

Surveying the enemy, and seeing that few battalions were under arms, and that Ney was evidently expecting no fighting—his cavalry indeed had given him no proper warning of the approach of the Allies—Wellington resolved to strike at once, though his nearest reserve, the 6th Division, was still some way off. Picton was told to attack the French left, the Light Division their right. The first blow was very effective and partook of the nature of a surprise, for the enemy was caught unprepared. Some companies of the 95th Rifles, penetrating down a hollow road, arrived almost unopposed in the village of Foz, quite close to the bridge, while the rest of the Light Division was holding Marchand's troops engaged in a frontal fight, and Picton was making good way against the brigade belonging to Mermet, which formed the French left. The noise of close combat breaking out almost in their rear, at a spot which seemed to indicate that the bridge was in danger, and their retreat cut off, caused a panic in the French right-centre, and the 39th regiment broke its ranks and hurried towards the bridge, where it met and became jammed against Lamotte's cavalry, who were hastily returning to take up the position from which they had unwisely retired an hour or two before. Finding the passage impossible, the fugitives turned to a deep ford a little down stream and plunged into it, where many were drowned and the regimental eagle was lost¹, while their colonel was taken prisoner. Ney saved the situation, which had arisen through his own disobedience to Masséna's orders, by charging, with the third battalion of the 69th regiment² the rifle companies which had got into Foz do Arouce and were threatening the bridge. They were driven back on to their support, the 52nd regiment, and the passage having been cleared by the Marshal's exertions, the troops to the left and right crossed it in some disorder, and took refuge on the opposite bank. They were shelled during

¹ It was found in the river at low water and sent to London. The loss is mentioned in George Simmon's diary under March 16. Wellington sent it home in July. (*Dispatches*, viii. p. 78.)

² So both Masséna's dispatch, and Frivion, who was present with the brigade of which the 69th formed part. Marbot is wrong in saying that it was the 27th. All the narratives on the French side are very confused, and differ widely.

their defile, not only by Ross's and Bull's horse artillery batteries, but by some guns belonging to their own 8th Corps, which in the deepening twilight failed to distinguish between pursuers and pursued. By the time that night had fully set in, the French rearguard was all over the river, and the bridge was blown up. If the attack had been delivered an hour earlier, it is probable that Ney would have suffered losses far greater than he actually endured—perhaps 250¹ men killed, wounded, drowned, or taken—for the British divisions were prevented by the failing light from acting as effectively as they otherwise might against the masses hastily recrossing the bridge. Wellington's loss was trifling—4 officers and 67 men, nearly a third of them in the rifle companies which had broken the French centre for a moment, and had then been driven back by Ney. The small remainder of the baggage of Marchand and Mermet was captured on this occasion, including some biscuit, which proved most grateful to the Light Division, as it had, like the rest of the British army, outmarched its transport.

It may not be out of place to note that the combat of Foz do Arouce bore a singular resemblance to Craufurd's combat on the Coa of July 24, 1810. In each case a rearguard was tempted to stay too long beyond an unfordable river and a narrow bridge, by the defensible nature of the position in which it found itself, and nearly suffered a complete disaster. The only difference was that Ney had at least double as strong a force as Craufurd, and had also a whole army in line beyond the river to support him, while the British general had no reserves near. In each case the endangered detachment got away by dint of hard fighting, with appreciable but by no means crushing losses. It is curious that the tables were exactly turned between pursuer and pursued in these two fights—in 1810 it was Ney who by a sudden assault hustled the Light Division over the Coa. In 1811 the Light Division was at the head of the striking force which thrust Ney over the Ceira. If Craufurd had been in command instead of the incapable Erskine, there can be little doubt that the matter would have been pushed to a more decisive conclusion, despite of the dusk.