

The Burning of the Philadelphia



The Stranding of the Philadelphia, Joseph F. Strabin

THE HARBOR was dark as small waves rocked the ship *Intrepid*. The *Intrepid* was built to hold only twenty men, but packed inside were sixty sailors and ten officers, along with four small cannons. A few men held their breaths as the wind blew the ship slowly forward. They were sailing into Tripoli harbor, and they were going to burn the ship *Philadelphia*, right under the noses of the Barbary Pirates.

THE PHILADELPHIA was once an American ship. In the early 1790s, Muslim pirates and French privateers had begun attacking American merchant ships. So, in 1794, the United States government ordered the building of a new navy, and a

few years later the citizens of Philadelphia decided to contribute a ship. They raised the money in just a single week, and in 1799 the *Philadelphia* was finished, and put out to sea. Just two years later America went to war with the Barbary Pirates when president Thomas Jefferson refused to pay them any more tribute money, and the *Philadelphia* was sent to fight them.

The American Navy won its first battle against the pirates when it captured the fourteen gun ship *Tripoli*. Very soon the pirate fleets began to avoid American ships. So the Americans blockaded the enemy's ports and harbors, stopping most trade or supply ships from passing through. During the blockade, however,

the *Philadelphia* was caught on a reef. Before she could be refloated, the pirates captured her. They decided to leave her in the middle of the harbor and use her guns to defend it. If the American Navy ever wanted to invade Tripoli, they would have to deal with the *Philadelphia* first, whose forty-four guns now defended the pirates.

THOSE GUNS were the reason Lieutenant Stephen Decatur and his men were in the harbor that warm February night. The guns, and the blow to enemy morale from losing their prize. An American prisoner had sent a message warning Decatur that it was impossible to capture the *Philadelphia*, and so he was ordered to burn her.

AS THE WIND pushed Decatur's ship, a captured Moroccan Ketch (or ship with two masts), towards the *Philadelphia*, the men kept very quiet, hidden underneath the ship's rails. Only a few officers were out in the open, ready to hail the enemy ship if they were spotted. Foot by foot the *Intrepid* floated forward, pushed by only a light breeze. One hundred yards from the *Philadelphia*, then fifty, then twenty. As they closed, Decatur could see ten or twelve pirates, dim shadows on the enemy ship.

THE PIRATES called out, and Decatur's helmsman answered in Italian, a local trading language. Pretending they were a Moroccan trading ship, the

helmsman asked that they be allowed to tie up alongside the *Philadelphia* so some repairs could be made. The Tripolitan captain agreed, and so one of the pirate longboats brought the Americans a rope, which they used to begin hauling themselves towards the enemy ship, since the wind had died out. The pirates on the longboat, however, had seen the Americans up close, and they quickly realized what was happening. "Americanos!" they shouted, as Decatur's men hauled heavily on the rope, pulling the *Intrepid* quickly closer to her goal.

The pirates began pulling the plugs out of their cannons, but it was too late. The *Intrepid* bumped against

the enemy ship, and with a cry of "Board!" Decatur swung himself over the side of the *Philadelphia*, with only one man ahead of him: eighteen-year-old midshipman Charles Morris (who later became an admiral). The pirates were still confused, and many were below decks, so the Americans took a moment to gather. There was a grim silence as the last Americans came over the side. They formed a line across the back of the ship, with Decatur, sword drawn, at the center.

THE PIRATES WERE still a messy crowd. Decatur and his line rushed grimly forward. Swords clashed as they met the enemy, short American cutlasses locking against curved pirate scimitars. A crossbow bolt whizzed over Decatur's head. As he cut down one pirate and then another, the enemy sailors faltered and fled, jumping off the ship and into the dark waves below. After only two short minutes, the deck was mostly empty. Only the Americans and twenty pirate bodies remained. The men and officers split off to clear the rest of the ship, which took them only another three minutes.

Decatur and his men had used no guns in taking the ship, to keep things quiet, but their efforts were in vain. An



Decatur boarding the Philadelphia, A. Bobbett

alarm was being sounded on shore, and on the enemy cruisers and longboats that lay all around. They had to move fast. Decatur wasted no time in ordering the materials for the burning to be brought up, and his men ran to their assigned tasks, setting tinder around the proper parts of the ship, especially the holds where the gunpowder and ammunition were stored. Soon they came rushing back out of the holds, followed closely by a thick black smoke. Still, Decatur waited, and so did the the men. The enemy boats were all around, but they were waiting for an opportunity to board which never came. Great red flames billowed out of the doors that led below, and Decatur finally ordered his men off the ship and back to the *Intrepid*.

AS THE INTREPID pulled away, great billows of fire and smoke leapt up into the masts and sails of the burning ship, lighting up the harbor. The Americans kept careful discipline, for if the fire spread to their own ship, they would surely die or be captured and enslaved by the enemy. Their luck held, however, as a breeze from the mainland caught their sails and drew them fully clear of the *Philadelphia*. The burning ship's cannons, heated by the

flames, let off a loud salvo to send our heroes home, cannonballs smashing into the enemy fort and town from the exploding guns. The light of the flames, meanwhile, finally allowed the pirates to see the *Intrepid*, and cannonballs flew all around them from the enemy ships and fort, sending up

spouts of water from the ocean where they landed. The *Intrepid* and her crew were unharmed, however, and as they sailed off into the welcoming darkness of the ocean, they let out three cheers: the *Philadelphia* was burned, the men were safe, and the pirates had suffered a great loss.



Portrait of Decatur From Old U.S. Currency