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Silas Talbot: Captain of Old Ironsides

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the leaders involved were selling out governments in exile, abrogating articles of the Atlantic Charter, or otherwise acting just like our demonized foes. For example, the sad tale of the Royal Navy's reluctant attack on the French fleet at Oran in July 1940 is retold without any examination of the broader political debates and the ultimate rationale that drove the British to this option. A number of complex political processes are treated in a like manner, with the intricacies of military decision-making elements essentially omitted.

The book is broken into sections about the origins of the war (a mere eighteen pages long), the actions of the neutrals (but little concerning the embedded and complex historical, geographic, economic, and political relationships among the nonbelligerents), mobilization, strategy (which includes, *inter alia*, logistics, tactics, and technology but little discussion of broad strategic goals), life under occupation, liberation, and the aftermath of the war.

For readers who are familiar with the historiography of World War II, there are sections of this book that can act as excellent catalysts for debate and discussion. Certainly the role of the Atlantic Charter in shaping Allied policy (which was either used as a political template or summarily ignored when inconvenient) is a topic ripe for detailed analysis. This is where a real historian would be an immense pleasure to read, but this author offers mere pontificating.

The weakest element of the book is not the author's perspective, however, but rather the total lack of support he offers for any of his "revelations." It behooves an author telling a provocative version of well known historical events

to cite a wealth of sources to underscore the seriousness of his or her intentions and scholarship. Ponting, however, fails to cite a single source for any of his hypotheses. There are *no footnotes*, and instead of a bibliography one is presented with a "Guide to Further Reading." Such poor scholarship effectively reduces this work to the level of a supermarket checkout tabloid, with the same amount of credibility.

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Fowler, William M., Jr. *Silas Talbot: Captain of Old Ironsides*. Mystic, Conn.: Mystic Seaport Museum, 1995. 231pp. \$29.95

Silas Talbot is not well known today, although his event-filled life is an excellent example of what one could accomplish in the early days of the Republic. Twenty-three years old at the opening of the American Revolution, young Talbot, born of a hard-scrabble farm family, already had become a skilled stonemason-bricklayer, gained seafaring experience in the coastal trade, and had returned ashore to establish himself successfully in business, begin a family, and build his own house.

The outbreak of the Revolution made him a militia lieutenant, then a Continental Army captain, and by 1779 a lieutenant colonel, his promotions propelled by his bravery. He was badly burned and temporarily blinded while commanding a fire ship on the Hudson and, after recuperating, he was twice wounded while commanding the rear guard at Fort Mifflin. Engaged as an Army officer in quashing Tory privateering off Rhode Island, he took more than a dozen prizes himself.

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Later, commissioned as a captain in the Continental Navy but denied his expected command, he turned himself to privateering. Soon captured by an overwhelming British force, Talbot spent the rest of the war in Mill Prison.

After a decade of civilian life, during which he managed to get himself elected first to the New York state legislature and then to Congress, Talbot took advantage of the renaissance of the Navy to get another captain's commission. His first intended command went a-glimmering, but in 1799 he was ordered to the USS *Constitution* as its second skipper. He made two cruises in the West Indies during the Quasi-War with France. During the first of these tours he kept his ship at sea for 347 out of 366 days with little sickness and few disciplinary problems, carried out the first attempts in the U.S. Navy at underway replenishment, and commanded the squadron off Hispaniola with leadership and diplomacy highly praised by the secretaries of State and the Navy.

Talbot resigned his commission in 1801 in a dispute over seniority and never went to sea, or served the government in any way, again. His wounds made him prematurely old; he died, largely unnoticed, in 1813.

The author will be familiar to students of naval history from his trilogy of general histories of the U.S. Navy through the Civil War. Fowler once more brings his considerable storytelling talent into play on a subject whose real-life derring-do is only enhanced by Fowler's way with words. In producing this biography, he had the benefit of extensive forty-year-old research by the

Commodore's great-great-grandson, William Richmond Talbot, and of the rich Talbot holdings of the G.W. Blunt White Library at Mystic Seaport.

This biography gives us a small window onto our country during its early years. In Silas Talbot we have a classic example of what a young man of small means but large ambitions could accomplish through his own efforts in those simpler days. While his command tour in *Constitution* comprised little more than two years and included no epic actions, it is precisely here where a serving officer today will find food for thought. Talbot was required by the confused diplomatic and political situation obtaining in and around Hispaniola to keep his force largely out of sight and yet be effective in putting down marauding privateers. To maintain his big frigate and the others on station, in concert with the Secretary of the Navy he devised a supply line from the United States that terminated with the delivery of foodstuffs and stores directly to his ships, *at sea*. In maintaining his crew in health and discipline (without recourse to the lash) for such a long time at sea, Talbot demonstrated exemplary leadership. Through his perfect understanding of his orders and of the situation in the area, and his resourceful solutions to tactical and administrative problems within that context, Silas Talbot has left us an important case study in command.

If not a biography of epic proportions, Bill Fowler's *Silas Talbot* is a good read with lessons applicable to today's service.

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