

Edward Boscawen (naval officer and politician, 1711-1761)

Participation in the War of the Austrian Succession: Expedition to Cartagena de Indias, Privateering, First Battle of Cape Finisterre, Siege of Pondicherry



Figure 1: Admiral Edward Boscawen (1711-1761) by Joshua Reynolds

Edward Boscawen, born on 19 August 1711, joined the British Navy as a young man in 1726, first serving on HMS *Superb* in the waters around the West Indies. After being promoted on 25 May 1732, he held a post as lieutenant on the HM Ships *Hector* and *Grafton* and was subsequently appointed to the command of the *Leopard* and *Shoreham*.¹ As part of the Spanish-British War of Jenkins' Ear, which commenced in 1739 and merged into the War of the Austrian Succession as early as 1740, he was a volunteer during the successful attack on Porto Bello in November 1739, during which the British captured the Spanish territory.² At the outset of 1741, he took part in the expedition to Cartagena de Indias (Colombia) led by Admiral Edward Vernon (1684-1757).³ Cartagena de Indias was the target of the attack, as the Spanish had their galleons carrying valuable cargo in this town. Vernon was aware that the expedition was fraught with risk due to the difficult sea conditions and the military strength of the Spanish, so it was not surprising that the British were unsuccessful in this battle.⁴ Despite the failure, Boscawen was promoted a short time later. As captain of the HM Ships *Prince Frederick*, *Royal Sovereign*, *Drednought* and *Deptford*, he captured at first only Spanish merchant ships as part of the trade war. However, since the official declaration of war with France in March 1744, clearing the sea of French ships also became part of his mission. In April 1744, he captured the French ship *Medée*, which was renamed Boscawen in recognition of his achievements and was henceforth used as a privateer for Great Britain.

After Boscawen was appointed to the HMS *Namur* in 1746 and joined a fleet led by George Anson (naval officer and politician, 1697-1762), he participated in the *First Battle of Cape Finisterre*, which

¹ cf. Wilkinson, Clive: Boscawen, Edward, 03.01.2008, in: Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/2931>.

² cf. The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica: War of Jenkin's Ear, in: Encyclopaedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/event/War-of-Jenkins-Ear>.

The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica: The early Bourbons, 1700-53, in: Encyclopaedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Spain/The-early-Bourbons-1700-53>.
Oxford Dictionary: Boscawen [internet resource].

³ cf. Harding, Richard: Vernon, Edward, 03.01.2008, in: Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/28237>.

Oxford Dictionary: Boscawen [internet resource].

⁴ cf. Oxford Dictionary of National Biography: Vernon, Edward [internet resource].

occurred on 14 May 1747, during which the British captured a French squadron.⁵ In this engagement, Boscawen earned the respect of Anson, who recommended him for the position of rear admiral as a result. His promotion followed shortly thereafter.⁶ In his new role, Boscawen was assigned by the Admiralty to join an expedition to India with the objective of dismantling French military power in the eastern part of the world.⁷ The expedition's targets included all major bases and forts, such as Mauritius, Pondicherry and Chandannagar of West Bengal. Boscawen carried out his orders and set sail towards Pondicherry with a force of approximately 4,500 men and a fleet comprising more than 30 ships, thirteen of which were warships. The fleet reached its destination on 29 July 1748, where they encountered Joseph François Dupleix (1697-1763) and an unexpectedly substantial garrison of about 4,800⁸ or 3,500⁹ soldiers.¹⁰ At the time, Boscawen was unaware that the *War of Austrian Succession* had already more or less concluded with a provisional peace agreement, before the *Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle* was decided on 18 October 1748; Consequently, Boscawen proceeded with the attack, which ultimately ended in failure.¹¹

*He had no knowledge of soldiering and he lost his prime military advisors with the capture of Major Lawrence and the death of Major Goodere (the chief gunner) in an ill-conceived preliminary attack on a small fort outside Pondicherry. His engineers did not know their jobs – the ground broken for the siege batteries was too far away and in the wrong place to exploit the weaknesses of the French fortifications. Within a few days the monsoon broke unexpectedly early, swamped the trenches and spread disease. With 816 casualties (two-thirds from sickness), Boscawen was forced into a humiliating retreat. Two months later, before the monsoon was over when operations could have been resumed, news arrived of a provisional peace which, when confirmed, restored the situation to the status quo ante, except of course that the British Company was saddled with the cost of rebuilding Madras's defences and numerous houses, a process that took another three years to make it safe for them to return from fort St David.*¹²

Nevertheless, Boscawen's career did not conclude with the *War of the Austrian Succession*. On 22 June 1751, he was appointed commissioner of the Admiralty. "He had been advanced to the rank of [vice admiral] on 6 February 1755 and had developed an unshakeable reputation that was about to see him become one of the most important naval officers of the time."¹³ Boscawen succumbed to fever on 10

⁵ cf. Rodger, Nicholas Andrew Martin: Anson, George, Baron Anson, 24.05.2008, in Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/574>.

Oxford Dictionary: Boscawen, Edward [internet resource].

⁶ cf. Oxford Dictionary: Boscawen, Edward [internet resource].

⁷ cf. Ibid.

Bryant, G. J.: The Emergence of British Power in India 1600-1784. A Grand Strategic Interpretation (Worlds of the East India Company 9), Woodbridge 2013, p. 43.

⁸ cf. Petersen, Sven: Die belagerte Stadt. Alltag und Gewalt im Österreichischen Erbfolgekrieg (1740-1748), Frankfurt/ New York 2019, p. 344.

⁹ cf. The Emergence of British Power in India 1600-1784, p. 43.

¹⁰ cf. Die belagerte Stadt, p. 344.

¹¹ cf. The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica: Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle, in: Encyclopaedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Treaty-of-Aix-la-Chapelle>.

Die belagerte Stadt, p. 344.

¹² cf. The Emergence of British Power in India 1600-1784, p. 43.

¹³ cf. Oxford Dictionary: Boscawen, Edward [internet resource].

January 1761 in Hatchlands. He is considered one of the greatest naval officers in the history of the Royal Navy.¹⁴

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¹⁴ cf. Oxford Dictionary: Boscawen, Edward [internet resource].