Tempestade

by hl (hele)

Summary

1810. Combat over the Coa River. Colonel Fitzwilliam POV.

Notes

Aperitif Delurkers Award for 50 Miles of Good Road. First of all, this is dedicated to Anna (Angorra), who delurked very charmingly on 50 miles' NEG's calling card thread. She chose the word borrasque, and told me I could use the equivalent in any of the languages in which it exists.

Loosely based on a real battle.

Thanks to Janice (DENVER at AHA) for a through and patient beta job. Any errors remaining are mine only.

July 24. He was prepared, under the early afternoon's inconstant sun. He had lived through many a battle. Unlike the sun, he would not hide. His curved sabre was at his hip. His red uniform was in order, its buttons gleaming dully. The pistol he did not think he would use, charged.

His horse whinnied, impatient, and he laid a trembling hand on his neck.

The terrain was rough, stones larger where the ravine fell into the river. The river, if you came to the edge and leaned enough to see it, gurgled dark, furious with the world. There was no time now to lean far enough to see it.
Fitzwilliam had seen it the night before, through a heavy haze of sweat, fear and vomit. He had come bringing a dispatch, express in its desire for the Light Division to cross the river and defend from the other side. He had orders to stay with General Craufurd here, and the Brigadier-General Robert Craufurd here—an excellent man, a gentleman, a soldier—had decided that his orders meant nothing. Colonel Fitzwilliam had drunk with his superior for a British victory. There was no time now to lean far enough to see it.

The French had come in the night. On the other side the river and impassable stone walls.

The storm, a treacherous foreign storm, had not cared who it hid. A tempestade, or perhaps a borrasca. He mixed his Portuguese and his Spanish, but now, in the border, who would care? There was blood, running over the ground still bloated dark and humid. Down it went to join the angry current of the river.

Four to one. Every time a bloody uniform found its resting place in the Portuguese land, his mind did not wonder if there was honour in dying here—in dying defending a bridge in the middle of nowhere. His memories did not run to his father's house, to his cousins'. Nor to his family. Not even to the dark eyes and hair, the warm soft pale complying body of some days ago.

He and the horse moved as one, thrusting forward against the confusion. His sabre cut deep red gashes, making splatters against his uniform and the ground. One man fell, his head nearly cut off by a blow to the back of his neck. He parried a lance and laid another blow against a face, and another fellow was fallen to the ground under the trampling of his own horse, screaming.

Finally, an impossible long time later, orders came to retire across the bloody bridge.

The infantry, low on the ground and fighting, fighting, always fighting, would cover for them. They huddled in small groups, firing. They were fell in numbers that no longer amazed him, but nevertheless, something still human, still at home in England, muttered in his head the number of dead.

The road was clogged with wagons. A limber was overturned. Men were everywhere, and the darkening red of the blood hid the uniforms of those who fell.

They drove them off time and again.

The cavalry ran towards the bridge and across. The infantry followed. They crossed, all but the dead. Their souls had been run through and sent through by the dozen.

The French kept coming. This time the enemy was weak infantry, trying to walk the fine path of carved stone. Quickly now, they encountered the British fire.

Three more times they came, trying to cross. Fire; fire; fire. Bodies grotesque piles, high on the narrow stone bridge, impeding the enemy's advance.

And then... miraculous as a benediction, because at some point the dead look dead no matter the uniform, another tempestade. Or perhaps a borrasca.

Or--he cursed his memory for the French word, but it did not come: it was as if all the French were dead.

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