Taking the War to the Water: The American Revolution At Sea, 1775-1776

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TAKING THE WAR TO THE WATER:
THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION AT SEA, 1775-1776
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Abstract

The story of the land war of the American Revolution has been told many times. However, the naval conflict remains largely ignored except for its most famous aspects, such as the voyages of John Paul Jones. When the sea battles of the Revolution have been discussed it has mostly been in the context of the end of the war when the navy had already existed for some time. Historians such as William Fowler and Nathaniel Miller have attempted comprehensive studies of the Continental Navy, but neither focus on the character and significance of naval combat in the first year of the war.

The early naval battles of 1775-1776 demonstrate that the navy of the United Colonies was still a decentralized, disorganized force that was controlled not by a central governing agency but by independent local leaders. These men looked for opportunities for success and valor, perhaps even for personal profit, and took advantage of opportunities as they arose, whether it was part of the navy’s larger plan or not. These characteristics were illustrated in the Battle of Machias, the Battle of Nassau, and the Battle of Valcour, in each of which men acted on their own initiative, and with the exception of Valcour, experienced success. The valuable and unique nature of the naval war of the American Revolution from 1775-1776 becomes clear through a close examination of the formation of the Continental Navy and the interconnections between the land and sea war.
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Introduction

The first shot of the American Revolution came in April 1775 at Lexington, Massachusetts. In the centuries since the American Revolution, it has been the subject of wide-ranging scholarship that has adopted multiple perspectives and interpretations. One area that has lacked careful research and close scrutiny, is the role of the naval battles and the Continental Navy itself. Although the Continental Navy only played a role until 1778, at which time the French navy took over the naval front of the war, it laid the foundation for the United States Navy. In the early years of the war this navy was anything but regulated. After the creation of the Continental Navy in 1775, John Adams created rules and regulations that were to govern the new defense force. However, these distant guidelines were rarely followed by the Continental Navy. While there were problems with having a decentralized naval force, it did provide the rebellious colonies with some advantages over Great Britain. With the American naval forces having little oversight, they were able to act with far greater flexibility than their British counterparts, who were restricted by the goals and designs of their superiors. The flexibility of the American naval forces and army allowed them to immediately react to local conditions in the most expeditious manner.

This independent, flexible, and decentralized spirit among the naval forces can be seen especially clearly before the navy was officially formed. In May 1775, colonists in Machias, Maine, rose up against Ichabod Jones, a trader from Boston. Although the Patriots were not necessarily in the majority there, they saw an opportunity to further the

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cause in which they believed. This independent spirit and willingness to take action, carried through the early years of the war.\(^5\) This same spirit was seen in Esek Hopkins’s cruise to New Providence in the Bahamas. Instead of following his orders to cruise Narragansett Bay, Hopkins sailed to the Bahamas and led an amphibious assault against Fort Nassau. Although this was a successful assault, and secured valuable supplies for the Americans, Hopkins violated his orders, an extreme measure even for the decentralized nature of the navy, and attacked a British colony instead of just protecting the American coast. Hopkins went to New Providence because he saw a valuable opportunity and took advantage of it. These actions further demonstrate the localized and independent spirit that was evident in the Continental Navy.\(^6\)

The Battle of Valcour also highlighted these characteristics. Although this was performed as a legitimate military act against Great Britain, it still demonstrated that Benedict Arnold was willing to go beyond his duties as an army officer to make a naval assault on the Royal Navy. In October 1776, Arnold led a quickly assembled American fleet against the much stronger British Navy. While a defeat for the Americans, they fought valiantly and secured a secondary strategic goal in delaying the British advance, which proved that an independent, decentralized force could indeed make a difference.\(^7\) These battles demonstrated that in the opening phase of the American Revolution the United Colonies’ naval forces relied heavily on the independent decisions of the men who led them. The Battle of Machais, the Battle of Nassau, and the Battle of Valcour,

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together demonstrate that the success of the Continental Navy was based on strong individual leaders.
Chapter One: The British Navy

The end of the eighteenth century was a time of change in the British Navy. The social status of naval careers was rising in Britain, and the Royal Navy became seen as a respectable career path for the sons of gentlemen to take if they were not inheriting land. 9 Despite this change, a majority of the officers in the navy were not sons of gentlemen, although these young men did have the best chance of becoming commissioned officers. 10 On the other end of the spectrum were the young men that joined the navy but were illiterate; for them the likelihood of receiving a commission was almost non-existent. 11 At this time the admiralty had to rely on being given good candidates for officers, as there was little that they could do to train or educate them. The only true method that existed was the Naval Academy, founded in 1737, at Portsmouth. This venue for educating future officers did not play much of a role and usually only had around forty students. 12 Thus they relied on the already educated to rise through the ranks based on their performance, as opposed to a formal training program for their officers. 13

In addition to growing respectability, the late eighteenth century also led to the creation of semi-professional specialization among the commissioned officers. Most of this development came in the form of transport agents who were employed and uniformed by the Navy Board. In addition, promotions increasingly became based on skill, as opposed to political connections. Lord Sandwich, who was named Lord of the

10 Ibid, 383.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid, 386.
13 Ibid.
British Admiralty for the third time in 1770, carried this out.\textsuperscript{14} Under his leadership the Royal Navy would go to war against their North American colonies. His strategy during this conflict was greatly affected by tensions that existed between Lord North, Lord George (Secretary of State for the Colonies), and himself.\textsuperscript{15} Nonetheless, from the time that the conflict broke out in British North America the necessity for naval involvement was clear.\textsuperscript{16} The role that the Royal Navy would play in the American Revolution faced more than ideological road blocks. This was in part caused by the disarmament of the Royal Navy during peace time. Once war broke out, the Navy had to be essentially rebuilt and staffed.\textsuperscript{17} At this particular time the Royal Navy had a problem with manning its ships both with seamen and officers.\textsuperscript{18}

Due to these difficulties, the Royal Navy initially served primarily as a means to transport troops during the conflict with the colonies. However, after the landing of troops in Boston failed to solve the problem in 1775, a more direct approach was decided upon.\textsuperscript{19} The next phase was for Vice Admiral Lord Howe and Major General Sir William Howe to launch an amphibious attack that involved landing the army on Long Island, then crossing Manhattan and finally routing the rebel army.\textsuperscript{20} By 1776, as the war intensified, “the Navy and Victualling Boards had taken up over 146,000 tons of transports, 46,000 tons more than the maximum of the previous war.”\textsuperscript{21} Although the Royal Navy made a significant commitment to the conflict in the mainland colonies, this

\begin{footnotesize}
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\begin{itemize}
  \item[14] Ibid, 329 and 390.
  \item[15] Ibid, 331.
  \item[16] Ibid.
  \item[17] Ibid, 381.
  \item[18] Ibid.
  \item[19] Ibid, 333.
  \item[20] Ibid.
  \item[21] Ibid, 333.
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conflict was not its main focus. Instead Great Britain was focused on the looming war with France and Spain, which posed a much more direct threat to their safety, and thus required more direct attention from the British navy.\textsuperscript{22}

One of the reasons that the Royal Navy became as involved as it did in the North American conflict were the attacks by American privateers on British vessels. After Captain John Manley’s American squadron proved to be enough to contend with the dispersed Royal Navy in May 1777, it became clear that a greater naval presence was needed there because a small American force was able to vanquish ships of the Royal Navy.\textsuperscript{23} However, a large portion would not be stationed in the colonies until after the Battle of Saratoga in 1777, at which point it became clear that the French were going to get involved. The imminent involvement of the French navy in the conflict forced Lord Sandwich to commit more of the Royal Navy to the North American conflict than the conflicts that were emerging in Europe.\textsuperscript{24} The British navy may not have been heavily involved in the American conflict at the onset, but it did force the colonists to take to the sea to combat the ships that were stationed there, especially in response to the blockade against Boston.\textsuperscript{25}

The Royal Navy also aided the success of the Continental Navy because of the changes that it underwent at the time of the Revolutionary conflict. Following the Seven Years War, the conflict between the European powers turned to the interior of the continent, meaning that Britain had to rely more upon her land troops than her navy. This

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid, 335-336.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid, 334.
shift in focus caused Great Britain to appear vulnerable as a naval force. Thus, when the American Revolution broke out Britain had to rebuild her navy. In addition they were faced with the problem of operating far from home. In addition, the administration of Lord North was very disorganized in its war operations. Each of these factors combined to create an atmosphere that was perfect for the colonists to develop their own naval force. A disadvantaged Royal Navy allowed the colonists to feel confident in taking the war to the sea, as they saw that the opportunity existed for them to be successful. Furthermore, once war broke out between France and Britain the navy was divided, between European and American theaters, giving the colonists and their allies an even greater advantage.

In the second half of the eighteenth century the Royal Navy had to overcome growing pains, “From 109 seagoing ships in 1690, the fleet had increased by 1765 to 266.” This setback in ship building because there wasn’t enough money to expand and modernize the shipyards to meet the growing demand. In addition, the navy was in need of new ships because many of the older ships were beginning to fall apart. The ability of the naval yards to expand and increase production relied on the government’s approval. This was only one of the ways in which the government maintained firm control over the navy and its operation. Whoever was lord of the admiralty made vital decisions concerning the navy. For example, when Lord Sandwich became lord of the admiralty he discontinued the program established by Egmont to improve the shipyards.

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26 Ibid, 328-329.
27 Ibid, 333.
28 Ibid, 335.
29 Ibid, 368.
31 Ibid.
However, a few years later when finances improved he reinstated his program. The fact that the government had so much control over the navy that it could change a critical part of the Royal Navy’s development, demonstrated how centralized it was. This was in direct contrast to the Continental Navy and other naval operations within the colonies that relied more on each captain’s individual decisions than those that were made by the Continental Congress.

As a whole the Royal Navy at the end of the eighteenth century was still a powerful force, but not as powerful as it was prior to the Seven Years War. This slight decline demonstrated to the world and to the colonies that if there was a time to take on the Royal Navy, this was it. In addition, the British government was more concerned with maintaining their financial balance than making improvements to shipyards that were necessary for creating an even stronger force. This demonstrated that the British Navy was at a crossroads, and that the government alone determined the path which it would take. This not only opened the door for the colonists to effectively take on the British navy, but also demonstrated how different the Continental and Royal Navy were in their administration. The colonists did not want their government, or the organization of their navy, to follow the very centralized British tradition. The Royal Navy had long been a symbol of tyranny and power abuse, which the colonists wanted to avoid. Instead, the revolutionary colonies succeeded in creating a decentralized, flexible navy.32

32 Ibid, 379.
Chapter Two: The Battle of Machias

Barely a month after the opening shots of the American Revolution were fired at Lexington and Concord, the first naval action of the war occurred in Machias, Maine. The battle broke out after Ichabod Jones, a merchant from Boston and a loyalist, attempted to get supplies from Machias. The group of Patriot colonists in the town took action to ensure that none of their lumber would fall into British hands. They attacked the British ship, the *Margaretta*, and Jones’s two sloops, the *Unity* and the *Polly*. Although this naval battle was very brief it was the first naval battle of the war, and demonstrated the decentralized and flexible spirit of the colonies in this early phase.

In William Fowler’s *Rebels Under Sail* and in Nathan Miller’s *Sea of Glory*, the Battle of Machias is presented as laying the foundation for the formation of the Continental Navy. Both Fowler and Miller spend their few pages on Machias discussing what happened just prior to and during the battle. The main difference between these two accounts was that Fowler focused on constructing his own account of the battle, which focused heavily on the people that were involved. The description of the battle itself was brief, but effectively informed the reader of what transpired. Miller also informed the reader of what happened during the battle and just after, but he spent more time on the injuries and damages that were done during the battle. For example, Miller discussed how the school was transformed into a hospital to care for the wounded, a fact that was completely absent from Fowler’s. In addition, Miller incorporated more direct quotes

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from primary sources, while Fowler just presented the information. As a pair, these texts presented a comprehensive view of the Battle of Machias. Fowler gave a clear picture of the battle, while Miller emphasized the physical costs of the battle. While each text took a slightly different approach to the battle they each came to the same conclusion that the Battle of Machias, to quote William Fowler, “had done much to strengthen the cause of those in the Massachusetts Provincial Congress who were urging a naval armament.”

Miller and Fowler may have approached the Battle of Machias in very similar ways, but another view was presented in the journal *The Aldine*, in an article titled “The Lexington of the Sea.” This article was published in 1876, during the country’s centennial. Thus, the article captured the fervor for the Revolution that was presented at this time. This article focused on James Fenimore Cooper’s account of the battle in *The History of the Navy of the United States of America, volume One*. It was Cooper who first made the comparison between the Battle of Lexington and the Battle of Machias, Lexington being the first battle on land and Machias the first battle at sea. Since Cooper provided this designation, a large part of this brief article quoted directly from Cooper’s work. While it was interesting to read about Cooper’s view of the battle, it did not lend itself to any deeper understanding. The most useful part of this article was the opening when the author discussed the problems that the colonies faced in establishing a naval force. The author wrote that the colonies struggled to have a naval force because it

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40 Ibid.
was harder to create or maintain than an army because vessels were required, and because it was unlikely that any naval attacks on Great Britain would be successful.41

The colonists at Machias proved, though, that it was possible for a small force of colonists to take on a British ship and be successful. It began when Captain Ichabod Jones, a loyalist merchant out of Boston, arrived in Machias with his two ships the Unity and the Polly in May 1775.42 There was nothing unusual about this encounter as Jones often traded with the residents of the town, serving the dual purpose of bringing them provisions, and trading with them for his own profit.43 Jones was such a frequent visitor to Machias that he even owned an estate there.44 He knew the people well, and thus was well aware that a section of the Machias population would not respond favorably to his presence.45

The concern that the Patriot colonists of Machias would do something to the loyalist Jones and his ship was so great that Vice Admiral Samuel Graves was informed, “Whereas his Excellency the Governor hath represented to me that some of the Inhabitants of the Eastern parts of this Province have threatened to intercept and destroy the Vessels of Mr. Ichabod Jones […]”46 Graves acknowledged the importance of this fear, but he did not cancel Jones’ trip to Machias, where he was getting lumber for the Royal Navy. In order to give Jones a better chance of being successful, Graves arranged

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41 Ibid, 67-68.
42 “James Lyons, Chairman of Machias Committee,” volume 1, 676.
43 Fowler, Rebels Under Sail, 17.
44 “Petition of Benjamin Foster and Jeremiah O’Brian to the Massachusetts General Court,” reprinted in Naval Documents of the American Revolution, 1774-1775, Volume 1, comp. William Bell Clark, (United States Naval Department, 1964) 924.
45 “Vice Admiral Samuel Graves to Midshipman James Moore, Commanding his Majesty’s Armed Schooner Margaretta,” reprinted in Naval Documents of the American Revolution, Volume 1, 1774-1775 comp. William Bell Clark (United States Naval Department, 1964), 537.
46 Ibid.
for an armed schooner, the Margaretta, captained by James Moore, to be an escort.⁴⁷ Although he had good intentions in providing an armed escort, the presence of the schooner made the colonists at Machias more suspicious of Jones’s and his intentions.

Once arriving in Machias, Jones did his best to avoid conflict with the colonists. He did not want his trip there to spark violence between Patriots and Loyalists, he wanted to trade. In order to avoid conflict Jones requested that colonists sign a petition stating that they approved of trading with him.⁴⁸ When first presented with this petition a majority of the colonists signed it. However, once they learned that he intended to trade with the British, according to James Lyons, some colonists regretted that they signed the petition. The colonists claimed they were unaware of Jones’ true intentions when they signed this petition.⁴⁹ Although it was likely that some were unaware of Jones’s intentions, it was doubtful that even a majority of those who signed the petition were ignorant of his loyalties. In an article published on August 14, 1775, in the Newport Mercury, referred to Jones as “that noted friend of government,” which demonstrated that his loyalties to Britain were no secret.⁵⁰ The well-known nature of Jones’s loyalties suggested that Lyons may have overstated the number of colonists that wanted to attack the Margaretta when he wrote to the Massachusetts Committee of Safety.⁵¹

Lyons benefited from making it appear to Massachusetts as if more colonists supported the attack on Jones and the British because it justified their actions at a time when the colonies were just beginning to fight the British. In addition, a positive account

⁴⁷ Ibid.
⁴⁸ “Lyons to Massachusetts Committee of Safety,” Volume 1, 676-677.
⁴⁹ Ibid.
⁵⁰ Newport Mercury, August 14, 1775.
⁵¹ “Lyons to Massachusetts Committee of Safety,” Volume 1, 676-677.
of the battle would earn him more support from the Massachusetts Committee of Safety. However, this was not the case, as the attack on Jones and the Margaretta was carried out by a small number of Patriot colonists. It was unlikely that any of these men had signed the petition that Jones shared with the town, further undermining Lyons’s attempt to justify their actions by stating that the petition was misleading. Thus when the attack did occur, lead by men such as Jeremiah O’Brien, it was not an example of an organized, premeditated attack carried out by the entire town, but rather an assault performed by the small Patriot contingent in Machias who saw an opportunity to weaken the British and took it. The attack began while Captain James Moore and another officer of the Margaretta were onshore in Machias at the Meeting House. At this time the Patriots of Machias made their first attack on the British naval officers in their midst. Had they been successful here, the mob may have stopped with the attack at the Meeting House, but Moore and the other officer managed to escape in an offshore schooner, and thus the fight between the H.M.S. Margaretta and the colonists of Machias took to the sea.

The colonists of Machias involved in the attack began by plundering one of Jones’ sloops that was anchored at the falls (see figure 1). Upon catching up to the schooner that carried Jones and Moore, the colonists demanded that it surrender to the Sons of Liberty. The main reason that the colonists wanted to capture the ship was so that they could take Jones prisoner because they blamed him, as a merchant, for the

52 “Journal of Massachusetts Provincial Congress,” Volume 1, 750.
55 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
problems that they had, such as increased taxes.\textsuperscript{57} Once again though, the matter was not to be settled so briefly. Moore refused to surrender to these rogue Patriot colonists, and for the time being the colonists actually allowed Moore and Jones’s to depart. The conflict resumed later that evening.\textsuperscript{58}

**Figure 1:**

The fighting resumed at this time, because Captain Moore began to move the *Margaretta* down river so that it was closer to Jones’s sloops. In order to prevent this, the colonists ran Moore and the *Margaretta* aground. They demanded that he “strike to the Sons of Liberty, threatening with Death if he resisted […].”\textsuperscript{60} This time Moore’s refusal was not allowed to go unpublished. The Patriot colonists exchanged fire with the *Margaretta*. The attack did not last long, and tipped off small bouts of fighting, which continued throughout the night.\textsuperscript{61} The fighting during the night was the result of attempts made by the Patriot colonists to board the *Margaretta*. The British sailors refused to let

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{58} “Godfrey’s Report on the action at Machias,” *Volume I*, 655.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid.
the colonists take advantage of them so easily, and fighting lasted for the remainder of the night. In order to avoid further attack, the *Margaretta* dropped down stream with the assistance of a local sloop commanded by Captain Toby (see figure 2).

**Figure 2:**

Jones and Moore attempted to complete their escape the next dawn by heading into the Bay of Fundy, once again with the assistance of Captain Toby. By this time the Patriot colonists were fired up and were looking for a fight. Despite the Sons of Liberty being in the minority at Machias, they persisted in their attack even as the British made their final attempt to leave peacefully. When captains Jeremiah O’Brien and Benjamin Foster, and the twenty to forty men who followed them, decided to pursue the British, they were not acting in the interest of the community, but rather in the interest of the local chapter of the Sons of Liberty. Nonetheless, these two men were able to raise a force that took advantage of a lone Royal Navy schooner, which gave the colonists an

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63 “Lyons to Massachusetts Committee of Safety,” *Volume 1*, 676-677.
65 Ibid.
opportunity to overpower the British at sea. In order to chase down Jones and Moore, O’Brien and his outfit of forty men used one of Jones’s captured merchant sloops to chase the *Margaretta.* In its current state Jones’s sloop did not stand a chance against an armed schooner of the Royal Navy; it would have been quickly destroyed if the *Margaretta* fired any broadsides. This, however, did not deter O’Brien and his troops who built breastworks on the former merchant sloop as they pursued the *Margaretta* and Jones.

Once O’Brien and his crew caught up with Jones the two ships began an exchange of fire in the bay (see figure 3). In the course of this fighting the Patriots mortally wounded Captain James Moore, who later died at the Jones’ second home in Machias. Other than Captain Moore, the British saw only five men wounded. The colonists, however, had six wounded men, one of whom later died, but during the battle, they like the British suffered only one casualty. Although the results of the battle were evenly matched on both sides, the colonists succeeded in taking a number of the British men captive, including Captain Jones himself. In addition the colonists captured Jones’s other sloop, the *Margaretta,* and the cargo that these ships held. This included “four double fortified [sic] three pounders, & fourteen swivels, and a number of small arms [and] a very small quantity of ammunition.” The plunder that the colonists at Machias seized as a result of this early battle was where their true victory against the British lay.

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67 Ibid.
68 Ibid.
69 Ibid.
70 “Nathaniel Godfrey’s report on Battle of Machias,” *Volume 1,* 655.
71 “Lyons to Massachusetts Committee of Safety,” *Volume 1,* 676-677.
72 “Nathaniel Godfrey’s report on Battle of Machias,” *Volume 1,* 655.
73 “Nathaniel Godfrey’s report on Battle of Machias,” *Volume 1,* 655.
This early victory would not have occurred had it not been for the actions of a few men acting on their intuitions. While the idea may have existed before the battle actually occurred, the actions that the colonists actually took were the result of the opportunities that presented themselves at the time of the battle and the leadership of Captain O’Brian. For example, had Captain Moore and his other officer not been at the Meeting House the colonists would not have had the opportunity to plunder one of Jones’s ships, which would later help them in catching up to the Margaretta. In an organized fight with a less independent leader the colonists would never have been able to react as quickly to the unique opportunities that presented themselves. This battle, which started the naval war of the American Revolution, set the stage for a war of unorganized battles and independent leaders that took advantage of opportunities for victory as they came, instead of developing a carefully planned strategy.

Although this independent action taken by Jeremiah O’Brien and the colonists at Machias led to a Patriot victory off of the Maine coast, it also created problems that the colonists were not prepared to deal with. For example, deciding what to do with the prisoners they took. Determining what to do with the prisoners taken during this engagement was no small feat as many men had been taken. The men taken prisoner included, “Capt. Knight. Lieut. Spry, five Midshipmen and Warrant Officers, together with 17 privates […]”  

James Lyons, chair of the Machias Committee of Safety, suggested that they send the prisoners to Pownalborough, on the Kennebec River, in a letter he sent to the Massachusetts Provincial Congress. This Congress decided during their meeting on July 13, 1775 to appoint an officer from the Watertown militia and a guard of no more than eight men, to convey the prisoners from Machias to Worcester. Once they arrived in Worcester the men were to be imprisoned indefinitely. Only two of the prisoners had a different fate. Jedediah Preble and Enoch Freeman, esquires, were required to build whaleboats as a public service instead of being imprisoned. 

It was likely that Preble and Freeman were given this lighter sentence because they were skilled shipwrights or because they played little to no role in the fighting that occurred. Ichabod Jones also had a different experience as a prisoner, because of the key role that the colonists attributed to him. Instead of being sent directly to Worcester he

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75 Story and Humphrey’s Pennsylvania Mercury and Universal Advertiser, August 14, 1775.
76 “Lyons to Massachusetts Committee of Safety,” Volume 1, 676-677.
78 “Massachusetts Spy, July 19, 1775” Naval Documents of the American Revolution, Volume 1 1774-1775, comp. William Bell Clark, (United States Naval Department, 1964), 926.
79 “Provincial Congress of Massachusetts,” volume 1, 877-878.
was detained in Machias. On July 28, 1775 the Massachusetts House of Representatives received a petition from Jones’s wife, Apphia, requesting that her husband, still in Machias, be allowed to appear before the Massachusetts General Court. The result of Apphia Jones’ request was that her husband was moved to the prison in Worcester with the other men that were captured at Machias. However, upon his arrival Jones was kept in solitary confinement, until the Massachusetts Council ordered that he be allowed to interact with the other prisoners. This harsh punishment demonstrated that to the Patriots he was a traitor and a threat. While this judgment was overly harsh it demonstrated that the Patriot colonists at Machias were waiting for the opportunity to go after the British. The arrival of Ichabod Jones with an armed escort provided this opportunity.

Dealing with the British prisoners taken at Machias was only one of the tasks that had to be completed after the battle occurred, for the Massachusetts Provincial Congress created a special committee to examine what had occurred at Machias. They looked at how similar problems should be dealt with, and whether or not naval protection should be provided for the colony. Thus, when the Massachusetts Provincial Congress received a request from Machias on July 7, 1775 requesting an armed sloop, it went to this committee. Machias was given permission to outfit this sloop, and Massachusetts

81 Ibid.
would provide a captain for it. 85 An entry in the journal of the Massachusetts House of Representatives on July 28, 1775, recommended that an additional force be sent to Machias to protect the town’s sheep and cattle from British plunder. 86 By August 18, 1775 Machias had also been approved to have a small troop and to receive supplies from Massachusetts to outfit it. Each of these measures was taken because the residents of Machias feared that the British would seek vengeance for the Patriot victory. 87

Although there was a great deal of concern about the safety of Machias after this battle, fear was not the only sentiment present. After their victory, there was an outburst of patriotic sentiment among the colonists in the town. This patriotism was so strong that it even gained the notice of George Washington. In a letter to the General Court of Massachusetts Bay he stated, “I cannot but Applaud their Spirit and Zeal.” 88 This same “Spirit and Zeal” which motivated the Patriot colonists in Machias to attack the Margaretta made them want to invade Nova Scotia, to further bring the war to the British. Washington, as much as he appreciated their desire to fight, condemned this notion, saying that it was foolish and that Nova Scotia had done nothing to provoke an attack from the colonies. 89

The Battle of Machias both demonstrated and furthered the independent spirit of some of the residents of the town. Men such as Jeremiah O’Brien and Benjamin Foster took action when they saw it as profitable, not when they received orders from a captain

85 Ibid.
86 “Journal of the Massachusetts House of Representatives,” Volume 1, 996.
87 “Petition of Benjamin Foster and Jeremiah O’Brien to the Massachusetts General Court,” Volume 1, 925.
89 “George Washington to a Committee of the General Court of Massachusetts Bay [extract],” Naval Documents of the American Revolution, Volume 1, comp. William Bell Clark, (United States Naval Department, 1964) 1114.
90 “Washington to General Court of Massachusetts Bay,” Volume 1, 1114.
of the militia, or when they were left with no choice but to fight back. The British did not attack the colonists at Machias, the colonists attacked an armed British schooner and two merchant sloops that belonged to an American merchant who was a loyalist. These colonists took advantage of their strengths, such as capturing one of Jones’s fast sailing sloops early on, to overwhelm the small British force at this small port. There was no plan ahead of time for this battle, as can be seen with the different phases it went through, such as firing on the British throughout the night and pursuing them to the Bay of Fundy, because the actions of the British here could not have been predicted ahead of time. In addition, because of the location of Machias on the periphery of the United Colonies’ made it easier for the colonists to act on their own, given their distance from the central government. This allowed them to act without fear of repercussions from the Massachusetts government of Continental Congress for their actions. Had Machias been more centrally located the colonists may have been stopped or punished for acting against the majority in order to attack the British.

The Battle of Machias demonstrated how flexible, unorganized battles and naval forces could be effective if they had an independent leader, but it also demonstrated some of the problems that came from these types of actions. For one, the colonists at Machias did not have a plan for what to do with the prisoners and had to turn to Massachusetts for advice. They also had not considered until after the battle that retaliation was a possibility. In addition to the lack of forethought, these early battles led by strong willed independent men often ignored the opinion of the majority. Despite the shortcomings

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90 “Nathaniel Godfrey’s report on Battle of Machias,” volume 1, 655.
that came with a decentralized, independent force, the Battle at Machias did help to further naval operations in the war and the efforts to create a Continental naval force.
Chapter Three: The Formation of the Continental Navy

91 “A Revolutionary War Painting Depicting the Continental Navy Frigate the Confederacy,”
The formation of a national naval force was a laborious process for the colonists at the onset of the Revolutionary conflict. It was met with both great resistance, and some very strong support. Much of the support came from John Adams, who was cited as the father of the Continental Navy. The hesitation to create a navy did not stem from lack of experience, but from a hesitation to commit to the conflict with Great Britain. Although the Continental Navy was officially created in 1775, not even a year after the debates began, its development would last until the very end of the war. Ultimately, this naval force laid the foundation for the modern American Navy, but the Continental Navy itself did not survive the Revolutionary period.

As in Britain, the sea played an important role in the lives of North American colonists. For John Adams, the prevalence of the sea in American life was one of the reasons he strongly supported an American naval force. In his autobiography Adams stated his belief that if American seamen, “were once let loose upon the ocean, they would contribute greatly to the relief of our wants, as well as to the distress of our enemy.” As hostilities arose between the colonies and Great Britain, Adams argued that a naval force had to be created. With a long coast to defend, and an opponent with a strong navy, the necessity for an American naval force seemed clear. This large coast also meant that the colonists had significant maritime experience and were prepared for some action at sea. From 1700 to 1775 the colonies produced more vessels than they had in the past, increasing from just four thousand burden a year to thirty-five thousands tons per year by the end of this period. This demonstrated that the sea, which had always been

important, was playing an even more vital social and economic role as colonial society
developed and had more of their own ships in the water.\textsuperscript{95}

Perhaps as a result of this increase, men in the Continental Congress began to
realize that the colonists were capable of building a naval force to challenge Great
Britain. In a letter to John Adams on July 11, 1775, Josiah Quincy questioned why the
colonies did not have a naval force.\textsuperscript{96} However, due to colonial fears about deepening the
conflict with Great Britain its development was delayed.\textsuperscript{97} Many members of Congress
were hesitant to develop a national naval force because at this early stage in the war
reconciliation with Great Britain still seemed possible. In addition, due to sectional
divisions within the Continental Congress the delegates were unable to act decisively,
especially since Southerners feared that New England would dominate the naval force.\textsuperscript{98}

Although a naval committee had existed since 1774, the first direct action that
Congress took to establish a naval force was to authorize the states to fit out their own
fleets.\textsuperscript{99} This was primarily done after two early sea battles in which American ships
demonstrated that they were capable of holding their own against the British fleet. The
first of these engagements occurred in Buzzards Bay off the coast of Cape Cod between
April and May of 1775. This battle occurred between the Royal Navy and American
smugglers, during which an American ship was captured. As a result of this engagement
the citizens of Dartmouth used their own vessels and not only reclaimed the ship, but also

\textsuperscript{95} Fowler. \textit{Rebels Under Sail}, 4.
\textsuperscript{97} Fowler. \textit{Rebels Under Sail}, 14.
\textsuperscript{98} Miller. \textit{Sea of Glory}, 40.
managed to take fourteen prisoners.\textsuperscript{100} Further steps to establish a naval force would take place after the first official sea battle of the war took place in Machias, Maine.\textsuperscript{101}

Machias suggested that colonists, in certain circumstances, could take on the Royal Navy with their own ships, and, in fact, were able to instill considerable fear into the sailors of those vessels. This mimicked Adams’s earlier view that American seamen would be a useful and fearsome tool in the American fight against Great Britain.\textsuperscript{102} It also demonstrated the ferocity with which the colonists believed in their cause, and their abilities in sailing.\textsuperscript{103} Increasingly after Machias, local ships and their owners throughout the colonies began to take on a quasi-military role. For example, the whaleboats in Boston began to take on British ships that were troublesome to Boston’s commerce.\textsuperscript{104} The armament of these smaller vessels led General George Washington to take another step towards a formal navy. Washington began to construct a fleet of schooners that he refitted and armed.\textsuperscript{105} The purpose of these schooners was simply to interrupt British shipping, not to wage war against British ships. This was a necessary precaution because in the summer and fall of 1775 war had not been officially declared against Great Britain, and thus outright attacks by the United States forces at sea could have potentially worsened a situation that still might have been remedied.\textsuperscript{106}

\textsuperscript{100} Fowler. \textit{Rebels Under Sail}, 17.
\textsuperscript{101} Fowler. \textit{Rebels Under Sail}, 17.
\textsuperscript{104} Fowler. \textit{Rebels Under Sail}, 20.
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid.
The colonies had standing militias prior to the conflict to keep their towns safe, so the creation of a Continental Army was much less of a jump because the foundations and organizations for it had existed long prior to the war. However, because the colonies never had a formal fleet to protect the coast the creation of a navy demonstrated a greater commitment to armed conflict, which they were not ready to make until late fall of 1775. Washington stood by his rag tag fleet despite the problems that he experienced with it, such as officers not following orders and openly seeking conflict with British ships.\textsuperscript{107} This fleet laid a foundation for the Continental navy, and demonstrated that it was needed, as colonists saw more attacks along the coast.

In response to the British attacks along the coast, the Continental Congress realized that some provision needed to be made to ensure the protection of the coastal colonies, especially the harsh reprisals against rebellious New England colonies in this opening phase of the war. However, there was still much debate about whether the nation should establish its own naval force.\textsuperscript{108} On July 18, 1775 it was decided that each colony should be responsible for protecting its coast. This did not authorize a national force, but did authorize each colony to pursue naval action against the British as necessary to protect their shores.\textsuperscript{109} The first of the colonies to establish a state navy was Rhode Island, and by August of 1775 they were commissioning armed ships to guard their shores.\textsuperscript{110} As the states were protecting their own shores the Congress began

working towards the creation of a national navy. One of the first steps taken towards this was the presentation of the Rhode Island Resolutions on October 7, 1775 to the Continental Congress.\textsuperscript{111} This resolution suggested the construction of a full-scale American fleet. However, it was met with ridicule as many congressmen saw a navy as unnecessary and therefore did not understand why Rhode Islanders wanted to spend so much money on one. There was great concern that the new navy would be concentrated in New England, thus giving those colonies an unfair economic advantage over others.\textsuperscript{112} The individuals who wanted to see a navy created were determined to convince the delegates to approve a navy. This was demonstrated in Samuel Ward’s diary entry dated October 3, 1775. He wrote that he had received a request from the Rhode Island assembly that the delegates be persuaded to undertake the construction of a navy.\textsuperscript{113} Constituents wrote their delegates at the Continental Congress, informing them of the desire for a naval force. However, the plea from Rhode Island did not persuade the Congress to create a navy.

In early October, the Continental Congress received two letters from John Barry, which proved to be the final step in convincing Congress to create a naval force, though a small one. These letters stated that two English brigs were heading to Quebec with munitions.\textsuperscript{114} In order to deal with this situation the Continental Congress appointed a three-person committee of John Adams, Silas Deane, and John Langdon to find a

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{112} Fowler. \textit{Rebels Under Sail}, 49.
\item \textsuperscript{113} “Samuel Ward’s Diary,” \textit{Letters of Delegates to Congress: Volume 2, September 1775-December 1775}.
\item \textsuperscript{114} “Pennsylvania Journal, October 11, 1775,” reprinted in \textit{Naval Documents of the American Revolution, 1775, Volume 2}, comp. William Bell Clark, (United States Naval Department, 1966) 408.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
solution.\textsuperscript{115} Within minutes these men proposed authorizing a squadron to intercept the ships en route to Quebec.\textsuperscript{116} However, much like the Rhode Island Resolutions this idea was not met with enthusiasm. Adams acknowledged that many of the Congressmen opposed this plan because, “It was an infant, taking a mad bull by his horns; and what was more profound and remote, it was said it would ruin the character and corrupt the morals of all our seamen.”\textsuperscript{117} In order to combat these concerns, Adams and his committee assured the Congress that the benefits of having a naval force that was able to both supply and protect the Americans outweighed the concerns held by the Congress.\textsuperscript{118} This plan was accepted on Friday October 13, 1775, and the Continental Navy was born.\textsuperscript{119} Another naval committee wanted Congress to authorize ten ships for a navy; however, they only authorized four, which was still double what had originally been requested.\textsuperscript{120}

Now that a navy was agreed upon the work of creating it began. The original committee was enlarged and became the Naval Committee.\textsuperscript{121} Before this navy could take to the seas it needed rules and regulations to dictate how it would operate. This task fell to John Adams, perhaps the greatest proponent for the creation of a navy. As can be seen in Adams’s autobiography he truly believed that a Continental Navy would serve the

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{116} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{117} Adams, “Autobiography,” 7.
  \item \textsuperscript{118} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{120} “Journal of the Continental Congress,” volume 2, 441-442.
\end{itemize}
American purpose not only because it provided the American coast with protection, but also because it gave the American forces a better way to obtain and transport supplies. Adams served on the Naval Committee until 1778, and would continue to support this committee even when he was no longer a member. For him, the development of a navy was of utmost importance, which was demonstrated in his involvement in its creation.

On November 25, 1775, Adams presented the rules and regulations that he had created for the Continental Navy. They contained forty-four articles, which governed everything from punishment for violation of the rules to religious services. The very first article made it clear that Americans feared corrupt officers who were unnecessarily cruel. This article stated that commanders, “are strictly required to shew [sic] in themselves a good example of honor and virtue to their men and officers […].” In addition to the demand that officers behave well, there were also articles which contained limits on the extent of punishment that could be performed. It even made clear the different standards to which officers and seamen were to be held. By outlining these distinctions in the rules of the Continental Navy it ensured that neither party could accuse their commander of unfair treatment.

In addition to placing limits on punishment, such as no punishment could exceed twelve lashes on the back with the cat-o-nine tails, Adams’s rules also protected the

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127 Ibid.
128 Adams, *Regulations of Navy*. 

sailors from being dismissed at the whim of the captain. If the captain wanted to dismiss a crewmember, he could only suspend him or have him confined, he could not force his removal. In order for a crewmember to be removed the captain had to apply for a court martial.\textsuperscript{129} The rules and regulations also contained details for how a court martial was to be carried out. In addition, the captain was required to keep accurate records of any seamen he hired and how much they were to be paid.

This measure ensured that the men would receive fair payment for their service as promised. These rules and regulations did not just protect the crewmen in the physical sense, but also in a moral and spiritual sense. Article two stated that religious services were to be performed on the ship twice a day, with a sermon on Sundays. This was an important aspect of these rules and regulations because one of the major concerns that members of Congress had about the creation of the navy was that the sailors would be immoral.\textsuperscript{130} With this concern assuaged by the presence of frequent religious services, the Continental Congress was free to approve these rules and regulations, which they did on November 28, 1775. These regulations included measures to prevent captains from abusing their power. This was representative of the republican ideals which were evident in the founding documents of the United States of the America, which advocated for equality and limited power. In addition, the navy still clung to the traditional idea of hierarchy because although the captain’s power was limited, they still had more power than any other seaman on the ship. This mix of equality and hierarchy demonstrated that the United Colonies were caught between the traditional, hierarchical world, and the world of equality advocated by Republicans.

\textsuperscript{129} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{130} Adams, “Autobiography,” 7.
Once the Continental Navy was voted into existence, Esek Hopkins was named as its commander in chief.\footnote{Adams, “Autobiography,” 11.} Hopkins was the first choice for many of the delegates to be the commander, but it would take the convincing of his brother, Stephen, to persuade Esek that this was a worthwhile command to accept. Stephen emphasized to his brother that his pay as well as the portion of seized prizes awarded to him would prove quite lucrative.\footnote{Stephen Hopkins to Esek Hopkins, “Letters of Delegates to Congress: Volume 2.”} Stephen’s method to convince Esek highlighted one of the main problems that the Continental Navy would face in getting enough men. Many men preferred to be privateers instead of naval seamen because of its lower risk and of its potential to make more money.\footnote{Edgar S. Maclay, A History of American Privateers (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1899), 113} Although Hopkins had misgivings about accepting the appointment, it was well received throughout the colonies. In a letter to Nicholas Cooke the Rhode Island delegates at the Continental Congress expressed their pleasure at Hopkins’s appointment, “Since our last We have the Honor of two Letters from You. Genl. Hopkins has arrived very well, his accepting the Command of the Fleet gives universal Satisfaction.”\footnote{Rhode Island Delegates to Nicholas Cooke, “Letters of Delegates to Congress: Volume 2.”} With rules and regulations, as well as a commander, the work constructing the ships could begin.

Although the Continental Navy was formally created in October 1775, and the Naval Committee became the Marine Committee in 1776, during the early years of the war naval conduct differed by ship and was controlled by individual captains.\footnote{Fowler, Rebels Under Sail, 65.} From 1775 to 1776 the organization and coordination of this naval force was minimal, and allowed men such as Esek Hopkins to act as they saw necessary, rather than as they were
ordered, much as Jeremiah O’Brien had done at Machias. The Congress acknowledged
the problems that came from having such a decentralized navy, leading the Marine
Committee to be reformed. This time the committee was divided into different
departments that focused on specific regions.\textsuperscript{136} The Marine Committee received a great
deal of criticism, and by 1779 it became the Board of Admiralty.\textsuperscript{137}

\textsuperscript{136} Ibid, 76.
\textsuperscript{137} Ibid, 79-81.
Chapter Four: Battle of Nassau

In early March 1776 the Continental Navy brought the American Revolution to the Bahamas. Here they attacked Fort Nassau and Fort Montagu in New Providence, Bahamas. The attack on Fort Nassau resulted from Captain Esek Hopkins ignoring his orders to clear the coast, and instead sailing to New Providence in order to capture powder that was stored in the two forts on the island. Hopkins’s disregard of his orders demonstrated that the independent spirit, which was prevalent at the Battle of Machias, continued into the next year of the war. Although, this attack was not an official mission for the Continental Navy, it was one of the most important successes for the Continental Navy had during the war. This battle was not a traditional battle between two naval fleets, but instead was an amphibious assault against the town of New Providence. The American success in this battle relied on the independent actions of Captain Hopkins, and the decentralized nature of the Continental Navy, which allowed Hopkins to act in such an independent manner.

The portrayal of the Battle of Nassau in Fowler’s *Rebels Under Sail*, focused on demonstrating that the American victory at Nassau was a demonstration of British weakness. Despite the British presence in New Providence the Americans were able to take Fort Nassau from them with out much of a struggle. “After firing off three twelve-pounders as a symbolic gesture, the defenders of the easternmost fort abandoned their positions to the Americans.”139 Despite British weakness evident in this battle, the American commander; however, Esek Hopkins was not spared. Fowler discussed that if Hopkins had acted in a more direct manner they would have captured more powder,

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which would have greatly benefited the American cause. Fowler’s critiques of both the British and American forces demonstrated that this battle truly represented the weaknesses within the Royal troops because each side had serious weaknesses, but the Americans managed to be victorious. Other than demonstrating the weakness of the British Fowler painted a picture of the battle as it occurred, including the conditions under which the Americans had made their way to New Providence. He also addressed the fact that Esek Hopkins was able to go to the Bahamas only by ignoring orders given to him. In sum, the presentation of the Battle of Nassau in *Rebels Under Sail* highlighted the weakness of the British, while simultaneously painting a clear picture of what transpired during the battle.

In contrast to Fowler, Miller, in *Sea of Glory*, did not address the weaknesses of the British. Instead he gave a detailed description of what actually occurred during the battle. This included not only a listing of the American ships that were present, but the methods by which the raid was carried out, and a specific timeline for the attack on Fort Nassau. Unlike Fowler, Miller saw the quick surrender of the forces at Nassau to the Americans as justifiable, and not a symbol of British weakness. He did, however, still discuss the shortcomings of Esek Hopkins as a commander, namely his delay of action, which cost the Americans a large supply of powder. Miller’s treatment of Nassau focused heavily on the smallpox outbreak that plagued the American forces as they were leaving Nassau to return to the United States. Several ships were set aside as quarantines for the sailors who became ill. This presentation of the battle was most effective because of the very detailed description of what occurred. The rest of the text, particularly the
section on the illness, while interesting, did not really add anything to the understanding of the battle.

A very different approach to this battle was taken in Michael Craton’s *A History of the Bahamas*. This text was very interesting because instead of detailing the battle from the American or British perspective, in this case it was examined from the perspective of the residents of the Bahamas. The focus of this was a simple account of what occurred during the battle, but the focus was not on the British troops who occupied the island, but rather on the American invaders. Like the texts by Fowler and Miller, this text also demonstrated that the Americans easily overpowered the British. This text spent more time looking at the two-week period during which the Americans plundered Nassau. Craton discussed how they entertained themselves at the government palace and consumed great amounts of wine that was either given to them or came from their plunder. This text provided an interesting contrast to the texts of Fowler and Miller because of the different perspective that it gave. Instead of the typical account this text looked at how the Americans and actions were viewed by the people of the island that was attacked.

The attack on Nassau was never supposed to happen. Commodore Esek Hopkins was given orders to clear the coast of the United Colonies, starting in the south and ending in Narragansett Bay. However, Hopkins decided to execute his own plan, which involved the fleet leaving Delaware Bay and sailing to New Providence. Hopkins wanted to go to New Providence because he knew that there was a valuable supply of weapons and powder there, and he wanted to ensure that the Americans took possession of these
Hopkins’s decision to attack New Providence demonstrated that as a leader he was an independent thinker, who, much like Jeremiah O’Brian, looked for the most beneficial opportunities and took advantage of them. Attacking Nassau was thus more beneficial because of the material gain that it would provide the Americans than clearing the American coast. Thus, in early March 1776 the American fleet arrived off the coast of New Providence, which sent waves of concern through the population of the island (figure 1).  

**Figure 1:**

In a letter to Vice Admiral Clark Gayton, New Providence resident, John Brown, captured his concerns about the presence of the American ships off the coast,

> The present distressed and defenceless (sic) State of His Majesty’s Bahama Islands occasioned by the arrival of an Armament fitted out by the American Colonies now in open and declared Rebellion.  

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141 “Extract of a letter from the Captain of Marines, on board the ship Alfred, dated New London, April 10.” *New York Journal.*  
The American fleet, which Brown saw off the coast, contained the *Alfred* (twenty-four guns), the *Columbus* (twenty guns), the *Cabot* (fourteen guns), the *Fly* (eight guns), the *Providence* (twelve guns), the *Andrew Doria* (fourteen guns), the *Hornet* (ten guns), and the *Wasp* (eight guns).\(^{144}\) When these ships first arrived off the coast, though, the residents of New Providence believed that they were Spaniards come to attack the island.\(^{145}\) It was not until the Americans actually landed that it became clear that in fact the invasion was not an act of aggression by Spain, but rather an attack from Britain’s rebelling colonies.\(^{146}\) Despite their misidentification, Nassau was ready for the attack. Once the ships were spotted, Governor Montforte Browne raised the alarm and had the militia assemble.\(^{147}\)

The militia did not deter the Americans in their goal to besiege the two forts located in New Providence. Both Fort Montagu and Fort Nassau contained large supplies of weapons and powder that the Americans were in desperate need of. These supplies were the reason that the American fleet went to New Providence.\(^{148}\) Captain Hopkins had no desire to hurt the population; he simply wanted to make sure that his fleet would be allowed to take the munitions and supplies with them. To avoid unnecessary casualties, Hopkins issued a manifesto, which stated his reasons for the attack, and gave the people warning so that they could get to safety.\(^{149}\)

To the Gentlemen, Freemen, and Inhabitants of the Island of New Providence. The Reasons of my Landing an armed force on the Island is in order to take Possession of the Powder and the Warlike Stores

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144 Miller, *Sea of Glory*, 528.
146 Ibid.
147 “Brown to Vice Admiral Gayton,” *volume 4*, 461.
148 Ibid.
belonging to the Crown, and if I am not Opposed in putting my design in Execution the Persons and the Property of the Inhabitants Shall be Safe, neither shall they be Suffered to be hurt in Case they make no Resistance.\textsuperscript{150}

In addition to the manifesto, the inhabitants of the island were led to believe that the American ships were there at the orders of the Continental Congress. This gave the attack more validity than if it had simply occurred because of Hopkins’s individual decision.\textsuperscript{151} Despite Hopkins’s attempts to keep the residents of New Providence calm, panic ensued as the American ships entered the harbor, and the attack began.\textsuperscript{152}

On March 6, 1776, the American ships entered the New Providence Harbor with the aid of a local pilot.\textsuperscript{153} The assistance of this pilot made the sail into the harbor much easier, and provided Americans the opportunity to launch the most effective attack on Fort Montagu and Fort Nassau.\textsuperscript{154} As the ships entered the harbor, the two forts were armed with local troops. Strategically, the position of these two forts was extremely effective as they were located on either side of the harbor (see figure 2). This should have made their goal, to keep the ships from entering the harbor, simple to accomplish.

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{150} Esek Hopkins, “Copy of the Manifesto sent Onshore at New Providence,” \textit{Letter Book of Esek Hopkins with Introduction and Notes by Alverda S. Beck.} (Providence: Rhode Island Historical Society, 1932), 44.

\textsuperscript{151} “Copy of Manifesto Sent Onshore,” \textit{Letter Book of Esek Hopkins}, 44.

\textsuperscript{152} “Brown to Vice Admiral Gayton,” \textit{Naval Docs} 461.

\textsuperscript{153} “Journal of the Continental Brig \textit{Andrew Doria}, Captain Nicholas Biddle, March 1776,” \textit{volume 4}, 373.

\textsuperscript{154} Ibid.
\end{footnotesize}
However, the forts were undermanned because the island’s troops were divided between the two, and they were not able to do much to deter the arrival of the ships. Governor Browne quickly realized that the division of the troops left the island too vulnerable to the incoming American fleet, and thus made the decision to relocate all of the troops to Fort Nassau, which he labeled as the more defensible position. Not only was Fort Nassau easier to defend, it was also more valuable to the island because it contained most of the powder that was kept on the island.

While this was an excellent strategy, it failed to protect some of the gunpowder and the island. This was in part due to the fact that the residents of New Providence had no desire to fight the Americans, and many abandoned the fort and returned home. This attitude, while it existed prior to the battle, heightened after the Americans successfully took Fort Montagu in the afternoon. By ten p.m. of that day most of the inhabitants and soldiers had left Fort Nassau, so that there were only one hundred men left to defend the fort from the American fleet. Given the conditions present at Fort

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156 “Brown to Vice Admiral Gayton,” volume 4, 461.
157 Ibid.
159 “Brown to Vice Admiral Gayton,” volume 4, 463.
Nassau the Americans should have been able to easily take control, and get all of the gunpowder, which was stored there. However, they were unable to do this because of Captain Hopkins’s hesitance to act. This lack of action has led to his critique both by historians and by men in his own crew. Although the American fleet did capture some of the gunpowder, a majority of it was removed from the island before the Americans started the attack.\textsuperscript{160}

Governor Browne made the decision, during a council of war, to send the island’s valuable powder to St. Augustine, where he hoped that it would be safe from the Americans.\textsuperscript{161} If Hopkins had been more direct in his attack on Nassau, then the governor would not have had time to send the powder to another location, and the Americans would have captured all of it. The American forces desperately needed the powder that could have been captured by Hopkins, far more than any of the weapons that were actually captured at Nassau.\textsuperscript{162} Instead, though, Hopkins chose to sit in the harbor waiting, which gave Governor Browne time to get the powder on board the schooner, St. John, commanded by Lieutenant William Grant, and to send it to St. Augustine.\textsuperscript{163} On his way to St. Augustine, Grant had rebel ships that pursued him, but he did manage to make it safely to St. Augustine. Upon his arrival Grant sent a note to Governor Patrick Tonyn, which told of what happened in New Providence. Grant believed that St. Augustine was next, “And I doubt not but you may expect a Visit from some of the Rebel

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\footnote{Fowler, \textit{Rebels Under Sail}, 97.}
\footnote{“Brown to Vice Admiral Gayton,” \textit{volume 4}, 463.}
\footnote{Fowler, \textit{Rebels Under Sail}, 97.}
\end{footnotes}
Vessels as I imagine they are in pursuit of me."\textsuperscript{164} Grant managed to save most of the powder that was kept at Fort Nassau by taking it to St. Augustine, but he was unable to save all of it.\textsuperscript{165}

The Americans were able to capture twenty-four casks of power from Fort Nassau.\textsuperscript{166} While this amount of powder aided the Americans, it hardly compared with the other stores that they managed to take during their siege of New Providence. From Fort Montagu the Americans took, “17 cannon, from 9 to 36 pounders, 1240 round shot, 121 shells, 81 iron trucks for carriages, 22 copper hoops, 1 worm, 2 copper powder measures, 1 ladle. Some old iron, copper, and lead.”\textsuperscript{167} Although this was a sizeable haul, the prizes taken from Fort Nassau more than doubled these in number. From Fort Nassau the Americans took seventy-one cannon, five thousand three hundred thirty-seven shells, nine thousand eight hundred thirty-one round shot, four hundred seven copper hoops, eight hundred sixteen fuses, and twenty-four casks of powder.\textsuperscript{168} This was only a small portion of what the American fleet was able to capture from the fort. In addition they took copper ladles, flint rope, and some other provisions.\textsuperscript{169} The American force spent two weeks in New Providence loading the supplies into their ships and enjoying the wine that they took and were given.\textsuperscript{170} No matter how many provisions they were able to take though, the American fleet had missed the bulk of the gunpowder because of Hopkins’s inaction. The disgruntled nature of the Americans was captured in the account

\textsuperscript{165} Fowler, \textit{Rebels Under Sail}, 97.
\textsuperscript{166} “Inventory of Stores taken Forts Montague and Nassau,” \textit{Virginia Gazette}, April 17, 1776.
\textsuperscript{167} “Inventory of Stores taken at Fort Montague,” \textit{Virginia Gazette}.
\textsuperscript{168} “Inventory of Stores taken at Fort Nassau,” \textit{Virginia Gazette}.
\textsuperscript{169} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{170} Michael Craton, \textit{A History of the Bahamas}, (London: Collins, 1932),
of the battle that John Paul Jones sent to the king of France.\textsuperscript{171} In this journal Jones was very critical of how Hopkins handled the situation, even stating that he could have done a better job. Despite his criticism Jones did not fail to highlight that the attack on Nassau was a success.\textsuperscript{172}

Despite Hokins’s shortcomings that as a captain, he was representative of the form that the Navy took in the early years of the war. Although he was given orders to clear the American coast, Hopkins chose to ignore these orders so that he could take advantage of a more valuable opportunity: attacking and raiding the forts of New Providence.\textsuperscript{173} He made the decision to not listen to orders and was able to carry out his plan because his crew also preferred an attack that promised to bring them prizes. These actions demonstrated that although there were hierarchies in place to govern the Continental Navy and its captains, they were not strong enough to actually maintain order. Had the Marine Committee been strong enough to regulate the actions of its captains, Hopkins would never have been able to lead his attack on Nassau.

Although the attack on New Providence was in direct violation of Hopkins’s orders it was one of the naval fleets’ most successful missions because of the amount of munitions and provisions that were captured there. The extent of this success demonstrated that at times the independent, decentralized nature of the Continental Navy was beneficial because it allowed captains to make the most of the opportunities that they saw as vital to the Revolutionary cause. In addition, it demonstrated, like Machias, that the further these independent actions occurred from the central government the better

\textsuperscript{171} “Journal Prepared for the King of France by John Paul Jones,” reprinted in \textit{Naval Documents of the American Revolution, volume 4}, comp. William Bell Clark, (United States Naval Department, 1969) 133.
\textsuperscript{172} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{173} Fowler, \textit{Rebels Under Sail}, 97.
chance of success they had in carrying out their independent plans. Although New Providence was a populous island, it was far from the colonies. This allowed Hopkins to carry out an unsolicited attack, and not have the government find out until it was too late. Had New Providence been closer to Philadelphia the Continental Congress could have stepped in, and stopped the attack. This would have denied what was considered to be a very important victory for the American fleet.

The American fleet was not alone in recognizing the importance of this battle. In his letter to Vice Admiral Molyneux Shuldham on March 8, 1776, Lieutenant William Grant recorded his reaction to the attack, which demonstrated that the American victory was not taken lightly. Grant was so enraged by the attack that he spoke of the Royal Navy taking vengeance on the Americans, “And I am Positive the whole Rebel Fleet and Armament will fall a sacrifice if attacked.” 174 Grant’s bravado in regard to the Royal Navy’s ability to defeat the Americans made it clear that he still felt as though the British were superior. 175 Given the ease with which the Americans took Nassau, however, the British seemed weak, while the Americans seemed strong and sure of their abilities. Lieutenant Grant was not the only one that wanted to see the Americans crushed. In his letter to Vice Admiral Gayton, John Brown expressed his desire that the British Navy attack the American fleet, and save the British colonists in the Caribbean from further American attack. 176 Brown’s letter acknowledged the strength of the American fleet because he felt as though it was a realistic possibility that they would attack again, which was why he wrote to Gayton in the first place. Brown’s letter also made it clear that he

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175 Ibid.
still believed in the strength of the Royal Navy.\textsuperscript{177} This letter demonstrated that although the Continental Navy was disorganized and decentralized in the early years of the war, it was still a strong force.

Brown’s request for aid from the Royal Navy did not fall on deaf ears. On March 14, 1776 a council was held on board the \textit{Scarborough} to discuss the possibility of the Royal Navy providing New Providence with protection.\textsuperscript{178} This once again demonstrated the strength of the American Navy, as shown through the Battle of Nassau, because as the Royal Navy posed a legitimate concern to the residents of Machias after the battle there, so the American Navy was seen as a real threat to the British admiralty and the residents of New Providence. Despite their clear concerns, the men at this council did not reach a conclusion about giving aid to New Providence. They decided to submit a request for assistance to Sir Peter Parker, who was supposed to have a large force with him at Cape Fear.\textsuperscript{179} Their hope was that Sir Parker would send this force to the Caribbean to assist New Providence and the surrounding islands.\textsuperscript{180} The one decision that the council did reach was in regard to the American fleet. They decided that it was detrimental for them to leave the port of Savannah in order to pursue the Americans because it would leave the harbor vulnerable.\textsuperscript{181}

On their way back to the United Colonies, Hopkins’s fleet suffered a run in with the H.M.S. \textit{Glasgow} off of Block Island. There was a brief exchange of fire, during which the \textit{Glasgow} received a broadside from two of the American vessels. This fire

\textsuperscript{177} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{178} “Minutes of a Council Held on Board His Majesty’s Ship \textit{Scarborough}, Savannah River in Georgia this 14\textsuperscript{th} March, 1776,” reprinted in \textit{Naval Documents of the American Revolution, volume 4}, comp. William Bell Clark, (United States Naval Department, 1969) 343-344.
\textsuperscript{179} Ibid, 344.
\textsuperscript{180} “Minutes of a Council on the \textit{Scarborough},” volume 4, 344.
\textsuperscript{181} Ibid.
greatly weakened the *Glasgow*, which caused her to run from the fight.\textsuperscript{182} The American fleet did not just vanquish the *Glasgow*, but also managed to capture a brig and three smaller ships that had accompanied the *Glasgow*.\textsuperscript{183} After the engagement with the American fleet the *Glasgow* returned to its harbor a broken ship, “…under all the sail she could set, yelping from the mouths of her cannon (like a broken leg’d dog) in token of her being sadly wounded.”\textsuperscript{184} The damage that just two Continental Navy ships did to the *Glasgow* further demonstrated the strength of this new navy. This victory was made even more impressive because Hopkins’s force was greatly weakened by a small pox outbreak that was running through the fleet. This outbreak was so bad that the *Andrew Doria*, where all the men had been vaccinated, was turned into a hospital ship.\textsuperscript{185} Hopkins force was so greatly reduced that upon reaching American shores a letter was sent by Gurdon Saltonstall on his behalf to General Washington requesting that one hundred fifty to two hundred men in Washington’s troops be enlisted as seamen.\textsuperscript{186}

This correspondence demonstrated that the army and the navy, while separate entities, were connected with each other, and that often their forces were drawn from the same pool. This connection aided the naval captains in maintaining their independence because instead of being forced to turn to the Marine Committee when they were in need of something they could instead turn to the Continental Army. Thus, the power that the

\textsuperscript{182} “Nathaniel Shaw, Jr. to Joseph Trumbull,” reprinted in *Naval Documents of the American Revolution, volume 4*, comp. William Bell Clark, (United States Naval Department, 1969) 697.

\textsuperscript{183} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{185} “Journal of the Continental Brig *Andrew Doria*, Captain Nicholas Biddle,” and “List of the People on Board the *Andrew Doria* from February 1776,” reprinted in *Naval Documents of the American Revolution, volume 4*, comp. William Bell Clark, (United States Naval Department, 1969) 712-715.

\textsuperscript{186} “Gurdon Saltonstall to George Washington,” reprinted in *Naval Documents of the American Revolution, volume 4*, comp. William Bell Clark, (United States Naval Department, 1969) 710.
Marine Committee had over the Continental Navy was weakened, which allowed the
captains to act on their own desires and opportunities, instead of following commands.
The lack of control that the Marine Committee had over the Continental Navy, and the
interconnectedness between the navy and the army, played a major role in the Battle of
Nassau, and continued to play an important role in other battles during the first years of
the war.
Chapter Five: The Battle of Valcour

187 “Valcour Island Map 1776: Overview.”
Although it was a major defeat for American naval forces, the Battle of Valcour on Lake Champlain in October 1776 was a key battle for American sailors. It pitted Benedict Arnold’s forces against a much stronger Royal Navy and demonstrated to the world that Americans, whether they were trained seamen or not, were able to put up a good fight. It also demonstrated the independent and decentralized nature of the Continental Navy in the early years of the war because Arnold, who was not an officer in the Navy, was able to decide that an American fleet should take on the British fleet on Lake Champlain. Arnold was so sure that this was the correct course to take that he and his men built nearly their entire fleet in the forests surrounding Lake Champlain so that they could directly face the British fleet. This battle established the American and British holdings in upstate New York, and laid the foundation for the American victory at Fort Ticonderoga. It did more than just that though; it demonstrated that in October 1776, a year after its creation, the Continental Navy maintained its decentralized nature, which was so prevalent in the battles waged at sea in 1775 and the early months of 1776.

For Fowler, the most important aspect of the Battle of Valcour was that it positioned the Americans for their victory at Saratoga. His discussion begins with the American decision to build a fleet for Lake Champlain. Fowler praised Arnold for the energy and dedication that he put into the project of building gondolas and galleys to assist the few ships the Americans already had on Lake Champlain. He stated that Arnold got involved in everything because he wanted to ensure that it was done right. In
Rebels Under Sail, Fowler stated that Carleton, the British commander, felt the need to establish a fleet on the lake after Arnold began constructing his fleet. This decision was caused by Arnold’s efforts, but it was also something that Carleton had wanted from the onset, because he recognized the importance of Champlain. Unfortunately for Carleton though, it took a very long time for him to get a fleet of any size or power to Champlain, because the ships had to be carried over a land portage to get them around the rapids on the Richelieu. According to Fowler this delay, which also delayed the battle on Lake Champlain, was the reason that the British army and Royal Navy did not continue their assault against the Americans. This delay allowed the Americans to strengthen their forces at Ticonderoga over the next year, which would allow the Americans to be better prepared for the Battle of Saratoga in October 1777.

In Sea of Glory, Miller took a different approach from Fowler. Instead of examining how this battle set the colonists up for their important victory at Saratoga, which was considered to be a major turning point of the war, Miller focused on the actual construction of the two fleets. Miller began by discussing Arnold’s fleet, which was constructed in the forests surrounding Lake Champlain. He stated that Arnold was credited with the design of the fleet, and with being the impetus, which started its construction. Miller thus gave Arnold a much more active role in the construction of the fleet from the onset than Fowler did. In addition, Miller like Fowler, examined the difficulties that Arnold faced in getting an experienced crew to man his new fleet, and credited the construction of the American fleet as being the reason behind Carleton’s work to construct a British fleet for Lake Champlain. Miller also spent more time discussing the technological advancements that were suggested by Lieutenant John
Schanck to Carleton to make the portage of the ships easier. Miller closed his chapter by creating a romanticized picture of Arnold and the battle that ensued on Lake Champlain. The only mention of Saratoga in Miller’s work comes in the very last paragraph of his chapter on Valcour, where he quotes another historian, Alfred Thayer Mahan, who stated, like Fowler, that the battle on Lake Champlain was crucial to the American victory at Saratoga.

Although Miller and Fowler each took a different approach to the Battle of Valcour, they came to the same conclusion that it laid the foundation for the American victory at Saratoga a year later. Paul Nelson, however, in his article for *New York History*, titled, “Guy Carleton versus Benedict Arnold: The Campaign of 1776 in Canada and on Lake Champlain,” took a very different approach. Unlike Miller and Fowler who were in agreement with Mahan about the role that Valcour played in the victory at Saratoga, Nelson refused to accept this as the main reason for the outcome. Nelson instead chose to focus on both the British and American commanders who played a vital role in the Battle of Valcour. He spent much of his article looking at the weaknesses of Carleton, stating that it was Carleton’s inaction that allowed for the delay to occur just prior to the battle, and that it had nothing to do with Arnold’s plans. Nelson was very critical of Carleton, but Arnold and Gates did not escape his criticisms. Instead forward thinking leaders, he presented them as responding to the British attempts to build a fleet. In addition, he criticized Arnold for not obeying Gates’s orders to return to Ticonderoga if the British fleet was superior, and Gates was criticized for ordering this return. After Nelson took the time to examine the materials surrounding the Battle of Valcour he came to the conclusion that the American victory at Saratoga was not the result of the delay
caused by Valcour, but was rather the result of Carleton’s hesitancy to launch an attack against the American forces. In this way Nelson’s arguments were in direct opposition to the ideas presented by both Fowler and Miller.

Despite Nelson’s argument that the Battle of Valcour did not aid the American victory at Saratoga, it was clear that it did in fact play a role. This battle did not only establish a delay that allowed the Americans to better prepare for Saratoga, but it also demonstrated that in 1776 the actions of the navy were still far more independent and decentralized than those of the army. This was seen through Arnold’s decision to ignore Gates’s orders and his decision to fight a naval battle on Lake Champlain (which did not come from the Marine committee).\(^ {188}\) It all began in late summer and early fall of 1776 when the Americans decided to abandon Crown Point at a war council.\(^ {189}\) However, with this decision Americans feared that they would be seen as giving up their claim on the lake, “to quash any rumors that by giving up Crown Point they intended to give up the lake, they further resolved at their meeting to take ‘Effectual Measures’ for securing Champlain by building more “Gundolas, Row Gallies, [and] Armed Batteaus.”\(^ {190}\) From here the construction began on these ships, and was pushed along by the “motivation” that Arnold supplied. Although Arnold’s sailing experience was only trading with the West Indies, he paid close attention to every detail of the ships that were being constructed.\(^ {191}\) Once Arnold made it clear how he expected these vessels to be

\(^{190}\) Ibid, 194.  
\(^{191}\) Ibid, 194-195.
constructed he quickly left Skenesborough where they were being built to return to Ticonderoga, where he attempted to find the men he needed to man his fleet. ¹⁹²

Arnold managed to get enough men to operate his fleet, but many of them had never sailed before, which was a detriment to his fleet. ¹⁹³ Despite all of his efforts, Arnold would not be able to compete with the British fleet that was developing at St. John, on the opposite end of the lake. British commander, Guy Carleton, had long had his eyes trained on Lake Champlain, which he recognized as valuable to both the British and the Americans because it provided the Americans with access to Quebec, and the British with access to New York. ¹⁹⁴ In order to ensure that he kept control of Lake Champlain, Carleton received help from Charles Douglas, a more than competent captain of the Royal Navy. Douglas and his men were responsible for creating the British fleet on Lake Champlain and figuring out a way to get the British war ships anchored in the St. Lawrence to St. Johns. ¹⁹⁵

The problem with this was that there was a portage around the rapids in the Richelieu. This portage greatly slowed the British progress in getting their fleet to St. John, which caused the battle with the Americans to take place at the end of the season, just before ice formed on the lake. In addition, the ship the Inflexible, had to be finished at St. Johns, further delaying the British fleet. ¹⁹⁶ Although the decision to get large British warships to St. Johns instead of building their own small fleet ultimately paid off for the British because they had bigger and better ships than the large, but weak

¹⁹² Fowler, Rebels Under Sail, 196.
¹⁹³ Ibid.
¹⁹⁴ Ibid, 197.
¹⁹⁵ Ibid, 196-197.
American fleet, the delay it took to assemble this powerful British force made further advances after the battle improbable.\textsuperscript{197}

In October 1776, the two fleets took to the water as they vied for control of the lake and access to Quebec. Before the battle began, Arnold had little knowledge of how powerful the British fleet that he was about to face was.\textsuperscript{198} The British fleet was actually smaller than the American fleet in number of ships. Compared to the Americans, who had sixteen ships, the Royal fleet had only five main ships, but they also had twenty gun boats and twenty-eight long boats, each lightly armed. (see tables 1 and 2).\textsuperscript{199} Where the British outnumbered the Americans was with the strength of the guns that they had, and with the number of men that they had to man their ships.\textsuperscript{200} The Royal Fleet had double the firepower of the American fleet, whose guns were mostly two pounders. In addition, the British fleet had about seven hundred seamen, each of which was experienced and a member of the Royal Navy. Arnold, by contrast, had eight hundred fifty-six men, the majority of whom had never set foot on a ship before the battle on Lake Champlain.\textsuperscript{201} These factors combined to give the British a decisive advantage over the Americans.

\textbf{Table 1: The British Fleet:}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ship</th>
<th>Armament</th>
<th>Commanding Officer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inflexible, ship</td>
<td>18-12 pounders</td>
<td>Lieutenant Schank</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{197} Fowler, \textit{Rebels Under Sail}, 210.


\textsuperscript{201} Nelson, “Carleton versus Arnold,” 354-356.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ship</th>
<th>Armament</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maria, schooner</td>
<td>14-6 pounders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carleton, schooner</td>
<td>12-6 poundrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thunderer, radeau</td>
<td>6-24 pounders, 6-12 pounders, 2 Howitzers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loyal Convert, gondola</td>
<td>7-9 pounders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 gun boats</td>
<td>Some 24 pounders, 9 pounders and Howitzers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four long boats</td>
<td>Carriage gun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twenty-four long boats</td>
<td>No armament, just provisions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2: The American Fleet:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ship</th>
<th>Armament</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enterprise, sloop</td>
<td>12 guns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Royal Savage, schooner</td>
<td>12 guns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revenge, schooner</td>
<td>8 guns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberty, schooner</td>
<td>8 guns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lee, row-galley</td>
<td>6 guns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trumbull, row-galley</td>
<td>8 guns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congress, row-galley</td>
<td>8 guns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington, row-galley</td>
<td>8 guns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 gondolas</td>
<td>3 guns a piece</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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The battle between these two mismatched forces began on October 11, 1776 around 11:30 am as the British ships and gondolas came within musket range of the American fleet. Within an hour the battle “became general, and very warm. Some of the enemy’s ships, and all their gondolas, beat and rowed up within musket shot of us.” The battle continued in this manner until five p.m., when the British fleet moved back six to seven hundred yards. This moderate retreat, however, did not end the British barrage of the Americans. The fighting continued until dark, when it ceased until October 13. 

During the fighting on October 11 the gondola, the Philadelphia, and one of the American schooners were lost in the action. The British used their Native American allies to continue the attack on the Americans throughout the night. Despite these pressures, the Americans were able to formulate their plans for the next day in the semi-calm of the night.

The next day the Americans headed towards Crown Point where they hoped to replenish their supplies, which were greatly depleted from the battle the previous day. However, in order to reach their destination the American fleet would have to sneak past the British fleet laying in wait. The fleet left Cumberland Bay for Crown Point at two p.m., but the winds did not blow in their favor, so at first they made little progress. By 6pm the winds were in favor of the American fleet, and allowed them to hasten their progress towards Crown Point. By six a.m. the next morning the fleet was only twenty-

205 Ibid.
207 Ibid.
208 Ibid.
209 Ibid.
eight miles away from their final destination.\textsuperscript{210} At this point everything seemed to be in favor of the American fleet. However, that morning the winds shifted again, and the British were able to catch up with the colonial fleet, which ushered in the second day of battle.\textsuperscript{211} Coming up alongside the American fleet the Royal Navy laid on heavy fire. The American vessel, the \textit{Washington}, was so battered from the fighting on the eleventh that after only a few broadsides she surrendered to the British.\textsuperscript{212}

While the \textit{Washington} was the first ship to surrender to the British during the early part of the engagement, it was only one of the American ships that succumbed to Britain’s superior might. Three British ships attacked the American row-galley, the \textit{Congress}, at one time. The heavy fire that the \textit{Congress} was exposed to caused its sails, rigging, and hull to be destroyed. When the \textit{Congress} was too damaged to fight, Arnold, “[ran] her ashore burnt her and escaped.”\textsuperscript{213} At the same time that the \textit{Congress} was burned, the Americans also burned four of their eight gondolas to prevent them from falling into British hands.\textsuperscript{214} After this engagement with the British, the American fleet was able to limp its way to Crown Point and then on to Ticonderoga. The Battle of Valcour cost the American fleet on Lake Champlain one third of its crew.\textsuperscript{215} In addition to losing many of his men, Arnold, also lost more than half of his fleet, “our Strength on the Water now remaining is one Sloop, 12 guns, Two Schooners, 8 guns each, Two

\textsuperscript{210} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{211} “Pennsylvania Gazette,” volume 6, 1389.
\textsuperscript{212} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{214} “Pennsylvania Gazette,” volume 6, 1389.
\textsuperscript{215} Ibid.
Galleys & one Gondola.”216 This massive American loss hardly compared to the minute losses suffered by the British. For example, the Royal Navy suffered only forty casualties compared to the one third of the entire force that the Americans lost.217 The Battle of Valcour was clearly a British victory.218

Although this was a British victory, the amount of time that it took the British to prepare for this battle ultimately cost them Saratoga, the major turning point of the American Revolution.220 The Battle of Valcour also revealed that the independent, decentralized nature of the American naval forces was still a major part of the naval warfare even at the end of 1776. Arnold demonstrated the independent nature of the navy

218 “Pennsylvania Gazette,” volume 6, 1389.
because he was not afraid to take on a far superior force, and even refused to acknowledge the possibility of an American defeat,

   This Officer, fiery, hot, and impetuous, but without discretion, never thought of informing himself how the enemy went on, and he had no idea of retiring to when he saw them coming, tho so much superior to his force.  

This demonstrated Arnold’s independent style of leadership because he was so confident in his abilities that he did not feel the need to listen to his superior officers, such as Gates, when it was recommended that he not take on a superior force.

   Instead, Arnold relied on his own intuition, and his confidence in his location on the lake, to make the decision to risk everything and take on the British. That Arnold was able to make such a decision without any consequences from his superiors speaks to the decentralized nature of the Continental forces in regard to naval forces. This battle also demonstrated the strong connections that the navy and the army had in this early period, because although Arnold and Gates were in the army, they were able to carry out an effective naval battle. Once again Valcour’s location in the periphery was important to this battle. The location of Valcour made it difficult for the British to transport their warships there. This delayed the occurrence of the battle, which in turn delayed their attack on Saratoga. Without the one-year delay, the colonists may not have been successful at Saratoga. Thus, the location of Valcour in the periphery allowed for a delay, which prepared the colonists for a major victory.

The ramifications of the Battle of Valcour went beyond an American defeat. Like at Machias, provisions had to be made for the protection of Ticonderoga, where the

223 Ibid.
Americans feared the British would attack next.  One way in which these concerns were assuaged was by requesting that additional militia be sent to Ticonderoga. By October 24, 1776 this request was met, and General Philip Schulyer had sent the militia to Ticonderoga. For additional defense, Arnold stated in his letter to Schulyer that, “A boom will be laid across the Lake this day, and a bridge to-morrow.” Arnold did not just want more troops and defense for Ticonderoga, but also desired that more supplies and ammunition be sent to the fort. All of this was done in preparation for the attack that the Americans feared was coming. Luckily for the Americans the British decided to hold off their attack until the following year because the season was getting so late that ice would soon be forming on the lake.

The American fleet may have been defeated during the Battle of Valcour, but that did not mean that they fought poorly. Praise for the American efforts on Lake Champlain appeared in the October 23 edition of the Pennsylvania Gazette. In this article the British praised the Americans for their bravery. The American fleet was further praised in a letter from Governor Jonathan Trumbull to Governor Nicholas Cooke, “[...] General Arnold in the Congress Galley fought till he could stand no longer [...].” The references to American bravery demonstrated that although the Americans lost, they were still recognized as being a worthy opponent. In addition, the British further demonstrated

224 “Pennsylvania Gazette,” volume 6, 1389.
226 Ibid.
228 “Pennsylvania Gazette,” volume 6, 1389.
229 “Lieutenant John Starke,” volume 6, 1244.
230 “Pennsylvania Gazette,” volume 6, 1389.
231 “Governor Jonathan Trumbull to Governor Nicholas Cooke,” reprinted in Naval Documents of the American Revolution, volume 6, comp. William James Morgan, (Naval History Division Department of Navy, 1972) 1380.
their respect for the Americans by quickly paroling the American prisoners, instead of keeping them as a bargaining chip for the release of British prisoners. By October 23, 1776 the Connecticut Journal reported that the prisoners were paroled and on their way home.²³²

The Battle of Valcour demonstrated how effective an American naval force could be if they had the right leader, even if the fleet ended up losing. This was demonstrated by the acknowledgement of American bravery during the battle, and the fact that they managed to sink several British gondolas during the first day of battle.²³³ It also laid the foundation for an American victory at Saratoga by taking the fight to the lake, which delayed the British force. This battle captured the nature of early naval battles, and further revealed the effects and connections that naval battles had with land battles.

²³³ “Pennsylvania Gazette,” volume 6, 1391.
Chapter Six: The Land and Sea War

234 Emmanuel Leutze, *Washington Crossing the Delaware*,
Although the naval and land fronts of the war each had its own commanding officer, the war at sea and on land was interconnected. A useful comparison can be made between the Battle at Machias and the Battle on Lexington Green. These two battles are often contrasted because they started the war at sea and on land. However, there are many more parallels between these two battles. Machias and Lexington were not the only areas of overlap between the two fronts of the war. Connections also existed between the Battle of Valcour and the Battle of Saratoga, and between the army and navy, more generally, as was demonstrated by the Battle of Nassau. Considering these similarities yields a fuller understanding of naval warfare in 1775 and 1776 because they reveal that American success in the war was dependent on the actions of both the navy and the army.

The first battle of the American Revolution occurred on April 19, 1775 in Lexington, Massachusetts.235 The trouble in Lexington began when British forces encountered the town’s militia, which had been alerted of the British arrival the previous night. Men such as Paul Revere, John Williams, and William Dawes spread the word throughout the Massachusetts countryside that the British troops were marching through the countryside.236 After hearing these warnings Captain John Parker mustered the Lexington militia on the town green, so that they could decide what to do if the British


\[236\] Ibid.
marched through their town. At 4:30 a.m. the British regulars were fast approaching the town, and Parker rallied his troops, “in a few minutes Parker had two ranks of a little over seventy men drawn up about a hundred yards from the road to Concord.” The battle began with a famous but anonymous first shot, and in that brief instant the Revolutionary War commenced. After several volleys the British troops reformed their columns and continued down the road to Concord. The Lexington militia was left with eight dead, including John Parker, and ten wounded.

The Battle of Machias did not lead to many casualties, and did not involve a sizeable British force, but it still shared many qualities with Lexington. Lexington and Machias were compared in an article published in the *Aldine*, called “The Lexington of the Sea,” in 1876, because they each started a front of the war. This article stated that James Fenimore first made this comparison. There were other similarities between these two battles. In both instances the town Patriots were aware of the British presence. In Lexington this was demonstrated by the troops that had assembled to face the British, and in Machias by the threats that the schooners belonging to Ichabod Jones would be attacked. Another similarity between these two battles was that the attacks that occurred were made by a group of colonists dedicated to the cause, and not an official military force, although the militia at Lexington was more formal than the group of Patriots at Machias. Each of these battles demonstrated that a relatively small group

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237 Ibid, 275.
239 Ibid, 276.
244 Ibid.
of colonists was willing to stand up to a British force in order to protect their town from a perceived threat.\textsuperscript{244}

The Battle of Valcour and the Battle of Saratoga were connected in a different way because the Battle of Valcour directly aided the crucial American victory at Saratoga by delaying the British.\textsuperscript{245} When Benedict Arnold began preparing an American fleet that could face the British on Lake Champlain, Carleton decided that he needed a strong British fleet to take on the Americans. Unfortunately for Carleton, this required taking the ships on a ten-mile portage to get around the rapids of the Richelieu.\textsuperscript{246} This delayed the battle on Champlain until October, and thus did not give the British forces enough time to pursue the Americans before the winter arrived.\textsuperscript{247} This delay gave the Americans time to prepare for the Battle of Saratoga, which ultimately resulted in a crucial United States victory. The British also faced numerous delays during the Battle of Saratoga, which led to their defeat. As the historian Robert Middlekauff has noted, “Burgoyne had delayed too long, and unable to cross the river, had no choice but to ask for terms.”\textsuperscript{248} The Battle of Saratoga was the turning point of the war and guaranteed that the French would formally ally with and assist the Americans.\textsuperscript{249}

Although the Battle of Nassau did not directly correlate to a land battle in the American Revolution, it still demonstrated the connections that existed between the army and the navy. After Esek Hopkins successfully captured the munitions and supplies held

\textsuperscript{244} Middlekauff, \textit{The Glorious Cause}, 275.
\textsuperscript{245} Fowler, \textit{Rebels Under Sail}, 210.
\textsuperscript{246} Nelson, “Carleton versus Arnold,” 330-366.
\textsuperscript{247} “Lieutenant John Starke,” \textit{volume I}, 1244.
\textsuperscript{248} Middlekauff, \textit{The Glorious Cause}, 390-391.
\textsuperscript{249} McCullough, \textit{John Adams}, 178.
in Fort Nassau in New Providence, Bahamas, he made the voyage back to the United States. However, during this voyage many of the American soldiers became very sick with the smallpox. This decimated Hopkins’s crew. In order to deal with this shortage, he turned to General Washington to request that his forces be replenished with men from the army. This request demonstrated that while the navy and army were two separate entities it was acceptable for one commander to request aid from the other. With connections such as this it was no wonder that there were similarities between the ways in which the land and sea wars occurred. Each front of this war had its own unique features, but when looked at together it became clear that in order for the war to be successful, they needed to rely upon each other. This connection was further demonstrated in the final battle of the war, when the Continental Army and the French Navy came together to corner Cornwallis on the Yorktown Peninsula and achieved American victory. Success for the Americans would have been improbable without army and navy cooperation.

250 “Nathaniel Shaw, Jr. to Joseph Trumbull,” *volume 1*, 697.
252 “Gurdon Saltonstall to George Washington,” *volume 1*, 710.
Conclusion

254 Thomas Mitchell, *HMS Serapis and Bonhomme Richard*,
The Continental Navy has long remained hidden in the history of the American Revolution because when compared to the army it seems relatively unsuccessful and was overshadowed by the mighty naval European superpowers. However, American naval forces should still be remembered. This unique force brought together leading political actors in Congress and local people in coastal communities who decided to take the conflict to the sea, whether it was officially approved by Congress or not. From 1775-1776, the naval force of the United Colonies was a decentralized and independent force despite having formal organizing structures such as the Marine Committee. The colonists at Machias who engaged the British sloop *Margaretta* and the merchant Ichabod Jones, even after a majority of the colonists supported his presence, demonstrated a bold, independent spirit, which was similarly demonstrated by Captain Esek Hopkins who ignored his orders to clear the British from the American coast and instead launched an attack against New Providence in the Bahamas. Finally, Benedict Arnold and his freshwater fleet on Lake Champlain ignored the advice of superior officers and engaged a far larger British force.

Although each of these battles highlights the decentralized and independent nature of the naval war in the American Revolution, they also demonstrate that Americans could take on the British. Even at Valcour, where Arnold suffered defeat, the American forces were heralded for bravery and determination. When put in the context of the land war, it
is clear that the naval Revolution was intimately connected with the land battles. In his book *Rebels Under Sail*, Fowler best captured the role of the navy in the American Revolution,

> Compared to the enemy’s squadrons, the Continental navy was a puny force. Nevertheless, against overwhelming odds, they ventured to sea, and in their own way, both by victory and defeat, they helped to achieve independence. For that they deserve to be remembered.²⁵⁵

The American naval force that existed from 1775-1776 was like no other naval force. Its commanders often did as they pleased, and answered to no one but themselves, but despite its decentralized organization the navy managed to achieve victories against the Royal Navy that successfully advanced the War for Independence.

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²⁵⁵ Fowler, *Rebels Under Sail*, ix
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Author’s Biography

Sarah Kent was born in Eliot, Maine on February 6, 1991. She graduated from Marshwood High School in June 2009. Sarah is majoring in History with a concentration in United States History. She is President of the History Club, a member of Gamma Sigma Sigma National Service Sorority, and a member of All Maine Women Honor Society. Sarah is also a member of Phi Alpha Theta, Phi Kappa Phi, and Phi Beta Kappa. She has received the Presidential Distinguished Scholar Scholarship, the Caroline Colvin Scholarship, and the Laurence Evans and Elizabeth Taylor Evans Award.

Next year she will be attending Brandeis University where she will receive an Masters in the Art of Teaching (M.A.T) in Secondary Education Social Studies. Sarah received the Public Educator Scholarship from Brandeis. After completing her degree she plans to teach high school history.