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978-1-108-02260-6 - The Naval Chronology of Great Britain: Or, a Historical Account of Naval and Maritime Events from 1803 to 1816, Volume 1

James Ralfe

Excerpt

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THE
NAVAL CHRONOLOGY
OF
GREAT BRITAIN.

1803.

OCCURRENCES AT AND NEAR HOME.

IN a work professing to treat solely of naval events, which has been undertaken with a desire of perpetuating the remembrance of the services of a body of men, who have ever shewn themselves alive to the cause of their country, uninfluenced by the spirit of faction, or the private views and resentments of ministers, it will not be expected that I should enter minutely into the causes of that war which has called forth the energies, the valour, and the unconquerable spirit of British seamen: I shall, therefore, content myself by making such observations only as are consistent with the object of the work.

It was the opinion of one of the most distinguished characters* of the age in which he lived, one who raised the naval glory of the nation to a greater height than it had ever before attained, that "it is the duty of seamen to fight for their country, into what hands soever the government may fall." Actuated by a similar spirit, their noble descendants have paid no attention to those declarations which are put forth at the commencement of a war to serve the purposes of governments; but seeing their country in danger, and knowing she stands in need of their services, they have fled to their posts, and their gallant exertions have ever been attended with complete success. By a series of victories they have not only increased their own reputation, but secured the peace and tranquillity of the country.

At the opening of Parliament in November 1802, his Majesty, in his speech to both Houses, stated, that the internal prosperity of the country had realized the most sanguine hopes; that the manufactures, commerce, and revenue of the kingdom were flourishing beyond all example; that in his intercourse with foreign powers he had been actuated by a sincere disposition for the maintenance of peace; that his conduct would be invariably regulated by a due consideration of the actual situation of Europe, and by a watchful solicitude for the permanent welfare of the people. But on the 8th March his Majesty sent a message to both

* Admiral Blake.

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Houses of Parliament, informing them, that in consequence of great military preparations carried on by France in the ports of that country and of Holland, he found it necessary to adopt additional measures of precaution for the security of the kingdom: at the same time he stated to them, that the preparations to which he referred were avowedly directed to colonial service; but as discussions of great importance were carrying on with the French government, the result of which was uncertain, he was induced to make the communication, that they might adopt such measures as circumstances might require, for supporting the honour of the crown and the interests of the people.

The message of his Majesty was taken into consideration on the 10th March, when 10,000 men for the sea-service, including 2400 marines, were voted for eleven lunar months.

On the 25th March 1200*l.* per annum were voted to Sir James Saumarez for the term of his natural life, for the eminent services he had rendered to the country; and particularly for the valour, promptness, and intrepidity displayed by him in an engagement with a Spanish squadron on the 12th July, 1801, in the Straits of Gibraltar.

This distinguished officer, according to Mr. Playfair, is descended from a very ancient and respectable family; is of French extraction; and the founder of the present family is said to have followed the fortunes of William the Conqueror from Normandy, and to have finally settled in the island of Guernsey. Sir James was born on the 11th of March, 1757, and commenced his honourable career in the sea-service as a midshipman in 1770, on board the *Montreal*, commanded by the late Commodore Alms, and employed on the Mediterranean station; where he continued until 1775, having intermediately served in the *Winchelsea* and *Levant* frigates, under the several commands of the late Admirals Goodall and Thompson; and returning in the latter ship to England in 1775, or soon after it, he passed for lieutenant, and was appointed to the *Bristol* of 50 guns, bearing the broad pendant of Sir Peter Parker; in which ship he served, June 28, 1776, at the attack of Fort Sullivan off the entrance to Charleston in South Carolina, where the *Bristol* had 111 men killed and wounded, including her captain and several officers; and Mr. Saumarez had a narrow escape, as a large shot from the fort entering the port-hole, when he was pointing a lower decker, struck the gun, and killed and wounded seven men who were stationed at it. Mr. Saumarez' conduct in this desperate business was so much approved of by the commodore, that he received the promotion of acting-lieutenant on board the *Bristol*, which was confirmed by Lord Howe. Subsequently to this he was employed in America upon most important and active operations connected with the army, and had the command of the *Spitfire* galley, in which he was ordered to cruise on the American coast; where he rendered great services in clearing away the enemy's privateers, and driving on shore a ship very superior in force to that of his own. Soon after, the *Spitfire*, with other vessels, was burnt at Rhode Island, when Count

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d'Estaing arrived at that port; and Lieutenant Saumarez, having acted as aide-camp on shore to Commodore Brisbane, and commanded a party of seamen and marines at one of the advanced posts, returned to England in the *Leviathan*, in which he narrowly escaped shipwreck on the Scilly Isles.

Soon after his arrival he was appointed one of the lieutenants of the *Victory*, carrying the flag of Sir Charles Hardy; and continued in that ship under different flag-officers, until his removal, as second lieutenant, into the *Fortitude*, bearing the flag of Rear-Admiral Sir Hyde Parker. In this ship he participated in the battle with the Dutch fleet under the command of Admiral Zoutman, off the Dogger Bank, when the Dutch were compelled to retire into the Texel with the loss of one ship of the line, and the relinquishment of their object—the prevention of the sailing of a most valuable convoy for the Baltic. For his services in this action, Mr. Saumarez, after seeing the *Preston*, a disabled ship, into port, was made master and commander, and appointed to the *Tisiphone*, a new fire-ship then fitting out at Sheerness*.

In the month of December following, Captain Saumarez formed part of a detachment of twelve sail of the line under the brave Admiral Kempfenfelt, which captured twenty sail of a French convoy in the face of nineteen sail of the enemy's line under Count de Guichen. This success was chiefly owing to the zeal and activity of Captain Saumarez, who first discovered the enemy; and immediately standing towards them, succeeded in taking several of the convoy, one of which, a ship of 30 guns, had 400 troops on board. He was then detached by the admiral with the intelligence to Sir Samuel Hood, commander in chief in the West Indies, whom it was necessary to apprise of the sailing of this armament;

* On the arrival of the fleet at the Nore, the king honoured it with a visit, and desired the commanding officers to be presented to him. When Mr. Saumarez, then acting-captain on board the *Preston*, was introduced, the king immediately asked the admiral, "Is he a relation of the Saumarez who were round the world with Lord Anson?"—"Yes, please your Majesty," the admiral replied, "he is their nephew, and as brave and as good an officer as either of his uncles."

Captains Philip and Thomas Saumarez, the officers alluded to, were in the expedition to the South Seas under Lord Anson. The former was made captain of the captured galleon, and afterwards commanded the *Nottingham* of 60 guns; subsequent to which he captured the *Mars* of 64 guns in a single action. Indeed he distinguished himself in every service in which he was employed, and was reported one of the best officers in the British navy. He at length gloriously fell in the memorable engagement of Lord Hawke.

Captain Thomas Saumarez was made commander of the *Antelope* of 50 guns, and stationed at Bristol, when information was conveyed to him that a French 64-gun ship was in the Bristol Channel. He immediately slipped his cable, and going in quest of her, met and captured her on the following morning. She proved to be *Le Belliqueux* of 64 guns, being one of the ships that had made her escape from Quebec, and got into the Bristol Channel by mistake.

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but he very narrowly escaped capture by two French frigates on his passage; from which danger he rescued himself in the most masterly manner, by making a number of night-signals and burning false fires, and thus inducing the enemy to suppose that he was the advanced ship of an adverse squadron.

On delivering his despatches to Sir Samuel Hood, he received, though then only twenty-four years of age, the command of the *Russell* of 74 guns; in which ship he took a distinguished share in the action of the 12th April, 1782, being at one time, during the heat of the engagement, separated from the main body of the English fleet, and exposed to the fire of many adversaries. Subsequently to this action, when the prizes were ordered to England, the *Russell* returned as one of the escorts; and soon after the war terminating, Captain Saumarez was enabled to enjoy an interval of repose. On the appearance of hostilities in 1787, he was appointed by Lord Howe to the *Ambuscade* frigate: and on the armament against Spain in 1790, he was ordered to commission the *Raisonné* of 64 guns; but the storm blowing over, he remained inactive until the commencement of the revolutionary war in 1793, when he hoisted his pendant on board the *Crescent* frigate of 36 guns, one half of his crew consisting of volunteers from his native island. In this ship he captured *La Réunion* French frigate of 36 guns and 320 men, off Cape Barfleur lighthouse, after a severe action, in which *La Réunion* had 120 men killed and wounded; and, what is a most remarkable circumstance, the *Crescent* had not a single man hurt. Captain Saumarez received on this occasion the honour of knighthood, and was presented with an elegant piece of plate by the merchants of London. Sir James was afterwards attached to the squadron under Admiral M'Bride, which formed a part of Earl Moira's expedition in favour of the royalists. On the 8th June, 1794, being ordered by the admiral to proceed from Plymouth to Jersey, and having under his command the *Druid* and *Eurydice* frigates, he fell in and maintained an action with a squadron of the enemy's ships more than double his force, consisting of two 74's cut down, two frigates, and a corvette. Here British seamanship was again called forth, and after some masterly manœuvres, the three English frigates escaped; the *Crescent* passing through an intricate passage off Guernsey, never before attempted by king's ships.

In the month of February following, Sir James was appointed to the *Orion* of 74 guns, one of the ships in the Channel fleet under Lord Bridport, and gave proof of his usual intrepidity in the action off L'Orient on the following 23d June, the *Orion* being one of the first ships that brought the enemy to action, when the French lost *Le Tigre*, *Formidable*, and *Alexandre*, of 74 guns each. He was then detached with two frigates to cruise off Rochfort; and, after some other services, he partook in the celebrated engagement with the Spanish fleet off Cape St. Vincent, February 14, 1797: and here Sir James added new laurels to those he had already won, by compelling the *Salvador del Mundo* of 112 guns to strike, when she was immediately taken possession of by an officer from the *Orion*.

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Towards the close of the action, the *Santissima Trinidad*, having been warmly engaged by the advanced ships, was finally attacked by the *Orion*, and compelled to haul down her colours; but the fleet being then on a different tack, and the body of the Spanish fleet coming down to rescue her, Sir James was very reluctantly obliged to abandon her. On the return of the fleet to Lisbon, for the purpose of repairing the damages, Sir James was ordered to cruise off Cape St. Vincent under the orders of Commodore Nelson, who was soon after joined by the whole fleet, when they proceeded to the blockade of Cadiz.

On the 30th April, 1798, Sir James accompanied the squadron under the command of Sir H. Nelson to the Mediterranean, and shared in the honours acquired off the Mouth of the Nile. The *Orion* was the third ship that anchored in-shore of the enemy's line, bringing up between *Le Peuple Souverain* and *Serieuse* frigate, the latter of which she sunk by a single broadside. After an action which added much lustre to the British navy, and reflected the highest credit upon every person engaged, Sir James was ordered to proceed to Gibraltar with the prizes, and the other ships that had suffered most in the engagement, as soon as they were in a condition to bear the sea. On their reaching Gibraltar he was ordered to Lisbon, and finally to Plymouth; when upon his arrival a promotion of admirals taking place, his Majesty was pleased to confer upon him one of the colonelcies of marines; and he was soon after appointed to the command of the *Cæsar* of 84 guns, continuing in the Channel fleet until the month of June in the same year: on the 13th of which month he was created a baronet, and obtained permission at the same time to wear the supporters belonging to the arms of his family, which have been registered in the Heralds' Office ever since the reign of King Charles II.

Previous to these honourable appointments, Sir James had resumed his station off the Black Rocks, where he continued nearly four months in defiance of dangers of every description. On his return from this-severe duty, he was ordered, having the command of a squadron, to proceed off Cadiz, for the purpose of blockading that port; and soon afterwards he received information that a French squadron, consisting of three sail of the line and a frigate, after making repeated attempts to push through the Straits, had anchored off Algeziras. The admiral immediately went in quest of it, and on the 6th July, 1801, he had the pleasure to see his enemy at the place expected.

To prove the danger of any attack upon a force so situated, it is necessary to state, that the bay of Algeziras is defended by various batteries of heavy guns placed upon an island about a quarter of a mile from the shore, and also by works to the north and south of the town; the fire from which, crossing before the harbour, intersected in front the situation chosen for the French ships, and took in flank any assailants who might approach them. The anchorage also is extremely dangerous, and the whole harbour and island is surrounded by reefs of sunken rocks. But no danger could appal our intrepid seamen. Hauling directly

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up for the French ships, the attack commenced; but after an action of five hours, Sir James was compelled to retreat with his squadron, after making every attempt that bravery, united with seamanship, could effect to obtain the object in view, and losing the Hannibal, which had unfortunately grounded. On this occasion the enemy lost 1000 men, including two of their captains, besides 600 men who fell at the batteries, and had eight gun-boats sunk, exclusive of other armed vessels, in the road. The exertions, however, that followed this action, in order to enable the English squadron to cope with the French fleet, then reinforced by six sail of the line from Cadiz, are unparalleled. From the evening of the 6th July to the 12th of the same month, a squadron of five disabled ships (for such was Sir James's force) was in a condition to follow, and determined to fight, the enemy's whole fleet, consisting of two ships of 112 guns each, one of 94, three of 84, four of 74, four frigates, and a considerable number of gun-boats. But nothing is impossible to British seamen. On the 12th of the same month, in the evening, the two squadrons met, and success, as usual, crowned the British flag, the enemy being completely discomfited; one French 74-gun ship being captured, and two Spanish ships of 112 guns each taking fire, blew up.

Thus, during an eventful period of only seven days, two battles were fought with an inferiority of force, and under peculiar disadvantages; which circumstances speak more strongly for themselves than any words can do. So much, however, may be affirmed, that none but British seamen, led by British officers, are capable of accomplishing similar exploits. For this service, which rendered the enemy's force at Cadiz totally useless, his Majesty was most graciously pleased to create him a knight of the order of the Bath, and he received the unanimous thanks of both Houses of Parliament.

The vote of thanks was moved in the House of Lords by Earl St. Vincent, and seconded by Lord Nelson, who bore ample testimony to the exalted character of Sir James, and concluded with these words: "A greater action was never fought than that of Sir James Saumarez. The gallant admiral had, before that action, undertaken an enterprise that none but the most gallant officer and the bravest seamen could have attempted. He had failed through an accident—by the falling of the wind; for I venture to say, if that had not failed him, Sir James would have captured the French fleet. The promptness with which Sir James refitted, the spirit with which he attacked a superior force after his recent disaster, and the masterly conduct of the action, I do not think were ever surpassed."

The following is a copy of the letter addressed by Sir James to the Speaker of the House of Commons:

On board the CÆSAR, Gibraltar Bay, Jan. 6, 1802.

SIR,

I have received the letter which you did me the honour to address to me, transmitting the vote of thanks of the House of Commons to me, and the officers

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and seamen of his Majesty's fleet under my command, for the successful attack made upon the combined fleets of France and Spain, in the Straits of Gibraltar, on the 12th and 13th July last. It was my peculiar fortune to have received similar thanks no less than four times, for several actions in which I was at different times engaged since I became commander of a line-of-battle ship. Those, however, which I have now received, are peculiarly gratifying to my feelings, as addressed to me in the higher station of commander of a squadron. I want words to convey in adequate terms the sentiments of gratitude with which I am impressed by this high mark of approbation. I shall take the earliest opportunity to signify the same to the captains, &c. (Signed,) JAMES SAUMAREZ.

The freedom of the city of London was also presented to him, with an elegant sword; and the people of England, by the above-mentioned vote of parliament, rewarded him for a long life of services spent in gloriously defending his king and country.

The discussions alluded to in his Majesty's message having terminated in the recall of the British ambassador at Paris, war was declared against the government of France on the 18th May: at the same time a proclamation was issued, to encourage seamen and landmen to enter themselves on board his Majesty's ships of war; and another, recalling those serving on board the ships or vessels belonging to the French or Batavian republics.

Thus after a short interval of eighteen months, the nation was again plunged into an apparently interminable war. When the government of a country has determined on commencing hostilities, it is seldom at a loss for an excuse: and the declaration issued by the British government on this occasion, in justification of the measures adopted by them, though plausible was in reality very insufficient, and void of that reason which ought alone to regulate the councils of a wise monarch, and which could alone justify the act of involving two nations in all the calamities of war—necessity. But I shall not pursue this subject further than by stating the opinion of a late eminent statesman: "The question to be considered is, whether the conduct of France towards this country had been unjustifiable since the conclusion of the peace of Amiens: as to any aggression that might have been committed against other nations, I deny that it is a just cause of war to England. We had no guarantee to bind us to maintain the independence of Switzerland. The aggrandisement of a rival country to a certain extent might furnish a ground of quarrel for self-defence, and induce a country such as this to enter into a war with another circumstanced as France might be supposed to be: *but after the numerous partitions and spoliations witnessed and sanctioned in modern times, I will not admit that any thing of the kind that happened since the peace, could justify the renewal of hostilities.*"

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SUPPLIES granted by Parliament, for the use of the Navy, for the year 1803.

December 2, 1802.

That 50,000 men be employed for the sea-service for the year 1803, including 12,000 marines.

	£.	s.	d.
For wages to ditto	1,202,500	0	0
For victuals for ditto	1,235,000	0	0
For wear and tear of ships in which they are to serve	1,950,000	0	0
For ordnance sea-service on board such ships	162,500	0	0

December 14.

For the ordinary of the navy, including half-pay to sea and marine officers	1,228,238	13	1
For the extraordinary establishment of ditto	901,140	0	0
For the hire of transports	590,000	0	0
For defraying the charge of prisoners of war in health	22,000	0	0
Ditto of sick prisoners of war	5,000	0	0

March 14, 1803.

That an additional number of 10,000 men be employed for the sea-service for eleven lunar months, commencing 26th February, 1803, including 2400 marines.

For wages for ditto	203,500	0	0
For victuals for ditto	209,000	0	0
For wear and tear of ships in which they are to serve	330,000	0	0
For ordnance sea-service on board such ships	27,500	0	0

July 2.

That an additional number of 40,000 men be employed for the sea-service for seven lunar months, commencing 12th June, 1803, including 8000 royal marines.

For wages for ditto	518,000	0	0
For victuals for ditto	532,000	0	0
For wear and-tear of ships in which they are to serve	840,000	0	0
For ordnance sea-service on board such ships	70,000	0	0
For the further hire of transports for the year 1803	100,000	0	0
For the further charge of prisoners of war in health	65,000	0	0
Ditto of sick prisoners of war	20,000	0	0

 10,211,378 13 1

The only operation of any consequence, at all connected with the navy, that occurred during this year on the seas near home, was the bombardment of the ports of Granville and Dieppe, by the squadrons under the command of Sir J. Saumarez and Captain Owen, but without any material effect. There was, however, not the slightest blame to be attributed to any person engaged; on the contrary, it

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evinced the spirit of the officers and men of the British squadrons, and drew forth applause and approbation on the respective commanders.

On the 18th May, whilst cruising off Ushant in the Doris frigate, Captain R. H. Pearson fell in with the French lugger *L'Affronteur*, mounting 14 long nines, and manned with 92 men. Upon the lugger making sail to escape, Captain Pearson fired a shot wide of her, with the hope that she would then have shortened sail, as he was gaining fast upon her: as this was without effect, he fired a second, which she returned, and kept up a running fight till the instant Captain Pearson laid her along-side; nor did she then give up a contest so fraught with temerity, until her first captain and eight men were killed and fourteen wounded. The Doris had only one man wounded.

On the 28th May, Captain Mansfield of the *Minotaur*, in company with the *Thunderer*, having chased from the fleet, and during the chase was joined by the *Albion*, captured the French frigate *La Française*, Captain Jurien, pierced for twenty-eight 12-pounders on her main-deck, and sixteen 9-pounders on the quarter-deck and fore-castle, and had on board 180 men; from Port-au-Prince thirty-five days.

On the 28th May, Captain S. Sutton of the *Victory*, captured the French frigate *L'Ambuscade* (late his Majesty's ship) of 32 guns, and manned, with 180 men.

On the 29th May, Captain J. Wallis of the *Narad*, captured the French corvette *L'Impatient*, of 20 guns and 80 men; from Senegal, bound to Rochefort.

LOIRE, off L'Isle de Bas, June 28.

SIR,

I have the pleasure of informing you, that last night three of the boats of his Majesty's ship *Loire*, commanded by Lieutenants Temple and Bowen, in a most gallant manner boarded, and after a very severe conflict of near ten minutes on her deck, carried the national brig *Venteux*, bearing four long 18-pounders and six 36-pound brass carronades, commanded by M. Montfort, lieutenant de vaisseau, lying close under the batteries of the *Isle de Bas*.

When it is considered that the *Venteux*, perfectly prepared, manned with 82 men, all of whom were upon deck, and covered by very heavy batteries, was opposed to the crews of two of our boats (as the third, from rowing heavy, did not get up till the brig was completely gained possession of), I feel confident that you will view it in the light that I do, as one of those brilliant exploits which add lustre to the British arms; of which, though so many instances occurred during the late war, no one has before been happy enough to have one thrown in his way during the present. The success of Mr. Temple's attempt speaks sufficiently for his conduct, and that of every one under his command, to render it superfluous for me to enter into any eulogium on the present occasion. Mr. Bridges has served

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his time, and passed for lieutenant, nearly a year, of whose conduct Mr. Temple speaks in the highest terms, together with that of every officer and man under his command. I am very sorry to add, that the loss on our side has been rather severe: six wounded, two dangerously. The *Venteux* had her second captain and two seamen killed; the captain, with four officers (all she had), and eight seamen wounded. She was stationed at the Isle de Bas to guard the coast, and regulate the convoy of stores, &c. bound to Brest; is a vessel of large dimensions, being 74 feet long, and 24 feet wide, and perfectly in a condition to be immediately employed.

To Sir J. COLBOYS, K. B. &c. (Signed,) F. MAITLAND.

On the 17th August, by an order of the Privy Council, general reprisals were granted against the ships of the Ligurian and Italian republics.

Copy of a Letter from Captain OWEN of the Immortalité, dated Sept. 14.

In obedience to the orders of Rear-Admiral Montagu, I, at eight o'clock this morning, in company with the *Perseus* and explosion-bombs, commenced an attack on the batteries which protect the town of Dieppe, and vessels building there (in number seventeen)

The firing was continued on both sides till past eleven, when the lee-tide making strong, and the town having taken fire badly in one place, and slightly in two others, I caused the bombs to weigh, and proceeded with them off St. Valery en Caux, where they are constructing six vessels; and at three in the afternoon opened our fire on that place for an hour. The enemy was for the most part driven from their batteries, the inhabitants flying to the country, and judging from the direction in which many of the shells burst, they must have suffered much.

On a service of this nature we cannot expect to escape unhurt: I have, however, the pleasure in reporting, that, although the enemy's fire, especially from Dieppe (which is very strong in batteries), was heavy and well directed, and many of their shot took effect, our loss has been but small. The *Perseus* has one man missing, and the serjeant of artillery is wounded. The boatswain of this ship and three seamen were bruised by splinters, but did not leave their quarters: the other damage, but that not material, is confined chiefly to the rigging.

The manner of executing my instructions, and the judgment shewn in placing and managing the bomb-vessels, entitle Captains Methuist and Paul to my best and warmest thanks; their conduct has been every thing I could wish: and they speak highly of the officers and detachments of the royal artillery embarked with them, as well as of the officers and men of their respective crews. My opinion of the first lieutenant of this ship, C. F. Payne, is already known to your lordship; and his conduct this day, as well as that of the other lieutenants, officers, and men, without exception, has fully justified the reports I have made to your lordship concerning them on former occasions.

To the Right Hon. Lord KEITH. (Signed,) E. W. C. R. OWEN.