

Spain's Havana Squadron and the Preservation of the Balance of Power in the Caribbean, 1740-1748

J. C. M. OGELSBY*

THE ROLE of Spain's Havana squadron has been virtually ignored in major studies dealing with the War of Jenkins' Ear and its immediate successor, the War of the Austrian Succession.¹ For almost a decade (1739-1748) the Caribbean was an important area of conflict. During the first five years Spain and Britain engaged in what has been justly called "the first major European war to be fought expressively for West Indian ends. . . ."² When the question of the Austrian succession brought France into the struggle, the center of the war shifted from the Caribbean back to Europe, but still Spain, Britain, and France dared not neglect their West Indian possessions.

The Havana squadron has failed to receive recognition apparently because it did not have the energetic or imaginative leadership shown by several British commanders in the Caribbean during the wars, and because the squadron did not engage in many spectacular actions. But whatever the reasons, a study of its activities during this period suggests that its commanders carried out their duties remarkably well, given their government's orders and the conditions which they faced. The squadron's assignments also clearly demonstrate the nature of Spain's position in the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico during the mid-eighteenth century.

The oft-discussed origins of the War of Jenkins' Ear centered on issues concerning the Caribbean and its trade. Naturally, therefore, both Spain and Great Britain focused their attention on the

* The author is Associate Professor of History at the University of Western Ontario.

¹ Richard Pares, *War and Trade in the West Indies, 1739-1763* (Oxford, 1936); Cesáreo Fernández Duro, *Armada española desde la unión de los reinos de Castilla y de León* (9 vols., Madrid, 1895-1903), VI; Herbert William Richmond, *The Navy in the War of 1739-1748* (3 vols., Cambridge, 1920).

² J. H. Parry and P. M. Sherlock, *A Short History of the West Indies* (London, 1960), 106.

area; the British government officially declared war on October 19, 1739, and Spain accepted the challenge on November 28.³

Before either declaration of war both governments had taken steps to prepare for the conflict. In July 1739 the British government sent Admiral Edward Vernon with six ships to strengthen the small squadron under Commodore Charles Brown at Jamaica. With orders to destroy Spanish shipping and *guarda costa* bases. While he was doing this, the government in London began to plan a major expedition to the Caribbean, for it was determined to capture and hold Spanish territory.⁴

The Spanish government's response to the increasingly obvious British threat was defensive in character. The Spanish did not want war, and they were convinced in any case that Spain was the injured party. Therefore, as soon as Spain's ambassador to England, Tomás Geraldino, heard of Vernon's departure for Jamaica, he sent warning letters to the governor of Havana and to the admiral at Cartagena, advising them to take protective measures.⁵ Philip V ordered two warships and six hundred troops to Cartagena. The ships would augment Admiral Blas de Lezo's small squadron (four ships of the line). The men were to strengthen that fortress city, the American port of the Seville trade's *galeones*, as well as the isthmian harbor of Portobelo.⁶

The Spanish forces in the Gulf of Mexico and the northern Caribbean also needed reinforcement. At Havana lay three frigates and a small pink, part of the *Armada de Barlovento*, Spain's traditional West Indian squadron. They had the duty of conducting the wealth of Mexico from Veracruz to Havana and were no match for

³ For some views on the origins of the war see the following: Pares, *War and Trade*, 1-64; Ernest G. Hildner, Jr., "The Role of the South Sea Company in the Diplomacy Leading to the War of Jenkins' Ear, 1729-1739," *HAHR*, XVIII (1938), 322-341; John Tate Lanning, *The Diplomatic History of Georgia, A Study of the Epoch of Jenkins' Ear* (Chapel Hill, 1936); Jean O. McLachlan, *Trade and Peace with Old Spain, 1667-1750, A Study of the Influence of Commerce on Anglo-Spanish Diplomacy in the First Half of the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1940).

⁴ George II to Vernon, July 16, 1739, Vernon-Wager MSS, Library of Congress; Pares, *War and Trade*, 65-77.

⁵ Geraldino to Güemes and Lezo, June 20, 1739, Archivo General de Simancas (cited hereafter as AGS), Estado, 9.909.

⁶ Quintana to Somodevilla, September 13, 1739, AGS, Marina, 395; Felipe V to Villarias, September 1739, AGS, Marina 395; Quintana to Eslava, August 29, 1739, AGS, Marina 395; Lezo to Somodevilla, March 28, 1740, AGS, Marina, 396; *Estado General de la Real Armada, Año de 1829* [1832] (4 vols., Madrid, 1829-1832), I, 61-62.

the Jamaica squadron under Commodore Brown, even without the addition of Vernon's six ships.⁷

Spain's precarious position in the Caribbean did not soon improve, for the additional reinforcements ordered out in July did not sail until October, and they arrived at Cartagena in January 1740, too late to defend Portobelo, which had fallen to Admiral Vernon the previous November. The commander of the reinforcements and newly appointed viceroy of New Granada, Sebastián de Eslava, therefore joined Admiral Lezo in concentrating on the protection of Cartagena.⁸

Vernon's squadron attacked this city in March 1740, while on its way toward the isthmus to destroy the Spanish post at the mouth of the Chagres river. Vernon had only five ships of the line and a few bomb vessels, but such was the condition of the defenses that Admiral Lezo had no confidence of repelling an attack.⁹ Vernon, however, felt no greater certainty that he could take the city at that time and was, in fact, merely carrying out a reconnaissance of its waters and defenses in case he should return one day with a larger force.¹⁰

The fact that the British concentrated their efforts along the Spanish Main in those early days resulted from conditions of both geography and politics. Havana lay too far windward to attack if the safety of Jamaica were ever in question.¹¹ Also once the official war had begun between Spain and England, the British commanders had to take into consideration the friendly relations existing between the Bourbon of France and Borbón of Spain. Vernon could undertake raids only in areas from which he could return to Jamaica in the shortest possible time; so he concentrated his efforts on the isthmian coast. While his activities won unprecedented applause from the poorly informed British public, his successful attacks on Portobelo and Chagres did not actually disrupt the Spanish position in the Caribbean. Nor was the channel of communication between Mexico, Havana, and Spain successfully blocked, once Commodore Brown had rejoined Vernon at Jamaica.

So far the activities of Admiral Vernon had been all warp and

⁷ Montalvo to Somodevilla, February 28, 1740, AGS, Marina, 396. Brown had three ships of the line, three frigates, and nine smaller warships under his command. See Cyril Hughes Hartmann, *The Angry Admiral, The Later Career of Edward Vernon, Admiral of the White* (London, 1953), 204-205.

⁸ Eslava to Quintana, January 21, 1740, Archivo General de Indias, Seville (cited hereafter as AGI), Santo Domingo, 2298; Ordan to Enseñada, January 4, 1740, AGS, Marina, 396; Fernández Duro, *Armada española*, VI, 244.

⁹ Lezo to Somodevilla, March 28, 1740, AGS, Marina, 396.

¹⁰ B. McL. Ranft, *The Vernon Papers* (London, 1958), 81.

¹¹ Wager to Vernon, June 10, 1740, in *Original Letters to an Honest Sailor* (London, 1746), 13.

no woof, but the British government had elaborate schemes to supply the latter. The government proposed to enlist eight thousand men in England and at least three thousand in the North American colonies for an attack on Havana or some other Spanish possession. The expedition, once recruited, would board ship at Spithead and at several American ports; then it would sail to join Vernon.¹²

The reports of the British plans were disturbing to both Paris and Madrid. The Spanish government had done little enough to aid its colonies, and the prospect of losing some of its chief possessions now suddenly stirred it to action. The immediate response was to order Admiral Rodrigo de Torres to take command of a squadron destined for the defense of the Spanish possessions in the Caribbean.¹³ The selection of Torres, a cautious man of average attainments for the period, suggests that the Spanish government was not looking for a bold or adventurous leader to conduct an aggressive campaign against the British. During the War of the Spanish Succession he had taken part in the battle off Cape Passaro, when the British defeated the Spanish forces. Only once had he served in the Caribbean, as a squadron commander in the Armada de Barlovento during the spring of 1726. At that time he had received a reprimand for lack of boldness, because he had withdrawn from a proposed attack on the British logwood cutters near Belize. These were the highlights of an undistinguished career.¹⁴

On July 10, 1740, Torres took command of twelve ships of the line and two smaller vessels, carrying almost two thousand soldiers and enough arms, munitions, and supplies to maintain them and the forces already in the colonies. The Spanish government expected him to stop at Cartagena and then proceed to Havana, the new home port of the squadron, from which he could frustrate British attempts to capture Spanish territory and protect the treasure ships. He did not have instructions to take aggressive action against the British.¹⁵

The Spanish squadron left Ferrol on July 31; and less than half-way across the Atlantic it ran into a hurricane which left one thousand men ill and sixty dead. The battered squadron did not

¹² Pares, *War and Trade*, 85-88. See John Tate Lanning, "The American Colonies in the Preliminaries of the War of Jenkins' Ear," *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, XI (June 1927), 129-156, for a study of American interest in the proposed expedition.

¹³ Felipe V to Torres, July 10, 1740, AGS, Marina, 396.

¹⁴ José Antonio Calderón Quijano, *Belice, 1663(?) - 1821 . . .* (Seville, 1944), 111-113; José Martínez-Hidalgo y Terán, *Enciclopedia general del Mar* (Madrid, 1957-), VI, 527.

¹⁵ Felipe V to Torres, July 10, 1740, AGS, Marina, 396.

arrive off Cartagena until October 23. Here Torres had planned to send into harbor only those ships intended to remain there, while he continued with the main body to Havana, which had a major dockyard capable of repairing his ships. But the long and difficult voyage had so undermined the morale of his crews that his captains persuaded him to take the entire squadron into Cartagena, even though none of the ships could be repaired there.¹⁶

Having made the decision, Torres knew that he would have to remain at Cartagena for some time in order to resupply the ships. He was not particularly pleased at the prospect, for he was anxious to get to Havana, but Lezo and Eslava welcomed him in port to aid in the defense of the city. Their greetings died away with the realization that the squadron's crews would increase the burden on the already limited provisions. Torres was not prepared to leave, however, until he had the additional supplies to carry him to Havana. Also his stay in port exposed his crews to the ravages of disease and made it difficult for him to carry out the more aggressive orders that the Spanish government now sent him.¹⁷

The French government had become alarmed at the aggressive intentions of the British in the Caribbean, for the French ambassador in London anticipated that they would "most certainly" seize Havana and "even all the island of Cuba."¹⁸ France was unwilling to have the British disturb the balance of power in the New World or gain complete control of commerce in the Caribbean. Therefore, the French government prepared two squadrons for Saint Domingue and placed them under the command of Vice-Admiral the Marquis d'Antin, one of the French navy's brightest young leaders.¹⁹

D'Antin had secret orders to prevent the British from taking Spanish territory even at the cost of war. He had several alternatives in entering the hostilities, which his country did not yet recognize as a war between Britain and France. He could attack the British convoy coming to the Caribbean; he could attack Jamaica; he could destroy the British Jamaica squadron; or he could choose a combina-

¹⁶ Torres' account of voyage, AGI, Santa Fe, 572; Torres to Somodevilla, September 22, 1740, and October 26, 1740, AGS, Marina, 396.

¹⁷ Eslava to Quintana, October 27, 1740, AGI, Santa Fe, 572; Torres to Somodevilla, November 8, 1740, November 30, 1740, and December 12, 1740, AGS, Marina, 396; Lezo to Somodevilla, December 1, 1740, AGS, Marina, 396; Spíñola to Somodevilla, December 23, 1740, AGS, Marina, 396.

¹⁸ Bussy to Amelot, July 25, 1740, Archive Étrangère, Paris (cited hereafter as AE), Angleterre, 407.

¹⁹ Georges Lacour-Gayet, *La Marine militaire de la France sous le règne de Louis XV* (Paris, 1902), 136-137.

tion of these. With twenty-two ships in his force (about one-third of the French navy) d'Antin had more than twice the number in the Jamaica squadron. Not only did he command a sizeable force; he was also ordered to be in contact with Admiral Torres, who would be receiving similar instructions from his government. The French and Spanish governments expected the two leaders to decide whether they could better work together or separately.²⁰

The French were certainly the more aggressive during this period; yet technically it was not their war. The intentions of the Spanish government and its principal naval officer in the Caribbean are seen in the correspondence between Torres and the French leaders at Saint Domingue. At the time of the French arrival there in the middle of November, the Marquis de Larnage, governor of Saint Domingue, optimistically wrote to Torres that the French and Spanish were "masters of the sea."²¹ But the Spanish admiral had not received notice about any change of plans and could not undertake any aggressive action until his ships were repaired and resupplied. Torres, in fact, did not learn that d'Antin had been ordered to work with the Spanish squadron until the end of December, and by that time d'Antin's squadron had been weakened by yellow fever. D'Antin himself fell ill just as the last section of his squadron arrived on December 15. He wrote to Torres: "But for that [his illness] we should find ourselves today united, but no doubt there will be occasions when we can work together."²² But these occasions did not develop, for the supplies in the French squadron were running low, and d'Antin decided to take most of his ships back to France. He sailed on February 3, 1741, leaving six of them to guard Saint Domingue and Torres to defend Spain's holdings in the Caribbean by himself.²³

The British force which gathered at Port Royal, Jamaica, on January 20, 1741, included over thirty ships of the line, a number of

²⁰ D'Antin's orders in Archives Nationales, Paris (cited hereafter as AN), Marine, B2 311. In the French government's August 1740 statement of its intentions, it declared that d'Antin was going to the Caribbean to relieve the Spanish possessions from the threat of British seizure and to prevent the British from establishing themselves in new territories. It declared that "this resolution of His Majesty moreover is not to be regarded as a declaration of war, for the King has no other aim than to maintain [the] legitimate commerce in America that has been established by treaties . . . for the preservation of the balance between the different powers. . . ." A copy of this declaration is in AGI, Santa Fe, 939.

²¹ Larnage to Torres, November 16, 1740, AGI, Santa Fe, 572.

²² D'Antin to Torres, January 20, 1741, AGS, Marina, 398.

²³ D'Antin to Maurepas, December 22, 1740, AN, Marina, B4 50.

smaller bomb, fire, and patrol vessels, and one hundred transports with over eleven thousand troops on board. It was the most formidable force ever assembled in the Caribbean, and its presence forced Spain into a purely defensive position. Eslava, the viceroy of New Granada, wrote that the Spanish could only wait and trust God to help them protect their possessions.²⁴ When the British finally chose their target, they laid siege to Cartagena in the spring of 1741, but the defenders managed to hold firm in the citadel, and the besiegers eventually had to retire in defeat.

Torres and his squadron were no longer at Cartagena when the British expedition arrived off that city. Expecting the British to attack Havana, he had moved his headquarters there.²⁵ He might have been disappointed to learn that Admiral Vernon regarded his squadron so lightly that he had determined to attack Cartagena whether Torres was there or not. Even after Vernon learned that Torres had sailed, he did not change his plans, because he was not afraid that Torres might attack Jamaica.²⁶

The British activity at Cartagena, however, permitted the Spanish squadron at Havana to carry out one of its principal duties, transferring to Spain the *caudales*, the collected income of Mexico. Torres' squadron conducted the treasure to Santander and returned to Havana while the British were failing to capture the mainland port.²⁷ This was the first of three such trips which have escaped the notice of scholars analyzing the success of British activities in the Caribbean between 1740 and 1748.²⁸

In July 1741, the British followed their defeat at Cartagena by seizing Cuban territory at Guantánamo Bay, which they attempted to use as a base for a proposed attack on Santiago de Cuba. Admiral Vernon believed that Torres could not forestall the British effort to seize the eastern part of the island because of the continued superiority of the British force.²⁹

Torres would have shrunk from attacking Vernon in any case, but a disaster soon almost wiped out even the defensive capacities of his squadron. On July 6, 1741 the squadron had been riding at anchor in Havana harbor when a bolt of lightning struck the *In-*

²⁴ Eslava to Villarias, March 31, 1741, AGI, Santa Fe, 572.

²⁵ Torres' Council of War, January 21, 1741, AGI, Santa Fe, 572.

²⁶ Ranft, *Vernon Papers*, 174, 177-180.

²⁷ Fernández Duro, *Armada española*, VI, 252.

²⁸ See Pares, *War and Trade*, 111, as well as the most recent statement by J. H. Parry, *The Spanish Seaborne Empire* (London, 1966), 299.

²⁹ For an account of the Cuban expedition see Richmond, *The Navy in 1739*, I, 125-129.

vencible, one of Torres' ships of the line. Flames spread quickly over the sails; hot tar fell to the deck; and the fire soon engulfed the powder room. The resultant explosion destroyed the ship, touched off nearby ships and houses, and spread panic through the port. Thousands of people fled the city in terror. The Spanish sailors worked desperately to prevent fire from destroying other ships, and after a long and arduous struggle they extinguished the last of the flames. But the squadron had lost the *Invencible*; the fire had destroyed ropes and sail among several other ships of the line; and many crewmen had been killed or injured. Thus Torres could neither challenge the British nor carry out his orders to convoy the *caudales* to Spain. Both he and the governor of Havana believed that under the circumstances it was Torres' main responsibility to protect the city.³⁰

The British attempt on Cuba ended in November 1741, and troops had all been withdrawn from Guantánamo by the beginning of December. After this failure, the British leaders reluctantly undertook one last major effort, the capture of Panama, but this ended ignominiously at Portobelo in April 1742.³¹ Three attacks and three failures had destroyed their resolution, and British military strength in the Caribbean had also diminished, for many of the British ships had lost men and suffered material damage by long exposure to tropical waters. With the recall of the British commanders and their forces in October, the Spanish position in the West Indies became more promising.

European events in the latter part of that year also served to strengthen Spain's position in the Caribbean. The imminent threat of war between Britain and France had focused British eyes on the continent and away from the Caribbean. The War of the Austrian Succession concerned the balance of power in Europe, and this was, as Lord Hardwicke wrote, the more important theater. "America must be fought for in Europe," he declared. "Whatever success we may have in the former, I doubt it will always *finally* follow the fate of the latter."³²

But even if the war was now to be fought primarily in Europe,

³⁰ Cariega to Somodevilla, July 13, 1741, AGS, Marina, 398; Torres to Campillo, July 30, 1741, and Güemes to Campillo, July 31, 1741, AGS, Marina, 396; Jacobo de la Pezuela, *Historia de la isla de Cuba* (4 vols., Madrid, 1868-1878), II, 382-383.

³¹ J. C. M. Oglesby, "The British and Panama—1742," *Caribbean Studies*, III (July 1963), 71-79.

³² Quoted in H. W. Richmond, "English Strategy in the War of the Austrian Succession," *Journal of the United Service Institution*, LXIV (May 1919), 250.

no colonial power could leave its colonies completely exposed. Thus Britain kept a squadron at Jamaica to defend the trade and the islands and to annoy the enemy, leaving the specific tactics to the discretion of the British commander. He never would have enough ships to do much, except in moments of crisis, but he could station patrols in the more important passages and sea routes, and thus perhaps keep the French or Spanish enemy on edge.³³ But uneasiness was not to be a monopoly of the Bourbon powers, for the British commanders at Jamaica had also to keep a wary eye on the Havana squadron during the next five years.

As the scene of the war shifted back to Europe, the Spanish government's orders to the Havana squadron remained unchanged. Torres and his second-in-command, Admiral Andrés Reggio, who followed him as commander, continued to give priority to protecting and convoying the treasure ships which sailed between Veracruz and Havana. The government expected that once the bars and coin had accumulated in the latter city, the squadron commander would order it carried to Spain under escort. Other duties that the squadron would undertake would be secondary to this protection, and routine patrols along the Cuban coast could guard against British privateers and illicit traders.³⁴

The Havana squadron had difficulty carrying out its instructions because of certain problems common to all naval squadrons sailing in the Caribbean. Tropical waters rotted wooden hulls; storms shattered mast and spars and ruined sails and rigging; disease and desertion kept the ships undermanned; and replacements for men and material were usually hard to find. But unlike the British, who had only limited repair facilities in the Caribbean, the Spanish had an important dockyard at Havana, which had facilities not only to repair but even to build new ships of the line—three seventy-gun ships during the war.³⁵ The Spanish could also obtain masts and spars in Mexico. Neither the building of ships nor the refitting of older ones kept the Havana squadron at full strength, however, and from 1744 to the end of the war it suffered from a continual shortage of men and supplies.³⁶

³³ Newcastle to Ogle, August 5, 1742, British Museum Additional MSS 32699; Newcastle to Davers, August 14, 1744, Public Record Office, London (cited hereafter as PRO), State Papers, 42/89.

³⁴ Felipe V to Torres, August 2, 1742, AGS, Marina, 399.

³⁵ Jiménez to Enseñada, June 4, 1744, AGS, Marina, 399; Lovio to Enseñada, June 12, 1747, AGS, Marina, 400(1). The three ships built at Havana were the *Glorioso*, the (new) *Invencible*, and Reggio's flagship, *Africa*.

³⁶ See Antonio de Béthencourt Massieu, "Arboladuras de Santa María de

A record of its activities from the departure of the British expeditionary force in October 1742 to the climactic confrontation with a British squadron six years later in the final days of the war, will perhaps illustrate the conditions faced. It should also serve to demonstrate the effectiveness of the Spanish squadron in carrying out its duties and show how its presence hampered the British naval forces.

The Spanish government ordered Torres to escort the *caudales* to Spain in the autumn of 1742, but at that time they had not yet reached Havana, so Torres sent five of his eleven ships into the Gulf of Mexico to await the *Vizarro*, the *caudales* ship. When the treasure finally arrived at Havana in May 1743 Torres was so short of necessities that he could not consider taking the *caudales* to Spain.³⁷ He was content to allow his smaller ships to cruise, while a few of his larger ships patrolled off Cuba and Santo Domingo. They had little to report on their return to Havana, and none of his ships apparently saw a British convoy homeward-bound out of Jamaica in September.³⁸

Torres was evidently unconcerned about the activities of Britain's Jamaica squadron during 1743. He knew that the British commander, Sir Chaloner Ogle, had twenty-odd ships, but he did not feel that they threatened him. Ogle, however, refused to send some of his ships back to England as ordered, citing directions by the Duke of Newcastle to Admiral Vernon in August 1742 that the Jamaica squadron must remain stronger than that of Havana. Ogle felt that the open war with France might change the situation in the West Indies, so that a strong squadron, even with its ships in poor condition, might prove useful.³⁹

In the first few months of 1744, both Torres and Ogle had their ships out cruising. This was Torres' last year in the West Indies, and he anticipated being able to take the *caudales* to Spain in the autumn. During March, he had sent out four ships of the line to escort the *Europa* and *Castilla* into Havana, carrying more than seven million pesos between them. In May Torres sent the two ships back to Veracruz for another cargo. They returned to Havana on July 7. From then until October Torres prepared for his departure. He had little to fear from the British, because Britain and France had at last officially declared war, and the British naval forces were concen-

Chimalapa-Tehuantepec en las construcciones navales indianas, 1730-1750,' ' *Revista de Indias*, XX (January-March 1960), 65-101. For accounts of the shortages of men and materials in the Havana Squadron see Reggio's numerous reports to Enseñada, AGS, Marina, 399 and 400.

³⁷ Torres to Campillo, June 7 and August 24, 1743, AGS, Marina, 399.

³⁸ Ogle to Admiralty, September 24, 1743, PRO, Admiralty, 1/233.

³⁹ Ogle to Admiralty, April 21, 1744, PRO, Admiralty, 1/233.

trating their efforts against Saint Domingue and the Leeward Islands.⁴⁰

Torres left Havana on October 25, 1744, commanding four ships of the line and one frigate. His ships carried over eight million pesos fuertes, and after an uneventful voyage the squadron arrived in Ferrol on January 2, 1745.⁴¹ The King was so pleased with this success that he conferred the title of Marqués de Matallana on the admiral. Torres went on to serve in the Mediterranean, and the command of the Havana squadron devolved upon Admiral Andrés Reggio, Torres' second-in-command,⁴² who had come out to the Caribbean in 1740, was a veteran of the War of the Spanish Succession, and had served in both the Atlantic and the Pacific. He had also taken part in major Spanish campaigns off Italy and North Africa.⁴³

The squadron that Reggio now commanded was in very poor condition, and he was able to do little beyond sending out a few of his ships against British privateers infesting the Cuban coast. But this was frustrating work, as his squadron lacked the smaller vessels so necessary to chase the fleet privateers. The only excitement in 1745 was the news that a large French squadron had arrived in the Caribbean. Reggio anticipated that the presence of this squadron might cause the British to send their homeward-bound convoy via the Florida Channel rather than the Windward Passage. He waited for it in vain and the most notable event in Reggio's first year as commander was the safe arrival at Havana of 396,146 pesos from Veracruz.⁴⁴ Nevertheless the presence of the French squadron in the Caribbean was enough to alarm Admiral Edward Davers, the commander of the weakened British forces, who dreaded the possibility of a joint Franco-Spanish attack on Jamaica. The attack did not come, because neither the French nor Spanish governments had thought in such terms, but Davers believed that such an action would have succeeded.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Jiménez to Enseñada, March 12 and July 15, 1744, AGS, Marina, 399; Lovio to Enseñada, April 22, 1744, AGS, Marina, 399; Spínola to Enseñada, June 10, 1744, AGS, Marina, 399; Ogle to Admiralty, June 3 and August 19, 1744, PRO, Admiralty, 1/233.

⁴¹ Jiménez to Enseñada, November 1, 1744, AGS, Marina, 399; Torres to Enseñada, January 5, 1745, AGS, Marina, 399; Freyres to Enseñada, January 7, 1745, AGS, Marina, 399.

⁴² Fernández Duro, *Armada española*, VI, 285; Martínez-Hidalgo, *Enciclopedia del mar*, VI, 527.

⁴³ Martínez-Hidalgo, *Enciclopedia del mar*, V, 786.

⁴⁴ Güemes to Enseñada, May 18, 1745, AGS, Marina, 399; Reggio to Enseñada, May 25, July 25, September 1, November 1, and November 28, 1745, AGS, Marina, 399.

⁴⁵ Davers to Admiralty, August 5, 1745, PRO, Admiralty, 1/233.

Never again did France have an opportunity to disrupt the relative positions of the powers in West Indian waters, and Reggio was left to check British ambitions by himself. British commanders were always aware of the Spanish squadron at Havana, even if they planned no operations against it. It was a fleet in being, a constant threat to the safety of convoys using the Florida Channel and also a brake on British offensive operations against the French colony of Saint Domingue.⁴⁶

Reggio was fortunate to find the British so cautious at a time when lack of supplies and men kept many of his ships in harbor. Ironically the British themselves seem to have eased the problems of manning when they sank Spanish ships at Cartagena during the attack of 1741, for their action released crews for other duty. But it took more than two years to transfer them to Havana, and even then only one thousand of them finally arrived. How long they remained in their new berths is open to question, for the squadron was seriously undermanned in early 1746, and Reggio was deploring the great number of desertions. An appeal by the governor of Havana to the country villagers had little effect, and Reggio was forced to go to the ships in the Armada de Barlovento at Veracruz and strip them of sailors. Only in this way could he keep his ships at sea and carry out the King's orders to bring the *caudales* to Spain.⁴⁷

The transfer of the treasure from Havana to Spain was Reggio's major project in 1746. At the end of October his second-in-command, Admiral Spinola, left Havana with two treasure ships. After only a few days at sea a heavy storm and a shift in the wind forced him back to port—a lucky chance for the Spanish government, because not many weeks later Spínola received word from Madrid that two British squadrons had been cruising off the Spanish coast. Reggio, therefore, suspended the sailing for that year.⁴⁸ The following October Reggio

⁴⁶ The British commanders of the Jamaica squadron were constantly receiving reports from a variety of sources regarding the Havana squadron. They knew when the Spanish admirals were having difficulty manning or repairing their ships; they also knew when Spanish ships were patrolling off the Tortuga Banks. As the British squadron's strength was limited by manning problems and lack of supplies, this information was essential to the commanders, who could then determine their course of action. See Davers to Admiralty, August 5 and November 24, 1745, PRO, Admiralty, 1/233; Clarke to Mitchell, August 1, 1747, PRO, Admiralty, 1/697.

⁴⁷ Felipe V to Cagigal (Torres and Eslava), April 23, 1744, AGS, Marina, 399; Felipe V to Reggio, February 19, 1746, AGS, Marina, 399; Reggio to Enseñada, March 24, April 24, May 2, June 27, and October 14, 1746, AGS, Marina, 399.

⁴⁸ San Justo to Enseñada, November 10, 1746, AGS, Marina, 399; Spínola to Enseñada, December 12, 1746, AGS, Marina, 399.

ordered the *Reyna*, a ship of the line, to convoy to Spain five ships carrying the *caudales*, including 1,796,000 pesos and 1,777 marks of worked silver. That convoy sailed from Havana on the 18th and reached Cádiz safely on January 9, 1748—the most significant achievement of the Havana squadron in an otherwise routine year.⁴⁹

If 1747 had been a routine year for the Spanish squadron, 1748 was to be a traumatic one. Anxiety as to British intentions and capabilities rose at the end of January with the arrival of Rear Admiral Charles Knowles, newly appointed commander of the Jamaica Station. Knowles was a commander in the Vernon tradition, an ambitious man of action who was also very interested in acquiring prize money. He had had long experience in West Indian waters, having participated in the destruction of Portobelo and Chagres, served in the attack on Cartagena, and commanded the unsuccessful expedition of 1743 against the Caracas coast. No sooner had he arrived in Jamaica than he planned to attack Santiago de Cuba and the French port of St. Louis on the south coast of Saint Domingue. He took the latter on March 18 and then sailed for Santiago de Cuba.⁵⁰

But like Vernon in 1742 Knowles found Santiago too strong for him. His squadron arrived off the harbor on April 8, 1748, and began the attack on the following day, but after a sharp exchange of shot the British withdrew. Still, the admiral's failure before Santiago did not diminish his determination to do something splendid. He had a number of projects in mind, but so few ships able to carry them out that he could only keep some on patrol, while he had the others cleaned and repaired.⁵¹

The inactivity of the British squadron continued into the summer, and on July 10 Knowles received word that Britain's war with France had ended. This meant that he could ignore French territory and concentrate on attacking the Spanish. Aware that August and September were the months in which the treasure usually left Veracruz for Havana, he intended to marshal all his forces for the purpose of capturing it. He therefore left Port Royal, Jamaica, on August 28 to cruise the Tortuga Bank.⁵²

⁴⁹ Reggio to Chatalain, October 18, 1747, AGS, Marina, 400 (1); Fernando VI to Reggio, April 6, 1748, AGS, Marina, 400 (1).

⁵⁰ For the activities of Knowles during the period, 1739-1748, see Richmond, *The Navy in 1739*, *passim*. On Knowles' need for money see Knowles to Anson, April 30, 1747, British Museum Additional MSS 15956.

⁵¹ Knowles to Admiralty, April 6, June 1, and July 4, 1748, PRO, Admiralty, 1/234.

⁵² Knowles to Admiralty, August 1 and August 29, 1748, PRO, Admiralty, 1/234.

Naturally the attack on Santiago de Cuba and the end of the Anglo-French conflict had alerted Admiral Reggio in Havana to the danger of further British action. Since 1743 the Spanish in the West Indies had been little disturbed by the military and naval forces of Britain. The state of war still permitted British privateers to infest Spanish waters, but the Spanish had not been idle in their own privateering activities. Major crises had been avoided, however, and the Havana squadron had carried out its defensive and convoying role relatively undisturbed. Now, however, Reggio assumed that Knowles would probably attempt to intercept the treasure fleet out of Veracruz. Yet the Spanish admiral could do little to prevent this, for storms had fouled his ships' rigging and damaged their masts and spars. It was his misfortune, too, that at just this time three of the six ships of the line in Havana were short of crew and needed repairs. All he could do was to inform the commander at Veracruz that Knowles' squadron was now off the Tortuga Bank and advise him to keep the ships in the Mexican port.⁵³

In the meantime Reggio was doing his best to prepare his squadron to meet Knowles. For the first time since late 1740 the Spanish had no alternative but to consider actually engaging the enemy, and at a council of war on September 15, the admiral and his captains decided to put to sea with the six ships. Augmenting his undermanned crews with criminals from the Havana prisons and recruits from ashore, they sailed on October 2.⁵⁴

Reggio set out, believing that Knowles' squadron consisted of only five ships of the line, but when only two days at sea, he was disturbed to learn from the captain of a captured British sloop that Knowles had nine ships, three more than the Spaniards. Realizing that he was dangerously outgunned, Reggio paused in his pursuit of the British squadron and called a council of war. The Spanish admiral and his captains considered going on to Veracruz and linking up with the warships there in order to gain superiority over Knowles' squadron, but this was impossible because two ships had mainmasts incapable of an extended voyage, and none was equipped to anchor in the open roadstead at Veracruz. So the squadron returned to Havana.⁵⁵

On October 8 Reggio sent a small vessel to reconnoiter and then took the remainder of the squadron out of Havana harbor to lie

⁵³ Reggio to Enseñada, August 31, 1748, AGS, Marina, 400 (2); Reggio to Egües, September 14, 1748, AGS, Marina, 400 (2).

⁵⁴ Diary of Teniente de navio Raphael Vielsa, AN, Marine, B4 62.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*; Reggio to Enseñada, October 12, 1748, AE, Espagne, 500.

about twelve miles off the port. Early in the morning of the 10th look-outs in the tops spied a warship to windward, evidently searching for the channel and twelve to fourteen other ships sailing with her. Reggio sent a fast frigate to investigate, ordering it to signal whether the strangers were the British squadron, a British convoy, or the ships from Veracruz. The remainder of the squadron then followed the frigate. At noon the frigate signaled from her position about six miles from the squadron that the ships were a British convoy escorted by two warships.⁵⁶

The convoy was homeward-bound from Jamaica, and had originally intended to use the Windward Passage, but strong currents prevented this and the escort captain had decided to try the Florida Channel. As soon as the convoy became aware of the Spanish pursuers they made all possible sail and managed to escape under the cover of darkness. Reggio hesitated to pursue the convoy too vigorously, because the motion of his ships and the feel of the current convinced him that his squadron was getting too close to the keys in the channel. Therefore, he ordered his large ships to head in a more southerly direction.⁵⁷

But Reggio's pursuit of the convoy had revealed the Spanish squadron's position to Admiral Knowles, for the captain of one escort ship decided to let the convoy make its own way to England, and turned back in an attempt to locate Knowles. He joined the British squadron, which then had six ships of the line, and the seven ships set out to look for Reggio's squadron of six men-of-war and a frigate.⁵⁸ The two squadrons sighted each other at daybreak on October 12 and joined battle at two in the afternoon. During the next nine hours the British captured one Spanish ship and compelled Reggio's flagship to seek shelter on the Cuban coast. Although the British flagship had also suffered extensively, the British admiral was able to keep his ships in the action, and, by continually pressing the Spanish, forced them to retire.⁵⁹

For almost three days the British hunted the Spanish flagship and on the 15th, at four in the afternoon, came upon her anchored just off shore. But before the British could take her, the Spanish crewmen fired the ship, and she soon exploded. Admiral Knowles then "stood

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*; Knowles to Admiralty, October 2, 1748, PRO, Admiralty, 1/234.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ For a professional analysis of the battle of Havana see Richmond, *The Navy in 1739*, III, 136-142.

for the Havana to put ashore the prisoners. . . .'⁶⁰ While he was off that port on the 16th, a Spanish sloop sailed into the British squadron, and its officer informed Admiral Knowles that a preliminary peace agreement had been signed. All hostilities between the British and Spanish were to cease. Knowles was dejected at this news. The defeat of the Spanish squadron had offered only glory, but it had made him master of the sea, and he had fully intended to go on and capture the treasure fleet, which would have been a much more rewarding undertaking for the admiral and his men.⁶¹

Thus Spain's Havana squadron lost its first and only major engagement during the war. Significantly, it had come at the end of hostilities, not at their beginning, and this meant that the squadron could successfully carry out its primary duty of protecting the treasure ships sailing from Veracruz to Havana. More important was the fact that the squadron's ships convoyed the treasure to Spain three times during the war, making millions of pesos available for Spanish use. When the squadron was not concerned with protecting the *caudales*, its ships were engaged in harassing British illicit traders and privateers.

The Havana squadron had spent eight years in West Indian waters. It had failed to prevent the British attacks on Cartagena, Cuba, and Panama, when the British had command of the sea, but once the British forsook their grand designs, the Havana squadron became useful. After 1742 its presence in the West Indies bothered the British commanders, always concerned about the possibilities of French and Spanish attacks on their ships and islands. When France and Britain ceased their struggle, only the ambitions of a dynamic British naval officer, Charles Knowles, led to increased British activity against the Spanish and ultimately into a naval engagement. The British won the engagement, but gained no advantage from it, for Admiral Reggio carried on with his original duty by escorting twelve million pesos back to Spain in 1749.⁶²

There was no glamor and little heroism in the activity of the Havana squadron. The duty was all too often routine. Yet its presence helped to maintain the balance of power among the colonial powers, and went far to preserve Spain's position in the Caribbean.

⁶⁰ Knowles to Admiralty, October 6, 1748, PRO, Admiralty, 1/234.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Martínez-Hidalgo, *Enciclopedia del mar*, V, 786.