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CROSSED SIGNALS OFF THE CHESAPEAKE

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1939

OUTLINE

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- A. French and American forces close in
- B. British attempt to escape to Gloucester
- C. Cornwallis surrenders

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It was in the fall of 1781, over four years after the Declaration of Independence, that General Cornwallis surrendered his force at Yorktown, and American independence was realized. Yorktown is generally supposed to have been the decisive battle of the American Revolution, but it was the naval engagement off the Virginia Capes six weeks earlier, when the British fleet through a confusion over tactical signals, was driven away from the Chesapeake Bay, that actually decided the fate of the British forces in America. Had Admiral Graves taken advantage of his superior position when he encountered the Comte de Grasse, who knows how long the colonies would have struggled for liberty, or whether they would finally have been forced into submission. For it was only through a combination of favorable, almost providential, circumstances, that Washington, able general though he was, was able to gain the victory.

In the latter part of January, 1781, Cornwallis was on the Catawba River in South Carolina, and Washington was on the Hudson, 700 miles away, each with their eyes on different objectives, and with no idea that eight months' time would find them face to face to settle the question of supremacy.

Cornwallis had been sent to the Southern States by General Clinton to create diversions in favor of the main armies at New York and Philadelphia--a favorite part of the Commander-in-Chief's strategy. He was expected to bring the state of North Carolina under his subjection. This involved crushing General Nathaniel Greene, who crossed the Dan River and met Cornwallis in battle at Guilford Court House on March 15. The British won the battle, but Cornwallis' losses were so great, and his army so weakened, that he made for the coast in order to recover, arriving in Wilmington on the seventh of April.¹

From Wilmington, Cornwallis marched up into Virginia, abandoning North Carolina altogether, and united at Petersburg with General Leslie.

General Benedict Arnold, the American traitor, had been sent to Virginia in December of 1780. He landed at Jamestown Island on January 3 and marched immediately to Richmond, which he plundered, then returned down the James to take up a fortified position at Portsmouth. To oppose the British in Virginia, Washington dispatched Lafayette with 1,200 Light Infantry troops by land and

¹ Johnston, Henry P., "The Surrender of Cornwallis." Harper's, LXII, (August, 1881), p. 326.

persuaded Rochambeau to send some vessels from Newport to blockade Arnold by sea.²

Des Touches, in command of the French fleet at Newport, which had just escaped a severe gale which wrecked three of the British squadron, at first sent only three vessels, a sixty-four gun ship of the line and two frigates, to the Chesapeake, but these were unable to reach the smaller British vessels, which withdrew up the Elizabeth River. Arbuthnot, the British admiral, ordered some brigades stationed off Charleston to the spot. One of these, the Romulus, was captured by the French as they left the Bay returning to Newport.

On the evening of March 8 the French fleet under des Touches left Newport. Arbuthnot, having learned that the French were making ready for sea, had moved to the entrance of Gardiner's Bay, where his squadron lay, and when, on the tenth, he learned they had sailed, followed immediately. By carrying a large spread of sail, and because his vessels had coppered bottoms, preventing fouling, the British admiral was able to intercept des Touches about forty miles northeast of Cape Henry on the morning of March 16. Each fleet was composed of eight ships of the line and several smaller vessels, but

² Ibid., p. 327.

the British, having larger ships, had the advantage of superior force. However, des Touches, by strategical handling of his fleet, eluded Arbuthnot without serious damage and returned to Newport. The British lost thirty killed and seventy-three wounded, while the French loss³ was seventy-two killed and one hundred twelve wounded.

Soon after this engagement, Clinton sent General Phillips to Chesapeake Bay with 2,000 troops as reinforcements for Arnold. After landing at Lynnhaven Bay,⁴ the force moved to Portsmouth.

In order to cooperate with des Touches, Lafayette had gone by forced marches to the head of the Chesapeake and expected there to embark his army on the French frigates. He had already set out in advance in an open boat with some other officers and reached Williamsburg and then Suffolk before he learned of des Touches' failure. Lafayette⁵ then set out to rejoin Washington's army. When he received news, at the head of the Elk River, of Phillips' expedition, he turned his army about and went to Baltimore,

³ Mahan, A. T., Major Operations of the Navies in the War of American Independence, p. 170-74.

⁴ Ibid., p. 174.

⁵ Harper's, loc. cit., p. 327.

where he borrowed 2,000 pounds with which to maintain his army. There was discontent among the troops over serving in the South, and several desertions occurred, but these stopped after Lafayette had a deserter hanged as an example. From Baltimore he marched with all speed through Alexandria, Fredericksburg, and Bowling Green, being reinforced by General Wayne with 1,000 troops at the North Anna River, and arrived in Richmond a few hours before Phillips made his appearance on the opposite side of the river. Phillips, surprised by this movement of the enemy,⁶ retired to Jamestown Island.

Cornwallis moved to Williamsburg June 20, where he received instructions from Clinton to send three thousand men back to New York and with the remainder to establish a defensive position on the coast as a base for future expeditions and for the protection of naval vessels. Cornwallis marched to Portsmouth and was preparing to embark the troops for New York, when later instructions from the Commander-in-Chief permitted him to retain them, and further ordered him to fortify Old Point Comfort. Finding, after a survey by engineers, that this spot could not be fortified, Cornwallis continued on to⁷ Yorktown, which he reached late in August, 1781.

6 Ibid., p. 327.

7 Ibid., p. 327-8.

Concerning this final position there has been a great deal of controversy. For a defensive position Yorktown was a poor choice. It was completely unfortified, and offered retreat only by a narrow neck of land, easily blocked, especially by the large army and de Grasse's immense fleet bottling up the mouth of the Chesapeake. Portsmouth would have been a far better choice. Its proximity to Lynnhaven Bay gave immediate communication with naval vessels, while its position on the Elizabeth River would have permitted Cornwallis to retreat into Carolina, out of reach of the French fleet, and perhaps dragged out the war interminably.⁸ Captain White, of the Royal Army, who saw service with Graves against de Grasse, contends that Cornwallis was forced to take up this "sickly, untenable" position against his own expressed judgement.⁹ Clinton later said his orders to occupy were discretionary, and that he never received a hint from Cornwallis that the place was untenable until after his surrender. Cornwallis maintained that he had occupied Yorktown in what he believed was the spirit of his superior's orders, and because he thought that in an emergency he would be relieved by Clinton and the British fleet.¹⁰ In any case, the

8 White, Naval Researches, p. 57.

9 Ibid.

10 Harper's, loc. cit., p. 328.

choice was an extremely unfortunate one, as later events showed.

Lafayette, meanwhile, had gone to Williamsburg and from there constantly watched Cornwallis' movements.¹¹

Washington, encamped on the Hudson River, where he was contemplating an attack on New York, received from Admiral the Comte de Grasse an announcement that he would be in the Chesapeake about the first of September. This news reached Washington on August 14. He immediately concentrated his attention on a descent on Cornwallis. His plan met the approval of the French commander, Rochambeau, and they began operations with the greatest secrecy. Washington first made a feint toward New York, then turning south, repeated this ruse from New Jersey, in order to prevent Clinton from learning of the intended campaign in Virginia. From New Jersey General Washington headed directly for the Chesapeake. On September 2 the 2,000 troops under his command, 4,000 having been left in New York, marched through Philadelphia, followed the next day by the French army. In that city they received news of de Grasse's arrival in the Chesapeake with a strong fleet. Thus encouraged, Washington pushed on toward his goal. At Baltimore he embarked his troops for the James

¹¹ Ibid., p. 327.

River, and joined forces with Lafayette at Williamsburg, so that by September 27¹² the combined army was ready to move on the British.

When Clinton finally realized the fact that Washington had given him the slip at New York, the only way he saw of meeting the danger to Cornwallis was to attempt to go to his relief by sea.¹³ But lack of certain information regarding the strength and movements of de Grasse's fleet handicapped the British in this endeavor.

Arbuthnot had sailed on July 2 for England, leaving Admiral Graves at New York in command of the British naval forces. Graves wrote Rodney, then in the West Indies, that intercepted dispatches of the enemy disclosed a large squadron from the West Indies was to arrive on the American coast during the summer, to operate in conjunction with the French fleet at Newport. On July 7 Rodney sent the sloop Swallow to New York with word that if he sent reinforcements, they would be headed for the Virginia Capes and thence to New York. He asked for cruisers to be stationed along the coast with information. Rodney was misled to believe that de Grasse had only fourteen ships of the line. On August 10 Rear Admiral Hood sailed from Antigua with fourteen ships of the line, bound for

¹² Ibid., pp. 329-332.

¹³ Ibid., p. 330.

the Chesapeake Capes. He had previously dispatched the brig Active to New York with notification of his departure. Meantime, the Swallow had arrived in New York on July 27, only to find Graves had left for Boston Bay. She was sent on, but meeting enemy vessels, was forced ashore on Long Island and lost. The Active was captured before she reached New York. Thus, Graves was uninformed of the pending crisis, and continued cruising until the sixteenth of August, when he returned to Sandy Hook. Here he found a duplicate of the Swallow letter, but it told him only the course a reinforcement would take; not that Hood had already departed. Hood, arriving off the Chesapeake on August 25, sent a copy of the Active's message, but these hardly preceded his own arrival on August 28. The same evening intelligence was received in New York to the effect that de Barras had left Newport with his whole division, bound for the Capes. Hood, therefore, anchored outside Sandy Hook, where Graves, who was the senior Admiral, soon joined him. On the thirty-first the entire fleet of nineteen ships of the line, as well as several smaller vessels, set sail for the Chesapeake, where it was understood that the French fleet and the combined armies of Washington and Rochambeau were bound.¹⁴

The British, by reason of their inaccurate information, expected that de Grasse's fleet would probably be inferior, and certainly not superior, to their own.¹⁵ Thus, if Graves could attack de Grasse before he united with the Rhode Island squadron of eight ships of the line and several frigates, it was natural to suppose that he could effectually upset the French and American plan of a combined attack by land and sea on the British forces at Yorktown.¹⁶

De Grasse had left Cap Francois on August 5 with 3,300 French troops and twenty-eight ships of the line. He anchored in Lynnhaven Bay on the thirtieth of the month and instantly landed the troops, which joined Lafayette, raising his force, then the only one opposing Cornwallis, to 8,000 men. At the same time Washington was on his way south with 6,000 regulars. The French cruisers took a position in the James River to prevent Cornwallis from crossing it and escaping into Carolina. Other vessels were sent to close the mouth of the York. By these detachments the main fleet was reduced to twenty-four sail of the line.¹⁷

On the fifth of September, de Grasse was anchored in Lynnhaven Bay, watering his ships before proceeding up the

15 White, p. 35.

16 Ibid.

17 Mahon, pp. 178-9.

channel formed by the Horseshoe sands and the shoals of the Middle-ground, at the upper entrance of which he planned to anchor his fleet, in order to prevent the British from interfering with the operation of the American and French armies. This he intended to do as soon as he was joined by the squadron from Rhode Island under de Barras, consisting of eight ships of the line and four frigates, expected at any moment.¹⁸

At eight o'clock on the morning of the fifth, a French look-out frigate cruising off Cape Henry sighted a fleet making for the Middle-ground. The vessels were at first thought to be de Barras' squadron. The size of the fleet, however, soon convinced the French that it was British. The boats were recalled, and preparation made to weigh anchor as soon as the tide began to ebb, without which they could not work out of the bay.¹⁹

The fleet under Graves was approaching the mouth of the Bay under a favorable wind when at 9:30 the Sodebay, advance ship of the British, signalled that she had sighted a fleet, which from the oblique angle from which it was seen, appeared as if it were stretched

18 White, p. 40

19 Mahon, p. 179.

White, p. 40.

across the entrance to the Bay. Actually the French were anchored as close to Lynnhaven Bay as their draft permitted. The tide began to ebb at noon, and the French vessels began to tack around Cape Henry. Some of the advance ships were able to clear the Cape without making more than one tack, but the innermost had to make several. Graves had meanwhile formed his fleet on an east and west line heading for the entrance. As the French cleared, they formed a line as quickly as they could. The van, however, clearing the Cape first, was some distance ahead of the rest of the fleet. Here Graves lost his first golden opportunity to strike a decisive blow. With the advantage of his windward position, he could have swept down and destroyed these vessels before they were in position, and while they were unsupported by the remainder of the fleet, and thus made the two fleets numerically equal, while still holding the superior position. ²⁰ So fixed in his mind, however, was the traditional line-of-battle formation of the British Navy that he failed to give the signal to engage the enemy until the two fleets were drawn up in parallel ²¹ lines facing each other.

By 2:00 p. m. the French rear squadron had gotten clear of the Horseshoe and was fairly well formed on the

²⁰ White, pp. 40-1.

²¹ Mahon, p. 179.

south side of the Middle-ground, and the whole line was making out of the Bay.²² The French were at this time approximately three miles from the British line, with their van abreast of the British center.²³ The two fleets were on opposite tacks; the British, on the starboard tack, were headed for the Middle-ground, while the French were standing out to sea. At 2:13 p. m. Graves gave the signal for his fleet to wear together, bringing both fleets on the same tack. Hood's division was now the rear, and Rear Admiral Drake's the van. After wearing around, the fleet stopped by bringing to the wind in order to permit the enemy center to come abreast of the British center. The two lines were by this time nearly parallel, but the smaller British fleet did not extend with the French rear, which was not yet clear of the Cape. At 2:30 Graves signalled for the van to fill and bear away two points; that is, to bear away from the wind and head more toward the enemy, instead of sailing parallel to their line. Each vessel then followed the van ship, so that the British line formed an angle with that of the French. The signal to bear away was later repeated twice, so that the angle became more marked.²⁴

22 White, p. 42.

23 Mahon, pp. 179-80.

24 White, p. 42.

Mahon, p. 180.

This was another serious blunder on Graves' part, for with the British on an angle to the enemy line, seven ships of the rear division were never able to get close enough to go into action; a fatal mistake for an inferior force at-
²⁵
tempting to attack.

At 3:46 the signal was hoisted for the ships to close to one cable's length (720 feet) apart, and for Hood's division to make more sail. This was almost immediately followed by the signal for close action, to bear down and engage the enemy, but the signal for the line was still flying. The two signals were thus contradictory. About four o'clock the headmost ships of Drake's division began to engage the enemy's van, which was separated from the center and rear.
²⁶ Here was another opportunity for Graves to cut off the French van and destroy it. Had the center gone to the support of the van, the French van could have
²⁷ been cut to pieces, but again Graves failed as a leader. De Grasse, in order to protect his van, as well as to decoy the British away from the entrance to the Bay, so that de Barras could enter, signalled for his van to bear away and take up a new position more to leeward, where they were at long shot range from the enemy. Graves again

25 Mahon, p. 80.

26 White, p. 42.

Mahon, p. 80.

27 James, William Milburn, The British Navy in Adversity, p. 299.

made the signal for his van to haul more to starboard; i.e., toward the enemy. As they ran down to renew the battle, the French were able to coolly direct their fire at them.²⁸ The signal for the line was hauled down briefly after four o'clock, but was soon hoisted again, because the ships were too close together.²⁹ The London, Graves' flagship, luffed up in order to bring her broadside to bear, but this brought the ship next ahead of her on her weather beam, which meant that the other ship would have to fire over the London to get at the enemy.³⁰

At 5:30 the signal for the line was again hauled down on the London, the close action flag still being up. At this time Hood finally bore down with his division, but the French also bore away, and he was unable to engage them. When he bore up to engage the enemy close, the signal for the line was again rehoisted, and he had to retake his position in the line, though the signal for close action was still flying.³¹

Shortly after sunset the firing ceased. The British losses were 90 killed and 246 wounded. The French losses are given only in round numbers: about two hundred killed

28 White, p. 43.

29 Mahon, pp. 180-81.

30 Ibid., p. 181.

31 White, pp. 44-5.

32
and wounded.

The two fleets continued all the next day in sight of each other, repairing damages. The British vessels had suffered greatly aloft, although their batteries were intact. The Terrible later had to be burned to prevent capture.³³ Graves at first thought to renew the action, but with his fleet so crippled, he did not do so. Late on the ninth of September the French fleet disappeared³⁴ under a great cloud of sail, bound for the Chesapeake. De Barras reached the Bay on the tenth, and was joined there by de Grasse on the eleventh, making a combined fleet of 36 ships of the line on the side of the Americans³⁵ opposing Cornwallis.

On the tenth Graves' fleet stood toward the Chesapeake, with a frigate going ahead to reconnoitre. Early on the thirteenth the look-out reported the French moored above the Horseshoe in the bay. When asked by Graves for an opinion of what to do, Hood replied that he knew "not what to do in the truly lamentable state to which we have brought ourselves." Graves then returned to New York,³⁶ arriving at Sandy Hook on September 19.

32 Mahon, p. 181.

33 Ibid., pp. 183-4.

34 Ibid., p. 183.

35 Ibid., p. 184.

36 Ibid.

with colors cased, filed between the ranks of American and French soldiers, their band, ordered not to play an American or French tune, playing "The World Turned Upside Down."⁴⁰

40 Harper's, p. 334.

Cornwallis was now encircled by the largest fleet that had ever filled the Chesapeake and the largest and finest army Washington had ever commanded. The British earthworks were unable to resist the artillery fire, and their own guns were insufficient to return it. On October 17 Cornwallis made an attempt at retreating across the York River with what was left of his able-bodied troops. Part of the force had gotten to Gloucester when a sudden gale arose, preventing the boats from returning until it was too late. The enemy had realized his intention, and taking advantage of the confusion, were able to force surrender.³⁷ The British general's military chest by this time contained only 1,800 pounds, which sum the French commissioners at the parleys did not condescend to notice, until "urged to do so by their more sordid allies."³⁸ The British troops amounted to only 4,017 men fit for service, while Washington had a force of 21,000.³⁹

On the nineteenth of October, 1781, Cornwallis surrendered to General Washington, as the British troops,

37 White, pp. 62-3.

38 Ibid., p. 58.

39 Ibid., p. 63.

with colors cased, filed between the ranks of American and French soldiers, their band, ordered not to play an American or French tune, playing "The World Turned Up-⁴⁰side Down."

40 Harper's, p. 334.

KEY TO PLATE OF THE CHESAPEAKE

From White: Naval Researches, p. 72

- A. The position of the French fleet at anchor
- BB. The British fleet at 2:30 p. m., the van bearing down in succession
- F. The French fleet, the centre and rear edging away
- C. The Middle-ground
- D. The Horseshoe sand
- EE. The "strong position," according to writer in the Political Magazine for the British fleet to have anchored in
- GGG. The position taken up by French fleet after the action
- H. York spit; 19 miles from Yorktown
- JJ. Position of French fleet at anchor, according to Mr. Clerk and Rear Admiral Ekris, on morning of September 5
- N. Norfolk in ruins
- P. Portsmouth
- O. Old Point Comfort
- R. Hampton Roads

N. B. The variation of the compass was 1° westerly and the ebb tide began to make at noon. The Plate would not admit of the four headmost French ships being included in it, but their positions may be easily imagined.

