto, and captured that city on 29 March. Enroute Soult created garrisons at Vigo and Tuy. He entrusted this latter fortress on the Minho river, with 36 heavy guns and 1250 men, to General Thomas Lamartinière. At Vigo Soult left 700 infantry under Colonel Jacques Chalot, twelve miles to the north of Tuy, to prevent the British from using its superb harbor to provide aid to the Spanish forces behind him. Chalot's garrison eventually increased to 1,300 men. ³ Soult also left garrisons in Portugal along his line of march, at Chaves and Braga, to secure his

communications with Galicia. When he finally reached Oporto the effective strength of the corps was only 16,000 men. The four garrisons had drained 7,000 men from his main force. Concurrently, Victor crushed the Spanish at Medellin on 28 March, and awaited word of Soult's advance toward Lisbon. That marshal, however, learned of the serious nature of an insurrection in Galicia and decided to establish communications directly with Tuy before continuing his advance. Simultaneously, he attempted to open communications with General Pierre Lapisse, whose large division was to cover the gap between the corps of Soult and Victor.⁴

The rising of irregular forces in Galicia and northern Portugal coincided with the departure of Soult's main force. While the 2nd Corps, like a ship, plowed through the waves to Oporto, like the sea, the Spanish and Portuguese closed in behind it so that soon not a trace of its passing appeared. Soult's forces commanded only the ground they occupied. Elsewhere, the insurgents enjoyed freedom of movement. The Galician rising, or *alzamiento*, was general and violent. Ney's 6th Corps would be engaged in a guerrilla conflict for the next three months and could not provide support to Soult. The British government was uncertain as to whether it would reenter Portugal with a large force and did not make a decision to do so until late March. In Lisbon, Berkeley's energetic response in support of the rising was to be in marked contrast to the timid and tepid reactions of his compatriots, the commanding general, Sir John Cradock and the minister, John Villiers, both of whom had arrived in December and now found that political and military affairs did not at all appear as bright they had the previous autumn when the French were on the run. Those two despondingly made plans for evacuation of Lisbon,

so that Sir Charles Oman wrote “In short, from January to the end of April the British Army exercised no influence whatever on the military affairs of the Peninsula.”⁵

Meanwhile, the Royal Navy was contributing to the discomfort of the French through active support of the insurgency. In the last week of February five British warships cruised off the northern coast of Portugal and the western coast of Galicia. The frigates Endymion(50) and Statira(38), and the brig Plover(18) were stationed off Corunna and Finisterre, while the frigate Lively(38) and the brig Adonis(12) cruised off Oporto. On 24 February Admiral Berkeley, in Lisbon, received reports from observers in Viana, Caminha, and Oporto detailing the uprising and requesting British support. Berkeley directed Captain James Crawford's Venus(36) to depart Lisbon on 1 March.⁶ The captains of the warships already on the coast had earlier received Berkeley's instructions to cooperate and act in concert with the insurgents, in which he gave them discretionary latitude in their judgment as the situation dictated.

During the first two weeks of March the crews of several British ships landed muskets, powder and other stores for Spanish forces in Marín, Pontevedra, Santiago and Villagarcia. On the 9th a detachment of French entered Marín but was driven off by the fire of the Lively and the Plover. A body of Spaniards pursued the enemy and captured two officers, whom they gave up to Captain George McKinley of the Lively. McKinley left the brig at Marín and sailed for Villagarcia on 11 March, where he wrote the Admiralty in the colorful language of the day:

It is with the most heartfelt satisfaction that I can with confidence assure their Lordships, that the spirit of the Galicians is aroused to the most enthusiastic ardour, governed by a cool and determined courage, . . . ; and they confidently look for aid to the generosity of the British Government, speedily to succour them with arms and ammunition, to enable them to succeed in the glorious and

just cause which they have undertaken.⁷

William Wellesley-Pole, secretary of the Admiralty, received this letter on 28 March and the same day the frigate Loire(38) sailed from Spithead with 3,400 muskets and a proportionate amount of ammunition and powder. Pole directed Captain Alexander Schomberg to proceed to the west coast of Galicia and "open a Communication with the Chiefs of the loyal Inhabitants, and furnish them with arms and ammunition."⁸

Meanwhile, by early March Lamartinière's garrison at Tuy had grown to 3,300 men. Within a few days, a Portuguese force crossed the Minho from their fortress at Valença and joined with Spanish insurgents to blockade the fort. After a failed initial assault, the insurgents kept up a distant blockade, until they learned of Sout's capture of Braga on 22 March. Accordingly, the Portuguese recrossed the Minho, back into Portugal and the Spaniards dispersed. Lamartinière sent a detachment of 300 men, under *chef de bataillon* Chapuzet, to raise the siege of Vigo and evacuate that garrison.⁹

Vigo had been besieged by peasants, under the command of Portuguese General Don João De Souza e Silva, since 27 February. The besiegers launched some ineffective attacks which the French repulsed, but Colonel Chalot felt he did not have enough men to repulse a serious assault. The appearance of two British frigates on 23 March convinced Chalot to open negotiations for capitulation. Captain Crawford's Venus had arrived in the entrance of the Vigo river on the 19th, having off-loaded weapons and supplies for the Portuguese at Oporto. On his approach to Vigo Crawford received numerous letters and deputations requesting assistance in arms and ammunition. It seemed, he wrote to Berkeley, as if "The whole country had risen upon the French. On landing I found it as

described, and have supplied them with whatever I can spare, nothing can be more general and determined than they seem to be." Meanwhile, he waited for the Lively.¹⁰

Captain McKinley's Lively entered the Vigo estuary on 23 March from Villagarcia. He met with Crawford and De Souza e Silva and determined the situation. The senior officer, McKinley directed the two frigates to approach the town and fortress of Vigo to better support the insurgents. Over the next four days the British ships provided muskets, ammunition, powder and other supplies, and landed heavy artillery and seamen. On 26 March Lieutenant Pablo Morillo arrived with 1,500 regular Spanish soldiers and took command of the siege from the land side. McKinley and Morillo sent an ultimatum to Colonel Chalot: surrender or face a night assault on the 27th. In a strong breeze and driving rain, McKinley and Crawford brought their ships parallel to the French fortifications in order to fire point-blank to create a breach for Morillo's men. At nightfall the ships opened fire and after two hours the breach at the Pescadería gate was practicable.¹¹ Chalot decided to surrender before the infantry assault. Crawford accepted the surrender, which Chalot and Morillo also signed on 27 March. The terms stipulated the British would take charge of the 1,304 French prisoners and transport them to England. The Spaniards gained 447 horses, sixty-two wagons and the 117,153 francs in Soult's military chest.¹²

Soon after the surrender Chapuzet's column reached Vigo; it was promptly attacked by the insurgents. The Spaniards pursued the French back to Tuy and inflicted severe casualties. Nearly ninety percent of his 300 men were killed, wounded or captured. The Spanish and Portuguese, 8,000 strong, recommenced the siege of Tuy, supported by a vast store of arms and twenty cannon captured at Vigo. Captain

McKinley rode over to visit the allied camp around Tuy and reported to Berkeley that the garrison appeared weak from lack of supplies but strong enough that he convinced the troops not to make an immediate assault.¹³

The British presence off the coast increased with the arrival of the brig Raven(16) and the frigate Niobe(38). On 1 April Berkeley learned of Soult's capture of Oporto and two days later he received word of McKinley's capture of Vigo. The following day he ordered Captain William Daniell, of the brig Jasper(10), to cruise off Oporto to warn incoming ships of the French occupation; at the same time he was to aid the escape of thirty captured British merchant ships in the river. Berkeley further directed two Portuguese schooners, the Concejo and the Curiosa, to reinforce McKinley's small squadron. The admiral also sent a message northward in the form of a printed handbill; in Spanish and addressed to the Inhabitants of Galicia – it derided the “Tyranny of the French,” encouraged the valor of the Spanish nation, especially the rising in Galicia, and promised British support. But, he stated the allies must “form a plan of operations and this plan must be observed religiously;” together the insurgents and the Royal Navy could have great success along the coast, wrote Berkeley, providing Vigo as an example.¹⁴

Meanwhile, Soult received little information of the other French forces until he took Oporto on 29 March. When he learned from captured letters of the predicament of his two detachments left in Galicia, he sent one of his four divisions under General Etienne Heudelet to relieve Tuy and Vigo, and seek news from Ney. He sent another division-sized detachment eastward, under General Louis-Henri Loison, to seek information on the approach of Lapisse. With his forces dispersed, Soult was too weak to advance on Lisbon, so he remained in defensive positions around Oporto. Heudelet

marched from Braga on 5 April with 4,000 infantry and one of Soult's three cavalry divisions. The column arrived outside the fortress of Valença at midday on the 10th and summoned the 200 defenders to surrender. The Portuguese fled and Heudelet opened communications with Lamartinière, across the river in Tuy, who had no news of Ney and could only tell Heudelet of the loss of Chalot's troops at Vigo.¹⁵ Since Soult's orders were to avoid operations in Galicia, Heudelet began evacuating the Tuy garrison on 11 April. Thus, Vigo and its garrison were lost, Tuy and Valença were abandoned, and one of Soult's four infantry divisions was dispersed and unable to support offensive operations in central Portugal.¹⁶

The British navy, meanwhile, continued to alter the balance of power both in Portugal and on the Galician coast. Convoys from Cadiz and Britain brought thousands of troop reinforcements, as well as horses, and tons of needed supplies for the British army at Lisbon in March and April. Lieutenant General Sir Arthur Wellesley arrived on 22 April and on 1 May had 24,200 men under arms, enough for him to begin his own offensive operations to drive the French out of Portugal. Off the coast of Galicia the navy supplied arms to the insurgents in increasing numbers.¹⁷

In the first week of April the Loire arrived off Finisterre and joined the Endymion. Captains Schomberg and Thomas Capel distributed 3,500 muskets and a great quantity of powder, pistols, pikes and sabres to the insurgents of Corcubiòn. On 13 April the French reacted by sending 1,000 troops from Santiago to attack the Spaniards, but were driven off by the defenders. The French returned on the 21st, with 2,000 infantry and 200 cavalry. Although the defenders of Corcubiòn included a party of British

marines led by a naval officer, the French drove them out of the town; the Spanish leaders went aboard the Endymion and escaped to Vigo.¹⁸

Meanwhile, on 14 April, a French division under General Antoine Maucune appeared near Vigo on its march from Tuy to Santiago. British naval Captain Crawford commanded a garrison of 274 British marines and seamen, representing roughly twenty percent of the crews present, in the castle of Castro. Five British frigates, including reinforcements sent from Lisbon by Berkeley, took up stations in the river to flank the position. Hundreds of regular and irregular Spanish troops, armed by the British ships, reinforced Crawford. The position appeared strong enough to convince Maucune to continue his withdrawal to Santiago, so Vigo remained in British hands.¹⁹

On 5 May Wellesley's reinforced and invigorated army, supported by ships from Berkeley's squadron, marched northward to dislodge Soult from Oporto.²⁰ With less than half of his force available, Soult was surprised by Wellesley on 12 May and chased into the mountains. Only by abandoning his sick and wounded, artillery, and supplies was Soult able to escape the enveloping Portuguese army and reach the relative safety of Spain with the loss of 5,000 men.²¹ Wellesley then turned his own attentions to a combined operation in central Spain that would result in the bloodbath at Talavera at the end of July.

Meanwhile, Marshals Ney and Soult met at Lugo from 30 May to 1 June to plan a reconquest of Galicia. That plan was forestalled, however, first, in Soult's immediately subsequent decision not to carry out his part and, second, in the battle of Sempayo, along the Oitaben river, on 7 and 8 June. In that fight Ney was defeated by a joint and combined Spanish and British force. Captain McKinley at nearby Vigo received a

request for assistance from the Spanish army commander on the 6th, and immediately sent parts of the crews of several ships, along with boats and cannon, ammunition, and powder in support. Captain Delamore Wynter of HMS Cadmus served as the senior British officer on the rainy, wind-swept field. Three gunboats, led by naval lieutenants of three nations, Spanish, Portuguese, and British, anchored the left of the line, and Lieutenant Francis Jefferson's boat destroyed two French batteries with its well-directed fire. In the end, after two full days of heavy cannonading and several failed assaults, Ney's nearly 10,000 men were defeated by a smaller mixed Allied force. McKinley's energetic response and the ingenuity and spirit of Wynter and his seamen proved critical to the success. Ney followed Soult's withdrawal with his own and abandoned Corunna and Ferrol on 22 June and the entire province soon after.²²

The French evacuation of Galicia provided a window of opportunity for the allies to secure the large Spanish naval squadron at Ferrol. As Ney and Soult licked their wounds and developed plans to entrap Wellesley in his late summer withdrawal from Talavera, the Royal Navy exercised herculean efforts to outfit, supply, and remove the powerful squadron from Ferrol to Cadiz on the southwest coast. Captain Henry Hotham of the Channel Fleet made the initial preparations but, under Berkeley's directions, Captain Samuel Hood Linzee took charge when he arrived in late August. Berkeley had sent all four of his ships of the line from Lisbon for the purpose and had moved his headquarters into a lowly transport as the only vessel at hand. By late September the exertions of thousands of British seamen had saved a squadron of sixteen warships from falling into Napoleon's hands - including five ships of the line (two of 120 guns), six frigates, and five smaller vessels.²³ It is interesting to observe that Linzee, Hotham, and

Berkeley all received very good cooperation, which they each noted, from the Spanish naval officers involved in this critical operation, and to contrast this with the very important difficulties Wellesley and General Gregorio Cuesta were having in the simultaneous Talavera campaign and aftermath.²⁴

Admiral Berkeley's naval squadron performed in an outstanding manner along the Galician littoral from January to September 1809. For most of that period there was no British military force in the region, and the allied troops were primarily local levies and home guards with a smattering of regulars. Still, this ad hoc coalition accomplished much. First, they effectively contained a large portion of Marshal Soult's corps. The actions of Berkeley's frigate commanders, and the forces supplied by them, caused Soult to divide his corps in an attempt to open communications with Ney and Lapisse. For a critical month the French halted at Oporto, while the British grew in strength. Berkeley wrote soon after Wellesley's arrival, "The Aspect of Affairs is now so much changed."²⁵ His words reflected the rise in confidence among the Anglo-Portuguese, and also portrayed the results of his operations. Hence, the Royal Navy, and the hodge-podge Portuguese and Spanish forces, had significantly contributed to the repulse of the second invasion of Portugal, and preserved that country as a sanctuary for future operations against the French. Second, they had contributed immeasurably to clearing Galicia of the French, and had secured a large and powerful naval squadron keeping it out of Napoleon's hands. Throughout, Berkeley exercised keen judgment from his base at Lisbon, directing forces to the critical scenes of action while at the same time leaving the commanders on the spot to make decisions as circumstances warranted. Captain McKinley, the senior officer off Galicia for much of the period, stated that Berkeley had

“been pleased to leave it to my discretion from local circumstances” to decide how to act.²⁶ That component, always operating within the commander’s intent while free to act and react to the changing situation, was key to the Royal Navy’s success in this campaign. Young naval officers worked outside their conventional comfort zone, exemplified in the quasi-political negotiations conducted with the Spaniards by McKinley, Crawford, Hotham and Linzee, in the outfitting of a foreign naval armament, and in the conduct of battle with Napoleon’s troops on land with battalions of marines and seamen, batteries of artillery, and gunboats on small rivers. The officers and men confronted and rose to these challenges and shaped a successful littoral campaign with significant impact on future operations.

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¹ Two recent and welcome additions to the literature of the Peninsular War examine portions of these operations. Charles Esdaile's The Peninsular War: A New History, (New York, 2003) may well become the standard single-volume history, while Christopher Hall's Wellington's Navy: Seapower and the Peninsular War 1807-1814, (London, 2004) is the first book-length treatment of its subject. See Esdaile, chapters 7 and 8, and Hall, chapter 3, for the period under examination.

² Louis Alexandre Berthier to Soult, 21 Jan 1809, cited in William Napier, History of the War in the Peninsula, (London, 1851), II, 12-3; Napoleon to Berthier, 15 Jan 1809, Correspondance de Napoleon Ier, (Paris, 1865), XVIII, 220-23; Pierre Le Noble, Mémoires sur les Opérations Militaires des Français en Galice, en Portugal, et dans la Vallée du Tage, en 1809 sous le Commandement du Maréchal Soult, duc de Dalmatie, (Paris, 1821), 64-7.

³ Le Noble, *Mémoires*, 69-70, 88-91; Charles Oman, *A History of the Peninsular War*, (Oxford, 1903), II, 181-3, 188-9, 263. The depth and breadth of research and treatment in Oman's seven volumes is still unmatched after 100 years.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 94-123, 149-80; Oman, *Peninsular War*, II, 189-95, 223-51.

⁵ Oman, *Peninsular War*, II, 206, 204-5, 250-1, 287-8; Berkeley to John Villiers, 25 Feb 1809, George Cranfield Berkeley Collection, Woodson Research Center, Rice University (hereafter cited as Berkeley Coll, Rice), Box 5; Berkeley to William Wellesley-Pole, Admiralty Secretary, 26 Feb 1809, Great Britain, Public Records Office, Admiralty (hereafter cited as PRO, ADM) 1/341. For the mindstate of the principals in Lisbon see Cradock to Colonel James Willoughby Gordon, Horse Guards secretary, 7 Feb, Cradock to Berkeley, 9 Feb, Cradock to Villiers, 15 Feb, Villiers to Cradock, 11, 15 (2) Feb, Cradock to Robert Stewart, lord Castlereagh, secretary for War and Colonies, 12 Feb 1809, Great Britain, British Library, Add Mss 49,488.

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⁷ McKinley to Pole, 15 Mar 1809, PRO, ADM 1/2160; Carlos Martinez-Valverde, "*El Mar, en el Alzamiento de Galicia Contra el Invasor (1809)*," *Revista General de Marina* (CXCV, 1978), 18-20.

⁸ Pole to Schomberg, 25 and 28 Mar 1809, Berkeley Coll, Rice, Box 5.

⁹ Le Noble, *Mémoires*, 188-91; Napier, *War in the Peninsula*, II, 59-60.

¹⁰ Crawford to Berkeley, 19 Mar 1809, PRO, ADM 1/341; Log of HMS *Venus*, 2-24 Mar 1809, PRO, ADM 51/2961; Oman, *Peninsular War*, II, 263; Napier, *War in the Peninsula*, II, 60; Martinez-Valverde, "*El Mar*", 21.

¹¹ Log of HMS *Lively*, 24-29 Mar 1809, PRO, ADM 51/1917; Carlos Martinez-Valverde, "*El Alzamiento contra el Invasor, en Galicia, en 1809*," *Revista de Historia Militar* (XXIV, 1980), 62-6. Martinez-Valverde declared "*La reconquista de Vigo fue una de las mayores victorias españolas en la guerra en Galicia*," 65.

¹² McKinley to Berkeley, 29 Mar 1809, PRO, ADM 1/341; Terms of the French Capitulation at Vigo, 27 Mar 1809, signed by Chalot, Crawford and Morillo, cited in Henrique de Campos Ferreira Lima, "*O tenente português João Baptista de Almeida Sousa e Sá herói da reconquista de Vigo em 1809*" *Boletim do Arquivo Histórico Militar* (VII, 1937), 14-17; Le Noble, *Mémoires*, 190-1; Oman, *Peninsular War*, II, 263-4.

¹³ McKinley to Berkeley, 13 Apr 1809, PRO, ADM 1/2160; Le Noble, *Mémoires*, 191-2; Oman, *Peninsular War*, II, 264; Martinez-Valverde, "*El Alzamiento*", 65-6.

¹⁴ Berkeley's Proclamation, 9 Apr 1809, PRO, Foreign Office 179/7; Berkeley to Captain J.M. Hanchett, *Raven*, 13 Mar 1809, Berkeley to Captain John Wentworth Loring, *Niobe*, 17 Mar 1809, Berkeley to Captain William Daniell, *Jasper*, 4 Apr 1809, NMM, LBK/36; Berkeley to Don Miguel Forjaz, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, War and Marine, 4 Apr 1809, Lisbon, Arquivo de Armada (Arquivo Geral da Marinha), 42/815.

¹⁵ Le Noble, *Mémoires*, 180-8; Oman, *Peninsular War*, II, 250-2, 262-3.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 193-96, 201-2; Oman, *Peninsular War*, II, 264-5.

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