

How Admiral Rodney's disability saved the American Revolution



Admiral George Bridges Rodney, 1718-1792. Painting by Jean-Laurent Mosnier.
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In the spring of 1781, the American Revolution had reached an impasse.¹ The government seemed unable to provide sufficient resources to George Washington's dwindling army, now encamped on the Hudson River near West Point, NY. France had entered the war almost three years earlier, but a French force under the *Comte de Rochambeau* sat idle in Newport, RI, reluctant to attack the British stronghold in New York City.

Most of the recent action had taken place in the South, with revolutionaries retreating before a superior British army commanded by Lord Cornwallis.

In July, Cornwallis established a base in Yorktown, VA, with easy access to the Chesapeake Bay from which he could be resupplied, reinforced or evacuated if necessary by the British navy. Washington learned that a large French naval force, commanded by Admiral de Grasse, was preparing to sail from the Caribbean to North America. Although its destination was uncertain, Washington prayed that it would be Chesapeake Bay. He would then plan to march south with both armies to besiege Yorktown and hope that Admiral de Grasse could blockade the entry to the bay.

The scenario unfolded as Washington had hoped. The French fleet sailed into Chesapeake Bay at the end of August, 1781, and, sighting British sails on September 5, lined up blocking the bay's entrance.

The British fleet was commanded by Admiral Thomas Graves, a last moment replacement for Admiral George Rodney, who was disabled and sailing to England for medical care. Graves was one of a group of elderly, incompetent political appointees. His understanding of naval tactics was limited, and he did not collaborate effectively with the army.²

The battle did not go well for the British. Graves delayed aligning his ships for an attack until nightfall was approaching, but the line was imperfect and only a few ships in front of each line were within cannon-shot range.

Commanding a ship near the head of the French line was Louis-Antoine de Bougainville, a notable maritime warrior and explorer, and the first Frenchman to circumnavigate the globe. He inflicted great damage on the British, and after two hours nightfall terminated the battle. Most of the ships saw no action. Although none were lost on either side, the British ships had sustained the most damage. Rather than

renewing the battle, Graves decided to return to New York for repairs, abandoning Cornwallis, who was obliged to surrender on October 11, effectively ending the war.

Historians have suggested that this outcome might have been radically different if Admiral Rodney, one of Britain's greatest naval heroes, had been in command at the Battle of the Chesapeake.¹

Rodney's life and illnesses

George Bridges Rodney (1718-1792) came from southern English aristocracy.³ His ancestors had connections with the royal family, and many had served in the navy and army. After his education at Harrow, he went to sea at 15-years-old, rising rapidly through the ranks in recognition of reliable performance and influential patrons in Parliament and the Admiralty.

By age 41, he was an Admiral of the Blue (Rear Admiral), having thwarted a French invasion of England by burning landing craft at Le Havre. In 1761, he commanded a Caribbean expedition that seized Martinique from the French. For this he was made a Baronet and later became a member of Parliament.

Despite his many achievements, Rodney was not popular among his naval colleagues because of his arrogant, contemptuous manner, and an air of intemperance that seemed to cling to him. His profligate gambling, spending, and womanizing would lead to severe indebtedness and an overwhelming obsession with money, or the lack of it.

In 1774, he was forced to leave his family and flee to France to avoid debtors prison, claiming that the relocation was for his health. He had been troubled with health problems, such as malaria, since his first voyage to the tropics many years earlier. He also had severe episodes of gout, which were mentioned in his letters from Paris, but may have started years earlier.

Just as his money was running out in 1778, a Swiss banker and a French Marshall offered to help with his debts and he was able to return to London.³ The Marshall canceled Rodney's note when his nephew was released from a British prison. The banker was reimbursed from an unidentified British source, rumored to be close to the Admiralty or the Crown.

The Lords of the Admiralty were apprehensive about French and Spanish support for the rebellion in America and Rodney was given command of the Barbados station, even though he had not seen action at sea for 16 years. Rodney requested that his personal physician, Gilbert Blane,

accompany him. Blane had treated Rodney for "gout and gravel."

They sailed on Christmas Eve, 1779, with 22 ships of the line and many smaller vessels. Before the crossing, Rodney defeated a Spanish fleet blockading Gibraltar, taking many prizes, including a Spanish merchant convoy. Despite Dr. Blane's presence, Rodney was disabled by gout during the encounter, and on arrival at Barbados was "much debilitated in both feet and his right hand."³

After a few brief, indecisive actions, severe hurricanes prevented further naval combat in 1780. Admiral de Grasse had arrived in the Caribbean having sailed to North America to avoid the storms.

In early 1781, Rodney was experiencing painful and difficult urination, which Dr. Blane attributed to a severe urethral stricture. Rodney also continued to suffer from gout and wrote to Lord Sandwich, his patron and First Lord of the Admiralty, requesting leave to seek medical treatment in England. When this was granted in August, Rodney sailed accompanied by Dr. Blane. Left in command of the Caribbean fleet was Rear Admiral Samuel Hood, who joined his superior, Admiral Graves, to participate in the unsuccessful encounter with the French at Chesapeake Bay.

Rodney arrived in late September, and after attending to financial matters in London, proceeded to Bath, where the eminent surgeon, Sir Caesar Hawkins, performed the painful but successful procedure to dilate the stricture. After three weeks of convalescence in Bath, despite his diminished health and questionable reputation, the Admiralty decided that Rodney was the best man to restore British naval superiority across the Atlantic. Even though gout in his hand made writing impossible, Rodney set sail in January 1782 with a squadron including 12 ships of the line, planning to join Hood's squadron, which had returned from the Chesapeake.

Admiral de Grasse had turned southward, and supported by Spanish and Dutch naval forces, hoped to capture the British island of Jamaica. The two evenly matched fleets clashed in mid-April in the Battle of the Saints off



English Fleet under Rodney, 1782. Public domain

the coast of Dominica. Rather than using the conventional plan in which the two fleets encounter each other in parallel lines, Rodney chose a new maneuver, famously used by Nelson at Trafalgar a generation later, called "breaking the line," in which his ships moved perpendicular through gaps in the French line. It was a smashing victory in which five French ships of the line were captured,

including de Grasse's flagship *Ville de Paris* (104 guns) with the Admiral aboard. The next day, Rodney wrote to King George III, "It has pleased God, out of His Divine Providence, needs to grant to His Majesty's arms a most complete Victory."

Rodney returned to England in September 1782, and was received as a national hero, but the glory was not sustained and old problems returned. Disabled by gout, he moved to the south of France for his health and to once again escape from creditors. In 1784, his wife demanded a separation after many years of marriage and six children.

Rodney later returned to London to live with his son, and died in 1792 at the age of 73 years, a decade after his great victory in the Caribbean. His death was painful, but the location and source of his pain are unclear. In future years his name would be inscribed on several battleships, and would be familiar in the Royal Navy.

Gout

The earliest of Rodney's disabling illnesses was gout, which affected his feet and hands episodically, and, in later years chronically, rendering him unable to write or walk. With a distinctive presentation of acute and exquisitely painful inflammation in one, or sometimes more joints, especially the large toe, gout was recognized in ancient times.⁴

Hippocrates described gout in the fifth century BC, and Galen identified tophi in the third century AD. Needle-like crystals from a tophus were seen by van Leeuwenhoek, inventor of the microscope, in 1679. These were identified as urate crystals at the end of the 18th century. A classic clinical description in the late 17th century by Thomas

Sydenham, himself a gout victim, has never been surpassed.

Physicians at the time of the American Revolution probably knew more about gout than most chronic diseases; however, their views on its treatment had not advanced for many centuries. Therapeutic measures included application of foul-smelling poultices, protection of the involved limb with flannel and bandages, diets, blood-letting, purgatives, “taking the waters” at spas, generous ingestion of opioids, and many herbal preparations often combined in an elixir. There is no information about Rodney’s treatment, but it is known that colchicine, extracted from the autumn crocus, had been used to treat acute attacks of gout since ancient times, but had fallen out of favor due to unpleasant side effects such as abdominal cramps, vomiting and diarrhea. Indeed, Sydenham condemned colchicine having personally experienced the adverse symptoms. Colchicine was resurrected two decades after Rodney’s death, when a proprietary liquid preparation with secret ingredients, “Eau Medicinale,” was marketed by a French army officer as a cure for gout and other maladies.⁴

The Prince Regent (and future King George IV), who also suffered from gout, as had many of his ancestors, obtained a supply of this “miracle drug.” News of its benefits for a royal personage spread rapidly throughout the kingdom. Gout was reputed to be highly prevalent among upper class Englishmen in the 18th century, and was often related to their dietary and drinking habits.⁴ They consumed large portions of meat and other high purine foods, washed down with generous goblets of wine. Many had a preference for fortified wines, like Port and Madeira, which in that era were likely to be contaminated with lead.⁵ Lead subacetate was often added as a sweetener and preservative. Metal tubes, barrel stave fasteners, and foil cork wrapping also contained lead. This would result in a more severe illness called “saturnine gout,” often associated with hypertension, renal failure, and cardiovascular disease.⁵

British naval commanders, including Rodney, often stopped at the island of Madeira for supplies, water, and wine at bargain prices.³ Dr. Gilbert Blane had been appointed Physician to the Fleet in 1779, and had a distinguished career in the Royal Navy. He supported many sanitary and dietary improvements, including the addition of fresh produce and citrus juice to prevent scurvy. His book on diseases of seamen would serve as a standard reference for navy surgeons.⁶

After leaving the service, he became Physician Extraordinary to the Prince of Wales (later King George IV), and was made a Baronet in 1812. In 1781, most urethral strictures were considered to be a late complication

of gonorrhoea, for which there were many treatments, some toxic and none curative.⁷ A surgeon was usually consulted to manage a stricture. His main instrument would be a bougie, a slender, flexible rod, rounded at the tip, initially made of wax but later of whalebone or metal. If gentle probing allowed passage through the stricture, bougies of larger caliber were used until free passage of urine was observed. The procedure was performed without anesthesia, except for opioids and alcohol, and might take several hours to achieve an optimal result. If unsuccessful, some surgeons would resort to inserting sodium hydroxide ahead of the bougie, hoping to weaken the stricture.⁸ This extreme and controversial measure greatly magnified the already excessive discomfort and could result in unpleasant complications.

There are no recorded details of Rodney’s procedure but the eventual outcome was satisfactory. Strictures would often recur but there was no evidence of this during Rodney’s final decade of life.

Since Rodney annihilated the same French fleet a year later, a similar outcome might have been expected had Rodney’s illnesses not required his return to London. Admiral Samuel Hood, who was present at both battles came to that conclusion.³ The result could have been a stalemate at Yorktown and prolongation of the conflict, with an uncertain ending. History, and the outcome of the battle at the entry to Chesapeake Bay, may have been quite different had Admiral Rodney been well and present.

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