



Clear for Action!

Comprehensive Rules Review

A Game of Command and Courage in the Age of Sail (1750–1815)

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Overview

Clear for Action! is a d20-based tabletop wargame of Age of Sail naval combat (1750–1815), designed for frigate duels and small-ship actions rather than fleet battles. Players command individual ships using ship cards that track crew, morale, hull, rigging, guns, and critical damage. The game uses a 6-phase round structure, a push-your-luck command chain, skill tests against crew ratings, and a penetration-threshold gunnery system.

The designer's stated inspiration is Patrick O'Brian's Aubrey-Maturin novels—"the roll of the deck beneath your feet, the sting of powder smoke, and the shouts of men as broadsides thunder through the haze."

This review evaluates the rules across ten dimensions, drawing on research into comparable rulesets (Beat to Quarters, Black Seas, Heart of Oak, Oak & Iron, Sails of Glory, Wooden Ships & Iron Men), wargame design best practices (Priestley & Lambshead, Sam Mustafa, Too Fat Lardies, Mike Hutchinson, Joseph McCullough), naval history of the period, and the naval fiction of O'Brian, Forester, and Pope.

Scoring Summary

Dimension	Score	Notes
Game Design	8	Strong core loop, clean d20 system, excellent command phase
Historical Accuracy	8	Good gunnery model, solid national differences, raking needs work
Playability	7	Clean mechanics, but needs QRS and starter scenario
Fun	8	Command decisions create real tension, gunnery interrupts are dramatic
Flavor & Theme	9	Best-in-class O'Brian feel, the design philosophy shines through
Originality	8	Command phase push-your-luck is genuinely novel
Accessibility	6	Rules are well-written but lack play examples and onboarding
Balance	7	Point system helps, but raking and rate-of-fire need tuning
Narrative Generation	8	Criticals, command failures, and morale create stories
Pacing	7	Good phase structure, close action could be faster
Overall	7.7	

Detailed Analysis

1. Game Design (8/10)

The Command Phase is the crown jewel. The push-your-luck order chain—where each additional order beyond the first incurs a cumulative -3 penalty on the Command skill test—is the game’s most original and impactful mechanic. It forces the central decision that defines Age of Sail command: *how much do you try to do in the chaos of battle?*

This maps directly to what Joseph McCullough identifies as the key to good wargame design: “Identify your core mechanic—the part of the game in which the player makes their most important decisions” (*Tabletop Gaming*). In CFA, the core mechanic is the command decision, not the gunnery roll. This is the right call—as the Too Fat Lardies design philosophy puts it, games should make “players think like real-life commanders rather than gamers.”

The d20 roll-under system is clean and intuitive. A single resolution mechanic (roll ≤ skill + modifiers) handles command, seamanship, gunnery, and close action. This is exactly what Rick Priestley advocates in *Tabletop Wargames: A Designers’ and Writers’ Handbook*: “A good system will have a mechanism or two which can be applied in a hundred different situations.” Players learn one test, then apply it everywhere.

The 6-phase round structure works well:

1. Command Phase (both players issue orders)
2. Seamanship Phase (execute sailing orders, Player A then B)
3. Gunnery Phase (fires as interrupt during seamanship)
4. Close Action Phase (boarding, melee)
5. Weather Phase (wind changes, environmental effects)
6. Resolution Phase (spread damage, check morale/status)

The gunnery-as-interrupt mechanic—where broadsides fire during the opponent’s movement—is borrowed from Heart of Oak’s movement/fire interruption system and creates genuine tactical tension. You must decide *when* during the enemy’s approach to fire: too early and you waste your broadside at long range; too late and they’ve crossed your bow.

The Ranked Skill Test for simultaneous resolution is elegant. When both players attempt something at the same time (e.g., both trying to grapple/cut grapples), both roll and the one who succeeds by more wins. This avoids the “I go, you go” problem cleanly.

Where it falls short: The phase structure could benefit from a quick-reference card that fits on a single page. As the BGG Wargame Rules Best Practices thread notes: “Key rules should fit on one side of A4.” Sam Mustafa’s *Blucher* is frequently cited as the gold standard for this. CFA currently has no QRS, which will slow down play as players flip through the rules for phase sequences, modifier tables, and damage procedures.

2. Historical Accuracy (8/10)

Gunnery is the strongest historical element. The penetration threshold system (Gun Damage – Defense = effective damage) captures the fundamental reality of Nelsonic naval combat: not all guns can hurt all ships. A 6-pounder bouncing off a 74’s hull is historically accurate—Captain Broke’s 18-pounder broadsides from Shannon shattered Chesapeake’s lighter scantlings precisely because of this differential.

The gun table correctly models the range-damage tradeoffs: long guns have longer range with moderate damage, while carronades are devastating at close range but useless beyond it. This mirrors the carronade revolution that began in the 1770s—a 32-pounder carronade weighed about one-quarter as much as a long 32-pounder gun, needed only a small crew, and was devastating at close range.

National skill differences are well-calibrated. The default ratings show British crews with higher gunnery and seamanship, French with better ship design (speed, hull), Spanish with large ships but lower crew quality. This reflects the historical reality: British crews had years of blockade duty for practice, while the French Revolution destroyed France’s officer corps (losing 22 of 27 admirals and 128 of 170 captains between 1789–1792).

Ship types span the full range: From boats and cutters through brigs, sloops, frigates, and ships of the line up to 1st rates, plus merchant types (East Indiamen, merchantmen, transports). The inclusion of

smaller vessels is historically appropriate for the designer's focus on frigate actions and prize-taking.

What's Missing or Could Be Stronger

Raking fire needs to be more devastating. Historically, a raking broadside was 3–5× more effective than a perpendicular one. Royal Sovereign's opening broadside through Santa Ana's stern reportedly disabled 400 men and 14 guns. Victory's treble-shotted opening through Bucentaure's stern killed 200–400 men. The current rules give raking a bonus, but it should be the most feared maneuver in the game—the moment players gasp.

Rate of fire differences aren't modeled. This is the single biggest historical omission. At Trafalgar, British crews fired one broadside every 2–3 minutes; Franco-Spanish crews managed one every 6 minutes—a 3:1 disadvantage. The research is unambiguous: “The difference in rate of fire between navies was the single most important factor in close combat.” Currently, all ships fire at the same rate. A crack crew should get more shots in.

The weather gauge advantage could be more pronounced. Historically, the windward ship controlled the engagement (choosing when and where to close), could blanket the enemy's sails, and had a gunnery advantage from heel. The leeward ship's advantage was being able to open lower gun ports. This asymmetry is the tactical puzzle of every Age of Sail battle.

Ships almost never sink from gunfire alone. John Keegan noted that wooden ships were “virtually unsinkable” by gunfire—only about two ships sank purely from gunfire in the entire period from 1750 to Trafalgar. Ships strike their colors when crew casualties make continued resistance impossible. The morale/striking system in CFA handles this well, but the rules should emphasize that sinking is the exception, not the norm.

3. Playability (7/10)

The rules are well-written prose. The design philosophy section is evocative and sets expectations clearly. Section organization follows the phase structure logically—you can read through the rules in play order.

The d20 system keeps math simple. No percentage calculations (unlike Beat to Quarters' constant division and multiplication), no custom dice (unlike Oak & Iron), no counter-draw pools (unlike Sails of Glory). A standard d20 is universally available and the roll-under mechanic is immediately intuitive.

What Needs Improvement

No Quick Reference Sheet. This is the #1 playability gap. Every comparable game provides one. Black Seas includes summary cards in the box. Sails of Glory has reference sheets for each rule complexity level. The BGG community consensus is firm: “If you cannot summarize core play on a single page, your game may be too complex for the target audience.”

No starter scenario. Black Seas includes a simple first-game scenario. Sails of Glory's basic rules create a starter experience. CFA throws the player into the full rules immediately. A “First Blood” scenario—two

frigates, pre-filled ship cards, annotated turn walkthrough—would dramatically improve onboarding. As Gabrio Tolentino (Black Seas designer) acknowledged: “Napoleonic naval wargaming had difficulty attracting opponents due to the intricacies of sailing games being complex and impenetrable to players.”

No play examples in the rules. Mike Hutchinson’s advice is relevant: “Rules are code, but players are not computers. Players can generalize from examples.” The gunnery section, command phase, and boarding procedures would all benefit from boxed examples showing a complete resolution with specific numbers.

Some terms could be defined more precisely. Robert Delwood’s rule-writing guidance applies: “Define terms precisely on first use with abbreviation, then use that exact term consistently throughout.” A glossary of key terms (broadside weight, penetration, defense, etc.) at the back would help.

4. Fun (8/10)

The command phase creates genuine tension. “Do I push for a third order and risk failing everything?” is a delicious decision. It’s the naval equivalent of poker: how much do you bet on your crew’s ability to execute under fire? When a command chain fails—the third order botched, leaving your ship unable to fire its prepared broadside—it creates exactly the kind of “narrative emergent moment” that the 5th Column Wargaming article identifies as the peak tabletop experience.

Gunnery interrupts are dramatic. The ability to fire during the opponent’s movement creates a cinematic moment: the enemy ship rounds your bow, and you unleash a devastating raking broadside. Or you hold fire, waiting for them to close to point-blank range where your carronades will shatter their hull.

Critical damage creates stories. Fire spreading below decks, a mast shot away at the worst moment, the steering destroyed as you’re trying to disengage—these are the events players talk about after the game. As the research notes: “Randomness within structure—a die roll might cause dramatic twists like the impossibly lucky shot—and these moments of chance are often the most memorable and story-worthy.”

The decision space is rich without being overwhelming. Each round involves genuine choices: which orders to attempt, when to fire, what shot type to use, whether to close for boarding or stand off and pound. This is the “multiple decision points” that Lloydian Wargaming identifies as key to engagement.

5. Flavor & Theme (9/10)

This is where CFA truly excels. The design philosophy statement reads like it was written by someone who has read every Aubrey-Maturin novel twice and can quote Cochrane’s autobiography from memory. The emphasis on “captain-level command, frigate duels, the feel of real seamanship” places the game exactly where the best naval fiction lives.

Patrick O’Brian’s central insight is that a warship is a floating society, and the captain’s effectiveness depends on forging disparate men into a fighting unit. CFA captures this through the crew rating system,

skills, and morale track. When your crew's morale breaks after absorbing a devastating raking broadside, it feels like the moment in *Master and Commander* when the Sophie's crew wavers before Aubrey steadies them.

C.S. Forester's Hornblower novels emphasize the mathematical mind of command—calculating odds, ammunition, crew casualties, timing. CFA's command phase mirrors this perfectly: you're weighing the risk of each additional order against the chance of failure, just as Hornblower calculates whether he can fire three broadsides before the enemy closes.

Dudley Pope's Ramage novels provide the most tactically detailed naval fiction, and CFA's granular gun tables, damage tracks, and critical hits echo Pope's precision about how a brig's guns are served and how a frigate fights a ship three times her size.

The abilities system adds character. Ship abilities (like “Coppered Hull,” “Hot Shot,” “Weatherly”) and captain abilities give each vessel personality beyond raw statistics. This maps to the naval fiction tradition where every ship has a character—HMS Surprise is fast and weatherly, Lydia is sturdy but slow, Shannon is a gunnery machine.

What Could Enhance the Theme Further

Weather gauge as an ability or tactical state. The weather gauge was the central tactical variable of every Age of Sail engagement. O'Brian spends pages describing Aubrey maneuvering for the weather gauge. Making it a named, mechanically significant state (with specific bonuses/penalties) would reinforce the theme.

First broadside rules. Historically, the first broadside—carefully loaded and aimed—was dramatically more effective than subsequent ones. Shannon's opening broadsides achieved a 4:1 hit ratio. Victory's triple-shotted opening through Bucentaure's stern was catastrophic. A “first broadside” bonus would create the dramatic opening moment that defines every naval action in fiction.

Prize money and motivation. In the fiction, prize money drives behavior—British captains actively sought action because captured enemy vessels could make them wealthy. A campaign layer with prize money would add the economic motivation that Forester, O'Brian, and Lambdin all emphasize.

6. Originality (8/10)

The command phase push-your-luck mechanic is genuinely novel. No other Age of Sail game makes the *decision of how many orders to attempt* the core tension of each round. Beat to Quarters uses written orders. Black Seas uses standard activation. Heart of Oak uses initiative-based alternating activation. Sails of Glory uses simultaneous card play. Oak & Iron uses initiative cards. None of them have this push-your-luck chain where each additional order risks the entire sequence.

The d20 roll-under system, while not unique, is uncommon in the genre. Most Age of Sail games use d100 (Beat to Quarters, Heart of Oak), d10/d6 (Black Seas), custom dice (Oak & Iron), or no dice at all (Sails of Glory). The d20 provides 5% granularity—enough for meaningful modifiers without the arithmetic burden of percentage dice.

The gunnery penetration threshold is a clean abstraction. Gun Damage – Defense directly encodes the fundamental physics: heavier shot penetrates heavier hulls. This is more elegant than Beat to Quarters’ broadside weight \times nationality modifier \times range modifier calculation, and more historically grounded than Black Seas’ flat damage values.

What’s borrowed (and that’s fine): Gunnery as interrupt during movement (Heart of Oak). Separate damage tracks for hull/rigging/crew/morale (genre standard since Wooden Ships & Iron Men). Critical hit tables (universal across the genre). Wind and sail mechanics (genre standard). Borrowing proven mechanics while innovating on the command layer is exactly the right design strategy.

7. Accessibility (6/10)

This is the weakest dimension and the most actionable. The rules themselves are competently written, but the onboarding experience needs significant work.

Missing elements that comparable games include:

- Quick Reference Sheet (Black Seas, Sails of Glory, Beat to Quarters all include these)
- Starter scenario with annotated walkthrough (Black Seas)
- Layered rules introduction—basic → standard → advanced (Sails of Glory does this brilliantly with three rule complexity levels)
- Visual diagrams of phase sequence, combat resolution, and wind/sailing (Black Seas is praised for “great diagrams, easy to read tables”)
- Boxed play examples showing complete resolution with specific numbers

The digital ship-card format helps. Having the ship builder as a web app means players don’t need to photocopy log sheets (a common complaint about Beat to Quarters and Heart of Oak). This is a genuine accessibility advantage.

Recommendation: Follow the Sails of Glory layered approach. Create three tiers:

1. **Basic**—Movement, broadside fire, hull damage only. Two frigates, pre-made cards. Playable in 30 minutes.
2. **Standard**—Full command phase, all damage tracks, criticals, boarding. The complete game as currently written.
3. **Advanced**—Weather changes, campaign rules, shore batteries, cutting-out expeditions.

8. Balance (7/10)

The point system provides a foundation for balanced force construction. The formula considers offense (gun damage \times count \times facing \times range), durability (hull \times defense multiplier + rigging + crew + morale + critical slots), mobility (speed + maneuver), and crew quality—all the right inputs.

National asymmetry is historically appropriate. British crews are more skilled but Spanish ships are larger; French ships are faster but their crews are less experienced. This creates natural asymmetric matchups where both sides have viable strategies.

Balance Concerns

Raking is potentially undertuned. If raking isn't devastating enough, there's no incentive to spend precious command orders on the seamanship needed to cross the enemy's bow or stern. The maneuvering game collapses into broadside-to-broadside slugfests.

Carronades vs. long guns. The tradeoff (devastating close-range firepower vs. effective fire at distance) needs careful calibration. If carronade ships can close without taking crippling damage, they dominate. If they can't close at all, they're useless. Historical evidence suggests the tradeoff was real and meaningful.

Crew quality as a multiplier. The point system correctly makes crew quality multiplicative (better crews make everything more effective), but this means small crew quality differences can produce large point swings. A British "crack" crew vs. a Spanish "landsmen" crew on identical ships might be a 2:1 point differential—and the actual combat effectiveness gap was often even larger historically.

9. Narrative Generation (8/10)

CFA excels at creating emergent stories. The combination of command phase failures ("The captain's third order went unheard in the smoke—the guns fell silent just as the enemy closed"), critical damage ("Fire in the magazine! All hands to the pumps!"), morale cascades ("The crew's nerve broke after the mast came down"), and boarding actions ("Grappled alongside, the marines poured over the rail") produces exactly the kind of narrative moments that define great tabletop wargaming.

The morale/striking system creates dramatic climaxes. Ships don't just run out of hit points—crews break, officers fall, the flag comes down. This maps to the historical reality where ships overwhelmingly struck their colors rather than sinking.

What Would Enhance Narrative Generation

Named officers with individual fates. O'Brian tracks not just Aubrey but his officers—Pullings, Mowett, Bonden. If the game tracked 2–3 named officers per ship, their deaths or wounds would create personal stakes.

A "ship's log" of key events. A simple post-game summary of critical moments would help players remember and retell their battles.

10. Pacing (7/10)

The 6-phase structure provides good rhythm. The alternation between command decisions (tense), seamanship/gunnery (dramatic), and resolution (consequential) creates natural peaks and valleys.

Potential Pacing Concerns

Close action (boarding) could drag. Boarding actions in real life were brief, violent, and decisive—Shannon captured Chesapeake in 15 minutes. If the boarding rules require multiple rounds of grinding melee, they'll feel slower than the historical reality.

Damage resolution overhead. With five damage tracks (morale, crew, rigging, hull, criticals), end-of-round bookkeeping could slow down. This is the fundamental tension the Wargaming Raft blog identifies: “In many naval wargames, the player must make decisions usually made by the ship’s commander, but then also get involved in the nitty gritty of targeting, shooting and resolving damage.”

Scaling. The game is designed for frigate duels and small actions. With 4+ ships per side, the per-ship overhead could push game length beyond the 2–3 hour sweet spot that research consistently identifies as the maximum for sustained engagement.

Competitor Comparison

Feature	CFA	Beat to Quarters	Black Seas	Heart of Oak	Oak & Iron	Sails of Glory	WS&IM
Complexity	Medium	Heavy	Light-Med	Heavy	Medium	Light-Med	Medium
Core Dice	d20	d100	d10/d6	d100	Custom	None (counters)	d100/d6
Movement	Free, ordered	Free mm, written	Inches, activation	Free mm, 2-leg	Ruler tools	Maneuver cards	Hex grid
Wind Detail	Dir + strength	32 pts, 5 strengths	8 dirs, simple	16 pts, 8 strengths	3 zones	Color-coded	6 hex-sides
Damage Tracks	5 tracks	3 columns	1 HP + crits	Hull + Crew + masts	Damage + Fatigue	Ship + Crew	Hull + Rig + Crew
Unique Feature	Command push-your-luck	Nationality gunnery mods	Weather Gage activation	Move/fire interrupt	Initiative cards	No-dice counter draws	Hex-based pioneer
Best For	Frigate duels, O'Brian feel	Hardcore sim	Quick miniatures	Detailed duels	Modern tactical	Elegant accessible	Classic wargamers
QRS	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Starter Scenario	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes

Actionable Suggestions

HIGH PRIORITY

- Create a Quick Reference Sheet.** Fit the phase sequence, all modifier tables, damage procedures, and key rules on a single double-sided page. This is the single highest-impact improvement for playability.
- Create a starter scenario (“First Blood”).** Two frigates, pre-filled ship cards, wind fixed, no weather changes. Include a 4-page annotated walkthrough of the first 3 rounds showing complete resolution of every phase with specific die rolls and outcomes.
- Strengthen raking.** Make raking broadsides 2–3× normal damage (currently not devastating enough relative to history). Royal Sovereign’s opening raking broadside disabled 400 men and 14 guns. Raking should be the most feared and most rewarded maneuver in the game.
- Model rate-of-fire differences.** A crack British crew should fire more broadsides per unit time than a raw Spanish crew. Options: trained crews reload faster (fire every round vs. every other round);

crew quality adds bonus hits; or a “sustained fire” order that only well-drilled crews can attempt.

5. Add play examples throughout the rules. Boxed examples for: command phase resolution (showing the push-your-luck chain), gunnery (showing penetration calculation), boarding, and morale checks. As Hutchinson writes: “Players can generalize from examples; they don’t need every permutation spelled out.”

MEDIUM PRIORITY

6. Add a “Weather Gauge” mechanic. The windward position should confer a specific, named advantage—perhaps +1 to seamanship tests, or the ability to choose engagement range. The weather gauge was the central tactical variable of the era and deserves mechanical weight.

7. Add a “First Broadside” bonus. The first broadside from a loaded, aimed battery should be significantly more effective. This creates the dramatic opening moment of every naval action and rewards patient players who hold fire.

8. Consider a layered rules structure. Basic (movement + broadsides + hull damage only) → Standard (full rules as written) → Advanced (weather, campaigns, cutting-out). This follows Sails of Glory’s highly praised approach and dramatically improves accessibility.

9. Add visual diagrams. Wind angles, firing arcs, boarding procedure, phase sequence—all benefit from visual representation. Black Seas is consistently praised for its diagrams.

10. Add a “Ship’s Log” mechanic for campaign play. Track key events (prizes taken, damage sustained, crew lost) across multiple engagements. This creates the persistent narrative that O’Brian, Forester, and Pope all build their novels around.

LOWER PRIORITY

11. Named officers with individual fates. Give each ship 2–3 officers with names and specific roles. Their death/wounding creates personal stakes and narrative hooks. “Lieutenant Mowett fell to a splinter during the third broadside” is more memorable than “lost 2 crew.”

12. Consider shot-type selection. Round shot, chain shot, grape shot, and double-shotting were real tactical choices. Round shot for hull damage, chain for rigging, grape for clearing decks before boarding, double-shot for devastating close-range fire. This adds one meaningful decision per broadside without excessive complexity.

13. Prize money for campaign play. The economic incentive that drove Age of Sail aggression. Captured ships are adjudicated for value; prize money funds crew improvements and ship repairs. This gives campaigns a progression system beyond “fight the next battle.”

Conclusion

Clear for Action! is a strong entry in the Age of Sail wargaming genre—better than average across nearly every dimension and genuinely excellent in flavor/theme and the originality of its command phase. The d20 system is clean, the ship card design is thoughtful, and the designer’s love for the subject matter shines through every page.

The game’s greatest strength is that it makes you *feel* like a frigate captain. The command phase creates authentic command tension. The gunnery system creates dramatic broadsides. The damage and morale systems create emergent narratives.

The most impactful improvements would be accessibility-focused: a QRS, a starter scenario, play examples, and visual diagrams. These don’t require redesigning any mechanics—they’re presentation improvements that would make the existing (good) game much easier to learn and play.

The mechanical improvements—stronger raking, rate-of-fire modeling, weather gauge, first broadside—would push CFA from “very good” to “exceptional” by better capturing the historical realities that the novels and the history both emphasize as decisive.

As Sam Mustafa said of his own naval design philosophy: “Just the right mix of period flavour and simplicity of design” that guarantees “a game within an evening’s play.” CFA is close to that ideal—closer than most of its competitors—and with the suggested improvements, it could be the definitive captain-level Age of Sail game.

Review prepared with reference to: Beat to Quarters, Black Seas (Warlord Games), Heart of Oak (FGU), Oak & Iron (Firelock Games), Sails of Glory (Ares Games), Wooden Ships & Iron Men (Avalon Hill). Design references: Priestley & Lambshead, Sam Mustafa, Too Fat Lardies, Mike Hutchinson, Joseph McCullough, Lloydian Wargaming. Historical references: naval history 1750–1815, contemporary accounts of Nelson, Collingwood, Cochrane, and Broke. Fiction references: O’Brian (Aubrey-Maturin), Forester (Hornblower), Pope (Ramage), Kent (Bolitho), Stockwin (Kydd).