

**AN OUTSTANDING NGS 1793 AWARDED TO A OFFICER WHO AFTER SERVING AT HOTHAM'S ACTIONS IN 1795 AND THE BATTLE OF CAPE ST VINCENT in 1797, WAS PRESENT AS SIGNAL MIDSHIPMAN AND ADC ABOARD H.M.S. GOLIATH AT NELSON'S GREAT VICTORY AT THE BATTLE OF THE NILE, 1798. ARGUABLY THE MOST IMPORTANT SHIP AT THAT BATTLE. WOUNDED DURING THE LATTER, HE COMMANDED H.M.S. NAUTILUS 1808-14, CAPTURING CAPTURED SIX PRIVATEERS, AND DESTROYED A SEVENTH. DURING HIS SERVICE HE WAS WOUNDED 6 TIMES**



NAVAL GENERAL SERVICE 1793, 3 CLASPS, 14 MARCH 1795, ST. VINCENT, NILE  
'THOMAS DENCH, MIDSHIPMAN.'

#### CAPTAIN THOMAS DENCH

Thomas Dench was born circa 1778 and entered the Navy in April 1793, as Midshipman on board the *Ardent* (64), Captain Robert Manners Sutton. During his service with this ship he served on shore at the occupation of Toulon, and was in warm action with the batteries of St. Fiorenza during the siege of Corsica. In April 1794, when the *Ardent* took fire and blew up, with all hands on board, this officer had the good fortune to be absent in charge of a prize. Dench's next appointment was as Midshipman aboard *St. George* (98), Captain Thomas Foley, this the flag-ship of Sir Hyde Parker. During his service, he took part in Admiral Hotham's actions of 14 March and 13 July, 1795. At the former, which was also known as the the Battle of Genoa, the British-Neapolitan fleet claimed victory capturing 2 French ships. The '14 March 1795' clasp to the Naval General Service Medal, was awarded for this action. The following May, Captain Foley was appointed to command of *Britannia* (100), Midshipman Dench following his captain. On 14 February 1797, serving under the flag of Vice-Admiral Charles Thompson, *Britannia* took part in the battle off Cape St. Vincent. At this battle, the British fleet under Admiral Sir John Jervis, defeated a larger Spanish fleet, capturing 4 ships of the line, the Spanish loosing near 4000 men to the British 300! (St

Vincent clasp). Removing again with Captain Foley, to the *Goliath* (74), he was present, in July following, at the bombardment of Cadiz; and on 1 August 1798, Admiral Nelson's famous victory at the battle of the Nile. During the battle, Dench served as one of the signal Midshipman and ADC to Captain Foley, leaving an account of the battle in which *Goliath* played such a pivotal role. Dench was himself wounded by splinter in shoulder when the French three-decker *L'Orient* exploded, sending shock waves across both fleets. A few days after that tremendous conflict, and clearly not disabled by his wound, he is recorded as assisting, as a Volunteer, in cutting out a heavy gun-vessel from under the castle of Aboukir. Although a specific date is not given, it must surely be for the following action that took place on the 25 August:

*"On the 25th of August, at 1 a.m., Captain Foley, of the Goliath, despatched the boats of that ship, under the orders of Lieutenant William Debusk, to attack a French armed ketch, which was moored under the guns of the castle of Aboukir. The boats were soon alongside, and a spirited scuffle ensued. Lieutenant Debusk, for some time, fought hand to hand with the French commanding officer. At length after an obstinate resistance of 15 minutes, the French national armed ketch Torride, mounting three long 18-pounders and four swivels, with a complement of 70 men, surrendered. Her commander, Lieutenant de vaisseau Martin Bedar, and 10 of his men were badly wounded. The loss on the part of the British amounted to two wounded, including Lieutenant Debusk."*



#### LATER SERVICE AND COMMAND

On his return to England he was appointed, at the recommendation of Captain Foley, Master's Mate of the *Prince* (98), bearing the flag of Sir Charles Cotton, to whom he became Signal-Lieutenant, in the *Prince George* (98), 23 January 1801, having been confirmed Lieutenant on that day. Serving aboard this ship until 20 April 1802, he next served aboard *San Josef* (112); 8 June 1802 – 29 January 1807 and from 4 May 1807 – 8 October 1807, he was next employed in a similar capacity under Rear-Admiral Thomas Wells in the *Zealand* (64), at the Nore. Short appointments to *Namur* (90) and *Hibernia* (110) followed, before he was advanced to the rank of Commander on 24 April 1808. On this date he was given his first command; H.M.S. *Nautilus* (18). In May 1809, Captain Dench brought home Sir Arthur Wellesley's despatches, announcing the defeat of Marshal Soult, and the capture of a fourth of his army, with all his artillery and baggage. After which he cruised with great success in the Mediterranean, where he captured six privateers, and destroyed a seventh, near Cape Bon. These included; 21 July 1812, *Le Brave* of 5 guns and 112 men – 7 February 1813, *La Léonilde* of 14 guns and 83 men – and, 24 May following, *La Colombe* of 4 guns and 40 men. For these and other services he received the public thanks of Sir Edward Pellew, the



Commander-in-Chief. After serving in Command of *Nautilus* for over 6 years, he was compelled to invalid home in November 1814 and did not serve afloat again. According to his obituary, Captain Dench was wounded 6 times in action, twice severely; the above at the battle of the Nile and during another action, a musket shot in the thigh. The dates for the latter and the four less severe wounds, has yet to be established. Dench was promoted to Captain on 4 June 1828 and died at his home in Suffolk in early 1853

Obituary:

*"At Little Thurlow, Suffolk, aged 76, Capt. Thomas Dench, R.N. He was midshipman of the Ardent at St. Fiorenzo, and served on shore during the occupation of Toulon in 1793; of the St George in Hotham's two actions, in 1797; of the Britannia in the battle of Cape St. Vincent; of the Goliath at the bombardment of Cadiz, and at the Nile; and commanded a boat, cutting out a gun-vessel from under the castle of Aboukir. In the Nautilus, 14, he served on the Lisbon and Mediterranean stations, and captured six privateers, and destroyed a seventh, near Cape Bon. In these actions the gallant captain received six wounds, two of them very severe—one from being struck by a splinter between the shoulders, when the L'Orient blew up at Aboukir, and the other a musket shot in the thigh."*

### DENCH AND THE BATTLE OF THE NILE 1 AUGUST 1798

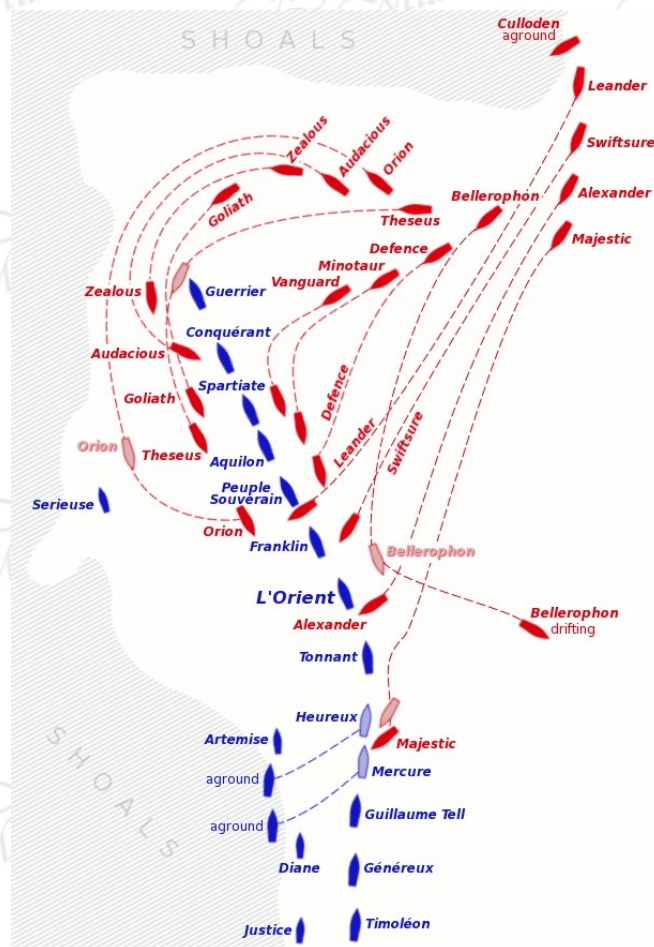
At the battle of the Nile, *Goliath* was first ship in the line and played a pivotal role in the battle, indeed probably the most important of any ship. Like a chain, the French fleet was anchored across Aboukir Bay, thereby necessitating the British fleet to attack the French on one side of its line only. Knowing this, as the British Fleet approached the French line, Nelson's plan was for each ship to anchor itself next to the first French ship on their line (not already in action). This thereby avoiding his leading ships taking fire from each French ship, as they proceeded all the way down the line. However on approaching the French line, Captain Foley spotted a gap between the first French ship in line and the shore and on his only initiative made for it, thereby getting behind the French line. Foley was followed by the next four British ships, each anchoring behind a French ship and bringing them into action. The next ship in the British line after these five was Nelson's *Vanguard* and he, along with the rest of the Fleet proceeded with the original plan. This meant that though only 10 French ships were attacked, the first five ships in the French line were fighting on both sides and after several hours, the action ended with an extraordinary British victory. Of the 17 French Ships, 13 were taken or burn by the British, for the loss of none. British casualties were 218 killed and 677 wounded, including 62 from *Goliath*. The French lost approximately 5000 killed and wounded and another 3000 captured. A fuller description of the battle can be found here:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle\\_of\\_the\\_Nile](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_the_Nile)

Regarding Dench's part in the battle, a 3 page letter written by Dench, postmarked Little Thurlow, 15 September 1841, was sold at Bonhams in 2005. This;

*"Autograph letter signed by Thomas Dench, formerly Signal Midshipman of the Goliath, to P.N. Scott, reminiscing over the Battle of the Nile and describing how Foley had made the decision to sail inside the French fleet ("...Captain Foley in closing with the Enemy observed to the Master, that if there was Water for the French Van Ship to lye her Anchor near the Shoal there was surely sufficient for the Goliath to pass in shore...I happened to be Signal Midshipman and Aid de Camp and consequently was close to him when he made the observation, and held the Book of Charts (which I think were French) open on the Fire Engine on the Poop. The Ships that followed inside were Zealous, Orion & Audacious the latter taking our situation abreast of the Van Ship in consequence of our not stopping our Cable in time which brought us alongside of the Second ship in the Enemies line, the Conquerant, who was dismasted in a very brief period..."*

Although the full letter cannot be viewed, what is given concurs exactly with a much fuller description of the battle, written by one of Captain Foley's other ADC's and Signal Midshipman George Elliot (a 1st rate ship having up to three Midshipmen performing these roles). Elliot's book; "*Memoir of Admiral the Honble. Sir George Elliot written for his children 1863*" is often quoted in books regarding the battle.



Dench's obituary also tells us that he received a severe wound; "*struck by a splinter between the shoulders, when the L'Orient blew up at Aboukir*". Though some distance from L'Orient when she blew up Gunner John Nichol, of Goliath gives a graphic description of explosion, which caused both sides to cease battle for some time; "*When the French flagship blew up, Goliath was so shaken that we thought that the stern of our ship had exploded... When the firing stopped, I went on deck to see what state the fleets were in and it was a horrible sight. The whole bay was entirely covered with mutilated corpses, the wounded, the burned, wearing no clothes other than trousers. There were a few Frenchmen from the flagship L'Orient pressed up against the poop of Goliath. Poor men!*"

Dench is not recorded of the casualty list. This is not at all unusual if the wounded man was able to continue duty. Indeed, George Elliot in his memoir describes how he received a wound in the neck but he too is not on the casualty list.

21 Nile clasps to the crew of *Goliath*, 6 of which were to Officers. Two Officers medals are known to be extant; Dench's and Midshipman William Parker's. Interestingly, Parker's medal bears the same three clasps, for the same three ships, all commanded by Captain Foley.

Looking at the other medals, it seem Captain Foley took a fair number of Officers and men with him when taking command of other ships.

### THE MEDAL

Confirmed as 'present and entitled' to clasp for '14 March 1795' in the published rolls. However, Dench is shown as having received the medal with 3 clasps in the Navy List for 1852, thus he had clearly received this medal with all 3 clasps prior to this date. Therefore he either made a slightly later claim, or more likely his claim for this clasp is contained in the missing rolls.



Condition; carriage cracked between first two clasps and some impact damage to clasp facings, disc itself NEF



Despite its relatively minor damage to the clasps, this is an outstanding medal to Naval Officer, in particular for his service at the Nile and as a successful ships Commander during the Napoleonic Wars. Provenance: Spink 1930; bought Seaby, November 1971. Sold with a quantity of research both printed and on CD