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A Rage for Glory: The Life and Times of Commodore Stephen Decatur, USN,

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Board alongside Harry Hopkins. Having given so much to his country, Reeves died on 25 March 1948.

Although a powerful speaker and orator, Reeves published very little and left behind no personal papers. In writing this biography, Wildenberg has done an admirable job of detective work, collecting together information from a diverse range of official and private sources. He uses a 1943 Princeton University undergraduate thesis based on interviews with Reeves, but little remains known of the admiral's family and personal life, other than the impression that he was a lonely man devoted full-heartedly to the navy. A ruthless streak in Reeves's character, however, comes out in his treatment of hapless Lieutenant Commander Robert Molten—an episode to be repeated during a run-in with a Royal Navy ordnance officer, Stephen Roskill, in Washington, D.C., during the summer of 1944. Wildenberg's conclusions about Reeves's attitude toward the British might have been tempered by closer study of his wartime work on the Combined Munitions Assignment Board. No reference is made in the book to Reeves's working files from the Lend-Lease Office of Record in Record Group 38 at the National Archive and Records Administration, or the diaries of Vice Admiral James Dorling, his British naval counterpart on the Combined Munitions Assignment Board at Greenwich's National Maritime Museum. In Reeves's second service tour, he facilitated American production behind the global war effort at sea and actually excelled in office work and the numbers game.

Even though biographies are somewhat out of fashion today and Wildenberg shows a tendency to give a little too

much weight to the man than to larger international trends in naval aviation at the time, Reeves clearly pressed, with single-minded determination, the existing technological and doctrinal limits of U.S. naval aviation and prepared his forces accordingly.

The book, which offers interesting insights into experimentation and innovation for future warfare in peacetime navies, is highly recommended for specialist historians and interested general readers.

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De Kay, James Tertius. *A Rage for Glory: The Life and Times of Commodore Stephen Decatur, USN*. New York: Free Press, 2004. 237pp. \$25

Accomplished historian and author James de Kay captures the essence of an age, as well as the spirit of a man, in his biography of Commodore Stephen Decatur. This finely written narrative, aimed at a general readership, may lack the scholarly apparatus expected of historical monographs, but it certainly does not lack the scholarship and analysis that is the hallmark of de Kay's work. Yet if this book sometimes appears to be a cross between an action-thriller and a hagiography, there is a reason. Decatur's active quest for fame and glory, as well as the deep sense of honor that would clip short his thread of life at age forty-one, earned the commodore a place in the hearts of his countrymen perhaps more appropriate for a saint. His name still echoes in those of some forty-five towns, five warships, and numerous other pieces of Americana.

Born amidst the upheaval of the American Revolution in 1779, Stephen Decatur spent his youth steeped in the twin influences of a national hubris born of victory against the tyrannical British Empire and a family tradition of seafaring, usually against that same entity (Dutch and French ancestry, and the master of a privateer as a father). His time as a midshipman during the Quasi-War with France may have lacked in naval action, but it certainly imbued in Decatur the ethos of the quarterdeck, that almost mystical triumvirate of glory, fame, and honor that not only defined a gentleman but all too frequently forced recourse to the *Code Duello*. It is de Kay's analysis and presentation of this triumvirate that is the strength of his study of Decatur.

From 1801 through 1815, Decatur earned a place in the pantheon of naval heroes. His part in the burning of the frigate *Philadelphia* at Tripoli in 1804 made him the darling of the nation. Further daring actions against the Barbary corsairs catapulted the young lieutenant over the heads of other officers to the rank of captain. In October 1812, Decatur steered his *United States* to victory over HMS *Macedonian*, then fought an even harder battle with Washington for prize money. Trapped in New London by a British blockade in 1813, he shifted his flag to the large frigate *President* in 1814. Beset by a British squadron shortly thereafter, Decatur surrendered the largest American warship lost during the War of 1812. Exonerated by a court of inquiry, he proceeded to regain his lost honor by leading a squadron to thrash soundly the Barbary corsairs in 1815. De Kay's portrayal of these actions is excellent,

using imagery appropriate to the concepts of glory, fame, and honor, central to the story. More importantly for general readers, naval jargon of the era is minimized; thus they do not become lost somewhere between the gudgeons and the mainsail clewlines.

The commodore spent his few remaining years as a member of the Board of Navy Commissioners. Then, on 22 March 1820, Stephen Decatur paid the ultimate price for his honor. Fellow captain and former mentor James Barron and he exchanged shots on a traditional dueling ground outside Washington. Mortally wounded, Decatur died a few hours later. Winding through de Kay's last chapters in the life of this American hero is a fascinating conspiracy theory involving the "bad boys" of the early U.S. Navy: Jesse Duncan Elliot, Captain William Bainbridge, and Captain James Barron. In de Kay's mind, there exists little doubt that both Elliot and Bainbridge contributed as much as Barron to the death of Decatur. His arguments are convincing.

Historians, particularly those familiar with the era, may be somewhat disappointed with this book. De Kay presents a narrative driven by specific events; thus, details such as Decatur's contributions to strategic planning during the War of 1812 are missing. On the other hand, those souls less knowledgeable of the U.S. Navy during the Age of Sail will have little to disappoint them and much to gain from reading this exciting biography of a most famous American naval officer.

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