

## CHAPTER 4

### THE HIGHLAND CHARGE

For more than a century the Highlanders of Scotland experienced an age of military triumph unlike any other in their history. The Scottish Highlanders won eight major battles between 1644 and 1746, leaving a profound impact on the political condition and military system in the British Isles. These victories were due in great part to the Highlanders' variation on a simple and ancient military tactic, the charge.

In its most basic form, the charge is a violent, rushing attack upon an opposing military force. The charge was not a novelty to the Highlanders; their Celtic ancestors used the charge as their primary offensive tactic for centuries. When Caesar landed in Briton in 55 B.C., Strabo wrote that Caesar was:

impressed by the innocent archaic courage of the Celts in battle, and mentions their dependence on the impact of their first great charge at the enemy.<sup>1</sup>

Again in Boudicca's War, around 60 A.D., the Celts relied on the impetus of the charge to battle the Romans. Over seventy thousand Romans were killed in the battles of Camulodunum, Verulamium, and Londinium, before the discipline, organization, and logistics of the Roman army finally won out, destroying Boudicca's tribe.<sup>2</sup> However, the Romans were never able to subdue the Highlands of Scotland, and around 85 A.D. they ended their conquest between the firths of Forth and Clyde.<sup>3</sup>

Over a millennium later, at the Battle of the Standard in 1138, the Scots were still using the charge. At this battle the English cavalry dismounted and formed two lines; the

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<sup>1</sup>H.D. Rankin, Celts and the Classical World (London: Croom Helm, 1987), 77.

<sup>2</sup>In the final battle of Boudicca's war an estimated eighty thousand Britons were killed when they charged the Roman legions. Ibid., 222-3.

<sup>3</sup>John S. Keltie, ed., A History of the Scottish Highlands, Highland Clans, and Highland Regiments (Edinburgh: A. Fullarton and Company, 1877) vol. 1, 3-5.

Scots charged the English lines, broke through the first, and were slaughtered by the second.<sup>4</sup> In 1513 at the battle of Flodden Field, the Highlanders were noted again for charging the English forces; however, the Highlanders were defeated.<sup>5</sup> The charge had become a fundamental element in the Highlanders' style of warfare, and it shows the continuity of Celtic warfare over the ages, as James Michael Hill maintains in his work Celtic Warfare 1595-1763. However the Highland Charge was different from the basic charge in several important ways.

The Highland Charge was a simple tactic that was surprisingly effective against more disciplined troops. When the time for battle arrived, the Highlanders situated themselves in line formation usually on high ground above their foe.<sup>6</sup> The Highlanders used their traditional weapons: the target, broadsword, dirk, and Highland Pistol; in addition, they used a more modern weapon, the musket. They threw off their jackets, shoes, and other encumbering clothing, and fought in their plaids.<sup>7</sup> With bone-chilling roars the Highlanders charged toward their enemy. When they arrived within twenty or thirty paces of their enemy, the Highlanders discharged their muskets in a single volley of fire and threw them down.<sup>8</sup> Then behind the cover of musket smoke, the Highlanders formed numerous wedges, twelve to fourteen men deep, took out their broadsword and

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<sup>4</sup>Andrew Lang, A Short History of Scotland (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1912), 23.

<sup>5</sup>Charles Oman, A History of the Art of War in the Sixteenth Century (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, 1971), 316.

<sup>6</sup>James Michael Hill, "The Distinctiveness of Gaelic Warfare, 1400-1750," European History Quarterly 22 (1992): 335. Hereafter noted as Hill, "Dist."

<sup>7</sup>Stewart, 71.

<sup>8</sup>Hill, Celtic Warfare, 48.

target, and charged the enemy's front lines in an attempt to break them.<sup>9</sup> The forces engaged in hand-to-hand combat, if the enemy's lines had not already dispersed, and the Highlanders then had the advantage since they were fighting with more traditional close-combat weapons. Not only did the Highlanders use their broadswords in the close-quarter combat, but they also made use of their dirks, and it was occasionally reported that the Highlanders would also fire their pistols immediately before they reached the enemy's line.<sup>10</sup>

The premise of the charge was the shock value that it had on the opposing army's lines, often resulting in the enemy being overwhelmed and their lines breaking. The battle cries of the Highlanders had an unsettling psychological effect on their enemies. When the Highlanders charged and fired a volley at the enemy's lines and then reformed behind a smokescreen before charging again, it usually confused and frightened the enemy (which was often essential to the success of the Highland Charge); the result was that the soldiers prematurely fired their muskets.<sup>11</sup> Since they did not have time to reload before the Highlanders reached their lines, and the English were not armed with a sword, this would leave them defenseless. Although the English army was equipped with the bayonet by the eighteenth century, the Highlanders were easily able to counter it by receiving the bayonet in their target and pushing it up or to the side. This left the English soldier defenseless, and exposed to the Highlanders' slashing broadsword.<sup>12</sup>

One of the best descriptions of the Highland Charge and the Highlanders' defense from the bayonet comes from the Chevalier de James Johnstone's memoirs of the Jacobite

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<sup>9</sup>David Stevenson, Alasdair MacColla and the Highland Problem in the Seventeenth Century (Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers, 1980), 82.

<sup>10</sup>Dalrymple, 460.

<sup>11</sup>Stevenson, Alasdair, 83.

<sup>12</sup>Dalrymple, 461.

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Their manner of fighting is adapted for brave but undisciplined men. They advance with rapidity, discharge their fire pieces when within musket-length of the enemy, and then, throwing them down, draw their swords, and holding a dirk in their left hand with their target, dart with fury on the enemy through the smoke of their fire. When within reach of the enemy's bayonets, bending their left knee, they cover their bodies with their targets, which receive the thrusts of the bayonets, while at the same time they raise their sword-arm and strike their adversary. Having one got within the bayonets and into the ranks of the enemy, the soldiers have no longer any means of defending themselves, the fate of the battle is decided in an instant, and the carnage follows--the Highlanders bringing down two men at a time, one with their dirk, in the left hand, and another with the sword.<sup>13</sup>

From this contemporary description, one can see that the Highland Charge was a formidable tactic.

The Highland Charge was a unique blend of the ancient and the modern. The ancient was the tactic of the charge and the use of swords and targets as the primary weapon; the modern was the use of the musket. The charge fit perfectly with the clan system, both founded in ancient tradition. Clan warfare was undisciplined and steeped in the glory of individual combat, both conditions the Highland Charge fulfilled. The economics of the Highland Charge also fit in well with clan society, because it was usually cheap. Almost all of the Highlanders had a broadsword, target, and dirk. Some of the Highlanders also possessed pistols and muskets. However, during the Jacobite campaigns, the Highlanders plundered muskets from their English enemies, either when they captured towns or overran baggage trains as at Falkirk in 1746. In addition, they did not have the great expense for powder, since they fired only one volley.

There were two main modern aspects to the Highland Charge. The first was the use of the musket, and the second was the change in formation after the volley. The

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<sup>13</sup>The Chevalier de James Johnstone, A Memoir of the 'Forty-Five, ed. Brian Rawson (London: Folio Society, 1958), 83-4.

musket was used by the Highlanders in the most effective way possible based upon the technology of the musket, and the slow speed at which it could be reloaded. David Stevenson describes the significance of abandoning the musket in his book about Alasdair MacColla:

By throwing down their own muskets after firing only a single volley, the Highlanders might be abandoning their most modern weapon in favor of ones which were basically centuries old, but given the limitations of the musket it was a decision that brought them great advantages at a critical moment in the battle.<sup>14</sup>

Thus the single musket volley was essential to the Highland Charge, and actually distinguished it from other charges.

The second modern element of the Highland Charge was the change in formation from linear (in a straight line) to columnar (in compact groups with depth). The Highlanders began their battle in linear formation, fired their volley, and behind the smokescreen reformed in the columnar formation. This change in formation provided greater impact of the charge on the English line, and greater numerical security to the Highlanders.<sup>15</sup> John Dalrymple, a contemporary writer, described the columnar formation of the Highlanders upon their final charge toward the English lines as "wedges condensed and firm."<sup>16</sup> There is no evidence that the Highlanders practiced this change in formation. It is possible that the Highlanders knew that in a deep formation their charge would have greater impact, thus the change in formation; or the bravest men began the charge after firing their weapons and with the smoke obscuring their view, others simply fell in behind the leaders of the charge. No matter what the reasons were behind the change in formation, the fact that there was a change in formation is important simply because of the increased power it provided to the Highland Charge. James Hill points out that this

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<sup>14</sup>Stevenson, Alasdair, 84.

<sup>15</sup>Hill, Celtic Warfare, 48.

<sup>16</sup>Dalrymple, 460.

flexibility in formation was not fully appreciated by Europeans until the eighteenth century.<sup>17</sup> It was amazing that a tactic so ancient and simple could overcome a professional army in a time of great military innovations in weaponry, tactics, and logistics. This is exactly why the Highland Charge is of great interest.

The origins of the Highland Charge are somewhat obscure. The Highland Charge was not defined by the tactic but by the weapons used in it; therefore, it could not be born until the technology and weaponry were developed, specifically the musket and broadsword. The premise of the charge was more ancient than the technology of the musket or the broadsword. As noted above, the charge was an ancient tactic that the Highlanders and their Celtic ancestors had used for centuries. Ironically, the Highland Charge did not originate in the Highlands of Scotland but in Ireland. Highland mercenaries, called "Galloglaigh" had settled in Ireland between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries. In one of their documented battles, the battle of Knockdoe in 1504, the "Galloglaigh: began their offensive with an opening volley of spears, before they charged the enemies' lines.<sup>18</sup> This is eerily similar to the Highland Charge, with an opening volley of projectiles followed by a charge. However, the weapons of the Highland Charge were not yet available.

By the seventeenth century, the elements were in place for the development of the Highland Charge. The two-handed claymore was slowly being replaced by the one-handed broadsword and the target, and the musket was becoming more readily available. In February 1642, at the battle of Laney, Alasdair MacColla, a Scottish Highlander fighting under James Graham Montrose in Ireland, ambushed some Protestant settlers,

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<sup>17</sup>Hill, "Distinctiveness of Gaelic Warfare 1400-1750," 334.

<sup>18</sup>Hill, "Dist.," 327.

using a new tactic, the Highland Charge.<sup>19</sup> The charge was not a new tactic, but for the first time the Highland Charge was recorded: Alasdair MacColla,

having commanded his murderers to lay downe all their fyre-arms . . . fell in amongst them (with swords and durck or scones [knives]) in such a furious and irresistible manner, that is was reported that not a man of them escaped of all the eight hundred.<sup>20</sup>

After firing a volley on the Protestants, MacColla's men threw down their muskets and charged their enemy with swords. The force that carried out this charge was a mixture of Scottish Highlanders and Irishmen.<sup>21</sup> In 1644, MacColla introduced the Highland Charge to the Highlands of Scotland.<sup>22</sup> His commanding officer, James Montrose, saw the success that this tactic had, and employed it on the mainland of England; Montrose was victorious during 1644-45 at the battles of Tippermuir, Aberdeen, Inverlochy, and Kilsyth.<sup>23</sup>

The Highland Charge was successful for several reasons. First, it was a good combination of speed, mobility, and shock power.<sup>24</sup> The mobility came from the Highlanders' ability to change formation mid-stream in the tactic, from a linear formation to a columnar formation. The shock power of the charge was obvious. The speed of the Highland Charge was due in part to a second reason for its success and that was the

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<sup>19</sup>This battle took place during the civil wars, and is sometimes referred to as the Battle of Bendooragh. David Stevenson, "The Highland Charge" History Today 32 (August 1982): 4. Hereafter referred to as Stevenson, "HC".

<sup>20</sup>Stevenson, Alasdair, 82.

<sup>21</sup>Stevenson, "HC", 4.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 261.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>24</sup>Jeremy Black, European Warfare 1660-1815 (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1994), 76.

choice of ground. The Highlanders almost always chose to launch the Highland Charge from high ground.<sup>25</sup> By running downhill the Highlanders gained additional speed, which contributed to the impact of the charge. Often the commanders of the Highland forces took advantage of situations (such as terrain and opportunity) that improved the chances for the success of the Highland Charge.

A third reason for its success was the ability of the charge to accommodate individual combat, and the skill and bravery of the individual Highland "Warrior."<sup>26</sup> Once the Highlanders encountered the enemy lines the combat turned from the unit to one-on-one. The Highlanders were skilled as individual warriors and did not work well as a unit. Thus the loose organization of the tactic fit well with the lack of training the Highlanders had as a large unit. A final reason for its success was discussed earlier, and that was the use of the musket for a single volley, then dispensing of it for the broadsword which gave the Highlanders an important advantage once they encountered the enemy line. Thus, a combination of factors led to the success of the Highland Charge. Some were inherent in the Highland forces, while others were due in part to individual commanders or opportunity.

The Highlanders of Scotland readily accepted this tactic. Not only was it successful against the English, but it fit easily into their style of warfare, based upon individual heroics, the glory of battle, their traditional weapon system, and the unbounded fury of the charge which worked well for the Highlanders for generations. The Highland Charge was used by a clan-based society which blended an ancient tactic with the modern instruments of war battling against an early modern, trained, gunpowder bearing military force. Thus one of the foremost military powers in the world would be repeatedly challenged by a primitive force (by the day's standards), but how long could the success

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<sup>25</sup>Paul Hopkins, Glencoe and the End of the Highland War (Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers, 1986), 20.

<sup>26</sup>Hill, Celtic Warfare, 2.



of the Highland Charge endure against such a formidable foe?