

## Naval War College Review

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Volume 32  
Number 6 *September-October*

Article 8

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1979

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### Recommended Citation

Syrett, David (1979) "The Role of the Royal Navy in the Napoleonic Wars After Trafalgar, 1805-1814," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 32 : No. 6 , Article 8.

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*Wellington's armies defeated Napoleon on the Iberian Peninsula but sea power exercised by the Royal Navy was required to install those land forces and to maintain them.*

## **THE ROLE OF THE ROYAL NAVY IN THE NAPOLEONIC WARS AFTER TRAFALGAR, 1805-1814**

by

David Syrett

The Royal Navy has a tradition of victory that reaches back into history at least as far as the reign of the Tudors.<sup>1</sup> The strength of this tradition is evident in the unbroken series of victories achieved by the Royal Navy during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, a series in which the Glorious First of June, Cape St. Vincent, Camperdown, the Nile, Copenhagen, and Trafalgar are only the high points. How did the British achieve victory after victory in the "Age of Fighting Sail"? The answer to this question, particularly during the period of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, lies in part with the makeup of the officer corps of the Royal Navy.

When the guns stopped firing off Cape Trafalgar in the late afternoon of 21 October 1805, for most of the officer corps of the Royal Navy it was the end of another battle among many in years of conducting war at sea. Most flag officers, and even a few senior post captains, were on their third war; and

for the majority of officers and ratings, it was their second war. By 1805, the officers of the Royal Navy had spent years at sea and collectively they had fought hundreds of victorious actions. There was, however, more to an officer of the Royal Navy than his vast experience at naval warfare: he was part of a tradition of victory. The post captains of the Royal Navy during the Napoleonic Wars had learned their profession under such officers as St. Vincent, Cornwallis, Nelson, and Collingwood; and the flag officers had served under men like Howe, Rodney, and Hood, who in turn had served under Pocock, Hawke, and Anson. This tradition of service and victory was the professional heritage of the officers and men of the Royal Navy during the Napoleonic Wars.

During this period the officer corps of the Royal Navy believed to a man that it had a special mission; for the British Navy was the only force that constantly had protected not only

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Britain but the entire world from the ravages of the French Revolution and Bonapartism. The Seven Years War had been a war of the *ancien régime* and as such had been fought over such things as colonies and commercial advantages. The American War started as a civil war within the British Empire and deeply divided the British. But the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars drove the ruling classes of Britain together to oppose what they saw as not only a danger to the "Rights of Englishmen" but also a threat to European civilization. To the rulers of Britain, the French Revolution was opening up the seams of society and producing an outpouring of strife, anarchy, and atheism while Napoleon's rule of France conjured up all their traditional fears of continental despotism and militarism. Britain believed that the excesses of the French Revolution and of Napoleon must be fought to the bitter end.

The Royal Navy fought on year after year with dogged determination as French armies won victory after victory. As long as the British Navy stood as a barrier between France and the British Isles, no matter how many victories French armies won on the Continent, the war would continue unresolved until Britain and the true values of European civilization were finally victorious. The officers of the Royal Navy fought with great skill, determination, and ruthlessness in the belief, especially when Britain was the only nation actively fighting the French, that their efforts alone would save Britain and European civilization. England not only expected victory from the Royal Navy but required it for survival.

In the Royal Navy of George III's reign an officer needed "interest" as well as ability in order to have a successful career. Skill and luck alone were not enough to enable a young officer to reach the rank of post captain and obtain further employment. The Royal Navy was full of aged lieutenants

who through lack of "interest" could not advance to the rank of commander and then to post captain. To have "interest" was to have the support of a person who had access to the high and mighty and who could intercede to insure that a young officer received the commands and appointments necessary for his advancement up through the ranks of the officer corps.<sup>2</sup> Nelson's protector or interest, for example, was his uncle Maurice Suckling, the Comptroller of the Navy.<sup>3</sup> By interest alone an officer might gain the rank of post captain, but without skill and luck he would remain a post captain on half pay for the rest of his life. In 1780, Adm. George Rodney promoted his 15-year old son, John, who had been at sea less than 2 years, from lieutenant to post captain in 10 days.<sup>4</sup> But John Rodney spent most of his life on the beach as an unemployed post captain.

It took skill, ability, and unremitting attention to master such subjects as gunnery, seamanship, navigation, and especially the difficult arts of administration, strategy, tactics, and diplomacy. The training of an officer in George III's Navy began at a young age and took place at sea. Nelson first went to sea at the age of 12 and Cornwallis and Collingwood at 11.<sup>5</sup> The early career of George Keith Elphinstone, who as Admiral Lord Keith commanded the Channel Fleet from 1812 to 1814 and during the Hundred Days in 1815, illustrates how a young man was educated to become an officer in the Royal Navy. Elphinstone was born near Stirling in 1746 and at the age of 15 entered the navy as an able seaman in H.M.S. *Royal Sovereign*. Elphinstone was rated as a midshipman and he served for the next few years in a number of different ships that were commanded for the most part by kinsmen. At his own request, Elphinstone was discharged from the navy in 1766 and he signed on the East Indian *Tryton* as third mate for a voyage to

India. Upon his return to Britain from the East Indies, Elphinstone reentered the navy, and in 1769 he was made acting Lieutenant in H.M.S. *Stag*. After being commissioned a lieutenant, Elphinstone rose slowly but steadily up through the commissioned ranks of the Royal Navy. Although he never took part in a major fleet action during the American and French Revolutionary Wars, he became an acknowledged expert on the conduct of blockades and amphibious operations. He reached the pinnacle of his career in 1812 when he was appointed to command the Channel Fleet; Elphinstone was 66 and had earned this appointment through hard work and long service.<sup>6</sup>

Elphinstone never would have been appointed to this command if, during the course of his career, he had permitted "too huge and obvious a blot to soil his naval escutcheon. If he did, he ran the risk of being 'broken'—dismissed from the Service." At the beginning of the Seven Years War, Admiral Byng was executed for an error in judgment, and over the years a number of officers had been dismissed from the service for failing to do their duty. However, the usual method by which the Admiralty dealt with an unfit officer was simply not to employ him, leaving him to sit out his life ashore on half pay.<sup>7</sup> The sanction of being dismissed from the service or, more often, not being employed, hastened the development of professionalism among the officer corps because it weeded out unfit officers.

During the last quarter of the 18th century and the first decade of the 19th century, the Royal Navy was a weapon of war being constantly improved. Some of its greatest advances, however, had nothing to do with arms and seamanship but concerned the health of seamen. The long blockades of French ports carried out during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars were made possible by a vast improvement in naval medicine. The efforts of the Royal

Navy, led by such men as Dr. James Lind, Sir Gilbert Blane, M.D., and Dr. Thomas Trotter to prevent or at least control or mitigate such diseases as smallpox, scurvy, and typhus is one of the first, largest, and most successful programs of preventive medicine in history.<sup>8</sup> The campaign to save seamen in the Royal Navy from death from disease was difficult and drawn out owing in part to a general lack of medical knowledge during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Compounding the problem was the inability of flag officers, captains, naval administrators, and even naval surgeons and doctors to learn from experience—Cook's voyages, for instance. Even though a number of naval officers and doctors saw the connection between the consumption of fresh fruit and the indices of scurvy, it was not until St. Vincent's close blockade of Brest in 1799 that the Admiralty ordered lemons and oranges to be issued on a regular basis. Scurvy could be and was for the most part eliminated by the regular use of citrus juice. Jenner's discovery of cowpox vaccine did much to control smallpox by the end of the 18th century. No cure was found for fevers such as typhus, but by the last decade of the 18th century a number of naval officers and doctors were beginning to see that there was a connection between personal and public hygiene and the rate of typhus on a warship. Numerous efforts were undertaken to improve shipboard hygiene in the Royal Navy by various enlightened captains, doctors, surgeons, and flag officers; and although a large number of these medical and hygienic measures were done on an *ad hoc* basis, they did much to reduce the ravages of disease. In 1778, for example, out of a total strength of 60,000 seamen and marines authorized by Parliament, some 15,978 were sent ashore sick. In 1780 the situation had not improved, for out of an authorized total of 85,000 men, 32,121 were sick. By 1805 there was a dramatic improve-

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ment, with only 8,083 sick out of a total of 120,000. In 1806, out of the same number, only 7,662 were sent ashore sick.<sup>9</sup> The ability to end, control, or at least reduce the indices of disease among the men of the Royal Navy during that period enabled the ships of the Royal Navy to stay at sea almost continuously. Strategies of constant close blockade and campaigns such as Trafalgar would have been impossible without the advances in preventive medicine made by the Royal Navy.

In the last quarter of the 18th century the Royal Navy introduced a number of innovations in naval gunnery designed to increase the firepower of a warship. As early as the autumn of 1779, Rodney requested that the cannon of his ships be fitted with locks,<sup>10</sup> mechanisms similar to those used to fire muskets; and by 1782 all the guns of Rodney's ships had been so fitted.<sup>11</sup> The use of locks instead of matches not only increased the rate of fire for each weapon but also, when combined with changes in the way in which gunpowder was handled on board warships, greatly reduced the number of accidents.<sup>12</sup> About the time locks were introduced, springs and other methods to reduce recoil were fitted. Methods also were devised to enable a gun mounted on the side of a ship to fire at a 45-degree angle forward or abaft the beam, a great improvement over a fixed gun. Also, a new type cannon—the carronade—was introduced. Carronades were lightweight guns that could be mounted on places such as the poop, quarterdeck, and forecabin of a ship. They were capable of throwing a very heavy shot with great smashing power at short ranges. The hitting power of the carronade at short range fitted perfectly into the Royal Navy's doctrine of engaging the enemy gun port to gun port.<sup>13</sup> Another weapon developed and deployed at the beginning of the 19th century was the Congreve rocket. These missiles were 3 feet 6 inches long, 4 inches in diameter,

weighed 32 pounds, and had a range of about 3,000 yards. They were designed primarily for shore bombardment and were described by their inventor as "ammunition without ordnance, the soul of artillery without the body; and has for the first principle of its flight a decided advantage for the convenience of use over the spherical carcass." Congreve's rockets were used with varying degrees of success at Copenhagen in 1807, Aix Roads in 1809, Fort Mchenry in 1814, and in support of Wellington's army along the north coast of Spain.<sup>14</sup>

During the American War the Royal Navy began a reformation of fleet tactics that culminated in the Battle of Trafalgar. Led by men like Howe, Kempenfelt, and Rodney, British officers began to realize that there was more to fighting a naval battle than having two lines of ships sailing parallel to each other while exchanging broadsides. British commanders began to think in terms of breaking the enemy's line of battle, of overpowering part of an enemy force by bringing the whole weight of their force to bear on a particular section of an enemy squadron, or of forcing upon an enemy a melee in which superior British gunnery would decide the issue. They reformed fleet tactics by rewriting various sets of fighting and additional instructions and adopting a numerical system of signals, but these changes evolved slowly and not very rationally. Throughout the American and French Revolutionary Wars, the commanders of different squadrons and fleets who were interested in fleet tactics, fighting instructions, and signals experimented with various types. They wanted to stop slavishly following, article by article, the old standing instructions and to work out new systems that would give a squadron commander freedom to employ his ships as tactical circumstances demanded. Tactics employed by the Royal Navy in battle grew increasingly sophisticated and effective,

culminating in the effort by Nelson at Trafalgar. After Trafalgar and the death of Nelson, however, Royal Navy tactics ceased to evolve because, as Corbett noted, "when there was practically no higher instruction in the theory of tactics, it was easy for officers to forget how much prolonged and patient study had enabled Nelson to handle his fleets with the freedom he did; and the tendency was to believe that his successes could be indefinitely repeated by mere daring and vehemence of attack." Tactics after Trafalgar tended to follow the doctrine of "Never mind manoeuvres: always go at them." But the years 1776 through 1805 were ones in which the Royal Navy's fleet tactics were perfected to a point that was not surpassed during the age of sail.<sup>15</sup>

The Royal Navy's ships-of-the-line were the heart of British naval power during the Napoleonic Wars. It was British strategy to use squadrons of ships-of-the-line to blockade enemy naval forces in European ports. Because of this policy, most of the Royal Navy's capital units were deployed in European waters. In September 1805, for example, Lord Barham, the First Lord of the Admiralty, calculated that the Royal Navy had 103 ships-of-the-line. Eleven were being refitted in British ports and 72 were deployed in European waters.<sup>16</sup> British squadrons of ships-of-the-line stationed in the western approaches of the English Channel, the North Sea, the Gulf of Cadiz, and the Gulf of Lions prevented major enemy naval units from putting to sea by keeping them under blockade, often for years.

The ability to maintain blockades that kept enemy capital ships in port gave smaller warships of the Royal Navy the opportunity to exploit the advantages of "command of the sea." According to Barham's figures for September 1805, the Royal Navy had 120 frigates and 420-odd sloops-of-war and other small warships.<sup>17</sup> These small warships

carried out such duties as escorting convoys, supporting minor coastal raids, hunting down enemy cruisers, and attacking enemy shipping on the high seas and in European coastal waters.

One of the major advantages of the British strategy of close blockade was that it allowed them, with certain exceptions, to use fewer ships as escorts for convoys. According to one authority, the convoy system in this period "was essentially a secondary line of protection. The escorts provided by the navy were sufficient to ward off privateers and even the odd man-of-war. They were not sufficient to ward off raiding squadrons."<sup>18</sup> Even with all the twists and turns of British military and political fortunes, the Royal Navy did not need to provide enormous escorts to protect British seaborne trade. This was in marked contrast to the American Revolutionary War when, after 1778, the Royal Navy had to use squadrons of ships-of-the-line to escort British convoys and defend them from major enemy squadrons.<sup>19</sup>

Squadrons of ships of the Royal Navy were stationed at chokepoints of maritime trade—the western approaches of the English Channel, the Strait of Gibraltar, and the Skagerrak—while scores of small British warships operated against enemy coastal trade. Year after year the small warships of the Royal Navy roamed the coastal waters of Napoleon's Europe attacking coastal shipping, undertaking cutting out operations, and making small-scale raids on enemy shore positions. This was very dirty and dangerous duty, but it affected Napoleon's strategy and also the economy of regions under his control. The Royal Navy's operations in European coastal waters denied the enemy, to varying degrees, the use of water transport, which in the age before mechanical means of transport was not only less expensive than land transport but also often the only means of moving certain types of goods. The movement

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of small coastal craft could not be stopped completely, but defense against operations of the Royal Navy in European coastal waters cost Napoleon dearly in material and manpower. For example, the French were forced to build a system of lookout posts and telegraph stations along entire coastlines they controlled to give warning of the approach of British cruisers. By 1810, in order to protect anchorages and harbors against British raiders, Napoleon had to deploy more than 3,600 cannons in some 900 batteries manned by 13,000 artillerymen. He still was unable to protect coastal shipping from British cruisers.<sup>20</sup>

Napoleon's answer to British naval power was to wage commercial war by attempting to close the entire continent of Europe to British ships and goods. On 21 November 1806 Napoleon proclaimed, by means of the Berlin Decree, a paper blockade of the British Isles. He prohibited all trade with Britain or in British goods in those areas of Europe under his control. This effort was known as the Continental System. It became French policy to wage "remorseless war against English merchandise." The British met Napoleon's commercial warfare head-on with a series of Orders in Council that placed under blockade all areas closed to British goods and then used the Royal Navy to enforce the blockade and to aid the entry of British goods into Europe. Ironically, the neutral United States was hurt just as much by British and French commercial warfare as were the two European powers. Between November 1807 and July 1812, the British seized 389 American merchant ships; and during the same period the French, their allies and satellites seized 468 American ships. The number of American merchant ships seized by both sides shows that there were huge gaps in the French Continental System. As John Quincy Adams observed, the Continental System was similar to "an attempt to

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exclude the air from a bottle, by sealing up hermetically the mouth, while there is a great hole in the side."<sup>21</sup>

The British had two main advantages in this armed commercial war with Napoleon, and both were owing to the Royal Navy. With naval blockades, Britain could prevent regions under Napoleon's control from exporting goods by sea, and she could also prevent, to a large degree, these regions from obtaining goods, such as sugar and cotton, produced outside Europe.

The British Government and British merchants used every conceivable method to break the Continental System. With the active support of the British Government, smuggling was undertaken on a huge scale. British goods seeped in from the Baltic to the Balkans. From strategically located depots, the Isle of Wight, Malta, Gibraltar, and Helgoland, smuggling flourished. Helgoland, an island of about 150 acres known as "Little London" to the British, was fortified and used as a base for moving goods into northwest Germany. In only 3½ months during 1808, some 120 ships unloaded cargoes at Helgoland. Hand in hand with large-scale smuggling—a major occupation on the Continent—went official corruption. This in turn produced a huge drop in customs duties. French customs receipts, amounting to some 60,600,000 francs during 1807, had declined in 1808 to 18,600,000 francs, and by 1809 had dropped to 11,600,000 francs. The situation got so out of hand in France that the head of the customs service seriously suggested that the government take up smuggling as a way of undercutting private smugglers. The British Government further increased the difficulties Napoleon's officials had enforcing the Continental System when it issued a large number of licenses and fake ships' papers designed to prove to various continental authorities that ships and goods were of non-British origin. Some idea of the scale of this

operation can be seen in the fact that in 1810 alone the British Government issued about 18,000 licenses.<sup>22</sup>

In the years 1808 to 1813, British trade in the Baltic was carried on by means of fake papers, licenses, and with the armed protection of the Royal Navy. Ships proceeding to the Baltic would travel under convoy from various British ports to Vinga Sound near Gothenburg. Baltic convoys were protected by naval escorts as they crossed the North Sea; and they received further protection by passing through an area heavily patrolled by British warships. These warships operated in the Skagerrak and off the Naze of Norway hunting down enemy cruisers and cutting communications between Denmark and Norway. At Vinga Sound the ships were formed into one large convoy for passage, either through the Sound or the Great Belt, into the Baltic. The two passages are very difficult to navigate and were open to attack by Danish gunboats. When a convoy was to pass through the Great Belt or the Sound into or out of the Baltic, six ships-of-the-line were deployed along the passage to act as floating gunboat bases for protection. These tactics were very successful; in 1809, for example, 2,210 merchant ships were escorted through the Great Belt without loss. Once into the Baltic, the Royal Navy would escort the merchant ships some 50 leagues and then the convoy would disperse so that the merchant ships would not be seen under protection. Protection against enemy cruisers in the Baltic was maintained by blockading ports from which the cruisers operated.

Each merchant ship traveling to the Baltic, British or not, had a set of false papers showing that she was complying with Napoleon's regulations and a license issued by the British Government to undertake a specific voyage; as long as a merchant ship stayed within the limits set forth in the license, she would not be subject to capture by

British cruisers. The Baltic powers wanted British goods and also to sell naval stores, and the British needed all the naval stores they could get. Thus, false documentation enabled officials of various Baltic states to appear to follow Napoleon's regulations; the licenses the ships carried let them, and not the enemy, through the Royal Navy's tight grip, and Britain was able to obtain naval stores and pour masses of British goods into Europe.<sup>23</sup> The Baltic was not the only hole in the Continental System, however. All along the coast of Europe, the British used similar methods to break down the Continental System.

The Continental System at times hurt the British economically, but never to such an extent that they were forced to make fundamental changes in policy toward the French Empire.<sup>24</sup> One of the great weaknesses of the Continental System was that it failed to understand the strength of British economy. Industrialization gave Britain an advantage in the world market. Also, the British economy was flexible and had been able to adapt to all political and military changes brought about through years of almost continual war by finding new markets as old ones closed. In order to maintain the Continental System, Napoleon was forced to invade or attack any European country that traded with Britain, or even appeared to be trading with her. The demands of the Continental System forced Napoleon to undertake military operations against such countries as Portugal and Russia because they refused, or were unable, to exclude British ships and goods, and to send armies to occupy regions, such as Dalmatia, that were at best marginal to the Emperor's main political, economic, and strategic interests.

Victory at sea does not by itself win wars against mighty armies. After Trafalgar, the Royal Navy controlled the seas of the world with an iron hand. But destroying enemy trade on the high



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seas, attacking the coastal trade of the enemy, blockading enemy warships in their bases, and punching holes in the Continental System was hitting for the most part at the extreme edge of Napoleon's power base. His strength was military control of the European mainland. Within days of Trafalgar and loss of the Franco-Spanish fleet, Napoleon moved to strengthen his control of Europe. On 2 December 1805, Napoleon's army defeated the combined Austrian and Russian armies at Austerlitz. In October 1806, the French smashed the Prussians at Jena and Auerstadt; and on 27 October 1806 Napoleon entered Berlin. Napoleon defeated the Russians on 14 June 1807 at the Battle of Friedland. Several weeks later he met the Emperor of Russia on a raft in the Niemen River at Tilsit. At this meeting Russia agreed to remove herself from European affairs, and Prussia was reduced to a minor power. After the famous meeting at Tilsit, Napoleon controlled all of Europe from the Franco-Spanish border in the west to the Niemen River in the east, and from the shores of the Baltic and North Seas to the Mediterranean. The Royal Navy could not prevent Napoleon from conquering any place that his armies could march to; conversely, Napoleon's armies were stopped at the coast by the Royal Navy. But how do a shark and a tiger do battle?

At least since the time of the Second Coalition, the British Government had pursued a policy aimed at forcing the French back to their pre-1789 borders and destroying the existing government in Paris. They had tried negotiating with various French Revolutionary governments but found that this was a meaningless effort; the French were not prepared to follow traditional methods of negotiation and diplomacy, nor were they prepared to abide by the terms of an agreement.<sup>25</sup> During the Peace of Amiens in 1802 the British attempted to negotiate again with Napoleon, but

without success. At the time it appeared to statesmen in London that Napoleon was forcing the European balance of power more and more in France's favor, and also was attempting to gain control of the Mediterranean and eventually to threaten British India. On 18 May 1803 the Peace of Amiens ended with a British declaration of war against France.<sup>26</sup>

If negotiation was impossible, only two courses were open: to put a British army on the Continent, with the objective of overthrowing the French government, or to retreat into maritime isolation. At any time since the beginning of the French Revolutionary Wars, Britain could have adopted the latter strategy and waged only a naval war against the French without supporting an army or allies. This strategy would have been popular, but it was a dead end. A naval war is defensive and in many respects passive. It would have given Napoleon time to organize the naval and economic power of the continent. Britain would lose political and strategic initiative and the Royal Navy would be paralyzed, the threat of invasion forcing its main strength to be deployed defending the British Isles. Napoleon knew that the mere existence of an invasion force would tie down a huge number of British warships. To adopt a strategy of maritime isolation would let the initiative fall by default to Napoleon.

As early as the Second Coalition, Lord Auckland told the House of Lords that "The security of Europe is essential to the security of the British Empire. We cannot separate them." At the time it seemed to most Englishmen that his lordship was stating the obvious.<sup>27</sup> Britain could not write off Europe. On the other hand, Britain could not count on her continental allies to assist in the fight against Napoleon. Ever since the beginning of the French Revolutionary Wars, the British had seen French military power smash British-led European coalitions and force continental allies

into hostility and even war against them. If allies could not be depended on and maritime isolation was strategically impossible, the only way that Britain could gain peace on acceptable terms was to use seapower to land and support a British army on the European continent. This line of reasoning allowed Lord Castlereagh, the Secretary of War, to argue successfully after evacuation of British forces from Corunna in 1809 that a British army must return to the Continent.<sup>28</sup> It took the British a long time to see that fighting Napoleon's armies on the Continent was the only workable strategy.

If victory over Napoleon's armies could be obtained only by landing a British army on the Continent and defeating the French in battle, the question of when and where remained. The Mediterranean had been a possible theater of operations since the breakdown of the Peace of Amiens. The British maintained military forces at various bases in the Mediterranean—in 1803, 9,380 troops, in July 1810, some 33,000—but for a number of reasons this force could never be brought to bear.<sup>29</sup> There were several other possibilities. In 1807 units of the Royal Navy and the British Army attacked Copenhagen and destroyed or carried away ships of the Danish Navy.<sup>30</sup> In the late spring, 1808, Lt. Gen. Sir John Moore was sent to Sweden with some 12,000 troops on an illogical, foolish mission to aid the King of Sweden against the Russians. After reconnoitering the Swedish situation, Moore saw that a British army in the Baltic did not make much sense, and he ordered it back to Britain.<sup>31</sup> It would be the British Government, Napoleon, and most of all the people of Spain and Portugal who would make the rugged terrain of the Iberian Peninsula the battleground where the British Army supported by the Royal Navy would confront the armies of Napoleon. In 6 years of ferocious warfare, French armies would

leave behind a quarter of a million dead and the sullied reputations of several marshals and numerous generals. The drain put on French resources by the Peninsular War and naval power was Britain's contribution to the overthrow of Napoleon in 1814.

Portugal was Britain's oldest continental ally, but after the meeting at Tilsit the Portuguese had been subjected to mounting French diplomatic pressure to adhere to the Continental System. Throughout the summer of 1807, under great pressure from Napoleon, Prince John, the Regent of Portugal, accepted every demand made by the Emperor of France except one. Prince John refused to confiscate and hand over to Napoleon all British property in Portugal. Using this act of defiance as an excuse, Napoleon ordered the invasion of Portugal. On 27 October 1807 Spain, who was France's ally, granted French forces transit rights across northern Spain and also the right to station troops there to protect the supply lines of the French Army in Portugal. But even before the Spanish had agreed to grant transit rights, some 20,000 French troops had moved into Spain and were marching on Portugal. By 12 November the French were at Salamanca. Eighteen days later 2,000 foot-sore French troops entered Lisbon. But the Royal Navy had frustrated Napoleon again for Prince John, the Portuguese Government, treasury, archives, and navy had sailed for Brazil under protection of a British squadron 2 days before the arrival of the French.

Napoleon next turned his attention to Spain. After a complex series of plots and maneuvers, the Spanish royal family abdicated, French troops occupied Madrid and most of northern Spain, and Joseph Bonaparte was proclaimed King of Spain. Napoleon, however, did not take into account the Spanish people. On 2 May 1808 there were large anti-French riots in Madrid, followed in a matter of days by a nationwide rebellion and the beginning of a protracted,

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savage guerrilla war. The French position in Spain collapsed within weeks, and Napoleon's forces began to withdraw eastward to the Ebro River. In a battle at Bailen, the Spanish forced 18,000 French troops to surrender. The great naval base at Cadiz was taken over by Spanish rebels, the French squadron there was destroyed, and the port was garrisoned by British troops from Gibraltar.

The first effective British military effort on the Continent in years began early in August 1808, when a small British army under the command of Sir Arthur Wellesley, later known as the Duke of Wellington, landed at Mondego in northern Portugal. After being reinforced, Wellington began moving south towards Lisbon. Near Vimeiro the British defeated the French Army of Portugal, which suffered 2,000 casualties and the loss of 13 guns. On 22 August the French agreed, under the terms of the so-called Convention of Cintra, to evacuate Portugal. The speedy liberation of Portugal, the disaster at Bailen, and the defeat at Vimeiro showed that the French could be beaten. Landing a British army in Portugal was a change in strategy by the British Government from "small-scale, colony-grabbing raids" to fighting a full-scale continental war.<sup>32</sup>

After massively reinforcing his army along the Ebro River, Napoleon began a second campaign on 7 November 1808. Within a month the French had overrun most of northeast Spain; and on 4 December, they entered Madrid. It appeared that all that remained to complete conquest of the Iberian Peninsula was to mop up in the south and dispose of the small British Army in Portugal. As French forces were overrunning northeast Spain, however, the British Army in Portugal, only 25,000 strong and under the command of Lt. Gen. Sir John Moore, marched from Lisbon to Salamanca in Spain. Moore had decided that a retreat was the only course that

he could follow with his small force. Spanish forces lacked organization and were of poor quality, and they were cracking under an attack by some 250,000 French troops. At the time Moore did not know that the French had occupied Madrid, but he perceived that if the British moved very quickly north or northeast they would threaten Napoleon's lines of communication with Bayonne and expose an isolated French corps under Marshall Soult to surprise attack and possible destruction. Moore knew that Napoleon would be deflected from southern Spain and Portugal and that he would march north to counter the movements of the British Army. Therefore, on 11 December Moore's army began marching northward towards Soult's corps and Napoleon's supply lines with France.

Napoleon was in Madrid when he learned of Moore's movements. Within hours the first units of French troops began marching north to attempt to cut off and trap the British. Every possible French unit was ordered to drop everything and march north. Moore had been right in his belief that Napoleon could not withstand the temptation of an opportunity to crush a British army. On 23 December at Sahagun, south of Leon, Moore learned of a large movement of French troops toward his position. The British general immediately ordered a retreat over the Cantabrian Mountains to Corunna. What followed was one of the epic retreats in British military history. Moore's army encountered incredible hardships traveling across the mountains of northern Spain in the dead of winter. He barely managed to keep one step ahead of the French and reached the port of Corunna in the northwest corner of Spain on 13 January 1809. On 16 January the French attacked the British at Corunna in an attempt to prevent them from being evacuated from Spain by the Royal Navy. The British easily drove off the attackers, inflicting about 1,500

casualties. Near the end of the battle, however, Sir John Moore was hit by a cannonball and, like Nelson, died at the moment of victory. Moore's death had not been in vain, for he had forced Napoleon to give up the conquest of southern Spain and Portugal, and his victory at Corunna had enabled Britain's only army to be evacuated, making possible its later return.<sup>33</sup>

As war on the Peninsula continued, it became a "people's war." The French could not break the will of the Spanish people. Patriotism, religious fanaticism, and deep hatred for the French produced a ruthless guerrilla war that raged throughout Spain. Further, after Corunna, the British Government did not give up; it formed an army and sent more troops to Portugal. This army was commanded by Wellington, a soldier of great strategic, tactical, and administrative skill learned in the wilds of India. Supported by the Royal Navy, Spanish guerrillas and Wellington's army turned Spain into a running sore that made endless demands on Napoleon's military resources.<sup>34</sup>

The power of the Royal Navy enabled the British Army and Spanish guerrillas to wage war.<sup>35</sup> Blockades and other operations prevented the French from using seaborne transport and forced them to use roads under constant attack by Spanish guerrillas. In Spain, important roads hug the coastlines, making them vulnerable to naval attack. Lord Cochrane, for example, first made a name for himself when as a frigate captain he attacked coastal roads, batteries, enemy troops, and telegraph stations along the French and Spanish Mediterranean coasts.<sup>36</sup> Ships of the Channel Fleet ranged along the Spanish coast in the Bay of Biscay, bombarding cities, stopping French coastal shipping, and aiding Spanish guerrillas with gunfire and supplying them with money and weapons.<sup>37</sup>

One of the problems the Royal Navy encountered in the Bay of Biscay was

that Wellington did not understand what types of operations the navy could or could not undertake. This led to friction between the army and the navy. Wellington, for instance, apparently did not understand the dangers of a lee shore for a ship-of-the-line operating in the extreme southeast corner of the Bay. Finally, Rear Adm. Sir Thomas Byam Martin was sent by the Admiralty to Wellington's headquarters to explain the abilities and limitations of the Royal Navy. Martin spoke with Wellington and his officers on 21 September 1813 and after their conversation cooperation between the army and the navy greatly improved.<sup>38</sup>

The greatest assistance rendered by the Royal Navy to Wellington's army during the Peninsula War was logistic. The French had to pass all their supplies down the Bayonne-Madrid road while fending off constant attacks by Spanish guerrillas. Wellington's army, however, was supplied by sea. From 1808 to 1813 hundreds of transports, storeships, and victuallers sailed from Britain across the Bay of Biscay to Lisbon and Oporto almost without incident. This could not have been done had not the Royal Navy provided escorts for army supply convoys and kept enemy warships in port by close blockade. One of the major strategic shortcomings of the Americans in the opening months of the War of 1812 was their having no units of the U.S. Navy to send to attack Wellington's seaborne supply lines.

Royal Navy control of the Bay of Biscay gave Wellington a very flexible logistic system. In 1813 Wellington forced the French to withdraw from most of Iberia when, with one skillful move, he changed his logistic base from Portuguese ports to Spanish ports on the Bay of Biscay. In May and June 1813, Wellington outsmarted the French Army by heading north into an area the French assumed to be impassable. He crossed the Douro River and marched into the wilderness of Tras

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os Montes. Wellington then turned east, outflanking the French in western Spain, and moved along the north side of the Douro River to Toro. This put him in position to push the French before him down the road to Bayonne but instead, in an inspired move, he turned north and marched to the shore of the Bay of Biscay at Santander, thereby outflanking the line of the Ebro River and placing the British Army within hitting distance of the French border at Bayonne. On 17 June the French learned that Wellington had outflanked every possible defensive position on the Iberian Peninsula; they had no choice but to retreat down the Madrid-Bayonne Road to France. Wellington would not allow the French Army to slip away unscathed. On 21 June 1813 the British attacked the retreating French at Vitoria, inflicting 8,000 casualties and capturing 151 cannon and all baggage. Thus in only 2 months Wellington had forced the French from Spain and had dealt them a crippling blow at Vitoria. None of this would have been possible, however, without the logistic support of the Royal Navy. For example, it would have been impossible to supply Wellington's army in northeast Spain overland through Portuguese ports. As soon as Wellington reached Santander, army supply ships were rerouted from Portuguese ports to Spanish ports on the Bay of Biscay. By moving to northeast Spain, Wellington had shortened his supply lines.<sup>39</sup>

After Nelson's victory at Trafalgar in 1805 the Royal Navy controlled the seas of the world. Most enemy warships were successfully blockaded in port and those that managed to escape were relentlessly hunted down and either captured or destroyed. The story of the Royal Navy after Trafalgar is not one of great fleet actions, but rather one of endless blockade duty, escorting convoys, numerous fights between small warships, shore bombardment, cutting

out operations, tip-and-run raids by the thousand, and year after year of dangerous, difficult, and extremely taxing work. What other service had an officer like Collingwood, the commander of the British Mediterranean fleet, who in the 4 years after Trafalgar so dedicated himself to his duty as he saw it that he literally worked himself to death?<sup>40</sup> From the Baltic to the Eastern Mediterranean, the Royal Navy held the shore of Napoleon's Europe in an iron grip. Its strength can be seen in the fact that the French could not even pass an army across the Messina Strait.

The Peninsular War saw the ultimate exploitation of British seapower during the Napoleonic Wars. Although the Royal Navy could drive enemy merchant ships from the seas, open enemy colonies to attack, and punch holes in the Continental System, it could not strike a blow at the center of French power. Seapower alone could only hit at the edges of Napoleon's empire, but it was the strength of the Royal Navy that enabled the British Government to send and maintain a large army on the Iberian Peninsula. Towards the end of the war in the Peninsula, Wellington stated the importance of the role of the

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### BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY



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He is the author of *Shipping and the American War*, *The Siege and Capture of Havana, 1762*, and co-author of *The Lost War: Letters from British Officers during the American Revolution*. Professor Syrett also has written a number of articles on naval history that have appeared in British and American historical journals.

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Royal Navy in his victory when he said, "If anyone wished 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."<sup>1</sup>

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