

## Information sheet no 099

### John Byng

John Byng was born in Southill, Bedfordshire in 1704, the fifth son of George Byng, Viscount Torrington, a prominent figure in both the "Glorious Revolution" of 1688 and the fighting against the Jacobite risings that followed. Byng entered the Navy in 1718 and he was serving in HMS *Superb* at his father's victory over the Spanish in a battle off Cape Passaro on 31 July 1718. He participated in the capture of the enemy Commander-in-Chief's flagship. At the age of 18, Byng passed his Lieutenant's examination although he continued as an Able Seaman in HMSs *Dover* and HMS *Solebay* until 1724 when he was appointed as a Second Lieutenant in HMS *Superb*.

On 23 April 1727, Byng was appointed as a Fourth Lieutenant in HMS *Burford* and later being promoted to Third and Second Lieutenant in turn. He was then appointed as Captain to command HMS *Gibraltar* in the Mediterranean Fleet and then later transferred to HMS *Falmouth* in 1731. In October 1739, he commanded HMS *Sunderland* and joined Vice Admiral Haddock off Cadiz. Much of Byng's career at this time was generally uneventful. Though the War of the Austrian Succession began the following year, Byng did not have a part in it until 1742, when he was sent to inspect the fisheries in Newfoundland.

In 1744, Byng received his largest command so far as Flag Captain in HMS *St George* under Admiral John Norris serving in the Channel Fleet. On 8 August 1745, Byng gained promotion to Rear-Admiral of the Blue. This was unusual as he had never commanded a squadron or fleet in a naval battle nor had he particularly distinguished himself. It is likely that it was his relationship to Lord Torrington that gave him the advantage in progressing up the ranks. In the autumn 1745, Byng hoisted his flag in HMS *Kinsale* and led a patrol of the eastern Scottish coast against the threat of a Jacobite invasion by Charles Edward Stuart, the Young Pretender.

In 1746, Byng served on a court-martial concerning the aborted actions of a British squadron at the Battle of Toulon in May 1744. Admiral Mathews and Vice Admiral Lestock were both tried for failing to act by the Fighting Instructions - the official and inflexible directives on how to fight a naval battle. Byng concurred with the court's verdict that although Mathews had engaged with the enemy, he had violated the Instructions by breaking away from the line of battle to do so. He was dismissed from the service. Mathews had accused Lestock of failing to join up the rear of the line with the van and centre divisions attacking the French but Lestock, with possible undue influence from influential supporters, was acquitted. The wording and punishment for the particular article of war under which Mathews was tried was tightened up following this court-martial and in doing so, led to Byng's own later demise for a similar offence as Mathews.

In 1747, Byng joined Vice Admiral Medley in the Mediterranean. He was promoted to Vice Admiral of the Blue on 15 July and then became Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Fleet, after Medley's demise. In 1755, tensions increased between Britain and France mainly over the ownership of dividends in North America. The prospects of a possible French invasion of the British Isles caused much alarm throughout the country. By the beginning of 1756, the Whig Government had been warned by intelligence of ships being prepared at Toulon for an attempt to seize the

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British-held island of Minorca. On March 17, Byng was promoted to Admiral of the Blue and then ordered to leave for Portsmouth to prepare his squadron and to wait for further instructions.

Hoisting his flag on HMS *Ramillies*, Byng was surprised to find that nine of his thirteen ships were desperately short of men but the Admiralty refused to allow him to enlist men from the other ships in the harbour. Some of the ships, such as HMS *Intrepid* and HMS *Captain* were old and leaky and when Byng had received the instructions from the Admiralty on April 1, he found them to be rather vague. He could not understand why one of his orders was to replace the Marines in his squadron with soldiers. Byng reached Gibraltar on 2 May after a voyage affected by gales in the Channel. He was informed that the French army had already landed in Minorca and were laying siege to St. Philip's Fort, the last position held by the British garrison under General Blakeney. Byng met Lieutenant-General Fowke, the Governor of Gibraltar with orders to provide a battalion to transport to the island. Fowke refused, as he was fearful of a possible French assault on Gibraltar. Surprised and angry, Byng turned his attention to the refitting of his ships but he was appalled by the poor conditions of Gibraltar's dockyards.

On 8 May, Byng led his fleet towards Minorca. He sent out Captain Hervey with three frigates to establish contact with Blakeney and to observe the situation of the siege. Hervey found St. Philip's Fort still in British hands but its garrison failed to respond to his signals. On 19 May, the French fleet led by the Marquis de la Galissonniere, was sighted and Byng gave the signal to chase the enemy. The wind became light and the two fleets did not engage until the following morning. Byng set up his line for battle with himself leading the rear and his second in command, Rear-Admiral West, leading the van. Byng's intention was to attack the French line on a diagonal course. The problem was that none of Byng's captains were aware of this plan and the signalling system was too ineffective for Byng to be able to communicate and explain it.

As his fleet approached the French, Byng was horrified to find that his van division were breaking the diagonal line and steering on a parallel course. His signals for them to head towards the enemy were not enough so he gave the order to attack. Many of his older ships were wrecked by the powerful cannons of the French vessels, which stood on the defensive throughout. Whilst Galissonniere sent many of his lead ships out of his line, the British ships kept to the Fighting Instructions and did not break the line of battle to pursue them. As HMS *Ramillies* was shot at, many of her men grew impatient and fired without Byng's orders. Smoke from the battle caused confusion with the fleets not being able to tell each other apart. To prevent two of his own ships from colliding with his flagship, Byng had to signal his whole squadron to stop.

Unwilling to break through a gap in the British line, Galissonniere signalled to the French fleet to retreat. Many of the British ships were severely damaged. Byng was unhappy with how the British ships had performed in action and called for a Council of War on May 24. All his captains and the senior army officers came to the agreement that it would be better to leave Minorca and return defend Gibraltar against possible attack. Byng sent his dispatch to London before arriving back in Gibraltar on 20 June. The fort on Minorca finally fell on 29 June. However on 2 July, HMS *Antelope* arrived at Gibraltar with Vice-Admiral Hawke to replace Byng and to send him back to England. To Byng's disgust, he found out that the Government had received and had accepted Galissonniere's report of the battle, which claimed that Byng had withdrawn first, before his own had arrived.

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When he arrived at Spithead on 26 July 1756, Byng was placed under arrest under the rewritten Article 12 of the Articles of War which stated *“every person in the fleet who through cowardice, negligence and disaffection shall in time of action withdraw or keep back, or not come into the fight or engagement, or shall not do his utmost to take or destroy every ship which it shall be his duty to engage.... and being convicted there of by the sentence of a court-martial, shall suffer death.”*

The Government and Admiralty were determined to ensure that Byng, through his failure of defend Minorca, would be the public scapegoat for their own shortcomings in the loss. Byng’s dispatch was heavily cut before publication to make him look guilty and he became the centre of a press campaign on the allegations of cowardice and incompetence. There was a nationwide call for an explanation for Minorca's loss and rioting erupted. Byng was moved from confinement on HMS *Antelope* to HMS *Royal Anne* in Portsmouth Harbour and then on to the Royal Hospital at Greenwich.

On 27 December 1756, the court-martial of Byng began on HMS *St. George* in Portsmouth Harbour. When questioned by the prosecution, many of Byng's captains and the other witnesses to the battle attempted to shift the blame onto him, but his own questioning of their actions revealed their own share of mistakes. Byng was confident of being acquitted. He claimed that he had done his utmost for Minorca and that he had been prevented to do more, due to the superiority of the French fleet and to the poor conditions of many of the ships given to him by the Admiralty.

On 27 January 1757, after hearing the evidence, the court-martial agreed on the verdict of guilty but their final resolutions were confused and contradictory. It was agreed that Byng’s guilt under the Twelfth Article meant a sentence of death but the court wanted to plea to the Government and the Admiralty for mercy. King George II received a petition from the supporters of Byng and his date of execution was delayed from 28 February to 14 March. Despite continued campaigning and parliamentary debates, the King and the Admiralty were adamant in allowing Byng's execution to proceed. They wanted to make an example of him.

On 14 March 1757, Admiral Byng was shot dead by a firing squad on HMS *Monarch* in Portsmouth Harbour. He was buried in the family vault at Southill. The exiled French author, Voltaire, summed up the situation by remarking that in England, they occasionally shot an Admiral *“pour encourager les autres”*.

*Note: The use of the abbreviations HMS in this information sheet is to clearly define the ships of Royal Navy. The abbreviation did not come into common use until c.1790s*