

Charles Knowles (naval officer, first baronet, d. 1777)

Participation in the War of the Austrian Succession: *Battle of Cartagena de Indias, Battle of La Guaira, Battle of Puerto Cabello, Battle of Havana*



Figure 1: Portrait of the Honourable Charles Knowles Esq Vice Admiral of the Blue Squadron of His Majesty's fleet by Thomas Hudson

Neither the childhood nor the first years of Charles Knowles' career are known with any certainty. His career can be traced back to 1718 when he first served on HMS *Buckingham* and then on HMS *Lennox*. The highest rank he attained in the Royal Navy was that of *Admiral of the White* in 1765. In 1770, he left the Royal Navy at his own request and, in 1774, he served as Chief of the Surveying Branch in the Russian Navy. Parallel to his career as a naval officer, he was also politically active. He was governor of Louisbourg, which was conquered in the War of the Austrian Succession in 1745, for almost two years from 1746. Then, between 1749 and 1752, he was a Member of Parliament for Gatton, Surrey, and from 1752 to 1756, he served as the governor of Jamaica.¹

Knowles is particularly known for several unsuccessful expeditions against Spanish territories in the region around the West Indies during the *War of the Austrian Succession*, or more precisely, the War of Jenkins' Ear. Having already participated as a captain under Vice Admiral Edward Vernon in the *Battle of Porto Bello* in November 1739, Knowles also joined Vernon's fleet in the expedition to Cartagena de Indias between March and May in 1741.² In this context, he wrote the book *An Account of the Expedition to Carthage. With Explanatory Notes and Observations* (1743), providing valuable insights into the battle action.³ Later, in the spring of 1743, he led a squadron into the *Battle of La Guaira* (2 to 6 March 1743) and shortly afterwards into the *Battle of Puerto Cabello* (26 April - 5 May). Both La Guaira and Puerto Cabello were important military ports for the Spanish, and their destruction would have been a major victory for Great Britain. However, the Spanish proved to be stronger, and Knowles was forced to retreat in both cases.⁴ In a higher rank, Rear Admiral Knowles commanded "the British Caribbean squadron of 7 ships of the line"⁵ during the *Battle of Havana* on 12 October 1748, which was the last major sea battle in the *War of the Austrian Succession*. Knowles'

¹ cf. Laughton, John Knox: Knowles, Sir Charles, first baronet, 03.01.2008, in: Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/15765>, access: 07.03.2022.

² cf. *ibid.*

³ cf. Knowles, Charles: *An Account of the Expedition to Carthage, with Explanatory Notes and Observations*, London 1743.

⁴ Marley, David: *Wars of the Americas. A Chronology of Armed Conflict in the New World, 1492 to the Present*, Santa Barbara 1911, pp. 263-265.

⁵ Tucker, Spencer Coakley (Ed.): *A Global Chronology of Conflict. From the Ancient World to the Modern Middle East Vol. I*, Santa Barbara 2010, p. 755.

squadron encountered a Spanish treasure fleet consisting of six ships of the line and a frigate near Havana. Only one Spanish ship was captured; the others managed to escaped.⁶ „The Spanish flagship *Africa* hast to anchor because of damage before reaching port. Discovered by the English several days later, the ship is burned by its crew to prevent capture.”⁷ As a result of the failure in the Battle of Havana, Knowles faced legal proceedings at Deptford in December 1749, which issued a reprimand for the disorganised attack.⁸

Before the conclusion of his naval career in 1774, he took part in the *Seven Years' War* as a Vice Admiral in the failed expedition against Rochefort under Admiral Edward Hawke in 1757. Charles Knowles passed away in St Marylebone, Middlesex, Great Britain on 9 December 1777.⁹

Literature:

LAUGHTON, John Knox: Knowles, Sir Charles, first baronet, 03.01.2008, in: Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/15765>.

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Sources:

KNOWLES, Charles: An Account of the Expedition to Carthagena, with Explanatory Notes and Observations, London 1743.

⁶ cf. *ibid.*

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ cf. Oxford Dictionary: Knowles, Sir Charles [internet recourse].

⁹ cf. *ibid.*