

## The 69<sup>eme</sup> Regiment in the Peninsular based on Capitaine Marcel's memoirs

### Introduction

The 69<sup>eme</sup> spent nearly 6 years in Spain, they arrived with Napoleon and were part of his force to avenge the defeat at Baylen in July 1808. They did not fight at Corunna or take part in Soult's second invasion of Portugal. Instead they were more than busy trying to subdue the troublesome Galicians in North West Spain. In 1811 they formed part of Massena's force that invaded Portugal for the third time and took a principal part in the attacks on the British at the Bussaco ridge in 1810. They followed Massena to the Lines of Torres Vedras where they like the other French forces suffered greatly from the shortage of food. They subsequently retreated with Massena back to Salamanca and in 1811 they fought at the battle of Fuentes D'Onoro, Massena's last battle before he was replaced by Marmont. They were also present at the battle of Salamanca in 1812 though they did not take an active part till the end when they formed the rearguard for the retreating French army. After Salamanca they were part of the French fighting retreat into France and again took an active part in the battles of Orthez, Bayonne and Toulouse. I have compiled this short history from the memoirs of Capitaine Marcel coupled with other French memoirs from the period and Oman's history of the war.



Bridge at Bayonne, where the Emperor stopped off on his way down.

### Episode 1 Transfer to Spain, 'The road to Madrid'

Capitaine Marcel begins his memoir in August 1808, he is then a sergeant in the voltigeur company of the 3<sup>rd</sup> battalion of the 69<sup>eme</sup> which forms part of General Marchand's division along with the 6<sup>th</sup> light, 76<sup>th</sup> and 39<sup>th</sup> line. These formed part of the 6<sup>th</sup> Corps which was commanded by Colonel Fririon. Like the rest of the grand armee the regiment was comfortably quartered in the province of Silesia in Germany following the treaty of Tilsit, when they hear rumours that they were shortly to be on the move. The Regiment marched on 17<sup>th</sup> August still not knowing their destination but as they travelled back through Germany and into France some had already guessed they were going to Spain, As soon as the drummers had finished beating that morning Marcel and his voltigeurs began to cry 'the road to Madrid!'

The 69<sup>eme</sup> were in fact part of the 3 veteran corps (over 100,000 men) that Napoleon had assigned to reinforce his troops in Spain who were currently facing the Spaniards along the whole line of the river Ebro.



On 31 October the Regiment arrived in Bayonne (see photograph). The Emperor was also here at this time and inspected the division including all 3 battalions of the 69eme which totalled more than 2000 men.

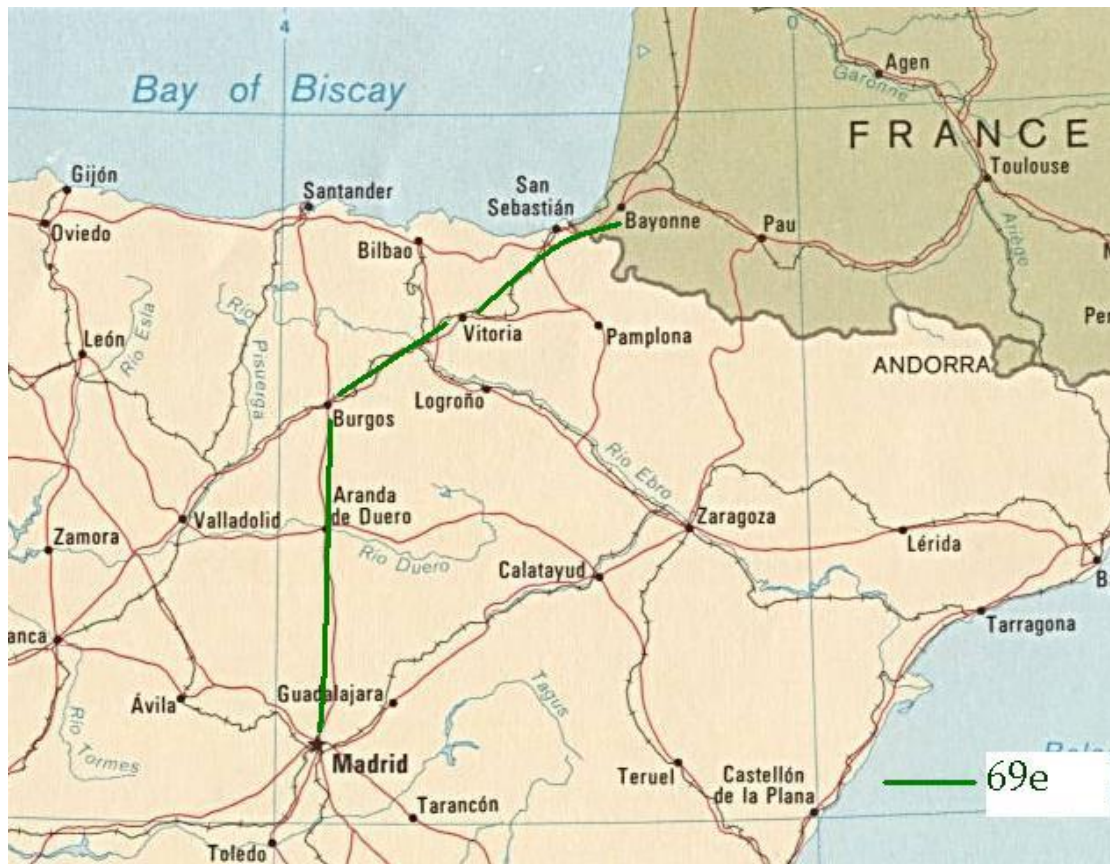
The regiment then crossed into Spain and Marcel recollects how he and his fellow soldiers were struck by the change in manners and dress of the inhabitants and laments the comfort which they had experienced in Germany and had now exchanged for the dirty houses they were now quartered in. On 7 November, the regiment reached Tolosa.



Tolosa Church

It was here that Napoleon himself addressed the Regiment and accepted half a biscuit from a voltigeur's haversack. Later that day a Mameluke brought this voltigeur a large cake and two bottles of fine wine from the emperor, which he shared with his squad.

At Vittoria Napoleon rearranged the organisation of the Corps in Spain and reunited Marchand's division with their old commander, Marshal Ney, who had previously lead them to victory at Jena and Friedland. As the 6<sup>th</sup> Corps under his command, they were to form a pivotal role in Napoleon's plan of attack. Napoleon had spotted that there was a large gap between the Spanish armies in the direction of Burgos (see map). He decided therefore to march there as soon as possible.



The 69eme marched with Napoleon to Burgos and arrived there on 12 November. Marcel describes the beauty of the City and its magnificent buildings but also notes that it was deserted; '...our soldiers were quick to invade the houses to get what they needed; the furniture they used for firewood, and the city soon presented the appearance that it would after an assault.'



Burgos & Cathedral

On 14<sup>th</sup> November the Emperor held another review of his troops on the plain at Burgos and stopped in front of the Regiment, complimenting the Colonel on its turnout. He expressed his satisfaction by saying 'the Champennois are always playing the nasturtiums, even under the snow and bullets'. He was referring to the large number of men from the Marne and Aube in the Regiment and their bravery at the battle of Eylau. He then awarded 14 crosses of honour to soldiers in the Regiment.

(On the subject of champagne, it should be noted that when returning from Silesia travelling through Northern France where many of the men had not seen their kin for several years, there were no desertions). Their commander broke the rules and gave conge for men to see their family, and at in the barracks around Paris they all returned six days later to continue their march south).

Napoleon then ordered Ney to take his corps and wheel to the East and conduct a forced march by Aranda and Soria to surround and cut off Castanos's Spanish army. The success of this strategy depended on the speed of Ney's manoeuvre.

Ney set out on 20<sup>th</sup> November and covered an astounding 121 miles in six and a half days. Unfortunately it was not quick enough and the Spanish army escaped. Ney pursued and mauled the Spanish rearguard twice but failed to catch the full army.

Madrid fell to Napoleon on 13 December and Ney was directed to march to Madrid with his divisions. They arrived there on 14 December and were to form part of a mass of troops the emperor was collecting in and about the capital for new offensive operations.

Napoleon had recently learnt of Moore's existence. At first he thought the British were retreating to Lisbon but he then discovered that they were on the plains of Castille and advancing to attack Sout.

Napoleon then began to devise a plan to pursue and surround Moore and his army.