

AN EXCEPTIONAL AND RARE MGS 1793 TO A ROYAL YORK RANGERS LIGHT COMPANY OFFICER WHO WAS SEVERAL TIMES WOUNDED DURING HIS SERVICE, INCLUDING AT THE TAKING OF MARTINIQUE IN 1809. HIS COMPANY LEAD A BAYONET CHARGE AT THE TAKING OF GUADELOUPE, THE REGIMENT SUFFERING OVER A THIRD THE NUMBER OF CASUALTIES SUFFERED BY THE ENTIRE ARMY THEY WERE LATER CELEBRATED IN DESPATCHES FOR THEIR GALLANTRY



MILITARY GENERAL SERVICE 1793, 2 CLASPS MARTINIQUE, GUADALOUPE ‘JOHN FLETCHER, LIEUT. ROYAL YORK RANGERS’

THE ROYAL YORK RANGERS

The Royal York Rangers was formed in 1807 from companies of the Royal African Corps serving in Guernsey. It was primarily composed of condemned men, mostly British and Irish prisoners desperate to escape the gallows. Despite its penal battalion character, it was an extremely effective regiment, receiving praise for its conduct and gallantry during the operations against Martinique and Guadeloupe. At the latter, the Regiment would sustain extremely high casualties whilst assaulting the enemy's hilltop positions, the taking of which led to the surrender of the French on the Island. With a uniform of green with red facings, they looked not dissimilar to the 60th Rifles whose uniform it was based on.

CAPTAIN JOHN FLETCHER

The service of Captain John Fletcher from a book *‘Our Kindred Spirits’*, 1995, by G Mitchell which details his family history:

“...Once Commissioned, young John Fletcher set out to gain his own high reputation, especially during service in the British West Indies. Although he was promoted from Cornet

to Lieutenant in the Wagon train on 2nd Jan 1806, he must have found such ancillary troops to tame for his liking. In 1806 the Royal African Corps was converted to Light Infantry Regiments, one being designated the Royal York Rangers a year later. As a keen Subaltern he was able to arrange a transfer to this front line Corps, effective 5th March 1807.

By mid 1808 British troops were being concentrated on Barbados or aboard ships of the Royal Navy, prior to operations against the French held islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe. As the ear ended more troops arrived from Bermuda and Halifax and were organised as two Divisions under the overall command of General Sir George Beckwith. A force of 10,000 men set sail for Martinique on 28th Jan 1809. On the morning of 30th the 2nd Division landed in force at St Luce, detaching the RYR's to land at Anse d'Arlet, capture the battery at Cap Salomon and seize the heights commanding Pigeon Island. As the main force pushed inland with little resistance, the Rangers under Major Henderson reached their objectives and the Navy's Blue jackets, with much labour brought the heavy guns to the heights. By 3rd Feb these guns were able to fire into the fort at Pigeon Island which surrendered the next day,, leaving the entrance to Fort Royal Bay open to the British Fleet.

A month or so after Martiniques capture, a French Squadron sailed into some nearby islands called the Saints. Gen Maitland commanding the 2nd Division was ordered to seize them with a detachment of 2800 men, including the RYR's Flank Companies. Setting out from Martinique on 12th April, Gen Maitland's troops forced the surrender of the Saints and returned within a week. That August the Colonel of the RYR, John Fraser (later Gen), wrote to his superior indicating Fletcher's notable part in these operations:

Although you are well acquainted with Lieutenant Fletcher's merits as a Regimental Officer, I think it my duty to state that he was severely wounded in Fort Edward, Martinique, and that I had opportunities there, and at the capture of. Saints, of seeing him under heavy fire conducting himself with the gallantry of a soldier and the judgment of an Officer. He possesses the best qualification for our profession..



Then at the capture of Guadaloupe in February 1810 John's RYR company led the successful attack. Major Henderson and his two senior captains were wounded, but Fletcher continued unscathed this time. The hilltop action ended with a bayonet charge and with the unit losing 9 Officers and 105 men killed or wounded. The fortress surrendered and citations followed.

John Fletcher was promoted to Captain on 25 August 1811 and the Rangers were withdrawn to Barbados, it seems. Family lore has it that his wife Martha visited the and that daughter Anna was born on Barbados in October 1813. By early 1815 John was detached to Grenada with four companies of the Rangers- normally a Major's Command. That June he requested six months leave to return to England on his private affairs. Apparently this was his first leave in seven years foreign service! By then peace between Britain and France had been concluded, so his leave was likely extended. In May 1817 we find Lt General Fraser, the Rangers old Colonel, sending a testimonial to "Right Honourable Lord Palmerston, Secretary at War," in support of John's request for "compensation on account of wounds received in the West Indies. But with the War ended, the War Minister presumably decided retirement on half pay was in order and effective 9th October that Year John was assigned to the 37th Foot. He continued on half pay with that unit until 1821 when he sought another, more active Regiment and, supported with the plea of Sir Herbert Taylor, soon received a transfer to the 72nd Seaforth Highlanders. He retired from that famed Highland Regiment the next year. His Son Edward explains:

'Fathers Commission bears the honoured signature of Wellington, shortly after he sold out and entered into some speculation of Peruvian Bonds that turned out badly. The RYR's were I think something more than a mere Militia Corps; in the West Indies the were always in the thick of the Fray and I recollect seeing in a printed volume of despatches, the statement that on one occasion at Guadeloupe, the conduct of RYR's was such 'as to secure the issue of the Campaign...' in a letter of my Fathers (12th Jul 1847) in which he claimed the medal, then given for WI services, he winds up saying " From the year 1803 to the end of 1822 I served faithfully as an Officer in the Army. During that period I had long foreign service, was many times in trying situations and received several severe wounds, but with the injuries sustained not being attended with the loss of a limb, I received no pension". (A doctor Caldwell, later of Montreal, had cared for him when wounded). He certainly did his duty well and when I look at the number of flattering testimonials and letters which he received, I think of his quiet, unostentatious manner and of his many excellencies of mind and heart.... "

NOTES TO ABOVE MEMORIAL AND THE TAKING OF GUADALOUPE

Captain John Fletcher Service
Cornet, Royal Wagon Train -25/02/1804
Lieutenant, Royal Wagon Train - 02/01/1806
Lieutenant, Royal York Rangers Flank Company - 05/03/1807
Captain, Royal York Rangers - 25/08/1811
Captain HP, 37th Foot, 9/10/15
Captain HP, 72nd Foot, 1821
Retired 1822
Born in 1779, Captain Fletcher died 1853

In a letter dated 30 September 1817 (copy with research), sent to the Military Secretary, regarding Fletcher's desire to be removed to a Regiment not service in the West Indies and to be placed on Half Pay, gives a brief description of his service, including the following:

"The memorialist led a Flank Company at the taking of Martinique in February 1809, where he was severely wounded, afterwards at the Saints, and also at the conquest of Guadeloupe, in the years 1810 and 1815"

The action in which Lieutenant Fletcher's company led the bayonet charge on the fortified hilltop at Guadaloupe gained many plaudits for the Regiment but at a heavy cost. Indeed whilst the capture of Gualaloupe cost the Army 4 Officers, 48 Men killed and 15 Officers, 243 Men wounded, the Royal York Rangers alone lost 4 Officers, 27 men killed and 5 Officers, 82 Men wounded, or over a third of the casualties suffered by the entire Army. Further details are as follows:

BRIGADE ORDERS. Feb. 4, 1810.—Brigadier-general Wale has the honour to congratulate his brigade upon the complete success of the action of yesterday, in which as much real, cool, and intrepid courage was displayed, as ever appeared among the annals of history!—Six hundred of the royal York rangers went to the attack of 500 of the best troops of the enemy through passes deemed, by them, impracticable, and routed them from a post considered as inaccessible. By this gallant achievement, the whole army hits this day the proud satisfaction of seeing the flag of truce displayed upon all the enemy's batteries, indicating the approaching end of our present labours.

'The pass of the river De la Pere was by nature most difficult, and was made still more by abbattis lined with troops, and every possible obstruction thrown in our way. Here it was the enemy first opened the fire of musketry; but our brave troops, superior to all difficulties, soon forced this passage. Having passed the river, we continued our march, for about 100 yards, through rugged rocks and bushes, when the front companies branched off into three columns, rapidly ascending the heights, the three leading companies reserving their fire till they gained the same; the remainder firing to their flanks on the enemy, but still following the van. As we approached the summit of the height, the ascent became more difficult, and about 500 of the enemy's best troops poured down on us a most destructive fire.



Major Henderson, with the three companies who first ascended the heights, found the enemy posted behind abbattis and stockaded redoubts. This intrepid officer did not return the fire of the enemy till within about twenty-five yards distance, and immediately closed with them; it was about one hour and a half from our being first engaged with the enemy, after the passage of the river, to their complete dispersion; during which time it was impossible for troops to shew more cool and undaunted courage, than was exhibited upon that occasion by that gallant regiment the Royal York Rangers, to every individual of which I feel highly indebted for the success of the day; and as your excellency was an eye-witness to the difficulties they surmounted, I need not say more upon the subject, and when all behaved well, it would be

invidious to distinguish particular merit. Major Henderson was wounded and disabled from further service by a ball in the breast, in close contact with the enemy.

'The brigadier-general deeply I regrets the loss of some gallant officers, and brave soldiers, but it was not to be expected that one of the strongest defended passes of the enemy, and the key to their entrenched camp, could be carried without considerable loss. To major Henderson, who led the attack, the brigadier-general has not words to express his high sense of that officer's invincible intrepidity in surmounting all difficulties, nor to captains Starck, Sutherland, Darling, and Mathewson, and the officers and soldiers in general, in support of their gallant leader. The brigadier-general calls to mind the critical moment when so many officers and men were killed and wounded; but for the undaunted firmness of the Regt the day would have been lost. But when the brigadier-general recollected the former exploits of the royal York rangers, he was convinced they would ultimately overcome all difficulties. The brigadier-general desires that the names of the gallant officers who fell in this action, lieutenants Coply, Symonds, Martincu, and Gregg, may be recorded in orders, as having greatly conduced to the success of the day. The brigadier-general returns his best thanks to major Hadden, the officers and soldiers of the grenadier battalion, for their support on that day.

GENERAL ORDERS. Head-quarters, Guadalupe, February 5, 1810.—The commander of the forces not being yet in possession of official reports from the general officers commanding divisions and brigades, intended to have deferred adverting in public orders to the high sense be entertains of the eminent services rendered by the generals, the staff, the officers of all kinds, the non-commissioned officers, and soldiers of the army now serving under his immediate command, until the final reduction of this important colony: but the conduct of the royal York rangers under the command of major Henderson. In the presence of brigadier-general Wale commanding the reserve, of which corps this regiment forms the principal part, has been of a nature so brilliant, anal so decisive in its Meets, that the commander of the forces feels it his duly to return his thanks in this public manner to brigadier-general Wale, major Henderson, and to the officers and men of the royal York rangers for their distinguished manner in forcing the enemy from their entrenchments and fastnesses in the woods and mountains on the evening of the 3d instant, turning the left of their position, seizing and maintaining the heights which commanded it. And the general is most sensible of the merits and discipline of this young corps in having the next morning at day-break, after being deprived of the talents and appearance of the brigadier-general, and major Henderson their commanding officer, both of whom were carried off the field wounded during the night, persisted in completing the important end arising from their position, by detaching under their captains, and, driving the enemy from his batteries, opened the passage of the bridge to the army which was not to be forced in front. Such a service is a precious deposit in the history of any corps, and cannot fail of being honoured with some signal mark of approbation of their king and country, and the commander of the forces trusts that the state of discipline of this regiment, its distinguished merits last campaign*, in maintaining Fort Edward, under the ordnance of Fort Dcssaix, and the exertions of Major Henderson, its commanding officer, on that and the present occasion, will secure to that officer all that consolation and promotion his uncommon services so highly entitle him to. .”



Condition EF, with original ribbon and a very attractive patina. Sold with a research on CD including Gazettes for actions in West Indies, letters regarding Half Pay, that details some of

his service, letters regarding his original Commission and transfer to the Royal African Corps and other research. Just 49 medals issued to the Royal York Rangers, 5 of which were to Officers.

An exceptional and very rare medal that would be hard to better for the campaigns in the West Indies 1808-15