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**A ROYAL NAVY "SPECIAL OPERATION" IN THE
TAGUS DURING THE PENINSULAR WAR
George Lind-Guimarães**

Overlooking the beach in Paço d'Arcos, beside the Estrada Marginal, the riverside road from Lisbon to Cascais, stands a simple but dignified monument with the following inscription:

SACRED TO THE MEMORY
OF
CONWAY SHIPLEY ESQ
AGED 25 YEARS
LATE CAPTAIN OF HIS BRITANNIC MAJESTY'S SHIP *LA NYMPHE*
WHO WAS KILLED IN AN ATTEMPT TO CUT AN ENEMY'S VESSEL OF
WAR OUT
OF THE TAGUS ON THE 22 APRIL 1808
CIRCUMSTANCES WHICH HUMAN WISDOM COULD NOT FORESEE, NOR
ANY EXERTION OF COURAGE OBTAINABLE RENDERED THE ATTACK UNSUCCESSFUL
AND CLOSED
THE SHORT BUT DISTINGUISHED CAREER OF THE GALLANT LEADER
OF IT.
BUT WHILE HIS NAME WILL LONG LIVE IN THE RECORDS OF FAME
AND THE
REMEMBRANCE OF HIS COUNTRY IT IS HOPED THE BRAVE AND
GOOD OF EVERY
NATION WILL VENERATE HIS ASHES AND CONTEMPLATE WITH
RESPECT THE LAST
MANSION OF A HERO.

Who was this young Captain, and what were these circumstances?

Conway Shipley was born in 1782, son of the Dean of St Asaph in Wales, and grandson of the Bishop. He joined the Navy at the age of eleven and as a midshipman in HMS *Phoebe* took part in many engagements, leading his Captain, Sir Robert

Barlow, after the capture of a French frigate, to inform the Dean "your son behaved very spiritedly indeed in the action; you know he is an old warrior". In 1800 he was promoted Lieutenant and commanded two ships, seeing more action; he was promoted to Post (,ie, permanent, not merely acting) Captain at the age of 24 and was Captain of the *Hippomenes*, a former Dutch corvette (14 guns and 90 men), when she captured the French frigate *L'Egyptienne* (36 guns and 240 men) after a chase of fifty-four hours, and a running fight of over three hours; for this the Lloyds Patriotic Fund awarded him one of their splendid ceremonial swords.

Early in 1808, after the first French invasion of Portugal, with Lisbon occupied by General Junot since November 1807, a Royal Navy squadron, under the command of Vice-Admiral Sir Charles Cotton, was blockading the port and keeping an eye on a Russian force under Admiral Sinyavin, which had put into Lisbon due to bad weather and been caught by the French invasion. The Russian admiral had been operating with the British in the Mediterranean; now he was reluctantly forced to regard them as the enemy after the Tsar's alliance with Napoleon (Treaty of Tilsit, July 1807).

Captain Shipley, in the 36-cannon frigate *HMS Nymphé*, was given the command of the inshore squadron covering the Tagus estuary and watching the Russian force. He kept himself occupied and alleviated the tedium of this task by receiving and helping Portuguese who wanted to escape Junot's occupation, and in planning what we should nowadays call a "Commando Operation" - the capture by small boats ("cutting out") of the *Carlotta*, a French 44-gun frigate at anchor near the Tower of Belem; this was a kind of operation he had already successfully carried out in the Canary Islands when in command of the

Comus in 1807.

He would be accompanied by Captain Pigot, commanding the 18-gun sloop H.M.S. *Blossom*. In planning the operation, Shipley was twice rowed up the Tagus from the Fort of São Julião to Belém to reconnoitre the frigate's position and see how she was guarded at night; he then decided to put his plan into action under cover of darkness at the ebb tide, if the wind was favourable, on April 22, 1808. His younger brother, Charles Shipley, (a civilian, who later followed the family tradition by being ordained), who was cruising with him for health reasons, had accompanied him on the reconnaissance trips and was to play an important part in the operation.

At 9 pm that night (the eve of St George's Day), Captain Shipley, in a 6-oared gig, set off up the river, followed by seven boats carrying more than 100 volunteer officers, seamen and marines, from the two ships, each man with a crescent-shaped piece of white cloth sewn on his right sleeve, to distinguish friend from foe in the dark; Captain Shipley had a white handkerchief tied round his arm.

The seven boats towed each other, in line ahead, to delay discovery, intending to separate and pull in to attack as soon as the alarm was raised. Familiar with the treacherous shoals at the mouth of the river, Shipley had stationed a boat at the South Cachopo sandbank, with orders to hoist a signal light to guide them out as soon as the captured frigate was seen approaching.

He had synchronised his operations with the tides, intending to take advantage of the slack water as the tide turned for his attack, and then the ebb tide to help him carry away his prize. However, as they approached Belem, the wind died away; also,

after heavy rain in the interior, the tide turned more quickly, and was flowing much more strongly against them than on Shipley's reconnaissance trips; the men were tiring and it would have taken too long for the whole force to pull against a 7-knot tide and take their prey by surprise, so that the original operation had to be abandoned.

However, not wanting to return empty-handed, he and Captain Pigot decided to capture a nearer enemy ship, the 22-gun brig *Gavotte*, captured by the French from the Portuguese, and guarded by gunboats. The two captains therefore decided to go on ahead in their faster gigs and overpower the night guard on the brig, leaving the other boats to catch up and then board her, the *Nymphe's* boats on the port side, and the *Blossom's* on the starboard. Within two or three hundred yards of the *Gavotte*, Captain Shipley's gig was hailed by the gunboats; he bought time by responding in French, but soon the alarm was raised, and when his gig reached the ship at about 2.30 am the boats were under fire from muskets and cannon.

The brig was protected with boarding nettings, and as he was cutting these away Captain Shipley was shot in the head, and fell back into the river. His brother jumped back into the gig and with a cry of "Save your captain!" ordered the crew to try to recover their commander. The 20 men of the *Nymphe's* barge were at this moment about to board the *Gavotte*, and already with one man killed and two wounded, on seeing the gig push off, thought that they were supposed to follow it, turned and, in the fast-running tide, collided with the ship's launch coming up close behind it. Captain Pigot, now approaching in his slower gig from the starboard side, and unaware of his commander's death, saw the *Nymphe's* boats retiring and concluded that Shipley had abandoned the attack, probably because the now

exhausted men could make little headway against the tide.

Captain Shipley's brother later took full responsibility for the confusion that led to the failure of the operation, stating that - as a civilian - his first concern had been to save his brother's life, but that had he continued to board the *Gavotte*, with more than 30 men coming up in the following launch, they would certainly have been successful.

On hearing of their captain's death, when the party got back at 4 am, many of the *Nymphe's* crew were in tears. Admiral Cotton informed the Admiralty: "I feel extreme regret at the painful necessity of thus recording the death of Captain Shipley, who was a most excellent, brave, and highly meritorious officer." A fellow officer, Captain Eyre, wrote to Shipley's brother: "The concern I feel I cannot easily express; and I assure you that the same sentiment is more general than in any instance of the kind I can recollect, for he was universally beloved and respected." His biographer, Lieutenant John Marshall, RN, states that "the ships commanded by Captain Shipley were always remarkable for their high state of discipline: the management of the great guns was a part of the service he particularly exercised his men in; he never inflicted punishment until he had consulted his pillow; nor omitted any opportunity, if the weather was favourable, of reading prayers on the Sabbath to his people. He was himself an excellent practical sailor and navigator; he read and spoke French fluently, and was well versed in history. Such were his natural acquirements, that had he followed any other profession, he must have distinguished himself in it. What might not his country have expected from Captain Conway Shipley?"

On the following day, Mr Charles Shipley wrote to General

Junot, asking him to search for and return his brother's body; receiving no answer, he then wrote to Admiral Sinyavin, who promised to do what he could.

In the end, Captain Shipley's body was washed up on Paço d'Arcos beach a week later, a bullet wound in his forehead and a sabre or pike wound to his body, with his sword still attached by its knot to his wrist, and the white handkerchief round his arm.

He was buried above the beach and later his brother officers erected the monument nearby (*Some years ago the British Historical Society of Portugal had the letters on the monument repainted- Editor*). At the beginning of the 20th century, a Royal Naval party visited it and found that it was being looked after by local people who had planted flowers round it. Various legends had grown up around the "Túmulo do Inglês Morto", such as that Captain Shipley's hands had been cut off as he boarded the French ship. The beach used to be known locally as the "Praia do Inglês Morto", though nowadays, as a popular bathing beach, "Praia (Nova) de Paço d'Arcos" sounds better.

When the Estrada Marginal was built in the early 1940s, the monument had to be moved to its present position. I think that this must be very near the original grave, which appears in a Portuguese military map of 1826 as about 310 meters north-west of the Fort (now demolished) of São Pedro in Paço d'Arcos. His descendant, Lord Langford, believes that the remains were then placed inside the monument; and, as well as the Lloyds Patriotic Fund Sword, the family still treasures the battle-sword found with his body.

His brother-in-law, the Revd Reginald Heber, later Anglican Bishop of Calcutta, and the author of such well-known hymns

as "From Greenland's icy mountains" and "The Son of God goes forth to war", wrote him an "Epitaph On A Young Naval Officer Designed For A Tomb In A Seaport Town In North Wales":

Sailor! if vigour nerve thy frame,
If to high deeds thy soul is strung,
Revere this stone that gives to fame
The brave, the virtuous, and the young![...]

In war's hoarse rage, in ocean's strife,
For skill, for force, for mercy known;
Still prompt to shield a comrade's life.
And greatly careless of his own.[...]

Then pity those whose sorrows flow
In vain o'er Shipley's empty grave!
Sailor, thou weep'st: indulge thy woe;
Such tears will not disgrace the brave!

Principal sources:

Naval History of Great Britain – Vol. V 1808 - 1811
by William James
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Royal Naval Biography; or, Memoirs of the Services of All the Flag-Officers, Superannuated Rear-Admirals, Retired-Captains, Post-Captains, and Commanders, Whose Names appeared on the Admiralty List of Sea-Officers at the commencement of the year 1823, or who have since been promoted; Illustrated by a Series of Historical and Explanatory

Notes, Which will be found to contain an account of all the Naval Actions, and Other Important Events, From the Commencement of the Late Reign, in 1760, to the Present Period

by John Marshall, Lieutenant Royal Navy

London 1827

GEORGE LIND-GUIMARÃES (MA Oxon), was a teacher of English. After service in the Royal Navy, he read Modern History at Oxford. He came out to Portugal for the British Council in 1963 and worked first in Oporto and then Lisbon. For over thirty years he taught English at the British Institute and to the officer cadets of the Portuguese Army at the Military Academy. He is now retired and lives in Lisbon.