

Major Pitcairn and The Marines in the Expedition to Lexington and Concord, 18th and 19th April, 1775

By Colonel C. Field

THE expedition from Boston to Concord, in which Major Pitcairn of the Marines—who afterwards fell gloriously in the moment of victory at Bunker's Hill—has been briefly mentioned in Chapter XI of my "Britain's Sea Soldiers." I have lately come across a great number of very interesting details of the doings of this little expedition in the course of which the shot was fired that signalled the birth of the United States. I propose in this article to combine those passages which deal especially with Major Pitcairn and the Marines who were present.

It is common knowledge that General Gage, who commanded in Boston, sent out this flying column, as it may be called, for the purpose of capturing and destroying various military stores which had been hidden away in the township of Concord by the disaffected colonists, generally referred to as Whigs or provincials.

The troops detailed were the Grenadier and Light Infantry companies of the following Corps: 4th, 5th, 10th, 18th, 23rd, 38th, 43rd, 47th, 59th Regiments and of the 1st and 2nd Battalions of Marines.

Lieut.-Colonel Smith of the 10th went in command, Major Pitcairn as second in command. Smith seems to have been a stout, heavy individual, but, from the point of view of military efficiency—to quote Euclid—"of no parts or magnitude." In every account of the affair he seems to slide into the background, Pitcairn being always the prominent figure.

It must be noted in passing that the 22 companies above enumerated by no means represented anything like 2,200 men. It is generally agreed that the force amounted to not more than between seven hundred and eight hundred men altogether, so that the average strength of these Flank Companies must have been under 50 men apiece.

According to one story, Pitcairn was chosen to go as "he had previously examined the road to Concord, and had studied the town in disguise." This can be traced to no contemporary source. But as we read in an old work that he had been "Military Commandant at Boston" before the War, it is extremely likely that he was well acquainted both with Concord and the routes to that place. It seems quite possible, not to say probable, that a detachment of Marines was the first British force to be landed in the city, very likely some little time before the arrival of a considerable military contingent. It would have been only one instance out of many in the history of the Corps in which a similar event has taken place.

In the case of Pitcairn's choice for the Concord expedition, however, we are told that he was a seasoned veteran and general favourite, popular with Whigs as well as Tories. For these reasons alone he may have been selected

This interesting article was clipped from *The Globe and Laurel*, a magazine published by the British Marines. It gives the British side of two famous incidents of the American Revolution.

for a post which was likely to demand discretion and good temper.

Pitcairn was a "veteran" since he had obtained his commission as a Lieutenant in Cornwall's (7th Marines) on 30th April, 1746, and it is quite on the cards that he may have been transferred to that Regiment from some other corps. He was given a Lieutenant's commission in the present Marine Corps on its first establishment in April, 1755, on the recommendation of "Mr. Hamilton of Pekinfield." That he was a general favourite is borne out by the statement in the old work previously quoted, that when in command at Boston "he had endeared himself to the people," and that at Bunker's Hill, "no officer fell more regretted, for he was beloved, even by his enemy."

As a matter of fact it appears that both Smith and Pitcairn were detailed as "the two Field Officers first for duty, and the senior of each rank."

Gage determined that the expedition should be sudden and secret, but in a city and neighbourhood swarming with Whig sympathizers, the cloak of mystery with which he enveloped his orders and proceedings, actually drew more attention to something "being in the wind" than if he had moved in a more open fashion.

The rank and file of the Flank Companies detailed "were not apprised of the design, till just as it was time to march, they were waked up by the sergeants putting their hands on them and whispering gently to them; and were even conducted by a back way out of the barracks, without the knowledge of their comrades, and without the observation of the sentries. They walked through the street with the utmost silence. It being about ten o'clock, no sound was heard but that of their feet; a dog, happening to bark, was instantly killed by a bayonet. They proceeded to the beach under the new power-house—the most unfrequented part of the town, and there embarked on board the boats, which had their oars muffed to prevent a noise."

The town of Boston is situated on a more or less pear-shaped peninsula attached to the south side of a large eastern-facing bay, by a narrow isthmus or "stalk," known as "Boston Neck." Bunker's Hill and Charlestown occupy a peninsula of somewhat similar shape attached by its "stalk"—Charlestown Neck—to the north-west corner of the bay. A strait runs between the outer ends of the two peninsulas, which may possibly have been connected with each other at some very remote period.

The spot selected for embarkation of the expedition was on the western side of the Boston peninsula, where it was

separated from the mainland about the mouth of the Charles or Cambridge river, where was the selected landing-place, at a spot known as Phipp's Farm, by over a mile of water.

The secrecy with which the operation orders were issued was all very well, so far as it went, but as it was known early on the 18th from seamen coming ashore "that provisions were being dressed on board the transports for a body of troops, that the boats were ordered to be on the beach near the Common at night, and that several officers had gone out towards Concord in the afternoon," there was quite enough rumour afloat to arouse suspicion among the Whigs of some move of importance.

The Officers in question were all mounted, Gage's idea being that they would be able to intercept messengers sent from Boston to warn the provincials. But it seems rather that they served as a warning themselves. It was they who, after Paul Revere in his celebrated ride had escaped them once, caught him again between Lexington and Concord, and foolishly released him. But another rider, William Dawes, also got away by a different route, and independently of these two messengers, we all know how fast news flies in country districts in an almost unaccountable manner, and in short the expedition failed altogether as a surprise.

Moreover, there was delay and miscalculation from the very beginning. Although the troops should have been at the place of embarkation at 10 p. m., it was nearer 11 before all were present. The number of boats provided by the men-of-war and transports proved to be too few, and two trips had to be made, so that the whole force was not ashore till nearly one o'clock in the morning. Another hour was lost in serving out the cooked provisions which had been prepared, so that the expedition did not begin its march till 2 a. m. Nor had its route been arranged with sufficient care and forethought, since the tide had not been taken into consideration, the result being that having got wet to the knees in a marshy landing place, waiting for their provisions to be issued, "which most of the men threw away, having carried some with 'em," the troops had to wade through two inlets; one of them at any rate up to their middles, before reaching the high road. Colonel Smith then advanced at a great rate, to make up for lost time, and probably also to warm the men after their prolonged wetting. Whether Smith perceived any indication of alarm in the countryside or not after his first halt, he gave orders to Pitcairn to push on full speed ahead of him to Lexington with six of the Light Infantry companies. Almost immediately afterwards the ringing of bells and firing of guns echoed on every hand through the early morning stillness. The provincials were awake.

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Pitcairn, nearing Lexington, met some of the mounted officers who had gone out the previous afternoon, who informed him that there were 500 militiamen drawn up on Lexington Green to oppose him. Pitcairn halted, ordered his men to prime and load, but "on no account to fire, nor even to attempt it without orders."

In the meantime, there now being no doubt that the whole countryside was alarmed, Colonel Smith sent back to General Gage asking for reinforcements.

Lexington Green was triangular in shape, and Pitcairn entered by the apex and rounding the Meeting House, which stood, with its belfry, to one side of it near that corner, found, not 500, but something over 100 Militia and Minute men drawn up with arms near the base.

What happened next? There seems no doubt that Pitcairn ordered the Provincials to lay down their arms and disperse. Their leader, a Captain Parker, asserted that he also ordered his men to disperse, but he did not, apparently, tell them to lay down their arms. Pitcairn, it seems, who had with him one or two mounted officers, galloped on to the Green round the left of the Meeting House, and probably gave his order immediately he saw the Militiamen. It is said that his men rushed forward somewhat tumultuously, and with loud "huzzas." What probably happened was that the leading companies doubled round the other side of the Meeting House, in order to overtake their Commanding Officer, but did not rush upon the rebels, as the latter evidently thought they were about to do, but formed up in two companies or half-companies facing them. It is in this order that they are shewn in an engraving made on the spot by an American, Amos Doolittle, only a few weeks later.*

About this time it seems that the Minute men began to disperse; but now came the fatal shot which had such momentous consequences. Who fired it will never be known, "each party imputing it to the other." Pitcairn denied positively that he gave any order to fire, but in any case the first shot was followed by fire from his men, which killed eight and wounded several others of the Minute men, though it is admitted by various American accounts that he did all he possibly could to stop the firing. The question as to which side fired the first shot is not worth arguing about. In the state of extreme tension which then existed between the armed Provincials and the British troops, it was a dead certainty that it was only a matter of hours, or at most days, before it was fired, if not at Lexington, at some other place in the district.

About this time Colonel Smith seems to have joined up with the Grenadiers and the rest of the Light Infantry.

After what had occurred, and considering the general alarm in the country, several of his officers suggested that it would be advisable to retire to Boston. Smith, however, was determined to push on to Concord, his original objective. It was a five miles march. On nearing the town the Grenadiers kept to the road and the Light Infantry moved up to a ridge which ran parallel to it on the right. provincials had been seen drawn up on the end of this ridge, but they retired to the far end just above the town on the advance of the British, and when the latter entered Concord, again retreated to an elevated piece of ground on the farther side of right angles to the British line of advance, at some little distance beyond the town. Here, during the time the troops were destroying the warlike stores they found, their numbers were continually augmented by arrivals from the surrounding townships and villages.

There was a bridge at this point, known as the North Bridge, and another a good deal further to the left, known as the South Bridge. Smith sent one company, under Captain Parsons, to hold the last mentioned bridge, and pushed on six to the North Bridge, three to hold it, while the other three went over and on some distance to search the farm of a Colonel Barrett. The search there and in the town itself seems to have been carried out with a great deal of consideration, for though a considerable quantity of arms and ammunition were discovered and destroyed, including two 24-pound guns, whose trunnions were knocked off and their carriages burnt, other stores escaped, on account of the good nature of the searchers, who allowed themselves to be easily put off by plausible excuses. According to General Gage's report, one sulky inhabitant even struck Major Pitcairn without being punished for it.

*When the Governor's Guard of the Connecticut Militia came in late April to the siege of Boston, there were in it two young men, Ralph Earl and Amos Doolittle. In some interval of their three weeks' stay on duty they went to Lexington and Concord, with the purpose of producing a set of engravings presenting the more important events of the 19th. On that trip, Earl, being a budding portrait painter, made sketches of his backgrounds; and Doolittle, the engraver, since his friend was not particularly skillful in drawing the human figure, posed as lay figure. From the four finished drawings Doolittle made his engravings, which were sold in New Haven in the following December for six shillings the set plain, eight shillings coloured. The originals are now among the rarest of American engravings, and fetch a high price because of their historic interest. . . . There is nothing romantic in their composition. No artistic licence is taken . . . and not a little because of the technical crudity . . . they speak for themselves . . . Both the artists were only 21."—The Day of Concord and Lexington.



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