



Lieutenant Stephen Decatur boarding a Tripolitan gunboat, August 3, 1804 (Painting by Dennis Malone Carter)

## *The first operations of the US Navy in the Mediterranean Sea*

*By Jean-Claude Janssens*

*Adapted into English by Gerald Hawkins*

### **CHRISTIANS AND BARBARY PIRATES<sup>1</sup>**

At the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, the Arabs had completed the conquest of North Africa. During the 16<sup>th</sup> century, it was the turn of the Ottoman Turks to control the region, with the exception of the empire of the Sultan of Morocco. The Turks never envisaged turning North Africa into a settlement, like the French after 1830. They limited their role to the administration of the provinces and establishing garrisons.

The North-African provinces of Algiers, Tunis and Tripoli, theoretically vassals of the distant and increasingly weak Ottoman Sublime Porte, quickly became autonomous. They were governed by *Pashas*, *Deys* or *Beys*. These dignitaries or Turkish-Arab military would eventually create genuine dynasties. Over time, these provinces became regencies. The three regencies were called by Westerners “Barbary States” or “Barbary

---

<sup>1</sup> The origin of the term “Barbary” is not the word “barbarian”, but rather “Berber”, the name of an indigenous North African people installed in this area well before the Arab conquest of the 8<sup>th</sup> century and already mentioned in Roman times.

Coast”, which also included the independent Sultanate of Morocco.

In those days in North Africa, the main economic activity was associated with the maritime traffic of other nations, in clear: piracy and privateering. As of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, and on the rise with time, Arabs then Barbary pirates spread terror across the Mediterranean Sea. They systematically attacked any ship that flew the pavilion of a Christian nation, seizing its goods and crews. These poor souls were enslaved until a ransom was paid. Over time, 1,500,000 Christians were captured. All would not be released and many found a painful end in the galleys or prisons of North Africa. The Barbary corsairs crisscrossed the Atlantic Ocean, even ravaging the British, Irish and Icelandic coasts!

The systematic raiding and plundering by the Maghreb Arabs and the Turks forced the Christians to react. Between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Maltese, Spaniards, French, British, Dutch, Venetian and even Danish took turns in systematically bombarding Algiers, Tunis and Tripoli, without however definitively subduing the Barbary pirates. During the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, six nations paid tributes to the Barbary States every two years: Holland, Naples, Portugal, Sweden, Norway and Denmark. The Dutch and British also provided weapons and ammunition. The French, traditional allies of the Ottomans against the Habsburgs of Spain or Austria, offered gifts of little value and never paid monies. As of 1783, a new nation joined the group, that of the United States of North America.

## **AMERICAN DIPLOMACY**

On July 4, 1776, the thirteen British Colonies of North America, future United States, signed their declaration of independence. At that time, the lucrative trade of the American pioneers in the Mediterranean Sea relied on a fleet of 20,000 tons and 1,200 crewmen. In 1778, when signing the Treaty of Alliance with France, Benjamin Franklin only managed to get the verbal backing of King Louis XVI of France in case of problems with the North Africans, but no naval protection. In 1782, a similar treaty was negotiated with the Dutch Antilles. In 1783, the Treaty of Paris officially put an end to the war. The United States of North America became independent. Their request for an inclusion in a treaty similar to those of 1778 and 1782 was however rejected by the Parliament of London. In reality, Britain secretly encouraged the activities of the Barbary pirates against their old foe, since they had become commercial rivals.

Although they had emerged victorious from a war that had lasted for eight years, the young United States were bankrupt. The army was disbanded, with or without pay, and the ships of the fleet were disarmed and sold, the last one in 1785. There were no longer any military and financial means. It was therefore impossible to envisage a war upon the Barbary pirates. From 1783, American diplomacy strove to establish some kind of European league against the Barbary, but without success. As of 1785, John-Paul Jones, a hero naval fighter against the British during the American Revolution, pleaded the US cause in France, Denmark, Holland and Russia. He died in 1792 in Paris without being able to conclude.

Meanwhile, events evolved dramatically on the naval theatre. In October 1784, the Moroccan pirates of Tangier captured the brigantine *Betsey*. The ship and crew were returned after six months of detention. On June 28, 1786, a treaty was finally signed with the Sultan of Morocco. In 1783 and 1785, Spain acted offensively against the Regency of Algiers, which prevented its privateers from operating freely, thus allowing the merchant navy of Washington to breathe momentarily. Indeed, the war was barely

over that the Algerians, secretly backed by London, crossed the Strait of Gibraltar and attacked American merchant ships off the coast of Portugal. On July 25, 1785, they seized the schooner *Maria* of Boston and, on July 30, the *Dauphin* of Philadelphia, capturing 21 American sailors. These would be harshly treated for many years in Algerian prisons. Their fate would have been even worse without the mediation of Spain and France.

While this was going on, war broke out between Portugal and the Regency of Algiers. Its first consequence was the closure of the Strait of Gibraltar, denying access to the Algerian corsairs, and the second a new respite for American maritime trade. It was finally decided in high places to try to deliver the American prisoners in the hands of the pirates. In 1787, Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson appealed to the religious Order of the Mathurin Brothers, expert in this type of negotiation. Indeed, since 1189, this brotherhood had managed to free 900,000 captives. For three years, their monks aided by France negotiated without making headway. The Dey of Algiers refused to listen to their pleas and released only a single American prisoner. In 1790, the French Revolution suppressed the religious orders and the negotiations ground to a halt. On September 17, 1793, the Portuguese and Algerians secretly signed an armistice for one year. Once again, without the protection of friendly warships or treaties, the American merchant navy paid the price.

### **NAVAL ACT OF 1794**

To mitigate the Barbary threat, a penniless Congress painfully voted, on March 27, 1794, the first Naval Act or bill for the creation of a military naval force. This act authorized the construction of four frigates of 44 guns and two others of 38 guns. These ships were sturdier, faster and more heavily armed than their European counterparts, both in number of artillery pieces and caliber. In 1795, peace with Algiers put an end to the construction works. It was not until 1796 that the first ship of the resurgent US Navy, the frigate *United States*, was finally launched. It was followed in 1797 by the frigates *Constellation* and *Constitution*. In 1800, the last three frigates of the program, the *Chesapeake*, *Congress* and *President* were finally put into service.

### **FIRST TREATIES WITH THE BARBARY**

In the interval, the situation with the Barbary pirates had somewhat relaxed. Various agreements were negotiated at high prices and finally concluded. In 1795, a first treaty was signed with Algiers. In 1796, another followed with Tripoli and the next year a final one with Tunis. In 1802, Congress made up its accounts: these wonderful treaties had cost the US treasury the colossal sum of \$ 2,000,000. This tribute money could have financed the construction of 20 additional frigates bound for the Mediterranean Sea!

### **THE “QUASI WAR” OR NAVAL WAR WITH FRANCE 1797-1800**

The United States were also trying to solve several economic problems with Britain. In 1794, London signed another agreement, the so-called Jay Treaty. Paris considered it a betrayal and an undeclared virtual war began. It took place at sea only, off the Atlantic coast of the United States and in the Caribbean Sea. Between 1796 and 1797, the French took the initiative of reprisals and their navy decimated unopposed American ships! In

1798, the US Navy timidly retaliated with 25 ships, including the three first frigates built in its arsenals and the 22 vessels that it had recently purchased. The convention of September 30, 1800, put an end to this “Quasi War”. Under the terms of the Peace Establishment Act of March 3, 1801, the US Navy again sold all its ships, except thirteen large frigates and the brig *Enterprise*.

### **THE FRIGATE “GEORGE WASHINGTON” IN CONSTANTINOPLE (1800)**

In 1800, Captain William Bainbridge, commanding the frigate *George Washington*, was commissioned to deliver the tribute to Dey Mustapha of Algiers. When he arrived at his destination, he found the situation rather complex. The Ottoman Empire, ally of England, was at war with France since the invasion of its Egyptian province by Napoleon Bonaparte. However, the Regency of Algiers, theoretical vassal of the Turks, had signed a peace treaty with France! The Sultan was outraged and he cautiously decided to send a reassuring mission to Istanbul.

He however needed a means of transport. He set his sights on the American frigate. Bainbridge at first flatly refused, but the Dey stated that he considered the American his obedient slave. Moreover, the batteries of Algiers held the frigate at their mercy. Finally, on October 19, 1800, the American ship sailed for Constantinople. It took on board some 100 dignitaries including the Algerian Minister of the Navy, a hundred Negresses as a gift, livestock and exotic animals! The Muslims were allowed to pray several times a day, forcing the captain to orientate the ship’s bow towards Mecca, which did not really facilitate the maneuver of the frigate!

In early November, the *George Washington* reached the Dardanelles, defended by forts outfitted with powerful heavy artillery. To cross the strait, it was necessary to show special passports. Bainbridge had none and the Ottomans were not aware of his nationality. He therefore had to bluff. The American commander gave the impression that he was stopping and greeted the Turkish batteries. They saluted back. A thick smoke screen then engulfed the ship and when cleared, the frigate was gone! It was impossible for the Turks to move their guns because their carriages were fixed! On November 9, the frigate moored in Istanbul to the great astonishment of the Turks! Fortunately, the British ambassador ironed out all the difficulties. The Sultan allowed the ship to enter the Black Sea, where an American pavilion flew for the first time. On December 30, 1800, Bainbridge left the shores of the Bosphorus and on January 21, 1801, he was back in Algiers with bad news. The message of the Turkish Sultan was caustic. He threatened to have Algiers bombarded by an Anglo-Turkish fleet, a threat that ultimately was not followed by any effect. The Dey asked Bainbridge to return to Istanbul. Out of range of the city’s guns, the commodore categorically refused and the matter was put to bed.

Despite the “Quasi War” between the United States and France, Bainbridge participated in the evacuation of French nationals, which earned him the personal gratitude of First Consul Bonaparte.

### **1801-1805 – FIRST BARBARY WAR WITH TRIPOLI**

In the year 1800, the Regency of Tripoli was in a dreadful shape. The treaties had forced its pasha to inactivity, prompting Yusuf Karamanli to resume sea warfare to replenish his stocks and coffers. However, the existing treaties had to be broken and so the Pasha set his sights on the North Americans who operated from far away and were

reportedly weak. He thus accumulated pretexts and vexations to renew the war upon the United States. He tirelessly called for gifts, donations and other tributes. The discussions dragged on, which further angered the Pasha. In September, the corsairs of Tripoli captured the brig *Catherine* of New York, detaining the crew for five weeks.

The year 1801 began with heightened tensions between Tripoli and Washington. In February, the Pasha demanded the immediate and exorbitant payment of \$ 250,000 as well as a future annual tribute of \$ 200,000. At that time, the total annual revenues of the American States were a mere \$ 10.000.000! In the meantime, in March 1801, Thomas Jefferson became third President of the United States<sup>2</sup>. He was far from being open to paying any tribute at all. He felt that the building of a military fleet would eventually cost less than to give in to the Barbary pirates' demands. His slogan became: *Millions for defense, not one cent for tribute!*

The climate undeniably deteriorated. The consul to Tripoli referred to his colleague in Tunis. Given the gravity of the situation, the consul to Tunis, William Eaton, judged that it was appropriate to advise his government. On May 14, 1801, his patience running thin, the Pasha had the flag mast of the US consulate cut down, forcing Consul Cathcart to flee to Livorno in Tuscany, Italy. This clearly meant that the Regency of Tripoli was at war with the United States. A few days later, Tripolitan Admiral Mourad Rais was in Gibraltar with two warships, on the lookout for American preys.

### COMMAND OF COMMODORE DALE

On May 20, 1801, a US squadron was formed, consisting of the frigates *President*, *Philadelphia* and *Essex* and the brig *Enterprise*, bearing together 124 guns. Its command was assigned to Commodore Richard Dale, veteran of the War of Independence. His purely defensive mission was most restrictive: protect merchant vessels and destroy or sink any hostile Barbary ship, but in no circumstance systematically attack the enemy, take prisoners of war or bombard the Barbary cities. The crews were recruited for a one year campaign, which would prove by far too short!

On June 1, 1801, the squadron left Hampton Roads, Virginia, for Gibraltar where it arrived on July 1. Dale met Mourad Rais without knowing that war had broken out with the US. The frigate *Philadelphia* kept an eye on Barbary ships in Gibraltar while the *Essex* escorted merchant vessels. Dale made the tour of the regencies with the frigates *President* and the brig *Enterprise*, beginning with Algiers. He was joined by the *Essex* in Tunis, where he made big impression. Back in Tripoli, the Pasha nearly choked since he was unaware of the presence of US ships in his waters! Negotiations were started but not concluded. Dale blocked the city for 18 days, but had to lift the blockade due to lack of water. He retreated to Malta where he arrived on August 16. Meanwhile, on August 1, 1801, the brig *Enterprise* encountered the corsair *Tripoli* that was searching for American preys. Captain Mohammed Sous was as surprised as his sovereign to see a US warship in the Mediterranean Sea. The two ships sided at musketry range and the battle started. After four hours of fierce fighting with artillery and small arms, the Tripolitans surrendered. When the Americans boarded the enemy ship, they evaluated the damage they had caused: the *Tripoli* was cut to pieces and its crew had lost 50 out of its 80 men, including the courageous Captain Mohammed Sous, wounded by several bullets. The Tripolitans painfully managed to regain Tripoli on their craft reduced to the state of raft. Upon his arrival, the injured captain was first stoned by the crowd and then

---

<sup>2</sup> Unusual for an American at the time, Jefferson had read the Qur'an and studied the behavior of the Arabs.

caned! The *Enterprise* had suffered little damage and no casualties. As a reward for this brilliant action, Lieutenant Sterret received a sword of honor and his men an extra month's pay.

Leaving Malta on August 21, Dale sailed back to Tripoli. He intercepted a Greek vessel sailing out of the harbor while carrying Tripolitan soldiers and merchants. He sent the ship back to Tripoli with the merchants but kept the soldiers hostage on the frigate *President*. Dale then returned to Gibraltar, leaving the *Philadelphia* to block Tripoli and the *Essex* to patrol the Barbary Coast. On October 1801, the sailors whose contract had ended returned to the United States on board the *Enterprise*. Later, the *President* struck an underwater rock in the port of Mahon, on the island of Menorca, and nearly sank. With great difficulty, the frigate headed for Toulon, reaching its harbor on December 6, 1801, where it was refitted in a dry dock. On February 9, 1802, President Thomas Jefferson received the congressional power to use the US Navy in a more aggressive way, but not to declare war on Tripoli, which put the military in an ambiguous situation!

On April 14, 1802, Commodore Dale was back in Norfolk, Virginia. He knew nothing of the Act of February 9. He further had no news of the frigate *Boston*, which had left on October 1801 to reinforce his squadron. Meanwhile, a parallel war had developed between Tripoli and Sweden and a Swedish squadron was ordered to participate in the blockade. Dale did however not have the opportunity to collaborate with the Scandinavians. While the Administration had given him little means and latitude, it nevertheless held him responsible for the poor results of the campaign. Disavowed by his government, Dale resigned from the Navy on December 17, 1802.

## COMMAND OF COMMODORE MORRIS

Congress decided to replace Dale's force by a new and larger squadron. It was assigned to Commodore Richard Morris. This second squadron consisted of the brig *Enterprise* repaired after its first campaign and the frigates *Constellation*, *Chesapeake*, *New York*, *Adams* and *John Adams*. They carried perhaps 180 guns. This time the crews were enrolled for two years. The squadron sailed between February 17 and September 19, 1802, seven months being needed for its full transfer to the Mediterranean Sea! Commodore Morris travelled on the *Chesapeake*. He took along his wife, baby and black slave Sally. The men were also allowed to bring their wives, a precedent in the US Navy! One of these brave ladies even gave birth on the flagship *Chesapeake*. At some point, questions arose as to who commanded the squadron: Commodore Morris or his wife. The latter in the meantime became pregnant and coming to term, she demanded to deliver in full comfort. It thus became necessary to lift the blockade of Tripoli to transport Ms. Morris to Malta, prompting Consul William Eaton to demand an immediate explanation regarding this ridiculous naval circus.

The situation at sea was equally disappointing. Unproductive operations consisted of countless crisscrossing of American ships between the United States, Gibraltar, Tunis, Algiers, Malta, Naples and Livorno. An inefficient blockade of Tripoli was attempted with one or two American ships at a time, fortunately in partnership with four Swedish frigates in a first stage, then with only one. On May 5, 1802, the crew of the *Enterprise* boarded a Tunisian sailboat by mistake, but quickly released it. On July 22, before Tripoli, the frigate *Constellation* battled successfully with 27 gunboats, including the enemy's flagship, and dispersed 6,000 horsemen lined up on the coast. In August, the Tripolitan cruiser *Meshouda* held in Gibraltar oddly left the harbor for Tangier. In fact,

the Sultan of Morocco, secretly allied with Tripoli, claimed to have bought the ship! Morris took no action as he felt he did not have the means and probably not the willingness to fight an additional war with Morocco. In January 1803, the fleet managed to dispatch four vessels to Malta, which dispersed soon after. On May 1, 1803, Malta saw a new concentration of the American squadron. Was this the sign of serious operations being prepared against Tripoli? Shortly after, the frigate *John Adams* captured without resistance the ex-Tripolitan *Meshouda* cruiser flying the Moroccan flag and packed with supplies bound for Tripoli. In May 1803, despite the cover of the fleet, a "commando" of 100 sailors tried to capture some enemy boats full of wheat but was repulsed. On May 28, an attack on Tripolitan gunboats brought meager results. On June 22, the brig *Enterprise* intercepted and fired on a 22-gun Tripolitan ship that eventually exploded, killing its 200-man crew.

The results of the campaign were in the end pretty thin and, as expected, Commodore Morris was suspended on September 12, 1803. The terms of the letter from Congress were very harsh, to such extent that the commodore couldn't help shedding a few tears! Captain Rodgers succeeded him on an interim basis. On November 21, 1803, Morris was back in the United States. On March 10, 1804, he appeared before a commission of inquiry and on May 16, 1804, the verdict fell: Captain Richard Morris, former commodore of the Mediterranean squadron, was revoked and forced to leave the service of the United States Navy.

### COMMAND OF COMMODORE PREBLE

Meanwhile, the United States had assembled a new squadron comprising the frigates *Philadelphia* and *Constitution*, the brigs *Siren* and *Argus* and the schooners *Nautilus* and *Vixen*. The *Enterprise* was already on-site in the Mediterranean Sea. This new squadron mustered about 150 guns. It was entrusted to Commodore Edward Preble, a 42 years old veteran of the War of Independence. The fleet left the United States between June 30 and September 8, 1803, arriving in the theatre of operations five weeks later. As in previous missions, its task consisted of patrolling, escorting merchant ships and maintaining some sort of blockade of Tripoli with ridiculous forces. There were however some differences from the past. One or more European ports were selected as rear bases, such as Syracuse in Sicily or Naples and Livorno in Italy, Malta and even Gibraltar. Additionally, a transport ship was chartered, which would have the beneficial effect of limiting the movement of the entire squadron, improving the blockade and increasing possible operations against Tripoli.

In the interim, the Sultan of Morocco had barely appreciated the fate of the *Meshouda* and sent his cruiser *Mirboka* hunting American ships. It captured the *Cecilia* of Boston, which was captured some time later by the frigate *Philadelphia* of Captain Bainbridge. A demonstration of force with three frigates in front of Tangier compelled the Sultan to a more peaceful attitude. This problem settled, Commodore Preble officially decreed the blockade of Tripoli on October 15, 1803. He assigned the task to the *Philadelphia* and *Vixen*, other ships providing escorts for US merchant vessels.

On October 31, 1803, the *Philadelphia* was chasing a Tripolitan blockade-runner when it accidentally ran aground on an unmapped reef near Tripoli. Despite a spirited defense, the enemy's gunboats easily captured the American frigate. The pirates triumphantly brought back the ship to the port of Tripoli where Captain Bainbridge and his crew were held prisoners. On February 16, 1804, at 10 PM, Lieutenant Stephen Decatur entered Tripoli harbor aboard the Tripolitan brig *Mastico*, which had been

captured in December 1803 and renamed *Intrepid*. Through the darkness of the night and with the help of a pilot speaking Arabic, he misled the guards and pulled alongside the *Philadelphia*. In no time, the American “commando” disguised as Maltese sailors and Arab seamen boarded the frigate. After short but violent hand to hand fighting, Decatur’s 80 men eliminated the enemy, rushed to the hold to liberate the prisoners and set fire to the ship, which finally disappeared in a spectacular fire. Covered by the brig *Siren*, the Americans managed to board the *Intrepid*, leaving the Tripolitans totally stunned. Both ships then made their way to Syracuse, arriving on February 18. Upon hearing the news of the American feat of arms in Tripoli, Pope Pius VII publicly declared that “*the United States, though in their infancy, had done more to humble and humiliate the anti-Christian barbarians on the African coast in one night than all the European states had done for a long period of time!*”<sup>3</sup> At 25 years of age, Stephen Decatur became a hero on both sides of the Atlantic. He received a sword of honor from Congress and became the youngest captain in the United States Navy. His crews were rewarded with two months additional pay.

In March 1804, the American ships boarded any vessel approaching Tripoli, regardless of its size or flag, including a Russian vessel and a British brig. They also fired a few shells on Tripoli, without causing major damage to the city fortifications or enemy fleet. Negotiations with Yusuf Pasha were started, but without making any headway. Commodore Preble came to the conclusion that only force would put an end to the conflict. He then rented six gunboats and two bomb ketches from King Ferdinand IV of the Two Sicilies, who had just declared war upon the Regency of Tripoli. Preble could now envisage a more muscular action the following summer.

On 7 July, a felucca trying to take advantage of the fog to sneak into the port of Tripoli was blown to pieces by the *Argus* while the *Siren* repelled a cavalry party rushing to the coast.

Finally, on July 25, 1804, the complete American squadron lined up in front of Tripoli for the first time since 1801. It included the frigate *Constitution*, flagship of Commodore Preble, 2 brigs, 6 schooners, 6 gunboats and a number of bomb ketches, totaling 120 guns. However, of these, only 28 were of large-caliber and 20 of medium-caliber, which were inadequate to reduce a fortified town. In contrast, the enemy could muster 115 heavy guns. Its fleet consisted of 19 gunboats, 2 galleys, 2 schooners and a brig. Its land forces amounted to 25,000 men whereas the American squadron had only 2,000 officers and men, including 100 Napolitano sailors.

Nevertheless, the attack started on August 3, 1804. At 2 PM, commodore Preble ordered to open fire. The Tripolitans fought back and the engagement became general. US gunboats rushed to board their Tripolitan counterparts near the harbor and hand to hand fighting quickly turned to the advantage of the Americans. Dozens of Arabs were killed or injured. Decatur barely escaped death while fighting with a Barbary captain. The galleys of Tripoli were neutralized by the gunfire of the brigs and schooners. During the entire action, the accurate artillery fire of the frigate *Constellation* silenced many enemy batteries. Its well-aimed projectiles destroyed part of the palace and the minaret of a mosque. The ketches threw 150 bombs on the town. Three Barbary gunboats were sunk and three others captured. It was impossible to precisely figure the enemy casualties, but one can imagine they were quite heavy. Despite the Tripolitan’s hot but inaccurate fire, damage to the American ships was negligible. The only man

<sup>3</sup> Mackenzie, Alexander. *Life of Stephen Decatur: A Commodore in the Navy of the United States*. C.C. Little and J. Brown. p. 443.



killed was Lieutenant James Decatur, brother of Stephen. Thirteen seamen were wounded. At 4.30 PM, the prevailing winds changed and the signal to retire was given. The American squadron withdrew in good order. On August 7, determined to maintain the pressure, Preble ordered his fleet forward, its target being a battery of seven large guns located west of the city. It was silenced and partially destroyed. However, an accurate or lucky enemy shot hit a gunboat that exploded and sank with two officers and eight sailors.

Preble envisaged using a new tactic: night bombardment. On August 9, while making a reconnaissance on the *Argus*, an enemy shell hit the ship below the waterline and the brig nearly sank. On August 24, the gunboats and two ketches bombarded Tripoli from 2 to 6 AM, without causing any retaliation fire. On August 28, the experience was renewed with the frigates *Constitution* and *John Adams*, the brigs, the schooners and the gunboats, the bomb ketches being temporarily out of action. At 1.30 AM, the Americans opened fire, hurling 700 projectiles on Tripoli. The Barbary fleet came out and the engagement lasted 45 minutes. An enemy gunboat was sunk and three others severely damaged, prompting the rest of the Arab fleet to retreat to the harbor. The coastal batteries and the castle of the Pasha suffered devastation. On the US side, Commodore Preble nearly lost his life when a Tripolitan shot destroyed the bridge of the frigate *Constitution*. Three other American sailors lost their lives on the frigate *John Adams*. At 6.15 PM, Preble felt that the show of force was sufficient for the night and the squadron retired. He later learned from a Spanish captain that the effects of the bombardment of the city had been devastating and that many civilians had been killed.

This encouraged him to pursue the effort of September 3. At 2.15 AM, the bombardment was renewed. The gunboats, brigs and schooners fired on a new battery - built by American prisoners - near the British fort and assailed the galleys and gunboats of Tripoli, which they sent fleeing. The bomb ketches that had been rehabilitated under the cover of the *Constitution* bombarded the city, the batteries of the mole and the Pasha's palace. The damage was worse than that inflicted on August 28 and huge fires enlightened the city. Miraculously, the Americans suffered no losses and damage was limited to inevitable holes in the sails. A ketch had to be taken in tow to prevent it from sinking. At around 4.30 AM, the winds became unfavorable and Preble put an end to the operation.

Despite the encouraging results of the last days, the commodore felt that they were still insufficient to eliminate the fleet of Tripoli, his main objective. To achieve this, it was necessary to enter the harbor's roadstead. Preble ordered a quick conversion of the *Intrepid* into a fire ship loaded with gunpowder and shrapnel, with Lieutenant Somers as commanding officer. On September 4, 1804, at 8 PM, the *Intrepid* slowly sailed into Tripoli harbor. However, the ship was quickly spotted by the enemy. The citadel artillery opened fire and a few seconds later, a lucky shot hit the fire ship that exploded with its 15 man-crew and commander. The shreds of their bodies were found a few days later. The emotion ran high in the American camp and also in the United States. Preble was already considering another operation to avenge his comrades. There would however be no time to organize it.

## COMMANDS OF COMMODORES BARRON AND RODGERS

Indeed, on September 10, 1805, Commodore Samuel Barron arrived with the frigates *President* and *Constellation*. He immediately took command of the squadron. Edward Preble left Tripoli on December 23, 1804, arriving in the United States on February 26,

1805. Unlike his predecessors, he was welcomed home with enthusiasm and received the Congressional Gold Medal on March 3.

During the winter of 1804-1805, Barron continued the blockade of Tripoli, extending the surveillance of the Tripolitan coast from Tripoli to Benghazi and Derna. In the spring of 1805, the pressure was increased further and barely a day passed without capturing a blockade-runner. However, on May 22, 1805, Barron fell seriously ill. His command passed to Commodore John Rodgers. The latter had a reinforced fleet consisting of 7 schooners and other sloops, 6 frigates, 16 gunboats and 2 bomb ketches freshly arrived from Boston on the judicious advice of Preble. This represented a serious firepower of about 300 guns of all calibers. With such a force, the new commodore could now give the final blow to the severely weakened Pasha. However, he made no use of it. He did not have Preble's stamina and preferred simply to obey the strict orders of his government and maintain the blockade of Tripoli, no more, no less. Moreover, the authoritarian Colonel Tobias Lear, the American consul in Algiers, had been vested with full powers. Although a former soldier, he was a strong advocate of diplomacy instead of force.

## **DERNA**

While Commodore Preble was maintaining the naval pressure on Tripoli, the imaginative and daring Consul William Eaton in Tunis planned a land attack of the enemy's capital from the rear. Commodore Dale had already discussed this project with him in 1801. To accomplish this, it was necessary to take advantage of the internal problems of the Regency of Tripoli. Indeed, in 1796, Pasha Hamet Karamanli, the older brother and legitimate heir to the throne of Tripoli, was ousted by his younger brother, the current Pasha Yusuf Karamanli. Hamet had fled to Tunis where he was introduced to William Eaton. In 1802, under the negotiation terms with Youssouf, Hamet was appointed Governor of the province of Derna, a Tripolitan port east of the capital, close to the Egyptian border, another theoretical possession of the Ottoman Empire. As of 1803, Hamet started plotting against Youssouf and raised an army. He was finally defeated and, in January 1804, he fled to Egypt.

Consul Eaton sailed on the *Argus* to Alexandria, Egypt, where he disembarked on November 27, 1804. He found Hamet at a time when the Mameluks were revolting against the Ottoman Turks and besieging the city of Minieh, on the Nile, 240 kilometers south of Cairo. The tireless Eaton obtained from the Ottoman Governor Mohamed Ali<sup>4</sup> a safe-conduct for Hamet, and all reunited in Alexandria. Of course, Eaton promised Hamet the throne of Tripoli after the inevitable victory. All this was reported on February 23, 1805, in a bold treaty signed by Eaton on behalf of the United States, but never ratified by the Senate and thus without much value!

On March 1, 1805, everything was ready and the troops assembled. Consul Eaton proclaimed himself general. His second in command was a Tyrolean by the name of Leidendorfer who became colonel. Eaton had recruited a British mercenary, 27 artillerymen of various nationalities and 40 Greeks. On the Arabic side, Hamet was accompanied by a hundred men of his suite and 300 other infantrymen, cavalrymen and camel drivers. The only professional soldiers were Lieutenant Presley O'Bannon and

<sup>4</sup> Mohamed Ali, Muslim of Albanian origin, ruled Egypt from 1805 to 1848 on behalf of the waning Ottoman Empire. Actually quite autonomous, he was much more powerful than the Sultan of Istanbul, first supporting him against the rebellious Greeks (1827-1831), then leading two victorious wars against the Turks (1831 and 1839).

six American Marines. This mixed bag force totaled about 500 men. Almost 1,000 miles of desert separated Alexandria from Derna.

The departure was set for March 8, 1805. The journey would be restless. The next day, the Arabs already demanded an advance on their pay. On March 18, the cameleers refused to go any further. On March 26, rumors of the imminent arrival at Derna of an important Tripolitan force created panic in the Arab contingent. On March 29, the Arab leaders were arguing among themselves and on April 8, their thirsty men mutinied. On April 10, food became short and rationing was imposed. Fortunately, on April 16, the brig *Argus* arrived at the port of Bomba with Captain Isaac Hull, bringing the needed supplies and especially the mercenaries' pay, but not the 100 Marines requested by Eaton. On April 17, the *Argus* was joined by the *Hornet*. After a week of much needed rest, the march resumed on April 23. But the next day, new rumors of the approach of an enemy column once more provoked panic among the Arabs. Finally, on April 25, Eaton's army arrived in full view of the prosperous small port city of Derna.

Eaton had planned an attack for April 27. In the morning, the *Nautilus* joined the *Argus* and the *Hornet* and landed weapons, ammunition, a single cannon and a handful of Marines. Eaton's forces faced 800 determined and well armed Arabs who were encouraged by their governor and supported by a battery of eight guns. The town had been fortified and the palace transformed into a citadel. At noon, the Derna guns opened fire on the American ships, without result. The latter then sent a deluge of projectiles on the centre of the city and the palace. The Arabs abandoned their positions in disorder. At 2 PM, Eaton attacked and was slightly wounded while heading his troops. Despite heavy but inaccurate enemy musketry, his men overran the Tripolitan defenses and resolutely advanced into the town. At 3 PM, the Marines took control of the palace, forcing the governor to take refuge in a mosque, then in a friendly sheik's house. For the first time in history, the American flag was planted on a fortress of the Old World. The enemy retreated everywhere. The Westerners captured eight enemy guns and turned them on the city now caught between two fires. Hamet's cavalry actively pursued the fugitives in the desert. At 4.30 PM, victory was complete. The "General-Consul" William Eaton was master of Derna but virtually without resources, situation which he bitterly complained about in various letters. Hamet Pasha returned to his palace. The victory had come at a very low price: two men killed and fourteen wounded. The enemy losses were significantly higher. Calm reigned for the next fifteen days.

Meanwhile, the relief army sent by Tripoli finally arrived and set its tents not far from the city. On May 12, the governor in hiding joined his compatriots. Strangely, the next day, 1,200 Tripolitans surprised Hamet's cavalry outposts, entered the city, and reached the governor's palace occupied by Hamet Pasha. Eaton and his men immediately intervened and the American ships opened fire. The Tripolitans retreated, pursued by Hamet's regrouped cavalry. William Eaton had escaped the worst. However, his situation became increasingly precarious due to the lack of reinforcements and funds. On June 3, the enemy simulated an attack to maintain the pressure. Inaction undermined the morale of the troops and the Tripolitan general was fully aware of this. That is why, on June 10, he assaulted Derna with 4,000 men. Using the cover of the land, his forces became less vulnerable to the firing of American vessels. However, the unusual resistance of Hamet Pasha's cavalry and the rapid fire of a US field gun eventually destabilized the enemy who retreated again in a frantic move.

On June 11 at dawn, the frigate *Constellation* set anchor in front of Derna. It brought the news of the signing of the Treaty of June 5 and the end of the war. The mercenaries and Marines evacuated the town during the night, unbeknown to the enemy. William

Eaton was the last to leave. Furious residents looted the abandoned American camp. Hamet Pasha was disembarked in Syracuse. On August 6, 1805, William Eaton left North Africa for good. His dream was over.

## **PEACE WITH TRIPOLI**

Meanwhile, the situation had changed in Tripoli. In December 1804, Pasha Yusuf Karamanli, demoralized and fed up, made it known that the time had perhaps come to cease hostilities and resume negotiations. This was not the opinion of Consul Tobias Lear and the blockade continued. In March 1805, the consul of Denmark communicated that peace could be achieved subject to the payment of \$ 120,000. Considering the Barbary demands excessive, Commodore Barron rejected the proposal and continued to blockade the city.

While staying in Malta in May 1805, Tobias Lear learned of the capture of Derna by William Eaton. The time was ripe to resume talks. On May 26, he was again in front of Tripoli on board the frigate *Essex*. On June 5, 1805, Yusuf Karamanli finally surrendered, accepting the exchange of prisoners and signing a new peace treaty. On June 19, he received \$ 60,000 as final settlement. The battered population was jubilant after four years of deprivation. On July 21, 1805, the American squadron finally left Tripoli. In August 1805, a last demonstration of force would prove necessary in front of Tunis where the local Bey had threatened to go to war with the United States. Indeed, on April 24, 1805, the US fleet had captured a Tunisian cruiser trying to run the Tripoli blockade. The spectacular American show of force quickly deterred the Bey from initiating hostilities. Commodore Rodgers had in the meantime replaced Barron who was ill. He then began to dismantle the squadron and returned to the United States in the summer of 1806. The last ships reached Hampton Roads, Virginia, in October 1807. A monument to the memory of the above events was later erected at the Naval Academy of Annapolis and the words "*From the halls of Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli*" were added to the Marines' anthem.

The Americans quickly forgot Pasha Hamet Karamanli, their yesterday's cumbersome ally, and abandoned him to his sad fate. Since June 1805, the rebellious Hamet lived in exile in Syracuse, alone and without resources. In 1807, his family eventually joined him. In 1808, Hamet obtained a pension from his brother Youssouf and retired in Morocco. In 1809, the enemy brothers seemed to reconcile, Hamet being reinstated Governor of Derna. However, he only remained at this post for two years. Following obscure plots, he was forced to flee once more. In 1811, he was again in Egypt where his trace was temporarily lost. He finally died there in total indifference and poverty!

## **1815 – SECOND BARBARY WAR WITH ALGIERS**

### **FIRST PROVOCATIONS**

As soon as he was sure that there were no longer US warships in the Mediterranean Sea, the Dey of Algiers, as eager and interested as his friend in Tripoli, multiplied provocations with the United States. In September 1807, he demanded as a tribute not species as usual, but shipments of specific goods that the Americans were unable to deliver. In October, the pirates of Algiers captured two US schooners and a brig. However, the crew of the *Mary Ann* of New York managed to throw its Barbary captors

overboard and made it for Naples on November 4. The other two vessels were eventually released thanks to the intercession of Consul Tobias Lear. A relative calm prevailed during the following years.

## **WAR OF 1812**

In 1812, the United States declared war with Britain. Brilliantly manipulated by London, Dey Omar sided with the British.

On July 17, 1812, the American merchant ship *Alleghenny* entered with assurance the port of Algiers. The Dey immediately questioned the quality of its goods and requested the payment of hypothetical tribute arrears since 1795. He also threatened to seize the ship and declare war upon the United States. However, the efficient Tobias Lear managed to borrow money from the Jewish Bank Bacri of Algiers. On July 25, the Dey was duly compensated and the *Alleghenny* sailed to Gibraltar where it arrived on the same day. The British authorities immediately seized the ship, to the surprise of Lear who ignored the state of hostilities existing between the two countries! The crew members were transferred to England as prisoners of war. On August 25, the Algerian corsairs captured the brig *Edwin of Salem* although it was flying the Spanish pavilion. The crew was thrown in prison. During the entire year 1813, the American consul in Tunis worked hard for the release of his compatriots from Algerian jails, but in vain.

## **COMMAND OF COMMODORE STEPHEN DECATUR**

It took until February 1815 and the end of the war with Britain to resolve the Algerian problem. The method was known and had been proven ten years earlier. The war with Algiers could thus begin. On May 20, 1815, a first squadron left Boston for the Mediterranean Sea. Commodore Stephen Decatur, hero of the first Barbary War with Tripoli was in command. Accompanying him was Commissioner William Shaler, future consul to Algiers. The squadron of ten ships consisted of 3 frigates, 2 sloops, 3 brigs and 2 schooners. The flagship was the brand new frigate *Guerrière*, built in 1814, outfitted with 50 guns, ten or fifteen more than any foreign frigate! In all, the squadron mustered 170 guns.

On June 15, Decatur's fleet anchored in Gibraltar. On June 17, the Algerian flagship *Meshouda* of 43 guns, flying the dreaded Hammida Rais corsair pavilion, was spotted in the strait. Hammida sailed unsuspecting, believing that the distant ships were part of a British fleet. The shrewd Decatur was indeed flying the British flag. At one point, a sailor hoisted by mistake the US flag and the ruse was discovered. The Algerian frigate took flight towards Spain. Three American ships launched in its pursuit to cut its retreat. The frigate *Constellation* and the sloop *Hawk* gave no quarter and shelled the Barbary ship until it surrendered. The deck of the *Meshouda* was blown to pieces and strewn with corpses. Hammida, already wounded, lay cut in two by a cannonball. The *Macedonian* then towed the ship to Cartagena with 400 prisoners.

On June 19, 1815, Decatur's sloops and schooners pursued the Algerian brig *Estedio*, and their guns killed many of the enemy's crew. The *Estedio* finally ran aground off the coast of Spain and the remaining pirates disappeared without further ado. The Americans immediately repaired the ship and also towed it to Cartagena.

After these encouraging debuts, the American fleet sailed directly towards the enemy's capital and on June 28, arrived in front of Algiers. Dey Omar was as stunned as frightened when he learned of the capture of his two ships and the death of his

admiral. Unfortunately, his fleet was at the time on the high seas and he found himself helpless. As of June 30, on the order of Commodore Decatur, discussions were initiated on board the flagship *Guerrière* and not on African soil as usual. The Algerian delegate nearly fainted when he was told that the United States not only would no longer pay any tribute, but also demanded compensation from Algiers. Dey Omar tried to gain time, hoping for the return of his privateers. Nothing came from the sea and Decatur was waiting for an immediate response. Three hours of negotiations were sufficient. With death in his soul, Dey Omar finally gave in. He signed the treaty and released the American prisoners. He also paid the claimed compensation of \$ 10,000 and Decatur returned the remains of his two ships. Later, receiving the British consul with a bleak face, the Dey told him: “*You promised me to empty the seas of their navy [that of the United States] in six months and now they make war with me with ships taken from you!*”<sup>5</sup>

On July 8, the American squadron left Algiers and arrived in Tunis on July 29. The consul there had been cut off from Washington since 1812 and informed Decatur that the attitude of Tunis towards the United States during the War of 1812 had been less than friendly. The Bey had even allowed the British to recover two prizes taken by the *Abellino*, in early 1815! Decatur felt no need to disembark and the Bey was very offended. The American was represented by the consul who demanded a compensation of \$ 46,000 dollars for the two ships in question. Discussions took place again on the frigate *Guerrière*. The Bey remembered Decatur’s role in the *Philadelphia* affair of Tripoli, in 1804. He had also observed the powerful American fleet through his telescope. He did not insist and paid the demanded indemnity.

On August 5, Decatur also paid a visit to Tripoli. Indeed, during the War of 1812, Pasha Yusuf Karamanli had handed over to a British warship two vessels previously captured by the *Abellino*. Moreover, the American ship was still blocked in the port. Decatur therefore proceeded in the same way as in Algiers and Tunis. The Pasha at first refused but finally gave in, paying the commodore \$ 25,000 in compensation for the lost American prizes. Decatur also obtained the release of Danish and Napolitano prisoners, traditional allies of the Americans in the Mediterranean Sea. This was most positive for the image of the United States in these two countries. With its fortune made, the squadron sailed on August 9, 1815.

Decatur paid additional friendly visits to the ports of Syracuse, Messina and Naples, in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. He then left the fleet to join Malaga. Along the way, the *Guerrière* came across seven Algerian ships, which preferred to continue their course rather than fight. The reputation of Decatur was now well established in the area. Covered with glory, Commodore Decatur was hailed as a hero in New York where he disembarked on November 12, 1815. He was lavishly rewarded when Congress awarded him and his crews the tidy sum of \$ 100,000.

## COMMAND OF COMMODORE BAINBRIDGE

In the meantime, on July 3, Commodore William Bainbridge, the unfortunate captain of the *Philadelphia* in 1804, left Boston with a squadron of 9ships bearing 236 guns: 2 frigates, a sloop, 4 brigs, a schooner and especially the *Independence*, first ship

<sup>5</sup> Omar probably referred to the *USS Macedonian*, formerly *HMS Macedonian*, already captured by Decatur in 1813!

of the line with 74 guns, built in 1814. A large part of Decatur's ships also joined the fleet, rendering the force even more impressive.

Decatur had well swept ahead of him and Bainbridge's task boiled down to visiting the regencies with his impressive suite to impose respect. On October 6, 1815, he returned to the United States without having fired a shot. Commodore Shaw continued to ensure the protection of American merchant vessels with a squadron of eight ships, including three frigates. From 1815 onwards, the United States would no longer pay any tribute to the North Africans.

The US maintained a naval squadron in the Mediterranean Sea until 1860. This presence materialized again in 1948 and continues to this day with the 6<sup>th</sup> fleet, based in Gaeta, Italy, south of Rome.

### **BOMBARDEMENT OF ALGIERS - 27 AUGUST 1816**

In 1816, European courts tried to abolish the slavery of Christian prisoners in the regencies of North Africa. To this effect, a British squadron of 26 ships commanded by Lord Exmouth<sup>6</sup> made a tour of the Barbary capitals. His demands in Tunis and Tripoli fell on attentive ears. However, in Algiers, Dey Omar, who had gathered all his corsairs, negotiated in force and rejected all proposals. The British admiral experienced humiliation and failure.

In March 1816, the frigate *USS Java* brought to Algiers the news of the ratification of the Treaty of 1815. The US fleet was commanded by Oliver Perry<sup>7</sup>. Feeling strong with his successes against the British, Dey Omar declared null and void the treaty imposed by Commodore Decatur. The *Java* rejoined the fleet that now included the frigate *Congress*. Warrant officers David Farragut and Franklin Buchanan<sup>8</sup> were on board. They would be back forty-five years later with the rank of Admirals, the first serving the North and the second, the South.

Commodore Shaw was offended by the attitude of Dey Omar and prepared a night attack on the port of Algiers. The action did not materialize because a French captain had informed the Dey and the latter was firmly waiting for the Americans. Finally things calmed down, and on April 24, 1816, the Dey wrote personally a long letter to US President James Madison, in which he developed the outstanding issues.

Meanwhile, the Algerians had massacred 200 Corsican, Sardinian and Sicilian fishermen who were theoretically under the protection of the British Royal Navy. Lord Exmouth decided to severely punish Algiers. His 21 ship squadron consisted of 6 line vessels, two of which carried 100 guns, 4 frigates, 7 sloops and 4 bomb ketches, totaling altogether 736 guns. Five Dutch frigates and a corvette joined this fleet with additional 188 guns. Algiers could only oppose 5 frigates, 5 corvettes, 40 gunboats and 50 other light ships.

On August 27, 1816, at 3.15 AM, the Algerian batteries opened fire and the Anglo-Dutch squadron at anchor immediately responded. The Barbary pirates made an all out sortie to attack the Anglo-Dutch armada. Their tactic failed and their fleet was cut to pieces. Thirty-three ships were sunk. At 4.15 AM, the mole battery was destroyed and at 7.30 AM, the port of Algiers was ravaged. The city itself suffered little damage. At

---

<sup>6</sup> Admiral Edward Pellew, 1<sup>st</sup> Viscount Exmouth.

<sup>7</sup> In 1854, Commodore Perry forced the Japanese feudal and isolationist nation to open its ports to Western trade.

<sup>8</sup> During the American Civil War the two accomplices met on August 5, 1864, in Mobile Bay, Alabama, where Farragut won a resounding victory. Before that time, Buchanan had also accompanied Perry to Japan.

10.15 AM, the Barbary batteries ceased fire and the fight ended. This time the Arabs had sold their lives dearly and Western casualties were rather heavy: 818 dead and wounded, or 16% of their total force. In addition, a bomb ketch had been destroyed by the fire of shore batteries. The next day, Lord Exmouth threatened to bombard Algiers again if the Dey continued to reject his conditions. Omar Dey was compelled to accept the British demands. He had however been duped since the Anglo-Dutch fleet had expended nearly all of its ammunition! On September 24, 1816, a new treaty was signed, 1,083 Christian slaves were freed and a large sum of money was refunded by Algiers.

In October 1816, the American squadron of Commodore Chauncey anchored in front of Algiers. Would Dey Omar's nightmare resume? The Algerians had not had time to rebuild all their batteries and their fleet lay in the bottom of the bay. Fortunately, the Americans had no hostile intentions; Chauncey was simply bringing President Madison's response to the Dey. In December 1816, the 1815 Treaty was finally ratified by Dey Omar. In April 1818, the appearance of commodore Stewart's squadron in front of Algiers was enough to deter the Dey from continuing systematic inspections of American ships. In 1820, the French obtained the same advantage through diplomacy.

## EPILOGUE

The year 1827 was rich in events. During the Greek War of Independence, an Anglo-Franco-Russian armada destroyed the Turko-Egyptian fleet at Navarino, on the coast of the Peloponnese. Above all, the Dey of Algiers was upset by the arrival of the ambassador of King of France Charles X, chasing him out of his courtroom with a fan. This more spectacular than painful gesture did nothing to ease the strained relations between Paris and Algiers.

By the spring of 1830, the French had assembled 453 ships under the command of Admiral Duperré. On June 15, their imposing fleet appeared before Algiers and submitted the city to a hearty bombardment, one more! An important expeditionary force led by Maréchal de Bourmont<sup>9</sup> landed on June 25 at Sidi-Ferruch, near Algiers, and on July 5, the French troops entered the Moorish city. In 1834, Algeria was officially annexed by France. The conquest was completed only in 1847, after the surrender of Emir Abd el Kader. The French protectorate was then extended to Tunisia in 1881 and to Morocco in 1912.

In 1835, the Ottoman Empire took over the control of Tripolitania, future Libya.

In 1911, taking advantage of the war in the Balkans, Italy easily tore out Libya from a Turkish Empire that was only a shadow of itself.

Twelve centuries after the arrival of the Arabs in North Africa, the Mediterranean became a "Western" sea and the Barbary problem was finally solved.

\* \* \* \* \*

## ***Bibliography***

- *Américains et Barbaresques, 1776-1824*, Emile Dupuis, Paris 1910.
- *Wikipedia*, Internet.

---

<sup>9</sup> On June 15, 1815, on the eve of the battle of Ligny near Waterloo, the royalist General de Bourmont defected to the Prussian enemy.