

Sharpe's Skirmish Study Guide

Sharpe's Skirmish by Bernard Cornwell

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Plot Summary

"Sharpe's Skirmish" by Bernard Cornwell is a story written about a battle between the English and the French in 1812. In order to secure a path for Wellington's army to reach their supplies, Captain Richard Sharpe and his men must retain control of the fort at San Miguel de Tormes, even when the French attack with General Jean Herault leading them. "Sharpe's Skirmish" provides an interesting fictional account of one aspect of this important historical war.

When Captain Richard Sharpe arrives at the fort at San Miguel, he orders Sergeant Harper to destroy all of the wine bottles stored in the fort to prevent his men from becoming drunk and useless should they be attacked. Major Tubbs worries about the French attacking, especially when a group of unfriendly-looking horsemen approach the fort, but Sharpe recognizes their leader as Teresa, his wife. Since the French are losing to the English in Spain, Major Ducos petitions Marshal Soult for soldiers to send North to assist Marmont's men by attacking the English at San Miguel. During dinner, MacKeon mentions being at Gawilghur with Sharpe before Sharpe checks on the sentries. Sharpe assures Harper that this is supposed to be an easy mission, but he is plagued with a feeling of unease. Herault impresses Ducos by formulating a plan to distract the English by sending a decoy mission to Avila, allowing the rest of the French troops to sneak through the mountains to San Miguel.

When Sharpe hears that the French are planning to attack Avila, he disbelieves the rumor, and suspecting they will attack San Miguel, he prepares his troops but will not send a false alarm to Salamanca. Since it is impossible for all of the French troops to reach San Miguel in time, Herault sends Pailleterie with 100 men ahead, promising to join them around midday. At Teresa's insistence, Sharpe has Hickey prepare a summons for reinforcements in case the French attack. Though he is prepared, he still feels like something is wrong. Pailleterie and his men head toward San Miguel. At dawn, as Sharpe begins to feel foolish for fearing an attack, the French forces arrive and take control of the fort as Teresa rides to Salamanca to summon reinforcements. After acquiring the fort, Pailleterie hangs the French battlements and settles in to wait for Herault and the remaining French troops.

Upset at losing the fort, Sharpe follows MacKeon's advice to find a back way in, locating a crack in the wall of the fort where he starts a fire that forces the French from the fort. Pailleterie's men and Sharpe's men fight, and once Sharpe regains the fort, he is bewildered to see the arrival of more French forces. When Herault arrives at San Miguel to see his men being defeated by the English, he commands his dragoons to open fire. Again adhering to MacKeon's suggestion, Sharpe orders his men to construct makeshift caltrops by breaking wine bottles on the bridge, and these caltrops prevent the French from crossing the bridge. In the ensuing encounter, Sharpe takes Herault as a prisoner. Teresa soon arrives with the reinforcements from Salamanca, but they are not needed. When he arrives that evening, Ducos is angry at Herault's loss. Sharpe is relieved that he won the skirmish at San Miguel, assuring the stability of his career for the time being.



Section 1: pages 9-19

Section 1: pages 9-19 Summary

"Sharpe's Skirmish" by Bernard Cornwell is a story written about a battle between the English and the French in 1812. In order to secure a path for Wellington's army to reach their supplies, Captain Richard Sharpe and his men must retain control of the fort at San Miguel de Tormes, even when the French attack with General Jean Herault leading them. "Sharpe's Skirmish" provides an interesting fictional account of one aspect of this important historical war.

In the Introduction, the author explains that "Sharpe's Skirmish" was first written in 1998 in a great hurry to be given away with every copy of "Sharpe's Fortress", but since the haste was obvious, this edition has been entirely rewritten. Major Lucius Tubbs welcomes Captain Richard Sharpe to San Miguel. Since the French are gone, their work in the Elysian fields shall be unmolested, and Tubbs is also happy that he has found choice wine in the fort; however, Sharpe instructs Sergeant Patrick Harper to break every bottle of wine because the war is not won yet and he does not want to rely on drunken soldiers if the French return. When Tubbs and Harper object, Sharpe concedes to save two dozen bottles in his room for medicinal purposes, assuring Tubbs that Sharpe will save many more. Tubbs has work to do with three Spanish laborers and one Scotsman, Mr. MacKeon. After Arthur Wellesley had chased the French from San Miguel, a priest has discovered nearly 5000 muskets and wine that they had left behind, and when he alerted the British, Tubbs had arrived to make sure the muskets are serviceable and take possession of them. Sharpe and his Light Company are charged with the duty of guarding Tubbs and his men while they work. Though Sharpe doubts there are any French nearby, he has not stayed alive by making assumptions of safety. When he walks to the bridge where Harper and three riflemen are breaking the bottles of wine, he sees the Light Company objecting, but their objections quiet as he nears. Sharpe summons Lieutenant Price, and saying he saw strange uniforms in the far vineyard, he instructs Price to take the rest of the company to search for the enemy. When Tubbs expresses worry about the enemy being to the south, Sharpe admits that he did not see strange uniforms, but if his men have enough energy to protest, they have enough energy to march and he does not want them to get slack. While watching Price's men marching, Tubbs notices dust coming from Salamanca and is sure the unfriendly looking group of horsemen must be French soldiers. His fear increases when a beautiful armed woman breaks from the group and rides toward the fort. Sharpe informs Tubbs that the woman is nicknamed La Aguja, the needle, because she likes to kill with a stiletto; she is Sharpe's wife. As Sharpe descends the stairs to meet Teresa, he reflects that perhaps he is in the Elysian Fields, whatever they are.



Section 1: pages 9-19 Analysis

This book begins with an introduction in which the author, Bernard Cromwell, explains why "Sharpe's Skirmish" was initially written and that it has been entirely revised for this edition. As the story begins, the reader is immediately introduced to the title character, Captain Richard Sharpe, as well as some of the other characters in the story. Tubbs alludes to the Elysian Fields as he compares them with San Miguel, and Sharpe reveals his lack of learning by the fact that he does not know what the Elysian Fields are. He also demonstrates his pride through his refusal to ask what they are. When the wine bottles are revealed, it is obvious that Sharpe takes his responsibilities seriously as he orders Harper to destroy them. By assuring Tubbs that Harper will save many more bottles than Sharpe agreed to, Sharpe shows his familiarity with his men while foreshadowing the later importance of the wine bottles in relation to Harper's disobedience. Sharpe's leading qualities are exemplified when he feigns seeing enemy uniforms and orders his men to march to keep them alert when they begin complaining about his decision to destroy the bottles of wine. Though Tubbs consistently insists that there are no French nearby, his cowardice is revealed by his fear when Sharpe suggests that he saw enemy soldiers, and this continues through his worry upon seeing a group of horsemen approach. Sharpe recognizes the woman leading the group of horsemen, and after intensifying Tubbs' fears with rumors of the woman's exploits, Sharpe reveals that she is his wife.



Section 2: pages 19-28

Section 2: pages 19-28 Summary

Like Tubbs, Major Pierre Ducos is not a proper major nor a civilian. He is a functionary for the Emperor and has long discarded pity and mercy. His opinion is important since it may go straight to Napoleon. Napoleon sends Ducos to Spain because the French armies are losing, and just after Ducos' arrival, Marmont's army is destroyed and only Soult's army in the South is winning victories. Ducos rides South to petition Soult for men to help Marmont, France and the Emperor. The idea is not unappealing to Soult as it will add a page of glory to his long record. Since it will surely make Napoleon grateful, Soult sends 6000 men North to attack Wellington's British forces with General Jean Hecourt in charge. Hecourt rides North through Toledo with Ducos at his side toward the sleeping enemy where the fort at San Miguel is their only obstacle and glory is within their grasp.

Sharpe, Teresa, Tubbs, Price, MacKeon and Ensign Hickey eat in the small room of the fortress used as an officers' mess. When Hickey stares at Teresa, Sharpe yells at him, but Price tells Hickey to go ahead and stare because Mrs. Sharpe is a watchable lady. Hickey asks Teresa if she really fights the French, and she tells him she fights "against all men who are rude" (page 23) but has fought the French since they killed her family and is at San Miguel to fight them again. Tubbs claims there are no French nearby. After asking if Sharpe remembers him, MacKeon explains that he was a soldier in Campbell's 96th when Sharpe was the first to cross the wall at Gawilghur. Though Teresa asks about the battle, Sharpe evasively claims it was a battle in India and they won before ducking out of the room to check on the sentries. Offering Sharpe a canteen full of medicine for his soul, Harper admits he may have missed a few bottles but insists his men got the message and know better than to get drunk. When Harper asks if they are expecting trouble, Sharpe assures him they are on soft duty while he recovers from a bullet wound, but noticing how old and fragile the fort is, Sharpe wonders how he would defend San Miguel if there were an attack. To Sharpe's query as to why Tubbs was assigned to collect the muskets, Harper informs his superior that Tubbs will condemn many of them and sell them on the black market. Although Sharpe knows it is nearly impossible for the French to reach San Miguel since Salamanca is in English hands and guerilleros fill the hills, he cannot shake his unease and, fearing that they are overconfident, instructs Harper to keep his eyes peeled. Harper believes Sharpe has the shakes and is seeing enemies where there are none, but he keeps his eyes peeled nonetheless.

Section 2: pages 19-28 Analysis

While the first section of this story introduces the English forces, the second section begins by introducing their enemy, the French. Major Pierre Ducos is introduced, and his status is compared to that of Tubbs. Moreover, when his character is described, he



is compared to a snake. His position is important, though, because he maintains influence with the leader of France, Emperor Napoleon. This allusion provides a historical context for "Sharpe's Skirmish". Because the French are losing in Spain, Ducos is sent to petition Soult in the South for men to aid Marmont in the North. Soult's agreement foreshadows a fight between the men he sends under General Jean Herault and Sharpe's men, especially as Herault rides toward San Miguel with Ducos. Sharpe shows irritation when Hickey stares at Teresa, but Price mocks Sharpe's jealousy by telling Hickey to continue staring because Mrs. Sharpe is a watchable lady. Hickey seems amazed that Teresa is a fighter, but she modestly tells him her reasons for joining the fight against the French. Tubbs continues to insist that there are no French nearby. MacKeon's reference to the battle at Gawilghur serves to provide a partial record of Sharpe's military glory and also foreshadows the importance of that victory in guiding Sharpe's encounter with the French at San Miguel. Sharpe shows modesty by evading the questions about that battle before checking on his sentries as a show of duty. Harper assures Sharpe that he destroyed most of the wine bottles and asks if Sharpe expects trouble. Though Sharpe does not expect trouble because he is recovering from a bullet wound, he still knows his responsibility and wants to be prepared for an attack, especially as he cannot get rid of his uneasy feelings about the safety of the fortress. Tubbs' greedy, disloyal character is developed when Harper says Tubbs will condemn many of the muskets to sell on the black market. Although Harper believes Sharpe is worried unnecessarily, he follows his superior's orders and pays attention to guarding the road near San Miguel.



Section 3: pages 28-38

Section 3: pages 28-38 Summary

General Jean Herault is thirty years old, handsome, and covered in glory after leading a charge at Alubera that destroyed a British battalion, even though the battle had been lost. After his glory was enhanced in battles against Ballesteros' Spaniards, Soult promoted Herault to command the South Army's horsemen, and now, Herault must capture the bridge at San Miguel de Tormes. He gives the problem a lot of thought and, realizing the danger lay in going through the mountains, impresses Ducos by suggesting they send 300 men to Avila to distract the guerilleros while the rest of them ride straight across the hills to San Miguel and hold the bridge until Ducos arrives. Ducos approves of this plan which will save Madrid, end Marmont's retreat and force the British back to the Portuguese border. He plans to recommend Herault to Napoleon. The plan will begin at dawn.

News of the French column marching from Toledo to sack Avila spreads quickly through the Spanish countryside, and Teresa, enraged at the potential desecration of the sacred place where Saint Teresa lived, wants to ride there; however, Sharpe believes the French want them to think they are going to Avila while they attack elsewhere, so he tells Teresa to keep her men at San Miguel since he thinks they will soon have Frenchmen to kill. Sharpe summons Harper to set up Tubbs' ox-cart on the bridge as a barricade, and he instructs Harper and twenty riflemen to take positions at the nearby farm because he knows the French are coming. Tubbs does not believe the French are coming and suggests warning Salamanca if they are, but Sharpe does not want to raise a false alarm. He is sure they can beat the French if they come, but he prays that they do not.

At Avila, 300 French infantrymen are sacrificed. When night falls, Herault marches across the hills freed of guerilleros. All 2000 of his men will not make it in time so Herault sends 100 men with Captain Michel Pailleterie in charge, planning to join them with the rest of their troops around midday. Although Herault regrets the fate of the 300 men at Avila, they served their purpose by clearing the guerilleros out of the hills and opening the back door to Castile.

The barricade is set up on the bridge, and 20 riflemen wait behind the wall of the farmhouse. When Teresa asks why the French would come to San Miguel, Sharpe explains that it would allow them to retake Salamanca and cut Wellington off from his supplies. He refuses to send for reinforcements because he is not sure the French are coming and he will never be trusted again if he raises a false alarm. Teresa convinces Sharpe to have Hickey write a request for reinforcements so she can ride to Salamanca at the first sign of French forces. Though Hickey is frightened, Sharpe tells him ensigns are expendable, and when Teresa chides him for frightening Hickey, he says he will be a better soldier if he learns to cope with fear. Sharpe is nervous. Although he listened to his instinct and is ready for the French, he fears defeat.



Section 3: pages 28-38 Analysis

The third section begins by describing Heralut and his former glory in battle, as well as by foreshadowing his future actions against the English at San Miguel as he details his plan to Ducos. His merciless nature is obvious as he is willing to sacrifice 300 men at Avila in order to take San Miguel. This contrasts with Sharpe's obvious intention to protect all of his men. Ducos is impressed with Heralut's plan and decides to recommend him to Napoleon. The rumor of the French attack on Avila quickly reaches Sharpe at San Miguel, but he is convinced that it is a ruse to distract the English forces while the French attack elsewhere, presumably at San Miguel. Sharpe's inference clearly shows his experience in military maneuvers. Sharpe follows his intuition and prepares his troops, but he refuses to summon reinforcements from Salamanca because he does not want to raise a false alarm. Heralut laments the fate of the 300 men at Avila, but he coldly reflects that they served their purpose. He appoints Pailleterie to lead 100 men to San Miguel to take and hold the fort until Heralut can join them with the rest of his men. Meanwhile, Sharpe prepares to defend the fort at San Miguel, explaining to Teresa why he believes the French will attack them. At her advice, he prepares a summons for reinforcements from Salamanca that she can use if the French arrive. Although the fight has not yet begun, Sharpe feels like it will result in defeat even though he has followed his instincts and prepared for an attack by the French.



Section 4: pages 38-47

Section 4: pages 38-47 Summary

As Teresa's men roast hares over an open fire, they are sure the flames cannot be seen from the road, but Pailleterie sees the fire, checks his company and advises them to proceed slowly and quietly. As he rounds the hill, he sees only peace and hopes San Miguel will be unguarded. He is grateful to God that his men are hidden as he sees a hidden path all the way down the hill to San Miguel. When Pailleterie threatens his men with death if they are not quiet, the hussars grin because they like Pailleterie since he gives them victory and is about to give them another.

With dawn nearing, Sharpe feels weary and foolish because no French are coming. Since dawn is the most dangerous time, all his men are awake and Price is alert, but when Sharpe looks down the Salamanca Road, all is quiet. He is jumpy and has made everyone else nervous. When Teresa asks if all is quiet, Sharpe admits that he may have panicked and seen enemies where there were none. Teresa may still go to Salamanca to visit Antonia, their infant daughter, and Sharpe suggests bringing Antonia to San Miguel for a week if the French do not come. At a shout from the bridge, Sharpe turns to see horsemen approaching, and as Price's men fire, Teresa is already on her way to fetch her horse. Realizing he can do nothing from his position, Sharpe tells Hagman, the senior rifleman, that he is going down as he quickly descends the stairs. Sharpe had been right and wrong; the French had fooled him by sneaking down the riverbank. Waving the letter at Sharpe, Teresa turns her horse toward Salamanca as guns sound and men scream. Landing at the foot of the stairs, Sharpe sees that the fort is lost: he has failed!

As the sun blinds the English, Pailleterie orders his men to charge, leading the charge through the barricade on the bridge against the enemy soldiers. He is glad he has done it, and Hernalt should arrive in about six hours. Hearing men shouting angrily, he notices his men suffering heavy fire from the farmhouse down the road so he shelters his men in the fort and hangs the battlements. Although Hagman and the riflemen escape through the storeroom, it does not matter since Hernalt is coming and the tricolor flies high above the Tormes.

When Coignet finds wine and asks Pailleterie if he should break the bottles, the captain says no but forbids his men to touch it. Pailleterie takes three prisoners, one being Tubbs who he allows to keep his sword and stay in the fortress after Tubbs promises that he will not try to escape. Pailleterie knows his men are safe inside the fort and the British will die if they run down the road because Hernalt is coming with his army. The road to the South is open and all Pailleterie needs to do is wait.



Section 4: pages 38-47 Analysis

Pailleterie leads his men down a hidden path, past Teresa's men and toward San Miguel. He plans to arrive completely unannounced in order to utilize the aspect of surprise. His men like him because he gives them victory and they expect their attack on San Miguel with Pailleterie in charge to yield another victory. As dawn nears, Sharpe feels foolish for his preparations, but as he talks to Teresa about their daughter, the French arrive. Teresa immediately rushes to her horse and heads to Salamanca with Sharpe's letter to summon reinforcements. Although Sharpe expected the French, they fooled him by taking a different route than the one he anticipated. He quickly descends the stairs to see that he has failed by losing the fort. Pailleterie's men charge the English, and he is grateful for the sun which aids him by blinding his enemy. He protects his men by taking shelter in the fortress and hangs the French flag to broadcast his victory over the English, knowing that he must now simply maintain control of the fort until Hernalt arrives with the remainder of their French forces. Unlike Sharpe, Palleterie does not order the wine bottles to be destroyed, and this further foreshadows their importance in the pending fight. Pailleterie feels confident that he has won the fight with Sharpe and now needs only to wait for Hernalt to arrive for absolute security and the destruction of the British forces.



Section 5: pages 47-57

Section 5: pages 47-57 Summary

Sharpe is upset about losing the fort and realizes more French are coming since the barricade has been removed. He knows he will be blamed for all hell breaking loose on the British supply lines but is glad Harper and his men are safe. MacKeon, reminded of Gawilghur, suggests that there is always a back way in and points out a crack in the Western wall. While Harper keeps watch, Sharpe sneaks to the wall, into the crack to a small place between the storeroom ceiling and the floor above. He beckons for one man to come to him, and when Perkins comes, Sharpe explains what he wants before settling into the hole to listen to the French as Perkins runs back to the village. Pailleterie and Tubbs discuss Sharpe and Tubbs says Sharpe was brought up from the ranks and does not satisfy because he was not brought up to it. Perkins returns with Cooper, Harris and several bundles wrapped in blankets. Sharpe piles the contents of the bundles between the timbers supporting the floor, sprinkles oil and kindling to it, and cocks his gun and pulls the trigger. After the fire takes hold, he climbs from the hole and runs to the village where he orders his troops to prepare. Sharpe still has a chance of winning this fight if the French do not extinguish the fire.

When smoke sifts through the floorboards, Coignet raises the alarm. He orders water, but it is useless since the whole floor is now under siege. Pailleterie orders his men and the prisoners onto the bridge. As rifles fire, he instructs his men to draw their sabers. They will charge the enemy as this is his last chance to hold the bridge. Sharpe shouts "Fire!" (page 54).

Ordering his men to charge, Sharpe runs ahead of them. He is filled with fury, wanting to kill the French and take his revenge. Pailleterie is also filled with rage, wondering how the English dare deny him his victory. The battle ensues as Sharpe and Pailleterie lead their men. On the bridge, Sharpe stabs Coignet and pushes Pailleterie into the water, so the French break ranks and run. Sharpe orders his men to form ranks, but his mouth drops open as he sees French reinforcements; every cavalryman in France is coming straight at the South Essex Light Company. Sharpe orders his men to retreat to the northern side of the bridge to allow him time to think.

Section 5: pages 47-57 Analysis

Sharpe laments losing control of the fort and worries about his career being jeopardized as a result of the loss, but he is happy that his men are safe. Fulfilling the earlier foreshadowing concerning the importance of the battle at Gawilghur, MacKeon suggests to Sharpe that there is always a back way in as he points to a crack in the fort wall. Following MacKeon's advice, Sharpe sneaks into the crack and formulates a plan, summoning his men with materials to build a fire. While he waits, Sharpe listens to Tubbs' derogatory remarks about Sharpe and his rise through the ranks to reach the



status of Captain Sharpe. Sharpe uses the materials that his men bring to start a fire and then retreats to the village to rejoin his men with the belief that he may still beat the French as long as they are unable to extinguish the fire. As the fire spreads through the fort, Pailleterie orders his men to charge the English since this is their last chance to hold the bridge, but Sharpe's men are also prepared as he orders them to fire. Filled with fury, Sharpe leads his men in their attack against the French fleeing from the fire in the fort. Comparatively, Pailleterie also is filled with rage and leads his men against the English. On the bridge, Sharpe vanquishes Coignet and pushes Pailleterie into the water, causing the French to flee. However, just as victory seems eminent for the English, Sharpe notices the approach of the rest of Hérault's army so he orders his men to retreat to the other side of the bridge in order to organize and plan their defense.



Section 6: page 57-63

Section 6: page 57-63 Summary

Herault comes down to the fort at San Miguel to see his troops being beaten by a handful of British. All that stands between him and victory is two ranks and some riflemen, but even a small amount of British troops can do damage. He will thin them out and release lancers on them. First, Herault summons the dragoons and instructs them to silence the riflemen. He will charge the bridge and kill all of the British; it is time to swat the enemy aside and win.

Sharpe does not know what to do. He needs to barricade the bridge, but the wagon is in the river and any useful timbers are now part of the inferno. Telling Sharpe he has found his answer, MacKeon points at the back of the chapel where there is a stash of wine bottles that Harper failed to break. The bottles look like a makeshift caltrops, a four-pointed star of metal spikes that disables a cavalry charge because the spikes go through the soft part of a horse's hoof and no horse can continue through the agony. Sharpe summons Harper, Harris, Cooper and Perkins as Herault walks to the front of his squadron and the dragoons volley. Sharpe realizes the wall will crush his men if it collapses, but he has no time to worry about that. He orders Harper and his crew to break the rest of the wine bottles by throwing them on the center of the bridge. The four men, MacKeon, and two redcoats throw the bottles and Sharpe is grateful for Harper's disobedience as the wine flows into the river and the glass, which will save Sharpe and his men, accumulates in the center of the bridge. Thundering hooves fill the air, and Sharpe watches the lancers coming at him as the dragoons cease fire to watch the Poles slaughter their way across the bridge. Sharpe orders the redcoats to stand up and present their muskets as the lancers cross the bridge in a gallop. Sharpe draws his sword as the dragoons open fire. He orders his men to fire and reload as the lancers' horses begin screaming in pain. The lancers are unable to pass the panicking horses, and Sharpe's men fire on the horses and the lancers. Sharpe runs onto the bridge and pulls the lead hussar away from his horse to take as a prisoner. The dead horses now barricade the bridge for Lieutenant Price and the redcoats. Sharpe calls for Ensign Hickey to negotiate a truce with the French to collect the wounded, but Hickey is dead, so Sharpe orders Harris to talk to the prisoner.

More hooves resound and a trumpet sounds, allowing Sharpe to see that there is no need for a truce because his reinforcements have arrived from Salamanca with Teresa riding alongside their leading officer, Captain Lossow of the King's German Legion. Lossow informs Sharpe that a battalion of infantry and a battery of guns are coming, but it appears that Sharpe managed without them. According to Sharpe, "we coped" (page 62.) Tubbs was trapped in the burning fort and is dead, and the captured French muskets are a twisted mass of molten metal. Sharpe thanks MacKeon who remembered how Sharpe managed at Gawilghur and reckoned he could manage again. Ducos appears with the French infantry that evening, but Herault's idea is defeated and Herault is now Sharpe's prisoner. Ducos promises to punish Pailleterie and writes



Sharpe's name as a name to remember in his notebook. Sharpe stands on the bridge with Teresa and watches the enemy leave. He was lucky because he did not deserve to win. MacKeon reminded him of what they did at Gawilghur and Harper helped by disobeying orders. Teresa assures him they won a battle in Spain, but Sharpe says it was just a skirmish. However, it was Sharpe's skirmish and he had won. The French had lost and their general was Sharpe's prisoner. Though it was Sharpe's fault that many men had died, the army will only remember that he had stopped the French, so his career is safe for the moment, the French will abandon Madrid and Wellington can continue his northward march.

Section 6: page 57-63 Analysis

As Herault nears San Miguel, he sees his troops being beaten by only a handful of English, and although he knows how dangerous a small amount of English troops can be, he prepares his men and plans to release lancers on the English for it is time to destroy the enemy and retake the fortress at San Miguel. Filled with confusion and indecision, Sharpe cannot think of how to barricade the bridge, but again fulfilling the earlier foreshadowing of the significance of the battle at Gawilghur, as well as fulfilling the foreshadowing of the utility of the wine bottles, MacKeon points to the wine bottles that Harper spared and reminds Sharpe of the use of caltrops. Following MacKeon's advice, Sharpe orders his men to construct makeshift caltrops by breaking the bottles on the bridge which will result in sharp pieces of glass that penetrate the soft part of the horses' hooves, making it impossible for them to proceed across the bridge. This plan works as the lancers' attempt to gallop across the bridge is thwarted by the agony of their mounts, preventing them from reaching the fort and Sharpe's men. Sharpe orders his men to engage in battle, and the fight ensues. Sharpe's men succeed in preventing the French from regaining the fort at San Miguel, and Sharpe takes General Herault as a prisoner. When Sharpe summons Hickey to negotiate a truce to allow both sides to collect their wounded, he learns that the ensign is dead, but when he hears a trumpet and more hooves resounding, he realizes this does not matter as the English reinforcements from Salamanca have arrived with Teresa. Their leader informs Sharpe of the battalion following them but praises Sharpe as he obviously has no need of their assistance, having maintained control of the fort without it. When Ducos arrives, he is extremely agitated to learn of what has transpired. He reverses his decision to recommend Herault to Napoleon as the general has been captured, and he makes a note of Sharpe's name as this enemy captain obviously poses a danger to the French forces. Teresa comforts Sharpe with the reminder that they won this battle in Spain, but he modestly admits that he did not deserve to win and claims that the fight at San Miguel was merely a skirmish. He admits that his victory is owed to MacKeon's advice and Harper's disobedience. Although he feels it is his fault that many men died, he knows the army will only recall the fact that he maintained control of the fort, so his career is safe and the English can proceed in their march northward toward victory in the war.



Characters

Captain Richard Sharpe

Captain Richard Sharpe is the main character in "Sharpe's Skirmish." He is a dark-haired man with many scars, which result from the many battles that he has seen. As a result of his achievements in war, he has been promoted from a private to a captain. When Sharpe first arrives at San Miguel, he orders Sergeant Patrick Harper to destroy the stock of wine bottles, knowing that Harper will disobey him and save some. When his men complain, he fabricates a story about seeing enemy uniforms and sends them on a march. As Tubbs is frightened of unfriendly horsemen approaching the fort, Sharpe recognizes Teresa, his wife with whom he has an infant daughter. During dinner, he yells at Ensign Hickey for staring at Teresa and brushes off MacKeon's comments about the battle at Gawilghur before excusing himself to check on the sentries. Although he does not expect trouble, Sharpe worries how his men will defend the old fort if there is an attack. He advises Harper to keep his eyes peeled because he cannot shake his unease and fear that they are being overconfident.

When Sharpe hears about the French plan to attack Avila, he disbelieves the rumor and insists that they will attack San Miguel instead, so he prepares his troops but refuses to summon reinforcements from Salamanca because he does not want to raise a false alarm. At Teresa's insistence, he has Hickey write a summons which Teresa can take to Salamanca if the French arrive at San Miguel. Although he listened to his instinct and prepared for a French attack, Sharpe feels like he has been defeated though the fight has not yet started. At dawn, he feels foolish since there is no sign of the enemy, but when the French appear, he rallies his troops but, by the time he descends the stairs, realizes he has lost the fort because the French fooled him by sneaking down the riverbank. When MacKeon reminds him that there is always a back way in and points at a crack in the fortress wall, Sharpe climbs into the crack and starts a fire in the fort, burning the French out.

After a fight between the French and English, Sharpe retakes the fort at San Miguel only to see the arrival of Heraldo and many more French infantrymen. At MacKeon's advice, he orders his men to construct makeshift caltrops by breaking wine bottles on the bridge, and this allows him to defeat the French and take Heraldo as his prisoner. As he stands on the bridge with Teresa and watches the enemy retreat, Sharpe says that he was lucky as he did not deserve to win. He claims that this was a skirmish, not a battle, and their victory was due to MacKeon reminding him of what they did at Gawilghur and Harper's disobedience. Though Sharpe feels guilty for the many men who died, he knows his career is safe since the army will only remember that he maintained control of the fort at San Miguel, allowing Wellington's army to continue their northward march toward victory over Napoleon's armies.



General Jean Herault

General Jean Herault is thirty years old. He is a cavalryman and hussar who is very handsome and clever. He is also lucky and brave. He was covered in glory after leading a charge at Alubera that destroyed a British battalion, even though the battle was lost. After his glory was enhanced in battles against Ballesteros' Spaniards, Soult promoted Herault to command the South Army's horsemen. When Soult sends 6000 men to the North with Ducos, he appoints Herault as their leader, and Herault must now capture the bridge at San Miguel de Tormes. After giving a lot of thought to the problem, he impresses Ducos with his plan to distract the guerilleros in the hills by sending 300 men to Avila as a distraction while the remaining forces ride across the hills to San Miguel and hold the bridge until Ducos arrives. Although he regrets the fate of these 300 men, he coldly feels that they have served their purpose.

When night falls, Herault marches across the hills emptied of guerilleros. Since all of his men cannot make it to San Miguel in time, he sends 100 men under the command of Captain Michel Pailleterie to overtake the fort and hold it until his arrival around midday. When Herault arrives at San Miguel, he sees his troops being beaten by a handful of British soldiers. With only two ranks and some riflemen standing between him and victory, Herault decides to thin them out and release lancers on them. He summons the dragoons and instructs them to silence the riflemen. Herault plans to charge the bridge and kill all of the British because it is time to swat the enemy aside and win. When Herault and his men charge the bridge at San Miguel, their attack is thwarted by the makeshift caltrops and Sharpe takes Herault as his prisoner.

Major Lucius Tubbs

Major Lucius Tubbs is a plump and cheerful man who is in charge of reviewing the French muskets left at San Miguel, but he is corrupt and plans to condemn many of the muskets in order to sell them on the black market. When he is captured by the French, he makes derogatory remarks about Sharpe's rise in rank in the English army. Tubbs dies in the fire at San Miguel.

Sergeant Patrick Harper

Sergeant Patrick Harper is a lean and scarred Irish rifleman in charge of the other riflemen under Captain Sharpe. He disobeys Sharpe's order to break the wine bottles which winds up being fortunate as Sharpe uses the bottles to construct makeshift caltrops on the bridge, allowing him to defeat the French.

Teresa Sharpe

Teresa Sharpe, Captain Sharpe's wife, is a thin-faced and good-looking, young woman. She is murderous, killing the French after she killed her family. Teresa's nickname is La



Aguja, the needle, because she prefers to kill using a stiletto. She has an infant daughter named Antonia with Captain Sharpe and their child resides in Salamanca. When the French attack San Miguel, Teresa rides to Salamanca to summon reinforcements.

Major Pierre Ducos

Major Pierre Ducos is a functionary of Emperor Napoleon. He is a small, balding man who abandoned pity and mercy long ago, but his subtle mind allows him to possess influence over the emperor. Ducos is sent to Spain because the French armies are failing, and he rides South to convince Soult to send troops to Marmont in the North to help prevent Wellington from reaching his supplies.

John MacKeon

John MacKeon is Tubbs' Scottish foreman. He is a tall, frowning man with huge hands, a heavy brow and scowling eyes. MacKeon was at Gawilghur with Sharpe and reminds him that there is always a back way in and suggests creating makeshift caltrops which leads to the defeat of the French at San Miguel.

Captain Michel Pailleterie

Captain Michel Pailleterie is a French captain with blonde pigtailed and a nearly white moustache. Herault sends him ahead to San Miguel with 100 men. The hussars like Pailleterie because he is brave and gives them victory. He leads the attack on San Miguel, overtaking the fort and imprisoning Tubbs. When Sharpe burns the French out of the fort, Pailleterie is filled with rage.

Ensign Hickey

Ensign Hickey writes the preemptive summons for reinforcements from Salamanca at Sharpe's command. He is killed during the skirmish at San Miguel.

Lieutenant Price

Lieutenant Price is in charge of the redcoats under Sharpe.



Objects/Places

San Miguel de Tormes

San Miguel de Tormes is the main setting of this story and is where the skirmish is fought between Sharpe's men and Heraldo's men.

Salamanca

Salamanca is a town near San Miguel where there are many English reinforcements which Teresa summons when Paillette arrives at San Miguel with his French soldiers.

Wine Bottles

When Sharpe orders Harper to break all of the wine bottles, Harper disobeys, but this is fortunate since the English later break these bottles on the bridge to construct makeshift caltrops which prevent the French from crossing the bridge to the fort, allowing Sharpe's men to win the skirmish.

Caltrops

Sharpe orders his men to construct makeshift caltrops on the bridge leading to the fort at San Miguel, thus preventing the hussars from regaining the fort and achieving victory in the skirmish for Sharpe and his men.

Gawilghur

Gawilghur is a place in India where Sharpe previously won a battle at which MacKeon was present. The experiences at Gawilghur helps Sharpe gain the victory at San Miguel.

Avila

Avila is a town in Spain where Heraldo sends 300 soldiers to distract the guerilleros into clearing the hills near San Miguel, allowing Heraldo and the remainder of his men to march against Sharpe at San Miguel.

Fortress

The fortress at San Miguel is very old, and this is where Sharpe's skirmish takes place.



Pierre Ducos' Notebook

Pierre Ducos keeps notes in his notebook about generals, captains and soldiers in order to report to Emperor Napoleon.

Farmhouse

There is a farmhouse near the fort at San Miguel, and this is where the English riflemen set up to defend the fort against a potential attack by the French.

Madrid

The French attack San Miguel in order to save Madrid by attempting to force the English to retreat; however, Sharpe saves Madrid by defending San Miguel, thus allowing Wellington's army to continue marching north.



Themes

Responsibility and Duty

One of the most important themes in "Sharpe's Skirmish," or any book about war for that matter, concerns responsibility and duty. Sharpe and his men, the South Essex Light Company are assigned to guard Tubbs' men at the fortress of San Miguel de Tormes while they review the muskets left behind by the French, seeing if they are serviceable and taking possession of them. Upon learning that many bottles of wine are stored at the fort, Sharpe orders Harper to break the bottles, spilling the wine, to ensure that his men do not become intoxicated which would hinder them in their duties and endanger everyone at the fort. Harper accordingly breaks the bottles, and when Sharpe's men complain, Sharpe sends them on a march to keep them from getting slack. Sharpe fulfills his duty after dinner by checking on the sentries to make sure everyone is alert and guarding the fort. Although Harper thinks Sharpe is being paranoid, he adheres to his superior's orders and keeps his eyes peeled.

When he hears the French are going to march on Avila, Sharpe does not believe the rumor and prepares his men for battle in order to serve his duty by defending the fort at San Miguel, and he even yields to Teresa's advice to prepare a summons for reinforcements from Salamanca in advance since he does not want to raise a false alarm by requesting reinforcements prematurely in case the French do not arrive. When the French arrive, Sharpe dutifully joins his men in the fight while Teresa takes the responsibility of riding to Salamanca to summon reinforcements. After losing the fort, Sharpe does not give up; instead, with MacKeon's advice, he sets a fire in the fort and burns the French out. When Herault arrives, he again follows MacKeon's advice and has his men construct makeshift caltrops, preventing the enemy from crossing the bridge. By the time the reinforcements arrive, they are no longer needed and the skirmish has been won because Sharpe was efficient in adhering to the demands of his duty and responsibility as the captain and leading officer of the men at San Miguel.

Military Careers and Glory

A recurring theme in "Sharpe's Skirmish" pertains to the military careers and glory of the characters. Captain Richard Sharpe is raised through the ranks from being a private due to the fact that he is good at war and succeeds in missions to which he is assigned. When Ducos petitions Soult for men to send North to help Marmont's army, Soult agrees because it will add a page of glory to his long record of glory. After recognizing Sharpe at dinner, MacKeon praises Sharpe's success during the battle of Gawilghur in India. General Jean Herault was also covered in glory after leading a charge at Alubera that destroyed a British battalion, even though the battle had been lost. After his glory was enhanced in battles against Ballesteros' Spaniards, Soult promoted him to command the South Army's horsemen and eventually appoints him to lead the 6000 men he sends North to San Miguel de Tormes with Ducos. Although Herault regrets the



fate of the 300 men he sends to Avila as a decoy, he feels that they served their purpose.

By telling Hickey that ensigns are expendable, Sharpe hopes to make him a better soldier by teaching him to cope with fear. Pailleterie is sent ahead to San Miguel with 100 men, and the hussars like him because he gives them victory. When Pailleterie captures Tubbs as a prisoner, Tubbs makes derogatory remarks about Sharpe's rise through the ranks, causing Pailleterie to admit that he also rose through the ranks. When Sharpe fears the French are coming, he is hesitant to summon reinforcements from Salamanca because he will not be trusted again if he raises a false alarm; however, he manages to defeat the French before his reinforcements eventually arrive, and he knows that the army will remember he stopped the French at San Miguel, so his career is safe for the time being.

Disloyalty and Disobedience

As with any situation in which a chain of command exists, disobedience and disloyalty is bound to appear. In this story, it is seen in both the English and French militaries. When Sharpe orders Harper to break the bottles of wine, he knows that the sergeant will disobey him by hiding more bottles than he agreed to, but Harper's disobedience ends up saving the English from defeat by the French when they are able to use the bottles to construct makeshift caltrops on the bridge.

Sharpe is agitated when he learns that Tubbs is on the payroll; he will condemn many of the French muskets and sell them on the black market. Tubbs' disloyalty is also shown by his derogatory remarks about Sharpe after he is captured by Pailleterie. Hault shows disloyalty to his men by sending 300 infantrymen to be sacrificed at Avila as a decoy while he marches on San Miguel de Tormes with the rest of his troops. Eventually, the skirmish is won by Sharpe and the South Essex Light Company, despite the disloyalty of Tubbs and ironically, because of Harper's disobedience.



Style

Point of View

The point of view in "Sharpe's Skirmish" is the third person. This point of view is omniscient and reliable and this is proven by the fact that the narrator is frequently able to report upon the thoughts and feelings of the characters in addition to the actions and events that occur in any particular scene. This method of writing is useful in this story as it allows the reader to understand the reasons behind the decisions that are made throughout the narrative. Additionally, this provides foreshadowing in the book as the reader is able to predict upcoming events based on the plans that characters consider.

This story is written using a fairly equal distribution of exposition and dialogue. This is very effective in allowing the reader to understand the dynamics between different characters, especially as it pertains to the chain of command in the military as the conversations demonstrate the respect owed to superior officers and such. Also useful is the way that the dialogue serves to show the derogatory attitudes that the characters tend to possess for their enemies, such as the tendency of Sharpe's men to refer to the French as "frogs." In this story, the viewpoint frequently varies with that of Sharpe being the most common but also including Tubbs, Herault, Ducos, Pailleterie, and others.

Setting

This story is set in the real world during the summer of 1812 in Spain, particularly at the fort in San Miguel de Tormes. The characters are two groups of enemy soldiers. Sharpe's men are mostly English but also include Scots, Spanish and Irish with German allies who are seen in the reinforcements from Salamanca. The soldiers commanded by Pailleterie and Herault are Frenchmen and Polish hussars. The difference in ranks is also shown in the respect afforded to different levels of officers, such as majors, generals, lieutenants, and captains, as compared to the infantrymen, riflemen, and guerilleros.

San Miguel de Tormes is the main setting of this story and is where the skirmish is fought between Sharpe's men and Herault's men. Salamanca is a town near San Miguel where there are many English reinforcements which Teresa summons when Pailleterie arrives at San Miguel with his French soldiers. Gawilghur is a place in India where Sharpe previously won a battle at which MacKeon was present. The experiences at Gawilghur helps Sharpe gain the victory at San Miguel. Avila is a town in Spain where Herault sends 300 soldiers to distract the guerilleros into clearing the hills near San Miguel, allowing Herault and the remainder of his men to march against Sharpe at San Miguel. The fortress at San Miguel is very old and this is where Sharpe's skirmish takes place. There is a farmhouse near the fort at San Miguel, and this is where the English riflemen set up to defend the fort against a potential attack by the French. The French attack San Miguel in order to save Madrid by attempting to force the English to retreat;



however, Sharpe saves Madrid by defending San Miguel, thus allowing Wellington's army to continue marching north.

Language and Meaning

The language used in "Sharpe's Skirmish" tends to be casual and informal. The sentence construction of the exposition is proper, but the dialogue tends to be improper as can be expected of militia conversations as necessary. The language used is very appropriate for the volatile environment in which the book is set as the characters are enduring a very dangerous and demanding situation that does not necessarily allow them time to be formal and polite.

The dialogue also serves to demonstrate reverence to officers of higher rank, and the language overall characterizes the individuals in the story and their military rank. There is a fairly equal distribution of exposition and dialogue in this story. The language serves to show the reader the differences between characters of different military ranks and moral character, as well as the differences between the English and French. Some of the derogatory remarks made about the enemy troops emphasize the antagonism between the two groups of soldiers, also. Overall, the language is easy to understand and allows the reader to understand the dynamics within each group and between the two groups.

Structure

"Sharpe's Skirmish" consists of sixty-three pages. The first page is an introduction and the remaining pages are not broken into formal chapters but are separated by asterisks. As such, there are sixteen sections which are divided based on either a change in viewpoint or an elapse of time. These sections are generally around three to five pages long, and they are neither titled nor numbered. The sections are short but very detailed as each encompasses a short span of time.

"Sharpe's Skirmish" by Bernard Cromwell is a story written about a battle between the English and the French in 1812. In order to secure a path for Wellington's army to reach their supplies, Captain Richard Sharpe and his men must retain control of the fort at San Miguel de Tormes, even when the French attack with General Jean Herault leading them. "Sharpe's Skirmish" provides an interesting fictional account of one aspect of this important historical war.

The pace of this story is very quick. The story is mostly linear with only a few episodes of flashbacks or background alluded to that refers to the relationship between Sharpe and Teresa or the events at Gawilghur. The story is easy to read and show both the French and English sides of the skirmish at San Miguel de Tormes. Overall, it is a very entertaining and interesting selection of historical fiction.



Quotes

"Welcome to San Miguel, Captain, where God is in his heaven and all is well with the world" (Major Lucius Tubbs, pg. 11.)

"Didn't see a damn thing, Major. But if they've got enough energy to make a protest, they've got enough energy to go for a march. Don't want them getting slack, do we?" (Captain Richard Sharpe, pg. 17.)

"Pity, Ducos considered, was an emotion fit only for women, while mercy was the prerogative of God, and the Emperor deserved sterner virtues than those of women and God. The Emperor needed efficiency, dedication and intelligence, and Ducos supplied all three, which was why he had the Emperor's ear" (Narrator, pg. 19-20.)

"Against all men who are rude, but I have fought the French, Mister Hickey, since the day they killed my family" (Teresa Sharpe, pg. 23.)

"If I march towards Avila it will draw the guerilleros like flies to a corpse. And I shall send a vanguard, say three hundred infantry? We give the bastards a victory, Major, by sacrificing those three hundred men on the Avila road, and when the guerilleros are busy destroying them, the rest of us will go straight across the hills" (General Jean Herault, pg. 30.)

"If I raise an alarm and no crapauds come, they'll string my guts out and hang their washing out to dry on them. I'll be a quartermaster for the rest of my days! They'll never trust me again" (Captain Richard Sharpe, pg. 36-37.)

"[Sharpe] was nervous. He had listened to his instinct, and he was ready for the French, but it still felt wrong. It felt like defeat, and it had not even started yet" (Narrator, pg. 38.)

"The hussars grinned. They liked Pailleterie, for he looked after them, he was brave and he gave them victory. And he was about to give them another" (Narrator, pg. 40.)

"Sharpe landed heavily at the foot of the stairs and ran through the arch. And saw instantly that the fort was lost. He had failed" (Narrator, pg. 43.)

"Sharpe is up from the ranks. Things like that happen in war, don't you know? A fellow makes a half-decent showing as a sergeant, and next thing they've stitched a yard of braid on his collar and expect him to behave like a gentleman. But they don't satisfy. Ain't brought up to it, y'see?" (Major Lucius Tubbs, pg. 50.)

"Sharpe was filled with utter fury. How dare these bastards have defeated him? And all he wanted to do now was to kill them, to take his revenge, but they were running now, fleeing from the glitter of bayonets" (Narrator, pg. 54-55.)

"So that was what stood between [Herault] and victory. Two ranks and a handful of grasshoppers. That was what the French called the riflemen, grasshoppers. The



bastards were always darting about in the grass, sniping away, then moving on"
(Narrator, pg. 57.)

"I just remembered how you managed at Gawilghur, Mister Sharpe, and reckoned you could manage again" (John MacKeon, pg. 63.)

"'No,' Sharpe said, putting an arm about her shoulders. 'It weren't a battle, love. Just a skirmish.' Just a skirmish, but the French had lost and their general was Sharpe's prisoner. And too many men had died, and that was Sharpe's fault, but the army would only remember that Captain Sharpe had stopped the frogs and so, for the moment, his career was safe and the French would abandon Madrid and Wellington could keep marching north. And all because Sharpe had fought a skirmish and he had won. It was Sharpe's skirmish" (Narrator, pg. 63.)

Topics for Discussion

How would you classify the genre of this story and why?

Who is the Emperor and why is he important in this story?

What is the reason for the animosity between the French and the British in "Sharpe's Skirmish?"

Compare and contrast Sharpe and Pailleterie.

What role does Teresa play in this story?

Describe who has control of the fort at San Miguel throughout this story as it changes hands at various points.

Who wins the skirmish at San Miguel and how?