

It Starts With A Jug

Pauline Duinker February 18th, 2006

I see in the newsletter that I am supposed to tell you a "Jug Story". Well it does sort of start with a jug, but I would like to tell you about the sea battle it commemorates and the famous Cornish man who won the battle.

I am sorry I cannot show you the jug as it is still in the U.K. with my nephew who would not let me have it to bring here but I can show you photos.
(Sorry, not available)

As you can see it has pictures of ships on either side and commemorates the engagement on June 18th, 1793 between the "Nymphe" 32 guns, 250 men and the "La Cleopatre" 40 guns, 320 men. This information is on a banner over the picture of the French ship, the other side has the "Nymphe" flying the flag of St. George and shows a very busy battle.



Before I go any further, I should give you an idea of the provenance of the jug itself, which has been in my family for many years (probably the 213 years since this event).

My father had it and my grandfather before him who must have inherited it from his mother, Joanna, who spent her later widowed years in his home. She was born in 1824, the daughter of Edward Thomas, who was born 1793 the year of the encounter, who was a ropemaker in Fowey. He was the son of James Thomas, also a roper whose Ropewalk made the best rope for Nelson's Navy. According to his Will, Joanna's maternal grandfather George Williams, was a "mariner of Fowey" who would have been about 22 at the time of the depicted battle so I wondered if he had been on the "Nympe". I searched muster lists but that did not seem to be the case, so I think the jug was acquired because of general Cornish interest in the event.

This type of inexpensive jug, about 8" high was commonly used to take ale home from the tavern. The "little brown jug" of the old song. Transfer printing on china or stoneware had been introduced earlier the century so they were sometimes decorated with scenes or portraits of famous people or events. The Maritime Museum at Greenwich has a collection of them with famous seamen — Nelson of course — ships and battles. This had been the first encounter of the new war with France and the victory was hailed as a good omen all over the country. This Jug would have been a popular memento for Cornish people to buy.

I was curious about the pictured encounter and further research showed that it was a very Cornish victory. The captain of the "Nympe" was Edward Pellew, a descendant of Cornish seafarers who was born in Dover in 1757 and brought up in Penzance and schooled in Truro. His father, a Packet Captain died when he was 8. At the age of 13 he went into the Navy, he did well and in 1782 became post captain, but in 1783 the War of American Independence during which the French supported the Americans against the British, came to an end.

For the next 10 years there was peace in Europe. For some of this time Pellew commanded a Frigate on the Newfoundland station but then was ashore on half pay and experimented with farming near Falmouth and also became a member of the Truro Corporation.

On the outbreak of war with Revolutionary France in 1793 he was assigned to the frigate "Nympe". She was fitted out at Spithead but Pellew anticipating

difficulty in manning her enlisted about 80 Cornish miners. He had his officer and about 12 seamen and by raiding merchant vessels he got together about 240 men. Very few of them had ever fired a musket or worked a cannon or knew anything of cutlass drill.

This then was the situation on board when the "Nymphe" went to sea. There is a much better description of what happened next written in "The Naval History of Great Britain" by W. James in 1826 only 33 years after the event. If any of you have seen the T.V. series with all those sea battles, think "Hornblower"! There are several names mentioned in this account, maybe someone here will recognize a family connection.

"On the 17th June the British 12 pounder 36 gun frigate Nymphe, Captain Edward Pellew sailed from Falmouth. Having, in his way up the Channel, arrived nearly abreast of Start Point, Captain Pellew ran out to the southward in the hope to fall in with two French frigates which before had been chased into Cherbourg. Next day the 18th at 3.30 a.m. a sail was discovered in the S.E. quarter. At 4.00 a.m. the Nymphe bore up in chase under all sail, the stranger which was the French frigate Cleopatre carrying a press of canvas, either to get away, or to prepare for action.

At 5.00 a.m., finding that the Nymphe had the advantage in sailing, the Cleopatre hauled up her foresail and lowered her topgallant sails, bravely awaiting the coming up of her opponent. At about 6.00 a.m., the Nymphe approaching near, the Cleopatre hailed her; but Captain Pellew, not hearing distinctly what was said, replied only by the usual "Ho! Ho!" an exclamation instantaneously followed by three cheers from the crew of the Nymphe. Captain Mullan, upon this, came to the gangway, and, waving his, exclaimed, "Vive la nation!" and the crew of the Cleopatre, at the same time, put forth a sound, which was meant for an imitation of the cheers of the British.

At 6 h. 15 m. a.m., the Nymphe having reached a position from which her foremost guns would bear on the starboard quarter of the Cleopatre, Captain Pellew, whose hat, like that of the French captain, was still in his hand, raised it to his head, the pre-concerted signal for the Nymphe's artillery to open.. A furious action now commenced, the two frigates still running before the wind, within rather less than hailing distance of each other. At about 6 h. 30 m. the Cleopatre suddenly hauled up eight points from the wind; and, before 7 a.m., her mizenmast (about 12 feet above the deck) and wheel, in succession, were

shot away.

In consequence of this double disaster, the French frigate, at about 7 a.m., paid round off, and shortly afterwards fell on board of her antagonist, her jib-boom passing between the *Nymphe's* fore and main masts, and pressing so hard against the head of the already wounded mainmast, that it was expected every instant to fall; especially, as the main and spring stays had both been shot away. Fortunately, however, for the *Nymphe*, the jib boom broke in two, and the mast kept its place.

After this, the two frigates fell alongside, head and stern, but were still held fast, the *Cleopatre's* larboard main-topmast-studdingsail boom-iron having hooked the larboard leech-rope of the *Nymphe's* main topsail. Here again was danger to the mainmast. In an instant a maintop man, names Burgess, sprang aloft, and cut away the leech-rope from the end of the main yard; and, while that was doing, as an additional means of getting the ships apart, Lieutenant Pellowe, by Captain Pellew's orders, cut away and let drop the best bower anchor.

During these important operations, no relaxation had occurred, on the part of the British at least, in the main purpose for which the two ships had met. Soon after they had come in contact in the manner we have related, the *Cleopatre* was gallantly boarded by a portion of the *Nymphe's* crew; one man of whom, at 7 h. 10 m a.m.; hauled down the republican colours. The firing now ceased; and it was just as the last of 150 prisoners had been removed into the *Nymphe*, that the two ships separated.

The loss on board the *Cleopatre*, in killed and wounded together, out of a crew, as certified by her surviving offices, of 320 men and boys, amounted to 63. Among the wounded, were included the ship's three lieutenants; and, among her killed, was the truly gallant captain Mullan. A round shot had torn open his back and carried away the greater part of his left hip. It is related that, having the list of coast-signals adopted by the French, in one of his pockets, Captain Mullan, during his short agonies, drew forth a paper which he imagined was the right one, (but which really was not), and died biting it to pieces. Here was a trait of heroism! And yet no French writer, as far as we can discover, has recorded the fact.

If length of service and nautical experience are to be taken into the account, the odds were in favour of the *Cleopatre*; her crew having been upwards of a twelvemonth in commission, while crew of the *Nymphe* had been very

recently assembled, and that without any opportunity of selection. Still, the numbers 50 and 63, for the killed and wounded of the two crews, show that, in practical gunnery, they were nearly upon a par; and both combatants displayed, throughout the contest, an equal share of bravery and determination. *

On the 21st the *Nymphe* arrived at Portsmouth with her prize; and, on the 29th, captain Edward Pellew, along with his brother, captain Israel Pellew, who happened to be on board the *Nymphe* during the action, was introduced by the earl of Chatham to George III. His late majesty was thereupon pleased to confer on one brother the honour of knighthood, and on the other, the rank of post-captain. The *Nymphe*'s first lieutenant, Amherst Morris, received, also, from the board of admiralty the step that was his due; and the second and third lieutenants, George Luke and Richard Pellowe, appear likewise to have distinguished themselves. The *Cleopatre*, being a fine little frigate, was purchased by the British government; and, under the name of *Oiseau*, (a *Cleopatra* already in the service,) became a cruising 36 of the 12-pounder class.

- It is seldom we read in a Paris newspaper, a paragraph announcing the capture of a French ship of war, couched in such terms as these: "Les Anglais nous on enleve dernièrement la superbe frigate las *Cleopatre*. Elle a ete prise par une frigate d'egale force. – *Abreviateur Universel*, Juillet 16, 1793. (Extracts from *The Naval History of Great Britain 1826*, Vol 1 W. James)

Since the *Cleopatra* was purchased there would have been prize money for all the ship's company. Richard Pearce, the Masters Mate who was killed must have been Cornish and also known to the Pellew family as Captain Pellew wrote to his older brother Samuel, who was a collector of customs at Flushing, "I cannot write to poor Pearce's mother for my life – do send her a note – I really cannot. I loved him poor fellow and he deserved it." He also wrote of how much he owed to their younger brother Israel who had taken command of some of the guns and his encouraging example to a young ship's crew.

By now I was learning a lot about Edward Pellew. Among other things, during the War of American Independence he, with a small party of seamen was attached to the Army under Burgoyne and fought at Saratoga where his younger brother John was killed and he with the whole force was taken prisoner.

Two years after the encounter of the *Nymphe* and *Cleopatra*, Sir Edward

Pellew was moved to the "Indefatigable". Then, in January 1796 the "Indefatigable" was in Plymouth for refit when on the afternoon of January 26th "The Dutton", a transport bound for the West Indies, was caught in a violent storm and driven into Plymouth Sound where she lay dismasted and beaten to pieces. The captain and senior officers were ashore and those on-board unequal to the emergency. Pellew was in a coach with his wife on their way to a dinner engagement when he saw the crowds gathered. When he saw what was happening, he went down to the beach, succeeded in getting aboard and took command. His well-known name, calmness and energy – not to mention his drawn sword – gave confidence to those on the wreck although things were made difficult because the soldiers had got at the liquor and many were drunk. Eventually hawsers were got ashore, cradles and traveling ropes contrived and with the assistance of a cutter that had come alongside all were saved before the ship broke up. There were over 500 people, seamen, soldiers and their families. He was deservedly praised, Plymouth voted him the freedom of the town and he was created a Baronet.

Pellew remained on the "Indefatigable" fighting many battles, and then in 1799 he was moved to the "Impetueux" where he was able to avert a mutiny. There was a mutinous mood in the whole fleet at this time in the endless war. He was now with the Channel Fleet during which time he was sent with a strong squadron to Quiberon Bay to support a French Royalist rising, which did not materialize.

Following the brief Peace of Amiens, he was back at home and was elected M.P. for Barnstable but in 1803 the war was renewed and once again he was back at sea. In 1804 he was promoted to Rear Admiral and appointed Commander-in-Chief in the East Indies. This involved protecting British trade routes and often fighting Malay pirates. He did not return until after Nelson had won his great victory at Trafalgar. I wonder if he regretted not being there, his brother Israel who also became an admiral took the surrender of the Commander of the defeated French fleet.

As Captain and Admiral Pellew was always careful of the health and comfort of the men under his command. Although he was determined to enforce strict discipline, he knew that usually frequency of punishment was a sign of unsatisfactory discipline, so soon after arriving in India he required a monthly return of discipline from all ships under his command. The Admiralty seeing the good effect of this order adopted it for the whole service. It is seen as the first step in "the milder and more effective system of discipline which has since prevailed".

In 1810 he was commander-in-chief in the North Sea blockading the enemy fleet in the Scheldt and the following year was continuing the war in the Mediterranean. In May of 1814 Pellew was raised to the Peerage as Baron Exmouth of Canonteign which was the name of the estate he had bought in Devon. In June he became Admiral of the Blue. At the end of the war when Napoleon was exiled to Elba Lord Exmouth returned to England but once again was back at sea when "Bony" escaped the following year.

By international agreement at the Congress of Vienna in 1816, the 'old sea dog' was appointed to command a difficult operation in the Mediterranean to suppress the trade in Christian slaves carried on by the Barbary States of Tripoli, Tunis and Algiers. The stronghold of Algiers was selected for attack and at daybreak a note was sent demanding, among other things, the abolition of Christian slavery and the release of all slaves. When no reply came by afternoon Exmouth signaled to move in to attack. A Dutch fleet of 5 frigates that had joined them in Gibraltar helped them; they played an important diversionary role in the battle that ensued.

The fire from the ships and return fire from the shore batteries continued for 8 hours until the batteries were silenced and in ruins as was most of the town. Next morning a message was sent to Exmouth that his demands were granted. About 3000 slaves, mostly Spanish and Italian, were liberated and sent to their own countries.

It was felt throughout Europe that the victory was Christian rather than English and many States awarded him great honours. In England he was made a Viscount, given freedom of the City of London and became Commander-in-Chief in Plymouth. This was his last big battle and after 1821 he had no further service and apart from occasionally attending Parliament, he retired to Canonteign near Teignmouth where he died on 23rd June 1833 age 76.

Edward Pellew had married Susan Frowde in 1783, in the period between wars and before the encounter with the Celopatra. He had 2 daughters and 4 sons. The eldest who became the 2nd Viscount he had named Pownell Bastard after a much-admired captain under whom he had served in the Apollo. Captain Pownell had been killed in an engagement with a French privateer but Pellew took command and continued the action. The 2nd son, Sir Fleetwood Pellew was in the Navy, first going to sea as a boy in his father's ship. He also became an Admiral but does not seem to have had the qualities of leadership of his father. The 3rd son George had a career in the Church as

did the youngest son Edward.

Edward Pellew was a tall and handsome man, active and strong. He was a good swimmer — most sailors were not — and repeatedly saved life by jumping overboard, once from the foreyard of the *Blonde*. Several times in storm or battle when the seamen quailed before some dangerous piece of work, he either did it himself or set an example, which the men felt bound to follow. He was a man of great courage and ability.



There are several portraits of Edward Pellew, two in the National Portrait Gallery and one at Greenwich. One as a Captain by the Cornish painter Opie. Like other Cornish seamen before him Viscount Exmouth had expressed a wish to be buried at sea — "to be buried in a clean hammock in the pure element of salt water". But this was not to be as he was buried at Christow near his home with the flag that had flown from his ship in his last great battle for the slaves off the Barbary Coast covering his coffin.

Pellew References:

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