

# 'A Perfect Hurricane': naval disaster off Jutland, 1811

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THE tasks of the British navy in the eighteenth century, during a period of significant imperial expansion and almost continual warfare, were threefold: to keep open Britain's trade routes; to carry the war to vulnerable parts of the enemy's territory; and to deny the enemy the use of the sea (mainly through blockade). As essentially mobile gun platforms, the navy projected British power throughout much of the world.

Britain's imperial pretensions and her trading wealth ultimately depended on the effectiveness of its navy.<sup>1</sup> During the long eighteenth century (1688-1815) there were few years of peace and thus there were usually large squadrons and fleets at sea for much of the time. In the age of sail, sea-keeping, whether in pursuit of a blue water policy or on blockade in European waters, was continually under threat from the vagaries of the elements: storms, tempests, hurricanes, fogs, icebergs and the ever-present fear of fire on board. Although navigational equipment had much improved by the end of the century, naval captains did not have easy access to chronometers and thus nature's fury often led to even the largest ships facing a lee shore, the mariner's greatest nightmare.<sup>2</sup>

Sailors had a healthy respect both for the sea and for nature's capriciousness. Long experience had brought to light the most dangerous seasons of the year in the different regions of the western hemisphere.

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1 John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State, 1688-1783* (New York 1989), chap. 2. Richard Harding, *Seapower and Naval Warfare 1650-1830* (London 1999), xix, writes of the battlefleet evolving between 1650 and 1830 into 'the ultimate expression of a global force'.

2 For a contemporary complaint about the ineffectiveness and expense of chronometers, see the letter from 'A Captain in the Royal Navy', *The [London] Times*, 17 Feb. 1812. More generally, see N. A. M. Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean: A Naval History of Britain, 1649-1815* (London 2004), 382-83.

Hurricanes made travelling through the central Atlantic in the months of September and October unwise. Ships heading for the Mediterranean were often beset by sudden and dangerous storms in the Bay of Biscay while, for ships on the homeward journey, storms often made the southern entrance to the English Channel extremely perilous.<sup>3</sup> In the Scandinavian waters of the North Sea vessels were at risk of either becoming ice-bound in harbour for months or facing destructive gales if winter came unseasonably early. A prudent captain would do his utmost to set sail southwards from the Baltic at the very latest by the beginning of October. Often, however, war policy overrode prudence and the results could be disastrous. In December 1811 one of the greatest maritime disasters to strike the Royal Navy occurred when three large ships of the line belonging to the Baltic fleet were wrecked by gales of hurricane force while en route to Britain. It was, as Charles Yorke, First Lord of the Admiralty, told parliament, 'a lamentable catastrophe'.<sup>4</sup>

The Admiralty established a Baltic fleet in the aftermath of the Treaty of Tilsit between France and Russia in 1807. Its primary role was determined by the policies of economic warfare instigated at first by Napoleon, who established a continent-wide system to ban British goods from Europe. The British government responded with a blockade of European ports. If British goods were not to be allowed into Europe, then neither were goods from other countries. Nor would exports from countries in alliance with France be allowed to pass the blockade.<sup>5</sup>

In reality, Napoleon was never able to seal off the continent from British trade completely. Leakages occurred in the south, through Portugal, and in the north, through the Baltic.<sup>6</sup> One role of the British fleet in the Baltic was to

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3 In October 1707 2000 men died when the main part of the Mediterranean fleet under the command of Sir Cloudesley Shovell ran aground on the Scilly Isles. Storms played a part in this disaster, but of more importance were navigational errors and Shovell's decision to enter the Channel at night. Simon Harris, *Sir Cloudesley Shovell: Stuart Admiral* (Staplehurst 2001), 332-337. One of Shovell's ships was the 96-gun *St. George*. It had struck the rocks but miraculously was thrown clear by the same king-wave that destroyed Shovell's flagship. *St. George* had previously survived the 'Great Storm of 1703' in the Downs.

4 *The Times*, 20 Jan. 1812.

5 See Orders-in-Council, 11 Nov. 1807, in John B. Hattendorf *et. al.* (eds), *British Naval Documents 1204-1960* (Aldershot 1993), 351-54.

6 Rory Muir, *Britain and the Defeat of Napoleon 1807-1815* (New Haven and London 1996), 179; A.N. Ryan, 'The Defence of British Trade with the Baltic, 1808-1813', *English Historical Review* 74 (1959), 443-66.

assist European merchants, if they wished to export goods, to find ways of circumventing Napoleon's system. Using false flags and false papers, Britain helped to create a massive smuggling operation, with all ships leaving the Baltic carrying two sets of papers and being forced into convoys to ensure that they sailed to British ports and were protected from enemy privateers.<sup>7</sup> Convoys in both directions were very numerous during the season, which, depending on weather conditions, lasted from April until November. A convoy could comprise as many as two hundred ships. By 1811 the leaks in Napoleon's continental system had become a flood at its northern end.

Much of the credit for this must go to Vice-Admiral Sir James Saumarez (1757-1836), who had been appointed commander-in-chief of the Baltic fleet in April 1808. This was his first command in a major theatre of war, although he had fought at the battle of Cape St. Vincent in February 1797, had been deputy to Nelson in the squadron which had destroyed the French fleet at Aboukir Bay in August 1798 and had commanded a squadron in the Mediterranean, defeating a much larger Franco-Spanish force off Cadiz in July 1801.<sup>8</sup> For his new position, his expertise as a fighting sailor was less important than his diplomatic skills and his wide experience of close blockade using large warships. With a fleet including several large ships of the line, including his flagship, the 100-gun *Victory*, the second-rate *St George* and four third-rate ships (*Defence*, *Cressy*, *Hero* and *Vanguard*), Saumarez was well prepared for his role as an armed diplomat. With deftness and dexterity, he not only kept open British trade routes into the Baltic, but he also maintained working relations with succeeding Swedish governments, ensuring that they remained neutral in practice despite pressure from Napoleon to declare war on Britain.<sup>9</sup> This enabled Saumarez to use safe anchorages off the Swedish coast, at Wingo Sound (Vingla) and in Hano Bay, from where he could oversee the protection of merchantmen from the depredations of Danish privateers.

Saumarez's second in command in 1811 was Rear-Admiral Robert Carthew Reynolds (1745-1811), an elderly Cornishman who had been a

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7 A.N. Ryan, *The Saumarez Papers: The Baltic 1808-1812* (London 1968), xx.

8 A.B. Sainsbury, 'Saumarez, James, first Baron de Saumarez (1757-1836)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [http://oxforddnb.com.prospero.murdoch.edu.au:80/view/article/24685, accessed 11 July 2006].

9 Harding, *Seapower*, 275.

prisoner of war following the famous frigate action against the 74-gun *Droits de l'homme* in January 1797. In 1811 he commanded the squadron based at Hano, which was destined to escort the final convoy of the year to England. He flew his flag from *St. George*, a 98-gun warship that had previously survived a hurricane in the West Indies in 1805.<sup>10</sup>

Although Saumarez's main enemy were the 'mosquito squadrons' of small Danish gunboats, large warships were necessary in the Baltic. They reminded Scandinavian countries of Britain's naval power and stretch; they acted as a threat to Russian sea power in the Baltic; and their boats could be used as gunboats in the never-ending skirmishes with Danish privateers. They were, nevertheless, cumbersome in waters that were narrow and strewn with small islands and rocky outcrops. Reliable pilots, competent captains and highly disciplined crews were essential if the fleet's effectiveness was to be maintained. Perversely, winds were often very light in the summer months, but sudden storms and gales were common in the spring and autumn.

In March 1811 the Admiralty issued Saumarez's orders regarding the evacuation of the Baltic before the onset of winter. They stated that the last convoy should leave Hano by 1 October, 'on account of the impossibility of remaining there later'. If, however, the Swedes showed no hostility to a convoy using Matvik harbour to rendezvous, Saumarez was given discretion to extend the departure date until 1 November, 'which is at all accounts to be the latest period of their sailing from the Baltic'.<sup>11</sup>

Reynolds took advantage of this flexibility and did not set sail from Matvik until the evening of 1 November, having awaited some stragglers. As many as 140 sail were in the convoy, a large number laden with the timber and hemp so vital to the operational needs of the navy. The risks involved in departing at so late a date were augmented by contrary strong winds, which forced the convoy back into Matvik three times in the next few days, many of the ships having lost all their anchors. Eventually, they took passage on 9 November and by the evening of the 15th were anchored off

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10 J.K. Laughton, 'Reynolds, Robert Carthew (bap.1745, d.1811)', rev. Nicholas Tracy, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://oxforddnb.com/prospero.murdoch.edu.au:80/view/article/23436>, accessed 11 July 2006].

11 W. and P. Emes to John Wilson Croker, 21 Mar. 1811, *Saumarez Papers*, 170-71.

the coast of Zealand in the Great Belt, the longer but safer route to Wingo Sound.<sup>12</sup>

That night, according to Sergeant of Marines William Galey, ‘a perfect hurricane’ struck the convoy.<sup>13</sup> Many of the merchantmen dragged their cables and one struck *St. George* towards the stern. According to a witness, ‘one piercing shriek followed’ and the merchant ship was ‘engulfed in the raging billows’.<sup>14</sup> As *St. George* began drifting fast to the shore, the best bower (starboard bow) anchor was immediately let go, but such was the force of the wind and tide that its massive ring broke off, ‘as if it had only been a piece of wire’. Attempts to wear the ship failed, as the sails were blasted away as soon as they were loosened. Finally, the masts were cut down, but just as they fell ‘a heavy sea lifted the vessel and hurled her with violence upon a sand bank, where she remained fast’. Continual pounding on the sand tore the rudder away. The crew, however, kept their discipline and manned the pumps until exhausted by their ‘arduous exertions and long exposure to the biting cold and constant fall of sleet and snow’.<sup>15</sup>

Dawn found the gale abating and the ship stuck four miles from shore. For the next twenty-four hours *St. George* remained fast, until on the morning of 17 November its head swung round and it floated off. With jury masts and the help of a temporary rudder made with cable from the *Cressy*, the ship limped to Wingo Sound. Left behind were the visible wrecks of twelve merchantmen and several other ships foundering at their anchors. Altogether, thirty ships remained unaccounted for.<sup>16</sup>

Saumarez’s official report of the disaster to the Admiralty made no comment on the late sailing of the convoy nor on the actions of Reynolds after *St. George* was struck by the merchantman. Subsequently, however, a pseudonymous but apparently knowledgeable naval officer, “Tim

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12 *The Times*, 20 Jan. 1812; William O.S. Gilly, *Narratives of the Shipwrecks of the Royal Navy between 1793 and 1849, compiled principally from official documents in the Admiralty* (1850), Project Gutenberg eBook .pdf, No. 15301, 79; Saumarez’s Narrative of the loss of the *St. George* and *Defence*, *Saumarez Papers*, 208.

13 Institute of Naval History website, (accessed 9 July 2006).

14 Gilly, *Narratives*, 79.

15 *Ibid.*

16 Letter from “Time Weatherside”, in Nicholas Tracy (ed), *The Naval Chronicle: The Contemporary Record of the Royal Navy at War* (London 1999), V, 61-62; Capt. Charles Dashwood (*Pyramus*) to Saumarez, 21 Nov. 1811, *Saumarez Papers*, 204; Saumarez to Croker, 2 Dec. 1811, *ibid.*, 205-6.

Weatherside", suggested to the *Naval Chronicle* that there had been hesitation on the *St. George's* quarterdeck. The author, who was possibly an officer from the *Cressy*, admitted that the wind was of hurricane force, but claimed that when the ship was being driven towards the shore, Reynolds 'resisted for a long time the advice of the captain [Daniel Guion] and officers, to cut away the masts'.<sup>17</sup> The implication was that when he finally gave the order, it was too late to prevent the ship from striking the sand bank.

*St. George* arrived in Wingo Sound about 1 December. For the next fortnight, additional repairs were made and water and food stocks replenished. By this late stage of the year spirits and bread stocks were very low. Supplies had to be shared amongst the fleet and the crews put on two-thirds rations.<sup>18</sup> This must have been a factor in the decision to try to sail *St. George* back to Britain. Crown Prince Jean Baptiste Bernadotte of Sweden, former marshal of France who kept a weather eye on Napoleon, would never have allowed the ship to overwinter in a Swedish port. The ship was not equipped for a winter in the ice, even if a suitable site could have been found. There were only two alternatives. In his statement to the house of commons, Charles Yorke was to say that Reynolds, if he had thought his ship was too badly damaged, would have been justified in destroying *St. George* and transferring his flag and his crew to another vessel.<sup>19</sup> The other option was to risk the long voyage to home waters.

Reynolds took the advice of his officers before reaching a decision. All agreed that it was worth risking the journey to England. Presumably, they had faith in the repairs that had been made and in the reliability of the artificial rudder. This was a "Pakenham rudder", named after its inventor Edward Pakenham, a frigate captain who had died when the *Resistance* had been hit by lightning and exploded off the coast of Sumatra in 1798.<sup>20</sup> It was suitable for an emergency, but when combined with the jury masts – short masts made from topmasts – there was a real danger arising from the ship's lack of manoeuvrability. The confidence onboard was best expressed by William Galey in his last letter home. 'We shall sail for England with the first

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17 *Naval Chronicle*, V, 61.

18 Saumarez to Croker, 2 Dec. 1811.

19 *The Times*, 20 Jan. 1812.

20 William Laird Clowes, *The Royal Navy. A History from the Earliest Times to 1900* (1899: London 1997), IV, 512.

fair wind', he told his wife. 'We have a fine ship to drag us along – the new *Cressy* – so that, when we arrive in England, the people may say: "Here comes the old *St. George*, like a child in leading strings".'

Saumarez decided to divide his fleet. Most were to return home with the *Victory*. The 74-gun *Hero* and several smaller ships were to convoy the merchantmen. Two other third-raters, *Cressy* and *Defence*, were ordered to sail with the *St. George*.<sup>21</sup> On 17 December all the ships left Wingo Sound. Trouble occurred from the outset. Many of the merchantmen had difficulty weathering The Scaw, the northern tip of Jutland, and Saumarez had to signal the convoy to return to Wingo Sound. Three merchant ships were wrecked at this point, and many others were lost subsequently.<sup>22</sup> The *St. George* managed to negotiate the Skegerrak, under the plan of heading as far west as possible before changing course to the south.

At 9am on 23 December, Captain Charles Pater of *Cressy* offered to take *St. George* in tow, but was refused.<sup>23</sup> Just one hour later a very strong north-westerly gale blew up and the *St. George* began to drift towards the Danish coast. For the next twelve hours Pater tried to keep his ship between *St. George* and the coast, but eventually, after taking the advice of his officers, he decided to wear ship and with good fortune managed to avoid Horn Reef.<sup>24</sup> By this time both *St. George* and *Defence* were heading on to a lee shore at the rate of three miles an hour.

On board the *Defence*, Captain David Atkins was as aware of the danger as Pater. Seeing *Cressy* sailing to the south, he too considered wearing, but felt constrained by his orders to assist his admiral. According to one survivor's report, at midnight Reynolds had issued orders to prepare to wear, and Atkins got ready to change course. But it appears that no further orders were sent, or, if they were, they were not seen. The *St. George* continued to burn a blue light, a signal that presumably would have changed when the time came to wear. When Atkins was informed that no signal had been received from the flagship, he cancelled his orders. Finally, at 6.30am he decided to wear ship, but just as the fore-topmen scrambled up the masts, the *Defence* struck the coast.<sup>25</sup>

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21 Saumarez, 'Narrative', 208.

22 *Naval Chronicle*, IV, 61.

23 Saumarez, 'Narrative', 208-9.

24 Gilly, *Narratives*, 80-81; *Naval Chronicle*, IV, 61-2.

25 *Saumarez Papers*, 209-10.

By this time the *St. George* had become unmanageable. It had been unable to wear, a manoeuvre that involved turning the stern to windward (and thus to face the lee shore), in the hope of completing a circle to safety. In the process all the sails were blown away. In desperation, the crew's hammocks were placed in the rigging, but they had no effect. An anchor was then dropped in an attempt to turn the ship's head into the wind, 'but the hawser, catching under her keel, tore away the temporary rudder, and snapped itself with the strain, and again the ship fell off'.<sup>26</sup> From this point *St. George* was totally at the mercy of the storm. To the mournful sound of the *Defence's* distress gun, it struck the Jutland coast near Ringkobing, two miles north of where its companion had gone ashore.

The subsequent fates of the crews were distressing and shocking. In freezing temperatures and buffeted by wind, snow and sleet, seamen were mercilessly culled by huge waves sweeping the decks. The guns and other heavy articles broke loose, killing and maiming crewmen as they careered around the deck. Most of the ships' boats were smashed to matchwood, except the *Defence's* pinnace and *St. George's* yawl. Twenty men tried to get off in the pinnace, but were drowned when a huge wave washed her overboard. Another wave was so strong that it lifted a spare anchor onto the forecastle, where it killed nearly thirty men.<sup>27</sup> Captain Atkins remained on the poopdeck, clinging on to a howitzer lashed to the mizenmast. Men strapped themselves or clung to spars and booms, which when swept into the sea carried one hundred men with them. The only survivors of the *Defence* came from these men.

The fate of the crew of the *St. George* was even more awful, as their distress was more prolonged. They too suffered the consequences of massive waves and freezing cold. As the ship broke up, the stern with the poop deck intact floated free, carrying off up to two hundred men. These included Reynolds and Guion. The admiral had remained in his cabin until daylight on the 24th, when he was lifted through a skylight onto the deck. He died at 3.30pm on Christmas Day, his body at first being laid out on the deck next to Guion's. But as casualties mounted, the bodies were made into a barrier against the waves. The bodies of Reynolds and Guion occupied part of the fourth tier.

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26 Gilly, *Narratives*, 80.

27 *Saumarez Papers*, 210.



It was now more than thirty-three hours since the ship had struck. The men on the poop could be seen from the shore, but the sea was still too strong for rescue boats to come near. Eventually, a crude raft was made and floated away. Only the few who had been lashed to it managed to reach shore. 'On coming to our senses', wrote one survivor later, 'we could muster only eleven hands'.<sup>28</sup>

The survivors were well treated by the local Danish inhabitants. Each was given a large tot of alcohol, then stripped, rubbed down, and put to bed. All the dead that came ashore were buried with military honours and attempts were made by boat two days later, in company with two survivors, to find Reynolds' body on the still floating poop, but the deck had been swept entirely clear.<sup>29</sup> One account states that the body finally came ashore a month later. The survivors were repatriated to England, without being exchanged for Danish prisoners of war, good evidence that the local Danish authorities viewed the disaster as an unfortunate act of God from which they should gain no advantage.

Neither Pater nor Atkins was subsequently criticised for his actions on that dreadful night, even though they had taken diametrically opposed decisions. Pater had ignored his orders 'to stay by and accompany' *St. George* to England, changing course more than two hours before Reynolds made his signal to wear. If Reynolds had survived, Pater may have found himself facing a court-martial. In his subsequent report to the Admiralty, Saumarez made no comment on Pater's decision, except to say that he had saved his ship, which may be taken as (a possibly reluctant) approval of the decision.

Atkins, on the other hand, achieved a posthumous reputation for courage and sense of duty that was soon encrusted with well-meaning myths. He was reported to have replied to his lieutenant's statement that no signal had been received from Reynolds: 'I will never desert my admiral in the hour of danger and distress'. The court-martial into the loss of *St. George* held at Sheerness subsequently decided that the *Defence* was lost 'in consequence of the noble and heroic determination of the captain to stay to the last by his admiral, at a moment of extreme danger and distress, conduct which, in the opinion of the court, will reflect immortal honour on the memory of Captain Atkins'.<sup>30</sup>

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28 Institute of Naval History website.

29 Gilly, *Narratives*, 82.

30 *Ibid.*, 83.

Reynolds and his officers died without being aware that, even before their own ordeal had begun on the coast of Jutland, the Baltic fleet had suffered another disaster. On 23 December the *Hero*, captained by James Newman-Newman, together with the sloop *Grasshopper* and a large number of the merchant convoy, had gone ashore on Haake Sand, off the Texel in Holland. The crew of the sloop were saved, but all on the *Hero* died. They were victims of the same hurricane, although in their case navigational errors played a major part in the disaster, Newman thinking he was avoiding the English coast off Yarmouth when he ran into the coast of Holland.<sup>31</sup>

The Royal Navy lost only thirteen ships of third-rate or above in the war with Napoleon between 1803 and 1815. Eight of these were wrecked.<sup>32</sup> Three of these losses came from the Baltic fleet in the space of two days in the last month of 1811. *St. George* had a crew of about 850, while *Defence* and *Hero* carried about 550 men each. Only seventeen survived. Hundreds more merchant seamen died in the convoy ships. It was the worst British maritime disaster since the beginning of the war with revolutionary France in 1793. British losses at the battle of Trafalgar had been 449.<sup>33</sup> Not since September 1782, when 3500 men and six Royal Navy ships were lost when a convoy from Jamaica met a hurricane in the central Atlantic, had Britain lost so many men.<sup>34</sup>

Saumarez, commander of the Baltic fleet, was a rational and level-headed man. The key to the disaster off Jutland, he thought, was that first collision between *St. George* and a merchantman on 15 November. In Parliament, the opposition MP Samuel Whitbread agreed that the calamity 'was the inevitable effect of misfortune, and misfortune alone'.<sup>35</sup> But that first collision was the result of weather conditions that might have been anticipated. The ultimate consequences of the other key decision – to sail *St. George* home in close formation with two other warships – were also determined by weather conditions. Napoleon may have been a powerful

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31 *Saumarez Papers*, 210-11; *The Times*, 17 Feb. 1812.

32 Compiled from Clowes, *Royal Navy*, V, 549-62.

33 Roy Adkins, *Trafalgar: The Biography of a Battle* (London 2004), 290.

34 David J. Hepper, *British Warship Losses in the Age of Sail 1650-1859* (Rotherfield 1994), 69-70. Many of these ships were suffering from severe battle damage.

35 *The Times*, 20 Jan. 1812.

and determined enemy, but in the war at sea he could not compete with Nature for perversity, hostility, and destructiveness.

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