

NEWSLETTER
THE FRIENDS OF
THE SOLDIERS OF GLOUCESTERSHIRE
MUSEUM



SPRING 2011



*'The King, Mr. President' by Fortunio Matania
Officers of the 28th after the Battle of Barossa – see 'The Loyal Toast' page 9*



The medals of Pvt. Victor Bowl and a Chinese photograph of the captured Gloucesters after the Battle of Imjin.

It would appear that Pvt. Bowl was recognized from a similar photograph after the battle, although he later died in captivity.

His father, too, was captured in a different war, by a different enemy, whilst serving in the other county regiment. - see next page.

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

The savage defence cuts that the Armed Forces are experiencing under the present Coalition Government will no doubt be reflected in the funding of military museums; we wait to hear how the slicing of budgets will effect out small, award-winning Museum. You will see from the Curator's report that the footfall through the Museum has been down, due to the restoration work being undertaken around the dockside, so our annual contribution to the Museum for specific projects is all the more important.

Last year, our main fund-raising event, the Autumn Lecture, was due to be presented by Prof. Richard Holmes but, sadly, he had to stand down a couple of weeks before the event due to ill health. We are extremely grateful to Lt. Gen. Sir Richard Sherriff, Commander of the Allied Rapid Reaction Corps (ARRC) for willingly arranging to present the Lecture at short notice; his talk was entitled 'Command in the 21st Century'. Many Friends will know that the ARRC has recently been relocated from Germany to take up residence at Innsworth, in Imjin Barracks. With something like 14 nationalities represented on its staff it is now a close neighbour and we intend inviting some members to the Summer Reception at the Museum, on June 15th.

This Reception marks the sixtieth anniversary of the Battle of the Imjin River, during the Korean War, where the 29th Independent Brigade of the UN forces, containing the 1st Bn. The Gloucestershire Regt. held up the advance of the Chinese 63rd Army, from the 21st to 25th April 1951. This is a significant event for the survivors of the battle, and for those who suffered several years of captivity. It will also give the Friends an opportunity to see the newly rearranged National Service display and the new Korean Gallery. We, The Friends were able to make a significant contribution to the Imjin 60 Fund to assist in this development within the Museum.

The celebrations started on April 2nd with a 'Freedom Parade' of 1 Rifles, the successors of the Gloucestershire Regiment, in Gloucester with a service in the Cathedral. The new Korean Room and 'Back Badge Square' on the dockside were opened by HRH The Duke of Gloucester, Paron of the Museum, on April 20th, and he was introduced to Gloster veterans of the Imjin action, Museum Trustees and Staff, and the Committee of The Friends. These events will be reported in the Autumn Newsletter.

We look forward to meeting as many Friends as possible at the Reception, enjoying drinks on the Museum Terrace and watching the Corps of Drums of the ACF.

Lt. Col. Ralph Stephenson

GLOUCESTERSHIRE SERVICE - THE BOWL FAMILY

Displayed in the medal cabinet, in the new Korean Room, are the medals of Private Victor T. Bowl, who enlisted in the 1st Bn. The Glosters in 1944 and served in India and Jamaica. Later, in the belief that The Wiltshire Regt. were heading for Jamaica, he transferred to that regiment, only to find himself in Hong Kong and was then transferred back to serve with 'B' Coy. The Glosters, in Korea, arriving on the eve of the Imjin battle. He was wounded and taken prisoner, but survived the forced march into captivity, only to die of either malaria or enteritis in the camp hospital on the 3rd July 1951.

His father, Francis E. Bowl, son of a Winchcomb farmer, had joined the Royal Gloucestershire Hussars on the 31st August 1914, served in Sinai and was captured by the Turks at the Battle of Katia 23rd April 1916. He was discharged from service in June 1919.

MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY AND TREASURER'S REPORT

On the membership front the Friends currently have 358 members on the books in all categories. New memberships this year stand at 11 (9 through the Museum Internet site and 2 from visitors to the Museum) but overall membership remains fairly constant as new members have replaced those who are sadly no longer with us.

Although annual membership renewal has gone well, we are still waiting for some members to pay their subscriptions for the current year (£5 for junior membership, £10 for single and £15 for couples) so here is a reminder of the ways to pay:

By cheque made payable to 'The Friends of the Soldiers of Gloucestershire Museum' forwarded to the Friends at the Museum address 'Custom House, 31, Commercial Road, Gloucester, GL1 2HE'.

Over the internet through the Museum website at 'www.glost.org.uk' – follow the link to the Friends' page on the Museum's Home page.

By Banker's Standing Order. To save having to write cheques, pay for postage, or remember that you need to renew your subscription annually, why not complete a Banker's Standing Order Mandate? Receipt of your payment directly into the Friends' bank account will trigger action on my part to issue your new membership card. You can of course cancel a standing order with your bank at any stage. If you would like a Standing Order form please contact me at the Museum.

The finances of the Friends remain healthy as at 31 January 2011 with funds valued at £27,098.75. This is after making provision for our annual grant to the Museum of £4,500 to support the IT project and an additional grant of £3,000 to help fund the special Imjin 60 anniversary exhibition. We are therefore well placed to continue with our activities in support of the Museum in the new financial year.

Wng. Cdr. Chris Campbell

SUMMER RECEPTION

The Friends are holding a Summer Reception at the Museum and Dockside to mark

The 60th Anniversary of the Battle of Imjin 1951

in the presence of Her Majesty's Lord-Lieutenant of Gloucestershire
Dame Janet Trotter

Wednesday June 15th 2011

This will provide the Friends an opportunity to view the new Korean War Gallery, and enjoy drinks and canapés on the dockside.

The evening will end with a sunset ceremony performed by
The Corps of Drums of the Gloucestershire Army Cadet Force (The Rifles)
(by kind permission of Col. Lance Ranson TD, Col Commandant)

Invitation with this edition of the Newsletter - Please check your envelope



CURATORS REPORT

What with the snow and the depressed state of the economy it is not surprising that we have had a difficult time this winter. We continue to be cut off from our main supply of visitors by the construction works going in the City, but that thankfully is coming to an end in time for the new season which is upon us. It will be splendid to see the new trees in the Docks in full leaf and we hope that the public come down to appreciate the high quality of the work completed and the changes that have gone on.

There is still a great deal of building work going on between The Museum and the City. The demolition of the old print works in Lady Bellgate Street will be a welcome change – this has blighted the area for the past 15 years to my knowledge. I have proposed that the area released by this demolition be used for a temporary coach park, lack of which has been one of the main causes of our poor visitor numbers. The Docks used to compete with the motorway service areas for passing trade and this has dried up because of the problems with coach parking.

Meanwhile we have a very busy winter. We have put on a series of small exhibitions included The Rifles Display, the Christmas Display and have re-vamped the Modern Army display with a series of spectacular photographs taken during operations in Afghanistan. We have spent a great deal of time concentrating on our new exhibition to commemorate the 60th Anniversary of the Battle of Imjin. It is worth remembering that the Korean War was the first significant armed conflict of the Cold War. North Korea and China, with Soviet Union air support, were ranged against South Korea who was supported by the United Nations, represented by the forces of twenty-two countries including the United Kingdom. Fund raising was started in the spring and has been very successful and we are most grateful for the very generous response from you all. We are now making every effort to put on an exhibition that does justice to the confidence that you have shown in us.

As part of the exhibition we have updated and reprinted the Imjin Roll and we hope to use it as a platform on which to build a database that would tell the life stories of as many as possible of those who were there. Of course, this is a huge undertaking and will take some time, but we would welcome brief summaries of the subsequent lives of any Imjin veterans as you visit the Exhibition

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to all the help and support that we get from the Friends. It is particularly welcome and vitally important in these hard times that you use every opportunity to encourage everyone to use the Museum and its facilities.

George Streatfeild

Two hundred years ago – No. 5

THE PENINSULAR WAR 1811

After battle of Busaco, in September 1810, in which the 2/28th, detachments of the 1/28th and the 61st Foot Regts. had taken part but suffered few casualties, Wellington withdrew the British and Portuguese Army into Lisbon, behind the fortified lines of the Torres Vedras to pass the winter, leaving the French in a landscape stripped and burnt to deny Gen. Massena the ability to live off the land. Unable to tackle the fortifications and denied the order to withdraw nearer to the Spanish border for better scavenging opportunities, the French were left to starve until early March 1811. Despite rear-guard actions and harried by Col. Trant's* British trained Portuguese militia, ammunition was discarded and pack animals left behind as the French hurriedly left to make a run for the Spanish border. A minor battle at Sabugal might have ended in a major defeat for the French, had Gen. Sir William Erskine been better able to command both the Light Div. and the cavalry; as it was the French lost 760 troops to the British 179 and Wellington considered it 'one of the most glorious actions British troops were ever engaged in'.

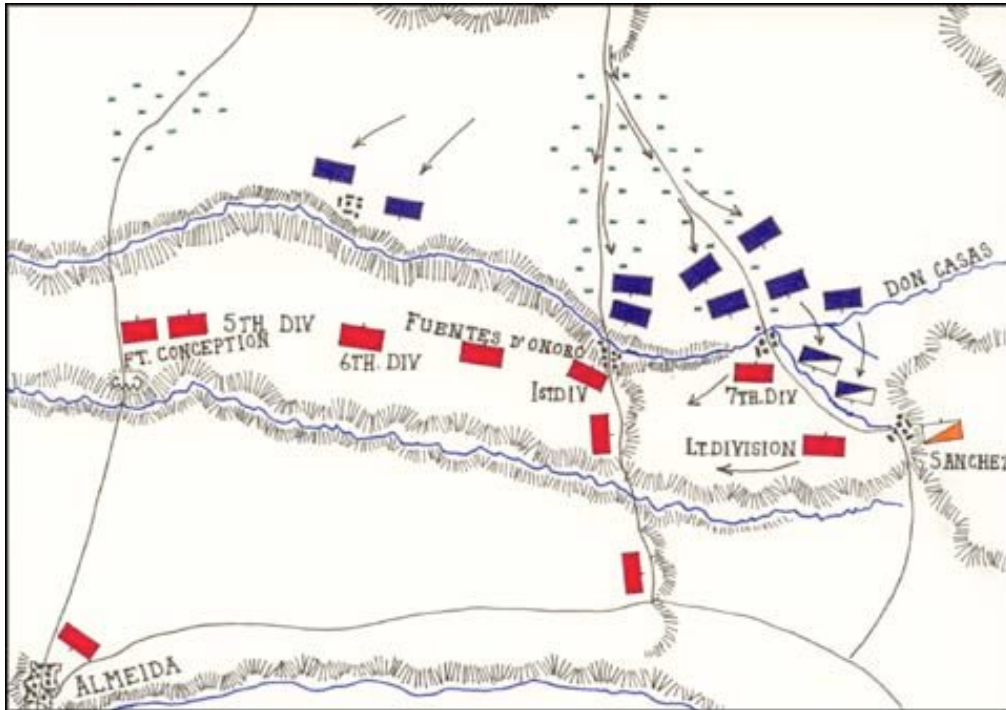


Major battles of the Peninsular War 1808-1814

Early in 1811, whilst the bulk of the French army, under Gen Soutle was occupied around Badajoz, the opportunity was taken to raise the siege of Cadiz, by an attack from the rear. Troops were shipped from Lisbon to Tarifa and the detachments of the 1/28th Foot and other regiments were called from Gibraltar – see the next article 'The Loyal Toast'.

*A descendant of the Col. later Gen. Sir Nicholas Trant; Lt Col R B Trant, *Queens Royal Lancers*, currently commands the *Royal Wessex Yeomanry*, one squadron of which is the *Royal Gloucestershire Hussars Sqn*.

The 61st were to have their turn next, although not in the thick of the action; on the 2 May, Gen. Massena, with a force of 48,000 troops, left Ciudad Rodrigo to relieve his besieged garrison at Almeida, on the Portuguese border. Wellington awaited him, with a force of 38,000 with the 61st Foot in the 6th Div., on a ridge above the village of Fuentes Oñoro, where the road to Almeida drops into a rocky valley to cross a small stream, the Don Casa. On the 3 May Wellington, high up in his lookout on the ridge, saw five French divisions emerge from the woods beyond and, by 2pm., the French attacked across the stream to climb the rocks to attempt to take the village.



The fighting see-sawed throughout the day, with the French troops forcing their way into the village and being driven out again. As night fell the attackers were finally pushed back across the stream and the village remained in British hands. The following day both sides retrieved their dead and injured from amongst the rocks and from the stream. Massena also used the day to transfer some of his forces to the right flank of the British. Wellington, in turn, moved the 7th Div. to oppose them, supported by cavalry.



Bull's Troop of Royal Horse Artillery force their way through French cavalry to reach the British line

On the morning of 5 May, concealed by fog, a large force of French cavalry attacked the British and Portuguese right flank, forcing the Spanish irregulars, commanded by Julian Sanchez, from their hill and severely mauling the 7th Div. As the French infantry followed, Wellington withdraw the 7th Div., sending the Crauford's Light Div. to draw off some of the French strength.

'Surrounded by swirling eddies of French dragoons, Crauford covered the retreat of the 7th with a series of rhythmical evolutions which suddenly transformed the deadly orthodoxy of Hyde Park reviews into a dance of life. Defying the enemy cavalry to approach his invincible infantry squares, holding off their artillery with short cavalry charges until his horses in Wellington words, 'had not a gallop in them'; and, as his squares formed in turns into column' protecting their retirement with the six guns of Bull's Horse Artillery. He brought his own Light Division and the crippled 7th to safety.'

– Elizabeth Longford.



French cavalry confront British infantry squares at Fuentes Oñoro.

By noon, wave after wave of French infantry assaults had eventually penetrated the village and gradually forced two highland regiments, the 74th and 79th Foot, to the highest point of the village, Colonel Wallace counter attacked with his 88th, the Connaught Rangers, those 'wild Irishmen' and drove the French out of the village and back across the Don Casas. The French, their ammunition running low, refrained from further attacks.

The 61st saw little action and did not, along with several other infantry regiments, receive Fuentes de Oñoro as a battle honour. The French lost some 3000 troops to Wellington's loss of 1500 and Almeida was not relieved, but Massena managed to get word to the garrison, through the British lines, to blow up the fortifications and evade the British.

A few days later, on 16 May, the 2/28th fought in the ferocious battle of Albuera, where the British, under Gen. Sir William Beresford fought Marshall Soult.

THE LOYAL TOAST

The formation of The Rifles on 1st February 2007 led to the loss of many traditions and customs belonging to our antecedent and former regiments in the interests of ‘uniformity’. Thus part of the heritage of The Rifles was lost, at least for the time being. ‘The Loyal Toast’ is one example.

For 200 years, since the Battle of Barrosa on the 5th March 1811, the officers first of the 28th (North Gloucestershire) Regiment of Foot, then The Gloucestershire Regiment and, more recently, The Royal Gloucestershire Berkshire and Wiltshire Regiment drank the Loyal Toast as if there were only two officers present. To the usual “Mr Vice, The Queen”, Mr Vice would reply “The Queen, Mr President” instead of the customary “Gentlemen, The Queen”.

The attractive painting by Fortunino Matania*, now hanging in 1 Rifles Officers Mess, records the event. After the Second World War Schweppes published a series of advertisements depicting the drinking traditions of certain famous regiments, all illustrated by Matania, and this was one of them. The Glosters asked Schweppes whether they could have the original. Since, however, the original was in water-colour Schweppes decided to commission Matania to make a copy in oils, which they presented to the Regiment in 1947.

Here the story might end but for the fact that although the 28th (North Gloucestershire) Regiment fought at Barrosa they certainly were not reduced to just two officers. Indeed research reveals that in no battle in the Peninsula War were the 28th reduced to just two officers, but there must be some authentic basis for the tradition. There is. At the Battle of Barrosa Major John Frederick Browne of the 28th was commanding a composite Battalion consisting of the flank companies, that is the Grenadier and Light Companies, of three Regiments, the 1st/9th (Royal Norfolks) the 1st/28th (North Gloucestershire), and the 2nd/82nd (South Lancashire) and the painting almost certainly represents Browne and his Adjutant, Lieutenant Robert Blakeney, also of the 28th.

Browne was another ‘original’ in a war that was full of them. However he was much more than that; he was a gallant and inspirational commander. Surtees of the 95th described him as “a wild and eccentric character”. He had joined the 28th as an ensign in 1781 and been in the Flanders Campaign of 1793 and the attack on St Lucia in 1796. During the British assault landing at Aboukir Bay in March 1801 in Egypt General John Moore (later Sir John Moore) led his Reserve Brigade, which included the 28th, up a steep sand hill from which they drove off two battalions of the French. However two French six-pounder guns remained firing at the 28th. Sir Henry Bunbury wrote: “Captain Browne, who commanded the grenadiers, put his men at the battery, and charging with bayonet, took the guns, with 16 horses, two ammunition wagons and two tumbrils. The French made a desperate attempt to defend them and lost on the bayonets of the 28th grenadiers’ one officer and twenty men”.

**Fortunino Matania (1881-1963) was born in Italy and worked as a worldwide magazine illustrator, his pictures being used by all adversaries during the First World War. He was the primary illustrator for the British magazine ‘The Sphere’ where the photographic-like realism of his pictures brought the war to British readers.*

Browne was therefore something of a veteran when he served as a company commander in Paget's Reserve Division during the dreadful retreat to Corunna. He was already recognised by the soldiers as an eccentric before, at Corunna, he had traded his horse for a pig. Sadly he and the pig were embarked on different vessels!

The 28th returned to the Peninsula in 1810 and were stationed in Gibraltar; by now Browne was the second-in-command. General Colin Campbell, the Governor of the Rock, ordered Browne to take the light companies of the 9th, 28th, 30th and 41st Regiments to garrison the nearby port of Tarifa. Then in May Campbell replaced the light companies with the whole of the 28th when its commander, Colonel Belson, left on leave. Browne received his brevet and became Lieutenant Governor of Tarifa. Here the locals nicknamed him 'El Commandante Loco'. He rode about the streets using a crooked stick to lift back the mantilla of the Spanish ladies so that he could admire their charming features. Inevitably Browne had his way in the end for the ladies, tired of torn lace, learnt to raise their veils when they saw 'el commandante' coming.

After an operation against Beguines and Medina, which had to be aborted because of the weather, the Spanish commander, La Pena, and General Thomas Graham, Commander of the British Forces on the Isla de Leon, decided to mount a major thrust against the French flank. They moved all available troops from Cadiz and Gibraltar to Tarifa. Belson now returned from leave but Graham, recognising Browne's ability, gave him an independent command for the operation, comprising the flank companies of the 1st/9th, 1st/28th and 2nd/82nd of Foot, 536 officers and men in total.



*Lt. Gen Sir Thomas Graham
Commander of the Anglo-Portugese Division.*

The concentration of troops at Tarifa began on 23rd February 1811 and the mess of the 28th Foot became the mess for all; upwards of 150 officers sat down to dine each day. Blakeney describes it: "Every room in the house had tables put down and many there were who felt glad to procure a dinner even in the kitchen. The draught on our cellar was deep, and profiting by the experience of the first day of the jubilee, on the second day we limited each officer to a pint of port and half a bottle of claret a day; but notwithstanding this restriction we ran a pipe of port dry in four days". It was all too much for Farrell, the unfortunate Mess Sergeant of the 28th. The prospect of sorting out the mess accounts was a nightmare and he was never heard of again after the battle of Barossa, though he was neither amongst those reported killed or taken prisoner.

On the morning of 5th March 1811 Brown's battalion of detachments, after an arduous night march, with some Spanish units, was by the old tower of the summit of Barrosa hill. This they had been ordered to hold until the rest of the allied force had reached Bermaja, where contact had already been made with the French. This was entirely contrary to General Graham's view, who regarded the Barrosa ridge as the key position to the whole area.

Marshal Victor, who had been holding his troops in concealment around Chiclana, saw how lightly the hill was held and launched General Ruffin's division against it. Once under fire the Spanish troops fled down the hill; only a squadron of the 2nd Hussars remained to charge the French cavalry and give Browne time to form square. The pressure of 2,500 against 500 began to tell, and Browne made an orderly withdrawal down the hillside.

Meanwhile General Graham, marching through the wood, heard the firing and guessed what was happening. He halted his force and warned Dilkes, who commanded the Guards Brigade and Duncan in command of the guns that they would be required to force their way up through the wood. Then he galloped off to find Browne, whose battalion, though still a fighting force, was now at the base of the hill. General Graham rode up and said, "It's a bad business Browne. You must instantly attack". "Very well, sir", said Browne. He rode to the front of his battalion, took off his hat, and spoke. "Gentlemen, I am happy to be the bearer of good news. General Graham has done you the honour of being the first to attack those fellows. Now follow me, you rascals!"

Browne led his five hundred back with such gay abandon, singing 'Hearts of Oak' as he rode at their head that his soldiers didn't hesitate. Fourteen officers and two hundred and fifteen men were struck down in ten minutes. But it was enough; already Duncan's guns were in action and soon the Guards broke out of the trees and began to advance up the hill where, after fierce fighting, drove the French off.

Miraculously Browne was untouched but the only other 28th officer not killed or severely wounded of the eight that had started the battle, was Lieutenant Robert Blakeney. After the battle the exhausted British withdrew to Cadiz and a week later the flank Battalion returned to its comfortable billets at Tarifa, whilst the 28th Regiment, still without its flank companies, sailed to Gibraltar.

Drinking and toasting were very much the custom of the time, and it is quite possible, that in their comfortable quarters at Tarifa, Browne and Blakeney sat down to dine together. In the absence of any other officer the latter may have responded to Browne's proposal "The King, Mr. President!" It is however unlikely that it was adopted forthwith as a custom of the 28th Mess. Browne and Blakeney were still detached from the Regiment where this little ceremony would be unknown. Moreover, in the following year both of them were transferred to other Regiments on promotion.

After the war Browne returned to command the 28th, and in 1818 they were sent to the Ionian Islands. Robert Blakeney was also posted to the Ionian Islands with his new regiment. It needs little imagination to believe that he found numerous opportunities to visit his old friends in the 28th and that together they would fight their battles again over the wine. As Barrosa was observed and celebrated in the 28th for many years it is likely that Blakeney dined with them on its anniversary and then the custom was revived and soon became permanent, not least as a tribute to a hero of the 28th, Colonel John Browne.

Now that The Rifles are so firmly established as a regiment perhaps it is time to allow some of the old customs and traditions to be marked again in at least one of the battalions. This would enrich the heritage of the regiment.

Maj. Gen. Robin Grist

The 28th Foot and the capture of St Lucia in 1778

This article concerns the capture of St Lucia from the French and the distinguished part played in that action by the 28th Foot and by a number of other British regiments, which subsequently earned them the battle honour *St Lucia 1778*.

St Lucia lies in the Windward Islands between Martinique and St Vincent. Its population is currently about 170,000 with an economy based on tourism and bananas, largely now supplied to Sainsbury's. In the late 18th Century its economic activity centred on numerous sugar plantations, manned by thousands of slaves. However it had a greater strategic significance which lay in its large deep water bay and main harbour, then called Carenage. This was said by both the Earl of Chatham and Admiral Rodney to be the safest fleet anchorage in the whole Caribbean. Today we consider St Lucia to be a holiday paradise, but in the late 18th Century it had a fearsome reputation as a death trap for Europeans, with up to a third of our soldiers dying during a posting, mainly from yellow fever. Thus during peacetime it was too expensive in manpower terms to hold, but during wartime the maritime power that held the harbour there could control the seas for a thousand miles around and therefore the world trade in sugar.

Earlier in 1778, the 28th had been soldiering in North America as a part of our forces attempting to deal with the group of rebels who had the impudence to declare their independence from the British Crown a year earlier. This problem was compounded on March 13th 1778 when France officially recognised the fledgling United States of America and intervened directly in the conflict, sending military forces under the Comte d'Estaing to the aid of General Lafayette who had already been supporting Washington and his men 'unofficially'. Great Britain immediately (and quite understandably) declared war on France.

This war quickly became more general, with both countries looking to attack the other's economic interests wherever they could. Thus the French decided to invade our sugar islands in the Caribbean and we decided to capture St Lucia as a naval base from where we could control the sugar trade. Strictly speaking our intent was to recapture it, as we had held the island previously – a pattern of alternating ownership between Britain and France that was to continue until 1815, by when the island had changed hands 14 times!

The 28th were then under the command of the 52 year old Colonel Robert Prescott, later to rise to become Governor-General of Canada.

Thus it was that two expeditionary forces set out from the North American coast in November 1778, totally coincidentally on the very same day, the British from New York and the French from Boston. These fleets were no small affairs; the British numbered some 59 transports, carrying approximately 5,000 troops under the command of Major General James Grant, including the 28th together with the 4th, 5th, 15th, 27th, 35th, 40th, 46th, 49th and 50th Regiments, plus fifty Light Dragoons, with all their horses, artillery and supplies, escorted by 11 warships. The French force, under the Comte d'Estaing himself, was said to be much larger still.

Initially neither force knew of the other's existence. Although they must have passed close by at times by during the long voyage south, the fleets never sighted one other. What the consequences might have been of such a meeting at sea, with so many vessels

heavily loaded with men one can only surmise. However one unfortunate event did give the French an advantage. A British transport became separated during a storm and was captured, thus alerting the French to our presence and to our mission. This caused them to change plans and head for St Lucia, after picking up further reinforcements from the large French garrison on Martinique, thus boosting their troop numbers to approximately 9,000.

In the event the British force won a race they did not know that they were in, arriving off St Lucia on the morning of December 13th. Having cruised around the island to gauge the strength of the opposition, General Grant began a landing on the west coast at Grand Cul de Sac, a large bay immediately to the south of Carenage. The island was found to be only lightly defended by a small garrison who, after a brief display of resistance, quickly fled inland. So great was their hurry that they abandoned the batteries around the harbour virtually intact and with all their powder and shot. They had spiked the guns, but these were quickly cleared and, within the next 24 hours, the British force was able to land all the troops and much of their supplies virtually unopposed.



The naval battle of St. Lucia December 15th 1778. Left, the twelve vessels of Admiral Jean Baptiste Charles Henri Hector Comte d'Estaing and, right, the seven ships of Admiral Samuel Barrington. At 1100 hours 15 December, Admiral d'Estaing approached St. Lucia with ten ships of the line, and was fired on by one of the shore batteries and a "warm conflict" raged between the two fleets. D'Estaing was repulsed but succeeded in reforming his line of battle. At 1600 hours d'Estaing renewed his assault by attacking Barrington's centre with twelve ships of the line. Again, heavy fire was exchanged and the French were eventually repulsed for a second time.

This was fortuitous as without warning in the late afternoon of the following day, the French invasion fleet was sighted to the north. However as night was fast approaching the French held back, losing much of their advantage of surprise. Throughout that night the Royal Navy worked tirelessly to form a protective line of warships shielding the transports. The delay also allowed General Grant to complete his dispositions, dividing his troops into three and sending an elite force of 1,500 under Lieutenant Colonel William Medows to the Vigie, a peninsula to the north side of Carenage. The batteries around the harbour were also readied for action and the remainder of Grant's forces were drawn up either side of Grand Cul de Sac. The force under Medows comprised three battalions, the 5th (later to become the Northumberland Fusiliers), a Grenadier battalion and a Light battalion, the latter two composed of the elite flank companies of all regiments present including the 28th. Foot. Fortescue, in his *History of the British Army*, describes them as "powerful veterans trained in the American school".

During the following days the French fleet made a number of perfunctory sorties on the anchored British warships, possibly only as a diversion while they landed their troops and supplies in Choc Bay to the north. Then, on 18th December d'Estaing made his move on land. Advancing to the base of the Vigie peninsula he perceived Medows to be cut off from the main body of British forces, which indeed he was, and decided to attack him with what he no doubt considered to be an overwhelming force. Thus approximately 5,000 French troops advanced in three columns along the narrow isthmus that led towards the hill at the far point of La Vigie where the main body of Medows' force was deployed. However d'Estaing's plan quickly backfired as his troops were cut down by musket fire both from the hill, and from the light companies, including the 28th's, deployed in front as skirmishers. Batteries on the other side of the harbour also played a full part, firing their 12 and 18 pdr. cannon from a range of less than 600 yards directly into the left flank of the advancing French columns. Several times the French attacked over three hours, only to withdraw each time with great loss.

Finally they withdrew completely, requesting a truce to collect their dead and wounded. Little did they know that by then the British had almost exhausted their ammunition supplies.

The outcome of this remarkable action was that a British force, although heavily outnumbered, had prevailed, inflicting a huge disparity in casualties on the enemy. In his diary, Lieutenant Francis Downman, who had charge of the captured batteries that day, recorded French casualties at '1,600 with ours at less than one tenth of that number'.

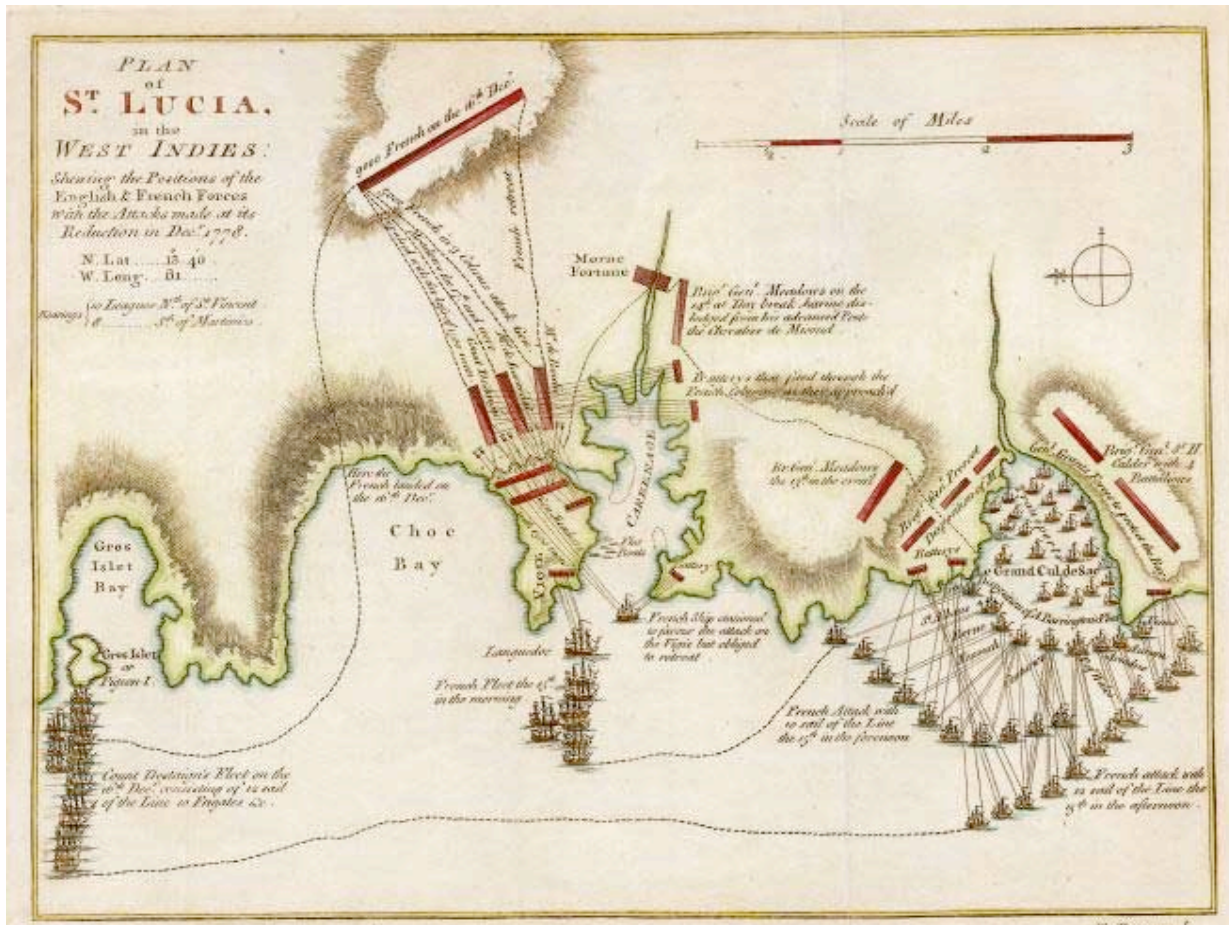
That the 28th were heavily involved is attested by the fact that of nine officers reported as casualties by Downman, Captains Daly and Hay were from the 28th. Sadly, according to our records at the Museum, Captain Hay later succumbed to his wounds. This victory, coming at a time when the campaign against the rebels in North America was not going well, was seized upon at home and widely reported in the Press. It has also become the key action for the Fusiliers whose 'hackle' derives from the white plumes to the French headdresses, dipped in their own blood.



Colonel Prescott - taken from the miniature in the National Portrait Gallery. This picture appears to be relatively contemporaneous to these events, showing him at about the right age and in an officer's uniform coat with the yellow facings of the 28th Foot.

A sidelight on these events concerns a local legend from Marigot Bay, a much smaller yet very pretty bay to the south of the Grand Cul de Sac. This legend states that several British warships once hid from a French fleet, behind a sand-spit lined with coconut palms by camouflaging themselves with palm leaves tied to their masts. To anyone familiar with the fighting ethos of the Royal Navy in the 18th Century, such a story might appear at first sight to be highly improbable.

However to return to the narrative above, it is also recorded in Downman's diary that by the time the dawn broke on December 15th, the vast majority of the transports had been collected behind the protecting British warships, but not all. We even have the name of those vessels outside the screen, apparently known to be unhandy sailer.



Plan of the dispositions of the British and French forces on St Lucia during the action in December 1778, originally published in the Gentleman's Magazine of February 1779. Unusually, the map is laid out with North to the left.

It seems very possible therefore that these remaining transport ships were simply told to scatter and that several then came into Marigot Bay to hide behind the sand-spit in the manner believed locally.

To anyone who may visit St Lucia today there is an interesting yet fairly naïve painting in the main restaurant of the Discovery Hotel at Marigot Bay depicting this event. Thus a local tradition preserved for over 200 years might well be vindicated.

So what is there to see today? The Americans built an airstrip on the Vigie during WWII thus obliterating virtually all traces of the action, although a button of the 5th was recovered there some years ago. However, the 18th Century batteries are still extant around the harbour, now called Castries. They are well preserved and worth seeing for anyone lucky enough to visit the island - as my final picture shows.



One of the 18th Century batteries around the harbour at Castries looking out to sea, with the oven for heating shot in the foreground.

Further Reading

Downman F. and Whinyates F.A. (1898), The Services of Lieut.-Colonel Francis Downman In France, North America And The West Indies Between The Years 1758 And 1784, The Royal Artillery Institution, Woolwich, London, republished by Kessinger (2007).

Fortescue J. W. (1899-1930), A History of the British Army, 20 vols., Macmillan, London, republished by Naval & Military Press, (2004). Vol. III covers the period 1763 to 1792 – see especially pp 259-266.