

Information sheet no 038

“Paintwork” vs “Gunnery” controversy

At the turn of the twentieth century, there were divisions in the naval administration between those who supported reform of the Navy and those who supported the old traditional methods. The main protagonists were the First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir John Fisher and his Commander in Chief of the Channel Squadron, Admiral Lord Charles Beresford.

Fisher had many colleagues who were eager to turn the Navy into a modern fighting force through technological developments, including the use of gunnery, and to achieve this, gunnery practice was encouraged. Rear-Admiral Sir Percy Scott was an influential gunnery specialist and did much in promoting the use of gunnery practice, through developing training devices and prizes for practices. Through him, the gunnery standards displayed by the navy improved.

Beresford was of the traditionalist viewpoint and suspicious of the naval reforms being carried out by his rival, Fisher. His ambition was to become First Sea Lord after Fisher and he had some considerable and influential support in Parliament.

Scott pursued his methods in unorthodox ways and had a temperament that was often abrasive. This often brought him into conflict with his superior officers. One such clash was very public indeed and illustrated the split within the naval administration.

In 1907, Scott was serving with the Channel Squadron as Rear-Admiral commanding the First Cruiser Squadron. Beresford was Commander in Chief of the Channel Squadron and thus Scott's superior officer. In November, Queen Victoria's grandson, Kaiser Wilhelm was due to make a visit to view the fleet at Spithead. Beresford ordered the whole fleet to Portland in order to be painted and cleaned for the visit. One cruiser in the First CS, HMS *Roxburgh* was delayed in going to Portland due to carrying out gunnery practices under Scott's orders. Her Captain signalled to Scott's flagship, HMS *Good Hope*, whether he ought to abandon the practice in order to enter Portland as commanded by the Commander in Chief. Scott sent the following signal to HMS *Roxburgh*:

"Paintwork appears to be more in demand than gunnery, so you had better come in to make yourself look pretty by the 8th."

While the signal did not directly insult the Commander in Chief, it indicated a lack of tact on Scott's part and, in his position, it was overtly insubordinate. However, the signal was not brought to Beresford's attention until a young Lieutenant heard of it in the wardroom of HMS *Good Hope* and informed the CiC's Flag Lieutenant and Signal Officer.

The Signal Boatswain was summoned to bring HMS *Good Hope*'s signal book to Beresford's flagship, HMS *King Edward VII*. Beresford over-reacted when he saw the signal. Instead of sending for Scott and reprimanding him in the privacy of his cabin, he decided to make the reprimand public and make an example of Scott. He requested that all the flag officers of the Channel Squadron, except Scott, to attend him on his flagship. When they were all assembled, he then summoned Scott to attend. Scott, being unaware of the reason for the summons, duly arrived and was



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surprised to see all his colleagues in attendance. Beresford ordered all other ranks off of the quarterdeck, except the Officer of the Watch, who acted as a sort of sentry. In the presence of all the flag officers, Beresford proceeded to reprimand Scott on his signal and attitude much to Scott's embarrassment.

However, Beresford did not intend to rest the case after his public humiliation of Scott. He then proceeded to signal the following message to the fleet:

"The signal made by the Rear-Admiral commanding First Cruiser Squadron is contemptuous in tone and insubordinate in character. The Rear-Admiral is to issue orders to the *Good Hope* and *Roxburgh* to expunge the signal from their signal logs and report when my orders have been obeyed."

This type of public humiliation was not the sort that twenty thousand officers of the navy could keep quiet and it soon became public knowledge. Beresford reported to the Admiralty on the incident and requested that Scott be removed from the Channel Squadron. His request would have meant an indirect humiliation for Fisher, having to remove one of his supporters from such a post. However, Fisher refused to comply and indicated that Scott would receive their Lordship's "grave disapprobation" and there the matter would end.

The matter bubbled away in the press into the following year and continued to highlight the feud between Fisher and Beresford. The lobbying of government supporters was made and questions asked in the House as to the discipline in the Navy. Beresford never achieved his ambition of becoming First Sea Lord.

Scott's career as a flag officer afloat did not continue for long after this incident. The First Cruiser Squadron was dispatched to South Africa and South America on a goodwill visit, during which Scott made a good impression. He was promoted to Vice Admiral in 1908 and spent the next four years concentrating on developments in gunnery technology.