Capt. Lt. Andrew Frazer to Ld. Rochford
April 1771

Remarks
on the Situation of the Port and Road of Dunkirk.

Presented to the Right Honorable
The Earl of Rochford, one of His Majesty's principal
Secretaries of State by His Lordship's most obedient
and most humble Servant,
Andrew Frazer.

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Remarks on the Situation of the Port and Road of Dunkirk.

1771. The Channel leading to the Harbour of Dunkirk is now so much fill'd up with Mud and Sand, in consequence of the Breaches which have been made in the Jettées or Piers, and the demolition of other works since the late Peace of Paris 1763, that the Port is inaccessible to any Sloop of war, or to trading Vessels drawing above thirteen feet Water.

There is however an excellent Road for Shipping directly before the Entrance of the Channel, of about three leagues in length and half a league in breadth: It is form'd by different banks of Sand which run parallel to the Coast and thereby break the force of the Sea. The nearest of these banks to the land is called the Brack on which there remains only about four feet of Water at low Water in Spring Tides, so that Ships cannot go over it excepting nearly in Time of flood, and even then very rarely attempt it. There are two passes at the east and west ends of the Road, by which any Vessels may come in and go out with the assistance of a Pilot — A considerable fleet may lye at anchor in this Road in the greatest Safety in all seasons of the year and as

and as it is situated at so small a distance as fifteen leagues from the mouth of the River Thames, and besides being the only Road the french are possess'd of north of Brest, the proceedings at Dunkirk have generally merited the Attention of the Court of London.

It is proposed, that, on the commencement of every War with France, this Road should be taken possession of by an English Squadron; It is an advantage which has never yet been obtaind, because the attempt has never been made untill such Time as Forts and Batteries had been erected on the Shore, whereby the success not only became precarious but these works have afforded plausible Reasons for desisting from the Trial. The Cruises made by different Squadrons on the Coast of Flanders in order to watch the Port of Dunkirk have also been ineffectual, because the Vessels employed on this Service, having no Road to ride in, have been obliged to put to Sea for their own safety upon all appearances of stormy Weather, whereas Ships in the Road of Dunkirk are enabled to ride out the hardest Gales —. The Batteries which are constructed for its defence in times of War must necessarily be placed near low Water Mark,

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and upon Spots which are dry only between two and three hours each Tide, & of course, these Works cannot be carried on above five or six hours in the twenty four. This Circumstance puts it out of the Power of France to have Batteries of Guns or Mortars erected on the Strand in less than a couple of Months from the Commencement of the Work. It is during this Interval that a few of the Kings Frigates should be sent on this Expedition, and in proportion as the Time is delayed, the Success will probably be found more or less precarious, tho the Risk can never be so great as to incline the English Ministry to lay aside the Project, while the Fleet can be supplied with intelligent Pilots, and these are at all times to be procured by means of the Brokers for Vessels trading from London to Dunkirk. The Masters and Mates of Vessels who frequent the last mentiond Port, are all of them acquainted with the Road as well as the Flemish Pilots themselves, besides very good Pilots are to be found amongst the Folkstone Cutters and the smuggling Boats of Deal and Dover.

While an English Squadron was in possession of the Road, no Batteries could be erected on the Side of the Sea but

Messrs Twyman & Baker, at the Tower, are the present Brokers for all Vessels employd on the Coast from Boulogne to Hambourg.

but with imminent danger to the Workmen employed, neither could any Repairs be made on the Pier-heads which from the nature of their Construction, they stand often in need of — In order to remain Masters of the Road, it might be found necessary to station a few fourty or fifty-Gun Ships there to ride constantly at anchor, and to be accompanied with some armd. Cutters to cruise along the Coast and procure intelligence; all or either of these Vessels might be relieved as often as thought proper, and nothing but a superior naval force could oblige them to abandon their Station. Mortar-Batteries could undoubtedly annoy them from the land but if they are not erected near low Water Mark, they would be too distant to do any real injury, the middle of the Road being above a mile and a half from High Water Mark — A few Mortars might indeed be placed on the Ruins of the Kisbank but this Fort is still above a mile from the middle of the Road, and the remains of it are daily washing away by the Sea; — besides as the Road is above nine miles in length, the Ships have only to shift their Ground, neither could any Batteries for Guns or Mortars be readily constructed on any part of the Shore, if the Squadron was joind with a few Bomb-Ketches.

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Were the French once convinced that an English fleet could at all times enter the Road of Dunkirk, which seems not difficult to be done, the Merchants or other Inhabitants would equip no more privateers: For how could they get to Sea? or if upon a Cruize how could they return? Any Prizes the French might make in the North Seas, must be conducted to Norway as was practised last War, when they could do no better. There they were sold for half their Value and attended with enormous charges.

I shall now point out some peculiar advantages of the situation of Dunkirk in respect to the other french Ports in the English Channel in case of an attempt to invade the Coast of England.—

First if a Descent was intended to be made on the Coast of Sussex or Kent, it may be presumed that the preparations for that purpose would be made on the opposite Shore, as at Cherbourg, Havre de Grace, Dieppe & Boulogne. All these Harbours are dry at low Water and destitute of any Road for Shipping. Vessels are therefore confined to the time of high water nearly, to sail out or in, and it cannot be supposd that above fifteen or twenty Transports or other Ships could put to Sea each Tide and of course a fleet of a hundred

Sail

fail would require six or seven days to assemble on the Coast, and having no Road to protect them during that period, they must lye exposd to the accidents of weather and the attacks of an Enemy. The marching of Troops to the abovementiond Ports must also occasion a considerable delay, having no large Garrison-Towns in their neighbourhood — These Obstacles are in a great measure removed by the Situation of the Town and Road of Dunkirk — Flanders, it has been observed, has never been totally abandoned to the incursions of an Enemy, even when France has been engagd in war in Germany and in Italy, particularly the Coast.

In times of Peace, there is generally quarterd in Dunkirk, and in the neighbouring Garrisons the following proportion of Troops Viz.t

At Dunkirk		6 Battalions.
Bergues	2 leagues distant	2
Gravelines	4	2
Calais	8	4
Ardres	8	1
St. Omers	8	6
Aire	11	2
Bethune	15	2 and 4 Squadrons
Lille	16	12 and 4 Squad.s
Douay	21	6 and 8 —
Arras	22	4 and 8
		47 Batt.s & 24 Squadrons.

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According to the present Ordonnances of the french Army the number of the above Troops will be found, 27,401 — Infantry and 2,736 Cavalry in all 30,137 Men.

One third part thereof (10,046) may upon any par-ticular occasion be assembled at Dunkirk in the space of twenty four hours and as many more in the course of the day following. Twenty thousand land forces might then be collected in two days, and the Road (while in possession of the French) might serve as the Rendesvous of a very considerable armament, secure from all Acci-dents, except the most violent Storms, which no Situa-tion can be said to be proof against. — A sufficient Number of small Vessels might also be assembled at Dunkirk without occasioning much Speculation, and in so short a space of Time as to afford little or no Opportunity for England to be advertised of the design.

There is constantly in the Harbour of Dunkirk a considerable number of Vessels call'd Billanders* of about 60 or 65 Tons burthen, and when loaded draw only four feet and a half of water, by means of which Troops might be conveyd to England without the Assist-ance of Transports & boats for Landing, unless it was intended

* These Billanders are 53 feet long and 10 feet broad; they are made so narrow in order to pass the Sluices on the Canals. —

intended that Cavalry should be embarked, in which Case, Transports would become necessary in proportion to the number of Horses. — The Billanders are chiefly used for the inland Navigation of the Country but are likewise employed in short Sea-Voyages, as from Dunkirk to Ostend, Dieppe &c. and are accounted very good Sea-Boats. Many of them were employed in transporting Corn from Dunkirk to London in Summer 1767. — It is computed that there are nearly 300 of these Billanders belonging to the different Towns of maritime Flanders such as Dunkirk Bergues, St. Omers & Gravelines: They are constantly made use of in transporting Troops, wherever there is a Communication by Water, and upon these Occasions they usually carry about 150 men each. — Supposing only a hundred men in each Billander, 200 of them would take on board an army of twenty thousand men, These might be escorted by a few Frigates aboard of which might be put a further detachment of forces, Artillery &c. &c.

This Project is formd upon the Supposition that the Armament is to be unsupported by a fleet of men of war. The artillery and other warlike Stores could be collected at Douay, (where there is an Arsenal & Foundery for Canon) & sent from thence by Water to St. Omers or Bergues where

they

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they might remain untill it was judged convenient to forward them to Dunkirk, which can be done by the Canals in one Day. This and the like precautions, it may be supposd, would be taken in order to conceal the real destination of the Armament. — As soon as the Billanders and other Vessels were collected in the Port of Dunkirk, the Troops might march thither from the Garrisons mentiond in Page 6, and embark either in the Harbour or in the Road, when the Wind was fair. Besides the Billanders abovementiond, there are in the different Ports of Flanders and Picardy, great Numbers of Doggers from 50 to 100 Tons Burthen drawing from six to eight feet water. Of the larger Sort, there may be in the Port of Dunkirk about a hundred, which are capable of carrying about fourty or fifty men each. These might also be employd in an Expedition of this Sort.

In order to form a Conjecture where a Descent may be made, a cursory View shall now be taken of the Coast of England opposite to France, particularly that Part nearest the Capital, where an Enemy would certainly endeavour to land, if any serious impression is ever meant to be made on the Kingdom.

First, from the Lands End to the Isle of Wight the Coast is impracticable for landing of Troops except in Torbay,

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Torbay, Portland Road, or to the Westward of Ram-head near Plymouth, the two first of these Bays are open only for making a Descent in fair Weather & when the Winds are westerly, in the latter with the Wind at East, — but these Places are very distant from the Capital.

It is dangerous to approach the greatest Part of the Coast of Sussex, on account of Banks of Sand and ledges of Rocks, unless people are very well acquainted with them There is indeed one Bay clear of Rocks between Newhaven and Seaford, but it is of small Extent and smooth Water only when the Wind is at north east.

An Enemy might land in Pevensea-Bay, when the winds are westerly, or in Rye-Bay with the wind at North west; the inland Country, however, is marshy and full of ditches which would afford considerable difficulties to an Enemy's advancing into the Country.

Dungeness is a Point of land or Beach, on which stands a light house running into the Sea about nine miles from Rye. On the west Side is a good Road for Shipping with smooth water with easterly winds, and on the east Side of the point is also a good anchoring Ground with westerly Winds. Near the point of the Ness it ebbs no Sand, and is deep water so that Ships may come close to the Shore at all Times of Tide.

Supposing

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Supposing then an Enemy landed on either Side of this Point, according as the Wind favours their design, it would be found very difficult to convey Guns or other heavy implements of war upon the Beach, besides, the Army must march several Miles along the Sea-Bank on the edge of Romney Marsh to Hyth before they could move forth into the main land.

From Sandgate to Dover is one continued inaccessible Cliff, The Castle which contains about thirty Acres of land, is situated on the summit of a Hill — 400 feet perpendicular above the Sea. From thence to the North foreland the Coast is guarded not only by Walmer, Deal and Sandown Castles mounting together about fifty pieces of Canon, but by the Shipping in the Downs which will prevent any attempts being made from Dover to the mouth of the River Thames. — Besides the natural strength of the County of Kent, which affords the most advantageous posts possible, joind to the impracticability of passing the River Medway, makes it very improbable that an Enemy will ever attempt to land upon this Coast, unless it should be with a small Body of Troops merely to cause a Diversion.

It seems more reasonable to apprehend that the Descent of an Enemy should be made on the Coast of Essex,

Essex which affords several places for disembarking of Troops, provided the Vessels employd on this service draw but little water such as the Billanders & Doggers above mentiond. Several situations seem favourable for this Purpose from the River Coln to Hosely-Bay in Suffolk-Shire — Small Vessels might run directly into the Harbour of Harwich at all times of Tide, and by keeping close to the Shore, need not come nearer than a Mile to Languard Fort & which could give very little annoyance at that distance. It serves merely to guard the deep channel which lies on that side & thereby prevents large Ships going into the Harbour; but on the opposite shore there is not less than six feet water at the time of low Water of Spring Tides. — An Enemy might possibly run up the River as far as Maningtree, & there disembark, but by getting any where into smooth water, the Troops might be landed from the Billanders without the Assistance of Boats + and nothing could prevent this, but the Shipping which might be at Harwich at the time such an attempt was made. —

+ in calm weather all along the coast up the Wallet from Harwich to Walton Island Troops might easily land.

The great Road from thence to London has not one difficult Pass and will therefore be at all times an inducement to an Enemy to invade England from that Quarter preferable to any other. In case

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In case of a Descent on the Coast of Essex, while the greatest part of His majesty's Forces are to the South of the Thames, the Troops may be supposd to cross the River at Gravesend, but a Good Road is awanting from Tilbury to Brentwood, particularly across the Marshes, which are impassable in the Winter Season.

All such projects as these would certainly be attended with great Risks, particularly the landing of Troops if discoverd by any English Shipping, yet it may one day be attempted by a Minister of an enterprizing Temper, persuaded, that tho his Aim might in part miscarry it would greatly embarrass the Nation and affect public Credit. — Different Attempts might possibly be made about the same Time. One in particular, might be apprehended at Newcastle upon Tyne, where infinite damage might be done by a small force, and in a very short Space of Time. Three thousand land Forces embarked in ten or twelve Frigates might be sufficient for this purpose. — Supposing the Troops landed at the mouth of the Tyne as at Shields, they might burn or destroy all the Fire-Engines upon the Coal Works from thence to Newcastle, and demolish the Salt, iron, and Glass-Works in that Town and in the Neighbourhood — By these means the Coal-Pits would be

would be laid under Water, perhaps for a twelvemonth. Coals would rise in many parts of the Kingdom to an exorbitant price and all manufactures depending upon that Commodity must suffer exceedingly. — If the Troops could not secure a Retreat they might surrender at discretion and thus England would be no otherwise indemnified for such immense losses but by the possession of a few french Prisoners. — as to the Shipping they might possibly escape to the North Sea, untill a favour-able opportunity offerd to return to France. — In a word, this Scheme seeming very practicable, the situa-tion of Newcastle merits particular attention in times of war, when a considerable body of regular Troops or Militia ought to be quartered there or in the neighbour-hood. One or two Guard Ships or others should constantly lie at anchor off Tinmouth Castle, and that Fort ought to be put in a proper state of defence, and supplied with a due proportion of Stores.

I have mentiond this Expedition in particular, having learnt from good authority that such a Plan was intended to have been executed in the beginning of the last war, and that some Frigates actually arrived in the Road of Dunkirk for that purpose; But

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Marshal Belleisle suffering himself to be captivated with Chimeras of the Grand Invasion with flat bottom'd Boats, the Expedition was drop't.

In case an Enemy could make a landing good in Essex, an attempt would probably be made to set fire to the Powder Magazines at Purfleet, where there are generally about fifty thousand Barrels of Powder, inclos'd only with a single Row of Palisades and guarded by a few Day Labourers. — So important a Trust seems not unworthy of being committed to an Officer of artillery and under him, a small detach-ment of non-commission'd Officers of approved fidelity.

London, April 1771.

Andrew Frazer Captain Lt. of the Corps of Engineers and His Maj.ty Commissary at Dunkirk

NB. The Billanders abovemention'd are generally navigated with three Men. Supposing even five to each, 200 of them would require no more than a thousand Seamen.

The Expence of one of them of 64 Tons burthen, with Cables and anchors equip'd for Sea is estimated at six thousand livres or £262.10 — 200 of them would then cost £52,500 — —

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Different Projects have been form'd for attacking the Town and Port of Dunkirk, by disembarking a Body of land Forces on the Coast near that place but it appears to me one of the most perilous Entrepriziz of that Nature, first, from the difficulty of landing on so flat a Shore, secondly from the danger the invading Army must be exposd to, from the vicinity of the place to so many Garison-Towns as mentiond in Page, 6, — and lastly from the uncertainty of securing a Retreat, notwithstanding all the precautions which could be taken for that purpose. It may however be expedient constantly to threaten this and the like Invasions, tho it may be better to threaten than execute. — Shipping alone will generally answer the purposes of harrassing the Enemy's Troops, by hovering on the Coast, thereby annoying their Trade and diverting their attention from thoughts of invading their Neighbours.

A few Squadrons of light Dragoons and some Regiments of Infantry quarterd along the Shore of Sussex and Kent, (suppos'd always ready to be embark'd) will ever employ a very considerable Number of the

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