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'General Amherst's Flag'

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One of the more challenging aspects of a regimental museum is the fact that while there are many wonderful pieces in the collection representing the rich tapestry of regimental history, they occasionally carry with them more questions than answers. Sometimes the link to the regiment is tenuous, but sometimes it is an object of great significance that with the passage of time has faded into the background and been overlooked. In antique terms, it is what might be regarded as a 'sleeper'.

In 2007 while the store at Tower Street was being reorganised a huge frame was found standing facing the wall. When it was moved, the frame revealed a white ensign measuring 207x170 cms, bearing the cross of St. George on a faded white ground with the Union flag of 1707 represented in the top left quarter. Beneath it, on the frame was the enigmatic inscription:

'THE AMHERST FLAG'

'This flag, said to be the personal flag of the First Lord Amherst, Colonel of the Regiment 1751-1757 is believed to have been flown at Quebec after its capture in 1759'¹

If the attribution on the plaque is correct and it flew over Quebec at its fall, the flag is not only an important regimental artefact but is an object of national, even international significance. There is however, no reference in the regimental records detailing how the flag came to be in York, and even less information explaining the link between the flag and Amherst.

Jeffrey Amherst was born in Riverhead, Kent in 1717. After being sent as a page to the 1st Duke of Dorset, his patron obtained a commission for him as an Ensign in the 1st Regiment of Foot at the age of 14. Having seen service during the War of Austrian Succession where he acted as ADC to General Sir John Ligonier, Amherst also saw action at Dettingen, Fontenoy and Rocoux, after which he joined the personal

staff of the Duke of Cumberland. The regimental connection becomes clearer in 1756 when he was made Colonel of the 15th Regiment of Foot².

The Seven Years War, sometimes described as the first 'world war' because of the global nature of the conflict, afforded Amherst the opportunity of command when after repeated lobbying from Ligonier, William Pitt selected him to lead the assault on Louisbourg on the Island of Cape Breton. A combination of his success at Louisbourg and the spectacular failure of General Abercromby, caused Amherst to be appointed Commander in Chief in North America. In 1759 Amherst succeeded in taking Fort Ticonderoga where Abercromby had also failed and proceeded to move north along Lake Champlain. In a letter dated August 5th 1759 to William Pitt³, Amherst gives a detailed account of his victory and assures him of his continued progress north⁴.

While this was happening General Wolfe had laid siege to Quebec⁵ and despite illness and significant sickness among his troops planned the taking of the city. In

his final letter to the King written from HMS Sutherland he writes:

"I have fixed upon a spot where we can act with most force, and are most likely to succeed".⁶

The spot he was referring to was L'Anse-au-Foulon and required his advance party to climb a steep cliff and seize the summit allowing the rest of his force to ascend. His own commanders rejected the idea; Townshend in particular regarded it as foolish. The defending commander General Montcalm also rejected the possibility of an attack there on the same grounds, despite his subordinate officers being concerned at its vulnerability. By sunrise the peak was secure and Wolfe's forces deployed on the Plains of Abraham. The encounter was brief and under Wolfe's orders the British held their fire until at close range. The French line broke and fled, though Wolfe himself had sustained three wounds and died on the field of battle⁷. Command was assumed by Brigadier Townshend (General Monckton also being wounded) and by Brigadier James Murray and on 18th September Quebec surrendered with



the Articles of Capitulation being signed by Brigadier Townshend and Admiral Saunders⁸.

At this juncture a further connection appears between the Amherst flag and the 15th Regiment of Foot in the person of James Murray. Murray had commanded the left wing of the assault on the Plains of Abraham. He had been a close friend of Wolfe's earning a commendation for his actions at Cape Breton the previous year. Murray had begun his military career as a cadet in the 3rd Scots Regiment under his brother who was the Colonel in 1736. He transferred to the 15th Foot in November 1741 as a Captain and having gallantly commanded the grenadier company at the Battle of Lorient he became Major in 1749 and purchased the Lieutenant-Colonelcy in 1751⁹. Having supported Wolfe in the assault on Quebec he was appointed military commander of Quebec the day after the city was taken. It was a hard winter with little by way of supplies in Quebec, but regardless of these conditions, Murray repulsed a further counter attack and siege by the French. Murray now moved forces up river to join Amherst and following the capitulation of Montreal was appointed to the role of military governor of the district of Quebec with direct responsibility to Amherst bringing to an end French rule in Canada. Another association between Amherst and Murray is that Amherst on appointment as Commander in Chief in America, was appointed Colonel of the 60th Foot (Royal Americans). Murray was also appointed to be Colonel of a Battalion of the 60th in October 1759¹⁰.

However, while both Amherst and Murray provide tangible links to the 15th Regiment of Foot, there still remains little direct evidence to connect them to the flag. A puzzling aspect of the mystery is of course that the Amherst flag is neither a King's or Regimental colour but a white ensign. The forces of the Royal Navy were heavily engaged in the campaign in 1759 and particularly in the siege of Quebec. In his letter of 20th September to Pitt, published in the London Gazette on 17th October 1759, Brigadier Townshend goes to great lengths to commend the Navy:

"I should not do justice to the Admirals and the Naval Service if I neglected on this occasion of acknowledging how much we are indebted for our success to the constant assistance and support received from them."¹¹

However this may be the thread which ties Amherst, Murray and the flag. It is interesting that the flag is regarded as being Amherst's when in practice Amherst himself was many miles away when Quebec fell. It has even been suggested that due to the poor communications and difficult terrain he was unaware of the victory until some two weeks later. If that was the case why is the flag ascribed as being Amherst's?

The answer may lie in an obscure text written in 1914. In his book 'The Fight for Oversea (sic.) Empire', Wood makes a brief reference to the events following the fall of the city of Quebec.

The British marched in on the 18th and hoisted three Union Jacks in token of possession – one

*over the citadel, a second on a gun in the centre of the esplanade, and the third, which was hoisted by the men of the fleet, on the ground to the left of Mountain Hill, looking down.*¹²

While it refers to Union Jacks it is quite likely that the third flag, being hoisted by sailors to signify the navy's part in the victory was not a Union Jack but in fact a white ensign.

Murray was the Governor of Quebec and presumably as time went on these flags were replaced by more permanent fixtures. If so, what happened to the ones flown on 18th September 1759? It is unlikely that the white ensign would have been returned to its ship of origin which would have long since departed. Were they retained by the Governor? Did Murray at a later date present one of them to Amherst as a souvenir of the victory over which he had overall command? Amherst is known to have visited Quebec, presumably with Murray in September 1760 before returning to his headquarters in New York.

Of course we can never be certain, but Wood's account provides a tangible explanation of why the Amherst flag is a white ensign and how it came to be in the possession of the 15th Regiment of Foot.

The flag is now scheduled to be carefully restored as a result of a grant from the trustees of the PWO Museum. It serves as a reminder of the loyal service and commitment of the officers and men of one of our antecedent regiments and is displayed in memory, not only of the siege of Quebec but two of the 15th Regiment own famous sons, Amherst and Murray.

NOTES

- 1 The Regimental records note that Amherst was Colonel from 22nd May 1756 to 21st September 1768.
- 2 Oxford Dictionary of National Biography *Jeffrey Amherst*. The DNB account confirms the regimental record of Amherst's appointment as Colonel rather than the earlier date on the plaque.
- 3 London Gazette 10th September 1759
- 4 Records of the Fifteenth or York East Riding Regiment of Foot. The records were compiled by General A F Macintosh in 1828 who commanded the regiment from 1825 to 1834 and give a detailed account of the 15th Regiment's involvement in North America.
- 5 London Gazette 16th October 1759, The London Gazette carries a detailed account contained in letters from General Wolfe and Admiral Saunders of the campaign and the events leading up to the assault on Quebec.
- 6 Lloyd C. *The Capture of Quebec* (London 1959) p.117.
- 7 Knox Captain J., *An Historical Journal of the Campaigns in North- America* (London 1759). In his diary detailing the assault, Knox provides a detailed account both of Murray's involvement and Wolfe's death.
- 8 London Chronicle and Universal Evening Press 16th October 1759. This edition not only reproduces the letter from General Monckton confirming the victory and Wolfe's death but also outlines the terms of capitulation requested by the French.
- 9 Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, *James Murray*.
- 10 Whitehall Evening Press 25th October 1759. This edition lists a number of appointments following the campaign against Quebec including for Brigadiers Monckton and Townhend.
- 11 London Gazette 17th October 1759.
- 12 Wood W., "The Fight For Oversea Empire: The Battle of the Plains", in Shortt A. and Doughty A., eds., *Canada and Its Provinces*, Vol. I, Toronto, Glasgow, Brook & Company, 1914, 312p., pp. 288-308.