

FRANCIS ROBERTS 1748-1794

Francis Roberts was born in 1748 and joined the Navy in his early teens, serving on 8 of HM ships as indicated on his Passing Out Certificate dated 21 June 1768 (*Source - National Archives*). The ships were Kingston, Royal Sovereign, Juno, Dragon, Superb, Essex, St Antonio and Tweed. Over a period of seven years he produced journals and had certificates from Captains Falconer, Marsh and Collingwood of his diligence. Roberts was promoted to Lieutenant on 21 June 1768.

On 26 August 1777, Francis Roberts married Fanny Nicholas at the Church of St Magnus the Martyr in London (*Source - Church Records*).

His appointment as 1st Lieutenant on HMS Quebec under Captain George Farmer is recorded under Commissions dated 11 March 1778. The Quebec was a 5th rate with 32 guns, built in 1760, evidently named to commemorate the capture of Quebec in 1759. The ship was at Woolwich in March 1778 refitting for channel convoy service.

"On 6 July 1778 he (Capt Farmer) wrote that he had driven on-shore and destroyed a convoy of forty-nine small vessels, with a 20 gun frigate and several armed vessels; but that the Quebec herself had struck heavily on the rocks, and he had been forced to throw his guns overboard. This necessitated his going to Portsmouth for repairs, and when these were finished, as there were no 12-pounders to replace the lost guns, he had to be supplied with 9-pounders, which were taken from another frigate not ready for sea. With this reduced armament, off Ushant, on 6 Oct., the Quebec met the French 18-pounder frigate *Surveillante* of 40 guns and nearly double the number of men. A sharp action ensued; after about three hours and a half both ships were dismasted; but the Quebec's sails falling over the guns caught fire, and the frigate was speedily in a blaze. There was little wind and a great swell; the *Surveillante*, completely disabled, was at some little distance; the *Rambler* cutter was to leeward, and also dismasted; and the French cutter *Expedition*, which had been engaged with the *Rambler*, had sought safety in flight. Thus it was impossible to help the burning frigate, which after some four or five hours blew up. Sixty-six only out of about 195 that were on board were picked up by the boats of the *Surveillante*, of the *Rambler*, and of a Russian vessel that came upon the scene; the rest, including Capt. Farmer, perished." (from *Dictionary of National Biography, Vol. VI, Farmer, George (1732-1779)*).

There are several other accounts of the engagement in the records. Lt. Roberts, who had lost an arm, was rescued by a boat from the *Surveillante*. Roberts is mentioned in *Naval and Military Memoirs*: "Mr Roberts, First Lieutenant of the Quebec, was taken up by the French frigate, whose Captain ordered several things to be thrown over, in hopes that some of the crew of the Quebec would lay hold of them; by this means, eleven men were saved."

In *Minor Operations, The Quebec and Surveillante* "The French behaved with a magnanimous humanity towards their prisoners; men who had so fought and suffered, they said, must be released; and accordingly they sent them back to a British port."

The Gentleman Magazine has an entry for Oct 28 1779: "Arrived at Portsmouth from Brest the first Lieut. of the Quebec, ad lieut. of marines and the surgeon of the ship, they having been saved, with 36 members of the crew by the *Surveillante*, the ship that engaged the Quebec; which we rather mention, to do justice to the humanity of the French, a report having been propagated that, instead of endeavoring the save any of the unfortunate crew, they fired upon our boats in the very act of taking up the drowned men"

In *Twenty-five Centuries of Sea Warfare- The Battle of Chesapeak Bay, pl39* there is a note "Du Couedic was able to save the victorious *Surveillante* only with the help of his prisoners". The source of this comment we have not found, but it may have come from French records.

Roberts was promoted to Master and Commander on 4 February 1780 (*Navy and Military Memoirs, p.561*).

He was given command of the ship Helena, sloop 14 (14-4 pdr) built in 1778. From 17 February 1780 he carried out convoy work in the Channel. During this time he wrote about 10 letters (which are held at the National Archives) to the Admiralty in respect of work with the ship. He also wrote a letter to the Admiralty on 6 December 1780, addressed Bridport, in which he states his private affairs in the county require his attendance a week or ten days longer. The Helena had been in dock during November 1780. He was in command of this ship until March 1782.

Roberts was promoted to Captain on 25 March 1782. In December of that year he took charge of HMS Seaford, a 6th Rate with 22 guns, built in 1754. He wrote a further 10 letters regarding this ship and its work to the Admiralty (also held at the National Archives). He remained Captain of the Seaford until March 1783, when the war ended and he was pensioned off on half pay.

At some time during his career, Roberts acquired Browns Farm (Mappercombe Manor), near Bridport, Dorset. A letter written by him dated 8 May 1790 is from Browns Farm and others dated 22 September 1787 and 6 April 1791 are addressed Bridport.

Roberts became Captain of the ship Success on 8 February 1793 (*Steels "Records of this List of the Royal Navy"*). The Success was a 32 gun frigate 5th rate, built in 1781, with a complement of 215 men. She was at Chatham in February 1793, being fitted out and repainted, and then at Sheerness until August when she sailed for the West Indies (*Steels Records*). Roberts name was on the Captain's Log from 13 February 1793 until 31 August 1794. At the time of the last entry in his Log the ship was moored at Port Royal, Jamaica. He is recorded as "DD" (discharged dead) in the Admiralty Pay Book dated 31 August 1794. Some 12,000 Englishmen died in the islands that year, mostly from Yellow Fever.

The Success returned to England with a convoy in 1797 and was involved in action against the French in the Mediterranean in 1780.

In his Will, signed before he left for the West Indies in 1793, Captain Roberts leaves £1,000 to his son, Francis Cateby Roberts (who at the time was serving on HMS Aigle) and £100 to each of his brothers. Everything else he leaves to Fanny.

Compiled by James Alexander Holliday