

A Brief History of the Independent Companies of South Carolina Based on *The American Independent Companies of the British Army 1664-1764*

Definition: An independent company is a company which has no parent regiment. It is a company whose captain has no superior other than the King himself. In practice, though, the Secretary of State and the Secretary-at-War issued orders in the King's name. In a colony, the governor was often empowered to issue orders to the captain of an independent company.¹

Independent Companies in England

In England, independent companies have been used as fortress garrisons since the reign of Henry the 7th. Traditionally, England has never willingly supported a large standing army, raising the troops she needs to fight a war during the war, then disbanding them afterwards. However, with the invention of gunpowder and cannons, fortresses were equipped with these latest in military advances. During peacetime, troops were needed to maintain these expensive weapons that were spread throughout the kingdom, often in isolated locales. These garrison troops were little more than caretakers of the artillery, and it was from these troops that the independent companies arose.²

After the Restoration of Charles II, Parliament banned the King from maintaining any large standing army with the Act for Disbanding the Army. The Civil War and the Commonwealth had shown Parliament that a large standing body of soldiers under the King's direct command was very detrimental to their own power. They allowed, by law, the King to maintain two regiments of troops, what are today the Coldstream Guards and the Grenadier Guards, as his personal bodyguard, to be paid out of his own pocket. Parliament also allowed for ten independent companies to garrison the forts along the Scottish frontier.³ As these independent companies were the only troops paid for by Parliament through taxation, they were effectively the only British national army for many years.

The Independent Companies in North America

The independent companies first appeared in North America in the Summer of 1664. Three companies arrived in Boston under the command of Colonel Richard Nicolls. The Duke of York, James Stuart, brother of Charles II and soon to be James II in his own right, had heard rumors that the French in the Hudson Valley and New Arcadia had plans to occupy the New Netherlands and then New England to secure their position in North America. Charles II decided to act first, preempting the French. However, he knew that Parliament would not approve starting a war with the Dutch, so he arranged it so that his brother should lead the attack so that he could deny knowledge of it when questioned by Parliament. James Stuart raised three companies of soldiers and armed them from the

¹ *The American Independent Companies of the British Army 1664-1764*, Foote, p 6

² Foote, p 7

³ Foote, pp 8-9, 78-79. The King was allowed 3 English Regiments of Foot, one Troop of Horse in Scotland and 10 Independent Companies, only the later to be paid by Parliament.

Tower of London armory. They were shipped to the New World, arriving in Boston in 1664. Although the Dutch knew of the existence of these companies, they were assured that the companies were only being dispatched for defensive purposes. The exact form of this defense was evident on August 29th, 1664, when the companies appeared in New Utrecht Bay, outside New Amsterdam, and demanded the surrender of the city. The Dutch, seeing the hopelessness of their situation, surrendered. After the Treaty of Breda, in 1668, the city was formally ceded to the British and renamed New York.⁴

The original three hundred men of the independent companies under the command of Colonel Nicolls were used to occupy and garrison the entire New York region, from Albany to New York itself, spreading them very thinly throughout the region. The outbreak of the Second Dutch War in 1672 required the raising of a fourth independent company in the region to increase troop strength.⁵ Thus were established the four traditional New York independent companies that garrisoned the region for the next 100 years.

Independent companies manned posts from Nova Scotia to the Caribbean. The actual number of companies was much greater than the four in New York and the three in South Carolina that are popularly remembered. There were companies in Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, New England, Virginia, Georgia, Jamaica, the Leeward Islands, Bermuda, the Bahamas, Guadeloupe, and Barbados.

Independent Companies in South Carolina

The Establishment of 1720

The colonists in South Carolina were extremely concerned that the forces the Spanish were mustering in Vera Cruz in 1719 were to be used to capture the city of Charleston. They requested that Parliament send them four battalions of Regulars for their defense. As George I was in Hanover and Parliament was unwilling to raise the number of troops that it supported, the troops were not available for South Carolina. Instead, the Lords Justices decided on a stop gap measure to raise some troops for the colony. They lowered the number of men in garrison in England from 50 men per company to 45, and then concentrated the surplus men at Portsmouth and Plymouth under Colonel Edmund Fielding's Regiment of Invalids [41st Foot]. These men were formed into a company of 100 men and sent to South Carolina on March 8, 1721. They arrived in Charleston on May 22, 1721.⁶

The South Carolina Provincial Assembly agreed to subsist, or pay, for the men in return for a voice in their employment. There is no record of the uniform for this company, but, as they are often referred to in records as being "Invalids", it could be assumed that they wore red coats with blue linings and facings with "ticker" breeches.⁷

⁴ Foote, p 151

⁵ Foote, pp 144-152

⁶ Foote, pp 301-303

⁷ Foote, pp 304

The company was first used to garrison Fort King George at the mouth of the Altamaha River. After Fort King George was accidentally burned in the winter of 1726-27, the company was moved to Port Royal. In 1730, part of the company was shifted south and Fort Delegal was built on St. Simons Island.⁸

The command of the independent company was transferred to Brigadier General James Oglethorpe on June 20, 1737. At this time, the company changed from being a South Carolina company to being that of a Georgia company. The company became the nucleus of Oglethorpe's new 42nd Regiment of Foot in August 25, 1737.

No independent companies were to be stationed in South Carolina from 1737 to 1746.⁹

The Establishment of 1744

As a result of Oglethorpe's failure to take St. Augustine in 1740, South Carolina pressed the Crown for troops not under Oglethorpe's command. Three new independent companies were to be raised by command of the Privy Council in 1744, but it was not until 1746 that the troops were actually recruited. On June 22, the core of the three new companies arrived in Charleston under the command of Colonel Alexander Vanderdusen. Only sixty officers and men actually arrived, the rest were to be recruited from Charleston and Virginia. However, these three companies never recruited to full strength. With the coming of peace, the three companies were disbanded, having seen no action in the two years of their existence. They were disbanded in the summer of 1749¹⁰

The Establishment of 1748

On May 29, 1749, Oglethorpe's 42nd Foot was disbanded, the soldiers of the regiment being drafted into three new independent companies of one-hundred privates each. The senior captain of the companies was the former Lieutenant Colonel of Oglethorpe's Foot, Alexander Heron. From the recognition of his former rank by the other captains and by the Governor of South Carolina, the custom originated whereby the senior captain of the companies acted as a brevet major and actually commanded the companies under the Governor.¹¹

The companies were moved from Georgia to South Carolina in 1749, with a small detachment being left behind at Fort William and another detachment under Captain Raymond Demere was left to guard buildings and stores at Fort Frederica.¹²

When the Seven Year's War broke out in Virginia in 1754, an independent company was present. A composite company of the fittest one-third of each company was sent with

⁸ Foote, p 309

⁹ Foote, p 310

¹⁰ Foote, p 313

¹¹ Foote, p 314

¹² Foote, p 314

Captain James Mackay to join Provincial Colonel George Washington to man Fort Necessity in Great Meadows. It lost Lt. Peter Mercier and a number of men in that action. The company remained at Will's Creek after the battle, where it was joined by two independent companies from New York. The three companies, under the combined command of Colonel James Innes, built Fort Cumberland. Captain Mackay returned to South Carolina, to be replaced by Captain Paul Demere, Raymond's younger brother, in 1755. The composite company accompanied General Edward Braddock on the ill-fated attack on the French Fort Duquesne. The company was part of the 1st Brigade in the battle and took part in the heavy action.¹³ The surviving privates were drafted into Major General Shirley's 50th Regiment of Foot. This was against orders as the company was supposed to have remained in garrison at Fort Cumberland. However, at this time, Colonel Dunbar, Braddock's 2nd in command and successor, had ceased to follow any order at all in his panicked flight back to Albany after the disaster. The officers and non-commissioned officers were returned to South Carolina to recruit replacements for the drafted privates.

A second provisional company was drawn from the three companies in 1756 to build and garrison a fort in the Cherokee Overhill country at the request of the Cherokee. Under the command of Captain Raymond Demere, the troops built Fort Loudoun on the Tennessee River. Armament for the fort consisted of twelve cannon painstakingly transported over the mountains on packhorses by John Elliot, an Indian Trader.

Although all three companies had been recruited back to full strength, it was still an insufficient number to defend South Carolina against a determined French attack. Royal reinforcements were sent directly from England and from New York. Lieutenant Colonel Henri Bouquet arrived with half of the 1st Battalion of the 60th Royal American Regiment of Foot. At this time, the independent companies came under command of the Commander-in-Chief in America, John Campbell, Lord Loudoun. The first Highland Battalion arrived and the excess of troops allowed Bouquet to concentrate the remaining independent companies as a garrison for Fort Prince George. However, when Lord Loudoun ordered the Royal Americans and the Highlanders to accompany the 2nd Fort Duquesne Expedition, the troops were divided between Charleston and Fort Prince George. The command of the troops reverted to South Carolina Governor Lyttleton with the departure of Bouquet.¹⁴

In 1759, hostilities broke out between the Cherokee and the British. A war party of Cherokee under the leadership of Oconostota had been sent to accompany Braddock on his expedition against Fort Duquesne.¹⁵ However, they had arrived too late to take part in the action and were sent home with no war trophies or recompense for their long journey. Disgruntled, the Cherokee lightly raided the frontier settler's homes on the journey home.

¹³ Patrick Demere, in his work "British Officer and St. Simons Island Planter: The Story of Captain Raymond Demere" maintains that the independent company was in the 2nd Division under the command of Colonel Dunbar.

¹⁴ Foote, p 319

¹⁵ Foote states that this was Braddock, though I suspect that he meant Forbes, as the Forbes Expedition against Duquesne occurred in 1758, much more reasonable than the 1755 of Braddock's Expedition. Anderson maintains that it was Forbes Expedition in *Crucible of War*, p 458.

In mid-February, 1759, a peace negotiation at Fort Prince George broke down and resulted in violence. Lieutenant Richard Cotymore, commander of the garrison, was killed in the fight, and Ensign Alexander Miln (who succeeded the command) attempted to put the Cherokee delegation into irons. More violence resulted, as the Cherokee were carrying concealed arms, and the Cherokee delegation was killed.¹⁶

Fort Prince George was cut off from the rest of South Carolina in early 1760, and Fort Loudoun was attacked in 1759. Fort Prince George was relieved by a column of Highlanders and Royal Scots Fusiliers in late 1760, but their attempts to reach Fort Loudoun failed. Fort Loudoun was forced to surrender on August 6, 1760, after an eight month siege. The troops marched out of the fort on the 8th of August, intending to march to Fort Prince George. However, on the morning of August 9th, during an exchange of fire between the British and the Cherokee, all of the officers except Provincial Captain John Stuart were killed. In all, 24 British were killed, the same number as were killed in the Cherokee delegation at Fort Prince George. The remainder of the company was taken hostage and hidden in the Cherokee villages. At the end of hostilities, most of these soldiers were ransomed back to South Carolina. The conflict was ended in 1761 after the 77th Highland Battalion, four companies of the Royal Scots and ten additional independent companies from England broke the siege around Fort Prince George and penetrated deeply into Cherokee territory, burning villages and fields.¹⁷

The independent companies in South Carolina saw no further action for the remainder of the war.

It is interesting to note that Robert Rogers, famed Major of Rangers later in the war, bought Paul Demere's commission in the South Carolina independent companies, though he later sold it, without apparently having actually served in the company.

Disbandment in 1763

The remains of the three independent companies were ordered disbanded, as were all independent companies in North America, in 1763. It was intended that the fit privates were to be drafted into the 60th Royal Americans. But, Captain Marcus Prevost, who was sent to Charleston to select the fittest of the privates, reported to Bouquet that the companies were full of soldiers who were a "bad lot—old drunkards for the most part, who were dirty, insolent and undisciplined"¹⁸

And so, the independent companies ceased to exist in North America. It is worth noting that the only times the independent companies were used offensively in America was the South Carolina Company and the two New York Companies that were incidentally involved in the Fort Duquesne campaign of 1754-55, and the English Independent Companies (under Colonel Burton) Amherst had to use as two provisional battalions in South Carolina. Independent companies of foot did not fit into the tactical formations

¹⁶ Foote, p 320

¹⁷ Foote, p 322

¹⁸ Foote, p 323. This quote has also been attributed to Sir John St. Clair.

used in the field for battle, and hence they could not be used in the field effectively. They were as great a misfit tactically as they were a nuisance administratively.¹⁹

The American Independent Companies of the British Army 1664-1764 was written by William A. Foot as his PhD dissertation in History from UCLA in 1966. The dissertation covers the entire 100 year history of the independent companies in North America and is fascinating to read. This paper is a distillation of the parts of the dissertation that are relevant to Fort Loudoun and the independent company garrisoned there and is in no way meant to be construed as an original work.

- Jon Vogel

¹⁹ Foote, pp 100-101