

Blooding the Hounds at Busaco

September 27th 1810



GENERAL VISCOUNT WELLINGTON, AGED 43.
a Drawing in Chalk by the Spanish artist Goya. Original in the British Museum.
[Vol. 1, p. 304.]

General Wellington's Allied army has been on a northward push out from Lisbon in Portugal. He's been tackling the French troops where he finds them and is doing it well, but they have come to realise just how outnumbered they are by the French in the country and they now have definite news that Marshal Massena, one of Napoleon's favourite generals, is heading in their direction with additional troops behind him. Massena had risen

far in the service of the emperor Napoleon. He is now titled the Prince D'Essling. He's of humble, but practical birth. His dad keeps an inn near Monte Carlo.

Massena has been charged by Napoleon with pushing the English into the sea or at least onto their boats to leave the scene. Massena is right on Wellington's wheel and thinks the only course open to the English General is to make for his ships in Lisbon Harbour to do a Dunkirk – as it were. Most of Wellington's troop and all of England share this view. Nothing is further from this long headed general's plans. The ever present problem to him is to keep the Lisbon road open. It's absolutely essential that his retreat route not be cut off. He needs his supplies and his magazine at Coimbra. It's very rough going over very strong country and Wellington; with his great ability to be 'johnny on the spot' to personally direct his army, keeps nine horses in work at any one time. Colm Doherty is along to strap his neddies and to keep two fresh horses close to hand. Wellington goes over country at a hand gallop and a change of horses occurs frequently.

Until Wellington sailed from England to take over the Brit Army in the peninsular, Colm was the man that made the small Irish Hunt at Trim work. He is the man for all seasons. He runs the breeding book of the hound pack, he looks after the patrons horses in Livery, including Wellingtons and he supervises the earth stopping that keeps the foxes out and about and chaseable by the Hunt instead of going to earth down their dens. Wellington has four hunters at the Trim stables and another five at the Longford Hunt, quite a way north of where the Trim is based on the River Boyne.

They get into conversation when the hounds lose a fox to an unstopped burrow. "What's this, what's this?" Wellington imperiously demands from Colm, as he mounts the new horse Colm has just given to him. Colm is a young man of better than middle height; he is in his usual gear – breeches, top boots, a black long hunting coat and a round bowler type hat.

"I like to leave a few out for tomorrows hunt, Milord," he says, "but fear not, there is a big dog fox right handed from that Spinney there," - gesturing to the wood on the skyline, "and he will without doubt show us good sport in a few minutes. In the meantime, Sir," - he hands a long silver flask up to Wellington, who takes a pull on it and hands it back.

There is in fact no old dog fox lurking above the coppice, but Colm was perfectly aware of the unstopped earth and a bit before the hunt, he has been up

here on his cobby grey and has laid a long drag line across the vale, running down and along the Boyne. It takes in fences, hedges, big and small ditches, stone walls and a bit of bog. The line he has laid will provide a very fast gallop for the hunt and on past experience; it will take all of the grumbles and flip out of the followers. Colonel Jerry Harkness, Master of the Trim, looks askance at Colm. Colm is as deep as a well under his raw boned Irish face and gives nothing away.

"Best leave it to the Huntsman, Colonel," he says, "but you will be wise to check your horse's girth."

This tips the lay to the Master, who does as Colm suggests and tightens the strap on his helmet. The Huntsman well knows Colm is the brain behind the success of the Trim and all Colm has to do is to canter up the hill a bit and give a 'view haloo' of the non-existent fox. A gesture with his whip shows the Huntsman the lay of the drag and his pack of hounds, today the pack is all bitches and they are super-fast. Away they go like the clappers, with the Hunt doing their best to keep up. The drag is close to four miles; everyone is run ragged and the horses blown by the time they arrive at the end of the run. A hole in a park fence seems to mark the foxes escape route and the park owner doesn't allow the hounds into the close proximity of his huge shallow roofed Georgian house, so honour is satisfied.

Wellington changes horses for the jog home. "Well done, Colm," he says. "This is an insignificant hunt compared with the Longford, but you prepare my horses better and you show us exceptionable sport after the foxes. I'm off for the Peninsular War in about a fortnight. What about strapping my horses going over and doing the same in Spain or at least Portugal? Spain, of course in due course."

'Jesus,' thinks Colm, 'if old Arty plans to get into Spain, there'll be a powerful lot of fighting the French to be done first.'

"Also," says Wellington, "I'm taking out a pack of hounds, a small pack, 19 couple."

'Ulp,' thinks Colm, '38 hounds is hardly a small pack, but then Wellington thinks big.' "I'm not a soldier, Sir," he says.

"Didn't say you were," Wellington retorts, "but I can promise you a very interesting life and quite fair pay for you and a tight group of helpers if you can recruit them."

Colm grins. "You're on, Sir. Who do I talk to for details?"

"My adjutant will call on you tomorrow," he says. "You will need to consider some arms. I keep up hard on the enemy and you may need something in case we meet with skirmishers or their advance guard. Also, you will need the means of carrying a good telescope with you on your saddle; half the secret of success in the Peninsular will depend on good powers of observation, which I know from your abilities in earth stopping, comes naturally to you."

"Thank you kindly, General," Colm says as he hands over again to Wellington the beautiful long silver spirit flask.

That night he says to Amity, the bred in the purple ducal runaway whom he lives with at Kenmare Village, nearest to the Trim Kennels, "If you're game love, we'll give you a boyish haircut, get you some flattening chemises and you can come along for the fun."

She gives him an intent look. "Having found you, Colm," she says, "I have no intention, no intention whatsoever to let you loose chasing Portuguese women in the low dives in Lisbon."

"Well," says Colm, "as long as you do your pissing very much in private, we can easily get away with it."

He has a bit of organising to do to gather up Wellington's horses; nine chargers and nine hunters and to get all this, plus the hounds which come from a Gloucestershire kennel, over to Portsmouth where the new military expedition is assembling. On his last day at the stables, the Huntsman came over to where Colm is gathering up a huge heap of gear and telling his seven helpers where and what to do with it all.

"You're fooking up the Trim hunt, Colm," he says.

"Oh, it's all for King and country, Joe," he says.

Joe retorts, "Whenever did a true blue Irisher care for that?"

"Wellington does," Colm says, "he's giving up the Irish secretaryship and his seat in Parliament to have a go at what John Moore couldn't pull off at all, at all."

"Well, the Hunt season is over anyway," Joe says, "and I expect you will be back for the start of the next one."

"Hmnn," Colm says, "man proposes."

Neither are to know that near seven hunt seasons will come and go before Colm gets back to the Trim; and then only as a visitor. The morning they load the horses, Colm takes out a bundle of horse bandages at the Ship Inn, where they are staying. Amity's hair is cut short like a boy's, she's slim hipped and her figure could pass as a boy's.

"Off with your shirt, Dim," Colm says. "We needs must disguise your fetching and overlarge superstructure."

He flattens her breasts with the bandages and tosses her a long, woollen jumper and a donkey jacket.

On the transport, about 70 barefooted sailors are manning the capstan to sling load the horses. Colm gestures at the boatswain running the loading and within minutes, he has a breeches buoy on the wharf; he climbs into it and they swing him up, not so gently. Cargill, the boatswain says, "Who are you?" Colm moves his coat open a bit; there's a beautiful tower pattern pistol in a holster.

"I'm Milord Wellington's horse coper," he says. "If you break a leg of any one getting them off the wharf and into the hold, I'll shoot you dead. If however, you are extra careful, I'll bring on a five gallon keg of French Brandy with the last horse."

And he does. They pen the horses in the hold; the hounds are put behind an ad hoc cage of boarding netting in the former gun deck of the transport. The approaching summer smooths their passage and they unload their charges on Lisbon Wharf six days later. They run the horses out to good quarters at Ruo Nova; in sight of the mighty Tagus River that protects Wellington's flanks on this side of the Peninsular. The English side of this operation want Wellington to pass up on Lisbon and run his war from Cadiz and Gibraltar, but he has been in Portugal before in Moore's late campaign. He plumps for a northward movement into Portugal and although his army is a miniscule 22,000 men with 8,000 more promised, he soon pushes the French over the Duoro and they destroy their pontoon bridges over this strong river.

Colm is looking through his telescope towards the huge seminary building near Amarante, there's a boat coming over, it's being skilfully sculled across the current. He walks down to the water's edge and helps secure the small boat.

"Who are you?" Colm asks. The Portuguese chap chuckles.

"I'm a barber from Oporto," he says. "This is the Prior of Amarante. Now look," he continues, "there's no guard on the seminary; it's screened by its outer high walls, its dead open to the river and we should immediately go over and grab the barges moored there."

So they do. Colm motions Amity to stay with the horses, so Colonel Waters, (a staff officer nicely handy nearby) Colm, the barber and the prior go straight over and are back by 10 with the three barges and they go straight back with an army officer and twenty-five men. The alarm is given, but the Brits take post in the seminary and while they literally hold the fort, the landing proceeds and they bring over perhaps more troops than the seminary enclosure can hold. In the meantime, horse artillery fire over the river keeps the French away from the seminary. Wellington has of course been very active in getting troops over to clear the town and does so. Soult recognises he's been well bested by the English General and suffering great privations in doing so, retreats.

Wellington rides into town and very courteously invites Colm and Amity to lunch with him at around 4pm. In one of the strangest turns in history, the meal they share is what was prepared for Marshall Soult's lunch. Ironic, but true. It's quite a coup-de-main by a man that Soult has claimed to be only a defensive general. Colm and Amity stay up front and centre in all the military campaigns that saw Wellington beat Junot at Viemero, Soult at Oporto, Joseph, Victor and Jourdon at Talavera. They have lived hard, but being right up there with his Lordships horses, have lived as well as any non-officers in the Army of the Peninsular. They have toughened up. Colm thinks that with so many French soldiers scattered throughout the land, that Wellington just has to be on a hiding to nothing when the enemy combine forces to choke the British out. The rest of the army certainly believe so, but they have very much underestimated this flinty Captain General. Colm doesn't appreciate at first hand, the strategic grasp of the military genius he is in daily contact with – bringing up a fresh charger and taking away the used up one. Wellington is a brisk man across country and his horses have to be up to it.

As Ney approaches Almeida, one of Wellington's favourite horses, a huge black gelding; black without a white hair on him, gets a bad stone cut in the frog of his nearside front hoof. Colm is on hand within minutes to swap horses and he and Wellington have a look at the damage. They are a fair way from Lisbon at this point.

"What will you do, Colm?" his boss asks.

"I'll borrow a horse float from the artillery lines, Milord," he says, "and send him back."

"All right," says Wellington, "things'll probably be quiet for the next week. I certainly don't want him left behind for the French if they push us too hard."

Colm gets on with things and the float they borrow is a good one. They straw pack the floor, put a horse in the shafts, one in front and Blackie on board this low slung vehicle and he is on his way. Colm takes advantage of the Army telegraph to get Callum O'Toole on his way from Lisbon with three new chargers from Wellington's stable and they meet in Coimbra where Wellington has his magazines. It's a busy place. Callum has the right horses with him and a competent Portuguese groom. They leave him in charge after getting a three-man sentry guard from the Captain of the Magazine and go off to dine in a nearby Bistro. They down a couple of good drafts of rich red local wine and sit back.

"Jesus, Mary and the Sainted Joseph," Callum says. "I'm the best informed man in the Peninsula this night." Colm is intrigued.

"Spill the beans," he says.

Callum says, "Let's order our dinner. What I have to tell you will take a deal of time. Firstly," he continues, "Lisbon, by rumour and the ill-informed advices from that idiot D'Souza purporting to represent the Regency, is a fair way towards total panic. The English merchants are sending their families home and the Engineers have

been busy strengthening the outer embarkation lines as well as the inner. The transports that brought out the last reinforcement of soldiers from England are still at the wharves and three ships of the line; three-deckers at that; are anchored just cannon shot off the wharves, with a clear line of fire and they are on springs so that by simply manning the capstans, they can rake fire the wharves and environs. I came away fully expecting a re-embarkation of our troops within weeks. Anyway I get on the road and at Bucellas; I come across huge fortifications very well advanced. I get through there with great difficulty due to the working parties and troops and cut for Torres Vedras. There, at Sobral, I strike another huge line. The hills have been blasted to provide ten foot scarps, fortresses like Badajoz on the high points, fortified entrenchments in the valley and I'm told there are huge dammed inundations down on the Tagus and the sea ends of the line with artillery overlooking the dams. The guns on the Torres Vedras line are all fixed pieces so that if the line is overrun, they can't be used against us. The lower lines, the stronger by far, are chocker with wheeled artillery and they've cut good roads in from the sea to land the marines who are off shore in transports if needed. The ends of the lines are ship-guarded by war ships in the bay and of course, there are gunboats on the roaring old Tagus."

Colm is gobsmacked. "The army know nothing of this?" he says.

"Yes," says Callum, "and you can take it from me, nor does Lisbon."

"What then, is the strategy?" Colm asks. Callum is nobody's fool.

"Um," he says. "There's an incredible build-up of magazine material and food stuffs in Lisbon. I suppose long-nose Artie wants to halt the Frogs at the Torres Vedras and let them starve on the hillsides – they have to live off the land, that's Napoleon's way – while our army fattens up and rests over the winter and lets the four horsemen have their way."

"Doesn't add up," Colm says. "Why make all the obvious preparations to re-embark the army? Well I suppose, the lines could be breached, in which case preparations have been made ready for it, but I think not. I'd say it's just a blind to divert attention from his real intentions."

"Anyway, Colm, I expect that in a short space of time, you and I will be hunting the hounds along the valley bottoms behind the lines and worrying more about earth stopping than the French."

Wellington looks at his change of horses and runs an experienced eye over them. "Colm," he says looking at him hard, "your groom has been doing your work and the penny has finally dropped. That's Amity, youngest daughter of Lord Innesfail. There's a big reward out for her."

"She's a runaway, Sir," he says. "I picked her up in a bar in Klondorkin. She's been with me ever since."

"Hmm," says Wellington. Colm looks at him seriously; he has heard of the liaison of Lady Caroline Lamb and Milord Wellington.

"I don't lend her out, Sir," he says.

Wellington grins. "You are a bit of a mind reader, Colm," he says.

While Lord John Russell writes of Wellington standing on the highest spot around and surveying the country before him with an eagle's imperious eye, Colm thinks Milord sometimes has a shifty look about him; perhaps he's just planning strategy. The Spanish painter, Goya, picks up the glimmering of this in a pencil sketch of Wellington; now in the National Gallery with a copy hanging in Apsley House. It's a far cry from the very flattering portrait that Lawrence RA painted of him in 1814.

Events now move on in the Peninsula War. Ney invests Almeida; arguably the strongest fortress in Portugal, but a magazine explosion three days later and the citadel tosses in the towel. The two contending armies are now in contact. The French inexplicably made no move of importance for near three weeks; good for Wellington, as it gave time for Hills troops to get up to augment his army.

On September 10th, three columns of French came after Wellington and on the 21st; they joined into one army of 72,000 men. Wellington, of course, is falling back. In reality, his troops are dispirited by the retreat strategy and expect they are off to the embarkation fleet. Crafty old Wellington has different ideas and he places his army on the steep ridge of the Sierra Busaco, in a very strong position that neutralises the French Cavalry and there he stands at bay. He moves right along the top of the ridge posting his men with Colm and Amity keeping back a bit and taking up a replacement horse when wanted. On the 26th, Massena himself marches in to take command and to add his 8th Corp to his massive army. The day is drawing on when Wellington says to Colm,

“I’ve done all I can. I plan a short nap. Now lad, take your telescope over the comb of the ridge and see what you can see, but watch yourself. I’ve seen skirmishers on the hill.”

Colm borrows a green jacketed rifleman from the 95th foot.

“Hang on to my stirrup,” he says. “I’m doing a reccy for Milord Conkey and I may need protection while so doing.”

“Yessir,” he man says and grabs the stirrup.

They go over the verge of the mountain and are immediately gobsmacked by the spread of the opposing French Army. Just below them at the foot of the precipitous heights on which they are standing looking, the army is bivouacking while hordes of Cavalry and a heck of a lot of Artillery are coming in, raising dust clouds as they do. The French have already posted their pickets immediately below them. No one takes a pot shot at them and bemusedly, Colm goes back to report.

Wellington sits up from where he is lying wrapped in his plain blue cloak.

“What would you do if you were Massena?” he asks Colm.

“Ah, easy peasy,” Colm says. “I would send up the young troops from the conscription; he’s got thousands of them.”

“What would that achieve?” Wellington asks.

“Oh, he’ll keep you busy while he does a big night march with his cavalry and try to cut the road to Coimbra.”

“And what will he do?” Wellington asks. Colm is a shrewd observer and has spotted for Wellington on many occasions when they were moving up to the enemy.

“Looking at the line-up,” Colm says, “you can expect a full on assault by his crack regiments about daylight.”

“Hmm,” says Wellington and rides back to his headquarters with his staff.

Colm and Amity are feeding the horses when a runner comes over from Wellington’s headquarters. “Milord Wellington has ordered breakfast for 4.30am,” he says. “Best have the horses outside the mess tent by 5am at the latest.” It’s a typical late September morning, the air is sharp. Colm is tempted to go over to the ridge for another look, but holds off, it’s too misty. Wellington comes out with his



MARÉCHAL ANDRÉ MASSÉNA, PRINCE D'ESSLING. [Vol. 4, p. 182.]

staff a bit after 5 and mounts up. This is a relatively compact battle scene with the front from the river, along the heights being about 5 miles long. The British line along the top of the ridge is scarcely visible to the French. *'God,' thinks Colm, 'The frogs have got it all before them with a stiff climb up, 300 metres in places, carrying their weapons. They've also in the case of Massena's men, had a long march and a brisk one to get here.'*

The drums rattle and roll and the French attack in five columns; the best target possible for the horse artillery. The going is a bit easier in some spots and taking full advantage of this and showing astonishing speed and dash, they break the British line three miles to the left. But Sir Thomas Picton rallies and with newly arrived help, corrects the line. Wellington gallops up at this point; he's totally unfazed.

"Hill," he says. "If they attempt this point again, give them a volley and bayonet charge them. Don't let your men go too far down the hill after them."

Things intensify when Marshall Neys men top the convent ridge to be greeted by the disciplined musketry volley fire that is the hallmark of British Infantry all over the world. The infantry fire and artillery is totalling crushing the French getting over the ridge, at which point the famous Crauford from the Light Brigade, brings out two battalions he had concealed in a sunken road under the comb of the ridge. They take to the French with the bayonet and toss them neck and crop back down the slope. The bugles sound the halt, they stop sharp and pour three withering volleys at them as they run.

Massena has lost near to five thousand of his troops and has gained nothing. He recognises what he should have seen at the start; that Wellington's position is to all intents and purposes, unassailable. It's all over by 2pm, but sporadic fighting takes place until near dark when the French are back at their starting line. This famous battle is perhaps unnecessary when taking into account Wellington's plans, but it gets fought for perhaps political reasons. He has visited red ruin on Massena's top troops, who shouldered aside the huge number of conscript soldiers in their keenness to get at the English. He has brought to effective prominence the Portuguese troops officered by the British; he has lifted the spirits of the nation at home and in hunting parlances, given that Wellington was always a keen man with the hounds, he has blooded his hounds and that was his whole purpose in standing firm at Busaco against enormous, overwhelming in fact, odds. Wellington is fully entitled to crow a bit – and he does, but only in private dispatches.

Wellington now retreats on Coimbra. He has to do this to protect his rear, his lifeline to Lisbon from the port of which he receives all of his sustenance: bread, beer, beef, ammunition, replacements. The French have no such resources; they have to live on what they can glean here and there from inhospitable country. They conduct a running skirmish, nothing more, with the French as they draw back, halting here and there to steady things. He is already sending his baggage train, the wounded and a fair few prisoners to the rear. At this point, he is about a hundred miles from his fortified line at Torres Vedras and as he conducts a fighting retreat, he is driving the entire populace before him. By the 4th October, a week after the bloody defeat at Busaco, the French drive the British pickets out of Pombal and the rear guard out of Leira. Wellington keeps withdrawing, engaging in daily, but only partial encounters with the enemy.

Wellington has now a finely balanced exercise in logistics on his hands. He has to get the entire Portuguese population on his line of retreat back behind the lines and he has to get his British and Portuguese troops and all their trappings back behind the same fortified line, but there also has to be a big enough gap between the

two to prevent the French following him through before the engineers can shut tight the gap. But the gap between the allies and the enemy is closing up a bit. General Crauford's Light Brigade, famous for its motto of 'first into action, last out', in its role as rear guard, is skirmishing with the enemy advance guard and doing it very well.

Wellington is in it to the death and issues prompt orders as he goes to keep the feisty Crauford reluctantly moving back on Torres Vedras. Fire and retire are the bugle constants at this stage – and they do.

They clatter through the fortified lines with the Royal Engineers blowing up the corduroyed roads and the temporary timber bridges to get the last of the guns back, the line is now complete in its entirety from the sea to the Tagus. Huge numbers of red coated British and Portuguese irregulars man the ramparts.

Wellington quite kindly invites Colm and Dimity to join him for a scratch late lunch to see what the French make of the massive defensive works smack in their path. Colm smiles when he sees companies of French troops stumbling along parallel with the lines, checking to see how far they run in each direction. They are marching along on difficult ground, made more difficult by the engineers here and there blasting rocks. One thing is for sure and certain, if the French are to mob up to have a crack at breaching the lines, they will be forming up on very rough ground.

Wellington sweeps his glass back and forth. "Idiots," he says, "burning up troops to see if the line is continuous when a single cavalryman could do the job more efficiently and more quickly." He turns to the artillery captain. "Colonel," he says, "it's time to tell those chaps they are trespassing."

The troop in question walking along the fortified line imagines they are out of cannon shot, but where this English General is on hand, it doesn't pay to take things lightly. The artillery have a couple of Long Tom ships brass cannons mounted to the front to dispel this myth and they start firing cannon balls over the heads of the reconnaissance party, who quickly divert up the hill into even rougher country to achieve a safe margin from the cannon.

"Call me if you want me," Wellington says. "I have a bit of sorting out to do so that we can give the hounds a run along the valley bottoms tomorrow morning."

'Gawd,' thinks Colm. 'The valley bottoms and the Cistus scrub will be Old Conkey's campaign territory tomorrow.'

Author's Note

Despite their number advantage, the French never had a crack at breaching the lines of the Torres Vedras. Could they have done so? We will never know. Massena just wasn't game; perhaps Wellington's stonewall tactics against incredible odds at Busaco put the wind up him. Perhaps that was Wellington's aim. The French entered Portugal, May 1810, with 86,000 of the most successful and best troops in Europe. They retreated April 1811, with just 45,000 ragged, half-starved and sullen survivors. Wellington, after enjoying a winters hunting behind the lines at Frenada, came out in the spring and fought the French back and well into France until hostilities ceased. Historians simply say of the Iron Duke – "He was England's best ever General".

His old London home, Apsley House, juts into Hyde Park. It's a treasure-house of Wellington's life and wars. If you are at a loose end in London, do go through it. The National Trust has it open on a regular basis.