

# The War of Jenkins' Ear

**When:** 1739-1748

**Combatants:** Great Britain vs Spain

**Reasons:** Cropping of Captain Jenkins' Ear, economic disagreements

**Other names:** The War of the Austrian Succession, Guerra del Asiento (The War of the Asiento)

**Key battles and places:** St. Kitts, Guadeloupe, Jamaica, Hispaniola

The uniquely named War of Jenkins' Ear takes its name from an incident in 1731, when the merchant ship *Rebecca*, captained by Captain Robert Jenkins of Britain, was boarded by a Spanish guardacosta, captained by Juan Leon Fandino, who were trying to prevent illegal trade with Spanish America. Despite Jenkins' destination being unclear, Fandino is said to have cut off Jenkins' ear, saying that he would have done the same to King George if he were there. Jenkins preserved his ear and later showed it to the British Parliament in 1738. The truth of the story has been debated by historians ever since, with the causes of the war having more to do with deteriorating economic relations between Britain and Spain than Jenkins' severed ear. The British had been abusing their trade privileges, including the asiento, and the Spanish guardacostas had been overzealous in stopping foreign vessels.



A cartoon of Captain Jenkins presenting his ear to Parliament

The War of Jenkins' Ear broke out in 1739 when negotiations between Britain and Spain collapsed and Britain declared war on 19<sup>th</sup> October. A fleet was despatched to the Caribbean under the command of Vice-Admiral Edward Vernon, who had previously served in the region during the War of the Spanish Succession. Vernon believed that it would be possible to force the Spanish Empire in the Americas to crumble by dividing it. He planned to capture two of its most important cities on the coast of the American mainland: Porto Bello in modern day Panama and Cartagena in modern day Columbia.



Initially, the Army did not have much of a role in the conflict, with Vernon's fleet comprising only sailors and marines. After arriving in the West Indies, Vernon and his fleet spent a few weeks at Jamaica. He had been given rather vague orders, although this had included directions to gather information on potential targets in the Spanish Caribbean. In the end, it was resolved to attack Porto Bello. This small city was notable for being the port at which the Spanish trading galleons arrived. Vernon's fleet of six ships arrived on the 20<sup>th</sup> November and captured the lightly-defended city with ease, as for most of the year, before and after the visit of the trading galleons, it was sparsely populated. Due to this small number of inhabitants, there was little advantage in trying to hold onto the city and the British decided to withdraw, but not before they destroyed all of the city's fortifications.

Despite the fact that Porto Bello was not a particularly difficult military target, in the minds of the public it was a great bastion of Spanish power and news of Vernon's victory was rapturously received in Britain; it became widely celebrated, with Vernon becoming a household name. As would later be the case in the aftermath of the Battle of Waterloo, many different locations were named 'Portobello' or a variation thereof, hence Portobello Road in London's Notting Hill and the Portobello district of Edinburgh. Vernon's name was also given to many squares and streets. The victory at Porto Bello meant that other operations in the Caribbean were planned, the targets now being Cartagena and Havana. In these the Army would play a part and a force was assembled of both British troops and a contingent from nine of the thirteen British colonies in North America. This force took some time to assemble and eventually met in Jamaica. The American contingent arrived before the end of 1740 and soon felt the ill effects of the Jamaican climate, namely disease and an abundance of rum. Amongst their number there was one figure of note, a Captain Lawrence Washington, the elder half-brother of future American President George Washington.

Meanwhile in Britain, the force was assembled on the Isle of Wight under the command of Major General Lord Charles Cathcart. This force comprised eight regiments and a total of 6,000 men. However, a large number of these men were fresh recruits, many of them quite young, and they had to be trained to a basic standard, a task that was carried out by Brigadier General Thomas Wentworth. For Wentworth's great efforts in this regard, Cathcart requested that the Army should assign him to the expedition when it left for the Caribbean, which was granted. There were, however, as had proven to be the case during the Nine Years War, many delays and false starts in the Army's departure from Britain but they eventually sailed successfully on 4<sup>th</sup> November 1740. It took them over a month to reach the West Indies, arriving at Dominica. Sickness had already begun to spread amongst the men on the transatlantic voyage and it proved fatal to some, including Major General Cathcart. As the next most senior surviving officer, Brigadier General Wentworth assumed command. Eventually the fleet arrived at Jamaica and rendezvoused with Vernon's fleet and the American contingent. From the beginning, it appeared that Vernon and Wentworth would not have a good working relationship, with Governor Trelawney noting on 31<sup>st</sup> January 1741 that, *"that there is such a disagreement between the Admiral and General that I think nothing will succeed as it should under their joint conduct"* and *"that the Admiral and Mr Wentworth will never act in concert together...their tempers and ways of thinking opposite"*. The task then was to decide where to attack; Panama was considered but discounted, as the amount of effort required would not be worth the gain and it would be difficult to garrison once captured. In the end, it was decided to attack Cartagena. The fleet sailed from Jamaica on the 25<sup>th</sup> February 1741 and arrived outside Cartagena's impressive harbour on 15<sup>th</sup> March.

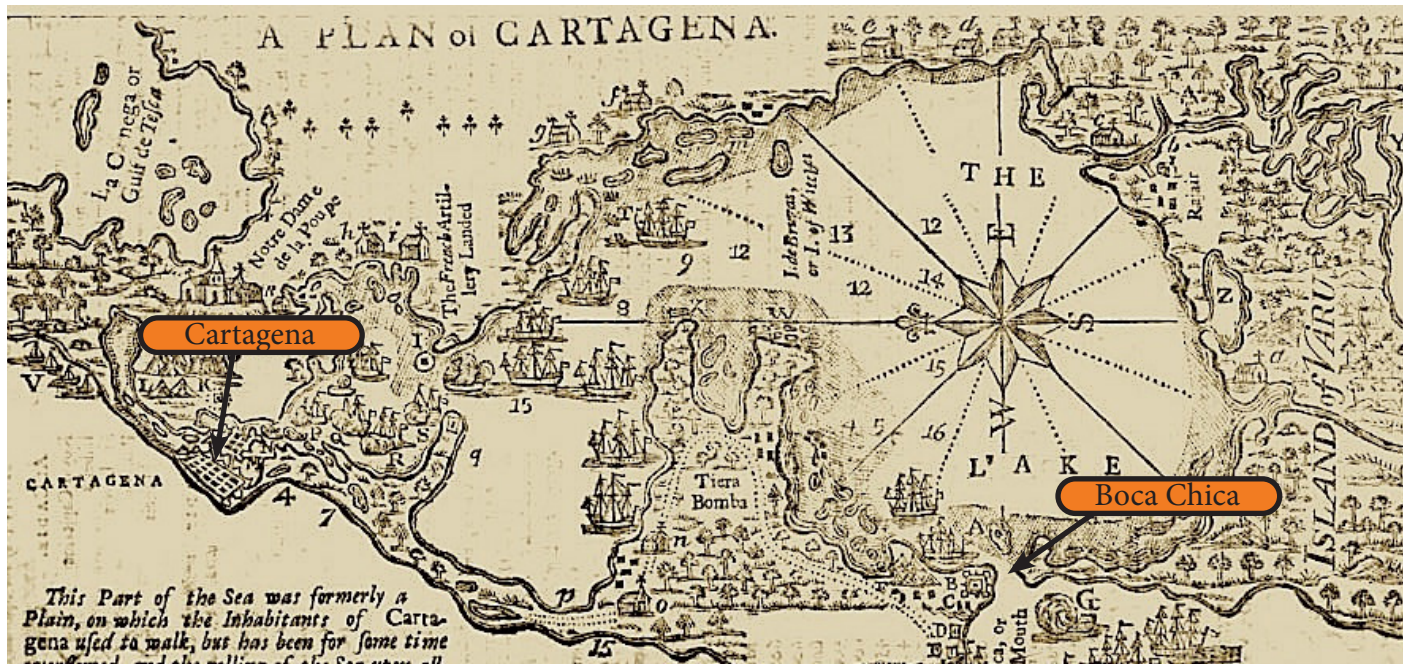


Thomas Wentworth

The plan on paper was simple: to force their way through the Boca Chica, the mouth of the harbour, with its defensive fort and batteries, and then proceed towards the city itself, overcoming the fortifications in the interior of the harbour before laying siege to the city and its main defensive works. After several days of launching feints from the sea, on 20<sup>th</sup> March the British began their attack proper and the Spanish defenders at the Boca Chica were driven back into Fort San Luis. The Army was landed to overwhelm and capture it, but it was here that the problems truly began. Despite his high rank and his evident skill at training men, Wentworth had no practical experience of commanding in the field, an issue compounded by the inexperience of many of his subordinate officers and the rank and file.

Vernon believed that the fort should have been stormed straightaway, but Wentworth decided to build a large, elaborate camp on the shoreline, as well as a gun battery with which to bombard the fort. Both of these constructions took time, something that the British could ill afford to lose. Not only did it give the Spanish greater opportunities to fortify Cartagena's defences but it also further exposed the men to the real enemy in the Caribbean - disease. Thus, as the building work continued, many of Wentworth's men began to fall sick. Annoyed with what he perceived to be Wentworth's unnecessary delay, Vernon landed a small band of the American colonial troops on the other side of the Boca Chica to attack the Spanish gun batteries positioned



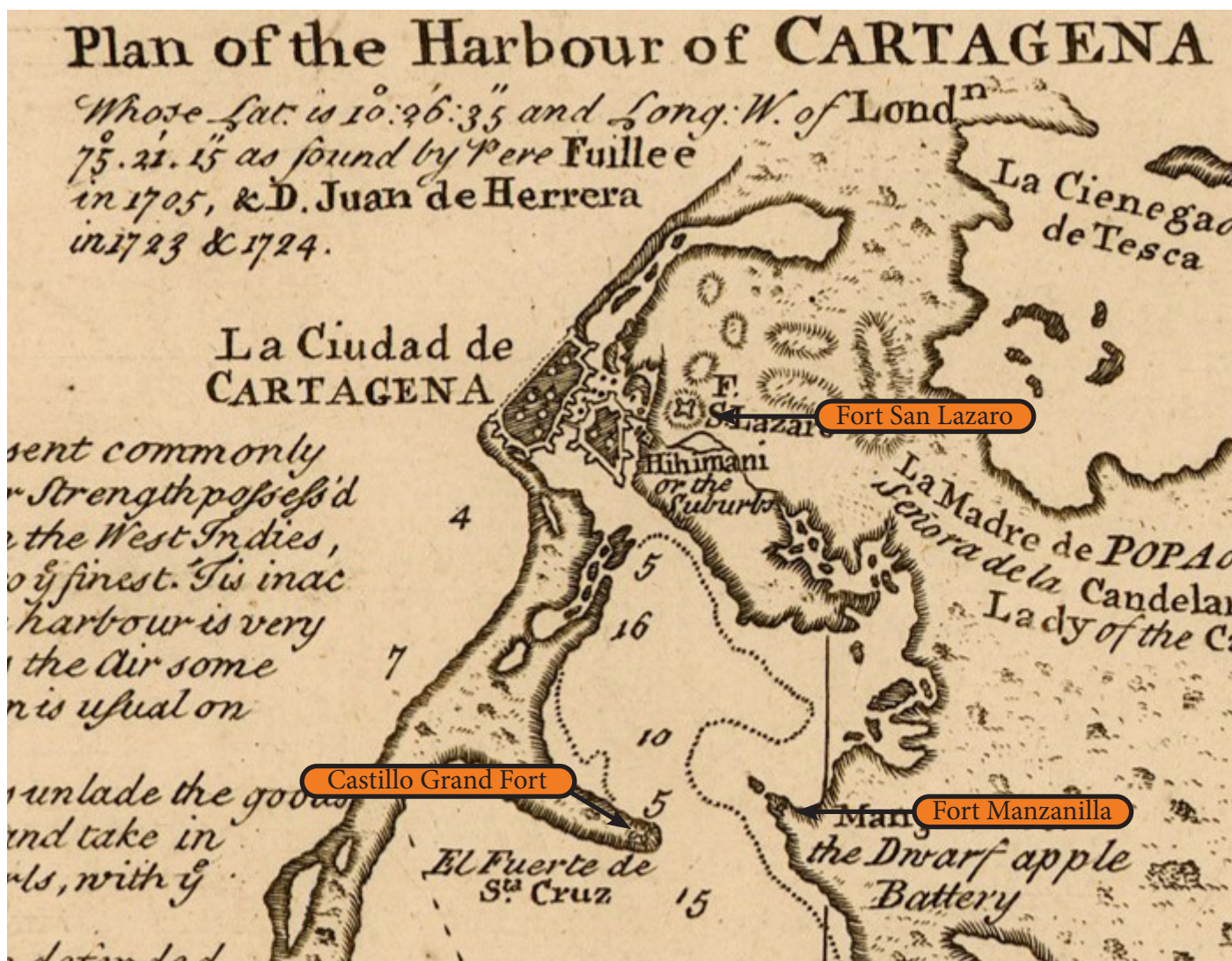


there in order to prevent them harassing the fleet. This force, led by Lawrence Washington, was put ashore on 30<sup>th</sup> March and successfully overcame these batteries, moving at speed to forestall the second one from being turned on them after they had dealt with the first.

Wentworth finally completed his battery and it opened fire on the 2<sup>nd</sup> April and successfully neutralised what was left of Fort San Luis' guns. However, Wentworth still hesitated, until he was prompted by Vernon, and then acted successfully to capture the fort by storm on the 5<sup>th</sup>. Time was not the only loss; 130 men had been either killed or wounded since Wentworth had landed. The figures for disease were worse, with 250 dead and over 600 in hospital. Despite this setback, Vernon now believed that he could seize victory. Notwithstanding, it took a week for the Army to be re-embarked and carried to the head of the harbour, where the assault on the main fortifications could begin. Whilst this was occurring, the Spanish decided to abandon Fort Manzanilla and the Castillo Grand Fort, the two forts guarding the harbour's interior, as they believed that they could not withstand attack from the superior British numbers and firepower for long. The Navy was thus able to move into position and begin bombarding the city.







The Army's next target was Fort San Lazaro, also known as the Castillo San Felipe. Again, Vernon and his fellow naval officers believed that the castle could be overwhelmed by storm, with a force of 1,500 men. Wentworth, however, disagreed and insisted that the full Army be landed. Vernon and his commanders reluctantly did agree, but warned him that any delay was dangerous, especially with the approach of the rainy season, which would only worsen the spread of disease.

Despite this advice, Wentworth elected to build the same elaborate camp as before, whilst the increasingly agitated Vernon continued to urge him to attack. In the meanwhile, the Spanish worked to improve their defences. Eventually, Wentworth was convinced to storm the fort, with the 1,500 men as Vernon had originally envisioned. The attack was made early in the morning on 20<sup>th</sup> April, with the attackers departing the British camp before sunrise at 04:00. They made use of guides, who were either locals or Spanish deserters, to manoeuvre them into position. However, these guides, by either accident or design, led them astray so that one of the two British columns found themselves approaching the Castle up a steep incline, which required the men to climb on their hands and knees.

By the time they reached the top, it was broad daylight and they were thus exposed to the musket fire of the Spanish defenders. On the other side, the second column advanced in the face of Spanish fire and the British regulars called for use of their siege ladders, so that they could ascend the walls and get into the fort. These ladders had been carried by the Americans, advancing behind the British, yet in the face of the Spanish defenders, they threw down the ladders and fled. In any case, the ladders would have been of no use, as the Spanish had dug a trench outside the castle walls, which would have meant that the British would have found the scaling ladders too short. Therefore, the British were stuck in position, returning the enemy fire as best they could until Wentworth finally gave the order to retreat. The commander of the second column, Colonel Grant, was mortally wounded in the fighting and amongst his last words is said to have remarked, "the general ought to hang the guide and the king ought to hang the general".





Fort San Lazaro (Castillo de San Felipe de Barajas)  
(photo by Mario Roberto Durán Ortiz CC BY-SA 4.0)

This failure marked the end of the attack on Cartagena and, with the men either ill or exhausted, the British retreated to Jamaica on 20<sup>th</sup> May. The number of men fit for service continued to decrease due to disease over the next three months, whilst the officers commanding the expedition continued to argue with one another. This included an incident in which Admiral Sir Chaloner Ogle assaulted Governor Edward Trelawney on 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1741, at the Governor's house. Sir Chaloner was put on trial for his attack on the Governor and was convicted by the jury, although apparently there was no punishment. Despite such altercations, the decision was still taken to make another attack, this time on Cuba. The British arrived at Guantanamo Bay on Cuba's south coast on 29<sup>th</sup> August. Vernon now urged Wentworth to take a force of 1,000 men, supported by 1,000 slave bearers, who had been assembled by the Jamaican government, and travel overland to attack Santiago, Cuba's second city. This involved a distance of some 90 miles and would have been a daring feat, but one that would possibly have been accomplished by a sufficiently experienced commander. Wentworth, however, refused, and so the Army remained stationary in southern Cuba for several months, with disease continuing to wreak havoc all the while. By the beginning of December, there were fewer than 300 privates fit for duty and the British finally decided to return to Jamaica. Of the men that had originally been assembled on the Isle of Wight, nine out of ten were dead. Reinforcements were sent in February 1742, but these men also fell sick on arrival. A second attack on Porto Bello was planned but, by the time the fleet reached the city, the levels of sickness and death were such that the whole operation was called off, which, in turn, marked the end of operations in the Caribbean.

### **The 49<sup>th</sup> Regiment**

In 1744, a new regiment was raised on Jamaica at the request of Governor Trelawney, who became its first Colonel. This regiment was eventually numbered the 49<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Foot and remained on Jamaica for some years, providing a regular garrison for the island as well as helping to deal with matters of local unrest, including slave rebellions such as 'Tacky's War'. The regiment recruited locally, and there is evidence for soldiers of both European and African ancestry in the regiment. Through amalgamation of regiments over the centuries, their successors are now the Mercian Regiment.



Operations in the region once again highlighted the necessity in Caribbean warfare for conducting operations quickly, before disease spread amongst the men, and also the requirement for the Army and Navy to work harmoniously together. The War of Jenkins' Ear merged with the wider War of the Austrian Succession, which was largely fought in Europe and was eventually ended by the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle in 1748. The issues left unresolved in the aftermath of this conflict led to the next great combat between the European powers - the Seven Years War.