The virtual battle: Flags in Georgian marine paintings

Barbara Tomlinson

Abstract
The 18th century saw the development of an English school of marine painting following the example of the Dutch in the previous century. When representing naval battles, artists needed to handle numerous technical details including the depiction of British squadronal colours, distinguishing flags and signal flags. This paper examines selected actions painted by Samuel Scott (1701/2-1772), Nicholas Pocock (1741-1821), Thomas Whitcombe (c.1752-1827) and William Anderson (1757-1837) and asks - how accurate were these artists, how did they research their paintings, how did they display flags for dramatic effect and who was their intended audience? The resources of the National Maritime Museum’s collections used to illustrate this subject include prints, drawings and documents.

The British maritime victories of the sailing navy era were immortalized by contemporary artists. Originally a Dutch genre, by the middle of the 18th century, marine pictures were also produced by British painters who specialised in these scenes. I would like to consider the relationship between the reality and the representation with particular reference to the way the artist shows British flags, concentrating on some of the less well-known battles.

One painter who took considerable pains to include accurate detail was Nicholas Pocock. A sketchbook survives compiled by Pocock during the Battle of the Glorious 1st of June when he was able to observe the action directly from the frigate Pegasus. These small and indistinct views remind us that in contrast to the way vessels are shown in marine paintings, in reality, everything would have been much more spread out and much further away. A short time after both sides had opened fire the battle was obscured by an all too literal “fog of war”. However Pocock’s clientele were frequently naval officers commissioning pictures of actions in which they had personally taken part. They expected some degree of accuracy. Pocock had to produce “virtual reality” without the computer, expecting the viewer to be able to “read” the picture.

The National Maritime Museum’s manuscript collection contains a written statement, dated 1846 (after Pocock’s death) describing his working methods with reference to a painting of Brunswick, Vengeur and Achille in the 1st of June action. “The late Mr N. Pocock who painted this Picture got his information on the subject from Lord Howe, who, with Lord Nelson, Lord Gambier & others used to make slight sketches, of their different

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actions, & bring them to Mr Pocock and stand over him while he sketched them, then from those sketches made the Pictures”. In common with other artists, Pocock made sketches of the hulls of the ships involved when they returned to port. Official despatches would be printed in the Naval Chronicle and the manoeuvres, signals sent, damage to vessels, and weather would all be logged and timed in the captain’s logs and sometimes in the lieutenant’s journals. From this information, Pocock would produce sketch plans of the action with wind direction, from which customers could pick a view.

I will start by looking at the work of an earlier artist, Samuel Scott. Unlike Pocock he had no professional sea going experience and made his name with views of the Thames. By the end of the 1730’s he had built up a flourishing business and received commissions for naval engagements and more general sea pieces from important patrons. In the following decade he was commissioned by both the Vernon and Anson families to depict their naval victories. This view of the Battle of Cape Finisterre, 3 May 1747 (Fig. 1) is in the National Maritime Museum’s collections originally thought to be commissioned by Lord Dover but more likely by the Anson family for their country house at Shugborough. There is another later version at Tate Britain, the latest of several (there is another version in the Paul Mellon Collection). It was researched by the former Keeper of Oil Paintings, E. A.A. Archibald in the late 1950’s and his conclusions published by Richard Kingsett in the journal of the Walpole Society. Prominently shown, almost in the centre of the painting is the flagship of the commanding officer Vice-Admiral George Anson, the Prince George, 90 guns. The Admiral’s rank and squadron are indicated by the plain blue flag at the fore. All the British ships wear Blue Ensigns of the 1707-1801 pattern. The flagship has a couple of signals hoisted (communication at this stage primarily ran one-way from the commanding officer). The red flag at the main is the signal for the fleet to attack without regard for line of battle that Anson hoisted at 3 pm. Just visible below the Blue Ensign is part of a striped red, white and blue flag which was displayed on the mizzen shrouds as a signal to “Chase to the S.W.” Anson was taking on two French squadrons and a convoy and in the latter stages of the action detached three ships in pursuit of the convoy. The artist has obviously had access to the sailing and fighting instructions first published in 1703 or one of the signal books derived from it. The red St George’s cross on a white ground apparently attached to the French vessel with the plain white ensign and collapsing mast to the right of Prince George is in fact the flag of Rear-Admiral Peter Warren, Anson’s second in command. It indicates the presence of his ship Devonshire, partly obscured by the French vessel and a cloud of gun smoke from Prince George. It is worn correctly on the mizzenmast. Lieutenant John Lockheart of Devonshire says “at 5 we engaged the French Admiral Mons. Le Jonquier in the Serieux of 64 guns and his second in the Invincible of 74 guns within half musket shot. Ditto shot the latter’s maintopmast away, ¼ past 5 the Serieux struck to us at ½ past 5 the Invincible struck to us”. According to Anson’s despatches “The Yarmouth and Devonshire having got up and engaged the Enemy, and the Prince George being near the Invincible and going to fire onto her, all the ships in the Enemy’s Rear Struck their Colours between six and seven o clock”. The incident therefore primarily depicted in the painting is the capture of Invincible. Comparison with the engravings by Boydell after Short of the captured Invincible confirms that this is the ship shown in Scott’s picture. Correspondence between Dennis Farr at the Tate and Captain Vichot at the Musées de la Marine established that the flag of the French commodore is shown more correctly as a white broad pennant at the mizzen in the later Tate Modern version.

Knowles action off Havana on October 1st the following year is represented by a se-
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Figure 1  Lord Anson's victory off Cape Finisterre, 3 May 1747, Samuel Scott.

Figure 2  Beginning of Knowles' action off Havana, 1 October 1748, Samuel Scott.
Figure 3  End of Knowles’ action off Havana, 1 October 1748, Samuel Scott.

Figure 4  Knowles's Action off Havana, Thomas Craskell.
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quence of pictures in the museum’s collections. Two are attributed to Samuel Scott, (they appear to have suffered some repainting) the third is by Thomas Craskell and a drawing by the same artist covers the end of the story. The first picture (Fig. 2) shows the sighting of the Spanish squadron at daybreak. Admiral Knowles command flag as Rear-Admiral of the Red Squadron is seen on the mizzen and the jack is still worn on a jack staff on the jib. Following later changes in rig, this flag was only worn in harbour.

The second painting attributed to Scott (Fig. 3) shows six of the Spanish squadron of seven, in line of battle. The Spanish Royal Arms is seen on their ensigns. The Spanish Vice Admiral Reggio’s ship *Africa* can be seen fourth from the end of the line. Charles Holmes commander of *Lenox* wrote an account of the action published some years later in the first volume of the *Naval Chronicle*. “Admiral Knowles in the Cornwall, perceiving by the enemies line of battle, that the Spanish Vice Admiral must fall to our share, bid us fall astern of him, that the two commanders might engage each other...About an hour after the action began, the Cornwall had her main-top-mast head shot away, with some other damages, which occasioned her to haul out of the line, and she never came into it again”. The first of the four British ships in the background is wearing two red flags in addition to her Red Ensign and is presumably Knowles repairing his topmast. The scattered vessels filling the gap on the right hand side must include at least two other British vessels that were in fact lagging slightly to the rear of the British line, so in contrast to Pocock’s productions, composition has taken precedence over historical accuracy. One of the Spanish ships was beaten out of the line and taken by Knowles ship but in the second Scott picture all the six Spanish ships are still in line of battle. The most conspicuous British vessel in the painting is Charles Holmes’s ship the *Lenox* which moved up and engaged the Spanish Vice-Admiral when Knowles had to withdraw. The enemy’s fire has just demolished her topmast. The lieutenant’s journal does indeed mention that her main topmast was “shot thro” though it does not say shot away. Holmes’s enthusiastic version says “We then shot up into her place abreast of the Spanish Admiral, where we had very warm work having three of the enemies ships playing upon us above an hour”. The lieutenant’s journal is less enthusiastic, they did not shoot up; the manoeuvre took about an hour owing to damage to sails and rigging and a near collision. About half way through “About 5 the Admiral hoisted a Blue flag in his Mizen Shrouds and Captain Taylor came alongside in his Barge and told us to go down to the ships and edge close, was Edging down when Captain Taylor spoke to us”. Knowles was telling them to bear down into his wake and reinforced his signal by a personal message from his Flag Captain, Polycarpus Taylor. Neither of these two pictures provide a starring role for Knowles unlike Craskell’s picture (Fig. 4) which shows *Cornwall* centre stage minus topmast with the Spanish Admiral behind her. The second red flag is the signal described in *Fighting Instructions* “As soon as the Admiral shall hoist a Red Flag on the flagg staff at the Fore-top-mast-head, and fire a Gun, every Ship in the Fleet is to use their utmost Endeavour to engage the Enemy in the Order the Admiral has prescribed unto them”. Knowles having fixed his topmast took *Conquestadore* which had been disabled and forced out of the Spanish line. The Spanish admiral’s ship *Africa* was badly damaged in her encounter with Holmes and having to anchor before she reached port, was discovered by the British two days after the action and burnt by her crew to avoid capture. This final act is shown in a sketch by Craskell and once again you can identify *Cornwall* by Knowles’s command flag. On their return to Britain a major quarrel broke out between Holmes and Knowles. Knowles unfairly, complained of Holmes’s conduct on leaving his convoy to warn Knowles of the presence of the Spanish squadron. He was court-martialed and honourably acquitted. Knowles faced court martial
in his turn for engaging the enemy with two ships lagging in the rear and not moving his flag to another vessel when it was disabled. They concluded that “Mr. Knowles expressed great earnestness and zeal to get into action, and while the Cornwall was engaged showed great personal courage; therefore the court do unanimously think that his not removing his flag arose from a mistake, and not from backwardness to bring his person into action”\textsuperscript{15} It is not unreasonable to suppose that the Scott sequence of pictures represents Holmes’s side of the story and the Craskell sequence, Knowles’s side. Only one of Knowles’s numerous signals is represented and considerable liberties have been taken with the disposition of the ships and the timing of events.

The major British naval victories that marked the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars and their representations have been fairly well studied so I am going to examine four less well-known engagements. By this time, the old signals in the Sailing and Fighting Instructions which relied on hoisting a particular flag at a particular place had been superseded by numerical codes where the flags were numbered and corresponded to numbered messages in the signal book. The French organized their signals on a tabular system that was marginally more difficult to crack. In 1803 a manuscript copy of the British signals fell into enemy hands. They left the numbers of the signals the same but rearranged the flags (Fig. 6).

William Anderson (1757-1837) produced this painting of Calder’s action of 23 July 1805 (Fig. 5).\textsuperscript{16} Anderson was born in Scotland and started his working life as a shipwright. He spent his working career in London where he was a regular exhibitor at the Royal Academy.\textsuperscript{17} He shows here an early battle in the campaign that led up to Trafalgar. The Toulon fleet under Villeneuve was under orders from Napoleon to evade Nelson’s
blockade, sail to the West Indies and join up with Ganteaume, (commander of the 21 ships in Brest), return to the Channel and protect an invasion fleet. Villeneuve escaped from Toulon and joined by a combined French and Spanish force from Cadiz, sailed for the West Indies; Ganteaume remained in Brest. Pursued by Nelson the combined French and Spanish force headed back to European waters where they encountered a numerically inferior force under Sir Robert Calder. Calder’s flagship The Prince of Wales is again recognizable by his flag as Vice-Admiral of the Blue worn at the foremast. She is flying a nice straightforward signal 291 “engage as closely as possible”, hoisted by Calder at 5:09 pm. The first British ship opened fire at 5:20 and firing continued until 9:30 by which time the British had taken two prizes. The following day both commanders declined the opportunity to renew the battle. Calder was trying to protect his prizes and worried about falling prey to attack from the French squadrons in Brest and Ferrol while in a damaged condition, Villeneuve was still under orders from Napoleon to affect a junction with the Brest fleet, if possible without getting into battle first. Anderson’s second picture (Fig. 7) shows Calder steering his squadron between his crippled ships, the two Spanish prizes and the allied fleet seen in line of battle on the horizon. The captured Spanish ships have the Union Flag hoisted above the 1785 Spanish Naval Ensign. Calder was criticized in the press and demanded a court-martial. Once again he was acquitted but was strongly reprimanded for not renewing the action.

The combined French and Spanish fleets were ultimately defeated by Nelson at Trafalgar and the flags used by the British during this action have been fairly comprehensively published.

After Trafalgar, four French ships escaped and under Rear-Admiral Dumanoir Le Pelley were trying to reach an Atlantic port. These were all captured by four ships of the line and four frigates commanded by Sir Richard Strachan. The museum holds some of Pocock’s preliminary sketches for a more finished depiction of this action (Figs. 8, 9), also a letter from Strachan to the artist. “Sir Richard Strachan’s compliments to Mr Pocock and informs him he just recollects that the French Admiral’s mizen topmast should be shot away at the time the picture is meant to represent, the French Admiral is that ship engaged by Namur - the ship with the main topmast aback & the main yard carried away”. Strachan added a sketch of his own of two ships inscribed Namur and Formidable with a note “The French Adml should have his ensign hanging as if fallen over the stern, and the flag and mizen topmast hanging after. The Courageaux stern should be like a frigate”. The two Pocock sketches more or less correspond with the latter stages of the action with both the squadrons on the port tack and Hero leading the British line. In the early stages of the action Strachan’s ship Caesar (then the leader) engaged the French Admiral’s ship Formidable then second in the French line. Following the attempt by Dugway Trouin the leading French ship to turn and rake Caesar, both squadrons tacked, broke off action and reformed their lines. The action with Formidable was recommenced by Hero then Namur and when Caesar came up within range of her, she surrendered. Pocock’s sketch plan shows Caesar beside Formidable. The second sketch has a note of the signal flown by Caesar which is number 4 and a pennant. Signal four was “Engage the enemy if closer with a red pennant over”. Pocock appears to have shown the pennant under the signal flag. The signal in this form is also shown in a print after Thomas Whitcombe. The signaling vessel is again likely to be Caesar, the two dismasted ships Scipion and Formidable.

Signal 15 also “Engage the enemy” is shown in a second Whitcombe print (Fig. 10). William Frissell in Caesar kept the lieutenant’s journal noting the signals for close action were sent at 1.10, this would have been number 4 with the pennant or number
Figure 6  Signal book for the ships of war (1799 with 1803 emendations). Signals identifying ships by new place in the line of battle.
Two signals were sent to particular ships. “We tacked at 1.20 Made the signal for Namur to Engage the van of the Enemy made the Hero’s signal to lead”. 34 was the number of “engage the van” and 97 “lead the fleet”.

For Sir John Thomas Duckworth’s action off San Domingo we have two Pocock preliminary sketches, a sketch plan and the finished oil painting (Figs. 11, 12). Prominent in the centre is Duckworth’s ship Superb 74 guns, engaging the much larger vessel of the French Vice-Admiral Corentin Urbain Leissègues, Impérial 130 guns. Duckworth is identifiable by his Vice-Admiral’s command flag. His ship carries signal number 4 again. This corresponds to a passage in Duckworth’s despatch published in the Naval Chronicle “The Superb closed upon the bow of the Alexander the leading ship and commenced the action; but after three broadsides she sheered off; the signal was now made for closer action, and we were enabled to attack the admiral in the Imperial (formerly the Vengeur) the fire of which had been heavy on the Northumberland, bearing the Honourable Rear-Admiral Cochrane’s flag”. Under Duckworth’s overall command were two rear-admirals of the white squadron - Rear-Admiral Thomas Louis in Canopus and the Honourable Alexander F. I. Cochrane in Northumberland. Both vessels would have worn the same white flag at the mizzen. The partly dismasted Northumberland can be seen to the right of the Impérial. Superb’s log records that number 4 with the “Red Pendant over” was hoisted at 10-20, they would have kept it flying during the course of the action when signaling largely stopped. It resumed again at 12 noon, when hostilities ceased and carried on until nightfall. A second sketch amongst other signals shows 58- a yellow, red, yellow flag over a white one meaning: “take possession of ship struck” (Fig. 12). This signal was logged.
Figure 8 Sketch of Sir Richard Strachan’s action with plan, Nicholas Pocock.

Figure 9 Sir Richard Strachan’s Action, Novr. 5th. 1805, drawing, Nicolas Pocock.
by *Superb* from one of the frigates tasked with repeating signals at 12.05. The vessel flying it in Pocock’s sketch is one of the two rear-admirals’ flagships, and as *Northumberland* had been dismasted at this stage, she must be *Canopus*. Unfortunately the relevant log has not so far proved traceable in the public archives. A surrendered French vessel is shown in the background with the British ensign hoisted over the tricolour, she is probably *Brave* with the other dismasted ship on the right *Alexandre*. There are a few mystery pennants in these sketches and in Pocock’s finished painting. They are almost certainly part of the system for directing signals to a particular vessel by the naval commanders. The signal book says “The signals generally used to distinguish ships from each other will be single pendants shown at different mast heads, or yard arms, as shall be appointed by the Admiral.” A published sheet of these pennants as issued by Nelson offers single pennants hoisted in particular places or double pennants hoisted anywhere (Fig. 13).32

*Canopus* is flying double pennants in Pocock’s sketch. The fall-back system was to use the pennants in the signal book which identified a ship by its place in the line and these were also to be used by “private ships” that is ships not commanded by flag officers (Fig. 14).33 On joining the fleet, ships were to identify themselves by hoisting the Union Flag over the ship’s number in the navy list.

We have another painting by Thomas Whitcombe showing Duckworth’s second major victory, his passage of the Dardanelles on the 19th February 1807 (Fig. 15). The
Figure 11  Oil painting Duckworth’s Action off San Domingo, 6 February 1806, Nicholas Pocock.

Figure 12 Sketch Duckworth’s Action off San Domingo, 6 February 1806, Nicholas Pocock.
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Figure 13 Distinguishing Pendants, published by Baily & Co.

Figure 14 Signal book. For the ships of war (1799 with 1803 emendations).
Figure 15  Oil painting Sir John Thomas Duckworth's passage of the Dardanelles, 19 February 1807, Thomas Whitcombe.

Vice-Admiral’s flag can be seen on *Royal George*, third in the line of battle and note also the Turkish flag on the shore fortifications (a mêlée obviously made a more interesting composition than the line of battle).

These battle paintings reveal the survival of an old-fashioned, individualistic attitude to battle amongst commanding officers. Their presence is indicated at the centre of the action by their command flags, almost as if they were engaged in single combat with the enemy leaders. The inclusion of signal flags giving an opportunity to add some dialogue to the action sequence. Variations on “Engage the enemy” were a nice simple message, in reality one of many more complicated signals sent from the commanding officer to his fleet during the course of an action. The message would not have got across to an uninitiated observer from outside the service, signals being in effect classified military information. How far British artists managed to display correctly French or Spanish signals is another and more complex issue and one I am not going to address in this paper.
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Notes

1 AGC/24/4 A note dated 1846 Describing Pocock’s method of working.
2 PAD8819 Sketch plan Duckworth’s Action off San Domingo, 6 February 1806 Nicholas Pocock.
3 BHC0369 Lord Anson’s victory off Cape Finisterre, 3 May 1747 Samuel Scott.
5 ADM1/87 Ansons dispatches 11 May 1747.
6 Ibid.
7 BHC0373 Beginning of Knowles’ action off Havana, 1 October 1748 Samuel Scott.
8 BHC0374 End of Knowles’ action off Havana, 1 October 1748 Samuel Scott.
9 Naval Chronicle vol i, p.114 “Extract of a letter on board the Lennox, Captain Holmes, arrived at Spithead, dated November 23th”.
10 ADM/L/L/78 [Lieutenant’s log Lenox].
11 1703 Instructions VI “If the admiral be to leeward of the fleet, or any part of the fleet, and he would have them bear down into his wake or grain, he will hoist a blue flag at the mizen peak”.
12 BHC0375 Knowles’s Action off Havana Thomas Craskell.
13 1703 Instructions XIII “As soon as the Admiral shall hoist a Red flag on the flagstaff at fore-topmast-head, and fire a Gun, every Ship in the Fleet is to use their utmost Endeavour to engage the Enemy in the Order the Admiral has prescribed unto them”.
14 PAF5734 The Burning of the Affrica Adml Riggio’s ship of 74 guns Thomas Craskell
15 Naval Chronicle vol.ii, p. 166.
16 BHC0540 Admiral Sir Robert Calder’s action off Cape Finisterre, 22 July 1805 William Anderson.
18 SIG/B/76 Signal book for the ships of war (1799 with 1803 amendments).
20 BHC0539 Admiral Sir Robert Calder’s action off Cape Finisterre, 23 July 1805 William Anderson.
21 AGC/24/4 Letter from Sir Richard Strachan to Nicholas Pocock.
22 PAD8805 Sketch of Sir Richard Strachan’s action with plan, Nicholas Pocock.
23 PAD8807 Sir Richard Strachan’s Action, Novr. 5th. 1805 drawing, Nicholas Pocock.
24 PAD5757 Sir Richard Strachan’s Action, Novr. 5th. 1805 Coloured aquatint, artist: Thomas Whitcombe, engraver : Thomas Sutherland.
25 PAD5756 Sir Richard Strachan’s Action, Novr. 5th. 1805 Coloured aquatint, artist: Thomas Whitcombe, engraver : Thomas Sutherland.
26 ADM/L/C/2 Lieutenant’s log HMS Caesar William Frissell.
27 PAD8820 Sketch Duckworth’s Action off San Domingo, 6 February 1806 Nicholas Pocock; PAD8821 Sketch Duckworth’s Action off San Domingo, 6 February 1806 Nicholas Pocock.
28 PAD8819 Sketch plan Duckworth’s Action off San Domingo, 6 February 1806 Nicholas Pocock.
29 BHC0571 Oil painting Duckworth’s Action off San Domingo, 6 February 1806 Nicholas Pocock.
30 ADM51/1545 Captain’s log HMS Superb.
31 PAD8820.
32 PAIS421 Distinguishing Pendants, published by Baily & Co.
33 SIG/B/76 Signal book.
34 BHC0575 Oil painting Sir John Thomas Duckworth’s passage of the Dardanelles, 19 February 1807 Thomas Whitcombe.
About the author

Barbara Tomlinson is from the United Kingdom and has worked at the National Maritime Museum since 1979 and has produced lectures and publications mainly on polar exploration, monuments and flags, most recently ‘The Battle Sanctified: Some Memorials and Relics’ The Glorious First of June 1794: A naval battle and its aftermath, Edited Michael Duffy and Roger Morriss, Exeter UP, 2001.

Author’s address: Barbara Tomlinson
National Maritime Museum
Park Row
Greenwich
London SE10 9NF
United Kingdom
E-mail: <BBToml@nmm.ac.uk>