



Written by on April 2, 2010

John Barry: True Father of the American Navy

Who was the “brilliant child of the wind and waves” who fired the inaugural volley at the Royal Navy’s pride by being the first to engage and capture an armed British warship, the *Edward*, during our War for Independence? Not sure? Here are a few hints: It was the same captain who fought the last naval skirmish of that long and bitter struggle for freedom, who held the record for the fastest American warship during the Revolution, and who was instrumental in the establishment of a permanent, separate American Navy.



It was the same captain whom President George Washington appointed commander of that navy, who trained many of our later naval heroes, and of whom James Fenimore Cooper, himself a navy veteran, wrote, “Perhaps of all the [Revolutionary period] naval Captains ... he was the one who possessed the greatest reputation for experience, conduct, and skill.”

From Irishman to American

Philadelphia in the 1760s was a bustling port on the Delaware River; ships came and went constantly. No one remarked the arrival of an Irish vessel, with a youthful 17-year-old second mate named John Barry. But when Barry stepped off the gangplank, his soul wedded instantly to his new country and its ideals of civil liberty, justice, and religious freedom. Before the century was through, this same young Irish Catholic seaman would not only prove himself an able and reliable naval officer, but a staunch American as well.

Barry’s seamanship was undisputed, and in 1775 he was employed by one of the most prominent merchantmen in Philadelphia — Colonel John Nixon. But when Nixon, a member of the Philadelphia Committee of Safety, sold Barry’s *Black Prince* (later renamed the *Alfred*) to the Continental Congress, Barry found himself without a ship. As an interesting aside, it was this same Colonel Nixon who gave the first public reading of the Declaration of Independence on July 8, 1776.

Now, there was no dearth of merchant ships sailing from Philadelphia, and Barry could have simply sought command of one of these, continuing his lucrative career as a merchant marine. However, love of country triumphed over love of lucre; Barry offered his services to Congress, which eagerly accepted. By early 1776, Barry had been made captain of the *Lexington*, reporting directly to the Marine Committee, which charged him to “take, sink, and destroy the enemies’ vessels” — which, to the Royal Navy’s great chagrin, he proceeded to accomplish most efficiently.

Score One for the Colonies

On April 7, 1776, after eluding two British frigates that dwarfed Barry’s little 14-gun brigantine, Barry engaged one of the frigates’ tenders, the *Edward*. From his opening salvo to the last broadside almost an hour later, Barry proceeded to shatter the eight-gun *Edward*, which chose to surrender rather than sink — its only other option. Taken virtually under the noses of the two frigates, the *Edward*



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represented the first armed British ship taken under the authority of the Continental Marine Committee; Barry proceeded to further insult the British frigates by slipping past them through the Delaware Bay with his prize, arriving in Philadelphia on April 11 with badly needed powder and firearms.

After the *Edward*, Barry and his *Lexington* captured several more British ships laden with firearms, powder, and other supplies. Equally important to General Washington's efforts, the *Lexington* afforded protection to many incoming colonial supply ships. From 1776 through 1778, Barry also served as commander-in-chief of the port of Philadelphia, overseeing the building of four new Continental frigates.

Service by Land or by Sea

Although much of Barry's service in the early years of the American Revolution was not on the open sea, he set a model for the nascent navy — determination, bravery, enterprise, and dedication to preserving freedom. Of Barry, historian John Frost, in his 1844 *American Naval Biography*, wrote, "For boldness of design and dexterity of execution, Barry's operations were not surpassed, if equaled, during the war."

As Barry was to command one of the new ships being constructed, the *Effingham*, the *Lexington* was assigned to another captain — but the *Effingham* wasn't yet finished. Barry was again a captain without a ship. And again, he put his energies to good use.

Congress had fled Philadelphia as the British approached. The Continental and state squadron of ships stationed in Philadelphia were in serious danger of being captured by the British ships that infested the lower Delaware. As a consequence, the Continental fleet retreated up river and was virtually helpless. General Washington, in a desperate attempt to turn the tide of the struggle, was planning the crossing of the Delaware. In this, Barry saw his chance to serve his country — if not on the rolling deck of a ship, then in the ice and snow of a December foot march.

Barry assembled a company of volunteers, and in cooperation with Captain William Brown's marines, assisted in bringing Washington's forces across the Delaware. After the crossing, Barry and his volunteers took part in the battles at both Trenton and Princeton.

Early January saw General Washington entrusting a sensitive mission to Barry — the convoying of money and stores to Trenton's captured Hessians. Washington wrote Lord Cornwallis, "I thought it most advisable to direct Captain Barry ... to give a safe conduct to the Hessian baggage as far as Philadelphia, and to the surgeon and medicines to Princeton."

Thanks to the American victories at Trenton and Princeton, Philadelphia and the ships under construction were safe — for the moment. Barry returned to his duties as senior commander of the port of Philadelphia and the ongoing ship construction. The reprieve of Philadelphia was short-lived, however: The British occupied Philadelphia in September, 1777, before the *Effingham* was fully fitted for duty at sea; the American squadron, both Continental and state ships, again retreated up the Delaware.

Imagine the Americans' position. The British were in command of the port of Philadelphia and Ft. Mifflin, Barry's ill-fated *Effingham* was sunk by General Washington's orders (to keep it out of the hands of the British), and Royal Navy vessels had the Continental ships trapped. General Washington's troops were literally starving at Valley Forge.



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Rather than sulk at the sinking of his *Effingham*, Barry went into action. He supported General Anthony Wayne's efforts, in February 1778, to procure livestock for Washington's beleaguered forces. While Wayne rounded up the cattle, Barry cruised up the Delaware, burning more than 400 tons of hay and decoying the British forces away from Wayne. Hardly standard fare for a man of the sea — but typical of Captain Barry's dedication to support the cause of liberty.

In March of that same year, Barry launched a daring mission — with only a few rowboats, a few small cannon, and 27 men, he made a midnight dash past the British guards on Philadelphia's riverfront. Rowing carefully with muffled oarlocks, at early daybreak Barry's meager forces silently slid alongside two heavily-laden British transports. The British sailors were caught completely unawares — surprise is an admirable weapon. Barry led his men in swarming over the gunwales; at the sight of the determined Americans, the sailors fled the decks. Barry then hailed the armed schooner accompanying the transports and suggested that the British captain surrender the schooner as well. The "hero of the Delaware," with more bravery than weaponry, had captured three valuable ships, many supplies, and more than 100 armed sailors!

The supplies, including four valuable brass howitzers, he sent to General Washington. The transports he burned, and the schooner, after a determined but unsuccessful fight to keep it, he sank. The embarrassment the British felt at losing three fine ships along with one major, two captains, three lieutenants, and a quantity of armed sailors to a force of only 27 men in rowboats must have been extreme.

Writing Barry after receiving the supplies, General Washington stated, "I congratulate you on the success which has crowned your gallantry.... [My wish is that] a suitable recompense may always attend your bravery."

Courier for Congress

After the British abandoned Philadelphia, Barry was free once again to harass His Majesty's ships on the Atlantic. In September 1780, Congress appointed Barry commander of the *Alliance*, the fastest and finest ship in the Continental fleet at that time, and gave him possibly one of the most important missions of the entire War — that of conveying Colonel John Laurens to France, with the object of securing desperately needed financing. The loans, supplies, and naval reinforcements for which Laurens negotiated enabled General Washington to move his troops to Yorktown, and set the stage for the critical American victory there.

During this same year, Barry authored a new signal book to improve communications between ships in a squadron.

Hardly a year later, Barry and the *Alliance* transported General LaFayette back to his homeland. Robert Morris, then director of the Finance Department and overseer of American naval affairs, instructed Barry as follows: "The safe and speedy arrival of Marquis Lafayette is of such importance that ... you are, therefore, to avoid all vessels and keep in mind as your sole object to make a quiet and safe passage to some port in France."

How disappointing to the dauntless Barry, to be forbidden to "take, sink, or destroy" the enemies' ships! John Kessler, Barry's first mate, kept a detailed log during all their voyages. While en route to France, Kessler noted that a British sail appeared on the horizon, "as if she could give them sport." But, here again we find Barry modeling the perfect naval officer, willing to follow orders and put the good of his country ahead of his personal wishes — he ordered his crew to avoid the ship, despite their loud



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grumbings about wishing “Lafayette was in France” and missing out on a possible prize.

Although the safety and speed of these two diplomatic missions were paramount, on his return voyages Barry managed to capture several British privateers and warships — more often than not, two at a time. In 1782, on another cruise to France, Barry captured nine British vessels, four of which, when sold in France, brought in \$2,500,000 in gold. On his return from this cruise, Barry and the *Alliance* outran several British vessels attempting to prevent him from getting into port. The *Alliance* reached a speed of 15 knots — a remarkable feat for ships at that time, and testament to both Barry’s seamanship and the quality of his ship.

The last naval battle of the American Revolution occurred on March 10, 1783, between Barry’s *Alliance* and an English frigate, the *Sybil*. The *Alliance* was carrying a large sum of money en route to Congress in Philadelphia from Havana. The *Sybil* fired upon the *Alliance*, but after a few exchanges of broadsides, the badly injured *Sybil* simply sailed away. Because the *Alliance* was convoying another, slower-sailing ship, Barry was unable to give chase and finish the quarrel the *Sybil* had started. Just one month later, Congress ordered a “cessation of arms.”

In the space of nine years, Barry had brought Congress its first armed prize, its last war money, and, in between, captured more than 20 British vessels and gave our country loyal and versatile naval service. But when Congress abolished the navy and sold its last ship, the *Alliance*, on August 1, 1785, Barry once again threw his energies into commercial shipping, both for private parties and for Congress, and into helping forge that “more perfect union” — the United States of America. And, not 10 years hence, he would find himself at the helm of the United States Navy.

A Compelling Personality

About a month before the newly proposed U.S. Constitution was ratified, the famed John Paul Jones left the United States for service in the Russian Navy; he never again resided in the United States, nor again commanded a U.S. vessel. In stark contrast, Barry possessed an abiding interest in the affairs of our burgeoning nation, as the following incident illustrates.

The Pennsylvania State Assembly resolved to call a State Convention for purposes of ratifying the newly proposed U.S. Constitution. Although the motion carried, 19 of the approximately 60 members voted against such a Convention. These 19 men failed to reappear after lunch, when the date of the Convention was to be decided. When politely asked to appear, they refused. They hoped to accomplish by sloth what they had not been able to accomplish by voting, for it was the next-to-last day of the Assembly’s session and the Assembly had no quorum. The State Convention — and the new Constitution — hung in the balance.

Never patient with those who shirked their duty, Barry decided to intervene. His imposing six-foot-four figure led a group of “compellers” to the lodgings of two of the absentees, and forcibly dragged them to the Assembly room. Their presence, though unwilling, established a quorum, and the Assembly fixed the Convention date.

Named Commander of the Navy

France and the United States came to blows in 1793, and the Barbary pirates were wreaking havoc on our shipping vessels. Barry again offered his services in defense of his country, and again they were eagerly accepted. In March 1794, President Washington signed an act authorizing the construction of six ships, which served as the foundation of our present navy. A week after the act was signed, Captain Barry received a letter from Henry Knox, Secretary of War. This letter stated: “The President ... has



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appointed you to be a Captain of one of the ships provided.... It is understood that the relative rank of the Captains is to be in the following order: John Barry, Samuel Nicholson..."

Captain Nicholson wrote Barry soon after, "Give me leave to congratulate you on your honorable appointment to the command of our navy." It took three years to build Barry's ship, the *United States*, and his official commission, clearly marked "Reg. No. 1," was issued February 22, 1797.

Now that the United States had a navy, Barry wanted to see it flourish. In January 1798, he wrote to a member of the House of Representatives: "The first thing that ought to be done is to place the [navy] department by itself." He also recommended the establishment of three navy yards. Was Barry a voice of prophecy, or a well-heeded expert? For within a few months, President John Adams did just that — created the Department of the Navy, separate from the Department of War, and purchased several dockyards.

From the launching of the *United States*, until President Jefferson drastically reduced the U.S. naval forces, Barry was in constant service. He commanded a squadron consisting of 10 or more ships in the West Indies protecting U.S. shipping from French depredations, and again found himself as trusted conveyor of our envoys to France in 1799, to negotiate peace.

Barry continued to command the squadron in the West Indies, until President Jefferson "laid up" all the U.S. naval ships in mid-1801; only nine captains were retained on half-pay, one of which was Barry. Two years later, Barry died at his residence in Philadelphia, mourned by all who knew him. A noted Revolutionary hero and signer of the Declaration of Independence, Dr. Benjamin Rush, wrote Barry's epitaph.

A Legacy

Although Barry's fame as "father of the American Navy" has waned for unknown reasons in the last 80 years, several monuments to Barry exist in Philadelphia and Washington, D.C., and four United States naval ships have been named *USS Barry*, the most recent one launched in 1992. Respected historian Martin Griffin wrote in 1908 that "Captain Barry was early in the struggle, foremost during its continuance, and latest in service."

Barry died childless — at least in the traditional sense of the word. But in a wider sense, he had many children — those officers who served under him and whom he mentored with great care. Naval exemplars such as Stephen Decatur, Jr., Richard Dale, Charles Stewart, Jacob Jones, and William Montgomery Crane, all who became commodores, started their naval careers under Barry's watchful eye, as did Richard Somers, of Tripoli fame. Indeed, during the War of 1812, the *Port Folio* of Philadelphia, an influential American magazine at the time, wrote, "So many of the distinguished naval men of the present day commenced their career under Commodore Barry that he may justly be considered as 'the father of our navy.'"

Painting of John Barry: U.S. Naval Historical Center



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