

LETTERS OF AN OFFICER
OF
ROYAL ENGINEERS
TO
HIS FATHER.

LETTERS OF AN OFFICER

OF THE

Corps of Royal Engineers,

FROM THE

BRITISH ARMY IN HOLLAND, BELGIUM,
AND FRANCE,

TO HIS FATHER,

FROM THE LATTER END OF 1813 TO 1816.



LONDON :

JAMES NISBET & CO., 21, BERNERS-STREET, W.

1872.

210. m. 135.

Part VII

Tholen, March 3, 1814.

Received yours, my dear father, of the 16th February, this day, for which many thanks. I have now nothing in hand but a small defensive work to protect the ferry on the Bergen-op-Zoom side of the river. The frost left us yesterday, which makes the country not so pleasant, the roads being so bad.

Rosendaal, March 10.

I resume my letter, my dearest father and mother, to ask you to join with me in praising God. Bless the Lord, our souls, and all that is within us bless His holy name ; who redeemed my life from destruction. Surely God has been my refuge and fortress, His truth my shield and buckler. He hath delivered me from terror by night, and the arrow that flieth by day.

7th March.

I received an order to go to Halteren, a village between Tholen and Bergen-op-Zoom. I rode over, and found there eight sappers with two wagons of tools. As the village was full of soldiers, a billet could only be obtained at some distance. I passed the night at Tholen.

8th March.

Extract from 'Letters of an officer of the Corps of Royal Engineers'.
See <http://books.google.com> for the whole publication

Left early for Halteren, with the kind expression of my hostess to come to her house should I again visit Tholen. My billet at Halteren was at a cottage, the owner half labourer, half farmer. It afforded only one sitting-room for all the family, our two selves and two Dutch waggoners. How we should sleep was a question ; but, as it proved, there was no occasion for taking thought for a sleeping place. As often the case, we busy ourselves in vain. From the number of soldiers collected together in the village, as the day advanced, it became apparent that something was in view, though the particular object remained concealed, and became a subject of discussion and conjecture among the various assembled groups.

ATTACK ON BERGEN-OP-ZOOM

Between six and seven o'clock I received a message to come to Major-General Skerret's, where his staff and a party of officers, among whom was Sir G. Hoste, were finishing dinner. He had been sent over from head quarters with instructions for an attack that night upon the fortress of Bergen-op-Zoom, which he had communicated to the General.

He now entered more into detail with me as to my part. The object was to take the garrison by surprise; ten o'clock was named for the hour of the assault, which had been fixed in reference to the attack by the river, as it was low water at that time ; otherwise a later hour would have been in every respect preferable.

He gave me a note, which stated that I was to put myself under the orders of Colonel Carleton, who commanded that portion of the 44th Regiment with the army, to lead the storming party, entering by the river into the town.

A tracing was shown me of the part of the fortifications where our attack was to be made. First, there was the dyke to be crossed close under a battery, which commanded its whole length. Then the descent into the river, the position of the guard-vessel in the middle of the river, with spiked harrows fixed at the bottom of the river on each side of the vessel and in front of it. The vessel itself and the entrance by the river was protected by two light pieces of artillery placed at the bend of the river into the town.

These obstacles being overcome, we were to mount the right bank of the river a little beyond the guard-vessel, where stood the guard house. Before entering into the body of the place, there still remained some palisades to be passed, and a bridge over a curve of the river communicating with the outworks.

There were to be two other columns of attack, besides a false one to draw the attention of the garrison to the other side of the town.

Sir G. Hoste then left for his own post, as attached to Major-General Cooke, commanding one of the columns.

Bergen-op-Zoom is strongly fortified ; the garrison, however, was weak and inadequate for the extensive works to be defended. The severe frost which had set in rendered it the

Extract from 'Letters of an officer of the Corps of Royal Engineers'.

See <http://books.google.com> for the whole publication

more assailable as the wet ditches were frozen over. The ice was kept broken in the middle of the ditches ; the breadth broken was not sufficient, but that by planks laid across an easy passage might be effected.

The possession of Bergen was an object to the Dutch for the defence of Holland in case of any reverse to the allies, and also affording us a ready communication with the sea. It was now a great annoyance, requiring a constant watch to prevent the garrison supplying their need by plundering the farms around.

The attack by the Water-gate, as the more difficult and dangerous, had been committed to Carleton, who had distinguished himself on similar occasions in the Spanish sieges.

Our column was ordered to assemble at nine o'clock; the intervening time afforded an opportunity for prayer and recollection. Where so many dangers were to be encountered, hope could scarcely dare to realize an earthly existence beyond that night. It was hid in the counsels of Divine Providence who should be preserved amidst the arrows of death ; and to the Almighty Director of all events I sought to commit myself, not without, I hope, a trust that whether for life or death my Redeemer liveth.

At the appointed hour we were paraded to the number of 11,000 men under the command of Major-General Skerret and Brigadier-General Gore. The Royals numbered 600 ; 44th, 300 ; two companies of 27th and 28th, 200. A selection was then made for the advanced party, or forlorn hope, who were

placed under Carleton. My place was with this party with seventeen sappers, furnished with various tools and implements for clearing away palisades or other impediments to our progress. We walked in front taking the lead with the guide, who was given in special charge to two men never to lose sight of him.

Halteren, the village from whence we started, is about two miles distant from the town. The first part of the way lay along the road, from which we deviated to an open field track, the fields being separated from each other by water ditches. It was a clear bright night, and the snow, which slightly covered the ground, made our column the more distinguishable. There was nothing now to conceal us from the observation of the sentinels on the ramparts had they been on the look out.¹⁾

It was an anxious time as we wended our way in this exposed situation to the dyke, which preserves these lands from the

¹ A second column under Major-General Cooke of 1,000 men, comprising Guards and others, were to enter about Bastion 4 from the Water Gate, and two from the Antwerp Gate. A third column of 1,200 were to have entered near the Breda Gate, but finding the garrison lining the ramparts, as they were late, followed to the place where the Guards entered. Thus there would be about 3,000 men in Bergen-op-Zoom, a much larger number than the garrison. Some of the false attack made good an entrance.

1st column, Major-General Skerret ... 1,100

2d col. Major-General Cooke 1,000

3d col 2,100

False attack 650

Extract from 'Letters of an officer of the Corps of Royal Engineers'.

See <http://books.google.com> for the whole publication

inundation of the river. The barking of a dog greatly alarmed us, and this followed by a musket going off accidentally in the rear quickened our apprehensions lest discovery should entirely frustrate the object of our expedition. A complete surprise could only give a prospect of success to an attack like ours upon a place so carefully prepared with every means of defence.

At last the dyke was reached, and we commenced filing along it to the fortifications, having in our face the battery which swept the whole length of the dyke on both sides. What a position was this to be in ! Happily we were unperceived. We now arrived close under the ramparts, and halted in anxious suspense for ten o'clock before crossing the dyke and descending into the river. It was barely ten when the sound of distant firing reached us. The alarm was thus given. There was no time to be lost. We scrambled up as well as we could the slippery sides of the dyke. The battery opened its fire, accompanied with one of small arms. Our safety consisted in rushing forward. As we jumped into the river, the guard, panic-struck, and ignorant of the extent of danger, hurried out of the vessel, and we, getting through the spikes and water, followed its defenders up the river. I was a little in advance of the Colonel, who, turning suddenly to the right, got up its bank, crying out, " I am in first." We hastened to the guard-house, which was almost deserted, the men being occupied upon the ramparts firing at our people who were crossing the dyke. They made little defence, and gave up their arms, bewildered by the suddenness and boldness of the

attack. The officer of the guard surrendered his sword to me. Having disarmed the guard, we took them with us. Our party consisted only of the advance. Those following were checked, and left the advance unsupported on account of the fire from the other side of the river. We now proceeded to the palisades, which presented no obstacle, the gate having been left open. The bridge over the river, which formed the communication between the town and outworks, was not drawn up, thus affording a free passage. Here, according to our instructions, we took to the right hand along the ramparts.

General Gore agreed with Carleton that it was better not to pause for the rest of the column, but to advance rapidly, to prevent the rallying of the different guards, and with the prospect of meeting General Cooke's column.

In our progress along the rampart at first we only fell in with the sentries, and then larger parties. They were all disarmed, the muskets being thrown over the rampart into the ditch, and the prisoners following in the rear.

We came to a halt about the fourth bastion, disappointed as to meeting General Cooke's column, of the place of whose entry, by some oversight, we had not been informed, though we were now near the very spot ; but they were very late. Our bugle was sounded, but in vain we listened for any response. I do not think our party exceeded one hundred and fifty— probably under. Our prisoners were,

Extract from 'Letters of an officer of the Corps of Royal Engineers'.
See <http://books.google.com> for the whole publication

however, more numerous, which in the dusk gave some importance to our body.

Again we resumed our progress along the ramparts, to prevent the assemblage of our opponents. It was found it did not answer to stand to fire, as our adversaries did the same ; but when we ran upon them they either surrendered or made their escape down the slopes. Our men, however, could not be kept from firing, which in the darkness was dangerous to ourselves. The Colonel complained of being separated from his own men, and being placed over others who neither knew him nor his voice.

We had now advanced more than half round the ramparts, and were quite at a loss to account for not having seen or heard anything of the other attacking columns so anxiously looked for. We had passed the Antwerp, and were close upon the Breda Gate. At Bastion No. 8 our progress was arrested by a more numerous body than we had hitherto encountered, who seemed determined to contest our further advance. This bastion was planted with trees, from behind which they fired upon us. Our party returned the fire. Their ardour being damped, were reluctant to come to the charge.

We had, however, become mixed with them in hand to hand fight around the trees, and were making prisoners, when the slow beat of a drum attracted our attention. As this ominous sound drew nearer, our opponents took fresh courage, while it filled us with anxiety. We soon discerned a large body of men advancing with measured step along the curtain leading

to the bastion in which we were engaged. Our contest was renewed with fresh energy.

A ball felled General Gore, which I noticed to Colonel Carleton. The column still gradually and cautiously approached, with the same ominous beat of drum, until they had entered to the middle of the bastion, when they came to a halt, as if to discern between friends and foes. This gave our brave Colonel an opportunity of rallying his little band, and the prisoners in our rear concealed in some measure the insignificance of our numbers. Observing their hesitation (for a sort of solemn pause had taken place), our gallant Colonel put on a bold face, and, stepping in advance, said, " Messieurs, mettez bas vos armes."

The answer was a volley of musketry, and this distinguished officer fell to the ground. Our party now made a simultaneous movement in retreat, but finding that after a little firing the column resumed its former caution, with slow step and beat of drum, we retired leisurely, with the hope of falling in with our own people. This cautious advance and hesitation of the main body of the garrison proceeded probably from the supposition that we were merely a detachment preceding the main body. It, however, proved our safety, and enabled us to bring off our prisoners, as we met with no opposition, except from stragglers who had resorted to the ramparts.

When we had retired to about the place where the advance had been sounded in our previous progress, we discerned a large body of men in front of us. We anxiously hailed them.

Extract from 'Letters of an officer of the Corps of Royal Engineers'. See <http://books.google.com> for the whole publication

They, knowing that no column had entered in the direction from which we came, had so entirely concluded us enemies, and were prepared to treat us as such, that no response was made to our cry.

Imagine our mutual joy when we recognised each other, and found that this was Major-General Cooke's column, consisting principally of the Guards, which had effected its entrance by the batardeau. The other column, which attempted an entrance near the Breda Gate, the next bastion to the one where we met our repulse, had been obliged to retire with considerable loss, and were brought in following the Guards. With General Cooke I had the pleasure of falling in with Colonel Smyth and Sir G. Hoste, and exchanging mutual congratulations, considering that the place was ours ; but was sorry to hear that Abbey was shot through the leg and arm (he now lies in a doubtful state), and Adamson killed by a shot through the head.

The opinion of our leaders was that we should remain quiet during the night, and take possession in the morning. Colonel Smyth then took his leave to report to the General, Sir G. Hoste accompanying him.

The plan adopted seemed unhappy. Here we were, men and officers standing about in a cold night. There were some casements or damp vaults where we passed some of the time. Close to the ramparts ran the wall of a garden, where was a small building, but carried up as a sort of look-out or summer-house, much higher than the surrounding houses, so as to give a commanding view. Here the General took up his abode.

Our passiveness was misconstrued, and invited attack. The garrison got possession of the houses of the streets abutting upon the ramparts, and annoyed us greatly. A sharp contest ensued, and they were driven out. Bullets were continually whizzing round us during the night.

From our quietness the garrison began to resume courage, and make little attacks. They retired immediately on our men showing themselves, but these not following up their assailants, it only encouraged a repetition of them. Allowing them to be the aggressors revived their hopes.

Believing myself the only Engineer officer in the place, I made frequent visits to the look-out, to see if the General had any orders. Lord Proby, who commanded the Guards, was filled with melancholy forebodings. He had taken up his post with the General, and seemed occupied in instilling the diffidence with which his own mind was filled. He characterized our situation as desperate, (although exactly the reverse, as any decisive measure must, humanly speaking, have insured success,) and the importance of the safety of the Guards.

Our position as the morning dawned was about as follows :— We had possession of the ramparts, from the Antwerp Gate to the Waterport, with the interruption of occasional stragglers, and probably as much further as we had chosen to send any party in force.

That part of General Skerret's column which had been checked by the fire from the ramparts, and had not followed the advance, had turned to the left-hand rampart, of which

Extract from 'Letters of an officer of the Corps of Royal Engineers'.
See <http://books.google.com> for the whole publication

they gained possession, and with it the command of the arsenal. The General, however, had been killed.

Part, also, of the false attack had established them selves near the Steinbergen Gate.

It was greatly in our favour that the inhabitants were all with us. We were much more numerous than the garrison ; and though they ventured to approach us, yet the moment the infantry showed themselves they ranoff.

The Royal Scots, who formed part of the Water-gate column, seem unaccountably to have remained in the outwork, instead of following into the town, or at least a number of them. Now the outwork was entirely commanded by the town ramparts, and a party of the garrison coming thither at dawn, saw the position of the Royals, and fired upon them, who then ran to the further end of the outwork for shelter. The General's attention was drawn to this from the look-out. Instead of a detachment being sent to drive away the stragglers who were firing upon the Royals, and when all was expectation of some decisive movement, to take possession of the place, we were surprised by an order for the Guards to leave the town.

Their Colonel withdrew his men by the way they entered. The other regiments occupied the ramparts to cover their retreat. The Guards were reluctant to abandon their comrades, and many of them gave expression to their feelings in thus retiring before the French and deserting their companions.

Those that remained were quite equal to the taking of the place, had there been a leader. Seeing, however, the turn things were taking, and that a capitulation was purposed, I went to the General to ask him whether, as the Sappers could be of no further service, I might withdraw them. With his consent we followed the Guards by the batardeau.

Outside the works were Sir Thos. Graham and Colonel Smyth, much cast down at the result of an undertaking which had promised so fairly. With them was a large reinforcement ready to march in. The race is not always to the swift, nor the battle to the strong. The Colonel smiled at my trophy, and directed me to go to Rosendaal.

Being on the Antwerp side of the town, the river cut us off from Halteren, obliging us to make the circuit of the fortifications. The corpse of poor Adamson lay in an outhouse, and several of the wounded in a house near. Abbey had been removed to Rosendaal.²⁾

² It seems evident that the failure of the assault arose partly from some misunderstanding, as it respects the false attack. At ten o'clock, which was the critical moment of the assault of the different columns, when everything demanded the greatest stillness, the false attack made as much noise as they could, with firing, and brought the garrison everywhere to the ramparts. But for this, at the river we should have made our entrance almost unperceived, with an undivided column, and might alone, under the guidance of Carleton, have taken the town. Had General Cooke's column been more punctual, they would have entered harmless, under the protection of Carleton's advance.

Extract from 'Letters of an officer of the Corps of Royal Engineers'.
See <http://books.google.com> for the whole publication

As we made our way round, a brisk firing was going on along the ramparts on this side of the fortifications ;and when afterwards they heard of the capitulation, many made their escape across the ditch. We reached Halteren about noon ; found my servant anxiously on the watch, and not a little relieved by my appearance.

Having collected our goods, we proceeded to Rosendaal, where I am comfortably billeted.

A bullet passed through my hat, close above my head, another through my coat. My three leading companions, Generals Skerret and Gore and Colonel Carleton, were killed ; then, again, Abbey and Adamson.

May that night be always remembered with thankfulness to God, and the life which He so graciously preserved show forth His praise.

Yours, &c, J. S.