

# **A SHORT HISTORY OF THE ROYAL NAVY**

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1805 to 1918

Christopher Lloyd

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Volume 18

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CHRISTOPHER LLOYD

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# A SHORT HISTORY OF THE ROYAL NAVY

1805 TO 1918

*by*

CHRISTOPHER LLOYD

*Author of Captain Marryat and the Old Navy, etc.*

THIRD EDITION



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## PREFACE

'I WILL make no other introduction to the following discourse than that as the importance of our being strong at sea was ever very great, so in our present circumstances it is grown to be much greater because, as formerly our force of shipping contributed greatly to our trade and safety, so now it is become indispensably necessary to our very being. To the question, What shall we do to be saved in this world? there is no other answer but this: Look to your moat. The first article in an Englishman's political creed must be, That he believeth in the sea' (Halifax, *Rough Draught of a New Model at Sea*. 1694).

Apart from a vague knowledge of a disconnected series of exciting episodes, we are, as a nation, singularly ignorant of the facts of naval history. In spite of numberless books devoted to particular aspects of the subject, there exists no short history of the Navy covering the vital period in which occurred the defeat of Napoleon, the expansion of the Empire, the transition from sail to steam, and the rise and fall of the first German menace. The aim of this book is to provide such a history from after the battle of Trafalgar to the end of the war of 1914 to 1918. My object has been to view both actors and actions in the framework provided by strategic considerations, whether political, military, or economic, and to describe the history of the Service in relation to the history of the nation during the past century.

I am greatly indebted to E. A. Hughes for the care with which he has revised my manuscript, though I remain responsible for any errors in fact or view which may be detected.

ROYAL NAVAL COLLEGE,  
DARTMOUTH

*November 1941*



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## *CONTENTS*

	PAGE
PREFACE	V
I. THE BLOCKADE AND THE CONTINENTAL SYSTEM	I
II. LORD COCHRANE	10
III. THE AMERICAN WAR, 1812-15	23
IV. THE NAVY IN THE MEDITERRANEAN	30
V. THE NAVY AND THE EMPIRE	43
VI. THE NAVAL REVOLUTION	54
VII. THE OUTBREAK OF THE WAR OF 1914-18	65
VIII. CLEARING THE OUTER SEAS	71
THE 'GOEBEN', THE 'EMDEN', CORONEL AND THE FALKLANDS	
IX. THE BATTLE CRUISER ACTIONS IN THE NORTH SEA	81
HELIGOLAND BIGHT—THE SCARBOROUGH RAID—THE DOGGER BANK	
X. THE DARDANELLES	89
XI. JUTLAND	99
XII. BLOCKADE AND COUNTER-BLOCKADE	117
INDEX	131

## *PLANS*

	PAGE
BATTLE IN THE AIX ROADS, APRIL 11-14, 1809	16
BATTLE OF THE FALKLAND ISLANDS, DECEMBER 8, 1914	78
JUTLAND, 3.45 P.M., MAY 31, 1916. 'OPEN FIRE'	103
JUTLAND, THE DEPLOYMENT, 6.15-6.30 P.M.	107
JUTLAND, NIGHT ACTION, MAY 31-JUNE 1, 1916	111
ATTACK ON ZEEBRUGGE, APRIL 22-23, 1918	125

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# I

## THE BLOCKADE AND THE CONTINENTAL SYSTEM

THE WEAPON which ultimately enabled Britain to defeat Napoleon was the command of the sea which had been won in the naval war culminating in the battle of Trafalgar. Thereafter the weapon operated in three distinct ways. Firstly, the blockade of the enemy's fleets, so that they could never again challenge Britain's supremacy at sea, though the war lasted ten years after the death of Nelson, and though Napoleon was able to build up an even larger navy than that which he possessed in 1805. Secondly, the economic blockade of Napoleon's continental empire. Lastly, our command of the sea enabled us to maintain an expeditionary force in Spain. 'If any one,' said Wellington in 1813, 'wishes to know the history of this war, I will tell them that it is our maritime superiority gives me the power of maintaining my army, while the enemy are unable to do so.' History affords no more successful example than this of the use of sea-power to support an eccentric, harassing force which diverts important elements of the enemy's power. When Spain rose against the French in 1808 the Peninsular War assumed the character of the first of the Wars of Liberation, the fundamental cause of which was the economic tyranny Napoleon sought to impose upon the whole of the continent in the course of his commercial war with Great Britain.

Trafalgar did not, as is commonly supposed, save us from invasion in 1805. The preparations for war in Austria did that. But it saved us from the recurrence of such a threat, and it stifled any hopes Napoleon may have entertained of world dominion. It was the less spectacular, but far more important, activities of the blockading fleets which brought about his downfall. Two aspects of the working of the blockade may be distinguished: the military aspect, in which the aim was to confine the enemy's fleets in their own

harbours; and the economic aspect, in which Britain not merely destroyed French trade, but maintained her own commerce in spite of everything the Emperor could do.

Let us consider first how the blockade of the enemy's fleets was carried out before and after the battle of Trafalgar. At the beginning of the war against Revolutionary France the old system of Open Blockade was in operation. Under this system the watch of the Channel Fleet on Brest was based on Portsmouth, from which port cruises were undertaken in the hope of making contact with the enemy. Thus the battle of the Glorious First of June (1794) was fought because both fleets were out on convoy duty and Howe succeeded in intercepting the French before they could regain their harbour. A force of frigates was normally maintained to watch the entrances to Brest and report if the enemy came out, but as there was seldom a clearly defined *rendezvous* it often happened that the main fleet could not be found in an emergency. Given an easterly wind, it was perfectly possible for the French to slip out unmolested, as it did in the winter of 1796 when an expedition under General Hoche was prevented from making a landing at Bantry Bay only by the weather and the indecision of the commanders. Similarly, in 1799 Admiral Bruix was able to sail to Toulon and back without interruption because the blockade was not strict enough.

To guard against the recurrence of such dangers Lord St. Vincent instituted a stricter system known as Close Blockade when he was appointed to the command of the Channel Fleet in 1800. This system was not entirely new, since Hawke had adopted it for a short period in 1759, and Duncan's watch on the Texel which ended with the battle of Camperdown in 1797 was similar to it; but under St. Vincent the Channel Fleet remained at sea for longer periods and under severer conditions than ever before. When war broke out again in 1803, and the old threat of invasion was intensified by Napoleon's formidable preparations, Cornwallis was appointed to carry on the same methods. It was his watch outside Brest which really prevented the invasion

of Britain during the crucial period from 1803 till August 1805, when the threat of war against Austria and Russia necessitated the removal of the Grand Army from the Channel ports.

Under this system of blockade the Channel Fleet was based on Plymouth or Torbay, the usual anchorage before Plymouth breakwater was completed in 1821. From 1803 onwards a fleet of between twenty and thirty ships cruised off Ushant in all weathers save when the fury of the westerly gales forced it to bear up for Torbay. When the wind was favourable for the enemy St. Vincent's rule was to be 'well up with Ushant in an easterly wind'. Not merely was the fleet larger than in the days of Howe and Bridport, but discipline was far more severe. Shore leave was curtailed so that officers could rejoin their ships at short notice, and when ships had to put into port for repairs only one or two at a time were permitted to return to port. In addition to this main squadron, whose *rendezvous* was off Ushant, an inshore squadron of half a dozen ships, chiefly frigates, cruised close off the mouth of Brest harbour and sheltered in the nearby Douarnenez Bay when it blew a gale. Cornwallis's instructions to the commander of the inshore squadron shows how the system was working in October 1803: 'The strictest watch is to be kept on the port of Brest. The squadron with me will keep its station off Ushant as long as possible, but should it, by stress of weather, be forced to the eastward the greatest care will be taken not to be driven beyond Torbay. And you are, with the ships under your orders, should it blow from the westward, to take shelter in Douarnenez Bay.' So efficient was this blockade that the Brest Fleet never came out until the system was relaxed after Trafalgar. Even then the small squadrons which did manage to escape were all caught and defeated.<sup>1</sup> Nelson's methods in the blockade of Toulon were of the older type, partly because of the lack of a convenient base, but mainly because

<sup>1</sup> e.g. in 1806 one squadron reached the West Indies, where it was defeated by Duckworth at San Domingo. In 1809 another reached the Aix Roads; see below, page 16.

it was his aim to lure Villeneuve out to fight. When the latter did come out he escaped Nelson's watch as successfully (in the short run) as Brueys had done in 1798. From 1805 till 1810 Collingwood maintained a closer watch on Toulon, but stress of weather usually forced him to retire to Port Mahon for much of the winter; after his death Pellew, Lord Exmouth, continued the blockade in the Mediterranean until the end of the war.

There were plenty of other ports to watch besides Brest and Toulon. When the threat of invasion was at its height British ships patrolled the entire coastline of France, Spain, and Holland. Keith was in the Downs co-operating with the North Sea Fleet and patrolling the Channel ports; Cornwallis was off Brest, Collingwood off Rochefort, Pellew off Ferrol, Orde off Cadiz, and Nelson off Toulon. After 1805 the blockade stretched from Sir James Saumarez's fleet in the Baltic to the ships of Collingwood's Mediterranean fleet operating in the Levant and the Ionian Sea. As Mahan said in the most romantic passage a naval historian has ever written: 'The world has never seen a more impressive demonstration of the influence of sea-power upon its history. Those far distant, storm-beaten ships, upon which the Grand Army never looked, stood between it and the dominion of the world.' So it was in 1914-18, and again in 1939-45.

A blockade on such a scale tested the men and the ships of the Navy to the uttermost. The crews had to be men of iron and their officers needed the finest qualities of leadership to prevent the rot of boredom from setting in. Of the many naval officers who spent the best part of their lives on such dreary duty Collingwood is the most illustrious example. From 1803 till 1805 he served under Cornwallis; after the momentary glory of leading his column into action at Trafalgar, he spent the rest of his life in command of the Mediterranean Fleet off Cadiz and Toulon. Some idea of the strain which finally killed him in 1810 while still on active service may be gathered from the fact that he never slept out of his ship for five years, and that at one time he did not even let go his anchor for fifteen months on end.