

An extraction of two letters written by Major James Wolfe (later General) (regarding the Battle of Culloden) April 17, 1746

‘I have the pleasure to tell you’—so Wolfe begins both letters—‘that yesterday about one in the afternoon we engaged the Rebel army, and in about an hour drove them from the field of battle; they left near 1500 dead, the rest (except prisoners) escaped into the neighbouring mountains; the action was three miles short of this place [Inverness] on Lord President Forbes’ land, and from thence the name of the battle of Culloden. I have never seen an action so general, nor any victory so complete.

‘The Rebels had posted themselves¹ so they imagined we could neither use cannon nor cavalry, but both did essential service. They waited till we came near enough to fire cannon on them, and were greatly surpris’d and disorder’d at it, and finding their mistake, they charged upon our front line in thick solid bodies, throwing down their arms without exploding them, and advancing furiously with their drawn swords.’²

‘You must understand before the cannonading they were (I mean the clans) in a very extended thick line, with their right to some houses and a wall, their left and centre were supported in their rear by the Lowlanders and some few horse. Four pieces of cannon were in their front, which they often fired, but with little effect.

‘The Duke’s army had at the beginning six battalions in the first line, commanded by Lord Albemarle and Lord Semple [Sempill]; as many in the second under General Husk, and three regiments formed a third line or reserve, commanded by Brigadier Mordaunt; Cobham’s Dragoons and two squadrons of Mark Ker’s were on the left of the front line, where the ground was firmest; the other squadron and one of Kingston’s Horse were on the right, and two pieces of cannon in equal intervals between the battalions of the first line.

‘And a little after the Rebels begun their attack, the Duke observed they intended to extend their line beyond his right by breaking to the left from their centre, and instantly ordered Pulteney’s from the reserve to form on the right of his first line, and brought the rest of that Corps towards the right of his second line to strengthen that wing; these movements obliged them to attack his front.

‘The front line on the Rebels’ near approach begun a most violent fire, which continued 8 or 9 minutes, and kill’d so many of their best men that they could only penetrate into our Battalion; that on the left of the line was Barrell’s regiment; they were attacked by the Camerons (the bravest clan amongst them),³ and ‘twas for some time a dispute between the swords and bayonets; but the latter was found by far the most destructive weapon. The Regiment behaved with uncommon resolution, killing some say almost their own number,

¹ ‘on a high boggy moor, where they imagined our cannon and cavalry would be useless.’—Letter to Sotheron.

² ‘The cannon in particular made them very uneasy, and after firing a quarter of an hour, obliged them to change their situation and move forward some hundred yards to attack our front line of Foot, which they did with more fury than prudence.’—Ibid.

³ ‘the best clan in the Highlands.’—Ibid.

whereas 40 of them were only wounded, and those not mortally, and not above ten kill'd;⁴ they were, however, surrounded by superiority, and would have been all destroyed had not Col. Martin with his Regiment (the left of the 2nd line of Foot) mov'd forward to their assistance, prevented mischief, and by a well-timed fire destroyed a great number of them and obliged them to run off.

'General Hawley, who commanded the five squadrons of Dragoons on the left, had, by the assistance of 150 Argyle-shire, thrown down two stone walls, and was (when the fire of the Foot began) posted with his Dragoons opposite to the extremity of the enemy's right wing, and as soon as the Rebels began to give way and the fire of the Foot slacken'd, he ordered Genl. Bland to charge the rest of them with three squadrons, and Cobham to support him with the two. It was done with wonderful spirit and completed the victory with great slaughter.

'We have taken 22 pieces of brass cannon or near it, a number of colours, and near 700 prisoners, amongst which are all the Irish picquets, most of the remainder of Fitz James's Horse, and a part of Drummond's Regiment, great quantity of powder, muskets, bayonets, broadswords, and plads innumerable.

'All the troops acquitted themselves as troops worthy the command of a great and gallant General, and no individual corps has been wanting in their duty.

'The Rebels, besides their natural inclinations, had orders not to give quarter to our men. We had an opportunity of avenging ourselves for that and many other things, and indeed we did not neglect it, as few Highlanders were made prisoners as possible. Lord Kilmamock is one, and Brigr. Stapleton, with some others you have a list of.⁵

⁴ These figures do not tally with those given by any other authority on the losses sustained by Barrell's, and as Wolfe was with Hawley during the action and not at the head of his company, we may infer that he accepted them on hearsay. Singularly enough, in the letter to his uncle Sotheron, written on the same day, he gives the casualties with approximate accuracy. Referring to the total Royal losses he writes: 'We had about twenty officers and three hundred men killed and wounded. Barrell's regiment suffered particularly, having out of three hundred and fifty had one hundred and twenty officers and men killed and wounded, fighting in a most obstinate manner against the Camerons.'

⁵ In Wolfe's letter to his uncle Sotheron the parallel passage reads: 'Orders were publicly given in the rebel army, the day before the action, that no quarter should be given to our troops. We had an opportunity of avenging ourselves, and I assure you as few prisoners were taken of the Highlanders as possible.' It will be observed that cause and effect are clearly linked together by Wolfe in the two letters he wrote a few hours after the battle; he had no reason to doubt the genuineness of the rebel order, and he was merely stating in the most matter-of-fact manner what he honestly believed and was generally accepted as true by the Royal officers and men who fought at Culloden. Were the premises true and admitted, there might be some justification at least for Cumberland's brutality after the victory. But it is now well established that no such order was given out by anyone in official authority on the Jacobite side, and a thorough search and examination of the papers left by Lord George Murray, who was in supreme command of the Highland army on that day, has failed to reveal any Culloden order issued by him with this suicidal clause in it. It was alleged that a no-quarter order, signed by Lord George Murray, had been found on the person of a Jacobite officer taken prisoner at Culloden; if so, it was a copy of Murray's order of April 14-15 tampered with to serve vindictive ends. The forgery did its work as effectively as the Ems telegram of 1870, and the lie served to excuse the butcheries and barbarities that followed Culloden. The indignant repudiation of it by the Jacobites passed unheeded, but it is difficult to believe that Lords Balmerino and Kilmarnock on the day of their execution should seek to clear up the mystery of this order unless they were convinced it was false. They were mainly concerned to clear Prince Charles of the charge, but the stain resting upon Lord George Murray's memory has also been removed (Miss Winifred Duke's *Lord George Murray and the Forty-Five*, pp. 200-202).

‘The enemy, by their own order of battle, had 8800 men in the field,⁶ and our utmost was 7200.⁷ Our loss is inconsiderable. Poor Col. Rich had his left hand quite cut off, and a very bad cut in his right elbow, and six in his head, one or two very bad ones.⁸ Lord Robert Ker was kill’d fighting against numbers.⁹ Rimor [Captain Romer], Edmunds [Lieutenant Edmunds], Hillary, [Ensigns] Campbell and Brown are wounded; the last of them obstinately defending one of the colours that was knocked to the ground, but not carried off. Twenty-one old soldiers kill’d and wounded of your former company.¹⁰

‘The Rebels are much dispers’d, and it is supposed will never be able to collect a body again. The Pretender was in their rear, but soon quitted the field.’

After references, already quoted, to the deplorable state of the weather during the early morning march of the Royal army from Nairn and the abortive attempt of the Jacobites to surprise Cumberland’s camp during the night, the writer of this interesting but disjointed and impersonal account of Culloden adds as a postscript:

‘I forgot to tell you that the whole loss of the King’s troops together was about 20 officers and 800 men kill’d and wounded; so you may see what a share your old Regiment had in it. I likewise forgot to mention the cavalry of the right, who were, I should have said, employed in pursuing and destroying the broken Rebels.’

To the last word of the letter Wolfe writes to Delabene as one soldier to another. Even in his account of Culloden which he sent to his uncle Sotheron on the same day, the aide-de-camp baldly describes the action from a professional standpoint, and only in the closing sentences does he allow expression to his feelings, deep as they must have been and greatly stirred. ‘I heartily wish you joy of the happy end of so horrid an undertaking,’ he writes. ‘And may they ever be punished in the same manner who attempt the like!’

The two letters from which this account have been taken were written to Major Henry Delabene and Wolfe’s uncle, Sotheron. This excerpt is taken from the publication “Wolfe in Scotland,” by J.T. Findlay

⁶ The actual figure was probably under 6000 men.

⁷ Cumberland’s effective strength in the battle is given officially as 8811, to which number the infantry battalions furnished 6411.

⁸ Lieutenant-Colonel (afterwards Sir) Robert Rich, who commanded Barrell’s at Culloden, was so seriously wounded there that the London newspapers announced his death. But happily he survived, and on August 22, 1749, succeeded old General Barrell in command of the regiment which he had so gallantly led during the ‘45. From Glasgow Wolfe sent to him a letter of congratulation on big promotion, and at the same time tells Mrs. Wolfe that he hopes Rich, whom he calls a quick-sighted man, will not ‘pass censure upon my labours and criticize my style of writ (as ‘tis termed here); but I could not deny myself the pleasure of assuring...the Colonel that he had the fairest title to the gift, large as it is.’

⁹ The same gallant captain who had interceded for the life of the Jacobite prisoner, Major Macdonald of Tiendrich, at the battle of Falkirk.

¹⁰ That is, Wolfe’s own company at Culloden.