A dispatch from the French Minister of War Clarke to General Caffarelli, the commander of the Northern Army in Spain, from the year 1812

The dispatch presented below was offered by an American dealer on an internet auction platform in the spring of 2021. There is no further information about its provenance except that the dealer had acquired it at an estate auction.

The dispatch was written on October 19, 1812 by the French Minister of War Henri Clarke, comte d'Hunebourg, duc de Feltre [1] to the French General Marie-François Auguste de Caffarelli du Falga [2], who was commander of the French Army of the North in Spain at the time.

Historical and military background of the dispatch

In order to be able to classify the dispatch historically and militarily, the situation in Spain at that time is briefly described below. Detailed information can be found in [3].

In 1812, France had occupied large parts of Spain. The French troops were divided into several armies:

- Army of the North under the command of General Caffarelli.
- Army of Portugal under the command of General Souham [4].
- Army of the Centre under the command of King Joseph Bonaparte [5] (brother of Napoleon Bonaparte), who was assisted by Marshal Jourdan [6] as Chief of Staff
- Army of the South under the command of Marshal Soult [7].
- Army of Aragon and Valencia under the command of Marshal Suchet [8]
- Army of Catalonia under the command of General Decaen [9]

Opposing the French armies was an alliance of the British Expeditionary Force and Portuguese troops. This alliance was commanded by Lord Wellington [10].

Between September 19 and October 21, 1812, Wellington's army besieged the city of Burgos [11]. This was preceded by an important victory of the allied forces in the Battle of Salamanca on July 22, 1812 [12]. The French Army of Portugal under the command of Marshal Marmont [13] suffered heavy losses. Marshal Marmont was seriously wounded during the battle and general Souham took command of the Army of Portugal. In the weeks that followed, Wellington's troops marched on the capital Madrid. In September 1812, Lord Wellington divided his army. He marched part of his forces north from Madrid toward Burgos, while general Rowland Hill [14] took up position with the rest of the troops south of Madrid on the river Tagus to establish a defensive line against the southern French armies. Only a few units were left behind in Madrid.

Lord Wellington undertook the siege of Burgos because, in his estimation, the Army of Portugal had not yet replenished the losses from the Battle of Salamanca and was therefore not yet ready for a new offensive. The Army of the North under General Caffarelli was kept busy by guerrilla fighters in various places, so Wellington assumed that no troops could be detached from there to support the Army of Portugal. Wellington also did not expect the Army of the South under Marshal Soult to advance toward Madrid, since this would require clearing all of Andalusia of French troops.

All these assumptions proved to be wrong. Marshal Suchet's troops were considered strong enough by the French side to hold Valencia without further support. Marshal Soult's Army of the South united with King Joseph's Army of the Centre and started moving north. Andalusia was actually cleared of French

troops in the process. At the same time, general Caffarelli with about 10,000 men marched from Vitoria through Briviesca towards Burgos to support the Army of Portugal and challenge Wellington to a battle.

The long duration of the siege of Burgos and the wrong assumptions about the actions of the French troops put Lord Wellington in distress. He was outnumbered with his troops in the north by the Army of Portugal and its reinforcement by the Army of the North. The same was true in the south for General Hill's troops on the Tagus, who were outnumbered by the combined Army of the Centre and Army of the South.

For the allied troops, the acute threat of being attacked simultaneously in the north and south by a pincer movement arose. Lord Wellington broke the siege of Burgos just in time before the arrival of the French armies. He ordered General Hill and his troops north toward Salamanca to join him. The capital, Madrid, was abandoned and, as it progressed, the allied troops withdrew to Ciudad Rodrigo [15] on the Spanish-Portuguese border.

So much for the military situation in September/October 1812. The events of the summer and fall of 1812 can be read in great detail in [16].

Transcription and translation

The dispatch is written in French. Three text passages are coded by numbers. In a first step, the handwritten text was transcribed as accurately as possible. The transcription and translation into German were carried out by Christian Mester from Switzerland. The transcription proved to be difficult in parts, as the handwriting is not always easy to decipher.

At the bottom of the dispatch is a narrow strip of paper, which also contains handwritten text, but in a different handwriting. This is the plain text of the coded text passages. The paper strip with the plain text was obviously glued on by the recipient.

There are further coded text passages on the left edge of the dispatch. It can be assumed that this is a transcoding of the plaintext using a different code table.

Since the dispatch was a communication at the highest command level, it was coded using the "Le grande chiffre de Paris" ("Great Cipher") [17]. This was only used for communication between Napoleon Bonaparte and the commanding generals of his armies. As Napoleon was on his Russian campaign in the autumn of 1812, the code tables were handed over to Henri Clarke, Minister of War, who maintained communication with the French armies on the Iberian Peninsula during Napoleon's absence.

The "Great Cipher" is a nomenclator that dates back to a 17th century diplomatic code. This originally had a scope of approx. 1200 entries (words, place names, syllables, letters, etc.). For the campaign on the Iberian Peninsula, it was expanded to 1400 entries by specific additions (place names, names of armies/commanders, rivers, etc.). For example, the code 1383 stands for "le Tage" (River Tagus/Tajo).

Ministère
de la Guerre.

Division particulière
des opérations
Militaires en Espagne

Général, J'ai reçu la lettre que vous m'avez fait l'honneur de m'écrire le 10. de ce mois pour m'annoncer votre départ de Vittoria, avec les chances que vous deviez amener à l'armée de Portugal ; j'attends le résultat de cette opération avec un grand intérêt. Par ma lettre du 14, je vous ai informé de la réunion opérée sur les frontières de Valence, entre les armées du Midi & du Centre ; depuis lors, j'ai reçu des lettres du Roi, de San Felipe, en date du 7. courant. Il avait vu le 3. M. le Duc de Dalmatie qui lui avait 280. 597. 914. 544. 1096. 637. 173. 330. 413. 656., sa majesté se proposait d'agir de manière à rétablir les affaires. On doit présumer que les armées réunies du Midi et du Centre auront pu se mettre en marche 112. 252. 58. 786. 703. 23. 739. pour se porter sur 1383. 906. 670. 701. 323. 761. 289. 168. 718. 694. Vous ne devez donc pas tarder à vous en apperçevoir, par l'influence que ce mouvement obtiendra nécessairement sur les opérations de Lord Wellington, & par suite, sur la position de l'armée de Portugal. Ne perdez point de tems, Général, pour m'instruire de tous les renseignements qui vous parviendront à cet égard.

Agréez, Général, l'assurance de ma parfaite considération

Le Ministre de la Guerre
Duc de Feltre.

Les parties de cette lettre qui sont chiffrées peuvent être traduites comme il suit avec la Table C D n°. 29. savoir:

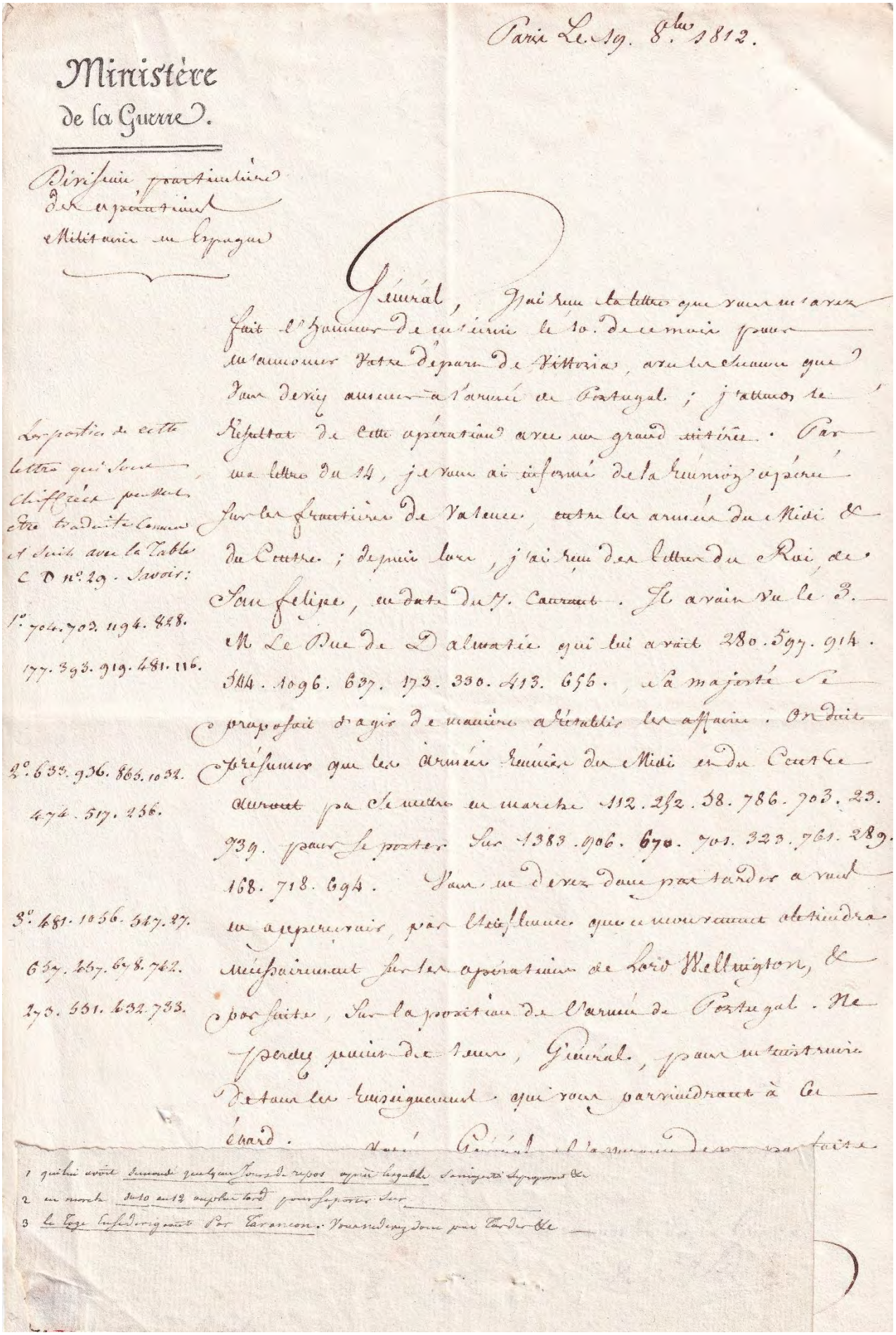
1°. 704. 703. 1194. 828. 177. 393. 919. 481. 116.

2°. 633. 936. 865. 1032. 474. 517. 256.

3°. 481. 1056. 547. 27. 657. 457. 678. 742. 273. 551. 432. 733.

A Monsieur Le Gal Comte Caffarelli.

Fig. 1: Dispatch from Minister of War Henri Clarke to General Caffarelli, Commander of the Army of the North(Collection K. Hansky)



Paris Le 19. 8bre 1812.

Ministère de la Guerre.

Division particulière des opérations Militaires en Espagne

Général, J'ai reçu la lettre que vous m'avez fait l'honneur de m'écrire le 10. de ce mois pour m'annoncer votre départ de Vittoria, avec les secours que vous deviez amener à l'armée de Portugal ; j'attends le résultat de cette opération avec un grand intérêt. Par ma lettre du 14, je vous ai informé de la réunion opérée sur les frontières de Valence, entre les armées du Midi & du Centre ; depuis lors, j'ai reçu des lettres du Roi, de San Felipe, en date du 7. courant. Il avait vu le 3. M. le Duc de Dalmatie qui lui avait 280. 597. 914. 544. 1096. 637. 173. 330. 413. 656., sa majesté se proposait d'agir de manière à rétablir les affaires. On doit présumer que les armées réunies du Midi et du Centre auront pu se mettre en marche 112. 252. 58. 786. 703. 23. 739. pour se porter sur 1383. 906. 670. 701. 323. 761. 289. 168. 718. 694. Vous ne devez donc pas tarder à vous en apperçevoir, par l'influence que ce mouvement obtiendra nécessairement sur les opérations de Lord Wellington, & par suite, sur la position de l'armée de Portugal. Ne perdez point de tems, Général, pour m'instruire de tous les renseignements qui vous parviendront à cet égard. Voici Général l'assurance de ma parfaite

Les parties de cette lettre qui sont chiffrées peuvent être traduites comme il suit avec la Table C D n°. 29. Savoir:

1°. 704. 703. 1194. 828. 177. 393. 919. 481. 116.

2°. 633. 936. 865. 1032. 474. 517. 256.

3°. 481. 1056. 547. 27. 657. 457. 678. 742. 273. 551. 432. 733.

1 qui lui avoit demandé quelques jours de repos après lesquels sa majesté se proposoit &c

2 en marche du 10 au 12 au plus tard pour se porter sur

3 le Tage en se dirigeant par Tarancon. Vous ne devez donc pas tarder &c

Fig. 2: Dispatch with glued-on paper strip (collection K. Hansky)

French transcription of the dispatch

Paris, Le 19 8bre 1812

Ministère de
la Guerre

Division particulière
des opérations
Militaires en Espagne

Les parties de cettre
lettre qui sont chiffrées peuvent
être traduites comme il suite
avec la Table
C D no. 29. Savoir:

1° 704.703.1194.828
177.393.919.481.116

2° 633.936.865.1032
474.517.256

3° 481.1056.547.27.
657.457.678.742
273.551.432.733

Général, J'ai reçu la lettre que vous m'avez fait l'honneur de m'écrire le 10 de ce mois pour m'annoncer votre départ de Vittoria, avec les sommes (?) que vous deviez amener à l'armée de Portugal; j'attends le Resultat de cette opération avec grand intérêt. Par ma lettre du 14, je Vous ai informé de la réunion opéré sur la frontière de Valence, entre les armées du Midi & du Centre; depuis lors, j'ai reçu des lettres du Roi de San Felipe, en date du 7 courant. Il avait vu le 3. M Le Duc de Dalmatie qui lui avait **280.597.914.** (1) **544.1096.637.173.330.413.656.** Sa majesté Se proposait d'agir de manière à rétablir les affaires. On doit présumer que les armées réunies du Midi et du Centre auront pu se mettre en marche **112.252.58.786.703.23.** (2) **739.** pour le porter sur **1383.906.670.701.323.761.289.** (3) **168.718.694.** Vous ne devez pas tarder à vous en appercevoir, par l'influence que ce mouvement obtiendra necessairement sur les opérations de Lord Wellingtron, & parsuite, Sur la position de l'armée de Portugal. Ne perdez point de tem[p]s, Général, pour m'instruire de tous les enseignements qui vous parviendront à cet égard.

Agréez, Général, l'assurance de ma parfaire Considération

Le Ministre de la Guerre
Duc de Feltre

A Monsieur Le Gal Comte Caffarelli

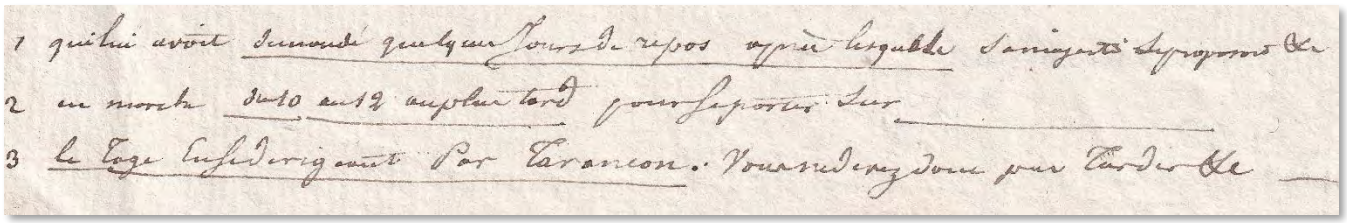


Fig. 3: Contents of the hard-to-decipher glued-on paper strip

The transcription of the text on the pasted paper strip reads as follows:

(1) qui lui avait **demandé quelques Jours de repos après lesquels** Sa majesté Se proposait
(2) en marche **du 10 au 12 au plus tard** pour le porter sur
(3) le Tage Ensedirigeant (en se dirigeant) Par (par) Tarancon ne devez donc pas tarder

English Translation

War Office Paris, 19 October 1812

Special department for
military operations
in Spain

The parts of this letter,
which are encoded,
can be translated
with table
C D no. 29
as follows:

General,
I have received the letter which you wrote to me on the 10th of this month, informing me of your departure from Vittoria, with the contributions [troops?, reinforcements?] which you must bring to the Army of Portugal; I await the result of this operation with great interest.
By my letter of the 14th I informed you of the union effected on the frontier of Valencia between the Armies of the South and the Centre; since then I have received the letters of the King of San Felipe, dated the 7th of this month. He had asked the Duke of Dalmatia, on the 3rd, for a few days' rest. His Majesty proposed to do so in order to restore the enterprise.
It is to be supposed that the united Armies of the South and Centre could set out on march from the 10th to the 12th at the latest to come to the Tagus in the direction of Tarancón. You may therefore soon ascertain this for yourself by the influence which this movement will necessarily have on the actions of Lord Wellington and, subsequently, on the location of the Army of Portugal.
Lose no time, General, in informing me of any knowledge that may come to you in this respect.

Yours sincerely [to a person of lower rank].

The Minister of War
Duke of Feltre

To General Count Caffarelli

(1) qui lui avait **demandé quelques Jours de repos après lesquels** Sa majesté Se proposait
who had asked him **for some days of rest**, according to which His Majesty propose etc.
(2) en marche **du 10 au 12 au plus tard** pour le porter sur
on march from the **10th to the 12th** at the latest, to come to _____
(3) le Tage Ensedirigeant (en se dirigeant) Par (par) Tarancon ne devez donc pas tarder
the Tagus in the direction of Tarancón. So you may soon etc. Tagus/Tejo → river

Notes on the contents of the dispatch

Henri Clarke, the Minister of War, refers to a message from Caffarelli dated 10 October 1812, at which time general Caffarelli was near Briviesca in northern Spain. His dispatch to the Minister of War thus took 9 days or less to reach Paris. Clarke also refers to a message from King Joseph dated 7 October 1812, who was near Valencia at the time. This dispatch therefore took 12 days or less to reach Paris. From this, we can estimate the transit time of a dispatch between the French armies in Spain and Paris to be at least 8-9 days.

The phrase "Roi de San Felipe" (King of San Felipe) refers to King Joseph. In the literature, however, there is no connection between the two terms, so it is unclear why this formulation was chosen. Possibly it is an allusion to an event or a place.

The content of the dispatch reflects the military situation described above very well. Minister of War Clarke expresses his pleasure at the departure of general Caffarelli to support the Army of Portugal. He also informs General Caffarelli of the unification of the Army of the Centre and Army of the South and their planned date of march towards the Tagus (10-12 October). In fact, Marshal Soult set off northwards on 15 October and King Joseph as late as 17 October (see [16], p. 92).

Henri Clarke also predicted that the French troop movements would influence Lord Wellington's actions. That he was correct in this is shown by the breaking of the siege of Burgos as well as the subsequent retreat of Wellington's troops towards Ciudad Rodrigo.

Cryptological notes

The dispatch offers some special features from a cryptological point of view:

1. Only parts of the message are encoded, most of it is in plain text. This was common practice at the time, presumably to save coding time. This method is problematic in that the content of the coded text can be deduced from the context of the plain text. For example, the coded text passages #2 and #3 in context suggest that they are time and place information.
2. The decoded plaintext of the three coded text passages is pasted onto the dispatch.
3. The decoded plaintext was encoded again with another code table (#29) and the code numbers were noted on the edge of the dispatch. Possibly the dispatch was to be forwarded to the division commanders.

Points 2. and 3. lead to the fact that the dispatch can be regarded as a kind of "Rosetta Stone", since it contains both the plaintext and the plaintext encoded with two different code tables. This compromises both code tables, at least as far as the code numbers used are concerned. The dispatch should not have been archived in this form.

The code table used

Jean-François Bouchaudy [18] helped to translate the French text into English and kindly provided photos of the code table #24 used to code the dispatch (Fig. 4). The original code table is in the archives of the SHD (Service Historique de la Défense) [19] in Vincenne (SHD box 1M-2352).

The section in Fig. 5 shows the code number 1383 = "le Tage" already mentioned above.

Fig. 4: Code table #24 (Photo: Jean-François Bouchaudy, source: SHD box 1M-2352)

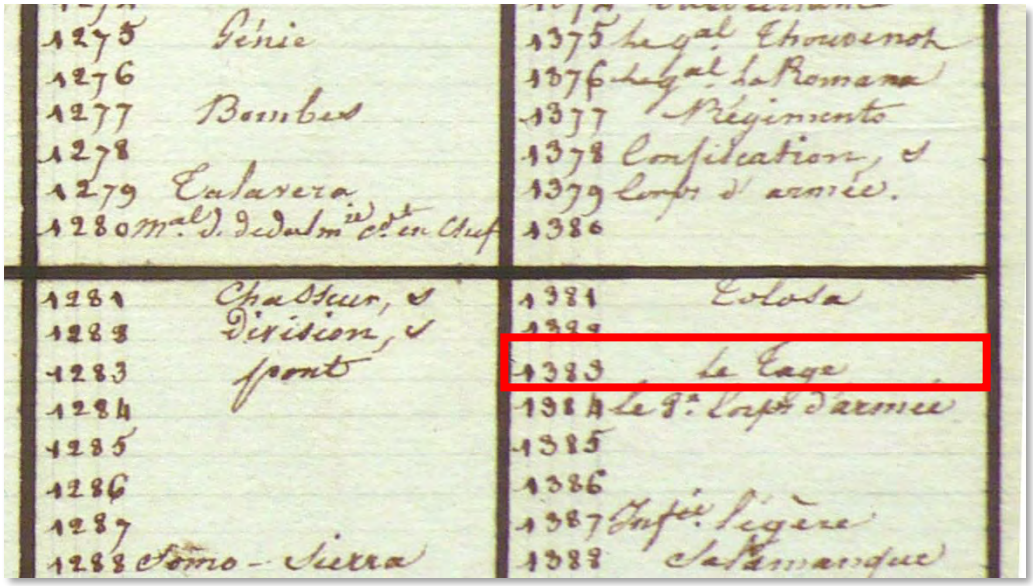


Fig. 5: Section from code table #24 with entry for code number 1383

Based on code table #24, the coded text passages can be read as follows:

```
(1)
280     – 597      – 914    – 544 – 1096 – 637 – 173 – 330    – 413 - 656
demandé – quelques – jours – de  – re   – po  – s   – après – les – quels.

(2)
112 – 252 – 58  – 786   – 703 – 23   – 739
du  – dix – aux – douze – aux – plus – tard

(3)
1383    – 906 - 670 – 701    – 323 – 761 – 289 – 168 – 718 – 694
Le Tage – en  – se  - direct - ant – par – ta  – ra  – n   – con
```

The word "direct-ant" should actually be "dirigeant". It is possible that the secretary responsible for coding did not find the appropriate syllables in the code.

George Scovell - The Man Who Broke Napoleon's Code

For a long time, it was virtually unknown to the public that Lord Wellington could widely read messages which were coded with the "Great Cipher". George Scovell [20], a British officer who served on the staff of the Quartermaster General, was responsible for this. In painstaking work lasting months, he succeeded in reconstructing major parts of the code table from a large number of intercepted dispatches, a groundbreaking work for the time.

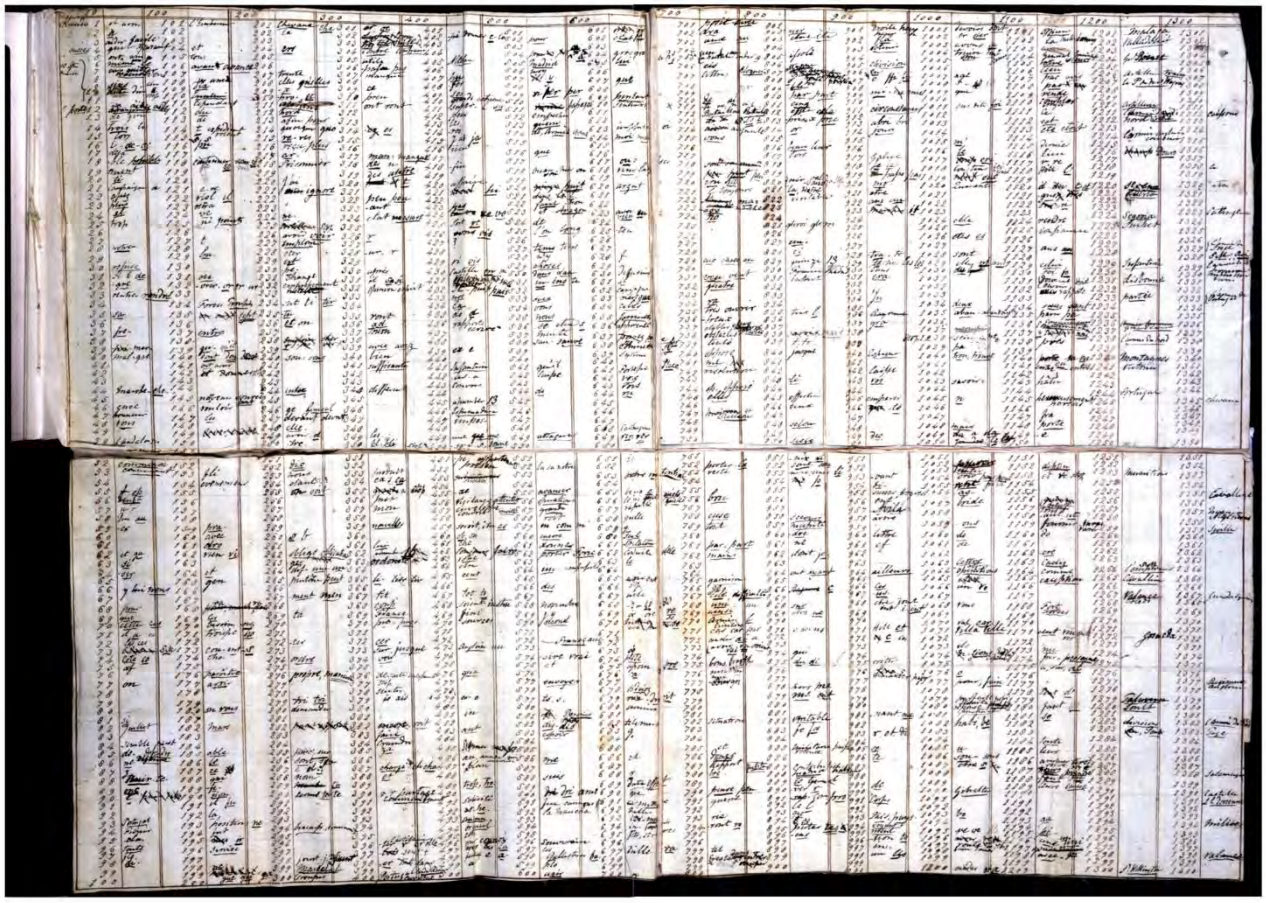


Fig. 6: Scovell's reconstructed code table, presumably as of the end of 1812 (Source: The National Archives, Scovell Papers WO37/9)

Scovell's achievement was first reported 100 years later by Charles Oman [21]. Once again, almost 90 years later, George Scovell was duly acknowledged by Mark Urban in his book "The man who broke Napoleon's codes - The story of George Scovell" [22]. Since Lord Wellington was only interested in the content of the intercepted dispatches, he allowed George Scovell to keep the originals. It is thanks to this fortunate circumstance that they found their way into Scovell's estate and ultimately into "The National Archives" [23] in Kew (London). There they are classified as a "public record" and are available under the reference WO37/9. In addition to the original dispatches (according to [21] there are 41 of them), the documents also contain the code table reconstructed from them by George Scovell himself.

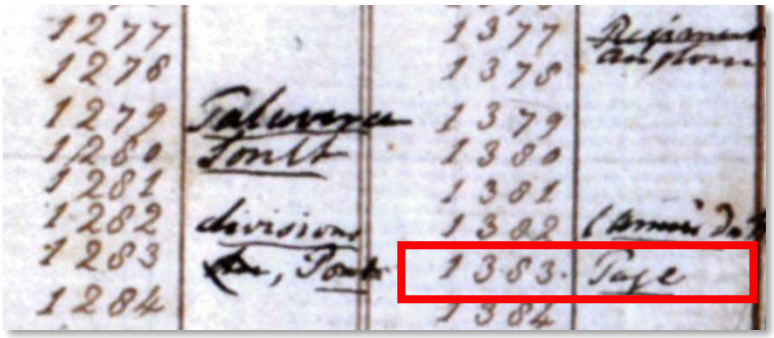


Fig. 7: Extract from Scovell's code table with entry for code number 1383

Conclusion

The dispatch presented is a good example of the communication practised at the highest command level at that time. Above all, it reveals errors in the application of the nomenclator procedure, which was in itself quite safe. To make matters worse, the dispatches had to be transported across enemy territory. The mounted messengers were often the target of guerrilla raids, so that many dispatches ended up in the hands of Wellington's troops. Important messages were actually sent several times and by different routes, so a possible loss was calculated from the outset.

In the course of time, sufficient material was collected to analyse and reconstruct the code table used. Since it was not changed regularly, George Scovell was able to reconstruct a major part of the code table. The code table was not changed until after the Battle of Vitoria in 1813 [24], during which King Joseph's code tables were captured by Wellington's troops.

Literature/Links

[1] Wikipedia: *Henri Jacques Guillaume Clarke.* - en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henri_Jacques_Guillaume_Clarke
[2] Wikipedia: *Marie-François Auguste de Caffarelli du Falga.* – en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marie-François_Auguste_de_Caffarelli_du_Falga
[3] Wikipedia: *Peninsular War*. - en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peninsular_War
[4 Wikipedia: *Joseph Souham*. - en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_Souham
[5] Wikipedia: *Joseph Bonaparte*. - en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_Bonaparte
[6] Wikipedia: *Jean-Baptiste Jourdan*. - en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean-Baptiste_Jourdan
[7] Wikipedia: *Jean-de-Dieu Soult*. - en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean-de-Dieu_Soult
[8] Wikipedia: *Louis-Gabriel Suchet*. - en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louis-Gabriel_Suchet
[9] Wikipedia: *Charles Mathieu Isidore Decaen*. - en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Mathieu_Isidore_Decaen
[10] Wikipedia: *Arthur Wellesley, 1st Duke of Wellington*. - en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arthur_Wellesley,_1st_Duke_of_Wellington
[11] Wikipedia: *Siege of Burgos*. - en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siege_of_Burgos
[12] Wikipedia: *Battle of Salamanca*. - en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Salamanca
[13] Wikipedia: Auguste de Marmont. - en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Auguste_de_Marmont
[14] Wikipedia: *Rowland Hill, 1st Viscount Hill*. - en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rowland_Hill,_1st_Viscount_Hill
[15] Wikipedia: *Ciudad Rodrigo*. - en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ciudad_Rodrigo
[16] Charles Oman: *A history of the Peninsular War*: Volume VI, Oxford Clarenton Press, 1922
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[18] Wikipedia: *Jean-François Bouchaudy*. - www.jfbouch.fr/crypto/
[19] SHD - Service Historique de la Défense. - www.servicehistorique.sga.defense.gouv.fr/en
[20] Wikipedia: *George Scovell*. - en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Scovell
[21] Charles Oman: *A history of the Peninsular War*: Volume V, S. 611 – 618, Oxford Clarenton Press, 1914
[22] Mark Urban: *The man who broke Napoleon's codes – The story of George Scovell*: Faber and Faber Ltd, 2001.
[23] The National Archives. - nationalarchives.gov.uk/
[24] Wikipedia: *Battle of Vitoria*. - en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Vitoria