Desertion, identity and the experience of authority in the North American Squadron of the Royal Navy, 1745-1812

Description

Title: Desertion, identity and the experience of authority in the North American Squadron of the Royal Navy, 1745-1812

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Abstract: No detailed study of the causes of desertion, the scale of the problem, or its effects on naval operations and interplay with society and identity formation in both the imperial peripheries of North America and in the British Isles, has previously been undertaken. Using underutilised sources such as ship muster and pay books, this dissertation utilises the phenomenon of naval desertion in North America as a lens to reconstruct the experiences of the common Royal Navy seaman from the establishment of the North American station, through the Age of the American Revolution, until the War of 1812. The study posits that the perception and practice of discipline in the naval service began to change dramatically as early as 1775, if not before, and that the primary impetus behind such calls for change was the problem of desertion and its attendant consequences. The unrest created by the republican ideals of the American Revolution and emerging concepts of American identity, often incompatible with super-imposed “Britishness” and multiple identities, led to new proposals for ubiquitous, centrally controlled and monitored systems.
of discipline across the fleet. The experience of authority of the average sailor aboard ship was similar to what he would have experienced on shore in the face-to-face parishes of Hanoverian England. Ships, and sometimes naval stations, perceived themselves as floating communities that possessed values and networks of kinship, profession, and status as their counterparts ashore. The dissertation reinforces the concept that the eighteenth-century naval justice system was more formal than has often been perceived. It had many commonalities with the common law system ashore, and was riddled at all levels with discretionary authority, which at times could become arbitrary in nature. Individuals held multiple roles in overlapping “grids of power”, which were based upon hierarchical power structures of status, rank, ethnicity, race, religion and language. The key characteristic of a Royal Navy seaman in this era was his cultural mobility, based upon multiple, concentric and shifting identities and loyalties, and strong connections to larger Atlantic, and imperial, maritime communities. Finally, the thesis seeks to personalise the experiences of average seamen and marines on the vessels of the North American squadron, whose lives remain largely effaced from history.

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The North America and West Indies Station was a formation or command of the United Kingdom's Royal Navy stationed in North American waters from 1745 to 1956. The North American Station was separate from the Jamaica Station until 1830 when the two combined to form the North America and West Indies Station. It was briefly abolished in 1907 before being restored in 1915. It was renamed the America and West Indies Station in 1926. It was commanded by the Commander-in-Chief, North America and West Indies.