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In My View

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IN MY VIEW . . .

“How Cross He Must Have Been. . . !”

Sir,

I was much taken by the painting on the cover of the latest copy of the *Naval War College Review* [details from “The Sloop *Providence*, John Paul Jones, Eluding H.M. Frigate *Solebay* and Firing a Swivel Cannon,” an oil painting by William Gilkerson, Spring 1993]. I am currently putting together a book on “command decisions” and have it in mind to include this incident as an example of professional skill, coolness in the face of danger, all accompanied by a little bit of luck!

So, as I was in the Public Record Office (PRO) on another task I decided to dig out the captain’s log (Captain Thomas Symonds, RN) of HMS *Solebay*. Somewhat to my surprise I read the following:

September 1. Moderate and cloudy with showers of rain. ½ past 1pm saw a sail ahead, fired 23 rounds [*sic*] shottes at the Chace, a Sloop from Philadelphia to Surinam laden with Flour, Tar and Lumber. 5 sail of the convoy in sight.

September 2. Moderate and cloudy. Read Articles of War. 3 sail of the convoy in sight.

Well, I thought, a British captain cannot tell a lie in his ship’s log, so all this talk of John Paul Jones making a fool of the *Solebay* must be fabricated, or, perhaps, the date is wrong. But, being a prudent researcher, I then decided to dig out the master’s log and here is what I found (some of the writing is ungrammatical, all of it difficult to read):

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Sunday September 1, 1776. [Off the New England coast.] Moderate breeze and cloudy. PM saw a Sail ahead and gave chase. At ½ past 3 fired 2 guns at the Chace. She broached too, found her to be a sloop from Philadelphia bound to Surinam. Out a boat and sent 2 petty officers and 8 men onboard the sloop and brought the master and 6 men from the Sloop. At 6 hoisted in the boat and made sail. At ½ past 6 AM saw a sail to windward, shortened sail for the convoy. At 7 made sail, out 2 reefs [indecipherable] and gave chase to the sail to windward. Found her to be Rebel privateer. Fired 2 Nine Pound shot at her. At ½ past 9 [our?] ship got up the fore-top-gallant yard. Still in chace.

Monday September 2. Moderate breeze and cloudy. At ½ past 5 PM the Chace finding we came up with her, bore away. We bore away after her and set Stearingsail. During the chace fired 40 Nine pounders at her. Night coming on left off chace. Hauled down the steering sail, in 2 reefs of the Topsails to wait for the convoy. . . .

So, the master was obviously a rather more honest man than his captain, who simply left out the bits that showed him up badly! How cross he must have been that a Yankee privateer outsailed him!

I find the master's timings a bit difficult to follow and am not sure what he means by "Stearingsail," but obviously he is writing about the same incident portrayed in the *Review*.

David Miller
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England

Editor's note:

As to the master's seemingly reversed "AM" and "PM," Mr. Miller points out in a separate letter that the master's log's "day" ran from noon to noon; "in modern terms, they caught the Surinam-bound vessel one afternoon and saw the 'Rebel' vessel the following morning," i.e., 2 September. Also, as the artist, Mr. Gilkerson, explains to us, "the master's reference to 'steering sail' refers to the setting of studding sails [light sails set outboard of square sails to increase their effective area]—no telling how many—probably foretopsail studding sails, maybe topgallants. There was a stiff breeze blowing."

Ψ
