

THE WEST AFRICA SQUADRON

In 1807 Britain declared war on the slave trade, and a small fleet of Royal Navy ships formed the frontline

In the early hours of 1 February 1829 the Spanish slaver *El Almirante* turned to face the Royal Navy ship that had been pursuing it doggedly for the past 31 hours. Bigger than its opponent and carrying 14 guns as opposed to the British ship's single 18-pounder, the Spanish vessel had every chance of fighting its way to freedom. The fate of the 466 slaves on board

El Almirante hung in the balance, as HMS *Black Joke* closed in under unusually calm weather conditions, resorting to oars to get within range of its prey.

A short, fierce firefight broke out, and over the course of 80 minutes *El Almirante* suffered 28 casualties, including the death of its captain. The Spanish ship had become another victim of one of the West Africa Squadron's

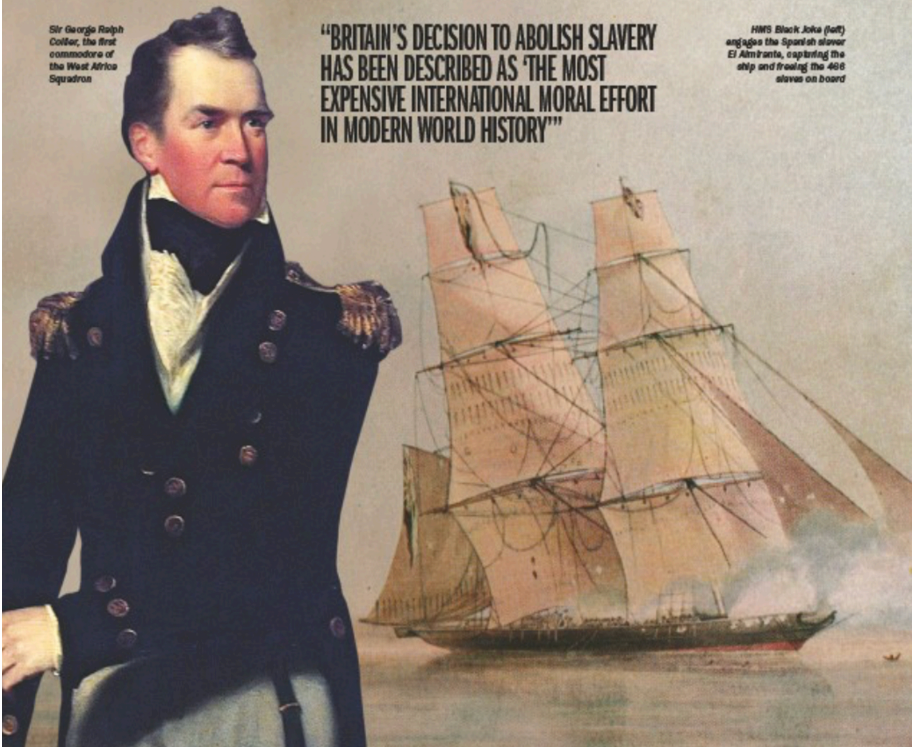
most effective ships, which was somewhat ironic – the *Black Joke* had started life as a slaver, and its speed had originally been intended to evade the British vessels aiming to stamp out the slave trade.

Abolition and war
Britain's decision to abolish slavery has been described as "the most expensive

Sir George Ralph Collier, the first commodore of the West Africa Squadron

"BRITAIN'S DECISION TO ABOLISH SLAVERY HAS BEEN DESCRIBED AS 'THE MOST EXPENSIVE INTERNATIONAL MORAL EFFORT IN MODERN WORLD HISTORY'"

HMS *Black Joke* (left) engages the Spanish slaver *El Almirante*, capturing the ship and freeing the 466 slaves on board



GEORGE WOOLLCOMBE

Commander, *The Glendower & Victor*

– West Africa Squadron –

Between 1816 and 1860, the West Africa Squadron seized approximately 1,600 ships involved in the slave trade and freed 150,000 Africans who were aboard these vessels

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM WOOLLCOMBE WHO HELPED ABOLISH THE SLAVE TRADE?

The [BBC Website](#) features a story of George Woolcombe's service

"Sailing against Slavery" in the West African anti-slavery squadron.

Abolished in Britain by the Act of 1807, nothing much happened until 1816 when the government sent the navy to enforce the act and capture slave-traders. Lt. George Woolcombe commanded two ships, the *Owen Glendower* and the *Victor*. He was, apparently, quite successful and was, eventually, promoted to the rank of Admiral. He wrote in his ship's log:

"On 11th August 1824, I detained the Brazilian brigantine named the *Diana* sailing under Brazilian colours armed with two guns and commanded by Manuel Dos Santos da Costa, who declared her to be bound from Benin to Rio de Janeiro with crew consisting of fourteen men and one hundred and forty three slaves of both sexes." George calls on the Admiralty first for more copper to protect Navy ships from leaks due to a 'worm' that eats into wood causing leaks; he also asks for more surgeons as the squadron lost a quarter of its men a year to disease and, on his return to the UK, seeks to design better ships that can outrun the Slavers.

For more information about this fascinating period of British History, and our family's part in it, read Anthony Sullivan's [excellent history](#) of *Britain's War Against the Slave Trade: The Operations of the Royal Navy's West Africa Squadron 1807-1867* published in 2020. Or read the earlier *Squadron* by John Broich – which tells the story of the four Royal Naval officers who made it their personal mission to end the slave trade. When their disruption in trade ships started to step on toes of wealthy merchants, the campaign was cancelled. However, in the end a coalition of naval officers and abolitionists forced the British government's hand into eradicating the slave trade entirely. *Squadron* grew from historian John Broich's passion to hunt down firsthand accounts of this untold story. Through research from archives throughout the U.K., he tells a tale of defiance in the face of political corruption, while delivering high seas heroism worthy of the Master and Commander series.



Admiral George Woolcombe as a young man

