

# A Strategy of Detachments: The Dispatch of Rear-Admiral Thomas Graves to America in 1780

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*Le professeur Syrett offre une critique de ce qu'il nomme la « stratégie des détachements » du conseil de l'Amirauté pendant la guerre d'indépendance américaine. Cet article établit la chronologie de l'envoi de l'amiral Sir Thomas Graves vers l'Amérique, en 1780, de la décision d'envoyer un escadron jusqu'à l'arrivée de celui-ci à New York. Les délais de son départ forment un bon exemple de « friction en temps de guerre ». Syrett met l'accent sur le fait que les décisions prises à Londres l'étaient toujours en réaction au renseignement plutôt que d'être des initiatives.*

In the American War, unlike in the other maritime conflicts of the eighteenth century, the British followed mostly a strategy of detachments.<sup>1</sup> In the Seven Years' and French Revolutionary Wars, a strategy of blockade was employed and attempts were made to bottle up enemy naval forces in European seas. By contrast in the American War squadrons of warships were dispatched across the Atlantic in pursuit of enemy forces proceeding to the Western Hemisphere. Beginning in 1778, when Byron with a squadron of warships chased the French admiral Comte d'Estaing, first to America and then on to the West Indies, down to the Saints campaign of 1782,<sup>2</sup> British naval strategy, for the most part, consisted of reacting to French and Spanish initiatives by sending British warships across the Atlantic to counter the movements of enemy squadrons of warships. While the application of such a strategy could prove challenging, its effectiveness could be even more tenuous. In order to implement a strategy of detachments as effectively as possible, the British required timely and accurate intelligence of enemy intentions and movements as well as the ability to quickly muster and then dispatch forces from England to pursue enemy ships proceeding across the Atlantic to North America and the West Indies. However, when carrying out such a strategy the British were, on many occasions, beset by the limitations of intelligence and the problems generated by what Carl von Clausewitz has called, the friction of war. During this conflict they would further discover that while a strategy of

<sup>1</sup> The best account of British strategy during the American War is Piers Mackesy, *The War for America, 1775-83* (London, 1964). Among the standard accounts of the Royal Navy during the American War are A. T. Mahan, *The Major Operations of the Navies in the American War of Independence* (New York, 1969 reprint) and W. M. James, *The British Navy in Adversity* (London, 1926). For French naval strategy, see Jonathan R. Dull, *The French Navy and American Independence: A Study in Arms and Diplomacy, 1774-1787* (Princeton, N. J., 1975).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. David Syrett, "Home Waters or America? The Dilemma of British Naval Strategy in 1778," *The Mariner's Mirror* (Nov., 1979), vol. 77, pp. 365-377 and "Count-Down to the Saints: A Strategy of Detachments and the Quest for Naval Superiority in the West Indies," *The Mariner's Mirror* (May, 2001), vol. 87, 150-162.

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detachments might be simple in theory - being in essence one of just pursuing the enemy, even if far away - its execution could be fraught with unforeseen difficulties and problems. Perhaps no other episode in the American War illustrates more clearly all the problems and difficulties inherent in the implementation of such a strategy than the dispatch, in the spring of 1780, of a squadron of ships under the command of Rear-Admiral Thomas Graves to America in pursuit of a French squadron under the command of *Chefd'escadre* Chevalier de Ternay D'Arsac.

De Ternay first came to the attention of the British government at the end of 1779 when reports were sent to London by Alleyne Fitzherbert (later Baron St. Helens), the British resident at Brussels, in the Austrian Netherlands, telling of the fitting out of ships, under the command of de Ternay, to be sent apparently to the Indian Ocean.<sup>3</sup> From the neutral city of Brussels, Fitzherbert was conducting an extensive secret correspondence with numerous informants in France whose role was to provide the British diplomat with information on French naval preparations and activities. The naval intelligence procured by him was included in government dispatches and sent by diplomatic bag to the office of Lord Stormont, the secretary of state for the Northern Department, in London. On Stormont's orders an under-secretary drew up abstracts of those portions of Fitzherbert's dispatches that concerned naval affairs. These were, in turn, sent to the secretary of the Admiralty for the information of the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty.<sup>4</sup> In 1780, Fitzherbert was certainly one of Britain's best, although by no means the only, source of intelligence on the activities of the French navy. The naval intelligence obtained during that year by him, as well as by other British diplomats and officials, ran the gambit from uninformed gossip to credible information that was most likely gained by first-hand observation of French activities.

In March of 1780 the British were confronted by a shifting strategic situation in the North Atlantic. At the beginning of February 1780 it appeared in London that the West Indies were becoming the centre of French strategic concerns. For on 11 February Fitzherbert reported to London that Lieutenant-General Comte de Guichen had sailed from Brest, on 2 February, with a squadron of seventeen ships of the line apparently to strengthen French forces in the West Indies.<sup>5</sup> This was followed by another dispatch, eleven days later, where the British diplomat informed the authorities in London that he had learned, by means of "letters from Brest," that the French were "now" fitting out at that port a squadron of seven ships of the line to be commanded by de Ternay and that "many people conclude ... that they are intended for the East Indies." However, owing to the inclusion of two 2nd rate ships of the line in the French squadron, he doubted that de Ternay's destination was in fact going to be the East Indies.<sup>6</sup>

During the first week of March 1780 Stormont had himself come to the conclusion that de Ternay was to go to America.<sup>7</sup> On 3 March Fitzherbert had reported from Brussels that he had learned from "several quarters (some of them rather respectable ones)" that the French were going to send eight thousand troops under the command of the Marquis de Lafayette to Boston, Massachusetts in order to attack Canada. The British diplomat believed that if this intelligence were correct then de Ternay's squadron, fitting out at Brest, was

<sup>3</sup> The Public Record Office (PRO), London, has changed its name to The National Archives of the United Kingdom, hereafter, referred to as TNA. TNA, ADM 1/4141, f. 15.

<sup>4</sup> TNA, ADM 1/4141, 4142.

<sup>5</sup> TNA, ADM 1/4141, f. 152.

<sup>6</sup> TNA, ADM 1/4141, f. 200.

<sup>7</sup> TNA, ADM 1/4141, f. 261.

intended to escort the transports carrying the French troops to America.<sup>8</sup> In other words, at the beginning of March 1780, intelligence arriving in London indicated that the French would soon be dispatching an expeditionary force and a squadron of six or seven ships of the line to America. If these indications were correct, then the French forces reported to be assembling at Brest would pose a threat to the British position in America. In taking stock of such a threat and laying out a strategy best to counteract it, the Admiralty was under the mistaken impression that there were only *two* British ships of the line in America when in fact there were *five* ships.<sup>9</sup> Thus Admiralty strategic planning would be based upon an assumption that underestimated British naval strength in America,<sup>10</sup> when compared to the strength of the French squadron which was *reported* to be six or seven ships of the line.

In view of all the evidence available at the time the British government decided to reinforce the British squadron, under the command of Vice-Admiral Marriot Arbuthnot, which was already in America. On 7 March the cabinet met and authorized the dispatch of six ships of the line to America "with the utmost Expedition" because there was "great Reason to believe from Intelligence received that the French meditate to send thither a Considerable Force under Monsieur de Ternay."<sup>11</sup> Later, at the suggestion of Lord George Germain, the secretary of state for America, who desired the reinforcement to be equal or superior to de Ternay's squadron,<sup>12</sup> the cabinet increased the strength of the force being sent to America to eight ships of the line.<sup>13</sup> At this time it was also decided that the squadron was to be commanded by Rear-Admiral Thomas Graves. The reasons for the selection of Graves for this command are rather obscure. Indeed, little is known about Graves who served briefly as a member of Parliament for East Loos, (January-May 1775), but otherwise had a lackluster career in the Royal Navy before being promoted, on 19 March 1779, to flag rank. In many respects, Graves was to remain a cipher who would amble through history and later preside over the defeat of the Royal Navy in the Yorktown campaign as well as serve as second-in-command to Howe on the Glorious First of June.<sup>14</sup>

When the decision was made to send Graves to America with a squadron of eight ships of the line the British government's knowledge of French strategic intentions towards America was certainly imprecise. The cabinet could only guess or, at best, speculate as to the exact destination as well as strength of the French forces. Not knowing where in America de Ternay's squadron was actually bound, George III believed that the squadron under Graves should nevertheless proceed first to Charleston, South Carolina, so that "from thence they may be ready to move northward or southward to the defence of the American coast against any attempts the French may make." By 11 March, following intelligence reports, Germain had concluded that the French were intending to attack Quebec from the sea and hence thought that Graves ought to be sent to Nova Scotia for "collecting the fleet at Halifax will not only defend that port, but be more ready for proceeding up the River St. Lawrence, if necessary."<sup>15</sup> Four days later, on 15 March, a dispatch arrived in London from

<sup>8</sup> TNA. ADM 1/4141. f. 310.

<sup>9</sup> *Europe, Russell, Robust, Defiance, Reasonable.*

<sup>10</sup> Syrett, "Count-Down to the Saints," 151-153.

<sup>11</sup> Sir John Fortescue, ed., *The Correspondence of King George the Third from 1760 to December 1783* (London, 1967 reprint), V, nos. 2961, 2962.

<sup>12</sup> G. R. Barnes and J. H. Owen, eds., *The Private Papers of John, Earl of Sandwich: First Lord of the Admiralty, 1771-1782* (London, 1932-1938), III, 244.

<sup>13</sup> Fortescue, *Correspondence of King George*, V, no. 2968.

<sup>14</sup> John Charnock, *Biographia Navalis, or, Impartial Memoirs of the Lives and Characters of the Officers of the Navy of Great Britain from the Year 1660 to the Present Time* (London, 1794-1798), VI, 126-143.

<sup>15</sup> Barnes and Owen, *Sandwich Papers*, III, 243-244.

Fitzherbert stating that he had received in Brussels reports from Brest that the French were collecting transports and "[were] making every other preparation for the embarkation of eight or ten thousand forces under Monsieur de Rochambeau" and that these troops and the ships of de Ternay's squadron were apparently to be sent to Boston, Massachusetts.<sup>16</sup> However, doubt was soon cast on the intelligence concerning Boston as the actual destination of the French forces when a few days later a fresh dispatch arrived in London from Fitzherbert stating that he had, after all, no exact information as to the precise destination of the ships and men under the commands of de Ternay and Rochambeau other than that the French ships and troops "are to make immediately for the coast of America."<sup>17</sup>

The British government, on 14 March, being in receipt of conflicting and imprecise intelligence reports and still not knowing where in America the French forces, being prepared at Brest, were heading to finally decided not to attempt to intercept de Ternay's forces on the American coast. It decided instead to send the squadron under Graves directly to New York, the main British base in America.<sup>18</sup> Instructions were accordingly issued by the Admiralty, on 25 March, directing the admiral to proceed to New York and upon arrival there to place himself under the command of Vice-Admiral Marriot Arbuthnot.<sup>19</sup> French intentions were to become somewhat clearer to the British when, on 8 April, a dispatch arrived in London from Fitzherbert stating that he was presently of the opinion that the French force was bound to the Delaware River. Fitzherbert supported this statement by pointing out that French army officers belonging to Rochambeau's command all talked of joining Washington's army, that American pilots were embarked on the French ships as well as that a large quantity of military stores consigned to the Americans were also being embarked on the ships at Brest. Moreover, the British diplomat estimated that de Ternay's squadron was not strong enough to undertake an attack either on Halifax or on Quebec. From all of the above Fitzherbert concluded that the French objective laid elsewhere in America.<sup>20</sup>

Problematic intelligence aside, the British would further discover, in the case of Graves's squadron, that it was one thing to authorize the dispatch of naval reinforcements to America and quite another actually to have the ships depart from England on the voyage! To start the process, on 16 March, the Admiralty placed eight ships of the line and a frigate<sup>21</sup> under Graves's command and directed that the admiral use the "utmost dispatch" in getting the ships ready for sea.<sup>22</sup> However, the whole process of fitting, storing and provisioning the squadron would be slow and it would be further retarded owing to the number of ships at the time at Spithead and Portsmouth, including two assigned to his command,<sup>23</sup> which had just returned to England after taking part in Rodney's relief expedition to Gibraltar, and were in need of repairs. As a result, the repair and storing facilities at Portsmouth were working beyond capacity.<sup>24</sup>

Unfortunately, it became immediately clear that a number of ships under the

<sup>16</sup> TNA, ADM 1/4141, f. 313.

<sup>17</sup> TNA, ADM 1/4141, f. 333.

<sup>18</sup> Fortescue, *Correspondence of King George, V*, no. 2968.

<sup>19</sup> TNA, ADM 2/1337, f. 8.

<sup>20</sup> TNA, ADM 1/4141, f. 404.

<sup>21</sup> *London, Marlborough, Shrewsbury, Resolution, Invincible, Prudent, Royal Oak, America*, and the frigate *Amphitrite*.

<sup>22</sup> French Ensor Chadwick, ed., *The Graves Papers and other Documents relating to the Naval Operations of the Yorktown Campaign, July to October 1781* (New York, 1968 reprint), 1-3.

<sup>23</sup> *Resolution, Shrewsbury*.

<sup>24</sup> Barnes and Owen, *Sandwich Papers*, III, 238.

command of Graves were amongst those that had to be repaired before proceeding to America. On 22 March Graves reported to the Admiralty that the main and foremasts of HMS *Marlborough*, the foremast of HMS *Invincible*, and the bowsprit of HMS *Shrewsbury* were sprung and would have to be replaced. Following this report, orders were immediately issued to repair the ships in question. Nevertheless, wishing to speed Graves to sea, the Admiralty gave him permission to sail with only seven ships of the line with the eighth to follow later. Furthermore, he was authorized, if it became absolutely necessary, to substitute HMS *Defiance* for HMS *Marlborough* should the latter ship not be capable of sailing owing to sickness among her crew.<sup>25</sup> In the event, it would be HMS *Bedford* that would be substituted for HMS *Marlborough*. With his ships having been given priority in being repaired and stored, on 5 April, Graves was able to report to the Admiralty that, with the exception of HMS *Resolution*, the rest of the ships in his squadron were ready to put to sea but for the need to load and stow beer and water. In order to speed his departure from England still further, the admiral proposed that the ships in his command sail to Plymouth as soon as possible and take in beer and water there. Loading the necessary beer and water at Plymouth would mean avoiding delays that could result from having to employ the over-worked port facilities at Portsmouth.<sup>26</sup>

The Admiralty intended that Graves's ships sail from Spithead in company with a squadron under the command of Commodore the Hon. Robert Boyle Walsingham and a convoy that was proceeding to the West Indies. The squadrons of Graves and Walsingham, as well as the West India convoy, were to proceed down the English Channel and for some two hundred leagues out into the Atlantic together before the two forces would have separated with Graves and his squadron proceeding independently on to New York.<sup>27</sup> On the morning of 8 April Graves received orders from the Admiralty that, even though a number of his ships were not completely stored, he should immediately sail from Spithead with any six ships of the line belonging to his squadron which were capable of putting to sea and to accompany Walsingham's ships and the convoy down the English Channel and out into the Atlantic. The remaining ships of his squadron were to follow the admiral as soon as they were able to put to sea. That evening Graves, in HMS *London*, followed by HMS *Prudent* and HMS *Amphitrite*, in preparation for putting to sea, proceeded from the anchorage at Spithead to St. Helens. However, HMS *Royal Oak* and HMS *Bedford*, owing to adverse tides, could not immediately follow Graves to St. Helens. And the crews of four ships of his squadron - HMS *Invincible*, HMS *Resolution*, HMS *America*, and HMS *Shrewsbury* - mutinied, refused to proceed and demanded that they be paid all the outstanding wages owed to them!<sup>29</sup>

Such a turn of events was not altogether unexpected. On 7 April Graves had warned the Admiralty that there might be trouble over the pay of the crews of several of the ships in his command citing, in particular, HMS *Resolution* whose crew had before mutinied over pay.<sup>30</sup> However, in the rush to get the squadron to sea, the Admiralty had disregarded his warning. So when Graves made the signal to weigh and get under way, the seamen of four of his ships simply refused to comply and haul up the anchors. For example, on HMS *Invincible* the seamen assembled between decks, closing the lower gun ports, and when

<sup>25</sup> TNA, ADM 2/566, 427-428, 474, 545-546.

<sup>26</sup> Chadwick, *Graves Papers*, 6-7.

<sup>27</sup> TNA, ADM 2/108, 438.

<sup>28</sup> TNA, ADM 2/567, 14-15.

<sup>29</sup> TNA, ADM 1/966, Pye to Stephens, 9 April 1780.

<sup>30</sup> Chadwick, *Graves Papers*, 8-9.

ordered onto the quarter deck refused to obey chanting "Money, Money".<sup>31</sup> The seamen were refusing to put to sea because, contrary to an act of Parliament known as Grenville's Act (after George Grenville, Treasurer of the Navy in 1754), their pay had been withheld. This law called for seamen to receive two months' pay before proceeding to sea. In the case of Graves, the men in several of his ships had been drafted from ship to ship faster than the necessary paperwork could be completed, so that while they were entitled to get paid, their records did not show it and hence they had not been paid.<sup>32</sup> In the event, the mutiny was swiftly quelled by a judicious mixture of force and persuasion permitting six ships<sup>33</sup> of Graves's squadron to sail finally from Spithead.<sup>34</sup> They were not able to proceed far, however.

On the late afternoon of 12 April, owing to contrary winds, Graves in HMS *London*, and accompanied by several ships<sup>35</sup> of his squadron, put into Cawsand Bay. HMS *Shrewsbury*, which had her main and fore topmasts carried away in a squall, was sent into Plymouth for repairs. Over the next several days the rest of the squadron under the command of Graves arrived in Cawsand Bay. By 16 April there were, in addition to Walsingham's force and the West India convoy, the eight ships<sup>36</sup> of Graves's squadron, plus HMS *Canada*, at anchor there. Upon arrival in Cawsand Bay, Graves made arrangements for the stores of beer and water on board his ships to be immediately completed from nearby Plymouth, for the admiral intended to sail as soon as expeditiously possible.<sup>37</sup> It was also the Admiralty's intention that Graves should not linger at Cawsand Bay. On 10 April, upon learning of the departure of Graves from St. Helens, the Admiralty sent him orders, in care of the commander-in-chief at Plymouth, in case the squadron should put into that port, calling for Graves to sail from Plymouth as soon as any six ships belonging to his squadron were able to put to sea. On 14 April, learning that Graves was at Cawsand Bay, the Admiralty sent further orders to the admiral to sail immediately in company with Walsingham and the West India convoy.<sup>38</sup> However, despite orders from the Admiralty and the desire of Graves to put to sea as soon as possible, his squadron would be prevented from sailing from Cawsand Bay for several weeks due to continuing adverse weather.

While Graves's squadron was immobilized at Cawsand Bay, waiting for a fair wind to put to sea, the Admiralty continued to receive intelligence reports, some of which were confusing and others misleading, telling of the preparations at Brest for sending de Ternay's squadron to America. On 11 April, Fitzherbert reported from Brussels that the French "will hardly be ready to sail before the 20th Instant at the soonest" because "Rochambeau carries with him a large quantity of Artillery and other stores and implements necessary to the conducting of a siege." From this information Fitzherbert was inclined to conclude that the French intended to attack New York City. At the same time, the British diplomat was puzzled by the fact that French preparations regarding de Ternay's squadron were not strong enough to support an operation such as an attack on the heavily-fortified city of New York.<sup>3</sup> On 12 April, a report from the lieutenant-governor of the Channel Islands arrived in London.

<sup>31</sup> TNA, A D M 1/966, Proceedings on Board HMS *Invincible* at Spithead on 8 April 1780. Enclosed in Pye to Stephens, 9 April 1780.

<sup>32</sup> Barnes and Owen, *Sandwich Papers*, III, 246-247.

<sup>33</sup> *London, Prudent, Royal Oak, Bedford, Shrewsbury*, and frigate *Amphitrite*.

<sup>34</sup> TNA, A D M 1/966, Pye to Stephens, 9 April 1780; Chadwick, *Graves Papers*, 9-11.

<sup>35</sup> *America, Prudent, Shrewsbury, Amphitrite* frigate.

<sup>36</sup> *London, America, Prudent, Shrewsbury, Bedford, Resolution, Royal Oak*, and *Amphitrite* frigate.

<sup>37</sup> TNA, A D M 1/489, ff. 363-367.

<sup>38</sup> TNA, A D M 2/567, 28-29, 54-55.

<sup>39</sup> TNA, A D M 1/5110, Fitzherbert to Stormont, 11 April 1780.

His intelligence was based on the debriefing of exchanged British prisoners of war, who had arrived at the Island of Jersey from Brest, and from whom it had been learned that the French were fitting out in that port five ships of the line and six frigates to escort a convoy from Bordeaux to the West Indies. Several days later Germain's office informed the Admiralty that it had received fresh intelligence this time stating that the French force at Brest under de Ternay was to attack Quebec in conjunction with an American overland expedition commanded by Lafayette!<sup>40</sup> The strategic situation became even more confused for the British when, on 15 April, a dispatch arrived in London from the Hon. Robert Walpole, a British diplomat in Portugal, stating that the Spanish intended to send to America 10,000 or 11,000 troops and twelve ships of the line, which were to sail from Cadiz.<sup>41</sup>

On 22 April, in response to the new intelligence concerning Spanish preparations to send troops and ships to America, the cabinet decided to reduce the size of Graves's squadron to six ships of the line. The two ships of the line that were being detached from Graves were to be sent instead to the West Indies.<sup>42</sup> The Admiralty explained the situation to Arbuthnot and Graves in dispatches dated 23 and 25 April, respectively, where it stated that since the most recent intelligence coming from Brest was indicating that de Ternay's squadron would not consist "of more than 6 or at the utmost 7 ships" as well as owing to the newly-emerging Spanish threat to the Caribbean, HMS *Shrewsbury* and HMS *Invincible* were to go to the West Indies. Enclosed in the dispatch sent to Graves was renewed intelligence as to the effect that de Ternay's force was "nearly ready to sail" and was going to attack Quebec.<sup>43</sup> Several days later, on 2 May, the Admiralty sent Arbuthnot orders that in the event of an attack by de Ternay's squadron on Quebec, the British admiral was "required and directed to follow them [de Ternay's ships] with all possible expedition ... and to use your utmost endeavours to frustrate their designs and take or destroy them."<sup>44</sup> The Admiralty believed that the weight of the available intelligence showed that de Ternay's squadron would indeed be operating against Quebec.

On 2 May, the same day as the Admiralty's instructions to Graves, de Ternay's squadron consisting of eight ships of the line<sup>45</sup> and four small warships escorting thirty-two transports and merchant ships, on which were embarked fifty-five hundred troops, sailed from Brest bound for America. The French force would proceed first to the Capes of Virginia and then on to Newport, Rhode Island, where it would arrive on 11 July.<sup>46</sup> The British in London did not learn of the sailing of de Ternay's squadron until some time after the event. On 4 May, the British were informed from "letters of today from Paris" that de Ternay's squadron "was ready for sea" and supposedly consisted of eight ships of the line, four frigates, and four corvettes and was escorting nineteen transports. It was not until 12 May that intelligence arrived in London from the Hague telling of the actual sailing of de Ternay's ships on 2 May but giving the strength of the force as seven ships of the line.<sup>47</sup> For sometime after the sailing of de Ternay the British would continue to believe that "there was no room to doubt that the French would send a Land & Sea force into the River St.

<sup>40</sup> TNA, ADM 1/4141, ff. 420, 473.

<sup>41</sup> TNA, ADM 1/4141, ff. 344, 416, 423-424.

<sup>42</sup> Fortescue, *Correspondence of King George, V*, no. 3002.

<sup>43</sup> TNA, ADM 2/1337, ff. 86-93.

<sup>44</sup> TNA, ADM 2/1338, f. 4.

<sup>45</sup> *Duc de Bourgogne, Neptune, Jason, Ardent, Provence, Conquérant, Eveille.*

<sup>46</sup> Dull, *The French Navy*, 190-191, 367.

<sup>47</sup> TNA, ADM 2/1338, ff. 12-13.

<sup>48</sup> TNA, ADM 1/4142, Yorke to Stormont, 9 May 1780.

Lawrence."<sup>49</sup> It would in fact be weeks before the British authorities in London finally learned that the destination of de Ternay's force was Newport, R.I., and not Quebec.

In the meantime, Graves remained with his squadron at anchor in Cawsand Bay awaiting a favourable wind to put to sea. Day after day the wind would blow out of the west preventing the British ships from sailing. On 4 May the wind finally turned to the south and Graves and his ships put out into the English Channel only to be forced back into Cawford Bay the next day by a westerly wind. On 12 May it blew so hard out of the west that HMS *Prudent* and HMS *Amphitrite* parted their anchor cables. Finally, on 17 May, the wind turned favourable once more and Graves, with six ships of the line and a frigate,<sup>50</sup> sailed from Cawford Bay. Leaving England some fifteen days after de Ternay had sailed from Brest, Graves had nevertheless a fast voyage to America. The British squadron arrived off Sandy Hook on 13 July,<sup>51</sup> too late to intercept de Ternay's ships on the coast of America, but only two days after the French had arrived at Newport.

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The utility of the British strategy of detachments during the last four years of the American War is, at best, questionable, and its effective application confronted the British with innumerable problems and difficulties. For a strategy of detachments to have been successful the British government required not only accurate and timely intelligence of enemy actions and intentions, but also accurate knowledge of the deployment of its own forces overseas. In the case of de Ternay's squadron and the decision to dispatch Graves to New York with six ships of the line, in March 1780, the Admiralty had timely and correct warning that the French were in fact preparing a force to sail from Brest. It was quickly deduced in London, for all indications pointed to such a possibility, that the French squadron would most likely proceed to America. However, the British never gained accurate intelligence about the exact enemy objective in America. Even after de Ternay's ships had sailed from Brest many of the British, including a number of officials at the Admiralty, believed that the French objective was most likely to be in the St. Lawrence River. Newport, R.I., de Ternay's actual destination, was never mentioned in any of the intelligence reports received in London. Nevertheless, on the basis of less than complete or, indeed, accurate information about French intentions, the British government decided to strengthen its forces in America by sending Graves with a squadron to New York. This decision was made on the assumption, which was itself incorrect, that there were only two ships of the line at New York when there were in fact five ships. This, in turn, led to the belief that the arrival of de Ternay's squadron in American waters would pose a major threat to the British position in America. In the final analysis therefore, the decision to dispatch a force to New York in the spring of 1780, as is often the case with many strategic decisions in wartime, was made on the basis of an incorrect assessment of the strength of the Royal Navy in America and on highly incomplete intelligence as to the real intentions of the French.

Compounding the problems were difficulties, some of which were beyond the control of the British government, and all of which were largely unforeseen. Delays in the repairing, storing and provisioning of the ships at Portsmouth were capped off by a seaman's mutiny over pay, and a long period of adverse winds and weather. Seventy-one days elapsed from the time when the British government first decided to send a reinforcement to America until the time when Graves squadron actually departed from England. This surely was the friction of war with a vengeance.

<sup>49</sup> TNA, A D M 2/1338, f. 20.

<sup>50</sup> *London, Bedford, Resolution, Royal Oak, America, Prudent, and Amphitrite* frigate.

<sup>51</sup> TNA, A D M 1/489, ff. 377, 381, 385; A D M 51/552, 10 May -15 July 1780.

Perhaps of even greater importance to the conduct of the American War than the problems of application was the decision to send Graves with a squadron to America, a decision taken in London only after receiving information that the French were preparing to undertake an overseas expedition. As in so many other instances, this was a case of the British simply reacting to the moves of the enemy. By employing a strategy of detachments, the British were surrendering the strategic initiative to the enemy in the naval war.