

1986

## Jack Tars and Commodores: The American Navy, 1783-1815

James C. Bradford

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

---

### Recommended Citation

Bradford, James C. (1986) "Jack Tars and Commodores: The American Navy, 1783-1815," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 39 : No. 1 , Article 23.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol39/iss1/23>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu](mailto:repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu).

Vietnam), and finally with the Rand office in Saigon.

And the Brown Water Navy's story is worth telling. It is a story filled with drama, courage, self-sacrifice and, ultimately, tragic failure as the US Navy, unwittingly, contributed mightily in a process that created in Communist Vietnam one of the strongest military powers in the world.

One of the duties of a writer of history is to separate wheat from chaff. Colonel Croizat seems to have done this but, inexplicably, he has given us mostly the latter. A good editor, perhaps, could have saved him, but his book shows little evidence of having been edited at all.

Buy it for the pictures. Some of them, particularly the US Navy's, are quite good.

R.L. SCHREADLEY  
Charleston, South Carolina

Fowler, William M., Jr. *Jack Tars and Commodores: The American Navy, 1783-1815*. Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1984. 299pp. \$17.95

Americans are a maritime people with vital interests upon the seas. During colonial times Great Britain's navy protected American seaborne commerce. During the War for Independence the French Navy provided the margin of victory at Yorktown. Yet, for a decade following the peace American leaders seemed to disregard these facts and the United States was without a navy. Some leaders went so far as to

question the need for such a force, but the establishment of a navy was inevitable. Whether American political leaders realized it or not, the use of the North Atlantic was, and remains of vital interest to the nation. Sooner or later the United States has been drawn into every major war involving the North Atlantic.

In this fast-paced narrative Fowler chronicles the nascent years of the US Navy from the first debates over how to meet the threat posed to American trade by the Barbary Corsairs, through the quasi-war with France to the Barbary wars and the War of 1812. An underlying theme is that the navy grew to become the nation's "chief glory" and that it brought to the new nation and to itself a high level of international respect. This record stands in sharp contrast to the navy of the Revolution as described by Fowler in his *Rebels Under Sail* (1976).

As in his earlier work, Fowler's research and use of secondary sources is thorough and his writing is excellent. He has a particular knack for selecting the telling phrase, as for example, when he calls Edward Preble "as hard and sharp as the Maine coast from which he came," and for selecting just the right document to cogently support the interpretations which he interweaves with the text.

His focus is on naval operations but he does not neglect naval policy, administration, or life in the navy. He is best in dealing with the 1790s, very good on the first decade of the

new century, and weakest on the War of 1812. In his analysis of congressional debates and explanation of Federalist and Republican naval policy, the most sophisticated and concise in print, he tends to side with the Jeffersonians and to endorse their preference for *guerre de cours*. He sees the quasi-war as “outstanding [a] success” for the navy as its action in the American Revolution was a failure. Yet he believes that the US Navy came of age during the Barbary wars, not during the quasi-war as many historians believe.

It comes as no surprise that Fowler devotes more coverage to the “commodores” than to the “jack tars.” Nor is it surprising that he finds far more unity within the officer corps than Guttridge and Smith did in their *The Commodores* (1968). It would be difficult to image a group as faction ridden as the one described by Guttridge and Smith accomplishing anything. Fowler may even verge on the other extreme since he virtually ignores the Perry-Elliott controversy which arose out of the Battle of Lake Erie and spawned cliques which plagued the navy for a generation. Fowler includes civilian shipbuilders and administrators in his assessments. He judges two of the first four navy secretaries—Benjamin Stoddert and William Jones—to have been excellent and the other two—Robert Smith and Paul Hamilton—to have been near-failures.

Though he focuses on naval leaders, he does not totally neglect the life of the sailor. Nor does he glamorize it. He pictures conditions

on the lower deck as harsh, makes the point that few sailors served for many years, and reminds us that “the myth of the old salt is just that—a myth” but he concludes that “despite the unpleasantness associated with naval service, men did go to sea, and more important than that, they served well.”

This is clearly the best survey of the early US Navy yet written and thus provides an excellent introduction to the era. The tables are informative and the maps models of utility. Naval history specialists may find little new in this book, but Fowler writes so well that they will certainly enjoy reading it.

JAMES C. BRADFORD  
Texas A&M University

Kiriakopoulos, G.C. *Ten Days to Destiny, The Battle for Crete, 1941*. New York: Franklin Watts, 1985. 408pp. \$18.95

In 1941 the invasion of Crete was another of a series of spectacular German victories over the British which began with Norway in the spring of 1940 and progressed through Dunkirk, Egypt and the Libyan desert, and just prior to Crete, the debacle in Greece. The myth of an invincible *Wehrmacht* supported by an all-conquering *Luftwaffe* captured the imagination of almost everyone. Crete was the first airborne invasion of an island in the history of warfare. Hitler, in defiance of the Royal Navy’s “control” of the Mediterranean had overflown that obstacle and snatched Crete with its Greek, British and Commonwealth defenders.