

A Shift in Focus: The Shift in Naval Warfare in the Caribbean during the Eighteenth Century

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Introduction

The War of Austrian Succession (1740-48) changed the course of naval warfare in the Caribbean for the following seventy years, with the shift in focus of naval operations from the northern Caribbean islands that were largely colonized by France and Spain to the Windward islands which were divided between France and Britain. This shift in the main area of operations brought Barbados into focus as an important forward operating base for the Royal Navy in the region. As the focus of naval warfare moved southwards, Barbados and Antigua became the lynchpins in what became known, somewhat confusingly, as the British Leeward Islands Station which stretched from Tobago in the South to Anguilla in the north. Throughout the 18th century, these two islands provided the naval infrastructure that allowed the British to mount naval campaigns in the region. The first major actions on the station took place during the Seven Years War (1756-63), thus changing the nature of the islands' military utilization. Barbados would inherit Antigua's role as a forward operating base; while advances in British shipbuilding would see Antigua concentrating on trade interdiction, scouting and anti-scouting operations.

Naval Infrastructure in the Leeward Islands

During the 17th and first half of the 18th centuries, Antigua provided the British with a strategically valuable base of operations to the windward side of the large French and Spanish islands in the northern Caribbean. Being upwind of the northern Caribbean, ships departing Antigua could easily sail to any of the large French or Spanish islands to conduct operations. The shift in the area of operations to the British Leeward Islands Station caused Antigua to become a northerly island in the central area of operation, removed from the main French islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe. Barbados, one hundred miles to the windward side of the Windward Island chain claimed Antigua's previous role as the forward operating base for the Royal Navy in the region. The naval infrastructure, that had been built to accommodate fleet vessels at English Harbour, could not accommodate the larger British warships being constructed thereby limiting the usefulness of the facility to large fleet units. This can be seen as early as 1760, when Commodore James Douglas, commander Leeward Islands Station wrote the following:

“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 have down to keep her

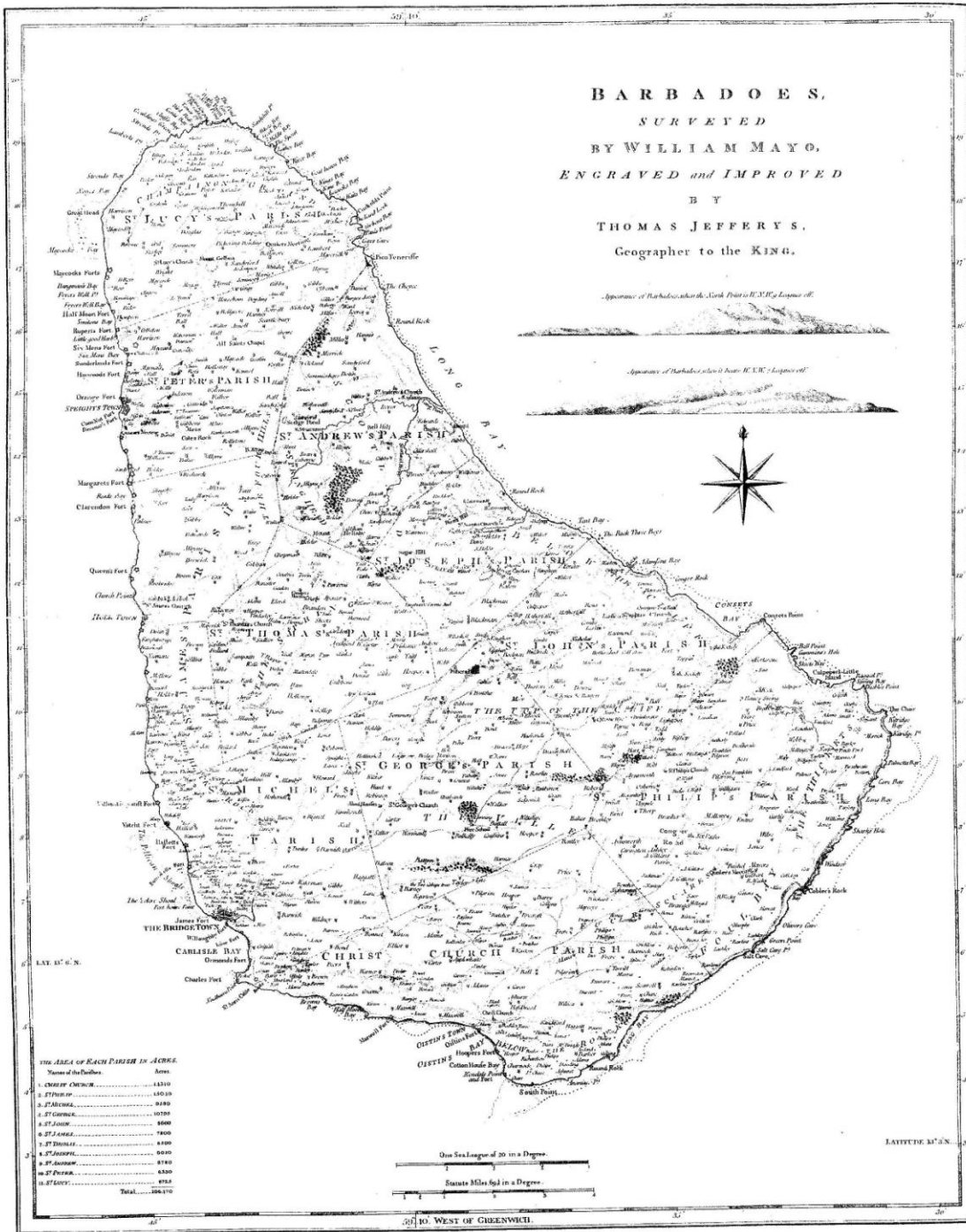
above water, and the Sutherland as soon after as possible, being in the same condition, which it seems she has complained of ever since she came from England, the Repulse with both main and foremasts wounded, and the Lizard with a sprung bowsprit, all which the Builder at Halifax knew were complained 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.”ⁱ

While not as important to the British liners, Antigua became essential in the less glamorous but important role of commerce protection and interdiction.

Fleet Action and Trade Protection

Naval warfare in the Caribbean can be categorized in two themes: (1) major actions, such as fleet engagements and (2) amphibious operations and commerce raiding. The Windward Islands' importance was primarily due to their sugar exports, which provided substantial funds for the British government in the form of taxes during conflicts. Consequently, throughout the wars of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, trade protection and interdiction were both essential factors in Caribbean warfare. Both trade protection and interdiction were not often carried out by large fleet units, though some were used to escort large convoys out of the region. Trade war was waged by smaller ships, frigates, brigs, brigantines and schooners. The smaller vessels could take advantage of the myriad of coves and inlets throughout the island chain. Such vessels could easily outsail and overpower most merchantmen while escaping the large fleet units. Correspondingly, vessels suited for trade interdiction were suited for trade protection as they could engage their adversaries on equal terms in the coves and inlets. The performance of these smaller ships was greatly affected by marine growth, and the ravages of the tropical climates on their ropes and sails. The naval infrastructure in English Harbour was ideal for the maintenance of the smaller vessels in the Royal Navy's Caribbean contingent.

As English Harbour became the centre of the trade war, Barbados became the hub for fleet action and amphibious campaigns in the region (Figure 1). The importance of Barbados was due to three major factors;(1) the island's geographical location 100 miles to the windward of the island chain (2) a large reasonably sheltered anchorage in Carlisle Bay and (3) a steady supply of freshwater from Beckles spring with which to refill their casks after a transatlantic voyage (Senn 1946). Fleet units and transport ships that often got separated during the Atlantic crossing, could easily locate Barbados. A ship would sail to a latitude of 13 degrees north, and sail along the line until reaching the island. If for some reason a ship missed Barbados, St. Vincent was 100 miles to the leeward side, providing a secondary port of call. Carlisle Bay was large, reasonably sheltered from the prevailing swells. It was also well defended, allowing a fleet or invasion force to gather, receive intelligence from smaller vessels and recuperate from the Atlantic crossing before proceeding *en masse* to their destination. Due to Barbados's geographical location, ships could easily sail to any of the Caribbean islands with the prevailing winds behind them.



Improved Edition: Engraved by LAURENCE & WHITTLE, 47, 49, 51 Fleet Street, London.

PLATE XVII. No. 38. Jefferys, 1775.

Figure 1: The Printed Map of Barbados from the Earliest Times to 1873. London: Map Collectors' Circle. Plate XVII. No. 38, Jeffreys, 1775 (Collection of the Barbados Museum and Historical Society).

Although Barbados was ideally located to be a major British base, the geology of the island did not suit such an installation. The coral formation did not provide any of the high hills or deep coves that are signatures of nearby volcanic islands in the Caribbean. There was also no safe haven for ships during a hurricane; Carlisle Bay being vulnerable to violent storms with south and west swells. As with Antigua, Barbados was too far removed from the main French islands to provide a primary fleet anchorage. It was difficult for ships, engaged in scouting and anti-scouting patrols around French-held islands, to return to Barbados in a reasonable amount of time. For these reasons, the British made Gros Islet, in northern St. Lucia, its main fleet base throughout the period. Gros Islet was reasonably well protected, and close to the main French naval base at Fort de France. Smaller ships could quickly send intelligence to the fleet, which could be mobilized in a timely manner to engage the enemy. However, Gros Islet did not possess adequate naval infrastructure to service large fleets. Barbados was used as a transshipment point for both naval stores and victuals that would be utilized in St. Lucia. The Royal Navy utilized the three islands, Antigua, Barbados and St. Lucia, to wage war within the Caribbean.

External Influences

The British, by utilizing a strong Western Squadron in the western approaches of Europe during the Seven Years War forestalled any significant French naval activity in the Caribbean.² By engaging naval units dispatched for the Caribbean in home waters The Royal Navy interrupted French naval reinforcements to the region.³ The utilization of the Western Squadron was partially dependent on Britain keeping Spain from forming an alliance with France for as long as possible, thus limiting the number of capital ships arrayed against the Royal Navy. By the Spanish declaration of war on January 4, 1762, the naval war had been largely decided in favour of Britain (Rodger 2004). The Spanish declaration of war, early in the American War, significantly altered the balance of naval power in Europe.⁴ The interwar naval programs of both France and Spain saw them enjoying a numerical advantage in ships of the line over the British at the outbreak of war in North America in 1775. This combined superiority was realized the Spanish declaration of war, forcing Britain into a defensive posture. The Royal Navy had the task of guarding the channel and patrolling the Western Approaches while providing ships for operations in both North America and the West and East Indies. The Navy also protected merchant shipping, though they operated with a numerically smaller force.

Attempted Invasions of Barbados during the American War

Throughout the American War, Barbados's importance was recognized by the governor of Martinique, the Marquis Bouille, and successive French naval commanders in the region. Although the Marquis Bouille does not have the notoriety of Lafayette or De Grasse he was one of the most celebrated French military commanders of the American War (Jamieson 1981). Young, experienced and energetic, Bouille showed a spirit of aggressiveness, commonly expected of British naval officers.. He unquestionably proved his tactical ability with the recapture of St. Eustatius in November 1781, regarded by many as the most daring military exploit of the war. British commander recognized Bouille as an able commander and a dangerous enemy (Jamieson 1981). At the outset of the 1778 war, the French made an annual

attempt to invade Barbados until their defeat at the Battle of the Saintes on 12 April 1782. All, but one of these attempts, was foiled by natural elements relating to heavy winds and tide.

The French opened hostilities in the American War by capturing Dominica on September 7, 1778 (Rodger 2004). The capture of Dominica allowed the French an unbroken chain of islands from Martinique to Guadeloupe, creating a dangerous zone in the Caribbean for British trade. December 8, 1778 saw the arrival of the Conte Estaing, a former army officer who had attained flag rank in the French navy and held command of the North American fleet. Estaing sailed into Martinique, with eleven liners and one 50 gun ship, and put forward a plan to invade Barbados, while raising 5,000 regulars and 1,500 militia for his amphibious operation (Jamieson 1981).⁵ Estaing's plans were cancelled upon hearing of Rear Admiral Samuel Barrington's capture of St. Lucia on December 13, 1778 (Rodger 2004).⁶

Estaing steadily built his forces in the Caribbean through early 1779. By June 1779, the French fleet numbered 21 ships of the line, 4 50 gunships and 12 frigates. Estaing was aided in his designs to capture British islands by his British counterpart Vice Admiral John Byron (Jamieson 1981).⁷ While Byron positioned his ships to the Leeward of Martinique his second and most influential mistake was using his fleet to escort the West India trade convoy until they were clear of French privateers in the northern islands while the French fleet lay at anchor in Martinique. While there was great pressure from the West Indian planters and their lobbyists in England to protect their trade from Estaing's active frigates, Byron made a foolhardy decision to acquiesce to the planter's demands for protection. Estaing utilized Byron's absence to quickly capture St. Vincent as a precursor to an attempt at invading Barbados with his fleet and 6,500 men. Contrary winds, and the difficulty in sailing to Barbados, forced Estaing to abandon this plan and sail for Grenada, capturing the island on July 5, 1778. (Jamieson 1981). Byron, on hearing of the French success in St. Vincent, quickly moved to protect Grenada; arriving two days after the island fell.

Charles Middleton, comptroller of the navy caustically wrote the following memorandum:

“It should be recommended to the commanding officer at the Leeward Islands never to quit the neighborhood of a French squadron of force while they continue at Martinique, but to leave the protection of its homeward bound trade to its own convoy and a proper escort of frigates till clear of the islands. By pursuing this conduct he will secure the islands, as well as the trade, but if he acts otherwise, he will protect one at the expense of the other.”⁸

By March 1780, the West Indies had become a naval battleground. The French fleet was commanded by the Conte Guichen, said to be the most accomplished admiral in the French navy (Jamieson 1981). His opponent was Admiral George Rodney. Fresh from his Gibraltar victory, Rodney would command the station until the culmination of rivalries at the Battle of the Saintes on April 12, 1782. Guichen and Bouille both formulated a plan to invade Barbados with a French fleet of 22 liners and 3,000 troops, after escorting a convoy northward (Jamieson 1981). Sailing from the north made it easier to reach Barbados than sailing into the prevailing winds, as Estaing soon discovered after subduing St. Vincent. Rodney arrived in St. Lucia in late March. Upon hearing of Guichen's departure from Martinique, he set sail April 15, in pursuit of Guichen with 20 liners, sighting the latter late in the evening on April 16 (Jamieson 1981). Rodney failed to decisively engage Guichen, partially due to ambiguous signals, leading to two months of

indecisive action by the fleets, recriminations by Rodney against his captains and a resolve on his part to hone his fleet into his idea of a disciplined force.⁹

The Great Hurricane of October 1780, and an active campaign season which saw the British capture St. Eustatius and the French Tobago, forestalled any plans for the invasion of Barbados, until December 1781. The Conte de Grasse, fresh from his victory against Rear Admiral Sir Thomas Greaves at the Battle of the Chesapeake, reached Martinique on November 26, 1781.¹⁰ Grasse and Bouille planned to complete the conquest of the British West Indian islands by subduing the Windward Islands, with the end goal being the successful invasion of Jamaica. Barbados was the key to subduing the remaining British islands in the Leeward Islands Station, as it could support St. Lucia, St. Kitts and Antigua. If Barbados were to fall, the French would then possess a windward base with which to carry out these invasions without fear of timely British reprisal. To this end, an invasion fleet of nearly 30 liners with 6,000 troops was mustered, with the invasion force setting sail on December 17 1781 (Jamieson 1981). Contrary winds and currents in the St. Lucia channel prevented the French forces from properly clearing Martinique. The fleet aborted the invasion, and returned to Martinique on December 23. A second attempt was made on December 26, Winds and currents were so contrary that the fleet could not reach the St. Lucia channel. The final attempt at invading Barbados ended as the French fleet returned to Martinique on January 5, 1782 (Jamieson 1981). After capturing St. Kitts and St. Eustatius from the British in early 1782, the battle for the West Indies culminated at the Battle of the Saintes on April 12, 1782.¹¹

Conclusion

The American War was a rude awakening to the British in the West Indies. The tripod arrangement, utilizing Antigua, Barbados and St. Lucia, was firmly cemented into British naval strategy in the region. Antigua remained the centre for littoral operations, while Barbados was transformed into a forward operating base for the region, through the construction of the Garrison Savannah. The Garrison was built to house a rapid reaction force for British possessions in the region; to defend against internal and external threats. During times of war, Barbados acted as the rendezvous point for amphibious operations. The expanded naval infrastructure, that accompanied the construction of the garrison, provided much needed support for the fleet anchorage in Gros Islet, St. Lucia. It is clear that the French realized the usefulness of Barbados, yet they were never able to capitalize on their naval superiority, which at best became fleeting in the region after the American War. Barbados was the only colony in the Leeward Islands Command that never changed hands. The St. Ann's Garrison became an expansive and unique military base that was utilized into the early 20th century. The Barbados Garrison and Historic Bridgetown were designated a World Heritage Site in June 2011 (Convention 2011).

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Endnotes

ⁱ (Rodger 1984) p.265-266

² The Western Approaches consist of the seas off of the west coast of France, primarily the Bay of Biscay. This area of operation was the hunting ground of the British Western Squadron, based at Plymouth.

³ For further information on the effectiveness of the Western Squadron in the Seven Years War read (Baugh 1997) (Duffy 1998) (Duffy 1992) (Dull 2005)

⁴ For further reading on British foreign policy and its effects on the early Spanish entry into the American War read (Black 1998) (Scott 1990) (Tracy 1988)

⁵ Bouille was against the invasion as he had intelligence that the British fleet was anchored in Barbados. A power struggle ensued that saw Estaing take control of the military units in Martinique.

⁶ Barrington arrived in Barbados on 10 December gathered all available intelligence on French dispositions, formulated an invasion plan of St. Lucia with Major General James Grant, commander land forces on station the same day and set sail for St. Lucia arriving at and capturing the island on 13 December. Estaing sailed immediately in support of St. Lucia from Martinique though he did not attack until 15 December by which time Barrington had arrayed his four liners, three fifty gun ships and three frigates across Grand Cul de Sac bay, successfully repulsing two French attacks by a greatly superior force. St. Lucia was to become the major staging base of British naval operations in the Leeward Islands during The American War.

⁷ Throughout the first six months of 1779 Byron failed to send liners to the windward of Martinique, opting to stay anchored in Gros Islet and watch Fort Royal though after the Battle of Ushant it was widely known that French squadrons could easily reinforce the Caribbean. If a sizable force of liners were sent to the windward of Martinique Byron could have interrupted Estaing's reinforcements, allowing him to maintain the advantage gained through numerical superiority on the station. By doing this he failed to stop French reinforcements reaching the island, undermining his naval superiority. Throughout the Seven Years War the Royal Navy sent liners to the windward of Martinique to intercept French reinforcements to the region. A fleet that started an Atlantic crossing together rarely arrived en masse. The British maintained a strong force to the windward of Martinique into intercept these vessels arriving in smaller groups. Byron did not order liners to cruise to the windward of Martinique allowing Estaing to build a battle fleet that could rival Byron's forces.

⁸ Jamieson, Alan G. "War in the Leeward Islands: 1775-1783 p.175

⁹ For further information on fleet command and control read (Palmer 1997)

¹⁰ Sir Thomas Greaves was repulsed while attempting to relieve Lord Cornwallis' forces at Yorktown leading to the capitulation of the British forces there, effectively ending the British campaigns to subdue their North American colonies.

¹¹ The Battle of the Saintes on 12 April 1782 saw thirty six British ships of the line; those of 64 guns or more engage a French fleet consisting of thirty seven sail of the line, a total of 73 fleet units. At Trafalgar on 21 October 1805 twenty seven British sail of the line engaged thirty three ships of the Franco-Spanish alliance, a total of 60 fleet units.