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Topic: The Battle of Assaye

The Battle of Assaye was a major battle of the Second Anglo-Maratha War fought between the Maratha Empire and the British East India Company. It occurred on 23 September 1803 near Assaye in western India where an outnumbered Indian and British force under the command of Major General Arthur Wellesley (who later became the Duke of Wellington) defeated a combined Maratha army of Daulat Scindia and the Raja of Berar. The battle was the Duke of Wellington's first major victory and the one he later described as his finest accomplishment on the battlefield, even more so than his more famous victories in the Peninsular War, and his defeat of Napoleon Bonaparte at the Battle of Waterloo.

From August 1803, Wellesley's army and a separate force under the command of his subordinate Colonel James Stevenson had been pursuing the Maratha cavalry-based army which threatened to raid south into Hyderabad. After several weeks of pursuit and countermarching, Scindia reinforced the combined Maratha army with his modernized infantry and artillery as the British forces closed in on his position.

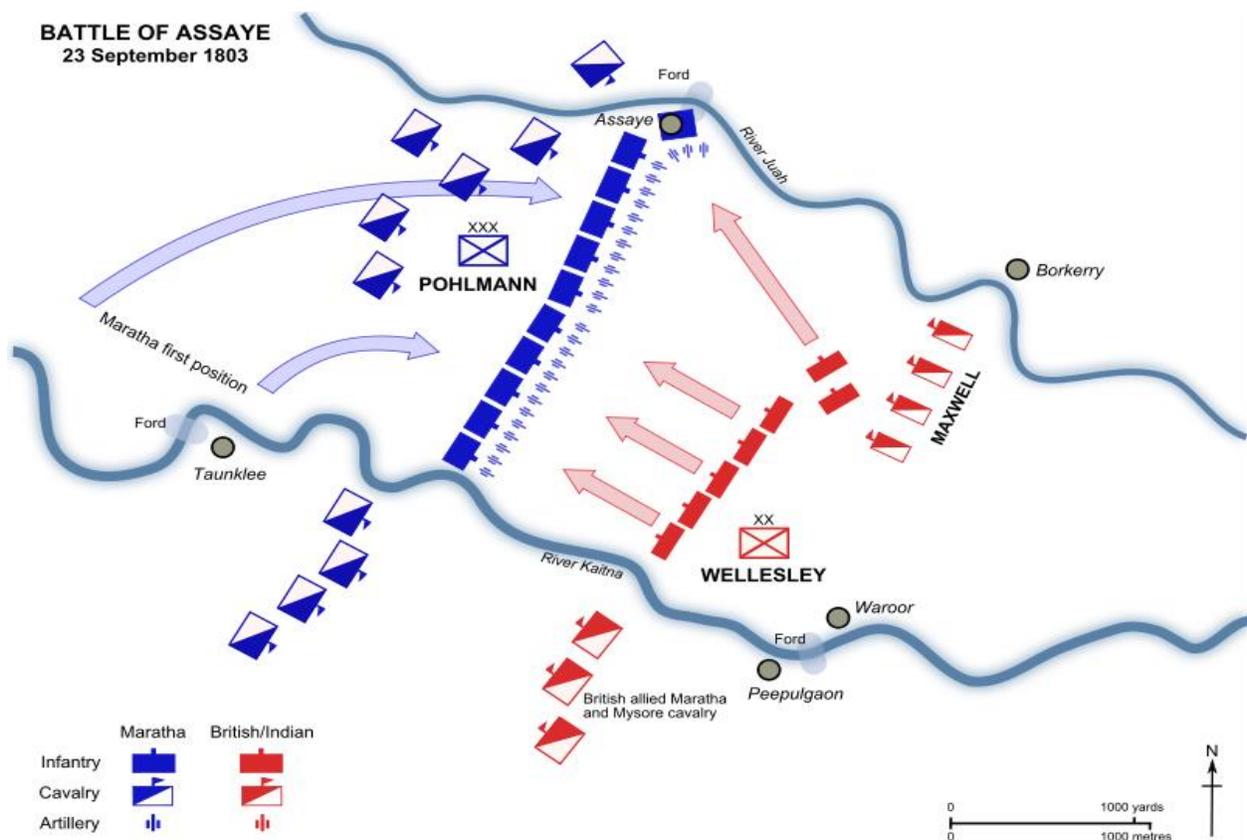
Wellesley received intelligence indicating the location of the Maratha encampment on 21 September and devised a plan whereby his two armies would converge on the Maratha position three days later. Wellesley's force, however, encountered the Maratha army – which was under the command of Colonel Anthony Pohlmann, a German formerly in British service – 6 miles (9.7 km) farther south than he anticipated. Although outnumbered, Wellesley resolved to attack at once, believing that the Maratha army would soon move off. Both sides suffered heavily in the ensuing battle; Maratha artillery caused large numbers of casualties among Wellesley's troops but the vast numbers of Maratha cavalry proved largely ineffective. A combination of bayonet and cavalry charges eventually forced the Maratha army to retreat with the loss of most of their guns, but Wellesley's army was too battered and exhausted to pursue.

Wellesley's victory at Assaye, preceded by the capture of Ahmednagar and followed by victories at Argaon and Gawilghur, resulted in the defeat of Scindia and Berar's armies in the Deccan. Wellesley's progress in the Deccan was matched by Lieutenant General Gerard Lake's successful campaigns in Northern India and led to the British becoming the dominant power in the heartlands of India

Background

Feuding between the two dominant powers within the Maratha Empire, Yashwant Rao Holkar and Daulat Rao Scindia, led to civil war at the turn of the 19th century. The hostilities culminated in the Battle of Poona in October 1802 where Holkar defeated a combined army of Scindia and Baji Rao II – the Peshwa and nominal overlord of the Maratha Empire. Scindia retreated into his dominions to the north, but Baji Rao was driven from his territory and sought refuge with the East India Company at Bassein. He appealed to the Company for assistance, offering to accept its authority if he were restored to his principality at Poona. Lord Mornington, the ambitious Governor-General of British India, seized on the opportunity to extend Company influence into the Maratha Empire which he perceived as the final obstacle to British paramountcy over the Indian subcontinent. The Treaty of Bassein was signed in December 1802 whereby the Company agreed to restore Baji Rao in return for control over his foreign affairs and a garrison of 6,000 Company troops permanently stationed in Poona. The restoration was commanded by Lord Mornington's younger brother, Major General Arthur Wellesley, who in March 1803 marched on

Poona from Mysore with 15,000 Company troops and 9,000 Hyderabad allies. Wellesley entered Poona without opposition on 20 April, and Baji Rao was formally restored to his throne on 13 May. The treaty gave offence to the other Maratha leaders, who deemed that the system of subsidiary alliances with the British was an unwarranted interference into their affairs and fatal to the independent Maratha states. The Maratha leaders refused to submit to the Peshwa's authority and tensions were raised further when Holkar raided into Hyderabad in May, claiming that the Nizam of Hyderabad (a British ally) owed him money. Mornington consequently engaged the various Maratha chieftains in negotiations. Lieutenant Colonel John Collins was sent to Scindia's camp to discuss his objections and propose a defensive alliance. However, Scindia had formed a military alliance with the Rajah of Berar with a view to bringing the Maratha leaders into a coalition against the British, and had begun to mass his forces on the Nizam's border. Wellesley, who had been given control over the Company's military and political affairs in central India in June, demanded Scindia declare his intentions and withdraw his forces or face the prospect of war. After a protracted period of negotiations, Collins reported to Wellesley on 3 August that Scindia refused to give an answer and would not withdraw his troops. Wellesley's response was to declare war on Scindia and Berar "in order to secure the interests of the British government and its allies".



Battle

Pohlmann struck camp and deployed his infantry battalions in a line facing southwards behind the steep banks of the Kailna with his cannon arrayed directly in front. The great mass of Maratha cavalry was kept on the right flank and Berar's irregular infantry garrisoned Assaye to the rear. The only observable crossing point over the river was a small ford directly ahead of the

Maratha position. Pohlmann's strategy was to funnel the British and Madras troops across the ford into the mouth of his cannon, and then on to the massed infantry and cavalry behind. Wellesley's local guides assured him that no other ford existed nearby, but he quickly discarded the option of a frontal assault as suicide. While reconnoitring he had noticed two unguarded villages, Peepulgaon and Waroor, one on each bank of the Kaitna beyond the Maratha left. On the assumption that a ford must exist between the two villages, Wellesley ordered the area to be further reconnoitred by his Chief Engineer, Captain John Johnson, who reported that there was indeed a ford at that spot. Thus Wellesley led his army east to the crossing in an attempt to launch an attack on Pohlmann's left flank.

At around 15:00, the British crossed to the northern bank of the Kaitna unopposed apart from a distant harassing fire from the Maratha cannon which was largely inaccurate but succeeded in decapitating Wellesley's dragoon orderly. Once across, Wellesley ordered his six infantry battalions to form into two lines, with his cavalry as a reserve in a third. His allied Maratha and Mysore cavalry were ordered to remain south of the Kaitna to keep in check a large body of Maratha cavalry which hovered around the British rear. Pohlmann soon recognised Wellesley's intentions and swung his infantry and guns through 90 degrees to establish a new line spread approximately 1 mile (1.6 km) across the isthmus with their right flank on the Kaitna and the left on Assaye. Although the new position secured the Maratha flanks, it restricted Pohlmann from bringing his superior numbers into action.

The Maratha redeployment was swifter and more efficient than Wellesley had anticipated and he immediately reacted by extending his front to deny Pohlmann the opportunity to outflank him. A battalion of pickets and the 74th Highlanders, which formed the right of the first and second lines, were ordered to move obliquely to the right. This allowed the 78th to anchor the left flank and Madras infantry battalions (the 1/10th, 1/8th, 1/4th and 2/12th) to form the centre of the British line. Wellesley's intention was to force back the Marathas from their guns and then – operating by his left to avoid the heavily defended Assaye – throw them back on the Juah and complete their destruction with his cavalry.

The Maratha cannonade intensified as the British redeployed. Although British artillery was brought forward to counter, it was ineffective against the mass firepower of the Maratha guns and quickly disabled through the weight of shot directed against it. British casualties mounted as the Maratha guns turned their attention to the infantry and subjected them to a barrage of canister, grape and round shot. Wellesley decided that his only option to neutralise the artillery and get his men out of the killing field was to advance directly into the mouth of the Maratha artillery. He ordered his cannon to be abandoned and gave the command for his infantry to march forward with bayonets fixed.

The Maratha cannonade punched holes in the British line, but the infantry maintained a steady pace, closing up the gaps in their ranks as they advanced. The 78th Highlanders were the first to reach the enemy in the southern sector next to the River Kailna. They paused 50 yards (46 m) from the Maratha gunners and unleashed a volley of musket fire before launching into a bayonet charge. The four battalions of Madras infantry to the right of the 78th, accompanied by the Madras Pioneers, reached Pohlmann's line shortly afterwards and attacked in the same fashion. The gunners stood by their cannon but were no match for the bayonets of the British and Madras troops who swiftly pressed on towards the Maratha infantry. However, instead of meeting the charge, the Maratha right broke and fled northwards towards the Juah, causing the rest of the southern half of the line to follow. The officers of the Madras battalions temporarily lost control as the sepoys, encouraged by their success, pushed too far in pursuit. Maratha cavalry momentarily threatened to charge, but were checked by the 78th, who remained in order and reformed to face the danger.

In the northern sector of the battlefield however, Wellesley's right flank was in turmoil. The commander of the pickets, Lieutenant Colonel William Orrock, had mistaken his orders and

continued his oblique path directly towards Assaye. Major Samuel Swinton of the 74th Regiment was ordered to support the pickets and followed close behind. This created a large gap in the centre of the British line and brought the two battalions under a barrage of cannonade from the artillery around the village and the Maratha left. The two battalions began to fall back in disarray, and Pohlmann ordered his remaining infantry and cavalry forward to attack. The Marathas gave no quarter; the pickets were virtually annihilated, but the remnants of the 74th were able to form a rough square behind hastily piled bodies of dead. Realising that the destruction of his right would leave his army exposed and outflanked, Wellesley ordered a detachment of British cavalry under Colonel Patrick Maxwell, consisting of the 19th Light Dragoons and elements of the 4th and 5th Madras Native Cavalry, into action. From their position at the rear, the cavalry dashed directly towards the 74th's square, crashed into the swarming attackers and routed them. Maxwell pressed his advantage and continued his charge into the Maratha infantry and guns on the left, driving them backwards and across the Juah "with great slaughter".

A number of Maratha gunners who had feigned death when the British advanced over their position re-manned their guns and began to pour cannon fire into the rear of the 74th and Madras infantry. Wellesley ordered his four sepoy battalions to re-form and ward off any threat from the Maratha infantry and cavalry while the 78th were sent back to retake the Maratha gun line. Wellesley, meanwhile, galloped back to 7th Madras Native Cavalry, which had been held back in reserve to the east, and led a cavalry charge from the opposite direction. The gunners again stood their ground but were eventually driven from their guns and this time it was ensured that all those who remained were dead.

While Wellesley was preoccupied with re-taking the gun line, Pohlmann rallied his infantry and redeployed them into a semicircle with their backs to the Juah; their right flank across the river and their left in Assaye. However, most of the Maratha cannon, which had inflicted heavy losses on Wellesley's infantry, had been captured or lay abandoned on the battlefield. Reluctant to join the fray, the Maratha cavalry lingered in the distance to the west. Most were Pindarries: loosely organised and lightly armed horsemen whose traditional role was to cut down fleeing enemy troops, harass convoy lines and carry out raids into enemy territory. They were not trained to attack well-formed infantry or heavily armed European cavalry, and did not play a further part in the battle.

With the remanned Maratha artillery silenced, Wellesley turned his attention to Pohlmann's reformed infantry. Although Maxwell had suffered heavy losses, he had rallied his cavalry and returned to the field of battle. Wellesley ordered him to charge the Maratha left flank, while the infantry moved forward as a single line to meet the centre and right. The cavalry spurred forward but were met with a volley of canister shot which struck Maxwell, killing him instantly. Their momentum lost, the cavalry did not complete their charge, but veered away from the Maratha line at the last moment. The British and Madras infantry marched on against the Maratha position. Pohlmann's men, their morale low, did not wait for the attack and instead retreated northwards across the Juah. Maratha sources claim the line marched away from the battlefield in an orderly manner on Pohlmann's orders, but British accounts claim the Maratha infantry fled in an uncontrolled panic. Berar's irregulars inside Assaye, now leaderless and having witnessed the fate of the regular infantry, abandoned the village and marched off northwards at around 18:00, followed shortly afterwards by the Maratha cavalry. Wellesley's troops were exhausted and in no condition to pursue, and the native allied cavalry which had remained on the south bank of the Kailna and had not been engaged, refused to pursue without the support of the British and Madras cavalry.

The number of Maratha casualties is more difficult to ascertain. Despatches from British officers give a figure of 1,200 dead and many more wounded but some modern historians have estimated a total of 6,000 dead and wounded. The Marathas also surrendered seven stands of colours, large amounts of stores and ammunition and 98 cannon – most of which were later taken into service

by the East India Company. Although Scindia and Berar's army was not finished as a fighting force, several of Scindia's regular infantry battalions and artillery crews had been destroyed. Their command structure had also been damaged: many of their European officers, including Colonel Pohlmann and Major Dupont, surrendered to the Company – which had offered amnesty to Europeans in the service of the Maratha armies – or deserted and sought employment with other native chieftains. Wellesley remained to the south while he established a hospital at Ajanta and awaited reinforcements from Poona. Two months later, he combined with Stevenson to rout Scindia and Berar's demoralised and weakened army at Argaon, and shortly afterwards stormed Berar's fortress at Gawilghur. These victories, coupled with Lieutenant General Lake's successful campaign in the north, induced the two Maratha chiefs to sue for peace.

Wellesley later told Stevenson that "I should not like to see again such a loss as I sustained on the 23rd September, even if attended by such a gain", and in later life he referred to Assaye as "the bloodiest for the numbers that I ever saw". Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Munro, the Company's district collector at Mysore, was critical of the high proportion of casualties and questioned Wellesley's decision not to wait for Stevenson. He wrote to Wellesley: "I am tempted to think that you did it with a view of sharing the glory with the smallest numbers". In response, Wellesley politely rebuffed Munro's accusations and defended his action as necessary because he had received and acted upon incorrect intelligence regarding the Maratha position. Assaye was 34-year-old Wellesley's first major success and despite his anguish over the heavy losses, it was a battle he always held in the highest estimation. After his retirement from active military service, the Duke of Wellington (as he later became known) considered Assaye the finest thing he ever did in the way of fighting even when compared to his later military career.

Lord Mornington and his Council lauded the battle as a "most brilliant and important victory", and presented each of the Madras units and British regiments involved in the engagement with a set of honorary colours. The British regiments and native units were also awarded the Assaye battle honour and most were later given permission to adopt an Assaye elephant as part of their insignia. A public monument was also erected by the East India Company at Fort William, Calcutta to commemorate the victory. The 74th Regiment of foot later became known as the Assaye regiment due to their stand at the battle and their modern-day successors, the Royal Highland Fusiliers (2 SCOTS), still celebrate the anniversary of the battle each year. Of the native infantry battalions, only the Madras Sappers survive in their original form in the Indian Army but they no longer celebrate Assaye as it has been declared a repugnant battle honour by the Government of India.

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