

# Wellington's Salamanca Campaign: A French Officer's Critique

## "Pour encourager des autres"

Jackson L. Sigler

Shortly before Napoleon's return from Elba, an anonymous pamphlet briefly appeared in the shop of the Parisian publisher J. G. Dentu. Entitled "A French Officer's Letter to Lord Wellington Concerning his Last Six Campaigns,"<sup>1</sup> the 76-page pamphlet is highly critical of Wellington's ability as a general. Did the pamphlet say anything new about Wellington? Who was the French author and what was his purpose? What was the pamphlet's significance?

I want first to discuss the pamphlet's judgments about Wellington and their import, then the authorship. The booklet consisted of two distinct parts, ostensibly written by the same author. The first part took the form of a letter to Wellington. The letter was dated 5 November 1812 from Valladolid in Spain and signed with an abbreviated nom-de-plume. The booklet's second part contained the French officer's comments on extracts of an English article entitled "An Appreciation of the Feats of Arms of the Duke of Wellington" by a Reverend Forbrooke,

published in the periodical *The Repertory of English Literature* of 15 June 1814.

The French officer began his critique with 's return to Portugal in 1809, when he took command of the British army four months after its evacuation from Corona. Why did the author choose that point in time? The *Lettre's* author contended that Wellington became overall commander of the British troops in the Peninsula only at that moment. This choice, of course, ignored the fact that Wellington had initially commanded the British expeditionary force in 1808 until just after his victory in the Battle of Vimiero in Portugal. This omission was in fact a clue as to the author's identity. The critique closed after the Battle of Salamanca when Wellington lifted his



Lord Wellington

siege of Burgos in the fall of 1812 and began his withdrawal to Ciudad Rodrigo and the Portuguese border.

The writer claimed to cover six campaigns; but he only lightly mentioned what he referred to as Wellington's first five. -- northern Spain against Soult in May 1809; the Talavera campaign (July-August 1809); the Portuguese Campaign of 1810 against Marshal Massena that ended before the Lines of Torres Verde; the Campaign of

<sup>1</sup> Ch. de Ste. L\_\_\_\_, *Lettre d'un officier Français au Lord Wellington sur ses six Dernières Campagnes*. (Paris, 1814).

1811 following Massena's retreating army including the Battle of Fuentes de Oñoro (May 5, 1811); and, finally, the Spring Campaign of 1812. This campaign resulted in the British capture of both Badajoz and Ciudad Rodrigo. The main thrust of the letter covered the Salamanca Campaign, starting in May 1812, and Wellington's operations during and after his victory there. This paper will thus concentrate primarily on the *Lettre's* discussion of the Battle of Salamanca and Wellington's campaign in summer and fall of 1812.

Victory at the Battle of Salamanca assured Wellington's reputation as a successful general. No other general of the 5<sup>th</sup> Coalition amassed such a record of victories over the French – Vimiero, the defense of the lines of Torres Verde, Fuentes de Oñoro, Badajoz, Ciudad Rodrigo, and then Salamanca. At Salamanca, Wellington decisively defeated an army of roughly equal size under Marshal Auguste Marmont and sent the French army flying in a disorderly retreat. After that battle, Wellington's reputation as a general was at an all-time high, not only among the rejoicing Englishmen, but among the French officer corps as well.

With that kind of reputation, what did the French officer intend to convey to Lord Wellington? The critique's theme was expressed by the French officer's first sentences:

My Lord -- All those who play a role on the world scene are subject to history, and ...I have only one objective, and that is to record the facts which

posterity must reconcile with the man whom two nations call immortal and proclaim *the first general of Europe, the general of the ages.*<sup>2</sup>

A devastating, albeit very one-sided, critique of Wellington's leadership ensued. The author immediately heralded Wellington's legendary caution, his tendency to deliberate movement, and his more obvious military mistakes. In the Battle of Salamanca, however, surely the French commentator would have been hard-pressed to fault Wellington's performance. In fact, the letter's author found fault not with Wellington's performance, but with the French failures that allowed Wellington his success. After discussing the French evacuation from Salamanca and the maneuvers of both armies before the battle, the writer posited that Marshal Marmont lost because he neglected a careful terrain analysis of Wellington's position on the Arapiles hills, and committed the Army of Portugal to battle prematurely to avoid sharing a victory with King Joseph and the Army of the Centre. Our critic nevertheless penned:

You (Wellington) turned his (Marmont's) left flank and ...you gained a memorable victory. As a result, the British government awarded you the well-merited title of marquis.

Yet, our French officer continued:

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<sup>2</sup> *Lettre*, 7-8.

Although for the mob one victory is everything, for those accustomed to consider and judge military operations, one victory, often the result of fortuitous events, often proves to be less than it appears, and in this case, you yourself destroyed most of the opportunity that might have come from it.<sup>3</sup>

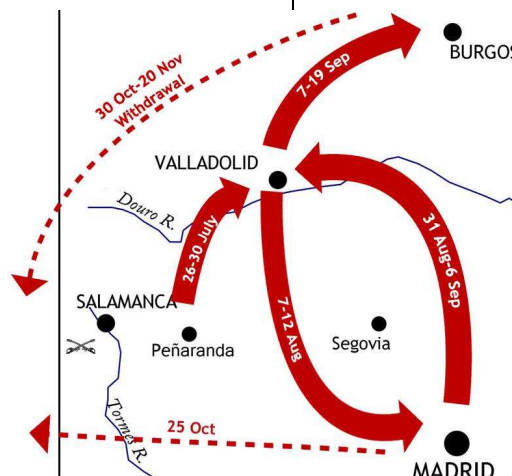
### The Pursuit

The author launched his real critique in the immediate aftermath of the battle -- the Pursuit phase. During the Battle of Salamanca on July 22, 1812, Marshal Marmont was wounded. General Bernard Clausel assumed command of the French army and attempted to restore the situation. About 7 pm, however, the French broke and began streaming to the left towards the bridge at Alba de Tormes six miles away and the fords over the Tormes River. General Maximilian Foy's Division, which had not been heavily engaged on the right of the French line, fell back and formed the rear guard. A Spanish battalion had earlier occupied the castle that covered the bridge. Shortly before the battle began, however, the Spanish general, Don Carlos Espana, withdrew the troops from the castle and

failed to notify Lord Wellington. The majority of the French army, covered by Foy's division, streamed through Alba de Tormes and crossed the bridge and fords above and below the town.

Wellington personally took command of the pursuit. His troops, however, were mainly from British divisions that had seen the heaviest fighting and were consequently exhausted. Elsewhere, two divisions of British troops and Espana's Spanish division rested on their arms; none of them having been actively engaged in the battle, and only about a thousand of Wellington's nearly 5,000

cavalrymen, primarily the heavy cavalry of the King's German Legion and the 12<sup>th</sup> Light Dragoons, were engaged in this phase of the operations. Before midnight, the British broke off their pursuit. The French continued to retreat



across the Tormes and towards Peñaranda, some 20 miles from the battlefield. By the next morning (23 July), Clausel was in Peñaranda, reforming his scattered units. Only a portion of the British cavalry continued the aggressive pursuit. A bloody rear-guard action ensued near the little village of Garcia Hernandez, halfway between Alba de Tormes and Peñaranda. The leading British units reached Peñaranda on the morning of 24 July to find only stragglers and a few wounded French soldiers. The French had left for Valladolid

<sup>3</sup> Lettre, 30,

at sunrise. That night, Wellington wrote, "How they get on their troops at such a rate I cannot conceive, but they left about two in the morning and they will arrive in Valladolid tomorrow."<sup>4</sup> The following day, Wellington abandoned aggressive pursuit and cautiously followed the Army of Portugal to Valladolid on 29-30 July. Clausel then abandoned the city without a fight and fell back on the other side of the Duero River.

### The First Hypothesis

In his criticism of Wellington's conduct of the pursuit, the author framed what he termed his "First Hypothesis". Let me paraphrase our French officer:

"You had won a victory that put the Army of Portugal at your mercy. If your cavalry, 12,000 infantry, and a dozen guns had marched to Peñaranda on the night of 22-23 July, only fragments of the army would have been able to escape. It was only

necessary to pursue to prevent it from rallying. On the 26<sup>th</sup>, you would have been able to arrive at Valladolid and capture the garrison trapped there by the guerrillas. On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of August, you then would have been able to take the unprepared fort at Burgos; on the 6<sup>th</sup> you could have attacked the fort at Pancorbo; and on the 10<sup>th</sup> you would have been able to cross the Ebro River and enter Biscay, where, reinforced by 20,000 insurgents, you could have expelled the 12,000 men of the Army of the North to France. Then, you could have marched on Pamplona and taken Madrid from the rear. In

short, My Lord, you could have in six weeks expelled us from the north of Spain and forced us to evacuate Madrid – a memorable campaign."



Indeed, many of Wellington's own army accounted him insufficiently aggressive, especially during his immediate pursuit of the French on 22-26 July. On 25 July,

<sup>4</sup> Wellington to Lord Bathurst, night of 24 July 1812. Quoted in Charles Oman, *Peninsular Wars* (London, 1914), V, 482.

however, Wellington had learned that King Joseph and the Army of the Center were marching to aid the Army of Portugal. Wellington thus appropriately took precautions to guard his right flank and rear. In judging Wellington's failure to engage in aggressive pursuit, we should perhaps also consider Meade's situation after Gettysburg or Montgomery at the Falaise pocket, to understand that such pursuit is seldom easy, and sometimes in reality impossible. So why would a seasoned French officer focus on this failure? This focus on Wellington's supposed error was another clue to his identity and purpose.

### **Wellington's Movements**

King Joseph meanwhile learned of the British victory at Salamanca and withdrew to Madrid. Wellington maintained his position near Valladolid for several days. Then, on 7 August, he decided to march his army towards Madrid. Marshal Soult's forces had failed to reinforce the 14,000-man Army of the Center despite Joseph's repeated orders, and Joseph abandoned the capital before Wellington's arrival on 12 August. He left only a small garrison in the fortified Retiro district that housed the French magazines. The city fell to the British on the 14<sup>th</sup>.

Wellington now occupied the central position in Spain, between the Army of Portugal in Burgos and the Army of the Center in the Kingdom of Castile, where Joseph was slowly being joined by Marshal Soult. Wellington sent detachments out in all directions until 31 August, when he finally decided to turn his attention again to

the Army of Portugal. He left nearly half of his force in Madrid and marched to Valladolid. Crossing the Dureo with no serious opposition from Clausel, Wellington invested the French fort at Burgos on 21 September as the Army of Portugal fell back towards the Army of the North in Vitoria. The siege of Burgos, however, by any standard was a costly failure. Wellington failed to bring up sufficient siege artillery and relied instead on storming parties as he had at Badajoz. On 30 October, he abandoned the siege and began his retreat to Ciudad Rodrigo and the winter cantonments along the Portuguese border.

### **The Second Hypothesis**

Articulating his "second hypothesis," our French critic wrote that he would not concern himself with the time "uselessly lost" in late July and early August around Valladolid, and instead would analyze on Wellington's movements to and after Madrid. Again, let me paraphrase his comments:

"If, after entering Madrid on 12 August and capturing the Retiro on the 14<sup>th</sup>, you had marched with all of your forces through Aranda, which was not garrisoned, you would have arrived at Lerma on the 22<sup>nd</sup> and at Burgos on the 23<sup>rd</sup>. You would have placed yourself between the Army of Portugal at Valladolid and the Army of the North headquartered at Vitoria. You would have

found the fort unable to make an extended resistance, and you would have cut off the retreat of the Army of Portugal. You could then have marched against the Army of the North, which would have been incapable of resisting you, and you would have been master of Spain's north and center while Marshal Soult was still evacuating Andalusia and marching to Castile."

### The Critique

Our author's critique (and my paraphrase) continued: Instead, my Lord, what did you do? Despite your complete victory, you did nothing to render it decisive. You exploited neither the enthusiasm among your troops that your victory engendered, nor the temporary disarray of the French army. After much hesitation, you decided instead to march on Madrid, where the prospect of a triumphant entry attracted you more than sound military operations. You took 22 days to reach Madrid and arrived only after 15 squadrons of your advance guard were defeated with the loss of three guns by only

nine squadrons of French cavalry.<sup>5</sup> You then lost 12 days in pointless maneuvers around Madrid instead of taking advantage of your central position which would have permitted you to mass your forces and commit them successively against the Army of Portugal, the Army of the North, the Army of the Center, and finally against the Army of the South. Instead, you attempted to confront them all at once, and, consequently, you were unable to defeat any of them in detail.

You finally marched on Valladolid (31 August – 6 September). General Clausel skillfully fell back before you, so it took you 12 days (7 - 19 September) to march the 80 miles<sup>6</sup> to reach Burgos. Again, you were slow. The fort at Burgos had been resupplied only the night before you surrounded it, but you believed that it could not be bypassed, (literally, "like the Pillars of Hercules"), so you halted. Then, not appreciating the strength of the works, you wasted an entire month and 5,000 of your elite troops attempting to capture it. In this case, your pride overcame your judgment, because this was the best time of the year for a field campaign as the

SALAMANCA CAMPAIGN: *Hypothesis 2*



<sup>5</sup> Probably the combat at Majalahonda, a village just outside Madrid, on 11 August. (See Oman, *Peninsular Wars*, V, 510-512.)

<sup>6</sup> "22 leagues." *Lettre*, 34.

countryside provides adequate subsistence and the rivers of northern Spain were too shallow to stop you.

So instead, what happened? The Army of Portugal, concentrated on the heights of Pancorbo, as it rested, rebuilt, and reorganized. The Army of the North disbursed the insurgent bands that were ready to support you in Biscay, while the Army of the Center and the Army of the South united and concentrated on Madrid.

For three entire months you were the master of events, and this was time enough to assure you of victory for you never lacked intelligence or supplies and were operating against opponents who had neither. You had the opportunity to control all of Spain, and instead, you demonstrated only your lack of ability.

You could have overwhelmed our forces in succession as they were separated by long distances and, being without communications for much of the time, they were unable to coordinate their operations. Not appreciating your central position, you divided your forces and enabled us to change places with you – our forces massed, and your forces scattered and pursued. With that, you lost the offensive, and in war the offensive is everything. Instead of remaining master of events, you put yourself at their mercy. Even your admirers must be aware that you failed to use the luck you had, yet they all absolve you of your failure."

Our French officer concluded his letter:

If you deserved to receive the title of marquis for your victory at the Battle of Salamanca, you also deserved to lose it for your conduct thereafter; and you are not entitled to be named *Immortal* nor proclaimed *general of all Europe* or *general of the ages*. ....

Receive, my lord, the assurance of sentiments of highest consideration, with which I have the honor to be, you Excellency's most humble servant.<sup>7</sup>

### Other Criticisms of Wellington

My purpose is not to attempt an operational analysis of Wellington's campaign of the summer and fall 1812 with or without the benefit of a French officer's hindsight. I merely point at that this officer's criticisms were not unique even at the time regarding some of Wellington's decisions and operations. Even fellow British soldiers had reservations with regard to Wellington's pursuit. A British dragoon officer commented in his diary, "This did not look like the quick advance following up a great victory, and I think they will be let off too easily,"<sup>8</sup> Other letters and diaries of the time echoed this view. More modern writers also fault Wellington for his indecisive and somewhat piecemeal operations after the

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<sup>7</sup> *Lettre*, 47-48.

<sup>8</sup> Lt. Col. William Tomkinson in *Diary of a Cavalry Officer in the Peninsular War and the Waterloo Campaign* (London, 1895) quoted in Oman, *Peninsular War*, V, 482.

battle. Both Charles Oman<sup>9</sup> and Rory Muir<sup>10</sup> in their accounts of the Battle of Salamanca fault him for both indecision and neglect of his central position after he occupied Madrid.

Our French officer's hypothetical alternatives offer us as much occasion for judgment as Wellington's actions, of course. Disregarding Wellington's uncertainties about French positions and strengths, the marches proposed by our officer would have barely been possible even for fresh, fast-marching French armies living off the land. That pace was virtually impossible for the Anglo-Portuguese Army suffering from the fatigue of combat and dependent upon supply trains.

### Why the *Lettre*?

So why was this critical letter written? The tone was certainly patronizing, perhaps even insulting. Who was the author? Why was it published over two years after its composition at a time when Napoleon was confined to Elba and the Bourbon monarchy restored?

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<sup>9</sup> 'Wellington's only real chance of success would have been to concentrate every man against Souham (who replaced Clausel commanding the Army of Portugal) and Cafarelli (Army of the North) on one side or against the King and Soult on the other. This was made difficult by the initial division of his army into two nearly equal halves....' Charles Oman, *Peninsular War*, VI, 178-79.

<sup>10</sup> "The allies did not gain a final victory in the Peninsular in 1812....By occupying Madrid, Wellington had gained the central position but found himself with the difficult, perhaps insoluble problem of how to use it....And so the year ended as it had begun, with the allied army cantoned along the frontier." Rory Muir, *Salamanca, 1812* (New Haven, 2001), 236.

In the *Mémoires* of French *Général de division* Paul Thiébault I came across the following passage:

While in Vitoria, I had been amazed by the manner in which French officers exalted the Duke of Wellington without reconciling his reputation with the enormity of his failings. I had, therefore, drafted a critical review of the Duke's military conduct in the Peninsular War from when he took command of the Anglo-Portuguese army until the Battle of Arapiles (Salamanca).<sup>11</sup>

Thiébault wrote that he had sent a draft of his critique on 24 November 1812 to Henri Clarke, the Minister of War, in the hope that the Ministry would publish it to deflate Wellington's reputation among the French officer corps. Clarke replied to Thiébault only the following March, when Thiébault was en route to Germany to take command of a division of Davout's Corps. The Minister refused to sponsor the letter's publication.

Thiébault in his *Mémoires* continued that he was able to publish the *Lettre* after the first Restoration, in June, 1815, "benefiting from more favorable circumstances" (probably the replacement of Clarke by General Pierre DuPont as Minister of War), although he never offered it for public sale because of Wellington's victory at Waterloo. Thiébault claimed, however, that the publisher

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<sup>11</sup> Paul Thiebault, *Mémoires* (Paris, 1893), V, 16.

illegally sold a few copies at a very high price, including one to the Duke of Wellington.<sup>12</sup>

Following the clue that the Duke of Wellington had a copy of Thiébault's publication, and with the valuable assistance of the Dr. C. M. Woolgar, Head of Special Collections, University of Southampton Library, I discovered the anonymous *Lettre d'un officier Français au Lord Wellington* among the Wellington Papers. The time period fits exactly; and the *Lettre's* theme unquestionably matched Thiébault's stated purpose: to convince other French officers that Wellington should not be feared.



Several internal aspects of the publication also pointed to Thiébault. The *Lettre* ignored Wellington's victory at the Battle of Vimiero in 1807 in Portugal. Thiébault was Chief of Staff of the French Army

at Vimiero, and would hardly have wished to critique his own operation. Thiébault, additionally, was one of the few lesser French generals mentioned in the *Lettre*; a footnote referred to his success over elements of Wellington's army at the action of Alde de Pont in 1811.<sup>13</sup> Although operations in Leon and Old Castile from

1810 to 1812 when Thiébault served in this region are treated in some detail, the author paid little attention to Wellington's successful siege of Badajoz further south, saying: "I know few of the details of that operation."<sup>14</sup> The letter's author also included an extensive and commendatory footnote concerning the role of one M. Thonnellier, paymaster-general of the Armies of Spain and a close friend of Thiébault's, on his role in resupplying Burgos just before Wellington's arrival.<sup>15</sup> And finally, the literary format itself – dense, written much in the subjunctive historical present, and with strong literary affectations, was consistent with Thiébault's style. Thiébault was the son of a prominent French literary figure of the Enlightenment and fancied himself a writer.

Weighed against this circumstantial evidence was the fact that Dr. Woolgar found the *Lettre* not in the original collection of Wellington papers, but among documents only recently purchased to add to the Wellington collection. Final resolution regarding the question of authorship awaited another favor to follow the next clue. With thanks to Kenneth Johnson of the Institute for the Study of Napoleon and the French Revolution for his invaluable facilitation in the French *Archives de la guerre*, I discovered the official letter from Thiébault to Clarke cited in Thiébault's *Mémoires*.<sup>16</sup> The manuscript attached to Thiébault's letter, although not

<sup>12</sup> Thiébault, *Mémoires*, V, 17.

<sup>13</sup> *Lettre*, 25.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>16</sup> Thiébault to Clarke (24 Novembre 1812), France, Archives de la guerre, Service historique de l'armée de la terre, Château de Vincennes, MSS, Armée de Espagne, Correspondance, Novembre 1812, C<sup>8</sup>102.

verbatim with the published pamphlet, is unquestionably the same text as the first portion of the published *Lettre* in the Wellington Library. Thiébault in his *Mémoires* said that Clarke did not respond until the following March when he refused to support publication of the *Lettre*. Although Clarke's refusal has not yet been located, Thiébault's transmittal letter revealed a marginal notation, "Replied to, 5 March 1813," corresponding to the date that Thiébault said Clarke had replied.

The original manuscript in the *Archives de la guerre* was signed: "D...B..., officier français." The published version in the Wellington Library was signed "Ch. de Ste. – L'officier français." This may be a clever play on words by Thiébault. The "Ch." could stand for either "Charles," Thiébault's middle name; or Chevalier. Thiébault had received the order of Chevalier de St. Louis from Louis XVIII, conferred immediately after the Restoration. The remaining part of the name, however, "de Ste. – L.," almost certainly refers to Sainte Larme, the Thiébault family estate near Amiens.<sup>17</sup>

In conclusion, what purpose did this harsh criticism of Wellington serve? In his November 1812 letter of transmission to the Ministry, Thiébault wrote: "The ... persons whom I have consulted on the contents of this piece believed that its publication could have a favorable effect [on the French army] in Spain." Publicizing what he saw as Wellington's errors, he hoped to revive the confidence of the French officer corps by demonstrating that Wellington could and did in fact make mistakes. Thiébault even

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<sup>17</sup> The clue is the use of the feminine form, *Sainte*, in the abbreviation.

noted in his 1812 memorandum to Clarke that he was having it translated into Spanish so it could be printed without delay. Therefore, if we accept Thiébault's explanation in his *Mémoires* for writing the pamphlet, we may reason as did Voltaire when contemplating the execution of the British Admiral Sir John Byng: "**Pour encourager des autres.**"<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> The original quote is from Voltaire's *Candide*. "Dans ce pays-ci, il est bon de tuer de temps en temps un amiral pour encourager les autres." ("In this country it is good to kill an admiral from time to time, to encourage the others.") He was referring to the execution of Admiral John Byng in England in 1757.