



## [Kenneth Macleod of Calbost - Soldier with the Alexandria Expedition (1807)]

In the summer of 1804 the hated army recruiting agents of the Lewis Seaforth Landlord were once again combing through the Lewis villages pouncing on unsuspecting young men, and forcibly enlisting them into the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the 78<sup>th</sup> Seaforth Highlanders. Seaforth had volunteered to raise Battalions earlier in 1793 and 1794, and at first the Regiment was called the 78<sup>th</sup> Foot.

In 1804 the Seaforth recruiting agents came to Calbost and according to tradition it was Norman 'Buidhe' Mackenzie who they first approached and he protested and pointed out that he should be exempt from Military service because of his domestic circumstances. His mother was a widow and he was therefore the bread winner. The only other person in their family was his orphan cousin Kenneth Macleod who was fostered by his mother, accordingly Kenneth was taken and that event is still remembered 200 years later by the Gaelic saying heard on the lips of older generations of Calbost people to this day:

Tormod Buidhe carach, chuir e mo sheanar do'n airm.

Crafty Norman Buidhe sent my grandfather to the army.

Kenneth Macleod 'Coinneach Mor' was born in 1776 and was therefore 28 years old when he enlisted in the army at Fort George on 4<sup>th</sup> June 1804; his height is given as 5ft 10ins, black hair, hazel eyes and swarthy. After he was discharged he married a girl from Tolsta Chaolais, 'Anna-an-Dhomhnuill', the area from which he himself came from originally.

They settled on Croft 13 Calbost and raised a large family there, as follows:

Kenneth Macleod	1776 - 1837	'Coinneach Mor' originally from Carloway area.
Anna Macleod	1790 - 1871	'Anna-an-Dhomhnuill' from Tolsta Chaolais
Mary	1810	Mrs Murdo 'Bàn' Macleod, 11 Cromore
Murdo	1814	?
Norman	1815	first tenant on croft 6, Calbost
Peggy	1817	Mrs Donald Mackenzie, 5 Cromore
Catherine	1820	Mrs Murdo Nicolson, 11 Calbost
John	1826	sub-tenant at 13 Calbost
Donald	1829	sub-tenant at 2 Calbost
Neil	1834	sub-tenant at 2 Calbost

At the time that Kenneth Macleod and his Lewis compatriots were recruited for the British army they would be Gaelic only speaking as there were no English or even Gaelic schools in the area where they could learn to read and write, therefore it could hardly be said that they knew what they were called on to fight for in the distant overseas lands. We may be sure however they were told they were fighting for 'King and Country'.

At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries Britain was engaged in several Empire building and protecting wars, both in Europe and on a Worldwide front. Britain felt that her lines of communication with the Indian sub-continent were threatened by Napoleon and the war against France continued on several fronts.

It was the Turkish army led by 'Muhammet Ali' in alliance with Napoleon of France that the British were fighting in Egypt at that time, a campaign known in Gaelic tradition as 'Cogadh na Tuirc', and after a spell of training at Fort George the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the Seaforth Highlanders to which our Kenneth was attached moved to Hythe Barracks and from there to Shorncliffe Barracks and then to Gibraltar, and on to Italy where they appear to have taken part in the glorious victory of the British at 'Maida' in Southern Italy.

Among those who joined up with our Kenneth Macleod of Calbost was another young soldier by the same name, Kenneth Macleod and it is sometimes difficult to distinguish the one from the other in the records. However, they were lucky they were not called John Macleod because there were 16 new recruits of that name at Fort George at that time.

After 'Maida' an expeditionary force was gathered in Sicily including the 2<sup>nd</sup> Seaforth Battalion and the two Kenneth Macleods were there. They went to Egypt in 1807 and after arriving in Alexandria they took part in stiff fighting at 'Rosetta'. Then units of the British army occupied the valley of 'El Hammet' on the 6<sup>th</sup> April 1807 and

the post was reinforced on 20<sup>th</sup> April. On the following day Lt. Col. Patrick Macleod who was in command reported that 70 'D-Germs' or large boats were descending the Nile with large enemy reinforcements, reinforcements of such magnitude that he requested instructions as to the wisdom of an immediate retirement, an order to that effect was despatched at once (to concentrate his forces and retire in three columns) but before he had time to carry out his design the enemy reinforcements had disembarked and rushed to the attack.

Colonel Macleod formed his men into a square, hoping assistance would come. They fought grimly until eventually Colonel Macleod, most of the officers and many of the men were killed, and there was no other course but to surrender. On surrendering on 21<sup>st</sup> April 1807 there was a mad scramble by the Turkish soldiers to take as many Prisoners-of-War as they could, because it was the Turkish custom, that Prisoners-of-War became the private property of the soldier who took them, and a ransom was expected for each prisoner. In that way the British Prisoners-of-War were pulled and hauled and man-handled with little or no ceremony by the Turks. Fragments of Gaelic songs composed later by Lewis soldiers of 'El Hammet' survive as follows:

Aig El Hammet bhruchd na naimhdean oirn mar mhuir làn, agus gur iomadh gille uasal bha mar uan air a phlat.

At El Hammet the enemy poured over us like a high tide, and many an outstanding lad went like a lamb to the slaughter.

Kenneth Macleod, Calbost, was among those listed killed or taken prisoner at 'El Hammet', and his worldly effects and credits at the time were valued at only £1.22. Fortunately it turned out that he was among the Prisoners-of-War, and he was therefore spared to spend his estate of £1.22.

After the Prisoners-of-War were sorted out by the victorious Turkish Army, they were made to march between two long avenues of poles topped with the heads of their slain comrades. The prisoners suffered barbarous treatment at the hands of their enemies. The ground at 'El Hammet' was strewn with headless bodies as well as those who were severely wounded.

Five hundred British Prisoners-of-War were taken to the slave market at Cairo and sold as slaves. There were Lewis men among them. The conditions of imprisonment were terrible and it was at this time that many of the Prisoners-of-War became affected with ophthalmia, a disease of the eyes which caused inflammation and blindness. Ophthalmia first appeared among the soldiers at Gibraltar and it was attributed partly, at least, to the change of diet from their native Scottish food of fish, oatmeal and vegetables to a greater consumption of animal food than they were accustomed to. Our Kenneth was among those who were afflicted with ophthalmia and he therefore escaped being sold as a slave in Cairo.

After the debacle at 'El Hammet' and their failure at Rosetta, the British army retired to Alexandria where they were secure from attack within the walls of that city, where they remained for several months waiting for succour from Britain that never arrived, and at length, General Fraser sent a flag of truce to the Pacha, offering to evacuate Egypt providing all the Prisoners-of-War in the hands of the Turks were released. The terms were readily accepted.

On September 23<sup>rd</sup> 1807, the British troops re-embarked and set sail for Sicily. Muhammed Ali did not carry out the terms of the truce to the letter but Kenneth Macleod of Calbost was released from prison hospital in Egypt in December 1807 where he was suffering from ophthalmia. Subsequently the blind and the wounded were sent home to Britain via Sicily and Malta in 1808. The other Kenneth Macleod in the regiment died in hospital in Malta.

Eventually, Kenneth Macleod of Calbost's regiment arrived in the Isle of Wight where he spent some time in hospital. In 1809 he was back at Fort George from where he was discharged on 12<sup>th</sup> September 1809 as a Chelsea invalided Soldier with a disability of blindness after serving five and a half years in the army. He was granted a disability pension of £30 a year and £12 a year for a guide to lead him about.

There was no medal however for Kenneth because the only medal struck for the period from 1793 to 1814 was the 'Military General Service Medal', but it was not actually awarded until 1847, and even then, those who were entitled to it had to send in a claim for it, if they were still alive. If not their medal was not issued. Kenneth Macleod died in 1837 at the age of 61 years and that was some ten years before his medal became available at his request. The writer who is a descendant of Kenneth Macleod enquired if Kenneth's medal was ever sent to his next of kin, and I was told that the medals were only to go to those of the eligible soldiers that were still alive in 1847.

In the eyes of the establishment Kenneth and his compatriots were not even worthy of a worthless medal for all their service and sacrifice, although Britain was considered to be one of the richest, if not the richest, country in the world at that time, and that was largely because of the blood and sweat of these soldiers.

In the early years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Seaforth Mackenzie was Governor of Barbados, and on his return to Britain in 1806 he offered to raise a 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion on his estates for the 78<sup>th</sup> Seaforth Highlanders. He wrote as follows to the Duke of York:

Sir, on my arrival from the West Indies, the first thing I learned was the gallant behaviour of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the 78<sup>th</sup> Highlanders... Should Your Royal Highness think an addition to this truly National Regiment would be beneficial to His Majesty's service, I beg to offer my utmost exertions towards raising a 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion.

Fortunately this was not accepted by the Duke. He wrote, 'At present it is not wished to establish any competition to the general recruiting of the army'.

At that time Seaforth Mackenzie was also pursuing his Landlord Policy of 'improvements' in Lewis. He established his first commercial sheep farm at Valamus in Southern Park in 1802 and proceeded to clear the indigenous people from two thirds or 42,000 acres of the Park Peninsula.

[ends]

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