

Capture of the Frigate *President*

Weeks after the mutual armistice ending the War of 1812, the Royal Navy captured one of the U.S. Navy's greatest treasures.

Britannia's trident had rusted over by the War of 1812. At sea, the conflict, largely initiated by antagonistic British policies concerning the impressments of American sailors, had produced a number of spectacular American victories over British men o' war. The *Constitution* soundly trounced two frigates already, and the smaller brigs, sloops, and corvettes of the tiny American navy managed to compile a respectable battle record. Since Lord Viscount Nelson's near-annihilation of the Franco-Spanish fleet at Trafalgar in 1805, British crews had seen none of the massive fleet actions which periodically occurred in prior years. The amount of French cruisers escaping port to wreak havoc upon Allied shipping lessened in frequency and those that did manage to escape Britain's cordon of the European Continent were in most cases eliminated in quick order. Thus, the vessels of the Royal Navy that were attending to more distant stations became familiar with the monotony of the "spit-and-polish" routine of inaction. Gunnery became lax and widespread experience was not as common as in yesteryear. Though Britannia still wielded a mammoth weapon in the form of her Royal Navy, its strength lay in its overwhelming numbers and not in its fighting efficiency.

The British, recognizing the threat made by American cruisers, implemented an expansive blockade (it being perfected against the French, Spanish, and Dutch navies on the European Continent) to devastating effect. American commercial interests plummeted and American warships found it difficult to escape to sea. As a result, Commodore Stephen Decatur had spent a number of months ashore both in New London and New York without active cruising.



Commodore Stephen Decatur

Following irreversible setbacks in the Canadian border campaigns and the catastrophic effects of the blockade upon maritime trade, the United States Congress had initiated peace talks with representatives of Great Britain during 1814. Negotiating in the Belgian city of Ghent, representatives of the two powers finally hammered out a mutual armistice by December of the year, and returned relations and policies to status quo ante bellum.

The Treaty of Ghent, as it became known, was signed on Christmas Eve 1814, but due to the long voyage time so endemic in that time period, the treaty did not arrive in America for another month. Ironically, though peace was nominally in effect and only awaited Congressional ratification, the individuals in distant quarters remained ignorant and carried on with hostilities. The time between signing and ratification of the Treaty allowed for the famous Battle of New Orleans and the relatively unknown final cruise of the *President* as an American vessel.

One of the central players in the upper echelons of American naval command in the War of 1812 was Commodore Stephen Decatur, the same officer who had distinguished himself so greatly in combat during the First Barbary War. In the more recent conflict, Decatur, commanding the heavy frigate USS *United States*, battered the luckless HMS *Macedonian* into submission in late 1812.



United States engaging Macedonian

Other cruises by the famed American commander were few and largely unremarkable affairs. By the Spring of 1814, the Navy Department detached Decatur to service in New York City, and as a result, Decatur was given command of the 44-gun *President*, the favorite flagship of Commodore John Rodgers. Decatur transferred his crew from the *United States* overland from New London, Connecticut and into their new quarters aboard the *President* not long after Rodgers relinquished his command of the well-armed frigate.

December 1814 saw the assemblage of a motley collection of U.S. Navy warships in New York Harbor. Among them was the 44-gun *President*, sloops *Peacock* and *Hornet*, and the armed supply brig *Tom Bowline*. Their orders, masterminded by Secretary of the Navy William Jones, were to depart at the first expedient moment to a rendezvous off of the southern Atlantic island of Tristan de Cunha and proceed in force to the Far East where, according to plan, they would destroy the British Pacific and Indian trades. The flagship of the squadron, which would depart piecemeal from port to the rendezvous, was the *President* herself. Launched in 1798, she was able to count as her sister ships the *United States* and the famed *Constitution*. Armed officially with 44 guns, her main armament revolved around a tier of 24-pounder cannons on the main deck, supplemented by a near-equal number of 42-pounder carronades on her spar deck, all fitted aboard a ship with the scantlings of a traditional 74-gun ship-of-the-line. Deadly at both long and close range, the *President* was a ship specifically designed to be able to cope with vessels nominally superior while simultaneously maintaining speed. As one of the treasures of the American fleet, *President* was notable for her speed in all varieties of conditions and gave her a reputation as a great flyer much prized by competing American captains. She was the same ship who, while commanded by Commodore Rodgers in 1811, was ordered to stop Royal Navy warships which were interdicting Northeastern merchant shipping. On the night of 16 May, *President* encountered and crippled the British war-sloop *Little Belt* under controversial circumstances. Even *President* had a significant role to play in the lead-up to war prior to 1812.



USS *President*

The British blockading squadron detached to guard the exits of New York consisted of a collection of heavy frigates. Captain John Hayes commanded the squadron from his 58-gun flagship, *Majestic*. Recently razed down from her original 74-gun ship-of-the-line condition, this veteran of the Glorious First of June and the Battle of the Nile acted as the powerful flagship of Hayes' squadron. Her consorts included the 40-gun *Endymion* and the 38-gun frigates *Tenedos* and *Pomone*. *Majestic*'s presence on the American station was specifically orchestrated to entice the American "super frigates" into an equal contest while maintaining some degree of the upper hand. Razed ships were ideal for just such an occupation as they maintained their large structure and firepower but were less cumbersome than a ship-of-the-line. *Endymion* was likewise an ideal assignment for the theatre as she mounted a main tier of 24-pounder cannons with a secondary armament of 32-pounder carronades. Both *Pomone* and *Tenedos* mounted 18-pounder guns with 32-pounder carronades.

On the evening of 13 January, the blockading squadron which had been diligently attending to its duties was blown off of its typical beat by the arrival of a fierce snowstorm containing gale-force winds. Hayes ordered the squadron to move approximately 50 miles offshore nearer to the vicinity of Long Island, with the wind blowing hard from the northwest. On the 14th, the weather remained essentially unchanged, and the squadron was not capable of beating back inside Sandy Hook, causing Hayes was forced to retain position his position from the night before. The greater consequence of the blizzard was that it allowed Decatur to attempt an escape unmolested amid the blowing storm.

In the early evening of the 14th, Decatur ordered *President* to weigh anchor and make it's approach to sea. *President* departed accompanied by the armed merchant brig *Macedonian* who likewise was using the blizzard as a chance to disappear from New York. Before exiting New York Harbor, every vessel was forced to navigate the dangerous submerged bar spanning the Narrows, and the *President* attempted her passage at approximately 10 P.M. Suddenly, disaster struck the warship. The US Navy marked the proper deepwater channel for vessels to sail through, but due either to misplaced anchored marker-boats or pilot error trying to judge the channel in the middle of the storm, the *President* ran aground, and ran aground hard. The true nature of the grounding is shrouded in some degree of mystery. Sources indicate, as earlier touched upon, that either the harbor pilot Decatur hired had misjudged the deep channel, or the U.S. Navy's boat-markers were misplaced. However, while both of these explanations are equally plausible, there remains another factor which must be taken into consideration. In 1814, while Decatur retained command of *President's* sister ship *United States*, he had attempted to run the blockade around New London.



USS *United States*

As he neared the inlet, two blazing blue lights appeared on either side of the channel, and Decatur, sensing treachery by the local inhabitants, turned back. Decatur had every reason to suspect sabotage on the part of the deeply Federalist, anti-war New England populace. Two blue lights extemporaneously appearing could only be interpreted as a signal to the British that Decatur was making a run for it, and it was this interpretation that Decatur subscribed to. Similarly, it is not inconceivable that the two marker boats were surreptitiously moved so as to mar a proper navigation. This possibility is only feasible so long as the markers were left unguarded by Navy personnel, but it remains feasible nonetheless. No matter the true culprit, the fatal error had been committed.

For nearly two hours, the *President* slammed against the submerged bar with every trough of the waves. The damage done to her hull and masts were incredibly extensive: the incessant slamming hogged the keel, even ripping off the *President's* false keel. Great sheets of copper protecting her hull were ripped away and others horribly twisted into grotesque shapes. The frigate's masts, which traveled down to the base of the interior of the hull, also saw extensive damage and became dislodged, twisted, and sprung. The masts, so critical for all maneuverability, lost a significant portion of their practical effectiveness.

The men of the *President* labored persistently to clear the wounded frigate from the submerged bar. The *President* was heavily laden with tons of provisions to supply the anticipated long and distant raid to the South Pacific. The preponderance of added stores might have made the difference between a safe passage and the grounding. As a result of this possibility, barrels of beef, pork, fresh water and ship's biscuit were thrown overboard in a desperate attempt to lighten the vessel. Sailors coaxed the maximum driving force possible from the *President's* strained masts, and amid the raucous cheering of the men, she was finally pried free from her predicament.

Decatur's options at this point were limited. It was clear that the *President* required immediate repairs to make her seaworthy again, but such a course of action was not practicable. Unfortunately for the American frigate, the gale had never ceased blowing from the northwest, and any hope of re-entering New York Harbor for repairs was entirely out of the question. Decatur recognized that the only hope of saving his ship was to commit to the sea and hope to put in at a regional American port or a neutral port across the ocean, and it was this, his only real option, that he ordered.

Decatur set a course which paralleled Long Island, a general route of east by north away from New York. The gale never abated during the early hours of the *President's* voyage in the Atlantic. Her progress was marked by high, choppy waves accompanied by snow flurries which accentuated the biting, freezing wind offered by the storm. Through the night, the lone American frigate sailed unseen and saw no one else, which encouraged the spirits of her sailors aboard and aided the idea that her mortal wounding in the Narrows just hours before would prove to be inconsequential. As their fate would have it, the grounding would be the culprit of the next 24 hours of misery and exhaustion.

In the early dawn hours of 15 January, Captain John Hayes of His Britannic *Majesty's* heavy squadron off Long Island, New York was beating into the freshening gale. Hayes' strategic relocation two days previous was not modified; the wind still did not yet permitted him to return to his cruising station. Hayes, a veteran of nautical warfare, was well aware that such dirty weather was likely to encourage his American counterparts to attempt an escape from New York. Privateers flourished along the eastern seaboard, and with the national blockade, the only opportunities for American cruisers to escape to sea came during intense fog and during foul weather when visibility was poor and blockading forces were forced to retreat further out to sea. Hayes was keenly confident that at least one if not much of the armed and merchant shipping in New York would make a go for the escape. As such, Hayes positioned his command in a placement ideal for just such a situation. His command was not far off of Long Island. Any vessels running out from New York paralleling the island would have to first run through Hayes'

gauntlet. It was just such a course that Decatur had ordered.

At approximately 5 A.M. on the 15th, the lookout perched high atop *President's* mainmast cried out with news of a number of strange sail in the offing. It did not take long for the American officers peering through their telescopes to determine the professional nature of these ships. The Marine drummer, like his British counterparts, beat to quarters and roused all of the ship's divisions to their battle stations. Decatur had sailed almost squarely into the trap that was laid for him, and passing near to the squadron, *President* was immediately pursued by Hayes' *Majestic* and Captain Henry Hope's *Endymion*, with the *Majestic* taking the lead in the chase for a short initial period. Hayes simultaneously sighted the *Tenedos* in the direction of the *President*, and taking her for an American vessel, the British captain ordered the *Pomone* to intercept the *Tenedos*.

Ranging shots were fired at the *President* approximately an hour later by the *Majestic*, but no harm was done. The chase continued into the afternoon, with the *Tenedos* and *Pomone* joining after *Tenedos* was properly identified. By the early afternoon, Decatur ordered nonessential items thrown overboard to lighten and thus increase the American frigate's speed. Fresh water casks, provisions, boats, anchors, and spars were unceremoniously tossed overboard to bob in the wake of the frigate. The *President*, like all of its pursuers, had every stitch of essential canvas stretched and in use. To add an extra advantage to his sails, Decatur ordered buckets of seawater hauled up to the topmen manning the sails which were then splashed on the sails to draw out extra wisps of breeze.

Endymion by this time had already surged ahead of her companions and took the lead in the chase, recommencing the action with sporadic ranging shots from her bowchasers, which were finally answered by angry shots from *President's* sternchasers. The pursuit became a cat-and-mouse game. Both sides fired their fore and aft-most guns respectively in the hope of silencing opposing guns, tearing gaping holes in enemy sails, and shredding enemy rigging. Both sides seized upon any opportunity to slow the progress of her nemesis, and both sides did occasionally score hits, though not causing significant damage or altering either ship's progress.

Proceeding east by north, by approximately 5:30 PM, *Endymion* had positioned herself on *President's* starboard quarter and initiated a general raking fire into the American frigate. From this position, Decatur was incapable of bringing any of his own guns to bear on the British vessel. It was a perfect situation for Captain Hope. Using his 40 guns, Hope poured a devastating fire into the hull and rigging of the *President*. Hope did not bring his frigate into a broadside vs. broadside placement, instead maintaining persistent yawing motions on *President's* starboard quarter. Decatur made to turn and strike the *Endymion*, but Hope conscientiously kept his own ship away from a vulnerable position which would permit Decatur such a course of action. Decatur ordered boarding parties to assemble on the spar deck in preparation of close combat aboard the enemy frigate. Armed with cutlasses, axes, boarding pikes and pistols and wearing bearskin boarding helmets, the men of the *President* anxiously awaited their chance to spring aboard the *Endymion*, defeat her crew, and escape with her. It was not to be. Hope doggedly maintained his elusive course and avoided the close contact which Decatur desperately needed.

By nearly 6 PM, Decatur took decisive action and swung *President* due south, a course which

Endymion emulated. The two frigates simultaneously belched forth stabs of flame in the January night. In rolling broadsides, 24 pound cannon balls screamed through the air and splashed around the two vessels while others struck home. The *President's* 42-pounder carronades, commonly known as "smashers," erupted while the United States Marines of Lieutenant Levi Twiggs (in the fighting tops) picked off targets. Across the water, British gun crews, stripped to the waist and laboring over their pieces took careful aim as Royal Marines poured deadly musket fire onto the spar deck of the *President*. In the copper-lined magazine below in the *President*, cartridges were carefully measured and delivered into the waiting hands of young boys, commonly known as Powder Monkeys, who ran the ammunition up to the gun crews plying their pieces by the battle lanterns swinging from the ceiling of the gun deck. Though her guns were fitted with friction lock mechanisms which allowed each gun captain to pull a lanyard to fire his gun, the scent of slow match, ready in case the lock failed, wafted and intermingled with the acrid powder smoke. Firing on the up-roll of the wave, the round-shot of the *Endymion* crashed through oak layer shielding the American crews. Acting as wooden shrapnel, the splinters of varying sizes scattered at high velocity in all directions striking the men, often fatally. Decatur, who had been cheering his men on to the fight, was early struck in the chest by the flat of a large flying splinter, which fortunately for the Commodore, merely bruised him. Toward the close of the engagement with *Endymion*, Decatur was again wounded, yet again by another flying splinter which this time sliced a bloody gash across his head.



Decatur lying wounded aboard the *President*

For a period roughly consisting of two hours, both ships dueled each other broadside to broadside. *Endymion's* fire primarily focused on the hull of the *President*, though not without substantial damage being done to the rigging of the American frigate. Conversely, the fire of the *President* was evidently focused on the rigging and masts of the *Endymion*, achieving its desired effect. Chain, bar, and star shot tore through great swaths of the British frigate's sails and permanently disabled her ability to sail ahead at a reasonable rate. By 9 PM, *Endymion* permanently hauled herself out of the running fight to repair her damage. *President*, with multiple killed and wounded, labored southward instead of pressing the fight. The grounding of the night before had already caused dangerous damage and leaking within the *President*, and the damage wrought by the round shot of the *Endymion* below the waterline merely compounded the problem. Decatur was forced to dispatch vital detachments of men to man the pumps against the

deepening well of water, a problem which in itself caused an even more pronounced decrease in the *President's* speed.

At approximately 11 PM, *Pomone* and *Tenedos* had come within "half point blank shot" of their quarry. Captain Hyde Parker of the *Tenedos*, son of the late Admiral Sir Hyde Parker, began carefully positioning his ship on the starboard quarter of the *President* while Captain John Richard Lumley of the *Pomone* came abreast of the *President's* larboard (port) broadside. The *Pomone* fired a full broadside into the injured *President*. Decatur reportedly hailed across to the *Pomone* with his surrender, but Lumley, seeing a lantern still hoisted amongst the mizzen rigging, took the lantern in lieu of the flag, and had his frigate fire yet another broadside into the *President*. Decatur realized that the lantern might have been the catalyst for the second broadside, and ordered it hauled down, after which Lumley, taking it as the surrender, all firing ceased. With much consternation, Decatur surrendered, saying in his after-action report: "about one-fifth of my crew killed or wounded, my ship crippled, and a more than fourfold force opposed to me, without a chance of escape left, I deemed it my duty to surrender." The last moments of American command of the *President* saw her in a terrible condition wallowing miles off of Long Island.

Three of the five American lieutenants were killed in the action, including Lieutenant Paul Hamilton. Hamilton had been the midshipman who brought the freshly-captured flag of HMS *Macedonian* to the First Lady during a ball in Washington. Now, severed in half by a 24-pounder cannon shot, the son of former Secretary of the Navy Paul Hamilton lay dead. Decatur survived his two wounds, but a large amount of his crew did not. American losses were moderately heavy considering the duration of the fight: 24 men had been killed and 55 wounded. British sources put American losses at 60 wounded. By contrast, British losses were comparatively light with four killed and 11 wounded.

The root of the disparity in casualties is well documented by both sides. When Hope and Decatur mutually engaged in general rolling battle following the alteration south, Decatur's intention was to disable *Endymion* and so Decatur specifically ordered his men to attempt to disable their enemy by dismantling her rigging and sails. With the majority of Hope's men manning the guns below decks, with the exception of her Marines and marksmen in her tops, there were far fewer men in the rigging for the Americans to hit. Decatur's goal in the engagement with the *Endymion* was purely to disable his opponent enough to allow himself time to escape, and not to decimate, board and capture. British aiming was focused along the white strake of the *President's* hull which housed a significant ratio of her crew. Accurate fire did not seem to be a problem for either side as both succeeded in their goals during the action. The *Endymion* was entirely forced out of the fight, and the *President* was sufficiently weakened to prevent her escape from the other fresh frigates of the squadron.

The Royal Navy seized upon the capture as a textbook case of British naval supremacy and touted it as evidence of what the outcome would be in a "fair fight." But was the outcome determined solely by a force of equal strength to the *President*?

Considering the amount of damage suffered by the American ship in her grounding hours before, her ability to effectively maneuver was essentially eliminated. The capability to properly sail in

the midst of battle was a required component of a successful action, and this advantage was severed: the results of twisted copper sheeting, hogging, and wrenched masts were only catastrophic to the chances of the *President*. The British vessels had suffered no damage of the sort that would prohibit easy sailing in the storm, and *Endymion's* ability to remain on *President's* starboard quarter with periodic and effective yawing acted as evidence of her uninjured state. In fact, *Endymion* had had a full refit in Halifax weeks before the engagement, so it is impossible to speculate that some existing defect or damage had undermined any superiority of *Endymion*. The only fight of the chase between two fresh vessels broadside to broadside resulted in *Endymion* bowing out of the engagement for good until after *President* surrendered, with the initial victory going to the handicapped participant. Should the events of the 15th have been a matter of *Endymion* vs. *President* alone in single-ship action, even with existing handicaps caused by the grounding, it is very probable that the *Endymion* would still have been added as another capture by the US Navy. The only issue preventing this change of events was the presence of three more Royal Navy warships (soon to be joined by the 18-gun brig *Dispatch*) which forced Decatur to abandon his first adversary. British naval historian William James in his *Naval History of Great Britain* made the scurrilous argument that the *President's* defeat was a product of *Endymion's* resolve alone, attempting to legitimize claims that the *President* had been defeated in a single-ship duel. His assertions included the characterization of the grounding as a "trifling" affair and that Decatur entered the battle with a veritably untouched ship. James discounts the two full broadsides of the *Pomone* as ineffective and had no say in the final decision to surrender. The final reality is that without the initial grounding, the fate of the *President* would have been dramatically different, something British naval historian C.S. Forester recognized in his history of the naval actions of the War of 1812. Undoubtedly, the damage inflicted by *Endymion* had a role in determining Decatur's decision to surrender once surrounded by *Tenedos* and *Pomone*, but it cannot be characterized as a defeat handed to Decatur by a solitary vessel.

Assuredly, fatigue on the part of Decatur and his crew contributed greatly to Decatur's decision to surrender. The men of the frigate were on alert from the moment they departed their anchorage in New York and expended much of their energy in their effort to save their ship during the grounding. From the moment the *President* had run in amongst the ships of the enemy squadron, until their capture, the men were at their quarters for a period roughly equating 20 hours. Such a perpetually taxing persuasion wore on Decatur's men, who's stress doubled during the engagement with *Endymion*. Decatur's decision is thus rooted in both humanitarian and military reason. As the final words of his after-action report support, the loss of life and injury to his men became unnecessary because of the caliber of the force opposing him. With *Pomone* engaged, *Tenedos* bearing up, *Endymion* licking her wounds but on her way, the prodigious *Majestic* over the horizon in company with *Dispatch*, and substantial damage to his own hull, Decatur's only sensible option was surrender, and nothing else. Though he possessed a great flair for nautical audacity, this was no time for a foolhardy gesture.

The American prisoners were divided equally amongst the ships of the squadron during their transfer to Bermuda. Decatur offered his sword Captain Hayes of the *Majestic* razeed who chivalrously refused the token of submission. The storm which allowed Decatur to run for the Atlantic had ceased not long following his capture, but another storm struck up in quick succession. *Endymion*, already reeling from the damage delivered to her masts and rigging by *President*, was this time completely dismasted, and *President* likewise lost two of her masts in

the second storm.

Certainly, the prevention of Decatur raiding British Pacific and Indian assets was a great, yet belated coup for the Royal Navy. The remaining vessels scheduled to rendezvous off Tristan de Cunha successfully ran the blockade and saw successful action before learning of the armistice in the months after its ratification in February. Even the little armed merchant brig Macedonian which had departed New York in company with the *President* had escaped unharmed.

Decatur arrived back in New London as a passenger on the British frigate *Narcissus* on 22 February where he met astounding celebration in both New London and New York despite his loss of the frigate. Mingled with the euphoria of the armistice, the zeal and support for the old veteran of Tripoli never waned even in defeat. In a like fashion, Decatur and his men were acquitted of all negligence in the late action by a routine U.S. Navy court-martial. Nor did Decatur's colleagues and superiors lose confidence in his fighting capability or commitment. Months later, Decatur was given command of a squadron that, under his leadership, finally dealt a decisive blow to the Barbary Powers' antagonism.

The captured *President* was taken across the Atlantic to the Royal Navy base at Portsmouth where duplicate plans were drawn of her design for use by the Royal Navy.

The capture of an American "super frigate" did much for the British propaganda machine which sought to parade its infamous trophy in home waters as a mark of the indefatigable strength of the Royal Navy. HMS *President* did not see active service as she remained in ordinary in her berth. In 1818, after a brief attempt to save the ship, the *President* was unceremoniously broken up and her timbers sold. Another frigate was built by the British not long afterward modeling the first *President's* lines, and this second frigate, like the one she was based upon, would be christened HMS *President*. Unlike the reproduction of the *President* in Britain, following the death of Commodore Stephen Decatur in a duel with American Commodore James Barron in 1820, America would

<http://www.militaryhistoryonline.com/19thcentury/articles/usspresident.aspx> never have another Decatur.

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