

THE QUASI-WAR AND THE ORIGINS OF THE MODERN NAVY AND MARINE CORPS

An Essay

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by

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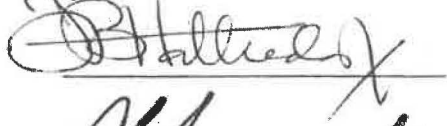
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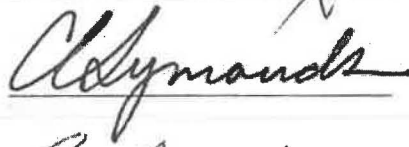
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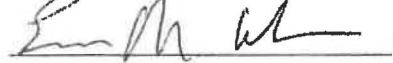
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ABSTRACT

The period 1797-1801 encompasses several significant firsts for the United States Navy and Marine Corps, yet most historical attention on the services' origin stories has emphasized the earlier actions of the Continental Navy and Marine Corps. During the Adams administration, the United States Navy conducted operations that are largely missing from recent scholarly and popular history. Legislation created the Department of the Navy and the position of Secretary of the Navy, and the United States also fought the Quasi-War with France. That conflict saw the first victories for the United States Navy at sea, and the first landing of the United States Marine Corps on foreign soil. This paper examines these significant events, analyzes why they do not have a larger place in U.S. Navy lore, and argues for greater inclusion of these events in the respective service origin stories.

Key Words:

Stephen Decatur

Quasi War

Early US Navy

Early American Republic

USS Constitution

Isaac Hull

Puerto Plata

Thomas Truxtun

The Quasi-War fought between the United States and France is a story of political rivalry, attempted bribery, and some of the most audacious actions in the early history of the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps. Despite this, the actions of the U.S. Fleet, and the war in general, remain relatively unknown. The Quasi-War is often forgotten, and although some of the officers of the U.S. Navy who participated in the conflict remain historically important figures in naval lore, they are remembered for their actions in future conflicts, not the Quasi-War. Those officers who did not continue to serve in the Barbary Wars or War of 1812, are mainly forgotten in popular history and service lore. If you take a walking tour around historic colonial Newport Rhode Island, many houses and buildings are adorned with plaques which bear the names of famous past residents. One of these buildings is the Decatur House. In 1752, Captain Stephen Decatur was born in this house. Captain Stephen Decatur was the man who commanded the first United States warship to ever capture a prize. The plaque hanging on the house makes no mention of this, only that it was the "home of Captain Stephen Decatur, father of Commodore Decatur, Hero of the War of 1812."¹ The son, Commodore Decatur wasn't born there, but was born in Philadelphia. This is an example of the how the Quasi-War has been forgotten. The local historical society does not even recognize its own native son as a naval officer worthy of remembrance in his own right for his actions in the Quasi-War. The plaque and the associated description on the society's website focuses only on the man he fathered.²

¹ "History Bytes: Decatur House," Newport Historical Society, last modified 22 August 2013, accessed 28 January 2020, <https://newporthistory.org/history-bytes-the-decatur-house/>

² Ibid.

The origin story of the United States Navy and Marine Corps draws heavily upon the events of the American Revolution, the Barbary Wars, and the War of 1812. The period coinciding with the Presidency of John Adams from March of 1797 until March of 1801 is often underrepresented in popular history, and not generally detailed in the lore of the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps. In fact, many important events concerning the naval services happened during this exact period.

Historically significant naval legislation that is still relevant today became law during this period. A bill authorizing the peacetime growth of the fleet was enacted on 27 April 1798.³ The Department of the Navy and the cabinet position of Secretary of the Navy were established on 30 April 1798.⁴ The modern Marine Corps was established 11 July 1798.⁵ These bills were a direct response to the growing threat of war between the United States and France. When eventually, diplomacy broke down between the United States and France, an undeclared “Quasi-War” was the result.

Even though many historic firsts for the American fleet occurred during the Quasi-War between 1798 and 1800, this conflict is largely unknown to Sailors and Marines in the fleet today. Its events don’t carry the same prestige in the origin story of the Navy as the wars that preceded and followed. The first-ever capture of a foreign ship by the U.S. Navy was Captain Stephen Decatur Sr, in command of the sloop of war *Delaware* taking the French Privateer *Croyable* on 7 July 1798. The U.S. Navy’s first victory over a foreign warship happened 9 February 1799 when the *Constellation* defeated the French frigate *Insurgente*. The first time

³ An Act to Provide an Additional Armament for the Further Protection of the Trade of the United States and for other Purposes, 5th Congress, 2nd Sess., (27 April 1798), 552.

⁴ An Act to Establish an Executive Department, to be Denominated the Department of the Navy. 5th Congress, 2nd Sess., (30 April 1798), 553.

⁵ An Act for Establishing and Organizing a Marine Corps, 5th Congress, 2nd Sess., (11 July 1798), 594.

U.S. Marines conducted an opposed amphibious operation on foreign soil was at Puerto Plata Harbor in May 1800. Scholars have argued that the roots of underway replenishment, a competitive advantage for the U.S. Navy even today, has its origins not in the 20th century, but in the sustainment of the *Constitution* on station in the West Indies in 1799-1800.⁶

The growth of the U.S. fleet and its performance in the Quasi-War was a significant contribution to peace with France in 1801. Meaningful legislation on the permanency of the Navy, was signed into law on the last full day of the administration of John Adams. Signed on 3 March 1801, "An Act Providing for a Naval Peace Establishment"⁷ created the first permanent peacetime navy in the United States. This bill is a fitting bookend for an oft-forgotten time in U.S. Naval history.

Before going further, it is worthwhile to examine why it is important for the Navy and Marine Corps to understand its origins and lore, and why these events of the early U.S. Navy deserve a greater place in the popular history of the United States. Understanding the lore and origin stories of the early U.S. is important because it is a significant contributing factor to the morale, unit cohesion, and fighting spirit of today's sailors.⁸ Historical tales continue to inspire modern sailors and Marines by commemorating the past. The modern navy has numerous ships named for historical battles, and early heroes of the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps. It is important these stories are told accurately. The foreword to *Naval Documents Related to the*

⁶ Tyrone G. Martin, "Underway Replenishment 1799-1800," *American Neptune* 46 (Summer 1986): 159-164.

⁷ An Act Providing for a Naval Peace Establishment and Other Purposes, 6th Congress, 2nd Sess. (March 3, 1801), 110.

⁸ Sam Cox, RADM USN (ret), "The Important Role of Naval History to Honor the Past, Inspire the Future," Naval History and Heritage Command, modified, 30 December 2016. Accessed 24 January 2020, <https://usnhistory.navylive.dodlive.mil/2016/12/30/the-important-role-of-naval-history-to-honor-the-past-inspire-the-future/>

Quasi-War Between the United States and France, written in 1934 by President Franklin

Roosevelt, states:

The many-sided lessons locked up in old naval manuscripts are well worthy of public attention. Our early naval and maritime history is closely associated with the country's pioneer settlement and expansion, with the winning of its independence and with its subsequent security in very precarious times. From the beginning also the sea was a direct source of sustenance, the greatest means of domestic transportation, and a prime agency of economic welfare through profitable overseas commerce. The integrity of all this throughout our earlier history rested upon naval protection. In addition the early Navy played a notable part in the development of the national spirit. Nonpartisan and nonsectional in sympathy, it devoted itself exclusively to the promotion and defense of broad national interests. Its faithful and arduous service together with brilliant victories served constantly to stimulate national pride, patriotism and unity. It may therefore be said that in many senses our naval forces, including both the regular and irregular armed ships, were among the important makers of the Nation.⁹

Despite the endorsement from Franklin Roosevelt, the significant firsts for the Navy and Marine Corps during the Quasi-War, and the enduring legacy of the legislation from the period, comparatively, it has not been deeply explored. The significant firsts are not part of the popular origin stories familiar to the fleet today. Recent scholarship on the origins of the Navy and Marine Corps have focused either on the Continental Navy during the American Revolution, the Barbary Wars during the Presidency of Thomas Jefferson, or the War of 1812.¹⁰

This article will analyze the important events for the Navy and Marine Corps during and related to the Quasi-War. It will demonstrate that the U.S. Navy had some significant successes, which helped to compel a great European power to alter its policies and relations with the United States of America. It will attempt to explain why these events are largely absent from popular

⁹ Dudley Knox, ed., *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi-War between the United States and France: Naval Operations from February 1797 to December 1801*, 7 vols, (Washington: Officer of Naval Records and Library), 1935-38, I:iii.

¹⁰ As example, "Utilize the forthcoming War of 1812 Bicentennial as a lever to jumpstart interest in naval history and heritage, ..." OSD Memo for SECNAV 2DEC08, accessed 18 February 2020, <https://www.navy.mil/navco/CFA/07%20BURNS%20Calendar%20For%20America%202010.pdf>. Or A.B.C. Whipple, *To the Shores of Tripoli: The Birth of the U.S. Navy and Marines*. (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2001)

history. Finally, it will argue that this historical period and the events therein are deserving of greater inclusion and relevance in the sea services' respective origin stories.

The Quasi-War remains comparatively unknown in modern popular history and relatively unstudied by scholars. It has been argued that the war has never even been the subject of a comprehensive study.¹¹ To date, the most significant works on the Quasi-War, deal not with the actions of the U.S. Navy at sea, but rather with the politics of the period. The political turmoil John Adam's presidency, and the election of 1800, in which Thomas Jefferson defeating John Adams is well documented. The ongoing political struggles in France during the 1790's has also been the subject of much scholarship. Scholars have undertaken a thorough examination of the diplomacy and international affairs between the United States, France, and Great Britain, in the time period surrounding the Quasi-War. Significant scholarly monographs on the political and diplomatic history of the Quasi-War were published; namely, the work of Alexander DeConde.¹² A renewed interest in the life and history of John Adams followed David McCullough's 2001 biography published on the 200th anniversary year of his leaving office.¹³ Popular culture took on the life and presidency of John Adams in a 2008 miniseries of the same name. The miniseries John Adams was highly acclaimed by critics and received thirteen Emmy awards in 2008.¹⁴ The series does cover the political intrigue in the United States leading up to and during the Quasi-War and makes mention of the XYZ affair, but not the details of the events of the Quasi-War.

¹¹ Donald R. Hickey, "The Quasi-War: America's First Limited War, 1798-1801," *The Northern Mariner* XVIII (July-October 2008): 67.

¹² Alexander DeConde, *The Quasi-War; The Politics and Diplomacy of the Undeclared War with France 1797-1801* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966).

¹³ David McCullough, *John Adams*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001.)

¹⁴ "John Adams," The Television Academy, Accessed 10 January 2020, <https://www.emmys.com/shows/john-adams>.

The renewed popular interest in the political history of the period did not, however, spur renewed interest in the study of the Quasi-War or the early United States Navy.

At the operational and tactical level, relatively little analysis exists about the Quasi-War and the actions of the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps during the conflict. Unlike the renewed interest in the Barbary Wars and the War of 1812 corresponding to the relatively recent bicentennials of those events, the 200th anniversary of the conflict did not act as a catalyst to a revisit of the Quasi-War in any significant way. *Stoddert's War*,¹⁵ by Michael Palmer, published in 1987, does provide a detailed review of the period, however, this historiography is not aimed at providing lessons for the modern U.S. Navy. Recent scholarship has examined the conflict briefly as a transition period between the American Revolution and the Barbary Wars and the War of 1812, but not as a standalone event containing valuable lessons for today.

Ample primary source documents necessary to complete a thorough review of the period exist and are accessible. The most important naval documents and correspondence related to the Quasi-War were compiled in the 1930s and made readily available to scholars for research.¹⁶ Scholars have made good use of this resource, however, there remain many unanswered questions, especially when viewing the Quasi-War through a twenty-first-century lens. As this paper examines the historiography of the period, and attempts to analyze how the events are viewed, or even sometimes ignored through the lens of both modern popular culture, and the lore of the sea services as portrayed to its members today, official websites of the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps as well vessels in commission today were examined. The events of the Quasi-War do not hold a high place in the lore of the U.S. Naval Services, although this was not always the

¹⁵ Michael A. Palmer, *Stoddert's War: Naval Operations During the Quasi-War with France, 1798-1801* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1987).

¹⁶ Knox, ed., *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi-War between the United States and France*.

case, and even though there is clear value to be gained from a greater understanding of the origin events of the U.S. Navy. Additionally, a comprehensive look at the conflict analyzing the actions at sea and ashore in the context of the political and strategic landscape of the time is as of yet incomplete and a worthwhile future project.

Background and Historical Context

The official birthday of the United States Navy is 13 October 1775. On that day, the Continental Congress authorized “That a swift vessel, to carry ten carriage guns, and a proportionable number of swivels, with eighty men, be fitted with all possible despatch [sic].”¹⁷ This is the first instance of American legislature appropriating funds for any kind of maritime force. Several additional pieces of legislation authorizing a force of frigates followed in the succeeding months.¹⁸ With few exceptions, most notably the success of John Paul Jones in the battle between *Bonhomme Richard* and *Serapis*, the Continental Navy’s effect on the war effort was marginal. The major naval actions of the American Revolution were fought between the French and British Navies. Even the victory over the *Serapis*, in which John Paul Jones is often quoted as saying “I have not yet begun to fight” was more of a boost to morale than an event with any effect on the war.¹⁹ The end of the American revolution eliminated the need for the Continental Navy. The last vessel of the Continental Navy, the Frigate *Alliance*, was sold in 1785. The Continental Navy had not been a great success. John Adams, who would preside over the growth of the rebirth of the Navy as the future Vice President and then President was disheartened by the results of the fleet and its end. In 1780, while in Paris, France he wrote a

¹⁷ Library of Congress. Manuscript Division, et al., *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789*, (Washington: U.S. Govt. Printing Office), 293.

¹⁸ For a short overview of the Continental Navy see: Craig Symonds, *The U.S. Navy A Concise History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.)

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 9.

letter to the President of the Continental Congress. "In looking over the long list of vessels belonging to the United States taken and destroyed and, recollecting the whole history of the rise and progress of our navy, it is difficult to avoid tears."²⁰

In a similar manner the U.S. Marine Corps celebrates its birthday as 10 November 1775. The Marine Corps regards the raid of Fort Nassau in March of 1776 as its first amphibious operation.²¹ But like the navy, at the end of the American Revolution the Continental Marines were disbanded, and no Marine service existed until the establishment of the United States Marine Corps in 1798.

Between 1785 and 1794, the United States did not have a navy. The French Revolution, and numerous wars that followed were destabilizing to Europe, but the United States sought to maintain neutrality. In April of 1793, President George Washington signed a proclamation of neutrality between the warring parties of Europe. A growing threat from the Barbary states in 1793, came when Portugal signed a treaty with Great Britain, joining a coalition against France. A provision of the agreement required that Portugal no longer provide protection at sea for vessels of any other nation.²² Soon thereafter, a fleet of corsairs from Algeria sailed and by the end of October 1793 ten American ships and more than a hundred sailors had been captured.²³ A debate commenced in Philadelphia about how to respond to these acts of aggression.

One of the results of the debate about how to respond was the passage of the Naval Act of 1794. In January of 1794, in a tight 46-44 vote, mostly along party lines, the house of

²⁰ Francis Wharton, ed., *The Revolutionary Diplomatic Correspondence of the United States*, Vol III (Washington: Govt Printing Office, 1889), 833.

²¹ "Battles Through Time," accessed 14 January 2020, <https://www.marines.com/who-we-are/our-legacy/battles-through-time.html>.

²² Howard P. Nash, *The Forgotten Wars, the Role of the U.S. Navy in the Quasi-War with France and the Barbary Wars 1798-1805* (A.S. Barnes and Company: New York, 1968), 34.

²³ Ibid, 34.

representatives passed a resolution, "that a naval force adequate to the protection of the commerce of the United States ought to be provided."²⁴ Over the next several months, the construction of the navy was debated in the halls of Congress. Some in Congress argued against the creation of a navy for various reasons, including cost of the fleet. Eventually, the Naval Act was passed on 27 March 1794. Its language contained the provisions for four 44-gun ships, and two 36-gun ships. Additional information about manpower, pay and rations is contained in the law. But perhaps most notably, the final section was a peace clause. "*Provided always, and be it further enacted*, That if a peace shall take place between the United States and the Regency of Algiers, that no farther proceeding be had under this act."²⁵ The beginning of the development of the fleet coincided with peace talks led by U.S. Ambassador to Portugal David Humphreys, and his consul in Tripoli Joseph Donaldson.²⁶ In 1795, a peace treaty was in fact signed, and in March of 1796, President George Washington ordered a halt on the construction of the frigates as required by the act of 1794. The harsh economic realities on American shipyards, and a continued growing threat from France, were factors against immediately halting all work on the ships. Because of these factors, Congress authorized construction on three of the ships, *Constitution*, *Constellation*, and the *United States* to continue, while construction on the *President*, *Cheasapeake* and *Congress* ceased.²⁷

While the situation in the Mediterranean had calmed as a result of diplomacy, U.S. French relations were deteriorating. A growing mistrust of the United States by France had been building since 1789 when France invoked the Treaty of Paris in an attempt to compel the United States to come to France's aid in the war against Britain, but the United States maintained its

²⁴ Ibid, 35.

²⁵ An Act to Provide a Naval Armament, 3rd Congress, 1st Sess., (27 March 1794), 350.

²⁶ Nash, 37.

²⁷ Benjamin Armstrong, *Small Boats and Daring Men* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2019), 39.

neutrality as called for in the proclamation of George Washington. Then, in 1795, the United States signed the Jay Treaty with Britain. Signing the Jay Treat did not change the status of the U.S. as a neutral party in the affairs between Great Britain and France.²⁸ The treaty intended to resolve issues which remained from the American Revolution, but in France it was viewed as the United States siding with Britain in its war against France. In response, France declared the right to detain and seize neutral shipping.²⁹ In 1796, France broke diplomatic relations with the United States and began raiding U.S. commerce at sea with its warships and privateers.

When John Adams was inaugurated into the presidency in 1797, he had to immediately deal with the growing crisis between France and the United States. Restarting the construction of the yet unfinished frigates was one of his highest priorities. The election of Adams to the presidency began a period of significant growth for the fleet, and the passage of significant legislation establishing the bureaucracy of the naval services which still exists today. Adams had always been a supporter of a strong navy and was even the first member of the Continental Congress to propose the creation of one.³⁰ The first months of his presidency, from his inauguration in March of 1797 until the first shots of the Quasi-War were fired in July of 1798, was a period encompassing the passage of significant and enduring legislation regarding the U.S. Navy. This legislation included the creation of the Navy Department, and the appointment of Benjamin Stoddert as the Department's first secretary. Soon thereafter, legislation established the U.S. Marine Corps.³¹

²⁸ Donald R Hickey, "The Quasi-War: America's First Limited War, 1798-1801," *The Northern Mariner* XVIII (July-October 2008): 67-77.

²⁹ Nash, 42

³⁰ William G Anderson, "John Adams, The Navy, and the Quasi-War with France," *The American Neptune* 30 (April 1970): 117.

³¹ An Act for Establishing and Organizing a Marine Corps, 5th Congress, 2nd Sess., (11 July 1798), 594.

While the Navy department was established, and the U.S. Marine Corps created in preparation for possible conflict, Adams attempted to avoid a war with France by sending three men, Elbridge Gerry, Charles Pinckney, and John Marshall on a mission to France seeking a resolution to the conflict. The three men were not received by the French government, but instead the French government attempted to extort payment from the American government in the form of bribes and an additional loan requirement to France. The requirement for a bribe in order to even speak to the French government was delivered to the Americans on behalf of the French foreign minister by three agents, annotated in American dispatches back to the United States as X, Y, and Z.³² The American mission to France would not accept the requirements presented by X, Y, and Z and sent dispatches back to the United States that a peaceful resolution to the issue was not possible. The XYZ affair was the final act on the road to the Quasi- War. When the dispatches reached Adams back in the United States, the president and the Congress moved the nation towards war. From March through May of 1798, Congress debated the way forward towards hostilities. Although there was much talk of war in the American government and amongst the public, it was never actually declared.

USS Delaware, French Privateer Croyable, and the USS Retaliation

On 28 May 1798, Congress passed legislation acknowledging French actions against U.S. vessels on the sea, and authorizing President John Adams to direct the U.S. Naval vessels, to seize "any such armed vessel which shall have committed or which shall be found hovering on the coasts of the United States, for the purpose of committing depredations on the vessels

³² Hickey, 70.

belonging to citizens thereof.”³³ On the same day, the President sent orders to all the armed vessels of the United States to take the actions authorized by Congress.³⁴

The first action of the conflict took place on July 7, between the USS *Delaware*, commanded by Captain Stephen Decatur, and the French Privateer *Croyable*. The French privateer mounted ten guns and crewed by fifty-three men.³⁵ Upon sailing, Decatur’s ship discovered the merchant vessel *Alexander Hamilton*. The *Alexander Hamilton* was recently boarded by the *Croyable* and from its cargo stole eighty-four bottles of wine as well as cash and other items of value.³⁶ After conferring with the vessel’s master, Decatur sailed after the suspect vessel and came upon it later that day off the coast of Egg Harbor, New Jersey. Unsure of the speed of his ship relative to the French Privateer, Decatur disguised himself as a merchant vessel until *Croyable* gave chase. Once the privateer was close aboard, Decatur revealed the *Delaware*’s colors. Realizing the vessel was a warship, (but believing it was a British vessel using the American colors as a ruse) the privateer attempted to run for port. After *Delaware* fired several shots, the *Croyable* surrendered.³⁷

The actions of Decatur and his ship on 7 July were the first time the newly reestablished U.S. Navy had taken a prize at sea. It was not until after boarding that the French captain understood the vessels true nationality and claimed surprise that the United States and France were in a state of war. “The Frenchman seemed to be vastly mortified at seeing his Colours

³³ An Act More Effectually to Protect the Commerce and Coasts of the United States, 5th Congress, 2nd Sess., (28 May 1798), 561.

³⁴ President John Adams, “Instructions to Commanders of armed vessels,” 28 May 1798, *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi-War with France*, 1:187.

³⁵ Letter from Secretary of State Timothy Pickering to Rufus King, U.S. Minister to Great Britain, London, 9 July 1798, *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi-War with France*, 1:175.

³⁶ Captain W. Wise, “Public Instrument of Protest, State of Maryland Baltimore County,” 17 July 1798, *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi-War with France*, 1:177.

³⁷ “A French Pirate Captured,” *The Columbian Sentinel*, Boston, July 14 1798, *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi-War with France*, 1:175.

hauled down, and wished he had been sunk. Decatur told him he should have been gratified if he had stood on board his vessel and fought her."³⁸ Interestingly, the story of the captured privateer would continue.

The captured ship was sailed with a prize crew into Fort Mifflin, where her sailors were taken as prisoners.³⁹ The ship was renamed USS *Retaliation*, and soon thereafter put to sea under command of Lieutenant William Bainbridge. The *Retaliation* was recaptured four months later by the French Navy. In November of 1798, *Retaliation* was sailing as part of a squadron of ships in the Caribbean for the purpose of protecting American shipping interests. After capturing a French vessel, the squadron left the *Retaliation* to guard the prize while the remaining ships in the squadron chased after two ships they had seen on the horizon. The vessels being chased were British Frigates, and during the chase, the outgunned *Retaliation* was closed by two French vessels, which compelled Lieutenant Bainbridge to surrender the ship.⁴⁰ The French vessels were the *Voluntier*, forty-four guns and the *Insurgente*, forty guns. The other American vessels in the squadron (*Montezuma* and *Norfolk*) were in sight, and while Bainbridge was taken aboard the *Voluntier*, the *Insurgente* gave chase. As the French officers observed *Insurgente* close the American vessels, Bainbridge asked to borrow a French Lieutenant's long glass and could see the other vessels were at risk of being captured. The French Commodore asked Bainbridge about the capability of the vessels. "To which he, with perfect self-possession and all the sangfroid he could assume, replied 'The ship carries twenty-eight twelve pounders and the brig

³⁸ *The Columbian Sentinel*, Boston, 8 August 1798, *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi-War with France*, 1:176.

³⁹ Letter from Secretary of the Navy Benjamin Stoddert to Secretary of War James McHenry, 9 July 1798, *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi-War with France*, 1:183

⁴⁰ Letter from Captain Andrew Murray to the Secretary of the Navy Benjamin Stoddert, 23 November 1798. *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi-War with France*, II:40.

twenty-nine pounders.”⁴¹ Bainbridge had reported a total broadside weight between the two vessels as 516 pounds, in fact the combined weight of broadside was only 288 pounds,⁴² however, this ruse worked. As a result of the report, the French Commodore immediately ordered the recall of the *Insurgente*, thus saving the Americans from losing two more ships.

The capture of *Retaliation* was more of an irony than a loss of any significant firepower. The ship had changed hands twice in the first six months of the war. Nonetheless, it was the first vessel of the United States Navy ever captured, and the only American warship captured in the Quasi-War. Although Bainbridge surrendered his command, his actions to deceive the French allowed the rest of the squadron to escape and prevented a much more serious loss to the U.S. Navy. Less than three months later the U.S. Navy would have its first victory over a commissioned warship of another nation, and the captured ship would be the same *Insurgente* that had both participated in the capture of retaliation and gave up chase on the *Montezuma* and *Norfolk*.

The U.S. Navy today has an *Arleigh Burke*-Class destroyer named USS *Decatur*. The current ship is the fifth vessel to bear the name. The namesake of the vessel is not the man who presided over the first capture of a foreign vessel by the U.S. Navy, but rather his son, Commodore Stephen Decatur, who gained fame in the Barbary Wars and the War of 1812.⁴³ The actions of his father, Stephen Decatur in the Quasi-War, remain comparatively unknown in popular U.S. Navy lore. There is likewise an *Arleigh Burke*-Class destroyer named after William Bainbridge. The ship’s official history of its namesake does mention his role in the events of the

⁴¹ Claypoole's *American Daily Advertiser*, 8 January 1799, *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi-War with France*, II:42.

⁴² Palmer, 71.

⁴³“Ship’s Namesake,” USS Decatur, accessed 10 January 2020, <https://www.public.navy.mil/surfor/ddg73/Pages/namesake.aspx>.

Quasi-War but gives much greater due to his leadership at sea in the Barbary Wars and War of 1812.⁴⁴ The actions at sea by Decatur and Bainbridge in the Quasi-War, are important, and deserve greater mention in the lore of the modern U.S. Navy.

The First Victory of the Constellation

The Frigate USS *Constellation*, put to sea out of Norfolk Virginia, on 31 December 1798. She was commanded by Captain Thomas Truxtun, and the ship was known for being a well-disciplined command. After operating in the Caribbean and making port visits to St. Kitts, the ship put to sea on 6 February 1799.⁴⁵ Three days later the at about noon, a sail identified as belonging to a warship was sighted on the horizon, and the *Constellation* gave chase.⁴⁶ The next day, seeing that the vessel was flying American colors, *Constellation* attempted to signal the warship. When the ship was unable to return the coded signal appropriately, and then fired a gun to windward, Truxtun concluded the vessel was a French Frigate, and made his ship ready for battle.⁴⁷

The engagement began with *Constellation* firing her guns broadside into the French frigate *Insurgente*. The French frigate immediately returned fire, but after about one hour and fifteen minutes of battle, the *Insurgente* struck her colors and the battle was over. The *Constellation* mounted 38 guns and had a crew of 316 men. The *Insurgente* mounted 40 guns and at the start of

⁴⁴ "Ship's Namesake," USS *Bainbridge*, accessed 10 January 2020, www.public.navy.mil/surflant/ddc96/Pages/History.aspx.

⁴⁵ Ian W. Toll, *Six Frigates the Epic History of the Founding of the U.S. Navy* (New York: Norton and Company, 2006), 114.

⁴⁶ Captain Thomas Truxtun's Journal, U.S. Frigate *Constellation*, 9 February 1799, *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi-War with France*, II:329.

⁴⁷ Letter from Captain Thomas Truxtun to Secretary of the Navy Benjamin Stoddert, 10 February 1799, *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi-War with France*, II:326.

the battle had a crew of 409 men.⁴⁸ During the battle, *Constellation* crossed the bow of the French frigate three times, enabling the American ship to fire its broadside the length of the *Insurgente*. Each time *Constellation* crossed the bow, the deck of *Insurgente* was raked by fire. When *Insurgente* struck her colors, she had suffered seventy killed and wounded, and serious damage to her hull, sails and rigging. The *Constellation* had also suffered significant damage to her rigging, but American casualties were comparatively light, with one man killed and three wounded.⁴⁹

The battle was noteworthy as the first ever victory of the United States Navy over a warship of a foreign nation, and a major European power no less. Several of the officers who would later join the pantheon of U.S. Navy heroes were aboard *Constellation* at the time. In addition to Thomas Truxtun, John Rodgers, David Porter, and Andrew Sterrett were all serving in the ship. Each of these officers would have ships named after them, several still in commission today. Three of the *Arleigh Burke*-Class destroyers are named *Truxtun*, *Porter*, and *Sterrett*. Despite the action resulting in the first capture of a foreign man of war, and the fame in American naval history of some of the officers serving aboard at the time, the battle remains relatively unknown in popular history or U.S. Naval Lore. It was the first frigate battle of the United States Navy, but its place is far overshadowed by the frigate victories over the British in the War of 1812.

The list of casualties on the American side was recorded as one man killed and three wounded, although one of the wounded, would later die. But the one fatality of the battle itself was a sailor named Neal Harvey, who was killed not by enemy action, but by his own officer, Andrew Sterrett. Writing to his brother Charles in the aftermath of the battle, Sterrett stated, "One Fellow I was obliged to run through with my sword, and so put an end to a coward. You

⁴⁸ Captain Thomas Truxtun's Journal, 9 February 1799, *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi-War with France*, II: 329.

⁴⁹ Saint Christopher's Paper, 15 February 1799, *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi-War with France*, II:333.

must not think this strange, for we would put a man to death for even looking pale on board this ship.”⁵⁰ Notably, the official account of the battle from Truxtun, makes no mention of the way Harvey died. On the contrary, the report of the battle from Truxtun to the Secretary of the Navy states that the entire crew performed admirably. “The high state of our discipline, with the gallant conduct of all my officers and men, would have enabled me to have compelled a more formidable enemy to have yielded, had the fortune of war thrown one in my way.”⁵¹

The tone of commentary on the bravery of his crew continues in a letter Truxtun wrote to the Secretary of the Navy five days after the battle, following up his initial report. Mentioning Sterrett by name as one of the three officers running the gun deck Truxtun states, “The zeal of these 3 officers in performing their duty, and complying strictly with my orders cannot be surpassed.” Later in the letter Truxtun continues by writing “I must declare that it is impossible for officers and men in any service to have behaved better than my people generally did on this occasion.”⁵² There is no clear explanation why Truxtun decided not to mention the manner of Harvey’s death, or why his analysis of his crew’s performance in battle is so full of praise, when Sterrett observed cowardly behavior. It seems that an officer running through a sailor for cowardice in battle is a noteworthy enough event for inclusion in official reports. The only evidence of the execution of Neal Harvey is the letter written by Sterrett to his brother. Reviews of the historiography of the event mention the actions of Sterrett as a point of fact, but do not seek to analyze the discrepancy between that event and Truxtun’s account of the bravery of the crew. It is unclear if Truxtun was even aware of the manner of death of Neal Harvey. Execution

⁵⁰ Letter from Lieutenant Andrew Sterrett, to his brother regarding the capture of *Insurgente*, 14 February 1799, *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi-War with France*, II:335.

⁵¹ Letter from Captain Thomas Truxtun to Secretary of the Navy Benjamin Stoddert, 10 February 1799, *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi-War with France*, II:327.

⁵² Letter from Captain Thomas Truxtun to Secretary of the Navy Benjamin Stoddert, 14 February 1799, *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi-War with France*, II:330.

of a sailor in battle without process as happened to Harvey appears to be a very rare if not unique event in U.S. Navy history. It is possible there are numerous incidents of such events, but Sterrett is unique for having written about it. The official webpage of the current USS *Sterrett*, in its section honoring the ship's namesake mentions his service aboard *Constellation* during the battle, but notably leaves out any mention of him killing Neal Harvey.⁵³ It is possible that one of the contributing reasons as to why the battle between *Constellation* and *Insurgente* doesn't hold a higher place in the lore of the U.S. Navy is the discomfort which would stem from having to frequently confront the legitimacy and ethics of the actions of Sterrett if the action were to be given greater precedence in naval lore. This incident is clearly worthy of further study.

The Battle of Puerto Plata Harbor

Thomas Cutler's *A Sailor's History of the United States Navy* provides an example of how popular history regarding the origin story of the Navy misses critical elements of this period. In the appendix covering the battle streamers flown from the Navy flag. The battle streamer from the Quasi-War is documented in this book as having three bronze stars. One each representing the two victories of *Constellation* during the war (*l'Insurgente* and *laVengeance*), and the third representing anti-privateering operations, but most notable is his statement that "French privateers began seizing American merchant ships, provoking an undeclared war fought entirely at sea."⁵⁴ The popular history of the early Marine Corps focuses on the role of the Continental Marines, and skips the Quasi-War almost entirely before focusing its traditions on

⁵³ "Ship's Namesake," USS *Sterrett*, accessed 8 January 2020, <https://www.public.navy.mil/surfor/ddg104/Pages/namesake.aspx>.

⁵⁴ Thomas J. Cutler, *A Sailor's History of the U.S. Navy* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2005), A-4.

the attack on Derna in 1805. The U.S. Marine Corps History section on the official Marine Corps website states, "The Battle of Derna was the Marines' first ground battle on foreign soil and is notably recalled in the Marines' Hymn."⁵⁵ In fact, Marines landed at Puerto Plata harbor in what is now the Dominican Republic five years earlier in 1800 during the Quasi-War. The journal of the USS *Constitution*, as well as the personal correspondence of the senior officers involved, all demonstrate that U.S. Marines waded ashore and conducted operations in and around the fort at Puerto Plata.

In early May of 1800, the *Constitution* was operating in the Caribbean in the vicinity of Santo Domingo. An armed French vessel had been anchored in Puerto Plata, and had gotten the attention of Commodore Silas Talbot, who planned a cutting out expedition to either capture the vessel, or if unable set the ship on fire. The vessel was formerly the British vessel *Sandwich*, but as then operating as a French privateer. The privateer was armed and additionally was protected by three heavy guns from the nearby fort.⁵⁶ The draft of the frigate would not support the *Constitution* sailing into the port, but on 9 May, sailors from the ship detained a small American sloop, the *Sally*. The detained sloop was a 58-ton ship, based out of Providence Rhode Island and her master was Thomas Sanford of Massachusetts.⁵⁷ The sloop frequented the waters of Puerto Plata harbor; therefore, her presence was unlikely to raise alarm in the forces protecting the French privateer. The plan called for sailors and Marines from the *Constitution*, under command of the Lieutenant Isaac Hull, with Marines under the direction of Captain Daniel Carmick to hide in the sloop *Sally*, until the ship could sail into the harbor, and execute the

⁵⁵ "Battles Through Time" accessed 12 January 2020, <https://www.marines.com/who-we-are/our-legacy/battles-through-time.html>.

⁵⁶ Letter from Commodore Silas Talbot to Secretary of the Navy Benjamin Stoddert, 12 May 1800, *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi-War with France*, V:503.

⁵⁷ Deposition of Thomas Sanford concerning his part in the cutting out expedition, 19 May 1800, *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi-War with France*, V:501.

capture of the French privateer. The detained sailors from *Sally*, would remain aboard the vessel, and sail it into the harbor. As an officer from the cutting out expedition, not identified but likely Captain Carmick,⁵⁸ wrote, "By this means it was easy to take the vessel by surprize [sic]; it put me in mind of the wooden horse at Troy."⁵⁹

On its way into the port for the cutting out, the sloop was fired on by a British Frigate, and subsequently boarded. The British officer found not a small vessel engaged in trading, but a vessel filled below deck with U.S. sailors and Marines. Lieutenant Hull reported the basics of the plan to the British officer, who indicated that the British had also been tracking the French privateer with an eye toward capturing it. After some discussion, the Americans were allowed to proceed on their mission with well wishes for success from the British.⁶⁰ On the 11th of May, the *Sally*, still maintaining her cover sailed into Puerto Plata. Lieutenant Hull ordered the sailors and Marines to remain below decks until directed to board. The sloop was laid alongside the French privateer, and "Boarded in handsome style, carrying all before them and taking possession of the Corvette without the loss of a man."⁶¹ Then, in accordance with the plan of Commodore Talbot, the two Marine officers, Captain Carmick and Lieutenant Amory lead their Marines toward the fort. The Marines "Landed up to their necks in water and spiked all the cannon in the fort, before the commanding officer had time to recollect and prepare himself for defense."⁶² After capturing the vessel, and spiking the guns, the sailors rigged the captured vessel for the journey out of the harbor and back to the waiting *Constitution*. Due to an unfavorable wind, the captured

⁵⁸ Gardner W. Allen, *Our Naval War with France* (Boston: The Riverside Press, 1909), 184.

⁵⁹ Claypole's American Daily Advertiser, Philadelphia, 10 June 1800, *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi-War with France*, V:501.

⁶⁰ Account of the Expedition of the U.S. Frigate *Constitution*, in Harbour of Porto Plata, *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi-War with France*, V:504.

⁶¹ Ibid, 505.

⁶² Letter from Commodore Silas Talbot to Secretary of the Navy Benjamin Stoddert 12 May 1800, *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi-War with France*, V:503.

French privateer was forced to remain in the port with the American sailors and Marines aboard, until a favorable shift of the wind allowed for the ship to get underway during the night.⁶³

Personal correspondence of the Lieutenant Hull, Commodore Talbot, other officers involved in the cutting out expedition, and the journal of the *Constitution* from that day all confirm the account.⁶⁴ Not only was the action noteworthy for being the first time that U.S. Marines conducted combat operations on foreign soil, the action itself was boldly and daringly executed. "Perhaps no enterprize[sic] of the same moment has ever better executed; and I feel myself under great obligations to Lieutenant Hull, Captain Carmick, and Lieutenant Amory, for their avidity in taking the scheme I had planned, and for the handsome manner and great address with which they performed this dashing adventure."⁶⁵ Unfortunately, the later decision of an admiralty court that the seizure of the vessel was in a neutral port and therefore illegal, meant that the *Constitution's* crew would receive no prize money and the vessel would be later returned.⁶⁶

Despite the boldness of the operation, and the fact that it is the first landing of the U.S. Marine Corps on foreign soil, the expedition does not hold a high place in the origin story of the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps. As indicated above, service history taught to Marines today skips from the raid on Nassau, (fought by the Continental vice U.S. Marines) to the battle of Derna in Tripoli. This was not, however, always the case. First published in 1934, with reprints in 1964 and 1974, Captain Harry Allanson Ellsworth's *One Hundred Eighty Landings of United States*

⁶³ Account of the Expedition of the U.S. Frigate *Constitution*, in Harbor of Porto Plata, *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi-War with France*, V:505.

⁶⁴ *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi-War with France*.

⁶⁵ Letter from Commodore Silas Talbot to Secretary of the Navy Benjamin Stoddert, 12 May 1800, *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi-War with France*, V:503.

⁶⁶ Nash, 166.

Marines, 1800-1934 states that not only was the Puerto Plata expedition the first landing of U.S. Marines on foreign soil, it argues that every Marine should know the story well. "Every United States Marine should have indelibly impressed upon his mind a picture of the island which now contains the Dominican Republic, because the city of Puerto Plata (Port Au Platte), in this republic is the birth-place of the history of the landings, other than in time of war, of his Corps."⁶⁷ Ellsworth's compelling commentary leaves one puzzled as to how the battle, clearly written in a 1934 publication, and reprinted twice and endorsed by the history and museums division of the Marine Corps at least as late as 1974, is now a relatively unknown action. After a description of the cutting out expedition and the landing of the Marines to spike the guns, Ellsworth concludes his commentary on the landing "Thus was the first deed of the landings of United States Marines recorded."⁶⁸

The frigate *Constitution* from which the cutting out expedition was launched is preserved as a museum ship and is considered both the oldest commissioned warship afloat and the United States' Ship of State.⁶⁹ Isaac Hull has maintained a significant standing in the lore of the United States Navy, but his time in command of *Constitution* during the War of 1812 maintains a much higher place in the popular and scholarly history of the U.S. Navy from the age of sail. The victory of *Constitution* over *Guerriere*, was the first defeat of a British warship by an American warship and happened under Hull's command. One of the reasons the expedition is not more widely recounted in popular history, is that the cutting out of the *Sandwich* and her being taken a

⁶⁷ Captain Harry Ellsworth, *One Hundred Eighty Landings of United States Marines, 1800-1934* (Washington D.C.: History and Museums Division U.S. Marine Corps, 1934), 65.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 66.

⁶⁹ "USS *Constitution*," accessed 12 January 2020, <https://www.navy.mil/local/constitution/>.

prize was deemed illegal because the privateer was taken from a Spanish port.⁷⁰ The historical significance of the first landing of U.S. Marines in a foreign land and its bold, daring, and well executed nature should ensure its inclusion in the mythology of the early Navy and Marine Corps, yet it remains largely unknown.

The Forgotten Quasi-War

Despite the success of the American Navy in the Quasi-War, and the overall effect of compelling France to change its policy of war against seagoing commerce of the United States. The Quasi-War remains relatively unknown not only in popular and scholarly history, but even in the history and lore of the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps. Some even argue that the war has never even been studied comprehensively. Perhaps the best reason for this is captured in this quote from British author Hilary Mantel. "We reach into the past for foundation myths of our tribe, our nation, and found them on glory, or found them on grievance, but we seldom found them on cold facts. Nations are built on wishful versions of their origins: stories in which our forefathers were giants, of one kind or another. This is how we live in the world: romancing."⁷¹ The Quasi-War simply doesn't fit snugly into the wishful version of the origin story of the U.S. Navy, and Marine Corps, and more generally into the wishful version of the early political history of the United States.

The Quasi-War was the first conflict the United States fought. Notably, it was fought without a Congressional declaration of war. A contributing factor to the reluctance to declare war formally was an embarrassment that the conflict was fought against France, America's first

⁷⁰ John Paul Russo, "Hull's First Victory, One Painting: Three Famous Men," *American Neptune* 25 (January 1965): 32.

⁷¹ Hilary Mantel, "Why I Became a Historical Novelist," *The Guardian*, Sat 3 Jun 2017, accessed 24 January 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/jun/03/hilary-mantel-why-i-became-a-historical-novelist>.

and oldest ally. The election of 1800, and the policies of Thomas Jefferson were also a significant shift from the policies of John Adams.

John Adams had historically been one of early America's staunchest advocates for creating and maintaining a navy. A proposal to create a Continental Navy was on his agenda since his involvement in the first Continental Congress in 1774.⁷² Throughout his life, and certainly through his presidency, Adams remained a proponent of a strong navy. As stated earlier, "An Act Providing for a Naval Peace Establishment" was one of the final acts of legislation passed during his presidency. During his presidency, however, there was significant debate over whether the United States should focus its defense on a strong army or a strong navy. Adams remained the leading advocate for the navy, while the leading advocate for a strong army was also a member of Adams' Federalist party, but his political rival, Alexander Hamilton.⁷³ Hamilton would play a significant role in the election of 1800 resulting in the Adams' defeat. The success of the navy during the Quasi-War, was of benefit to the navalists in America politics. Navalists wanted not only a navy large enough for defense, but one which would be capable of exerting American influence overseas, especially in Europe, and succeeded in getting legislation passed to grow the fleet. Antinavalists considered an expanded fleet too big a risk. An expanded navy would be viewed by Britain as a threat, and war with Britain would be the inevitable result.⁷⁴

Although the navalists in the Federalist party had significant success in expanding the fleet during the Quasi-War, the inauguration of the Republican Thomas Jefferson, coupled with a

⁷² William G. Anderson, "John Adams, the Navy, and the Quasi- War with France," *American Neptune* 30 (April 1970): 117.

⁷³ Anderson, 119.

⁷⁴ Craig Symonds, *Navalists and Antinavalists: The Naval Policy Debate in the United States, 1785-1827* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1980), 79.

new Republican majority in Congress resulted in the largest shift in U.S. policy regarding its navy in its history.⁷⁵ Under Jefferson and the Republican party, growing the fleet of the United States was not considered sound policy. He thought that building a large fleet, even if the United States remained neutral in its stance towards the ongoing wars in Europe was flawed policy. In Jefferson's opinion, a large fleet had the potential to provoke a naval war with Britain. This position is supported by the actions of Great Britain against Denmark in April of 1801. Denmark was neutral in the ongoing war between France and Britain, but when Denmark declared it would use its navy to protect its shipping from the British Navy, the result was a British attack on the Danish Fleet in the Battle of Copenhagen. Britain defeated the Danish Navy at Copenhagen just one month after Jefferson's assuming the presidency. The lesson Jefferson took, was that having a fleet, capable of challenging the superiority of the British Navy, even if a nation is a declared neutral was an unacceptable risk.⁷⁶

The legacy of Thomas Jefferson, and his role as a founding father remains strong in America today. Unlike his predecessor, he was certainly not a strong advocate for the navy. It can be argued that Adams only serving a single term and losing the election of 1800, was in part due to his advocacy for the U.S. Navy and the Quasi-War. Perhaps the forgotten nature of the Quasi-War is a matter of presidential popularity and lore. Adams was surrounded in the office by two giants of the presidency, Washington and Jefferson. He was subverted in the 1800 election by his own party member, Alexander Hamilton, who continues to this day as a subject of not only scholarly and popular history but even popular culture. Interestingly, Jefferson oversaw the deployment of the U.S. Navy to the Mediterranean to fight the Barbary Wars. While

⁷⁵ Ibid, 82.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 89.

Jefferson was not a proponent of the navy as much as his predecessor, he spent far more on the navy than the army during his presidency.⁷⁷ Fought during Jefferson's Presidency, the Barbary Wars nonetheless appear to have a greater role in the culture and lore of the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps.

Why then are the American frigate victories of the War of 1812 a preeminent part of the history of the U.S. Navy in the age of sail? In the American Revolution, the United States, with the help of its French Allies, had defeated the world's foremost naval power in a conflict fought primarily on land. In fighting the French Navy to a standstill between 1798 and 1800, the United States had waged a moderately successful naval war against a nation whose military was not known for its naval prowess but was Europe's most powerful land force.⁷⁸ The frigate victories of 1812, although single-ship vice fleet on fleet engagements, were fought between the United States Navy and the British Navy. At the time of the War of 1812, Britain was undoubtedly the world's foremost naval power. Victories at sea over Britain established the United States as a significant player in the naval domain more than any victory over France ever could.

The three U.S. Frigate victories of 1812 were not strategically significant. Even Alfred Thayer Mahan wrote that these battles were "Simply scattered efforts, without relation either to one another or to any main body whatsoever capable of affecting seriously the issues of war."⁷⁹ Mahan's analysis misses the point. The victories do not need to have a significant military impact to be important. The victories significantly wounded the pride of the British Navy, which had been riding upon the buoyancy of the victory at Trafalgar since 1805. Britain may have

⁷⁷ Ibid, 87.

⁷⁸ Palmer, 233.

⁷⁹ Alfred Thayer Mahan, Quoted in Kevin D. McCranie, "Perception and Naval Dominance: The British Experience During the War of 1812," *The Journal of Military History* 82 (October 2018): 1068.

eventually won the war at sea, but the frigate victories of 1812 compelled Britain to commit twenty percent of its fleet to North America.⁸⁰ In the end, the United States successfully forced the British to remove its troops from America. Historians argue about the military significance of the naval battles of the War of 1812, and debate whether the U.S. or Britain won the War of 1812. Perhaps this is not the lens through which the outcome should be studied. The strategic value of the battles was in the communication of prestige and honor for the United States. In that arena, the United States Navy more than held its own. Although the victories of the reborn U.S. Navy in the Quasi-War deserve a greater place in its origin story, the monumental role given to the War of 1812 in the origin story of the U.S. Navy is not without reason.

Conclusion

The Navy and Marine Corps celebrate their origins in the creation of the Continental Navy and Marine Corps in Philadelphia in 1775. The problem with this perspective on the respective services' early history, is that these forces would cease to exist after the American revolution. The actions of the heroes of the Continental Navy in battle live on in the lore of the sea services, but they had little impact on the outcome of the war for independence. There were significant naval battles in the American War for Independence, but these naval actions were fleet engagements between France and Britain. The Naval Act of 1794 is more established in naval lore because it was the legislation which authorized the building of the initial six frigates of the United States

⁸⁰ McCranie, 1082.

Navy, but after peace was negotiated with Algiers in 1795, construction halted, and the ships languished at their building yards.

By contrast, during the period 1797-1801, the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps were created and have existed ever since. The original six frigates were completed, saw action at sea and were part of the first victories for the fleet. The capture of the *Croyable*, the defeat of the *Insurgente*, and the battle of Puerto Plata Harbor are significant firsts which deserve greater prestige in the origin stories of the navy.

The Barbary Wars and the War of 1812 have an outsized place in the origin stories of the navy and Marine Corps that have taken on an almost mythic place in American naval history. President Jefferson, who was no great proponent of the Navy, presided over the Barbary Wars, fought with a navy and Marine Corps built during the John Adams Presidency. The fleet which had success during the presidency of James Madison in the War of 1812, was, primarily the fleet built between 1794 and 1801. The successful frigate battles fought by the U.S. Navy in 1812 should be celebrated. These were naval victories over Britain, the world's preeminent naval power. Jefferson, who won the election over Adams in 1800, in large part due to the political turmoil created by the Quasi-War even credited Adams for the successes of 1812. "I sincerely congratulate you on the success of our little navy, which must be more gratifying to you than most men, as having been the early and constant advocate of wooden walls."⁸¹

Several factors contribute to the oft forgotten nature of this critical period. First, the war itself was perhaps the critical underpinning of John Adams losing the election of 1800. Second, the Quasi-War represented the first use of executive power to conduct war outside of

⁸¹ David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), 606.

Congressional approval. Although the U.S. Navy fought multiple successful engagements during the Quasi-War, victories against the French fleet were never going to be considered as prestigious as the victories over the British Navy a decade later. Some of the actions had questionable outcomes. As example, the combined force of Sailors and Marines daringly cut out and took the vessel *Sandwich* a prize in Puerto Plata Harbor, but admiralty proceedings later deemed the prize unlawful because she was taken from a neutral port. Finally, the election of Thomas Jefferson represented the end of Federalist dominance of American politics. Jefferson was not a navalist, and even wanted to dismantle the Navy after his inauguration.⁸² What the Quasi-War did demonstrate to the world was that the United States, and its navy, could compel a Great European power to change its policies. Because of the actions of the U.S. Navy, France ended its policy of predation of American commerce.⁸³ The political ramifications of the war, and the questionable outcome of some of the actions, should be considered; but the significant Naval legislation of 1797-1801 and the impact the Quasi-War had in building the expertise the Navy would put to good use in both the Barbary Wars and the War of 1812, indicate that it should occupy a much higher place in the lore and origin story of the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps.

⁸² Abraham Sofaer, *War, Foreign Affairs and Constitutional Power: The Origins* (Cambridge: Ballinger, 1976), 209.

⁸³ Hickey, 67.

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