

Bicentennial Re-enactment of the Battle of La Albuera

By Ronald Brighthouse



On the weekend of the 6th, 7th and 8th May 2011 groups from Spain, France, UK, Portugal, Gibraltar, Ireland, Belgium, Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, Malta, Poland, Ukraine, Canada and Argentina came together in the village of La Albuera, near Badajoz in Spain to re-enact the famous battle which took place in 1811 and was described as the bloodiest contest of the Peninsular War.

The village of La Albuera normally has about 1.500 inhabitants, but on this weekend it received an influx of 1800 re-enactors and over 12.000 visitors each day, who came to experience the village fête and watch the battle re-enactment.

The re-enactment of the battle in Albuera began in 2001 when a group of British and Spanish re-enactors staged a skirmish in the village. I was one of those who introduced this hobby to the villagers of La Albuera. The people were so taken by the idea that by the next year they had formed themselves into regiments so they could take part in the re-enactment of their battle. Around 500 villagers are part of British, French, Polish, Spanish and Portuguese regiments. The Mayor, Manuel Díaz González, has worked tirelessly for many years looking forward to the bicentennial, and at his request, for the last 9 year I have had the honour of playing the role of Marshal Beresford. The annual commemoration has become the village fête, the whole place adopts a carnival atmosphere,

there are flags in the streets, balconies decorated with Manila Shawls, most people dress in period clothing, there are market stalls and donkey rides for children.

The serious part of the bicentennial commemorations began with the Parade through town by the re-enactors, which took place on Saturday in the early afternoon. The long lines of troops marching past the dais where the Mayor reviewed them added colour and spectacle and attracted lots of attention from the crowds. In the early evening, the battle was re-enacted on the original ground occupied by the Portuguese Reserves prior to entering the fray in the village in 1811. The Armies deployed on the field, there were 1.800 re-enactors, 120 horses and 12 artillery pieces. On the left of the Allied line, a mock up of the village of Albuera had been built and the battle line drawn up of Portuguese, Kings German Legion, and British infantry were there together with the Allied Cavalry brigade. Followed by the long lines of Spanish troops under General Castaños. The main artillery battery was in the centre, and to the right, General Blake's Spanish brigades. Slightly behind them the British Brigades of General Houghton. Marshal Beresford, as overall Allied commander was seen riding all along the Allied lines. Opposite them, Marshal Soult deployed his brigades, sending one to attack the village with artillery and cavalry support. The battle raged from then on, with the movements of troops following closely the historical facts, re-enacting particular events such as the French reinforcing the attackers in the village and launching their outflanking move on the Allied right. The Spanish troops of Zayas and Lardizabal changing positions between French attacks; the British support to these brigades, advancing in line when they were surprised by the French Cavalry; the attack of the Polish Lancers on Colbourne's brigade; Beresford attacked by a lancer and punching him; the advance of the Fusilier brigade to assist the remnants of the line, as described by Napier, firing and advancing, an unstoppable force continually firing at the French; the village almost captured by the French and defended valiantly by Portuguese and KGL; the final French assault on the right of the allied line, and the multitude of casualties all over the field.



The battle ended with both sides holding their positions and facing each other, and as the firing died down, a bagpipe could be heard playing and then the Albuera Anthem was played over the loudspeakers to signal the official end of the battle. The public enjoyed it very much as the commentator was able to explain what was going on at each stage of the battle and also explained details of the tactics and weapons of the period.

The period encampment was the largest one ever assembled in Spain, and attracted lots of visitors. Unfortunately there was an accident on the Saturday and a fire destroyed 10 tents belonging to fellow re-enactors from Poland. In a show of true solidarity with fellow re-enactors, the rest made a collection to help them.

Representatives of all the re-enactment groups present took part in a commemoration at the old monument in the main square, a wreath was laid and various national anthems played.



For British re-enactors Albuera is a special place, so on Sunday morning, I led a column to the garden by the old bridge where there is a monument to the British regiments that fought on that famous field, there we held our own commemoration. We formed up around the monolith in the garden, on all four sides, and placed a wreath on the monument, presented arms and a bugler played the Last Post. Then our Army Chaplain, the Rev. Stephen Fletcher, read the prayer for the fallen from an 1808 prayer book. A volley was then fired and the ceremony was concluded.

The battle was repeated on the Sunday evening, following the same format as the day before.

The village of La Albuera commemorate their battle every year, and we have an open invitation to return there every year to re-fight the battle all over again.

Ronald Brighthouse

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Some links to pictures of La Albuera

<http://zenitramaral.blogspot.com/2011/05/actos-conmemorativos-de-la-batalla-de.html>

<http://www.hoy.es/multimedia/fotos/ultimos/76804-2000-personas-recreacion-batalla-albuera-0.html>

<http://www.hoy.es/v/20110508/regional/foto-enfoque2-personas-participan-20110508.html>