

Nowhere is Perfect: British Naval Centres on the Leeward Islands Station during the Eighteenth Century

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Abstract

The Lesser Antilles would see some of the most intense naval actions of the eighteenth century. Through three major wars the Royal Navy's Leeward Islands Station, formed in the middle of the century to provide a continuous naval presence in the region, there would be, at the height of the American War in April 1782, more fleet units engaged at the Battle of the Saintes than would meet at Trafalgar some twenty three years later. Maintaining such a large fleet many thousands of miles from Britain was a challenge, with the Royal Navy battling the elements and disease along with the French and Spanish. This paper briefly investigates the three most important islands, Antigua, Barbados and St. Lucia, used to effectively project British naval presence in the region. No island was eminently suitable for the support of naval operations, yet the combination of the three gave the Royal Navy a firm footing on which to stand while campaigning in the region.

Introduction

The eighteenth century saw the expansion of the British national interest throughout the world. During this period the Lesser Antilles were to assume great importance both financially and politically in Britain. To this end they were subjected to a goodly amount of European expansion, most often manifested in conflict throughout the century. From the French raids on St. Kitts and Nevis in 1706 to the fall of Trinidad in 1798, the southern Caribbean was a central battleground for European powers vying for hegemony (Rodger 2004:591-600). European nations attempting to control a collection of small islands such as the southern Caribbean needed significant naval forces to properly project power in the region.

To try and cover naval operations in a short paper would be superfluous as there are fine works available on the subject.¹ One vein which runs continuous

through works on naval operations in the Leeward Islands during the eighteenth century is the challenges faced by operating in the theatre. While the effects of these challenges were obviously unique to each endeavour the challenges were similar. This paper will identify the major tactical themes and some of the challenges faced by the Royal Navy during operations on the Leeward Islands Station during the eighteenth century as the squadrons and fleets attempted to (and often did) gain naval supremacy in the region.

The three most tactically important islands the British utilized on the Leeward Islands Station were Antigua, Barbados and St. Lucia. These islands were used as naval bases to good effect, particularly during the second half of the eighteenth century when the naval campaigns during the second half of the century were focused in the Lesser Antilles. There was no British island in the Leeward Islands Station that was suitable to command the island chain, provide a dockyard to repair the ships serving on station and provide a tactical base overlooking the main French base at Fort Royal. The Lesser Antilles became an important theatre of operations largely due to what Daniel Baugh (1997:145) calls the "foundations of seapower." Baugh (1997:119) identifies geographical position, concern for trade, financial capacity and political will as four foundations of sea power. He states that both Britain and France

had established transatlantic colonies in the seventeenth century, and in each case the metropolitan governments undertook during the second half of that century to integrate them into an imperial commercial system, a "mercantile system" as Adam Smith termed it. Whatever the initial failures the statistical record of eighteenth century trade shows that in both cases their efforts were ultimately successful. The most increases occurred in the Atlantic basin. The nexus was the West Indies [Baugh 1997:151].

The geographical position of the West Indies, coupled with the value of the sugar crops to the triangle trade ensured that the West Indies met the four foundations of seapower as defined by Baugh.

The value of West Indian trade confirmed that, in times of war, the French subscription to the *guerre de course* after the "limited French defeat at Barfleur-La Hougue" in 1692 saw the trade of Britain and her allies threatened throughout the conflicts with France during the eighteenth century (Ranger 1989:168).

¹ Some of the works that cover aspects of naval warfare in the Caribbean are Crewe (1993), Harding (1991), Pares (1936), and Rodger (2004).

Guerre de course is, in effect, commerce raiding as a naval strategy. This commerce raiding not only denied British merchants the use of their goods; it increased the cost of transport. The increasing costs of shipping the goods, through an increase in shipping and insurance rates, was compounded by the need to travel in convoy which could affect the selling price of goods due to a brief glut on the market caused by the wholesale arrival of the merchant vessels.

The War of Jenkins's Ear 1739-48 saw the Leeward Islands, which were previously of a secondary importance, come to the fore. The French entered the war in 1744, dramatically increasing the importance of the newly formed Leeward Islands Station in the Lesser Antilles. This shift of focus from the Greater Antilles to the Lesser Antilles was caused by the geopolitical organization of the West Indies at the time. The Greater Antilles were largely colonized by the Spanish, with the French controlling one half of Santo Domingo. The only possession of any size or importance owned by the British in the region was Jamaica. The entry of France into the war allowed Britain to utilize her possessions in the Lesser Antilles to conduct operations against the French in the same area.

The Seven Years War 1759 – 1763 saw large-scale operations on the Leeward Islands Station that resulted in an overwhelming victory for the Royal Navy. It is ironic that this overwhelming victory sowed the seeds for the unenviable position the Royal Navy found itself in during the American War. Barbados and Antigua were utilized as the main naval bases during this conflict. Barbados, one hundred miles to the windward of the island chain, provided a staging base from which British forces gathered to invade Guadeloupe and Martinique. Antigua, in the north of the islands chain provided the only dockyard in the region where naval vessels could be refitted. As is often the case with military operations, the situation was not a simple one. Both Antigua and Barbados had major flaws that proved burdensome yet not critical while the Royal Navy retained the upper hand. During this war, St. Lucia was used as a forward operating base for Rodney's fleet. The defensive nature of British naval strategy during the American War would see the shortcomings of the individual islands exacerbated by difficult naval campaigns that resulted in the Royal Navy losing all of the British West Indian possessions except Antigua, Barbados, Jamaica and St. Lucia. The most serious disadvantages of the islands were most clearly seen in the victualing

of ships' companies and the repair of the ships themselves.

The logistical challenges faced by the Royal Navy in the Caribbean during the eighteenth century were substantial. Almost everything relating to naval operations had to be imported from either Britain or North America. Spars, cordage, canvas, gunpowder, guns and their accoutrements, victuals and, towards the end of the century, copper for sheathing ships bottoms had to be both shipped and stored in sufficient quantity to supply the large fleets that were operating in the theatre. The harsh climate and the distances stores had to travel to replenish stockpiles often caused shortages, especially during conflicts.²

Perhaps the greatest disadvantage to the Leeward Islands Station was the lack of a dockyard suitable for repairing large fleet units. While smaller vessels could careen in English Harbour to rid themselves of shipworm on a regular basis, the larger ships of the line had to endure the worm, often leading to a decrease in the integrity of the ship's hull. As the large ships became badly infested with worm they were usually ordered to England to repair and refit, often protecting merchant convoys on their homeward passage.

The Royal Navy employed victualing agents to provide food for the naval vessels on the Leeward Islands Station. A civilian contractor entered into an agreement for providing food at a fixed rate per man per day, allowing the navy to more accurately prepare its budgets while passing any risk relating to the increase in price of produce due to conflict to the agent (Hamilton 2004). The agent was to provide the following per seaman per week.

	pork lbs	beef lbs	pease pints	oatmeal pints	butter oz	cheese oz	suet oz	flour lbs
Sunday	1	-	½	-	-	-	-	-
Monday	-	-	-	1	2	4	-	-
Tuesday	-	2	-	-	-	-	4	1½
Wednesday	-	-	½	1	2	4	-	-
Thursday	1	-	½	-	-	-	-	-
Friday	-	-	½	1	2	4	-	-
Saturday	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	-

³

During peacetime the provisioning of the station ships and cruisers was a relatively simple exercise. Salt

² During the American War there was an almost constant call for supplies to the Leeward Islands station by its successive commanders in chief. It is only in 1783 that there was a surplus of naval stores on the station.

³ from Crewe (1193:146)

meat was brought in from Britain with North America providing almost everything else. During times of conflict, particularly in the American War, provisioning was more difficult. This was due not only to the loss of trading partners in North America due to the rebellion, but also because of the effective use of American and French cruisers against the British merchant marine resulting in the capture of ships, leading to higher insurance rates and prices that the agents could not meet. During times of conflict the victualing agents would prove a burden to naval forces in the region.⁴

Tropical climates are unkind to ships. The baking sun caused ships' equipment to wear more rapidly than northern climes. Commodore Douglas, commander of the Leeward Islands Station wrote to Commodore Lord Colville, Commander in Chief of North America on 6 July 1761 the following on the state of affairs in his squadron:

We are greatly in want of stores here of all sorts, masts especially and likewise artificers, so that it is with great difficulty that we can keep the frigates and sloops so clean as they ought to be, and your Lordship has I will venture to say undesignedly added to my distress by sending the Falkland, who is so leaky she must hove down to keep her above water, and the Sutherland as soon after as possible, being in the same condition, which it seems she has complained of ever since she came from England, the Repulse with both main and foremasts wounded, and the Lizard with a sprung bowsprit, all which the Builder at Halifax knew were complained of but would not give them new ones although they have such plenty there...They have sent me from home several large ships that can't go into English Harbour to clean, therefore without orders I am sending them home to England as it is a pity good ships should be spoilt by the worms, and as they have not sent me out a ship for myself to relieve the Dublin, and as I must heave down some of your squadron here, have in revenge sent my own ship to careen and refit at Halifax, which I beg your Lordship will suffer to be done with the utmost dispatch [Rodger 1984:265-266].

The letter to Colville not only demonstrates the want of masts and spars for his squadrons, it addresses the lack of a naval base in the Caribbean to repair and refit large ships of war. While on station in the Lesser Antilles the greatest threat to a ship's integrity was found underwater, the *Terredo Navalis*.

Below the waterline there were two main threats to the effectiveness of fighting ships in tropical waters, weed and worm. While seaweed grew on all ships in the sea, it grew twice as quickly in the tropics (Rodger 2004:344). Early antifouling was applied in an attempt to slow the growth of weed, which could significantly decrease the speed of a ship, particularly under fighting sail. White stuff, black stuff and brown stuff were used with varying degrees of success.⁵ In 1778 Lord Sandwich took the bold decision to copper the bottoms of naval ships, the effect being that by 1781 most of the large fleet units had coppered bottoms (Rodger 1194:296).

Maurer Maurer (1950:58) contends that; "The foremost advantage to be gained by coppering the fleet proved to be speed, speed for observation, for convoying, for chasing, and above all, for conducting aggressive operations with an inferior force." While this may be the foremost tactical advantage, the foremost strategic advantage was the reduction in the number of overhauls and repairs that needed to be done in dry dock. Charles Middleton, controller of the navy claimed that the effect on coppering the fleet was to increase the size of the effective force by one third.⁶ The copper did not only retard the growth of seaweed and barnacles, it protected the ships against the *Terredo navalis*, the unrelenting shipworm.

One of the most destructive creatures to attack wooden ships in the tropics is the naval shipworm (*Terredo navalis*). A family of bivalve mollusks that were able to survive on wood alone, shipworm was the scourge of ships during the age of sail (Didziulis 2007:3). Mature shipworm were both destructive and highly reproductive, growing up to 50 centimeters long in the tropics, and release over 1,000,000 larvae annually (Didziulis 2007:1).

Though modern antifouling paint can temporarily repel shipworm, even today there is no cure for the

⁵White stuff consisted of train oil, rosin and brimstone or sulphur, black stuff a mixture of tar and pitch and brown stuff tar, pitch and brimstone. White stuff was considered superior to black stuff and on par with brown stuff (Lavery 1987:57-58).

⁶ Rodger (1994:296) states that; "As soon as they experienced the result of copper, every flag officer wanted their ships coppered, especially in the West Indies."

⁴ Professor Roger Knight and Dr. Martin Wilcox (2010) have recently released a book based on their investigation of the Royal Navy's victualing system.

eradication of shipworm.⁷ The introduction of coppered bottoms helped to counteract the infestation of shipworm by forming an impenetrable barrier. Copper plating prevented the spread of shipworm as long as the integrity of the seals between the plates was maintained. If plates were damaged and wood was left exposed the shipworm would vigorously attack the exposed area of a ship's underwater structure. Shipworm bored into the hulls of vessels, causing planks to weaken. Left long enough without replacement, the planks could disintegrate in heavy seas or action, leading to the foundering of a ship.

The construction of English Harbour, while started in 1728, did not expand significantly until 1743. Captain Lisle, commanding officer of the station was sent instructions to commence an expansion to include for a careening wharf capable of a 60 gun ship (Crewe 1993:232). The construction of the wharf had not commenced, due to a problem securing adequate timber, before Charles Knowles arrived to take command of the station. Knowles wrote to Lisle in June 1743 stating he envisaged a wharf where two 70 gunships could be careened (Crewe 1993:233). Knowles, while being admonished by the Navy Board and the Admiralty and temporarily having the bills for the construction imprest against him, oversaw the expansion of English Harbour. The dockyard could careen two 60 gun ships side by side while providing the infrastructure necessary to facilitate their repairs (Crewe 1993:235-237).

During the 1740s, the majority of British naval vessels operating in West Indian waters could have been serviced by English Harbour, but British ships of the line were increasing in size and power. The fall of the Walpole government in 1742 began the process of dislodging the elder conservative naval architects, making way for younger designers who were willing to experiment with ship design.⁸ By late 1747 Sir

Thomas Slade was the forerunner in modifying French warship designs for the Royal Navy (Rodger 1994:25-27). Soon after his promotion to Surveyor of the Navy by Lord Anson, First Lord of the Admiralty since 1751; in 1755 Slade began designing 74 gunships of the line to replace the smaller 64 gunships (Lavery 1985:7). These first 74-gun ships of the *Dublin* and *Bellona* classes entered service during the Seven Years War (Lavery 1985:8). The 74-gun ship would become the mainstay of the British line of battle until after the Napoleonic Wars. The increase in the size of ships prevented them from using English Harbour as they drew too much water in ballast to navigate the channel. The lack of repair facilities in the Leeward Islands resulted in ships rapidly falling into disrepair as the tropical climate took its toll.⁹

Antigua, with its dry dock that could accommodate the cruisers on station and smaller ships of the line, had good harbours to protect ships in foul weather yet was hindered as a naval station by a limited water supply. Antigua therefore was in a good position to affect a campaign in the Greater Antilles; it provided the only major dockyard in the region that could conduct conservable repairs on naval vessels, although larger vessels could not be refitted there. The limited water supply was probably the island's greatest disadvantage as a naval centre. Without a constant adequate water supply, ships on station in Antigua had to depart to wood and water.

Barbados enjoyed an advantageous geographical position one hundred miles to the windward of the island chain, yet was not naturally equipped to protect

⁷ Didziulis (2007:6) states that the salinity of the water has to be above 8‰ for shipworm to reproduce. Wooden ships can stay in freshwater rivers and lakes for several months to rid themselves of the worms. This was impractical for naval vessels of the period, which would have been reexposed to the worms as they reentered the saltwater.

⁸ "It would seem ... that the chief administrators of the Walpole government were echoes of a bygone era — men over seventy years old held the four most important appointments in naval administration. First Sea Lord, Sir Charles Wager, was seventy-four years old in 1740. He entered the Royal Navy during the reign of Charles II, attained flag rank in 1707, was beached as an administrator by 1714 and held the post of First Sea Lord as of

1733. Admiral of the Fleet, Sir John Norris, was eighty in 1740. Secretary of the Navy, Josiah Burnett, had held his post since 1694 and was the same age as Sir Charles Wager, while Jacob Pickworth, who had held the position of Surveyor of the Navy since 1715, was of similar age. These men had neither the boldness nor the energy to implement the new ideas in shipbuilding being utilized in France and Spain. The fall of the Walpole government in 1742 saw the removal of Wager, who was replaced by the Earl of Winchelsea, a civilian. Winchelsea appointed Lord Archibald Hamilton, who last saw sea service in 1710, and Philip Cavendish, who had never been operational as an admiral, as his advisors. After a short and tumultuous term which saw the dismissal of Mathews on a technicality, the dismissal of Admiral Vernon after criticizing the administration, and the refusal of promotion to Rear Admiral by Vice Admiral George Anson, the Winchelsea Board fell in December 1744 (Ward 2008:11)."

⁹ The introduction of coppered bottoms helped extend the effective time a ship of the line could stay in service in the Caribbean, but the ships had to sail to Halifax or England to be properly refitted.

large fleets. Carlisle Bay, the only major bay in which ships could assemble, is situated in the south west of the island. From there ships could rendezvous after a transatlantic voyage, collect intelligence on enemy dispositions and orders from the station commander before proceeding to their final destination. There was good clean water available in quantity, though wood was not readily available (Senn 1946:62). The Royal Navy set a yard in Barbados, dealing with naval stores and victuals for the ships, while businesses grew in nearby Bridgetown which offered services to naval and merchant vessels alike.¹⁰ While offering shelter in moderate conditions, Carlisle Bay is not protected from south and west swells that accompany major storms. This lack of a suitable harbour in poor weather was the major obstacle in making Barbados the premier naval base in the Caribbean.

Barbados was perceived to be a well defended island. While the island was well defended, the majority of this defense was due to natural forces. Ships had a hard time beating up to Barbados. French warships could and did get caught in the Martinique-St. Lucia channel, which could effectively halt a fleet. Once reaching the island, an invasion force would find their options limited to a small portion of the south coast, from Oistins to Maxwell and some of the larger west coast beaches namely Speightstown and Holetown.

Barbados was geographically located in a tactically advantageous position. The island had the infrastructure and water to support a fleet, yet there was no harbour suitable for a fleet during rough weather. While the fleet was in Barbados it could get anywhere in theatre relatively quickly yet forces on the island were in no position to observe enemy movements and react quickly to them. For this St. Lucia was utilized.

By the beginning of 1779 the Royal Navy found themselves effectively split in the Caribbean. With Dominica captured and Antigua too far to the north to effectively provide the naval infrastructure for the running of the campaign to protect the southern British possessions in the Lesser Antilles, it was St. Lucia that was chosen by Rear Admiral Hyde Parker to be the pivot for British naval operations in the region.¹¹ Rodney, approving the decision, ordered seamen and soldiers to fortify Pigeon Island to

protect Gros Islet Bay.¹² Rodney would concentrate his fleet in Gros Islet as the French fleet could be kept under constant watch in Fort Royal.

St. Lucia, while a good anchorage for the fleet, did not possess the infrastructure needed to support a large fleet. Furthermore St. Lucia was a sickly island, with men falling ill in such numbers that Rodney, in an attempt to limit the effect of disease on his fleet appointed Dr. Gilbert Blane to the post of surgeon of the fleet, ordering that reports on the dispositions of the seamen on board all of the ships under his command be sent to Dr. Blane at the beginning of every month.¹³ The lack of infrastructure in St. Lucia would cement Barbados' place in the naval operations of the American War. The close proximity of Barbados upwind of St. Lucia allowed stores to be sent quickly to the fleet while it was anchored in Gros Islet, while allowing them to be stored properly in Barbados.

There was no one island on which the Royal Navy could use as a permanent base. Both Antigua and Barbados maintained a permanent infrastructure that supported the Royal Navy, while St. Lucia was used in time of war when the over watch of French naval elements based at Fort Royal in Martinique became a priority. This arrangement, while not the most efficient or cost effective, did provide some defense in depth. Naval vessels were not hindered by the lack of naval bases when the French almost overran the Leeward Islands Station. Barbados provided a logistical centre for St. Lucia and protection for Antigua. Antigua in turn provided protection for Jamaica. The presence of these two major naval centres ensured that if one was captured, the Royal Navy be in a position to offer timely assistance. If either Antigua or Barbados was indeed captured the Royal Navy would still be able to operate effectively on the Leeward Islands Station.

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¹⁰ These businesses form a considerable portion of the author's investigation in his postgraduate thesis.

¹¹ Hyde Parker to Rodney 20 March 1780 (Syrett 2007:407)

¹² Rodney to Captain Butchart, 15 April 1780 (Syrett 2007:454)

¹³ Rodney to the respective captains of His Majesty's fleet under my command, 3 May 1780 (Syrett 2007:481)

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