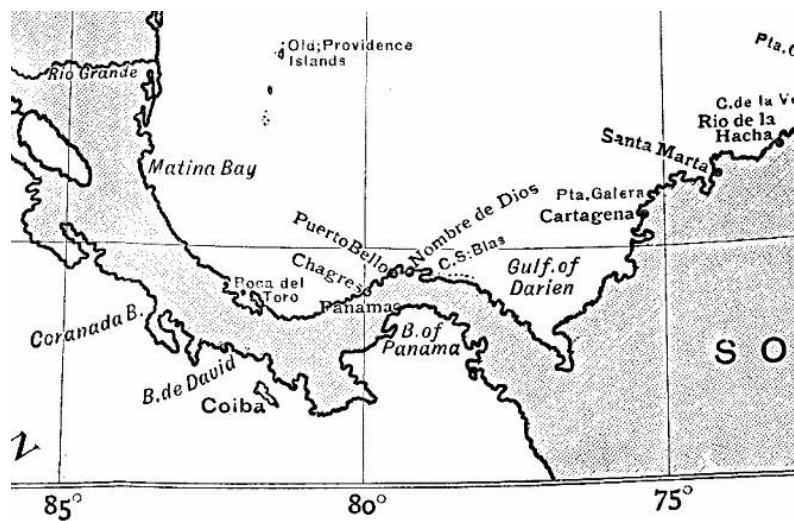


With Six Ships Only



Bombardment of Porto Bello – Samuel Scott

Entries 92 to 179 in the George II section of *Medallic Illustrations of the History of Great Britain and Ireland* (MI) are all for medallions commemorating the activities along the coast of Central America of the fleet of British warships under the command of Admiral Edward Vernon (1684-1757) between November 1739 and July 1741. The above title is taken from the most commonly encountered reverse legend found on this series.



Map showing the locations of the various actions mentioned below

Edward Vernon was the son of the onetime Secretary of State to William III, James Vernon. He joined the navy in 1700 at (for the time) the rather mature age of 16. His extended education (and presumably parental influence) seems to have been of benefit as he was promoted

captain in January 1706 and was commanding the West Indies Station by April 1708. He gained further experience in the region later as commodore on the Jamaica Station in 1720. From 1721 Vernon spent a period ashore on half pay during which time he entered Parliament as MP for Penryn. He saw active service again between 1726 and 1728 before returning to Parliament.

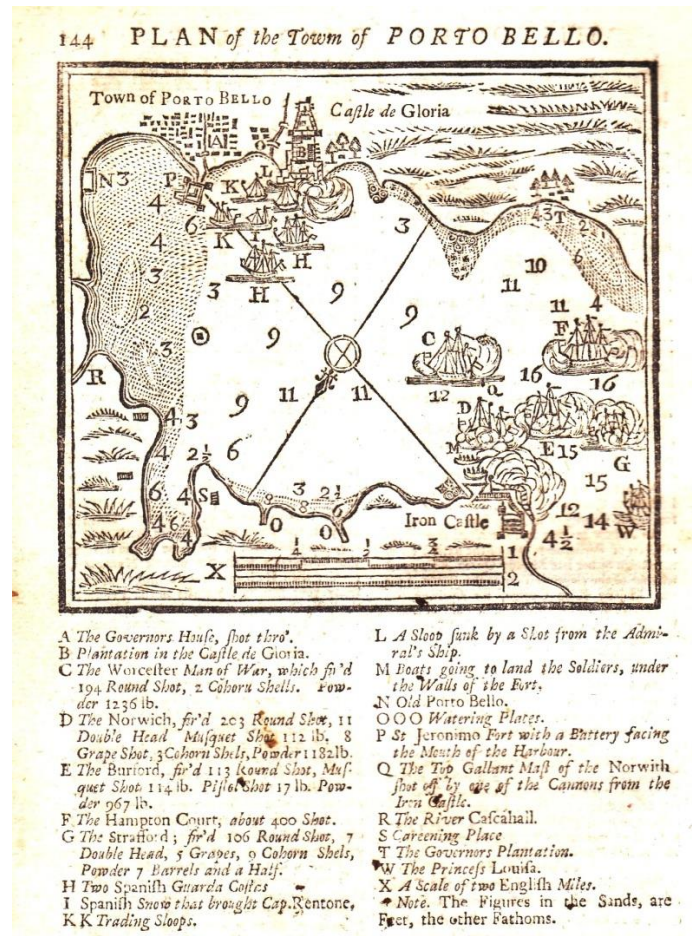
In 1731 a Welsh merchant seaman by the name of Robert Jenkins claimed that his ear had been cut off by Spanish coast guards when his ship was boarded as it was returning from the West Indies. This relatively trivial event (not for Jenkins, of course) was an early incident in the sequence of conflicts between England and Spain which led, in 1739, to what became known as 'The War of Jenkin's Ear' (although this term was not actually used until 1858, by the essayist Thomas Carlyle)

Vernon frequently took part in Parliamentary debates on naval matters and, in 1738, claimed that the capture of Porto Bello on the Spanish Main would incapacitate Spanish aggression in the area and, furthermore, he believed that he could, himself, achieve this with just six ships.

The Convention of Prado, intended to address the conflicts between British and Spanish interests in the West Indies, broke down in July 1739 and Vernon was sent with a fleet authorised to attack Spanish ships and possessions as part of a policy of reprisal. War was officially declared in October 1739 and the capture of Porto Bello was planned to be the first major action – giving Vernon the chance to prove his Parliamentary boast. Although not specifically intended as such Vernon actually did have six ships with which to make his attack.

Porto Bello was the main Spanish entrepot port for the region with a deep, wide bay protected by the Castillo de Todoferro (Iron Castle). The

town itself was guarded by two other forts. However these various defences had been much neglected and their artillery was in a very poor condition.



Plan of the attack – Gentleman's Magazine, March 1740

Vernon attacked in ignorance of this state of affairs however, but the bombardment by his ships as they entered the bay soon caused sufficient damage to render the defences ineffective and the Iron Castle was duly captured. The following morning, as Vernon prepared to attack the other forts the Governor sent out a flag of truce along with an offer to surrender.

Terms were negotiated which avoided the sacking of the town but involved the destruction of its defences and the handing over of some 10,000 'pieces of eight' for distribution amongst the British seamen.

There was immediate, and somewhat excessive, celebration back in England over what was, in reality, a fairly minor success from a strategic point of view. Vernon was promoted to Admiral of the White and given the freedom of the City. Inns were named in his honour and even whole districts in London, Edinburgh and Dublin renamed to mark the victory. The composition of 'Rule Britannia' by Thomas Arne belongs to this period of national celebration.

Following his success at Porto Bello Vernon decided, early in 1740, to attack the last Spanish stronghold in the immediate area and, on the 22nd March a strong force of 12 assorted ships began a bombardment of the fortress of San Lorenzo el Real Chagres a few miles to the west of Porto Bello. The fortress mounted only 4 guns, had a garrison of just 30, and was supported only by a few small patrol boats. The overwhelming British firepower forced surrender by the Spaniards after only 2 days and the fortress was duly destroyed.

Just prior to the destruction of 'Fort Chagre' Vernon had been off the coast of present day Colombia undertaking a reconnaissance in force of the defences of Cartagena de Indias – the main departure port for gold and silver shipments to Spain. In May 1740 Vernon made an abortive attempt to bombard the town, but it wasn't until April 1741 that sufficient forces were available for a sustained attack as part of the objective of capturing all of Spain's main Caribbean ports.

The amphibious British force comprised some 124 ships and 27,400 military personnel. Cartagena, however, was in a better state of preparedness than Porto Bello had been and this, coupled with disunity of command and poor organisation by the British, together with the ravages of tropical disease, led to a withdrawal after 67 days. The British suffered some 18,000 casualties during this period, together with the loss of, or damage to, some 50 ships.

Vernon had anticipated victory and sent news to Jamaica (and thus to England) of that expected outcome. When the truth became known the consequences were significant. Not only did Robert Walpole's government collapse soon afterwards but the weakening of British prestige in Europe was, in part, responsible for the escalation of the conflict into the War of Austrian Succession (1740-48) which involved most of Europe.

The final 3 medals in the series listed in MI (177-179) refer, somewhat enigmatically, to Havana, the capital of the Spanish island colony of Cuba. Vernon's final act in the Caribbean was the proposed capture of the town. The attempt proved a total disaster. A bitter dispute between Vernon and the commander of the military forces, coupled with, at that time, the inevitable ravages of disease resulted in abandonment of the venture and the recall of Vernon to England.

Numerous medallions were struck in commemoration of the various British 'triumphs' – predominantly in a cheap, affordable alloy of zinc and copper and around 37 to 40 mm in diameter. Most of these depict some sort of portrait of Vernon on the obverse with a plan view of the action in Porto Bello harbour on the reverse. The makers remain anonymous or are, at best, identified by rather enigmatic initials.



Porto Bello Nov 22nd 1739



'Fort Chagre' 22nd March 1740



Cartagena April 1741



Various other 'dramatis personae' are depicted on the medallions as follows: Commodore Charles Brown was Vernon's second in command at Porto Bello, and it was his ship Hampton Court which was the first to enter the harbour; Rear Admiral Sir Chaloner Ogle commanded part of the fleet at Cartagena; Major General Thomas Wentworth commanded the military force at Cartagena; Admiral Blas de Lezo ('Don Blas' on the medallions) commanded the Spanish defences of Cartagena, who, despite the manner in which he is usually represented on the medallions, most definitely did not surrender!



Vernon and Brown



*Vernon, Ogle and
Wentworth*



*Vernon, Ogle and
Blas de Lezo*