

THE SINKING OF HMS VENERABLE

I stumbled across this story by accident whilst surfing the internet. If you want the full story, go to www.swmag.org/hms-venerable - the following is a summary.



HMS Venerable was launched in 1784 - a 74 gun man-of-war. It took almost 4,000 mature oak trees to build her at a cost of some £3,800.

Little is known of her early years, but it may be that having been built of "green" wood, she stayed in dock for several years until her timbers seasoned.

She was involved in the Battle of Algeciras in July 1801, under Captain Samuel Hood. The British fleet, consisting of seven ships, was stationed in the Bay of Gibraltar, blockading the port of Cadiz. On arrival and finding Cadiz blockaded, a smaller French fleet of three ships of the line and a frigate, sailed into the nearby harbour of Algeciras, considering this a safe option as the harbour was protected by four Spanish forts.

Under Sir James Saumarez, the British Fleet attacked Algeciras, but were repulsed by the French ships and the guns of the Spanish forts. The British lost HMS Hannibal, which ran aground, together with 121 men killed and 240 wounded. The French lost 306 men, with 280 wounded.

Under Captain Hood, HMS Venerable was damaged in the conflict, but sailed back to the Bay of Gibraltar for repairs.

Three years later, on Saturday 24th November 1804, the Channel Fleet was at anchor in Tor Bay and one of the ships was HMS Venerable, now captained by Capt. John Hunter. At 3pm there was a sudden change in the weather, with a shift of wind to the North East and heavy rain. The Admiral ordered the fleet out to sea for safety, and anchors were raised. However, just as HMS Venerable was preparing to set sail, a seaman fell overboard.

A boat was launched to rescue him, manned by Midshipman Deas and two seamen. However, one rope was released too soon - the rescue boat tipped and the three sailors fell into the sea and were drowned. A second boat was launched and the "man overboard" was rescued. Whilst this was going on, Venerable had drifted and found herself unable to weather Berry Head. Captain Hunter gave the order to tack North, but this brought Venerable on a course straight towards other ships of the fleet. To avoid collision a new course was set, but with the wind against her, Captain Hunter realised his ship was nearing the lights of Paignton. In the growing dark, another ship loomed ahead of Venerable. Again the ship changed direction, but too late Captain Hunter found his ship touching the bottom and grounded under Paignton cliffs on rocks fore and aft.

By now it was 8.30 pm. The wind changed direction again, and an Easterly whipped up the sea around the grounded ship. A distress signal was fired, and by 10pm water had filled the lower gun deck. HMS Impetueux and HMS Goliath managed to anchor near the stricken Venerable, and rescue the crew. By midnight, 547 men had been rescued and only 8 drowned, including the three drowned trying to save the "man overboard".

Captain Hunter was court-martialled and acquitted. At the trial, he said of his crew that he would sail again with any of them again except one. Marine David Evans was dragged on deck during the rescue efforts drunk on port wine, having filled his pockets with loot from the officers' wardroom whilst the rest of the crew strove to save the stricken ship. He was given 200 lashes of the cat-o'-nine-tails and beaten round the Fleet some weeks later.

The next day, the guns of HMS Venerable were salvaged in the shallow waters off Roundham Head, and more recently in the 70's and 80's cannonballs and small lead shot were brought up by divers.

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