

## THE DEFENCE OF ST. MARCOUF.

By LT.-COL. M. E. S. LAWS, O.B.E., M.C., R.A. (ret.).

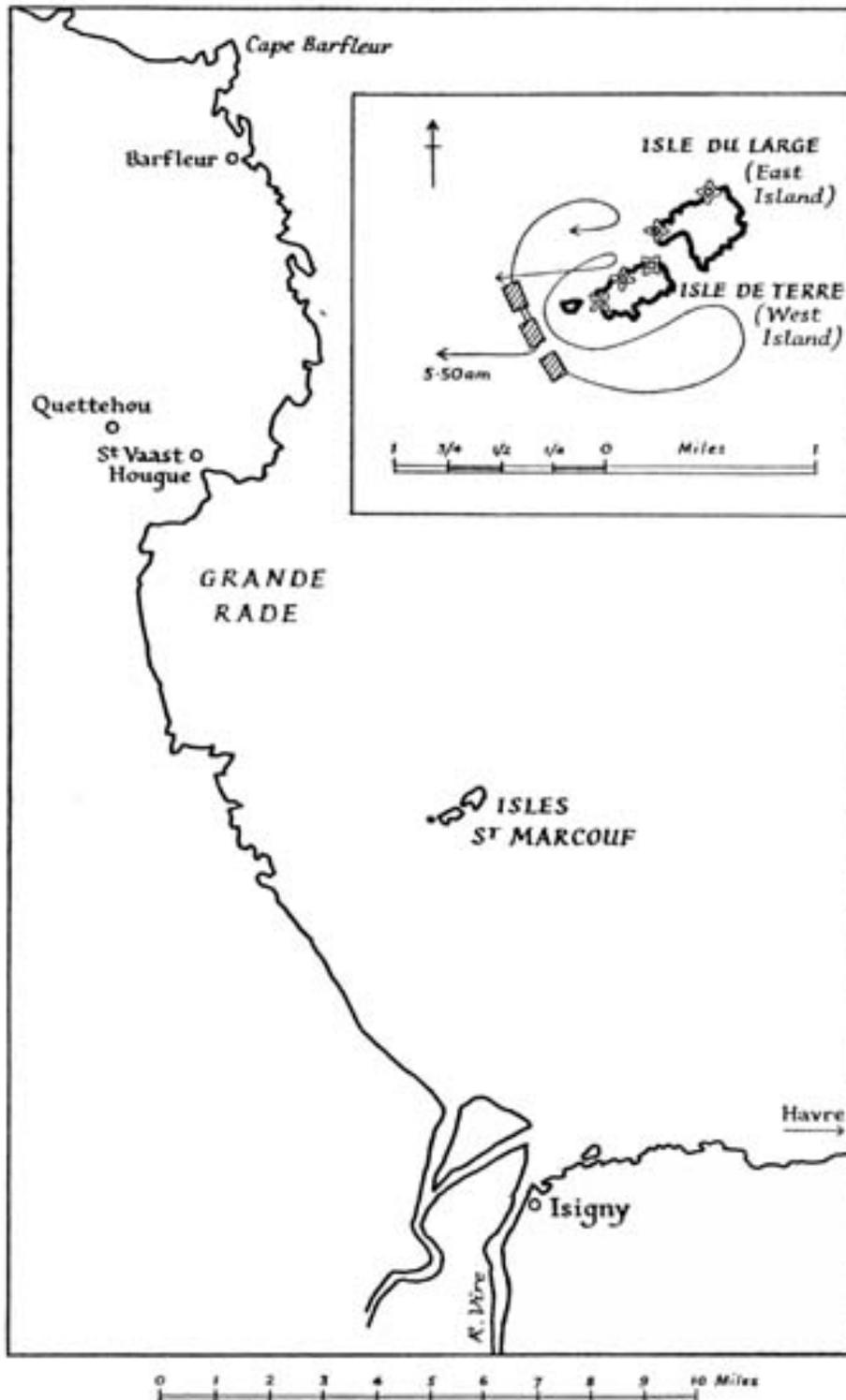
IN July 1795 Captain Sir Sydney Smith, in command of a small naval squadron, was engaged in blockading the French coast from Cape Barfleur to Havre—roughly the area covered by the Allied invasion of June 1944. It occurred to that enterprising officer that an advanced base close to the French coast would greatly facilitate his operations, and on 6th July, 1795 he therefore sent the launch of H.M.S. Diamond to hoist British colours on the Isles of St. Marcouf<sup>1</sup>. These two flat rocks, each about an acre in extent and two hundred yards apart, lie some 3 ½ miles from the French coast and about 9 miles south-east of Cape La Hogue. Their occupation by the British was intended to achieve three objects, namely, to provide:—

1. A partially sheltered anchorage for frigates and small craft engaged in blockade duties.
2. A base for ships' boats (manned by the garrison); such boats could attack the small enemy coasters which, keeping too close inshore to be got at by gun vessels, carried on an important trade eastwards with provisions for Havre and Paris and westwards with naval stores, timber, etc., for St. Malo and Brest.
3. A suitable collecting point for French emigré agents passing to and fro between Portsmouth and the Royalist forces in La Vendée.

Obviously such small islands could contain only a small garrison and its security would depend chiefly on British command of the sea. Sir Sydney Smith, having no troops at his disposal, at first garrisoned the islands with the crews of two gun vessels (H.M.S. Badger and Sandfly) and three Dutch hoys (H.M.S. Shark, Hawk and Serpent). Lieutenant C. P. Price, R.N., of H.M.S. Badger was put in command of the whole garrison with Lieutenant Chilcott, R.N.<sup>2</sup> of H.M.S. Sandfly in command of East Island (Isle du Large). Lieut. Price himself took charge of West Island (Isle de Terre) with the crews of H.M.S. Badger, Serpent and Shark, leaving the crews of H.M.S. Sandfly and Hawk to garrison East Island.

It was decided to construct field works on the two islands and to arm them with the guns from the gun vessels and hoys. By early September 1795 these guns—68-pdr., 32-pdr., 24-pdr. and one or two 6-pdr. field guns—had been put ashore and work started on hauling the Badger and Sandfly ashore on their respective islands and dismantling them. Their sails were made into tents which housed the crews and H.M.S. Serpent was broken up to provide timber for gun platforms. Meanwhile on 9th September an enemy squadron of 17 gun vessels approached East Island from La Hogue during the temporary absence of the British frigates, but being surprised at the reception they met from heavy guns, the French withdrew without pressing the attack home.

# ISLES ST MARCOUF



Sir Sydney Smith had realised that if the islands were to be made secure against sudden attack by French gun vessels, more elaborate defences must be constructed and a proper garrison installed. He therefore arranged through the Admiralty for a Royal Engineer officer to visit the islands and submit definite plans for their fortification. On 10th September, 1795, Captain R. Hockings, R.E., with a sergt.-major, a draughtsman, a carpenter and 9 privates of the Royal Military Artificer arrived at St. Marcouf from Guernsey by the cutter Earl of Chatham; seven days later the officer, sergt.-major and draughtsman returned to Guernsey leaving the 9 artificers to start on the semi-permanent works which had been planned. These forts were closed works surrounded by ditches, which had to be blasted out of the rock, and had stone revetments. They were armed with two 68-pdr. carronades, four 24-pdr. guns, two 24-pdr. carronades and at least one 32-pdr. carronade besides several 6-pdr. field guns; all these pieces had been taken from H.M.S. Badger, Sandfly, Serpent, Hawk and Nancy (fire ship), but, later others were added from England. Shortly afterwards each island received two prefabricated wooden block houses which were erected inside existing forts and were armed with a number of 4-pdr. guns. There were forts on the north-west and south-west extremities of East Island and probably on the northern and south-westerly points of West Island, the object being to defend the sound between the two islands which was used as an anchorage.

The living conditions on these tiny rocky islands only 18 feet above mean sea level were very hard, and it is not surprising that desertions were numerous, especially in view of the fact that there was at that time much unrest in the Navy which culminated in the mutinies at Spithead and the Nore.<sup>3</sup> Thus on 18th September, 1795, two ratings of H.M.S. Shark deserted to the enemy in her jolly boat, on 8th October another party from H.M.S. Force took her cutter, and on 4th November five seamen from H.M.S. Badger and Serpent took the former ship's jolly boat. One of these parties of deserters—composed of men on guard duty at night—actually spiked every gun on West Island with wooden plugs before leaving so that they could not be fired on until the vents, had been cleared! The climax of the desertion epidemic came on 15th December, 1795, when the watch on H.M.S. Shark carried off the ship to La Hogue

As a result of these alarming instances of ill-discipline, it was decided to provide some regular troops for St. Marcouf and on 22nd December, 1795, a subaltern and 20 N.C.Os. and men of the Royal Marines were landed on West Island from H.M.S. Diamond. A similar Royal Marine detachment from H.M.S. Syren landed on East Island some six weeks later. On 10th February, 1796, the following detachments of the Royal Artillery were landed by H.M.S. Hornet from Portsmouth:—

*East Island* (borne on the books of H.M.S. Sandfly).

1 Bombardier and 6 Gunners of Capt. C. Terrot's Company, 1 Bn. R.A.  
(in 1938, 101 Fd. Bty.).

*West Island* (borne on the books of H.M.S. Badger).

1 Corporal and 6 Gunners of Capt. A. Robertson's Company, 1 Bn. R.A.  
(in 1938, 1 Heavy Bty.).

As Captain A. Robertson's Company embarked for the Cape of Good Hope in March 1796, the detachment of the Company on West Island at St. Marcouf was transferred en bloc to Captain C. Terrot's Company, which was stationed

at Portsmouth. Previous to the arrival of the Gunners, Conductor of Ordnance Stores Archibald Watson arrived at West Island where he remained without a single day's absence from 3rd August, 1795, till the evacuation of St. Marcouf in May 1802!

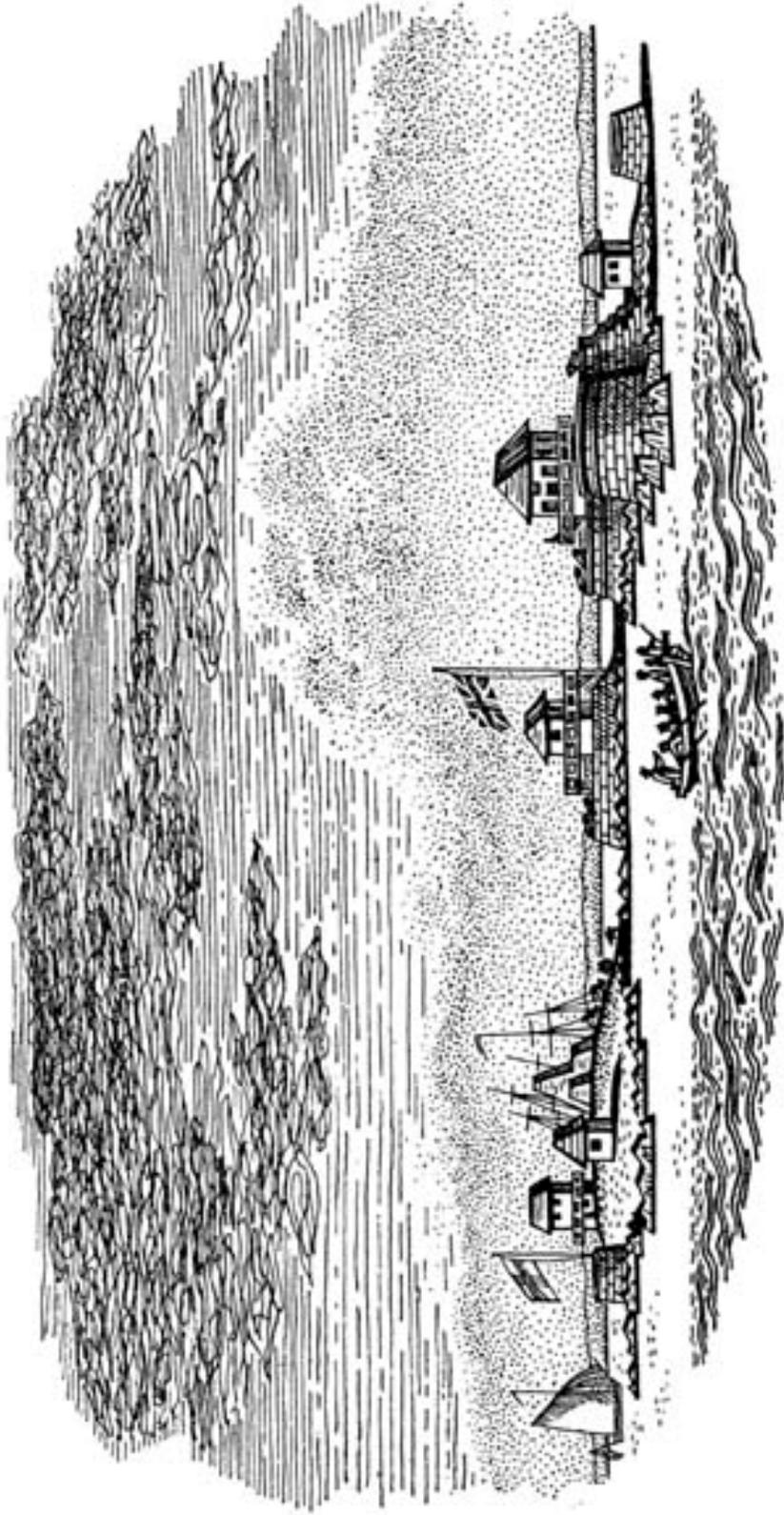
Since frigate Captains rather naturally objected to having their Royal Marine detachments permanently ashore, an effort was made to obtain regular infantry as part of the St. Marcouf garrison, and on 11th March, 1796, the following party of Invalids arrived from Guernsey by H.M.S. Druid:—

<i>Independent Coy. of Invalids</i>	<i>Ensign</i>	<i>Sergts.</i>	<i>Corpls.</i>	<i>Drms</i>	<i>Ptes.</i>
Col. John Crofton's	1	1	1	1	6
Capt. Smollet Campbell's	—	1	1	—	7
Capt. Mark Napier's	—	—	1	—	5
Capt. Robert McCrea's	—	—	—	—	4
Capt. Sylvester Murrison's	—	—	—	—	5
Capt. L. A. Campbell's	—	—	—	—	5
Col. William Anstruther's	—	—	—	—	5
Major Robert Bourne's	—	—	—	—	3
Total	1	2	3	1	40

Note.—The Ensign was John Thornton, who died at St. Marcouf on 2nd April, 1798, and was replaced on 2nd May, 1798, by Ensign Wilson Carter of Capt. John Waugh's Independent Company of Invalids. Colonel Crofton died on 8th October, 1797, and his Company then passed to Captain W. Stewart.

This detachment of Invalids remained on West Island until 5th January, 1798, when it was moved over to East Island, by which time it had been reduced by deaths by one Sergeant and three Privates. Its arrival on West Island in March 1796 released the party of Royal Marines of H.M.S. Syren which rejoined the ship.

The arrival of detachments of Royal Artillery, Royal Marines and Invalids seems to have had a steadying effect, for there was a notable decrease in desertion, and discipline improved, judging by the punishments entered in the Captains' logs. During the remainder of the period of occupation of the islands, though many seamen and marines were flogged for various offences (usually drunkenness, "mutinous behaviour" or "neglect of duty"), and the same punishment up to three-dozen lashes was inflicted on several of the Invalids, only one artilleryman (Gunner Parker) was similarly dealt with; in that case one dozen lashes were awarded for disobedience of orders. This punishment was ordered by Lieut. Heard, R.N., who was temporarily in command of H.M.S. Sandfly (that is, of East Island) during the absence of Lieut. Bourne, R.N. The matter was reported to Captain and Brevet Major G. Terrot, the Company Commander, at Portsmouth, by the senior R.A. N.C.O. at St. Marcouf. Major Terrot was most indignant at "the unprecedented manner of Lt. Heard taking the law in his own hands", and, in reporting the matter officially to the D.A.G.R.A. on 19th December, 1797, he announced that he would give Gunner Parker "every assistance" to take civil action. Lieut. Bourne, who shortly afterwards replaced Lieut. Heard, told Major Terrot that "he never saw men behave better than those at present at St.



*Island of Marcouf, with a distant view of the French Coast near Cape La Hogue.*

Marcouf". Eventually the Admiralty gave a full and satisfactory apology, but the incident illustrates very clearly the attitude of R.A. officers to flogging.

It should be noted in this connection that during the whole period of over six years that an R.A. detachment served at St. Marcouf under the Royal Navy no artillery officer was ever present. The detachments were normally under Corporals or Bombardiers, and their disciplinary record during this long period was very good indeed.

Even after the arrival of the prefabricated block houses, the garrison of St. Marcouf lived a very uncomfortable life. The winter gales repeatedly blew away the improvised tents and the sea frequently made a clean sweep over the islands. The troops were supplied with provisions from Portsmouth, but water was always very strictly rationed. The work on the fortifications was unending, since the gales and high seas destroyed some of the redoubts which had to be rebuilt. Each island garrison also built small breakwaters to protect their boat anchorages, and the East Island troops even attempted to lay out a garden and to keep cattle and poultry. In August 1797 the Secretary to the Board of Ordnance wrote to the Secretary to the Admiralty to forward a strongly worded complaint from Captain Hockings, R.E. that the St. Marcouf redoubts were "liable to be injured from the present practice of suffering cattle and poultry to run over them"; he later alleged that "one parapet had already been damaged and there was no turf to be got." There were other complaints from the Sapper, mostly relating to reputed interference by the naval officers who insisted on misappropriating the timber huts as store rooms even though they had been intended by Captain Hockings to house his Royal Military Artificers and their workshops.

Meanwhile the garrison of St. Marcouf was by no means only concerned with its defences. The launches and cutters from the islands continually raided the enemy coasts close inshore and at times even penetrated into the river near Isigny to cut out ships taking refuge under the protection of shore batteries. There was an almost daily boat service engaged in landing and taking off French royalist messengers, and parties of ten or more emigrés at a time passed in and out of France through St. Marcouf. The British frigates used the islands as an advanced base for their blockade of Havre, and the lookout on West Island was often able to give them early information as to the movements of enemy shipping.

Early in 1798 the French authorities decided to make a serious attack on the islands, either because the garrison had become an intolerable nuisance or perhaps in order to focus British attention on the Channel at a time when Napoleon was sailing from Toulon on the secret expedition which eventually took him to Malta and Egypt. It was possible that an attack on St. Marcouf might confirm the rumours then in circulation that Bonaparte's objective was England or, more probably, Ireland. Some 5,000 troops were assembled near La Hogue and a formidable flotilla of 58 gunboats and flats was eventually collected in the same harbour after numerous skirmishes with British frigates on the way round the coast from Havre. These French gunboats were powerfully armed craft, carrying each two or three heavy guns—usually 24-pdrs. and 18-pdrs. with some 36-pdrs. The flats each carried an 18-pdr. and a 6-pdr. with about 130 soldiers as well as a crew of 15 sailors.

The British garrison of St. Marcouf at this time consisted of the following troops and naval ratings:—

*West Island.* Lieutenant C. P. Price, R.N.

Ship's Company H.M.S. Badger (about 50 in all); Royal Marines (detachments from H.M.S. Diamond, Hornet, Naiad, and H.Qs. Portsmouth Division) 125 all ranks; R.A. 1 Sergeant and 9 Gunners Total 185.

*East Island.* Lieutenant E. Bourne, R.N.

Ship's Company H.M.S. Sandfly (about 50 in all); naval ratings lent by H.M.S. Adamant (7), and Eurydice (8) (15 in all); Invalids—1 Ensign, 1 Sergt., 3 Corpls., 1 Drummer, 36 Privates; R.A.—1 Corpl., 1 Bomdr., 8 Gunners; Royal Marines—44 all ranks. Total 161.

The original R.A. detachment which arrived at St. Marcouf on 9th February 1796 had returned to Portsmouth in June 1797 on relief by a similar detachment, partly from Captain C. Terrot's Company, 1 Battalion R.A., and partly from Captain F. M. Sproule's Company, 5 Battalion R.A. This latter company had arrived at Portsmouth from Woolwich in May 1796, and from then on took its share of out-station duties with Terrot's Company. The second party was still at St. Marcouf in early May 1798 but was in process of relief by a new party which actually arrived at the islands late in April 1798. By sheer luck, therefore, there were two parties of Gunners at St. Marcouf when the French made their attack. These parties were composed as under:—

WEST ISLAND.

<i>Unit.</i>	<i>Sgt.</i>	<i>Corpl.</i>	<i>Bdr.</i>	<i>Gnr.</i>	<i>Total.</i>
Capt. C. Terrot's Coy., 1 Bn. R.A. ... (In 1938, 101 Fd. Bty. R.A.)	1	—	—	7	8
Capt. F. M. Sproule's Coy., 5 Bn. R.A. (In 1938, 1 Medium Bty. R.A.)	—	—	—	2	2
Total on West Island	1	—	—	9	10

EAST ISLAND.

Capt. C. Terrot's Coy., 1 Bn. R.A. ...	—	—	—	2	2
Capt. F. M. Sproule's Coy., 5 Bn. R.A.	—	1	1	6	8
Total on East Island	—	1	1	8	10

Note.—In addition, Conductors of Stores A. Watson, John Mathers and Thomas Pink were serving on the islands.

The British Garrison had received ample warning of impending attack and had devoted much time to “exercising the guns” and practising “beating to quarters”. Two days before the French attacked, the garrison was reinforced by Royal Marines and seamen from ships on the station. The defences of both islands had been strengthened by the construction of *chevaux de frise* at possible landing places, by the building of obstacles ashore and by a floating

boom moored off shore to prevent the approach of boats. A 24-pdr. howitzer was also mounted on East Island and all guns had actually been tested by firing inland to sweep landing places as well as seawards. In fact, very thorough preparation had been made, and the defenders had 14 heavy guns mounted—two 68-pdrs., two 32-pdrs., six 24-pdrs., three 24-pdr. carronades, one 24-pdr. howitzer besides over a dozen 6-pdrs. and 4-pdrs.

The French flotilla could only hope to attack the islands during a calm, which would prevent the British frigates from interfering, and preferably when the tide would not seriously hinder the progress of their own gunboats and flats, which were propelled by sweeps. At noon on 6th May the conditions appeared promising and the French were observed to be warping out of La Hogue; shortly after dusk the British sent a boat to watch their movements. At 10 p.m. the garrison was warned of the enemy's approach, but the night was very dark, and a thick fog, which persisted till dawn on 7th May, allowed the French to advance unseen.

At daybreak on 7th May the French flotilla was found to be drawn up in three divisions off the south-westerly point of West Island. The centre division, consisting of the gunboats, advanced to within three hundred yards of the island and at 0345 hours opened a heavy bombardment of the forts, which at once returned the fire. Meanwhile the northern division, consisting of flats carrying troops, rowed northwards and then eastwards so as to land their soldiers in the strait between the two islands, but was met by a heavy enfilade fire of grape from the two 68-pdrs. and other guns on East Island. The French could not face this murderous cross-fire, and the northern division of the invasion fleet soon drifted off westwards out of range. The southern enemy division of flats carrying troops made an even more determined attempt to penetrate between the islands from the south, but finding the defenders' gun-fire still unsubdued, turned westwards skirting the southern and western shores of West Island and attempted to land its troops at the northern end of the strait. Here again the French vessels came under the devastating cross-fire from both islands, and despite the greatest gallantry the enemy could not reach the shore. By 0550 hours the attack was over, the French withdrawing to La Hogue having had several flats destroyed and having lost heavily in men. One flat was later recovered by the British and was sent to Portsmouth as a prize.

The British casualties amounted to one Royal Marine Private killed and two Privates and one seaman wounded on West Island; there was not a single casualty on East Island. Four of the British guns were dismounted during the fight, but all were in action again before nightfall on 7th May. H.M.S. Adamant (50), Eurydice (24) and Orestes (18) lay becalmed during the morning some 6 miles E.N.E. of St. Marcouf and took no part in the action.

In his official report of the action, dated 9th May 1798, Lieut. Price paid particular tribute to the services of the Royal Artillerymen, who were almost entirely responsible for repulsing the attack, since the defenders had not been required to open small arms fire. Yet the French had brought into action over 80 heavy guns, and had the artillery fire of the defenders once been subdued, nothing could have prevented a landing being made with every chance of final success. An unusual feature of the action was the fact that the two 68-pdrs on East Island at one time engaged the French gun-boats off the south-west corner

of West Island with time fused shell and to do so had to fire over the heads of their comrades on West Island. Lieuts. Price and Bourne were each promoted to the rank of Commander for their successful defence of St. Marcouf.

As a result of this attack, the Admiralty sanctioned a considerable increase in the Royal Marine garrison of St. Marcouf, but the Invalids and Royal Artillery detachments remained as before. The Invalids were not relieved, though normal wastage was replaced from time to time to keep the party up to its original strength. The R.A. detachment was relieved in June 1798 and again in February 1799, but in September of the latter year Capt. Sproule's Company, 5 Battalion R.A., left Portsmouth for Gibraltar and Capt. Terrot's Company, 1 Battalion took part in the expedition to Holland; the detachment of Sproule's Company at St. Marcouf was therefore transferred to Captain G. Cookson's Company,<sup>4</sup> 5 Battalion which moved from Woolwich to Portsmouth early in 1800. When, however, Captain Cookson's Company left Portsmouth in June 1800 for Houat and later Malta, its detachment at St. Marcouf was withdrawn to rejoin it. The party on the islands from Capt. Terrot's Company remained unaffected. Captain Terrot was promoted Major on 12th November 1800 and his Company was taken over by Captain J. Quayle on that date; it remained at Portsmouth after its return from Holland. In July 1799 three gunners of Captain H. Hutton's Company, 5 Battalion R.A. (in 1938, 107 Field Battery R.A.) joined at St. Marcouf, but they were relieved in May 1800 and Terrot's (later Quayle's) Company provided the party on the islands for the remainder of the period of occupation.

The St. Marcouf garrison continued to act as an advanced base for the blockade of the French coast and was not again seriously attacked. From the islands were carried out innumerable boat operations against the enemy coasting trade with considerable success, and hundreds of French royalists were passed in and out of France. When the Peace of Amiens was signed, the bulk of the garrison was withdrawn on 16th May, 1802, in the frigates *Penelope*, *Beaulieu*<sup>5</sup> and *Ambuscade*, leaving a small rear party to hand over the islands and the dismantled H.M.S. *Badger* and *Sandfly* to the French. On 18th May, 1802, Chef de Bataillon Chauve and his staff arrived on the islands and two days later the hand-over was completed and the last British troops left St. Marcouf for Portsmouth on board H.M.S. *Starling*.

That a British garrison should have been maintained for nearly seven years less than four miles from the enemy's coast is a remarkable illustration of the supremacy of British sea-power. The repulse of the French attack in May 1798 was indeed a very gallant achievement and provided one of the comparatively rare instances of British success in coast defence during the Napoleonic wars. But St. Marcouf has long been entirely forgotten until the islands once again came into the news on 6th June, 1944, when they were captured at 0725 hrs. by 4 U.S. Cavalry Group.

#### FOOTNOTES.

1. The name is sometimes written St. Marcou.
2. Lieutenant R. Bourne, R.N., replaced Lieut. Chilcott, R.N., in command of East Island on 14th February, 1796.

3. It should be remembered that the seamen of the Royal Navy at that time were not regularly enlisted and disciplined men, but were merely hired, or more often “prest”, sailors taken straight from civil life.
4. Captain G. Cookson’s Company, 5 Battalion, R.A., was in 1938, 26 Medium Battery, R.A.
5. The R.A. detachment was withdrawn from St. Marcouf in H.M.S. Beaulieu on 12th May, 1802, being landed at Portsmouth on 16th May.

## NOTE 1.

The view of St. Marcouf published in *The Naval Chronicle*, Vol. 8, for December 1802, was engraved by F. Gibson, F.A.S. and was described as being “from a sketch taken on the spot by Capt. H. Rudyerd, Royal Artillery”. Almost certainly the sketch was by Lieut. W. C. Rudyerd (Kane 733) who transferred from R.A. to R.E. in 1793; according to the Captain’s Log of H.M.S. Sandfly he was at St. Marcouf between 7th June, 1796 and 27th August, 1797, presumably in charge of the Royal Military Artificers working on the defences. There was a Fireworker H. Rudyerd in the R.A. (Kane 448) who also transferred to the R.E. on 10th January, 1770, but it is certain he was not the officer who sketched St. Marcouf. The only other officer of that name in the R.A. was Lieut. S. Rudyerd (Kane 1130) and there seems no evidence that he was ever at St. Marcouf.

## NOTE 2.

The present-day designations of Coys. R.A. mentioned in this article are as follows:—

<i>1938 Designation.</i>	<i>June 1947 Designation.</i>
101 Field Bty., R.A.	2 Lt. A.A. Bty., R.A.
1 Heavy Bty., R.A.	3 Coast Bty., R.A.
1 Medium (Sphinx) Bty., R.A.	13 Coast (Sphinx) Bty., R.A.
26 Medium Bty., R.A.	76 Lt. A.A. Bty., R.A.

## AUTHORITIES CONSULTED.

## UNPUBLISHED OFFICIAL DOCUMENTS IN THE PUBLIC RECORD OFFICE.

Captains’ Logs (P.R.O. series Adm. 51) of H.M.S. Badger (1445), Sandfly (4496), Eurydice (1456), Diamond (1124), Adamant (1302), Orestes (1310).  
 Master’s Log (P.R.O. Series Adm. 52) of H.M.S. Sandfly (3391).  
 Ships’ Muster Books (P.R.O. Series Adm. 36) of H.M.S. Badger (11947, 11948, 12364 and 14135), Sandfly (12632, 12633 and 14201), Diamond (13010), Starling, (14206), Penelope (14455), Beaulieu (15485), Ambuscade (14903) and Druid (11886).  
 Royal Artillery Muster Rolls (P.R.O. Series W.O. 10) of 1 Bn. R.A. (291, 306, 308, 327, 331, 353, 363, 378, 389, 405, 418, 437 and 452); 5 Bn. R.A. (314, 318, 331, 341, 357, 367, 338 and 392).  
 Independent Companies of Invalids Muster Rolls (P.R.O. Series W.O. 12);  
 Guernsey 11603.

Admiralty Correspondence Books. Sec. of Adm. to Commanders-in-Chief of Squadrons 1795 (P.R.O. Adm. 2/941); Correspondence from Guernsey 1794-1802 (P.R.O. Adm. 1/221); Correspondence from Board of Ordnance 1795-97 (P.R.O. Adm. 1/4014); Letters from R.A. Officers to the D.A.A.G., R.A. (P.R.O. W.O. 55/1066).

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