

## **CAPTAINS OF HMS AJAX 1**

**JOHN CARTER ALLEN:** CAPTAIN OF HMS AJAX from 27 MAY 1770 to 6 JUNE 1771 and from JUNE to 23 AUGUST 1779

John Carter Allen was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant on 14 June 1745 and to that of Commander on 15 April 1757. He was appointed to the Grampus sloop in command, and towards the end of the same year captured a large privateer. He was soon after posted to a large 6th-rate on the Mediterranean station. He was promoted to the rank of Post Captain on 21 March 1758, and appointed to the Experiment, but in August 1760, he was transferred to the Repulse frigate on the Halifax station, and took part, under Mr Byron, in the attack and destruction of three French frigates and a considerable number of small craft in Chalem Bay.

The Repulse then joined the West India fleet, and continued on that station until the end of hostilities. In 1763 the Repulse was laid-up. John Allen did not hold any further commissions until May 1770, when he was appointed to the Ajax, 74. This was the ship's first commission, and she, together with the Ramillies, Defence, Centaur, and Rippon, 74's, embarked the 30th Regiment of Foot at Cork and transported them to Gibraltar. Soon after the Ajax was laid-up, and it was not until 1777 that Captain Allen was appointed to the Albion, and in the following year to the Egmont. When the Channel Fleet returned from Ushant, he once more assumed command of the Ajax, refitting at Portsmouth.

He held no further commissions, but in May 1782, he was appointed Rear-Admiral of the Blue. Subsequent flag-rank promotions were - September 1787, Rear-Admiral of the White; September 1790, Rear-Admiral of the Red; February 1793, Vice-Admiral of the Blue; April 1794, Vice-Admiral of the White; and June 1795, Admiral of the Blue. Admiral Allen died 2 October 1800.

**PHILIP BOTELER:** CAPTAIN OF HMS AJAX from ? to 1779

Philip Boteler was the son of a very ancient family who held a large estate in Hertfordshire. He was appointed a Lieutenant in the Navy in February 1756, and advanced to the rank of Commander 16 June 1761. On 26 March 1762, he was promoted to the rank of Captain and appointed to the Nottingham, 60, in the West Indies, and soon after to the Penzance 5th-rate, on the same station.

In 1764 he commanded the Shannon frigate off the coast of Africa. He left the ship and returned to England but did not hold any further commission until 1776, when he was appointed to the command of the newly-built Acteon, 44, on the West Indian station. At the beginning of the year 1779 he was appointed to the Ajax, 74, on the same station, but early in the summer transferred to the Ardent, 64.

In August, on passage down Channel to join Sir C. Hardy, he had the bad luck to fall in with the combined fleets of France and Spain, off Plymouth. He had had no previous intelligence that the enemy was out, and little thought that they could be off Plymouth, or that the English fleet he was to join was many leagues further to the westward. He was in the act of reefing his topsails when the enemy frigate poured her broadside into his stern. This unfortunate episode, being followed by a court martial, Captain Boteler was dismissed the service.

**SAMUEL UVEDALE:** CAPTAIN OF HMS AJAX from 4 SEPTEMBER 1779 to 28 APRIL 1780

Samuel Uvedale was born in the county of Warwick, and was appointed a Lieutenant in the Navy 5 May 1747. No details are known after this date until 18 February, 1760, when he was appointed Captain of the Boreas frigate on the West Indian station. She returned to England in 1762, and was broken up.

Captain Uvedale's next commission was not until 1779, when he was appointed to the Ajax, 74, one of Sir George Brydges Rodney's fleet. Sailing to Gibraltar, to relieve the garrison with a convoy, on 8 January 1780, a strange fleet was sighted in the north-east quarter. A general chase was signalled, leaving the convoy in the charge of a frigate or two. The fleet proved to be a Spanish convoy of storeships on their way to supply the Spanish fleet lying at Cadiz. They and their escort of a 64-gun ship, four frigates and two corvettes, surrendered without firing a shot. The British fleet continued, with its twenty-two prizes, to rejoin its own convoy. The 64-gun ship was renamed the Prince William, made escort to the prizes and sent back to England.

On 17 January 1780 the Bedford made the signal for seeing a fleet in the south-east, quarter, which proved to be eleven Spanish ships of the line, with two frigates, commanded by Admiral Don Juan de Langara. At 4 p.m. the Edgar began to engage a 74-gun ship, and soon after the Ajax opened fire on another. Shifting their targets after two broadsides, the second 74, the San Domingo, blew up. All the British ships were soon in action. Five other Spanish ships struck their colours before 2 in the morning. Two more drifted to leeward - one driving ashore and the other being retaken by the Spaniards. Nevertheless, four ships and the Spanish admiral remained in Rodney's hands. Only four of Langara's ships escaped.

The Ajax sustained damage to sails, lost her foretopmast, and had two guns disabled. Casualties, however, were light - she had only nine officers and men wounded. The fleet lay anchored in Gibraltar Bay for three weeks, and then Rodney sailed with the Sandwich, Ajax and Terrible on 12 February 1780 for the West Indies, and moored in Carlisle Bay, Barbados, on 18 March 1780. France and Spain had joined the American cause, after the commencement of the War of Independence.

The French Admiral de Guichen and Rodney met for the first time on 17 April, 1780, between Martinique and Dominica. After a day spent jockeying for position Rodney won the weather gage, and signalled to his fleet that he meant to attack the enemy's rear and centre. De Guichen, seeing the danger, wore all his ships together, and stood down to save his rear. Rodney hauled up on the same tack as the enemy, both fleets headed for the south-eastward. At noon Rodney signalled for each ship to steer for her opposite in the enemy line, meaning her opposite at the moment, not her opposite in numerical order. Unfortunately, the Stirling Castle, Captain Robert Carkett, the leading ship, instead of bearing down for the enemy ship opposite, was reaching forward for the van. The remainder of the van division, of which the Ajax was one, followed; the Stirling Castle and the Ajax began the action. Rodney could only carry the rear and centre divisions into close action.

The two fleets pounded away from a quarter to one until five o'clock. The Ajax in particular was gravely damaged, the main topgallant mast being shot through, and seventeen men killed or wounded in this inconclusive action.

At last de Guichen withdrew to his base of Basse Terre, Guadeloupe. His ships had been beaten to a standstill and he abandoned his objective of an attack on Barbados. Too many of the British ships had been crippled for Rodney to follow him.

Captain Uvedale's health being very poor, Rodney sent him home after the battle with despatches. The Countess Cornwallis wrote to her husband that on reaching London Uvedale claimed complete forgetfulness of the action as 'something heavy had fell on his head.'

Probably due to his ill-health, he did not hold any further commissions, and was superannuated in 1787. However, after strong representations that an officer who had distinguished himself so gallantly in his youth should not be treated thus, he was promoted in 1789 to the rank of Rear-Admiral, on half-pay. He died 14 December 1808.

**JOHN SYMONS: CAPTAIN OF HMS Ajax from 10 JUNE 1780 to 14 MAY 1781**

John Symons was advanced to the rank of Post Captain 28 January 1771. John Symons took command of HMS Ajax on 10 June, 1780, at Gros Islet Bay, St Lucia.

On 10 October 1780, an appalling hurricane struck the West Indies. HMS Ajax was at anchor in the carenage in Gros Islet Bay. At 6 o'clock in the evening she struck her topgallant masts. About the same time the seas became so steep that the cable to the small bower parted. They let go the best bower and veered to half a cable, but the exceptionally high seas forced the ship aground, in only 27 feet of water. They succeeded in getting clear, and for the next day and a half they drifted blindly. She eventually regained harbour, but not without great damage to masts and sails, and the loss of one seaman.

On 28 April, 1781, Rear-Admiral Sir Samuel Hood, with sixteen line of battle ships, was off Martinique. HMS Ajax was the van ship of Rear-Admiral Drake's Blue Squadron. A British frigate, flying the signal for 'Enemy fleet in sight' bore down. Admiral the Comte de Grasse, with twenty ships of the line, his flag in the Ville de Paris, 110, was escorting a convoy of 150 sail to Martinique.

Hood was held down to the westward of Martinique by the trade wind and the westward-running currents, and de Grasse hove to windward of Point Salines, and sent ashore to announce his arrival. Early next day he advanced through the channel between Martinique and St Lucia, his line of battle ships forming a screen for the convoy hugging the coast. Hood was to leeward, running south, and tacked his ships to range alongside the enemy, offering battle. De Grasse held off, firing at long range so ineffectually that Hood did not bother to reply. By 11.20 a.m., both fleets were approaching the north shore of Port Royal Bay, and both reversed course, turning towards each other. Hood brought to, inviting the French to come to him, but they sailed on, although their fleet had been increased by the four ships of the line from Port Royal. Hood kept ahead of them, firing at long range, and bewailing the waste of powder and shot.

The two fleets again approached the channel between Martinique and St Lucia. The four leading ships of Hood's line caught the breeze and drew away from the rest, to be opposed by double their number of the enemy, and harshly dealt with. The Russel had to be ordered to St Eustatius, her damage was so great. She gave Admiral Rodney his first news of the action.

The next day, 30 April, the two fleets still faced each other. Though de Grasse no longer had to concern himself with the safety of his convoy, now in Port Royal Bay, he still refused action. Finally, Hood made the signal to withdraw, at 8 p.m. The state of the three ships badly damaged, and the general condition of the remainder of his fleet (he had 1,500 sick and short of complements) made it impossible to beat 24 ships of the line, and if the French had been victorious the consequences would probably have meant the loss of the British islands.

Captain Symons transferred to the Gibraltar and then to the Formidable, as Sir George's flag captain, but the Admiral, who had a great deal of trouble with the dockyard, and also with his own officers, over the speedy refitting of the ships, considered Symons as bad as the rest, and as soon as a vacancy occurred, transferred him to the Warrior.

John Symons died 16 December, 1799.

**GEORGE BOWEN:** CAPTAIN OF HMS AJAX from 15 MAY 1781 to 29 JULY 1781

This officer was of a respectable Welsh family. He attained the rank of Post Captain 14 February 1781, and was appointed to HMS Ajax, 74, on the West India station, from May 1781 to 29 July of the same year. He then transferred to the Montague, 74, and commanded her in the partial action between Rear-Admiral Graves and the Comte de Grasse off the Chesapeake 5 September 1781 in the same year. The Montague afterwards accompanied the squadron under Sir Samuel Hood to the West Indies, and Captain Bowen was present at all that officer's brilliant achievements on the Leeward Islands station. He also shared the glories of the memorable 12 April, 1782, when the British fleet, under Rodney, defeated that of France commanded by de Grasse, who was taken prisoner on the occasion. The loss sustained by the Montague in this battle amounted to 12 killed and 31 wounded. Captain Bowen was then appointed to the Bellona, 74, in 1789.

A long interval of peace succeeded the above glorious events, and Captain Bowen remained unemployed until the commencement of war with the French republic in 1793, at which period he was appointed to the Belliquex, 64, and afterwards removed into the Veteran, of the same force.

In the Autumn of 1795 he obtained command of the Canada of 74 guns, and early in the following year proceeded to the West Indies, under the orders of Sir Hugh C. Christian, with whom he served at the reduction of St Lucia, after the capture of that island, the Canada was sent to Jamaica, the station where Captain Bowen continued to command her until 1797, when he removed into the Carnatic, another ship of the same rate.

Sir Hyde Parker appointed him President of the Court Martial of four of the captured mutineers of the Hermione - Antonio Marco, John Elliott, Joe Montell and Pierre D'Orlanie. The Court Martial was held on 17 March 1798 on board the York. All four were found guilty and condemned to death, and their execution took place on board the York on the 19th. Captain Bowen presided over a second Court Martial held on board the Carnatic, at which William Benives, William Herd, John Hill and John Brown were tried. Although charged, John Brown was allowed to turn King's Evidence. The other three were found guilty and hanged on board the Carnatic.

Captain Bowen was advanced to the rank of Rear-Admiral 14 February 1799; Vice-Admiral 9 November 1805; and Admiral 31 July 1810. During part of the late war he commanded the Sea Fencibles in Ireland, but, it is believed, never served as a flag officer. Admiral Bowen died 1 July 1823.

**NICHOLAS CHARRINGTON:** CAPTAIN OF HMS AJAX from 30 JULY 1781 to 8 AUGUST 1783

Nicholas Charrington was advanced to the rank of Post Captain 27 July 1781. Captain Charrington took command of HMS Ajax 30 July, 1781. On 9 August he sailed with Rear-Admiral Sir Samuel Hood's squadron from Antigua to American waters to join Rear-Admiral Thomas Graves, who was in command of a strong force moored in the mouth of the Hudson River.

De Grasse, after avoiding battle with Hood's squadron in April, had to decide how best to support the French and American land forces in America. The British were advancing through Carolina and Virginia towards Chesapeake Bay, and the French were crossing Connecticut to join up with Washington. De Grasse chose to make for Hampton Roads (the mouth of the Chesapeake) where he could give close support to the Franco-American armies. He set sail, keeping to leeward of the Bahamas and creeping up the coast of the mainland. Hood took the shortest route to the Chesapeake, and arrived on 25 August to find the anchorage empty. He continued northward and anchored three days later at the mouth of the Hudson.

Five days after Hood had left, de Grasse arrived at Chesapeake Bay, and anchored inside Cape Henry. He put his troops ashore, and sent two pairs of ships to blockade the rivers James and York. The British troops, commanded by Cornwallis, were thereby invested by sea and land, and withdrew to Yorktown.

Graves now had more than twenty warships. They sailed south with the object of helping Cornwallis. Hood had the van, with his flag in the *Barfleur*, 100, Graves the centre, and the rear, including the *Ajax*, was commanded by Rear-Admiral Drake. In this formation, with the wind dead astern, they approached the mouth of the Chesapeake. A few suspicious sail were sighted, and Graves, believing that he had to deal with a small division at the most, crowded on all sail. It was ten in the morning of 5 September, 1781. The French also did not expect to see a strong enemy force, and their ships' crews were ashore, or ferrying boats across the bay with supplies for the army. When sails were sighted, they were at first thought to be Barras's division, which was expected with supplies. But then the frigates came in, firing guns to announce the strength of the enemy - 19 men of war, 27 in total. To gain time de Grasse ordered his ships to slip their cables.

Hood suggested that Graves should attack each ship as she came tacking slowly out of the bay. Instead, he gave the French all the time they needed. He deployed to port, so that the squadrons should face each other in two long lines. It was unfortunate that this movement brought Drake's division into the van - 'an officer with a great name, but of moderate worth' - and left Hood's to the rear, where he could not influence the main action. When Graves signalled 'Prepare to attack' the French van veered away, delaying the beginning of the action and enabling de Grasse and the rest of his squadron to get into proper station. Hood continued in line ahead, and maintained afterwards that the signal for the line was still flying in the *London*, Graves' flag ship.

The action began at 4 p.m., the first few minutes being the worst for the four or five French van ships. After this the French gained the ascendancy and Graves drew off. For five days the fleets were in sight of each other, then the wind shifted and de Grasse returned to his anchorage.

The British withdrew to New York; except for Hood's seven ships, the ships were much damaged. The *Ajax* had her fore topgallant mast shot away, mizzen topmast shot through, main tressel-trees, fore cap and head of the mast, main and fore topsails 'much wounded'. Seven men were killed and sixteen wounded.

The outcome of the battle was that the French and Americans were freed from threats from the sea. Washington and the French divisions tightened their grip on Yorktown, and Cornwallis surrendered on 19 October.

On 12 November the British fleet sailed for Barbados, arriving on 5 December Hood deduced that de Grasse's next objective would be Barbados, and while he was sailing there he received a letter from Governor Shirley of St Kitts. A large fleet of men of war and transports had been sighted from the heights of Nevis. Hood went north with 22 of the line to his base at Antigua to pick up troops under General Prescott. He sailed on 23 January 1782.

Hood sent for his flag officers, Rear-Admiral Drake and Commodore Affleck, and explained his intentions to them; they were then to inform their captains. Such a thing was unheard of, but probably ensured the success of the manoeuvre. Hood intended to attack the French fleet at anchor, but this was frustrated through a collision which occurred between the *Alfred* and the frigate *Nymphé* during the night. Because of this, his fleet was still rounding the southern part of Nevis at daybreak of 24 January. De Grasse, warned of Hood's approach, put to sea in the afternoon. He had 25 of the line, and two 50-gun ships.

Hood now decided to relieve St Kitts, and sailed into Frigate Bay while de Grasse waited for his attack outside, and anchored. Nevertheless, the rear squadron, and some of the centre, had to perform this manoeuvre under heavy fire. Next day, the French attacked with great spirit, but the British ships, with springs on their cables to enable them to swing, were able to concentrate the fire of several ships on each French ship in turn. The French withdrew at the end of the day to leeward. Hood's ingenuity greatly raised the morale of the garrison and fleet, but it could not save St Kitts. The garrison, greatly outnumbered, retreated to the fort on Brimstone Hill, on 29 January, and held out for over a month. They were forced to capitulate when a number of heavy guns were brought against them.

De Grasse now had 33 ships of the line, and waited to seaward, hoping to bring the British fleet to action. On the evening of 13 February Hood called his captains to the Barfleur. Synchronising their watches, at 11 p.m. they were to cut their cables and set sail, leaving a boat with a lantern to deceive the French. Dawn the next morning revealed to de Grasse an empty anchorage.

Hood's fleet returned to Gros Islet Bay, where Rodney waited. Rodney considered the whole episode a disgrace to Britain, and told Hood that he should have got to windward and attacked the enemy when the opportunity offered. He was also annoyed at the deliberate waste of so many anchors and cables at a time when naval stores of all kinds were in short supply.

The object of the combined efforts of France and Spain now swung to the conquest of Jamaica. They planned to concentrate at Cap Francais (Cap Hatien) in Haiti 20,000 troops and fifty ships of the line. Part of the troops were already there, and Rodney was charged with preventing de Grasse collecting the remainder, and supplies, from the French islands, and conveying them to the rendezvous.

The final decisive encounter between Rodney and de Grasse took place on 12 April 1782, between, and a little to the westward of Dominica and Guadeloupe, where the channel is narrowed to thirteen miles by three islets called the Saintes, ten miles south of Guadeloupe. The British fleet came up with de Grasse off Dominica, and he sent the convoy into Basse Terre, Guadeloupe, while with the French fleet he tried to beat through the channel and pass east of the island, drawing the British fleet away from the transports. Just as the fleets were beginning to cannonade away at each other, the wind shifted, taking aback two ships of the French line, and creating two gaps. Rodney seized the opportunity to break the line with his centre division -Formidable, followed by Namur, St Albans, Canada, Repulse and Ajax – and Hood's rear division, six ships astern. The French fleet was scattered and five ships taken. The Ville de Paris surrendered to the Barfleur soon after 6 p.m. At sunset Sir George signalled the fleet to break off and lie to, to Hood's astonishment. He considered that if Rodney had signalled a general chase every French ship would have been taken. HMS Ajax had eight men killed and 38 wounded; rigging and topgallant masts and yards damaged.

The fleet anchored in Fort Royal Bay, Jamaica on 30 April. Rodney went home in July while Sir Samuel Hood looked after repairs to the ships. He wrote:  
"The chearfulness shewn, and diligence exerted by all the Artificers were truly great and pleasant ... every Ship which was in action (the Ajax excepted) will be ready for sea in three days ... I have therefore directed the Naval Storekeeper to pay them two for one from the end of the month."

The Ajax's refit was not completed until the end of December, and the next four months were spent cruising about the islands. On 30 April 1783, Captain Charrington wrote in his

Journal: "Employ'd getting the Ship to England as fast as possible!" as they sailed for home. They reached Dover on 30 June and the ship was paid off at Gillingham on 8 August, 1783.