

## Information sheet no 052

### Edward Vernon

Edward Vernon was born 12th November 1684 at Westminster, London. After attending Westminster School, he joined the Navy on 10th May 1700 as a Volunteer on HMS *Shrewsbury*. In March 1701, he was transferred to HMS *Ipswich* and three months later, joined HMS *Mary*. On 16th September 1702, Vernon was promoted Lieutenant and appointed to HMS *Lennox* serving in the Channel Squadron. The ship was later transferred to the Mediterranean and finally paid off in March 1704. He was then appointed to HMS *Barfleur*, which at the time was the flagship of Admiral Cloudisley Shovell in the Mediterranean. The ship was present at the capture of Gibraltar and the Battle of Malaga. In December, with Shovell, he transferred to HMS *Britannia* and was present at the capture of Barcelona in 1705.

On the 22nd January 1706 he was promoted Captain and appointed to HMS *Dolphin*. However, he was moved ten days later into HMS *Rye* and remained in the Mediterranean until 1707. With the rest of Shovell's fleet, he returned to England, but was fortunate to escape the disaster that befell Shovell's flagship, HMS *Association* at the Scilly Isles. In November, he joined HMS *Jersey* and in April 1708, took command of the West Indies station. In 1710, he successfully broke up a Spanish squadron off Cartagena. At the end of the War of the Spanish Succession in 1712, he returned to Britain.

In March 1715, he was appointed to HMS *Assistance*, in which he served in the Baltic until 1717 when the ship was paid off. After this, he was put on half pay for the next eighteen months. In March 1719, he was appointed to HMS *Mary* and returned to the Baltic. In 1721, he again went on half pay for five years. During this period, he became the MP for Penryn and took a leading part in naval debates. In 1726, he was re-appointed to active service in HMS *Grafton*. This ship served in the Baltic until the winter of 1727 when it was transferred to the fleet at Gibraltar, after Spain had declared war on Britain. In May 1728, peace was made with Spain and Vernon returned to Britain and resumed his Parliamentary duties.

The peace with Spain was not strong. The agreements led to smuggling and oppression in Spanish colonies. He became a supporter of another war against Spain to defend British merchants who were suffering severe losses in the West Indies from the Spanish coastguards preventing foreign trade there. He took up the case of Robert Jenkins, a merchant seaman who claimed to have had his ear cut off after his vessel was boarded by the Spanish coastguards in 1731. It was not until later in the decade, as the Spanish continued to fiercely react against foreign traders in the West Indies, that his story was taken to Parliament. In the face of this and increasing demands for action, the British government finally declared war on the Spanish again in 1739, in what became known as the War of Jenkin's Ear.

On 9th July 1739, Vernon was promoted Vice-Admiral, and as he had prominently spoken for both the war and the navy, he was given the command of a squadron of five ships for the West Indies. The squadron was given an impossible task; they were to destroy as many Spanish settlements and shipping as possible. To do this, they could employ any method they needed. The hope was that because the squadron was so small, it would, of course, be unable to achieve any of the objectives and its commander, Vernon, would be held responsible and be ridiculed in naval and Parliamentary circles. Vernon was to prove them wrong. The squadron went to the Spanish stronghold of

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Porto Bello. Against the odds, Vernon was able to not only capture the town's fort, but also the town itself, destroyed all the war stores held there and hold it to ransom against the Spanish. The British government was then forced to send reinforcements for further operations against Spanish possessions. To the British public, Vernon was a hero. He was granted the Freedom of the City of London and commemorative medals were produced. On 21 August 1740, Vernon issued an order that the daily ration of rum issued to sailors of the fleet was to be watered down to three parts water to one part rum with the aim of reducing drunkenness in his fleet. Vernon was well known for wearing a grogram cloak on his ship and his nickname in the Navy was "Old Grog". Grog became the name for the watered down rum served in the Navy after the Admiral who introduced it.

In April 1741, with a much larger fleet and land forces under Major General Wentworth, Vernon turned his attention to Cartagena. He had previously tried to bombard this settlement with his small squadron without success. Vernon and Wentworth did not get on and time was wasted in deciding where to land the army. Wentworth was not an able commander and this led to delays in attacking. When they did, the army was severely repelled and the operation had to be abandoned. An epidemic of yellow fever ravaged the crews of the ships and the soldiers ashore compounded the problems and the force returned to Port Royal. At the end of May 1741, it was decided to attack Cuba. Again the inability of Wentworth to order his troops to good effect held up the campaign, which was finally abandoned in December after sickness broke out again. Vernon could no longer hold back his anger at Wentworth's ineptitude and a bitter quarrel ensued ending in the recall of both parties to Britain at the end of 1742. While he had been away, Vernon had been elected MP for Ipswich, after having purchased the Nacton estate in Suffolk. He returned to Parliament and continued to hassle the government on naval affairs. At this time, many anonymous pamphlets criticising the Navy and the Admiralty appeared and although Vernon denied he was the author, some have been attributed to him. In 1745, Vernon was promoted to Admiral and appointed to command the North Sea Fleet in response to the threat from the French forces in support of Bonnie Prince Charlie. This was his last operational command. When the Admiralty refused to grant him the status of Commander-in-Chief, he asked to be relieved on 1 December 1745. With the "anonymous" pamphlets being circulated, the Admiralty removed him from the list of flag officers in 1746. Throughout his career, he had tried to improve naval procedures and encouraged his captains to improve manoeuvres and gun drill. He introduced new instructions to aid the flexibility of handling fleets in battle and formed the basis of continuing improvement to Admiralty fighting instructions by subsequent naval commanders. Vernon continued to serve in Parliament and remained active in the interest of naval affairs until his death at Nacton on 30 October 1757.