



SMALL WARS JOURNAL

smallwarsjournal.com

A Ketch Named *Mastico*: North Africa Maritime Security Operations

Benjamin Armstrong

In May of 1801 the United States of America became involved in the nation's first overseas conflict when the administration of Thomas Jefferson formally refused tribute demanded by the Pasha of Tripoli to halt piracy on the Barbary Coast of Africa. Tripoli immediately declared war. For decades prior to the conflict American merchants struggled with the dangerous waters of the Mediterranean. The challenge posed by the Barbary pirates to American national and economic security was the very reason for the founding of the United States Navy and Marine Corps. The First Barbary War was a naval war, based on maritime causes and fought by America's young sea services. However, it wasn't a traditional naval conflict made up of fleet or squadron engagements and decisive battles at sea. America's first maritime conflict was made of maritime interception, counter-piracy, and maritime security operations as well as the organization and leadership of an insurgent force. It was a conflict that 21st century sailors would recognize and identify with, both in terms of geography and missions assigned. It can be described as the 19th century predecessor of today's naval irregular warfare campaigns.

Grounding and Capture

In the fall of 1803 the United States Navy, despite being at war with Tripoli for nearly two and a half years, had little to show for it. In the first two years two squadrons were dispatched to the Mediterranean to combat the Tripolitan Navy and the corsairs, neither of which met with much success. Hands tied alternately by restrictive rules of engagements and a lack of aggressive leadership, both squadrons returned from their deployments without making a significant impact on attacks in the region and without applying any real pressure on Tripoli. Commodore Edward Preble deployed in command of America's third Mediterranean Squadron in 1803. He immediately dispatched one of his frigates, USS *Philadelphia*, and the schooner *Vixen* to the coast of Tripoli to intercept any suspicious vessels.

On 31 October 1803 Captain William Bainbridge, in command of USS *Philadelphia*, spotted a coastal raiding craft "very near the shore," running toward the harbor of Tripoli. Having dispatched *Vixen* in search of enemy cruisers the American frigate gave chase alone, and the unknown vessel hoisted Tripolitan colors. Bainbridge ran in as close to shore as he felt comfortable, carefully checking his charts which indicated forty two feet of water beneath the keel. As the Tripolitan ship neared the entrance to the harbor *Philadelphia* was obliged to bear

off the wind, allowing the Tripolitan to escape, and the American warship ran aground on unmarked rocks in twelve feet of water.¹

The Americans were unable to refloat the ship, even after casting the ballast and the majority of the cannon overboard and cutting away the foremast. Gunboats sailed from Tripoli harbor and began to shell the grounded ship. Bainbridge's officers later wrote to the Secretary of the Navy that "every exertion was made, and every expedient tried, to get her off and defend her." Nonetheless, fearing for the safety of his crew as the enemy shells began to gain accuracy, Bainbridge surrendered his ship. Local knowledge of the tides and currents allowed the enemy to float the ship and carry their prize and three hundred prisoners into Tripoli.²

Philadelphia was moored deep in the harbor, "within pistol shot of the whole of the Tripolitan marine, mounting altogether upward of one hundred pieces of heavy cannon, and within the immediate protection of formidable land batteries, consisting of one hundred and fifteen pieces of heavy artillery." The Tripolitan Navy had a brig, two schooners, two galleys, and nineteen gunboats anchored in the harbor, manned with a thousand Tripolitan sailors. Ashore the Pasha's army was reported to have twenty-five thousand troops encamped in and around the city's fortress. By comparison the American Mediterranean Squadron was made up of eight gunboats and seven warships, manned by a total of a thousand sailors and marines.³

On Patrol

A month after the capture of *Philadelphia* and imprisonment of her crew, the frigate USS *Constitution* and the schooner *Enterprise* assumed the patrol box outside of Tripoli harbor. Built in Baltimore in 1799, *Enterprise* was commanded by an aggressive young Lieutenant named Stephen Decatur. Decatur was a second generation American naval officer, his father Captain Stephen Decatur was the first commanding officer of *Philadelphia* when the frigate was commissioned in 1800. Decatur and his crew aboard *Enterprise* had already experienced a successful deployment by the time winter approached in 1803. That fall they captured several Tripolitan vessels and took part in the bombardment of enemy ports. On December 23, 1803, as the sun began to rise, the ship was nine miles east of Tripoli harbor and sailing in company with the squadron's flagship USS *Constitution*. The lookout reported land in sight and only minutes later he spotted a sail on the horizon. Decatur signaled the discovery to *Constitution* and set off in pursuit. On the flagship Commodore Preble set a course to follow *Enterprise* as the smaller ship intercepted the unknown vessel.⁴

¹ William Bainbridge to Robert Smith, 1 November 1803 in "Loss of the Frigate Philadelphia," *American State Papers: Naval Affairs*, Vol. 1, 123.

² Letter From Officers of USS *Philadelphia* to William Bainbridge, 20 March 1804, forwarded to Secretary of the Navy, in "Loss of the Frigate Philadelphia," *American State Papers: Naval Affairs*, Vol. 1, 123. Bainbridge to Smith, 1 November 1803.

³ Report of Senator Hayne, "On Claim of the Officers and Crew of the ketch Intrepid to prize money for the destruction of the frigate Philadelphia, at Tripoli, in 1804," 9 January 1828, *American State Papers: Naval Affairs* Vol. 3, 122–24. Edward Preble, dispatches, in *Documents, Official and Unofficial, Relating to the Case of the Destruction of the Frigate Philadelphia at Tripoli, on the 16th February, 1804* (Washington, D.C: John T. Tower, 1850), 16.

⁴ Extract from log book kept by Sailing Master Nathaniel Haraden, U.S. Navy, 23 December 1803, in U.S. Office of Naval Records and Library, Naval Documents Related to the United States Wars with the Barbary Powers: Naval

At 8:30 the winds shifted to the southwest and the unidentified vessel changed course with the wind to remain ahead of *Enterprise*. The new course drove the pursuit toward *Constitution*. Decatur and *Enterprise* caught the ketch after an hour and a half in chase, as they approached the frigate, and fired a warning shot which caused the target to heave-to. The crew identified the unknown vessel as *Mastico*. The small 64 ton ketch was 60 feet long, had a 12 foot beam, and was sailing under a Turkish flag. The ship was constructed in France in 1798 to serve as a bomb ketch during Napoleon's Egyptian expedition and was sold to merchants after the failure of the French campaign.⁵

Decatur put a boat in the water and sent a boarding party across to *Mastico* while *Constitution* remained within gunnery range. *Enterprise*, the closer of the two warships, covered the boarding party with Marine sharpshooters and swivel guns. The party from *Enterprise* boarded the ship and discovered a mixed crew of Turks, Greeks, and Tripolitans. While it flew the Turkish flag the vessel's documents and logs indicated that it was from Tripoli, a port the Americans were actively blockading. Despite his initial attempt to flee the ship's master appeared compliant once he realized he was under the guns of a 44-gun frigate.

Commodore Preble ordered the vessel brought alongside *Constitution* and the Americans began a more detailed search. Despite the fact that *Mastico*'s master claimed to be a merchant they discovered two cannon on deck, two more in the hold, an armory full of pistols and muskets, and Tripolitan officers and soldiers on board. Preble found the cargo, a good portion of which was made up of slaves being transferred from Tripoli to Constantinople, suspicious but he didn't have anyone capable of translating the vessel's Turkish documents. In order to pursue the investigation further he ordered Midshipman Hethcote Reed to lead a skeleton prize crew of Americans aboard *Mastico*. They sailed the captured ship to the American base at Syracuse, on the island of Sicily.⁶

Allies and Courts

Once anchored in the harbor at Syracuse the Americans discovered the true identity of *Mastico*. Two merchant sailors who had been in Tripoli harbor when *Philadelphia* was captured confirmed the identity of the ketch. One of them was Salvatore Catalano, a native of Palermo and an experienced Mediterranean merchant captain who was at Syracuse when *Mastico* was brought in. He had returned from a voyage to Tripoli at the very end of October and was in that harbor when word spread that *Philadelphia* was aground. Anchored nearby in the harbor was *Mastico*, flying Turkish colors.

When word of the grounding spread the small ketch's captain, Mustapha Rais, lowered his Turkish flag and raised a Tripolitan one. He loaded a group of soldiers with firelocks and sabers, then slipped his anchor cable and sailed for the rocks where *Philadelphia* lay stranded. Rais and

Operations Including Diplomatic Background From 1785 to 1807, Volume 3. (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1939-1944), 288.

⁵ Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships (Washington D.C.: Naval Historical Center, 2004), available at www.history.navy.mil/danfs/index.html.

⁶ Edward Preble to Hethcote J. Reed, 23 December 1803, in Naval Documents, 288-9.

Mastico took part in the capture of the frigate and then the ketch assisted in transporting the American prisoners back to the Pasha's fortress. Rais personally helped to escort Captain Bainbridge and his officers to see the Pasha. Catalano's story was confirmed when a thorough stem to stern search of *Mastico* uncovered the officer's sword of Lieutenant David Porter, *Philadelphia's* First Lieutenant.⁷

Commodore Preble began the process to condemn *Mastico* as a prize after concluding that "if a Tripolitan, he is a prize. If a Turk, a pirate." Either way, the vessel could be condemned. Preble filed papers with Don Nicholas Thomas Fucile, the judge for the Royal Vice-Admiralty Court of Syracuse, claiming *Mastico* as a prize of war. The evidence included Catalano's testimony, translations of the ship's documents, and the American officer's sword. The admiralty court concluded that it was a rightful prize and took possession. The Americans used the prize money that the court awarded to purchase the vessel back from the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies for 1,800 dollars. Commodore Preble took her into the American service and renamed the ketch *Intrepid*.⁸

The Tripolitan officers and soldiers aboard *Mastico* became prisoners of the Americans, as well as the slaves that were being transported. Some of the slaves were intended as tribute gifts to the "Pasha General" in Constantinople, and others were to be sold there for leading officers and merchants in Tripoli. The Commodore's first inclination was to use the captured officers, soldiers, and slaves as bargaining chips to negotiate for the release of some of *Philadelphia's* sailors.⁹

Lieutenant Decatur saw it differently. The capture of the small coastal vessel was still recent and likely to be unknown in Tripoli's harbor, and it blended easily with the local commercial traffic. Decatur saw an opportunity and devised a plan to use *Intrepid* to slip a maritime raid force of seventy sailors and marines into Tripoli harbor to destroy *Philadelphia*. Preble gave him his orders at the beginning of February and, in the company of the sloop-of-war *Syren*, Decatur and his men attacked *Philadelphia* on 16 February 1804 and burned her to the waterline. It was an operation so dramatic that the Royal Navy's Admiral Lord Horatio Nelson called it "the most daring act of the age."¹⁰

People, Platforms, and Partners

The 2010 Naval Operating Concept (NOC 10) makes it clear that in the 21st century the general purpose force is expected to be able to conduct naval irregular warfare missions, just as they were in the 19th century. NOC 10 states that "Frequently, the unique circumstances associated with confronting irregular challenges require general purpose forces to apply their capabilities in

⁷ Statement of Salvatore Catalano, 2 February 1804, in *Naval Documents*, 181 and A.B.C. Whipple, *To the Shores of Tripoli: The Birth of the U.S. Navy and Marines*. (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1991), 131.

⁸ Edward Preble to Tobias Lear, 31 January 1804 in *Naval Documents*, 378. For details of the court filings see "Documents concerning the participation of the ketch *Mastico* in the capture of the *Philadelphia*" in *Naval Documents*, 180. Purchase data from Dudley W. Knox, ed., *Register of Officer Personnel, United States Navy and Marine Corps, and Ships' Data, 1801-1807*, (Washington D.C: Government Printing Office, 1945): 74.

⁹ Edward Preble to Tobias Lear, 17 January 1804, in *Naval Documents*, 340.

¹⁰ For more on Decatur's raid on Tripoli harbor see Benjamin Armstrong, "The Most Daring Act of the Age: Principles for Naval Irregular Warfare," *The Naval War College Review*, Vol. 63, No. 4 (Autumn, 2010): 106-118.

innovative ways.” In order to develop that innovation today’s Navy must identify the principles that have helped to guide success in the littorals and facing non-traditional enemies in the past. History is the best foundation for developing today’s military practices.¹¹ The capture of *Mastico* helps to illustrate three elements that may guide success in naval irregular warfare: people, platforms, and partnerships.

The importance in having the right people involved in an operation is admittedly obvious. There are two elements of this principle that the capture of *Mastico* illustrates specifically. First, having crews that are skilled at the kinds of naval irregular warfare involved is vital. Frequently in the modern age these responsibilities have fallen to special warfare operators. However, the experience of the United States Navy in the age of sail demonstrates that this is rightfully a responsibility of the general purpose force. Sailors in the antebellum navy took part in cutting-out expeditions, maritime raids, and boarding operations just as readily as manning the big guns for full ship engagements. Part of ensuring that crews from the surface fleet are capable of such missions today is returning members of the United States Marine Corps to the sea. Marines played an important role in the initial boarding of *Mastico*, not only as part of the boarding party but also providing close fire support with their sharpshooters. Marines were also a part of Decatur’s maritime raid force that eventually sailed *Intrepid* into Tripoli harbor.

The second element of the right people that is necessary to highlight is aggressive officers who also know how to operate diplomatically. Commodore Preble was very careful in his handling of *Mastico*. When he concluded that the vessel was an enemy of the United States he still used the local admiralty court to officially condemn the prize. Maintaining a proper relationship with the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies was vital to the success of the American squadron. Therefore he used the proper diplomatic channels even though it took longer to take possession of the ship and rename her *Intrepid*. He was also meticulous about the treatment of the prisoners and the property taken from the vessel. In the ship’s papers was a letter to the French Ambassador at Constantinople. Recognizing diplomatic correspondence Preble ensured that the letter made it safely to the Turkish capitol and was properly delivered. He also wrote to the Ambassador to make sure that the Turkish Court knew that the captured officer he was sending with the letter was not at fault for the capture of *Mastico*, and had behaved as an officer and a gentleman who reflected great credit on the Turkish Empire.¹²

Having the right platform is also an important principle of naval irregular warfare. *Philadelphia* was forced to run in close to shore, where the danger of grounding was much higher, because Bainbridge sent the schooner *Vixen* away in search of other prizes. Preble, on the other hand, kept *Constitution* and *Enterprise* together. The schooner’s draft was less than ten feet, while the 44-gun frigate, the largest ship in the United States Navy, was over 15. Operating as a tactical pair, Decatur and *Enterprise* could aggressively chase *Mastico* across the shallows within sight of shore while Preble and *Constitution* provided heavy guns to cover any challenge that came during the interception. The reef where *Philadelphia* grounded, with 12 feet of water above it, would have passed un-noticed under a shallow draft vessel like *Enterprise* or *Vixen*. The right vessel, in the form of *Intrepid*, made a huge difference in the success of Decatur’s raid to burn

¹¹ U.S. Navy Dept., “Naval Operations Concept 2010,” available at www.navy.mil/maritime/noc/NOC2010.pdf.

¹² Edward Preble to General Brune, French Ambassador to Constantinople, 4 March 1804, in *Naval Documents*, 469.

Philadelphia. While it's important for naval vessels to be able to defend themselves it is also vital to have a sufficient number of smaller combatants that are designed for work in the littorals where most irregular operations occur.¹³

The final principle illustrated during the capture of *Mastico* is the importance of partnerships. On a macro level, the role played by the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies was central. The American facilities at Syracuse provided a safe base of operations that wasn't as far away as Malta or Gibraltar, where the Royal Navy had already offered limited assistance. A sympathetic admiralty court was also important to the Americans hoping to dispose of enemy ships once captured. On a micro level, the assistance provided by individual Sicilians was also important. Specifically Salvatore Catalano, who provided the central testimony in the prize case and also had intimate knowledge of the ports and merchant traffic in the central Mediterranean. He served as *Constitution*'s pilot and, when Decatur wanted to slip into Tripoli harbor he volunteered to go with the American raiding force to pilot the *Intrepid*. Local knowledge and partnerships are essential to working in the world's green and brown waters and to success in naval irregular warfare.

In the era between the nation's founding and the American Civil War, the United States Navy commonly took part in a wide range of operations. These included missions what today would be called maritime interception operations, counter-piracy, maritime security operations and riverine patrol. As the Navy of the 21st century works to develop modern irregular warfare strategies and conduct global operations the examples from the past can be instructive. While there are never exact parallels, or perfect analogies, principles can be determined which help provide overarching ideas for success. With doctrine and forces based in these principles the U.S. Navy will be better prepared to engage in the asymmetric and hybrid conflicts that we face on today's oceans.

LCDR Benjamin "BJ" Armstrong is an active duty Naval Aviator currently serving as Officer-In-Charge of an MH-60S Armed Helicopter Detachment. His unit is currently assigned to 6th Fleet providing search and rescue, special operations, and gunship support for contingency and maritime security operations off the coast of Libya. A frequent contributor to Small Wars Journal, he holds a Master's degree in military history from Norwich University and has published on naval irregular operations in a number of journals including USNI's Proceedings, Defense and Security Analysis, and American Diplomacy.

This article is a standalone expansion of his article "The Most Daring Act of the Age: Principles for Naval Irregular Warfare," published in the Autumn, 2010 issue of The Naval War College Review. The historical narrative serves as "prequel" to the NWCR article, describing the details of how the United States Navy's Mediterranean Squadron captured the Tripolitan ketch Mastico following the grounding and surrender of USS Philadelphia. The squadron's Maritime Security Operations reinforce the principles developed in the original article. Specifically, it illustrates the importance of having the right people, platforms, and partnerships for success in Naval Irregular Warfare.

¹³ Knox, *Register*, 70-71.

This is a single article excerpt of material published in Small Wars Journal.

Published by and COPYRIGHT © 2010, Small Wars Foundation.

Permission is granted to print single copies for personal, non-commercial use. Select non-commercial use is licensed via a Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 3.0 license and per our Terms of Use. We are in this together.



No FACTUAL STATEMENT should be relied upon without further investigation on your part sufficient to satisfy you in your independent judgment that it is true.

Contact: comment@smallwarsjournal.com

Visit www.smallwarsjournal.com

Cover Price: Your call. [Support SWJ here.](#)