

The Napoleon Series

The Peninsular Journal of Major General John Randoll Mackenzie 1808-1809: April 1809

Transcribed, edited and annotated by [Moisés Gaudêncio](#) and [Anthony Gray](#)

Source: Mackenzie Papers Vol, XV Diary of Maj. Gen. J. R. Mackenzie 1808-09

April 1st The storm has this day much abated, and as nothing has been seen off the coast of any collection or fleet of ships, previous to or during its continuance, we have hopes General Hill may have expected it. Particularly as it is not usual for the effects of these storms to be felt at any distance from the coasts of Portugal, and it very generally happens that with the wind at southwest here, it blows from the north in the bay of Biscay. Had some conversation today with Sir J. Cradock on the state of affairs, who intends calling a council of war tomorrow.

2nd This day a council of war was assembled by Sir J. Cradock, consisting of the general officers in Portugal, who all appeared, except Brigadier General Cameron, & Brigadier General Driberg King's German Legion, who were both sick. There were present Marshal Beresford, Major Generals Sherbrooke, Cotton, Murray¹, Mackenzie & Tilson, Brigadier Generals Sontag, Campbell (Frederick), Richard Stewart & Langwerth of the King's German Legion. The questions were, 1st "Whether the ultimate defence of Portugal, under existing circumstances, will be best secured, by the movement of the British forces to the northward, with the view to regain Oporto, and expel the enemy from that quarter." or 2nd "Does it appear preferable to place the British Army in the best position the vicinity of Lisbon affords, and for the present direct our operations of the capital & the Tagus."

On the 1st question it was unanimously decided not to advance to Oporto, which would leave Lisbon completely open to Victor's army from Badajoz.

On the 2nd question Brigadier General's Langwerth, Stewart, Campbell, Sontag, Major Generals Tilson & Murray were "for remaining in our present position for the defence of the Tagus & the capital." I was the first who proposed "to move to an advanced position, but not farther than we were determined to engage the enemy in, keeping in view the defence of the Tagus & the capital, under the present circumstances." As this opinion was adopted with some shades of difference by Major Generals Cotton & Sherbrooke and seemed to meet the ideas of the Commander in Chief, I stated the grounds of my opinion in a letter. 1st "That a movement of the British troops towards

¹ John Murray. A Brief Service Biography": McGuigan, Ron. *British Generals of the Napoleonic Wars*. 2006-2014. The Napoleon Series. Retrieved 26 March 2017. http://www.napoleon-series.org/research/biographies/BritishGenerals/c_BritishGenerals44.html

the enemy would have a good effect on the Portuguese army & nation.” 2nd “That on the same principle, & considering the great inferiority of our numbers to those of the enemy, the ill consequences of a retrograde movement should be avoided. Our advance should therefore be no farther than to the ground we are determined to dispute. At present while the army of Marshal Victor is near Badajos, with the Alentejo open to him, this advance ought not to be distant from Lisbon.” 3rd “That as we must look to the Tagus for reinforcements & supplies, & every subsistence, it is indispensable that our communication with it, should be kept open, particularly from Lisbon to the sea. That, “these ideas are of course only suited to our present circumstances. Reinforcements from England, or changes in the situation of the enemy, particularly in Marshal Victor’s army, will naturally lead to different measures, and may enable us to advance against Soult, without endangering the safety of the capital.”

Marshal Beresford arguing as a Portuguese rather than a British officer, wished for a more rapid forward movement, as he finds the Portuguese troops in a very insubordinate state, indeed mutinous & disorderly, and he hopes the vicinity of a British army might enable him to make some reformation in their system. On the whole I think a forward movement of the army will take place immediately.

3rd Various reports of the situation of the enemy. The Commander in Chief seems determined to move the army forward as soon as the means can be procured. It is now certain Oporto, has been some days in possession of Soult’s army. The populace were mutinous, resolute to defend the place until the enemy appeared, but then made no resistance. It is also certain Cuesta has received a severe overthrow from Marshal Victor on the Guadiana, and his army has been almost dispersed². Our situation becomes thus more & more critical.

4th Preparations for our taking the field are making [sic], in which are found many difficulties. A fleet in the offing, supposed to be General Hill’s corps.

5th General Hill’s arrival announced. His force consists of about 4,000 men, Brigadier General Alexander Campbell³ comes with him. This reinforcement adds to the activity of our equipment, and I believe we shall soon advance with as little delay as possible towards Leyria [Leiria]. Soult it is said is pushing forward from Oporto towards Coimbra. It would certainly be desirable to bring him to action alone, and I hope we shall be able to add another trophy to the British army.

6th In consequence of General Hill’s arrival the army is newly brigaded. Mine is now composed of the 3rd battalion 27th, 2nd battalion 31st & 1st battalion 45th.

7th Received orders to move my brigade on the 8th, on which day the general movement of the army commences.

²At the battle of Medellin, 29 March 1809.

³“Alexander Campbell A Brief Service Biography”: McGuigan, Ron. *British Generals of the Napoleonic Wars*. 2006-2014. The Napoleon Series. Retrieved 26 March 2017. http://www.napoleon-series.org/research/biographies/BritishGenerals/c_Britishgenerals6.html

8th The 27th Regiment moved today to Tojal, the 45th to the same place, the 31st to Bucellas.

9th The three regiments moved today to Sobral [Sobral de Monte Agraço], where I have joined them. The army moves in three columns. The right consists of the Guards & a brigade of the line, under the command of two Brigadier General Campbells [sic]. The center consists of Major Generals Cotton's, Hill's, Mackenzie's, Sontag's & Cameron's, and the left of General Murray's (German Legion) & Major General Tilson's. General Sherbrooke is second in command of the army has no particular command, but takes a general superintendence, and moves with the center column.

10th Halted today at Sobral, or rather at a small village near it, where my quarters are. We have come thro' a very barren country & the weather is at present extremely cold. This is so much the better for marching, as long as we can procure quarters for our men. But I fear we must soon bivouac.

11th Moved today my quarters into the town of Sobral, being succeeded in my former ones by Brigadier General Stewart, whose brigade has marched into the villages adjacent to Sobral. Have received my orders for my brigade to move at a moment's warning.

12th The 27th moved today to Curgeira [Corujeira] and Quinta de Marialva where I accompanied them. The 45th to St. Domingo & La da Rainha. The 31st to Freria. These were all very short marches.

13th The whole brigade moved to Vila Verde [Vila Verde de Francos] & adjacents [sic]. A convent⁴ on a high hill near the town received 500 men.

14th The whole marched to Caldas [Caldas da Rainha], thro' Obidos [Óbidos]. Passed the scene of the first action of our troops with the French in August last. It happened on the 17th of that month. Obidos is a strong hill fort. Caldas a large well built town. Our quarters last night at Vila Verde, where General Sherbrooke & I inhabited the same house, were most wretched. At Caldas we are very well lodged, altho' there is now a pretty large army in it. This place is famous for its warm & mineral baths & waters. I presume we must halt here a day or two for supplies.

15th Halted here today, and it is probable we must remain here for some days; General Hill's brigade & the Cavalry (14 [Light] Dragoons) are under orders to march tomorrow. Victor is said to be near Badajoz, and Soult advancing to Coimbra. I wish this last maybe true. If he is advancing he will soon be placed in an awkward dilemma, either to fight us or retreat, but I apprehend our information is not to be relied on.

16th The Dragoons & General Hill's brigade marched this morning for Alcobaça, about 4 Portuguese leagues in advance, the Commander in Chief Sir J. Cradock is expected immediately. The 16th Dragoons have arrived at Lisbon, and are ordered to join the army in all expedition, I hope they will come before we meet Soult. We shall then bid defiance to his numerous cavalry. This is a very pleasant town, and the establishment

⁴Convento de Nossa Senhora da Visitação.

of the Baths, on a very handsome & liberal scale. There is a large bath for the general use of the people, and smaller baths for private use. The privacy is the only difference, for they are supplied from the same springs of warm water, and are constantly kept running off, so that the water never cools much, and the impurities it acquires from bathing are carried off imperceptibly. If the baths are at any time required of a greater degree than the natural heat of the springs, there are fires for the purpose. The water is strongly mineral, smells like those of Harrogate & Strathpeffer, but is more like the latter, containing no portion of salt. Wonderful cures are related, of almost all disease, but chiefly rheumatism, gout, and all impurities in the blood, and I believe they may safely be tried in almost all other cases, for where they do not act very efficiently as a cure, they have never been known to do any mischief.

17th I have received lately some letters from Seville, thro' Estremadura by the common post, which throws rather a doubt upon the reported situation of the French armies. The people in Andalusia [Andalucía], are not at all dismayed at Cuesta's defeat, nor has he lost any credit with them from it. On the contrary he has been appointed to the Chief Command of the armies as well in Estremadura, as in Andalusia & La Mancha, in consequence of the conduct of General Urbino (Conde de Cortijal)⁵ which has been very reprehensible⁶. The Commander in Chief, Sir John Cradock joined the army here this day. The scarcity of forage will soon force us to move from this place and Alcobaça, and I presume our next sleep will be towards Leyria two days march farther on than Alcobaça. The ignorance of the people even in the highest as well as most active situations in Portugal, is not to be credited. We were assured that here & at Alcobaça we should find plenty of corn and straw, in both of which we find them almost entirely deficient. And what adds to the probability of our being soon without resource here, is the refusal of Admiral Berkeley to send a victualler to Peniche, alledging [sic] its being unsafe. This is the first instance of an unwillingness of cooperation shown by any naval commander of late years. His predecessor Sir C. Cotton was extremely ready to promote the views of the army. The army is now disposed as follows. Major General Cotton with the 14th [Light] Dragoons, & a brigade of light 3 pounders, Major General Hill with the reserve brigade, at Alcobaça. The three brigades commanded by Major General Mackenzie, Brigadier General Stewart & Brigadier General Sontag, with the park of artillery, at Caldas. The whole of the above belong to the center column. The German two brigades with their artillery are at Obidos, as also Major General Tilson's brigade. Brigadier General Cameron's brigade at a village about three miles in rear of Obidos. The right column consisting of the brigade of Guards under Brigadier General Frederick Campbell, & the brigade under Brigadier General A. Campbell, are at Rio Maior & adjacents.

⁵José de Urbina y Urbina (1761-1833), Conde de Cartaojal. Spanish Lieutenant General. At the beginning of the Spanish uprising he was appointed second in command in the Army of Galicia by the provincial *junta*. He was present at the battle of Medina del Rio Seco (July 1808). Replaced the Duke of Infantado at the head of the Army of the Center (February 1809) and was defeated at the battle of Ciudad Real. Replaced by General Venegas in April 1809. See: Martinez, op. cit. p. 890-891.

⁶Count Cartaojal commanded the Spanish Army in the province of La Mancha and was defeated by the French corps under General Sebastiani at Ciudad Real (27 March 1809). See: Oman, op. cit. vol. II, pp. 143-148.

18th There is reason to believe the army will move in a day or two, the troops at Rio Maior to Santarem, where they will be joined by the 16th Light Dragoons. All the rest of the army to Leyria & Batalha. Santarem will be under General Sherbrooke. These positions will be well chosen for the defence of the Tagus, in case of an attempt to force a passage, or to seize on Abrantes; but they are not so convenient for operation against Soult, Santarem being too far in rear of Leyria. I have just heard, that it is probable some of our infantry will remain at Alcobaca. This I suppose for the convenience of subsistence. Otherwise, they are too distant from Leyria and Abrantes.

19th The intention of sending a part of our force to Santarem is altered, and the whole will now proceed to Leyria & Batalha, in consequence of dispatches from General Beresford, who seems extremely anxious for an united move against Soult. I do not believe this gentleman will wait for us, and probably his army is at this moment on its retreat from Oporto. I am not therefore very easy at the idea of running so far from Lisbon, as to leave it in danger from Victor, in quest of an enemy we have no chance of coming up with. I wish I may be wrong.

20th I have received my orders to move in command of a column consisting of my own & General Stuart's brigade, with the artillery of the center column, for Alcobaca tomorrow. The next day for Batalha, the following for Leyria. Had my brigade out this morning, and manoeuvred them for the first time. Various circumstances had prevented & disappointed me before this morning from having this satisfaction. Considering how long they have been without a field day, they behaved extremely well, and are very ready to meet the enemy.

22nd Marched this morning for Alcobaca at 5 o'clock in the morning, arrived there about 2 o'clock p. m. and dined with the monks.⁷ The Commander in Chief was there. The country between Caldas & Alcobaca is rich, & tolerably cultivated. The Convent of Alcobaca is very handsome, and extensive. Its establishment very much favoured by the different monarchs since the reign of John the 4th by whom it was founded about four hundred years ago⁸. The revenues are said to be near thirty thousand pounds sterling per annum. The library is a most beautiful & well proportioned room, and the kitchen, the most convenient & extensive I have ever seen. My whole brigade officers & men were accommodated within the walls of this convent. Our entertainment was most sumptuous. The distance from Caldas, is 4 leagues, near eighteen miles.

23rd Marched this morning for Batalha at 5 o'clock in the morning. A steep hill, with a horrible road over it, within a mile of Alcobaca, retarded our march greatly. Arrived at Batalha about one o'clock a distance of three leagues. The rest of the road good. There is a large convent⁹ at Batalha, where some of our men were quartered, indeed more than two thirds, of our whole number. There is an unfinished part of this convent of very beautiful architecture. In the church, the greatest curiosity is the body of one of the Johns', King of Portugal, in great preservation about three hundred years old. We were entertained with great good will by the monks, who are poor compared with their

⁷The monks of the Real Mosteiro de Santa Maria de Alcobaca.

⁸Actually founded by Portugal's first king, D. Afonso Henriques.

⁹Mosteiro de Santa Maria da Vitória.

neighbors at Alcobaça, but were equally the objects of the rapacity of the French last year. They were plundered of every thing [sic] that contained any of the precious metals. When the French officers dined with them, they pocketed the silver forks & spoons.

24th Marched this morning at the usual hour for Leyria, an excellent road, arrived at Leyria about half past nine o'clock, where I found an excellent breakfast prepared for me by my friends Colonel Darroch¹⁰ & Major Tidy. The difficulty of procuring forage & provisions here, has induced the Commander in Chief to send forward the 14th [Light] Dragoons & the reserve to Pombal, on the road to Coimbra, and the accounts of the approach of the enemy from Oporto, make it probable the whole army may soon move in that direction.

25th I am again appointed commandant of the troops collected together. A troublesome office, which I however have no objection to, as employing my time professionally. The difficulties of provisioning an army in this country appear everyday more serious, and render our situation, the more we recede from Lisbon, the more precarious. We are however in an excellent position for moving against the enemy whether it shall be ultimately determined to attack Soult or Victor first. News have arrived this morning of General Sir Arthur Wellesley, who has come out to take the command of this army in the room of Sir John Cradock, who is appointed to the command at Gibraltar. This removal has been softened by every expression of kindness by ministers, but must be severely felt by Sir John, who has conducted himself with great propriety in very difficult circumstances. Has suffered great anxiety of mind in the various arrangements that have taken place, and the various tempers & obstacles he has had to manage & remove. The treatment he has received is unfair, & he leaves this army with the love & affection I believe of every individual in it. His conciliatory manners, & kindness of disposition, have enabled him to work through a most unpleasant time without creating an enemy of any description in any rank. His successor I have the highest esteem & respect for. But this tribute of justice to Sir John Cradock, is due from every one who like me, have witnessed his exertions & seen & felt his worth.

26th Today our worthy Commander in Chief left us. I rode with him, as did most of the general officers, to Carvalhos, about three leagues towards Lisbon, where we took leave of him with great regret. The 16th Light Dragoons has advanced to Santarem. Generals Sherbrooke & Tilson dined with me today, when we had much & serious conversation on our present situation. With a good British army, I think it is not a difficult task, to drive the French out of Spain in this campaign, under such an active Commander in Chief as Sir A. Wellesley whom we expect to join us in a few days.

27th Nothing extraordinary has occurred today. General Sherbrooke has determined to have the whole line out tomorrow morning, if the weather permits, which from present appearances, is uncertain. There is an excellent situation about a mile & half

¹⁰Duncan Darroch. A Brief Service Biography": McGuigan, Ron. *British Generals of the Napoleonic Wars*. 2006-2014. The Napoleon Series. Retrieved 26 March 2017. http://www.napoleon-series.org/research/biographies/BritishGenerals/c_Britishgenerals249.html

from this place, for drawing up our whole force here in one line. There are now here (in Leyria) about 9,000 men, at Batalha about 5,000 men and at Pombal about 3,000, of which we could bring about 16,000 fairly in to action.

28th This morning has been so rainy & tempestuous, the design of having the line out under arms, on the ground proposed yesterday, has been postponed. I wished to have devoted this day to writing to my friends in the Strath & Black Isle, but have been prevented by the necessity of examining many prisoners & deserters brought in, a part of the duty attached to my situation.

29th This morning arrived a sudden order for the army to march immediately. The whole except my brigade, are ordered to Coimbra, with a view of advancing immediately on Soult. My brigade is ordered to Ourem [Ourém], and then to Thomar [Tomar], so that I suspect I am to be left to watch the Tagus at Abrantes, in case of Victor's advancing from the side of Badajoz. This movement has disappointed & distressed me. I dare say it will be accompanied with all those expressions that can gild the pill, but being the first act of Sir Arthur Wellesley's command, I do not bade much of the favorable kind from it. I dare say I shall be told of the importance of the post entrusted to my charge, and that the situation is honorable to me. This is a sort of reasoning easily 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. My brigade marched for Ourem at half one o'clock, with a brigade of 5 light (...) pounders & a howitzer attached to it, under the command of Captain Henry Baynes of the Royal Artillery. We arrived at Ourem (4 long Portuguese leagues from Leyria near 18 miles), at nine o'clock at night. Ourem is a singularly situated place on the summit of a high hill. A moorish fort commanded it, now in ruins. Besides Ourem, the town of Aldea da Cruz [Aldeia da Cruz], near it, and some scattered houses, covered the brigade for the night.

30th Halted here today, to learn whether the Portuguese troops have left Leyria for Coimbra; finding they have, we shall march tomorrow for Tomar.

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