

NAVAL BIOGRAPHY

WILLIAM EATON - (1764-1811)
Army Officer, Diplomat, and U.S. Navy Agent

The USS EATON, DD-510, named in honor of William Eaton, was commissioned in the U.S. Navy in December, 1942. Built by the Bath Iron Works, Bath, Maine, she was launched on September 20, 1942. The classification of the vessel was changed to DDE-510 as of January 3, 1951.

Born in Woodstock, Connecticut, on February 23, 1764, William Eaton was one of thirteen children of Nathan and Sarah (Johnson) Eaton. At an early age he joined the Continental Army, and remained in its service until April, 1783. After nine years in private life, in which time he managed to work his way through Dartmouth University, teach in Vermont, serve as Clerk of the House of Delegates of Vermont and marry Eliza Sykes Danielson, widow, he was appointed a Captain in the U.S. Army in 1792.

He filled many important and confidential assignments before taking the post of U.S. Consul at Tunis, in December, 1798, by appointment of his friend, then Secretary of State Timothy Pickering. At that time American merchants were endeavoring to establish commerce in the Mediterranean on a sound basis, but the Navy of the United States was too weak to protect American interests at that distance. Eaton's growing experience and knowledge of conditions in the piratical Barbary Regencies led him to conclude that "Peace and war with them are articles of commerce. . ."

In May 1801, Tripoli had declared war against the United States, and the United States Navy had twice formed Mediterranean squadrons in an effort to maintain peace and honor. On May 26, 1804, President Thomas Jefferson had appointed him U.S. Navy Agent for the Barbary regencies. His instructions placed him directly under Commodore Barron's orders, in the position of adviser to the Commodore. Eaton strongly advocated an attack by land against Tripoli. He gained approval of a plan to collaborate with the rightful heir to the throne, the brother of the reigning Bashaw.

With naval aid, Eaton went to Egypt, raised a small army which included only ten Americans, and under the American flag they marched from Alexandria 600 miles across the Lybian desert to attack Derna on April 27, 1805, while the warships NAUTILUS, HORNET, and ARGUS bombarded it. Wounded in the wrist, Eaton and his infantry continued the advance, dashed through a rain of musket balls fired from the walls of houses, reached the water battery and planted the American flag on the walls. Tripolitan guns were turned on the fleeing enemy, and when Eaton sent his report to Barron on April 29, Derna was firmly in American hands. He received a hero's welcome upon his return to Richmond, Virginia, and Washington, before the end of 1805, and the final solution of the Barbary problem was in sight.