Governor Tonyn's Brown-Water Navy: East Florida During the American Revolution, 1775-1778

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GOVERNOR TONYN'S BROWN-WATER NAVY: EAST FLORIDA DURING THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION, 1775-1778

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MOSES KIRKLAND left St. Augustine aboard the brigantine *Betsey* bound for British-held Boston with a packet of letters requesting an expedition to Charleston, South Carolina, so that the southern loyalists and Indians might be saved for the crown. East Florida's Royal Governor Patrick Tonyn's letters were among the bundle being forwarded to General Thomas Gage. On December 17, 1775, the Continental schooner *Lee* captured the *Betsey* off the New England coast and made for an American port. The next day the intercepted East Florida letters were taken to General George Washington's headquarters at Cambridge, Massachusetts, where they aroused considerable interest. Washington immediately wrote to John Hancock that the letters from St. Augustine indicated a quantity of ammunition in its forts and a weakness in its defenses. The information revealed by this mail was an invitation to attack the royal province. The packet was displayed next to the Continental Congress at Philadelphia, and Congress sanctioned the idea of an assault on East Florida, calling upon the Carolinas and Georgia to seize St. Augustine. [1]

The Floridas, East and West, remained loyal to the British crown during the American Revolution. East Florida was separated from its northern neighbor Georgia by the wilderness of forest and swamp lands. There were three communication routes between the two: a sea voyage in the Atlantic, a boat trip down

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1. Wilbur H. Siebert, *Loyalists in East Florida, 1774 to 1785,* 2 vols. (DeLand, 1929), I, 28-29; George Washington to John Hancock, December 18, 1775, in William Bell Clark, ed., *Naval Documents of the American Revolution,* 7 vols. to date. (Washington, 1964-1976), III, 147 (hereinafter cited as *Naval Documents); Journal of the Continental Congress,* January 1, 1776, printed in *Naval Documents,* III, 560-61.

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the inland coastal waterway, and the King's Road, which ran from Fort Barrington on the Altamaha River south to St. Augustine. The road was cut by the St. Marys and St. Johns rivers in the frontier zone between the two colonies. Thus, the easiest and most direct route was by water, and for armed intervention the inland waterways proved the most accessible. This fact caused Governor Tonyn to direct his energies toward creating naval defenses to protect his province from the Americans.

The discovery that his dispatches had miscarried was the third naval disaster Tonyn had suffered so far that year. Earlier, the merchant vessel *Phillipa,* loaded with ammunition, was seized in mid-July 1775 off the Georgia coast and taken to Savannah for unloading. [2] Gunpowder in St. Augustine was in short supply following this first incident. Early in August the second misfortune struck the governor when Captain Alvare Lofthouse brought the *Betsey,* heavily laden with ordnance stores, to the coast off St. Augustine. Captain Lofthouse, aware of the danger of attempting to cross the shallows at the harbor entrance while riding so low in the water, decided to wait and lighten ship before coming in. The lone vessel filled with gunpowder sitting unprotected outside the harbor made Governor Tonyn anxious. He wrote that "had His Majesty's Schooner Saint John been in port, it was my intention to have desired her to go out to protect the Brig." [3] The next morning Lofthouse requested the governor to send out a provincial vessel to unload part of his cargo. Tonyn agreed, and 293 barrels of gunpowder were moved ashore. Thus lightened, the *Betsey* could cross the bar, except that weather and heavy seas again delayed Lofthouse.

Meanwhile, Captain Clement Lempriere of the rebel privateer Commerce, a sloop from South Carolina, arrived off the Matanzas Inlet, just south of St. Augustine. Getting underway on the morning of August 7, Lempriere headed north where he sighted and approached the *Betsey.* Lookouts on the *Betsey,* and also in the coastal watchtower near the harbor entrance, followed the Commerce as she drew near. Captain Lofthouse mistook the American for a "negro vessel," and allowed her to come

2. Patrick Tonyn to Lord George Germain, March 5, 1776, *Naval Documents,* IV, 187; Tonyn to William Legge, Earl of Dartmouth, July 21, 1775, ibid., I, 802-03.
3. Tonyn to Dartmouth, August 24, 1775, United Kingdom, Public Records Office, Colonial Office, 5/555:323 (hereinafter cited as CO).

alongside. To his dismay, twenty-six men from the American sloop boarded the *Betsey.* [4] The rebels removed 111 barrels and thirty-seven kegs of gunpowder. The South Carolinians gave Captain Lofthouse a draught stating: "Ten days after delivery please pay to Alveric Laufthouse *[sic]* on order, the sum of One Thousand Pounds Sterling." [5] It was drawn on a Charleston merchant and was authorized by Captain Lempriere.

A detail of unarmed soldiers had remained aboard the *Betsey* anticipating the eventual unloading. According to the *Commerce's* journal these soldiers had been bribed with 100 pounds sterling. Later the men reported that a bribe had been offered, but they did not say whether it had been accepted. Governor Tonyn's account of the incident gives the troops credit for hastening the sloop's departure by their plotting to seize the rebels' arms: "the Pirates caught the alarm [and] evacuated the Brig with pre-cipitation." [6] In fact, they left the vessel so quickly that a frag-ment of the *Commerce's* sailing orders, signed by Henry Laurens, was left aboard the *Betsey.*

Governor Tonyn reacted quickly to the news of the *Betsey's* plunder. The provincial vessel *Florida,* outfitted with eight small cannon and a crew augmented by an officer and thirty men from the 14th Regiment of Foot, was dispatched in pursuit. Several days later the *Commerce* crossed the Savannah bar with the *Florida* a few hours behind. The rebels had reached the safety of the inland passage to Beaufort, South Carolina, before the governor's sloop could catch up. [7]

When Governor Tonyn wrote to Vice Admiral Samuel Graves about the affair of the *Betsey,* he blamed Royal Navy Lieutenant William Grant, of the schooner *St. John,* because Grant had failed to be at St. Augustine as the governor had requested. Normally the Royal Navy had two vessels, the *St. John* and the sloop *Savage,* sailing in the waters off East Florida

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4. Ibid., 5/555:324-25; journal of *Commerce,* August 7, 1775, *Naval Docu-ments,* I, 1091-092.
5. Tonyn to Dartmouth, August 24, 1775, CO 5/555:324-25, 333; Siebert, *Loyalists in East Florida,* I, 22.
6. Siebert, *Loyalists in East Florida,* I, 21; journal of *Commerce, Naval Documents,* I, 1091-092; Tonyn to Dartmouth, August 24, 1775, CO 5/555:324-25, 333.
7. Ibid.; journal of *Commerce,* August 15, 1775, *Naval Documents,* I, 1156.

and the Bahamas, but Tonyn accused both captains of hiding in the Bahamas "out of the way of action." [8]

In response, Admiral Graves ordered Lieutenant John Graves of the schooner *St. Lawrence* to proceed to St. Augustine to aid the King's troops, secure the city, and protect the vital trade links. Early in October the St. Lawrence arrived carrying a supply of ordnance and recruits for the garrison. Lieutenant Graves's reassuring presence at St. Augustine proved to be of short duration. On December 16 he departed to join the British flotilla at Charleston. [9] Once again Governor Tonyn was in need of a naval force.

All of these events caused the governor to appeal for adequate naval defense, for, in the absence of the Royal Navy, he was responsible for maritime matters affecting East Florida. He was concerned constantly with the inadequate assistance he felt he received from the navy. Thus Tonyn diligently pursued the task of maintaining some armed ships to guard St. Augustine, to reconnoiter East Florida's riverine frontiers (the St. Johns and the St. Marys rivers), and to communicate with loyalist elements in the other colonies.

With the loss of the packet of letters in December 1775, Governor Tonyn was convinced that he needed naval protection because the military weakness of his province was now apparent to the enemy. Admiral Graves agreed, and towards the end of the month he ordered the *Hinchenbrook* to East Florida to replace the *St. Lawrence.* However, it was two months before Lieutenant Alexander Ellis brought his ship to anchor at St. Augustine. [10]

Meanwhile, Martin Jollie sent word from the northern border that the Georgians were planning an attack. [11] Tonyn was in a quandry; where was his naval protection? Without ships he would not be able to scout the St. Marys and the St. Johns rivers nor fend off the rebel supply vessels traveling south

8. Tonyn to Samuel Graves, September 14, 1775, *Naval Documents,* II, 105; Siebert, *Loyalists in East Florida,* I, 30.
9. Ibid.; Samuel Graves to John Graves, September 15, 1775, *Naval Documents,* II, 107; Tonyn to Samuel Graves, October 3, 1775, ibid., II, 289; journal of HMS *St. Lawrence,* January 26, 1776, ibid., III, 1003.
10. Samuel Graves to Andrew Barkely, December 26, 1775, ibid., III, 254-56; Tonyn to Germaine, March 5, 1776, ibid., IV, 187.
11. Martin Jollie to Tonyn, February 13, 1776, CO 5/556, duplicate 39.

along the inland waterways supporting the invasion. East Florida's defenses were weakened by the absence of naval ships.

Commodore Ezekiel Hopkins's raid on New Providence in the Bahamas in mid-February 1776 provided Governor Tonyn with his naval defense. When the American squadron approached New Providence Lieutenant Grant loaded powder on the *St. John* and made sail for East Florida. He was anxious to unload his precious cargo at St. Augustine before the Americans arrived and overwhelmed his ship. The *St. John* and the *Hinchenbrook,* which had arrived two weeks earlier, gave Tonyn his badly needed ships. [12]

An alarm from the St. Marys River reached Tonyn on April Fools' Day. He sent the *St. John* and planter Jeremy Wright's sloop with a fifty-man infantry detachment to the northern border. This sudden show of force by the East Floridians drove back the Americans, but not before the *St. John* confiscated forty-three barrels of rice belonging to the rebels. A week later the enemy schooner *Neptune* was captured. Tonyn's prompt response with adequate naval force ended the invasion for the time being. [13]

By the end of the month Governor Tonyn was happy to report to Lord George Germaine, the British Colonial Secretary of State, that three companies of the 60th Regiment of Foot had arrived at St. Augustine. At the same time Tonyn was upset over the abrupt and unannounced departure of the *Hinchenbrook.* Her commander, Lieutenant Ellis, became bored with drab St. Augustine and, loosely interpreting his orders, departed for the more exciting waters off North Carolina. [14]

When word reached Governor Tonyn in May 1776, that the Georgians were planning to interrupt British cattle drives and stage guerrilla attacks on plantations along the north side of the St. Johns River, he advised the loyalist settlers to drive their cattle to the south side at the Cow Ford. He also ordered Lieutenant Grant to reconnoiter the St. Marys and St. Johns rivers again. On May 31, while on patrol, the *St. John* sighted and detained a small rebel sloop used for loading larger vessels. While

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12. William Grant to Tonyn, March 7, 1776, *Naval Documents,* IV, 225.
13. Journal of HMS *St. John,* April 1, 5, 12, 1776, ibid., IV, 702-03, 825.
14. James Young to Phillip Stephen, January 9, 1776, ibid., III, 706; Tonyn to Germaine, April 22, 1776, ibid., IV, 1210.

engaged in this endeavour, the *St. John* was attacked by a force of 200 Americans who almost succeeded in boarding her. A heated engagement ensued before the British sailors beat off the Georgians. [15]

Governor Tonyn's objective during the latter half of 1776 was to secure the St. Johns River. Locally he commissioned several privateers while he pleaded with London and North American commands for naval assistance. His dispatches were answered temporarily by the arrival of several warships which anchored in St. Augustine's harbor. This show of force brought confidence to the East Floridians and caused the Americans to postpone their planned offensive until a later time.

The inhabitants of south Georgia were eyeing apprehensively the troop build-up in East Florida. They feared a British invasion. From their point of view, the schooner *St. John* would be the spearhead of any attack coming up the inland waterways. It was decided to send out an expedition for the express purpose of capturing the *St. John.* The force consisted of a schooner, a flat, an auxiliary vessel, and 240 men. [16]

On August 1, J. Kitching, collector of customs at Savannah, found out about the expedition. He hurried to Cockspur Island to tell Captain John Stanhope, commanding the sloop *Raven,* of the impending attack. Stanhope replied that he could do nothing about the matter because his provisions were low and he had to return to the fleet for supplies. In desperation Kitching decided to bring the news to Governor Tonyn himself. He boarded a schooner bound for St. Augustine on August 4. It was a gallant but tardy effort. However, on August 5, when the American naval force passed Jekyll Island heading south, John Martin observed the operations, and he sent a messenger overland to warn Lieutenant Grant. [17]

Since the first of August Grant had been stationed on the St. Marys working with the *Florida* and the pilot boat *Pompey.*

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15. Journal of HMS *St. John,* May 29, 31, 1776, ibid., V, 328; Siebert, *Loyalists in East Florida,* I, 39; Luis R. Arana, "A Bicentennial Calendar of British East Florida," [part 1], *El Escribano,* XIII (April 1976), 41-43.
16. Luis R. Arana, "A Bicentennial Calendar of British East Florida" [part 2], *El Escribano,* XIII (July 1976), 71-78; Siebert, *Loyalists in East Florida,* I, 39-40.
17. Arana, "Bicentennial Calendar of British East Florida" [part 2], 71-72, 74-75.

All three vessels were cooperating with Captain Colin Graham's detachment of infantry. At the time Lieutenant Grant received Martin's warning the *St. John* was alone on the coast. Grant sent a message to Captain Graham suggesting that the *Florida* and *Pompey* join the *St. John,* and that Graham provide soldiers for the three ships. Graham visited the *St. John* that evening, then left saying that he would check on the situation. Grant heard no more from Graham. [18]

After Grant dispatched his message to Graham he spent the rest of the day drilling his crew in preparation for his meeting with the Americans. That evening he anchored just north of Amelia Island and set the watch. The next morning dawned clear and calm. Finally, Grant saw "a large flat resembling a Vessel cut down and made into a floating battery, with one mast and liberty colours flying." [19] It was being towed south by a group of rowboats. He exchanged shots with the flat. When two more towed rebel ships appeared, Grant decided to go to open water to avoid being bottled up. He sent his boats ahead, "with oars double-manned, and was laboriously towed away," to sea and safety. [20] What had happened meanwhile to the other two loyalist vessels? The *Pompey* was captured, and the *Florida* was blown up by Captain Graham to prevent it from falling into enemy hands.

There was an indecisive skirmish between Lachlan Mc-Intosh's raiding party and Captain Graham's men before both groups broke contact and headed for their respective bases. The incident ended without a clear-cut victory for either side. Later Colonel Augustine Prevost defended his forces retreating from the St. Marys by claiming that the river could not be held without naval support. [21]

Meanwhile, Governor Tonyn, anxious about the action on his northern frontier, requested that Captain Thomas Bishop,

18. Ibid.
19. Ibid., 78; journal of HMS *St. John,* August 7, 1776, *Naval Documents,* VI, 108; Grant to Tonyn, August 7, 1776, CO 5/556:704-05, 731-34; Charles L. Mowat, *East Florida as a British Province, 1763-1784* (Berkeley, 1943; facsimile ed., Gainesville, 1964), 119.
20. Arana, 'Bicentennial Calendar of British East Florida" [part 2], 78; Lewis Butler, *The Annals of the King's Royal Rifle Corps,* 5 vols. (London, 1913-1932), I, 299, appendix 2.
21. W. Calvin Smith, "Mermaids Riding Alligators," *Florida Historical Quarterly,* LIV (April 1976), 450.

HMS *Lively,* check the situation on the St. Marys River on his way north. The *Lively,* accompanied by the privateer *Governor Tonyn,* sailed for the St. Marys, but they were too late to be of service. The skirmish had ended, and the *St. John* was en route to St. Augustine.[22] Had the *Lively* and the sloop arrived earlier Colonel Prevost might have established his first line of defense at the St. Marys.

The increasing severity of the border incidents gave Governor Tonyn much concern. He was aware of the importance of naval power along his northern frontier; therefore, he exercised his Admiralty commission to issue a letter of marque to the sloop *Rebecca,* commanded by Captain John Mowbray. Between the *St. John* and the *Rebecca,* the governor expected to maintain control of the St. Johns River. Accordingly, Tonyn placed his two vessels on patrol on the river in September to discourage overland rebel raids.[23]

At sea, the Americans harrassed British shipping in Florida waters whenever possible. For example, on August 28, 1776, a British transport carrying loyalist immigrants and their possessions stood off St. Augustine's harbor awaiting favorable tides and winds. The impatient settlers debarked finally in small boats. Meanwhile, the waiting transport was attacked and seized by a Charleston raider. At almost the same time a British transport brig *Fincastle,* was fired upon by a rebel schooner. The *Fincastle* was carrying eighty recruits for the St. Augustine garrison, and these men not only resisted the onslaught but carried the American ship in a boarding maneuver.[24]

Toward the end of 1776 Tonyn believed his defensive efforts were deterring the rebels from invading East Florida. He confidently wrote that "by means of the Sloop Rebecca whom I commissioned and stationed on the St. Johns River, the inland passage from Georgia is secured; . . . and this town . . . has its coast at last well defended."[25] When Tonyn looked out on the

22. Thomas Bishop to Tonyn, August 9, 1776, *Naval Documents,* VI, 134.
23. Tonyn to Germaine, August 26, 1776, ibid., VI, 313-14; Tonyn to Grant, September 8, 1776, ibid., VI, 717.
24. William Bull to John Pringle, August 13, 1776, ibid., VI, 176; Tonyn to Germaine, September 8, 1776, ibid., VI, 749; journal of HMS *Otter,* September 10, 1776, ibid., VI, 775; Butler, *Annals of the King's Royal Rifle Corps,* I, 299, appendix 2.
25. Tonyn to Germaine, October 30, 1776, *Naval Documents,* VI, 1468.

harbor in October he saw the HMS *Cherokee, Lively,* and *Haven,* the sloop *Otter,* and the schooners *St. John* and *St. Lawrence* riding at anchor. He was grateful for this show of force. [26]

The naval defense of the East Florida province remained the major concern of Governor Tonyn throughout 1777. British naval vessels and merchant ships continued to come and go. Tonyn's waterborne defense devolved upon Captain John Mowbray and his sloop *Rebecca,* for the schooner *St. John* had been condemned as unfit for service and was left idle in St. Augustine harbor. [27] The *Rebecca* was busy patroling and scouting the enemy's movements to the north. On one voyage, skirting the Georgia coast, Captain Mowbray succeeded in capturing an armed enemy galley.

Intelligence reports reaching Tonyn indicated that preparations were underway for a major American invasion. The governor sought additional ships, reporting that "we have now no armed vessel in the Province except Captain Mowbray of the Rebeca *[sic].*" [28]As a result, he extended the *Rebecca's* contract for another four months. For additional protection he enlarged his East Florida provincial navy by pressing into service the *Meredith,* a recent arrival from England mounting ten guns, and the transport *Hawke.* Captain Mowbray, a former Royal Navy officer, was placed in overall command. [29]

Indeed, an American invasion by land and sea was underway. Colonel Samuel Elbert, the commander, intended to bypass the swamps south of Savannah by sailing to the St. Marys River and coming ashore. A smaller force of Georgia militia was led overland via the King's Road by Colonel John Baker to rendezvous with Elbert at Sawpit Bluff, Florida. Arriving first, Baker's men undertook a scouting mission, but met with an ambush and were routed on May 17 near Thomas Creek, a tributary of the Nassau River. Elbert's force, after learning of Baker's fate, soon returned to their ships and sailed back to Georgia. [30]

26. Journal of HMS *Cherokee,* October 5, 1776, ibid., VI, 1141.
27. Tonyn to Augustine Prevost, January 17, 1777, CO 5/557:278.
28. Tonyn to Germaine, April 2, 1777, CO 5/557:262.
29. Tonyn to Germaine, May 5, 1777, CO 5/557:405-06; Edgar L. Pennington, "East Florida in the American Revolution, 1775-1778," *Florida Historical Quarterly,* IX (July 1930), 32.
30. Siebert, *Loyalists in East Florida,* I, 46-47; Tonyn to Germaine, June 16, 1777, CO 5/557:481-82; Charles E. Bennett, *Southernmost Battlefields of the Revolution* (Bailey's Cross Roads, Virginia, 1970), 6.

While the events near Thomas Creek were occurring, a lesser known but significant sea battle was underway off East Florida. Governor Tonyn intended to have the Rebecca, then on station up the St. Johns, lead the other provincial defense vessels into the St. Marys. Captain Mowbray brought the *Rebecca* and the *Hawke* to the mouth of the St. Johns and anchored just outside the bar. The *Meredith* and the other small vessels followed suit, though remaining slightly up river. Suddenly and unexpectedly a strong wind whipped up the sea, forcing the *Rebecca* and her escort to make for open water.

During the process of going to sea, Captain Mowbray's lookout spied a rebel brigantine, and the sturdy East Florida sloop prepared to engage her. The *Rebecca* mounted only ten carriage guns. Mowbray soon discovered his disadvantage against the more heavily armed American brig, but he pressed on, and as the distance between the ships decreased a running fight ensued. Both ships were aggressive. Finally, Captain Mowbray gained the upper hand as his fire silenced the rebels for about eight minutes. Mowbray then maneuvered to board. During this time the Americans resumed fire, and, as Tonyn later related, "an unlucky shot carried away the Sloop Topmast and rent the mainsail, which gave the Brigantine the advantage in sailing and the opportunity of flight." [31] The damaged American vessel's decks were crowded with men. As she heeled over in the wind to flee northward, the *Rebecca's* detachment of British army riflemen began to fire upon them. Captain Mowbray observed many dead rebels lying on deck as the brig pulled away. The *Rebecca* suffered only one dead and nine wounded, but due to its damaged condition Captain Mowbray returned to St. Augustine. However, Colonel Elbert's loss of the brig, the remaining East Florida ships in his path, plus the defeat of Colonel Baker's men all led him to decide to return to Georgia. Governor Tonyn was delighted to hear of the *Rebecca's* triumph. He gave much of the credit to Captain Mowbray, lauding "his zeal, activity, and unwearied industry, on all different parts of service." [32]

The tension between East Florida and her northern neighbor did not lessen, although the amount of activity declined through

31. Tonyn to Germaine, June 18, 1777, printed in Bennett, *Southernmost Battlefields of the Revolution,* 16.
32. Ibid., 16-17.

the end of 1777. Tonyn was so suspicious of this lull that he requested another detachment of infantry for the *Rebecca,* which was by then fully repaired and back guarding the inland water passage. [33]

The climax of American efforts to subdue East Florida occurred in 1778. Once again naval matters remained a high priority; the *Rebecca,* joined by the schooner *Hinchenbrook* and the ship *Galatea,* the latter two of the Royal Navy, formed a powerful defense triad protecting the waterways approaching St. Augustine. By virtue of his Royal Navy rank, Captain Thomas Jordon of the *Galatea* assumed operational command of the East Florida vessels. On April 6, he decided to intercept the invading American ships at Frederica, on St. Simons Island, Georgia. His plan was to neutralize Frederica and then send the *Hinchenbrook* and the *Rebecca* to sea north to the Sapelo River. At this point they would enter the inland waterways and move south, flushing the Americans out to where the *Galatea* awaited them. [34]

At the St. Marys River on his way north, Captain Mowbray picked up a lieutenant who had deserted from the American force. Mowbray took him to Captain Jordon, who was then off St. Simons Island. The lieutenant reported that the patriot squadron was vulnerable; the galleys were undermanned and in poor repair. Captain Jordon was encouraged by his report and decided to press on.

On March 13 the three ships crossed the bar of Frederica Sound. The *Hinchenbrook* and the *Rebecca* were dispatched to Frederica's harbor to secure the fortifications there and then to proceed to the Sapelo River. The *Galatea* remained near the harbor entrance. [35] Upon arriving at the Sapelo, around the first week in April, the *Hinchenbrook* made several attempts to cross the shallow bar but failed. When Captain Jordon heard of the trouble he brought the *Galatea* north to direct the activities. He ordered a scouting party to enter the river utilizing small boats. When the mission had been accomplished Lieutenant Ellis of the *Hinchenbrook* and Captain Mowbray returned to report

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33. Tonyn to Prevost, CO 5/558:35-36.
34. Thomas Jordon to Tonyn, March 6, 1778, CO 5/558:255-56; Tonyn to Germaine, March 20, 1778, CO 5/558:226-27.
35. Jordon to Tonyn, March 17, 1778, CO 5/558:259-60.

their findings to Captain Jordon. En route their boat overturned in the heavy swells, and Lieutenant Ellis drowned. Captain Mowbray was barely able to save himself. [36]

Some days later, Captain Jordon learned that the American ships *Washington, Lee,* and *Bulloch* were near a branch of the Altamaha River at a position on the inland waterway south of his vessels. Jordon ordered the *Hinchenbrook* and the *Rebecca* to intercept the enemy ships. En route they suddenly entered an area called Raccoongut where the channel seemed to end and the water became shallow. Both ships ran hard aground, and all attempts to maneuver the vessels failed. Colonel Elbert capitalized on the British vessels' predicament. He brought two artillery pieces close up to bombard the stricken ships. The tide began to ebb; the situation grew hopeless as the shallow water "laid their decks open to musquetry *[sic]* which Colonel Elbert took advantage of, the crews taking to their boats the vessels fell into the hands of the enemy." [37]

Governor Tonyn reported the loss of the ships to Lord Germaine on April 28, 1778. He questioned the circumstances, and he requested a formal investigation. Initially, Tonyn had been suspicious of even Captain Mowbray's actions. Later he settled for testimony before the provincial council. In the end, he concluded that Mowbray was faultless and had been acting under orders. The governor further justified Mowbray's actions by saying that the captain had "attempted to destroy the vessel before he left her." [38] The loss of the *Hinchenbrook* and the *Rebecca* was a severe blow to the East Florida forces. Captain Jordon had hoped to seize the offensive, but the debacle at Raccoongut changed all that. The momentum had swung to the Americans, and Jordon would have to await their next move.

By the end of April 1778, East Florida was facing a critical situation regarding the lack of coastal and riverine defense. With haste, the governor was forced to purchase three vessels. Tonyn named one of these, an armed ship carrying fourteen guns,

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36. Jordon to Tonyn, April 16, 1778, CO 5/558:263-65; Siebert, *Loyalists in East Florida,* II, 173.
37. Burton Barrs, *East Florida in the American Revolution* (Jacksonville, 1932), 29; Butler, *Annals of the King's Royal Rifle Corps,* I, 303, appendix 2.
38. Ibid.; Siebert, *Loyalists in East Florida,* I, 56; Tonyn to Germaine, April 28, 1778, CO 5/558:251-53.

the *Germaine,* possibly hoping to flatter Secretary of State Lord Germaine into sanctioning the expenditure. The *Germaine* was suited for her task; she had a shallow enough draft to cross all the local harbor entrances. Tonyn bargained with the crew by agreeing to split whatever profits were made with them. The *Germaine* and two other vessels, the brig *Dreadnought* and the galley *Thunderer,* were converted into warships. By the middle of May two floating batteries also were being readied with twenty-four-pound guns. Tonyn vowed his further intention of procuring as many privateers as could be had to protect river navigation. [39]

On June 30, Governor Tonyn learned that "five Gallies, two flats, and two Pettuguas carrying Cannon," laden with a considerable supply of provisions, were in Cumberland Sound awaiting an opportunity to enter Nassau Inlet. [40] His East Florida defense vessels were ready to challenge the American ships. He sent the *Germaine,* probably under the command of John Mowbray, the *Dreadnought,* and the *Thunderer* to patrol the St. Johns River. Twelve days later his flotilla was strengthened by the timely arrival of two Royal Navy vessels, the ship *Perseus* and the sloop *Otter.* [41]

Captain Keith Elphinstone of the *Perseus,* the senior naval officer, formulated plans to engage the rebels. However, before his operation could begin, the Americans learned of the increased naval power and fled. Led by the *Perseus* and the *Otter,* Governor Tonyn's navy made an effort to overtake them, but time and distance were on the side of the rebels. [42]

Tonyn was ecstatic over the turn of events. He confidently predicted that "the check given to the Rebels [by] the floating Batteries and naval Armament in St. John's River, the dispositions in posting His Majesty's Forces and the Difficulties thrown in their way have made the Rebels from all present appearances relinquish their Design against this Province." [43]

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39. Ibid.; Tonyn to Germaine, March 15, 1778, CO 5/558:314; Mowat, *East Florida as a British Province,* 114.
40. Alexander Shaw to Tonyn, July 1, 1778, printed in Bennett, *Southernmost Battlefields of the Revolution,* 35.
41. Tonyn to Germaine, July 3, 1778, *CO 5/558:375;* Butler, *Annals of the King's Royal Rifle Corps,* I, 311, appendix 2.
42. Tonyn to Germaine, July 24, 1778, CO 5/558:412-14.
43. Pennington, "East Florida in the American Revolution," 45.

Through the remainder of the summer of 1778 ships from East Florida continued to patrol the coastal waters. The *Galatea, Perseus,* and others captured several vessels and delivered them to St. Augustine. A particularly interesting prize was the vessel carrying the Chevalier de Bretigny with 200 men from France bound for the American army. They were denied parole and were esconsed in the statehouse. [44] The sloop *Otter* and the armed ship *George* made sail from St. Augustine to intercept a patriot privateer, carrying thirty blacks, which had put in at New Smyrna. Both ships were lost off Cape Canaveral in a violent storm, and the crews barely escaped with their lives. [45]

During the rest of 1778, and for that matter, the remainder of the war, what fighting East Florida forces did was away from the province on overland pushes against American strongholds in the rebellious southern colonies. After the capture of Savannah and the eventual British occupation of Charleston in May 1780, all military threat to East Florida had ended, and with it the Revolutionary War on the inland waters in and around British East Florida.

The armed incursions between Georgia and Florida were remote from the major struggles farther north, but Tonyn's recognition of the importance of naval power on his frontier waterways was crucial to the defense of the province. In this small corner of the war, Governor Tonyn's navy had been a factor keeping the Americans at bay.

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44. Butler, *Annals of the King's Royal Rifle Corps,* I, 303, appendix 2.
45. Tonyn to Germaine, August 20, 1778, printed in Pennington, "East Florida in the American Revolution," 46.