

## THE BLACK WATCH INCIDENT

In the early hours of the morning of Saturday 21<sup>st</sup> May 1743 more than a hundred Highland soldiers of the Black Watch regiment slipped quietly across the road between Sudborough and Lowick and filtered up into the woods beyond. They were only just in time. Even as they disappeared into the trees, a squadron of English dragoons, under the command of Captain John Ball, came galloping along the same road on its way from Huntingdon to Uppingham. Although they had not been seen, the Highlanders must have been dismayed to see their pursuers so close behind them. They crossed the wooded ridge and came some time later to the northern edge of Ladywood. Here they found a ready-made defensive position of mounds and ditches in what was most probably the overgrown garden to the northwest of Lyveden New Bield (Note 1). Each man was armed with a musket and ammunition, a bayonet and broadsword, a dirk, and possibly a pair of pistols, and here they decided to make a desperate last stand for liberty.

What on earth were they doing there? For the answer we must go back another seventy-six years to 1667.

That year, in an attempt to give some protection to the Lowland Scots against the marauding parties from the Highlands intent on robbery and extortion, and also to keep some of the more unruly Highland clans in check, Charles II authorised the Earl of Atholl to raise independent companies of clansmen to keep “a watch on the braes”. This set-a-thief-to-catch-a-thief exercise relieved the inadequate English garrisons of the kind of guerrilla warfare for which they had no aptitude or training, and also provided the members of The Watch (as it came to be called) with an unrivalled opportunity to pursue their own robbery and extortion as before, but legally. This happy arrangement continued until 1715 when, not surprisingly, some companies of The Watch defected to the Jacobite side in the rebellion of that year. The Watch was disbanded and the carrying of arms in the Highlands was forbidden, in 1717.

However, it proved impossible to keep the peace in the Highlands where fighting and raiding between clans had even been the national sport, and 1725 the Watch was re-established on the advice of General Wade. He recommended that the men should all wear a similar dark plaid in order to present a uniformed appearance, and this may be why they later came to be called the “Black” Watch. There was no lack of volunteers to carry arms officially. Many of the men came from good families and were accompanied by a servant to carry their gear.

Almost certainly in the beginning The Watch was intended for no other purpose than the policing of the Highlands, and without doubt this is what its members believed. However, in 1739 a King’s Warrant changed the Independent Companies of the Watch into the 43<sup>rd</sup> Regiment of Foot (which became 42<sup>nd</sup> in 1749). The terms of enlistment into the British Army and the Articles of War should then have been read and carefully explained to the men in their own language (the majority spoke only Gaelic), but, if this was done at all, it was skated over fairly lightly. Later it became clear that few of the men realised that

they were now liable to fight both at home and, most alarmingly, abroad, for their masters.

The first parade of the new regiment, about 850 strong, was held in a field by the Tay at Aberfeldy in 1740, and here the men learned the standard drill and manoeuvres of the army. They wore their dark plaid originally a piece of cloth about 12 yards long which could be turned into skirt, overcoat, tent, blanket, groundsheet or umbrella as occasion demanded, and, in addition, they wore buckled brogues, red and white chequered stockings, a scarlet waistcoat and short scarlet jacket, and a flat blue bonnet. They must have presented a colourful spectacle.

In the autumn of 1742, rumours of another Jacobite rebellion probably influenced the decision of the government to bring the Watch out of Scotland. It was decided to send them to Flanders to fight in the War of the Austrian Succession, a dispute about which people in the Highlands must have known little and cared less. There is no doubt that this decision was deliberately disguised in order to avoid objections. Some of the officers knew what was afoot but the men were not told though some may have guessed.

It seems they were decoyed onto England by degrees. First they were told to march to Musselburgh to be reviewed; once there they were told that the review would take place at Berwick-on-Tweed, and once over the English border they were told the king himself wished to review them in London. They were encouraged to believe that they would then return to Scotland. Few of them ever did.

Even before they left there were rumours and suspicions of treachery. Some men slipped away into the safety of the hills almost at once, and there had been more desertions before the regiment reached London in May 1743. On the way they had met with experienced soldiers who had lost no time in telling the Highlanders the full horrors of service abroad, particularly in the West Indies where disease was the real enemy and the chances of survival in the fever swamps were almost nil. Added to this the men had genuine grievances over pay, clothing and equipment which had been promised but not supplied. Their state of mind cannot have been happy and was not improved when they were told that George II had left for Flanders without bothering to wait for the review, and had asked General Wade to act in his place.

Disillusioned and apprehensive the Highlanders can hardly have enjoyed the review on Finchley Common on Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> May, the King's birthday. A crowd of 40,000 came to see them drawn by the unique spectacle of nearly 1000 savages from the North dressed in skirts. Perhaps it is just as well that few of the Highlanders would have been able to understand the more ribald comments of the spectators. General Wade carried out a careful inspection noting the poor state of the uniform and the shortcomings in the equipment.

It was only later that same day that the Regiment was told officially for the first time that they were going abroad. On the following Thursday they were to

march to Kent for embarkation. Some were told that it would be for Flanders, but no one believed anything anymore, and all feared they were about to be sent across the Atlantic.

It is not surprising that discontent and unrest grew and finally, on Tuesday night, about 100 men decided to cut short their stay in London and started off North towards St Albans and home. On Wednesday they were followed by a further 60 but this party was soon found and the majority persuaded to return.

There was a panic. The deserters were fully armed and might be extremely dangerous. At once 600 men of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Foot Guards, 50 riders from the Horse Grenadiers and 19 troops of Dragoons were ordered to find them. Forty shillings were offered in addition to the usual reward for each captured deserter. Meanwhile the Highlanders, who had no desire to fight except as a very last resort, were slipping swiftly and quietly northwards keeping to the woods as far as possible. On Thursday morning they were south-east of Bedford and by evening were reported moving towards Rockingham Forest. Squadrons were ordered to march at once to Kettering in the west and Huntingdon in the east, while more troops gathered at Stamford and others watched the roads to Newark and fens. It could only be a matter of time before the deserters were caught in this net.

By Saturday morning, as we already know, the fugitives had crossed the Nene east of Wellingborough and reached Sudborough. In those deep woods that still lie between Brigstock and Oundle they must have spent the day in urgent debate. In the end it was agreed that they would send a message to the authorities to the effect that they would give themselves up in return for a free pardon on the grounds of their many grievances, otherwise they would fight and die to the last men.

So it was that later that day an astounded passer-by, perhaps from Brigstock, was stopped along the Lyveden road and asked to take a message to a Justice of the Peace. He went to John Creed at Cobthorne House, Oundle. In response to this message John Creed, an ex-army major who had fought at Blenheim, went to Ladywood late in the evening. He was favourably impressed by the men's arguments and went back to Oundle promising to write at once to the Lords Regent on their behalf. He returned again to the woods that night but by that time the matter was out of his hands.

News of the deserters' whereabouts had already reached the dragoons and, early on Sunday morning, a troop of horsemen commanded by Captain Anthony Renkine took up positions round Ladywood. Captain Renkine then made contact with the Highlanders who apologised for the trouble they were causing, explained their grievances and gave him their written appeal, which he promised to pass to his superiors.

*"We are all of us fully determined never to surrender otherwise than upon these terms while we live, tho our chance is but small; seeing we must suffer for our disobedience by returning captives we chuse loose our lives in making*

*our way if our pardon will not be granted. I expect your Honour will see this reasonable and will be assisting in procuring the same. You'll be pleased let us hear your opinion in the mater. This is by the general consent of the whole party."*

Brigstock must have been agog with speculation after Captain Ball and his troopers galloped through on Saturday morning. Imagine the rumours that must have been flying around about the goings-on in the woods. No doubt the foolhardy rushed off to see for themselves while the rest barricaded themselves in against murder, pillage and rape. Excitement must have reached its height when later on Sunday Captain Ball came storming back again. He had no sympathy for the deserters and must have been furious when news reached him at Uppingham that he had missed them so narrowly the day before.

He rode at once to Ladywood to confront them. Ignoring the soldiers already there he delivered an ultimatum – immediate surrender or would attack. However, the excellence of their position must have caused him to reconsider, as no attack took place and there was no surrender. (Note 2)

The afternoon wore on into evening when soldiers came and went, officers conferred, and rumours flew around the villages. For the men in the wood it must have been one of the longest days of their lives. For one of the Highlanders it may have been his last. There is a legend that one of them died and was buried by his companions some time during this day, and the story of the Soldier's Grave and its attendant ghost persisted for many years. (Note 3)

At last Captain Ball rode again to the wood to talk the Highlanders into surrender. There was a tense confrontation and eventually Ball, with no proper authority, promised them free pardons for surrender but death for continued opposition.

There was really no choice. Gradually the gathering darkness of that Sunday evening, ninety-eight men left the safety of the trees and gave themselves up to the waiting dragoons. They were taken to Thrapston where they spent a miserable night in the churchyard. Not all of them, however, had waited to surrender – some had slipped away to continue northwards. Three of these were soon caught but one man, Private Farquar Shaw (Note 4), managed to get another 60 miles on his own before being recaptured and sold back to the authorities for the reward and the promised 40 pieces of silver. Meanwhile the rest were marched first to Kettering, then to Northampton, and finally back to London – to the Tower.

In June, one hundred and seventy mutineers were tried by court martial. All were found guilty of mutiny and desertion and sentenced to death.

By this time, public opinion was completely on the side of the Highlanders, no longer regarded as dangerous barbarians, and the mass execution of so many prisoners would clearly be a mistake. The mercy of the King was sought and all but three of the sentences were commuted to transportation to the American

colonies – the very fate they had most feared. However, in the event, the twenty-six youngest prisoners were drafted to other regiments in Gibraltar and Minorca instead. The rest were sent to join his Majesty's forces in Georgia and the West Indies. It is unlikely that any of these men ever came back. (Note 5)

The three men executed as an example to the others were Private Farquar Shaw, Corporal Samuel Macpherson and his cousin Corporal Malcolm Macpherson. Expediently dressed in shrouds under their kilts, they were shot at the Tower of London on Monday 18<sup>th</sup> July 1743 by a firing squad from the Scots Guards.

This was the end of the first Highland Mutiny.

## NOTES

1. There is a detailed account of this incident in "Mutiny" by John Prebble, published in 1975, and it is Mr Prebble who places the site of the last stand firmly in the water gardens at Lyveden. I wrote to him asking the source of his information. In reply he says he studied very carefully the military reports of the time, particularly those of Captain Ball. He then came to Ladywood himself and, after spending some time walking over the ground, he came to the conclusion, based on his own military training, that the water garden was the only spot that corresponded with Ball's description of the position.

The military reports are now in the Public Records Office in London but are gathered together and published in "The Official Records of the Mutiny in the Black Watch, 1743" by H.D. MacWilliam, published in 1910.

2. The gardens lying to the northwest of Lyveden New Bield have recently been extensively cleared by the National Trust and in January 1980 their plan was clear. The site is approximately 250 yards square with large mounds at each corner. Round three sides the mounds are connected by wide ditches which are full of water. No mention is made of water in the military reports of 1743. Perhaps it was a dry spring or perhaps the ditches have been deepened since that time. In those days Ladywood ran right up to the New Bield from the south and had no doubt invaded the gardens, abandoned since the early years of the previous century. The two mounds on the northern perimeter are connected by a high bank backed by a ditch, and beyond the gardens to the north, the ground slopes away towards the Old Bield and open country. Mr Prebble feels sure this is the most likely position for their last stand, as they could not defend the whole perimeter.
3. The Northampton County Magazine carried an article in 1928 about the Black Watch Mutiny and the surrender. It contains a reference to

something written by Whyte Melville in the 1870s – “On the wayside turf that borders the tract of woodland stretching between Brigstock and Oundle is a low green mound called the Soldier’s Grave. The natives of the district do not care to pass it after dark for of course the place is haunted, and a figure is sometimes said to be seen sitting on the mound in the dusk, shrouded in a long dark mantle.” The article goes on to say that the grave has entirely disappeared and with it almost all local recollection of the mound and the ghost. There is not mention in the official reports of any death among the Highlanders that day.

4. According to “The Black Watch” by Philip Howard, written in 1968, there is a statue in the field at Aberfeldy where the first parade took place. It is of Private Farquar Shaw, son of a Strathspey laird, an honoured member of his Regiment even though he was shot for mutiny and desertion.
5. Historians differ about the exact numbers of men involved in the Mutiny and what became of them, but Mr Prebble’s analysis is as follows: 104 transported, 3 shot, 3 disappeared, 1 probably died, and 9 succeeded in getting back to Scotland.

In addition to Mr Prebble, I would like to thank local historians Mr T. Litchfield of Barnwell and Mr J.E. Bailey of Brigstock for their help. If anyone has any further information, or would like to make corrections or comments, please do let me know.

Ann Shrive            March 1980  
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