

Ships and Seamen of the American Revolution

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The Status of Sea Power Circa 1775

After the end of the Seven Years War in 1763, England's empire greatly increased, thus diluting the Navy's ability to provide sea power in a concentrated sense (p.17). King George III and his party did not appreciate the need for a continued or strengthened navy, thus letting the dockyards and ships in ordinary ("mothballs") become neglected, even letting the stockpile of oak timbering grow low (pp. 17, 19), and creating a shortage of trained seamen because crews were discharged and officers pensioned after 1763 (p.19).

A "ship of the line" or "men of war of the line" were the terms applied to a ship carrying 60 to 100 guns generally. Those over 80 guns were usually 3-decker ships (p.35). This class of ship is often used in comparisons of sea power for the time. (p.22)

To wage full naval war in America would leave British shores unprotected since France had 75 men of war of the line at the time available or in progress with half of them ready for service (p.19). Royal Navy vessels of all types in North America in January 1775 totaled only 24 (4 of them in the southern states and Florida). By June 1775, only five small sloops had been added. So even with rumblings of problems in the Americas, Britain either didn't see the need yet or couldn't do much about increasing sea power in the area. Of the 24, only 3 had 60 or more guns and 10 of them had only 6 to 8 guns. (p.20)

Circa 1778-1779, the relative strengths of the European navies in ships of the line were (p.20): England with 40, France with 50, and Spain with 60.

The changes in British sea power overall is reflected in these statistics. The Royal Navy had 365 ships of all types in 1763, 270 in 1775, and 478 in 1783. (p.22)

Even with a relatively small presence, England was dominant over American sea power in North America (pp.20-22) because:

- America's shipping was merchant oriented
- Merchant seamen were not trained for naval warfare or discipline
- Merchant captains were not familiar with warfare tactics
- American privateering was more lucrative to recruit seamen than naval service

However, with the French navy joining the Americans, the thinly spread English Navy could not long provide the support needed to keep the British army in control (p.22).

The Beginning of the Colonial Navy

On December 11, 1775, a squadron of 13 frigates was ordered with each having from 24 to 32 guns. The Royal Navy had 98 frigates and two-deckers (20 to 56 guns) at the time (p.22).

Washington started acquiring other vessels, the first being the schooner *Hanna* to use against Boston sea traffic (p.23). Other early ships were the schooners *Hancock*, *Lee*, *Warren*, *Lynch*, *Franklin*, and *Harrison* and the brigantine *Washington* (pp.24-25).

On February 17, 1776, a new squadron of ships acquired and fitted out in Philadelphia was launched under Commander in Chief of the fleet, Esek Hopkins (p.26) as follows. Britain had about 38 sloops of war in 1775 (8 to 18 guns) (p.22).

Name of Ship	Type of Ship	# of Guns
Alfred	Flagship	24
Columbus		18-20
Andrew Doria	Brig	14
Cabot	Brig	14
Providence	Sloop	12
Hornet	Sloop	10
Wasp	Schooner	8
Fly	Schooner	8

Hopkins set sail for Ft. Nassau on New Providence Island in the Bahamas, arriving March 1, 1776, and returning in early April, having easily captured Fort Montague in Nassau, Bahamas, in order to carry off its known military stores, including 71 cannon and 24 barrels of powder, and capturing the 6-gun tender *Hawk* and 12-gun *Bolton*. (pp.26-27)

Warship Design

Like the infantry, naval guns were inefficient. It was difficult to aim and fire on a rolling ship and even in good conditions firing was inaccurate. Thus the philosophy became to put as many guns as possible on a ship in hopes that some damage could be done before the enemy did the same (p.33). British ships were generally inferior to those of the same class by the French, thus the best British ships were captured French vessels.

A typical 100-gun ship had the following statistics (p.35):

- 230 feet long and 50 feet in beam
- drew about 22 feet in the water
- cost about 54,000 pounds in 1776 (\$1.5 million today)
- guns were 30 32-pounders, 28 24-pounders, 30 18-pounders, 12 12-pounders
- 850 to 900 men (a 74-gun ship would have 650 men)

Naval Warfare in Lake Champlain – October 11, 1776

One of the few “naval actions” of the war was in Lake Champlain.

American Benedict Arnold saw the threat of Britain splitting the northern colonies in half by controlling the Lake. Thus, he hastily had an American fleet built on the Lake in 1776 (p.51). In addition to existing schooner ships *Royal Savage*, *Liberty*, and *Revenge*, and the sloop *Enterprise*, he built the row galleys (80 men) *Washington* and *Trumbell*.

Arnold had 700 men, almost none of them sailors. British forces were more than twice as large. (p.54)

The American force did damage to the British, but the Americans were ultimately destroyed. However, this effort delayed the British move against Ticonderoga and Saratoga to the next year and may have prevented the early defeat of Washington’s army, and helped secure French entry into the war.

Submarine Warfare

The first working sub, the *Turtle*, was created by David Bushnell. Three efforts to sink English ships, the first in September 1776, proved unsuccessful, and the *Turtle* was then probably destroyed to keep it out of British hands. Its failure was probably due to the auger equipment used to attach an underwater mine to a ship. (pp.59-64)

Privateers

Privateers were privately owned vessels which operated against the enemy under government commission (i.e., a vessel fitted out as a warship and primarily intended to cruise against enemy merchantmen). A government commission issued to an armed cargo-carrier was known as a “letter of marque.” (p.66)

Although bothersome to the British, with over 1,000 British vessels captured (but very few sunk or destroyed), these losses had little material effect on the outcome of the war. The real impact of privateers was the competition they provided to manning the American warships. A privateer offered \$12 to \$16 a month wages compared to \$8 in the navy. (p.66)

Prize money was also important. In 1776, Congress ruled that the prize money awarded should be divided into twentieths, after the government took its half. The Commander-in-Chief received 1/20 (5%) whether present or not. 2/20 went to the captain who made the capture. 5 ½ twentieths was split among masters, Navy lieutenants, and captains of marines, and master’s mates; chief gunners, carpenters, surgeons, chaplains, and marine lieutenants; and midshipmen and other petty officers. Then 8 ½ twentieths was shared by the lower deck seamen, marines, ship’s boys, etc. (p.78).

Even a cabin boy might receive more for one cruise than he could hope to make in several years' work ashore. (p.65) In 1779, one 14-year-old after only a single month in *Ranger* received \$700, one ton of sugar, 35 gallons of rum, and 20 pounds apiece of cotton, ginger, logwood, and all-spice. (p.76)

Under the Royal Navy system, the number of a ship's crew was multiplied by the sum of the calibers of her armament and prizes were divided accordingly among a squadron. Thus, a vessel with 80 crew and 14 6-pounders and one 12-pounder would have a factor of 7,680. A frigate of 250 men with 32 12-pounders would have a factor of 96,000. Therefore, if they were in a squadron with a total factor of 192,000, the smaller ship would receive 4% of the prize and the frigate would receive 50% of the prize – to then be divided among the men of each ship according to a given formula. (p.78)

Whereas in 1775-1776 many vessels were mere cockleshells mounting 4 or 6 guns with crews of 25 or 30, by 1781 some privateers carried 24 guns and crews of 150 or more. Privateers had large crews to provide prize crews for captured vessels.

The Continental Congress issued letters of marque to the following privateers by state as follows: NH 43, Mass 626, RI 15, CT 218, NJ 4, NY 1, PA 500, MD 225, VA 64, and SC 1.

The ensign usually flown by privateers and merchantmen, 1776-1795, was one of red and white stripes only. (p.77)