

CHAPTER I

THE BATTLE OF TOULON

WE left Mathews at Villefranche, about to proceed to Turin to take part in a conference with the representatives of the allied Powers. He reached Turin on the 11th December and had an audience of the King of Sardinia next day; on December 14th the various representatives met. The king himself with his minister the Marquis d'Orméa, Kaunitz the Austrian Plenipotentiary with the Austrian General Vettes, and Villettes the British Ambassador with Mathews, were the members of the conference.

The first and most urgent question was the invasion of Naples which Kaunitz was pressing upon the allies. Bent on the restoration of Naples to Austria, he desired to use the allies to further his ambition, and what he proposed was that the Piedmontese should furnish troops and the British provide a squadron to escort and assist the expedition.

Apart from the undesirability of undertaking a war of conquest—a totally different matter from the expedition referred to in Mathews' instructions—the proposal was undesirable at this juncture for other reasons. The Spaniards had an army of about 18,000 men already in Savoy, which was being joined by another now on its march through Dauphiné, and France, it was now known, had made an engagement to assist Spain with 30,000 troops who were already in Dauphiné. Thus an allied army of well over 50,000 men, would be ready to invade Lombardy in the spring. The snow in the Alpine passes would make the passage of the Alps difficult, and it was therefore nearly certain that the advance must be begun along the coast, and would be supplemented later, when the weather permitted, by a move through Savoy. The Piedmontese troops were therefore required to resist an immediate advance through Nice and a later one through the Alps.

The naval and military operations were intimately bound up with each other. The defence of Nice was of the highest importance to the sea-command, since Nice was the only defended position between the enemy and Villefranche, the main victualling and refreshing base of the squadron. If the enemy captured Villefranche, or if they occupied the surrounding hills, the fleet could no longer use the harbour. Its loss would have made the operations of blockade and observation more difficult, and it is not too much to say that the Piedmontese battalions

defending Nice were largely contributing towards maintaining the British command of the local waters. Mathews, during the discussions, went so far as to say that the loss of Villefranche would oblige the fleet to fall back upon Mahon and would thus open the sea for the transport of enemy troops to Spezia, but this was an exaggeration, and was probably used for purposes of impressing upon the allies the importance of the place. The loss of the base would unquestionably hamper the operations of the squadron, cutting off an important source of supplies and denying the use of a harbour excellently situated to control movements from Antibes; but so long as supplies could be furnished from Mahon, Sardinia, or Vado Bay, a blockade would still be possible, though more difficult to maintain and therefore less effective. The capture of Villefranche by the enemy would in fact have been serious, but not fatal; and Mathews' wish to make the point as decisively as possible can be understood.

Thus Sardinia was so fully occupied in defending her own territory and cooperating with the fleet that she had no troops to spare for an expedition for the aggrandisement of Austria. Nor could the British fleet make a detachment at this time, when the French and Spanish squadrons in Toulon were evidently making ready to come to sea. The result therefore of the conference was that both the British and Sardinian representatives declined to participate, d'Orméa taking the occasion to point out that before embarking upon conquests in Naples, the allies should devote themselves to securing their own territories against the formidable invasion with which they were threatened.

No other matters of importance appear to have been discussed. Mathews remained at Turin, completing arrangements with the King and Villettes, until the 20th¹ when he returned to Villefranche. Here he arrived on the night of the 23rd, and before embarking he spent three days "very busy in consequence of the multiplicity of business," which was occasioned by the certain intelligence given him by the King of Sardinia, that the French and Spaniards intended jointly to invade Nice and Piedmont. His exertions during these days were directed towards strengthening the defences of Villefranche and making arrangements for the embarkation of its garrison if it should be impracticable to preserve the place, "the King of Sardinia having in a particular manner recommended it to me that I would give him all manner of assistance to prevent from falling into the enemy's hands so great a body

¹ It has been stated frequently that Mathews spent most of his time at Turin. This visit, lasting from the 11th to the 20th December, undertaken for a special and important purpose, was the only occasion on which he went there. We have already seen that his ill-health was the result of 38 weeks confinement on board his ship.

of his troops as 19 battalions and perhaps more, the loss of which will inevitably endanger not only the loss of Italy but also his Majesty's whole country¹."

On the 27th, having completed his arrangements he embarked on board the 'Namur,' and next day anchored at Hyères, where Lestock was lying with seventeen ships². Here he heard that the allied fleet, though preparing with diligence, would not be ready till the end of the month; but there was no time to lose in getting in his outlying ships, some of which were as far distant as Gibraltar, others still under repair at Mahon. "Ships I want," he wrote, "but I do not know where to find them; they are all employed on stations from which they cannot be taken without prejudice to the service."

A problem which naturally exercised Mathews at this moment was the part the French intended to take. Writing on the 11th January to the Duke of Newcastle, he said: "The French have now in my humble opinion, but one game to play, viz. to put to sea alone and to go down the Straits: should they do that, it would greatly distress me for though I think myself in a condition to cope with them when all together, I am by no means in a condition to send a squadron after them and keep a sufficient strength here to save Italy³."

His position was complicated by the Brest squadron which, so far

¹ Mathews to the Duke of Newcastle, 25th December, 1743. *S. P. Dom. Naval.*

² Including three 50-gun ships—'Chatham,' 'Romney' and 'Salisbury.'

³ Disposition of the larger ships of the British fleet on the 3rd January, 1744, was as follows:

Station	Ships of					
	90 guns	80 guns	70 guns	60 guns	50 guns	40 guns
In Hyères Road	3	6	6	1	4	—
At Minorca or on their way to Hyères	1	1	3	1	1	1
Off Toulon	—	—	—	2	1	—
Off Villefranche	—	—	—	—	—	1
On her way to join Mathews	—	—	1	—	—	—
Attending the army with Lobkowitz	—	—	—	—	1	—
Returning from the Adriatic	—	—	—	—	—	1
Cruising off Gibraltar	—	—	—	1	1	—
	4	7	10	5	8	3

In addition to the above ships of force, there were small craft off the coast of the Romagna, and in the Adriatic, as well as off Villefranche, Sardinia and Toulon. Mathews had six ships unfit or quite unready for service; so that, at this moment, he had actually available on the Riviera twenty-three ships of the line, including 50-gun ships. He was joined a week later by four more ships: 'Berwick,' 'Elizabeth,' 'Princessa' and 'Marlborough.'

as he knew, might already be at sea¹, and by the fact that as France had not yet declared war he had no powers or reason to attack the French Toulon squadron if it should come out of harbour alone. Yet he felt that if it did so, it would be incumbent on him to observe its movements and to keep touch with it. The possibility would then be open that the Brest and Toulon squadrons might join, and fall upon his detached force and crush it. The situation may be compared with that in which Vernon found himself in the West Indies when d'Antin's squadron arrived from Europe, but there was this difference between the two cases. In Vernon's case a French fleet of considerable strength coming to the West Indies could only indicate an intention of taking some part, a part impossible to estimate with certainty, in the struggle between England and Spain. No other quarrel was being fought out in those waters, and direct French interests could be protected efficiently by a far smaller force. But in the case of Mathews, the Toulon squadron might be proceeding to one or more of the ports on the Atlantic coast. French ships and squadrons had met those of England at sea in several cases without attacking or interfering with them, and there was no just cause, however suspicious the movement of so large a force might appear, to precipitate hostilities in European waters by attacking it. Norris, in the Channel in 1740, had thought it necessary to ask specifically for instructions in the case of a French squadron leaving Brest and attempting to enter Ferrol, and the Ministry had indicated the line he was to take, namely that he was not to attack them unless they should endeavour to go into Ferrol; but in this case Mathews had no instructions to guide him, and the problem which might confront him was not one of preventing a French squadron from joining an enemy's squadron in an enemy's harbour², but of a French squadron sailing from one of its own harbours and leaving its ally behind it. Uncertainty as to the French attitude prevailed in the fleet up to the day of the subsequent action, when the Captains did not even know whether or no we were at war with France. Captain Pett of the 'Princessa,' when asked at a Court Martial if he had any orders as to engaging the French, replied that if he had fallen alongside a French ship before his Rear-Admiral engaged, he would not have begun to engage her until she had first engaged him³, a reply which indicates that Mathews did not take

¹ He had been told by d'Orméa on Dec. 18th that it had actually sailed. The information was incorrect.

² For this eventuality he had his instructions. He was told to prevent the junction. Similar instructions had been sent to Haddock on November 11th, 1741, and these were repeated to Mathews. It will be noticed that the policy is the same as that laid down for Norris in 1740.

³ P.R.O. Court Martial on Captain Pett.

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his captains into his confidence and keep them informed as to the general situation.

Three days after Mathews had written his letter of January 11th, he received the news that the French and Spanish Admirals had been down to the coast together, observing the British squadron as it lay in Hyères Road¹. On the same day, the 'Winchelsea,' which was watching Toulon from Giers Road, reported that 35 sail of enemy ships were lying inside the boom, with their sails bent or bending. On the 26th his agents informed him that a strong reinforcement of Spanish seamen (who being unable to come by water had marched from Barcelona) had joined the Spanish squadron; and the 'Winchelsea' reported that 22 sail of French ships, including two Admirals, were now in the outer Road. It was thus clear that some movement was about to take place, and it appeared probable that it would take the form of a joint sally of the allied fleet and a simultaneous land attack.

Still, even if the matter should be simplified by such a declared intention on the part of the French, Mathews had the Brest squadron to think of. He had heard from the Duke of Newcastle, in a letter written on the 13th January, that the frigate 'Phoenix' had seen a French squadron of 21 sail lying in Brest water on January 8th, that it was daily expected to sail for Toulon², and that when it did so, a strong reinforcement would be sent to the Mediterranean. But Mathews could not but observe that the Brest squadron might get away with a good start and reach the Mediterranean in advance of his own reinforcement, and though he had ships cruising in the Straits of Gibraltar³ with strict instructions to hasten to inform him immediately the enemy passed the Straits, it was within the bounds of possibility that the Brest ships might pass in the night and succeed in joining the ships at Toulon. In such case he proposed to retreat at once to Gibraltar, there to await reinforcements. But if he received information in time he would engage the Brest squadron. "I must," he wrote, "when I receive certain advice that the Brest squadron is entered the Streights, put to sea with my whole strength and use my utmost care and diligence to intercept them, or to attack the conjunct fleet now in Toulon should they put to sea with a design of joining the ships from Brest, the time of whose sailing they will know before me. I say, should that happen, Don Philip will

¹ There were twenty-seven sail with Mathews on that day, but not all of them were in Hyères as some were absent cruising to the westward.

² "We may expect every day to hear they are sailed, and in all probability with orders to join the fleet at Toulon." Duke of Newcastle to Mathews, Jan. 13th, 1744.

³ 'Dragon' and 'Lowestoft' had orders as early as 8th Dec. to look out for the Brest squadron in the Straits.

pass unmolested into Italy: it must be so in the nature of things: all I shall presume to say on that head is, that I will do my best to prevent so fatal a stroke." So long as all the Brest squadron did not come he was easy in his mind as to his ability to deal with the conjunct fleet at Toulon, though he needed more small craft to deal with the expected invasion. "It's true," he wrote on January 31st, "I want a few small ships to send into the Adriatic and to line the coast of Italy to prevent small embarkations: but when I shall be joined by the ships already in the Mediterranean and do not hear any more of the Brest squadron, I shall detach all my small craft to cruise between Cape Roux and Port Especia, to prevent if possible any embarkations getting with troops, artillery and ammunition into any port in Italy."

Throughout all this time indeed, Mathews' dominating pre-occupation was for the security of Italy, and it must be remembered, when the events following the battle of the 11th February are considered, that this had been clearly impressed upon him as the main object of his operations. "You know the King's principal views and intentions in sending so considerable a naval force into the Mediterranean, viz.: the destroying of the Spanish ships and embarkations and the fleets of France and Spain acting together or in any manner aiding or assisting each other, and to assist, protect and defend the states and dominions in Italy belonging to the Queen of Hungary and the Great Duke, his Majesty's allies¹." This instruction had been repeated constantly²; and now all his correspondents intimated that a move was about to be made in which the Brest and Toulon squadrons were to play some part which would allow the Spanish army to be carried into Italy. One advice from Paris³ reported that, as soon as sufficient local craft were collected to carry the army, the conjunct fleet were, "in the best manner they can to employ Mr Mathews whilst their transports make the best of their way to Genoa." A later letter⁴ reported that seven sail were to leave Brest and go to Naples to "give heart" to the King of the two Sicilies to break the agreement made with Martin, and send troops to reinforce the Spaniards with de Gages. It was calculated that if Mathews should send a squadron to deal with them, his force off Toulon would be so weakened that he would be unable to hold the conjunct fleet, and if

¹ Duke of Newcastle to Mathews, Sept. 30th, 1742.

² 18 Jan., 1743. To dispose the ships to prevent an attempt being made to invade Italy by sea.

26 Apr., 1743. To do everything in his power to distress H.M.'s enemies and for the support of the allies and defence of their dominions in Italy.

13 Dec., 1743. To provide against a reported project to send the Spanish forces by sea into Italy.

³ December 3/14, 1743. Mr Thompson's letter.

⁴ December 14/25, 1743.

he did not send any, it was certain that the Neapolitan reinforcement to the Spanish army would be provided¹. A still further report stated that “however dangerous it is for the enemy to ruin their marine, they are nevertheless resolved to run the risk” of a pitched battle between the fleets in order to get the troops into Italy as quickly as possible. This would ease the French situation in Germany by obliging the Queen of Hungary to detach forces from that theatre to support Prince Lobkowitz in preserving her dominions in Lombardy²; and Austrian troops might also have to be diverted to assist the King of Sardinia to resist the French army in the Alps.

In all this diversity of opinion as to how the enemy intended to achieve their end, there appeared no doubt as to what that end was—the invasion of Lombardy by sea. Whether they could live on the country or must depend on the long line of communications for their supplies remained to be seen; but by possessing all the harbours along the coast, they would deny their use as bases of supply to the British fleet, would make the blockade more difficult to maintain, and therefore facilitate the transport of stores and men in small craft which could be moved rapidly from the shelter of one harbour to that of another, keeping inshore where their interception would be difficult.

On the 26th January, the Brest squadron put to sea. The news that it had done so reached Turin on the 31st, and d’Orméa hastened to transmit it to Mathews. The Duke of Newcastle wrote also, expressing the opinion that the squadron might either make a descent on the British coast, lie in the Channel and attack trade, or endeavour to intercept the supplies and reinforcements going to the Mediterranean. When Mathews received this news, he at once sent instructions to Minorca to hasten all available ships to join the flag at Hyères.

The enemy were indeed nearly ready, and their intention, as supposed by Mathews’s Geneva correspondent, was to come out and free the way for the troops by destroying the British fleet³. It was believed by them that Mathews’s fleet was weaker than it really was. When the French and Spanish Admirals had come down to the coast of Hyères to examine the British fleet in the second week in January⁴ there were not more than 27 ships with Mathews, all of which were not in harbour. On the 3rd of February—the day the allies were ready and intended to sail⁵—there were no more than 28 sail with Mathews, and the 28 sail

¹ It appears that five or seven ships did sail from Brest early in January and went so far as Cadiz.

² Letter from Geneva. Jan. 4/15, 1743/4. Villettes to Duke of Newcastle.

³ See instructions to Admiral de Court. Appendix.

⁴ Mathews to Duke of Newcastle, 14th January, 1744.

⁵ *Journal of M. de Lage de Cueilly.*

of clean ships which the enemy could bring out might reasonably expect to deal such a blow to the British that they would no longer be able to remain on the coast. If the fleet could be surprised before it could get out of harbour, or could be attacked as it came out, there would be an increased probability of its destruction. The allies therefore intended to sail into Hyères Road and there attack Mathews. If he should endeavour to leave by one channel as their squadrons entered, the French division was to go round and cut him off in the entrance¹. Unfortunately for the allies, the wind was foul on the 3rd February, and they were unable to get out of harbour until the 8th, and when they did get to sea the northerly wind that took them out of Toulon prevented them from fetching the entrance to the Bay of Hyères. If they could have engaged the British fleet on the 3rd, they would have had no more than 28 sail to encounter; in the intervening days before the 11th, on which the battle was fought, Mathews was joined by five more large ships².

Meantime a continual watch had been kept on Toulon from the sea by the 'Winchelsea,' who, using Giers Road as an anchorage, cruised continually off the port, and kept Mathews informed of the movements of the fleet. On the 15th January, he sent the 'Diamond' to join the 'Winchelsea,' and the 'Essex,' 50, to anchor in the Little Pass, to repeat signals and give a strengthening to the light vessels. But he was not dependent only on reports from his cruising ships. Continual advices from other sources kept him well informed as to the state of preparation of the enemy, and early on the morning of the 8th February, he received the news from one of his correspondents that the enemy were going to sail next day. He at once detached three more large frigates to Porquerolles Road, to watch and keep touch with the enemy. If the allies built on being able to surprise him, it will be seen from this how little chance they had of doing so; their best chance would lie in a W.S.W. wind that would take them to sea and up to Hyères, while Mathews would be unable to work out of his anchorage.

Between 3 and 4 P.M. on the 8th, the 'Winchelsea' sighted the enemy making sail. She quickly ran down towards the Little Pass flying a red flag, the prearranged signal to indicate that the allies were under way. The 'Essex' repeated the signal, firing guns, and the Admiral at once loosed his foretop-sail as a signal to unmoor, and sent two more heavy

¹ *Journal of M. de Lage de Cueilly*. M. de Lage's account of the offensive intentions of the fleet is quite borne out by their preliminary tactics on the 9th and 10th; on both of these days he tried steadily to work to windward.

² 'Warwick' and 'Dragon' joined on the afternoon of February 3rd, 'Boyne' and 'Chichester' on the 10th, 'Royal Oak' on the 11th; 'Burford,' too late for the battle, joined next day.

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The Fleets put to sea

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frigates—‘Oxford,’ 50, and ‘Guernsey,’ 50—and a barcolongo to reinforce the look-out squadron and keep him informed of the enemy’s movements.

In the course of that evening Lestock went on board the ‘Namur’ to ask Mathews whether he had any commands for him in the expected engagement. Mathews is reported to have replied that he had not, and to have observed that it was a cold night and he wished him good evening. This incident has been quoted, with others, as shewing the lack of civility shewn by the Admiral to his second in command. It was referred to at a later time in the House of Commons, where Mathews in explanation stated that what he said of its being very cold “arose out of pure regard for the Vice-Admiral’s state of health”; but this cannot be held to condone his refusal to discuss with Lestock the impending battle.

The whole of the combined fleet did not manage to get to sea. The van, composed of the French squadron, cleared the land, but the Spaniards who formed the rear were obliged to anchor for the night, and it was not until 10 o’clock on the 9th that they were again under sail. The British frigates as before informed Mathews, who weighed at the same time on a light north-westerly wind, and proceeded to form line of battle ahead with the starboard tacks on board, to work out of harbour. The wind however veered to S.W. during the forenoon, and fell very light, an easterly current ran through the anchorage, and the combined effect of these two causes was that the ships could not fetch the entrance on one board. The whole day was spent in beating over 30 large ships to windward in the restricted waters of Hyères Bay. The difficulty of the operation can be well understood. Twice the fleet had to tack in order to get sufficiently to windward to draw out of the entrance, but they were unable to get clear. Jumbled together, taking each other’s wind, they drifted and fouled each other without making progress. At 3 in the afternoon, the ‘Warwick’ fell on board the ‘Nassau’ in going about and ran ashore; and an hour later Mathews, seeing that it was hopeless to work out in such circumstances, signalled to the fleet to anchor.

All that night the frigates kept touch with the enemy and signalled their positions continually by firing guns. At daylight next morning Mathews again weighed, this time with a fresher and more favourable breeze from the W.N.W. By 6 the fleet was under sail and began to form in line ahead on the Vice-Admiral’s division, which, by the line of battle, was appointed to lead with the starboard tacks on board. But the flattering breeze proved disappointing. It lasted only a short while, and by the time the fleet, still in no kind of order, reached the

entrance, it had died away altogether and boats had to be hoisted out to tow the ships away from each other and from the shore, upon which many of them very nearly drifted. In going out the ships, making use of every puff, had all stood regardless of order for the entrance, and the confusion was increased by the calm being followed by a breeze from the eastward, accompanied by a heavy westerly swell.

Mid-day found the fleet nearly clear of the island, though in no semblance of order¹. The 'Boyne' and 'Chichester' appeared from the eastward at this time. Arriving at this moment the reinforcement had the appearance of being providential, for they might well have run into the enemy's squadron on the 8th or 9th and suffered capture.

The wind having now established itself in the eastward, the line of battle became reversed. According to the orders issued, Vice-Admiral Lestock was to lead on the starboard tacks, Rear-Admiral Rowley with the port tacks on board. The 'Revenge' followed by the 'Buckingham,' had therefore been among the leading ships while going out of harbour, and the remainder of Lestock's division had endeavoured to form in the van. Now it became necessary to invert the line, and Mathews, after standing to the southward in a rough line ahead under easy sail, far enough to give room and clear the land, brought to at 2 o'clock to allow the rear to pass ahead of the centre². The wind was light, the swell heavy, and the movement was naturally a protracted one.

Until about noon, when the first puffs of the easterly breeze were felt by the British fleet, the enemy held a westerly wind and stood before it towards the British, but when the easterly wind established itself, they went about and stood away, first to the southward and later to the south-westward. Mathews, fearful lest they should make away, did not wait to complete the new formation, but at 3 P.M.³ made the signal for the line of battle abreast and stood towards them, steering between S.W. and W.S.W. The Vice-Admiral, to prolong the line to the northward, steered more northerly, and the Rear-Admiral crowded sail to extend his division to the southward of the centre; but though the signal for line abreast was made and kept abroad all the afternoon, the fleet did not get into a correct formation before dark. The Admiral was ahead of the line throughout the remainder of the afternoon, nor was the line formed with any regularity. This is but natural; the

¹ Diagram 1 shows the noon positions of a certain number of them. It cannot be taken as absolutely correct, as the time kept on board the different ships might vary; but it indicates generally the scattered condition of the fleet at that hour.

² This is the occasion when Vernon's red flag signal used at Porto Bello would have been useful. See vol. I, p. 47.

³ The logs give different times for this signal, but it appears to have been made after lying to for about an hour.