# …POOR OLD JACK SPRATT IS DONE UP AT LAST !

*A brief account of Commander James Spratt, R. N., and an introduction to his HOMOGRAPH.*

BY LOUISROEDER

AS USUAL with naval logs, one entry in the Defiance's on 21 October 1805 was typically laconic:

…Stood on for a French two-deck ship ( l'Aigle ). About 3.10 run alongside of her and made her fast. Boarded and got possession of the quarter-deck and poop. Struck the French colours… [1]

Much too laconic for the heroic deeds of Midshipman James Spratt that afternoon.

James Spratt was born in County Dublin in 1771. In 1798, at the age of 25, after some years in the merchant service, he joined the navy as a First Class Volunteer. Promoted Midshipman in 1798 on board the *Bellona*, 74 (Captain Sir T. B. Thompson), he participated in his first fleet action, the Battle of Copenhagen, three years later. The *Bellona* seems to have had more casualties caused by the state of her guns than from the Danish fire; Spratt narrowly escaped being killed when …a gun he was in the act… of firing, burst and killed or wounded nearly all around [2]. *Bellona*'s log states that the second and fourteenth guns of the lower deck burst – at which of these Spratt was serving, is difficult to know. [3]

In 1803, the *Bellona* having been decommissioned, Spratt joined the *Defiance*, 74 (Captain P. C. Durham). On 22 July 1805, the *Defiance*, with Spratt serving as Master's Mate, took part in Sir Robert Calder's inconclusive victory.

Shortly afterwards, in respect to Trafalgar and his rôle in the battle, fate intervened. Admiralty orders were issued to those Captains who had taken part in July's action, to give evidence, if willing, at Sir Robert's court martial. Durham was not willing and …declined signing a public letter applying for leave to quit his ship, got into his boat, and [re]joined the Defiance [4]. Durham's refusal on 7 October later proved fortuitous for Spratt (see note 12).

At 1.40, fourteen days later, *Defiance*, acknowledging a general signal from Victory *to engage closer*, opened fire on the Spanish three-decker *Principe de Asturias*, 112 – Gravina's flagship. Durham kept her engaged for half an hour, then, seeing, two English line-of-battle ships coming up on the Spaniard's quarter, the Defiance pushed on and got up with the French eighty gun ship l'Aigle… [5]

1 *Logs of the Great Sea Fights*, Navy Records Society, 1900, Vol. II, p. 254.

2 *Naval Biographical Dictionary*, William R. O'Byrne, 1849, p. 1105.

3 *Logs of the Great Sea Fights*, Vol. II, p. 106.

4 *Memoir of the naval life and services of Admiral Sir Philip C. H. C. Durham.* Captain A. Murray, 1846, p. 60.

5 Ibid. p. 61. (O'Bryne, p.1105 states she was a 74, as does James, Vol. III, p. 386.)

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*L'Aigle* was in a bad way having been previously engaged by six or seven British ships; she was, though, ready for further action, but at last, …her fire began to slacken, and Captain Durham thinking she surrendered, called up his boarders to take possession… [6] This proved difficult as not one of the ship's boats had survived intact and the wind had dropped to, light airs, inclinable to calm. [7]

At this moment, Spratt, in command of the boarding party, volunteered to take possession by swimming to the *l'Aigle*. His offer was accepted and calling for the others to follow him, he at once jumped overboard and swam - cutlass between his teeth and battle-axe in his belt - round to *l'Aigle*'s stern. Undeterred that none had followed him, he climbed by means of the rudder chains, through one of the stern-chase ports of the gunroom. Rapidly discovering that *l'Aigle* had not surrendered, Spratt, overcoming some resistance, and with the element of surprise still with him, succeeded in reaching the poop [8]. Once there he was seen, …with his hat on the point of his cutlass, calling the boarders to his assistance, who were then anxiously waiting for the ships to close. [9]

Whilst attempting to haul down the French colours, the intrepid Master's Mate (the element of surprise no longer with him…) was immediately attacked by three Grenadiers with fixed bayonets. Springing with dexterity over them by the assistance of the signal halyards, he got upon an arm-chest, and, before they could repeat the operation, disabled two of them. Seizing the third one, he threw him from the poop on the quarter-deck… [10] Spratt fell with him; before he fell the *third Grenadier* had taken hold of him and whilst the Grenadier broke his neck on the quarterdeck, Spratt (as Dudley Pope in England Expects puts it) sprawled unhurt on top of him.

By now Durham had warped the *Defiance* next to *l'Aigle* and other boarders were fighting their way towards their shipmate; attacking, during their progress, a French officer who pleaded with Spratt to save his life. This he did, when another Grenadier lunged at him with his bayonet, he parried, but the Frenchman then aimed at his chest. Spratt immediately struck the firing musket down with his cutlass but unfortunately the ball shattered both the tibula and fibula of the right leg, just below the knee.

Spratt now positioned himself between two quarterdeck guns, his back to the bulwark. Three soldiers were attacking him in this perilous situation before his shipmates finally came to his rescue. Spratt was then seen by Captain Durham on the upper stool of the quarter-gallery (an extension of the quarter-deck planking) [11], and heard him calling, Captain, poor old Jack Spratt is done up at last. After that, according to O'Byrne, …he swung himself by one of the boat-tackle falls to the Defiance, and, resting on a lower-deck port which happened to be up, was carried into the cockpit.

Even though the Tricolour had been lowered and an English flag raised, resistance on board *l'Aigle* continued unabated and Captain Durham was forced to recall the boarders. Sheering off, the *Defiance* engaged her again, at pistol shot distance, for half an hour. At last the firing stopped and a prize-crew took possession.

Mr. Spratt's leg was eventually saved, although three inches shorter. When Captain Durham arrived in England he received three commissions from the Admiralty, one for his first lieutenant and two for midshipmen. One of the latter he immediately sent to Mr. Spratt… [12]

6 Ibid.

7 Defiance's log extract - *Report…to examine the evidence relating to the tactics employed by Nelson at the Battle of Trafalgar*, Admiralty, 1913, p. 18.

8 See, *The Seventy-four Gun Ship*, Jean Boudriot (David H. Roberts translator), Vol. II, Fig. 128, pp. 46-7 and Fig. 198, p. 166. Also, plates; XXI (Inboard works), XXIV (The Gundeck), XXVI (Quarterdeck and Poop).

9 *Naval Anecdotes illustrating the character of British Seamen*, Anon., Pub'd by James Cundee, 1806, p. 508.

10 Author – This is a film-maker's dream - true swashbuckling material. Sorry, I lapse... *A Naval Biographical Dictionary,* p. 1105.

11 *The Seventy-four Gun Ship*, Vol. II, plate XVIII.

12 *Memoir of the Naval Life and Services of Admiral Sir Philip C.H.C. Durham*, p. 63. Author - Durham remaining with the Defiance was fortuitous for Spratt. Had he gone home, his orders were to leave his First Lieutenant in charge. Whilst that Lieutenant would have been promoted after the battle, it is unlikely that he would have received blank commissions to hand out or that he would have furthered Spratt's interest.

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Between October 1806 and February 1813, Lieutenant Spratt commanded a signal station at Teignmouth in Devon. During this time he developed his **humble invention** - a signal system that he called, *The Homograph*. After his time in the West Country, Spratt then served for about a year on the Albion, 74, (Captain John Ferris Devonshire) until invalided home. A little while later, he commanded, until October 1815, the *Ganges* prison ship at Plymouth. For his wound he received £50 from the *Patriotic Society* and was granted a pension of £91 5s per year. In 1838, he accepted the rank of *Retired Commander*.

During his career, he saved nine men from drowning and, even at the age of sixty, could swim more than fourteen miles. On 30 May 1809, he was presented with the *Society of Arts* silver medal by the Duke of Norfolk for his invention of a *Homograph* – the forerunner of semaphore as later developed by England and France.

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