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The Waters of War

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A Privateer Whaleboat Raid on a New Jersey Night



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On the night of June 11, 1777, Atlantic Ocean waves racing in from the southern end of New York Bay slapped the sides of the two whaleboats creeping along the shore and attempted to climb aboard like raiding pirates. The privateers manning the whaleboats followed the waves out into the Bay on a similar raiding mission to Long Island. They intended to raid the homes of several prominent Tories or Loyalists pirate-style, capture them, and exchange them for captured Patriots.

Whaleboat privateer Captain William Marriner didn't recite privateering success statistics as he and his whaleboat crew crept along the coast of New Jersey during the night of June 11, 1777, because reliable statistics wouldn't be compiled until after the war ended in 1783. Even if Captain Marriner had known the statistics, he probably wouldn't have cared. The adrenalin of outwitting the better armed British, and the probability of good profits for his trouble compelled him to undertake this dangerous mission. Adrenalin and patriotism enabled him to capture

British soldiers and Tories and fade back into the New Jersey shoreline with his men and ships.

Captain Marriner and his whaleboat privateers were part of the sea war against the British Navy, at the time the most powerful navy on earth. The Patriot privateers and their rag tag maritime army inflicted tremendous losses on the British during the Revolutionary War and were instrumental in tipping the balance in favor of the Patriots.

After the Battle of Fort Washington on November 16, 1776, the Continentals or the Patriots evacuated Long Island and for the rest of the Revolutionary War the British controlled most of what is now Greater New York. Lord Richard Howe and his brother Sir William Howe shaped New York City which then comprised only the southern tip of Manhattan Island, into the center of the British political and military operations in North America.

New York harbor bustled with British activity. Hundreds of British sloops, schooners, tenders, and supply barges dotted New York harbor like white seagulls riding blue waves. British war ships protected merchant ships that supplied the British Army isolated in New York. Over 150 sloops and schooners carried farm products from Tory farms in New Jersey, Staten Island, and Long Island to Manhattan which was the main source of British supply. Sails of hundreds of vessels unfurled a continuous white canopy over the blue waters of New York Bay.

British ships of war escorted merchant ship convoys from New York across the Atlantic Ocean to England. Three decker ships of the line with tiers of heavy cannon, swiftly sailing gun heavy frigates, and smaller sloops of war ringed the British war ships. An armada of British and Tory privateers hovered to protect and defend British shipping and prey on Patriot shipping.

New York Bay and the Atlantic Ocean waters surrounding it also teemed with Patriot activity where an armada of Patriot privateers lurked to prey on British shipping and protect Patriot shipping. Captain William Marriner challenged the occupying British in New York and New Jersey, as part of the Colonial privateer army that successfully fought and often won battles with the most powerful Navy in the world. His whaleboat and others like it were part of an armada of privately owned and operated sloops, schooners, and whaleboats that avidly hunted British ships, captured goods, supplies, and British soldiers, and significantly helped supply the Colonial Army.

Patriots Were Privateers and Entrepreneurs

On March 23, 1776, the Continental Congress passed an act establishing uniform rules of conduct for Letters of Marque which commissioned ships as privateers. Owners of ships acting as privateers had to post bonds to ensure they followed regulations. Some scholars of the American Revolutionary War estimate that about 1,700 Letters of Marque were issued on a per voyage basis during the Revolution to nearly 800 vessels. These privateers were credited with capturing or destroying approximately 600 British ships. The privateers captured enemy ships and took them back to port. In port they sold the cargo and often the ship as well and split the profits between the backers of the privateer, the crew, and the government.

In his book *Patriot Pirates The Privateer War for Freedom and Fortune in the American Revolution*, Robert Patton reported that Lloyd's of London recorded 3,087 British merchants ships captured, with 879 of those recaptured on the spot or ransomed. About 2,208 ships were destroyed or sold with their cargoes as prizes in American ports. Privateering was a business combining patriotism with profits. The lowest members in the crewman hierarchy could make a fortune if their ship successfully captured prizes.

The ships used for privateering were as varied as the privateers themselves. Privateers used ships from the scale of the 600-ton, 26-gun ship *Caesar* from Boston to the smallest whaleboat. Privateering crews varied from a small whaleboat crew of three men to more than 200 men aboard a large, well-equipped privateer like the *Defense* of Falmouth, Massachusetts. Two masted schooners and brigantines were most often used in privateering.

The New Jersey privateers mostly pitted whaleboats against the ship of war might of the British Navy. As described by Fred J. Cook in *What Manner of Men: Forgotten Heroes of the American Revolution*, whaleboats measured from 26 to 30 feet long, were broad beamed, had a shallow draft and featured "sharply double ends." Whaleboats carried crews of 14-24 men, usually local residents who knew the coastline and inlets as intimately as they did their whaleboats. The whaleboat men armed themselves with boarding pikes, and muskets or duck guns, but the weapons they relied on most were pistols, cutlasses, and surprise attacks.

The largest whaleboats carried only one piece of artillery, a small swivel gun mounted on the bow or the stern of the largest boats. The widely known secret about the identity of the swivel gun was that it was a large musket fixed on a swivel mounting so that it could fire a quarter of a pound ball at all ranges and in

all direction. It was a glorified small arm, not a canon.

Whaleboat privateers had to rely on swift, surprise attacks for successful raids. They had to swarm like angry bees over the decks of their astonished enemies, capture the prize, and quickly escape. To escape to safety, whaleboat privateers navigated across treacherous shoals and up winding channels where the heavier armed, deeper drafted war ships, couldn't follow them.

Captain William Marriner

Many of the Patriot Privateers earned local, regional, and even national fame. Captain Adam Hyler and Captain William Marriner, two privateers from New Brunswick, New Jersey, became renowned for their whaleboat operations against the British.

General George Washington knew Captain William Marriner as a tavern keeper and a jovial, relaxed man with a good sense of humor. Tall with a large body and possessing great physical strength, William Marriner early in the Revolutionary War served as a private in the New Jersey regiment of Lord Stirling - William Alexander Stirling- but eventually he left and established a tavern on the banks of the Raritan River outside of New Brunswick. Patriot spies, informers, and whaleboat men used Captain Marriner's tavern as an informal information clearing house and he conducted raids across New York Bay with the whaleboat men who were his tavern customers.

The British commanders in New York had instituted a policy of rounding up prominent patriots in New Jersey. Tories knew the identity of the Patriot leaders and they were familiar with the roads and the countryside. The British engineered repeated raids, snatching Patriots from their homes and confining them in the dank, disease ridden holds of British prison ships anchored in Wallabout Bay in Brooklyn and other locations. For their part, the Americans didn't have any influential prisoners to use as pawns in exchanges, so they decided to acquire some.

John Schenck, a local militia captain, and Captain William Marriner organized a whaleboat raiding expedition bound for the Long Island shore where many prominent Tories had established their country homes. Captain Schenck had many friends and relatives in Flatbush that he had visited since childhood, so he knew the area well.

Captain William Marriner's First Whaleboat Raid

On the night of June 11, 1777, Atlantic Ocean waves racing in from the southern end of New York Bay slapped the sides of the two whaleboats creeping along the shore and attempted to climb aboard like raiding pirates. The privateers manning the whaleboats followed the waves out into the Bay on a similar raiding mission to Long Island. They intended to raid the homes of several prominent Tories or Loyalists pirate-style, capture them, and exchange them for captured Patriots.

Captain William Marriner conducted his first and one of his most daring and successful whaleboat raids on June 11, 1777

Darkness settled over the land and sea like a black velvet blanket and Captain Schenck, Captain Marriner, and 26 hand-picked men in two whaleboats set out on Matawan Creek on the southwestern shore of Raritan Bay. They hugged the shoreline so that their boats could slip in and out of the shadows to avoid the British patrols that monitored the Bay.

The sky was overcast and a sword edged east wind swept in from the open Atlantic Ocean creating waves that romped across the open water meadows of Lower New York Bay and battered the sides of the whaleboats. North of the mouth of the Raritan River, the whaleboats veered over to the Staten Island shore reaching the coast just north of Princess Bay and creeping along the Bay close to land. The rough waters roiled the stomach of one of Captain Schenck's militiamen and he became noisily seasick. Captain Marriner growled an order to the whaleboat men, telling them to throw the man overboard if he made another sound. The miserable man somehow controlled his seasick noises.

The whaleboats slanted across the Narrows, the channel that separates Staten Island on the west from Long Island on the east, and connects upper and lower New York Harbor. Grounding their boats on the shore of Long Island the whale boatmen hurried to accomplish their mission. They hid their boats in the bushes, left a man to guard them, and stationed three pickets on the road to the beach so the British couldn't turn the tables and surprise them. Then they moved inland on the next phase of their raid.

Captain Marriner and Captain Schenck had compiled a list of Tories that they had in mind for capture. David Matthews, the Tory Mayor New York topped the list. After him came Miles Sherbrook a wealthy Tory merchant and an enemy of Captain Marriner, wealthy Jacob Suydam, Colonel William Axtell, a member of

the Governor's Council and a wealthy Tory, and Theophylact Bache, president of the New York Chamber of Commerce. His brother Richard had married Sarah, a daughter of Patriot Benjamin Franklin.

Captain Marriner and Captain Schenck marched their men into the protective shadow of a neighborhood church, divided their men into four squads, and gave each squad a heavy plank to use as battering ram to carry out their mission. If the mission worked as clockwork as planned, each squad would raid a selected home at the same time, seize their prisoners quickly, return to the church, reunite, and make their way back to their boats in a group.

The raiders faded into the night to fulfill their respective missions. The fact that the British enjoyed an active and party filled night life in Long Island worked in favor of the whaleboat raiders. Captain Marriner's men soon discovered that Mayor Matthews and Colonel Axtell were attending an all-night party in New York City and they wouldn't be home until before dawn. The privateer raiders didn't have time to welcome home the British partiers, so they moved on to more promising prospects.

At the Suydam house they encountered Captain Alexander Gradon, an American officer who had been taken prisoner in the capture of Fort Washington in November 1776. He had been billeted at the Suydam house waiting for a prisoner exchange and Captain Marriner's men promptly liberated him. At the next house they found Theophylact Bache sleeping in his bed and they captured him and dragged him away.

In the nearby home of George Martense, Captain Marriner ferreted out Miles Sherbrook hiding in a garret behind a Dutch chimney. Captain Marriner's men had entered the house so quickly that Miles Sherbrook hadn't had time to put on his breeches, so they dangled from his hand as he stood staring at Captain Marriner in disbelief. Instead of giving Miles Sherbrook time to pull on his breeches, Captain Marriner prodded his prisoner to the gathering at the church. While they waited for the other raiding parties to return, Miles Sherbrook managed to pull on his breeches before Captain Marriner led him and Theophylact Bache to the whaleboats.

The Patriots Sail Home with their Tory Prisoners

The whaleboat privateers had raided the British and the Loyalist homes so swiftly and skillfully that they didn't have a chance to sound an alarm or fight the Patriot privateers. The privateers quickly launched their boats and headed straight across

New York Bay for home. On the return voyage the wind and the waves were at their back and the tide surged with them. The little whaleboats skimmed across the wide expanse of Lower New York Bay and it took the privateers only an hour and a quarter to reach Keyport, New York. By 6 a.m. they were docking at Matawan.

The whaleboat raiders hadn't captured all of the Tories on their list, but they had at least two to exchange for patriot leaders and Continental Army officers and they had returned safely without fighting or losing a man. As he tied his whaleboat to the dock, Captain Marriner was already planning his next raid.

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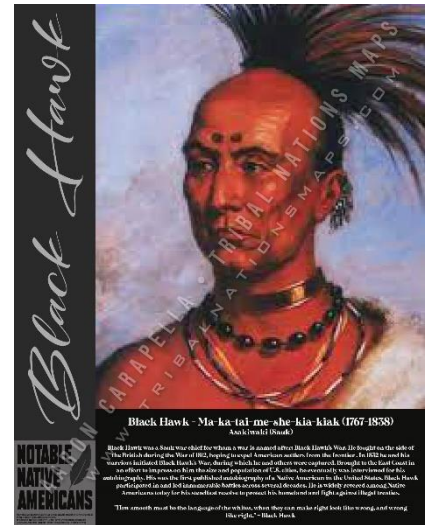
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Lt. Jefferson Davis, Black Hawk, and Cholera

At first glance, Black Hawk, chief of the Sac and Fox Indians, Noah Brown master carpenter, and United States troops and cholera epidemics don't seem to be connected with each other. Then in the spring and summer of 1832, they combined into a deadly mixture that made troop transport on Great Lakes steamers a focal point of the Black Hawk War.



Black Hawk Takes A Stand and the United States Government Charters Four Steamers

Black Hawk was just one chief of the Sac and Fox Indians, but his courage of desperation propelled him to revolt against the white inroads on his lands in the early spring of 1832. He and his warriors invaded Northern Illinois and Southern Wisconsin. The Fox and The Sac Indians occupied country west of the Mississippi River in an area that was then known as Michigan Territory.

Black Hawk had assured the United States government that his people would remain on the west side of the Mississippi, but as he watched white settlers claiming Indian lands he changed his mind. Black Hawk and his warriors entered Illinois and murdered many settlers and burned their property. He vowed that he would do everything, including fighting a war, to recover the old lands on the east side of the river which the Indians had given up by treaty.

In response to Black Hawk's challenge, the United States government chartered four steamers -the Henry Clay, the Superior, the Sheldon Thompson, and the William Penn to transport troops and provisions to Chicago to fight in the Black Hawk War. The government had already sent a detachment of troops up the Mississippi River, but felt it was essential to transport troops and provisions across the lakes as well.

Asiatic Cholera, the Silently Stalking Enemy

The government wasn't aware of another enemy that ravaged the troops as effectively as Black Hawk and his warriors, an enemy called Asiatic cholera. This

particular cholera epidemic was by no means the first to take a toll on emigrants and early settlers along the lakes. In 1815, an Asiatic cholera epidemic spread from Buffalo, New York to Erie and other lake ports. It was called the Black Rock Fever, because it had originated in the Black Rock-Buffalo area and was spread by soldiers from the War of 1812 as they traveled about.

How it got to Buffalo is a matter of speculation. Buffalo was an important lake port and possibly emigrants from New York City brought it up to Buffalo. Whatever its origin, the epidemic claimed many lives. Among its victims in Erie County Pennsylvania were Andrew and Martha Thompson, a middle-aged couple, and the young wife of Joel Thompson.

The 1832 epidemic was eerily similar. It first appeared at Quebec on June 11, 1832, where thirty-four people died. The victims were mainly emigrants who had just landed on died on the passage. From Quebec, the cholera spread to New York City, Albany, and Buffalo in the first part of July. It gradually worked westward. A Colonel Thompson, probably related to the earlier Thompson victims, played an important part in the cholera campaign of the Black Hawk War.

The Steamer Henry Clay Arrives at Detroit

The steamers that the government sent to Chicago filled with troops and supplies in 1832 were intertwined with the histories of lake ports. The steamer Henry Clay, 1,300 tons burden, began traveling between Buffalo and Detroit in 1826 as a traveling companion to the Superior. Their order of sailing was every fourth day from Buffalo and Detroit, leaving Buffalo at 9:00 o'clock a.m. and Detroit at 4 p.m. They called at Dunkirk, Portland, Erie, Grand River, Cleveland, and Sandusky.

The arrival of lake steamer was an important event in port cities. The Henry Clay first arrived at Detroit from Buffalo at the opening of navigation on May 8, 1826. The local press described the event:

"The first arrival from Buffalo the present season is the new and elegant steamboat Henry Clay, Capt. Walter Norton. This vessel is worthy of the name of the great Western orator and statesman, and we have no doubt the enterprise and liberality of her owners will be amply remunerated. The Henry Clay has an engine of 60 horse power. Her model is highly approved, and her cabins are elegantly and expensively fitted up. The well-known politeness of Captain Norton, his experience and skill as a seaman together with a circumstance that considerable of her stock is owned in

Detroit will insure to the Henry Clay a profitable business."

Thomas McKenny of the Indian Department Writes a Letter from Detroit

Six years before the Black Hawk War, a passenger on the Henry Clay had a mission that seemed touch on the battles of 1832. Thomas L. McKenney of the Indian Department was traveling to Fond du Lac, Wisconsin to negotiate a treaty with the Chippewa Indians. He wrote from Detroit on June 16, 1826:

"I arrived at this place this morning, after an agreeable passage from Buffalo of 37 hours, exclusive of the time lost in stopping at Grand River, Cleveland, Sandusky, etc. to put out and take in passengers - distance, about 330 miles.

It is due to the Henry Clay in which I made my first lake voyage, that I should speak of her as being one of the first class. She is schooner rigged, and has a depth and beams suited to the use of sails, when these are needed, and her timbers are stout and well put together, that she may sail the shores of this inland sea, and the stormy route, for which she was built...the steam boats Superior and Henry Clay are surpassed by few, if any, either in size or beauty of model, or in the style in which they are built and finished..."

The Sheldon Thompson, Troops for the Blackhawk War and Cholera Arrive in Chicago

The American government decided to charter four lake steamers to transport troops and supplies to Chicago to fight in the Black Hawk War. Henry Clay's companion steamer, the Superior, was built on the banks of Buffalo Creek by Noah Brown, a master carpenter, during the winter of 1821. She was the first sizeable ship built at Buffalo and she presented a navigational problem before she even set sail on the lakes. The sand bars at the mouth of Buffalo Creek had to be cut to let her out into Lake Erie. The Lake Erie Steamboat Company, the Superior's owner, were guaranteed that either human force or the forces of waters in the spring would clear the mouth of the creek so that the Superior could enter the lake. Solid citizens of Buffalo pledged \$100 for each day that the Superior might be delayed in the creek.

The Superior was launched on April 13, 1822, after some difficulty in getting through the sand bar. She finally splashed into the lake with the help of her engine. Her sailors wound a cable around the shaft of the engine and attached it to an anchor carried ahead. After a few miles run on the lake to try her machinery, the

Superior returned triumphantly to Buffalo.

Captain Jedediah Rogers and the Superior

Captain Jedediah Rogers was the captain of the Superior when it was commissioned in May 1822. Until 1826, she was the only steamboat on Lake Erie and made voyages to Mackinac, which was then the pinnacle of lakes navigation. Henry Schoolcraft of Detroit was a passenger on the Superior in 1822 during a trip to Sault Ste. Marie. He said that she had "proved herself a staunch boat."

Indian Department employee Thomas McKenney also had something to say about the Superior during his stay in Detroit in 1826. He wrote, "I have just returned from the Governor's, where I have spent the evening, and most agreeably, notwithstanding a most furious gust of wind and rain, accompanied by vivid and frequent flashes of lightning and most appalling thunder.

"Great fears are entertained for the steamboat, the Superior, which was expected up about an hour before the gust arose, and has not yet arrived. I have this moment heard the signal gun, announcing the arrival of the Superior. She is several hours out of her usual time, no doubt in consequence of the gust."

The William Penn and the Sheldon Thompson

The William Penn was the first steamboat launched at Erie, Pennsylvania on May 18, 1826, and was the sixth American steamboat on the lakes. She was built by the Erie & Chautauqua Steamboat Company, which was incorporated on April 10, 1826, and she was 200 tons burden, 95 feet keel, 25 feet beam, and 8 feet hold.

Captain John F. Wright sailed her to Detroit, arriving on August 22, 1826. The William Penn was described as a powerfully built boat and well calculated for lake navigation. She had a low-pressure engine with a walking beam of cast iron. On her arrival at Detroit, she exchanged salutes with the steam brig Superior.

Captain Augustus Walker was one of the best-known navigators and expander of steamboat interests on the Great Lakes. He built the Washington, the Great Western, and the Sheldon Thompson at Huron. She had 242 tons burden and carried three masts, the first of that rig on the lakes. On August 1, 1830, the Sheldon Thompson made her first trip to Mackinac and Green Bay.

The Buffalo News of July 7, 1830, printed a notice about the Sheldon Thompson.

"The steamer Sheldon Thompson, A. Walker, master, proposes to leave her dock, August 30th for Mackinac, Green Bay, and intermediate ports. This stanch and elegant steamship is lauded as being a specimen of Ohio architecture. She will remain at Green Bay two or three days and one or two days at Mackinac to give her passengers a chance to view the delightful scenery of the upper lakes. "General Friend Palmer of Detroit saw the Sheldon Thompson leave Detroit on July 6, 1832, from her dock in Dorr & Jones at the foot of Shelby Street. He said that she had on board a "goodly number of passengers, besides a number of United States troops, with their officers and regimental band, destined for the seat of the Black Hawk War."

At the beginning, the Black Hawk War seemed to be shaping up into a serious Indian war, so the government thought that the steamer route up the lakes would be a good troop route to supplement the regular troops on the Mississippi River. Major General Winfield Scott came on the steamer Sheldon Thompson, along with 220 officers and men.

Captain Augustus Walker still commanded the Sheldon Thompson. The Sheldon Thompson came from Buffalo to Chicago, arriving there on July 10, 1832. At Chicago one officer and 51 men died of cholera. General Scott and several officers had a slight attack, but soon recovered.

The lake steamer Sheldon Thompson arrived in Chicago with troops for the Blackhawk War and cholera aboard. About eight days after the Sheldon Thompson arrived in Chicago, the William Penn appeared in Chicago harbor with troops and supplies. General Twiggs and his men had embarked on the steamers Henry Clay and William Penn and numbered about 370 strong, including officers. Cholera attacked this detachment before the Indians could and they had to land at Fort Gratiot.

Soldiers Take to the Woods to Escape Cholera

The Henry Clay and the Superior had to remain at Fort Gratiot. No discipline could be maintained on the Henry Clay. As soon as the steamer docked at Fort Gratiot, each man sprang on shore hoping to escape the disease. Some fled to the woods, some to the fields. Others lay down in the streets and under the cover of the river bank. Most of them died, unwept and alone.

Only 150 men remained alive. A large number died of cholera and were buried in

the grave yard at the fort. The rest fled to the woods and along the road to Detroit. Few of them reached Detroit. Many died in the woods by the wayside and their bodies were devoured by wolves and other wild animals. Colonel Cummings landed at Detroit with another detachment of troops and camped there.

Cholera camped with the soldiers and several died. The survivors fled in terror from the enemy that didn't war whoop or brandish tomahawks. They embarked on the steamer William Penn, ready to travel to a safer place. Gradually their officers ordered them to return to the war, and they did. They didn't have many more cholera casualties. About July 12, 1832, Colonel Thompson with two companies of infantry from Fort Gratiot came to Detroit by steamer. The men landed and marched cross country to Chicago. They didn't suffer many cholera casualties either. The cholera casualties on the steamers totaled more than half of the total of the men in the six companies that left Fortress Monroe.

General Henry Atkinson and Colonel Zachary Taylor Travel the Mississippi to St. Louis

Cholera didn't vanquish all of the soldiers. There were many left to fight the Indians. A force of 1,800 soldiers from Illinois marched to the mouth of the Rock River on the Mississippi, where the Indians had their headquarters. General Atkinson commanded a company of regulars and under the immediate command of Colonel Zachary Taylor, the company went down the Mississippi to St. Louis, Missouri.

General Hugh Brady, commander of the Department of the Lakes, headquartered at Detroit traveled overland with Lieutenant Electus Backus and his staff and they joined General Atkinson in the field. Colonel Henry Dodge of the Michigan Territory raised a territorial volunteer force and moved to St. Louis. During the spring and summer of 1832, these troops fought several sharp skirmishes with the Indians. Some of the men from the lake steamers and the cholera companies fought in these campaigns.

The Indians found themselves closely pressed by advancing troops. They were pushed up Black River and soon they were more anxious to run away from the pursuing troops than to make war on them. The white men continued to pursue the Indians up the Wisconsin River to the bluffs. Here they found Black Hawk and his band crossing the river with their women and children. At the battle of Wisconsin Heights, the Indians were driven into the bottoms of the Wisconsin. There they hid and darkness concealed them from the white troops.

The white men kept up the chase and on August 2, 1832, twelve days after the Battle of Wisconsin Heights, the army found the Indians near the mouth of the Bad Axe river, which flows into the Mississippi River about forty miles above Prairie du Chien.

The Steamer Warrior and the Battle of Bad Axe

The American government had also sent the Warrior, a steamer armed with a six pounder, up the Mississippi River to keep the Indians from escaping across the river. The Indians were surrounded and this encounter, the Battle of Bad Axe, soon ended. Most of Black Hawk's band was captured and dispersed. Official reports estimate the white man's loss as 25 killed and wounded. In fact, the army's entire casualties in the Black Hawk War except for the cholera deaths were estimated to be about 50. The Indians were reported to have had 230 men killed in battle. Many others died of wounds and others died of starvation, disease, and drowning.

Black Hawk escaped and made his way to the dalles of the Wisconsin River, where he was captured by One-Eyed Decorra, a Winnebago Chief. One Eyed Decorra delivered Black Hawk to General Street, the Indian Agent at Prairie du Chien on August 27, 1832.

Lieutenant Jefferson Davis and His Troops Escort Black Hawk Away, but Cholera Remains in Port

Lieutenant Jefferson Davis of the regular army and his troops escorted Black Hawk down the Mississippi River to Jefferson Barracks, Missouri, where he was confined as a prisoner of war for several months. Finally Black Hawk was set free and lived quietly on the Mississippi River until his death on October 23, 1838.

The cholera survivors from the steamers Henry Clay, William Penn, Superior and Sheldon Thompson returned home from the Black Hawk War, victorious over both marauding Native Americans trying to preserve their homes and the marauding cholera. Black Hawk and his warriors would not make a comeback in the Department of the Lakes, but cholera did again and again.

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Captain Amos Foster Meets Admiral Porter and President Lincoln

Captain Amos Foster

During the Civil War, Captain Amos Palmer Foster had a humorous experience with President Abraham Lincoln and a serious one with Admiral David Porter of the United States Navy. Amos Foster, who would later become a noted Great lakes captain was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1834 and absorbed the sea into his blood at an early age. He attended school in Brooklyn and later was a pupil at the North River Military Academy. He passed the examination for admission to the Naval Academy at Annapolis, but remained there only a short time.



Captain Foster Serves in the Lower Potomac During the Civil War

Amos Palmer Foster began sailing as a boy on a ship in the China trade. In a few years he had worked his way up until he was given command of the *Horatio*, a full rigged ship which sailed between New York and China.

When the Civil War broke out, Amos Foster offered his services to the United States government and he was appointed acting master in the United States Navy and assigned to duty in the lower Potomac. He commanded the *Wyandank*, assigned to the Potomac Squadron and later when commanding the *Resolute*, his job was conveying Union ships past Confederate batteries.

On October 11, 1861, Captain Foster destroyed a Confederate schooner which was

carrying guns for a Confederate battery that had sailed up the Potomac River and entered a creek. The official result was that Senator Edgar Cowan of Pennsylvania offered a resolution expressing a vote of thanks from Congress to Captain Foster.

Captain Foster Commands the Commodore Perry

Captain Foster's next adventure happened early in April 1865. The *Commodore Perry* lay in the James River, about half mile above the Dutch Gap Canal. The Union lines surrounding Lee's Army were being drawn tighter and closer and the final blow against the Confederacy was about to fall. Suddenly the Captain heard the sound of heavy firing from the direction of Richmond.

Captain Foster at once went ashore in his gig and climbed to the top of the "Old Crow nest" signal tower. From there he had an excellent view from miles around. In about an hour he came back aboard the *Commodore Perry*. In a few minutes, the flagship signaled the *Commodore Perry*. The message read: "Get underway. Take the lead to Richmond. Be very careful of torpedoes."

Captain Foster weighed anchor and the *Commodore Perry* began to steam up the James River. The crew destroyed about 51 torpedoes, which enabled the rest of the Union fleet to come up the river with little difficulty or danger. When the *Commodore Perry* reached Fort Darling, she ran aground on the obstruction placed across the river. Captain Foster ordered his chief engineer to pay no attention to the engine bells, but instead forced the ship forward and backward as hard as possible until she was worked off.

Captain Foster Encounters Admiral David Porter and His Flagship, *Malvern*

While Captain Foster grappled with his mini-sand bar, the United States steamship *Malvern*, Admiral David Porter's flagship with President Lincoln aboard, came up astern of the *Commodore Perry*. It was impossible for the Admiral's ship to pass the *Commodore Perry* because of the narrowness of the river at that point. President Lincoln and Admiral Porter had to resume their trip to Richmond on the Admiral's barge.

As the men attempted to force the barge through the narrow passage, it was caught close to the *Commodore Perry*'s immense paddle wheel, and the engineer, not being aware of what had happened, began turning the wheel over. President Lincoln, the Admiral, and the crew of the barge shouted and Captain Foster, remembering his instructions to his engineer, ran to the engine room hatch and

called to the engineer to stop. The immense wheel was stopped just in time, for one more half turn would have resulted in the injury and possible deaths of all of the people on board Admiral Porter's barge.

Admiral David Porter ordered Captain Amos Foster not to proceed to Richmond, but to anchor and allow all of the other vessels to go up the James River in front of him. Captain Foster obeyed and the barge carrying Admiral Porter and President Lincoln sailed up the James River toward Richmond. After the barge had passed, tugs dragged the *Commodore Perry* head first through the obstructions and continued on the journey up the James toward Richmond. The *Commodore Perry* was the first ship bearing national colors to drop anchor before Richmond.

President Abraham Lincoln Enjoys the Joke

A few hours later, Admiral David Porter's flag ship, the *Malvern*, dropped anchor near the *Commodore Perry* and during the evening President Lincoln and Admiral Porter reboarded her. For Captain Amos Foster, the greatest ordeal of the whole campaign was about to begin. Duty compelled him to go on board the flagship, *Malvern*, and report the presence of the *Commodore Perry* to Admiral Porter. Captain Foster rowed over to the *Malvern* and entered the cabin. Here he found President Lincoln and Admiral Porter sitting and talking. Saluting, Captain Foster announced the arrival of the United States Steamship *Commodore Perry* at Richmond.

According to the version of the story in *History of the Great Lakes*, Admiral Porter said to Captain Foster in a very stern voice, "Captain Foster, I thought I told you not to come up to Richmond."

"Sir, I did not understand you so. I thought you told me that when I backed off not to attempt to come up here," Captain Foster said.

"Well, what of it?" Admiral Porter demanded.

Captain Amos Foster replied in the same measured accents he had used during the entire conversation. "Sir, I did not back off. I ran her over, bow first."

Admiral Porter turned many shades of red, but before he could say anything, President Lincoln saw the joke and threw back his head and laughed. Still laughing, he stood up and offered his hearty congratulations to Captain Foster.

Admiral Porter's color returned to normal, and he, too, got to his feet. He said, "Sir, you can now go aboard your vessel. I will see you concerning this matter in the morning."

Much to his relief, that was the last that Captain Foster heard from Admiral David Porter.

Captain Foster Sails the Great Lakes, but Doesn't Forget His Admiral Porter Story

After the Civil War ended, Captain Foster resigned from the Navy and went into mercantile pursuits until 1891, when he began to work for the United States government as a captain of the lighthouse steamer *Dahlia*. From 1891 to 1895, he remained in the light house engineer's office and in 1895, he commanded the light house boat *Warrington*. He finished out his maritime career on the Great Lakes, but his warmest memory and his best sea story was the yarn about the time that he met Admiral Porter and got to Richmond ahead of him.

Captain Foster kept the flag that the Commodore Perry flew the day that he bested Admiral Porter and made President Abraham Lincoln laugh, and he cherished it for the rest of his days.

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Operation Dynamo At Dunkirk: Snatching Soldiers from the Fists of the Nazis



Never give up, never, never give up.” - Winston Churchill

Seventy-two years ago, between May 27 and June 4, 1940, over 338,226 Allied soldiers trapped on the French beaches of Dunkirk were rescued from the advancing Nazi forces in a heroic effort called Operation Dynamo. For nine days, a hastily assembled armada of scows, life

boats, row boats, destroyers, yachts, fishing boats, barges, almost anything that could float transported soldiers from France to England. The “little ships” made multiple trips under withering German fire.

The Germans Backed The Allied Army Against the English Channel

The Germans had devised a master plan that included invading Belgium for strategic advantage for the second time in a quarter of a century. German airborne infantry seized bridges and transportation points and then Panzers attacked through the Ardennes Forest, crossed the Meuse River and other water avenues, and overwhelmed the British Expeditionary Force and segments of the French and Belgian Army in northern France. Belgium surrendered to Hitler on May 28, 1940. The British and French armies were pinned with their backs to the English Channel, and the surrounding Germans planned to slowly and systematically decimate them.

Thousands of Crossings to Dunkirk and Back

The Royal Navy quickly came up with a plan to remove the trapped armies from the beach at Dunkirk, France, and transport them across the English Channel to Dover, England. The Navy called for ships, anything in England that could float, seaworthy or non-seaworthy. The civilian population worked beside the Navy to move over 900 ships across the Channel to the rescue. The ships included America’s Cup racing yachts as well as fishing boats. Merchant ships, sloops, tugs, pleasure boats, fishing boats, ferries, barks, and boats that could not be readily classified gathered for the trip.

The people who manned the boats ranged from experienced sailors to raw volunteers. They didn’t need to navigate by the stars or instruments because they

could follow the fires and smoke of the battle for Dunkirk on the coast and steer by sight. They did need courage. Boats collided with each other in black outs and inept steering. German planes and submarines attacked. There were unmarked mines. The amateur and professional sailors of the Dunkirk armada often didn't sleep, eat, or rest for days.

Dutch and Belgian Coasters Provided Rescue Ships as Well

A coaster is a shallow-hulled ship that is used for trade between places on same island or continent and all European countries included them in their maritime fleets. Thirty-nine Dutch coasters had escaped the Germans when they occupied the Netherlands on May 10, 1940. The Dutch shipping bureau in London and the Royal Navy asked the coasters to join the rescue flotilla. The Dutch coasters saved 22,698 men, primarily because they could get very close to the beach since most of them were flat bellied.

Belgian Canal Boats including the *Sambre*, and *Escaut* in tow of the minesweeper *Skipjack* participated in the Dunkirk evacuation.

The Soldiers on the Beach

Over 1,300 nurses cared for the wounded in the open air on Dunkirk beach. Long lines of weary, ragged soldiers waited in the water, often chest and neck deep, to be pulled aboard the next available boat. Often the bloody, dirty, and starved soldiers fell asleep as soon as they felt the solid deck underneath them.

The overloaded boats ferried to the soldiers to the English shore to food, shelter, and care. The boats headed across the English Channel for a return trip and then another, a cycle that continued around the clock for nine days. Only people were evacuated. Equipment and supplies were left behind to allow more men to be rescued.

The Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force Checked the Germans

The Germans maintained a withering artillery barrage, dive bombers incessantly attacked, and infantry machine guns took their toll. The Royal Navy held the Germans back with a barrage of antiaircraft fire and antisubmarine measures. On the beach, the Royal Air Force, the Navy shell fire, and a defensive perimeter kept the German Army at bay while over 338,000 men, including 140,000 French and Belgian soldiers were loaded aboard the "Little Ships" and transported to England.

The Germans entered the city of Dunkirk on June 4, 1940, and captured the French soldiers left at the docks. About 5,000 French, British, and Belgian troops were either killed or captured at Dunkirk. The Germans marched the captured soldiers to the east to POW camps where they would remain for the rest of the war.

Dunkirk – a Brilliant Improvisation Inspired by Desperate Times

Some arm chair and afterward historians called the evacuation at Dunkirk a “desperate improvisation,” others called it a defeat and others called it a miracle. Prime Minister Winston Churchill himself termed Dunkirk a “miracle of deliverance,” but he added a few weeks later that “wars are not won by evacuations.” Most of the soldiers rescued from the beach that day continued to fight and played a vital part in winning the war for freedom from Nazi tyranny and world domination.

The Fate of Just Two of Dunkirk’s ‘Little Ships’

In the early 1920s, the General Steam Navigation Company contracted with J. Samuel White & Company at Cowes to build the *Crested Eagle* as one of the its steamers carrying passengers down the Thames estuary and beyond. Launched on March 25, 1925, the *Crested Eagle* was registered at 1,110 tons gross, measured 299 ½ feet long with a 34 ½ foot beam and she could reach over 18 knots.

The *Crested Eagle* was the first Thames pleasure steamer and the first steamer in Europe to burn oil fuel.

Her builder designed her with an especially long and commodious promenade deck and a telescopic funnel and hinged mast so that she could pass under London Bridge to take on passengers at the Old Swan Pier.

In March 1940, the British Navy requisitioned the *Crested Eagle* as an auxiliary anti-aircraft coastal ship and armed her. During the evacuation of the British Expeditionary Forces from the beaches at Dunkirk, the Germans dive bombed the *Crested Eagle* on May 19, 1940. Her fuel caught fire and she ran ashore on the beach. Many of the soldiers aboard the *Crested Eagle* were badly burned, but survived. The *Crested Eagle* herself burned to the water line.

A Scottish ‘Little Ship’ Sold on E Bay

The Scottish ‘little ship’ *Skylark IX* made many trips back and forth from the beach

at Dunkirk, carrying 150 soldiers at a time and helping to save about 600 of them from the Nazi forces. She also served out of Poole Harbor as a shallow water mine sweeper.

After World War II ended, the *Skylark IX*'s owners put her to work cruising Loch Lomond for thirty years. Since 2010, *Skylark IX* has been underwater in the River Leven in Balloch, Dunbartonshire, near Loch Lomond and her owners decided to offer her for sale on eBay for the sum of one pound.

The *Skylark IX* has a new owner, but the new owner will have to spend many more pounds than one to raise her from the River Leven and make her seaworthy again.

Mariner on a 'Little Ship'

Commander Charles H. Lightoller sailed his 58 foot 'little ship' *Sundowner*, to help rescue troops from Dunkirk beaches. On June 1, 1940, Charles Lightoller, his oldest son, and a young man from the Sea Scouts sped in the *Sundowner* across the English Channel ahead of the other 'little ships'. Despite the efforts of German bombers to sink him, Charles Lightoller and his crew rescued 130 men and brought them safely back to England.

Charles Lightoller had also served as Second Officer on the *Titanic*, the largest ship afloat, until April 15, 1912.

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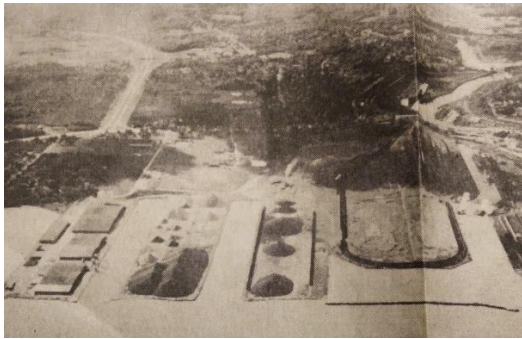
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