

St Mary-le-Bow, Cheapside, London EC2V 6AU

The Admiral Phillip Commemoration

Monday 22nd January 2018 at 11.30am

Address by First-Lieutenant Bruno Gonçalves Neves,

Portuguese Navy – Maritime Museum, Head of the Research Service

*In his absence the address was delivered by Commander Alexandre Gamurça Serrano,
Maritime Command, Northwood*

Arthur Phillip – A Captain of the Portuguese Navy 1774-78

On the morning of April 19, 1777, the Spanish ship of the line *San Agustin* was cruising down the south Brazilian coast, heading to Santa Catarina Island, when it was met by two smaller vessels.

The *San Agustin* was one of the most recent assets of the Spanish Navy. A fine and brand-new warship with a crew of 550, fitted with 70 guns. It was heavier, faster and much more powerful than both the smaller ships combined. However, the *San Agustin* took them as friends, when actually they were foes.

These were two Portuguese ships, closing in fast and taking the bigger *San Agustin* by surprise. It was only when the first of the two ships opened fire that the Spaniards realised their misjudgement. And it was already too late. While one of the ships was firing from a distance, aiming at the masts and rigging and slowing her down, the second and smaller one came in so close, in such a daring manoeuvre, that the Spaniards were still taking her for one of their own. And again, they were wrong. The captain of the Spanish ship was still unable to convince himself that such a small vessel would venture to attack a 70-gun man-of-war when it poured a full broadside on him. A direct and decisive hit that forced the Spanish ship to withdraw and try to escape. But to no success.

The *San Agustin* was captured in the following day and taken as a prize. And a highly valuable one, for she was a first-class ship by all standards, a brand-new vessel built of excellent wood and armed with first-rate artillery. She was repaired and commissioned in the Portuguese Navy, under the name *Santo Agostinho*.

She was placed under the command of the Captain of the *Nossa Senhora do Pilar*, the small Portuguese frigate that ventured into close-quarters with the larger Spanish warship, as a recognition of his valiant action.

The Captain's name was Arthur Phillip!¹

By the end of the 17th century, Portuguese Brazilian territories were facing a continuous economic development and expansion. And this expansion was heading south, reaching the La Plata Estuary where it met the opposition from Spain.

In 1680, Portugal established the Colónia do Sacramento, prime site on the northern bank of the La Plata estuary, facing Buenos Aires. The Portuguese presence and claim on the territory was regarded by the Spanish officials as deliberately provocative, since Colónia, as it came to be known, was a direct competition to Buenos Aires, the main gateway of the La Plata estuary. From the strategic and military perspective, that advanced Portuguese post represented a permanent menace to the future of Spanish South America².

Needless to say that right after its foundation, Colónia was immediately under the Spanish plans to seize it, and throughout the 18th century it changed hands several times.

In times of peace, Colónia prospered in commerce, though most of it consisted in illegal trade - smuggling in goods from the motherland and contrabanding out local materials, namely silver from the Spanish mines. This was an environment of open opportunities for free settlers that poured into Colónia, mainly adventurers and entrepreneurs, but also all kinds of outlaws and outcasts. Apart from these, its population was made up of administrative, military and naval personnel, a few peasants coming from Brazil or even from the motherland and finally of *degradados* or convicts that were sent there under compulsion as soldiers or simply as the necessary labour for the maintenance of the outpost.

Although of little economic relevance, and even of questionable strategic importance, Colónia was a symbol of Portugal's projection and expansion in South America, a claim against its traditional enemy and an argument for a war which inevitably came in 1773.

Throughout the 18th century, Portugal had been able to stay aside from most of the endemic conflicts among European continental powers. On the other hand, the safety of Portugal's overseas territories rested on the proposition that any attack by Spain or any other country would certainly have to face England's support to Portugal, and hence from the Royal Navy, as part of the Anglo-Portuguese alliance, the oldest diplomatic and military alliance in the world, still standing to this date.

As a result, the Portuguese Navy had been neglected for many years. And now, with the outbreak of a war against Spain in South America, that was not only threatening the Colónia outpost but also Brazil itself and its southern territories, new naval assets were of the utmost urgency.

And these were not only new and better warships, but also seasoned naval officers able to command them at sea in wartime.

It was the Portuguese Minister of the Colonies and the Navy. D. Martinho de Melo e Castro, the main responsible for setting up the Portuguese Navy to suitable operational standards. But this would take time, and time was of an essence to face the immediate threat by Spain to the Portuguese presence and interests in South America.

Melo e Castro had been previously the Portuguese ambassador in London and he was now using his influence among his British friends, among which was Rear Admiral John Hervey, one of the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty. And it was Lord Hervey who recommended Arthur Phillip for service in the Portuguese Navy, stating that: "Phillip is a very good naval officer; he combines theory with practice; he has always given good service and he is a Lieutenant, but worthy of a command."³

The main conditions made by Arthur Phillip were that he be given the rank of Captain; that he would have command of a ship and that it would have to be a ship-of-the-line. Few references were made as to his pay, only that it should be equal to English pay.

The Portuguese Minister of the Navy, Melo e Castro, assured him the rank of Captain. However, as it happened to any Portuguese Captain, "they have to sail in ships of the line or frigates, as they may be ordered. (...) And, though a captain in rank, he might at times be only second in command on a ship."

Nevertheless, Phillip was already determined to serve in the Portuguese Navy, the most likely only naval employment he could get in the near future, and so he was willing to take the risk.

Upon his arrival in Lisbon, Phillip was promoted to the rank of Captain on 14 January 1775. On that same day he was informed that he was to embark as second captain (or executive officer) on the warship *Nossa Senhora de Belém*, heading for Brazil.

In Brazil, Arthur Phillip met with the Marquis of Lavradio, the Viceroy of Brazil, who granted him his first command of a ship: the *Nossa Senhora do Pilar*. She was a Portuguese merchant ship converted for use as a frigate in Rio de Janeiro. She had a crew of 208 men and an armament of 26 guns. Although a former merchantman, the *Pilar* was now a fast and seaworthy naval vessel⁴.

This was not a first-class ship of the line as Phillip intended when he left England. But it was finally his chance as a commanding officer of a ship.

By then, the Portuguese outpost on the southernmost territories of Brazil, the Colónia do Sacramento, had been under Spanish blockade for months. Arthur Phillip and his ship, the *Pilar*, were sent to Colónia, along with a second ship named *Nazaré*, to support the Portuguese outpost and its garrison.

Shortly after their arrival at Colónia, the *Nazaré* was ordered to sail back to Rio de Janeiro, leaving Phillip as the commander of local naval forces, meaning that he was in charge of one single ship – his own.

Phillip and his ship, the *Pilar*, served at Colónia from October 1775 until November 1776, for a total period of about eight months, excluding short absences in Rio de Janeiro.

The settlement was surrounded by fortified walls, set on a peninsula on the seafront, with few farms stretching from its rear walls to the interior. During the blockade, it was completely dependent on all the few supplies that could be brought in by sea, whenever the supply ships were able to dodge the Spanish besiegers.

Once a relatively prosperous settlement, by the time Arthur Phillip was serving in Brazil Colónia had become a hopeless and indefensible outpost. Its population was made up of a garrison of about 2000, among few officers, some soldiers and sailors and a working force of mostly convicts sent from Rio de Janeiro; a “motley crew of smugglers and assorted villains, and a few honest free settlers who had once been on the abandoned farms”. And they all had to rely on each other for survival.

Although we don't know much from Phillip's experiences during his stay in Colónia, the Marquis of Lavradio, the Viceroy of Brazil speaks of his high service defending the outpost, as he wrote that: “This officer is most honourable and meritorious. When at Colónia he, with only his frigate, made the Spaniards respect that fortress as they ought to.”

And one can easily infer the influence that his service at Colónia had for his future career. Namely when assigned to command Australia's First Fleet, to set an outpost on the other side of the world, having to endure the same hardships and challenges that may have contributed to forge his skills and character while serving at Colónia.

On October 1, 1777, the Treaty of Santo Ildefonso was signed between Portugal and Spain, ending all hostilities between the two countries and thus the Colónia war.

Portugal had lost its outpost of Colónia, which had been overrun and destroyed by the Spaniards few months earlier. However, it was able to recover and claim the southern territories of Santa Catarina and Rio Grande, incorporating them permanently in Brazil jurisdiction, thus widening and ensuring its presence in South America.

As all captured ships during the war had to be returned, Phillip's ship of the line *Santo Agostinho* was again *San Agustin* of the Spanish Navy. But he was immediately given the command of the ship of the line *Santo António*, Brazil's naval forces flagship.

Arthur Phillip left Rio de Janeiro heading to Lisbon on May 10, 1778, on his new ship, the *Santo António*. But before he left, the Viceroy of Brazil wrote to the Minister of the Colonies and the Navy, D. Martinho de Melo e Castro, who was still in office, giving high regards about his service, stating that:

"[Arthur Phillip] is one of the officers of the most distinct merit that the Queen my Mistress, has in her service... He (...) is no flatterer, saying what he thinks, but without temper or want of respect."

In fact, the Viceroy recommended that Phillip should be kept in service in the Portuguese Navy adding that:

"This, which I write to Your Excellency, you will not only find to be corroborated by such officers of merit as Your Excellency may consult; but you, yourself, with your great talent, when you have formed his acquaintance, will render the same justice to his worth that I do."⁵

However, times had changed and the Royal Navy was again in need of experienced officers like Arthur Phillip. Only four days after entering the Tagus river on his ship, on August 24, 1778, Phillip was paid off from the Portuguese Navy.

He left Portugal and headed back to England to rejoin his service in the Royal Navy. Britain was at war once again, now against the American Colonies, backed by an old enemy – France.

The last document referring to Phillip's service in the Portuguese Navy is a letter kept at the Portuguese Navy's Historical Archive, mentioning that the former Captain of the *Santo Agostinho* – Arthur Phillip – had left the names of those who, under his command, had served beyond the call of duty and therefore should be commended and distinguished for their service⁶.

One last example of Phillip's remarkable character and leadership!

We all know what followed and the man that Arthur Phillip came to be. While his service in the Portuguese Navy finally rendered him the possibility of commanding a ship of war, his time and service in Colónia do Sacramento was a decisive *tour de force* that prepared him for the most important assignment of his career.

Almost ten years later, on the way from England to Australia, the First Fleet dropped anchor at Rio de Janeiro on 6th August 1787. Admiral Arthur Phillip was honoured on his return to Brazil as one of Portugal's heroes of the late war against Spain.

As we stand here today, it is with great pride and honour that the Portuguese Navy remembers one of its finest officers – Admiral Arthur Phillip, first Governor of New South Wales and founder of Australia.

¹ A vivid description of the combat and its aftermath is published by Armando da Silva Saturnino Monteiro, *Batalhas e Combates da Marinha Portuguesa*. Vol. VII, 1669-1807 (Livraria Sá da Costa, 1996).

² Henrique Alexandre Machado da Silva da Fonseca, *A Colônia de Sacramento* (Academia de Marinha, 1985).

³ Arquivo Histórico da Marinha – “Processo individual do Tenente de Mar Arthur Phillip” (1774) AHM CX 817-2-4.

⁴ The ship’s full name was *Nossa Senhora do Pilar e S. João Baptista*. Cf. António Marques Esparteiro, *Três Séculos no Mar (1640-1910)*, III Parte, *Fragatas*, 2º Vol. (Edições Culturais da Marinha, 1980).

⁵ Quoted by Kenneth Gordon McIntyre, *The Rebello Transcripts. Governor Phillip’s Portuguese Prelude* (Souvenir Press, 1984), pp. 150-152.

⁶ Arquivo Histórico da Marinha – “Memória dos voluntários que tem o *Santo Agostinho* no tempo que foi comandado pelo Capitão-de-mar-e-guerra Arthur Phillip” (24-09-1778) AHM CX 447 Doc. 253.