

The 23rd Foot had no further opportunity to distinguish themselves in the remaining three years of the Seven Years War although the grenadier company did well at Warburg (31st July 1760) and the whole Regiment was lucky to escape from the confusion, not of their own making, at the action at Kloster Kampen (16th October 1760) which cost them 165 casualties, with the commanding officer and two company commanders being taken prisoner. After the peace in 1762 they were stationed in Devon and Cornwall where they helped to prevent smuggling, curbed the activities of wreckers and put down riots among the tin miners of Padstow. In the customary peacetime economies the establishment was reduced to nine companies, each of forty-two privates, but in 1770 all regiments of infantry were ordered to form a tenth company, known as the light company, intended for skirmishing. Not that the overall size of the unit was increased, since the strength of the companies was simultaneously reduced to thirty-five privates.

Meanwhile, the situation in the American colonies was deteriorating and Lieutenant-General Thomas Gage, who commanded in America, was calling for his force to be increased to 20,000 men, an impossible total since there were only 40,000 men with the colours, of whom 9,000 were required for other overseas garrisons and 6,000 were cavalry who could not be shipped across the Atlantic. Reluctantly the British government sent fourteen battalions but these totalled less than 7,000 men. The 23rd set sail crammed into small vessels, on 15th April 1773, and had an uncomfortable voyage, especially in the second week in May which saw a five-day gale. Despite having sprung the main mast they reached New York on 11th June, a shorter than average voyage for that period, and the city made a favourable impression on all ranks.

In August 1774, the Regiment, with the bulk of the New York garrison, was shipped round to Boston, the centre of colonial disaffection, where the magistracy did its best to make the life of the soldiers unendurable and the Provincial Congress of Massachusetts issued ever more inflammatory proclamations, drilled its militia and accumulated arms. One of the Regiment's tasks was to try to stop the removal of arms and ammunition, much of it illegally acquired, from Boston itself. It was a miserable period but the 23rd the best of it, celebrating St David's Day as best they could. In a contemporary book of memoirs is found the first mention of the Regimental Goat 'with gilded horns and adorned with ringlets of flowers' leading the parade. It was clear that the goat was already an established part of the Regiment since the writer noted that 'the corps values itself much on the ancientness of the custom'.

In April 1775 there was more serious business. Hearing that there was a large store of arms at Concord, 20 miles from Boston, Gage sent out two composite battalions, one of eleven grenadier companies, the other of ten light companies to secure the arms. Since the light company of the 23rd had only thirty-five rank and file and the grenadiers only twenty-nine, the companies were no more than modern platoons and the whole force was unlikely to exceed 700 of all ranks and, since he was not expecting serious trouble, Gage sent them out with only thirty-six rounds a man. They found themselves marching through a hostile countryside and at Lexington, five miles from their objective; the local militia were drawn up on the village green. It may never be known who started shooting but it is certain that the first shots in the American War of Independence were fired at Lexington on 19th April 1775.

They pushed on to Concord and secured the little that remained of the arms, but it was clear that their retreat would be barred if they did not soon return and they found themselves fired at by rebels from every scrap of cover. Fortunately, Gage got word of their plight and sent out a brigade of four battalions (less their flank companies) and two guns to help them. The 23rd took part, their battalion companies numbering 218 rank and file, making it improbable that the whole brigade fielded as many as 1,000 muskets.

The two forces met at Lexington at 2.30 pm, by which time the composite battalions, which had already marched 25 miles, were exhausted. They were allowed a short rest while the guns tried to scatter the rebels without much success since 'not above 50 of them were to be seen in a body in any place'. At 3.15 pm the brigade started its long march back to Boston by way of Charlestown Neck. For the first seven miles the 23rd formed the rearguard. It was past midnight when the Regiment, worn out and short of ammunition, reached Boston having suffered thirty-seven casualties, including Lieutenant-Colonel Bernard who was wounded. The whole force suffered 273 casualties but the rescue of the composite battalions in the face of some 3,700 rebels was a not inconsiderable feat although Gage was not wholly satisfied with the discipline of those engaged. In a General Order he praised 'the courage and spirit of the men'.

The retreat into Boston was followed by a blockade of the place on the landside by the rebel militia which greatly outnumbered the garrison and which was soon to be commanded by a former colonel of Virginia Militia, George Washington. Meanwhile reinforcements from Britain, seven weak battalions and a regiment of light dragoons, were on their way, preceded by three more generals, one of whom was of special interest to the Royal Welsh Fusiliers since, on his voyage out, Major-General the Hon Sir William Howe had been appointed Colonel of the Regiment. Believed to be a grandson of George I, Sir William had made his reputation overnight when he led the advanced party of Wolfe's army up the Heights of Abraham in 1759. During the peace he had become well known as a trainer of light infantry and, although he was a strict disciplinarian and extremely taciturn, 'He is much beloved by the whole army'. The government hoped that he and his two colleagues, Generals Clinton and Burgoyne, would put some spirit into the British command in America.

Spirit was certainly needed since Gage seemed to have despaired of his task and had allowed the tactical situation to drift into one of extreme danger by allowing the rebels to occupy the Charlestown peninsula which juts out into the bay opposite Boston. Heavy guns mounted on Breed's Hill, the most southerly height on the peninsula, could make the harbour untenable and cut off all seaborne supplies to the garrison who would have to surrender. Howe, Clinton and Burgoyne had been trying to stir the Commander-in-Chief into correcting this neglect when on the night of 16th/17th June 1775 the rebels built an earthwork on Breed's Hill. 'The first knowledge the general had of it was by hearing one of the ships firing at the workmen and going to see what had occasioned the firing.'

A counter attack was quickly mounted with Howe in command, an operation made no easier because the boats of the fleet could only carry 1,100 men across the bay in a single lift. Breed's Hill was retaken on 17th June 1775 but in circumstances which are a tribute to Howe's tenacity rather than his tactical skill since he suffered 1,054 casualties including ten officers and 207 other ranks dead, a loss the garrison could simply not afford. Only the flank companies of the Regiment took part in the Battle of Bunker Hill (as the attack on Breed's Hill is unaccountably known). They lost fifty-nine men, the grenadier company going into action forty-nine strong and emerging with only five unwounded men.

By March 1776, it was obvious that maintaining a growing garrison in beleaguered Boston could not subdue the American colonies and Howe, who had succeeded Gage in command, evacuated the army to Halifax, Nova Scotia, the 23rd embarking twenty-six officers, twenty-seven sergeants, eleven drummers and 297 rank and file, less than thirty muskets to a company. They spent two months in Canada while the army reorganized itself and a trickle of recruits from Britain brought the musket strength of the companies up to forty-two by July. Howe was meanwhile devising a new plan for winning the war and decided to occupy the water line formed by the Hudson and Richelieu rivers with one army, under Burgoyne marching south from Canada, while Howe himself recaptured New York and moved up the Hudson to meet him.

He duly set sail in June 1776 with an army of 25,000 men, including the 23rd Foot, and started to land on Staten Island on 3rd July, the day before the Declaration of Independence was signed in Philadelphia, but he moved with such extreme deliberation that it was November before he had cleared the long peninsula which is now covered by New York City and the Regiment played only a small part in the operations. During the winter Howe changed his mind and decided to take the bulk of his troops to reduce Pennsylvania, regardless of the fact that the unfortunate Burgoyne was loyally marching towards him and, left to his own devices, was overwhelmed and, on 17th October 1777, forced to surrender at Saratoga.

The 23rd Foot embarked on two small transports of, respectively, 303 and 355 tons on 5th July 1777, and had a thoroughly uncomfortable voyage to the Delaware since they were 850 strong (without their flank companies which were, as usual, brigaded), and they were on board for fifty-one days. They were not greatly involved in the various actions which captured Philadelphia and the surrounding countryside but by the time these were complete the whole condition of the war had changed. France and Spain had declared war, command of the sea was lost and Britain was threatened with invasion. Howe resigned his command to be succeeded by Sir Henry Clinton who in May 1778, decided to evacuate Philadelphia and concentrate his army at New York. He was only just in time.

Hardly had the army regained its base when a large French fleet arrived to blockade the Delaware.

