

Gibbs George

Pike & Cutlass: Hero Tales of Our Navy



George Gibbs

**Pike & Cutlass: Hero
Tales of Our Navy**

«Public Domain»

Gibbs G.

Pike & Cutlass: Hero Tales of Our Navy / G. Gibbs — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

THE EFFRONTERY OF PAUL JONES	6
A STRUGGLE TO THE DEATH	11
THE TERRIER AND THE MASTIFF	14
DECATUR AND THE “PHILADELPHIA”	18
THE BIGGEST LITTLE FIGHT IN NAVAL HISTORY	21
A DOUBLE ENCOUNTER	26
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	27

George Gibbs

Pike & Cutlass: Hero Tales of Our Navy

NOTE

The writer expresses thanks for their courtesy to the editors of “Lippincott’s Magazine” and the editors of the “Saturday Evening Post,” of Philadelphia, in which periodicals several of these Hero Tales have been printed. He also acknowledges his indebtedness for many valuable historical facts to “Cooper’s Naval History;” “History of the Navy,” by Edgar S. Maclay; “History of Our Navy,” by John R. Spears; “Twelve Naval Captains,” by Molly Elliot Seawell; “American Naval Heroes,” by John Howard Brown; “Naval Actions of the War of 1812,” by James Barnes; and to many valuable works and papers in the archives of the Library of the Navy Department at Washington. Thanks are due the Art Department of the “Saturday Evening Post” and the Art Department of “Collier’s Weekly” for their permission to reprint many of the drawings herein.

GEORGE GIBBS.

August 15, 1899.

THE EFFRONTERY OF PAUL JONES

In April, 1778, there were more than two-score of French ships-of-the-line within easy sailing distance of the coast of England. They were tremendous three-decked monsters, armed with tier upon tier of cannon, and it took nearly a thousand officers and men to man each of them. They lay at anchor in the harbors of France or sallied forth into the open sea to the southward to prey upon the commerce of Great Britain. But grand as they were, not one of them dared to do what John Paul Jones did in the little Continental sloop of war “Ranger.” By good seamanship, an element of chance, and a reckless daring almost without precedent, he accomplished under the very noses of the gold-laced French admirals what they had been hemming and hawing about since the beginning of the war.

Inaction weighed upon the mind of Paul Jones more heavily than the hardest of labor. He had to be up and doing all the time, or trouble was brewing for everybody on shipboard. So when he reached Nantes, France, and found that the frigate which had been promised him was not forthcoming, he determined, alone and unaided, to do with the little “Ranger” what he was not yet destined to do with a bigger ship. No person but Paul Jones would for a moment have considered such a desperate project as the one he conceived. What the flower of the navy and chivalry of France had refused to attempt was little short of suicide for the mad American. But Jones was not cast in an ordinary mould. When he got to Brest, he made up his mind once and for all, by one good fire of British shipping to put an end to all the ship and town burnings in America.

There was clanking of bit and chain as the anchor was hove up short on the little craft. The officers and men of the great vessels of the French fleet looked over the glistening water, warmed by the afternoon sun of spring, and wondered where their impetuous harbor-mate was off to. A week before, they knew Paul Jones had demanded that the French Admiral salute the Continental flag which the “Ranger” wore for the first time. And they had given those salutes right willingly, acknowledging publicly the nation they had been helping in secret. They knew he was a man of determination, and they wondered what the American was going to do. Some of them – the younger ones – wished they too were aboard the dainty little craft, bound out to sea under a man who feared nothing and dared everything. They heard the whistles and hoarse calls of the bos’n as the men tumbled down from aloft, the sheets flew home, and yards went up to their blocks with a clatter and a rush that showed how willing were the hands at the tackles. The tops’ls caught a fine breeze from the southward and, bracing up, the “Ranger” flew down the harbor and around the point of Quiberon just as the sun was setting behind the purple cloud-streaks along the line of limitless ocean. Up the coast she moved, her bowsprit pointing fearlessly to the north, where lay the Scilly Isles. The Frenchmen left behind in the harbor looked enviously at the patch of gold, growing every moment more indistinct in the fading light, and said “En voilà un brave!”

The next day Jones left the Scilly Isles on his starboard quarter and steered boldly up Saint George’s Channel into the wide Irish Sea. The merchantmen he boarded and captured or scuttled did not quite know what to make of a man who feared so little that he looked into the eyes of the lion sternly and even menacingly when one movement might have destroyed him. These channel-men thought themselves secure, for such a venturesome procedure as that of Paul Jones was contrary to all precedent. They couldn’t understand it at all until their vessels were burned and they themselves were prisoners. Then they knew that they had been taken by a man whose daring far surpassed that of the naval captains of England and France. In plain sight of land he took a brig bound from Ireland to Ostend. He didn’t want to be bothered with prisoners, so he sent her crew ashore in their own boat to tell the story of their escape. Then off Dublin he took another ship, the “Lord Chatham,” and sent her in charge of a prize-crew down to Brest.

Paul Jones had one great advantage. Nowadays, when the railway and telegraph have brought all the people of the world closer together, such a cruise would be impossible. The report would be sent

at once to the Admiralty, and two fleets, if necessary, would be despatched post-haste to intercept him. But Paul Jones knew the value of the unexpected. And although fortune favors the brave and the winds and waves seem always on the side of the ablest navigators, he had made his calculations carefully. He knew that unless an English fleet was at some point nearer than Portsmouth he would have ample time to carry out his plans.

He made up his mind before burning any shipping to capture, if possible, the Earl of Selkirk, who lived on St. Mary's Isle, and to hold him as a hostage. By this means he hoped to compel England to treat American prisoners with humanity, according to the laws of war. But on the twenty-first of April he picked up a fisherman who gave him information which for the moment drove all thought of the Earl of Selkirk and the shipping from his mind. Inside the harbor of Carrickfergus, where Belfast is, lay a man-of-war of twenty guns, the "Drake," a large ship, with more men than the "Ranger" carried. He would drop down alongside of her under cover of the night and board her before her crew could tumble out of their hammocks. Such an attempt in a fortified harbor of the enemy would not have occurred to most men, but Paul Jones believed in achieving the impossible. He waited until nightfall, and then, with a wind freshening almost to a gale, sped up the harbor. The "Drake" lay well out in the roadstead, her anchor lights only marking her position in the blackness of the night. Carefully watching his time, Captain Jones stood forward looking at the lights that showed how she swung to the tide. He kept full headway on the "Ranger," until she could swing up into the wind almost under the jib-boom of the Englishman. By dropping his anchor across the chain of the "Drake" he hoped to swing down alongside, grapple, and board before the crew were fairly awake.

But this time he was destined to fail. Everything depended on the dropping of the anchor at the proper time. His orders were not obeyed, for not until the "Ranger" had drifted clear of the Englishman's chain did the splash come. Then it was too late. Fortunately the watch on the "Drake" were not suspicious. Had they been wider awake they would have had the "Ranger" at their mercy, and Paul Jones might not have survived to fight them a few days later. As it was, they only swore at the stupidity of the Irish lubber they thought he was. Jones knew that his chance was gone, and as soon as a strain came on the cable it was cut, and he filled away to sea again.

He now returned to his original plan of burning the shipping of some important town. He decided on Whitehaven as his first objective point, and the "Ranger," sailing leisurely over, dropped anchor in the outer harbor during the following night.

Whitehaven was a town of considerable importance in the Scottish and North of England shipping trade. The inhabitants were for the greater part sailors and others who made their living by the sea, and there was never a time when the docks were not crowded with vessels, of all countries, from the sloop to the full-rigged ship, discharging or taking on cargoes which figured largely in England's commerce. At one side of the harbor lay the town, and farther around to the left lay the docks where the shipping was. Over two hundred vessels, large and small, lay there or out in the roadstead. Two forts, mounting fifteen guns each, guarded the town. They were adequately garrisoned, and it looked like a piece of desperate folly to make the attempt upon a town directly under their guns.

Paul Jones knew Whitehaven from his childhood. He remembered just where the guard-houses were to be found, and knew how to force the entrance to the barracks. By three o'clock in the morning he was ready to make the assault. Two cutters with fifteen men in each, armed with cutlasses and pistols, were all he took to do the work. With thirty men he went fearlessly and confidently to intimidate the soldiers, spike the guns in the forts, overawe the town, and burn the shipping! Lieutenant Wallingford was given command of one of the cutters. His mission was to burn the shipping to the left. The other cutter Paul Jones commanded himself, and assumed the more hazardous duty of holding with his fifteen men the forts and the town, until such a blaze should illumine the morning sky that all England would know that the burning of Portland, Maine, was avenged.

Quietly they pulled up towards the great stone dock, where the shipping-houses were. The tide was very low as they moved past the schooners and brigs in the harbor, many of them careened far over on their sides, waiting for a rise in the tide to pull down to more comfortable moorings. But the boats went by without challenge or notice, and Wallingford's cutter had slipped away like a gray shadow in the darkness. The first violet streaks of dawn were just beginning to throw the shore-line to the east in hazy silhouette when they reached the landing-place.

The dawn was coming up quickly now, and Paul Jones led his fifteen men at a run to the nearest fort. With cutlass in one hand and pistol in the other, they dashed upon the first sentry. There was no time for stealth, so they bore him down by sheer weight. The next one saw them coming, but Jones locked him and the rest of them in the guard-house. Then he proceeded to spike the guns. So quick was the work that not a shot was fired. They were running towards the second fort before the soldiers were quite sure what had happened. Even then they were too terrified to follow in pursuit. As the gallant band ran towards the other fort they got a clear view of the harbor, a glimmering sheet of orange and violet, under the morning glow. But strain his eyes as he might, their captain could get no sign of Wallingford or his work. They dashed as desperately at this fort as at the other and were equally successful, intimidating the garrison and spiking every gun they could find.

But what could be the trouble with Wallingford? Still seeing no blaze or even spark among the shipping to the eastward, Paul Jones felt that the main object of his descent upon the town was to prove a failure. So he dashed down the street from the fort towards the dock, pistol in hand, followed by his crew, who rolled along grinning at the ease with which they had accomplished their work. One of them had a bad cut over the head and the blood was staining his shoulder, but he didn't seem to mind it in the least. To their surprise as they passed the houses the people began coming out of their doors shaking their fists at and cursing them. They grinned no longer, for they knew that some one had betrayed them. Jones looked around for the fifteenth man. The fellow with the cut wiped some blood from his cheek and said, —

“Dave Freeman, sir, he's gone!”

Freeman was the traitor, then.

But there was no time for parley or revenge. The mob was collecting in the street they had left and soon would be down on the dock. Though Wallingford failed, Paul Jones would not. He dashed into a house on the dock, and seizing a burning brand went aboard one of the largest vessels of the fleet. He hastily pulled together some straw and hatchway gratings and soon had a roaring blaze. Then one of his men spilled a barrel of tar in the midst of it to make the destruction more sure.

He had been so intent upon his work that he had not noticed the mob that had gathered on the dock. The place seemed black with people, and their number was increasing every minute. Then, leaving the work of destruction to the others, he went down alone to face fifteen hundred infuriated people with a single flint-lock pistol! Dave Freeman had done his work well, for they seemed to pour from every street and doorway. But Paul Jones was determined that the work should be finished, and took a position where he could command the boat-landing and retreat of his men. The people came down in a body to within twenty paces of Paul Jones and then – stopped. There was something in the *look* of the man and the menacing black barrel that moved from one to the other that made them quail and fall over each other to get out of range. Those in the background swore and pushed gallantly, but the front rank was a line of straw, and Paul Jones moved it with his old flint-lock as though a Biscay wind-squall was striking it. For fifteen minutes and longer he stood there, immovable, the master of the situation, the picture of the intimidating power of one resolute man over a mob. Such another instance is hardly to be found in history.

When the black smoke rolled up from half a dozen vessels of the fleet, Paul Jones's crew retreated in an orderly manner to the cutter. Jones walked down the steps into the boat, covering the crowd the while. Then his men leisurely rowed away, not a shot having been fired. It was not until the cutter was well out into the bay that some of the bewildered soldiers recovered sufficiently to

load two cannon that Paul Jones had overlooked. These they brought to bear upon the cutter dancing down in the sunrise towards the “Ranger” and fired. The shot whistled wide of the mark, and Jones, to show his contempt of such long-range courage, fired only his pistol in return.

But that was not the end of this remarkable cruise. Having failed to find the Earl of Selkirk on St. Mary’s Isle, Paul Jones squared away to the southward, hoping to pick up another full-rigged ship off Dublin or to meet with the “Drake” again. He knew that by this time the Admiralty was well informed as to his whereabouts, and that before many hours had passed he would be obliged to run the gauntlet of a whole line of British fire. But he hated to be beaten at anything, and since the night when he failed to grapple her had been burning to try conclusions yard-arm to yard-arm with the “Drake.”

On the twenty-fourth of April, just two weeks after sailing from the harbor of Brest, he hove to off the Lough of Belfast, where within the harbor he could plainly see the tall spars of the Englishman swinging at his anchorage. Paul Jones was puzzled at first to know how he was to lure the “Drake” out to sea, for a battle under the lee of the land in the harbor was not to be thought of. So he went about from one tack to another, wearing ship and backing and filling, until the curiosity of the English captain, Burdon, was thoroughly aroused, and he sent one of his junior officers out in a cutter to find out who the stranger was. Jones ran his guns in and manœuvred so cleverly that the stern of the “Ranger” was kept towards the boat until he was well aboard. The young officer was rather suspicious, but, nothing daunted, pulled up to the gangway in true man-o’-war style and went on deck. There he was met by an officer, who courteously informed him that he was on board the Continental sloop of war “Ranger,” Captain Paul Jones, and that he and his boat’s crew were prisoners of war.

In the meanwhile Captain Burdon, finding that his boat’s crew did not return, got up his anchor, shook out his sails, and cleared ship for action. He was already suspicious, and too good a seaman to let unpreparedness play any part in his actions. There was not very much wind, and slowly the “Drake” bore down on the silent vessel which lay, sails flapping idly as she rolled, on the swell of the Irish Sea. As the afternoon drew on the wind almost failed, so that it was an hour before sunset before the “Drake” could get within speaking range. Hardly a ripple stirred the surface of the glassy swells, and the stillness was ominous and oppressive.

When within a cable’s length of the “Ranger” Captain Burdon sent up his colors. Captain Jones followed his lead in a moment by running up the Stars and Stripes.

Suddenly a voice, looming big and hoarse in the silence, came from the “Drake,” —

“What ship is that?”

Paul Jones mounted the hammock nettings and, putting his speaking-trumpet to his lips, coolly replied, —

“The American Continental ship ‘Ranger.’ We have been waiting for you. The sun is but little more than an hour from setting, and it is time to begin.”

Then he turned and gave a low order to the man at the wheel, and the “Ranger” wore around so that her broadside would bear. Paul Jones always believed in striking the first blow. When they came before the wind the word was passed, and a mass of flame seemed to leap clear across the intervening water to the “Drake.” The “Ranger” shuddered with the shock and felt in a moment the crashing of the other’s broadside through her hull and rigging. The battle was on in earnest. Yard-arm to yard-arm they went, drifting down the wind, and the deep thundering of the cannonade was carried over to the Irish hills, where masses of people were watching the smoke-enveloped duel. The sun sank low, touching the purple hilltops, a golden ball that shed a ruddy glow over the scene and made the spectacle seem a dream rather than reality. Still they fought on.

It was a glorious fight – and as fair a one as history records. The “Drake” pounded away at the “Ranger’s” hull alone, while Jones was doing all he could with his smaller pieces to cripple his enemy’s rigging. First the “Drake’s” fore-tops’l yard was cut in two. The main dropped next, and the mizzen gaff was shot away. For purposes of manœuvring, the “Drake” was useless and drifted down, her jib trailing in the water and her shrouds and rigging dragging astern. She was almost a wreck. As

she heeled over on the swell, the gunners on the “Ranger” could see human blood mingling with the water of the division tubs that came from her scuppers. The first flag was shot away, but another was quickly run up to its place. In a moment that too was shot away from the hoisting halyard and fell into the water astern, where it trailed among the wreckage. But still she fought on.

On the “Ranger” the loss had been comparatively slight. Lieutenant Wallingford and one other man had been killed and there were five or six wounded men in the cockpit. Jones seemed to be everywhere, but still remained uninjured and directed the firing until the end. He saw that the sharpshooters in his tops were doing terrific execution on the decks of his adversary, and at last he saw the imposing figure of Captain Burdon twist around for a second and then sink down to the deck. Another officer fell, and in a moment above the crash of division firing and the rattle of the musketry overhead he heard a cry for quarter.

The battle was at an end in a little over an hour. It was almost as great a victory as that of the “Bonhomme Richard” over the “Serapis.” Paul Jones’s ship carried eighteen guns; the Englishman carried twenty. The “Ranger” had one hundred and twenty-three men; the “Drake” had one hundred and fifty-one and carried many volunteers besides. The “Ranger” lost two killed and had six wounded; the “Drake” lost forty-two killed and wounded. Against great odds John Paul Jones still remained victorious.

The people on shore heard the cannonading cease and saw the great clouds of gold-tinted smoke roll away to the south. There they saw the two vessels locked as if in an embrace of death and a great cheer went up. They thought the “Drake” invincible. The gray of twilight turned to black, and the ships vanished like spectres in the darkness. But late that night some fishermen in a boat came ashore with a sail from the store-room of the “Drake.” They said it had been given them by John Paul Jones. The people knew then that the “Drake” had been captured.

When the “Ranger” returned with her prizes to Brest, and his people told the tale of Paul Jones’s victory, France was electrified. Neither in France nor in England would they at first believe it. France made him her hero. England offered ten thousand guineas for his head.

A STRUGGLE TO THE DEATH

Never, since the beginning of time, has there been a fiercer sea-fight than that between the “Bonhomme Richard” and the “Serapis.” No struggle has been more dogged – no victory greater.

Three – four times during the night-long battle any other man than Paul Jones would have struck his colors. His main-deck battery and crews blown to pieces – his water-line gaping with wounds – his sides battered into one great chasm – still he fought on. His prisoners released – his masts tottering – his rudder gone – his ship afire below and aloft, his resistance was the more desperate. The thought of surrender never occurred to him.

After taking the “Drake” in a gallant fight, burning Whitehaven, and terrorizing the whole British coast, Paul Jones went to Paris, where a commission to the converted East Indiaman, the “Bonhomme Richard,” awaited him. Putting her in the best shape possible, he boldly steered across for English waters. Paul Jones thirsted for larger game.

When Captain Pearson, with the new frigate “Serapis,” on a fine September afternoon in 1779, sighted Paul Jones, he signalled his merchant convoy to scatter, and piped all hands, who rushed jubilantly to quarters. The opportunity of his life had come, for the capture of the rebel frigate meant glory and a baronetcy. But he reckoned without his host.

Across the oily waters came the cheery pipes of the boatswain’s mate of the “Richard” as Jones swung her up to meet her adversary, and Pearson knew his task would not be an easy one. The wind fell so light that the sun had sunk behind the light on Flamborough Head before the ships drifted up to fighting distance, and it was dark before they were ready to come to close quarters. On the “Bonhomme Richard,” Jones’s motley crew, stripped to the waist, were drawn up at the guns, peering out through the ports at the dark shadow on the starboard bow they were slowly overhauling.

The decks were sanded, the hammocks piled around the wheel, and there at the break of the poop stood the captain, trumpet in hand, turning now and then to give an order to Richard Dale or his midshipmen, quiet and composed, with the smile on his face men saw before the fight with the “Drake.” The clumsy hulk rolled to the ground-swell, and the creaking of the masts and clamping of the sheet-blocks were all that broke the silence of the night. No excitement was apparent, and the stillness seemed the greater for an occasional laugh from the gunners, or the rattle of a cutlass newly settled in its sheath.

Then close aboard from out the blackness came a voice, —

“What ship is that?”

Paul Jones moved to the lee mizzen-shrouds and slowly replied, —

“I can’t hear what you say.”

He wanted all of his broadside to bear on the Englishman.

“What ship is that? Answer, or I shall fire.”

The moment had arrived. For answer Jones leaned far over the rail of the poop and passed the word. A sheet of flame flashed from one of the “Richard’s” after eighteen-pounders, followed by a terrific broadside which quaked the rotten timbers of the “Richard” from stem to stern. At the same time the guns of the “Serapis” were brought to bear, and her side seemed a mass of flame.

On the “Richard,” two of the eighteen-pounders burst at this first broadside, killing their crews, heaving up the deck above, and driving the men from the upper tier. The others cracked and were useless. In this terrible situation Paul Jones knew the chances for victory were against him, for he had thought his lower battery his mainstay in a broadside fight.

But if he felt daunted his men did not know it, for, amid the hurricane of fire and roar of the guns, his ringing voice, forward, aft, everywhere, told them that victory was still theirs for the gaining. He ordered all of the men from the useless battery to the main deck; and it was well he did so, – for so terrific was the fire that the six ports of the “Bonhomme Richard” were blown into one, and the

shot passed clear through the ship, cutting away all but the supports of the deck above. No one but the marines guarding the powder-monkeys were left there, but they stood firm at their posts while the balls came whistling through and dropped into the sea beyond. But the fire of Paul Jones's battery did not slacken for a moment. There seemed to be two men to take the place of every man who was killed, and he swept the crowded deck of the "Serapis" from cathead to gallery.

In the meanwhile, the "Serapis," having the wind of the "Richard," drew ahead, and Pearson hauled his sheets to run across and rake Jones's bows. But he miscalculated, and the American ran her boom over the stern of the Englishman. For a moment neither ship could fire at the other, and they hung together in silence, fast locked in a deadly embrace. Jones's crew, eager to renew the battle, glared forward at the shimmering battle-lanterns of the Englishman, cursing because their guns would not bear. The smoke lifted, and Paul Jones, who was deftly training one of his guns at the main-mast of the "Serapis," saw Pearson slowly climb up on the rail. The silence had deceived the Englishman, and his voice came clearly across the deck, —

"Have you struck?"

A harsh laugh broke from the "Richard."

"Struck!" Paul Jones's answer came in a roar that was heard from truck to keelson. "I haven't begun to fight yet!"

A cheer went up that drowned the rattle of the musketry from the tops, and the fight went on. Swinging around again the jib-boom of the "Serapis" came over the poop so that Paul Jones could touch it. Rushing to the mast, he seized a hawser, and quickly taking several turns with it, lashed the bowsprit of his enemy to his mizzen-rigging. Grappling-irons were dropped over on the enemy — and the battle became a battle to the death.

"Well done, lads; we've got her now." And Jones turned to his nine-pounders, which renewed their fire. Both crews fought with the fury of desperation. The men at the guns, stripped to the buff, grimed and blackened with powder, worked with extraordinary quickness. Every shot told. But the fire of the "Serapis" was deadly, and she soon silenced every gun but Jones's two nine-pounders, which he still worked with dogged perseverance. He sent Dale below to hurry up the powder charges. To his horror Dale found that the master-at-arms, knowing the ship to be sinking, had released a hundred English prisoners. The situation was terrifying. With foes within and without, there seemed no hope. But Dale, with ready wit, ordered the prisoners to the pumps and to fight the fire near the magazine, telling them that their only hope of life lay in that. And at it they went, until they dropped of sheer exhaustion.

The doctor passed Dale as he rushed upon deck. "Sir," said he to Jones, "the water is up to the lower deck, and we will sink with all hands in a few minutes."

Jones turned calmly to the doctor, as though surprised. "What, doctor," said he, "would you have me strike to a drop of water? Here, help me get this gun over."

The surgeon ran below, but Jones got the gun over, and served it, too.

To add to the horror of the situation, just at this moment a ball from a new enemy came screaming just over the head of Paul Jones, and the wind of it knocked off his hat. The carpenter, Stacy, ran up breathlessly.

"My God, she's firing on us — the 'Alliance,' sir!" And the captain glanced astern where the flashes marked the position of the crazy Landais, firing on his own consort.

If ever Paul Jones had an idea of hauling his colors, it must have been at this moment.

He had been struck on the head by a splinter, and the blood surged down over his shoulder — but he didn't know it.

Just then a fear-crazed wretch rushed past him, trying to find the signal-halyards, crying wildly as he ran, —

"Quarter! For God's sake, quarter! Our ship is sinking!"

Jones heard the words, and, turning quickly, he hurled an empty pistol at the man, which struck him squarely between the eyes, knocking him headlong down the hatch.

Pearson heard the cry. "Do you call for quarter?" he shouted.

For answer Paul Jones's nine-pounder cut away the rail on which he was standing.

Then came the turn in the fight. Horrible as had been the slaughter on the "Richard," the quick flashes from his tops told Paul Jones that his marines had not been placed aloft in vain. He saw the crew on the spar-deck of his enemy fall one by one and men fleeing below for safety. Raising his trumpet, he cheered his topmen to further efforts. In their unceasing fire lay his only hope.

One of them in his maintop with great deliberateness laid aside his musket and picked up a leather bucket of hand grenades. Jones watched him anxiously as, steadying himself, he slowly lay out along the foot-rope of the main-yard. His captain knew what he meant to do. He reached the lift, which was directly over the main hatch of the "Serapis." There he coolly fastened his bucket to the sheet-block, and, taking careful aim, began dropping his grenades down the open hatchway. The second one fell on a row of exposed powder charges. The explosion that followed shook sea and sky, and the air was filled with blackened corpses. The smoke came up in a mighty cloud, and soon the forks of flame licked through it and up the rigging.

That was the supreme moment of Paul Jones's life, for he knew that victory was his.

The fire from the "Serapis" ceased as if by magic. The explosion had blown a whole battery to eternity, and, as the smoke cleared a little, he could see the figure of Pearson leaning against the pin-rail, almost deserted, his few men running here and there, stricken mad with fear. Then the English captain stumbled heavily, as though blind, over the slippery deck towards the mizzen, where the flag had been nailed, and with his own hands tore it frantically from the mast.

A mighty victory for Paul Jones it was. But now, as the flames mounted higher through the rifts of smoke, he could see at what a cost. His dead lay piled upon the poop so that he could not get to the gangway. His masts were shot through and through, and strained at the stays at every lift of the bow. The fire, though beaten from the magazine, still burst from the forward hatches, firing the tangled rigging and outlining them in its lurid hues against the black beyond. The water had risen, and the freshening breeze lashed the purple foam in at the lower-deck ports. For hours the men fought against their new enemy; but towards five in the morning their captain decided that no human power could save her. He then began moving his wounded and prisoners to the "Serapis".

The first gray streaks of dawn saw Paul Jones upon the poop of the "Serapis," looking to the leeward, where the "Richard" lay rolling heavily. Her flag, shot away again and again, had been replaced and floated proudly from its staff. Lower and lower she sank into the water, mortally wounded, a heavy swell washing in at the lower gun-ports. At length, heaving her stern high in the air, her pennant fluttering a last defiance to the captured "Serapis," she slowly disappeared, dying grandly as she had lived.

After Pearson's release, the British government offered ten thousand guineas for Paul Jones, dead or alive. Forty-two British frigates chased him and scoured the Channel; but Jones passed within sight of them, the American flag flying at the mast, and reached France in safety, where he became the hero of the hour. And so long as the Stars and Stripes fly over American war-ships will the men who know hold up as their ideal of a dogged warrior and gallant seaman the hero of Flamborough – Paul Jones.

THE TERRIER AND THE MASTIFF

The first of the great American captains to give his life to the cause of liberty was Nicholas Biddle. And the action in which he lost it is the finest example of daring and hardihood in the little known pages of naval history. His part in that glorious action must ever remain unknown as to its details since but five out of his crew remained alive to tell of it, and we are chiefly indebted to the British accounts for the information which has been handed down.

Nicholas Biddle began his naval career by being shipwrecked on a desert shoal at the age of thirteen. But being rescued, with his four companions, at the end of two months, his ardor was so little dampened that as soon as opportunity offered he immediately went forth in search of further adventures on the sea. A war between England and Spain being imminent, he went to London, and succeeded in getting a midshipman's warrant on the ship of Captain – afterwards Admiral – Sterling.

But just before the declaration of independence of his own country, a voyage of discovery to the North Pole was proposed by the Royal Geographical Society, and this opportunity seemed to hold forth infinitely more possibilities for advancement than the daily port routine of a British frigate of war.

So, Admiral Sterling refusing Biddle's mild request to be transferred to one of the vessels, the young man took it upon himself to doff his gold-laced uniform and present himself upon the "Carcase" in very shabby sailor clothes, upon which he was forthwith entered upon her books as a sailor before the mast. He was in glorious company, though, for Horatio Nelson – afterwards to be the greatest admiral England has ever known – shared his humble lot as a jacky, although his prospects in the service were more brilliant than Biddle's. The expedition, having accomplished its purpose, returned to England in 1774, both young Nelson and Biddle having been appointed coxswains for meritorious service.

When hostilities in the United States began, Biddle, of course, resigned from the British navy and offered his services to the Continental Congress. His first commission was the command of the "Camden," a galley fitted out by the State of Pennsylvania for the defence of the Delaware River. He was then made a captain in the naval service, and took command of the "Andrew Doria," of fourteen guns and one hundred and thirty men.

Just before Commodore Hopkins's fleet hoisted anchor, Biddle had an opportunity to show his intrepidity in a very personal way. Two men who had deserted from his vessel had been taken and were placed in prison at Lewistown. Biddle sent an officer and a squad of men ashore to bring them off. But the officer returned to the ship and reported that the deserters had joined with the other prisoners, and barricaded the door, swearing that no man alive would take them. Biddle put on his side-arms and, taking only a young midshipman with him, went at once to the prison. The door was tightly barred from the inside, and the prisoners, led by one of the deserters named Green, shook their fists and pointed their weapons at him. Some of the more venturesome of the townfolk, who only needed a resolute leader, now smashed down the door at the naval officer's directions, and Biddle, drawing both his pistols, quickly stepped within the opening. Green stood in front of his ill-favored companions, his eye gleaming villanously down the barrel of his flint-lock. Without moving his eye from the man, and planting himself squarely in the doorway, Biddle said, steadily, —

"Now, Green, if you don't take good aim, you are a dead man!"

There was a moment's pause, after which the pistol fell a little, and finally, under the resolute attitude of his captain, the fellow broke down. He was completely awed, and at Biddle's command dropped his pistol to the floor and allowed himself to be conducted to the ship. Their leader cowed, the remainder of the prisoners permitted the Lewistown militia, who had recovered from their fright, to come in and make them fast again.

This incident had its moral effect upon his men, and never again, when they learned to know him, was Biddle troubled with disaffection among his crew. The fury with which they went into the fights that followed showed how much he was a man after their own hearts.

After Commodore Esek Hopkins's unsuccessful encounter with the British fleet, the "Andrew Doria" put to sea and cruised off the coast of Newfoundland. Biddle captured a prize laden with arms and ammunition, which he carried to port, where they greatly strengthened Washington's army, which was badly in need of supplies of all kinds. He captured a transport and four hundred British soldiers, and made a great number of merchant prizes. He would have taken more, but he only had five men left aboard to take the "Doria" back to Philadelphia.

The Congress had authorized the building of several new frigates, and one of these, the "Randolph," of thirty-two guns, was just off the stocks. Biddle was made commander of her, and set immediately about finishing her and making her ready for sea. He had great difficulty in getting a crew, as privateering, where the prizes were greater and ship actions less frequent, proved more attractive to the adventurous spirits of the day. Congress, however, drafted a number of men from the army, and the crew was completed by the enlistment of volunteers from among the prisoners taken on prizes. After many difficulties with this motley crew, Biddle at last got to sea in February, 1777.

The men of his old crew were with him to a man, but many of the volunteers were shoal-water sailors, and his army recruits didn't know a sheet from a buntline. So when he ran into a Hatteras gale a few days out, the "Randolph" carried away her masts, and was altogether so uncomfortable a wreck that the volunteers mutinied, and Biddle had a hard time getting into Charleston harbor. He succeeded at last in refitting and in instilling some of the man-of-war spirit into his crew, sailing at last for the West Indies. Then his luck turned for the better, and he sighted the English ship "True Briton," twenty guns, convoying three merchantmen. Without accident he succeeded in taking them and in bringing all four prizes safe and sound into Charleston harbor. This was the first capture of the navy in the South, and, as the prizes were again liberally supplied with arms, the capture was doubly welcome. So much did Congress appreciate this affair that they had a medal struck off in Biddle's honor. The British hearing of this exploit of the "Randolph," sent a fleet south, and succeeded in blockading her at Charleston for a time.

The State of South Carolina got ready a fleet in the hope of raising the blockade, but before they could get to sea the Englishmen had disappeared.

In February, 1778, Biddle went out with a little fleet composed of the "General Moultrie," 18, the "Polly," 16, and the "Fair American," 14, in search of the British squadron. But missing them, they only succeeded in taking a few merchant vessels of the enemy. They boarded a number of Dutch and French ships, and Biddle knew that before long they must fall in with some of the enemy. To Captain Blake, who was dining with him, he said, "I would not be surprised if my old ship should be out after us. As to anything that carries her guns upon one deck, I think myself a match for her."

On the afternoon of the 7th of March, a sail was made out to windward, and they sailed up to examine her. As she came down with the wind she was made out to be square-rigged; but, bows on, she looked rather like a sloop than a frigate. A short time later she could be made out more plainly a man-of-war, – evidently of the enemy, – coming down speedily, and, from the way she was sailing, able to out-foot any of the squadron. Biddle could see that she stood well out of the water; but a small frigate might do that. And if she was only a frigate of forty guns or under, he promised himself a great battle that day. But if she were a ship of the line, not only the "Randolph" but the smaller vessels were in great danger, for nothing save a craft somewhere near her size could resist the broadsides of the two heavy gun-tiers.

He quickly made his resolution. Signalling to the fleet of cruisers and prizes to go about, he himself took the deck and sent the little "Randolph" boldly down towards the stranger. On she came, bowing majestically over the water, never making a sign until nearing gunshot distance, when the sound of the pipes and the calls on her deck showed that she was clearing ship for action. Biddle

had been prepared for an hour. Now, as she came a little closer to the wind, the American captain discovered what he had suspected – two long lines of muzzles running out of her leeward ports.

She was a line-of-battle-ship, then.

He clinched his jaws and looked over his shoulder to where the prizes were scurrying away in the gathering darkness. They at least would be safe. But he did not shift his course a point, sailing on until the canvas of the great ship seemed to tower far above the little spars of his own vessel. The men of the “Randolph” were aghast at the action of their captain. To them an English “Sixty-Four” was the epitome of all that was powerful upon the seas. Biddle thought so, too; but there was nothing of timidity in his voice as he bade his gunners stand by to train upon her. He knew that this battle would be his last, for he resolved in those few moments that he would not give up his ship while one plank of her remained above water. The enemy might blow him out of the water and send him to the bottom, but before she did it he would give them such a lesson in patriotism that the world would not easily forget it.

His men guessed something of what was in his mind, and by the time the big ship hove close aboard they were keyed up to the fighting pitch, waiting with the utmost impatience for the first shot to be fired. The dusk had fallen, but the great loom of the sails of the English frigate showed plainly as she came closer. They were scarcely a pistol-shot apart when a figure on the Englishman mounted the hammock nettings aft, and a voice came clearly across the water, —

“Ahoy, the frigate!”

Biddle paused a moment to gain time, and then giving a word to his division officers, lifted his speaking-trumpet, —

“What ship is that?”

“His Britannic Majesty’s ship-of-the-line ‘Yarmouth,’ Captain Vincent. Who are you? Answer, or I will be compelled to fire.”

Another pause as Biddle directed the American colors to be run up to the mast, and then said, —
“This is the American Continental ship ‘Randolph,’ Captain Biddle!”

Without the pause of a second a tremendous broadside was poured into the Englishman, and in a moment the battle was on.

Biddle had gained a slight advantage in position by waiting as he did, and the “Randolph’s” broadsides did great execution on the crowded decks of her adversary. But the “Yarmouth” men sprang to their guns, and in a few moments were firing their tremendous broadside of thirty guns as fast as they could be served and run out.

On the “Randolph” Biddle’s men were working well, but the crashing of the shot and the flying splinters were terrific. In fifteen minutes the decks were covered with the bodies of dead and dying men, and the surgeon and his mate below in the cockpit, covered with blood, were laboring to help such of those as could be aided, and the decks, in spite of the sand, were so slippery that as the ship rolled it was difficult to stand upright upon them. Many of the guns of one of the broadsides were disabled, and there was not a gun that had a full crew to man it.

Biddle walked to and fro from one battery to another, lending a word here and a hand there, acting as sponger or tackle or handspikeman, wherever he was most needed. The men fought with the energy of despair – the despair of the dying. If they were to die, they would die hard, and the guns were loaded as though they would fire as many times as they could in the short time left them. The English aimed more deliberately. But when the dreaded broadside came, it dealt a blow that shook the smaller ship from stem to stern.

Biddle, although badly wounded, refused to leave the deck, and, ordering a stool to be placed where he could best direct the firing, sat calmly down, though in great agony, and gave the orders to his officers, who repeated them to the men.

It has never been discovered just what happened on the “Randolph.” In spite of her losses, she was keeping up her fire wonderfully, when, with scarcely a warning of any kind, she blew up.

The force of the explosion was so great that the ship split in two, and sank immediately. The air was filled with guns, spars, and the blackened bodies of men, many of which fell upon the deck of the “Yarmouth.” An American ensign, neatly rolled in a ball, ready to be sent aloft on the “Randolph” if the others had been shot away, fell on the quarter-deck of the Englishman unsinged.

That national emblem was all, save a spar or two, that remained of the “Randolph.” Captain Biddle and three hundred and ten of her crew of three hundred and fifteen were blown to pieces and drowned. Four days later the “Yarmouth,” cruising near the same place, discovered a piece of the wreck to which five men, more dead than alive, had managed to cling.

The “Randolph” was lost, but the “Yarmouth” was so badly cut up that she could not follow the chase, and was obliged to lay to for repairs. What, if any, difference there might have been had the “Randolph” not been destroyed by explosion from within it is not easy to say; but all authorities agree that the fight, while it lasted, was one of the most determined in history. Captain Biddle at the time of his death was but twenty-eight years old, and the infant navy and the colonies lost one of their most intrepid officers and gallant seamen.

DECATUR AND THE “PHILADELPHIA”

It was on the deck of the “Enterprise,” before Tripoli, in 1804. The crew had been called aft, and Decatur, smiling, stood on his quarter-deck.

“My men,” said he, “the ‘Philadelphia’ is in the hands of the enemy. A few days from now and we may see American guns turned against American sailors. The commodore has given us permission to sail in and blow her up. Will you go?”

Into the air flew a hundred caps, and three wild American cheers were the answer.

“I can’t take you all,” he explained; “the expedition is a dangerous one. We are going under the broadsides of the enemy, and I only want those of you who are ready. Now, lads, any of you who are willing to go, take one step aft.”

Without a second’s pause the crew of the “Enterprise,” to a man, stepped out; then, fearful lest others should get in the front rank, came towards the young commander in a body, elbowing and swearing at one another lustily.

Decatur smiled. With such a spirit there was nothing he might not accomplish. He picked out sixty-two of his youngest and steadiest men, each of them touching his tarry cap with a grateful “Thank’ee, sir,” as Decatur called his name.

That afternoon they tumbled joyfully down into a captured ketch, which had been named the “Intrepid,” and, stores aboard, hoisted their three-cornered sail for the harbor of Tripoli. As they hauled off, Decatur went below to see that all his supplies and combustibles were stored, when Midshipman Lawrence came towards him somewhere from the depths of the fore-hold, pushing along by the scruff of the neck a youngster, who was crying bitterly.

“I found this stowaway, sir,” said Lawrence, with a smile.

“Please, sir,” sobbed the boy, “don’t send me back. I want to see this ’ere fight, and I ain’t going to do no harm. Don’t send me back, sir.”

Decatur had looked up with a fierce frown, but the anxiety on the lad’s face was pathetic, and he smiled in spite of himself.

“You can go,” he laughed, “but I’ll put you in the brig – when we get back.”

On that six days’ voyage to Tripoli the wind blew a hurricane, and the masquerade of the American tars seemed likely to end in disaster, without even a fight for their pains. But as they sighted the coast the sea went down, and the arrangements were completed. The yellow sails of the “Siren,” their consort, hove again into sight, and by the afternoon of the 16th of February the two vessels were bearing down upon the dark line that lay shimmering purple under the haze of the southern sky.

The sun dropped down, a ball of fire, into the western sea, and by eight o’clock the towers of the bashaw’s castle loomed dark against the amber of the moonlit sky. To the left the stately spars of the doomed frigate towered above the rigging in the harbor, and floating at her truck was the hated insignia of the enemy.

The piping northern breeze bellied the crazy sail of the ketch and sent the green seas swashing under the high stern, speeding them good luck on their hazardous venture. Catalano, the pilot, stood at the helm, swinging the clumsy tiller to meet her as she swayed. By his side was a tall figure, a white burnoose about his shoulders and a fez set jauntily on his head – Decatur. Four others, in unspeakable Tripolitan costumes, lounged about the deck or squatted cross-legged. But the delusion went no further. For one of them, Reuben James, was puffing at a stubby black pipe, and another spat vigorously to leeward. The others were below, lying along the sides, sharpening their cutlasses.

On they sped, Catalano heading her straight for the frigate. As the harbor narrowed and the black forts came nearer, they could see the dusky outlines of the sentries and the black muzzles that frowned on them from the battlements. Over towards the east faint glimmers showed where the town was, but the wind had now fallen low, and the lapping of the water along the sides alone awoke the

silence. A single light shone from the forecastle of the frigate, where the anchor watch kept its quiet vigil. She swung at a long cable, a proud prisoner amid the score of watchful sentinels that encircled her.

As placid as the scene about him, Decatur turned to the pilot and gave a low order. The helm was shifted and the tiny vessel pointed for the bowsprit of the “Philadelphia.” Nearer and nearer they came, until scarcely a cable’s length separated them. They saw several turbaned heads, and an officer leaned over the rail, puffing lazily at a cigarette. He leisurely took the cigarette from his mouth, and his voice came across the quiet water of the harbor, —

“Where do you come from?” he hailed.

Catalano, the pilot, answered him in the lingua Franca of the East, —

“The ketch ‘Stella,’ from Malta. We lost our anchors and cables in the gale, and would like to lie by during the night.”

The Tripolitan took another puff, and an ominous stir, quickly silenced, was heard down in the hold of the ketch. It seemed an eternity before the answer came, —

“Your request is unusual, but I will grant it,” said the Tripolitan, at last. “What ship is that in the offing?”

The officer had seen the “Siren,” which hovered outside the entrance of the harbor.

“The British ship ‘Transfer,’” said Catalano, promptly.

The ketch was slowly drifting down until a grappling-iron could almost be thrown aboard. Right under the broadside she went, and a line of dark heads peered over the rail at her as she gradually approached the bow.

The chains of the frigate were now almost in the grasp of Reuben James, on the forecastle, when the wind failed and a cat’s-paw caught the ketch aback. Down she drifted towards the terrible broadside. But at a sign from Decatur the eager Lawrence and James got into a small boat and carried a line to a ring-bolt at the frigate’s bow. A boat put out from the “Philadelphia” at the same time. But Lawrence coolly took the hawser from the Tripolitan — “to save the gentleman trouble,” he explained — and brought it aboard the “Intrepid.” A moment more, and the ketch was warping down under the “Philadelphia’s” quarter. It was a moment of dire peril. The slightest suspicion, and they would be blown to pieces.

Decatur leaned lightly against the rail, but his hand grasped his cutlass under his robe so that the blood tingled in his nails and his muscles were drawn and tense. Morris and Joseph Bainbridge stood at the rigging beside him, trembling like greyhounds in leash.

Suddenly they swung around and shot out from under the shadow into a yellow patch of moonlight. The watchful eyes above the rail saw the anchor and cables and the white jackets of the sailors below decks as they strove to hide themselves in the shadows. One glance was enough. In an instant the ship resounded with the thrilling cry, “Americano! Americano!”

At the same moment the “Intrepid” ground up against the side of the frigate. In an instant, as if by magic, she was alive with men. Throwing off his disguise, and with a loud cry of “Boarders, away!” Decatur sprang for the mizzen-chains. And now the hot blood of fighting leaped to their brains. The long agony of suspense was over. Lawrence and Laws sprang for the chain-plates and hauled themselves up. Decatur’s foot slipped, and Morris was the first on deck. Laws dashed at a port, pistols in hand. Nothing could withstand the fury of the charge, and over the rail they swarmed, cutlasses in teeth, jumping over the nettings, and down on the heads of the Tripolitans below. Though Morris was first on deck, Decatur lunged in ahead of him, bringing down the Tripolitan officer before he could draw his sword. One of them aimed a pike at him, but he parried it deftly, and Morris cut the fellow down with a blow that laid his shoulder open from collar to elbow.

Though surprised, the Tripolitans fought fiercely. They had won their title of “the best hand-to-hand fighters in the world” in many a hard pirate battle in the Mediterranean. Around the masts they rallied, scimitars in hand, until they were cut or borne down by the fury of their opponents.

After the first order, not a word was spoken and not a shot was fired. The Americans needed no orders. Over the quarter-deck they swept – irresistible, clearing it in a trice. Overwhelmed by the fierce onslaught, the Tripolitans fled for life, the sailors driving them up on the forecastle and overboard in a mass, where their falling bodies sounded like the splash of a ricochet.

So swift was the work that in ten minutes no Tripolitans were left on the deck of the frigate but the dead. Not a sailor had been killed. One man had been slashed across the forehead, but he grinned through the blood and fought the more fiercely. Then the watchers out on the “Siren” saw a single rocket go high in the air, which was Decatur’s signal that the “Philadelphia” was again an American vessel.

In the meanwhile the combustibles were handed up from the ketch with incredible swiftness, and the work of destruction began. Midshipman Morris and his crew had fought their way below to the cock-pit and had set a fire there. But so swiftly did those above accomplish their work that he and his men barely had time to escape. On reaching the upper deck, Decatur found the flames pouring from the port-holes on both sides and flaring up red and hungry to seize the tar-soaked shrouds. He gave the order to abandon, and over the sides they tumbled as quickly as they had come. Decatur was the last to leave the deck. All the men were over, and the ketch was drifting clear, while around him the flames were pouring, their hot breath overpowering him. But he made a jump for it and landed safely, amid the cheers of his men.

Then the great oars were got out, eight on a side, and pulling them as only American sailormen could or can, they swept out towards the “Siren.”

The Tripolitans ashore and on the gunboats had hastened to their guns, and now, as the ketch was plainly seen, their batteries belched forth a terrific storm of shot that flew across the water. The men bent their backs splendidly to their work, jeering the while at the enemy as the balls whistled by their heads or sent the foam splashing over them. Out they went across the great crimson glare of the fire. It was magnificent. The flames swept up the shrouds with a roar, catching the woodwork of the tops and eating them as though they were tinder. She was ablaze from water to truck, and all the heavens were alight, – aglow at the splendid sacrifice. Then to the added roar of the batteries ashore came the response from the guns of the flaming ship, which, heated by the fierce flames, began to discharge themselves. But not all of them were fired so, for in a second all eyes were dazzled by a blazing light, and they saw the great hull suddenly burst open, with huge streaks of flame spurting from between the parting timbers. Then came a roar that made the earth and sea shudder. The fire had reached the magazine.

The waves of it came out to the gallant crew, who, pausing in their work, gave one last proof of their contempt of danger. Rising to their feet, they gave three great American cheers that echoed back to the forts while their guns thundered fruitlessly on.

Decatur and his men were safe under the “Siren’s” guns.

Is it any wonder that Congress gave Decatur a sword and made him a captain, or that Lord Nelson called this feat “the most daring act of any age”?

THE BIGGEST *LITTLE* FIGHT IN NAVAL HISTORY

It should have been renown enough for one man to have performed what Nelson was pleased to call “the most daring act of any age.” But the capture of the “Philadelphia” only whetted Decatur’s appetite for further encounters. He was impetuous, bold even to rashness, and so dashing that to his men he was irresistible. But behind it all – a thing rare in a man of his peculiar calibre – there was the ability to consider judiciously and to plan carefully as well as daringly to execute. His fierce temper led him into many difficulties, but there was no cruelty behind it; and the men who served with him, while they feared him, would have followed him into the jaws of death, for they loved him as they loved no other officer in the American service. Once while the frigate “Essex,” Captain Bainbridge, lay in the harbor at Barcelona, the officers of the American vessel suffered many petty indignities at the instance of the officers of the Spanish guardship. Having himself been subjected to a slight from the Spanish commander, Lieutenant Decatur took the bull by the horns. He bade his coxswain pull to the gangway of the Spaniard, and he went boldly aboard. His lips were set, for he had resolved upon his own responsibility to make an immediate precedent which would serve for all time. The Spanish commander, most fortunately, was absent. But Decatur none the less strode aft past the sentry to the gangway and, lifting his great voice so that it resounded from truck to keelson, he shouted, —

“Tell your comandante that Lieutenant Stephen Decatur, of the ‘Essex,’ declares him to be a scoundrelly coward, and if Lieutenant Decatur meets him ashore he will cut his ears off.”

So among the men of the squadron Decatur came to be known as a man who brooked nothing and dared everything.

But when the crusty Preble took command in the Mediterranean he was not over-impressed with the under-officers of his command. Not one of the lieutenants was over twenty-four and none of those higher in authority had turned thirty. Decatur and Somers were twenty-five; Charles Stewart was only twenty-six, and Bainbridge the younger; Morris and Macdonough were barely out of their teens.

It was not the custom of the commander-in-chief to mince his words. So sparing himself the delicacy of secluding himself behind the saving bulkheads of the after-cabin he swore right roundly at his home government for sending him what he was pleased to call “a parcel of d – school-boys.” He was a martinet of the old style, and believed in the school of the fo’c’s’le, and not in young gentlemen whose friends at home sent them in by the ports of the after-cabin. He held the youngsters aloof, and not until he had tried them in every conceivable fashion would he consider them in his councils. A year had passed, and Decatur, Morris, Bainbridge, Macdonough, and Somers had helped to add glorious pages to naval history, before the old man, with a smile to Colonel Lear, the consul, consented to say, —

“Well, after all, colonel, they are very good school-boys!”

Although Decatur’s success in the destruction of the “Philadelphia” had removed a dangerous auxiliary battery from the harbor of Tripoli, the bashaw was far from overawed, and, with the officers and crew of the “Philadelphia” as hostages, declined to consider any terms offered by the Americans; and so it was resolved by Commodore Preble to make an attempt upon the Tripolitan batteries and fleet. The Americans had the “Constitution,” – “Old Ironsides,” – Commodore Preble, and six brigs and schooners mounting twelve and sixteen guns each. Preble had also succeeded in borrowing from “the most gracious king of the Sicilies,” who was then at war with the bashaw, two bomb-vessels and six single gunboats, – quite a formidable little force of a hundred and thirty-four guns and about a thousand men.

It was not until the morning of the 3d of August, 1804, that the weather, which had been very stormy, moderated sufficiently to allow the squadron to approach the African coast. The gunboats were unwieldy craft, flat-bottomed, and, as the sea made clean breeches over them, they were a dozen

times in danger of sinking. But by ten o'clock the sky to the southward had lightened, and the heavy storm-clouds were blowing away overhead to the westward. "Old Ironsides" shook the reefs out of her topsails and, spreading her top-gallant-sails, she beat up for the entrance of the harbor of Tripoli with two of the gunboats in tow. Her tall spars, seeming almost to pierce the low-rolling clouds, towered far above the little sticks of the "Siren" and "Nautilus," which bore down directly in her wake. The sea had lashed out its fury, and, before the little fleet had reached the reef, the gray had turned to green, and here and there a line of amber showed where the mid-day sun was stealing through.

Stephen Decatur, on gunboat No. 4, had been given command of the left division of three gunboats. Casting off the tow-lines from his larger consorts, he got under weigh, and bore down for a rift between the reefs at the eastern entrance to the harbor, where the Tripolitan fleet, cleared for action, lay awaiting him. The wind was on his bow, and he was obliged to hold a course close to the wind in order to weather the point.

The gunboat lumbered uncertainly in the cross-sea, for she had no longer the steady drag of the "Constitution's" hawser to steady her. The seas came up under her flat bottom, and seemed to toss rather than swing her into the hollows. She was at best an unsteady gun-platform, and nice sail-trimming was an impossibility. But they got out their sweeps, and that steadied her somewhat. Great volumes of spray flew over the weather-bow as she soused her blunt nose into it, and the fair breeze sent it shimmering down to leeward.

Decatur stood aft by the helmsman, watching the quivering leeches, and keeping her well up into the wind. Beside him stood his midshipmen, Thomas Macdonough – afterwards to win a great victory of his own – and Joseph Thorn. Both of them had smelt powder before, and Macdonough had been one of the first on the deck of the ill-fated "Philadelphia." This was to be a different sort of a fight from any they had seen. It was to be man to man, where good play of cutlass and pike and youth and American grit might mean victory. Defeat meant annihilation. But youth is good at a game of life and death, and as they looked at Decatur there was never a moment's fear of the result. They leaned against the rail to leeward, looking past the foam boiling on the point to the spars of the African gunboats, and their eyes were alight with eagerness for battle.

The men were bending steadily to their sweeps. Most of them were stripped to the waist, and Decatur looked along the line of sinewy arms and chests with a glow of pride and confidence. There was no wavering anywhere in the row of glistening faces. But they all knew the kind of pirates they were going to meet, – reckless, treacherous devils, who loved blood as they loved Allah, – the best hand-to-hand fighters in the Mediterranean.

The ring of the cutlasses, loose-settled in their hangers, against the butts of the boarding-pistols was clear above the sound of the row-locks and the rush of the waters, while forward the catch of a song went up, and they bent to their work the more merrily.

As they came under the lee of the Tripolitan shore and the sea went down, Decatur ordered the long iron six-pounder cast loose. They had provided solid shot for long range at the batteries, and these were now brought up and put conveniently on the fo'c's'le. But for the attack upon the vessels of the fleet they loaded first with a bag of a thousand musket-balls. At point-blank range Decatur judged that this would do tremendous execution among the close-ranked mass of Tripolitans on the foreign vessels. His idea was not to respond to the fire of the enemy, which would soon begin, until close aboard, and then to go over the rail before they could recover from their confusion. He felt that if they did not make a wreck of him and batter up his sweeps he could get alongside. And once alongside, he knew that his men would give a good account of themselves.

But as they came up towards the point the wind shifted, and the head of the gunboat payed off. Even with their work at the sweeps, he now knew that it would be no easy matter for all the Americans to weather the point, for two of them were well down to leeward. But his brother, James Decatur, in gunboat No. 2, and Sailing-Master John Trippe, in gunboat No. 6, had kept well up to windward, and so he felt that he should be able to count on at least these two. As they reached the

line of breakers, one of the gunboats to leeward, under Richard Somers, was obliged to go about, and in a moment the two others followed. Then the young commanders of the windward gunboats knew that if the attack was to be made they alone would have the glory of the first onslaught.

What Decatur feared most was that Preble, on the "Constitution," would see how terribly they were overmatched and signal the recall. But as they reached the point, Decatur resolutely turned his back to the flagship, and, putting his helm up, set her nose boldly into the swash of the entrance and headed for the gray line of vessels, three times his number, which hauled up their anchors and came down, gallantly enough, to meet him.

There was very little sound upon the gunboat now. The wind being favorable, the Americans shipped their sweeps, and sat watching the largest of the Tripolitan vessels, which was bearing down upon them rapidly. They saw a puff of white smoke from her fo'c's'le, and heard the whistle of a shot, which, passing wide, ricocheted just abeam and buried itself beyond. Thorn stood forward, waiting for the order to fire his long gun. But Decatur gave no sign. He stood watching the lift of the foresail, carefully noting the distance between the two vessels. Trippe and James Decatur had each picked out an adversary, and were bearing down as silently as he, in spite of the cannonade which now came from both the vessels and batteries of the Turks. The shots were splashing all around him, but nothing had been carried away, and the American jacksies jeered cheerfully at the wretched marksmanship. As the Tripolitans came nearer, the Americans could see the black mass of men along the rails and catch the glimmer of the yataghans. Then Decatur ordered his own men to seize their pikes and draw their pistols and cutlasses.

At the word from Decatur, Thorn began training the fo'c's'le gun, which in the steadier sea would have a deadly effect. The distance was a matter of yards now, and a shot came ploughing alongside that threw spray all along the rail and nearly doused the match of the gunner of the fo'c's'le. But not until he could see the whites of the eyes of his adversaries did Decatur give the order to fire. As the big gun was discharged point-blank into the thick of the crowded figures, Decatur shifted his helm quickly and lay aboard the Tripolitan. So tremendous had been the execution of the musketballs, and so quickly had the manœuvre been executed, that almost before the Tripolitans were aware of it the Americans were upon them. The few shots from the Turkish small arms had gone wild, but a fierce struggle ensued before the Americans reached the deck. At last Decatur, followed by Thorn, Macdonough, and twenty-two seamen, gained the fo'c's'le in a body, and the Tripolitans retreated aft.

The Tripolitan boat was divided amidships by an open hatchway, and for a moment the opposing forces stopped to catch their breath, glaring at one another across the opening. Decatur did not pause long. Giving them a volley of pistol-bullets at close range, he dashed furiously down one gangway, while Macdonough and Thorn went down the other, and, with a cheer, cut down the remaining Turks or drove them overboard. A half-dozen went down a forward hatch, and these were made prisoners.

It was a short fight, with an inconsiderable loss to Decatur, but the Tripolitan dead were strewn all over the decks, and the Turkish captain was pierced by fourteen bullets. The Tripolitan flag was hauled down, and, taking his prize in tow, Decatur put his men at the sweeps again, to move farther out of the reach of the batteries.

By this time James Decatur and John Trippe had got into the thick of it. Following Stephen Decatur's example, they dashed boldly at the larger of the bashaw's vessels, and, reserving their fire for close range, they lay two of them aboard. John Trippe, Midshipman Henley, and nine seamen had gained the deck of their adversary, when the vessels drifted apart, and they were left alone on the deck of the enemy. But Trippe was the man for the emergency. So rapidly did they charge the Turks that their very audacity gave them the advantage, and Trippe finally succeeded in killing the Tripolitan commander by running him through with a boarding-pike. They fought with the energy of despair, and, although wounded and bleeding from a dozen sabre-cuts, struggled on until their gunboat got alongside and they were rescued by their comrades.

But the story of the treachery of the Turkish captain and Stephen Decatur's revenge for the death of his brother makes even the wonderful defensive battle of Trippe seem small by comparison.

James Decatur, having got well up with one of the largest of the Tripolitan vessels, delivered so quick and telling a fire with his long gun and musketry that the enemy immediately struck his colors. He hauled alongside and clambered up and over the side of the gunboat to take possession of her personally. As his head came up above the rail his men saw the Turkish commander rush forward and aim his boarding-pistol at the defenceless American. The bullet struck him fairly in the forehead, and Decatur, with barely a sound, sank back into his boat.

In their horror at the treachery of the Tripolitan, the Americans allowed the boat to sheer off, and the Turk, getting out his sweeps, was soon speeding away toward the protection of the batteries.

Stephen Decatur, towing his prize to safety, had noted the gallant attack, and had seen the striking of the Turkish colors. But not until an American boat darted alongside of him did he hear the news of the treacherous manner of his brother's death. The shock of the information for the moment appalled him, but in the place of his grief there arose so fierce a rage at the dastardly act that for a moment he was stricken dumb and senseless. His men sprang quickly when at last he thundered out his orders. Deftly casting off the tow-line of the prize, they hoisted all sail and jumped to their sweeps as though their lives depended on it. Macdonough's gun-crew were loading with solid shot this time, and, as soon as they got the range, a ball went screaming down towards the fleeing Tripolitan. The men at the sweeps needed little encouragement. They had heard the news, and they loved James Decatur as they worshipped his brother, who stood aft, his lips compressed, anxiously watching the chase. The water boiled under the oar-blades as the clumsy hulk seemed to spring from one wave-crest to another. Again the long gun spoke, and the canister struck the water all about the Turkish vessel. The Tripolitans seemed disorganized, for their oars no longer moved together and the blades were splashing wildly. Another solid shot went flying, and Decatur smiled as he saw the spray fly up under the enemy's counter. There would be no mercy for the Tripolitans that day. Nearer and nearer they came, until the Turks, seeing that further attempts at flight were useless, dropped their sweeps and prepared to receive the Americans. They shifted their helm so that their gun could bear, and the shot that followed tore a great rent in Decatur's foresail. But the Americans heeded it little more than if it had been a puff of wind, and pausing only to deliver another deadly discharge of the musket-balls at point-blank range, Decatur swung in alongside under cover of the smoke.

As the vessels grated together, Decatur jumped for the Tripolitan rigging, and, followed by his men, quickly gained the deck. Two Turks rushed at Decatur, aiming vicious blows with their scimitars; but he parried them skilfully with his pike, looking around him fiercely the while for the captain. As he thought of his brother dying, or dead, he swore that no American should engage the Turkish commander but himself. He had not long to wait. They espied each other at about the same moment, and brushing the intervening weapons aside, dashed upon each other furiously.

Decatur was tall, and as active as a cat. His muscles were like steel, and his rage seemed to give him the strength of a dozen. But the Mussulman was a giant, the biggest man in the Tripolitan fleet, and a very demon in power and viciousness. So strong was he, that as Decatur lunged at him with his boarding-pike he succeeded in wrenching it from the hand of the American, and so wonderfully quick that Decatur had hardly time to raise his cutlass to parry the return. He barely caught it; but in doing so his weapon broke off short at the hilt. The next lunge he partially warded by stepping to one side; but the pike of the Mussulman in passing cut an ugly wound in his arm and chest. Entirely defenceless, he now knew that his only chance was at close quarters, so he sprang in below the guard of the Turk and seized him around the waist, hoping to trip and stun him. But the Tripolitan tore the arms away as though he had been a stripling, and, seizing him by the throat, bore him by sheer weight to the deck, trying the while to draw a yataghan. The American crew, seeing things going badly with their young captain, fought in furiously, and in a moment the mass of Americans and Tripolitans were fighting in one desperate, struggling, smothering heap, above the prostrate bodies of their captains,

neither of whom could succeed in drawing a weapon. The Turk was the first to get his dagger loose, but the American's death-like grasp held his wrist like a vise, and kept him from striking the blow. Decatur saw another Turk just beside him raise his yataghan high above his head, and he felt that he was lost. But at this moment a sailor, named Reuben James, who loved Decatur as though he were a brother, closed in quickly and caught on his own head the blow intended for Decatur. Both his arms had been disabled, but he asked nothing better than to lay down his life for his captain.

In the meanwhile, without relinquishing his grip upon the Turk, Decatur succeeded in drawing a pistol from the breast of his shirt, and, pressing the muzzle near the heart of the Tripolitan, fired. As the muscles of his adversary relaxed, the American managed to get upon one knee, and so to his feet, stunned and bleeding, but still unsubdued. The Tripolitans, disheartened by the loss of their leader, broke ground before the force of the next attack and fled overboard or were cut down where they stood.

The death of James Decatur was avenged.

The other Tripolitan gunboats had scurried back to safety, so Decatur, with his two prizes, made his way out towards the flagship unmolested. His victory had cost him dearly. There was not a man who had not two or three wounds from the scimitars, and some of them had cuts all over the body. The decks were like a slaughter-pen and the scuppers were running blood. But the bodies of the Tripolitans were ruthlessly cast overboard to the sharks; and by the time the Americans had reached the "Constitution" the decks had been scrubbed down and the wounded bandaged and roughly cared for by those of their comrades who had fared less badly.

Decatur, by virtue of his exploit in destroying the "Philadelphia," already a post-captain at the age of twenty-five, could expect no further immediate honors at the hands of the government; but then, as ever afterwards, he craved nothing but a staunch ship and a gallant crew. The service he could do his country was its own reward.

A DOUBLE ENCOUNTER

The old “Constitution” was out on the broad ocean again! And when the news went forth that she had succeeded for the seventh time in running the blockade of the British squadrons, deep was the chagrin of the Admiralty. This Yankee frigate, still stanch and undefeated, had again and again proved herself superior to everything afloat that was British; had shown her heels, under Hull’s masterly seamanship, to a whole squadron during a chase that lasted three days; and had under Hull, and then under Bainbridge, whipped both the “Guerriere” and the “Java,” two of their tidiest frigates, in an incredibly short time, with a trifling loss both in men and rigging. She was invincible; and the title which she had gained before Tripoli, under Commodore Preble, when the Mussulman shot had hailed against her oaken timbers and dropped harmlessly into the sea alongside, seemed more than ever to befit her. “Old Ironsides” was abroad again, overhauled from royal to locker, with a crew of picked seamen and a captain who had the confidence of the navy and the nation.

Her hull had been made new, her canvas had come direct from the sail-lofts at Boston, and her spars were the stanchest that the American forests could afford. She carried thirty-one long 24-pounders and twenty short 32-pounders, – fifty-one guns in all, throwing six hundred and forty-four pounds of actual weight of metal to a broadside. Her officers knew her sailing qualities, and she was ballasted to a nicety, bowling along in a top-gallant-stu’n-sail breeze at twelve knots an hour.

The long list of her victories over their old-time foe had given her men a confidence in the ship and themselves that attained almost the measure of a faith; and, had the occasion presented itself, they would have been as willing to match broadsides with a British seventy-four as with a frigate of equal metal with themselves. They were a fine, hearty lot, these jack-tars; and, as “Old Ironsides” left the green seas behind and ploughed her bluff nose boldly through the darker surges of the broad Atlantic, they vowed that the frigate’s last action would not be her least. The “Constitution” would not be dreaded by the British in vain.

For dreaded she was among the officers of the British North Atlantic squadron. As soon as it was discovered by the British Admiralty that she had passed the blockade, instructions were at once given out and passed from ship to ship to the end that every vessel of whatever class which spoke another on the high seas should report whether or not she had seen a vessel which looked like the “Constitution.” By means of this ocean telegraphy they hoped to discover the course and intention of the great American, and finally to succeed in bringing her into action with a British fleet. By this time they had learned their lesson. Single frigates were given orders to avoid an encounter, while other frigates were directed to hunt for her in pairs!

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.