

February 22nd

Memory Verse:

Thou therefore **endure hardness,**
as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. 2 Timothy 2:3

This verse tells us that Christians are soldiers. That does not mean that we fight people and hurt them with weapons. True Christians spread the gospel by telling people about the Lord Jesus not by fighting wars with them. This makes Christianity different from many false religions which teach their followers to force others to join them by fighting against them. How are Christians soldiers then? Christians have to fight sin in their own lives. This is one way of being a Christian Soldier. We have to resist the devil when he tempts us to do wrong. Christians are like soldiers too when they tell the gospel message to others. When the gospel spreads it is like a victorious army claiming territory for its king. Younger children can learn the words in bold.

A story from history: the most recent invasion of mainland Britain and the Last Invasion Tapestry.¹

Today's story is about soldiers – and about some ladies who had to *pretend* to be soldiers to help protect their country!

In 1797 England was at war with Revolutionary France during what is known as the War of the First Coalition. There were other troubles too. Over in Ireland conditions were becoming violent. The United Irishmen, an organisation with many members throughout Ireland wanted a violent French style revolution. This, they thought, would free the country from English rule and turn Ireland into a Republic. In 1796 the united Irishmen began to negotiate with the French. A plan was hatched. A French invasion force of 15,000 would land in Ireland to help the United Irishmen who would rise against the English when the French landed. In order to tie up as many of the English defence forces as possible, a smaller French invasion force would try to capture England's second city. This would distract attention from the landing in Ireland and there would be few defenders left to deal with the Irish invasion. In those days, the second city was not **Birmingham** or **Manchester** which were still quite small places but the bustling port of **Bristol**.²

A French expedition, led by General Louis Lazare Hoche (1768-1797), sailed from **Brest** in December 1796 with 15,000 troops on board; its objective was to invade Ireland. The expeditionary fleet arrived in **Bantry Bay** on December 21st but storms prevented the vessels from landing. The invasion was a failure, some 2,000 soldiers were drowned or captured and the rest of the fleet returned to France. But the French and Irish had not given up.

It began to grow dark on the evening of **February 22nd**, 1797. In the little town of **Fishguard** on the Welsh coast, lights began to twinkle in the houses of the unsuspecting inhabitants. Unbeknown to them, sixteen boats all full of Irish and French soldiers in dark brown and black uniforms, making them hard to see in the darkness, quietly came ashore at nearby **Carregwastad Point**. This was the *Legion Noire* and it numbered over 1,400 well-armed men. Their objective was **Bristol**. The men were led by an experienced American Lieutenant, William Tate, who had fought against the British in the American War of Independence but they were hardly a picked force – in fact at least 800 of them were convicts forced to serve in the army. Things began to go wrong even before the inhabitants of Fishguard were aware of the invasion force. One boatload of ammunition capsized and sank and then the soldiers who had been landed on the beach made an interesting discovery. The cargo from a ship wrecked in the stormy weather had been strewn over the beach. The ship had

1 Illustrations by kind permission of the Fishguard Invasion Centre Trust Ltd <https://lastinvasiontapestry.co.uk>

2 The background to the Irish part of this story can be found in *A History of Ireland* which is available on the *Mothers' Companion* flashdrive Volume 9 as a supplement to *The Story of God's Dealings With Our Nation*. You can obtain the flashdrive here: <https://motherscompanion.weebly.com>.

been carrying wine from Portugal. The convict-soldiers lost no time in dealing with it...

Tate took over a farmhouse for his headquarters and then he and his men moved up a further two miles inland and occupied two strong defensive positions at **Garn Wnda** and Garnelli.

Meanwhile in the town the alarm had been given when one of the French ships was seen in Fishguard Bay. A messenger was sent to **Tregwynt Mansion** home of George Harries of Tregwynt, Sheriff of Pembrokeshire, where Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Knox, of the Militia³ was attending a ball given by Mrs Harries. It took a while to convince him that anything was greatly amiss but when it became clear to him that something serious was happening he left to join the militia who were preparing for action at the **Fishguard Fort** at Castle Point. Meanwhile at **Haverfordwest** Lord Cawdor, commander of the Pembrokeshire Yeomanry, had also been alerted and he set off with his men to help.

It was not long before Colonel Knox realised that his little force of militia was hopelessly outnumbered. They could not possibly defend Fishguard so he led his men out of the town towards the approaching Yeomanry. They met them at **Treffgarne** and together the Yeomanry and Militia marched back towards the town. Here they made their headquarters at the Royal Oak Inn.



By now things were not going at all well for the French. They were running out of food and began foraging in local farms and ransacking **Llan Wnda Church** to the rage and terror of the inhabitants who had fled there. The French ships had had orders that, once the men had been landed, they should sail away, leaving them with no means of escape! This made the French soldiers demoralised and afraid.

3 Volunteer local defence forces.



A local tradition of long standing says that the ingenious ladies of Fishguard thought of a trick which soon convinced the French it was they who were outnumbered. Arrayed in their red shawls and Welsh hats they looked from a distance like just British Yeomanry who in those days wore red coats and tall black hats called “shakos”. You can see some soldiers wearing shakos in the picture below standing on the left. Together the ladies formed up and marched round and round The Bigney (a local hill) as if there were more and more of them arriving and on manoeuvres.

The demoralized French sent two men that evening as delegates to Lord Cawdor at the Royal Oak to negotiate surrender terms. Lord Cawdor bluffed. With his superior numbers, he said, he would not negotiate. Unconditional surrender was all he would consider. If they would not surrender unconditionally, the French should prepare to meet an attack. Next day hundreds of civilians joined the Milita forces and the Yeomanry under Lord Cawdor lined up in battle order waiting to see what the French would do. Tate, thinking himself completely outnumbered and having no means of retreating fell for Cawdor's bluff. To the beat of their drums his men marched down to **Goodwick Beach**. Here they stacked up their weapons in surrender. Tate and his men were taken prisoner. The following year the French prisoners were exchanged for English prisoners and returned to France.



The invasion was over but meanwhile...

In those days news took a long while to travel. Before anyone knew how many men were in the invasion force or what they were doing, messengers on horseback hurried through every village

with the stark news: soldiers of Napoleon had landed at Fishguard.

Napoleon was the dreaded conqueror of Europe. His name struck terror into men's hearts and everyone was afraid of the French. As soon as they heard the message, people at once thought that the terrible invasion, so long expected, had begun. They would be attacked by French soldiers and they would lose their farms, their families and their lives. The familiar world as they knew it seemed to be coming to a horrible end.

At a chapel in Rhydybont near **Aberystwyth**, a service was going on when one of the messengers galloped up to the door.

Mysteriously he whispered his wild message to someone near the door, and away he went again to scatter broadcast the seeds of a storm. From one to another in the chapel the news mysteriously flashed – the curiosity of those who did not know being almost as tragic as the consternation of those who knew. The preacher was confounded, and he was compelled to stop and ask for the cause of such an unseemly commotion. Someone shouted – 'The French have landed at Fishguard!' Bad before, it was worse now. Had ... lightning struck the house, the panic could scarcely have been more overpowering. No one durst move or speak; the preacher himself sat down in the midst of his sermon utterly overborne.⁴

Amidst the confusion one lady at least remained calm. Nancy Jones called out to the preacher, "Go on: if the French are at Fishguard we have God to take care of us." Alas, the preacher was like someone struck dumb and could not say a word. Nancy looked across to David John Edmund, one of her neighbours whose voice was often heard in the prayer meeting. Nancy asked him to pray but he also was dumbstruck by the horror of the message and could not utter a word.

In those days people did not generally have hymn books. Instead, they knew many hymns off by heart. In chapel the minister would read or repeat the verse of a hymn and then the congregation would sing it. Nancy asked David John Edmund to give out a hymn verse if he could not pray, so that they could all sing. No, he could not even do that, his mind was so full of terror. "Very well," said brave Nancy, "I shall give out the verse myself, and you start the tune. And she began reciting: *Duw os wyt am ddybenu'r byd...*

If Thou would'st end the world, O Lord,
Accomplish first Thy promised word,
And gather home with one accord
From every part Thine own:
Send out Thy word from pole to pole,
And with Thy blood make thousands whole,
Till health has come to every soul,
And after that – come down!⁵

But she found she had to start the tune herself too! As she began singing her courage suddenly struck the congregation and they joined in with a will, "... the French well-nigh forgotten in the glorious inspiration of 'the promised word'".

What joy there must have been when the news of the French surrender reached Rhydybont!

4 H. Elvet Lewis, *Sweet Singers of Wales* (London, 1889)

5 Hymn by William Williams (1717-1791) on the occasion of the Lisbon Earthquake 1755. English translation by H. Elvet Lewis.

Something to make

The beautiful pictures above are taken from the Last Invasion Tapestry. It is on display in Fishguard at the Town Hall and is well worth a visit if you are ever in that part of the world. This piece of embroidery was inspired by the Bayeux Tapestry which you will know about if you did the lesson for September 28th. The Last Invasion Tapestry measures 30 metres. Look at the lesson for 28th September and work out which Tapestry is longer, the Bayeux Tapestry or the Last Invasion Tapestry. The Last Invasion Tapestry was designed to be a similar height to the Bayeux Tapestry.

If you want to do some embroidery of your own there are some suggestions in the 28th September Lesson that would go very well with today's topic.

The Last Invasion Tapestry was designed by the watercolour artist Elizabeth Cramp in 1983 and with the help of embroidery advisors the design was transferred to a cotton canvas. This split the tapestry up into separate panels so that individual local ladies could each work a part of the picture. Those taking part ranged in age from 30 to 82. Work began on the embroidery at the end of 1994 using a specially selected embroidery wool that would withstand fading. The Tapestry went on display on 22nd February 1997, the two hundredth anniversary of the Invasion.

A game to play

If there are enough of you, you could play Chinese whispers. Sit in a line or a circle and pass a message about the French invasion from one to another in a whisper. Choose a message that no one else will have thought of to start with. See how well you can pass the message without it getting distorted.

Map Work

I have highlighted the various places in the story in green so that you can look them up. If you have a good enough map, or use one on line, you will be able to follow the ins and outs of the adventure.

Something to do for younger children

Marching for both soldiers and ladies comes into this story. You can learn to march too. First of all you can practice on the spot. You need someone to help you by calling out "Left, right, left, right..." Stand behind one another so that you can see the feet of the person in front of you. Then you can check that your left foot is going up when their left foot goes up and not when their right foot goes up! This is not as easy as it sounds and takes quite a bit of practice. Now find a recording of some marching music (the American composer Susa wrote some very cheerful marches) and see if you can keep the "left, right" pattern going in time to the music. When you can keep it going well, clear a space (or even better go outside if you can) and set up something to represent the Bigney Hill. Now you can march round like the gallant ladies of Fishguard! If you live in Wales and have some Welsh costumes you could use so much the better! Anything red to make a cloak would do too and perhaps you could even improvise a tall black hat!

Something to think about

Our hymns are a great help to us. We can sometimes sing a hymn when our courage fails us and we cannot put our fears or troubles into words of our own. Look at your own hymn book and decide what hymn you would have chosen if you had been Nancy. Learn to sing a verse from that hymn from memory.