

The Nine Years War

When: 1688-1697

Combatants: England and allies (The Grand Alliance) vs France

Reasons: Expansionist policies of Louis XIV of France

Other names: The War of the Grand Alliance, The War of the League of Augsburg, King William's War

Key battles and places: St. Kitts, Guadeloupe, Jamaica, Hispaniola

In 1688 England experienced the 'Glorious Revolution' which ended the reign of the Catholic James II in a largely bloodless event. James's daughter, Mary, and her husband, William of Orange, were invited to ascend the throne as joint Protestant monarchs – William III and Mary II. England could no longer remain neutral in the conflicts that were occurring on the European continent, namely caused by the expansionist ambitions of the French King Louis XIV. William had for some years been opposing Louis' plans in his role as Stadtholder of the Dutch Republic. On 20th December 1688, an alliance was formed between England, the Dutch Republic and the Archduchy of Austria, later joined by Spain and the Duchy of Savoy, to oppose France. This led to the ensuing conflict, which was named the War of the Grand Alliance or, more popularly, the Nine Years War for its duration (1688-1697), but also known as King William's War in the Americas.



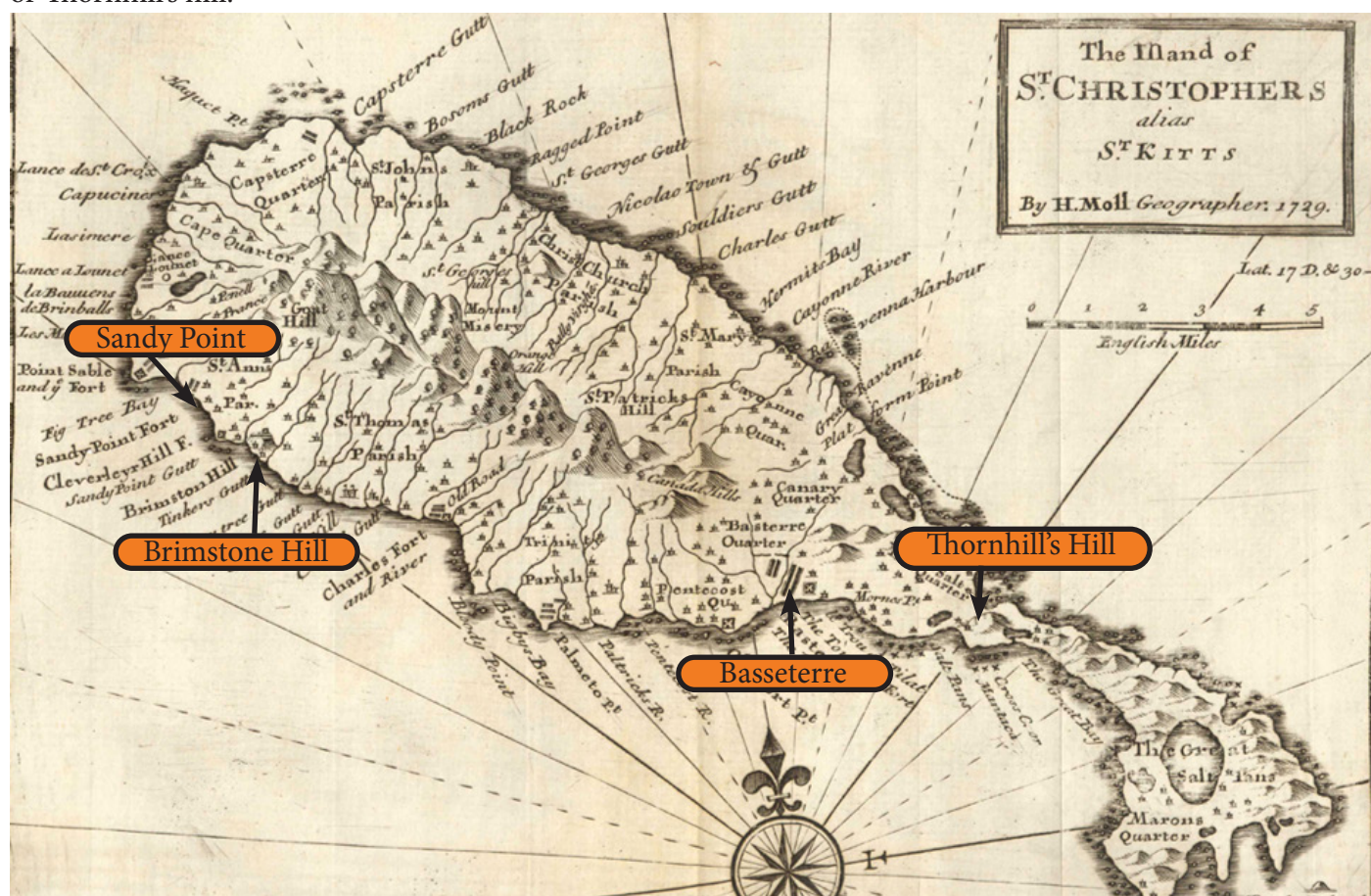
King William III and Queen Mary II

As was the case in other wars between European powers, the conflict also spread to the Caribbean. The French made the first move in capturing the Dutch island of St. Eustatius in April 1689, taking over the English half of the shared island of St. Kitts two months later; in this they were helped by Irish Catholic forces who were loyal to Louis' ally, the former King James II, who wished to recover his throne. The Governors of the English colonies in the region were naturally worried by these developments and felt that the military might that they had at their disposal was insufficient to combat the French and recover the captured territories, or better yet, capture any French territories. In Barbados, before the French had expelled the English from St. Kitts, Sir Timothy Thornhill, a local wealthy planter, slaveowner and Major-General in the Barbadian militia, raised a regiment of 700 men, who were paid from the island's public purse. He had intended to rendezvous with forces commanded by the Governor of the Leeward Islands, Christopher Codrington, before going to reinforce St. Kitts but, unbeknownst to him, the English on the island had capitulated before he left Barbados.

Although too late to repel the French from St. Kitts, Codrington, Thornhill and their compatriots resolved, nevertheless, to launch a few expeditions against the French, whilst awaiting reinforcements from Britain in late 1688. They were successful in rescuing the inhabitants of Anguilla, when the island was attacked in November 1689, and in forcing the French to capitulate on St. Bartholomew. Thornhill also led an expedition to capture the Franco-Dutch island of St. Martin in January 1690 but, owing to the appearance of French reinforcements, was forced to retreat, although they were successful in destroying the major fortifications on the island.

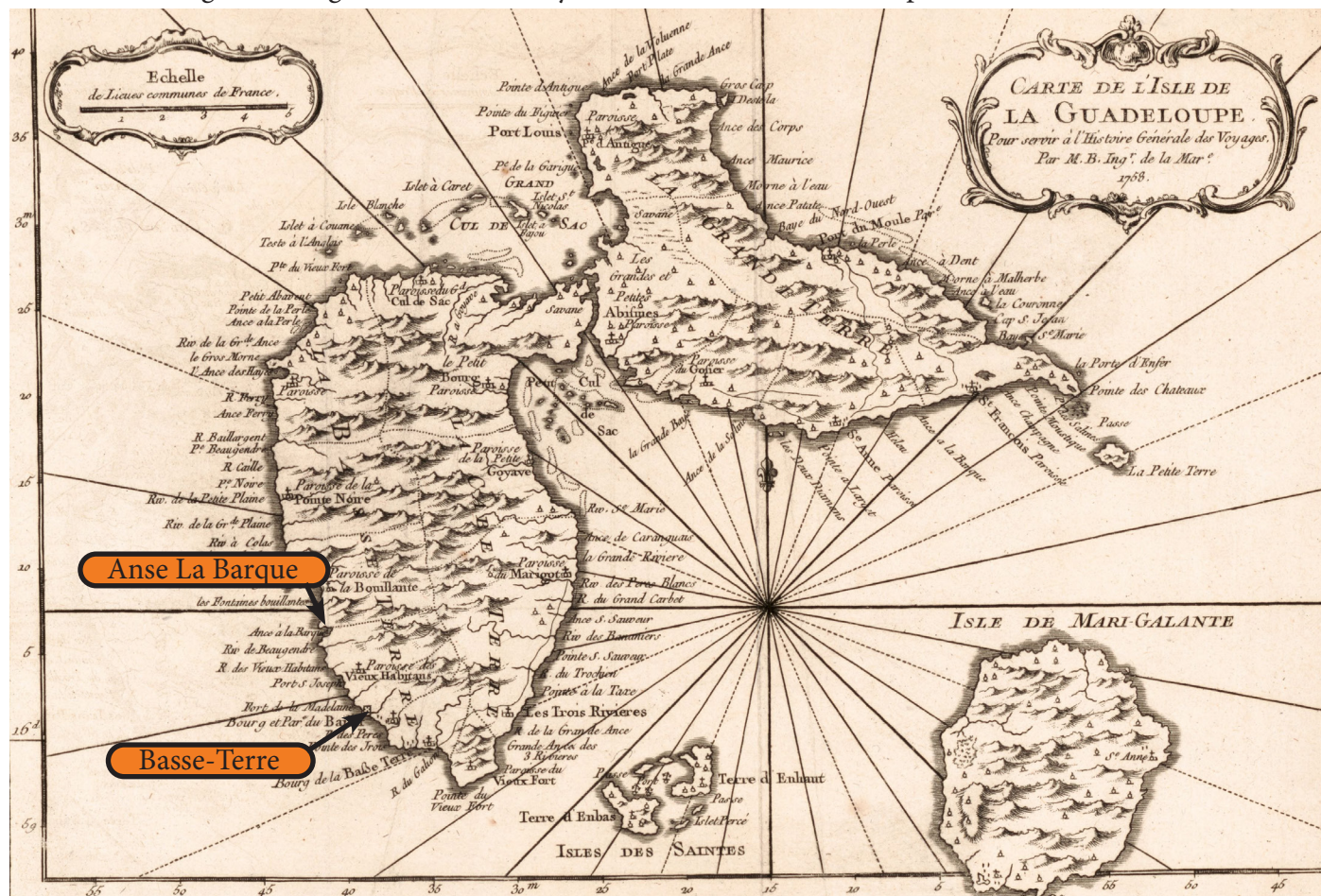
In England, the planned expedition was subject to a variety of delays and did not depart until 9th March 1690, arriving in Barbados in early May 1690. Commanding the fleet of 13 ships was Captain Lawrence Wright, whilst Lieutenant Colonel Henry Holt commanded the Duke of Bolton's second Regiment of Foot. Further delay occurred when many men became ill during the crossing; the fleet was forced to remain at Barbados for a month for them to recuperate before proceeding to Antigua to rendezvous with Codrington and Thornhill's

forces. Codrington, who was designated overall Commander of the land forces, was disappointed with the number of men that had arrived, only providing a total force of approximately 2,000, as he had designs on capturing the entirety of the French West Indies. There was yet another delay whilst more men were recruited, bringing the total to possibly 3,000. With these numbers, a surprise attack on St. Kitts was attempted on 19th June 1690 but the chosen landing site of Frigate Bay was discovered to have been fortified by the French with trenches and the landing was called off. Codrington believed that a head-on assault in such conditions would fail and therefore a new plan was constructed - the English would attack Frigate Bay the next day. The French would hopefully think that this was nothing but a feint; however, a force of 500 militiamen, led by Timothy Thornhill, would land half a mile to the east, ascend an 800ft hill and then come crashing down onto the French flank, opening a hole in their position. This strategy was a complete success and the English force was able to land its troops. For his efforts, the hill that Thornhill climbed has been known ever since as Sir Timothy's Hill or Thornhill's hill.



The English then advanced towards Basseterre, the principal town of the island, along two roads, one through the mountains and the other by the coast. The Antiguan militia, taking the coast road, saw heavy fighting with the French defenders with many of their number killed or wounded. Abandoning Basseterre, the French decided to make their stand at Charles Fort on Sandy Point. The English were able to observe them from the nearby vantage point of Brimstone Hill. A battery of guns was also established on Brimstone Hill to bombard the fort, marking Brimstone Hill's first use as a military site. It would later become the home of the island's principal defensive fortification. Between the 2nd and 12th July 1690, the English bombarded the fort; this was ended by a ceasefire, which turned into a French surrender two days later, securing the island for the English. This victory was followed by the successful recapture of the Dutch island of St. Eustatius by Sir Timothy and his men before the onset of the annual hurricane season ended campaigning. An attack on Guadeloupe was planned for later in the year, but was abandoned for a variety of reason, one of which was deteriorating relations between Codrington and Wright. Poor relations between commanders on land and sea would affect not only this expedition but the remainder of English operations in the Caribbean during the war. Thus, the next effective military operation did not take place until the following year with an attack on the island of Marie Galante on 28th March 1691, after much disagreement between Codrington and Wright. Although the English had successfully captured the island, they chose not to leave a garrison, but instead retained as much manpower as possible for the assault on Guadeloupe, a far more strategically important target.

The English fleet arrived at Guadeloupe on 19th April 1691, with the hope that they could land near the principal town of Basse-Terre on the island's southwestern coast. However, this proved to be impossible due to the strength of the French fortifications and thus they were required to proceed up the eastern coast. After considering Anse la Barque Bay as a landing point, they decided to sail slightly further to ensure that they could land without having directly to confront the French; this naturally meant a longer march, through difficult and dangerous territory to reach Basse-Terre. On 21st April Codrington and his men landed successfully and began marching southward through terrain filled with thick woods and deep gullies, which the French used to their advantage. The English endured heavy losses in their advance but pressed on, until, at sunset on 22nd,



Codrington, with his advance force, reached La Baillif, a mere 3 miles from Basse-Terre. The main body of the Army arrived the next day, whilst a naval force was sent to reconnoitre the town, where the French had decided to withdraw into the castle and accompanying fortifications. The English attempted to bombard the French position, at first unsuccessfully, from the sea and then from land. However, in the midst of these efforts, word arrived that French reinforcements had landed on Martinique. Not wishing to be trapped between the fort and these reinforcements, should they attempt to relieve Guadeloupe, the decision was made to leave. Thus, the expedition was ended, with the Army re-embarking aboard ship on 14th May and Captain Wright and his forces leaving shortly afterwards.

The failure to capture Guadeloupe led to another expedition being launched the following year under the command of Captain Ralph Wrenn of the Royal Navy. However, the land force only consisted of 400 men from the Duke of Bolton's Regiment, who never had a chance to fight as the fleet was unable to gain mastery of the seas when they arrived in January 1692. Many of them died of disease at Barbados, as did Captain Wrenn, and the remainder of the force returned, as per their orders, to England in the April. Following this disaster, a third expedition was launched in 1693, under the command of Sir Francis Wheler, with nearly 2,000 soldiers, in addition to the naval fleet. They arrived at Barbados in late February 1693. Militia forces had again been raised in the West Indies, totalling around 1,000 men, to support this force, but the Antiguan militia were unwilling to serve unless it was under their own officers, so Governor Codrington accompanied them in a voluntary capacity. The target of this expedition was Martinique, with the English landing at the beginning of April and Codrington's men landing on the 9th. On the 15th, the English decided to attack Fort Royal,

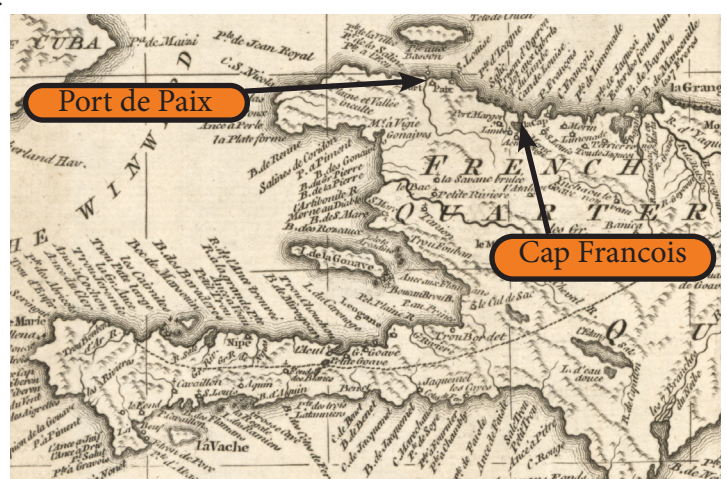
modern day Fort-de-France. The initial advance did not go well, with the advance parties forced by the French to retreat. The French, however, decided to withdraw to the safety of the Fort and town. The initial attacks failed and a French counterattack resulted in many English casualties. On 21st April, it was decided, in light of the 800 men who had been lost since the initial landing, and concerns about the loyalty of the large number of Irish Catholics in the Army, to withdraw. The expedition once again had orders to return to England, even though the commanders felt that an attack on Guadeloupe could have been successful.

One final expedition to the West Indies embarked as a result of an attack on Jamaica in 1694. 3,000 French troops had landed on Jamaica at Cow Bay and Morant Bay, under the command of Governor Ducasse. The Jamaicans had some advance warning from one Captain Elliot on 31st May, declaring Martial Law that evening and preparing their defences as best they could. When the French finally arrived on 19th June, the Jamaican militia put up a stiff fight and were able to drive the French back to their ships, but not before the French had done severe damage to the island, destroying over 50 sugar plantations, causing damage of over £60,000, which would be almost £12 million today. When news reached Britain of the French invasion, a force was sent to relieve Jamaica and recapture the island if it was found to be in French possession when it arrived. This expedition was composed of 1,200 men, divided between two regiments, under the overall command of Colonel Luke Lillingston, who had taken part in the earlier invasion of Martinique. The Navy was placed under the command of Commodore Robert Wilmot.



Luke Lillingston

All vessels of the squadron arrived at St. Kitts by 25th March 1695. As the militia had successfully defended Jamaica, the expedition proceeded with their secondary objective - to retaliate against the French by attacking St. Domingue on the western side of the island of Hispaniola, from which their attack had been launched. Travelling to the Spanish side of the island, who were allied with the English, they agreed a plan of attack, and began operations at Cap Francois, today's Cap-Haïtien, in May 1695. The French abandoned the local fort and retreated to Port de Paix with the English in pursuit. However, they misunderstood the distance and what they believed to be a four-day march was actually a sixteen-day one through terrible weather. The Navy arrived within the space of a few days and Commodore Wilmot began his attack whilst waiting for the Army. Operations were hampered by poor relations between Lillingston and Wilmot, with disagreements about where to position gun batteries to bombard the French fort. The poor working relationships between Army and Navy commanders had undermined the success of other Caribbean expeditions during the war, to the point that King William had made the unusual step of granting a joint audience to Lillingston and Wilmot to impress upon them the need for joint cooperation, a message that clearly went unheeded. Despite the arguments, the Fort at Port de Paix was successfully breached by the Lillingston's gun battery. The French attempted to escape before the Army could storm the fort, and managed to break out into the woods, where they were eventually captured by the Spanish. The English left Hispaniola on 17th July and sailed to Jamaica, where the remnants of Lillingston's regiment remained to bolster Jamaican defence and was eventually disbanded.



The Nine Years War ended with the signing of the Treaty of Ryswick (Rijswijk) in 1697. This war demonstrated that, owing to the geography of the Caribbean, it was vitally important for the Army and Navy to work together in the region. Furthermore, the war highlighted the toll that disease could take on armies serving in the region. Some of the expeditions had also arrived too late in the year, when the rainy season was starting, which exacerbated the problem of disease. However, lessons were not learnt and these issues continued throughout the wars of the eighteenth century.