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NAVAL MUSEUM

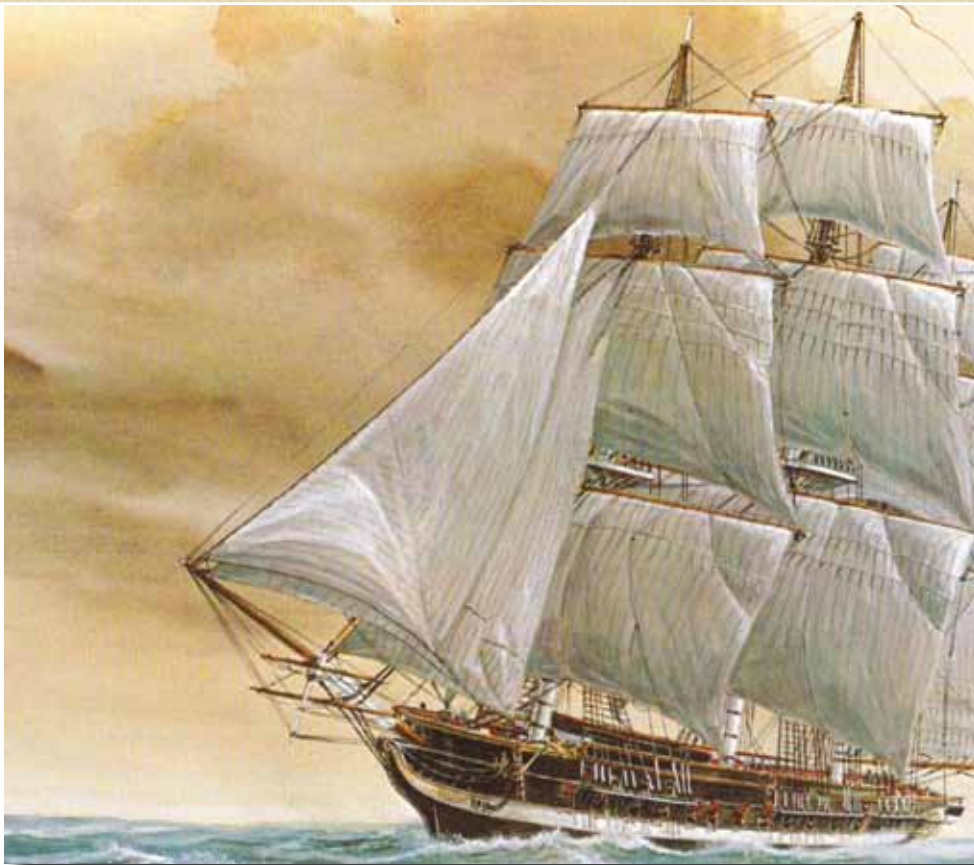
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“Kill the Men and the Ship is Yours”

Hampton Roads’ USS *Chesapeake* is Captured

By Joseph Mosier

By the end of May 1813, the U.S. Navy was riding high. Successes in three straight frigate battles (*Constitution – Guerriere*, *United States – Macedonian*, and *Constitution – Java*) had provided practically the only bright spots amid a drumbeat of bad news on the

administration. The *Niles’ Weekly Register* of February 27, 1813 remarked on the capture of HMS *Java*: “Com. Bainbridge, on landing at Boston, was received with a salute of cannon, and the loud of acclamations of thousands. . . Party feeling was prostrated in national glory. Let us keep that daemon down.” Those opposed to the war could praise the success at sea even while taking a swing at those politicians they felt responsible for an unnecessary conflict. The anti-administration *Norfolk Gazette* and *Publick Ledger* editorialized on March 1, 1813: “The Navy has fought itself into favour. It is the little remnant of federal policy which has escaped from the destruction which has followed democrattick misrule. If the federalists had remained in power we should have had a fleet of seventy-fours and stout frigates, in the place of miserable gunboats...

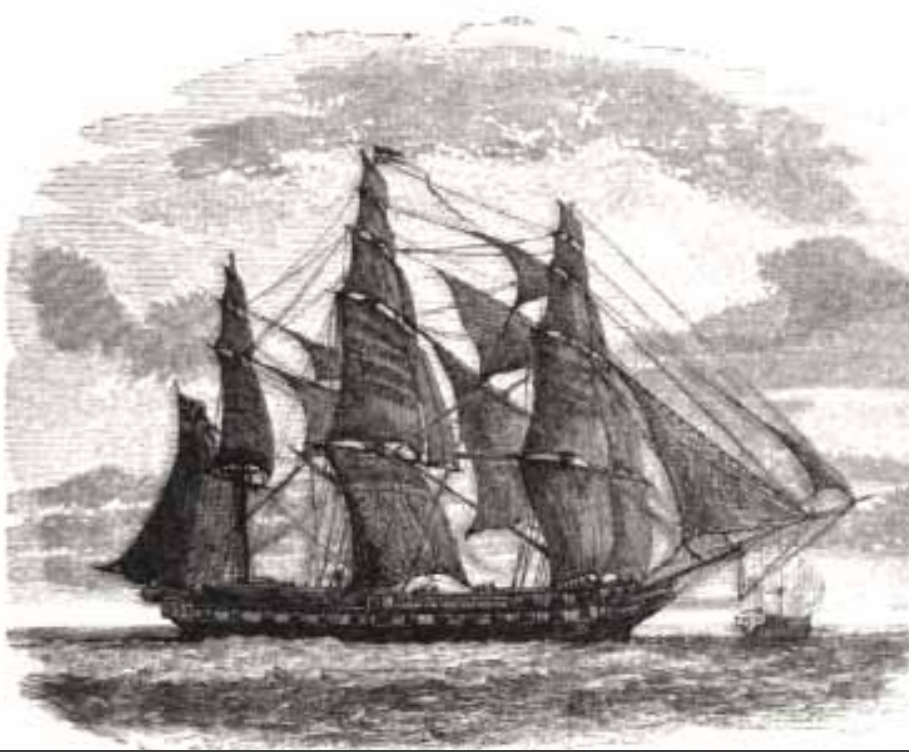
Captain James Lawrence (above) relieved Samuel Evans as commanding officer of the frigate USS *Chesapeake* (above left) in Boston in May 1813. With several combat victories to his credit during his stellar career, he took the frigate into combat just one month later. (HRNM and NHHC images)

Three large frigates would now be of more service than the entire fleet of gunboats, without costing the nation one eighth part of money.”

The British, of course, took a different view of the frigate battles. They objected strongly to American triumphalism. There had been no “fair fights”. Much was made of the size disparity between the two vessels. The charge that the Americans were somehow cheating due to their superiority in firepower appeared repeatedly in England’s newspapers. The *Naval Chronicle* cautioned: “. . . [C]onsidering that these immense frigates are equal in weight of metal and compliment of men to our two-decked fifties, being actually laid down on the keels of seventy-fours, the



Canadian front. The war was unpopular in many parts of the country. Victory brought political support to the Madison



Chesapeake's opponent was the 38-gun frigate HMS Shannon. Commissioned in 1806, the warship was the third ship in the successful Leda-class of frigates. Her first commanding officer was the talented Captain Philip Vere Broke, who remained at this post until after the battle with Chesapeake in 1813. Assigned to the North American Station in 1811, Broke and his well-trained ship aggressively sought out a fight with an American frigate. (Both images from Sir Admiral Vere Broke, Bart.: A Memoir)

public must make up its mind to hear before long of some further misfortunes, similar to that of the *Guerriere*, without feeling any tarnish has been left upon the National trident." When these "misfortunes" did come, the British public did not receive them dispassionately. The *Times of London* on December 29, 1812 decried the loss of *Macedonian* - "Oh! What a charm is thereby dissolved! What hopes will be excited in the breasts of our enemies! The land spell of the French is broken and so is our sea spell. We have sunk our own maritime character; for, with a navy that could admit of no competition, we have suffered ourselves to be beaten in detail, by a power that we should not have allowed to send a vessel to sea."

As one American victory followed another, Royal Navy officers longed for the opportunity to reset the balance in the proper direction. Thirty-six-year-old Captain Philip Bowes Vere Broke was a veteran of twenty years' service. A post captain since the age of twenty-five, he had commanded HMS *Shannon* from the time she came into service in 1806. He and his ship had been on the North American Station for the entirety of the war. Broke understood the necessity for the tedious blockade work he was ordered to do. As

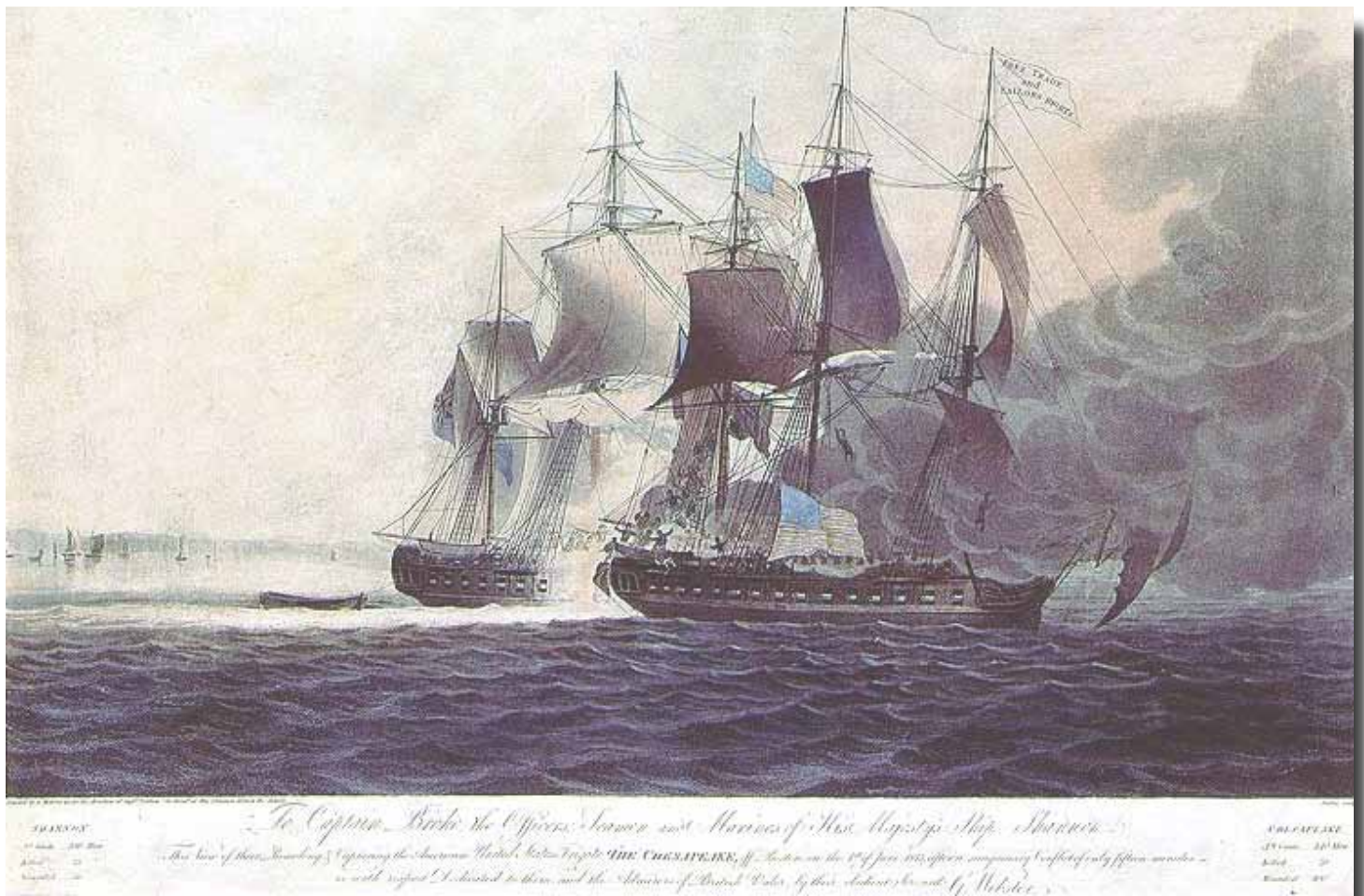
he wrote his wife, "If our adversaries will not come out and dispute the ground fairly with us, we shall punish him by harassing the trade . . . they will soon learn who commands the ocean - it will be pious work to chastise them." Still, he was tired after months at sea. Broke wished for nothing more than to return to his beloved family. Victory over an American frigate would give him the opportunity to do so with caché.

Broke's chance came in late May 1813. Bad weather forced the small blockading squadron he commanded away from Boston harbor. American frigates *President* and *Congress* used this break to sail from the Massachusetts port. Broke wrote to his wife that he was "much mortified at *President* escaping us after watching so long and anxiously for him; God send us better fortune to finish my campaign creditably." On May 28, Broke was heartened that "[*President's*] den still contains another large wild beast." His hopes were high for "an honorable recontre".

The "large beast" was the U.S. frigate *Chesapeake*. Built at Norfolk in 1798-1799, she was the last of the original six frigates constructed under the 1794 program. At an equal thirty-eight guns and of approximately the same size, *Chesapeake*

and *Shannon* were evenly matched. The American ship had arrived at Boston in early April following a moderately successful cruise against British shipping off South America. Her captain, Samuel Evans, begged off from further service due to illness. James Lawrence had recently been promoted to captain in consequence of his defeat of HMS *Peacock* while he commanded USS *Hornet*. Secretary of the Navy William Jones ordered Lawrence to replace Evans and to sail with all dispatch to cruise north to the mouth of the St. Lawrence. The plan was to interrupt the flow of naval stores between Canada and England before moving on to attack the British whaling fleet off Greenland. To counter the American plan, the Royal Navy would have to draw off some of its blockading forces. Lawrence assumed command on May 20. Along with the new captain came four replacement officers and about a quarter of *Chesapeake's* compliment of men. Lawrence ran his crew through gun and boarding drills although the effort lacked realism since the ship was still tied up to Boston's Long Wharf. Finally, on May 30, *Chesapeake* slid down to President Roads to complete final preparations for going to sea.

When Broke saw the American frigate's



"To Captain Broke, the Officers, Seaman of the Shannon—This view of their boarding & capturing of the American frigate Chesapeake of Boston, the 1st of June, 1813, after a sanguinary conflict of 15 minutes, is with great respect, dedicated to them and admirers of British Valor. (Signed) G. Webster." This is a British print of the Chesapeake-Shannon engagement at the climax of the battle. George Webster was a London-based artist who worked with Sir Captain Charles L. Falkner, Shannon's fourth officer, to compose the print. While it is a British image, this artwork is among the more accurate and graphic depictions of the battle. (HRNM image)

upper yards being raised, he understood the vessel was ready to sail. The British captain released a captured local fisherman with instructions to deliver a letter to Lawrence. The letter contained a challenge to meet "to try the fortunes of our respective flags." Such challenges were fairly common in the era. Broke had issued one earlier to Commodore Rodgers in *President* which the American ignored. While in *Hornet*, Lawrence had sent such a note to the captain of the British sloop-of-war *Bonne Citoyenne*, which the Englishman had refused. In this case, the letter from Broke never reached his opponent. Its sole value lay in offering British propagandists an after-the-fact example of the chivalry of the Royal Navy's officers.

About 1 p.m. on the afternoon of June 1, *Chesapeake* sailed past Boston Light. *Shannon* sailed off to the northeast toward Cape Ann. Broke wanted to avoid the possibility that American gunboats might join in the fight. Finally, about 4:30, both

ships slowed their progress and shifted to fighting sail with only topsails, jibs, and spankers filled. Both captains gave a last minute pep talk to their crews. Lawrence said his plan was to "Peacock them". This reference to his previous victory showed he intended to dismast the British frigate before sweeping the immobile ship with killing broadsides. To this end, the guns were double-loaded with a variety of bar and star shot on top of the usual round shot.

Broke was in a more murderous mode. He urged his crew, "Don't try to dismast her. Fire into her quarters, maindeck to maindeck; quarterdeck to quarterdeck. Kill the men and the ship is yours!" *Shannon's* crew was well-prepared to carry out this scheme. Unlike most Royal Navy captains, Broke emphasized gunnery throughout his time in command. His gunners were skilled at aimed fire. Additionally, he had mounted two nine-pounders on pivots high on the quarterdeck and forecastle. These he ordered to concentrate on the American

quarterdeck.

Chesapeake slowly overtook her British opponent with about one knot of speed advantage. At about 5:45 p.m., when the two vessels closed to within fifty yards, Lawrence gave orders to luff up and fall alongside. As the helmsman completed this maneuver, the American frigate heeled to port with her guns pointing at a slight downward angle. As a result, her first broadside, which was intended to injure *Shannon's* masts, landed just above the waterline. Subsequent inspection of the British ship showed most of the star and bar shot had hit below the gun ports causing almost no damage. Broke's crew did not fire a broadside. Instead each gun fired as it bore, spar deck against spar deck and gun deck against gun deck, the aftermost British gun crew engaged the second American gun forward and so on as *Chesapeake* drifted past. *Shannon's* marines and sailors began shooting from aloft with a combination of muskets, swivel guns and



Shown here is a typical romanticized view of Captain Lawrence's death and Chesapeake's last stand. Several American artists show Lawrence dying in the arms of his officers and sailors, usually with one arm raised as if to give the "Don't Give Up the Ship!" order one last time. (NHHC image)

grenades. This first fire killed or wounded approximately 100 of the 150 Americans on the spar deck. The command group on *Chesapeake's* quarterdeck was wiped out in an instant. Sailing Master William White had his head taken off by round shot. Marine Lieutenant James Broom, two midshipmen, and the helmsman were killed at their stations around the ship's wheel. A second helmsman immediately took the helm and was just as quickly killed. Captain Lawrence took a musket ball in the right leg. As he leaned against the compass binnacle, a round shot from the British nine-pounder pivot gun smashed the wheel, killing a third helmsman.

Shannon's opening salvo also cut away the lines that controlled the American frigate's jib. With no helm to answer and loose headsails, *Chesapeake* came further up into the wind and began to drift astern. As she did so, the British fore-castle guns added to the carnage that surrounded the wounded Lawrence on the exposed stern. Few American gunners remained to man the quarterdeck guns that could be brought to bear. Lawrence ordered boarders to be mustered to fight off the impending British rush to come aboard. The ship's bugler, however, was hiding under a boat and

the word had to be passed by voice midst the roar of cannon fire. First Lieutenant Augustus C. Ludlow, badly wounded by a splinter, passed the word for boarders down through the steerage scuttle, before being taken below for treatment.

The response was tardy and confused. Most of the men on *Chesapeake's* spar deck were dead or wounded. The Third Division, the aftermost on the gun deck, was still engaged at their cannon. The guns of First (forward) and Second (amidships) Divisions could no longer bear on the enemy making their crews available. Second Division's commander, Acting Lieutenant William S. Cox, urged his men up through the main hatch. It was a classic case of from the frying pan into the fire.

Cox and his men struggled to gain the upper deck against a flow of men headed below. Propped up against the binnacle, Lawrence stood out in his uniform. A British marine officer took careful aim from atop one of *Shannon's* carronades and hit him again; this time a mortal wound to the groin. Cox saw his captain fall. He ordered his men to "rush on" to counter any attempt to board and then turned to help Lawrence below. Sensing how badly the fight was going, Lawrence uttered his iconic "Don't give up the ship!"

Captain Broke hurried forward to command *Shannon's* fore-castle guns. As the two ships came together, he ordered British boarders to attack over *Chesapeake's* transom. Just before they charged across, a grenade landed in an open box of ready ammunition on the American poop deck resulting in a fire between the fore and mizzen masts that enveloped both ships in smoke for several minutes. The English boatswain attempted to pass a line over the American frigate's taffrail only to have his arm chopped off by a sailor swinging his cutlass up from the quarter gallery. Broke stepped onto the muzzle of a quarterdeck cannon and became the first Briton to board. *Chesapeake's* chaplain, Samuel Livermore fired his pistol directly at Broke's face, only to have the



In 1840, American artist Alfred Jacob Miller went well beyond romanticizing Lawrence's death when he produced this apotheosis interpretation of the captain's final moments. More well known for his depictions of the American West, this was one of Miller's early works. (Waltham Art Gallery image)



British illustrator George Cruikshank had his own views about American bravery during the Chesapeake-Shannon duel. Cruikshank was internationally known for his caricatures and political cartoons and this work mocking the U.S. Navy was one of his early works. He would later become friends with author Charles Dickens and illustrate many of Dickens' novels, including *Oliver Twist*. (Library of Congress image)

gun misfire. As many Americans would discover, the pistols provided had faulty flints and incorrectly-sized bullets. Broken parried with a slash that nearly severed the chaplain's arm. At the start of the conflict, forty-four marines had been stationed on *Chesapeake's* quarterdeck and poop. Well-aimed British gunnery reduced that number

to less than a dozen. With their officer and senior enlisted dead, the remaining marines put up the best defense they could, but were soon overwhelmed. The British quickly lashed a grating over the after hatch leaving only one access for Americans below to get up to the spar deck.

A messenger finally reached Second

Lieutenant George Budd in command of First Division with the order for "borders away". Budd climbed up to the spar deck as the British swarmed over the poop deck. He ordered men to get control of the headsails in the hope that they would provide enough forward momentum to separate the two frigates. First Lieutenant Ludlow, freshly patched up from his prior wound, joined Budd on the upper deck. Together they attempted to rally the men and repel the British before they could advance beyond the quarterdeck. At this point they were outnumbered by about sixty to twenty. Both were wounded in the melee; Budd with a sword cut across his arms and Ludlow by cutlass blow that left "his head almost cloven in twain."

Lieutenant Cox handed down Lawrence to others to be carried to the cockpit for treatment. He then joined Fourth Division, the only *Chesapeake* guns still engaged. He helped aim and fire Number 13 gun for what would prove to be the last cannon fire from the American frigate. Cox subsequently moved to the forward hatch gathering men as he went. At the hatch, however, he was met by a stream of men fleeing the battle on the upper deck. The young acting lieutenant tried to shame them with curse words but to no effect. Midshipman Higginbotham asked if he should assault their own fleeing men in hopes of turning the tide. Cox responded, "No, Sir; it is of no use."

Some Americans continued to resist. Marines and sailors in the tops fired with



Another British view of the battle correctly shows Captain Broke wearing a top hat made of stiffened leather. Its purpose was as a helmet rather than a fashion statement. Titled "Treacherous Attack Upon Broke," George III's Prince Regent knighted Broke and he was awarded a baronetcy for his actions. He retired from the Royal Navy in 1814 to live the life of a quiet sheep farmer. This helped little as he suffered further injury when he fell from a horse. Though he lived until 1841 as a national war hero, he constantly suffered from seizures, speech and memory problems, constantly feeling cold on his left side, and irregular heart beats. (NHHC image)



Crowds of people lined the shores of Halifax, Nova Scotia as Chesapeake was brought in under the British flag. The Royal Navy imprisoned all of the surviving Chesapeake officers and sailors in Halifax. (NHHC image)

great effect on the British below. Broke called to his own topmen to turn their guns against them. Some British sailors leapt across from *Shannon's* yards to those of the *Chesapeake* and finally ended that threat. Three Americans attacked Broke with a pike, a cutlass, and an empty musket. The British captain was wearing a top hat made of stiffened leather to protect against falling rigging and overhead blows. A swing of the musket knocked off this hat and Broke's head received a vicious cut from the cutlass. It peeled back the skin and exposed his brain for two or three inches.

below to the cockpit for medical attention. Captain Lawrence asked him, "What brings you here?" "They have taken her" was Ludlow's response. Lawrence turned to the surgeon and told him to tell the surviving officers to "fight her till she sinks". If all else failed, the crew was to blow the frigate up. "Let the colors wave while I live." No one else seems to have shared Lawrence's suicidal wishes. By 6:00 p.m., the action was over and the British victory complete.

The battle proved to be one of the costliest frigate engagements ever fought. In less than fifteen minutes, out of combined ships




The Royal Navy decommissioned Shannon for good in the 1830s. She served out her life as a barracks ship for dockyard workers in Sheerness, England. (Sheerness Historical Society image)

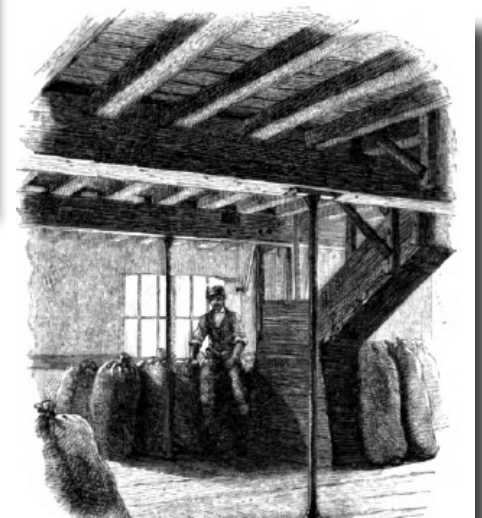
A group of his boarders saved their captain by killing his assailants. The attack on Broke incensed the now victorious British, who killed some of the injured American and threw others overboard. Americans Midshipman William Berry watched from the mizzen top as a *Chesapeake* sailor with his legs shot off clawed his way toward one of the hatches. A British boarder stood over the wounded man for a moment before killing him with his cutlass.

Lieutenant Ludlow was again carried

companies numbering 680, over 230 men were killed or seriously wounded (many to die later). *Shannon* lost twenty-six killed and fifty-eight wounded; *Chesapeake* had forty-eight killed and ninety-nine wounded. This means that at least fifteen men fell during every minute of the fight. A prize crew under the British fourth lieutenant Charles Falkner took over *Chesapeake*. The victors went about the grizzly task of throwing bodies overboard and clearing the carnage of battle. Two lots of prisoners

were transferred from the American frigate to *Shannon*. The rest of the Yankee crew was shackled below on the berth deck. Broke's First Lieutenant, George Watt, had been killed by a salvo from his own ship while trying to raise a British ensign on *Chesapeake*. Thus, 22-year old Lieutenant Provo Wallis, Broke's third in command, assumed charge of both stricken vessels. After hasty repairs, the frigates got underway for Halifax at about 9:00 p.m.

Captain James Lawrence lay dying in the wardroom of the *Chesapeake*. Both the American and British surgeons examined him and found the case hopeless. Their skill was sufficient to stop the bleeding but they could do nothing about the onset of peritonitis. Lawrence grew increasingly delirious. Periodically he shouted, "Don't give up the ship!" He lived for five more days, death coming just before the frigates entered Halifax harbor on Sunday, June 6. Captain Philip Broke rested in his own cabin, weak and capable only of monosyllabic replies to questions asked of him. His surgeon thought him a dead man. But the same strength of will that served him so well in battle brought Broke through the crisis. Convalescing in Halifax, he wrote to his wife telling of the victory and sharing his hopes of a quiet life in the retirement his wounds would force upon him: "I will be modest when I get to Suffolk and turn Farmer, renounce vanity with my laced coat." 



As for *Chesapeake*, the Royal Navy broke her up in 1819 and sold the wood off. The lumber went to build the "Chesapeake Mill" in Wickham, Hampshire, England. (Image from Sir Admiral Vere Broke, Bart.: A Memoir)

Don't Give Up the Expression

“Finality commands attention; last words, unlike all others, can not be taken back,” remarked cultural historian Karl S. Guthke in his work *Last Words: Variations on a Theme in Cultural History*. As you have read, James Lawrence produced some of the greatest final words in history: “Don't Give Up the Ship!” Of course, *Chesapeake's* company did give up the ship. But even in defeat, the expression is as famous as “Remember the



The Museum Sage

Alamo,” “Remember Pearl Harbor,” and the 9/11 expression “Let's Roll”.

Like most famous expressions, there is much more to tell. The story goes that



Lawrence did not hear much fighting on the top deck and felt the need to encourage his men. Historians believe that the only person at his side was John Dix.

What Lawrence said, like many expressions, has been changed, modified, shortened, and/or tailored to a writer's needs and memory. The accepted full order from Lawrence was, “Tell the men to fire faster, don't give up the ship.” “The Colors shall wave while I live,” he added just before Dix went topside. Lawrence also gave the order to scuttle the ship.

But did he actually say it? Historians have discovered that many famous expressions have no foundation in fact. One only needs to remember Julius Caesar's famous last words “*Et tu Brute?*” We don't know if the Roman general/emperor said that when the Roman senators assassinated him. The only time it appears is in William Shakespeare's fictional portrayal of the assassination in his play, *Julius Caesar*.

In Lawrence's case, The Sage, for once, will not take the cynic's route and is confident the captain did utter the words. American newspapers reprinted an unsigned June 19, 1813 letter, just a few days after the battle. The writer claimed to have been recently released from a British prison in Halifax and described Lawrence's wounds in graphic detail. He did not seem to be a member of *Chesapeake's* company as the frigate's sailors were not released for another ten months, but still had some conversation with the company.

Regardless, the words caught fire with the American public. The phrase spread across the country and every newspaper printed some account of it. A thousand miles away on Lake Erie, Lawrence's friend and brother officer Oliver Hazard Perry had a flag made with the expression written on it and carried it into battle. When he transferred the flag in the middle of the Battle of Lake Erie, Perry propelled the phrase into immortality.

Over time, “Don't Give Up the Ship” has made its way into popular culture, with the word “ship” now being used in a more generic fashion, while the actual *Chesapeake* has faded from view. The refrain has often been a battle cry for political and social justice causes.

One of the earliest attempts to use the phrase for something other than a military action comes from Samuel Dexter. In 1815, he hijacked the expression as a campaign slogan while running for governor in Massachusetts. It is not exactly clear what the Dexter's ship is supposed to symbolize, and more than likely he used the expression to grab voters' attention. In Rhode Island, a newspaper stated “Mariners, ‘Don't Give



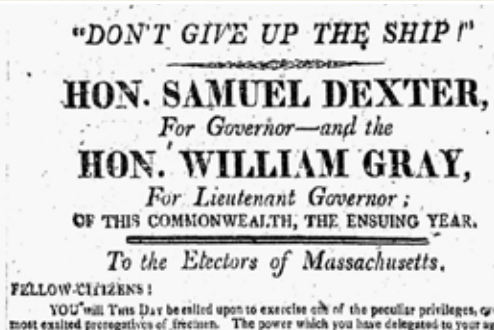
Up the Ship!,' but vote for WASHINGTON PROX! ‘Don't Give Up the Soil!’ Say the Patriotic Farmers!” Political use of the phrase continued well into the 1850s. A pro-Whig Party newspaper wrote, “Don't give up the ship, the results of the late election furnish no grounds for despair.” It did not help, as the Whig Party dispersed just a few years later.

With the outbreak of the American Civil War in 1861, Unionists used the phrase many times over as a battle cry to preserve the Union. The abolitionist newspaper *Christian Recorder* wrote, “DON'T GIVE UP THE SHIP- The government of our country, as our Father left it, is the best under which man has ever lived.”



Five years later, with the Union cause victorious and emancipation secured, the same newspaper was apparently losing readership and used the expression for more self-serving purposes. The editors wrote “DEAR PATRONS-We hope that all of you will at once renew your subscription, Think of this. Think of your manhood. We give you ten thousand times your money's worth! Stand by your guns, and, with the immortal Lawrence, as he lay on the blood stained deck of the *Chesapeake* proudly exclaim with your latest breath, “DON'T GIVE UP THE SHIP !”

Anti-Reconstructionists used the expression as well. One Alabama newspaper wrote in 1869, “Don't Give Up



Up until the 1930s, many political campaigns have used the expression as a slogan. Here, Samuel Dexter used it in 1816—though, like Lawrence, he was defeated.

the Ship! To those who despair of a restored freedom and/or a release from Egyptian bondage...if only the HOPE of Southern liberation.”

By the 20th century, the phrase became more removed from history or social causes. In praise of two women who kept a New York City tea room going in the face of chauvinism and slow business, one magazine wrote, “we forget the struggle that had made them a success. Commander Lawrence said, ‘Don’t Give Up the Ship!’ ‘Don’t Give Up the Tea Room!’ these girls had to tell themselves over and over.”

Commercial enterprises have used the expression extensively. In 1890, an Atlanta company marketed its elixir with “Don’t Give Up the Ship, though the fight might be long and bitter, old bad blood may yet be conquered. Have you not tried Botanic Blood Balm?” Fast forward to 1959 when Jerry Lewis starred in the movie *Don’t Give Up the Ship*. Lewis’ character is a junior


officer tasked with finding a destroyer he lost during the war, or risk paying for the whole thing. Adding to his woes is that he just got married. Hilarity ensues. In the 1970s, the *Scottish* distillers of Cutty Sark used the expression as a marketing slogan.

Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels reclaimed the expression for the Navy, if only for a short time, when he defended his action to award honors who had their ship sunk during World War I. He wrote, “It is, of course, the victory in battle which gives highest glory, but medals of distinction are awarded for exceptionally meritorious service and Lawrence was no less deserving of a nation’s gratitude when his ship was lost than was Perry when leaving his sinking ship.”

The issue brought up by Daniels’ critics is one that the public-at-large tends to avoid. If one looks deep into some of the most famous acts of bravery in American military history, one usually finds an act of incompetence often proceeds the act of bravery. Lawrence is no different. There is evidence that he made missteps that led to his ship getting captured. But, Americans embrace defeat in battle and use it as motivation.

Today, a reproduction of Perry’s flag with Lawrence’s words have a prominent place in the U.S. Naval Academy’s Memorial Hall. Officially, it is not the motto of the United States Navy. It is,

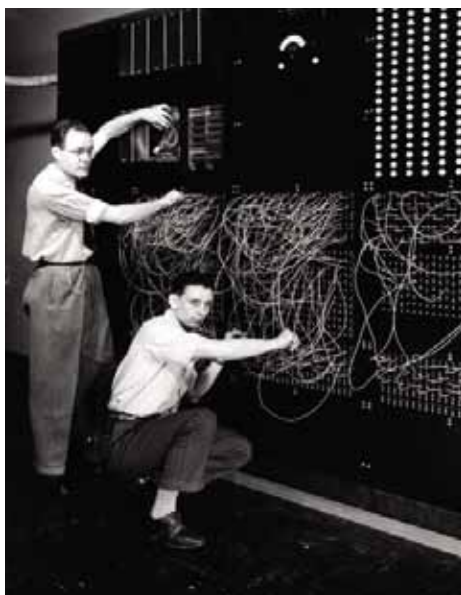
however, the most powerful message of encouragement ever stated for members of the Fleet.

There is one surreal use of the expression that should be mentioned. Alcoholic concoctions often have a catchy name both for ease of ordering and future fame. In 1941, a “Don’t Give Up the Ship” cocktail appeared in fine food and drink writer Crosby Gaige’s *Cocktail Guide and Ladies’ Companion*. It is not clear where the name came from, though the air raid on the U.S. Naval station at Pearl Harbor might have had something to do with it. There has been a small revival of the drink in the 21st century. So, if you are out on the town, order one and remember Lawrence, his company, and all who defend us on the high seas, no matter what the circumstances. 



Pictured here is a “Don’t Give Up the Ship” cocktail—1.5 oz. gin, .5 oz. triple sec, .5 oz. red sweet vermouth, .5 oz. Fernet Branca, one dash of orange bitters. Stir over ice; strain into chilled cocktail glass; garnish with an orange or lemon peel. (Picture provided by drinksanddrinking.com)

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Book Reviews

A Plain Sailor in China: The Life and Times of Commander I.V. Gillis, USN

By Bruce Swanson *et al.*

Reviewed by Ira R. Hanna

A *Plain Sailor in China* is another mis-titled book. (*Editor's Note: See Hanna's review of The Captain Who Burned His Ships by Gordon S. Brown in The Daybook, Volume 16 Issue 2.*) But this time, the title is taken from a self-deprecating comment by the subject of this complex biography. Commander Irvin Van Gorder Gillis was far from a plain sailor in China. He was a graduate of the U. S. Naval Academy, class of 1894, the son of an admiral, and had at least three different careers.

Bruce Swanson, *et al.* *A Plain Sailor in China: The Life and Times of Commander I. V. Gillis, USN.* Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2012. ISBN 978-1-61251-105-4

His first career included thirty years of service in the Navy and commanding several ships. Much of his shipboard experience involved ships homeported in Hampton Roads. For instance, in 1905, he reported to Norfolk to command the Reserve Torpedo Flotilla and then the cruiser USS *Atlanta*.

On the other hand, a significant part of his Naval service was spent as a naval attaché in Japan and China while gathering information for the Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI), which became his second career. When he was recruited by the ONI, the Office gave him the standard spy equipment - a Kodak camera, a pocket code book, and a Remington typewriter that he used for every written communication for the rest of his life. He taught himself Mandarin Chinese and gained a reputation as a frequent guest at Chinese social affairs. Thus, he was able to learn a great deal about the machinations of the inner circle of powerful military and political leaders.

After his first retirement in 1914, Gillis returned to Peking, China, as a civilian representative for U.S. shipbuilders and manufacturers. As Swanson said, "At age

thirty-nine he was probably more driven to secure his finances and prepare for the rest of his life as a civilian."

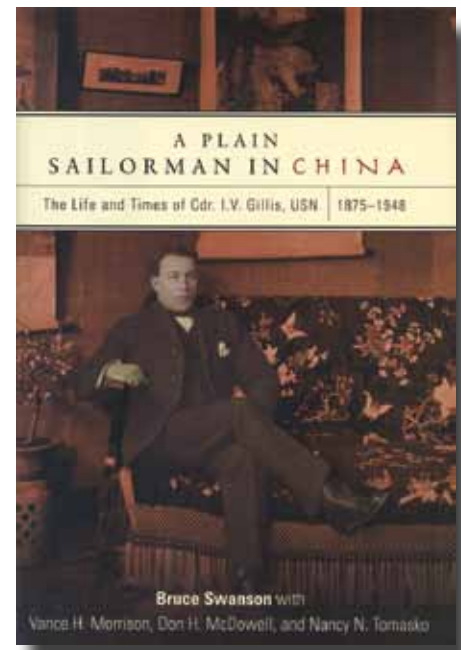
However, he was called back to duty in 1917, once again becoming U.S. naval attaché in Peking, where he continued to build a network of informants, paying particular attention to Japanese activities in eastern Asia. He also reported on political conditions in China, collecting and translating articles from the Chinese newspapers and magazines, while his informants provided information on mining, railroads, and shipyards. For his efforts, he later received the Navy Cross, the Navy's second-highest award for valor. After World War I concluded in 1919, he retired for the second time and remained in China as a foreign military salesman for Bethlehem Steel, Electric Boat, DuPont, and others.

At this point in the biography, the original author, Bruce Swanson had planned to end his book. But he did sufficient research to allow Morrison, a former U.S. naval and defense attaché; McDowell, former Commander, Naval Security Group Command; and Nancy Tomasko, former editor of the *East Asian Library Journal*, Princeton Library, to complete a final chapter on Gillis's third career.

Of the many choices that one can imagine that Gillis would make for the rest of his life, collecting ancient Chinese books would not be one. He used all the contacts he had formed for twenty years in Asia. Plus, he married Zhao Yubin, a woman eighteen years his junior, who was said to be a member of the former Manchu imperial clan. Zhao helped Gillis make contact with present and former members of the government who needed money to continue their lifestyle and would be willing to sell their rare books and manuscripts.


Even though he and his wife were interned by the Japanese for two years, Gillis came back to his home in 1946 and salvaged hundreds of books to add to the thousands already shipped to the United States during the twenties and thirties. All of these books are now part of the Gest Oriental Library at Princeton University.

This is a book that greatly expands our



knowledge of how the U.S. obtained intelligence data, specifically about China and Japan, before, during, and after World War I and leading up to World War II. It provides a picture of how the Office of Naval Intelligence was formed, how it operated before World War II, and how the Department of War and Navy ignored or misused information that could have better prepared America for war.

Although this book is well researched, there are a few factual errors. There were numerous references to Bancroft Hall as the Naval Academy dormitory where Gillis spent his days as a midshipman (1890-1894). The construction of Bancroft Hall was not completed until 1908, long after he graduated. Additionally, some of the slang identified by the author as used by the midshipmen used were incomplete. For instance, a perfect score on an exam (not one's whole academic record) was termed a "four 0" not just a "four," and to be dismissed from the Academy for failing grades was called "bilged out" not just "bilged," which generally meant failing an exam.

None of these errors or any others caused this book to be any less significant to its purpose - to bring to life the exploits of an extraordinary naval officer, diplomat, intelligence officer, linguist, and student of Chinese culture, collector of rare books, and recipient of the nation's second highest award for valor. This book is a tribute to a "plain sailor-man" who was anything but. 

*Arctic Mission: 90 North by
Airship and Submarine*

By William F. Althoff

Reviewed by Howard Sandefer

Commander William Anderson, commanding officer of USS *Nautilus* (SSN-571) said, “The best way to explore the Arctic Basin is with a cup of coffee in your hand, and in shirt sleeves.” The fascination with the Arctic Ocean escapes this reviewer, who is more at home in sub-tropical or tropical environs. Nonetheless, 1958 saw these two U.S. Navy expeditions or operations that contributed to new knowledge of the Arctic Ocean and Basin. The airship referred to

William F. Althoff. *Arctic Mission: 90 North by Airship and Submarine*. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2011. ISBN 978-161251-010-1

in the book was a U.S. Navy blimp, model ZPG-2 and the submarine is *Nautilus*. These two vehicles were committed to exploration of the Arctic Ocean in the summer months of 1958.

The more famous of the two was the polar transit of *Nautilus*. Forgotten was the flight of a blimp that sortied into the Arctic Circle to test the possibility and feasibility of such craft for Arctic exploration and data collection. This work is illustrative of the competition between two differing technologies at the time.

Before any of these technological wonders could begin, the cooperation of America’s northern neighbor was needed. The author carefully notes the cooperation of Canada in the explorations. The possibility of the use of the Arctic for military purposes was (and still is) of concern to Canada, as it was to the Soviet Union. The Cold War dictated the interest of both blocks in the possibility of the region becoming a battlefield.

Once cooperation with Canada was secured, there was the issue of getting the

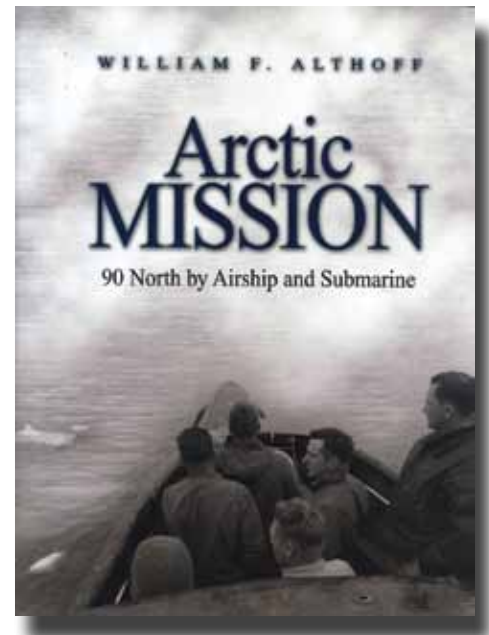
equipment to work properly in the Arctic’s hostile environment. Both submarine and blimp operations required training and attention to detail by their crews.

For a submarine to navigate properly, the boat requires a lot of trimming and pumping to stay on depth and course. When added to the problem of keeping under the ice and over the ocean floor, the extent of the problem becomes apparent. The *Nautilus* operation was in some ways like a space shot, in that there was no possibility of rescue should an emergency arise. She was not equipped to push up through ice, unlike later boats. The blimp, on the other hand, had the possibility of rescue by other aircraft, depending on the weather and the ice conditions in the summer months of melt.

This is not to say the airship’s company had an easy time heading north. The author spent a great deal of time describing some of the manipulations to get a blimp to fly and to behave. The considerations of properly distributed weights and balance mirror, to some extent the machination of keeping a submarine level under the sea. They look so serene when flying over football games, yet this can be deceiving. Even going under a cloud can disturb the delicate balance of lift from the helium gas.

Since these two expeditions, submarines have continued to explore the Arctic Basin, while the blimp has disappeared from the Navy inventory. Both vehicles were exploring new roles—the nuclear submarine with her new power plant, and the blimp looking for a mission in a post-World War II environment. The nuclear submarine became a defense mainstay, while the blimp faded into military history. Both had advantages in Arctic exploration and proceeded at about the same speed.

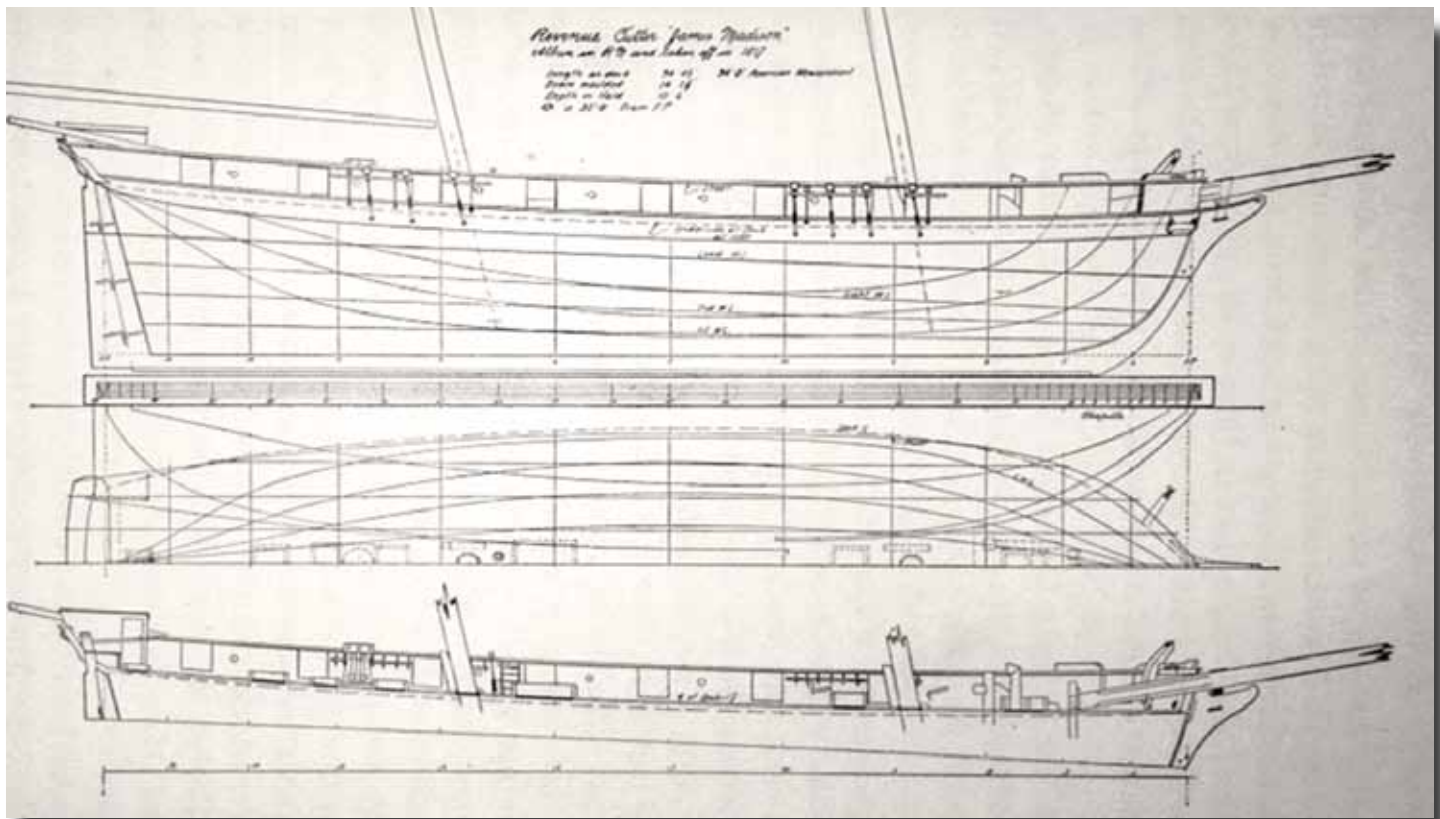
Nautilus opened new vistas for the true submarine, as opposed to a submersible. She penetrated further under the ice than any of the previous attempts by conventional submarines, using her ability



to stay submerged for long periods, not requiring outside air. The airship was used in a mission to ice island T-3, which was the last and largest of the blimps built for the Navy. The Lighter-than-Air (LTA) community was searching for a mission or missions for their particular capabilities. With its roomy accommodations and spacious cargo capacity as opposed to the heavier than air craft, Arctic missions seemed a good fit. But the era had passed.

The author devoted more space to the blimp mission than to the submarine mission, perhaps because he had more access to the blimp’s history or because *Nautilus*’ accomplishment is world renown and the boat can be seen in Groton, Connecticut. However, this bias toward ZPG-2 is somewhat deceiving, as the LTA branch of Naval aviation was slated for elimination shortly after this particular mission. The inevitable demise of the LTA program was caused by budget constraints between the 1950s and 60s.

The only complaints were the rather eccentric punctuations early in the work, consisting of lots of semicolons and colons, which distracted from the narrative, and the lack of charts leaving the reader to wonder about some of the locations of mentioned geographical places. Otherwise, the book was a pleasant read about a little-known piece of the U.S. Navy’s Arctic history. 🚢



The schooner design was the foundation of the Revenue Service for much of the 18th and 19th century. Lightly armed, but fast with a shallow draft, the design was useful for both inland river and coastal service. Many were former civilian vessels purchased for law enforcement before the War of 1812. (HRNM image)

Local Revenue Service Operations in the War of 1812

By William Thiesen, Ph.D.

After a concerted effort to maintain its neutrality, the United States could no longer avoid involvement in the European conflict. On June 18, 1812, President James Madison signed a declaration of war against Great Britain and the war officially commenced.



At that time, the United States faced the Royal Navy's 600 ships with seventeen commissioned navy vessels, a fleet of small navy gunboats, fourteen cutters, and

a number of smaller revenue boats.

On the day President Madison signed the declaration of war, Secretary of the Treasury Albert Gallatin sent a one-sentence circular to all of his customs collectors, who oversaw the revenue cutters, writing, "Sir, I hasten to inform you that War was this day declared against Great Britain." He then ordered revenue cutters stationed along the East Coast to dispatch the news to underway U.S. Navy vessels.

While heavily armed American privateers and warships carried out a war against British ships on the high seas, a domestic maritime force of revenue cutters, navy gunboats and a few trapped American warships waged war against British ships stationed off the East Coast. This defensive force did its best to defend American shipping and beat off British privateers, Royal Navy warships, and

the barges they deployed for shallow water operations. The diminutive revenue cutters became frontline units protecting American ports and shipping against enemy patrols and Royal Navy squadrons.

As they would in future American conflicts, the revenue cutters went in harm's way and participated in some of the first encounters of the war. On June 25, 1812, Norfolk-based cutter *Thomas Jefferson* captured the British schooner *Patriot* bound from Guadeloupe to Halifax with a cargo of sugar. Termed "Prize No. 1" by the press, this was the first maritime capture during the War of 1812. On July 4, 1812, according to at least one source, cutter *Surveyor* also captured a British brig bound from the Caribbean.

During the war, the revenue cutters did not operate under the direction of the Navy, as they had during the Quasi War with France. Instead, the cutters took their



By 1813, the Royal Navy had complete control of the Atlantic coastline. With the dual purpose of trying to end the war more quickly and draw ground forces off the Canadian frontier, the British launched a major offensive into the Chesapeake Bay. (Library of Congress image)

orders from the Department of Treasury through the local customs collector, and the Treasury Department did not sanction high seas revenue cutter combat operations. Instead, Treasury required cutters to enforce tariffs and trade laws, and protect American maritime commerce, so the number of enemy ships taken should not be considered a measure of success of the wartime cutters.

In addition to the Non-Intercourse Act, which was in force throughout the conflict, cutters had to enforce seven additional trade restrictions passed by Congress during the war. American shippers and ship captains would often challenge any seizures, forfeitures or detentions of ships they believed illegal or wrongful. This meant that wartime cutter officers and crews had to be literate and well-versed in the fine print of these numerous trade laws.

Built in Norfolk, Virginia, and commissioned in 1802, *Thomas Jefferson* serves as a prime example of a revenue cutter enforcing Federal maritime laws. The cutter served out of Savannah until 1809, when *James Madison* took up station there and *Jefferson* returned to Norfolk.

Master William Ham worked his way through the junior officer ranks, serving in Norfolk cutters as a mate starting in 1791 and receiving his master's commission in 1804. Ham commanded *Jefferson* through the war and several years afterward. While

Jefferson detained many vessels entering the Chesapeake Bay and Hampton Roads, the local newspapers noted only a few cases. For example, on September 2, 1812, Cutter *Jefferson* seized the brigs *Ariadne* and *Rockland* for carrying illegal cargoes and escorted them into Norfolk. On January 1, 1814, the Baltimore newspapers reported that the *Thomas Jefferson* boarded the schooner *Despatch* and sent it into Norfolk for breaching the embargo.

Built in Norfolk, in 1807, the revenue cutter *Gallatin* sailed south to take up station at Charleston. While most cutters had one or, at most, two masters over the course of the war, *Gallatin* had three. Master Daniel McNeill commanded the *Gallatin* until August of 1812, when the Treasury Department transferred the cutter to Norfolk. In July of 1812, Norfolk merchant captain Edward Herbert received a revenue cutter master's commission and took command of *Gallatin* in August, when it arrived in Norfolk. Some of the highlights of *Gallatin*'s brief career in Norfolk included the August 12, 1812, release of the 12-gun schooner HMS *Whiting*, the first naval vessel captured in the war. *Whiting* was on a diplomatic mission at the start of the war, so American authorities ordered her release. On September 2, 1812, *Gallatin* escorted into Norfolk the ship *Tom Hazard*, which carried an illegal cargo of British goods. On October 10, 1812, *Gallatin* detained vessels

Active, of London, and *Georgiana*, of Liverpool. Herbert remained in command of *Gallatin*, which served together with *Thomas Jefferson*, until *Gallatin* returned to Charleston in October 1812.

Within a month of the war's declaration, in June 1812, Royal Navy squadrons began patrolling off the Eastern Seaboard. There were local cases of Royal Navy blockades, such as the ports in South Carolina and Georgia in November of 1812. However, over the course of the war, the Royal Navy gradually tightened its blockade around all major ports along the nation's East Coast.

The British Admiralty initiated the strategy on November 27, 1812, sending orders to Admiral John Warren, commander-in-chief of the North American Station, to blockade the Chesapeake and Delaware Bays. Probably due to winter conditions and the cessation of the sailing season, Warren did not begin enforcement of the orders until February 1813. On February 4, a British fleet under Rear Admiral George Cockburn anchored in Hampton Roads, to begin a close blockade of the Chesapeake Bay.

In response, on March 15, 1813, *Gallatin* ordered the Norfolk customs collector to "immediately extinguish" the lights and remove the lamps, oil and "other moveable apparatus" in all lighthouses located in the Chesapeake Bay "for the purpose of preventing the enemy again putting up the lights." In the spring, the Royal Navy began a campaign of attacking and burning Chesapeake's coastal towns, such Maryland's Havre de Grace, Georgetown, and Fredericktown. This campaign of coastal attacks and infiltration served to cut off local commerce and shipping.

Next, on March 30, 1813, Admiral Warren extended the blockade beyond the Delaware and Chesapeake Bays, adding the major American port cities of New York, Charleston, Port Royal (South Carolina), Savannah, and New Orleans. By summer, the blockade closed in around Southern ports and, on September 15, 1813, a British officer landed at Ocracoke, North Carolina, under a white flag and delivered to the deputy customs collector a notice declaring that part "and all others of note to the southward of this, in a state of blockade." The officer also noted that the Royal Navy had sealed off ports as far north as Boston. By October 17, 1813, the British 18-gun brig HMS *Recruit* also



The Revenue Cutter Thomas Jefferson is shown here capturing three barges of British marines and sailors on the James River, April 11, 1813. The cutter also rescued the several members of an American merchant ship that had been captured by the British. (USCG image)

instituted a close blockade of Wilmington, North Carolina.

During the War of 1812, revenue cutters undertook new missions and established their reputation as effective shallow water, or “brown water,” naval vessels. The sailing warships of the U.S. Navy were too large to enter many inland waterways of the American coastline; however, revenue cutters were designed to catch smugglers in coastal waters and proved effective in navigating such areas.

The enforcement of a tight blockade of the Chesapeake Bay early in 1813 saw Royal Navy warships and their armed barges patrolling parts of the Hampton Roads area in search of unlucky American merchantmen. These armed barge patrols met their match in April 1813 on the James River. On April 11, 1813, the cutter *Thomas Jefferson* together with a pilot boat and a contingent of local militiamen overhauled three Royal Navy barges. The armed barges attempted to escape up the James, but the *Thomas Jefferson* ran them down so fast that the flotilla hove to. Just as Captain William Ham was about to fire a broadside into them, the British commander ordered

the white flag displayed and surrendered. Ham ordered the nearly sixty British officers and men ashore under an armed guard of about forty riflemen. The cutter and militiamen also repatriated the crew of the American merchantman, *Flight*, captured earlier by the Royal Navy barges. The *Alexandria Gazette* reported, “the loss of so many men and barges at this time will embarrass the enemy not a little, as it will weaken very considerably his means of annoyance.”

Cutter *Thomas Jefferson* had fulfilled its mission to protect Americans against enemy operations. However, while the revenue cutters experienced successes such as these during the British blockade of the Chesapeake, they were still vulnerable to attack in waters outside the safety of their homeports.

The British blockade of the East Coast brought the naval war to American shores, especially in the Chesapeake Bay. On June 12, 1813, Captain Samuel Travis anchored the Cutter *Surveyor* off Gloucester Point, near Yorktown, Virginia. Not knowing the proximity of British naval forces to his cutter, Captain Travis set out a picket boat

with a small crew and installed boarding nets around the cutter’s deck. The customs collector for the port of Baltimore built the cutter *Surveyor* to serve the Baltimore station and commissioned it in 1807; however, during the British blockade, the cutter served in the southern Chesapeake Bay. The cutter measured sixty-eight feet on deck, nineteen feet wide, and drew about six feet of water; and it carried a crew of about twenty-five officers and men, and the usual cutter armament of six six-pound cannon.

At about midnight that evening, barges carrying a party of over fifty British officers and men from the 32-gun frigate HMS *Narcissus* approached through the evening haze with muffled oars. They managed to close within 150 yards of the cutter before the picket boat detected them and fired a warning shot. The British navigated their barges away from *Surveyor*’s main armament of six-pound carronades, rendering the cutter’s guns ineffective; so Travis armed each man with two muskets and ordered them to wait until the British rowed within about fifty yards, when he would give the word to fire. The *Surveyor*’s

crew of eighteen fought stubbornly and killed three attackers while wounding seven more. However, the British boarding party managed to gain the cutter's deck, overwhelmed the outnumbered crew and captured the cutter.

The lieutenant in charge of the attacking flotilla returned Travis's sword, commending him for the valiant defense of his ship in the face of overwhelming enemy forces: "Your gallant and desperate attempt to defend your vessel against more than double your number excited such admiration on the part of your opponents as I have seldom witnessed, and induced me to return you the sword you had so ably used...I am at a loss which to admire most, the previous arrangement on board the *Surveyor* or the determined manner in which her deck was disputed inch-by-inch."

The battle of the *Surveyor* proved one of the most hotly contested revenue cutter engagements of the war. Ironically, on June 19, 1813, a week after the fight, the Baltimore customs collector wrote that the seven-year-old *Surveyor* "was an old vessel, scarcely worth repairing." Within days, the British fleet occupying Hampton Roads would land troops at Hampton, Virginia, and sack the city using the

captured cutter to help cover the landings. The ultimate fate of the gallant cutter is still unknown.

After the battle, Captain Samuel Travis found himself held prisoner on board the British 44-gun frigate HMS *Junon*, anchored at the time near the mouth of the James River. On June 21, 1813, nearly ten days after *Surveyor's* capture, Acting Secretary of the Treasury William Jones wrote the Baltimore customs collector that "as a Revenue Cutter can be of no use in the waters of the Chesapeake, during the continuance of the present state of things [close British blockade], it will be proper for you to inform the officers and crew of the 'Surveyor' that they are to consider themselves as being no longer in the service of the United States."

By this time, *Surveyor's* two captured junior officers and fifteen enlisted men had begun their journey to a British military prison at Halifax. They were among dozens of cuttermen that endured the brutal conditions of British prisons in Canada and England. Captain Travis would fare better, with the British paroling him at Washington, North Carolina, on August 7, 1813. Travis returned to Virginia after his release and lived in Williamsburg for the remainder of his life

With U.S. naval vessels cruising far off shore and Navy gunboats often stationed in port cities, revenue cutters became one of the American land forces' most effective maritime intelligence gathering tools. They monitored enemy naval movements, identified British privateers, and provided the latest news regarding U.S. Navy vessels. Because of their speed and agility, the revenue cutters proved the most reliable source of this naval intelligence.

During the attempted British invasion of North Carolina, the revenue cutter *Mercury* homeported in the city of New Bern, proved the value of small maneuverable vessels in the shallow sounds and inland waterways of the Carolina coast. *Mercury's* master, David Wallace, came from a prominent family from the state's Outer Banks and he had an intimate knowledge of the coast. By late May 1813, the British Blockade began to encircle the Southern port cities, including Ocracoke, North Carolina. Located next to a channel through the Outer Banks that served as the entrance to North Carolina's inland sounds, Ocracoke proved easy prey for British attackers.

On May 21, the brazen British privateer *Venus* of Bermuda, attempted a surprise attack on cutter *Mercury* and American vessels anchored at Ocracoke. The local inhabitants detected the plot and raised an alarm before the British privateer could spring its trap. The enemy raider managed to escape and searched for easier prey sailing offshore.

In mid-summer, a more ominous threat loomed on the horizon, as a Royal Navy squadron appeared off Ocracoke. On July 12, 1813, the cutter *Mercury* saved the day after the squadron launched a surprise attack. Fifteen armed barges, supporting approximately 1,000 British officers and enlisted men, captured two American privateer brigs, but *Mercury* managed to escape with the local customs house papers and bonds by "crowding upon her every inch of canvas she had, and by cutting away her long boat."

The British had hoped to take the cutter, so their barge flotilla could enter Pamlico Sound and



After rowing for several hours from Hampton Roads, British marines and sailors launched a night attack on the U.S. Revenue cutter *Surveyor* in the York River. After a gallant fight by the outnumbered Americans, the British forces captured the schooner and used it when they raided Hampton. (USCG image)


capture the city of New Bern. *Mercury* thwarted those plans by outrunning the barges, sailing quickly to the town, and warning city officials of probable attack by British troops. *Mercury*'s early warning allowed locals the time to muster the necessary army and militia forces to defend the city and the British reversed their invasion plans. New Bern's newspaper, the *Carolina Federal Republican*, wrote, "Captain David Wallace of the Revenue Cutter, merits the highest praise for his vigilance address and good conduct in getting the Cutter away from the enemy, and bringing us the most speedy intelligence of our danger."

Afterward, *Mercury* remained active in North Carolina waters. On November

12, 1814, the cutter captured the ship *Fox*, used as a tender by ship-of-the-line HMS *Ramilles*, and delivered to New Bern the vessel and its crew of a Royal Navy midshipman and seven enlisted men.

Beside their rescue operations, the cutters also delivered sensitive military papers, naval dispatches and treaties. The cutters also transported high-ranking government officials and military personnel. For example, between August 8 and 9, 1812, Cutter *Diligence* transported Major General Thomas Brown and his staff between Wilmington, North Carolina, and his headquarters at nearby Smithville. In addition, on July 30, 1813, *Mercury* carried New Bern militia officers to the Outer Banks to identify islands suitable for

erecting new fortifications.

On February 4, 1815, Congress passed "An Act to prohibit intercourse with the enemy, and for other purposes," requiring the revenue cutters to enforce yet another trade restriction aimed at cutting off illegal trading with the enemy. Over the course of February and March 1815, word spread that the war had ended. On March 3, 1815, Congress repealed "the acts prohibiting the entrance of foreign vessels into the waters of the United States," thereby rescinding many of the trade restrictions imposed before and during the war. Soon after, Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Dallas ordered his revenue cutters back to the tedious peace work of law enforcement and revenue collection. 



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