

British Squadrons in North American Waters, 1783-1793

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After 1783 both Britain and the Royal Navy (RN) groped to find ways to deal with the consequences of the loss of the American colonies. For the country as a whole the task required regaining confidence in national strength and resolve; for the RN it meant understanding how in the American war several maritime enemies had come close to embarrassing the senior service. With a talent such as Sir Charles Middleton at the head of the Navy Board, directing the rebuilding and repair of ships, the fabric of the fleet was going to be in very sound condition.¹ For officers, contemplating lost opportunities and the effects of a late and feeble naval effort, the peacetime decade was a time for reflection and preparation.

Of course not many officers or men found naval employment after demobilization. From a strength of over 150,000, the RN fell to 12,000 quite quickly. About twelve guardships (ships-of-the-line, kept in readiness at all times to provide the nucleus of a force as required by government) and attendant frigates were in home waters, and various squadrons patrolled the sea lanes and protected the trade and fisheries of far-flung colonies. Two distant stations, which merited permanent squadrons and commanders up to the rank of Admiral, were Newfoundland and North America. Given the fact that these commanders were posted close to the recently rebellious colonies, now the sovereign United States, diplomatic as well as naval skills were needed.

The Newfoundland station was the lesser of the two.² The squadron assigned there typically comprised, as in September 1785, one fifty-gunner, a thirty-six, a thirty-two, a twenty-eight, two sloops, two brigs and about 1200 men. The fifty-gun *Salisbury* served as flagship, a custom popular with the Admiralty, since the fifties were more imposing than "true" frigates yet far cheaper than even the smallest line-of-battle ships. Such awkward ships, too small to take the line yet considered unsuitable as frigates, eked out a few more years of useful life as flagships in these distant waters.

The duties of this squadron were listed in the orders left by Admiral John Campbell in November 1783 with Captain Niçois of the *Thorn* sloop.³ It is obvious that senior officers did not believe in spending the winter on the station — that was for juniors, and not many of them at that. The ships were to winter at St. John's, and in spring to

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visit the ports between Cape Race and Cape Ray to protect the fishery. All captains were to take back to England the same number of men as they brought out, to prevent a draining of valued seamen "to other places." If the former colonies were no longer sources of trained manpower, neither were they to become receptacles. Likewise, care was to be taken to ensure that local trade was carried on solely by British and Irish subjects.

The captains also had some assignments that went far beyond the merely naval. Naval officers often served as agents of the distant imperial government at various levels, especially in the absence of more regular civil authorities at the rougher edges of the empire; in Newfoundland, where the commander-in-chief also was the governor, until 1824 captains were directed to see that fish were cured with good salt and to cooperate with the port admirals in reporting offenders. They were to promote good relations between British subjects and Indians and to bring any murderers of the latter to justice, in the fashion of a frontier police force. Americans were to be allowed to fish as they always had done, except that they were not allowed to cure their fish on Newfoundland soil or in the inhabited bays of Nova Scotia. The new French Shore, stretching from Cape Ray to Cape St. John in Notre Dame Bay, was to be recognized; in their spare time the captains were to make charts and draughts of uncharted bays. On 10 August all ships would return to St. John's for further orders. This was a considerable set of tasks for three frigates and four smaller vessels.

Admiral Campbell's participation was limited. In 1784, for example, he sailed from Portsmouth in the *Salisbury* on 13 June, arriving in St. John's on 3 July. On 29 October he departed, arriving at Spithead on 13 November, for a sojourn of four months on station. His 1785 report makes it clear that he and the flagship spent most of his time at St. John's. His dispositions also indicate that all three frigates would depart by the end of October, either to England or to serve as escorts for the trade to Spain and Portugal, leaving only a small force for the winter.⁴

Campbell's assignment, remarkably free of crisis or controversy, came to an end when he struck his flag at the end of November 1785 upon his return from St. John's. Admiral John Elliott assumed command, receiving his orders on 27 May 1786. His station was described as "In and about Newfoundland; the Islands of Madeleine and Anticosti; and on the coast of Labrador from River St John to the entrance of the Hudson Straits" — a very considerable area. There was, however, an unmistakable increase in the quality of the squadron. Under Elliott in the *Salisbury*, captained by Erasmus Gower, were Captain Edward Pellew in the thirty-two-gun *Winchelsea*; Prince William Henry (the future William IV) commanding the *Pegasus* (twenty-eight); and the diminutive *Merlin* (sixteen) under Edward Pakenham. While not quite a Nelsonic band of brothers, it certainly contained enough talent to make the squadron seem formidable on paper. As usual, the flagship remained in port while the lesser ships actually patrolled the fisheries. Prince William, it may be remarked, found Newfoundland uncongenial, describing its appearance to his father as "truly deplorable:...a small brushwood for the first five hundred yards in shore and then a most dreadful, inhospitable and barren country intersected by fresh water ponds, lakes and bogs." He did, however, bestow princely

charity on a penniless local child, giving him clothes, a place as a midshipman, and a naval education in England.³

Elliott discovered that his duties required more vessels, particularly two more tenders of about forty tons to communicate with the French commander, especially in the many harbours and small islands which were too small to admit any other craft. He recommended that a shipyard at Trinity, formerly employed by the Navy Board, could do the construction more cheaply than in England and had all the necessary seasoned timber and materials at hand. Nothing was done about the request, which was repeated by Admiral Mark Milbanke, who assumed command in 1789. This time the Admiralty agreed and directed the Navy Board to contract with a Newfoundland firm for the construction. In October the vessels, described as "two armed sloops," were commissioned. Regrettably for the reputation of Newfoundland shipwrights and the chances of future contracts, the vessels were found wanting. In 1792 Admiral Sir Richard King, the next station commander, judged the two "almost useless," as every shallop on the coast could outrun them. He speculated that rigging them as schooners and coppering them might remedy the problem, but their ultimate fate is unknown.

Events in the wider world did begin to make an impact on the station in 1787, the year of the Dutch crisis, when Britain commenced arming a fleet for a confrontation with France over the support of rival factions in the Netherlands. The pacific and finance-centred Prime Minister, William Pitt the Younger, moved to action by this unspeakable threat and a fear that Dutch maritime resources would fall under French domination, threw down the gauntlet. The French government was humiliated by its inability to respond, thus providing the first public clue that it was near bankruptcy.⁶ The crisis was mercifully short, too brief even for meaningful orders to be drafted and sent to overseas stations. Admiral Elliott, however, was observant of any threats and reported in September 1787 that most, if not all, of the French West Indies' squadron would pass the hurricane season in Boston that year, an ominous development for the RN in North America should events in Europe proceed to extremes. He quoted a New York newspaper which reported the arrival in Boston in August of a French seventy-four, a sixty-four, three twenty-sixes, and a brig, under the Viscount de Beaumont. A forty-gun ship was also at Cape Ann, having lost its rudder. Although the crisis ended peaceably, he was still watchful, reporting the presence on his station of one French forty-gun ship, plus a twenty and a sloop, with two more frigates expected from the West Indies, ostensibly to supervise the fishery. Clearly the British squadron had local superiority, but dispersed as it was, only a complacent commander would disregard such a substantial force when the European situation was tense.⁷ On top of this, the Admiralty warned him to be aware of the threat of Moorish pirates when making his convoy dispositions for the Europe-bound trade.

Relations with the French in North America had been correct if not warm. The 1783 Treaty of Paris defined the French Shore, and the rights appertaining thereto, in somewhat ambiguous language. By 1788, there was some suspicion that France wanted to exercise conventional sovereignty on the Shore; French naval vessels had even been chasing off British fishermen, as well as settlers who had penetrated the western coasts.

On occasion Elliott had even instructed his ships to cooperate in such expulsions, making plain his punctilious observation of the treaty. The outbreak of war in 1793 put ahead to the problem.⁸

The awkwardness posed by a large French force was brought home in 1789, when Admiral Milbanke passed on a detailed report from Captain Drew of the *Echo* sloop. Upon arriving at Croak this officer discovered two forty-gun French frigates. They politely aided him in entering harbour, but the commander, the Chevalier de Vaugiraud, asked him to leave after he completed taking on wood and water, as during the fishing season the harbours were theirs. When Drew refused, the French responded with an ultimatum either to leave or be fired upon. According to Drew, "my answer was that he might do as he pleased but that I was determined not to quit the Harbour until I thought proper." Of course the French did not fire, and the incident seems to have petered out after some mutual posturing.⁹ Captain Drew's stance was certainly in the finest traditions of the service, but one doubts he was in real danger: by the standards of the day, it would have been quite unacceptable for two forty-gun ships to open fire on an anchored sloop.

There were no further tense encounters prior to the outbreak of war in 1793, but French forces were tracked carefully. Admiral King reported in November 1792 that the French squadron consisted of one forty-gun, one thirty-six and a cutter, with another forty-gun ship expected. Apparently they would remain until all the merchantmen were ready and then convoy them back to France. It is perhaps a sign that nobody seriously expected the war which would break out three months later that Admiral King delivered this despatch after arriving at Spithead, having left the station while the French were still there with what amounted to overwhelming local superiority.¹⁰

One cannot claim that the Newfoundland station was a hotbed of excitement in the interwar years. Aside from peripheral involvement in some tense European moments, and some posturing with French vessels, the squadron's work involved the routine of policing the fishery, convoying the trade home in the autumn, charting distant bays, and occasionally aiding the civil authorities on shore. A typical example of the latter concerned the pacification of a number of Irish convicts who, having been landed in July 1789, made their way to the towns and caused some mayhem. The lack of any recorded disputes about the RN's performance of these tasks perhaps indicates the services were carried out to general satisfaction. It is possible, too, that this station, along with the others, provided some opportunity for promising young officers, such as Pellew and Pakenham, to gain experience in handling ships and men.

What one receives here is a picture of a decade in the history of the fishery as seen through the eyes of the RN. Newfoundland was not considered a plum posting, but the squadron's responsibilities in protecting this "nursery of seamen" were of great importance. With all the responsibilities of the navy in the still vast empire of the 1780s, Newfoundland merited ten percent of available peacetime manpower. The tasks were long-established and routine, but perhaps all the better performed for that.

The force destined for Halifax, on the other hand, had its origins in the evacuation of New York at the end of the American war. Admiral Digby had the unpleasant task of

managing this and was faced with numerous administrative problems, such as finding adequate transport. In April 1783 he had only 40,000 tons, a quite inadequate amount." He asked Admiral Pigot in the West Indies for fourteen or fifteen of his ships, but also requested the Admiralty to make it a direct order to ensure it was done. He had sent orders to recall all his cruisers, according to Admiralty directives, and in the absence of expected directions about what to do with all his ships, he had begun to sell some of the smaller ones which could not make an ocean voyage without major repairs.

By 13 August he lamented that the transport situation was still inadequate for the evacuation of troops, let alone refugees, as the increasing numbers of Loyalists placed greater demands on space. The Navy Board sent another 7000 tons, nowhere near enough; all his ships which could go home were already dispatched by 28 October, while the decrepit ones had been broken up. Those remaining were working feverishly to complete the evacuation. He announced his intention to station a frigate off each of the new settlements, both for the protection of the Loyalists and to help clear the land and build shelter.¹² On 25 November New York was finally evacuated, the remaining troops shifting to Staten Island. By 24 December everyone was embarked for passage to Halifax. Some transports were to be sent to Florida to retrieve many black Loyalists stranded there. Finally, the last squadron sailed on 25 December for the new base in Nova Scotia.

Digby relinquished command, probably gratefully, to Commodore Sir Charles Douglas, whose appointment was acknowledged in September 1783. His main concern seems to have been the fear that the intended appointment of a Navy Board Commissioner to Halifax (a sign of the great importance accorded the new main base) might mean the appropriation of the existing Admiral's house in the dockyard. Hence, he earnestly requested provision be made for a house ashore for his use.¹³ By 17 October he was weighing anchor from Spithead, despite the minor inconvenience of the Nova Scotia coastal charts not having arrived. After a nine-week voyage he arrived to find New York evacuated except for a handful of last-minute transports. He announced his intention to winter at Barbados, for fear of the damage a Nova Scotia winter might do to the upper works of his ships, but promised to return north in April or May. Concern for the ships is laudable, although the Loyalists huddling in their new log cabins might have felt the Commodore really was not entering into the spirit of the new enterprise.

True to his word Douglas, after a brief call at Antigua, did return to Halifax on 29 May 1784. He was happy to report that all but three hired transports were gone, and those would be discharged when they were done carrying supplies to the new settlements. By 26 July, however, the enormity of the task was clear and he announced that he must retain the ships, partly because the numbers of Loyalists kept increasing. Both the Governor and Commissary told him that without these transports the supply situation might become impossible and "the lives then of so many New Settlers, possibly depending thereupon, it is impossible for me to refuse complying with such a requisition."¹⁴ While the wretched refugees had ample cause to complain of official parsimony, "the attitude toward the settlers of the military in general, and the navy in particular, differed

noticeably from that of the government and its officials, as did the degree of gratitude it aroused."¹⁵

There were also events of a more naval nature to occupy the squadron. One involved the common problem of retaining the ships' crews. Douglas remarked that "our Seamen are so prone to desertion," and cited a very sad case on 31 December, in which a watering party of six overpowered their midshipman and made for the Jersey shore. The First Lieutenant of the flagship *Assistance* (fifty), a marine lieutenant, eleven gentlemen of the quarterdeck, and one seaman gave chase in a barge. Bad weather blew up and they were all lost to view. When investigation was possible two days later it was discovered that the deserters had landed safely but their pursuers had all drowned, which reduced poor Douglas to "such a state of mind as to be scarce capable of signing my name."¹⁶

The ships of the squadron were allocated around the settlements as a rule, to give any aid possible to the new settlers. A typical disposition had the fifty-gun *Renown* at Halifax; *Mercury* (twenty-eight) at Shelburne; *Bonetta* (sloop) at Port Matroon; *Atalanta* (sloop) at Annapolis Royal; *Observer* (sloop) at St. John's River in the Bay of Fundy, together with the *Hussar* and *Delaware* galleys; and the *Vixen* (galley) at Pasamaquoddy. Douglas was particularly pleased with the three galleys, "being not only very well adapted to, but moreover very necessary for those three stations." Patrols were also sent to the St. Lawrence, and in late July he announced that Captain Stone of the *Hermione* (thirty-two) would sail to Québec to confer with Governor Haldimand on the best ways to protect British subjects fishing and trading in the Gulf. There were, of course, the usual admonitions to captains to chase any Americans found curing fish on shore, although not to confiscate their catch. The standing orders to all ships revolved around a scrupulous compliance with the treaties and a desire to protect all British subjects within their stations, especially the new Loyalist settlements. If faced with "Piratical Ships or vessels too powerful for you," captains were to call in the captain from the next patrol area.¹⁷

It was not uncommon for friction to develop between naval officers and the civil officials of the navy. One suspects there was little understanding or sympathy for the administrators' problems on the part of the men at the sharp end of the trade. It was all too easy to see corruption and sloth in the dockyards as the real reason for delays, all the more so since few of the employees were born gentlemen. And, of course, sometimes there were corruption and sloth. Douglas' first impression of the Halifax operation was enthusiastic: "As to His Majesty's Dockyard here, everything bears the appearance of such good Order and regularity as might be expected from the approved assiduity of the Commissioner," Henry Duncan.¹⁸ Regrettably, this warm opinion of Duncan did not extend to the Naval Storekeeper, Mr. Thomas. As the result of a dispute over stores, Douglas suspended him and put his own protege, Mr. Edgcombe, in his place. Douglas had demanded (in what seems an extremely overbearing manner) that Thomas supply an exact return of all the stores, arranged under the usual headings, and to attend the Commodore for an hour the following week to answer questions. Thomas' reply, quite respectful despite the unreality of a request to provide such an inventory (comprising much of the stores evacuated from New York) on a week's notice, was that precision was

impossible. In fact, the accounts were so voluminous that he was under Navy Board orders to return to England to settle them. He tactfully mentioned that the Navy Board, his "immediate superior officers," were aware of the impracticality of such an accurate sudden survey, but said that his deputies would work at the task, as long as it did not interfere with necessary business. Thomas did say, however, that he would attend the requested "interview." Douglas, quick to sense he was being told to mind his own business by a puffed-up clerk, penned another haughty letter forbidding Thomas to leave until he had his permission in writing. It was most regrettable that Commissioner Duncan, who would have smoothed the way, and indeed whose responsibility the issue was, had left on 20 July to inspect timber supplies in the Bay of Fundy. Left to his own questionable human relations skills, Douglas blundered ahead to disaster.

With a take-charge attitude, Douglas ordered the Master Shipwright, Provo Wallis, the Master Attendant, and the Master of the flagship *Assistance* to undertake the survey, telling Thomas that he must attend them with his clerk and all the keys until the job was done. Thomas then got into the spirit of the thing, sending Douglas the book of abstracts of receipts and issues "that you may collect the remains yourself, if you think it proper." He requested their speedy return "as the Service will stand still until they come back." In other words, Douglas was to have fun with the ledgers, but not to expect that any stores would be issued to his ships while he was about it. Thomas finished by saying he was now returning to London, according to his orders. Sensing he was about to be defied openly, Douglas suspended Thomas from his post, leaving him free to leave as he pleased.

The farce was compounded after Thomas left the office (he seems not actually to have sailed for home) and left the public money in his charge with a Mr. Lawson, who refused to state the balance on hand or even to answer letters. Douglas was reduced to the risky (if the Admiralty subsequently did not approve) step of authorizing Edgecombe to draw the necessary bills, lest the yard grind to a halt for lack of funds. Lawson, when finally contacted, said he did not belong to the yard and had no obligation to obey any orders except from Thomas. At this point, having displayed a complete lack of talent for civil administration, Douglas ordered the disputed survey stopped! Wallis and the others, however, felt it wise to continue, not because of shortages but because of an excess of material. Indeed, there was so much there that they felt it would have been useful at New York in the late war had its existence been known. To finish his human relations debacle, Douglas also suspended Alexander Anderson, second clerk of the departed Thomas and apparently a loyal subordinate. The young man was charged with "Neglect of Duty and declared Disobedience" for stating he could only serve Thomas or his deputies.

Douglas undoubtedly expected the Admiralty to support him, a fellow officer and gentleman, against these disrespectful clerks, but he got a rude surprise. Their Lordships, apparently without even officially consulting the Navy Board, expressed disapproval of his treatment of Thomas and Anderson, especially as no evidence to support the charges against the latter was given. Douglas was directed to remove the persons he had put in their places and Commissioner Duncan was directed to return the charge of the stores to those who had them in the first place. The Navy Board was fully informed of these

actions, which must have caused it great satisfaction, as it was usual for officers to stick together in such cases.¹⁹ This incident provides a rare example of understanding and cooperation between the two Boards in London, possibly because it came in the earliest days of Lord Howe's tenure as First Lord, before he had a chance to develop a rather testy relationship with the Navy Board, and particularly with its headstrong Comptroller, Sir Charles Middleton.

The miserable Douglas faced even more of the Admiralty's displeasure when it expressed its disapproval of his appointments of chaplains to *Hermione*, *Ariadne* and *Resource* with the observation that they would have been so provided had it been thought necessary. The hapless clerics were to be discharged. Further, he was told that he had no right to appoint Edgewcombe as Purser of *Boulogne*, a hulk which did not merit a purser and was outside his jurisdiction. Poor Edgewcombe lost this post, too, and was not to be paid for the time served.²⁰ Clearly the civil administration of the navy had won this battle hands down. Douglas had unwisely overstepped the bounds of his authority; the clear message was that squadron commanders should keep their noses out of the dockyards.

On 5 February 1785 the Admiralty recalled Douglas after just over a year in the post. No reasons were given, but one may speculate that it had enough of this particular loose cannon. The final humiliation came when his ill-considered directions to Edgewcombe to issue bills on his authority were refuted by London. The disallowed bills amounted to £2400, and Douglas' pay was stopped from August 1784 until all Edgewcombe's accounts were settled to the satisfaction of the Navy Board. In December 1785 Douglas was reduced to asking that at least his half-pay be released so he could support his family.²¹

A more serious problem occupied the squadron in the winter of 1784. Douglas pointed out that the Navigation Acts allowed British-owned vessels to trade with the US from certain ports in the West Indies, but that all trade with the Americans was forbidden from Nova Scotia. The problem was that since the person contracted by the Victualling Board to supply the squadron regularly got much of his supply from American sources, the Admiralty was breaking the law. "One cannot help beholding, with astonishment unspeakable, an open Commercial intercourse, in American as well as British Bottoms, carrying on between Nova Scotia and the said States without any legal sanction whatever." Usually the need to supply the province, as well as the squadron, was offered in justification. Douglas, however, felt the effect was actually deleterious because British merchants were discouraged from sending supplies from home for fear of cheap American competition, yet Philadelphia merchants were likewise fearful of losses in a sudden clampdown on what everyone knew was an illegal activity, with the result that "the Province, which would otherwise from thence [Britain] have been fully and regularly supplied, is ever exposed to want." His particular concern was that promised wheat had not reached the squadron.²²

Intrusive American fishermen provided another headache. Douglas had issued a general order to his captains to remove all Americans curing and drying fish on British soil, since it had been a serious problem in 1784 on the south shore of the St. Lawrence and on the north side of the Bay of Chaleur and the adjacent islands. If the interlopers

agreed to leave quietly, they were to be allowed to keep their catch, but if they refused, their fish were to be forfeited. On no account were they to carry off fish purchased from British subjects, a practice contrary to treaty. The Navy officers, of course, were to behave "with good language and all proper civility."

The gentle approach became somewhat suspect when Douglas, on a tour of the squadron, found some of the Americans who had been chased off last year returning to dry their fish ashore, claiming now to be in the service of English employers. He left a tender on site as a permanent guard. On the western shore of Cape Breton he found a permanent American dwelling at Waistcoat Bay, with storehouses of provisions and copious amounts of salt for curing fish. Some Americans stayed the winter, spending their time trapping, often under the American flag. Upon being ordered off, the American in charge agreed to become a British subject and to move his family to Nova Scotia "in order to enjoy the many blessings and advantages of a British Constitution." Douglas congratulated himself that this was the first step in an inevitable process which "will soon thin the northern States of America of their Fishermen" and whalers, "and thus reunite a Body of industrious Men becoming loyal Subjects of the parent Stock." Aside from this noble vision of the gradual wasting away of the American fishing fleets, Douglas further established his reputation for prediction by labelling Spanish River "the most excellent and capacious Harbour, which I believe to be the easiest of access and upon the whole the safest and best in all North America," and heartily recommending it as the site of the future colonial capital.²³ One can only wonder with what mixed feelings the Admiralty awaited each breathless despatch.

Commodore Herbert Sawyer was next in the command, arriving in Halifax on 10 June 1785 in *Thisbe* (twenty-eight). Immediately he confirmed the reports of scarce provisions for the squadron. The colonial legislature had forbidden any entry to American vessels and the Nova Scotia farmers, quite awake to the laws of supply and demand, were charging an "exorbitant price" for meat, a situation which would worsen in winter. In take-charge fashion Sawyer directed the contractor to send a British vessel, with a British crew, to Boston to purchase live cattle for the squadron, accompanied by HMS *Mercury* in case any should doubt the legality of this approach.

Sawyer cancelled some of Douglas' measures, such as having two tenders patrol near Spanish River and along the Québec south shore. He found they were a great expense and, being manned from the remainder of the squadron, his other ships were weakened. Primarily, however, since the tenders were "not properly Manned and Armed," they could not expect to drive off any ship caught violating the treaty.²⁴ Yet the problem of American interlopers was real. Petitions from Québec merchants and fishermen were included in the despatches and made clear that many Americans were fishing illegally. Some of the merchants pointed out that as their shores were so extensive, foreign vessels often went unnoticed even by a warship in the area. They requested two shallow-draught schooners, a step or two up from the tenders. Sawyer regretted he had no such vessels.²⁵ But there was evidence that many Nantucket whalers were dissatisfied with their lot and

desired British citizenship. Governor Parr had encouraged them, and Dartmouth had been set aside for their settlement, the harbour being sufficiently large for their ships.

There was also a personal dispute of the sort all too familiar to the pre-war navy. On 19 November 1785 Sawyer had to suspend Captain William Bentinck of the flagship *Assistance*. Apparently two seamen from *Assistance* had made a disturbance at Sawyer's house, where their wives were employed as servants, whereupon Sawyer ordered them to stay on board and ordered that the wives not be allowed on the ship until new servants had been found. Bentinck refused these orders, feeling that punishing his crewmen was his responsibility. Bentinck went so far as to request a court-martial to clear the issue, a request Sawyer sent to England. The scarcity of captains locally precluded an immediate trial in any event, but after six months of tension Bentinck capitulated, "being thoroughly convinced of his Error, and of the Impropriety of his conduct" and "made proper Concessions." As a result, Sawyer removed the suspension. It was not, unfortunately, an isolated incident, as Sawyer also had to reprimand Captain Stanhope of *Mercury* over his habit of hoisting squadron signals even when Sawyer was present in the harbour. Stanhope bitterly complained that this instance was "not the first of unmerited Disgrace" he had received from Sawyer. The Commodore reported he would hold a court-martial over the affair if enough captains were present. Undaunted, Stanhope wrote to his commanding officer demanding that in future correspondence "your Language may be consistent with the Dignity of my Appointment."²⁶ When two of six captains in a squadron are threatened with courts-martial within a year, one is perhaps entitled to question the abilities of everyone involved. Such incidents are a poignant reminder that we are dealing with eighteenth-century codes of honour and not Victorian concepts of duty and obedience to authority.

The duties of the squadron continued despite all the disputes. In October 1785 Sawyer reported the state of the ships: *Resource* (twenty-eight), Captain Paul Minchin, was fit for sea; *Ariadne* (twenty-four), Captain Samuel Osborne, was refitting; *Weazel* (sloop), Captain Samuel Hood, was fitting; *Brisk* (sloop), Captain Edward Buller, was fit for sea; *Assistance*, Captain William Bentinck, was fit for sea; and *Mercury*, Captain Stanhope, was also fit for sea. In the ongoing food saga the Victualling Agent finally went bankrupt and Sawyer had his Secretary assume the duties until orders arrived from home. To further underline the fact that they were far from the comforts of home, Sawyer reported he was using the Surgeon's quarters at the hospital and paying the rent of a house for that officer, "there being no other House to be got here that I could inhabit." Manpower was another worry, causing him to keep *Weazel* in harbour, being twenty-one men short "and no men to be had at present." He did start the custom of wintering on the station, albeit with the ships unrigged to protect them from the rigours of winter. Most were in Halifax, except *Ariadne*, posted at Pasamaquoddy to prevent illicit trade. In 1787 this practice was extended to Shelburne, not only to enforce the trade laws in both regions "but for giving consequence to them" and "for promoting, tho' but in a small degree, a circulation of Money, which is very scarce there." To emphasize the sense of isolation,

Sawyer complained that Admiralty letters, sent by packet via New York, were usually opened and read before he got them and were often five months in transit.²⁷

In August 1787 Sawyer commenced a tour of his station, starting at Québec, with his flag in the fifty-gun *Leander*, accompanied by *Ariadne*, *Resource*, *Pegasus*, and *Weazel*. Concentrating much of the squadron might have been in response to news of the tense European situation over the Dutch crisis.²⁸ On 22 September Commissioner Duncan informed him from Halifax that three French sail-of-the-line and four frigates had passed Shelburne at the end of August and were now in Boston, under the command of Chevalier de Beaumont. He further learned that this squadron had left Boston hurriedly at the end of September upon the arrival of a packet from L'Orient, leaving two frigate captains ashore, and that its destination was unknown. Partly as a precaution, Captain Hood and *Weazel* would winter at Halifax, ready for sea, instead of remaining isolated at Shelburne. *Thisbe*, under Captain Coffin, would remain at Québec, should Lord Dorchester need it. It was not until February 1788 that he received official news of the successful end of the European crisis.

Sawyer, having been promoted Rear Admiral of the White at the end of 1787, requested replacement on 3 February 1788 because of family concerns which required his presence at home. He duly arrived at Plymouth on 18 August, which prompted a surprised letter from the Admiralty saying that he had not been expected for months yet. His disingenuous reply was that his flagship, *Leander*, had been on shore and so would not have been capable of a later voyage.²⁹ Sawyer's tour of duty had been successful, but clearly he took second place to no fellow officer in creative disobedience.

Admiral Sir Richard Hughes succeeded him, arriving in Halifax on 1 August 1789. He stepped right into the ever-present food problem. Lord Dorchester was allowing the temporary importation of flour and rice from the US to stave off starvation in Canada. The Council in Nova Scotia informed him "that the scarcity of bread corn in this province is so great that without speedy supplies a famine may be apprehended." This did not mean an end to illicit trade, however, as the practice of smuggling from the US was growing. Designated as a particular trouble spot was Liverpool, whose citizens were so joyously adept at the task that the Deputy Naval Officer there had placed the port "under threats." At Governor Parr's request Hughes placed two ships there and seized some suspect ships. To eradicate the practice completely would require three or four shallow-draught craft, which could be obtained locally at reasonable cost and manned from the squadron.³⁰

Hughes' routine concerns faded rapidly, however, upon receipt of a despatch on 13 June 1790, while in Charlottetown, warning of imminent hostilities with Spain and possibly France, arising from the Spanish seizure of some British ships at Nootka Sound on the west coast of Vancouver Island. Of course, in any Spanish war the West Indies would be the arena, but Hughes made preparations for any northern eventuality. Returning immediately to Halifax, he held the squadron ready to sail at the shortest notice. His complements were seventy men below peace establishments and filling the gap became his first priority. Many men had been lured to the merchant service while others had been invalidated home. Finding that voluntary recruitment was insufficient, he applied to the

Governor and Council for permission for a press. To his extreme vexation, they rejected the plea. With feeble hope of success he then opened a rendezvous for enlistment and offered the King's Bounty (a "signing bonus," usually £5) as was done automatically in Britain. As Commissioner Duncan did not feel authorized to sanction the added expense, Hughes took it upon himself. He was lucky here: an Admiralty minute on his despatch said that while this ought not to have been done without its order, it would direct the Navy Board to allow it. How was a station commander to cope with emergencies, one wonders, since regular mails could be months in arriving? Duncan rested on the regulations, noting that as a rendezvous was unprecedented at Halifax, the Navy Board had never issued instructions on dealing with one in an emergency. In August, Hughes claimed the rendezvous expenses as £84/7/5.³¹

The manpower situation was reported as *Penelope* (thirty-two), 199 of 220 men; *Thisbe*, 189 of 200; *Admament* (fifty), 298 of 350; *Dido* (twenty-eight), 173 of 180; *Rattler* (sloop), ninety-seven of 125; and *Brisk* (sloop), ninety-three of 100. This meant a shortage of 125 men, but all ships were reported as fit for sea. By 16 August he reported that *Penelope* had enlisted four men; *Thisbe* eleven; *Adamant* three; and *Rattler* nine; *Dido*, however, had fallen by one. In all, twenty-four men seem to have been attracted to the naval service in August. Hughes lamented the obvious: "Seamen are not entering as fast as I could wish," so all the rendezvous, except for *Adamant*, were disbanded. While his actions in the Nootka crisis to this point seem energetic and laudable, he came perilously close to buffoonery in his despatch of 28 July, in which he described his private signal system to ensure accurate identification in the crisis and suggested that any ships coming out should adopt the system. His complex instructions involved hauling various sails up and down, with flags, on odd and even days.

When they come within Hail, the Ship who hails first shall say 'What Ship that?'; and he who is hailed shall answer 'Great Britain,' then he who first hailed shall reply 'Honour & Success'; and the other shall answer 'And Victory'. After which the ship who hailed first shall demand from the Ship first hailed the Nightly Parole.

Even from a distance of 200 years, one can almost see the rolled eyes of the Admiralty who, perversely, did not see fit to adopt the system.³² This unfortunate despatch aside, Hughes seems to have been conscientious; had any Spanish squadron menaced Nova Scotia in the autumn of 1790, a sound drubbing would surely have been its fate.³³

Through a filing error, we also have a glimpse into Hughes' influence network. A private letter of 20 September 1790 to Philip Stephens, Secretary to the Admiralty, has been left with the official despatch of the same date. The Secretary was a powerful person, through whom all correspondence was funnelled and all requests for special treatment made. A wise captain would cultivate such a person's goodwill if at all possible. In this case Hughes had appointed lieutenants to the four schooners which the Admiralty finally had authorized him to purchase for trade regulation. Hughes expressed to Stephens

"his particular pleasure" in having appointed "your young friend Mr Sayer" as Lieutenant and Commander of one of the schooners. "I think if Master Sayer keeps anything of a Look-Out, he will pick up Sufficient Prize Money to make a Purchase in the Neighbourhood of your Borough." Other appointees were listed as William Spranger and Richard Hughes.³⁴ Six months later, this same Richard Hughes was made temporary Commander of the flagship *Adamant* upon its captain's illness, and four months after that he was promoted to Master and Commander of the *Rattler* sloop, upon Captain Linzee's resignation. Admiral Hughes wrote home asking for a confirmation of the appointment, "trusting that my own Services, and the natural claim they give me, in behalf of my son" would make the process agreeable. This sort of situation was familiar in the eighteenth-century RN, and it must have come as a shock when the Admiralty turned it down. Hughes' hurt request for "a more deliberate Consideration" was likewise rejected. Young Hughes was not to leap ahead solely on his father's record.³⁵ One has the welcome impression that connections might ease the path to a lieutenancy, but command of a ship larger than a colonial schooner required more than just influence.

We have one final picture of how the squadron spent its days before the outbreak of war in 1793. On 27 May 1791 Hughes reported his dispositions. *Adamant*, his flagship, was to carry him to Québec via Prince Edward Island; *Penelope* was to cruise between Cape Canso, the Bay of Chaleur and around the coast to Cape Breton; *Alligator* (twenty-eight) had been sent to New Brunswick to cruise between Cape Sable and the Seal Islands and Grand Manan; *Rattler* ranged between Jeddore to the west as far as Cape Negro; while the three armed schooners were split, one between Halifax and Cape Canso, one between Halifax and Cape Sable, and one to accompany the Admiral to Québec.³⁶ The duties on this station were made easier than on the Newfoundland posting by the greater amenities of Halifax, which was described as "sleepy, sedate, even a little aristocratic." Prince William found it far more attractive than St. John's and wrote warmly of it as "a very gay and lively place, full of woman and those of the most obliging kind."³⁷

In retrospect this was the last time such a powerful peacetime squadron was on the station. Over the next twelve months ships were withdrawn or transferred to more vulnerable areas and the North American posting became something of a backwater for a number of years. On 1 July 1791 Hughes granted Lord Dorchester's request for a ship to carry him home, which left only *Adamant* with one frigate, one sloop and the three schooners on station. Hughes rightly complained that adequate patrolling was impossible, and of course no courts-martial could be convened without more captains. In August one of the schooners ran aground and was lost. The vessel was commanded by Lieutenant Crispo, one of the few midshipmen to survive the famous sinking of the hundred-gun *Royal George* at Spithead in 1782, which had claimed the life of Admiral Richard Kempenfelt, and who now possibly was seriously considering a career change. In April 1792 Hughes received orders to return in *Adamant*, with *Penelope*, *Sphynx* (twenty) and *Rattler*, while ordering *Triton* (twenty-eight) to Jamaica. The sole ship thus left on station was *Winchelsea* (thirty-two), which had brought the despatches.³⁸

During late 1791 and 1792 the Admiralty was redistributing its ships to meet the growing threat of war, first with Russia in the Ochakov crisis, and then with revolutionary France.³⁹ Perhaps a further sign of the downgrading of the station is that the next commander was a mere Captain, Rupert George, in the *Hussar* (twenty-eight). George's first task was to embark two regiments from Halifax to Jamaica in July 1792; subsequently in March 1793, just after the formal outbreak of war, one of the remaining Nova Scotia regiments was sent to Barbados, although the usual insufficient transport tonnage hampered the task. In May he reported the successful capture of St. Pierre, but that was all the action recorded. Sadly, the squadron had been stripped of virtually all its ships, which were transferred to colonies thought to be more at risk in a French war. As Captain George reminded the Admiralty, "the whole of this Coast is defenceless."⁴⁰ It would not be until the next American war in 1812 that the importance would return.

One cannot describe the 1783-1793 era as a period of gripping drama for the RN in North America or Newfoundland. The service - and Nova Scotia for that matter — was grappling with the consequences of having lost the thirteen colonies. Former bases, markets, suppliers and manpower were now beyond legal reach. Indeed, the service had to guard against these former fellow-citizens who might wish to retain traditional trading and fishing practices. Despite the inadequate numbers of ships, this seems to have been done reasonably well. The role of the RN in ensuring the viability of Loyalist settlements is also apparent. This came in the form of carrying Loyalists to their new settlements, transporting scarce food supplies in the early years, protecting them from various dangers, helping to clear the land and construct shelter, and aiding the local economy by stationing ships nearby (the purchases made would add to the local money supply). There were two or more regiments of infantry to hand, of course, but with the usual difficulties of road transport, the RN was the real force behind government efforts to establish and nurture the colony after 1783. Generally, the RN seems to have worked hard to perform this role, and even those commanders whose other actions sometimes appear questionable were assiduous in their duties in this area.

The Navy demonstrated examples of standard behaviour as well: rivalry and friction between the civil administrators and the gentlemen officers; friction between commanders and subordinates; threats of courts-martial to settle disputes; trade-offs of favours for friends and contacts; naked nepotism, manpower concerns, and all the problems of commanders on distant stations where communication with home was neither regular nor swift. The duties of the station, one of many for the RN, were performed satisfactorily to the benefit of Nova Scotia. Doubtless the Navy benefitted also from the welcome experience granted to numerous officers and crews, who would need all the experience they could muster in the wars after 1793.

NOTES

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1. See Paul Webb, "The Rebuilding and Repair of the Fleet 1783-1793," *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* Vol. 50 (November 1977), 194-209.

2. All information on the Newfoundland squadron, unless otherwise noted, comes from the commanders' despatches in Great Britain, Public Record Office (PRO), Admiralty (ADM) 1/472.

3. *Ibid.*, folios 97-100.

4. *Ibid.*, folio 162.

5. Philip Ziegler, *King William IV* (New York, 1971), 56, 59.

6. See Paul Webb, "The Navy and British Diplomacy, 1783-1793" (Unpublished MLitt thesis, Cambridge University, 1971), 35-119.

7. PRO, ADM 1/472, folios 247-248.

8. See Frederic F. Thompson, *The French Shore Problem in Newfoundland* (Toronto, 1961), 14-20; and Frederick W. Rowe, *A History of Newfoundland and Labrador* (Toronto, 1980), 317-320. The best study of broad British policy in the region remains Gerald Graham, *Sea Power and British North America 1783-1820* (Cambridge, Mass., 1941), particularly 19-35, and 95-111.

9. PRO, ADM 1/472, folios 319-320.

10. *Ibid.*, folio 430.

11. PRO, ADM 1/490, folio 459, Digby to Admiralty, 12 April 1783.

12. *Ibid.*, folios 316, 327. The best overview of the new settlers' problems, including some naval material on the evacuation, is Neil MacKinnon,

This Unfriendly Soil: the Loyalist Experience in Nova Scotia, 1783-1791 (Montréal, 1986).

13. PRO, ADM 1/491, folio 3, Douglas to Admiralty, 1 September 1783. Douglas had a distinguished career, much of it in North American waters starting with Louisburg in 1745, Quebec in 1759, the relief of Quebec in 1776, and subsequently on Lake Champlain. As Rodney's captain of the fleet, he may have been the one to suggest breaking the French line at the Saintes in 1782. Of the ten senior RN figures in this article, he has the only entry in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Vol. IV.

14. *Ibid.*, folios 20 and 33.

15. MacKinnon, *Unfriendly Soil*, 22.

16. PRO, ADM 1/491, folios 11-13.

17. *Ibid.*, folios 47, 49 and 59.

18. *Ibid.*, folio 20, 18 June 1784.

19. Copies of the relevant letters, and Admiralty minutes, are in *ibid.*, folios 67-83, 85, 95, 100-102 and 109-110.

20. *Ibid.*, folio 115. Admiralty minute. On 9 November Douglas replied feebly that *Boulogne* was not a hulk, but "in ordinary" (i.e., laid-up) and hence entitled to officers. Edgcombe, however, was removed and surrendered the post of Naval Storekeeper; *Ibid.*, folio 109.

21. *Ibid.*, folios 207 and 222.

22. *Ibid.*, folios 126-128 and 135-137, 15 October 1784.

23. *Ibid.*, folios 178-180 and 184-186.

24. *Ibid.*, folios 279 and 285-287, Sawyer to Admiralty, 26 June and 23 July 1785.

25. *Ibid.*, folios 341-347, Sawyer to Admiralty, 10 October 1785.
26. Sawyer's reports, and copies of the correspondence of 19 November 1785, and 29 January, 15 May, and 11 June 1786, are in *ibid.*, folios 354, 370-388, 395-399 and 405.
27. *Ibid.*, folios 322, 351, 363, 392, 401 and 438-439, Sawyer to Admiralty, 27 July, 12 October and 3 December 1785; 15 May, 5 June and 12 July 1786; and 11 January 1787.
28. PRO, ADM 2/1342, Secret Admiralty orders to all overseas station commanders, 22 September 1787. By these orders the Prince was to be sent home in *Pegasus* with all speed. Ziegler, *William IV*, 66-67, speculates this was done to ward off another amorous scandal, yet the context seems to indicate the possible hostilities of the Dutch crisis are a more likely reason.
29. *Ibid.*, folios 458, 474-475, 486, 489-492, 499-500, 504, 517 and 521, Sawyer to Admiralty, 10 August, 22 September, 10, 18 and 19 November 1787; and 3 and 6 February and 18 and 25 August 1788.
30. PRO, ADM 1/492, folios 17 and 55, Hughes to Admiralty, 1 August 1789; and 28 January 1790.
31. *Ibid.*, folios 75-77 and 93-97, Hughes to Admiralty 13 June and 12 and 25 July 1790.
32. *Ibid.*, folios 98-101, 109 and 122-123, Hughes to Admiralty 28 July and 16 August 1790.
33. The preparations in European waters may be followed in Paul Webb, "The Naval Aspects of the Nootka Sound Crisis," *Mariner's Mirror* Vol. 61 (1975), 133-154.
34. *Ibid.*, folios 130 ff, Hughes to Stephens, private, 20 September 1790. Stephens had just been re-elected MP of "his Borough" for the fourth time. Clearly he was buttressing his "influence" in the area.
35. *Ibid.*, folios 183, 220 and 245, Hughes to Admiralty, 27 May and 28 September 1791; and 20 March 1792, with minute.
36. *Ibid.*, folio 182, Hughes to Admiralty, 27 May 1791.
37. Ziegler, *William IV*, 60. His pursuit of these obliging Halifax women resulted shortly in a mercury cure for an unspecified social disease.
38. PRO, ADM 1/492, folios 189, 198 and 253-254, Hughes to Stephens, 1 July and 13 August 1791; and 19 April 1792.
39. See Paul Webb, "Naval Aspects of the Ochakov Affair of 1791," *International History Review* Vol. 2 (January 1980), 13-33.
40. PRO, ADM 1/492, folios 265, 269, 277 and 281-283, George to Admiralty, 2 June and 17 July 1792; and 19 March, 25 April and 28 May 1793.