

The Seven Years War

When: 1756-1763

Combatants: Great Britain and allies vs France, Spain and allies

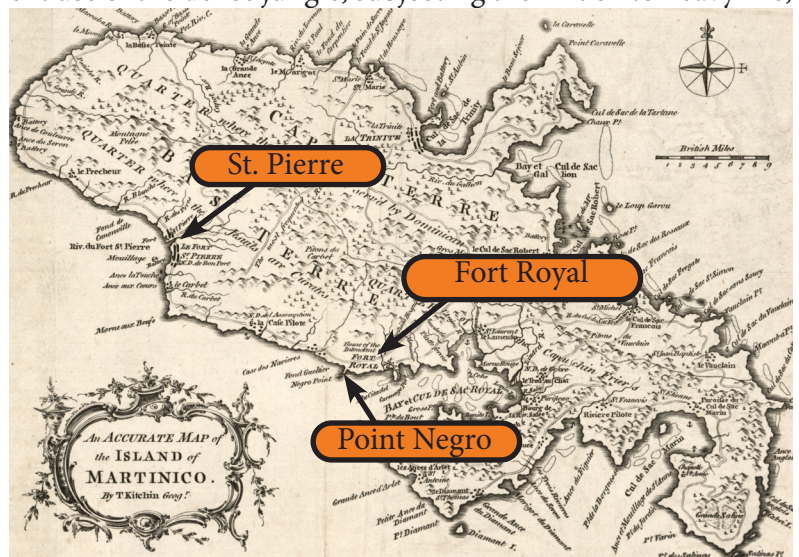
Reasons: Unresolved territorial disputes and national rivalries

Other names: The Pomeranian War, The French and Indian War, The Third Silesian War, The Third Carnatic War

Key battles and places: Martinique, Guadeloupe, Havana

The Seven Years War arose from various unresolved issues between the European powers after the War of the Austrian Succession. These included disputes over territory between Austria and Prussia, as well as rivalries between the French and the British in Canada and India. This war was fought on many different continents, between the great European powers and their colonies. It is the widespread nature of this conflict which leads some historians to label it the first true World War, over a century and a half before the Great War of 1914-1918 broke out. The early years of this conflict were focused in other parts of the world, so it was not until 1758 that the British Government and William Pitt the Elder, Secretary of State and Member of the Cabinet, first turned their minds towards the Caribbean. Louisburg in Nova Scotia had been successfully captured, although, overall, the war had not been going in Britain's favour and it was now thought that a victory in the Caribbean would be useful in domestic politics. Many West Indian planters, who had taken up residence in Britain, were also in favour of the war, as French islands had been more profitable than their own holdings; this was mainly the result of the French subsidising their own slave trade and trading illegally with the British colonies in North America. William Beckford, who owned extensive sugar plantations and was twice Lord Mayor of London and also represented the City of London as an MP, assured the British Government that Martinique could be conquered easily by a small force under a good commander. The capture of some rich French colonies, like Martinique, in addition to depriving the French of the economic benefit of such islands, would, it was believed, prove useful in any future peace negotiations, as the French would be prepared to make concessions in other areas in order to recover them. It would also have a military advantage by preventing the French from having a base en route to their territories in North America around the St. Lawrence and Mississippi rivers.

A force of around 7,000 men was thus dispatched in November 1758 under the command of Major Peregrine Thomas Hopson to invade the island of Martinique, arguably the most important and valuable of the French possessions in the Caribbean. Arriving first at Barbados, the fleet and the army approached Martinique on 15th January 1759. Troops were landed the next day at Point Negro and the Army began to advance the day after that. However, the French defenders made excellent use of the dense jungle, subjecting the British to heavy fire, whilst simultaneously concealing their position. The British realised that they would be unable to transport the necessary cannons to attack the French fortifications through this heavy terrain, as well as convey the necessary supplies to keep the troops fed and watered. They could not land closer to the fort or bombard it from the sea. Therefore, the British re-embarked that very same evening, having sustained 100 casualties since the morning. The fleet sailed up the coast, briefly pausing to bombard the town of St. Pierre, but it was decided to continue on to the expedition's secondary target, Guadeloupe.

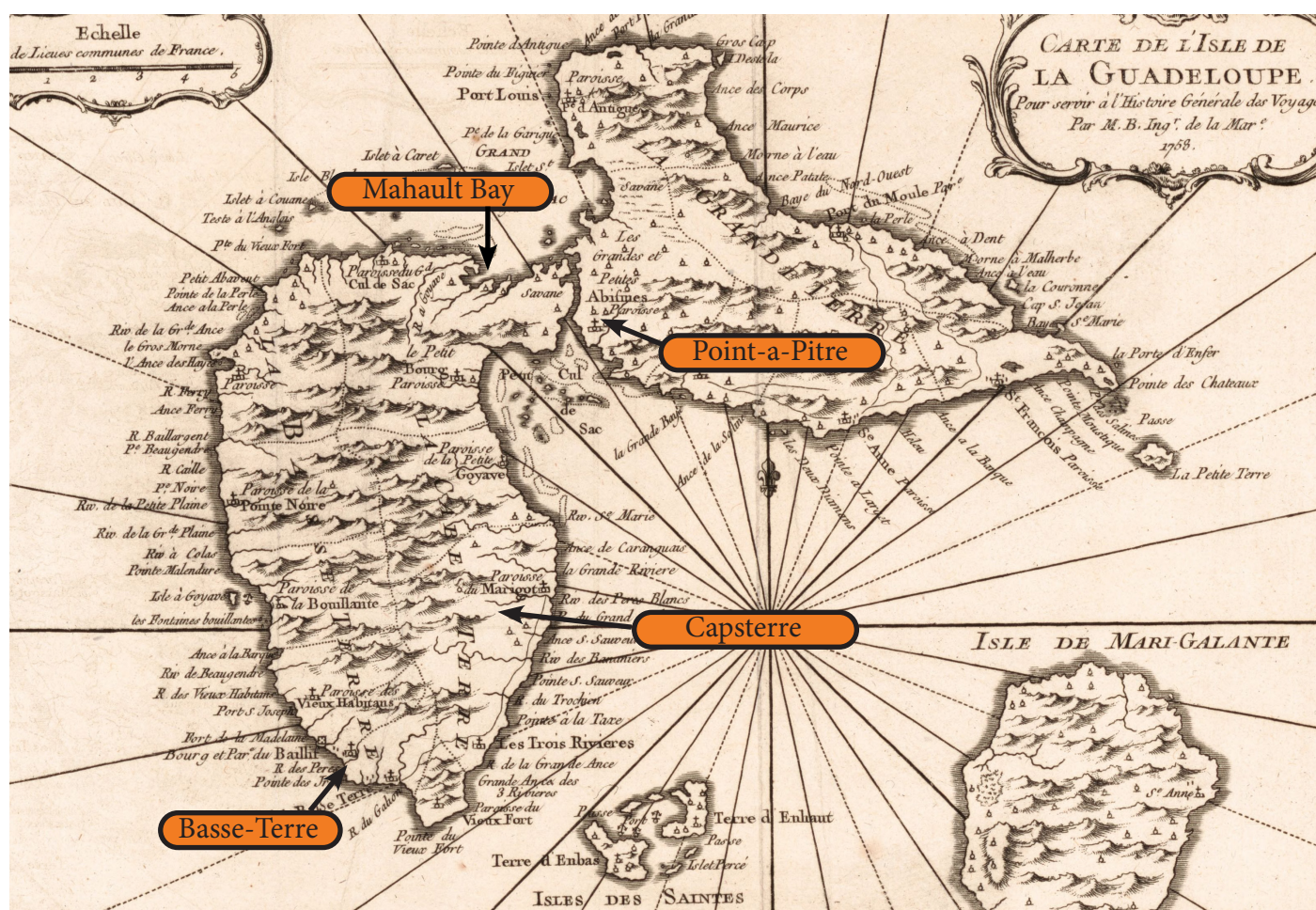


They arrived on the morning of 23rd January, bombarding Fort St. Charles near the town of Basse-Terre, forcing the inhabitants of both to flee, and landed the Army unopposed the next day. As the British bombardment had set the town on fire, the French retreated to Dos d'Ane, a mountain stronghold, which the British could not assail and the French Governor refused to surrender. A stalemate ensued for the next few weeks, with Hopson refusing to adopt a new strategy, despite the urging of many of his junior officers. The old enemy of sickness reared its head and many men fell ill with dysentery, so that 2,000 of them had to be transported to Antigua, where most of them recovered. However, this reduced the number of effective troops to around 3,300 and Hopson himself also fell ill, which ultimately proved fatal. Whilst he was indisposed, Commodore Moore of the Navy took a small force, composed of Marines, sailors and Highlanders and successfully captured Point-a-Pitre, providing the British with an excellently-situated base from which to launch attacks on both islands of the territory. After Hopson died on the 27th, command fell to Colonel John Barrington, Pitt's first choice to lead the expedition, who swiftly moved against the French.



John Barrington,
Image © National Army Museum,
London

Barrington removed the majority of his Army to the central point at Point-a-Pitre, leaving a small garrison of 500 men at Basse-Terre, as well as setting up tents and huts to mislead the French into thinking that he was establishing a long-term camp. Manpower was now a concern, as he had also to provide 300 soldiers to Commodore Moore to serve as sailors when the Commodore had to sail to intercept a French fleet that arrived in the region. This, coupled with losses from disease, left him with 1,200 soldiers, in addition to 350 volunteers and 300 slaves from Antigua. From Point-a-Pitre, Barrington launched attacks against various points around the coasts of the two islands, including the successful capture of Mahault Bay, where the French had been receiving supplies from the Dutch island of St. Eustatius. When the British entered the district of Capesterre, where Guadeloupe's most valuable sugar plantations were located, the principal residents, seeking to save their property from destruction, agreed to negotiate with Barrington. For his part, Barrington offered them generous terms, as he knew that the coming summer months would only intensify the sickness that was spreading



through his troops. Almost 800 men had been lost to disease, whilst 59 had been killed in action, with 149 wounded. The French fleet managed to outmanoeuvre Commodore Moore and reached Guadeloupe on 2nd May, the day after the terms of surrender had been agreed. Although the commander of these reinforcements tried to convince the French Governor to break the agreement, he refused and they departed.

Following Guadeloupe's fall, the nearby islands of Marie-Galante, Petite Terre, La Désirade and Les Saintes also surrendered to the British. It was this great success, coupled with victories in other theatres of the war, that led to 1759 being deemed an *Annus Mirabilis*, a wonderful year. However, the Army had lost too many men to comply with an order sent from Britain to capture St. Lucia, and some troops were sent to Canada to aid the campaign against the French there. The capture of Guadeloupe and nearby islands was not the final British military triumph in the Caribbean during the war. In addition to several successful naval operations, 700 men were landed on Dominica 7th June 1761 and forced a French surrender the next day. The following January, another British force arrived at Martinique, approximately twice the size of the one sent three years earlier. The Army, commanded by General Monckton, landed on the 16th at Case Navire and slowly advanced towards the capital at Fort Royal. This involved a gruelling march through three miles of difficult terrain, overcoming French defences and counterattacks. This included securing the French stronghold at Morne Grenier, which was successfully captured in the early hours of 29th January by the forces under the command of Brigadier Haviland, a veteran of the siege of Cartagena. A few days later, the advancing troops forced Fort Royal's surrender on 3rd February. The remainder of the island was secured within a further nine days. Other islands, Grenada and St. Lucia, were secured with minimal or indeed no fighting.

Following this success, the British prepared to attack another target, but this time a Spanish one - the city of Havana, Cuba. This operation was planned in great secrecy, based on knowledge from Admiral Charles Knowles, who had previous experience of operations attacking Cuba and had visited the city on several occasions in his previous role as Governor of Jamaica; he knew that the city's defences were in poor repair. The fleet and troops were gathered at Cape St. Nicholas, between Cuba and St. Domingo, and in order to take the Spanish by surprise, travelled around the eastern end of Cuba through the Old Bahama channel, as opposed to the normal western route.

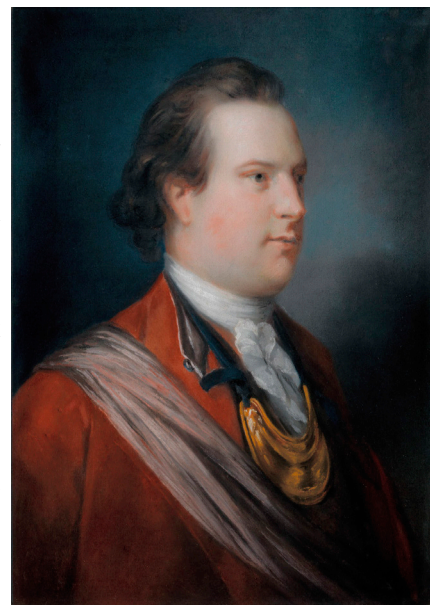
The fleet arrived on 6th June 1762, taking the Spanish by surprise, but were initially prevented from disembarking by high winds. The Army, comprising over 12,000 men under Lieutenant General George Keppel, the 3rd Earl of Abermarle, and including some of the men who had taken Martinique, was landed without a single loss the following day. They came ashore to the east of the city at Coximar Bay, whilst some Marines were landed to the west in a feint. The British built batteries with which to lay siege to El Moro, the city's main defensive castle, and opened fire on 1st July. Most of the cannons were operated by sailors, who impressed their soldier colleagues



The capture of El Moro
© The West India Committee

with the speed with which they fired the guns. The batteries managed to neutralise the castle guns and the Army's siege lines began to get closer to its walls. However, matters were delayed when the first battery caught fire owing to the heat of the cannon and a lack of water, and a new one had to be built to replace it. The Spanish attempted to counter-attack but were driven back and on 30th July, following the British engineers detonating a large mine underneath the walls, the castle was captured by storm.

A few days later, the British began their bombardment and disabled Fort Puntal, the other main fortification, which led Spanish Governor, Juan de Prado, to send out a flag of truce. Terms were agreed on 13th August 1762. This success, which granted Britain control of the main passage from the Caribbean to Europe on the trade winds, was met with widespread celebration back in Britain. Yet the Army at Havana was now very sick, to the extent that Abermarle could not send the 8,000 troops that had been earmarked by the overall British War Strategy to join the assault on French Louisiana in North America; nor could Abermarle send the troops, who had come from the British North American colonies, home if he was to hold Havana. The siege itself had cost 1,000 men through wounds or death. By 18th October, the British had buried over 5,000 dead from disease.



George Keppel,
3rd Earl of Abermarle

Despite yet another catastrophic death toll from disease, the operations carried out by the British Army in the Caribbean in the Seven Years War were highly successful and, as planned, put the Government in a strong negotiating position when the time came to talk peace. With these French Caribbean bargaining chips, they were able to secure the return of captured British territories, such as Minorca. The French were also forced to recognise British dominion over parts of India and Canada, whilst the Spanish relinquished Florida and their territory to the east of the Mississippi. In the end, Britain returned all of the Caribbean conquests it had made during the war, with the exception of Dominica, which it retained for the time being. Yet the next conflict, overshadowed in popular history by developments in North America, saw the British forced on the defensive in the Caribbean.

