

# State Papers Naval (1714-1782)

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During the first seventy-five years of the eighteenth century Britain emerged as the paramount world naval power. The ground work had been laid gradually during the seventeenth century and with the conclusion of the War of Spanish Succession (1701-1713) Britain's rivals for oceanic naval power, the French, Spanish and Dutch, had all faded at least temporarily from serious contention. Maintaining naval forces which had global reach and could exercise sustained force at sea as well as influencing events on land was a massive bureaucratic, financial and economic task, which, for most of the century, other European powers found that they could not maintain long term. In Britain, unlike the other powers, the economic underpinning of maritime trade provided both the financial resources and physical infrastructure to build and maintain a growing naval force. Similarly, unlike other powers, British political ideology provided the political support for increased expenditure, and her geographical position, offered an advantageous location to maintain major naval forces that could dominate the European littoral.

Naval policy was made by the king with his cabinet or with his most trusted ministers in an inner cabinet. A member of that cabinet was the First Lord of the Admiralty Board. His job was to advise the king and ministers on the state of the Royal Navy, its rivals and its operational potentialities. Since 1708 the Lords of the Admiralty sat as a board exercising the functions of the Lord High Admiral.<sup>[1]</sup> They had overall responsibility for the navy, supervising the work of the three subordinate boards - the Navy, Victualing and Sick and Wounded Boards. It was through the Admiralty that orders from the king, or more usually one of his secretaries of state, were distributed to the other boards or to the ships' captain. The First Lord of the

Admiralty may have been the minister present at discussions of policy, but the Admiralty Office was always required to keep the monarch and ministers informed of detailed events through correspondence with the Secretaries of State, providing intelligence reports, lists of ships, progress reports, other statistical administrative data and legal opinions. The Secretaries of State collated this material that was to be put before the king and this collection of State Papers Naval is the result of that activity.

The Admiralty correspondence makes up the largest part of this collection, but there were other important sources of naval information, particularly the correspondence of the naval commanders-in-chief on major stations or operations across the globe. These officers usually made their operational reports directly to the Secretaries of State, only writing to the Admiralty on matters related to the state of their ships and crews. These papers are an invaluable operational record. Overall, the SP42 series is a large and rich collection of documents that are vital to understanding the role of the navy in the British political and diplomatic context.

### **Admiralty General and Supplementary Correspondence**

Correspondence from the Admiralty covered a wide range of issues as can be imagined with a department of such size and importance. They range from matters of critical urgency to those of administrative detail. For example, a little remembered event is the attempted French and Spanish invasion of Great Britain in 1779, at the height of the War of American Independence (1775-1783). It failed, but the anxiety it caused was as real as other invasion preparations in 1588 and 1940. The invasion was anticipated and Admiral Sir Charles

Hardy, who commanded the Channel squadron, was sent to Brest to keep a watch on the French squadron there. His report to the Secretary of the Admiralty, Philip Stephens, that the French and Spanish fleets were already at sea and how he got that news is in this collection<sup>[2]</sup>. The combined enemy was possibly between his squadron and the British Isles and the Admiralty despatched his report urgently to the Secretary of State.<sup>[3]</sup>

Other matters were less dramatic, but required the Secretary of State's attention. The expansion of the officer corps during wars was always followed by its reduction at the peace. Early in the century half-pay provisions were not yet fully regularised, so the fate of officers suddenly unemployed had to be addressed. In January 1713 this was the content of a report from the Admiralty to the Secretary of State<sup>[4]</sup>. These volumes are full of administrative activities such as this, which were at the heart of the navy's function and development. Reports of courts martial, mutiny, petitions, appointments, trials of various materials and methods for improving ships, give us the detail of how the navy was built, maintained, manned and disciplined.

The supplementary volumes are full of similar correspondence, across the range of administrative, operational and diplomatic concerns. Running throughout this whole series of correspondence is the diplomatic impact of British naval action. Destroying the trade of the enemy was a vital role of the Royal Navy in wartime while protecting British trade in peace and war was a constant duty. Inevitably, neutrals got entangled in the actions, their ships or their goods being seized. Complaints from foreign ambassadors or courts had to be understood, investigated and resolved.<sup>[5]</sup>

## Naval Commanders Correspondence

Naval commanders on major operations usually corresponded directly with the Secretary of State. For this reason there are many important volumes of correspondence preserved in this collection outlining operations for the period up to about 1770. With the correspondence are the enclosures sent by those officers concerning the intelligence they had gathered, copies of their correspondence to other commanders, naval administrators and civil officials. These are the core of the official operational correspondence and invaluable for understanding the exercise of naval power from the perspective of the admirals commanding and the ministers in London. Occasionally, the collection includes volumes of papers collated within the Secretary's office relating to specific operations, such as Lorient in 1746<sup>[6]</sup> or Rochefort in 1757<sup>[7]</sup>, which include correspondence from the army commanders as well as naval officers. From all these volumes, we get an excellent view of the variety of operations conducted by the Royal Navy. From major operations in the Baltic (1717, 1719 and 1726), the Mediterranean and West Indies (1713 to 1748), celebrated cruises, such as George Anson's circumnavigation of the globe, 1740-1744<sup>[8]</sup>, to smaller operations that have been largely forgotten, like Admiral Norris's deterrent cruise to Lisbon in 1735<sup>[9]</sup> (SP42/84) and the fatal blockading operations of Admiral Francis Hosier off Cartagena in 1726 - 1727<sup>[10]</sup>.

## Sick and Wounded Board 1722-1782

One of the subordinate boards of the Admiralty was that of the Sick and Wounded. Its duties related to the medical care of seamen and all matters concerning prisoners of war. Originally, the Board only existed

during wartime as its duties related specifically to wartime activities. From 1713 until 1739 when a new war with Spain broke out, the Board's role was carried out within the Navy Board. Thereafter it regained its independent existence until it was abolished in 1806<sup>[11]</sup>. There is a series of volumes of correspondence from this board in the Secretary of State's papers. As we might expect, most of the papers relate to prisoners of war, which had a diplomatic dimension rather than the health of seamen.<sup>[12]</sup> These involved obtaining approval for the ransom of individual prisoners, cartels for the mutual exchange of prisoners and passes for ships moving in hostile zones. One of the first jobs the revived Commission for Sick and Wounded had to undertake in 1739 was to set up the procedures for a cartel with Spain<sup>[13]</sup>. The diplomatic impact of dealing with high status prisoners required for the Secretary of State to be involved in the Board's proceedings. In 1760, a Chevalier Mirabeau turned up in London four years after being arrested in New York suspected of spying. He was arrested again until his case had been referred to the Secretary of State<sup>[14]</sup> (SP42/136 f. 176). Occasionally, British diplomatic concerns may be roused by the treatment of seamen. In 1770, 17 seamen on the British merchant ship *General Conway* then lying in the Downs, which had been taken into Russian service and put under Russian naval discipline, contrary to their expectations, petitioned to be released from their contracts before they were forced to sail to the Mediterranean<sup>[15]</sup>.

### Prizes and Seizures

The other diplomatic concern that filled the correspondence between the Admiralty and the Secretary of State was the constant disputes with neutral states over prizes. The cases were seldom

clear cut and the correspondence gives an excellent picture of their variety and complexity. Witness statements had to be gathered, legal opinion had to be sought and action taken. In January 1780 the Secretary of State, Lord Hillsborough, wrote to the King's Proctor, Philip Crespigny, to begin proceedings against Captain Charles Mackenzie of the privateer *Hope and Plenty*, who had seized a French ship laden with Turkish and British owned goods and had managed to have the whole wrongfully condemned as lawful prize<sup>[16]</sup>).

The disputes with neutrals over seizure during wartime were to continue throughout the century and, as this case illustrates, it was not only neutrals who suffered from British action and nor were the disputes restricted to seizures by Royal Navy ships of war. The privateer, or privately commissioned warship or coast guard, could be more troublesome. Furthermore, so far as Britain was concerned, the problem was not confined to wartime. Far more diplomatically significant in the first half of the century was the irritation over Spanish seizures of British ships in the West Indies during peacetime. The determination of the Spanish to prevent illegal trading to their American colonies and the willingness of British merchants to push their trade with the Spanish colonists beyond the legal limits was bound to cause friction. Within this series there is a volume which deals largely with this problem. Most of it deals with the determination of one set of owners to obtain redress for the loss of their ship, the *Ann Galley*, which had been seized by the Spaniards on 12th June 1728 off the southern coast of Hispaniola. The ship was seized by a coast guard commissioned by the Governor of St Jago on the island of Cuba, just after the proclamation of peace between the two nations. Samuel Bonham, representing the owners, kept up a

correspondence with the Secretary of State, the Duke of Newcastle for five years, as the ministry tried to resolve both his specific case and the more general issue of free navigation<sup>[17]</sup>. The case is an excellent illustration of the tortuous negotiations and frustrations involved in settling disputes between two courts and across two continents during the eighteenth century.

## Conclusion

There are a vast number of documents relating to the Royal Navy and British naval power during the eighteenth century lodged in The National Archives. The SP42 series is only one very small part of it. However, it is, nonetheless, a significant collection because they are some of the papers that found their way to the Secretaries of State and became part of the decision-making process. They give some impression of the naval concerns at the highest level of government at any given time. They are the best single collection for developing an understanding of major naval commands and operations in the first half of the century. They give a feel for the diplomatic pressures that the exercise of naval force was imposing on British policy and some insight into the mechanics of Admiralty relations with the Secretaries of State.

## NOTES

<sup>[1]</sup> D. A. Baugh, *British Naval Administration in the Age of Walpole* (Princeton, 1965), pp. 61-66. The relationship of the Admiralty to the other boards can also be found in Baugh, 29-61. See also, J.C. Sainty, *Admiralty Officials, 1660-1870* (London, 1975)

<sup>[2]</sup> SP 42/55 f. 21, Hardy to Stephens, 25 June 1779

<sup>[3]</sup> For the full story, see A. Temple Patterson, *The Other Armada: The Franco-Spanish Attempt to Invade Britain in 1779* (Manchester, 1960)

<sup>[4]</sup> SP 42/13 unfoliated, 15 January 1713

<sup>[5]</sup> This matter is deal with in detail in R. Pares, *Colonial Blockade and Neutral Rights, 1739-1763* (Oxford, 1938)

<sup>[6]</sup> SP 42/98

<sup>[7]</sup> SP 42/100

<sup>[8]</sup> SP 42/88

<sup>[9]</sup> SP 42/84

<sup>[10]</sup> SP 42/80

<sup>[11]</sup> P. K. Crimmin, "The Sick and Hurt Board and the Health of Seamen c. 1700-1806", *Journal for Maritime Research*, 1 (1999), pp. 48-65.

<sup>[12]</sup> For this reason the activities of the Victualling and Navy Boards only appear rarely, when information was forwarded by the Admiralty Office to assist ministerial decision-making.

<sup>[13]</sup> SP 42/142, ff. 24-25, Fowler and Gashry to Burchett, 28 January 1739/40

<sup>[14]</sup> SP 42/136 unfoliated, L. Guiguer and N. Tom to R. Wood, 10 April 1760

<sup>[15]</sup> SP 42/136 f. 163, Petition, Ship *General Conway*, the Downs, 14 September 1770

<sup>[16]</sup> SP 42/138 unfoliated, Hillsborough to Crespigny, 15 January 1780

<sup>[17]</sup> SP 42/124 unfoliated, Petition of Samuel Bonham, 02 January 1728/9

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