

Translated by Greg Gorsuch
Volume 2 Part 6

SECOND SIEGE OF ZARAGOZA,

BY THE FRENCH ARMY OF ARAGON,
IN 1808 AND 1809.

On the same day as the capture of Monte Torrero, the investment was completed on the banks of the Ebro. Grandjean's division took up position on the road to Valencia, extending its posts to the right as far as the river's edge. The division of Musnier was positioned on the city's avenues at Monte Torrero, supporting its left at La Huebra. Morlot's division remained astride the road to Madrid, in front of the great locks. The division of Suchet completed the investment on the left of the Ebro.

Marshal Moncey established his headquarters at the Carthusian monastery of La Concepcion, located a league and a half from the city on the road to Valencia. The cavalry, under the command of General Wattier, was placed in observation on this road at El Burgo and Fuentes, to maintain the countryside, gather supplies, and gather news of the enemy in the directions of Valencia and Tortosa.

We still had some hope that the capture of Monte Torrero, the presence of two army corps, the news of the rout of the Spanish troops, and the capitulation of Madrid would shake the stubborn courage of the Aragonese and dispose them to listen to words of conciliation. This is why on the 22nd, at eleven o'clock in the morning, Marshal Moncey sent an officer from Monte Torrero as a parliamentarian, bearing a letter to the governor. This officer advanced to the bridgehead of La Huebra or the redoubt of Pilar. Palafox was there at that moment, surrounded by men of all classes employed in the works. Unworthy of a summons that he regarded as offensive to his character, and wanting to give the inhabitants a pledge of his devotion, he cried out: "*What, capitulate! Surrender Zaragoza!... When I am dead, I will speak of that. The people do not know how to compromise with tyrants; they abhor slavery: is that not so, Zaragoza?... --Yes, yes; conquer or die; long live Ferdinand VII! long live Spain!*" Palafox then wrote a letter to Marshal Moncey which left us no hope of reaching an agreement¹.

The days of December 22nd and 23rd were spent in partial combat with the Spanish outposts, which had moved beyond the Convent of Saint Joseph to protect the olive groves. The besieged were firing heavily on the slopes of Monte Torrero. A mortar battery, which they had established under vaults in the botanical gardens, launched a large number of bombs on the large canal warehouses we occupied on the plateau. In two days, we lost almost as many men at Monte Torrero as the attack on that position had cost us.

While the camps were being cleared, the engineering officers carried out the necessary surveys and reconnaissance to form a master plan for the attacks. The sappers established trestle bridges over the Huebra River to connect the districts. They built gabions and fascines, repaired the mills that the peasants had destroyed, and restored navigation on the canal, which had been interrupted since the dikes were

¹ See supporting documents, nos. 3 and 4.

breached. The gates of one of the chambers of the large locks had been destroyed by the enemy, and three large boats were downstream. They were raised with capstans over the waterfall of the locks to the upper reach, and from there they were taken to Alagon, where they were used to transport tools and supplies. The flying bridge of Juslibol, which served as a link between the two banks of the Ebro, upstream from the city, was replaced by a fixed bridge of boats and pontoons, in front of which an earthen lunette was built on the left bank to cover it.

After reconnoitering the fortifications, General Lacoste proposed three attacks to Marshal Moncey, which were adopted:

1st. The right attack was to be directed against the convent of Saint Joseph, and then to the rear, against the city walls, which presented a salient on this side that was easy to capture by advancing along the Ebro, especially if one simultaneously advanced along the opposite bank against the suburb; an attack that General Lacoste, despite the failure of the 21 December attempt, still had hope of success.

2nd. The central attack was to be directed against the Huebra bridgehead, or Pilar redoubt, and against Santa Engracia, in order to support the first, to which it was easily linked, and which the number of engineer troops and siege equipment made possible.

3rd. The left attack, or mock attack against the castle, aimed to push back and worry the enemy on this side, one of the strongest in the area.

The officers and engineering troops were divided into three brigades to carry out these attacks.

On the 23rd, a route was undertaken on the right, along the Valencia road and a thousand meters from the convent of Saint Joseph, to approach this convent. In the center, and on the road that descends from Monte Torrero to Santa Engracia, a cut was begun five hundred and forty meters from the bridgehead, at the same time as a portion of trench on the edge of the vineyards and olive trees that the enemy had not destroyed. From there, a long trench was directed to the right on the slope of Monte Torrero, to approach the convent of Saint Joseph and connect with the parallel that was to be opened later in front of this convent. These first routes were supported by a battery of four eight-inch howitzers established on the slope of Monte Torrero. To the left, a cut was begun on the Alagon road, about four hundred and sixty meters from the castle. They emerged on the left through a section of trench, to reach the old parallel line opened against the castle, which the enemy had not entirely cleared.

During these preliminary works, General Dedon, commander of the artillery, was assembling the siege crew at the park established at the powder magazine, opposite Monte Torrero. The pontoons, brought by water from Tudela, had been loaded with sausages, gabions, and platform timbers for the batteries. But since the repairs to be made to the canal had forced the interruption of navigation, it was necessary, while waiting for it to be reestablished, to place relays of horses on the road to provide land transport.

On 24 December, Gazan's division received orders from Marshal Mortier to extend to its left as far as the Ebro to complete the blockade. One of the brigades was placed to the right of the Zuera road, and the other to the left. These two brigades entrenched themselves against the enemy's sorties and covered part of their front by flooding using the irrigation canals which, raised on dikes, crisscrossed the plain. Two battalions took up post at the Gállego bridge, which they were charged with defending. Finally, General Gazan, to be informed of the arrival of relief that might come from Catalonia, sent an advance guard to Villa Mayor, which sent reconnaissance as far as Villafranca. These arrangements were made opportunely: Palafox, feeling the need to relieve the town by the departure of some battalions and a certain number of peasants, had the day before called a council of the senior officers of the garrison to discuss this question. They were of the opinion to take advantage of the moment when the avenues of the

suburb were still free; but, either through irresolution or mistrust, the sortie prepared during the night did not take place. Don Francisco Palafox, brother of the Governor, escaped alone by going down the Ebro in a small boat, and went to Mequinenza with the intention of gathering troops there to raise the siege.

On 29 December, three large boats, built in Tudela, transported artillery along the canal. A few days later, navigation was suspended once again: the Ebro overflowed, causing extensive damage to the Juslibol Bridge. Several pontoons were submerged; timber and rigging were lost. The bridge had to be folded up and replaced with a ferry.

The same day, General Junot, Duke of Abrantès, arrived at the camp to command the Third Corps, replacing Marshal Moncey, who had been called away. He took note of the state of the administration and the troops and reported it to the Major General².

The Third Corps was composed entirely of young men who, already very tired from the last campaign, were almost naked, without greatcoats or shoes. It had a large number of sick people in the hospitals, where it had lost two thousand two hundred men since November, and this number was still growing.

The Fifth Corps, on the other hand, arriving from the Grand Army, where it had covered itself with glory at Ulm, Austerlitz, and Jena, was composed only of old soldiers; but it was to play only a minor part in the siege.

Since the opening of the campaign, the army had lived with great difficulty; often its rations had been reduced to half. The villages were deserted, and the marauding had already consumed a large part of the country's resources. There was a lack of everything for the hospitals: employees, medicines, and camping supplies. Soldiers were selected from the regiments to be millers and bakers. Requisitions were made in Navarre for flour and oxen, which were sent to Aragon; finally, mobile columns traveled the countryside for ten to fifteen leagues around, collecting everything the peasants had not destroyed in the abandoned villages.

During the day of the 29th, they were able to open the trench. This operation took place that same evening.

1st NIGHT, December 29th to 30th.

Right Attack. Engineer Battalion Commander Haxo, the attack leader, opened a first parallel line of twelve hundred meters in front of the Convent of Saint Joseph, and at a distance of three hundred and sixty meters. This line had three communications: the right line, formed by a sunken road; the center line, traced in a zigzag pattern from the cover of the Fourteenth Regiment's camp; and the left line, established before the trench was opened, on the slope of Monte Torrero. Thirteen hundred workers and eighty-five sappers or miners were employed in this work. The central communication line, which had a length of one thousand fifty meters, was only opened along a partial length.

Center Attack. Engineer Captain Prost, the attack leader, opened a portion of the first parallel line fourteen hundred meters long, three hundred twenty meters from the bridgehead, and a rear communication line. To support the left flank of this attack, another portion of the parallel was simultaneously opened on the left bank of the Huebra, near the escarpment of this river, as well as a communication. Eight hundred workers were employed in this work.

² See supporting documents, no. 5.

Left Attack. Captain Henry, the engineer leader, had a detachment of sappers reestablish a hundred meters of the old parallel of the castle.

DAY of 30 December.

At daybreak, the enemy, having discovered our works, opened up a fairly heavy fire, mainly on the attack at Saint-Joseph, where we suffered three killed and four wounded. Twelve hundred workers were employed in this attack, and six hundred seventy in the central attack.

2nd NIGHT, 30-31 December.

Right Attack. Twelve hundred men worked to widen the parallel, making it six feet wide everywhere. They also built banks there and extended the center's communication line along the Valencia road.

Attack from the center. The parallel line begun on each of the two banks of the Huebra was extended. The parallel on the right bank was connected to the road that descends from Monte Torrero to the city.

Attack from the left. The parallel was extended forty meters to the left.

DAY of 31 December.

At eight-thirty in the morning, the enemy made a general sortie to reconnoiter our work. About twelve hundred men emerged from an olive grove on our right, near the Ebro, and crossed the front of the Parallel of Saint Joseph within half-shot of their fusils. Afterward, they joined up with five hundred men who had emerged from the Huebra valley, near the bridgehead, and moved forward; but the heavy fire from the Parallel forced them to withdraw.

An hour later, the Spanish appeared in front of the parallel of the Castle and threatened it from the right, while another column of about twelve hundred infantry and three hundred horse emerged from the left along the Ebro and sought to cross the Parallel. The Spanish cavalry fell upon one of our posts, where they sabered some men; but the arrival of reinforcements forced the enemy to withdraw. Palafox, careful to take advantage of the slightest advantage to motivate his troops, exaggerated this success in his proclamations and solemnly distributed decorations to all those who had taken part in this action, which was, moreover, of little consequence and without any other loss on our side than about thirty men killed or wounded³.

³ See supporting documents, no. 6.

No. 3.

*Letter from Marshal Moncey to the
Governor and Magistrates of the City of Zaragoza.*

At Headquarters, Monte Torrero, 22 December 1808.

Gentlemen,

The city of Zaragoza is surrounded on all sides; it can no longer have any communication with the outside world. Thus, we are able to employ all the means of destruction that war permits; but there is already enough bloodshed and enough misfortune around us. The Fifth Corps of the Grand Army, under the command of Marshal Mortier, Duke of Trévisé, and the one I command, threaten your walls. The city of Madrid has capitulated and has thus preserved its inhabitants from the misfortunes that a longer resistance would inevitably have brought upon them. Gentlemen, the city of Zaragoza, trusting in the courage of its inhabitants, is unable to overcome the means that the art of war will unleash against it; if they were allowed to be used, its total ruin would be an inevitable consequence.

Marshal Mortier and I have no doubt, Gentlemen, that you will take into very great consideration what I have the honor to present to you, and that you will be imbued with the same sentiments as we are: to stop the bloodshed, to preserve the beautiful city of Zaragoza, so interesting for its population, its wealth, and its commerce, from the misfortunes of a siege, and the terrible events that may follow; this would certainly assure you the love and blessings of the people under your government. Therefore, Gentlemen, dispose your fellow citizens to feelings of peace and tranquility; and, for my part, I guarantee you everything that may be compatible with my heart, my duties, and the rights with which I am invested by His Majesty the Emperor.

I am sending you this dispatch with a parliamentarian, and I propose that you appoint commissioners to enter into negotiations with those I will appoint for this purpose.

Please accept, Gentlemen, the assurance of my highest consideration,

MARCHAL DUKE OF CONEGLIANO,

Signed: MONCEY.

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No. 4.

*The response of Palafox to the preceding letter.*

Zaragoza Headquarters, 22 December 1808.

Mr. Marshal,

The commander-in-chief of the reserve army answers for the place of Zaragoza; this beautiful city will never consent to surrender. The Marshal of the Empire will observe all the laws of war and will measure his forces against mine. I am in communication with all points of the Peninsula, and I lack nothing. Sixty thousand men determined to fight know nothing above honor, any more than I, who command them; and this honor, I would not exchange for the empire of the world.

His Excellency Marshal Moncey will cover himself in glory if, by observing the noble laws of war, he succeeds in defeating me; mine will be no less if I defend myself. What I can assure Your Excellency is that my troops will fight with honor, and that I condemn the oppressive measures that the former Marshals of France abhorred.

He who wishes to die with honor does not worry about his position; therefore, I should not be concerned about mine, the advantages of which I experienced during the sixty-one days of the first siege. If, with fewer troops, I did not surrender then, should Your Excellency expect me to submit today, at the head of more troops than all the armies surrounding me?

The blood of the Spaniards shed for their homeland covers them with glory, whereas it covers with ignominy those who shed it unjustly.

The Marshal of the Empire is well aware that oppression cannot extinguish the enthusiasm of eleven million inhabitants, and that he who wants to be free, becomes so. I would not wish to shed the blood of those I command; but there is not a single one who is not ready to lose his life with pleasure, in defense of his country.

Yesterday, the French troops left numerous testimonies to this truth at our gates: we have not lost a single man, and I believe I am more than capable of speaking of surrender to the Marshal, if he does not want to lose his entire army beneath the walls of this place. The wisdom that characterizes him so well, and which earned him the nickname "Good," will not allow him to view so many disasters with indifference, especially since neither the war nor the Spanish caused or authorized them.

If Madrid has capitulated, Madrid will have been sold; and I cannot believe it. However, Madrid is only a city, and that is no reason for Zaragoza to submit.

I must only point out to the Marshal that when you send a parliamentarian, you do not send two columns out from different sides; we were about to open fire, believing it to be a reconnaissance mission rather than a parliamentary one.

I have the honor to respond to His Excellency Marshal Moncey, respectfully, but in the only language I know, and to assure him of my most sacred duties.

*Signed: PALAFOX.*

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No. 5.

Report from General Junot, Duke of Abrantès, to the Major General, on the situation of the Third Corps.

At the headquarters of the Third Corps, outside Zaragoza, 1 January 1809.

Monseigneur,

I arrived in front of Zaragoza on 29 December; I gave Marshal Moncey the letter I was charged with for him, as well as the one addressed to Marshal Mortier. I immediately set about finding out the situation of the Third Corps, and its position in front of Zaragoza. Its situation is deplorable; it does not have twelve thousand infantrymen, and Your Majesty can be certain of that. Men of whom there has been no news since the Valencia expedition are still listed in the situation reports as detached. This corps is composed of young men extremely tired by the last campaign; they are naked, without greatcoats and without shoes; so they enter the hospitals by the hundreds, which, due to their total destitution, the absence of employees, the bad administration and the shortage of aid, become the tomb of all those who are there. In the city of Pamplona alone, six hundred and eighty men died in November; and the loss in December will have been more considerable.

I have made a general report to His Majesty, in which I have not been able to go into all the details, since I have only just arrived. He will no doubt send it back to Your Majesty; I beg him to consider it extremely accurate; it is of the utmost importance for the interests of Spain that the Emperor fully understand what Zaragoza is, and what means I have to reduce it. The Third and Fifth Corps could have been tasked with this operation and succeeded; but one of the two alone is incapable of it; even more so the Third Corps, which is not worth a division of the Fifth. At least thirty thousand men are needed to completely invest Zaragoza and lay siege to it; if we don't have them, we will be in front of this city for a long time; we will lose many men there, and we will eventually be forced to leave it.

The First Division of Marshal Mortier left last night; and to cover the area of ground it occupied with eight thousand men, I can only move the Morlot Division, which is two thousand five hundred men strong. So I only have General Gazan's division, five thousand strong, and the division of General Musnier, about four thousand men strong, to invest Zaragoza, from the right bank of the Ebro, below the city, to the small river Huebra; that is to say, I have about nine thousand men to occupy an immense area, and open the trench in front of a place that has a garrison of more than eighteen thousand regular troops, and at least twenty five thousand armed men, who fight better than they do.

With the Suchet Division gone, I am no longer able to continue the siege; if Gazan's division must also leave, it will have to be lifted shamefully. What I say, Monseigneur, is true, and to speak otherwise would be a crime against the Emperor for which one would have to answer on one's head.

Marshal Mortier writes to me that General Gazan's reconnaissance party has reached as far as Pina, beyond Villafranca, and that all the inhabitants have abandoned their homes, taking with them food and all the resources that could be useful to us. A similar measure has been taken for ten leagues around and will increase our difficulty in obtaining supplies.

The administration of this army corps is completely ineffective. It is essential that a chief commandant, war commissioners, and employees be sent there promptly to assist him; there are none of any kind. We need hospital administrators, nurses, and money for transportation, medicines, and supplies: the country has no resources, everything has been ransacked.

The Chief of the General Staff has no officers; send some, Monseigneur, and let orders be given to send from Bayonne to Tudela enough to clothe this unfortunate corps, whose absolute destitution is pitiful and disgusting to the soldiers. The corps is also short of a very large number of officers; and without officers, there is no war.

Marshal Mortier, in his instructions to General Gazan, expressly forbids him from interfering in any way with the siege attacks; he is to blockade only the part of Zaragoza located on the left bank of the Ebro: this is a lot for me, but it is not enough. The Marshal must have written to Your Majesty how necessary the presence of his corps, or another, was here. He has rendered a great service to His Majesty by remaining here, even if he were to be blamed for it. He puts me in a critical position by sending his First Division; if the Second leaves, I must leave too. All the reports that will come to you from Zaragoza, and which do not say this, are false, and perhaps criminal.

The siege artillery is without means of transport; everyone is doing all they can. The engineers are well directed. Morale will improve in the Third Corps. We will all do our duty; but we need the means to do it usefully. I do not aspire to a great command, I am before Zaragoza and I want to serve the Emperor there; whether I command or obey, no one will see any difference in my manner of serving; but I will tell the truth, I owe it all to him. Thirty thousand men are needed to take Saragossa, and a large artillery force to crush this immense assemblage of stones, and devastate a population considerably increased by the gathering of all the families in the surrounding area. Many soldiers must be killed there, because there are many of them. We are surrounded by insurrections on all sides, and a corps would be needed to dissipate them, without the siege corps getting involved: its work is sufficient. Zaragoza is more important to Spain than Cadiz, and undoubtedly than Madrid; surrendering Zaragoza reassures all of Aragon, Catalonia, and Castile; as long as it exists, these provinces will not be subjugated. We must strike hard and swiftly; but we will need drastic measures.

The warmth that Your Majesty will notice in this letter is the natural effect of my devotion to His Majesty. I see that until now he has not been told the truth about this part; he must know it, and soon his genius will have removed all obstacles, smoothed out all difficulties.

Preserve your kindness, My Lord, and deign to believe me with respect,

Your Serene Highness,

The most humble and obedient servant,

Signed: THE DUKE OF ABRANTÈS.

P.S. Another very interesting subject, Monseigneur, is that of correspondence: since the battle of Tudela, the Third Corps has received only one letter. Your Highness knows the French spirit; deprived of news from his country, he believes himself separated from it forever, and sadness takes hold of his soul. I have not seen a corps, not a soldier, without having spoken to me of this deprivation. We have no letters, and nothing that is necessary to establish this administration.

A vigorous administrator and money are essential to rebuild the administration, where everything remains to be done. A few promotions, a few decorations, and clothing are essential to boost the morale of this army, which is very weakened.

Finally, two army corps or thirty thousand men, and a large artillery force, are essential to take Zaragoza, and Zaragoza is indispensable to His Majesty's interests.

P.S. I have just received a letter from General Wouillemont, commander of the mountain chasseurs. Instead of four thousand men, on 27 December, including those of Adjutant Commandant Lomet, he had only two thousand five hundred, naked, poorly armed, and deserting by the hundreds. Your Majesty must therefore regard this assistance as nothing, or almost nothing, for me.



No. 6.

*Proclamation of Palafox to the Zaragoza garrison,
on the occasion of the sortie of 31 December.*

At the headquarters in Zaragoza, 1 January 1809.

Yesterday, you worthily ended the year with an action that does you credit. When I ordered a general reconnaissance of the points occupied by the enemy, I found you ready for an attack, so barely could your courage be contained. First, you found the opportunity to fight; and when the enemy camp fell upon you en masse, obeying my order and even anticipating it, you rushed upon them, and, seconded by your valiant cavalry, you cut to pieces those famous warriors of the North who were waiting for you firmly. Their fire did not frighten you, much less their bayonets; your swords answered them, and our invincible city had the pleasure of seeing countless corpses of the bandits besieging it lying around it. The bugle sounded, and immediately the edges of your swords threw to the ground those haughty heads vanquished by your valor and patriotism. Numancia! Olivenza! I am satisfied with your courage; and I am certain that you will be able to preserve the honor of our army and sustain the enthusiasm of the inhabitants of these sacred walls. Battalions who have found yourselves in action! You all deserve my esteem. And you, brave leaders, who have the command of these corps, you to whom is entrusted the guard of the walls of this city, you have all acquired rights to public esteem. Begin this year as you ended the last: our works will undoubtedly be greater, but our glory will also increase, if we obtain by our courage the complete freedom of Spain. Soldiers! I promise you all my solicitude; and, to signal the valor of those who distinguished themselves on yesterday's memorable day, I have decided that they will wear in the future a red ribbon on their chest. And you too, inhabitants of this city who wish to enjoy the same glory, by fighting among my soldiers, you will bear this distinction like them. Valiant soldiers! Wear this decoration, and may it always be for you the object of noble emulation; be assured that you will always find me ready to reward valor, as well as to punish cowardice, of which, moreover, I believe you all to be incapable. Continue to bear these bloody swords which are the titles of your happiness, the support of the homeland, the foundations of the throne of Ferdinand, and the glory of your general.

Signed: PALAFOX.