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Publisher: Routledge

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Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## The Mariner's Mirror

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rmir20>

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Published online: 22 Mar 2013.

To cite this article: Guy E. Cooper (1922) THE LAST LORD CAMELFORD, *The Mariner's Mirror*, 8:6, 162-167, DOI: [10.1080/00253359.1922.10655115](https://doi.org/10.1080/00253359.1922.10655115)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00253359.1922.10655115>

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## THE LAST LORD CAMELFORD.

BY GUY E. COOPER.

RATHER more than a year ago—in January, 1921, to be precise—we had a note about an anchor in the old naval dockyard at Antigua. Known as “Peterson’s Anchor,” the local tradition was to the effect that it marked the spot where a Lieutenant Peterson had been shot by Lord Camelford as the outcome of rivalry in love. In reply it was pointed out that the episode was described in the Dictionary of National Biography (s.v. Thomas Pitt, 2nd Lord Camelford), that the quarrel was said to have arisen out of a dispute as to seniority, and that Camelford had practically murdered Peterson.

The affair was an extraordinary one, and I have lately had the curiosity to look up the original papers on the subject at the Record Office, especially with a view to discovering whether there was any evidence to support the local tradition. As a result of these enquiries it appears to me that the account given in the D.N.B., though accurate so far as it goes, does Lord Camelford scant justice. That turbulent nobleman has quite enough follies and crimes to answer for without adding to their number, and as the dispute which was the immediate cause of the tragedy has a certain permanent interest, I venture here to describe it with more detail than can be found in accessible accounts.

The facts are briefly as follows. On January 13th, 1798, the sloop *Favourite* was lying hove-down at the eastern capstan house in English Harbour, Antigua. Her commander, Lieutenant Lord Camelford, was at the time 23 years of age, and had held the command under an acting order from Admiral Harvey since the previous September. Through his father he was a cousin of William Pitt, and on his mother’s side, of Sir Sydney Smith. It is possible that there was some hereditary craziness in the maternal stock; certainly Camelford was already notorious for violence and eccentricity. A contemporary account describes his appearance in these terms: “His Lordship wore no swabs, all the hair was shaved off his head on which he wore a monstrous large gold laced cocked hat which from its appearance one would think had seen service

with Sir Walter Raleigh. His dress consisted of a lieutenant's plain coat, the buttons green with verdigris as the ship's bottom. and the rest to correspond."

On January 13th, the only other vessel in English Harbour was the "*Perdrix*" 22, lying hove down, at the western capstan house. Her captain (Fahie) was on leave, and in his absence the command devolved on the first Lieutenant, Charles Peterson. This Peterson, though two years senior to Camelford, had actually served under him as first Lieutenant of the *Favourite* until the end of November, when an exchange into the *Perdrix* was arranged. He does not appear to have been an amiable character or a competent officer, and there is independent evidence to justify Camelford's statement that "Exclusive of his constant neglect of duty, the general tenour of his conduct was so illiberal that I have often been heard to express myself vexed that he could not be treated as a gentleman."

The *Favourite* and *Perdrix* had been lying at English Harbour since November, but nothing of note had happened, and as other ships had always been present, the question as to whether Camelford or Peterson was senior officer had not arisen. The aftermath of the great mutinies was causing a good deal of tension. On January 12th, one man in the *Favourite* received 7 dozen for saying that "if he was at Spithead he would throw the irons overboard and somebody else along with them," and no less than 16 men received a dozen apiece for the extraordinary offence of "refusing their grog without letting their grievance be known to the Commanding Officer." The "*Hermione*" mutiny had taken place in September.

During the afternoon of January 13th, one of the forts signalled that two hostile vessels were standing in towards the island, and subsequently an action was observed in the offing. Camelford, considering himself Senior Naval Officer, accordingly sent his acting Lieutenant, Milward, over to the *Perdrix* with a verbal message that Peterson should hold his men ready to assist the military, and having sent a petty officer to the Commander of the troops to arrange concerted action, went ashore to his lodgings.

This was before sunset, but Camelford's absence from the *Favourite* delayed the receipt of Peterson's reply, which was to the effect that he was surprised at Camelford's having the presumption to send him orders. It was not till about 7 p.m., that he realised the state of affairs, and then sent a written order to Peterson directing him to provide a guard boat at the

mouth of the harbour during the night. This was issued by Camelford as "Senior Officer of H. M. Ships and Vessels lying in English Hardour, Antigua," but it had no greater effect than the previous verbal order. The master's mate who delivered the letter came back with a similar reply—that Peterson was surprised at Camelford's presumption.

This was at about 8 p.m., and events now moved quickly. When Camelford realised that Peterson seriously disputed his authority he sent the master's mate back with orders to Crawford, the master of the "*Perdrix*," to put Peterson under arrest and take over the command himself. There seems to be some evidence that Crawford had played a considerable part in inspiring Peterson, and he certainly made no attempt to carry out the order. On the contrary the next move was that Peterson sent Crawford to the *Favourite* bearing a written order to Camelford directing him in almost identical terms to provide a guard boat for the mouth of the harbour. This was said to be issued by "Lieutenant Charles Peterson, Commander of H.M.S. *Perdrix* and Senior Officer of H.M. Ships and Vessels for the time being in English Harbour." ; the straggling and almost illegible signature to this document sheds some light on the statement of a witness that Peterson was "as sober as he ever was."

At about the same time the men of the *Perdrix* were ordered to prepare their arms and get ready for service. It should be noted that if Peterson really considered himself Senior Officer, this was the first step he took to assist in the defence of the island though the alarm was some hours old.

The receipt of Peterson's order roused Camelford to fury. He considered it as a case of downright mutiny and accordingly ordered Milward to take a file of marines, seize Peterson and bring him over to the Eastern capstan-house, alive or dead.

It was at 9 p.m., that Milward with a sergeant, a corporal and four privates reached the *Perdrix's* quarters, where they found the door guarded by two seamen with fixed bayonets. On sending in his name Milward was allowed upstairs to the officers' mess room where Peterson, Crawford and a purser were assembled.

A confused brawl then took place, Peterson making a pass with his sword at Milward who called up his marines. Pistols were produced and Crawford taking one pointed it at the sergeant who replied by threatening to cut the master's head off. There was some angry argument which ended in Peterson calling

to his crew to get under arms and fall in outside. Camelford seems to have been close at hand, since his attention was attracted by the noise of the men turning out, and he called up to Milward "Desist. Come downstairs."

The *Favourite's* party then came down to the wharf and fell in about ten yards from the position where the *Perdrix's* crew was forming. While they were falling in Camelford walked up and down with Milward and expressed an intention to avoid as much bloodshed as possible. He was unarmed—a strong point in his favour—but borrowed a loaded pistol from Milward and decided to put an end to the "mutiny" by cutting off the ringleader. He had come to the conclusion that any attempt to carry off Peterson alive would "result in a downright battle," and though he sent for his own crew to assemble it was evident that it would be some time before he could be supported.

When about 40 of the *Perdrix's* had assembled, Peterson appeared at the door of the capstan house with a drawn sword in his hand. In spite of the darkness and confusion, all the witnesses are substantially agreed as to what followed.

Peterson called out "*Perdrix, Perdrix* are you all here?" to which the men replied "Yes." Peterson then ordered "load with ball and cartridge and fix bayonets." The rattle of the ramrods could be heard in the darkness and it appeared probable that the next order would be one to fire. Camelford accordingly stepped up to the *Perdrix's* rank and asked where Peterson was. The reply was "I am here, damme, Sir." Camelford then asked if he persisted in disobeying his lawful commands, and on Peterson answering "I do, Sir," fired at close range and shot him through the heart.

As soon as Peterson fell Crawford ordered "Stop, avast loading your pieces," and Camelford addressing the men told them that he had shot Lieutenant Peterson "for the height of mutiny," that they had been right to obey their officer but should now dismiss. They dispersed quietly and the disturbance was at an end. The men had been quite in the dark as to what was happening, some thought the French had landed but all agreed that if ordered to fire they would have done so.

There are two problems arising out of this remarkable transaction, firstly was there any private motive behind Camelford's act; secondly was he justified in considering himself Senior Officer.

Now I think it is clear from the account given above that

Camelford was actuated by service considerations, but none the less it seems very probable that there was a lady in the case or some other private matter of dispute between the two. The existing local tradition hints as much and Captain Mitford of H.M.S. *Matilda* who investigated the affair, reported that in his opinion "the whole has arisen from a vast deal of bad blood long existing between the parties."

Camelford bitterly resented this remark and applied for a court-martial to clear his honour. His defence was chiefly devoted to proving that he was not influenced by indirect motives.

"Gentlemen, it has been propagated with equal art and assiduity that my motives for slaying Lieutenant Peterson were only those of private pique and resentment, and that in order to cloak my diabolical designs I availed myself of a difference on service to perpetrate my detestable revenge . . . It is for men of black hearts, it is for men like Captain Mitford that this justification is necessary." Camelford pressed all the witnesses as to whether they knew of any private quarrel, but most of them were non-committal saying they knew nothing definite. Perhaps there was some fire behind all this smoke.

As to whether or no Camelford was Senior Officer, this depends on whether the appointment of a Lieutenant "to command" gave him seniority over other Lieutenants. This is certainly not the case now, but there seems to have been considerable uncertainty in 1798 as to the status of such an officer. Although the Admiral's order directed Camelford to repair on board the *Favourite* "and take upon you the charge and command of Commander in her until further orders," the order was addressed to Lieutenant Lord Camelford, and in fact he continued to sign himself "Lieutenant."

The following points can be urged in Camelford's favour.

(1). Peterson had served under Camelford in the *Favourite* for over two months, and this does not seem to have been considered extraordinary.

(2). When Captain Mainwaring of H.M.S. *Babet* left Antigua on January 12th, he turned over the Port Orders, etc., to Camelford as being the next Senior Officer.

(3). A court martial consisting of five captains investigated the affair for four days and found unanimously that "the very extraordinary and manifest disobedience of Lieutenant Peterson both before and at the instant of his death to the lawful orders of Lord Camelford, the Senior Officer at English

Harbour at that time, and the violent measures taken by Lieutenant Peterson to resist the same by arming the *Perdrix* ship's company were acts of mutiny highly injurious to the discipline of His Majesty's Service." Camelford was therefore acquitted, and it seems impossible that the finding could have been so expressed had there been any doubt as to his status.

(4). In fact Camelford was a Commander, his commission as such having been dated at the Admiralty on December 12th, 1797, but this was unknown to any of the parties concerned.

I think, therefore, that on the whole Camelford must be acquitted of having acted in a violent or brutal manner on this occasion. He seems to have behaved reasonably, and even with a certain amount of coolness and moderation, for perhaps the only time in his short and troubled life.

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## GRAFFITI OF MEDIÆVAL SHIPS.

FROM

THE CHURCH OF ST. MARGARET'S-AT-CLIFFE, KENT.

BY A. B. EMDEN.

THE lower portions of the massive piers of the fine Norman Church of St. Margaret's-at-Cliffe, on the coast of Kent, were in mediæval times scored with engravings of ships—the unauthorised handiwork of former inhabitants. The church, with its pillared chancel- and tower-arches, and ten great piers (the girth of one of these, the pillar standing to the east of the font, measures 9 ft. 5½ in.) provided mediæval parishioners with plenty of scope for the exercise of this propensity. Subsequently the piers were covered with whitewash. These coatings, which were repeated from time to time, concealed these defacements and protected them. In 1836, when the church was cleaned of some of its whitewash, these coatings were probably first taken in hand; but it was during a restoration of the fabric, in progress from 1864 to 1869, that they were finally removed. This cleaning down of the piers was not carried out with quite that severity of treatment which has afflicted much ancient stone-work in churches. Yet the treatment seems to have been severe enough to erase many of