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 forecast. 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

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

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\(^6\) 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

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

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 unnoticed 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

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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 worlds 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.