



Landguard 1667

Darell's Day - The Battle for Landguard Fort 1667

After some initial successes in the Second Anglo Dutch War, a war over trade between two great seafaring nations, 1666 had not been a good year for Charles II and England. The Great Plague had continued to ravage the country whilst the Great Fire of London had damaged the country's financial institutions. The Kings coffers were empty. By 1667 there was no money to keep the Navy's sailors paid or to refit and supply the ships. In London there were stirrings of rebellion.

In June 1667, the Dutch fleet carried out an audacious raid on the Medway, at Sheerness and Chatham. Their fleet destroyed a number of the Navy's best ships and captured the Royal flagship, taking it back to Holland as a prize. The Navy, and the King were humiliated. The Dutch were unable to press their advantage and destroy the main naval dockyard at Chatham (the largest industrial complex in the country at the time) but continued to patrol and blockade the English Channel and North Sea coast, whilst they set their sights on the important deep water port and town of Harwich, and its naval dockyard.

The Navy was in such a poor state that it could not risk challenging the Dutch in a fleet action at sea. As Dutch intentions were realised panic set in and reinforcements were mobilised, but as the Dutch attacked the only significant defence between them and Harwich's destruction was Landguard Fort with its small garrison of two companies of the Lord High Admirals Regiment (forerunners of the Royal Marines), under the command of Captain Nathaniel Darell. Whilst the fort and its cannon remained no enemy ships could safely enter the Harwich Haven and attack the town and dockyard.

The Dutch fleet of some seventy ships appeared off the East coast. Its commander, the renowned Admiral De Ruyter, sent a squadron of warships to bombard the fort, but the treacherous sandbanks kept them out of effective range. They then landed a 2000 strong force further up the coast at what is now known as Cobbolds Point. Whilst part of the force secured the landing point some 1500 Dutch marines led by the English turncoat Colonel Dolman marched on Landguard carrying scaling ladders, grenades and dragging cannon.

The Dutch tried twice to take the fort, both times beaten back by the withering musket fire from Darell's men. A small English ship came to help. Its shallow draught allowing it to manoeuvre in the estuary it fired its cannon into the shingle where the Dutch took cover, causing the shingle to act like shrapnel and causing many Dutch casualties. During the battle Colonel Dolman was killed, and the Dutch force retreated back to its landing site before English reinforcements were able to join battle. After fighting a rear guard action the Dutch re-embarked and taking their casualties sailed away that night.

"From all accounts it seems clear that the honours of the day rested mainly with Captain Nathaniel Darell, the governor of the fort... To Darell, therefore, distinctly belongs the credit of having beaten off a determined assault in the face of overwhelming numbers, and with him and his garrison rests the honour of having saved the fort from capture, and of having thus in great measure restored the confidence in our fighting power which had been so rudely shaken by the disasters sustained at Sheerness and Chatham".

Extract from a letter dated July 15th 1667 from an English Exile in Holland who was present at the attack.



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English losses were light, though Captain Darell was wounded. After his victory he was hailed as a national hero. The Lord High Admirals Regiment had only been formed a few years earlier but at Landguard they had restored some of the Navy's honour, foiling the Dutch raid and preventing the destruction of Harwich and the naval dockyard. They had also saved the King and country from further humiliation at the hands of the Dutch. As well as trying to deal a serious blow to England's ability to build and repair its ships, another outcome of the raid if it had been successful would have been to cause dissent and possibly destabilise the already unpopular Charles II. The Dutch raids on the Medway had caused panic in London. With the Thames blockaded and the Dutch having control of the seas a further defeat at Harwich might even have caused an uprising against the King. At the very least it could have put the Dutch in an even stronger position at the subsequent peace treaty negotiations at the end of July. If the Dutch had succeeded in destroying the dock yards then England's ability to rebuild its fleet could have been put back decades, leaving England weak and vulnerable.

The Duke of York made a visit to Landguard soon after the battle, as did the King some time later to thank Darell and his men. Although not a great battle in terms of size, the consequences of a defeat could have been far ranging. Luckily for King and country the Marines had arrived, fought their first land battle and saved the day.

"Thus ends the account of the memorable attack on Landguard - an event which is, I regret to say, almost forgotten by most of us today. More than 230 years have elapsed, yet nothing has ever been done to commemorate the victory won on that 2nd July 1667. Surely some part of the existing fort might be called after Darell, so that the name, at least, of a fine soldier shall not be entirely lost to recollection".

Major John Henry Leslie. *The History of Landguard Fort in Suffolk*. Published in 1898.

In 1904 the then Minefield Battery was renamed Darell's Battery. Its twin control towers, added in 1940 when the fort was once more called upon to defend the country, remain a distinctive feature to those visiting Landguard or sailing through the Harwich Haven. Nearly 350 years after the battle it has been thanks to the efforts of the Landguard Fort Trust and the Royal Marines Association that Captain Darell is not forgotten, and we hope that on this important forthcoming anniversary that many more will learn about this "fine soldier" and an important piece of our history.

