

## **BELLISLE 1761**

The colonial and territorial war between Britain and France over North America and the West Indies, and India and the East Indies, expanded into the Seven Years War of 1756-1763. The war had swung in Britain's favour in 1759, when General Montcalm had lost Quebec, and the French fleet had been crippled at Quiberon Bay. However, by 1761 Britain's national debt had spiralled, George II had died and there was a growing fear of a Spanish alliance with France that would enable their fleets to combine and threaten Britain's gains. The new king, George III, was keen to bring about a peace with Louis XV, but sought to arrive at any negotiating table with as much French territory as possible in order to bargain a favourable treaty. The British, at this point, had not secured any part of France, and the island of Bellisle, guarding the entrance to Quiberon Bay and the Loire estuary, offered a relatively close and contained target for this purpose.

Opinion differed as to the merits of the proposed expedition, even at the time. The 'Annual Register' for 1761 described the island as "poor in itself, capable of little improvement.. " with three harbours "...every one of which labours under some capital defect, either being exposed, shallow, or dangerous at the entrance. The only branch of trade carried on here is the curing [of] pilchards". It went on to report "Several did not see of what considerable service such a conquest could be of to England in time of peace, or what prejudice to the enemy in time of war. They foresaw that it could not be taken without considerable loss, or kept without considerable expense". On the other hand Bellisle was the largest European island belonging to the French king, strongly fortified and garrisoned at great cost, and as such, her capture would "be a grievous wound to her [France's] pride..", and could "persuade her to set a value on the place when it came to be eliminated in the treaty". This, combined with the strategic position of the island which created pressure on the French coastal trade, enabled the British to conclude that the operation viable. A fleet of twenty-six warships (later reinforced) and a hundred transports left Portsmouth on the 29<sup>th</sup> March 1761, under Admiral Augustus Keppel.

The military force, under Major-General Studholm Hodgson, formerly of the 50<sup>th</sup> Regiment, was nominally nine thousand men, but with many of the regiments under strength, a battalion of 500 Marines, under Colonel John MacKenzie was added. This was to be the first battalion-sized deployment of the newly established 'Corps of Marines' since 1755, and to mark the event, the taxpayer paid £23 13 shillings for a new stand of colours.

The Island was sighted on 6<sup>th</sup> April, and Keppel detached six frigates to sever communications from the mainland and scout for any possible intervention from French warships. The Vauban citadel, the fortification at the principal town Le Palais, was at once discovered to be too strong to be assaulted directly from the sea, and alternative landings were attempted on the 8<sup>th</sup> April. The Island's naturally difficult coastline being augmented by defences at the

passable beaches, resulted in the French repelling the initial assaults, and forced Keppel to write a less than optimistic despatch while he regrouped.

However, with the remains of the French fleet unable to relieve the island, a further 900 Marines were drawn from the ships, and a fresh attempt was made on the 22<sup>nd</sup> April. In a landing intended as a feint, a foothold was established at an unopposed beach at the north end of Loc Maria. Grenadiers of the 19<sup>th</sup> Regiment and Marines gained surprise by scaling cliffs that were left undefended. As the French counter attacked, all of Colonel Mackenzie's Marines were used as reinforcements to drive them back, pursuing them to their main fortifications. Once the landing had been consolidated, artillery was brought ashore and siege lines constructed to bombard the citadel (see map). In the following weeks the Marines fought a number of skirmishes and counter-attacks against the French. On the 13th May, two hundred Marines rushed the redoubts south of Palais to bring them within 500 yards of the citadel. Later, a shell exploded a magazine and blew a gap in the fortifications' walls 'large enough to pass a wagon through'. With no chance of reinforcement, this signalled the end to the French Governor, Chevalier de St. Croix, who capitulated on 7<sup>th</sup> June and marched out of the fortress with the honours of war the following day.

The Marines won the approbation of General Hodgson and the Admiralty, along with a testimonial from the defeated French as they impressed them enough to be titled 'Les Petit Grenadiers'. Three Marine Officers in the action went on to be divisional Commandants; the wounded Mackenzie, and Captains Arthur Tooker Collins, and Walter Carruthers. The Marines suffered 92 of the 800 total British casualties. At the Treaty of Paris on 10<sup>th</sup> February 1763, Bellisle was exchanged for Minorca.

It is believed the laurel that surrounds the globe of the Royal Marines crest was presented for the Marines' part in the capture of Bellisle, however it was not featured until the issue of new Colours by the Duke of Clarence in 1827.