

Frigates: The Eyes of The Fleet

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"If I were to die today you will find engraved on my heart "lack of frigates".ⁱ

Rear Admiral Sir Horatio Nelson, after being wounded at the Battle of the Nile, 1798.

Nelson's quote indicates the tremendous respect earned by the frigate during the Age of Sail (16th to the mid 19th century), a period in which sailing ships dominated naval warfare. Although they were smaller and carried fewer guns than a ship of the line, frigates were a highly prized class of warship because of their effective combination of speed and firepower.ⁱⁱ During the Second World War, Great Britain revived the term frigate to describe smaller ships that protected convoys from enemy submarines.

The classic frigate design dates from the 18th century. These vessels carried three masts and were fully rigged, a highly aerodynamic and efficient system for sailing ships. Unlike larger ships of the line, which carried guns on two or even three decks, a frigate's guns were placed on a single deck with additional armaments appearing on the poop and forecastle. Ships of the line, as opposed to frigates, were designed primarily for a naval tactic involving two columns of opposing ships, the victor usually being the side with the most firepower. Frigates, on the other hand, were built for speed and agility and could operate with the fleet or independently. Although frigates could be equipped with as many as fifty-six guns, the number of guns usually varied between about thirty and forty. Although these smaller, fast sailing vessels lacked the firepower to battle with a ship of the line carrying much greater armaments, frigates had a number of other important roles in naval warfare.

Nelson described the frigate's role as "the eyes of the fleet."ⁱⁱⁱ One of the most important jobs for frigates, therefore, was in reconnaissance duties. Frigates used for reconnaissance had the role of scouting enemy ships, remaining in contact until the enemy's position could be reported to the admiral. Due to their great speed, frigates were also highly effective as escort vessels, guarding convoys by outmaneuvering enemy raiders and privateers. Furthermore, frigates had great range because they carried fewer guns and, therefore, had more capacity. With increased range, frigates gained the important task of delivering messages and transporting individuals to distant locations around the world, such as the American colonies. A well-known example of a frigate with such a role was the French ship *L'Hermione*. In 1780, she successfully carried the French general La Fayette from Rochefort, France to Boston with a secret message that reinforcements from France had been secured for the American's fighting in the Revolutionary war.

During the eighteenth-century, French frigates such as *L'Hermione* were considered to be at the forefront of warship design.^{iv} Although Gardiner has attempted to prove that the French ship design superiority was a myth, the French ships were highly coveted at the time for their formidable speed and firepower.^v Because of the design superiority of French frigates, several of these ships were captured by the English and taken as prizes. Captured frigates were then surveyed in detail, and the opposing navies occasionally adopted their designs, or its new owner reused the ship itself.

The command of a frigate was considered a highly desirable position for a ship captain. Because of their capacity to operate independently from the rest of the fleet, long range, and tremendous speed, captains held the frigate with great respect and admiration. Even today many people continue to be fascinated by frigates. Patrick O'Brian, for example, bases the film *Master and Commander*, on an acclaimed series of historical novels about a Napoleonic War-era frigate and her adventurous captain "Lucky" Jack Aubrey. The ship featured in the film, the *HMS Surprise*, is actually a recreation of an 18th century frigate named the *Rose*. These tales of high seas adventure, with skilled and brave captains in command of ships battling in distant locations around the world, continue to fascinate contemporary audiences.

Another important frigate recreation is currently taking place in Rochefort, France. A replica of *L'Hermione*, the 18th century French frigate discussed above, has undergone an enormous reconstruction project that began in 1997. Once completed, she will sail the same route that was taken by General La Fayette, from Rochefort to Boston, during the Revolutionary War.^{vi} As much as possible, the current shipbuilders are using 18th century tools and technology in recreating the ship. *L'Hermione* is being built at Rochefort, France, the original shipyard where she was built, and the site is open to the public. Although the original ship was built in less than one year, the current project is forecast to last for sixteen years. The project has become a major tourist attraction for the town of Rochefort, which probably accounts for the long duration of the reconstruction! Films such as *Master and Commander*, along with modern reconstructions of frigates, highlight the continued romance and contemporary interest in warships of the Age of Sail, especially frigates.

Notes

i "The Battle of the Nile," British Battles, 2010 <<http://www.britishbattles.com/waterloo/battle-nile.htm>>

ii "Frigate," Encyclopaedia Britannica Online, 2011. 03 Jan. 2011 <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/220346/frigate>>.

iii Robert Gardiner, *Frigates of the Napoleonic Wars* (London: Chatham Publishing, 2000) 157.

iv James Pritchard, "From Shipwright to Naval Constructor: The Professionalization of 18th Century French Naval Shipbuilders," *Technology and Culture* 28.1 (1987): 1.

v Robert Gardiner, "Frigate Design in the 18th Century," *Warship: A Quarterly Journal of Warship History* 12 (1979): 275.

vi *L'Hermione, la Fregate de la Liberte*, 2007, <<http://www.hermione.com/>>