

## FLAGS AT THE BATTLE OF THE GLORIOUS FIRST OF JUNE 1794

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The battle of the Glorious First of June was the first major fleet action of the Revolutionary wars. A tactical victory for the British, who took six ships and sank a seventh; perhaps a strategic victory for the French, who successfully protected the grain convoy, the safe arrival of which was vital for the survival of the republic during this period of poor harvests.

The French commander, Villaret-Joyeuse, discussing the action later with Captain Edward Brenton while a prisoner of war in the *Belle-isle*, said that:

*... he only gave battle when he knew that the convoy was near at hand, and that it would fall a prey to the British fleet unless that fleet was disabled by action, or busied in securing prizes: for he had made up his mind to the loss of a few ships: 'What did I care,' he said, 'for half a dozen rotten old hulks which you took?'*

Nevertheless the victory boosted British morale and for this reason is very well documented. The National Maritime Museum possibly holds more material relating to this battle than it holds relating to Trafalgar.

Nicholas Pocock, a marine artist noted for his painstaking accuracy, was present during the action on board the frigate *Pegasus*. This was not as dangerous as it sounds, as frigates were not generally fired on during fleet actions. His sketchbook and notes are preserved amongst the Museum's manuscript collections and the Pictures Section holds many loose sketches. In some cases these were the basis for oil paintings executed at a later date and they include records of flags and signals. Other artists produced less technically accurate but perhaps more lively renderings of the battle, most notably Mather Brown and Philippe Jacques de Louthembourg. Robert Cleveley and Robert Dodd also produced versions which were subsequently engraved and published.

Manuscripts Section holds journals, letters, accounts of the battle and the lieutenants' logs. The masters' logs in the Public Record Office were published by the Navy Records Society in 1899 as *Logs of the Great Sea Fights 1794-1805 Volume 1*. The Museum also has the relevant signal books - the 1793 edition of Howe's signals - a printed version, which according to the inscription was issued to "George Bowyer Esq. Rear Admiral of the White, by Admiral Lord Howe from His Majesty's ship the Queen Charlotte at Spithead

28th May 1793" (1). There is also a manuscript signal book, produced a short while before June 1794, which contains the order of battle with distinguishing vanes for Lord Howe's fleet (2).

From 1776, Howe had been developing a more flexible and comprehensive signal code, as had Charles Knowles and Richard Kempenfelt. The 1793 edition was a rearrangement alphabetically and under appropriate headings of the 1790 signals. These had adopted the numerary system proposed by Captain Mahe de la Bourdonnais: the flags were numbered, the signals to which they referred were numbered, and they were hoisted wherever they could best be seen rather than in specific places which formed part of the message (3).

The improvements in the signalling system helped the British to exploit their superior fire power at close quarters. Better discipline resulted in a faster rate of fire and they benefited from such technical improvements as gun locks, flannel cartridges and quill tubes (4). Their opponents were labouring under organizational disadvantages, after a period when the French navy had profited from generous finance and the personal interest of Louis XVI, its upper ranks had now been thinned by dismissals, arrests and executions. Villaret-Joyeuse was, in particular, hampered by the activities of a politician called Jean Bon Saint-Andre who had unhelpfully disbanded the old-established divisions of trained seamen gunners, arguing that they formed an aristocracy of artillerymen.

The French fleet was first sighted well out into the Atlantic on 28 May. The next couple of days saw some minor action as Howe manoeuvred to gain the weather gage. On the first of June, Howe dressed his line and sent out signal 34 ... "Having the wind of the enemy the Admiral means to pass between the ships of the line for engaging them to leeward". This tactic of cutting the enemy line at all (in practice several) points, was a novel one, which achieved concentration of force, held the enemy and prevented their escape.

How well did the new signal system work in practice, given visibility problems due to smoke and possibly resistance from his subordinates to a newly introduced system? An anecdote from Sir John Barrow's life of Howe illustrates the latter point. Richard Kempenfelt when first Captain of the Channel fleet under Admiral Geary

*... was constantly in the habit of exercising the ships by his signals ... One day a fleet of ships supposed to be that of the enemy hove in sight. The signals were resorted to; but ... somehow or other were not managed so well as when made at their leisure. Geary at last grew impatient and going up to Kempenfelt, and laying his hand gently on his shoulder, exclaimed with good-natured earnestness, 'Now, my dear Kempy, do for God's sake, do, my dear Kempy, oblige me by throwing your signals overboard and make that which we all understand, "Bring the enemy to close action" (5).*

Two of the most important signals sent out by the flagship were 34 - "When having the wind of the enemy, the admiral means to pass between the ships in the line for engaging to leeward" and 36 - "Each ship independently to steer for and engage her opponent in the enemy's line". To judge by the way that these two signals were recorded, there do indeed seem to have been transmission problems.

Four ships seem to be without surviving logs. The master's log of the *Queen* is not complete as he was killed during the action, but she was one of the ships which obeyed signal 34 and broke the line successfully. Of the remainder of the fleet, eleven ships logged both signals at approximately the right time, four ships logged both signals but gave very inaccurate times, eight ships logged 36 only, and six ships kept very poor signal records and logged neither signal. The six ships with the exception of *Queen* which executed signal 34 correctly, also logged it, which suggests that if it was received, it was noted down, but the fact that so many ships logged only the more conventional and predictable 36, suggests that the recognition problem may have been mental rather than visual. *Gibraltar* was one of the ships which kept poor signal records, and a Lieutenant Lloyd criticised his commanding officer in the following terms:

*Our captain, Mackenzie, is about the stupidest man possible. Having been signal midshipman with Lord Howe, I took the opportunity of saying: 'Captain Mackenzie, you have not been accustomed to signals. Will you allow me, as I have been signal midshipman in the Queen Charlotte, to go over the signals with you?' He said: 'I shall be very much obliged to you'. I dwelt particularly on the two signals: 'Each ship to take her opponent', and 'engage to leeward', which we had always understood Lord Howe would use. After the action, although those were the only two signals made before bearing down, Captain Mackenzie asked me if either of these two signals had ever been made (6).*

Where possible, I checked the lieutenants' logs against the masters' logs, investigating the possibility of internal lack of communication, but found them invariably in agreement. If the master kept poor signal records so did the lieutenant.

In addition to the main signal flags, Howe's code included a system of triangular pennants to direct signals to particular squadrons, and with red, white or blue pennants above, to divisions of those squadrons. There were also pennants to direct signals to individual ships - seven pennants which could be flown in eight different places. Compass points and hours could be signalled and there was a separate system for private ship signals (from individual ships to the flagship). During the six days from 28 May to 1 June, the British fleet made use of most of these systems.

Individual ships were identified by vanes which were constructed of bunting spread on wooden frames, rectangular in shape, with the proportion of length to depth much greater than in signal flags.

The National Maritime Museum does not have any signal flags of this date in its collections, but a Navy Board letter of 2 July 1790 (7) gives the sizes of signal flags used by Howe's fleet. On the large ships the flags were to be 12 ft by 14 ft and on the smaller ships 10 ft by 12 ft.

Flag officers, during the 18th century, theoretically flew a flag of their squadronal colours from the appropriate masthead - mizzen for rear admirals, fore for vice admirals, and main for full admirals. Seven flag officers were present at the battle, including three rear admirals of the white, thus offering plenty of opportunity for confusion. To quote midshipman Thomas Consett of *Defence*: "The admirals during the action hoisted distinguishing flags instead of their own". This seems to have meant that they were arranged so that there were no two admirals' flags of the same colour hoisted on the same mast. Indications of how this rearrangement was organised are found in Pocock's papers. A printed sketch plan of the battle for the *Morning Herald* is bound in with the *Pegasus* journals, which gives a list of the admirals' flags as follows ...

**Thomas Pasley**, rear admiral of the white - white at the mizzen. Thomas Graves, vice admiral of the red - blue at the mizzen.

**Benjamin Caldwell**, rear admiral of the white - white at the fore. George Bowyer, rear admiral of the white - red at the fore. A note says that this should have been red at the mizzen but was altered by way of distinction. This is not accurate; he should have flown white at the mizzen.

**Alan Gardner**, rear admiral of the white - blue at the fore. This entry has a similar misleading note.

**Alexander Hood**, vice admiral of the red - blue at the main.

Apparent demotion seems to have been preferred to duplication.

The Pocock sketches include a diagram of the identification vanes, which is similar to the table in the manuscript signal book reference SIG/B/24.

Small crosses indicate ships not present at the battle, and sketches of the admirals' flags are interposed, confirming those given in the table on the printed sketch plan, although there is one anomaly in the case of *Royal Sovereign*, Admiral Graves' ship, the name of which is accompanied by a St George's flag with no indication of the masthead.

The National Maritime Museum has a contemporary admiral's flag, that flown by Duncan as admiral of the blue, on loan from the Duncan family. The size is 101 x 146 inches (2.57 x 3.71 m) and it is made of plain wool bunting, hand sewn, the linen hoist containing a rope with a tight loop at either end rather than a toggle.

Also in the Museum's collection is the union flag, flown at the main of the *Queen Charlotte* by Howe as acting admiral of the fleet. This is shown in detail of the de Louthembourg painting. It is on loan to the Museum, having been passed down through the family of William Burgh, a midshipman on the *Queen Charlotte*, together with a letter to his sister giving an account of the battle, and a canvas kitbag marked "Lieut Burgh Royal Navy". This flag is again made of wool bunting, as in all early British flags very light and loosely woven - one ply warp and weft and approximately 30 threads to the inch. It is hand sewn, 156 x 220 inches (3.96 x 5.59 m) and like the Duncan flag it has a narrow linen hoist containing a rope looped at each end. As you can see the design is very inaccurately constructed.

Instead of the squadronal colours which might have been red or white, red ensigns were hoisted at the start of the battle by all the British fleet, to avoid confusion with the enemy's colours. Although the modern pattern French tricolour had been prescribed for use at sea on 24 May 1794, there had not been time to issue the new flag to the French fleet which was still flying the old naval ensign. This was predominantly white with a tricolour in the canton and it could easily have been confused with the white ensign which, as we have seen, was the squadronal colour of many ships in the British fleet. Admiral Villaret-Joyeuse, however, flew as a command flag in the *Montagne*, a tricolour of the new pattern.

Not all British ships ended the battle flying the red ensign. *Marlborough*, losing her red ensign during the course of the action, hoisted squadronal colours in its place. A letter from her first lieutenant, John Monkton, states:

*... Our masts then being shot away by the three decker under our stern, carried away the ensign staff and deprived us of hoisting any colours for a few minutes.*

*I ordered the wreckage to be cleared away from the colour chest and spread a Union Jack at the spritsail yard and St George's [ie white] ensign at the stump of the foremast; but perceiving that the latter was mistaken by some of our own ships for the tri-coloured flag, I ordered the [fly of the] flag to be cut off.*

The other British ship to be completely dismasted in the battle was *Defence*, whose log records that "the *Royal Sovereign* bore down to our assistance but remained to windward firing into us mistaking the colours". *Defence* is shown in a painting by Nicholas Pocock

also flying a white ensign. *Alfred* had two ensigns shot away together with the staff, but there are no clues as to the colour of the replacements. It should be said that vexillological confusion might not be the only reason for being fired on by one's own side. Smoke obscured the lower rigging and crossfire was side effect of tactics which led to a melee.

The Museum's collections contain a pre-1801 pattern white ensign, passed down through the family of John Harvey, captain of the *Brunswick*, which was supposedly flown during the battle. The *Brunswick* was also dismasted and the captain died of his wounds following her return to Portsmouth. A painting after Pocock, however, shows her at the close of the action still flying the red ensign. The other possibilities are that these are the squadronal colours of the ship, or it might, less plausibly, be suggested that they were associated with another member of the family, which included five naval officers at this time.

The flag is possibly unique. I know of no other complete 1707-1801 white ensign which has been preserved. The design of the union flag is very inaccurately made up as in the *Queen Charlotte* example. The size is 246 x 475 inches (6.25 x 12.07m). It is made of wool bunting, hand sewn, with a narrow linen hoist containing a rope and toggle. The flag itself is very much repaired.

Although I have not said very much about the flags of the French fleet, I should mention the third Glorious First of June flag in our collection, the banner of the boarding division of *L'Amérique*, captured by *Leviathan*, commanded by Lord Hugh Seymour. It is 27 x 26 inches (686 x 660 mm), made of white linen with a fringe of gold thread, the surface of the banner embroidered in yellow with the words MARINS LA REPUBLIQUE OU LA MORT. There is some fainter illegible lettering underneath in ink. The banner is evidence of attempts to carry out the ideas of Jean Bon Saint Andre.

*Disdaining skilful evolution ... perhaps our seamen will think it more fitting and useful to try those boarding actions in which the Frenchman was always a conqueror, and thus astonish Europe with new prodigies of valour.*

I would like to finish with a quick look at surrender procedure. White flags were obviously not practical in these circumstances. That the signal for surrender was the hauling down of the colours and the cessation of firing is evident from the following accounts. Stuart, the master of the *Brunswick*, says in the log that "at 1/4 past 2 the *Vengeur* hauled her colours down and displayed a union jack over her quarter". Isaac Schomberg in his account of the battle says "Several of the French ships hauled down the national colours and cheered us as we passed".

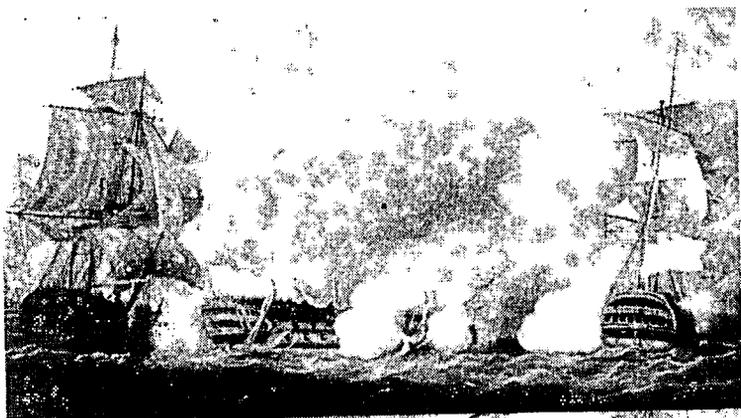
An aquatint after Livesay showing one of the French prizes, *Sans Pareil*, at Portsmouth, shows her flying the British colours above the French ones.

The British flag system was particularly complicated, particularly before the abolition of the squadronal system in 1864. During the Battle of the First of June, as in most of the major naval actions of the Revolutionary wars, the squadronal system of ensigns and admirals' flags was abandoned in favour of different *ad hoc* arrangements, thus making life even more difficult for the accuracy-seeking marine artist, whether contemporary or present day.

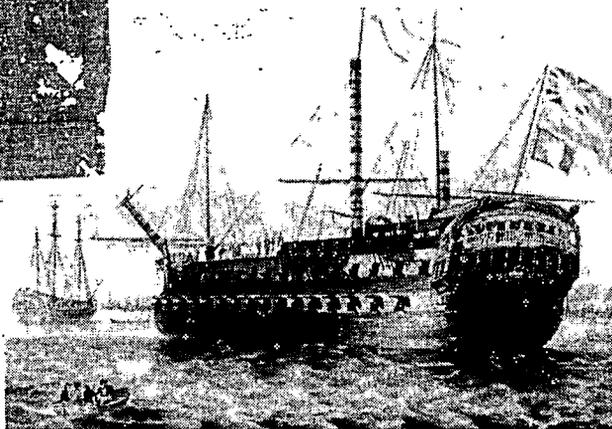
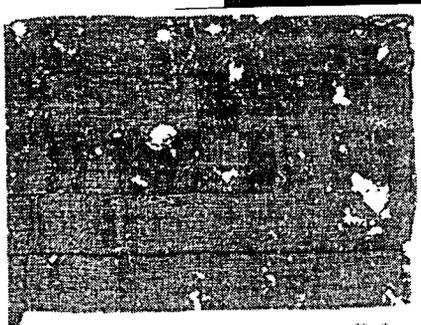
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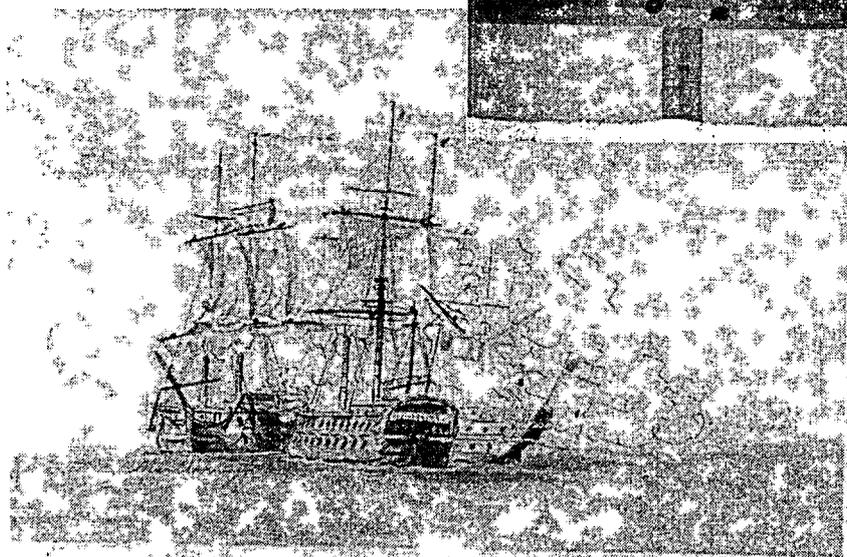
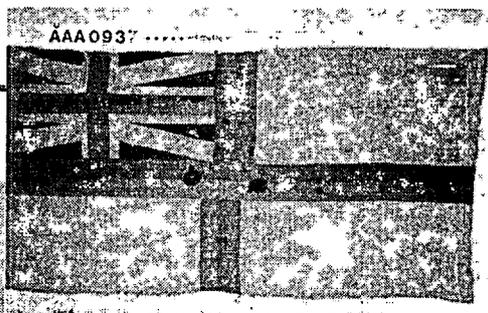
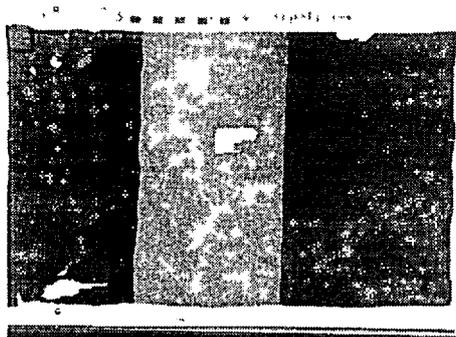
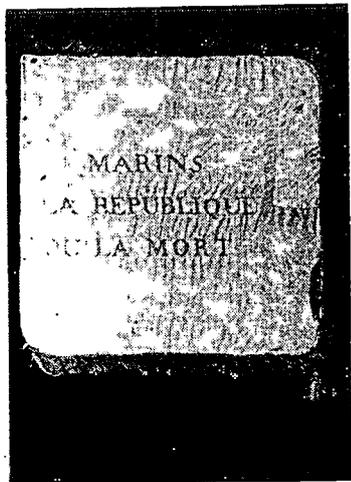
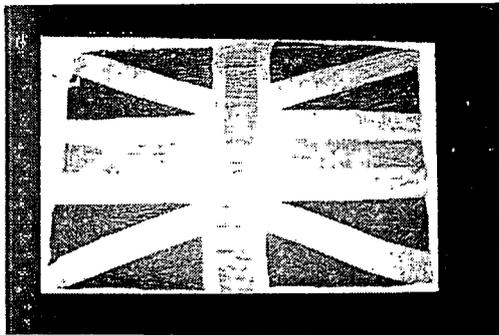
#### NOTES

1. NMM ref SIG/B/62
2. NMM ref SIG/B/24
3. Capt L E Holland *The Development of Signalling in the Royal Navy* (The Society of Nautical Research 1974)
4. Peter Padfield *Guns at Sea* (Hugh Evelyn, London 1973)
5. D L Woods *The Evolution of Visual Signals on Land and Sea* (Ohio State University 1976)
6. Oliver Warner *The Glorious First of June* (Batsford Ltd 1961)
7. NMM MS ADM/BP/10, letter of 2 July 1790



Selection from slides illustrating  
Barbara Tomlinson's presentation





"The Glorious First of June, 1794" — NICHOLAS POCOCK 1741-1821.

