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III

Stephen Decatur and the early U.S. Navy

By Timothy Smalarz '07



After the Revolutionary War the United States slowly realized the need for a true Navy. Since most of the states bordered some sort of water they were vulnerable and needed to safeguard themselves. The makeshift Navy of the war had done its job, but now the states were a country, and had to act and look like one. If they were to achieve this end they needed knowledgeable and experienced sailors. One of these fine men, who would bring glory and honor to the early Navy, was Stephen Decatur. He had been around sailing his entire life, and this advantage gave him the prowess to lead a young country deep into the seas that bordered their newly formed union.

One midshipman described Decatur as “an officer of uncommon character, of rare promise, a man of an age, one perhaps not equaled in a million!” Similar endorsements followed Decatur throughout the rest of his life. He started out just like any other midshipman, yet he worked his way up quickly because of the way in which he carried himself. Every man was as equal to another in Decatur’s eyes—this made him favorable among the men he commanded. Decatur would be a hero to many and an enemy to few, but those few always understood that he would go to any lengths to ensure victory.¹

When Decatur was assigned his first command at sea he wanted his men to act the part of a true Navy. In fact, one of his officers said he “seemed, as if by magic, to hold a boundless sway over the hearts of seamen at first sight.” By gaining respect from his men he was able to conduct a new Navy better than most would have ever thought at this time. Although he had served just as long as most of the men of which he was in command, Decatur understood his role. Life at sea was in no way similar to that on land. There were different rules to be followed, and Decatur was responsible for enforcing them. He would have to deal with many problems among his men, and they respected him for the way in which he dealt with them.²

Most of the men who enlisted in the Navy were sailors from merchant ships. They lacked the discipline that a Navy needed, and Decatur recognized that he would not

¹ Robert J. Allison, *Stephen Decatur: American Naval Hero, 1779-1820*. (Amherst: University Of Massachusetts Press, 2005), 25.

² *Ibid*, 30.

have an easy task. Decatur himself would even get mixed up in situations that were not seen as proper, but he went about them the best way that he could. A fine example is what occurred on February 14, 1803 in Malta.³

That morning Decatur stood with one of his midshipmen, Joseph Bainbridge, who was to duel James Cochran, the secretary of Malta's Governor. After months at sea Decatur's men, especially Bainbridge, became restless. Cochran was one of the most experienced duelists, and Decatur knew that Bainbridge could not handle a man of Cochran's caliber. Therefore, as Bainbridge's commanding officer, Decatur stepped into the fray and insisted that he take the place of Bainbridge. He was refused because he had no "quarrel" with Cochran personally. The duel took two attempts, and Bainbridge would be the one standing in the end. Even though Decatur was not responsible for this duel, he felt compelled to take the place of this young man. It helped generate the respect that would follow Decatur throughout his days in the Navy.⁴

Decatur was a man of "eager action and meticulous preparation" which mimicked that of Edward Preble, a senior member of the Naval force. In having these unique characteristics, Decatur would help formulate one of the most vital missions the Navy would face in its early existence. During the Barbary Wars the *U.S.S. Philadelphia* had been taken by opposing forces and docked in the port of Tripoli. It was a key vessel to the Navy, but they knew that there was no opportunity to properly recover the ship. Instead they would have to act decisively, and they came to the conclusion that the best idea would be to burn it. Some credit Decatur with this idea, because he was the one who would eventually carry out this mission. The respect he held allowed for a full crew to voluntarily come together under his command.⁵

Decatur made a name for himself by carrying out the mission of the *U.S.S. Philadelphia* successfully. The mission was not easy due to of the crew's lack of knowledge of the port of Tripoli. Through his command, Decatur was able to provide clear leadership and pass on orders to his men in an orderly fashion. According to one historian the mission possessed the best "fortitude under adverse conditions" to date in the Navy. This was due in part to Decatur's "calm and courageous" demeanor in such a situation. Decatur and his men found their way into the harbor and were able to complete the mission successfully even though they were fired upon. They held strong in the conditions in which they found themselves. This established Decatur's strength as a leader, and made others within the Navy try their best to attain a similar level.⁶

By successfully completing this mission, Decatur opened the door for the Navy to finally take hold of the Tripolitan conflict. Along with the mighty *U.S.S. Constitution*, led by Preble, and many other gunboats, led by Decatur and other officers, the Navy was able to directly take aim at the coast of Tripoli. The fighting would be brutal, and Decatur's role very pivotal. He was able to command his men quite dutifully through the chaos of oncoming bombardment from the Tripolians. Decatur's sheer bravery and ability to conduct the situation properly led Preble to promote him to Captain. Not only had he destroyed the *U.S.S. Philadelphia*, but he had also stood strong in the face of his first all-

3 Ibid, 37.

4 Ibid, 37.

5 Ibid, 45-46

6 Frederick C. Leiner, "...the greater the honor": Decatur and Naval leadership," *Naval History* 15, no. 5

out fight against enemy forces. He was therefore, given the “order to repair to Malta and there take command of the *U.S.S. Constitution*.” At such a young age, Decatur had proven himself.⁷

The force of the Navy finally began to take form and Decatur was a huge part of its success. Years after the conflict in Tripoli, Decatur would become one of the most senior members of the Navy. Since there was no significant action, Decatur began patrolling the shores of the northern coast in order to enforce the Embargo Act of 1807. The act “cut off all American trade” with Britain and France. The work was not demanding at all, and Decatur preoccupied his time by making the men on his ship, the *U.S.S. Chesapeake*, better fighters. Within months his men were better equipped in “drilling and artillery” matters. He also accomplished their honing by dealing with the men in a very civil manner. Instead of making them feel below him, he made them want to work to the highest level imaginable. If not they were dismissed. Not only did he accomplish these goals, but he was also able to sway his group to stay through their enlistment period. Again, this only points to the amount of respect these men garnered for him.⁸

With the embargo imposed, the United States understood that war might be imminent. The only way to defend themselves at first was to have the best possible Navy. Decatur had been reassigned from the *U.S.S. Chesapeake* to the *U.S.S. United States*. Similar to his style on the former ship, he made his men superior fighters. On June 21, 1812, Decatur and other senior officials received word that the United States was at war with Britain, and to act swiftly to gain ground early.⁹ Decatur knew that “No ship has better men than she now has” (referencing the *U.S.S. United States*). His confidence, almost arrogance, showed the extent to which he believed in his crew.¹⁰

Decatur’s ship, the *U.S.S. United States*, set sail along with the other major frigates of the Navy. Eventually, they broke off from each other to defend separate territories from the British. Decatur would benefit greatly from this decision. Years earlier he had encountered a British ship, the *HMS Macedonian*, commanded by Captain John Carden. Carden had expressed that if he ever encountered Decatur during war he “should be obliged to capture you (Decatur).” Now, off the coast of Africa he had his shot. Decatur realized that a situation like this was vital to his cause as well. The training Decatur had instilled in his men payed off greatly. His men caught the *HMS Macedonian* off-guard with their precision and speed of attack. It did not take long for the *HMS Macedonian* to succumb to the *U.S.S. United States*. Decatur had claimed the largest prize in the war to that point, and the only way to celebrate properly was to take command of the broken ship. Once again Decatur showed great leadership skills, and his humanitarian side as well. The surviving crew of the *HMS Macedonian* was treated with utmost respect and dignity, even Carden. Even during war, Decatur was a civil man who recognized that every man should put up a good fight, while understanding that there had to be a victor and loser. By contributing to the early Navy once again in such fashion,

7 Fletcher Pratt. *Preble’s Boys: Commodore Preble and the Birth of American Sea Power*. (New York: William Sloane Associates, 1950), 95-97.

8 Robert J. Allison. *Stephen Decatur: American Naval Hero, 1779-1820*. (Amherst: University Of Massachusetts Press, 2005), 99-103.

9 Irvin Anthony. *Decatur*. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1931), 176-181

10 Robert J. Allison. *Stephen Decatur: American Naval Hero, 1779-1820*. (Amherst: University Of Massachusetts Press, 2005), 109.

Decatur continued to gain accolades from his peers and superiors. He deserved it, for he and his crew were the first Americans to “capture a British frigate and bring it safely to an American port.” This in itself was significant—Decatur and his crew received the full prize money for the vessel, and Decatur would become the leading prize receiver throughout the war.¹¹

Throughout this period Decatur was involved with Robert Fulton, the inventor of the steam-powered ship. He consulted with Fulton on developing a ship for the Navy that would be able to outrun any other ship with its sails and steam-powered engine combined. Decatur’s interest in a subject such as this one demonstrates that he was thinking of the greater good of the future Navy and wished for it to have the best tools possible. Their first venture would be the *Demologos*, a steam-powered warship being built in New York harbor during the war. Its intended use was to protect the coast of New Jersey, and more importantly New York City. Around the same time, Decatur took control of the *U.S.S. President*; unfortunately for him it consisted of a less experienced crew than his previous two ships. Decatur would face a challenge under the command of this ship. Due to the lack of ability of his crew and the circling of a few British frigates, Decatur knew that if anything were to happen, he would have to destroy the ship, just like the *U.S.S. Philadelphia*, in order to prevent its capture. Instead, he decided to fight. He was claimed to say, “This is a favorite ship of the country. If we allow her to be taken we shall be deserted by our wives and sweethearts.” These words alone empowered his men.

Unfortunately for Decatur he would face one of his rare defeats. Distinguished as he was, people who had heard the wonderful stories of Decatur did not wish to see their man conquered. Instead, they believed in building him a brand new ship so that he could “return to the sea and to glory.” Even though he had not succeeded, Decatur was supported by the people he served. He had demonstrated poise and valor unlike any other man of his time. He did not back down even when he knew there was only a slight chance for victory. Usually, victory was what he accomplished; that is why people wanted him back at sea.¹²

The people wanted to see their hero make a comeback, and Decatur would get that chance not long after the War of 1812 had finished. More problems had arisen in the Mediterranean between the United States and Algiers—in fact war was declared on Algiers by the U.S. Congress, thus the need for a fleet of ships in the region. Since the *U.S.S. President* had run its course, Decatur would be given command of the *U.S.S. Guerriere*. This time he understood that a letdown would be an embarrassment and more importantly unacceptable. Decatur tried to confuse the Algerian Navy constantly by switching the flags on the ship. Soon he was able to corner them, and the Algerians had to ask for a “truce.” Essentially he had won victory, but being the man that he was, he understood that things were not so simple. Instead, he took the diplomacy into his own hands. His demands of the Algerians were straightforward; if they did not accept, then they would face consequences. His persuasive abilities were able to convince them that they were no match for his forces. Decatur stood by his demands. He wished to right a wrong for what had happened with the *U.S.S. President*. Decatur was able to leave the

¹¹ Ibid, 115-127.

¹² Ibid, 145-158.

region with the reassurance that he had put up the best fight out there.¹³

Decatur had taken on a very diplomatic role during his second tour of duty in the Mediterranean. After brokering deals with both the Algiers and Tunis, John Quincy Adams praised Decatur for his actions with Algiers, saying that he “made a durable impression on its [United States] future policy; and I most ardently pray that the example, which you have given, of rescuing our country from the disgrace of a tributary treaty, may become our irrevocable law for all future times.” Such an endorsement from a statesman such as Adams only validates the importance of Decatur to the Navy at this time. He had brought proper respect for the United States and was considered to be “the favorite of the navy, and honored by the voluntary and unanimous applause of his countrymen.” These statements validate his contribution to the Navy’s history. Without him, it is quite possible that many of the Naval victories and diplomatic matters would have been solved quite differently.¹⁴ It harkens back to a description of Decatur as, “an officer of uncommon character, of rare promise, a man of an age, one perhaps not equaled in a million!”¹⁵ This was Decatur.

Decatur would never live to see his full glory. Instead he would be killed in a duel by Commodore James Barron in 1820. This event shattered many people’s lives, from the Naval department to the normal lad who aspired to be the next great Naval commander. His impact on people this early in American history potentially puts him on par with some of the founding fathers. If not for Decatur and his methodical way of reviewing everything from strategy to foreign policy, then this nation may have never had a chance against the British or in the Mediterranean. Conceivably, Decatur’s slight involvement with political affairs could have led him to run for congress, or even the presidency. The vast majority of the people in the nation at the time knew that they needed a new hero, and Decatur was their man. The previous generation was led by George Washington; this new generation of the 19th century was led by Stephen Decatur. His impact on this country’s history still rings true today. In defending our borders at home or at sea, Decatur tried his best, even when he knew the seas might be choppy.¹⁶

¹³ Carroll S. Alden and Ralph Earle, *Makers of Naval Tradition*. (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1925), 57-59.

¹⁴ Robert J. Allison. *Stephen Decatur: American Naval Hero, 1779-1820*. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005), 168-178.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 25.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 200-211.

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