



SIX FRIGATES

THE EPIC HISTORY OF THE FOUNDING OF
★★★ THE U.S. NAVY ★★★

IAN W. TOLL



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*The Epic History of the
Founding of the U.S. Navy*

Ian W. Toll

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Frontispiece: USS *President* entering the harbor of Marseilles.
Watercolor by Antoine Roux, c. 1805. New York Public Library. Page 1: "Preparation for war to defend commerce." The USS *Philadelphia* under construction in Joshua Humphreys's shipyard, 1800. New York Public Library. Page 145: USS *Constitution*. Watercolor, 1819. Artist Unknown. The Mariners' Museum, Newport News, Virginia. Page 255: USS *Philadelphia* on the rocks off Tripoli, October 31, 1803. Colored lithograph, P.S. Duval Son & Co., undated. The Mariners' Museum, Newport News, Virginia.

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DEBTS OF GRATITUDE

This book would have required at least twice as much time to write—and it might be more truthful to say it would not have been written at all—if not for the painstaking efforts of the Department of the Navy, beginning in the 1920s and continuing to this day, to collect, transcribe, and publish large numbers of early naval records, documents, journals, and letters. Three series merit special mention. *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi-War Between the United States and France* (7 vols.) is invaluable not only as a documentary history of the Quasi War, but for its attention to the construction and fitting out of the first frigates. *Naval Documents Related to the United States Wars with the Barbary Powers* (6 vols.) reaches back to the earliest debates of the 1780s, when American ships first fell prey to the Barbary corsairs, and provides a comprehensive day-to-day history of Commodore Edward Preble's 1803–04 campaign against Tripoli. *The Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History* (3 vols. with a fourth in process) addresses not only the naval war itself but the Anglo-American disputes that preceded the war. The third volume, released in 2004, provides a wealth of newly published material on the 1814 operations in the Chesapeake Bay, including the invasion and destruction of Washington. Additional naval records and letters are kept at the National Archives, Record Group 45; and several collections of officers' correspondence can be found at the New-York Historical Society and the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. The latter is the repository of Joshua Humphreys's letter and account books, an essential source both for debates over the design of the frigates and for the construction and fitting out of the frigate *United States*.

American State Papers (38 vols.) provides many vital documents, particularly in the volumes for Foreign Relations, Finance, Commerce and Navigation, Military Affairs, and Naval Affairs. *Annals of Congress* provides a record

of debates in the House. The Library of Congress Web site provides scanned original images of the Thomas Jefferson Papers, much of it text-searchable, with transcriptions by Paul Leicester Ford. (The Library's site, at <http://memory.loc.gov>, also provides full-page access to *American State Papers*, *Annals of Congress*, and several other essential sources.) *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, an ongoing project at Princeton University Press, is the preferred source for Jefferson's early career. Also useful are *The Adams-Jefferson Letters* (Lester J. Cappon, ed.) and *The Republic of Letters: The Correspondence Between Thomas Jefferson and James Madison 1776-1826* (James Morton Smith, ed.). Most trade, economic, and fiscal statistics have been drawn from the U.S. Census Bureau's *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970* (2 vols.). Of the contemporary newspapers, the most essential are the *Philadelphia Aurora General Advertiser* (excerpted at length in Richard N. Rosenfeld's *American Aurora*, 1997), the *Niles' Register*; *The Times* of London, and the *British Naval Chronicle*.

For naval policy debates and politics during the pre-1815 era, two books merit special mention: Marshall Smelser's *Congress Founds the Navy* (1959) and Craig Symonds's *Navalists and Anti-Navalists* (1980). The importance of American merchant shipping interests is emphasized in Robert G. Albion and Jennie Barnes Pope's *Sea Lanes in Wartime* (1942). The best overall work on the early American merchant marine is William Armstrong Fairburn's *Merchant Sail* (1945-55). Howard Chapelle remains the leading American authority on ship design issues in the age of sail, even if most of his books are more than half a century old. I have particularly relied on *The History of the American Sailing Navy: The Ships and Their Development* (1949). Virginia Steele Wood's *Live Oaking: Southern Timber for Tall Ships* (1981) relates the little-known history of the use of live oak as a ship's timber. For ship-handling and seamanship, the best modern work I have found is John Harland's *Seamanship in the Age of Sail* (1984).

Several naval biographies deserve mention. The best I have read from this era is Christopher McKee's *Edward Preble: A Naval Biography* (1972). Also important are David F. Long's *Ready to Hazard: A Biography of Commodore William Bainbridge, 1774-1833* (1981), Albert Gleaves's *James Lawrence* (1904), Eugene Ferguson's *Truxtun of the Constellation* (1959), and Linda Mahoney's *Captain from Connecticut: The Life and Naval Times of Isaac Hull* (1986). Two biographies of Stephen Decatur, Jr., were published in 2004: *A Life Most Bold and Daring*, by Spencer Tucker, and *A Rage for Glory*, by James Tertius De Kay. Of the political biographies, I have relied particularly on David McCullough's *John Adams* (2001), Dumas Malone's *Jefferson and His*

Time (1948–70), and Joseph Ellis’s several excellent works on the founders. For the politics of the 1790s, no single work is more comprehensive than Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick’s monumental *The Age of Federalism: The Early American Republic, 1788–1800* (1994). Two important sources on the Quasi War are Michael A. Palmer’s *Stoddert’s War* (1987) and Alexander DeConde’s *The Quasi War: The Politics and Diplomacy of the Undeclared War with France, 1797–1801* (1966).

For general histories of the navy during the pre–1815 period, a seminal modern work is Christopher McKee’s *A Gentlemanly and Honorable Profession: The Creation of the U.S. Naval Officer Corps, 1794–1815* (1991). Tyrone Martin’s *A Most Fortunate Ship: A Narrative History of Old Ironsides* (1980) is the definitive work on the frigate *Constitution*, written by one of her former commanders. William Fowler’s *Jar Tars and Commodores* (1984) is a good narrative history of the era between the Revolution and the War of 1812. For the Barbary Wars, there are several histories; none is more thorough than Glenn Tucker’s *Dawn Like Thunder: The Barbary Wars and the Birth of the U.S. Navy* (1963). Two accounts of captivity in Tripoli by members of the crew of the *Philadelphia*, one written by a surgeon and one by a sailor, appear in *White Slaves, African Masters: An Anthology of American Barbary Captivity Narratives* (Paul Baepler, ed., 1999).

For the political history of the Jeffersonian period, the essential point of departure is Henry Adams’s magisterial nine-volume *History of the United States of America During the Administrations of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison*, published in the last decade of the nineteenth century. Spencer Tucker and Frank Reuter’s *Injured Honor* (1996) is the indispensable source for the *Chesapeake-Leopard* encounter of 1807. For the War of 1812, Theodore Roosevelt’s *The Naval War of 1812* (1882) and Alfred T. Mahan’s *Sea Power in Its Relation to the War of 1812* (1905) have done remarkably well at standing the test of time. I have also relied on Donald R. Hickey’s *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict* (1989) and Wade Dudley’s *Splintering the Wooden Wall: The British Blockade of the United States, 1812–1815* (2003). For the British perspective, no one interested in the subject should ignore William James’s *Naval Occurrences of the War of 1812* (1817). A good modern treatment, with contributions by several British historians, is *The Naval War of 1812* (Robert Gardner, ed., 2001); and a neglected classic is C. S. Forester’s *The Age of Fighting Sail: The Story of the Naval War of 1812* (1956), a work of non-fiction by the author better known for the “Horatio Hornblower” series of historical novels.

Thanks to Burt Logan, Sarah Watkins, and the staff of the USS Consti-

tution Museum for their enthusiastic support for this project. The officers and crew of the *Constitution* generously allowed me to be conducted on an extended tour of the frigate. Richard Whelan of the Naval Historical Center (NHC) Detachment Boston, who is responsible for looking after the *Constitution*, showed me around both the frigate and the adjoining repair and maintenance facilities. Thanks too to Michael Crawford, Charles Brodine, and the staff of the NHC's Early History Branch at the Washington Navy Yard for allowing me access to their excellent research facilities and for taking the time to discuss the project. I would also like to acknowledge the efforts of the professional archivists and librarians at the National Archives, the Library of Congress, the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, the American Philosophical Society, the Phillips Library (Salem, MA), the New-York Historical Society, the New York Society Library, and the New York Public Library. For assistance, advice, and support, I must thank, in no particular order, Peter Neill, Phil Kopper, Jay Iselin, Ralph Carpenter, Admiral Paul Engel, Nick Stevens, Kate Sheekey, Chris Vroom, Illya Szilak, Jim Woolsey, William Luers, David McCullough, and finally McKay Jenkins, who was a die-hard advocate of this project before the first word was committed to paper. Others who have helped along the way are Dan Hollins, Roy Penny, and Bill Schenck; also Dorothy Brown, Emmet Curran, and Ed Ingebretsen. For their kindness and generosity when I was struggling through the middle chapters, I would like to thank Frank, Kay, and Montgomery Woods. At Janklow & Nesbit, I would like to thank Mort Janklow, Tif Loehnis, Dorothy Vincent, and particularly Eric Simonoff, who has been a gentleman, a consummate professional, and a friend. At W. W. Norton, thanks to Morgen Van Vorst, Louise Brockett, and especially my editor, Starling Lawrence, who unknowingly started me down the path that led to this book when he made the decision, almost fifteen years ago, to publish the novels of Patrick O'Brian in the United States.

No research assistants were employed in this project, but several family members provided invaluable (and unbillable) assistance. My father, among other things, hunted down several obscure eyewitness accounts of the sea actions of 1812. My mother read and critiqued the manuscript, and her comments have been extremely useful. My brother, Adam, explored and turned up sources in Halifax (during his honeymoon, no less). Kathryn, my wife, often helped me talk through the outlines and provided excellent critical feedback on the early drafts of the manuscript. George Orwell once said: "Writing a book is a horrible, exhausting struggle, like a long bout of some painful illness." For love, inspiration, and support, I am grateful, above all, to Kathryn.

*War is the tao of deception.
Therefore, when planning an attack, feign inactivity.
When near, appear as if you are far away.
When far away, create the illusion that you are near.
If the enemy is efficient, prepare for him.
If he is strong, evade him.
If he is angry, agitate him.
If he is arrogant, behave timidly so as to encourage his arrogance.
If he is rested, cause him to exert himself.
Advance when he does not expect you.
Attack him when he is unprepared.*

— SUN-TZU, *THE ART OF WAR*
CA. 4TH CENTURY B.C.

NOTE ON LANGUAGE AND NAUTICAL TERMINOLOGY

The era of wooden sailing ships produced a vast and highly specialized vocabulary, and few of us living today are able to decipher it without the constant use of a reference guide. It is tempting to adopt the rule that one should simply avoid jargon as often as possible. On the other hand, the language of the maritime past is part of the essential DNA of modern English. When we hear it said that Smith's marketing report was "by and large" encouraging, or that Jones was "taken aback" by the sales forecasts, or that Smith is a marketing man "through and through," or that Jones is a "loose cannon," or that Smith has let "the cat out of the bag," or that Smith and Jones are "at loggerheads," how likely are we to pause and reflect that these are faint echoes of a language that time and progress have rendered obsolete? To be interested in nautical jargon is to be interested in English itself.

But if jargon is to be employed and not avoided, how much of it should be defined in the text? To include no definitions risks leaving the reader mystified. The alternative, defining every unfamiliar term, results in prose that reads like a glossary. In these pages, I have attempted to steer a middle course, using or quoting nautical terms and phrases when the narrative context sheds light on their meaning, and only rarely pausing to insert a definition or explanation. All direct quotations, nautical or otherwise, are taken from the original sources verbatim; I have occasionally modernized spelling or punctuation for the sake of clarity or readability.

CONTENTS

Debts of Gratitude IX

Note on Language and Nautical Terminology XV

PART ONE

To Provide and Maintain I

PART TWO

To the Shores of Tripoli 145

PART THREE

England Again 255

Epilogue 453

Chronology of Later Events: 1815–2005 469

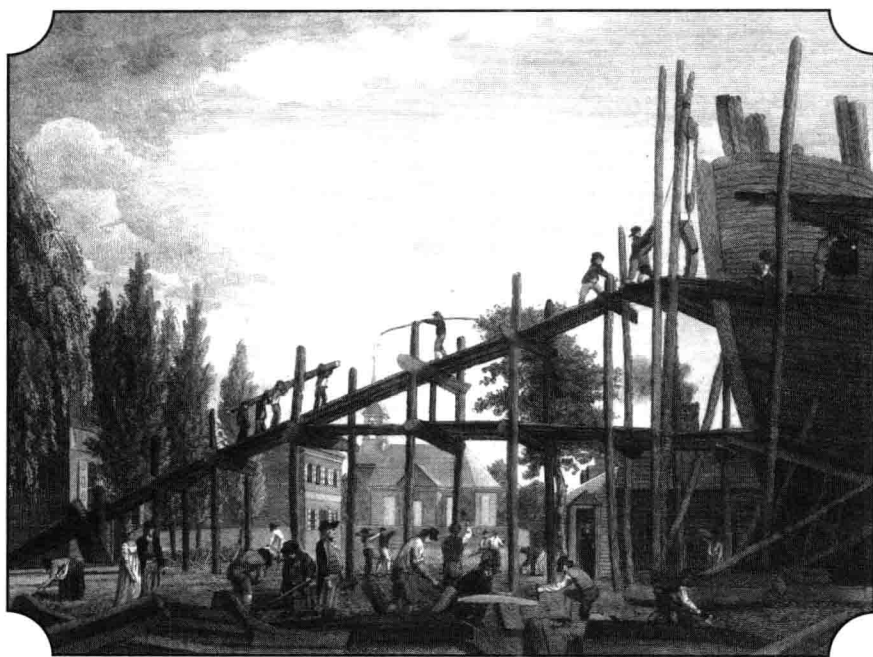
Notes 483

Bibliography 525

Index 541

PART ONE

To Provide and Maintain



CHAPTER ONE

On October 21, 1805, an English fleet commanded by Admiral Lord Horatio Nelson hunted down and annihilated the combined fleets of France and Spain in an immense sea battle off Cape Trafalgar, near the Spanish coast. The Battle of Trafalgar, as it came to be known, crowned the British Royal Navy as undisputed sovereign of the world's oceans and confounded Napoleon's last hope of a cross-Channel invasion of England.

Napoleon, campaigning against the Austrians and Russians in the east, was angered and disgusted by the news. But he was hardly surprised. Since the outbreak of war in 1792, the Royal Navy had methodically and ruthlessly burned, sunk, or captured nearly every enemy warship that had come within range of its guns. To the French and all the other European peoples who had been punished by British seapower—the Spanish, the Russians, the Dutch, the Danes—it seemed as if the English were inherently more skillful, more resourceful, and more in their element while at sea, in the same way that a seal or a shark is inherently a better swimmer than a horse or a bear.

It would be no exaggeration to say that England's naval supremacy in the early years of the nineteenth century was unlike anything the world had ever seen before, or has since. The Romans had won complete control of the Mediterranean twenty centuries earlier, but rarely did they venture in force out into the Atlantic, and of the more distant oceans they knew nothing. In our own time, the United States might be capable of defeating all the world's other navies combined, but that claim has never been tested in war, and there are many other functioning navies afloat. But Britain, after Trafalgar, forced every other great power virtually to abandon the sea and seek refuge in its harbors. Though remnants of the French navy survived in some French ports, they

were imprisoned there by blockading squadrons of British warships that maintained a constant presence from the Scheldt estuary to Toulon. The Danish navy had ceased to exist after the British assault on Copenhagen; the Dutch navy had never recovered after being routed at Camperdown. The Russian tsar ordered his ships not to leave their moorings in his Baltic seaports. Spain's seapower had been mortally wounded at Cape St. Vincent and put out of its misery at Trafalgar; after that its days as a global empire were numbered, and Spain would never fulfill its ambition of recapturing Gibraltar.

Britain's gigantic fleets held sway over the Atlantic, the Pacific, the Indian, the Caribbean, the North Sea, the Baltic, and the Mediterranean. Its bases were far-flung, strategically located, and unassailable; the Royal Navy sailed out of Chatham, Sheerness, Plymouth, Portsmouth, Kinsale, Gibraltar, Port Mahon, Malta, Halifax, Bermuda, Jamaica, Barbados, Antigua, Capetown, Bombay, Calcutta, Trincomalee, Jakarta, Pelu Penang, and New South Wales. England had huge seaports and dockyard complexes on its southern and western coasts, with a large and highly developed infrastructure to build, fit out, and provision ships of every kind. The nation could draw upon a broad population of experienced seamen who had learned their professional skills in service on merchant ships, fishing dories, coastal traders, and men-of-war. Britain's far-flung colonies brought wealth—wealth that it in turn reinvested in defending the trade routes that linked it to those colonies.

British warships were kept constantly at sea, on convoy duty, on blockade duty, in commerce-raiding cruises, in shuttling troops and dignitaries from place to place. They put into port for short, furious bursts of work—with little or no shore liberty for the crews, who were kept constantly busy in refitting and reprovisioning—and then hurried back out to sea. A captain who kept his ship in port too long was diminished in the eyes of his colleagues and superiors. The long months at sea were the best possible training for officers and crew, working them into a high state of efficiency and readiness. With constant repetition and practice, every maneuver became second nature. The men learned to work together, to anticipate one another, to carry out the countless finely timed and intricate procedures involved in sailing and handling a wooden ship. Foreign naval officers who visited British warships—or were taken aboard as prisoners of war—were dismayed by what they saw. The contrast with their own ships was palpable and stark. British ships were simply far more trim, more highly disciplined, and better handled than their own.

British naval hegemony was founded on the leadership of great commanders, and none was greater than Nelson, who is still revered as a kind of

god in England. His stone likeness, three times larger than life, gazes down on Whitehall, the British Admiralty, and the Houses of Parliament from a 165-foot-high column at the geographic center of London. The third son of a country parson, he was a small, harmless-looking man, who stood five feet six inches tall and weighed 130 pounds. His features were gentle and pubescent, even feminine. He was as passionate and tender as a poet in springtime, pouring his heart out to the women he loved—above all to Emma Hamilton, the beautiful young wife of the British ambassador to Naples, whom he loved adulterously and publicly. He wrote impassioned love letters to her, addressing her as “my dearest beloved Emma,” “Fair Emma, Good Emma, Great Emma, Virtuous Emma,” and “the dear friend of my bosom,” and he adored their illegitimate daughter, Horatia, whom he called “my dearest angel.” He was full of warmth and kindness and praise for all of his colleagues in the navy. He called them his “Band of Brothers”—a reference to *Henry V*, his favorite play—and he was gracious and thoughtful and generous to them all. He had a magnetism that drew his fellow officers to him and made them compete for his approval.

But Nelson had a darker side. Behind the gracious and sensitive exterior there was a cold resolve, a ruthlessness, even a kind of savagery. His personal courage was extreme to the point of recklessness. He had seen so much action that it is incredible, in retrospect, that he survived as long as he did. In a 1794 attack on Corsica, a shell had exploded nearby, blasting sand and dirt into his face. He lost the sight of his right eye as a result, and for the rest of his life both the pupil and the iris had a uniformly cloudy blue tone that made his gaze unnerving, especially when he was angry. In an attack on the Canary Islands in 1797, his right elbow had been shattered by a musket ball, and his arm had to be amputated without anesthetic. He did not complain when the surgeon sawed through the bone, but he thought the use of a cold knife to cut through the flesh caused unnecessary pain, and instructed that all future amputations should be performed with a heated blade. At age thirty-nine, Nelson was required to submit to his government a memorial summarizing his service record. He wrote, in part:

Your memorialist has been in four actions with the fleets of the enemy, in three actions with frigates, in six engagements with batteries, in ten actions in boats employed in cutting out of harbors, in destroying vessels, and in the taking of three towns. . . . He has assisted in the capture of seven sail of the line, six frigates, four

corvettes, eleven privateers of different sizes, and taken and destroyed near fifty sail of merchantmen. [He] has been actually engaged against the enemy upwards of one hundred and twenty times, has lost his right eye and arm, and been severely wounded and bruised in his body. . . .

This he had written in 1797, when his three greatest sea battles—Aboukir Bay, Copenhagen, and Trafalgar—had not yet been fought.

Nelson's approach to war at sea was simple, effective, and brutal. He had little regard for clever maneuvering, and no patience for complicated battle tactics. He thought it a waste of time to try to outsail an opponent in the hope of winning an advantageous position, and he thought it a waste of ammunition to fire at an enemy from long range. Nelson chose to take his ships directly and quickly into close-range action, where they would pulverize the enemy with broadside after broadside from his main weapon, the "great guns" or heavy cannon. His notion of how a naval action should be fought, which he put into practice at Trafalgar, was to fight the enemy "yardarm to yardarm," to position his ships parallel to those of the enemy—so close that their hulls were literally touching—and to order his gun crews to fire and reload and fire again as quickly as they possibly could. "The best and only mode I have found of hitting the enemy afloat," he told a colleague, "is to get so close that whether the gun is pointed upwards or downwards, forward or aft, it must strike its opponent." His officers could not fail to understand his wishes. On the eve of Trafalgar, he wrote them: "In case signals can neither be seen nor perfectly understood, no captain can do very wrong if he places his ship alongside that of an enemy." And in case that wasn't clear enough, once the battle was joined he flew his trademark signal from the flagship *Victory*'s masthead: *Engage the enemy more closely*.

Warships of this era were armed with a battery of so-called great guns, colossal iron weapons with barrels nine or ten feet long, each weighing 2 tons or more. The caliber of a gun was based on the weight of the round shot it fired. Battleships and frigates carried 18- or 24-pounders, weapons three and four times heavier and more destructive than the standard 6-pounder field-piece used by the army during the same period. On firing, the gun bellowed with a noise that was "like some awfully tremendous thunderstorm, whose deafening roar is attended by incessant streaks of lightning." It discharged enormous billowing clouds of white, acrid smoke, and recoiled with a force that would kill a man who was caught in its way. As the gun came to rest at the

end of its breeching, the gun crew—as many as ten or twelve men to a weapon—began a rapid and precisely timed series of movements to reload and fire again. The bore hole was sponged out with a swab; the gunpowder, bound in a cloth cartridge, rammed down into the muzzle; a wad was rammed in on top of the powder; and then the cannon ball and another wad were rammed down on top of that. The cloth of the cartridge was pierced and some priming powder poured into the touch hole; the gun crew ran the monstrous weapon out through its port by heaving in unison on the gun tackle; the captain of the gun adjusted his aim and gave the order to fire. A match was touched to the primer. The gun roared, recoiled, and the process began again.

The British were happy to trade blows at point-blank range, to fight “ball for ball,” because their gunnery was superior to that of their enemies. The potency of British gunnery owed nothing to the weapons themselves, for the French and Spanish ships were armed in much the same way. Nor was it the aim of the British gun crews, for even when their aim was superior it was rarely decisive. The single most important factor was the *rate* of fire. A British warship would fire three broadsides to every two fired by an enemy ship—if that enemy ship was particularly well manned, well led, and well practiced. More often, the British would get off two or three broadsides to the enemy’s one, and the ratio would continuously improve in their favor as the battle wore on toward its inevitable conclusion.

The Royal Navy owed its advantage in gunnery to its commitment to intensive training. The gun crews drilled and drilled endlessly as their officers timed them with stopwatches and corrected their mistakes. Crew was pitted against crew in competition. Wagers were placed. Rewards were offered: double rum rations or light duty assignments. The men strove to improve and took pride in perfecting their skills. Practice and team spirit transformed the British gun crews into well-oiled fighting machines. When English and French warships met in battle, the French ships commonly suffered much greater casualties, even when the ships were evenly matched. Remarkable discrepancies in the number of killed and wounded were common. One example of such a rout—and there are many—was the single-ship action between the *Monmouth* and the *Foudroyant* off Cartagena in 1758, when the French enjoyed a 2.6 to 1 advantage in combined weight of ordnance, but surrendered with losses of four and a half Frenchmen dead for every Briton killed. During the long period of war from 1793 to 1815, the British lost 17 frigates to the French (9 of which were subsequently recaptured), while in the same period the French lost 229 frigates to the British.