

The French capture of Carrickfergus, February 1760

The Seven Years' War (1756-63) was the world's first truly global conflict and the most stunningly successful war the British ever waged against France. They deprived the French of Canada and expelled the French from most of their possessions in India, West Africa and the West Indies. They also seized Manila and Havana from the Spanish. The Royal Navy devastated its European rivals. Compared to Robert Clive's crushing defeat of Siraj-ud-Daula's army at Plassey in June 1757 or James Wolfe's posthumous victory at Quebec in September 1759, the events detailed here at Carrickfergus in February 1760 cannot be described as being of world historical significance. Nevertheless, as we will see, these events are not devoid of local interest and significance.

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On the early morning of 21 February 1760 a French squadron, commanded by Commodore François Thurot and consisting of three warships, the *Maréchal de Belle-Isle*, the *Blonde* and the *Terpsichore*, arrived off Island Magee. At 10:00am the French squadron anchored off Carrickfergus. Shortly afterwards a landing force of 600 men were put ashore at Kilroot and they advanced on the town, capturing and briefly occupying the Castle. The French also threatened to burn and sack Belfast, a threat which happily was never realised.

Thurot, an energetic French privateer who had been appointed *lieutenant des frégates du roi*, captured 60 British ships during the course of the first year of the Seven Years' War. By 1757 Thurot was the scourge of English shipping in the Baltic, in the North Sea and around the shores of Ireland. Thurot was so successful that by 1760 he had been promoted to the rank of *capitaine de vaisseau* and had been ordered to mount 'hit and run' raids on the British coast preliminary to a projected full-scale French invasion. Thurot's force was to land in England and Ireland, wreak as much destruction as possible and quickly re-embark before the British could muster a creditable military response. Louis VX's orders forbade any raids on Scottish soil because he viewed the Scots as potential allies (on account of the Auld Alliance in the past and residual Jacobite sentiment). The

expedition was not a great success for a multiplicity of reasons, not the least being the horrendous relationship which existed between Thurot and Brigadier Flobert, a military veteran in his 50s and the commander of the troops. Flobert bitterly resented being subordinate to a 33 year-old sailor of inferior social origins. Severe weather proved to be a second serious difficulty: three of Thurot's original six ships, damaged in storms, abandoned the expedition and limped back to Dunkirk. Thurot was determined to obey his orders and wished to raid Londonderry but once again unfavourable weather intervened: contrary winds forced him to abandon his plan. Thurot wished to raid Belfast but Flobert insisted on landing at Kilroot and attacking Carrickfergus before advancing on Belfast.

Objectively, Carrickfergus was in poor shape to withstand attack. The garrison consisted of four under-strength companies (about 200 men) of the 62nd Regiment of Foot commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Jennings. The remainder of the 62nd Regiment was stationed in Belfast. While Carrickfergus Castle represented state of the art military technology at the end of the twelfth century, by the mid-eighteenth century the Castle was close to being a dilapidated ruin with a 50-foot breach in the sea wall and cannon of doubtful serviceability. Willoughby Chaplin, the Mayor, insisted that Jennings defend the town. Jennings believed resistance was futile but reluctantly complied with the Mayor's wishes.

Jennings and his troops, reinforced by some of the local gentry, tried to defend the town but before long a 'dreadful want of Ammunition' obliged them to take refuge in the Castle. The French attacked the Castle gates, forcing the bolts and bursting them open, only to be driven back by a fierce counterattack. In all, Jennings and his troops withstood three determined French onslaughts on the Castle. In addition to being outnumbered, the garrison was short of ammunition. By the time the French made their third attack, the defenders had expended all their ammunition. Regimental tradition claims that the 62nd used their coat-buttons as bullets. Then they were left with bricks and stones from the Castle walls and their bayonets.

The French were shaken by the ferocity of the garrison's resistance: the French lost 19 men with a further 30 wounded, one of whom was Brigadier Flobert. By comparison the defenders lost only four men and 30 men wounded. The French called upon the garrison to surrender and threatened to

burn the town if they refused. Jennings, recognising that his men lacked the wherewithal to sustain further resistance, agreed terms.

Jennings and his men surrendered the Castle, gave their parole, and were allowed to retain their arms and colours. In return, the French promised not to plunder the town or molest the inhabitants. Jennings undertook that all possible care would be taken of any wounded French officers and soldiers left behind when the French re-embarked. They were not to be treated as prisoners of war but would be repatriated at the earliest possible opportunity. These conditions were scrupulously observed.

The French demanded provisions which Carrickfergus could not supply. Thus, Revd David Fullerton, a Presbyterian minister, accompanied by a French officer and a flag of truce, were dispatched to Belfast with a letter to the Sovereign (i.e. the Mayor) demanding '30 hogshead of Wine, 40 of Brandy, 60 barrels of Beer, 6,000lb of Bread and 60 bullocks'. Failure to supply these would result in the burning of Carrickfergus and then Belfast.

The inhabitants of Belfast thought it best to comply with the French demands. They loaded the requested provisions on to a lighter but bad weather prevented the lighter sailing to Carrickfergus that day. A message was sent to the French explaining the delay. When the lighter did leave Belfast it was prevented from going to Carrickfergus by an Admiralty tender in the Lough. The French threatened to hang Mr Fullerton, to put the inhabitants of Carrickfergus to the sword and burn the town if the provisions were not aboard the French ship by 8:00 on Sunday morning. The French also reiterated their threat to visit a similar fate on Belfast. Although the people of Belfast did not realise it, this was a fairly empty threat because the French were too exhausted to advance on the town and the wounded Flobert had lost his enthusiasm for doing so. Besides, the French had to make good their escape before the authorities could move decisively against them. The inhabitants of Belfast hastily loaded the provisions on to carts which set off for Carrickfergus.

On the afternoon of 25 February the French began to re-embark. Contrary winds prevented the French ships from putting to sea until 8:00 pm on 27 February. Flobert and a dozen other wounded were left ashore but Chaplin and two other notables had been taken onboard the *Maréchal*.

The French squadron was intercepted by three Royal Navy frigates, *HMS Aeolus*, *HMS Pallas* and *HMS Brilliant*, at the entrance of Luce Bay. To avoid being trapped in the bay, Thurot's squadron set sail towards the Isle of Man. However the faster frigates caught up with the heavier French ships. Thurot signalled the *Blonde* and the *Terpsichore* to rally but they continued their course. The *Maréchal* then turned to face the three frigates alone. Thurot's only hope lay in to grappling the *Aeolus* and using his soldiers to board her but his attempt to deploy grappling irons failed. The *Maréchal*'s mizzen mast was shot away. The two ships drifted apart and the *Aeolus*'s gunners poured shot into the *Maréchal* below the water-line. Thurot ignored the entreaties of his subordinates to strike the colours (i.e. surrender) but Thurot refused. However, almost immediately he was killed. All three French ships then surrendered.

Thurot, wrapped in a silk-velvet carpet from his cabin, was buried at sea. A few days later his body was washed ashore near the Mull of Galloway. He was buried with full honours in the churchyard of Kirkmaiden, at the expense of the local laird, Sir William Maxwell of Monteith, who also served as chief mourner.

Initially, there was much unease at the capture of Carrickfergus but the sense of humiliation turned to relief with the realisation that Lieutenant-Colonel Jennings' spirited defence of the Castle had almost certainly prevented the capture and occupation of Belfast. The 62nd Regiment had acquitted itself well and the men had 'behav'd like Lyons'. They received a vote of thanks from a grateful Irish Parliament and the citizens of Carrickfergus presented the officers with silver cups.

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This small-scale invasion prompted a widespread and spontaneous mobilisation of the Protestant population of Counties Antrim, Down and Armagh. They poured into Belfast to defend the town (Belfast did not become a city until 1888) against the French but arrived after the French had departed these shores. This is usually regarded as providing the inspiration

for the formation of the more historically and politically significant Volunteer movement in 1778-9, out of which evolved both the United Irishmen and the Orange Order in the 1790s.