



# *PERILOUS* FIGHT

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AMERICA'S INTREPID WAR *WITH*  
BRITAIN *ON THE* HIGH SEAS,  
1812-1815

STEPHEN BUDIANSKY

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ALSO BY STEPHEN BUDIANSKY

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*America's Intrepid War with  
Britain on the High Seas,  
1812–1815*

Stephen Budiansky

ALFRED A. KNOPF



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## Prologue

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MANY WARS have been called “the forgotten war”: those words have become a catchphrase much beloved of military historians seeking to excuse their obsession with obscurity. But rarely was a war—or at least large parts of a war—forgotten with such swiftness, and such mutual determination, as the War of 1812. America and Britain both had things they wanted to forget, and forget quickly, about this often brutal three-year fight that raged across half the globe, from the wilderness of the northwestern forests to the capital cities of Canada and the United States, from the seas off Chile to the mouth of the English Channel. The forgetting began almost as soon as the last shot was fired, and it has been going on ever since.

It would be decades before the war even had a name; until the 1850s this war that left thirty thousand dead, that pushed the fledgling American republic to the brink of bankruptcy and secession, that brought down some of the loftiest military reputations of the Revolutionary generation to ruin and disgrace, that saw hundreds of American citizens executed by firing squad for desertion, was most often just called “the late war” or “the late war with Great Britain.” “The War of 1812” came into widespread use only after the Mexican War of 1846–48 usurped the place of the “late war” in American memory. It proved a memorable phrase, yet like “the late war,” it sidestepped any memory of why the war had been fought, or even whom it had been fought against.<sup>1</sup>

Americans above all wanted to forget the disastrously mismanaged land campaign, which had been marked from the start by miscalculation, blunders, incompetence, and monumental overconfidence. No one had escaped humiliation; the wisest men had predicted easy success and quick victory, and had wound up with egg on their faces. A month into the war Thomas Jefferson, from his quiet retirement at Monticello, had smugly assured a fellow Republican politician that “the acquisition of Canada this year, as far as the neighborhood of Quebec, will be a mere matter of marching.” One more year, Jefferson added, would bring the “final expulsion of England from the American continent.”<sup>2</sup>

Two weeks after Jefferson’s pronouncement, in the very opening of the offensive against British forces to the north, the American brigadier general William Hull surrendered his entire army at Detroit without firing a shot. He was subsequently court-martialed, convicted of cowardice, and sentenced to be shot by a firing squad until President Madison granted him a reprieve based on his meritorious service in the Revolution. DISASTER ON DISASTER ON LAND read the headlines in the anti-administration newspapers that winter as the debacles of the war’s opening months were repeated again and again.<sup>3</sup>

Along with the military blunders were a string of political embarrassments that bored American political parties were eager to disown in the war’s aftermath. Not until the Vietnam War a century and a half later would a decision to go to war so divide the nation, and



impassioned feelings had led to many injudicious words and ill-considered stances. The Federalists, the party of Alexander Hamilton and John Adams, whose stronghold was mercantile New England, had voted in Congress to a man to oppose the declaration of war and were unsparing in their bitter denunciations. Sermons preached week after week from northern Congregational pulpits added religious censure to the torrent of inflammatory words, warning that any “accomplice in the wickedness” of Mr. Madison in such an iniquitous and unjust war would become a very murderer in the sight of God, “the blackest of crimes on his conscience, “the guilt of blood upon his soul.” By the end of 1814 disunion was being bruited in the northeastern states. But with the return of peace all such talk simply sounded wild, if not outright treasonous, and the Federalists desperately wanted to bury the recent political past.<sup>4</sup>

The Republicans had their own partisan excesses to live down, and they too quickly contracted a convenient case of amnesia, forgetting how for years they had denounced the very existence of an American navy as an evil of evils, a road to ruinous tyranny, and an overweening Federalist ambition incompatible with the common-man values of a free republic. On the very brink of the war that they were clamoring for, the Republican Congress had voted down a modest naval expansion that the Federalists had strongly backed.

And so the Federalists had opposed the war, the Republicans had opposed the navy, and so the one thing they could agree on after it was all over was how gloriously the tiny American navy had triumphed. For decades afterward the whole complex history of the war was reduced to a simple romantic tale of patriotic pride and derring-do. The stories of a few glorious single-ship actions fought by heroic American captains would be the story of the war to generations of Americans. The glory was real and merited, yet it was only a fraction of the story of the whole war, a fraction even of the story of the whole *naval* war. But it was that part that would command almost all the attention whenever the War of 1812 was periodically revisited by popular writers, notably in 1882 by a young Theodore Roosevelt (who nearly two decades later would become assistant secretary of the navy) and in 1956 by the novelist C. S. Forester (who two decades earlier had begun to write his Horatio Hornblower stories).

The one thing Americans could agree upon was precisely the one thing Great Britain wanted to forget: the humiliations her all-powerful Royal Navy had sustained on the high seas, the astonishing wounds to her prestige and pride she had suffered at the hands of the same upstart rival for the second time in thirty years. And so this second war with America became little more than a footnote to the contemporaneous, and much more important, Napoleonic Wars. In Britain too it became ever after a war without a real name, to this day something to be found in scholarly indexes under the musty title “Anglo-American War, 1812–15.” In his monumental fifteen-hour-long television documentary of the history of Britain, the British historian Simon Schama devoted less than one sentence to the war. Ask even a well-educated Briton today about the War of 1812 and you are likely to get a blank stare followed by a question about whether it has something to do with the piece by Tchaikovsky.

Where amnesia induced by political expedience and national shame left off, the haze of quaintness took over. Some of the nostalgia about the war was honestly come by: the world of sailing ships and sea battles would just a few generations later seem as remote and abo-

as real as the Knights of the Round Table. The historian Henry Adams, the grandson and great-grandson of presidents, mused in his 1907 autobiography whether the “American boy of 1854 stood nearer the year 1 than to the year 1900” in the world he was born into, in the education he received, and in the habits of mind he was inculcated with.<sup>5</sup> Like the year 1854, the year 1812 was barely beyond the medieval in its technologies and its rhythms of life, with its lingering feudal codes of personal and family honor. Nine-tenths of the seven million Americans alive in 1812 lived on farms, rising with the sun and going to bed with dusk, using tools unchanged for a thousand years; the rest lived in a few small cities of ten or twenty thousand, or thirty thousand hugging the Atlantic coast.

By the turn of the twentieth century literally everything had changed. One can read the memoirs and letters of soldiers and seamen from World War II or even World War I and instantly know these men: they were our fathers and grandfathers; they looked on the world much as we do; their jokes may be corny but are never incomprehensible; the mechanized and ordered warfare they fought is awful but familiar. The men of the War of 1812 can seem at times to be from another world entirely. The archaic tools with which they waged war are almost the least of it; their assumptions, their motives, their ways of thinking take work to get our minds around. The officers who commanded America’s fledgling navy of 1812 really did fight duels over tiny aspersions to honor, things we would literally laugh at today; they really did in the midst of war engage in the most astonishing acts of chivalry toward the enemy; they really did endure suffering of an unspeakable blackness with a stoicism that can seem superhuman to a modern sensibility.

They also squabbled over money and promotions, lied and schemed, fornicated and drank, and stabbed each other in the back when it suited them, and wrote very bad poetry. One of the enduring reasons to study war is that it shines a light on humanity hidden in ordinary times; it lays bare what is so often successfully hidden.

And how they did reveal themselves, if we care to look: not just the officers but the common men, too. The American Civil War was the first war in which the voice of the common soldier came to the fore, but a surprising number of ordinary American seamen from the War of 1812 were literate: 70 percent could sign their names, 30 percent with a practiced penmanship that clearly reflected formal schooling.<sup>6</sup> A good many of them wrote letters home, or kept journals that ranged from the pedestrian and the mechanical to the eloquent and the wry, and along with some shipboard officers—these were mostly surgeons and chaplains—and a few of the more earnest midshipmen, some even possessed enough literary ambition to publish memoirs that, while they have to be taken with a grain of salt in places, are nonetheless full of life and surprises.

And then no one wrote as much as those occasional amazing Royal Navy captains of the eighteenth century, soliloquizing in long, long serial letters nominally to lonely wives back home that were really inner dialogues with their own lonely selves. In an art that long blockade duty seemed to have honed, they bared their souls as few of their contemporaries ever dared.

Newspapers of the day are not always a reliable source, but they too are full of life and surprises. News traveled much faster than we might imagine in the pre-telegraph era, and the press of the early American republic has a vitality and wide-awakeness, an excitement in repeating news, gossip, rumors, plagiarized snatches from newspapers just arrived from the next city or state or foreign port, an animation and immediacy that loses nothing from being

viewed across the intervening span of two centuries. In 1812 there were some four hundred newspapers published in America, two dozen of them dailies; Boston alone boasted a dozen newspapers for a population of thirty thousand.<sup>7</sup> They were serious and sarcastic, authoritative and vituperative; capable, as in Baltimore in the months after the declaration of war, of igniting lethal riots with their invective; but in their densely covered four broadsheet pages they also printed long verbatim extracts of official documents and foreign reports, songs and poems, accounts of dinners and funerals, prayers and Fourth of July orations, and ephemeral quips and retorts of the day that would otherwise have been lost to history.

Another unfailingly rich source of eyewitness views and contemporary attitudes is the *British Naval Chronicle*, a publication founded in 1799 that continued its monthly installments until 1818. Aimed at both a core professional audience of Royal Navy officers and a broader British public that had begun to follow the exploits of the navy through its heyday in the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, the *Chronicle* included in every issue lists of promotions, biographies of notable officers, articles on navigation and scientific developments, official and unofficial reports recounting actions and battles, still more ballads and poems, and a surprisingly open and self-critical forum in which active and retired officers exchanged frank views—though often under pseudonyms—about the management and mismanagement of the service.

All of these help to reconstruct the woof and warp of the life and times of the men of 1812. A true account of the naval war of 1812 is first and foremost, like all true military histories, an account of humanity revealed under extraordinary circumstances. Like all wars, the War of 1812 is worth a close reading on this score alone.

This war is also one worth examining, and remembering, for the strikingly modern lessons it holds for the art of waging battle against a vastly superior opponent. Much of this story is embodied in the strikingly modern person of William Jones, America's secretary of the navy for the most critical two years of the conflict, a man well ahead of his time who grasped that the war is as much about strategy, politics, public relations, finances, manpower, and logistics as it is about fighting. Jones, ever unflappable and ever with a clear eye and a cool head, knew that the war was never to be won by the single-ship engagements that so electrified the American public, not when facing an opponent who held a hundred-to-one numeric advantage in ships and men. Jones made this clear in May 1814 when he wrote President Madison with the news that the American sloop of war *Peacock* had taken HMS *Epervier* off Cape Canaveral, Florida. "I like these little events," Jones stated. "They keep alive the national feeling and produce an effect infinitely beyond their intrinsic importance."<sup>8</sup>

His refusal to be misled about the "intrinsic importance" of "these little events," even while acknowledging their value in bolstering public feeling, was the heart of the matter. Jones never lost sight that his own quietly resolute strategy of hitting Britain where it really hurt—in her vulnerable commerce and not her powerful navy, was what counted, and he tirelessly reiterated the point to his glory-seeking captains. Keeping the Royal Navy tied up and distracted by hit-and-run raids against Britain's overextended merchant fleets would be a way to turn Britain's vast presence on the oceans against itself. A later age would call this "asymmetric warfare," and it would become the subject of intensive military study in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as guerilla and insurgency warfare found the United States more and more often playing the muscle-bound Goliath. How America once skillful

played the nimble David is an enduring lesson well worth revisiting.

If popular accounts of the War of 1812 romanticized the clashes on the high seas, the work of modern academic historians went to the other extreme ever since Henry Adams's incisive study of Jefferson's and Madison's presidencies revealed the enormous political and diplomatic complexities that lay behind the conflict. Untangling all the skeins of frontier and party politics, diplomatic maneuvering, and European statecraft that became raveled together in the war's prosecution and inconclusive resolution has tended to occupy so much of modern historians' attention that the actual fighting often seems to vanish altogether from the accounts by the time one reaches the end.

But there is a much stronger connection between the strategy and prosecution of America's naval campaign and the lasting political and diplomatic consequences of the war than has generally been appreciated. Writing a century after the war's end, with a bit of hyperbole but an essence of truth, Charles F. Adams Jr., another scion of the presidential dynasty, dated the exact moment of America's birth as a world power to Wednesday, August 19, 1812, 6:30 p.m.—the instant the British frigate *Guerriere* struck her flag to America's *Constitution*.<sup>9</sup>

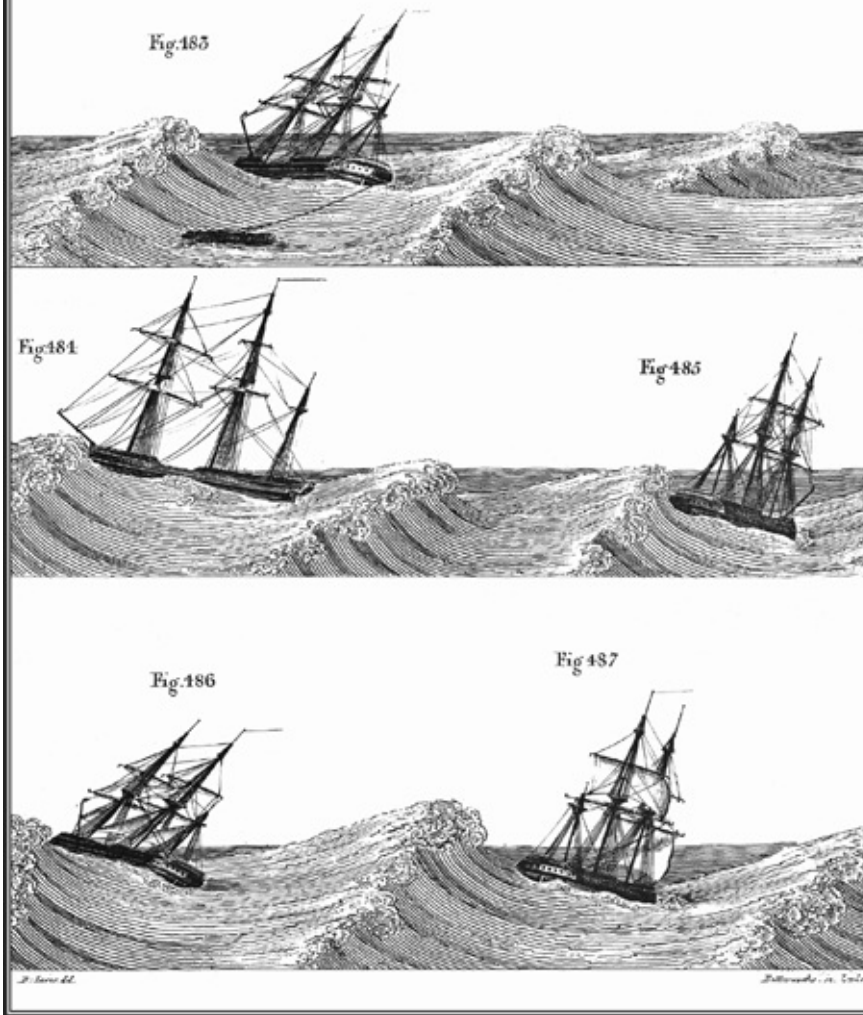
However inconclusive the formal treaty ending the war may have been, the European nations never again attempted to interfere with American sailors or America's oceangoing trade, the two great issues that had driven America to war. The war on land was a dismal stalemate, but the new de facto realities that the American navy established with its success after success at sea ensured that the war would have a lasting consequence that went well beyond the de jure terms negotiated by diplomats. The British diplomat Augustus J. Foster, who served as his country's minister to America in 1811 and 1812, did not hesitate to acknowledge the war's real, and enduring, significance.

"The Americans," he said simply, "... have brought us to speak of them with respect."<sup>10</sup>

ANYONE WHO writes about the navy of America's early years walks in the footsteps of a remarkable group of scholars at the U.S. Navy's Naval Historical Center (now the Naval History & Heritage Command), who for decades have tirelessly edited and made accessible in published form compendious collections of original documents, most recently three monumental volumes relating to the War of 1812. These works are models of scholarship, clarity, and judicious selection, as well as being beautifully produced books that are a true national treasure. I would add my personal thanks to Charles E. Brodine Jr. and Margherita M. Desy of the historical center for sharing their knowledge, expertise, and time in many ways. Mr. Brodine went well above and beyond the call of duty in generously sharing with me several hard-to-find images that appear in this book, as well as helping me locate other key materials; Ms. Desy spent most of a day giving me a fascinating and deeply informed tour of the magnificently restored frigate *Constitution* in Boston and subsequently answering me many questions about shipbuilding, seamanship in the age of sail, and much else. I am also very much indebted to Margherita Desy, Frederick Leiner, and William Cook for reading my manuscript and providing many corrections and suggestions and much sage advice.

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Method of sailing a ship in distressed condition (Lever, *Young Officer's Sheet Anchor*)



## *In Barbary*

THAT AMERICA would have a navy at all in 1812 on the eve of her mad war against Britain was the direct result of events of a decade before that had spoken more to the young nation's heart than to her mind. The American mind was dead set against the temptations that the republic's founders believed always led governments to war and tyranny. A solid majority of America's political leaders opposed on principle the very notion of a standing navy, a solid majority of Americans opposed the taxes that would be required to pay for one, and no sane American of any political inclination thought that any navy their country could ever possess would be able to contend with those of the great European powers.

Yet from the Anglophile merchants of New England to the backwoods farmers on the frontier, Americans had been stirred by the glory that had been won by the captains and men of the tiny United States navy in worlds far away ever since its founding in 1794, and it was that glory that had kept the service alive against all rational calculation to the contrary.

Edward Preble had no illusions about the price to be paid for that glory. "People who handle dangerous weapons," he once wrote, "must expect wounds and Death."<sup>1</sup> Preble was a man of action to the core, possessed of a legendary decisiveness and a volcanic temper. Just a year before joining his country's young navy in 1798 as a not-so-young thirty-seven-year-old lieutenant, Preble had taken exception to something a fellow merchant sailor had said to him in Boston, and cracked him over the head with a musket. Preble ended up paying his victim's room and board and medical bills while he recovered, then gave him \$200 for his troubles; he never apologized, though.<sup>2</sup>

The first week of February 1804 found Commodore Edward Preble, forty-two years old, captain of the frigate *Constitution* and commander of America's six-ship Mediterranean squadron, going prematurely bald and gray. His dark blue eyes were as fierce as ever, but he was increasingly given to bouts of racking physical debilitation from a griping stomach complaint that laid him low for days at a time. On the outside he usually managed to keep up a front of self-control and even optimism; inside he was blackened by darts of despair at the task before him, at his mission in life, at the distressing run of bad luck that kept coming his way.

Just a year before taking command of the *Constitution* the previous May, he had tried to resign his commission from the navy altogether, pleading his shattered state of health, which had kept him bedridden more often than not for weeks on end. Writing the secretary of the navy, Robert Smith, with his decision, Preble had enclosed a statement from his physician confirming that he was "reduced to a distressing state of debility and emaciation," adding "he is extremely susceptible of injury from the cares and fatigues of business." His ship's surgeon agreed that the burdens of the job had proved too much for a man of Preble's hard-driving and easily provoked temperament.<sup>3</sup>

But Secretary Smith had spurned the resignation, ordering Preble on furlough to get some rest, and slowly his health had improved enough for him to return to the endless vexations of commanding one of the three plum ships of the tiny American fleet. For more than two years the American squadron in the Mediterranean had been waging an anemic battle against the Barbary corsairs that were raiding American ships traversing the region. For centuries the semi-independent Muslim states of Tunis, Algiers, and Tripoli had flourished on piracy and tribute extorted from European shippers that sailed the Mediterranean. On May 14, 1801, the pasha of Tripoli had made known his dissatisfaction with the amount of tribute he had been receiving from the United States in return for allowing American ships to pass unmolested: a symbolic declaration of war, the pasha had sent his men to chop down the flagstaff in front of the American consul's residence.

Little had happened since. The American naval force found it could not effectively blockade Tripoli's harbor and had been reduced to defensive measures, convoying American ships rather than directly confronting the Tripolitan corsairs. American consuls in the region warned that the United States' prestige was plummeting—as was her navy's, both at home and abroad. Jefferson's cabinet, true to the antinavalist credo of the Republican party, was strongly inclined to simply pay off the pasha and be done with it; Treasury Secretary Albert Gallatin wrote the president that he considered the decision “a mere matter of calculation whether the purchase of peace is not cheaper than the expense of a war.”<sup>4</sup>

Preble's and the *Constitution's* mission was to prove them wrong; or at least to prove that the navy had some value at all. Painfully aware how much was riding on their mission, the secretary of the navy confidently let it be known in Washington that Preble would be on station ten weeks from the date of receiving his orders. Instead, the months had slipped by. Preble struggled to get his ship seaworthy. The *Constitution* was only five years old but was literally rotting away at her moorings. She had served with distinction during America's undeclared naval war with France from 1798 to 1800—the Quasi War, as it came to be called, triggered by French captures of American merchant ships trading with Britain and the by a wave of popular anger over the XYZ Affair, when an American delegation sent to Paris to resolve the rising tensions was approached by three agents of the French government who demanded a large bribe. In May 1800, a detachment of sailors and marines from the *Constitution* staged a daring cutting-out raid on a harbor in Haiti, seizing a French privateer and recapturing an American merchant brig; two days later the *Constitution's* men exhibited equal derring-do in snatching another French privateer from under the guns of a nearby port in Hispaniola. But with the signing of a peace treaty between America and France in September 1800, the ship had returned to Boston after one final cruise in the West Indies, and since June 1802 she had lain utterly neglected, accumulating weeds and decay, in the Charlestown River near Boston's Charlestown Navy Yard.

On May 20, 1803, Preble had come aboard, inspected her skeleton crew of one midshipman, one boatswain, and twelve men, and ordered a caulking stage brought alongside so he could examine the ship's bottom. The next day he climbed out onto the stage armed with a rake and began pulling up swaths of sea grass that had grown through gaping holes in the copper sheathing below the waterline.

Through the spring and summer of 1803 Preble worked day after day, morning to night, making “every exertion in my power,” he wrote an old acquaintance, denying himself even



“the pleasure of dining with a friend” as he urged the work on.<sup>5</sup> Every seam of the frigate planking had to be recaulked, a job that required all of the officers’ rooms alongside the wardroom to be knocked out. There were cables to be made and tarred, ballast to be brought in, fifty-four thousand gallons of water in casks to be loaded, all new yards to be fitted, all of the ship’s rigging to be removed and rerigged. For the damaged copper sheathing to be replaced, the ship first had to be brought over to a wharf at Boston’s North End, just across the mouth of the Charles River, and all her guns and nearly all her ballast laboriously removed. Then the gunports had to be hammered shut and temporarily caulked tight to make them waterproof, everything that might slide around had to be unloaded and the rudder unshipped, and then each day she was tipped over and held at a frightening angle by huge ten-inch-thick ropes running from her lower masts to a capstan on the wharf alongside. Massive poles braced the masts against the edge of the deck to take the strain as the ship was heaved over, exposing her side all the way down to the keel, while relieving tackles running from the opposite side made sure she did not capsize altogether. Carpenters set to work from a stage, ripping off the old copper sheets and filling the exposed seams beneath with oakum. Then came a coating of tallow, tar, and turpentine; then sheets of tarred paper roofing felt; then finally the new sheets of copper hammered on. Sailing Master Nathaniel Haraden—his nickname was “Jumping Billy”—oversaw the backbreaking schedule; work started at 5:15 each morning, and the laborers kept at it until seven at night, with an hour off for breakfast and dinner and fifteen minutes for grog at eleven and four. Some captains had found Haraden hard to take for having “assumed too much” in telling them how to run their ship, but the fact was no one knew the *Constitution* better, and the log Haraden kept of the repair operation spoke of a man justifiably proud of his mastery of the myriad technical complexities the job entailed. Preble told Secretary of the Navy Smith he thought Haraden knew his job and that he could keep him in line when he had to.<sup>6</sup>

By August 9 the *Constitution* at last was ready to sail, awaiting only a favorable wind to carry her out of Boston harbor. Preble wrote a farewell letter to an old friend from Maine, Henry Dearborn, now Thomas Jefferson’s secretary of war. “I assure you I am not in pursuit of pleasure—excepting such as the destruction of the piratical vessels in the Mediterranean can afford me,” Preble wrote. “If Tripoli does not make peace, I shall hazard to destroy the vessels in port if I cannot meet them at sea.”

And he added: “None but a real friend would have given me the kind advice which you have respecting the government of temper. Be assured it shall be attended to.”<sup>7</sup>

. . .

NOTHING ABOUT his command was calculated to improve the new commodore’s temper. One early and spirited display of his legendary short fuse, however, did him some good with the officers and men under his command who were already growing weary of what one midshipman, Charles Morris, termed their captain’s “ebullitions of temper.” Nearing the Straits of Gibraltar on the evening of September 10, the *Constitution*’s lookout had spotted through the lowering haze just at sunset a distant sail, tracking the same course but far ahead. A few hours later, dark night settled in and they were suddenly on her: the same ship, apparently, and almost certainly a ship of war. The *Constitution*’s crew was brought swiftly and silently to their action quarters—no beating of the drums, but every gun crew at i

station, gunports open and guns run out, the men peering down their barrels at the strange slow matches smoldering at the ready to set off their charges the instant the order to fire came. Only then did Preble give the customary hail.

“What ship is that?”

Across the water a defiant echo came back: “What ship is that?”

“This is the United States ship *Constitution*. What ship is *that*?”

Again the question was repeated, again with the same result. At which Preble grabbed the speaking trumpet and, his voice strained with rage, shouted, “I am now going to hail you one last time. If a proper answer is not returned, I will fire a shot into you.”

“If you fire a shot, I will fire a broadside.”

“*What ship is that?*” Preble thundered one last time.

“This is His Britannic Majesty’s ship *Donnegal*, eighty-four guns, Sir Richard Strahan, an English commodore. Send your boat on board.”

Now the volcano erupted. Leaping to the netting, Preble bellowed, “This is the United States ship *Constitution*, forty-four guns, Edward Preble, an *American* commodore, who will be *damned* before he sends his boat aboard *any* vessel.” And then, turning to his crew, he bellowed an equally loud, and theatrical, aside. “Blow on your matches, boys!”

An ominous silence ensued, broken by the sound of a boat splashing down and rowing across. A shamefaced British lieutenant came on deck and apologetically explained that his ship was in fact the frigate *Maidstone*, no eighty-four-gun ship of the line at all. Her lookout had been caught napping, and they had not seen the *Constitution* until they heard her hail; they had no expectation of encountering an American ship of war in these waters, and uncertain of her true identity and desperate to buy time to get their own men to quarters, they had stalled and dissembled.

The apologies were accepted; more important, as Morris later recalled, “this was the first occasion that had offered to show us what we might expect from our commander, and the spirit and decision which he displayed were hailed with pleasure by all, and at once mitigated the unfriendly feelings” that their commander’s irascibility had produced.<sup>8</sup>

Throughout the fall of 1803 the commodore was vexed by the subtleties of Levantine politics, the difficulties of securing reliable translations of Arabic and Turkish documents, and a furious altercation with Commodore John Rodgers, who insisted that as senior captain, owing to the earlier date of his commission, only *he* was entitled to fly a commodore’s broad pennant on the Mediterranean station. Then disaster: on November 24, on the passage from Gibraltar to Malta, the *Constitution* spoke a passing British frigate that gave them the appalling news that the Tripolitans had captured the American frigate *Philadelphia* and all her crew on the last day of October. The available facts were few but devastating. Chasing a corsair running into Tripoli harbor, the American frigate had struck a shoal and helplessly surrendered to Tripolitan gunboats that had poured out from the town; the enemy had since refloated her, and she now stood in Tripoli harbor, snug under the guns of the forts that ringed the shoreline. “This affair distresses me beyond description,” Preble confessed to the secretary of the navy in a dispatch two weeks later, “and very much deranges my plans of operation for the present.”

Although Preble never publicly let slip a word of criticism of the *Philadelphia*’s officers, he poured out his despair and dismay in his private letters. To the secretary he continued:

I fear our national character will sustain an injury with the Barbarians—would to God, that the Officers and crew of the *Philadelphia*, had one and all, determined to prefer death to slavery; it is possible that such a determination might save them from either.... If it had not been for the Capture of the *Philadelphia*, I have no doubt, but we should have had peace with Tripoly in the Spring; but I now have no hopes of such an event.... I do not believe the *Philadelphia* will ever be of service to Tripoly; I shall hazard much to destroy her—it will undoubtedly cost us many lives, but it must be done. I am surprised she was not rendered useless, before her Colours were struck.<sup>9</sup>

And in a letter to his wife, he laid bare how much the circumstances of the *Philadelphia's* loss had racked him, heart and soul, beyond the blow to his operational plans: “Capt. Bainbridge, together with all his officers and crew, amounting to 307 men, are slaves and are treated in the most cruel manner, without a prospect of ever again beholding their friends. I hope to God such will never be my fate! The thought of never again seeing you would drive me to distraction ... May Heaven preserve us both... I most sincerely pity the cruel fate of poor Bainbridge. I know not what will become of them. I suspect very few will ever see home again.”<sup>10</sup> There were reports that the pasha of Tripoli was going to demand \$3 million as ransom for his prisoners. “A pretty good asking price,” Preble sarcastically observed.<sup>11</sup>

Adding to Preble's troubles were a raft of vexations large and small. The *Constitution* was in need of repairs again. Chafing under Preble's stern discipline, a half-dozen crew members had deserted and taken refuge on British warships; he was constantly doling out punishments for drunkenness and neglect of duty, two or three dozen lashes apiece, throwing a man in irons for “impertinence.”

Syracuse, the port town in southern Sicily where Preble had decided to base his squadron and where the *Constitution* began to undergo three weeks of repairs in late November, proved a constant headache, and a discipline problem too. Things had started well. The local officials and leading citizens hastened to make the Americans welcome, and the town's somnambulant economy had undergone an instant revival with the sudden influx of dollars. Two new hotels in the “English style” had opened to cater to the Americans; the leading opera singers of Sicily had hastened to Syracuse when word went out across the island that American officers showed their appreciation for their favorite performers by throwing gold coins on the stage. “The Inhabitants are extremely friendly and civil, and our Sailors cannot desert,” Preble optimistically reported to Secretary Smith on December 10, 1803.<sup>12</sup>

On the other hand, that very dependency on the American trade had quickly translated into a swaggering contempt on the part of Preble's young officers for local law and authority. This was an attitude unintentionally encouraged by Preble himself, who had set the tone with his own high-handed impatience with the mostly innocent pettifogging of the local governor, an indecisive man who brought out the worst of the commodore's temper. Preble so cowed the poor man that the Americans were soon a law unto themselves. All an American officer had to do was utter the magic words “I shall inform the commodore.” Disciplining the cocky Americans ultimately fell to the commodore himself, who was distracted by a thousand other details. In the end he admitted somewhat helplessly that “great irregularities have been committed by some of our officers” and passed the problem on to his successor, saying he hoped the new commander might “make an example” of some of the worst offenders.

But the town was also frankly dangerous, as well as dreary, filthy, wretchedly poor, and depressingly decayed from its ancient grandeur of classical times. Mobs of beggars followed the Americans in the streets; at night gangs of cutthroats marauded more or less at will. Lieutenant Stephen Decatur and Midshipman Thomas Macdonough were returning to the ship, the brig *Enterprize*, one night not long after the Americans' arrival when they were accosted by three armed men in a narrow street. The officers drew their swords and, keeping their backs to a wall, fought off their attackers, wounding two. All three of the assailants then fled, and Macdonough chased one of the men into a nearby house and up to the roof, where the man tried to escape capture by leaping to the ground—killing himself in the fall.

The Sicilian nobility did not wear well either. They kept up a show of ostentation, but soon there was a story making the rounds about the dinner party given by Lieutenant Decatur aboard the *Enterprize* during which one of the guests, a Baron Cannarella, was intercepted by Decatur's servant as he was about to slip two silver spoons into his pocket. (The servant held out his tray and deadpanned, "When you have done looking at them, sir?")<sup>13</sup>

It would be months before Preble's urgent request for reinforcements, especially a frigate to replace the *Philadelphia*, could reach Washington and be acted on, and so his reduced squadron, now consisting of one frigate, two eighteen-gun brigs, and three schooners, settled in for the winter, biding their time in their less than completely easy new home.

But something was afoot; a careful observer could see the commodore was in a state of expectant tension as the new year began. On February 3, 1804, Preble wrote to several of the American consuls in the Mediterranean and to Secretary of the Navy Smith, informing them that he had somewhat surprisingly decided to condemn, and take into his service as a lawful prize, a vessel he had stopped and boarded off Tripoli in late December. She was a ketch, a tall two-masted vessel, fore and aft rigged like a schooner. Though sailing under Ottoman colors when Preble had halted her, her crew had acted more than a little suspiciously—showing outright panic when the *Constitution* revealed herself to be American, hauling down the false British colors she had been flying and raising the Stars and Stripes in their place. On searching the ketch, the *Constitution's* boarding party had found sidearms and clothing apparently belonging to officers of the *Philadelphia*.

Since then, a Maltese merchant captain who had been in Tripoli harbor the day the *Philadelphia* was taken had come forward; Salvador Catalano told Preble that he had seen the very same ketch haul down her Turkish colors, raise the Tripolitan flag, and take aboard a hundred soldiers, then make her way out to the stranded *Philadelphia*, where she led the way plundering and taking the American crew prisoner.

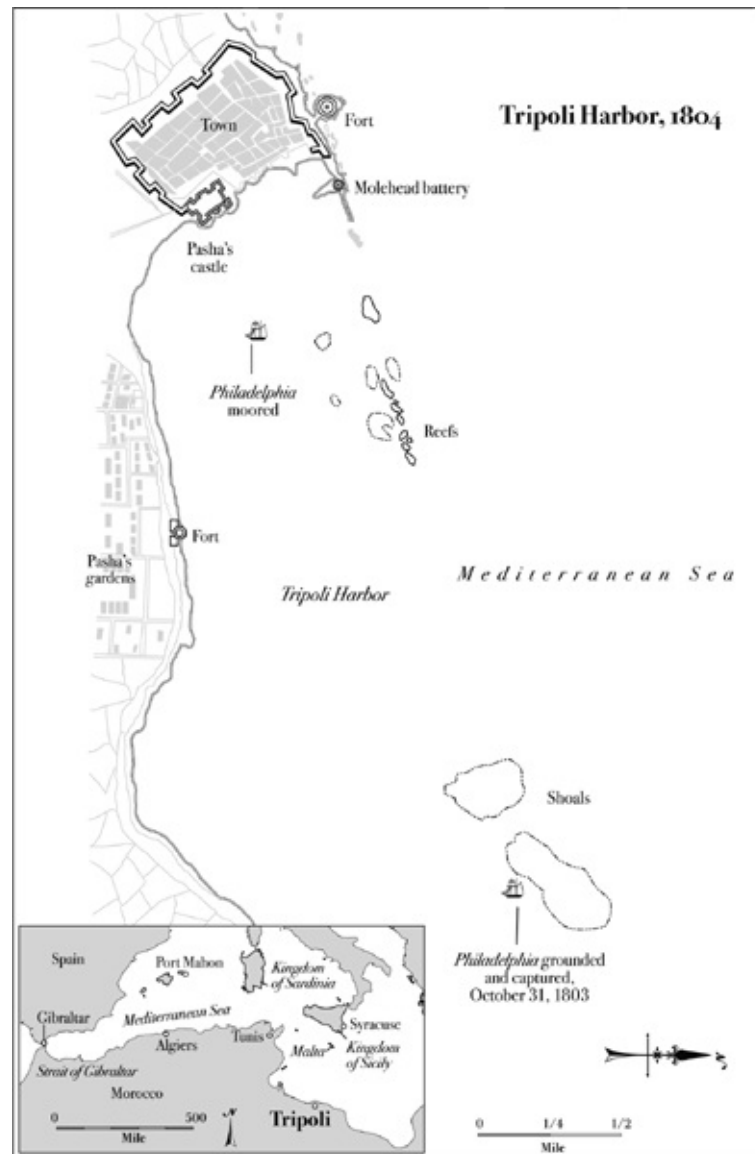
American navy department regulations required prizes to be sent back to the United States for adjudication and condemnation by a prize court, but Preble brushed that aside, pointing out in his dispatches that "there cannot be the smallest doubt of her being a lawful prize" and that in any case—and this had lame excuse written all over it—"she is not a proper Vessel to cross the Atlantic at this season of the year."<sup>14</sup>

The crew, and forty-two slaves who were being shipped in her hold, were removed from the ketch, and soon the vessel was a beehive of activity. Lieutenant Decatur was seen leading daily work parties of his officers and men: towing her to the mole; ferrying boatloads of weapons, muskets, cutlasses, boarding pikes, and tomahawks from the *Constitution*; bringing up two guns from the hold. The commodore was now calling the ketch the *Intrepid*. C



January 31, Preble ordered Lieutenant Charles Stewart to prepare his eighteen-gun brig *Syren* for a cruise and be ready to sail “as soon as the Signal is made.”<sup>15</sup>

On the same day that Preble had written the American consuls of his decision to condemn the ketch as a lawful prize, the *Constitution*'s sailing master, Nathaniel Haraden, noted in his logbook: “Towards evening sailed the *Syren* and the Prize. The prize was commanded by Captain Decatur and had on board 70 of the *Enterprizes* men and Officers. Six Officers from the *Constitution* were also on board her. They stood out to the South<sup>d</sup> and are bound on some Secret Expedition.”<sup>16</sup>



STEPHEN DECATUR Jr. was young, twenty-five years old, but he had already made a mark for himself in the American navy as a natural leader, one who inspired men rather than bludgeoned them into doing their duty. Brought up in Philadelphia, the political and maritime capital of the young nation, son of a captain of the American navy who commanded the *Philadelphia* during the Quasi War with France, Decatur perfectly looked the part of the dashing naval officer. Tall, trim, broad-shouldered, an excellent shot, a strong swimmer, good horseback rider, with a mop of curly dark hair, slightly rakish sideburns, and puppy-dog brown eyes, he was the stuff nineteenth-century heroes were made of. He was also known for

an aversion to corporal punishment as a means of discipline in an age when that was the norm, and was “proverbial among sailors, for the good treatment of his men,” said one marine private who hadn’t a good word to say about anyone else.<sup>17</sup> Preble had singled out Decatur for this job, taking a chance on a man who had not yet distinguished himself with any great feat but who seemed to have the drive and dash that it would take.

Ten days went by with no word or sign.

On February 12, unable any longer to hide his apprehensions of disaster, Preble ordered a lookout posted on the masthead of the *Constitution* to keep watch for Decatur’s or Stewart’s return.

Another week passed; then, at ten in the morning on the nineteenth, a Sunday, there they were, both American ships, running into the harbor. Atop the *Constitution* three numerical signal flags, no doubt long at the ready, flashed out at once: 2-2-7.

A tense minute passed as the *Syren*’s signal officer flipped through the signal book to locate the meaning—“Business or enterprise, have you completed, that you was sent on?”—and assembled an answering hoist. And then the flags Preble had been waiting for broke forth gloriously on the *Syren*’s peak: 2-3-2, “Business, I have completed, that I was sent on.”<sup>18</sup>

The commodore spent much of the rest of the day pouring out his relief in a flood of correspondence, beginning with a letter to the secretary of the navy, to whom he could convey the first good news he had had for nearly a year.

At 10 AM the *Syren* and Ketch *Intrepid* arrived from the coast of Tripoly after having executed my orders highly to my satisfaction, by effecting the complete destruction of the Frigate late the *Philadelphia* in the Harbour of Tripoly on the night of the 16<sup>th</sup> Inst by burning her with all her Materials. The Frigate was moored in a situation from whence she could not be brought out. Of course it became an object of the first importance to destroy her. It has been effected by Lieut<sup>t</sup> Decatur and the Officers and Crew under his command in the most gallant manner. His conduct and that of his brave Officers and Crew is above all praise.

Later that day the commodore dashed off a second letter to Secretary Smith.

Sir,

Lieutenant Decatur is an Officer of too much Value to be neglected. The important service he has rendered in destroying an Enemy’s frigate of 40 Guns, and the gallant manner in which he performed it, in a small vessel of only 60 Tons and 4 Guns, under the Enemy’s Batteries, surrounded by their corsairs and armed Boats, the crews of which, stood appalled at his intrepidity and daring, would in any Navy in Europe insure him instantaneous promotion to the rank of post Captain. I wish as a stimulus, it could be done in this instance; it would eventually be of real service to our Navy. I beg most earnestly to recommend him to the President, that he may be rewarded according to his merit.<sup>19</sup>

Preble’s elation—an ebullition of joy rather than temper, for once—only increased as the

full details of Decatur's feat became known. It was a coup of the first order, a model naval operation, a redemption after months of shame.

The two ships had left Syracuse in company in a moderate breeze and pleasant weather. At five p.m. on the third, the small and none too strongly built *Intrepid* at one point taken under tow by the *Syren* as they cleared the southernmost reach of the harbor.

On board the *Intrepid* was a crew of sixty-four volunteers from the *Enterprize*, along with a number of the *Enterprize's* officers, among them Midshipman Macdonough; Decatur's second in command, Lieutenant James Lawrence; and Lieutenant Joseph Bainbridge, brother of the *Philadelphia's* now imprisoned captain. From the *Constitution* Preble had sent five midshipmen, including nineteen-year-old Charles Morris, to complete the company. Salvador Catalano, the Maltese merchant captain who had confirmed the ketch's identity and who knew Tripoli harbor well, had volunteered to serve as pilot. Surgeon's mate Lewis Heermann, who had been confidentially informed of the mission in advance and asked by Decatur for an official report on any men or officers who ought to be excluded for physical causes, begged to be allowed to go along too. Decatur had proposed having Heermann sail on the *Syren*, which was to stand outside Tripoli harbor during the actual attack, but Heermann argued he'd be of more use accompanying the men directly into action, where his "professional services might be the most useful." Decatur at last relented, so long as the doctor promised to "get into a place of safety" on the ketch "in the moment of danger." Heermann replied that he considered "the permission you have given me to go in as an order."<sup>20</sup>

Only after they were under way did the crews finally learn their true destination: the cover story Preble had put out was that they were bound for Malta so the *Intrepid* could be reregged. On board the *Syren* all hands were mustered at nine the following morning and the commodore's orders read aloud. They would "proceed with all possible dispatch for the Coast of Tripoly." Before nearing the coast they were to disguise the brig "to give the appearance of a Merchant Vessel": striking down the topgallant masts that unmistakably marked a man-of-war, repainting her sides with a new color, housing the guns and shutting the gunports, concealing her deck with quarter cloths. The *Intrepid*, less likely to raise suspicion, would make its way into the harbor first under cover of night, supported by the *Syren's* boats; on reaching the *Philadelphia*, they would board and burn her, having equipped themselves with "combustibles" for the purpose. Since "on boarding the Frigate it is probable you will meet with Resistance," the commodore cautioned, "it will be well in order to prevent alarm and carry all by Sword."

He concluded: "The destruction of the Frigate is of National importance, and I rely with confidence on your Valor Judgment & Enterprize in contributing all the means in your power to effect it. Whatever may be your success you will return if possible directly to this place.

"May the Almighty take you under his protection and prosper you in this Enterprize."

The crew let out three hearty cheers. When Stewart asked for volunteers from the *Syren's* crew to take part in the actual attack, the entire crew stepped forward.<sup>21</sup>

THE PASSAGE to Tripoli was miserable. The *Intrepid* was barely seaworthy. Conditions aboard would have been bad under the best of circumstances, but crowded with a vastly larger crew than she was ever intended to carry, the ketch bordered on the uninhabitable. Decatur, the three lieutenants, and the surgeon were packed into the tiny cabin; the six midshipmen and

the pilot slept on a platform laid atop the water casks on one side of the hold, with barely enough room to squeeze in under the deck; the eight marines occupied a corresponding arrangement on the other side; and the men were left to their own devices to find a place to sleep among or on the casks. The officers had embarked with less than an hour's notice and been told to bring only a single change of clothing. "To these inconveniences were added ... the attacks of innumerable vermin, which our predecessors the slaves had left behind them," recalled Midshipman Morris. The ship's provisions, also hastily loaded, turned out to be so putrid when the casks were opened.

Still, spirits were high, the weather was unusually fair and mild, and the afternoon of February 7, 1804, found the two ships approaching their destination. But there were already indications of a coming gale; the wind was out of the west and freshening. When Morris and Catalano went ahead in a boat to scout the approach to the harbor, they found the surf breaking right across the narrow harbor entrance, hemmed in by a series of menacing shoals and reefs, and Catalano declared that "if we attempted to go in we would never come out again." Decatur ordered the attack called off, and with the wind shifting to the north and mounting quickly to gale force, the ships had to laboriously tack their way windward throughout the night to be out of sight of the town when dawn broke. The *Syren's* anchor was wedged so tight in the rocky bottom it took half the night to try to haul it in; three times the men at the capstan were knocked down by the bars, and several were seriously injured when the cable parted under the strain. In the end, the brig rolling up to its gunwales and daylight approaching, Stewart ordered the cable cut and the anchor left behind. And then the wind began to blow in earnest.<sup>22</sup>

For four days they were blown eastward, scudding on nearly bare poles, the crew so sick with most of the time that they didn't have to worry about contending with their rotten food. The gale finally blew itself out on the tenth, and then began an arduous five days of working back westward. The storm, the hardships on board, the disappointment of the abandoned first attempt were beginning to take their toll. Morale was dropping dangerously; they had surely not been seen from shore by now, the men were saying; the town would be thoroughly alarmed and the *Philadelphia* so heavily guarded that they didn't stand a chance.

On the fifteenth they were again nearing Tripoli. Again the attempt had to be abandoned. A night fell before they had come close enough to catch sight of the town and take a bearing; it was now impossible to find the harbor entrance in the dark.

The morning of the sixteenth of February began with light winds, pleasant weather, and a smooth sea: an auspicious start. The two vessels kept far apart during the day. Now the timing was critical; Decatur aimed to reach the harbor entrance just after dark while not arousing suspicions by obviously loitering outside the harbor. "The lightness of the wind allowed us to keep up all appearance of an anxious desire to reach the harbor before night," recalled Morris; all sail set, to aid the deception a drag of spars, lumber, and ladder were dropped astern to further check their speed. The *Intrepid* aimed to pass as a Maltese trader flying English colors; the crew was now completely concealed below save a half dozen on deck dressed in Maltese garb. As the sun set behind the white walls of the city and castle, the *Intrepid* was two miles from the eastern entrance of the harbor, the *Syren* about three miles behind. In the last glow of light they saw the English consul's house along the shore raise the English colors in recognition of theirs.



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