



HALIFAX MILITARY HERITAGE
PRESERVATION SOCIETY

Historical Paper No. 5: Unlucky Armada – The
Destruction of the Duc d'Anville's Fleet

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Abstract: HMHPS Historical Paper No. 5: Unlucky Armada – The Destruction of the Duc d’Anville’s Fleet

A combined force of New England militia and Royal Navy ships surprisingly captured the strong French fortress of Louisbourg in the summer of 1745. In response, the next summer the French sent the largest fleet ever to cross the Atlantic Ocean up to that time to recapture Louisbourg, retake Acadia and reclaim French honour. The armada, under an inexperienced commander, was beset by a never-ending series of disasters and was unable to accomplish its mission.

The undersigned would be pleased to receive any comments or questions regarding this paper at contactus@hnhps.ca.

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Louisbourg Lost—France’s Answer

Perhaps no one was more surprised than themselves when, in June 1745, after a seven-week siege, a rag-tag force of 4,000 New England militiamen, supported by a British fleet, captured the “impregnable” French fortress of Louisbourg in retaliation for French attacks at Canso and Annapolis. France’s answer to this insult was to send the largest fleet ever assembled across the Atlantic. Its aim was not only to recapture Louisbourg, but take back all of Acadia it had lost by the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713.

The fleet embarked on Wednesday, June 22, 1746, from the west coast of France under the command of Jean-Baptiste-Louis-Frédéric de la Rochefoucauld de Roye, Duc d’Anville. The fleet consisted of ten ships of the line, seven frigates and sloops, two fire ships, 19 transports, 14 store ships, 11 merchantmen and one hospital ship. On board were 3,500 infantry marines and artillery gunners, as well as 7,300 sailors, which consisted of officers, petty officers and seamen (many of whom were conscripted)—in all about 11,000 men and 25,000 tons of shipping. Nearly six months later, only a few ships and men from this great armada straggled home to French ports. In the words of Nova Scotia author Thomas H. Raddall, “The story of this great armada is one of the most tragic in the history of America.”

What happened to cause such a disaster?

Just about everything, as it turned out: sub-standard ships, poor preparations, rotten food, raging storms, unexpected calms, disease and inadequate leadership, to name but a few. The French Navy had been ignored for years and its warships were old. Major overhauls of ships—a frequent necessity in the days of wooden hulls—were inconsistent. Most admirals were too elderly to go to sea, the products of a promotion system based on seniority and favour with the Royal Court rather than ability, and many of them had never been in battle. As the expedition’s commander, Duc d’Anville, only 39, had little naval experience. He owed his appointment to his cousin, the Secretary of State for the Navy, Jean-Frédéric Phélypeaux, Comte de Maurepas.

Contracts for food, drink, ships’ stores and hundreds of other items were awarded to those with friends in high places, which often resulted in sub-standard goods. Biscuit, a key item of the sailors’ diet, was frequently rotten, often reissued after being returned from earlier campaigns. This had no effect on officers, fed from completely separate sources.

When news of Louisbourg’s fall reached France, King Louis XV was shocked. Something had to be done, and an armada originally assembled to assist the Jacobite cause of Bonnie Prince Charlie in Scotland was redirected to Canada.

The Fleet Sails

When the fleet left France, only d'Anville knew its real destination. It was to gather on the coast of Nova Scotia at Chibouctou (Chebucto) harbour—later established as Halifax in 1749—while crews thought they were sailing to Britain. Told of their true purpose later, many crews nearly mutinied, having a great fear of the long ocean crossing and the wild, uncharted, fog-bound coasts of Nova Scotia. Once they arrived on the coast, they were to join a squadron from the West Indies and, together with a French-native land force, coordinate an attack to recapture Louisburg. This would be followed by attacks on other British outposts, especially Annapolis Royal, and possibly as far as Boston.

The voyage to Nova Scotia, normally a seven-week passage, was beset by difficulties. The fleet took the southerly route to the West Indies using the Northeast Trade Winds, and then rode the Gulf Stream northwards to Nova Scotia, 5,400 kilometres longer than the more direct northern route, but usually a more comfortable and calmer crossing. Only not this time. The convoy soon encountered variable headwinds, fog, thunder and lightning. Ships' progress slowed to a crawl, while some collided in poor visibility.

After three weeks, the ships had barely made it out of the Bay of Biscay. For soldiers and others unused to the sea, the situation aboard the crowded ships quickly became appalling. Lice spread everywhere, while seasickness affected many. During the fourth week, the fleet finally picked up the trade winds and made twice as much progress as it did during the previous three weeks.

But the armada struggled. In addition to pulmonary, venereal and infectious diseases, which already plagued ships' crews before departure, inadequate and rotten provisions contributed to hundreds of cases of scurvy. Several seamen died, their number soon increased by outbreaks of typhus and typhoid. As many as 50 bodies a day went over the side. Water also began to run out.

With crews severely depleted and often becalmed by a lack of wind, the convoy finally arrived off Sable Island on September 10, just in time for the annual fall gales. During a terrific storm, several ships were sunk, others demasted and all scattered. Slowly, the remnants of the once great fleet reassembled, considerably fewer than before the storm. Some ships' captains, believed they could not carry on, and returned independently to France.

Arrival at Chibouctou (Chebucto)

After enduring a three-month voyage, the remaining 16 ships—less than a quarter of d'Anville's original force—arrived at Chebucto on September 21.

The pressure on the inexperienced commander, who despaired of ever completing his mission, must have been tremendous. Failure seemed the only possible outcome. During the night of September 25, alone in his cabin, d'Anville suffered an attack that left him partially paralysed and drowsy. The ministrations of the naval surgeon—the bleeding and enemas of the time—did little to help and he died two days later. Shortly

afterwards, 36 ships, including six of the line from his battered fleet, sailed into Chebucto harbour, too late for d'Anville.

Shortly after d'Anville's death, 700 French troops from Quebec, 300 Abenaki from the St. John River and 300 Mi'kmaq from Nova Scotia, under the command of Jean-Baptiste Nicholas Roch de Ramezay, with Abbé Jean-Louis Le Loutre coordinating the native force, arrived to greet the fleet. They had been waiting for d'Anville's fleet since the summer and were already in the process of dispersing or returning to Quebec. But upon hearing the news of the fleet's arrival, they regrouped to greet the battered fleet.

Command of the d'Anville expedition fell to Commodore Constantin-Louis d'Estourmel, 55, an inexperienced officer clearly not up to the task. While d'Estourmel pondered his new appointment, d'Anville was buried on Ile à la Raquette, today's Georges Island. D'Estourmel, visibly shaken, held a council of war on September 29 to decide what to do next. His preference was clearly to return to France, but virtually every senior naval and army officer opposed him, believing French honour must be satisfied by attacking the English somewhere.

What happened next remains unclear, but in a few hours D'Estourmel was wounded by having been run through with his own sword, apparently self-inflicted. Weakened, he resigned and handed over command to Jacques-Pierre de Taffanel, Marquis de la Jonquière. La Jonquière, 61, a respected, seasoned sailor, was one of those most opposed to returning to France. With the remainder of the fleet and the combined French and native force, he knew he was not strong enough to attack Louisburg, but hoped to take Annapolis Royal.

De Ramezay's troops and native warriors were sent overland to Annapolis Royal and arrived in mid-October. They camped there for 21 days waiting for La Jonquière's ships to arrive from Chebucto.

Birch Cove

In preparation, La Jonquière ordered the fleet into Bedford Basin and anchored at Birch Cove, where hundreds of sick and dying were put ashore to recover while senior officers took stock of their situation. It was not good.

Not only had the great storm severely reduced the armada, the squadron from the West Indies never arrived. And instead of getting better, the men ashore got steadily worse. Soon the shores of the little cove were dotted with hastily dug graves. The best estimates of the number who were buried at Chebucto vary between 1,100 and 2,000, but the actual total will never be known.

From mid-October, troops and sailors, many still sick, slowly returned to their ships. On several there were barely enough seamen to man them properly. On October 24, four weeks after arriving at Chebucto, the remains of the fleet departed for their siege on Annapolis Royal—13 ships carrying 94 infantry officers and 1,410 soldiers. Also onboard were 50 Acadian pilots from Minas and Abbé Le Loutre. The hospital ship set

sail for France with the most critically ill. But soon the weather worsened, which prevented the fleet headed to Annapolis from reaching its destination.

Information about an approaching British fleet caused La Jonquière to rethink his plans. A hastily convened council of war decided it was now impossible to attack Annapolis; orders were given to sail immediately for France to save as many of the surviving ships and men as possible. Orders were also dispatched to De Ramezay to withdraw from Annapolis Royal. But the trials of the sorely-tested Frenchmen were not over. As the flotilla passed Cape Sable, violent gales struck, scattering vessels far and wide. Individually and in small groups, ships began to make their way back to France.

After more storms and additional deaths, a few ships finally made French ports in December. In all, perhaps as many as 8,000 men sailors, soldiers and seamen died without ever having faced the enemy in battle. In their haste to put such a monumental failure behind them, French naval authorities quickly buried the memory and the records of it, attributing the catastrophe to a series of unfortunate events. It was as if the expedition, one of the worst naval disasters in history, had never occurred.

Another unanticipated and deadly consequence of the French expedition was the effect on the hundreds of Mi'kmaw warriors who gathered at Chebucto to await arrival of the ships. Historians record the Mi'kmaq came into contact with disease-wracked crews through receiving woolen blankets as presents, which were unintentionally infected with typhus. The contagion spread throughout the province. Abbé Maillard, who returned from France with the d'Anville fleet, would later point out in correspondence to Paul Mascarene (the colony's Administrator during part of the extended absence of Governor Richard Phillips), there were losses of over half of the Mi'kmaq warriors in northern Nova Scotia by 1746 and upwards of half of the entire Mi'kmaq population may have died "during the fall and winter of 1746-'47." As Queens University historian James Pritchard noted "...the impact of the French arrival on the Micmacs of Nova Scotia was murderous."

Better to Have Waited

Ironically, the French could have saved themselves the enormous loss of men, materiel and money if they had just waited a bit longer. French victories in Europe in 1747 led to peace the next year. Louisburg was returned to France in exchange for the removal of French forces from the Netherlands. Needless to say, the New Englanders were thoroughly disgusted with their mother country's decision, widely seen as a double-cross. These feelings would be reinforced over the next few years, culminating in the American Revolution.

The return of Louisburg to the French also had a profound effect upon Nova Scotia. Never happy with the situation of Annapolis Royal, the British decided to move the capital and in 1749 founded Halifax at Chebucto harbour. Newly arrived settlers found the bones of many of d'Anville's men scattered along the shores of Bedford Basin.

But the admiral's bones were not among them. On September 3, 1749, Governor Cornwallis permitted the French to disinter d'Anville's body from George's Island and

transport it to Louisburg. He was reburied in the King's Chapel with proper ceremony, finally attaining in death the location he had been unable to achieve in life. Legend also has it his heart was sent back to France.

On May 15, 1925, the Duc d'Anville's encampment site at Birch Cove on Bedford Basin was named a National Historic Site of Canada and is located on a small plot of land in Centennial Park.