

Information sheet no 082

Charles Napier

Charles Napier was born March 6 1786 at Merchiston Hall, Shropshire. He entered the Navy in 1799 on board the sloop HMS *Martin*. He moved to HMS *Renown* attached first to the Channel fleet and then in the Mediterranean. He transferred to HMS *Greyhound* in November 1802, serving under Captain William Hoste. The following year, he moved to HMS *Egyptienne* for a voyage to St Helena escorting a convoy of ships. In 1804-5 he served briefly in HMS *Mediator* before moving to HMS *Renommee* off Boulogne.

He was promoted to Lieutenant on 30 November 1805 and appointed to HMS *Courageux*. On 13 March 1806, the ship was part of a squadron under Sir John Warren that captured two French ships, *Marengo* and *Bell Poule*. He was afterwards appointed to HMS *St George* and stationed in the West Indies, during which time he was appointed Acting Commander of the brig HMS *Pultusk*. He was confirmed in his rank on 30 November 1807. In December, the ship was present at the reduction of the Dutch islands of St Thomas and Santa Cruz. In August 1808, he transferred to another brig, HMS *Recruit* and on September 6, fought an indecisive action against a French sloop, *Diligente*. During this action, Napier's thigh was broken, but he refused to leave the main deck until the end of the action, which came when the *Recruit's* mainmast fell. In February 1809, he distinguished himself at the reduction of Martinique, and this was followed up by the capture of the French ship, *Hautpoult*, after giving chase when it had been in action against HMS *Pompee*. As a reward for this action, the Commander in Chief, Sir Alexander Cochrane, commissioned the captured vessel into British service and appointed Napier as Acting Captain. His promotion was confirmed by the Admiralty on 22 May 1809, when Cochrane's dispatches had been received. He was then appointed to HMS *Jason* and returned to England.

He was put on half pay on his return and during this period he studied in Edinburgh and followed various social pastimes. In 1810, he decided to pay a family visit to the Peninsula and sailed from Portsmouth to Oporto. On his arrival, he joined the army just in time to be involved in the battle of Busaco, in which he sustained a leg wound. He accompanied the army in their retreat to Torres Vedras and stayed with it until November, when he left for Cadiz and returned to England.

Early in 1811, he was again seeing active naval service with an appointment to the frigate HMS *Thames*, stationed off the west coast of Italy and Naples on blockading duty; during this period, the ship captured upwards of eighty gunboats and coastal vessels, and reduced the island of Ponza. He then transferred to HMS *Euryalus* and was stationed off the south coast of France. On 16 May 1813, he joined HMS *Berwick* and saw action with the attack on the batteries in Calvarie Bay, which were protecting enemy ships, without great loss or damage. In June 1814, the ship was part of a squadron conveying a fleet of transports to North America and he distinguished himself once again in expeditions to Alexandria and Baltimore. He returned to England in the summer of 1815 and was made a Companion of the Bath on 4 June.

He married Frances Elers, a widow with four children, who all changed their name to Napier. They lived briefly in Alverstoke, Gosport before settling in Versailles once the Allies had occupied Paris. This was followed by spells in

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Napier, Venice and Switzerland before returning to Paris in winter 1818. He began investing in a steam vessel service along the River Seine. The family returned to Alverstoke in 1820 but continued to spend spells in Paris and Le Havre. In 1827, the steam vessel service failed, leaving the family in financial difficulty and they moved to Rowlands Castle. Napier did not see active service again until January 1829 when he was appointed to HMS *Galatea*. He was given permission to fit her with paddles worked by winches on the main deck. He carried out trials with them that successfully proved that ships could travel independently of the wind. However, his efforts were negated by the Admiralty's move towards steam power.

Between 1830 and 1832, HMS *Galatea* was stationed at various times in the West Indies and Portugal. His business at Lisbon required him to demand the return of British vessels seized by Don Miguel, who was claiming Kingship of Portugal. In 1831, the ship was instructed to watch over British interests in the Azores as opposition to Don Miguel was established under Don Pedro and his daughter Dona Maria. Napier took a lively interest in these affairs until HMS *Galatea* returned to England in January 1832 to be paid off. After an unsuccessful attempt to be elected to Parliament for Portsmouth, he was offered the command of the Portuguese fleet of Don Pedro and Dona Maria in February 1833. Under a false name, Carlos de Ponza, to avoid penalties under the Foreign Enlistment Act, he left Falmouth on 28 May with a small party of officers, including his stepson, Charles Elers Napier and a contingent of Belgian and English soldiers. He received his commission on 8 June as Vice Admiral, Major General of the Portuguese Navy and Commander in Chief of the fleet. On 20 June, he sailed to Oporto with his small fleet to convey the troops to a place near the river Guadiana, and secured several other ports along the south eastern coast. On 2 July, the fleet of Don Miguel was sighted of Cape St Vincent. Napier attacked two days later when the weather was more favourable and captured four ships, and most of the crews immediately volunteered for service with Dona Maria. On 6 July, he was promoted to the rank of Admiral and was made Viscount Cape St Vincent in the Portuguese peerage. News reached the fleet on 24 July that the land forces had taken Lisbon and the supporters of Don Miguel had surrendered. He visited Rear Admiral William Parker of the Royal Navy who was in the vicinity of the Tagus and was received according to his Portuguese rank. He was awarded the Grand Cross of the Order of the Tower and Sword by Don Pedro. The victory was viewed at home as more of a British success and resolutions were passed to admit Napier back into his rank in the Royal Navy when he returned to Britain.

He remained in Portugal for some time to continue with the pockets of resistance from Don Miguel's supporters in the civil war. He was not enamoured of administration and sought out active service, and, in March 1834, sailed to Setuval to recapture Entro-Douro-e-Minho, relieve Oporto and cut the enemy off from one of the richest provinces in Portugal. He was raised further up the Portuguese peerage by Don Pedro to Count Napier St Vincent and his wife was invested with the order of Isabella. He concluded his work in the civil war with an expedition to Figuera and Ourem, both of which surrendered. On 24 September, Don Pedro died and his daughter, being now of age, took over with a new government. Napier's plans for reform in the navy were rejected and he resigned, although the Queen asked him to retain the honorary rank of Admiral. He sailed back to Britain in November, where for the next two years he wrote an account of the Portuguese civil war, embellishing his part in it. He purchased a small property in Catherington, Hampshire, known as Quallett's Grove; this he changed to Merchistoun in memory of his birth place which had been sold in 1816.

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In January 1839, Napier was commissioned to serve in HMS *Powerful*, and sent out to the Mediterranean to reinforce Sir Robert Stopford's squadron in the Levant. In June 1840, he was sent with a small squadron to Syria and was then instructed to Beirut to compel the Egyptian Mohammed Ali to withdraw. With such a small force, there was little that Napier could do against an Egyptian force of fifteen thousand until September, when the Admiral joined up with him. Due to the illness of the Brigadier-General of the army, Napier was instructed to command the land force. He led an expedition to Sidon which was successfully captured in two days. While preparing for an attack on the Egyptians at Nahr-el-Kelb, Napier received an order to retire from the command of the land forces to make way for Brigadier-General Sir Charles Smith, who had recovered from his illness, and also had received command of the Turkish force in the allied army. To do this, Napier would need to retreat from his position; he decided to disobey the order and continued with the attack. The fighting was furious but victory was secured. The Egyptians left Beirut and Napier left the land forces to Smith. The fleet was then instructed to retake Acre, which was the only coastal position left in Egyptian hands. On 3 November, the fleet attacked and their firepower was overwhelming, and within two hours, the Egyptian guns were silenced. The city was handed over on the following day. However, during the action, Napier had once more disobeyed orders to come into the position from the south. Instead, he came in from the north, leaving a space in the fleet's position and crowded the ships astern. Stopford disapproved of his conduct but decided not to press for a formal court-martial. Napier's action was not popular with his fellow officers and resulted in Napier being sent to command the squadron at Alexandria. Here, acting independently again, he agreed terms with Mohammed Ali and a treaty was signed recognising Ali as hereditary Pasha in return for evacuating Syria and restoring the Turkish fleet. Stopford repudiated it immediately when he had heard the news and several of the Allied powers declared it void. Opinion generally in Britain accepted the treaty, excepting the guarantee of succession of Ali, and Napier took this as justification for his actions.

In December 1840, all officers who were at the capture of Acre were awarded the CB, and Napier, as second in command, was awarded the KCB. He also received foreign honours from Austria, Russia and Prussia. In January 1841, Napier was sent on a special mission to Alexandria and Cairo to see that the treaty was being carried out. He returned to Britain in March and took a month's leave. He was invited to stand as Parliamentary candidate in two constituencies and, not being granted an extension on his leave to pursue this avenue, requested to be placed on half pay. He was returned as MP for Marylebone at the General Election. He spoke mainly on naval topics, especially conditions for seamen and increasing the strength of the navy. Most of his ideas were impractical and often were badly presented or lacked full information. He also wrote an account of the Syrian campaign, which was again full of inaccuracies and embellishments in his own favour.

On 9 November 1846, he was promoted to Rear Admiral and returned to active service in May 1847 on HMS *St Vincent* in command of the Channel fleet. The fleet was sent to Lisbon in August, but he was refused permission by the Admiralty to assume his Portuguese title. During 1848, the fleet were mainly off the coast of Ireland until December, when it was sent to Gibraltar and then onto the Moroccan coast, with the purpose of curbing the activities of Riff pirates. Napier returned to Britain in April 1849 and ordered to strike his flag. He was disappointed that his expected three years term had been cut short. This led to bitter letters to *The Times* criticising the Admiralty's policy. When he applied for the vacant Mediterranean command, the Government and Admiralty agreed



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that he could not be trusted and he was rejected, appointing Rear-Admiral Sir James Dundas instead. This led to more bitter letters to the newspaper and directly to Lord John Russell claiming that he had been defrauded of his just rights. His claims were, as ever, embellished in his favour, but several well-substantiated narratives of the actual events in which he had taken part were also published to contradict his claims.

On May 28 1853, he was promoted to Vice Admiral and in February 1854, nominated to command the Baltic fleet during the Crimean War. Napier made ill-judged public boasts that promised the capture of Kronstadt within one month. However, the situation in the Baltic was completely different to the situations encountered at Sidon and Acre. The Russian ports were sealed and, apart from enforcing a blockade, could only be attacked from land. The public disappointment was great. Napier blamed the Admiralty for providing him with an ill-equipped, poorly manned fleet with no significant ships to support his work; the Admiralty, however, blamed Napier for not having the nerve or temper to attack, pointing towards his indulgences in alcohol. In 1855, Napier was recommended for the GCB, which he declined, stating his grievances and reasons to Prince Albert, Grand Master of the Order. He was instead elected MP for Southwark and spent most of the time bitterly attacking the Admiralty and naval policy. When not at Parliament, he spent his time at his home and interested himself in experimental farming. He became an Admiral on 6 March 1858 and died two years later on 6 November 1860.