

Having stumbled into war with Russia and cobbled together expeditionary forces, the British and French governments, working in unwonted alliance, had no idea what to do next. Their first plan had been to assist the Turks in driving the Russians out of Moldavia and Wallachia, Turkish provinces now forming part of Romania, but by the time the allied troops arrived, the Russians had already evacuated the provinces. While a second plan was hatched, the expeditionary forces, were stationed at Varna (now in Bulgaria), a most unhealthy place where cholera soon broke out, the 23rd losing an officer and thirty-six other ranks dead in three months. Matters were not improved by the gross inefficiency of the administrative services.

Eventually, in late August 1854, London and Paris decided that their armies should take the Russian naval base of Sevastopol although no information was available 'as to the extent of the enemy's forces or to the state of their preparations'. The 'state of preparations' of the British force was also giving cause for concern. The units composing it were, individually, well trained and well armed but they had no experience of working together and there were very few trained staff officers. The transport and supply services were totally inexperienced and were responsible not to the army but to the Treasury. None of the general officers had commanded so much as a brigade in peacetime and the command was given to the 66-year-old Lord Raglan. He was highly intelligent and greatly concerned with the welfare of his troops but he had no experience in command, had last heard a shot fired in anger at Waterloo, where he lost an arm, and had spent the intervening years at a desk in Whitehall.

All the commanders of infantry divisions were Peninsular veterans except the 35-year-old Duke of Cambridge, whose sole qualification was that he was Queen Victoria's cousin. The organization of the army was closely modelled on Wellington's Peninsular army, to the extent of having a Light Division though there was not a light infantry unit in the force and only one of the two Rifle battalions present was allocated to it. The command of it was given to Sir George Brown, a survivor of the Peninsular Light Division, who had since become notorious as a martinet. The 1st Battalion considered him 'a fine old soldier, but rather crabbed.' He was very short-sighted but refused to wear glasses. One of his two brigades was, in another Wellingtonian echo, the Fusilier Brigade, composed of the Royal Fusiliers and Royal Welsh Fusiliers with the 33rd Foot, the Duke of Wellington's Regiment. Their brigade commander was Major-General William Codrington, a 50-year-old Guardsman, also short-sighted, but prepared to wear spectacles.

On 14th September 1854, the allied army began to land at the ominously named Kalamita Bay, 35 miles north of Sevastopol, the dress for the British army being laid down as 'full dress without plumes'. In all other respects the plan for the landing was copied from that used at Aboukir Bay in 1801 and it was curious that, as on the former occasion, the Royal Welsh Fusiliers were the first ashore. There was no opposition, although some Cossacks watched from a distance. It took four days before the entire force, 26,000 British, 24,000 French, 8,000 Turks with their horses and guns were ashore and by that time one ship loaded with 1,000 fresh cholera cases had been sent back to base. Meanwhile 350 local carts, 253 horses, 67 camels and 1,000 head of cattle had been rounded up so as to make the combined armies, which had no transport of their own, mobile.

It was early on 19th September that the allies began to move south, with the French on the seaward flank and the Fusilier Brigade in the front of the British array. Water had been short ever since the landing and, as they marched through the sultry morning, every man in the brigade felt acute thirst. From noon onwards a ridge of hills could be seen ahead and those officers with telescopes could make out dark columns of Russian troops moving into position on the hills. That night the armies camped on the banks of the Bulganak stream, four miles from the ridge. A meeting

of the allied commanders that evening produced no firm decision about future action. The French were eager to attack but Lord Raglan was determined to 'wait on events' and would promise no more than to cover the French inland flank.

The ground in front was open and rolling until it reached the Alma river which was sheathed in vineyards in which were a few villages and scattered cottages surrounded by stone walls. The river itself was generally fordable but beyond it was a sharp bank above which the hills rose steeply and smoothly to their crests some 400 feet above. These crests ran six miles inland from the cliffs and for the first mile inland the slope was so steep that the Russian commander, Prince Menschikoff, thought it necessary to guard it only with a token force. Three miles from the sea the crest rises some fifty feet to a height known, from an unfinished signal tower, as Telegraph Hill, which marked the left of the French front.

The inland section of the ridge which faced the British consisted of a great amphitheatre through which ran the main road to Sevastopol. On the right was Telegraph Hill, on the left a similar height, the Kourgane Hill, beyond which the ridge shades away. Here Menschikoff had stationed his large force of cavalry as a flank guard. Between Telegraph and Kourgane hills he deployed thirty-three battalions of infantry and had thrown up earthworks to strengthen the position. Astride the main road and 600 yards from the river was the Causeway battery containing sixteen guns, and on a spur of the Kourgane was a position for twelve heavy guns which could fire down to the river at a range of 400 yards and across to the main road at twice that distance. This battery was called by the British the Great Redoubt. A smaller work with field guns was in its right rear and called the Little Redoubt.

On 20th September 1854 the French started to advance at an early hour, the British, largely due to bad staff work, moving forward much later to the last ridge before the Alma where they halted under damaging cannon fire. Meanwhile the French were finding progress difficult and repeatedly called on the British to support them by engaging the Russian right. This Raglan was unwilling to do until 3 pm when he decided to seize the hills to his front and sent orders for the Second and Light Divisions to advance in line with the Third and First in support, flank protection being provided by Fourth Division and the light cavalry brigade. Both forward divisions deployed all their six battalions in a single two-deep line and the solitary battalion of Rifles did their best to screen the whole front. The deployment was mismanaged - no one in the army had ever seen twelve battalions deployed in a single line - and the Royal Fusiliers, on the right of the Light Division, formed in front of the 95th (Derbyshires), the left-hand battalion of Second Division.

As far as the edge of the vineyards the lines went forward with admirable regularity, but then they were broken as the men had to climb over walls and thread their way through the cultivated strip. They were subjected to a heavy bombardment as they crossed the river but, once across, they were in dead ground and recovered their dressing as far as the winding of the river allowed. In front of them was a steep bank, up to twelve feet high, and beyond that a smooth slope, devoid of cover, which was swept with grape shot from twelve heavy guns at short range. It was a forbidding prospect made worse because things were going badly on either side of the Fusiliers. On their right the Second Division was halted by the fire of the Causeway Battery and on their left the other brigade of the Light Division, having crossed the river with small loss, was halted by its brigadier, Buller, another short-sighted general, who convinced himself that he was threatened by cavalry, and ordered his battalions to form square.

In the Fusilier Brigade there was a short period of hesitation before Codrington shouted, 'Fix bayonets! Get up the bank and attack!' With the 23rd on the left, the three battalions went forward not in tidy ranks but, as one observer commented, 'like the dense crowd you would see on Derby Day'. Deluged with grape, they pressed

