



Photograph of William Taylor Skiddy (c. 1795-1870),
midshipman on the U.S. Hornet in 1815, in after years.

Early Days in the Navy

During these at present, as I write this, excoriating months of summer, I am taking a break from my more usual studies to brush up on my immediate familiarity with the history of the post-Revolutionary War United States Navy. Among the volumes I've thus far, or else mostly, finished are Stephen W.H. Duffy's *Captain Blakeley and the Wasp: The Cruise of 1814*, and *A Gentlemanly and Honorable Profession: The Creation of the U.S. Naval Officer Corps, 1794-1815* by Christopher McKee -- both veritable classics of their kind.

Duffy's biography of Master Commandant Johnston Blakeley is singularly splendid. Here's some first-rate research and accompanied by descriptions of naval actions that could hold their own in drama and excitement with some of the masters of nautical fiction; by an author who knows the technical niceties of sea faring and survival in an early 19th century sailing ship breasting the ocean in time of war. As well, the book ends up being surprisingly moving: Blakeley, having lost his entire (immediate) family at a young age, makes his way up the ladder in the nascent U.S. navy, encountering daunting and trying challenges along the way; finds time to get married; finally sets sail after a protracted and tedious fitting out of his new vessel and command; wins two incredible and stunning battles; only to shortly after be *mysteriously* lost at sea with his victorious ship and men.¹ While Duffy's facts and data could be shored up at points and be profitably served by further analysis, exploration and development of what he presents (including perhaps philosophical-artistic development), this shortcoming can be pardoned given what a magnificent job he's done gathering up the requisite materials.

The book concludes with an anonymous tribute poem to Blakeley and the officers and crew of the *Wasp* (p. 329) as it first (?) appeared in the *Newburyport [Mass.] Herald*, 23 July 1816. I found out later, however, that Duffy's, though perhaps given its brevity is better as poetry, is not the complete version; having discovered in an 1838 edition of the *Army and Navy Chronicle* (vol. VI, no. 21, Washington, Thurs, May 24, 1838, p. 329) this:

The following beautiful lines on the melancholy fate of a noble ship and her daring crew, have never before appeared in print. They were written in 1815 or 1816 by a highly gifted and accomplished young lady, for several years a resident of the District of Columbia, but now no more.

*To the Memory of the Officers
of the U.S. Sloop of War Wasp
Lost at sea in 1814.*

by MISS C. W. B., OF NEWBURYPORT, MASS.

¹ There is even an "Ishmael" in the way of Midshipman David Geisinger who was sent home on a prize ship shortly before the *Wasp* disappeared in ostensibly the eastern or south Atlantic.

No more shall Blakeley's thunder roar,
Along the stormy deep.
Far distant from Columbia's shore,
His tombless ruins sleep.
Yet long Columbia's sons shall tell.
How Blakeley fought -- bow Blakeley fell.

Though long on foamy billows cast,
The battle's fury braved,
And still unsullied on thy mast,
The starry banner waved,
Unconquered shall Columbia be,
While she can boast of sons like thee.

Oh! Sleep -- the battle's rage no more
Shall animate thy breast,
No sound on Lethe's silent shore,
Disturbs the warrior's rest;
No wave molests its peaceful tide,
No navies on its waters ride.

Nor will the muse refuse a tear,
O'er Reilly's² corse to flow;
Or one less generous and sincere,
On Tillinghast³ bestow.
Farewell! no warlike sound again
Shall rouse you from the watery main.⁴

And shall the oblivious waves that roll
O'er Baury's⁵ lifeless breast,
Drown the remembrance of that soul,
That asked no other rest?
No! ocean shrouds thy earthly part --
Thy deepest grave is in the heart.

Still in our hearts, by love illumed,
The gentle Clarke⁶ is urned,
Whose hand was prompt to heal the wound.
His pitying spirit mourned.
Farewell! thou hast nor night nor morn,
Nor requiem, save the howling storm.

Quite different from the Blakeley biography is Christopher McKee's *A Gentlemanly and Honorable Profession: The Creation of the U.S. Naval Officer Corps, 1794-1815*. While mostly a strictly academic and scholarly work, it has its fair share of ordinary human interest elements. Though I myself take exception to his psycho-analyzing contemporary portrait paintings of individual officers, he gives us rarely seen information and insights into the United States navy in its formative years that makes for a most unique and indispensable history.⁷ Among the many and varied treasures contained in his book is

² First Lieutenant James Reilly. Duffy's text here reads "course," rather than "corse;" the latter apparently being the correct word.

³ Second Lieutenant Thomas G. Tillinghast.

⁴ Duffy and the *Newburyport Herald's* text of the poem ends here.

⁵ Midshipman, but acting Third Lieutenant Frederick Baury.

⁶ Midshipman William Montague Clarke.

⁷ One striking and little known point brought out by McKee is that a little over half of the U.S. Navy's enlisted personnel between 1794 and 1815 was comprised of foreign born (predominantly British) sailors, p. 219n.

Midshipman William Taylor Skiddy's report of the battle between the *Hornet* and the *Penquin* (pp. 147-149), and that originated with Skiddy's autobiography "The Ups and Downs of Life at Sea." I subsequently uncovered two other versions of his story in *History of Stamford, Connecticut: from its settlement in 1641, to the Present Time* (1868) by Elijah Baldwin Huntington (pp. 356-358), and "The Hornet's Sting and Wing" by P. S. P. Conner found in *New England Magazine*, Nov. 1900, Vol. XXIII, no. 3 (pp. 268-275.) All three renderings somewhat diverge with each other as to what is included and the way some sentences are phrased and worded; though this last anomaly is a fairly minor difficulty. Not having Skiddy's original at hand myself, and to attempt to rectify this (for some) conflicting state of texts, I edited and spliced together the following version that combines as much of Skiddy's account as all three make available -- though without in any way claiming that mine be necessarily preferred to the others.

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March 15th, 1815.<sup>8</sup> We arrived off the island of Tristian d' Aurca [Tristan da Cunha], in latitude 37 degrees south and 11 degrees longitude west. Our [acting, he was formally only a midshipman at the time] first lieutenant David Conner had just landed when the signal was made for him to return, in consequence of a strange sail heaving in sight and standing down before the wind for us. We hoisted and took our dinner (it was duff-day)<sup>9</sup> while she was running down. The duff was hardly swallowed when the drum beat to quarters. In a few minutes all was ready for action, every eye watching the stranger. He soon luffed to on our weather-quarter (starboard) about pistol shot off, hoisted the British flag, and gave us a gun. This we did not notice -- waiting for him to shoot ahead more. He then gave us the first broadside.

The moment his guns flashed, ours were in operation; and, strange to say, in five minutes I perceived the blood running from his scuppers, when they almost stopped firing. Our little captain [James Biddle<sup>10</sup>] ordered us to cease firing; when the enemy, thinking we were disabled, renewed his fire, -- and of course we soon convinced him of his mistake. He then, as a last alternative, ran his bowsprit between our main and mizzen mast, with the intention of carrying us by boarding.

I was standing with the first lieutenant, in the third division, on the quarter deck (three after guns on each side) and was soon in command of this division -- first lieutenant, Mr. Conner, having been severely wounded at the commencement of the action. This brave officer was standing near my right arm. I was then assisting the working the second gun from aft, and after taking aim he inquired of me how the enemy looked, and I just answered that from appearances his time had nearly expired, when a shot struck him (Mr. Conner) in the groin. I watched the effect of the wound, and soon observed him whiten from loss of blood. I attempted to assist him out of the way of the guns and, stopping abreast of the mizzen mast, asked him if I should send him below. Putting his hand over the wound, he said, 'No, I'll see it out.' He then sank down on the deck beside the mast. The captain observing this despatched [sic] his aid, Midshipman Samuel Phelps, to help him below, and I continued in charge of the third division.

The jib-halyards being shot away, the fore tack was hauled down to veer the ship. The enemy was now foul of us, and all hands were called to repel boarders; we immediately mounted the hammock cloths and the enemy's booms; the shout of 'Board' and cheers from our boys soon thinned off the crowd on their forecastle deck, and it required all the exertions of our captain and officers to prevent our men from boarding; had they done so the enemy would have suffered much; many of them were now dodging below and some left their first lieutenant (MacDonald) standing alone on the forecastle. Many muskets were levelled at him, but were prevented, by our officers, from firing on so brave a man. He then enquired of our leader, Second Lieutenant Newton, the name of the ship, and was answered, "the United States sloop Hornet;" he then waved his sword and walked aft.

Our ship in shooting ahead carried away his bowsprit, tore away all our mizzen rigging, and the enemy swung across our stem. Our captain was standing aft on the arm chest speaking to them, when their

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<sup>8</sup> This is an error as the correct date of the meeting between the opposing ships is March 23<sup>rd</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> McKee: "One day a week, in both the U.S. and British navies, the ship's company received -- in place of beef -- flour, suet [the residue of fat left over from cooked beef], and currants or raisins with which to make a duff, a stiff pudding boiled in a bag or steamed." *A Gentlemanly and Honorable Profession*, p. 147n.

<sup>10</sup> Nephew of Captain Nicholas Biddle of the *Randolph* vs. *Yarmouth* engagement.

foremast fell along the lee waist. The marines in the foretop clung with their muskets to the rigging as the mast fell on deck, and then jumped forward, fired and wounded our captain. They made an attempt also at this time to rake us with their bow-guns, then pointed on our stern; I was standing in the larboard stern port in front of their two bow-guns, only about twelve feet from us. The greater part of our crew then being aft to prevent their boarding, I certainly expected to see many of our party fall at that fire. Had these guns been well directed, many of us must have been killed; but fortunately at that very moment the sea lifted our ship's stern and the shot went under the counter into the sea. Our ship now came round on the other tack (larboard), and I played my division into them, raking them fore and aft. They again cried quarters, and our wounded captain came and ordered me to cease firing.

Our antagonist proved to be H. B. M. sloop-of-war Penguin, Captain [James] Dickinson [also seen spelled, for example, in Fenimore Cooper and Theodore Roosevelt's naval histories as "Dickensen"] (one of Lord Nelson's favorites), who was killed during the action by a ball through the heart. This was a new vessel, mounting sixteen thirty-two pound carronades, two long nines, and one twelve-pounder on the forecastle. They reported fifteen men killed and twenty-eight wounded; but they had a number of men from the Medway seventy-four, and were sent expressly from the Cape of Good Hope to cruise for the Young Wasp privateer, of twenty-two long guns. We made out, by the rolls on board of her, twenty-five killed. Several of the wounded died. The Hornet was of the same length, one foot less beam, guns of the same calibre, one more in number than the Penguin. The Hornet had, before the action, 130 men; the Penguin had 158 men, including volunteers from the Medway -- 28 difference. The Hornet had one man killed and eleven wounded, and this all in the after third division. The poor fellow that was killed was a six-foot marine, named Town, from Vermont; he was firing over my head, and I suddenly perceived his brains on my shoes -- and, on turning, I observed the top of his skull had been taken off by a ball. As he was now much in the way, I shoved him through one of the ports overboard. After the fight came the most painful and heart-sickening sight of poor fellows, who only a few minutes since were well and joyful, now all mangled by balls and splinters. Groans were heard from all quarters. We were now employed getting the prisoners on board, unbending and bending sails, repairing rigging, and replacing as soon as possible all damages. This called us from the dying groans of the wounded. The surgeons were all employed amputating limbs and dressing wounds. The prize was taken in tow, and night veiled the dismal scene. The next morning the Penguin was scuttled and sunk; Captain Dickinson was buried with the honors of war, his own officers and marines being allowed to perform the ceremony.

When our little captain was wounded a man from one of my guns pulled off his old checked shirt, tore it in strips, took hold of Captain Biddle, and wound this round his neck. He [Biddle], then holding his bandage himself, was asked by one of our officers if he thought himself much hurt, when he replied "No, no, give it to the damned rascals!"<sup>11</sup> This shot was fired, recollect, after they had once given up. After the action was over, the doctor ([Surgeon Benjamin P.] Kissam) came to the captain (who was still at his post, holding onto his neck) and asked him if he would go down and have his wound dressed? The captain answered that, if he had got through with the rest, he believed he would go, and then we heard that the ball had passed through his neck and out through his collar behind.

One of our men on board the Penguin picked up a hat on the quarter deck in which he found a man's head that had been shot off. He very deliberately pull[ed] the head out, looked at it saying, "Matey,

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<sup>11</sup> J. F. Cooper, *History of the Navy of the United States of America* (1839), p. 342: "The vessels lay in this position but a minute or two, the American raking, when the sea lifted the Hornet ahead, carrying away her mizzen-rigging, davits and spanker boom, the enemy swinging round and hanging on the larboard quarter. At this moment Captain Biddle sent the master forward to set the foresail, with a view to part the vessels, when an officer on board the English ship called out that she surrendered. The positions prevented any other firing than that of small arms; this was ordered to cease, and Captain Biddle sprang upon the taffrail to inquire if the enemy submitted. He was within thirty feet of the forecastle of the English vessel, when two marines on board her discharged their muskets at him. The ball of one just missed the chin, and, passing through the skin of the neck, inflicted a severe, but fortunately not a dangerous wound. This incident drew a discharge of muskets from the Hornet, which killed the two marines; the American ship drew ahead at that instant, and the enemy lost his bowsprit and foremast as the vessels separated.

"The Hornet now wore round, with a fresh broadside to bear, and was about to throw in a raking fire, when twenty men appeared at the side and on the forecastle of the enemy, raising their hands for quarter, and eagerly calling out that they had struck. The excitement on board the American ship, however, was so great, in consequence of the manner in which their gallant captain had received his wound, that it was with the utmost difficulty Captain Biddle and his officers could prevent the people from pouring in another broadside."

you don't now require a hat," put it on his own head and dispatched the other overboard. I have seen him with this hat on often in New York. The sailors were also looking out for the legs amputated, that they might get some shoes and stockings, as the doctor did not take the trouble to pull them off. One very remarkable occurrence, and that that was one of the English midshipmen, a young man who sat on the wardroom table, smiling and talking and joking with one of his wounded shipmates near him who had lost a leg, while the doctor amputated one of his [own] legs, without the least emotion. When it was off, "Never mind," said he, "Bond (his messmate wounded), we will soon get on sticks and have fun with the girls yet." The poor fellow was on crutches when removed on board the Tom Bowline [the U.S. squadron's storeship] with the other prisoners, took cold, and had his leg amputated a second time by their own surgeon. Poor fellow, he died. Bond I often met at St. Salvador, Brazil.

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As a sort of last minute afterthought, below are some additional musings from my personal website on a separate but related 1812 naval topic, and which some may also possibly find of interest – WTS.

While I am neither disposed nor situated at the moment to write a formal piece or article on the subject, I could not help wanting to add a little something about my reaction to the O.H. Perry vs. Jesse Duncan Elliott [controversy](#) regarding the latter's dilatoriness in supporting Perry at the Battle of Lake Erie. The mystery is simply this -- how could Elliott have avoided being engaged for two hours? The response of Elliott's detractors was either that he was cowardly or else designing to gain glory for himself (i.e., once Perry and the *Lawrence* "went under.") In examining diverse perspectives on this question, and which have over many, many years been taken on to amazingly prolix and vituperative length, it seems one explanation has been overlooked -- namely that Elliott's fault was one of indecision (i.e., "What am I to do?...*I don't know.*") -- rather than fear of battle or envy of his commander. Two things happened to cause this 1) Perry's orders that the fleet maintain its line of battle combined with 2) Perry's violating his own instructions to remain in line and going dashing after the British himself. This then put Elliott in a position of a) having to disobey his commander's earlier instructions, and b) to act on his own initiative. Not sure that he could or should do either, this caused him to be indecisive. He arguably could not disobey his prior orders; while at the same time Perry was rash to assume Elliott necessarily would take the initiative. Per chance too, though we have no way ourselves of knowing this, *pride* was a factor in making Elliott reluctant to have Perry *force him*, without advanced notice or warning, to act on his own; and which could further remind him that technically the rules were on his side. So yes, we can say then Elliott may be considered at fault for his indecisiveness, but this is *far less* impugning of his *character* than the charges of timidity and or conspiracy.

William Thomas Sherman

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