

# HMS Wager

Generated on 12 October 2026 by GPT-6

---

HMS Wager was an armed ship of Britain's Royal Navy, assigned to carry supplies on an expedition to the Pacific. It had been built as a merchant vessel. The Navy converted it for military service and loaded it with equipment, weapons, and stores for the other ships. Its cargo included the gear needed to maintain and repair vessels far from home. Wager would have to make the same ocean passage as the warships it supported, while carrying much of what they would need when they arrived.<sup>1</sup>

The expedition grew out of Britain's war with Spain. British planners wanted to attack Spanish possessions overseas and interrupt the movement of wealth that helped sustain the Spanish crown. Ports and merchant shipping in the Pacific offered targets a long way from the fighting in European waters. Reaching them, however, meant sending a force to the other side of South America.<sup>2</sup>

The officer placed in command was Commodore George Anson. He led a squadron, a group of ships operating together, each with its own captain and crew. Wager was one of those ships. Its supporting role mattered to the whole force: a plan to attack a distant settlement depended on getting the necessary equipment there as well as the men who would use it.<sup>3</sup>

From England, the route led across the Atlantic and down the eastern side of South America. The ships then had to round Cape Horn, near the continent's southern end, to enter the Pacific and turn north along its western coast. The Spanish settlements they were meant to threaten lay beyond that passage. Before the expedition could fight its intended enemy, it had to get its ships, crews, and supplies through the voyage.<sup>2</sup>

That distance shaped life aboard Wager. The ship was transport, accommodation, and storage in the same crowded space. Its cargo could not simply be left behind to make sailing easier: it had been brought because the expedition expected to need it. Yet the weight and crowded condition of the vessel made it harder to handle in heavy seas. John Byron, a young midshipman aboard, would later begin his account of the disaster with precisely this problem. The condition in which the ship left home was part of what happened to it afterward.<sup>1</sup>

Anson's squadron finally sailed from England in September 1740. Wager set out with a place in a larger force, orders to follow, and other ships to keep company with.<sup>3</sup>

## The voyage south

The departure had come after months of delays. Richard Walter's published account of Anson's expedition describes disputes over manpower and a force that sailed with fewer experienced sailors than its commander had sought. He also blamed the late departure for bringing the ships toward Cape Horn in a dangerous season. His account presents the voyage as an expedition whose difficulties began while it was still being prepared.<sup>2</sup>

Byron's recollections bring those difficulties down to the scale of one damaged ship. In heavy seas, Wager lost its mizzenmast, the mast nearest the stern. A wave then broke into the vessel and damaged its boats. At the time, its carpenter was aboard another ship in the squadron, the Gloucester, and the weather prevented him from returning. The person needed to make repairs was close enough to be with the expedition but unable to cross the water between its ships.<sup>1</sup>

When the carpenter did get back, he rigged a replacement using a spare piece of timber. Byron described the work as a temporary remedy. The ship could continue, but it had not recovered the condition in which it had begun the passage. Further damage to the rigging brought further decisions about what could be repaired, improvised, or cut away.<sup>1</sup>

Around Cape Horn, bad weather scattered Anson's ships. The squadron also suffered from scurvy. Walter describes men who could speak and eat but collapsed when they tried to exert themselves. A crew list could therefore conceal how few hands were actually available to work a vessel.<sup>2</sup>

Sails, lines, and repairs still required coordinated physical labor. When a sick man could no longer take his place, someone else had to do the work. Rough weather increased that work just as illness was reducing the number of men able to perform it. A ship might survive a gale with damaged equipment and still be less able to meet the next one.

Wager became separated from the other ships. Under Captain David Cheap, it struggled toward the coast of southern Chile. Anson would eventually continue his campaign and capture the Spanish treasure galleon Nuestra Señora de Covadonga in 1743. That later success belonged to a future the men aboard Wager could not see. They had lost contact with the squadron and had to navigate a damaged ship without knowing how the rest of the expedition was faring.<sup>4</sup>

## The wreck and the camp

In May 1741, Wager wrecked in the Gulf of Penas region, among the islands of the Guayaneco archipelago. Reaching the shore did not bring the survivors near a town or a road. They had arrived on a coast of islands and channels, and the route away would have to be found by water.<sup>5</sup>

Parts of the wreck remained accessible. In *The Wager*, his modern account of the shipwreck, David Grann describes salvaged sailcloth and timber becoming shelter, with provisions from the ship placed in a store tent. Cheap controlled access to the supplies and secured the weapons and ammunition. The crew began making a camp out of materials that had previously belonged to their ship.<sup>6</sup>

Salvage was an immediate necessity, but it also created decisions about the future. Food could be consumed once. Timber and tools might be used to improve shelter or held for work on the boats. The men needed enough comfort to remain alive and enough transportation to leave. Preparing for escape required labor from people who were already hungry and ill.

John Cummins, the carpenter, and other workers enlarged the longboat. It became the Speedwell, the main escape vessel for the group that would follow John Bulkeley. A longboat had been useful while there was a ship to return to. Now it had to carry people and supplies on a journey whose length and difficulties were not yet known.<sup>7</sup>

The camp also changed the relationship between rank and practical authority. A captain could issue an order, but a carpenter had to make a boat seaworthy, and sailors had to judge how to handle it. The Navy had always depended on specialized trades. On the island, their contribution was especially visible because there was so little equipment left between the crew and the conditions around them.<sup>8</sup>

## Cheap and Bulkeley

Cheap continued to assert command. Bulkeley, the gunner, became a leading figure among the men who resisted him. Grann describes Bulkeley as an exceptionally capable seaman whose opportunities for advancement were limited by social position. He had knowledge that the men needed, although he had not held the captain's rank aboard *Wager*.<sup>9</sup>

The conflict was partly over where to go. Cheap wanted to move north and continue pursuing the expedition's objectives. Bulkeley's group favored sailing south through the Strait of Magellan, reaching the Atlantic, and trying to get home. Their disagreement joined a practical question about the route with a question about what they still owed the original mission.<sup>10</sup>

It is possible to make either position sound straightforward by describing only its strongest reason. A naval officer had orders that did not simply disappear because the voyage had become difficult. Men who had lost their ship also had reason to consider whether continuing the campaign was realistic. On the island, however, the positions were held by people who had to live with one another and use the same remaining supplies. A disagreement that could be discussed abstractly in England had immediate consequences for food, work, and departure.

Nor was there a way to obtain a prompt ruling from a higher authority. Whatever the legal position might ultimately be, someone had to decide what would happen next. Cheap's continued claim to command and Bulkeley's growing support therefore came into direct competition.

The dispute became more severe after Cheap shot Henry Cozens, a midshipman. Bulkeley's journal places the shooting within a quarrel over provisions. It records an initial shot by the purser, Cheap's subsequent shooting of Cozens, and Cozens's death fourteen days later. Some details were reported to Bulkeley by other men.<sup>10</sup>

Byron also described Cheap shooting Cozens. He wrote that he was in his hut when it happened and came out afterward. His loyalty to Cheap's party did not lead him to deny the shooting. The accounts agree on the central act, even though the circumstances and its justification remained disputed.<sup>1</sup>

Afterward, the question of obeying Cheap could no longer be separated from what the men thought of his conduct. The captain's judgment was already contested. The death of a fellow castaway made that contest more personal and raised the prospect of accusations that would follow the survivors home.

## Leaving the island

In October, Bulkeley's party restrained Cheap and departed in boats. The enlarged longboat carried men toward the southern route. A decision had finally been made, but it had been made by separating the crew. Cheap and a smaller party remained behind.<sup>11</sup>

Departure did not settle the disagreement about authority. Bulkeley's men had taken the boats they needed to survive. From Cheap's position, they had also rejected command and abandoned the mission. The act could be described as a necessary escape or as mutiny. That difference would matter if the captain survived to make his own case.

For the men who had left, the immediate concern remained the voyage. Grann's book description records thirty survivors reaching Brazil on January 28, 1742, after more than a hundred days and roughly 2,500 miles at sea. Their arrival demonstrated that the southern route could bring survivors to safety. It did not establish that every decision taken along it had been right, or explain the fate of everyone who had started.<sup>12</sup>

Those who reached Brazil had endured an escape that would have been remarkable on its own. Their trouble was that the escape was also evidence in an unresolved dispute. They would need to describe why they had left the island, why they had opposed the captain, and what had happened before and after departure.

## The northern route

Cheap's party had a different ordeal. Its attempts to travel north repeatedly failed, and hunger, exposure, and retreats prolonged the journey. The survivors eventually reached Spanish-held Chiloé with Indigenous assistance. The Royal Geographical Society's account describes a passage using local canoes and an arduous portage when the coastal route became too dangerous.<sup>7</sup>

This part of the story changes the meaning of the coastline. To the British castaways, it was an unfamiliar place where they could struggle for months without finding a route out. To the people helping them, it was a landscape of known passages, obstacles, and alternatives. A navigational problem that the British men could not solve was not necessarily unsolvable for those who lived there.

The Chilean Museum of Pre-Columbian Art describes the Chono as maritime peoples known through incomplete records written largely by outsiders. It cautions that the historical label may encompass different groups. Their world included travel along the coast, contact with neighboring communities, and encounters with Spanish expansion. The wreck occurred within that history, even though British accounts place their own survivors at the center.<sup>13</sup>

Byron's writing preserves accounts of assistance while also expressing European prejudices about the people he met. Modern research on the wreck brings historical records together with Indigenous canoe traditions, salvage, and material remains. It asks how the event affected the coast and its inhabitants, as well as how the British survivors escaped.<sup>5</sup>

Reaching a Spanish settlement also did not mean immediately returning to Britain. The countries were at war. Cheap and his companions were detained before their eventual release and return; Campbell traveled back separately. The story of a group leaving the island therefore does not end neatly at the first place where they could obtain food and shelter.<sup>7</sup>

## Returning with different accounts

Bulkeley and Cummins published their account in 1743. The book defended their conduct at a time when a charge of mutiny could still hang over them. Its account of the wreck, island, and escape was also an argument about what the authors had been entitled to do.<sup>11</sup>

That does not make the book useless as evidence. A man who needs to defend himself may have kept careful records precisely because he knows that his conduct will be challenged. It does mean that detail and sincerity cannot be treated as guarantees of impartiality. A factual description can leave things out or arrange them to support its author.

Byron's narrative appeared in 1768, much later than Bulkeley and Cummins's publication. He was recalling the crisis from another point in his life. The difference in publication dates matters, but it does not automatically settle which man should be believed. A later account can preserve things absent from an earlier one, while an earlier account can be shaped by an immediate need to justify its author.<sup>14</sup>

Grann built his modern narrative around Cheap, Bulkeley, and Byron, drawing on their accounts and other records. In an interview, he describes trying to show how the men shaped their stories as well as what they experienced. This is why the accounts remain part of the event's history, rather than merely neutral containers from which a later writer can extract the facts.<sup>15</sup>

The shooting of Cozens illustrates the problem. Two writers can agree that the captain fired and still differ over what the confrontation revealed about him. Bulkeley's decision to leave can likewise be accepted as an event while its necessity, legality, and consequences remain contested.

## **The court-martial**

The court-martial examined the loss of Wager. Bulkeley's expanded account reports Cheap and the other officers acquitted on that matter, with Lieutenant Robert Baynes reprimanded over failures concerning orders for the topsail and anchor. The report used here comes from that participant's publication, rather than an independently inspected transcript.<sup>16</sup>

The scope of the hearing is important to the ending. It could establish a result concerning the ship's loss without resolving the accusations about events on the island. Acquittal on the first matter was not a finding that every subsequent act had been justified. The disagreement that made the survivors' return contentious was therefore larger than the question decided in court.

The affair also exposed difficulties in naval law. Historian Samuel McLean connects it with the 1748 legislation extending naval discipline to crews of wrecked or lost ships and continuing their wages under specified conditions. The dispute about Cheap's command involved pay, jurisdiction, and the legal position of men whose vessel no longer existed.<sup>17</sup>

The survivors eventually had to resume lives outside the crisis. Their publications, the hearing, and later histories kept different parts of it alive. Anson's expedition had an account of military success; Wager's survivors had accounts of shipwreck and escape. Those histories belonged to the same voyage, but they did not give it the same meaning.

## Further reading

Grann's *The Wager* is the next read for a fuller narrative. Bulkeley and Cummins's account and Byron's narrative let you hear the survivors in their own words. The modern book benefits from bringing those accounts together; the older works make their differences more visible.

The Chilean research offers another perspective: what the wreck left behind, how local communities encountered it, and how an episode usually told as British naval history also belongs to the history of the coast where it happened.

---

## References

1. John Byron's narrative. <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/44193/pg44193-images.html>. – later participant recollection; first published in 1768. The Gutenberg edition includes later editorial material.
2. Richard Walter: *A Voyage Round the World*. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/47130/47130-h/47130-h.htm>. – contemporary published account of Anson's expedition.
3. Royal Museums Greenwich: Centurion logbook record. <https://www.rmg.co.uk/collections/objects/rmgc-object-526205>. – expedition context.
4. Royal Museums Greenwich: Anson portrait record. <https://www.rmg.co.uk/collections/objects/rmgc-object-13991>. – expedition context.
5. Ocean, Heritage and Culture: research on the wreck. <https://oceanoycultura.cl/cientificos-investigacion-naufragio-de-fragata-britanica-en-la-patagonia-chilena/>. – Chilean archaeological perspective, reported in 2023.
6. Grann's account of the island camp. <https://www.wired.com/story/david-grann-the-wager-book-excerpt/>. – published extract.
7. Royal Geographical Society of South Australia: its Bulkeley and Cummins volume. <https://rgssa.org.au/heritage/treasures/bulkeley-and-cummins-loss-of-hms-wager-1743>. – publication history and overview.
8. U.S. Naval Institute: "Anson's Voyage". <https://www.usni.org/magazines/naval-history-magazine/2023/august/ansons-voyage>. – naval organization and skills.
9. David Grann, Fresh Air interview. <https://freshairarchive.org/segments/wager-chronicles-shipwreck-mutiny-and-murder-tip-south-america-0>. – crew, rank, and the dispute.
10. Bulkeley and Cummins: 1743 account. <https://darwin-online.org.uk/content/contentblock?basepage=1&itemID=A750&viewtype=text>. – participant testimony, requiring critical reading.
11. Alan Gurney's epilogue to *The Loss of the Wager*. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/loss-of-the-wager/epilogue/F1398FC8B157E3796EC0D2E199A19936>. – the escape and the risk of a mutiny charge.
12. David Grann: *The Wager*. <https://www.davidgrann.com/book/the-wager/>. – modern narrative nonfiction.
13. Chilean Museum of Pre-Columbian Art: Chono history. <https://chileprecolombino.cl/en/pueblos-originarios/chono/historia-2/>. – Indigenous context and limits of the surviving record.
14. Wellcome's original-edition record. <https://identity.wellcomecollection.org/works/ex47sec2>. – original-edition record of Byron's narrative, first published in 1768.

15. Grann, Tufts interview. <https://now.tufts.edu/2023/04/18/shipwreck-tale-ages>. – research and the survivors' perspectives.
16. Bulkeley and Cummins: expanded account. <https://llds.phon.ox.ac.uk/llds/xmlui/bitstream/handle/20.500.14106/N06192/N06192.html?isAllowed=y&sequence=5>. – participant testimony, requiring critical reading.
17. Samuel McLean: *The Westminster Model Navy*. [https://globalmaritimehistory.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Samuel\\_McLean\\_Westminster\\_Model\\_Navy\\_4May\\_2016.pdf](https://globalmaritimehistory.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Samuel_McLean_Westminster_Model_Navy_4May_2016.pdf). pp. 241–243 – scholarly discussion of wrecks, discipline, and legal reform.