Crewed Chartering

Island ship of stone

By John Campbell

My wife, Lana, and I have spent several years working as charterboat operators and cruising on our own boat in the eastern Caribbean, and we have had time to look beyond the white beaches and swaying palms. We see the history of the islands lying everywhere in ruins waiting to be explored. A bit of research has led us to discover some interesting tales, and we have added a whole new dimension to our lives here. For one thing, we have begun to notice that almost all the anchorages that we use show traces of earlier "protection."

Today when sailors use the term *protected anchorage*, we usually mean one that is safe from the effects of wind and weather. However, a couple of hundred years ago the term had a rather different meaning in most areas of the world. Britain, France, Spain, the Netherlands, and Portugal were taking turns going to war with each other. Piracy was common. A successful pirate was often sponsored by his government for a share of the take. Under these conditions, the expression protected anchorage took on a new importance. The protection in this case was given by big guns that kept unwelcome visitors away.

A place that was a good natural anchorage then is usually still a good anchorage. This is particularly true in the West Indies, where often the waterfront has not substantially changed over the last two hundred years. If you are on a charterboat it can be great fun to spend part of your vacation exploring some of the ruins left at these harbors, ruins that are very accessible to sailors.

Everybody worth his sailor's salt has heard of Antigua's English Harbour. The more erudite may even know that the British Leeward Islands fleet was based there from 1743 until 1889 with the 26-year-old Horatio Nelson in command for three of those years.

What Lana and I hadn't realized until recently, though, was that the British Windward Island fleet was based in St. Lucia during this same period, and that it, not the Leeward Island fleet, fought one of the most decisive battles for Caribbean control against the French.

"Protected anchorage" used to mean a port with big guns to keep visitors away

In 1782, the British fleet, some 36 ships under the care of Admiral George Brydges Rodney, was based in the anchorage off Pigeon Island, at the northwestern end of St. Lucia, where there are still interesting ruins to be found—the old barracks, powder magazines, an almost-intact fort, and on the highest peak, the old signal station.

The French had declared war on England in 1778, thus assisting the Americans in their war of independence. Meanwhile, Britain had decided that the colonies of the West Indies were actually of greater value than the colonies of the Americas, and therefore she maintained substantial fleets in the West Indies.

Rodney received word that a combined French and Spanish attack was planned against Jamaica. It was to be led by the French Admiral de Grasse, who was then in Martinique, some 30 miles to the north of St. Lucia.

As soon as the French fleet, comprised of 33 warships and a convoy of 150 troop transport vessels, sailed, Rodney and the British set off in pursuit. They finally caught the French off the north end of the island of Dominica. In the ensuing battle, which became known as the Battle of the Saintes, over 3,000 men in the French fleet were killed. This battle was held to be decisive, for if the French fleet had been able to combine with that of the Spanish, there is little doubt that the British would have lost Jamaica and that their Caribbean presence would have been threatened. Now if you cruise to Les Isles des Saintes, between Guadeloupe and Dominica, it is hard to imagine that bloody carnage lies in the wake of islands so peaceful and tranquil.

Off the little town of Bourg on the island of Terre de Haut in the Saintes is a good, safe anchorage; and sure enough, it is well protected by forts. The most prominant one is Fort Napoleon on the hill to the north of the town, one of the best preserved forts in the eastern Caribbean.

It is quite a stiff walk up the hill, but very rewarding. The views down are spectacular. And the fort itself, open to visitors in the mornings, houses an interesting museum that, among other things, shows how the Battle of the Saintes was fought.

There were other battles. Twenty-two years after the Battle of the Saintes, young Samuel Hood, who had sailed aboard Rodney's flag-

ship, *Barfleur,* found himself back in St. Lucia, commanding the Windward Island fleet. One of his major jobs was to try to blockade the island of Martinique against the French.

During a patrol off Martinique, Commodore Hood had a truly imaginative idea. He decided to land troops and weapons on Diamond Rock, scarcely a mile off the southwestern tip of Martinique. If this bold plan could be accomplished, it would effectively give him an extra "ship," which would be permanently "anchored" where his men could see all the enemy ships coming and going to Fort-de-France, the capital of Martinique, or Fort Royal as it was called then. All ships sailing to and from Fort Royal had to pass near the southwestern corner of Martinique, because to approach the harbor from the northern end of the island would be to risk sailing into the lee of Mount Pelé. For some of the more cumbersome ships, this might entail being becalmed.

A sailor only has to wallow past Diamond Rock to realize the enormity of the undertaking. The rock rises precipitously from the sea to about 600 feet. The water around the rock is deep, making anchoring difficult at best and under most conditions, impossible. There is almost always a heavy Atlantic swell breaking around the base of the rock.

But Hood was determined, and Lieutenant James Maurice, first lieutenant on Hood's ship, the *Centaur,* was given the job—a daunting prospect for anybody, but especially for someone only 28 years old.

Daunted or not, Maurice and his men made their first landing on January 7, 1804. They found a small, rocky ledge on the northeast side of the rock, which they quickly set about turning into a makeshift landing stage.

Along the northeastern side, they blasted a ledge some 400 feet long that is clearly visible today if you sail past the northern side of the rock. In calm weather, we have sometimes seen fishermen working from the ledge.

At either end of the ledge, a 24-pounder cannon was placed. This must have been a fantastic undertaking; a 24-pounder cannon weighs over 2½ tons. Along the seaward side of the ledge Maurice's men built a stone wall; the walk between the two newly established batteries was called the Covered Way.

Diamond Rock was in business. The Union Jack was hoisted, and just three days after the initial landing, the rock became commissioned as a ship in the Royal Navy—His Majesty's Sloop of War: *Diamond Rock.*

More 24-pounders were hauled to a cave halfway up the eastern flank of the rock that became Hood's Battery; the cave also became the main storage area for powder and provisions. Maurice (now a captain) was reluctant to cut steps in the steep rock face. Although the French at this stage were content to watch in puzzlement, he knew that sooner or later they would attack, and he did not want to make things easier for them by cutting footholds.

While the guns were being set in place, other construction work proceeded apace. The caves were made into storage and sleeping areas, and

Diamond Rock, 600 feet high, became a commissioned ship in the Royal Navy

a large cistern for storing water was built. Preparations were finally complete, and on March 3 *Centaur* left Captain Maurice and his 120 men on the rock.

They were to stay for almost a year and a half. It soon became apparent to the French that the British presence on the rock was, to put it mildly, a nuisance. But by this time the British were well established and were not to be easily dislodged.

Captain Maurice had a sloop of 16 guns at his disposal. This vessel was called the *Fort Diamond* and carried all the Diamond Rock supplies out from St. Lucia. (It is interesting to note that the ship was named *Fort Diamond,* while the rock was commissioned as one of His Majesty's ships—naval logic at its best!)

By and large, the ship kept Maurice's men well supplied, and apolitical Martiniquan fishermen also traded freely with the British on the rock. Maurice and his men were well able to fight off attempts at retaking the rock. They were able to communicate with the rest of the British fleet by a system of flag signals to Pigeon Island, and they sent much useful information about ship movements. Because of their strategic location and the comparatively long range of their guns at the summit (almost 2 miles), they were also able to harass French ships.

By May 1805, the French decided that they had to solve the problem and Admiral Villeneuve assembled a formidable fleet to attack the rock. With two 74-gun ships, a frigate, a brig, a schooner, and 11 longboats carrying 1,500 troops, he stormed the British "ship."

Despite the awesome odds, Captain Maurice and his men might well have withstood the onslaught for a considerable time, except that they were short of powder and water. The supply ship had been delayed in St. Lucia and then on its return had sailed right into Villeneuve's fleet and was captured. On board was enough powder for a prolonged battle. For the men on the rock, the lack of water was equally serious in the tropical heat. The pounding of heavy guns had opened a crack in their cistern, allowing the water to drain out. The reserve water, stored in oak casks, was found to have gone bad.

After considerable heart-searching, Captain Maurice decided not to prolong the agony of his men, and on June 2 he surrendered. He and his men left the rock the next morning after living there for almost exactly 17 months.

In those days, warfare was perhaps more chivalrous than it is now. The French decided that the men had suffered enough during their sojourn on the rock, so Maurice and his men were merely transported to Barbados and released.

It does not take too much imagination now to relive some of these scenes. To walk up to the top of the hill of Pigeon Island, to the old signal station, it is easy to imagine the lookout peering through his telescope at Diamond Rock, shimmering in the heat haze.

John Campbell and his wife, Lana, have sailed much of the Atlantic and Caribbean both on their own junk-rigged boat and as skipper and mate of charterboats.