

“Wellington’s Gunner in the Peninsula” – Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Dickson

By Colonel Nick Lipscombe

INTRODUCTION

Wellington was, without doubt, a brilliant field commander but his leadership style was abrupt and occasionally uncompromising. He despised gratuitous advice and selected his close personal staff accordingly. He trained his infantry generals as divisional commanders but not army commanders; of his cavalry commanders he had little time often pouring scorn on their inability to control their units and formations in battle; but it was his artillery commanders that he kept at arm’s-length, suspicious of their different chain of higher command and, in consequence, their motives. One gunner officer was to break through this barrier of distrust, he was a mere captain but by the end of the war he was to become the commander of all the allied artillery succeeding to what was properly a major general’s command.

EARLY LIFE 1777-1793

Alexander Dickson was born on the 3rd June 1777, the third son of Admiral William Dickson and Jane Collingwood of Sydenham House, Roxburghshire. There is little information regarding his childhood and it is difficult to paint an accurate picture from his marvellous diaries, or the ‘Dickson Manuscripts’¹ as they are known. By the time Dickson commences his peninsular diaries, at the age of 32 and in his 15th year of army service, both his parents and two of his older brothers had died. His mother was to die when he was only five, and as the young Dickson was coming to terms with this tragedy his oldest brother James also died, aged just fifteen. Four years later his father had remarried. His stepmother, Elizabeth Charteris, was to have six children but it would appear (from the absence of correspondence or reference within the manuscripts) that he did not keep in close contact with her or his stepbrothers and sisters in the years that followed.

Both his father and uncle were admirals of the blue² and there would have existed overt expectations that Alexander should take up a career in the Royal Navy. Most of the officers of the navy were from the middle classes and unlike the mainstream army, entry did not depend on birth; patronage was far more important and this the Dickson family certainly wielded in naval circles. Alexander’s older brother Archibald Collingwood³ would capitalise on that benefaction, joining the Royal Navy at the first opportunity and by the start of the Napoleonic Wars he was already a captain. However, it was his oldest brother William who was first to break the mould by joining the army with a purchased commission as an ensign in the 22nd Regiment. He was to die a young captain in 1795 during the campaigns in the West Indies most likely from disease, which proved a far greater killer than operational duty. ‘For on the 1st June the returns showed that, of the three thousand British soldiers in St. Domingo, seventeen hundred were on the sick list and but thirteen hundred fit for duty’⁴.

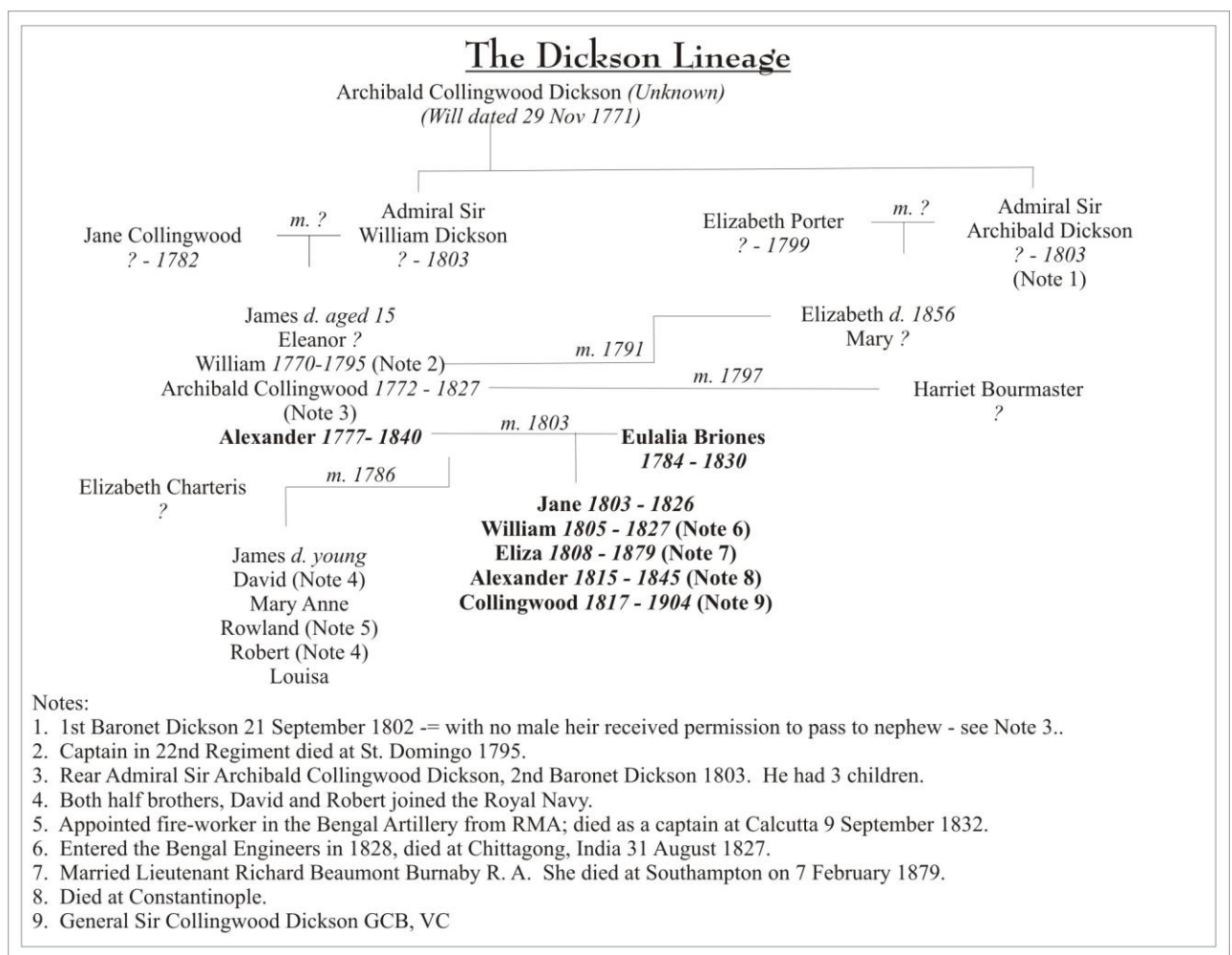
¹ The ‘Dickson Manuscripts’ are a series of diaries, letters, accounts books, officers’ squad books, orders and returns, maps and drawings. They commence in 1794 and end in 1840. Series A covers ‘Notes on Artillery’ from 1294 to 1794 (the year of Dickson's commission) and consisted of notes compiled for Dickson by Captain Orde, his personal staff officer for many years. Major Murdoch edited these and they were published in the Proceedings of the Royal Artillery Institute (RAI) between 1899 and 1903. Series B, covering the years 1794 to 1808 were edited by Lieutenant Colonel Desmond Vigors and sent to the RAI in 1989. Series C, covering the years 1809 to 1813, were edited and published part by part by Lieutenant Colonel Leslie between 1906 and 1914. Lieutenant Colonel Desmond Vigors continued the series from 1814 to 1818 in four volumes between 1986 and 1991. (Chapter 9, Jan to Apr 1814; Chapter 10, May to Dec 1814; Chapter 11, Jan to Dec 1815; and Chapter 12, 1816 to 1818). Lieutenant Colonel Desmond Vigors was subsequently allowed an additional Chapter 13, 1819 to 1840, published in 1992.

² Blue was the first step on the rank ladder, then white and finally red; providing three levels for each ranks of rear, vice and full admiral.

³ Rear Admiral (of the red) Sir Archibald Collingwood Dickson succeeded his uncle as 2nd Baronet.

⁴ Fortescue, *History of the British Army*, vol. IV, part I, p. 459.

Two years prior to William's untimely death, Alexander had also joined the army but with no hope of funding for the purchase of a commission he applied for a place at the Royal Military Academy where a commission was earned by attaining the required level of expertise. Dickson's decision to join the Royal Military Academy on the 5th April 1793, in his sixteenth year, was not altogether surprising. Although not a gifted academic, he was clearly bright, possessed considerable common sense and had inherited the family's spirit of adventure. By 1792 it was clear that war between England and France was inevitable and in the first month of 1793 an augmentation to the Artillery was authorised which, *inter alia*, increased the number of gentlemen cadets at the Academy to thirty. Dickson was quick to seize the opportunity and like many of the cadets revelled in close-knit camaraderie and opportunities and temptations of Woolwich town. The Academy facilities, in terms of instructional and infrastructure capacity, were stretched to the limit; textbooks were in very short supply and, to compensate, cadets were expected to illustrate their own notebooks. This had two advantages, these notebooks were to provide an invaluable reference later in their respective careers and secondly, it taught the students the art of drawing and sketching, which for both gunners and sappers,⁵ proved exceedingly useful.



INITIAL SERVICE & MARRIAGE 1794 - 1806

In the same year that Dickson joined the Academy, the first four troops of horse artillery were formed. 'Two troops were authorised in January of that year, but not for twelve years of struggling

⁵ The Academy provided technical instruction to cadets on commissioning joined the Royal Artillery. They retained the option to transfer to the Royal Engineers, which they were able to exercise after a few months in the artillery. Dickson's intake had only 2 officers who joined the Royal Engineers, one of whom (Gustavus Nicolls) went on to become a general.

augmentations of staff officers and troops, can it be said to have attained its proper maturity'⁶. The most able officers were selected to command these new *elite* horse artillery troops and Dickson cannot have been anything other than disappointed to discover that he was not selected; particularly as one of his friends and fellow cadet, Hew Dalrymple Ross, was selected to join A Troop. Ross was later to command the "Chestnut Troop" and was to enjoy varied and valiant action with the celebrated Light Division during the Peninsular War. Instead Dickson was despatched to Gibraltar, where he was to join Bradbridge's Company, 4th Battalion. His disappointment at not being selected for the new horse artillery would certainly have been tempered by the news of his brother's death in the West Indies and the fact that his first assignment was not to that very operational theatre, which was considered a virtual death sentence. He was to be able to share his grief with Captain John Bradbridge who had lost a younger brother at St. Domingo the year prior⁷.

His first year in Gibraltar was comparatively uneventful but the following year the company were tasked to provide a few gunners to HMS *Terror* to assist Rear Admiral Nelson in the bombardment of the Spanish fleet at Cadiz, in March and May 1797, and later to attack Santa Cruz, Tenerife. Dickson was disappointed not to have been selected to command this detachment for it would have provided him his first opportunity to see action and alleviated some of the monotony of serving of the 'rock'. The rest of the year was without incident until September when, following a General Court Marshal for duelling, Captain Bradbridge was removed from his post, and dismissed the service. The promotion and appointment of Captain Framington to command the company coincided with a change of strategy, by the British Admiralty, in the Mediterranean. The promise of Naples as a sea base for the Royal Navy ended the two-year moratorium to British naval operations on the 'French Lake'. Nelson entered the Mediterranean with a squadron destined for Egypt and Dickson was about to undertake his first operation. A week after Nelson passed the straits of Gibraltar he surprised and defeated the French fleet at Aboukir Bay⁸, it was a crushing blow for Bonaparte but it posed a dilemma in London. Debate raged as to how to capitalise on this advantage. Minorca was chosen as the first objective and in November 1798, Lieutenant General Stuart and an expeditionary force from Gibraltar, which included Framington's Company, captured the island. The gunners played their part, remaining for the next three and a half years, their stay only interrupted by the operation to capture Malta in 1800.

⁶ Duncan, *History of the Royal Artillery*, vol. II, p. 31.

⁷ First Lieutenant Thomas Bradbridge RA who died at Port au Prince, St. Domingo on the 30th June 1794.

⁸ Battle of the Nile, 1 August 1798.



Dickson Aged 21 - Courtesy of the Royal Artillery Historical Trust

Despite these successes, relations between the British military, naval and political hierarchy were strained. ‘It is difficult to speak with patience of the British Ministers during this year. Already in 1799 they had been guilty of the egregious blunder of sending their troops to a most hazardous campaign in the Helder.....on the evacuation of Holland Abercromby had pressed them to train and equip the army carefully so that it should be ready for service in the spring; but they had taken pains not to do so’⁹. The British military and naval commanders were convinced of the need to use Minorca as a staging base from where they could launch operations at any point in Italy in support of the Austrians, who were engaged against Bonaparte and very nearly beat him at Marengo. The Admiralty too had reason to be discontented; their abortive combined operations against Ferrol and Cadiz were bad enough but Nelson’s foolish attack against eight thousand Spanish at Tenerife was ‘completely and disastrously defeated’. Admiral Sir William Cornwallis was to sum up the mood. “What a disgraceful and what an expensive campaign we have made! Twenty-two thousand men, a large proportion not soldiers, floating around the greater part of Europe, the scorn and laughing stock of friends and foes!”

Alexander Dickson was not overly concerned at his prolonged stay on Minorca, or of political events playing out around him. He was seriously engaged with the daughter of Don Stefano Briones, and in 1801 he was to marry Eulalia Rita Barbara¹⁰ at the Catholic Church in the island’s capital. In October the same year, Dickson was to be promoted to Captain Lieutenant¹¹. At some stage during this period, Dickson was transferred to Miller’s Company, 6th Battalion, which left Minorca in May 1802 and, on return to England, mustered at Porchester Castle before moving to barracks near Portsmouth. The following year, a number of gunner detachments were seconded to naval vessels for the bombardment of the French invasion flotilla at Dieppe, St. Valery en Caux, Calais and Granville. Dickson was not selected and his opportunity to command a Royal Artillery detachment with the Royal Navy vanished the following year when the duty of manning the mortars on naval bomb vessels was taken over by the Royal Marine Artillery, which was formed for this very purpose¹².

⁹ Fortescue, *History of the British Army*, vol. IV, part II, p. 794.

¹⁰ It is curious that Dickson always spelt her first name Eularia and indeed that is how it is spelt on her tombstone at Plumstead churchyard (now St Nicholas Church, Plumstead), although the correct spelling is undoubtedly Eulalia.

¹¹ The rank of captain lieutenant was abolished in 1804 being replaced with that of second captain.

¹² Laws, *Battery Records of the Royal Artillery 1716-1859*, p. 123.

The year of 1803 was therefore one of mixed emotions for Dickson. Both his father and uncle passed away, and Eulalia had given birth to their first child, Jane. Family patronage certainly seemed to be helping his older brother Archibald, who was now promoted to naval captain and had his first independent command; furthermore, he had been made 2nd Baronet, following the death of his uncle who, lacking a male heir was entitled by special permission to pass the title to his nephew¹³. On the 10th April 1805, Dickson was promoted Captain and with Captain Miller assigned to 'I' Troop RHA; Dickson assumed command of the Company and was able to take it away for four months, from July to October, to a camp near Weymouth. In 1806, Dickson was to get his first chance of command on operations. Beresford had captured Buenos Aires in June 1806 with a small force consisting of the 71st Regiment and a few guns under Lieutenant Macdonald. Dickson's Company would have witnessed the great jubilation at the landing of the treasures and chattels captured from the city, which arrived at Portsmouth docks in September. The British government, prompted by ambitious businessmen, decided to exploit the success and mustered additional forces to join Beresford and the British garrison at the Cape of Good Hope. Dickson's Company was part of this force, which set sail in October; unaware that Santiago Liniers had already defeated Beresford's force¹⁴ and that the Spanish had reassumed control of the city. Dickson's ship, the Transport *Harriet*, arrived off the Argentine coast on the 5th January 1807, and the young captain assumed overall command of the artillery when Captain Watson returned to the Cape. General Auchmuty's force took Monte Video as a preliminary operation to re-taking of Buenos Aires and Dickson was to be mentioned in the commander's General Order following the successful capture of the town. Any elation was however to be short lived; Captain Augustus Fraser's arrival downgraded Dickson to second in command of the artillery but more significantly the overall command of the force passed to General Whitelocke. The subsequent operation was a complete disaster, Whitelocke being an officer entirely incapable of accomplishing the mission. Fraser was to write from Monte Video, following the disastrous campaign, that 'he and his troop might be attached to any portion of the army which might be on active service'¹⁵. Dickson too was eager to distance himself from the fiasco and, like Fraser, was determined to opt for the first available opportunity to prove his worth. It was not long in coming.

ARRIVAL IN THE PENINSULA 1809

A series of events had prompted British political support in aid of the Portuguese, and subsequently the Spanish, in their combined struggle against Bonaparte. Failed expeditions to Holland in 1799, Calabria in 1806 and Buenos Aires in 1807 had left a bitter taste and a yearning to notch up a military and foreign policy success. In May, a force of about 9,000 was being assembled in Cork for possible operations in South America; this was easily redirected to the Peninsula. Early victories at Roliça and Vimeiro over Delaborde and Junot were enough to evict the French from Portugal, but the terms of the ensuing peace convention were far too lenient. While the three generals¹⁶ responsible for the convention were withdrawn to face a court of inquiry in London, Sir John Moore assumed command of the British Army. However, it was events in Spain that were more significant in 1808. Spain, having assisted the French in the invasion of Portugal in 1807, was now having second thoughts as Napoleon's intentions in their own country began to manifest themselves more plainly in the early part of 1808. The disunity in the Spanish Court, the ease of capitulation in the Portuguese campaign and the misguided belief that Spain would follow suit led Napoleon to err; despite strong opposition from the sly but able Count Talleyrand, his minister of foreign affairs. In March, Carlos IV was forced to capitulate in favour of his son Ferdinand; however, through a series of Machiavellian enterprises, Ferdinand was lured to Bayonne and by the

¹³ Debrett, *Patronage of England*, p. 1003.

¹⁴ Beresford and the force were taken as prisoners to the interior of the country.

¹⁵ Duncan, *History of the Royal Artillery*, vol. II, p. 184.

¹⁶ Wellesley, Burrard and Dalrymple who had all commanded the army for varying lengths between the force arrival and the convention: but it was the latter two generals who were largely responsible for the terms and accordingly lost any chance of future field command.

10th May, stripped of his crown. In Madrid, restless at the proximity of this French force and with news of the unravelling treachery at Bayonne, the mood turned vicious and on the 2nd May (El Dos de Mayo) the city erupted- the Spanish *guerre de la independenciac* had officially begun.

The early Spanish victory at Bailén in July and the successes by the Spanish defenders at Valencia, Zaragoza and Gerona, coupled with the liberation of Portugal (by the British) gave rise to considerable optimism. The combined Spanish armies massed south west of the Pyrenees as Napoleon and an additional 120,000 French veterans moved south to join forces with the 160,000 troops already in theatre. Napoleon's campaign plan was brilliant but Soult and Ney's executions of their respective right and left encircling manoeuvres failed to capture and therefore annihilate the Spanish armies of the left, centre and right. Nonetheless, subsequent French victories at Espinosa, Burgos O'de Gamonal and Tudela rendered the Spanish military resistance ineffective and opened the way to Madrid. Meanwhile, Moore had moved across Portugal and into Spain in order to provide assistance to the Spanish armies and to protect the capital, but he was forced to withdraw when Napoleon chose to drive this 'troublesome' British force into the sea. Moore was killed during the delaying battle on the outskirts of the Galician port; Britain's foreign policy was in ruins, and both Spain and Portugal were at the mercy of the French.

British determination to rekindle support for the Iberian cause was non-existent and had it not been for Wellesley's challenging memorandum to Lord Castlereagh, on the 7th March in which he stated that he had 'always been of the opinion that Portugal might be defended whatever might be the result of the conquest in Spain', it is unlikely that Britain would have re-entered the war. Castlereagh permitted the deployment of another expeditionary army, despite Tory and Whig reluctance and, having missed out the year prior, Dickson was determined to play his part. He had exchanged his company with that of Richard Dyas, as this Company was part of the new 10th Battalion that was being established at Woolwich. It was here, at the artillery headquarters, that Dickson influenced events in order to secure a place for his Company in the deployment list. He left Woolwich on the 11th March, arrived at Portsmouth three days later and set sail on HMS *Champion* arriving in Lisbon on the 2nd April 1809.

PENINSULAR FRUSTRATION 1809-1810

Following Junot's successful invasion of Portugal in 1807, the Portuguese army had been disbanded¹⁷. Once liberated in August 1808, the government council acting in the name of the Prince Regent¹⁸ requested that a British officer be appointed to command, reorganise and modernise the Portuguese forces. The officer selected was William Carr Beresford. Dickson had met Beresford at Monte Video following his release from capture, and capitalising on that association wrote to him, and General John Craddock¹⁹, asking for employment with the Portuguese artillery. 'I found that neither had received notification respecting me', Dickson was to write in his first letter to Brigadier General Macleod,²⁰ 'nor did the latter (i.e. Beresford) express any wish on the subject'. This was perhaps not surprising as captains May and Eliot had already been allocated the available positions and so Dickson gratefully accepted the appointment as

¹⁷ One of Junot's first actions had been to dissolve the Portuguese Army. He then pressed about 9,500 of them (the most articulate and enthusiastic) into 5 infantry and slightly more than 2 cavalry units and sent them to serve the *Imperial Armée* as the Legion Portugaise. Only 2,000 ended up in the Baltic States and Northern Germany, the rest deserted in Portugal on the way. There were some units left for the Russian Campaign (being among of the first to enter Moscow) although they nearly all died during the retreat. Many of the more senior members of the officer corps had departed with the Prince Regent (to Brazil) in 1807, while a few others had emigrated to England, where they formed the Loyal Lusitanian Legion, and some departed to the Azores. What was left in Portugal, in terms of manpower and equipment, was of questionable quality; the exception being in the North where very few officers left their native Portugal having refused to join the Legion Portugaise.

¹⁸ The prince Regent, Joao VI had departed, as part of a well orchestrated plan, two days prior to Junot arriving in the capital and subsequently established the Royal Court in Brazil where it remained until 1822.

¹⁹ He had been left at Lisbon, when Moore departed in October 1808, to command the British garrison that remained behind.

²⁰ John Macleod was Director-General of Artillery (later titled Director Royal Artillery – DRA) based at Woolwich and with whom Dickson corresponded on a very frequent basis. His letters to Macleod were some of the most informative and illuminating in the set of manuscripts.

Brigade Major of Artillery with the Commander Royal Artillery (CRA), Brigadier General Howorth.

On the 22nd April Wellesley landed in Lisbon and put in to practice that time honoured tactic that the best defence is a vigorous offence; he sent a containing force east towards Victor in Estremadura, marching with the balance of the army to engage Soult at Oporto. Wellesley's passage of the Douro and the re-capture of the city are legendary, but Dickson was deeply frustrated at having been tied to the staff and removed from the action. Before long his relationship with the CRA was showing the strain; in a personal letter he vented his frustration. 'After taking the field a total altercation took place in the temper and manners of the General; he became excessively irritable and dissatisfied, and in his line of deportment immediately towards me unhandsome, and I may safely say ungentlemanlike, finding fault with almost everything that I did or said'. Within a month, Captain May had indicated a desire to resign from the Portuguese artillery and assume command of a company of Royal Artillery with Wellesley's main army; Dickson on hearing the news immediately wrote to Beresford and by the 11th June had been placed in command of three brigades of artillery (each with six light 6-pounders), called a division; although the three brigades seldom operated together.

While Wellesley marched his Anglo-Portuguese army east to link up with the Spanish Army of Estremadura (under General Cuesta) Dickson busied himself with the challenge of his new charge. Prior to departing, Captain May had issued a number of regulations, some quite extraordinary, calculated to knock the Portuguese gunners into shape. 'If NCOs and men do not shave they will be shaved in view of everybody on parade', better still 'men who turn out with clothes, buttons or boots not properly cleaned will be punished by having their coats turned inside out'. Typically, Dickson quickly set about making these regulations more relevant and seemed to spend much of the next few months marching and counter marching up and down the Portuguese-Spanish border. While this was ongoing, the allied armies had defeated King Joseph²¹, Victor and Sebastiani at Talavera; Wellesley was elevated to a peer with the title of Wellington and many gunners (including May) had distinguished themselves in action. Dickson's frustration at being on the sidelines was all too apparent and even promotion to the rank of major in the Portuguese service did little to placate his discontent, more especially as he appeared to be one of the few that did not receive automatic backdating of the associated pay and allowances.

Following the disastrous autumn campaign by the Central Junta (at Sevilla by this time) the mood was little better across the Anglo-Portuguese force as they retreated west and into Portugal. Areizaga, Albuquerque and Del Parque were all forced to withdraw in the face of the three French corps who countered the Spanish offensive and opened the way for an assault into Andalusia early the following year. Dickson appears to have had a thoroughly enjoyable time throughout the winter cantonment with parties, pretty girls and bullfights! 'This day (5 November) returned the visit of Colonel Brito...in the evening I went to a party at their house. After tea, cards were introduced and again I played casino with the same ladies as last night.... The daughter of Colonel Brito and Donna Maria de Mello sang two of three songs'. 'This day (8 November) called on Senhor Duarte de Saldana...the brother of Donna Maria de Mello, and has two sisters unmarried, one of which (the eldest) is a very pretty girl'. During winter, Dickson was to fall ill, the first of many times over the next few years that he was to succumb to fever.

²¹ The oldest of Napoleon's brothers who was 'crowned' King of Spain in 1808.



*Dickson in the uniform of the Portuguese Artillery.
(Courtesy of the Royal Artillery Institute)*

Professionally, however, Dickson was less sanguine; the year of 1810 was one of continued frustration. He spent much of the first few months visiting Portuguese and Spanish garrisons and making inventories of their guns and munitions – this, as it turns out, was time well spent. The anticipated French invasion of Andalusia had taken place and succeeded in conquering the entire region except Cadiz, where the Central Junta was now ensconced having moved hotfoot from Sevilla. The Duke of Albuquerque, who acted with remarkable foresight, moved his force to protect the port and the Junta²², an act that without doubt, saved southern Spain. Notwithstanding this stalemate, between December 1809 and September 1810 a total of 138,000 French reinforcements were sent to Spain following the French victory over Austria at Wagram. A large number of these men were to form the new Army of Portugal under the command of Marshal Masséna and as early as April a new front had opened to the north. General Hill, commanding the 2nd Division, which included the Portuguese Division under Hamilton and Dickson's artillery division, was called north in support of Wellington's main army to meet this emerging threat. Following the loss of the border forts at Ciudad Rodrigo and Almeida, Masséna continued to harass Wellington's force until the allied commander decided to make a stand at Buçaco. It looked like Dickson was at last to get his chance to fight with Wellington but, following the encounter, his disappointment was once again apparent. The battle was a resounding success, defeating Masséna and his three capable lieutenants, Ney, Reynier and Junot, but Dickson had been task organised with Hill's Division, on the far south of the Buçaco ridge, and saw no action. Despite the success, Wellington was to receive considerable criticism for fighting the battle: 'In the battle which followed, Lord Wellington displayed an ignorance of Artillery tactics, from the results of which he was happily saved by the intelligence and gallantry of the representatives of that arm. This want of knowledge, which he never overcame, was the cause of not infrequent irritation against Artillery as

²² The disastrous autumn campaign in 1809 sounded the death knell for the Central Junta, which was replaced in Cadiz by the revolutionary government in late January 1810.

an arm, and a tendency to depreciate its value'²³. Duncan, never a supporter of Wellington, seems to have missed the point that in fact the individual who must shoulder the blame for not keeping some of the artillery in reserve, (particularly the Portuguese light guns under Dickson) which could then be moved to counter the French attacks, must surely be the CRA, Howorth. Perhaps it demonstrated Wellington's lack of confidence in his artillery commander.

Following Bussaco the Anglo-Portuguese army fell back to a pre-prepared defensive line, known as the Lines of Torres Vedras. This momentous construction demonstrated a very different relationship between Wellington and his engineer commander and the principle architect of the Lines, Lieutenant Colonel Richard Fletcher. In short, Masséna having been bloodied at Buçaco came up against the Lines and could find no way through, it was to be a long hard winter. Even Dickson who was the most loyal of subordinates found himself questioning Wellington's waiting game. 'I never as yet have been a croaker with regard to operations, but in the present state of things I am far from being satisfied with measures. I really think we are letting slip an opportunity of pressing upon and distressing a dispirited enemy which we may never have again'. His sentiments summed up the mood of the army as a whole and when Masséna finally withdrew from in front of the Lines in March 1811, Dickson was to get the break he had been waiting for.

CHANGE OF FORTUNE – 1811

While Masséna and the remnants of his Army of Portugal were fighting a retreat across Portugal, Beresford had been sent with three divisions and two independent brigades to counter Soult's spring offensive into Estremadura. Following Masséna's expulsion from Portugal and defeat at Fuentes de Oñoro, Wellington rode south to link up with Beresford. A few days prior Dickson had successfully commanded the siege artillery at Olivenza, which was captured by mid April. Wellington stayed only a few days, but long enough to note Dickson's achievement at Olivenza and his industrious preparations to raise a siege train from the rather motley collection of guns and stores in Elvas. 'You ask' wrote Dickson to his friend General MacLeod 'whether the guns we got at Elvas for the battering of Badajoz were English. None of them were so. They were old Portuguese guns from the time of Joao IV and his son Alfonso, bearing dates such as 1646, 1652, 1654 also some Spanish guns even older, of Philip III and IV, dated 1620.... probably no siege, since modern history began, had ever been conducted with cannon varying from 150 to 190 years old!'²⁴ The British expeditionary force in Iberia suffered from a number of shortfalls, chief amongst them was a lack of suitable siege artillery and Dickson's ingenuity and positive approach to the hitherto insurmountable problem was noted by Wellington – the die was cast.

Prior to returning north, Wellington had given Beresford clear instructions as to what to do if Soult reappeared during the initial siege of Badajoz. Soult did return, and the resulting Battle at La Albuera was the most costly of all during the six-year war. Dickson commanded his two batteries with professionalism and to good effect at both ends of the village and received handsome testimony regarding his services that day. So much so, that he judged the time right to make a case for brevet promotion to lieutenant colonel, on the basis of his actions that day and that the span of his command suited such rank. Beresford supported the application and sent it to Wellington who handed it to Lord Fitzroy Somerset, his military secretary, with orders to process the application; in the meantime, Dickson continued in the substantive rank of captain but with the Portuguese rank of major. Dickson had other matters on his mind as he tried to organise another siege train to resume the siege at Badajoz. A flawed engineer assessment of how best to tackle the seemingly impregnable fortress resulted in a second failure. This failure was not to rub-off on Dickson and as the engineer was Fletcher who had made more than a name for himself with his Lines at Torres

²³ Duncan, *History of the Royal Artillery*, vol. II, p. 276.

²⁴ Oman, *Review of Chapter III, Series 'C'*, vol. XXXV RAI Journal, p. 317.

Vedras, the commander-in-chief was guarded in his criticism but he was heard to mutter that next time 'he would be his own engineer'. Dickson received his first direct correspondence from Wellington: 'on the morning of the 10th (June 1811) Lord Wellington communicated with me his intention of raising the siege...was good enough to say that every thing that could be done on our part had been done'.

With Marmont having replaced Masséna and Soult more interested in holding on to his vice-royalty in Andalusia, the French were very much on the defensive in the west. The French busied themselves with attacking the Catalans and Valencians in an attempt to gain control of the east coast once and for all. This left Wellington free to plan his offensive campaign, the capture of the 'Keys to Spain' – Ciudad Rodrigo and Badajoz. At Wellington's insistence a siege train had been requested from England and it, along with engineer stores, now lay at Oporto. As early as 19th July 1811, Dickson and Fletcher were summoned and Wellington outlined his plans and then gave orders for Dickson to go personally to Oporto and arrange for the safe passage of the siege train and the two companies who were to service it. Brigadier General Howorth had returned to England on account of ill health and Lieutenant Colonel Framingham was placed in temporary command pending the arrival of Major General Borthwick. He was not even consulted by Wellington in the matter of Dickson's employment for he had already made up his mind that Dickson was to command the artillery at the forthcoming sieges.

PROMOTION AND COMMAND 1812 – 1813

Dickson was now employed as Wellington's siege artillery commander. This was not an official post and, as such, it was never listed. He spent the final months of 1811 establishing and moving a substantial siege train, a task that required considerable leadership, resilience and no little ingenuity. 'Guns and material brought by sea from England, and others from Lisbon and Oporto, were collected at Villa de Ponte, and thousands of mules and oxen provided for their transport'²⁵. Dickson was not informed until mid November that the first target was to be Ciudad Rodrigo. The siege commenced on the 8th January 1812 and was concluded by the 19th January; it was brilliantly conducted and Dickson, amongst many other officers, was mentioned in Wellington's dispatches. Within days Dickson was transporting south, by every available means, his massive siege train and ammunition to take the second key, the fort at Badajoz, which had proved somewhat elusive the year prior. The siege started in mid March and by the 6th April, both forts were in Wellington's hands. It was a remarkable achievement, a turning point in the war and notwithstanding considerable extraordinary heroism by the assaulting infantry, the contributions made by Fletcher's engineers and Dickson's gunners were critical.

One serious shortcoming of the then Board of Ordnance was their policy of promotion by seniority. Captain Ross summed it up. 'My despondence, chiefly arises from the unmanly and miserable feelings of our own corps. There has ever been a prejudice in the heads of our regiment against inferior officers obtaining brevet'²⁶. Our senior officers, having grown grey themselves in the subaltern ranks, cannot endure the thought of their followers being more fortunate'²⁷. With Wellington's support; 'my dear Beresford, I concur entirely about Dickson's merits, and I will endeavour to get for him the rank of major'. He succeeded, and in February 1812, Dickson was promoted to brevet major which entitled him to wear the rank of lieutenant colonel in the Portuguese army. However, the strength of Wellington's application, coupled with that of Major General Macleod in Woolwich, resulted in a most welcome surprise. 'The manner at which he was employed at the two sieges of Badajoz, and that which he is now employed, will make a distinction

²⁵ Ibid, p. 318.

²⁶ Brevet was a document conferring the privilege from the sovereign to wear rank without corresponding pay.

²⁷ Ross, *Memoir of Field Marshal Sir Hew Dalrymple Ross*, p. 19.

in his case, of which I will avail myself in my recommendation of him to headquarters'. Such strong endorsement from the commander in chief was enough to include Dickson's name on a list of four artillery officers sanctioned by the Prince Regent²⁸ to receive brevet lieutenant colonel only two months after his first promotion. Such rapid advancement inevitably caused animosity with other, older and therefore more senior gunner officers. Dickson was entitled to wear the rank of full colonel in the Portuguese army but chose instead to wear lieutenant colonel rank and dressed only in his Portuguese uniform so as to minimise offence.

The Spanish armies, in conjunction with the Anglo Portuguese Army, now commenced the next part of the offensive. A series of diversions were timed to coincide with Wellington's move towards Salamanca, from where Marmont withdrew awaiting reinforcement from the French Army of the North. With no immediate requirement for siege operations, Dickson had been left south with General Hill²⁹ who had been tasked, as part of Wellington's planned diversions, to take the forts at the bridge at Almaraz. The operation was a rapid success but events had not gone quite so well at Salamanca and having allowed Marmont to withdraw, Wellington was now faced with the task of taking the three forts at Salamanca. Dickson was ordered north and immediately made arrangements for the siege artillery at Almeida and Ciudad Rodrigo to be brought forward. The forts were taken by the 27th June and within days the Battle of Salamanca had been fought and won. Joseph wasted little time in evacuating the capital and on the 12th August, Wellington entered Madrid in triumph 'amidst scenes of great rejoicing'.

The mood was not to last. When Clausel³⁰ began manoeuvring south, threatening to link up with Caffarelli's Army of the North, Wellington was forced to march north to Valladolid and engage him. Wellington's pursuit of Clausel took him to Burgos, a city dominated by a fortified castle and supporting horn-work. It was a formidable obstacle and Wellington needed to capture it before the French armies of Souham, Caffarelli, and Soult united. Dickson was commanding the reserve artillery, which included the siege train of three 18-pounder guns and five 5½-inch (or 24 pounder) iron howitzers. A ridiculously small and ineffective train of artillery scant on ammunition that had little chance of success. 'The siege of Burgos is a blot on the military reputation of the Duke of Wellington; and revealed an ignorance of what artillery could and could not do...'.³¹ As there were plenty of suitable siege guns at Madrid, Ciudad Rodrigo and Almeida the decision to take such an inadequate train seems inexplicable. Indeed many observers, including Colonel (later general) Napier urged that the responsibility for the failure lay with the artillery commander not Wellington. He had a point, but Wellington who refused 'the other modes and other points of attack (that) were suggested'³² was also magnanimous enough to relieve the artillery and engineer officers of their responsibility: 'the officers. rendered me every assistance; and the failure of success is not to be attributed to them'³³.

Arguably, Dickson should have shouldered considerable blame but the CRA, Lieutenant Colonel William Robe, despite the sentiments in Wellington's letter, was put under such pressure that he resigned, and was sent away with the brutal words:

'as you state that you don't feel yourself equal to the magnitude of your situation....I can feel no scruple....in pleading guilty to the charge of not placing confidence in you....I have found that you were not so capable as I had believed you for the arduous task which you had undertaken'³⁴.

²⁸ By this time George III had been declared irreversibly insane and the Prince Regent had assumed his duties.

²⁹ Hill had returned from sick leave and provided Wellington with the perfect opportunity to release Beresford from field command and return him to Lisbon to continue his work in reorganising the new Portuguese Army.

³⁰ Commanding the 2nd Division in Souham's Army of Portugal.

³¹ Duncan, *History of the Royal Artillery*, vol. II, p. 335.

³² Jones, *Journal of Sieges*, vol. I, p. 334.

³³ Wellington to Lord Bathurst, Cabeçon, 26th October 1812.

³⁴ Urban, *The Man Who Broke Napoleon's Codes*, p. 245.

Wellington was seldom content with the artillery commanders who were sent by the Board of Ordnance. He considered Howorth a ditherer, and after the CRA had complained that he³⁵ had not been sufficiently mentioned in the Talavera despatch, Wellington retorted 'I think I shall be lucky if he does not get me into a scrape yet'. His successor, Framingham, lasted only four months and was followed by Major General Borthwick. Ross was to write in his memoirs that 'Lord Wellington told him he wanted an active officer to fill so important a situation as Chief of Artillery and recommended him (i.e. Borthwick) to go home'. Framingham was to stand-in again until Robe took over, before resigning following Burgos. Lieutenant Colonel Waller then filled the gap for two months until Lieutenant Colonel Fischer arrived. He held the post for six months but his 'uncertain manner' in answering Wellington's questions irked the commander and, in a rage, resulted in Fischer being told that 'Sir, you know nothing'. Fischer wrote asking for leave, Wellington was only too willing to oblige; it was May 1813 and this time Wellington was determined to have his own man – Dickson; despite their being twelve other gunners officers in theatre who were senior to him.

VICTORIOUS VITORIA, OVER THE PYRENEES & FINAL VICTORY 1813 - 1814

The retreat from Burgos was reminiscent of Moore's retreat to La Coruña; indeed those unfortunate souls who had endured both adversities claim the retreat in 1812 to have been manifestly more harrowing. It was a long hard winter, during which time Wellington and his staff planned the next year's offensive, determined not to make the same mistakes of 1812. It was an elaborate plan, which Wellington kept close to his chest; it was mid May before everything was in place. The allied armies advanced on four axes and they caught up with King Joseph and the three French armies at Vitoria. At the height of the battle the largest artillery duel of the entire war commenced; with seventy-five allied guns plying their trade against seventy-six French guns. However, it would appear that this concentration of allied guns was more by accident than design. Dickson wrote, 'The nature of the country, and want of roads, was the means of throwing a large proportion of our Artillery together, away from their divisions, which I availed myself of, and by employing them in masses it had a famous effect'. The detail was of little consequence, the battle was won and Dickson had proved himself an able artillery commander in an offensive battle and not just of a siege train. The fact that, *inter alia*, one hundred and fifty one French guns were captured following the battle was merely icing on the cake. 'I did not fail to bring under consideration to the Prince Regent the very striking and unexampled circumstance of the whole of the British Artillery having been brought into action at the battle of Vittoria, and the whole of the enemy's Artillery having been captured in the glorious victory which crowned the exertions of the Allies on that ever-memorable occasion'³⁶.

³⁵ With some justification as the artillery were, on many occasions, poorly rewarded in his dispatches.

³⁶ Letter from Lord Mulgrave, Master-General of the Ordnance, to Dickson, 16 July 1813.



Major General Sir Alexander Dickson GCB KCH
(By W Salter R.B.A., Courtesy of the Royal Artillery Institute.)

The siege train demanded from England the previous winter had now arrived off La Coruña and was being transported to Santander by Major Augustus Fraser. Wellington tasked Dickson with besieging San Sebastian while his main force continued to press the French in the northeast. The first siege was a failure, through no fault of the gunners, who had blasted two practicable breaches; but with Soult manoeuvring menacingly near the French border³⁷, Wellington ordered the guns to be withdrawn and he turned his attention to meet this developing threat. The Battle of The Pyrenees³⁸ resulted, leaving the allies poised for the final assault into southern France. Wellington was keen to leave no stone unturned and ordered Fletcher³⁹ and Dickson to resume the siege of San Sebastian. It was a costly affair but by the 8th September the key town was in allied hands. A month later, Wellington crossed the River Bidassoa in a daring and calculated operation. Dickson called forward the 3-pounder guns from Lisbon and established a mountain battery under the 6th Division and two 3-pounder troops under the Light Division and General Giron's Spanish Reserve. Allied successes followed at Nivelle and the Battles on the Nive before the final showdown in Toulouse the following spring. During this latter period of the war, Dickson had about 8,000 men, over 200 guns and approximately 3,500 horses under his direct command.

³⁷ Soult was now commander-in-chief of all the French (Iberian) armies.

³⁸ The absence of Dickson in the Army headquarters, during the Battles for the Pyrenees, has unfortunately resulted in few details of the artillery during this phase of the war.

³⁹ Fletcher was killed while observing the main assault.



Dickson's Medals & Decorations

1. Peninsular War Gold Cross - 10 Clasps:
- Busaco, Albuhera, Ciudad Rodrigo, Badajoz,
Salamanca, Vittoria, St. Sebastian, Nivelle,
Nive, Toulouse. (Note 1)
2. Waterloo Medal.
3. Portuguese Commander's Star.
4. Portuguese Cross for the Peninsular War.
5. Knight of the Order of the Tower & Sword
6. The Prussian Military Order of Merit.
7. The Spanish Star for the Battle of Albuera.

Note: The first 4 battles/sieges are annotated on the four limbs of the cross. Spellings are as they appear on the medal.

Photo: Author's Collection.

POST PENINSULA 1814 - 1840

The fall of Toulouse in April 1814 closed the curtains on the Peninsular War and attention turned back to America. A force was being assembled to attack New Orleans; it was to be led by Sir Edward Pakenham who applied for Dickson to be his artillery commander. By November, Dickson was en-route for America where he participated in his second disastrous operation in the Americas, returning back to Europe in just time for the great Napoleonic showdown in Belgium. He joined Mercer's Troop as the 2nd Captain and was present at Quatre Bras and Waterloo on the artillery staff of Wellington's army, and subsequently commanded the British battering train under Prussian command at the sieges of the French fortresses at Maubenge, Landrecies, Philippeville, Marienbourg and Rocroy in July and August 1815. He was mentioned in dispatches at nearly all these actions. For the rest of his life he was on home service, principally as a staff officer of artillery. Dickson reverted to his British substantive rank of captain and amazingly, remained in that rank until 1825 when he was appointed ADC to the King and promoted to Lieutenant Colonel. No doubt assisted by Wellington who, quite ironically, was now Master General of Ordnance in Lord Liverpool's Cabinet. On the 10th April 1827, he succeeded his friend and senior mentor, General Sir John Macleod as Deputy Adjutant General, Royal Artillery; was appointed Master Gunner St. James' Park in 1833, promoted to Major General in January 1837 and then, still holding his previous two appointments became Director-General of Artillery in 1838, until his death two years later. He was created KCH⁴⁰ in January 1815 and GCB⁴¹ in June 1838.

FINALE

Following Waterloo, Dickson was to father two more boys with his beloved wife; the youngest Collingwood was to serve the Royal Regiment of Artillery with the same dedication, courage and pride – General Sir Collingwood Dickson was to win (as a colonel) the Victoria Cross at the Battle of Inkerman during the Crimean War.

Dickson died in London on the 22nd April 1840, aged 63 and was buried with full military honours at Plumstead Churchyard⁴². In 1847, a monument was erected to his memory in the grounds of the

⁴⁰ Knight Commander of the Royal Guelphic (or Hanoverian) Order.

⁴¹ Knight Grand Cross of the Bath, having been a KCB, Knight Commander of the Bath in 1815.

⁴² Now St. Nicholas Church; his wife and oldest daughter are buried beside him.

Royal Military Repository at Woolwich; this was moved in 1911 to Front Parade, Woolwich and again in 2007 to Larkhill, Salisbury, when the Royal Artillery vacated Woolwich after 291 years. His brother officers paid for the monument, a fitting bequest to an officer who was pre-eminently the first artilleryman of his day and one of the most popular who served under the Duke of Wellington.



The Dickson Memorial at Front Parade Woolwich - prior to the move to Larkhill.
(Courtesy of the Royal Artillery Historical Society)
