



All Guns Blazing!

Newsletter of the Naval Wargames Society

No. 186 – October 2009

EDITORIAL

Gentlemen,

First off this month, I think it is only fitting that I thank David Manley once again for distributing this newsletter via the Society website over the past few months. Try as I might, I was not able to get my 'Outlook Express' to send to the group as a whole, or even smaller 'mini-groups'. I contacted 'Talktalk', my service provider, and Microsoft, but to no avail. It seems now that the only option open to me is to send it out in far smaller groups, which is how you've received it (I hope!) now. As I'm sure you will appreciate is quite a job; nevertheless I shall endeavour to keep to our monthly timetable. If anyone has experienced difficulty in receiving *AGB* since I took over in July (No. 183), then please let me know and I'll re-send you the required issues.

October, of course, sees the anniversary of the Battle of Trafalgar, and I have no idea whether this has any *particular* bearing on my love of our hobby but I was born on Trafalgar Day! (October 21st 1964, by the way, not 1805!) Nevertheless, from an early age it was drummed into me what this 'honour' meant, and an elderly maiden aunt (do they still exist in this modern age?) never missed writing Nelson's 'England Expects' signal on the inside of my birthday card. Influences in our formative years surface in the end!

I remember on my birthday five years ago that there was a bit of 'hoo-ha' over an actor dressed as Nelson having to wear a lifejacket before being allowed to sail up the Thames; a case of political correctness and health and safety gone mad. I know all PC is idiotic and to be avoided like the 'Yellow Jack', but it did provoke a brilliant piece of tabloid journalism in the *Daily Mail*, superbly titled 'A rum do at Trafalgar'. Actually, the article seems to have been submitted by a reader, a Mr. Bruce Baker from Pinner, and although you will all be shocked to the core at the reference to a crow's nest in a man-of-war, I think you'll find it diverting. I enjoyed it so much I still have it five years later! Then, on a more serious note and to add a little more to this issue, I've put in a review of a superb book on war at sea in the eighteenth century. I have to admit that a much shorter version was printed in *Wargames Illustrated* a few months ago, but in this organ I can go over a somewhat constricting 500 words!

Please keep anything you'd like to say coming over my 'desk'!

Yours Splicing the Mainbrace

Richard Wimpenny

wimpenny@talktalk.net

For those wanting to contact me via the Royal Mail, my address is:

10, Bettridge Place,
Wellesbourne.
Warwickshire,
CV35 9LY.

A Rum Do At Trafalgar

By Bruce Baker

(Taken from the *Daily Mail*, October 2004.)

It's almost 200 years since Lord Nelson's famous naval victory in the Battle of Trafalgar. To kick-start the anniversary celebrations an actor dressed as Nelson posed for pictures on the River Thames at Greenwich. But before he was allowed on board an RNLI Lifeboat, he was told to wear a lifejacket over his 19th-century admiral's uniform. How would Nelson have coped with modern health and safety regulations?

"Order the signal to be sent, Hardy."

"Aye, aye, Sir."

"Hold on, that's not what I dictated to the signal officer. What's the meaning of this?"

"Sorry, Sir?"

"England expects every person to do his duty, regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, religious persuasion or disability.' What gobbledegook is this?"

"Admiralty policy, Sir. We're an equal opportunities employer now. We had the devil's own job getting 'England' past the censors, lest it be considered racist."

"Gadzooks, Hardy. Hand me my pipe and tobacco."

"Sorry, Sir. All naval vessels have been designated smoke-free working environments."

"In that case, break open the rum ration. Let us splice the main brace to steel the men before battle."

"The rum ration has been abolished, Admiral, because of Government policy on binge-drinking."

"Good heavens, Hardy. I suppose we'd better get on with it. Full speed ahead."

"I think you'll find that there's a four-knot speed limit in this stretch of water."

"Damn it, man! We are on the eve of the greatest sea battle in history. We must advance with all dispatch. Report from the crow's nest, please."

"That won't be possible, Sir."

"What?"

"Health and safety have closed the crow's nest, Sir. No harness. And they said that a rope ladder doesn't meet regulations. They won't let anyone up there until proper scaffolding has been erected."

"Then get me the ship's carpenter without delay, Hardy."

"He's busy knocking up wheelchair access to the fo'c'sle, Admiral."

"Wheelchair access? I've never heard of anything so absurd."

"Health and safety again, Sir. We have to prove a barrier-free environment for the differently abled."

"Differently abled? I've only one arm and one eye and I refuse even to hear mention of the word. I didn't rise to the rank of admiral by playing the disability card."

"Actually, Sir, you did. The Royal Navy is under-represented in the area of visual impairment and limb deficiency."

"Whatever next? Give me full sail. The salt spray beckons."

"A couple of problems there too, Sir. Health and safety won't let the crew up the rigging without crash helmets. And they don't want anyone breathing in too much salt—haven't you seen the adverts?"

"I've never heard of such infamy. Break out the cannon and tell the men to stand by to engage the enemy."

"The men are a bit worried about shooting anyone, Admiral."

"What? This is mutiny!"

"It's not that, Sir. It's just that they're afraid of being charged with murder if they actually kill anyone. There's a couple of lawyers on board watching everyone like hawks."

"Then how are we to sink Frenchie and the Spanish?"

"Actually, we're not."

"We're not?"

"No, Sir. Frenchie and the Spanish are now our European partners now. According to the Common Fisheries Policy we shouldn't even be in this stretch of water. We could get hit with a claim for compensation."

“But you must hate a Frenchman as you hate the devil.”

“I wouldn’t let the ship’s diversity co-ordinator hear you saying that, Sir. You’d be up on a disciplinary.”

“You must consider every man an enemy who speaks ill of your king.”

“Not any more, Sir. We must be inclusive in the multicultural age. Now put on your Kevlar vest. It’s the rules.”

“Don’t tell me—health and safety. Whatever happened to rum, sodomy and the lash?”

“As I explained, Sir, rum is off the menu. And now there’s a ban corporal punishment.”

“What about sodomy?”

“I believe it’s to be encouraged, Sir.”

“In that case...kiss me, Hardy.”

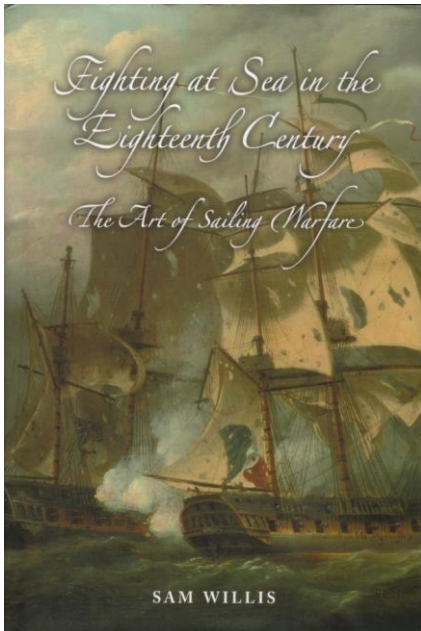
FIGHTING AT SEA IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

THE ART OF SAILING WARFARE

By Sam Willis.
(Boydell and Brewer Ltd)

£30.00

Sam Willis is a maritime historian and archaeologist, as well as an experienced square-rig sailor and he has packed all his academic and practical understanding into this remarkable volume. ‘Fighting at Sea’ is a medium-sized hardback, running to some 250 pages. Aside from the main text, there are copious notes for those wanting further information, an appendix on ‘Fleet Battles, 1688-1815’ and a useful ‘Glossary of Nautical Terms’; there are also nine beautifully drawn maps; the text is further fleshed out with sketched illustrations and black and white renditions of period paintings.



Willis’s overriding aim has been to subject the many, often baffling, practices of fighting at sea during this period to a very practical scrutiny, as opposed to relying on the theoretical treatise of the day. As Mr. Willis states in his introduction,

“The...reason for our inability to understand the practical reality of fighting at sea is the continued use of contemporary sources that are not themselves rooted in those practical realities.”

This line of enquiry is brought into sharp focus in eleven fascinating chapters that range from the perils of meeting another ship at sea, through the problems of exercising command, to a discussion on the type of conduct a captain or admiral could rightly expect of his peers while in action. These subjects are all extremely

relevant to the naval wargamer and Mr. Willis's descriptions of the 'how' and, perhaps even more importantly, the 'why' are superb.

Eighteenth century naval warfare is noted for its reliance on the 'line of battle', and a correct understanding of this often maligned formation is the second theme running through 'Fighting at Sea'. The author believes that too much emphasis has hitherto been placed on the official 'Fighting Instructions' and signal books, the result being that battles have been viewed as merely a succession of rigid encounters, choreographed by inflexible and unimaginative commanders. Mr. Willis believes this to be an unfair and inaccurate judgement on men who understood their business and that 'the line' was greater than the sum of its parts. He states that:

"The line drew its strength from cohesion and unity of action, and those examples requiring strict station keeping were there to help provide that cohesion, not restrict mobility or aggression. The [Fighting] Instructions were not dreamt up by bloody-minded and short-sighted administrators with little knowledge of the realities of sea warfare, but by battle-hardened veteran seafarers who knew their ships, knew the Navy, and knew war."

Wrapped up with the implementation of an effective line of battle is a discussion on the flexibility of command, and it is interesting to discover just how much importance was attached to orders received during councils of war or passed verbally from ship to ship, even in pre-Nelson times. I had not realized that these personal touches were considered just as official as any flag signal, and their correct use could mean the difference between victory and defeat—as could the correct use of initiative.

Initiative (or lack of it) is something of a thorny issue with regard to the Royal Navy during the age of sail; however, in order for an officer to have been able to exercise his judgement he needed an established framework of accepted behaviour. Of course, one man's 'initiative' could be another man's 'mutiny', and Chapter Six 'Unwritten Rules' (one of the most interesting, in my view) addresses this. As Mr. Willis says,

"Hierarchy, respect, obedience and discipline are essential to the efficient functioning of a military body, but victory itself remains the ultimate aim. It is in this rather murky area that insubordination becomes acceptable."

The author goes on to explain how one of the most vital of the 'unwritten rules' was mutual support. If an admiral or captain stood into danger he could *expect* his brother officers to support him. Examples given include Nelson's famous 'blind eye' at Copenhagen, when his squadron stayed with him rather than obey Hyde Parker's order to retreat; and Lord Cochrane's hurling of his frigate at the French Fleet in the Basque Roads to sting the passive Admiral Gambier into action. This is the sort of reasoned information that can help the writing of scenarios; just how much can a player 'bend' his orders? Well, see Chapter Six!

Initiative comes into discussion throughout further chapters, where it is highlighted that the role of the good admiral was to leaven control with a pinch of flexibility, so that captains, rather than going off to 'do their own thing', would use their initiative in a way their admiral expected. Nelson, of course, had an instinct for this style of command, but as Mr. Willis makes perfectly clear: "Nelson's captains were more a 'Band of Nelsons' than a 'Band of Brothers'."

For me, the great success of 'Fighting at Sea' is that a close study of the aspects of sailing has added *hugely* to my understanding of how crews fought their ships. This is not to say, however, that the book is obsessed with 'ropes and knots'; far from it. Mr. Willis takes the many and varied examples of war at sea, practical as well as theoretical, and blends them in an engaging narrative that covers single-ship actions and fleet actions with ease and clarity. Indeed, I would say that if you ever feel dissatisfied with your age of sail rules and feel inclined to try and write your own, then this excellent volume is quite simply indispensable.

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NWS Events and Regional Contacts, 2009

NWS Northern Fleet – Falkirk East Central Scotland

Kenny Thomson, 1 Excise Lane, Kincardine, Fife, FK10 4LW, Tel: 01259 731091

e-mail: kenny.thomson@homecall.co.uk - *Website:* <http://falkirkwargamesclub.org.uk/>

Falkirk Wargames Club meets each Monday night at 7pm with a variety of games running each evening. Naval games are popular with 2 or 3 run each month. Campaign games sometimes feature in our monthly weekend sessions. Games tend to be organised week to week making a 3-month forecast here a waste of time. Please get in touch if you'd like to come along.

- Popular periods – Modern (Shipwreck), WW1 and 2 (GQ), WW2 Coastal (Action Stations), and Pre-dreadnought (P Dunn's rules)
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NWS North Hants [Every 3rd Sunday]

Jeff Crane 31 Park Gardens, Black Dam, Basingstoke, Hants, 01256 427906

e-mail: gf.crane@ntlworld.com

NWS Wessex [Bi-Monthly Meetings]

The Wessex Group has gone into (hopefully) temporary abeyance for the moment. If anyone living in the Bath / Bristol / Gloucester area (or further afield) would like to take on managing the group please contact myself or any of the other NWS officials.
