

The Napoleon Series

The Peninsular Journal of Major General John Randoll Mackenzie 1808-1809: A Short Biography

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Military career:¹

1778, July: Second Lieutenant Marine Forces

1780, 3rd November: First Lieutenant Marine Forces

c. 1791: resigned commission in the Marine Forces

1793: Lieutenant 7th Foot

1793, 13th March: Captain 78th Foot

1794, 10th February: Major 78th Foot

1794, 15th November: Lieutenant Colonel (2nd Battalion)

1796, 27th February: Lieutenant Colonel 78th Foot (1st Battalion)

1801, 1st January: Brevet Colonel

1804-1808: Brigadier General on the Staff

1808, 25th April: Major General

Birth and Family:

John Randoll Mackenzie (Mackenzie) was born c. 1763, the second and only surviving son of William Mackenzie of Suddie and Margaret, daughter of Sir Alexander Mackenzie, 5th Baronet, of Coul. He never married and died without heir, leaving his estates in Suddie, Ross-shire County near Inverness in the northeastern Scottish Highlands, to his surviving sister.²

Political and military experiences:

Mackenzie was from an illustrious Scottish family and undoubtedly benefitted from the patronage of his relatives and his family connections.

His uncle, General John Mackenzie as colonel commandant in the Marines probably influenced Mackenzie's first commission as second lieutenant in that service in 1778. Mackenzie was appointed adjutant to the Chatham division, received promotion to first lieutenant in 1780, and was in India in 1787.³

Mackenzie returned to Britain from India in about 1792 and resigned his commission in the marine service. His motivations were, possibly, to benefit from succession to the title to his family's estate and also "perhaps from an ambition to get forward in his profession more rapidly than the service admits of."⁴

He was appointed lieutenant in the 7th Foot in early 1793 but it is unlikely he served with the regiment.⁵

Francis Humberston Mackenzie, Lord Seaforth, himself a British general and member of parliament and, at that time, head of the Clan Mackenzie, raised the 78th regiment of foot, the Ross-shire buffs. Mackenzie was appointed captain in the 78th in March 1793 and, one year later, promoted to major in the second battalion and subsequently lieutenant colonel in that junior battalion in November 1794, serving in the Cape of Good Hope in 1795. The second battalion of the 78th was disbanded and the officers and men absorbed into the first battalion. In February 1796, Mackenzie was appointed lieutenant colonel in the first battalion 78th, serving on garrison duty in India until 1801.⁶

It is likely that Mackenzie developed a close relationship with General Mackenzie-Fraser at this time, his colonel in the 78th, although there is little information other than references in his diary, for example when in Lisbon, recording the need to write a long overdue letter to his friend Mackenzie-Fraser, then with Moore's army.⁷

On returning to Britain, Mackenzie was promoted to the rank of colonel, and in 1803 placed on the Northern Staff as a brigadier, taking command of the militia in the five northern counties of Scotland in the following year. He was subsequently appointed governor of Alderney, from August to October 1806, but soon afterwards resumed staff duties at Dunbar.⁸

Lord Seaforth again featured in Mackenzie's career, supporting his election to parliament for the seat of Tain Burghs in 1806, for which he had an electoral pact with Lord and Lady Stafford. Lord Seaforth supported his candidature again in 1807, when he was returned by the Staffords in the same constituency, albeit with some reluctance due to emerging political differences. Mackenzie was subsequently returned by the Staffords for the seat of Sutherland in May 1808.⁹

In April 1808, just prior to this latest political development, Mackenzie was appointed to the rank of major general and later that year was once more on active service "appointed to serve as a Major General with one Aide de Camp upon the staff of the army serving in Spain and Portugal from the 25th ultimo [September]."¹⁰

By early October of that year, he was embarking for Spain, commanding a brigade in the expeditionary force of lieutenant general Sir David Baird. After the arrival of Baird's expedition at Corunna, Mackenzie received the news of his appointment to the staff of Portugal but remained commanding a brigade, with the agreement of Sir David, until the anticipated union of Baird's force with Sir John Moore's army.

However, on 16th November, Mackenzie received a further letter from Lisbon¹¹ that left him astonished and not a little disappointed, given the delay in disembarking and after only serving temporarily in northern Spain with his command:

"16th This morning arrived a letter for me from Sir Harry Burrard, commanding in Portugal, containing the disagreeable & unwelcome intelligence to me, that there was no mistake, but that I am undoubtedly the person appointed to the staff of

that kingdom, and peremptorily ordering me immediately to Lisbon to assume the command of the troops in Portugal, as he was ordered immediately home.”¹²

After consulting with Sir David Baird and Colonel Bathurst (Deputy QMG), Mackenzie quitted his command in Spain for Lisbon, ultimately to assume command of the remaining British forces in Lisbon upon the departure of lieutenant general Sir Harry Burrard to face the court of enquiry into Convention of Cintra.¹³

Mackenzie arrived in Lisbon on the 2nd December 1808, holding overall command of British forces there until the arrival of lieutenant general Sir John Cradock on the 13th of that month.

In January 1809, Mackenzie was to be dispatched to assist the army of lieutenant general Sir John Moore in northern Spain, the order being subsequently rescinded prior to embarkation. In February, he was ordered with his brigade to Cadiz to support the defence of the town by the Spanish patriots. After much discussion with the Spanish government in Seville, Mackenzie was unable to obtain permission to disembark in Cadiz and returned to Lisbon by order of Sir John Cradock.¹⁴ As is evident from the diary though, Mackenzie provided some useful assistance – albeit of a more astute, diplomatic nature as opposed to military action.

At the time, Mr Frere, the British ambassador reported “General Mackenzie appears to have conducted himself with perfect prudence and judgement.”¹⁵ Lady Holland after spending some days with Mackenzie in Lisbon, in January 1809, wrote in her journal: “He is a man of an excellent, sound understanding, remarkably well informed in his profession, and very correct in his judgment. He laments the division of the English forces, wants them to concentrate in Spain.”¹⁶

As is evident from these events as set out in Mackenzie’s diary, British military policy in Spain and Portugal, and relations with their respective governments were complex, changeable and, at times, confusing, due to conflicting military and political objectives and cultural differences.¹⁷

By 11th March, Mackenzie was back in Portugal and, upon the replacement of Sir John Cradock by lieutenant general Sir Arthur Wellesley in April, was retained on the staff of the army in Portugal. Wellesley chose Mackenzie to undertake a semi-independent command rather than serve with the main allied army against Soult in northern Portugal:

“The corps of troops placed under your command is destined to watch the movements of the enemy on the Eastern frontier of Portugal, and to guard the passes in to this country on the right of the Tagus, during the period the main body of the British army under my command will be employed on the Douro.”¹⁸

Indeed, under Wellesley, Mackenzie had command of his own brigade (3/27th, 2/31st, 1/45th) together with the 2/24th (recently arrived in Portugal), Fane’s brigade of heavy dragoons and May’s company (under captain Baynes) of six-pounders, amounting to 4,500 British troops, together with a substantial Portuguese contingent comprising 7,000 troops of all arms, all stationed around Abrantes.¹⁹

This decision, despite the importance of the task and enormity of the command for a major general, was a further disappointment to Mackenzie as he recorded in his diary at the time:

“This movement has disappointed and distressed me. I dare say it will be accompanied by all those expressions that can gild the Pill, but being the first act of Sir Arthur’s Command, I do not bode much of the fortunate kind from it. I dare say I shall be told of the importance of the Post entrusted to my Charge and that the selection is honourable to me. This is a sort of reasoning applied and most fallacious. I would be sorry to suppose that my political connections have occasioned any of the rubs I have met with in the line of my profession. Time will shew [sic].”²⁰

Mackenzie was anxious that his political allegiances and actions, for example voting against the Portland administration on a number of important issues, might invoke Wellesley’s prejudices against him. However, “in fact Wellesley seems to have formed a high opinion of his ability entrusting him with a semi-independent command and then a division, even though he was a junior major-general”.²¹

Despite the strategic importance of the role, Mackenzie regretted the missed opportunity of active campaign with the main army against Soult. His disappointment, as is evident from subsequent entries and communication with his commander in chief, was intensified by the extension of his responsibilities to include command of a substantial Portuguese contingent.

Mackenzie was not alone in his reservations concerning the incorporation of Portuguese forces under British army command. In fact, Wellesley himself shared some of Mackenzie’s reservations, at least to some degree, despite needing to incorporate some Portuguese troops into a number of relatively weak British brigades.²²

Mackenzie was clearly not shirking responsibility; he desperately wanted to remain in command of his brigade in active service and in the main theatre of operations as shown by his diary entries which, at this time, are very similar to the tone expressed when removed from his active command in Galicia, describing his feelings about this latest development as follows:

“May 1st This command is represented of great importance, and it undoubtedly may become so. I do not like to have any thing [sic] to do with the command of Portuguese troops, and I wish I were with the main army, at the head of my brigade, instead of this important, but certainly troublesome command, in which there is much reputation to be lost, but little to be acquired”.²³

Sir Arthur Wellesley ultimately approved Mackenzie’s conduct and appointed him to command the third division of the British army in the Talavera campaign. Indeed, as Rory Muir neatly summarised: “Wellesley did not lightly entrust any subordinate with a semi-independent command” and despite these political differences and actions as “an Opposition MP ... this did not prevent Wellesley forming a high opinion of his talents and entrusting him with a semi-independent command and then a division [in the Talavera campaign], and even going ... to some trouble that Mackenzie would not be superseded by the arrival of a more senior officer from home”.²⁴

Mackenzie's command, alongside Sherbrooke's first division, formed the advance guard of the British army when crossing the Alberche and the rear guard on re-crossing that river and prior to these two divisions taking up their place in line for the forthcoming battle.

Wellesley reported to Castlereagh: "At about 2 o'clock on the 27th [July], the enemy appeared in strength on the left bank of the Alberche, and manifested an intention to attack Mackenzie's division. The attack was made before they could be withdrawn; but the troops consisting of Gen. Mackenzie's and Col. Donkin's brigades, and Gen. Anson's brigade of cavalry, and supported by Gen. Payne with the other 4 regiments of cavalry in the plain between Talavera and the wood, withdrew in good order, but with some loss, particularly by the 2nd batt. 87th regt. and the 2nd batt. 31st regt. in the wood. Upon this occasion, the steadiness and discipline of the 45th regt. and the 5th batt. 60th regt. were conspicuous, and I had particular reason to be satisfied with the manner in which Gen. Mackenzie withdrew this advanced guard... Gen. Mackenzie continued to fall gradually upon the left of the position of the combined armies, where he was placed in the second line in the rear of the Guards, Col. Donkin being placed in the same situation farther (sic) upon the left, in the rear of the King's German Legion."²⁵

General Cuesta writing about the battle of Talavera made the follow appreciative comments concerning Mackenzie's command of the British rear guard, during the combat of 27th July on the Alberche, where the British forces were surprised by the sudden attack of the French and Donkin's brigade (under Mackenzie's command) was roughly handled, forcing the entire division to retire:

"The regularity, steadiness, and fortitude of all these troops, as well as the military talents of General Mackenzie, were conspicuous in every movement, and this officer is deserving of the highest praise and admiration for the coolness and serenity with which he withdrew this division to the left (sic) of the British army."²⁶

Sir Charles Oman described the most critical moment during the battle of Talavera and Mackenzie's death commanding his brigade:

"Sebastiani came up with great boldness against the fresh front thus presented to him, and for twenty minutes there was the most furious musketry battle in the British right centre. Mackenzie himself fell, and his three battalions lost 632 men out of about 2,000. ...on this point, the battle was saved: the main credit must go to Mackenzie's brigade, which has never received the praise that was its due, for its general was killed and thus no report from the 3rd division was sent in to Wellesley, who omitted all mention of its doings in his Talavera dispatch. It is never too late to do homage to forgotten valour, and to call attention to a neglected feat of arms. The services of the 24th, 31st, and 45th saved the day for Britain."²⁷

Rory Muir, in his biography of Wellington, quoted Charles Cocks' eulogy of Mackenzie regarding his actions at this crucial moment in the battle, when Mackenzie's brigade checked the French advance in pursuit of the retiring Guards. Despite being denied the full recognition he deserved, due to the lack of an official account of the third division's actions and, no doubt, the interpretation that future historians have placed on Wellesley's report to Castlereagh, and the erroneous conclusion that the 1/48th had supported the Guards, Cocks insisted that Mackenzie was: "the man who did more than anyone towards our victory".²⁸

Placed on the Napoleon Series: December 2017

- ¹ McGuigan, Ron and Robert Burnham. *Wellington's Brigade Commanders: Peninsula and Waterloo*. Barnsley: Pen and Sword Military, 2017. Mackenzie, John Randall, p. 1. (E-Book)
- ² For the genealogy of the family Mackenzie of Suddie see Burke, John. *A Genealogical and Heraldic Dictionary of the Peerage and Baronetage of the British Empire*. Sixth Edition. London: Henry Colburn Publisher, 1839. p. 671-672.
- ³ Thorne, R.G. (Ed.). *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons, 1790-1820*. Vol. 4. London: 1986. Mackenzie, John Randall article by David R. Fisher, pp. 494-496. On-line Edition: <http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1790-1820/member/mackenzie-john-randoll-1763-1809>; Burnham and McGuigan, op. cit. Mackenzie, John Randall p. 1.(E-Book)
- ⁴ Thorne, op. cit., pp. 494-496; *The Gentleman's Magazine*, Vol. 79, Second Part, August 1809, p. 780.
- ⁵ McGuigan and Burnham, op. cit., Mackenzie John Randall, p. 3. (E-Book)
- ⁶ Keltie, John S. (Ed.). *A History of the Scottish Highlands, Highland Clans and Highland Regiments*. Vol II. Edinburgh: A. Fullerton, 1875. pp. 617-626.
- ⁷ BL Add MS 39201: Mackenzie Papers, Vol. XV, Diary of Maj. Gen. J. R. Mackenzie 1808-1809.
- ⁸ Thorne, op. cit., p. 496.
- ⁹ For Mackenzie's political career and allegiances, see Thorne, op. cit., pp. 494-496. There was no perceived conflict, at this time, with holding both military rank, serving overseas and continuing to hold political office.
- ¹⁰ BL Add Ms 39199: Mackenzie Papers, Vol. XIII, f.1 (Letter from the War Office to Mackenzie, dated 3 October 1808).
- ¹¹ BL Add Ms 39199: Mackenzie Papers, Vol. XIII, f. 3 (Letter from Sir Harry Burrard to Mackenzie, dated Lisbon November 6 1808).
- ¹² BL Add MS 39201: Mackenzie Papers, Vol. XV, Diary of Maj. Gen. J. R. Mackenzie 1808-1809.
- ¹³ For the proceedings and outcomes of the court of inquiry, see Glover, Michael. *Britannia Sickness: Sir Arthur Wellesley and the Convention of Cintra*. London: Leo Cooper, 1970.
- ¹⁴ For details of this expedition see Mackenzie's own report in: Napier, William. *History of the War in the Peninsula and the South of France*, 3rd Edition, Vol. II. pp. 494 et seq.: Appendix IX, Narrative of the Proceedings of Major-General Mackenzie detachment from Lisbon to Cadiz.
- ¹⁵ Dispatch from the Right Honourable J. H. Frere to Mr Secretary Canning, Seville, 4th March 1809, reported in *Parliamentary Papers*, 1810.
- ¹⁶ The Earl of Ilchester (Ed.). *The Spanish Journal of Elizabeth Lady Holland*. London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1910. p. 255, entry 19th January 1809.
- ¹⁷ BL Add MS 39201: Mackenzie Papers, Vol. XV, Diary of Maj. Gen. J. R. Mackenzie 1808-1809.
- ¹⁸ Wellesley to Major General Mackenzie, Leyria, 1st May, 1809 in Gurwood, John (Ed). *The Dispatches of Field Marshall The Duke of Wellington during his various campaigns*. Volume The Fourth, A New Edition. London: John Murray, 1837. p. 286.
- ¹⁹ Muir, Rory. *Life of Wellington. Commentary of Rory Muir's biography of Arthur Wellesley, the Duke of Wellington*. <http://www.lifeofwellington.co.uk/commentary/chapter-eighteen-oporto-april-may-1809/> ; Lipscombe, Nick. *Wellington's Guns: the untold story of Wellington and his artillery in the Peninsula and at Waterloo*. Botley: Osprey Publishing, 2013. pp. 93-4.
- ²⁰ BL Add MS 39201: Mackenzie Papers, Vol. XV, Diary of Maj. Gen. J. R. Mackenzie 1808-1809.
- ²¹ Muir, Rory. *Life of Wellington. Commentary of Rory Muir's biography of Arthur Wellesley, the Duke of Wellington*. <http://www.lifeofwellington.co.uk/commentary/chapter-eighteen-oporto-april-may-1809/>
- ²² Wellesley reported to Beresford after reviewing Portuguese troops in Coimbra "your troops made but a bad figure this morning of the review. The battalions very weak, not more than 300 men; the body of men; particularly of the – regt., very bad; and the officers worse than anything I have seen." Wellesley to Marshal Beresford, Coimbra, 6th May, 1809 in *Wellington's Dispatches* op. cit. pp. 303-304.

²³ BL Add MS 39201: Mackenzie Papers, Vol. XV, Diary of Maj. Gen. J. R. Mackenzie 1808-1809.

²⁴ Muir, Rory. *Wellington. The Path to Victory 1769-1814*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013. p. 303 and citing Wellesley to Villiers, Coimbra, 4th May, 1809 in Wellington's Dispatches, op. cit. p. 299.

²⁵ Wellesley to Viscount Castlereagh, Talavera de la Reyna, 29th July, 1809 in Wellington's Dispatches, op. cit. pp. 533-534. All of the infantry commended belonged to Mackenzie's division.

²⁶ Official account, by General Cuesta, of the battle of Talavera, to the Secretary at War, dated Seville Sept. 7, printed in Cobbett's Political Register, Vol. XVI, 1809. p. 561.

²⁷ Oman, Sir Charles. *A History of the Peninsular War*. Vol. II. London: 1903 (Greenhill Books reprint, 2004). p. 541. Oman adds in a footnote "Except that he mentioned the colonels of the 31st and 45th among the officers who had done well in the battle".

²⁸ Muir, Rory. *Wellington. The Path to Victory*, op. cit., p. 337, citing Cocks, 30th July 1809 in a letter to his father in Page, Julia. *Intelligence Officer in the Peninsula: The Letters and Diaries of Major the Hon. Edward Charles Cocks, 1786-1812*. Spellmount, 1986. p.37.

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