

= John Balchen =

Admiral Sir John Balchen ( 2 February 1670 ? 4 October 1744 ) ( sometimes written as Sir John Balchin ) was an officer of the British Royal Navy with a long and distinguished career during the late 17th and early 18th centuries . In the course of his service at sea , Balchen saw action in numerous battles against the French and Spanish navies across 60 years and three separate wars . He was twice captured by the French in action , both times being exonerated and commended for the defence of his ships against overwhelming odds .

Balchen died in the shipwreck of the 100 @-@ gun first @-@ rate HMS Victory off the Casquets in the Channel Islands during operations to deter French blockading of Spanish and Portuguese ports during the War of the Austrian Succession . A capable and efficient officer , Balchen never found the wealth and prestige fellow officers secured in other commissions , a fact which remained a source of frustration to him until his elevation to knighthood shortly before his death .

= = Nine Years ' War = =

Balchen was born in February 1670 , the only surviving child of the yeoman gentleman , John Balchen , and his wife , Ann Edspur . Home educated , Balchen took a commission in the Royal Navy aged 15 and , seven years later , gained promotion to lieutenant . For most of this period Balchen was stationed in the West Indies and , during his service there , was lucky in his health ; the West Indies command was considered very dangerous during this period , mortality rates amongst sailors stationed there being very high due to malaria and yellow fever . The high death rate led to rapid promotion for those who survived , and Balchen was made Post Captain at the relatively young age of 27 during the Nine Years ' War . Balchen had spent the war aboard HMS Dragon and HMS Cambridge under Admiral John Neville , who was impressed enough with his subordinate to give him command of the prize ship HMS Virgin , the safe conduct of which to England earned him the step to captain .

= = War of the Spanish Succession = =

As with the majority of the Royal Navy , Balchen was placed in reserve at the war 's conclusion and returned to England to await further deployment . Whilst there , he married Susannah Apreece , daughter of an army colonel . The marriage produced six children , two of whom survived into adulthood ; Frances , who later married Temple West ( Vice Admiral Temple West ) and George , who followed his father into the Navy . In 1701 , Balchen was again at sea , commanding the small fireships HMS Firebrand and then HMS Vulcan with Sir George Rooke 's fleet off the Spanish coast at the outbreak of the War of the Spanish Succession . He was probably engaged during the Battle of Vigo Bay in 1702 , where Rooke 's fleet captured a Spanish treasure fleet and was instrumental in the capture of the 56 @-@ gun *Modéré* , which he went on to briefly command as HMS *Modéré* .

In 1703 , Balchen was transferred to the 44 @-@ gun frigate HMS Adventure in the North Sea . This was an area of great importance to the British war effort due to the convoys carrying naval supplies from Scandinavia , which crossed it regularly . The commission , however , yielded few opportunities in the way of prize money . The next year , he was transferred to the 54 @-@ gun HMS Chester , with which he was dispatched to the West African Coast , a region considered almost as fatal as the West Indies . Surviving once again , Balchen remained in the Chester and was attached to the convoys bound for Portugal and Virginia .

Balchen suffered his first defeat on 10 October 1707 . Leaving the safety of Portsmouth harbour , his convoy was ambushed by a French squadron under Forbin and Duguay @-@ Trouin , in what became the Battle at the Lizard . Although the dozen French warships were larger and stronger than the convoy escorts , Balchen took his ship into battle with the other warship captains . This action allowed the merchant convoy time to disperse and escape . The ensuing battle was one @-@ sided , with the French warships battering three English ships into submission over several hours , including Balchen 's command , which had been boarded by three French ships of the line . One

British warship escaped , but HMS Devonshire exploded with the loss of nearly 900 lives . The French captured just 15 merchant ships from the hundreds in the convoy , as most made English ports before their pursuers could catch them .

Briefly a prisoner in France , Balchen , as an officer , was allowed to return to England on parole , where a court martial exonerated him for the loss of his ship and commended him for a brave defence . In 1709 , he was formally exchanged for a French officer and returned to naval service , receiving command of the newly built 60 @-@ gun HMS Gloucester in August . Leaving Spithead on his first cruise in October , he had been at sea for just a few hours when Duguay @-@ Trouin again appeared with a squadron of five ships of the line . Unable to outrun his opponents , Balchen engaged the 74 @-@ gun flagship Lis before being forced to surrender after being dismasted and threatened with boarding .

Balchen was exchanged almost immediately and the court martial , once again , exonerated him from all blame for the loss of his ship . He was rewarded for his bravery with command of HMS Colchester in 1710 , in which , on 9 November , Balchen secured his first prize , a 20 @-@ gun French privateer which he outran in a gale . In 1712 and 1713 , Balchen was in the Mediterranean under Sir John Jennings and returned home in 1713 for a period of unemployment on shore . With the end of the War of the Spanish Succession in 1715 , Balchen was returned to sea in the 40 @-@ gun frigate HMS Diamond , which he used in the suppression of piracy in the West Indies until 1716 . The same year , he received the shore position commanding the guardship HMS Orford in the Medway .

= = War of the Quadruple Alliance = =

In 1718 , war once again broke out and experienced officers were immediately given sea postings , Balchen in the 80 @-@ gun HMS Shrewsbury in the fleet of Sir George Byng . Arriving in the Mediterranean , Vice @-@ Admiral Charles Cornwall made Shrewsbury his flagship and Balchen his flag captain , a position which remained until December of that year . In July 1718 , Shrewsbury had been engaged at the Battle of Cape Passaro , at which a Spanish fleet had been comprehensively defeated ; Balchen 's first great naval action and his first major victory .

In May 1719 , Balchen was given command of the 70 @-@ gun HMS Monmouth under Sir John Norris , and served in the Baltic and North Seas until 1722 . In 1722 , Balchen took over the guardship HMS Ipswich at Spithead and , in 1726 , returned to the Monmouth for further service in the Baltic under Norris and Sir Charles Wager . In 1727 Balchen was part of a mission to resupply besieged Gibraltar , although , by the time the fleet arrived , the siege had been broken . In 1728 , Balchen received promotion to Rear @-@ Admiral . In 1731 , after a period in command of the 60 @-@ gun HMS Dreadnought , Balchen took over the 80 @-@ gun HMS Princess Amelia and commanded her in support of a Spanish landing at Livorno . Balchen returned in December and , in 1734 , was promoted to Vice @-@ Admiral , spending the next five years at his estates in England .

= = War of the Austrian Succession = =

At the outbreak of the War of Jenkin 's Ear with Spain in 1739 , Balchen commanded a squadron of seven ships off the Spanish Atlantic Coast . Tasked with intercepting Spanish convoys , Balchen was almost caught by a superior Spanish squadron , which forced him to withdraw deeper into the Atlantic . For several weeks , this provoked rumours in Britain that his force had been destroyed , until he got word to the Admiralty of his hurried retreat . During the next two years , Balchen spent most of his time on convoy duty and came to resent younger and more active officers who made substantial fortunes from prize money . He confided to a friend in 1741 :

" [ We ] have Nobody spoke of Now but Mr. Virnon ; he has all the Glory , and success pursues him . The West Indie people will be so Rich there wont be Roome for them to purchase Lands ; whilst I am forced to drudge from place to place for Nothing . "

= = Loss of the Victory = =

In March 1743 Balchen received the command of the Greenwich Naval Hospital and £ 600 per annum as a pension . Balchen chafed at being forced to remain ashore and was not pleased when he was forcibly retired in April 1744 , aged 74 . Two months later , however , Balchen was recalled up to the Admiralty . A fleet of 25 British and Dutch ships had been raised in a hurry to rescue a British squadron and convoy under Sir Charles Hardy , which had been trapped in the Tagus by a French Brest squadron . Due to a shortage of officers of sufficient experience and seniority to command a fleet of this kind , Balchen was called up at short notice and rewarded with a knighthood .

Balchen 's fleet was successful in driving off the French , who retired in the face of his superior fleet without firing a shot , and Hardy 's convoy was escorted safely to Gibraltar . On the way to the Portuguese Coast , Balchen finally made his fortune in prize money , capturing six heavily laden French West Indiamen . On his return journey however , the fleet was sailing through the Western Approaches in early October when it was hit by a violent storm . Scattered across the Channel , they one by one returned to England in a battered and leaking condition until , a few days later , only HMS Victory was missing . Victory , Balchen 's flagship , was , at the time , one of the largest ships in the world , holding a broadside of 100 guns . She was also very new , having been completed less than seven years before .

Frigates were dispatched across the English Channel to search for the missing battleship , which was last seen on the horizon on 4 October . Captain Thomas Grenville of the frigate HMS Falkland landed at Guernsey in the Channel Islands to reprovision and there heard from locals that wreckage and part of a topmast had washed up on the island 's shores . Further investigation proved that the wreckage had indeed come from the Victory , which was believed to have run into the Casquets , a group of rocks nearby . Other wreckage was washed up on Jersey and Alderney , whose inhabitants had heard distress guns the night before the wreck but were unable to provide aid in the severe storm . Of the 1 @, @ 150 sailors aboard Victory , none was ever recovered .

( In 2008 , the H.M.S. Victory was found approximately 100 km ( 62 miles ) from the Casquets . )

= = Legacy = =

Balchen 's death was met with national mourning in Britain , where he was regarded as an expert and veteran commander of great talent in seamanship , tactics and ship construction . He was also very popular with sailors below decks , having fought for them in the Admiralty over issues such as allowing volunteer seamen to transfer ship when their captain did the same and giving trustworthy sailors shore visiting privileges . His widow was allowed a pension of £ 500 a year following her husband 's death and the consequent end of his income whilst his son George received a promotion to post captain . George , however , did not long outlive his father , dying of illness in Barbados the following year , aged only 28 .

A large memorial to Balchen 's memory was raised in Westminster Abbey , where it can still be seen . The relief commemorates Balchen 's career , that of his son and also the men lost on the Victory in 1744 who have no other permanent memorial . Balchen is remembered in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography as " a hard @-@ working , thoroughgoing professional , recognised for his readiness to accept duty whenever and wherever required . "