

# THE BATTLE FOR ANGUILLA 1796

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The story of this battle is well known in Anguillan history but it might be of interest to look at the details a little more closely. In this connection it is worth quoting a description which appeared in 1933 in a book by St Johnston entitled 'The Leeward Islands during the French wars'. As a background it should be remembered that a fresh outbreak of war had occurred between Britain and France in 1773.

Thus it was that 'in November 1796 the notorious revolutionary Victor Hughes sent (presumably from St Martin) an expedition of three or four hundred men in two French frigates, the Valiant (4 guns) and the Decius (30 guns) to devastate Anguilla. They landed at Rendezvous Bay. The inhabitants made a determined resistance, using up all their ammunition and finally having to take lead fish net weights to make shot, but had at last retreat to Sandy Hill Fort. News reached Captain Barton of HMS Lapwing (76 guns) then at Basseterre, St Kitts and he hastened to the rescue. The French heard of his approach, cease their plundering and hastily re-embarked. In a brief but brilliant action Captain Barton forced the Valiant ashore at St Martin, across the narrow channel, and riddled the Decius so much that she had to strike her colours. Whereupon Barton took off her troops and then set fire to her. They were bloodthirsty days and the Anguillians, somewhat naturally incensed at the French plundering, and particularly at the murder of a crippled man named Hodge, took the law into their own hands and shot a number of prisoners through the

loopholes of a stone prison at Crocus Bay. Captain Barton, on the other hand, received a well-deserved Sword of Honour, and an Address, from the residents at the Basseterre headquarters.'

From this brief description it is clear that the Battle for Anguilla involved both a land battle and a naval engagement. The details of the letter are probably much better known than the fighting which occurred in Anguilla itself. Here Anguilla's own militia were involved and, under the command of Deputy Governor Benjamin Gumbs, were able not only to harass and delay the vastly superior, better armed and better trained French troops but also finally to hold them at Sandy Hill Fort. There as the description above indicates, they made a determined resistance and even had to resort to using lead fishing weights to make ammunition for their muskets and cannon. When in 1825 H.N. Coleridge (who subsequently described his trip in 'Six Months in the West Indies in 1825') visited Anguilla he was told by the same Deputy Governor, Benjamin Gumbs, of the valiant resistance of the Anguilla he was told the French landing and of how the French, seeing the English ship sailing down the channel between Anguilla and St Martin, had abandoned their siege at Sandy Hill and Had retreated and re-embarked their troops.

Coleridge wrote that the attack 'could serve no warlike or colonial purpose especially as, it is said, the instructions to the officers were to exterminate the inhabitants, the French burned the little town, stabbed men in their houses and stripped women of their clothes. In such a case it is a real satisfaction to know that punishment followed hard upon the crime. Every man in the expedition was afterwards killed or taken prisoner by the Lapwing and the two French ships were destroyed.' When he asked Governor Gumbs about the tactics he used

against the French he was informed by the old warrior that 'I told the men, I'll tell you what, I know nothing about marching and countermarching, but my advice is to you to wait till the enemy comes close, and then fire and load and fire again like the devil.' As Coleridge wrote, 'Victor Hughes himself would have trembled to have heard such a soldier in his den, but that ruffian never did anything more wantonly atrocious than ordering the attack on Anguilla in 1796. When Coleridge mentioned to Governor Gumbs that there was no flag on the flagstaff at Government House the latter remarked 'it matters little for no enemy, Sir, will ever penetrate into this country to see whether we have a flag or not.'

In regard to the naval engagement, which followed the land battle, Captain Barton's own account of the action as addressed to the Admiralty published in 'Naval Achievements of Great Britain' under the heading 'Capture of Le Desius: November 26<sup>th</sup> 1796', is brief and to the point –

'Basseterre, December 3, 1796

Sir,

A packet leaving this place today for England, I embrace the opportunity, for the satisfaction of their Lordships, to acquaint them, that I anchored at St. Kitts on the 25<sup>th</sup> ultimo, when an express boat had been sent from the Island of Anguilla, to inform the Admiral, that the island was attacked by two French men-of-war, and several small vessels, containing four hundred troops, I felt it my duty (as the express boat returned here with the loss of her main mast), to leave the service I was ordered on, to endeavour to relieve the place. The wind being to the northwest, prevented my getting up there in time to stop them from burning the town; but I have the pleasure to day, after an action of nearly two hours, I effectually relieved the island by taking the ship and sinking the brig. The

ship proved to be Le Desius, mounting 24 six pounders, 4 twelve pound carronades, and 2 brass field pieces, with 133 men of her own complement and 203 troops, commanded by Mons. Andree Seris; and the brig La Vaillante, mounting 4 twenty-four pounders, with 45 men and 90 troops, commanded by Mons. Laboutique.

I am,

(signed) R. Barton.

N.B. I am informed that they were picked troops from the garrison under the command of Victor Hughes, for the sole purpose of plundering and destroying the island.'

It is recorded that, in the course of the action HMS Lapwing suffered one man killed and six wounded and Le Desius had eighty men killed and four wounded. #after the action was over Captain Barton was proceeding with his prize to St. Christopher when, on the following day, he was chased by two French frigates. In order to prevent Le Desius from being recaptured he was compelled, after taking off the prisoners, to set the ship on fire.

By contrast to Capt. Barton's own report the Address from the inhabitants of Saint Christopher, subsequently presented to Captain Robert Barton, was couched in the most and laudatory terms. It read as follows:

'Deputations from a whole community are not common, because it rarely happens that actions so brilliant as to excite general admiration are performed; but your success, Sir, is of a

nature so glorious to yourself, so honourable to the service in which you are engaged, so fortunate and critical for the inhabitants of Anguilla, that a sister colony would be insensible not to feel, and ungrateful not to acknowledge it. It is not, however, by your acknowledgments or emotions that your deserts can be expressed, they are proclaimed by the tongues and engraved on the hearts of the people you saved; whom a merciless enemy doomed to destruction and whom you rescued from the horrors with which they were menaced. These devoted people hail you as their deliverer, bless you for the security and happiness to which they are restored; and while they recite your action, will perpetuate your name in the traditions of their country, and the memories of their children, nor do the testimonies of your honour cease here; even your enemies bear witness to the value of your exertions, and the importance of your victory. They tell it whenever they mention their losses and disappointments, the destruction of their shipping and the slaughter of their men. They tell it too, not indeed so loudly, but much more emphatically, whenever they mention your humanity and goodness, your care of the wounded, your anxiety for their preservation when the *Desius* was sinking, your endeavours and success in rescuing from the waves such as the fury of the battle had blindly driven into them; while saying this, they acknowledge that mercy and courage are the inseparable associates of noble minds, and that the honour of the union is yours'.

As a postscript it is worth mentioning that, when in 1848 Queen Victoria authorised the issue of a Naval General Service Medal for naval engagements that had taken place between 1793 and 1840 (with bars for the 230 different engagements concerned), the 26<sup>th</sup> bar was awarded to the officers and men of H.M.S. *Lapwing* (of whom in 1848 there were only three still

alive) and was inscribed LAPWING 3 DEC 1746 (the date being incorrect).

But who was 'the notorious revolutionary Victor Hughes' who is mentioned in the various accounts above? He was the son of a Marseilles baker, born around 1760, who in the 1780's had made much money as a slave trader in Port-au-Prince in French Hispaniola (Haiti). Following the slaves revolt in that island he had moved to Guadeloupe where, with the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789, he had found it more profitable to engage in piracy in the name of the Revolution. Thus, Pointe-a-Pitre became a great centre of the French corsairs in the Caribbean, organised by Victor Hughes, and fortunes were made by the local traders, much of the booty being disposed of through the Dutch islands.

With the outbreak of war with Britain in 1793 Victor Hughes first defeated an invading British force (supported by French Royalists) and then caused considerable damage and destruction to their shipping in the Caribbean. He became self-declared dictator in the area, paying little heed to instructions from the Revolutionary Directory in Paris, though implementing their terror tactics. In 1796, as we know, he organised the vicious French attack on Anguilla; and this was followed by a declaration of war on the United States, which country Hughes then accused of selling arms and ships to Britain. He went on to say that 'the very name of America inspires only scorn and horror here, the Americans have become the reactionary enemies of every ideal of liberty after fooling the world with their Quaker play-acting'. Initially Hughes' attacks on American shipping were very successful until in 1798 Congress declared war on France. Thereafter Hughes' name fades from history

and is lost in the turmoil of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars.

The events in the Battle for Anguilla were commemorated by a special issue of six postage stamps in November 1976. The name Lapwing has also been handed down and several Anguillan boats have since carried that name. Unfortunately the site of the historic fort at Sandy Hill was not preserved and all traces of the fortification disappeared when the hilltop was cleared to permit the construction of a Government building there in 1968.