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First Contact: Lisbon

In August 1811, 23-year-old Lieutenant William Bragge of the 3rd King’s Own Dragoons left Plymouth with his regiment bound for Lisbon and the Peninsular War. Born into English gentry, and educated at Winchester and University College, Oxford, Bragge was relatively new to the army, commissioned in only 1810. He wrote from Belem, just outside Lisbon, on 29 August, the first of 40 letters home to his father over the course of the war. The sea voyage had been a relatively quick one, lasting only ten days, although he found it rather tedious, for the most part ‘Sea and Sky, Sky and Sea’. As a self-proclaimed ‘Landsman at Sea’, he had found it rather difficult to pursue his favourite pastimes – reading and writing – although at least he had not suffered from sea sickness, as many soldiers did on their way out. On 24 August, as the ship entered the Tagus, Bragge had been taken by the magnificent panorama of the river valley and the city rising up on its northern bank: ‘The entrance to Lisbon is truly grand and Beautiful, it being built on Seven Hills rising from the Water’s edge and every Building retaining its original colour of White.’ Yet there ended the city’s magic. ‘Here ends the Beauty of Lisbon for on setting your Foot on Land you are almost overcome with the Stench, every Filth being thrown into the street.’ Such was his shock at the new that Bragge found himself ‘Dreading to enter any House the first night’ and found refuge in what he hoped would be the closest thing to home – the ‘Floor of an Englishman’s House’. Yet even that offered little protection: ‘I accordingly turned in and then underwent the severest Pennance Fleas & bugs can inflict; and as long as I live the first bed in Portugal will be remembered.’ Bragge was now a long way from his family’s ancestral home of Sadborow in Dorset. The physical distance from England was but ten days by sea, but culturally it seemed he had entered another world entirely.1

G. Daly, The British Soldier in the Peninsular War
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With a population of 200,000 inhabitants, Lisbon was the largest city of the Iberian Peninsula. Lying upstream from the mouth of the Tagus, the city’s historic life force was the river and the Atlantic beyond. Whilst Lisbon’s ‘Golden Age’ of the early to mid-eighteenth-century had passed – an era when Brazilian gold and diamond mines paid for the construction of sumptuous palaces and churches – Lisbon remained a port of international significance, linked to the trade routes of Asia, Africa and the Americas, especially Brazil. In the European and British imagination of the time, the city remained famous for the earthquake of 1755, which destroyed much of the old city and left 30,000 dead. Just over half a century later, a second great seismic force shook Lisbon: the coming of Napoleon. The 1808 French occupation under Junot, however, proved short-lived. Following Wellington’s victory at Vimeiro, the British army triumphantly entered Lisbon to cheering crowds. Under the watchful eyes of the British, the last French soldiers then sailed from Lisbon in early October 1808.

From that time on, Lisbon was the British gateway to the war. Whilst the very first soldiers arrived at Mondego Bay, and later some regiments arrived in Corunna and Cadiz, the overwhelming majority of soldiers who made their way out to the Peninsular War came via the Tagus and Lisbon. This came courtesy of the British decision in early 1809 to use Portugal, and Lisbon in particular, as the central base of their war effort. With this came growing British power over Portugal itself: the British exerted influence over the Regency Council that was set up to rule in the name of the Brazilian-based Braganzas; General William Beresford was appointed in 1809 to command and reform the Portuguese army; and Wellington came to wield great power over the country’s population and resources in mobilizing its defence and war effort. Lisbon was the operational axis of all this. Indeed, in the words of Lieutenant James Hope of the 92nd Highlanders, who landed in Lisbon in October 1811: ‘From the immense number of British officers and soldiers continually parading the streets of the city, a stranger, not knowing the cause, would, naturally enough, conclude that Portugal had become a colony of Great Britain.’

Lisbon became the chief supply base of the British army, where soldiers, horses, arms and supplies arrived by sea. As George Farmer, a private in the 11th Light Dragoons, recalled upon arriving in 1810: ‘Lisbon was in perpetual bustle during that season. Day after day ships arrived, bringing men, or stores, or munitions of war from England. The quays were continually crowded with soldiers, sailors, and camp-followers, whilst the river itself seemed to support a very forest of