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National Cipher Challenge Introduction to part A

May 12th 1809

My Dearest Mary,

How delighted I am to write of our successes at Oporto. At last we won the chance to pay off some of the debt we owed our old friend Marshall Soult for the humiliation of our retreat at Corunna. Our brave troops, under the command of General Wellesley, infiltrated Villa Nova under his very nose, and with the help of local fishermen and bargemen they were able to cross the river and drive the French from the city.

General Foy made a brave attempt to hold us at the bridge, but Wellesley's artillery rained death upon the French gunners and we were able to pay off the debt we owed Soult for our humiliating defeat at Corunna in January. Hitherto the only consolation I could find in that hasty retreat was the weeks it gave us together upon my return, but now I feel that we learned much in the earlier battles that is paying off handsomely in our current campaign.

Just as we were forced to leave horses and artillery on the beach at Corunna, Soult's men have abandoned much of their wagon train and many of their guns as Soult and Loisson have retreated north. They departed today, and I will follow tomorrow with a small cavalry reconnaissance force. With luck we may find a way to break their rearguard and bring Soult up by his heels.

I treasure the few weeks we had together and most ardently hope to find a way for you to join me here in Portugal, but the heat of battle demands my full attention. I will write again when I can.

Your loving husband, George

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National Cipher Challenge Introduction to part B

To Marshal Soult from the hand of General Foy

Mon Frere Marshal, the attack on Oporto was, as we had hoped, severely hampered by the demolition of the bridge at Villa Nova, and the scuttling of the ferries, and British casualties were severe. Nonetheless, the treacherous local enemy sympathizers – watermen and bargemen – assisted them in crossing the river upstream, and climbing the steep cobbled street to the top of the hill they were able to take the seminary guarding a secure landing place.

Recognizing the danger, I ordered three battalions to attack in order to secure this point, but Wellesley, anticipating this move, had established artillery emplacements upon a hill overlooking the river, and these guns wrought terrible injury upon our own brave soldiers as they attempted to train their guns upon the landing site.

The reinforcements you sent enabled us to effect an orderly evacuation of guns and stores and we mounted three further assaults upon the seminary, but with losses mounting under the barrage we were forced to retreat, this time with loss of much of our wagon train.

General Loisson attempted to secure a line to the east, but the English, under Beresford's command, have cut off this escape. I will follow this message as we seek to rejoin you and I await your further orders.

Vive La France,

General Foy.