



Bread and Beef

Wellington's Success in the Peninsula Through his Eyes

Introduction

Wellington was a tireless man possessed of seemingly inexhaustible energy as one sees through Captain William Tomkinson's of the 16th Light Dragoons description of his daily routine.

"Lord Wellington rises at six every morning, and employs himself to nine (the breakfast hour) in writing. After breakfast, he sees the heads of departments viz.: Quarter-Master and Adjutant-General, commissary-General, Commander of Artillery, and any other officers coming to him on business. This occupies until 2 or 3 p.m., and sometimes longer, when he gets on his horse and rides to near six – this, of course, is interfered with when the troops are before the enemy. At nine he retires to write again, or employs himself until twelve, when he retires for the night. His correspondence with England, and the Spanish and Portuguese Government is very extensive.¹

While he made supreme efforts to address every detail of his troops, Wellington never lost sight of the goal as his comment cited by Bryant says,

"If we can maintain ourselves in Portugal, the war will not cease in the Peninsula, and, if the war lasts in the Peninsula, Europe will be saved."²

Wellington tried not to leave anything to chance and he himself stated one of the reasons for his success against Napoleon when he said to Stanhope,

"The real reason I succeeded in my campaigns is because I was always on the spot. I saw everything and did everything for myself." Wellington told Stanhope.³

Wellington also husbanded his resources. In an 1810 note to Croker he said,

"There is a great deal of difference (particularly in the blood to be spilt) between fighting in a position which I choose or in one which the enemy chooses to fight."⁴

¹ P. 217. Brett-James, Antony. **Wellington at War 1794-1815. A Selection of his Wartime Letters Edited and Introduced.** London: MacMillan & Company Ltd. 1961.

² P. 179. Bryant, Arthur. **The Great Duke or the Invincible General.** London: Collins. 1971.

³ P. 181. James, Lawrence. **The Iron Duke – A Military Biography of Wellington.** London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson. 1992.

⁴ P. 181. James, Lawrence. **The Iron Duke – A Military Biography of Wellington.** London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson. 1992.

Wellington himself stated another key to success in the Peninsula when he noted,

“Much of the success of this army has been owing to its being well supplied with provisions.”⁵

Historians are most fortunate, as Wellington was a prolific writer with many many volumes of his correspondence and general orders either in print or resting in archives and libraries. Even the modest collection of his documents at U of T can be overwhelming therefore; I limited my focus to Volume 4 of Wellington’s Dispatches. As well I refer to Arthur Wellesley as Wellington throughout the paper even though that title was granted to him during the campaign. This helped to keep names straight in my mind. This paper outlines the challenges that Wellington faced when he took a British Army to the Iberian Peninsula to fight portions of Napoleon’s Grand Army. It is not a battle history nor is it a political history or a biography. Rather it is a look at the facets that pre-occupied Wellington as he was establishing his army and his campaigns against the French in Portugal and later Spain.

The paper is divided into two parts. The first part is a brief description of the political and organizational morass Wellington had to work with to get anything done. I was expecting to see great revolutionary changes in how the army was organized and managed. But I was very surprised to find that Wellington aside from establishing the division, left the army’s organization as it was. Rather, he tried to get the most out of the existing political and military structures that were around him. That is probably the major unspoken factor to Wellington’s success. The second part outlines and highlights the importance of logistics in keeping Wellington’s army in the fight against Napoleon. It is interesting to observe that when the commissariat was functioning, discipline, looting and other related problems were minimized. And when the commissariat fell short, the army began to devolve into a hungry mob with guns looking for food.

The paper is somewhat long. However, I tried to tell the story using as many direct citations from Wellington and his contemporaries as possible. Too many times, the actual subject of history is lost in overanalyzes by secondary and tertiary commentators. Here is an opportunity to see the challenges and some of the solutions through the eyes of the General

⁵ P. 114. Glover, Michael. Wellington’s Army – In the Peninsula 1808-1814. London: David & Charles. 1977.

himself and those who were directly affected by his decisions. A map has been included to show the reader the scope and the long distances that Wellington traversed in his campaigns – all keeping in mind he was feeding and caring for a medium sized town on the march, out of battle, in battle and in quarters during the winter.

Man for man, the British soldier was the best trained and possessed the greatest battlefield discipline in Europe. For the longest time this fact was not appreciated at home. As will be seen, organization and bureaucracy especially unity of command ranked among the biggest challenge to the British Army in its fight against Napoleon.

Castlereagh, the Duke of York and General Sir John Moore (Wellington's predecessor in the Peninsula) were the driving forces behind army reform. The return on the time investment of training and discipline was first seen with the 1800 – 1801 Battle of the Nile. Unfortunately it went unnoticed back in Westminster.⁶ The significance of the Army contribution was not acknowledged despite Archibald Alison's observation,

“Within two years after the Treaty of Tilsit, which seemed to put the whole naval forces of the continent at his feet, Napoleon had lost a hundred sail of the line, his two wings were completely destroyed, and all this mainly by the operations of the land forces.”⁷

Charles Oman noted that Wellington's army in Portugal had no transport for its artillery and its commissariat (logistics) with a cruel quip about the Duke of York and Mrs. Mary Ann Clark. Oman didn't realize the non-existent unity of command Wellington had to suffer. However, Sir John Fortescue fully realized it when he shot back with,

“Oman has manifestly forgotten that the Commander in Chief [York] had no control over either the artillery or the Commissariat.”⁸

The 18 century British Army Command Structure was Byzantine. Fear of another Cromwell usurping power through the army lingered and Wellington suffered.⁹ Through the 18th century, the army's senior officer was the Commander-in-Chief who had control of regular infantry and cavalry. Only the C-in-C could order troop movements. Note that the Secretary-at-War, a member of the Cabinet had to authorize the troop movement before it could be made. However, the Master General of the

⁶ Pp.6-7. Glover, Richard. **Peninsular Preparation: The Reform of the British Army – 1795-1809**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1963.

⁷ P. 7. Glover, Richard. **Peninsular Preparation: The Reform of the British Army – 1795-1809**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1963.

⁸ P.14. Glover, Richard. **Peninsular Preparation: The Reform of the British Army – 1795-1809**.

⁹ P. 182. James, Lawrence. **The Iron Duke – A Military Biography of Wellington**. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson. 1992.

Ordnance controlled the artillery and the engineers. The Master General of the Ordnance also supplied greatcoats, weapons and ammunition to the regiments. The regimental Colonel supplied his men with uniforms. The regimental Colonel looked to a civilian Commissary General for rations. The Secretary-at-War was responsible for troop movements within England. The Transport Board was responsible for troop movements outside of England but only to move the men and **materiel** at sea. The Admiralty was responsible for escorting the troops to their destination port. The civilian Commissary General was responsible for transport, rations, and fodder for the disembarked troops.¹⁰

This command structure was complicated by the existence of four armies in Britain. They are the regular Infantry and Cavalry - the Artillery and the Engineers - the Militia - the Reserve.¹¹ Consequently the military dimension of a troop movement was very difficult to co-ordinate. This was one great source of friction, as Clausewitz would quaintly say a few years later. This complicated command structure was exacerbated by the fact that the largest unit of the British Army at this time was the Regiment.¹² The French had organized their army around the division, an independent 5000 man all arms (infantry, cavalry, artillery, engineer) group of about four regiments. This strategic and tactical flexibility allowed Napoleon to disperse and subsequently converge huge masses of men on a decisive point far faster than his opponents did.

The second great source of friction was the convoluted political command of the Army. The Secretary of State was responsible for military planning on the Continent while the Colonial Secretary was responsible for military planning on in the Colonies. Pitt created the part time post of Secretary-at-War, which combined military planning in 1794. From 1798 to 1848 the Colonial Office controlled military planning. The Foreign Secretary had not lost his strategic influence however. He lost the ability to successfully carry it out. It gets better. The Home Secretary was responsible for militia

¹⁰ P. 15. Glover. **Peninsular Preparations**. P. 15 Glover. **Wellington's Army in the Peninsula – 1808-1814**. London: David & Charles. 1977. The Secretary at War had political enrichment in mind, not military necessity. The C-in-C was only filled in wartime so his influence and connections with the government was limited at best.

¹¹ P. 35. Glover. **Wellington's Army in the Peninsula – 1808-1814**. In 1805, more than half army's recruits came from the militia. Militia volunteers supplied half the Army's recruits until 1815. A legal contradiction existed, "the Act of 1802 had not been repealed and, had not Parliament indemnified them, a number of former militiamen equal to the number of Wellington's army in Spain would have been liable to six months imprisonment each for having enlisted."

¹² P. 19. Glover. . **Wellington's Army in the Peninsula – 1808-1814**.

and the volunteer troops for home defence. He periodically required regular troops to maintain public order. He could effectively petition Cabinet to hold regular troops for “aid-to-civil power” when those regular troops were desperately required abroad.¹³

The theoretical Chief-of-Staff, the connection between the government and the military was the Master General of Ordnance. However, Pitt did not like The Duke of Richmond, a practical soldier. Pitt equally ignored Lord Cornwallis, his successor of 1795. Consequently learned military advice on campaigns and potential troop employment was factored out. The politicians could not understand that an army was not a police force nor was it a colonial raiding party. They did not see the true political danger of France completely dominating Europe. They did not understand until General Cornwallis told them in 1801,

“[Britons] must play the game against Bonaparte that our ancestors did against Louis XIV.

The third source of friction was the British Government’s and by extension the Army’s woefully inadequacy in the crucial elements of military planning which included geography, intelligence and logistics. Geographic knowledge of both England and Europe was non-existent. The quaintly named Drawing Room was the government’s sole cartographic repository. British troops had no maps of the areas where they would be likely to fight.¹⁴ Oftentimes, enemy troop dispositions were gleaned from smuggler’s reports of dubious reliability at best. There was no dedicated intelligence service.

Wellington faced almost insurmountable command problems. Weller neatly summarizes the dilemma when he said,

“The great weakness of the British Staff organization was that the C-in-C of an expeditionary force was not in complete command of his own staff. Eight of his nine senior officers were primarily responsible to their superiors at home...The power of a C-in-C abroad to reward and punish was drastically curtailed. He could not choose subordinates officers nor get rid of those who proved incapable.”¹⁵

¹³ P. 15. Glover. **Peninsular Preparations.**

¹⁴ Pp. 18-19. Glover. **Peninsular Preparations.**

¹⁵ P. 28. Weller, Jac. **Wellington in the Peninsula 1808-1814.** London: Greenhill Books. 1992. Originally published in 1962.

Wellington was very outspoken regarding his own superior's perceived meddling in his efforts to get the best out of his troops as this excerpt from a dispatch to his brother, the Hon. William Wellesley-Pole dated 16 September 1808. After complaining about his Generals being shuffled around without any seeming reason or rhyme, he bluntly declares,

...Then my orders & regulations in respect to the discipline and supply of the Army are treated as so much waste paper; contradicting orders are issued without even a reference to them; & there never was such a state of confusion as we are now in in this respect. To this add that they have illegally broken the contract which was made under my authority for the supply of Meat to the troops; & the consequence is that a great proportion of the Army is now fed upon Salt provisions. Then the tricks they have played me personally are no bad symptom of their feelings towards me.¹⁶

Not all was complete gloom and doom for Wellington as a former Irish member of parliament was well connected and was able to use some of his political connections to get things done. And, the Army was reasonably well trained as Glover identified three tactical items that significantly contributed to British success in the Peninsula. These tactical items are: two rank front instead of three; steady troops supported with well-trained riflemen; shielding the troops from artillery fire or musket fire before engagement by holding them on reverse slopes or having them lie down before engagement in battle.¹⁷ Wellington as a true master of military art and science took a true measure of his enemy very early on. He trained and employed his troops accordingly. He was a true leader and his troops implicitly knew it.

Wellington stated in 1808,

¹⁶ P. 147. Brett-James, Antony. **Wellington at War 1794-1815 – A Selection of his Wartime Letters Edited and Introduced**. London: MacMillan & Company Ltd. 1961. This was an ongoing problem as Wellington noted again in a dispatch to Colonel Henry Torrens dated 6 December 1812. “Nobody in the British Army ever reads a regulation or an order as if were to be a guide for his conduct, or in any other manner than as an amusing novel; and the consequence is, that when complicated arrangements are to be carried into execution (and in this country the poverty of its resources renders them all complicated), every gentleman proceeds according to his fancy; and then, when it is found that the arrangement fails (as it must fail if the order is not strictly obeyed), they must come upon me to set matters to rights, and thus my labor is increased ten fold.” P. 257.

¹⁷ P. 161. Bryant, Arthur. **The Great Duke or the Invincible General**. London: Collins. 1971. This is one of many references to Wellington ordering his troops to shelter or lie down in order to avoid casualties before they were ordered into battle.

“If what I hear about [the French] system of maneuver is true, I think it is a false one against steady troops. I suspect all the continental armies were more than half-beaten before the battle was begun. I at least will not be frightened beforehand.”¹⁸

Glover noted that Wellington relied on the steadiness of his infantry and excellent musketry. Despite the management and organizational problems noted earlier, the British soldier and the Royal Artillery on average was very skilled and disciplined in the military arts. This discipline could be devastating to the French as Weller dramatically recounts the Light Division commander Brigadier-General Craufurd’s virtual nose-to-nose engagement. The point blank range of this engagement was typical of most battles during this period. It took a lot of training and discipline to get troops to stand fast, not bolt or fire too soon when a column several thousand strong, armed and shouting (as well as shooting) was advancing on your position.

“[Craufurd’s] two battalions 20 yards to the rear and on either side of their commander, were ready but invisible to the enemy. [He placed them out of the French line of fire] Ross’s battery fired one last round of case from each piece and pulled back. When the French saw the guns retire, they let out a shout and surged forward to clear the ridge. Craufurd seemed to be facing them alone. He waited until the two French columns were 25 yards from the edge of the shelf.

‘Now!’ He roared in his mighty bass voice. His veterans rose as one man, moved forward a few yards, and fired a staggering volley.

‘Fifty-second, avenge Moore!’ Craufurd bellowed again. The two southernmost companies of the 52nd and the two northernmost of the 43rd fought with their bayonets. The others, eight on each flank, lapped around the columns, firing regular volleys from their two deep lines.”¹⁹

It took a leader such as Wellington to manipulate the organizational hurdles to effectively employ his army. Weller observed that the British Army was the only army that actually practiced live firing and the men were proficient in the use of the musket with an effective range of 80 yards and the rifle with an effective range of 300 yards.

¹⁸ P. 55-56. Glover. **Wellington’s Army in the Peninsula. – 1808-1814.**

¹⁹ P. 13. Weller, Jac. **Wellington in the Peninsula 1808-1814.** London: Greenhill books. 1993. Originally published 1962.

Wellington deployed his infantry in two tight (elbow dressing not arm dressing) ranks instead of three. Wellington maintained his two ranks by having them cover to the centre to fill gaps caused by casualties. He calculated that a French 5000 man division moving against a two-company front – each company holding a 170 man wide front could bring 340 muskets to bear at any one time. This was less than the firepower of only three and half companies drawn up two ranks deep. Consequently, Wellington was the first commander to consistently demonstrate success over the French column using this method to bring overwhelming firepower down on it. Here was the secret behind “the thin red line”.²⁰ And, Wellington simplified his command structure when he took a page from the French book by re-organizing his own Peninsular Army into independent divisions on 8 May 1808.²¹ In essence, Wellington maximized the efficiency of his troops given the organizational and technical limitations of the time.

Although the ratio of guns to muskets was low (2guns per 1000 muskets) in comparison to the French preferred ratio of 5 guns per 1000 muskets, the British Royal Artillery was matchless at the battery (group of 4-8 guns) level. British artillerymen were noted for their prowess and tenacity in battle. They would fight to the last man rather than be driven off their guns. British artillerymen were very well trained and had excellent guns and reliable powder.²² Wellington always endeavoured to equip his troops with the best possible equipment available as this dispatch notes. After

²⁰ P. 56. Glover. **Wellington's Army in the Peninsula. – 1808-1814.** Grover notes an unnamed French observer, “They [the British] use every exertion to render the fire of the soldier efficient; and in place of expending nearly the whole of their powder in discharging volleys by platoons or battalions, ...they endeavour to instruct the soldier in the true principles at a small, moderate and great distance. He [the soldier] is frequently practiced in shooting at a target; and it is an object never lost sight of that the value of musquetry is not the compactness or the regularity of its sound, but in the murderous execution produced by steady aim”. Writer’s note: Marksmanship is still a highly practiced art in the British Army as the Germans discovered about a century later in the opening days of World War I. The Germans found themselves on the receiving end of devastating 1000 yard aimed rapid fire by the British in the opening days of World War I. They thought they were under machine gun fire! [The author fully appreciates the challenge of this military art through his own experience with rapid fire at 600 meters] P. 26. Weller, Jac. **Wellington in the Peninsula 1808-1814.** London: Greenhill Books.1992. Originally published in 1962.

²¹ Pp. 178-179. Longford, Elizabeth. **Wellington – The Years of the Sword.** London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson. 1969. Volume 1. P. 146. Bryant, Arthur. **The Great Duke or the Invincible General.** London: Collins. 1971.

²² Pp. 24, 27. Weller, Jac. **Wellington in the Peninsula 1808-1814.** London: Greenhill Books. 1992. Originally published in 1962. P. 100. Glover, Michael. **Wellington's Army – In the Peninsula 1808-1814.** London: David & Charles. 1977. Writer’s note. To this day, the Royal Artillery and by extension the Royal Canadian Artillery does not have regimental colours as the infantry regiments. Their guns are their colours. Gunners rally around their guns as the infantry rally around their colours. And the loss of an artillery piece has the same shame as the loss of the regimental colour.

suffering with inadequate siege artillery, Wellington wrote Admiral Berkeley on 9 October 1811,

“...I have had enough of sieges with defective artillery and I will never undertake another without the best. Therefore in all my letters I have desired to have either 29 pdrs 9 feet long, Carron manufacture or 38 pdrs 8 feet long of the same manufacture and Carron shot.”²³

The British Army was the only army who retained the rifle for their skirmishers (riflemen or light infantry) after 1807 when Napoleon disbanded his rifle regiments. The Baker rifle had a range of 300 yards. Although slow to load as the ball had to be pushed down a 30 inch grooved barrel, the precision of the Baker rifle allowed the skirmisher/rifleman to harry ordinary infantry beyond their musket range. And it was short enough to be reloaded from the prone position. Wellington ensured the role of the rifleman when he ordered each brigade maintain a permanent company of riflemen to ensure the steadiness of his men in the line. Consequently his steady troops proved even steadier when they knew their flanks were protected by accurate rifle fire.

Wellington was the only general who understood that his troops were safe from artillery or musket fire when drawn up on a reverse slope. Consequently, when battle was joined, Wellington's troops were fresh with relatively light casualties. At Cascjal during the battle of Talavera, at 5:00am the French started a potentially devastating artillery barrage. Casualties were light as the troops were ordered to retire behind rests or lie flat on the ground.²⁴

As stated earlier, the British soldier was one of the best in Europe despite savage discipline, poor food, being drawn from the desperate classes and suffering through government mismanagement. One key to this excellence was the Regiment. As many of the men were social miscasts, the Regiment was their family. It provided a sense of security, stability and reputation which even the worst of them would strongly defend in battle.

²³ P. 260 Longford, Elizabeth. **Wellington – The Years of the Sword**. London. These were the same pieces; carronades that Nelson used in his ships to utterly destroy the French fleet.

²⁴ P. 97. Weller, Jac. **Wellington in the Peninsula 1808-1814**. London: Greenhill Books 1993. Originally published 1962. Pp. 178-179. Longford, Elizabeth. **Wellington – The Years of the Sword**. London

This was the glue that kept the army cohesive under the worst conditions.²⁵ As well, many officers were extremely devoted to their men. Glover noted,

“They [the officers] seem, almost without exception, to have understood the art of leadership. How else could they have welded the drunken plundering collection of social misfits they commanded into ‘the most complete machine for its numbers now existing in Europe’”²⁶

The other key was discipline. And Wellington continually acted decisively to maintain discipline.²⁷ Given his reliance on very steady troops, who would unfailingly follow a battlefield order, Wellington was deeply and continually concerned about anything regarding discipline.²⁸ He sent the Eighty Fifth (Bucks Volunteers) home after eight months. Before the regiment was shipped to the Peninsula, a captain had been cashiered and another had been shot in a duel. He did make a concerted effort to maintain discipline in his army as sections of the First General Order of the Peninsular War clearly state. Many floggings reinforced them.²⁹ Wellington continually instructed his officers to maintain discipline as this General Order dated 16 September 1809 Badajoz emphasizes,

“The Commander of the Forces cannot avoid taking this opportunity of calling upon the field officers of the regiments in particular, and all the officers in general, to support and assist their Commanding officer in the maintenance of discipline, and in the preservation of order and regularity in their corps....”³⁰

At the same time, Wellington applied discipline where it counted and didn't waste energy on insignificant details. Glover cites the adjutant of the Fifty-Third

²⁵ pp. 176-177. James, Lawrence. **The Iron Duke – A Military Biography of Wellington**. London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson. 1992.

²⁶ P. 75 Glover. **Wellington's Army in the Peninsula. – 1808-1814**

²⁷ p. 179 Glover. Wellington's Army. Glover cites (no page unfortunately) [Sergeant of the Fusiliers] John Spencer Cooper. **Rough Notes of Seven Campaigns** 2nd Edition. 1914. “it has often been stated that the Duke of Wellington was severe. In answer to that I would say that he could not be otherwise. His army was composed of the lowest orders. Many, if not most of them, were ignorant, idle and drunken ...Could a general, so wise, just and brave as he was, suffer the people to be robbed with impunity?”

²⁸ p. 175. James, Lawrence. **The Iron Duke – A Military Biography of Wellington**. London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson. 1992.

²⁹ p. 79 Glover. **Wellington's Army in the Peninsula. – 1808-1814**. P. 149 Longford, Elizabeth. **Wellington – The years of the Sword**. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson. 1969. Vol. 1. Everything from rape to robbery was addressed. Respect for Catholic religious beliefs was specified. Wellington stressed “The troops are to understand that Portugal is a country friendly to his majesty”...

³⁰ Pp. 169-170. Brett-James. Antony. **Wellington at War 1794-1815. A Selection of his Wartime Letters Edited and Introduced**. London: MacMillan & Company Ltd. 1961.

“He [Wellington] is a good soldier and much beloved by the army. He gives no unnecessary trouble if people conduct themselves as they ought, but otherwise he is very severe. Provided we brought our men into the field well appointed, with sixty rounds of good ammunition each, he never looked to see whether their trousers were black, blue or grey.”³¹

Despite what would be considered draconian and savage disciplinary measures, Wellington continually struggled for his troops welfare as this telling anecdote recounted by Sir James Bland Burges in a letter to his son told to him by Major Gordon, Wellington’s aide de camp describes,

[...arrived there about midnight. They found a great number of sick lying in the open air.]

“Lord Wellington immediately knocked up the commanding officer, and asked him why the men were left in such a condition. He said, that there was no accommodation for them in the place.

‘Be so good’ said Lord Wellington, ‘as to show me this house.’ After he had walked over and inspected it, he told Gordon immediately to move 150 of the sick into it. He then went to the next officer in rank and so on, till he had removed the whole of the sick; and addressing the officers, he read them a severe lecture on the impropriety of their conduct and told them that if they or any officer under his command should presume to consult his own convenience or luxury while a single sick man should remain unsheltered, he would make an example of them....

He and Gordon then mounted their horses, and returned to head quarters before day, and without any one suspecting they had been absent. On the following evening, however, he [Wellington] suspected, from the sulky manner in which his orders had been received, that they were likely enough to be disobeyed; he was therefore determined to pay those gentlemen another visit.

Accordingly, they mounted their horses again and arrived past midnight at the post, where they found the sick removed into the open air and the officers comfortably reposing in their old quarters. However, he soon aroused them, for he ordered the sick be instantly brought in, put the officers under arrest, marched them to head quarters where they were tried for disobedience of orders and cashiered.”³²

³¹ Pp. 179-180. Glover, Michael, **Wellington’s Army – In the Peninsula 1818-1814**. London: David & Charles. 1977. Glover pulled this observation from Ed. H. F. Johnston. **The 2/53rd in the Peninsula War. Letters of Lieut. John Carss**. Army Historical Research. Xxvi?

³² Pp. 233-234. Brett-James. **Wellington at War 1794-1815. A Selection of his Wartime Letters Edited and Introduced**. London: MacMillan & Company Ltd. 1961. Brett-James cites a letter dated 11 February 1812 from

In summary, this was the instrument Wellington possessed when he entered the Peninsula. However, that does not tell the entire story. Modern armies rely upon comprehensive air, sea and land transport to move troops and equipment. This is seen even today by the fact that more planning went into logistics for the Gulf War than for the actual engagements. 18th Century British troops still had to be fed, clothed, armed, tended to and moved to where they would fight. That required horses, their drivers and waggons – lots of them. This is in addition to Cavalry and Artillery demands for horses. However, there was no provision for the wagon train. No horses, no movement – no movement no fighting or defeating the enemy. British royal chits and warrants issued by a civilian commissariat were of little use in a potentially hostile countryside. Initially, a scant 546 horses arrived in Portugal.³³

Battlefield success requires the ability to keep the troops fed, clothed, armed and well supplied with transport while on the march in battle or in merely in the field. This requires an efficient commissariat or logistical support. Wellington had faced and overcome logistics and transport problems while on duty in India.³⁴ Wellington worked with his Commissary-General Sir Robert Kennedy to develop the logistics that allowed the British army to outlast the French in the Peninsula. This is the greatest challenge Wellington had to overcome - after defeating the French army or course! With Kennedy, Wellington had a network of thirty even magazines or storage depots across Portugal from which mule trains could move supplies to the troops staffed by British commissaries, clerks and locally hired muleteers.³⁵ Supply within 50 miles of these depots was relatively efficient. Beyond fifty miles, especially within Spain, food and fodder

Sir James Bland Burges to his son. It came from Wellington's aide de camp Major Gordon. Although out of the period being examined, this incident is indicative of Wellington's determination to preserve as many of his troops as possible for battle. While this may be repeated several times, this is the kind of leadership that is the hallmark of a truly great General and leader.

³³ P. 29. Weller, Jac. **Wellington in the Peninsula 1808-1814**. London: Greenhill Books.1992. Originally published in 1962.

³⁴ P. 146. Bryant, Arthur. **The Grand duke or the Invincible General**. London: Collins. 1971.

³⁵ P. 183. James. Lawrence. **The Iron Duke – A Military Biography of Wellington**. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson. 1992. Wellington paid attention to every detail. He calculated the load a mule could carry in one day and determined the maximum distance between magazines was about 50 miles. The quantities needed were huge. James notes on page 184 that 750,000 pounds of oats, 900,000 pounds of barley and 1 million pounds of wheat were required for horses and mules. 6 months later 80% of that was consumed. 2.7 million pounds of flour, 1.52 million pounds of salted meat and 72,000 gallons of rum were in the magazines.

supply was done by local purchase. Once Wellington was firmly established in Spain, he shifted his main supply base from Lisbon to various northern Spanish ports, i.e. Santander. While sometimes short on bread/wheat, meat was always in supply as herds of oxen and cattle accompanied the rapidly moving campaigning troops.³⁶

Wellington never failed to use any opportunity to voice significant concerns and thoughts regarding his troops to the government. During a Board of Inquiry convened to review the operations in Portugal and the 30 August 1808 Convention of Cintra, he noted in a letter to Dundas the importance of the commissariat,

“The fact is, that I wished to draw the attention of the Government to this important branch of the service [commissariat], which is but little understood in this country. The evils which I complained are probably to be attributed to the nature of our political situation, which prevents us from undertaking great military operations, in which the subsistence of armies becomes a subject of serious consideration and difficulty; and these evils consisted in the inexperience of almost every individual of the Commissariat, of the mode of procuring, conveying and distributing the supplies here to be got or the use of the troops.”³⁷

In August 1809, after suffering extreme privations due to Spanish failure to provide promised supplies, Wellington tersely informed the Spanish General Eguia, General Cuesta’s deputy

“I must either move into Portugal where I know I shall be supplied or I must make up my mind to lose my army.”³⁸

Wellington began to withdraw to Portugal shortly after that – despite protests from London and from Spain. This was entirely due to lack of supply not battlefield defeat. This theme of limits on movement due to lack of supply is repeated again and again.

Wellington was able to influence the government of the time on a few occasions to give the British army the means to discharge its duties in eloquently dramatic ways. Wellington underscored the role of the engineer

³⁶ P. 112. Glover, Michael. **Wellington’s Army - In the Peninsula 1808-1814**. London: David & Charles.1977.

³⁷ p. 184. Editor Lieut. Colonel Gurwood. **The Dispatches of Field Marshal the Duke of Wellington, During his Various Campaigns in India, Denmark, Portugal, Spain, the Low Countries, and France from 1799-1818**. London: John Murray, Albemarle Street. 1837. Volume 4. Referred to as “Dispatches” with the appropriate volume and page number. Board of Inquiry 1.2 November 1808.

³⁸ P. 172. Bryant, Arthur. **The Great Duke or the Invincible General**. London: Collins. 1971.

when in a Dispatch dated 23 April 1812 with a very large casualty list attached,

“The capture of Badajoz affords as strong an instant of the gallantry of the troops as has ever been displayed. But I greatly hope that I shall never again be the instrument of putting them to such a test as they were put to last nite. I assure your lordship that it is quite impossible to carry fortified places by vive force without incurring grave loss and being exposed to the chance of failure unless the army should be provided with a sufficient trained corps of sappers and miners.”³⁹

One can only imagine the impact in a Cabinet meeting when those at the table were confronted with a seemingly endless list of names – each one a death or a crippling injury. The result was immediate. A royal warrant was issued that day which established the Royal Sappers and Miners.

Armies in the late 18th and early 19th centuries did not travel in complete independence from local supplies. Items such as bread, meat and horses were either purchased or requisitioned [read stolen or plundered] from the countryside the armies traveled through. Unlike the French, Wellington did not want to plunder his erstwhile allies the Portuguese and the Spanish. This required money – which could be a significant problem. Finances were another challenge and a number of Wellington’s dispatches pleaded for money. They also outlined the consequences if the requested funds were not forthcoming.⁴⁰

A series of dispatches in 1809 repeatedly raised the issue as this 11 June 1809 excerpt to the British Envoy to Spain; the Right Hon. J. H. Frere illustrates.

“I should now be ready to move into Spain in two or three days if I had any money: but the distress in which we are from want of that necessary article will, I fear, render it impossible for me to move till I shall receive a supply.”⁴¹

³⁹ p. 96 Glover. **Wellington’s Army in the Peninsula. – 1808-1814**

⁴⁰ Editor Lieut. Colonel Gurwood. **The Dispatches of Field Marshal the Duke of Wellington, During his Various Campaigns in India, Denmark, Portugal, Spain, the Low Countries, and France from 1799-1818.** London: John Murray, Albemarle Street. 1837. Volume 4. Referred to as “Dispatches” with the appropriate volume and page number. Especially 5 May 1809 to K. Huskisson Esq. Secretary of the Treasury. 21 June 1809 to Villiers (Ambassador to Portugal 1808-1810.); 21 June 1808 to Castlereagh; 27 June 1809 to Castlereagh; 28 June 1809 to K. Huskisson esq Secretary of the Treasury.

⁴¹ Pp. 411-412 Editor Lieut. Colonel Gurwood. **The Dispatches of Field Marshal the Duke of Wellington, During his Various Campaigns in India, Denmark, Portugal, Spain, the Low Countries, and France from**

Wellington appealed directly to the British Cabinet as Viscount Castlereagh, the Secretary of State also received urgent requests for funds as this dispatch from Abrantes 11 June 1809 clearly states.

“I think it proper to draw your Lordship’s attention to the want of money in this army. The troops are nearly two months in arrear, and the army is in debt in Portugal a sum amounting to not less than 200,000 pounds.”⁴²

Eventually money was delivered and Wellington was able to proceed. Wellington’s fertile imagination and boundless resourcefulness was always working as is shown below. How would a lesser man solve this problem? A potentially large cash problem was dealt with most imaginatively as this anecdote summarizes. Once the British Army entered France, payment for supplies in cash was very important. The British Army had to be seen as liberators, not as occupiers as the French were in Spain. Now, the French peasants wouldn’t accept Spanish coin. So, Wellington collected 40 experienced forgers and had them convert Spanish coin into French coin. Identification could only be made by a secret mark on the coin. Voila! Problem solved.⁴³

Wellington’s observation of bureaucracy was as true in 1808 as it is in 2001 when he noted,

“[T]he great business of the Commander-in-Chief is to discover a mode of carrying on the business of this important department as much conformity with the instructions of the Commissary General as possible.”⁴⁴

No detail was too small to be ignored. He brought two wagon companies from Ireland with him and they formed the nucleus of the logistical organization that allowed the British army to move quickly and efficiently in this campaign. He barely landed when he wrote to Viscount Castlereagh Secretary of State 26 July 1808

1799-1818. London: John Murray, Albemarle Street. 1837. Volume 4. Referred to as “Dispatches” with the appropriate volume and page number. P. 157. Brett-James. Frere was replaced by the Marquess Wellesley.

⁴² Pp. 413-414. **Dispatches** Volume 4.

⁴³ p. 108. Glover. **Wellington’s Army in the Peninsula – 808-1814.**

⁴⁴ p. 102. Glover. **Wellington’s Army in the Peninsula. – 1808-1814**

“While I was at Oporto I requested the Bishop to supply me with 150 horses for the remount of the 20th light dragoons.... I also requested him to supply the troops with 500 mules, of a description which could be applied either to draft or carriage, which I propose to apply to the carriage of the musket ammunition and intrenching tools, (there being with the army no ammunition, tumbril, or intrenching toolcarts.)...”⁴⁵

Wellington’s fixation for keeping his troops supplied and thus fit for marching and fighting is especially evident in two memoranda dated 2 May 1809. These memoranda are liberally sprinkled throughout his dispatches. Wellington continually attended to these details – almost fanatical in his determination to prevent any mistake or problem with logistics. Doubtless some of these subjects are addressed in standing orders or orders issued to the army commanders. Seeing these same topics addressed in specific dispatches to individual commanders underscores the urgency or importance Wellington applied to logistics and the maintenance of his Army.

One memorandum outlined the Commissariat arrangements at the brigade and regimental levels. The common denominator for these arrangements was having each man carry three days worth of bread and as required, two days worth of meat (one pound of each per day). In this instance, the meat ration is being moved on the hoof.⁴⁶ This memorandum issued 2 May 1809 before the march from Coimbra detailed,

“2. The troops shall march from Coimbra, with three days’ bread on their backs: the cavalry and artillery with three days forage.

3. The Assistant Commissaries with brigades, regiments, &c., to have cattle for their brigades and regiments for three days.

4. The Assistant Commissaries with brigades and regiments should likewise have with them bread for their brigades and regiments for three days.”⁴⁷

⁴⁵ P. 47. Letter to Viscount Castlereagh Secretary of State dated 26 July 1808 on **HMS Crocodile**. Editor Lieut. Colonel Gurwood. **The Dispatches of Field Marshal the Duke of Wellington, During his various campaigns in India, Denmark, Portugal, Spain, The Low Countries and France, From 1799-1818**. P. 293. Volume 4. London: John Murray Albermarle Street. 1837. Referred to as Dispatches.

⁴⁶ P. 48-49. **Dispatches**. Volume 4. Wellington’s Memorandum for Embarkation dated 29 July 1808 specifies the men carrying a 3-day bread and two-day cooked meat ration. It goes on to specify they carry one shirt, one extra pair of shoes, comb, razor and brush. The soldier had to also carry three good flints for his musket. The company officer was authorized to make local arrangements for mule purchases to move camp equipment from their embarkation money allowance. Again, this systematic attention to detail brought the British to victory.

⁴⁷ P. 294. **Dispatches**. Volume 4.

The second memorandum dated 2 May 1809 specified instructions for a large troop movement into Northern Portugal from Vouga to Oporto. The excerpts illustrate the details that Wellington considered.

“2. A depot or six days for 30,000 men, and 5000 horses, should be formed at Coimbra. This [the depot] should be carried forward by the waggons at Coimbra, in its due proportions to Vizeu and Vouga respectively...These waggons should return as soon as they shall have performed this service, and fresh waggons procured at Vizeu and Vouga to carry on the supplies.”⁴⁸

Attention to detail is a hallmark of any superior leader. Again, the subject is transport and excerpts from two dispatches illustrate the importance that Wellington puts to this. Abrantes 12 June 1809 to Lieut. Colonel Walsh, Town Major of Lisbon and 12 June 1809 to Lieut. Colonel Seymour 23 Light Dragoons.

“Three hundred horses belonging to the Irish Commissariat will have arrived from Cork in the fleet which brought out the 23rd Dragoons; and I desire that these horses may be landed as well as the 23rd Dragoons, and given in charge to the Officers and men of those troops of the Waggon Train which are at Lisbon. Care must be taken that none of these horses or those of the 23rd are put into the infected stables at Lisbon.”⁴⁹

Seymour’s dispatch was remarkably detailed for correspondence from the C-in-C to a battalion commander. However, Wellington understood that ignorance of these details would jeopardize a scarce resource and reduce the combat efficiency of his cavalry. This attention is what made Wellington excel as a commander and a leader.

“...[I]n that view I recommend your attention to the following objects:-
First, to their shoeing: the greater the number of sets of spare shoes and nails the better.

Secondly, you should at an early period accustom the horses to eat barley or Indian corn and straw. We find that by giving them half barley and half oats, and by degrees diminishing the oats, they soon eat the former as well as the latter...I shall take care that, when you get your route for marching, you shall not be made to go marches of too great length.

⁴⁸ P. 294. **Dispatches**. Volume 4.

⁴⁹ P. 387. **Dispatches**. Volume 4.

Some of the stables at Lisbon are infected by glanders; and, indeed, at all events, it is desirable that after the first day or two you should have your horses picketed rather than placed in stables.⁵⁰

An army with foot problems is useless. Wellington urgently arranged for 20,000 pairs of shoes to be delivered. The fact that he requested that a warship carry them underscores the urgency of the situation and the lengths that Wellington went to quickly obviate it as this dispatch dated 24 May 1809 Oporto says,

“...We are sadly in want of shoes; and the carts upon the road from Lisbon to Coimbra have been so ill used, that I fear we cannot depend upon the communication; and if we could I believe we should receive them sooner by sea.

It will require forty carts to bring up 20,000 pairs of shoes, which we want; and I shall be very much obliged to you if you ask the Admiral to allow one of his ships of war to take them on board, and bring them as soon as possible to the mouth of the Mondego: we cannot depend upon the transports making way against the wind at this season.”⁵¹

Wellington didn't hesitate to make his position known to the British Cabinet regarding any factor that interfered with his campaign. Shortly after he landed in Portugal, commissariat shortcomings were painfully clear and had to be addressed immediately as this dispatch from Lavaos 8 August 1808 to Lieut Colonel Robe commanding the Royal Artillery (please recall the split command structure Wellington had to suffer with) notes,

“... I have had the greatest difficulty in organizing my commissariat for the march, and that department is very incompetent, notwithstanding the arrangements which I made with Huskisson upon the subject. The existence of the army depends upon it, and yet the people who manage it are incapable of managing anything out of a counting house.

I shall be obliged to leave Spencer's guns behind for want of moving them; and I should have been obliged to leave my own if it were not for the horses of the Irish commissariat. Let nobody ever prevail upon you to send a corps to any part of Europe without horses to draw their guns. It is not true that horses lose their condition at sea.”⁵²

⁵⁰ Pp. 388. **Dispatches**. Volume 4.

⁵¹ Pp. 360-380. **Dispatches**. Volume 4.

⁵² P. 71. **Dispatches**. Volume 4.

This very candid dispatch dated 7 May 1809 to Viscount Castlereagh is illustrative. It is evident that Wellington also had intimate knowledge of the bureaucracy and was skilled in obtaining the best possible performance from it as is seen below.

“Before I left Lisbon I made arrangements for sending to England all the tonnage, containing provisions ... and 5,000 tons of infantry transports, which quantity I intended, and to still intend, further to increase by the whole amount of the transports in Portugal, if I can either beat or cripple Soult.

I do not know whether this arrangement has been carried into execution, as the Agent of Transports is the worst hand I have seen of that description, and you are aware that the transports are not solely under my directions. I write to inform you, however, what I intended; and to tell you that if you wish that I should arrange this branch of the service on the most economical plan for the public, you will send out Lieut. Fleetwood, whom I had with me last year in Portugal to be Agent of Transports in charge of the whole fleet. Commissioner George is well acquainted with him.”⁵³

A single broken baggage cart could not evade Wellington’s attention as this dispatch to Major General Mackenzie 29 June 1809 Sarzedas illustrates. The significance of broken carts and rations not getting to the troops can be seen between the lines so to speak.

“I am sorry to tell you that I have passed a broken cart, laden with intrenching tools and other baggage, belonging to the 31st regiment in charge of a sergeant’s guard, in the pass on this side of Sobreira Formosa..

...but the cart ought not to have been loaded with three times more baggage than it could carry;

I shall be obliged to you to tell the Commissary, that, having put on the carts three casks of flour instead of two, a great number of the carts have broken down between Sobreira Formosa and this place.

I request, that immediately on receipt of this note he [an officer to be detailed by Mackenzie] will send off twenty empty carts with an Officer of the Commissariat.... who will let him know where the different carts have broken down, and where the casks of flour are; and I beg that only two casks may be placed on each cart.⁵⁴

⁵³ P. 306. **Dispatches**. Volume 4.

⁵⁴ P. 474. **Dispatches**. Volume 4

The gravity of logistics and transport is underscored in the following excerpts from Wellington's Memorandum for Disembarkation dated 29 July 1808.

4th General Hill will inform the Officer commanding the 20th Light Dragoons that he is to receive a sufficient number of horses to mount all his men; that he will therefore be prepared to land the horse appointments of the men who have at present no horses.

...10th Mr. Commissary Pipon to be directed to attach a commissary, and the necessary number of clerks &c., to each brigade, to the cavalry and to the artillery. He will hereafter receive directions to take charge of the bread [see 9th] above to be prepared, and to make his arrangements for victualling the troops.

12th The horses of the Irish commissariat to be handed over when landed to the Commanding Officer of the artillery who will allot the drivers to take charge of them; and then the Officers and drivers belonging to the Irish Commissariat to place themselves under the orders of Mr. Pipon.

13th The Officers commanding companies will make an arrangement for purchasing mules for the carriage of camp equipage, for which they have received an allowance in the embarkation money."⁵⁵

Detailed instructions organizing and allocating mules for moving everything from bread to ammunition were issued to the Commissary General in Memorandums dated 1 August 1808 and 3 August 1808. Wellington was especially concerned about Supplying General Spencer's artillery with sufficient draft mules as these excerpts indicate.

"5th The Artillery will require, to move with the army, 250 mules each to carry 2000 rounds of musket ammunition. [1 Aug]"⁵⁶

"3rd The 250 mules for the artillery must be mustered and set apart, and an Assistant Commissary must be appointed to take charge of them and forage them, and give rations to the drivers. [3 Aug 1808]"⁵⁷

Wellington continued his attentions for transport mules for the artillery with this dispatch to a Lieut. Colonel Brown 4 August 1808.

⁵⁵ Pp. 49-50. **Dispatches**. Volume 4

⁵⁶ p. 58. **Dispatches**. Volume 4.

⁵⁷ P. 59. **Dispatches**. Volume 4.

“...We shall be much distressed for the want of about 150 draft mules, to complete the draft of General Spencer’s artillery, which I was in hopes I should have had from the 500 I expected Mr. Walsh would have purchased for me. Can he, or you, or the Portuguese Commander In Chief do anything to assist us in this way? Are there no draft mules left in the country?”⁵⁸

Wellington was fortunate that muleteers displaced by the war were willing to work for him for a dollar a day. Given the general state of Spanish and Portuguese roads, mules were the most efficient transport medium. Mule trains moved food and forage from the depots networks established. Mules were the prime transport of the army. Bullock (oxen) drawn carts supplied the depots. These carts, loaded with 600 pounds of supplies, had a solid axle wheel assembly attached with a crude journal to the body. The result was a terrible shrieking heard for miles as they easily traversed the worst roads. Therefore, reliable locally hired muleteers running the mule trains and the carts gave Wellington’s army the strategic mobility needed for its Portuguese and Spanish operations. As well, the Spanish mules were particularly hardy.⁵⁹

Wellington’s attention to detail paid off many times as the following letter to Lieut. Colonel Murray the Quarter Master General dated 15 Sept 1808 at St. Antonio de Tojal recounts.

“I believe the army which was under my command afforded a rare instance of a British army on its march, shortly after its landing in a foreign country, which did not experience any want....”⁶⁰

⁵⁸ P. 62. **Dispatches** Volume 4.

⁵⁹ Pp. 109-110. Glover. **Wellington’s Army in the Peninsula – 1808-1814.**

⁶⁰ P. 155. **Dispatches** volume 4.

Conclusion

In many cases, grand sweeping movements and flourishes does not win battles. Battles and wars are won by careful attention to seemingly arcane and harmless details.

Wellington's success in the Peninsula was the culmination of many details being sorted out a few at a time – sometimes easily, sometimes painfully. There was no revolution in government organization or in the military organization. A tireless and relentless Wellington attended to details on the ground and in Westminster. Wellington identified the importance of holding the Iberian Peninsula a key to defeating Napoleon. Holding the Iberian Peninsula required moving and supporting an army in the field that initially had no comprehensive support system.

This paper outlined as the steps Wellington had to take to keep his army supplied and cohesive. They were the constant attention to detail regarding the supply of his troops, the establishment of magazines to keep his men supplied while on the move – towards or away from battle. Wellington's resoluteness in preserving his army to fight by withdrawing from Spain due to lack of supplies is the most telling argument he used in dealing with the British and the Spanish governments. The result of this unswerving determination was the defeat of the Grande Armee in the Iberian Peninsula, the re-constitution of the Spanish and Portuguese Armies into a relatively efficient and disciplined field army. Finally, European respect for these feats of British arms on land brought Britain into true partnership in the coalition against Napoleon.

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