

CHAPTER FOUR

Types of Naval Leadership in the Eighteenth Century

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Ever since his death during his greatest victory in 1805, Horatio Nelson has been the international benchmark for naval leadership. Even Napoleon on St Helena lamented that if Suffren had lived on ‘I would have made him our Nelson and our affairs would have taken a different turn. Instead I spent all my time looking for such a sailor and never found one.’⁸⁷

Could a Nelson have flourished in a Napoleonic system that subordinated maritime affairs to the will of a soldier with little understanding of such matters, and whose admirals lacked the support of a powerful Admiralty containing expert professional naval advisers, provided with sufficient funds to secure the best materials for building and maintaining a navy, and with experienced officers and trained seamen inspired by a tradition of naval success? The fleets of the great European naval powers were operating to different systems and with different requirements, best displayed in the composition of their fleets. The British designed sturdy, bluff-bowed warships capable of both keeping to the seas for long periods and fighting. For the latter they included in their fleets far more three-decked warships whose size and guns could dominate a battle. The French on the other hand built a mission-orientated navy to carry or

How to cite this book chapter:

Duffy, M. 2017. Types of Naval Leadership in the Eighteenth Century. In: Harding, R and Guimerá, A (eds.). *Naval Leadership in the Atlantic World*. Pp. 49–57. London: University of Westminster Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16997/book2.e>. License: CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0

escort troops and supplies to French possessions overseas, and hence put more emphasis on sharp-lined, lighter-framed, speedy ships to reach their destination rapidly, but at the expense of their durability in storms and battles; in the mid-eighteenth century they excluded three-deckers since their emphasis was on the mission rather than winning battles. The Spanish meanwhile had large, solidly built ships, including three-deckers, to defend their imperial trade, which financed Spanish power. The two Bourbon powers built for defence rather than attack. The first orders to the main French fleet to seek out and destroy the main British fleet were given to d'Orvilliers in 1779, when he was to be joined by the Spanish fleet as the preliminary to the invasion of Britain. Neither the French nor Spanish fleets were powerful enough in themselves to defeat the British, and the usual French invasion plan was for a surprise attack before the British were prepared, or to create a diversion which would lure the British fleet out of area and leave the way clear for the intended invasion force – as was Napoleon's plan in 1804–5.⁸⁸

The Nelsonian model was not universally applicable. Naval leadership has to be judged in relation to circumstances – on the ability of an admiral to make the best possible use of the resources he had available so as to accomplish the stated ends of national policy – and both the means and the ends differed from country to country.

There were also differing views on how to prepare officers for naval leadership. The British and the Dutch had gone the way of the apprenticeship system. Aspirants joined ships as captain's servant (volunteer first class from the 1790s) at the ages of 12–16 to learn their trade from a captain at sea. The French from 1682, followed by Spain and the Baltic powers, sent their aspirants to naval academies between the ages of 16 and 20 where as *gardes de marine* they receive a heavily theoretical education in mathematics, hydrography, naval architecture, and English and Spanish, and time was also allotted to fencing and dancing; they were educated as gentlemen as the main attribute of an officer's authority, and their sea time was short.⁸⁹ The British also created a naval academy at Portsmouth in 1733, but its 40 places were seldom full, as most preferred the practical opportunities to learn from the example and under the eye of a serving officer who might patronise their advancement, and their path to lieutenant specified six years' sea time including two as a midshipman.⁹⁰ The main need of all navies was for lieutenants – 67% of commissioned sea officers in the British navy in 1790, 61% of the French (1789) – for which practical sea experience equipped them better than scientific theory. The British apprenticeship system brought them to command more quickly and enabled those who rose through the ranks to do so at a considerably lower age than their continental counterparts, with all the consequent advantages of experience and the boldness and robustness of younger men (see Figs 1 and 2).

Successful British admirals such as Jervis and Collingwood advised would-be officers to read history, and there was an abundance of books on naval history and biography to provide inspiration and give them a common doctrine. We

	Hawke	Boscawen	de la Clue	Conflans
Born	1705	1726	1696	1690
Joined	15	12	18	16
Lieutenant	24	20	34	37
Captain	28	30	45	43
Rear Adm	42	35	59	59
Vice-Adm	45	43	67	62
Admiral	52	46		68 (Marshal)
Died	1781	1761	1764	1777

Fig. 1: Age at advancement of leading admirals of the Seven Years' War.

	Rodney	Howe	De Guichen	De Grasse
Born	1717	1726	1712	1722
Joined	15	14	18	19
Lieutenant	22	19	34	32
Captain	25	20	44	40
Rear Adm	42	44	64	56
Vice-Adm	45	50	67	59
Admiral	61	66	n/a	n/a
Died	1792	1799	1790	1788

Fig. 2: Age at advancement of leading admirals of the American War.

know that mid-century admirals Sir Peter Warren and Sir Edward Hawke read works such as Josiah Burchett's *A Complete History of the Most Remarkable Transactions at Sea* (1720) and Thomas Lediard's *The Naval History of England* (1735), and, as John Hill explained in the preface of his *Naval History of Britain from the Earliest Periods* (1756), 'The use of history is, by recording actions of the dead, to set examples before the living... Our former successful enterprises will afford sufficient instances of what future commanders should pursue; and the fate of our enemies will teach them what they should avoid.'⁹¹ James Ralfe's *Naval Biography of Great Britain* (1828) avowed the same didactic purpose, following on from a series of naval biographies – above all John Campbell's *Lives of the Admirals and Other Eminent British Seamen*, whose four volumes of 1740–2 were expanded by continuators to eight volumes by 1817. Ralfe also repeated the national view of the importance of the navy, constantly expressed in all of these books and in the Navy Acts of Parliament of 1660 and 1749, that 'upon the navy has depended the prosperity and independence of the Country; and upon the navy this kingdom must always chiefly rely for the preservation

of its safety and glory.⁹² No other officer corps had such a clearly expressed view of its purpose nor so much literature showing how it had been achieved by its predecessors.

While these works substituted for leadership manuals for officers, the nearest job description of the qualities demanded of an admiral is in William Falconer's 1769 *Universal Dictionary of the Marine*. After pointing out that a fleet is unavoidably exposed to a variety of perplexing situations in a precarious element, and that a train of dangerous incidents necessarily arises from a sudden change of climate, infection or unwholesome provisions which threaten as much to destroy the health, order and discipline of his crews as tempestuous weather or dangerous navigation threaten the condition of his ships, he advised that an admiral:

‘...ought to have sufficient experience to anticipate all the probable events that may happen to his fleet during an expedition or cruise, and by consequence provide against them. His skill should be able to counter-act the various disasters which a fleet may suffer from different causes. His vigilance and presence of mind are necessary to seize every available opportunity that his situation may offer to prosecute his principal design; to extricate himself from any difficulty or distress, to check unfortunate events at the beginning, and retard the progress of any great calamity. He should be endued with resolution and fortitude to animate his officers by force of his example, and promote a sense of emulation in those who are under his command, as well as to improve any advantage, as to frustrate or defeat the efforts of ill-fortune.’⁹³

Nelson would have agreed. When once asked what he thought was the key to his success, he replied: ‘being fifteen minutes beforehand’, and Martin van Creveld puts it succinctly in *Command in War* (1985) that ‘90% (at least) of good command consists of things that never happen.’⁹⁴

Where could ill-fortune come from? Where could things go wrong beyond an admiral's control? Some things are clear: the number and quality of the ships and men provided; the quantity and quality of his naval stores and provisions and the facility of resupply; the availability of adequate repair facilities; the amount and accuracy of available intelligence; the unity and coherence of the naval administration; the unity of the officer corps within the fleet – there were notable feuds within the British navy (Mathews/Lestock in 1743–7, Keppel/Palliser 1779–80, Jervis/Alexander Hood 1779–1800), but these were as nothing compared with the divisions in the French fleet, whose personnel were parochially divided between the three major naval arsenals, three naval academies, the reds (the uniform of the academy-trained officers) and blues (the uniform of officers recruited from the merchant navy), or between officers whose noble origins lay in the military or the state bureaucracy. Their Minister of Marine Berryer summed up his experience in 1758–9 – ‘in the navy they all hate each other.’⁹⁵

Many of these factors were to a large extent known before operations and might be taken into account, but another remained lurking to happen at any time – the inherent tendency of fleet cohesion to degenerate from ‘top downwards’ to ‘bottom upwards’ controlling forces, that Sam Willis has explained so well in *Fighting at Sea in the Eighteenth Century* (2008), and which resulted from the inability or unwillingness of captains to keep station and act to a common plan. Cohesion depended on catering for the speed of the slowest ship; the variability of speed between and within different classes of ship; their different speed requirements and crew capacities for tacking or wearing ship; ship seamanship in the face of unpredictable wind, weather and sea conditions; fleet seamanship in keeping to a common speed and direction and avoiding collisions; differing weather conditions along a line of battle which might extend as far as ten miles; the different extent of battle damages and the capacity to repair them (which brought the Battle of Ushant to a halt in 1778); and the ability of captains to see and interpret signals, as well as their ability or willingness to obey them. In all this there was the danger that the worst captain or ship could end up controlling the actions of the best admiral or fleet.⁹⁶

Over time, the adoption of copper bottoms and the reduction in the number of ship types within the line of battle helped reduce some of these problems, and the performance of ships and captains could be tested and ameliorated through training cruises (e.g. those by the French in 1772–3), and by the conscientiousness of good commanders who exercised their fleets in manoeuvres while voyaging to operational zones. (Anson and Hood had reputations for this, while Villeneuve was blamed for not doing so in the voyage of the combined fleets to Martinique and back in the Trafalgar campaign.) Fleet seamanship was built up over time and with constant sea experience – something that enabled the British, who kept their ships at sea far longer, to improve fleet performance while the fleet performance of the French, who didn’t, went down in each war, as they were unable to keep up the supply of skilled and trained officers and seamen to replace earlier losses.⁹⁷ The prize for bad seamanship must go to the Chevalier de Gras Préville, captain of the 74-gun *Zélé*, who managed 14 collisions in 13 months in 1781–2, four of them between leaving Martinique and the defeat at the Saintes four days later, the last with the flagship of his commander-in-chief, the Comte de Grasse (whose own collisions in the training squadron in 1772 had led his admiral to comment that ‘there is something lacking in his judgement by eye’)!⁹⁸

The revealing leadership diaries of Captain Graham Moore comment in 1799 that ‘There is something in the nature of the seaman’s profession which many men of superior endowments never acquire and which many comparatively dull men frequently excel in. This is what the French call *gros manoeuvre* and what very few of the French navy officers of the old regime knew anything at all about. They affected indeed to despise it, which men often do when they find those whom they deem their inferiors more perfect in an art than themselves.

The superior skill, however, in practical seamanship is one of the causes of the unrivalled eminence which the British navy has attained.⁹⁹

Those admirals who anticipated and tried to deal with the ‘bottom-upwards’ erosion of their command tended to do so in one of two ways, summed up by Captain Mahan when he wrote that ‘Each man has a special gift, and to succeed must needs act in accordance with it. There are those who lead and those who drive. Hawke belonged to the one class. Rodney to the other.’¹⁰⁰ Rodney tried to fight it. He ordered rather than explained, and enforced his orders by intimidation: ‘My eyes on them had more dread than the enemy’s fire, and they knew it would be more fatal,’ he boasted after one battle.¹⁰¹ He achieved noteworthy victories, but on at least two occasions (the Moonlight Battle and the first battle of Martinique) his failure to explain the situation to his captains thwarted him of the victories he hoped to achieve. Failure to communicate effectively facilitated ‘bottom-upwards’ situations.

The admirals most admired and loved were those who accepted the likely ‘bottom-upward’ trend in action and sought to work with it, having explained their thinking and expectations in advance. We know of Hawke’s address to his captains in taking over the Mediterranean fleet from Byng in 1756, and of his willingness to give his captains their head in chase actions when opportunity offered. Likewise Howe calling his admirals and captains together before sailing to relieve Gibraltar in 1782, explaining ‘his intention and manner of attacking the enemy if we should find it necessary to engage them’, and of his addition to his signal book in 1794 for passing through the enemy line that ‘The different captains and commanders not being able to effect the specified intention ... are at liberty to act as circumstances require.’¹⁰² On his arrival before Cádiz in 1805, Nelson had two dinners, one with his admirals and senior captains and the other with junior captains, at which he explained his intended battle plan, and he followed it up by sending them all his plan in a memorandum in which he set out this management method clearly:

‘Thinking it almost impossible to bring a fleet of forty sail of the line into line of battle in variable winds, thick weather, and other circumstances which must occur, without such a loss of time that the opportunity would probably be lost of bringing the enemy to battle in such a manner as to make the business decisive...

‘Something must be left to chance, nothing is sure in a sea fight beyond all others. Shot will carry away the masts and yards of friends as well as foes...

‘...in case signals can neither be seen or perfectly understood, no captain can do very wrong if he places his ship alongside that of an enemy.’¹⁰³

Commanders who could manage to contain the drift to ‘bottom-upwards’ leadership were then in a position to use their fleets positively, and in the book

which the present writer co-authored with Ruddock Mackay, *Hawke, Nelson and British Naval Leadership 1747–1805*, we set out twelve criteria for leadership excellence.¹⁰⁴ However, it is worth focusing here on the one which was the essential prerequisite to all the others. Effective naval leadership required moral courage: to be prepared to risk failure to achieve positive results. Among many notable command decisions, at least six stand out in the eighteenth century as having been made in difficult circumstances, which might have ended in total disaster, but which were in their own ways the game-changers their national policies required.

Three of these come from the Seven Years' War and signify the moment at which the British navy made the decisive step-change in its capacity for power-projection that out-matched all of its rivals – establishing an expertise in operating on enemy coasts and waterways that made it a formidable 'brown water' as well as a 'blue water' navy. Two instances triumphantly demonstrated British long-distance amphibious warfare capacity and ensure it became the nightmare of all powers with colonial empires. In 1759 Sir Charles Saunders took 20 ships of the line, 20 other warships and 180 transports carrying 8,500 troops 420 miles up the St Lawrence River to capture Quebec. Such an enterprise had been tried before, in 1711 when Admiral Hovenden Walker's fleet of 11 warships and 60 transports had been shattered and wrecked amidst the difficulties of the passage. The St Lawrence was tidal, with strong currents, strewn with hidden rocks and shoals, and frequently fog-bound between its rocky shores. It was a navigational nightmare, quite apart from French opposition with the guns of the fortress of Quebec, fireships and their removal of navigation buoys. Lacking charts, Saunders sent small boats ahead to sound and mark channels to reach Quebec, and when the attack faltered took his ships upstream, past the batteries of the fortress, to cut off its communications with upper Canada and support Wolfe in his final dangerous but successful landing.

Saunders's moral courage, careful leadership and maintenance of good relations with the army (a leadership quality particularly necessary in British naval warfare) were replicated three years later by Sir George Pocock in the capture of Havana. In order to achieve surprise, instead of taking the long windward way round the island of Cuba, he took his 31 warships and 200 transports with 11,000 men through the leeward passage and along the Old Bahama Passage on the north coast – a route unknown to British navigators and thought by the Spanish to be impossible for Pocock's 20 ships of the line. The project was Anson's, but it was left to Pocock to take the decision to risk his expedition by implementing it, again by sending boats ahead to take soundings and mark the passage by fires on boats and islands. The result was complete surprise and an unopposed landing.¹⁰⁵

The third of this Seven Years' War trio was Sir Edward Hawke who, in the same year as the capture of Quebec, undertook a continual close blockade of the main French fleet at Brest in order to prevent a planned invasion. As late as

1756 an Admiralty memorandum discounted this as a possibility. Charts of the French coast were lacking to the navy whereas the French knew their own coasts perfectly and could keep near the shore and in shoal water 'where we dare not follow them.' The supply and maintenance problems of a fleet constantly at sea on the rocky French coast and the storms sweeping in from the Bay of Biscay also loomed large.¹⁰⁶ Yet Hawke decided to attempt it, and his leadership powers on the coast and Anson's organisation of the logistical backup from home enabled the blockade to continue for six months, until the French finally came out and Hawke caught up with them off Belle-Isle, from whence they sought safety in Quiberon Bay, not believing Hawke would follow them. But in the fading daylight of a late November afternoon and amidst a raging gale on a lee shore, and without pilots and mostly without charts of the coast, Hawke took the main British battlefleet into the cul-de-sac of Quiberon Bay, itself strewn with hidden rocks and shoal water, and achieved a crushing victory. 'No British admiral ever ran such navigational risks or gained so dramatic a victory,' is the verdict of Nicholas Rodger.¹⁰⁷

France was nevertheless capable of showing that positive results could still be achieved in the face of such an aggressive foe. The Comte de Grasse may have been a collision-prone seaman and was disliked by his subordinates, but he had been picked out by the squadron commander d'Orvilliers during the 1772 training manoeuvres as 'An officer of first distinction, made to be a general officer and capably direct the squadrons and fleets of the King.'¹⁰⁸ In 1781 he took a decision that decided the fate of a nation. When the imminent onset of the hurricane season led both the British and the French to withdraw their fleets from the Caribbean, Rodney sent just over half of his fleet to support the war in North America and took much of the rest home, escorting the rich West Indian convoys whose wealth helped sustain the war effort. He expected de Grasse to do likewise, but the latter decided to respond to an American call for aid against Lord Cornwallis's army, which had invaded Virginia, by taking his entire fleet thither, leaving only one 64-gun ship to escort France's equally valuable trade home. It was a decision that could have led to double disaster – if Rodney had taken all his fleet to America, and if the weakly escorted merchantmen had been captured and French credit ruined. Fortunately, neither happened and de Grasse's fleet closed the ring around Cornwallis's army on the Yorktown peninsula, and his repulse of the outnumbered British fleet coming to its relief decided the fate of the land campaign and of American independence. '[A]n indifferent tactician but a commander whose strategic vision made possible the most important naval victory of the 18th century,' is Jonathan Dull's verdict.¹⁰⁹

In May 1794 Louis Villaret-Joyeuse, newly appointed commander of the main French battlefleet – itself recently restored to discipline after mutinies, freshly mobilised in preparation for an attempted invasion, and lacking training in fleet manoeuvres – sailed from Brest in the knowledge that the British

Channel fleet was at sea, and with his orders to prevent it from intercepting a massive French convoy bringing North American grain and West Indian sugar to hard-pressed France. Failure might destabilise further the already unstable revolutionary republic; it might involve losses that would prevent its ulterior mission, and it might lead to the loss of his head! When he encountered Lord Howe's fleet, he took the decision to fight and to use his fleet as bait to lure Howe away from the path of the incoming convoy. In three actions, on 28 and 29 May and 1 June, he succeeded, in the last two leading with his flagship to the rescue of damaged ships threatened with capture. He lost seven of his 26 ships of the line, but saved the rest while so damaging Howe's ships as to render them unable to get back in front of Brest to prevent the escape of either his damaged ships or the convoy.¹¹⁰

Lastly, and despite the cautions at the start of this essay, we do come back to Nelson and his performance in the Nile campaign in 1798. In his first major command, when the French fleet sailed from Toulon in June escorting Napoleon's army and vanished into the Mediterranean, he took the decision to take his fleet a thousand miles off station to look for it off Egypt – so fast as to get there ahead of them and return disappointed to Sicily, only to find his instinct had been right and to sail back again, this time to find the French fleet anchored in a strong defensive position in Aboukir Bay. To attack a fleet at anchor, when it had had time to prepare its defences and when he lacked charts of the anchorage, was a hazardous task, and in the American war had led to bloody repulses – of d'Estaing at St Lucia (1778), Byron at Grenada (1779) and de Grasse at St Kitts (1782), yet Nelson attacked at once and was rewarded with the most decisive battle of annihilation of the eighteenth century, one that seared the minds of the French naval leadership throughout the Napoleonic Wars.¹¹¹ Leadership showing great moral courage could produce massive results for whichever national policies were being pursued.

