

The Napoleon Series

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

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

May 1st This morning at 3 o'clock, I received an express from Sir A. Wellesley, wishing me to halt my brigade till the 3rd, to avoid meeting two squadrons of the 16th Light Dragoons, who are to be at Thomar on the 2nd. In consequence of which I have countermanded our march till the 3rd. My conjectures are but too true. I am to be left to watch Victor, and the passes of the Tagus. I have this afternoon received my instructions, in consequence of which I shall proceed early tomorrow to Thomar, to have a conference with Marshal Beresford, as I find I am to have a large Portuguese force attached to me, at least it appears large on paper. I have not the least confidence in it, but I find I am to have two regiments of English Dragoons, and another battalion of infantry, which I like well.¹ 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.

Postscript

The entry for 1st May 1809 is the last Mackenzie wrote in his journal. Or rather, the last entry that appears in the bound volume that is now in the British Library. There is nothing to explain why the journal does not continue beyond this date. However, Mackenzie himself notes that the journal was written up from "memorandums made generally from day to day" which on one occasion, at least, were accidentally destroyed and entries made from memory.

It is possible that Mackenzie simply did not have time to "write up" memoranda made after 1st May into the formal journal. A further possibility is that memoranda or even pages of the draft journal were destroyed or lost. These possibilities are all quite plausible. Mackenzie was very busy in the weeks he was in command of the containing force near to Abrantes. He was even busier in the weeks immediately prior to his death – the circumstances of which could, of course, have been a significant factor in papers being lost. All of this is conjecture.

However, these "missing" entries are all the more regrettable as they may have shed light, from Mackenzie's personal perspective, on a number of very interesting aspects

of Wellesley's command of the British army. Firstly, Wellesley's decision to create formal divisions in the army. Secondly, Mackenzie's appointment to command the third division. Finally, and most crucially, they would have provided a very useful, additional, primary source for the advance of two divisions of the British army beyond the Alberche and their subsequent withdrawal into line of battle at Talavera.

Placed on the Napoleon Series: February 2018

¹ Four battalions, two cavalry regiments and one battery field artillery: 3/27th, 2/31st, 1/45th, 2/24th, 3rd Dragoon Guards, 4th Dragoons, Baines battery RA. The 2/24th was attached to Mackenzie's brigade having recently arrived at Lisbon, The Portuguese force comprised seven line battalions, three of caçadores, five squadrons of cavalry and three batteries of artillery. The 'containing force' ultimately comprised 12,000 troops of all arms (excluding three militia regiments garrisoning Abrantes). For comprehensive details of the Portuguese forces, see: Oman, op. cit. vol II, p. 317.