

MORE  
FAMOUS TRIALS

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## ADMIRAL BYNG

ON 14th March, 1757, there was a tragic scene on His Majesty's Ship *Monarch* which lay in Portsmouth Harbour.

Admiral John Byng was shot for having showed cowardice in front of the enemy.

This affair remains a tragic blot on British justice for, while it is true that Admiral Byng failed to engage a French squadron at the island of Minorca in the accepted tradition of the British navy, it is equally true that the French admiral, with a more powerful armament, failed to engage Byng's squadron.

Voltaire with amusing sarcasm summed up the matter in *Candide* in which an account of the death of Byng is given.

"Talking thus," writes Voltaire, "we approached Portsmouth. A multitude of people covered the shore, looking attentively at a stout gentleman who was on his knees with his eyes bandaged, on the quarter deck of one of the vessels of the fleet. Four soldiers, placed in front of him, put each three balls in his head, in the most peaceful manner, and all the assembly then dispersed quite satisfied.

"'What is all this?' quoth Candide, 'and what devil reigns here?'

"He asked who was the stout gentleman who came to die in this ceremonious manner.

"'It is an admiral,' they answered.

"'And why kill the admiral?'

"'It is because he has not killed enough of other people. He had to give battle to a French admiral, and they find that he did not go near enough to him.'

"'But,' said Candide, 'the French admiral was as far from him as he was from the French admiral.'

"'That is very true,' replied they; 'but in this country it is useful to kill an admiral now and then, just to encourage the rest (*pour encourager les autres*).'"

Byng was a victim to the ineptitude of a weak administration. To save themselves from condemnation by the British public

for the loss of Minorca, ministers were content to allow the admiral to die a treasonable death.

The year 1756 opened with the affairs of England in a precarious condition. The imbecile ministry neglected its colonies and the defences of its own country. To keep themselves in office ministers pandered to George II, who was more concerned with the protection of Hanover, his hereditary kingdom, than with the safety of England. A great deal of money had been spent on Hanover, and there was none left to bring the defences of Britain to a state of efficiency.

France threatened an invasion. The British Government became alarmed and hurriedly voted funds for a navy of 50,000 men. Meanwhile, however, as these could not be got ready for some time, it was decided to bring over 10,000 Hessians and Hanoverians.

To pay for all this, it was necessary to lay on new taxes and duties. In presenting the appropriate money bills in the House of Commons, Mr. Speaker Onslow could not help remarking that circumstances created considerable alarm, and that there was little hope for any reduction in taxes for some time to come.

The island of Minorca had been taken from the French in 1708, and was secured to Britain by the Treaty of Utrecht. Since that time the French had set jealous eyes on this possession and determined at a favourable opportunity to repossess it.

In 1756 the opportunity arrived, and they resolved to occupy this most favourable port in the Mediterranean before Britain could strike a blow in its defence.

Great preparations were therefore made by the French. Reports of their activity were brought constantly to the British Government. At first ministers were inclined to laugh at the news as improbable.

Premier Newcastle was apprised of the fact that a fleet of fourteen sail of the line was being equipped at Toulon, that troops were congregating there and that provisions were being taken on the ships in such quantity as to suggest an expedition.

The British Cabinet paid no heed to the warnings. At length it became certain that the French were about to sail on Minorca.

Thoroughly alarmed a frantic attempt was now made to

do something. On 7th April, 1756, Admiral John Byng sailed from Spithead with a squadron of ships in half-rotten condition, to intercept a new French squadron preparing to sail from Toulon.

Byng's expedition had to cross the Bay of Biscay, and traverse 200 leagues of the Mediterranean. The French had only 70 leagues to sail altogether.

The French armament was known to consist of twelve ships of the line, numerous transports containing 16,000 men, and many small craft. Byng's ships numbered ten, all badly manned.

Byng began his voyage three days before the French ships left Toulon. Thus it was impossible for him to catch up with the enemy before reaching Minorca.

The Port of Mahon in Minorca had no worth-while garrison. The Governor, Lord Tyrawley, was in England, and the deputy-governor, General Blakeney, a gallant old officer, was disabled by infirmity and deficiency of troops.

Blakeney received information of the approach of the French and began to prepare for a defence. He gathered his forces into the castle of St. Philip which commanded the town of Mahon. They amounted to 2,800, a totally inadequate number for a successful defence of the port.

The French fleet appeared in sight on 18th April, but Byng was not seen until 19th May, a month afterwards.

On the way to the Mediterranean, Byng had called at Gibraltar and produced an order from the Secretary of War empowering him to take on board his ships a battalion of troops from the garrison. General Fowke, the Governor of Gibraltar, refused however, to allow this depletion in his forces. That was the first setback that Byng suffered.

In a despondent frame of mind, Byng continued his journey to Minorca, in the belief that Minorca had already fallen to the French. Great was his surprise, however, to find, on coming within view of the island, that the British flag still fluttered above the castle.

The fact was that the French had so far made little impression on the place. It was clear that the strategy of the enemy was at fault, and if Byng's squadron had been well equipped it would not have been a difficult matter to dispose of them.

Nevertheless, it was thought that Byng could have given

a good account of himself even with his poor fleet and inferior forces.

An attempt, though somewhat half-hearted, was made by Byng to get into touch with General Blakeney, but it does not appear to have been carried out with persistence and energy.

The French squadron which lay off Minorca was under the command of La Galissoniere. On 20th May, the two fleets faced each other.

About 2 o'clock in the afternoon Byng gave the signal to Rear-Admiral West to engage the enemy. West carried out his orders with such courage that he succeeded in causing confusion in the French line. Several of the ships were forced back, and might well have been subjected to a destructive fire from the British.

But at the moment when there seemed hope of success, Byng was found wanting.

Had he followed the example of West, the French line would have been cut in half. But he hung back, and West's advantage was lost.

Byng's flag captain urged him to attack. The Admiral declared that he could not do so without throwing his ships out of line. He kept such a distance that his vessel, which carried ninety guns, was never really a factor. Not a single man was killed or wounded on the flagship.

West was thus deserted and had to fall back. La Galissoniere, the French commander, showed no disposition to put up a fight, and actually sailed away, leaving Byng to land troops on Minorca if he desired to do so.

The British admiral now called a council of war of his officers. He pointed out that forty-two men had been killed in the short battle, including Captain Andrews of the *Defiance*, and a hundred and sixty-eight wounded.

He argued that his vessels were too damaged to keep at sea, that St. Philip could not be relieved with his inadequate forces, and that in the event of the return of the French squadron, the British expedition would be annihilated and Minorca taken.

He proposed to return to Gibraltar, which might possibly need protection. The council finally decided to do as Byng advised.

As Byng's squadron passed the French ships, the latter fired an ironical salute from their guns. Blakeney was now left to his fate. A week later he capitulated to the French squadron which had renewed the attack.

The loss of Minorca was a great blow to the people of England. They demanded the punishment of those responsible for the disaster. Ministers of the Government were condemned for their procrastination and gross neglect of the defences of the country, and demands were made for an inquiry. The administration decided to make Byng the scapegoat.

Byng and West were brought to England as prisoners. Blakeney, who had defended the island to the best of his ability, was created an Irish baron. Tyrawley who had been on leave when the island was captured was given the governorship of Gibraltar and Fowke was brought home under arrest.

Byng showed insolence and blamed the Government for the disaster. He wrote a scathing letter to ministers, criticized them for their neglect and disclaimed any blame.

When he was brought a prisoner to Portsmouth crowds pressed on to the quay and threatened to tear him to pieces. Soldiers had to surround him to keep off the mob. He was brought to London guarded by sixty dragoons.

His younger brother who had gone to Portsmouth to meet him, was so affected by the scene that he died in convulsions.

While a prisoner in Greenwich Hospital Byng persisted in his insolence. He abused the Admiralty and the Government.

The Duke of Newcastle, as Premier, was as culpable as Byng, for as the responsible head of the administration he was to blame for Britain's unreadiness.

Instead of trying to ensure fair play for Byng he encouraged the popular clamour against the Admiral because it distracted attention from himself.

The city demanded vengeance. "Hang Byng, or take care of the King!" was a device that appeared on hoardings all over London. It must be remembered that only ten years before had occurred the Jacobite Rebellion when the Hanoverian dynasty was within an ace of falling.

The Government were scared out of their wits and feared a rebellion.

"He shall be tried and hanged directly!" was Newcastle's reply to a deputation from the City.

The whole kingdom was enraged against Byng. His effigy was burned in public, and the pamphleteers and caricaturists reaped a rich harvest as a result of their efforts to throw mud at the admiral.

Byng's house and park in Hertfordshire were rescued with difficulty from the depredations of the mob.

West was set at liberty and complimented by the King on his bravery.

Meanwhile the Duke of Newcastle was trembling with terror. He had not the courage to blame the King whose Hanoverian interests had led to the trouble. Other members of the Cabinet trembled, too, for they thought that Newcastle might try to fix the blame on them.

The year 1757 opened more gloomily for Britain than had the previous year. War loomed all over Europe and huge sums of money were voted in Parliament for the defences of Hanover. Public discontent reached a high pitch, and people were determined to exact reparation from someone.

Byng had languished in prison since the previous May. It was decided by the Government to distract attention from themselves by bringing him to trial.

On 28th December, 1756 the Court-Martial on Admiral Byng was begun on H.M. *St. George* in Portsmouth Harbour.

The articles of accusation against him were read. He was charged with cowardice in the face of the enemy, a treasonable offence.

On the following day Rear-Admiral West gave evidence. A summary of it is given below.

Questioned by the Court, West said that so far as he could see there was no reason why Byng could not have gone to his assistance. He added that the wind was calm, and the weather fine.

Court: "Did you see any fire from Admiral Byng's ship during the engagement?"

West: "When I was looking towards the *Intrepid*, which was in distress astern of her, I saw some smoke, which might very probably be from the Admiral's ship, or some of his division; but I was not able to discover at which ship it was directed."

Question by Admiral Byng : "Was it not in the power of the enemy to decline coming to a close engagement, as the two fleets were situated ?"

West : "Yes it was ; but, as they lay to our fleet, I apprehended they intended to fight."

Byng : "Are you of opinion that the forces on board the fleet could have relieved Minorca ?"

West : "I believe they could not."

Byng : "Were not some of the ships deficient in their complement of men ?"

West : "Yes."

Byng : "Was not the fleet deficient, in point of force, with the enemy ?"

West : "Yes."

Lord Blakeney was sworn and testified that in his opinion Byng's forces could have been landed on Minorca very easily.

Court : "If the admiral had attempted to land the men, would it not have been attended with danger ?"

Blakeney : "Most certainly. It could not be so easy as stepping into this ship. I have been upwards of fifty years in the service, and I never knew any expedition of consequence carried into execution but what was attended with some danger, but of all the expeditions I ever knew this was certainly the worst."

Byng : "Had not the French a castle at the point, which might have prevented the landing of the troops ?"

Blakeney : "Not on the 20th of May ; and the enemy were then in such distress for ammunition that they fired stones at the garrison."

Byng : "Do you think that the officers and few men I had on board the fleet could have been of any great service to the garrison."

Blakeney : "Yes, certainly, of great service ; for I was obliged at that time to set a great number of my men to plaster the breaches."

At a subsequent sitting of the Court, Byng put further questions to Lord Blakeney :

Byng : "If I had landed the troops do you think it could have saved St. Philip's from falling into the hands of the enemy ?"

Blakeney: "It is impossible for me to pretend to answer that question with any certainty; but really, I am of opinion that if they had been landed, it would have enabled me to hold out the siege till Sir Edward Hawke had come to my relief."

Various other officers were examined and they all agreed that there was nothing to prevent Byng following up the success of West.

Captain Gardiner of the *Ramillies*, Byng's flagship, was called on 11th January, and questioned by the Court.

Court: "Were all the sails of the *Ramillies* set?"

Gardiner: "No, they were not."

Court: "If the *Ramillies* and the Admiral's division had carried all their sail, do you think they could have assisted the van, and have prevented them from receiving so much fire from the enemy's rear?"

Gardiner: "I do believe they might."

Court: "Did you advise the Admiral to bear down?"

Gardiner: "I did, but the Admiral objected to it, lest an accident of a similar nature with that of Admiral Matthews on the same seas should be the consequence."

Court: "Did the Admiral show any signs of fear or cowardice?"

Gardiner: "No, quite the reverse."

Court: "Have you anything to allege against the Admiral's personal behaviour?"

Gardiner: "No, I have not."

One of the most important witnesses was Lord Robert Bertie, who was stationed on the quarter deck with the Admiral at the time.

He was questioned by one or other of the Court Martial officers as follows:

Court: "If the officers and recruits that were intended for Minorca had been landed, do you think that they would have saved fort St. Philip's?"

Lord Bertie: "No, I think they were of greater service on board the fleet."

Court: "Were you on the quarter deck with the Admiral during the engagement?"

Lord Bertie: "Yes; but upon informing the Admiral that I discovered one of our own ships through the smoke upon

the lee-bow of the *Ramillies*, and which ship I was apprehensive the *Ramillies* would fire into without seeing her, I was detached by the Admiral between decks to stop firing."

Court: "Did you discover any signs of fear or confusion in the Admiral?"

Lord Bertie: "No, far from it. He expressed an impatience to engage the enemy."

Court: "How near were you to the enemy at the time of the engagement?"

Lord Bertie: "We were so near the enemy as to be hulled by them, and many of the enemy's shots passed over us."

Court: "Did you ever hear any murmurings, or complainings, by any of the officers or men on board, upon a supposition that the Admiral had not done his duty?"

Lord Bertie: "No; I never heard anything like it."

Colonel Smith, who was on the quarter deck, corroborated the evidence given by Lord Bertie. He added that a shot passed between him and Lord Robert Bertie, as they were abaft the main-mast, which came off the head of a timber on deck, and went through the hammocks in the main shrouds.

Captain H. Ward of the *Culloden* declared that the shot fell short of him, being to leeward of the Admiral. It was his opinion that had the Admiral bore down on the enemy the British squadron could have taken all the enemy's ships. Several lieutenants gave similar evidence.

All the evidence having been heard, Admiral Byng made a statement in his own defence.

He began with the following words:

"The articles of the charge exhibited against me are of such a nature that everything which can be supposed interesting to a man is concerned in the event of this cause. My character, my property, and even my life are at stake; and I should, indeed, have great reason to be alarmed, were I not conscious of my innocence, and fully persuaded of the justice and equity of the Court."

He then described the situation as it appeared to him when he arrived off Minorca, details of the battle and justified his own action in retiring:

"When, then, from the inferiority of the English, nothing could be reasonably expected but misfortune and disgrace; or if by the greatest efforts of good fortune, victory should

declare for our fleet, that no advantage could be drawn from it ; when the risk of losing the whole fleet was the result of a unanimous council of war ; and the nation, considering the state of the English and French navies, so little able to sustain a loss of that kind ; when Gibraltar would have been defenceless, and fallen of course to the enemy ; could the seeking of the French admiral, by a commander who foresaw these probable consequences with not only an inferior, but a shattered fleet, and no other ships in the Mediterranean to reinforce him, have been justified in the judgment of men who have studied the nature of military achievements, or according to the rules and observations of ancient and modern writers on this head.

“The utmost advantage could have been but a prolongation of the siege, without the least probability of raising it ; because the fleet, unable to keep the seas, must have retreated to Gibraltar, the port of Mahon being still commanded by the enemy’s batteries.”

Admiral Byng finished his statement, optimistic that the case would be dismissed. It was not to be, however. The Court found that Admiral Byng did not “do his utmost to relieve St. Philip’s Castle, and also that during the engagement between his Majesty’s fleet under his command and the fleet of the French king, on 20th May last, he did not do his utmost to take, seize, and destroy the ships of the French king, which it was his duty to have engaged, and to assist such of his Majesty’s ships as were engaged in fight with the French ships, which it was his duty to have assisted.”

The court unanimously agreed that Byng’s case came under a recent Act of Parliament relating to the government of H.M. ships.

They were unanimous, too, in their judgment, namely that “the said Admiral John Byng be shot to death, at such time, and on board such ship, as the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty shall direct.”

The Court, however, added the rider :

“But as it appears, by the evidence of Lord Robert Bertie, Lieutenant-Colonel Smith, Captain Gardiner, and other officers of the ship, who were near the person of the Admiral, that they did not perceive any backwardness in him during the action, or any marks of fear, or confusion, either from his

countenance or behaviour, but that he seemed to give his orders coolly and distinctly, and did not seem wanting in personal courage, and from other circumstances, the Court do not believe that his misconduct arose either from cowardice or disaffection, and do therefore unanimously think it their duty most earnestly to recommend him as a proper object of mercy."

It does not need a lawyer to judge that the rider was almost a revocation of the judgment. They adjudged him not guilty of cowardice, so that, in effect, the findings were that Admiral Byng had not exercised sufficient sagacity.

So apparently thought Admiral Byng himself, for he had a post-chaise ready to take him to London. He was a member of Parliament and was determined to raise the matter in the House of Commons.

But he was not released. He could not be until the Admiralty or the Government had had time to consider the ambiguity of the judgment. He therefore remained in custody.

In addition, the officers who had formed the Court did all they could to secure Byng's release. They petitioned the House of Commons, requesting them to hear new evidence of an important character. They asked also to be released from their vow of secrecy.

There seemed no reluctance on the part of the House of Commons to pass a Bill for the purpose. The King thereupon respited the Admiral till all inquiries had been made.

The Bill passed the House almost unanimously. It then turned out that the five officers who had formed the Court had nothing further to disclose.

The truth was that their consciences had troubled them and their object was to save Byng by hook or by crook.

Lord Temple, head of the Admiralty, was averse from carrying out the execution of Byng. He agreed that, in view of the Court's judgment, the offence was not one that merited death.

William Pitt also interceded with the King, and further petitions were made to the Admiralty.

But the King's ministers were determined to make it a political affair. The country was clamouring for the death of Byng, and they dared not release him without exposing their own share in the loss of Minorca.

The Commons' Bill went up to the Lords. They soon settled the matter. They demanded that every member of the Court-Martial should attend at the Bar of the House, and declare without equivocation whether they knew of anything which showed their sentence to be unjust. They all declared that they had nothing further to say. The Lords thereupon threw out the Bill.

Byng was sentenced to be shot on 14th March.

He showed no symptoms of fear, either while under arrest or at the Court-Martial, a striking commentary on the fact that he had at first been charged with cowardice.

He was taken on board the *Monarch* in Portsmouth Harbour.

While awaiting the time of execution one of his friends went in to him and said in a casual way: "Which of us is the taller?" He stood close up to Byng as if to measure their respective heights.

"Why this ceremony?" asked Byng. "I know what it means; let the man measure me for a coffin."

On the deck he asked that his eyes be left unbound. But he was told that the soldiers would be nervous and their aim distracted.

"Let it be done, then," said Byng. "If it would not frighten them it would not frighten me."

His eyes were covered. He sat down in a chair and bravely faced the firing-party.

Four shots rang out as one, and Admiral John Byng slumped from the chair, dead.