

Edward Hawke (naval officer, politician, 1705-1781)

Participation in the War of the Austrian Succession: Privateering (Mediterranean), Battle of Toulon, Second Battle of Cape Finisterre



Figure 1: Portrait of British Admiral Edward Hawke, 1st Baron Hawke (1705-1781) by Francis Cotes

Edward Hawke, born in London in 1705, had a remarkably successful career in the Royal Navy. Not only did he reach the rank of admiral of the fleet, the highest officer rank in the Navy, on 15 January 1766, but he also served as the First Lord of the Admiralty from 11 December 1766 to January 1771 when he resigned from the office for health reasons.¹

Hawke began his naval career on 10 February 1720 as a volunteer on HMS *Seahorse*. In 1725 he was promoted to lieutenant and in the following years served on the HM Ships *Kinsale*, *Portland*, *Leopard* and *Edinburgh*. When the *War of Austrian Succession* broke out in 1740, Hawke had already held the rank of captain for several years. In the early years of the war, which included a contemporary trade war, he mainly escorted British merchant ships until he assumed command of HMS *Berwick* on 14 June 1743. With this ship, he joined the fleet of Admiral Thomas Mathews and vice admiral Richard Lestock in the Mediterranean, participating in the unsuccessful *Battle of Toulon* on 11 February 1744 as a captain in the vanguard.² Through the mistakes of his superiors “[...] Hawke had seen how important it was for an admiral to relate effectively to his captains and subordinate admirals, and provide them with clear and aggressive tactical guidance.”³ He also testified in the subsequent court cases in which he impressed King George II, whose support led to Hawke’s promotion to Rear Admiral of the White on 15 July 1744. On 5 August 1747, he rose to second-in-command in Peter Warren's fleet, and on 14 October, he commanded a squadron of that fleet from HMS *Devonshire* during the British-French *Second Battle of Cape Finisterre* on 25 October 1747.⁴ The accuracy of the battle’s name is debatable, because “[...]the battle was fought at an estimated distance of 300 miles west of Lorient and 350 miles north of Cape Finisterre.”⁵ Furthermore, the number of ships in the enemy convoy is also subject to dispute in the literature. The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography cites the number as 150 merchant ships and eight ships of the line, whereas in his book *A Global Chronology of Conflict. From the Ancient World to the Modern Middle*

¹ cf. Mackay, Ruddock: Hawke, Edward, first Baron Hawke, 03.01.2008, in: Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/12651>.

² cf. *ibid.*

³ Mackay, Ruddock/ Duffy, Michael: Hawke, Nelson, and British Naval Leadership, 1747-1805, Woodbridge 2009, p. 23.

⁴ cf. Hawke, Nelson, and British Naval Leadership, p. 29. Oxford Dictionary: Hawke, Edward [internet recourse].

⁵ Hawke, Nelson, and British Naval Leadership, p. 37.

East, Spencer Tucker describes a convoy of 250 merchant ships escorted by nine ships of the line and 14 frigates.⁶ Nevertheless, there is agreement that the French were superior to Hawke's squadron, consisting of 14 ships of the line.⁷ "The French ships had large complements compared with the British and they could man their guns on both sides."⁸ Despite this initial disadvantage, Hawke gave the order to attack and, after a battle lasting approximately eight hours, he achieved one of the most significant victories at sea during the *War of the Austrian Succession*.⁹ With the exception of two ships of the line, including the flagship, all the French warships were captured in the battle. The merchant ships, however, continued sailing towards their destination port of Martinique. Their escape was not final, as Hawke, somehow aware of their destination, immediately informed the Admiralty. Another British squadron then managed to capture 35 or 38 (again, there is disagreement) of these French merchant ships.¹⁰ On the other hand, it is worth noting that the British also suffered heavy losses and damage to their ships. Hawke himself was severely burned by an explosion of gunpowder.¹¹ The *Second Battle of Cape Finisterre* was Hawke's last major combat action during the *War of the Austrian Succession*, but it certainly enhanced his reputation for the period that followed. During the *Seven Years' War* (1756-1763) he was deployed to Minorca, Rochefort and the Basque Roads between 1756-1756, took part in the *Blockade of Brest* in 1759 and fought in the *Battle of Quiberon Bay* on 20 November 1759.¹²

Literature:

- MACKAY**, Ruddock/ Duffy, Michael: *Hawke, Nelson, and British Naval Leadership, 1747-1805*, Woodbridge 2009.
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- TUCKER**, Spencer Coakley (Ed.): *A Global Chronology of Conflict. From the Ancient World to the Modern Middle East Vol. I*, Santa Barbara 2010, p. 754.

⁶ cf. *Oxford Dictionary: Hawke, Edward* [internet recourse].

Tucker, Spencer Coakley (Ed.): *A Global Chronology of Conflict. From the Ancient World to the Modern Middle East Vol. I*, Santa Barbara 2010, p. 754.

⁷ cf. *ibid.*

⁸ *Hawke, Nelson, and British Naval Leadership*, p. 39.

⁹ cf. *A Global Chronology of Conflict*, p. 754.

Hawke, Nelson, and British Naval Leadership, p. 37.

¹⁰ cf. *Hawke, Nelson, and British Naval Leadership*, p. 37.

Oxford Dictionary: Hawke, Edward [internet recourse].

¹¹ *Hawke, Nelson, and British Naval Leadership*, p. 40.

¹² cf. *Oxford Dictionary: Hawke, Edward* [internet recourse].