Sea Stories

Forays into American Naval History During the Age of Sail

Michael J. Crawford

Naval History and Heritage Command

Sea Stories

Sea Stories

Forays into American Naval History During the Age of Sail

Michael J. Crawford

NAVAL HISTORY AND HERITAGE COMMAND

DEPARTMENT OF THE NAVY

WASHINGTON, DC

Published by:
Naval History and Heritage Command
805 Kidder Breese Street SE
Washington Navy Yard, DC 20374-5060
www.history.mil

Cover image: Excerpt from "Celebration of Washington's Birth Day at Malta on Board the USS *Constitution*, Commodore Jesse D. Elliot, 1837," James G. Evans, Courtesy U.S. Naval Academy.

The chapters have been previously published or presented at the following:

Chapter 1: VIIes Journées franco-britanniques d'histoire de la marine, Brest, France, 4–7 May 1998
Chapter 2: Society for Military History, Lexington, Virginia, 21 May 2010
Chapter 3: Council on America's Military Past, Buffalo, New York, May 10, 1997
Chapter 4: Poughkeepsie Quadricentennial of the Hudson River, Poughkeepsie, New York, 26 May 2009
Chapter 5: Military Classics Seminar, 27 April 1999, Fort Myer, Arlington, Virginia
Chapter 6: International Journal of Naval History 1 (April 2002)
Chapter 7: "Painting the Breeze: The Flag as Art and Symbol," The Flag House, Baltimore, Maryland, 9 April 2005
Chapter 8: Melville Society Extracts 94 (September 1993): 1–5

Use of ISBN:
This is the official U.S. Government edition of this publication and is herein identified to certify its authenticity. Use of 978-1-943604-28-9 is for this edition only.

Author's note: Two of the essays were originally published elsewhere, and I thank the Naval Historical Foundation for permission to reprint "The Lasting Influence of Theodore Roosevelt's *Naval War of 1812*," from the *International Journal of Naval History* and the Johns Hopkins University Press for permission to reuse "*White-Jacket* and the Navy in which Melville Served," from *Melville Extracts*.

Table of Contents

Part One: Strategy and Operations

CHAPTER 1: The *Queen of France* Comes to America, 1778…….....1

CHAPTER 2: The Tale of the Milk Pail: Vice Admiral Comte d'Estaing's Strategic Vision for the War of 1778 in America…….....9

Part Two: Building a Naval Tradition

CHAPTER 3: The Invasion and Defense of Canada in 1775 and 1776: A New Perspective from a New Eyewitness Account…….....22

CHAPTER 4: Poughkeepsie, the Continental Shipyards, and Defense of the Hudson River…….....28

Part Three: The Navy's Image on Paper and Canvas

CHAPTER 5: Samuel Eliot Morison's *John Paul Jones: A Sailor's Biography,* A Retrospective Appreciation.....42

CHAPTER 6: The Lasting Influence of Theodore Roosevelt's *Naval War of 1812*.....52

CHAPTER 7: National Ensigns in the Naval Art of the War of 1812.....61

CHAPTER 8: *White-Jacket* and the Navy in Which Melville Served.....77

List of Illustrations

Ch.2 Figure 1: Vice Admiral Comte d'Estaing. Naval History and Heritage Command, NH 70283 KN.

Ch.3 Figure 1: Part of the St. Lawrence River in 1780. Anville, Jean Baptiste Bourguignon D', Simpkins, and John Harrison. The river St. Lawrence. [London, J. Harrison 178-?, 1780] Map. Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/74696184/.

Ch. 4, Figure 1: Ship Carpenter's Tools (USS Constitution Museum, Boston, MA.) Photographed by Harrie Slootbeek.

Ch. 4, Figure 2: Detail from "A Topical Map of Hudson's River," by Claude Joseph Sauthier, engraved by William Faden, in Faden, "The North American Atlas (London: William Faden, 1777); reprinted in W. Bart Greenwood, comp., The American Revolution, 1775-1783, An Atlas of 18th-century Maps and Charts: Theaters of Operations (Washington: Naval History Division, Dept. of the Navy, 1972), Map 8.

Ch. 4, Figure 3: "New England Armed Vessels in Valcure Bay, Lake Champlain, commanded by Benedict Arnold." Watercolor by Charles Randle. Courtesy Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa, Ontario. MIKAN 2837164.

Ch.4 Figure 4: American Fire Ships Attack British Warships in the Hudson River, August 1776. Lithograph by G. Hayward. Naval History and Heritage Command.

Ch. 4 Figure 5: A Revolutionary War Row Galley on Lake Champlain. Detail from "Battle of Valcour Island," by V. Zveg. Naval History and Heritage Command.

Ch. 4 Figure 6: John Hills and William Faden, "Plan of the Attack of the Forts Clinton & Montgomery Upon Hudson's River, Which Were Stormed by His Majesty's Forces Under the Command of Sir Henry Clinton, K.B., on the 6th of Octr. 1777," (London: Wm. Faden, 1784). Map. Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/gm71002205/.

Ch.5 Figure 1: John Paul Jones, Captain, Continental Navy. Naval History and Heritage Command, NH 48743.

Ch. 7 Figure 1: Naval Engagement Between the U.S. frigate Constitution and HM frigate Guerriere by Thomas Birch. Naval History and Heritage Command, KN 10953.

Ch. 7 Figure 2: Bainbridge Medal. Naval History and Heritage Command, NH 1391.

Ch.7 Figure 3: An engraving based on a drawing by Essex's Commanding Officer, Capt. David Porter. Naval History and Heritage Command, USN 902460.

Ch. 7 Figure 4: Engraving by John Warner Barber of Oliver Hazard Perry's victory on Lake Erie. Naval History and Heritage Command, Navy Art Collection, 65-433-Z.

Ch. 7 Figure 5: "Perry's Victory on Lake Erie," by William H. Powell. Naval History and Heritage Command, KN-621.

Ch. 7 Figure 6: William Strickland's engraving of the engagement between the U.S. frigate Constitution and HMS Guerriere. Naval History and Heritage Command, Navy Art Collection, 60-380-AE.

Ch.7 Figure 7: Thomas Birch's engraving of the capture of Guerriere. Naval History and Heritage Command, Navy Art Collection, 2008-058-0717.

Ch. 7 Figure 8: Thomas Birch's engraving of the capture of Guerriere. Naval History and Heritage Command, Navy Art Collection, 2008-058-0717.

Ch.7 Figure 9: Nathaniel Currier's print of final moments of the Battle of Lake Champlain. Naval History and Heritage Command, NH 72328 KN.

Ch. 7 Figure 10: Lithograph published by H.R. Robinson. Naval History and Heritage Command, NH 86698.

Ch. 7 Figure 11: Thomas Birch's portrayal of engagement between American and British brigs, Hornet and Penguin.

Naval History and Heritage Command, NH 1159.

Ch. 7 Figure 12: Thomas Birch's portrayal of engagement between American and British brigs Hornet and Penguin. Naval History and Heritage Command, NH 1159.

Ch. 7 Figure 13: British engraving of HMS Endymion and USS President. Naval History and Heritage Command, Navy Art Collection, 2001-050-01.

Ch. 7 Figure 14: Engraving by J. Aspin. Naval History and Heritage Command, Navy Art Collection, 65-433-X.

Ch. 7 Figure 15: First plate in Louis Haghe's engraving series of the contest between Shannon and Chesapeake. Naval History and Heritage Command, NH 63177 KN.

Ch. 7 Figure 16: Second plate in Louis Haghe's engraving series of the contest between Shannon and Chesapeake. Naval History and Heritage Command, NH 63179 KN.

Ch. 7 Figure 17: Third plate in Louis Haghe's engraving series of the contest between Shannon and Chesapeake. Naval History and Heritage Command, NH 63178 KN.

Ch. 7 Figure 18: Fourth plate in Louis Haghe's engraving series of the contest between Shannon and Chesapeake. Naval History and Heritage Command, NH 63180 KN.

Ch. 7 Figure 19: Image of HM brig Epervier. Naval History and Heritage Command NH 51053.

Ch. 7 Figure 20: Thomas Birch lithograph. Naval History and Heritage Command, Navy Art Collection, 75-354-C.

Ch. 8. Figure 1: Herman Melville, head-and-shoulders portrait, (photograph), circa 1944. Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item2005694855/.

Part One: Strategy and Operations

CHAPTER 1

The *Queen of France* Comes to America, 1778

On 4 May 1778, having been delayed in its sailing, the French navy frigate *Nymphe*, Nicolas-Antoine Chevalier de Beaudot de Sainneville in command, arrived at Boston, Massachusetts. She carried copies of the treaties of alliance and of amity and commerce between the United States of America and France, entered into three months earlier. A few days after *La Nymphe* anchored at Boston, the French merchant ship *Brune* sailed into the harbor. *La Brune* was a former East Indiaman of 450 tons armed with 20 six-pounder cannons under the command of Jean Berubé Dufraine. When Sainneville admonished Dufraine to take precautions so that his seamen would not desert, the merchant captain reported that *La Brune,* although sailing as a French vessel, had actually been sold to the Americans before leaving Lorient. Early in 1778, in fact, the Continental Congress's three commissioners in France had purchased the armed merchant ship *Brune* for the Continental Navy. Renaming it *Queen of France,* they dispatched it to America with a dual captaincy consisting of the French master, Dufraine, and a Continental Navy captain, John Green, and with a crew consisting entirely of French seamen. All this was in contravention of French regulations and policy. We can only imagine the consternation of the French crew when they first discovered in Boston Harbor that they were not serving in a French merchantman, but in a commissioned warship of a foreign navy.

Sainneville enjoined Dufraine to prevent the American flag from being hoisted on board until Sainneville had removed all the French sailors who made up her crew. The next day Sainneville sent an officer to take a copy of *La Brune*'s muster roll, and Dufraine repeated a pledge that he would answer for anyone, down to the last boy, who would be missing. Two days later, the American flag was seen flying on board the ship, and several of the French sailors indicated by motions that they wished to be taken off. Even though Captain Green was ashore, the French officers who were on board at first turned over very few of the sailors. Eventually, almost all the seamen transferred over to *La Nymphe* and volunteered to serve in her, since, according to Sainneville, "they learned that the Americans promised much, paid them nothing, fed them poorly, and held them in irons to be sure of them." The next day, Continental Navy Captain John Green came to see Sainneville and denied reports that he had tried to entice away all the French seamen or intended to keep them by force from being turned over to *La Nymphe.* In the end, the two men parted amicably. Sainneville recovered 56 men from *La Brune*—5 officers, 40 seamen, and 11 boys—as well as 11 other French sailors he found at Boston.[1]

This was a minor episode in Franco-American relations on the eve of the entrance of France into the war on the side of the United States, and one should not overstate its significance. Yet, the episode throws into sharp relief the texture of the awkward period between France's decision to enter into alliance with the United States and the realization of that alliance. In addition, the episode is indicative of intrinsic conflicts between the two allies, each of which had its own war aims and requirements for pursuing them.

The government of France played a double game between May 1776, when it began providing secret

aid to the American colonial rebellion against British authority, and 6 February 1778, when Louis XVI entered into treaties of alliance and of amity and commerce with the Continental Congress, formally recognizing the independence of the United States. During that interval, France professed to maintain neutrality in the contest and to conform to provisions of treaties with the British that obliged France to refrain from supplying warships of Great Britain's enemies. Ostensibly, the French prohibited sales of American prizes in French ports and expelled American privateers and their prizes within 24 hours. In actuality, France gave the United States millions of dollars' worth of war supplies, allowed American warships to remain in port under various pretenses, winked at clandestine sales of prizes to French merchants, and even allowed Americans to build, outfit, and man a Continental Navy warship, the *Deane,* at Nantes.[2]

Because of this double game, the French could give contradictory impressions to American privateersmen. When the prizemaster of the British brigantine *Mercury* sailed into the Gironde River flying the British flag inverted and declared to the captain of a French navy frigate that she was a prize to the New Hampshire privateer ship *Portsmouth,* John Hart, master, the French naval officer had no choice but to enforce the regulation expelling such prizes. Captain Hart was chagrined at having to send his prize to a Spanish port and displeased that the *Portsmouth* "was ordered out of the river, and strictly forbid taking on any warlike stores or French seamen." He wrote his employer that French ports were closed to American prizes and stated his surprise that "the many people who have gone from France to America, have represented the French as being friendly to us."[3] Yet, American privateersmen who were more circumspect about how they brought their British prizes into France were able to dispose of them in private and were even allowed to use public dockyard facilities. On returning home to Boston, Massachusetts, privateer captain William Day announced to the public that

> the treatment of the officers and seamen of the ship *General Mifflin,* both at Brest and port L'Orient, was beyond their most sanguine expectations—We were permitted to go into the King's dock at Brest to clean (a privilege never granted to a Briton) and when there, received every assistance we could expect, both from the gentlemen of the navy and army, of his Most Christian Majesty.[4]

In playing their double game, the French government had to walk a fine line. On the one hand, they did not want to act so flagrantly as to force the British into a declaration of war before the French navy was fully prepared to fight. On the other hand, French policy was to provide the American rebellion sufficient aid to keep up the armed struggle as long as possible and to sustain the Americans' morale so that they would not submit to a premature peace. The French wanted the American war to endure, so as to drain Great Britain's finances and manpower.[5]

The British ministry was well aware of the French duplicity—the American commissioners' private secretary, Edward Bancroft, was a British spy. The British, however, like the French, had to walk a narrow line. They had no desire to precipitate a war with France, yet they knew how essential French aid was to the Americans. The British sought to press their official protests strongly enough to limit

wwthe extent of the French aid reaching the Americans, but not so far as to create a break in diplomatic relations.

By the end of 1777, the double game was about to come to an end. In December, the French government informed the American commissioners of their intention to enter into a formal alliance, only awaiting the Spanish court's reply to France's invitation to join the alliance. At the same time, the French promised to provide a naval convoy part of the way from Nantes to America for a number of merchant ships and American warships laden with munitions.[6]

The Continental Navy brigantine *Lexington* was captured by the British on 19 September 1777, a week after having been expelled by the French from Morlaix under strong British diplomatic pressure. Among its crew of 94, the British captured 19 French seamen.[7] When the British ambassador to France "made Strong Remonstrances" to the French minister for foreign affairs and the French minister of state, Comte de Vergennes and Comte de Maurepas, the ambassador reported that

> they both assured me that the most positive Orders had been sent to all the Ports, to do every thing possible to prevent an Abuse, which they said was manifestly as prejudicial to France as it could be to us.[8]

Despite their consistent record of double-dealing with the British, in this case the two members of the highest French councils were stating the truth about French policy.

Although the French government had been secretly aiding the American rebellion long before entering into a formal alliance, their support for the American war effort had its limits. The French minister for foreign affairs, for instance, scoffed at the American commissioners' proposal that France sell or loan the United States eight ships of the line, noting that every available ship of the line was needed for the French navy.[9]

As it was with ships of the line, so it was with seamen: the French government sought to reserve French seamen for service in the navy of France. In the 18th century, the factor that limited the size of a country's navy was not so much how many warships a country could build, but how many sailors there were to man them. In both the British and American navies, warships fitting for sea frequently had difficulty finding enough seamen to fill their complements. The French navy had experienced identical problems during the Seven Years' War, when, according to the historian James Pritchard, "incomplete crews remained the most common cause of delayed ship departures."[10] France's system of registering seamen in each port into classes had ceased to function as an effective system of conscription by the middle of the 18th century. Having to complete their crews with landsmen, ships often "contained too small a proportion of real able seamen."[11] Nothing had changed to make France's leaders expect anything different in the coming war. Because even the loss of a handful of experienced sailors could make a difference to the efficiency of a warship, the French navy jealously guarded its stock of seamen.

France's leaders were genuinely concerned about the many French sailors serving in American vessels. Gabriel de Sartine, French secretary of state for the marine, instituted strict procedures to ensure that

French seamen served only in French ships, so that they would be available for conscription into the navy. He issued repeated admonitions to port officials to take precautions that French seamen did not serve on board American privateers.[12] On 7 November 1777, he threatened to punish a French merchant at Lorient for facilitating the secret enlistment of French sailors on board two recently arrived Continental Navy vessels. He ordered the *commissaire de la marine* of that port to "pay the closest attention so that our sailors have no dealings on the American ships and to prohibit clandestine enlistments; you are aware of how important this subject is."[13] Suspicious that French seamen transferred to American ships after having left port aboard French ships, Sartine ordered the *commissaire* to prevent French merchant ships from leaving port with more seamen than necessary to navigate them, and to remind ship masters that they were responsible for returning with all the men with whom they sailed, or for accounting for every seaman they did not bring back.[14] At the end of November, Sartine instructed the *commissaire* to "require guarantees of the [French] shipowners to head straight for our colonies, and to return therefrom." The reason for this requirement was that the sailors who go over to America are taken away from the king's service here.[15] As a result of these instructions, the *commissaire* added a detailed statement to the crew list required from each master of a ship intending to sail to America. By signing the statement, the master pledged himself to sail only to a specific French port in America, without deviating from his course, and to return directly to France. The master also promised to take care to prevent desertion among his crew.[16]

Sartine made efforts to discover how many French seamen were actually in American naval service and to repatriate French seamen serving in America. In November 1777, the French ministry sent Jean Holker, a French merchant, to America to let leaders there know that the French government was doing its best to oblige American commerce and to report on conditions in America. Among the kinds of information sought was the number of French sailors in the Continental Navy.[17] At the end of December, in order to frustrate a British peace overture, the French navy dispatched a frigate to Boston carrying an American messenger with dispatches from Congress's commissioners to France reporting on the agreement reached in principle to enter into a formal alliance. The French commander's secret orders instructed him to attempt to bring back all the French sailors he found in America, using both positive enticements and promises of a pardon.[18]

France's ambiguous relationship with America sometimes led officials in the ports into mistakes that foiled the official policy emanating from Paris regarding the service of French seamen in foreign vessels. In October 1777, the *Commissaire des Classes* in Paimboeuf—the officer in charge of the registration of sailors for conscription into the navy—complained of the efforts of American privateer captains—Thomas Truxtun of the Massachusetts privateer ship *Mars* in particular—to seduce French seamen into joining their ships; but the *commissaire* then rationalized France's loss of the seamen with the observation that "these captains find hardly more than bad subjects, vagabonds and adventurers whom they treat accordingly, and of whom society cannot be purged soon enough."[19] A month later, the commander of the French transport ship *Porteuse* reported to Sartine that Truxtun was recruiting French seamen and was thought to have 35 of them on board *Mars.* When these men asked the commander of the transport to reclaim them, however, he did nothing but report the situation to the

admiral. "I might have made use of the article in the ordinance that states that we will take charge of all Frenchmen found on board foreign vessels," he explained,

> but the connections of the latter with us, the complicated interests, and the advantages we draw from this diversion, all these reflections stopped me, and with even more calm as their families in Paimbeouf had made no demands reaching me, and I had heard that they were largely tradesmen and adventurers.

Sartine's dry comment on this justification reads: "It would have been approved if he had claimed, conformable to the ordinance, the French sailors on board the Anglo-American vessel."[20]

Lieutenant de Vaisseau de Kergariou was diligent in fulfilling his orders to prevent the service of French seamen on foreign ships. On 29 December 1777, he reported to Sartine that at St. Nazaire he had removed seven French seamen from the Continental Navy sloop *Independence.*[21] Also, in December 1777, he reported to Sartine about an inn at Paimbeouf where the Americans were "lodging and boarding several French seamen, whom they intend to pick up at sea by having them go down the river on local barges." He took measures to foil this scheme. Yet, even zealous de Kergariou suggested that the government should not pursue this policy with any strictness:

> Permit me, My Lord, to remind you that this search for our seamen which is on one hand very advantageous could repulse and keep away from our ports the American vessels, which are at this time procuring us a very profitable trade; the expulsion of prize vessels is already a considerable loss and I think that your intention would be to tolerate a few abuses so long as it is possible to keep them unseen.[22]

In the case of *La Brune,* Americans fitting out the vessel successfully implemented a stratagem to circumvent the French government's restrictions on the employment of French seamen. In September 1777, John Ross, a Philadelphia merchant residing in Nantes, purchased the French East Indiaman *La Brune* in partnership with Silas Deane. Deane served with Benjamin Franklin and Arthur Lee as one of the American Congress's commissioners in France.[23] By October, Ross had engaged John Green, an Irish-born merchant ship captain of Philadelphia, as its master.[24] The plan was to maintain the façade of French ownership, recruit a French crew, and dispatch the ship under the nominal command of a French captain, ostensibly for the French islands in America. John Green would appear as a passenger, but would actually direct the ship's route, taking it into a port in the United States.

On December 10, Jean Berubé Dufraine, a 46-year-old merchant captain of Saint-Malo, filed *La Brune*'s crew list, according to regulations. That document disguised *La Brune*'s transfer to the American merchant John Ross by listing as its owners the French firm Bérard Frères & Company. Dufraine signed the required statement attached to the crew list by which he pledged himself to sail directly to the French West Indian possession of St. Domingue and return directly to Lorient. The statement also bound Dufraine to prevent desertion of his crew and to be accountable for returning them to France, barring desertion, death, or other unavoidable circumstance.[25] The very next day after giving his word to sail directly to St. Domingue, however, Dufraine signed his instructions by which he agreed to

follow Green's directions to take *La Brune* into an American port.[26]

When Sartine learned of this plot, he remarked that "this is an arrangement which is impossible to tolerate" and directed the *commissaire de la marine* at Lorient:

> you will stand in the way of this passage [of the American captain], and you will take necessary measures to that effect. . . . You will assure the compliance of the French captain who is to command *La Brune* to go to our colonies or to return to France under such penalty as His Majesty will deem appropriate to pronounce.[27]

The Americans intended to lade *La Brune* with munitions on the account of Congress and dispatch it with a flotilla of similarly-laden French and American merchant ships to be convoyed by the *Deane.* If the convoy was attacked, *La Brune* was expected to help the *Deane* defend it. But, Ross found that fitted out as a ship of force, with six months' provisions for a crew of 70 or 80 men, the ship had too little stowage remaining to carry enough freight to make a profit. In February 1778, with Deane's approval, he proposed to sell the ship to the Congress at his original cost. The United States would then have an armed vessel, completely fitted out, manned, and ready to sail.[28] The cargo, which was U.S. property anyway, would then be at the Congress's risk. Arthur Lee, one of the three American commissioners, noted sourly that "if the Ship is lost, she would be chargd to the public; if not, Mr. Ross would either sell her or receive the freight. In this manner the public was always sacrificed."[29] Despite Lee's objection and Continental Navy Captain Samuel Nicholson's opinion that Ross was a "snake in the grass,"[30] the two remaining commissioners, Deane and Franklin, consented to the proposal. Neither Lee nor Benjamin Franklin seems to have been aware that Silas Deane was part owner of *La Brune.* It appears a clear conflict of interest that the letter accepting the offer in the name of the commissioners is signed only by Deane. He sent Ross a commission for Green as captain in the Continental Navy, which Ross filled in, renaming the vessel the *Queen of France.*[31]

By February 25, when *La Brune* sailed with the American flotilla from Quiberon Bay under a French naval convoy, the treaty of alliance had been signed, and the French had no objection to *La Brune*'s carrying munitions to their new ally.[32] Had they been aware that *La Brune* was now the Continental Navy frigate *Queen of France*, they would, no doubt, have objected to the sending of 60 French seamen in it. When the French fleet returned in late March, it reported that a few days out, *La Brune* separated from the convoy, unable to carry sufficient sail.[33] Nevertheless, the ship arrived safely at Portsmouth, New Hampshire, the first of May, and at Boston shortly thereafter.[34] There, as we have seen, it met French navy frigate *La Nymphe,* whose captain, Sainneville, retrieved the French crew.

After his return to France, Sainneville prepared a memorandum for the secretary of state for the marine. Heading a section with the phrase, "Abuse extremely prejudicial to the French Navy," Sainneville advised that:

> The French government cannot take too many precautions to oppose the emigration of its seamen. The Americans . . . purchase in France ships manned by Frenchmen under our nation's flag, and then retain them under the pretext that they have engaged for three

> years in the vessel on which they left France, even though these seamen were unaware of the true nature of the ship, which is carefully kept secret. The ill treatment which they make the French seamen kept on board their vessels suffer, and their extreme bad faith in their promises will infinitely encourage the pains that the government will take to stop this abuse, which is of the greatest importance to end.[35]

The international competition for seamen was an integral part of the war at sea during the American Revolution. British officials pressured captured American seamen to serve in the Royal Navy. Officers of the Continental Navy enlisted British seamen from among prisoners of war. Naval officers of every country deplored the competition for skilled sailors that came from their own countrymen's privateers. The crew of John Paul Jones's *Bonhomme Richard,* officers and men, consisted of 79 Americans, 59 English, 29 Portuguese, 21 Irish, 7 Swedes, 4 Scots, 3 Norwegians, 2 East Indians, and one each French, Italian, and Swiss seaman. In addition, 36 French landsmen and 137 French marines sailed in *Bonhomme Richard*.[36] This mixed crew may have been an extreme case, but it is indicative of the polyglot nature of the crews of many Continental Navy vessels. While the total number of Frenchmen who served in American warships is unknown, it may have been significant. No other case compares to that of the Continental Navy frigate, *Queen of France,* whose crew was entirely French. We can only speculate on what would have happened to the crew if *La Nymphe* had not been at Boston when their ship arrived.

French officials took the problem of the service of French seamen in American warships seriously but did not make it a matter of official remonstrance. Instead, they treated the problem as one to be dealt with on a day to day, even on a sailor by sailor, basis. The conflict over the manner in which *Queen of France* sailed to America in 1778 was amicably resolved and the matter quietly dropped. Later that summer, when the French naval squadron under the Comte d'Estaing sailed away from Rhode Island, leaving the American army's attack on the British post at Newport unsupported, it became clear that there were more consequential frictions between the two allies than the competition for seamen.[37] Thus, the day *Queen of France* came to America never made it into the history books.

NOTES

[1] Sainneville to Sartine, 15 June 1778, Marine B4, Vol. 141, fol. 19-20, Archives Nationales, Paris.
[2] Michael J. Crawford, "The Hawke and the Dove, a Cautionary Tale: Neutral Ports and Prizes of War during the American Revolution," *The Northern Mariner/le marin du nord* 18 (2008): 49–66.
[3] John Hart to John Langdon, 23 Dec. 1777, William Bell Clark, et al., eds., *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, 13 volumes to date (Washington, DC: Naval Historical Center, 1965–) [henceforth, NDAR], 10: 1002.
[4] William Day, et al., to the public, 29 Nov. 1777; ibid., 629.
[5] For France's American policy during this period, see Jonathan R. Dull, *The French Navy and American Independence: A Study of Arms and Diplomacy*, *1774–1787* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975), 68–105.
[6] NDAR, 10: 1117; Dull, *The French Navy and American Independence*, 93–94.
[7] "A List of French Men Taken in the *Lexington* Rebel Privatier by His Majesty's Cutter *Alert* the 19th Sept. 1777," *NDAR*, 10: 874.
[8] Lord Stormont to Lord Weymouth, 15 Oct. 1777, ibid., 914.
[9] Comte de Vergennes to Marquis d'Ossun, 3 Oct. 1777, in B. F. Stevens, comp., *B. F. Stevens's Facsimiles of Manuscripts in European Archives Relating to America, 1773–1783*, 24 vols. (London, 1889–95), Vol. 19, no. 1711.

[10] James Pritchard, *Louis XV's Navy 1748–1762: A Study of Organization and Administration* (Kingston, Ontario: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1987), 71.
[11] E. H. Jenkins, *A History of the French Navy: From its Beginnings to the Present Day* (London: MacDonald and Jane's, 1973), 147.
[12] See, for example, Sartine to M. Viger, commissary of the port and dockyard of L'Orient, 2 Aug. 1777, *NDAR*, 9: 545–46.
[13] Gabriel de Sartine to Charles Pierre Gonet, 7 Sept. 1777, ibid., 10: 976–77.
[14] Sartine to Charles Pierre Gonet, 11 Nov. 1777, Ser. 1 E4, Vol. 80, p. 122, Archives du Port de Lorient, Lorient, France.
[15] Gabriel de Sartine to Charles Pierre Gonet, 29 Nov. 1777, *NDAR*, 10: 1048–49.
[16] For an example of this pledge, see the "Rolle d'Equipage" of *La Brune,* signed by Jean Berubé Dufraine, 10 Dec. 1777, Ser. 2, p. 15, I Bureau de Classes 1777–79, Archives du Port de Lorient, Lorient, France.
[17] "Verbal Instructions Given to Jean Holker," 25 Nov. 1777, *NDAR*, 10: 1028–29.
[18] Louis XVI and Gabriel de Sartine to Lieutenant de Vaisseau Chevalier de Bernard de Marigny, 20 Dec. 1777, ibid., 1126–29.
[19] Jean-Pierre Louvel to Gabriel de Sartine, 10 Oct. 1777, ibid., 897–98.
[20] Gouyon de Mallévre to Gabriel de Sartine, 19 Nov. 1777, ibid., 1004–5.
[21] Lieutenant de Vaisseau de Kergariou to Gabriel de Sartine, 29 Dec. 1777, ibid., 1159–61.
[22] Lieutenant de Vaisseau de Kergariou to Gabriel de Sartine, 18 Dec. 1777, ibid., 1118–20.
[23] John Ross to the American Commissioners in France, 6 Feb. 1778, ibid., 629–31. The fact that Silas Deane was a partner with Ross in *La Brune* is established in John Ross to Silas Deane, 26 Jan. 1778, Silas Deane Papers, Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford, CT; and Deane's reply, 1 Feb. 1778, *The Deane Papers*, 5 vols., *Collections of the New-York Historical Society*, Vols. 19–23 (1886–90): 20: 349–50.
[24] James Van Zandt (alias George Lupton) to William Eden, 15 Oct. 1777, *NDAR*, 10: 913.
[25] "Rolle d'Equipage" of *La Brune*, signed by Jean Berubé Dufraine, 10 Dec. 1777, Ser. 2, p. 15, I Bureau de Classes 1777–79, Archives du Port de Lorient, Lorient, France.
[26] Shipping Articles for the Officers of the Ship *Brune*, 11 Dec. 1777, *NDAR*, 10: 1087–90.
[27] Gabriel de Sartine to Charles Pierre Gonet, 22 Nov. 1777, ibid., 1014–15.
[28] John Ross to Silas Deane, 26 Jan. 1778, Silas Deane Papers, Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford, CT; Deane to Ross, 1 Feb. 1778, *The Deane Papers*, 20: 349–50; Ross to the American Commissioners in France, 6 Feb. 1778, *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, Leonard W. Labaree, et al., eds., 41 vols. to date (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959–), 25: 629–30.
[29] Notation on John Ross to the American Commissioners in France, 26 Feb. 1778, *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 25: 716.
[30] Samuel Nicholson to the American Commissioners in France, 12 Feb. 1778, ibid., 656.
[31] John Hancock, commission to John Green as captain in the Continental Navy of the frigate *Queen of France*, 11 Feb. 1778, Papers of the Continental Congress, item 137, Vol. 2, p. 31, National Archives, Washington, DC; the American Commissioners in France to John Ross, 11 Feb. 1778, *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 25: 648–49; Silas Deane to John Ross, 11 Feb. 1778, *The Deane Papers*, 20: 362–63; John Ross to the American Commissioners, 26 Feb. 1778, ibid., 716.
[32] John Ross to the American Commissioners in France, 28 Feb. 1778, Silas Deane Papers, Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford, CT.
[33] Jonathan Williams, Jr., to the American Commissioners in France, 24 March 1778, The Papers of Benjamin Franklin, 26: 164.
[34] The Continental Commerce Committee to the American Commissioners in France, 28 May 1778, *The Papers of John Adams*, Robert J. Taylor, et al., eds., 17 vols. to date (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981–), 6: 167; Continental Marine Committee to John Green, 19 June 1778, *Out-Letters of the Continental Marine Committee and Board of Admiralty, August, 1776–September 1780*, Charles Oscar Paullin, ed., 2 vols. (New York: Naval History Society, 1914), 1: 262.
[35] Sainneville memorandum, 19 June 1778, Marine B4, Vol. 141, fol. 32–33, Archives Nationale, Paris, France.
[36] Samuel Eliot Morison, *John Paul Jones: A Sailor's Biography* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1959), 205.
[37] Michael J. Crawford, "The Joint Allied Operation at Rhode Island, 1778," in *New Interpretations in Naval History: Selected Papers from the Ninth Naval History Symposium Held at the United States Naval Academy, 18–20 October 1989,* William R. Roberts and Jack Sweetman, eds., (Annapolis, MD.: Naval Institute Press, 1991): 227–42.

CHAPTER 2

The Tale of the Milk Pail: Vice Admiral Comte d'Estaing's Strategic Vision for the War of 1778 in America

Jean de La Fontaine's fable, *La laitière et le pot au lait*, or "The Dairymaid and Her Milk Pail" goes something like this. A young farmer's wife hurries off to the market to sell a jug of milk. Along the way, she thinks about buying eggs with the proceeds, imagines hatching chicks from the eggs, raising the chicks, selling the chickens in return for a piglet, and keeping the piglet until it has grown into a fat pig, whose pork she would exchange for a cow and calf. Pleased with this last thought, she jumps for joy and accidentally drops the jug and loses all the milk. The moral of the story?

> Who buildeth not, sometimes, in air
> His cots, or seats, or castles fair?
> From kings to dairy women, all,
> The wise, the foolish, great and small,
> Each thinks his waking dream the best.[1]

Or, prosaically, don't count your chickens before they are hatched.

In describing his vision of what the French fleet under his command might accomplish in the American Theater in the 1778 campaigning season, Vice Admiral Charles-Henri Comte d'Estaing made reference to this fable, observing that all his hopes were built on as uncertain a foundation as the dairy maid's and were as liable to be dashed. In the event, d'Estaing's reference to the tale of the milk pail proved prescient.

The French entered the American War of Independence in 1778 with two basic war aims. First, they sought to humble the pride of Great Britain and restore the balance of power that British victory in the Seven Years' War had upset. Second, and subordinate to the first, they sought to separate the British from their North American colonies and thereby break their monopoly on North American trade and deprive them of a source of economic power.[2]

To achieve these aims, Louis XVI's cabinet determined a strategy with three principal parts, each of which was largely naval.[3]

1. Help the Americans win their struggle in North America.

2. Threaten an invasion of the British homeland by concentrating troops on the coast of Normandy and Brittany and maintaining a powerful fleet at Brest. This would force the British to keep a substantial portion of their fleet in the English Channel and thereby provide the French an opportunity to achieve

at least temporary naval superiority in the American or Asian theaters, in the latter of which the French hoped to expand their holdings in India.

3. Capture several British West Indian islands, but then abandon most of them after dismantling their fortifications. In the West Indies, mobility was more important than territorial conquest. The goal was to deprive the British fleet of its bases. If the British chose to reoccupy their captured islands, they would have to expend additional resources to defend them, while the French would be relieved of the necessity of committing forces for their defense.

In the spring of 1778, the French navy boasted 64 ships of the line to Great Britain's 80. A key element of French strategy was for Louis XVI to persuade his cousin, Charles III, to come into the war. The addition of Spain's approximately 40 ships of the line would give the Bourbon allies some 104 ships of the line, enough to intimidate the British with a credible threat of invasion.[4]

The overall operational war aims of the French, as summarized by French Minister for Foreign Affairs, Charles Gravier Comte de Vergennes, in a memo of January 1778, were to preserve the French and Spanish possessions in America and to aid the Americans' efforts on land as well as to counteract British cruising against American seaborne commerce. The best way of accomplishing these aims, Vergennes argued, was to send a French fleet to America.[5] The admiral chosen to lead that fleet, Comte d'Estaing, was appointed vice admiral of the seas of Asia and America on 6 February 1778, the same day that France recognized the independence of the United States. D'Estaing had been consulted frequently on the war's strategy and was one of the chief instigators of Vergennes's memo.[6]

As a war fighter, d'Estaing was an amphibian, with experience directing operations both on land and at sea. Born in 1729, the young noble had become a musketeer before he was 10 years old. He served with distinction in the army during the War of the Austrian Succession in Flanders and during the Seven Years' War in Asia, where he armed two vessels and in a cruise of five months destroyed several English settlements on the Persian Gulf and on the coasts of Sumatra. By 1763, he had risen to the rank of lieutenant general in the army and chief of squadron of the navy. In the ensuing years of peace, he had risen to the highest grades: governor general of the Leeward Islands and lieutenant general of the navy.[7] In addition to his war experience on land and sea, his strengths for his crucially important assignment included knowledge of English, diplomatic experience, and relative youth. At 48, he was in his vigorous manhood in comparison with the other general officers of the French navy, all of whom were over 70 years of age. His major weaknesses were that he had never fought a significant naval engagement and that, because of his army origins, fellow naval officers saw him as an intruder into their ranks.[8]

Figure 1: Vice Admiral Comte d'Estaing

France formally recognized the independence of the United States of America by entering into a treaty of amity and commerce and a treaty of contingent alliance on 6 February 1778. The slide into open warfare with the United Kingdom accelerated quickly, from the breaking of diplomatic ties within days of 13 March, when the French ambassador communicated the commercial treaty to the Court of

St. James, to 28 June, when Louis XVI, citing British attacks on four French warships in the English Channel, ordered the commander of the Brest Fleet to make war on the British. [9]

The strategic situation in America in the spring of 1778 can be briefly sketched. The British controlled the extremities of the North American Atlantic coast, holding East and West Florida to the south and Canada, Newfoundland, and Nova Scotia, with a naval base at Halifax, to the north. In between, the British were fortified in New York City, Newport, and Philadelphia, but controlled little other territory on the mainland. The British had 31,000 troops in North America,[10] where they were opposed by the Continental Army, which fluctuated in strength between several thousand and a peak of 23,500,[11] as well as state troops and local militia who could muster to defend against immediate, short-term threats. Vice Admiral Richard Viscount Howe, commanding on the North American station, had received orders from London to send four ships of the line to the West Indies. Minus these ships, he would have nine ships of the line remaining on the coasts of North America to oppose d'Estaing's fleet of 12 ships of the line. On his arrival in North America, d'Estaing would enjoy naval superiority in the number of line of battle ships, number of guns, and especially weight of metal they could throw—at least temporarily. In the spring of 1778, the Admiralty appointed Vice Admiral the Honorable John Byron to the command of a squadron of 13 ships of the line held in readiness in England to reinforce the North American station in case North America proved to be the destination of the French Toulon fleet.

In the West Indies, the winds prevailing from east to west made the Windward Islands the keys to a successful campaign. Whoever controlled the windward-most islands controlled traffic with Europe. Because the West Indian islands could not supply the needs of large bodies of troops and ships, control of the Windward Islands gave a combatant a base from which it could intercept its enemy's supplies and reinforcements and from which it could protect its own. In the Windward Islands, France held Guadeloupe, Martinique, Saint Lucia, and La Désirade, and the British held Dominica, Barbados, Saint Vincent, Grenada, and Tobago.

Conrad-Alexandre Gérard, Louis XVI's ambassador to the United States, took passage to America on board d'Estaing's flagship, the ship of the line *Languedoc*. On 15 June, in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, he formally asked d'Estaing about his plans for the ensuing campaign, based on a number of contingencies. What would the plan of operations be if the British still occupy Philadelphia? If we take Philadelphia, will we attack New York, and if so, what cooperation would we ask of the Americans, and what would we ask as compensation for our effort? If our ships are not able to attack New York directly, but only reduce it by preventing convoys from resupplying the city, how would we expect the Americans to cooperate? If there are other operations—such as against Newport—that either Congress or we will propose, what compensation—such as provisions—would we ask for delaying our operations in the West Indies? And finally, what are our options if, when our fleet arrives in America, the British have arranged an armistice to allow them to withdraw their forces to Canada and Nova Scotia and to move troops to England and to the West Indian islands?[12]

D'Estaing's lengthy and thoughtful response, which he submitted to Gérard a week later, on 22 June, provides an insight into the French admiral's strategic vision for the American campaign in 1778.[13]

D'Estaing addresses his plans for operations in each of three regions: First, in reference to support of the American revolutionaries on their coasts; second, in reference to Canada, Newfoundland, and Nova Scotia; and third, in reference to the West Indies, including support of Spain's interests in that region. D'Estaing's orders, issued by the king before the French fleet sailed from Toulon, had provided him guidance on operations in each of these areas.

In support of the American revolutionaries, d'Estaing had the freedom of choosing for himself where to attack the enemy, based on his judgment where it would be most effective. D'Estaing was to act alone or in conjunction with the forces of the United States, as he saw fit. In any case, whether he attacked the British in the Delaware, at New York, or any other North American port, before the French fleet departed for the West Indies he was to "proceed with an outstanding action advantageous to the Americans and glorious for the arms of the King and proper in showing the protection that His Majesty grants to his allies."[14]

In Canada and Nova Scotia, French cooperation with U.S. military projects were to be predicated on an understanding that France and Spain would be afforded rights to establish fishing settlements on the island of Newfoundland and in Nova Scotia.

In the West Indies, d'Estaing was instructed to ignore the British Leeward Islands in favor of capturing all the British Windward Islands. Whenever he captured a British island, he was to destroy its commerce, burn its ships, raze the storehouses and fortifications, and impose a contribution. Only Dominica was to be retained and fortified. If Spain was to request his help with the conquest of Jamaica or of Pensacola, d'Estaing was to assist only indirectly by diversionary operations.

The foregoing, then, is the general context in which d'Estaing, in responding to Gérard's questions, laid out his strategic vision for operations in the American theater in 1778.

D'Estaing began his answer with an observation that is the equivalent of the modern aphorism: no battle plan survives contact with the enemy.

> The variety of maritime and military circumstances render uncertain the most probable projects; the best established foundations are only too often reversed by an unforeseen event; if the informations themselves are found to be only dubious speculations, the problem is nothing more than chimerical, one floats in doubt.

Nevertheless, d'Estaing believed that responding to Gérard's questions served a useful purpose, since "two men applying themselves to the same work understand it better." Still, he reminded the ambassador "that the conclusions drawn from what is going to be said will very frequently be contradicted by the always imperative law of the moment."

As you may surmise from the phrases quoted here from his opening paragraph, d'Estaing has a penchant for aphorisms.

> D'Estaing on the element of surprise: "Speed is the first of weapons; to surprise is almost always to vanquish. . . . Surprise is worth more than four battles, more than a reinforcement of a ship of the line and three frigates."
>
> On seizing the day: "Today's possibility can disappear tomorrow."
>
> On optimal force: "The greatest force is always best."[15]

D'Estaing's detailed responses commence with a projected attack on the British at Philadelphia, presuming the enemy will not have abandoned that city when the French fleet arrives. Surprising the British army and navy at Philadelphia would depend on a complex series of events, involving winds, tides, soundings in the Delaware River, and the maneuvers of the opposing fleets. The French would need to obtain pilots and to make contact and coordinate with the American land forces. The ideal circumstance would be to encounter the British fleet at sea, presuming the enemy will not have received a reinforcement from England. It would also be desirable to obtain intelligence about the situation in North America from American or British ships encountered before making landfall. If any ships the French encounter near America get away, extreme speed will be required to prevent compromising surprise.

Assuming landfall is made and pilots are taken on board, d'Estaing suggests that the next order of business would be to find the location of the American Congress and safely deliver there Gérard and Silas Deane, a former American commissioner to France returning to the United States on board *Languedoc*. Deane should carry letters in cipher addressed to Congress and General George Washington. Those letters, d'Estaing asserts, could "decide the destiny of the entire campaign," depending on the answers they produce to essential operational questions: Should the French fleet attack Philadelphia or only blockade it? Should the Americans and French cooperate against New York? What would Washington want the French to do if the British retreated through the Jerseys?

Needing to act quickly, before the British could prepare to oppose them, the French would have to ascend the Delaware River immediately, even before receiving word back from General Washington. To ascend the Delaware River as far as the good anchorage at Reedy Island, below Philadelphia, would require lightening ship. To lighten ship in order to get over sandbars and then rearm would mean leaving a barrier between the ocean and the fleet. Once at the anchorage, would d'Estaing wait for an answer from Washington? How long would that take? To arrive opposite Philadelphia would require additional lightening of ship, possibly making the ships of the line unstable. Would the fleet be able to support Washington's attack on the city? Would the fleet be able to destroy the British victualers and transports? Could the fleet then depart for New York even before Congress returned to the American capital? And would the fog of the Delaware undercut the entire plan?

A successful enterprise against New York would require accurate and detailed information about the depth of water in the passages between Coney Island and False Hook, and between False Hook and Sandy Hook, as well as precise data on the tides. D'Estaing's information indicated a maximum depth of less than two feet more than the draft of his 74-gun ships, which were required to have superiority

over the British 64s, and only 16 inches greater than the draft of his deepest ships of the line. “Sixteen inches of water below oneself is not sufficiently reassuring,” he observes, particularly considering the sea swell at a river’s mouth, “where banks confine the open sea.”

Assuming that the French fleet could pass though the Narrows, what cooperation could be expected from the Americans? Until we know the size of the enemy force at New York, says d’Estaing, the question is unanswerable. While the French fleet bombards the city, the Americans could attack from Long Island, aided by cannon and mortars from the French fleet mounted on Brooklyn Point; French troops onboard the fleet might seize Governors Island and turn its batteries against the city. Before entering into this campaign, the French must be assured of the firmness of the American troops, for if—from American timidity—all the weight of the action fell on the French, the entire expedition would be doomed to failure. The useless loss of men, equipment, or munitions by the French, poorly supplied to start with, would force a period of inaction “as injurious to the Americans as to ourselves.” The attack on New York should aim at the capture of the city. An attack that was merely diversionary would be a waste of precious time—time needed to complete a campaign against Halifax before the onset of winter, when the fleet must relocate to the West Indies.

In return for the French fleet’s assistance given the United States, Gérard should negotiate for provisions for the fleet and a guarantee of fishing rights in Newfoundland. D’Estaing was particularly concerned about resupplying his ships. If the arrival of the French fleet was to unsettle the British sufficiently, they would abandon their southern cruising stations, which would allow the Americans to ship provisions from the southern states to whatever northern port the French established as a base. Otherwise, the French would have to create some diversion to cause the British to abandon their southern stations and facilitate resupply of d’Estaing’s fleet.

Capturing Newport would benefit both the Americans and the French, since Newport could serve as the French fleet’s principal base in North America. Besides, d’Estaing, with a fleet desperately short of rigging, had hopes of capturing British rigging presumably stored at Newport.

Gérard’s supposition that the Americans and British may have come to an arrangement to allow the British to withdraw their forces from New York and Newport in order to reinforce Britain and the West Indies, d’Estaing dismisses with a shudder, saying, “Let us hasten, without denying the existence of such a possibility, to the matter of an attack on Halifax.”

Having a deep interest in Nova Scotia, the Americans will undoubtedly contribute significant forces to its reduction. Given the time the French will be devoting to the northern campaign, at the expense of advancing their own interests in the West Indies, the French can expect compensation in the form of territory and fishing rights. Like Gérard, d’Estaing favors asking for Newfoundland, because of its importance for the operation of the fishery, but the royal orders bind him to requesting the island of St. John, which is valuable principally for agriculture.

D’Estaing’s ideal outcome of the Canadian campaign, what he calls his “castle in Spain,” is as follows. Newfoundland would be joined to the United States either as a 14th state or by being incorporated

into one of the existing states under the special protection of France. France, Spain, and the United States would guarantee to each other exclusive fishing rights in specific areas, and the right of drying fish on designated sections of the coast. France and Spain would provide troops for the security of Newfoundland and subsidize the new American province of Newfoundland for the upkeep of those troops, officers, engineers, artillery, and fortifications. The United States would cede and guarantee to the king sovereignty over the island of St. John, which would serve as a food source for the French fishing establishments on Newfoundland. The king would guarantee to the inhabitants of St. John political liberty, so that the "true freedom of action, of discourse, and tranquility" found there would serve as a contrast to the worry, jealousy, and ingratitude to be found in republican governments, and thus be an example constantly in view of the Americans and presumably temper their zeal for republicanism. Having introduced this vision as a castle in Spain, d'Estaing concludes by admitting it is but a chimera that strongly resembles the fable of the milk pail. "Alas, after all my 'thats,' that will too probably be some abridged 'thats,' I have the right at least of telling everything that is in my dream, like the little milkmaid."

D'Estaing next turns his sights on the West Indies. The admiral is reluctant to capture the Bermuda Islands because their lack of an anchorage and vulnerability to both hurricanes and calms would mean that the fleet could not remain long enough for a revolutionary government to be consolidated, and would leave the people feeling abandoned. However, he would be willing to reconsider if Gérard believed possession of the Bermudas would be advantageous to the security of France's trade or to harassing that of the British, and if agreeing to the capture would help persuade the Americans to offer more assistance against Newfoundland, St. John, and, perhaps, Barbados.

D'Estaing planned to attack Barbados immediately, before it was known that the French fleet was in the Windward Islands. Only afterward would he put in at Fort Royal, Martinique. From there he would launch expeditions against all the British Windward Islands. Successful operations in the Windward Islands would depend on Gérard's securing for the fleet pilots, charts, plans, and intelligence. In addition, for a particular purpose, d'Estaing would need a half dozen brave emissaries and a dozen Negro slaves who would be freed. Of all the captured islands, only one, Dominica, would he retain. In all the rest, he would give freedom to all blacks who joined him before the capture or surrender of each island. This action would injure the British economically, depriving them of workers. D'Estaing would enlist some of the blacks; those whom he did not enlist he would arm, and thus leave behind him "an infinitely troublesome leaven of rebellion." If they had someone to lead them, they would become a great distraction and drain on the British, as illustrated by the recent history of Jamaica. Only two years before, Jamaican authorities had suppressed a widespread revolt, subsequently trying 135 slaves for rebellion, executing 17, sentencing 11 to corporal punishment, and transporting 45 to another colony.[16] D'Estaing's emissaries, white and black, "would be employed from the instant of landing to spread among the inhabitants the desire and the certitude of freedom." English-speakers would be needed for this task; blacks would be more persuasive among people of their own color than whites would be; but some whites would be needed to direct the undertaking and keep an eye on everyone involved.

D'Estaing would rely on two sets of soldiers to fortify Dominica and render it difficult to recapture:

soldiers drawn from the garrisons of Martinique and Guadeloupe, and freed blacks recruited into the army. D'Estaing argued in favor of this latter expedient, from his own experience in Asia during the Seven Years' War, for

> it is principally through the assistance of freed Negroes, made soldiers and sailors, that I succeeded in my expedition in India; there they proved themselves men of courage, faithfulness, and discipline, which erased from my mind all contrary prejudices.

The French admiral then proceeds to delineate two principles whose truth personal experience has proven—the first of which suggests an unprejudiced racial attitude.

> The first is that everything that calls itself a man, when he attains a better condition, if one uses him there, occupies him, and inspires emulation in him, can be led and animated.

The second "truth," in contrast, confirms racial stereotypes.

> The second is that if one fought in fire, one would have to try to use salamanders in it [salamanders being, in Greek mythology, an animal able to endure fire without harm]; the tropics are the element of the Negroes and almost everywhere poison to the whites.

Employing slaves as soldiers had been a widespread practice from classical times down to the 18th century.[17] At the time of the American Revolution, however, it was highly controversial, particularly in North America and the West Indies,[18] and d'Estaing felt a need to justify his decision. He recognized that the French West Indian colonists "see an armed negro as a monster ready to devour him and to revenge his fellows." But d'Estaing countered that when he was governor general of the Leeward Islands he noted that free blacks were the ones who treated slaves with the greatest rigor. To the possible objection that if the French free and arm slaves on the British islands, the British will retaliate by freeing and arming slaves on the French islands, d'Estaing asserted such behavior on the part of the British was unlikely because the British are too greedy and believe so much in their ability to hold on to what they conquer because of their trust in their accustomed maritime superiority. D'Estaing stated that his proposed policy is merely a momentary expedient, restricted to the captured islands that the French plan to abandon, and to Dominica, "a small island currently without means of defense that we wish to retain." Finally, he stipulates that his plan does not violate the laws of war or of nations. If, on the one hand, slaves are considered to be only beasts, armies universally confiscate and make use of horses and oxen. If, on the other hand, blacks are considered to be peasants, "those of Saxony have been, very much despite themselves, made into Prussian soldiers." D'Estaing would not force the blacks to serve, but take only voluntary recruits, and would compensate all who served.

D'Estaing entered the 1778 campaign with a clear operational vision tied to overall strategic considerations. As d'Estaing had predicted, that vision proved as ephemeral as a castle in Spain. If "speed is the first of weapons," then d'Estaing forfeited that weapon from the start of the campaign. His fleet departed Toulon in mid-April and did not make landfall in North America until early July.

Storms in the Mediterranean, damage to spars and rigging, the poor sailing qualities of several ships, and the need to exercise the sailors in fleet maneuvers before engaging the enemy contributed to this delay. By the time the French fleet arrived at the mouth of the Delaware, the British had abandoned Philadelphia. D'Estaing found the British army fortified in New York City and the British North American squadron in a strong defensive position inside Sandy Hook. Unable to find pilots willing to lead the French through the shallow passage, d'Estaing abandoned the attack on New York and moved on to the next objective, Newport. The joint allied attack on Newport was delayed by the dilatory amassing of American land troops and then aborted on the day the attack began when the British fleet showed up. Unwilling to put the West Indies at risk by allowing his fleet to be bottled up in the Narragansett, d'Estaing sailed out to engage the British fleet. A violent storm interrupted pre-battle maneuvers, and extensive storm damage forced the French to put into Boston. The time spent in making repairs, refitting, and re-provisioning, as well as the arrival of British naval reinforcements, precluded an expedition against Halifax.[19]

D'Estaing's fleet departed Boston for the West Indies on 4 November. As had been the case in North America, local conditions in the Windward Islands prevented the realization of the French admiral's plans for operations. He arrived to find that the Marquis de Bouillé, governor of Martinique, had already captured Dominica and that the British had invaded St. Lucia on 13 December. D'Estaing arrived off St. Lucia on 15 December to attempt to prevent the fall of the island, but wind conditions prevented a close engagement with the British fleet defending the harbor. The arrival of British reinforcements on the 28th gave the British commander naval superiority and d'Estaing withdrew. The last day of 1778 witnessed the fall of St. Lucia to the British. D'Estaing would not resume active campaigning in the islands until the following June and July, when, reinforcements having given him equality with the British in the theater, he captured St. Vincent and Grenada. Why he decided to retain both conquests and not follow his orders to abandon them after destroying the plantations and leveling the fortifications and implement his plan to free and arm slaves is not clear. French naval historian François Caron declares his behavior strange.[20] D'Estaing's biographer, Jacques Michel, says that the admiral seemed to become intoxicated by the conquest of Grenada, writing to the French naval minister, "I have all my life been very obedient, nevertheless, I am keeping Grenada," until you confirm that you still want me to abandon it.[21] Perhaps having accomplished so little, d'Estaing was reluctant to give up the few conquests he had made. Later, in 1779, he would return to North America where he would cooperate with the Americans in an unsuccessful attempt to retake Savannah, Georgia. Once again, he had to forego launching a campaign against Halifax. D'Estaing's return to North America, however, was not without its success. Just as news of the sailing of d'Estaing's fleet for North America in 1778 had led the British to abandon Philadelphia, word of its return in 1779 led them to evacuate Newport. At the end of the Savannah campaign, d'Estaing sailed for Europe, to which the fleet had been recalled. The year 1779 saw an adjustment of French strategy, with a greater focus on European waters, to take into account the desires of France's new ally, Spain.[22]

D'Estaing's outline for the 1778 French naval campaign in American waters adhered closely to his orders and was adapted to secure national strategic war aims. As the actual campaign unfolded,

however, the fundamental premise with which he began the explication of his vision for the campaign, that all plans are contingent on conditions of the moment in the theater of operations, proved to be all too true. Was it a waste of time, then, for d'Estaing to have built his castle in Spain by responding to the French ambassador's questions on the eve of the campaign? Certainly not. Having thought deeply about the national goals for the war and the means of securing those goals, any commanding officer is better prepared to adjust the means as circumstances change amid fluid contingencies. A strategist ought to be ready to adapt, without tears, when the pail of milk spills, as inevitably it will.

NOTES

[1] Jean de La Fontaine, *The Fables of La Fontaine, Translated from the French*, by Elizur Wright Jr., (Boston, 1841 [and later editions]), book 7, fable 10.

[2] Jonathan R. Dull, *The French Navy and American Independence: A Study of Arms and Diplomacy, 1774–1787* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975), 38, 143. James Pritchard, "French Strategy and the American Revolution, A Reappraisal," *Naval War College Review* 48 (1974): 85–90. See the entire article, 83–108, for an analysis of the evolution of French naval strategy over the course of the war.

[3] François Caron, *La guerre incomprise ou la victoire volée* (Paris: Service historique de la marine, 1989), 138–59.

[4] For British warship construction during the War of Independence, see Daniel A. Baugh, "Why did Britain Lose Command of the Sea During the American Revolution?" Jeremy Black and Philip Woodfine, *The British Navy and the Use of Naval Power in the Eighteenth Century* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1989), 149–67.

[5] "Mémoire sur les opérations auxquelles on pouroit employer nos forces navales contre l'Angleterre," in Henri Doniol, ed., *Histoire de la Participation de la France a l'Établissement des États-Unis d'Amérique, Correspondance Diplomatique et Documents* (Paris, 1888), 3: 31–34.

[6] Jacques Michel, *La vie aventureuse et movementée de Charles-Henri Comte D'Estaing* (Verdon, France: Jacques Michel, 1976), 162.

[7] Charles Moran, "D'Estaing, an Early Exponent of Amphibious Warfare," *Military Affairs* 9 (1945): 314–32.

[8] Michel, *La vie aventureuse et movementée de Charles-Henri Comte D'Estaing*, 163.

[9] On 16 March, the British ambassador departed Paris. On 18 March, anticipating hostilities, the French detained all British merchant ships found in its ports. On the 19th, the French ambassador withdrew from England. On the 20th, Louis XVI formally received the American Commissioners. On the 21st, George III signed orders to Lieutenant General Sir Henry Clinton to attack French St. Lucia. On the 27th, Louis XVI issued sailing orders to d'Estaing. On 13 April, d'Estaing's fleet of 12 ships of the line sailed from the French Mediterranean naval base at Toulon for America. On 20 May, at sea, d'Estaing informed his fleet that war had been declared against Great Britain. On 17 June, elements of the British Channel Fleet attacked the French navy frigate *Belle Poule* and captured the French warships *Pallas*, *Licorne*, and *Coureur*. On 26 June, Vergennes wrote France's ambassador to the United States that he considered a state of war to exist with Great Britain. On 28 June, Louis XVI, citing the attacks on the *Belle Poule* and the three other French warships, ordered Louis Guillouet Comte d'Orvilliers, commanding the Brest fleet, to make war on the British navy and British merchantmen. On 7 July, d'Estaing's fleet, having reached the Virginia coast, commenced operations against the British. On 10 July, France authorized privateering. And on 27 July, the British Channel Fleet and the French Brest fleet engaged each other in the Battle off Ushant.

[10] Piers Mackesy, *The War for America 1775–1783* (1964; reprint ed., Lincoln, NE, and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 524–25. The total includes troops in Canada.

[11] Charles H. Lesser, ed., *The Sinews of Independence: Monthly Strength Reports of the Continental Army* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 84–86.

[12] Doniol, ed., *Histoire de la Participation de la France a l'Établissement des États-Unis d'Amérique*, 3: 235–36. Gérard asked additional questions on 27 June, ibid., 252–53.

[13] Ibid., 3: 239–52. D'Estaing replied to Gérard's additional questions on 29 June, ibid., 253–56.

[14] D'Estaing to Gérard, n.d., "Extraits de mes instructions du 27 mars 1778," and "Extrait du supplément de mes instructions du 1er avril 1778," in ibid., 3: 237–39.

[15] On negotiating with the Continental Congress: "Every republic exhibits dilatoriness and has very little secrecy." On a diversionary attack on New York City: "A diversion that is merely that, that does not have victory as its objective, is only a minor advantage: It consumes time, the result is doubtful; a real attack is the diversion that matters; only success produces it; it becomes doubly useful, because one has achieved success and impeded the enemy from acting." Comparing military choices to the pruning of fruit trees: "Military dilemmas have too often the sad inconveniences of having branches that cross themselves, that injure each other, and in lopping off the one that seems the least important, one sometimes loses the most productive one." On the need to complete the Canadian campaign quickly: "Winter does not wait, it hunts." On the value to France of the Newfoundland fishery: "Seamen are the

commodity we need, the cod fishery produces them." And on the fleet's shortage of cannon shot: "Powder without balls does not kill even quails."

Another characteristic of d'Estaing's style is the combining of metaphors and word plays. On the need to obtain pilots for the coast of North America: "Pilot Town—the name of this town promises, but will it fulfill its promise?" On American cooperation in a campaign against Newport: "For this place as for others, the flag of liberty borne by American hands and marching in front of the king's arms can become the ark of the Lord and make the walls fall. One needs a miracle when so much must be done in so short a time." And on preparing the inhabitants of Newfoundland to welcome union with the United States: "Apostles sent . . . to . . . Newfoundland . . . ; that the mission be preached well . . . the more our gospel would appear plausible."

[16] In 1760 a slave revolt, known as Tacky's Rebellion after one of its leaders, and its suppression resulted in the deaths of 60 whites and more than 300 slaves and the deportation of about 600 slaves to the Bay of Honduras. Five years later, a slave uprising designed to take place simultaneously on 17 plantations was suppressed when it broke out prematurely. In 1766 31 slaves rose and killed 19 whites. Michael Craton, *Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), 125–39; Andrew J. O'Shaughnessy, *An Empire Divided: The America Revolution and the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 38, 40–43, 151–52.

[17] Christopher Leslie Brown and Philip D. Morgan, editors, *Arming Slaves from Classical Times to the Modern Age* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2006).

[18] Philip D. Morgan and Andrew Jackson O'Shaughnessy, "Arming Slaves in the American Revolution," in ibid.

[19] On the French navy's operations under d'Estaing during the War of Independence, see, Jean J. Calmon-Maison, *L'Amiral d'Estaing (1729–1794)* (Paris, 1910); Caron, *La guerre incomprise ou la victoire volée*; Louis Eduoard Chevalier, *Histoire de la marine Française pendant la guerre de l'indépendance Americaine* (Paris, 1877); Michael J. Crawford, "The Joint Allied Operation at Rhode Island, 1778), in William R. Roberts and Jack Sweetman, eds., *New Interpretations in Naval History* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1991), 227–42; Paul F. Deardon, *The Rhode Island Campaign of 1778: Inauspicious Dawn of Alliance* (Providence, RI: Rhode Island Bicentennial Foundation, 1980); Georges Lacour-Gayet, *La marine militaire de la France sous le règne de Louis XVI* (Paris, 1905); Alfred Thayer Mahan, "Major Operations of the Royal Navy, 1762–1783," in William Laird Clowes, *The Royal Navy: A History from the Earliest Times to the Present* (London, 1898), 3: ch. 31; and Michel, *La vie aventureuse et movementée de Charles-Henri Comte D'Estaing.*

[20] Caron, *La guerre incomprise ou la victoire volée*, 249.

[21] Michel, *La vie adventureuse et movementée de Charles-Henri Comte D'Estaing*, 216.

[22] Pritchard, "French Strategy and the American Revolution," 94.

Part Two: Building a Naval Tradition

CHAPTER 3

The Invasion and Defense of Canada in 1775 and 1776: A New Perspective from a New Eyewitness Account

Christopher Prince, a 24-year-old Massachusetts mariner, was mate of *Polly,* Samuel Pepper, master, when it was seized by Governor General Guy Carleton at Quebec on the schooner's arrival there in the summer of 1775, after the American revolutionaries had taken Ticonderoga and Crown Point. Prince remained on board *Polly* when Carleton stationed it at Sorel, at the confluence of the Richelieu and St. Lawrence Rivers. In October, Prince transferred to H.M. brig *Gaspée,* stationed at Montreal, and was still on board when the American forces under General Richard Montgomery took possession of the brig following the fall of Montreal in November. Prince remained with the American forces besieging Quebec through the winter and left with them when they retreated south in May 1776.

From his position on board *Polly* and *Gaspée* in the St. Lawrence River, Prince witnessed the American invasion and British defense of Canada from a unique perspective. In 1806, Prince wrote a manuscript memoir of his life, which consists of 60,000 words. About a quarter of that total is devoted to his experiences in Canada in 1775 and 1776.[1]

This essay discusses Prince's account of events there, evaluates its reliability as a historical source, and analyzes the new insights it provides on a crucial episode in the American Revolution.

Prince's account appears to be candidly truthful. He does not neglect the less patriotic intervals of his career, such as his assisting the Royal Navy during the closing of the port of Boston, or his acting as master on board British vessels of war on the St. Lawrence River. Yet, he was aware that his motives could be open to question, since, during his subsequent service with the Connecticut Navy, he took pains to conceal his former service with the British.

Although Prince's autobiography is undoubtedly authentic, it is not altogether accurate. A work of memory, it suffers the errors to which memory is prone. Recalling deeds 30 years past, Prince gets dates and names wrong, telescopes events into shorter spans of time than they actually took, and mistakes the order in which things happened. Yet, he had vivid and accurate recall of those events that affected him most closely. Prince's accounts of those events in which he directly participated are most trustworthy, followed by those that he directly witnessed.

To understand how Christopher ended up in the St. Lawrence in 1775, we have to go back to April 19, 1775, and the battles of Lexington and Concord. Following the battles, the British authorities in Boston asked Job Prince, a prominent Boston merchant, to dispatch one of his vessels to carry John Vassall, a wealthy loyalist from Cambridge, Massachusetts, and his family to safety in Halifax. Because the port of Boston had been closed by the Boston Port Act, the British authorities would not allow any cargo to be exported on board the vessel carrying Vassall, but did allow the vessel to sail wherever its owner pleased after it discharged its passengers. Job Prince complied with the offer,

intending that after Halifax his vessel would sail to Quebec, where it would take in a cargo for sale in Leghorn, Italy. He appointed Captain Samuel Pepper, master of his schooner *Polly,* and sent his nephew, Christopher Prince, along as mate and pilot.

All went according to plan until they reached Quebec. There, the government seized *Polly,* for, on June 9, Governor and Major General Guy Carleton had declared martial law in response to the capture of Fort Ticonderoga and Crown Point by an American force.[2] Those forts, at the southern end of Lake Champlain, guarded the traditional invasion route between the Hudson and St. Lawrence Rivers. With few soldiers under their command, the Canadian authorities now felt extremely vulnerable to invasion by the revolutionaries, and intended to employ *Polly* as a guard ship in the St. Lawrence River, at the mouth of the Richelieu River, also known as the River Sorel. On August 6, Carleton placed *Polly,* along with two other schooners "taken up for the River Service," under the "care and management" of Lieutenant William Hunter, commanding H.M. brig *Gaspée.*[3] Both Pepper and Prince consented to stay on board *Polly* as master and mate, but they also bore the character of prisoners, for they refused to take an oath of allegiance to the king. In September, Prince declined the rank of sailing master on board one of the armed schooners being built at Fort Saint John, located 20 miles southeast of Montreal, near the head of navigation from Lake Champlain down the Richelieu River, saying that he could not consent to lift a finger against his country.

In October, *Polly* was ordered to Montreal, where Prince was transferred to *Gaspée*, a six-gun brig with a complement of 30 men. Its officers included Lieutenant William Hunter, Midshipman William Bradley, and Sailing Master Maltis Lucullus Ryall. Sometime in August or September, Hunter and several crewmen were sent to man a schooner at Fort St. John, where they were taken prisoners by the Americans on November 2.[4] There are a couple of discrepancies between Prince's account of his service on board *Gaspée* and the documentary record, but these can be reconciled by making a few logical deductions.

The first discrepancy relates to the presence of Sailing Master Ryall on board *Gaspée.* Prince says that Brigadier General Richard Prescott put him in charge of the brig until the officers return and that he and a midshipman were the only officers on board. He also asserts that he was in charge when Ethan Allen was sent on board as a prisoner, after being captured on September 25 during a failed attempt to take Montreal. This version of events accounts for Midshipman William Bradley, but not for Sailing Master Ryall. In later testimony to his American captors, Bradley stated that in "pursuant to Orders of Capt Ryall, who then commanded said Ship," he put leg irons on Ethan Allen.[5] "Capt Ryall" is clearly Sailing Master Ryall. And in Allen's account of his captivity, published in 1779, he says the captain's name was "Royal," more likely a mistake for "Ryall" than for "Prince." A second discrepancy is the failure of Ethan Allen to mention Christopher Prince. Allen writes that the captain was not an "ill natured man" and that Midshipman Bradley generously shared food with his prisoner.[6] Prince tells the same story of Bradley, but says that he, too, shared his food with Allen. An examination of the sequence of events suggests a solution to reconciling these discrepancies. Allen was captured and sent on board *Gaspée* on September 25, where he was kept for about six weeks. Prince reports that it was in October that he was ordered to *Gaspée* and that Allen remained on the brig only a few days. It seems

probable that Prince is mistaken that he was in charge of the brig when Allen was captured. Rather, Sailing Master Ryall was in command at that date. Then late in October, Ryall was needed elsewhere, and Prince was transferred to take his place. Allen, who had already been on board many weeks, was removed a few days after Prince took command, and, hence, had little reason to refer to him in his own narrative.

If Prince's account of Ethan Allen's imprisonment is interesting because of the way it serves to verify Allen's own account of his treatment as a prisoner, Prince's account of the capitulation of Montreal, and its aftermath, is even more valuable because of the minute detail he provides that is not found elsewhere.

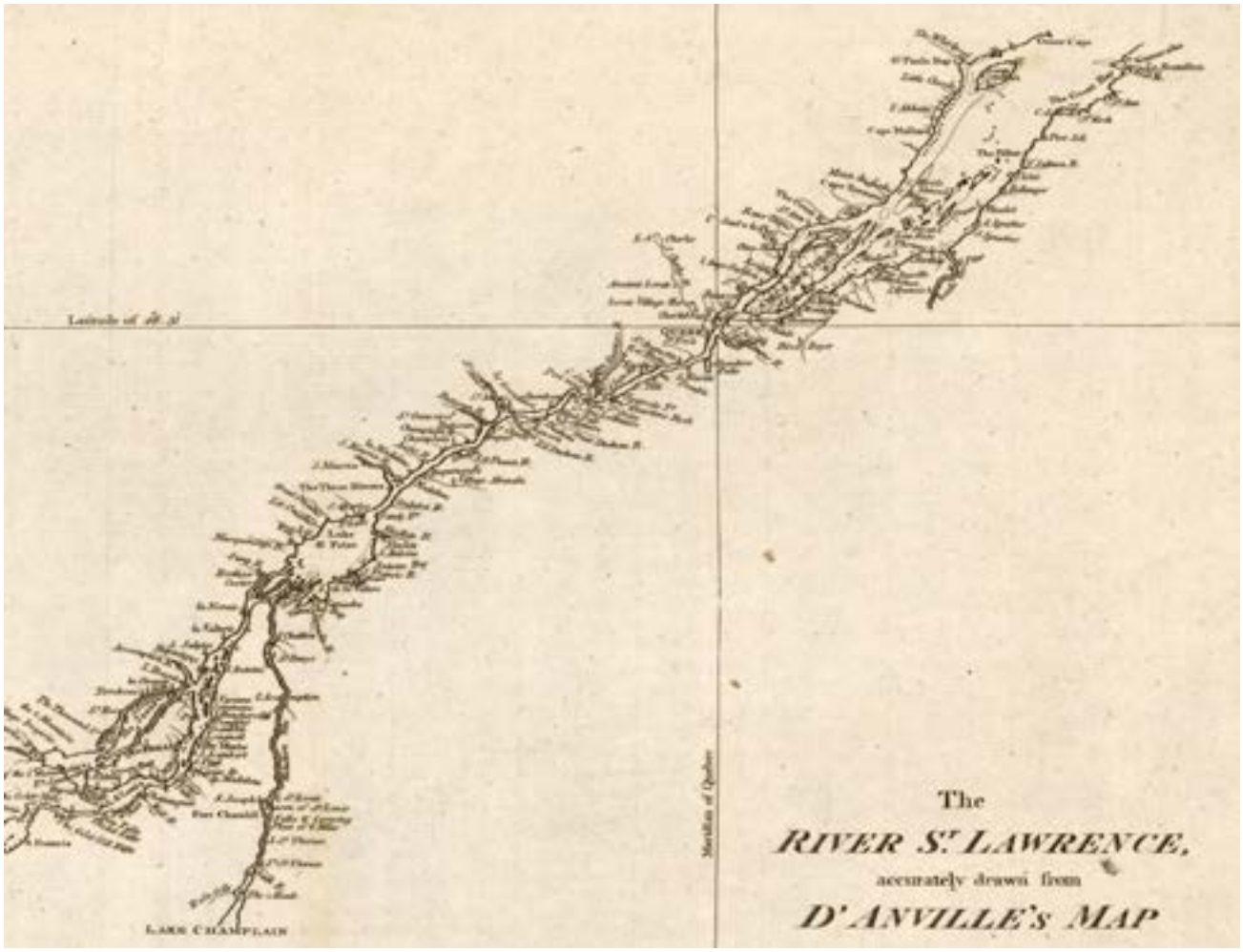


Figure 1: Part of the St. Lawrence River in 1780

The British fort at St. Johns had been under attack by forces of Brigadier General Richard Montgomery of the Continental Army since September. The British post at Chambly, north of St. Johns, on the Richelieu River, fell on October 18. On October 30, Carleton sent a mixed force of Canadians, Royal Fusiliers, and Indians to relieve the siege of St. Johns. But a detachment of New Yorkers and Green

Mountain Boys that Montgomery had posted at Longueuil, on the bank opposite Montreal, where the British sought to land, halted them. In the exhaustively researched study, *Our Struggle for the Fourteenth Colony,* Justin H. Smith observed that "we have no contemporary report of this affair from one who was present."[7] With one exception, American and British sources report the engagement in very general terms. The one exception is a circumstantial, if rather jaundiced, account by a Monsieur Sanguinet, a French-speaking resident of Montreal, an account not published until 1873.[8]

But now we have the account by Christopher Prince, who saw the action with his own eyes from on board *Gaspée.* Prince's description of the British procedures accords exactly with standard British amphibious tactics, including the building of flat-bottomed boats designed to carry 40 soldiers, and the employment of flags to signal the boats to advance or withdraw.[9] According to Prince, in crossing the river, the British boats were instructed to proceed to an eddy below an island, and there watch General Prescott's boat for a flag signal as to whether to go on or turn back. In the event, Prescott signaled retreat. The current, however, caught three canoes, filled mostly with Indians, and swept them onto a shelf of rocks opposite the cove where the Americans were stationed. The Americans brought down a field piece and fired at the isolated band until they surrendered. To this point, Prince's account is consistent with Sanguinet's. Some descriptions mirror each other closely. Both agree that the British had some 40 boats. Sanguinet calls the rocks onto which the canoes were swept by the French word, *battures,* a specialized term meaning "breakers" or "shelf of rocks." Prince describes the location as "a high and a very steep rock on every side." But Prince's descriptions are much more specific than are Sanguinet's. For instance, from Prince we learn the details of the flag signals and come to understand that the reason the Indians' canoes were caught in the current and the boats were not is that those who rowed the boats faced the flag signals in Prescott's boat, whereas those in the canoes faced away from the signals.

Prince's account makes one major departure from all other accounts of the battle, and here one suspects that he is in error, probably from mistaking what he observed at a distance. According to all other accounts, the Americans took two Indians and two Canadians prisoner off the rock.[10] Prince, in contrast, reports that the Americans carried their Indian prisoners, of whom he implies there were many, across to the Montreal side of the river and set them at liberty and that in grateful response, the Indians abandoned Montreal the next day, which would have been October 31. According to Carleton, however, the Indians left him after hearing of the capture of St. Johns, which fell on November 2.[11]

Having secured St. Johns, Montgomery's men moved on to Montreal. Montgomery also sent a body of soldiers under Colonel James Easton to Sorel at the mouth of the Richelieu River to block the British troops' escape route. Unable to contest possession of Montreal with his 150 regulars and handful of militia, Carleton sailed away with his forces and military supplies aboard three armed ships and eight transports. Contrary winds prevented them from passing American shore batteries at Sorel, where they were forced to surrender. Carleton, however, left *Gaspée* in disguise and escaped to Quebec.[12]

Prince's memoir agrees with what is known about the British withdrawal from Montreal, but provides many new details. Again, his memoir is important because it is one of very few accounts by someone

actually present. According to him, as soon as the British realized that they would not be able to hold onto Montreal, they began loading vessels with provisions and implements of war. What they could not put on board, they destroyed or threw into the river. On November 11, the day the Americans began crossing the river onto Île Saint-Paul (St. Paul Island), a small island off Île de Montréal (Montreal Island) on which Montreal is situated, the British garrison abandoned the city and set sail. Both Carleton and Prescott along with some 50 soldiers went on board *Gaspée*. In Carleton's dispatches to England, he reports that contrary winds delayed them several days before Sorel, and this is confirmed by Prince's narrative.[13] On November 15 *Gaspée* reconnoitered the American fort at Sorel but it came under such heavy fire that it had to turn back with the rest of the flotilla. There is some question as to how formidable the American artillery position at Sorel actually was, but if the Americans were bluffing, they succeeded in fooling Prince. As he remembered it: "as soon as we doubled the point with our starboard tacks on board, they opened the fort upon us which threw us in such confusion not a gun was fired from us. Although we had several shot that struck us we were all safe." That afternoon, according to American sources, Ira Allen delivered on board *Gaspée* an ultimatum from Colonel James Easton, Continental Army: "Resign your Fleet to me immediately without destroying the Effects on Board . . . , to this I expect your direct and Immediate answer. Should you Neglect you will cheerfully take the Consequences which will follow."[14] According to Prince's eyewitness account of this exchange, an American officer—Prince did not know it was Ira Allen—came on board under a flag of truce and asked to see General Carleton. But General Prescott insisted that he, himself, had full authority to negotiate. The American officer gave Prescott the proposed conditions of capitulation and Prescott asked for an hour to give an answer. The American returned at the appointed time and Prescott demanded changes to the conditions; but when the American firmly refused to alter them, Prescott gave in and consented to turn over the fleet at 8:00 p.m. that night. That evening, Prince observed the British break the conditions by heaving overboard of all the vessels the powder and nearly all the provisions, despite Midshipman Bradley's opposition to this breach of their word. Montgomery himself later complained of this: "I hear Carleton has thrown a great quantity of powder into the river. I have desired a severe message to be delivered to him on that subject."[15] According to Prince, Prescott—this time opposed by a British Army sergeant—then gave orders for all the vessels to weigh anchor and to attempt to escape to Quebec, but a strong gale of wind that had come up prevented the order from being followed. This attempt having failed, Carleton escaped in a boat, disguised as an ordinary civilian.

When the British surrendered their ships, Christopher fell into the hands of the American army, which treated him as an enemy prisoner, especially since his former master, Captain Pepper, had told the Americans that Prince was a traitor to his country. Pepper's animosity against Christopher arose from the fact that the British had offered Christopher, and not him, a sailing master's berth in the Royal Navy. In December, when Pepper was caught passing military intelligence to the British at Quebec, the Americans finally accepted Prince's assertion that he had been a prisoner under the British. That winter, Christopher lodged with a French Canadian family a few miles outside of Quebec.

In April 1776, Major General John Thomas arrived at Montreal and on May 1 reached Quebec, where

he took command of the American army there. When Major General David Wooster learned that Thomas—who lived in Kingston, Massachusetts, Prince's hometown—was a friend of Prince's father and knew Christopher well, Wooster entrusted Prince with command of *Polly,* which was to be used as an army transport. In May 1776, the ice in the St. Lawrence broke up, allowing British warships convoying reinforcements from England to reach Quebec and break the American siege.[16] Prince retreated with the American army down Lake Champlain and the Hudson River.[17]

Christopher Prince carried on to experience many more adventures in the war, and survived to write about them after he retired as a merchant sea captain. In older age, he moved to New York, where he was employed by the U.S. marine hospital and was active in the seamen's religious movement, dying in 1832 at the age of 80.

NOTES

---

[1] Christopher Prince, *The Autobiography of a Yankee Mariner: Christopher Prince and the American Revolution*, edited by Michael J. Crawford (Washington, DC: Brassey's, 2002), 25–86.
[2] On 20 May 1775, Governor and Maj. Gen. Guy Carleton (1724–1808) learned that on 10 May an American force captured the British garrisons at Fort Ticonderoga and Crown Point. Adam Shortt and Arthur G. Doughty, eds., *Canadian Archives: Documents Relating to the Constitutional History of Canada 1759–1791*, 2d and rev. ed., Pt. II (Ottawa, 1918), 663–66.
[3] Sir Guy Carleton to Lt. William Hunter, 6 Aug. 1775, *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, edited by William Bell Clark, et al., 12 vols. to date (Washington, DC: Naval Historical Center, 1964–) [henceforth, NDAR], 1: 1076–77.
[4] Lt. William Hunter to Vice Admiral Samuel Graves, 16 Dec. 1775, NDAR 3: 128–29.
[5] Depositions of Crew Members, H.M. Brig Gaspée, 14 Feb. 1776, NDAR 3: 1272–73.
[6] Ethan Allen, *A Narrative of Colonel Ethan Allen's Captivity, From the Time of his being taken by the British, near Montreal, on the 25th Day of September, in the Year 1775, to the Time of his Exchange, on the 6th Day of May, 1778*, 1st ed. (Philadelphia: Bell, 1779), 10–11.
[7] Justin H. Smith, *Our Struggle for the Fourteenth Colony: Canada and the American Revolution*, 2 vols. (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1907) 1: 453, n27.
[8] M. Sanguinet, "Temoin Oculaire de 'L'Invasion du Canada par les Bastonnois," in M. L'Abbe Verreau, *Invasion du Canada: Collection de Memoires, Recueilles et Annotes* (Montreal, 1873), 65–66.
[9] David Syrett, "The Methodology of British Amphibious Operations during the Seven Years and American Wars," *Mariner's Mirror* 58 (1972): 269–80.
[10] Richard Montgomery reported two Canadian and two Indian prisoners. Montgomery to Philip Schuyler, 3 Nov. 1775, in Peter Force, *American Archives*, 4th ser. Vol. 3 (Washington, 1840): 1392–93.
[11] Carleton to Earl of Dartmouth, 5 Nov. 1775, in K. G. Davies, ed., *Documents of the American Revolution 1770–1783* (Colonial Office Series), Vol. 11, *Transcripts 1775 July–December*. (Dublin: Irish University Press, 1976), 173.
[12] Mark Mayo Boatner III, *Encyclopedia of the American Revolution* (New York: David McKay, 1966), 728–29.
[13] "The 12th one of our armed vessels ran aground which occasioned a considerable delay; in the evening the wind failed us near Sorel and became contrary for several days." Carleton to the Earl of Dartmouth, 20 Nov. 1775, in Davies, ed., *Documents of the American Revolution* 11: 185.
[14] Quoted in Robert McConnell Hatch, *Thrust for Canada: The American Attempt on Quebec in 1775–1776* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979), 94.
[15] Montgomery to Gen. Philip Schuyler, 19 Nov. 1775, in Peter Force, *American Archives*, 4th ser., Vol. 3 (Washington, 1840): 1683.
[16] On 6 May 1776, H.M.S. *Isis*, H.M. frigate *Surprise*, and H.M. sloop *Martin* arrived at Quebec, convoying considerable reinforcements of British and Hessian troops under Maj. Gen. John Burgoyne. In consequence, the American forces made a precipitous retreat, leaving behind large quantities of supplies. Hatch, *Thrust for Canada*, 183.
[17] The Americans began to retreat from Sorel on l3 June l776, fell rapidly back through Chambly, St. John, and Ile aux Noix, arriving at Crown Point by early July.

CHAPTER 4

Poughkeepsie, the Continental Shipyards,

and Defense of the Hudson River

On 29 January 1777, in Poughkeepsie, New York, the carpenters—that is, the shipwrights and joiners—who had engaged to build the Continental Navy frigates that later would be named *Congress* and *Montgomery,* addressed a petition to the New York State Convention asking for an increase in wages. You can say that this essay is a brief in support of those carpenters' petition. This is not to judge whether the demand for an increase from eight shillings to eleven shillings, plus a half pint of rum daily, was economically justified. Rather, I seek to convince you of the validity of the argument they used in support of their demands, when they observed, "It's Evident to a Demonstration that

Figure 1: Ship carpenter's tools: maul (top left), saw (top right), plane (bottom left), caulking iron head (bottom right).

[shipwrights and joiners] in a particular manner are the Great Bulwark of the Navy, which no war Can be vigorously Prosecuted without."[1]

There is a saying that amateurs discuss strategy, but professionals talk logistics. The same may be said of military histories of the American Revolution. For instance, in Christopher Ward's respectable two-volume, *The War of the Revolution,* for half a century a standard survey of the American War of Independence, the frigates *Congress* and *Montgomery* appear in the highlands of the Hudson Valley without a word of explanation from whence they came. Nor does the fair name of Poughkeepsie grace the pages of that or many other histories of the war. That there was no Battle of Poughkeepsie during the American Revolution is no reason that Poughkeepsie's contribution to the war effort—which was of value—should be ignored. A naval battle does not begin when the first broadsides are exchanged, but when the carpenters first lay the warship's keel. It is only when you get to very specialized studies, like Charles Paullin's classic administrative history, *The Navy of the American Revolution,* or William Fowler's scholarly examination of the Continental Navy—published during the bicentennial year of the Declaration of Independence under the title, *Rebels Under Sail*—that we find mention of the role of Poughkeepsie's shipyards in the winning of American independence. Even then, with the notable exception of Lincoln Diamond's monograph, *Chaining the Hudson,* Poughkeepsie gets only a passing mention. [2]

To learn the story of Poughkeepsie's shipyards in the American Revolution, we must go to the original records. When we delve into the Navy's documentary series, *Naval Documents of the American Revolution,* and turn to those pages indexed under the terms *Poughkeepsie* and *Congress* and *Montgomery*, the tale emerges. Here we discover that the shipyards did more than build these two frigates. They supplied ships' stores for the building of the American Lake Champlain fleet and oak planks for Fort Washington at New York City. The yards also served as a collection point for timber for a boom used to block enemy ships from ascending the Hudson River. In addition to building warships, including galleys as well as the two frigates, the shipyards' carpenters also built fire ships and fire rafts, and their blacksmiths helped fashion the iron chain that blocked the Hudson in the highlands.

Since the foundation of these various contributions to the war effort was the building of the two Continental Navy frigates, let us start with the Continental Congress's decision to build those warships in Poughkeepsie.

Americans were a maritime people. Their settlements were concentrated along the coast and the shores of great bays and navigable rivers. Large numbers of Americans engaged in the carrying trade, fishing, and shipbuilding. In 1775, at least 10,000 Americans were serving in the merchant service. America's shipbuilding industry was well developed, for, at the beginning of the war, at least one out of every four ships in the British merchant marine was American-built. In previous wars, America had mounted large expeditions against French settlements in North America and had sent forth privateering vessels to attack enemy shipping, with considerable success. Some 18,000 colonial seamen served in the Royal Navy during the French and Indian War (1754–1763). Hence, Americans had the resources and experience necessary to fight at sea.[3]

The establishment of the Continental Navy came with the gradual escalation of the armed conflict in 1775. Americans first took up arms not to sever their relationship with the king, but to defend their rights within the British Empire. Outwardly the Second Continental Congress, assembling in May 1775, pursued a policy of reconciliation. They sent George III an Olive Branch Petition, professing loyalty and asking him to disavow his oppressive ministers. At the same time, they issued a "Declaration of the Causes and Necessity of Taking up Arms," demonstrating that the hour for talking had passed. Fighting had broken out at Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts, in April 1775, and the Congress now had to assume some of the responsibilities of a central government for the colonies. It created a Continental Army, appointed George Washington of Virginia as commander, issued paper money for the support of the troops, and formed a committee to negotiate with foreign countries. During 1775, Continental forces captured Fort Ticonderoga and launched an invasion of Canada.

On 13 October 1775, Congress adopted the legislation first providing for a national navy for America. On that day, Congress authorized the procuring, manning, arming, and fitting-out of two armed vessels for a three-month cruise, specifically to capture unarmed transports bringing war supplies to the British Army in North America.[4] Within a few days, Congress established a naval committee, charged with equipping a fleet.[5] This committee directed the purchasing, outfitting, manning, and operations of the first ships of the new navy, drafted subsequent naval legislation, and prepared rules and regulations to govern the Continental Navy's conduct and internal administration. On 13 December 1775, the Continental Congress authorized the construction of 13 frigates.[6] Building sites were divided among several colonies, in order to preclude the British from destroying the naval construction program with a single raid, avoid placing a strain on the resources of any one region, and spread the benefits of large government expenditures. Two of the 13 frigates were to be built in the colony of New York. Given the strategic importance of the Hudson River, the fact that New York City would be an obvious objective for the British to seize, and the possibilities for defense offered by the highlands, Poughkeepsie was an obvious choice as a locale for building the two frigates allocated to New York.

When the American War of Independence began, Poughkeepsie was a "thriving little commercial entrepot," as historians have described it, serving as the hub of "one of the most fertile and productive farm regions in British North America."[7] Here local grain, flour, and dairy products were collected for transport to New York, from where they would be shipped to markets in Europe, the West Indies, and South America. Although having a population of only a few hundred, Poughkeepsie was the third largest town in New York. For this reason, and its protected location in the highlands, the New York Convention would choose it for its capital after the city of New York fell to British arms.

The Hudson River was the strategic center of the American War of Independence from the beginning of the conflict until at least 1778, when the entry of the French began shifting the strategic center southward. The Hudson held this strategic importance for two reasons.

One reason for the Hudson's strategic importance was that it was a critical link in the water route between Canada and New England and New York. To go from Quebec to New York City in 1776, the traveler's quickest inland route was by water. The traveler journeyed up the St. Lawrence River to the

Figure 2: Located on the Hudson River, above the highlands, Poughkeepsie was the commercial hub of a productive agricultural region in 1776.

Richelieu River, then upstream to the falls just below the village of St. Johns on the Richelieu, around which he portaged before continuing on to Île aux Noix at the base of Lake Champlain. Near the head of the lake, the traveler went through a narrow passage, a quarter-mile wide, passing by Fort Ticonderoga on heights to the west. A portage just south of Fort Ticonderoga took him to Lake George, across which he found another portage to the Hudson River, which carried him down to New York City. During the 18th-century wars of empire between England and France, the Lake Champlain–Hudson River corridor was the natural route of invasion for forces moving north or south. In 1775, the revolutionary forces used that corridor to invade Canada. In 1776 and 1777, the British attempted to use it to invade the revolted colonies from Canada.

The second reason for the Hudson's strategic importance was that it divided the New England states from the rest of the colonies to the west and south. As early as February 1775, the royal governor of New York suggested posting a small Royal Navy squadron in the river to help commercially isolate refractory New England.[8] Geologically a fjord, with a channel cut deep by glacial action, the Hudson River has a depth of water that made it navigable from New York City up to just 18 miles below Albany by warships as large as 74-gun ships of the line. By mid-summer 1775, after the actions at Lexington and Concord had inaugurated the shooting war and after the Americans had captured Fort Ticonderoga and launched their invasion of Canada, British planners in London saw the control of the Hudson as not only a way to crush the rebellion in New England but also as a way to starve the American army in Canada. In 1776, the British drove the Americans out of Canada but were delayed from moving southward by the need first to defeat Benedict Arnold's Continental fleet on Lake Champlain. By 1777, British forces had set the stage for seizing control of the Hudson River. One army led by Lieutenant General John "Gentleman Johnny" Burgoyne was to move south from Canada and another army under command of

General Sir William Howe was to thrust northward from New York City along the Hudson, with the two forces joining at Albany. By controlling all traffic on and across the river, the British expected to isolate New England—which they considered the seat of the Revolution—and easily pacify the non-New England colonies, where they believed the king's loyal subjects were a suppressed majority. For their part, the revolutionaries understood the necessity of maintaining control of the highlands as an avenue for the movement of troops, supplies, and intelligence. The topography of the highlands, about 40 miles above Manhattan Island, allowed the construction of batteries that could command the river from heights close to the water, and the narrowness of the river there offered the possibility of blocking the channel with a wooden boom or an iron chain, both of which were eventually put in place. This is why the revolutionaries maintained fortified posts in the highlands until independence was secured, and why Benedict Arnold's attempted betrayal of West Point in 1780 was the pinnacle of treachery.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. We need to return to the spring of 1776, well before Arnold's treachery and when he was on the verge of becoming a savior of the American Revolution. Despite the difficulties of hauling timber to the Poughkeepsie shipyard over bad roads, progress on the frigates had been good. By May, both ships had been planked up to the base of the gun ports.[9] By early June, contracts for casting cannon and shot had been let and the work begun, with delivery expected in September.[10] On 12 June, the two frigates were assigned names, *Montgomery,* to honor the memory of General Richard Montgomery who had given his life in the desperate New Year's Eve attack on Quebec, and *Congress,* chosen by the Continental Congress to honor itself.[11]

By late spring, calls began to be made on both the materials and the craftsmen assembled in Poughkeepsie for building the frigates to meet other urgent demands created by immediate threats posed by enemy forces. As early as May, Robert Livingston was urging that the carpenters building the frigates be detailed to build 14 or 15 bateaus armed with 12-pounder cannons to secure the Hudson River.[12]

Then, in late June, word came that there might be a greater need for both the materials and the shipwrights elsewhere, at Skenesboro, at the southern end of Lake Champlain, to assist the Continental Army—under command of Arnold—in creating a fleet of gunboats to oppose the movement of the British Army in Canada under Sir Guy Carleton down the Champlain-Hudson corridor toward Albany.[13]

On 3 July, the day after Congress resolved on independence and the day before the Declaration of Independence would be proclaimed in Philadelphia, the carpenters working on the Poughkeepsie frigates walked off the job. Jacobus Van Zandt, the manager of the frigate project, reported that this was the result of a wage dispute.[14] But the narrative of Abraham Leggett, one of the carpenters, states that they left not for lucre's sake but for patriotic reasons. They laid down their tools in order to take up arms. On 2 July, a large British fleet had taken position off Staten Island and on 3 July landed the British Army on the island in preparation for a campaign to capture New York City. A number of the carpenters working on the frigates at Poughkeepsie formed a volunteer militia company to help defend New York City.[15]

On the heels of the call by Arnold from Lake Champlain on the shipbuilding resources at Poughkeepsie,

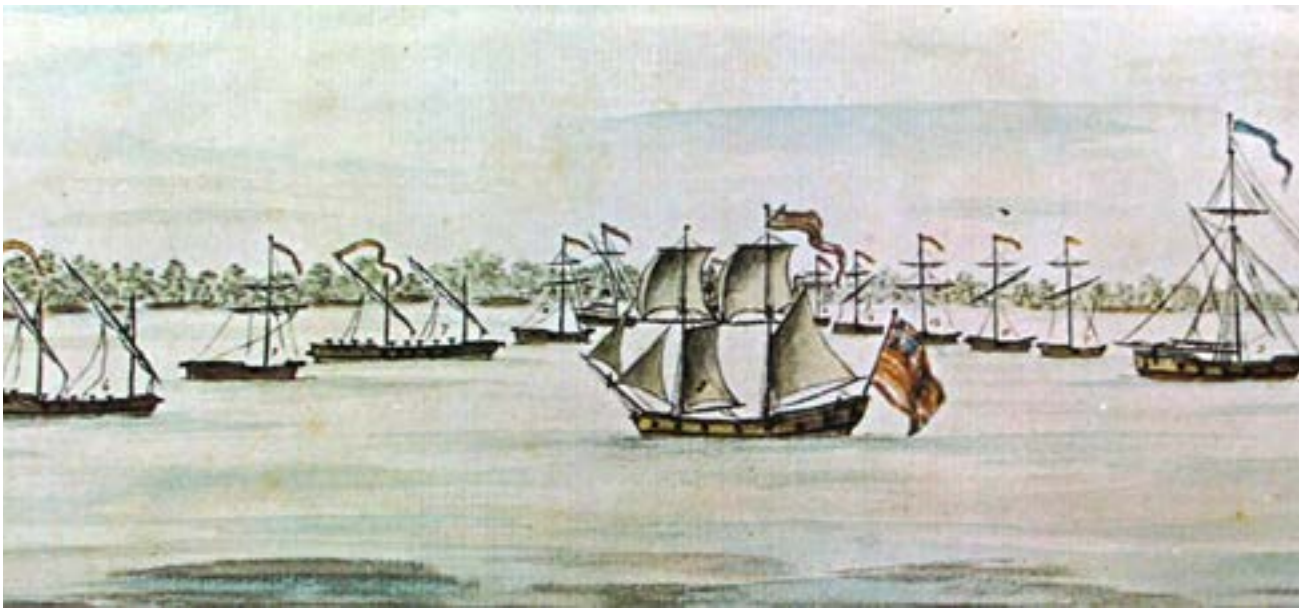


Figure 3: Benedict Arnold's Lake Champlain fleet.

came orders for the shipwrights to go to nearby Esopus to build fire ships.[16] Fire was a great danger to all wooden sailing vessels, constructed of highly inflammable wood, canvas, and hemp, much of it coated with tar. To prevent accidents, sailing officers enforced strict precautions in the use of fire aboard ship. Navies employed fire ships and fire rafts in the confined waters of rivers and harbors to take advantage of the liability of warships to sudden and rapid conflagration. Fire ships were relatively small, swift vessels stripped of everything of value and laden with combustible materials. A fire ship's small crew would attempt to sail into the path of an enemy ship, set the combustibles on board the fire ship alight, and either abandon the fire ship before it came into contact with the enemy ship, or, if exceptionally brave, attempt to grapple the intended victim. The danger of the latter attempt and the courage it took are evident in the petition filed with Congress on behalf of Silas Talbot. In command of a fire ship in the Hudson, with a crew of eight, in the early hours of 17 September 1776, Talbot

> embraced a favourable Opportunity, & bore down for the *Asia* Man of War, then at Anchor in said River: That he laid her on Board upon the Bow, carried away his Bowsprit, grappled her, and with his main Boom in the fore Shrouds, fired his Ship fore & baft, & then with some difficulty, escaped to the Shore: That for fifteen Days following he was deprived of his Sight, and otherwise much enfeebled, The Flames reaching him before he could quit the Vessell.[17]

At Esopus, the Poughkeepsie carpenters were to convert boats confiscated from Tories into fire ships to oppose HMS *Phoenix* and HMS *Rose*, two British warships that had sailed up the Hudson.[18] These warships had succeeded in finding a passage through the line of ships the patriots had sunk to block the river between Forts Washington and Lee, just where the George Washington Bridge now crossesthe Hudson. Congress appointed New Yorkers John Jay and Robert Livingston a secret committee to annoy the enemy ships in the Hudson, and charged John Hazelwood of Philadelphia to hasten to Esopus to

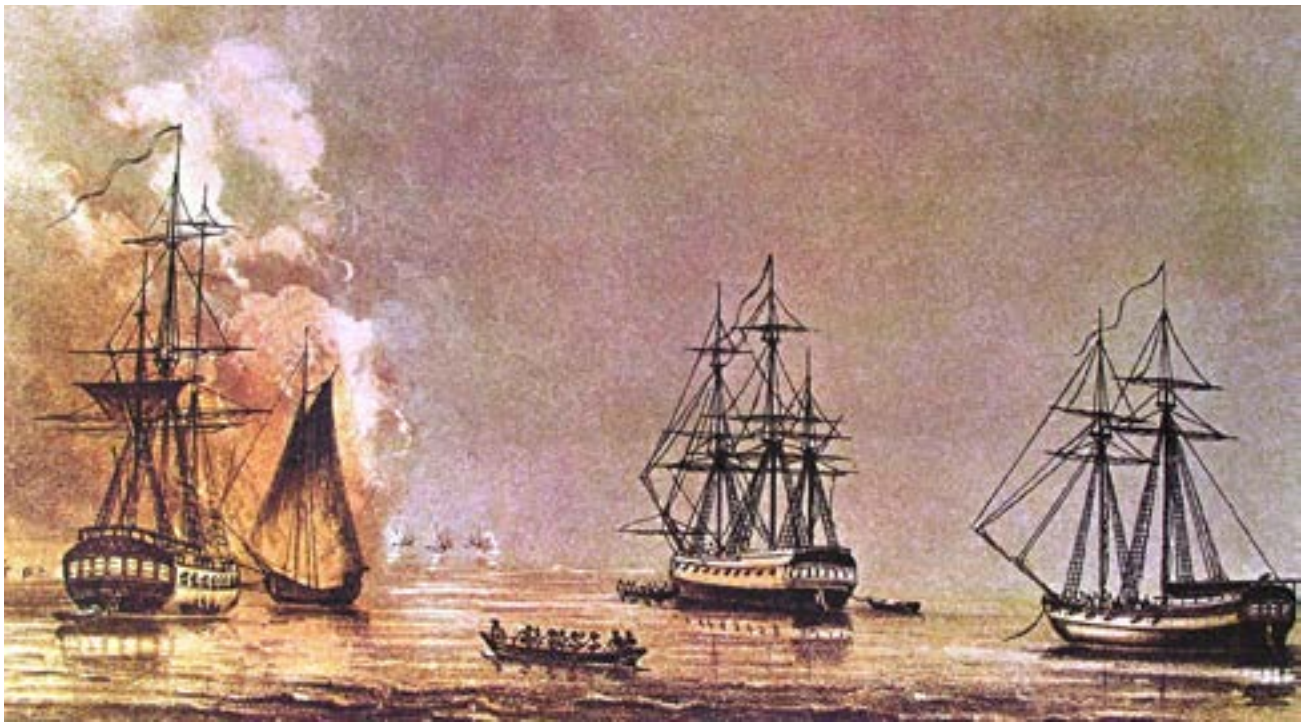


Figure 4: American fire ships attack British warships in the Hudson River, August 1776.

direct the composition of combustible materials for the fire ships and for fire arrows.[19] Hazelwood would later be appointed commodore of Pennsylvania's state navy. The suspicion was, and it turns out correct, that the object of those British ships was to destroy the frigates building at Poughkeepsie. On 16 July, the New York Provincial Convention ordered the superintendents of the ships to provide for their defense, and if that proved impossible, to save at least the plank, rigging, and stores.[20]

On 18 July, the Declaration of Independence was read at city hall in New York City; the hearers gave three cheers, the king's coat of arms was taken down and burned, and the Grand Union Flag of the United States was raised. Church members in the city were given allowance to remove the royal arms from their churches, and if they did not do so, then the people were at liberty to remove them.[21] On the same day, HMS *Phoenix* and *Rose,* schooner *Tryal,* and their tenders made an attempt against *Montgomery* and *Congress*, but gunfire from Americans entrenched in the heights at Peekskill drove them off and the British ships returned downstream.[22] A month later, in mid-August, a nighttime fire ship attack against the three British warships succeeded in destroying one of their tenders. The light from the burning tender enabled *Phoenix* to see and disengage itself from one of the fire ships that had come close aboard.[23]

By the end of July, the Poughkeepsie shipwrights had a chain of fire ships and fire rafts at the two forts in the highlands, Fort Montgomery and Fort Clinton, to protect their unfinished handiwork, which the British obviously considered a threat.[24]

In the meantime, Van Zandt and the superintendents of the frigate construction working under him, Augustin Lawrence and Samuel Tudor, processed a constant stream of requisitions for shipbuilding materials for the fleet building on Lake Champlain. On 31 July, Van Zandt had to report that the sails

and rigging had already been cut to size for the frigates and was not appropriate for the gunboats on Lake Champlain; he would, however, have the block makers make as many blocks as were needed within a fortnight and send fire match. As to other materials, such as anchors, cables, pistols, cutlasses, sheet lead, sheet copper, and swivel guns, the Poughkeepsie yards had none on hand and were in need of them themselves.[25]

On 22 August, the British began their expected attack on New York City with a landing on Long Island. Outmaneuvered, the Continental forces under George Washington effected a nearly miraculous withdrawal to Manhattan Island on the night of 29 to 30 August. Abraham Leggett and his fellow carpenter volunteers from Poughkeepsie served in the "forlorn hope" rear guard during this precarious withdrawal. Leggett denied any special merit for bravery—asserting that this role as rear guard resulted from a series of accidents.[26]

Figure 5: A Revolutionary War row galley on Lake Champlain.

In August and September, the pace of requisitions on the ship stores at Poughkeepsie for the American fleet preparing to meet the British invasion force on Lake Champlain intensified, and Van Zandt balked at supplying more without the explicit approval of the New York Provincial Convention.[27] The contributions of the Poughkeepsie shipyards to the defense of Lake Champlain would prove indispensable. Cables made at the yards, for instance, reached Ticonderoga on 3 October and were forwarded on to Arnold's fleet.[28] That fleet engaged the British lake fleet at the Battle of Valcour Island on 11 October. Although the American fleet was defeated and eventually destroyed, its very existence delayed the British invasion of New York State to the following season. The delay gave the patriot forces time to prepare to oppose the renewed British movement south from Canada—in 1777 under Burgoyne—leading to the surrender of a British army to the Americans at Saratoga. This brings to mind the ditty about "all for the want of a nail," and underscores the importance of logistics, and in this particular case, of the Poughkeepsie shipyards in the fight for America's freedom.

Returning to September 1776 and the battle for Manhattan, we find contributions made by the

Poughkeepsie shipyards to that theater of the war effort. On 20 September, General Washington asked for use of the Poughkeepsie fire ships to help harass British warships that might try to get above Forts Washington and Lee.[29] And on the following day, the superintendents of the frigates at Poughkeepsie were requisitioned to send short oak plank for Fort Washington, with the utmost dispatch.[30] By the end of October, however, the British had won New York City and in mid-November captured Forts Washington and Lee.

Despite lacking lead, anchors, and cables, *Congress* and *Montgomery* were ready to launch at the end of October, and commanding officers appointed—Captain Thomas Grennell to *Congress* and Captain John Hodge to *Montgomery*.[31] The New York Committee of Safety authorized their launching and the traditional treat for the carpenters—warning against any extravagance in the latter, however.[32] After the launching, in November, the frigates were moved into Esopus Creek for the winter, where their rigging and fitting out was to be completed.[33] The carpenters were engaged to build gun carriages.[34] Much had yet to be done to ready the ships for battle. Tons of iron were lacking, and anchors had to be fetched from as far away as New Canaan, Connecticut.[35] Now that the frigates were nearly ready for service, and in the face of the success of the British lower on the Hudson, the Continental Congress expressed greater concern for their security. The Provincial Congress appointed an artillery detachment to protect them and had a marine guard recruited to serve under a lieutenant, and in the spring ordered 200 soldiers raised to guard the Continental frigates and the public records of New York at Esopus Landing.[36]

In May, the Continental Army generals at Forts Montgomery and Clinton recommended to George Washington the best use of the new frigates: They should be manned, along with two row galleys, and stationed above the wooden boom and iron chain that had been installed at Fort Montgomery. "The communication between the Eastern and Western States," they observed,

> is so essential to the Continent; & the advantages we shall have over the Enemy by the communication, and the great expense that will be saved in the transportation of Stores, by having the Command of the River, warrant every expense to secure an object of such great magnitude.[37]

If the grand purpose of the ships was to guard the chain and prevent the British from winning command of the river, it was unfortunate that the frigates were in no condition to engage in battle. In mid-June, they were nearly rigged, but they lacked guns and men. To arm them, it was said, would mean dismantling the forts.[38] On the first anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, neither ship had enough guns to fire a national salute,[39] nor did either commanding officer have his full complement of commissioned and warrant officers.[40]

The ships were in no better condition of preparedness when the long dreaded British attack on the highlands finally came in early October. By then, Burgoyne's invasion of New York had gone badly awry. The Americans had used delaying tactics to slow his southward progress and cut off his vital supply line. His road to Albany blocked, he sent a desperate plea for help to Major General Henry

Clinton at New York City. Clinton responded with a sudden move in force into the highlands, to capture and destroy Forts Montgomery and Clinton, intending to create a diversion to draw away American troops and take pressure off Burgoyne.

The British move into the highlands was a joint army-navy operation. To oppose the naval part of the attack, George Clinton, New York State governor and brigadier general, Continental Army, stationed

Figure 6: Plan of British attack on Forts Clinton and Montgomery.

the frigate *Montgomery* near the chain at Fort Montgomery with a privateer sloop, and two Continental Army galleys, *Lady Washington* and *Shark,* and posted the frigate *Congress* at Fort Clinton.[41] During the attack, which took place on 6 October, *Montgomery* exchanged fire with HM brig *Diligent* but, badly manned and lacking anchors or a cable to secure her, and with a falling wind, the frigate was unable to counteract the force of an ebb tide. She drifted down toward the chain and her commander made the decision to set her afire to prevent her falling into the hands of the enemy. *Congress,* also badly manned, went aground on a flat near Fort Clinton and was also burned to prevent her capture.[42]

The British attack on the highlands forts proved a brilliant tactical success, ending in their relatively easy capture. But the expedition was a strategic failure. The diversion was too little and too late to save the northern army. Burgoyne capitulated on 7 October. His troops laid down their arms and Burgoyne engaged that his soldiers would not take them up again against the Americans during the course of the present war. Further, the British did not retain control of the highlands and thus fulfill a major objective of their strategy of depriving the Americans the use of that defensible position as an avenue of communication between New England and the rest of the rebellion. Rather, Major General Henry Clinton chose to dismantle the forts and after a couple of weeks of harassing the local communities, withdrew downriver to New York City.

In the aftermath of the British victory against the highland forts, Poughkeepsie received its share of British harassment. On 11 October, HM brig *Diligent* gave chase to the Continental Army galley *Lady Washington* off Poughkeepsie.[43] The next day sailors from HM galley *Dependence,* formerly the Continental galley *Independence,* burned mills and other buildings three miles from Poughkeepsie.[44] On 15 October, a small British squadron explored the Hudson River as far north as Poughkeepsie.[45] After this, New York Governor George Clinton was concerned enough about Poughkeepsie's security that he recommended leaving a contingent of troops there.[46] On 23 October, HM galley *Dependence,* in sailing past Poughkeepsie, fired on an American battery posted behind heights there.[47]

After the British withdrawal from the highlands, the Poughkeepsie shipyards resumed their contributions to the war effort. In the spring of 1778, they were producing four gunboats, 36 feet on the keel, and 14 in the beam, armed with 18 pounders in the bow for protection of the Hudson.[48]

The Americans continued to post a strong force in the highlands to maintain east-west communications until independence was secured, and the British attempted to recapture the highlands by stealth and treachery, rather than by main force. But after 1777, the Hudson's highlands ceased to be a major focal point of fighting and strategy. After Burgoyne's failure, there would not be another attempt to invade the United States via the Lake Champlain–Hudson River corridor, until 1814, during the War of 1812.

Let us recognize the contributions of those who work to prepare for the day of battle, creating the weapons and supplying the requirements of men, ships, and guns. In the United States of America, we live in a land of liberty in part because of the productive capacity of our people. America's naval shipyards throughout our history have been essential to national defense. The War of 1812 on the Great Lakes was largely a shipbuilding contest, and the U.S. Navy won the Battle of Lake Erie not because

of superior seamanship, but because of a superior fleet. In large part, we were victorious against the Axis powers in World War II because our shipyards and factories built ships, airplanes, and tanks better and faster than the enemy. When we think of America's wartime shipyards, the big yards—such as the Brooklyn, Philadelphia, and Norfolk Navy Yards—come to mind. But we should remember that when our nation was just aborning, when even small-scale events had momentous consequences, a small shipyard in the Hudson River Valley made a valuable contribution. The Poughkeepsie revolutionary shipyard earned a place in America's history.

NOTES

[1] William Bell Clark, et al., eds., *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, 13 vols. to date (Washington, DC, 1964—) [henceforth, NDAR] 7:1059, Petition of Shipwrights to the New York Convention, 29 Jan. 1777.
[2] Christopher Ward, *The War of the Revolution*, 2 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1952); Charles O. Paullin, *The Navy of the American Revolution: Its Administration, Its Policy and Its Achievements* (Cleveland: Burrows, 1906); William M. Fowler Jr., *Rebels Under Sail: The American Navy during the Revolution* (New York: Scribner, 1976); Lincoln Diamond, *Chaining the Hudson: The Fight for the River in the American Revolution* (Secaucus, NJ: Lyle Stuart, 1989).
[3] William J. Morgan, "First Commentary," in *Maritime Dimensions of the American Revolution* (Washington, DC: Naval History Division, Dept. of the Navy, 1977), 23.39
[4] U.S. Continental Congress, *Journals of the Continental Congress*, *1774–1789*, edited by Worthington C. Ford and Gaillard Hunt, 34 vols. (Washington: Library of Congress, 1904–37), 3:293–94.
[5] Ibid., 311–12.
[6] Ibid., 425–27.
[7] Thomas S. Wermuth and James M. Johnson, "The American Revolution in the Hudson River Valley—An Overview," *Hudson River Valley Review* 20 (2003): 5.
[8] NDAR 1:101, Lieutenant Governor Cadwallader Colden of New York, to Vice Admiral Samuel Graves, 20 Feb. 1775.
[9] NDAR 5:170, Francis Lewis to Robert Treat Paine, 20 May 1776.
[10] NDAR 5:452, John Griffiths to Robert Treat Paine, 10 June 1776.
[11] NDAR 5:398, Journal of the Continental Congress, 6 June 1776.
[12] NDAR 5:191, Robert R. Livingston to John Jay, 21 May 1776.
[13] NDAR 5:731, Brigadier General Benedict Arnold to George Washington, 25 June 1776.
[14] NDAR 5:892–3, Robert Boyd, Jr. to George Clinton, 3 July 1776.
[15] NDAR 5:893n.
[16] NDAR 5:1041, Richard Carey Jr. to Colonel James Clinton, 12 July 1776.
[17] NDAR 10:121–22, Captain Silas Talbot to the Continental Congress.
[18] NDAR 5:1040–41, Richard Carey Jr. to Colonel James Clinton, 12 July 1776.
[19] NDAR 5:1171n; NDAR 5:1244, Journal of the New York Provincial Convention, 27 July 1776.
[20] NDAR 5:1102, Journal of the New York Provincial Convention, 16 July 1776.
[21] NDAR 5:1125, Diary of Ensign Caleb Clap, 18 July 1776.
[22] NDAR 5: 1124–25, Journal of H.M.S. *Phoenix*, Captain Hyde Parker Jr., and Journal of H.M.S. *Rose*, Captain James Wallace, 17–18 July 1776.
[23] NDAR 6:208, Memoirs of Major General William Heath, 16 Aug. 1776.
[24] NDAR 5:1245, Colonel Jedediah Huntington to Colonel Jabez Huntington, 27 July 1776.
[25] NDAR 5:1307–8, Jacobus Van Zandt to Captain Richard Varick, 31 July 1776.
[26] NDAR 6:361–62, Narrative of Abraham Leggett, 1 July–30 Aug. 1776.
[27] NDAR 6:35, Captain Richard Varick to Lieutenant Timothy Hughes, 3 Aug. 1776; NDAR 6:872–73, Major General Philip Schuyler to the Committee for Building the Continental Frigates at Poughkeepsie, 17 Sept. 1776; NDAR 6:902, Journal of the New York Provincial Convention, 19 Sept. 1776.
[28] NDAR 6:1117–18, Major General Philip Schuyler to John Hancock, 3 Oct. 1776.
[29] NDAR 6:926–27, Journal of the New York Provincial Convention, 20 Sept. 1776.
[30] NDAR 6:928, Journal of the New York Provincial Convention, 21 Sept. 1776.

[31] NDAR 6:1353–54, Continental Marine Committee to Augustin Lawrence and Samuel Tuder, 21 Oct. 1776; NDAR 6: 1200–201, Journal of the Continental Congress, 10 Oct. 1776.
[32] NDAR 6:1443–44, New York Committee of Safety to the Superintendents of Frigates at Poughkeepsie, 29 Oct. 1776.
[33] NDAR 7:315–16, Minutes of the New York Committee of Safety, 28 Nov. 1776.
[34] NDAR 7:367, Minutes of the New York Committee of Safety, 4 Dec. 1776.
[35] NDAR 7:1072, Francis Lewis to Abraham Ten Broeck, 31 Jan. 1777; NDAR 7:1202, Report on the Continental Frigates at Esopus, New York, 14 Feb. 1777.
[36] NDAR 6:1185–86, Tench Tilghman to Major General William Heath, 9 Oct. 1776; NDAR 7:607, Order of New York Committee of Safety, 27 Dec. 1776; NDAR 8:457, Journal of the New York Provincial Convention, 28 Apr. 1777.
[37] NDAR 8:987, Continental Army Generals to General Washington, 17 May 1777.
[38] NDAR 9:118, Brigadier General George Clinton to Major General Israel Putnam, 15 June 1777.
[39] NDAR 9:251–52, Brigadier General George Clinton to Major General Israel Putnam, 9 July 1777.
[40] NDAR 9:320, Captain John Hodge to the New York Council of Safety, 23 July 1777.
[41] NDAR 10:48, General Orders of Governor George Clinton, 6 Oct. 1777.
[42] NDAR 10:48, Journal of H.M. Brig *Diligent*, Lieutenant Thomas Farnham, 6 Oct. 1777; NDAR 10:94, Governor George Clinton to George Washington, 9 Oct. 1777.
[43] NDAR 10:118, Journal of H.M. Brig *Diligent*, Lieutenant Thomas Farnham, 11 Oct. 1777.
[44] NDAR 10:128n.
[45] NDAR 10:172, Journal of H.M. Galley *Dependence*, Lieutenant James Clark, and Journal of H.M. Brig *Diligent*, Lieutenant Thomas Farnham, 15 Oct. 1777.
[46] NDAR 10:204, Governor George Clinton to Major General Israel Putnam, 18 Oct. 1777.
[47] NDAR 10:243, Journal of H.M. Galley *Dependence*, Lieutenant James Clark, 23 Oct. 1777.
[48] NDAR 11:835, *The New-York Gazette: and the Weekly Mercury*, 30 Mar. 1778.

Part Three: The Navy's Image on Paper and Canvas

CHAPTER 5

Samuel Eliot Morison's *John Paul Jones: A Sailor's Biography,*

A Retrospective Appreciation

Even before his death in Paris in 1792 at the age of 45, John Paul Jones was the subject of legend and fictitious tales. Early 19th-century chapbooks falsely made him out to be the illegitimate son of the Earl of Selkirk, to have raped a scullery maid, to have served in the Royal Navy, to have engaged in piracy, and to have died at a ripe old age on the Kentucky frontier. In 1900, author Augustus C. Buell compounded erroneously held beliefs about Jones by publishing his two-volume biography, complete with scholarly apparatus.[1] Buell, riding the wave of enthusiasm for all things naval that swept the country in the wake of the U.S. Navy's victories in the recent war with Spain, cashed in on renewed interest in John Paul Jones as the nation's earliest advocate of naval professionalism. Unfortunately, Buell fabricated many of his sources, quoted non-existent correspondence, and made up events. Scholars quickly exposed Buell's falsehoods, but the damage he did remains. The unsuspecting continue to cite Buell's invented letter on the qualifications of a naval officer as authentic John Paul Jones. You will find Buell's tall tale of Jones assaulting Stephen Sayre—reported as fact in the respected military historian John R. Alden's 1983 biography of Sayre.[2] In writing her two-volume *Life and Letters of John Paul Jones*, published in 1913, Anna F. (Mrs. Reginald) De Koven was well aware of Buell's falsehoods, but unfortunately was undiscriminating in her use of other sources and made several factual errors.[3] Lincoln Lorenz's *John Paul Jones: Fighter for Freedom and Glory,* published in 1943, was the best scholarly work available on Jones when Samuel Eliot Morison began his study.[4] Yet, even Lorenz mistakenly concluded that Jones saw brief periods of service in the Royal Navy and in a buccaneer. After attempting to read the 800 pages of Lorenz's turgid prose, the reader will turn gratefully to the Jones biography by Morison.

John Paul Jones: A Sailor's Biography, published in 1959, filled a need for an accurate and readable biography of the early American naval hero, at one and the same time accessible to the general public and useful to scholars.[5] The "sailor" in the subtitle may be taken as referring as much to the author as to the subject, and Samuel Eliot Morison's seamanship gives his biography of Jones a distinctive quality. Based on extensive primary research, employing Parkmanesque first-hand descriptions of the localities of crucial events, and written in a lively and personable style, the book merited the author's second Pulitzer Prize for biography.

When Morison began work on his biography of John Paul Jones in 1957, he was 70 years old. By that age, he had attained extraordinary success as a historian, making his mark in a variety of genres of American history. Morison wrote his first book, published in 1913, on the life of his ancestor, Harrison Gray Otis, a Massachusetts Federalist. One of the founders of the *New England Quarterly* in 1928, and author of *Builders of the Bay Colony* (1930), five volumes on the history of Harvard University (1930–1936), and *The Puritan Pronaos* (1936), Morison helped revitalize New England studies and

was one of the "three Ms" of Puritan revisionism, along with Kenneth Murdock and Perry Miller, who restored intellectual regard for the early leaders of New England. *The Growth of the American Republic*, on which he collaborated with Henry Steele Commager, stood as a standard college history textbook for decades. These accomplishments would have been sufficient to render him a leading American historian; but his contributions in the field of maritime history were prodigious: 1921, *The Maritime History of Massachusetts, 1783-1860;* 1939, *The Second Voyage of Christopher Columbus;* 1940, *Portuguese Voyages to America in the Fifteenth Century;* 1942, *Admiral of the Ocean Sea,* for which he won the Pulitzer Prize; and 1947–1962, *History of the United States Naval Operations in World War II* (15 vols.). Following publication of *John Paul Jones* came more maritime history, including a biography of Matthew C. Perry and two volumes on voyages to America in the age of discovery. Morison's expertise in maritime history and his consummate skill as a yachtsman rendered him peculiarly fit to write Jones's biography.

Morison's biography of John Paul Jones reflects the author's education as a historian at Harvard University, as well as the approach to history he took in his mature career. While Morison was an undergraduate at Harvard, 1904–1908, the teaching of history was in transition. He was exposed to the older approach that emphasized political institutions, politics, and leaders, based on the study of law and official government documents, but was profoundly influenced by younger teachers who preferred the study of society and culture, drawing on literature, popular songs, and folk customs. In *John Paul Jones: A Sailor's Biography,* this training appears in Morison's use of popular songs to gauge the fighter's image in the popular mind.

Disillusioned, like many intellectuals, in the aftermath of the First World War, with the idea that history could be the servant of social reform, Morison concluded that historians should seek to serve the general reading public, rather than just fellow scholars. In *The Maritime History of Massachusetts*, he succeeded in developing a voice and style that the reading public found attractive. That same conversational voice and narrative style makes his biography of Jones a good read. In researching his biography of Christopher Columbus, Morison sought to produce a model work based on professional, scientific research, but written without tediousness or pretension.[6] In doing so, he developed his "participatory" style, based on his own retracing—while sailing in a ketch—of Columbus's voyages in order to verify his thoughts on the tracts the explorer sailed as described by Columbus's journals and logs. In a less extensive way, Morison used the same techniques in *John Paul Jones,* such as retracing the route of Jones's funeral cortege through the streets of Paris in order "to convey a sense of it to the reader."[7]

In contrast to Progressive and leftist historians who told American history in terms of conflict between sections, classes, and ideologies, Morison sought to interpret the American past as a unified whole, emphasizing commonly held values, continuity, and stability. Critics dubbed this approach "consensus history," arguing that it obscured "all history of dissent and conflict in American culture."[8] However, Morison preferred to characterize his approach with the French term *mesure,* by which he meant balance and evenhandedness. "Observance of *mesure,*" he said,

> will prevent one from overemphasis on a single aspect of history, such as the political, the social, or the military . . . ; *mesure* requires the historian to do justice to movements and personalities that he instinctively dislikes; to try fairly to present what they were driving at, why they acted as they did.[9]

The quality of *mesure* characterizes Morison's study of John Paul Jones. Morison's Jones is a blemished hero. Morison presents a balanced portrait, delineating both admirable and tragic traits. Consider Morison's examination of the famous bust of John Paul Jones by the French sculptor Jean-Antoine Houdon. "It is a strong, resolute countenance; proud, uncompromising, defiant, ambitious, and (from long experience) on the defensive against fools and intriguers."

> Let the reader make up his own mind as to the manner of man Paul Jones was by studying this noble portrait of him. To me, it is a passionate, not a calm face; the face of a man who is not at peace even with himself, but at war with society and the world; yet that of a man who longs, even yearns, for peace. I see no sense of humor in his countenance, but a look of impatient irony. It is the face of a man who exacts everything that is due to his rank and his accomplishments, but is ungenerous, even to the women whom he loves and discards. A man incapable of giving himself completely to a friend or a mistress, but who identifies himself completely with his cause—Pro Republica.[10]

Morison, like many of the naval administrators who had to listen to Jones's unceasing complaints about "ill treatment in matters of promotion and seniority," finds Jones a "querulous bore." He agrees with Benjamin Franklin's advice to Jones that "if you should observe an occasion to give your officers and friends a little more praise than is their due, and confess more fault than you can justly be charged with, you will only become the sooner for it, a great captain. Criticizing and censuring almost every one you have to do with, will diminish friends, increase enemies, and thereby hurt your affairs." Jones, in Morison's estimation, "was a colossal egotist, seldom generous enough to share credit with his subordinates."[11] "No officer in the Navy," writes Morison, "was more considerate of his crew. . . . His first care . . . was for the people and the ship."[12] Yet, Jones's "faultfinding, nagging and perfectionism . . . , coupled with his unpredictable temper, made him disliked by . . . many of his shipmates."[13] In the end, Jones died a lonely man, and the cause of his loneliness was "his colossal egotism. Paul Jones was never deeply interested in anybody except Paul Jones." He failed to inspire the enthusiastic loyalty of his men because "too few officers and men received the encouraging word, the pat on the back, that build shipboard morale and make a commanding officer beloved."[14]

Balancing Morison's estimation of John Paul Jones as "not altogether an amiable character," is his finding that Jones is still worthy of our esteem, "a sea warrior of well-deserved renown" who "accomplished what he did through sheer merit, persistence, and force of character." Jones's "zeal to improve himself as a naval officer, to prepare for a fleet command, makes him stand out from brother officers in the Revolutionary Navy." Jones understood that the proper role of the Continental Navy was not commerce-destroying, which could be left to privateers, but raids on the British isles or remote British possessions in hopes of drawing British naval forces away from the coast of North

America. Never afforded the opportunity to prove himself as a strategist, he performed magnificently on the tactical level. He swiftly adapted tactics to the situation of battles as they unfolded, and his seamanship was masterful. His indomitable will evinced itself in acts of uncommon valor. "His battle with *Serapis,*" judges Morison, "as an example of how a man through sheer guts, refusing to admit the possibility of defeat, can emerge victorious from the most desperate circumstances, is an inspiration to every sailor."[15]

Although the biography became a Book-of-the-Month-Club selection and has seldom gone out of print, it did not attain the level of sales for which Morison hoped. A not altogether amiable hero, who in midlife became a bore, was not what the public was seeking. One critic writing for a popular magazine observed, "a biography of a hero who becomes a bore at last is itself in danger of fetching up on boredom." The riches of data and detail in the book exhausted the same reviewer. His most damaging criticism was that Morison failed to capture the reader's imagination—Morison neither empathized with the protagonist as he had so wonderfully with Christopher Columbus, nor did he reveal what motivated Jones—"you read what he did but you don't know what he was."[16] It may be that Morison wrote the book so quickly—in a year and half—that he did not have time to identify with his subject. I suspect that the real cause of the disappointing level of sales was Morison's intellectual honesty and adherence to rules of evidence. He stripped Jones of his romantic aura, refused to speculate beyond the point that the sources led, and portrayed Jones as he was, "warts and all."

Scholars liked the book. C. Vann Woodward, a naval veteran of the Second World War, and at the time a history professor at Johns Hopkins, observed that from Morison "we get the Olympian detachment we have learned to expect from the senior naval historian and the dean of the craft in this country. He is also an admirer of Paul Jones, but that does not oblige him to take up all his quarrels and defend him against all comers. Another advantage that Morison has gained from long experience at sea and long experience in archives is the knowledge that a great fighter is not necessarily always a great man." Woodward concludes his review, written for the *New York Times,* with high praise for the nautical expertise Morison brought to "this splendid book." "The command of seamanship that can confidently compare the tactical and strategic problems of the age of wood and sail with those of the age of steel and electronics" is not very widely distributed. "One reason that Samuel Eliot Morison can perform these feats is that he has lived intimately with the great captains from the fifteenth to the twentieth century and knows them very well. It is rather doubtful that another could be found among contemporaries who could bend his bow."[17] The committee of judges for the Pulitzer Prize must have agreed with Woodward's assessment of Morison as the Ulysses of naval history.

Let us turn now to the book itself, and see how Morison handles several controversial episodes in John Paul Jones's life, starting with the stories that before the American Revolution the future naval hero was a slaver and a murderer.

Between the ages of 17 and 20, John Paul did sail in the slave trade. He was third mate in one slaver and chief mate in another, operating between Africa and the West Indies. Morison disposes of this period in a single paragraph, noting that Jones would have no more of that "abominable trade," as

young John Paul called it. Morison suggests that Jones left the slave trade both because it "outraged his sentiments of humanity," and because it was, literally, a filthy, stinking business.

At the age of 23, John Paul, now a master in the transatlantic merchant service, was accused of brutality that resulted in the death of one of his crew. Morison exonerates Jones from the charge, but observes that it was his own "ungovernable temper" that exposed him to it. On a passage from Kirkudbright, Scotland, to Tobago, John Paul had his ship's carpenter, Mungo Maxwell, flogged for disobedience of orders. The judge of the vice admiralty court in Tobago dismissed Maxwell's complaint, declaring the stripes on his back "neither mortal nor dangerous." On the return voyage, Maxwell was taken with a fever and died. Concluding that the death resulted from the flogging, Maxwell's father had Jones arrested for the death of his son. John Paul cleared himself by obtaining depositions from witnesses who testified that Mungo was in good health before the return voyage to Scotland. That the respectable people of Kirkcudbright put no stock in the murder charge is evidenced by the admittance soon after of John Paul into the local Masonic lodge.

Three years later at Tobago, another of John Paul's crewmen died at his hands, and he fled and changed his name to escape justice. The only account of this incident comes from John Paul Jones himself. Angry over a pay dispute, a huge, powerful sailor attacked Jones with a club. Faced with only two other alternatives, falling down a hatchway or taking the club's blow to his skull, John Paul ran his assailant through with a sword. He offered to turn himself in to authorities, but friends urged him to flee, because there was no admiralty court on the island and a regular jury trial risked the death sentence. Morison admits that he is unable to solve several mysteries about this incident. The story seems inconsistent. Jones says he intended to return when an admiralty commission arrived on the island. But he also says that the lieutenant-governor, William Young, was one of those who recommended flight. Why Young, who held vice-admiralty powers, could not have presided over an admiralty hearing is not clear. Morison speculates that the death of the local Tobago man "had so stirred up local sentiment that John Paul's friends could not be responsible for his safety and prevailed upon him to escape at once."

John Paul Jones made some broad claims about his accomplishments as a lieutenant in the first months of the Continental Navy. Morison evaluates those claims candidly. Jones stated that he acted as Commodore Esek Hopkins's "planning officer, strategist and master brain," on the cruise in which the Continental fleet made a surprise attack on New Providence in the Bahamas. "That, of course, is nonsense," says Morison. "Hopkins and Saltonstall not only knew the Bahamas well, through their former merchant voyages; they had fought ships in the French and Indian War."

Morison concludes that Jones was in the wrong in his falling out with Hopkins. In command of *Alfred,* Jones boarded and searched the Rhode Island privateer *Eagle,* on which he discovered and took into custody two deserters from the Continental Navy and two from the Rhode Island brigade. He also pressed 20 of *Eagle*'s seamen. *Eagle*'s owners objected and sued. Although Hopkins defended Jones's actions before the Marine Committee and filed a counter suit against *Eagle*'s master for enlisting deserters, Jones believed that Hopkins "had disavowed his action and refused to defend him." This misunderstanding fed Jones's later mistaken belief that Hopkins was responsible for the cancellation

Figure 1: John Paul Jones, Captain, Continental Navy

of a squadron under Jones's orders which was to capture St. Christopher and then cruise in the Gulf of Mexico.

No slight rankled Jones more than his position on the seniority list that the Continental Congress established for the Navy on 10 October 1776. Morison refuses to "echo the soprano (and falsetto) shrieks of Jones's biographers about the injustice of Congress, sectional prejudice, and the like." Morison

reasons that Congress followed a rational principle in making ship assignments and establishing seniority. Of the first 14 captains, 13 were assigned to the 13 new frigates Congress had authorized. Almost every captain was native to the locality of the frigate to which he was assigned because seamen had to be recruited locally and were more likely to sign up under a commander they knew and trusted than under a stranger. Jones, a recent immigrant to Virginia, had no local community behind him, he wielded no interest with the Virginia delegates, and his principal sponsor in Congress, Joseph Hewes of North Carolina, was absent at the time seniority was determined. Furthermore, in October 1776, the Marine Committee had little in the way of performance records from which to judge and should not be faulted for failing to foresee Jones's sterling accomplishments as a naval commander. Nor does Morison concur that Jones suffered from sectional prejudice, for his promoters and detractors were distributed among the sections.

John Paul Jones entered the navy of Catherine the Great of Russia as a rear admiral in 1788 and assumed command of the Russian naval squadron whose assignment was to help defeat the Turkish forces that blocked the Liman, the Dnieper River's exit into the Black Sea. In contributing substantially to the Russian victory in the campaign of the Liman, Jones made enemies within the Russian navy among those who did not care to share the credit. Our hero's short career as Kontradmiral Pavel Ivanovich Jones ended in 1789 under the cloud of a scandal that drove him from Russia. In Morison's handling of this scandal, our hero's character emerges less pure than it does in the accounts by Mrs. De Koven and Lincoln Lorenz. In early April 1789, Jones was charged with attempting to rape a 10-year-old girl. All three biographers concur that the girl and her mother trumped up the charges at the instigation of one of Jones's enemies. The girl was actually two years older than the mother deposed; the mother admitted that a gentleman who wore a decoration was behind her and that she was only interested in money; the mother had deserted her husband and was living with a younger man; and someone was pressuring lawyers not to take Jones's case. De Koven and Lorenz take at face value Jones's public denials, as announced by his loyal friend the Comte de Ségur and as printed in Jones's own memoirs. In Jones's public version, the girl called at his lodgings to ask if he had any mending she could do and Jones replied in the negative; she made some indecent gestures and Jones advised her "not to enter on so vile a career, gave her some money, and dismissed her." As soon as she left his rooms the girl tore her clothes, started screaming "rape!" and ran to her mother, who was standing by. Morison, however, believes that Jones's letter to the chief of police, a document unknown to De Koven and Lorenz, is closer to the truth. Jones admitted that the girl had visited him often, that they had engaged in what he refers to as badinage, or playful conversation, and that she "lent herself very amiably to all that a man would want of her," but if she were not a virgin, he was not the one who had deflowered her. Morison concludes that Jones's private habits made him vulnerable to an enemy who found the girl and her mother "willing instruments of his malice."

Morison's treatment of the various controversies in Jones's career is admirably evenhanded, censuring him here and defending him there, as circumstances require.

Morison addresses the reader in an easy, personal voice, as if telling stories seated mug in hand in front of the hearth. He is careful, nevertheless, not to overplay the humor inherent in a couple of episodes in

Jones's life. One hilarious episode involved a sheriff with the unlikely name of Dogberry. This is how Morison tells the story.

While Jones was in Providence, Rhode Island, the owners of privateer *Eagle*, whose sailors Jones had pressed, "employed an elderly lawyer named Joseph Lawrence to go with the sheriff to arrest Jones in the street. Captain Jones drew his sword and swore he would 'clip' any man who touched him; and Lawrence, so excited as to use language no longer appropriate, exclaimed, 'Oppose this man if you dare. He is a King's officer!' Jones flourishing his sword, replied, 'Is he? By God, I have a commission then to take his head off!' The sheriff retreated and cried, 'He lies, he lies, I ain't no King's officer!' Lawrence, turning to the sheriff, said, 'Why don't you take him?' to which Dogberry replied, 'The devil—don't you see his poker?' So Jones was not arrested."[18]

To render the age of fighting sail understandable to his readers, Morison makes frequent analogies with the Second World War. The engagement between the Continental fleet under Esek Hopkins and HMS *Glasgow* reminds the author "in miniature of the Battle off Samar on 25 October 1944 when when Admiral Kurita was so flabbergasted at encountering Admiral Sprague's escort carriers that he, too, committed his ships piecemeal and was defeated by a greatly inferior force."[19] He explains the term "commodore" as the courtesy title of the "officer in tactical command of a squadron or task force." Jones's "strategy of hit-and-run raids," says Morison, "was adopted by England against Germany in 1940, culminating in the famous raid on Dieppe in August 1942. Paul Jones and Lord Mountbatten would have understood each other perfectly."[20] Describing the encounter between *Bonhomme Richard* and HMS *Serapis*, Morison says, "In terms of recent warfare, it was as though a 14-inch-gunned battleship, with an additional advantage of speed, engaged an 8-inch-gunned heavy cruiser."[21] These analogies—coming naturally to a historian nearing the end of supervising the writing of 15 volumes of naval history of the recent war—are pertinent and appropriate to the year 1959, when the biography was published. The frequent references to World War II, nonetheless, make the book sound dated today, more than 50 years after the close of that conflict.

Morison is at his narrative best in recounting the famous battle off Flamborough Head. Note in the following paragraph how Morison makes the reader feel like an eyewitness, like one of the spectators that came to watch from Flamborough Head. Note the homely similes and informal colloquialisms. Note how the author neatly summarizes in this one paragraph the course of the middle game of the match. And note how he ends the paragraph with the spotlight on the subject of the biography.

> It is now between 8:00 and 8:30; the harvest moon, two days short of full, rises over heavy clouds on the eastern horizon and illuminates the battle. "Flamborough reapers, homegoing, pause on the hillside; for what sulphur-cloud is that which defaces the sleek sea; sulphur-cloud spitting streaks of fire?" Spectators, attracted from Scarborough and Bridlington by the sound of the opening salvos, flock to Flamborough Head. They witness a naval combat the like of which has never been fought before or since. Here, for two long hours, *Bonhomme Richard* and *Serapis* are mortised together, snug as two logs in a woodpile, guns muzzle to muzzle. They are so close that the starboard gun

> ports of *Serapis*, shut during the first phase of the battle, cannot be opened outboard and have to be blown off by her guns; and the gunners, in order to load and ram their charges home, must thrust their staves into the enemy's gun ports. At one point the sails of both ships are ablaze, and killing is suspended while damage control parties fight the flames; then each ship resumes banging away at t'other. The Englishman wants to break off and fight at cannon range but cannot, the American clings desperately to him, knowing that only by maintaining the clinch can he survive. Deprived of his eighteen-pounder battery in the gunroom by the bursting of the guns, and of his main battery of twelve-pounders by the blast from *Serapis's* two decks of eighteen-pounders, Commodore Jones has no cannon left except three nine-pounders on the quarterdeck, one of which he helps to trundle over from the port side and serves with his own hands.[22]

This paragraph accomplishes an amazing amount in a natural, relaxed style. This is obviously a paragraph over which Morison sweated blood.

After 40 years, Morison's account of the famous engagement off Flamborough Head holds up well in light of investigations that are more recent. The one book-length study of the battle, by popular author John Evangelist Walsh, follows Morison's version of the course of the battle blow by blow.[23] Peter Reaveley, an amateur historian with a passion for the history of *Bonhomme Richard*, has studied the battle as closely as anyone has. He differs with Morison on a few important points.[24] According to Morison, Jones attacked *Serapis* because he realized that he must defeat the armed escort before capturing the merchantmen under her convoy. In Reaveley's view, *Serapis* intercepted *Bonhomme Richard* as Jones was trying to reach the convoy and to cut off the escort. Morison covers the opening moves of the engagement by saying that with each captain maneuvering his ship to rake the other, *Serapis* "several times gained an advantageous position." Reaveley finds that during the first phase of the battle, *Serapis* actually fired three devastating stern rakes into *Bonhomme Richard*. Near the end of the battle, an American seaman lobbed a grenade through a hatchway onto *Serapis*'s gundeck, causing a tremendous chain-reaction explosion of gunpowder cartridges lying near the guns. Morison places this explosion well before, and Reaveley just before, *Serapis*'s captain struck his colors. Finally, a couple of authors question Morison's assessment of the eccentric actions of Captain Pierre Landais, of Continental Navy frigate *Alliance*, during the battle. *Alliance* contributed nothing to *Bonhomme Richard'*s victory over *Serapis* or to *Pallas'*s capture of *Countess of Scarborough*, and at least three times during the course of the battle, fired broadsides that killed men on board *Bonhomme Richard* as well as did damage to *Serapis*. Morison concludes that Landais ordered those broadsides with evil intent. Walsh judges that behind these acts lay cowardice, not treason. Thomas J. Schaeper, a specialist in 18th-century French history, discovers in French accounts of the battle what he believes to be "a credible, or at least a plausible, explanation of Landais's behavior," and exculpates Landais of both treachery and cowardice.[25]

John Paul Jones, A Sailor's Biography, by Samuel Eliot Morison, published in 1959 by Little Brown, is a fine, honest, well-crafted biography. It is the only accurate and reliable life of John Paul Jones based on original research in the authentic sources.

Postscript

Subsequent to the delivery of this appreciation, at least three new biographies of John Paul Jones have been published. Evan Thomas's *John Paul Jones: Sailor, Hero, Father of the American Navy*,[26] is a lively narrative retelling Jones's life with a focus on psychological explanations of his choices and personality. In *John Paul Jones: America's First Sea Warrior,*[27] author Joseph F. Callo, a retired naval officer, narrates Jones's naval career evaluating the effects, positive and negative, Jones's actions had on that career. In *John Paul Jones: Maverick Hero,*[28] Frank Walker brings originality to the story of Jones's naval exploits in European waters during the War of Independence by retelling it from a British perspective. Each new work on John Paul Jones, in one way or another, owes a debt to Morison's study, which cleared away the detritus of myth and error surrounding Jones's life and built a usable framework for interpreting his character and career.

NOTES

[1] *Augustus C. Buell, Paul Jones, Founder of the American Navy: A History,* 2 vols. (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1900).
[2] John R. Alden, *Stephen Sayre, American Revolutionary Adventurer* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1983).
[3] Anna Farwell De Koven [Mrs. R. De Koven], *The Life and Letters of John Paul Jones*, 2 vols. (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1913).
[4] Lincoln Lorenz, *John Paul Jones, Fighter for Freedom and Glory* (Annapolis, MD: United States Naval Institute Press, 1943).
[5] Samuel Eliot Morison, *John Paul Jones, A Sailor's Biography* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1959).
[6] Gregory M. Pfitzer, s.v. "Samuel Eliot Morison," in John A. Garraty et al., eds., *American National Biography* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999), 15:867–71.
[7] Gregory M. Pfitzer, *Samuel Eliot Morison's Historical World: In Quest of the New Parkman* (Boston: Northeaster Univ. Press, 1991), 253.
[8] Pfitzer, s.v. "Samuel Eliot Morison."
[9] Samuel Eliot Morison, "The Principles and Experiences of an Historian," 17, typescript lecture, Navy Department Library.
[10] Morison, *John Paul Jones*, 202.
[11] Ibid., 92.
[12] Ibid., 118.
[13] Ibid., 272.
[14] Ibid., 411–12.
[15] Ibid., 412.
[16] Quoted in Pfitzer, *Samuel Eliot Morison's Historical World*, 253, 254.
[17] C. Vann Woodward, "Portrait of a Hero Who Fought for Himself," *New York Times*, 13 Sept. 1959.
[18] Morison, *John Paul Jones*, 85–86.
[19] Ibid., 48.
[20] Ibid., 195.
[21] Ibid., 226.
[22] Ibid., 233.
[23] John Evangelist Walsh, *Night on Fire: The First Complete Account of John Paul Jones's Greatest Battle* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978).
[24] Peter Reaveley, "The Battle," in Jean Boudriot, *John Paul Jones and the* Bonhomme Richard: *A Reconstruction of the Ship and an Account of the Battle with H.M.S.* Serapis (Paris: Jean Boudriot, 1987), 64–91.
[25] Thomas J. Schaeper, *John Paul Jones and the Battle off Flamborough Head: A Reconsideration* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989).
[26] New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003.
[27] Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2006.
[28] Philadelphia: Casement, 2008.

CHAPTER 6

The Lasting Influence of Theodore Roosevelt's *Naval War of 1812*

In 1882, 23-year-old Theodore Roosevelt published his first book, *The Naval War of 1812*. Reviewers praised the book's scholarship and style, the recently established Naval War College adopted it for study, and the Department of the Navy ordered a copy placed in every ship's library.[1] *The Naval War of 1812* continues to be reprinted. Most recently, in 1999, two new editions came out, a hardback from Da Capo Press, and a Modern Library paperback.[2] The work influenced all subsequent scholarship on the naval aspects of the War of 1812. More than a classic, it remains, after 120 years, a standard study of the war. What is it, one may ask, that gives the book its persistent authority?

It is said that amateurs talk strategy but professionals talk logistics. Roosevelt discusses neither. His sole subject is the tactics employed in individual naval engagements. For a discussion of the overall naval strategy of the War of 1812 and of the strategic importance of particular actions or campaigns, one turns to Alfred Thayer Mahan's 1905 *Sea Power in Its Relations to the War of 1812*. Denying that the famous ship duels on the oceans had any significance for the outcome of the war, Mahan eschewed the loving detail with which Roosevelt described each engagement. As Michael Crogan observes, "Roosevelt's study had just that sort of technical orientation that Mahan strove so earnestly to overcome among his students at the Naval War College." Mahan fostered a more exalted viewpoint and developed overarching issues such as how a larger, if still modest, American Navy might have deterred a war with Britain and the effectiveness of the British blockade of the American coast.[3] Today, most historians of naval warfare take for their field of purview a much wider array of concerns, which include, in addition to strategy and logistics, force structure, recruitment, administration, finance, and politics. Roosevelt says nothing, for instance, about how the U.S. government determined the size, composition, and distribution of its fleet during the war, the process by which the secretary of the navy issued sailing orders, or the wisdom of those orders. Yet, Roosevelt's study of the narrow subject of tactics has had a persistent influence on the writing of the naval history of the War of 1812. For, as William Dudley observes, the tactical details "make his work . . . an essential reference for those working deeper in the subject."[4]

Roosevelt strove for objectivity, avoiding the chauvinistic biases of earlier writers on the war, both American and British—the deliberate distortions of facts to denigrate the enemy found in the British William James, and the indiscriminate assignment of praise to one's own countrymen found in James Fenimore Cooper.[5] Our interest at the moment, however, is not how Roosevelt differed from historians who came before him, but how he influenced those who came after.

Roosevelt examines each engagement between American and British naval forces during the War of 1812. He analyzes the absolute and relative strengths of the ships, crews, officers, and armaments, weighs the advantages and disadvantages of each side, describes the course of the engagement,

evaluates the tactics employed, and assesses the merits of the actions taken by the opponents. He did not invent the statistical approach; what sets him apart is his methodical persistence in applying the approach to every engagement and the use of the resulting data to make comparisons among engagements and draw general conclusions. The lasting value of his approach lies in the care he took to get the facts right, the consistency of his criteria for assessing the actions, and the judiciousness of his assessments.

Trained in the scientific history being newly taught at Harvard University in the latter half of the 19th century, Roosevelt relied on original sources, principally the reports of the participants, to establish the facts on which he based his narrative. He cites the sources for his statements of fact—in the particularly controversial encounter between *President* and HMS *Endymion*, he documents every statement. He worked under the disadvantage, however, of not having access to British archives. As a result, for the British record he relied on published accounts, such as those appearing in *The Naval Chronicle*. Complicating Roosevelt's attempt to weigh both sides of the story was the British decision after 1812 to desist from making public the after-action reports of engagements in which British warships were vanquished. In those cases, he often accepted James's account for the British side. Roosevelt judged that James was reliable for the British side of the naval war on the oceans—though not on the northern lakes—but entirely unreliable, and often mendacious, for the American side.

For each engagement that Roosevelt narrates—both single-ship and fleet actions—he attempts to find out, as accurately as the records allow, the relative force of the antagonists. To gauge the relative force, he compares the tonnage of the vessels, the armament, and the crew size.

The measurement of tonnage is a complex technical matter, complicated by the use of different methods of determination between the American and British navies, between ships of war and ships of commerce, and between ocean and lake vessels. Roosevelt's interest was the relative size, not the absolute tonnage, of the opposing ships.

For armament, Roosevelt takes into account: the number of guns and whether any could pivot to fire with either broadside; the numbers of long guns and of carronades, and their varying effective ranges; and the nominal and actual weight of the shot.

In rejecting the notion that American 44-gun frigates were disguised ships of the line, Roosevelt focuses on the number of their guns and the weight of their broadside. Although he mentions the closeness and the thick dimensions of the hull timbers, it is the armament with 24-pounders that he considers distinguishes the heavy frigate from the 18-pounder frigate. But, modern commentators point to both heavier ordnance and sturdier construction as being integral to the success of the American 44s in battle, for it was this ability to unleash and withstand punishing gunfire that enabled Yankee frigates to prevail in battle over their British counterparts. It was as much the American 44s having the scantlings of a ship of the line and unusually thick masts and spars as it was their powerful armament that led the British Admiralty to prohibit its frigates from engaging them singly.[6] Roosevelt consistently ignores or undervalues the contribution to victory made by the heavy build of American warships.

The number of men engaged on each side is only one of several factors Roosevelt weighs when considering ships' complements. He compares the quality of the training and discipline of the opposing crews. He addresses the percentage of British subjects serving in American crews, and of American citizens serving in British crews. Roosevelt held racial views typical of his class and era; his scorn toward Italian and Portuguese sailors is palpable. On how racial factors influenced the naval conflict in the War of 1812, however, he concludes that the ethnic stock was nearly identical between the American and British crews, giving neither side the advantage. Although he notes the presence of African-Americans in the U.S. Navy, he does not give their role the intense scrutiny several recent writers have.[7] He judges that American seamen were marginally better materials from which to mold effective crews than were British seamen because America's freer institutions and the little naval protection its high seas commercial fleet received forced the American sailor to develop greater self-reliance.

Roosevelt took a statistical approach. He sought to determine the ratio between relative force and relative loss of the combatants and to explain the outcome of each engagement in terms of that ratio. The following, for example, is his table for the encounter between the U.S. sloop *Wasp*, Captain Johnston Blakely, and H.M. brig-sloop *Reindeer*, Captain William Manners, of 28 June 1814.

COMPARATIVE FORCE.

	Tons.	Broadside Guns.	Weight Metal.	No. Men.	Loss
Wasp	509	11	315	173	26
Reindeer	477	10	210	118	67

Based on this ratio of force to loss, Roosevelt concludes that the British "yielded purely to heavy odds in men and metal," and "the execution was fully proportioned to the difference in force."[8] When the results of any naval combat were disproportionate to the difference in force, he sought in the record evidence of differences in training, discipline, and courage of the crews, and in the skill and judgment of the commanders. Take, for example, the encounter between *Wasp* and H.M. brig-sloop *Avon*, Captain the Honorable James Arbuthnot, of 1 September 1814.

COMPARATIVE FORCE.

	Tons.	Broadside Guns.	Weight Metal.	No. Men.	Loss
Wasp	509	12	327	160	3
Avon	477	11	280	117	42

"It is self evident," says Roosevelt, "that in the case of this action the odds, 14 to 11, are neither enough to account for the loss inflicted being as 14 to 1, nor for the rapidity with which, during a night encounter, the *Avon* was placed in a sinking condition." Here, he concurs with James's judgment that *Avon's* was a failure of gunnery, and with Cooper's opinion that Blakely's behavior was exemplary.[9]

Canadian historian Frederick C. Drake writes that "most writers still tend to determine the comparative value of ship actions by comparing the weight of metal thrown in any one broadside" and criticizes Roosevelt for taking this method to the extreme. Roosevelt, Drake writes, "compared the ratios of people killed between two vessels with the rate of the weight of metal thrown." "Other factors, however," Drake continues, "influence the results of an action."[10] Roosevelt's method was not as simplistic as Drake implies. Roosevelt took into account such factors as the mixture of long and short guns and the state of the seas. His use of the statistics of force and loss was not formulaic. Rather, the statistics provided the basis for measuring the contribution made to victory and defeat of other factors, such as the maneuvers each commander ordered and the execution of their duties by the crews.

To put the Anglo-American naval conflict into perspective and to pass judgment on the relative capability and merit of the opposing navies, Roosevelt uses comparisons with encounters between British warships and their European opponents. He employs those encounters not simply as examples, but as controls in a scientific experiment. Thus, to help assess the significance of the outcomes of four encounters between American and British sloops, he compares the ratios of force and loss in those encounters to the ratios of force and loss in encounters between similarly matched British and French warships.[11] To judge the overall effectiveness of the American Navy in its opposition to the British navy, Roosevelt considers the actions between ships of the British and French navies during the years spanned by the War of 1812.[12]

New studies and newly available records have proven Roosevelt wrong on details, and subsequent naval scholars have taken issue with many of his conclusions.[13] My concern here, however, is not where he was right or where he was wrong, but how his work influenced other historians.

Instances in which accounts of the War of 1812 in general and popular accounts of naval warfare in the War of 1812 incorporate Roosevelt's findings are frequent. The true measure of the influence of his

Naval War of 1812 on naval historiography, however, is the frequency of instances in which authors doing original scholarship into naval engagements of the War of 1812 take his analyses into account.

Examples from the works of David F. Long illustrate some of the ways in which Roosevelt's *Naval War of 1812* have influenced historical scholarship for more than a century. In his 1981 biography of William Bainbridge, David Long determined the number of men who manned HMS *Java* during her encounter with *Constitution* using a method similar to Roosevelt's. Long made his own calculations and did not simply rely on Roosevelt's, yet both historians arrived at the same number. Long follows Roosevelt on the significance of the number, for on it rests the answer to the question of the number of casualties the Americans inflicted, a number on which the contemporary British and American accounts widely differed.[14]

Long again makes good use of Roosevelt, without slavish reliance on him, in his study of the life of James Biddle. He concurs with Roosevelt that the contest between *Wasp* and HMS *Frolic* "had been between equals, and that the triumph of the Americans had been won by their more effective tactics and more accurate gunnery."[15] On *Hornet'*s victory over HMS *Penguin*, quoting Roosevelt's statement that it was Biddle's "cool skilful seamanship and excellent gunnery that enabled the Americans to destroy an antagonist of equal force in such an exceedingly short time," Long says that Roosevelt "is only partially correct. . . . In this case seamanship was hardly an issue." Given their short-range carronades, the two sloops had to fight at close quarters, with little opportunity for maneuvering. "But certainly Roosevelt is correct," Long concludes, "When he stresses the *Hornet*'s 'excellent gunnery.'"[16]

Roosevelt's analysis of the *Constitution-Guerriere* engagement is the one most frequently cited by naval historians through the decades.

James Hannay's 1901 *The War of 1812*, a volume in *The Collections of the Nova Scotia Historical Society*, is an apology for the British war effort in Canada. Hannay cites Roosevelt as "an American writer, who has written a tolerably honest account of the naval operations of the war." Hannay approves Roosevelt's admission that in the contest between *Constitution* and *Guerriere* "the disparity of force was as 10 to 7." Unlike Roosevelt, Hannay does not take into account the short weight of American metal. Hence, he consistently reports the American vessels approximately 9 percent more powerful than does Roosevelt. That Hannay was consciously responding to Roosevelt is evident from the parallels of his discussion of the comparative force in three single-ship encounters between American and British frigates with Roosevelt's similar discussion.[17]

Bruce Grant, in his evaluation of the *Constitution-Guerriere* fight in his 1947 biography of Isaac Hull, and Linda Maloney, in her analysis of the same sea fight in her 1986 biography of Hull, both refer to Roosevelt's statistical ratio of force and loss and concur with the conclusion that "the disparity of force . . . is not enough to account for the disparity of execution."[18]

One historian who has taken exception to Roosevelt's evaluation of the *Constitution-Guerriere* fight is Tyrone Martin. Roosevelt sees Isaac Hull as the consummate seaman. "The *Constitution* was handled faultlessly; Captain Hull displayed the coolness and skill of a veteran in the way in which he managed

first to avoid being raked, and then to improve the advantage which the precision and rapidity of his fire had gained." In contrast, Martin calls the encounter "a straightforward, toe-to-toe . . . slugfest. With his green crew, Hull may have decided on the direct approach, hoping to minimize having to maneuver and fight simultaneously. He fought a graceless fight, relying on his size advantage to compensate for his inexperience and that of his crew."[19]

Among the hottest issues in the historiography of naval combat in the War of 1812 has been that of the respective merits of the opposing sides in the Battle of Lake Erie. Historians have debated the number of guns, the weight of broadside metal, the mix of long and short guns, the number and quality of men, the quality of the warships, and the tactics employed on each side. Roosevelt's *Naval War of 1812* has had a fair share of influence on the debate.

For the sake of illustration, consider the matter of the mix of long and short guns employed on each side. Roosevelt argues that Americans magnified the glory of Oliver Hazard Perry's victory well beyond what it merits. He points out that, given the fact that the American fleet outgunned the British fleet by a factor of two to one in the weight of metal they could throw, the American victory is not surprising. The American fleet's potential gunfire from its short carronades exceeded in weight that of the British by an overwhelming margin, and the potential gunfire from its long guns exceeded that of the British long guns by a factor of three to two. "With such odds in our favor," concludes Roosevelt, "it would have been a disgrace to have been beaten," and "it might be said that the length of the contest and the trifling disparity in loss reflected rather the most credit on the British." Roosevelt criticizes the American commander for rushing into combat in such a manner as to allow his ships to become greatly separated and for forming his line in such a way that the gunboats, with their heavy long guns, could not support *Lawrence*, armed principally with short-range carronades.[20]

In 1901, James Hannay embraced Roosevelt's conclusions and carried them a step further. He divided the battle into its three segments, the van, in which the American *Scorpion*, *Ariel*, *Lawrence*, and *Caledonia* opposed the British *Chippewa*, *Detroit*, and *Hunter*, the center, in which *Niagara* opposed *Queen Charlotte*, and the rear, in which *Somers*, *Porcupine*, *Tigress*, and *Trippe* opposed *Lady Prevost* and *Little Belt*. In each segment, the American broadside outweighed the British. In the van, the American superiority was a broadside of 472 pounds to 177 overall, or 320 against 204 pounds from carronades and 152 against 162 pounds from long guns. Despite being outgunned, the British won the conflict in the van, forcing *Lawrence* to strike her colors.[21]

In his 1913 biography of Oliver Hazard Perry, James Mills does some creative manipulation of the figures to argue that Perry had to fight at close range because the British fleet outgunned the American in long guns. Roosevelt concluded that the Americans had a potential broadside from long guns of 288 pounds to oppose that of the British of 195 pounds. Although Mills uses figures identical to Roosevelt's for the armament of the two fleets, he states "the most weight that could be thrown by the Americans by long guns was one hundred and fifty pounds." To determine how Mills derived such a low figure from the table of armament of Perry's fleet that appears on the page opposite this statement—a table identical to that used by Roosevelt— is baffling.[22]

In his 1935 biography of Perry, James Dutton also states that Perry had to fight at short range because of the discrepancy between the two fleets in the mix of long and short guns. He does not say, with Mills, that the British long guns fired more metal, but that the British had more long guns than Perry had. In addition, Perry "had been forced to place many of his long-range guns upon his small schooners," writes Dutton, and "they formed unsuitable platforms for the heavy guns and made good marksmanship impossible." In a battle fought at long range, the British "could stand off and batter his ships to pieces." Dutton fails to mention that, in the event, the battle was fought in smooth waters in which the guns on the small schooners could do good execution.[23]

In their 1990 study, *HMS Detroit: The Battle for Lake Erie*, Robert and Thomas Malcomson analyze the tactical imperatives imposed by the mix of long and short guns in the opposing fleets. Since the preponderance of firepower in the American was in the two brigs, *Lawrence* and *Niagara*, armed with carronades except for a couple of long 12 pounders each, "an action at close quarters" best suited the Americans. The British would be at a severe disadvantage in a battle fought at short range, since the broadsides of the two principal American combatants, the brigs *Lawrence* and *Niagara*, alone outweighed those of the entire British fleet. Yet, in a battle fought at long range, the long guns of Perry's schooners posed a significant danger to the smaller British ships. In a running fight, the British might be able to separate the American brigs from their smaller consorts and then fight them at long range with long guns.[24]

In their 1997 study, *A Signal Victory: The Lake Erie Campaign, 1812–1813*, David Skaggs and Gerald Altoff agree with Roosevelt that the American fleet "enjoyed a broadside advantage in weight of metal fired" in long guns as well as in carronades. They analyze the tactical imperatives the mix of long and short guns imposed on Perry and his opponent, Robert Barclay. Perry, as all analysts agree, would have the greatest advantage at close range. Barclay's *Detroit* would do best "to fight a running battle at long range and hope to damage Perry's fleet without a close engagement." But such a battle would "nullify the *Queen Charlotte*'s main armament" of carronades. Skaggs and Altoff speculate that Barclay "placed the *Detroit* in the van so she might damage one of Perry's brigs with her long guns. Then the *Queen Charlotte*'s carronades and her soldiers [by boarding] could eliminate one American vessel while Barclay engaged the duplicate American brig at long range." Like Roosevelt, Skaggs and Altoff criticize Perry for "impulsively bearing down on the British line, allowing the schooners to lag farther and farther behind." They concur with Roosevelt that "Perry did not need to rush into battle without his long guns."[25]

This overview of one aspect of the historiographic debate on the Battle of Lake Erie demonstrates the continuing relevance of Roosevelt's method in studying the naval combat history of the War of 1812. The questions he asked are still asked today, and today's answers are frequently quite similar to his.

Roosevelt employed a careful statistical analysis of naval engagements. No subsequent historian has matched his methodical consistency, and none has embraced his use of the ratio between force and loss as an analytical tool—other than a simple reference to Roosevelt's own analyses. But the enduring success of Roosevelt's *Naval War of 1812* is not owing solely to its scientific approach.

The endurance of Roosevelt's book in the standard literature of the War of 1812 results from a marriage of cold science with warm passion for values the author held dear. Roosevelt's overriding concern, irrespective of which side won any encounter, was to determine where honor and credit lay. Having arrived at a judicious assessment, he employed vigorous, even passionate, prose to assign praise and blame, as merited. Consider his depiction of the death of William Manners, captain of HMS *Reindeer*.

> Then the English captain, already mortally wounded, but with the indomitable courage that nothing but death could conquer, cheering and rallying his men, himself sprang, sword in hand, into the rigging, to lead them on; and they followed him with a will. At that instant a ball from the *Wasp*'s main-top crashed through his skull, and, still clenching in his right hand the sword he had shown he could wear so worthily, with his face to the foe, he fell back on his own deck dead, while above him yet floated the flag for which he had given his life. No Norse Viking, slain over shield, ever died better.[26]

In a chapter on the Battle of New Orleans added to the second edition, Roosevelt dipped his pen more freely in purple ink so that the work begins to read like a caricature of the drums and bugles school of military history:

There was never a fairer field for the fiercest personal prowess, for in the darkness the firearms were of little service, and the fighting was hand to hand. Many a sword, till then but a glittering toy, was that night crusted with blood.[27]

Through the original chapters of the book, however, Roosevelt maintains a balance between the dispassionate language of science and the impassioned endorsement of courage, judgment, skill, and honor, and condemnation of their opposites. *The Naval War of 1812* is a work that, while enlightening the mind, stirs the blood.

NOTES

[1]Edward K. Eckert, "Introduction," in Theodore Roosevelt, *The Naval War of 1812: Or the History of the United States Navy during the Last War with Great Britain to Which Is Appended an Account of the Battle of New Orleans* (1882; reprint, Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1987), xi–xxxii.

[2] Theodore Roosevelt, *The Naval War of 1812*, with a new introduction by H. W. Brands (New York: Da Capo Press, 1999); Theodore Roosevelt, *The Naval War of 1812*, introduction by John Allen Cable (New York: Modern Library, 1999).

[3] Alfred T. Mahan, *Sea Power in Its Relations to the War of 1812*, 2 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1905); Michael T. Crogan, "Mahan and Roosevelt: The Assessment of Influence," *Naval War College Review* 33 (Nov.–Dec. 1980): 89–97; William S. Dudley, "Alfred Thayer Mahan on the War of 1812," in *The Influence of History on Mahan: The Proceedings of a Conference Marking the Centenary of Alfred Thayer Mahan's The Influence of Sea Power Upon History*, edited by John B. Hattendorf (Newport, RI: Naval War College Press, 1991): 141–54; Jon Tetsuro Sumida, *Inventing Grand Strategy and Teaching Command: The Classic Works of Alfred Thayer Mahan Reconsidered* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1997), 40–41, 44, 46–48.

[4] Dudley, "Alfred Thayer Mahan on the War of 1812," 150.

[5] In his preface, he wrote that he endeavored to supply a work "made just enough to warrant its being received as an authority equally among Americans and Englishmen," and that his "only object is to give an accurate narrative of events." Roosevelt, *The Naval War of 1812* (Annapolis, MD: 1987), 2, 3.

[6] First Secretary of the Admiralty John W. Croker to Station Commanders in Chief, 10 July 1813, Admiralty 2/1377, 154–56, Public Record Office, London, United Kingdom, printed in William S. Dudley, et al., eds., *The Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History*, Vol. 2 (Washington, DC: Naval Historical Center, 1992): 183.
[7] For example, Gerald T. Altoff, *Among My Best Men: African Americans and the War of 1812* (Put-in-Bay, OH: Perry Group, 1996).
[8] Roosevelt, *Naval War of 1812* (Annapolis, MD: 1987), 296–97.
[9] Ibid., 301.
[10] Frederick C. Drake, "Artillery and Its Influence on Naval Tactics: Reflections on the Battle of Lake Erie," in William J. Welsh and David Curtis Skaggs, eds., *War on the Great Lakes: Essays Commemorating the 175th Anniversary of the Battle of Lake Erie* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1991), 19–20.
[11] Roosevelt, *Naval War of 1812* (Annapolis, MD: 1987), 203–5.
[12] Ibid., 401–4.
[13] Contrast, for example, the accounts of the engagement between *Wasp* and HMS *Reindeer* in Roosevelt, *Naval War of 1812* (Annapolis, MD: 1987), 293–97, and in Stephen W. H. Duffy, *Captain Blakely and the* Wasp: *The Cruise of 1814* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2001), 202–16. Note the differences between the two historians' diagrams of the battle: Duffy shows *Reindeer* crossing *Wasp*'s bow, during which the former gave the latter a raking broadside (18th illustration between 150 and 151), a series of events totally absent from Roosevelt's version (296).
[14] David F. Long, *Ready to Hazard: A Biography of Commodore William Bainbridge, 1774–1833* (Hanover: University of New Hampshire, 1981), 155; Roosevelt, *Naval War of 1812* (Annapolis, MD: 1987), 136–38.
[15] David F. Long, *Sailor-Diplomat: A Biography of Commodore James Biddle, 1783–1848* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1983), 42–44; Roosevelt, *Naval War of 1812* (Annapolis, MD: 1987), 111–17.
[16] Long, *Sailor-Diplomat*, 54; Roosevelt, *Naval War of 1812* (Annapolis, MD: 1987), 381–86.
[17] James Hannay, *The War of 1812*, Vol. 11 of *Collections of the Nova Scotia Historical Society* (Halifax: Nova Scotia Historical Society, 1901): 118–22; Roosevelt, *The Naval War of 1812* (Annapolis, MD: 1987), 83–86.
[18] Bruce Grant, *Captain of Old Ironsides: The Life and Fighting Times of Isaac Hull and the U.S. Frigate* Constitution (Chicago: Pellegrini and Cudahy, 1947), 258; Linda M. Maloney, *The Captain from Connecticut: The Life and Naval Times of Isaac Hull* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1986), 191; Roosevelt, *The Naval War of 1812* (Annapolis, MD: 1987), 108.
[19] Roosevelt, *Naval War of 1812* (Annapolis, MD: 1987), 108; Tyrone G. Martin, *A Most Fortunate Ship: A Narrative History of Old Ironsides*, revised edition (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1997), 160.
[20] Roosevelt, *Naval War of 1812* (Annapolis, MD: 1987), 239–59, quotations from 252 and 254. Roosevelt did not originate these criticisms. Cooper wrote: "Captain Perry was criticised, at the time, for the manner in which he had brought his squadron into action, it being thought he should have waited until his line was more compactly formed, and his small vessels could have closed." Cooper argues that Perry was correct to race into battle to prevent Barclay from escaping. The modern consensus, however, is that in the circumstances, it was Barclay who had to force an engagement, not Perry. James Fenimore Cooper, *The History of the Navy of the United States of America*, Vol. 1 (Paris, 1839; reprint, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Literature House/Gregg Press, 1970): 291.
[21] Hannay, *War of 1812*, 201–12.
[22] James Cooke Mills, *Oliver Hazard Perry and the Battle of Lake Erie* (Detroit: John Phelps, 1913), 115–18.
[23] Charles J. Dutton, *Oliver Hazard Perry* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1935), 137–38.
[24] Robert Malcomson and Thomas Malcomson, *HMS* Detroit: *The Battle for Lake Erie* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1990), 90–91.
[25] David Curtis Skaggs and Gerald T. Altoff, *A Signal Victory: The Lake Erie Campaign, 1812–1813* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1997), 112–17, 127.
[26] Roosevelt, *Naval War of 1812* (Annapolis, MD: 1987), 295–96.
[27] Ibid., 415.

CHAPTER 7

National Ensigns in the Naval Art of the War of 1812

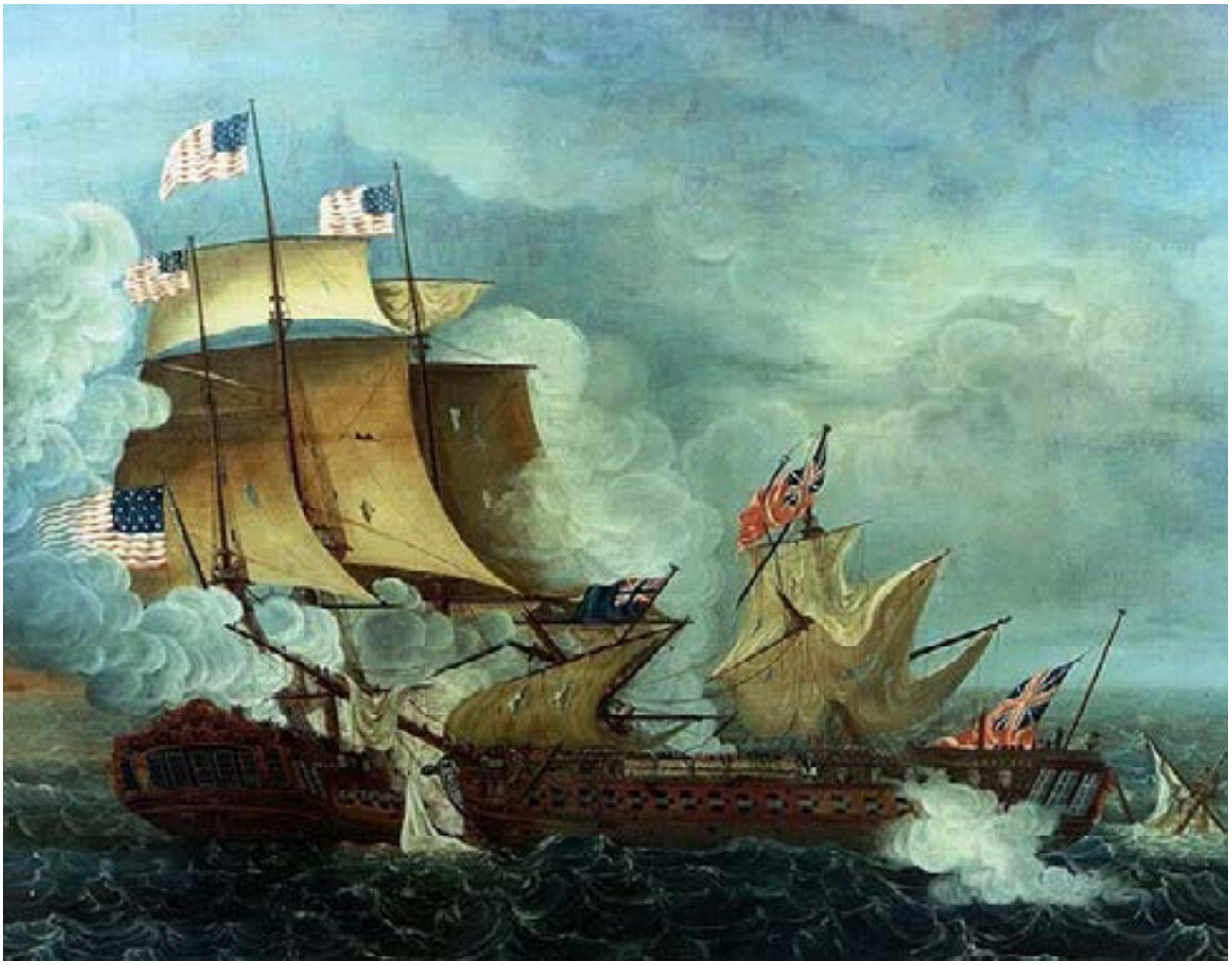


Figure 1: Naval engagement between the U.S. frigate *Constitution* and HM frigate *Guerriere* by Thomas Birch.

In Thomas Birch's painting of the naval engagement between the U.S. frigate *Constitution* and HM frigate *Guerriere* (figure 1), multiple Stars and Stripes flags wave triumphantly, while the British ensigns are either fallen or entangled in the rigging. Mid-19th-century artists portrayed national ensigns in their depictions of naval episodes of the War of 1812 both as fact and as symbol. They employed ensigns not only for the sake of accuracy, but also to convey specific impressions.

Naval officers cared about the symbolism of the flag in depictions of their battles. Take for instance the medal that Congress authorized to commemorate *Constitution*'s victory over HM frigate *Java*. When the victorious captain of *Constitution*, William Bainbridge, saw a draft of the proposed design with *Java*'s flag still flying, he wrote to urge the Navy agent in Philadelphia to get it changed:

> My dear sir: By Consul Harris, I yesterday received the cast of the reverse of my medal which appears to be well executed but has one very material fault and which I trust you will think is absolutely necessary to be altered. I mean the *Java*'s flag to be struck. The flag at present on the die shows that the ship has not surrendered. I know you took too much interest in the capture of the *Java* to allow her flag to be kept flying after so many hard knocks which old Ironsides gave her.[1]

Figure 2

Evidently the designer of Bainbridge's medal noted the captain's objections, for, in the final design (figure 2), no British flag is to be seen.

The importance that naval officers of the War of 1812 laid on the portrayal of the national ensign in naval art is evident when the naval officers themselves are the artists. Consider an engraving based on a drawing by David Porter, who commanded *Essex* during its remarkable cruise in the Pacific Ocean. After nearly destroying the British commercial whaling fleet in that ocean, Porter established a camp on Nuka Hiva, one of the Marquesas Islands, to refit. While there, he annexed the island to the United States, renamed it Madison Island, and named his settlement Madisonville. In his drawing (figure 3), a large American flag on a hilltop clearly proclaims U.S. sovereignty, and flags flown in *Essex* and her prizes assert American ownership.

Figure 3: An engraving based on a drawing by *Essex*'s Commanding Officer, Capt. David Porter.

During the age of fighting sail, a warship's ensign signified its nationality. A commander could display his national and foreign ensigns in various patterns on his ships' masts for signaling. A warship could also fly a foreign flag, instead of its own, as a *ruse de guerre*, but it was required to raise its true flag before firing a shot in battle. And the lowering of the ensign was the universally recognized indication of surrender. This essay examines how mid-19th-century artists, in depicting naval engagements of the War of 1812, employed national ensigns as symbols of identity, sovereignty, strife, victory, and defeat.

Sometimes artists used the ensign simply to identify the two sides, similar to the way the different-colored uniforms of soccer teams help the spectators follow the game. Take for instance the work of John Warner Barber (1798–1885). A Connecticut historian, artist, printmaker, and publisher, Barber handled all aspects of his books, including the texts and woodblock illustrations. His books included, among others, *Historical Scenes of the United States* (1827) and *Incidents in American History* (1848).[2] In his primitive engraving of Oliver Hazard Perry's victory on Lake Erie (figure 4), the flags stick up above the fray like colored pins on a map. At a glance, the viewer understands that the British fleet is to the left and the American fleet to the right. In the little boat between the two vessels in the foreground is Perry, switching his flag from *Lawrence* to *Niagara.*

Some illustrations of Perry transferring his flag show him carrying the motto flag emblazoned with James Lawrence's immortal words, "Don't Give Up the Ship." But in his painting of the event, William H. Powell, an Ohio-born artist trained in New York City, places the national ensign in the prow of the boat.

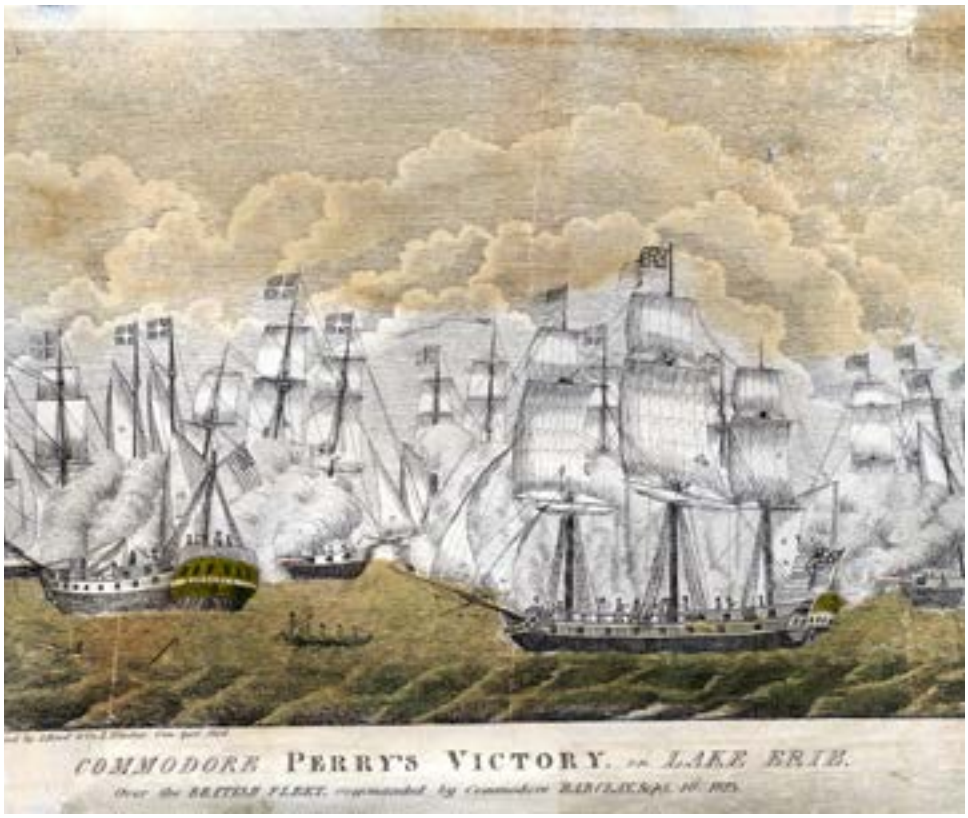


Figure 4: Engraving by John Warner Barber of Oliver Hazard Perry's victory on Lake Erie.

Powell (1823–1879) is known for his historical paintings, such as *De Soto Discovering the Mississippi, Landing of the Pilgrims, Washington's Valley Forge*, and *Columbus before the Court of Salamanca*, many of which hang in the U.S. Capitol.[3] In Powell's painting of *Perry's Victory on Lake Erie* (figure 5), Perry, supposedly pointing to *Niagara*, in effect points to the flag, as if to say, "I am risking my life for the sake of my country."

American artists of War of 1812 naval engagements employed the national ensign to convey messages to the viewer. Take for example William Strickland's engraving of the engagement between the U.S. frigate *Constitution* and HMS *Guerriere* (figure 6). Strickland (1788–1854), American engineer, architect, painter, and engraver,[4] chose to depict the moment in which *Guerriere*'s mizzenmast started to collapse, which gave him the opportunity to place the British ensign prominently in the center of the picture, inverted to symbolize defeat, while two Stars and Stripes flags and a brace of American jacks wave in triumph in *Constitution*.

Figure 5: "Perry's Victory on Lake Erie," by William H. Powell.

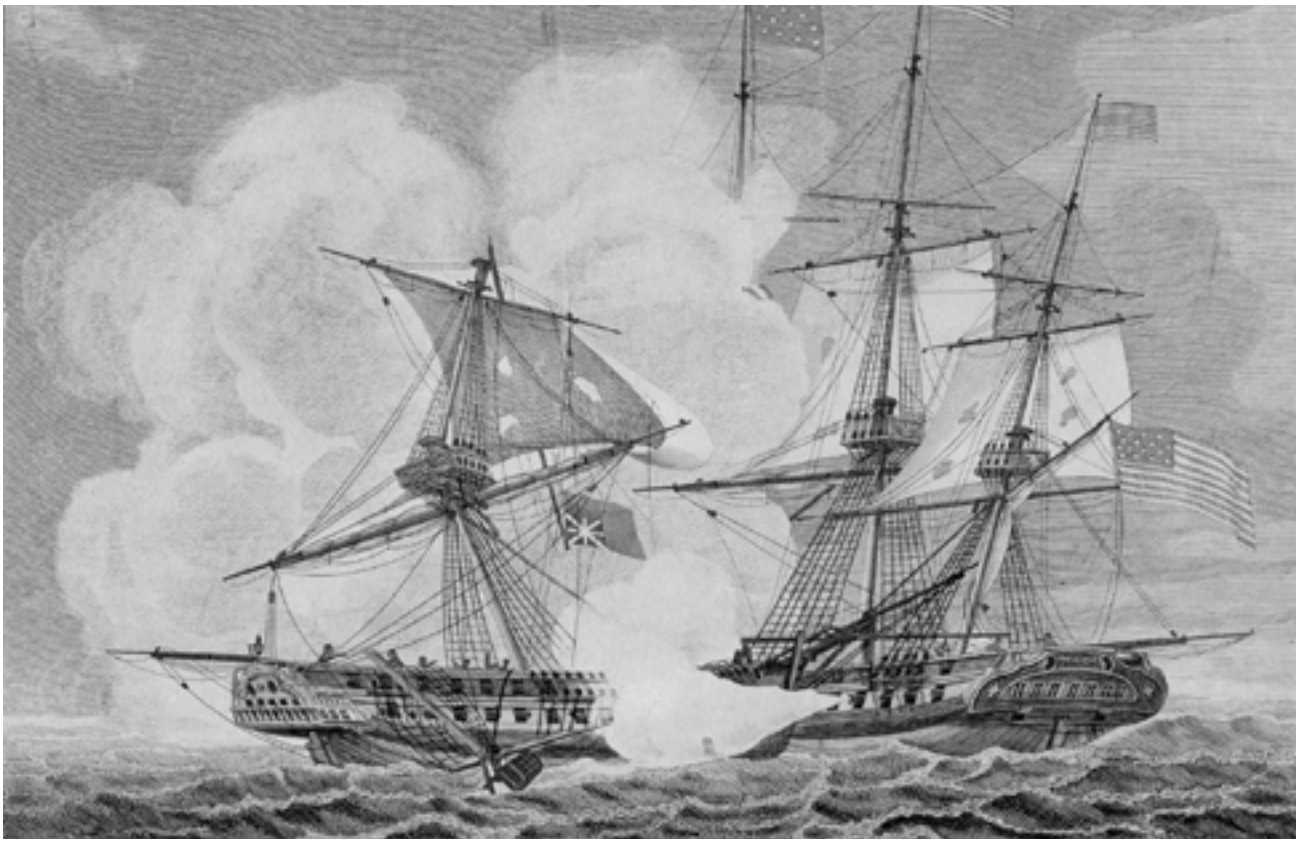


Figure 6: William Strickland's engraving of the engagement between the U.S. frigate *Constitution* and HMS *Guerriere.*

Thomas Birch chose to depict the same moment in his engraving of the capture of *Guerriere* (figures 7 and 8). But in his version, as *Guerriere'*s last standing mast goes by the board, at the stern the British ensign sinks into the sea. The ensign fallen into the sea is a persistent emblem of defeat in naval art.

Nathaniel Currier (1813–1888), after an apprenticeship to America's first lithographer, began his own business in 1835 and entered into his famous partnership with James Ives in 1857. The firm of Currier and Ives produced more than 7,000 different lithographic prints.[5]

In Currier's print depicting the final moments of the Battle of Lake Champlain (figure 9), the ensign of the British flagship lies prominently in the foreground, dipping into the waters of Plattsburgh Bay. In contrast, several Stars and Stripes flags proudly wave above the thick smoke of battle.

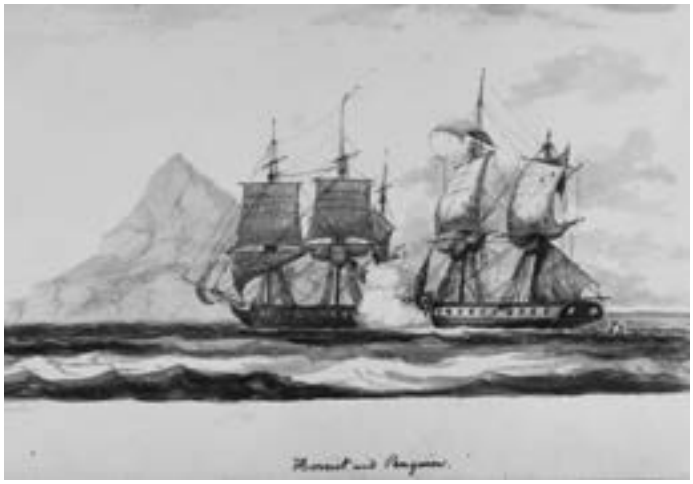
In the pretty and childlike lithograph of the 5 September 1813 encounter between the U.S. brig *Enterprize* and HM brig *Boxer*, published by H. R. Robinson (figure 10), the positions of the respective ensigns, as well as the loss of *Boxer*'s main-topmast, communicate the fortunes of the battle.

Figure 7: Thomas Birch's engraving of the capture of *Guerriere.*

Figure 8: Thomas Birch's engraving of the capture of *Guerriere*.

Figure 9: Nathaniel Currier's print of the final moments of the Battle of Lake Champlain.

Figure 10: Lithograph published by H.R. Robinson.



Figures 11 and 12: Thomas Birch's portrayal of the engagement between American and British brigs *Hornet* and *Penguin*.

Thomas Birch (1779–1851), with whose painting of *Constitution* vs. *Guerriere* this essay began, was English-born but moved to the United States with his father when he was 15. Settling in Philadelphia, Birch studied art under his father. He is noted for his ship portraits, seascapes, winter scenes, and naval battles of the War of 1812.[6] In his portrayal of the engagement of the American and British brigs *Hornet* and *Penguin* of 23 March 1815 (figures 11 and 12), he makes use of the established image of the flag in the sea to indicate *Penguin*'s defeat.

Artists employed the positions of national ensigns in battle scenes as a form of patriotic propaganda, as in a British engraving of the action between HMS *Endymion* and the U.S. frigate *President* on 15 January 1815. Stephen Decatur, the American commander, considered that he had fairly beaten *Endymion* before he had to break off the engagement—when the rest of the British squadron—seen in the background to the right, drew close. This British engraving (figure 13), with the Stars and Stripes falling astern *President*, suggests a different view of the engagement.

The several victories of the heavy American frigates against Royal Navy frigates during the War of 1812 dismayed Britons, who found solace in the outcome of the encounter between HMS *Shannon* and the U.S. frigate *Chesapeake*. *Shannon*, manned by an experienced crew thoroughly drilled at gunnery, handily shot up and took by boarding the American frigate. In a little vignette of the boarding of *Chesapeake*, engraved by J. Aspin (figure 14), the ensign at the top of the circle lets us know that it is an American vessel that is being boarded, while the blue and white stripes of the trousers on the fallen sailor in the foreground counterbalance the red and white stripes on the flag.

Louis Haghe (1806–1885), born in Belgium and trained there in architecture and lithography, moved to England as a young man. According to the judgment of his biographer in *The Dictionary of National Biography*, he "raised lithography to perhaps the highest point to which it ever attained." Nevertheless, Hague gave up lithography in 1852 in favor of watercolor painting.[7]

Hague published a series of four lithographs in London, in 1830, depicting various stages in the contest between *Shannon* and *Chesapeake*. Text accompanying the lithographs describes the encounter as "the most important Frigate action ever recorded," which may be a bit of hyperbole to encourage sales, but does reflect the importance of the victory in British eyes. A look at the flags in the series repays the effort.

In the battle, *Shannon* flew the following flags: a union jack at the foretruck; a blue ensign at the peak of the mizzen gaff; a blue ensign on the mainstay, ready to unfurl; and a blue ensign in the main rigging, also ready to unfurl. In addition, the first lieutenant placed a large white ensign on the capstan "to hoist over the enemy's colors."[8]

Figure 13: British engraving of HMS *Endymion* and USS *President*.

Chesapeake displayed these flags: a U.S. ensign at the mizzen royal masthead; a U.S. ensign at the peak of the mizzen gaff; a U.S. ensign in the starboard main rigging; and a white flag with the motto,

Figure 14: Engraving by J. Aspin

"Free Trade and Sailors' Rights," at the fore-royal masthead.[9]

In the first plate of Haghe's series (figure 15), *Shannon* commences the action with a single gun as *Chesapeake* draws alongside. On board *Shannon* the blue ensign droops from the stern gaff. Flown from *Chesapeake*'s forepeak is the white "Free Trade and Sailors' Rights" flag, and in the main shrouds—at the mizzen peak and aft from the mizzen gaff—flutter American ensigns. This part the artist has gotten historically correct. In this and the rest of the plates, the artist has put about twice as many red and white stripes in the U.S. flag as there should be. It is hard to believe that this was from ignorance. The artist may have been enjoying putting artistic ripples in the cloth and the extra stripes gave him more play.

The view in the second plate (figure 16), is of *Chesapeake*'s bow. *Shannon*'s broadsides have completely disabled the American frigate. Rigging has been cut to pieces and sails hang uselessly. Still, the American flags can be seen clearly, while heavy smoke obscures all British ensigns. What might all this signify but that the battle is not yet won or lost.

The third plate (figure 17) depicts *Chesapeake* in contact with, and grappled by, *Shannon*. The ensigns help tell the story. The American ensign in the main shrouds has fallen on the deck and another ensign is entangled in the mizzen rigging. A third American ensign ripples furiously from a spanker halyard. Meanwhile, the British blue ensign floats serenely in the breeze. British victory is assured.

There are two versions of what happened when the British ensign was hoisted above *Chesapeake* to indicate that *Shannon* was in possession. Both suggest the importance, both practical and symbolic, of flags in naval engagements. According to one version, after receiving a wound in boarding, Lieutenant Watt, RN, sought to hoist a blue ensign over the American ensign at the peak of the mizzen gaff, but

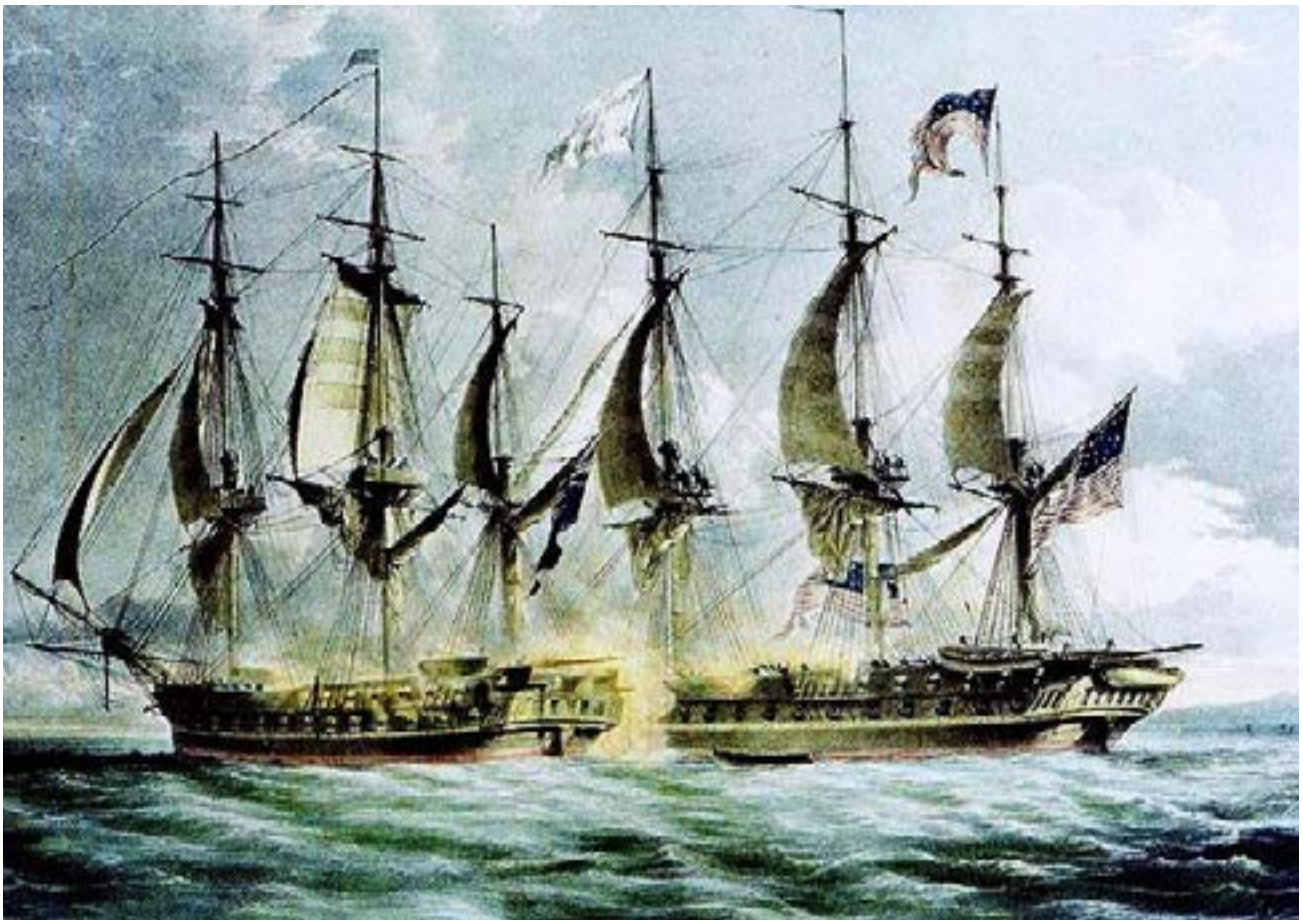


Figure 15: First plate in Louis Haghe's engraving series of the contest between *Shannon* and *Chesapeake*.

Figure 16: Second plate in Louis Haghe's engraving series of the contest between *Shannon* and *Chesapeake*.

the lines became tangled and from *Shannon* it appeared that the American ensign was on top. A gun in *Shannon* fired, killing Watt and six others. The other version has it that, after a small blue ensign had been hoisted at the peak of the mizzen gaff, Lieutenant Watt wanted to replace it with the white ensign he had specially prepared. When the blue ensign was hauled down, *Shannon* opened fire, killing Watt and his companions.[10]

The final piece of the set (figure 18) shows *Shannon* leading *Chesapeake* triumphantly into the harbor of Halifax, Nova Scotia. Flags ashore identify this as a British port. The British ensign flying above the American on halyards from the spanker gaff proclaims *Chesapeake* to be a British prize of war.

On 29 April 1814, Lewis Warrington—the victorious commander in the action between the U.S. sloop of war *Peacock* and HM brig *Epervier*—received from admirers a cane with a gold head, which was engraved with the image of *Epervier*, and about the size of a dime (figure 19). The engraver employed the simple device of placing the British ensign under the American ensign to indicate that the British warship had been made an American prize. The ensign on the mizzen gaff indicates that the ship is under the command of U.S. officers and crew.

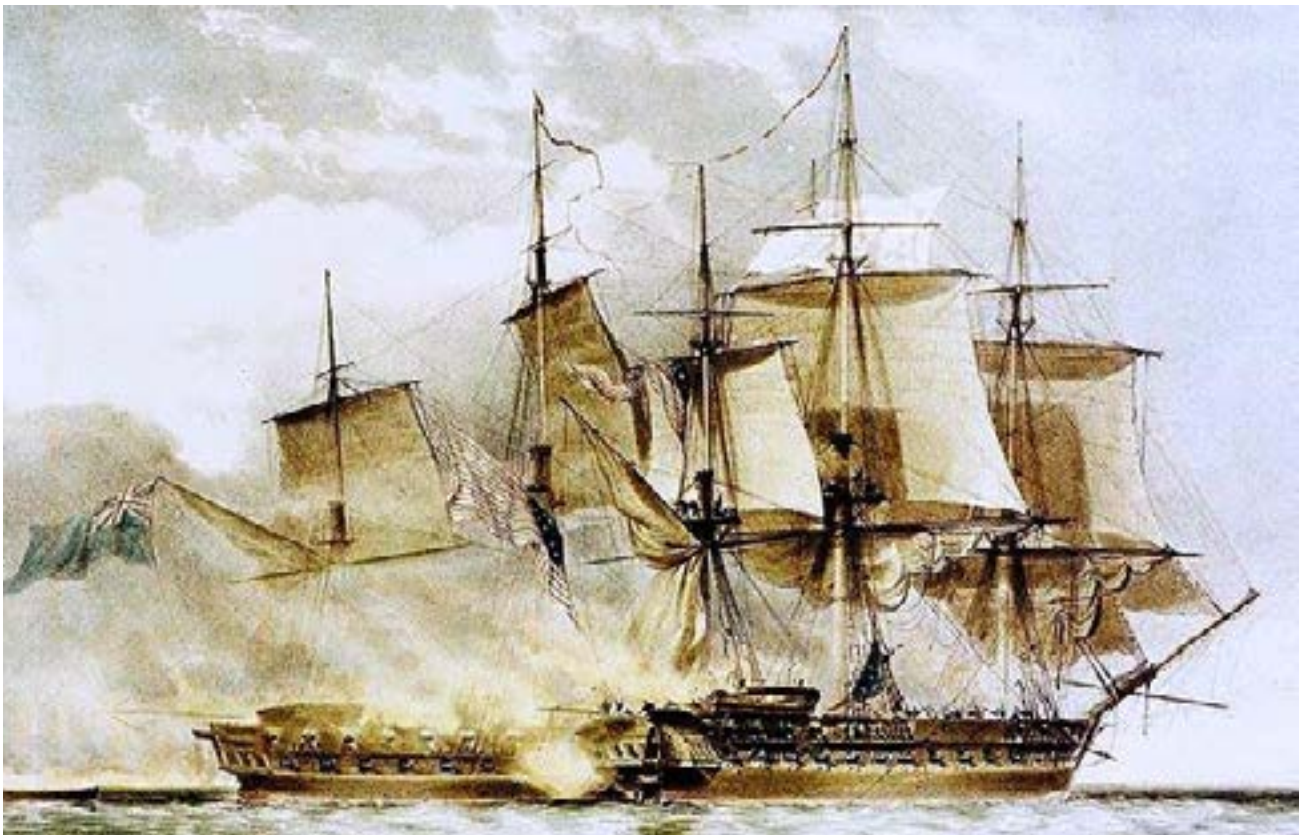


Figure 17: Third plate in Louis Haghe's engraving series of the contest between *Shannon* and *Chesapeake*.

Figure 18: Fourth plate in Louis Haghe's engraving series of the contest between *Shannon* and *Chesapeake*.

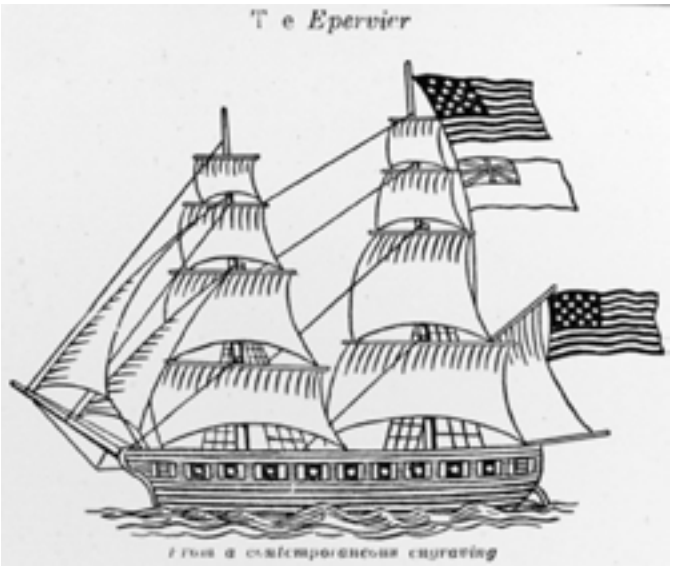


Figure 19: Image of HM brig *Epervier*.

A final engraving (figure 20), illustrates how a skilled artist could use light to create a beautiful image. This lithograph exhibits a dramatic night battle in which the U.S. frigate *Constitution* captured two Royal Navy warships, *Cyane* and *Levant*. The artist, Thomas Birch, uses the light of the gun flashes and of the moon to illuminate the ensigns, so that the flags seem to glow in the dark.

This essay has explored ways in which mid-19th-century depictions of naval engagements of the War of 1812 employed national ensigns for more than historical accuracy, but for symbolic purposes as well. If this essay has been successful, Gentle Reader, you will never look at another naval battle scene in quite the same way and you will begin applying the interpretive techniques used in this essay as you view the art of other naval conflicts and eras, considering how the artist has exploited the symbolic powers not only of flags, but also of other evocative features.

Figure 20: Thomas Birch lithograph.

NOTES

[1] William Bainbridge to George Harrison, 28 Oct. 1817, Accession no. 54-013-12, Naval Historical Foundation, Washington, DC.
[2] Michael T. Johnson, s.v., *Barber, John Warner*, in *American National Biography*, John A. Garraty and Mark C. Cairnes, general eds., 24 vols. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999) 2: 133–34.
[3] United States Senate, Art and History, Senate Art, Battle of Lake Erie, https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/art/artifact/Painting_33_00008.htm.
[4] Nancy Halverson Schess, s.v., *Strickland*, *William*, in *American National Biography*, 21: 26–28.
[5] Linda S. Chase, s.v., *Currier, Nathaniel*, in *American National Biography,* 5: 875–76.
[6] Tony Lewis, s.v., *Birch, Thomas,* in *American National Biography*, 2: 802–3.
[7] *Dictionary of National Biography,* s.v., *Haghe, Louis*.
[8] H. F. Pullen, *The Shannon and the Chesapeake* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1970), 57.
[9] Ibid., 58.
[10] Ibid., 61; Kenneth Poolman, *Guns off Cape Ann: The Story of the Shannon and the Chesapeake* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1961), 121.

CHAPTER 8

White-Jacket

and the Navy in Which Melville Served

Herman Melville enlisted as a seaman on board the American frigate *United States* on 17 August 1843 at Honolulu, the Sandwich Islands, and was discharged 14 months later on 14 October 1844 at Boston, Massachusetts. Five years later, in August and September 1849, he composed the book, *White-Jacket: or The World in a Man-of-War*, which was published the next year in London and New York. In a note to the New York edition, Melville wrote:

In the year 1843 I shipped as "ordinary seaman" on board of a United States frigate, then lying in a harbor of the Pacific Ocean. After remaining in this frigate for more than a year, I was discharged from the service upon the vessel's arrival home. My man-of-war experiences and observations are incorporated in the present volume.[1]

Early in the text he stated his intention to write "an impartial account . . . inventing nothing."[2] But in the preface to the English edition, not reprinted in the American edition, Melville specifically denied that the work was intended as a journal of his cruise. Rather, he wrote:

> As the object of this work is not to portray the particular man-of-war in which the author sailed, and its officers and crew, but, by illustrative scenes, to paint general life in the Navy, the true name of the frigate is not given. Nor is it here asserted that any of the persons introduced in the following chapters are real individuals.[3]

Where "facts have been strictly adhered to," he said, was in regard to the established laws and usages of the Navy.

Whatever Melville's autobiographical intention may have been, his chief object was to explain what life is like on board a warship from the perspective of the common seaman. The resulting portrait is much more lifelike and complete than anything else we have on the antebellum Navy. And the work is filled with tales as interesting as any that must have been exchanged between Melville and his fellow maintopmen on board *United States*. But, as we know, in *White-Jacket* Melville is more than a storyteller. He is a propagandist for reform. If Melville was not telling a true story, he did intend to speak the truth as he saw it, and, by revealing that profounder truth, motivate his readers to act in the cause of naval reform.

Melville's impassioned condemnation of naval discipline is well known,[4] but I would like to put into context a few of his other criticisms of the Navy and to judge whether he wrote the truth. The three topics are religion, medicine, and the education of officers.

Religion

Melville's was only one voice among several that called for reform in the matter of religion in the Navy. In the 1840s and 50s, Congress received numerous private memorials in favor of abolishing the chaplaincy because it violated the principle of separation of church and state, many chaplains treated appointments as sinecures, appointments were made for political reasons rather than on the basis of ability or piety, and unworthy men received appointments. The proponents of the chaplaincy asserted that the seamen had a right to attend divine service and, hence, the government had an obligation to provide it. Besides, religion was conducive to good order. Despite calls for reform, for most of the century little was done to change the system of appointing chaplains aside from requiring in 1841 that they be regularly ordained or licensed.[5]

The narrator in *White-Jacket* tells us that it is inevitable that Christianity, the religion of peace, will not flourish on board an instrument of war. He underlines this philosophical premise with the image of officers driving the men to Sunday services with the ironic command, "Go to prayers, damn you!"[6] Melville has two practical criticisms of official religion on board naval vessels. The first is that the sermons are, "ill calculated to benefit the crew."[7] The chaplain on board *Neversink* is an Episcopalian priest and a transcendentalist:

> He enlarged upon the follies of the ancient philosophers; learnedly alluded to the Phaedon of Plato; exposed the follies of Simplicius's Commentary on Aristotle's "De Coelo," by arraying against that clever Pagan author the admired tract of Tertullian—De Praescriptionibus Haereticorum—and concluded by a Sanscrit invocation. He was particularly hard upon the Gnostics and Marcionites of the second century of the Christian era; but he never, in the remotest manner, attacked the everyday vices of the nineteenth century, as eminently illustrated in our man-of-war world. Concerning drunkenness, fighting, flogging, and oppression—things expressly or impliedly prohibited by Christianity—he never said aught.[8]

There is nothing new in this caricature of the preaching of the state church. Evangelicals had been saying the same thing ever since Rationalism came into vogue in the later 17th century. The importance of fitting sermons to the capacities and needs of the common people rather than to the polite tastes of the genteel was a familiar refrain of evangelical reformers. The question is whether Melville's transcendental divine was typical in the antebellum Navy.

The Episcopalian Reverend Theodore B. Bartow, the chaplain of *United States* when Melville served on board, was appointed naval chaplain in September 1841. Charles R. Anderson reports an eyewitness account of one of Bartow's services on board *United States* early in 1842, one year before Melville signed on. The author of that journal received an impression different from Melville's:

> Our Chaplain, "*the Revd. Theo. Bartow of New York*," then stept forward to the Desk, which was coverd with the American Flag. The Service of the Episcopal Church was then read. All was quiet save the soft toned voice of the Chaplain, who gave us a most eloquent and impressive Sermon.[9]

In this account, the seamen gaze anxiously in the preacher's face. "It was a solemn [occasion]," the writer concludes, "one that would have gladdened the heart of a pious philanthropist—'twas truly divine worship at sea.'"

If one is to judge by Bartow's sole published sermon, *Preparation for Heaven, Man's Duty and God's Gift*,[10] preached at the Naval Academy in Annapolis a dozen years after Melville knew him, his preaching was not the model for that of his counterpart on board *Neversink*. This relatively short sermon, eight pages of text in an era when published sermons often ran to 20 or 30, explicates in clear and simple language a non-Calvinist version of the teachings that holiness is a prerequisite for entering heaven, that holiness is a gift from God, and that individuals are responsible for accepting the gift. The sermon contains no Latin, technical theological terms, condemnation of obscure heresies, transcendentalist jargon, or references to any learned authorities but the Scriptures. It is, however, a summons to personal piety and reformation of individual morals and not a call to social reform.

Of the 22 Navy chaplains listed in the Navy Register for 1844, 12 were Episcopalian, four Methodist, three Presbyterian, one Congregationalist, one Baptist, and one Unitarian. Official religion in the Navy was strongly liturgical in tone and conservative in sentiment. By Peter Karsten's reckoning, the 19th-century naval officer corps came overwhelmingly from conservative, upper-class faiths, two-thirds being Episcopal, Unitarian, Presbyterian, or Congregationalist. In contrast, in 1850, only about 14 percent of the nation belonged to those denominations. Less than a quarter of naval officers belonged to the Methodist or Baptist churches, or to evangelical sects, as opposed to more than half of the general population. As a consequence, many officers apparently assumed that the regulation of 1818 that chaplains "read prayers at stated periods" required, or at least implied, use of the Episcopal prayer book.[11]

Melville's second practical criticism of shipboard religious administration was its violation of the right of free exercise of religion. The Articles of War, requiring commanders of naval vessels to "cause all, or as many of the ship's company as can be spared from duty, to attend at every performance of the worship of Almighty God," were, he said, in direct violation of the Constitution of the United States, which says "Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion, or the free exercise thereof." On board *Neversink*, a seaman approached the captain with the following request: "Sir, I am a Baptist; the chaplain is an Episcopalian; his form of worship is not mine; I do not believe with him, and it is against my conscience to be under his ministry. May I be allowed sir, <u>not</u> to attend service on the half-deck?" Request denied.[12]

Melville's anecdote had its parallel in real life. The Baptists' practice was to pray extemporaneously rather than to read set prayers, and Joseph Stockbridge, the Navy's one Baptist chaplain in 1844,

objected to the wording of the regulation requiring chaplains to *read* prayers. Eventually the House of Representatives became interested and asked the Navy to explain whether naval regulations required chaplains "to read prayers, or comply with any particular forms or ceremonials of divine service; and whether there is any evidence on file in the department tending to show that non-Episcopal ministers are required by officers of the navy to use the Episcopal liturgy." As a result, in 1859 the Navy issued an order that the regulation requiring chaplains to read prayers was to be construed to require them to *offer* prayers, and the next year adopted the following regulation: "Every chaplain shall be permitted to conduct public worship according to the manner and forms of the church of which he may be a

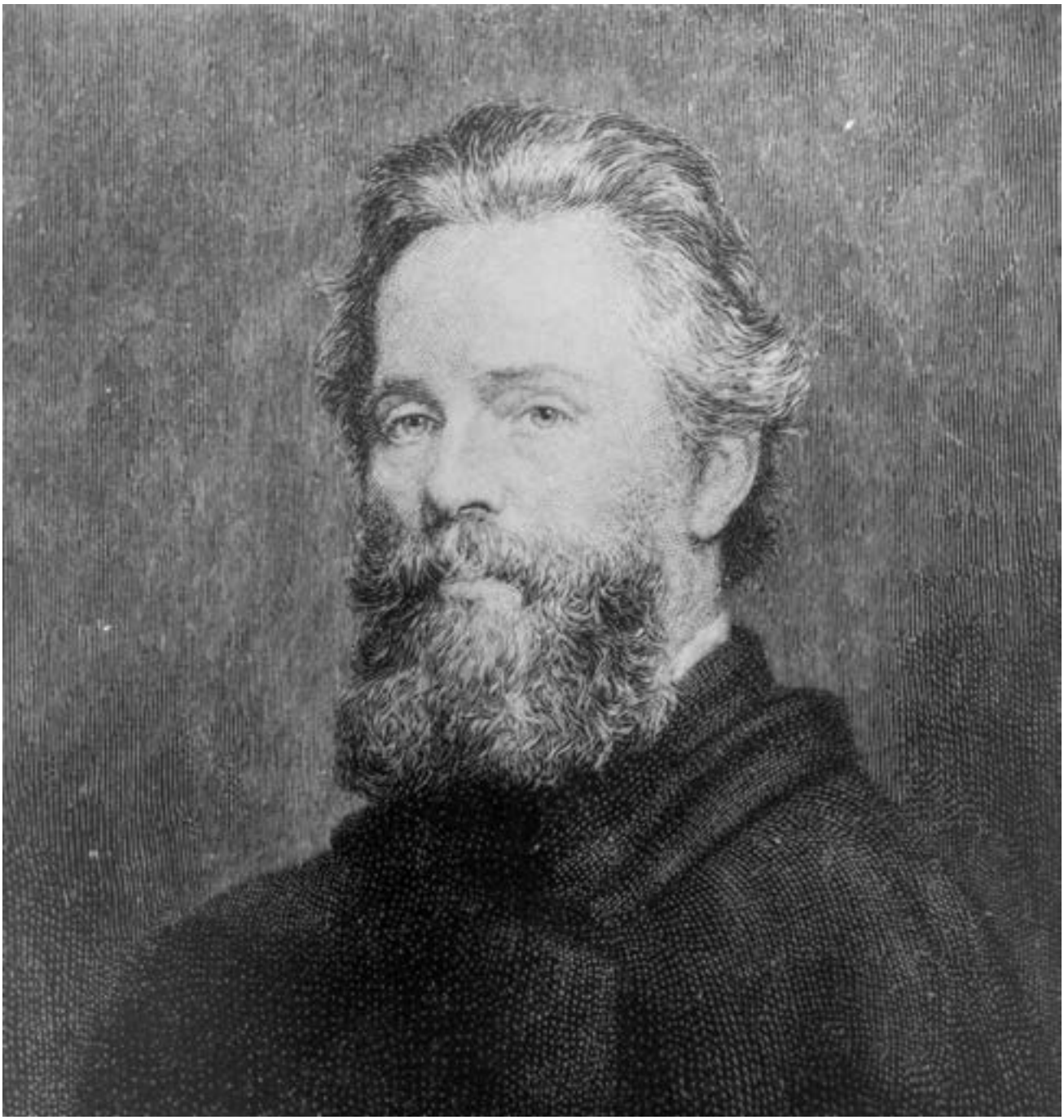


Figure 1: Herman Melville, head-and-shoulders portrait (photograph), circa 1944.

member."[13] Stockbridge believed that his being put on the inactive list was the Secretary of the Navy's way of showing disfavor of his agitating this issue.

Medicine

Melville's portrayal of medical care on board a ship of war is brutal. Surgeon Cadwallader Cuticle is interested in the science of his profession, but has no concern for the sensibilities, or even lives, of his patients. He subjects a wounded seaman to an amputation merely to demonstrate his skill to the surgeons of the other ships of the fleet that are in port. None of the other surgeons oppose the operation with manly vigor, even though they all judge it unnecessary and dangerous. The seaman, of course, is not asked his wishes. When the patient dies, Cuticle's only reaction is to consider it an opportunity for anatomical study of the corpse.[14]

Melville objects that the ship's sick bay is without light or ventilation, that the sick are denied the wine and chicken supposed to be reserved for them, and that the surgeon fails completely to exercise his right of interposing in any instance in which the sanitation of the ship or the health of the crew is involved.[15] On the last point, Melville protests in particular the practice of wetting down the decks in frigid weather:

> Is a ship a wooden platter, that it is to be scrubbed out every morning before breakfast, even if the thermometer be at zero and every sailor goes barefooted through the flood with the chilblains? And all the while the ship carries a doctor, well aware of Boerhaave's great maxim "*keep the feet dry*." He has plenty of pills to give you when you are down with a fever, the consequences of these things; but enters no protest at the outset—as it is his duty to do—against the cause that induces the fever.[16]

In short, Melville finds the medical care inhumane and compassionless.

It is difficult to find clear evidence of the humanity and compassion, or of the lack of it, of the medical corps in the antebellum Navy. There is, however, direct confirmation of Melville's picture of the conditions of medical treatment and of preventive medicine in a treatise on naval medicine published in 1854 by naval surgeon Gustavus Horner, M.D. (1804–1892). Commissioned in 1826, promoted to the rank of surgeon in 1831, and retired in 1866, Horner was one of the most notable naval surgeons of his era.[17] Examination of the dead, says Horner, is among those duties that medical officers owe to science and their profession. But, because of the prejudices of the deceased's friends and messmates, "it is not advisable for a medical officer to wantonly dissect any person, and when he does so to do it only when he really is uncertain what morbid changes may exist in the dead."[18] The monition implies that wanton dissection was not unknown. Horner states that in American warships the sick bay is located almost without exception on the berth deck—the third deck down—but that "between the tropics, in frigates and ships of the line, the gun-deck [the second deck down] is the most preferred from its airiness."[19] In view of this, Melville's complaint about the oppressive atmosphere in the frigate *Neversink*'s sick bay on the berth deck sounds valid. The introduction of steam power exacerbated the situation. In the steamer *San Jacinto*, says Horner,

> the sick are exposed to both the heat of the galley or cooking range just abaft them, and to the intense fires in the adjacent furnaces generating steam, in the hold below. . . . During her late experimental cruise of a week, the thermometer on the berth deck stood at 126°.[20]

Echoing *White-Jacket*, Horner condemns the deluging of the decks in cold weather. "In doing this the men generally go barefooted, and suffer proportionally from the conjoined ill effects of cold and moisture, inducing rheumatic and pulmonic complaints."[21]

Melville's accusation that medicinal alcohol was diverted to improper uses is supported by a circular issued by William Barton, chief of the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, during the very period in which Melville was in the Navy. The circular, which was to be pasted inside the lid of the medical liquor cases, affirmed that the contents were medical supplies and restricted them to the use of the sick. Barton's attempts to reform the abuse of medical liquor brought him into bitter conflict with the commander of the Florida squadron, in which the abuse was alleged to be flagrant.[22]

Education of Officers

What validity have Melville's strictures on the education and competence of naval officers? Melville opposed the way the Navy prepared midshipmen to be leaders. "These boys," he wrote,

> are sent to sea, for the purpose of making commodores; and in order to become commodores, many of them deem it indispensable forthwith to commence chewing tobacco, drinking brandy and water, and swearing at the sailors.[23]

Melville finds many of them rather nasty creatures, and the lot ill-disciplined:

> Some of them are terrible little boys, cocking their caps at alarming angles, and looking fierce as young roosters. . . . They are something like collegiate freshmen and sophomores, living in the college buildings, especially so far as the noise they make in their quarters is concerned.[24]

That such children are given authority over grown men twice their age appalls him. He believes that by being brought into the Navy at very young ages, they do not develop independence of thought and willingness to innovate.

Melville served at a time when the Navy was overrun by an unusually large number of midshipmen. In 1841, three successive secretaries of the Navy had appointed a record 219 midshipmen, raising the total to an unprecedented 490. The next year Congress prohibited the appointment of midshipmen until the number had been reduced to 260.[25] Another more compelling circumstance that brought the midshipmen to Melville's attention, however, was the incident on board *Somers* in 1842. During a midshipmen's training cruise, the captain hanged a midshipman, a petty officer, and a seaman for planning a mutiny. Among the officers who supported the captain's action was Melville's cousin, Lieutenant Guert Gansevoort. This incident—one of the executed was the psychologically disturbed

son of the Secretary of War—strengthened the position of those who had been agitating to systematize the heretofore haphazard education of midshipmen and led to the establishment of the United States Naval Academy at Annapolis in 1845.

"Are there incompetent officers in the gallant American navy?" Melville asks, and he answers:

> Considering the known facts, that some of these officers are seldom or never sent to sea, owing to the Navy Department being well aware of their inefficiency; that others are detailed for pen and ink work at observatories, and solvers of logarithms in the Coast Survey; while the really meritorious officers, who are accomplished practical seamen, are known to be sent from ship to ship, with but a small interval of a furlough . . . it is not too much to say [that many officers are] national pensioners in disguise, who live on the navy without serving it.[26]

As with so many of the other reforms he advocated, Melville was adding his voice to a rising chorus of reformers.

The antebellum Navy was much like an over-tenured university, freighted with an unwieldy amount of dead wood. In 1844, every one of the Navy's 67 captains had entered naval service more than 30 years earlier. Congress had repeatedly refused to create admirals and in 1842 prohibited the increase of the number of officers in any of the grades. There was no retirement system. The Navy had in commission only seven ships of the line, one of which had been cut down to a 54-gun ship, and 12 frigates. The other 47 vessels in service, sloops of war, brigs, schooners, steamers, and store ships, were unsuitable for the command of a captain. This left little opportunity for promotion for the 96 commanders and the 322 lieutenants. It also meant that many of the Navy's leadership positions were filled by men wedded to the conservative traditions of the age of sail and unprepared to pilot the Navy into the age of steam propulsion, iron hulls, and modern gunnery. The nation also needed dynamic naval officers to promote overseas commerce by exploring little-known waters, improving navigation, opening markets through diplomacy, and protecting the merchant fleet in the oceans worldwide.[27]

As a result of the growing pressures for reform, in 1855 Congress provided for the so-called "Plucking Board." This consisted of naval officers who would examine the qualifications of line officers—from captains down to passed midshipmen—and recommend to the president those whom it deemed, "incapable of performing promptly and efficiently all their duty both ashore and afloat."[28] The board could recommend that an officer be dropped entirely from the rolls or that he be put on a newly created reserve list. Those on the reserve list, as well as those dropped, would not be counted against the total for each grade and thus would open a position for the promotion of a deserving junior. The result, after the affected officers were given the opportunity to appeal the board's decisions, was that 137 officers were removed from the active list, creating the potential of promoting an equal number.

In a move that mirrored Melville's prejudice against officers who exercised their scientific talents in observatories or on the coast survey rather than their command skills on board ship, the Plucking Board put on the reserve list Lieutenant Matthew F. Maury, head of the Naval Observatory and a

pioneer of modern oceanography, because an injury had disqualified him from sea duty. The Secretary of the Navy, however, took advantage of the provision that an officer on the reserve list remained subject to recall to active duty and retained Maury at the observatory.[29]

The rediscovery of Melville by scholars of American literature in the 1920s brought *White-Jacket* once more under the scrutiny of naval officers and kindled the ire of at least one rear admiral, who in 1930 called him "a devotée of poetic exaggeration, a propagandist for world peace, a scoffer at gold braid and salutes and ceremonials, an antimilitarist, an apostle of leveling and democracy."[30] This characterization is right on the mark and is one that Melville, himself, undoubtedly would have relished. The examples offered above, however, demonstrate that Melville's critique of the Navy, root and branch as it was, was not fictitious, faultfinding, or frivolous and almost always rings true.

NOTES

[1] Herman Melville, *White-Jacket, or The World in a Man-of-War*, edited by Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and Newberry Library, 1970), ix. [Hereafter cited as *White-Jacket*.]
[2] Ibid., 47.
[3] Ibid., 487.
[4] For the movement to abolish flogging in the United States Navy, see Harold D. Langley, *Social Reform in the United States Navy, 1782–1862* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1967). See also Robert B. Chapel, "The Word against the Cat: Melville's Influence on Seaman's Rights," *American Neptune* 42 (Jan. 1982): 57–65.
[5] Clifford M. Drury, *The History of the Chaplain Corps, United States Navy*, 9 vols. (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1948–85), 1:64–65. [Hereafter cited as Drury.]
[6] *White-Jacket*, 156.
[7] Ibid., 155.
[8] Ibid., 155–56.
[9] Charles R. Anderson, ed., *Journal of a Cruise to the Pacific Ocean, 1842–1844*, *in the Frigate* United States, *with Notes on Herman Melville* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1937), 22–23.
[10] Annapolis, MD, 185[7?]
[11] United States, Department of the Navy, *Register of the Commissioned and Warrant Officers of the Navy of the United States, Including Officers of the Marine Corps, for the Year 1844* (Washington, DC, 1844), 30–31; Drury, 1:68–69, 249–50; Peter Karsten, *The Naval Aristocracy: The Golden Age of Annapolis and the Emergence of Modern American Navalism* (New York: The Free Press, 1972), 73–75.
[12] *White-Jacket*, 157.
[13] Drury, 1:68–69, 98.
[14] *White-Jacket*, chs. 61–63.
[15] Ibid., 325–31.
[16] Ibid., 86.
[17] Louis H. Roddis, *A Short History of Naval Medicine* (New York: Paul B. Hoeber, 1941), 216–17.
[18] Gustavus R. B. Horner, *Diseases and Injuries of Seamen: With Remarks on their Enlistment, Naval Hygiene, and the Duties of Naval Officers* (Philadelphia, 1854), 20–21.
[19] Ibid., 13.
[20] Ibid., 45–46.
[21] Ibid., 51–52.
[22] Frank L. Pleadwell, "William Paul Crillon Barton (1786–1856), Surgeon, United States Navy—A Pioneer in American Naval Medicine," *The Military Surgeon* 46, No. 3 (March, 1920): 241–81, 272–74.
[23] *White-Jacket*, 25.
[24] Ibid., 25, 26.
[25] Drury 1:62.
[26] *White-Jacket*, 112, 113.

[27] United States, Department of the Navy, *Register . . . for the Year 1844*, 4–22, 110–11; Howard C. Westwood, "Reform in the United States Navy: The 'Plucking' of Officers in the Latter 1850s," *American Neptune* 50, No. 2 (Spring, 1990): 107. [Hereafter cited as Westwood.]
[28] *Statutes at Large of the United States of America*, *1789–1873*, 17 vols. (Washington, DC, 1850–73), 10: 616–17.
[29] Westwood, 107–18.
[30] Livingston Hunt, "Herman Melville as a Naval Historian," *Harvard Graduates' Magazine* 39 (Sept. 1930): 22–30, 22.