

Information sheet no 004

Adam Duncan

Duncan was born 1 July 1731, in Dundee. He entered the navy in April 1746 when he joined HMS *Trial* under the patronage of his cousin, Captain Robert Haldane. The ship was involved in the hunt for Prince Charles Edward Stuart (Bonnie Prince Charlie) who was in hiding on the Western Isles of Scotland after his defeat at Culloden. The ship gave chase and captured the French vessel *Le Bien Trouve*, sent to pick up the fugitive Prince.

Haldane and Duncan transferred to the frigate HMS *Shoreham* in January 1748, patrolling the English Channel and had some success at capturing French privateers before joining Sir Edward Hawke's squadron patrolling Belle-Isle in the Bay of Biscay. On 22 June while at anchor in gale force winds, an anchor rope broke and the ship drifted onto the rocks. She was severely damaged and returned to England where she was paid off on September 13.

In January 1749, Duncan joined HMS *Centurion* as Midshipman under Admiral Keppel and the two formed an instant bond. The ship sailed from Portsmouth for the Mediterranean on 25 April, but repairs to her topmast sail delayed their journey in Plymouth until May 11th. The purpose of their voyage was to negotiate for the release of British hostages and cargoes in Algiers; this was not achieved until 1752 and the ship paid off in July. For the next two years, Duncan was on half pay. He returned to active service when he was appointed Acting Lieutenant on HMS *Norwich*. He was confirmed in the rank of Lieutenant on 10 January 1755 and re-joined Keppel in HMS *Centurion*, when Keppel had been appointed as Commander in Chief North American Station.

At the outbreak of the Seven Years War in 1756, he joined Keppel in HMS *Torbay* in July as second Lieutenant and the ship joined Admiral Hawke's squadron off Brest. The ship captured a French snow, *Diligent* on 25 November, intercepted a French store ship, *Anna Sophia*, who was carrying British prisoners and recaptured a British snow, previously taken by French privateers. She came into action with a French frigate, *Chariot Royal*, who was outgunned and surrendered. HMS *Torbay* returned to England with her prizes in December 1756. She re-joined the squadron in June 1757, after Keppel's attendance at the court-martial and execution of Admiral Byng. Lt Duncan was an enthusiastic participant in boarding parties, showing great courage and leadership. The ship returned to Portsmouth for a complete refit in late summer 1757 and then prepared for an expedition against the French at Isle d'Aix in the Basque Roads. On 11 November 1758, Duncan was promoted to First Lieutenant on HMS *Torbay* and he remained with this ship while it was involved with the blockade of Brest. He left the ship when he was promoted commander on 21 September 1759 and was appointed to HMS *Royal Exchange*, narrowly missing out in the action at Quiberon Bay. The ship he joined was a hired vessel and used as an armed escort for merchant convoys, which he continued in until 1761, when on 25 February, after Keppel had requested his services, Duncan was promoted to Captain and appointed to HMS *Valiant*. During this service, he was involved in the reduction of Belle-Isle (1761) and Havana (1762), returning to England in 1763. After being paid off, Duncan found his naval career halted for the next fifteen years.

During the intervening period, he returned to his native country and lived in Dundee. He married Henrietta Dundas on 6 June 1777 and through the influence of her family, he was at last able to return to active service. At the end of



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1778, he was appointed to HMS *Suffolk*, but almost immediately transferred to HMS *Monarch*. In January 1779, he sat as a member of the court-martial of Admiral Keppel, the result of a dispute with Admiral Palliser. However, Duncan often interfered, in Keppel's favour, with the prosecution case and the Admiralty tried to stop him from attending the subsequent court-martial of Admiral Palliser by ordering his ship to the St Helen's anchorage. His crew refused to set sail unless they were paid in advance and so, inadvertently, he was still able to sit at Palliser's trial against Admiralty wishes. In Summer 1779, HMS *Monarch* was attached to the Channel fleet under Sir Charles Hardy, but in December, she was part of the squadron that was taken by Admiral Rodney to assist in the relief of Gibraltar, and during an operation that was trying to bring supplies to the besieged island, took part in the "moonlight" battle off Cape St Vincent on 16 January 1780, when Rodney's squadron defeated a Spanish fleet under Admiral de Langara. On their return to England, Duncan left HMS *Monarch* and was not in active command again until 1782, when Keppel became First Lord of the Admiralty.

Duncan was appointed to HMS *Blenheim* and attached to Lord Howe's fleet in the Mediterranean, where they were involved in the relief of Gibraltar and an encounter with a combined allied fleet off Cape Spartel. He succeeded Sir John Jervis in command of HMS *Foudroyant* in 1782, and after the peace, was in command of HMS *Edgar*, a guard ship at Portsmouth for three years. He was promoted to Rear-Admiral on 24 September 1787, followed by Vice Admiral on 1 February 1793, and just before attaining the rank of Admiral on 1 June 1795, he was recalled to active service, as Commander in Chief North Sea on board HMS *Venerable*. The main purpose of his employment was to guard against attack from the Dutch. The Dutch were allied to the French at the time and their fleet was mainly based in the Texel. The first two years were spent blockading the Dutch coast, but in spring 1797, the Dutch were preparing to sail.

In the meantime, the mutinies at Spithead and the Nore had broken out, creating disaffection and inactivity within the British fleet. By his own personal influence and strength of purpose, countered with some sympathy for the sailor's plight, Duncan was able to keep his own crew from joining the mutiny, while most of his fleet, apart from HMS *Adamant*, refused to leave the Yarmouth anchorage. The two ships were left to continue the blockade, but by clever signalling, Duncan managed to convince the Dutch fleet that the remainder of the British ships were just over the horizon. The Dutch were unable to take advantage of the paralysis in the British fleet as they were not yet ready for their planned invasion of Ireland with the French and the weather was against them. However, the Dutch government, against the opinion of Admiral de Winter, ordered them to set sail in early October. The mutinies over, Duncan's fleet were revictualing at Yarmouth when the signal from the observation squadron came through that the enemy were at sea. Duncan's fleet left Yarmouth rapidly and the Dutch were sighted on 11 October off the enemy coast near Camperdown. When the fleets engaged, Duncan did not wait for his squadron to form a line of battle, disregarding the Fighting Instructions laid down by the Admiralty, and the battle was won when nine Dutch sailing ships and two of their frigates were captured. The fleet returned with their prizes to avoid a violent gale. The tactics used by Duncan at Camperdown were a forerunner of those used by Nelson at Trafalgar.

At home, Duncan was raised to the peerage as Baron Lundie and Viscount Camperdown. Many felt that these were inadequate rewards for the victory. He continued in service in the North Sea until 1801. He died suddenly on 4 August 1804 at an inn at Cornhill on the Scottish border where he had stopped on his journey to Edinburgh. He left

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three children, the eldest son succeeding him to the peerage, and who was finally granted the earldom that his father had richly deserved in 1831. Duncan had been a man of great personal courage and humanity; he had dealt mercifully with those of his crew who had mutinied since he had great sympathy with the conditions in their life. Nelson wrote of him "There is no man who more sincerely laments the heavy loss... but the name of Duncan will never be forgot."