

Lieutenant Colonel James Ward Oliver

By Major Nick Hallidie



(At the beginning of 1807 the buttons and lace on the officers' coats changed from silver to gold, also the epaulettes and wings, so this portrait was painted before this date, when Oliver was a Captain in the 4th Foot)

In Elvas, on the wall beside the narrow gate was a battered tin sign saying “*Cemitério dos Ingleses*”. Bemvinda, a frail old woman dressed in black, produced a key and let us in. A short area of weedy paving and two more steps and we were in the Bastion, well correctly a semi-bastion. Two large cypresses dominated the area; the rest was a jungle of long grass, unkempt rosemary and straggly irises. Beyond the cypresses was a square railed area. Within it, surrounded by cracked concrete were four gravestones. One of them read:

SACRED TO THE MEMORY
OF
LIEUTENANT COLONEL
JAMES W. OLIVER
WHO WAS MORTALLY
WOUNDED AT BADAJOS
AND DIED IN THIS CITY
THE 17TH JUNE
1811

*DEDICADO Á MEMÓRIA
DO TENENTE-CORONEL
JAMES W. OLIVER QUE FOI
MORTALMENTE FERI
DO NO CERCO DE BADAJOS
E MORREU NESTE CIDADE
A 17 DE JUNHO DE
1811*

James was born in the Parrish of St Mary's, Paddington in 1777,¹ the second son of Thomas and Mary Oliver. On 1st October 1794, aged 16, he was gazetted Cornet in the 4th Foot, also known as the King's Own and joined the Regiment in Canada, being promoted to Lieutenant on the passage on 1st September 1795. At that time five companies were garrisoning the island of St Pierre, recently captured from the French, three were at Halifax and two in Newfoundland. Shortly afterwards, the companies on St Pierre moved back to Canada. In 1796 the Regiment was concentrated at Montreal, afterwards moving to Quebec.

Here a major reorganisation took place. The effective men were drafted to the 26th Regiment. Twenty-five officers, twenty-one sergeants, twelve drummers and eight rank and file formed a cadre on which to build a new regiment. On 25th September 1797 the cadre, which included Lieutenant Oliver sailed for England accompanied by twelve women and twenty-six children.

When nearing Land's End, one of the transports, The Three Sisters was sighted and chased by a French Privateer. Among those on board were Lieutenant Colonel John Hodgson, Surgeon Maguire with his wife and baby son, Francis and Lieutenant Oliver. James was convinced the ship had been betrayed by the Captain.² They were taken to Brest where they were herded together in a common prison. Oliver and several others were moved to Orleans where they were held for eleven months in a common jail.²

He and three others eventually managed to effect their escape by bribing guards who let them down the walls by ropes. They were just crossing the bridge when the toxin sounded and they thought themselves discovered. They pushed on across France to St Omer, but found the coast in that area around Calais so strictly guarded that there was no chance of getting a boat. They were now obliged to retrace their steps across Normandy to Le Havre. Among the Chouans, a royalist organisation, they met with great kindness, being passed from Chateau to Chateau and were treated most hospitably. Their hosts served them almost raw beef, which they supposed the English preferred.

To make their escape from Le Havre they were obliged to crawl within 30 paces of a sentinel to a fishing boat. There they were hidden under sails until the evening. James was wearing striped blue and white trousers and jacket, a neckband and a large cocked hat with a national cockade. They were 48 hours at sea with only a bottle of brandy and one loaf for sustenance, before being taken on board an English ship and landed at Portsmouth in 1798, having spent a year in France.

He rejoined his regiment in November at Botley. Following the defeat of Napoleon's Army in Egypt, it was decided to try to recapture Holland. On 11th July 1799 the King's Own were ordered to move from Worcester, where they had been stationed for three months, to Horsham. When the Regiment left Worcester it was only one hundred and seventy-three strong, with seventeen officers away on recruiting duties. In preparation for the planned invasion of Holland, on 13th July, fourteen regiments, including the King's Own, were named to receive volunteers from militia regiments. The response was overwhelming. By the beginning of August the King's Own was, on paper, over three thousand strong, and Horsham was overcrowded.

This operation was mounted in excessive haste. On 13th August the first four brigades left Barham Downs for Holland, under the command of Sir Ralph

Abercromby. The regiments that were to reinforce the expedition took their place in Canterbury, and the King's Own moved there from Horsham. Yet more and more men poured into the camp. They rolled up, riotously drunk, in every description of vehicle. It was with difficulty that they could be sorted out into their regiments; there was no time to alter their uniforms or to ascertain the standard of efficiency attained in their various militia units. Knowing nothing of each other, nothing of their officers, having been taught different forms of drill according to the tastes and theories of their respective militia colonels, the three thousand odd men of the King's Own were formed into three battalions. Perhaps because the increase in the number of battalions created more vacancies, Oliver was promoted Captain on 3rd September.

On the same day H.R.H. The Prince of Wales presented a new stand of colours to the 1st Battalion. This is the first recorded time of a presentation ceremony in a regular battalion of the King's Own. When the Regiment embarked for Holland the officers and sergeants had only had two scant weeks to reduce the motley throng into something approaching an orderly army. The volunteers from the Militias were of an infinitely better type than the ordinary recruit. In two months they would have been good, and in six months excellent, troops. So great was the hurry to embark at Deal that many necessary articles were left behind. Some of the recruits were half clothed, and two whole brigades did not possess a great-coat between them. The three battalions of the King's Own were brigaded with the 31st under the command of Lord Chatham. They landed on 13th September and conditions continued as bad if not worse. There was no fuel for fires; so captured Dutch ships were broken up for firewood. Seventeen hundred of Abercromby's force were already in hospital and to make matters worse, they had taken no sutlers and there was not a drop of spirits to be had.

Captain Oliver had now been serving for five years. It had been a varied and adventurous time, but now at the age of 21 he was commanding a company of half trained men, who, he could expect to take into battle very shortly. The administrative chaos and planning inadequacies, obvious to the most junior officer, must have been depressing. He probably did not realise that the greatest enemy was what became known later as 'Walcheren Fever'. The Helder and Walcheren lie below sea level. The canals and ditches bore human and vegetable waste. The Walcheren fever was not only Malaria, but was compounded by Splenomegaly and perhaps other infectious diseases breeding in the foul smelling sludge at the bottom of these watercourses. Disease caused far more casualties than enemy action. Even those who survived were, in many cases, afflicted by recurrences of the fever.

The campaign is too dreary and depressing to recount. Two major actions were fought – Egmont-op-Zee and Alkmaar. James and his company were present at both. At the latter, the 1st battalion had been surrounded and taken prisoner. The 2nd and 3rd battalions suffered heavily, having, according to regimental records, 'principally sustained the shock of the enemy's horse'. This ended the intervention in Holland. The Duke of York accepted the terms of a convention proposed by the French on October 18th. The English would pay for all damages, prisoners would be exchanged, but the English could keep what was left of the Dutch fleet. When the army re-embarked, it had only three days rations left. James had contracted the dreaded fever and was extremely ill when the army withdrew. He spent the next three months in bed at home in London.

Thus ended the disastrous expedition to the Helder. Its lack of success was due to incompetent command, lack of information and the unfitness of troops plunged straight into the fighting, raw, unformed and hastily assembled. The men themselves were the finest England had put into the field since Cromwell's army was disbanded; the discipline was good and there was remarkably little crime.

There followed a peaceful period in England. Fear of invasion continued and stimulated intensive training and manoeuvres. The Treaty of Amiens in March 1802 signalled the end of nine years of war and the news of the peace was received throughout the country with great rejoicing.

Only a year later increased friction between England and France put the country on a war footing. The regular units were concentrated on the south coast. The King's Own was brigaded with the 52nd, 59th and 70th Regiments under Sir John Moore at Shorncliffe. This Brigade held the coast from Deal to Dungeness, immediately opposite Napoleon's great flotilla and therefore formed the advance guard of the whole system of defence of the country. On a clear day the troops had no difficulty in seeing the immense mass of the white tents of the French Army gathering upon the opposite coast. Throughout the summer of 1803 tension remained high, but no invasion materialised.

During the winter, when there was no danger of French invasion, troops moved into quarters, the King's Own being in new barracks in Hythe. They were fortunate in being under the command of Sir John Moore, who was the great military innovator of his time and developer of the light infantry. The intensive training of the infantry, both in drill and musketry was to be the foundation of the British army's successes in the years to come. Sir John laid much stress on the training, behaviour and duties of the officers. Although commissions were still bought and sold, Sir John ensured that the officers in his brigade knew and carried out their duties.

Throughout the summers of 1804 and 1805, Napoleon's forces across the Channel were still seeking an opportunity to elude the vigilance of the British Navy and swoop down on the English coast. The defeat of the French fleet at Trafalgar on 21st October 1805 finally established Britain's maritime supremacy and Napoleon was compelled to abandon his intention to invade Britain.

Napoleon's chief interest now lay in the operations in central Europe. Hitherto Hannover had been occupied by French troops, but it was now evacuated in order that Napoleon could use his entire force against Austria. King George III, also Elector of Hanover, decided to send a small expedition to co-operate with the Austrians with Hanover as its base.

The 1st Battalion of the King's Own in which Captain Oliver was serving, joined three other regiments of the Line, two regiments of Foot Guards, the 95th Rifle Corps, the German Legion and some artillery at Deal. The fleet weighed anchor on 5th November and on the 19th arrived at Cuxhaven. Shortly afterwards, Napoleon utterly defeated the Austrians at Jena and by the end of February the small expeditionary force was once more safely in the British Isles.

With his failure to invade Britain, towards the end of 1806 Napoleon issued his famous decrees declaring the British Isles to be in a state of blockade. To be successful the Continental System, as this scheme was called, had to be complete; in this Napoleon failed and British goods leaked through, especially into Holland and Portugal.

At the beginning of 1807 rumours reached England of an agreement between Russia and France to seize the Danish fleet, an act that would have enabled Napoleon to complete the Continental System. For Portugal, Napoleon had other plans.

In July the 1st Battalion of the King's Own received orders for embarkation. This time serious preparations were made and the Regiment moved to Harwich, where they were brigaded with 1/23rd in the 2nd Brigade under Major General Grosvenor. On 1st August the fleet weighed anchor; more ships from Plymouth joined it from the Downs and a week later arrived off Elsinore, dropping anchor on a pitch-black night in the middle of a thunderstorm.

The Army had improved immensely since the fiasco in Holland. James had now been a Captain for nearly eight years and would have been a company commander for all or nearly all that time. He was an experienced officer with a well-trained company.

The initial diplomatic negotiations to persuade the Danes to hand over their fleet failed after two days and with it the attitude of the Danes themselves changed from warmth to distrust. On 14th August a Danish frigate slipped her moorings, was chased, captured and brought back. The campaign had opened.

The next day the fleet passed through the Straits of Elsinore towards Copenhagen, where the bulk of the Danish fleet lay at anchor. The summons to surrender it to the keeping of Great Britain was refused and the island of Zealand, on which Copenhagen stands was invested by the ships and on Sunday morning 16th August landings began near the village of Vedbeck, halfway between Elsinore and Copenhagen.

The laborious work of a siege now began. Copenhagen had impressive defences. The work of erecting shelters, preparing batteries and sapping forward took time. The King's Own held the extreme left of the army, on the beach and opposite the Citadel. On 31st August the batteries, with one exception were completed and armed. Alarmed at this progress, the Danes made a sortie of from two to three thousand men supported by eight guns. They moved out from their right, aiming to destroy the batteries in this area. The force opposed to them consisted of only ten companies, two of which were of the King's Own. James may well have commanded one of these. With two light field pieces, these companies held out against three times their number until reinforcements arrived led by General Sir David Baird.

The next day, with all preparations complete, the Danish garrison was again summoned to surrender, which again they refused to do. The next day, 2nd September, the bombardment began. The damage was terrible and fires raged. After three nights, an armistice was declared on 6th September and on the morning 7th September the town capitulated.

During the whole campaign the relationship between the British soldiers and the Danes was extraordinarily good. The latter did not conceal their displeasure at the

landing of the troops, the burning of the capital, and the removal of the fleet, but at the same time they behaved with great civility towards the British, and so no case is recorded of a soldier being abused or ill treated. As a result little, if any, looting took place.

It took until 15th October to prepare and victual the Danish fleet, when they were sailed away with their prize crews. As the fleet passed Helsingborg, the King of Sweden came to see it pass, and from every ship he received a Royal Salute.

The value of the ships and their stores was estimated at four and a half million sterling, but as no formal declaration of war had been made it was held that the captors were ineligible for prize money. This unpopular decision was slightly sweetened by the grant of £900,000 by way of compensation.

As a result of losing their fleet, all Danish landowners with forests were ordered to grow oaks and to prune them in the shape needed to form the ribs of ships in a new navy. These trees were ready for felling in 1990!⁹

The next six months passed quietly in Colchester, but on 24th April 1808 the 1st battalion of the King's Own was again called to active service and with four other regiments, it marched, nine hundred and sixty eight strong to Harwich. Besides the sixty rounds of ammunition each man carried, he now had three flints. The six women per company and their children embarked with them. The expedition of some 11,000 men and commanded by Sir John Moore was sent to aid the Swedish king in his operations against the French. The conditions imposed by the English Government were unacceptable to the Swedes and despite intensive negotiations the expedition returned to England in the middle of July. For the regiments, the stay was not unpleasant. They were able to exchange their salt pork for fresh fish and forty or fifty lobsters could be obtained for a dollar. The weather was ideal and there was no night. The Swedes came in their multitudes to listen to the bands of the different regiments and to admire the ships. Regiments landed in a daily rotation on a small island a short distance from the fleet where they had the opportunity of bathing and taking exercise.

When they left Sweden, the situation in Europe had changed. Spain and Portugal had requested help from Britain. Sir John Moore's force was not allowed to land in England, but was hurried on to Portugal. The insurrection in Spain the "2 de Maio" had left Junot isolated in Portugal with twenty-five thousand men.

On August 19th the 1st Brigade with the King's Own began disembarking at the mouth of the Mondego, where Wellesley had landed his own forces some weeks previously. These orders were countermanded and the fleet was ordered to sail on to Peniche. As the King's Own sailed along the coast, the men heard the sounds of fighting on shore, which turned out to be the battle of Vimieiro.

The Regiment finally disembarked in Maceira Bay, south of Peniche with some difficulty due to the rough weather, over a few days beginning on 25th August. Immediately upon landing the troops were hurried forward to join Sir Arthur Wellesley, some 18 miles away. They had been on board ship for four months except for an occasional run on Swedish rocks. Laden down with their packs, spare clothing, three days rations and sixty rounds of ball-cartridge, they started their first march with the

thermometer between ninety and a hundred. Grossly unfit, many found it too much and fell out, only catching up later.

The signing of the Convention of Cintra a few days later found the British and French armies billeted close to each other north of Lisbon. Relations between the soldiers of both armies were extremely cordial. “They were to be seen drinking, carousing, shaking hands, and walking arm in arm, while officers of both armies frequented the opera, which had at one time claimed to be the best in Europe.”³

The signing of the Convention of Cintra and the departure of the French army on British transports were of little importance to a junior officer in the King’s Own. What affected him more personally was the order of 8th October, placing Sir John Moore in command of the 30,000 troops in Portugal. His orders were to advance into Spain with 20,000 of them to help the Spanish drive the French back across the Pyrenees, leaving the remainder in Portugal under the command of Sir John Craddock.

It was an optimistic order, for, although there were around 80,000 Spanish troops in the field, they had no coordinated plan and no recognised C-in-C with whom Moore could collaborate.

Moore decided to advance on Burgos, where he could link up not only with the Spanish armies facing the French across the Ebro, but also with a force of 10,000 being sent out from England to Corunna under Major-General Sir David Baird. He set off on 18th October, but unfortunately sent his artillery and cavalry on an enormous loop south via Badajoz and Madrid to join him at Salamanca, because he was advised (wrongly, it turned out) that the direct route through Ciudad Rodrigo was impassable for guns.⁶

Very little baggage was allowed. As soon as the army crossed the Spanish border, many Portuguese muleteers deserted sometimes with and sometimes without their mules. The few wagons of the Royal Wagon Train proved to be far too heavy for the roads of the peninsula and were gradually replaced by country carts, which were scarce.

On 14th October the King’s Own set off, leading the 1st Brigade of the 1st Division, health and fitness completely restored. They crossed the frontier into Spain on 7th November. ‘At Ciudad Rodrigo the whole town turned out to welcome the army with shouts of ‘Viva los Ingleses’.³

During the second half of November the army remained stationary in the neighbourhood of Salamanca waiting for his artillery and news of Baird’s movements.

What Moore did not know was that Napoleon had himself crossed into Spain on 8th November with 200,000 troops, determined to settle the Spanish trouble once and for all. ‘The echoing passes of the Pyrenees were filled with the ceaseless flow of infantry, cavalry, and artillery, a living flood of armed men, glittering with steel. Napoleon’s own rhetoric had a roll as of drums when he declared that his force was such that, ‘when I shall show myself beyond the Pyrenees, the leopard in terror will plunge into the ocean to avoid shame, defeat and death’.³ Napoleon was well aware that the uprising in Spain and the defeat at Vimieiro were a threat to France’s aim for hegemony and could easily be repeated in other parts of Europe.

It was 26th November before Moore heard that the Spanish armies he was supposed to support had disintegrated under Napoleon's 'blitzkrieg'. General Hope, with the artillery and the cavalry was negotiating the Escorial Pass north of Madrid. Baird was still a hundred miles away at Astorga. On the same evening, both he and Hope heard of Napoleon's approach and his great strength. He immediately realized that he must abandon his plan to advance on Burgos, and he issued orders instead for a withdrawal. A few days later, hearing that the city of Madrid was making a desperate stand, Moore was induced to change his plans and attempt to concentrate at Valladolid, thus threatening Napoleon's flank and lines of communication. All previous orders were countermanded, and on 12th December, after he had been joined by Hope and the artillery, the whole of the allied forces moved forward.

"I was aware that I was risking infinitely too much," he wrote, "but something must be risked for the honour of the service, and to make it apparent that we stuck to the Spaniards long after they had given up their cause for lost."⁸

The army was now entering a period of order and counter order. Junior ranks had no idea of what was going on. The weather was frightful. The intelligence available to Moore was patchy, but on 23rd December he heard that Madrid had fallen, that French troops were already on the road to Lisbon to cut his communications and that Soult had come up on his left with a comparatively weak force and was isolated. Moore moved to attack Soult, but heard the next day that Napoleon himself was closing in on him from the south with 80,000 men. It was then clear that he was heavily outnumbered and must make every effort to extricate Britain's only army.

Thus began on Christmas Day 1808 one of the most miserable retreats in the annals of the British Army. Marching by villainous cross roads, they tramped through lanes up to their knees in mud and reached Astorga on December 30th.³ Here they met up with a Spanish army under General la Romana, which they had been given to believe was 'a fine army of 20,000 men.' Their disappointment when they found that this force was but the wreck of an army, a mass of worn-out, half starved wretches, almost naked and rotten with disease, helped to shake still further the morale of the British Troops.³

Astorga had a large depot of all sorts of stores except food, but the Regiment spent only a few hours before moving on. The maintenance of discipline in Astorga had been difficult. At each succeeding place it was worse. There were several cases of scandalous behaviour, which Moore dealt with summarily. On one occasion a plunderer was tried by drumhead court-martial and shot. The army was forced to march past his corpse.

The Rearguard under Major General Edward Paget fought a series of actions to keep the French at bay. A subaltern's party of the King's Own was detached to form a guard for the treasure of the army. It was contained in two carts each drawn by a pair of bullocks, and by January 6th these unfortunate animals were hardly able to stand up. Moving so slowly that the wheels could scarcely be seen to turn, they were that day overtaken by the rear-guard with the French hot upon their heels, and to prevent the carts falling into the hands of the enemy they were tipped over the side of the precipice, falling in a silver cascade into the valley below.'³ Commenting on this later, Sir Charles Oman said, "it was not from necessity but from the mismanagement of the subordinates who had charge of it."¹² He later compared this abandonment of the wherewithal to pay

the troops with Soult's dispersal of £50,000 of military chest during his withdrawal from Oporto. Owing to the weight of the silver coins, his soldiers were not anxious to fill their pockets with it. The chest was blown up with other equipment that Soult decided to abandon at Penafiel. For years after the peasants enriched themselves collecting the coins.

Many men had dropped out on the way and Regiments were judged by the number of men they had lost. It is to the credit of the King's Own that from December 19th a week before the retreat began, until the Regiment disembarked in England it lost only fourteen men. The loss of the remaining thirty-four regiments of Foot over the same period was more than three thousand.

When the troops arrived at Corunna, they were disappointed to find that the transports were not in harbour. Sir John Moore now realised he would have to fight a defensive action to cover the embarkation. In his dispositions, the King's Own found themselves on the extreme right of the position in Bentinck's Brigade with the 50th and 42nd Regiments on their left. They were therefore in the most exposed place of the whole position, within range of the enemy cannon and open to attack in flank as well as front. At last on 14th January, 110 transports sailed into the harbour and loading began at once.

On 15th January Soult seized the heights of Palavea and Penasquedo, but the morning of the 16th passed with no French attack and Moore hurried on with the embarkation. At about 13:45, as the reserve division was moving down to the harbour, Soult finally launched his attack. As they heard the firing behind them, every man of the Division halted, turned about, and within minutes were striding back to their positions.

It soon became apparent that the main weight of the French attack would be on the British right. Moore ordered the right wing of the King's Own to wheel back. 'The French column advancing on the right of the Regiment found itself walking into a trap; it was scourged with a deadly musketry from the King's Own upon the one side and from the 28th and 91st upon the other; between the two no column could go on and the flank attack gradually died away.'³

Moore, directing the battle from a hilltop behind Elvira, could see victory in his reach. But at that moment a round shot struck his left shoulder, tearing the arm from his body. As he lay in a house by the harbour, mortally wounded, he was heard to murmur, "I always wanted to die this way."⁶

On 18th January, around 18,000 men of Moore's army sailed for home, where their desperate appearance caused an unprecedented outcry of public concern. Among the lesser wounded was Captain Oliver, who had been wounded in the foot. They left behind the body of Sir John Moore, "alone with his glory" together with some 800 other dead.'⁶

Meanwhile Sir Arthur Wellesley, who had left Portugal after the disgraceful Convention of Cintra, which was none of his making, had taken up his old post as Chief Secretary for Ireland. His thoughts however were still on the military situation in the Peninsular and on 1st August 1808, he wrote to the Prime Minister, Lord Castlereigh

arguing that whatever might happen in Spain, armies consisting of 20,000 British and 30,000 Portuguese could defend Portugal, but that Britain would have to organise and pay the Portuguese Army.

These thoughts were developed in a further letter in March 1809 and were accepted by the British Government. The Portuguese Army, at the request of their government, already had a British Commander in Chief in Sir William Carr Beresford, who had been appointed in February, only a month after he had returned from Corunna. As a preliminary measure he asked for volunteers from Sir John Craddock's army, and obtained about enough English officers to give three to each regiment. He also got leave from the British Cabinet to offer Portuguese commissions to officers serving in corps on the home station. The first British officers to be seconded to the Portuguese Army received a promotion in the British Army and a second promotion in the Portuguese Army, receiving the pay for both. At a time when promotion was by purchase or dead men's shoes, this was a powerful incentive. In typical Horse Guards/Ministry of Defence behaviour it was soon dropped as too expensive, but most officers went up a rank in the Portuguese Army and many British senior non-commissioned officers gained commissions. Oliver's promotion in the British army could not be in his regiment, where there was no vacancy, so it was gazetted to "the Staff of the Army" on 16th July 1809, only a few months after Wellesley's proposal.

William Warre, Beresford's ADC wrote from Thomar on 27th April 1809 that "the Portuguese troops immediately under the instruction of British officers are coming on very well."⁴ We are not yet sure of the exact date that Oliver joined the Portuguese Army, but it seems probable that it was late February or early March 1809. Oman¹⁰, writes that by 22nd April Beresford had been reorganising the Portuguese troops 'during the last two months'. At this time, Wellesley was organising his force for the offensive against Soult at Oporto. Lieutenant Colonel Oliver, commanding the 1st Battalion of the 10th Portuguese Line was brigaded with the British regiments 2/7th (Royal Fusiliers) and 2/53rd (Shropshire) and one company 5/60th (Green Jackets) under the command of Major General A. Campbell. One witness of May 1809, Lord Londonderry wrote, 'There was one brigade under General Campbell (the 4th and 10th Regiments), which struck me as being in the finest possible order: it went through a variety of evolutions with a precision and correctness which would have done no discredit to our own army.'¹¹ Only days later he and his battalion were present at the battle of the Douro and the capture of Oporto. The brigade did not take an active part in the operation.

The British pursuit of Soult's broken army halted around Montalegre, just south of Portugal's northern border and Wellesley turned south to meet the greater threat of Victor in the centre. While he concentrated his army at Abrantes on the Tagus, he detached the four Portuguese battalions (1st & 2nd 10th and 1st & 2nd 16th), to join Beresford with the rest of the Portuguese regulars. They were dropped behind, destined to form an army of observation in case a French force should threaten the frontier between the Douro and the Tagus during the absence of the British to the south. Throughout the Talavera campaign, Beresford held his army behind Almeida, able to move north to the Douro or south to the Tagus as required. He had collected thirty-two battalions of regular Portuguese infantry, with one more from the Lusitanian Legion, and the University Volunteers from Coimbra; also five squadrons from various cavalry regiments and four batteries of artillery – a force of 18,000 men in all.¹³

On 31st July he crossed the Spanish frontier and approached Ciudad Rodrigo. There he heard of Soult's march from Salamanca towards Plasencia, and very properly made up his mind to bring his army down to Estremadura by a line parallel to the French.

On 12th August he made his head quarters at Moraleja. Here his right wing was already in contact with the seven battalions of reinforcements Wellesley had hoped to receive before the battle of Talavera. He was now ordered to move his army further south to Zarza la Mayor, from where he could withdraw safely to Castello Branco should that be necessary. Wellesley, having withdrawn from Talavera held the heights of Miravete, which controlled the crossing of the Tagus at Almaraz. With Beresford's Portuguese army securing his left wing, his position was militarily strong, but his army was starving. The supplies promised by the Spanish had not materialised. The French had stripped the countryside of all provisions, supplies from Abrantes had not arrived. By 20th August he had no alternative but to withdraw in the direction of Truxillo and Badajoz.

British Headquarters were fixed in Badajoz from 3rd September to 27th December 1809. This had military and political advantages. From here he threatened any French move south of the Tagus. A move out of Spain would appear to the Junta in Seville as abandoning his Spanish allies. However with the advent of the rainy season, the intermittent ague, known to the British as 'Guadiana fever' was never absent and many men fell sick. Wellesley did not waste the time and it is generally accepted that the whole concept of the withdrawal to the Lines of Torres Vedras was developed during this period. He felt the borders of Portugal could not be defended; 'The whole country is frontier, and it would be difficult to prevent the enemy from penetrating by some point or other.' He would therefore have to confine himself to 'preserving what is most important – the capital.'¹⁴

At the end of August Beresford moved the bulk of his force back to the area north of Lisbon, to continue the training of the Portuguese units. It was here in Thomar that James Oliver wrote his service record in October 1809.

By this stage, the British Government was paying half of the Portuguese army, including the 10th and 14th regiments. Beresford insisted that each two battalion regiment should have one British lieutenant colonel, two British captains and two British drill sergeants. Incompetent Portuguese officers were weeded out, with plenty of young officers of good calibre ready to take their places. This system was modified to placate national sensitivities so that if there was a British commanding officer, his second in command would be Portuguese and vice-versa.

The essence of infantry training at this time was drill. Battles were won and lost through the ability of formed bodies of men to manoeuvre under fire. Discipline was an essential element, so that men immediately obeyed an order under any circumstances. Musketry was important, but mainly through the ability to complete the complicated motions required to reload, rather than accuracy of fire.

The British officers and NCOs set about drilling the men in the English exercises, which now superseded the old German system left behind by La Lippe, the last reorganizer of the Portuguese army. For the whole drill of the infantry was changed,

and the British formations and manoeuvres introduced. Dundas' 'Eighteen Manoeuvres' were translated, and became the Bible of the Lusitanian no less than the British officer.'¹⁵ This later had the immense advantage that British and Portuguese units of Wellington's army could be moved by the same words of command and in the same formations.

Col. Oliver's regiment had spent some four months from April to August 1809 on manoeuvres, close to, but not involved in the fighting. The next year was relatively quiet. There was considerable but inconsequential manoeuvring of the French forces on the Spanish side of the frontier and it must have been difficult for a regimental officer to understand what was going on. From the reports found in Col D'Urban's journal he put the time to good use, turning his regiment into an impressive fighting unit.

Wellington rightly expected a French invasion of Portugal. For much of 1809 Napoleon had let it be known that he would be in command. Of the three possible invasion routes, General Hill, his most trusted subordinate was given responsibility for the southern route through Badajoz and Elvas, Beresford and his Portuguese took care of the central and least likely route on the line of the Tagus, while Wellington himself assumed responsibility for the most likely route through Ciudad Rodrigo and Almeida.

On 14th December 1809 Col Benjamin D'Urban, Beresford's Chief of Staff recorded in his journal:

"The Marshal inspected the 4th and 10th Regts. of Portuguese Infantry. Col. Campbell and Lt. Col. Oliver – these officers deserve the highest credit. I have never seen an English Brigade move with more steadiness and precision."¹⁶

At the end of the year Lord Wellington arrived for a tour of inspection. On Jan 1st at Leiria – "Lord Wellington inspected the 4th and 10th Regiments under Col. Campbell, -perfectly pleased,- marked his approbation by making Col. Campbell (to the great satisfaction of all people) a Colonel on the Staff."¹⁷

The 10th, now under the command of Lt. Col. Doyle, had marched to Viana de Castelo in the north of Portugal by 20th January, where they were again inspected by Marshal Beresford. On 16th February D'Urban reports that Col. Archibald Campbell's Brigade consisting still of the 4th and 10th Regiments and B. Genl. Luiz's Brigade of the 2nd and 14th Regiments are with General Hill's Division in the Alentejo. The two Portuguese Brigades were later formed into a Division commanded by Maj Gen Hamilton. This division remained under Gen. Hill's command through all the operations to Albuera.

In September when Wellington was satisfied that the French did not intend to make an advance through the Alentejo, but was moving his whole force along the northern bank of the Mondego, he ordered Hill with his entire force to move to join him on his chosen field of battle at Bussaco. Hill's force held the extreme right of the line and was not committed in this famous battle. Then followed the withdrawal to and the occupation of the Lines of Torres Vedras. These massive works had been built in great secrecy and were manned by militia regiments. The regular divisions were held behind the first line as an army of manouvre. Hamilton's Portuguese Division, which still

included Col Oliver was with Hill's 2nd Division behind the Alhandra-Arruda section, on the extreme right of the Line and adjacent with the Tagus.

Massena very soon realised the impossibility of a successful assault on the Lines and settled down to await reinforcements that never came. Wellington's scorched earth policy ensured that there was practically no food available. Even so the French army managed to exist in front of the lines for a month. On 14th November they began a withdrawal to Santarem. There was now a danger that Massena might cross to the southern bank of the Tagus or that the army of Andalusia might be ordered up to assist the army of Portugal. On the 19th and 20th November Hill and the 2nd Division, attended as usual by Hamilton's two Portuguese Brigades, including of course Lt Col Oliver, and with the 13th Light Dragoons attached crossed the Tagus in boats a little to the north of Salvaterra.

Hill moved his force up the river and established his headquarters at Chamusca, a little north of Santarem, from where he could observe the main body of the French and prevent any attempt at crossing. He was also able to keep in touch with the Portuguese garrison at Abrantes. On 29th November Hill was disabled by a severe attack of fever and control of all the troops beyond the Tagus devolved on his senior Brigadier, William Stewart. This hard fighting but over adventurous officer was only allowed to remain in command for a few weeks before Beresford arrived to take charge.

On 12th March Beresford with the 2nd and 4th Divisions was ordered to recapture Badajoz. A few days earlier, the intention had been to relieve Badajoz, under siege by Soult, but well stocked and with a strong garrison led by a dynamic general – Menacho. Misfortune struck when General Menacho, while watching a sortie, was killed by a stray bullet. His successor Brigadier José Imaz, “a man of desponding heart and utterly lacking in energy”⁵, surrendered the fortress a few days later, despite having received a telegraph message from Elvas that succour was on its way. General Hoghton, writing to his brother from Elvas on 31st March 1811, mentioned the generally held belief that Imaz had received 100,000 dollars for his treachery. Beresford's force was ill equipped to conduct a siege. The 14th Line with Oliver now commanding the 2nd Battalion was again present with Hamilton's Portuguese Division.

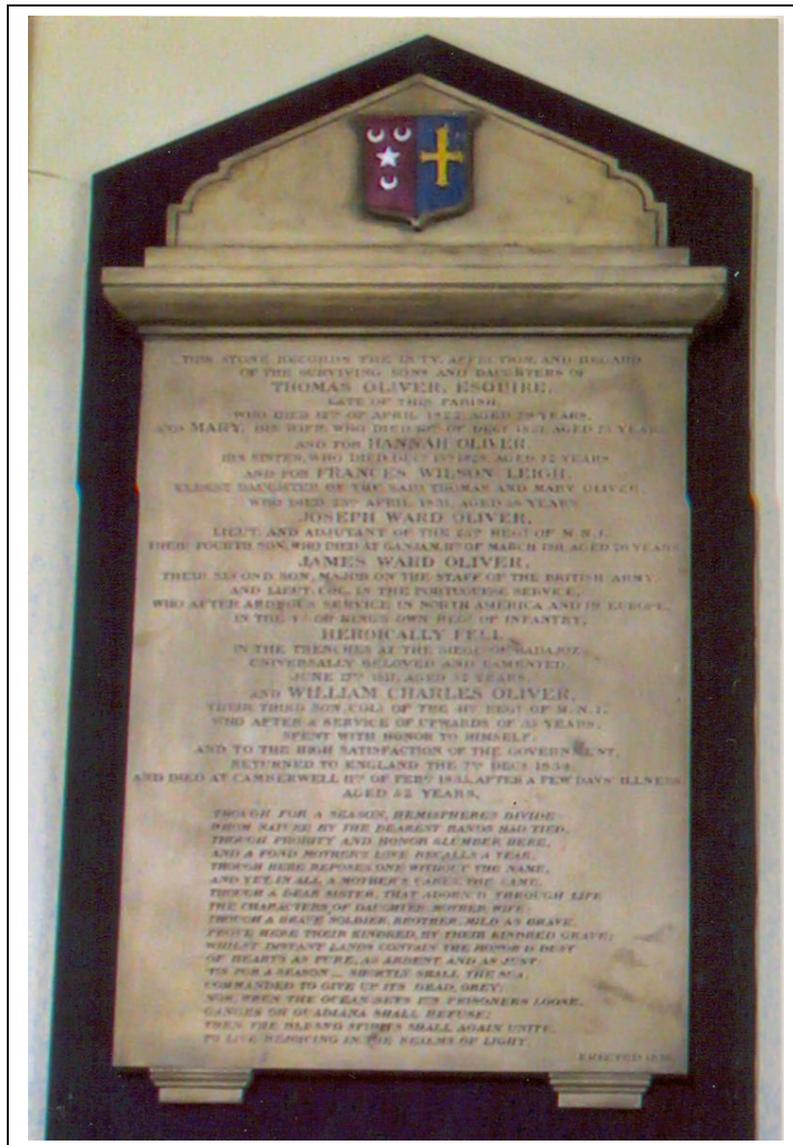
I am not sure of their role in the capture of Olivença or the first siege of Badajoz, but when Beresford moved his army south to Albuera to counter Soult's attempt to relieve Badajoz, Hamilton's Division held the extreme left flank, east of the Badajoz road. They were scarcely engaged, evidenced by having only 2 men wounded out of a strength of 1,204 (both battalions).⁵

Hamilton's Portuguese Division with Lt Col Oliver was soon despatched to reinvest Badajoz and took up their positions on 18th May. When Wellington took charge of the operations of the second siege, he employed the 3rd and 7th Divisions together with Hamilton's and Collins's Portuguese. The 2nd and 4th Divisions that had born the brunt of Albuera were given the less demanding tasks of providing peripheral security. We do not know in which part of the siege he served, but he is said to have received his mortal wound “in the trenches” about 27th May, shortly after the siege was resumed. He was moved to the military hospital in Elvas, but on 17th June he died from his wounds and was buried in the British Cemetery.

It was extremely unusual for a grave to be marked with an inscribed stone as his was. Senior and highly thought of officers were usually buried near where they fell, often accompanied by full military honours, so there must have been something special about James Oliver. Much has been revealed about his life, much more is still hidden.

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Memorial To the family of Thomas Oliver Esquire
In St Mary's Church, PADDINGTON



From this we learn that JAMES WARD OLIVER was the second son of THOMAS OLIVER and his wife MARY. The memorial is to the entire family. The part relating to JAMES states he was a:

“Major on the Staff of the British Army and Lieut. Col. in the Portuguese Service, who after arduous service in North America and in Europe in the 4th or King’s Own Regt. of Infantry who HEROICALLY FELL in the trenches at the siege of Badajoz, universally beloved and lamented, June 17th 1811, aged 32 years.”

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Notes:

1. The Memorial in St Mary's states he was 32 when he died in June 1811. He must therefore have been born in the latter half of 1778, or the first half of 1779. Since he was aged 16 (Megan's letter) when he entered the 4th of Foot on 1st October 1794 (Service Record), he must have been born between 18th June and 31st September 1778. James letter from Megan Eisenbraun.
2. The King's Own. The Story of A Royal Regiment by Colonel LI Cowper
3. Letters from the Peninsular 1808-1812 – Lt Gen Sir William Warre
4. Peninsular War Vol IV, Oman
5. Wellington's Peninsular War – Julian Paget
6. Correspondence, Vol XVIII, N° 14445, p. 39
7. *Sir John Moore*, Carola Oman p. 559
8. Verbally from a forest owner – Hans Vedkjaer
9. Peninsular War Vol II, p. 315 Oman
10. Londonderry (i. p. 305)
11. Oman Vol II p. 363
12. Oman Vol II p. 600
13. Oman Vol II p. 610
14. Oman Vol III p. 175
15. D'Urban's Peninsular Journal p. 77
16. Ditto p. 78

The sequence in which the information on James Oliver came to light is interesting:-

1. In 1997 we knew nothing about him. General Sir Garry Johnson, who had been with the Ambassador at the Re-dedication that year, wrote that he was listed in the Army list as being commissioned in the 4th Kings Own Regiment.
2. Some time later, Miss Letitia Fraser acquired a photocopy of James Oliver's hand written service record.
3. In 2003 Mrs Janet Bromley discovered the Memorial to the Oliver family in St Mary's Paddington.
4. In 2004 Dr. Megan Eisenbraun bought the enchanting watercolour and discovered on the back of it a letter describing James Oliver's career.
5. Mr Peter Donnelly the Curator of the King's Own Regimental Museum sent photocopies of the Regimental history of the period of James Oliver's service.

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After 24 years in the Army, serving in the Green Howards, Nick Hallidie moved to Portugal where his parents had been living since the middle 1960s. In 1996, the Mayor of Elvas pointed out to the then British Ambassador, Roger Westbrook, the lamentable state of the British Cemetery. The British residents in the area met to find a solution. The result was the founding of the 'Friends of the British Cemetery, Elvas'. As Nick was the only one present with a military background, he was elected Chairman, and has been so for the last 19 years.

The first task was to smarten up the cemetery and mount memorials to the regiments that fought at Albuera and Badajoz. This was completed in 2000, with massive help from the Portuguese Army. The Association has grown year by year, and in 2010 it completed the renovation of the Chapel at the entrance, at a cost of €100,000, which mostly came from fund-raising.