

CHAPTER I – ESTABLISHMENT AND STRUCTURE OF THE SPANISH NAVY

The Aftermath of the War of the Spanish Succession

After Charles II's death without successors, his testament in favor of the French Duke of Anjou was not accepted by either England, Holland or Austria. The future Philip V had the obvious support of his grandfather King Louis XIV, but Spain was divided into those who favored the Bourbon monarch and those who supported the Hapsburg pretender, the Archduke Charles of Austria.

The outbreak of the War of the Spanish Succession took the French Squadrons deployed in the Atlantic and Mediterranean by surprise. A 50-ship Dutch-British fleet took advantage of the situation in the Atlantic under command of Sir George Rooke with a twofold goal: the seizure of the so-called 'Silver Fleet' from the West Indies and the occupation of the city of Cádiz, one of the most important maritime strongholds in the Atlantic. The Earl of Fernán Núñez successfully defended the city with his armed galleys and land artillery, but on September 23rd 1702, the Fleet from America loaded with treasures, and poorly defended by French ships commanded by Chateaurenat, was completely destroyed and sunk off the coast of Vigo (NW Spain).

French supremacy backing the future King Philip V came to a halt when Sir George Rooke crossed the Strait of Gibraltar and engaged in a fierce battle off the coast of Málaga. The rock of Gibraltar was conquered on August 4th 1704 followed by the important naval bases of Cartagena, Majorca, Naples, Sardinia and Oran. At the end of intense battles all over Europe, the French candidate was accepted as King of Spain but to compensate such an election, large historical territories were lost. On April 11th 1713 the Treaty of Utrecht was signed by both sides but Spain lost most of its European territories, Menorca and Gibraltar.

The 'Royal Armada'

The naval consequences derived from the conflict were quite significant. It was of paramount importance to try and rebuild a capable and modern naval service to safely maintain the traffic to and from America.

The so-called 'Royal Armada' brought together for the first time all the different squadrons scattered all over the peninsula now that most European territories had been lost. On February 21st 1714, a Royal Decree established, what was later officially known as, the Spanish Navy (*Real Armada*), mainly centered on the defense of the Spanish coasts and the Atlantic Ocean routes.

In order to join the competence and expertise of soldiers and seamen in one single professional corps of servicemen, the Secretary of State José Patiño set up the Royal Company of Midshipmen to train future naval officers. They became both capable sailors and expert military men.

However, and since Austrian troops were easily expelled from Sardinia, José Patiño decided to move forward and reconquer the isle for the Spanish Crown with a large fleet and 30,000 infantry and cavalry men. This incident forced the other European powers to fight back the expansionist desires of the new monarchy. A fourfold alliance was set up and a British fleet encountered and defeated the Spanish forces in Sicily. Great Britain declared war to Spain once again.

Patiño and his Naval Plans

The much needed structural reforms did not yield fruit until decades later. In order to reduce imports as much as possible, for example, guilds that had been neglected were given a new boost like hemp plantations for the manufacturing of ropes and canvas for the sails, naval blacksmiths, etc.

The combat of smuggling and illegal trafficking in the Indies was also given priority establishing a constabulary force in Cuba.

Naval shipbuilding was encouraged with ad-hoc budgets with a standard design based on a 60-gun boat as the backbone of the Navy. This design was so successful that it was subsequently copied by British shipbuilders when they seized the 'Princesa' which finally surrendered after a 7-hour combat with three British warships off Cape Prior.

Shipyards were more orderly set up in strategic areas like Santander and Havana which greatly contributed to build a well-organized and well-maned navy. The main headquarters were in Cádiz. Following Patiño's death, the Navy had built 34 ships of the line, an important step forward after a navy that had been neglected over the previous years.

Tactics and weapons

In the 18th century, all State affairs went through the King's office, advised by his Secretary and Council. In 1714 the Navy Secretariat was established to deal with the growing importance of American issues since all relations with the overseas territories were necessarily maritime.

Combat squadrons in the 18th century were made up of the so-called ships of the line; that is, ships ready to join the line of a combat. These ships had double gun batteries in two decks and fought in line trying to break the enemy's formations. After the artillery combat, the boarding for a hand-to-hand fighting followed.

With the available ordnance of those days, ships of similar characteristics typically spent hours firing at each other until one of them was badly damaged and could not continue the fight. There are examples in history where combats had to be postponed at nightfall because of lack of light.

Small fire arms were begun to be used during boarding operations like spark rifles, muskets, blunderbusses and pistols but sailors used mainly swords and spears.