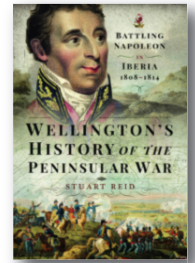


BOOK REVIEW:

Wellington's history of the Peninsular War: battling Napoleon in Iberia 1808 – 1814

by Stuart Reid

*Pen & Sword Military: Barnsley, South Yorkshire; 2019; 301 pp.; ISBN 9781526737632
(hardback); RRP \$75.00; Ursula Davidson Library call number 515 REID 2019*



Wellington's History is a one-volume narrative of Britain's 1808-1814 war against Napoleon in Portugal and Spain (the Peninsular War). Stuart Reid, author of numerous military history publications, has compiled the book from selected memoranda and despatches written by Sir Arthur Wellesley (later Field Marshal, the Duke of Wellington) as the war progressed.

During the Napoleonic Wars in 1807, a French army under Marshal Junot, with the encouragement of Spain, had invaded Portugal. In 1808, when Spain abruptly switched from being an enemy to an ally of Britain, a British expeditionary force led by Wellesley was deployed to the Iberian Peninsula to support Portugal and Spain.

Wellesley would go on to command the British forces in Iberia for seven years. From 1808 to 1811, the Iberian conflict was a stalemate while Britain defended Portugal, rebuilt the Portuguese army and integrated it with the British army. Then, in 1812, Napoleon depleted his forces in Spain to invade Russia. This gave the allies an opportunity to invade Spain with victories on the border at Ciudad Rodrigo and Badajoz followed by an advance to Salamanca and then Madrid. In 1813, Wellesley's capture of Vittoria opened the road to the Pyrenees. The French were driven from the Pyrenees over winter 1813-14 and, while Wellesley was defeating Marshal Soult at the battle of Toulouse in April 1814, Napoleon was deposed in Paris and the war ended.

While he did not write a formal history of the war, at the end of 1808, 1809, 1810 and 1811, Wellesley wrote a memorandum to the British government, detailing the military and political operations of the year. He did not write similar memoranda in 1812, 1813 or 1814, but Reid has drawn on a selection of Wellesley's despatches to the government to round out the story of the campaign.

Wellesley's memoranda and despatches provide an overview of, and contemporaneous commentary on, the war as it unfolded. He describes the manoeuvres and battles he oversaw objectively and gives due credit to those of his subordinates who warranted it, occasionally criticising others who 'let the side down'. Key battles (Vimiero, Oporto, Talavera, Fuentes d'Onoro, Ciudad Rodrigo, Badajoz and Vittoria) are illustrated by contemporary maps, but more maps are needed and it can be difficult to follow Wellesley's text due to the inadequacy of the maps in this volume. In particular, a contemporary map to set the context at the strategic level is badly needed.

In reporting to the government on specific battles, Wellesley pitches his text at the grand tactical level

describing how the action unfolded. At times, he also gives the reasons for key decisions he may have taken. He then goes on to 'mention-in-despatches' officers from lieutenant-general down to major, and occasionally captain, from the staff, infantry, artillery, engineers, and the cavalry, who performed acts of gallantry and distinguished service. He usually concludes the description of the battle with a tabulation of the British and Portuguese casualties and sometimes a brief mention of the French casualties including major weapons captured. I was particularly struck by the high casualties among the British general officers and colonels, many leading their men from the front. Sometimes, Wellesley will conclude a despatch at the military strategic (operational) level, foreshadowing manoeuvres he is contemplating.

While Stuart Reid has reproduced Wellesley's annual summaries of operations from 1808 to 1811, for 1812 - 1814, Reid has reproduced Wellesley's despatch to the government for each of five major battles during this period – the storm of Ciudad Rodrigo, January 1812; the storm of Badajoz, April 1812; the battle of Salamanca, July 1812; the battle of Vittoria, June 1813; and the battle of Toulouse, April 1814. Reid inserts a helpful linking paragraph before each despatch.

More than half the book is devoted to two appendices: a brief biography of each British officer mentioned in Wellington's despatches; and an annotated order of battle of Wellington's armies from 1808 to 1814. More serious researchers will find the book more than worthwhile for these two compilations.

The book contains 20 contemporary plates in colour; and, as previously mentioned, eight maps. These are inadequate and the serious reader also will need an external source of contemporary maps so as to gain a proper understanding of the text. Also, unfortunately, the copy editing is quite deficient in places – not what one would expect of a volume of this nature.

This book goes some way towards providing a history of the campaign from Wellesley's perspective. Not only was he the overall British commander, he is still regarded by many military historians as Britain's greatest general. This book, though, is not recommended for the general reader. It would appeal mainly to military historians of the Napoleonic era, but they may prefer to use Wellington's original despatches of which we have a complete set in the Ursula Davidson Library.

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