

Information sheet no 061

Hugh Palliser

Hugh Palliser was born on 26th February 1723 at Kirk Deighton, in the West Riding of Yorkshire. He first entered the Navy in 1735 when he became a midshipman on HMS *Aldborough*, which was commanded by his maternal uncle, Nicholas Robinson. Two years later, Robinson was appointed to HMS *Kennington* and Palliser followed him onto the ship. After three years, he had a brief spell at the Deptford stores before joining HMS *Tiger* and the following year, re-joined his uncle on board HMS *Essex*.

He was promoted to Lieutenant in September 1841 and served under Captain Sir John Norris in HMS *Essex*. Palliser was present at the action at Toulon on 11 February 1744. He gained promotion to Commander on 3 July 1746 and was appointed to command HMS *Weasel*. He was not long on that ship before he was promoted to Captain in November 1746 and appointed to HMS *Captain* and posted to the West Indies station. In September 1747, he transferred to HMS *Sutherland*. Six months later, an accident occurred when an arms-chest inadvertently exploded and caused him severe injuries. He returned to Britain to convalesce. After regaining his health, he was appointed to HMS *Sheerness* at the end of the year and was dispatched to the East Indies arriving in July 1749.

Three years later, he was appointed to the Chatham guardship HMS *Yarmouth* for three months. In March 1753, he was appointed to HMS *Seahorse* for revenue protection duties, guarding against smuggling from France and Holland. After eighteen months, the ship was sent to Sheerness for a refit and after completing, she sailed for Cork. In January 1755, she escorted a convict transportation to America. Palliser took a more southerly route and avoided the usual stormy weather of the Atlantic and arrived in under eight weeks. On 26 July, Commodore Augustus Keppel joined the ship for its return journey and the two men became friends. On his return to Britain, Palliser was appointed to HMS *Eagle* and undertook a passage to Ushant, where he captured several vessels and 217 prisoners. He returned to Britain in November. Palliser remained with the ship for two more years undertaking cruises in Ushant and Louisbourg. In 1758, he transferred to HMS *Shrewsbury* and joined the fleet at Ushant under Admiral Anson. In the following year, the ship was involved in naval operations around Quebec which eventually fell to the British troops.

On their return to Britain, Palliser remained serving in HMS *Shrewsbury* and was posted to the Mediterranean and the Levant. In 1762, he was sent to Newfoundland to capture St John's but this had already been achieved by the time he arrived. In 1764, he was appointed Governor and Commander in Chief at Newfoundland and transferred to HMS *Guernsey*. As this appointment only lasted for the summer period, his appointment was renewed for the two subsequent years.

In 1770, he was appointed Comptroller of the Navy and three years later was created a baronet. Two years afterwards, he attained flag rank by being promoted to Rear Admiral in 1775. In 1774, he had been elected to Parliament for Scarborough, which he retained until 1779. After this, he became a Lord Commissioner of the Admiralty under the Earl of Sandwich. A legacy from a former commander of Palliser's, Sir Charles Saunders, with whom he had served in the Mediterranean, gave him some wealth and he was also appointed to succeed the late Sir Charles as Lieutenant-General of Marines. Three years later, he was promoted again to Vice Admiral of the Blue and

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he was appointed to the Channel Fleet, under Admiral Keppel. This was to be the start of a serious dispute between the two men which became very public and political and brought naval discipline into disrepute.

Keppel was a Whig supporter of the Marquis of Rockingham. This was in complete contrast to the political allegiance of the First Lord of the Admiralty, Lord Sandwich and Hugh Palliser. However, the two men were, on the whole, good friends, even though Keppel was not happy that Palliser had been appointed as Lieutenant General of Marines in 1775. Keppel had been appointed to the Channel Fleet in 1776 and it had been an uneasy appointment in regard to the political environment. The fleet had been in a poor condition when he arrived with only six ships in any condition to sail. Keppel was constantly arguing with Sandwich over the state of the Fleet. On his arrival to the Channel Fleet, Palliser tried to keep the relationship between his superiors calm. Eventually, Keppel was given some more ships in order to make sail.

On 27 July 1778, the Channel Fleet engaged the French fleet under Admiral d'Orvilliers at Ushant. D'Orvilliers had orders to avoid an engagement and tried to evade the British fleet. In their attempt to evade the Channel Fleet, d'Orvilliers found himself in a position that left the British between the French and their home ports. Keppel signalled for his fleet to give a general chase, although this was at the risk of some disorder to the battle line. Both fleets manoeuvred for position and it was in utter confusion that they engaged. French casualties were high and some British ships were also badly damaged, including HMS *Formidable* with Palliser on board. Keppel hoisted the signal to reform the battle line. Palliser's division was some distance away and a frigate had to be dispatched to give them this instruction. However, due to the damage to the ships in the division, Palliser was not able to comply with the instruction until the evening, when it was too late to continue the battle. The French withdrew to Brest during the night. The battle itself was indecisive with both fleets claiming victory. Substantial casualties and damage had been amassed on both sides. Keppel reported that this damage had prevented a more decisive outcome and in his initial report commended all his officers for their conduct. This dispatch was printed in the *London Gazette*.

After returning to Britain for refit, Keppel's fleet sailed again in August among rumours of discontent. A supporter of Keppel, and politically a Whig, suggested to Palliser that Keppel had had private conversation with Lord Sandwich over Palliser's actions which had been construed as deliberately disobeying the superior officer's orders and prevented a second engagement. Angered, Palliser wrote a paper defending his actions and left it addressed to Lord Sandwich in case he did not return from sea. While the fleet was at sea, an anonymous letter was printed in a newspaper accusing Palliser of disobeying the order from Keppel. On their return, Palliser demanded that Keppel refute the allegation. He received no reply and Palliser decided to defend himself instead. He made it public that his ship had been too badly damaged for him to join the line and that Keppel had not intended to re-engage until the morning. Keppel was angered by this public statement and requested that he did not serve with Palliser again.

The argument was fuelled in the political arena in November by a claim that had the French been defeated then, a British diplomatic mission to America would not have failed. A naval defeat would have given the Americans a chance to abandon their treaty with France. This claim was inaccurate and far-fetched, but it led to greater debates on the Navy Estimates in Parliament. An MP suggested the matter be investigated and Keppel claimed he had not accused any officer of neglect and that he was shocked by Palliser's public attacks. Palliser endorsed an investigation,

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angering Keppel and although not directly charging him with disobedience, made it quite clear that he believed that Palliser had disobeyed orders.

Palliser decided to bring capital charges against Keppel in December, and in Parliament, a motion was brought to try Palliser. The controversy could not be stopped and was fuelled by accusations from the Whigs that Palliser and Sandwich had colluded to bring Keppel to trial, especially considering the speed that the Admiralty had accepted the charges. A court martial was ordered to try Keppel on charges of "misconduct and neglect of duty". Both of these carried an automatic death sentence if found guilty. Keppel was all too aware of the seriousness of these and the lack of clemency shown to Admiral John Byng some years earlier on similar offences.

Keppel's court martial was held at Portsmouth in January 1779. It was held under public scrutiny and Keppel was heavily supported by Whig colleagues. The evidence was ultimately found to be in his favour and he was eventually acquitted after 27 days, with the court finding the charges were unfounded and had been brought with malicious intent. This acquittal meant ruin for Palliser. Although defended by Lord Sandwich, he was forced to resign from Parliament and as Lieutenant-General of Marines. He then demanded that a court martial was held in order that he could defend himself. Keppel was asked to prepare the charges but refused. It was conducted in a hostile environment, but eventually, after 21 days, Palliser was also acquitted. He was, however, censured in that he had failed to inform his superior officer about the damage to his ships much earlier than he actually had. The whole episode had weakened the standing of the Navy and its discipline.

After his acquittal, Palliser hoped that he would be reinstated as Lieutenant-General of Marines. Instead, he was appointed Governor of Greenwich Hospital in 1780. He was also elected to Parliament for Huntingdon, which he retained until 1784. In 1787, he was promoted to the rank of Admiral.

Palliser died in Vach, Buckinghamshire on 19th March 1796 and was buried in Chalfont St Giles. He died childless and his title passed to his nephew.

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.