

HISTORY & CULTURE

HOW TO MAKE HORSE SOUP

Forty Cannon That Never Fired a Shot (Except for Parties)

Two hundred and seventy five years ago, under the hot sun of the West Indies, the fate of Prince of Wales Fort and of northern Canada's fur trade was sealed.

The French navy, at that time allied with and supporting the American revolutionaries in what would come to be called the Seven Years War, was assigned to blockade the trading lanes of the West Indies. On April 12, 1782, they were routed by the British under the command of Rear Admiral Lord Hood.

One french ship under the command of Jean Francois de Galaup, the Comte de La Perouse or 'La Perouse' had been delayed in port and arrived late for the battle, just in time to witness the final death throes of the French Navy.

This delay would come to signal a turning point in La Perouse's career, besides the obvious fact that he wasn't blown up with the rest of the French.

For years, he had been hungry for the command of his own expedition. With its navy in disarray, the French government finally granted his request to lead a secret raid against the economic interests of the British government, the Hudson's Bay Company trading posts ringing Hudson Bay. It was a bit of a desperation move, even considered a suicide mission.

La Perouse was given command of three warships: the 75-gun Sceptre and two 36-gun frigates, the *Astree* and *Engaente*. In the summer of 1782, three hundred marines boarded these ships. Dressed lightly, as though headed back to the Caribbean, they nonetheless loaded two eight inch mortars, three hundreds bombs and four cannon. Maintaining secrecy meant leaving winter clothing behind, a potentially costly mistake in Hudson Bay.

The passage into Hudson Bay is fraught with danger. Hudson Strait is packed with ice well into July, navigating this passage can take up to four weeks. The men were cold, tired and sick when they finally pierced Hudson Bay.

La Perouse recorded his final approach to Churchill. 'On the 3rd of August, sailing with security enough in the Bay



Does this puffy shirt make me look fat? With men such as this protecting the post, most of which had only fired a cannon for special occasions, Prince of Wales Fort was doomed from the start.

of Hudson, I was enveloped in a fog, and immediately surrounded with large islands of ice, which extended beyond our view... But on the 5th of August the bank of ice... opened a little, and I determined to force through it by a press of sail... and on the 8th of August in the evening, I saw the colours of Fort Prince of Wales.'

La Perouse raised English pennants and lowered his boats to sound the mouth of the Churchill River.

Meanwhile, the Governor of Prince of Wales Fort, Samuel Hearne, waited within the walls of Prince of Wales Fort. Hearne had now been Governor for seven years, elevated to this post not long after his monumental 3500 mile walk to the Coppermine River. Coincidentally, Hearne had begun his career in the British navy, aboard Lord Hood's ship.

At first, the men rejoiced at the apparent arrival of British supply ships, but Hearne quickly recognized them as French war vessels. Preparations were made to defend the fort and even a couple cannon were loaded and prepared to fire.

But, there was a problem. Prince of Wales Fort sported a contingent of thirty nine men along with some homeguard Cree. It is also rumored that some of the men were out goose hunting, securing provisions for the winter, likely in the North Knife River delta.

Regardless of total numbers of men in the fort, Samuel Hearne was the only one to have experienced real naval combat.

He had seen the effects of cannonfire and combat and he knew the consequences of defeat.

Each cannon required a crew of about ten men, further many of the pieces at PWF were of museum quality even at that point, dating back 70-80 years to the reign of King William or Queen Mary.

The Hudson Bay posts were sent used cannon, the royalty saving the best and newest weapons for the British navy, quite reasonable considering these were more 'party' cannon than anything else, fired to recognize holidays and special events such as the arrival of the annual supply ship.

At 2am that evening, La Perouse deployed six longboats under cover of the brief darkness of a subarctic summer; half of LaPerouse's contingent entered Button Bay. As these boats landed on the southwest flank of Prince of Wales Fort, the Sceptre moved into firing range to the east.

With first light, an emissary, replete with accompanying drummer, approached the gates and declared the terms of surrender. Hearne raised a white table cloth and the gates of Prince of Wales Fort were opened. The fort had surrendered without firing a shot.

By August 13th, the destruction of the fort was complete. For three days, the french had mined the walls, set fire to the wooden structures and cannon carriages and disable the cannons, driving spikes into the fuse holes and breaking the trunnions (side bars designed to hold the

cannon stable in the carriage) without which cannon cannot be properly aimed and are too dangerous to fire.

Samuel Hearne and the HBC men taken prisoner by La Perouse had to watch helplessly from the ships, feeling the shockwave as the gun powder stores exploded. Hearne for his part, kept track of the 'furs and other stock carried off by the French'. He was a good 'Company man'.

Now in possession of a map of York Factory, containing details of its contingent, guns and supplies, La Perouse sailed south to loot that post as well. However, they soon encountered an HBC ship, *Prince Rupert*, along the west coast of Hudson Bay. They turned and pursued it, ending up back at the mouth of the Churchill River.

A group of aboriginals, Caribou Dené about sixty strong, stood on shore not far from the ruins. A gentleman soldier, La Perouse, had left gunpowder and shot for them after the destruction of the fort. Still, they raised the British flag in hopes that a Company ship would be landing with goods to trade... and an explanation.

As *L'Engaente* closed in on the Prince Rupert, the Dené watched, 'dejected at the sight of the misfortunes which we had brought down upon them'. Trading with Churchill was no easy feat for the Dene people, unlike the Cree to the south, they did not use the canoe to transport furs. They carried their spoils on their backs, walking halfway across the barrenlands to trade their wares. The absence of trade goods at the end of this journey was a mortal wound.

On August 25, 1782, York Factory was surrendered to LaPerouse and his crew. It was the eighth time that the heart of the Hudson's Bay Company had changed hands.

The HBC prisoners were moved to the captured sloop *Severn* as LaPerouse headed back to France. After a British pilot had helped them navigate Hudson Strait, La Perouse released the sloop. It was early September.

This was still the era of 'noble soldiers' and Edward Umfreville, York Factory's second-in-command, recorded in his journal that the 'politness, humanity and goodness secured (La Perouse) the affection of all the Company's officers;

HISTORY & CULTURE

and on parting at the mouth of Hudson Strait, they felt the same sensation which the dearest friends feel in an interview preceding a long separation.' It also appears that LaPerouse read Hearne's journals and encouraged, if not demanded, him to publish them. He eventually would as his 'Journey to the Northern Sea'. (Hearne's journals and his remarkable naturalist observations can also be found at the Arctic Dawn website,, archived at web.archive.org or just google it.)

While the only casualties at Prince of Wales Fort were the post's two horses (all mates dined on horse soup the evening of August 9th), the French suffered major losses from scurvy and malnutrition, almost one hundred men would perish before LaPerouse's return to Cadiz, Spain on October 13th.

Some historians regard the attack as 'pure nonsense' but this is to underestimate La Perouse. If the French had been able to follow up this raid the next year with personnel and supplies, they may have been able to corner the British in northeastern Canada. Trapped between the American and French allies, this may have meant a very different fate for the British Empire and for Canada.

While his raid was successful, incurring an estimated loss equal to about \$5 million Canadian dollars today, France's vision for Canada was not. The Hudson's Bay Company would launch a lawsuit against the British Government for not protecting its interests in the Bay which, in turn, would be passed over to the Government of France when the Treaty of Paris was signed in 1783. Paris would end up paying compensation for the forts it conquered only a year earlier. Don't mess with the HBC.

While the Treaty of Paris signaled the end of the war in the states, it heralded in a new, economic war in northwestern Canada, at that time called Rupertsland. The American Revolution had seen Canadian 'free traders' head west to avoid the conflict. These 'pedlars' would solidify the grip of the newly formed Northwest Company, a group of independent traders competing with the Hudson's Bay Company. The Northwest Company would dominate the fur trade for the next fifty years, until finally merging with the Hudson's Bay Company.

LaPerouse returned to France, married and tried to settle for a bit. However,

the opportunity to lead a scientific exploration navigating the globe drew him back to the sea. After successfully navigating around Tierra Del Fuego, up to Kamchatka, Alaska and back down to Botany Bay, Australia, he and his crew wrecked on a reef in remote part of the Pacific. Without this stroke of black luck, La Perouse would have gone down in history alongside explorer's such as Captain James Cook.

As for Churchill and its Dene traders, it was a disaster. At this time, a smallpox epidemic was spreading north from the Mississippi region, almost two thirds of the Caribou Dene trading at Churchill would perish in this epidemic.

For Samuel Hearne, it was equally disastrous. He would return to establish another post at Churchill in 1784. However, he would find that his young country wife, Mary Norton, who had fled when the French arrived, had died of starvation. He would find that his friend and main Dene trading partner, Matonabee, had seemingly taken his own life. It seems that Lord Hood's victory in the Caribbean would translate to his young protege's personal downfall.

The remaining Dene moved trade to the independent post, Fort Chipewyan on the Athabaska River – run by Peter Pond, the first man to map the MacKenzie River system and discoverer of the Athabaska tar sands. Few would ever make the long and arduous journey to trade at the reopened Fort Churchill, five miles south from the ruins of Prince of Wales Fort.

It was a stunning blow to not just the fur trade in Churchill but throughout northern and western Canada. Of any event in 18th century fur trade history, the La Perouse Affair is arguably the most significant factor in determining the path of European and Aboriginal relations for the century to come.

The Northwest Company would increasingly bring alcohol into the trading mix and soon increased competition between the HBC and NWC would lead to conflict. By 1821, when the companies merged, it could no longer be considered a trade of equals, aboriginal trappers were now just part of the balance sheet, another commodity to be used cost effectively.

- prepared by Kelsey Eliasson






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