



The Spanish Armed Forces and the Balmis Operation



Blanca Palaci3n de Inza*

The ship Maria Pita sets sail from La Coru3a in 1803.
Engraving of Francisco P3rez

The homeland is not the men and women that people a country, or its trivial everyday affairs. Rather, it is the union of the past and future that comes to life in each concrete man –the tradition and the hope merging in the brief agitation of our mortal existence¹.

Gregorio Mara33n

Introduction

The Ministry of Defense of the Government of Spain named its operation against **coronavirus** “Balmis”, in honor of **Francisco Javier Balmis**, a physician born in Alicante (1753-1819). Balmis was the military doctor who led an expedition that saved the population of the New World and the Philippines –the overseas territories ruled by the Spanish Empire in the early 19th century– from the dreadful scourge of smallpox. Thanks to this little known achievement, smallpox is the only human disease to have been eradicated. And, now as then, the armed forces are actively involved in whatever tasks are needed to provide the highest level of safety and security to the society they serve.

Although this is a fact that unfortunately remains largely unknown, Spanish military health has often been at the forefront of its field. One example is the health organization of Spanish military units known as the *Tercios*, which not only proved its effectiveness in every battlefield, but can also be considered as the source of the present “social security”.² But the clearest and most spectacular instance of a forward-looking endeavor, as well as of effectiveness, courage, humanity and science, is the Royal Philanthropic Vaccine Expedition headed by Balmis.



Portrait of Francisco Xavier Balmis

The Royal Expedition sailed from La Coru3a on November 30, 1803. After carrying out vaccination activities in the Canary Islands and crossing the Atlantic, it touched Puerto Rico and went on to Venezuela, where it

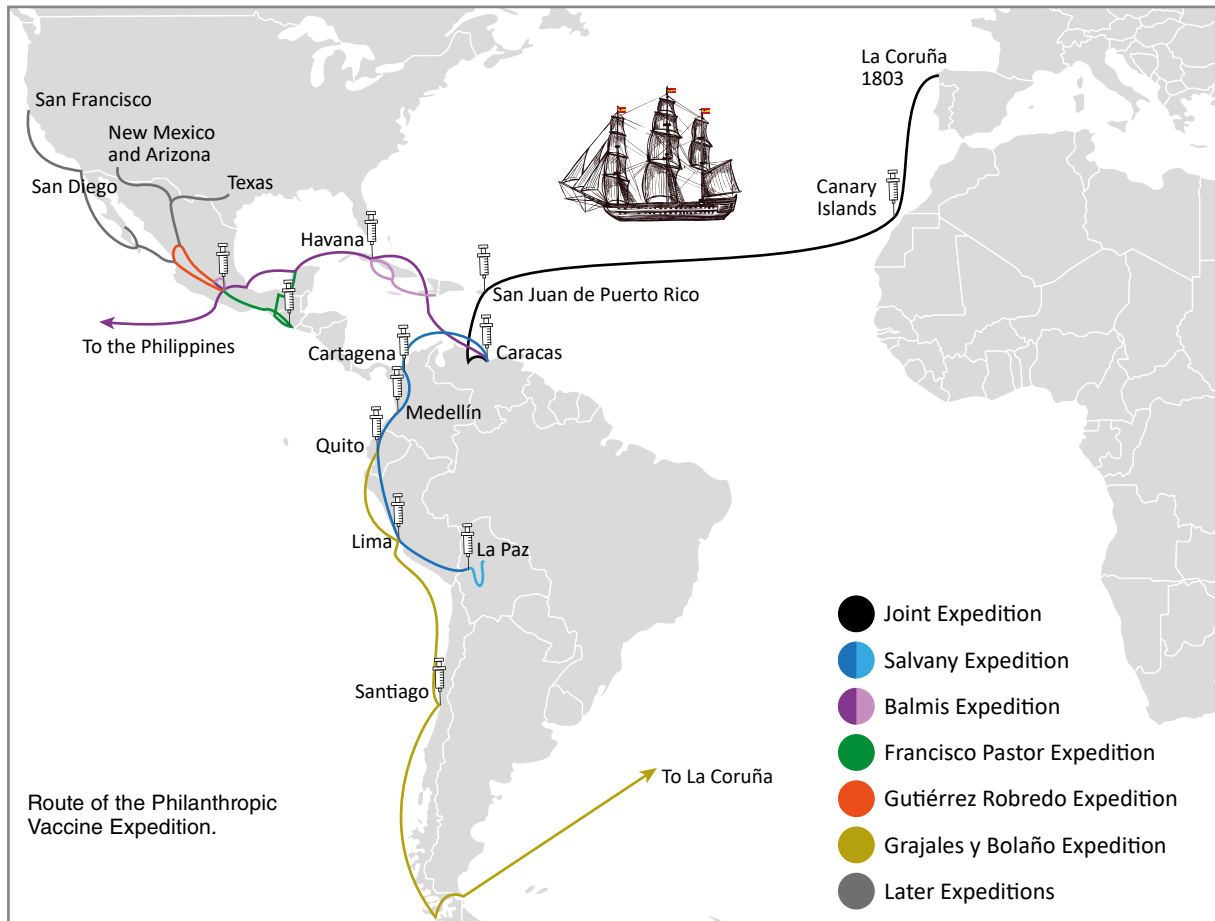
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1 Antonio Campos Mu3oz, “El Legado De Cajal A La Cultura Espa3ola”, in *Anales de la Real Academia Nacional de Medicina*, Vol. CXXIII, Book 2, (2006): 290.

2 Manuel Guiote Linares, “Sanidad Militar. Un paseo por la Historia. Introducci3n”, *Revista Ej3rcito* 889 (april 2015): 74.



split into two branches. One disseminated the practice of vaccination throughout South America and was led by José Salvany, deputy director of the expedition. The second branch was led by Balmis; it headed first to Cuba and then to Central America and Mexico. From Acapulco, the expedition crossed the Pacific Ocean and reached the Philippines. Later, after carrying out vaccination work in Canton, Macao and the island of St. Helena, the expedition returned to Spain, three years after its departure.³



In order to take the vaccine to such a large number of places, the expedition transported the vaccine fluid through carrier children. The fluid was kept active through the successive inoculation of two children per week with the fluid taken from the vesicles of the subjects inoculated the week before. In other words, the vaccine was transported from arm to arm. Luckily for Balmis, the children were well looked after by Isabel Zendal, named by the World Health Organization (WHO) as the first nurse on an international mission.

The Spanish Armed Forces and the Balmis Operation

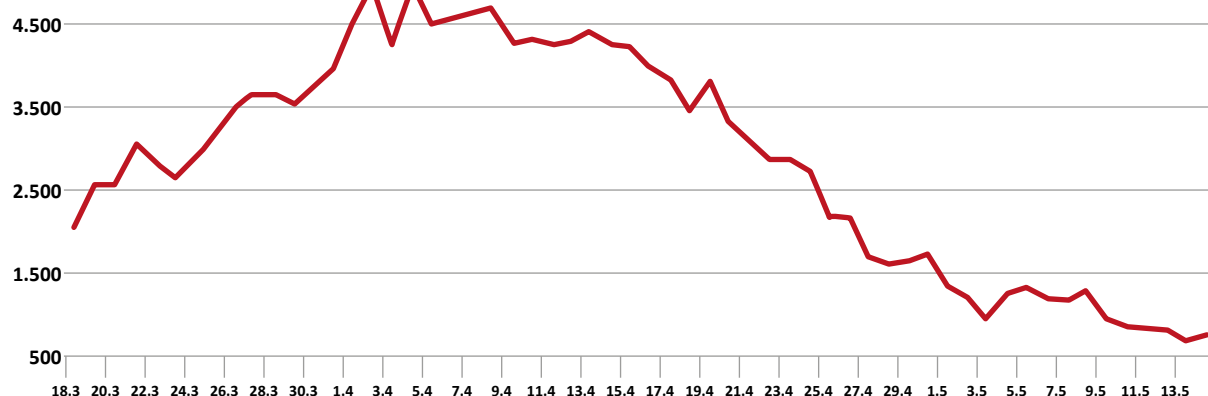
Inspired by Balmis and his desire to serve society, the operation undertaken by the Spanish Armed Forces to respond to the population's needs in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic was named after him. And although the present military operation called Balmis does not—in principle—include in its functions that of vaccinating the population (hopefully, if a vaccine is found soon, this may also happen), the operation does assist and serve the population in the fight against the consequences of a powerful disease.

³ Manuel Guiote Linares, "Sanidad Militar. Un paseo por la Historia. Introducción", 77-78



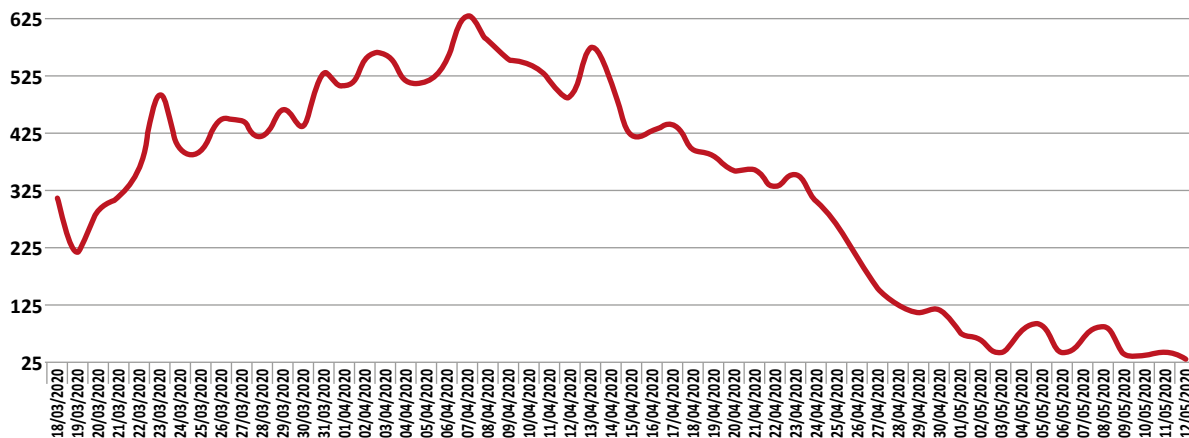
At times during the pandemic, more than 4,000 military personnel worked day after day in Spain to block the advance of coronavirus. Fortunately, this is not a war. We are not fighting an enemy, but a disease. This is a pandemic endangering our safety, and therefore all the tools and resources of Spain have been put to work to eliminate this threat and return to normalcy. The armed forces are one of those tools.

Evolution in the number of military personnel



Source: Operations Command, data as of May 16, 2020

Number of military personnel deployed in the Balmis Operation, by day



Source: Operations Command, data as of May 16, 2020.

The Military Pharmacy, the Gómez Ulla Hospital, the Engineers units, the Military Emergency Unit, the Air Force, the Legion, the Navy, the Army and the Royal Guard, acting under the control of the political power as established by the Constitution, are working ceaselessly and risking their lives out of love for our society, which does not always appreciate them as it should.

The tasks performed are many and diverse: disinfection, food distributions, presence, security, patient transportation, training, bridge construction, field hospitals, installation of power generators, ablution facilities, etc. To avoid overwhelming the reader with figures, we will mention just one example: by mid-April, disinfection work had covered 1,353 elderly homes, 500 hospitals and health centers, 64 airports, 22 ports and 247 subway, train and bus stations.



MISSIONS ABROAD 2020

> 2,800 military members

Last December 13th, the Council of Ministers approved the extension of overseas military missions where the Spanish Armed Forces are involved.

These operations are performed in accordance with international obligations undertaken by Spain to the United Nations, NATO, the European Union as well as bilateral agreements signed with various countries, all of which have been approved by the General Courts, under the Organic Law on National Defense 5/2005.

As approved, Spain will be involved in several European Union missions during 2020: Bosnia-Herzegovina, Atalanta in the Horn of Africa, Somalia, Mali, Republic of Central Africa and VFOR MED Sophia. It will continue to deploy blue helmets to the mission in Lebanon and observers to the UN mission in Colombia; air support operations will be maintained in Mali and the Republic of Central Africa, as well as the operation to fight Jihadist terrorism in Iraq.

Within the NATO framework, forces are still deployed in Afghanistan and as part of Deterrence and Defense missions of the Allied Territory, such as the Forward Presence supporting the East flank and Operation Persistent Effort, which includes air policing in Baltic countries and air defense support in Turkey. In addition, support will be given to the maritime security operation -Sea Guardian- in the Mediterranean, the standing naval forces in the Mediterranean and the North Atlantic, and the Enhanced Response Forces (e-NRF). Likewise, the participation of the EU Battle Group Package Rapid Response Force is expected. The Government has authorized the deployment of the Military Emergency Unit (MEU) and the 43rd Air Forces Group abroad in the event of serious risk, disasters, calamities or other needs, either in a bilateral framework or as part of the European Union Civil Protection Mechanism.

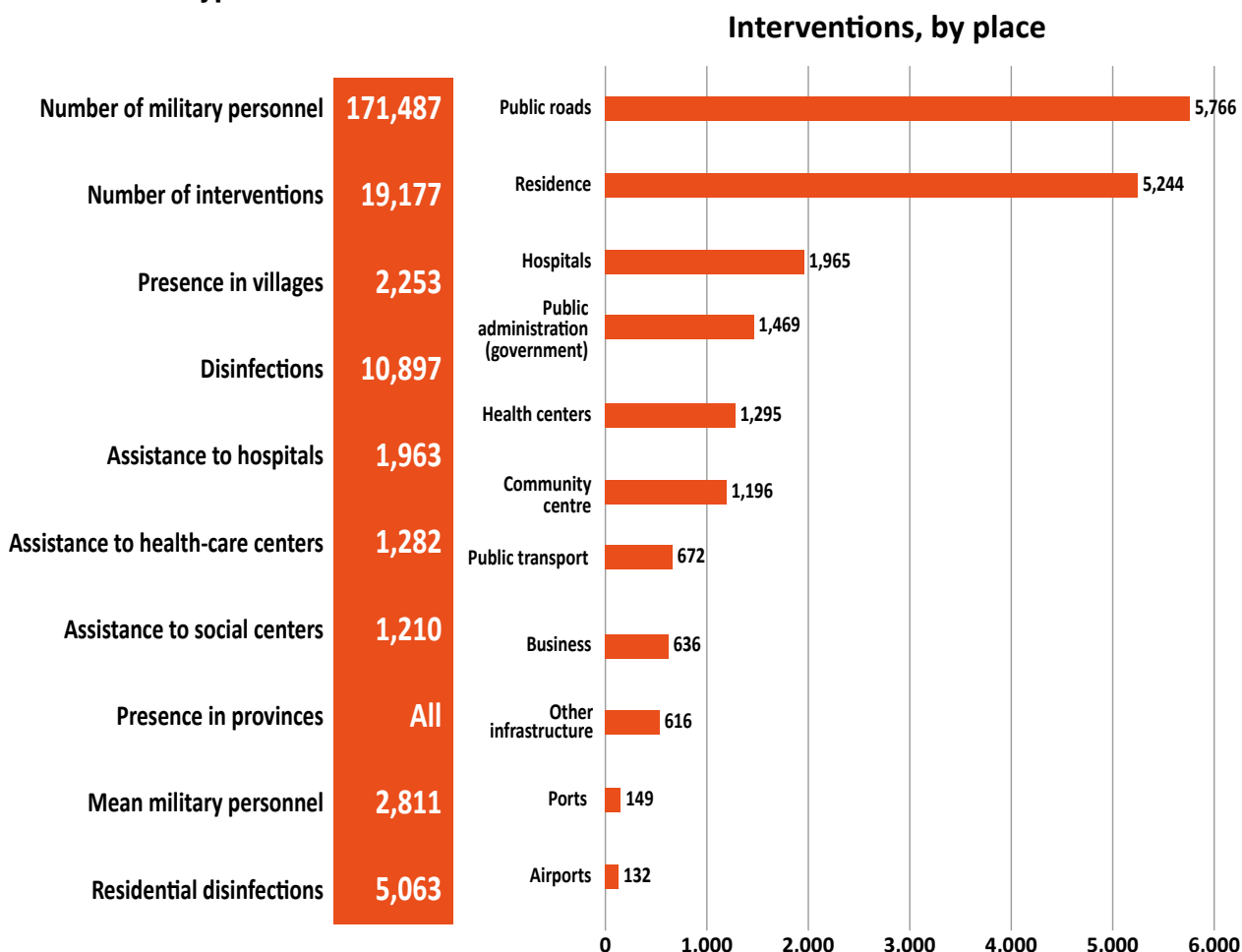


Rafael Navarro / Revista Española de Defensa
Source: EMAD Operations Command



In addition to the above, almost 3,000 personnel of the Spanish Armed Forces remain deployed in many operational areas, carrying out –as far as the virus allows—such missions out-side our borders aimed at defending our freedom and security. This work is less obvious and has no visibility in the citizens' ordinary life, but it is nonetheless essential.

Number and types of interventions.



Source: Operations Command, data as at May 16, 2020.

Final remarks

Although the Balmis Expedition of the 19th century fell into oblivion –an omission which perhaps we are remedying today to some degree– we trust that the Balmis Operation will not have the same fate.

Without the actions of the Spanish Armed Forces, many life-saving activities would not have been possible. In the present environment, which may be described as a VUCA context because of its volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity, the organizations capable of providing responses are those which are able to adapt. If countries lack modern, robust and well-equipped armed forces, they are likely to find themselves at a disadvantage when facing future crises. In this sense, defense is certainly not a superfluous expense: it is an investment in freedom and security.

THE WORK OF MILITARY FORCES IN THE
CONTEXT OF THE **COVID-19** CRISIS

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