

THE FORT RICASOLI MUTINY

by

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I am publishing today the following interesting letter (by kind permission of the owner) for general information. The letter was written by a Scottish soldier, J. Laing, serving in Malta in the early years of British rule, on the 16th April 1807. Writing to his father in Edinburgh, Scotland, the author narrates in detail the mutiny that took place on the 4th April, 1807 in one of the Foreign Corps under the direction of British Officers, known by the name of "Colonel Grunt Froberg's Regiment", stationed at Fort Ricasoli.

The letter is quite clear and no further elaboration on the event is needed. However the entire is also very interesting from the postal history aspect as it leaves a number of questions unanswered.

On the entire we have: (1) a set of obliterations indicating the route; (2) a set of charges. The following obliterations are shown: (on the front) — a) Ship Letter Portsmouth; b) "May/1807/31"; and (on the back) — c) "F/May 28/1807".

a) The "Ship Letter/Portsmouth" is the standard S.B. Type (Robson Lowe Encyclopedia) indicating that the letter travelled by ship and delivered at Portsmouth. In fact in the letter itself we find "The Royal George Sir W.T. Duckworth is just going out so I must bid you adieu". The "Royal George" I believe was a Naval frigate, and Portsmouth was the naval dockyard.

c) From Portsmouth one must presume that the letter went to Fal-mouth — hence "F/MAY 28/1807",

and from there it went to Edinburgh, Scotland by coach, arriving:-

b) in Edinburgh "MAY/1807/31", taking four days to do the journey by coach.

The set of charges (or numbers) are: a) 2/9 on front, b) 4/3 on front, c) 11/5 on back. These are more difficult to put a meaning to:-

The charges for Ship Letter rates from 1796 to 1814 were:-

Single 4d, Double 8d, Treble 1/-, per ounce 1/4; Captain's Gratuity id. (Malta Study Circle, S.P. 39).

This letter having 12 pages weighed approximately 2 ounces, so a) the 2/9 (2 & 9) can be explained by a way of 2 ounces at 1s 4d per ounce plus 1d Captain's Gratuity.

What about the marks 4/3 and 11/5? Surely this could not mean 4s 3d and 11s 5d, as these are exorbitant amounts for the period. A likely explanation is that they signify a division of money between the Government and the Contractor or vice versa.

If we examine the Inland Postal rates in the United Kingdom in 1805, we find that

“not exceeding 80 miles the charge was 7d” (M.S.C. S.P. 39). Portsmouth is approximately 78 miles from Falmouth, so the charge would be 7d, divided in the ratio 4d and 3d (4/3).

“Not exceeding 300 miles the

charge was 11d plus 2d for each additional 100 miles”. The distance to Edinburgh is approximately 500 miles making a charge of 16d divided in the ratio of 11d and 5d (11/5).

I am a strong believer in this theory; can readers elaborate further?

Now we read on:-

Malta, 16th April, 1807

My dear Father,

Since I wrote to you by last month's packet we have had access to witness the most extraordinary scenes. The public prints will probably give you more ample details than I can, at this moment, afford time to write you, but what I do communicate you may rely on as authentic.

On Saturday the 4th of April a mutiny broke out in one of the foreign Corps which is distinguished by the name of the Colonel, a Count Froberg. The Regiment was quartered at Ricasoli, one of the Forts at the entrance of the harbour and on the opposite side from the Town of La Valletta — It is now understood to have been the intention of the mutineers to have delayed the execution of their plans until the Officers were at dinner, but the latter having perceived some alarming symptoms were about to institute an enquiry when the Ringleaders finding that no time was to be lost, instantly declared themselves, collected their party, secured the persons of the officers and of such of their comrades as they could depend upon, drew up the bridge and shut the gates. Some of the officers were massacred on the spot and several others were wounded. The Adjutant of the Regiment, Lt. Schwartz (a German) seems to have been particularly abnoxious to the men from the strictness of his discipline.

** = The Regiment in all consisted of about 700 or 750 — of those 150 or more were then out of the fort employed in guarding the Cottonera lines and other ferries — of the remaining 600 many were not provided with arms (the Corps being newly raised) and the first objective of the mutineers (who it is supposed might amount to 150-200) was to secure arms.*

This poor young man was run through by several bayonets at once, Capt. Watleville was shot through the head (rather I believe by accident than by design) and died instantly, one of the Ensigns endeavoured to escape over the walls and by leaping into the sea to save himself by swimming; but having broken one of his arms by the fall he sank, overcome by pain and fatigue. In the course of half an hour from the commencement of the mutiny it was known in La Valletta and you may conceive the sensation which the news communicated

as the place is so immediately in our vicinity and the Officers were known to all of us — (so near indeed is the Fort that it is completely overlooked from the higher part of the Town, and may be as far perhaps, as from the Castle to the Register Office). The Ringleaders lost no time in loading the great guns and mortars and pointing them against the Town, and in this operation Captain Fead of the Artillery and his men who were quartered in the Fort, were compelled under the threat of instant death to assist. General Killelly instantly ordered detachments from the different other regiments in the garrison to surround Ricasoli towards the land so as to cut off the retreat of the mutineers should they attempt to escape into the country, and a parley was held over the walls — The only terms on which they would surrender were — an unconditional pardon, and to be sent to their own country in transport provided by our Government. The greater part of the Regiment is composed of Greeks and other Turkish subjects and they alleged that at the period of their enlistment they were deceived as to the nature and condition of their service. That there may be some ground for their assertion I fear there is too much reason to apprehend and it is to be regretted that Government though not immediately concerned should indirectly sanction such measures by accepting of tenders for the raising of Corps without enquiring into the means adopted for provisioning the men. But however true the allegations of those unfortunate men may be, they were not to be justified in the means they took to redress their wrongs. I need scarcely add that the conditions they proposed were instantly rejected. They then said that they were resolved never to surrender at discretion and that they were determined sooner that to yield to massacre everyone of their officers whom they kept as hostages and to bombard the Town. It was known however, that they had not above one day's full provisions in the Fort and it was generally believed that when they should begin to suffer from famine, they would seize on the Ringleaders and open the gates. At all events it was deemed advisable to delay the adoption of violent measures from a conviction that the mutineers driven to despair would inevitably have executed their threat of murdering the officers and their families. They were given to understand however, that the very first gun fired on their part should be the signal for the whole vengeance of the Garrison being wreaked upon them and accordingly several tremendous batteries were manned and pointed towards them. So passed the night of Saturday. On Sunday the 5th things remained pretty much in the same state. In the course of the morning an officer was sent out by them to say that if they were not furnished with bread in the course of two hours they would commence massacre and their fire. The General remained firm and they were too well aware of the consequences to themselves to execute their intentions. Poor Captain Fead was paraded about on the ramparts under a strong guard of the Mutineers to see that the guns were properly loaded and pointed

and he was obliged to deliver over to them the keys of the powder magazines and to execute the mandates of those miscreants in every respect. Finding it necessary to comply, Fead thought it well to do so with a good grace and they became such good friends that they elected him Commander of the Fort and as such they obeyed him as far as to put under arrest some of their own party with whose conduct he had occasion to find fault.

On Monday the 6th a Greek Priest was sent over to talk to them under the walls, but the good man's exhortations had little or no effect. In the course of the evening some of the ringleaders signified their intention to surrender, but they were soon overpowered. Next morning they showed some symptoms of relenting by sending out the wives and families of some officers but the husbands were retained. In the course of the day they killed a horse or two, their provision being nearly exhausted. One of the officers who happened to be in La Valletta when the mutiny began went up to the gate and was invited in by the Mutineers. The young man had the courage to go in and to remain some time endeavouring to persuade them that they had nothing to expect by holding out. They treated him civilly enough but desired him to acquaint the General that they would only surrender on the original terms proposed by them. This was not only the time Mr. de Clermont went into the fort but they at length told him that they were resolute and that it might be dangerous for him to return with a similar message. Clermont saw his brother officers who were now despairing of their lives. Major Schummalketal (with whom as indeed with almost all the officers, I am acquainted) was wounded very severely and his situation was the more deplorable from the anxiety of his mind and the privation of those comforts which were so necessary for his recovery. Mr. Muralt was wounded in the head by a musket ball and almost the whole lot of them were maimed or bruised in some way or another. To add to the horror of their situation the savage mutineers were frequently insulting them and threatening that when their provisions were finished, they would feed on them adding that they were not unaccustomed to such repasts. Indeed there is nothing of which these wretches might not be supposed capable many of them having been leaders or members of different gangs of bandette, in Wallachia, Bulgaria and other provinces of Turkey. For my part I confess that I began to despair of ever seeing any of the officers again. The night was dark and dismal and blowing and the mutineers were now becoming more rife from despair for deed of horror. The only hope seemed to be that of their escaping over the walls during the night, in which case there being no doubt of any one of them being apprehended by our patrols. What was our surprise then, next morning to observe of a sudden crowds of people issuing from the Gate and amongst the rest all the officers. How this extraordinary reverse took place I have never yet satisfactorily discovered, nor do the officers themselves know for certain. It

appears however that their escape was not the effort of any premeditated scheme, but that some of those who had been induced to join the Mutineers from fear of availing themselves of a favourable moment killed the sentinels at the gate and having got together as many of their friends as they could and the officers amongst the rest sallied forth. Many of the ringleaders hoping perhaps to be lost in the crowd rushed out likewise and in the course of the morning the Fort was almost deserted. Those who came out were all secured by our soldiers, and the persons who had borne the most distinguished part in the mutny were soon pointed out by Capt. Fead and others and kept apart from the rest but all were confined.

Some desperadoes still remained in the Fort drew up the Bridge and expressed their determination to die rather than to surrender. To show that they were in earnest they had a guard constantly stationed in the powder magazine where there were upwards of 500 barrels of powder and they vowed that if reduced to extremities, they would blow themselves up. It is not exactly known what number remained but I don't think there were above 20 or 30, and of that number some escaped during the Thursday and Friday and several sick and wounded were lowered down by ropes from the walls. It was still thought better to abstain from storming the fort with the view of preserving if possible the magazine and such part of the fort as must be ruined by its explosion. On Friday afternoon the 10th however we were alarmed by the firing of one of the mortars from the fort. The shell came over the town but fortunately did no harm. Whether they were irritated by some of our soldiers firing musquet upon them I know not, but I rather think this was the case. It now became necessary to put an end to the business and accordingly it was determined that a party should scale the walls next morning at 3 o'clock. A party of chosen men from Froberg's commanded by Mr. De Clermont accordingly ascended by scaling ladder but they had scarcely arrived at the top when the Mutineers alarmed by the barking of some dogs made the best of their way to the magazine with the exception of two who ran to fire off four Mortars which were placed together and directed towards the Town. You may conceive the alarm occasioned to the inhabitants by a bombardment at 4 o'clock in the morning. Yet strange to relate not one of the shells took effect. It is almost incredible that five shells should have been fired upon a very close built and populous town without injuring either the person or property of one of the inhabitants and the truth is I believe that Capt. Fead when forced to load the mortars availed himself of the ignorance of the Mutineers to overcharge the mortars and to elevate them as to carry the shells in general, over the town. The two men who remained to fire the mortars being cut off from their usual retreat, the powder magazine, attempted to conceal themselves, but they were soon discovered and were tried by a Court Martial with 23 of their

friends the same day. The whole 25 were condemned to death and to be executed the same day. Ten to be hanged and 15 to be shot! One of the latter was respited but there were 10 hanged and 14 shot. Such a degree of hardened depravity as these men exhibited can scarcely be conceived. They seemed totally callous to their fate and went out of the world with as little concern as if they had been mere spectators of the scene. On Sunday and Saturday our soldiers who were now in possession of the fort watched the miscreants who had taken possession of the magazine in the hope that they would be reduced by famine to come out. They occasionally put their heads out and fired on our people who in their turn aimed at them, but no shot took effect on either side. It was conceived that they would hardly do so afterwards. April 12 on Sunday evening however, about 9 o'clock the whole city was alarmed by the most tremendous explosion. The shock which it occasioned was such as to shake the houses to their foundations. You may conceive the effect of the confusion caused by the explosion of upwards of 500 barrels of powder. The number of windows broke is incredible yet we who reside in La Valetta are separated by the Harbour from Ricalosi. Both the quantity of powder was greater than that which exploded last July and the concussion was greater here from the distance being less and the interruptions to the ground fewer.

Fortunately however only three lives were lost on the occasion as our guard was posted in a very strong bomb proof building in the fort. Those who perished were three sentries who were knocked down by the shower of stones occasioned by the explosion. It was believed of course that the miscreants were blown to atoms, but it now appears that the villains had escaped over the wall leaving a slow match and train to effect their purpose. It seems that only six were in the magazine during the day preceding the explosion. It is now certain that 4 of the 6 escaped over the wall immediately before the explosion leaving a slow match to set fire to the magazine. Five soon found and the other two cannot possibly be long concealed and I need scarcely add that they may expect their 'reward'.

The Royal George Sir W.T. Duckworth is just going out so I must bid you adieu. Sir J. Smith is expected to sail few days when I shall not fail to write.

This narration be legible, you may show it to any of our particular friends, but I should not wish any other use to be made of both as it is hurriedly written and for many other reasons.

Govt. has sustained a loss in the magazine of a few thousand pounds, but had any other plan been followed than that adopted by the general many lives must have been sacrificed for those scoundrels.

With love to you all, believe me

Your sincere affect son

J.L.