

## **The American Navies and the Winning of Independence**

During the American War of Independence the navies of France and Spain challenged Great Britain on the world's oceans. Combined, the men-o-war of the allied Bourbon monarchies outnumbered those of the British, and the allied fleets were strong enough to battle Royal Navy fleets in direct engagements, even to attempt invasions of the British isles.

In contrast, the naval forces of the United States were too few, weak, and scattered to confront the Royal Navy head on. The few encounters between American and British naval forces of any scale ended in disaster for the Revolutionary cause. The Patriot attempt to hold the Delaware River after the British capture of Philadelphia in 1777, however gallant, resulted in the annihilation of the Pennsylvania Navy and the capture or burning of three Continental Navy frigates. The expedition to recapture Castine, Maine, from the British in 1779 led to the destruction of all the Continental and Massachusetts Navy ships, American privateers, and American transports involved, more than thirty vessels. And the fall of Charleston, South Carolina, to the British in 1780 brought with it the destruction or capture of four Continental Navy warships and several ships of the South Carolina Navy.

Despite their comparative weakness, American naval forces made significant contributions to the overall war effort. Continental Navy vessels transported diplomats and money safely between Europe and America, convoyed shipments of munitions, engaged the Royal Navy in single ship actions, launched raids against British settlements in the Bahamas, aggravated diplomatic tensions between Great Britain and European

powers, and carried the war into British home waters and even onto the shores of England and Scotland. Early in the war squadrons under Continental Army command harried British transports in Massachusetts Bay and delayed a British invasion from Canada that led to the surrender of a British army at Saratoga, New York. State navies interfered with British operations along coasts and up rivers and within bays. And privateers interrupted British seaborne trade, forcing the Royal Navy to divert forces to convoy duty, produced rises in marine insurance, and made the war costly to British merchants.

### Birth of the Continental Navy

In October 1775 the British dominated the seas and threatened to block the colonies' trade and to wreak destruction on their coastal settlements. In response a few of the revolutionary governments had commissioned small fleets of their own for defense of local waters. Some in Congress, hoping that reconciliation with the mother country was still possible, worried that American naval operations might push the armed struggle too far. Others from the outset of armed hostilities had advocated a Continental Navy. They argued that a national navy would defend seaports, protect vital trade, retaliate against British raiders, and make it possible to seek out from among neutral nations of the world the arms and stores necessary for resistance.

On Friday, October 13, 1775, matters came to a head and the advocates for a navy won the argument. Congress voted to fit out two sailing vessels, armed with ten cannon each, as well as other arms, and manned by crews of eighty, and to send them on a cruise of three months to intercept transports carrying munitions and supplies to the British

army in America. This legislation, out of which the Continental Navy grew, constitutes the birth certificate of today's Navy.

Within a few days of its first resolution to employ armed vessels, Congress established a Naval Committee charged with equipping a fleet. This committee directed the purchasing, outfitting, manning, and operations of the first ships of the new Navy, drafted subsequent naval legislation, and prepared rules and regulations to govern the Continental Navy's conduct and internal administration.

During the War of Independence, no suitable alternative to a national navy was available to serve the purposes of Congress. Wherever there were military objectives requiring naval support, public vessels commanded by commissioned officers, subject to the will of the Continental Congress, were essential to carrying out the mission.

#### The Other American "Navies" of the Revolutionary War

The Continental Navy during the American Revolution did not enjoy a monopoly in American military operations on the sea. The Continental Navy represented only one part of the American naval effort, which also included "Washington's Navy," state navies, and privateers.

The Continental Army had its own naval service (often called "Washington's Navy") that predated the Continental Navy. Even after the Continental Navy came into existence in late 1775, army officers continued to command vessels in Long Island Sound, off Massachusetts, and, most notably, on Lake Champlain where Brigadier General Benedict Arnold scored one of America's greatest naval successes at the Battle of Valcour Island in 1776. Although Arnold's fleet was destroyed, he was able to turn

back a British invasion from Canada, buying time for the Americans to mount a defense, which they successfully did the next year when they forced a British army to surrender at Saratoga, New York.

The states, too, operated their own independent navies. With the exceptions of New Jersey and Delaware, each of the original thirteen states operated at least one armed ship during the Revolution. While the navy of no one state was as large as the Continental Navy, the total number of state navy vessels greatly exceeded the number of vessels under control of Congress. Generally, state navy vessels were smaller than their Continental Navy counterparts. This smaller size reflected the fact that the states had smaller means available than had the Continental Congress and that the primary mission of the state navies was to protect the seaports, coasts, and trade of the states, for which purposes small craft, adapted for moving in and out of shallow harbors, bays, and rivers, were desirable. The navy of only one state, Massachusetts, had more craft designed for deep water than for inshore work. Many state navy vessels did, however, act in concert with Continental Navy ships by cruising, escorting merchantmen, and even participating in joint operations, such as the attack on Castine, Maine, in 1779. The Continental Navy, with its bigger ships and closer supervision by Congress, performed missions that were different from, and less locally focused than, those the state navies performed.

By far, the largest component of the American naval effort was privateering. Privateers were privately owned vessels armed with guns that operated in time of war against the commerce of the enemy. They ranged from private vessels devoted exclusively to warlike operations to armed trading vessels that were authorized to capture enemy ships. Such vessels operated independently, though the government through

formal documents called letters of marque and reprisal, which licensed them to take prizes, commissioned them. In return, the owners of such vessels were required to post bonds to insure the good behavior of their privateers. When a privateer captured an enemy vessel (a prize), it returned the captured ship to port where, if normal procedures were followed, a hearing was held in a special court (the Admiralty Court) to decide the legitimacy of the capture. If the court ruled that the prize was legitimate, the ship and its cargo were sold and the net proceeds (the prize money) split among the privateer's owners and its captain and crew according to a formula established by contract before the privateer sailed.

Since Congress allowed Continental Navy captains and crews to keep only one-half of the value of many of the prizes it captured, privateering could be much more lucrative than regular naval service for the average sailor. Continental Navy captains constantly complained of the difficulty they had recruiting and retaining men in the face of competition from privateers.

Until the Declaration of Paris in 1856 outlawed privateering, all nations engaged in privateering, and privateers were especially prevalent during the American Revolution. It is estimated that Americans sent out between two thousand and three thousand privateers to prey on British commerce. The British, too, commissioned privateers and, though fewer in numbers than their American counterparts, these privateers on average were larger and better armed. Assessing the effects of American privateers on the war, one American naval historian has written: "Valuable service to the country was rendered by the privateers, and they contributed in a large degree to the naval defense, and so to the fortunate outcome of the war. On the other hand, the system was subject to abuses

and was in many ways detrimental to the regular naval service.” Another has commented that, despite taking more than two thousand enemy prizes, American privateers damaged British “pride far more than its pocketbook” and evoked a “cry of rage rather than of pain.”

While none of these elements in the American naval effort could or did succeed alone, in tandem they contributed to the sapping of the British will to fight that in the end gained America its independence.

### The Yorktown Campaign and the American Navies

George Washington recognized that naval power made the success of the Yorktown campaign possible. Naval power was, as he remarked, “the pivot upon which everything turned.” Washington also knew that it was French naval power, by depriving Lord Cornwallis of any prospect of succor by sea, that insured allied victory at Yorktown. American naval forces played little role in the campaign because by September 1781, they had declined to negligible size.

Consider the fate of Continental Navy vessels during the preceding half year. In mid-March three ships, *Confederacy*, *Deane*, and *Saratoga*, cruised together raiding British commerce in the West Indies. On their return voyage *Confederacy* fell prize to a brace of Royal Navy frigates, *Saratoga* disappeared at sea, and only *Deane* made it safely into Boston. Continental Navy frigate *Alliance* sailed from L’Orient, France, on March 29. During the passage, she engaged and captured HMS *Atalanta* and HMS *Trepassy*, and put into Boston with her prizes on June 6. In August the Continental Navy ship *Trumbull* fell prize to another pair of British warships. Thus, on September 5, when the French fleet

under Admiral Comte de Grasse fought its historic engagement with the British fleet under Rear Admiral Sir Thomas Graves, the Continental Navy consisted of only two operational warships, *Alliance* and *Deane*, both refitting at Boston and unable to recruit a sufficient number of seamen to return to sea.

Financial woes were a deadlier foe to the Maryland and Virginia Navies than the warships of King George III. Beginning in 1777, the cash-strapped Mid-Atlantic states attempted to stem the tide of runaway inflation by shipping public-owned cargoes of tobacco in naval vessels. Largely unsuccessful, the states could not afford to keep their vessels in commission. By 1781, state currency had depreciated so much that the navies could attract no more than a few recruits even in the face of a major statewide emergency. Thus, when turncoat Benedict Arnold led a British raid up the James River at the beginning of the year, he captured several immobilized Virginia Navy ships as well as privateers and merchantmen.

The assistance that the remainder of the Maryland and Virginia Navies could provide the resistance was minimal, at best. The few armed-barges Marylanders managed to put into service during the summer of 1781 were busy protecting trade along the Eastern Shore beset by Loyalist privateers. The two surviving vessels of the Virginia Navy (pilot boat *Nicholson* and schooner *Liberty*) joined with a few small craft impressed by the state to collect and deliver provisions to the French and American armies besieging Yorktown in the fall of 1781.

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