

THE YEAR OF LIBERTY or 'Blaian na bhFrancach' YEAR OF THE FRENCH

CLASS WARGAMES REPLAYS A CRITICAL MOMENT IN THE IRISH REBELLION

THE NAVAL BATTLE OF TORAIGH (TORY) ISLAND (DONEGAL) 10-12 OCTOBER 1798

Historical Background

The great Irish rebellion of 1798 was an attempt to throw off the English yoke of 700 years and unite all the Irish people, north and south, whether protestant or catholic. The organisation that took on this historic task was the United Irishmen, concentrated in Ulster, and led by Wolfe Tone, a Protestant and his colleagues, Napper Tandy, Bartholomew Teeling, Matthew Tone (his brother) and others.

The Irish revolutionaries realised that British military strength was too strong to take on alone, and for this reason the UI turned for assistance to revolutionary France, governed after the fall of Robespierre, by the Directory.

The Directory realised that rebellion in Ireland could have a major impact on the war with Britain, diverting military resources away from French possessions around the globe that were threatened by the powerful British navy. They therefore agreed to supply and support several expeditions to Ireland from 1796-1798.

The 1796 expedition of General Hoche was an attempt to land Wolfe Tone and 12,000 troops in Bantry Bay to commence an uprising. The delay in setting off until December meant the weather turned for the worse and led to a scattering of the fleet. In Hoche's absence his second in command, General Grouchy refused to land the troops, and the fleet returned to Brest. Arriving a day later Hoche was, understandably, furious.

The following year, 1797, Wolfe Tone saw an opportunity after the naval mutinies at Spithead and the Nore. He turned to help from the Batavian Republic of Holland which had a powerful fleet, but unfavourable winds kept it stuck in the port of Texel for 2 months. The 13,000 troops disembarked. The Dutch fleet under Admiral de Winter then ventured out but was badly mauled at the battle of Camperdown. This ended any further appetite for help from that quarter.

In Paris, General Augereau had led a pro Jacobin coup in September (18 Fructidor, Year V) which led to a purge of royalist sympathisers and put thoughts of a direct invasion of England back on the table.

Sadly, Tone's main supporter, General Hoche, had died, but Tone turned to the Directory's again in the hope they might yet help him establish an independent republic in Ireland. The Directory had already successfully established allied republics on the French model in Holland, Switzerland, and several in Italy. The 1798 Irish rebellion was to be carefully planned, to be instigated by the arrival of French troops.

General Bonaparte was sent to inspect the Channel ports and the material available, but he declared an invasion of England impossible at that time. Tone was unable to persuade him to consider Ireland. Instead Bonaparte set his sights on Egypt. He later said he might have been persuaded had the UI agents in Paris not been so quarrelsome.¹

In the very month that Bonaparte left for Egypt, in May 1798, rebellion broke out in Ireland, triggered prematurely by British intelligence agents penetrating the UI and getting their leadership arrested.

Tone convinced the Directory to send another expedition. Three expeditions set off that summer with the aim to help the Irish insurgents. The uprisings were uncoordinated but met with some

¹ Napoleon later gave a pension to Wolfe Tone's widow and commissioned his son in the French Army. In 1802 he obtained the release of Napper Tandy then under sentence of death and gave him a general's pension. In 1803 he established an Irish Legion that later fought against the British in Spain and Portugal.

success in Carlow and Wexford until crushed by British regulars and yeomanry at the battle of Vinegar Hill.

On 22 August 1798 the first expedition of just 3 frigates left La Rochelle and landed General Humbert and his 1000 troops (including the 70th Line Regiment, grenadiers, artillery and light cavalry) in Killala Bay, County Mayo. Alongside the General was Bartholomew Teeling and Wolfe Tone's brother, Matthew. Initially victorious at the battle of Castlebar, despite being outnumbered, they were soon surrounded and forced to surrender to the notorious and brutal General Lake at Ballinamuck on 8 September. He had both Irishmen shot, despite them being commissioned officers in the French army and prisoners of war.²

The second French fleet with General Kilmaine had 6000 troops but failed to land at all.

Meanwhile, Napper Tandy and a few UI left Dunkirk in a corvette and arrived in Donegal on the very day that the third expedition set sail. Learning of the defeat of Humbert he set sail again, landing in the free port of Hamburg, having captured a British ship on the way.

Finally, Wolfe Tone left with the third expeditionary force from Brest on 16 September 1798, on which General Hardy's 3000 troops had been embarked on 10 vessels. A new third rate was named *Hoche* in memory of Tone's great friend and supporter, serving as the flagship of the fleet, and on which he sailed. The fleet commander was Commodore Jean-Francois Bompart who had at his disposal the *Hoche* and 9 frigates (5th rates). The fleet slipped out of Brest at night, but too slowly not to be spotted the following morning by a patrolling British frigate. A zig zag chase followed in the western approaches, but Bompart's fleet arrived successfully off the coast of Donegal on 10 October 1798.

The Game

Our game is based on this legendary moment. The French fleet must land Wolfe Tone and 3000 troops of the invasion force on the coast while fighting off the British squadron that has discovered them, and is approaching from the north-east, commanded by Commodore Sir John Warren. He has a more powerful fleet with three 3rd rates and five 5th rates.

The Rules we will use have been adapted from a careful research of many out there; we hope to have a game that is not too complex, but keeps in the many variables of naval warfare of the era.

As well as tactics, the players may have to take account of the changeable and heavy weather on the Atlantic coast which disrupted the plans of both commanders. Rough seas mean no troops can be landed.

Order of Battle

FRENCH

Inner Squadron

Hoche (74) 3rd rate* flagship with Commodore Bompart and Wolfe Tone + 400 soldiers of IL

Loire (40) * with General Hardy + 300 soldiers (as on each of 8 frigates)

Romaine (40)

Immortalite (40)

Biche (8)

Second (Outer) Squadron

Resolue (36)

Bellone (36)

Embuscade (36)

Semillante (36)

Coquille (36)

² Humbert later fought successfully for the Americans against the British at the battle of New Orleans, 1815.

BRITISH

First Squadron

Magnanime (44) 5th rate
Amelia (38) 5th rate
Ethalion (38) 5th rate
Melampus (36) 5th rate

Second Squadron

Canada (74) 3rd rate *flagship with Commodore Sir John Warren
Robust (74) 3rd rate
Foudroyant (80) 3rd rate

Anson (44) 5th rate (frigate)* separated

Special Rules

The game will use a hex board to represent the coast of Donegal at the entrance to Lough Swilly, with open sea navigable to all vessels, and lighter blue sea navigable only by frigates and smaller.

The very light blue hexes represent possible landing areas, only ship's boats can use these hexes to transfer troops to land, 100 men per boat. Ships must be anchored in order to launch boats.

The weather is set at fair, with the prevailing wind from the West. However, this may change.

The British fleet appears in two squadrons, line ahead, from the north-east, one behind the other, the first (frigates) arrive after the first French move; the second (flagship and 3rd rates) arrives behind, but separated by 1d6 moves. The *Anson* was separated from the British fleet due to bad weather and may appear on any of the 6 open sea boards (throw 1d6 and throw again for which game turn).

The French fleet is also in two squadrons, line ahead, approaching Lough Swilly from the west, with frigates acting as an outer screen and the others closer to the coast.

French ships must be anchored to lower boats. It takes one move to anchor or to weigh anchor. Cables can be cut and a ship can move immediately, but it cannot anchor again.

Troops can be transferred when two ships are alongside, 100 men per turn.

Rocks are obviously dangerous and any ship drifting onto rocks will founder and may sink.