

# Ranks in Nelson's navy

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In this gallery we look at the crew of a typical warship from the Napoleonic era, from the officers to the common sailors. Large ships needed a skilled and varied crew to complete a successful voyage. The average third-rate ship of the line of 74-guns during Nelson's day carried some 650 men, all of whom had particular jobs at sea and in battle.

Admiral, c. 1799



Fleets were usually divided into three squadrons which formed the van (forward), the centre and the rear. The rear was commanded by a rear-admiral who was subordinate to the vice-admiral commanding the van. The admiral commanded the centre squadron and had overall command of the whole fleet. The rear- and vice-admirals reported to him. The ship of an admiral was recognised by flags and thus known as a flagship.

Captain, c. 1799



The captain was responsible for fitting out his ship for sea and had 'to use his best endeavours to get the ship manned', by fair means or foul, which usually meant the press gang. At sea he was responsible for the ship and for all on board. The powers of the captain were so great that some behaved like tyrants thus inciting their men to mutiny. However, many, such as Nelson, were very popular and their men would follow them from ship to ship.

Lieutenant, c. 1799

Midshipman, c. 1799

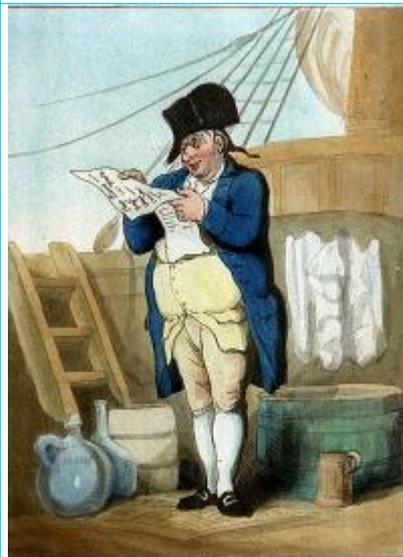


Midshipmen had to pass an examination to be promoted to the rank of lieutenant, usually at around the age of 19. Lieutenants were in charge of deck watches, and in action commanded a gun battery. They were sometimes despatched on shore in ports like London in charge of press gangs. Although landsmen were sometimes taken by mistake or by malice, the gang concentrated their efforts on finding experienced seamen, who were often taken from merchant ships in port at the time.



Midshipmen were usually the sons of wealthy or aristocratic families training to become commissioned officers. They usually joined the navy at the age of 12 to 14 and can be easily identified by the white patch on the collar of their uniform, which is still in use today. They were taught navigation, astronomy and trigonometry by the ship's schoolmaster as well as undertaking watches on deck when school hours were over.

Purser, c. 1799



Bosun's Mate, c. 1812



To become a purser, a man had to have served at least one year as a captain's clerk, helping the captain with his correspondence and records. The purser was in charge of the stores and accounts on board ship. He was not well paid but had many opportunities to cheat the seamen by embezzling the crew's food. Dishonest pursers could become quite rich. This caricature by Rowlandson depicts a rather crafty looking purser, overweight from good living off the spoils of his dealings.



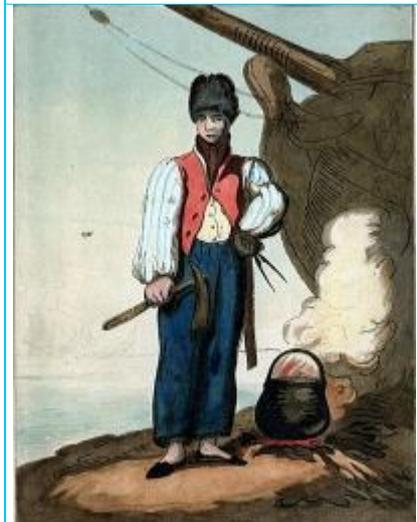
Although the print shows a bosun's mate in his best shore-going rig, it does give an impression of the sort of clothes worn by sailors of the period. Bosun's mates were petty officers promoted from within the ranks by the ship's captain. They were responsible to the ship's boatswain for the supervision of the seamen in their everyday duties about the ship and practical seamanship. They were also responsible for the punishment of the men in the form of flogging.

### Cook, c. 1799



Ships' cooks were usually disabled seamen but were ranked as warrant officers. They were not appointed for their culinary skills, but produced the seaman's standard diet of boiled beef or pork and the ubiquitous ship's biscuit. This cook is wearing the typical cook's dress of the Royal Navy. The average sailor's diet each week was 1lb (450 g) of ship's biscuit, 4lbs (1.8 kg) of beef, 2lbs (907 g) of pork, 2lbs (907 g) of peas, 1.5lbs (680 g) of oatmeal, 6oz (170 g) of sugar and 6oz (170 g) of butter, and 12oz (340 g) of cheese a week. These

### Carpenter c. 1799



An British man o'war used four different kinds of timber in its construction: oak, elm, beech and fir. As a result, the ship's carpenter was one of the most important warrant officers on board. He had to pass an examination at Shipwrights' Hall before he could go to sea. His duties included inspecting the ship for defective timbers and examining the state of the masts. After battle, he repaired any shot holes and other damage to the vessel.

provisions were often rotten after months at sea.

Sailor, c. 1799



Sailors were assigned to various jobs according to their skill. Topmen worked on the rigging, Forecastle men looked after the anchors and attended to other deck duties, and the rest formed gun crews. At the end of one voyage they might be drafted straight away to another ship and were often at sea for several years. Before 1857 there was no uniform for Royal Navy seamen, who usually wore baggy trousers with a short blue jacket, their hair tied in a pigtail.

Cabin Boy, c. 1799



Ship's boys were usually aged between 12 and 16 years. Some came from poor families, others who had been convicted of petty crimes or vagrancy were recommended by magistrates. They were at the bottom of the naval hierarchy and were tasked with such menial duties as cleaning the pigsties and hen coops.

National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London