

= Sir George Collier , 1st Baronet =

Sir George Ralph Collier , 1st Baronet KCB (1774 ? 24 March 1824) was an officer of the Royal Navy during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars , and the War of 1812 . He had an eventful early life , being shipwrecked early in his career and later captured by the French . Nevertheless , he saw enough service to attract the attention of powerful patrons that secured his rise through the ranks . An officer of considerable ability , he won a noteworthy victory against a stronger French opponent , before embarking on a period of distinguished service off the Spanish and Portuguese coasts , working closely with the British generals fighting the Peninsular War , and markedly contributing to their success . His good service led to a prime posting in command of a squadron despatched to hunt down and neutralise the American super frigates during the War of 1812 . He came close to capturing the USS Constitution , but lost her in circumstances that were unclear and would later return to haunt him . The years of peace that followed the end of the Napoleonic Wars saw him rewarded with a baronetcy , and he continued to serve in the navy where he was tasked with the suppression of the slave trade . The publishing of William James 's account of the War of 1812 , which lambasted him for incompetence and cowardice in his failure to catch the Constitution , broke his personal peace . Having failed to clear his name , and increasingly depressed by the accusations , Collier took his own life .

= = Family and early life = =

Collier was born in London in 1774 , the second son of the chief clerk of the Victualling Board Ralph Collier , and his wife Henrietta Maria . He began his education at the Chelsea Maritime Academy , but by January 1784 his name appeared in the books of the 74 @-@ gun third rate HMS Triumph as a captain 's servant to the Triumph 's commander , Captain Robert Faulknor . This was likely to have been only a nominal entry to gain seniority , and Collier 's naval service probably actually began three years later in January 1787 , when he joined the 28 @-@ gun frigate HMS Carysfort at the rank of midshipman . He moved in June 1790 to take up a position aboard Captain Edward Pellew 's 50 @-@ gun HMS Salisbury and spent the rest of that year serving on the Newfoundland station . Collier transferred again in December 1790 , joining the 100 @-@ gun first rate HMS Victory , then under Captain John Knight in the English Channel .

Collier 's next ship was Captain Samuel Hood 's 32 @-@ gun HMS Juno , which he joined in March 1791 . He remained with the Juno until she was paid off . On being discharged he took passage aboard the East Indiaman Winchelsea , bound for the East India station . The Winchelsea ran onto a reef in the Mozambique Channel on 3 September 1792 and was wrecked . Collier and the other survivors were able to reach Madagascar , where they remained until being picked up a Portuguese brig in May the following year . Before they could reach friendly soil the Portuguese ship was captured by a French privateer and Collier and his fellow survivors were sent to Île de France as prisoners . He remained in captivity there until being released in late 1794 , whereupon he sailed to the British @-@ held port of Madras .

= = French Revolutionary Wars = =

By now the French Revolutionary Wars had broken out , and after a period spent recuperating from his several ordeals , Collier joined Commodore Peter Rainier 's flagship HMS Suffolk in June 1795 . Collier had passed his lieutenant 's examination in 1790 , but only now did he receive his commission , when he was appointed lieutenant and commander of the Suffolk Tender on 31 July 1795 . Rainer sent him to the Cape of Good Hope , but shortly after his arrival , the commander of the station , Admiral Thomas Pringle ordered that Suffolk Tender be surveyed . She was subsequently condemned as unseaworthy , and Collier returned to Rainer at Madras without a ship . Rainer recommended that he return to Britain , where the good report of his service would assure him further employment and promotion . Collier duly arrived in England in May 1799 , and on 2 July that year received an appointment to the 64 @-@ gun HMS Zealand , which was then under the

command of Captain Thomas Parr . A further advance came shortly afterwards , when he made first lieutenant on 29 July aboard Vice @-@ Admiral Andrew Mitchell 's flagship , the 50 @-@ gun HMS Isis . He was present at the capture of the Dutch squadron in the Vlieter Incident in August , and was chosen by Mitchell to carry the despatches back to Britain .

= = = Battle with the Flèche = = =

As was customary Collier received a promotion , to master and commander on 3 September 1799 , and a command , the 18 @-@ gun sloop HMS Victor , on 21 October . Collier commanded the Victor for the next couple of years , escorting convoys and on one occasion a convoy of troop transports to the Red Sea , bringing troops to defeat the French forces in Egypt . He stopped briefly at Diego Garcia to take on supplies , whereupon he fell in with the 22 @-@ gun French corvette Flèche . The two ships fought a brief engagement on 1 September 1801 , during which the Flèche damaged the Victor 's rigging and managed to escape . After repairing the damage , Collier searched the surrounding area before coming across his opponent on 5 September , sheltering in Mahé Roads . The channel was very narrow , and the wind unfavourable , but Collier managed to warp the Victor into the harbour , and with the aid of her staysails , closed on the French ship . After enduring raking fire for sometime , he was finally able to haul his ship around and the two vessels exchanged broadsides for over two hours . By then the Flèche was observed to be in a sinking condition , and her captain ran her aground . A party of men were sent over from the Victor , but having boarded the French vessel , found her crew had set her on fire and then abandoned ship . The men were temporarily evacuated while further assistance was sent across , after which they re @-@ boarded and managed to extinguish the fire . Just as this had been achieved , the Flèche slipped off the reef into deeper water and sank .

Collier therefore came away without his prize , but his exploit came to the attention of the First Lord of the Admiralty Earl St Vincent . Impressed by Collier 's daring , St Vincent promoted him to post @-@ captain , with the 50 @-@ gun HMS Leopard as his command . As a further mark of favour , St Vincent antedated his commission to 22 April 1802 , giving him greater seniority over the officers promoted a week later in the general promotion that followed the Peace of Amiens . With the paying off of the Leopard in 1803 Collier moved ashore , spending until 20 January 1806 in command of the Sea Fencibles at Liverpool . On 18 May 1805 he married Maria Lyon , a resident of the city . The couple did not have any children . It was during this period ashore that Collier devised and presented the plans for a blockade of the Texel , in the hopes of being appointed to lead the expedition . Nothing had come of the scheme by the time he received his next sea @-@ going command , that of the 42 @-@ gun HMS Minerva in February 1806 .

= = Napoleonic Wars = =

The Minerva was sent south to the Spanish and Portuguese coasts , where Collier found himself busy suppressing privateering , and the Spanish coastal forts . He was moved on 22 April 1807 to take up command of the 38 @-@ gun HMS Surveillante , and duly took part in the expedition to Copenhagen . He received approbation for his services , and the British commander , Admiral James Gambier sent him back to Britain with his despatches . Collier received a knighthood , and by 1812 was back in the Bay of Biscay . He was active off the coast of Spain that year , supporting the guerrillas in the countryside under Admiral Sir Home Popham , and was personally involved in some of the land @-@ based operations of the Peninsular War . He was wounded on 1 August 1812 in an attack on the castle at Santander , but though the attack failed , it led to the French withdrawing from the castle , considering it too exposed . Collier 's raids were particularly useful in forcing the French forces in the north of the county to attempt to fortify and defend hundreds of small coastal creeks and villages , instead of supporting the forces in the south , allowing Wellington to defeat them .

It was while operating off the Iberian Peninsula that Collier devised a need for an improved type of ships ' boat . He developed a design based on elements of both a whaleboat and a jolly boat , and

had one built for him at Plymouth Dockyard . The boat proved extremely useful after tests aboard the Surveillante , especially at being able to land safely on a flat beach to give close support . Collier further modified it by installing a howitzer in the bows , and soon boats of its type were being requested by other captains for their ships . In 1813 Collier succeeded Sir Home Popham in commanding the north coast squadron , Spain . He and a small squadron supported General Arthur Wellesley and General Sir Thomas Graham in the capture of San Sebastián and the siege of Bayonne .

= = War of 1812 = =

On 15 March 1814 Collier received command of the 50 @-@ gun HMS Leander and was sent to North America to deal with the American super frigates that were causing losses to British merchant shipping . It was a highly sought after posting , and reflected the Admiralty 's approval of his efforts off Spain . Collier sought battle with the USS Constitution , but the American ship escaped from Boston and evaded him . He gathered a squadron consisting of the Leander , the 60 @-@ gun HMS Newcastle and the 40 @-@ gun HMS Acasta , and set off in pursuit . He almost caught up with the Constitution off St Jago , but failed to close on her , later claiming the weather frustrated his attempts . The Constitution was at the time sailing with two captured British prizes , the former HMS Levant and HMS Cyane . Collier 's three ships gave chase and were overhauling the Constitution , when , having allowed the Cyane to escape , the Levant broke away and Collier followed her . In doing so he retook the Levant , but allowed Constitution to escape . Collier continued to cruise in the area , but before he had another opportunity to pursue the Constitution , news reached him that the Treaty of Ghent had been signed and that the war was over .

= = Years of peace = =

Collier returned to Britain and on 20 September 1814 was created a baronet . He was invested as a Knight Commander of the Order of the Bath on 2 January 1815 . He was also appointed groom of the bedchamber to the Duke of Gloucester that day . He continued to see active service at sea , being appointed as commodore of the West Africa Squadron , with the 36 @-@ gun HMS Creole as his flagship . Between 1818 and 1821 , he played a distinguished role in anti @-@ slavery efforts , which led to his election as an honorary life member of the African Institution on 17 May 1820 .

= = James 's account and death = =

Collier 's life was disturbed by the publication of William James 's Naval History in 1823 . James paid particular attention to the escape of the Constitution , and lamented Collier 's failure to bring her to action and capture her . James claimed Collier 's incompetence had allowed the Constitution to escape from Boston , while his failure to bring her to action when his squadron later sighted her was attributed to what amounted to cowardice on his part . James summed up the episode with

Most sincerely do we regret ... that this last and most triumphant escape of the Constitution , the first frigate of the United States that had humbled the proud flag of Britain , had , not long ago , been brought under the scrutiny of a court @-@ martial . The blame would then have fallen where it ought to have fallen ... The more it is investigated , the more it will show itself to be , the most blundering piece of business recorded in these six volumes .

Collier applied to the Admiralty for the opportunity to clear his name , but this was not satisfied . Friends and relations had become increasingly concerned about his mental state as a result . His brother took the precaution of removing the razors from his home , but Collier appears to have smuggled one to his room , and used it to cut his own throat early in the morning on 24 March 1824 . His servant who was sleeping in the same room immediately brought help , but nothing could be done and Collier died less than five minutes after inflicting the injury . The inquest later determined that ' The deceased destroyed himself , being in a state of temporary mental derangement . ' The baronetcy became extinct upon his death .

