



Cacabelos

How a legend was forged

The legend

The precise moment that a legend comes into being is rarely known, but in the case of the famous 95th Rifles, we can in fact say that its legend began in a small Spanish village, Cacabelos, in the heart of Leon.

The feats of the 95th riflemen are told in many sources, both in their own memories, by British historians and in fiction, with the famous character created by Bernard Cromwell: Richard Sharpe and his faithful sergeant Harper.

But it is not the British alone who have their legends. The French also have their legendary heroes, and in this



case, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, author and father of Brigadier Gerard (of the 3rd Hussars of Conflans), should certainly have placed his hero in Cacabelos, since the 3rd Hussars took part in this action. But no, neither Cromwell nor Doyle placed their heroes in Cacabelos. So allow us to do so, because if they had existed, they would certainly have been there.

Moore's retreat towards Corunna

In early January 1809, the British relief expedition led by Lieutenant General Sir John Moore, although it had almost reached the outskirts of Madrid, had already failed. Its troops were in full retreat, the Emperor Napoleon in person had entered the peninsula and had imposed order on the rebellion and on the interference of the always hated British ... or so he believed, since the Spanish ulcer (as Napoleon himself called it) had only just begun.



Moore's expedition initially consisted of the best of the British army, but its aim of evicting the intruder king from Madrid was thwarted by the lack of coordination with the Spanish, caused by the disintegration of the Spanish regular army and the political struggles among the recently created Defence Juntas.

Napoleón had commissioned Mariscal Soult with the destruction of the British expeditionary force and, following his orders, in early January Soult's vanguard had already caught up with Moore's rearguard.

Specifically, it was the cavalry brigade of Mariscal Ney's corps that had caught up with Moore's rearguard. This brigade was commanded by General Colbert, one of the most intrepid and promising generals of the French cavalry, like his counterpart, Lefevbre-Desnouettes, who had been captured by the English cavalry shortly before (on December 29, 1808, in the action at Benavente, but that's another story). Colbert had all the virtues of the French cavalry generals: he was ardent, daring and rather imprudent, but he won victories by leading the most spectacular cavalry charges.

Standing against Colbert was Lord Paget, Count of Uxbridge, perhaps one of the best cavalry generals that the English army has ever had. Unlike his French counterpart, he was more reflexive and a thorough analyst of the terrain, to use it in his favour. Sadly, his command in the peninsula was cut short because of a direct personal clash with Wellington: Paget had eloped with his sister-in-law (the wife of Wellington's older brother). This circumstance meant they were incompatible for joint action in the peninsula.





The troops face to face, the morning of January 3rd

We are situated in the district of Bierzo on January 3 after a heavy snowfall. The bulk of Moore's troops had arrived at Villafranca del Bierzo while the rearguard remained in Cacabelos and had not crossed the bridge over the river Cúa on the road leading to Villafranca.

The British officers had been obliged to take disciplinary action against their troops who had been guilty of pillaging against the Spanish.

The British troops in Cacabelos consisted of the 15th Hussars (King's Hussars), the 1st battalion of the 28th Infantry Regiment (North Gloucestershire), the 2nd battalion of the 52nd Light Infantry (Oxfordshire Light Infantry), 3 companies of the 1st Battalion of the 95th Rifles and a battery of the Royal Horse Artillery.

Early that morning, Lord Paget had gathered his troops at the north of Cacabelos, forming a "hollow square", in the centre of which was the "triangle", a wooden structure to which unruly soldiers were bound before receiving punishment. Paget was enraged at his troops' behaviour. He had also sent some of the riflemen and the hussars towards the east to reconnoiter the terrain and relieve the frozen outposts.

It can also be said that most of the English troops, because of their excesses the day before and the bitter cold, had apparently passed a sleepless night - what is known in Spanish as a "night in Toledo".

While this was going on in Cacabelos, Colbert, commanding the 15th chasseurs on horseback and the 3rd hussars, a total of about 500 men, had advanced to the vanguard of Merlé's infantry division formed by the 4em

légere and the 19eme dragoons of La Houssaye's cavalry division which was close behind them.

The outposts of the British hussars met up with the French advance and immediately sent several reports to Lord Paget informing him that the enemy was close; he was in such a rage that he paid no attention, until General Slade himself, the commander of the hussars, arrived to report in person that the French were about to arrive. Paget, still angry, answered that "if so, why was he doing the work that could be done by any messenger, instead of commanding his troops?". Nevertheless, Paget decided to lift the square and fall back, first making his troops promise that they would behave correctly in future. They drew back across the bridge towards the hills to the west of Cacabelos.

Meanwhile, Colbert's vanguard harrassed the British hussars to such an extent that they were forced to gallop off towards the bridge. There was a moment of great confusion in which they almost crushed the men of the 95th rifles who were also falling back. In this skirmish, the French captured 48 riflemen. The light company of the 28th took up positions on the banks of the river Cúa beside the bridge to cover their countrymen's retreat.

Colbert attacks, Thomas Plunket fires

In the best tradition of the French cavalry, seeing that the British were in frank disarray, Colbert decided to charge over the bridge against the enemy troops. The west side of the bridge was planted with vines, and the riflemen took up positions among them, the 52nd fell back to the rearguard and further behind the artillery



battery speedily deployed itself and began to provide covering FIRE with bullets. The 28th turned towards the ford to the north of the Cúa.

According to the different sources, Colbert was riding a white horse and was clearly visible at the front of the charge together with his ADCs. Reaching the level of the church of las Angustias, he received a direct impact in the head and fell dead. His ADC Latour Maubourg (son of the famous cavalry general) turned back to assist his general and also received a mortal wound. What had happened? Rifleman Thomas Plunket, camouflaged among the vines, was lying on his back 200 m. away, and in a feat of marksmanship had shot down the general and his ADC.

Plunket's shot is now a legend, but was it possible? The fact is that the precision of the Baker rifles makes the accuracy of a shot at that distance quite feasible. It was weapons like the Baker that changed warfare at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Plunket became a hero, and the rifles undeniably demonstrated their efficiency, since a shot like this would have been impossible with an ordinary smoothbore musket.

Battle continues until nightfall

In spite of the loss of their general, the French cavalry continued to harrass the British who were obliged to defend themselves vigorously, holding their positions. At sunset, French reinforcements arrived, the 19th dragoons and the 4th light infantry. The dragoons tried to cross the river before the light infantry had arrived, but the British defence was stubborn and the ford was complicated to cross. At

last, night fell and the English retreated under cover of darkness. It had achieved its aim, the French advance had once again fallen back. From the heights on the west side, Moore arriving from Villafranca had seen the end of the action. The troops continued in retreat towards the sea, but the 95th was now something more than an ordinary unit it was a legend. From then on, they would be known and feared by the French as "les sauterelles", the grasshoppers.

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