

A Bit of Newfoundland History

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Friends:

Here is a bit of Newfoundland history tied to today as the date “A French warship commanded by Captain Pierre Le Moyne d’Urberville (sic) defeated an English squadron at the Battle of Hudson's Bay.”

When Canada was building a new type of Destroyer designed with no flat surfaces excepting decks on the outer skin of the ships, it named the first one HMCS d’Urberville in honor of the French Captain who won the Battle of Hudson’s bay. After winning that battle, d’Urberville was forced by the approaching winter to find a spot in the New World to make camp and keep himself and his crew alive. Wooden ships don’t fare well in the living Atlantic ice. d’Urberville chose a spot in the SE corner of Newfoundland’s peninsula, about 90 miles from the English-occupied city of St. John’s. St. John’s harbor was heavily fortified against danger coming from the sea, and there was no known threat that could traverse the formidable landscape West of the city. The terrain is so difficult that it was used by American astronauts to prepare for walking on the surface of the moon.

d’Urberville knew about the strength of St. John’s Atlantic approaches, and about the weakness to the city’s East. After hastily building a fort from rocks he found at a place he named Placentia and making peace with the local Beothuk tribe, d’Urberville developed a plan to attack St. John’s. He marched his small force to St. John’s in the dead of winter and attacked St. John’s by land. His little group sacked and burned all of St. John’s except the cannon-fortified seawall, then marched back to Placentia with supplies taken from English military stores.

When the time came for the Atlantic fishing fleet to return to Newfoundland the following summer, d’Urberville decided to stay. By common law, the Admiral of the fishing fleet was the captain of whichever ship was first to arrive at Placentia, regardless of nationality, and since he was already there, that honor fell to d’Urberville. Being Admiral of the fishing fleet meant that he not only directed which ships fished where but that, based on a century-old pirate custom, he also got a cut of the fleet’s take. He bartered for livestock and women from the fishing fleet, paying the fishermen with their own fish.

Anticipating an English attack, d’Urberville fortified both his land approach and his sea-lane approaches high atop a basalt cliff guarding the “Placentia Gut.” When the English failed to attack his fortifications that summer, d’Urberville once again settled in for a long, nasty Newfoundland winter. Once again, d’Urberville decided to test English land defenses at St. John’s in winter, and once again he was able to sack and burn St. John’s to the ground. d’Urberville and his troops spent another well-fed winter at Placentia before heading back to

France. He left a small contingent of Frenchmen at Placentia, a group that was never defeated by the English, and small settlements on the islands of St. Pierre and Miquelon just off the coast of Newfoundland. Those islands are still part of France, having been overlooked by the English in dictating the terms of the Treaty of Utrecht in which the French lost all territorial claims in the New World.

Fast forward to the 1970s, and Canada's new class of Destroyers.

Since d'Urberville's successes in Newfoundland were part of Canadian history, Canadian military decision-makers decided to make the ship's first port call in St. John's. Part of the visit was televised nationally by CNN and military reporters. One Lieutenant thought it would be a good idea to interview the Mayor of St. John's. All went well in the interview until the Lt. asked the Mayor what the visit would mean to the community. The Mayor thought for a moment.

"I hope," he said, "that it reminds everyone to renew their fire insurance."

Ken