

BRITISH MILITARY MASONRY

(by John Parsons, presented April 30, 2003 to Nebraska College M.S.R.I.C.F.)

We, as American Masons, are generally inclined to view Masonry from a fairly narrow, that *is*, nationalistic viewpoint. In our studies of Masonic history we tend to focus on famous American Masons: the signers of the Declaration of Independence and the military leaders in the American Revolution, the Masonic Presidents, and various famous leaders of business, industry, politics, religion, and the military through the 19th and 20th centuries. While this emphasis is natural, we tend to lose sight of the bigger Masonic picture. We need to remember that Freemasonry is a global fraternity, and as such, there are famous Freemasons in all walks of life in many countries of the world, but in particular in the English speaking nations of the world. Freemasonry was first organized in England, and many of its deepest roots and traditions are found in Britain. In the same way that American Masons were leaders in our country's armed forces, Freemasons were among the leaders of the British military and naval establishments from the time of the American revolution up through the late 20th century.

Several notable British Masons served during the time of the French and Indian War and the American Revolution. James Wolfe (1727-1759), the British commander who was mortally wounded while capturing Quebec from the French in 1759, was a member of a British military lodge and was made a Mason in Minden, Germany. Lord George Sackville (1716 -1785, also known as Lord Germain from 1770) served in European wars against the French in the mid -18th century, and later directed British military efforts in North America during the Revolution. He was a Mason, and served as Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Ireland in 1751. Sir Peter Parker (1721-1811) led the unsuccessful British expedition against Charleston in 1776. Parker later rose to become the ranking officer in the Royal Navy (Admiral of the White), and served as Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of England (Moderns) from 1787-1811. Sir George Rodney, who commanded the British fleet that defeated the French in the Caribbean in 1782, was a Mason. Lord Charles Cornwallis, commander of the British Army in the southern colonies late in the Revolution, delivered the Masonic funeral oration for Baron DeKalb, an American general killed at the Battle of Camden in 1780. While we have no definite proof of Cornwallis' lodge affiliation, members of his family were affiliated with Irish lodges, and one served as Grand Master of Ireland. Just as we have no definite proof of the lodge membership of some famous Americans of that era, it is difficult to ascertain exactly who among the British were Masons. Generals Henry Clinton and William Howe both commanded British regiments in North America during the French and Indian War, and those regiments had Masonic Lodges, chartered by the Grand Lodges of Scotland and Ireland.

This brings us to the case of the Howe brothers, William and Richard. Lord Richard Howe ("Black Dick") commanded the Royal Navy during the Revolution, and his brother Sir William, commanded the British Army in North America from 1776-1779. Both of the Howes were vehemently pro-American, and refused to take the assignments in North America unless they could also serve as peace commissioners. Sir William kept up a covert correspondence with Benjamin Franklin, with Washington's knowledge, all during the war. Was this correspondence facilitated by Masonic ties? That is a great mystery that unfortunately will probably not be solved. Most of Howe's letters from this period were burned by one of his descendents in the 19th century, ostensibly because they disclosed treasonous activities.

Other famous British Masons served during the time of the Napoleonic Wars. Sir John Napier (1782-1853) served as a Lt General in the British Army in Portugal in 1810. He later served in the War of 1812 against the US. He was made a Master Mason in a British military lodge in Germany in 1807. Sir John Moore (1761-1809), the commander of British forces in the Iberian Peninsula, had been made a Mason in Halifax, Nova Scotia in 1781. Moore was killed in action against the French in 1809, and was succeeded in command by Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington, perhaps the most famous British military personage of the 19th century. Wellington was a member of his family lodge in Trim, Ireland, and his brother later served as Grand Master of Ireland. As a sidelight, it should be noted that Wellington commanded the British Army that finally defeated Napoleon (probably a Mason) at Waterloo in 1815, with the assistance of the Prussian Army, commanded by Field Marshall Bluecher, another Mason. There is also some discussion as to the Masonic membership of the other great British hero of the age, Admiral Viscount Horatio Nelson (1758-1805), victor of Trafalgar. While there is no firm evidence of Nelson's membership, a funeral service was conducted for him by a Masonic lodge in Portsmouth, and there are numerous Masonic references to him.

British military Masons continued to be involved in Britain's wars of empire during the 19th century. Sir Garnet J. Wolseley (1833-1913) lost an eye at Sevastopol in 1855 during the Crimean War. He served in India during the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857-1858, and later commanded British forces in colonial wars in Africa and Asia throughout the 19th century. He commanded the relief expedition to Khartoum in 1884 in a vain effort to save Gordon's forces. He became a Mason in 1854 in Military Lodge #728, working under the Grand Lodge of Ireland. He served as its Master in 1893, and was also a member of a Mark Masons' Lodge in London. Perhaps the most famous of this group was General Frederick S. Roberts (1832-1914), Earl of Kandahar, Pretoria, and Waterford. Roberts, known later as "General Bobs", began his military career in India. During the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, he participated in the siege of Delhi, the relief of Lucknow, and the Battle of Cawnpore. He was awarded the Victoria Cross for his actions at Delhi. He led British forces in the successful Second Afghan War in 1882, and was made the Earl of Kandahar as a result. During the Boer War in South Africa in 1900, he led British forces to raise the siege of Kimberly. He served as Past Master of Khyber Lodge in Peshawar (then in India, now in Pakistan).

Another noteworthy Mason of this era was Lord Horatio Herbert Kitchener (1850 - 1916), Earl of Khartoum. Kitchener reconquered the Sudan for Britain in 1898, defeating the Sudanese at Omdurman and Khartoum. He served as Commander in Chief in India from 1902-1909, and returned to England to become the Commander in Chief of the British Army. At the outbreak of World War I, Kitchener began a program to enlarge the British Army from 6 to 62 divisions, and his foresight was one of the principal reasons for the subsequent Allied victory. His picture on British recruiting posters served as the later model for American recruiting posters featuring Uncle Sam. Kitchener became a Mason in a lodge in Egypt, and in 1885 was one of the founding members of Drury Lane Lodge #2 127 in London. He was named a Past Grand Warden of the Grand Lodge of England in 1897, and served as the District Grand Master for the Sudan in 1899. Kitchener was drowned in 1916 when the cruiser (HMS Hampshire) on which he was traveling to Russia, struck a mine and sank.

Other notable British Masons served during World War I as well. Field Marshal Sir John French (1852-1925), 1st Earl of Ypres, commanded the British Expeditionary Force which landed in France in 1914. French had earlier served in the Nile Campaign of 1884 under Wolseley, and commanded British cavalry in the Boer War (1899-1901). He served as Chief of the Imperial General Staff from 1912-1914, until taking command of the BEF. French became a member of Jubilee Masters Lodge #27 12 in London in 1906. French was replaced as commander of the BEF in 1915 by Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig (1861-1928). Haig had also served in the Sudan in 1898, and in the Boer War. He commanded the British 1st Army 1914-1915, and then succeeded Sir John French as Commander of the BEF, the post he held until the end of the war. Haig had an unusual Masonic career, being initiated in Elgin Lodge #91 in Leven, Scotland in 1881, but not becoming a Master Mason until 1924. He served as Master of Elgin Lodge in 1925, and also as Grand Junior Deacon of the Grand Lodge of Scotland. He became a Mark Mason in 1925, and later took out membership in Lodge Canongate Kilwinning. Sir John Jellicoe (1859-1935), the Commander of the Grand Fleet and the victor at Jutland, did not become a Mason until he was 63 and serving as the Governor General of New Zealand, a position he held from 1920-1924. He served as Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of New Zealand from 1922 to 1924, and upon his return to England he was named a Past Grand Warden of the Grand Lodge of England.

The Commander of Allied forces in the Mediterranean Theater in World War II, Sir Harold R. L. G. Alexander, Viscount of Tunis, was also a Mason. Alexander served as a junior officer in a Guards Regiment in France from 1914 to 1918, being severely wounded and winning several decorations for gallantry. Alexander commanded the rear guard at the evacuation of Dunkirk in 1940, and then served as the commander of British forces in southeastern England before being assigned to the Middle East. He was a member of Athlumney Lodge #3245 in London, serving as its Master in 1938 and 1939. He was an active Royal Arch Mason and later served as a Grand Steward and Grand Warden of the Grand Lodge of England. Finally, no record of British Military Masons in World War II would be complete without mentioning the Commander in Chief, HRH George VI (1895-1952). The King was a very active Mason from the time of his initiation in 1919 into Naval Lodge #2612. In 1922 he became Grand Senior Warden, and in 1924 Provincial Grand Master of Middlesex. He accepted the rank of Past Grand Master on his ascent to the throne in 1936. In 1936 he affiliated with Glamis Lodge in Scotland, and was installed Grand Master Mason of Scotland. He installed three Grand Masters, and was active in the Mark Lodges, and Royal Arch Masonry, serving as First Principal (GHP). He was a Past Grand Master of the Temple, and a 33rd Degree Scottish Rite Mason. Said he of Masonry, "The world today does require spiritual and moral regeneration. I have no doubt, after many years as a member of our Order, that Freemasonry can play a most important part in this vital need."

SOURCES

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Hamil (Ed.), "Freemasonry: A celebration of the Craft"