

Richard Lestock (naval officer, approx. 1679-1746)

Participation in the War of the Austrian Succession: Privateering (Mediterranean), Battle of Toulon, Raid on Lorient

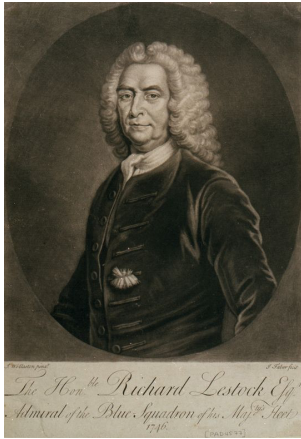


Figure 1: Portrait of the Honble Richard Lestock Esq. Admiral of the Blue Squadron of his Majesty's Fleet 1746 by John Faber Junio

The exact date of birth for Richard Lestock is uncertain, but there are indications pointing to 22 February 1679. A career as a naval officer seemed to be in his blood, as his father, bearing the same name, was not only a magistrate for Middlesex but also a captain in the British Navy. In 1701, Lestock commenced his service as a lieutenant on HMS *Cambridge*, under the command of his father. He later served in this role on the ships *Solebay*, *Exeter* and *Barfleur* before being promoted to captain of the fireship *Vulture* in 1705. As captain, or at least second captain, he also commanded the HM Ships *Fowey*, *Weymouth*, *Barfleur*, *Princess Amelia*, *Royal Oak*, *Somerset*, *Grafton Nore*, *Boyne* and *Princess Carolona* until 1741.¹ With these ships, he not only took action against piracy but patrolled British merchant ships and captured numerous enemy merchant vessels. With the

outbreak of the *War of the Austrian Succession*, Lestock was dispatched to the Mediterranean as commander of HMS *Neptune*. This was followed by a promotion to rear admiral on 13 March 1742, and shortly afterward, he assumed the role of acting commander-in-chief in the Mediterranean. However, despite his hopes, Lestock did not rise to the rank of the first commander. His personal rival, Thomas Mathews, rose to that position and demanded Lestock's recall shortly after his own arrival. Whether Lestock was indeed recalled remains a matter of dispute. What is certain is that on 29 November 1743, he was promoted to vice admiral and appointed second in command behind Mathews. In this capacity, he took part in the naval *Battle of Toulon* on 22 February 1744 as commander of the squadron's rear. In the subsequent court case, Lestock was not only acquitted despite numerous accusations through the help of his political friends and his eloquence, but he was also promoted to admiral of the blue two days after the judge's verdict of 3 June 1746.² In this position, he commanded a large squadron alongside James St. Clair, with which he led the *Raid on Lorient* between September and October 1746. Lorient was chosen as the target of Lestock's and St Clair's expedition, because the French East India Company had stored provisions there, and their ships were

¹ cf. Oxford Dictionary: Mathews, Thomas [internet recourse].

² cf. Oxford Dictionary: Mathews, Thomas [internet recourse].
Oxford Dictionary: Lestock, Richard [internet recourse].

docked in the harbour.³ However, the attack more or less failed: Although the British managed to destroy the fort of Quiberon, a bay near Lorient, the fighting conditions were unfavorable due to numerous illnesses among the British forces. In addition, the French had successfully received military reinforcements, leading to the British force's withdrawal to England on 17 October 1746. This marked the last known military engagement of Lestock, who died on 13 December 1746 due to a stomach.⁴

Literature:

BAUGH, Daniel Albert: Lestock, Richard, 23.09.2004, in: Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/16506>.

BAUGH, Daniel Albert: Mathews, Thomas, 03.01.2008, in: Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/18332>.

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The enemy between Thomas Mathews and Richard Lestock

One reason for the failure of the *Battle of Toulon* on 22 February 1744 can certainly be attributed to the negative personal relationship between Thomas Mathews and Richard Lestock, which was reflected in their disagreements during this act of war. The strained relationship began around 1736 when Mathews served as commissioner at Chatham, and Lestock was in charge of the local guardships.⁵ For Lestock, who was then acting as commander-in-chief in the Mediterranean and harbored aspirations of becoming commander-in-chief, it must have been sobering when Mathews, of all people, was promoted to this position in 1743. Conversely, Mathews was not particularly enthusiastic about his vice admiral and attempted to have him recalled, citing issues with performance and health conditions. Following the events of the *Battle of Toulon*, a conflict developed between Mathews and Lestock that not only entailed a long-running court case but also divided the general public. Mathews accused Lestock of disregarding the order for line positioning, creating a gap in the blockade, and also of prematurely withdrawing from the action of the war, despite having a real opportunity to capture Spanish ships. Lestock, on the other side, defended himself by accusing Mathews of unclear commands and exhibiting poor leadership. Opponents of Lestock, however, claimed that he deliberately left the battle because of the personal enmity and wanted to see Mathews fail.

Hundreds of witnesses were brought home from the Mediterranean for the courts martial. Seven captains and four lieutenants were tried in 1745 at Chatham, where the trials of the admirals were feverishly

³ cf. Spain, Jonathan: Sinclair [St Clair], James, 23.09.2004, in: Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/25622>.

⁴ cf. *ibid.*

Oxford Dictionary: Lestock, Richard [internet recourse].

⁵ Oxford Dictionary: Lestock, Richard [internet recourse].

anticipated. For two days in October the yard was at a standstill as the workers 'assembled at the dock gate, to the number of about eight hundred, and examined everyone that went in or out whether for Mathews or Lestock, and were all strong for Mr Mathews'. The Board of Admiralty, pondering whether there might be riots 'if upon the courts martial it should appear that Mr Lestock has not been so much to blame as thought and Mr Mathews should be found guilty', ordered the venue changed to Deptford.⁶

In the history of admiralty courts, there have rarely been cases of such magnitude. Moreover, the outcome of the several years of legal proceedings in the summer of 1746 must be considered surprising. While Mathews was found guilty, Lestock was acquitted of all charges – a fact that might not have been pleasing to Mathews in many respects.⁷

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⁶ cf. Oxford Dictionary: Mathews, Thomas [internet recourse].

⁷ cf. *ibid.*

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