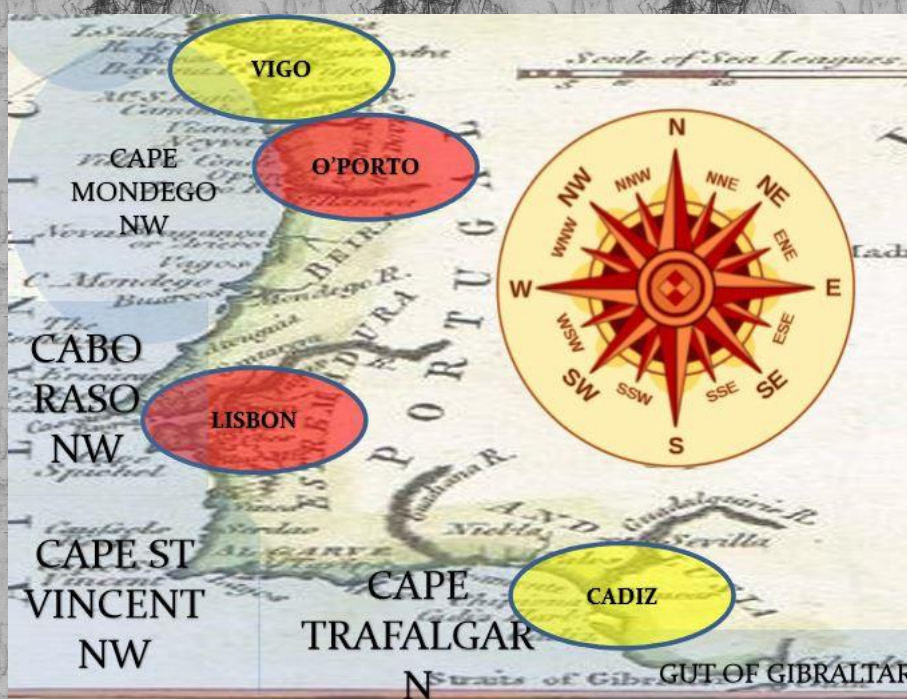


The Battle of Cape Trafalgar 1744 – after action report



PROVENANCE OF THE GAME

I had become fascinated by the War of Austrian Succession, lesser known than other C18 wars such as the AWI, SYW, and Spanish Succession. After finding a good source on the land war, I eventually stumbled across Richard Harding's excellent book on the naval war – THE EMERGENCE OF BRITAIN'S GLOBAL NAVAL SUPREMACY; THE WAR OF 1739-48.

The problems facing the Admiralties of both sides were so complex, with a multitude of strategic factors to consider, and fog of war obviously playing such a large part in naval warfare, that within the first few pages I had started to think this would be a great subject for Krieg spiel treatment. I had previously attempted, with mixed results, only one other age of sail KS, based on the Indian Ocean campaign of 1810 aimed at capturing the French bases of Reunion and Mauritius.

Consequently, my reading time over the previous year had been almost entirely focused on age of sail navies and the campaigns of 1739 – 48 in particular. When then in Charing Cross Road I came across the fabulous volume by Brian Tunstall, NAVAL WARFARE IN THE AGE OF SAIL, with its very detailed account of the chaotic development of tactics and signalling in C18 navies, I knew game was on!

THE CAMPAIGN

In the runup to the expected French declaration of war in Spring 1744, the Admiralties of the Pragmatic Allies and their Bourbon opponents were busily engaged in developing their naval strategies for the upcoming year.

Admiral Don Cristobal Fernando de Merluza (Steve H) decided to take on the relatively weak British squadrons in the Mediterranean with the aim of dominating that sea, and thus opening the way to land Spanish troops to contest Italy with the Austrians. His French ally, Jean-Jacques Marlin, Viscomte de

Chateaurenault (Graham) decided to take himself, the French Biscay squadrons, and a West India company convoy assembling in the Aix roads, across to Martinique where he would cooperate with the Spanish against British Jamaica.

The British Sea Lords Edward Codrington (Alan) and 'Foul Weather Jack' Norris (David C) decided, in contrast, that it be much too early in the year and too chilly to take yet to the water, and contented themselves with sailing desks from their plush Admiralty offices in Whitehall. They did however spot the weakness of the British position in the Mediterranean, which unbeknownst to them had already resulted in a near defeat outside Toulon in February.

Their Whitehall lordships, having failed to persuade their Dutch allies to sail down in support, receiving a guttural and rude-sounding response, instead despatched Admirals Nicholas Haddock (though ill with gout) and the relatively young untried Tobias Hake, to Gibraltar in support of Thomas Mathews, Richard Lestock, and William Rowley, the Admirals presently commanding there and responsible for the Toulon debacle.

The campaigning season opened badly for the French, with the Dutch fleet mounting guard in the Channel, as agreed with Whitehall, and effectively confining the French to their Channel ports. Marlin departed with his convoy and a light squadron from Rochefort, but only in Santa Cruz de Tenerife was he joined by the heavy squadron from Brest, whose admiral had been thrown by a set of confused and barely legible orders, which resulted in him remaining in port for some weeks while sending couriers galloping off to Rochefort for clarification.

In the meantime, Don Merluza had been collecting together the various Spanish Mediterranean squadrons, with the object first of blockading and reducing Gibraltar with its small resident British squadron. He sent one inshore squadron to the harbour mouth, to prevent supplies and reinforcements reaching the Rock and give early warning of an exit attempt. With his remaining 12 ships of the line, he cruised the west end of the Straits, using Cadiz as a base, and awaited the anticipated British relief force somewhere off Cape Trafalgar.

THE ENCOUNTER

Haddock and Hake (played of necessity by David and Alan though their senior admiral characters were still on dry land) duly arrived, and fortuitously also with 12 liners, of approximately the same strength as Merluza's fleet. Both Admirals had seen fit to divide their fleets into two divisions, a heavy and a light, with Haddock and Merluza commanding their respective heavy divisions in the van, each consisting of six first- and second- raters.

Hake, and Rear Admiral Barracuda, played by Graham, brought up the respective rears with their light divisions, each of six third- and fourth rates. A light wind emanated from the SW, with the British standing towards the SE on the starboard tack, and the Spaniards sailing slowly westwards closehauled on the larboard tack; thus the British started with the weather gauge. The battle took place far enough west of the Straits for the otherwise strong tides not to be a significant factor.

THE BATTLE

Haddock and Merluza, with the heavy divisions of each fleet in line ahead, continued on their respective opposite tacks, but with Merluza adjusting course to the NW so as to pass the British heavies to leeward and within broadside range. Since both divisions continued on after passing each other, however, damage from this first encounter was limited. The British heavies, with a following wind, sailed further on than the Spaniards. Merluza thus gained the weather gauge.

Meanwhile, both light divisions, which had been following the heavies in line ahead, and were sailing faster than the heavies, had altered course so as to peel off away from the enemy heavies, and behind and protected by their own heavies. The Spanish light division under Barracuda continued tacking slowly across the wind in pursuit of its heavies. However, the British lights, with a following wind, seized the opportunity to wear onto a course parallel to Barracuda's, and come up with the Spaniards broadside to broadside.

An extended exchange of broadsides then occurred between the light divisions, with the British getting the worst of it. This was due purely to bad die rolls although, lying across the wind, had it picked up in strength they would have heaved over to leeward forcing them to close their lower ports against flooding, and thus be at a heavy disadvantage.

Hake (Alan) then sensibly gave the signal for a general boarding action, before the Spanish gunnery could tell too badly. Although weather conditions were favourable to boarding, and crew numbers had started equal, the Brits had suffered more casualties from the gunnery. The main effect of the boarding actions was therefore to entangle masts and rigging in a number of cases, and prevent the British ships escaping when they were eventually bombarded into submission.

While the two light divisions were thus slugging it out, both heavy divisions wore round to rejoin the action. The Spaniards however now had the wind, which gave them the initiative since they could reach any desired position much sooner than could the enemy. Merluza also speeded matters considerably by signalling to wear simultaneously, rather than in succession. He then signalled "engage the nearest unengaged enemy", and later "general chase" which permitted the individual captains to use their own initiative to engage from a favourable angle.

Merluza's first and second raters were thus able to sail large around to the south of the engaged light divisions, and choose their targets amongst the British heavies, whose attempt at tacking round directly into the wind, to face the oncoming enemy ships, succeeded only in breaking up their formation. They were able to rake one oncoming Spaniard, but a number of them were in turn raked by Merluza's ships, using the following wind to position themselves better. For the same reason, the Spaniards were able to double on and trap two large British ships, who found themselves bombarded from both sides.

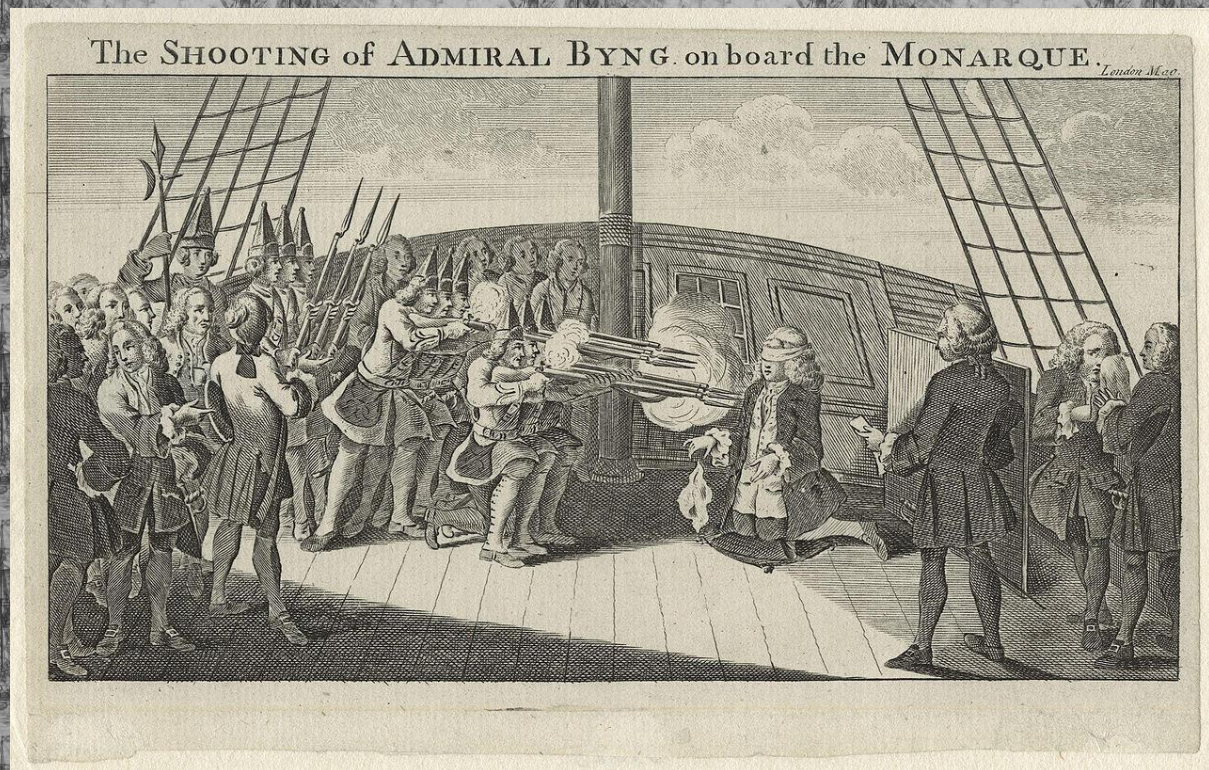
The end was not long in coming. Rear Admiral Hake's flagship was sunk and he suddenly found himself bobbing on the Atlantic in a small boat, with all save one of his other ships then striking their colours in surrender. In Haddock's division, the 'Norfolk' second rater was also sunk, and the two trapped heavies surrendered. Haddock himself managed to slink off towards his base at Lisbon with his remaining, badly damaged, ships, losing another in the pursuit. The Spaniards towed their prizes with a fair wind into nearby Cadiz, arriving the same evening to great acclamation from the populace.

THE AFTERMATH

The battle changed the naval balance completely and proved decisive to the war. The wavering Dutch sued for peace with France and withdrew their fleet from the Channel. In fear of a Jacobite-inspired invasion (and as later, in the 1790's), the British had to evacuate the Mediterranean completely in response, causing Savoy also to withdraw from the alliance, Genoa to declare for the Bourbons, and Gibraltar to fall again to Spain. Britain was also unable to reinforce Jamaica, leaving Marlin a free hand when he eventually arrived there.

Hake, comfortably imprisoned in the citadel of Cadiz, was forced to watch Don Merluza being feted through the streets. Norris, Codrington and Haddock, though escaping imprisonment, were all placed on the retired list, and subjected to years of Admiralty enquiries and pillorying in broadsheets. Suspected of incompetence, the Old Whig government fell to be replaced by an administration under Mr Pitt.

Haddock's lenient treatment led to the death sentence being introduced into law for Admirals "failing to do their utmost". When Mahon later fell to the French in 1757, this led to Byng, the Admiral in charge, being shot to death by a squad of Marines on the quarterdeck of the Monarque at Spithead ("pour encourager les autres" as Voltaire wrote).



LESSONS LEARNT BY THE UMPIRES

Personally I was pleased with how the simplified tactical system worked out, giving a battle lasting perhaps only half an hour. The strategic system however needed a lot of scaling back during the first few turns, in order to keep the game flowing. For example, wind direction checks on strategic movement were abandoned almost immediately, instead giving an movement allowance of one area on the ocean chart, or three areas on the sea charts, per week (though we did pay more attention to wind direction when enemy fleets approached each other).

The postulated tracking of courier ships was also abandoned in short order, with many other features I had originally envisaged.

Immediately following the game, I noted further possible improvements which I record here as much for my own reference as for others:-

If a fleet is divided into two or more divisions, follow the historical precedent of equal strength divisions, rather than permit a heavy and a light division.

In the initial dispositions chart, before the game commences, assign a named junior admiral to each squadron on the board, for ease of order writing and delivery.

Make it clear that scrappy and illegible orders will not be queried, they are likely to be set aside for query by the mystified HQ staff, and then forgotten completely in the heat of the action. It is often wise for orders to be written in block capitals, for this reason, and they should clearly state the ID of both sender and recipient, the assumed location of the latter, the date and time of sending, and the route to be taken by the courier, if there are options.

Perhaps mark Quiberon and Ushant on the map; also ownership of the various Atlantic islands

Start both a French and a Spanish division in San Sebastian

Before any report of a tactical sighting of the enemy, enquire of the Admiral in what formation and order his fleet is sailing, and how much sail it has on.

On the tactical display, could introduce further gradations in damage extent by using standard size counters, each counter present reducing the number to hit or less by one (obviously down to zero, when the ship sinks). Alternatively could inscribe squares on the underside of the ship counters, and fill them in pencil.

Also on the tactical display, its important to divide the action into segments or rounds, giving the players an opportunity to raise new signals at the beginning of each. And don't forget to use the random tactical event cards to cater for unexpected shifts of wind (which occurred during several historical battles) and other occurrences.

Further, on the tactical display, perhaps keep distances sailed per round a little shorter, to give the players more time to react to each others' movements.

Have some rules prepared for boarding actions!

MAPS, CHARTS, BRIEFINGS, SHIP CHITS & PLAY AIDS

..... Can be found [HERE](#)



Rufus King of Rufus Enterprises, December 2018