

## Book Reviews

# The Capture of Louisbourg 1758

By Hugh Boscawen

Reviewed by Air Commodore Neville Parton

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### Introduction

**I**t has to be admitted that the book which forms the subject of this review is not the standard fare for Air Power Review – with no obvious links to air power or current events – and yet it is this reviewer’s contention that it has much to offer anyone with an interest in joint operations, strategy, history – and how to learn lessons.

In terms of the story itself, the author is uniquely qualified to write on this subject, having not only a 32-year career as a soldier within the British Army with a strong background in both operations and doctrine, but also a good understanding of the maritime environment gained from many years as an offshore yachtsman. He is also a direct descendant of the admiral who commanded the operation, and his personal interest in the subject, captured in over three decades of research, is evident in the care that has been taken to not only capture all the facts, but to weave these together to tell a story, complete with all the very human elements that form such a key aspect of any military operation.

The book itself covers the 1758 campaign by British forces to capture the French fortified settlement of Louisbourg, in what is now Nova Scotia, which turned out to be a significant act in the Seven-Years War. This was a ground-breaking and hugely successful joint amphibious operation, particularly when set against a less-than-prepossessing British record in this area

at the time. It covers not only the action in the campaign itself, but looks at the way in which the armed forces engaged on both sides were raised and maintained, and where they and this particular engagement fitted within the overall strategy of the British and French war ministers. Also, the longer-term implications are considered, for as is eloquently pointed out: "The experience gained during this campaign shaped Britain's amphibious capability, which Pitt [William Pitt, Britain's War Minister] used subsequently to construct a trading empire."<sup>1</sup>

Particular elements that immediately evoke interest include the speed with which the Secret Committee of the Privy Council was able to develop a campaign plan, refit a fleet, and embark two regiments and their stores (ten weeks!), the use of a joint staff to develop a system for organising, commanding and controlling an amphibious assault, the carrying out of practical exercises to enable tactics and techniques to be perfected, and the difference that a truly joint staff can make to a campaign – both for good and ill.<sup>2</sup> However, the personal element is not overlooked, and there are some inspiring tales of key individuals at all rank levels, ranging from the three junior Officers whose initiative brought success in the initial assault, through individual acts of bravery by ordinary soldiers, to the senior Officers whose combined leadership brought overall success – in particular Admiral Edward Boscawen and Major General Jeffery Amherst.<sup>3</sup>

In a well-reasoned concluding section, the importance of a clear overarching strategy is brought out, along with the importance of choosing not only competent and experienced Commanders, but those who can work well with others. The importance of training at all levels, the use of a joint staff with top-down direction, and the need to balance operational imperatives with the ever-present demands of logistics are also identified. It is interesting to see the names of certain individuals appearing in the operations who would subsequently go on to greater achievements: Brigadier James Wolfe (of Quebec fame) and Master James Cooke being immediately apparent as a cut above their contemporaries. A final note points out that the capture of Louisbourg could be seen as marking a crossover in the history of the British Empire – whilst Boscawen and Amherst's success may have laid the foundations for Britain's trading empire, it also represented the last high point in the American colonies – which within 20 years would be fighting against Britain for their independence.

It should be noted that the work is copiously referenced, and has a fulsome set of appendices which include a guide to Louisbourg today, a full listing of the French and British orders of battle, and a 'where are they now' guide to the ships and regiments involved in the campaign. It also has a full glossary to assist those who may not be so familiar with the terminology involved in 18<sup>th</sup> century warfighting, as well as a wide range of maps and tables to assist in understanding the actual campaign itself, and a number of illustrations depicting the key individuals and locations.

Attractively produced and priced, whilst this is in every sense of the word a scholarly piece of work, it is also eminently readable, and provides not only an understanding of the campaign

of 1758 but also where that campaign fitted within the wider picture of the British and French operations in the Seven-Years War. It delivers some great insights into the problems of joint campaigning, and thereby not only reveals how our ancestors faced many of the same problems that we do today, but also points to some very relevant lessons that can be drawn from their experiences. Equally importantly, it is thoroughly absorbing, well balanced, and beautifully written – it comes heartily recommended as a truly great read.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Hugh Boscawen, *The Siege of Louisbourg 1758, Campaigns and Commanders* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2011), p xv.

<sup>2</sup> See *ibid.*, pp 77, 130, 33 and 228. For instance the British commanders initially discovered that they could land 2,957 men simultaneously, and form them up within 7 minutes of landing, but within three days they procured additional craft and a further exercise allowed them to put nearly 6,000 men ashore with their commanders in the same timescale.

<sup>3</sup> In the first case, Lieutenant Christopher Atkins RN, who landed Lieutenants Thomas Brown and Joseph Hopkins, and Ensign Alexander Grant, who with 40 men secured a landing site. With regard to the ordinary rank and file, when a mortar bomb landed in front of one of the British trenches, a Corporal Donald McPherson ran forward to it, twisted out the blazing fuze and held it over his head so that the French gunners could see what he had done. *Ibid.*, p 259. *ibid.*, pp 166 and 259.



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