The Bridgehead
at Villamuriel de Cerrato

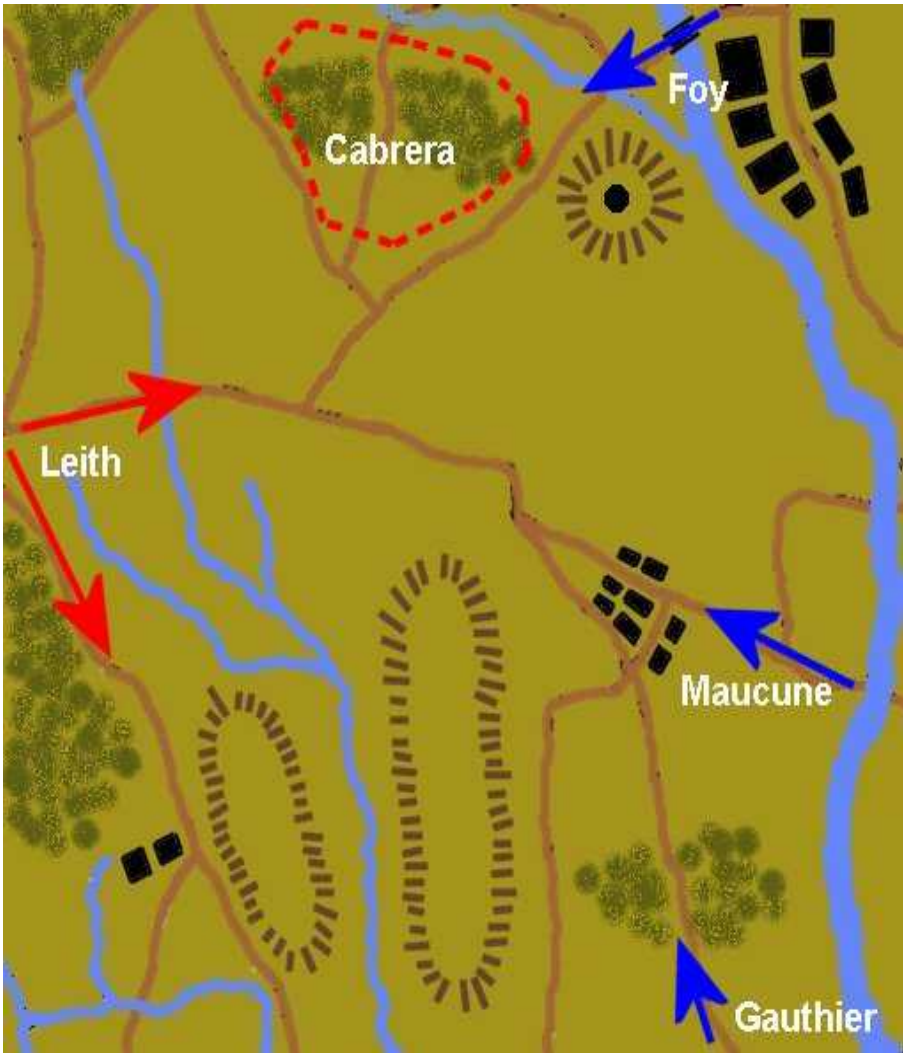
Events Leading Up to the Battle

When the Marquess of Wellington was forced to abandon the siege of Burgos on 21 October 1812, pursued by General de Division Souham and the optimistically named Army of Portugal, he sent word to his subordinate, Hill, at Madrid, that he should give up the city and march to join him. He then commenced a series of rearguard actions, utilizing the rivers across his line of retreat, intended to buy the time necessary for Hill to receive his instructions and take action. Pushed back from the Pisuerga, Wellington retreated to the line of the Rio Carrion, mining the bridges there and covering the river with light forces. When the French arrived, the bridges at San Isidro and Villamuriel were duly blown up, but the Spanish covering his left at Palencia delayed crossing until an attack by Maximilien Foy's division forced them back. The fuse on the bridge at Palencia failed and the British engineering detachment was captured by Foy's troops before a second attempt could be made. At the same time, the divisions of Maucune and Gauthier began to ford the Carrion at Villamuriel and San Isidro. Recognizing the importance of containing the French crossing, Wellington sent General Alava, with Ponsonby's heavy dragoons, to bolster Cabrera's Galicians facing Palencia, and Leith's 5th Division to drive Maucune back across the river.

The Game

The Gentlemen Wargamers gathered to play out the ensuing action, using 10mm miniatures from Old Glory, AIM, and Pendraken, and the Napoleonic Command 2nd Edition rules. The battlefield was reconstructed as shown by the following map:

The French forces, consisting of the divisions of Foy, Maucune and Gauthier (in command of Bonnet's division, who had been injured) entered from the points shown below. For the Allies, Cabrera's division was reforming in and around the woods near Palencia, while Leith brought up his division of British and Portuguese from the southwest (the left edge of the map).



The initial positions of the forces.

Cabrera's Galicians, now rallied after being forced out of Palencia, moved up to contain the aggressive Foy.

The Galicians return to the fight.

Leith chose to split his advance, with the Portuguese brigade in the center between two veteran British brigades. He wanted to keep a reliable force on his left, just in case Cabrera failed to contain Foy. (In the actual event, the Spanish were forced back and Leith was compelled to refuse his left *en potence* to cover the attack of his other brigades.)

With the Brunswick-Oels jaegers in the lead, Leith's division advances.

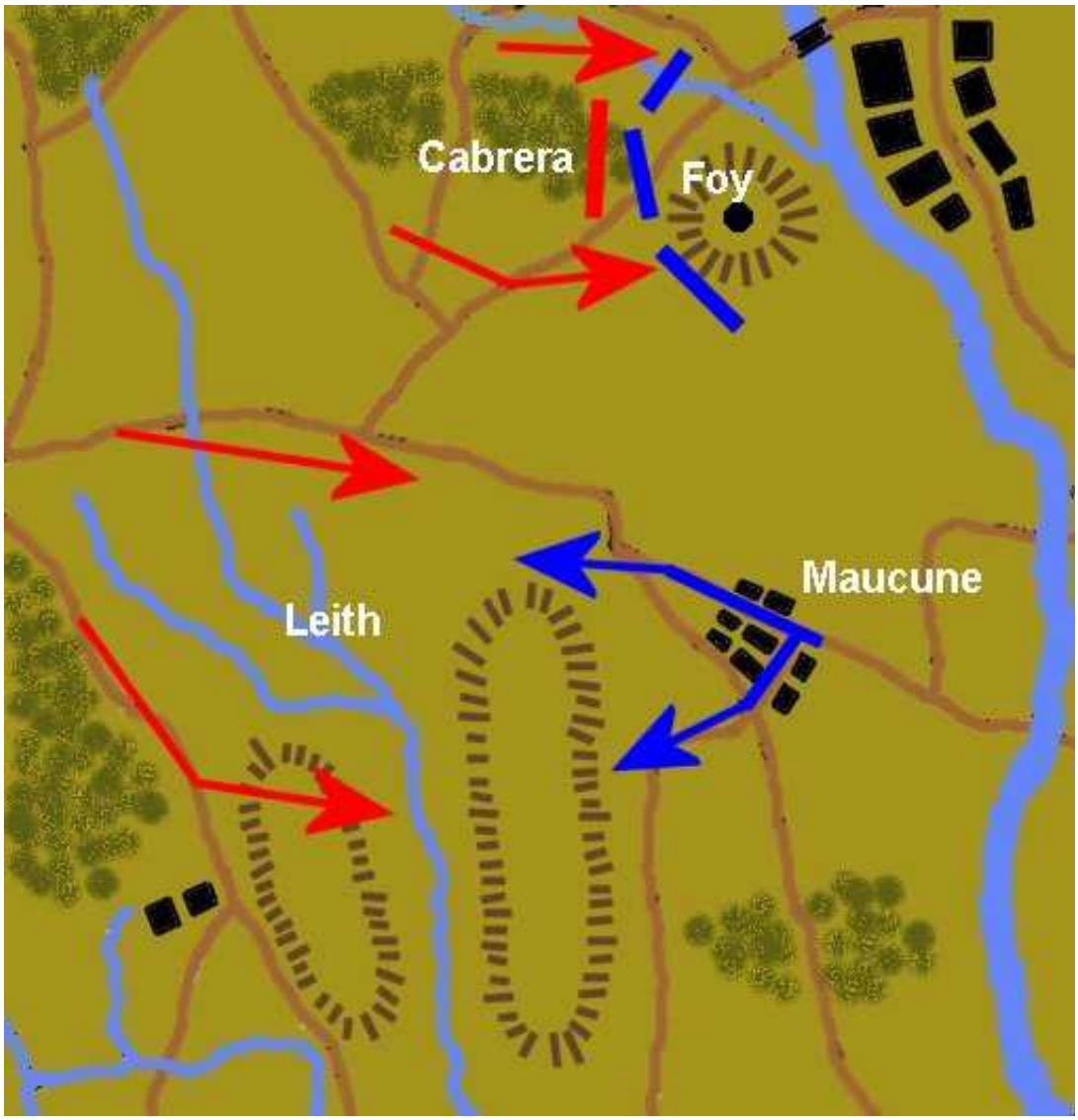
Foy moved to a knoll, occupied by a windmill, on the right bank of the Carrion, to observe the deployment of his division. (The buildings and walls of Palencia are cardstock models, built by Yours Truly. The Spanish windmill is resin, provided by Elliott, our host.)

Foy's division crosses the Carrion via the stone bridge at Palencia.

In the meantime, Maucune's division occupied Villamuriel and moved to occupy a low ridge beyond. (The buildings of Villamuriel are a mix of resin and cardstock models.)

Maucune's division moves up from Villamuriel.

Here's the situation as the forces move into position:



Maucune also sent forward a regiment of chasseurs a cheval to delay the British advance, so he would have time to gain the ridge and complete a defensive deployment. Note that, in the center of this photo, the veteran redcoats have deployed into line, two battalions up and two in reserve, while the somewhat less reliable Portuguese on their right remain in battalion columns, *en echequier.* The British batteries have deployed so that their fire crosses the area in front of Leith's advance, which, with the impressive number of muskets, keeps the chasseurs from charging home.

Maucune's cavalry forces the British to deploy, slowing their advance.

A closer view of the chasseurs' delaying action.

In the meantime, in front of Palencia, the Galicians are proving surprisingly stubborn. Cabrera has thrown a bunch of irregulars into the point of the woods, and the French voltigeurs are having a tough time dislodging them. A detachment of Spanish cavalry (minus a portion of one squadron, which was left to guard the withdrawal of the supply trains, just visible in the right distance) is threatening Foy's right, so he moves a few squadrons of hussars over to hold them off. Foy's left is threatened by Ponsonby's heavy dragoons, but he lacks enough cavalry to cover both flanks so the infantry will have to deal with them.

Foy's bridgehead across the Carrion is contained.

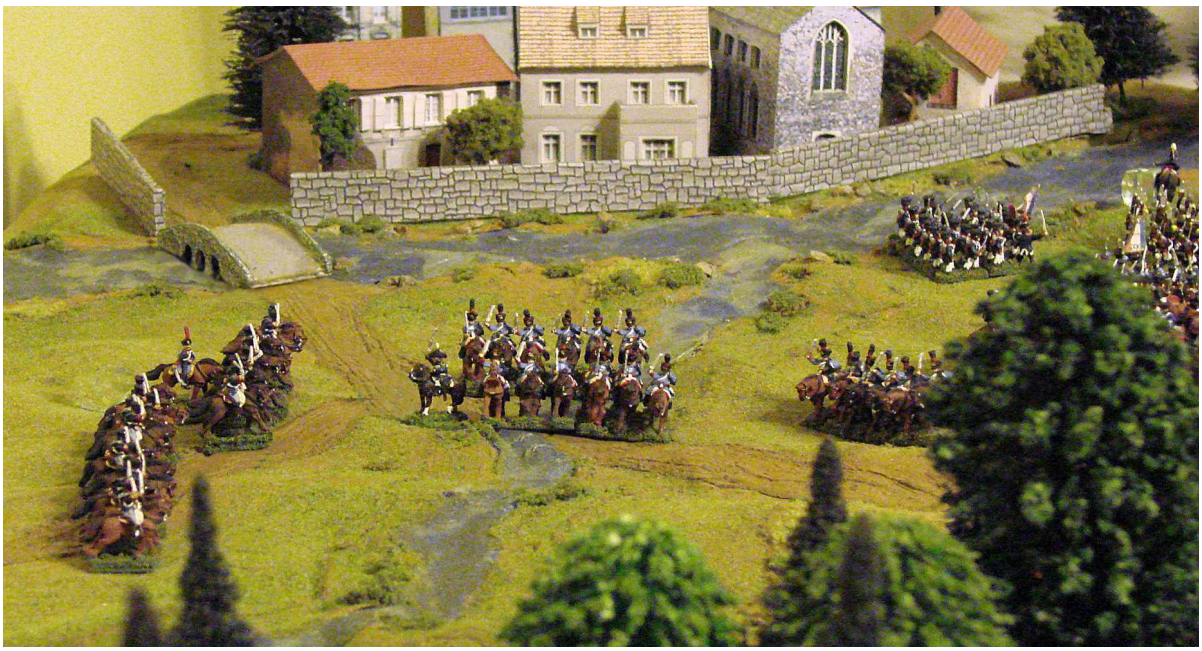
At this point, Maucune is beginning to wonder where Gauthier has gotten off to. He is expected to arrive from the direction of San Isidro at any moment, and the miniatures are ready and waiting in the staging area (on the fireplace mantel), but he is nowhere to be seen. (In the actual event, Gauthier was content to have captured the damaged bridge and set about repairing it instead of marching to the sound of the guns.) So we see Maucune's cavalry (center of the photo) attempting to hold up Leith's division (on the left), while Maucune's infantry makes a dash for the ridgeline (on the right), while in the distance Foy is tied up in a scrum around the windmill.

A view of the field of battle, looking northwest.

Cabrera's Galicians are keeping up the pressure on Foy, who can seem to make no headway against the stubborn irregulars ensconced in the woodline. The Spanish regulars are making a convincing attempt to drive the French away from the windmill.

The Spanish regulars continue to be an obstacle.

The Spanish cavalry, though repeatedly driven off, keep coming back for more.



The Spanish cavalry clash with French hussars in front of Palencia.

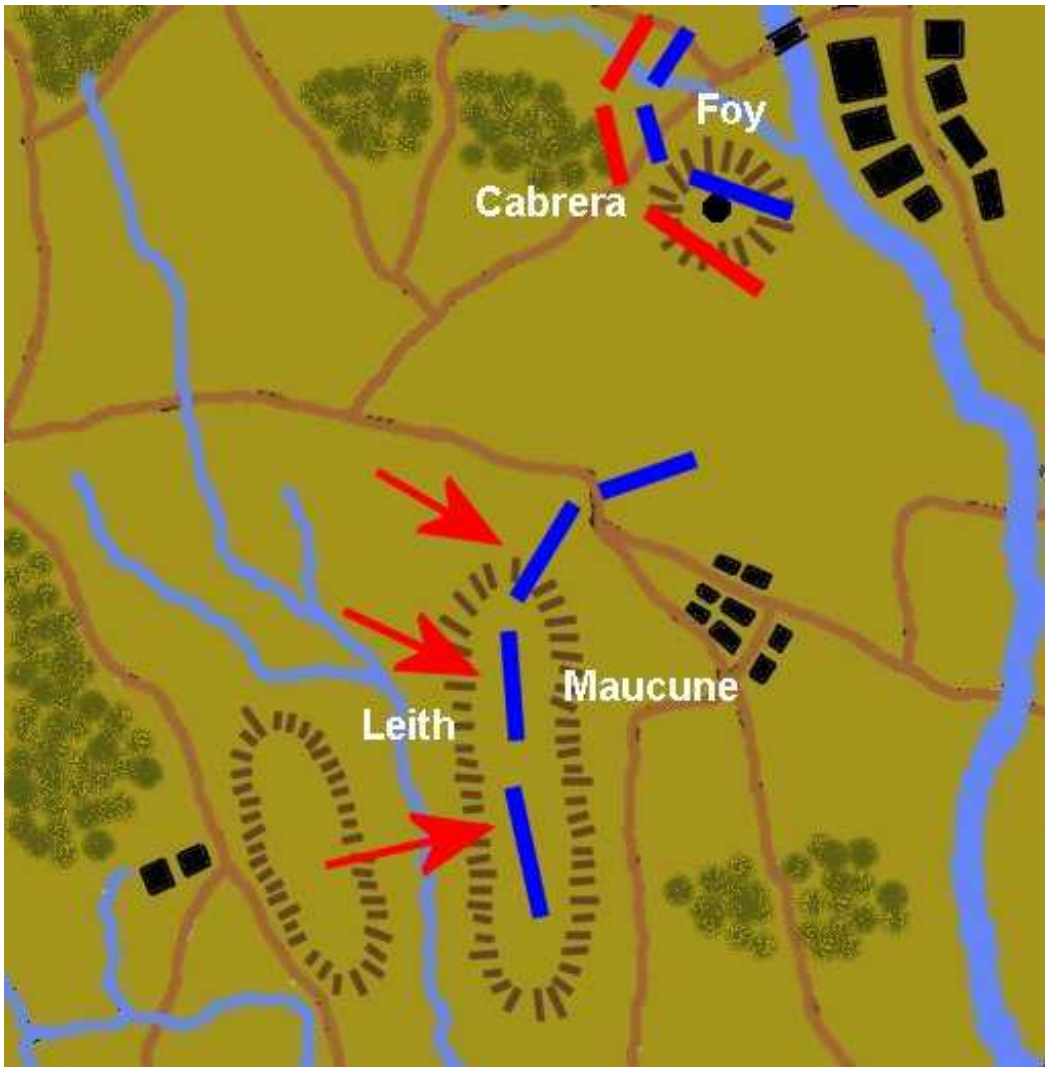
Cabrera's success on the left has allowed Leith to concentrate his entire strength against Maucune. He arranges his three brigades side by side, and prepares to assault the ridgeline occupied by the French division in front of Villamuriel.

The 5th division's entire strength arrayed against Villamuriel.

Leith watches from the ridge as his attack goes in.

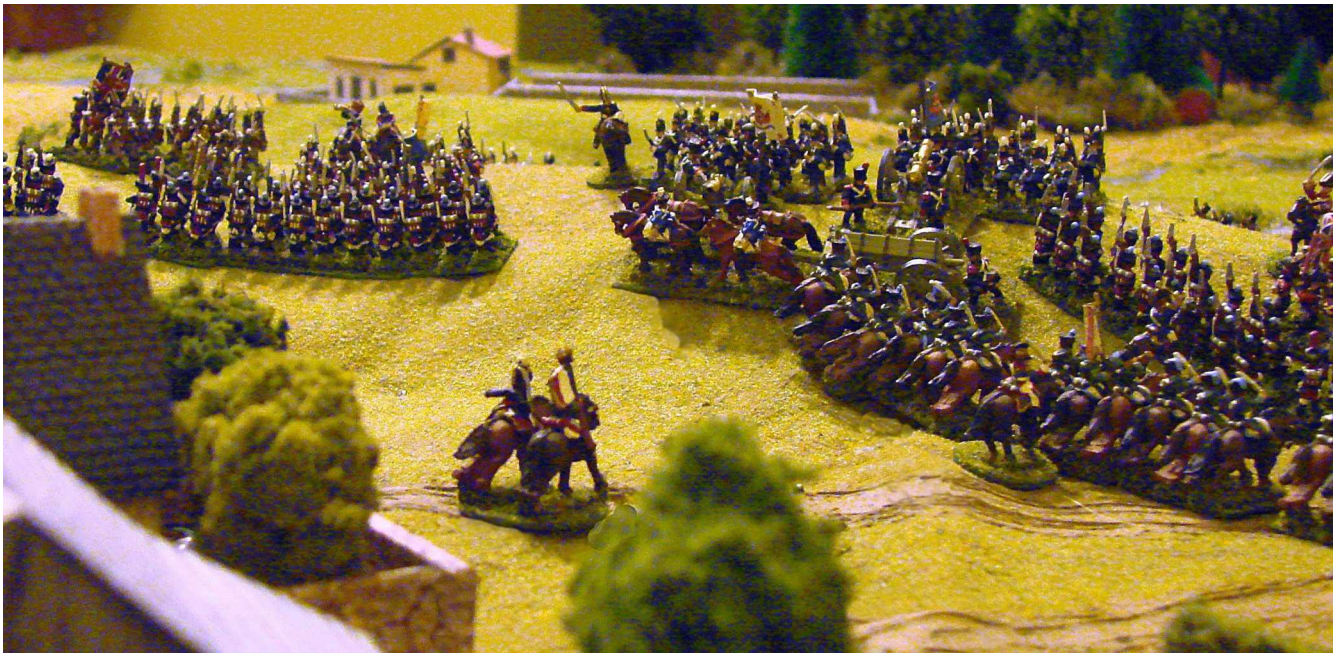
The 5th division crosses the open ground.

The overall situation now looks like this:



Leith's attack crashes into the position on the ridge, and the French are sent reeling back. The situation looks grim, and Maucune falls back to Villamuriel. It appears he's not going to get any help from either Foy, on his right, or the still absent Gauthier, on his left. (At this point, the players observed that we were witness to an interesting role reversal - British in column of attack versus French in line on a reverse slope!)

The French are dealt a crushing blow.

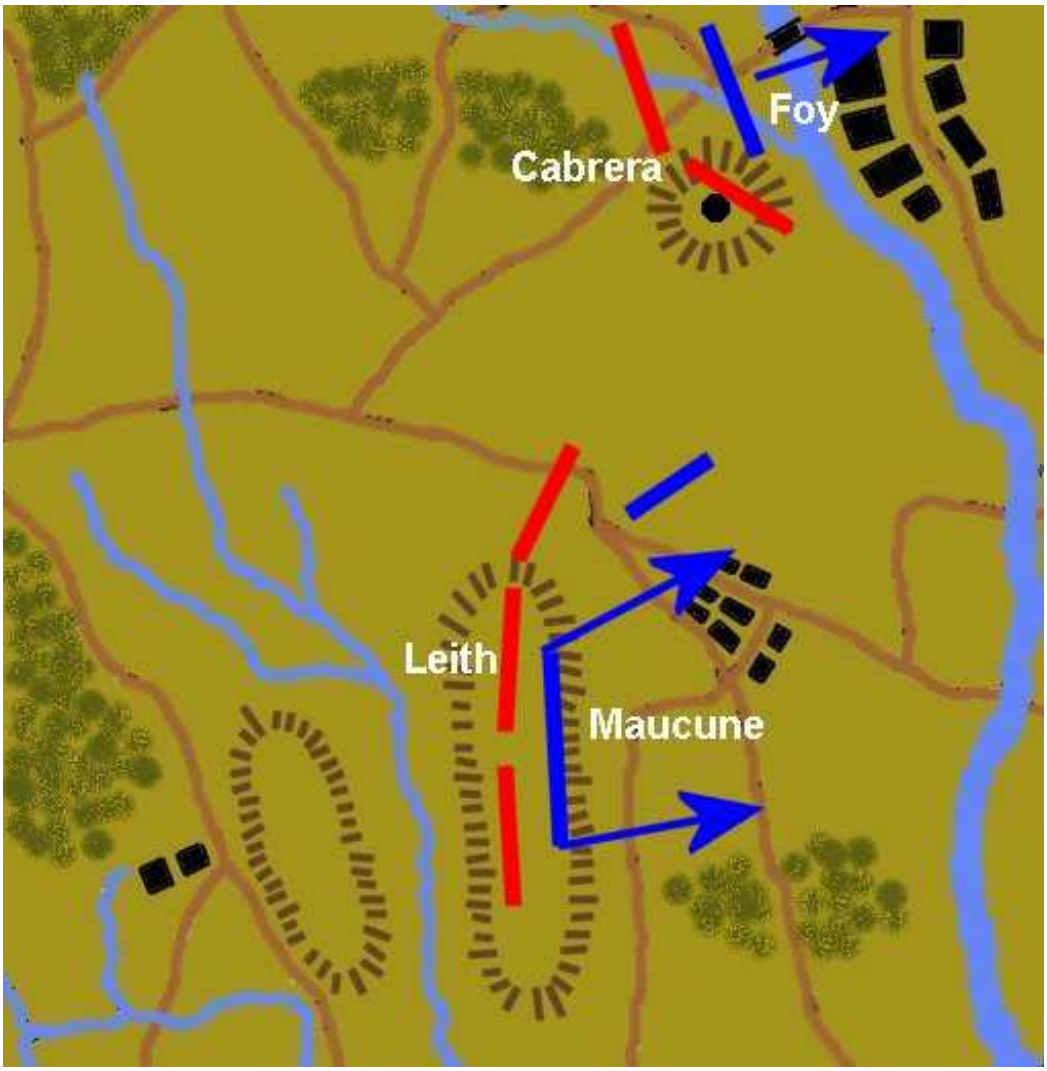


General Maucune watches from behind the ridge as the Portuguese hit the crest and overrun his guns.

At about this same time, the exhausted Galicians make one final push, and manage to drive the equally disorganized division of Foy off the windmill hill. Foy's troops begin streaming back towards Palencia.

Cabrera's Galicians overrun the windmill hill.

It looks as though the French bridgehead is doomed:



In the actual event, Maucune was forced back across the Carrion, but Foy managed to hold on, which forced Wellington to withdraw to the line of the Duero, from which he would be driven back once again, at Tordesillas.

ORDER OF BATTLE

French Forces
Army of Portugal - GdD Souham

Foy's Division

5 Battalions line infantry (line)
2 Battalions light infantry (line)
4 Squadrons hussars (line)
1 6 pdr. battery

Maucune's Division

5 Battalions line infantry (line)
3 Battalions light infantry (line)
4 Squadrons chasseurs a cheval (line)
1 6 pdr. battery

Gauthier's Division (one brigade)

4 Battalions line infantry (line)
1 6 pdr. battery

Allied Forces
Marquess of Wellington

5th Division - Leith

8 Battalions line infantry (British) (veteran)
4 Battalions line infantry (Portuguese) (line)
1 Battalion cacadores (Portuguese) (line)
1 Company jaegers (Brunswick) (line)
1 9 pdr. battery
1 6 pdr. battery

Cabrera's Division (Galician)

1st Brigade (line -1)
3 Battalions line infantry
1 Battalion cacadores

2nd Brigade (conscript)
3 Battalions line infantry
1 Battalion irregular infantry

4 Squadrons light cavalry (conscript)