

H.M.S. ORION

1937 - 1939.



H.M.S. ORION 1937-1939.

H.M.S. "ORION" 1937-39



Drawn by]

[A. W. Bradshaw.

H. M. S. "ORION"
1937 - 1939.

Dedicated
in deepest sympathy
to
THE BARON
of whom so many of us have heard,
but so few have met.

FOREWORD

By *CAPTAIN H. R. G. KINAHAN, Royal Navy.*

In the years to come I hope that this book will bring back many pleasant memories of a happy commission spent in H.M.S. "ORION" on the America and West Indies Station.

We have steamed many thousands of miles; we have met countless people and I hope that wherever we have been, we have left good impressions behind. From a number of letters received I feel that we have been successful in this important side of our work.

Before we had completed our first year on the station, the storm clouds rolled up over Europe and brought us many anxieties with some disappointments. Since the summer of 1938, these clouds have never been far away, but they did allow us to make our long anticipated cruise up the west coast of North America to British Columbia.

In between our strenuous periods in foreign ports as "Ambassadors of Britain," we have had to make ourselves and our ship an efficient fighting unit under conditions which are less easy than they are in some other parts of the world. Should we be tested, I trust that we shall give a good account of ourselves.

At the time of writing this Foreword, our thoughts are turned towards HOME but our date for crossing the Atlantic is still unknown. When we do see England again we will find that many changes have taken place since we last saw the Eddystone in the summer of 1937.

Soon after our return to England, we will be saying good-bye to our shipmates of the last two years. May you all have good ships and rapid advancement and promotion. For myself I hope that I may again be fortunate enough to serve with as loyal a company of officers and men as I have had with me in this, my first command.

H.M.S. "ORION."
Colon, August, 1939.

H. R. G. KINAHAN.



CAPTAIN H. R. G. KINAHAN, R.N.,
(Kinahan of the Caribbean).

Photo by]

[F. J. Luscombe.

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by

Captain H. R. G. Kinahan, Royal Navy.

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The Crest for the cover was drawn by H. P. Bunt.

PREFACE

When I was a younger and more ambitious man I used to have visions of myself penning the Preface of some monumental work which was to shake the scholastic world to the foundations. Fortunately for the scholastic world, and, as I now know, for myself, I have long since realized my limitations—at least in this respect. Only now has it been borne on me what misery is the lot of the one who attempts to write any type of book, and the fact that that misery may be the lot of his readers too, in no way eases the strain on him. I ought to have learned this at School when, for my sins, I used to edit the Magazine, but I didn't—chiefly, I suppose, because I was then in a position, in which so many people from time to time find themselves, of being able to make others do most of the work. Nor was I then limited by my profession from telling them *exactly* what I thought of them if they didn't.

But times have changed (platitude) though something of the old craving to be an author must have remained, and in their trusting innocence the Canteen Committee have let me loose on a helpless public, and, moreover, agreed to foot the bill for the perpetration when perpetrated. It has made me sweat much blood and tears, but, unlike the normal man mentioned in paragraph one, I draw much comfort from thinking of the fury of some of my readers when the book falls into their hands.

Speaking seriously for a moment, the chief difficulty in writing this book has been in trying to produce a story of the commission which will be at once of interest to three groups of people. Two of these groups are formed by the officers and men of the ship's company; the third group by the people at home, and those others, unconnected with the Navy, into whose hands the book may fall. Whether I have achieved that end I don't know. I can only say that I have done the best I can in the far too short a time which I have had to bring the narrative to completion. Added to this, I am not a writer either by



Photo by]

Tim History School.

[F. G. V. Scorell.

CHAPTER I.

THE PAST.

MOST of us, on those days when the ship has been "open to visitors," and probably at other times as well, have repeated so often "this is the fifth 'ORION,'" or words to that effect, but possibly not so many of us know much about those four predecessors, and to what extent they are connected with the history scroll which is displayed on the front of "Y" gun-turret. That is going to be the excuse for this brief résumé of facts which we will call Chapter I.

We must not say that we live on the glories of the past, but it is the first "ORION" which is by far the most outstanding and famous of the ships of her name. She was built, we are told, on the Thames in 1787, and was a ship of the line of 74 guns—a Third Rater—as ratings went in those days. The length of her gun deck (the lower deck of to-day) was about 170 feet (less than one third of our present length), and her keel 141 feet. Her breadth and depth are given as nearly 47 feet and 20½ feet respectively and her tonnage was 1,645. Two thousand oaks were used to build her, half of which were probably English. The weight of her broadside was 781 lbs. She appears to have been commissioned "for the Dutch Armament" in 1788, and to have been commanded by Sir Hyde Parker, but she first comes into prominence in the first of the honours mentioned on our history scroll—"The Glorious First of June 1794."

This is not a History Book so there is no need for alarm, but some short account of these engagements would not seem out of place here. Let us take them in chronological order.

"The Glorious First of June 1794."

"This was, of course, the action in which Admiral Lord Howe, with twenty-six sail of the line and seven frigates, came up with, and fought, in the Atlantic, the French Fleet of twenty-six ships of the line, and fifteen or sixteen frigates and corvettes under Admiral Villaret-Joyeuse" says one writer on the period. "The British Fleet" he continues, "had long been waiting its chance. At anchor most of the winter months, it was ready for a start as soon as the vessels cruising off the French coast could bring news that the grand fleet of France had sailed from Brest roads. There were British convoys, too, for the East and West Indies, which had to be seen clear of the Channel: there were rumours of a French convoy—some 350 sail in number—richly laden with provisions and stores, and bound for France from the west."

Lord Howe weighed anchor from S. Helens (L.O.W.) early in May 1794. Among the ships under his command was the "ORION," (Capt. J. T. Duckworth, R.N.) The fleet and British convoy amounted to some 148 sail in all, and, off the Lizard, after detaching the merchant ships with six 74's and two frigates to see them well on their way, Howe reconnoitred Brest roads. But again we must remind ourselves that this is not a history book, and, ignoring the general details of this famous battle, which in any case are so well known, content ourselves with a record of the part played by the first "ORION." To this end there follow extracts from the journals of the Master and Captain.*

From the journal of John Hunter, master of the "ORION."

1st June, 1794.

Sunday, June 1st.

A.M. At half-past 5 bore up to the enemy's line.

*Quoted by Pollen in "Story of H.M.S. 'ORION' in the Five Great Battles" pp. 6-7.

At 7, signal to form the order of battle on the larboard line of bearing.

At 8, for the van to close to the centre.

At half-past 8, for each ship to engage her opponent. As the enemy had begun to cannonade us, signal to engage closer.

At 9, being close to enemy began to engage.

At 10, had our main top-mast shot away.

At half past 10, our main yard shot in two in the slings. Drove three of the enemy's ships in confusion, who ran to leeward. We being disabled, could not follow, and having no other near to us, but others astern coming up. Cut away all the wreck, and got clear of it for others as they came up. Observed many ships both sides dismasted, but the enemy terribly so.

At 12 noon, got a little in order, hauled up and closed near the Admiral, per signal, to repair our damage. The enemy giving way could not follow.

P.M. At 1, the enemy that were able ran to leeward and formed.

At 4, the enemy collected what disabled ships they could and set off, leaving seven behind, which we took possession of, but one went down before we could take all the people out of her.

At 7, got up a main top-gallant mast for a jury main top-mast and fore top-gallant sail for a main topsail, a fore topsail yard for a main yard, and fore topsail for a mainsail.

Monday, June 2nd.

A.M. The fleet lying to, repairing their damages. Employed knotting, repairing, and reeving new rigging. All our rigging and sails shot to tatters.

The following is an extract from Captain Duckworth's account of the "ORION's" proceedings during the action. It gives a glimpse of just one corner of the fight:—

Proceedings of His Majesty's Ship the "ORION."

John Thomas Duckworth, Esq., Commander.

"When the signal for each ship to engage her opponent was made, the "QUEEN," "VALIANT," and "ORION," being close together, hailed each other and agreed on the eighth, ninth and the tenth ships as their proper opponents. At this time the enemy's line filled, and made sail. The "QUEEN" hailed us, and though not distinctly heard, from the heavy fire, judged it was to make sail. Hauled on board the main tack, and found the main sheet shot away, which prevented our trimming. The enemy's line making sail, caused our taking the seventh ship from their rear. Bore down as close as possible without boarding, and observed the "QUEEN," our second, bear up for the fifth, which was a three-decker. Some time after observed the "BRUNSWICK" on our starboard bow between two French line of battle ships; these were between us and the "BRUNSWICK," so that we could not cut the line to assist her. At half past ten, the two ships we were engaging bore up, when the masts of one went overboard, which enabled us to oppose our broadside to one coming up on our quarter. At this time our main top-mast, which had gone some time before, was hanging over the starboard side, and carried away half the main top, and the main yard in the slings. The wreck much impeded three guns on each deck; we, however, continued firing until the enemy left us. As the smoke dispersed, we perceived the "QUEEN CHARLOTTE" with both her top-masts carried away, and otherwise much damaged; hauled up to support her, observing two of the enemy's line-of-battle ships bearing down upon her, under full sail.

In March, 1795, a new Captain was appointed to "ORION" by name James Saumarez, afterwards Sir James Saumarez, and later Admiral Lord de Saumarez.

He was a remarkable man, a great fighter and a great sailor. A native of Guernsey, where he was born in 1757, he had had an amazing career, going to sea at the age of 12, and bringing distinction upon himself in an engagement as early as 1776. He was 38 when he was appointed to "ORION," and such was the man that the whole crew of the "CRESCENT," his previous ship, volunteered to follow him. It was under his command that our ship took part in the next two great Sea Fights, S. Vincent and the Nile.

But before passing to "ORION's" part in the battle of Cape S. Vincent, we must make mention of an earlier engagement in which she took part and which is not mentioned on our history scroll. We refer, of course, to Lord Bridport's Action on June 23rd, 1795. After his appointment to "ORION," Saumarez was placed under the orders of Lord Bridport, the Commander-in-Chief of the Channel Fleet, and sailing with him on June 12th, was in the famous action already mentioned which took place off L'Orient and the Isle de Groix. The "ORION" before morning on June 23rd, was the headmost ship of the fleet, and before 6 a.m. was the first which actually began the action with one of the enemy's largest ships.

Saumarez in a letter to his brother written the following day gives quite a vivid story of the action and the part played by his own ship, and he ends like this:—"Our loss in this ship has been inconsiderable when I assure you that we were engaged with very little intermission the whole of the action, which lasted four hours. We have four killed, two since dead and eighteen wounded. The ship has suffered more in proportion in the hull, masts and sails. We regret not to have had a few leagues more space, as none could then have escaped. Port Louis, near L'Orient, has afforded them this timely shelter, but not till they had a severe drubbing."

Refits and cruises were not unknown in those days, and there were also small jobs to be done which only a warship could do. "ORION" had her share of all of these, and it is in 1796, after four months in dock and

a short cruise off Brest, that we hear of her proceeding to reinforce the fleet under Sir John Jervis off Cape S. Vincent. Then, early in September, we hear of her returning to Spithead to refit and replenish after a six months' unsuccessful cruise. Later in the year Sir James Saumarez, with his ship, was attached to Admiral W. Parker's squadron, which joined Sir John Jervis off Cape S. Vincent on February 6th, 1797. On February 13th, there joined the fleet the "MINERVE," flying the broad pennant of Commodore Nelson, with news that the Spanish Fleet had been sighted, and the historic action followed.

Cape S. Vincent, 1797.

It happened the following day, February 14th, S. Valentine's Day. Sir John Jervis had fifteen sail of the line, and four frigates against twenty-seven of the enemy, including one 130-gun ship, six 112-guns, two 80-guns and eighteen 74's, not counting twelve 34-gun frigates, and one brig corvette.

Both the Ship's Log and a letter of the Captain are extant, and as both cover practically the same ground the latter is printed here for the sake of brevity. It is as follows.

"ORION," Lagos Bay, 15th February, 1797.

"You will be happy to receive an account from me of the important victory obtained by our squadron over the Spanish Fleet, consisting of nearly double our force

"Early on Tuesday morning, the weather being hazy, with light winds, the frigates on the look-out made the signal for discovering the enemy, and soon after we discerned several ships to leeward, and the body of the fleet to windward. We were then on the starboard tack, standing to the southward. The signal was made to different ships to chase; and, shortly after, for the fleet to form in line of battle as most convenient. The enemy at this time were bearing down to join their ships to leeward, but we came upon them so fast that, before they could effect the junction, the headmost ships, which were the

"CULLODEN," "PRINCE GEORGE," "ORION," "BLENHEIM," and "COLOSSUS," with the "VICTORY" and the rest coming up, it was effectually prevented. They then hauled their wind on the larboard tack, and our Admiral made the signal for the fleet to tack. Our sternmost ships then became the headmost.

"Commodore Nelson, who had joined from Elba the day before, shifted his pennant to the "CAPTAIN," the leading ship, and distinguished himself most eminently. The "CULLODEN," "BLENHEIM," "PRINCE GEORGE" and "ORION," were the next that came up, and were warmly engaged for nearly three hours with the body of the enemy's fleet, who had not the time, or address, to form into any order. But it is only doing them justice to say, they defended themselves very bravely.

"We were, for above an hour, opposed to a three-decker, the "SALVADOR DEL MUNDO," which finally struck to the "ORION;" we lowered the boat from the stern, and gave orders to Mr. Luce, the First Lieutenant, to take possession of her; still making sail for the other ships, and following Admiral Parker in the "PRINCE GEORGE." The "EXCELLENT," which had passed us to windward, had made a line-of-battle ship, the "SAN YSIDRO," strike some time before this.

"Several ships of the enemy were extremely shattered in their masts and sails; but, keeping up a warm fire on their ships, the "CAPTAIN" laid one of them, an 84, on board and hauled down her colours. His bravery on this occasion is above all praise.

"The "NAMUR," and other ships had by this time joined the van, and engaged as they came up. I stood for a three-decker, which, after engaging some time, struck her colours; she first had shown a white flag which, though I concluded to indicate a truce, was not satisfactory to myself, and we continued firing till they hoisted an English flag over the Spanish, on which we ceased firing. The enemy's ships, many of which had not been in action, at this time came up and were forming to windward.