



USS Constitution  
Museum

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# British and American Naval Prisoners of War During the War of 1812

Matthew Brenckle, 2005

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*A publication of the USS Constitution Museum, Boston*

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# Introduction

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Assheton Humphreys was a perceptive man and a good judge of character. Appointed chaplain to the frigate *Constitution* in June 1814, Humphreys was on board to witness the ship's capture of HMS *Cyane* and HMS *Levant* on the night of February 20, 1815. After diligently recording the trials of the engagement, the chaplain smugly noted the behavior of the British prisoners during their confinement on board the American vessel. Nearly all, he thought, were given over to “ungentlemanly accusation and recriminations,” frequently assigning culpability for their loss to each other. “Were I disposed,” he mused, “I could here dwell upon scenes that would astonish all who have any idea of the conduct becoming an officer and gentleman, but ‘tis an unpleasant theme and better dispensed with.”<sup>1</sup>

Humphreys' remarks, as uncharitable as they may seem, are among the few firsthand reports we have on the behavior and treatment of British prisoners of war during the War of 1812. This subject failed to elicit much attention in the United States during the war and the fates of these unlucky men were often forgotten in the midst of victory celebrations. However, the experiences of British seamen after they hauled down their colors should warrant consideration for the simple reason that their treatment serves as a counterbalance to the patriotic trumpeting of the American press and war-hawk politicians. Newspapers and stump speakers enjoyed broadcasting lurid tales of the horrors suffered by American prisoners at the hands of the British while at the same time contrasting such alleged barbarity with the humane treatment bestowed upon those who fell into American hands. The following account looks at the issue from both sides and will attempt to sort the propaganda from the reality of incarceration in prison hulks, cellars, and barracks on both sides of the Atlantic.

<sup>1</sup> Assheton Humphreys, *The USS Constitution's Finest Fight, 1815. The Journal of Acting Chaplain Assheton Humphreys, US Navy*. Tyrone G. Martin, ed. (Mount Pleasant, SC: The Nautical & Aviation Publishing Company of America, 2000), 31.

# Surrendering a Warship during the War of 1812

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Unlike the major fleet actions of the era, single ship engagements of the early-nineteenth century frequently lasted only a few hours or less. HMS *Cherub* and HMS *Phoebe* beat USS *Essex* to kindling in about two hours and 20 minutes, USS *United States* captured HMS *Macedonian* in about an hour and a half, and HMS *Peacock* surrendered to USS *Hornet* only 15 minutes after coming into close action. There was no hard and fast rule that governed when a commanding officer should surrender his ship; it was left to the most senior officer standing to determine when a ship and its crew had received enough punishment from an opponent's guns. An enemy's accuracy and rate of fire played a decisive role, but the morale and discipline of a crew were just as important. Captain Philip Broke and the British frigate *Shannon* captured USS *Chesapeake* after the latter's seamen had all fled from their guns.<sup>2</sup>

On December 29, 1812, the unenviable task of surrendering the heavily-damaged HMS *Java* to USS *Constitution* fell to Lieutenant Henry Ducie Chads. Captain Henry Lambert had been wounded early in the action and taken below deck. Chads, the first officer, "consulted the Officers who agreed with myself that on having a great part of our Crew killed & wounded our bowsprit and three masts gone, several guns useless, we should not be justified in waisting [sic] the lives of more of those remaining whom I hope their Lordships & Country will think have bravely defended His Majestys Ship. Under these circumstances, however reluctantly at 5:50 our Colours were lowered from the Stump of the Mizen Mast and we were taken possession a little after 6."<sup>3</sup> Humanity dictated that one should not "waist" the lives of one's crew, especially if there was no chance of a favorable outcome to the engagement.

The lowering of a vessel's ensign (the "colors") was a universal sign of surrender, but even this simple signal could be mistaken in the heat of battle. Flags were often shot away and crews went to great lengths to ensure that the disappearance of one piece of bunting was not taken for capitulation. As David Porter of USS *Essex* reported, during his ship's fight with *Phoebe* and *Cherub*, "our Gaff with the ensign and the motto flag at the mizen had been shot away, but Free trade and sailors rights continued to fly at the Fore- our Ensign was replaced by another and to guard against

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<sup>2</sup> An Account of the *Chesapeake-Shannon* Action, June 6, 1813, in William S. Dudley, ed., *The Naval War of 1812, A Documentary History*, vol. II (Washington, Naval Historical Center: 1992), 129.

<sup>3</sup> Lieutenant Henry D. Chads to Secretary of the Admiralty John W. Croker, December 31, 1812, in William S. Dudley, ed., *The Naval War of 1812, A Documentary History*, vol. I (Washington, Naval Historical Center: 1985), 647.

a similar event an ensign was made fast in the Mizzen rigging and several Jacks were hoisted in different parts of the ship.”<sup>4</sup> During the fight with HMS *Guerriere*, a flag fluttering from *Constitution*’s fore royal mast was carried away. Ordinary seaman Daniel Hogan, “a little Irish chap...brim-full of courage,” scampered aloft and made “all fast, so that the flag could never come down unless the mast came with it.”<sup>5</sup> For this enterprising action, the Secretary of the Navy awarded Hogan an extra month’s pay.<sup>6</sup>

All these nails and lashings might have made it difficult to haul the colors down when the time came to surrender. Another option was the firing of a “lee” gun -- that is, a gun on the unengaged side. Once a ship gave the sign of submission, there was nothing to do but wait for the enemy to take possession. Typically, a boat with an armed crew, commanded by a lieutenant or midshipman, was sent to secure the prize. When *Guerriere* surrendered to *Constitution*, Captain Isaac Hull “sent Lieutenant [George C.] Reed on board as a flag to see whether she had surrendered or not, and if she had to see what assistance she wanted, as I believed she was sinking. Lieutenant Reed returned in about twenty minutes, and brought with him, James Richard Dacres, Esqr. Commander of his Britannic Majesty’s Frigate the *Guerriere*.”<sup>7</sup> This quote illuminates the fact that a combatant frequently did not know the name of his opponent’s ship until after the action had ended.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Captain David Porter to Secretary of the Navy Jones, July 3, 1814, in Michael J. Crawford, ed., *The Naval War of 1812, A Documentary History*, vol. III (Washington, Naval Historical Center: 2002), 734-735.

<sup>5</sup> Moses Smith, *Naval Scenes in the Last War, Or, Three Years Aboard the Frigates Constitution and the Adams, Including the Capture of the Guerriere*, (Boston, Gleason’s Publishing House, 1846), 33. Hogan’s actions were immortalized in the second painting of Michael Felice Corne’s famed four-part series detailing the action. The paintings are in the collection of Naval History & Heritage Command.

<sup>6</sup> Secretary of the Navy to Captain Isaac Hull, September 9, 1812, M149, Secretary of the Navy Letters to Officers 1798-1868, Roll 9, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.

<sup>7</sup> Captain Isaac Hull to Secretary of the Navy Hamilton, August 28, 1812, *Naval War of 1812*, vol. I, 241.

<sup>8</sup> American Midshipman William Skiddy remembered that, as *Hornet* shot ahead of its opponent, a lieutenant on the British deck “asked our leader the name of the ship and was answered ‘U.S. Sloop Hornet,’ when he waved his sword and walked aft.” Quoted in Christopher McKee, *A Gentlemanly and Honorable Profession, The Creation of the US Naval Officer Corps, 1794-1815*, (Annapolis, Md., Naval Institute Press: 1991), 147.

# Boarding the Captured Warship: A Bloody Encounter

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Members of these preliminary boarding parties have left memoirs recording the horrors that they witnessed on the decks of the defeated vessels. After spending the whole night on board *Guerriere*, Midshipman Henry Gilliam wrote: “I had one of the most convincing & awful examples of the effects of mortality & the tyranny of Kings, in conte[mplating] upon the sc[ene] which her decks presented; pieces of skulls, brains, legs, arms & blood Lay in every direction and the groanes of the wounded were enough almost to make me curse the war.”<sup>9</sup> Midshipman Pardon Mawney Whipple had a similar reaction when he stepped on board the shattered *Levant*: “The quarter deck seemed to have the appearance of a slaughter house, the wheel having been carried away by a shot, killed and wounded all around it. The mizen mast for several feet was covered with brains and blood; teeth, pieces of bones, fingers and large pieces of flesh were picked up from off the deck. It was a long time before I could familiarize myself to these and if possible more horrid scenes that I had witnessed.”<sup>10</sup> Other young men were horrified less by the charnel house before their eyes than by the callowness of their shipmates. Midshipman Skiddy reported how one sailor took the hat from a decapitated head, saying, “Matey, you don’t now require a hat,” and how others sifted through a pile of amputated legs looking for shoes and stockings to purloin.<sup>11</sup> For one British captive, the very sight of American seamen coming on board sent him into paroxysms of terror:

*“A little boy, a passenger, going to England to be educated, upon being told that we were Americans fell at the feet of the boarding officer and entreated he would not kill him; being assured of his safety he acquired confidence, and replied to the question, of what motive induced him to behave so, that the inhabitants of the country from whence he came were assured by the British Officers that the American ships were all provided with scalping knives and tomahawks, and that none of their prisoners were spared.”*<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Lilla M. Hawes, “Letters of Henry Gilliam, 1809-1817,” *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 38 (March 1954): 60-61.

<sup>10</sup> Pardon Mawney Whipple, *Letters from Old Ironsides, 1813-1815*, Norma Adams Price, ed. (Tempe, AZ: Beverly-Merriam Press, 1984), 20-21.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in McKee, *Gentlemanly and Honorable Profession*, 149.

<sup>12</sup> Humphreys, *Finest Fight*, 23.

# Captured Baggage and Stores

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When a prize was not on the verge of sinking, the transfer of prisoners, their baggage, and stores could proceed at a more leisurely pace. The discipline of a crew could be sorely strained during this process. It would have been tempting to steal objects from the prisoners as their bags and chests were removed; allegations of misconduct were ever present.<sup>13</sup> James Durand claimed that when the *Guerriere* prisoners “called for their bags, the bags were delivered up nearly emptied of their contents.”<sup>14</sup> He asked, should British seamen “fighting bravely for their country’s cause...be robbed of their all?” The *Port Folio* magazine, however, proudly exclaimed that “every chest, trunk, and box belonging to the officers... was delivered to them without examination. The very trifles which the crew of the *Constitution* saved from the *Guerriere*, before she was blown up, were scrupulously restored to the English-sailors; no article of private property was touched.”<sup>15</sup> Three days after taking *Levant* and *Cyane*, Captain Stewart of *Constitution* “mustered all hands with their bags, examined and searched every part of the ship for articles complained by the Prisoners to have been taken from them, found a few old coats &c as per the list given in, but nothing of any consequence- some of the articles were given to our men by theirs. Ordered all the Prisoners baggage put into the empty bread room locked up and the key given to the first lieutenant with orders to let none go into it without an officer of the *Constitution* being present.”<sup>16</sup> A week later Stewart mustered the crew again and made another search of the bags. He finally ascertained that “after the ships had struck their colours that their men broke into the Spirit and Slop rooms, and Officers apartments, and pillaged all they could.”<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, the British officers continued to make shrill accusations, none more so than Captain Gordon Thomas Falcon of HMS *Cyane* who claimed that two fowling pieces, one of which belonged to him, had disappeared from the locked bread room. A thorough search of the ship, including the officer’s staterooms and Stewart’s own store room, was again conduct-

<sup>13</sup> Article IX of An Act for the Better Government of the Navy of the United States, April 23, 1800, states: “No person in the navy shall strip of their clothes, or pillage, or in any manner maltreat persons taken on board a prize, on pain of such punishment as a court martial shall adjudge.” in *Statutes at Large of the United States of America*, 1789-1845, 8 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1846-47), 2:45-53.

<sup>14</sup> James Durand, *An Able Seaman of 1812*, George S. Brooks, ed., (New Haven, Conn., Yale University Press: 1926), 134.

<sup>15</sup> *The Port Folio*, Third Series, vol. II, no. 2 (August 1813), 252.

<sup>16</sup> USS *Constitution* Log, February 24, 1815, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.

<sup>17</sup> USS *Constitution* Log, March 2, 1815, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.

ed under the eyes of the British officers, but nothing was found.<sup>18</sup> The looting of a ship by its own crew after surrendering seems to have been commonplace. Captain David Porter reported that after HMS *Alert* struck to the *Essex*, and the British captain had left the ship, “a scene of pillage and destruction was pursued by her crew, that would have disgraced a corsaire of Barbary- The Spirit room, pursers, and other store rooms were broken or thrown open, nor did the Captains Cabin & private stores escape, and such articles as could not be taken were broken, thrown overboard, and otherwis [sic] wantonly destroyed.”<sup>19</sup>

The British for their part were notorious (in American eyes) for pillaging their enlisted prisoners, and sometimes officers as well. Benjamin Waterhouse wrote an admittedly biased account of what happened when the crew of his Salem, Massachusetts privateer surrendered to HMS *Tenedos*. “When our baggage was brought on board, the master of arms took every portable article from us, not leaving us a jack-knife, pen-knife, or razor. We Americans never conduct so towards British prisoners. We always respect the private articles of the officer and sailor.”<sup>20</sup> Clearly, the British were trying to deprive their prisoners of anything that might be used as a weapon, but they also took essential clothing that would be needed in the cold and damp environment of the Nova Scotian prison where they were sent. When HMS *Shannon* took USS *Chesapeake*, the British officers allegedly demanded of the American pursuer the keys to Captain James Lawrence’s private storeroom. The purser, Thomas J. Chew, politely declined, for he intended to return the valuable collection of provisions and clothing to the captain’s widow and children. “This request was not merely declined, it was haughtily and superciliously refused” by the victors.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> USS *Constitution* Log, April 4, 1815, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington D.C.

<sup>19</sup> Captain David Porter to Secretary of the Navy Hamilton, September 3, 1812, in *The Naval War of 1812*, vol. I, 445.

<sup>20</sup> Benjamin Waterhouse, *A Journal of a Young Man of Massachusetts*, (Boston: Rowe and Hooper, 1816), 10.

<sup>21</sup> *The Port Folio*, Third Series, vol. II, no. 2 (August 1813), 253.



# The Fate of the Prisoners

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Having brought these prisoners on board, the captors then had to decide what to do with them. The influx of enemy seamen onto the ship, often as many men as in the ship's company itself, created a humanitarian dilemma. Should they be allowed the freedom of the deck, to bask in the fresh air, or should they be placed below, under armed guard? Secured or not, they all had to eat. Should they be allowed full rations, or put on half or quarter rations to ensure that, should circumstances require, the victorious vessel could stay at sea for as long as possible? Captains of both nationalities, while fully recognizing the horrors of close captivity in the hold of a vessel, generally were not taken to letting gangs of prisoners roam at large through their ships. While officers were often given the run of the wardroom and quarterdeck, enlisted men and inferior officers were normally struck into the hold. Assheton Humphreys recounted the experiences of the American prize crew who were captured when a British squadron retook *Levant*:

*“By sunset all the Americans were removed from the Levant and distributed among the ships of the Enemy in such a manner as to prevent any two officers being members of the same wardroom or steerage, and, doctor Johnson [Surgeon’s Mate Artemus Johnson] and myself were all that were allowed to remain on board the Levant. ...these twenty odd men [American prisoners] on board each ship were treated with a vigour that would put humanity to the blush. Confined in the hold with double irons [i.e., shackles on wrists and ankles], and deprived of their bedding, they were obliged to take the partial rest, which such circumstances allowed, upon [the stones making up] the shingle ballast used in the stowage of the water casks; add to this a total privation of grog (the elixir vitae of a sailor) in a warm climate, and a reduction of water and provision, in the proportion of four of their own crew allowance to six prisoners [the normal practice], and obliged to submit to all the indignities which British seaman are so fruitful in towards their prisoners, and it will require no great degree of sympathy to conceive their situation truly pitiable.”<sup>22</sup>*

Benjamin Waterhouse suffered first-hand the unpleasantness of confinement in a warship's bilges. The highly claustrophobic atmosphere brought to him the “appre-

<sup>22</sup> Humphreys, *Finest Fight*, 49-50.

hension of our suffering cruel death by suffocation.” The very thought set his “brain on fire,” and “in my distress, I stamped with my feet, and beat my head against the side of the ship in the madness of despair.”<sup>23</sup>

Those British officers who were sensible of the good treatment afforded them by their American captors had nothing but praise. In his letter to the British Admiralty reporting the loss of *Java*, Lieutenant Henry Ducie Chads expressed his “grateful acknowledgement thus publicly for the generous treatment Captain Lambert and his Officers have experienced from our gallant Enemy Commodore Bainbridge and his Officers.” In a private letter, however, Chads reveals that he was “sorry to find the Americans do not behave with the same liberality towards the Crew that the officers experienced[.] [O]n the contrary, they were pillaged of nearly everything and kept in irons.”<sup>24</sup> Seaman James Durand agreed with Chads’ assessment. “The manner in which the *Java’s* men were treated by the American officers reflected upon the latter in the highest degree. The moment the poor fellows were brought on board the *Constitution* they were handcuffed, a thing unknown in our service except upon urgent necessity and pillaged of everything.”<sup>25</sup> There is plenty of evidence to suggest that Commodore Bainbridge had planned for such an eventuality. A requisition dated October 21, 1812 and signed by Bainbridge recorded the delivery of 150 pairs of leg shackles and 200 pairs of handcuffs to *Constitution*.<sup>26</sup> These items were probably purchased as a response to Captain Isaac Hull’s experience with the *Guerriere* prisoners: the Americans had to resort to using nails and staples to bind the British seamen.<sup>27</sup> Even these contrivances were not necessarily enough to deter determined prisoners from taking over a ship. The night after *Constitution* scuttled *Guerriere*, the British “prisoners undertook to rise, and gain possession of the ship.” Warned of the affair, Hull went down to the berth deck (where the prisoners were confined) and “found nearly thirty of the English prisoners had managed to remove the iron fore-locks from their hands, and to substitute leather ones for them.”<sup>28</sup> The captives were placed back in irons and remained closely guarded until the ship reached Boston.

The prisoners from *Cyane* and *Levant* were forced to remain on board *Constitution* for a longer period. After nearly a month, Captain Stewart “increased the liberty of

<sup>23</sup> Waterhouse, *Journal of a Young Man*, 29.

<sup>24</sup> Henry Ducie Chads to John Wilson Croker, January 4, 1813, HMS *Java’s* Papers, Chads’ “Green Book.”

<sup>25</sup> James Durand, *An Able Seaman of 1812*, 134.

<sup>26</sup> Amos Binney Accounts, RG 217, Box 38, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.

<sup>27</sup> USS *Constitution* Log, August 1812, The Huntington Library, San Marino, CA. Transcribed by Tyrone G. Martin.

<sup>28</sup> Smith, *Naval Scenes*, 37.

the prisoners by allowing one third to come on the spar deck in the morning, another third in the afternoon, and the rest to stay on the birth deck until 6 o'clock P.M. then sent them down in the lower hold.”<sup>29</sup> A few warm days later, the log noted, “the Prisoners [were] kept above deck as much as possible.”<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup> USS *Constitution* Log, March 16, 1815, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.

<sup>30</sup> USS *Constitution* Log, March 24, 1815, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.

# The Emotional Impact on the Captured Crew

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Even after the guns had gone quiet, the experiences of battle and surrender exacted a physical and mental toll on the captives. For some, the adrenaline high of battle gave way to despondency and hopelessness. For the youngest members of the crew, especially those who had never experienced combat before, the strain could be unbearable. Fourteen-year-old David Farragut, a midshipman on USS *Essex* when it was taken at Valparaiso, remembered that “I went on board the *Phebe* [sic] about 8. P.M and was ushered into the steerage: I was so mortified at my capture, that I could not refrain from crying, and so laid down and gave vent to my tears.”<sup>31</sup> While humiliation overwhelmed some, others succumbed to less gentle feelings. One American privateersman taken in the last days of 1813 found himself enraged at his captivity and literally blood-thirsty for revenge: “This is the first time that I was ever deprived of my Liberty and when I sit and think of it it almost deprives me of my senses [sic] for we have nothing else to do but sit and reflect on our present situation....now I want to get out of heir [sic] before the war is over so that I can have the pleasure of killing one Englishman and drinking his blood which I think I could do with a good will for I think them the worst of all the human race for their [sic] is no crimes but what they are guilty of...”<sup>32</sup>

For other seamen, the results of a failed engagement left them entirely nonplussed, and they bore their misfortunes with equanimity. Contemporary commentators noted that the common seamen seemed to be completely without care and, though they may have grieved inwardly for messmates lost and liberties foregone, their culture required a happy-go-lucky form of stoicism incomprehensible to landmen. Even after the horrors he had witnessed on the gun deck of the *Macedonian*, Samuel Leech claimed that,

*“I soon felt myself perfectly at home with the American seaman; so much so, that I chose to mess with them. My shipmates also participated in similar feelings in both ships. All idea that we had been trying to shoot out each other’s brains so shortly before, seemed forgotten. We eat [sic] together, drank together, joked, sung, laughed, told yarns; in short, a perfect union*

<sup>31</sup> David G. Farragut, “Some Reminiscences of Early Life,” in *The Naval War of 1812*, vol. III, 754.

<sup>32</sup> Perez Drinkwater to Elbridge Drinkwater, May 20, 1814, in Bruce Felknor, “A Privateersman’s Letters Home from Prison” via [www.usmm.org/felknor1812.html](http://www.usmm.org/felknor1812.html).

| of ideas, feelings, and purposes, seemed to exist among all hands.”<sup>33</sup>

American seamen evinced the same level of concern when taken prisoner. After Ned Myers’ vessel surrendered to a British squadron on Lake Ontario in 1813, he went below to have his wounds dressed. “A party of English was below, and some of our men having joined them, the heads were knocked out of two barrels of whiskey. The kids and bread-bags were procured, and all hands, without distinction of country, sat down to enjoy themselves. Some even began to sing, as it would have been in a jollification ashore.”<sup>34</sup> These passages reveal the fluid nature of Atlantic seafaring during this period. Seamen were used to moving from a vessel of one nation to a vessel of another with very little trouble and thought of themselves as belonging to a distinct subculture or occupational group. Within these circles they moved effortlessly; it mattered little to them whether they were on an American or English ship. It is probably significant that in most of the stories of bad usage, it is the foreign officers and not the seamen who abuse the enlisted prisoners.

<sup>33</sup> Samuel Leech, *Thirty Years from Home*, 147.

<sup>34</sup> Ned Myers, *Ned Myers; or, A Life Before the Mast*, J. Fenimore Cooper, ed. (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1989), 99.

# Preferential Treatment for Captured Officers

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A terse entry in *Constitution's* log for August 31, 1812 illuminates the unequal treatment received by men of different rank on both sides during the war: “Employed in taking the Officer’s Paroles, and Sending the prisoners on board of the prison Ship.”<sup>35</sup> Officers, considered gentlemen by custom and law, were expected to give their word of honor that they would not attempt to escape from captivity or fight against the enemy again until properly exchanged. According to a provisional agreement for the exchange of prisoners in May 1813, parolees were required to sign a document that stipulated the terms of their parole. The agent responsible for taking the paroles also issued a certificate to the officer prisoner, specifying the “limits to which his parole extends, the hours and other rules, to be observed, and granting permission to such person to remain unmolested within such limits.”<sup>36</sup> *Guerriere's* officers were given parole as soon as *Constitution* reached Boston. Captain Dacres took up residence in Boston, and the other officers settled in Concord.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Log of USS *Constitution*, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.

<sup>36</sup> “Cartel for the Exchange of Prisoners of War Between Great Britain and the United States of America, May 12, 1813, in Hunter Miller, ed., *Treaties and Other International Acts of the United States of America*, vol. 2, Documents 1-40, 1776-1818 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1931).

<sup>37</sup> *Boston Gazette*, September 3, 1812.

# Incarceration of Enlisted British

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The enlisted men, on the other hand, suffered close confinement in a prison ship or old “hulk” moored in the Charles River, near the Charlestown bridge. A plank walkway from Pond Street gave visitors access. The prisoners formed something of a diversion in wartime Boston, and many Bostonians paid the ship a visit. John Tucker Prince, son of the U.S. Marshall for prisoners, remembered visiting often with his father. The vessel was a “sparless hull of a large ship, fenced above her bulwarks with wooden pickets, a marine guard pacing her deck, and well filled with the tars of the ‘fast-anchored isle,’ taken as prisoners of war by our naval vessels and privateers.” According to Prince, the prisoners

*“...led an easy life, and lived ‘on the fat of the land,’ faring better than they had ever dreamed of. They ‘laughed and grew fat;’ the Winchesters furnished such beef as had never passed their lips before, while Howe and Veazie, the cracker-bakers of that day, gave them their ‘daily bread,’ such as was eaten by our ‘upper ten.’ Try to run away? Not a bit of it; for here they read, and sang, and danced, and rigged their miniature vessels, and carved their beef-bone ornaments, or chains of wooden links, ‘happy as clams at high water.’”<sup>38</sup>*

Although Prince’s recollections may be skewed by the fact that his father was responsible for the prisoners’ well-being, one suspects that a prison operated under the sympathetic eye of a Federalist populace would be somewhat better than those tucked away in the country or in Democratic states. British prisoners in Charleston, South Carolina lived in rather different surroundings. There the prison hulk holding the surviving crew of the ill-fated HMS *Dominica* was in urgent need of repair.<sup>39</sup> Unfortunately, before repairs could be made, a massive hurricane struck Charleston on August 27, 1813. According to the naval commander of the station, “the Prison ship parted her cable and is now on shore at James Island.”<sup>40</sup> A second storm struck the region on September 17, and it is not known if the prison ship was saved, or what became of any prisoners on board at the time.

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<sup>38</sup> John Tucker Prince “Boston in 1813, Reminiscences of an Old School-Boy,” *Bostonian Society Publications* 3 (1906), 99-101.

<sup>39</sup> Charles R. Simpson to Thomas Barclay, Charleston, SC, August 24, 1813, in *Naval War of 1812*, vol. II, 216-217.

<sup>40</sup> Captain John H. Dent to Secretary of the Navy Jones, August 28, 1813, in *Naval War of 1812*, vol. II, 229.

# American Prisoners in England

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When possible, American prisoners were transferred to hulks and prisons on shore in England. This required them to endure a passage across the Atlantic in wretched conditions, often crammed into the hold of a ship and forced to subsist on reduced rations. When they finally arrived at the hulks, most grudgingly admitted that the living conditions, though cramped, were better than what they had experienced before. Benjamin Waterhouse, for one, reported that,

*“Our allowance of food here was half a pound of beef and a gill of barley, one pound and a half of bread, for five days in the week, and one pound of cod fish, and one pound of potatoes, or one pound of smoked herring, the other two days; and porter and small beer were allowed to be sold us. Boats with garden vegetables visited the ship daily; so that we now lived in clover compared with our former hard fare and cruel treatment. Upon the whole, I believe that we fared as well as could be expected, all things considered; and had such fare as we could do very well with; not that we fared so well as the British prisoners fare in America. Rich as the English nation is, it cannot well afford to feed us as we feed the British prisoners; such is the difference in the two countries in point of cheap food.”<sup>41</sup>*

Like Waterhouse, many American prisoners captured in North America were sent to prison in Halifax. The prison on Melville Island, three miles from Halifax, was connected to the mainland by a bridge; as the newly arrived prisoners marched across it, a “very dreary spot” presented itself to their view. Crammed onto this five-acre island were six or seven red-painted wooden buildings, including a prison barracks, a barracks for the guards, a cook house, a store house, and houses for the officers and surgeon. Waterhouse thought the complex had, “upon the whole, a neat appearance.”<sup>42</sup> The prison itself was two stories tall, 100 feet long and 50 feet wide. Only the first floor was given over to enlisted prisoners; into this 5,000 square foot space nearly 900 American and French prisoners were packed. Sadly, many perished every winter from the severity of the weather and the lack of adequate bedding and clothing. The interior of the prison had been divided into stalls, such as used in sta-

<sup>41</sup> Waterhouse, *Journal of a Young Man*, 49.

<sup>42</sup> Waterhouse, *Journal of a Young Man*, 12.



bles “for separating the cattle from each other.” Four tiers of hammocks bedecked the rooms. “To those unused to these lofty sleeping-births [sic], they were rather unpleasant situations for repose.”<sup>43</sup> These bad accommodations could be endured, but for many, it was the poor food that most rankled prisoners. Just as in the Quebec prison ships, prisoners at Melville Island were frequently fed condemned rations, including beef “found too much tainted for a dog to eat.”

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 13.

# England's Infamous Dartmoor Prison

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The Melville Island prison had its own wretched reputation, but it was Dartmoor Prison in England that loomed large in the consciousness of American seamen. A score of memoirs about the prison were published in the years following the conflict, detailing lurid tales of deprivation and barbarous conduct. For men from middle-class American households, the conditions in the prison must have seemed unbearable. However, the British government did the best it could with the resources available to provide for the prisoners.

Opened in March 1806, the prison was built on a windswept piece of ground called Tor-Royal on Dartmoor in Devonshire, approximately 17 miles north of Plymouth. In May 1809, the first draft of 2,500 French prisoners entered the newly completed prison; by the end of June they had been joined by 2,500 more.<sup>44</sup> The first Americans were transferred there in April 1813 from the prison hulks at Plymouth. Forced to march overland through the bleak countryside, the prison's formidable outline was no welcome sight for new arrivals. One inmate wrote, "we arrived at Dartmoor late in the after part of the day, and found the ground covered with snow. Nothing could form a more dreary prospect than that which now presented itself to our hopeless view. Death itself, with the hopes of an hereafter, seemed less terrible than this gloomy prison."<sup>45</sup> The epithet "dreary" seems to have been most commonly applied to the prison and its surroundings. "Certain it is," wrote another prisoner upon sober reflection, "that the common people in this neighborhood were impressed with the notion that Dartmoor was a place less desirable to mortals, and more under the influence of evil spirits, than any other spot in England. I shall only say, that I found it, take it all in all, a less disagreeable prison than the ships; the life of a prudent, industrious, well behaved man might be rendered pretty easy."<sup>46</sup>

If one could overlook the crowded accommodations and the vermin, life in Dartmoor was indeed much better than in the hulks. The prisoners were allowed to sell items that they manufactured, and, beginning in February 1814, received 1 ½ d. (pence) per day.<sup>47</sup> With this money they could visit the market stalls that local farm-

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<sup>44</sup> Ron Joy, *Dartmoor Prison, A Complete Illustrated History*, vol. 1 (Tiverton, Devon, UK: Halsgrove, 2002), 28.

<sup>45</sup> Charles Andrews, *The Prisoner's Memoirs, or Dartmoor Prison* (New York, 1852), 10.

<sup>46</sup> Waterhouse, *Journal of a Young Man*, 157.

<sup>47</sup> Joy, *Dartmoor*, 61, 69.

ers and merchants set up in the prison, where one could buy “every little article.” Some complained that the food allowance was too scanty,<sup>48</sup> but Benjamin Waterhouse, for one, found that “the bread and meat supplied by government were not bad; and as good I presume as that given to British prisoners by our own government.”<sup>49</sup> The Transport Board itself appears to have been conscientious when it came to supplying the prisoners with necessities. It issued a reprimand to Commandant Captain Isaac Cotgrave for issuing bread that was “clammy, sour, and of a musty taste, and such as ought not to be issued to prisoners,” and a year later it fined a contractor £3,000 for the faults of the subcontractors he had used to supply the prisoners.<sup>50</sup> Despite the best of intentions, it was clear that early-nineteenth-century Britain did not have the infrastructure or bureaucracy needed to smoothly deal with the thousands of prisoners flooding the country.

In the beginning, the Americans were badly clothed and suffered much from the unusually cold winter of 1813 to 1814. Many had been supplied with clothing meant to last 18 months, consisting of a yellow roundabout jacket, a pair of pantaloons, a waistcoat, a pair of shoes, a shirt, and a woolen cap. Unfortunately, the garments were universally too small and of poor materials and workmanship.<sup>51</sup> In the spring of 1814, the U.S. government assumed responsibility for clothing the prisoners at Dartmoor, and each received a new suit consisting of a blue jacket and trousers, a shirt, and shoes. To prevent the men from selling their new clothes, the prison staff ordered that the prisoners had to wear their issue clothing when they came to take their rations; without them no ration would be given.<sup>52</sup>

For both American and British prisoners of war, daily life in the prisons was a fight against monotony and boredom. Some of the more sober men occupied themselves with self-improvement projects. Books were always in high demand and the literate taught the illiterate to read and write. In Dartmoor, one captive kept a boxing school. The French prisoners in the English hulks amused themselves with various gambling pursuits, including the roulette table, billiards, and cards.<sup>53</sup> Prisoners were often allowed to work at a trade and sell their wares locally for cash. According to the Dartmoor Prison Regulations, “The prisoners are allowed during market hours

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>49</sup> Waterhouse, *Journal*, 157.

<sup>50</sup> Quoted in Robin F.A. Fabel, “Self-Help in Dartmoor: Black and White Prisoners in the War of 1812,” *Journal of the Early Republic*, 9 (Summer 1989), 172.

<sup>51</sup> Andrews, *The Prisoners' Memoirs*, 22-23.

<sup>52</sup> Joy, *Dartmoor*, 70

<sup>53</sup> Waterhouse, *Journal*, 91. According to most narratives, the “virtuous and industrious” Americans in general deplored gambling on the ships, preferring to spend their time in more productive pursuits.

to sell articles of their own manufacture, except mittens or woolen gloves, straw hats or bonnets, shoes, plaited straw, obscene pictures or images and articles formed out of prison stores, which are all strictly forbidden.”<sup>54</sup> Many seamen lost themselves in the production of the much-admired ship models of bone and ivory that now grace so many museum collections. All in all, if a man was able to occupy himself, his time in prison would not weigh as heavily on his mind.

<sup>54</sup> Joy, *Dartmoor*, 39

# Wounded Prisoners: Accusations of Mistreatment

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In 1813, a letter allegedly written by Thomas Cook Jones, surgeon of HMS *Java*, appeared in the *British Naval Chronicle*. In the piece, Surgeon Jones made the serious accusation that USS *Constitution*'s officers mistreated the British wounded after his ship surrendered:

*“Their [the British wounded] removal to the Constitution, the deprivations they there experienced as to food, and the repeated disturbances they suffered by being carried below, and kept there for several hours three different times on the report of an enemy heaving in sight; when these, I say, are considered...the recovery of our seamen appears as miraculous as it proved happy.... I sent my assistant, with most of the wounded men, in the evening, and remained myself in the Java till within a few minutes of her being set on fire; one poor fellow only remained, who had received a musket ball, which entered the right orbit, and remained imbedded in the brain; he was in articulo mortis, and I begged the American lieutenant to let me stay with him undisturbed for a few minutes, as I expected his immediate dissolution. This Yankee son of humanity proposed assisting him into eternity; I instantly dragged him into the boat, and he expired along-side the Constitution.”*<sup>55</sup>

In the eyes of Dr. Amos Evans, surgeon of USS *Constitution*, this account was nothing short of slander and he penned a long rebuttal to a national newspaper to clear his name and those of his fellow officers. Evans claimed that there was not any distinction made between the British and the American wounded, and that “they were slung [i.e. in hammocks] promiscuously together on the gun deck, and everything which humanity could dictate that the ship afforded was provided for their comfort and convenience.”<sup>56</sup> Evans goes on to explain that the ship was cleared for action only once, and on that occasion the wounded were moved to the “birth deck,” one deck below, where the crew normally slept. As to the accusations of barbarity leveled at the “Yankee son of humanity,” “No man who knows lieut. Hoffman, will hesitate

<sup>55</sup> Thomas Cooke Jones, letter to the editor, *The Naval Chronicle*, vol. XXIV, (London: Joyce Gold, 1813), 414-417.

<sup>56</sup> “British Veracity,” *The War*, 15 Mar 1814.

to pronounce Dr. J. an infamous calumniator.... The ward-room officers of the *Constitution* will recollect to have heard Dr. J. frequently spoken of during the cruise, as an inhuman monster, for his conduct to this same unfortunate sailor.”<sup>57</sup> This private war of words between enemy surgeons is difficult to analyze. It is not clear what Dr. Jones’ motivations were for rendering such an account. Was he, as he suggests in his letter, merely pointing out the inhumanities he witnessed, or was he attempting to bolster his own reputation at the expense of the Americans, who, understandably, made easy targets? Amos Evans’ retort is powerful and convincing, but unfortunately there is really no way of verifying anything that he says in the letter. It is true that General Hyslop and Lieutenant Chads of the *Java* praised the conduct and generosity of Commodore Bainbridge and the officers of *Constitution*, but then Chads also made an ominous comment about how *Java*’s enlisted men were pillaged and kept in irons. In the end, it was the word of one gentleman against another, with no way to break the impasse.

A nineteenth-century warship at sea was not the most comfortable situation for a wounded man, friend or foe. George Emerson, sailmaker on HMS *Guerriere*, recounts a painful tale that must have been fairly common among wounded prisoners: “I Received [sic] a musket shot in my left legg [sic] in a downward direction the shot passed down my legg from the calfe [sic] to the instep and lodge there and the shot broke the bone of my leg in a shattered manner. I suffered much from pain, being prisoner and moved about so often from ship to ship, and was put on a currantine [quarantine] island, then move to Charlstown [sic] Hospital in the States- there I got my legg Set after 14 days.”<sup>58</sup> Sadly, the interests of the wounded came second to the operation of a ship. The best of intentions could not prevent the wounded from exposure to wet and cold (or hot) conditions, the jostling of the ship in heavy seas, and the need to “unlumber” the decks when the ship beat to quarters. Wounded men typically transferred to hospitals on shore as soon as possible and, for men like George Emerson, this was often the first time they received proper medical care beyond the most basic triage. When the wounded from USS *Argus* were landed at Mill Prison Hospital in Plymouth, England, the surgeon in charge was shocked at their deplorable condition, nearly all being in a “state of gangrene” and many with shattered limbs untreated. The case was communicated to Reuben G. Beasley, the American agent for prisoners, who launched an investigation into the conduct of Surgeon James Inderwick of *Argus*. After consulting *Argus*’ surviving officers, Beasley concluded that Inderwick had paid “the most prompt & particular attention... to

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Memorial of George Emerson, able seaman and sailmaker in his Majesty’s Service from June 1803 to January 11, 1813. On file in the Samuel Eliot Morison Memorial Library, USS *Constitution* Museum.

the wounded under the most difficult circumstances” and absolved him of any negligence or wrongdoing.<sup>59</sup> Dr. Magrath of Mill Prison Hospital also offered that, in his opinion, the wretched state of the American prisoners was due not to Inderwick’s neglect, but to “the scene of intemperance, riot, and disorder, which I am informed from good authority, pervaded the Crew, from the moment of their capture; and whilst some with shattered limbs refused to submit to amputation, others as obstinately resisted the adoption of such medical treatment as was considered necessary to their respective conditions.”<sup>60</sup> In this case, the wounded alone were responsible for their pain.

The “currantine” island to which George Emerson referred was Rainsford Island in Boston Harbor. Used in the eighteenth century to quarantine victims of the small pox and other contagious diseases, by the early nineteenth century the 11-acre island supported a small hospital.<sup>61</sup> When *Constitution* returned victorious from her engagement with HMS *Guerriere*, “The British wounded men were immediately landed and sent to the hospital on Rainsford Island, to which place Marshall Prince has sent surgeons and every necessary for their comfort and recovery, under the direction of Capt S. Prince, Dep. Marshall, whose attention and humanity to the unfortunates under his care are highly spoken of. They were brought up yesterday [September 2, 1812] from the Island, and are now in the Naval Hospital, Charlestown.”<sup>62</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Reuben G. Beasley to Secretary of the Navy Jones, October 30, 1813, in *The Naval War of 1812*, vol. II, 275.

<sup>60</sup> Reuben G. Beasley to Secretary of the Navy Jones, November 15, 1813, enclosure, Geo. Magrath to Transport Board November 8, 1813, in *The Naval War of 1812*, vol. II, 276.

<sup>61</sup> Stefan Claesson, “Rainsford Island Archaeological Survey,” [http://fishhistory.org/project\\_rainsford.php](http://fishhistory.org/project_rainsford.php).

<sup>62</sup> *Boston Gazette*, September 3, 1812.

# Sailors Switching Sides

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Anglo-American seamen of the early nineteenth century inhabited a world without national borders. They left one ship for another without discrimination and many cared little that a ship was of American or British registry. Warships of both nations had foreigners among their crews. This free flow of labor back and forth across the Atlantic worked well in peacetime, but when the United States declared war on Great Britain, men who had been shipmates were suddenly enemies. Several thousand American seamen serving on British warships in June 1812 gave themselves up as prisoners of war, but many more probably did not. Admiral Sir Herbert Sawyer, commander-in-chief of the Royal Navy's North American Squadron, wrote to his superiors at the Admiralty that "six men who were serving on board the Congress frigate, having given themselves up as British Subjects have been sent here, but I am sorry this is not generally the case nearly two thirds of the American Frigates crews are English and manifest a disposition to quit them, but means are resorted to, to prevent it."<sup>63</sup> From the abundance of evidence on the subject, it appears seamen had few qualms about enlisting in an enemy vessel after the declaration of war. At the same time, the archives are full of letters from the British and American governments accusing the other side of encouraging prisoners of war to enter into their naval service. This was a charge that they found difficult to prove, but considering the circumstantial evidence that confirms the practice, there can be little doubt that switching sides was considered a viable method for getting out of prison and making a living wage.

At the court martial of James Richard Dacres, former commander of HMS *Guerriere*, the presiding captains asked, "Do you know of any Bribe being offered to our Seamen to enter into the American Service?" Dacres responded in the negative, but he had heard that one of the ship's boys had been offered a £5 bounty to join an American vessel. Several of *Guerriere's* senior enlisted men had more direct experience with such enticement:

"Samuel Burn, Sergeant of Marines, John Melvin quarter master, quartered on the quarter Deck, John Shore Boatswain's Mate quartered on the Main Deck and George Morrison quarter Master stationed on the Forecas-

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<sup>63</sup> Vice Admiral Herbert Sawyer, R.N., to Secretary of the Admiralty John W. Corker, September 17, 1812, in William S. Dudley, ed., *The Naval War of 1812, A Documentary History*, vol. 1 (Washington, Naval Historical Center: 1985), 498.



tle were called forward, who stated that every thing was done for the preservation of His Majesty's Ship. On being questioned whether any Bribe was offered to induce them to enter into the American Service Samuel Burn stated that he was enticed by a Military Officer to enter to the Service, while at Boston, promising him promotion above what he then was, and any thing that he stood in need of. John Shole Boatswain's Mate also stated that he had been offered a Bounty of forty and fifty Dollars by a Naval Officer having Epaulets, if he would enter the American Service, with four Days leave, and as much to eat and drink for that time as he chose, and would then be put on board a Ship until the Chesapeake was ready to receive Men..”<sup>64</sup>

The fact that the officer who approached Shole had two epaulets means that he could only have been a captain or master commandant; in either instance, a high-ranking officer who would have known that such transactions were frowned upon.<sup>65</sup> Here American officers approached the petty officer and non-commissioned officers, all experienced veterans, probably with combat experience. But the Americans also appear to have targeted young boys and inexperienced men. Commodore Rodgers was said to have made “every attempt” to convince the British prisoners at Boston to join the American service, with little success. “Several boys, however, from 10 to 15 years of age, who were apprentices under indentures, were compelled or persuaded to enter, and not withstanding repeated applications for their release were still detained.”<sup>66</sup> Samuel Leech, himself a boy during the war, remembered being easily enticed into the U.S. Navy. James Durand claimed that the *Constitution's* officers “used every art to inveigle the *Guerriere's* men into their service. Sixteen or eighteen, Americans and other foreigners, and about eight British who had been pressed on their way to the U. States, remained at Boston (to enter the American navy)”<sup>67</sup>

Once in the American navy, it was not so easy for British subjects to get out again. Whereas a few thousand Americans who were serving on British ships had chosen prison in England over fighting against their country at the beginning of hostilities,<sup>68</sup> very few British sailors in the U.S. Navy were able to give themselves up. Thomas

<sup>64</sup> “Record of the Court Martial of Captain James Richard Dacres, Jr., Late Commander of HMS *Guerriere*,” Public Records Office, Kew. ADM 1/5431, The National Archives, London.

<sup>65</sup> The officer may have been Captain Evans himself, then commanding officer of USS *Chesapeake*.

<sup>66</sup> Anthony St. John Barker to Secretary of State James Monroe, September, 19 1812, in *The Naval War of 1812*, vol. 1, 499. These boys came from merchant vessels.

<sup>67</sup> Durand, *Able Seaman*, 134.

<sup>68</sup> Joy, *Dartmoor*, 61.

Jones, a London-born seaman on the *Chesapeake*, “reported himself to Captn. Evans when he commanded the *Chesapeake* & told him that he was an Englishman, but he [Evans] threatened to put him in Irons.” Another seaman, John Pearce of Ipswich, England, joined *Chesapeake* after the declaration of war, but when told by Captain Lawrence that they were going out to fight HMS *Shannon*, he and some other British seamen on board “asked to have their Prize Money for the last Cruize [meaning they wished to be discharged] when he [Lawrence] damned them for a set of Rascals, then they went down & hove up the anchor, but very unwillingly.”<sup>69</sup>

The Americans, for their part, vehemently denied making offers to British seamen. When the British press claimed that *Constitution’s* officers once again tried to canvass prisoners from HMS *Cyane* and HMS *Levant* for recruits, two American officers retorted that “no offers whatever were made, nor any temptations held out to the crews of said ships to induce them to desert, or quit the service of their King; on the contrary, the very frequent expressions of a desire on their part to enter our service, were invariably discountenanced by the officers of the *Constitution*.”<sup>70</sup>

As much as the British government objected to British seamen joining the American navy, the Royal Navy was just as guilty of forcing prisoners into its service. Lieutenant William M. Crane of USS *Nautilus* complained to British Admiral Sawyer, commander of the North American Squadron, that his men were being mistreated by their captors: “I learn from my crew that every art was Essayed to induce them to enter the service of his Brittanick Majesty and on their refusal the most insulting epithets were bestowed....”<sup>71</sup> The admiral who superseded Sawyer in Halifax was reprimanded by the Admiralty for allowing Americans who had been captured in merchant vessels to be shipped as crew on board British merchant vessels bound for England. For those prisoners, the Atlantic voyage must have provided a welcome respite, even though they were to be delivered into custody once the vessel reached land.<sup>72</sup> American prisoners were also forced to man a fleet of transports at Quebec; the ships’ regular crews had been drafted to the Upper Lakes. The Americans refused to volunteer, “and were accordingly forced on board the Vessels by a brittish [sic] press gang...they had Quarters assigned to them & were compelled to assist in navigating Brittish Vessels to hallifax [sic], & and afterwards to England...not one of

<sup>69</sup> Captain Robert Dudley Oliver to Admiral Sir John B. Warren, R.N., June 23, 1813, in *The Naval War of 1812*, vol. II, 192-193.

<sup>70</sup> *The Columbian*, 24 July 1815.

<sup>71</sup> Lieutenant William M. Crane to Vice Admiral Herbert Sawyer, R.N., August 28, 1812, in *The Naval War of 1812*, vol. 1, 234.

<sup>72</sup> Rear Admiral Edward Griffith, R.N., to First Secretary of the Admiralty John W. Croker, October 18, 1813, in *The Naval War of 1812*, vol. II, 264.

the Seamen who was Prisoner there was exempted from this proceeding.”<sup>73</sup>

Official opprobrium aside, switching sides during the conflict was not looked on kindly by the men who fought or bled for their countries. Charles Andrews recorded the fate of two American seamen who voluntarily entered the British Navy from Dartmoor. It appears that they did not get along well with their new shipmates and were transferred from ship to ship over the course of a year. Finally tired of the ill treatment they received, they gave themselves up as Americans and were returned to prison. Upon entering the prison, the two unfortunates were immediately recognized and seized by the other prisoners. “After holding consultations, many were for putting them to immediate death, others were for flogging them as severely as they could bear, and every man for giving them some condign punishment; but at last it was unanimously concluded to put upon them a mark, which would be a lasting stigma, and an example to others. They seized and took the traitors into prison, and fastened them to a table, so that they could not resist, and then, with needles and India ink, pricked U.S. on one check, and T. on the other; which is United States Traitor.”<sup>74</sup>

<sup>73</sup> Deposition of Abraham Walter, November 23, 1813, in *The Naval War of 1812*, vol. II, 601.

<sup>74</sup> Andrews, *The Prisoner's Memoirs*, 77.

# Prisoner Exchange: Rank for Rank

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Without the infrastructure and organization to take care of hundreds and thousands of prisoners, belligerent nations usually made provision for rapid exchanges of prisoners. Writing to the United States' agent for prisoners in Halifax not long after the declaration of war, Secretary of the Navy Paul Hamilton laid out the government's expectations regarding the exchange of prisoners: "The principles of exchange will be, rank for rank, man for man. If you can do better, you will of course do so- and when it can be done, without injury, you will in commencing the exchange, pay that respect to rank, to which it is entitled, by giving to the senior officer, tho' of the same class, the preference."<sup>75</sup> There were often not enough prisoners of high rank to exchange on a one-to-one basis, so ratios were established that allowed so many enlisted men for one officer according to that officer's rank. For example, a petty officer was worth two enlisted men, a navy lieutenant six, and an admiral sixty.<sup>76</sup>

The orderly exchange of prisoners was disrupted early on, however, by Britain's policy of sending men suspected of being British citizens or deserters back to England for trial. Among the earliest examples of this practice was the case of six men detained from the crew of USS *Nautilus*. Despite their protestations to the contrary, Admiral Sawyer at Halifax found "strong grounds for thinking they are British Subjects and Deserters."<sup>77</sup> In retaliation, Commodore John Rodgers took 12 of the British prisoners from *Guerriere* and kept them in close confinement. By way of explanation and apology to the Secretary of the Navy, Rodgers wrote: "You will, no doubt, readily perceive, Sir, the propriety of my orders for the detention of these men, as a retaliatory pledge for the return of those so insultingly taken from the *Nautilus*; should I, however have mistaken the policy of our government, or misconstrued our rights as a Belligerent, I hope it will be attributed to proper motives- a real wish to serve my Country, and an earnest desire to protect her rights."<sup>78</sup> Rodgers may have been protecting the rights of the United States, but his actions were not, strictly speaking, legal. Anthony St. John Baker, British Chargé d'Affaires in Washington, quickly penned a strongly worded letter to Secretary of State James Monroe:

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<sup>75</sup> Secretary of the Navy Hamilton to John Mitchell, August 26, 1812, in *The Naval War of 1812*, vol. 1, 228.

<sup>76</sup> Lieutenant William M. Crane to Secretary of the Navy Hamilton, October 31, 1812, in *The Naval War of 1812*, vol. 1, 560.

<sup>77</sup> Vice Admiral Herbert Sawyer, R.N. to Lieutenant William M. Crane, August 29, 1812, in *Naval War of 1812*, vol. I, 235.

<sup>78</sup> Commodore John Rodgers to Secretary of the Navy Hamilton, September 12, 1812, in *The Naval War of 1812*, vol. 1, 477.

*“I need not point out to you, Sir, the evil consequences to which a proceeding of this nature may lead, and which I am convinced will be deprecated by no person more than by yourself. With a view therefore to arrest in this early stage a course of measures which may have so fatal a tendency, I have the honour to request that the persons who were seized by the order of Commodore Rodgers may be released, and to offer to afford every facility in my power in transmitting either to Vice Admiral Sawyer or to his Majesty’s Government any claim which may be made by the Government of the United States to the Seamen either at Halifax or in England whose detention has served as a pretext for the violent proceeding adopted by Commodore Rodgers.”<sup>79</sup>*

Unfortunately, the fates of the men embroiled in this political battle are not known, but it is likely that the *Guerriere* prisoners at least were incarcerated for a long time. The Madison administration believed that the situation was a case of “an eye for an eye” and was generally quite rigorous in its use of retaliatory tactics. Writing to newly appointed Commissary General of Prisoners and Superintendent of Alien Enemies John Mason, President Madison urged that strict measures should be adopted immediately:

*“The encouragement which the Enemy seem to derive from our reluctance to retaliate their cruelty towards our military citizens in captivity, requires that an appeal should be made without delay, to their feelings for their own unfortunate people, as they have none for ours. You will proceed therefore to have a corresponding number and grade of British prisoners of war in our hands, placed under a rigor of treatment, corresponding with that authenticated to be used towards American prisoners of war in their hands; reserving a disproportionate retaliation, for the necessity which may be produced by the inefficacy of a numerical one.”<sup>80</sup>*

These orders had ominous repercussions. Madison was relying on the magnanimity of the British government toward its subjects to halt the escalation of retaliatory actions -- a generosity that was not strategically or politically valuable to Westminster.

The stance of the American government toward British prisoners may have contributed to the deteriorating conditions that the American prisoners had to endure

<sup>79</sup> Anthony St. James Baker to Secretary of State James Monroe, in *The Naval War of 1812*, vol. 1, 500.

<sup>80</sup> President James Madison to Commissary General of Prisoners John Mason, September 23, 1813, in *The Naval War of 1812*, vol. II, 248.

in England, but surprisingly, the prisoners themselves applauded the policy. Benjamin Waterhouse thought that a “plan of retaliation” saved many lives and “insured the usual treatment of ordinary prisoners of war” to British-born men captured in American service. Indeed, Madison’s plan merited “the respect and gratitude of the present and future generations of men.”<sup>81</sup>

<sup>81</sup> Waterhouse, *Journal*, 34.

# Prisoners Returning Home

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Months and years were spent in the anticipation of the happy day when prisoners learned that they were to be exchanged and sent home. Although exchanges took place throughout the war, it was not until the ratification of the peace treaty that most were released from captivity. For one prisoner, as for many, adjusting to his newfound freedom was a profoundly emotional experience: “My sensations on first setting my foot once more on my native soil, were such as I have not power to describe. Tears gushed from my eyes, and had I not been ashamed, I should have kneeled down and kissed the earth of the UNITED STATES.”<sup>82</sup>

Most prisoners came home on cartel ships. These were usually privately owned vessels purchased specifically as a vehicle for repatriation. They were issued with passes that allowed them to cross the Atlantic unmolested by enemy warships or privateers. In late 1812 and early 1813, the United States purchased three cartel ships, the *Analostan*, the *Perseverance*, and the *Neptune*. The *Perseverance* was fitted out to receive 400 men, two-thirds of whom would be accommodated on a platform of boards in the hold. Although this may have reminded the prisoners of their unpleasant journey to England, at least the food was better: the ship was to be provisioned with “20,000 Rations of the United States Navy.”<sup>83</sup>

The American prisoners were all too happy to be rid of their hulks and dank prison barracks, but according to some (American) accounts, British seamen did not exactly jump for joy when their day of liberation came. Benjamin Waterhouse patriotically proclaimed:

*“On thanksgiving days, and on Christmas days, and such like holy days, we, in America, used to treat these European prisoners with geese, turkies, and plumb pudding. Many of these fellows declared that they never in their lives sat down to a table to a roasted turkey, or even a roasted goose. It is a fact, that when the time approached for drafting the British prisoners in Boston harbor, to send to Halifax to exchange them for our own men, several patriotic Englishmen, and many Irishmen, ran away; and when taken showed as much chagrin as our men would have felt, had they attempted to desert and run home from Halifax prison, and had been seized and*

<sup>82</sup> Waterhouse, *Journal*, 237.

<sup>83</sup> Secretary of the Navy Jones to Navy Agent George Harrison, April 3, 1813, in *The Naval War of 1812*, vol. II, 86-88.

| *brought back!*<sup>84</sup>

It is true that early nineteenth-century Americans generally ate much better than their European counterparts, but to suggest that this was the sole reason for their unhappiness at their repatriation seems somewhat ridiculous. The Irishmen probably had much better reasons for wishing to remain in America. British policy toward returning seamen was unclear, but many probably felt that they would be forced once again into navy service. Still, it seems that British prisoners in America, on the whole, had a more favorable experience than their American counterparts in English prisons. Yet the question remains: were British prisoners better treated than American prisoners? Perhaps the hortatory remarks of a Boston newspaper had the desired effect: “By the capture and destruction of the *Guerriere* the chance of war has thrown into our hands a large number of the subjects of the enemy- Let no rude tongue disgrace our nation’s name by the offer of an insult to an individual. Let them be treated kindly and humanely- If HULL is brave, assure these unfortunate men that the *American people* are magnanimous.”<sup>85</sup> In the end, it is difficult to assess the relative severity or liberality of treatment afforded these men. Between the lines of newspaper boasts and letters of praise, there can be little doubt that magnanimity disappears in the face of armed conflict.

<sup>84</sup> Waterhouse, *Journal*, 49-50.

<sup>85</sup> *Boston Patriot*, September 2, 1812.



# Citing this publication

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## APA

Brenckle, M. (2020). "British and American Naval Prisoners of War During the War of 1812." USS Constitution Museum. <https://www.usscm.org/publications/british-and-american-naval-prisoners-of-war-during-the-war-of-1812.pdf>.

## MLA

Brenckle, Matthew. "British and American Naval Prisoners of During the War of 1812," USS Constitution Museum, 2020, <https://www.usscm.org/publications/british-and-american-naval-prisoners-of-war-during-the-war-of-1812.pdf>.

## Chicago

Brenckle, Matthew. "British and American Naval Prisoners of During the War of 1812," USS Constitution Museum (2020): <https://www.usscm.org/publications/british-and-american-naval-prisoners-of-war-during-the-war-of-1812.pdf>.