

BATTLE OF ALMANSA

At 3 o'clock on the afternoon of April 25th, 1707, the armies of the Bourbon and Austrian candidates for the Spanish crown, opened fire very close to the adobe walls of the kitchen gardens which demarcated the small town of Almansa, at that time a community of 3,400 inhabitants. This began a crucial chapter in the so-called War of the Spanish Succession, a war whose repercussions would be known throughout the whole of Europe, since this battle overturned the direction of events which the war had taken up to this point. Until now, the situation had been favourable to Archduke Charles of Austria, who was already signing his documents as 'Charles III of Spain'. Let us look at the development of the battle and how both armies came to arrive at this small town.

Proximity of the Bourbon Army to Almansa

James FitzJames (1670-1734) Duke of Berwick, had been driven across the Caudete-Yecla-Montealegre-Pétrola line to Chinchilla, by the advance of the Austrian army. En route, he had withdrawn the garrisons at these posts - a prudent move, but one which was harmful for his honour as Commander-in-Chief of the Army of the Two Crowns. Now, from Chinchilla, Berwick advanced anew towards the only site in the area which had escaped the sackings of the Austrian army and where meanwhile it could - although with difficulties - supply with provisions its army, which was daily increasing in numbers; this place was Almansa.



Castillo de Chinchilla

The Confederate army was composed of English, Dutch and Portuguese units. These were under the shared command of Henry Massue de Ruvigny (1648 – 1720), Count of Galway, a French Huguenot nobleman in the service of England, who amongst his other injuries had lost an arm in the Extremadura campaign a year earlier, and the spirited but almost elderly Portuguese Antonio Luis de Sousa (1644-1718) Marquess Das Minas. Under their orders this army had turned away from Montealegre in order to once again advance to Villena, where the castle garrison and a dozen compatriots, under the command of a French captain, were holding out in an audacious manner; this, despite the fact that the town had been left deserted after the army's arrival.

Berwick's army was formed of French units, which Louis XIV of France had sent the year before, and the Spanish army of Philip V – which contained some units of other kingdoms of the Spanish monarchy, of Italian origin. In addition, there were natives of the Low Countries and at least one Irish battalion which formed his personal guard. The size of this army increased daily, as mergers began to take place with those units which, at the end of the winter hiatus, came together from all over La Mancha, Andalucia and Castilla, as well as with the new levies which were arriving. These latter forces had very little preparation for battle, but at least they added to the army's size.

The army advanced over impoverished land towards Montealegre, and from there to Almansa. The scarcity of food caused groups of soldiers who fell behind on the march, to sack the Vega of Belén , including the Sanctuary, as well as the so-called Casa de Las Barracas and the windmills of the area. According to the Acts of the Municipal Council of Almansa of April 22nd, 1707, they stole animals and flour.



Ermita de Ntra. Sra. De Belén, Exterior View

The huge Bourbon camp was installed to the North-East of Almansa and consisted of hundreds of canvas tents in the area of El Hondo, stretching almost to the hamlet of San Benito. Senior officers were accommodated in the homes of the dignitaries of Almansa, including the Duke of Berwick, who stayed in the home of Don Luis Enríquez de Navarra, Governor of Almansa Castle.

In the early hours of April 23rd, Berwick personally advanced with a full cavalry escort towards Villena, to see if it was possible to help the castle garrison there, but the well-organized positioning of the enemy stopped him from doing so. In his own words: “ I am both of the opinion and can see, too, that we can’t help Villena castle, and it will be lost to us, so I shall stop risking the little honour they have left me...”

Perhaps it was the gossip against the Commander-in-Chief of the Bourbons – which started with stories about his English background –which forced him to use some initiative and organize a column to attack Ayora, which was under the control of the troops attached to Archduke Charles.

Under the command of the Count of Pinto, approximately 2000 infantry and 500 cavalry with two guns, left for Ayora on the morning of April 24th. After arriving in the small town and talking with Federico De Ávila, the commander of the Austrian

troops, the plaza was surrendered , but upon entering it, the Bourbon troops began a brawl, which resulted in the death of various soldiers and injuries to others. These latter included Monsieur Courbille, who was wounded in the arm, and the Regimental Colonel Du.Maine, who would later die in Almansa from his wounds.

Orders were quickly given for siege operations; the storming and burning of the castle and the town immediately followed, because an urgent message was received from Berwick, ordering the Count of Pinto to return to Almansa at once, since news had arrived that the Confederates had lifted the siege of Villena castle and were now making for Almansa.

Proximity of the Austrian Army to Almansa

After the arrival of two Bourbon deserters at the Confederate camp outside Villena, the commanders were informed of the march of the Bourbonic column towards Ayora. According to the words of the Portuguese Colonel Antonio Do Couto, to them it seemed the ideal moment to attack Berwick, since his army was reduced in size by the column that had been ordered to Ayora and by the fact that the Duke of Orleans – who was supposedly bringing extra forces- had not yet arrived.



Tower of the Castillo de la Atalaya (Villena)

Showing the impacts of the Anglo-Portuguese Artillery in 1707

Thus, the Austrians suddenly lifted the siege and set out towards Almansa as evening was falling on April 24th, setting up camp outside Caudete, in the area known as Torre de Bogarra. At 3 o'clock in the morning of April 25th, drumbeats announced reveille, so that the Portuguese might know that they must be ready by 4 o'clock to march towards Almansa.



Caudete (Albacete) - View of the so-called "Sala de la Villa"

Four long columns of soldiers marched in parallel to the neighbourhood of the Torre de D. Enrique, now known as the Torre Grande (Great Tower) where, according to Captain Hawley of the 4th Regiment of Dragoons, the troops left their equipment and where their numbers were counted. According to their calculations there were 13,400 soldiers, not counting auxiliaries or officers, which brought the figure to approximately 16,000 men.

Around 11 o'clock in the morning, the first English observers arrived at the top of Las Cabezuelas, small elevations which closed the Almansa corridor. From this distance they observed the reorganizing movements of Berwick's army, which they interpreted as preparations for a new flight. This drove them to push forward with the march at once, in order to enter into combat as soon as possible.



The Hills of Las Cabezuelas, seen from Fuennegra.

At least one of the columns was unable to enter the pass which opened out between the hill of the Atalaya de Xativa (Xativa Watchtower) and Las Cabezuelas, because it was a steep climb. Hawley wrote “ when our army reached the top of the hill, the infantry was unable to do anything more.”

The columns began to unfold in the meadow of the old “laguna del saladar” (salt marsh lagoon), forming into two parallel lines, which were organized as follows:

The left wing was made up of English and Dutch cavalry, plus a few squadrons of Portuguese; amongst these were placed some battalions of English infantry.

The centre was exclusively composed of infantry, English, Dutch, Portuguese and Huguenot (French Protestants), who were paid and armed by England and Holland.

The right wing was formed of both infantry and cavalry and was exclusively Portuguese. The artillery consisted of 20 guns, spread out in 3 sets across the length of the frontline. According to Captain Hawley’s records, there were 13,400 soldiers in the army, plus auxiliaries and officers, which brought the figure to some 16,000 men.

Progress of Combat

The Confederate army now formed a very long line, which covered the whole of the Eastern side of the Almansa corridor, including the hills at both ends. With great resolve, it moved forwards to meet Berwick’s army which, after a reorganization of their lines (interpreted by Galway as a new plan to flee the battle) was now also in two lines, very close to Almansa town centre.

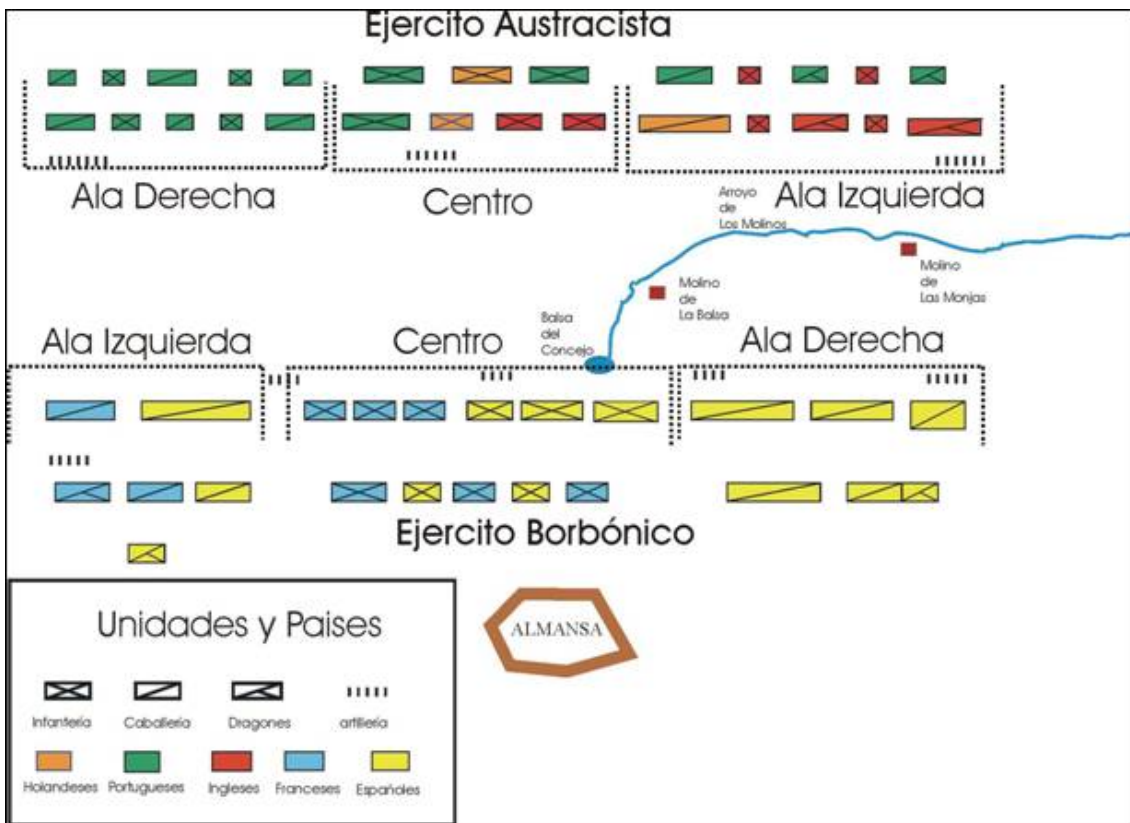


Illustration of the arrangement of both armies at 1500h., April 25th, 1707

The first line of the Bourbon army covered a front of approximately 6 kms, from the Eastern slope of the Cerro de la Atalaya to the neighbourhood of the Upper Mill, though not reaching the Mill building itself.

The left wing was composed of French, Spanish and Irish cavalry and dragoons. The centre was formed of brigades of infantry, with the French and Spanish blocks alternating, as well as some Walloon battalions, some Irish – and one Swiss soldier. This army occupied the plain from near to the Atalaya to the Balsa del Concejo, as can be seen in the picture

Continuing from this, the right wing comprised the Spanish cavalry, including Neapolitan and Flemish units, which stretched across the west face of the Cerro Montizon, up to the surroundings of the Upper Mill. The artillery of 24 guns, each weighing between 4 and 6lbs, was distributed in 5 batteries, the most exposed of these consisting of 5 guns, which were placed near the Molino de las Monjas, in front of the cavalry itself. The second line was positioned 200 metres behind the first, very close to

some of the adobe walls which defined the vegetable gardens of the houses, and which gave the small town of Almansa the appearance of having a fortified enclosure, although, in fact, this was not the case. The Bourbon army would probably have had between 23,000 and 25,000 men.

The Confederate army stopped some 1,500 metres from the enemy, its right wing on the Carasoles hill, the centre group on the Romeral plain and the left on the Cantoblanco. This standstill before battle lasted for an hour, during which time they had first sight of the layout of the Army of the Two Crowns, and it became clear to the Confederate officers that their own army was inferior in numbers. Nevertheless, the antagonism that existed between Das Minas and Galway, together with the certainty that Berwick was weak and afraid of entering into battle, incited them to venture into terrain that was totally unknown to them, an action whose ending would be decisive.



View of Almansa Castle, of Almohad origin

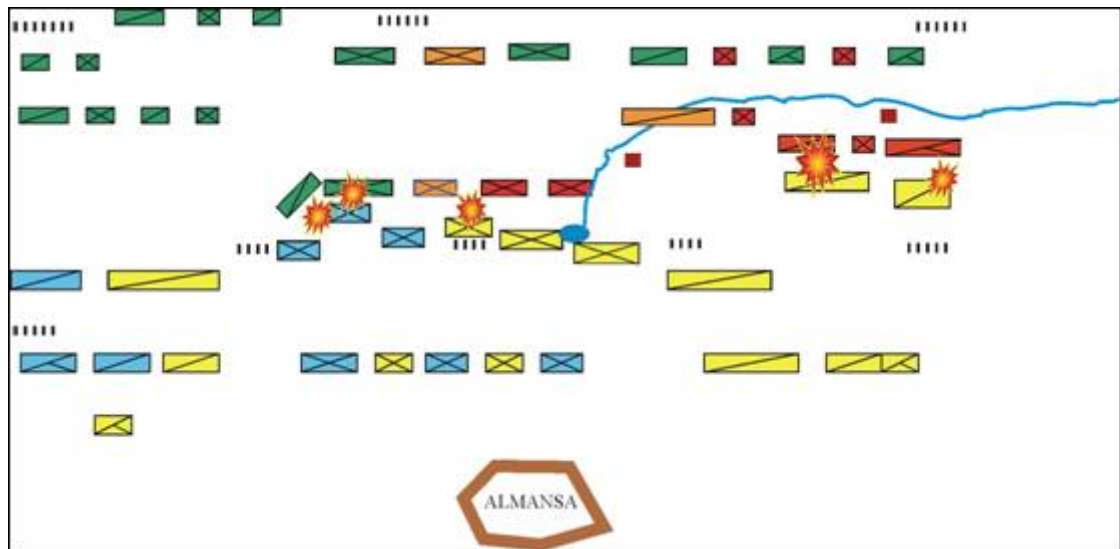
At three o'clock in the afternoon of April 25th, 1707, a cloudy and cold Easter Monday, the guns of the Two Crowns began firing. The cannons of the Austrians immediately responded. Part of the English cavalry crossed the Mill stream and fell into line at the

bottom of Montizón hill. It began to ascend the hill, to attack the Bourbon artillery which was in the area of the Molino de las Monjas.

Seeing this, some squadrons of the Cavalry of the Royal Guard – Spanish, Neapolitans, Belgians – rushed downhill to hold back the attack ; this resulted in their pursuing the English Dragoons, until they came up against the line of English infantry which, placed between the cavalry, had also crossed the stream. The English fire caused the Spanish to withdraw to its own lines, pursued by new Confederate squadrons, the intervention of the cavalry of the Marquess of Pozoblanco neutralizing the danger that existed during this withdrawal. At least one other time a similar encounter occurred , with the same result, i.e. the more powerful Spanish cavalry drove back the Confederates, but on arrival at the infantry line, the organized firing there forced them to withdraw.

In the centre, both armies moved towards each other slowly and rhythmically. Once at shooting distance, they stopped and began an exchange of gunfire which was to last for about half an hour. Finally, at approximately 3.30p.m., the Bourbon line decided to advance on the Austrians, but they did so in a disorganized fashion, since each brigade was moving at a different pace because of the enemy's fire.

It appears that the French brigade “Couronne” (Crown) moved forward impulsively and, in so doing, was exposed both at the front and the sides. As a consequence of this, in the combined Portuguese infantry and cavalry counterattack which took place, the French lost 40% of their infantry.



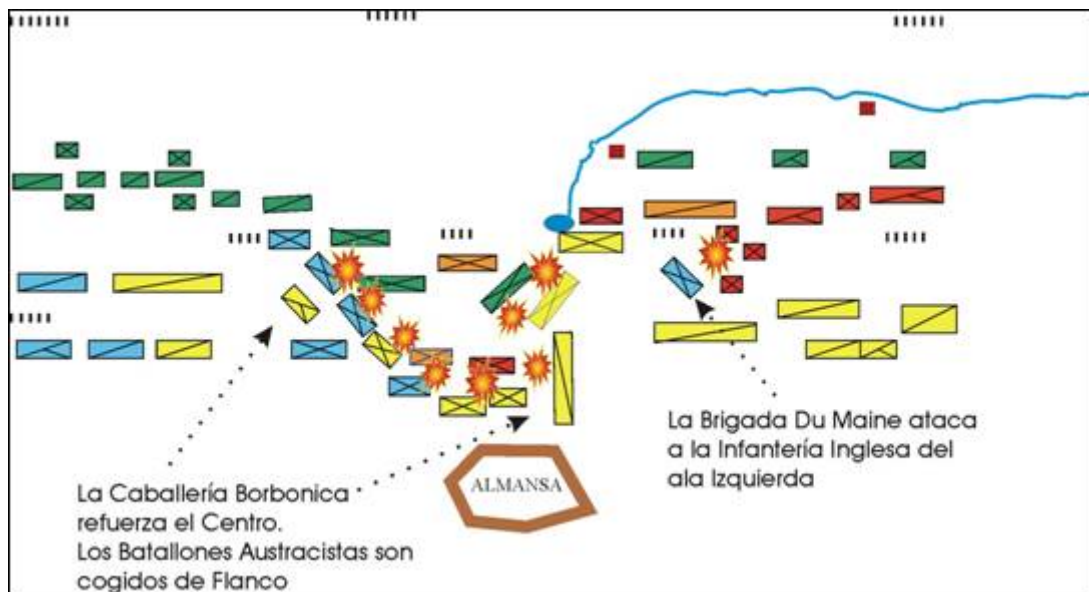
First Combat, 15.30h

All the brigades of the Bourbon centre were driven back, the picture of 1709 showing the Castilla brigade doing so with much strength in the area of Pozo de Nieve, where it stood up to the impact of various Anglo- Dutch battalions. Some French-Spanish divisions were actually fighting as they withdrew. This moment is also captured in the picture, where we see many soldiers in white uniforms running towards the area around the Ermita de S. Blas.

At least two battalions, one English, the other Dutch according to the 1709 picture, opened up a pass between the two enemy lines, arriving in the town area at a moment of great danger for the Bourbon army.

At the other extreme, battle commenced at about 3.30p.m., between the French cavalry and the Portuguese army, because Galway had agreed with Das Minas that the English would attack first. The result was the same as on the other wing, with the Portuguese infantry stopping the French cavalry, which had beaten the Portuguese cavalry.

Around 4 o'clock in the afternoon, Berwick was in a dangerous situation. With much effort, he had control of the two fighting wings, but in the centre the line had been broken, and if the enemy succeeded in introducing more units or widening the breach, defeat would be inevitable.



Bourbon Cavalry reinforces the centre. Austrian battalions are caught on this wing

The Du Maine Brigade attacks English infantry on left wing

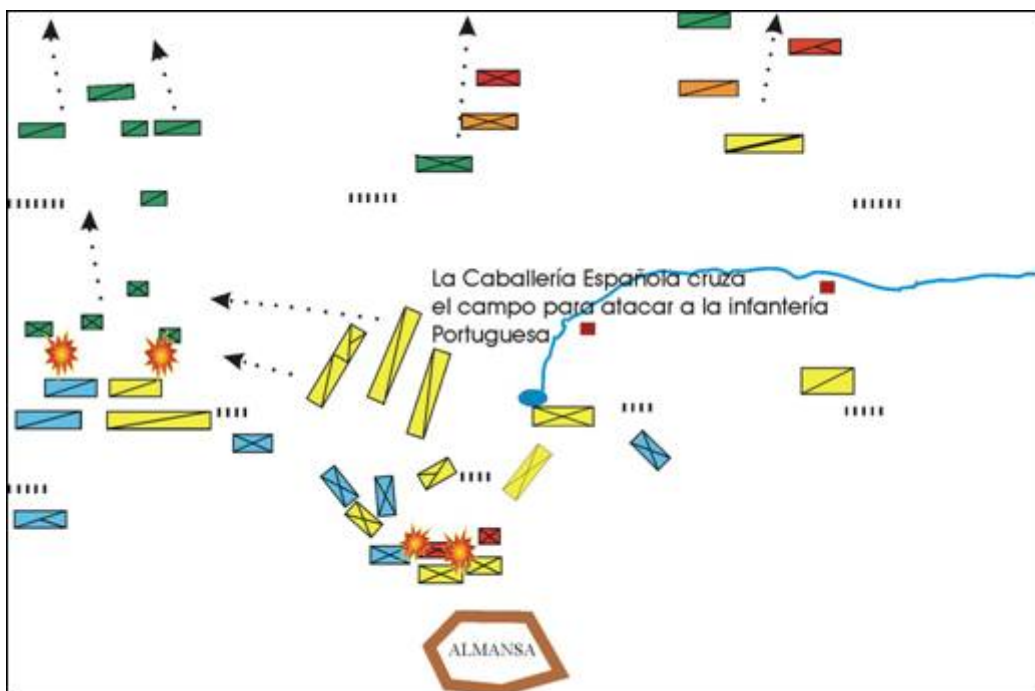
Breach of Bourbon centre and counterattack

It was the moment for Berwick to assert his superiority in resources. Thus, from the right wing, he sent part of the Spanish second line, which had been inactive up until now, to attack the sparse Austrian units which had managed to reach Almansa. The battalions of Blood and Belcastel, without question weak and disorganized by the effort, were now almost annihilated by the cavalry squadrons of the Old Orders.

At the same time, he ordered that on the edges of the breach, the infantry units should turn themselves around towards the centre, in order to catch with their fire from the wing, those battalions which might enter the breach. The effects of this – both physical as well as on the troops' morale – was devastating, and noticing that the breach was becoming a pocket, where all those who entered were massacred, the English General Erle, who commanded the centre front line of infantry, ordered Captain Hawley to carry to Count Donha, chief of the second line, the order to withdraw, since if he continued advancing, he would lose all his men. Donha ordered them to remove their green hat emblems, which identified them as the Austrian army, and playing a French march, he began to withdraw 11 battalions, to which, later on, two more were added.

With the danger in the centre brought to an end, it was time for decisive action on the right Bourbon wing. Seeing that without the help of the infantry, he would be unable to destroy the left Austrian wing, and once again using his best resources, Berwick ordered the advance of the Maine brigade, which was composed of 4 French battalions and 1 Irish. They moved forward from the second line to face the English infantry, which was supporting its cavalry on the left.

After a bayonet charge, the English infantry finally gave up. At the same time, the Spanish cavalry charged again; now without its infantry, the Confederates were beaten into withdrawal. The final attempt at resistance was the responsibility of 2 squadrons of English heavy cavalry, the squadrons of Colonel Harvey, which had seen their deployment obstructed by the presence of the orchard wall of the Molino de la Balsa. This can be seen in the picture of 1709, where it appears broken in two places.



Spanish cavalry crosses battlefield to attack Portuguese infantry.

Confederate withdrawal and final Portuguese Resistance. Approx. 1700h.

By about 4.30pm, the situation for Berwick had totally reversed. The centre had been stabilized, the front enemy line was being neutralized and the second line was beaten into retreat. On the right wing, the Confederates were being pursued by 5 Spanish squadrons, while the cavalry had been kept under control by D'Asfeld.

Only the left wing, facing the Portuguese, remained indecisive. This battle zone is the one for which we have the fewest details, but in outline we can say that after an action in the area of Charco Negro right on the Rambla de Sugel, the Portuguese infantry began to withdraw. It would be abandoned by its cavalry once it was noticed that both the left wing, as well as the centre of its allies, had been beaten. They also noted that the Spanish cavalry of d'Asfeld was approaching in a mass, crossing the battlefield – and ignoring the column that Donha was withdrawing – to pounce on them from the side.

Thus, with Colonel Couto's account showing no reproaches towards his cavalry, but rather, an understanding that they had to retreat to avoid being massacred, the Portuguese infantry began an heroic withdrawal, trying to maintain its grouping, as is shown in the picture of 1709, in which caption number 180 tells us "Places where the total defeat of the right wing of our enemies by our left wing, took place, under the command of Sr. Marquess Davaray; also, during the march, the Charco Negro where D.Juan de Zereceda took the enemy wing, on the orders of the said Sr. Marquess."



(Almansa) Plaza de S. Agustin, with the front of the Church of the Agustinas on the right and the former public granary on the left, today the Casa de Cultura. Both buildings already standing in 1707.

During this withdrawal, other units, including the Third of Novo de Chaves, under the command of Antonio de Couto, were pursued relentlessly by the Bourbon cavalry and fought at several places between the Rambla de Sugel and the Casa de los Pandos, finally surrendering at this latter point.



Sunset in Almansa

Berwick and his men were on the point of Victory. From now on, they would dedicate themselves to pursuing the remaining escapees and Count Donha, whose column of 13 battalions is easily identifiable in the picture, as it passes near to the Casa de Fuennegra, with Casas de Campillo behind on the left. The soldiers trying to escape sought shelter in the “Cerros de los Prisioneros” (Hills of Prisoners), the name appended after 2,500 men were captured there on the morning of the 26th. Hundreds of men, mostly foreigners, wandered through the fields and surrounding mountains, either alone or in small groups, looking for a friendly village. Many of them, however, became victims of the residents of nearby towns, Almansa, Villena and Yecla, where the most hot-headed citizens came out looking for booty, in revenge for the hardships they had suffered. This might be the reason for some place names around Almansa, such as the “Cerro de la Bandera” (Flag Hill), in the direction of Caudete.

As for Berwick’s losses, it was calculated that there were some 2,500 men either dead or wounded. The Confederate Army lost many more; in an inspection carried out a few days later in Torrent (Valencia), there were only 4,000 cavalrymen and fewer than 1000 infantry. That is to say, counting the dead, the prisoners and the escapees, it had lost two-thirds of its Army.

In keeping with the custom of that time, after having organized the prisoners, Berwick tracked down the senior ranks and on the night of April 27th, offered them dinner in the

house where he was staying - that of D.Luis Enríquez de Navarra - after which, in that same house, these surviving high-ranking officers signed the act of surrender.

In the following days, all the beds and household furnishings of Almansa's homes were requisitioned for the use of the thousands of wounded, and the town became a huge hospital for several weeks. Numerous residents became ill and died during the next few months, due to the poor hygienic conditions and because of having to sleep on the ground. Food was scarce, since crops had been ruined and thousands of dead had to be buried at locations only a few kilometres from the town. Even the snow-well, so important in daily life in the 18th century as an ice-store for the summer months, became useless, as it was now used for burials

Chance chose Almansa for one of mankind's great historic dramas – a drama for which it was made to pay a high price.