Admiral Peter Rainier and the Command of the East Indies Station 1794-1805

Submitted by Peter Augustus Ward to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, August 2010.

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I understand that all material in this thesis which is not my own work has been identified and that no material has previously been submitted and approved for the award of a degree by this or any other University.
ABSTRACT

Admiral Peter Rainier and the Command of the East Indies Station 1794-1805.

Peter Rainier was the longest serving commander on the East Indies station by some margin, and the longest serving commander of any of the navy’s stations in the long Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars.

This thesis illustrates the issues that needed to be addressed on this station and considers how successfully Rainier dealt with them. It will also suggest that he remains so little known amongst the pantheon of British admirals of the Napoleonic era because the traditional measure of value of a naval commander is success in battle. Although Rainier had a reputation as a fighting captain, as a commander in chief he saw action only in combined operations. Perhaps it is time to acknowledge that skill other than fighting battles is important. Rainier’s thorough knowledge of the station, his capacity to work with people over whom he had no authority, his ability to protect a rapidly expanding and wealth creating trade, and his administrative and financial professionalism, enabled him to play an important, if secondary, part in the establishment of the Second British Empire which, arguably, had a far greater impact on British history than all but the most seminal battle.

The East Indies Station had a number of unique elements that heavily influenced the actions of its commander in chief. The two-way communication process between Rainier and the Admiralty could take a whole year. Its thirty million plus square mile area meant that communication and logistics within the station needed long term planning. It was still relatively unfamiliar to British navigators, and charting it was still in progress.

The relationship between the admiral and the East India Company, the official government of British India, could make or break the success of both the navy and the Company. With his diplomatic skills and wide experience of the station, Rainier worked with its officials and army commanders to defend current British possessions in the East Indies and India, to extend them to such an extent that, by his return to Britain, they were the foundation of the second British Empire. During this period the centre of power on the station moved eastwards as the value of trade with China overtook that with India – Rainier had to take this into account when allocating his resources. The constraints on navigation and timing caused by the narrow channels in the East Indies and by the weather made it easier for enemy vessels to know by which route the British trade would travel. Rainier had to cover potential threats off Macao, through the Straits of Bali, Banda, Sunda and Malacca, in the Bay of Bengal, off Madras, around Ceylon and between Bombay and the Persian Gulf. When possible he had to cover the French naval base at Mauritius. With a limited number of vessels,¹ of which some were always in need of repair, Rainier was often on the defensive. Acquisition of new colonies opened new trading routes which, together with his commitment to trade protection,

¹ See Chapter Eight for details of naval vessels at Rainier’s disposal.
led to a steady, if often unregulated, expansion in British trade. His attention to detail and his management skills also allowed him to establish an efficient logistics, victualling and financial operation.

What Rainier achieved has to be seen in the context of the complexity of his station and the role of the East India Company. Then it stands far above the level of its absolute achievement. This thesis shows that Rainier’s organization and management skills, unruffled nature, sound strategic judgement made him a “Safe Pair of Hands”, ideal for such a detached but important command.
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<tr>
<td>ADM</td>
<td>Admiralty</td>
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<tr>
<td>BL</td>
<td>British Library</td>
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<tr>
<td>BPP</td>
<td>British Parliamentary Papers</td>
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<tr>
<td>KEI</td>
<td>Lord Keith Papers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MM</td>
<td>Mariner’s Mirror</td>
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<tr>
<td>NAS</td>
<td>National Archive of Scotland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NLS</td>
<td>National Library of Scotland</td>
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<td>NMM</td>
<td>National Maritime Museum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TNA</td>
<td>The National Archive, Kew</td>
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<tr>
<td>UKHO</td>
<td>United Kingdom Hydrographic Office</td>
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