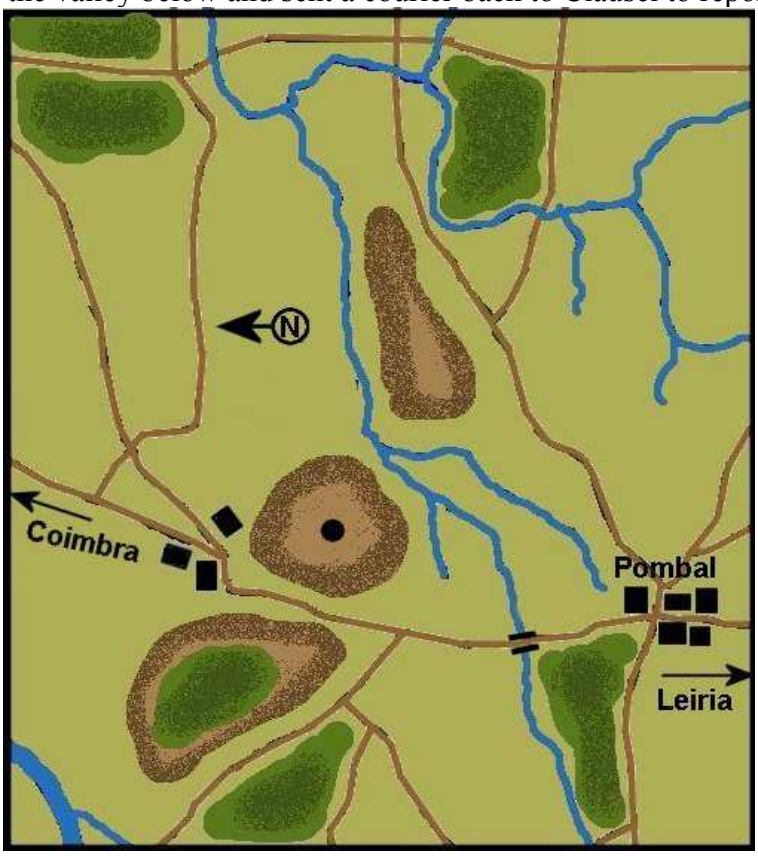
STALLING FOR TIME

Rearguard Action at Pombal, September 1810

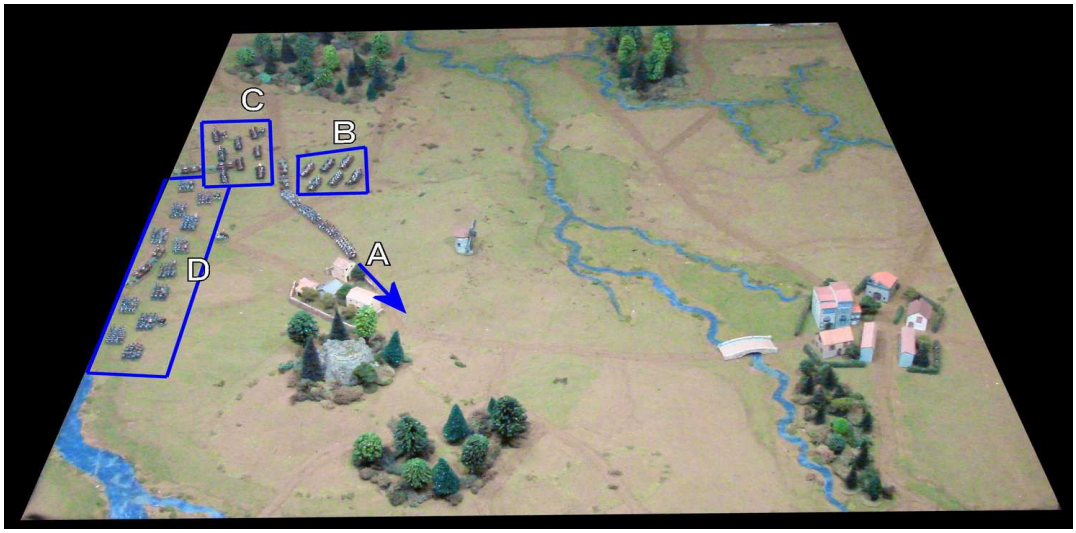
Welcome once again to sunny Portugal! The Gentlemen Wargamers return to the Peninsula, where Wellington's army, having given the French a bit of a bloody nose at Bussaco, are currently engaged in falling back to the lines of Torres Vedras. Their retreat to Leiria and beyond is being covered by the experienced and reliable Light Division of "Black Bob" Craufurd, who finds himself directly in the path of a pursuit by part of Junot's corps. (See the Order of Battle at the end.)

Historically, all that occurred at Pombal was a cavalry skirmish, the bulk of Massena's relatively inexperienced French army being occupied with pillaging Coimbra. We have assumed, for the sake of this fictional encounter, that one of Massena's more veteran divisions (Clausel's, to be precise) had managed to pull itself together and launch a pursuit of the Anglo-Portuguese rearguard a day or two earlier than actually happened.

The action began late in the day with a half-dozen squadrons of light cavalry under Pierre Soult skirmishing with Anson's light dragoons, who were supported by Campbell's independent Portuguese brigade, along a line of hills about a mile in front of Pombal. The latter had been moving south to join Craufurd's Light Division who were encamped in the vicinity of Pombal, in anticipation of continuing their retreat to Leiria the next morning. Unable to make any headway against this force of all arms, Soult settled back into the valley below and sent a courier back to Clausel to report what he had found.



With this intelligence in hand, Clausel made plans to attack the Anglo-Portuguese position at first light. He chose to advance with Godard's brigade (A) in the lead, heading directly for a gap in the hills through which the road to Leiria passed, in order to clarify exactly what forces stood in his way. Godard's left would be covered by cavalry of Soult (B), still in place, and a brigade of dragoons and lancers under Lorcet (C). The very large brigade of Taupin (D) would deploy in support and await events.



Clausel's plan.

Having received the reports that the French were pressing hard upon his rear, Craufurd realized that to continue his withdrawal without first causing some delay would endanger the orderly ensconcement of the main portion of Wellington's army in the fortifications of the Lines. He determined to give some sort of fight, without taking too many casualties, in order to force the French to deploy and waste a day in dislodging him from the vicinity. He ordered Anson and Campbell to hold the line of hills, and made plans for rousing the Light Division in case an attack should be made in the morning.

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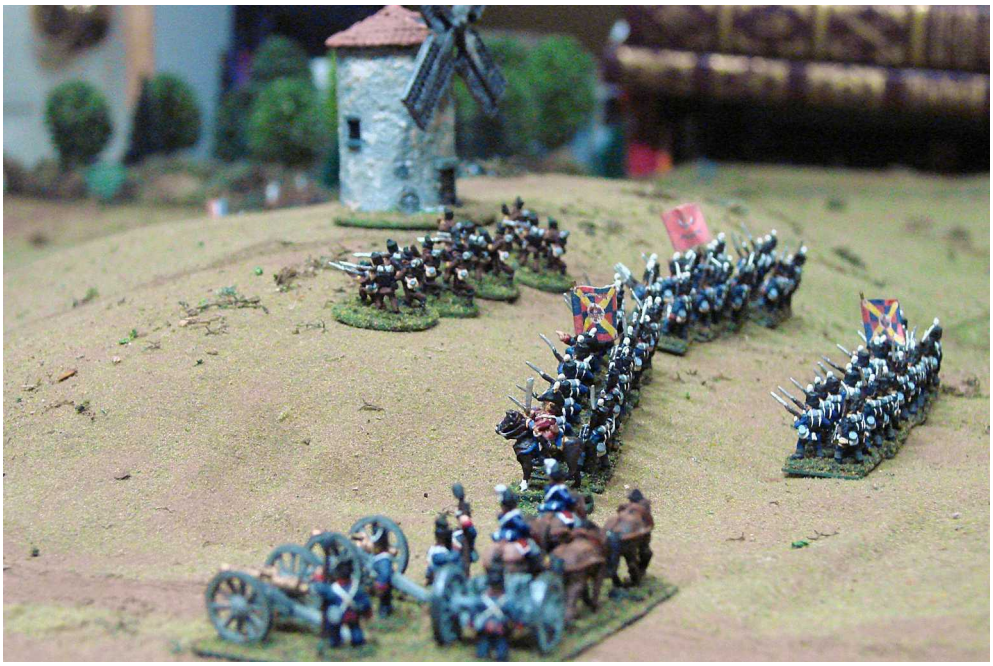
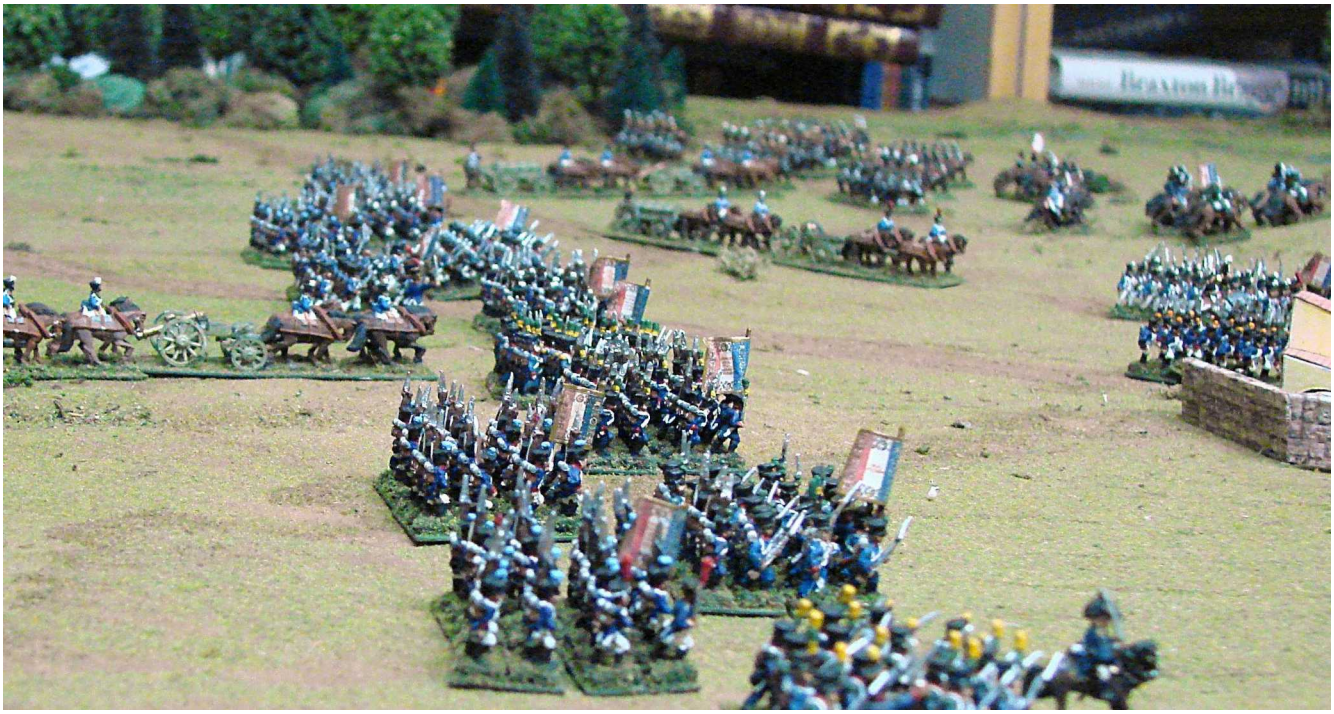
As dawn broke, Craufurd anxiously awaited either a courier from his advanced line informing him from which direction the threat would come, or the sound of artillery betraying the start of the action. As it was, a horseman arrived from Anson, informing him that the head of a column of infantry had been spotted heading for the little village on the Coimbra-Leiria road. At once he put his three commands into motion; Barclay's Portuguese brigade, which had been camped to the West of Pombal, he sent back up the road towards Coimbra to reinforce Campbell. De Grey's heavy cavalry was moved to the center rear of the line of hills, along with Beckwith's veteran British infantry.

Campbell, in the meantime, was observing the advance of Godard and the deployment of Taupin's brigade about a half mile away . . . 16 battalions to his 5 . . . and was overheard to remark, rather stoically, "There's an awful lot of them, aren't there?"



Campbell's brigade, cacadores out front, deployed on the reverse slope.

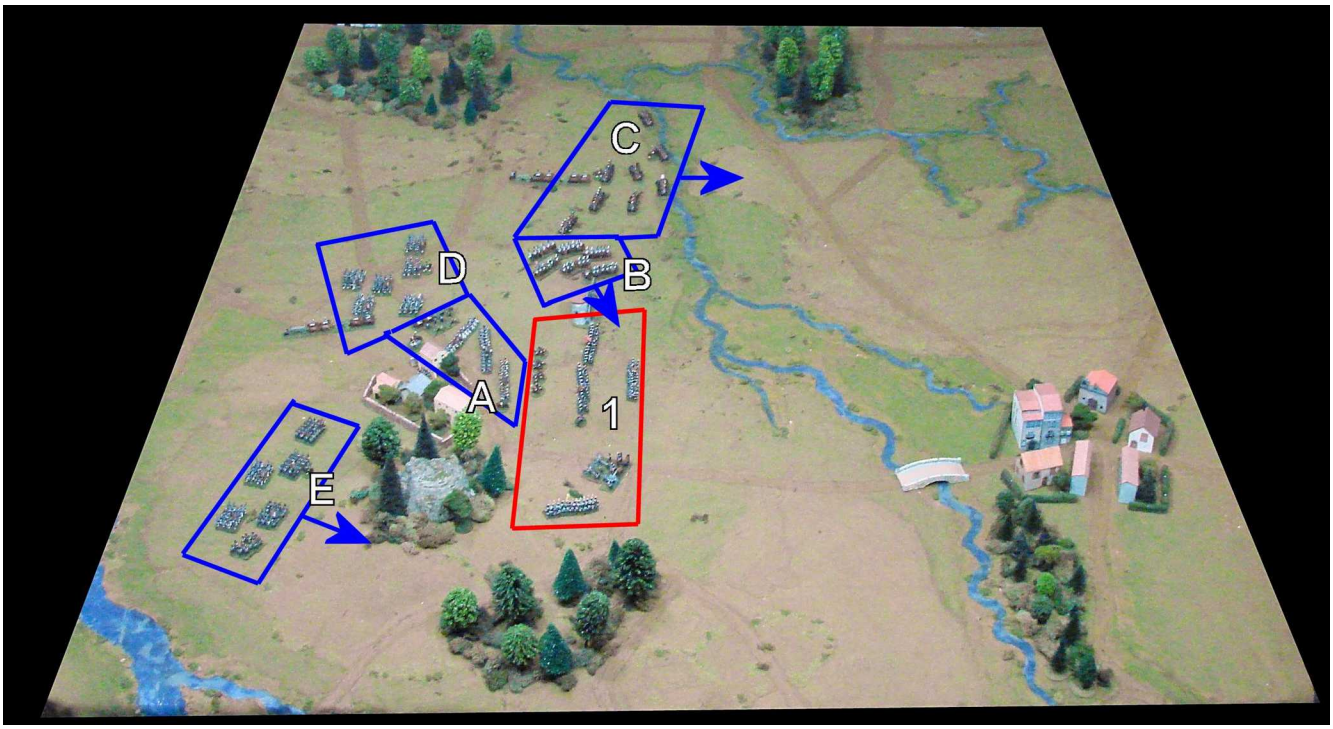


Taupin's brigade deploys in support of the advance. On the right, Godard enters the village and in the distance the French cavalry covers the left flank.

Godard's advance brought him quickly into contact with Campbell, the bulk of whose brigade was deployed on the reverse slope of the hill in the center of the field, with a windmill atop it. Musketry broke out and Campbells battery joined in, signaling the start of the ball. Soult's cavalry, on Godard's left, advanced on an apparently undefended ridge, supported by Lorcet, although expecting at any moment to be confronted with the light dragoons he had faced on the previous evening.

Lorcet's dragoons and lancers scout across the valley.

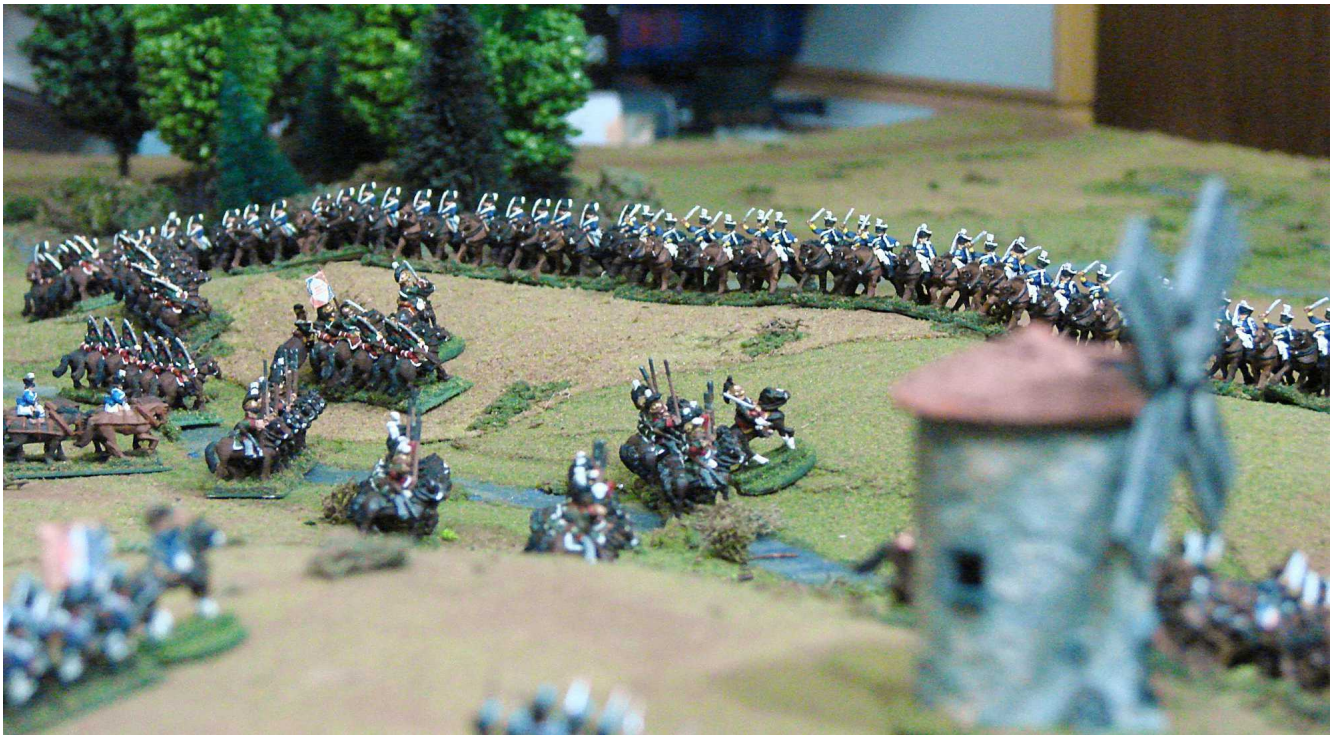
Campbell (1) made an aggressive move up to the ridge and beyond, cacadores in the lead, and placed his battery blocking the Leiria road in the saddle between the hills. His lead brigade having met resistance, Clausel ordered Taupin to split his brigade, sending half (D) up in support of Godard and the other half around to the West (E) to seek a route through the rough terrain there, onto the flank of Campbell's position. Soult's cavalry (B) were unable to resist the undefended Portuguese flank on the windmill hill, and broke off their advance on the ridge, leaving Lorcet (C) to carry on.



Clausel's attack develops.

Campbell's defence of the windmill, as seen from the vicinity of Pombal.

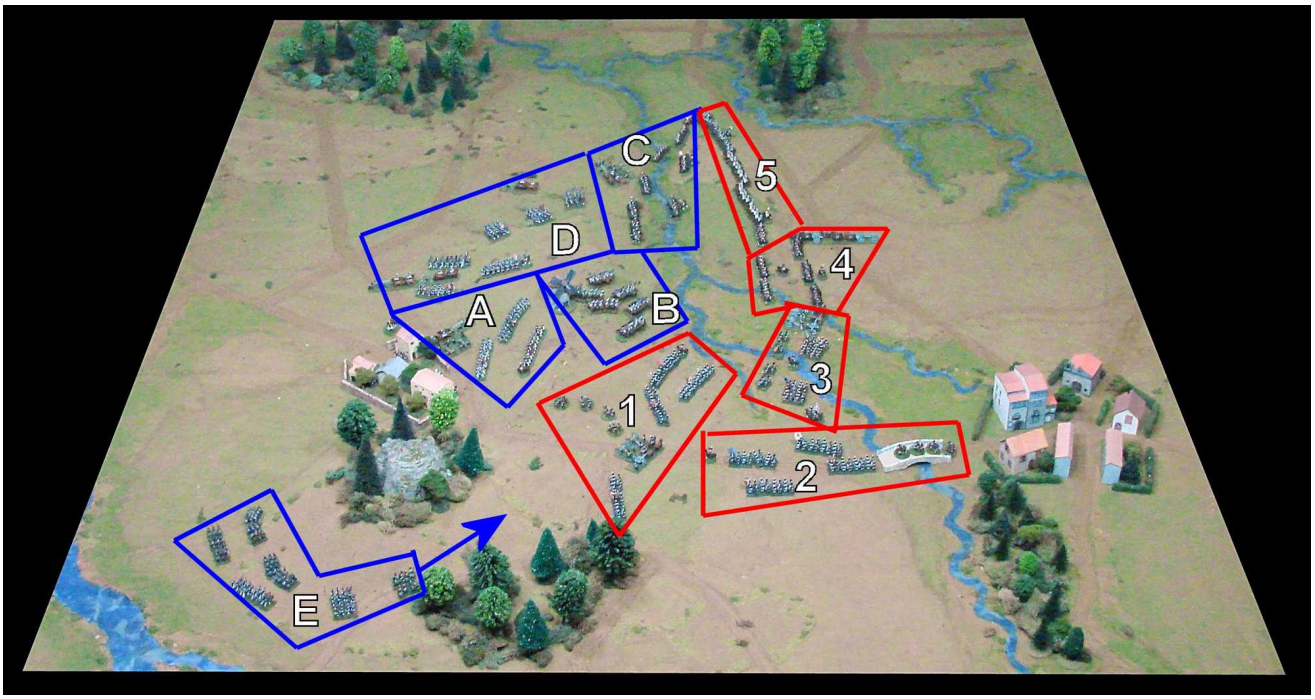
The remainder of the French cavalry moved resolutely up to the ridge, where they were met by the eight squadrons of Anson's light dragoons and were roughly thrown back.



Anson's light dragoons crest the ridge, catching Lorcet somewhat unprepared.

In the meantime, Soult's threat to Campbell's infantry was met by refusing his flank, and the steady Portuguese were able to hold off the impetuous charge of the hussars and chasseurs a cheval, without having to form square, Campbell ignoring the danger to his person and boldly joining the battalion on the right in their defense.

Soult's cavalry ride down on Campbell's flank.

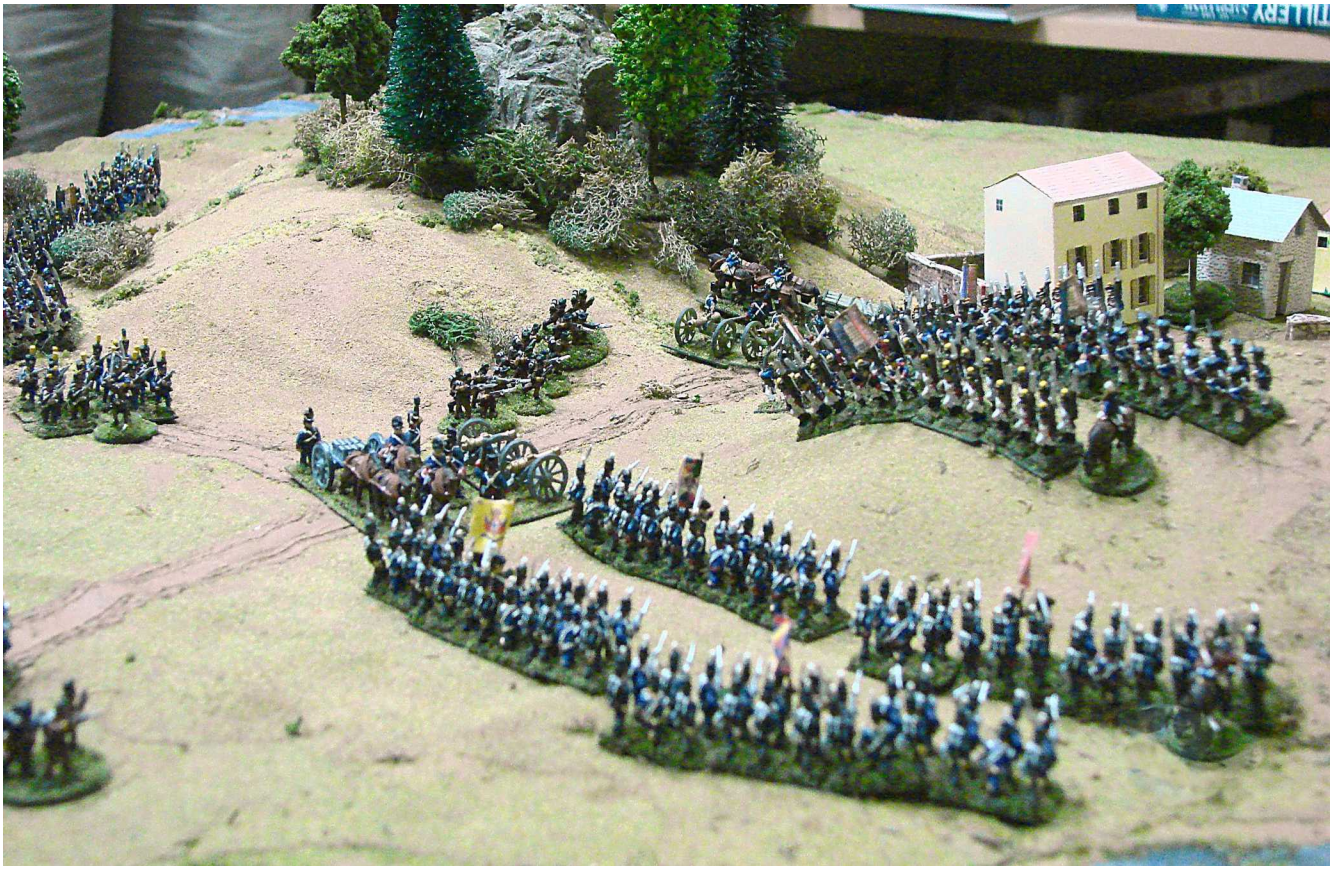


From his position on the hill, Soult (B) could now see the full force of Craufurd's Light Division moving up to support Campbell (1) . . . Barclay (2) on the left, Beckwith (3) in the center, and De Grey's heavies (4) on the right.

De Grey's heavy dragoons, standing in reserve.

Barclay's brigade, moving up from Pombal in support of Campbell.

The weight of Godard's attack was now beginning to take a toll on Campbell, with Soult harassing his right flank and the western half of Taupin's brigade approaching through the rough terrain on his left. Seeing Campbell's increasingly difficult position, Craufurd sends Barclay to the relief of his left flank and De Grey to his right.

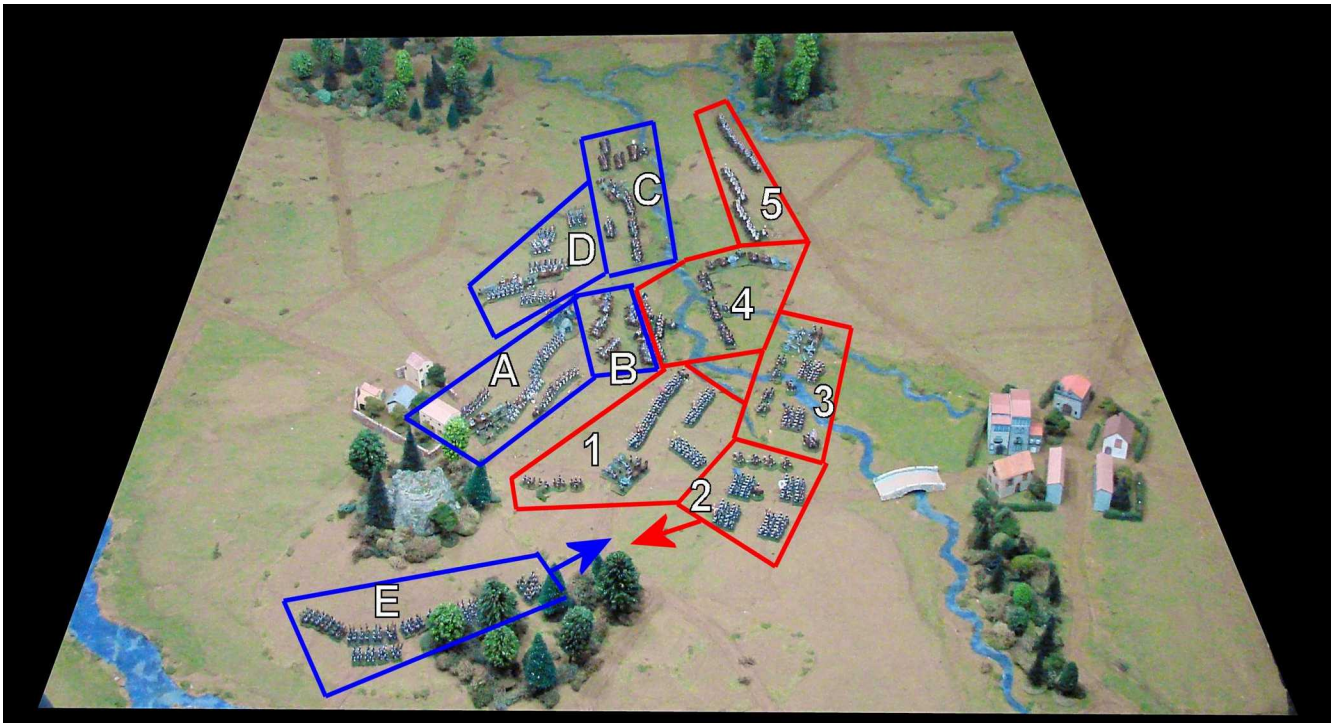


Campbell is pushed back off the hill, as Taupin's flanking movement arrives on his left.

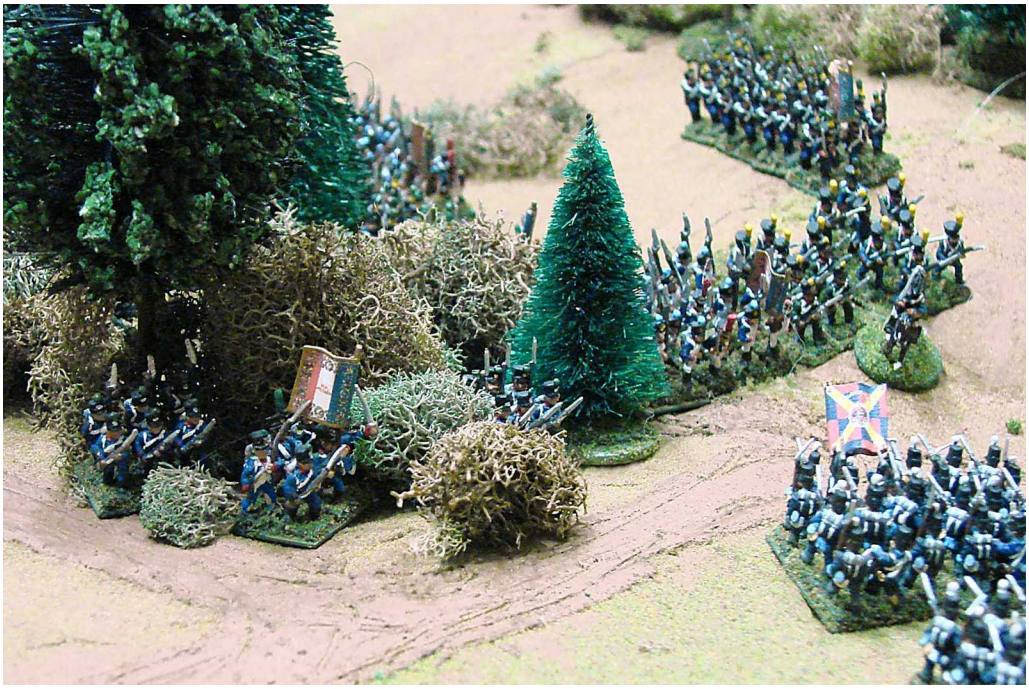
Sensing victory, Clausel moves up to the windmill to get a better look.

Taupin leads a legere battalion at the head of his column through the hills on the French right.

De Grey's heavy dragoons advance up the hill, in an attempt to relieve the pressure on Campbell's right flank.



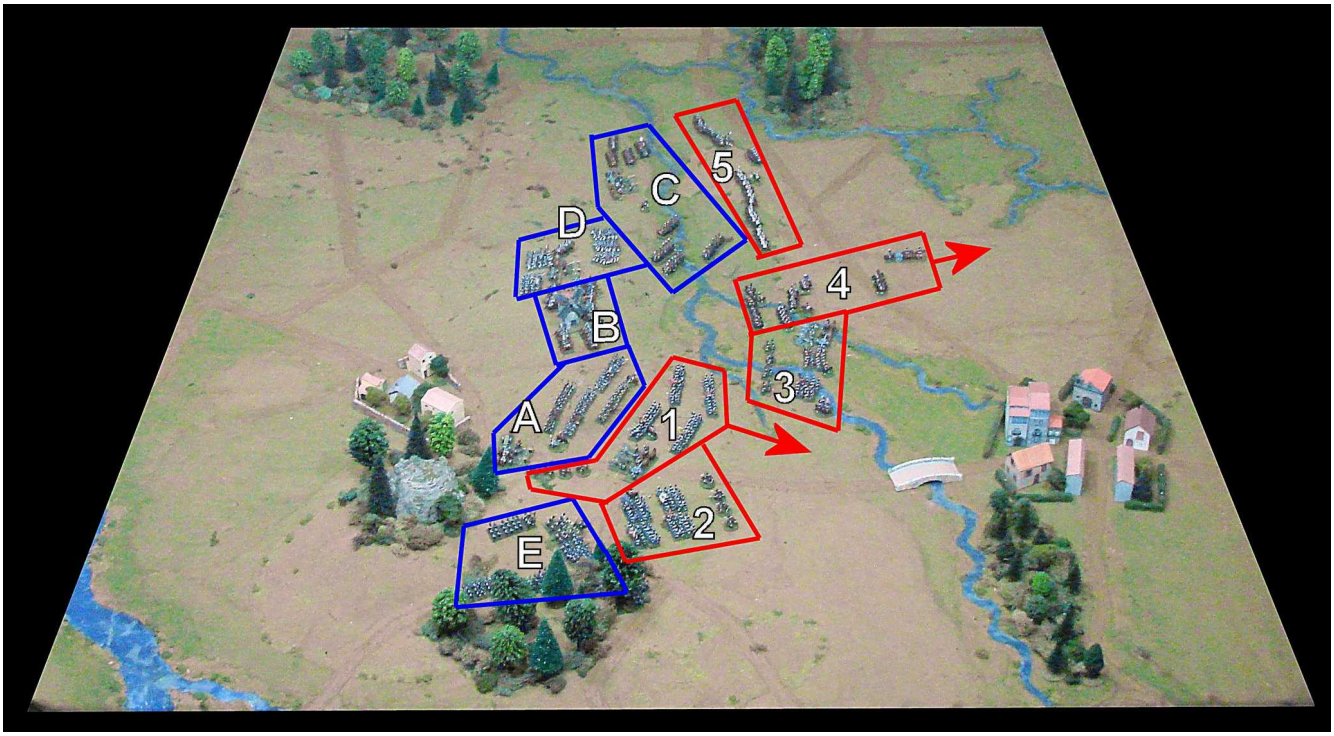
On the far left of Clausel's position, Lorcet (C), with the support of part of Taupin's infantry (D) is managing to hold off Anson (5). The cavalry charge, fall back, reform and attack again, neither side gaining an advantage. In the center, De Grey (4) is attempting to dislodge Soult (B) from the windmill hill and Godard (A), somewhat disorganized, is getting ready for a final push on Campbell (1). On the French right, Taupin's flanking move (E) is met by Barclay's fresh troops (2) and thrown back into the defile.



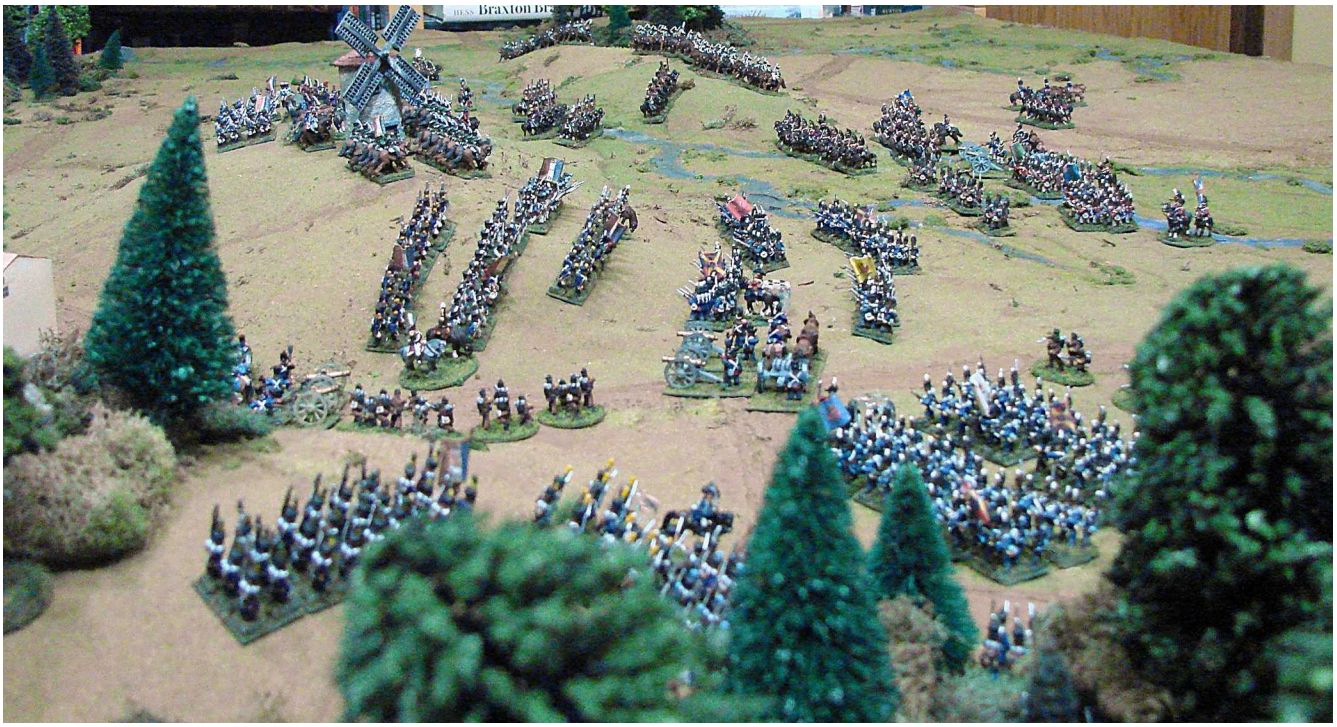
Taupin's flanking move is met and driven back.

The uphill charge of the British heavy dragoons stalls out. At this critical juncture, Clausel sees an opportunity and launches part of Lorcet's brigade into the right flank of De Grey, leaving the rest to hold off Anson. The attack is every bit as successful as he had hoped, driving off the British cavalry and riding over De Grey's battery, part of which is dispersed and the remainder of which breaks for the rear.

Lorcet's horse battery assists in driving off the British heavies.



Craufurd realizes that he can do no more without unacceptable casualties and sends a messenger to Campbell (1) requesting him to withdraw to Pombal, with Barclay (2) as a covering force (which he was going to have to do anyway, under the pressure of Godard's (A) renewed assault. De Grey's brigade (4) is in full retreat and Anson's (5) spent cavalry is unable to accomplish any more on the eastern flank now that Lorcet (C) has got infantry support (D).



A view of the field as the British begin to pull back.

Both commanders are content with the results of their efforts, Craufurd having kept Clausel occupied for much of the day, the rest of which he will have to spend reorganizing before resuming his advance on Leiria, and Clausel having driven the Anglo-Portuguese blocking force out of a strong position.

ORDER OF BATTLE

The Anglo-Portuguese Forces:

Craufurd's Light Division

Beckwith's Brigade: 2 line infantry battalions (British, Elite), 1 cacadore battalion (Portuguese, Elite), 1 6# foot battery

Barclay's Brigade: 4 line infantry battalions, 1 cacadore battalion (Portuguese, Veteran)

Campbell's Independent Brigade 4 line infantry battalions, 1 cacadore battalion, 1 6# foot battery (Portuguese, Line)

Anson's Brigade 8 squadrons light dragoons (British, Veteran)

De Grey's Brigade 3 squadrons heavy dragoons, 3 squadrons dragoon guards, 1 9# horse battery (British, Veteran)

The French Forces:

Clausel's Division

Taupin's Brigade 8 battalions line infantry, 4 battalions light infantry, 1 6# foot battery (Line)

Godard's Brigade 4 battalions line infantry, 1 6# foot battery (Line)

Lorcet's Brigade 4 squadrons dragoons, 4 squadrons lancers, 1 6# horse battery (Line)

Soult's Brigade 3 squadrons hussars, 3 squadrons chasseurs a cheval (Veteran)

Figures were 10mm, by AIM and Old Glory
Rules were Napoleonic Command, 2nd Edition
Figure painting and terrain by Yours Truly.

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