The Fighting Temeraire: The Battle of Trafalgar and the Ship that Inspired J.M.W. Turner's Most Beloved Painting by Sam Willis

Once arrived off Belle isle, a force of eighty marines, made up of four officers, four sergeants, two drummers and seventy rank and file, was kept in constant readiness aboard the *Temeraire* to assist in the landing, with each man allocated three days' ration of bread and cheese. Eighty men were a drop in the ocean of such a mighty invasion force, but the valuable role of the Temeraire did not lie necessarily in the fate of these men, but in that of her captain. Matthew Barton had been ordered - and honoured - to command the fleet of flat-bottomed boats that was to land the invasion force itself and then to take command of the naval troops ashore. Once the plan of attack had been settled upon by the combined commanders, Commodore Keppel and Major-General Hodgson, the invasion itself would, for a time at least, be the sole responsibility of the captain of the *Temeraire*.

Up to 1761, British forces had enjoyed mixed success in amphibious assaults on French soil. At the start of the war they had only very vague ideas about how to conduct an amphibious landing, but by the time the Belle Isle operation was conceived many lessons had been learned. There had been a highly successful attack on Cherbourg in 1758, but a contrasting disaster at St Malo, where eight hundred British troops had been massacred on the beach at the bay of St Cast. Right from the inception of the Belle Isle assault, government ministers and military planners had harboured grave concerns about the prospect of attacking such a formidable natural fortress. To make matters worse, the British had been openly reconnoitring the island for almost six months. They had been unopposed throughout and had reported a perfect state of tranquillity on the island. In reality, however, the French knew that something was afoot and had taken great care to augment the island's natural defences. They had constructed formidable redoubts and had built batteries high into the cliffs. By the time that the British fleet sailed majestically around the south of the island on 7 April and began a detailed search for an appropriate landing place, the French were watching, quietly confident that every beach that could accommodate the landing force was a death trap.

Ignorant of the quality of the French preparations, the British drew up their plans. Six frigates were sent to cruise in the gap between the island and the mainland to sever any communications, while thirteen of the line and three frigates were despatched to cruise off Brest to prevent any sortie by the remnants of the French fleet. The *Temeraire*, so central to the forthcoming invasion itself, anchored a little distance away from the rest of the fleet and hoisted a blue pendant, the signal that she was the rendezvous point for all of the transports and the flat-bottomed boats. Keppel and Hodgson, meanwhile, had been taking a closer look at the

shore in a cutter and had settled on an inlet midway along the south-eastern shore as the focus of their attack.

The next morning the wind was favourable and Keppel made the signal to disembark the main force while a feint was made further north, near the village of Sauzon. The main invasion force gathered in their flat-boats around the *Temeraire* and were led inshore by Matthew Barton. Three British warships, the *Prince of Orange*, *Dragon* and *Achilles*, together with two bomb ships, opened fire on the great four-gun battery that commanded the little bay, and succeeded in silencing it. Then, in the words of Keppel, recorded with a measure of pride, the troops were 'pushed towards the landing with great briskness and spirited behaviour at three different places near each other by Captain Barton.'

Things were looking up and the invasion force passed the line of battleships that had anchored nearer the shore to cover their descent. It was only when they had landed and had fought their way to the back of the beach, however, that the full extent of the french preparations became clear. French troops were deeply entrenched high up in the cliffs, which formed a natural amphitheatre, and, in the months before the attack, had scarped away the bottom of the cliff, which was now vertical and could not be climbed without scaling ladders. One flat-boat, laden with sixty grenadiers, managed to land a little further up the coast on some rocks, from which they climbed up to the French positions. No sooner had they formed up, however, they were attacked by a far larger body of French troops and forced to fight their way back to the rocks. Only twenty of those grenadiers survived to be picked up by another flat-boat and taken to safety.

This miniature withdrawal was then repeated by the entire force. Under continual fire, the flat-boats were once again manned and the invasion force taken off with heavy loss, some dead, some captured. The weather then worsened, driving the flat-bottom boats against the unforgiving hulls of the warships and troop transports so that twenty were destroyed. Many of the transports also ran foul of each other and were damaged. It was not an auspicious start, but the invasion force, at least, had been led courageously and well by Matthew Barton of the *Temeraire*. News of the failed attack and the French defences was met with grim resolution in Britain. Pitt simply ordered four more battalions and a fresh supply of flat-boats and military stores, escorted by five more ships of the line to Belle Isle.

Sustained bad weather at Belle Isle, meanwhile, had given the British force time to recuperate while it awaited its reinforcements, and by 22 April they were set for another attempt. This time, however, it would be at a different location, and there would be two feints, at St Foy and Sauzon, designed to distract the enemy from the main descent. The commanders of the feints were nevertheless instructed to make a good go of it and to hold their ground if they could,

rather than simply creating a diversion. Brigadier-General Hamilton Lambart led one of these forces and chose a spot that was so high, so steep and so threatening that the French had made no effort at all to augment the natural defences. They had not even posted sentries to watch over it. When Lambart succeeded in landing his troops on the rocks and they then found a route to the top of the cliffs, his tiny force was unopposed. A message was quickly sent back to the fleet while Lambart prepared to hold his ground, and the entire landing force, destined for the main assault at Fort d'Arsic, was diverted to Lambart's defended cliff top. After a brief skirmish in which the British dominated, a great fire was seen burning at the highest point of the island, the signal for all French troops and native inhabitants to retreat to the fortress of Pallais. The beaches were left clear for the British landing.

The army advanced while the navy steadily unloaded the tons of stores that would be needed to besiege Pallais and to keep the British army in the field. This was a stern challenge and no time could be lost since the army had to be made secure, and it had to be done within three days, when the soldiers' provisions would run out. On hearing that the troops had landed and held their ground, Keppel ordered that the sailors involved in getting the cannon, provisions and necessaries for the army ashore all be given double allowance of wine or spirits. They were also read a message sent direct from the King as soon as he had learned that British forces were ashore:

> The Commodore has it in command from His Majesty to express His most gracious satisfaction of the behaviour of His Officers and Seamen upon the present service; and has firm reliance on the continuance of the same spirit and vigour on the further operations towards the complete reduction of Belle Isle.

Those ashore, meanwhile, soon discovered that the great cliffs were only their first challenge: one soldier remarked that the redoubts that surrounded Pallais were 'perhaps the best constructed that ever were seen', and he believed that the challenge of taking Belle Isle was as great as the more famous attack at Quebec in 1759, which was only taken after Wolfe's madcap assault of the Heights of Abraham. Pallais withstood the British siege for a further seven weeks, but finally surrendered on 7 June. The British losses were 282 dead and 494 wounded, and they had used up 11,926 shells and at least 15,522 shot in the attack. News of the success was sent back to England, by none other than Matthew Barton of the *Temeraire*, who had also been publicly thanked for his services by General Hodgson. Upon his arrival, as was then the common practice, Barton was presented with £500 by the King.

Detailed plans were immediately drawn up by the French to recapture Belle Isle with a huge force of fourteen ships of the line, two frigates, dozen *prâmes* (another type of landing craft, a dozen gunboats and fifty-four flat-boats. What the French lacked, however, was enough sailors to man their ships, and enough supplies to meet the naval minister's demands. Such an attack

could never become a reality. Belle Isle stayed firmly in British hands. It remained a valuable card in the negotiations at the end of the war which saw Minorca returned to British hands and the relinquishment of Canada by the French. The entirety of Nova Scotia itself was exchanged directly for Belle Isle.

An exact Representation of the Attack made by the British Fleet, under the Command of Adm.l Keppel the 8th of April, 1761, at Port Andre, on the Island of BELLE ISLE.

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