

*'Maintaining my army while the enemy are unable to do so'.*

*The Duke of Wellington*

## **The Royal Navy and the Peninsular War**

Colonel Nick Lipscombe

*'We did not win the battle of Trafalgar. We did not remain masters of the seas and we do not have the two hundred million consumers that Britain has. That is the whole secret of our inferiority'.*

*Thiers, Histoire du Consulat et de l'Empire*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The battle, which did more than any other to shape the outcome of the Peninsular War was, in fact, fought nearly three years prior to the celebrated Madrid rebellion of the 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1808. The naval engagement off Cape Trafalgar on the 21<sup>st</sup> October 1805 was the knock out blow to Napoleon's French and Spanish fleet, which had been systematically hounded in the preceding two years by the British Royal Navy that *'had performed the greatest sustained and communal feat of seamanship there has ever been, or ever will be'*<sup>1</sup>. However, all too often, the role of the Royal Navy during the Peninsular War has been accredited solely with logistical support and troop mobility; in reality their role was both more widespread and more aggressive in nature. *'Such naval duties included attacks on French maritime supply routes; the direct supplying and sometime direct supporting of the Spanish guerrillas; the repeated assaulting of French coastal batteries and strongpoints; the vital task of helping to preserve the Spanish and Portuguese fleets; the constant support of coastal fortresses under enemy attack; and the assistance of British land forces in ways beyond the sole provision of food and movement by water'*<sup>2</sup>.

There is little doubt that the foresight of Major Jose Maria das Neves Costa, which ultimately led to the construction of the formidable Lines of Torres Vedras, provided the basis of protection for the nation's capital and *de facto* the executive, from the Napoleon's Peninsular *Armée*. Equally, there is little dispute that the actions by the Duke of Albuquerque, following the loss of Sevilla to Soult's invasion into Andalusia, by moving his division south to protect Cadiz saved the Junta and subsequent Regency and by so doing arguably saved Spain. Less readily acknowledged however, is the role played by the Royal Navy in providing Cadiz and Lisbon support and protection during these crucial stages of the war, without which neither locality would have prevailed, and to all intents and purposes the Portuguese and Spanish 'emergency' regimes would have ceased to function.

### **ORIGINS OF THE WAR**

In March 1796 Napoleon Bonaparte appointed himself commander of the French army that invaded northern Italy and concluded an unbroken series of military victories lasting nearly fifteen months. Returning to Paris, Napoleon used this personal enhancement to convince the government to finance a powerful expedition to the Middle East. The army deployed in the summer of 1798 and was victorious in Egypt but failed in Syria; most significantly however, on the 1st August 1798 the French navy was crushed by Nelson at the Battle of the Nile. Napoleon returned to France in the autumn of 1799 and seized power with two associate consuls that November but it took another four years and considerable political manoeuvring before he was crowned Emperor on the 18<sup>th</sup> May 1804.

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<sup>1</sup> Howarth, *Trafalgar, The Nelson Touch*, p.p. 18-19.

<sup>2</sup> Hall, *Wellington's Navy, Sea Power and the Peninsular War 1807-1814*, p.p. 1-2.

Within three years Napoleon was at the zenith of his power; victories at Ulm, Austerlitz, Jena and Friedland humbled Russia and resulted in the overthrow of the Prussian and Austrian regimes. Only Portugal and Sweden evaded direct control and these two nations, along with Sicily, were allies to the biggest fly in the Napoleonic ointment, namely Britain. ‘*Britain’s continuance as a belligerent depended on the Straights of Dover and the dominance of the Royal Navy. As long as the fleet was in existence Britain could not be defeated. Conversely, Britain could not win as long as the French army was in being. The Royal Navy could not defeat the Grand Armée, nor could the French Empire be brought to its knees by naval blockade*’<sup>3</sup>. Napoleon, in concord with these sentiments, set about trying to establish a fifty percent naval superiority over the Royal Navy through alliance and annexation; ‘*we shall be able to make peace safely when we have 150 ships of the line*’<sup>4</sup>. The British Ministry and Admiralty were equally clear of the overriding need to maintain naval supremacy through a similar strategy of alliance, forceful annexation or the destruction or capture of enemy warships at sea. The engagement off Cape Trafalgar in 1805, without doubt, provided the best example of this latter policy. At the start of the following year the Royal Navy had one hundred and four ships of the line, supported by five hundred and fifty one cruisers and supporting twenty-eight troop ships<sup>5</sup>. At the opening of 1807, Napoleon could muster one hundred and twenty nine ships of the line<sup>6</sup> and one of the secret clauses of the treaty at Tilsit was the acquisition of the seventeen Danish ships and a further ten from Portugal. A pre-emptive strike by the British on Copenhagen removed the Danish option and pressure on Lisbon from both Paris and Madrid to comply with the Continental System<sup>7</sup> produced a series of half measures from Portugal’s Prince Regent; they fell well short of securing Napoleonic approval and war was now inevitable.

<u>The Rating of British Warships (c. 1802)</u>				
		Rate	No. of Guns	Crew
SHIPS OF THE LINE	Three Gun Decks	1 <sup>st</sup>	100 plus	850 plus
		2 <sup>nd</sup>	90-98	750-850
	Two Gun Decks	3 <sup>rd</sup>	70-84	500-750
		4 <sup>th</sup>	50-70	350-400
FRIGATES	Single Gun Deck	5 <sup>th</sup>	30-50	200-300
		6 <sup>th</sup>	20-30	120-200
Below 6 <sup>th</sup> - rates came the sloops-of-war, brigs, gunboats, bomb vessels, fireships, schooners and cutters. The larger commanded by Commanders and the smaller by Lieutenants.				

Source: Gordon, *Admiral of the Blue – The life and times of Admiral John Child Purvis 1747-1825*, p. xi.

The terms of the Treaty of Fontainebleau provided the pretext of compelling Portugal to join the Continental System, through force if necessary, and just to make the point a French army under General Junot traversed Spain in October 1807 and entered Portugal. Within a month Lisbon had been captured and (just prior) the Royal Court of Bragança had instigated their contingency plan and made good their escape (escorted by the Royal Navy) to Brazil. However, long before this scene had played-out, Napoleon had already decided to expand his Iberian ambitions and the tangled intrigues at the Spanish court provided him just the opening he required. More French troops followed across the Pyrenees in early 1808, some clearly not destined for Portugal and Godoy tried desperately to negotiate with Napoleon as the realisation of the Emperor’s next objective began to dawn. Unrest in Madrid in March was quickly dispersed but the subsequent uprising on the 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1808 was an altogether different affair: la

<sup>3</sup> Glover, M. *The Peninsular War 1807-1814, A Concise Military History*, p. 23.

<sup>4</sup> Glover, R. *The French Fleet 1807-13, Britain’s Problem and Madison’s Opportunity*, *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 39, no. 3.

<sup>5</sup> James, *The Naval History of Great Britain*, vol. IV, p. 477.

<sup>6</sup> The combined French and Dutch fleets numbered 75 ships, Spain could add a further 30 and Russia the balance of 24; nine of the latter ships of the line (Siniavin’s Russian Squadron) were operating off the Portuguese coast and were captured in 1808.

<sup>7</sup> The basis of an economic blockade to bring pressure to bear on Great Britain that was first introduced in 1793 and taken up again by Napoleon in late 1806 in response to the British maritime blockade of 16 May 1806.

Guerra de la Independencia had just begun and Napoleon had made the most serious miscalculation of his time.

### THE ROYAL NAVY IN THE WAR

The role of the Royal Navy in the execution of Britain's maritime policy that ultimately contributed to, *inter alia*, the Peninsular War is well known and well documented; less well known, and certainly not as widely acknowledged, is the role played by the Royal Navy during the conflict itself. Conversely, the role of the Royal Navy should not be overplayed: as Michael Glover points out *the Royal Navy could not defeat the Grand Armée* and equally the French Empire would not be brought to its knees through naval action and blockade alone. Yet with no French fleet with which to counter the Royal Navy, the force multiplication advantage this provided the allies was considerable. 'Without the Royal Navy, Britain's fight in the Peninsula could never have been waged and certainly not with the success that was eventually achieved'<sup>8</sup>.

*'Much of the decisive continental fighting in the years 1793-1815 took place in areas which were remote from the sea and therefore less sensitive to British flanking assaults; but this inability to influence events significantly was simply furthered by the transitory nature of these amphibious raids. The campaign in the Spanish Peninsula proved to be the brilliant exception to this rule and, as such, has always been regarded as the classical example of one of the great strategic advantages conferred by sea power'*<sup>9</sup>. Professor Kennedy goes on to state that the British peninsular army benefited from added logistical support and mobility, however, by restricting the navy's role to one of supplies and movement is too narrow in outlook. Dr. Hall's excellent work on Wellington's Navy, Sea Power and the Peninsular War 1807-1814, opens by accepting that Professor Kennedy's comment: 'True enough though this is, the comment does not do justice to just how critical these elements were on that conflict and pays no account whatever to the other numerous ways in which control of the sea influenced the outcome of events on land'<sup>10</sup>.

The geography of the Iberian Peninsula provided the ideal conditions for support from the sea. The countries of Spain and Portugal comprise two thousand four hundred kilometres of coastline and with the exception of Madrid and a couple of other cities; all the other principle cities lay on the coast: namely, Barcelona, Valencia, Malaga, Cadiz, Oporto and Lisbon. Only four of the rivers, the Ebro, Douro, Tagus and Guadalquivir were navigable all year round, which was more of a disadvantage to the French, as they were condemned to use the roads for the transportation and the movement of supplies and men. The major roads that connected the great cities should have been on a par with the best roads in Europe but by the start of the war many of these Royal projects were unfinished. The connecting roads tolerable in dry weather were soon turned to rutted quagmires in the wet seasons.

*'For the greater part of 1808-11 Wellington's army operated within a comparatively short distance from the coast, enabling it to draw on a constant stream of supplies provided via maritime convoys'*<sup>11</sup>. Of course, the British army were not the only force to benefit from this advantage, all the allies and the Spanish and Portuguese people were maintained (and the former moved) to a greater or lesser extent throughout the conflict. The French, by contrast, had no such advantage and although the *Grand Armée* were past masters at living off the land, the simple fact was that the great tracts of infertile land were barely enough to sustain the indigenous population let alone provide for great armies on the move or in cantonment. Additional supplies

<sup>8</sup> Gates, *The Spanish Ulcer – A History of the Peninsular War*, p.p. 28-29.

<sup>9</sup> Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, p. 135.

<sup>10</sup> Hall, *Wellington's Navy, Sea Power and the Peninsular War 1807-1814*, p. 1.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, p. 6.

had to be moved from France over bad roads and these convoys needed considerable protection otherwise they would inevitably fall into the hands of the guerrilla bands that ruthlessly operated on the roads from France through Catalonia, Aragon and Navarre.

The need to conduct sieges was interwoven into the peninsular tapestry, but the movement of the heavy siege trains over the mountainous terrain and poor roads was not a task for the faint hearted. This fact played heavily upon Wellington's decision to take a small train (through the interior) towards Burgos in 1812 and contributed to the first two allied failures to take Badajoz<sup>12</sup>. Suchet tried to make use of the Ebro to move his train down river for the sieges of Tortosa and Tarragona in 1810 but even this proved problematic and derailed his Napoleonic timetable for the subjugation of the east coast. Conversely, Wellington made full use of the Royal Navy to move his heavy guns in preparation for the siege of the northern key to Spain, the city of Ciudad Rodrigo in 1811. *First the transports had to sail from Lisbon to Oporto where the equipment was loaded into 160 boats. These carried it up the Douro as far as Lamego, the limit of navigation*<sup>13</sup>. In July 1811 Alexander Dickson, who had become Wellington siege artillery commander (although no such post existed officially), was informed that Ciudad Rodrigo was to be the first 'key' he intended to capture by way of a preliminary operation to his 1812 campaign. *'He told me he wished I should proceed to Oporto by way of Almeida, and to superintend (sic) the conveyance of the English battering train up the Douro to Lamego, and from thence by land to Transcoso, from whence it would also be conveyed by land to its ultimate destination'*<sup>14</sup>. Wellington calculated that this movement would take sixty-two days; in fact it took three months and would certainly have taken longer had it not been for the assistance provided by the Royal Navy in moving the massive train as far as Lamego, three quarters of the total distance.

In addition to the movement of supplies and guns, the sea was also used to transport men to, within and from the Peninsula. The evacuation of Moore's army from La Coruña in January 1809 and that of La Romana from the Danish island of Fyn to Santander in August to September 1808 are perhaps the two most significant examples but there were numerous others. Indeed, the option of force evacuation was one Wellington had up his sleeve throughout the early part of the war and it formed an integral part of his contingency plans for the Lines of Torres Vedras. Wellington's very arrival off the Portuguese coast in August 1808 owed much to the skill of the Royal Navy. *'The dangers surmounted in landing some 30,000 men on a more or less open coast were numerous and its successful completion was a fine testimonial to the sailors concerned'*<sup>15</sup>. On the south coast, an allied naval borne force was used to attack Victor's lines from the rear in 1811, to the east, the redeployment of part of the Anglo-Sicilian garrison from Sicily in 1812 led to numerous engagements with varying degrees of success for the next fourteen months in both Valencia and Catalonia. This force was supported by an amalgam of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Spanish armies but also by two thousand Spanish troops who were moved from Galicia and Andalusia on naval vessels. This ability to land forces at will caused the French huge problems; thousands of men were tied up in shore- patrols who were *'required to patrol enormous lengths of coastline, they were invariably thin on the ground and easy prey for the amphibious forces...'*<sup>16</sup>.

However, it was this more kinetic aspect of the Royal Navy's involvement which is perhaps less well renowned. At the outbreak of the Peninsular War, and in line with the change in status of Spain, the Admiralty allocated the task to three naval commands. The north coast of

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<sup>12</sup> Rather than move his limited siege train considerable distance, the artillery commander (Dickson) was tasked to make best use of the guns at Elvas, which were inadequate for the task. It must be added that 6 ships guns were brought up from Lisbon to support the second siege.

<sup>13</sup> Glover, M. *The Peninsular War 1807-1814, A Concise Military History*, p. 173.

<sup>14</sup> Dickson, *The Dickson Manuscripts*, vol. III, p. 412.

<sup>15</sup> Hall, *Wellington's Navy, Sea Power and the Peninsular War 1807-1814*, p. 31.

<sup>16</sup> Gates, *The Spanish Ulcer – A History of the Peninsular War*, p. 29.

Spain and the Bay of Biscay was the responsibility of the Channel Fleet; the Portuguese station, which was initially exclusive to Gibraltar and Cadiz<sup>17</sup>; and the Mediterranean Fleet that stretched from Cape St. Vincent eastwards. Perhaps the most well known example of Royal Navy support to a land operation from the Mediterranean Fleet was that of Captain Cochrane at Rosas. *'On the 24 November, a boatload of over one hundred men led by Cochrane himself landed to reinforce the defenders of Rosas. And while the heavy guns of the Imperieuse and the bomb vessels began to silence the more exposed of the French batteries, Cochrane threw all his ingenuity into converting what was left of the castle (Fort Trinity) into a vast mantrap... But Cochrane could only delay the inexorable French assault...Next day, as the French prepared their advance, he blew up the castle's strong points and effected a flawless evacuation, sending his men, both British and Spanish, scrambling down the cliff to the waiting boats of the Imperieuse, Fame and Magnificent which had arrived to help'*<sup>18</sup>. In the greater scheme of naval support and offensive operations this was but a tiny example but it admirably serves to highlight the intricate support provided by the Royal Navy in the assistance of prosecuting attacks upon the French.

There are countless other examples. In 1810 two squadrons, comprising both British and Spanish ships were established at Ferrol and La Coruña to harass Imperial troops along the Biscay coast and to assault French coastal batteries and strong points, tying down upwards of twenty thousand French soldiers. On the east coast the blockade and attacks on French shipping attempting to provision the numerous French garrisons along the coast continued for most of the war. Moving convoys along the coast road was extremely hazardous for they were continually bombarded by allied ships forcing these unwieldy convoys to the interior roads which were equally hazardous as they provided easy targets for the guerrillas and *miqueletes*<sup>19</sup>. At Tarragona, the Royal Navy were involved in 1811, moving both Spanish and British troops and providing intimate fire support against the French siege parallels and gun pits and again in 1813 in less active and certainly less productive results when the Anglo-Sicilian force under General Murray dithered and then withdrew from the city walls. The northern coast proved more successful when in May 1812 the Admiralty allocated Sir Home Riggs Popham and two ships of the line along with a battalion of marines to *'give all possible assistance to the Spaniards short of actually endangering his own vessels'*. *'... Popham instead sailed towards Bermeo and Lequitio to establish contact with El Pastor. The latter's men appeared near Lequitio on the afternoon of the 19 June and the next day, despite a strong surf, a heavy 24-pounder gun was landed and, thanks to the efforts of 100 seamen, 400 guerrillas and 20 oxen, dragged half-a-mile up a hill and opened fire on a fort that covered the town'*<sup>20</sup>. Popham's next target was Bilbao; he remained off the Cantabrian coast for a year and a half before the Admiralty tired of his exploits and withdrew him. While these accounts are not exhaustive, it was the involvement of the Royal Navy at both Cadiz and Lisbon that was to have the greatest impact on the outcome of the war.

## CADIZ

Following Trafalgar, and the subsequent storm, eleven Spanish and seven French ships of the line limped to safety within the inner harbour at Cadiz. The ensuing blockade of the port by the Royal Navy lasted until June 1808 when Spain became an ally and the French squadron under Admiral Rosily was forced to surrender to Spanish naval and coastal artillery action. *'On the 4<sup>th</sup> July the British government issued an order, directing that all hostilities between England and Spain should immediately cease. Those cruisers, hitherto so much dreaded along the coast of the latter, were hailed as deliverers'*<sup>21</sup>. *'At 1000 (hours on the 14<sup>th</sup> June) Spanish colours were*

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<sup>17</sup> A situation that was altered in June 1812.

<sup>18</sup> Vale, *The Audacious Admiral Cochrane*, p.p. 49-50.

<sup>19</sup> Catalan Home Guard.

<sup>20</sup> Hall, *Wellington's Navy, Sea Power and the Peninsular War 1807-1814*, p. 201.

<sup>21</sup> James, *The Naval History of Great Britain*, vol. IV, p. 295.

hoisted on the French ships and their crews were taken off as prisoners-of-war. A feu de joie was then fired staring with the shore batteries and finishing with the recently surrendered enemy ships<sup>22</sup>. Added to Rosily's unfortunate sailors who became prisoners-of-war were many thousands of men from Dupont's legacy of Bailén; about four thousand of these men were confined to hulks anchored in the harbour<sup>23</sup>. These unfortunate souls were still confined some eighteen months later when Joseph began his invasion of Andalucia.

*In January of 1810 the French Army began the invasion of Andalucia, arriving without difficulty until Carmona. At this point they pondered whether to go to Seville or to continue until Cádiz, where the English squadron was anchored. The election of the first possibility was a great error that benefited Cádiz. Many think that if they had gone directly to Cádiz, that without the assistance of the troops of Albuquerque, that the city would have fallen with ease. Others believe, however, that this provided the citizens time to complete their fortification at the isthmus<sup>24</sup>. The combination of Albuquerque's quick thinking and his calculated disobedience to follow the orders of the failing Junta at Sevilla and attack Victor's far stronger corps in the flank coupled with the determination of the people of Cadiz to defend their city, whose defensible characteristics were greatly enhanced by geography, thwarted Victor as he approached the port in early February. 'Soul's negligence in failing to secure Cadiz was the greatest disaster which had yet occurred to the French in Spain. The city gave the Spanish government an inviolable refuge on Spanish soil, a rallying-point for the spirit of the Spanish people. French strategy was distorted for the next thirty months. Twenty thousand men were the fewest who could man the abortive siege lines<sup>25</sup>. That the refuge remained inviolable due to the Royal Navy is a fact often overlooked. Joseph's first reaction when he saw for himself that his prize of southern Spain had been lost at the final hurdle requested the release of the French fleet at Toulon<sup>26</sup>. Napoleon ignored his brother's request. However, both had good reason for their actions; Napoleon was well aware that the fleet would be annihilated long before it reached Cadiz and Joseph was equally well aware that without naval support his cause at Cadiz was hopeless.*

In reality there was little hope of the French succeeding in taking Cadiz while the Royal Navy exercised naval supremacy. That supremacy was however severely tested during the last half of 1810 when the French constructed numerous small-armed craft all along the southern Spanish coastline and tried to concentrate them at Cadiz. Their attack was to be coordinated with the ever-increasing number of coastal batteries that they were constructing along the opposite shoreline. By the 1<sup>st</sup> November the French were ready and many of the ships moved successfully along the coast, it was a painstakingly slow affair but, *'on the evening of Christmas day the British gunboats moved east in preparation for a joint attack with the Spaniards. The next day at high water, around 1pm, the Allies attacked, The Spaniards engaging Fort San Luis while the British targeted the flotilla and its protecting batteries. ... A furious action ensued for 90 minutes, at the conclusion of which the Allies withdrew, leaving 12 French craft destroyed behind them<sup>27</sup>.*

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<sup>22</sup> Gordon, *Admiral of the Blue – The life and times of Admiral John Child Purvis 1747-1825*, p. 147.

<sup>23</sup> The treatment of the French prisoners at Cadiz still causes considerable animosity to this day. Under the terms of the Bailén capitulation, the thousands of prisoners were to be shipped back to France; the problem arose through the disagreement and lethargy of the Junta at Sevilla and the (British) Admiralty over the responsibility of moving the men to France. The hostility of the locals at Cadiz forced the authorities to imprison (some of) the men on ships (old hulks) moored in the bay where their conditions were appalling. The repercussions of repatriation of Junot's force from Portugal in 1808, following the Convention of Cintra, inevitably played a key role in the British decision making process as many thousands of French soldiers were back in the peninsula within weeks.

<sup>24</sup> Ramón Solís, *El Cádiz de las Cortes*. From: Instituto de Historia y Cultura Naval, *El Castillo de San Lorenzo del Puntal*, p. 46.

<sup>25</sup> Glover, M. *The Peninsular War 1807-1814, A Concise Military History*, p. 120.

<sup>26</sup> Joseph to Napoleon, Sta. Maria, 18<sup>th</sup> February 1810.

<sup>27</sup> Hall, *Wellington's Navy, Sea Power and the Peninsular War 1807-1814*, p. 162.

The siege of Cadiz lasted for two and a half years and was lifted following Wellington's decisive victory over Marmont at Salamanca in 1812; which left Soult's force exposed in Andalusia. On the 25<sup>th</sup> August, *'The city of Cádiz, thanked the British squadron for the invaluable protection they had provided, and for the losses they caused the French during dangerous times and they agreed to send a deputation to Admiral Legge... the entire British fleet was collocated in ceremonial form and greeted the representatives of Cádiz'*<sup>28</sup>. Dangerous times they were indeed and the Royal Navy's contribution to the success of the siege in terms of naval action, blockading and the movement of supplies and men to and from Cadiz and the immediate area (namely Graham, Blake and Ballasteros) were all significant. However, there is one additional factor that the presence of the Royal Navy provided Cadiz and the new Cortes and Regency: the opportunity to re-engage with their colonies in Central and South America. *'During the course of 1808 British policy moved rapidly from encouraging independence among Spain's colonies to encouraging them to remain quiescent and supportive of the mother country against the French invader'*<sup>29</sup>. This enabled the fledgling government the opportunity to re-establish trade and influence that in turn provided badly needed revenue and supplies; essential for successful governance. Of course this was, in effect, an insurance policy for Britain should their intentions in the Peninsula fail. *'The city of Cadiz is more connected with South America than all the rest of Spain put together, and the establishment of our influence here will greatly facilitate any arrangements we may wish to make hereafter with South America'*<sup>30</sup>.

## LISBON

As with Cadiz, Peninsular War events opened in Lisbon with the need to secure an enemy squadron. Siniavin's Russian squadron (9 ships of the line and a frigate) had been Russia's Mediterranean fleet but under the terms of the Treaty of Tilsit, the fleet had lost its Mediterranean base and was making its way back to Russia via the Baltic when, en-route, they sought shelter at Lisbon. At much the same time Russia declared war on Britain and the Admiralty reacted by sending Admiral Cotton with a blockading force; it was a hazardous task with their backs to the Atlantic and no convenient harbour to shelter or repair the vessels. The following May, the Franco-Spanish force in Portugal fragmented following the national uprisings in Spain and provided the opportunity that Britain sought. The Spanish commander in Oporto withdrew to his native Galicia, taking the French soldiers stationed there as prisoners, the vacuum was immediately filled by Portuguese insurrection forcing Junot's small force to concentrate in and around Lisbon. Cotton aware that a British expeditionary force was imminent ordered Captain Bligh and one hundred and eighty five marines to capture Fort Catalina and secure the entrance to the River Mondego from where this force would embark<sup>31</sup>. By the 21<sup>st</sup> August, following two quick victories at Roliça and Vimeiro, Portugal had been liberated but the subsequent Convention of Cintra was a farce. Nevertheless, Britain had a firm footing in Iberia from which to reorganise Portuguese defences and to plan the link up with Spanish armies to prosecute the war in Spain and the impediment of the Russian squadron had been resolved.

The following year the second French invasion of Portugal by Marshal Soult ended in ignominious failure but Wellington was clear that an invasion by well-resourced French force would likely compel him to retire on Lisbon and may necessitate the re-embarkation of his army. *'My difficulty upon the sole question lies in the embarkation of the British Army. There are so many entrances into Portugal, the whole country being a frontier, that it would be very difficult to prevent the enemy from penetrating: and it is probable that we should oblige to confine*

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<sup>28</sup> De Castro, A., *Cádiz el la Guerra de la Independencia* (Cadiz 1862), p.p. 52-53.

<sup>29</sup> Hall, *British Strategy in the Napoleonic War 1803-15*, p. 91.

<sup>30</sup> Wellington, 2<sup>nd</sup> Duke of (ed), *Supplementary Despatches*, vol. VI. p. 502. Hall, *British Strategy in the Napoleonic War 1803-15*, p. 190.

<sup>31</sup> These landings were a considerable feat in August against the Atlantic swell, see: Hall, *British Strategy in the Napoleonic War 1803-15*, p.p. 29-34.

*ourselves to the preservation of that which is most important – the capital’*<sup>32</sup>. Wellington had noted the ground north of Lisbon in September 1808 (following Vimeiro) and, upon his return in April 1809, quickly endorsed the report submitted by Major Neves Costa and (following a quick reconnaissance) the concept of the Lines of Torres Vedras was placed in secretive motion. *‘Neither Wellington nor his political masters in London could have trusted the fate of Britain’s only effective field army to the probable strength of a group of fortifications alone. The crucial factor permitting the army to sit and wait for an attack to be delivered by a much stronger enemy was the knowledge that if things went wrong, as could always happen in war, then the troops had every chance of being evacuated by sea in safety. It was the Royal Navy’s provision of this maritime insurance policy that permitted the cabinet to allow Wellington to test his theory that Portugal was defensible’*<sup>33</sup>. Thus the ability to save Britain’s only field army was crucial but the key was the defence of the Portuguese capital, the denial of which would render the third French invasion untenable; neither was possible without the Royal Navy.

In addition to manning the evacuation fleet at short readiness, the Royal Navy also provided manpower to assist in the construction of the Lines and in manning them once completed. *‘To occupy 50 miles of fortifications, to man 150 forts and to work the 600 pieces of artillery required a number of men. The native artillery and the militia supplied all the garrisons of the forts of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and most of the 1<sup>st</sup> Line; the British marines occupied the 3<sup>rd</sup> Line; the navy manned the gunboats on the river and aided, in various ways, the operation in the field’*<sup>34</sup>. Furthermore, naval assistance was also provided to the five signals stations along the Lines, which employed a derivative of Popham’s code of signals. Coastal defence was provided as a matter of course by Admiral Berkley’s command but far more demanding was the role of crewing the gunboats along the Tagus River and estuary. A large flotilla of armed launches and flatboats were assembled and these moved upstream to engage the French as they began to arrive in front of the Lines. During one of these engagements, General Saint-Croix was cut in two by a round shot delivered from one of these vessels. Faced with such aggressive patrolling and artillery and rocket fire any French thoughts of assembling boats to get around the Lines were quickly dispelled.

Notwithstanding the considerable and pivotal, contribution made by the Royal Navy to the defence of the Lines, there remained one additional role without which the whole concept would have faltered. *‘At the end of 1809 it was decided that, so vast were the stocks of flour and salt provisions accumulated in the depots of Lisbon via supply convoys, that supplies loaded aboard victualling ships in Plymouth and Portsmouth would be re-assigned for the fleet’s use. A year later the French outside Lisbon would be starving’*<sup>35</sup>. As part of the overall design, Wellington had instigated a scorched earth policy for many kilometres north of the Lines aimed at denying the French the ability to live comfortably off the lands while those behind the Lines began to starve. Crops and livestock were destroyed and the farmers and populace were withdrawn south to Lisbon swelling the cities numbers to three hundred thousand. The abundance of provisions was quickly overturned, as they were needed to feed not just an expanded civil population but also a military force of some eighty thousand. Maintaining supplies through the naval bridge for nearly four hundred thousand was a tall order and food was inevitably in short supply but it was the cramped living conditions that claimed many more of the forty thousand lives through disease rather than starvation. It is questionable whether, without being resupplied from sea, the people of Lisbon would have survived long enough to compel Masséna to give up the game and limp back to Spain.

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<sup>32</sup> Wellington Dispatches, (Murray 1834-38) – from Norris & Bremmer, *The Lines of Torres Vedras*, (The British Historical Society of Portugal, 1986), p. 9.

<sup>33</sup> Hall, *British Strategy in the Napoleonic War 1803-15*, p. 95.

<sup>34</sup> Norris & Bremmer, *The Lines of Torres Vedras*, (The British Historical Society of Portugal, 1986), p. 31.

<sup>35</sup> Hall, *British Strategy in the Napoleonic War 1803-15*, p. 115.



## CONCLUSION

There are many comparisons between the Royal Navy's supremacy during the Peninsular War and that of the modern coalition air forces in the prosecution of their campaigns in Kosovo and the two Gulf Wars. They were a means to an end and not an end in itself. The Royal Navy was never going to defeat the *Grand Armée* and while their contribution should not be overstated, it should equally not be underestimated. Wellington wrote "*if anyone wishes to know the history of this war, I will tell him it is our maritime superiority which gives me the power of maintaining my army while the enemy are unable to do so*"<sup>36</sup>. This is half the story; the role and achievements of the Royal Navy were far more extensive than logistical support and at Lisbon, that the allied army and Portuguese people did not suffer the same fate as that of Masséna was almost entirely due to the Royal Navy; while at Cadiz, the nation's executive remained inviolate and sufficiently protected to enable them to pen the Constitution of 1812<sup>37</sup>. When in 1812, the United States declared war on Britain the Royal Navy was committed to providing eleven ships of the line supported by another ninety vessels to blockade the American coast. The effect this withdrawal had on combined operations in the Peninsula was almost instantaneous; had 1812 not been the year of Napoleonic misjudgement over Russia, and a year of shifting fortunes for the allies in Iberia, the outcome of the war in the Peninsula could have been very different.

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<sup>36</sup> Blanning, T., *The Pursuit of Glory, Europe 1648-1815*, p. 660, (Penguin, 2007).

<sup>37</sup> This was a contentious document forced through by the liberal majority – see Esdaile, C., *The Peninsular War, A New History*, p.p. 306-310.

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