

Despite the fact that the wars of the middle eighteenth century are littered with naval actions great and small, some of which contributed significantly to the outcome of those wars, they are much less celebrated and less often wargamed than maritime activities of the subsequent Napoleonic era. They have also received less attention from wargame designers, often leaving aspiring wargame admirals to cobble together house rules for their favorite Napoleonic naval rule set when they get an itch to do battles like Quiberon Bay or Cape Finisterre. So what's a modern-day Anson or Suffren wannabe to do? Let's have a look at some of the options.

First off, there's nothing wrong with using a set of Napoleonic naval rules (with modifications) for the earlier battles of the eighteenth century. In spite of incremental improvements in ship construction (coppered bottoms), rigging (replacement of the lateen mizzen sail), armament (addition of carronades and the adoption of flintlock firing mechanisms) and command and control (improved signaling systems) in the final decades of the century, the basics of naval warfare remained similar enough that the same set of basic mechanics will work for all the battles of the golden age of fighting sail. Indeed, some Napoleonic naval rule sets include stats and special rules especially for that purpose.

The rule sets covered in the following survey were chosen first for their suitability for naval wargaming in the middle eighteenth century; either they are designed specifically for it, have rules to cover it, or can be easily modified to do so. Second, they were chosen because they are available. A great set of rules that you can never get a hold of is no use to anyone. Third, I only included rules with which I have some familiarity (and in almost fifty years of wargaming, the list is fairly substantial!). That is, I had to have spent some time getting familiar with the rules and have done a walk-through of the mechanics if not played an actual game.

If you don't see your favorite age of sail rule set here, it is not necessarily because I have a low opinion of it; it merely means that it didn't meet one or more of the above criteria. Conversely, the inclusion of a rule set does not necessarily constitute a personal endorsement.

(Some of you may notice that I have somewhat immodestly included one of my own designs. This is entirely because it occupies a lonely niche at the edge of naval wargaming, being dedicated to very small ships and freshwater navies. Lest someone see this as a shameless commercial plug, let me point out that I do not stand to profit directly from its inclusion since it is available as a free download from my website.)

In reverse alphabetical order, the rules under consideration for this survey are as follows:

Wooden Ships and Iron Men

This venerable boardgame is widely considered to have a few glitches in the rules, but is still quite accessible and yields a decent game. It, and its earlier incarnation as "Ship of the Line" use gridded surfaces (hexes for WS&IM and squares for "Ship of the Line") but both are easily converted to an open tabletop. The game is currently owned by Hasbro, which has made the rules available online at <http://www.hasbro.com/common/instruct/7090001.PDF>.

Note that page 7 is missing, but can be acquired here:

http://web.archive.org/web/20070411191526/helios.acomp.usf.edu/~bmwillia/wsim_pub/pdf/page7.pdf

Warfare at Sea in the Age of Reason

One of the few naval systems that are designed specifically to encompass 18th Century naval combat, it covers the entire age of sail from the Armada to the mid-nineteenth century. The mechanics are relatively simple and straightforward. Available as a PDF from Wargame Vault at

<http://www.wargamevault.com/product/138509/Warfare-at-Sea-in-the-Age-of-Reason>

Kiss Me Hardy

Written with TooFatLardies typical flair and humor, the terminology and setting is very idiosyncratic of the Napoleonic Era. A few tweaks to the crew types and ship capabilities would make it suitable for mid-eighteenth century actions (and what wargamer doesn't love to tweak rules?) Available as a PDF from <http://toofatlardies.co.uk/> and well supported by a blog and an active Yahoo Group.

Heart of Oak

Another very durable title that has been around for decades, released as a tactical module for Fantasy Games Unlimited's role playing system, "Privateers and Gentlemen". Includes extensive advanced, tournament and campaign rules. Available as "Age of Fighting Sail: Heart of Oak" at Wargame Vault (www.rpgnow.com)

Form Line of Battle

A detailed and comprehensive treatment of naval combat from the 16th through the early 19th centuries. The movement system introduces slight random variations which some players find awkward and others feel adds considerable interest and authenticity. Available as a softcover booklet or PDF (or both) from Wargame Vault at

<http://www.wargamevault.com/product/57247/Form-Line-of-Battle>

Flying Colors

A hex-and-counter boardgame, covering fleet actions from the middle eighteenth through the early nineteenth centuries. While it lacks the visual spectacle of a miniatures game, it does make possible the recreation of large actions with limited expenditure of time and resources. With its supplements, "Serpents of the Sea" and "Ship of the Line" (which cover small ship actions and large battles of the American War of Independence, respectively) it's coverage of the period is quite broad. Published by GMT; currently out of stock at the publisher, but copies can be found online and at retail outlets.

Fire as She Bears, 2nd Edition

The first edition of these rules used a square-gridded playing surface, but this edition substitutes octagonal "movement templates" which can be used either as counters or as bases for miniatures. Though primarily intended for the Napoleonic era, the rules extend back to the American War of Independence so require only a little adjustment for mid-eighteenth century battles. Complemented by "Hoist Sails Aloft", an add-on signalling, command and control supplement. Available as a PDF download at:

http://www.wargamevault.com/product_info.php?products_id=18616&it=1

Away Borders

Especially intended for use with very small vessels typical of actions inshore and on the Great Lakes. A free download from War Artisan's Workshop at <http://warartisan.com/rules>.

Admiralty: Fighting Sail Warfare

The War Times Journal's free system includes ship stats and special rules for mid-to-late eighteenth century naval combat. Available as a free download from:

<http://www.wtj.com/games/admiralty/>

What follows is a chart which compares the salient characteristics of the various sets of rules, to help you pick out the one that will best fit the type of game you enjoy playing. I have tried to avoid (as much as possible) imposing value judgements and stuck to less subjective aspects, since the purpose is to guide you the set of rules that will suit your purposes, and not necessarily the one I think is best. I have attempted to include the game features which most affect purchasers' decisions. The ratings for the various aspects are explained below the chart.

	WSIM	WaSAoR	KMH	HoO	FLoB	FC	FasB	AB	AFS
# of Pages	12	6	29	14	18	15	25	13	18
Needs to be modified for C18th	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No	No
Sailing Detail	–	–	A	+	+	A	A	–	A
Gunnery Detail	–	–	A	+	+	–	–	+	A
Initiative/Activation	S	D	C	D	C	D	C	S	S
Complexity of Ship Roster	–	A	+	+	+	NA	A	A	A
Prepared Surface	H	No	No	No	No	H	No	H	No
Special Basing	No	No	No	No	Yes	NA	Yes	No	No
Pre-plotted Movement	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No
Suggested Player Command	S	S	S	1	S	F	S	1	S
Suitability for Single Ship Action	–	A	+	+	+	–	A	+	A
Suitability for Fleet Actions	A	A	–	–	–	+	+	–	A

of Pages: This is intended as a rough indicator of the overall complexity and detail of the rules. The number entered in the chart is the number of pages occupied by the basic rules for the game, not including any optional or advanced rules. Basically, just what's necessary to play the game.

Needs to be modified for C18th: "No" means the rules are designed to cover the period, or at least include a set of optional rules to make it workable. "Yes" means you'll have to do some tweaking of your own to make them suitable.

Sailing Detail: This indicates the relative level of detail built into the rules governing the sailing of the ships in the game. An "A" indicates they are about average for the rules covered in this survey. A "+" means they are more detailed than average, and a "-" means they are less detailed than average.

Gunnery Detail: This indicates the relative level of detail built into the rules governing combat, using the same marks as for the previous rating.

Initiative/Activation: The order in which the players execute their actions may be governed in several ways. An "S" indicates that the game uses sequenced or simultaneous movement. If the game uses card activation, a "C" is shown, while a "D" means that the initiative is determined by a die roll.

Complexity of Ship Roster: This indicates the relative size and complexity of the record sheet for each ship, using the same marks as for the previous rating. "NA" indicates that the game does not use rosters.

Prepared Surface: A "No" indicates that the game is designed to be played on a plain surface, using templates and measuring devices to regulate movement and gunnery. An "H" indicates that the game is designed to be played on a surface marked with a hex grid, while an "S" indicates that it is designed to be played on a square grid (Note* Keep in mind that games which use a grid can usually be transferred to a plain surface by using rulers and angle templates to regulate movement and gunnery.)

Special Basing: A "Yes" or "No" indicates whether or not the game has specific basing requirements. The exception is a boardgame that uses counters instead of based miniatures, and is marked "NA".

Pre-plotted Movement A "Yes" or "No" indicates whether or not the game requires movement orders to be written out before each move.

Suggested Player Command: Most of these games are designed with a specific command role in mind for the individual player. If not specified in the rules, I have made my best guess as to what level of command would be most workable for all but very experienced players. A "1" indicates a single ship command, an "S" indicates a squadron (say, 2-6 ships, typically 3 or 4), and an "F" indicates a fleet (2 or more squadrons).

Suitability for Single Ship Actions: Even if a particular game is designed for a specific player command, it is sometimes very compatible for another. Using the ratings from above (A, +, and - for Average, Above Average and Below Average) this indicates the relative usefulness of each ruleset for actions involving single ships.

Suitability for Fleet Actions: As for Single Ship Actions, but for large battles involving multiple squadrons on each side.