

= Battle of Barrosa =

The Battle of Barrosa (Chiclana , 5 March 1811) was part of an unsuccessful manoeuvre to break the siege of Cádiz in Spain during the Peninsular War . During the battle , a single British division defeated two French divisions and captured a regimental eagle .

Cádiz had been invested by the French in early 1810 , leaving it accessible from the sea , but in March of the following year a reduction in the besieging army gave its garrison of British and Spanish troops an opportunity to lift the siege . A large Allied strike force was shipped south from Cádiz to Tarifa , and moved to engage the siege lines from the rear . The French , under the command of Marshal Victor , were aware of the Allied movement and redeployed to prepare a trap . Victor placed one division on the road to Cádiz , blocking the Allied line of march , while his two remaining divisions fell on the single Anglo @-@ Portuguese rearguard division under the command of Sir Thomas Graham .

Following a fierce battle on two fronts , the British succeeded in routing the attacking French forces . A lack of support from the larger Spanish contingent prevented an absolute victory , and the French were able to regroup and reoccupy their siege lines . Graham 's tactical victory proved to have little strategic effect on the continuing war , to the extent that Victor was able to claim the battle as a French victory since the siege remained in force until finally being lifted on 24 August 1812 .

= = Background = =

In January 1810 , the city of Cádiz , a major Allied harbour and the effective seat of Spanish government since the occupation of Madrid , was besieged by French troops of Marshal Soult 's I Corps under the command of Marshal Victor . The city 's garrison initially comprised only four battalions of volunteers and recruits , but the Duke of Alburquerque ignored orders from the Spanish Junta and instead of attacking Victor 's superior force , he brought his 10 @,@ 000 men to reinforce the city . This allowed the city 's defences to be fully manned .

Under pressure from widespread protests and mob violence the ruling Spanish Junta resigned , and a five @-@ man Regency was established to govern in its place . The Regency , recognising that Spain could only be saved with Allied aid , immediately asked the newly ennobled Arthur Wellesley , Viscount Wellington , to send reinforcements to Cádiz ; by mid @-@ February , five Anglo @-@ Portuguese battalions had landed , bringing the garrison up to 17 @,@ 000 men and making the city effectively impregnable . Additional troops continued to arrive , and by May , the garrison was 26 @,@ 000 strong , while the besieging French forces had risen to 25 @,@ 000 .

Although the siege tied up a large number of Spanish , British and Portuguese troops , Wellington accepted this as part of his strategy since a similar number of French troops were also engaged . However , in January 1811 , Victor 's position began to deteriorate . Soult ordered Victor to send almost a third of his troops to support Soult 's assault on Badajoz , reducing the besieging French army to around 15 @,@ 000 men . Victor had little chance of making progress against the fortress city with a force of this strength , nor could he withdraw ? the garrison of Cádiz , if let loose , was large enough to overrun the whole of Andalusia .

= = Prelude to battle = =

Following Soult 's appropriation of many of Victor 's troops , the Allies sensed an opportunity to engage Marshal Victor in open battle and raise the siege of Cádiz . To that end , an Anglo @-@ Spanish expedition was sent by sea from Cádiz south to Tarifa , with the intention of marching north to engage the French rear . This force comprised some 8 @,@ 000 Spanish and 4 @,@ 000 British troops , with the overall command ceded to the Spanish General Manuel la Peña , a political accommodation since he was widely regarded as incompetent . To coincide with la Peña 's assault , it was arranged that General José Pascual de Zayas y Chacón would lead a force of 4 @,@ 000 Spanish troops in a sally from Cádiz , via a pontoon bridge from the Isla de León .

The Anglo @-@ Portuguese contingent ? a division commanded by Lieutenant @-@ General Sir

Thomas Graham ? sailed from Cádiz on 21 February 1811 , somewhat later than planned . Graham 's forces were unable to land at Tarifa due to bad weather and were forced to sail on to Algeciras , where they disembarked on 23 February . Joined by a composite battalion of flank companies under Colonel Browne , the troops marched to Tarifa on 24 February , where they received a further reinforcement from the fortress garrison there . By 27 February , they were joined by la Peña 's Spanish troops , who had left Cádiz three days after Graham and , despite encountering similar weather difficulties , had succeeded in landing at Tarifa .

To further strengthen the Allied ranks , a force of Spanish irregulars under General Antonio Begines de los Ríos had been ordered to come down from the Ronda mountains by 23 February and join the main Anglo @-@ Portuguese and Spanish force . Unaware of the delays in sailing , Begines had advanced as far as Medina @-@ Sidonia in search of the Allied army ; unsupported , and embroiled in skirmishes with Victor 's right flank , he returned to the mountains . General Cassagne , Victor 's flank commander , informed the Marshal of the developing threat . Victor responded by sending three infantry battalions and a cavalry regiment to reinforce Cassagne , and ordering the fortification of Medina @-@ Sidonia .

Having concentrated , the combined Allied force began marching north towards Medina @-@ Sidonia on 28 February , and la Peña now ordered Beguines 's irregulars to join them at Casas Viejas . Once there , however , Beguines 's scouts reported that Medina @-@ Sidonia was held more strongly than had been anticipated . Rather than engaging the French and forcing Victor to weaken his siege by committing more of his troops to the town 's defence , la Peña decided that the Allied army should march across country and join the road that ran from Tarifa , through Vejer and Chiclana , to Cádiz .

This change of plan , combined with further bad weather and la Peña 's insistence on marching only at night , meant the Allied force was now two days behind schedule . La Peña sent a message to Cádiz informing Zayas of the delay , but the dispatch was not received and on 3 March , Zayas launched his sally as arranged . A pontoon bridge was floated across the Santi Petri creek and a battalion sent across to establish a bridgehead prior to the arrival of the main force . Victor could not allow the Cádiz garrison , which still numbered about 13 @,@ 000 men , to make a sortie against his lines while he was threatened from outside , so on the night of 3 ? 4 March he sent six companies of voltigeurs to storm the bridgehead entrenchments and prevent a breakout . Zayas 's battalion was ejected from its positions , with 300 Spanish casualties , and Zayas was forced to float the pontoon bridge back to the island for future use .

Marshal Victor had , by now , received intelligence from a squadron of dragoons that had been driven out of Vejer , informing him of the strong Anglo @-@ Portuguese and Spanish force making its way up the western road from Tarifa . In conjunction with the aggressive action of the Cádiz garrison , this led him to conclude that the approaching troops were heading for Cádiz ; their line of march was therefore predictable , so he prepared a trap . General Eugène @-@ Casimir Villatte 's division was sent to block the neck of the peninsula on which the western road ran , preventing access to the Santi Petri creek and the Isla de León . Two other divisions , under the commands of Generals François Amable Ruffin and Jean François Leval , were ordered to conceal themselves in the thick Chiclana forest in position to attack the flank of the Allies as they engaged Villatte 's division .

After another night march , on 5 March the Allies reached a hill to the south east of Barrosa , the Cerro del Puerco (also referred to as the Barrosa Ridge) . Scouts reported the presence of Villatte 's force , and la Peña ordered his vanguard division to advance . With the aid of a fresh sortie of Zayas 's troops from Cádiz , and reinforced by a brigade of the Prince of Anglona 's division , the Spanish drove Villatte 's force across the Almanza Creek . La Peña refused his vanguard permission to pursue the retreating French , who were consequently able to regroup on the far side of the creek . Graham 's Anglo @-@ Portuguese division had remained behind on the Cerro del Puerco to defend the rear and right flank of la Peña 's main force .

= = Battle = =

Having opened up the route to Cádiz , la Peña instructed Graham to move his troops forward to Bermeja . However , on Graham 's strenuous objections to vacating a position that would result in both an exposed flank and rear , a force of five Spanish battalions and Browne 's battalion was left to hold the Barrosa Ridge . In addition , three Spanish and two King 's German Legion (KGL) squadrons of cavalry , under the command of Colonel Samuel Whittingham , were sent to flank this rearguard force on the coast track . Graham 's division then moved north as ordered ? instead of descending from the heights on the coast road , they followed a path through a pine wood to the west of the ridge . This route was shorter and more practical for artillery , but the trees restricted visibility in all directions , meaning that they were effectively marching blind .

= = = French attack = = =

Victor was disappointed that Villatte had failed to block the Cádiz road for longer , but he was still confident that his main force could drive the Allies into the sea . He could see that the bulk of the Spanish troops had taken station opposite Villatte and , on hearing reports that Barrosa Ridge was deserted , realised that here was an opportunity to take this commanding position . Ruffin was ordered to occupy the heights while Leval struck at Graham 's troops in the woods , and three squadrons of dragoons were sent around the Cerro to take the coastal track .

Victor 's plan rapidly developed momentum . Ruffin 's advance sufficed to send the five rearguard Spanish battalions running , leaving only Browne 's battalion defending the ridge and , confronted by the French dragoons , Whittingham 's cavalry decided to retire . Whittingham lent a single squadron of KGL hussars to Browne to cover his retreat ; Browne initially positioned his battalion in the ruins of a chapel at the summit but , seeing Whittingham 's retreat and spotting six French battalions advancing on his position , he had little choice but to give way and seek Graham 's force in the woods . Barrosa Ridge fell unopposed as Victor had intended , and Ruffin emplaced a battery of artillery on the heights .

= = = Graham 's response = = =

Meanwhile , midway through his march to join la Peña 's Spaniards , Graham received news from Spanish guerrilleros that French soldiers had emerged from the Chiclana forest . Riding to the rear of his marching columns , he witnessed the Spanish battalions retreating from the ridge , Ruffin 's division climbing its slopes , and Leval 's division approaching from the east . Realizing that the Allied force was in danger of being swamped , Graham disregarded his orders and turned his division to deal with the threats to his flank and rear . He ordered General Dilkes 's brigade to retake the ridge while Colonel Wheatley 's brigade was sent to see off Leval 's force to the east .

Because of the time it took to deploy a full brigade into battle formation , Graham knew he needed to delay the French . He therefore ordered Browne , who had rejoined the division , to turn his single " Flankers " battalion of 536 men around and advance up the slope of the Barrosa Ridge against the 4 @, @ 000 men and artillery of Ruffin 's division . Colonel Barnard , who led the light battalion of Wheatley 's brigade , and Colonel Bushe , leading two light companies of Portuguese skirmishers , were ordered to attack through the woods to hold up Leval 's advance .

= = = Barrosa Ridge = = =

Advancing up the ridge they had just abandoned , Browne 's battalion came under intense fire from Ruffin 's emplaced infantry and artillery . Within a few salvos , half the battalion was gone and , unable to continue , Browne 's men scattered amongst the cover provided by the slope and returned fire . Despite his success , Ruffin could not descend the hill to brush away the remnants of Browne 's battalion , as Dilkes 's brigade had by now emerged from the wood and was forming up at the base of the slope .

Dilkes , instead of following Browne 's route up the slope , advanced to the right where there was more cover and ground not visible to the French . As a result , the French artillery could not be

brought to bear , and Dilkes 's brigade managed to get near the top of the ridge without suffering serious loss . By this time , though , its formation had become disorganised , so Ruffin deployed four battalion columns in an attempt to sweep both Dilkes and the remaining " Flankers " back down the slope . Contrary to French expectations , the crude British line stopped the attacking columns in their tracks , and the two forces exchanged fire . Marshal Victor , by then himself on the crest of the ridge , brought up his reserve in two battalion columns of grenadiers . These columns were , as with the previous four , subjected to intense musket fire and were brought to a halt just metres from the British line . The first four columns had started to give ground , so Victor tried to disengage his reserves and bring them to their support . However , as the two grenadier columns attempted to move off from their stalled positions , they came under additional fire from the remnants of Browne 's battalion , which had renewed its own advance . Prevented from rallying , the entire French force broke and fled to the valley below .

= = = Leval 's advance = = =

While Dilkes was moving on Ruffin 's position on Barrosa Ridge , Barnard and the light companies advanced through the woods towards Leval 's division . Unaware of the impending British assault , the French had taken no precautions and were advancing in two columns of march , with no forward line of voltigeurs . The unexpected appearance of British skirmishers caused such confusion that some French regiments , thinking there were cavalry present , formed square . These were prime targets for shrapnel rounds fired by the ten cannon under Major Duncan which , having made rapid progress through the woods , arrived in time to support the skirmish line . As the situation became clearer , the French organised themselves into their customary attacking formation ? the ' column of divisions ' ? all the time under fire from Barnard 's light companies and Duncan 's artillery . Finally , with the French now in their fighting columns and beginning their advance , Barnard was forced to draw back . Leval 's men then encountered Bushe 's companies of the 20th Portuguese , who supported the light battalion 's retreat and kept the French engaged until Wheatley 's brigade had formed up in line on the edge of the woods . The retreating light companies joined Wheatley 's troops ; Leval 's division of 3 @, @ 800 men was now marching on an Anglo @-@ Portuguese line of 1 @, @ 400 men supported by cannon .

Although they had the advantage in numbers , the French were under the impression that they were facing a superior force . Having been mauled by Barnard 's and Bushe 's light companies , and now facing the rolling volleys of the main British line , the French needed time to form from column into line themselves . However , Wheatley attacked as soon as the light companies cleared the field , and only one of Leval 's battalions was able to even partially redeploy . The first French column Wheatley engaged broke after a single British volley . The 8th Ligne , part of this column , suffered about 50 percent casualties and lost its eagle . The capture of the eagle ? the first to be won in battle by British forces in the Peninsular wars ? cost Ensign Keogh of the 87th his life and was finally secured by Sergeant Patrick Masterson (or Masterman , depending on source) . As Wheatley 's brigade moved forward , it encountered the only French battalion , from the 54th Ligne , that had begun to form line . It took three charges to break this battalion , which eventually fled towards the right where it encountered the remainder of Leval 's fleeing division .

= = = French retreat = = =

Ruffin 's and Leval 's divisions fled towards the Laguna del Puerco , where Victor succeeded in halting their disorganised rout . The Marshal deployed two or three relatively unscathed battalions to cover the reorganisation of his forces and secure their retreat , but Graham had also managed to call his exhausted men to order and he brought them , with Duncan 's artillery , against Victor 's new position . Morale in the re @-@ formed French ranks was fragile ; when a squadron of KGL hussars rounded the Cerro and drove a squadron of French dragoons onto their infantry , the shock was too much to bear for the demoralised soldiers , who retreated in a sudden rush .

Throughout the battle , la Peña steadfastly refused to support his Anglo @-@ Portuguese allies .

He learnt of the French advance at about the same time as Graham , and decided to entrench his full force on the isthmus defending the approach to the Isla de León . Learning of Graham 's decision to engage the two French divisions , the Spanish commander was convinced that the French would win the day and so stayed in place ; Zayas repeatedly asked for leave to go to Graham 's support , but la Peña denied permission each time . On hearing that the British had prevailed , la Peña further declined to pursue the retreating French , again over @-@ riding the continued protestations of Zayas .

= = Consequences = =

Furious at la Peña , the following morning Graham collected his wounded , gathered trophies from the field and marched into Cádiz ; snubbed , la Peña would later accuse Graham of losing the campaign for the Allies . It is almost certain that , had the Allies pushed the French positions either immediately after the battle or on the morning of 6 March , the siege would have been broken . Even though Victor had managed to rally his troops at Chiclana , panic was rife in the French lines . Fully expecting a renewed offensive , Victor had made plans to stall any Allied advance just long enough to blow up most of the besieging forts and to allow I Corps to retreat to Seville . Such was the French discomposure that , despite the Allied inactivity , one battery was destroyed without any signal being given .

La Peña had determined not to heed plans from Graham and Admiral Keats to make a cautious advance against the French at Chiclana , and he even refused to send out cavalry scouts to find out what Victor was doing . After remaining entrenched at Bermeja during 5 ? 6 March , the Spanish army crossed to the Isla de León the following day , leaving only Beguines 's irregulars on the mainland . This force did manage to briefly secure Medina @-@ Sidonia , but then returned to the Ronda mountains . By 8 March , just three days after the battle , Victor had reoccupied even the evacuated southern section of his lines and the siege was back in place . It would remain so for another eighteen months , until finally being abandoned on 24 August 1812 , when Soult ordered a general French retreat following the Allied victory at Salamanca .

Despite the conduct of their commanding general , both the Spanish success at Almanza Creek and Graham 's actions at Barrosa Ridge gave a much needed boost to Spanish morale . La Peña was subsequently arraigned for court @-@ martial , mainly for his refusal to pursue the retreating French , where he was acquitted but relieved of command . At a time when Anglo @-@ Spanish relations were already strained , Graham 's criticism of his Spanish allies meant that it was no longer politic for him to remain in Cádiz , so he was transferred to Wellington 's main army .

Both tactically and in terms of the casualties inflicted , the battle was a British victory . Graham 's troops had beaten a French force approaching twice their number despite having marched through the previous night and part of that day . The British lost approximately 1 @, 240 men , including Portuguese and German contingents under Graham 's command , while Victor lost around 2 @, 380 . The Spanish suffered 300 ? 400 casualties . Strategically , however , the failure of the Allies to follow up their victory allowed Victor to reoccupy his siege lines ; Cádiz was not relieved and the campaign effectively failed to achieve anything . Victor even claimed the battle as a French victory , since the positions of the opposing sides remained unchanged following the action .

= = Legacy = =

In November 1811 , the British Prince Regent commanded that a medal be struck to commemorate the " brilliant Victory obtained over the Enemy " ; this was awarded to the senior British officers present at the battle .

Four Royal Navy ships have taken their names from the battle , as has the Sea Cadet Corps Unit , TS Barrosa .

A young officer in the 4th Dragoons , Lieutenant William Light who later served on Graham 's staff and was a great admirer of the general , subsequently became the Surveyor General of South Australia in the 1830s . Light decided to name one of the valleys in the new colony Barossa Valley (

now a famous wine making region) in memory of the victory , albeit misspelled due to a clerical error . It is often incorrectly stated that Light fought at the Battle of Barrosa but he was actually hundreds of miles to the north , his diary of 6 March 1811 recording he was with Wellington 's cavalry travelling through Santarem to Pernes .

Unofficially , the training area at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst is also known as Barossa .

= = In fiction = =

Cornwell , Bernard , Sharpe 's Fury : Richard Sharpe and the Battle of Barrosa , March 1811 , HarperCollins , 2006 , ISBN 978 0 06 053048 8 .