Strangling Napoleon: King George III’s Ships at War

Term: Winter 2020

Title: Strangling Napoleon: King George III’s Ships at War

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(Specific weekly content subject to adjustment)

WEEK 1: Overview of the Course and British Royal Navy Foundation

A review of the British Navy (and subsequently the British Royal Navy) starting with the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 up to the beginning of the French Revolutionary War in 1793. We will familiarize ourselves with British fighting ships and examine the various ship types, seafaring terms, and the Admiralty (Naval hierarchy) and fleet organization. As in subsequent weeks, we will watch a video that illustrates key elements of the course. The overview will continue in Week 3.

WEEK 2: Health Challenges on the High Seas

Ah, the allure of the high seas! Invigorating work, exotic ports and women, and three squares a day. Yet, the work can maim or kill you even in peacetime, the ports transmit ague and yellow jack, the bunkroom foments deadly flux, and the food can even kill you. We will see how brilliant physicians and visionary officers placed the British Navy decades ahead of its competition in both peace and war.

WEEK 3: Life on a Fighting Ship

This week we conclude the overview. Then we get into the nitty gritty of life aboard these fighting ships. We will cover the various ranks and roles of the officers and others, the “long guns,” recruitment and the press, living quarters, punishment and overall discipline.

WEEK 4: Major Battles

We continue learning about life on a fighting ship before moving into communication at sea -- vital element of Britain’s success in major battles. Here’s how it was accomplished in a time of no phones or Internet. We will look in depth at each major battle and watch a video. Major battles will continue in Week 5.

WEEK 5: Napoleon
We continue recounting key elements of the major battles of this period before moving into a close look at Napoleon Bonaparte, the “Little General.” Complexity personified, the heroic and tragic Napoleon exhibited charismatic leadership mixed with narcissistic pettiness, compassionate loyalty alternating with ruthless brutality, and brilliant innovation in both war and peace. We will share highlights of his life by viewing segments of a 4-part PBS documentary narrated by David McCullough.

WEEK 6: War of 1812 -- Naval Aspects Emphasis

We conclude our study of Napoleon. Then we move into the War of 1812, a pesky skirmish in which America’s fledgling navy outdueled England’s dominant navy to save its fledgling democracy. Or did it? Naval battles fought in two vastly different theaters narrate most of its story. While still in his early 20s, future President Theodore Roosevelt wrote the definitive history of these naval encounters. We will share Teddy’s precocious brilliance as well as parts of Michael Beschloss’s compelling Presidents of War to enhance our understanding of this mini-war.

WEEK 7: War of 1812 and the Legacy of Admiral Nelson

We conclude our rearview mirror on the War of 1812. Then: In a war of heroes, some of public acclaim and many unsung, Admiral Horatio Nelson stood out during perilous times for Britain. We will review his legacy and then view a video of Prince Edward on the Victory, Nelson’s flagship at the battle of Trafalgar that rides proudly today at Portsmouth, England.

WEEK 8: An Historical Perspective on the British Royal Navy, 1793-1815. Odds and Ends. Popular historical fiction of this period. Whatever We Left Out! More video!