

Before we meet again at next year's Remembrance Parade, we shall have marked the 200th anniversary of the Battle of Albuera. – the bloodiest battle of the Peninsular war. It was one of the most glorious triumphs in the history of the Fusiliers. The British Commander was William Carr Beresford who, unfortunately, was not a good tactician. At Albuera he was paralysed by indecision and he would have lost the battle had it not been for the energy and resourcefulness of Henry Hardinge and the moral courage of Lowry Cole.

One of the most controversial of Beresford's decisions was to replace the commander of the cavalry, Robert Long, when he was in the very act of forming the troops. And John Mills of the Coldstream Guards surveyed the battlefield the following year and said: *Beresford had the choice of two positions 200 yards distant from each other. He chose the worse and lost his men taking up the other after he had perceived his error.*

The Battle of Albuera began at 8am on 16th May under gathering storm clouds. The enemy, under their commander Nicolas-Jean de Dieu Soult advanced audaciously although he had 10,000 fewer men than the Allies. Jac Weller described the French infantry attack as *The most massive single attack of the Peninsular War.*

Among the allied forces were Zaya's four battalions of Spanish troops. Ian Fletcher reported: *To their immense credit Zaya's four battalions stood firm, loaded their muskets and began to return fire. Amazingly, the great French mass halted in its tracks. The terrible killing match of Albuera had begun in earnest.*

The Allies might have won a swift and surprise victory had it not been for the weather. As Fletcher says: *Dark clouds opened up and a torrential storm of rain and hail came lashing down into the faces of the redcoat infantry, rendering their muskets useless and making it almost impossible to see anything more than a short distance. The, out of the blinding rain, large dark shapes came looming straight for them, the ground shaking beneath their pounding weight. For infantrymen formed in line, this was the worst of all nightmares: cavalry.*

It was the most devastating cavalry attack of the whole war. The regimental Colour of the Buffs fell into the hands of the enemy but it was soon recovered by Sergeant William Gough of the 7th Royal Fusiliers following the heroically successful advance of the Fusilier Brigade. The killing match went on for hours with both sides simply firing into each other at ranges between twenty and sixty yards in a duel described by Fortescue, the historian of the British army, as *having but few parallels in the annals of war.*

Now on the slopes of this anonymous Spanish field, in a nightmare battle that was pushing them to the very limits of their endurance, they simply loaded and fired, reloaded and fired,

often blindly into the smoke opposite for as long as their cartridges held out. And when their ammunition pouches were emptied, there were plenty more to be found in those of the dead and wounded who lay in ever-increasing piles all around them.

The move that was to win the Battle of Albuera was not instigated by the hesitant and confused Marshal Beresford but by those two courageous and inspired staff officers: Henry Hardinge and Lowry Cole. These two officers took it upon themselves to act on their own initiative to prevent disaster falling upon the whole army. Cole's division consisted only of Myers' brigade – the 1/7th Royal Fusiliers, the 2/7th and the 1/23rd Royal Welsh Fusiliers.

Marching with the 2/7th Fusiliers was Private John Spencer Cooper who later described the scene:

At the crisis the words 'Fall in Fusiliers!' roused us and we formed line. Six nine-pounders, supported by two or three squadrons of the 4th Dragoons took the right. The Fusilier brigade with some small detachments of the brigade left at Badajoz, stood on the left. The line in this order approached at quick step the steep position of the enemy, under a storm of shot, shell and grape, which came crashing through our ranks

Cole's line picked up the pace and continued south towards the main fight. This was no mere outflanking move but a direct assault upon Soult's 5th Corps. Cole's men simply refused to stop or even pause this attack. The enemy commander Soult said later of the British infantry: *The day was mine but they did not know it and would not run.*

Commanding the 2/7th Fusiliers, was Colonel Edward Blakeney who later recalled the moment when, after having closed to within forty yards of the French, his men opened fire:

From the quantity of smoke I could perceive very little of what went on in my own front. The 1st battalion of the 7th closed with the right column of the French. I moved on and closed with the second. The 23rd took the third. The men behaved most gloriously, never losing their rank, and closing to the centre as casualties occurred. The French faced us at a distance of about thirty or forty paces. During the closest part of the action, I saw their officers endeavouring to deploy their columns, but all to no purpose. For as soon as a third of the company got out, they would immediately run back to be covered by the front of their column.

The advance of the Fusilier brigade at Albuera is one of the great episodes in the Peninsular War. Canister shot from the French canons tore huge gaps in the British line, but the Fusiliers simply stepped over their dead and wounded and closed to the centre. The Fusiliers managed to hear the beating of their drums as the orders were given to advance further. It had become clear to Myers that just to stand still and fight was to invite disaster. The only way to achieve victory was to advance in the teeth of the enemy's fire.

The Battle of Albuera had begun at 8am and by 2pm it had ended. During these six hours, no fewer than 5,916 Allied soldiers had become casualties of which 4,159 were British. Myers' Fusilier brigade had advanced to contact with a strength of 2,015 and finished on the fatal hill with just 970 men. Little wonder that Albuera has been called *The most honourable of all Peninsular blazons on a regimental flag*.

It was a glorious victory. But in what chiefly does glory lie? The truest glory is found in comradeship. A soldier will give his life to save his comrade. That great soldier, General Sir Brian Horrocks puts this better than anyone:

"Many times, at Old Comrades' gatherings, some old soldier has come up to me and said, referring to one of the World Wars, 'They were good times, Sir, weren't they?'

"They were not good times at all. They were horrible times. But what these men remember and now miss was the comradeship and esprit de corps of the old Regiments."

Greater love hath no man than this: that a man lay down his life for his friends. Let us wear our poppies proudly in honour of those who gave their tomorrow so that we might have our today.