

# The French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars

**When:** 1792-1815

**Combatants:** Great Britain and allies vs France and allies

**Reasons:** French Imperial Ambitions

**Other names:** The War of the First/Second/Third/Fourth/Fifth Coalition, The Hundred Days

**Key battles and places:** Guadeloupe (1815), St. Lucia, Grenada, St. Vincent

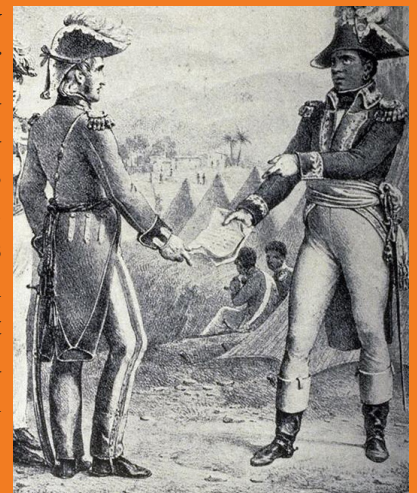
Following the execution of French King Louis XVI at the hands of revolutionaries, the European powers were once again drawn into conflict. The French Revolutionary Wars comprised several smaller wars of allied coalitions drawn together against French Power and would set the stage for world events for years to come.

As before, the conflict spread to the Caribbean where, on this occasion, the British enjoyed an advantage in that many of the inhabitants of the French islands remained loyal to the fallen Monarchy and were willing to co-operate with the British to bring about its resurrection. The spread of French Revolutionary ideals, with their motto of *liberté, égalité* and *fraternité*, posed a major threat to the social order of the Caribbean at the time, and indeed these ideals encouraged the spread of several revolts and uprisings amongst both the free and enslaved black populations, nowhere more dramatically than in Haiti, where the British Army would also become involved.

The early stages of the war against France in the Caribbean were marked by the recapture of Tobago and a failed assault on Martinique when Britain entered the conflict in 1793. As had been the case in previous wars, large expeditions were sent from Britain to fight, the first of them being directed by Lieutenant General Sir John Grey, a very experienced soldier who had served in both the Seven Years War and the American Revolution; his experiences in the latter influenced the style of warfare that he waged in the Caribbean. Grey and his deputy, Vice Admiral John Jervis, arrived at Barbados on 6<sup>th</sup> January 1794, but had to wait for the rest of the troops to arrive from Europe, as well as soldiers already in the Caribbean to gather there. During this time they trained the officers under their command in the skirmishing techniques that Grey had honed during the American War, which contributed significantly to his success in the Caribbean.

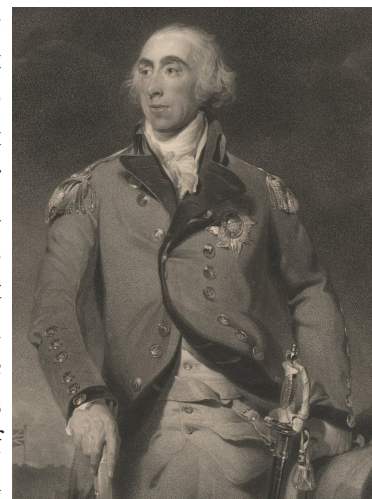
## Haitian Revolution

The Haitian Revolution began in 1791, with the black and mixed-race population rising up against the ruling white planter class. As Saint Domingue, as it was then known, was an important French colony, the British decided to get involved in 1793, in response to a request from some of the colony's inhabitants. However, the British involvement was a failure, with some 13,000 of the 20,600 troops involved losing their lives, largely through disease. Britain withdrew in 1798 after signing a treaty between commander Sir Thomas Maitland and the famed revolutionary leader, Toussaint Louverture. The Revolutionaries would go on to win their struggle against France in 1804 and to found their own independent nation.



By the end of January, Grey had over 7,000 men and was prepared to launch his first attack, against Martinique, arriving there on 5<sup>th</sup> February and landing his Army at three separate locations. Over the course of the next

month, these three forces swept across the island, until the time came at the beginning of March for the siege of the main settlement and defences at Fort Royal. Fort Louis was seized when Captain Faulknor of the *Zebra* ran his ship aground under its very walls and successfully stormed it with his crew, whilst the town of Fort Royal itself was captured by the Light Infantry and Grenadier battalions. The French commander realised that his position was hopeless and surrendered, marching out of the remaining fortifications on 23<sup>rd</sup> March, thus securing Martinique for the British with minimal casualties. Grey's next target was St. Lucia, which the British reached on 1<sup>st</sup> April, landing at four locations on the coast. This operation was much quicker than that on Martinique, with the British marching along the coastline, capturing the French sea-facing batteries and meeting at Morne Fortune on 2<sup>nd</sup> April. Following the successful capture of the outer defences of Morne Fortune by Grey's famous bayonet tactics, French General Ricard surrendered that evening.



Sir Charles Grey

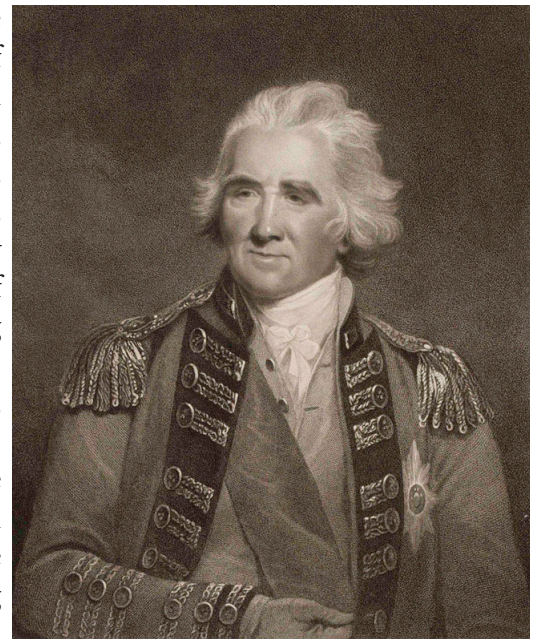
Grey's final target was Guadeloupe, at which he arrived on 11<sup>th</sup> April, landing 1,000 men at Gozier Bay on Grand Terre. His forces successfully captured Fort Fleur d'Épée and another fortification on Morne Mascotte in a night time assault on the morning of the 12<sup>th</sup>, carrying out the operations with bayonet alone. On the 14<sup>th</sup> Grey crossed to Guadeloupe's other island, landing at Petit Bourg, and marched down the coast to Basse-Terre. Three days later, another force under General Dundas landed to the northwest of the town and marched to join Grey. French General Collot realised the hopelessness of the situation and surrendered. With their three targets in the Caribbean taken, Grey and Jervis now had to endeavour to retain the prizes. This proved to be more difficult than the initial conquests, particularly as sickness began to take its toll after two months of solid campaigning. The arrival of French reinforcements at Guadeloupe saw the British hold on the island weakened, and therefore Grey returned to the island on 7<sup>th</sup> June with reinforcements for the British garrison. Although they were successful in securing the Basse-Terre side of the island, they were unable to recapture Grand-Terre, following a failed night attack on Point-à-Pitre and Fort Fleur d'Épée on 1<sup>st</sup> July. Grey's request for further reinforcements and supplies went unanswered and he was soon recalled to Britain. In September, the French launched another attack on the British-held side of Guadeloupe and succeeded in recapturing the island in its entirety.

1795 saw a series of uprisings, that started on Grenada, against British rule. A mixed-race plantation owner, Julien Fédon, at the beginning of March that year, led a rebellion supported by French Republicans. Mainly comprising the non-white population, but including some whites, the rebels took the local militia and garrison largely by surprise, in the process capturing the local Governor. Meanwhile the Caribs of St. Vincent were encouraged by the French to take up arms against the British, whilst tensions on Jamaica boiled over into another Maroon War. Lieutenant General John Vaughan, Grey's replacement as Commander in the West Indies, prioritised Grenada and sent what reinforcements he could spare. However, they were unable to overpower the rebels and the latter gained control over most of the island, whilst the French Republicans continued to send supplies to support them. Reinforcements did arrive from Britain, but they were inexperienced and so few in number, yet Vaughan had to divide them between the various British holdings in revolt. Those sent to Grenada met with some success, although Fédon executed Governor Home and fifty others in retaliation for an attack on the rebel stronghold at Mount St. Catherine. By the end of July, thanks to the leadership of Lieutenant Colonel Oliver Nicholls, the British were able to secure the main ports and the coastline, making it more difficult for the Republicans to land supplies. However, increasing sickness again weakened the British position and reinforcements were few, meaning their position was looking increasingly tenuous by early 1796.

On St. Lucia, although Brigadier General Stewart had gone on the offensive on 14<sup>th</sup> April after receiving his initial reinforcements, he was forced off the island with his 1,200 men five days later. The French also sent an expedition against Dominica in June 1795, but the British garrison and local militia were able to repel them, despite over a third of their number suffering from illness. A new expedition from Britain would soon change the course of the Caribbean war again. After many delays, Sir Ralph Abercromby arrived at Barbados on 17<sup>th</sup> March 1796, with orders to capture Guadeloupe and St. Lucia as his primary objectives. Following this, he was

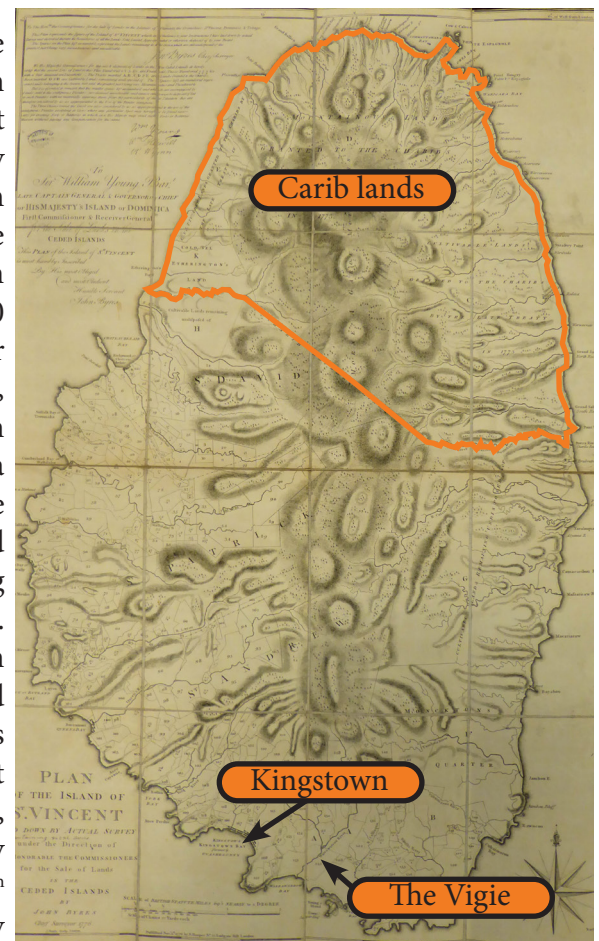


to quell the uprisings on Grenada and St. Vincent and then to secure the Dutch colonies of Surinam, Berbice and Demerara. Some of the men, who had arrived before him, had already proved useful in turning the tide against the enemies on Grenada and St. Vincent, whilst Abercromby, still awaiting the rest of his expedition to arrive, was able to use what troops he had to secure the Dutch colonies; some of them had already offered to surrender and none put up any resistance when confronted by the British Army. The main body of the expedition finally reached the Caribbean in mid-April, giving Abercromby 8,000 men and the opportunity to capture St. Lucia. From 25<sup>th</sup> April 1796, Abercromby's troops landed, as Grey had done, in three locations - at Anse du Cap, Anse du Choc and Anse la Raye. The British were able to force the French back to Morne Fortune and laid siege to the stronghold over the next month. The British succeeded in pressing the French to surrender on 25<sup>th</sup> May, as the latter were running low on food, medicine and water. Any remaining French resistance had fled to the interior, and Abercromby left 4,000 troops, under the command of John Moore, to keep the island secure, although disease quickly took a toll on their numbers.



Sir Ralph Abercromby

Abercromby then sailed for St. Vincent, leaving some reinforcements at Grenada en route. Landing on St. Vincent on 8<sup>th</sup> June 1796, the following day he began a siege of the Vigie, a set of elevated fortifications to the east of Kingstown. Whilst many of the French Carib allies retreated in the face of this, the French generally held their ground. The British attempted to storm the French position at 14:00 hours and drove the enemy back from their outer defences, resulting in a French surrender at 17:00 hours. Although conflict with the Caribs would continue for some months, the French had now been defeated on St. Lucia, allowing Abercromby to journey to Grenada, arriving there on 16<sup>th</sup> June. On the night of the 18<sup>th</sup>, Lowenstein's Chasseurs, a mercenary unit in British employ, succeeded in securing the stronghold at Mount Quoca, the tallest peak on the island and British control was slowly restored over the territory during the following months. Fédon fled and was never seen again. Abercromby returned to Britain for a brief period, but soon journeyed back to the Caribbean with orders to capture Trinidad and Puerto Rico; the Spanish had, by this time, switched sides due to developments in Europe and were now fighting against the British. When the British troops arrived on 17<sup>th</sup> February, Trinidad surrendered with minimal resistance, with the only British casualty believed to be Lieutenant Villeneuve of the 8<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Foot; he is thought to have been shot accidentally in an incident of friendly fire.



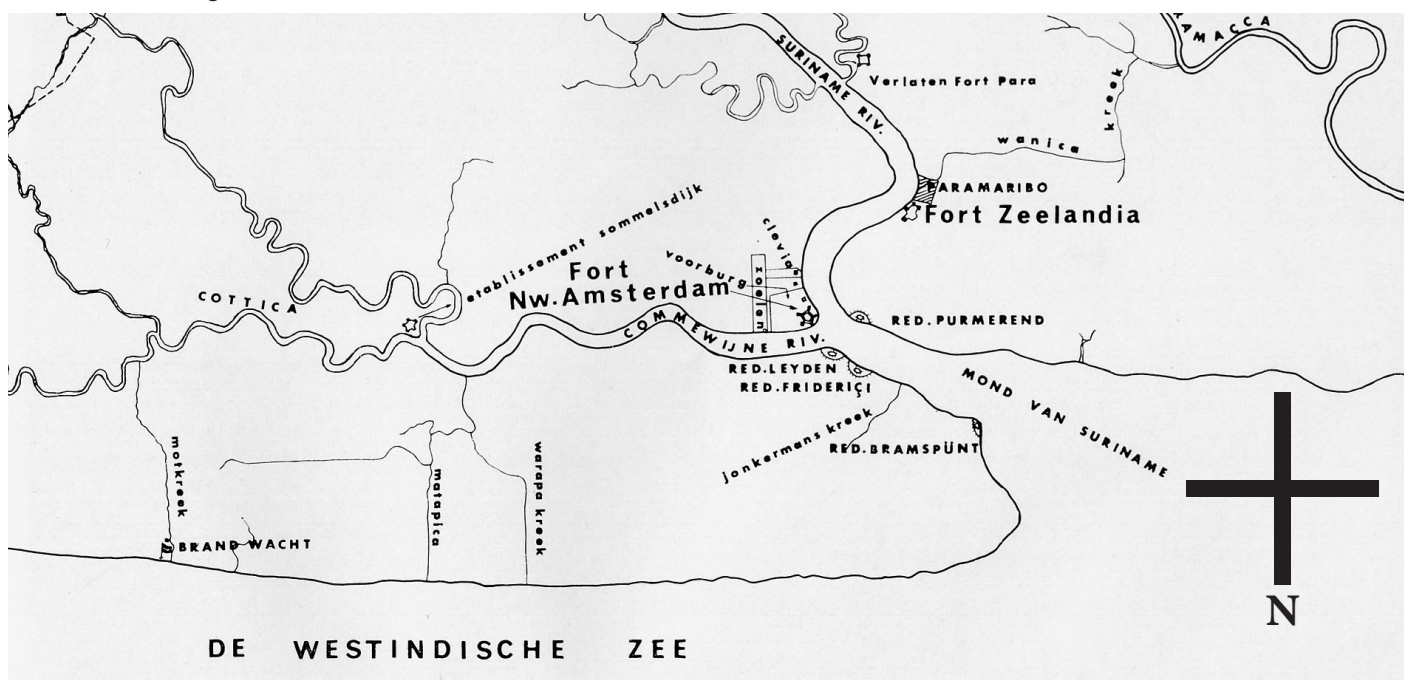
St. Vincent 1778

After returning to Martinique to make preparations, Abercromby sailed for Puerto Rico, arriving on the 17<sup>th</sup> and landed on the 18<sup>th</sup>, with Abercromby, himself, the first ashore. Approaching the principal town of San Juan, and driving back the Spanish troops they encountered, he resolved to bombard the town, setting up a battery to the south for that purpose, but it proved ineffective and the Spanish guns did far more damage to the British position than vice versa. As a possible change in the weather risked leaving him isolated, Abercromby decided to withdraw. Although this was the last major British expedition of the war, General Sir Thomas Trigge was able to secure the surrender of Surinam in late 1799 and, between 22<sup>nd</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> March 1801, also led

an expedition from Antigua which secured Swedish St. Bartholomew, Franco-Dutch St. Martin, Dutch St. Eustatius and Saba and Danish St. Croix, St. John and St. Thomas. Many of these islands were, in fact, returned to their former colonial owners under the terms of the Peace of Amiens in 1802, although Britain retained control of Trinidad.

The Peace of Amiens is often said to be the point at which the French Revolutionary Wars became the Napoleonic Wars, with Napoleon Bonaparte having become leader of France in 1799. The redeclaration of hostilities came as a surprise to no one and when, in June 1803, news reached the Caribbean of a new war, Britain still had 10,000 men stationed in the region. The Commander of the British forces, Lieutenant General William Grinfield, was ordered to attack St. Lucia, Martinique or Tobago. With the 3,000 men he had available for an attack force, landing on 21<sup>st</sup> June, he quickly secured Morne Fortune, and the whole island of St. Lucia the following day. When Grinfield and his men arrived at Tobago on 25<sup>th</sup> June, the small French garrison opted to surrender without a fight. Grinfield was also ordered to secure the Dutch settlements of Demerara, Berbice and Surinam. Demerara, Essequibo and Berbice surrendered in August 1803, with many of their inhabitants having actually requested a British presence.

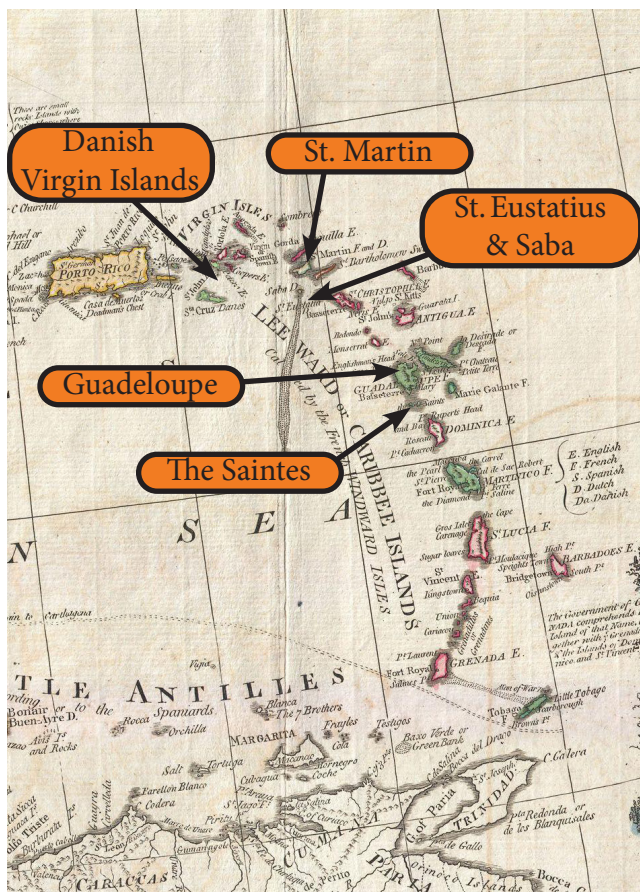
Dutch Surinam, however, opted not to surrender on this occasion and a force of some 2,150 men was sent, arriving there in late April 1804. In order to capture the colony, the British had to go up the Surinam River, past not only the battery at the river mouth but also six other forts, before they reached the capital of Paramaribo, ten miles upstream. An advance force was landed thirty miles to the east of the river mouth, with the intention that they would journey overland to secure the Commewyne River and obtain boats to sail downstream to approach Fort New Amsterdam from the rear. Meanwhile, the main body of men overcame the river mouth battery and then sent a force overland, guided by locals, on a five-hour march through jungle terrain to capture Fort Frederick from the rear; this success was quickly followed by the capture of Fort Leyden. From here they were able to bombard Fort Amsterdam, whilst the advance party succeeded in drawing close to the rear of the fort on 4<sup>th</sup> May 1804. At this point the Dutch sent out a flag of truce, which led to terms being agreed and Surinam coming under British control.



A map of Dutch Surinam in the early nineteenth century

The following February saw the French launch an attack on Dominica, but the British defenders were able to put up enough resistance to induce the French to withdraw, despite the latter having a two to one numerical advantage. For the next few years there were no major operations; when Denmark entered the war in 1807, the Danish islands of St. Thomas, St. John and St. Croix in the Danish Virgin Islands all surrendered without a fight in the face of a 2,500 strong British force drawn from the local garrisons. Thus, the Army's next major role was not until 1809 with another invasion of Martinique; despite a blockade of the island, the Navy had failed to coerce it to surrender. A force of 10,000 men, divided into two divisions, under General George Beckwith landed on 31<sup>st</sup> January. The first contingent travelled overland from Bay Robert to Fort Desaix, encountering heavy opposition on the way.



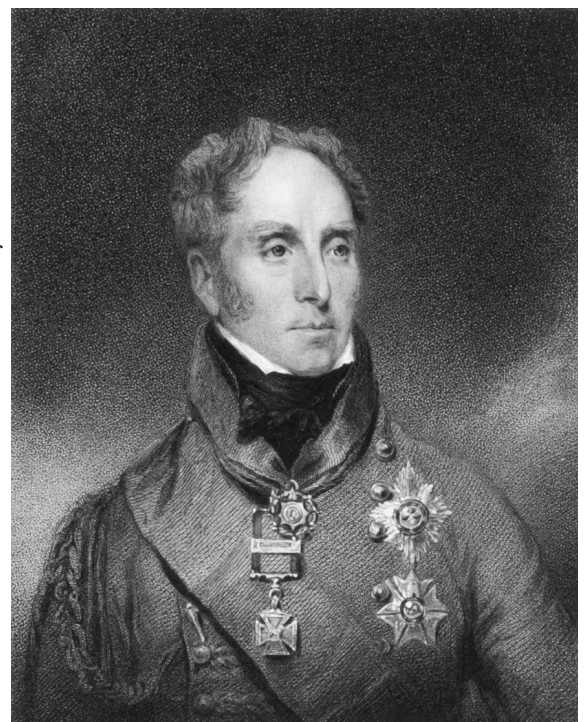


However, the Second Division, who had landed near Sainte Luce, encountered no resistance as they advanced, even accepting the surrender of members of the local militia en route. With both divisions at Fort Desaix, they began preparations for a siege, with the British batteries opening fire on the 19<sup>th</sup> February, forcing a French surrender on the 24<sup>th</sup>. April 1809 saw a successful British invasion of the islands of Les Saintes, with the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> West India Regiments being noted for their bravery and strenuous exertions in the capture of Terre en Haut.

Beckwith launched another invasion of Guadeloupe in late January 1810. The strategy adopted was to form a pincer movement to attack Basse-Terre town, so the First Division landed on the east coast of Basse-Terre island and began a march along the coast towards the town, whilst the Second Division landed to the northwest and began advancing from the other side. The French chose to abandon the town and fell back into the mountains. The British pursued them, overwhelming the French defences on the Plateau de Palmiste and crossing the River Gallion, before coming to the River Noire, where the French held the opposite bank. The Royal York Rangers crossed the river to the north, flanking the French and overwhelming their positions in

the heights overlooking the river, enduring heavy casualties in the process. With this, French General Ernouf opted to surrender, signing terms on 6<sup>th</sup> February. St. Martin, St. Eustatius and Saba also opted to capitulate shortly afterwards, without a fight. With this, the Napoleonic Wars in the Caribbean came to an end, save for the events of 1815 and the famous 'Hundred Days' following Napoleon's escape from Elba.

Hearing of Bonaparte's escape and resumption of power, those who remained loyal to him in the French Caribbean once again took up his banner. In agreement with the French Royalist Governor of Martinique, 2,000 British soldiers were stationed on the island to help successfully to prevent a Bonapartist uprising. However, Guadeloupe declared itself for Bonaparte on 18<sup>th</sup> June 1815, unbeknownst to them, the same day as the Battle of Waterloo. Sir James Leith, Commander of the British troops in the Leeward Isles, gathered available soldiers and launched an invasion, landing on 8<sup>th</sup> August at Anse Saint Sauveur and Grande Anse. Over the next two days the French were forced back towards Morne Houel, where the majority of their troops were situated. Morne Houel was attacked, forcing a French surrender on the 11<sup>th</sup>, thus ending the Napoleonic Wars. However, Guadeloupe was returned again to France by a treaty.



Sir James Leith