

Report on the Naval History of the Siege of
Yorktown, 1781 -

By:

Theodore Edward Temple
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UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
COLONIAL NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK
YORKTOWN, VIRGINIA

REPORT ON
THE NAVAL HISTORY OF THE SIEGE OF YORKTOWN, 1781.

It is useless to state the importance of the cooperation between the land and naval forces in the American Revolution. There has been a tendency to neglect the important operations of the French Fleet under Comte de Grasse in 1781. It must be realized that had it not been for the French fleet the surrender of Cornwallis could not have been brought about as early as October, 1781. It will then be my purpose to show briefly, yet somewhat in detail, the different operations of the two fleets that finally led to the surrender.

It is, however, important to note one of the outstanding characteristics typical of the two fleets. A very interesting reference has been made concerning the advantages of the English fleet over the French. The coppering of vessels had been adopted by the English, and it proved to be an outstanding feature of the English vessels. It aided in the speed and durability of the vessels. The French also had a disadvantage in that only one side of the vessel was prepared for action at a time. The English no longer used this method, and consequently with a slight manoeuvre in which the French vessel was poured into, it could not return. For this reason the French fleet often found it difficult to combat the English.

As we view the Revolution in the late days of August and the beginning of September, we find the military situation as follows: "(1) Cornwallis fortifying leisurely at Yorktown, (2) Lafayette in a camp of observation at Holt's Forge, (3) Wayne on the James about opposite Harrison's Landing, (4) Washington's troops marching down through Trenton, and (5) De Grasse entering the Chesapeake."¹

The operations leading to Yorktown were well under way by the last of August. On the 25th, De Barras sailed from Newport, having under his command eight ships of the line and a number of frigates. On the 28th this news had reached Graves who was then in New York. It might be here noted that the French fleet under Comte de Grasse left St. Domingo and on

¹Johnston, H. P., The Yorktown Campaign and the Surrender of Cornwallis, 1781, (Harper and Brothers, New York, 1881).

the 30th arrived in the Chesapeake. The advanced guard of his squadron consisted of the Glorieux, a coppered seventy-four, and the Diligente and Aigrette, frigates, which met the Guadaloupe near the Capes, who not understanding their signals, kept aloof and afterwards by swiftness made good her retreat to Yorktown, while the Loyalist, a twenty-gun ship which was stationed in the bay, after a gallant struggle in the mouth of the channel, fell into possession of the French.² On the 31st, Graves' five ships of the line and one fifty-gun ship joined Hood who was then in Command of fourteen vessels. The entire English fleet was gradually moving toward Chesapeake Bay, where it had been understood that the Americans and French were concentrating. It was now the aim of the English fleet to get into the Chesapeake as soon as possible.

By September 1 the news was sent to a part of the English land forces that the French fleet was approaching, there being twenty-eight ships of the line and four frigates, all very large vessels. On September 2, a detachment of 3,200 men under M. de Simon was put aboard boats and sloops and transported from the fleet at Lynnhaven Bay to Jamestown, where they landed on the same day. "This morning [September 2] at daylight, the troops took up the line of march and encamped opposite Jamestown, where lay a small English vessel under the sanction of a flag. We lay about two hours on our ground expecting every moment to see a glorious sight; at last a number of large boats appeared in sight on board, and also three large armed vessels to cover the troops landing...which spread an universal joy amongst our officers and soldiers. Never did I behold a more beautiful and agreeable sight...."³

On September 4, under a favorable northeast wind the English fleet approached the Capes of the Chesapeake. Within one half hour all of the cruisers were called into action. The English ships manœuvored into position and by noon all were into their stations.

On the morning of September 5 the French had been anchored in Lynnhaven Roads, awaiting the arrival of General Washington and Rochambeau, and the return of the boats which had been sent up the James River. At 8:00 o'clock a frigate signaled to the French fleet twenty-seven sail in the east, approaching the Chesapeake. The French fleet was immediately ordered into action by De Grasse, even though there was an absence of nearly ninety officers and 1,800 men who had not returned from landing St.

²History of the Campaigns of 1780-81, by Lt. Col. Tarleton, p. 374.

³The Journal of Lieut. William Felton...Embracing the Siege of Yorktown and the Southern Campaign", in Pennsylvania Historical Society Collection, May, 1853, pp. 311-312.

Simon's command. By 12:45 both fleets were ready for action, the British vessels being on a line parallel to the line of approach of the French fleet. De Grasse's line of battle numbered twenty-four ships, carrying 1,700 guns and 19,000 seamen. The engagement between the two fleets was started at 4:15 in the afternoon and lasted until 6:30. The end of the engagement gave a slight advantage to the French with slightly more damage to them. It is, however, interesting to note that the French were successful in driving off the English and later regaining the Chesapeake and re-establishing blockade.

The following day (September 8) part of the French fleet was at the Head of Elk, on the Chesapeake; where letters were sent from Count de Grasse to Rochambeau in which he (Count de Grasse) appraised Rochambeau on his entrance into the bay on August 28 and of the landing of troops of the Marquis de La Fayette, at Jamestown. During the 7th and 8th of September, the two fleets kept from two to five leagues apart, each endeavoring to take advantage of a slight shift of wind. On the evening of the 9th, De Grasse lost sight of the English fleet and on the 10th Hood sent a note to Admiral Graves as to the whereabouts of the French fleet. Also, on September 10, the Charon, an English vessel of forty-four guns was burned by a hot shot fired from the French battery at Yorktown. De Grasse feared that the English might return and on the 11th of September the French fleet came to anchor inside of Cape Henry. The French had watched closely the movements of the English and by noon of the 12th the French had reached a point southeast of Cape Henry.

On September 15 an officer arrived from Count de Grasse's fleet, bringing certain accounts of the arrival of his and Count de Barras's fleet from Rhode Island, with a number of French troops on board, with much heavy artillery and mortars. The news was also brought of the capture of the Iris, frigate, and the Richmond, frigate, which was sent to Baltimore and Head of Elk to bring back the troops and apparatus for the siege of Yorktown. We can note with interest that the English fleet was gradually diminishing.

Court William de Deux-Ponts states in his journal that he was engaged in embarking all material of his army on the 19th and 20th of September but he did not go aboard until the morning of September 21. His squadron was composed of the Komulus, the frigates Ventile, Delligante, Aigrette, Iris and Richmond, the last two having been taken from the English, and nine transports, in all fifteen vessels.⁴ At four o'clock in the afternoon of September 21 the English fleet set sail with a steady wind. By the afternoon of the 22nd the English had found the French fleet blockading the mouth of the York River; at 8:00 o'clock the English anchored in the

⁴My Campaigns in America, by Count William de Deux-Ponts, p. 132.

midst of the French fleet. Finding it difficult to continue operations in the midst of French, the English moved out of the Chesapeake on September 24 and set sail. They entered the James River on the evening of the 24th. On the evening of the 26th Lord Cornwallis sent some five ships to destroy the French vessels, but they were not successful.

It may, however, be noted that the French ships that blocked the mouth of the York River were driven from their station (no date) and were almost destroyed by fire-ships commanded by Captain Palmer. He would probably have burned a man-of-war which was driven ashore had it not been for the misbehavior of a master of a privateer.

"Capt. Smith, and Lt. Parker and self [Lieut. William Feltman] took a walk to the York River, [October 1] where we had the pleasure of seeing all the enemy's vessels, of which they had four of them sunk this side of the river in order to prevent the French shipping from passing this side. We observed at a great distance down the river three of the French ships riding at anchor."⁵

By October 4 twelve merchants had been sunk off of the shore of Yorktown and piles had been driven in front of these vessels to prevent any part of the French fleet from approaching the town and debarking troops. The Charon and the Guadeloupe were moored before Yorktown, in such a manner as to defend the town and not the passage of the river. A number of vessels in form of half galleys containing 110 men each had been collected. Cornwallis had desired even a larger number but found that he was unable to procure any more. Cornwallis had hoped to be succoured by Graves' fleet composed of twenty-nine ships; three had arrived under Digby. Four had been expected to arrive daily, and the twenty-two under Graves.

The English Admiral Digby arrived on October 5 with three vessels, two of which were in bad condition. The French also learned on this date that the English had a vessel damaged to such an extent in the last engagement with Conte de Grasse that it had to be burned. De Grasse stated that it was only an encounter between two advanced guards.

One of the English frigates, the Guadeloupe, of twenty-six guns, was forced to take shelter from the fire of hot shot on October 9, but the Charon, a ship of forty-four guns was burned. However,

⁵The Journal of Lieut. William Feltman...Embracing the Siege of Yorktown and the Southern Campaign, in Pennsylvania Historical Society Collection, May, 1853, p. 316.

on October 16 the Guadaloupe, which had been driven to the Gloucester side, was sunk.

With such a large number of vessels lost during operations around Yorktown the English found it almost impossible to continue important naval operations in this vicinity. Land operations seemed also to be impossible, since the works at Yorktown had been taken by the French artillery. Cornwallis was now determined to make his escape by the way of Gloucester. A violent storm prevented the succeeding division of the garrison of York from passing over. That part which had arrived returned early in the morning and the firing soon ceased. By October 19 the English had found it impossible to continue any further operations because of the position of the French fleet which blockaded the river, and the American and French troops on land.

On October 27 a part of the French fleet set sail and on the same day the enemy appeared. It was impossible for the French to continue and they returned to the James River. The enemy continued to cruise in sight on the 28th, having six thousand infantry to aid Cornwallis. On the same day, (28th) this part of the fleet returned to the main squadron. On the 29th the English squadron was continually in sight. The enemy did not appear for several days. On November 1, the Count de Grasse sent an ensign on board of the Andromaque to wish us a pleasant voyage, [a part of the French fleet] and to permit our captain, M. de Ravel, to set sail. We got under way at eleven o'clock, passed Cape Henry at two o'clock and afterwards brought it to bear east. The 'Hercule' escorted us until night.⁶

In the last view of the American Revolution we, as Americans, should turn to pay tribute to Admiral Francis Joseph Paul de Grasse, who was the outstanding hero at the siege of Yorktown. The importance of the arrival of De Grasse cannot be over estimated. Not only was the cooperation of the French fleet essential to Washington at Yorktown concerning the British Army, but it was equally as essential in breaking the stalemate in which the war had developed. With the French fleet came new thought for American independence.

⁶ My Campaigns in America, by Count William de Deux-Ponts, pp. 154-155.

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