



A SEA FIGHT TO REMEMBER: *The Randolph vs. The Yarmouth*

The son of a Philadelphia banker, Captain Nicholas Biddle has been described as one of the finest and valiant captains the nascent U.S. Navy produced: perhaps matched only by John Paul Jones and Joshua Barney for both shrewd wit and unsurpassed intrepidity. Prior to the Revolutionary War, he actually schooled and served in the Royal Navy alongside fellow midshipman Horatio Nelson. When troubles began brewing to a heated pitch with the Mother country, however, Biddle resigned his commission, going on to officer ships of the Pennsylvania, and afterward Continental Navy.

On the moonlit night of March 7, 1778, his 36 gun frigate the U.S.S. *Randolph* -- armed mostly with 18 pounders; plus a flotilla of four smaller S.C. Navy ships not engaged -- encountered the H.M.S. *Yarmouth* of 64 guns (mostly 32 and some 42 pounders) east off Barbadoes. Writes James Fenimore Cooper in his *History of the Navy of the United States of America* (1839) that notwithstanding the marked superiority of his British foe: "we find it difficult, under the circumstances, to suppose that this gallant seaman [Biddle] did not actually contemplate carrying his powerful antagonist, most probably by boarding" (pp. 66-67, 1856 ed.)

Captain William Hall of the South Carolina sloop *Notre Dame*, 16 guns, who was a witness reported that the *Randolph* beat up on the *Yarmouth* "so roughly for 12 or 15 minutes [out of some 20 minutes in all after contact] that the British ship must shortly have struck, having lost her bowsprit and topmasts and being otherwise greatly shattered, while the *Randolph* had suffered very little; but in this moment of glory, as the *Randolph* was wearing to get on her quarter, she unfortunately blew up." ~ *Independent Chronicle*, August 13, 1778.

Yet the most detailed and full contemporary account of what occurred comes from the letter of Captain Nicholas Vincent, of the *Yarmouth*, to his superior Admiral Young, written on March 17th:

"On the 7th instant at half past five P.M. discovered six sail in the S.W. quarter, on a wind standing to the northward; two of them ships, three brigs and a schooner. We were then 50 leagues due east of this island. We immediately bore down upon them and about nine got close to the weather quarter of the largest and headmost ship. They had no colours hoisted and as ours were then up, I hailed her to hoist hers or I would fire into her; on which she hoisted American and immediately gave us her broadside, which we returned, and in about a quarter of an hour she blew up.

"It was fortunate for us that we were to windward of her; as it was, our ship was in a manner covered with parts of her. A great piece of a top timber, six feet long, fell on our poop; another large piece of timber stuck in our fore top-gallant sail, then upon the cap. An American ensign, rolled up, blown in upon the forecastle, not so much as singed.

“Immediately on her blowing up, the other four dispersed different ways. We chased a little while two that stood to the southward and afterwards another that bore away right before the wind, but they were soon out of sight, our sails being torn all to pieces in a most surprising manner. We had five men killed and twelve wounded.

“But what I am now going to mention is something very remarkable. The 12th following, being then in chase of a ship steering west, we discovered a piece of wreck with four men on it waving; we hauled up to it, got a boat out, and brought them on board. They proved to be four men who had been in the ship which blew up and who had nothing to subsist on from that time but by sucking the rain water that fell on a piece of blanket which they luckily had picked up.”

~ *London Chronicle*, May 26, 1778; Almon’s *Remembrancer*, vi, 143; Brit. Adm. Rec., Captain’s Logs, No. 1091 (log of the *Yarmouth*); Port Folio, October, 1809.

What must have been the thoughts, one wonders, of the four survivors -- out of a 315 man crew and which included a detachment of the 1st South Carolina regiment, under Capt. Joseph Joor, acting as Marines -- after going through such an event; and which was the greatest loss of life in a single U.S. Navy ship up until Pearl Harbor.

With respect to the general subject of instances where defeat was snatched from the jaws of victory -- arguably due to a bizarre and unlikely “act of god” -- there is, in again the annals of the Navy, the case of the U.S.S. frigate *Essex* versus the H.M.S. frigate *Phoebe* and the brig H.M.S. *Cherub* that took place Mar. 28, 1814; in the Pacific Ocean just off Valparaiso, Chile. There Capt. David Porter, commanding the *Essex*, lost the main topmast owing to a sudden squall just when he was clear to make his escape from the two British vessels which had been sent in those far off waters to go after him, and which unforeseeable accident effectively caused the *Essex* to lie a sitting duck in the water.

The story of that most dramatic engagement, and unusual circumstances leading up to, is the basis of the Patrick O’Brien’s *The Far Side of the World* (later made into the film “Master and Commander” [2003]), and which, telling the story from the British viewpoint, has the *Essex* as a French ship. Porter’s own frequently gripping narrative of his most enterprising and, but for his strange final undoing, nearly successful voyage is recounted in his memorable *Journal of a Cruise made to the Pacific Ocean by Captain David Porter, in the United States Frigate Essex, in the Years 1812, 1813, and 1814* (1815).¹

ON THE DEATH OF CAPTAIN NICHOLAS BIDDLE ²
Commander of the Randolph Frigate, Blown up near Barbadoes, 1776

By Philip Freneau

What distant thunders rend the skies,
What clouds of smoke in columns rise,
What means this dreadful roar?
Is from his base Vesuvius thrown,
Is sky-topt Atlas tumbled down,
Or Etna’s self no more!

Shock after shock torments my ear;
And lo!—two hostile ships appear,
Red lightnings round them glow:
The *Yarmouth* boasts of sixty-four,
The *Randolph* thirty-two—no more—
And will she fight this foe!

The *Randolph* soon on Stygian streams

¹ In the above, I use the title “U.S.S.” retroactively when such designation was not formally adopted by United States Navy ships until 1907.

² First published in 1781.

Shall coast along the land of dreams,
The islands of the dead!
But Fate, that parts them on the deep,
May save the Briton yet to weep
His days of victory fled.

Say, who commands that dismal blaze,
Where yonder starry streamer plays?
Does Mars with Jove engage!
'Tis Biddle wings those angry fires,
Biddle, whose bosom Jove inspires,
With more than mortal rage.

Tremendous flash!—and hark, the ball
Drives through old *Yarmouth*, flames and all;
Her bravest sons expire;
Did Mars himself approach so nigh,
Even Mars, without disgrace, might fly
The *Randolph's* fiercer fire.

The Briton views his mangled crew,
“And shall we strike to thirty-two?—
(Said Hector, stained with gore)
“Shall Britain's flag to these descend—
“Rise, and the glorious conflict end,
“Britons, I ask no more!”

He spoke—they charged their cannon round,
Again the vaulted heavens resound,
The *Randolph* bore it all,
Then fixed her pointed cannons true—
Away the unwieldy vengeance flew;
Britain, thy warriors fall.

The *Yarmouth* saw, with dire dismay,
Her wounded hull, shrouds shot away,
Her boldest heroes dead—
She saw amidst her floating slain
The conquering *Randolph* stem the main—
She saw, she turned—and fled!

That hour, blest chief, had she been thine,
Dear Biddle, had the powers divine
Been kind as thou wert brave;
But Fate, who doomed thee to expire,
Prepared an arrow, tipped with fire,
And marked a watery grave.

And in that hour, when conquest came,
Winged at his ship a pointed flame,
That not even he could shun—
The battle ceased, the *Yarmouth* fled,
The bursting *Randolph* ruin spread,
And left her task undone!

Wm. Thomas Sherman

1604 NW 70th St.

Seattle, Washington 98117

206-784-1132

wts@gunjones.com

<http://www.gunjones.com> and http://www.scribd.com/wsherman_1

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