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THE ROSS OF BLADENSBURG AUGMENTATION

By Paul Campbell

Augmentations are special heraldic marks of favor from the Sovereign bestowed for truly exemplary services rendered, and they are understandably not common. Probably, the best known augmentation is from English heraldry, the “demi-lion pierced in the mouth with an arrow, depicted on the colours for the arms of the King of Scotland” granted to the Earl of Surrey, later Duke of Norfolk, for his victory at the Battle of Flodden, an augmentation still borne today by the Earl Marshal. Another augmentation along this very line – showing a representation of the vanquished on the arms of the victor – incorporates Old Glory to mark a significant American defeat during the War of 1812, and the augmentation in question is that of Ross of Bladensburg¹.

The United States had declared war on the United Kingdom on 18 June 1812 in response British-imposed trade restrictions, the kidnapping of American sailors at sea into the Royal Navy, British support for Indian tribes on the frontier, and other incidents, such as the Chesapeake Affair. For the UK and the rest of Europe, North America was a theater of the Napoleonic Wars. With the Treaty of Ghent signed in 1815, the war itself ended effectively in a draw but had lasting effects; in America, although a forgotten war today, it was seen at the time as a second War of Independence where the American Navy in particular came into its own as a result of its excellent performance against what was still the most power Navy in the world. Canadian performance in the war is a great source of national pride for that country which saw it help defeat American attempts at conquest.

But in the summer of 1814, the war was still on. With the French defeat at the Battle of Paris that March, Napoleon was exiled to Elba – he had yet to meet his Waterloo – and this freed up British troops which were sent to North America. Lieutenant General Sir George Prevost, the British commander in chief, led an invasion of New York from Canada. Command of a diversionary force on the US East Coast was given to Major General Robert Ross, a seasoned and successful veteran of the Continental wars

in Europe. On 19 August 1814, Ross with his brigade landed near Benedict, Maryland.

After a successful landing, Ross moved his force and attacked Bladensburg, also in Maryland. Although the British forces suffered heavier casualties, many a result of heat exhaustion, the hastily organized American defenders were routed, and the retreat became known as the Bladensburg Races. President Adams and the federal government were forced to flee Washington DC, where public buildings – including the Capitol and the White House – were burned for retaliation of the American burning of York, now Toronto.

Ross then turned his attention to Baltimore where, while leading his troops, he was shot by an American sharpshooter and died while being transported back to the fleet, eventually being buried at St. Paul's Church in Halifax, Nova Scotia. He died the day before the now famous bombardment of Fort McHenry that inspired Francis Scott Key to write the poem “Defence of Fort McHenry” which would be set the music of “To Anacreon in Heaven,” officially designated in 1931 as the American national anthem, “The Star-Spangled Banner.”

As related by Arthur-Charles Fox-Davies, the family was given the choice of a baronetcy or an augmentation, and they chose the latter². Ross' arms with the augmentation feature in a memorial at Kilbroney Parish Church, Rostrevor, County Down, and at Rostrevor House, home to his widow and once known as Bladensburg, but neither at the Ross Monument, also in Rostrevor, nor at his national memorial in St. Paul's Cathedral³ in London. Fox-Davies transcribed the

patent granting the augmentation to commemorate the Battle of Bladensburg⁴ and is reproduced here with some introduced paragraph breaks for ease of reading:

“To all and singular to whom these present shall come
SIR ISAAC HEARD Knight GARTER Principal
King of Arms and GEORGE HARRISON Esquire
CLARENCEUX King of Arms of the South
and West Parts of England from the River Trent



College of Arms, Grants 29 p. 343. Reproduced by permission of the Kings, Heralds and Pursuivants of Arms'. A close examination shows that the flag appears to have twenty-seven stripes (fourteen white, thirteen red) and twenty stars. The US flag at this time actually had fifteen stripes (8 red, 7 white) and fifteen stars arranged in five rows of three.

Southwards send Greeting Whereas His Royal Highness the PRINCE REGENT by Warrant under HIS MAJESTY'S Royal Signet and the Sign Manual of His Royal Highness in the Name and on the Behalf of His Majesty bearing date the Twenty-fifth day of August last did signify unto the Most Noble CHARLES late Duke of Norfolk Earl Marshal and Hereditary Marshal of England deceased that taking into consideration the highly distinguished Services of the late ROBERT ROSS Esquire Major General of His Majesty's Forces and Lieutenant Colonel of the 20th Regiment of Foot deceased upon divers important occasions and the signal Intrepidity displayed by him in the brilliant action with the Enemy on the Plains of Maida in Calabria and throughout the recent arduous and Splendid Achievements of His Majesty's Arms in the Peninsula particularly at the memorable Engagement at Corunna and in the several brilliant and decisive Actions with the Enemy at Vittoria in the Pyrenees and at Orthes and more especially the Ability Promptitude and Energy with which on the 14th day of August 1814 with the Troops under his command he accomplished the Capture of the City of Washington in America after having on the same day defeated the Army of the United States at the Village of Bladensburg although greatly superior in Force and strongly posted with Cannon And considering also that the said Major General unfortunately but gloriously fell at the head of His Majesty's Troops under his Command on the 12th day of September following in an arduous attempt to gain possession of the Town of Baltimore And being desirous to commemorate these important Services His Royal Highness had been pleased to give and grant HIS MAJESTY'S Royal Licence and Permission that the following honourable Armorial Ensigns may be placed on any Monument to be erected to the memory of the said Major General Ross viz "Per fess embattled in Chief a dexter Arm embowed and encircled by a Wreath of Laurel the Hand grasping the Colours of the United States of America the Staff broken on a Canton a representation of the Gold Cross with which HIS MAJESTY was pleased to honour the said Major General in testimony of His Royal Approbation of his Services in base the Arms of Ross of Ross Trevor" with this Motto "BLADENSBURG."

'And for Crest in addition to that of Ross the following Viz "Out of a Mural Crown a dexter Arm grasping the Colours as in the Arms"

'And His Royal Highness did further grant and ordain that the said honourable Armorial Distinctions may be borne and used by ELIZABETH CATHERINE ROSS Widow and Relict of the said Major General during her Widowhood and by his Descendants and that she and they henceforward be called "ROSS OF BLADENSBURG" as a Memorial to them and to His Majesty's beloved subjects in general of the Loyalty Ability and Valour of that highly distinguished Officer whose valuable Life was thus gloriously devoted to the Service of his Country Provided the said honourable Armorial Distinctions be first duly

exemplified according to the Laws of Arms and recorded in the Heralds' Office otherwise the said Royal Licence and Permission to be void and of none effect And forasmuch as HENRY THOMAS HOWARD MOLYNEUX Esquire Deputy with the Royal Approbation to his Brother the Most Noble BERNARD EDWARD Duke of Norfolk Earl Marshal and Hereditary Marshal of England did by Warrant under his hand and seal bearing date the twentieth day of April instant authorize and direct us to exemplify such honourable Armorial Distinctions accordingly

'Know Ye therefore that We the said GARTER and CLARENCEUX in obedience to the said Warrant and by Virtue of the Letters Patent of our several Offices to each of Us respectively granted do by these Presents exemplify the honourable Armorial Distinctions following that is to say Per fess embattled Argent and Or in Chief Issuant a dexter Arm embowed vested Gules Cuff Azure encircled by a Wreath of Laurel the hand grasping a Flag Staff broken in bend Sinister therefrom flowing the Colours of the United States of America proper in Base the Arms of Ross of Ross Trevor on a Canton of the third pendent from a Ribband a Representation of the Cross presented by Command of HIS MAJESTY to the said late Major General in testimony of his Royal Approbation of his Services with the Motto "BLADENSBURG"

'And for a Crest of honourable Augmentation in addition to the Crest of the Family of Ross of Ross Trevor the following that is to say On a Wreath of the Colours Out of a Mural Crown Or a dexter Arm grasping the Colours as in the Arms as the same are in the Margin hereof more plainly depicted the said Arms and Crest to be placed on any Monument to be erected to the Memory of the said late Major General ROBERT ROSS and to be borne and used for ever hereafter by his Descendants and the said Arms to be borne and used by her the said ELIZABETH CATHERINE ROSS during her Widowhood according to the Tenor of the said Royal Warrant and the Laws of Arms In Witness whereof We the said GARTER and CLARENCEAUX Kings of Arms have to these Presents subscribed our Names and affixed the Seals of our several Offices this twenty-sixth day of April in the Fifty-sixth year of the Reign of our Sovereign Lord GEORGE the Third by the Grace of God of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland King Defender of the Faith etc. and in the year of our Lord One thousand eight hundred and sixteen.

'ISAAC HEARD Garter Principal King of Arms
'GEORGE HARRISON Clarenceux King of Arms.'



End Notes:

1. The town is spelled Bladensburg, but many of the British documents of the day spell it as Bladensberg.
2. Fox-Davies, Arthur Charles. *A Complete Guide to Heraldry*. London: T.C. & E.C. Jack, 1909. Page 593.
3. Correspondence with Dr. John McCavitt, who maintains an excellent web site – themanwhocapturedwashington.com – dedicated to General Ross.
4. Fox-Davies. *The Right to Bear Arms*. London: Elliot Stock, 1900. Pages 57-61.