

THE RISK APPROACH OF ADMIRAL SAMUEL HOOD



ABOUT THE RISK APPROACH SERIES

This study is part of THE RISK APPROACH series which examine the risk attitude of naval leaders. The objective of this series is to uncover elements that shaped these leaders’ risk approach, understand their philosophy towards risk and draw lessons for today’s leaders in any sectors of activity.

ADMIRAL SAMUEL HOOD 1724-1816

Admiral Samuel Hood was an active commander in the Royal Navy. He was stationed in the West Indies and along the North American coast during the War of American Independence (1776-1783). He also commanded the Mediterranean Fleet during the French Revolution War (1793-1802).

A brilliant officer, Hood was a fine combatant known for his bold character and strategic vision.

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If it shall please the Almighty to give success to the arms of his Majesty in the business we are going upon, I think we shall stand a tiptoe.

(14 October 1781, after the Battle of Chesapeake Bay)

Admiral Samuel Hood

A NAVAL CAREER MASTERING RISKS

Hood was an audacious fighter, for whom winning battles was insufficient. Instead, victory had to be pursued until the enemy was completely annihilated. For this reason, he famously criticised his superiors, Admiral Graves at the Battle of Chesapeake Bay (September 1781) and Admiral Rodney at the Battle of The Saints (April 1782), for their lack of resolve. In these instances, the Royal Navy missed the opportunity to forcefully pursue the enemy and search for a decisive victory.

In contrast, when Hood was autonomously in command of his squadron at the Battle of St. Kitts (January 1782), he took important risks engaging against superior French forces. His unflinching determination proved to be a decisive factor in succeeding against all odds.



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A FEARLESS RISK TAKER

Hood’s risk approach entailed confidently driving and pushing risks to achieve decisive results. Two preconditions were necessary to take such risks. First, an appropriate level of resources had to be engaged in the fight, if not in quantity at least in quality. Second, once an opportunity has been identified and decision has been made to proceed, it has to be followed without hesitation.

- 1 HAVING THE MEANS TO TAKE RISKS
- 2 SEIZING THE OPPORTUNITY

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2

HAVING THE MEANS TO TAKE RISKS

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[n]o officer who looks to the honour and credit of his Majesty's navy can venture to take upon him the charge and command of the Mediterranean fleet with one ship less than twenty of the line, without risk of becoming the instrument of disgrace to the nation, by encountering difficulties that appear great and almost insurmountable, and which evidently stare him in the face.

(18 March 1759, referring to the lack of reinforcements for the Mediterranean Fleet)

Taking risks without the necessary means to deal with them is a hazardous proposition that could lead to serious harm. Risk taking requires both making daring moves and evaluating its own capacity to be successful.

2

SEIZING THE OPPORTUNITY

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Surely there never was an instance before of a great fleet being so completely beaten and routed and not pursued.

(20 April 1782, referring to the Battle of the Saints)

A leader should recognise when an opportunity arises and assess if it is worth taking a risk. The amount of risk to be taken becomes a function of the perceived ability to succeed and the expected benefits.

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We, who know his judgement, which no affected fears can warp, will not be surprised that success is the consequence.

Horatio Nelson describing Admiral Hood
after the fall of Bastia in 1794

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

André Fournier is a risk management practitioner and naval historian with more than 25 years of professional experience. He is a risk researcher and the founder of MARITIME STRATEGY RESEARCH.