

Historical Background for British Worldwide Military Actions 1800 - 1850

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This section provides a general historical framework for understanding the individual actions described in the alphabetical list.

Following the execution of Louis XVI in 1793 Britain and France were to be at war with each other for the next 22 years except for fourteen months in 1802-3. In the first years the royalists were still active in France, particularly in the North-West and the South and in both they were supported by the Royal Navy. Toulon was occupied by British and Spanish forces until they were forced to withdraw. The following year came the Glorious First of June off Finistere, the first great naval battle of the war, between Lord Howe and a French fleet which was escorting a convoy of grain ships across the Atlantic. The French occupied the Netherlands and forced Spain to make peace but in 1797 Sir John Jervis with 15 ships of the line defeated a Spanish fleet with 27 off Cape St. Vincent, Nelson in *CAPTAIN* disobeying orders and breaking away from the line; and Admiral Adam Duncan fought the Dutch off Camperdown capturing nine out of eighteen enemy ships.

On 1 July 1798 Napoleon landed in Egypt, having captured Malta on the way, and on 21 July his army defeated the ruling Mamelukes at the Battle of the Pyramids. Nelson destroyed the French fleet at Aboukir Bay on 1 August thus denying Napoleon future reinforcements. The French marched towards Syria and besieged St. Jean d'Arc but were beaten off with the help of a British squadron under Sir Sidney Smith and retreated back to Egypt in May 1799. Napoleon abandoned his army on 23 August and sailed back to France, arriving at Frejus on 9 October. In August 1801 20,000 French troops surrendered in Egypt.

In protest at British cruisers claiming a right of search, Russia, Denmark, Sweden and Prussia formed a hostile league in the Baltic which was broken by a British attack on Copenhagen on 2 April 1801. Only two ships out of the Danish fleet survived, the rest being either sunk, burned or captured.

The Revolutionary War ended with the Peace of Amiens in March 1802. Malta was restored to the Knights of St. John and France regained her possessions in Africa and in the East and West Indies. Holland had her West Indian possessions restored except for Guiana. She lost the Cape of Good Hope and Ceylon but regained everything in the East Indies. Britain gained Trinidad

Britain disarmed and the French rearmed for a year before Britain declared war on 16 May 1803. On 12 December 1804 Spain declared war on Great Britain after British cruisers intercepted a Spanish treasure fleet. In the spring of 1805 Nelson chased a French fleet from the Mediterranean to the West Indies where it linked up with a Spanish squadron before returning to Europe. In July there was an inconclusive action in thick fog with Sir Robert Calder's fleet before the combined Franco-Spanish fleet arrived in Cadiz. Throughout the same summer British frigates and sloops blockaded the French coast in the Pas de Calais where an invasion fleet of barges was being assembled.

The combined fleet sailed from Cadiz on 20 October 1805 and was brought to action by Nelson off Cape Trafalgar on the 21st. Of the 33 ships in the enemy fleet, 18 were taken in the battle and four more were taken off Ferrol. Collingwood ignored Nelson's final warning to anchor the fleet after the battle and the prizes were lost in the subsequent stormy weather.

In November, while Napoleon was invading Austria, 26,000 British troops were sent to the Elbe to back up Prussia but they were doomed when the Allies were shattered at Austerlitz on 2 December and Prussia entered into an alliance with Napoleon in return for Hanover. Three weeks later Austria ceded Istria and Dalmatia to France. A second British army with Russian help landed at Naples in November but, faced with 25,000 French troops, it pulled out in January 1806 and retired to Sicily. Also in January the Dutch surrendered Cape Colony to a British force of 6,000. Some of these troops were used by Commodore Home Popham to capture Buenos Aires in July 1807.

In August 1806 Napoleon prepared to invade Portugal but was forestalled by the dispatch of Lord St. Vincent and the Channel fleet to Lisbon.

The Berlin Decrees of November 1806 prohibited British ships from entering the ports of France and her allies. Britain replied with an Order in Council of January 1807 which imposed a total blockade of Napoleon's Europe.

In South America the Spanish colonists soon recaptured Buenos Aires and a British expeditionary force with the unlikely destination of Valparaiso was diverted to assist in the River Plate. This force was to be surrendered in the moment of victory by General Whitelocke who had a "notorious antipathy to the smell of gunpowder."

In January 1807 Britain captured the Dutch island of Curacao.

To take pressure of Russia a British squadron was sent to Constantinople in the Spring of 1807 but too much time was wasted in pointless bargaining and the squadron had to fight its way out through the Dardanelles. Half the British garrison of Sicily was sent to capture Alexandria on 22 March. A month later it was blockaded there.

By the Treaty of Tilsit on 7 July Russia abandoned the allied cause and gave Napoleon a free hand in Europe. In a secret clause Russia and France agreed to force Denmark, Sweden and Portugal to also close their ports to British trade but Britain reacted by calling on Denmark to surrender her fleet and forcing her to do so by attacking Copenhagen in August. Sweden stood firm and at the end of the month an Anglo-Swedish fleet was in action against the Russians in the Baltic.

At the beginning of February 1808 French brigades in Spain seized important garrisons and 100,000 troops crossed the frontier from France. The result was a popular uprising against the French which soon spread to Portugal and appeals were made to London for help. British naval commanders were already assisting. A squadron seized French warships at Cadiz and British frigates and sloops were operating all round the coast attacking French communications, landing Spanish troops and supplying them with arms and money. Tasks they continued until the end of the war.

Wellesley arrived at Oporto on 24 July 1808 and the navy landed his 9000 troops and their supplies at Mondego Bay over the following week. He found that he was to be subordinate to Sir John Moore. The army's defeats and victories in the peninsular will not be detailed but its supply routes across the Bay of Biscay could only be secured by the constant vigilance of the navy. In April 1809 a great attack was made by frigates, sloops, gunboats and other small vessels on French ships in the Basque Roads behind the Ile d'Oleron.

Cadiz, sustained by British sloops and flotillas of gunboats, became the seat of the Cortes - or parliament of the Spanish resistance- in 1810 and was to be besieged by Soult and Victor for thirty months until the autumn of 1812. In 1811 650 sailors and marines were employed in 25 gun vessels on this duty.

On 28 July 1809 a British expeditionary force of 40,000 men commanded by a political nominee, Chatham, and escorted by 245 warships under Rear Ad. Sir Richard Strachan, sailed for the Scheldt. Using the firepower of the fleet Flushing was taken on 17 August. It was to be the only success. If the land commander had been less dilatory the troops could have marched on Antwerp but he waited until the area was surrounded by French and Dutch reinforcements. The flooding of Walcheren Island produced typhoid and a malarial fever which spread rapidly. Evacuation was unavoidable in December.

Farther afield Guadeloupe was captured from the French at the beginning of 1810 and between February and April two British frigates and a sloop captured the Spice Islands which had been returned to Holland in 1803. The following month a British squadron with troops from India attacked other Dutch possessions in the East Indies and captured Banda Neira. Following an abortive attack in 1809 the French island of Bourbon (now Reunion) in the Indian Ocean, was captured in July 1810 by troops from Rodriguez. Mauritius was taken in December.

Early in 1811 the United States banned the export of cotton to Britain and restricted imports of British goods. The damage to the British economy was only relieved by the opening of Russian and Swedish ports. A fleet under Rear Ad. Stopford and troops under Major Gen. Wetheral forced the surrender of the island of Java on 18 September 1811.

The United States, complaining of British impressment of American sailors, declared war on Britain in June 1812 and attempted an invasion of Canada. There were numerous operations by British frigates and sloops along the American seaboard. American frigates and privateers were also operating in British and European waters. The war continued until the Treaty of Guent was ratified in Washington on 18 February 1815.

In 1813 operations were carried out against French garrisons in the Adriatic.

On 31 March 1814 The allied armies entered Paris and Louis XVIII landed at Calais. On 28 April Napoleon was conveyed to exile on the island of Elba in the frigate UNDAUNTED. Apart from supporting Royalist areas the Royal Navy was not involved in Napoleon's 100 days return which culminated in the Battle of Waterloo on 18 June 1815. Following his abdication ships were stationed to prevent his escape to America and until his death in 1821 three frigates and six brigs were deployed continuously guarding St. Helena, his final island of exile.

In 1816 a fleet under Ad. Lord Exmouth was sent to take action against Algerian pirates, "The Barbary Corsairs". He was joined by a Dutch squadron off Gibraltar. The ships anchored off the city on 27 August and commenced a bombardment. The following day the Dey of Algiers agreed to the demands that he had previously rejected and released more than 1200 Christian slaves, repaid over 380,000 dollars to Naples and Sicily and compensated the British consul for loss of property.

An incursion by Burmese troops into Assam in 1824 led to the first Burmese War. The rivers, particularly the multi-mouthed Irrawaddy, provided the only communication with the interior and it was along these that the campaign was fought. A squadron of Royal Navy and East India Co. vessels assembled at the Andaman Islands at the beginning of May and then transported troops up the Irrawaddy to a deserted Rangoon. In the succeeding months a flotilla of gunboats and ship's boats, manned by all the available naval officers and seamen, accompanied the armies advancing along the rivers to capture Prome. The crews of all the vessels involved were badly affected by tropical diseases and scurvy. One vessel lost a quarter of her ship's company. The campaign was finally brought to a halt by the onset of the rainy season.

An armistice was arranged in 1825 but this did not last beyond November when a British force was driven back by a large Burmese army at Prome. Another armistice lasted for a couple of weeks in January 1826 when the naval brigade took part in an attack on Melloone. A peace treaty was finally signed on 24 February.

In 1832 the Royal Navy became involved in the 'War of the Two Brothers' or Miguelite War in Portugal. When his younger son Miguel led a revolt against the liberal constitution King Joao VI sent him into exile. On the death of the king in 1826 the elder son was made regent as Pedro IV but he abdicated in favour of his daughter, Maria, and Miguel was made Regent. Miguel abolished the constitution and proclaimed himself king. With the backing of liberals in Spain and England an expedition supporting Pedro IV landed near Oporto in 1832 where it was besieged by Miguelite forces. To protect British interests a naval squadron under Cdr. William Glascock in ORESTES was stationed in the Douro where it came under fire from both sides. The Miguelite forces were eventually defeated by a Pedroist force which landed in the Algarve in 1833 under the protection of a naval squadron commanded by Charles Napier alias Calos de Ponza

In the early years of the nineteenth century the various Christian nationalities in the Balkans began to revolt against their Turkish masters and when the Greeks rebelled in 1820 Russia declared her intention of intervening. Britain and France decided that the best way of averting war was to put pressure on Turkey and on 6 July 1827 Great Britain, France and Russia signed the Treaty of London, the objects of which were to bring about an armistice between Greece patriots and Turkey and to suppress piracy in the Archipelago. When the Turks did not agree to negotiate the British Commander-in-Chief, Vice-Ad. Sir Edward Codrington, was instructed to prevent Turkish actions against Greece. He was joined by French and Russian squadrons and they kept watch on a combined Turkish/Egyptian fleet numbering, with transports, more than 100 vessels in the harbour of Navarin in Messinia. The anchorage was

commanded by batteries on the mainland and on the island of Sphacteria. The allied fleet entered the harbour on the afternoon of 20 October and a general action developed which left only one frigate and 15 smaller vessels of the Turkish fleet in a sea-going state.

Britain refused to consider herself at war with Turkey unlike Russia which declared war early in 1828. This lasted until a peace treaty was signed on 14 September 1829.

Following a revolution in Belgium in 1830 which demanded separation from Holland, a five-power settlement of the situation was reached at the end of 1831. The Dutch king refused to accept it or to evacuate Antwerp so an British fleet under Sir Pultney Malcolm joined with the French to blockade Dutch ports until a French army liberated Antwerp on 23 December 1832.

Mehemet Ali, the Pasha of Egypt, who had sent men and ships to help subdue Greece, decided to take advantage of the weakened state of Turkey to extend his own area of influence by invading Palestine in November 1831. He advanced north, capturing Acre in May 1832 and Damascus in June. The Sultan, in desparation, turned for help to Russia and made concessions to Mehemet Ali ceding him Palestine and Syria. In 1839 the Sultan decided to strike back at Egypt but his army was routed at Nezib on 29 June and the Turkish main fleet deserted at Alexandria. In July 1840 Britain, Austria, Russia and Prussia agreed to back Turkey and Admiral Sir Robert Stopford ordered Captain Charles Napier to proceed to Beirut which was captured on 11 August. Syria rose in revolt and Napier moved on to Acre and took it in three hours. The Egyptians capitulated when Napier appeared off Alexandria. 32 British and 8 Austrian vessels operated off the coast of Syria.

Since 1757 British traders in China had been confined to 13 warehouses in Nanking (the 'Factory') where corrupt local officials had connived at the illegal importation of opium from India. On 10 March 1838 the Emperor appointed a new commissioner to stop this smuggling and at the end of July a British ship, BOMBAY, was boarded and searched but the presence of a British squadron stopped further Chinese action for the time being. The uneasy truce was broken by attacks on British ships and property and in the spring of 1839 the Chinese forced British merchants to abandon Canton and Hong Kong became the main British centre.

A British fleet was assembled and established a blockade of Canton then sailed north and captured the town of Tingai on the island of Chusan in order to facilitate the blockade of the Yang-tze Kiang. Throughout the summer the British negotiated while their soldiers on Chusan died of fever and the Chinese reinforced.

On 24 May 1841 a large force of ships and boats landed about 2000 troops and 1000 seamen and marines to attack Canton and on 24 August Amoy was captured. The fleet wintered at Chusan and mounted an attack on Woosung at the mouth of the Yang-tze in June 1842. At the beginning of September everything was ready for an attack on Nanking but the Chinese sued for peace and by 24 September the war was over. The Treaty of Nanking opened more ports to British trade and gave Britain sovereignty over Hong Kong.

In 1845 a Franco-British flotilla protecting the interests of their nationals in Uruguay fought a battle with an Argentine dictator more than 100 miles from the sea up the Parana River.

In 1845-46 vessels of the Royal Navy and the East India Co. with Mr. (later Sir) Henry Brooke attacked pirates in the East Indies,

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