



THE WATCHSTANDER

Newsletter of the Belize Coast Guard

Volume 3 Issue 1

10 September



Belize at

Hopeful Hearts

40

Together We Rise

Steady Hands

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- **Independence:** *the Coast Guard Contribution*
- The Battle of St. Georges Caye

Mission:

- Humanitarian Assistance: Graham Creek
- Bugles Caye Counter Piracy

Security & Defence Engagement

- CARICOM IMPACS
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Independence: *The Coast Guard's Contribution*

From the Commandant



Independence is not as simple as we may consider it to be. Is it absolute? Is it definitive? Or is it a process, and is it conditional, and if so what are those conditions? To the average Belizean mind Belize gained independence on the 21st September 1981 resultantly from a political struggle for self-determination and we have since then been responsible for our nationhood. What we take for granted is the fact that states can fail, states can be dissolved or even absorbed by other states. States can completely disappear from the international system and be relegated to the annals of history. A few complicated examples across the globe includes Taiwan which was in the United Nations until 1971; Palestine which is recognized by over 135 nations but yet remains under the jurisdiction of Israel; Czechoslovakia which separated in two separate states in 1993; Catalonia which boasted independent status twice but is now under the jurisdiction of Spain just to name a few. And then there are those countries with multiple independence day such as Latvia, Lithuania, Turkey, Philippines, Slovakia, Cameroon amongst others that had to fend for self-determination on multiple occasions.

Belize's independence in 1981 was contested then, and is contested today in 2021. In September 1981 our independence was not only contested externally by

Guatemala, but also the internal political divide that resulted in riots and accusations of treason.

In defence and security context this mandates that the government of Belize be cognizant and responsible for combating threats that are both foreign and domestic, and such is the Coast Guard mission. As a military organization with law enforcement authority, the Belize Coast Guard is charged with both maritime security and naval defence. We deliver a broad range of strategic missions that provides a stable environment for nation building. Governing the vast sea spaces under the jurisdiction of Belize falls squarely within the purview of the Belize Coast Guard and we enthusiastically embrace that responsibility. From deterring transnational and organized crime and interdicting illicit activities to protecting and preserving the marine environment to providing the naval defence of Belize, the Coast Guard contribution to the process of independence is an essential one.

Whilst it took Belize twenty four years after independence to establish its Coast Guard, its maritime defence and security lineage is deeply routed in our history from the Battle of St Georges Caye in 1798 to a defence obligation of the Royal Navy to independent Belize in 1981 and the BDF Maritime Wing in 1983 and the evolution of maritime services resulting in the perfection of a National Coast Guard in 2005.

As Belize continues to strengthen its democracy and develop its institutions, likewise the Coast Guard strives to mirror its advancements and deliver the platform for maritime governance by remaining *utrinque paratus*.

The Battle of St. Georges Caye:

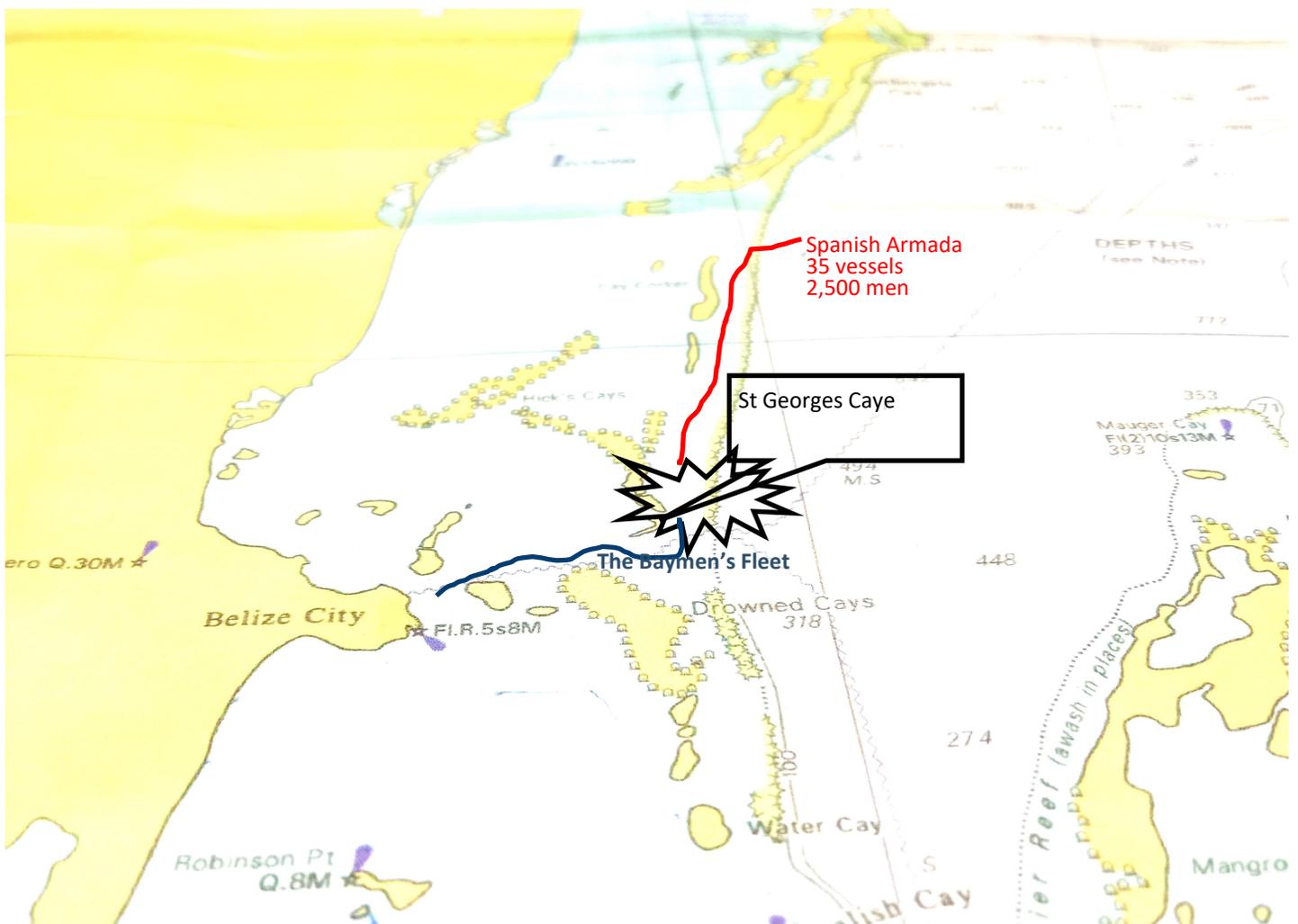
The Genius of Captain John Moss

Captain Elton Bennett

It is also unnecessary of me to say anything respecting Captain Moss: his penetration in discovering and activity in defeating the views of the enemy; his coolness and readiness of conduct in action, point him out as an officer of great merit.

Colonel Thomas Borrow.
Superintendent British Honduras

The name Captain John Moss has been enshrined in the annals and journals that chronicles the history of Belize. In similar fashion as Admiral Lord Nelson who defeated the Franco Spanish fleet at the Battle of Trafalgar only seven years later, the genius of Captain Moss was demonstrated in victory at St. Georges Caye. But how could a flotilla inferior in numbers and firepower defeat a Spanish expeditionary force that was prepared for an



Battle of St Georges Caye cont.

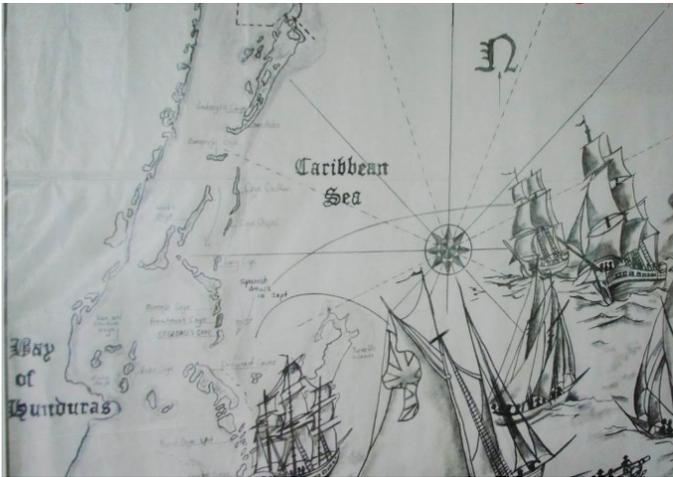
invasion and occupation of the territory once known as British Honduras? The Watchstander analyses the actions taken by Captain Moss that explains how and why victory was achieved.

Captain Moss was not a part of the Public meeting of 1st June 1797 that voted whether to defend or to evacuate. Instead on the request of Colonel Barrow he was detached from Jamaica after the decision was made to defend the territory as the replacement for Captain Thomas Dundas. Dundas later fought under the command of Admiral Nelson at Trafalgar in 1805. According to Borrow, who was the Superintendent at the time, Captain Moss was a strategist. He dedicated his time to surveying the approaches to Belize, charting the Cayes, reefs, channels, and those geographic areas that would be considered vital in the naval defence of the settlement. This was demonstrated in the effectiveness of the scouts that were forward deployed to Rocky Point at Northern Ambergris. He knew the environment better than the approaching enemy.

Secondly, Moss understood that he was disadvantaged in numbers when compared to the Spanish fleet in Mexico and mainland Central America. He had to rely on all human and material resources that the settlement could generate. This included the Towser and the

Tickler, two merchant vessels that he converted for naval duties by adding eighteen pounder canons along with the Mermaid, Swinger, and Teazer that carried 9, 6, and 4 pound canons respectively. With the support of Colonel Barrow, Moss fleet consisted of all hands in the settlement including slaves, slave owners, and free men of colour. Without all hands, Moss knew that he had little chances of success in the naval defence. He demonstrated this when he wrote to the magistrates on the 21st July 1798 stating that “any person attempt to escape or effect their retreat to the River Sheboon [*Sibun*] or any other place to which they may pass within gun shot or Merlin I am determined to oppose it.” Moss was determined to employ as much as he could muster for the naval defence. However he was also cognizant that the main defence was on mainland of Belize City under the Command of Colonel Barrow which included battery positions near the Haulover, Newtown Barracks and Fort George. However, Captain Moss, being a naval strategist knew that the best chance of thwarting an invading force was to launch an offensive. The burning of St. George Caye by the settlers on the 9th August would have suggested that the island was not considered vital in the defence of the settlement. Furthermore, it implied that the settlers believed that the Spaniards would occupy the island and use it as an operating base for conducting offensive operations on the

Battle of St Georges Caye cont.



mainland. Captain Moss shared a different opinion. Considering that he possessed a fleet of small boats that could operate in the shallows between St Georges Caye and the reef system heading north towards Caye Chapel, and that his officers and sailors and the slaves that were conscripted were of high morale and prepared for battle, Moss seized the moment and deployed from Belize City to engage the advancing Spanish Armada. To his advantage the Spanish fleet found themselves in a challenging and unfamiliar waters, stuck between the reef and the chain of islands. This resulted in an unfavourable tactical formation exposed to raking fire from the broadside of HMS Merlin. The Spanish fleet couldn't manoeuvre due to navigable restrictions on either side and hence were limited to fire power

from the bow only, and due to the line of battle formation, only the lead vessel could fire, (a striking similarity at the battle of Trafalgar). A mile and a half away the broadside of HMS Merlin commanded by Captain Moss positioned in the centre of the baymen's flotilla bombarded the Spanish fleet for two and a half hours.

In summary, the Battle of St Georges Caye was a decisive naval engagement that determined the future of the settlement and laid the foundation for the status of colony. At the centre of it all was a strategist in form of Captain Moss. His preparation for the naval defence of the settlement coupled with the intestinal fortitude to engage a superior enemy resulted in victory at old St Georges Caye.