

English Naval Tactics

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When Henry VIII began his reformation of the English Church in the 1530's, his relations with the two most powerful Catholic rulers, Francis I of France and Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor, reached their low point. In 1538, these two monarchs ended their fighting with the Peace of Nice, and it appeared to England that they were the target of the two continental powers. With war threatening, Henry began to modernize England's defences. The first line of defence was the Royal Fleet and by 1543, when war with France broke out, it was the most powerful naval squadron in Europe, its ships armed with the latest bronze and iron guns. Improvements in sailing technology made these ships vastly superior to those that Henry inherited from his father. English naval leaders were beginning to realise that there was a growing gap between advancing naval technology and current concepts of naval tactics.

England, unlike most European countries, had always used a fleet that was made up primarily of sailing ships and had never made any very extensive use of galleys. But, these ships were only used for transporting men-at-arms and longbowmen to the site of the battle. The Battle of Sluys, fought by Edward III in 1340, is typical of this kind of fighting. The introduction of artillery aboard English ships (probably during the reign of Henry V) did not change the basic tactical premise; close on the enemy as quickly as possible and board. These were the tactics that characterised Henry VIII's first war with France in 1512-1513. A brief discussion of this war will be useful in understanding how English tactical thought evolved during Henry's reign.

Although the 1512-1513 war was fought primarily at sea, there was only one full scale fleet engagement. An English fleet of twenty-five ships, under the command of Sir Edward Howard, engaged a French fleet of twenty-two ships, commanded by Admiral Rene de Clermont, off Brest on August 10, 1513. Both fleets were well equipped with artillery, mostly small serpentines, the predecessor of the base. But, there was some heavy artillery present. The Mary Rose, Howard's flagship, carried fifteen heavy guns, as did the Cordeliere, one of the largest French men-of-war.¹

The battle opened with both fleets formed in a line abreast. This formation did not last long as ships from both sides sprang forward in a race to see who would have the honor of being the first to engage the enemy. Howard attacked the French flagship, while the rest of the English fleet engaged various Frenchmen in no particular order or formation. The battle no longer resembled a planned military operation, instead it was a brawl fought between individual ships.²

The English were superior in gunnery, and many French ships were damaged early in the action. Clermont's ship, the Louise, lost her mainmast in action against Howard and was forced to retire.³ With her fled most of the remaining French ships, and only two, the Cordeliere and the nef de Dieppe, remained. Both ships had been very closely engaged with the English and could not disengage. The nef de Dieppe fought for seven hours against five English ships until she was finally able to escape.⁴ The Cordeliere was not so lucky. She successfully resisted a boarding attempt by the Sovereign and the Mary James, but she was finally boarded by the crew of the Regent, the largest ship in the English fleet. The English were eventually able to enter the Cordeliere, but before they could capture her, a disastrous fire broke out aboard

the French man-of-war. Tradition has it that a French gunner set the fire, but since the situation was still in doubt, it seems more likely that it was accidental. The Cordeliere was soon in flames and the Regent was too tightly grappled to her to get away. Both ships were soon engulfed in flames and only one hundred and twenty English and twenty French were rescued.⁵

Although this battle will remain a footnote in most studies of the Tudor period, it was very important in the development of the English Navy. This was the first battle fought by an English fleet in which gunpowder played an important - if not decisive - role. The damage done to the French flagship by the guns of the Mary Rose forced the French Admiral to retire. The remainder of the French fleet lost heart and those that could followed the retreat of their leader. It is obvious that the preferred tactic of the English was to board the French ships in the time honored fashion. Both sides protected themselves from boarding attempts by covering the top deck with a net. Anti-boarding nets of this kind can be clearly seen on the ship portraits on Anthony's Roll. Individual missile weapons, the crossbow for the French and the longbow for the English were also important in preventing boarding.

But it was gunpowder and the addition of artillery that made it very difficult for the enemy to board. A large number of breech loading swivel guns, each with several chambers, combined with the larger guns would make any boarding attempt by the enemy bloody work. The nef de Dieppe successfully defended herself for over seven hours against five English ships, her fire power was strong enough to prevent boarding.⁶

Another major factor in the battle was the improvement in sailing made possible by using a full ship rig. The improved handling ability of these vessels made it easier for a ship to avoid a boarding action. Before she was boarded by the Regent, the Cordeliere successfully outmanoeuvred both the Mary James and the Sovereign.⁷

The warship was undergoing transition. In the past, it served the crew as a transport to the site of battle. With the introduction of artillery, this situation was changing to the point where the ship was the main offensive weapon and its crew served it. Although, as we shall see, boarding was still the preferred tactic of the English admirals, the process that was to make firepower supreme was underway, to reach its peak nearly three hundred years later at the Battle of Trafalgar.

The lessons of the battle fought off Brest were clear: If Henry's admirals expected to win an action by successfully boarding the enemy, new tactics would have to be developed that would allow the English ships to use their guns to the best advantage, to overcome enemy fire, and finally board the enemy.

The first known set of fighting instructions that reflected the results of the war of 1512-1513 appeared around 1530.⁸ They were written at the King's command by Thomas Audley.⁹ Audley was a lawyer and had never commanded a ship. According to Julian S. Corbett, in his introduction to *Fighting Instructions, 1530-1816*, Audley drafted these instructions from long established precedents and they represented "the last word in England of the purely medieval time, before the development of gunnery ... had sown the seeds of more modern tactics."¹⁰ While parts of the fighting instructions dealing with discipline, internal order, and prizes may indeed be medieval

in origin, they were not printed in Corbett's edition and I have not seen them. I think that Audley's section on fleet tactics are an attempt to solve the problems of using heavy artillery at sea rather than a summation of "medieval" tactics.

Audley urges that the admiral make every attempt to win the weather gage, that is to take a position up wind from his opponent, thus giving him the freedom of manoeuvre. He even suggests a tactic to use is the admiral is to the leeward of the enemy :

... then to gather his fleet together and seem to flee, and flee indeed for this purpose till the enemy draws within gunshot. And when the enemy doth shoot them (he shall) shoot again, and make all the smoke he can to the intent that the enemy shall not see the ships, and (then) suddenly hale up his tackle aboard,¹¹ and then have the wind of the enemy. And by this policy it is possible to win the weather-gage of the enemy...¹²

This instruction shows Audley's inexperience with the sea, and most experienced captains probably shook their heads. For this manoeuvre to be successful, the English fleet would have to have had great superiority in handling quality over the enemy fleet. But it does show that Audley is trying to find ways to take advantage of artillery, even if only to use it to create a smoke screen.

After the weather gage has been gained, the fleet is to close with the enemy, each ship picking an enemy ship that matches it in size. This is a little different than what actually happened off Brest in 1512. There was to be no formation to speak of, each ship would pick her target and sail at it. In a tradition already ancient, which would last until Nelson's day, Audley directs that the enemy's admiral was reserved for the fleet admiral.

Audley strictly forbade the firing of artillery until the fleet had closed with the enemy. However, as we shall see in the next chapter, the English tended to fire at least twice during closing, once at long range and again as they came along side the enemy. Once a ship had neared its foe, it was not to board until the enemy's deck was cleared by cannon fire and archery. The enemy's fighting tops were to be captured, if possible, before the soldiers of the boarding party actually stormed the enemy.

While the main ships of the fleet were engaged in combat, pinnaces were to remain aloof so they could reinforce any ship that found itself in trouble. One ship was to stay close to the flagship

"... for the overcoming of the admiral is a great discouragement of the rest of the other side."¹³

Audley also instructs the admiral to make his instructions clear to the rest of the captains. He realized that a superior fleet can be defeated if one of its ship's captains is not sure of how he should act.

It is not known if Audley's instructions were ever issued to the fleet and in any case, they were never used in battle. As Audley saw it, once the enemy was sighted, the fleet no longer exists. The battle became one of individual ships chasing their

opponent and closing to fight. The strength of the fleet acting and manoeuvring as a unit was still not appreciated. However, Audley's instructions mark the first step towards matching tactics with the improving naval technology.

The next important influence on English tactical thought did not originate in England; but was imported from Spain. In the first half of the sixteenth century, Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor and King of Spain, established a lectureship in navigation at Seville. Here some of the finest mariners in Europe came to lecture and publish treatises on all aspects of naval thought. The school was well known in England and Hakluyt used it as an example in an attempt to have a lectureship in navigation established in London.¹⁴

Around 1530, Alfonso de Chaves, one of the official lecturers at Seville, wrote a treatise for Charles entitled *Espejo de Navegantes*, or the *Mariner's Mirror*.¹⁵ While it was never published, de Chaves' work represented the foremost in Spanish naval thinking. A copy somehow reached England, probably as a gift to Henry VIII when the alliance with Charles V against France was formed in 1543.

De Chaves was greatly influenced by the instructions used to govern galley fleets. He tried to enforce the rigid battle formations used by large galley fleets on fleets of sailing ships, something that was not thought to be possible:

Some may say that at sea it is not possible to order (sailing) ships and tactics in this way, nor to arrange beforehand so nicely for coming to the attack or bringing succor just when wanted, and therefore there is no need to labour on order of battle since order cannot be kept. To such I answer that the same objection binds the enemy, and that with equal arms he who has taken up the best formation and order will be the victor, because it is not possible to the break up an order with wind and sea as that he who is more without order shall not be worse broken and the sooner defeated. For ships at sea, so long as there be no storm, there will be nothing to hinder the use of any of the orders with which we have dealt...¹⁶

De Chaves does not rule out the importance of superior sailing skills, all this will do is give the more ordered formation an even bigger advantage.¹⁷

De Chaves suggests that a fleet be made up of two different types of ships. The first type should be the largest ships available. They should be well furnished with soldiers for boarding, but only lightly armed with artillery. The second type of ships are smaller and they are to be well armed with heavy artillery and should harass the enemy from a distance. The fleet should try to win the weather gage and then deploy into battle formation. The standard formation called for a vanguard of the largest ships formed into line abreast. It is interesting that de Chaves strictly forbids the line ahead formation saying "... because thense would come great trouble, as only the leading ships can fight," showing, once again that boarding is still the primary objective.¹⁸ The detached squadron should be stationed on one or the other flank, depending on the wind and situation.

There were variations to the basic formation depending on the enemy's formation. If the enemy fleet forms a single line abreast, the friendly ships should do the same, with

the strongest ships in the centre and the lighter ships at the ends. If the enemy advances in a triangular formation, two lines should be formed echeloned to make a "V" to receive the enemy on both sides.

De Chaves also suggests that up to a quarter of the ship's boats should be manned and armed with bases. They are to be towed behind the larger ships, casting off when battle is joined. As the fleets closed to combat, the heavy guns should be fired first. De Chaves suggests that the psychological effect of such fire might force the enemy to retreat. After the heavy guns have fired, those guns on wheeled carriages that were unable to fire should be moved to a position from which they can fire before boarding takes place. This would be a rather remarkable achievement as heavy guns are hard enough to manoeuvre under ideal conditions, and a sea battle could hardly be called an ideal situation.

The light guns should not be fired until the two fleets have come close enough to prepare for boarding. They, along with other individual missile weapons, should be used to clear the enemy's deck. When this has been accomplished, the ship should grapple its opponent and a boarding party of heavily armed soldiers should be sent aboard. During the fight, part of the boarding party should be assigned the task of damaging the enemy's rigging. If the boarding party is forced to retreat, the enemy ship will not be able to pursue. After the two sides are engaged, the ship's boats should seek to circle the enemy ship and board a section that is away from the main fight. If this is not possible, an attempt should be made to damage the enemy's rudder.

The flagship should avoid action during the initial stage of the battle. It should stay clear so the admiral can observe the fighting. He should then be in a position to decide where reinforcements need to be sent to aid ships in trouble and to direct the detached squadron towards any gaps in the enemy's formation. The flagship should not be committed until a situation develops that would secure a victory or stave off a defeat.

Likewise, the detached squadron should not closely engage the enemy. They should pay attention to the flagship and be ready to follow the admiral's instructions. They should use their artillery against the enemy and be in a position to pursue any of the enemy that flees.

The fighting instructions gave a fleet much more flexibility than it had in the past. By using a regular formation, the admiral was able to exercise greater tactical control over his forces. He increased his control by not being among the first ships to engage. By staying in the main body he could observe the battle and act as needed. In the past once an admiral signalled for his ships to advance, he lost all control over the fleet. He would be one of the first to engage the enemy, and, as we have seen, his ships would be operating as individuals rather than as a unit.

The idea of using a regular formation is what makes de Chaves's instructions so important in the development of naval tactics. By staying in a formation, the sailing ship was to become an effective man-of-war. *Espejo de Navegantes* can be considered the first text book of modern naval tactics.

By 1545, de Chaves's ideas had reached England and were adopted by the English. Two sets of fighting instructions were drawn up by Lord Lisle, Henry VIII's Lord

Admiral, for use against the French. The first set was dated July 15, 1545 and the second set was prepared on August 10, 1545 after the arrival of additional English ships. Both sets show that de Chaves had a great deal of influence on their creation.

During this period, it was still customary to appoint a noble to the position of Lord Admiral as a political favor. Lisle was not an exception.

He had had some naval experience during the "rough wooing" of Scotland, but by no means was he a professional sea officer. Lisle was to develop into an excellent fleet commander, but he was constantly forced to refer to the king when any major decisions concerning the fleet were made. It is stretching credibility to believe that Lisle could develop a brand new style of naval tactics at this stage of his career. It is logical to assume that a novice fleet commander might take the advice of one of the of the most naval authorities in Europe when a new set of tactics were needed.

The first set of instructions was written the day after the French fleet withdrew from the Isle of Wight. Henry VIII was in Portsmouth and it is entirely possible that he visited Lisle aboard his flagship, the *Henry Grace a Dieu*. As Henry had always shown a great interest in naval activities, it seems quite likely that he had an active hand in the development of these fighting instructions. Two copies of the first set of instructions are extant today. One copy is printed in Corbett's *Fighting Instructions*, the other is printed in the *Calendar of Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic*.¹⁹

Corbett must not have known of the second copy because it includes some major modifications in Lisle's own hand. Much of Corbett's commentary on this set of instructions thus does not consider Lisle's more fully developed thoughts. The instructions are only summarized in the *Calendar*, though fortunately, it does note Lisle's additions. Therefore in order to more fully comprehend this important development in English tactics, Corbett will be used as the main source, and Lisle's corrections will be added to it.

The first part of the July 25 fighting instructions is an order of battle for the English fleet that was present at Portsmouth. The fleet was divided into three parts: a vanguard and two wings. Lisle changed this by combining the two wings into a single formation. The vanguard was divided into three ranks. The first rank consisted of eight large foreign merchants that were either bought or leased to the Crown. The second rank contained twelve ships, all but two of which were Royal Ships. The *Henry Grace a Dieu* was in this rank.

The third rank was made up of twenty ships, including several of the smaller Royal Ships, the rest being small English merchant ships that were either hired or impressed into the King's service. The ships in each rank would be formed in a line abreast formation and the entire vanguard would take the shape of a blunt wedge.

The ships in the wing included the newest and swiftest galleasses and pinnaces, ships that had better sailing qualities than the hulks and carracks of the vanguard and were also capable of movement under oars. The right wing contained ten ships, including the *Galley Subtile*, and two boats of Rye. The left wing was similar except it did not include a galley.

Lisle's order of battle greatly resembles the formation advocated by de Chaves except that the reserve was split into two bodies. Probably realizing that the ships of the wing would be more effective working as a unit, Lisle changed his July 25 instructions so that the two wings were combined. With this modification, Lisle's order of battle exactly parallels de Chaves.

After the laying out of the order of battle, Lisle lists the regulations that the fleet was to fight under. The first regulation made clear that all ships were to stay in their assigned ranks. This would allow Lisle to keep better control over the movement of the fleet. Lisle had adopted the idea that a regular formation was the most effective way to handle a fleet in a sea fight.

The actual instructions for engaging and fighting the French fleet were brief and straightforward. The first rank of the vanguard was instructed to sail straight through the French fleet, disrupting their formation. The second rank was to follow closely behind the first rank and by taking advantage of the disorder created by the passage of the large merchant ships, they were to engage the main ships of the French. The French flagship was specifically reserved for Lisle. The rest of the second rank were each to engage a French ship of equal size.

After the second rank had engaged, the ships of the first rank were to return to battle where they were needed most. There were no specific instructions for the third rank, but since they were small and relatively lightly armed, they probably served as a ready reserve of infantry for the larger ships. They would remain unengaged until they saw an opportunity to board an enemy ship in conjunction with one of the large ships. If they saw a friendly ship in trouble, they would grapple with it and add their infantry to the defence of the large ship.

While the main bodies became engaged, the ships of the wing were to take the weather gage from the enemy. Their primary duty was to screen the vanguard from attack by the French galleys. They were also to help any first or second rank ship that ran into trouble. They were specifically ordered to avoid small French ships because by engaging them, they would weaken the already outnumbered English fleet and do little to hurt the enemy.

The instruction of August 10 differ from the earlier instruction.²⁰ They differ mainly in regards to the order of battle, as forty ships had joined the fleet since July 25. The fleet was now divided into three parts: a vanguard, a battle, and a wing. The vanguard contained twenty-four ships, including the eight large merchant ships that were in the first rank of the old vanguard. The other sixteen ships were small merchant ships or small Royal Ships. The battle consisted of forty ships, including all of the ships from the old vanguard's second rank and three galleasses from the old wing. As with the vanguard, the remaining ships were small fishing and merchant ships. The wing contained forty "galliasses, shalupes and boats of war."²¹ The three galleasses that were transferred to the main battle were replaced by four galleasses that had been freshly converted in Portsmouth.

Although the term vanguard and battle had been used since early medieval times to describe divisions in land armies, they did not correspond to Lisle's division of the fleet. In land armies of this period, there was little difference between the vanguard

and the battle. The vanguard received its name because it was first in the march order. When a battle was fought, it was usual practice for the vanguard to form up beside the battle. On the other hand, as we have seen, the three parts of the English fleet were made up of different types of ships and each formation had its own duties and objectives.

It is not clear what kind of formation the vanguard and battle took. They may have each formed a single abreast, but this formation would have been very unwieldy and difficult to control. A more likely formation would have been to form each body into several ranks, as in the old vanguard.

It is interesting to note that in both the vanguard and the battle, the large ships are outnumbered by the small ships two to one. It is possible that each body was made up of three ranks, the first containing the large ships and the second two ranks consisting of the small ships. The advantage of this formation is that each of the large ships had a reserve of infantry in the two ships that were following them.

There is no difference between the two sets of fighting instructions, except that if the French fleet had a separate vanguard, the English vanguard would engage it. Otherwise, they were to penetrate the French formation as before.

The tactics that Lisle chose for the English fleet follow very closely those of de Chaves. Like the ships in de Chaves's vanguard, the foreign merchant ships were lightly armed when compared to the similar sized ships of the Royal Fleet. However, they were very strongly built and could absorb a lot of punishment. Their primary purpose was to function as heavy cavalry, penetrating the enemy's formation and breaking it up so the main battle could take advantage of the disruption to defeat the enemy in detail. The Venetian galleasses at Lepanto in 1571 would be used in this way to disrupt the Turkish galley formation before the Allied main fleet closed.

The English did not go as far as de Chaves did in advocating that the smallest ships to be the best armed. In 1545, the shortage of artillery in England was so great that the opposite was true.

The carracks of the Royal Fleet were much better armed than the new galleasses that joined the fleet that year, though the introduction of cast iron guns in the English fleet during the winter of 1545-1546 did improve the arming of the galleasses. The four new galleasses that joined the Royal Fleet in the spring of 1546 were, for their size, the most powerfully armed ships in the fleet.

With the information we now have, it is possible to envision how Lisle would have liked to have fought the French. The first phase of the battle would be a race between the English wing and the French galleys to gain the wind. The wing would use sails and oars in an effort to beat the French. Once the wing had won the weather gage, its galleasses and pinnaces would screen the French galleys from the rest of the English fleet, using their superior mobility to prevent the galleys from closing and boarding. While they protected their own main body the ships of the English wing would use their superior artillery to destroy or drive off the French galleys.

Meanwhile, the main fleets would be engaging. The ships of the vanguard would fire their main guns at least once before they started to pass through the French, being sure to reload before they actually penetrated the enemy formation. Then as they sailed through the French fleet, they would fire every gun they had. Swivel guns, port pieces, fowlers and other guns that had more than one chamber would fire as often as they could be reloaded. The cannon fire would be joined by a hail of smaller projectiles from the English longbowmen and hackbutteers. The French fleet would unleash its guns upon the ships of the vanguard, but the large Hanseatic merchants could absorb a lot of gunfire and little real damage would be done.

As the vanguard passed through the French, the ships of the battle would quickly engage the enemy ships while they were disordered and their guns were unloaded. The *Henry Grace a Dieu* would attack the French flagship while the other ships of the Royal Fleet would pair off against the other large French ships. The French would be at a disadvantage because they had already fired their guns at the English vanguard and they had not had time to reload. The English battle, on the other hand, contained the pride of the Royal Fleet, the largest and most powerfully armed ships in the English navy. These ships would deliver devastating broadsides as they closed with their opponents. If possible, the English would try to manoeuvre so their forecastles would overhand part of the enemy's castles. The swivel guns, hackbutts and longbows would be used to clear the upper deck of any opposition.

When this was accomplished, a large well armed and armoured boarding party would storm across to engage the disordered and demoralised enemy. The ship's boats would be armed and loaded with soldiers who would attempt to board the enemy at some place away from the main boarding action. If the French resistance proved to be stronger than anticipated, reinforcements would be provided from one of the small ships in the ranks behind. Other small ships would keep similar reinforcements from reaching the beleaguered French ship

The return of the vanguard would secure the victory. They would engage any large French ships that were unengaged and they would help any English ship that was hard pressed. When the French flagship struck the English flagship, the morale of the remaining French ships would break and rout would begin. As the French retreated, they would be pursued by the ships of the wing, who by this point in the battle should have gained victory over the French galleys, and many prizes would be captured. The English would gain control of the sea and Lisle would return to England in triumph to receive all the rewards a grateful monarch could give.

But, it is a lot simpler to plan a battle than to actually fight one. What actually happened is covered in the section on the naval campaign of 1545.

¹ ETSG, p. 256; and Archbishop Thomas Cardinal Wolsey to the Bishop of Worchester, Aug. 26, 1512, Alfred Spont, ed., *Letters and Papers relating to the War with France, 1512-1513*, Navy Records Society, Vol. 10, (London: The Navy Records Society, 1897), doc. #30.

² For a description of this action, see Edward Hall, *The Triumphant Reigne of Kynge Henry VIII*, *The Lives of Kings*, introduction by Charles Whibley, pp. 55-56 and *French Wars*, *Ibid.*

³ *French Wars*, p xxv.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Antonio Bavarin to Francesco Pesaro, Sept. 5, 1512, *Ibid.*, #33.

⁶ *Ibid.*, xxv.

⁷ Hall, Vol.1, p.55

⁸ The date is not certain, see Julian S. Corbett, ed., *Fighting Instructions, 153--1816*, The Navy Records Society, Vol. 29, (London: the Navy Records Society, 1905), p.14, (hereafter cited as F.I.), for setting the date at 1530.

⁹ F.I., pp.15-17.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.14.

¹¹ Corbett suggests that this should probably read "hale or haul his tack aboard."

¹² F. I., p.16

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.1

¹⁴ Cited in F. I., p.3.

¹⁵ Portions of the treatise are printed in F. I., pp. 6-13. The original manuscript is undated, Corbett suggests circa 1530 for no apparent reason. In any case, it had to have been written before 1545.

¹⁶ F. I., pp.4-5.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.5

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.9

¹⁹ F.I., pp.20-23; "The War," July 25, 1545, L&P, Vol.20, pt.2, Appendix #27.

²⁰ F.I., pp.23-24

²¹ "The Navy", August 10, 1545, L&P, Vol.20, pt.2, #88