WHEN HORNBLOWER BROKE THE RULES

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I want to talk about how our favorite naval hero interpreted, applied, misapplied, and surprisingly often, broke the Navy's rules.

I think we can agree that the Royal Navy at the end of the 18th century was a profoundly conservative and rule-bound organization. The officers and men were bound by customs and regulations that controlled virtually everything, from the time of day to serve grog, to the rules of engagement, to the Articles of War, which dated back to the time of Charles II a hundred years earlier.

Indeed, one scholar writes that:
"the British Navy was an effective fighting force, not because of its physical and human capital, but rather because of the set of rules under which the British fought."

That scholar is Douglas Allen, who holds the Burnaby Mountain Chair at Simon Fraser University in Canada. (By the way, I have checked, and Burnaby Mountain is in fact a mountain in British Columbia; but just barely, at a maximum elevation of 370 meters. I don't know if that reflects on the stature of Prof. Allen.)

Most of the Navy's rules and regulations were disobeyed at one's peril. We know what Voltaire famously said of the unfortunate Admiral

Byng: "it pays to shoot an Admiral from time to time, *pour encourager les autres.*"

So, one would think that the path to success in the Royal Navy was through following the rules.

And yet, on careful examination of the record, we find that our favorite naval officer, in his path from midshipman to Admiral of the Fleet, time and time again violated the rules, at every stage of his career. Some of the violations were relatively petty; some were gross derelictions of duty; some were violations of personal or gentlemanly conduct; and some were very serious crimes.

So I thought it would be instructive to examine those instances when Hornblower broke the rules; in virtually every book; and to see if we can categorize them and draw instruction from them.

Hornblower's disobedience, or at least his dishonesty, begins as early as his service as a Midshipman in the *Indefatigable*. This one was more a peccadillo than a sin; when Hornblower lies to Capt. Pellew about the reason the French privateer *Pique* caught fire when the expanding cargo of rice broke up Hornblower's first command, the *Marie Galante*. "I think it must have been spontaneous combustion in the paint locker," he lies to Pellew. "I can't account for it otherwise," he says. Forester puts this in the category of "The Penalty of Failure," as he titles this chapter, and no real harm is done.

Of course, in the same book, even earlier in his career, Hornblower breaks a rule by challenging his superior officer, Capt. Keene of the *Justinian*, to a duel. But we may attribute that to youthful exuberance, if not ignorance, and nothing came of it.

A far more serious violation of the rules, and a clear violation of the Articles of War, comes in the next book, with Hornblower now a lieutenant aboard the *Renown*. Whatever your own theory of the cause of Capt. Sawyer's plunge down the hatchway – did he fall, was he pushed, and if so, was it by Wellard with or without Hornblower's involvement? – whatever your theory, the officers' meeting in the hold was surely mutinous, exposing them to a punishment of death. In all his career, this is Hornblower's worst violation of the rules, unless you want to attribute to him Captain Sawyer's injury or his later death, as Mr. Parkinson does.

But it was not Hornblower's only dereliction as a lieutenant. In the anachronistic short story *The Hand of Destiny*, he decides on the spur of the moment not to push the tyrannous Capt. Courtney out of the line of fire, so Courtney is incapacitated and removed from command. Here, though his conscience bothers him, Hornblower concludes that the incident had resulted in the good of the service. He no doubt felt the same about Capt. Sawyer.

And also as a lieutenant, but aboard the *Renown*, when Capt. Sawyer was still apparently in control of his faculties, Hornblower tosses Barry McCool's chest overboard, and thereby spares the lives of Irish rebels. Hornblower justifies the act to himself with the thin rationalization that he "could afford to be merciful."

By the way, this story is titled in the 2018 Folio Society edition as "Hornblower and the Big Decision." Though it is generally titled as either "Hornblower's Temptation" and "Hornblower and the Widow McCool," in fact "Hornblower and the Big Decision" is the title of he story as it originally appeared in magazines. (I am indebted to CSF Society member James Ashton for this information.)

If not, let us move on to Hornblower's disobedience as a Commander and Captain.

In *Hotspur*, there is an incident reminiscent of the cargo of rice, where Hornblower refuses to take credit, and lies to Cornwallis about extinguishing the mortar shell that had been shot aboard off the Breton coast.

But far, far more serious, was his conniving at the escape of his steward Doughty, who was facing a sentence of death for striking a superior. This was neither for the good of the service, or as a balance for some other conduct. Hornblower at first considers, but then rejects the idea that, after the perils he had run during his career, the service owed him a life. But later, after his selfless act in turning aside from the capture of the Spanish treasure fleet by Capt. Moore's squadron, he feels the scales are balanced and he can grant himself absolution.

And, as we will see, there is a pleasant counterpart to Doughty's escape much later in Hornblower's career.

In *Atropos*, there is a single incident of disobedience, where Hornblower appears to violate the rules of war by threatening to hang the privateersman Lebon and his crew; but it is a ruse to obtain information about their ship, and he never meant to do it.

Moving on, there is not much professional disobedience in the three original Captain Hornblower volumes. There are two glaring exceptions, in *Ship of the* Line, when he presses members of the Indiamen's crews, clearly for what he regards as the good of the service; and in the short story *Hornblower's Charitable* Offering, when he sends relief to the French prisoners, technically his enemies, out of a humanitarian instinct like his action with Barry McCool's trunk. Later, there is also, possibly, the intentional avoidance of a rendezvous with Admiral Leighton as the *Sutherland* passed southward through the Palamos Point rendezvous just offshore here. We may regard that as for the good of the service, too, even though slightly disobedient. What else? Hornblower, though tempted, is faithful to Maria in *Beat to Quarters*, and unfaithful to her in *Flying Colours* – though I think it just barely possible that Maria had already died at the time Hornblower took up with Marie, so it might have been disloyalty but not technically adultery. If you like, you may wish to consider Marie's death in *Lord Hornblower* to be literary expiation for the affair.

There is more certain adultery in *The Commodore*, with the Countess. That may have been the cause of Hornblower's exposure to typhus -- so there is again some plausible literary retribution. But Forester muses in *The Hornblower Companion* that Hornblower's typhus-bearing flea bit him instead during the siege of Riga. You may form your own conclusion.

Much later in his career, Admiral Hornblower violates a basic rule of personal honor, apparently falsely giving Count Narbonne his word of honor that Napoleon was dead. He feels himself disgraced and no longer worthy to serve as an officer; and he is rescued only by the miracle of Saint Elizabeth of Hungary – a story I have always found unsatisfying.

But *Hornblower in the West Indies* has the reverse bookend of a dereliction earlier in Hornblower's career. This comes when Hornblower himself is victimized by Lady Barbara's contrivance at the escape of the trumpeter Hudnutt. This strikes me as a wholly satisfying counterpart to Hornblower's contrivance at the escape of Doughty. But the problem, if you prefer a literary, rather than a moral, analysis, is that the Hudnutt story was written five years <u>before</u> the Doughty story. So you may need to suspend some disbelief if you wish to enjoy the equivalence.

So, what lessons can we learn from this long list of disobedience and dereliction by our favorite hero? Bear in mind, first, that even Lord Nelson was famously disobedient, in the interest of the service, when he literally turned a blind eye to the recall signal during the battle of Copenhagen.

Hornblower, too, was disobedient on multiple occasions for what he regarded as the good of the service: by impressing the civilian crew members, by lying about Napoleon's death, by his mutinous acts aboard the *Renown*, and by facilitating the injury to Capt. Courtney in *The Hand of Destiny*. He also contemplated, but didn't act upon, the

potentially treasonous act of surrendering King George to the Americans in *Hornblower and His Majesty*.

On other occasions, he engaged in some sort of false self-centered equivalence: by lying to Cornwallis about the mortar shell after foregoing the capture of the Spanish treasure fleet; or by lying about the fire on the *Pique* after he mishandled the cargo of rice.

Sometimes, he acted out of compassion, as by his charitable offering to the French prisoners, or by avoiding the exposure of Irish patriots through the list in McCool's chest.

And sometimes, he just acted selfishly, as in his faithlessness to Maria and Barbara; and the escape of Doughty.

But whatever the reasons for these many examples, they combine to make Hornblower a more complex and interesting character whose exploits have so strongly appealed to all of us.