

Warfare on the Mediterranean in the Age of Sail

A HISTORY, 1571–1866



DAVID S.T. BLACKMORE

Foreword by Vice Admiral J.A. Baldwin, Jr., U.S. Navy (Ret.)

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McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers
Jefferson, North Carolina, and London


LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGUING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Blackmore, David S.T.

Warfare on the Mediterranean in the age of sail : a history,
1571-1866 / David S.T. Blackmore ; foreword by J.A. Baldwin, Jr.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-7864-4799-2

softcover : 50# alkaline paper 

1. Mediterranean Region — History, Naval.
2. Mediterranean Region — History, Military.
3. Naval art and science — Mediterranean Region — History.
4. Sailing ships — Mediterranean Region — History.

I. Title.

V55.M44B53 2011 359.009182'20903 — dc22 2010048307

British Library cataloguing data are available

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On the cover: Clarkson Frederick Stanfield, *The Battle of Trafalgar*, 1836

Manufactured in the United States of America

McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers
Box 611, Jefferson, North Carolina 28640
www.mcfarlandpub.com

· Warfare on the Mediterranean
in the Age of Sail

ALSO BY DAVID S.T. BLACKMORE

*The Seafaring Dictionary: Terms, Idioms
and Legends of the Past and Present*
(McFarland, 2009)

Contents

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	vii
<i>Foreword by Vice Admiral J.A. Baldwin, Jr., U.S. Navy (Ret.)</i>	1
<i>Preface</i>	3
<i>Introduction</i>	5

Part One: Muscle Power Slowly Yields to Sail

1. Naval Developments in the 13th to 15th Centuries	33
2. The Advent of Sail and Cannon (1258–1538)	41
3. Naval Developments in the 15th to 17th Centuries	50
4. Swan Song of the Galley (1571–72)	55

Part Two: The Early Days of Sailing Warfare

5. Naval Developments in the Age of Sail	63
6. From Lepanto to 1645	77
7. Wars and Rumors of War (1646–1674)	86
8. European Power Struggles (1675–1699)	97
9. The War of the Spanish Succession (1701–1714)	106
10. Struggles for Maritime Supremacy (1716–1744)	118
11. The Seven Years' War (1755–1783)	125
12. Gibraltar Under Siege (1779–1783)	135
13. Russians and Neapolitans (1783–1791)	142

Part Three: The Golden Age of Fighting Sail Begins

14. Upheaval in France (1793–1794)	151
15. French Revolutionary War (1795–1796)	161
16. Nelson and Napoléon (1796–1798)	172
17. Nelson and Brueys Play Hide-and-Seek (1798)	182
18. After the Nile (1798–1799)	191
19. Nelson's Fallibility (1799)	200
20. Sequel to the Nile (1800)	209

Part Four: Sailing Battles Great and Small

21. 1801 to the Peace of Amiens in 1802	217
22. The Corsairs of North Africa (1800–1803)	228
23. The Trafalgar Campaign (1805)	238
24. Russians and Ottomans (1806–1809)	252
25. Small Ship and Littoral Operations (1807–1810)	262
26. Small Ship and Littoral Operations (1810–1813)	271
27. The Demise of Napoleon's Empire (1812–1815)	281
28. The Corsairs of North Africa (1812–1827)	289

Part Five: Transition from Sail to Power

29. Naval Developments in the Early 19th Century	295
30. The Greek War of Independence (1821–1850)	299
31. Crimean and Late 19th Century Wars (1853–1878)	315
32. Technology Ends the Age of Sail	330

<i>Appendix A. Masts, Sails and Rigging</i>	337
<i>Appendix B. Levels of a Ship of the Line</i>	338
<i>Appendix C. Royal Navy Victualing Regulations</i>	339
<i>Appendix D. Letter: Queen Caroline to Lady Hamilton</i>	340
<i>Appendix E. Letter: Nelson to Tsar Paul I</i>	341
<i>Appendix F. Preble's Orders to Decatur</i>	342
<i>Appendix G. Nelson's Last Letters and Wishes</i>	343
<i>Appendix H. Collingwood's Report on the Gale</i>	345
<i>Appendix I. French Report on Trafalgar</i>	346
<i>Appendix J. Excerpts from 1827 Treaty of London</i>	348
<i>Chapter Notes</i>	351
<i>Bibliography</i>	369
<i>Index</i>	373

List of Illustrations

Figure 1. Principal Square Rig Sails	10
Figure 2. The Decks of a First-Rate	11
Figure 3. Fields of Fire	12
Figure 4. The Mediterranean System	14
Figure 5. The Weather Gage	73
Figure 6. Cadiz 1702	108
Figure 7. Leake's Plan 1705	114
Figure 8. Cape Sicié 1744	123
Figure 9. Minorca 1755	128
Figure 10. Dnieper Estuary 1788	144
Figure 11. Genoa Gulf 1795	162
Figure 12. Cape Saint Vincent 1797	176
Figure 13. Aboukir Bay (The Nile) 1788	186
Figure 14. <i>Leander</i> and <i>Généreux</i> 1798	194
Figure 15. Algeçiras 1801	222
Figure 16. Tripoli 1803–1804	234
Figure 17. Trafalgar 1805	247
Figure 18. The Turkish Straits	256
Figure 19. Navarino 1827	307
Figure 20. Acre 1840	312
Figure 21. Sinope 1853	316
Figure 22. Sevastapol 1854–1855	322

Foreword

FOR THOSE OF US WHO GREW UP reading Frederick Marryat and C.S. Forester and thrilling to their tales of combat — and politics — at sea and ashore, this volume is the Domesday Book of fighting sail. Added to the fictional characters of Mr. Midshipman Easy and Horatio Hornblower are such more recent names as Jack Aubrey, Richard Bolitho, and Alan Lewrie, all of whom have their intellectual antecedents in the era covered herein by David Blackmore. Indeed, Marryat, Forester, O'Brian, *et al.* based their characters largely on the exploits of such naval exemplars as Horatio Nelson, Thomas Cochran, and Stephen Decatur, fleshing out the dry records of logs and accounts to bring them to life with a vividness that assured their popularity. The same information describes the actions depicted in this book, and gives us a look at real naval heroes in their element.

In addition to the ship-to-ship encounters, David frames the battles at sea with an appreciation of the political context in which the action is taking place. We are informed of the shifting alliances between and among all of the littoral powers of Homer's wine-dark sea, along with Great Britain, Imperial Russia, the Netherlands, and the relatively new player on the international stage, the United States of America. And many of the national rivalries had as a recurring theme the confrontation between the Christian and Islamic worlds which has such resonance with today's events.

In short, David Blackmore has given us a sweeping account of warfare on the Mediterranean in the age of sail. It is a lively and informative read, and I hope that you will enjoy it and learn from it as I did.

J.A. Baldwin, Jr.
Vice Admiral, U.S. Navy (Ret.)
Chestertown, Maryland
Spring 2011

Preface

I must go down to the seas again, to the lonely sea and the sky,
And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by,
And the wheel's kick and the wind's song and the white sail's shaking,
And a gray mist on the sea's face, and a gray dawn breaking.

—JOHN MASEFIELD

Only two general truths emerge from the study of history,
One is that things tend to change much more, and more quickly, than one might
think. The other is that they tend to change much less and much more slowly, than
one might think ... and so, for good or ill, we shall always find what happens some-
what surprising.

—J. M. ROBERTS

It is not the business of a naval officer to write books.

—REAR ADMIRAL F.M. RAMSAY, USN

BEING NO LONGER A SERVING NAVAL OFFICER, I can undertake this work without being constrained by Admiral Ramsay's comment (made in his endorsement of an unfavorable fitness report on Alfred Thayer Mahan). Our arena will be the Mediterranean system, including the Black Sea, and adjacent Atlantic waters during the age of fighting sail, which I have arbitrarily defined as lying between the last battle fought entirely under oars (Lepanto, 1571) and the first fought entirely under steam (Lissa, 1866).

For the sake of continuity, that period is preceded by a discussion of the galley warfare that dominated the Mediterranean for millennia, and it is followed by an outline of subsequent technological developments. I have tried to provide information that will be of interest to aficionados of naval history in terms comprehensible to people less familiar with maritime affairs. Also, in order to provide verisimilitude and immediacy I have, whenever possible, included contemporary commentary, especially that of eyewitnesses or protagonists.

As can be seen from the bibliography, I consulted a large number of written sources,

including rare and out-of-print works in the Toronto Reference Library and at the Archives and Collections Society of Picton, Ontario. Inevitably in this electronic century, I also made extensive use of Internet search engines. One of the principal sources had to be Wikipedia which, unfortunately, due to the way in which it is compiled, can vary widely from authoritative to misleading and (occasionally) erroneous. It has therefore been my practice to search for a “second opinion” whenever using that source.

I also wanted to highlight some of the small battles — encounters between single ships or light squadrons — that are not significant enough to feature in most naval histories, yet frequently involve more maneuver and seamanship than can be found in the ponderous movements of large line of battle formations. In this connection, William James’s 1837 *Naval History of Great Britain* is a gold mine of information, although, unfortunately, only when the Royal Navy was involved.

Incidentally, if a ship’s name appears alien it doesn’t necessarily mean that the vessel was actually foreign. It was relatively common for navies in the age of sail to retain original spelling and accents following the capture of an enemy vessel. It was also confusing, but not uncommon, for hostile fleets to contain ships with the same or similar names — at the battle of Trafalgar, for instance, there were ships called *Neptune* in both the French and British lines, while the Spanish fielded a *Neptuno*.

Throughout history, warships have been at the cutting edge of contemporary technology, but in the age of sail the most important element was the men who sailed in them. To glide silently toward an enemy line, standing quietly at one’s station for seemingly endless hours, while shot and shell whistled overhead or threw deadly splinters across the deck, demanded immense discipline and steadiness.

Moreover, this would be followed by hour upon interminable hour of the deafening thunder of muzzle-to-muzzle dueling, accompanied by the visual horror of ghastly wounds and blood streaming out of the scuppers.

Then, deafened, fatigued, and in shock, the crew had to respond to the call “boarders away” by leaping across a chasm that would be intimidating at the best of times in harbor, but absolutely fearsome when the two ships were heaving up and down relative to each other, and the far side was a wall of cutlasses, pikes, axes and muskets. The courage and steadfastness of such men boggles the imagination.

I have included a number of maps and battle diagrams on which shorelines (where shown) are topographically accurate, but ship sizes and movements are purely illustrative and not to scale. In any case, depictions of tactical maneuvers tend to show ships in perfect formation, just as the admirals intended them to be. This can work with powered warships, aided by radar and satellite navigation systems, but such precision was frequently unattainable during the age of sail, when differences in wind speed, cross-currents and fouling of a ship’s bottom could directly affect station keeping. Readers should therefore be aware that what looks like a straight line or regular curve was in actuality likely to have been staggered or irregular.

I owe debts of gratitude to Vice Admiral J.A. (Jack) Baldwin, United States Navy (retired), for proofreading my efforts (all errors remaining are mine alone) and, not least, to Paula, my wife, for unflagging support during the long periods when I neglected her (and my household chores) in favor of research and writing.

Introduction

Flashing-eyed Athena sent them a favorable wind,
a strong-blowing West wind that sang over the wine-dark sea.

—HOMER

The navy is always at war, because it is always fighting winds and waves and fog.

—ADMIRAL JOHN FISHER

I keep six honest serving men
(They taught me all I knew);
Their names are What and Why and When
And How and Where and Who.

—RUDYARD KIPLING

Setting the Stage

AT UNITED STATES NAVY training establishments they tell the tale of a backwoods politician whose speechifying was so successful that someone asked him if he had a secret formula. “No,” he said, “I jest tells ’em what I’m gonna tell ’em; then I tells ’em; and then I tells ’em what I done told ’em.” In other words, he provided introduction, narrative, and epilog. I can do no better, and shall begin this introduction by examining the elements of the title, starting with “Mediterranean.”

Geographically a gulf of the Atlantic Ocean, this is a landlocked water system that links three of the world’s six continents — Asia, Africa, and Europe. It witnessed the great migrations of prehistoric tribes and fostered the early civilizations of the Minoans, Phoenicians, Hittites and Egyptians. It was the birthplace of Western thought and democracy and home to the Hellenistic realms of Alexander’s successors. Later, the mighty Roman Empire encircled the entire region, while its Levantine littoral nurtured three of the world’s great religions — Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It saw the birth of the Renaissance. It forms the backbone of Western history.

No one is likely to quarrel with the definition of “naval” as being “armed and organized maritime activity,” but “warfare” is a bit more complex, its definition depending on the writer’s philosophical outlook. For example:

- Cicero defined it broadly as “contention by force”;
- Thomas Hobbes considered it “a state of affairs, which may exist even while its operations are not continued” (e.g., the Peace of Amiens [1802–3] and the more recent “cold war”);
- Denis Diderot moralized that war is “a convulsive and violent disease of the body politic”;
- Karl von Clausewitz, famously, declared it to be “the continuation of politics by other means.”

There are many other interpretations; each with its own strengths and weaknesses, but for our purposes we can use the *Webster’s Dictionary* definition — “a state of open and declared, hostile armed conflict between states or nations.”

The Age of Sail¹ is a bit of an oxymoron, because wind propulsion is almost as old as seafaring itself. However, the great age of sail is generally considered to stretch from the time European ships first undertook worldwide voyages in the 15th century until the coming of steam propulsion in the 19th century. In this work, we can be more specific, narrowing it down to the period between the last Mediterranean battle fought primarily under oars and the last fought mainly under sail. We could call this “the Age of Fighting Sail.”

When covering a field as specific as this, it is difficult to decide how much background to include. At one extreme it becomes nothing more than a catalogue of naval encounters; at the other it cannot be distinguished from a general history. Although focused on seafarers, sea fighters and sea traders, I have tried to strike a balance, covering enough of the military, social, and political aspects of life ashore to explain the circumstances within which nautical events took place. Land campaigns are mentioned only briefly and insofar as they affected naval activity.

I make no apology for the emphasis on combat. In spite of its horrors, it is perhaps the most dramatic and demanding of human endeavors; as Thomas Hardy wrote, “War makes rattling good history, but peace is poor reading.” Wherever possible I have enlivened the narrative with the words of protagonists, eyewitnesses, contemporary commentators, or distinguished historians. Sources are identified in the text, while footnotes are mainly explanatory.

Newspaper editor and author Rudyard Kipling’s mnemonic, cited above, is far from new. As early as the first century BCE, Roman rhetorician Hermagoras of Temnos defined seven circumstances that define an issue, usefully splitting Kipling’s “how” into two: *Quis, quid, quando, ubi, cur, quem ad modum, quibus adminiculis* (Who, what, when, where, why, in what way, by what means).

This introduction will follow Hermagoras’s more complete format, starting — since there is little point in discussing any of the others unless one knows the causation — with “why.” Then, because history is said to rest on the twin pillars of geography and chronology, it will make sense to continue with “where” followed by “when.”

Why

The reasons for armed conflict have varied over time, beginning with clashes between local tribes or city-states and gradually escalating to become searches for power and national prestige. Moreover:

There is no single cause of war. Peace is an equilibrium among many forces. Change in any particular force, trend, movement, or policy may at one time make for war, but under other conditions a similar change may make for peace. A state may at one time promote peace by armament, at another time by disarmament, at one time by insistence on its rights, at another time by a spirit [of] conciliation [Quincy Wright, *A Study of War*, 1965].

During our period of consideration, warfare arose when national credibility or honor was at stake; due to squabbles over succession to the thrones of Europe; and from rebellion or the spread of revolutionary fervor. The probability of conflict was usually increased by parity of power and inhibited by its disparity.

Looking specifically at the maritime environment, the basic objectives of a fleet in the age of sail were to keep the coast of its home country free from attack and to ensure the protection of its commercial trade routes. Secondary objectives were the denial of trade routes and troop movement to the enemy, and the acquisition of new trade routes and resources (but not of territory since the sea cannot be occupied nor, during the age of sail, could it be exploited for natural resources). These aims could be achieved by destruction of the hostile fleet in combat, or by its paralysis by blockade.

Where

Geographically, our arena includes five seas normally considered to be “mediterranean” — the Alboran, Ligurian, Tyrrhenian, Lybian, and Cretan — plus another five that are frequently spoken of as separate entities — the Adriatic, Aegean, Marmora, Black, and Azov. Together they form a system that is unique in being almost fully enclosed. In the age of sail its only outlet was the narrow Strait of Gibraltar, the Suez Canal not then having been dug.

Before the era of oceanic exploration, except for a few backward communities along the Atlantic seaboard, the Mediterranean was the hub of the western maritime world. In this geographically confined arena, navigational skill was almost irrelevant since mariners tended to sail from headland to headland, never losing sight of land. Also, rival political entities were crammed close together, making commercial rivalry and political conflict almost inevitable. The art of naval warfare was essentially born here.²

Almost all of the action in this book takes place within this landlocked Mediterranean system, but occasionally the pursuit of conflict, politics, or commerce leads us briefly into the contiguous Atlantic Ocean, usually for one of the following reasons:

- At least one of the protagonists originated in the Mediterranean (e.g., the Battle of Trafalgar).

- The location is part of Mediterranean strategy (e.g., Lisbon or Cadiz).
- The event has a major impact on Mediterranean strategy (e.g., the Battle of Vigo Bay).
- The occasion is one of global magnitude (e.g., Napoleon's departure into exile)
- It illustrates a technological development (e.g., the Battle of Mobile Bay)

So much for the big picture, but we also need to determine the locations of individual encounters, and that is not so easy. At the best of times, combat is a confused muddle, but at least on land it can usually be reconstructed from reference points such as hills, trees, rivers, farms, and buildings. On the featureless sea, only a navigator with sextant, chart, and compass can tell where it took place, let alone how the fight evolved. Moreover, details are often sketchy, ambiguous, or based on hearsay, and even eyewitness accounts sometimes disagree. Wherever possible I consulted several sources before describing actions or drawing the battle plans which, I believe, reflect a reasonable interpretation of events.

When

Galleys dominated Mediterranean naval warfare until the battle of Lepanto³ in 1571; and the last war fought mainly by sailing warships was the Crimean conflict of 1853. These dates delimit the Mediterranean age of sail. However, they also coincide with a period when, confusingly, two different dating systems were in use.

In 1582, Pope Gregory XIII issued a papal bull changing calendar dates from the old (OS or Julian) style to the new (NS or Gregorian), but not everyone changed at once.⁴ This creates problems when working with contemporary accounts. If they differ by 9, 10, 11, or 13 days one can be fairly certain that the earlier is Julian and the later Gregorian. But if only one date is given one has to consider the nationality of the author.

Another problem arises because some historians date a battle from when the protagonists first sighted each other, while others date it from the first exchange of gunfire. Sometimes these are several days apart. For example, in the 1718 Battle of Elafonisos, the Turks and Venetians met on 20 July but maneuvered for position and did not begin to fight until the 22nd.

What

In general, it can be said that combat afloat in the western world was conducted first under oars, then under sail, and finally under power. However, while the transition from sail to power was rapid and clearly identifiable, there were almost four centuries between the first important battle of sailing ship fleets and the last significant action involving oared galleys. During this period of overlap, both forms of naval warfare were

practiced; therefore, we shall begin with a brief discussion of warfare under oars, beginning in antiquity and concluding with the great galley battle of Lepanto.

The core of the book will be devoted to the age of sail — covering lesser conflicts as well as major wars, and single ship or light squadron encounters as well as fleet battles⁵ — ending with an outline of subsequent developments.

When researching long-ago events, ensuring accuracy can be a problem. The human brain being a fallible instrument, eyewitness reports tend to be unreliable and frequently contradictory, while even the writings of learned historiographers sometimes differ as to the sequence of events, the number of ships involved, their names, and their armament. Furthermore, in the words of eminent naval historian William James:

The official accounts are also very imperfect. The letters are generally written an hour or so after the termination of the contest, and of course before the captain has well recovered from the fatigue and flurry it occasioned. Many captains are far more expert at the sword than at the pen, and would sooner fight an action than write the particulars of one. Moreover, whatever may have been the mistakes or omissions in an official account, no supplementary account, unless it relates to a return of loss, is put forth to rectify or supply them [*Naval History*, Vol. 1, p. vi].

Sea fights tend to be briefer and cleaner but bloodier than those on land, but sailors have an affinity with their opponents that is often lacking between soldiers. Living on the waters with a ship as their home, they have much in common.

How — By What Means

Navies in the age of sail were at the cutting edge of contemporary technology, and by far the most complex and expensive arms of government. The shore facilities and dockyards that supported them were the largest and most complex industrial establishments of the day. Throughout this long period, although vessels steadily grew bigger, there was little change in their fundamental design. All were built of wood, and powered by the action of wind on sails made of canvas, mounted on horizontal poles (called yards) attached to vertical masts that were supported by rigging made of rope woven from hemp. It would take a technical treatise to describe all the types and variations of masts, yards, sails and rigging that evolved over centuries, but their general characteristics are described in Appendix A and principal sails are depicted in Figure 1.

There were three fundamental types of sailing warship, each of which carried smooth-bore cannon arrayed along the side of the ship (broadside). These were ships of the line; frigates, sloops, and brigs; and small (unrated) craft. The ship of the line carried from sixty to a hundred and thirty guns on two, three, or four decks (levels) as depicted in Figure 2 and described in Appendix B. Frigates were armed with twenty-eight to forty-four cannon on a single level (occasionally two decks). Smaller vessels mounted six to eighteen guns on the weather (open) deck.

Ships of the line had hulls that were reinforced with double-layered oak planks up to 46 cm (18 in) thick. Each was a floating city, housing from six hundred to upwards of a thousand men of numerous trades and specialties. The bigger ones tended to be slow and ponderous, built mainly for national prestige and as admirals' command ships.