

= Battle of Block Island =

The Battle of Block Island ( April 6 , 1776 ) was a nighttime naval encounter between the Continental Navy , returning from a successful raid on Nassau in The Bahamas on its maiden voyage , and HMS Glasgow , a Royal Navy dispatch boat . Glasgow successfully escaped capture by a fleet of seven ships under the command of Commodore Esek Hopkins , although she sustained significant damage in the encounter .

Several of the ship captains of the Continental fleet were criticized for their actions in the engagement , and one was dismissed as a result . Commodore Hopkins was criticized for other actions pertaining to the cruise , including the distribution of seized goods , and was eventually also dismissed from the Navy .

= = Background = =

HMS Glasgow was a sixth @-@ rate 20 @-@ gun frigate of the Royal Navy . In early April 1776 , under the command of navy captain Tryingham Howe , she was carrying dispatches from Newport , Rhode Island to the British fleet off Charleston , South Carolina . ( This fleet had been assembled to launch an assault on Charleston , which ultimately failed in the June Battle of Sullivan 's Island . )

The Second Continental Congress had established the Continental Navy in late 1775 . By February 1776 the first ships of the fleet were ready for their maiden voyage , and Commodore Esek Hopkins led a fleet of eight ships on an expedition to the Bahamas , where the British were known to have military stores . In early March , the fleet ( reduced by one due to tangled riggings en route ) landed marines on the island of New Providence and captured the town of Nassau . After loading the fleet 's ships , enlarged to include two captured prize ships , with military stores , the fleet sailed north on March 17 , with one ship dispatched to Philadelphia , while the rest of the fleet sailed for the Block Island channel . The fleet 's cruise was marked by outbreaks of a variety of diseases , including fevers and smallpox , resulting in significant reductions in crew effectiveness .

By April 4 the fleet had reached the waters off Long Island , and captured a prize , HMS Hawk , which was also laden with supplies . The next day brought a second prize , the Bolton . Hoping to catch more easy prizes , Hopkins continued to cruise off Block Island that night , forming the fleet into a scouting formation of two columns . The right , or eastern , column was headed by the USS Cabot , followed by Hopkins ' flagship , the USS Alfred , at 20 guns the largest ship of the fleet , and the left column was headed by the USS Andrew Doria , followed by the USS Columbus . Behind these came the USS Providence , with USS Fly and USS Wasp trailing further behind as escorts for the prizes . The need to provide crews for the prizes further reduced the fighting effectiveness of the fleet 's ships .

= = Battle = =

That night was an exceptionally clear night with a nearly full moon . Between 1 and 2 am on April 6 , with the fleet headed in a generally southerly direction , Andrew Doria and Glasgow spotted each other about 8 leagues ( 20 to 24 nautical miles ) southeast of Block Island . Glasgow was heading westerly , destined for Charleston . Captain Howe came about to investigate the fleet , and over the next 30 minutes closed to within hailing distance . Commodore Hopkins gave no signals during this time , so the fleet formed no battle line which resulted in a battle that Captain Nicholas Biddle of the Andrew Doria later described as " helter @-@ skelter " .

Howe first came upon the Cabot , whose captain was Esek Hopkins ' son , John . The younger Hopkins , when hailed for identification , replied , " The Columbus and Alfred , a 22 @-@ gun frigate . " An overzealous seaman on his ship then tossed a grenade onto the Glasgow 's deck , and the battle was engaged . Cabot , a lightly armed brig , fired one ineffective broadside of six @-@ pounders . Glasgow countered with two broadsides with its heavier weaponry , killing Cabot 's master , wounding Hopkins , and disabling her steering . As she drifted away , the Alfred came up to engage Glasgow , and the two engaged in a broadside duel . A shot from Glasgow early in the

action broke the lines to Alfred 's tiller ; her temporary loss of steering exposed her to raking fire . Her drift also made it difficult for the Andrew Doria to join the action , who also had to maneuver to avoid the drifting Cabot . The Providence held back , and Columbus was eventually able to join the action late , but her fire was so wild that little to no damage was done to Glasgow .

With Glasgow now exposed to fire from three ships , Howe decided to break off the battle in order to avoid being boarded , and made sail for Newport . Despite extensive damage to sail and rigging , he pulled away from the pursuing fleet , which was fully laden with its captured goods . After several hours of chase , lasting into daylight , Hopkins called off the chase to avoid an encounter with the British squadron at Newport . His only prize was Glasgow 's tender , which the fleet brought to anchor in New London , Connecticut on April 8 .

= = Aftermath = =

The Glasgow suffered only four casualties , one killed and three wounded . This count demonstrated the poor quality of the Continental fleet 's gunnery : all of the casualties were due to musket fire . Aboard the Cabot there were four killed and seven wounded , and the Alfred had six each killed and wounded ; Andrew Doria 's drummer was also wounded .

Although Continental Congress President John Hancock praised Hopkins for the fleet 's performance , its failure to capture the Glasgow gave opponents of the Navy in and out of Congress opportunities for criticism . Nicholas Biddle wrote of the action , " A more imprudent , ill @-@ conducted affair never happened . " Abraham Whipple , captain of the Columbus , endured rumors and accusations of cowardice for a time , but eventually asked for a court martial to clear his name . Held on May 6 by a panel consisting of officers who had been on the cruise , he was cleared of cowardice , although he was also criticized for errors of judgment . John Hazard , captain of the Providence , was not so fortunate . Charged with a variety of offenses by his subordinate officers , including neglect of duty during the Glasgow action , he was convicted by court martial and forced to surrender his commission .

Commodore Hopkins came under scrutiny from Congress over matters unrelated to this action . He had violated his written orders in sailing to Nassau instead of Virginia and the Carolinas , and he had distributed the goods taken during the cruise to Connecticut and Rhode Island without consulting Congress . He was censured for these transgressions , and dismissed from the Navy in January 1778 after further controversies , including the fleet 's failure to sail again ( a number of its ships suffered from crew shortages , and also became trapped at Providence , Rhode Island by the British occupation of Newport late in 1776 ) .

Glasgow , suffering from the battle and having dumped her dispatches , returned to Newport . She was found to be in bad enough shape that she was made as seaworthy as possible and sent to Portsmouth for repairs . Her mission was reassigned to Nautilus , another ship in the Newport squadron .