

# Regret, Determination, and Honour

The Impact of the Single Ship Losses in North American Waters on the British Royal Navy,  
1812-1813

by

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## Abstract

The French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars was a time of unprecedented naval success for the United Kingdom. By 1812, after nineteen years of warfare, the Royal Navy had won every major battle and maintained a choking blockade over the ports of France and her allies. When war broke out with the United States in 1812 many hoped that the new conflict meant a fresh period of prizes, glory, and honour. By the end of the year, however, five British ships had been defeated in action by their American counterparts. For the British, it was as shocking as it was depressing.

British naval historiography tends to focus on victory, and in this period, there were plenty of victories to study. But these losses and the reactions to them provide an interesting case study to examine the post-Nelsonic Royal Navy culture and fighting spirit. This thesis examines how the navy reacted to the losses culturally through an examination of the defenses made by the defeated officers of 1812 and their receptions in Courts Martial held after the loss of a ship. These naval officers understood their losses not as the result of vastly superior enemy firepower but instead as contests which they could have won if not for a lack of fortune. The naval-interested public did not agree, and instead justified their own insecurities regarding their beloved naval heroes by clinging to the impressive broadsides of America's heavy frigates like USS *Constitution*.

The Admiralty responded to the defeats and resulting public uproar with cautious policies in the North American Squadron. The captains of the North American Squadron, however, were not sympathetic to the cautious policies. Their desire to avenge British honour resulted in the issuing of challenges which weakened Britain's efforts to blockade the United States and, except for the successful *Shannon-Chesapeake* action, were in vain.

## **Acknowledgements**

For all of the hard work and worry that inevitably comes with the academic process, it has been a joy to have developed this project. Throughout the last three years I have always treated this project as an escape from other responsibilities. As with any project extending of this length or magnitude, reaching the finish line was by no means a solitary effort. Throughout the project I was continuously encouraged by my family and friends, historians or otherwise, and I cannot thank them enough. Of course, my closest companion these last three years has been my dutiful feline, who never failed to choose my lap or my thesis draft as a place to settle for a nap.

This thesis evolved out of my honours work at Acadia University, and as such I would like to thank my honours supervisor Dr. Paul Doerr, and the amazing faculty of Acadia's Department of History and Classics for their support. While at Dalhousie I was encouraged and spurred on at every stage by Valerie Peck, whose support has been a blessing. I would also like to thank Dr. Roger Marsters and Dr. Justin Roberts, who generously agreed to serve as readers on my defense committee. I cannot express my gratitude to them both, as Justin went beyond the normal duties as a third reader and provided much needed comments and edits that helped to polish this thesis, and as Roger has twice given his time to act as my second reader.

I would especially like to thank Dr. Jerry Bannister for agreeing to serve as my supervisor. Without his advice and guidance this project would not have been possible. Jerry's expertise and experience helped me to mould my interests in naval culture into a workable project, and without his understanding and hard work this would not have been possible. I am indebted to Jerry for his guidance and support through it all.

## **Chapter One: Introduction**

In the early afternoon of the 19<sup>th</sup> of August 1812, lookouts of HMS *Guerriere*, a sixteen-year-old Royal Navy frigate captured from the French in 1806, spotted another frigate on the horizon. Not long after, one of her lieutenants made her out to be the American frigate USS *Constitution*, which had escaped from *Guerriere* and her companions earlier in the war. Without hesitation Captain James Dacres reduced *Guerriere's* sail so that *Constitution* could catch up. He was determined to bring her to action, and the maneuvers of the Americans indicated that her commander was equally determined to fight. When the guns fell silent that evening, Dacres' ship was battered to pieces and had struck to the enemy. It was the first time in over a year that a British ship had surrendered, and as news of the event spread through the British Empire and the United States, shock followed. The British and Nova Scotians, bred on a diet of naval victories and a perception of invincibility at sea, were dumbstruck at this loss in Nova Scotian waters. The Americans, who had not expected anything of their small navy in the recently declared war, were surprised and overjoyed at the humbling of their former colonial masters.

In popular memory, and indeed in some aspects of historiography, both sides of the war emphasized their triumphs and tried to explain away their losses. The British focused on the successful defense of Canada, the burning of Washington, and the much-celebrated *Shannon-Chesapeake* action, whilst reminding readers that the frigate losses in 1812 were unequal contests, pitting 38-gun frigates against America's superbly built heavy frigates, and that the true enemy of Britain at the time was Napoleonic France. The Americans focused on their feat of holding their own against the world's foremost global power of the age and of triumphing in single ship actions

against the best navy in the world, while downplaying their failure to conquer Canada and the fact that their aggressive war ended without any peace aims being settled in the cessation of hostilities.

In terms of the naval war, neither traditional narrative is truly correct, although combined they tell a coherent and mostly complete story. While the British are correct in pointing out that the three famous single ship actions in 1812 were unequal contests, they fail to acknowledge the justification for the deep shock and shame felt in the Royal Navy as a result of those losses. Simply put, the Royal Navy, after two decades of war with France, expected their ships to triumph against even vastly superior odds.

That is the subject of this study – given the expectation of victory in the Royal Navy, by the officers and by the public, how did the Royal Navy experience the losses in 1812? How did the shock impact naval press, naval policy, and the actions of the officers serving on the North American Squadron? It is true that the three single ship actions in 1812 are often over emphasized and over studied – this despite them having no impact on, for instance, the American invasion of Canada, or on Britain’s ability to blockade the United States’ eastern coastline. However, as will become clear, these battles were not unimportant. They mattered deeply to the Royal Navy and the British-Canadian cultural sphere and examining how the navy reacted to these losses after two decades of victory will shed light on the nature of the naval officer culture of the period. To do that, one first needs to review the factors that influenced that officer culture.

## **The Royal Navy in the Napoleonic Era**

The social backgrounds of naval officers in Britain’s Royal Navy reflected British society, and while many were of noble backgrounds, many others were not. Familial backgrounds included those from professional and political backgrounds, and especially navy and army backgrounds. A

small percentage of officers even came from the genuinely poor, including at least two officers of African descent. It was one of the few careers in which genuine social mobility was possible. Many of the most famous peers in the service – Nelson, Pellew, Jervis, etc. – were not of noble birth, but instead earned their titles through victories at sea. Often, this meant that sea officers' social standing and reputation depended on their success at sea. Aristocrats who expected to inherit titles had established social positions. Younger sons or cousins of titled aristocrats, or those otherwise without inherent social status had to rely on their professional reputation. Certainly, established connections in society were a boon to a naval career in Britain, just as they were to a career in the army, but social connection and birth was not a guarantor of a successful career.<sup>1</sup>

Nearly every officer joined the navy midshipmen, apprentice officers who started their careers at sea as young as eight. These young boys served at sea – a hardening experience – and learned how to sail, navigate, and most importantly, how to lead. Young boys and teenagers often found themselves in command of subdivisions of men, gun crews, boarding parties, and prizes. Alternatively, a small number of officers began their careers by attending the Royal Navy's Naval Academy, a shore-based institution envisioned to provide young gentlemen with a better education than their sea-born counterparts, who relied on ship-board schoolmasters and other officers for instruction.<sup>2</sup> Very few officers of the period started via this route, and it was often dismissed as insignificant. Early writers were dismissive of the school's reputation as a whole.<sup>3</sup> Interestingly,

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<sup>1</sup> Adam Nicolson, *Men of Honour: Trafalgar and the Making of the English Hero* (London, New York, Toronto, and Sydney: Harper Perennial, 2005): 102-114; Tom Wareham, "The Duration of Frigate Command During the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars," *The Mariner's Mirror* 86, no. 4 (2000): 420-421; Tom Wareham, *The Star Captains: Frigate Command in the Napoleonic Wars* (London: Chatham Publishing, 2001): 35; "To the Right Honourable the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty, 1809." In Nicholas Tracy, *The Naval Chronicle: The Contemporary Record of the Royal Navy at War, Vol. II*, (London: Chatham Publishing, 1998): 355-356

<sup>2</sup> John Blatchly, "Broke – His Youth and Education," in Tim Voelcker, editor, *Broke of the Shannon and the War of 1812*, (Seaworth Publishing, Barnsley, 2013): 78

<sup>3</sup> Ibid



several of the officers involved in the key actions of the War of 1812, including Captain Philip Broke, began their service at the Academy.

After an average of six years as midshipmen, the now young men faced an examination before being eligible for promotion to lieutenant. While described as onerous and an effective measure of controlling competency within the lieutenants' list, as it established a base level of skill that every officer needed to demonstrate, it is worth mentioning that very few young gentlemen actually failed their examinations. It was also not uncommon for midshipmen to pass their examinations and never receive a commission. There was intense competition for promotion within the Royal Navy, even when the fleet was fully manned at wartime. Promotion sprees at the beginning of conflicts, as the navy rearmed, resulted in periods of stagnation such as late in the Napoleonic Wars, when the lists of lieutenants, commanders, and captains far exceeded the demand for officers. This only worsened during times of peace, when large portions of the fleet was laid up in ordinary.

Once one received his commission as a lieutenant, the next step was that of commander – previously called master and commander, captains of small unrated vessels called sloops of war. A fundamental problem for officers in the Royal Navy was that there were always far more commanders than there were unrated ships. Many lieutenants were effectively promoted to commander into retirement.<sup>4</sup> Becoming a post captain was the most coveted step; post captains commanded the navy's rated ships, from tiny frigates to massive ships of the line. It was particularly desirable because of the nature of promotion past that point. Captains were promoted to admirals based on their seniority – the Admiralty could not promote a captain to admiral without first promoting every captain of higher seniority to him. If a captain lived long enough he was

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<sup>4</sup> Evan Wilson, "Social Background and Promotion Prospects in the Royal Navy, 1775-1815." *English Historical Review* CXXXI, no. 550 (2016): 538

guaranteed to be promoted to admiral. Again, this did not ensure security. Many admirals never served at sea after promotion. Rather than be promoted into the three-tired red, white, and blue admiralty system, some became what was called “yellow” admirals – those effectively in retirement. Still, a half-pay post captain earned far more than a half pay commander, and he was guaranteed another boost in pay upon reaching flag rank. If an officer was worried about a future on half pay, the notion of retiring as a half pay admiral was preferable to a half pay commander.

Additionally, some appointments and commands were more desirable than others, particularly when prize money was concerned. Officers frequently complained about inadequate pay; rates of pay for officers had not kept up with inflation in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and the expectations of social status among officers meant that it could be expensive to serve in the fleet. Prize money was the coveted solution – it was a fundamental part of the navy’s system of incentives, alongside honours and titles, and some officers earned fortunes from capturing enemy warships, privateers, and merchant vessels.<sup>5</sup> The chance of capturing an enemy ship in action was the opportunity that nearly every officer longed for, but it was also a relatively rare occurrence. Those commanding ships of the line, for instance, were unlikely to make any significant captures, as opposed to those commanding frigates or sloops. As such, frigates were the most desired ships to either command or be appointed to.<sup>6</sup>

Given the competition for promotions and appointments, with the incentives of employment and prize money dangled before every officer’s eyes, the culture of the Royal Navy officer corps was heavily influenced by competition. As with any competitive job field, candidates

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<sup>5</sup> Douglass W. Allen, "The British Navy Rules: Monitoring and Incompatible Incentives in the Age of Fighting Sail." *Explorations in Economic History*, 39 (2002): 204-230, Gabriela A Frei, "Prize Laws in the War of 1812," in Tim Voelcker, editor, *Broke of the Shannon and the War of 1812*, (Seaworth Publishing, Barnsley, 2013): 52-56, D.A.B. Ronald, *Young Nelsons: Boy Sailors during the Napoleonic Wars* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2012): 207-211

<sup>6</sup> Wareham, *The Star Captains*, 160 Wareham, "Duration of Frigate Command," 412-423

with better and more well-known reputations had an advantage. Social and political connections were certainly an advantage for naval officers, but so too were professional connections, which were becoming increasingly more influential in the Napoleonic period. Officers who demonstrated ability, determination, aggression, and zeal were the most likely to receive desirable appointments and commands. Britain's naval strategy often hinged upon a focus of aggressive action and reflected virtues of bravery and professionalism in its naval officers. Driven by competition and the wider culture, naval officers approached command at sea with an aggressive ethos. Battles were eagerly sought and fought in direct, ferocious close quarter fashions. These qualities were a significant factor in the unprecedented level of success that Britain saw at sea during the twenty-two-year period of warfare against Revolutionary and Napoleonic France.<sup>7</sup> Britain and France, along with the other major European powers, had battled for naval supremacy throughout the eighteenth century. During the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, however, the Royal Navy attained a dominant position on the seas. Every major battle was won by the Royal Navy, and the majority of minor actions were British victories. Most of the major actions were fought in the period before the Peace of Amiens; following the resumption of war, Britain's navy was able to effectively blockade the major French, Spanish, and Dutch fleets in port. The only notable foray of Napoleon Bonaparte's battle fleets following 1803 culminated in the decisive Battle of Trafalgar. It is often misleadingly stated that this battle destroyed French naval power. France continued to build ships of the line and maintained large fleets in Brest and Toulon, fleets in being that continued to worry the Royal Navy until the wars concluded in 1815. What Trafalgar did do

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<sup>7</sup> This is explored in detail in my 2015 Acadia University honours thesis. Though at times uncritical of the institution of the British navy as a whole, it effectively breaks down the system that developed in the Royal Navy that established a unique fighting force that, supported by a superb administrative system, dominated the seas during the period – *Professionalism and the Fighting Spirit of the Royal Navy: Rules, Regulations, and Traditions that made the British Royal Navy an Effective Fighting Force during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, 1793-1815*. Honours Thesis, Acadia University, 2015.

was provide a nail in the coffin of France's naval morale. Nelson's victory was shattering, and the French navy remained under blockade for the rest of the war, giving the British a free hand to operate worldwide.<sup>8</sup>

Most sea actions were between smaller squadrons and ships in localized skirmishes throughout the theaters of war. Many of these were not even combats. It was not uncommon for two frigates to chance upon a lone enemy frigate, for example.<sup>9</sup> It was rare for two evenly matched ships to meet in combat, so much so that when such an action occurred it had a significant impact back home. The Royal Navy's record in single ship actions, particularly frigate actions, was exemplary. Of the forty-five single ship frigate battles fought between Britain and France, thirty-five were outright British victories, seven were inconclusive, and only three were French victories.<sup>10</sup> A handful of those British victories were affairs where a frigate armed with 18-pounder main batteries defeated a heavy frigate armed with 24-pounder main batteries.

Broadly speaking, there were three types of frigates in existence during the Napoleonic period. The first were rated with between twenty and twenty-eight guns and were called sixth rates by the Royal Navy and often corvettes by the French Navy. The most notable of these frigates today was HMS *Surprise*, made famous as the favorite ship of Patrick O'Brian's Jack Aubrey. As with the smallest rate of ships of the line (fourth rates, which were rated between fifty and sixty guns), these frigates were increasingly rendered obsolete during the Napoleonic Wars, and consequentially there were few of them in service. The most common build of frigate in the navies of Europe were what the Royal Navy termed fifth rates, rated between 30 and 40 guns. These frigates carried main batteries of 12 or 18-pounders, often with carronades as forecastle and

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<sup>8</sup> Martin Robson, *A History of the Royal Navy: The Napoleonic Wars* (London and New York, I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2014): 142-143

<sup>9</sup> Mark Lardas, *British Frigate vs. French Frigate: 1773-1814*, (London: Osprey Publishing 2013): 70

<sup>10</sup> Lardas, *British Frigate vs. French Frigate*, 69

quarterdeck armaments. A frigate's rate did not always correspond to the actual number of guns on board, as individual captains would tweak their ship's armament to their liking. Carronades, being short range weapons, were often not counted towards the ship's rate. For instance, HMS *Java* and *Guerriere* each carried over forty guns and carronades (including chase guns), despite their 38-gun rating.<sup>11</sup> Their captor, USS *Constitution* (rated 44-guns) carried fifty-two guns and carronades, of a significantly larger caliber. While not normally a good indication of the exact number of shipboard weapons, a ship's rate was nevertheless a good indication of strength.

As frigate design had developed over the eighteenth century, there was a general trend towards building larger vessels that had the speed and maneuverability of frigates but carried heavier armaments. By the 1780s and 1790s, France began experimenting with larger frigates, rated at 40 or 44-guns (and usually carried close to their rate in guns), that carried main batteries of 24-pounders. This sparked some initial concern amongst the Admiralty and following Britain's capture of France's *La Pomone* in 1794 an arms race broke out between the two warring powers. British yards produced frigates armed with 24-pounder main batteries. Three British 64-gun ships (*Indefatigable*, *Anson*, and *Magnanime*) were razéed into 44-gun frigates that kept their 24-pounder main batteries. Purpose-built ships rated at 38, 40, and 44 guns, such as HMS *Endymion* and HMS *Cambrian*, were constructed, and designed to carry 24-pounder main batteries.<sup>12</sup> What the British found, however, was that their smaller frigates armed with 18-pounder main batteries were able to handle the new heavy frigates, so much so that by 1803, during the rearmament, the heavy frigate threat was no longer of concern.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Rif Winfield, *British Warships in the Age of Sail, 1793-1817: Design, Construction, Careers and Fates* (London, Chatham Publishing, 2005): 176, 181

<sup>12</sup> Robert Gardiner, *Frigates of the Napoleonic Wars* (Annapolis, Naval Institute Press, 2000): 9-48, Winfield, 132; Mark Lardas, *American Heavy Frigates, 1794-1826*, (Oxford: Osprey, 2003): 11

<sup>13</sup> Gardiner, 9-48

Across the Atlantic, however, a separate innovation was taking place. In response to maritime threats posed by Algiers pirates, the United States Congress authorized the construction of six frigates, including the still-afloat USS *Constitution*. Three of these, *Constitution*, *President*, and *United States*, were of a radical design. They were heavily built; while consequentially less handy than 18-pounder frigates, they were still excellent sailors when well handled. Their heavier scantlings provided increased protection from enemy fire. And, most importantly, they were even more heavily armed than their French and British counterparts. They were rated 44-guns but carried between 50 and 60, with main batteries of 24-pounders. They were designed to be able to tackle any frigate in the European navies and to run from any forces they could not handle.<sup>14</sup>

By the outbreak of the War of 1812, Britain was the world's foremost naval power. Their fleet was the largest in the world and maintained squadrons of varying strength throughout the globe. Every major naval battle and nearly every minor action had been a British victory. In fact, in 1811, no British ships struck their colours to the enemy. In the words of American statesman, historian, and future President Theodore Roosevelt, "A continuous course of victory, won mainly by seamanship, had made the English sailor overweening self-confident."<sup>15</sup> It was in that context that the war with America, motivated by justified American outrage at British impressment of Americans and hawkish aspirations to liberate Canada from the Empire, began.

A theme of Patrick O'Brian's novel *The Fortune of War*, set in 1812 and in which the protagonists witness both the capture of HMS *Java* and USS *Chesapeake*, is the excitement among several British naval officers when they hear of the commencement of the war with the United States. Naval characters express a yearning for a declaration of war and for the chance to get at

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<sup>14</sup> Ian W. Toll, *Six Frigates: The Epic History of the Founding of the U.S. Navy*, (New York and London, W.W. Norton and Company, 2006): 49-58; Lardas, *American Heavy Frigates*, 4-22; Gardner, 89-97

<sup>15</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, *The Naval War of 1812 or the History of the United States Navy during the last war with Great Britain*, (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1882): 24

American prizes, and upon hearing news of the war converse at great lengths about the prospects of matching their frigates against those of the United States. One officer even remarks to Dr. Stephen Maturin – renowned doctor and convenient naval novice used for explaining nautical topics to the reader – that taking a heavy frigate armed with 24-pounders in a much smaller frigate can be done: HMS *Sybil* taking *La Forte* in 1799 was an excellent example. Following the news of *Guerriere*'s loss and the destruction of *Java*, that excitement gives way to a sense of anger and urge for vengeance.<sup>16</sup> O'Brian's works are, of course, fiction, but in many ways remarkably accurate fiction. They are interesting enough to garner a mention in the preface of more than one non-fiction work on the age of Nelson, and for historian John B. Hattendorf to contribute to two series-reference companion works.<sup>17</sup> Given the difficulty of finding personalized, less formal and official accounts from the officers of the Royal Navy in general, and the small selection of officers who served in the North American Squadron, it is difficult to judge how accurately those scenes reflect the reality of the naval culture during the period.

## **Historiography of the Royal Navy in the Napoleonic Period**

A Royal Navy social history of this nature is, inherently, difficult to do. Getting inside the minds of naval officers to judge the overall perspective of the naval service primarily using official dispatches, and occasional letters submitted to publications such as the *Naval Chronicle*, is not as straight-forward as using personal correspondence. Personal correspondence from serving naval officers was rare, and the only surviving sources relating to the North American Squadron appear

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<sup>16</sup> Patrick O'Brian, *The Fortune of War*. (HarperCollins, 2003 – originally published in 1979).

<sup>17</sup> John B. Hattendorf collaborated with author Dean King on two reference works – King, Dean, John B. Hattendorf, and J. Worth Estes. *A Sea of Words: a Lexicon and Companion for Patrick O'Brian's Seafaring Tales*. (New York: Henry Holt, 2001); King, Dean, and John B. Hattendorf. *Harbors and High Seas: an Atlas and Geographical Guide to the Complete Aubrey-Maturin novels of Patrick O'Brian*. (New York: Henry Holt, 2000). Additionally, three other reference/companion works exist that focus on the Aubrey-Maturin series.

to be those of Philip Broke, the victor of the celebrated *Shannon-Chesapeake* action, and while extensive and thoroughly useful, they only provide insight into one man. Understandably, this type of historical research is not a common thread in Royal Naval historiography. Most historical works focus on administrative or operational aspects of Britain's naval history, in addition to the growing and excellent field of naval social histories.

One monolith of recent Royal Navy historiography (who will be examined in more depth later), N.A.M. Rodger, best summarized the historiography of the British Royal Navy during most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in a 1999 *Historical Journal* article:

It is not very likely that the editor of the *Historical Journal*, or any other scholarly publication, would have asked for such an article as this twenty-five years ago, or indeed that it could have been written had it been invited. Even in Britain, where it might be thought to have a natural habitat, naval history was deeply unfashionable, and among academics lay on the bare margins of professional acceptability.<sup>18</sup>

In that article Rodgers described the cycle of naval historiography in Britain since the conclusion of the Napoleonic Wars. During the Pax Britannia, a wealth of authors produced an extensive collection of naval history works, detailing the operational history of the Royal Navy, particularly in the Napoleonic Era. These works, led by giants such as William James, an eccentric anti-American, Dr. John Campbell, Captain William Goldsmith, and Captain Edward Pelham Brenton, focused on operational narratives. Expressing themes of patriotism and daring, these works were long, multi volume collections of anecdotes, from titanic naval actions to minor single-ship actions.

In the decades before the First World War, naval power was increasingly being seen by the public and political elite of Europe as the key to global power and security. As such, interest in naval history intensified. The style of the historical works being produced did not change

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<sup>18</sup> N.A.M. Rodger, "Recent Work in British Naval History, 1750-1815." *The Historical Journal* 51, no. 3 (2008): 741



considerably, and multi volume histories continued to dominate, but there was an increasingly practical application of naval history to current geopolitics. American naval history giant Alfred Thayer Mahan, a USN officer and lecturer at the United States Naval War College, exemplified this. His works explored the influence of naval power on history and provided lessons that could be applied to the modern United States Navy. Unlike previous works, Mahan also emphasized the importance of quality in terms of men and ship building. He argued that Britain's officer corps was excellent, and that this made up for issues of poor treatment and poor administration in the naval service. The efficiency of the naval officers played a key role in Britain's naval success.<sup>19</sup> This contrasted with the importance of ship building quality. Indeed, Mahan was adamant that the losses in 1812 were primarily because of the inferiority of British 18-pounder frigates to American 24-pounder heavy frigates.<sup>20</sup>

Among the other major authors of the period, Britain's Sir Julian Corbett's works reflect the style and principles of Mahan. He examined British naval and military history in many periods, from the Elizabethan war with Spain to the early nineteenth century. One notable work of his is *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, published in 1911, in which he applies aspects of Britain's naval history to modern naval theory. He makes an argument that the best naval defense is made with an offensive spirit, demonstrated by Japan's defeat of the Russian navy in Japanese home waters, and being the same spirit that underpinned fighting doctrine and culture in the Nelsonic period.<sup>21</sup> For example, the Royal Navy defended the Channel by maintaining a blockade of Brest; any French fleet intending to invade England had to first bring the blockading squadron to battle.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon The French Revolution and Empire, 1793-1812*. Vol. I. (London: Sampson Low, Marston, 1892): 69-71

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 66-67

<sup>21</sup> This book was published during the High Point of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, and in fact the Imperial Japanese Navy was modelled after the British Royal Navy in many ways, including its tactics and strategy

<sup>22</sup> Sir Julian Stafford Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1911): 20-23

Following the First World War, naval history fell out of fashion amongst university trained historians. As such, the volume and quality of naval history works declined.<sup>23</sup> The niche was picked up primarily by non-academic historians writing general historical works. Additionally, this period saw the continued activities of the Navy Records Society, which had been founded during the previous boom period of British naval history and was dedicated to preserving and publishing collections of naval documents. Today, the society has published over 160 volumes of documents, ranging from the Anglo-Spanish War of the late 1500s to the Second World War. Their works are overall an excellent collection of resources for students and academics, although as a source for researching Britain's naval history in North America they are lacking. To date, the only notable collections relating to Britain's activities in North America include a volume dedicated to naval operations supporting Britain's 1806-1807 invasions of the River Plate and the a volume edited by Julian Gwyn on the first decade of exploits of the Royal Navy in North American waters.<sup>24</sup> More recently, a section of the *Naval Miscellany Volume VIII*, a series of collections too small individually for an entire volume, contained the correspondence of Admiral Warren during his time commanding the North American Squadron.<sup>25</sup>

Published resources for British navy records relating to the two conflicts with the United States, the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812, are American in origin. The twelve volume (and counting) *Naval Documents of the American Revolution* consists of more than 16,000 pages of documents representing the American, British, French, and Spanish points of view in the naval theater of the Revolutionary War. The current twelve volumes only cover the war until 1778, the

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<sup>23</sup> Rodger, "Recent Work in British Naval History, 1750-1815." 741 N.A.M. Rodger, "Recent Books on the Royal Navy of the Eighteenth Century," *The Journal of Military History* 63, no. 3 (1999): 683

<sup>24</sup> John D. Grainger, *The Royal Navy in the River Plate, 1806-7*, Vol 135 (London, Navy Records Society, 1996); Julian Gwyn, *The Royal Navy and North America*, Vol 118, (London, Navy Records Society, 1973)

<sup>25</sup> Brian Vale, *The Naval Miscellany Volume VIII*, Vol 164, (London, Navy Records Society, 2017)

first year during which the Kingdom of France participated.<sup>26</sup> Of particular use for this thesis was the less extensive three volume *The Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History*. Published by the Department of the Navy, and electronically by the American Naval Records Society, these three volumes provide important documents principally from the American point of view, but also incorporate key British documents from the war. Many documents which are otherwise buried in overseas archives were made available to this project through the first two volumes.

Around the 1970s university trained historians began to return to Britain's naval history as a subject of respectable study, and in doing so introduced the recent trends of historical research to the field. Naval history, which had once been dominated by battle-oriented narratives, was now being examined through the lens of different schools of thought. It was approached through the traditional operational lens, but also through the scope of social history, economic history, and wider national histories.<sup>27</sup>

As this thesis is primarily a work of naval social history, literature on the social history of the Royal Navy is important to address. Tom Wareham's *Star Captains* is an excellent social history of frigate captains in the Royal Navy. He challenged the long-standing view that frigate command was a stepping stone to command ships of the line. Frigate commanders were not all young captains, indeed some of the most famous – the “star captains” as he called them – were older, Edward Pellew among them. He also demonstrated that while single ship frigate actions were very rare events – only about 4-5% of captains who commanded frigates ever fought one – there was a deep longing for such a victory amongst many captains. Since they were so rare, they

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<sup>26</sup> The Naval History and Heritage Command has all twelve current volumes available online: "Naval Documents of the American Revolution." *Naval History and Heritage Command*. Accessed May 16, 2018. <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/publications/publications-by-subject/naval-documents-of-the-american-revolution.html>.

<sup>27</sup> Rodger, "Recent Books on the Royal Navy of the Eighteenth Century," 683-684

had a major impact on the culture of naval captains.<sup>28</sup> Wareham's work was the first attempt to survey the social history of the Royal Navy's frigate captains, many of whom "were as obscure as the men they commanded" in naval historiography.<sup>29</sup>

D.A.B. Ronald's *Young Nelsons* takes on the task of describing the lives and careers of the Navy's apprentice officers – midshipmen and boys as young as eight, training for careers as naval officers by serving afloat, learning on the job, and being thrust into the realities and dangers of naval life in the process. Of relevance to this thesis, Ronald argues that wartime service gave young men an opportunity to break out of the rigid class system, to "reach out to a bright new future."<sup>30</sup> To that end, many young gentlemen in the service (and indeed, many older officers) were particularly eager to serve in frigates due to the better opportunities for notable service and prize money.<sup>31</sup>

Another work that examines the social history of naval officers is Adam Nicolson's *Men of Honour*, a work that focuses on explaining the mental landscape behind the victory at Trafalgar. Nicolson's work, a thoroughly readable approach to the often-told narrative of the Battle of Trafalgar explores the idea of the Trafalgar hero, and indeed the way in which the battle was fought and understood by Nelson and his Band of Brothers hinged in the sense of totality that hung over the British fleet. Over a decade of warfare and the looming sense of crisis, brought on by the disastrous war in Europe, the threats of French invasion, and the memories of revolution contributed to the sense of urgency that dominated the psyche of the officers in Nelson's fleet. The battle was fought with totality. Nelson's tactics hinged on liberating his captains' individual

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<sup>28</sup> Wareham, *The Star Captains*, 157-160

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 168

<sup>30</sup> Ronald, 207-221

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*

energies to pursue the annihilation of the enemy.<sup>32</sup> Battle was not understood as a necessary evil but as a moment of anticipated revelation. However, once the battle ended, Nicolson notes that the British expended every effort to save the lives of their opponents. While aggression had dominated the mindset of the British captains before and during the battle, charity, honour, and self restraint dominated afterwards.

One particularly useful field in the category of social history for this thesis is the study of advancement, promotions, and social class in the Royal Navy. This is one of the key points addressed in Wareham's works, in which he argues that while there was a high proportion of aristocratic officers in the Royal Navy, the navy still maintained a "progressive ethos of professionalism" in which attaining the patronage of officers through proven ability was crucial to a successful naval career.<sup>33</sup> Even the King could not save the career of an officer who was thoroughly incompetent, Wareham argued.<sup>34</sup> Richard Knight explored the role of patronage further by examining the system of patronage and networking amongst the Royal Navy, arguing that maintaining extensive and overlapping social connections across various aspects of British society – but most importantly within the navy itself – was of crucial importance when building a career in Britain's navy.<sup>35</sup> Douglass W. Allen's 2002 article in *Explorations in Economic History*, "The British Navy Rules: Monitoring and Incompatible Incentives in the Age of Fighting Sail" explored the system of incentives and monitoring of the Navy's officers.<sup>36</sup> Allen argued that the navy's reward system hinged upon the promise of prize money and the threat of unemployment. Aggressive and zealous officers were promoted and appointed to the ideal stations, while those

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<sup>32</sup> Nicolson, *Men of Honour*, 182-199

<sup>33</sup> Wareham, *The Star Captains*, 122-123, 228

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 150

<sup>35</sup> Timothy Knight, "Navigating Networks in the Napoleonic Era: A Close Study of three British Naval Officers and their Deliberate use of Networking." Masters Thesis, California State University (2016): 102-110

<sup>36</sup> Allen, 204–210

who were found lacking or failed to build a reputation as such were not.<sup>37</sup> Evan Wilson, in *Social Background and Promotion Prospects*, utilized new sources and statistical databases to challenge the conventional view that the navy was dominated by titled nobility. Instead, he found that the most important connections to have as an officer were to other naval officers, not to Royalty and the Nobility.<sup>38</sup> Finally, though far more briefly, Nicolson makes the distinction in his work that the officers of Britain's Royal navy were:

largely a reflection of social structure. In England, the officers of the navy came from a broad spread of English society, stretching from the power reaches of the aristocracy through the landed gentry and professional classes to (occasionally) the genuinely poor.<sup>39</sup>

Career prospects played hand in hand with the culture of naval officers. The navy expected their officers to behave in a certain way, in and out of battle. And as there were always fewer appointments than officers commissioned, even during wartime, competition was rife amongst the officer corps.

Naval culture, being the culture within the Royal Navy and the culture of naval admiration and influence in wider society, was explored by Margaret Lincoln and Timothy Jenks. Lincoln's *Representing the Royal Navy* examines the self image of naval men as well as civilian and political views of the navy. She argued that the navy made an extensive effort to portray itself as a defender of British liberty and religion and fostered a reputation of invincibility and honour. It was a reflection of their self image, which hinged upon the realities of the service. She highlighted the rewards officers might expect for valorous service, and the high degree of competitiveness for

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid

<sup>38</sup> Evan Wilson, "Social Background and promotion Prospects in the Royal Navy, 1775-1815." *English Historical Review* CXXXI, no. 550 (2016)

<sup>39</sup> Nicolson, 24

appointments, especially in peace.<sup>40</sup> This was so ingrained in the public's image of the navy that victories against opponents of equal force did not normally garner significant honour or glory.<sup>41</sup> That public image of the navy in wartime Britain, fostered by celebrations of victory and the efforts of the navy and government, was very strong. As Jenks argued, however, naval commemoration did not work to harmonize society or to ease social or political tensions; naval patriotism was often a divisive force.<sup>42</sup>

Operational narratives and studies are still prominent in naval historiography, particularly in the category of general histories. However, the operational histories of today are radically different from those of the previous two centuries. Large, multivolume works that extensively detail individual skirmishes, actions, and battles are no longer the norm. Some, such as Martin Robson's recent *A History of the Royal Navy* series, provides an introduction to the naval warfare of individual periods (the flagship of the series being the mistitled *Napoleonic Wars*). In recounting the major actions and operations of the French Revolutionary Wars and Napoleonic Wars, Robson emphasized the importance of amphibious operations and came to the defense of Admiral Robert Calder, who was chastized in life for failing to win a decisive victory over Villeneuve's fleet at the Battle of Cape Finisterre. Robson argued that, despite failing to inflict a significant defeat on the French fleet, Calder's action was enough to stall Villeneuve's attempt to sail to Brest to lift the British blockade, the crucial first stage of any invasion of Britain.<sup>43</sup> The importance of amphibious

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<sup>40</sup> Margaret Lincoln, *Representing the Royal Navy: British Sea Power, 1750-1815* (Aldershot, Ashgate and the National Maritime Museum, 2002): 13-36

<sup>41</sup> Lincoln, 17-19

<sup>42</sup> Timothy Jenks, *Naval Engagements: patriotism, Cultural Politics, and the Royal Navy, 1793-1815* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>43</sup> Martin Robson, *A History of the Royal Navy: The Napoleonic Wars* (London and New York, I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2014): 114-119

operations and army support is further explored in Christopher Hall's *Wellington's Navy*, which examines naval operations in support of the Peninsular War.<sup>44</sup>

The aforementioned N.A.M. Rodger has produced some of the most extensive works in Age of Sail naval history which have touched upon operational, administrative, and social history. Rodger tried to reconnect naval history with Britain's wider history, pointing out in an introduction to his most extensive work that:

To describe the eighteenth-century British state, in war or peace, without mentioning the Royal Navy is quite a feat of intellectual virtuosity; it must have been as difficult as writing a history of Switzerland without mentioning mountains, or writing a novel without using the letter 'e.'<sup>45</sup>

Rodger's works are part of a movement described by Keith Mercer as naval revisionism.<sup>46</sup> Rodger provided a fresh take on the importance of Britain's naval administration, and took to the topics of impressment, shipbuilding, and living conditions on board Georgian navy ships with the goal of myth-busting. In some areas, however, Rodger's revisionism went to far, and portrayed the realities of the Royal Navy as too benign.<sup>47</sup>

Another area that has seen recent historical revisionism is that of maritime warfare in general, under Sam Willis. Willis points out that:

With such an established tradition of scholarly research backed, and in many respects driven, by public and commercial interests in sailing warfare, one may be forgiven for thinking that we know more about how sailing warships of the eighteenth century were fought and how battles were won or lost than we actually do, but the reality of the situation is far less encouraging. There is indeed much that we do not know, and much of what we do know is unsafe.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Christopher Hall, *Wellington's Navy: Sea Power and the Peninsular War, 1807-1814* (London: Chatham Publishing, 2004).

<sup>45</sup> N.A.M. Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean: A Naval History of Britain, 1649-1815*. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005): lxiii

<sup>46</sup> Keith Mercer, *North Atlantic Press Gangs: Impressment and Naval-Civilian Relations in Nova Scotia and Newfoundland, 1749-1815* Ph.D. Dissertation, Dalhousie University, (2008): 12

<sup>47</sup> Ibid

<sup>48</sup> Sam Willis, *Fighting at Sea in the Eighteenth Century: The Art of Sailing Warfare* (Woodbridge, The Boydell Press, 2008): 1



He argued that Historians have been limited by the complexity and uniqueness of maritime language. Rather than focus on the printed Fighting Instructions, Willis examined a wealth of different records to determine how ships actually fought at sea. Willis found that academic studies of maritime warfare in the age of sail were too often done in a vacuum, and were detached from the practical realities of sailing warfare.<sup>49</sup> This fresh take on maritime history may be the result of Willis having no real maritime links or interests before turning to naval history.<sup>50</sup> Unlike myself, who grew up immersed in maritime life and had a lifetime fascination with naval history, Willis entered the field without any preconceived notions for how warfare at sea was conducted. When examining how it actually happened, this allowed him to take an unbiased approach to describing the realities of maritime warfare.

Of the British works, academic and general, that tell a narrative history of the period (particularly in books that examine the 1793-1813 period of warfare) the War of 1812 is often a sideshow. Rodger tended to dismiss the importance of the colonial sphere in Britain's wider naval history.<sup>51</sup> The section devoted to the American conflict in Rodger's extensive *The Command of the Ocean* is very short and dismissive of the importance of that conflict on any aspect of naval history.<sup>52</sup> While not all are as dismissive as Rodger, discussions of the American war are often dismal compared to other theaters of conflict in the Napoleonic Era, particularly in more general works. David Howarth's 1962 *Sovereign of the Seas* skips the entire period, passing right from the

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 170

<sup>50</sup> This is discussed at length in the Podcast *Histories of the Unexpected*, hosted by Willis and Plymouth University professor James Daybell

<sup>51</sup> N.A.M. Rodger, *The Wooden World: An Anatomy of the Georgian Navy*, (London: Collins, 1986); Rodger, "Shipboard Life in the Georgian Navy, 1750-1800: The Decline of the Old Order?," in Lewis R. Fischer (et al.), *The North Sea: Twelve Essays on the Social History of Maritime Labour* (Stavanger, Norway, 1992), pp. 29-39; Rodger, "Sea-Power and Empire, 1688-1793," in P.J. Marshall (ed.), *The Oxford History of the British Empire: Volume 2, The Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 169-83.

<sup>52</sup> Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean*, 567-572

calm after Trafalgar to Napoleon's final surrender aboard HMS *Bellerophon* in 1815. Christopher Lloyd's *The Nation and the Navy's* and Peter Hore's *The Habit of Victory's* discussion of the War of 1812 is effectively reduced to two paragraphs on the actions of 1812, the *Shannon-Chesapeake* action, and the Admiralty policy response. Even Arthur Herman's thoroughly readable *To Rule the Waves* dismissed the War of 1812 as a side note to the ongoing conflict.<sup>53</sup> As this thesis will explore, the events that occurred during the War of 1812 had a significant influence on naval policy and naval identity back in Britain.

Literature regarding the operations and administration of the North American Squadron has exclusively come from Canadian historians, but it has not been a subject of great popularity even within Canada. Early works in the 1950s that addressed the topic include Gerald Graham's *Empire of the North Atlantic* and a Ph.D thesis by W.A.B. Douglass, though in the decades that followed little was done in the field.<sup>54</sup> Marc Drolet's 2002 thesis was the first in depth study of the North American Squadron. He examined the operations of the squadron from 1807 to the conclusion of the War of 1812,<sup>55</sup> and argued that too often historians and popular imagination focused on what the North American Squadron did not achieve, thus coming to a poor conclusion regarding its effectiveness. He instead concluded that given the logistical and geographic problems that the Squadron had to surmount it did an effective job of protecting British trade, establishing a near-coastlong maritime blockade, and giving the British army freedom to strike along the American coastline.<sup>56</sup> This thesis was soon after followed by Julian Gwyn's *Frigates and*

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<sup>53</sup> Arthur Herman, *To Rule the Waves: How the British Navy Shaped the Modern World* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004).

<sup>54</sup> Julian Gwyn, *Frigates and Foremasts: The North American Squadron in Nova Scotia Waters, 1745-1815* (Toronto and Vancouver: UBC Press, 2003): xi

<sup>55</sup> Marc Drolet, *The North American Squadron of the Royal Navy, 1807-1815* Ph.D. Dissertation, McGill University, (2008): 4

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, 4-7, 360-365

*Foremasts*, which made the same argument.<sup>57</sup> Beset by logistical problems, the North American Squadron, and particularly the ships that operated out of Halifax, proved to be a very effective fighting force during its years of operation.<sup>58</sup>

Keith Mercer's doctoral dissertation explored the relatively untouched field of naval-civilian relations, in the context of impressment in Nova Scotia and Newfoundland. His work is significant for using the North American Squadron as a case study to examine wider naval trends and for its work in revising historical interpretations of impressment in the British Empire. His work fits into the historiography in between the long-standing view of the press gangs as violent, indiscriminate kidnapping rackets and the benign view of N.A.M. Rodger. Mercer argued that while violent confrontations between communities and the navy erupted over the harsh realities of the press gang, there was also a great deal of cooperation between communities, colonial authorities, and the navy. It was indeed a hazard for many sailors but was regarded as an occupational hazard.<sup>59</sup> He also argued that colonial histories need to write the navy back into Canadian history, and naval historians need to examine the impacts and relations of the Royal Navy beyond imperial warfare. Too often narratives are told from one end of the spectrum.<sup>60</sup>

Mercer's latest work examined naval commemoration in the North American context – another area to which naval historians need to pay more attention. In “Nelson on the Mind,” Mercer examined commemorations of the victories and career of Admiral Horatio Nelson in Halifax, finding that for Halifaxians Nelson was “the biggest celebrity of the day,” and that the cultural memory of Nelson lived on after into his death.<sup>61</sup> The impact of the *Shannon-Chesapeake* action

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<sup>57</sup> Gwyn, *Frigates and Foremasts*, 149-150

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, 149

<sup>59</sup> Mercer, *North Atlantic Press Gangs*, 5

<sup>60</sup> Mercer, *North Atlantic Press Gangs*, 4

<sup>61</sup> Keith Mercer, "Lord Nelson on the Mind: Naval Victories and Cultural Memory in Nova Scotia" *Trafalgar Chronicle* 22, (2012), 171-172

was even more profound; Mercer argued that the commemorations following the local victory were unprecedented in scale and generated a never-before-seen level of patriotism in Halifax and Nova Scotia.<sup>62</sup> While the relationship between the Royal Navy and wider society has been examined before (though, as Rodger pointed out in 2008, it is still a new field), Mercer was the first to explore this relationship in the Canadian colonies.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, Mercer commented on the little attention that was paid to Halifax's commemorations of the action in the 2013 collection of articles on the *Shannon-Chesapeake* action by Tim Voelcker.<sup>64</sup>

## Historiography of the War of 1812

The historiography of the War of 1812 comes from three broad national perspectives: American, Canadian, and British. Most books that discuss this conflict are written from the United States' perspective.<sup>65</sup> While it has largely faded from public memory, the War of 1812 was often portrayed at America's Second War of Independence against the United Kingdom, still a foremost world power, while in Britain it is rarely thought of as more than a side note to the titanic Napoleonic Wars being waged across Europe. In contemporary literature, and overall historiography, the American conflict was viewed as a regrettable distraction from the true enemy. In Canada, arguably the "country" most impacted by the conflict,<sup>66</sup> the conflict with America has

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<sup>62</sup> Keith Mercer, "Colonial Patriotism to 'Mystical Chords of Memory:' The Halifax Celebrations and Commemorations of the *Shannon-Chesapeake* Battle," *Acadiensis* XLIV, no. 1 (2015): 37-39

<sup>63</sup> Mercer, "Lord Nelson on the Mind:" 172

<sup>64</sup> Mercer, "Colonial Patriotism:" 40; Tim Voelcker, editor, *Broke of the Shannon and the War of 1812*, (Seaworth Publishing, Barnsley, 2013)

<sup>65</sup> Carl Benn, "Review of 1812: War with America, by Jon Latimer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, P.P, 2007)" *The English Historical Review*, Vol 124, No. 506, (Feb, 2009): 197; Martin Salmon, "Review of 1812: War with America, by Jon Latimer (London, Faber and Faber, 2012)" *Journal for Maritime Research*, Vol 17, No. 1, (Feb, 2015): 82

<sup>66</sup> While the conflict was not the patriotic war of national identity that is sometimes seized upon in Canada, its outcome was incredibly important to the development and existence of a separate country in the northern half of North America, one framed by a culture of Loyalism and one whose Head of State is not an elected President but a Monarch of the House of Windsor.

never been popular in academic circles. Prime Minister Stephen Harper's Bicentenary War of 1812 Commemorations were met with ambivalence from many academic historians.

Recently, there have not been many well-known works on the War of 1812 to emerge from Canadian authors. Wesley Turner's 1990 account argued that both the British-Canadians and the Americans won the conflict. The United States were "victorious" because it ended the threat posed by the British and Native Americans, and the British-Canadians won because they had secured the existence of an Anglo-Canadian state in the northern half of North America.<sup>67</sup> The most notable Canadian accounts were older. Pierre Berton's classic two volume work is a thoroughly readable account of the campaigns on land, though does not discuss the war at sea in any detail.<sup>68</sup> J. Mackay Hitsman's 1965 monograph, among other things, countered the myth that the war was won by Upper Canadian militia; his work was updated in 1999 by Donald E. Graves, who also wrote an article that emphasized the internal dissent within Canada during the conflict.<sup>69</sup>

Nicole Eustace and Donald Hickey both argued that the United States claimed victory during the War of 1812, but that the Americans had no real evidence to support the claim. Their aggressive war ended in a *status quo ante bellum*, largely due to military blunders.<sup>70</sup> They are also in agreement over the historical significance of the War of 1812, although their approach to the war's significance takes different forms. Eustace focuses on the cultural impact of the war through literature, stories, and songs that emanated from the war. This cultural memory of what was seen

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<sup>67</sup> Wesley B. Turner, *The War of 1812: The War that Both Sides Won* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1990).

<sup>68</sup> Pierre Berton, *The Invasion of Canada: 1812-1813* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1980); Pierre Berton, *Flames Across the Border; The Canadian-American Tragedy, 1813-1814* (Boston: Atlantic-Little, Brown, 1981).

<sup>69</sup> J. Mackay Hitsman, *The Incredible War of 1812: A Military History*, updated by Donald E. Graves (Toronto: Robin Brass Studio, 1999); Donald E. Graves, "The War of 1812 along the St. Lawrence Border and the Lake Ontario Littoral: A Canadian Perspective," in *A Shared Heritage: The Historical Legacy of Sackets Harbor and Madison Barracks*, ed. Jan M. Saltgaber (Ithaca, N.Y.: Ithaca College, 1993), 15-32

<sup>70</sup> Donald Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990): 1-3; Nicole Eustace, *1812: War of the Passions of Patriotism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012): xi

by many as a benign war (as very few Americans were actually impacted, according to her arguments) led to shock upon the opening of the American Civil War, when civilians were witness to the carnage resulting from the Battle of Manassas (or Bull Run).<sup>71</sup> In contrast, Hickey's narrative is broader and examines the entire war, analyzing the events and their significance.

Alan Taylor's *Civil War of 1812* takes an entirely different approach; he does not write from any distinct national angle, and instead views the conflict as a multifaceted civil war. This manifested in many ways: the shared cultural and linguistic heritage between the British servicemen, the Americans, and the Canadian settlers, the conflicting understandings of citizenship, namely the British understanding that subjects could not renounce their status, and the nature of the region. The frontier between Upper Canada and the United States was a borderland, where individuals and trade frequently crossed from one side to the other. Taylor argued that the most important result of the war was the separation of the identities of Upper Canadians and Americans, without which a distinct, Loyalist Anglo-Canadian culture could not have formed.<sup>72</sup>

Of the above works, none devote any meaningful discussion to the Atlantic theater of the conflict. Of the general War of 1812 histories examined for this thesis, only the two most "partisan" focused on the naval exploits in the conflict, and each took opposing viewpoints on the true winner of the naval engagements. Jon Latimer's work, self described as the first British account in decades, argued that the War of 1812 was a failed American "War of Conquest."<sup>73</sup> The work devotes three chapters fully to the war at sea, and throughout emphasized the role played by the Royal Navy in coastal operations.<sup>74</sup> Daughan's *1812: The Navy's War*, as the title suggests, argued

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<sup>71</sup> Eustace, xi

<sup>72</sup> Alan Taylor, *The Civil War of 1812: American Citizens, British Subjects, Irish Rebels, and Indian Allies* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010)

<sup>73</sup> Jon Latimer, *1812: War with America*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2007): 3

<sup>74</sup> Ibid

that while America's political and army leadership bungled the war, it was their success at sea that formed the basis of America's claim to victory.<sup>75</sup> A particularly interesting aspect of Daughan's thesis is the significance of the American naval victories in 1812, largely regarded by historians as "spectacular but of no strategic importance," Daughan argues that they were significant because of the psychological impact they had on the British. Those losses, Daughan argued, transformed Britain's opinion of the United States, and fostered a sense of great respect that shaped the relations between the two North American powers.<sup>76</sup>

Daughan's claim that America's victory came from its naval successes is countered to some degree by Wade Dudley's *Splintering the Wooden Wall*, an analysis of Britain's maritime blockade of the United States during the conflict. He challenged the long-standing assumptions that Britain's blockade was devastating to America's economy, a claim first argued by Alfred Thayer Mahon.<sup>77</sup> He did not claim that the "Wooden Wall" collapsed, but argued that it was an ineffective blockade. This was caused by cautious Admiralty policy, logistical and geographical difficulties, and risk taking in the British fleet that reduced the blockade's effectiveness. This argument is challenged in Brian Arthur's work on the same subject, which focused more on the economic impacts of the blockade. *How Britain Won the War of 1812* argued that the economic impacts of Britain's blockade and commerce raiding (both he and Dudley point out that American merchant shipping had ground to a halt by 1814) were so profound that it compelled the Americans to end the war on favourable terms with the United Kingdom.<sup>78</sup> Both Dudley and Arthur agree that the frigate actions were of little significance; Dudley considered them as distractions which only hindered Britain's

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<sup>75</sup> George C. Daughan, *1812: The Navy's War*. (New York, Basic Books, 2011)

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, 416-417

<sup>77</sup> Wade Dudley, *Splintering the Wooden Wall: The British Blockade of the United States, 1812-1815*, (Annapolis, Naval Institute Press, 2003): 4-7

<sup>78</sup> Brian Arthur, *How Britain Won the War of 1812: The Royal Navy's Blockade of the United States, 1812-1815* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2011).

ability to carry out the blockade (the *Shannon-Chesapeake* action in particular, as it left Boston free from blockade), and Arthur argued that single ship losses and victories were less significant than the economic blockade.<sup>79</sup>

Authors of military histories of the War of 1812 generally agreed with Arthur and Dudley that the single ship actions were not significant. However, some supported Daughan, or generally found the naval war of great enough interest to devote entire monographs to. As part of the before-cited collection of articles on the *Shannon-Chesapeake* action edited by Tim Voelcker, American historian and retired naval officer John B. Hattendorf (who has also written extensively on British naval history) penned “The War of 1812: A Perspective from the United States,” in which he argued that while lacking in strategic significance, the tactical American victories in 1812 had profound cultural and morale significance in the conflict and in later American culture.<sup>80</sup> In his narrative history of the early United States Navy, *Six Frigates*, Ian Toll makes a similar argument: it was really the American navy that won the War of 1812, because although overall the war was a disaster for the Americans, they remembered the fact that “America’s tiny fleet had shocked and humbled the mightiest navy the world had ever known,” putting an end the Republican anti-navalism that had plagued the United States Navy.<sup>81</sup> Stephen Budiansky’s *Perilous Fight* makes the same argument: Britain’s losses at sea secured British and global respect for the United States as a military power, and the cultural respect for the young United States Navy ended the anti-naval policies that had advocated against creating a navy at all.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Dudley, *Splintering the Wooden Wall*, 94-95; Arthur, 97-98

<sup>80</sup> John B. Hattendorf, “The War of 1812: A Perspective from the United States,” in Tim Voelcker, editor, *Broke of the Shannon and the War of 1812* (Barnsley: Seaforth Publishing, 2013): 1-16

<sup>81</sup> Toll, 456

<sup>82</sup> Stephen Budiansky, *Perilous Fight: America’s Intrepid War with Britain on the High Seas, 1812-1815* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010): xv, 360-368



British historian Andrew Lambert takes an entirely different approach to the naval war. In his 2013 *The Challenge* and in an article in Voelcker's *Shannon-Chesapeake* collection, Lambert argued that the war at sea was a disaster for the Americans. Though they latched onto the 1812 naval victories of the heavy frigates against "smaller, less powerful British opponents,"<sup>83</sup> even those victories were hollow, as they prevented the participating frigates from pursuing the more important mission of commerce raiding.<sup>84</sup> Unlike most historians, Lambert focused less on the first three frigate actions of the war – *Guerriere*, *Macedonian*, and *Java*, and instead examined the victories of *Shannon*, *Phoebe*, and *Endymion*. However, it should be noted that *Phoebe* and *Endymion*'s victories were not frigate actions in the sense that the 1812 losses were; if the victories of *Constitution* and *United States* were one sided affairs, so to were *Phoebe*'s capture of *Essex* with the help of an 18-gun sloop, and *Endymion*'s running fight with *President* with an entire squadron in pursuit.<sup>85</sup> This is not to say that Lambert's conclusions or analysis of the naval actions were necessary wrong, but as this thesis will argue, the officers of the Royal Navy themselves may not have agreed with him.

By contrast to other histories of the naval war, Kevin McCranie's *Utmost Gallantry* is a balanced approach to the operations and campaigns of the naval war, which uses British and American archival sources to examine the events often told in narratives. Rather than just retell the stories of naval encounters, entire cruises and campaigns are analysed in full. McCranie

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<sup>83</sup> Andrew Lambert, *The Challenge: Britain against America in the Naval War of 1812*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2013); Andrew Lambert, "Sideshow? British Grand Strategy and the War of 1812, in Tim Voelcker, editor, *Broke of the Shannon and the War of 1812* (Barnsley: Seaforth Publishing, 2013): 17-39

<sup>84</sup> Ibid

<sup>85</sup> *Endymion* certainly battered *President* into submission on her own, but the remaining ships of the squadron played an important role. For one thing, their presence in the distance meant that *President* had to run – she did not have the freedom to maneuver. Captain Hope and his crew certainly deserved the credit for fighting and battering *President* into submission one on one, but the capture may not have been possible without *Majestic* and *Tenedos* coming up after the fighting stopped. It is impossible to speculate what may have happened had the rest of the squadron not been present.

evaluates the successes and failure of the British and Americans throughout the war, and discusses the extensive logistical and geographical problems that beset the British forces just as he explains the vastly outnumbered American's successful challenging of the Royal Navy. Events are told from both perspectives whenever possible, and McCranie's analysis points out that often the encounters were seen very differently by the opposing sides.<sup>86</sup>

## Thesis and Sources

Both Wareham and Ronald commented on the popularity of serving in frigates during this period. The rare chance of winning a single-ship action was coveted by officers of all stripes. However, Lincoln is correct in pointing out that, normally, defeating an enemy ship of equal strength was not an overly glorious affair in Britain's navy. The captain who captured an enemy frigate of similar tonnage and broadside weight in 1805 could hardly have expected the treatment that awaited Philip Broke after his capture of USS *Chesapeake*.<sup>87</sup> That leaves the question: what had changed in 1813?

Most work on the Royal Navy in the War of 1812 focuses on operational and administrative effectiveness. This thesis does not attempt to address that topic in any meaningful way, other than to comment on the disparity between operational decisions made in the wake of the 1812 losses and the perspectives and actions of the officers in the North American Squadron. While historians such as Drolet, Gwyn, and Lambert rightly point out that the 1812 losses were unequal contests, and therefore no real stain on the effectiveness of the North American Squadron, this thesis examines the defeats in their cultural context. The Royal Navy entered the War of 1812 expecting

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<sup>86</sup> Kevin D. McCranie, *Utmost Gallantry: The U.S. and Royal Navies at Sea in the War of 1812* (Annapolis, Naval Institute Press, 2011).

<sup>87</sup> McCranie described the honours bestowed on Broke and his officers as extraordinary given the equality between the two ships: McCranie, 154

to defeat America's heavy frigates, just as it had defeated the 24-pounder frigates of the French Republic and Empire. Instead, it was not until USS *President* was battered into submission by HMS *Endymion* in early 1815 that any of America's heavy frigates succumbed to the self-perceived invincible Royal Navy. Instead, in three separate actions three British frigates were taken or destroyed, and two sloops of war met similar fates.

This thesis superficially builds off the arguments of Mercer, who examined the concern among Nova Scotians over Britain's naval reputation, and those of Americans Daughan, Hattendorf, Toll, and Budiansky, who argued that the unequal 1812 contests had a profound impact on Britain's perception of the United States. This was a fundamental result of the shock that Britain experienced. The culture of victory that had developed in the Royal Navy did not imagine that such losses could occur, so when three British frigates were captured by the Americans in 1812 there was a shift in how Britons perceived the Americans and the United States Navy. Daughan specifically argued that Britain's post-war relationship with the United States hinged upon their newfound respect for the United States as a military power, largely driven by their single ship victories in the War of 1812.

As much as can be observed, this thesis' method of studying naval culture is unique. Lincoln and Jenks both approached naval culture from the perspective of commemoration and literature, whereas this thesis seeks to explore the lived culture of naval officers serving at sea. Fundamentally, it is more difficult to do. There are very few existing personal documents of Royal Navy officers of the period, let alone those who served in the North American Station. Therefore, to explore the naval culture in the North American Squadron of the period, this thesis employs a hybrid biographical and microhistory approach. As there were only a handful of officers involved in the notable actions of this conflict and so few personal sources that have survived, a handful of

officers are examined closely. Their opinions, actions, and the themes reflected in their personal and official correspondence are set into the wider context of the Royal Navy.

There are three main types of sources used to explore the mindset and culture of naval officers in this thesis. The first is official dispatches: letters sent by captains to their commanding admirals, and admirals to the Admiralty, outlining the notable incidents that occurred at sea. In the case of actions, either victories or defeats, they were often eventually published in news outlets, and officers wrote them with the consideration of publication and digestion by readers throughout the British Empire. The themes addressed in dispatches therefore reflect the common themes of naval culture as a whole. Naval officers tried to elevate tones of duty and heroism in official dispatches, both as a means of influencing public opinion and of enhancing the reputations of the officers under their command.<sup>88</sup> The majority of those documents are held by the United Kingdom's National Archives, primarily under various Admirals Dispatches collections.

The minutes kept by Courts Martial for the 1812 losses are also important resources. Courts Martial, being drier and more invested in the nuts and bolts of a particular incident, were published less frequently, and as such the speeches officers gave in their own defense were not issued with the goal of speaking to public perceptions. Rather, the themes expressed in Courts Martial better reflect the expectations of the Royal Navy, given that an officer's goal under trial is to appease the panel of officers who would decide his fate.

The most useful, but less common, type of naval source was personal correspondence. "Personal letters were of the most profound importance to individuals in the eighteenth century. For naval officers, such as Philip Broke and his contemporaries, letters were their main means of communicating with their family and friends and home. They were essential to maintaining and

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<sup>88</sup> Jenks, 14-20

developing relationships during periods of prolonged absence.”<sup>89</sup> Personal letters were the best indication of what the author was truly thinking, as they were rarely written with any intention of public publication. Unfortunately, the only known collection of letters from an officer involved in the North American Squadron is that of Philip Broke. As such, the themes of Broke’s correspondence through the events he witnessed or participated in are used as a case study, in concert with more official accounts used elsewhere.

Finally, the *Naval Chronicle* is examined extensively as a historical source, and as a collection of printed copies of hard-to-find sources from the period. The *Chronicle* commented extensively on the events of 1812 and included a wealth of submitted letters from largely anonymous readers offering their own opinions on the events of the day. This is complemented by a brief overview of Britain’s wider public press, and of two of Halifax’s newspapers: the established *Royal Gazette* and the much younger *Acadian Recorder*.

Chapter Two analyses the five single ship losses in 1812 through the viewpoint of the officers who struck their colours. The reactions and defense of the defeated commanders in 1812 demonstrate the culture of aggressive action and “fighting spirit” in the Royal Navy. In four of the five actions, the losing British ship struck to an enemy of vastly superior tonnage and broadside weight, yet in each case the disparity in manpower and firepower was not the primary defense invoked by the defeated captains. In one case it was not even discussed as a meaningful factor. Rather, it was the result of the inability to continue action with a chance at victory. There was an understanding among the defeated officers and their judges in the Courts Martial that the Royal Navy’s 18-pounder frigates had a fighting chance against the American heavy frigates.

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<sup>89</sup> Ellen Gils, “Letters to his Wife ‘Loo’”, in Tim Voelcker, editor, *Broke of the Shannon and the War of 1812* (Barnsley: Seaforth Publishing, 2013): 94

Chapter Three examines the reactions to these losses that reverberated throughout the Royal Navy and the wider naval community, primarily through the *Naval Chronicle*. In contrast to the defeated officers, coverage of the losses in the *Naval Chronicle* was more concerned with the disparity in force. Indeed, the sheer size and firepower of the American heavy frigates, at times exaggerated, became a focal point in the naval discourse. This, in turn, sparked outrage at the Admiralty, as naval policy was blamed for putting the frigates in danger. With the exception of papers in Halifax, the popular press of the British sphere largely agreed that the Admiralty was to blame for the tragedy of their naval heroes.

Finally, Chapter Four examines how the Royal Navy itself reacted to the losses of the previous year in 1813. The Admiralty responded by trying to prevent the navy's frigates from challenging their American counterparts one-on-one, fearing further losses. They sought concentrations of force and extensive blockades to protect British interests. The serving captains on the North American Squadron were instead more concerned with honour; both the personal honour of individual captains and the collective honour of a naval service that had been humbled in 1812 and could be vindicated by one-on-one victories against the Americans.

In a system where one's career and reputation depended on demonstrating zeal and an aggressive ethos in action, where battles and actions were encouraged – and running from superior enemies (to a degree) was severely discouraged – the impact of five single ship losses in one year was extreme. Interestingly, the views of the naval community and the Admiralty did not reflect those of the navy's serving officers. The latter were interested in revenge as well, but annihilation through overwhelming force did not interest officers such as Captain James Yeo, Captain Richard Kerr, Captain Thomas Capel, or Captain Philip Broke, who instead sought to restore Britain's honour through equal contests. They maintained that Britain's 18-pounders could defeat the

American heavy frigates, as they had defeated France's 24-pounders. In some cases, this desire for revenge jeopardized the wider strategy of the North American Squadron, as matters of honour took precedence over strategy. Philip Broke, in his months blockading Boston, twice defied orders to try and bring about an even contest, first with USS *President* and USS *Congress*, who consequentially escaped from their blockaded port, and finally with USS *Chesapeake*.

Overall, this thesis attempts to examine the "culture of victory" and the fighting spirit of the post-Nelsonic British Royal Navy through its experience of loss. As such it examines some naval events that are over-studied. The three frigate actions of 1812 are frequently discussed in British and American accounts of the conflict. In British accounts, just as the *Shannon-Chesapeake* action is over-celebrated, the 1812 frigate actions are described as inconsequential and dismissed as unequal contests. A common British perspective is best summed up by Rodger, who argued that: "in the case of 18-pounder frigates in action with 24-pounder ships, the disparity in force is a sufficient explanation."<sup>90</sup> That justification would not have been well received by the officers of the Royal Navy, and their record at sea in the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars implied that it was not an accurate statement. Regardless of how true this was, the fact that it was not a sufficient justification for the Royal Navy of the period says something about the culture and the fighting spirit that had developed in the service. These actions mattered a great deal to contemporary Britons and to the Royal Navy.

This thesis also explores lesser known events in the War of 1812 and reassesses their importance in Britain's navy history. The loss of *Alert*, *Frolic*, and *Peacock* in 1812 and early 1813 are often overshadowed by the frigate duels, and this is largely the result of the fact that the public was more concerned with the loss of three frigates than the losses of small sloops. However, the

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<sup>90</sup> Rodger, *Command of the Ocean*, 516

post-battle accounts of these actions reflect similar themes to those of the more well-known losses of *Guerriere*, *Macedonian*, and *Java*. Finally, the events of the Blockade of Boston by Capel's squadron are thoroughly examined; the proceedings in April and May are interesting in and of themselves and add lot of weight to the motivation behind Captain Philip Broke's famous challenging of USS *Chesapeake* at the end of May 1813.

This thesis stands in contrast to British naval histories which dismiss the colonial context, notably N.A.M. Rodger. The widespread concern amongst the officers, Admiralty, and civilian followers of the Royal Navy, not to mention the press in London, demonstrate that what happened in the waters off Nova Scotia could and did reach deep into the minds of Britons across the Empire. The defeat of five vessels in American waters provides an excellent set of case studies for how the Royal Navy reacted to losses. It generated a consuming insecurity and urge for vengeance. Interestingly, however, while Britons were outraged at the losses that occurred, no one blamed the officers involved. In fact, their decisions to surrender were widely accepted. This is contrasted to some degree by the mindset of the Navy at the time of Trafalgar as described by Nicolson. In that sense it complicates Nicolson's thesis. The Nelsonian medieval cult evident in the writings of Nelson and his brother officers is not present, and nor is the sense of dread and totality. The losses of 1812 were shocking and inspired a strong desire for vengeance, but they were not fuelled by the same conditions as existed at the Battle of Trafalgar. England was not threatened by invasion, and the Royal Navy had aged by a decade.



## **Chapter Two: “It is with the deepest regret:” Reporting and reconciling loss in a navy accustomed to victory, 1812**

Generally, both Americans and Britons expected that war between the two would play to America’s advantage on land and to Britain’s by sea. Upper and Lower Canada were poorly defended and neither the British nor American administrations expected much resistance to an American invasion. Former President Thomas Jefferson claimed in a letter to the editor of a Philadelphia newspaper that invading Canada would be “a mere matter of marching.”<sup>1</sup> The subsequent invasions of Canada in 1812 were frustrated by the logistical issues of invading a region as vast and rugged as Canada, the tenacity of General Isaac Brock’s generalship, the unexpected determination of his soldiers and militia, and the important contribution of Britain’s Indigenous allies. Three separate American invasions failed: two armies were defeated by Brock’s British and First Nations forces, and a third army simply refused to cross the border due to terrible morale late in 1812.<sup>2</sup>

No one expected that the tiny American navy would pose a threat to the North American Squadron. But just as the expected American victory on land was not realized in 1812, the British were humbled through 1812 and into 1813 by the United States Navy. By the end of 1812, five single ship actions had been fought, and in each one the Americans had triumphed. Historians disagree on the historical significance of these five actions, but they were significant to the officers and men who fought and lost them, and to the wider community of naval officers and general

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<sup>1</sup> Hickey, *War of 1812*, 73; “The acquisition of Canada this year will be a mere matter of marching” (U.S. National Park Service).” *National Parks Service*. Accessed January 25, 2018. <https://www.nps.gov/articles/a-mere-matter-of-marching.htm>; this quote is so famous, and over-used, that it borders on cliché. But it does demonstrate the extreme overconfidence that some within America’s Democratic-Republican Party held regarding an invasion of Canada. The full, often uncited quote from Jefferson was that: “the acquisition of Canada this year, as far as the neighborhood of Quebec, will be a mere matter of marching; and will give us the experience for the attack of Halifax the next, and the final expulsion of England from the American continent.”

<sup>2</sup> Hickey, *War of 1812*, 72-99; Berton, 101-305; Eustace, 36-75

public of the United Kingdom and Halifax. In an examination of the post-Nelsonic naval culture, these battles are also significant. The Royal Navy was shocked by the losses in 1812. Royal Naval culture that had developed was one which expected aggressive action and victory against superior odds. The losses that occurred in 1813 and 1814 were no less significant strategically, but it is the losses in 1812 that are the most well-known.

Using naval correspondence and courts martial records, this chapter highlights the themes of the characteristic Nelsonic naval culture in a time of defeat. This is examined through individual actions that occurred throughout 1812, from the opening chases of HMS *Belvidera* and then USS *Constitution*, to the destruction of HMS *Java* in the final days of 1812. Following two decades of exceptional success, the naval officers involved in the first year of operations against the American navy found themselves frustrated and humiliated. These five actions highlight the expectations and characteristics of the Royal Navy in the decade following Nelson's death, and how those were manifested during action and in defeat. This chapter argues that enemy superiority in tonnage or broadside weight was not the most important facet of the defenses of the Royal Navy captains and commanders defeated in the five single ship actions in 1812. They understood their defeats not as the result of dangerously tackling a superior foe, but as the result of fortune. What mattered more was what parts of their ships were damaged in the fight. In each of the actions enemy fire disabled the British ships by knocking away spars and masts. This damage was understood as an act of fortune and not that of an inevitable result of enemy gunfire. Had the Americans been less fortunate in what their fire was able to hit, and the British ships not been disabled, the British may still have prevailed. The British fought as long as they felt they had a "chance" at victory. Once that chance was lost, surrender was deemed to be a regrettable but respectful course of action.

## Rodgers and Broke on the Hunt

The United States Navy, ill-prepared for war, only had a portion of its ships ready when the government commenced hostilities.<sup>3</sup> Commodore John Rodgers was the first to action, putting to sea with a squadron consisting of the 44-gun heavy frigates USS *President* and USS *United States*, the 36-gun USS *Congress*, and two sloops. He departed hours after hearing of the Declaration of War early in June, hoping to intercept a homeward bound Plate fleet that had departed from Jamaica in late May, and was lightly defended. Rodgers did not catch that fleet, but instead encounter the 36-gun HMS *Belvidera* on June 23<sup>rd</sup>.

Richard Byron, HMS *Belvidera*'s unusually long-serving captain since 1800, was unaware that war had broken out, but was nonetheless prepared.<sup>4</sup> At dawn on the 23<sup>rd</sup>, at least five vessels were spotted from *Belvidera*'s lookouts, and Byron "stood towards them to investigate."<sup>5</sup> When the incoming squadron did not return the private signal, Bryon tacked away from the much stronger American squadron, not wanting to risk capture in the very likely case that war had broken out. *President* was able to keep close behind *Belvidera*, even when she turned to fire broadsides at the fleeing frigate. Cannonade continued between the two ships until late in the day, but the British frigate was able to slip away from the Americans, much to Rodgers' disappointment.

Byron's account of the action, written whilst limping home to Halifax, assured Vice Admiral Sawyer of Byron's displeasure at having to flee rather than fight. He indicated his decision to retreat as one of duty: "I thought it my duty to make a firm retreat from three Frigates of the largest Class..."<sup>6</sup> and added that "the necessity of retreat was painful to everyone on board."

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<sup>3</sup> Hickey, *War of 1812*, 34, 90-93;

<sup>4</sup> Roosevelt, 74; Captain Richard Byron to Vice-Admiral Herbert Sawyer, HMS *Belvidera*, Halifax Harbour, 27<sup>th</sup> June 1812. MG12 ADM1/502, C-12854

<sup>5</sup> Byron to Sawyer, MG12 ADM1/502, C-12854

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

Assuring his superiors of the strong fighting spirit of his men was an important facet of his account of the action. In this action, Byron stated that he carried out his duty to flee from a superior force, but emphasized that in carrying out his duty he and his crew were dismayed at having to flee from action rather than fight. They were hoping for a fight, and fled only because risking an action against such a superior force would have been in violation of their duty.

These sentiments are reflected in another officer's account of the action, which was published in volume 28 of the *Naval Chronicle*. An anonymous officer of *Belvidera* stated that "our little vessel can do something for her country."<sup>7</sup> The officer brazenly accused Rodgers of cowardice for not coming up alongside *Belvidera*. Like his captain, he was confused by the actions of the Americans; *President* had yawned several times to fire broadsides at the fleeing *Belvidera*. Byron and this unnamed officer both questioned the rationale of the move, given *President's* good sailing qualities.<sup>8</sup> He also included an anecdote, which claimed that one wounded sailor expressed a wish to go back on deck after having his wounds dressed, as he wanted "to have another shot at the cowards." He also included a statement comparing the weight of metal between the *Belvidera* and the American squadron, to drive home to his correspondents that his frigate was indeed outmatched, though incorrectly lists *Constitution* and *Essex* among Rodgers' ships.<sup>9</sup>

Following *Belvidera's* arrival at Halifax, Vice Admiral Sawyer dispatched most of his ships under the command of Philip Broke. Broke was commanded to "capture or destroy all ships under the American flag in consequence of the [declaration of war]," and particularly to hunt down

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<sup>7</sup> "Extract of a Letter from an officer on Board H.M.S. *Belvidera*, dated Halifax, 27<sup>th</sup> June," Fuller, John, Israel Pottinger, John Cooke, and J. Ross. *The Naval Chronicle, for 1812: Containing a General and Biographical History of The Royal Navy of the United Kingdom; with a variety of original papers on Nautical Subjects*. Vol. XXVIII: July to December (London: Joyce Gold, 1812) 104-105 (Hereafter: *The Naval Chronicle*, Vol 28)

<sup>8</sup> Ibid; Byron to Sawyer, MG12 ADM1/502, C-12854

<sup>9</sup> "Extract of a Letter from an officer on Board HMS *Belvidera*, Halifax, 27<sup>th</sup> June," *the Naval Chronicle*, Vol 28

the squadron under Rodgers' command.<sup>10</sup> He left the exact course and plans for the cruise up to Broke, as Sawyer had given Broke most of the available warships, and in consequence did not have a means of communicating with or providing any direction to Broke once he departed. In doing this, Sawyer left himself in a vulnerable position. He expressed his concern over the safety of Halifax, given that during Broke's absence "this port and arsenal is left unprotected... till the arrival of reinforcements from England."<sup>11</sup> Sawyer, who was deeply concerned about the inadequate number of ships under his command for the duties he had to carry out,<sup>12</sup> opted for an aggressive rather than passive strategy when the war broke out. He valued the chance of catching Rodgers' squadron in action over ensuring that Britain's primary naval base in the region was protected.<sup>13</sup> Dispatching Broke with the entire Halifax squadron to hunt in the Atlantic was exactly what Rodgers and the American naval administration wanted. It left America's ports open for returning merchant ships, and for warships to prepare for sea unmolested by British observation.<sup>14</sup>

Broke's correspondence with his wife over his time in command of HMS *Druid* and HMS *Shannon* demonstrates that he was frustrated by the lack of opportunities for action and bored with tedious convoy duties.<sup>15</sup> At the start of 1811, Broke expressed some desire to snatch up American prizes, after a "silly American" ship passed the blockading forces off Basque en route to Plymouth.<sup>16</sup> Not long after, he complained of his situation to his wife, asserting that he wished a French frigate would "come out voluntarily to give me an opportunity of going home with honor," boasting that he would offer any French frigate captain the prize money Broke would earn by

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<sup>10</sup> Vice Admiral Sawyer to Captain Philip Broke, HMS Africa, Halifax, the 11<sup>th</sup> July, 1812, MG12 ADM1/502, C-12854

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> Sawyer to Broke, 11<sup>th</sup> July, 1812, MG12 ADM1/502, C-12854; Drolet, 176-181, McCranie, 29

<sup>13</sup> Broke to Croker, 30 Jul 1812; McCranie, 29

<sup>14</sup> Daughan, 73-82

<sup>15</sup> Wareham, *Star Captains*, 160

<sup>16</sup> Philip Broke to Louisa Broke, 31<sup>st</sup> January 1811, SRO HA 93/9/59

defeating them.<sup>17</sup> In a letter dated October 27<sup>th</sup>, 1811, he expressed to his wife that “If there is an American war... our services will be brilliant for a short while and then there will be nothing but *blockade* and I may as well go home.”<sup>18</sup> On November 3<sup>rd</sup>, he expressed his boredom with serving on the American station, and added: “Perhaps the Congress may find some brisker work for us next month.”<sup>19</sup> At the beginning of 1812, he again confided in his wife that he was eager for action, asserting that “Next month may decide great points. The American government will make war if they *dare*, and are trying to persuade their people that the Prince Regent is a personal enemy of theirs.”<sup>20</sup> Just as he assured his wife during these years that he yearned to be home with her, he also was eager for action in his present commission. In a letter to his mother, he confided that “As I am not under my gentle wife’s spells I shall tell you more of my plans and prospects... Under my present circumstances and with the prospects of war here I shall continue to serve tho’ I cannot tell how long.”<sup>21</sup>

This longing for action, particularly for victory in single ship actions, was not uncommon among naval officers of the period. According to Tom Wareham, most captains yearned for such an opportunity. Single ship actions were rare – only about 4-5% of captains ever fought an evenly matched single ship action. In part because of their rarity, and how coveted they were by Britain’s public and political elite, winning such an action resulted in extensive glory and prize money, and occasionally honours and titles.<sup>22</sup> Wade Dudley argued that the Royal Navy’s officers rejoiced when war was declared; potential prizes were growing less and less common, and the opening up of America’s merchant fleet meant a return to the days of rich prize hunting. Additionally, the

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<sup>17</sup> Philip Broke to Louisa Broke, 28<sup>th</sup> April 1811, SRO HA 93/9/68

<sup>18</sup> Philip Broke to Louisa Broke, 27<sup>th</sup> October 1811, SRO HA 93/9/81

<sup>19</sup> Philip Broke to Louisa Broke, 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1811, SRO HA 93/9/82

<sup>20</sup> Philip Broke to Louisa Broke, 19<sup>th</sup> January 1812, SRO HA 93/9/92

<sup>21</sup> Philip Broke to his Mother, date unknown, quoted in Padfield, *Broke and the Shannon*: “marked by unknown [likely his son’s] hand as “written before war was declared with America”.”

<sup>22</sup> Wareham, *The Star Captains*, 160

British expected their cousins in the American navy would fight well, meaning that capturing an American warship was viewed as a source of honour and glory.<sup>23</sup>

Broke's eagerness to bring the Americans to action continued after war was declared. When Broke was preparing to depart Halifax with his squadron, he informed his wife of his upcoming cruise and his hopes for it:

we shall probably sail in a few days, but with such a force as will *sweep the seas* clear of all enemies and shall then reap our harvest. I grieve at this as a patriot, my Loo, but as a naval officer must rejoice at it... We are all sanguine in our expectations of soon sweeping their Navy into our ports and sending (or rather bringing) home a convoy of good prizes.<sup>24</sup>

Broke was soon frustrated, however, by the realization that his “*particular object*, Rodgers and his squadron, are far away from where I was sent to look for them. However, my Admiral has given me liberal scope to do all we can and we yet hope that us much – although we have been in a *fever of anxiety* since we sailed. An American frigate escaped us by her rapid sailing last week. We will have her yet.”<sup>25</sup>

The frigate in question was USS *Constitution*, under Captain Isaac Hull. *Constitution* had mistakenly been identified by one of *Belvidera's* officers as one of Rodgers' three frigates during the chase; in fact, *Constitution* had been laid up in Annapolis at the start of the war. Like several of the tiny navy's warships, she was not yet ready to sail when Congress declared war.<sup>26</sup> She had only departed on July 5<sup>th</sup>, under a very confident captain. Hull assured the Secretary of the Navy that “we shall have nothing to fear from any single deck Ship; indeed: unacquainted as we now are, we should I hope give a good account of any Frigate the enemy have.”<sup>27</sup> *Constitution* was

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<sup>23</sup> Dudley, *Splintering the Wooden Wall*, 44-50

<sup>24</sup> Philip Broke to Louisa Broke, 2<sup>nd</sup> July 1812, SRO HA 93/9/105

<sup>25</sup> Ibid

<sup>26</sup> McCranie, 33; Secretary of the Navy Hamilton to Captain Isaac Hull, Navy Department, June 18<sup>th</sup>, 1812. *The Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History*, William Dudley, et al. (Henceforth: *Naval War of 1812*).

<sup>27</sup> Captain Isaac Hull to Secretary of the Navy Hamilton, U.S. Frigate *Constitution*, Annapolis Bay, 2<sup>nd</sup> July 1812, *Naval War of 1812*

dispatched to link up with Rodgers' squadron, but by July 16<sup>th</sup> she had instead chanced upon Rodgers' pursuers. Like Byron had earlier in the conflict, Hull stood towards the unknown ships to determine if they were friendly or not, and turned to flee when it became clear that he had run into Broke's squadron. James Dacres, commanding HMS *Guerriere*, pursued, and signaled to alert the rest of the squadron. The nearest British warship was *Belvidera*, repaired and attached to Broke's force, but Byron was confused by the situation; night had fallen and he could only determine that two frigates, sailing close together, were before him. Fearing that this meant that two American frigates were in the distance, he kept back to remain close to the rest of the squadron. By morning it was clear that Byron had mistaken *Guerriere* for an American, but by then *Constitution* had gained several miles. A grueling chase followed over the next couple of days, but by the 19<sup>th</sup> the *Constitution* had escaped.<sup>28</sup>

Following the action, Byron wrote to Broke to describe his "mortification from the extraordinary escape of the *American* frigate," adding that he was concerned that "it should fall so heavily on Dacres."<sup>29</sup> This letter demonstrated Byron's grief and sense of guilt at *Constitution* escaping from the British Squadron, but also justified Byron's hesitation during the first night: he had mistaken Dacres' signal and did not realize his mistake until daybreak. Furthermore, as he believed that he was facing two American frigates, he stood off, and neglected to signal Broke's distant ships fearing that this would Alert the Americans and drive them away.<sup>30</sup> It was his "most anxious intention to secure the enemy"<sup>31</sup> that motivated Byron's decisions that night. Kevin McCranie argued that Byron's mistake was important – as Byron had admitted, if he had approached and joined Dacres in the night the two frigates could have engaged *Constitution* by

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<sup>28</sup> McCranie, 34-37; Roosevelt, 80-89

<sup>29</sup> Captain Byron to Captain Broke, 20<sup>th</sup> July 1812, SRO, HA 93/6/2/41

<sup>30</sup> Ibid

<sup>31</sup> Ibid



daybreak.<sup>32</sup> Roosevelt, writing over a century before McCranie, instead emphasized Hull's seamanship in outwitting and escaping two exceptionally skilled sailors as Broke and Byron.<sup>33</sup> However, Byron blamed both his own misjudged actions and the overall "unfortunate circumstances" that transpired for allowing *Constitution* to escape.

Disappointing as this was for Broke, capturing USS *Constitution* was not his primary goal. His priority was to locate and destroy Rodgers' squadron, but by September Rodgers had continued to elude detection:<sup>34</sup>

We are much disappointed to hear that Rodgers is gone beyond our reach ... we shall now return to his coast & revenge ourselves for the dance he has led us ... We are all now bent on punishing the Americans for their malicious war by destroying their trade, as we cannot find their marauders.<sup>35</sup>

To his wife, Broke expressed disappointment that the two squadrons had not yet met. His personal drive was to bring that squadron to battle, but as of yet he had been frustrated and had only encountered the lone frigate.

His squadron did capture an American schooner USS *Nautilus*, which elicited little excitement. Sawyer reported the capture to Secretary Croker in early August, stating that "The United States Brig *Nautilus* of 14 guns and 100 men had been sent in here, by His Majesty's Squadron, under the Command of Captain Broke, but I have received no official account of this Capture, the Squadron being then in Chase of an Enemy's Frigate, which I am concerned to say, effected her escape."<sup>36</sup> Sawyer's concern over *Constitution*'s escape understandably outweighed the victory of a whole squadron over a schooner. In the same letter, he reports the capture of

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<sup>32</sup> McCranie, 35

<sup>33</sup> Roosevelt, 89-90

<sup>34</sup> Captain Broke to Secretary Croker, 30<sup>th</sup> Jul 1812, Captain's Letters B, MG12 ADM 1/1553, B-2608; Daughan, 60-71

<sup>35</sup> Philip Broke to Louisa Broke, 9<sup>th</sup> Aug 1812, HA93/9/109

<sup>36</sup> Vice Admiral Sawyer to Secretary of the Admiralty Croker, HMS *Centurion*, Halifax, 2<sup>nd</sup> August 1812. *Naval War of 1812*, 215-216

privateers by HM Sloop *Colibri*, an effort which earned Sawyer's praise for her captain and officers.<sup>37</sup> This action was between vastly more equal forces, and had a more direct impact on protecting British commerce in Nova Scotian waters.

Frustrated by Rodgers' continued evasion, and the inability of his squadron to capture anything beyond merchant prizes and *Nautilus*, Broke split his squadron and cruised alone in *Shannon*. On the 5<sup>th</sup> of August he encountered USS *Essex* (36-gun frigate) while chasing an American merchant vessel, the *Minerva*. *Essex*'s Captain David Porter incorrectly identified a recently captured prize accompanying *Shannon* as another frigate, and escaped by executing what McCranie described as a "daring maneuver."<sup>38</sup>

Broke only mentions *Constitution*'s escape in passing in an official dispatch to the Admiralty, informing Secretary Croker that *Constitution* "escaped by very superior sailing" despite the good sailing qualities of his own frigates.<sup>39</sup> His description of the event to his wife was similarly short and dismissive, and did little else but praise the sailing qualities of the enemy. Broke's account of *Essex*'s escape, which he included in a letter to his wife, was much more animated: "she sailed too well for us... he did not like to *fight*, it was well for him he *could run*, and had the night to shade him."<sup>40</sup> As this was a private letter, the more emotion-driven tone is expected. It is also likely that, after months of failing to engage any of America's frigates, he was more frustrated with *Essex*' escape than when *Constitution* slipped away. He also could not have known that Porter believed he was approaching two enemy frigates; as far as Broke was aware, *Essex* ran from an even fight, whereas *Constitution* ran from a squadron that included four frigates

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid

<sup>38</sup> McCranie, 45

<sup>39</sup> Broke to Croker, 30<sup>th</sup> July 1812, Captain's Letters B, MG12 ADM 1/1553

<sup>40</sup> Philip Broke to Louisa Broke, 30<sup>th</sup> Aug 1812, SRO, HA 93/9/111

and a 64-gun ship of the line, a situation in which she was hopelessly outmatched.<sup>41</sup> His frustration was further demonstrated when Broke told his wife that, after catching the *Minerva*, “we burn’d the ship *in spite*.”<sup>42</sup>

The accounts and actions of Admiral Sawyer and his Halifax squadron in the opening months of the War of 1812 reveal a squadron eager for action. Sawyer, in a move described by McCranie as risky, dispatched his entire force under the command of Philip Broke to search for Rodgers’ squadron.<sup>43</sup> Sawyer understood that this left Halifax vulnerable, but prioritized the attempt to catch the American squadron at sea. In their official accounts, Byron and Broke expressed a desire to bring about action with the enemy – a sentiment that was better reflected in Broke’s personal correspondence. Those three officers were frustrated, as no notably evenly-matched actions occurred in the opening months. In fact, the first single ship action of the war saw *Essex* pitted against HMS *Alert*, a sloop of vastly inferior tonnage and broadside.

### ***Essex-Alert* Action, 13<sup>th</sup> August 1812**

The loss of a British sloop of war received far less attention in naval circles than the loss of a rated ship. This was especially true of the two sloops, *Alert* and *Frolic*, that were defeated in action during 1812, as they were overshadowed by three frigate losses in that year. For the officers involved, however, the stakes were just as high as for frigate captains, if not higher. Notwithstanding individual social and professional connections, a young commander who lost his sloop was in more danger professionally than an older captain. A post captain in the British navy would inevitably be promoted to rear admiral in the future so long as he remained alive and in the

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<sup>41</sup> HMS *Africa*, Sawyer’s flagship, which was dispatched without the Admiral under Broke’s command

<sup>42</sup> Philip Broke to Louisa Broke, 30<sup>th</sup> Aug 1812, SRO, HA 93/9/111

<sup>43</sup> McCranie, 29

service long enough; promotion to flag rank was determined by one's seniority on the list of captains. For a post captain who lost his ship but was honourably acquitted, the worst-case scenario was remaining on half pay indefinitely, with the likelihood of being made a Yellow Admiral down the road with a significant increase in pay. A commander in the same position, who was never given an active appointment again, would very likely not be promoted to post captain, and so would end his career as a half pay commander or possibly as a retired captain.

Commander Thomas Laugharne found himself in this position in August 1812, after Porter captured his HM Sloop *Alert* in a quick action and short chase. In Laugharne's initial letter to Admiral Sir John Duckworth, Governor and Commander-in-Chief of Newfoundland, and the following Court Martial testimony, he laid out for Duckworth and the Court the dire situation he was in. Laugharne knew that his sloop was slow and significantly outgunned: sixteen 18-pound carronades and two 6-pounders to *Essex's* forty 23-pound carronades and four 12-pounders (*Essex* actually had six 12-pounders).<sup>44</sup> During his court martial he added that: "Her bulwarks were exceedingly slight and unlike those of other Ships of War and were incapable of resisting an ordinary Musket Ball."<sup>45</sup> In short, Laugharne felt that *Alert* was too slow to run from USS *Essex*, but too weak to fight a pitched action.

Laugharne's plan, then, was a desperate attempt to attack *Essex*, hoping to inflict enough damage on his opponent to allow *Alert* to flee. His attack was short lived – after firing three quick broadsides at pistol shot, *Alert's* rigging was effectively destroyed by *Essex's* return fire.<sup>46</sup> The testimonies of Laugharne, the purser, and a junior lieutenant all described the scene on board the heavily damaged *Alert*, when it became clear that escape was not possible. The crew, which at the

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<sup>44</sup> Laugharne to Duckworth, 30<sup>th</sup> Aug 1812; Comments of Laugharne, CM *Alert*, ADM 1/5431, quoted in McCranie

<sup>45</sup> Comments of Laugharne, CM *Alert*, ADM 1/5431, quoted in McCranie

<sup>46</sup> Laugharne to Duckworth, 30<sup>th</sup> Aug 1812; Comments of Laugharne, CM *Alert*, ADM 1/5431 quoted in McCranie

start of the action had enthusiastically uttered cheers, rushed aft to implore their captain to strike. Laugharne was reluctant to strike, and asked his crew if he had done his duty. Their reply, insisting that he had done all that was required, resulted in *Alert's* colours being struck.<sup>47</sup> The scene described is one of the commander and most of his officers remaining cool and determined, reluctant to abandon the fight, but in the end appealing to their humanity and the wishes of the crew.

Per the testimonies, Lieutenant Andrew Duncan led the charge to insist that Laugharne surrender the ship. According to commentary in the *Naval Chronicle*, he was “found guilty of disobedience of orders, and not rendering that assistance to Captain Laugharne that he ought to have done.”<sup>48</sup> To the Royal Navy, the image of a British captain leading his sloop into battle against a much more powerful frigate was likely very appealing, and would have reminded them of Thomas Cochrane’s capture of *El Gamo* in HM Sloop *Speedy* twelve years before.<sup>49</sup> But the image of a lieutenant appealing to the captain to strike instead invoked notions of cowardice and disgust amongst the Court, even considering how badly outmatched *Alert* was. The Court had no quarrel with Laugharne’s decision to strike, but were very upset over the conduct of the senior lieutenant preceding the surrender. Admiral Duckworth, in a letter to Croker dated August 21<sup>st</sup>, added his own view of the loss of *Alert*, which reflects the general view of the Court in regards to their condemnation and appraisal of the officers involved: “With respect to the *Alert*, it is a consolation to reflect that the Enemy have not gained either credit in conquering so poor an adversary or profit in the acquisition of a vessel so little suited to the purposes of war.”<sup>50</sup> *Alert* being handed to the

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<sup>47</sup> CM *Alert*, ADM 1/5431: Comments of Laugharne, Testimonies William Haggerty (Purser) and Philip Nind (Lt.) quoted in McCranie

<sup>48</sup> Ibid; *Naval Chronicle* Vol 28, 506

<sup>49</sup> Herman, 400-401

<sup>50</sup> Duckworth to Croker, 31<sup>st</sup> August 1812, ADM 1/477/60, quoted in *Utmost Gallantry*

enemy was not of great concern to Duckworth, just as the Court was more concerned with Lieutenant Duncan's conduct and cowardice during the action than Laugharne's decision to surrender his command to Captain Porter. Duncan was dismissed from the service, while his commander was honourably acquitted.<sup>51</sup> Still, Laugharne only served at sea again briefly from 1814 to 1815. He was promoted to post captain in 1832, nearly two decades since he had last served at sea.<sup>52</sup>

Porter's accounts of the action invoked a far more gallant perception of *Alert's* crew and their efforts. He described the action in his initial letter to the Secretary of the Navy, saying that *Alert* "ran down on our weather quarter gave three cheers and commenced an action (if so trifling a skirmish deserves the name) and in eight minutes struck her colours with 7 feet of water in her hold and three men wounded."<sup>53</sup> In both this letter and a more detailed one he wrote half a month later, he praised the zeal and activity of his men, while stressing that he wished they had a better opportunity to display it. He even states that he would have preferred that *Alert* encountered her intended prey, USS *Hornet*, as "the forces would then have been more equal."<sup>54</sup> He also describes the efforts of the *Alert* and the enthusiasm of the enemy men. *Alert's* broadside was accompanied by cheers audible from *Essex's* deck, though *Alert's* gunnery "did us no more injury than the cheers that accompanied it."<sup>55</sup>

In his letter, Porter referenced a discussion within the United States Navy, stating that:

We are now well convinced ... that an English Sloop of War, calculating on the Magic of the British name and Terror of British Thunder, has had the assurance to "commence attack within pistol shot on an American

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<sup>51</sup> David Syrett, R.L. DiNardo, *The Commissioned Sea Officers of the Royal Navy, 1660-1815*. Aldershot, Scholar Press for the Navy Records Society, 1994, 135

<sup>52</sup> Ibid; Thomas Laugharne, Officer Service Record, ADM 956/5

<sup>53</sup> Captain David Porter to Secretary of the Navy Hamilton, U.S. Frigate *Essex*, At Sea, 15<sup>th</sup> August 1812, *Naval War of 1812*, 218

<sup>54</sup> Captain David Porter to Secretary of the Navy Hamilton, U.S. Frigate *Essex*, At Sea, 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1812, *Naval War of 1812*, 444

<sup>55</sup> Ibid

Frigate” for such (they informed us) they knew us to be, and have repeatedly reported, that had we been Frenchmen they would either have taken us, or made their escape.<sup>56</sup>

The Royal Navy’s reputation had made an impression on the American navy before the war, and *Alert’s* decision to attack a much stronger opponent clearly impressed Porter. The disparity in force was wide enough that a single broadside from USS *Essex* knocked *Alert* out of action. British zeal impressed Porter both during and after the action, but he was also amused to point out that, for all the talk of British discipline at sea, once *Alert’s* commander:

left his ship, then a scene of pillage and destruction was pursued by her crew, that would have disgraced a corsaire of Barbary - The Spirit room, pursers, and other store rooms were broken or thrown open, nor did the Captains Cabin & private stores escape, and such articles as could not be taken were broken, thrown overboard, and otherwise wantonly destroyed.<sup>57</sup>

The British’s enthusiasm and vain attempt to attack and disable *Essex* confirmed Porter’s preconceived notions of British sailors. His account implies that he thought *Alert’s* actions were a genuine attempt to defeat and capture *Essex*, a perception likely influenced by his high opinion of the boldness of the Royal Navy.

American historian George Daughan’s account of the *Essex-Alert* action reflects the contemporary American perspective. His explanation of *Alert’s* decision to attack, demonstrates that he did not read Laughtarne’s accounts, and instead closely reflects Porter’s understanding:

In the finest British tradition – going back to Sir France Drake – he was defying the odds and continuing his mad dash toward the much larger frigate, bent on evening the odds by surprising her and hitting her hard before she knew what was up.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 445

<sup>58</sup> Daughan, 69

Laugharne's plan was not to try and capture *Essex* – his account makes that clear. Daughan also describes an incident earlier in the year on July 11<sup>th</sup>, when *Essex* attacked a convoy guarded by the frigate HMS *Minerva*. Porter expected, and hoped, that *Minerva* would leave the convoy to meet *Essex*'s challenge, and was very surprised that *Minerva* did not. Daughan estimated that *Minerva* did not leave the convoy due to the importance of defending it, as it carried the First Regiment of Foot on route to Quebec:

He probably judged it more important to accomplish his mission than to take on the *Essex*, although he must have wanted to. Except in extraordinary circumstances, no British captain would avoid fighting an American of equal strength. Doing so would earn him a court-martial and severe punishment.<sup>59</sup>

Porter was disappointed by this; he hoped for an honourable frigate action, and the equally matched *Minerva* did not take the bait, in a move that conflicted with Porter's perception of British boldness. But that boldness that the British navy was famous for was seemingly exemplified by HMS *Alert* in her ill-fated attempt to escape from *Essex* with a quick attack.

### ***Constitution-Guerriere* Action, 19<sup>th</sup> August 1812**

If Dacres was indeed, as Byron worried, wrought with guilt over *Constitution*'s escape from Broke's Squadron in July, then perhaps when he again chanced upon her on August 19<sup>th</sup> he saw his chance to settle the score. Lieutenant Bartholomew Kent asserted in his Court Martial testimony that *Constitution*'s previous escape was in fact on his mind when they “made her out to be the United States Frigate *Constitution*.”<sup>60</sup> Regardless of the emotional stakes for Dacres, the stakes for the wider naval communities in both countries were very high. It was the first single

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 60

<sup>60</sup> Bartholomew Kent (Lt.), CM *Guerriere*, ADM1/5431/7



ship frigate action of the conflict. This action gave the USS *Constitution* her legacy as “Old Ironsides” and initiated a flood of horror and outrage through British press manifested in the *Naval Chronicle* and among the Royal Navy itself.<sup>61</sup>

As stated and argued by Wareham and D.A.B. Ronald, single ship actions were rare during the Napoleonic period. Given the potential for honour and glory, the chance to fight and win such an action was coveted by many zealous captains in the service. James Dacres was also born into a naval dynasty; his father, uncle, brother, and cousin were all serving naval officers, so Dacres had been immersed in naval culture from his earliest days, even before he entered the navy himself at the age of eight. When he engaged the American frigate, he had become one of the four or five percent of frigate captains who fought a single ship engagement during the period.<sup>62</sup> Dacres would have, understandably, not wished to begin his account of the action with: “I am sorry to inform you of the capture of H. M. late ship *Guerriere*, by the American frigate *Constitution*, after a severe action, on the 19<sup>th</sup> of August.”<sup>63</sup>

Dacres’ letter described the action and defended his decision to strike his colours. To defend his honour and that of his crew, Dacres described the damage inflicted onto his ship and the havoc that enemy shot wrecked upon his crew and officers. Heavy fire, particularly from being raked several times by the enemy, left *Guerriere* “a perfect unmanageable wreck.”<sup>64</sup> Several officers, along with many crew members, were wounded, including himself, two lieutenants, and the ship’s master. He cited the wounding of his officers as a significant blow to his ship’s performance in action, and is careful to defend the honour of the officers under his command,

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<sup>61</sup> Secretary of the Navy Hamilton to Captain Isaac Hull, Navy Department, 9<sup>th</sup> Sept 1812, *Naval War of 1812*, 472-473

<sup>62</sup> Wareham, *Star Captains*, 160

<sup>63</sup> Captain James Dacres to Admiral Herbert Sawyer, Boston, 7<sup>th</sup> September 1812, *Naval War of 1812*, 243-245

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, 243

adding that “none of the wounded Officers quitted the Deck till the firing ceas’d,” praising those officers for remaining on duty despite their wounds.<sup>65</sup> He pointed out that *Guerriere* had been so damaged in the action that the Americans could not attempt to take her in as a prize. The decision to strike was made after conferring with the ships officers, who concluded that continuing the fight, while still under fire and “all attempts to get her before the wind being fruitless,” “would only be a needless waste of lives.”<sup>66</sup> It was only then that, with *Guerriere* in a dismal state, Dacres ordered “though reluctantly, the Colours to be struck.”

As to how HMS *Guerriere* found herself in such a dismal state, Dacres puts forward the superior small arms fire and sailing of *Constitution*, as well as “the early fall of the Mizzen Mast which enabled our opponent to choose his position.”<sup>67</sup> Despite the *Constitution*’s significant advantage in broadside weight, Dacres does not suggest that this was a crucial factor in the defeat. In fact, aside from mentioning the *Constitution*’s broadside, he does not emphasize that he was out-gunned at all. He does say that “the Enemy had such an advantage from his Marines and Riflemen, when close and his superior sailing enabled him to choose his distance.”<sup>68</sup> Enemy musketry was a factor in the defeat, but the much heavier broadside of the enemy was not. Much of the action was fought at close range – neither ship inflicted much damage upon the other until they closed to within pistol shot – so the longer-ranged guns of the *Constitution* were not an important factor in this battle. But Dacres does not assert that the *Constitution*’s larger and heavier broadside, which fired heavier and therefore more destructive shot, played any important role, either.

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 244

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 243

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 244

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 245

Following the action Dacres and his crew were carried to Boston, where he and his officers were paroled and his men placed in a prison hulk anchored in the Charles River. They did not remain in Boston long. Early in the conflict both American and British authorities in North America were eager to exchange prisoners of war, as neither administration had the capacity to house and manage them. Early agreements were established for exchanges and an official Cartel agreement was reached in 1813. As such officers like Dacres were quickly paroled and sent back to Halifax, where they awaited their official exchange.<sup>69</sup> It was in Halifax under parole where Dacres was court martialed.

Dacres' defense during the trial reiterated the points he made in his letter to Sawyer. One point that he expanded on was his aborted attempt to board the enemy. Late in the action, when the ship had been reduced to an "unmanageable wreck," Dacres' last ploy was to prepare his crew to board the enemy as they approached. But these preparations were cut short upon "finding his deck filled with men, and every preparation made to receive us, it would have been almost impossible to succeed."<sup>70</sup> He also told the court that he ordered the colours to be struck as the enemy prepared to rake them, and that "nothing but the unmanageable state of the ship (she being a perfect wreck) could ever have induced me to do, conceiving it was my duty not to sacrifice uselessly the lives of the men, without any prospect of success, or of benefit to their country." To summarize the general theme of his arguments, both in his letter to Sawyer and in his Court Martial

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<sup>69</sup> Anthony G. Dietz, *For Their Safekeeping and Accommodation: British Prisoners of War in the United States During the War of 1812* (Harriett G. Dietz (Standard Copyright License), 2011): 2-17. Over time tensions grew between the British government and the United States, and the official Cartel of 1813 was abandoned. Delays in exchanging prisoners became more commonplace, and British officials frequently accused Americans of delaying exchanges in hopes that sailors would desert from the Royal Navy. A particularly contentious issue between the two governments respected former slaves freed by British forces. The British refused American demands to return them, and in turn the Americans refused to grant captured blacks parole or exchange. By the end of the conflict for many American and British sailors and even some officers their prospects for exchange looked bleak, and some men remained in prison hulks until after the war. Dietz, 371-386

<sup>70</sup> Testimony of James Dacres, CM *Guerriere*, ADM 1/5431

testimony, his duty as a naval captain was to continue fighting, to take great risks through violence, but only if there was a chance of victory. Once that chance had been removed, then a captain's sense of humanity and responsibility to his crews' safety overcame his duty and ambition to continue the fight.

Dacres concluded his testimony to the Court with a bold assertion:

Notwithstanding the unlucky issue of the affair such confidence have I in the exertions of the officers and men who belonged to the *Guerriere*, and I am so aware that the success of my opponent was owing to fortune, that it is my earnest wish, and would be the happiest period of my life, to be once more opposed to the *Constitution*, with them under my command, in a frigate of similar force to the *Guerriere*.<sup>71</sup>

As with his letter to Sawyer, Dacres made it clear in his testimony that the superior broadside of the *Constitution* was not the cause of his defeat. In this statement, he attributed the defeat more to fortune than to the enemy's strength, something that had not been argued in his previous letter. Dacres' misfortune was to blame for the loss, and not the enemy's superior gunnery, broadside weight, or seamanship in and of themselves. This statement could stem from a genuine desire for a rematch and the belief that his officers and men could fight the *Constitution* again under the same conditions and emerge victorious. This cannot be proven, of course. The alternative explanation is that his sentiments were exaggerated, in an effort to add weight to the case for acquittal for the loss of the frigate, and to uphold his honour and reputation within the navy. Both explanations suggest that this sort of confidence was expected of officers in the Royal Navy, and that the bold assertions made by Dacres would have appealed to the judges at his Court Martial. In this case, the sense of infallibility that had developed after twenty years of unprecedented naval successes was demonstrated in a court martial following a loss in a single ship action, either out of genuine

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid

sentiments from the captain on trial or in a deliberate effort to demonstrate his exaggerated confidence to the court.

The verdict of this Court Martial would determine Dacres' future. If he was not acquitted, he could be removed from the naval service. This would be shameful for anyone, but particularly to someone with so many close family members serving in the Royal Navy. Even an honourable acquittal would not guarantee he would again be appointed to active service in the Navy. Dacres' bold assertions in his defense reflect the values that were central to the Royal Navy's fighting spirit. As Lambert argued, "running from an enemy, even with 50% more firepower, was not an option for naval officers."<sup>72</sup> Past victories had been won given similar odds. Whether his desire to face the *Constitution* with another ship like *Guerriere* was completely genuine or exaggerated, it highlights the expectation of officers in the competitive Royal Navy.

The *Naval Chronicle's* twenty-eighth volume included a letter written by an anonymous officer of HMS *Guerriere*, dated October 15<sup>th</sup> in Halifax, which briefly describes the action. The officer is particularly worried about the perceptions of *Guerriere's* loss. He is unsure of how the English public will react, but hopes that "they certainly cannot expect more than to fight her until she was sinking."<sup>73</sup> According to this account, the *Guerriere* would have sank without assistance from the American frigate, adding that "so many shot struck her between wind and water, that her hull was nearly shattered to pieces."<sup>74</sup> This officer justified *Guerriere's* defeat by reflecting on the extensive damage she had received. He also expressed shock at the size and strength of USS *Constitution*:

No one that has not seen the *Constitution* would believe there could be such a ship for a frigate, the nearest ship in the British navy, as to her

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<sup>72</sup> Lambert, *The Challenge*, 79

<sup>73</sup> "Extract of a Letter from an Officer, late belonging to H.M.S. the *Guerriere*, dated Halifax, 15<sup>th</sup> October," *The Naval Chronicle* Vol 28, 426

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*

dimensions and tonnage, is the Orion, of 74 guns. She was laid down for a 74-gun ship, is 180 feet long on her upper deck, and 45 feet 10 inches breadth of beam. She had no gangways, but two complete decks, the same as a line-of-battle ship, and is 1630 tons burden.<sup>75</sup>

The officer's account differs from Dacres' accounts by emphasizing the superior size and strength of the enemy during the action, suggesting that the USS *Constitution* is more like a ship of the line than a frigate. He does not mention the number of guns she carried directly, only suggesting that she had two full gun decks: "the same as a line-of-battle ship."<sup>76</sup>

The unnamed officer is not the only one whose account contrasts with Dacres' on the importance of the *Constitution's* gunnery and broadside. Sawyer's letter to Secretary Croker, which accompanied Dacres' account, describes *Guerriere's* opponent as "of very superior force, both in guns and men (of the latter almost double)."<sup>77</sup> Both Dacres' commanding officer and one of his subordinate lieutenants were willing to emphasize *Constitution's* superior tonnage and broadside to help justify the British defeat, but Captain Dacres did not. This is because Dacres was on trial, but his admiral was not, and the stakes for his officers were not nearly as extreme. It was therefore more important for Dacres to play to the biases of the post-Nelsonic navy.

In other ways, Sawyer's letter was similar to Dacres' accounts. Both reflected two themes that were common among naval correspondence reporting losses in action. Dacres opened his account to Sawyer of *Guerriere's* loss with: "I am sorry to inform you..." and Sawyer's letter to the Admiralty similarly opened with "Sir, it is with extreme concern..."<sup>78</sup> This same sense of despair is reflected in the opening of the before-mentioned letter from Byron to Broke following

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid

<sup>76</sup> Ibid; Without knowing the author of this account or its original recipient, it is difficult to assess what this account was initially intended for. It is of more relevance, then, in the context of the *Naval Chronicle's* coverage and discussion of this event in Chapter Three.

<sup>77</sup> Copy of a Letter from Vice-admiral Sawyer to Joh Wilson Croker, Esq, dated on board H.M.S. Africa, at Halifax, the 15<sup>th</sup> September, 1812, *The Naval Chronicle*, Vol 28, 316

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 316; Dacres to Sawyer, 7<sup>th</sup> September 1812, *Naval War of 1812*, 243

USS *Constitution*'s escape from Broke's squadron, where Byron expressed his "mortification from the extraordinary escape of the *American* frigate." Similarly, Sawyer's report to Croker of the same event expressed his concern. Letters detailing defeats in battle emphasized the officer's personal distress at the event, just as letters announcing victory expressed the officer's joy at the triumph.

Sawyer also defended Dacres' surrender, invoking the theme of preserving humanity once chances of victory had vanished. He assured Croker that, because *Guerriere* had been dismasted and began rolling hard enough to render efforts to work the guns ineffective, "it became a duty to spare the lives of the remaining part of her valuable crew, by hauling down her colours."<sup>79</sup> Due to the fact that *Guerriere* fought until she had been heavily damaged, and placed in a position where she was likely to be raked, Sawyer states that this should "satisfy their Lordships she was defended to the last."<sup>80</sup> The last does not refer to the literal last man standing, or even until the ship had sank but rather to the last point in which the British could hope for a victory.

The Court agreed with the sentiment that fortune was to blame for the loss, and not the shortcomings of Dacres or any of his officers or crew, and that the surrender was justified to save the "valuable remaining crew."<sup>81</sup> Their verdict stated that *Guerriere* found herself in such a perilous state due to the "accident" of losing her masts, adding that "which was occasioned more by their defective state than from the fire of the enemy, though so greatly superior in guns and men."<sup>82</sup> Fortune and the ship's defective state were blamed rather than the superior firepower of the enemy frigate. James Dacres and his crew were honourably acquitted, following a trial steeped in the aggressive traditions of the Royal Navy. Two years later he was given command of another

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid

<sup>80</sup> Ibid

<sup>81</sup> Verdict, CM *Guerriere*, ADM 1/5431

<sup>82</sup> Ibid

frigate, HMS *Tiber*, and continued in active service until 1848, when he was promoted to vice admiral and effectively retired.<sup>83</sup>

### ***Wasp-Frolic Action, 18<sup>th</sup> October 1812***

The third single ship action was also the second between two ships of the same class. In fact, as Theodore Roosevelt asserted, it was the only single ship action in 1812 between two evenly matched vessels.<sup>84</sup> HM Sloop *Frolic* was captured while defending its convoy from USS *Wasp*, an American sloop, both rated 18 guns. *Wasp* was commanded by John Smith, a master commandment (the equivalent rank to commander in the British navy),<sup>85</sup> though *Frolic* was commanded by Post Captain Thomas Whinyates, an unusual appointment for a sloop of war.<sup>86</sup> While this meant that Whinyates had more financial security than his counterpart in HMS *Alert*, he still had no guarantee of being appointed to active service again following his defeat to a sloop carrying equivalent armament.

Like other letters reporting defeat in action, Whinyates invoked his distress at having to relay the news of the defeat. In his letter to Vice Admiral Warren, who had succeeded Sawyer as commander-in-chief of the North American Squadron, he wrote that “It is with the most bitter sorrow and distress I have to report to your excellency the capture of His Majesty’s brig *Frolick*.”<sup>87</sup> He later informed Warren that he “shall ever deplore the unhappy issue of this contest.”<sup>88</sup> The

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<sup>83</sup> James Dacres, Officer Service Record. ADM 196/3

<sup>84</sup> Roosevelt, 105

<sup>85</sup> The USN adopted the more common term “commander” for this rank in 1838.

<sup>86</sup> Syrett and DiNardo, 466.

<sup>87</sup> Captain Thomas Whinyates, R.N., to Admiral Sir John B. Warren, R.N., His Majesty’s Ship *Poictiers* at Sea, 23<sup>rd</sup> October 1812. *Naval War of 1812* 539

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid*, 541



letter praised the bravery and coolness of his officers in the action, adding that it would be an injustice if he did not do so.<sup>89</sup>

In his dispatch, Whinyates stated that initially his ship's gunnery was more effective, and that he expected an easy victory. However, mounting damage and weather conditions quickly turned the tide. According to Roosevelt, *Frolic* fired three broadsides to the *Wasp*'s two; modern sources conclude that *Frolic*'s fire was fast but ineffective, as much of the shot went high.<sup>90</sup> Whinyates asserted that *Frolic*'s damage was so extensive in comparison to *Wasp* not on the superiority of American gunnery but on the weakened state of his rigging following a recent gale. Unable to properly maneuver (like Dacres, Whinyates also described his vessel as unmanageable), the *Frolic* was subjected to raking broadsides and suffered extensive damage.<sup>91</sup> In a similar, but far less dramatic, vein to Dacres' declarations at his Court Marital, Whinyates states that "I am convinced if the *Frolick* had not been crippled in the gale I should have to make a very different report to your Excellency."<sup>92</sup> The action ended when, "every individual officer being wounded, and the greater part of the men either Killed or Wounded, there not being twenty persons remaining unhurt,"<sup>93</sup> the crew of USS *Wasp* boarded the now virtually defensesless sloop. Whinyates' account makes it clear that he and his crew had fought until nearly everyone had been wounded, and every gun had been put out of action.<sup>94</sup>

That same day, the third rate seventy-four gun ship of the line HMS *Poictiers* captured the triumphant but heavily damaged *Wasp* with her prize in toe.<sup>95</sup> The recapture was mentioned both by Whinyates in his letter to Warren announcing *Frolic*'s defeat, as well as in *Poictiers*' captain

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid

<sup>90</sup> Roosevelt, 101; McCranie, 75; Latimer, 104

<sup>91</sup> Whinyates to Warren in *Naval War of 1812*, 541

<sup>92</sup> Ibid

<sup>93</sup> Ibid

<sup>94</sup> Ibid

<sup>95</sup> "Journal of HMS *Poictiers*, Captain John P. Beresford," *Naval War of 1812*, 536-537

John Beresford's account. The recapture of his sloop is not praised or emphasized by Whinyates; it was not his victory to report. Beresford does not celebrate a triumph either; rather than proclaiming *Poictiers'* capture of two badly damaged and impossibly outmatched sloops, Beresford's letter reads more like a dutiful statement of his recapture of a prize, and his effort to collect the convoy that *Frolic* had been captured defending. Like the typical letter informing a superior of the capture of a much smaller warship or privateer, Beresford does not discuss the action nor praise the conduct of his officers and men. Capturing a pair of sloops was a trivial matter for a ship of the line. But he does assure Admiral Warren that "The conduct of Captain Whinyates, who I regret to say is wounded, and of his crew appears to have been so decidedly gallant, that I have been induced to continue him in command of the *Frolic*, until your pleasure is known."<sup>96</sup>

Whinyates' command of *Frolic* continued until his return to port. And while the court martial agreed with Beresford's assessment of Whinyates' conduct, *Frolic* had a new acting-commander later that month, a lieutenant who was promoted to commander a year later.<sup>97</sup> Whinyates did not receive another command until 1815, and then only served another nine months at sea, after which he saw no further active service and was promoted into retirement when his name reached the top of the Post Captains list in 1846.<sup>98</sup> It is difficult to say if his removal from *Frolic* was the result of his loss to *Wasp*, a simple logistical decision considering his wound and need to keep his ship at sea, or if it was because the command was considered to be more appropriate for a more junior officer at Halifax, given that Whinyates was a post captain. Regardless, his active career was nearly over following his loss to an equivalent foe. Meanwhile,

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<sup>96</sup> Beresford, "Copy of a Letter from Admiral the-Right Honourable Sir John Berclase Warren, Bart. K. B. Commander in Chief of His Majesty's Ships: Beresford to Warren, at sea, Oct 23 1812." The London Gazette, 22<sup>nd</sup> December, 1812 16684, 2568 <https://www.thegazette.co.uk/London/issue/16684/page/2568>

<sup>97</sup> Rif Winfield, *British Warships in the Age of Sail 1793–1817: Design, Construction, Careers and Fates*. Seaforth, 2008, 297

<sup>98</sup> Syret and DiNardo, 466; Whinyates, Officer Service Record, ADM 196/6

his captor Jones of the *Wasp* and his lieutenant Biddle were both promoted following their exchange, and voted \$25,000 in prize money by Congress. Jones was soon appointed to command the newly captured and refitted USS *Macedonian*.<sup>99</sup> Ironically, the man whose ship was preserved from capture fared far worse than the man whose ship was taken into the enemy's possession, due to the importance that both navies placed upon the single ship action that precipitated *Poictiers'* arrival.

### ***United States-Macedonian Action, 25<sup>th</sup> October 1812***

On the 28<sup>th</sup> of October, John Surman Carden faced the same task as Dacres had: reporting the loss of his frigate to his superior. His ship, HMS *Macedonian*, engaged and was captured by the USS *United States*, commanded by Commodore Stephen Decatur. The two officers had met earlier in the year, when *Macedonian* had stopped in Hampton Roads. They developed a mutual respect over discussing the merits of their respective frigates. When they chanced upon each other in the Atlantic, both were eager for action.<sup>100</sup> After a long action, much of it fought at long range, Carden struck his colours and surrendered his extremely damaged *Macedonian*. Carden believed that he was the first British captain to lose a frigate to the Americans; when he was informed that Dacres had that dubious honour, he was only partially mollified. He had still lost his ship in one-on-one combat, and *Macedonian* became the first and only British frigate to be brought into an American port as a prize.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Roosevelt, 106; Mark M. Cleaver, *The Life, Character, and Public Service of Commodore Jacob Jones*. (Wilmington, Delaware: The Historical Society Of Delaware, 1906).

<sup>100</sup> John Carden to Secretary John Croker, USS *United States* at Sea, 28<sup>th</sup> October 1812. Captains Letters C, B-2612 v1663; McCranie, 97

<sup>101</sup> Daughan, 131

Carden's entry into the navy was peculiar. He came from an army background and was educated privately on land before joining the Royal Navy at 17, following which he served an active career in various stations. He fought in several minor actions as well as the Glorious First of June, and served for a time as lieutenant under Dacres' father. Daughan described him as a veteran, but asserted that despite his experience, his performance in the *Macedonian-United States* action was dismal. The loss was as much Carden's fault as it was Decatur's, he argued, citing poor relations with his very new ships company, poor use of tactics, and inability to take advantage of his ship's superior sailing qualities.<sup>102</sup> Lambert criticized Carden as an officer who "lacked the single-minded determination required by successful cruiser captains," and attributed his lack of "self-confidence, insight, and tactical acumen and leadership" for the loss.<sup>103</sup> The Court Martial that tried him did not share these harsh judgements, but nonetheless the loss of *Macedonian* effectively ended Carden's long naval career.

Like Dacres, Carden's accounts of the action make clear that he and his crew fought as long as victory was possible, and only then surrendered the ship. The first hour of the action was at long range, during which time Carden says that he attempted to close the distance. *Macedonian* suffered during that hour under fire from the *United States*' heavier battery. When Carden was able to close with the enemy, his ship had been damaged, and the enemy's superiority in fire was very apparent. He explained to Croker that: "I soon found the Enemys force too superior to expect success, unless some fortunate chance occur'd in our favor, and with this hope I continued the Battle for two hours and ten minutes." Over those two hours his ship's rigging was destroyed, leaving *Macedonian* "a perfect and unmanageable Log" and in a position to be raked by the *United*

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid, 131-134

<sup>103</sup> Lambert, chapter: *United States and Macedonian*, (ebook)

*States*.<sup>104</sup> Carden's defense rested on the fact that he and his crew fought and held out as long as he anticipated that they had a chance of victory, and that the *Macedonian* would not have been surrendered "whilst a man lived on board, had she been manageable."<sup>105</sup> Without his ability to maneuver and to return fire, there was no chance of defeating the enemy, so continued resistance was pointless.

Unlike Dacres, Carden acknowledged the superior strength of the enemy and that he realized he was facing overwhelming force during the action, but continued to fight nonetheless. He fought for two hours against superior firepower, only relenting when it was clear that he could not return fire on the enemy. The enemy's superior firepower was not a major concern during the action, then, but following the action he:

... ceased to wonder at the result of the Battle; the *United States* is built with the scantling of a seventy four gun Ship, mounting thirty long twenty four pounders on her Main Deck, and twenty two forty two pounders, Carronades, with two long twenty four pounders on her Quarter Deck and Forecastle. Howitzer Guns in her Tops, and a travelling Carronade on her upper Deck, with a Complement of Hour hundred and seventy-eight pick'd Men.<sup>106</sup>

Whereas Dacres had ignored the enemy's strength in his account and defense, Carden emphasized it as an important factor in his loss. Carden's background was very unlike Dacres, and indeed unlike many other officers. He had no familial ties to the Royal Navy and had spent his childhood and teenaged years ashore. By contrast, Dacres had been at sea since a young age and came from a naval family. As such, the traditions of odds-defying confidence that Dacres demonstrated may not have been as hard-set in Carden's psyche. However, he was still careful to emphasize that he, and his officers and crew fought against these odds as long as possible. As with Dacres' account,

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<sup>104</sup> Carden to Croker, 28<sup>th</sup> October 1812. Captains Letters C, B-2612 v1663

<sup>105</sup> Ibid

<sup>106</sup> Ibid

it was the damaged state that his ship was in that compelled Carden to strike; although he acknowledged the role that *United States*' superior broadside played in so damaging *Macedonian*.

To demonstrate to Croker why that chance had dissipated by the action's conclusion, he described the desperate state his ship and crew was in compared to the enemy. Extensive damage to his masts and rigging had left his ship unmanageable, and enemy fire had resulted in "all the Guns on the Quarter Deck and Forecastle disabled but two, and filled with wreck, two also on the Main Deck disabled, and several shot between wind and water. A very great proportion of the Crew Killed and wounded."<sup>107</sup> His ship had suffered very heavy damage, was rendered incapable of maneuvering, and most of his ship's company had been killed or knocked out of action. He then adds that he was faced, while in this desperate situation, with an "Enemy comparatively in good order, who had now shot ahead, and was about to place himself in a raking position without our being enabled to return the fire, being a perfect wreck, an unmanageable Log."<sup>108</sup>

Similar to other officer's accounts of losses, Carden invoked the theme of sorrow and distress in his letter. He expressed his "deepest regret" at the loss of his ship and his sorrow at the severity of his losses. It appears that Carden himself was physically and emotionally shaken by the action. Carden wrote two subsequent letters while he was in America: one on the 6<sup>th</sup> and one on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of January. Both are noticeably more neat and legible than his initial letter of the 28<sup>th</sup> October.<sup>109</sup>

By the conclusion of the action, Carden wrote that "Every effort has been made against the Enemy by myself, my brave Officers, and men, nor should she have been surrendered whilst a man

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid

<sup>108</sup> Ibid

<sup>109</sup> Ibid; John Carden to Secretary Croker, New London, America, 6<sup>th</sup> January 1813, Captains Letters C, B-2612 v1663; John Carden to Admiral Warren, New London, America, 23<sup>rd</sup> January 1813. MG-12 ADM 1/503 C-12854

lived on board, had she been manageable.”<sup>110</sup> He praised the conduct of his first lieutenant, David Hope, who suffered a head wound near the close of the action, but promptly returned to the deck, “displaying that greatness of mind and exertion, which who it may be equaled, can never be excelled.” The third lieutenant was also wounded, but remained at his post. Carden speaks very highly of his officers’ conduct and bravery during the action. His narrative was that of a gallant crew fighting an unmanageable ship against impossible odds.

His opening defense at the court martial reflected the same themes. He described his initial attempts to close with the enemy, which were frustrated by the enemy’s maneuvers. In this time his ship suffered greatly from enemy fire:

*Macedonian* became more crippled every broadside... the topmasts fell on deck, the main yard was before then cut away to pieces. The swell was great and the *Macedonian* roll’d heavy as her canvas and spars was reduced by the enemy’s shot. The enemy shot ahead and left the *Macedonian* a perfect wreck we having only about one third of the foresail left to the yard, every other sail having shot away, we now endeavored to clear the wreck which had all fallen on deck, the mizzen foremast forward and the fore and main ones after, and to get the ship before the wind, which had considerable abated in consequence of the heavy cannonading. But while this effort was making the mizzen mast, being very much wounded by shot, fell over the stern, the wreck of which in the water rendered the ship totally unmanageable, and the enemy ... now placing himself under our stern, the congruent circumstances occurred as stated in my Public Letter.<sup>111</sup>

He emphasized the superior dimensions and broadside of the enemy ship, and was crewed by many veterans of the British navy. It was not, in Carden’s mind, a defeat that robbed Britain of prestige or reputation, as “My county has lost a ship but I consequentially feel that is all she was lost; Victory over such a superiority of force could not be obtained.”<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid

<sup>111</sup> Carden’s Narrative, CM *Macedonian*, ADM 1/5436

<sup>112</sup> Ibid

The first hour of action at long range was crucial, given the damage that *United States* inflicted upon *Macedonian* in that time. Consequentially, the fact that Carden was unable to close during that hour generated extensive controversy in naval circles. Carden's defense in his initial letter to Croker was that "the Enemy keeping two points off the Wind I was not enabled to get as close to her as I could have wished."<sup>113</sup> This appears quite the feat according to modern nautical terminology – standing two points off the wind would place a square rigger in the "no sail zone," often referred to today as "irons," as they could not generate the power necessary to move the ship. As Sam Willis pointed out, however, nautical terminology has changed over the centuries. Historically, sailors measured their point of sail not from the direction of the wind but from the angle at which their vessel would have been close hauled, just outside of the "no sail zone."<sup>114</sup> *United States* was likely sailing between six or eight points from the wind, depending on her own sailing qualities.

Lambert asserted that this was a justification invented later. His analysis of the action was quite simple: Carden held the weather gauge and did not attempt to close the distance until it was too late.<sup>115</sup> This sort of nautical history is what Willis criticized; the realities of combat in sailing warships were more complicated than is usually depicted.<sup>116</sup>

Carden elaborated on the maneuvers in his defense, although he did not appear to have convinced the court. When questioned by the Court, David Hope testified that he believed they could have maneuvered and engaged the enemy at closer range, but that Carden preferred to keep

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<sup>113</sup> Carden to Croker, 28<sup>th</sup> October 1812. Captains Letters C, B-2612 v1663

<sup>114</sup> Sam Willis, "Capabilities of Sailing Warships," *The Northern Mariner*, XIII no. 4 (2003), 31-32

<sup>115</sup> Lambert, *The Challenge: United States and Macedonian*, (ebook)

<sup>116</sup> Willis, *Fighting at Sea in the Eighteenth Century*, 113



the weather gauge, and was more cautious in maneuvering.<sup>117</sup> Carden maintained that he believed it was impossible, and assured the court that:

It ever was my intention (impossible to accomplish) from the first moment I made the stranger out to be an enemy to engage him as close alongside on The same tack to windward, as the yards of the ship would allow, at the same time to advantage by a way more preferable circumstances that might offer, but that more preferable one I never did perceive, and as I hear every circumstance fully in my mind, I feel conscious it never existed, or was apparent to me.<sup>118</sup>

On the question of keeping off for so long, Carden maintained that it was the only option he had. But he is careful, in every account, to state that it was his intention to bring about a close action. This alludes to a common theme in British tactics in the Age of Sail. Royal Navy officers preferred fighting at close range. In this case, the criticism against Carden’s decision to stand off was based upon the fact that at long range his ship was at a severe disadvantage.

The Court agreed with Hope, stating in their verdict that: “previous to the commencement of the action, from an over anxiety to keep the weather gage an opportunity was lost at closing with the enemy, and that owing to this circumstance the *Macedonian* was unable to bring the *United States* to close action until she had received material damage...”<sup>119</sup> The court believed that, had a close action been brought about earlier, the smaller 18-pounder frigate could have prevailed. As such, it was Carden’s failure to bring about a close-range action that was blamed for his loss. This demonstrated the mindset of those naval officers – being the second such loss, members of the court still held confidence in the ability of an 18-pounder British frigate to be able to tackle a heavier enemy frigate if well-handled and well fought.

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<sup>117</sup> Hope’s Testimony, CM *Macedonian*, ADM 1/5436

<sup>118</sup> Carden’s Rebuttal, CM *Macedonian*, ADM 1/5436

<sup>119</sup> Verdict, CM *Macedonian*, ADM ADM 1/5436

A failure of tactics was not important enough to convict Carden, however. While he was criticized by Hope for not closing near the start of the action, neither Hope nor any other officers called Carden's courage into question. His conduct was described as courageous and morale inspiring.<sup>120</sup> The Court concluded that his failure to close with the enemy did not originate "in the most distant wish to keep back from the engagement."<sup>121</sup> It was not cowardice or hesitation that caused the loss, but bad judgement. Carden's conduct satisfied the court, and he was honourably acquitted.

The wider naval community, steeped in the culture of Nelsonic aggression and close action, was not satisfied. Carden's reputation in the navy was tarnished, and he was never again offered any active appointments following the loss of his frigate.<sup>122</sup> He was eventually promoted to flag rank after two decades on half pay and progressed up the ladder of admiral ranks, but did so as a retiree.<sup>123</sup> Many of his peers inside and outside the service criticized him for his handling of *Macedonian* during the action.<sup>124</sup> Years after the war concluded, Carden's reputation remained linked with his loss to USS *United States*. The criticism he faced later compelled him to write a memoir of his naval career, in which he admits that the criticism he received for losing the *Macedonian* was the motive for the book.<sup>125</sup>

The memoir's short account of the action invoked the boldness and bravery of himself and his crew in rushing to fight such a superior enemy. The bravery of the British sailor was defeated by overwhelming force and ill fortune. He asserted that *Macedonian* could have out-sailed and ran from the enemy, but had he done so he "should have Suffer'd an Ignominuous Death for

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<sup>120</sup> CM *Macedonian*, ADM ADM 1/5436

<sup>121</sup> Verdict, CM *Macedonian*, ADM ADM 1/5436

<sup>122</sup> McCranie, 66; John Carden, Officer Service Record, Carden, ADM 196/3

<sup>123</sup> Syrett and DiNardo, 72; John Carden, Officer Service Record, Carden, ADM 196/3

<sup>124</sup> Tracy, 71-72

<sup>125</sup> Wareham, *Star Captains*, 157; John Surman Carden, *A Curtail'd Memoir of Incidents and Occurrences in the Life of John Surman Carden, Vice Admiral in the British Navy*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1850)

Cowardice.”<sup>126</sup> Lambert echoes that sentiment in his discussion of Dacres’ loss to *Constitution*. He argued that, despite the decayed state of HMS *Guerriere*, had he run from the action, Dacres would have been chastised and been dishonourably discharged.<sup>127</sup> Carden attacked and failed, and while he was honourably acquitted, his career in the navy had come to an end.

### ***Constitution-Java* Action, 29<sup>th</sup> December 1812**

The Royal Navy and the naval-interested public were very demoralized by the end of 1812. Four warships had been lost to the American navy, and there had been no successes to counter the losses. But there was a final shock at the close of 1812 that reverberated throughout naval discourse into the new year. On the 29<sup>th</sup> of December, HMS *Java*, commanded by Captain Henry Lambert, was captured by USS *Constitution*, commanded by Commodore William Bainbridge, in the South Atlantic. She was en route to the East Indies, and carried nearly one hundred passengers, including naval supernumeraries and senior officers destined for commands in the east. Because of the extra hands on board, the action between *Java* and *Constitution* was the first frigate action where each side had roughly equal numbers. This was a deceptive equality, however, as many of the supernumeraries, bound for service on ships in the East Indies, were poorly trained and ill disciplined.<sup>128</sup>

Lambert scored a victory early in the action, setting what proved to be a deceptively optimistic mood for the British. *Java*’s first broadside was fired into *Constitution*’s weather bow and destroyed her helm. This gave *Java* an advantageous position; with the enemy’s ability to maneuver impaired she was able to hold the weather gauge and rake *Constitution* at will. Lambert

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid, 270

<sup>127</sup> Lambert, *The Challenge*, 77

<sup>128</sup> McCranie, 77-78

continued to counter Bainbridge's attempts to maneuver into a more favorable position, until an attempt to tack (pass bow first through the wind) put pressure on the *Java*'s damaged bowsprit. – The bowsprit was blown away, reducing *Java*'s speed and maneuverability and allowed *Constitution* to gain the upper hand and to rake *Java*. The action closed to pistol shot, where American musketry and grape shot inflicted heavy casualties on the British, and caused extensive damage to *Java*'s rigging. A last-ditch effort to board the enemy by Lambert was called off after their foremast fell, causing the heavily-damaged *Java* to lose speed and fall astern. Bainbridge was now in complete control of the action, and he sailed along *Java*'s starboard, firing into the British frigate from her defenseless side – her starboard battery was covered in wreckage, so *Java* was unable to return fire. *Constitution* then took position astern of the helpless *Java*. The British remained under a raking stern fire for 40 minutes before they surrendered; her colours were struck not on the orders of her Captain, who was dangerously wounded and taken below, but by her first lieutenant, Henry D. Chads.<sup>129</sup>

Like Carden, Lieutenant Chads entered the navy late. He first served at sea at the age of fifteen, after attending the Royal Naval Academy. However, he also had naval connections: his father was a Post Captain. This was not Chads' first experience with defeat; he was the first lieutenant of HMS *Iphigenia* (serving under Captain Lambert: this implies that Chads was a follower of Lambert, and likely very attached to him) during the Battle of Grand Port, a disaster for the British forces of the Mauritius Campaign. The melancholy state Chads was in following this defeat is evident in his evocative letter to Secretary Croker:

It is with deep regret that I write you for the information of the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty that His Majesty's Ship *Java* is no more, after sustaining an action on the 29<sup>th</sup> Inst for several hours with the American Frigate *Constitution* which resulted in the Capture and ultimate destruction of His Majesty's Ship. Captain Lambert being dangerously

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid, 77-81; Daughan, 142-145

wounded in the height of the Action, the melancholy task of writing the detail devolves on me.”

Chads’ melancholy task was to not only to detail the loss of his ship and provide justification for his actions and decisions (and that of his crew), but he also had to defend the honour of his captain, who by the 31<sup>st</sup> was in critical condition. Lambert ultimately died on the 4<sup>th</sup> of January, just days after his ship had been destroyed.

The account is sparse on details of much of the action before he took command. This makes sense, as Chads would have had his own specific position in action, and would not have paid as much attention to the battle as a whole as his commander had. He did explain the most important moments of the battle, and that *Java*’s dire situation arose due to the fact that USS *Constitution* was “avoiding close action and firing high to disable our masts, in which he succeeded too well.”<sup>130</sup> While Lambert held the weather gauge initially he could not bring about close action. It was because of damage to *Java*’s rigging that she lost the weather gauge and found herself at the mercy of the *Constitution*’s raking fire. Casualties increasingly mounted, and wreckage put most of the starboard battery out of action. By 4:15pm, when the American frigate stood off to make repairs, *Java* was left as “an unmanageable wreck.”<sup>131</sup> He assured Croker that, during that lull in the action:

Every exertion was made by us during this interval to place this Ship in a state to renew the action. We succeeded in clearing the wreck of our Masts from our Guns. a Sail was set on the stumps of the Foremast & Bowsprit the weather half of the Main Yard remaining aloft, the main tack was got forward in the hope of getting the Ship before the Wind, our helm being still perfect. the effort unfortunately proved ineffectual from the Main mast falling over the side from the heavy rolling of the Ship, which nearly covered the whole of our Starboard Guns.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> “Lieutenant Henry D. Chads to Secretary of the Admiralty John W. Croker, United States Frigate *Constitution*, off St Salvador 31<sup>st</sup> December 1812,” *Naval War of 1812*, 646

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid*, 647

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid*

The account maintains that even with the captain, the master, and a good portion of the crew wounded or killed, Chads was still trying to keep *Java* in the fight. But when attempts to repair and get back some control over the frigate failed, *Constitution* again sailed towards *Java*, preparing to rake her “without a possibility of our returning a shot.”<sup>133</sup>

As the frigate’s acting commanding officer, Chads decided to confer with his remaining officers on what to do next. He wrote:

I then consulted the Officers who agreed with myself that on having a great part of our Crew killed & wounded, our Bowsprit and three masts gone, several guns useless, we should not be justified in wasting the lives of more of those remaining whom I hope their Lordships & Country will think they have bravely defended His Majesty’s Ship. Under these circumstances, however reluctantly at 5:50 our Colors were lowered from the Stump of the Mizzen Mast and we were taken possession a little after 6.”<sup>134</sup>

The decision was made “reluctantly,” out of a recognition that further resistance would be futile. The message was that *Java*’s officers’ sense of humanity and duty to their crew came into force once the chance of victory had receded. Chads made it clear that the remaining officers collectively agreed to strike, and that it was not solely his decision, and that furthermore it was a necessary one.

Chads did not dismiss the disparity in force between the two frigates in his report. Instead, he included a description of the broadsides and dimensions of both, with which he hopes that “their Lordships will not think the British Flag tarnished, although success has not attended us.” An unnamed *Java* lieutenant’s letter, written a month after the battle, was later published in the *Naval Chronicle*.<sup>135</sup> In the letter, the officer placed the blame on his opponent’s strength; in addition to

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid

<sup>134</sup> Ibid, 647

<sup>135</sup> “Unnamed *Java* Lieutenant, to “My Dear Friend,” Mercury Cartel, St Salvador, 26<sup>th</sup> January 1813,” Fuller, John, Israel Pottinger, John Cooke, and J. Ross. *The Naval Chronicle, for 1813: Containing a General and Biographical History of The Royal Navy of the United Kingdom; with a variety of original papers on Nautical Subjects*. Vol. XXIX: January to June. (London: Joyce Gold, 1813), 452 (Hereafter: *The Naval Chronicle*, Vol 29)

the fact that the *Constitution's* crew was made up of “our prime sailors,” some from *Iphigenia* and *Guerriere*, he described the disparity in force. “From the manner in which this action was fought, and the unequalled injury the *Java* sustained beyond the *Constitution*, it appears evident that the American had advantages which do not belong to our frigates.”<sup>136</sup> Both the quality of the enemy sailors and the superior firepower and strength concerned this officer.

The resulting Court Martial was covered extensively in the *Naval Chronicle*, thanks to the submission of several documents that included accurate accounts and minutes of the trial. An excellent summation of the themes of Chads’ testimony was provided by the submitter: “the determination shewn by the gallant Chads to commence the second action, whilst the least gleam of hope of ultimate success remained.”<sup>137</sup> Chads particularly emphasized the efforts and gallantry of the now-deceased Captain Lambert, but also recounted his own efforts to renew the action at close quarters following Lambert and the Master being wounded and sent below. He also elaborated on the council he took from his officers during the lull in the action:

consulted now with the lieutenants Herringham and Buchannan, when it was determined to engage him again, should he give us an opportunity of doing so, with a probability of disabling him, which was now our sole object, but that it would be wasting lives resisting longer, should he resume a raking position, which unfortunately was the case.”<sup>138</sup>

His argument to the Court was that, if they could continue fighting, they would do so. But the officers would not resist and risk the lives of the crew if the *Constitution* assumed a raking position. *Java* was un-maneuverable and unable to counter an attempt to rake. In the opinion of the officers, continuing to fight under raking fire, as they had done for forty minutes previously, would have

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid

<sup>137</sup> “I. T. L., to the Editor, Walsworth,” *The Naval Chronicle*, Vol 29, 402

<sup>138</sup> Testimony of Chads, CM *Java*, ADM 1/5435

only needlessly risked the lives of the *Java*'s crew.<sup>139</sup> Consequently, when *Constitution* moved to reassume a position off *Java*'s stern, Chads struck.

Overall, Chads testimony was modest in nature, and focused on the collective efforts and responsibilities of the officers.<sup>140</sup> The testimony of Major General Hislop, the highest profile passenger from *Java*, enthusiastically defended Chads: "It would be presumption in me to suppose that any testimony of mine can be requisite to give weight to the more substantial proofs which must appear before this honourable court, in manifestation of the exemplary conduct of Lieutenant Chads."<sup>141</sup> He echoed the sentiment of fighting to the last chance of victory, informing the Court of the "cool, firm, and determined resolution" of Chads to continue the action "should the possibility of hurting or disabling the enemy's ship present itself."<sup>142</sup>

Chads was in a very different position from Laugharne, Dacres, Whinyates, or Carden – he assumed command of *Java* very late in the action, and was not as responsible for the loss as Lambert would have been. As the historian Lambert argued, "because [Captain] Lambert died heroically, and the ship had been stoutly defended against a more powerful foe, their Lordships were correct to consider the action a matter of some pride."<sup>143</sup> Arguably, this interpretation had more to do with the death of Captain Lambert than it did with the disparity in force. The disparity between *Java* and *Constitution* was not noticeably different from the disparity between the opponents in the two previous frigate actions. Chads, who had inherited an impossible position, not only was honourably acquitted; he was promoted to commander on the 28<sup>th</sup> May 1813 and was

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid

<sup>140</sup> Testimony of Chads, CM *Java*, ADM 1/5435

<sup>141</sup> Testimony of Hislop (Major General) CM *Java*, ADM 1/5435

<sup>142</sup> Ibid

<sup>143</sup> Lambert, *The Challenge: Constitution and Java* (ebook)



a post captain by July 1815.<sup>144</sup> He continued active service for some time and finished his career as an admiral, renowned in the navy as a gunnery specialist.<sup>145</sup>

## Conclusion

On the 31<sup>st</sup> of December 1812, Bainbridge was forced to burn his prize. *Java* was in too wrecked a state to make the long journey to an American port as a prize ship. And so, fittingly, the year 1812 ended with the burning of a prized British frigate. These five actions, the accounts detailing them, and their Courts Martial demonstrate several recurring themes of importance within the post-Nelsonic Royal Navy. The same qualities that were praised in the victories of the Napoleonic Wars, such as aggressive action, gallantry, and preference for close direct action, are all reflected in the accounts of the five losses. In each case, the principled defense reflected the notion that the British forces were expected to fight as long as their commanders felt that there was a chance of victory; as long as that chance existed, they were expected to be aggressive in their efforts to overcome the enemy.

The defense of the officers rested upon the fact that enemy gunfire had reduced their ships to an unmanageable state. Without the ability to move or steer the five British vessels were at the mercy of their American counterparts, who retained their ability to maneuver and were able to rake or board the British at will. And yet, the superiority of the enemy's gunfire was not in itself to blame for the situation the British found themselves in. Nor, seemingly, did the British consider it was the result of the skill of American commanders and sailors. Instead it was the arbitrary sense of luck or fortune that was chiefly to blame. As the British understood it, as powerful as the

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<sup>144</sup> Syrett and DiNardo, 77

<sup>145</sup> Lambert, *The Challenge: Constitution and Java* (ebook), Syrett and DiNardo, 77; Henry Chads, Officer Service Record, ADM 196/3

broadships of the heavy American frigates or as skilled as their volunteer crews were, in each case the British had a real chance at victory if they had been more fortunate. If important masts and spars had not been knocked away during the action, if the British had been more fortunate in how enemy shot had inflicted damage, then the British could have prevailed, as they had against the heavy frigates of France over the last two decades.

The Courts Martial agreed in each case that the loss was not fault of the captains, officers, or ships' companies involved. Only one officer, Lieutenant Andrew Duncan, was dishonourably dismissed. The rest were honourably acquitted, although the nature of their careers following the acquittal were drastically different. Above all, the most successful career post-defeat was Dacres. Perhaps it was his bold defense in his Court Martial, or his strong naval connections – or perhaps both. Chads was unique in that he was promoted following the defeat; his career was not as active as Dacres' was, but he remained employed for a period after the Napoleonic Wars ended. Laugharne, Whinyates, and Carden were not as fortunate. Their career prospects collapsed once Britain was at peace and were among the many naval officers who remained on half pay in the peace-time navy. There were only so many commands available, and those went to officers with reputations or connections. Dacres had connections and Chads had distinguished himself. The other three's reputations reflected their losses. Though honourably acquitted, that stain was significant in the competitive race for peacetime commands.

Regardless of their post-battle careers and reputation, none of the officers were criticized for fighting the actions against superior forces. Neither Dacres, Carden, nor Lieutenant Chads were told that they should have run from a battle where they were significantly outgunned. Carden and Chads cited the enemy's superior force as important factors in their defeats but emphasized the unmanageable state of their ships as the more important factor. They fought as long as they had a

chance at victory, and this was accepted by the Courts. In the case of Carden, it was decided that if he had fought the action at close range, he would have had of chance at defeating the enemy. Dacres boldly dismissed the enemy's superiority in his defense entirely. This was the style of the Royal Navy; it harked to memories of Thomas Cochrane's capture of *El Gamo*, or to the *Sybille-La Forte* action. Running from an enemy, even when at a 50% disadvantage, was not an option for naval officers.<sup>146</sup> It was a reputation that had made a stark impression on American naval officers such as Porter, and one which impaired their interpretation of the events of 1812. But just as this aggressiveness was encouraged and expected, so too were the Courts perfectly willing to accept the defense that each officer struck once they no longer had a chance at victory.

The news of these losses was not well received in Halifax nor London. They became the center of a contentious naval discourse through the first half of 1813. There were outcries and resentment from within the Royal Navy and the general public in the British Empire over the strategic decisions that led to these defeats, the damaging impacts on Britain's morale, and most importantly over the lack of any naval successes in the first months of the war with America.

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<sup>146</sup> Lambert, *The Challenge*, 79

## **Chapter Three: Broken “Spell of Invincibility:” Impact of 1812 losses on the *Naval Chronicle* and Halifax Press, 1812-1813**

Speaking in Parliament in February 1813, former Foreign Secretary and future Prime Minister George Canning remarked that “the sacred spell of invincibility of the British navy was broken by those unfortunate captures.”<sup>1</sup> His was one of many similar reactions to the losses of the previous year. Naval, civilian, and political voices were outraged by the losses, and this outrage was best exemplified in the *Naval Chronicle*.

Being one of the most prominent sources of naval news and discourse during the Napoleonic Era, the contents and discussion within the *Naval Chronicle* in relation to the first half-year of the War of 1812 provide an interesting contrast to the views expressed by the officers involved in the five naval losses on which the *Chronicle* commented. While similar themes are reflected in the *Chronicle* as in the naval correspondence and Courts Martial, they contrast significantly with service accounts. Many commentators in the *Chronicle* were very concerned with the disparity in force between the British and American frigates in 1812, which heavily influenced their understanding of their countrymen’s honour. In the minds of many commentators, their naval heroes were exonerated because of the overwhelming odds they faced, and their frustration and outrage was instead directed at the strategic decisions of the Admiralty.

The *Naval Chronicle* was “the most important original published documentation of the Royal Navy” during its run of publication, from 1799 to 1819.<sup>2</sup> It was a journal written by and for naval officers, though its readership extended into the naval enthusiastic educated public, and even

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in James Davey, “Representing Nations: Caricature and the Naval War of 1812,” in Tim Voelcker, editor, *Broke of the Shannon and the War of 1812*, (Seaworth Publishing, Barnsley, 2013): 161: *Hansard*, vol 24, cc 643, 18<sup>th</sup> February 1813

<sup>2</sup> Nicholas Tracy, *The Naval Chronicle: The Contemporary Record of the Royal Navy at War, Vol. I*, (London: Chatham Publishing, 1998): vii

found its way into the offices of foreign governments.<sup>3</sup> In addition to naval news and printed copies of notable dispatches, each edition included printed letters submitted to the *Chronicle* from its audience. Almost all were submitted anonymously, using pseudonyms that reflected naval or patriotic themes. According to Nicholas Tracy, these letters to the editor were “apparently from Naval Officers.”<sup>4</sup> However, not all were military experts – “Muzzle to Muzzle” argued that British naval tactics, comprising of bold, close range action, should be applied by Lord Wellington’s armies in Spain, and clearly demonstrated a lack of understanding of the nature of Napoleonic warfare. Other letters were written in a way to suggest that the average reader may not be fully aware of naval matters, such as the inner workings of a naval crew. As this chapter will argue, while the commentators all displayed a strong sense of patriotism and devotion to the British navy, their opinions on matters of naval honour, reputation, and strategy differ considerably from those of the officers discussed in the previous chapter, questioning the passive statement made by Tracy that they were indeed naval officers.

The *Chronicle*’s commentaries and contributed letters overall were highly critical of the Admiralty – the losses were blamed on naval policies that had put the nation’s frigates in danger of the menacing American heavy frigates. They advocated the use of overwhelming force to destroy the upstart American navy; a strategy that would not have sat well with the captains whose losses the *Chronicle* was eager to avenge. Britain’s wider press seemed to reflect these sentiments as well, although there were important differences in the coverage of the losses in Halifax’s papers, which were more restrained and resisted placing blame on any particular party. They were as concerned with the losses off their shores, but they reacted to them in very different ways.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, viii; Emperor Napoleon I and his Minister of Marine read the *Chronicle* “with much interest”

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

## British Honour and the Spell of Invincibility

A focus of commentary in the *Chronicle* was that of the honour and gallantry of the members of the British Royal Navy. Correspondence printed in the *Chronicle* during 1811 was filled with accounts of bravery, championing moments of gallantry, and praise for the individual zeal and activeness of naval heroes. Many writers sent stories of gallantry, copies of letters, and firsthand accounts of naval actions to the *Naval Chronicle*. Many were of recent actions that had made headlines in the United Kingdom, while others were accounts of actions from previous years and wars that were of interest to the readers of the *Chronicle*.

Initially the Editors were not terribly interested in the American War; in the August-September edition they expressed their disdain for the new conflict against “the descendants of Englishmen, a war against the seat of political and religious freedom.”<sup>5</sup> In the September-October edition, the editors again expressed their disdain for the conflict and a hope that it would see a speedy resolution, given their view that France was the biggest danger for both Britain and America.

When the news broke of Britain’s early losses in 1812, particularly the destruction of HMS *Guerriere*, there was a tremendous shock amongst the *Chronicle*’s readers. Losses in single ship actions had been rare enough during the French Revolutionary Napoleonic Wars, and during the whole of 1811 no British ship struck their colours to the enemy. The editors reluctantly commented on the news from “these lamentable hostilities.”<sup>6</sup> As they stated, the first events on land and at sea

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<sup>5</sup> “Naval History of the Present Year, 1812 (August-September): Retrospective and Miscellaneous” *The Naval Chronicle* Vol 28, 246

<sup>6</sup> “Naval History of the Present Year, 1812 (September-October), Retrospective and Miscellaneous,” *The Naval Chronicle* Vol 28, 313

of the conflict were in stark contrast to Britain's expectations.<sup>7</sup> While an American Army surrendered to Major General Isaac Brock's (who, they add, was promptly knighted) smaller army:

The unlooked for reverse of the medal is the capture of one of our stoutest frigates, the *Guerriere*, by a single opponent of the same class of ship, commanded by a nephew, bearing the same name, of the invading general against whom the fortune of war prove so adverse in the back settlements. Disasters of this kind are so rare in our naval annals, that it is not to be wondered at if such a result of a single-ship action, fought under such peculiar circumstances, should have aroused a more common feeling.<sup>8</sup>

They argued that British frigates, "rated 38 guns, should undoubtedly (barring extraordinary accidents) cope successfully with a 44-gun ship of any nation; but if that 44, by advantage of wind and superior sailing, should be able to choose her position, and vary her distance as may suit her convenience, it becomes problematical whether an English 38 could conquer her adversary under such circumstances; which seem to have been those attending this action."<sup>9</sup> In the view of the editors, British frigates were expected to triumph over heavier frigates, except when the enemy was fortunate in having a superior position and excellent handling. The *Constitution's* superior broadside and manpower was not in itself a deciding factor in *Guerriere's* defeat, but was nonetheless very important to the Editor's reconciliation with the shocking event.

For the editors, these numerical advantages are understood as significant obstacles to the British, and while they fully expected a British triumph in such a fight, the obstacles are enough to uphold the honour of the Royal Navy and to justify their own understanding of British might at sea. They cite the *Constitution's* "overwhelming superiority" in gunnery and musketry, and the fact that "these immense frigates are equal in weight of metal and complement of men to our two-decked fifties."<sup>10</sup> This defeat, shocking due to a lack of similar experiences of single ship action

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 313-314

<sup>10</sup> Ibid 314

defeats in recent years, reveals a paradox in their understanding of British naval might and invincibility – they expect an inferior British force to triumph against superior odds, but are still able to justify their losses due to enemy superiority. The editors do not want the British public to feel that “any tarnish has been left upon the national Trident” nor on the reputation of Captain Dacres.<sup>11</sup>

Following *Macedonian*’s capture, the editors again expressed this theme, arguing that USS *United States*’s superior size and broadside (described as “a frigate in name only”) and “the circumstances [of *Macedonian*’s capture] were such as are universally deemed honourable to Captain Carden and his brave crew.”<sup>12</sup> In the February-March 1813 edition, following news of HMS *Java*’s loss to *Constitution*, commentary from the editors was growing more grim and despairing. “We have still, however, to regret the disastrous progress of the naval war between this country and America. Another frigate has fallen into the hands of the enemy! – The subject is too painful for us to dwell upon.”<sup>13</sup> In part their despair was due to the superior number of prizes and victories that the American ships have earned: “The gazette contains a pretty long list of captures and recaptures on the American station: still, however, we are behind-hand.”<sup>14</sup> But the shock of the three frigate losses were the main points of contention, and it would not be until the United States “be made to *feel* the real weight of the British trident, when properly wielded; and not be allowed to skulk from their challenge for the mastery on the ocean, under the shelter of some compromising special-pleading treaty, til not only our losses have been indemnified, our defeats avenged, but the spell be restored.”<sup>15</sup> They had first declared the conflict a regrettable and

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> “Naval History of the Present Year 1812-13 (December-January) Retrospective and Miscellaneous,” *The Naval Chronicle* Vol 29, 74

<sup>13</sup> “Naval History of the Present Year 1812-13 (February-March) Retrospective and Miscellaneous,” *The Naval Chronicle* Vol 29, 242

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 244

<sup>15</sup> Ibid



contentious affair, and now the editors demanded that it be resolved only after a vicious effort in the Atlantic. Britain's naval supremacy, and the morale-inspiring effect that it had upon the British public, was of paramount importance to the editors.

The "spell" of British naval supremacy, in the minds of the editors, had real world strategic implications. The same piece also relayed the news of an action on the West African station, between two equally armed British and French frigates, HMS *Amelia* and *Aréthuse*. After a long and bloody action, the affair ended in a stalemate, the news of which astounded the editors of the *Naval Chronicle*. "It is long since any thing like this persevering effort has been witnessed on the part of the French. Is it not obvious that they are stimulated by American triumphs?"<sup>16</sup> It is a very serious concern that these American victories could embolden the French:

The French sailor, who went into battle, with a persuasion, founded on long experience, that his antagonist must be victorious, was already half-conquered. How different when he learns that his dreaded opponent has been beaten, yea, thrice beaten, by a new and inexperienced enemy. Not only does it cure him of superstitious terror, but it substitutes a spirit of emulation, and national rivalry. These are not flattering reflections; but we ought not to shrink from them.<sup>17</sup>

Many historians agree that by the time of Trafalgar, French naval morale and experience had deteriorated so badly that the outcomes of notable fleet actions of the Napoleonic Wars had nearly already been determined.<sup>18</sup>

"Albion," an anonymous contributor who sent in a letter to the *Chronicle*, also felt that the loss of the *Guerriere* to a ship "rated equal force" was an important and devastating blow to

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid

<sup>17</sup> Ibid

<sup>18</sup> Nicolson, 32-33; Roy Adkins, *Nelson's Trafalgar: The Battle that Changed the World* (Toronto: Penguin Books, 2004): 332; Howarth, David. *A Brief History of British Sea Power: How Britain Became Sovereign of the Seas*. (London: Constable & Robinson, 2003): 337-341; Charles B. Arthur, *The Remaking of the English Navy by Admiral St. Vincent - Key to the Victory Against Napoleon: The Great Unclaimed Naval Revolution (1795-1805)*, (London: University Press of America, 1986): 11; Robson, 121; Jonathan R. Dull, *The Age of the Ship of the Line: The British and French navies, 1650-1815*, (Lincoln and London, University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 123-136, 171-173

Britain's naval reputation and "almost unprecedented in the naval annals of Britain."<sup>19</sup> Its importance was primarily due to the fact that it "occasioned a loss of reputation to our navy, [and] an increase of character to that of the Americans."<sup>20</sup> Another, or perhaps the same, "Albion," argued that these defeats were mortifying, and also concluded that the news had emboldened the French in their action with HMS *Amelia*.<sup>21</sup> He was very concerned that the French were "now desirous of following the example of the Americans," both in their pursuit of snapping up British frigates in single ship actions and in the design of their heavy frigates.<sup>22</sup>

A third "Albion" writing in 1813 told the *Chronicle* that the few circumstances "appear more astonishing, than the unfortunate and inglorious commencement of the present war with American, on the ocean, the theatre of so many victories to Britons." For him, the losses of 1812 were a massive blow to Britain's naval reputation and to its ability to protect trade in the West Indies, but he does not extend the blame to the officers and crew who fought the action; "inglorious, I say, because unsuccessful; but I am ready to bear testimony to the gallant and noble exertions of the officers and ships' companies who have been obliged to yield (after *seeking the* combat) to the enemies' superiority; which we have *now only* been taught to acknowledge."<sup>23</sup>

The British public did not pay attention to naval news coming from North America until the first week of October, when news of *Guerriere's* defeat at the hands of *Constitution* reached London. It resulted in a surge of disbelief and widespread alarm. *The Times* "declared that far more than a single ship was lost. The invaluable reputation of the Royal Navy was undermined with incalculable consequences."<sup>24</sup> By 1811 and early 1812 it seemed that the Royal Navy was truly

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<sup>19</sup> ""Albion" to the Editor, Aberdeen, 10<sup>th</sup> November, 1812," *The Naval Chronicle* Vol 29, 386

<sup>20</sup> Ibid

<sup>21</sup> ""Albion," to the Editor, 4<sup>th</sup> April, 1813," *The Naval Chronicle* Vol 29, 291

<sup>22</sup> Ibid

<sup>23</sup> ""Albion," to the Editor," *The Naval Chronicle* Vol 29, 115

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Daughan, 82

invincible at sea, as the only major British naval loss in the Napoleonic Wars was the Battle of the Grand Port (fought in the Grand Port, Isle de France, in the Indian Ocean from 20<sup>th</sup>-27<sup>th</sup> August 1810). Commentators in 1812 and 1813 saw recent events as serious threats to Britain's "spell of invincibility." Britain's public and overall naval culture had been deeply shaken, and many feared that this would have important ramifications in the wider war against Napoleonic Europe. As will be seen later in the chapter, this sentiment would result in many voices in the *Chronicle* calling for the American Navy's annihilation.

### **"They are Frigates in Name Only"**

Some commentators dismissed the importance of the American victories, arguing that they were not necessarily indicative of a loss of British greatness, or a stain upon the honour of its navy, but instead attest solely to the superior size and firepower of the three American heavy frigates. The commentators felt the same urge for vengeance as many others did, but they argued that these losses did not reflect badly on the officers and sailors who had fought outgunned with honour and zeal, and nor on Britain's reputation on the whole. They argued that they were not fair contests, and many also argued that they should be avenged through equally unfair contests.

In a letter submitted in March 1813, "J.C." stated that "there is no cause for regretting the late disasters at sea, viz. the capture of the *Guerrier*, *Macedonian*, *Java*, and *Frolic*."<sup>25</sup> While he was very concerned by the defeats and loss of life, he felt that the national dialogue was out of control. According to the Press, the "charm is broken," "and the trident is, according to their ideas, already snatched from our hands, - by what? By a navy so small we scarcely know where to find

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<sup>25</sup> "J.C. to the Editor, 25<sup>th</sup> March 1813," *The Naval Chronicle* Vol 29, 288

it, consisting of *three sail of the line*, three frigates, and about as many sloops.”<sup>26</sup> Part of the reason why these defeats, in J.C.’s mind, are inconsequential, is the fact that the British ships were outmatched in each of the four actions.<sup>27</sup> He does not refer to *Constitution*, *United States*, and *President* as frigates, instead calling them ships of the line. Moreover, he states that “they have been victorious in four actions, in all of which they have been vastly superior in tonnage, weight of metal, and number of men (all of them picked) in the proportion of three to two.”<sup>28</sup> Victory against those odds, then, were near impossible.<sup>29</sup> Linking the crews of those British warships to Leonidas and his force of Spartans, he instead argues that the British crew should be praised for their conduct in battle. Despite losing, they inflicted so much damage upon the enemy that they were compelled to return to port and abandon their missions. Their defeat was honourable and reflected well on the British spirit.

In his letter prefacing a submission on the details of the action between *Java* and *Constitution* to the *Chronicle*, “I.T.L.” shares this sentiment. He praised the crew and commanders of HMS *Java* for taking on a much stronger assailant, and in that action *Constitution* (incorrectly identified as USS *United States*) was forced to abandon her cruise due to damage sustained in the action. “I.T.L.” stated that the documents he submitted “reflect much honour on both parties; and in the hope that the gallantry of our frigate’s crew may be known throughout the British dominions and preserved from oblivion, I send them for insertion in the *Naval Chronicle*.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid

<sup>27</sup> The letter mentions *Guerriere*, *Macedonian*, *Java*, and *Frolic*. HMS *Alert* was discounted. The *Essex-Alert* action was barely touched upon in the *Chronicle*’s coverage – likely because it was the least evenly matched of the five single ship actions in 1812. A sloop being taken by a fifth rate was not particularly noteworthy, compared to the loss of three frigates.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 289

<sup>29</sup> Ibid

<sup>30</sup> “I.T.L. to the Editor, Walsworth, 1813” *The Naval Chronicle* Vol 29, 402

“Britannicus” displayed a deeply patriotic tone in his letter in late 1812 – he argued against the retention of French names for captured ships, as “It is no longer, thanks to our brave seamen, a novelty to see a French man of war captured by a British ship.”<sup>31</sup> The tone and content of the letter suggests that “Britannicus” was very devoted to Britishness, and has a great respect for the Royal Navy that, in his mind, had captured enough enemies to diminish the need to retain their foreign names and thus “to let it be known that she was taken from the enemy.”<sup>32</sup> Despite this, he was willing to admit that “At present, our frigates are no match for the Americans.”<sup>33</sup> Because of this, the new heavy frigates (he specifically comments on the planned 58-gun fur frigates) being constructed by the Navy are badly needed – he wrote that he hoped they will “be built on a scale enabling them to cope with the American frigates.”<sup>34</sup>

“R”’s letter of October 13, 1812 countered the sentiment that HMS *Guerriere*’s loss was a stain on national honour. While “The loss of H.M. frigate *Guerriere* is no doubt much to be regretted; but she is not in possession of the enemy, she is not a trophy of victory – not a tarnish is to be found upon the trident of the seas.”<sup>35</sup> He criticized papers that asserted that Dacres’ efforts were not sufficient and a stain on national honour; therefore and deserving of punishment:

Is the editor of the paper alluded to ignorant of the force of the *Constitution*? Does he know that she is as heavy as an English sixty-four? Has any person informed him that the upper deck of the *Constitution* is flush fore and aft, and that she thereby mounts a double tier of guns, like a line-of-battle ship? Does he not feel, does his conscience not tell him, that when a ship has been fought to the last extremity, until resistance is impotent, and perseverance vain, that the captain is responsible for the lives of his crew; and that had Captain Dacres obstinately persisted longer, the blood of every forfeited life would have been upon him, and their valuable services would have been taken from their country, to deck the funeral of the commander. Had the *Guerriere* gone down from such

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<sup>31</sup> “Britannicus to the Editor,” *The Naval Chronicle* Vol 28, 467

<sup>32</sup> Ibid

<sup>33</sup> Ibid

<sup>34</sup> Ibid

<sup>35</sup> ““R” to the Editor, Oct 13, 1812,” *The Naval Chronicle* Vol 28, 381

obstinacy as the Editor alluded to requires, Captain Dacres would have been an executioner.<sup>36</sup>

He goes on to ask the editors of other papers if they would have fought to the death under such conditions. In one sense, his argument was similar to that employed by the defeated officers that he was defending – once all hope of victory was gone, it was Dacres' duty to save the lives of his men. But just as important for "R" was the fact that *Guerriere* had faced such tremendous odds in the first place. His letter highlighted the comparison of USS *Constitution* to a British ship of the line. Given those odds, "R" argued, the fact that *Guerriere* was fought until she had effectively been destroyed was a triumph for Dacres and for Britain's honour.

One commentator pointed out that a reason for the immense shock at these losses was the fact that many in the public simply understood all frigates as more or less equal. Commentary and news reporting until 1812 had given this impression:

People, unacquainted with sea matters, are apt to infer a perfect equality in the term frigate; ... it cannot but be observed, that the loss of the *Guerriere* and *Macedonian* is still viewed (even by many who are well informed) as a national source of regret, and a blemish in our naval annals... When a British frigate of equal force shall submit to an American, we may then allow our transatlantic descendants a plea of quality; but that the two instances before us can give them the smallest claim to it, I deny.<sup>37</sup>

Despite this disparity in force, "Æolus" argued, these British crews were compelled to seek out action because of their "gallantry," and he was convinced that "there is no ship of that rate in our service, provided she be in an effective state, which will hereafter shun an action with either of the three overgrown American frigates."<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 381-382

<sup>37</sup> "'Æolus" to the Editors, 16<sup>th</sup> January 1813," *The Naval Chronicle* Vol 29, 113

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 113

“Arion” also argued that much of the nation’s shock was the result of public ignorance of the true nature of the American frigates. They are called frigates, and so the general public equate them with Britain’s much lighter warships. The “American frigates, as they are called” were not true frigates, as “their tonnage, weight of metal, number of guns and men, being superior to any class of ships in the British navy, under a sixty-four; and far superior to this rate, or even a seventy-four, in blowing weather should prevent their lower deck ports from being opened.”<sup>39</sup> Because of this, he argues, the *Guerriere* and *Macedonian* did not stand a chance. “Arion” believed that the superior broadside of the enemy was the one crucial factor – if the American ships had been manned by Frenchmen, they still would have won. And if the British had had the heavy frigates and the Americans the lighter ones, the heavier ships would have prevailed. It was a sentiment that both Dacres and Carden would have firmly disagreed with, just as they would have disagreed with “Arion’s” speculation that the British may have had a better chance if they had fought at long range, due to the heavy but short-range carronades that made up the American frigates’ fore-castle and quarterdeck batteries. “British officers have not been accustomed to find any disadvantage from close action, but the contrary; but here they have evidently a new species of force to contend with.”<sup>40</sup>

Many commentators argued that the American warships were not frigates at all, but instead a fast two-decked ship of the line.<sup>41</sup> The *Naval Chronicle* reported the *Constitution*’s broadside at 777lbs and *Guerriere*’s at 526 lbs, and later reported that USS *United States*’ broadside was “one

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<sup>39</sup> “Arion,” to the Editor, *The Naval Chronicle* Vol 29, 206-207

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 207

<sup>41</sup> “Arion,” to the Editor, *The Naval Chronicle* Vol 29, 206-207; “Naval Patriot” to the Editor,” May 1813 *The Naval Chronicle* Vol 29, 466-468; “Impartial” to the Editor, London, 23<sup>rd</sup> May, 1813, *The Naval Chronicle* Vol 29, 470-472, among others

hundred and eighty-eight pounds more than an English sixty-four gun ship!”<sup>42</sup> “Albion” states that the American frigates are really 60-gun ships.<sup>43</sup> The three American heavy frigates, though rated as 44-gun frigates, all in effect carried over 50 guns and carronades, more than any of their British counterparts. British frigates often carried additional guns as well. An account from an officer of the *Constitution* was included in the *Chronicle* as a comparison to the British accounts published there and in the *London Gazette* – the officer remarks that *Guerriere* carried 49 guns and carronades in total.<sup>44</sup> However, none of the British commentators point out that each of the British frigates carried more guns than they were rated – they do not refer to *Guerriere* as a 50-gun ship. Most British commentators focus on the weight of broadsides involved, rather than the specific number of guns involved.

“Naval Patriot” attributed the losses almost exclusively to the fact that the American frigates carried two decks of guns, and had a main battery of 24-pounders, which far outclassed the 18-pounders found on most of Britain’s large frigates.<sup>45</sup> “They are called frigates, but are in every sense two-deckers. The *Constitution*, *United States*, *President* (and I believe *Chesapeake*), each of them mounting 56 guns, and 480 men, were all of them built on the scantlings of 74-gun ships, and were intended to be such, when their keels were laid down.”<sup>46</sup> While he specified that *Constitution* carried 56 guns, he does not specify how many guns were carried by *Guerriere* or *Java*, instead referring to them as 38-gun ships. The commentator further speculates that USS *Hornet*, which captured HMS *Peacock* in 1813, likely carried a broadside that far outmatched

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<sup>42</sup> “Naval History of the Present Year, 1812 (September-October): Retrospective and Miscellaneous” *The Naval Chronicle* Vol 28, 314; “Naval History of the Present Year, 1812-1813 (December-January): Retrospective and Miscellaneous,” *The Naval Chronicle* Vol 29, 74

<sup>43</sup> “Albion” to the Editor,” 14<sup>th</sup> January, *The Naval Chronicle* Vol 29, 115

<sup>44</sup> “Naval Anecdotes, Commercial Hints, Recollections: Capture of the *Guerriere*,” *The Naval Chronicle*, Vol 28, 370

<sup>45</sup> ““Naval Patriot” to the Editor,” May, 1813 *The Naval Chronicle* Vol 29, 466-468

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*



*Peacock's*, though admits he is unaware of any actual details on USS *Hornet*. Nevertheless, he is quite confident that the *Hornet* must outclass *Peacock*.<sup>47</sup>

The first edition of the *Naval Chronicle* for 1813 included an overview of the naval strength of various powers, including the United States, as of November 1812. Each American ship was listed, including both its official rate and the actual number of guns mounted. British ships stationed in North America were also included, but while their official rates were detailed, there is no account of the actual number of carriage guns on board. Other specifications that were generally more important in the official dispatches of the 1812 losses, such as the size, length, tonnage, and broadside weight, were detailed. By pointing out that the American frigates carried more guns than their rate but omitting the same detail about many (though not all) British frigates, the *Chronicle* exaggerated the disparity between the forces available to the British and American navies in North America. The comparison's purpose, after all, was to "enable the reader to appreciate the heroism with which our officers and seamen have defended themselves in the recent actions with our trans-Atlantic descendants."<sup>48</sup> Their discussion focused on the disparity in the weight of metal, arguing that a ship mounting heavier guns has a significant advantage over ships mounting smaller guns.<sup>49</sup> For the Editors, the importance of the exact number of guns was overshadowed by the weight of metal, tonnage, and overall length and size,<sup>50</sup> but they still felt the need to highlight the fact that each of the American heavy frigates carried about 54/56 guns (depending on the account) when they were rated 44. By omitting the fact that *Guerriere* carried a total of 49 guns rather than 38, it

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid

<sup>48</sup> "General Maritime Force of Europe," *The Naval Chronicle* Vol 29, 37-38

<sup>49</sup> Ibid

<sup>50</sup> They particularly state that the American heavy frigates carried main batteries of 24-pounders, whereas no British frigate carried anything heavier than an 18-pounder, ignoring ships such as HMS *Indefatigable* and HMS *Endymion*, which likely still retained their heavier 24-pounders even after the RN began reducing batteries.

became clear that, like other commentators, they were concerned about the common public perception that America's frigates were equal to British ones.

"An Iron Gun" stated that the caliber of gun was the most important factor in the British defeats: "I am confident, that had the British frigates guns of equal caliber with the Americans, we should have had a different [result]."<sup>51</sup> "An Iron Gun" does not, however, advocate sending frigates armed with 24-pounders to the American theater, to bring about the fair fight that he suggests would have been victorious. He relays news that HMS *Culloden*, a 74-gun ship of the line, is to be cut down into a frigate and given a 24-pounder main battery. "Why deprive her of the advantage of retaining the 32-pounder guns already on board, as it is asserted that, after the intended alterations are completed, she will then be scarcely equal to the American frigates?" Additionally, he suggested that 68-pounder carronades be placed on the fore and quarterdecks to further give the British an advantage in strength. He also considered retaining her as a seventy-four, as "It is not usual to reduce one's strength when going to fight an enemy."<sup>52</sup> Despite his confidence in the superiority of British sailors given equal conditions, he has no interest in giving the Americans a fair fight in which to test that confidence. Instead, it is suggested that the ideal strategy for the destruction of the American frigates is to bring as much force to bear against them as possible.

"Albion," who in January wrote to the *Chronicle* to proclaim that naval protection of trade in the West Indies was in a desperate state, referred to the American heavy frigates as 60-gun men of war. So distressful were the losses that "Albion", who praised the gallantry of the officers for seeking action in the first place, concedes that "it must not henceforth be expected that our frigates can go alongside of them."<sup>53</sup> His preferred method for dealing with the Americans is the use of

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<sup>51</sup> "'An iron Gun of a Large Calibre,' To the Editor," 28<sup>th</sup> January 1813, *The Naval Chronicle* Vol 29, 114

<sup>52</sup> Ibid; Interestingly, there is at least one instance where a British captain (Broke) does diminish his own force on blockade to try and tempt the American forces out of port.

<sup>53</sup> "'Albion,' to the Editor, 14<sup>th</sup> January 1813," *The Naval Chronicle* Vol 29, 115

overwhelming force, so that it would be “almost impossible for them long to escape us; and, I have no fear, they will soon be taught to acknowledge it a vain attempt to wrest from us the trident of the ocean.” Further letters concur that destroying the American forces with overwhelming strength is the most important priority.<sup>54</sup>

Daughan’s work highlights this as well: “When the British had more time to think about it, they rationalized the defeat by pointing out that the *Constitution* was more of a line of battle ship than a frigate. They maintained that the *Guerriere* would have been justified in refusing combat with an obviously superior foe. Captain Daces had a different excuse.”<sup>55</sup> Dacres’ excuses, as highlighted in the previous chapter, centered on the structural conditions of his ship prior to the battle. For Dacres and his fellows, the superior size and firepower of the American warships was not the deciding factor.<sup>56</sup> For a serving member of the Royal Navy, refusing combat against America’s heavy frigates was unthinkable, but for many of the *Chronicle’s* commentators that was not the case. After the shock of realizing that their naval heroes were not invincible, they rationalized their own senses of patriotism and understanding of British might by clinging to the vast disadvantages their countrymen had faced during the single ship actions. Many demanded action in the form of vengeance – vengeance through overwhelming force. Commentators were just as concerned with the blow to Britain’s command of the sea (both physically and metaphorically) as they were with the losses of five ships. Some focused their frustrations on the decision makers, whom they saw as responsible for placing the Royal Navy and the North American Squadron in such a perilous position in the first place.

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<sup>54</sup> ““Albion,” to the Editor, 4<sup>th</sup> April 1813.” *The Naval Chronicle* Vol 29, 291-292; ““Albion to the Editor, Aberdeen, 10<sup>th</sup> November 1812,” *The Naval Chronicle* Vol 29, 286-287; ““Oceanus” to the Editor, December 1, 1812.” *The Naval Chronicle* Vol 29, 12-13

<sup>55</sup> Daughan, 82

<sup>56</sup> Daughan, 82; Testimony Dacres, CM *Guerriere*, ADM 1/5431

## Outrage at the Admiralty

The *Chronicle* and its readership did not blame the naval disasters on the officers and crew who were involved, and instead some blamed the Admiralty. Some questioned the Admiralty's strategic decisions in relation to the North American theater; others were outright furious with the policymakers in the Admiralty. Even the editors, who rarely discussed politics in the *Naval Chronicle*, decided to weigh in with their own opinions. They were distressed by the fact that the British were falling behind in the naval war. Despite a long list of captures and recaptures, they had lost all five of the single ship actions, and many merchant vessels had been snapped up. It was the result of the "petty, hesitating system of warfare" that the Navy was employing in North America. Direct, aggressive action was advocated by the *Chronicle*.<sup>57</sup>

Many were critical of the Admiralty's apparent failure to keep sufficient forces in North America to counter America's heavy frigates. "Albion's" 4<sup>th</sup> April 1813 letter argued that Britain's heaviest frigates should be immediately sent to North America. He particularly called for the Navy to build new heavy frigates, rather than spend its time on cutting down old ships of the line.<sup>58</sup> Combined with ships of the line, they would be necessary to "restore the success of the British naval arms."<sup>59</sup> Another "Albion" wanted to see the Navy focus on obliterating the American navy, for which more ships were needed in North America.<sup>60</sup> A commentator known as "Triton" also stated that a significant allocation of naval strength was needed in North America.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> "Naval History of the Present Year, 1812 (February-March): Retrospective and Miscellaneous" *The Naval Chronicle* Vol 29, 244

<sup>58</sup> Cutting down ships of the line, a process known as razing, was faster than building new frigates. Older ships of the line had their structure reduced and the upper gun deck removed, leaving a larger frigate shaped hull. Britain's first heavy frigates were razéd former 64-gun ships of the line like HMS *Indefatigable*. The First Lord preferred this quicker method of acquiring heavy frigates to counter the American threat; this commentator strongly disagreed.

<sup>59</sup> "'Albion,' to the Editor, 4<sup>th</sup> April 1813," *The Naval Chronicle* Vol 29, 292

<sup>60</sup> "'Albion to the Editor, Aberdeen, 10<sup>th</sup> November 1812," *The Naval Chronicle* Vol 29, 286-287

<sup>61</sup> "'Triton to the Editor, Lloyd's C.H. 10<sup>th</sup> December 1812," *The Naval Chronicle* Vol 28, 461

“Oceanus” wrote to the *Chronicle* to question pre-war Admiralty naval policy in regards to North America and its inability to prevent the naval disasters that occurred in 1812:

Though I am convinced that clever men are selected to form the board of Admiralty, I am at a loss to determine their motive for not employing our largest frigates on the American station. Had common precaution been taken, previously to the declaration of war against us, we should, in all probability, have been spared the mortification that was felt at the loss of the *Guerriere*.<sup>62</sup>

There were not enough ships on station as a precaution in case of war with the United States, and to “Oceanus” it did not appear that enough was being done to rectify the situation and prevent another frigate from being overpowered by a superior foe. It is the government officials whom should be blamed, according to “Oceanus.” The solution, in his mind, is to send every one of Britain’s heavy frigates “which carry, or are capable of carrying, twenty-four pounders on their main decks ... as a flying squadron, under the command of an enterprising officer,” to hunt down and destroy the American squadron.<sup>63</sup>

“M” criticizes the Admiralty for failing to station adequate forces on the North American Squadron: “I do not know what information the government may have possessed respecting the largest class of American ships of war, called by them frigates; but I remember being told, twenty years ago, by one who had been in their service, that if ever we should have war with that country, our frigates could be no match for them... Recent events have proved the correctness of the observations.”<sup>64</sup> He criticized the Admiralty for failing to acquire and act on the information that he claimed he had learned of years before. He suggests that this might be because, after so many years of success, the impossible was expected from British warships. However, it was still a serious

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<sup>62</sup> ““Oceanus” to the Editor, 1<sup>st</sup> December 1812.” *The Naval Chronicle* Vol 29, 12-13

<sup>63</sup> Ibid

<sup>64</sup> ““M to the Editor,” *The Naval Chronicle* Vol 29, 469: This is a bold claim, given that the Six Original Frigates were not authorized by Congress until 1794, and the first ship (USS *United States*) did not enter service until 1797.

blunder, one in which there was no retribution for the seamen “who have fallen contending against a superior foe.”<sup>65</sup>

Some vehemently argued that powerful squadrons centered around ships of the line should have been stationed in North America to ensure that the United States Navy never posed a threat. At the very least, Britain’s own existing heavy frigates, carrying 24-pounder main batteries, should have been stationed at Halifax and Bermuda when relations with the United States began to sour. So, why did Britain not station heavier frigates in North America prior to the outbreak of war? There were two main reasons for this.

As there were very few naval threats in North American waters during the wars with Revolutionary and Napoleonic France, the North American Squadron was a low priority. The bulk of the fleet was concentrated in European waters to blockade French, Spanish, and Dutch forces. In 1811, the North American Squadron included a 64-gun ship, seven frigates, eight sloops, one gun-brig, and five schooners. It was the largest it had been since war broke out in 1793, though much smaller than in 1774, prior to the Revolutionary War. At that time, British Admiral Sir Hugh Palliser, who had extensive experience in those waters, estimated that fifty ships were needed to conduct a blockade of the thirteen colonies. In 1814, Vice Admiral Alexander Cochrane estimated that the operation would require ninety ships.<sup>66</sup> Admiral Sawyer and Admiral Warren both immediately realized that they needed far more ships to achieve their objectives of protecting Britain’s extensive trade and operating against enemy trade and cruisers.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid

<sup>66</sup> Gywn, 134

<sup>67</sup> Gywn, 134-140; Lambert, “Sideshow? British Grand Strategy,” 17-39, 21; Daughan, 125; Roger Morriss, *Cockburn and the British Navy in Transition: Admiral Sir George Cockburn, 1772-1853*. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1997): 87; Dudley, *Splintering the Wooden Wall*, 68-78

The second is Britain's wartime experience regarding the once-feared French 24-pounder frigates. During the French Revolutionary Wars, it quickly became apparent that Britain's smaller 18-pounder frigates were able to cope with their French cousins.<sup>68</sup> Of the forty-five single ship frigate duels fought between British and French frigates between 1793 and 1814, nine of Britain's thirty-five victories were against French ships with superior broadsides (up to 250% the firepower of the victorious British frigates), and Britain won every frigate duel where the two sides were evenly matched. All of France's 24-pounder frigates were eventually captured by inferiorly armed British frigates.<sup>69</sup> By the early 1800s, the Admiralty no longer felt that the French naval threat warranted the continued effort required to build and man the larger frigates. Admiral Sir John Jervis, Lord St. Vincent, had concluded by 1797 that Britain's newer frigates were of excessive size, and remarked that in his time at sea he had never found himself in need of larger frigates; instead, his concern as a serving admiral was that there were never enough lighter frigates. Furthermore, heavier frigates were more expensive to build, man, and operate (particularly in a navy always short on manpower). When he became First Lord of the Admiralty in 1802, the overall trends of British frigate design and construction focused on quantity, not quality.<sup>70</sup> Larger numbers of smaller frigates, including 18- and even 12-pounder designs, were constructed. Britain's existing heavy frigates were given a lower priority; lighter frigates were armed and put to sea before heavier ones, as they were easier to man and cheaper to maintain. A handful of Britain's heavier frigates, such as HMS *Endymion*, had their main batteries reduced from 24-pounders to 18-pounders.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Lardas, *British Frigate vs French Frigate*, 69

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, 69-40; Britain won thirty-five actions, France won three, and seven actions were inconclusive.

<sup>70</sup> Gardner, 9-20

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*

As Gardiner points out, the British public had been “brought up on a diet of almost uninterrupted naval victories against apparently any odds.”<sup>72</sup> The Admiralty had consumed much of the same diet themselves, and over the course of the wars with France had concluded that heavier ships were not required. Smaller British frigates, which were cheaper to build and maintain, could do the same job as Britain’s heaviest frigates (such as *Endymion*). When this streak ended in 1812, there was a storm of outrage at the Admiralty. He pointed out “That the American ships were about 40 per cent larger and carried fifty per cent more firepower was ignored by the journalistic clamor, and the public and parliamentary pressure forced the Admiralty to review its North American strategy.”<sup>73</sup>

Overall, Britain’s wider popular press agreed with the *Chronicle* that the Liverpool Ministry and the Admiralty were to blame for the disasters in 1812. According to McCranie, predictions that the naval losses in 1812 would outweigh news of successes in Canada in the popular press proved true. Papers such as *The Morning Chronicle*, “the mouthpiece of those in opposition to the current British government,” relentlessly attacked the Liverpool Ministry and the Admiralty for the policies that lead to the disastrous course of the naval war with the United States.<sup>74</sup> Even more moderate papers such as *The Times* blamed the government and the Admiralty for the navy’s losses. A significant proportion of the *Naval Chronicle’s* commentators acknowledged and commented on the disparity in strength between the American heavy frigates and their British 18-pounder opponents. Segments of the popular press did as well, including *The Morning Chronicle*, which argued that the disparity in force vindicated the defeated officers and sailors of guilt, but did not vindicate the policymakers in Whitehall.<sup>75</sup> According to Gardiner, this

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 35

<sup>73</sup> Ibid

<sup>74</sup> McCranie, 89

<sup>75</sup> Ibid



distinction was lost in the wider public press overall – the general public did not understand the actual difference between a frigate armed with 24-pounders and one armed with 18 pounders. Bred on two decades of victories against impressive odds, the public ignored the disparity in force between the opponents in the 1812 frigate actions.<sup>76</sup> Perhaps that is why some papers stressed the difference in size and strength between the British and American frigates, as commented on in *The Morning Chronicle*.<sup>77</sup>

### **Halifax's Popular Press**

News readers in wartime Halifax were very interested in war coverage. Papers such as the *Royal Gazette* and the much younger *Acadian Recorder* printed extracts of British and American newspapers that detailed the course of the European wars on nearly every front. Readers were particularly interested in the exploits of Admiral Horatio Nelson; according to Keith Mercer, Nelson's career was closely followed by Nova Scotians, who did not let the considerable time delay in learning of his exploits and major actions stop them from speculating on rumours of this exploits and celebrating his victories.<sup>78</sup> Just as the naval defeats in 1812 were shocking to the British public, Halifax was deeply shocked by the losses of the British frigates, particularly *Guerriere*, one of the frigates that had been stationed in Halifax before the declaration of war.<sup>79</sup> Just as public celebrations had followed news of Nelson's victories at the Nile, Copenhagen, and Trafalgar, public shock and sorrow followed the losses of the *Guerriere*, *Alert*, *Macedonian*, *Frolic*, and *Java*.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Gardner, 35

<sup>77</sup> McCranie, 89

<sup>78</sup> Mercer, "Nelson on the Mind," 171-178

<sup>79</sup> Mercer, "Colonial Patriotism," 42; Thomas H. Raddall, *Halifax: Warden of the North*, (Nimbus Publishing, 2010): 140-141

<sup>80</sup> Mercer, "Nelson on the Mind," 173-178; Mercer, "Colonial Patriotism," 42

Curiously, residents of Halifax often learned about events taking place in the American naval theater from copies of papers from American ports such as Boston or Philadelphia – and regarding American naval victories, the editors of the *Royal Gazette* and *Acadian Recorder* preferred to wait for the British accounts than to go off of American ones. As such, in the September 16<sup>th</sup>, 1812 edition of the *Royal Gazette*, editors commented on the recently arrived news of the capture of Halifax-based HMS *Guerriere*:

We have extracted from late Boston papers the American account of the capture and destruction of His Majesty's Ship *Guerriere* – As we have not had any other particulars of this distressing event, we think it our duty to abstain from any comment whatever.<sup>81</sup>

Similarly, in the first edition of the *Acadia Recorder*, published 16<sup>th</sup> January 1813, the loss of *Macedonian* was discussed only briefly:

Of the *Macedonian*'s action we have hitherto had only the American account, and it is but common justice to suspend our judgement “till we are acquainted with both sides of the question.”<sup>82</sup>

Halifax received official British accounts of actions occurring off the North American coastline from the *London Gazette*. It is telling that the Halifax newsmen refrained from printing the American accounts of the loss of *Guerriere*, *Alert*, *Macedonian*, *Frolic*, and *Java*; Nova Scotians felt the same devotion to Britain's naval exploits as the British themselves. Just as Nelson's victories had overjoyed the residents of Halifax, the American victories were shocking, so much so that the *Royal Gazette* and *Acadian Recorder* felt duty bound to wait for British reports before reporting on those “distressing events.”

News of the *Macedonian*'s loss reached Halifax as late as December, when it was reported briefly in the *Royal Gazette*. Both papers had said very little about her loss by early March, when

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<sup>81</sup> *Royal Gazette*, Wednesday 16<sup>th</sup> September 1812, No. 611, Vol XII, Nova Scotia Archives, Microfilm Reef 8172

<sup>82</sup> *Acadian Recorder*, Saturday 16<sup>th</sup> January 1813, No. 1, Vol I, Nova Scotia Archives, <https://novascotia.ca/archives/newspapers/archives.asp?ID=752>

rumours of *Java*'s loss reached Halifax. The *Acadian Recorder*'s reporting was restrained, as the reporting on *Guerriere* and *Macedonian* had been in the *Gazette* and *Recorder*. In the March 6<sup>th</sup> 1813 edition the newspaper simply reported that, unreliable as intelligence from American sources was, "we cannot flatter ourselves that [*Java*] is not destroyed, but from all we can learn, and the tried and established character of Capt. Lambert, we have no doubt the defence of her has been such as to reflect additional lustre on the British name."<sup>83</sup> On the 20<sup>th</sup>, however, the *Recorder* printed an American paper's account of the *Constitution*'s triumphant return after defeating HMS *Java*.<sup>84</sup> It seemed that the restraint showed by the *Recorder* when they declined to print American accounts of *Macedonian*<sup>85</sup> and *Frolic* had waivered after three months without news of either action, and the shock of another loss.

*The Gazette*'s approach to *Java*'s loss was markedly more radical – the same rumours that the *Recorder* had alluded to in the March 6<sup>th</sup> edition were discussed in detail in the *Gazette*'s March 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. *The Gazette* reported that: "It is with utmost concern we announce to our readers and the Public the capture of His Majesty's Frigate *Java*, Capt. Lambert, by the United States Ship *Constitution*."<sup>86</sup> While mostly accurate, this account does erroneously claim that *Java* was set on fire by some of her own crewmembers.<sup>87</sup> The date is reported incorrectly as well, indicating that this account was not the most well informed. The restraint showed by *the Gazette* when receiving news of HMS *Guerriere*'s loss gave way following the combined losses of 1812.

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<sup>83</sup> *Acadian Recorder*, Saturday 6<sup>th</sup> March 1813, No. 8, Vol I, Nova Scotia Archives, <https://novascotia.ca/archives/newspapers/archives.asp?ID=752>

<sup>84</sup> *Acadian Recorder*, Saturday 20<sup>th</sup> March 1813, No. 10, Vol I, Nova Scotia Archives, <https://novascotia.ca/archives/newspapers/archives.asp?ID=752>

<sup>85</sup> In the following edition, 27<sup>th</sup> March, Carden's official report on the loss of his ship arrived in Halifax, and was printed in the *Acadian Recorder*.

<sup>86</sup> *Royal Gazette*, Wednesday 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1813, No. 635, Vol XIII, Nova Scotia Archives, Microfilm Reef 8172

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*

The *Acadian Recorder's* first edition was distributed in mid January, as news of the losses in 1812 were still coming into Halifax. The *Recorder's* mission statement was, in the words of the editor, Anthony Holland, to chronicle “those interesting events that are daily transpiring in the present awful state of human affairs.”<sup>88</sup> Following the statement, the first section of the *Recorder's* first edition was devoted to loss of HMS *Guerriere*, nearly half a year ago. The reason being that, in the opinion of the *Recorder*:

every circumstance relating to our Navy, or naval character, most naturally excite our warmest feelings, and as our readers residing in the interior of this and the neighboring Provinces cannot have opportunities of obtaining information from English papers, we consider it our duty to afford them all the intelligence in our power on a subject so interesting: though such communications may sometimes appear stale to those living at the fountain head of news.<sup>89</sup>

As such, a piece of “stale” news led the *Recorder's* first edition. It included the official accounts of Dacres and Sawyer, and commented on the superior size and strength of the American frigate, adding that “it is asserted (we fear with too much truth) that more than one half of the captains of guns on board the *Constitution*, had fought under Lord *Nelson* in the battle of Trafalgar.”<sup>90</sup> Reporting of the previous year's successes in Canada followed in the next edition. Of all of the military and political news from Europe and Canada, it was the naval losses from half a year earlier that the *Recorder* felt would be of most interest to Nova Scotians.

Interestingly, Nelson's name was italicised in the newsprint – the emphasis on his name is intentional on the part of the editors, which is understandable given Mercer's arguments on the influence that Nelson had on Halifax society, even after his death. Nearly a decade after Trafalgar, his name and memory still meant something. Memories of the Age of Nelson, when Halifax

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<sup>88</sup> *Acadian Recorder*, Saturday 16<sup>th</sup> January 1813, No. 1, Vol I, Nova Scotia Archives, <https://novascotia.ca/archives/newspapers/archives.asp?ID=752>

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid*

residents eagerly sought rumours of his exploits in the Mediterranean and waited for expected victories, were in stark contrast to the rumours and reports that wafted into Halifax in 1812, as five Royal Navy vessels, two of which were stationed in Halifax, were lost in combat with their American counterparts.

Both the *Recorder* and the *Gazette* pointed out the superior size and strength of the American frigates. When discussing the *Guerriere's* loss, the *Recorder* assured its readers that the *Constitution* far outclassed the *Guerriere*, and added that it was rumoured to have had a large portion of Royal Navy veterans serving on board.<sup>91</sup> In the *Gazette's* account of the loss of *Java*, the editor points out that HMS “*Java* was but a 36-gun frigate.”<sup>92</sup> Like the editors of the *Chronicle* and the major papers in England, the editors of the Halifax papers wanted to assure their readers of the superior strength of the American frigates, so as not to diminish the reputation of the naval heroes so respected in Halifax society. After all, the debate between Britons and Americans over whether the frigate actions had been fair fights or uneven contests was well known in Nova Scotia.<sup>93</sup>

As Halifax learned of recent events from American sources first, rumours emanating from Boston or other major American ports made their way into the port. One such rumour reached Halifax early in 1813, targeting the crew of HMS *Orpheus*. According to a letter by her Captain, the Boston report claimed that the crews of HMS *Orpheus* “and other ships on this station, would not fight against the American frigates.”<sup>94</sup> The crew of *Orpheus* responded to the rumour with a letter they presented to First Lieutenant Frayrer that included an assertion of their dedication to

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid

<sup>92</sup> *Royal Gazette*, Wednesday 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1813, No. 635, Vol XIII, Nova Scotia Archives, Microfilm Reel 8172

<sup>93</sup> Mercer, “Colonial Patriotism,” 46

<sup>94</sup> “Captain H. Pigot to the Editor,” *The Naval Chronicle*, Vol 29, 195; *Royal Gazette*, Wednesday 3<sup>rd</sup> February 1813, No. 631, Vol XIII, Nova Scotia Archives, Microfilm Reel 8172; *Acadian Recorder*, Saturday 23<sup>rd</sup> January 1813, No. 2 Vol I, <https://novascotia.ca/archives/newspapers/archives.asp?ID=753>

duty and willingness to fight. That letter, along with an accompanying one penned by the ship's captain, was later printed in one of Halifax's newspapers on Friday, 29<sup>th</sup> of January. At the captain's request, they were reprinted in the *Acadian Recorder* the following morning.<sup>95</sup> On February 3<sup>rd</sup>, the following Wednesday, the *Orpheus* letters were again reprinted in the *Royal Gazette*, along with a similar set of letters from the crew and captain of HMS *Atalante*.<sup>96</sup> The patriotic anecdotes those captains provided were desired by these two papers, and given their readerships interest in naval affairs and naval heroes, it can be assumed that the residents of Halifax were very receptive to this. Patriotism and naval heroism were valued by the readership of Halifax, just as by the readership of the *Naval Chronicle*, who printed the same letters months later.

What the Halifax papers did not demonstrate, compared to the *Chronicle* or England's wider press, was fervent antagonism towards the British Admiralty. British policymakers were not blamed for the losses in the American theater. In fact, the two Halifax papers examined do not place blame on any party for the losses. Shocked and distressed though they were, the *Recorder* and the *Gazette* in Halifax did not scapegoat any party to reconcile the losses. Their reporting was reserved and careful, although over time that caution began to waver. This was likely due to the political – and physical – distance to the policymakers in London. It also better reflected the respectful, event-focused, and sorrowful reports that came from naval officers in the Royal Navy.

## Conclusion

The views and understanding of the bad news that reached Britain of the events of 1812 were wide ranging and changed over time. After the second and third frigates were lost, emotions

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<sup>95</sup> *Acadian Recorder*, Saturday 23<sup>rd</sup> January 1813, No. 2 Vol I, <https://novascotia.ca/archives/newspapers/archives.asp?ID=753>

<sup>96</sup> *Royal Gazette*, Wednesday 3<sup>rd</sup> February 1813, No. 631, Vol XIII, Nova Scotia Archives, Microfilm Reel 8172

and concerns grew more heated. Many began to see what had once seemed an isolated stain on Britain's honour as a threat to Britain's naval supremacy. As more details were revealed on the nature of the battles and of the American foes, many rationalized the defeats by emphasizing the sheer difference in force between the 18-pounder fifth rate British frigates and the 24-pounder American heavy frigates, which many of the *Chronicle's* commentators considered to be effectively fast ships of the line. This understanding was used to defend to honour of the defeated British crews and justify their understanding of British sea might. The *Chronicle* and British newspapers were highly critical of the Admiralty. The policy makers in London were blamed for putting their beloved naval heroes in jeopardy. Halifax's newspapers, on the other hand, were more restrained, and did not invoke any sense of disdain or anger towards Westminster for the losses that they found deeply shocking.

A clear difference between the focus and general theme of the *Chronicle's* coverage of the naval losses in 1812, and the correspondence and courts martial evidence from the officers involved, was the importance of the disparity in force between the ships involved in the single ship actions. Carden and Chads described their shock at the enemy's firepower and the physical characteristics of their ships; they were beyond anything that the Royal Navy had that could be called a frigate. But neither officer leaned on these facts in their defense to the extent that the commentators in the *Chronicle* did. Dacres dismisses the *Constitution's* superior firepower as a crucial factor in his loss altogether. And while many in the *Chronicle* suggested that overwhelming forces should be applied to the American theater to overpower America's super frigates, Dacres stated in his Court Martial that he would like to fight *Constitution* again with a ship of *Guerriere's* class.

In the volumes consulted for this study, only one officer wrote into the *Chronicle* and signed his name. Every other commentator was anonymous and used a pseudonym. Their opinions differed wildly from those of the defeated officers and their colleagues in the Royal Navy. If the majority of the *Chronicle's* commentators were naval officers, then why did their commentary differ so wildly from the officers examined in the previous chapter? The more likely explanation is that the commentators who wrote into the *Chronicle* were not mostly serving naval officers – indeed it seemed that very few were. It is more likely that civilians and long-retired (either by choice or by the failure to secure appointments) naval officers sent in the majority of the letters to the *Chronicle*. Their opinions of strategy, honour, and means of retribution were markedly different from those displayed by the serving officers of the Royal Navy. All that they shared was a mutual love of the Royal Navy and an urge for vengeance.



## **Chapter Four: “Great hopes yet of an honourable encounter:” Capel, Broke, and the Blockade of Boston, 1813**

The five losses in 1812 were deeply troubling to navy men at all levels and following the events of late February it might have appeared that the new year would be as bleak as the last. On February 24<sup>th</sup>, the 16-gun brig-sloop HMS *Peacock* sunk shortly after her acting-commander, Lieutenant Frederick Wright, surrendered the ship to the American ship-sloop USS *Hornet*, commanded by Master Commandment James Lawrence. Coverage of the capture of *Peacock* in the *Naval Chronicle* was sparse, as it had been for the losses of *Frolic* and *Alert*. Still, it was the sixth British vessel defeated in a single ship action, and as McCranie pointed out, “The *Guerriere*, *Macedonian*, *Java*, *Frolic*, and *Peacock* made five warships defeated in single combat by what many considered ships of their class. Though these losses did little to diminish Britain’s ability to command the sea, they gave the United States Navy honor and glory that the Royal Navy was not in the habit of conceding.”<sup>1</sup>

Wright’s report of the loss, addressed a month after the *Peacock* was sunk, justified the loss in the same manner as those written by Laugharne, Dacres, Carden, Whinyates, and Chad in 1812. Sentiments of melancholy are invoked regarding the loss of the commander and of the ship to the enemy. But the loss was justified in the same way in which the others were; Wright assures his superiors that *Peacock* was fought until the last chance of success, when the ship was sinking dangerously fast under raking fire.

His account of the early action was dominated by the death of his commander. He invoked the bravery of his deceased commander in the letter, stating that commander Peake brought the

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<sup>1</sup> McCranie, 84

ship into close action early on. His conduct in action was gallant, noble, meritorious, and brave, and his death was described as “lamented” and as a robbery of his services to the British navy.<sup>2</sup>

Wright also described the extensive damage that had been inflicted on *Peacock* by the time command devolved to him. Four guns were out of action, the ship was slowly sinking, and nearly all of the *Peacock's* rigging had been destroyed. According to Wright, the state of the ship at that time was not enough to compel him to surrender:

yet as the fire was briskly kept up by the Waist Guns I was determined to support the honor of the British Flag as long as defense was practicable but the Main Mast going close by the board a few minutes afterwards and the Enemy again taking up his raking position and the Vessel an unmanageable and sinking wreck, I was at length to save the lives of the remaining Crew however reluctant and painful it was compelled to wave my hat in acknowledgment of having struck the ensign having fallen with the Gaff into the water.<sup>3</sup>

Initially, then, Wright asserted he wanted to continue the action. The fighting continued, he described, “with an ardour characteristic of British Seamen.”<sup>4</sup> That determination continued until the ship had become “unmanageable,” and began to sink, at which point Wright concluded that victory was no longer a possibility.

Wright emphasized the enemy’s superior numbers as a crucial factor in the action, while also passingly referencing a disparity in firepower. He informed the Admiralty that “we came to compare the disparity of Force between the two Vessels with the extraordinary Number of Men on board the Enemy which allowed them to keep a large number in their Tops who supported an incessant galling and destructive Fire.” Wright does not discuss the disparity in firepower, however. *Peacock* was armed with sixteen -pounder carronades, whereas *Hornet* carried eighteen

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<sup>2</sup> Lieutenant Frederick Wright to Admiral Warren, New York, 26<sup>th</sup> March 1813, MG12 ADM1/503, C-12854

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

32-pounder carronades.<sup>5</sup> Wright stated this in a postscript to his letter, listing the numbers and armament of both vessels, but does not directly attribute this as a factor of the loss in the letter. He does state that his crew would have prevailed had they “not been opposed to an overwhelming force under more favorable circumstances and with anything like equality of Guns or Men have ensured success...”<sup>6</sup> In the Court Marital it was revealed that *Peacock's* fire was very poor and often overshot, therefore doing little damage to *Hornet*. One officer attributed it to the rough conditions of the waves, although the gunner attributed it to a poor gunnery training regime.<sup>7</sup> The Court agreed with the gunner, and while Wright and his men were acquitted, the officers were criticized for not adequately instituting gunnery practice.

When news of *Peacock's* loss broke, it must have seemed that victory must continue to elude the Royal Navy. The Admiralty and the Admirals commanding in North American waters and the captains and commanders of the ships stationed there had very different reactions to the losses of the previous year, and very different ideas on how to exact revenge. For the Admirals, the primary concern was the overall strategic situation for the United Kingdom – protecting the trade that kept British coffers full and able to support the war effort on both sides of the Atlantic.

By contrast, the officers of the North American Squadron were driven by a personal and profession-wide desire for revenge. Their focus was on the honour of Britain's navy, not the strategic interests of Britain's war effort. This was not unlike the feelings of the victorious and newly promoted Captain Lawrence, who sought the prestige that his peers had achieved in the frigate victories in 1812. Some officers took matters into their own hands and acted in violation of orders to seek out honourable and glorious actions.

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<sup>5</sup> Roosevelt, 166; McCranie, 83; as both pointed out, most brigs in *Peacock's* class carried sixteen 32-pounder carronades.

<sup>6</sup> Wright to Warren, 26<sup>th</sup> March 1813,” MG12 ADM1/503, C-12854

<sup>7</sup> McCranie, 83

Unfortunately, most of the personalized sources available were written by just one officer on the North American Squadron: Captain Philip Broke. As such, an examination of the North American Squadron's response to the losses of *Alert*, *Guerriere*, *Macedonian*, *Frolic*, *Java*, and *Peacock* must hinge on the extensive correspondence between Broke and his wife. Broke's story is dominated by the capture of USS *Chesapeake* on the 1<sup>st</sup> of June and the triumphant return of *Shannon* and her prize to Halifax. That event is well studied, especially in British naval literature. To see its impact, look no further than the excellent Maritime Museum of the Atlantic in Halifax, which displays a model of Halifax and the prize *Chesapeake* moored with a British ensign flying from her mast, while making little to no reference to the British defeats that preceded her capture. But the events that preceded *Chesapeake's* capture are just as important in Broke's story, and in understanding what motivated him to challenge Lawrence to combat. These events illuminate the general trends of naval discourse and attitudes in the fleet following the losses of 1812 that can be gleaned from the remaining existing documents and the actions of officers in the North American Squadron.

## **Changing Naval Policy**

The British public and many of its politicians blamed the Admiralty, not the officers and men who had lost the actual actions, for the shocking losses in 1812.<sup>8</sup> The Admiralty, by contrast, blamed the commander-in-chief in North America. Early in the conflict, Sawyer was dismissed and replaced with Admiral Warren, who was given authority over the various stations and commands in American waters. Over time, however, the Admiralty grew dissatisfied with Warren

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<sup>8</sup> McCranie, 91; This is also evident in the coverage of the *Naval Chronicle* and popular press in Britain.

as well. He was criticized heavily by the Admiralty for what they saw as his inability to act decisively and to adequately communicate with them.<sup>9</sup>

Warren's reports to the Admiralty in 1812 and 1813 reaffirmed that the American frigates were very dangerous. One of Warren's reports, coincidentally written on the day of HMS *Java*'s capture, informed the Admiralty that the American frigate victors in the previous two actions were:

are of very large Class, and altho' denominated Frigates, are constructed to carry 24 Pounders on their Main Deck, with another complete Tier of Guns along the Quarter Deck, Gangway and Forecastle, and manned with from Four hundred and twenty, to upwards of Five Hundred prime Seamen and Gunners, which from their superiority in sailing and the number of Riflemen and Musquetry give them a manifest advantage over any of our single Frigates.<sup>10</sup>

Days later, on the 5<sup>th</sup> of January, Warren wrote: "I am anxious to Take or Destroy some of the Enemys Frigates, as they are called, but in reality they are small Two Decked Ships." As a result, Warren ordered his frigates to sail in pairs, accompanied by a sloop, to alleviate the danger of encountering one of the American frigates.<sup>11</sup>

According to McCranie, the Admiralty was fully aware of the danger of the American heavy frigates but did not do anything to protect against them in case of war with America. Many reports had reached the Royal Navy about the armament of America's 24-pounder frigates, including from the Royal Navy's own officers.<sup>12</sup> Carden once visited his future captor, and *Constitution* had even visited Portsmouth before the war.<sup>13</sup> Admiral Sawyer was aware of this and expressed his concerns about the impact of losing one of his frigates to the heavy American frigates

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<sup>9</sup> First Lord of the Admiralty, Viscount Robert Melville to Admiral Sir John Warren, Admiralty, 3 December 1812, *Naval Miscellany* Vol VIII, (London, Taylor and Francis: 2017): 230-231; First Secretary of the Admiralty John W. Croker to Admiral Sir John Warren, R.N., 20<sup>th</sup> March 1813, *Naval War of 1812* Vol 2, 76-78; Viscount Robert Melville to Admiral Sir John Warren, 26<sup>th</sup> March 1813, *Naval War of 1812* Vol 2, 78-79; McCranie, 89-93; Drolet, 176-185

<sup>10</sup> Admiral John Warren to Secretary Croker, Bermuda, 29<sup>th</sup> December 1812. MG-12 ADM 1 Vol 503

<sup>11</sup> Warren to Croker, San Domingo, at Sea, 5<sup>th</sup> January 1813. *The Naval War of 1812*, vol 2.

<sup>12</sup> McCranie, 85

<sup>13</sup> McCranie, 85

early in the war.<sup>14</sup> However, no real efforts were undertaken to prepare the North American Squadron for the American naval threat. As previously discussed, this was the result of the Admiralty's evidence-based conclusion that a British frigate armed with 18-pounders could cope with enemy frigates armed with 24-pounders. Nearly twenty years of war had distilled that impression in the Navy. If heavy frigates such as *Endymion* were not even a priority upon rearmament in 1803, it is not surprising that those expensive and important naval assets were not sent to a relatively calm theater like North America.

Yet, as Warren's reports detailed the danger posed by America's frigates the Admiralty eventually decided upon a series of policy changes regarding the North American Squadron.<sup>15</sup> According to Grenville, "The novelty of defeat in single-ship actions [in 1812] galvanized the Royal Navy into the reconsideration of many of its long-established assumptions."<sup>16</sup> For the first time in many years, enemy 24-pounder frigates were perceived as a threat to Britain's frigates. As a result, the Admiralty halted the trend of replacing 24-pounder main batteries with lighter and cheaper 18-pounders. There was another round of cutting down older ships of the line into razéed frigates armed with 24-pounder batteries. As with the program in the 1790s, obsolete 64-gun ships of the line were cut down, but so too were 74-gun ships. New frigates were ordered altogether, with designs varying between 40-gun and 60-gun frigates. With this reconsideration of the importance of heavy frigates came another revolution in frigate design. Some of the new ships ordered were frigates that were superior in size and broadside weight to even the three American

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<sup>14</sup> Gwyn, 135

<sup>15</sup> Admiral John Warren to Secretary Croker, Bermuda, 29<sup>th</sup> December 1812. MG-12 ADM 1 Vol 503; Gardner, 110

<sup>16</sup> Gardner, 110

heavy frigates, up to that point the most powerful frigates afloat.<sup>17</sup> Effectively, the long obsolete fourth rate ships of the line had been resurrected as frigates.

One of the Admiralty's major concerns was the state of gunnery in British warships. This reached the Squadron in a memorandum issued by Warren in March, where he stated that:

Their Lordships trust that all of the Officers of His Majesty's Naval Service must be convinced that upon the good discipline and the proper training of their Ships Companies to the expert management of the Guns, the preservation of the high character of the British navy most essentially depends, and that other works on which it is not unusual to employ the Men are of very trifling importance, when Compared with a due Preparation (by instruction and practice) for the effectual Services on the day of Battle.<sup>18</sup>

Success in battle depended upon skill in handling the guns, and that required extensive drilling. Captains were ordered to instill regular gunnery drill and to record exercises in the ship's logs.<sup>19</sup>

The North American Theater had always been a low priority for the Admiralty; even when they feared a war with the United States, the bulk of Britain's naval forces were needed to protect Britain's extensive worldwide trade and possessions, and most of all, to maintain a rigorous blockade of the naval forces of Napoleon Bonaparte in Europe. The fact that additional forces were dispatched to the Americas demonstrates the concern the Admiralty had over America's naval victories in 1812.<sup>20</sup>

Still, the Admiralty was never happy about giving Warren additional ships, as they believed he already had a sufficiently powerful fleet. Croker explained this to Warren by stating that "My Lords are glad to think that you will consider the amount of force now under your orders as most

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 110-115; The British did not adopt the American flush-decked frigate design, and even their heaviest frigates retained an open waist

<sup>18</sup> Admiral Sir John Warren, R.N., Standing Order on the North American Station, Bermuda, 6 March 1813, *Naval War of 1812* Vol 2, 59

<sup>19</sup> Ibid; Martin Bibbings, "A Gunnery Zealot: Broke's Scientific Contribution to Naval Warfare," in Tim Voelcker, editor, *Broke of the Shannon and the War of 1812*, (Seaworth Publishing, Barnsley, 2013): 114

<sup>20</sup> McCranie, 89-90

ample – It exceeds very much what on a mere comparison with the means of the Enemy would appear necessary...’’<sup>21</sup> On paper it was a dominating force, but the realities of the theater meant that it never seemed that way to the Royal Navy commanders in North America. There were too many strategic objectives over a vast distance for the force Warren commanded.<sup>22</sup> As Moriss pointed out, “At least for the time being, war with America was to mean unlimited demands to which the response had to be at the smallest possible cost to the British effort in Europe.’’<sup>23</sup>

The Admiralty’s priorities in the naval war against the United States was the blockade of American ports and their ability to harm American commerce and protect Britain’s overseas trade. Melville wanted to impose a strong blockade and did not want to try and tempt the American warships out.<sup>24</sup> Large squadrons were called for – forces powerful enough to overwhelm the American’s heavy frigates without endangering additional British warships.<sup>25</sup> To that end, cruising and blockading squadrons were to include a ship of the line.<sup>26</sup> According to Melville, Warren was instructed to impose such a hazardous blockading force that the American frigates would “rarely attempt [putting to sea], & that their expectations by Sea are chiefly confined to their small privateers in the Channel.’’<sup>27</sup>

As emotions began to grow heated in the British government over the losses in 1812, those orders became more conflicted. Warren was ordered to destroy the American naval forces and to

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<sup>21</sup> First Secretary of the Admiralty John W. Croker to Admiral Sir John Warren, R.N., 20<sup>th</sup> March 1813, *Naval War of 1812* Vol 2, 76

<sup>22</sup> Gywn, 138-139

<sup>23</sup> Moriss, 84

<sup>24</sup> McCranie, 84; Rodgers, 569; this is in contrast to the strategy of Nelson, who as the Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Fleet actively tried to tempt the French forces in Toulon out so he could engage them in a pitched battle.

<sup>25</sup> McCranie, 116-117

<sup>26</sup> First Secretary of the Admiralty John W. Croker to Admiral Sir John Warren, R.N., 20<sup>th</sup> March 1813, *Naval War of 1812* Vol 2, 76

<sup>27</sup> First Lord of the Admiralty, Viscount Robert Melville to Admiral Sir John Warren, Admiralty, 3 December 1812, *Naval Miscellany* Vol VIII, (London, Taylor and Francis: 2017): 230-231



restore British honour. Importantly, the Admiralty was not concerned about any notions of a fair rematch, as was suggested by Dacres. The American navy should be destroyed, but either through overwhelming force or by rendering their ships useless through blockades. Some of Warren's more aggressive plans were checked by the Admiralty, who preferred that Warren prioritize the blockade.<sup>28</sup> Melville ordered Warren only to undertake operations where success was "a reasonable prospect."<sup>29</sup>

This Admiralty policy and attitude towards fighting the enemy, which had pushed against single cruising and advocated for strong, overwhelming squadrons, was in part influenced by public outrage at the loss of three British frigates. In fact, the Admiralty intended to withdraw many of the 74-gun ships of the line that they dispatched to North America after the three heavy American frigates had been destroyed.<sup>30</sup> They did not want British frigates to tackle the Americans without the overwhelming force provided by a ship of the line. By March, the general Admiralty attitude towards discouraging lone cruising and risky one on one combat went another step further. The First Lord wrote to Warren to state that British frigate captains should be aware that they were:

not only not expected to attack those large American Ships, but that their voluntarily engaging in such an encounter would be considered here in the same light as if they did not avoid an action with a Line of Battle Ship.<sup>31</sup>

This was followed by an order issued July 10<sup>th</sup>, in which the Admiralty stated that under no circumstances should any frigate captains "attempt to engage, single handed, the larger Class of American Ships, which though they may be called Frigates, are of a size, Complement and weight of Metal much beyond that Class, and more resembling Line of Battle Ships."<sup>32</sup> From March

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<sup>28</sup> Moriss, 87-88

<sup>29</sup> McCranie, 87

<sup>30</sup> Dudley, *Splintering the Wooden Wall*, 80-81

<sup>31</sup> Melville to Warren, 23 Mar 1813, NMM, WAR/82/56-64: quoted in McCranie, 121

<sup>32</sup> First Secretary of the Admiralty John Croker to Station Commanders in Chief, 10 July, 1813, *Naval War of 1812*, Vol 2, 183

onwards, Admiralty policy was that British frigate captains should consider the three heavy American frigates ships of the line, and should avoid combat with them. One on one fights against USS *Constitution*, USS *President*, and USS *United States* like the ones fought by *Guerriere*, *Macedonian*, and *Java* were forbidden to Britain's frigate captains. Voluntarily engaging one of these frigates was effectively forbidden; Dacres' bold and public desire for a rematch with the *Constitution* was no longer allowed in the Royal Navy's rules of engagement. This order was uncharacteristic of the Navy, and in fact ran counter to the confidence and perception of invincibility that had developed in the Royal Navy in the last two decades of conflict.<sup>33</sup>

### **Reactions of the Captains of the North American Squadron**

Given the lack of surviving personal correspondence and the formal nature of Admiralty archival records, determining the general mood of the commissioned officers of the Royal Navy following the events of 1812 and the changing Admiralty policy is difficult. The correspondence of Philip Broke is a rare example that provides the personal views of an officer on the events of 1812. His connection to those events in early 1812 was more acute than others, as *Constitution* had escaped from his squadron, and he later found himself sitting as a judge on the court martial for *Guerriere's* loss to that ship. In September he wrote to his wife and told her that:

We are all very angry at hearing that the American frigate *Constitution*, whom our squadron hunted so lately has taken one of our frigates and burned her. However this will all forward the chance of *Shannon's* making an honorable game of it as the enemy will be *saucy* now.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> McCranie, 122

<sup>34</sup> Broke to Louisa Broke, 22<sup>nd</sup> September 1812, SRO, HA 93/9/113

By the end of November, he informed his wife that “now the unlucky events of *Guerriere* and *Frolic*’s actions bind us all to the service until we have restored the splendor of our flag.”<sup>35</sup> Broke and the claimed collective anger among the naval officers had transformed to a drive for vengeance as the news of more defeats reached Halifax and the squadron. On January 8<sup>th</sup>, he told his wife that “*Macedonian* must be avenged, or the Americans will be *quite too saucy*.”<sup>36</sup> Initially, Broke considered the boldness that *Constitution*’s victory had generated in the American navy to be an advantage to the British – with *Macedonian*’s loss, however, Broke had reconsidered. In his eyes, the Americans were only growing more confident. As Broke saw that confidence grow, so too did his desire to avenge his fellow captains and to uphold British honour.

Broke held British honour in high regard, of which he informed his wife in a letter mid-December in 1812: “*Honor* is a jewel of more value than whole fleets & armies & public prejudice waits not to enquire into the particulars of a defeat where the result is so mortifying.”<sup>37</sup> He added in February that, “Had the Americans been as heartily beaten at sea as they have been by land, we might now have retired with honor.”<sup>38</sup> It was important to Broke both personally and professionally, as will be discussed in greater detail below.

This worked to further drive Broke’s eagerness for action with the enemy; the longing for battle, a chance to retire home with honour and to stave off the boredom of patrolling and convoy duty was a common theme of his personal correspondence since he departed home in command of HMS *Druid* in 1806. The grim news of 1812 stoked that longing further. It was no longer a personal matter of Broke’s honour, but a matter of the honour of the entire British navy. Philip Broke was an excellent example of an officer whose longing for a single ship victory bordered on obsession,

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<sup>35</sup> Broke to Louisa Broke, 26<sup>th</sup> November 1812, SRO, HA 93/9/124

<sup>36</sup> Broke to Louisa Broke, 8<sup>th</sup> January 1813, SRO, HA 93/9/132

<sup>37</sup> Broke to Louisa Broke, 14<sup>th</sup> December, SRO, HA 93/9/128

<sup>38</sup> Broke to Louisa Broke, 4<sup>th</sup> February 1813, SRO, HA 93/9/134

but he was hardly an exception. Other similarly minded officers, yearning for the chance for glory, prize money, reputation, and advancement, must have also been outraged by the losses in 1812.

The *Naval Chronicle* edition for January-February of 1813 contains submissions relating to naval officers' responses to the naval defeats of the previous year. The Naval Anecdotes section opens with an account of the reaction of Alexander Kerr, captain of HMS *Acasta*.<sup>39</sup>

Captain Kerr, placing a due confidence in the largest, the best officered, and the best manned frigate in the service, has been roaming about for his prey for several months, and we only wish him fairly alongside the *President*, *Constitution*, or the *United States*. On receiving the accounts of the capture of the *Guerriere*, Captain Kerr assembled his crew, and addressed them as follows; - "My lads, it is with a distress which I cannot sufficiently depict to you, that I inform you of the capture of the *Guerriere*, by the *Constitution* American frigate. We are going to sea, and in the largest and best armed frigate in the service. Hear my determination - I am determined never to strike the colours of the *Acasta* - My mind is made up - What say you, my boys?" The exclamation of - "To the bottom!" and three truly British cheers, followed his words.<sup>40</sup>

Any original sources detailing this event are lost, so it is difficult to determine how accurate it is or what had been embellished. Assuming it is mostly accurate, the determination Kerr displayed in wanting to get revenge for *Guerriere*, and his desire to restore British honour (by refusing to strike *Acasta's* colours), reflects the sentiments displayed by Broke in his personal correspondence. Assuming some, or all, of the account is inaccurate, however, one can still conclude that this type of boastful displays of naval zeal would have been appealing to the audience of the *Naval Chronicle*.

The aforementioned letter of the crew of HMS *Orpheus* is worth another, closer examination here. Whereas it had previously been discussed in relation to why its inclusion in the Halifax publications, in this case the letter is important as a vessel of the sentiments of the crew of

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<sup>39</sup> *Acasta* was a 40-gun frigate armed with an 18-pounder main battery. According to this account, Kerr replaced the 18-pounders with 24-pounders before departing

<sup>40</sup> "Naval Anecdotes," *the Naval Chronicle* Vol 29, 189

*Orpheus*, and of her captain who sent in the letter for publication. In their letter, addressed to Lieutenant Fayrer, the representatives of the crew stated that:

A report having been circulated, that the seamen and marines of H.M.S. *Orpheus*, now lying at Halifax, commanded by High Pigot, Esq. would act cowardly, they are very much hurt at the thought of such a representation respecting them, and they now beg the liberty to acquaint Mr. Fayrer, for the information of Captain Pigot, that they are anxious to have it in their power to shew their loyal disposition in defence of their King and Country ... their determination is to fight against their enemies, to sustain the honour and glory of Great Britain, or die in the attempt.<sup>41</sup>

In their letter to Lieutenant Fayrer, the representatives (who stated they spoke for the entire crew) displayed their distraught at being called cowards by the Americans and countered those rumours with a zealous assurance that they were determined to fight in the name of their country.

Captain Hickey, of HMS *Atalante*, also sent in a letter composed by noncommissioned members of his crew, who expressed that “the crew of the *Atalante* do most heartily coincide in their comrades’ representation, and their loyal disposition for their King and country.”<sup>42</sup> Having read the letter composed on behalf of the crew of *Orpheus*, the *Atalantes* responded with their own letter that displayed their determination to fight. Their account was seemingly intended to show their solidarity with the *Orpheus*’ crew, but it also may have been intended to exceed their zealotry. They added that they would never surrender their ship, “even to a superiority of force.”<sup>43</sup>

The two captains sent in their letters to the Halifax papers and later to the *Naval Chronicle* to, as Hickey described, “do justice to the character” of their respective crews.<sup>44</sup> Displaying the

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<sup>41</sup> “Collins, et al, (crew of HMS *Orpheus*) to Lieutenant Fayrer,” *The Naval Chronicle*, Vol 29, 195-196; *Royal Gazette*, Wednesday 3<sup>rd</sup> February 1813, No. 631, Vol XIII, Nova Scotia Archives, Microfilm Reel 8172; *Acadian Recorder*, Saturday 23<sup>rd</sup> January 1813, No. 2 Vol I, <https://novascotia.ca/archives/newspapers/archives.asp?ID=753>

<sup>42</sup> “Fowler, et al, (crew of HMS *Atalante*)” *The Naval Chronicle* Vol 29, 196; *Royal Gazette*, Wednesday 3<sup>rd</sup> February 1813, No. 631, Vol XIII, Nova Scotia Archives, Microfilm Reel 8172; *Acadian Recorder*, Saturday 23<sup>rd</sup> January 1813, No. 2 Vol I, <https://novascotia.ca/archives/newspapers/archives.asp?ID=753>

<sup>43</sup> Ibid

<sup>44</sup> “Pigot to the Editor,” *The Naval Chronicle* Vol 29, 195, “Hickey to the Editor,” *The Naval Chronicle* Vol 29, 196

determination, patriotism, and zeal of their crew reflected well on their own leadership. Rather than publicize their own zeal, they demonstrated that they had imposed in their crew a culture that reflected that of their officers. These letters demonstrated to the readers of the *Chronicle* that the crews of *Orpheus* and *Atalante* were anxious to get into action with the enemy, and that reflected the determination of their captains and officers to fight the enemy in fair combat.

Most frigate captains longed for the opportunities that were being denied them in the North American theater. Single ship actions, while uncommon, could make an officer's fortune and reputation, and as Wareham explained:

It is clear that such an action was something that many captains longed for. The possibility of meeting and taking an enemy frigate in a single ship action was without doubt one of the great motivators of the young officers aspiring to frigate command. Indeed, it could sometimes become almost an obsession.<sup>45</sup>

Lieutenants and midshipmen from victorious frigates could expect promotion, which was becoming increasingly difficult this late in the war, with many more officers than positions available. Fighting a single ship action when sailing in company with other ships was very difficult. To count as a single ship victory, all other ships had to be out of sight when the enemy struck their colours. After all, even the presence of an additional enemy on the horizon could impact the decisions and options available to a captain in an action. Independent cruises, however, removed that barrier. Frigate captains coveted the opportunity to sail on an independent cruise, as it meant the chance of taking rich prizes and fighting lone enemies one on one.<sup>46</sup>

Victories over ships of substantially weaker firepower were not praised by their captors. The reports of Captains of British frigates capturing American sloops or privateers were not boastful reports but instead dutiful acknowledgements of capture. These accounts were brief and

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<sup>45</sup> Wareham, *The Star Captains*, 160

<sup>46</sup> Ibid; Wareham, "Duration of Frigate Command," 420; Allen; 204-230

stated in a manner-of-fact way. The report of Captain Beresford following the capture of the defeated HMS *Frolic* and USS *Wasp* is an example of this.<sup>47</sup> Captain Yeo's report of frigate HMS *Southampton* capturing the first American naval vessel of the war was similarly delivered in a two-sentence letter:

Sir, His Majesty's Ship under my command this day captured the United States brig *Vixen* Capt George Reed, mounting twelve 18 Pd Carronades, two long nines, and One hundred and thirty men. She had been out five weeks, and I am happy to say had not made any capture.<sup>48</sup>

The notable characteristics of after action reports, such as praising the conduct of officers and crew and emotional undertones, are not present. Yeo was happier that *Vixen* had not made any captures than his own capture. The capture of USS *Nautilus* was similarly reported in a passive, non-celebratory way by both Captain Philip Broke, who captured her, and Admiral Sawyer, who reported her arrival in Halifax as a prize ship.<sup>49</sup> Victories over significantly weaker ships and vessels would not earn an officer fame, glory, or distinction. Zealous officers wanted to triumph in evenly matched fights, which were rare and hard to come by.

One attempted solution to this problem was to formally issue challenges to enemy ships of similar strengths to single ship duels. This was an extraordinary occurrence. As pointed out by Martin Bibbings, most naval actions came about by chance meetings. Issuing formal challenges was very unique, but several challenges were issued during the War of 1812. Captains from both navies issues such challenges throughout the war, betting on the zealousness and ambition of their counterparts. In many cases this involved a promise from one captain that ships in his company

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<sup>47</sup> Beresford, "Copy of a Letter from Admiral the-Right Honourable Sir John Borlase Warren, Bart. K. B. Commander in Chief of His Majesty's Ships: Beresford to Warren, at sea, Oct 23 1812." *The London Gazette*, 22<sup>nd</sup> December, 1812 16684, 2568 <https://www.thegazette.co.uk/London/issue/16684/page/2568>

<sup>48</sup> James Yeo to Admiral Stirling, *Southampton*, at Sea, 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1812, *Naval War of 1812*, Vol 1, 594

<sup>49</sup> Philip Broke to Secretary John Croker, HMS *Shannon*, at Sea, 30<sup>th</sup> July 1812 Captains Letters B, B-2608, V 1553; Vice Admiral Herbert Sawyer, R.N., to Secretary of the Admiralty John W. Croker, HMS *Centurion* at Halifax, 2 August 1812, *Naval War of 1812*, Vol 1, 215-216

would not interfere in such an action – something that neither the Admiralty nor the Navy Department would have been pleased with. Both American and British captains had a lot to gain from triumphing over an enemy in naval combat, while they and their respective navies had a lot to lose should a contest result in the loss of a frigate or sloop.

One such challenge was issued by the aforementioned Captain James Yeo of HMS *Southampton*, a 36-gun frigate part of a squadron blockading Philadelphia, to Captain Porter of the 36-gun USS *Essex*.<sup>50</sup> Yeo's challenge, sent on September 18<sup>th</sup>, was very likely in reaction to Porter's capture of the sloop *Alert* a month previously.<sup>51</sup> The challenge appeared in the *Philadelphia Democratic Press*, along with Porter's response. According to the newspaper, Yeo sent a message to Porter informing him that "he would be glad to have a tete-à-tete anywhere between the Capes Delaware and Havanna, where he would have the pleasure to break his own sword over his damn'd head, and put him down forward in irons."<sup>52</sup> Porter formally accepted the challenge, but the duel never took place. By the time that *Essex* left Philadelphia, *Southampton* (and indeed the entire blockading squadron) were safely preoccupied. *Southampton* was escorting prizes to the West Indies, while the rest of the squadron was on the lookout for Rodgers' American squadron, keeping off Philadelphia in respect to Yeo's desire for a single ship action.<sup>53</sup> As a result, *Essex* was able to escape from the blockade without a shot being fired.

Another challenge was issued by James Lawrence, commanding USS *Hornet*, to HM Sloop *Bonne Citoyenne*'s Burnaby Greene, which was anchored in the neutral port of Salvador. The offer was advocated by Lawrence's companion, Bainbridge in *Constitution*, who departed for his own

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<sup>50</sup> Ben Hughes, *In Pursuit of the Essex: Heroism and Hubris on the High Seas in the War of 1812* (Annapolis, Naval Institute Press, 2016): 12

<sup>51</sup> Ibid

<sup>52</sup> "Naval Defiance: From the Philadelphia Democratic Press," *The Naval Chronicle* Vol 28, 372

<sup>53</sup> Hughes, 12-13



cruising and promised not to interfere in an action between the two vessels. Both were sloops, armed with eighteen 32-pounder carronades and two long guns. Lawrence was frustrated, however, as Green declined the challenge. Both McCranie and Daughan agree that this decline was due to the fact that he was carrying a huge quantity of specie, and (mistakenly) worried that USS *Constitution* would intervene, as he noted in his official response:

The result could not be long dubious and would terminate favourably to the ship which I have the honour to command, but I am equally convinced that Comm. Bainbridge could not swerve so much from the paramount duty he owes his country as to become an inactive spectator, and see a ship belonging to the very squadron under his orders fall into the hands of an enemy.<sup>54</sup>

In declining the challenge, Greene could not appear to be shrinking from a fair fight. His reputation, and that of the Royal Navy, was linked to that. He did not reference the precious cargo that he was caring. Revealing such a secret would have been very dangerous; could Greene be assured that such a rich prize, and one so vital to the British, would not tempt Lawrence into disobeying Portugal's neutrality in the Anglo-American conflict? Instead, his explanation of the decline was based upon his interpretation of Bainbridge's sense of duty as Lawrence's commodore.

Issuing and accepting any challenge to single ship combat presented itself with risks. In the case of *Essex* under blockade, Yeo's challenge offered the chance of taking *Essex* and exacting revenge for *Alert*, but risked the loss of a British frigate and the likelihood of *Essex* escaping from the blockading squadron. That challenge resulted in *Essex* escaping unscathed from the blockade, as the rest of the squadron left Yeo alone, and were unable to take his place when *Southampton* returned to Bermuda to escort prize ships into a friendly port. *Essex* would then go on to prey on

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<sup>54</sup> McCranie, 76-77; Daughan, 140-141; Green in Consul Hill to Captain Lawrence, 29<sup>th</sup> Dec 1812, quoted in McCranie, 77

British shipping throughout the Atlantic and into the Pacific. Given the Admiralty's demands for a "strict and rigorous" blockade, Yeo's challenge hardly sounds like it would have met with their approval. Greene risked losing his ship and its valuable cargo if he accepted Lawrence's challenge, just as Bainbridge risked losing one of the ships of his squadron by promising to not interfere with any action between the two sloops.

The most notable challenge issued during the War of 1812 was that issued by Broke of *Shannon* to Lawrence of *Chesapeake*. Lawrence, who had been denied a fight with *Bonne Citoyenne* and was now eager for a frigate action victory following his victory over *Peacock*, had not even received Broke's challenge before setting sail to confront the lone British frigate off Boston. This was not the first such challenge issued during Broke's time blockading Boston, and while the resulting *Shannon-Chesapeake* action was a resounding victory for Broke, the previous challenge nearly resulted in a professional disaster for him and his commanding officer, Captain Thomas Capel.

## **The Blockade of Boston**

Many works examining the naval theater of the War of 1812 ignore or barely discuss the events of the blockade of Boston before the famous *Shannon-Chesapeake* confrontation, chiefly the British plan to tempt the squadron commanded by Commodore John Rodgers out to fight *Shannon* and *Tenedos*. Roosevelt's work ignored the drama of the blockade entirely. He stated that Rodgers with *President* and *Congress* "sailed on his third cruise," without mentioning the challenge offered or the successful escape from the blockade. The port from which he sailed is not even specified until later, in direct reference to the fact that *Chesapeake* had been left in Boston

when they sailed.<sup>55</sup> Latimer's account is also brief and does not reference the challenge. It also inaccurately describes the British squadron as containing only four ships, ignoring the two ships of the line.<sup>56</sup> Robson's chapter on the War of 1812 also skips over the blockade of Boston until Shannon's challenge, and incorrectly states that none of the American heavy frigates got to sea in 1813.<sup>57</sup> Daughan's account in *1812: The Navy's War* is confined to two paragraphs, which leave out the drama of the challenge issued to Rodgers.<sup>58</sup> Surprisingly, even Tim Voelcker's 2013 volume on the *Shannon-Chesapeake* action does not include any discussion of this important prelude, leading to Broke's decision to offer one-on-one combat with *Chesapeake*. Dudley's *Splintering the Wooden Wall*, which focused explicitly on the blockade of the United States, did not cover the episode at all, despite being critical of the impact of the *Shannon-Chesapeake* action on the blockade.<sup>59</sup> Budiansky's *Perilous Fight* describes the event briefly but also does not depict the British challenge.<sup>60</sup>

Of the works of naval history surveyed, only two works went into this event in any detail. The general-audience oriented Ian Toll's *Six Frigates* does include a good account of the drama, and McCranie's account was also detailed.<sup>61</sup> Overall, though, this event was overshadowed by the event of the 1<sup>st</sup> of June off Boston. The escape of *President* and *Congress*, however, was important; it demonstrated the risks that came along with issuing challenges, and it added to the building frustration felt by Philip Broke over being continuously denied a chance at action with the enemy.

Boston was the northernmost port that was put under blockade in 1812 and 1813, as the Admiralty hoped that leaving New England untouched by the blockade helped foster anti-war

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<sup>55</sup> Roosevelt, 174

<sup>56</sup> Latimer, 163

<sup>57</sup> Robson, 207-209

<sup>58</sup> Daughan, 188

<sup>59</sup> Dudley, *Splintering the Wooden Wall*, 92-95

<sup>60</sup> Budiansky, 216

<sup>61</sup> Toll, 401-404; McCranie, 117-127

sentiment and distaste for the Maddison Administration.<sup>62</sup> While Boston was part of New England, it was home to a substantial naval base, and so a blockade there was necessary. In 1812, that blockade was very distant and ineffectual, primarily due to the weather conditions. Boston was not an easy port to blockade in the winter, and Warren made this clear to the Admiralty.<sup>63</sup> An Admiralty reply on the issue came in March 1813, saying that while the Admiralty acknowledged Warren's concerns about weather making blockading Boston difficult from November to March, five American warships sailed from Boston in December of 1812, so while:

... it was not possible perhaps to have maintained a permeant watch on that Port, yet having as you state in your letter of the 5<sup>th</sup> Novr last precise information that Commodore Bainbridge was to sail at a given time, my Lords regret that it was not deemed practicable to proceed off that Port at a reasonable and safe distance from the land) and to have taken the chance at least of intercepting the Enemy if the weather should not have permitted you to blockade him.<sup>64</sup>

Warren did not order a close blockade of Boston until March, although a squadron was on-station in the area in February. Still, this squadron was unable to intercept the twice-victorious *Constitution* as she slipped back into port, as they were blown off station at an inopportune moment.<sup>65</sup> By March, Warren had been reinforced with additional ships, including fast seventy-fours, that allowed him to station powerful blockading squadrons off Delaware, New York, Rhode Island, Boston, and the Chesapeake. While still far from perfect, the beginnings of a blockade were taking shape and starting to have an effect.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Dudley, *Splintering the Wooden Wall*, 79

<sup>63</sup> Drolet, 177-181; Dudley, *Splintering the Wooden Wall*, 79; Lambert, *The Challenge: Looking For a Way Out* (ebook edition)

<sup>64</sup> First Secretary of the Admiralty John W. Croker to Admiral Sir John Warren, R.N., 20<sup>th</sup> March 1813, *Naval War of 1812* Vol 2, 76-78

<sup>65</sup> Lambert, *The Challenge: Looking For a Way Out* (ebook edition)

<sup>66</sup> Dudley, *Splintering the Wooden Wall*, 79-89

The now-permanent close blockading squadron off Boston was commanded by Captain Thomas Bladen Capel, in the seventy-four gun ship of the line *La Hogue*.<sup>67</sup> *La Hogue* was a good sailor and her captain an experienced frigate captain.<sup>68</sup> He had been graced by rapid promotion in his youth; he was commissioned in 1797 and was promoted to post captain a year and a half later after serving on Nelson's flagship at the Battle of the Nile.<sup>69</sup> In addition to serving with Nelson at his first independent victory, Capel served under him again as a frigate captain at Trafalgar, and so twice witnessed the potential of Nelson's aggressive efforts to seek action and his ferocious tactics.<sup>70</sup> In his force he had two seventy-fours, his own *La Hogue* and *Valiant*, as well as three frigates and two sloops. Two of the frigates were *Shannon* and *Tenedos*, respectively commanded by Broke and his Suffolk neighbor Hyde Parker, and were the first ships on station, as well as the most active.<sup>71</sup>

Broke and Parker were easily able to observe the port from their station, and relayed their information back to the rest of the squadron. Inside were four frigates: *President* and *Congress*, which were preparing to sail under the command of Commodore John Rodgers, *Constitution*, which was repairing from her victory over *Java* and months away from being ready for sea, and *Chesapeake*, which had just returned to port in April and for the time being was not a threat.<sup>72</sup> Capel's job was to blockade the port, to stifle American commerce through the port and to prevent privateers and, importantly, the heavy American warships from escaping. This passive approach

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<sup>67</sup> In most historical secondary literature she is referred to as *Hogue*, her official name, but as she was originally a French ship of the line of the *Armada* class she was referred to as "*La Hogue*" by both Broke and Capel in their correspondence. Consequentially, she is referred to as *La Hogue* in this thesis.

<sup>68</sup> Lambert, *The Challenge: Looking For a Way Out* (ebook edition)

<sup>69</sup> Syret and DiNardo, 72; T.A. Heathcote, *Nelson's Trafalgar: Captains & Their Battles*. (Barnsley, South Yorks: Pen and Sword Books Ltd: 2005): 21

<sup>70</sup> Adkins, *Nelson's Trafalgar*, 354: Capel commanded the 36-gun HMS *Pheobe*.

<sup>71</sup> Parker was a member of the Parker naval dynasty, son of the more famous Sir Hyde Parker who commanded the British fleet at Copenhagen (1801)

<sup>72</sup> McCranie, 115

did not sit well with Broke, who convinced Capel and his fellow captains to take a different approach.<sup>73</sup>

There does not appear to be any surviving documents that record the dialogue between Broke and the senior captain, but McCranie and Toll attributed the plan largely to Broke's influence.<sup>74</sup> Broke and Parker were the first captains on station and took a very proactive approach to the blockade from the start. On April 8<sup>th</sup>, Broke sent a message to Captain Robert Oliver of HMS *Valiant*, and told him that he thought "if two of us show off Boston for a few days, *President* and *Congress* will turn out, provided no seventy-fours are seen from the capes or pilot boats."<sup>75</sup> In a letter to his wife, dated April 14<sup>th</sup>, he informed Louisa that he was "keeping now close with the land, we are constantly chasing or reconnoitering our enemy, or exercising ourselves in readiness to play our part well when he meets us," adding that he hoped:

*Shannon's* campaign will soon be honourably terminated, though perhaps, the fear of our friends in the offing (*La Hogue* and *Valiant*) may render our antagonists cautious of meeting us. Indeed my wooden wife is very weak and crazy, and must soon be sent home.<sup>76</sup>

Broke used "when," not "if," when discussing the expected battle between his two frigates and Rodgers' ships. It was not until the 25<sup>th</sup> that Capel informed Warren of the plan, telling him that he was keeping the bulk of the squadron out of sight in hopes of inducing *President* and *Congress* to venture out to confront *Shannon* and *Tenedos*.

It is not wholly surprising that Broke's fellow captains were interested in his bold plan. Captain Hyde Parker III, who commanded *Shannon's* companion *Tenedos*, was the third Hyde

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<sup>73</sup> McCranie, 117; Toll, 402

<sup>74</sup> Ibid

<sup>75</sup> Captain Philip Broke to Captain Oliver of the *Valiant*, *Shannon*, 8<sup>th</sup> April 1813, quoted in J.G. Brighton, *Admiral Sir P.B.V. Broke: Chiefly from Journals and Letters in the possession of Rear-Admiral Sir George Broke-Middleton*, (London: Sampson, Low, Son, and Marson: 1867): 151

<sup>76</sup> Philip Broke to Louisa Broke, 14<sup>th</sup> April 1813, SRO, HA 93/9/138

Parker in his family to serve in the Royal Navy. His father had commanded the British fleet at Copenhagen in 1801, and his grandfather won fame and fortune after capturing a rich Spanish galleon. His heritage was steeped in the gallant traditions of Royal Navy service. Similarly, Capel's quick rise from lieutenant to post captain resulted from his service at the Battle of the Nile. He had witnessed Nelson's victory first hand at the Nile and Trafalgar, and consequentially was well steeped in his methods. He was one of Nelson's Band of Brothers, and he knew firsthand the rewards of victory under such ambitious circumstances.

Sometime late in the month, a formal challenge was sent ashore by Broke, inviting Rodgers to come out and pit *President* and *Congress* against *Shannon* and *Tenedos*.<sup>77</sup> It came after weeks of *Shannon* and *Tenedos* standing in to look into the port, purposefully within view of the American ships anchored within. Unlike the more famous challenge issued to Lawrence before the *Shannon-Chesapeake* action, there do not appear to be any surviving copies of Broke's letter. Lambert, who does not provide a citation for the challenge, does attest that the challenge was "elegantly written" and sent ashore as a public letter.<sup>78</sup> However, Broke later only referenced "the various Verbal messages which had been sent into Boston,"<sup>79</sup> and did not explicitly acknowledge a written challenge. Ian Toll described only "verbal challenges to that effect [conveyed] to Rodgers by various fishing smacks and pilot boats."<sup>80</sup>

Still, Broke made sure that Rodgers knew that *Shannon* and *Tenedos* were challenging his two frigates to combat, and that *Valiant* and *La Hogue* were kept far out of sight at sea. While the challenge very likely got under Rodgers' skin, he knew that accepting it was risky. For one thing,

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<sup>77</sup> Lambert, *The Challenge: Waiting for the President* (ebook edition)

<sup>78</sup> Ibid

<sup>79</sup> Captain Philip Broke to Captain James Lawrence, HMS *Shannon* off Boston, 31<sup>st</sup> May 1813 [dated only 1813], *Naval War of 1812*, Vol 2, 126-129

<sup>80</sup> Toll, 402

one of the few American merchants that had been able to slip by the British squadron into Boston had reported that there were other vessels in the vicinity and he could not have determined if the offer to fight was genuine or not.<sup>81</sup> More importantly, Rodgers felt that his mission and orders were a priority over engaging enemy frigates.<sup>82</sup> In his letter to the Secretary of the Navy in late April, Rodgers demonstrated that he had extensive plans for his cruise; he planned to cause mischief near Halifax before proceeding through to British waters, down to the Azores, and perhaps even into “the China Seas, and from thence back to the United States.”<sup>83</sup> On April 30<sup>th</sup>, Rodgers took advantage of a shift in the wind. Just as *Shannon* and *Tenedos* were driven off station, *President* and *Congress* slipped away. They were not spotted until the 2<sup>nd</sup> of May by one of the British sloops that had parted company.

For several days, the squadron thought that the challenge was still on, and remained on station. Broke wrote to his wife that “... the enemy have sent no frigate yet... but they seem by their papers to have been much annoyed at our being so familiar with their harbor lately. They may prove our best friends yet, and favour me with an opportunity of retiring with honour.” In the same letter, this portion dated May 5<sup>th</sup>, he added that “I flatter myself that they are not gone away, but merely parading themselves to prepare for a field day.”<sup>84</sup> Capel and Broke rationalized the absence of the *President* and *Congress* as a result of the poor weather on the 30<sup>th</sup> and hoped that they were returning to accept Broke’s challenge. However, by the 11<sup>th</sup> Capel was forced to concede that the Americans had in fact escaped his blockade.

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<sup>81</sup> McCranie, 117: McCranie implies that this was indeed a British trap, simply stating that Rodgers “correctly sensed a trap.” However, he does not include any evidence that this was indeed the British intention. He does argue that this challenge arose out of Broke’s eagerness for an action. Why then would Broke advocate leading the Americans into a trap, when what he most desired was an “honourable” action?

<sup>82</sup> Indeed, according to Ian Toll, by this stage in the war, “it was clear that single-ship duels ran against America’s strategic interests.” Ian Toll, *Six Frigates*, 408

<sup>83</sup> Rodgers to Jones, President, April 22<sup>nd</sup> 1813, *Naval War of 1812*, Vol 2, 105

<sup>84</sup> Philip Broke to Louisa Broke, HMS *Shannon*, 5<sup>th</sup> May 1813, SRO, HA 93/9/139



Capel's report to Warren was not announcing the loss of a ship, or an actual defeat in battle, but he was still reporting a failure. He had failed to contain the American frigates in Boston, or bring them to battle, and now two frigates were loose.

It is with great mortification I am to acquaint you, that since my letter of the 25<sup>th</sup> of April last, two of the Enemy's Frigates (the *President* and *Congress*) have escaped from Boston. I deeply lament the circumstance, but trust you will be satisfied that every exertion was made by the Ships under my orders to prevent the Enemy putting to Sea – indeed it is impossible for more zeal and perseverance to have been shown by any Officer than by Captain Broke, who with the *Tenedos* has been invariably as close as possible off the Port of Boston as the circumstances of the weather would permit, but the long continued Fogs that prevail on this part of the Coast at this Season of the year give the Enemy great advantage.<sup>85</sup>

Like the letters reporting a ship lost in combat, Capel emphasized his own mortification at the escape, and assured Warren of the efforts made by the men under his command. Capel and most of his squadron left their posts off Boston and spent the better part of May searching for the American frigates. For the most part, Warren was left in the dark. It was not until mid-June before the Admiralty learned of the events, by which time *President* was operating in European waters.<sup>86</sup>

If Capel's ploy to have *Shannon* and *Tenedos* fight the *President* and *Congress* was not a violation of Admiralty orders, then it was certainly very close to a violation. *Congress* was a 38-gun 18-pounder frigate, and could match either *Shannon* or *Tenedos* in terms of weight of metal. Meanwhile, *President* was a sister of *United States* and *Constitution* – the 24-pounder frigates that had triumphed in the previous year and which the Admiralty had forbade their 18-pounders from challenging. Technically, the Admiralty had only forbade single ship actions between British 18-pounders and the three American frigates, so this action may have been allowed, or at least not expressly forbidden. But if the intention of the Admiralty's order was to prevent uneven frigate

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<sup>85</sup> Captain Thomas Bladen Capel to Admiral Sir John Warren, HMS *La Hogue*, at sea 11<sup>th</sup> May 1813, *Naval War of 1812*, Vol 2, 105-106

<sup>86</sup> McCranie, 121

actions, then Capel's plan would have violated the intentions behind their orders. Whatever advantage Broke and Parker might have gained from mutual cooperation could easily have been countered by mutual support between the two American frigates, who retained the advantage in broadside strength and range.

In fact, the Admiralty advocated a strategy of blockade by force; weakening the blockade to tempt the enemy out to battle might have been a tactic that would have appealed to Nelson, but it did not appeal to Melville. On June 3<sup>rd</sup>, incidentally two days after *Shannon's* victory off Boston, but before news of either the escape of *President* or the capture of *Chesapeake* had reached the Admiralty, orders were penned that called for Warren to strengthen the blockading force off Boston, "where the greatest number of Ships of War appear at present to be."<sup>87</sup> By the time those orders were penned, Capel had already weakened the blockade, and in consequence *President* and *Congress* had escaped. Most of the squadron dispersed to search for the loose frigates, leaving only *Shannon* and *Tenedos* to watch the port.

What is not clear, from the surviving documents, was if Broke and Capel's plan was to engineer a fair fight between the Americans and British, or to lead the Americans into a trap. Both were possible, and Rodgers assumed the later. If the plan was to trap the Americans, however, there was no certainty that the main force of the squadron could reinforce Broke in time. Indeed, when the British concluded that the Americans had gotten to sea, Broke and *Tenedos* were left off Boston to wait for them, while the rest of the ships went out to sea to search. Capel, in hoping that the battle would take place as planned, clearly did not rest his plan on the arrival of his squadron, which would have been away and unlikely to learn of any action until it was over. As the First

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<sup>87</sup> First Secretary of the Admiralty John Croker to Admiral Sr John Warren, 3<sup>rd</sup> June 1813, *Naval War of 1812*, 139-140: at that time, the Admiralty believed there were two heavy frigates and two 38-gun frigates in Boston – a considerable portion of the United States Navy.

Lord of the Admiralty later stated, it did not appear that the ships of the line of Capel's squadron ever came within 150 miles of the port.<sup>88</sup> Finding ships at sea was no easy task; this was demonstrated when *President* and *Congress* took advantage of the weather on the 30<sup>th</sup> and evaded Capel's squadron. Despite being spotted by one of the smaller ships in Capel's squadron, the main force was unable to catch the escaping frigates, nor unable even to recognize they had escaped until it was too late. If Capel and Broke's plan was to trap the Americans, they must have been prepared for *Shannon* and *Tenedos* to fight the American frigates alone, as help could not have been guaranteed.

Broke's attitudes and the contents of his letters home also suggest that the intention was to fight the Americans without involvement from the rest of Capel's squadron. As previously discussed, Broke was motivated by his general desire to win a notable action, stoked by his growing feeling of frustration and anger at the course of the war with America. Early in the blockade, Broke told his wife that he would "at any time feel contented with the attainment of my only object when I first embarked – an opportunity of retiring honourably, and with the consciousness of having done my duty as an Englishman."<sup>89</sup> On the 5<sup>th</sup>, while still hoping that the Americans intended to fight, Broke emphasized his hope that they would "favour me with an opportunity of retiring with honour to my gentle wife (if the Admiralty do not remove me before they are decided upon meeting us)."<sup>90</sup> Honour was a key virtue emphasized by Broke. He was driven by honour, according to the letters he wrote to his wife. Destroying two American frigates as part of a squadron of two seventy-fours and three frigates may have pleased the commentators of the *Naval Chronicle*, but it would not have satisfied Broke's desire for personal and professional

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<sup>88</sup> McCranie, 148

<sup>89</sup> Philip Broke to Louisa Broke, 14<sup>th</sup> April 1813, SRO, HA 93/9/138

<sup>90</sup> Philip Broke to Louisa Broke, 5<sup>th</sup> May 1813, SRO, HA 93/9/139

honour. Winning against inferior foes was not a pathway to glory in the British navy; frigate captains like Broke coveted victories in event combat, or against superior foes.

Broke's sense of duty and honour, which drove his determination to bring an enemy frigate to battle, was both underscored and complicated by his sense of duty to his family and home.<sup>91</sup> Broke had been at sea since 1805, only a couple of years after marrying. Throughout his time in active service, he expressed his desire to return home to Louisa. His letters in 1813 emphasized a caveat to his desire to return home, that of his wish to retire home with *honour*. "I shall at any time feel contented with the attainment of my only object when I first embarked – an opportunity of retiring honourably, with the consciousness of having done my duty as an Englishman.... Surely no man deserves to enjoy an estate in England who will not sacrifice some of his prospects to his country's welfare." While searching for the *President*, he again emphasized the connection between honour and his desire to return home: "They may prove our best friends yet, and favour me with an opportunity of retiring with honour to my gentle wife." His personal, professional, and familial duties were tied into his reputation in the navy. As much as Broke wanted to return home, he sought an act of honour at sea before he could do so.<sup>92</sup>

Broke and Parker were ultimately frustrated; Commodore Rodgers escaped with his two frigates, and there was no action off Boston as expected late April or early May. Capel had failed to blockade Boston, and now two American frigates were loose, and most of the squadron dispersed to search for them. According to McCranie, the news of the escape and the resulting government panic contributed to the Admiralty issuing their July 10<sup>th</sup> order expressly forbidding single ship combat with the American heavy frigates.<sup>93</sup> Insurance prices spiked when the news

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<sup>91</sup> Ellen Gill, "Letters to his Wife 'Loo,'" in Tim Voelcker, editor, *Broke of the Shannon and the War of 1812*, (Seaworth Publishing, Barnsley, 2013): 86-89

<sup>92</sup> Voelcker, "Victories or Distractions," 70; Gill, 86-89

<sup>93</sup> McCranie, 121-122

broke in London.<sup>94</sup> Lambert described the *President's* escape as a strategic success, but the *President's* cruise as ultimately unimportant, as it only netted a dozen prizes and no glory.<sup>95</sup> According to Latimer, *President's* escape and cruise as far as the Shetlands was as great a source of embarrassment to Warren as it was an achievement for Rodgers.<sup>96</sup>

Whatever the real effects of *President* and *Congress'* cruises, the escape was deeply troubling for the Admiralty, and that was not helped by the fact that the slowness of communication prevented them from learning exactly what had happened until the situation off Boston had changed entirely. Reports of *President* trickled into London through the month of June, and speculation ran wild in Whitehall – at one point the Admiralty suspected that all three of America's heavy frigates were at sea. While it later became clear that only one heavy frigate, *President*, was loose, her presence in northern waters severely alarmed the Admiralty. In a desperate attempt to avoid a repeat of the losses in 1812, a significant force, including two ships of the line and accompanying frigates and sloops, was dispatched to find him.<sup>97</sup> Rodgers only made a handful of captures, but his single frigate caused great panic and disruption to naval stations on both sides of the Atlantic.<sup>98</sup> According to McCranie, causing so much disruption with a single frigate was a significant achievement, one that Rodgers was very modest about.<sup>99</sup>

Broke and Capel were to blame for that disruption, but the delay in communications provided them with a window of salvation. Broke proposed the plan that allowed Rodger to escape, and Capel, as the commanding officer, had put it into action. After it became clearer what had happened, the Admiralty voiced its discontent; they questioned the deployments of Capel's

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<sup>94</sup> Toll, 403

<sup>95</sup> Lambert, *The Challenge: Looking For a Way Out* (ebook edition)

<sup>96</sup> Latimer, 164

<sup>97</sup> McCranie, 120-127; Toll, 419-420

<sup>98</sup> Ibid

<sup>99</sup> McCranie, 120-127

blockading squadron, and particularly the fact that the flagship had been more than 150 miles off shore at all times, leaving the watch to *Shannon* and *Tenedos*. By the time that these questions began to formulate, however, the news arrived of *Shannon*'s victory over *Chesapeake*. McCranie argues that it was very possible that, had Broke not given the Royal Navy a victory on the 1<sup>st</sup> of June, his and Capel's professional reputation might have been irreversibly tarnished.<sup>100</sup>

### ***Shannon-Chesapeake Action, 1<sup>st</sup> June 1813***

By the 25<sup>th</sup> of May, only *Shannon* and *Tenedos* remained on station off Boston. Inside the port were *Chesapeake* and *Constitution*, the latter dismasted and undergoing a major refit. Both frigates were short on provisions and water, and could not maintain their station for long. As Capel had departed, Broke was the senior officer on station, and as such issued a directive to his companion Parker:

Having every reason to expect that the American frigate *Chesapeake* will sail from Boston in a few days, and thinking there is more chance of her being intercepted by our frigates cruising separately than if they keep together, I have to direct that during the absence of the Hon. Captain Capel, the senior officer, you will proceed to cruise upon the range lately occupied by *La Hogue* viz., from Cape Sable to the latitude of 42.10 N., to watch for the *Chesapeake*, should she pass by the *Shannon* in nighttime or thick weather. You are to take an opportunity, in such winds as you think less likely to favour the enemy's escape, to procure water enough to last out your provisions at Shelbourne, or any other port which you may find most convenient, joining the *Shannon*, off Boston, on the 14<sup>th</sup> June, unless otherwise ordered by the senior officer.<sup>101</sup>

Broke took on some of *Tenedos*' stores before dispatching him to sea, enabling *Shannon* to continue off Boston. *Tenedos*' operating range was vast, stretching from the northern boundary of

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<sup>100</sup> McCranie, 148; Dudley, *Splintering the Wooden Wall*, 94-95

<sup>101</sup> Philip Broke to Hyde Parker, *Shannon*, off Boston, 25<sup>th</sup> May 1813, SRO, HA 93/6/2/8/98

Massachusetts Bay to Cape Sable, Nova Scotia. With the lack of the stores *Tenedos* would have to make port before too long *Shannon* was left alone operating off Boston Harbour.

Broke was putting his previous plan into employ again, this time hoping to entice the lone 38-gun frigate *Chesapeake* to come out and fight by reducing the blockading squadron to a single 38-gun frigate. By instructing *Tenedos* to return on the 14<sup>th</sup>, Broke gave himself a window to try and tempt the enemy out, before he would be forced to return for supplies himself. Given that this ploy had failed just a month earlier, resulting in the escape of two frigates, the fact that he tried it again demonstrates Broke's determination to bring about an action with the Americans.

Broke's correspondence demonstrated that he was distressed at the escape of Rodgers, and still sought some form of vindication. As soon as Broke realized that Rodgers had eluded him, he wrote to his wife about his frustration, saying:

I feel much mortified at *President* escaping us after watching so long and anxiously for him; God send us better fortune to finish my campaign creditably. The day those rogues sailed it was thick weather, we must have been very close to them but they did not seek us – you will hear of their doing mischief... *Lord Knows where*.<sup>102</sup>

Early in 1812, Broke had chased Rodgers for months, hoping to bring him to action, and was eluded. Now Rodgers had frustrated Broke again and deprived him of his honourable fight:

Since Rodgers escaped we have rarely hunted our game far from his den, which still contains another large wild beast; if all the nobler prey elude us, we must chase the vermin, but have great hopes yet of an honourable encounter. My constant comrade, Parker, I detached two days ago on a separate range, that we might show an even more inviting appearance to our enemy, now a single frigate of our own size; we shall do a grand service if we can get hold of him, preventing all the mischief he would do if he escaped out; and I trust in God and our brave crew in brightening up the honor of our flag and soothing the feelings of our countrymen for their late mortifications.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Broke to Louisa, 9<sup>th</sup> May 1813, SRO, HA 93/9/140

<sup>103</sup> Broke to Louisa, 28<sup>th</sup> May 1813, SRO HA 93/9/141

This irritated Broke, just as it had when (as Broke incorrectly believed) USS *Essex* had avoided a fair fight with *Shannon* in 1812. Broke yearned for a single ship action, and he had now thrice been deprived of one. Now he found himself blockading a port containing a single American frigate ready for sea, and time was running out.

Broke was well aware that HMS *Shannon* was in need of an extensive refit, and was running short on provisions and supplies.<sup>104</sup> His concern had been mounting for months, as on the 14<sup>th</sup> of April he wrote: “My Wooden wife is very weak and crazy, and must soon be sent home.”<sup>105</sup> On the 5<sup>th</sup> of May *Shannon* suffered damage when lightning struck her mainmast.<sup>106</sup> Even with an additional fifteen tons of water Broke had taken from *Tenedos* on the 25<sup>th</sup>, he could only remain on station for a short time. It may also have dawned on Broke that he might be blamed for the escape of *President* and *Congress*; it was in large part his desire for battle that had resulted in Rodgers escaping, and the Admiralty was not likely to be happy about those frigates loose in the Atlantic.<sup>107</sup> Maintaining his position off Boston and keeping to his orders not to provoke an action was a possibility, as *Tenedos* was scheduled to return on the 14<sup>th</sup> to take over the blockade, giving Broke leave to return to port to refit and eventually return to the blockade. That prospect did not interest Broke much at all – he found blockade duty dull, and sought a chance to win an honourable victory and return home. The longer he waited, the less likely that was to happen. Britain’s blockades were growing more efficient, so the frequency of American warships escaping to sea was likely to decrease as the war went on. His anxiety over this led to him penning the now famous challenge to Captain James Lawrence, the new commanding officer of USS *Chesapeake*.

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<sup>104</sup> Padfield, 132-133; Martin Bibbings, “The Battle,” in Tim Voelcker, editor, *Broke of the Shannon and the War of 1812*, (Seaworth Publishing, Barnsley, 2013): 127-128; McCranie, 148

<sup>105</sup> Philip Broke to Louisa Broke, 14<sup>th</sup> April 1813, SRO HA 93/9/138

<sup>106</sup> Bibbings, “The Battle,” 129

<sup>107</sup> McCranie, 148



Broke's (unread) challenge to Lawrence and the action between their two frigates has been extensively covered in the historiography of the War of 1812, particularly by British and Canadian accounts. But as with the over-studied single ship actions of 1812, the documents and events surrounding this action are of significance in the context of understanding the naval culture of the Royal Navy. Broke had been in command of *Shannon* since 1806, and in that time had never tested his ship, his crew, nor his unique gunnery training regime against anything close to an equal opponent.<sup>108</sup> Broke's actions were further driven by his personal and professional outrage and frustration over the last year. He was an officer of a navy that encouraged aggressive action and expected victory but that had been humbled by six losses and ordered to act passively. His professional and familial priorities drove him to seek an act of honour, and thus far his efforts had been frustrated, and his challenge to Lawrence reflected that.

In his challenge, Broke offered single combat to Lawrence. He assured Lawrence that his was the only ship left on station – *Tenedos* had returned to port – and even offered to warn Lawrence should a British vessel arrive to reinforce the blockade.

As the *Chesapeake* appears now ready for Sea, I request you will do me the favor to meet the *Shannon* with her, Ship to Ship, to try the fortune of our respective Flags; to an officer of your character, it requires some apology for proceeding to further particulars, be assured Sir, that it is not from any doubt that I can entertain of your wishing to close with my proposal, but merely to provide an answer to any objection which might be made, and very reasonably, upon the chance of our receiving an unfair support.<sup>109</sup>

The uniqueness of this phenomenon has already been attested to – the fact that Broke issued two such challenges was remarkable. Indeed, Broke admits that his frustration over the failure of the first challenge motivated his decision to issue a second one:

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<sup>108</sup> Bibbings, "The Battle," 128

<sup>109</sup> Philip Broke to James Lawrence, HMS *Shannon*, off Boston, 31<sup>st</sup> May [only dated 1813] 1813, *Naval War of 1812*, Vol II, 126-128

After the diligent attention which we had paid to Commodore Rodgers, the pains I took to detach all force, but *Shannon* and *Tenedos*, to such a distance that they could not possibly join in any Action fought in sight of the Capes, and the various Verbal messages which had been sent into Boston to that effect, we were much disappointed to find that the Commodore had eluded us.<sup>110</sup>

This also served as an additional assurance to Lawrence that his challenge was genuine, as he continued by stating that “he, perhaps, wished for some stronger assurance of a fair meeting; I am therefore induced to address you more particularly, and to assure you that what I write I pledge my honour to perform to the utmost of my power.”<sup>111</sup> Rodgers is not accused of cowardice – indeed, Broke suggests that Rodgers’ decision to escape rather than accept the challenge was disappoint but inherently Broke’s fault – it was due to a lack of steadfast assurance that a fair challenge was being offered. To rectify this, Broke made sure that this challenge could not be interpreted as a trick or half-hearted promise.

To that end, Broke described the force under his command; the number of guns and men were specified, and he was careful to point out that a significant proportion of his crew were boys, and included an additional thirty men, boys, and passengers recently taken from recaptured ships, and were not drilled members of *Shannon’s* crew. He explained that *La Hogue* and the rest of Capel’s squadron had left for provisions, and that he would “send all other Ships beyond the power of interfering with us,” and would warn Lawrence if any additional British ships should arrive.<sup>112</sup> Broke was playing to Lawrence’s sense of honour, hitting the same virtue that was so important in the Royal Navy. Victory in combat against an opponent of equal force was professionally and personally coveted by officers from both the Royal Navy and the United States Navy. The match proposed was between two ships rated 38 guns, carrying approximately the same number of

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid

<sup>111</sup> Ibid

<sup>112</sup> Ibid

armaments in total, and of very similar broadside weight. *Shannon* had two additional guns compared to *Chesapeake*, though *Chesapeake* was of heavier tonnage and overall broadside weight.<sup>113</sup> And Lawrence, in the same vein as his fellow Captain Porter, coveted glory in one-on-one combat perhaps as much as Broke.

Lambert argued that Broke's letter was written to intentional inflame the patriotic and ambitious Lawrence. If that was not intentional on Broke's part, it is very likely that the challenge would have inflamed Lawrence, who did not even wait to see Broke's challenge before he weighed anchor to confront the lone frigate. When *Shannon* sailed within sight of Boston, as she had done many times over the last couple of months, that was enough to goad Lawrence into seeking out action with the vain British ship that patrolled off Boston Harbour.

Lawrence had himself sent a similar challenge when in command of *Hornet* – encouraged by his commodore, he had challenged *Bonne Citoyenne*, and must have been as frustrated as Broke when his challenge was refused. Despite having received similar orders to Broke, warning against initiating single ship actions to mitigate the risk of losing one of America's few ships in combat, Lawrence was obsessed with winning a frigate action. He was the victor of the action between his sloop *Hornet* and the sloop *Peacock*, which had earned him a promotion. Lawrence had set his hopes on being given command of one of the prestigious 44-gun frigates, but instead was given *Chesapeake*. Even beyond this slight, his victory did not satisfy his personal and professional desire for glory, as argued by Voelcker:

He wanted glory; the public recognition that he was an outstanding officer, a hero, who would go down in history as the man who had defeated the arrogant Briton who had sailed up to Boston light and fired a challenging gun.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Bibbings, "The Battle," 133-134

<sup>114</sup> Voelcker, "Victories or Distractions," 62-70

When *Shannon* appeared close in off Boston on June 1<sup>st</sup>, Lawrence seized the opportunity to win glory for himself and, presumably, for the American navy as a whole. He has been criticized in the historiography for going into battle with a ship in a poor state of manning and training. Voelecker argued that this was not the case; Lawrence would not have disobeyed orders and risked his ship if he did not think he could win, and the butchers bill of *Shannon* following the action attested to the destructiveness of *Chesapeake's* gunnery. While he lost the battle, in death Lawrence's memory and final words lived on – he won his glory on the deck of *Chesapeake*.<sup>115</sup>

In issuing such a challenge, and in standing *Chesapeake* out to face *Shannon*, both captains disobeyed orders. The Admiralty, once they learned of the escape of *President* and *Congress*, were furious – had *Chesapeake* done the same, or worse, defeated *Shannon* off Boston, both Capel and Broke would have faced the blame for letting three frigates escape from what had originally been a tight blockade of overwhelming force. Dudley argued that: “Lawrence paid with his life for ignoring his orders; had he emerged victorious, however, death would have been Broke's only alternative to being condemned by court martial.”<sup>116</sup> That this course of action was taken, for the second time, demonstrated Broke's burning desire to bring about action with his American foe, if not also considerable confidence in the training regime he had instilled upon his ship.

Broke's desire for action with the enemy was portrayed virtuously in his challenge, as he assured his American counterpart that it was not a challenge issued out of personal vanity, but instead was motivated by a sense of duty: “You will feel it as a complement if I say that the result of our meeting may be the most grateful Service I can render to my country.”<sup>117</sup> Broke continued by speculating on possible motives for Lawrence accepting such an offer:

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid

<sup>116</sup> Dudley, *Splintering the Wooden Wall*, 95

<sup>117</sup> Philip Broke to James Lawrence, HMS *Shannon*, off Boston 31<sup>st</sup> May [dated only 1813] 1813, *Naval War of 1812*, Vol II

I doubt not that you, equally confident of success, will feel convinced that it is only by continued triumphs in even combats that your little Navy can now hope to console your Country for the loss of that Trade it can no longer protect.<sup>118</sup>

As it happened, Lawrence's orders were to interdict British trade in the Gulf of Saint Lawrence – not to gain “triumphs in even combats.” Broke bet that Lawrence's personal and professional craving of glory in even combat would make him see such a battle in the same light as Broke. Though it was indirectly in violation of orders and a great risk, it was a wholly worthwhile contest. As it happened, Lawrence was in full agreement and set sail even before the challenge reached him.

The final portion of Broke's challenge hit upon the same point addressed above, and acknowledges the primary strategic risk that he had taken in both challenges issued while blockading Boston:

For the general service of watching your Coast, it is requisite for me to keep another Ship in Company, to support us with her Guns and Boats, when employ'd near the Land, and particularly to Aid each other, if either Ship in chase should get on shore; - you must be aware that I cannot consistently with my duty, wave as great an advantage for this general service, by detaching my Consort, without an assurance on your part of meeting me directly, and that you will neither seek, or admit Aid from any other of your armed Vessels, if I detach mine expressly for the sake of meeting you – should any special order restrain you from thus answering a formal challenge, you may yet oblige me by keeping my proposal a secret, and appointing any place you like to meet us (within Three Hundred Miles of Boston) in a given number of days after you sail.<sup>119</sup>

Broke issued the call as a gentleman to another gentleman; two naval officers with similar notions of duty and honour, though different underlying motivations.<sup>120</sup> Both were, to some degree, in

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid

<sup>119</sup> Ibid

<sup>120</sup> Tim Voelecker makes a compelling argument that Lawrence and Broke were motivated by different forces. Lawrence was driven by notions of public glory – honour and doing his duty was tied in with public recognition and fame. Broke's driving force was more of a personal recognition. For Broke, honour and doing his duty was tied more with his personal sense of honour. It was not his public image that he was concerned with so much as his personal repute. Voelcker, “Victories or Distractions,” *Broke of the Shannon*, 69-71

violation of standing orders. Broke was driven by his personal desire for combat, but also by a belief that vindicating his nation's honour in combat with the navy that had humbled his in the previous year was worth the risk. He had hoped to bring about an action earlier with Rodgers, who was either too wary of the British intentions or driven to adhere to his orders to go along with the plan. Broke bet successfully that Lawrence would offer him the even combat that he craved.

The resulting frigate action is, in British narratives at least, one of the most over-studied frigate actions in Royal Naval history. As with the actions of 1812 and early 1813, a detailed analysis of the fight is not necessary for this thesis. But it is still important as an event, despite its established presence in War of 1812 naval historiography. The fact that it became one of the most over-studied frigate actions, and indeed one of the most celebrated frigate actions (in the British sphere on both sides of the Atlantic) speaks to its significance of an event in naval history.

The two frigates were, in armament, well matched. But the composition of the two ships companies were very different. Lawrence had only taken command of *Chesapeake* on May 20<sup>th</sup>, taking over from a captain on sick leave. Several of her officers had left as well, and their replacements were recently promoted midshipmen – many of her crew were new to the ship as well, and morale was low. Many members of her crew were heavily intoxicated the morning of the battle. While Lawrence himself was an excellent commander, he had not had time to train his crew or restore their morale.<sup>121</sup> By contrast, Broke had been in command of *Shannon* since she was first commissioned. While Broke himself complained about the composition of his crew, they were a cohesive and superbly trained body of sailors.<sup>122</sup>

On the morning of the action, the citizens of Boston and the two crews all anticipated a showdown between the *Chesapeake* and the lone remaining blockading ship. It was not until late

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<sup>121</sup> Toll, 408-409; Roosevelt, 180-182; McCranie, 150

<sup>122</sup> Ibid

in the afternoon that *Chesapeake* closed, and both captains decided to fight a close-range action. While a cheers erupted on board *Chesapeake* that could be heard by the *Shannons*, the later, upon orders from Broke, remained quiet despite being equally eager for action. *Shannon* opened fire from her starboard battery first, inflicted significant damage on *Chesapeake* before the first American broadside erupted. *Shannon's* early gunnery killed and wounded many – among the former was the ship's master, and among the latter Lawrence himself, who refused to go below. Both ships inflicted significant damage on the other, but *Chesapeake's* wounded command structure and general lack of experience began to eat away at her ability to maintain a defense, while *Shannon's* remained steadfast.

Following *Shannon's* third broadside, *Chesapeake* was unmanageable, and luffed up into the wind. In irons, she was blown sternwards towards *Shannon*, which continued a relentless raking fire into the *Chesapeake's* stern as she collided stern-first into the *Shannon's* starboard side. Lawrence, wounded but determined, tried to rally his men to board the British frigate, but in the confusion amongst his crew he was unable to muster any force. Instead Broke mustered his boarders and led his crew onto the *Chesapeake's* decks. The defense on board the *Chesapeake* was disorganized and in a state of confusion, and after a brief but vicious fight on *Chesapeake's* deck (in which Broke himself was wounded) Broke's men overran the Americans. Less than fifteen minutes after the first guns had been fired *Chesapeake* was in British hands. *Shannon's* first lieutenant, George Watt, then hauled down the American colours, a moment of triumph in his career, as the victory would have meant almost certain promotion. In that moment of triumph Watt and his party of men attempted to re-hoist the American colours with a British ensign above them, the sign of a British prize. However, in the confusion, Watt mistakenly began hoisting the

American colours first, and was fired on by men on board *Shannon*, thinking the American crew were trying to fly their flag again. Watt and seven of his men were killed.

The fighting had been ferocious – *Chesapeake* suffered more casualties in eleven minutes than *Victory* did at Trafalgar. Indeed, in a testament to the efficiency of gunnery and small arms fire on both frigates, more men were killed on both sides per minute than in both Nelson’s and Villeneuve’s fleet combined.<sup>123</sup> In the end, both captains were seriously wounded, and it fell to Halifax-born second lieutenant Provo Wallis and third lieutenant Charles Falkiner to sail the *Shannon* and her prize into Halifax.

In fighting the action, Philip Broke had again defied orders and risked his ship and the blockade, in an effort to bring about an even contest with the enemy. It was one of several attempts to do so throughout the first half of 1813. The sentiments expressed by Broke reflect those of Captain James Yeo, who challenged *Essex*, and Captains Kerr, Hickey, and Pigot, who boldly wrote into local papers and the *Chronicle* of the determination of their crews to fight the Americans. Through Broke’s correspondence with his wife, we have a unique window into the mindset that drove Broke’s obsession. He had yearned for an honourable action for the whole of his married life, seeking a culmination of his service that would allow him to retire home with his honour. When he heard of his fellow captains being defeated by their American counterparts, Broke’s sense of frustration turned to vengeance, which caused him to seek a contest with *President* and her smaller companion – a contest that would not have been any closer to even than the three frigate duels in 1812. Had Broke’s gambit failed as his previous ploy had, Broke’s career and reputation might have been wrecked. Instead Broke’s reputation was made by his capture of *Chesapeake*, a victory that brought joy to the whole of British society.

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<sup>123</sup> Bibbings, “The Battle,” 142



## Chapter Five: Conclusion

It took five days for lieutenants Wallis and Falkiner to sail the battered *Shannon* and her prize to Halifax. The sick bays of both ships were crammed with British and American wounded, and both exhibited signs of battle: expansive structural damage and the gore of dead and wounded sailors. *Chesapeake* entered the mouth of Halifax harbour first and hove too around McNab's island to allow *Shannon* to lead her into the harbour. They were greeted by public admiration and exuberant celebrations. Naval personnel and civilians alike were overjoyed as the first major American prize was brought into the harbour.

The senior officer at Halifax was none other than Capel, who immediately sent dispatches to both the Admiralty and to Admiral Warren. The letter to the Admiralty ended up being published in the *Naval Chronicle*, and, as expected, it was boastful and zealous. The battle was described as a "brilliant achievement," and the official account recounted the "particulars of this gallant affair." Capel did not add anything himself, other than to affirm the valor of Broke, his officers, and crew. In particular, he emphasized that Broke "sought every opportunity of meeting the enemy on fair terms."<sup>1</sup> The dispatch sent to Warren was far more restrained. It reported on "the glorious issue of a contest with the United States frigate *Chesapeake*,"<sup>2</sup> but did not go into detail, nor did it lavish the same level of praise onto Broke as the letter directed to the Admiralty. The Admiralty dispatch was, of course, the account that was more likely to be made public, rather than the dispatch to the commander-in-chief.

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<sup>1</sup> Copy of a Letter from the Hon. Captain Capel of HMS *La Hogue*, to John Wilson Croker, Esq, dated at Halifax, 11<sup>th</sup> June 1813, 181, Fuller, John, Israel Pottinger, John Cooke, and J. Ross. *The Naval Chronicle, for 1813: Containing a General and Biographical History of The Royal Navy of the United Kingdom; with a variety of original papers on Nautical Subjects*. Vol. XXX: July to December. (London: Joyce Gold, 1813): 83, (Hereafter: *The Naval Chronicle*, Vol 30)

<sup>2</sup> Captain Thomas Bladen Capel to Admiral John Warren, HMS *La Hogue*, Halifax, 11<sup>th</sup> June 1813. MG12 ADM1/503, C-12854

The most important of the service reports at Halifax would have been that of Broke himself. However, the version of Broke's official dispatch to his senior officer, Capel, is in fact a fabrication. Due to Broke's very serious condition he was unable to write a report himself for some time after arriving in Halifax. Capel decided to write one instead with the assistance of fellow captains Philip Wodehouse and Richard Byron. Consequentially this report was inaccurate, as Provo Wallis (who had had reservations about the whole process at the time) later asserted. Capel wanted to send an official dispatch to London as soon as possible, do doubt motivated by the excitement of the victory and by Capel's personal apprehensions over his letting *President* and *Congress* escape a month earlier. If Capel feared repercussions from a potentially furious Admiralty, he was likely correct. Dispatching the news of this victory, then, was of great importance to the senior captain.

The account, fictitiously from Broke's perspective, is brief but powerful. The prose is boastful and patriotic in its description of the boarding and capture of the enemy frigate:

I gave orders to prepare for boarding – Our gallant bands appointed to that Service immediately rushed in under their respective Officers, upon the enemys Decks driving every thing before them with irresistible fury... The American flag was hauled down and the proud old British Union floated triumphant over it... I have to lament the loss of many of my gallant Shipmates, but they fell exulting in their Conquest.<sup>3</sup>

The imagery of the "gallant bands" rushing the enemy deck with "irresistible fury" is powerful, as is the image of the triumphant British flag being raised. Various officers who were wounded or killed are mentioned by name, customary with dispatches of the sort. Capel stated that Broke's "brave first Lieutenant Mr. Watt" was killed in the act of hoisting the British colours – killed in the moment of victory.<sup>4</sup> Wallis and Falkiner were directly commended, and "Broke" asked "to

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<sup>3</sup> Captain Philip Broke [in reality Captain Capel, Captain Philip Wodehouse, and Captain Richard Byron] to Captain Thomas Capel, HMS Shannon, Halifax, 6<sup>th</sup> June 1813, Naval War of 1812 Vol 2, 129-133

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

recommend these Officers most strongly to the Commander in Chiefs patronage,” for their role in the action and in sailing *Shannon* and her prize back to Halifax.<sup>5</sup> However, the account does not reference Broke’s now famous challenge. Instead, Capel and his fellow captains only described that *Shannon* stood in when they observed *Chesapeake* “coming out of the Harbour to engage the *Shannon*.”<sup>6</sup> The particulars of how this action came about were ignored completely. Those particulars would soon become common knowledge and were praised in naval circles. However, perhaps due to the current climate in the Admiralty, Capel and his fellow captains felt adding such a detail may inflame some unjust displeasure at the Admiralty.

Keith Mercer examined the Halifax celebrations thoroughly. Halifax’s four newspapers in their competition to cover the recent action, competed to publish compelling editorials and to interview *Shannon* veterans.<sup>7</sup> Commentary on the Anglo-American naval debates over the 1812 losses intensified as well; while it had been restrained and dutiful in previous months, Mercer found that there was a renewed discussion. Motivated by *Shannon*’s victory, Halifax’s papers declared that the previous losses had been attributed to luck, and that the recent victory vindicated the honour and prestige of their proud naval service.<sup>8</sup> Paintings, songs, and poems influenced by the battle flourished. The post battle literature reflected a deep sense of patriotism in Nova Scotia, “which combined pride in Britishness with local concerns over the American maritime threat.”<sup>9</sup>

The *Naval Chronicle*’s excitement was equally evident. In addition to printed copies of Capel and “Broke’s” dispatches, numerous letters and commentaries discussed the battle. The editors described the action as “the most brilliant act of heroism ever performed, and, perhaps,

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Mercer, “Colonial Patriotism,” 45-46

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 49

never can be excelled.”<sup>10</sup> This was reiterated by the editors who stated that “the brilliant style in which the business was done, may perhaps be equaled, but we are sure will not be excelled, by any incident that can be quoted from British history.”<sup>11</sup> Various letters that were sent in over the following months praised the action and declared that it affirmed the supremacy of Britain at sea. Broke’s victory was a vindication for the readers and editors of the *Chronicle*.<sup>12</sup>

Broke received a baronetcy, the key to London, and was showered with additional praise and gifts from the nation.<sup>13</sup> Lieutenants Wallis and Falkiner were promoted to commander – a move that is very significant, given the overabundance of commanders and general difficulties of promotion in the period as a result.<sup>14</sup> The honours bestowed onto Broke were extraordinary. *Shannon* and *Chesapeake* were essentially equal ships, and such a victory had rarely received such praise before by British society.<sup>15</sup> As McCranie argued, “Broke had indeed been correct when writing his challenge to Lawrence: ‘The result of our meeting may be the most grateful Service I can render to my Country.’”<sup>16</sup> While the war in the North American theater continued throughout the year, the *Chronicle* began to lose interest in the American conflict, at least until the end of the 30<sup>th</sup> volume. Broke’s act of vindication was, for the time being, satisfactory to settle the wound caused by the shocking 1812 losses. For many, the action seemed to be a pure vindication of the Royal Navy’s honour. It was a bandage to the shattered spell of invincibility.

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<sup>10</sup> “Naval Anecdotes: Captain Broke,” *the Naval Chronicle*, Vol 30

<sup>11</sup> Naval History of the Present Year: June-July, *the Naval Chronicle*, Vol 30, 69

<sup>12</sup> ““A.F.Y.” to the Editor, June 22rd, 1813” *the Naval Chronicle*, Vol 30, 130; ““A.FY.” to the Editor, July 9<sup>th</sup>, 1813” *the Naval Chronicle*, Vol 30, 136; ““Albion” to the Editor, 16<sup>th</sup> August 1813,” *the Naval Chronicle*, Vol 30, 199-200

<sup>13</sup> McCranie, 154; Latimer, 164

<sup>14</sup> McCranie, 154: while Falkiner struggled to find active employment following his promotion, Wallis was later promoted to captain and continued in active service for decades. He finished his career as Admiral of the Fleet and became the longest serving Royal Navy officer. He refused to retire from the active list until his death in 1892.

<sup>15</sup> Lincoln, 17-18; McCranie, 154

<sup>16</sup> McCranie, 154

That Philip Broke and his fellow captains (for without Capel's approval and Parker's agreement, neither of the two challenges could have been issued) tried this gambit a second time, after the first met with disaster, demonstrated the determination they felt to bring about an action, rather than to try and tighten the blockade of Boston. An even combat such as *Shannon-Chesapeake* would not have elicited such extensive praise in another context, but in 1813, following disaster in 1812, Britain's naval community was overjoyed. The *Chronicle* was satisfied; for the time being the bitter rebukes of Admiralty blunders ceased and the calls for overwhelming annihilation were calmed.

The Admiralty's concerns, however, did not change, and neither did their policies. They still feared losses to the three American heavy frigates, and the orders that prohibited frigate captains from engaging them single handedly remained in place. The wishes of the captains of the squadron did not change either. In early 1814, Captain Thomas Hardy found himself in a similar situation as Capel's in April 1813. His squadron had Commodore Decatur with *United States*, *Macedonian*, and *Hornet* under blockade, and in a meeting with a captured American merchant, Captain Henry Hope of the British heavy frigate *Endymion* (though inferior in broadside weight to the *United States*) proposed issuing a challenge to Decatur: *Endymion* and the 38-gun *Statira* could engage *United States* and *Macedonian* in combat. Decatur was interested in the challenge, and the two squadron commanders corresponded over a few days. Hardy was hesitant to allow *Endymion* to engage the larger *United States*, and instead only offered the *Statira* to fight *Macedonian* alone. He was more cautious than Capel had been. Perhaps the example of *President's* escape had made an impression, or his responsibility for maintaining the blockade and fear of risking as powerful an asset as *Endymion* triumphed over his interest in Hope's plan. In the end, Decatur refused. Both the American and British naval administration (particularly Warren) were

angered by what had nearly transpired; Warren quickly issued an order preventing such challenges in the future.<sup>17</sup>

This disconnect between the interests of individual captains and squadron commanders, and those of the Admiralty and Commander-in-Chief of North America, is similar to the disconnect between the senior officers of Britain's World War I Grand Fleet. The commander of the subordinate Battle Cruiser fleet, Vice Admiral Beatty, was cut in the mold of Nelson, Capel, and Broke – he was always eager to bring the German High Seas Fleet to battle and attempted to at the Battle of Jutland. Admiral John Jellicoe, the commander-in-chief of the Grand Fleet, was more akin to Warren. He was cautious and had good reason to be; risking the Grand Fleet could mean losing the war. As Jellicoe saw it, defeating the Germans in a pitched Trafalgar-style naval battle was one way of neutralizing Germany's naval threat; keeping them blockaded was the alternative and safer means of doing so. Still, the whole of the Grand Fleet – Jellicoe included – wanted another Trafalgar. Jellicoe's caution, however, outweighed his desire for action, just as Warren's caution outweighed any sympathies he had for the interests of his captains in seeking honour through even contests.

Furthermore, just as there was disconnect between Admiralty policy-makers and the captains of the North American Squadron, there was a disconnect between how naval officers and naval-interested civilians interpreted and understood the losses. Whereas the naval officers defended their perception that an 18-pounder frigate of the Royal Navy could prevail against an American 24-pounder, civilians took the opposite view, clinging to the disparity in force to calm their fears and insecurities regarding Britain's naval supremacy. This reinforced the notion that naval officers saw themselves as a breed apart from civilians.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> McCranie, 158-160

<sup>18</sup> Lincoln, 9-13

In general, one-on-one actions between British and American ships in the War of 1812 were influenced more by honour than by military strategy. Honour was commonly invoked in the *Naval Chronicle* correspondence and in the private and public correspondence of naval officers. As two of his letters to Louisa Broke pointed out, Captain Philip Broke was very concerned with the honour of the Royal Navy as a whole: “*Honor* is a jewel of more value than whole fleets & armies & public prejudice waits not to enquire into the particulars of a defeat where the result is so mortifying.”<sup>19</sup> A later letter claimed that “had the Americans been as heartily beaten at sea as they have been by land, we might now have retired with honor.”<sup>20</sup> The crew of HMS *Orpheus* twice invoked honour in their collective letter to the first lieutenant; they were writing to assert their determination to fight to “sustain the honour and glory of Great Britain,” doing so under the command of officers “by whom they have the honour to be commanded.”<sup>21</sup> Honour was equally applied by civilians, officers, and ordinary seamen to the collective reputation of the British navy, and their desire to protect the reputation of their country.

Just as important was the honour of individual officers in the Royal Navy. Commentators in the *Chronicle* defended the individual honour of officers and commanders of the 1812 losses, just as they defended the honour of the institution and country which they served. Philip Broke was obsessed with his own personal sense of honour. His letters home clearly spelt out his wishes to retire home to his wife and family, but also his conviction that he could only do so if he had won some distinction at sea. He could not retire if it was not an honourable retirement, one in which he and others would be satisfied that he had done his duty as an officer of the Royal Navy.

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<sup>19</sup> Broke to his wife, 14<sup>th</sup> December 1812 SRO, HA 93-9-128, quoted in Utmost Gallantry

<sup>20</sup> Broke to his wife, 4<sup>th</sup> February 1813, SRO HA 93/9134

<sup>21</sup> “Collins, et al, (crew of HMS *Orpheus*) to Lieutenant Fayrer,” *The Naval Chronicle*, Vol 29, 195-196; *Royal Gazette*, Wednesday 3<sup>rd</sup> February 1813, No. 631, Vol XIII, Nova Scotia Archives, Microfilm Reel 8172; *Acadian Recorder*, Saturday 23<sup>rd</sup> January 1813, No. 2 Vol I, <https://novascotia.ca/archives/newspapers/archives.asp?ID=753>

For Broke, that combination of personal and collective honour drove him to issue his two challenges. The challenges issued by officers like Yeo, Broke, and Hope resonate with the dueling culture of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Strategically, these were nonsensical. Britain had nothing to gain by risking their frigates in action with the tiny American navy, just as the United States had nothing to gain by risking theirs with the Royal Navy. And yet, personal and collective understandings of honour drove men like Broke or Lawrence to issue or accept challenges to even combat, risking expensive naval assets. It was an important source of tension between the sentiments of naval officers and their orders to avoid single combat during the War of 1812. Indeed, the virtue of honour was intrinsically linked to the aggressive fighting spirit and culture of the Royal Navy.

However, naval officers did not appear to invoke personal or collective honour in public accounts. This is most evident in the dispatches and court martial testimonies revolving around the 1812 losses. Individual officers might be said to have acted with honour, and the Courts exonerated those under trial with “honourable acquittals,” but the commanders themselves did not invoke the sense of personal or collective honour that was so openly discussed of them in the *Naval Chronicle*. Amongst naval officers, honour was an important virtue; honour was linked to their reputation as naval officers. But the officers themselves did not comment publicly on their honour, nor on the impact of their losses on Britain’s honour. For example, Philip Broke did not comment publicly on his personal honour or the Navy’s, of which he cared so deeply. For it was not honourable to boast of one’s honour publicly. In private, however, Broke worried about the collective honour of the Royal Navy in the wake of the 1812.

The concern over a seemingly small handful of naval losses in the American war demonstrates that what happened in the colonial sphere mattered to the wider Empire. This is



evident from the coverage of losses in the *Chronicle* and in Britain's wider press, as well as the Admiralty's policy shift in North America. Even General Lord Wellington, preoccupied with his campaigns in Spain and constant anxiety over naval support, commented in early 1813 that "I think we should have peace with American before the season for opening the campaign in Canada, if we could take one of two of these damned frigates."<sup>22</sup> Indeed, their reputation was so strong that the simple act of one of America's heavy frigates escaping and operating in the western Atlantic, as USS *President* did, could elicit panic in the Admiralty. Several naval theaters were disrupted as ships were dispatched in chase of the illusive frigate. British historiography does not contest the impact that the losses had in British society, but often there are no claims made regarding its wider significance. In contrast, American historians make the claim that the post-war relationship between Britain and the America was built upon the respect that the 1812 losses generated.<sup>23</sup>

British historians are correct in pointing out that the losses were one-sided affairs, but doing so ignores a crucial detail: in the culture of aggression and victory, which had developed in the Royal Navy, losing to a superior foe such as *Old Ironsides* was not perceived as inherently justified. The public largely forgave the officers involved and they were officially exonerated, but many of the defeated officers fell behind in the peacetime competition for appointments and commands. Whatever the Admiralty and the public concluded, the officers of the Royal Navy did not accept that their fifth-rate frigates could not prevail against the behemoths *Constitution*, *President*, and *United States*. The losses were perceived as stains on Britain's honour, and the personal honour of the losing officers, melded over two decades of victory against daunting odds. Although, on a bigger scale, these naval actions may not have been significant to the outcomes of

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<sup>22</sup> Wellington to Beresford, 6<sup>th</sup> February 1813, Wellington, *Dispatches of Wellington*, quoted in McCranie, 90

<sup>23</sup> Daughan, 416

the war, they had a clear and lasting socioemotional impact on the officers involved, the Admiralty, and the general public in Britain and her colonies.

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## Appendix A: Dispositions of Warships in North American Waters, July 1813

Glossary:

- LoB: Line of Battle Ships (64-100 guns)
- 24pdr: Frigates armed with main batteries of 24 pounder guns, including Razees
- 18pdr: Frigates armed with main batteries of 18 pounder guns
- 12pdr: Frigates armed with main batteries of 12 pounder guns

North America – Admiral Sir John Borlase Warren – 50 ships

LoB: Ten 74s, including *San Domingo* (flagship)

24pdr: 58: *Majestic*

18pdr: 38: *Nymphe, Junon, Tenedos, Spartan, Shannon, Armide, Lacedaemonian*  
36: *Maidstone, Belvidera, Barrosa*  
32: *Narcissus, Aeolus*

12pdr: 32: *Cleopatra, Minerva*

Other: Two 6<sup>th</sup> rates, twenty-five sloops, three schooners, two receiving ships, one prison ship

South America – Rear Admiral Manly Dixon – 14 ships

LoB: One 74, *Montagu* (flagship)

24pdr: 44: *Indefatigable*

18pdr: 38: *Niscus*  
36: *Inconstant*  
32: *Nereus*

12pdr: 32: *Aquilon*

Other: Three 6<sup>th</sup> rates, three sloops, two cutters

Jamaica – Rear Admiral Brown

LoB: Two 74s, including *Vengeance* (flagship)

24pdr: One 44

Other: Five 6<sup>th</sup> rates, six sloops, two gunbrigs, one receiving ship

## Leeward Islands – Rear Admiral Sir Francis Laforey - 40 ships

LoB: Two 72s, including *Cressy* (flagship), one 50

18pdr: 38: *Statira, Surprise, Phin*

36: *Orpheus, Pique, Venus*

12pdr: 32: *Circe, Castor*

Other: Three 6<sup>th</sup> Rates, twenty sloops, three gunbrigs, two schooners, one cutter

## Newfoundland – Vice Admiral Sir Richard Goodwin Keats

LoB: One 74, *Bellerophon* (flagship)

18pdr: 38: *Sybille, Crescent*

36: *Dryad*

32: *Hyperion*

12pdr: 32: *Quebec*

Other: Two 6<sup>th</sup> rates, four sloops, one cutter, one prison ship

## Unappropriated Vessels which would soon be sent to NA

24pdr: 50: *Akbar* – under construction to be converted to a frigate, would join NA squadron shortly

40: *Endymion* – completing refit, would join NA squadron shortly

18pdr: 38: *Cydnus* – would join NA squadron shortly

## Frigates assigned to Convoys and Particular Services

18pdr: 36: *Theban* and *Doris* were sent to hunt down USS *Essex* in Pacific.

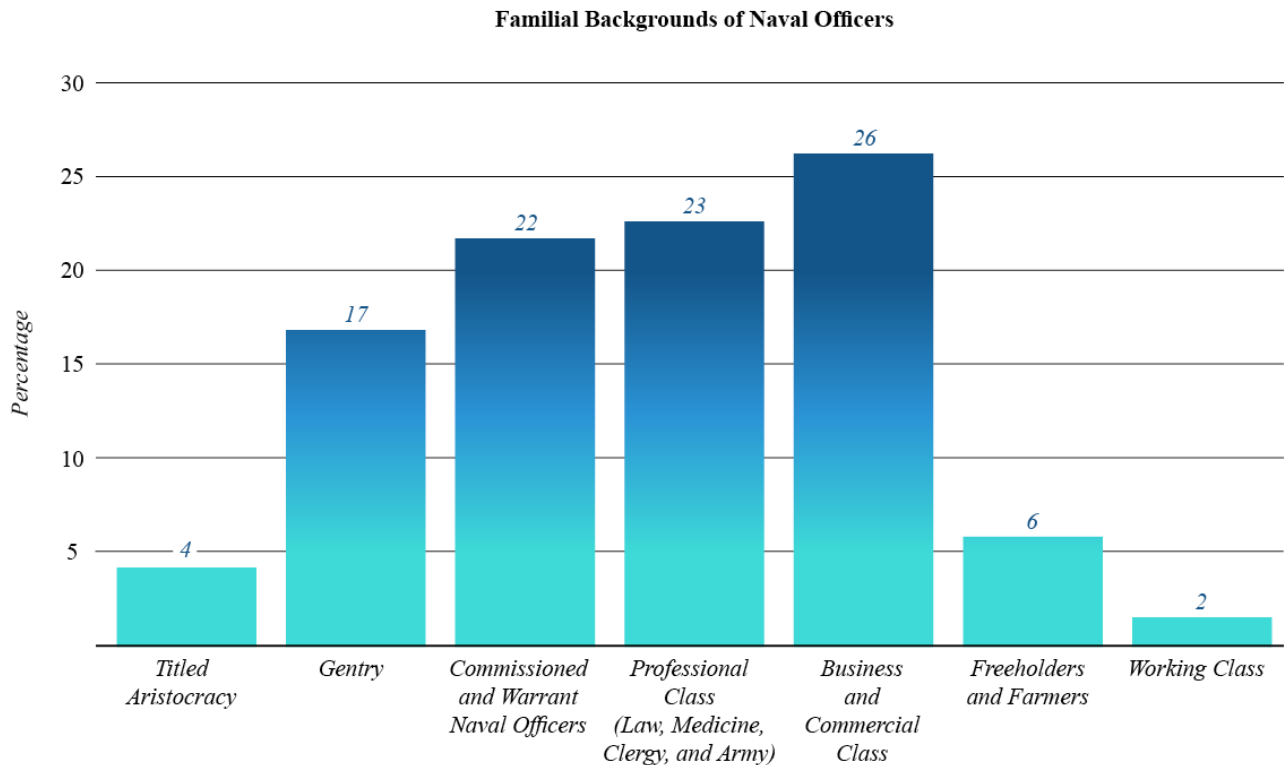
36: *Phoebe* was en route to the Pacific escorting convoys<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Gardiner, *Frigates of the Napoleonic Wars*, 2000, 185-190

## **Appendix B: Social Backgrounds of Royal Navy Officers, 1793-1815**

Wilson’s statistical analysis challenged the long-standing perception that the Royal Navy during the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century was dominated by the aristocracy and gentry. Wilson argued that, as roughly half of naval officers came from “Professional Backgrounds” and from naval backgrounds, and so few were from the Aristocracy of Gentry, Naval Officers were set apart from civilian and army society in terms of upwards mobility.<sup>25</sup>



<sup>25</sup> Wilson, 570-580

## Appendix C: Careers of the Captains, Commanders, and Lieutenants of the actions of the War of 1812

Ship and Rank	Commission as Lieutenant	Promotion to Commander	Promotion to Captain	Effective Retirement
<i>Thomas Laugharne</i>				
Alert, Commander	8th August 1806	12th February 1811	4th April 1832	Commanded one additional sloop from June 1814 to November 1815. No further active service.
<i>Andrew Duncan</i>				
Alert, 1st Lieutenant	5th November 1806	-	-	Dismissed from service, 1812
<i>James R. Dacres</i>				
Guerriere, Captain	15th November 1804	5th July 1805	14th January 1806	Continued to see active service until 1848 after promotion to rear admiral. Active service ended with promotion to vice admiral.
<i>Bartholomew Kent</i>				
Guerriere, 1st Lieutenant	2nd May 1804	29th March 1815	-	Died January 1841
<i>Henry Ready</i>				
Guerriere, 2nd Lieutenant	8th July 1807	13th August 1812	-	KIA 19th August 1812 before learning of his promotion.
<i>John Pullman</i>				
Guerriere, 3rd Lieutenant, Absent in command of prizes	18th September 1810	-	-	-
<i>John S. Carden</i>				
Macedonian, Captain	24th July 1794	25th October 1798	22nd January 1806	Never served at sea following the loss of Macedonian.
<i>David Hope</i>				
Macedonian, 1st Lieutenant	30th August 1806	15th June 1814	4th February 1830	Continued to see active service until April 1820.
<i>Samuel Mottley</i>				
Macedonian, 2nd Lieutenant	20th May 1808	30th April 1845 (retired)	-	30th April 1845. Died the same year.
<i>John Bulford</i>				
Macedonian, 3rd Lieutenant	27th January 1809	16th August 1854 (retired)	-	16th August 1854. Died 26th December 1859.
<i>Thomas Whinyates</i>				
Frolic, Commander	7th September 1799	16th May 1805	12th August 1812	Retired RA, 31st October 1846. Died 15th march, 1857.

Ship and Rank	Commission as Lieutenant	Promotion to Commander	Promotion to Captain	Effective Retirement
<i>Charles McKay</i>				
Frolic, 1st Lieutenant	?	-	-	KIA 18th October 1812.
<i>Fred Broughton Wintle</i>				
Frolic, 2nd Lieutenant	5th September 1810	-	-	Died 5th September 1817
<i>Henry Lambert</i>				
Java, Captain	15th April 1801	5th April 1803	10th April 1805	Died of wounds, 4th January 1813.
<i>Henry D. Chads</i>				
Java, 1st Lieutenant	5th November 1806	28th May 1813	25th July 1815	Died 7th April 1868
<i>William A. Herringham</i>				
Java, 2nd Lieutenant	2nd November 1810	16 January 1818	10 January 1837	Continued to see active service until March 1832. Retired Captain 1st July 1851.
<i>Buchanan (Possibly Alexander, Archibald, or George)</i>				
Java, 3rd Lieutenant	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown
<i>William Peake</i>				
Peacock, Commander	21st July 1797	22nd January 1806	-	KIA 24th January 1813.
<i>Frederick A. Wright</i>				
Peacock, 1st Lieutenant	13th June 1807	-	-	Unknown
<i>Philip B. V. Broke</i>				
Shannon, Captain	19th August 1797	2nd January 1799	14th February 1801	Active service ended when WIA, 1st June 1813.
<i>George T. L. Watt</i>				
Shannon, 1st Lieutenant	20 January 1806	-	-	KIA 1st June 1813.
<i>Provo W. P. Wallis</i>				
Shannon, 2nd Lieutenant	30th November 1808	9th July 1813	12th August 1819	Continued to see active service through promotion to Admiral of the Fleet in 1877. Died 1892.
<i>Charles L. Falkiner</i>				
Shannon, 3rd Lieutenant	4th January 1810	9th July 1813	5th April 1848 (Retired)	Never served at sea after promotion to commander. Retired Captain 1848, died in 1858.



## Appendix D: Comparison of Force in the Single Ship Actions

1812

Class and Rate	Tonnage	Complement	Armament	Broadside Weight
<i>Essex-Alert Action: USS Essex</i>				
American 36-gun frigate	897 tons	~ 300 officers, seamen, boys, and marines	40 x 32-pounder carronades 6 x 12-pounder guns	664 lbs
<i>HMS Alert</i>				
Ex collier Oxford, 16-gun ship sloop	398 tons	80 officers, seamen, boys, and marines	16 x 18-pounder carronades 2 x 9-pounder guns	144 lbs
<i>Constitution-Guerriere Action: USS Constitution</i>				
American 44-gun heavy frigate	1576 tons	480 officers, seamen, boys, and marines	32 x 24-pounder Guns 20 x 32-pounder carronades	754 lbs
<i>HMS Guerriere</i>				
French-built fifth-rate 38-gun frigate (originally rated 40-guns in the French navy)	1092 tons	272 officers, seamen, boys, and marines	28 x 18-pounder guns 16 x 32-pounder-carronades 2 x 12-pounder chasers	528 lbs
<i>Wasp-Frolic Action: USS Wasp</i>				
American 18-gun ship sloop	450 tons	140 officers, seamen, boys, and marines	16 x 32-pounder carronades 2 x 12-pounder gun	268 lbs
<i>HMS Frolic</i>				
Cruizer-class 18-gun brig sloop	384 tons	121 officers, seamen, boys, and marines	16 x 32-pounder carronades 2 x 6-pounder guns	262 lbs
<i>United States-Macedonian Action: USS United States</i>				
American 44-gun heavy frigate	1576 tons	428 officers, seamen, boys, and marines	32 x 24-pounder Guns 20 x 42-pounder carronades	864 lbs
<i>HMS Macedonian</i>				
Lively-class, fifth-rate 38-gun frigate	1082 tons	301 officers, seamen, boys, marines, and passengers	28 x 18-pounder guns 14 x 32-pounder-carronades 2 x 9-pounder chasers	528 lbs
<i>Constitution-Java Action: USS Constitution</i>				
American 44-gun heavy frigate	1576 tons	~ 480 officers, seamen, boys, and marines	32 x 24-pounder Guns 20 x 32-pounder carronades	754 lbs
<i>HMS Java</i>				
Pallas-class (French), fifth-rate 38-gun frigate	1082 tons	397 officers, seamen, boys, marines, and passengers	28 x 18-pounder guns 18 x 32-pounder-carronades 2 x 12-pounder chasers	528 lbs

## Early 1813

Class and Rate	Tonnage	Complement	Armament	Broadside Weight
<i>Hornet-Peacock Action: USS Hornet</i>				
American 18-gun ship sloop	440 tons	140 officers, seamen, boys, and marines	18 x 32-pounder carronades 2 x 12-pounder guns	300 lbs
<i>HMS Peacock</i>				
Cruizer-class 18-gun brig sloop	383 tons	130 officers, seamen, boys, and marines	16 x 24-pounder carronades 2 x 6-pounder guns	198 lbs
<i>Shannon-Chesapeake Action: HMS Shannon</i>				
Leda-class fifth rate 38-gun frigate	1065 tons	330 officers, seamen, boys, and marines	28 x 18-pounder guns 16 x 32-pounder carronades 2 x 9-pounder "dismantling guns" 1 x 6-pounder gun	520 lbs
<i>USS Chesapeake</i>				
American 38-gun frigate	1135 tons	379 officers, seamen, boys, and marines	29 x 18-pounder guns 20 x 32-pounder carronades	581 lbs