

The Skirmish at Highbridge 16 August 1745

by
Norman H. MacDonald

News of the Prince's landing and early preparation for a rising having reached the authorities in Edinburgh, Lieutenant General Sir John Cope, Commander-in-chief of the forces in Scotland, sent orders for two recently raised companies of General Sinclair's 1st Royal Regiment of Foot (later The Royal Scots), under the command of Captain John Scott, son of Scotstarvit, and Captain James Thomson, brother of Charleton, totalling around eighty-five or ninety men, then stationed at Perth, to march to Fort William in order to reinforce the garrison of that stronghold. This force, having reached Fort Augustus, set out from that garrison, early one morning of 16 August with the intention of covering the twenty-five miles to Fort William that day, there being no suitable accommodation en route, through wild and barbarous country.

Alexander MacDonnell of Keppoch, having been alerted of the advance of the two companies, resolved to intercept and thus prevent them from reaching Fort William. He therefore sent his cousin, Donald MacDonell of Tirnadris, with about eleven men and a piper to the inn which formerly stood near the south end of the High Bridge over the River Spean, some eight miles north of the fort, to await the arrival of the government troops, while he -- Keppoch, endeavoured to gather a sufficient number of his clan to oppose them. Meanwhile Tirnadris placed the few men he had behind the inn and when the troops appeared on the opposite bank, above the bridge, he ordered the piper to play, while he and his men rushed out from behind the inn and with loud yells, darted among the surrounding trees in order to exaggerate their number. By this sudden and unexpected attack the troops were seized with such a panic that Captain Scott, their commanding officer, had difficulty persuading them to cross the bridge. He therefore sent forward his servant and a sergeant to discover the strength of the enemy. The Highlanders allowed the men to cross the bridge after which two of their number sprang out from the woods and dragged them off as prisoners. This incident was the final straw for Scott's men so he decided to retreat. The Highlanders allowed the redcoats to get some distance away before they followed, being careful not to reveal the smallness of their number. After pursuing the retreating troops for five or six miles, the Highlanders, though still outnumbered, considered themselves strong enough to come up with the enemy and began firing at the retreating hollow square into which Scott had formed his men. The redcoats continued to retreat, firing indiscriminately as they went until all their ammunition was exhausted, without having inflicted a single casualty among the Highlanders, who were by then, with the arrival of Keppoch, had increased to around forty or fifty, not half of whom were armed. The redcoats, in their panic, began to break ranks and run, while Scott and his brother officers did all they could to prevent their force from disintegrating and managed to restore some sort of order but they were finally brought to a halt at Laggan Achadrome (now South Laggan) where they found their way blocked by a strong party of Glengarry's men. The Highlanders poured several volleys into the disorganised force -- Scott was wounded in the shoulder, a sergeant and three or four other ranks killed, and about a dozen wounded. All organised resistance having by then ceased, Keppoch, with drawn sword, advanced alone towards the soldiers and

warned then that if they did not immediately lay down their arms and surrender, they would all be cut to pieces. Scott, aware that Keppoch was in earnest acquiesced.

Soon after the surrender, Lochiel, to whom Keppoch had sent a message informing him of the affair, arrived with a few and at about 7 p.m. the prisoners were conveyed to an inn at Achnacarry. Captain Scott was carried to Lochiel's residence where he was treated more like a guest than a prisoner, but an express sent to Fort William requesting that the garrison surgeon might be sent to dress Scott's wound was rejected by the Governor. Captain Scott was therefore transported to the fort after giving his parole. The other prisoners were taken by Lochiel to the Prince at Glenfinnan, on 19 August.

In 1994, the 1745 Association erected a cairn near the south side of the bridge at Highbridge to commemorate this first action of the Forty-Five.