

Thomas Mathews (naval officer, 1676-1751)

**Participation in the War of the Austrian Succession: Privateering (Mediterranean), Battle of Toulon**



Figure 1: Portrait of Admiral Thomas Mathews (1676-1751) by Claude Arnulphy

Thomas Mathews, born in October 1676, joined the British Navy at the age of fourteen. After his promotion to lieutenant on the HMS *Boyne* in 1699 and on HMS *Deal Castle* in 1701, he participated in the successful expedition aboard the HMS *Chester* to the French-occupied Nova Scotia in 1710 as part of the *War of the Spanish Succession*.<sup>1</sup> With the signing of the *Peace of Utrecht* in 1713, which ended the *War of the Spanish Succession*, Nova Scotia came under British rule. However, it faced further disputes during the *War of the Austrian Succession*, starting with the French *Raid on Canso* in May 1744.<sup>2</sup> Following his involvement in the failed attack on Quebec under the command of Admiral Sir Hovenden Walker (naval officer, prob. 1666-1725) in 1711, Mathews took a brief career break; He returned to duty as captain of HMS *Kent* in 1718.<sup>3</sup> He rose to the rank of squadron commander, and in this role, he took action against piracy in the Indian Ocean. It is assumed that he willingly took on the task with the intention of increasing his wealth, as in 1724, the directors of the company charged him for receiving merchandise on board without permission, but the court case was dropped in 1728. Nevertheless, this did not mark the lowest point in his career: Having served as dockyard commissioner at Chatham since 1736, Mathews was called back to sea after the outbreak of the *War of the Austrian Succession in 1740*. „With Britain at war with Spain and war with France likely, Mathews [...] was promoted at one step on 13 March 1742 vice admiral of the red [...], and was also made commander-in-chief in the Mediterranean, and plenipotentiary to the king of Sardinia and the states of Italy.“<sup>4</sup> Since Great Britain was allied with the Habsburg Maria Theresa, Mathews was tasked with taking action against Spain, which sought to assert its claim to the Habsburg territories in Italy with the support of its allies France and the Republic of Genoa. Mathews' area of operation was mainly focused on the coastal route between Marseille and Genoa. After an allied Spanish-French fleet set sail on 21 February 1744, the *Battle of Toulon* occurred the following day, triggering the dramatic end of Mathews' career. On the day before the battle, Mathews commanded his squadron to form a line with the aim of creating a

<sup>1</sup> Bough, Daniel Albert: Mathews, Thomas, 03.01.2008, in: Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/18332>.

<sup>2</sup> cf. *ibid*.

The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica: War of the Spanish Succession summary, in: Encyclopedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/summary/War-of-the-Spanish-Succession>.

<sup>3</sup> Loughton, John Knox/ Davies, J. D.: Walker, Sir Hovendan, 03.01.2008, in: Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/28487>.

<sup>4</sup> Oxford Dictionary: Mathews, Thomas [internet recourse].

blockade for the enemy fleet, preventing it from continuing its journey. Rear Admiral William Rowley led the van of the squadron, Mathews commanded the centre and his personal rival Richard Lestock led the rear. While the van and the centre executed the order, the rear drifted several miles away from the squadron on 21 February, creating a gap that could not be closed even on the day of the battle on 22 February. When the Spanish fleet threatened to escape, Mathews reluctantly initiated the battle without waiting for the rear to close the gap. During the action, four Spanish ships unintentionally drifted to the point where Lestock's ships could have captured them, but Lestock allowed them to escape without engaging in hostilities. Lestock's actions during the battle led to a correspondence between him and Mathews, which began with Lestock's suspension and culminated in a significant court case, resulting in Mathews' career downfall. Mathews was found guilty as the main culprit for the battle's failure in October 1746 and was relieved of his post.<sup>5</sup> „As the result of the battle the blockade was fairly broken; reinforcements and supplies were sent to the Spanish army in Italy, and the course of the war was turned in favour of the allies. But what specially enraged the people of England was the too evident fact that the English fleet had met a Franco-Spanish fleet of inferior force, and had gained no decisive advantage over it, if, indeed, it had not been worsted.“<sup>6</sup>

Despite numerous voices claiming otherwise as a result of setbacks such as the naval *Battle of Toulon*, his career bears witness to diligence, commitment and success. From 1745, Mathews held a seat in the House of Commons as member of Parliament for Glamorgan, which he resigned at the end of the court case but resumed in 1747, representing the Borough of Caranthen. He held this office until his death in London on 2 October 1751.<sup>7</sup>

### 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>.
- LAUGHTON**, John Knox/ Davies, J. D.: Walker, Sir Hovendan, 03.01.2008, in: Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/28487>.
- LAUGHTON**, John Knox: Mathews, Thomas, in: Leslie Stephen/ Sidney Lee: Dictionary of National Biography Vol. 37, London 1894.
- THE EDITORS OF ENCYCLOPEDIA BRITANNICA**: War of the Spanish Succession summary, in: Encyclopedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/summary/War-of-the-Spanish-Succession>.
- TUCKER**, Spencer Coakley (Ed.): A Global Chronology of Conflict. From the Ancient World to the Modern Middle East Vol. I, Santa Barbara 2010.

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<sup>5</sup> cf. Oxford Dictionary: Mathews, Thomas [internet recourse].

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

Tucker, Spencer Coakley (Ed.): A Global Chronology of Conflict. From the Ancient World to the Modern Middle East Vol. I, Santa Barbara 2010, p. 743.

The literature gives different dates for the Battle of Havana (T. C. Spencer, p 743: 22. February 1744), which could be attributed to the switch from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar.

<sup>6</sup> Laughton, John Knox: Mathews, Thomas, in: Leslie Stephen/ Sidney Lee: Dictionary of National Biography 37, London 1894, p. 45.

<sup>7</sup> cf. Oxford Dictionary: Mathews, Thomas [internet recourse].