

The Royal Navy and the Defence of Newfoundland during the American Revolution

Olaf Janzen

Volume 14, Number 1, Autumn 1984

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad14_1art02

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Department of History of the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (print)

1712-7432 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Janzen, O. (1984). The Royal Navy and the Defence of Newfoundland during the American Revolution. *Acadiensis*, 14(1), 28–48.

OLAF JANZEN

The Royal Navy and the Defence of Newfoundland during the American Revolution

WHEN THE WAR OF AMERICAN INDEPENDENCE began in 1775, one of the many dilemmas facing the Americans was how to make the British conscious of their threat. It seemed inconceivable to most British political and military leaders that the suppression of a colonial revolt would require a very determined or prolonged military effort. In 1774 Secretary at War Lord Barrington even predicted that, in the event of an American rebellion, the army would not be needed. "A Conquest by land is unnecessary", he explained, "when the country can be reduced first to distress, and then to obedience by our Marine". Lord North echoed Barrington's perception in 1775, although he conceded "that a Large land force is necessary to render our Naval operations effectual".¹ Few understood that the Patriot leadership enjoyed widespread sympathy and support, or that the Americans would be less concerned with trying to secure a military victory over the British than a political one. This entailed exerting sufficient pressure on the British government to cause it to abandon its efforts to crush the rebellion and accept instead a negotiated settlement. Towards this end, the political leadership of the American cause made the destruction of the British fishery at Newfoundland one of their earliest objectives. In so doing, they reminded the British that the stronger power did not necessarily have the ability to dictate the course of a war.

The Newfoundland fishery made an excellent target. It was widely regarded throughout the North Atlantic community as one of Great Britain's most important national assets. The wealth which it generated was later estimated to have had a value in 1769 of £600,000, while the fishery's function as a "nursery for seamen" made it, according to the conventional wisdom of the day, an essential component of British seapower.² To ensure that the commercial and

1 Barrington is cited in Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (London, 1976), p. 114; Lord North to William Eden, 22 August 1775, in William Bell Clark and William James Morgan, eds., *Naval Documents of the American Revolution [NDAR]*, (Washington, 1964-), I, p. 684.

2 The estimate of net gains from the fishery for 1769 is cited in Gerald S. Graham, *Sea Power and British North America* (Cambridge, 1941), p. 98. Compare this figure with that of £519,598, which is the calculated value of the codfish trade for the year 1770 according to Shannon Ryan, "Abstract of CO 194 Statistics", cited in Glanville Davies, "England and Newfoundland: Policy and Trade, 1660-1783", Ph.D. thesis, University of Southampton, 1980, p. 328. On the perceived importance of the fishery as a "nursery for seamen", see G.S. Graham, "Fisheries and Sea Power", *Canadian Historical Association Annual Report, 1941*, pp. 24-31, and J.-F. Brière, "Pêche et Politique à Terre-Neuve au XVIII^e siècle: la France véritable gagnante du traité d'Utrecht?", *Canadian Historical Review [CHR]*, LXIV (June 1983), pp. 168-9.

strategic value of the fishery remained with the mother country, it was official British policy to preserve its migratory character.³ The defence of overseas British possessions had traditionally been based upon the maintenance and exercise of naval power in metropolitan waters.⁴ Because this conformed perfectly with British fisheries policy, hardly anything was done to provide Newfoundland with local defences. Not until 1770, when government approval was given to begin construction of new fortifications at St. John's, was a serious effort made to provide the fishery with an effective refuge in case of an attack.⁵ But these works were far from complete in 1775, so that when American privateers and cruisers began to make their presence felt in Newfoundland waters in 1776, the fishery looked for its defence to the warships stationed there each year for the purpose of supervising its activity. To defend the fishery, dispersed along hundreds of miles of difficult coastline, was a formidable task which was further complicated by the fact that the Newfoundland stationed ships lacked both the numbers and the strength to protect the fishery against the American foe.

A demonstration of the threat which faced the British fishery at Newfoundland had already been provided late in the previous year. In November 1775, American privateers had disrupted the Canso fishery and then had attacked the Island of St. John, sailing boldly into Charlottetown harbour and plundering the town. It seemed only a matter of time before similar attacks would be made on the Newfoundland fishery as a means of exerting economic pressure on the British government. Indeed in 1776 the Continental Marine Committee planned a major expedition to attack and destroy the fishery at Newfoundland. Upon learning of this plan, the Massachusetts state government directed its armed cruisers to accompany the continental warships.⁶ In the end, the expedition never materialized, having fallen victim to a problem which bedevilled American efforts before 1778 to carry the war to sea, namely the lack of an effective navy. Continental and state governments experienced constant difficulty in competing with the owners of privateers for recruits and naval stores, because the latter could afford to pay higher prices, better wages, and larger shares of prize money.⁷ Rebel governments were also frustrated by their inability to control the activities of the privateers.⁸ As business ventures,

3 The circumstances leading to the adoption of the policy are outlined in C. Grant Head, *Eighteenth Century Newfoundland* (Toronto, 1976), pp. 35-41.

4 G.S. Graham, "The Naval Defence of British North America 1739-1763", *Royal Historical Society Transactions*, 4th ser., XXX (1948), pp. 95-7.

5 Olaf Janzen, "Newfoundland and British Maritime Strategy During the American Revolution", Ph.D. thesis, Queen's University, 1983, pp. 104-5.

6 Continental Marine Committee (Philadelphia) to Commodore Esek Hopkins, 22 August 1776, *NDAR*, VI, pp. 271-3.

7 James C. Bradford, "The Navies of the American Revolution", in James J. Hagan, ed., *In Peace and War: Interpretations of American Naval History, 1775-1978* (Westport, Connecticut, 1978), p. 6.

8 The raid on Charlottetown had been unauthorized; as George Washington complained in a letter

privateers preferred targets which promised a maximum return for the least amount of risk and effort. Such concerns did not necessarily coincide with strategic requirements, as the repeated failure to mount an effective attack on the Newfoundland fishery during the war would demonstrate. Nevertheless, individual privateers did begin to make their appearance on the banks of Newfoundland shortly thereafter. Only the lateness of the season spared the fishery from serious damage.⁹

The naval and military establishment in Newfoundland did what it could to prepare for the expected onslaught, but this was never very easy. The squadron of warships stationed in the fishery, never very large in the best of times, had been steadily reduced in strength since 1769.¹⁰ In that year it consisted of one fourth-rate ship, three frigates, two sloops of war, and a few insignificant brigs and schooners. In the ensuing years, government commitment to fiscal restraint had whittled that number away so that by 1775 the squadron consisted of the *Romney* (50), *Surprise* (28), two sloops of war, and some armed cutters and schooners.¹¹ Hardly sufficient to carry out peacetime responsibilities, this number of warships was completely inadequate for the additional responsibility of meeting the privateering challenge. Complicating matters was the weak state of the fixed defences on the island itself. The new works at St. John's were incomplete while the fortifications at Placentia were "in a very ruinous State & unfit for defence".¹² The troops in garrison at these places were never very

of 20 November 1775: "Our rascally privateersmen go on at the old rate, mutinying if they cannot do as they please", cited in John Dewar Faibisy, "Privateering and Piracy: The Effects of New England Raiding Upon Nova Scotia During the American Revolution, 1775-1783", Ph.D. thesis, University of Massachusetts, 1972, p. 44n.

- 9 John Montagu to Lord George Germain, 12 November 1776, Colonial Office 194 Series [CO 194], vol. 33, Public Record Office [PRO], London.
- 10 In this article the term "squadron" is frequently used when referring to the warships stationed at Newfoundland. Strictly speaking, this is not correct. A "squadron" was a detachment of warships which included several ships of the line and was capable of exercising or disputing command of neighbouring waters. "Stationed ships" were smaller warships, usually frigates and sloops of war, which escorted trade to a particular destination and then remained there on a temporary or seasonal basis; they were too weak to fight decisive engagements. See Graham, "Naval Defence", pp. 96-97. Nevertheless, the term "squadron" has also been used in the broader sense of any small detachment of warships serving under the command of a single officer on a particular service. It is in this sense that the warships on station duty at Newfoundland can be referred to as a "squadron"; see for instance G.R. Barnes and J.H. Owen, eds., *The Private Papers Of John, Earl Of Sandwich, First Lord Of The Admiralty* [*Sandwich Papers*] (London, 1932-38), I, pp. 179-81.
- 11 Admiralty 1 Series [ADM 1], vol. 470, PRO; CO 194/32, PRO; Captains' Logs, Admiralty 51 Series, [ADM 51], vols. 29, 581, 950, PRO; Robert Duff Papers, Vol. 5, National Maritime Museum [NMM], Greenwich. The figures in parentheses immediately following the ships' names throughout the article refer to the number of guns with which the ship was armed. Thus, the *Surprise* was a 28-gun frigate, and the *Penguin* sloop (see below, footnote 29) carried ten cannons and ten swivels.
- 12 Robert Linzee to Montagu, 13 August 1776, Colonial Secretary's Records, GN 2/1, vol. 6,

numerous — barely a hundred men in 1775 — and generally they were the castoffs of their parent regiments. In commenting on the detachment of the Royal Highland Emigrants serving at St. John's from 1776 to 1778, one of the senior officers of the regiment conceded with deliberate irony that "They were certainly the worst we could find in the B[attalion] when they were sent there. So that we can say with a great deal of truth they were picked men..."¹³ So long as the major centres of the fishery were incapable of defending themselves, the commanders-in-chief at Newfoundland were compelled to station their warships at the more important harbours instead of cruising the fishery in search of privateers. In 1776, only one warship of the six in the squadron was able to patrol at sea; the others were either detached temporarily to other duties, being refitted, or assigned to protect Placentia or St. John's harbours.¹⁴

The weakness of the Newfoundland station during the early years of the war was both a reflection and a consequence of the general condition of the Royal Navy before 1778. A decade of determined efforts by successive British ministries to reduce the national debt had imposed drastic restraints on navy spending, not only on the maintenance of the fleet in reserve but also on the fleet in readiness. Between 1766 and 1769 the naval estimate had been slashed nearly in half.¹⁵ This left the Royal Navy poorly prepared for the sort of conflict which unfolded after 1775. It was a war in which the navy would be expected to carry out several demanding responsibilities — maintenance of sufficient strength in European waters to guard against French and possibly Spanish intervention in the war, protection of British bases in America, support for British military operations in America, and patrols of an extensive American coastline to interdict American supplies and shipping.¹⁶ At the same time, the British government was reluctant to respond to the situation in America with overwhelming force, in the belief that a reconciliation with the rebellious colonies was still possible. No attacks on colonial shipping were permitted for the first six months of the war; letters of marque were not issued until April 1777; convoy procedures were not adopted until the summer of 1776; a general press was not allowed until 1778.¹⁷

Provincial Archives of Newfoundland and Labrador [PANL], St. John's.

13 Alexander McDonald to David Hay, 7 September 1778, "Letter-Book of Captain Alexander McDonald of the Royal Highland Emigrants, 1775-1779", *New York Historical Society Collections*, XV (1882), pp. 449-50.

14 Montagu to Lord Sandwich, 28 May 1776, *Sandwich Papers*, I, pp. 192-3.

15 Piers Mackesy, *The War for America 1775-1783* (London, 1964), pp. 170-1; G.S. Graham, *The Royal Navy in the War of American Independence* (London, 1976), p. 5.

16 David Syrett, "Defeat at Sea: The Impact of American Naval Operations upon the British, 1775-1778", Navy History Division, Department of the Navy, *Maritime Dimensions of the American Revolution* (Washington, 1977), pp. 14-15. On 18 September 1776, Vice-Admiral Lord Howe, the senior officer on the North American station, provided the Admiralty secretary with a thorough discussion of his squadron's many responsibilities, in order to justify its inability to suppress the activity of the privateers: ADM 1/487, PRO.

17 Syrett, "Defeat at Sea", pp. 13-22; Mackesy, *The War for America*, pp. 170-2; Graham, *Royal Navy*, pp. 6-7.

Consequently, the North American squadron, like that in Newfoundland, had to assume wartime responsibilities at peacetime strength. It was an impossible task, as successive commanders of the North American station regularly reminded the Admiralty.¹⁸

Insofar as the Newfoundland station was concerned, this meant that there was an intense competition with other squadrons and stations for the insufficient men and ships which became available. And, invariably, the Newfoundland station was forced to defer to the needs of more important operations. For instance, in 1776 the Admiralty's intention to send the Newfoundland squadron out to the fishery as early as possible was frustrated by manning delays at Portsmouth, where warships destined for New York and Quebec were permitted to bring their complements up to strength first. And, while the paper strength of the Newfoundland station was greater by two frigates than it had been in 1775, its effective strength was no greater for most of the season. The *Surprize* (28) and *Martin* (14) were temporarily detached to the expedition sent to lift the American siege of Quebec, while the services of the *Cygnat* (14) were lost, first to a desperately-needed refitting and later when she fell in with a Halifax-bound troop convoy which ordered her to accompany them. The Admiralty did order Vice-Admiral Molyneux Shuldham of the North American squadron to direct the *Fowey* (24), a frigate in his command, to join the Newfoundland squadron. This well-intentioned gesture was frustrated by *Fowey's* participation in an expedition against the *Chesapeake*; she could not be made available until the season was practically over.¹⁹

The commander of the Newfoundland station from 1776 to 1778 was Vice-Admiral John Montagu, the first officer of such senior rank to serve there.²⁰ The *London Chronicle* welcomed his appointment, describing him as an officer who

18 See, for instance, Thomas Graves to Philip Stephens, 22 June 1775, ADM 1/484, Lord Howe to Stephens, 10 December 1777, ADM 1/488, James Gambier to Stephens, 20 December 1778, ADM 1/489, and Marriot Arbuthnot to Stephens, 29 August 1779, 30 September, 14 December 1780, ADM 1/486, PRO. See also Syrett, "Defeat at Sea", p. 17, Faibisy, "Privatering and Piracy", pp. 57-8, and George Comtois, "The British Navy in the Delaware, 1775 to 1777", *American Neptune*, XL (1980), pp. 14-16.

19 Germain to the Admiralty, 6 January 1776, CO 5/254 (transcripts), Public Archives of Canada [PAC], Ottawa; Montagu to Sandwich, 10 March 1776, *Sandwich Papers*, I, pp. 191-2; Admiralty to Linzee, 17 February, 1776, Admiralty to Harvey, 17 February 1776, *NDAR*, IV, pp. 919-20; Montagu to Stephens, 28 May 1776, *Sandwich Papers*, I, pp. 192-3; Montagu to Stephens, 15 August 1776, ADM 1/471, PRO; Admiralty to Shuldham, 18 April 1776, *NDAR*, IV, p. 1047; Shuldham to Stephens, 2 June 1776, *NDAR*, V, pp. 344-6; Hamond to George Montagu, 6 August 1776, *NDAR*, VI, pp. 88-9.

20 Montagu served in North America from 1771 to 1774. An outline of his career is provided in *The Dictionary Of National Biography* (Oxford, 1917), XIII, pp. 705-6. In addition to his command of the Newfoundland station, Montagu was appointed governor of the island. Until the British Parliament finally recognized Newfoundland as a colony in 1824, it was customary for the officer commanding the stationed ships at Newfoundland to be appointed governor as well. See Frederick Rowe, *A History Of Newfoundland And Labrador* (Toronto, 1980), chapter 9.

was "experienced and active" — a reference to his three years' service as Commander-in-Chief of the North American station, where his enforcement of British trade regulations had been particularly vigorous, even heavy-handed.²¹ Now, he applied himself to the task of improving the effectiveness of his command. With Admiralty permission, he began to replace his squadron's cutters, sloops, and schooners with larger vessels capable of facing the challenge of the privateers. Concerted efforts were made to accelerate construction of the works at St. John's and to effect temporary repairs sufficient to halt the further deterioration of those at Placentia. In this way, the ships assigned to protect those harbours might be released to patrol the fishery. But for all his efforts, Montagu was not rewarded with much success. Although damage to the fishery during his first year of command was much lighter than had "been naturally expected", this was hardly to the credit of Montagu's warships, which had made no contact whatsoever with enemy cruisers. Over the next two years, the privateers did become a serious problem for the bank fishery, and beginning in 1778, they extended their activities to the inshore fishery and outports of the south coast. Against this onslaught, the Newfoundland stationed ships seemed helpless. Only two privateers were taken in 1777, and only one in 1778, whereas one of Montagu's frigates was captured, and a sloop of war and an armed schooner were wrecked in separate incidents. Noting the success with which Montagu's warships captured three enemy merchantmen with valuable cargoes in 1777, the Admiralty suggested that such activity might be more appropriately directed towards the protection of the fishery.²²

Montagu objected vigorously to such thinly-veiled criticism. "I beg leave to observe to their Lordships", he wrote in a letter to Philip Stephens, the Secretary to the Admiralty, "that I never did give an order to any Captain under my Command but it was for the protection of the fishery..."²³ Any failure on the part of his warships, he added, was an unavoidable consequence of their lack of proper support by government. Frequent appeals for reinforcement had had little effect. Despite purchases of smaller warships, the Newfoundland station from 1776 to 1778 would show very little increase in effective strength. Although Admiral Montagu had been provided with an increase in frigates in 1777, two were armed only with 20 guns each, while the capture of the *Fox* (28) in June by the Continental frigates *Hancock* (32) and *Boston* (28) left the squadron no stronger than it had been in the previous year. As for 1778, in some respects the Newfoundland station was even weaker than it had been in 1777. For most of the season, it had fewer armed vessels, fewer sloops of war, and only one additional

21 *London Chronicle*, 5 to 7 March 1776, in *NDAR*, IV, p. 948.

22 Admiralty to Montagu, 23 March 1776, *NDAR*, IV, pp. 990-4; Montagu to Stephens, 21 June, 15 August, 12 November 1776, ADM 1/471, PRO; Janzen, "Newfoundland and British Maritime Strategy", pp. 187-8; Montagu to Stephens, 5 May, 27 July, 2 September 1778, ADM 1/471, PRO.

23 Montagu to Stephens, 5 May 1778, ADM 1/471, PRO.

effective frigate.²⁴

In contrast, American privateers and warships during that same period cruised in what seemed to British officials in London to be embarrassing numbers. Vice-Admiral Sir Hugh Palliser, one of the Lords of the Admiralty from 1775 to 1779, observed that "The escape of so many privateers of force from so great a fleet as we have in America to watch them, and the taking of the Fox, is very mortifying and disgraceful".²⁵ The Commander-in-Chief of the North American squadron at this time, Vice-Admiral Lord Howe, pointed out in his defence that collecting accurate intelligence was easier said than done. Furthermore, he maintained that acting upon such intelligence with a squadron which was too small for the many tasks assigned to it, whatever Palliser thought to the contrary, was even more difficult.²⁶ Reinforcement of the stationed ships in North America and Newfoundland was essential, if only to keep up with the expanding activities of the Americans.

Adding to Montagu's woes was a shortage of naval stores and an absence of service facilities in Newfoundland which persisted throughout the war. Every new acquisition to the squadron was armed, manned, and suited with sails and rigging by borrowing from the larger warships. The lack of repair facilities was still another problem. Ships with foul bottoms could not be properly cleaned; damaged masts and spars were either given temporary repairs, or the injured vessel was sent to Halifax for proper repairs. Occasionally, one problem fortuitously solved the other. When the *Proteus* (20) sloop of war arrived at St. John's in 1778 in an unserviceable condition, she was permanently moored in the harbour where she was slowly and steadily cannibalized by the other vessels stationed at St. John's. While *ad hoc* measures provided some measure of relief from the problems of inadequate supplies and service facilities, generally the collective strength of the Newfoundland squadron was reduced. Worn-out suits of sails, rigging, and spars which might have been replaced, had instead to be conserved. Of necessity, aggressive pursuit of privateers was avoided or discouraged. Such considerations provided sufficient frustration in themselves, without the addition of the disapproval of one's superiors.²⁷

24 Montagu to Germain, 12 November 1776, CO 194/33, PRO; Montagu to Stephens, 13 March, 15 June 1777, 5 May, 19 May, 27 July 1778, ADM 1/471, PRO. W.H. Whiteley describes Montagu's squadron in 1778 as "more powerful than ever before": W.H. Whiteley, "Newfoundland, Quebec, and the Administration of the Coast of Labrador, 1774-1783", *Acadiensis*, VI, 1 (Autumn, 1976), p. 108. But the strength of the squadron was always changing and never reached its projected strength for that year: see Janzen, "Newfoundland and British Maritime Strategy", p. 228n.

25 Palliser to Sandwich, 22 July 1777, *Sandwich Papers*, I, pp. 233-5.

26 Howe to Stephens, 10 December 1777, ADM 1/488, PRO.

27 Montagu to Stephens, 15 June, 2 August 1777, ADM 1/471, PRO; Janzen, "Newfoundland and British Maritime Strategy", p. 228n; Edwards to Charles Chamberlayne, 29 July 1779, Letter-Books of Rear-Admiral Richard Edwards, 1779-1782 (Naval), Metropolitan Toronto Library [MTL]; Edwards to Cadogan, 5 August 1780, *ibid.*; Sir Richard Pearson to Stephens, 31 August

On the other hand, from the government's perspective, the hardships of the Newfoundland squadron were secondary to the navy's principal role in the war before 1778, which was to support the military effort in North America. The Newfoundland fishery might be regarded as an economic and strategic resource of the first order, but the way to protect it from American cruisers, it was felt, was to bring the war in North America to a victorious conclusion. It was to this end that a strategy of military reconquest in America was directed in 1777, and it was to this end that naval stores and ships released from service in British waters were usually sent to North America.²⁸ Therefore, until his circumstances improved, Montagu would have to protect the fishery as best he could, with what he had.

When he returned to St. John's with the *Romney* (50) early in May 1777, there were only two other warships on station. The *Martin* (14) was a sloop of war which had spent the winter at St. John's and since early April had been cruising along the coast south of that harbour. The *Spy* (14), also a sloop of war, had wintered at Placentia but now joined Montagu at St. John's. Four smaller armed vessels could not be fitted out immediately because of the absence of naval stores.²⁹ Upon the return to St. John's of *Martin* from her cruise, the *Spy* was sent out to patrol the banks beyond Cape Race. As additional ships of the squadron arrived at St. John's, they were sent out either to patrol the banks south of Newfoundland or to take up station to protect valuable centres of the fishery, such as Placentia. Thus, the *Fox* (28) was ordered to patrol the Grand Bank between 42 and 45 degrees north latitude, while the *Surprise* (28) was sent to protect Placentia until one of the armed vessels could be made ready and relieve the frigate.³⁰

The deployment of Montagu's warships was therefore essentially a defensive one to discourage the harassment of the bank fishery, watch over passing trade, and protect the major centres of the fishery as effectively as possible. To attempt to do more, such as to seek out and suppress the activity of American cruisers, was not realistic, even if the Newfoundland station were significantly reinforced. A successful campaign against American privateers would first require that their home ports be captured or blockaded. But since the North American squadron at this time was concentrating instead on its role of supporting the operations of the British army in America, the American home ports were poorly watched, if at all. For Montagu to attempt to suppress enemy activity in New-

1782, ADM 1/2307, III, PRO.

28 Graham, *Royal Navy*, p.9; *Sandwich Papers*, I, p. 202; Isaac Schomberg, *Naval Chronology; Or An Historical Summary of Naval & Military Events, From the Time of the Romans to the Treaty of Peace 1802* (London, 1802), IV, pp. 325-31.

29 The *Penguin* (10..10) sloop, *Postillion* (10) brig, *Egmont* (8) brig, and *Bonavista* (8) sloop.

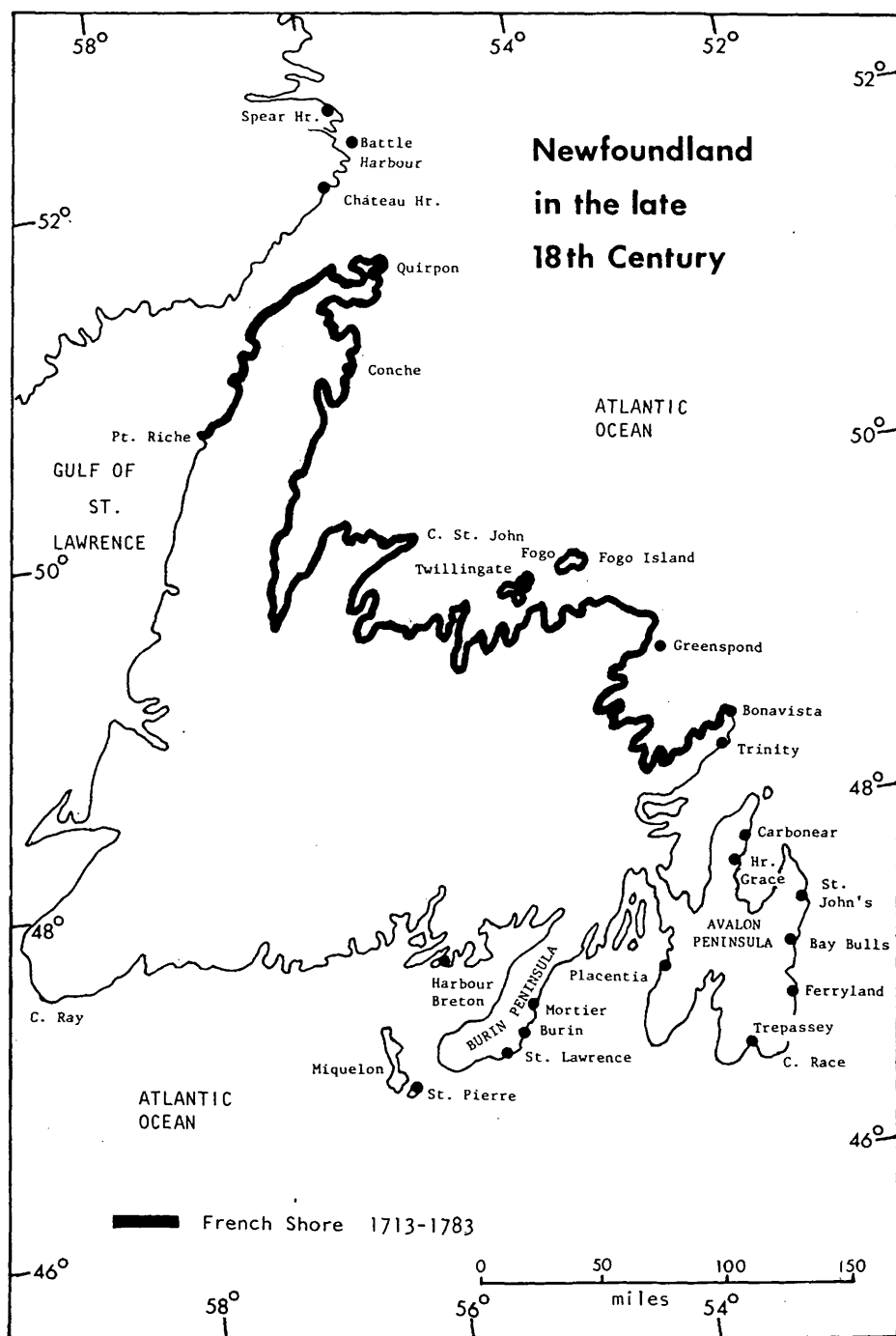
30 This would not be until mid-June: Montagu to Stephens, 12 November 1776, 15 June 1777, ADM 1/471, PRO; "Log of Captain Henry Harvey, HMS *Martin*", ADM 51/581, PRO; "Log of Captain Robert Linzee, HMS *Surprise*", Adm 51/950, II, PRO.

foundland waters would have been like attacking the upper branches of a tree while the roots were left alone.

Consequently, Montagu carefully avoided a deliberate attempt to hold the American cruisers in check. Instead, he instructed his ships to patrol as regularly as possible in the cruising grounds favored by the Americans; by remaining visible, they could discourage enemy activity — at least, that was the plan. The essence of Montagu's complaints was not that he lacked the means to seek out and destroy the enemy cruisers, but rather that he lacked the resources needed to defend his station from them. This became all too evident in 1777 and 1778. Following the capture of the *Fox* in June 1777, Montagu rearranged his dispositions, pairing his ships up so that they could support each other and avoid a repetition of that humiliating loss. As a result, even less of the fishery could be covered by patrols than before, giving the Americans an additional advantage which they did not ignore. In 1778 Montagu attempted to concentrate his meagre resources in the area of the bank fishery, where the Americans seemed to be most active. This meant leaving the Labrador coast unprotected — a calculated risk which, as it turned out, proved very costly. The American privateer *Minerva* (24) chose that year to cruise and destroy the fishery of Labrador. At the same time, American privateers began focusing their attention on the inshore fishery and outports along the south coast; by one estimate, nearly two dozen fishing vessels were cut out of various harbours and several communities were plundered during the summer of 1778.³¹

Yet the year 1778 represented something of a turning point for the Newfoundland stationed ships during the War of American Independence. Thereafter it became apparent that the so-called "privateering menace" had been misunderstood almost from the beginning of the war. As the purpose behind the presence of American cruisers in Newfoundland waters became clear, it was possible to develop a strategy to combat them which did not demand daily support of the fishery by the warships stationed at St. John's. This would release them for more traditional wartime activities such as protecting trade and watching for enemy descents upon the fishery such as had occurred in 1762. The most noteworthy development in 1778 was the French decision to intervene directly in the war. When the news arrived in Newfoundland, Vice-Admiral Montagu immediately put into execution his secret instructions, which had been in his possession for several months, to capture the French islands of St. Pierre and Miquelon, a dozen miles off the south coast of the island. Although St. Pierre had occasionally provided refuge and intelligence for American privateers, its real importance to the Americans was in the movement of supplies and war matériel from France to the United States. Capture of the French islands gave Montagu a badly-needed victory with which to restore his

31 "Log of Captain Robert Linzee, HMS *Surprise*", ADM 51/950, II, "Log of Captain William Williams, HMS *Active*", ADM 51/5, VI, PRO; Montagu to Stephens, 9 September 1777, 2 September 1778, ADM 1/471, PRO; Pringle to Germain, 31 January 1779, CO 194/34, PRO.



squadron's spirits.³²

A more important consequence of French involvement in the war was that the Royal Navy could now be established on a proper war footing. The surrender of General John Burgoyne's army at Saratoga in October 1777 had discredited the strategy of military reconquest which the British had been pursuing in America and raised interest in adopting a policy of maritime pressure and blockade as an alternative. At the same time, Saratoga seemed to make a French declaration of war inevitable.³³ As a result, the navy experienced a rapid expansion after December 1777.³⁴ Yet the Newfoundland station did not benefit immediately from this growth. What Montagu needed most were frigates, which were in extremely short supply. In August 1777 there had not been a single frigate available to send to sea with the Home Fleet, which Lord Sandwich regarded as England's only defence against invasion.³⁵ This meant that overseas stations, particularly those of secondary importance such as Newfoundland, had to wait until sufficient frigates had been commissioned to meet the minimum needs of fleets at home and in the more important overseas theatres such as North America and the West Indies. Thus the 1779 squadron at Newfoundland was no larger than that of the previous year, whereas by 1780 and 1781, the number of frigates in the squadron had very nearly doubled, and by 1782 there were 13 warships on the Newfoundland station, of which six were frigates carrying 32 or more guns each.³⁶

Also in 1778, the new fortifications at St. John's were sufficiently close to completion that they could at last be provided with a garrison of more than 400 men. Although the ordnance for the works did not arrive until 1779, temporary batteries using cannon borrowed from the old fortifications were laid, placing the harbour in an unprecedented state of defence. Thereafter, the strength of the harbour defences was steadily increased through continued improvements to the works themselves, and through the establishment of batteries at neighbouring

32 Germain to the Admiralty, 30 April 1778 (secret), and William Knox to Montagu, 1 May 1778, CO 194/23, PRO; Montagu to Germain, 5 October 1778, CO 194/34, PRO; Janzen, "Newfoundland and British Maritime Strategy", p. 244. St. Pierre is linked with the activity of American privateers in Newfoundland waters in Gordon O. Rothney, "The History of Newfoundland and Labrador 1754-1783", M.A. thesis, University of London, 1934, pp. 245-6, and in G.S. Graham, *Empire Of The North Atlantic: The Maritime Struggle For North America* (Toronto, 1950), p. 209.

33 Lord Sandwich to Lord North, 7 December 1777, *Sandwich Papers*, I, pp. 327-50; Mackesy, *The War for America*, pp. 154-6.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 176.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 174; Sandwich to North, 3 August 1777, *Sandwich Papers*, I, pp. 235-8.

36 Compiled from various documents in ADM 1/471 and 472, PRO. In 1777 the Royal Navy had 89 frigates (including 50-gun ships) in service; in 1778 that number had increased only to 96, but by 1783 there were 180 frigates in service: see Graham, *Royal Navy*, p. 9n, and Antony Preston, David Lyon and John H. Batchelor, *Navies of the American Revolution* (Englewood Cliffs, 1975), p. 146.

coves and harbours as well as on the roads leading into the town.³⁷

But of all the precautions and measures taken to strengthen the posture of defence at St. John's, none was quite so extraordinary as the creation in 1780 of the Newfoundland Regiment. This innovation was the climax of several years of effort by Captain Robert Pringle of the Royal Corps of Engineers, who was in charge of the construction of the new defences for the harbour at St. John's. He had long dreamed of establishing a corps of light infantry on the island of Newfoundland as the fishery's principal defence. He first explained his ideas in a plan submitted to the Board of Ordnance in 1773. Pringle reasoned that the fishery at Newfoundland would best be defended by the establishment of harbour batteries at the major fishing centres and by the creation of a corps of light infantry or "rangers" who would go to their support in case of an attack. The rangers would be recruited in Newfoundland. This would give them a familiarity with the terrain and conditions which would enhance their effectiveness and therefore multiply their strength. If garrisoned somewhere in the interior and linked with the major fishing centres by a network of woodland trails, they would be able to respond quickly and in overwhelming strength to any appearance by hostile forces on the coast.³⁸ It was a plan with calculated appeal, since it offered an inexpensive if unorthodox defence based upon sound principles of mobility and concentration. Moreover, Pringle's recommendations concerning harbour batteries coincided with suggestions submitted to the government about the same time by Governor and Commander-in-Chief of the Newfoundland station, Rear-Admiral Molyneux Shuldham, with whom Pringle had consulted in 1772. The government was receptive to such ideas since orders were given in the spring of 1773 to improve the security of the harbours at St. John's and Placentia with additional batteries.³⁹

Pringle's concept of a ranger force was never endorsed, for reasons which can only be surmised. According to government perception and official policy, the Newfoundland fishery was a migratory one, based in England, whose defence was provided through the exercise of British sea power in metropolitan waters. Local defence served no other purpose than to provide a protected refuge

37 Montagu to Germain, 30 July 1778, CO 194/34, PRO; Lieut. Col. Hay, "Present State of the Forts and Batterys in the Harbour of St. John's...", GN2/1/7 (Letters), PANL. A more thorough discussion of the measures taken to secure and defend the harbour at St. John's during the war is provided in Janzen, "Newfoundland and British Maritime Strategy", chapter VII.

38 Pringle to the Board of Ordnance, April 1773, "A Plan for the General Defence of...Newfoundland", Robert Duff Papers, Vol. 8, NMM.

39 Shuldham to Lord Hillsborough, 30 September 1772, Dartmouth Papers, Series 1, transcripts of original manuscripts, 1713-1798, vol. 12, #2429, PAC; Shuldham, "Remarks...made...to His Majesty's Instructions...1772 & 1773", CO 199/17, PRO; Lord Dartmouth to Lord Townshend, 15 April, 20 February 1773, CO 5/161 (transcripts) PAC; Pringle to Board of Ordnance, 1 March 1774, War Office Papers, Series 55, vol. 1557, II, PRO. See Janzen, "Newfoundland and British Maritime Strategy", chapter IV, for a more detailed discussion of government thinking and decisions concerning local defence at Newfoundland during the period from 1770 to 1775.

in which the fishery might seek shelter in case of an emergency and only for as long as it took to send relief from England. This resulted in the conclusion, articulated in 1766 by Secretary of State the Duke of Richmond, that "the protection of the Inhabitants settled on the Island is neither practicable nor desirable".⁴⁰ Towards that end, government in 1770 had given its approval to construct new fortifications at St. John's which were to be modest in scale and would require no more than 300 men in garrison.⁴¹ Pringle's plan, which assumed that the defence of the fishery required the defence of the major settlements on the island of Newfoundland, conflicted with that policy, and so it was ignored by the government.

Nevertheless, despite his inability to convince his superiors that his ideas had merit, Pringle seized every opportunity to promote defensive measures which applied his ideas, if only in part. He was responsible in 1777 for organizing his workmen into a defence force, and then expanding this idea in 1779 into a civilian volunteer defence force of 360 men, consisting largely of the servants of local merchants and fishermen. To proceed from there to the creation of a provincial regiment in 1780 was a relatively simple step, especially since the governor by then was Rear-Admiral Richard Edwards, who had experimented with similar measures when he had served as Governor of Newfoundland during the Seven Years' War.⁴²

While the posture of defence at St. John's was improved in this manner, the British government had given its permission to arm the outports as well, so that they might be able to resist occasional attacks by privateers. Beginning in 1778, the government made several hundred stand of small arms available for distribution, in response to requests from merchants who had invested in the northward expansion of the fishery as far as Labrador. At the same time, Governor Montagu encouraged the more influential residents of the leading outports to support the erection of small batteries for the defence of their harbours, using ordnance no longer needed at Placentia. Montagu was probably responding to the advice of Captain Pringle, who had proposed such an idea late in 1777 after the governor had already departed for England.⁴³ With only a few exceptions, the

40 Duke of Richmond to Captain Hugh Debbieg, Royal Engineers, 28 June 1766, Shelburne Papers, vol. 86, William L. Clements Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

41 Board of Ordnance to Hillsborough, 25 May, 13 September 1770, CO 194/29, PRO; Janzen, "Newfoundland and British Maritime Strategy", p. 104.

42 Pringle to Germain, 6 June 1778, 4 February 1779, CO 194/34, PRO; Edwards to Pringle, 28 October 1779, GN 2/1/8 (Orders), PANL; Pringle to Lord Amherst, 3 November 1779, Papers of General Sir Jeffery Amherst, vol. 120, War Office Papers, Series 34, PRO; F.F. Thompson, "Richard Edwards", *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, IV (Toronto, 1979), pp. 259-60.

43 Jeremiah Coghlan to Montagu, 10 September 1778 GN2/1/7 (Letters), PANL; Knox to the Master General of the Ordnance, 20 March 1779, CO 5/261 (transcripts), PAC; Germain to Edwards, 2 April 1779, CO 194/34, PRO; Montagu to the merchants of Bay Bulls, etc., 27 July 1778, GN2/1/7 (Letters), PANL; Pringle to the merchants of St. John's, 17 November 1777, CO 194/34, PRO.

The Defence of Newfoundland 41

response to these measures was favourable, so that by 1782, fishing centres from the Burin Peninsula around the Avalon Peninsula and up to Labrador were able to put up some resistance to American privateers. The measures seemed to have the desired effect. In the remaining years of the war, only one of the outports which had been so equipped was actually attacked by a privateer, and that attack was easily beaten off.⁴⁴ Yet only the largest communities had received weapons. To equip every fishing port with the instruments for its own defence was unrealistic; there were simply too many of them to be defended this way. Consequently, attacks on the outports of Newfoundland, particularly those along the south coast, would continue until the end of the war.⁴⁵ Arming the larger outports could do nothing to entirely discourage attacks on more vulnerable targets.⁴⁶

What made these various provisions for the local defence of the fishery so extraordinary was not their effect, real or perceived, on the activity of the American cruisers. Rather, it was the way in which they departed from the policy which had governed local defence before 1778. Gone was the careful adherence to the principle that "the protection of the Inhabitants...is neither practicable nor desirable". The proliferation of outport batteries, the distribution of small arms, and especially the creation of the Newfoundland Regiment in 1780, which more than doubled the original intended size of the garrison, all suggest that the purpose for which the defences at Newfoundland had been established had changed considerably. So long as the Royal Navy could exercise command of the sea in European waters, the migratory fishery at Newfoundland was reasonably secure and stood in need of nothing more than a temporary refuge. The rebellion in America, with its recourse to commerce-raiding at sea, had exposed a flaw in this logic, since the British government could not respond effectively in American waters without weakening her strategic reserve at home. But the "Paltry Privateers", as Governor Edwards contemptuously referred to

44 In September 1780 the American privateer *General Sullivan* (20) attempted to cut a vessel out of Trepassy harbour: Edwards to Stephens, 28 September 1780, ADM 1/471, PRO.

45 "American Privateers...infests this Coast in great numbers, and have committed great depredations on the South and South West this Island", Lt. Caddy to Board of Ordnance, 5 July 1779, Books of the Royal Engineers, Correspondence 1774-1779, GB2/1, vol. 1, PANL. In 1780 Edwards informed the Admiralty that there were "a number of Privateers of force being upon the Banks and Coast": Edwards to Stephens, 13 August 1780, ADM 1/471, PRO. A similar observation was made two years later by Edwards' successor, Vice-Admiral John Campbell: Campbell to Stephens, 23 September 1782, ADM 1/472, PRO.

46 In 1779 privateers plundered harbours at Fortune Bay, St. Lawrence and Burin: William Saunders to Edwards, 21 July 1779, GN2/1/7 (Letters), PANL. A similar attack on Mortier in the spring of 1780 was frustrated only because an army officer happened to be in the village recruiting for his regiment and was able to organize a defence: Edwards to Germain, 1 August 1780, CO 194/35, PRO. A lightly-armed privateer sailed boldly into Twillingate harbour early in 1779 and plundered the stores before proceeding to Battle Harbour on the Labrador coast where it caused more damage; W. Gordon Handcock, "John Slade", *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, IV, p. 713.

them in 1779, never threatened the survival of the fishery, at least not through their activities in Newfoundland waters.⁴⁷ It was only with the entry first of France, then of Spain and Holland, into the war that the ability of the British to exercise command of the sea became uncertain. It was the threat from Europe, not that from America, which made the defence of the island of Newfoundland itself so necessary by 1780.⁴⁸

Contributing to this development were changes within the British fishery at Newfoundland which were accelerated by the war. Throughout the 18th century, the fishing merchants of the English West Country had been reducing their direct activity in the fishery, preferring to concentrate on the trade. In so doing, they elevated the importance and stimulated the growth of a resident fishery. That fishery remained in the shadow of the migratory fishery until the War of American Independence. Then, the trans-Atlantic movement of men and matériel which was the definitive characteristic of the migratory fishery was increasingly interrupted. The coup de grâce came in 1778, when the migratory fishery was required to fulfil its role as a "nursery for seamen"; as it lost its vital reserve of skilled labour to the navy, the migratory fishery went into a rapid decline, and was supplanted by the resident fishery.⁴⁹ By the end of the war, the resident fishery was supplying about 75 per cent of the fish for the trade with southern Europe (Table One). Since the government still regarded the fishery as a "most important Branch of the Nation's Commerce & Source of her Power", it accepted the need to protect "those very important Possessions of the Crown upon which it depends", namely the outports.⁵⁰ The retreat from the position which had been so neatly articulated by the Duke of Richmond only 15 years earlier was complete.

For the naval garrison at St. John's, the implications of all of these changes were quite profound. So long as land defences had been fairly modest, limited in recent years to St. John's and Placentia, and were intended only to provide the fishery with a defended refuge in the event of an unexpected attack, the ships stationed in Newfoundland waters had played an important role in the local defence of the fishery. Once local defence was entrusted to the garrisons, fortifications and batteries at St. John's, Placentia and the major outports, the stationed ships began cruising farther and farther at sea. Whereas in 1776 they had cruised in waters no farther south than 42 to 45 degrees north latitude, by 1780 and 1781 they were regularly instructed to cruise as far south as 38 degrees

47 Edwards to Germain, 9 December 1779, CO 194/34, PRO.

48 Expressions of concern for "the defence of the island", or words to that effect, can be found in Edwards to Germain, 16 September 1780, CO 194/35, PRO, in Edwards to Pringle, 22 October 1780, GN2/1/9 (Letters), PANL, and in Germain to Edwards, 16 March 1781, CO 194/35, PRO.

49 Head, *Eighteenth Century Newfoundland*, chapter 8; Keith Matthews, "A History of the West of England — Newfoundland Fisheries", D. Phil. thesis, Oxford University, 1968, pp. 416-7, 464-84.

50 Germain to Edwards, 16 March 1781, CO 194/35, PRO.

The Defence of Newfoundland 43

Table One

**The British Fishery at Newfoundland
during the American Revolution¹**

Year	Quintals of fish made by			Quintals of fish carried to foreign markets
	British fishing ships ²	Bye boat fishery ³	Inhabitants	
1772	305,391	155,847	298,605	481,347
1773	262,925	150,957	366,446	489,665
1774	237,640	145,800	312,426	516,358
1775	268,250	159,525	230,540	600,220
1776				
1777				
1778	80,000	215,300	205,840	386,530
1779				
1780				
1781	26,600	75,750	220,100	286,403
1782	25,300	60,400	214,350	306,917
1783				
1784	131,650	93,050	212,616	497,884
1785	170,372	111,994	262,576	606,276

1 The accuracy of fishery statistics in the 18th century, always open to criticism and doubt, is never more in question than during the American Revolution. Statistics were compiled by the officers of the Newfoundland squadron as part of their peacetime function. The war interfered with this activity, and prevented it altogether in certain years. Nevertheless, these are the only statistics we have, and it is assumed that as relative indicators of trends, they are reasonably accurate. This table is compiled from data found in CO 194/21, PRO; ADM 1/471, PRO; Shelburne Papers, vol. 86, William L. Clements Library; and Shannon Ryan, "Abstract of CO 194 Statistics", Centre for Newfoundland Studies, Memorial University of Newfoundland, St. John's.

2 The term "British fishing ship" included the traditional migratory ship fishery, which was an in-shore activity, and the bank fishery.

3 The bye boat fishery was a branch of the migratory fishery. It consisted of small boat owners who migrated seasonally to the fishery as passengers on the fishing ships, but who left their boats and other equipment in Newfoundland. It, too, was an inshore fishery. See Shannon Ryan, "Fishery to Colony: A Newfoundland Watershed, 1793-1815", *Acadiensis*, XII, 2 (Spring, 1983) pp. 34-52; Head, *Eighteenth Century Newfoundland*, pp. 63, 72-4.

north latitude. This placed the Newfoundland stationed ships deep in the North Atlantic trade lanes. There they were expected to watch for any signs of a French expedition against Newfoundland. They were also expected to protect British trade while hunting for enemy ships and vessels — a rare example of strategic requirements coinciding with an opportunity for prize money.⁵¹

Soon there were handsome dividends in the number of enemy cruisers and merchantmen captured by the warships stationed at Newfoundland. In contrast to 1778 when only one privateer was taken, 1779 saw six privateers captured by the squadron, now under the command of Rear-Admiral Richard Edwards. In 1780 the number was even greater, so much so that initial reports of Edwards' success were received with disbelief in England. Then came 1781, the Newfoundland squadron's very own "*annus mirabilis*", when 15 enemy cruisers were captured. Against this success, from 1779 to 1781 the squadron lost only two armed schooners and two sloops of war to the enemy. Admiral Edwards could be forgiven if, in reporting these results to his superiors, he disregarded the absence of any supporting evidence and confidently asserted that "our taking so many of the American Privateers and their disappointment in not Capturing the Quebec Vessels as they did last year, has distressed the Northern Rebels much".⁵²

From these results it would be easy to conclude that the problem of protecting the fishery and trade at Newfoundland from enemy cruisers had been solved, and in spectacular fashion, by Rear-Admiral Edwards.⁵³ In fact, such was not the case. Careful attention to the location and date of capture of these privateers confirms that few of them had been threatening the Newfoundland fishery when taken. The *Rambler* (14) was captured in 1779 while *Sibyl* (28) was escorting trade to Portugal; the *Venus* (16), *Independence* (16), and *Diana* (10) were all taken in 1781 as *Surprise* (28) and *Dance* (32) were returning from Halifax; the *Montgomery* (13) was also taken in 1781 while *Maidstone* (28) was cruising off Cape Breton Island.⁵⁴ In short, most were taken in waters far beyond the coast of Newfoundland. Edwards' success was due more to the expansion of his

51 Admiral Edwards' instructions in 1780 to the commanding officers of some of his frigates, Edwards Letter-Books (Naval), MTL: for example, Edwards to Captain Isaac Prescott, 28 July 1780.

52 Edwards to Germain, 28 September 1781, CO 194/35, PRO. See also Janzen, "Newfoundland and British Maritime Strategy", pp. 259-60; Eden to Lord Carlisle, August 1780, Historical Manuscripts Commission, *Fifteenth Report, Appendix, Part VI: Carlisle Manuscripts* (London, 1897), p. 442; Edwards to Stephens, 20 August 1781, ADM 1/471, PRO.

53 See for instance Rothney, "Newfoundland and Labrador", pp. 250-5, Matthews, "The West of England-Newfoundland Fisheries", p. 480, and Davies, "England and Newfoundland", pp. 199-202.

54 *Rambler* was taken 22 October 1779, more than 200 leagues from Cape Spear: Captain Thomas Pasley, "Journal 1779-1780, HMS *Sibyl*", Journals and Diaries, vol. 85, NMM; "Log of Captain James Wainwright, HM Sloop *Hinchingbrook*", ADM 51/442, VII, PRO; William Dickson to the Surveyor General, 10 September 1781, ADM 1/1014, #7, PRO; "Log of Captain William Parker, HMS *Maidstone*", ADM 51/572, IX, PRO.

warships' cruising range than to any increase of privateering activity within the fishery.

Indeed, under Edwards, patrols of the fishery itself had fallen off considerably. Warships were rarely sent north of St. John's except in response to specific complaints of occasional privateers. It was more usual for them to be sent south, escorting trade back and forth between St. John's and Placentia, then ranging out in search of privateers cruising the trade lanes adjacent to Newfoundland. Not infrequently, Newfoundland stationed ships were detached to escort trade bound for Halifax or Quebec. At one point at the height of the 1781 fishing season, six of Edwards' warships were employed in this manner; a seventh was assigned to the Labrador coast. Of the four ships of force which this left at Edwards' disposal, three spent much of August cruising the outer reaches of the banks which, by that stage of the war, had been abandoned by the fishery.⁵⁵

This does not mean that the fishery was neglected. By 1779 the commander-in-chief of the Newfoundland station had recognized that American privateers, in contrast to the American Patriot leadership, did not wish to make the Newfoundland fishery a primary target. Although they could be found cruising in Newfoundland waters, they did so in order to intercept the trans-Atlantic British trade, much of which passed by the island and which could provide the privateers with profitable prizes. The bankers which had been victimized at the beginning of the war and the shallops which were characteristic of the resident fishery were little more than targets of convenience. Plundering them of their gear, sails, rigging, stores, and even men, enabled the privateers to extend their cruising time in the trade lanes, thereby enhancing their chances of taking a truly valuable cargo. Significantly, it was the fishery on the south coast of Newfoundland, nearest the trade lanes, that was molested most frequently by the privateers; the fishery from St. John's to Fogo was rarely disturbed. Only once, in 1777, had the Americans managed to organize an expedition with the purpose of destroying the British fishery at Newfoundland. Consisting of the Continental frigates *Hancock* (32) and *Boston* (28), as well as a number of privateers, this expedition had captured the *Fox* (28). Despite that success, the expedition could be regarded as a failure. The privateers disappeared almost immediately upon setting out, preferring to hunt more profitable prey, while the victorious frigates decided not to press their luck and turned instead for home. Although it raised a great panic within the Newfoundland fishery, the expedition had caused very little damage. With the exception of the south coast, the fishery at Newfoundland passed through the remaining years of the war relatively unscathed.⁵⁶

55 Edwards to Lloyd, 31 August 1780, to Prescott, 28 July 1780, to Lloyd, 23 July 1781, and to Koppel, 6 August 1781, Edwards Letter-Books (Naval), MTL.

56 See, for instance, Caddy to Board of Ordnance, 5 July 1779, GB2/1/1, PANL; Gardner W. Allen, *A Naval History of the American Revolution* (Williamstown, 1970 (1913)), I, pp. 202-16; Memorandum of Captain McBride, n.d. [Summer? 1777], ADM 1/471, PRO; Janzen, "New-

The greatest damage to the Newfoundland fishery and trade did not occur at Newfoundland at all, but instead was inflicted in European waters. That was where the fishing fleets, assembling in the spring or converging upon southern European markets in the fall, were most attractive as targets and, coincidentally, were most easily detected and most vulnerable to attack. Enemy privateers swarmed out of French channel ports, hovered off the Irish coast, or cruised between the Azores and the Portuguese coast, knowing that all British trade (including the Newfoundland trade) must eventually pass by.⁵⁷ Moreover, that was where chance encounters with enemy fleets might occur with devastating effect. Such was the case in June 1782, when Cordoba's fleet of 32 ships of the line was on its way to a rendezvous with a French squadron and stumbled upon the Newfoundland convoy. Nineteen merchantmen were taken.⁵⁸ Even though privateers were known to be active in Newfoundland waters, trade approaching the island evidently felt that the worst danger had been left behind them. Thus, in 1779 Captain Thomas Pasley, HMS *Sibyl* (28), observed that the merchantmen under his escort from England to St. John's had "behaved uncommonly well till they were about three or four hundred Leag. to the westward of Scilly, when thinking themselves out of all danger...they thought my protection no longer absolutely necessary" and dispersed, making for their respective destinations within the fishery.⁵⁹

As the so-called "privateering menace" became better understood, the possibility of a French raid upon Newfoundland loomed once again as the fishery's greatest perceived danger. Ever since the raid of 1762, Newfoundland's defences had been planned with the expectation that a similar attempt to destroy the fishery would be made when England and France next found themselves at war with each other. That perception had occasioned, first, a reassessment of the fishery's defences during the 1760s, and then the decision in 1770 to begin construction of the new harbour defences at St. John's. By the time those defences neared completion in 1779, France and Great Britain were at war, so that practically every year between 1779 and 1782 saw alarms at St. John's in the belief that a French descent upon the fishery was imminent. Partly for this reason, improvements were immediately begun to give added strength to the new harbour defences. This required nearly three more years of work, but it made the

foundland and British Maritime Strategy", pp. 206-12; Pringle to Board of Ordnance, 20 June 1777, GB2/1/1, PANL; Montagu to Germain, 11 June 1777, CO 194/33, PRO.

57 Janzen, "Newfoundland and British Maritime Strategy", pp. 256-7; Patrick Crowhurst, *The Defence Of British Trade, 1689-1815* (Folkestone, 1977), p. 134; Benjamin Lester to Stephens, 20 November 1782, Benjamin Lester's Particular Letter-Book, Dorset County Record Office [DCRO], Dorchester; Graham, *Royal Navy*, pp. 7-8; Gomer Williams, *History of the Liverpool Privateers and Letters of Marque with an Account of the Liverpool Slave Trade* (London, 1897), p. 198.

58 Campbell to Stephens, 24 June 1782, ADM 1/472, PRO; Lester to Preston, 19 October 1782, Lester's Particular Letter-Book, DCRO.

59 Pasley "Journal", 21 April 1779, Journals and Diaries, vol. 85, NMM.

harbour of St. John's much less dependent for its security upon the naval garrison stationed there.⁶⁰

Several factors were therefore responsible for the decision to order the warships stationed at Newfoundland to patrol the outer edges of the fishing banks. The importance of the migratory fishery had declined. The principal out-ports were increasingly able to defend themselves against occasional visits by privateers. It was recognized that privateers were more interested in the passing trade than in destroying the British fishery at Newfoundland. The strength of the harbour defences at St. John's was unprecedented. And it was felt desirable to detect any approaching French squadron as early as possible. That the long-awaited attack never materialized was perhaps fortuitous, since the French did consider such an attack more than once.⁶¹ However, in the final analysis, the French were more concerned with applying pressure on the British in the Caribbean and in Europe. Besides, their American allies wanted a share of the Newfoundland fishery when the war ended, and were suspicious of French designs on the island. Since the alliance with the United States was important to French war aims, the French government was unwilling to make the capture and occupation of Newfoundland one of its primary objectives.⁶²

The precautions taken on shore to protect the fishery against the attacks of privateers and the preparations at St. John's in anticipation of a French raid upon the island therefore made it possible for the commanders-in-chief of the Newfoundland station to send their warships to cruise the outermost edges of the banks. There they provided valuable service in the protection of trans-Atlantic British commerce. This, in turn, enabled the Home Fleet and the North American stationed ships to husband their own meagre resources and to give more attention to other duties. Consequently it is not enough, when evaluating the role of Newfoundland during the American Revolution, to state merely that Newfoundland remained aloof from strategic considerations.⁶³ The naval gar-

60 Janzen, "Newfoundland and British Maritime Strategy", pp. 260-81.

61 Storm damage in 1779 prevented D'Estaing from conducting operations against British strongpoints in the North Atlantic, including Halifax and Newfoundland, as planned: Jonathan Dull, *The French Navy and American Independence: A Study of Arms and Diplomacy, 1774-1787* (Princeton, 1975), pp. 160-1; *Sandwich Papers* III, p. 122. In 1781 Barras wanted to take the French squadron then at Newport, Rhode Island north against the Newfoundland fishery. The remonstrations of Generals Rochambeau and Washington persuaded him to participate instead in the campaign against General Cornwallis in Virginia: Mackesy, *The War for America*, pp. 349-50, 413-4; Dull, *The French Navy*, pp. 222, 239-42; Howard C. Rice, Jr. and Anne S.K. Brown, eds., *The American Campaigns Of Rochambeau's Army 1780, 1781, 1782, 1783* (Princeton, 1972), I, p. 39n.

62 Janzen, "Newfoundland and British Maritime Strategy", pp. 292-4; Dallas Irvine, "The Newfoundland Fishery: A French Objective in the War of American Independence", *CHR*, XIII, (September, 1932), pp. 281-3; Orville Murphy, "The Comte de Vergennes, the Newfoundland Fisheries, and the Peace Negotiation of 1783: A Reconsideration", *CHR*, XLVI, (March, 1965), pp. 32-46.

63 G.S. Graham, "Newfoundland in British Strategy from Cabot to Napoleon", in R.A. Mackay,

rison at St. John's made a significant contribution to the security of British trade in its neighbourhood and indirectly to the execution of British maritime strategy during the War of American Independence. Moreover, the changes in official attitudes and actual measures for the defence of Newfoundland contributed to the gradual shift in British policy which marked the island's evolution from fishery to colony.