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Everett C. Wilkie



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NEW LIGHT ON GÁLVEZ'S FIRST ATTEMPT TO ATTACK PENSACOLA

by EVERETT C. WILKIE, JR.

BERNARDO de Gálvez's proposed siege of Pensacola, Florida, in 1780 started inauspiciously when his fleet was overtaken by an October hurricane that seriously compromised prospects for an assault that year on the British garrison. Concrete information about the hurricane's destruction is, however, sketchy concerning those ships that returned to Havana. The contemporary reports that are known are fairly brief and contain little or no specific information about the damage that befell the fleet as a result of the storm.¹

In general terms, the facts of this ill-fated expedition are these. The fleet, fully loaded with troops and supplies, sailed from Havana on October 16, 1780. This fleet, composed of warships, troop ships, hospital ships, and supply vessels, was struck by a hurricane shortly after setting sail. Most of the ships that did not sink or run aground returned to Havana or put into Campeche, towards which they had been blown by the storm. Some others arrived at Mobile, New Orleans, and Pensacola. The fleet was so wrecked, however, that no assault on Pensacola could be mounted until the following year.

A Spanish manuscript recently brought into the collections of the John Carter Brown Library sheds some new light on this

Everett Wilkie is bibliographer, John Carter Brown Library, Brown University.

1. The printed version of Gálvez's report, *Diario de las operaciones de la expedición contra la Plaza de Panzacola concluida por las Armas de S. M. Católica, baxo las ordenes del Mariscal de Campo D. Bernardo de Gálvez* [s.l., s.n., 1781?], 1, dismisses this unfortunate episode in a single paragraph, in which Gálvez is described as "frustrada por el uracán." Other reports give only a partial accounting of a few ships. See, for example, M. Navarro's December 7, 1780, report to Gálvez, "Noticias de los buques de la Expedición que se separaron del Comboy por el temporal y que han arribado a la Baliza de este río [i.e., New Orleans]," in F. de Borja Medina Rojas, *José de Ezpeleta, Gobernador de la Mobila, 1780-1781* (Seville, 1980), 465-66. Specific notices of other ships at Mobile on December 10, 1780, are given in "Noticias de las embarcaciones que han arribado a este río hasta hoy día de la fecha con expresión de su carga y de las novedades que han tenido en la navegación," in *ibid.*, 465-66.

first futile attempt to attack Pensacola. Written at Havana on November 28, 1780, this manuscript recounts the anonymous author's experiences as part of the fleet. He provides quite specific information on the actual damage done, particularly to the ships of the line. Although one cannot be certain, he appears to have been aboard the *Matilde*, one of the larger warships seriously damaged in the storm. He further appears to have been a sailor rather than a soldier, because his principal concerns and observations are those that one would expect from a seaman. He was perhaps a junior officer, although his manuscript does not seem to be part of any official report. Because of his detailed knowledge of the ships and the damage to them, the author's observations would appear to be authentic and first-hand. The manuscript seems to have been composed at one sitting on that day in November, perhaps from notes.

Gálvez himself returned to Havana about two weeks before the manuscript was written. The predominant conclusion that emerges is that Gálvez was greeted with a scene of destruction that must have disheartened him. One may imagine the scene as described in this manuscript. After a month's absence, Gálvez beheld only a fraction of his fleet. Of his seven ships of the line, only one, the *Guerrero*, was relatively undamaged. The *Dragon* was unaccounted for. All the others lay at anchor without their masts. The *San Juan Nepomuceno* had even had its figurehead torn away by the waves. Of those ships that survived, some needed to be completely resupplied. What the ocean had not washed overboard, frantic sailors had heaved into the sea trying to stay afloat. One hospital ship had lost all its equipment. Another ship's crew had thrown cannons over the gunwales. Another crew, transporting horses for the dragoons, had even thrown the animals into the sea in their efforts to stay afloat.

The author also provides some insight into Gálvez's whereabouts between the time of the hurricane and his return to Havana, long the subject of speculation. His frigate, the *Nuestra Señora de la Ô*, had rejoined several other ships, including the warships *Santa Cecilia* and *San Pio*, and had attempted to make for the rendezvous point. According to this author, contrary winds prevented their approach to Pensacola, so they decided to return to Havana. Moreover, they sighted no other ships from

Havana 28. de Nov.^{re} de 1780.

Diario de la Expedición destinada para
Panzacola.

La Esquadra se componía de 7 Na-
vios de Guerra, 4 Fragatas, un
Chambequín, dos Paquebotes, y un
Suzpe, y de 57 Navíos de transpor-
te, mandada por el Jefe de Esqua-
dra D.ⁿ Josef Solano. La Fropa
que se embarco en la Havana
convirtía en Trec mil y ocho-
-entos hombres, comprendidos
los Mozeros y Pardo, mandada
por el Mariscal de Campo -

the convoy the whole time. Gálvez may have been somewhat relieved, therefore, even at the wrecks that awaited him at Havana. Gálvez's small fleet did manage to capture two vessels, presumably English, on its way back to Havana. If this report is accurate, Gálvez spent the better part of his time between October 22 and November 17 tacking unsuccessfully towards Pensacola against a contrary wind.

The manuscript itself consists of six leaves of watermarked

paper; the last leaf is blank. The hand is clear and well-formed. From the folds in the document, it appears at one time to have either been mailed in a letter or been carried in someone's pocket.² Nothing further is known of its provenance before it came into the library's possession in 1980. The translation follows the original paragraphs, although several of the sentences have been rearranged for clarity. The first page of the manuscript itself is shown in the plate. Spelling, punctuation, and grammar have not been changed in the translation.

Havana 28 November 1780

Diary of the Expedition Bound for Pensacola

The escort was made up of seven ships of the line, a chamberlain, two packet-boats, and a lugger, plus 57 transport ships, commanded by the squadron chief Don Josef Solano.³ The troops which boarded at Havana numbered 3800 men, including Morenos and Pardos, commanded by Field Marshall Don Bernardo de Gálvez.

The troops boarded on 10 November.

The 16th the commander signalled to raise sails. The horizon was clear and the wind favorable. Some ships did not get out in the morning, forcing the commander to signal the ships to anchor at the Cape.⁴ Very late in the night the ships finally cleared the harbor.

On the 17th the day began beautiful, with a clear horizon and a good wind. At eight the signal was given to get underway. The wind rose at 9:30; at 12 it became violent; and at 4 there was a furious hurricane that lasted until 9 at night. The escort

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2. Although folded like a letter, the manuscript lacks an address leaf or any mark of a seal; neither is it signed, as one would expect of a letter.
 3. This figure of seventy-two ships does not agree with the sixty-four ships given by "Esguadra del mando del Señor Dn. Josef Solano Gefé de esta Clase en la Real Armada, y Buques de su comboy que transportan la tropa del Exersito a las ordenes del Mariscal de Campo el Señor Dn. Bernardo de Galves. A bordo del Navio San Juan Nepomuceno a la Vela a la boca del Puerto de la Habana, 16 de octubre de 1780," reprinted in Borja Medina Rojas, *José de Ezpeleta*, 446-49. The numbers of major warships and frigates match; this account shows two additional lesser warships, however, and six more transports. This document will be hereinafter referred to as "Esguadra."
 4. The cape forms one side of the entrance to Havana harbor; ships anchored there would have been under the protection of the guns of Fort Moro.

and the convoy were separated at 5 [i.e., 3 p.m.?]. The frigate *Matilde* had already lost sight of all the other ships, and the sails on the mainmast and fore mast had rent. We were running before the wind the entire storm.

The afternoon of the 19th, we lost all the masts but it was our good fortune that no one was injured. The sea water came in through the heads, the ports, and everywhere, so that we lost the better part of our equipment.

The 22nd there was no wind but the sea was still very rough. A sighting was taken, and we were at 27° 28".⁵ The same day we raised the jurmast for the mizzen; the 23rd, that for the foremast; the 25th, that for the mainmast.

The 26th we sailed towards the port of Havana. On the morning of the 29th we saw in the very far distance some ships it was impossible to identify. The 30th while underway we saw six warships, a commercial frigate that served as a hospital, and the chambequin, which were also heading for Havana. We could not close on them. The 31st we all entered port. The ships were the *San Juan Nepomuzeno*, completely dismasted and without its figurehead; the *Velasco*, which lost her main and mizzenmasts; the *Santa Genara*, which lost all her masts; the *San Ramón*, which was taking on 58 inches of water an hour and had to throw 11 cannons overboard. The *Guerrero* suffered little. The *Astuto* had its rudder parted and without any sail had arrived here. The chambequin had suffered very little.⁶ The frigate *Mercante* which served as a hospital suffered greatly, so that all her equipment and materials were jettisoned.⁷ The loss was 300 pesos.

The evening of the 30th a ship from the convoy had entered port, loaded with provisions for Mobile. They there learned of our misfortune here from them. Until that day the forecasters had said we had had very good weather and had waited for word at any moment of our sailing.

Until the 17th of November we learned nothing of the missing ships, but on that day entered the frigates the *O*, on which Gálvez had sailed, the *Santa Cecilia*, the packet-boat *San Pio*, a com-

5. About the latitude of modern-day Sarasota, Florida.

6. These are all warships.

7. The *Mercante* is not mentioned in the "Esguadra;" the author's orthography also allows the readings *Mexcante* or *Mencante*. It may be that the author means the frigate *Luisiana*, which served in the same capacity as this ship.

mercial ship with troops, and two prizes taken 20 miles away, one of 26 guns and 60 men and the other of 16 guns and 20 men. They were said to be worth 2000 pesos. These ships were unable to get to the rendezvous point because of contrary winds and had decided to return, since they met with no other ships.

It should be noted that the *O* had good weather on the 20th and sighted the dismasted *Juan Nepomuzeno* the morning of the 21st, and afterwards the storm ceased; and that the *Matilde* had bad weather from the night of the 21st to the 22nd. The prevailing winds were South and North. On the 18th a settee came in on which had sailed some cavalry horses. The ship suffered little but they had to throw the horses into the sea.⁸

On the 19th the frigate *Santa Rosalia* came in, to which Solano had transferred after the *San Juan Nepomuzeno* was dismasted. The Squadron Chief was at the rendezvous point 16 days; the lack of provisions and water forced him to come to this port, not having encountered any other ships except a transport, which came back with him.

On the 21st a packet-boat with 86 soldiers and 5 officers from Navarra sailed in.⁹ They had had absolutely nothing befall them.

On the 27th a ship from Campeche arrived, and we learned from them that 23 were there and that one settee had foundered but another had saved the entire crew. Another settee also foundered but all its crew were lost; it was not learned what happened to them. Several had run aground, but it was not known for sure how many.

The fate of the warship *Dragon* was unknown, a fine lugger with 23 regular ships and 1500 men.¹⁰

8. The *Buen Viaje*, one of three such ships carrying horses.

9. The only packet-boat listed as carrying members of the Regiment of Navarra is the *Jesus Nazareno*; the "Esguadra," however, lists only four officers but eighty-six soldiers.

10. The *Dragon* was actually at the rendezvous point, where it remained until early December, when it finally put into New Orleans. It is not clear why this ship did not encounter Solano's small force, which was also in the area for over two weeks.