

Information sheet no 056

Augustus Keppel

Keppel was born on 25th April 1725 and joined the Navy at the age of 10 in 1735. His first appointment as Midshipman was in HMS *Oxford*, serving on the coast of Guinea. After a couple of years, he was transferred to HMS *Gloucester* and served in the Mediterranean for three years. On his return to England in 1740, he was appointed to HMS *Prince Frederick*, and later that year transferred to HMS *Centurion*, under the command of Commodore Anson. He sailed with Anson on the celebrated round the world voyage between 1741-1744, and distinguished himself during the sacking of Patya on 13th November 1741. Anson promoted him to Acting Lieutenant in March 1742. On his return to England, he passed the Lieutenant's examination on 25th July 1744 and was confirmed in the rank.

Keppel's career advanced quickly after this. A month after the examination, he was appointed to HMS *Dreadnought*, but three months later he was transferred to a sloop, HMS *Wolf* and promoted to Commander. Another month later, he was transferred to the frigate HMS *Greyhound*. In February 1745, he was appointed to HMS *Sapphire*, in which he served off the south coast of Ireland. In November 1745, he was transferred to HMS *Maidstone*, and was employed in sailing in the Soundings and the Bay of Biscay. On 27th June 1747, after having chased an enemy's ship in-shore off Belle Isle, the ship ran aground and was wrecked, while Keppel and his crew were taken prisoner. After an exchange of prisoners, Keppel returned to Britain where he faced a court martial for the loss of his ship in which he was acquitted in October 1747.

In November he was appointed to a new ship, HMS *Anson*, in which he served until 1748. He was then promoted to Commodore and appointed to HMS *Centurion*. He was given a special mission to sail to the Mediterranean to arrange a treaty with the Dey of Algiers to protect British naval vessels from harassment by his ships. The Dey was said to be angry at the relative youth of the officer sent to negotiate with him, but Keppel, backed up by the British naval force present with him, persuaded the Dey to negotiate. However, the treaty took a long time to finalise and it was not until 1751, that Keppel was able to return home and the ship paid off.

On his return, he was appointed to HMS *Norwich* and left to take command of the North American station, where he served until 1756. On his return, he was appointed to HMS *Swiftsure*, followed shortly by a transfer to HMS *Torbay*. After an autumn spent sailing off Cape Finesterre, he was appointed to sit in judgement at the court martial of Admiral John Byng. Although Byng was found guilty at the court martial, the judges recommended that mercy be shown to the Admiral. However, Keppel soon realised that the Admiralty was unlikely to be lenient and actively pursued the matter through Parliamentary means, although this was ultimately unsuccessful.

In the following September, HMS *Torbay* was attached to the squadron commanded by Admiral Sir Edward Hawke on a blockading expedition to the Basque Roads. The ship remained with the fleet until September 1758. Keppel was appointed to command a squadron of ships to reduce the French settlement at Goree in December with small loss. On his return, the ship was once again attached to Hawke's blockading squadron. In November 1759, it took part in the battle of Quiberon Bay. During the engagement in appalling weather conditions, the enemy ship she engaged and sank the *Thesee*. His own ship was for a time in some danger of sinking through taking in a lot of water.

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In March 1761, Keppel transferred to HMS *Valiant* and was put in command of a squadron to reduce Belle Isle, which was successfully completed in June. Keppel continued patrolling in the area until January 1762, when after a violent gale damaged most of his squadron, he was forced to return to Britain for repairs. He was then appointed as second-in-command to Admiral Sir George Pocock who was leading an expedition to capture Havana, after the declaration of war with Spain. The fleet arrived in Havana in June and by August the surrender had been accomplished. After the capture, Pocock returned to Britain leaving Keppel in command of the remaining squadron, where he remained until 1764. In October 1762, he was promoted to Rear Admiral of the Blue. In July 1765, after he had returned home, he was appointed as a Lord Commissioner at the Admiralty. In September 1766, he was appointed to convey Princess Caroline on board the royal yacht, *Catherine*, to Rotterdam for her marriage to the King of Denmark. During this period, he became attached to the Whig party under the Marquis of Rockingham and this trend towards political alliance was to have an impact on his future career. In 1770, he was promoted to Vice Admiral of the Blue and had been nominated to lead a squadron during a dispute with Spain. However, the dispute was settled before he could hoist his flag.

During the following years, he continued to be allied to the Whigs, in complete contrast to the political alliance of the First Lord of the Admiralty, Lord Sandwich. The Whigs were opposed to the American War of Independence. Tension was further increased between Keppel and Sandwich, when the post of Lieutenant-General of the Marines was given to a supporter of Sandwich, Sir Hugh Palliser. Keppel and Palliser were close friends, and although Keppel was jealous that Palliser had been presented with the post, it did not appear to affect their friendship at first.

In November 1776, Keppel reluctantly accepted the command of the Channel Fleet, but felt that he could be caught in a trap by his political enemies. In 1778, he was promoted to Admiral of the Blue and took up his appointment as Commander of the Channel Fleet. One of his Vice Admirals was Sir Hugh Palliser. The fleet was in a poor condition when Keppel arrived to hoist his flag on HMS *Victory*, with only six ships ready to sail. This led to continued quarrelling between Keppel and Sandwich on the state of the fleet, with Palliser trying to calm the situation between them. Eventually, Keppel was granted eleven ships from another squadron and he made sail on 13 June.

The larger French fleet, under Admiral d'Orvilliers, was sighted off Brest on 23 July 1778. D'Orvilliers was under orders to avoid an engagement and did his best to evade the British fleet, but was finally brought to battle on the 27th, but the French fleet now had the enemy between them and their home ports.

Keppel decided to engage the French using unorthodox tactics. He signalled a general chase, risking some disorder to the line of battle. Both fleets manoeuvred for the best position but engaged in some confusion. French casualties were high, but the British ships were also badly damaged. During the battle, Keppel hoisted a signal to reform the line of battle, and Palliser's division was some distance away, so Keppel sent a frigate to get Palliser to rejoin the line in order for a renewed attack. Palliser's ship HMS *Formidable*, had been badly damaged and it was not until the evening that Palliser and his division was able to comply. By then, it was too late to restart the battle and the French retreated to Brest during the night. Although both sides claimed victory, the battle had been indecisive, with substantial damage and casualties on both sides. Keppel sent a report to the Admiralty that the damage to his ships

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had prevented a more decisive outcome. The initial report commended all his officers for their conduct, and was publicly printed.

However, after a refit, Keppel sailed again in August amongst rumours of discontent behind the scenes. A follower of Keppel had discreetly suggested to Palliser that Keppel had had private words with Sandwich about Palliser's actions, and that it had been suggested that Palliser had deliberately disobeyed Keppel's order to rejoin the line of battle to prevent a second engagement with the French. Palliser, before sailing again in August with Keppel, left a paper defending his actions addressed to Sandwich should he not come back from sea. Before the fleet returned, the matter was fuelled by an anonymous letter published in a newspaper accusing Palliser of directly disobeying Keppel's order. Palliser requested Keppel to refute this accusation publicly; Palliser received no reply to his request and Palliser decided to defend himself publicly instead, stating his ship had been too badly damaged for him to join the line and that Keppel had not intended to re-engage until the following morning. Keppel reacted by asking not to serve any further with Palliser.

The argument was further fuelled into the political arena in November. A claim was made that had the French been defeated at the time, a diplomatic mission to America would not have failed, as it would have given them the opportunity to abandon the French treaty. The claim, however inaccurate and far-fetched, led to greater outbursts in debates on the Navy estimates. After a suggestion by an MP for an investigation into the action, Keppel claimed that he had not accused anyone of neglect, but had been shocked at Palliser's attacks on him in the newspapers. Palliser responded by endorsing an investigation. This angered Keppel and although not charging him with actual disobedience, made it clear that he felt that he had disobeyed his orders.

In December, Palliser brought capital charges against Keppel and an MP brought in a motion at the House of Commons to try Palliser. The controversy became heated and Sandwich and Palliser were accused of collusion against Keppel for the speed in which the Admiralty accepted the charges brought against Keppel. It was decided that a court martial should be held to try Keppel on Palliser's charges of "misconduct and neglect of duty"

The court martial was held at Portsmouth on 7 January 1779 and lasted 27 days. He was accused under various Articles of War, two of which carried automatic death sentences if found guilty. The main charges related to his signal of general chase that entailed unnecessary disorder, and by not re-engaging, left Palliser to be exposed to the enemy for capture or death. Thus, he was accused of not having done enough to attack and destroy the French fleet (this charge being similar to that under which Admiral Byng had been found guilty and shot years earlier). The trial was held under public scrutiny and Keppel had vociferous support from the Whigs. The evidence appeared to favour Keppel and ultimately, he was acquitted to his supporter's delight.

Keppel's acquittal, however, meant that Palliser was ruined. Sandwich defended him but Palliser was forced to resign as Lieutenant-General and also his Parliamentary seat. Palliser demanded a court martial to defend himself. Despite being conducted in a hostile environment, Palliser was acquitted on the charges brought against him, but with a censure that he should have informed his superior officer of the damage to his ships much earlier than he had.



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The whole episode had severely weakened the standing of the Navy. Keppel asked not to be sent to sea under the current Ministry, and so the Admiralty retired him, which led to a general resignation by his naval supporters, depriving the Navy of many able officers in the continuing war against America.

Keppel continued in Parliament on the Opposition benches and continually harried the Tory government on naval affairs. In 1782, the administration fell and Lord Rockingham formed a new Whig government. Keppel was then appointed First Lord of Admiralty. He held this post on two separate occasions, both times being succeeded by Admiral Lord Howe. In 1783, after the fall of his second administration, he retired from public life. He was raised to the peerage as Viscount Keppel and Baron Eldon and in 1785 went to Naples for his health. He died on 2 October 1786. His title became extinct since he had died unmarried and childless.