SOLDIER JOHN GRIGSBY

AND THE EXPEDITION TO CARTAGENA, COLUMBIA

1740 - 1741

(By Elizabeth M. Nicholson)

In the summer of 1739, Admiral Edward Vernon, a veteran of 40 years service in the Britial Royal Navy, set sail for the Caribbean. His orders were to "destroy the Spanish settlements in the West Indies and to distress their shiping by every method whatever." War would not be officially declared for three more months, but all of England was clamoring for action. Business interests had long wanted to get access to the rich Spanish ports in the New World, only an excuse was needed. That summer, a Mr. Jenkins had told his tale of outrage, how the Spanish had boarded his ship in the Caribbean and cut off his ear - it was not stressed that this incident took place 8 years earlier. For added emphasis, he brought along his severed ear, carefully pickled in a jar of brine. The public outcry was immense - the "War of Jenkins Ear" was launched.

Admiral Vernon met with immediate success. With only six ships - just as he had bragged he would do - he took the spanish town of Porto Bello, on the Isthmus of Panama, in November of 1739. There was great rejoicing at home; further victories seemed inevitable. England soon sent reinforcements for Vernon, and demanded that the American colonies do likewise. One of the colonials who responded to his call was John Grigsby of Virginia.

The "American Regiments"

Nine of the colonies contributed troops and funds, with 400 men and L5000 coming from Virginia. There were a total of 3,600 men in the "American Regiments," as they became known, and Governor William Gooch of Virginia was their commander. (This was to be the first American Expeditionary force beyond our own shores; there would not be another until 1898.)

It is not entirely clear what types of men made up the American regiments. We can learn what the British thought of them by reading the anonymous pamphlets published in London after the failure of the expedition. In 1743, one writer found them worse "by many degrees" than their British counterparts - who he labelled generally inexperienced and

led by political appointees. "The American officers in particular . . . who were composed of blacksmiths, tailors, shoemakers, and all the Banditti that country affords . . . insomuch that the other parts of the Army held them in scorn, and for engineers, bombardiers, and gunners, worse never bore the name, or could be picked out of all Europe.[1]

In 1744, another pamphleteer responded to the first:

> What an heap of Billingsgate does the author (of An Account) employ to vilify the American regiment? On the contrary, the field officers were all men of long service, named by his majesty, and sent from Britain.
>
> The companies were chiefly raised by the interest, and at the charge of their respective captains, of whom some were members of the assemblies in the provinces where they resided; others lived upon their own plantations, and had commands in the militia; and some few had been concerned in traffic...
>
> The rest of the subaltern officers were recommended by the governors and by the gentlemen of the first rank in the provinces where the companies were raised, and were either younger sons of principal families, bred to no particular profession, or such of them as had been brought up to the law, to merchandise, or who had served at sea.
>
> ....Since the levy was made in haste, there was neither time for strictly examining into their respective circumstances, nor for their being well disciplined before they joined the army; whence it became necessary in a great measure, to employ them on board the fleet.[2]

John Grigsby was a neighbor of Lawrence Washington (the elder half brother of George), and since the elder Washington was captain of one of the four Virginia companies, it is possible - although only speculation - that John Grigsby may have been solicited by him and may actually have been in Washington's company. To speculate further, as a third son, John Grigsby could possibly have been one of the "subaltern officers . . . who were younger sons of principal families."

As for the rank and file soldiers in the American regiments, they must have been a mixed lot. At least some of them were n'er do wells. In Virginia, they were recruited by an act of the General Assembly that called on the justices of the peace to levy such able-bodied men as did not follow or exercise any lawful calling or employment.

It does seem certain that the bulk of the expedition's troops were inexperienced, and that the Americans were viewed with a certain amount of skepticism at the very least. It was probably anticipated that they would not be needed for actual combat. Even without them, the force that rendezvoused in Jamaica at the end of 1740 was formidable.

England had reinforced Admiral Vernon with 12,000 land troups under General Wentworth; 15,000 sailors; and a veritable armada that included 30 line of battleships; 22 frigates; and miscellaneous transports, fireships, bomb-ketches, and tenders. The colonials and their transports brought the total force close to 30,000 men.

With this impressive array at his command, Admiral Vernon decided that his next goal would be Cartagena, Columbia, the Spanish shipping point for all the wealth and treasure coming out of their South American colonies. He had reconoitered Cartagena the previous year, and even shelled the city. (Of course, this gave the defenders ample lead time to prepare for the attack ...) His forces were well prepared, right down to the drawing up of documents for the distribution of the "booty" that would result from the anticipated victory.

It is quite possible that Vernon could have succeeded, and eventually rearranged the political geography of the entire region. However, one unsurmountable obstacle made success extremely unlikely, and that was the personal animosity between himself as head of the naval forces, and General Wentworth, commander of the land troops.

Vernon vs. Wentworth

Tobias Smollett, an English surgeon who was to become a noted novelist and historian, was attached to the expedition. He did not really care for either of the leaders - "in a word, the admiral was a man of weak understanding, strong prejudices, boundless arrogance, and over-boiling passions; and the general, though he had some parts, was wholly defective in point of experience, confidence, and resolution."[3]

(It should be noted that Smollett's opinions were probably influenced by his unpleasant and nearly impossible task of treating the hundreds of men who were dying from battle wounds and the ravages of yellow fever.)

General Wentworth came to his position through the untimely death of his predecessor, and all accounts describe

him in negative terms. Admiral Vernon is a more complicated figure. He did have great experience, and probably was a competent - albeit arrogant - leader.

(As a historical footnote, he had recently added a new word to the English language. Only the previous summer, he had decided that the daily rum ration was taken in such excess that it "impaired the sailors' health, ruined their morals, and made them slave to every brutish passion."[4] He ordered the ration diluted with water. The resulting concoction was served twice a day to the sailors, was low in popularity, and soon became known as "grog," after Vernon's favorite grogam cape.)

The bickering between the two men started in early March of 1741, with the assault on Boca Chica, the entrance to the harbor of Cartagena. The same basic themes were to be repeated throughout the entire campaign. General Wentworth claimed that Vernon was not providing adequate naval support, and Admiral Vernon claimed that Wentworth was stalling in using his land troops.

Success at Boca Chica

Despite this conflict, the forts at Boca Chica were eventually taken. (Capt. Washington was mentioned for his gallantry in leading 200 men against the batteries at Boca Chica. One can only wonder if John Grigsby was with him.)

So confident was Vernon at this point, that he dispatched a ship for England with the news of his victory at Boca Chica, and his impending victory over the city of Cartagena itself. In England, there was great rejoicing at this premature news - victory poems were written, and commemorative medals were cast. The "Vernon Series" as these victory medals came to be known, depict various scenes, such as the military governor of Cartagena making a hasty retreat in a rowboat, or handing the keys of the city to Vernon.

Actually, the defender of Cartagena was a courageous and capable foe. Earlier battles had left Don Blas de Lezo with only one eye, one arm, and one leg. He was to die from wounds suffered during the British siege, but only after successfully defending Cartagena with 4,000 troops - half of whom were inexperienced - against the British host of 30,000.[5]

San Lazaro Next ... Time Runs Out

As soon as Vernon's forces were inside the harbor, they secured the remaining small forts, and planned their assault on the massive fortress of San Lazaro - also know as

San Felipe de Barajas.[6] Once this was taken, the old walled city of Cartagena would be relatively defenseless.

Time was starting to run out however. Smollett tells us:

> ...the rainy season had begun with such violence, that it was hardly practicable to keep the field, for it poured down in a deluge incessantly, from the rising to the setting of the sun; and then the lightening began to play in such a continued flashing, that one might have read a small print all night long by the illumination.
>
> Such a change of atmosphere is always attended with an epidemical distemper, in consequence of which the men dropped down so fast, that there was scarce a sufficiency to relieve the proper guards of the camp, much less to cut down the wood and raise a battery, so as to attack San Lazaro in form.[7]

Probably because of these losses already being suffered within the British ranks, Wentworth was compelled to ask Vernon for aid from the American regiments. A few days prior to the atttack on San Lazaro, Admiral Vernon agreed that the general would be supplied with "all such of the American forces, as he should judge proper to be trusted on shore."[8]

The Role of the Americans

It is not clear how many of the 1500 Americans who were landed actually took part in the final assault on April 9th. Although some later writers (Americans) have implied that the colonials played a major role, they were probably intended to be only support troops for the British.

For example, Smollett mentions that before the battle, on April 5th, a group of 200 Americans were used as "pioneers" - usually those carrrying gear and assisting the soldiers - for a scouting party. On April 6th, a group of Americans and Negroes (from Jamaica) were landed to clear the ground for an encampment in anticipation of the coming assault.[9]

In describing the situation two days after the battle the London pamphleteers refer to the Americans in these terms: "including 1140 American soldiers, of whom 600 were employed only in working parties,"[10] and "... 1200 of these were Americans, and not esteemed fit for service.[11]

At any rate, there were certainly a number of colonials in the group of 1200 men that attacked San Lazaro in the

hours before dawn on April 9th. Unfortunately, either Wentworth had miscalculated, or the native guides had betrayed the British, for the men were led to the very point where the fortifications were strongest, the walls the highest, and the ground the roughest - the southern or landward side. The scaling ladders were hopelessly too short. All too soon, the tropical sun was rising, and the Spanish defenders - only 500 in number - had no trouble aiming for their unsheltered attackers.

Smollett describes the scene:

> ... nor could the scaling ladders, wool-packs, or hand grenades be of any service in this emergency, for the Americans, who carried them in the rear, seeing the troops falling by whole platoons, refused to advance with their burdens; but though they would not advance as pioneers, many of them took up the firelocks which they found in the field, and mixing among the troops, behaved very bravely. It must be owned, for the honour of the army in general, that no officers, or soldiers could act with more courage, alacrity, and perseverence, than that which was manifested on this unhappy occasion, although very few of them had ever seen the face of any enemy before this trial.[12]

Death and Defeat

The soldiers found themselves in a desperate situation. Retreat would have been an obvious and understandable alternative. Instead, the soldiers stood their ground until half their original number lay dead or wounded. (In his 1894 article, Walter Clark mentions that Lawrence Washington also participated in this ill-fated attack; however, his name is not so mentioned in the earlier sources.)

These battle casualties began to look trivial compared to the devastation being wrought by the yellow fever. In the two days after the battle, 3400 of the land troops had perished.[13]

Smollett describes the aftermath of the battle: the appalling conditions of the so-called "hospital ships," the corpses floating in the harbor, the terrible stench, the incessant rain and heat, the pathetic rations of "putrid beef, rusty pork, bread swarming with maggots," and water that could only be tolerated by holding one's nose ...

Not surprisingly, it was decided to give up the assault on Cartagena. The land troops and their gear were re-embarked,

and on May 8th, what remained of the original armada set sail back to Jamaica.

It is still debated whether Vernon or Wentworth bore more responsibility for the disaster. Whether or not naval aid was requested, Vernon did not supply any; no sailors for the attack, no artillery fire for support, and no naval surgeons to assist with the resulting casualties. It is questionable whether there was enough depth in that part of the harbor for his large ships to have gotten within range.

For his part, General Wentworth did not plan for a land battery to support his own men. Perhaps, as some argue, Vernon ridiculed the idea, and kept pushing Wentworth to attack immediately without any precautions. Perhaps with the rains and raging fever, there simply was not sufficient time...

What is clear is that there was a lamentable lack of cooperation between Admiral Vernon and General Wentworth. It undoubtedly cost many lives. By the time the British sailed back to England, the soldiers had been reduced in number from 12,000 to 2,000; and the naval forces - originally 15,000 men - had been so severely reduced, that Vernon had to press American seamen in order to get his ships to sea.[14] As for the Americans, probably only 300 of the original 3600 ever returned to the colonies.[15]

The Aftermath

Despite the high rate of attrition among the Americans, Admiral Vernon had the timerity to suggest that the survivors should be colonized in eastern Cuba, as "North America is already too thickly settled, and its people wish to establish manufactures which would injure those at home" (in Britain).[16] Ironically, sentiments like this were to sow the whirlwind reaped 35 years later by Lawrence Washington's brother, George.

Lawrence himself, however, must have been a great admirer of Vernon's. Upon his return to Virginia, he named his lovely estate on the Potomac after his commander in the Cartagena expedition. He also desired to obtain a midshipman's warrent in the Royal Navy for his younger brother. He corresponded with Vernon, and it was probably through the latter's influence that the warrent was obtained in 1746. George was then 14, and anxious to go, but his mother was against it. Ultimately, the project failed.[17]

We will probably never know what John Grigsby thought of his experience. The most important reality for this family has always been that he survived the whole ordeal to return to his homeland, and thereafter was known with respect and admiration as "Soldier John." It was a well deserved appellation.

Footnotes

1. An Account of the Expedition to Cartagena, pp. 55-58.
2. A Journal of the Expedition to Cartagena, p. 54.
3. Smollett, An Account of the Expedition Against Cartagena, p. 448.
4. McCormick-Goodhart, "Admiral Vernon, His Marylanders and His Medals," p. 245.
5. Hart, "Struggle for Control of America," p. 326.
6. Arrazola, editor, Historial de Cartagena, p. 286.
7. Smollett, op. cit., p. 449.
8. Hart, op. cit., p. 334.
9. Smollett, op. cit., p. 447.
10. An Account, op.cit., p. 45.
11. A Journal, op. cit., p. 44.
12. Smollett, op. cit., p. 452.
13. An Account, op. cit., p. 45.
14. Clark, "A Recovered Chapter in American History," p. 757.
15. Ibid., p. 753.
16. Ibid., p. 757.
17. Ford, Admiral Vernon and the Navy, p. 166.

Partial Bibliography

A Journal of the Expedition to Cartagena, with notes in answer to a later pamphlet entitled "An Account of the Expedition to Cartagena." London: printed for J. Roberts, in Warwick Lane, 1744.

An Account of the Expedition to Cartagena, with Explanatory Notes and Observations, London, printed for M. Cooper, at the Globe, in Pater Noster Row, 1743.

Arrazola, Roberto, editor, Historial de Cartagena, printed in Columbia, 1955.

Clark, Walter, "A Recovered Chapter in American History," Harpers Magazine, October 1896. (This is a more complete version of the article that first appeared in The University Magazine, in 1894, and was also published as "North Carolina Troops in South America - The Lost Batallion," in 1903, by the North Carolina Society of the DAR.

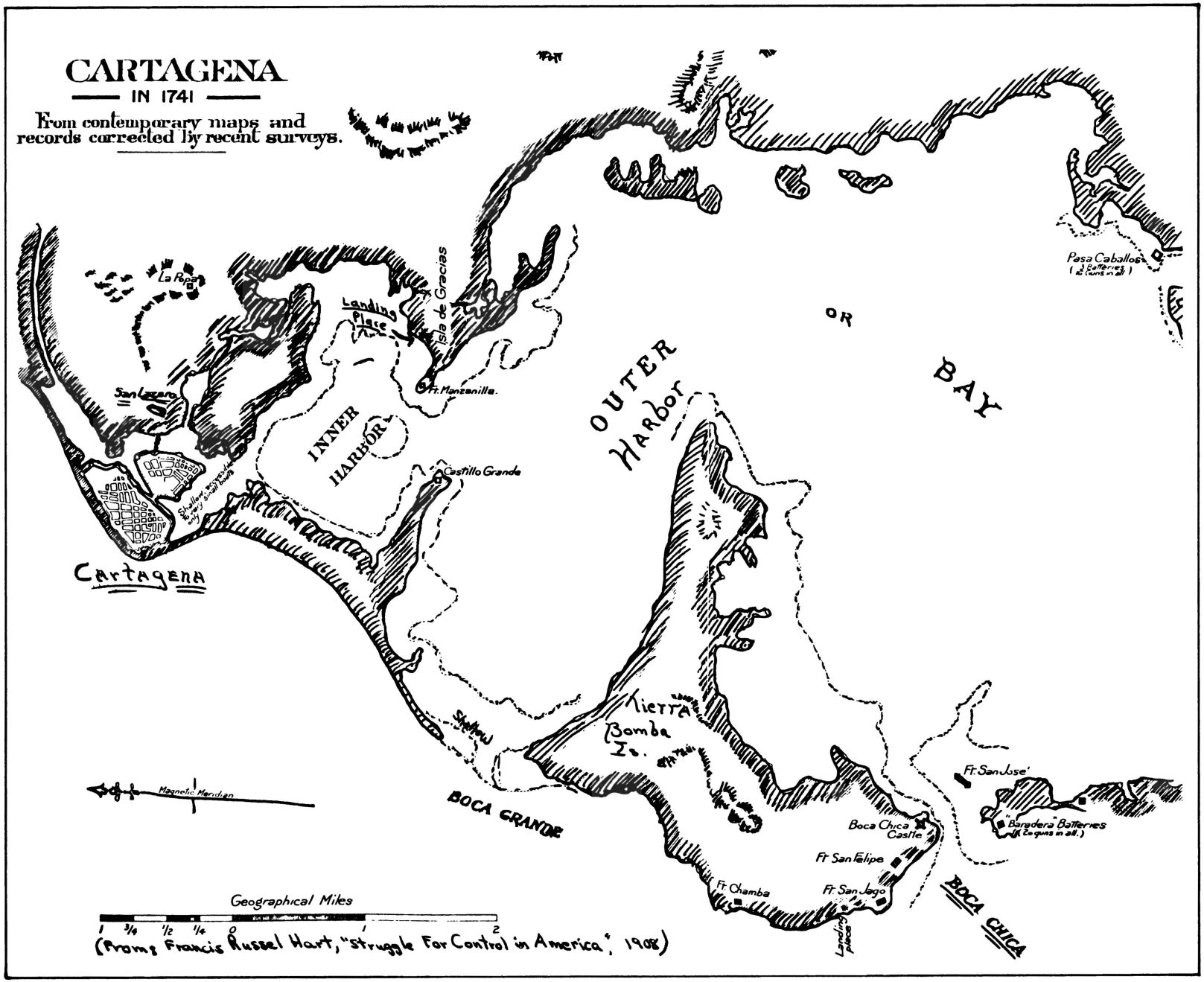
Dwight, Allan, To The Walls of Cartagena, Colonial Williamsburg Publications, Inc., Williamsburg, Virginia, 1967. Distributed by Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc., New York. (This is an excellent book for "young readers of all ages." Much of the book concerns a smuggling plot, for added excitement; but the basic interpretation of the events of the expedition is very good.)

Ford, Douglas, Admiral Vernon and the Navy, a Memoir and a Vindication. T. Fisher Unwin, Adelphi Terrace, London, 1908.

Hart, Francis Russel, "Struggle for Control of America," in Journal of American History, edited by Francis Trevelyan Miller, Boston, Massachusetts, 1908. (Vol. 2, No. 2)

McCormick-Goodhart, Leander, "Admiral Vernon, His Marylanders and His Medals," an address delivered before the Maryland Historical Society, April 3, 1935.

Smollett, Tobias George, An Account of the Expedition Against Cartagena, London, 1872.


CARTAGENA
IN 1741
From contemporary maps and records corrected by recent surveys.
La Popa
Landing Place
Bja de Gracias
Ft. Manzanillo.
San Lazaro
INNER HARBOR
Castillo Grande
OUTER Harbor
OR
BAY
Pasa Caballos
(3 Batteries (8 guns in all))
Cartagena
Tierra Bomba Is.
Magnetic Meridian
BOCA GRANDE
Ft. San Jose'
Barradera Batteries
(6 guns in all.)
Boca Chica Castle
Ft. San Felipe
Ft. Chamba
Ft. San Jago
BOCA CHICA
Geographical Miles
1 3/4 1/2 1/4 0 1 2
(From: Francis Russel Hart, "Struggle For Control in America", 1908)