

TO THE SHORES OF TRIPOLI

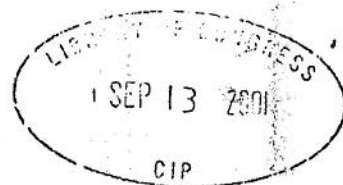
THE BIRTH OF THE
U.S. NAVY AND MARINES

A.B.C. Whipple



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reach under a freshening breeze, to of the harbor's eastern entrance. At and the officers returned to their ves- sing, so Preble signaled to wait. He otorious late summer gales along the

1 to slacken. And at 1:15 A.M. Preble in. By 3 A.M. they were in position other rocket soared into the sky from ardment commenced, with the brigs il of metal into the harbor and town. ll had some fight left; shore batteries swered the attack. But soon the bat- d; and a galliot and a galley in the k.

from the flashes of cannon fire and bardment kept up until dawn, at sperate attempt to put a stop to it, of his gunboats out from the inner stitution's quarterdeck, Preble called ok the big flagship straight down on ats and into the fire from the shore

under full sail, he signaled his gun- l off, their crews cheering as the One gunboat crewman recalled the t sight I ever saw; she had her tom- ries lighted up all hands at quarters ' The flagship rounded to only 400 a broadside. The one withering hail politan gunboat and sent the others ; some of them with burning sails. om the shore, Preble sent 225 rounds h one making a cloud of mortar fly The batteries' guns tried to home in ll she suffered was the loss of a few ed yards²⁵ before the batteries were

ble was planning his next assault, a

Spanish vessel came out of Tripoli Harbor and spoke the *Constitution*. She had been in the inner harbor during the August 27 bombardment, and it had taken her nearly a week to repair her damaged spars and sails.²⁶ Her captain reported that the last assault had wreaked massive destruction in the city and had killed a "vast number" of people.²⁷

Preble went ahead with his next bombardment, sending his gunboats into the harbor's eastern entrance. A division of Tripolitan gunboats sortied from the inner harbor, and the Americans opened up on them. He meanwhile sent his repaired bomb ketches to the western entrance, where they pounded the city throughout the afternoon. Again he took the flagship into enemy fire, pouring 200 rounds—eleven rapid broadsides—into the bashaw's castle. The *Constitution's* gunners could not tell amid the smoke how much damage they had done, but the *Philadelphia's* Dr. Cowdery in his Tripoli prison recorded that they damaged the castle and several houses (and leveled the home of a Spanish carpenter who built most of the bashaw's gunboats). Only a wind change to the north forced the squadron to retire. And now Preble planned a final attack, one he hoped would be unexpected and devastating.

The most dreaded weapon in the days of fighting sail was the fireship—a vessel loaded with flammables and set afire, her guns shot- ted, aimed toward the enemy and cast loose with her helm strapped down, descending on her victims like a fiery monster, her guns firing as she came. Preble's idea was to combine the devastation of the fireship with something even worse. He called it an "inferno," a huge floating bomb that would flatten everything in its vicinity. And he intended to send it right into the fleet inside Tripoli's harbor.

His choice was the *Intrepid*—the former *Mastico* that had taken Decatur and his arsonists in to set the *Philadelphia* afire. Under Preble's supervision she was rebuilt. Her forward hold was planked over and packed with five tons of black powder. On top of the powder were loaded a hundred 13-inch mortar shells plus several tons of shot and pig iron (normally used for ballast) and fifty 9-inch shells. The carpenters built a small tunnel aft to a section loaded with powder, shavings, lint soaked in turpentine, and pitch and other highly flammable materials. A powder train would be laid

through the tunnel connecting the two compartments. Two musket barrels were laid down, containing two fuses that could be lit just before the *Intrepid* was cast off; the fuses were set for eleven minutes, allowing only enough time for the crew to get safely away. The fuses would touch off the combustibles in the waist of the vessel, turning her into a roaring fireship. And as she approached her target, the fire racing along the powder trail in the tunnel would ignite the powder and mortars in her forward hold, exploding in a gigantic eruption.

Virtually every officer and man in the fleet volunteered for the mission. Preble selected as commander Master Commandant Richard Somers, who had complained about missing the glory—and promotion—that Decatur had earned for firing the *Philadelphia*.²⁸ Preble also chose Henry Wadsworth,²⁹ by now promoted from midshipman to lieutenant, as the other officer. The crew of ten was a carefully picked group.

Somers and Wadsworth together selected the two fastest ship's boats in the fleet for their getaway. They and their crew went carefully over every detail of the mission. They would sail the *Intrepid* (which some were now calling the *Infernal*) into the harbor in the darkness, slipping past the gunboats and heading for the walls of the castle. Everyone was given his assignment: tying the helm so she would stay on course; lighting the fuses; going overboard into the boats. And each man was assigned his place at the oars.

By 8 P.M. on September 3 a thin haze had settled over the harbor, cutting horizontal visibility to a couple of hundred yards. The stars could be seen overhead and the tallest minarets of the city were visible, but the harbor itself was obscured by drifting fog. Preble decided that these were ideal conditions.

The *Intrepid* was brought alongside the *Constitution*. Somers, Wadsworth, and ten seamen climbed down onto her deck—plus one more, a lieutenant named Joseph Israel who came aboard overtly to deliver a farewell message from Preble and entreated Somers so earnestly to let him join the crew that Somers consented.³⁰ Whether or not Somers stopped to consider that Israel raised the *Intrepid's* complement to 13 is not recorded—or whether he cared; not all mariners were superstitious.

At 8 P.M. the *Intrepid* slipped away, trailing her two escape boats as she headed for the harbor's western entrance. Shortly the *Argus*,

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Vixen, and *Nautilus* spread their sails and followed. They would anchor just outside the rocks at the entrance to wait for the *Intrepid's* escaping boats. Meanwhile the *Siren* moved eastward to station herself off the northern entrance in case the *Intrepid's* men chose that exit. Preble ordered the flagship to up anchor and sail in as close as possible to the harbor.

As the *Nautilus* approached the harbor, the *Intrepid* could be seen ghosting under a light easterly through the passage. Then she disappeared in the haze.

Everyone aboard the fleet waited. The harbor was as still as it was dark. After an eternity of about ten minutes, the shore batteries suddenly opened up, and the watchers could see the guns' flashes stabbing through the fog. The harbor was lit momentarily as if by lightning each time a cannon fired, and everyone tried to pick out the *Intrepid*.

Aboard the *Siren* a Lieutenant Carrel, standing in the gangway and straining his eye through his glass, thought he did see the *Intrepid's* ghostly shape in the mist. A light was moving along her deck, perhaps a man carrying a lantern. Carrel pointed it out to Lieutenant Charles Stewart, who thought he saw it, too. The light stopped, then disappeared. In less than a minute—at exactly 9:47 P.M.—the harbor exploded.

It was an ear-shattering, sky-lighting eruption. The concussion was felt aboard the *Constitution* more than a mile offshore. Lieutenant Robert Spence later described "a vast stream of fire, which appeared ascending to heaven." Some of the watchers claimed that they saw the *Intrepid's* mast soaring skyward like a missile; darkness came so quickly that they did not see it descend. And with darkness there was utter silence. The awed gunners in the shore batteries ceased fire. And outside the harbor's two entrances there was no sound.

The watchers were struck dumb. But all were wondering what had gone wrong. The *Intrepid* could not have reached the anchored Tripolitan Fleet in so short a time. Evidently she had exploded in the harbor's western entrance.

The brigs and schooners put out their boats, which spider-legged to their waiting positions along the rocky passageways. They sat there rolling in the swells all night, while periodically a rocket flared into the sky from the *Constitution* to guide any survivors

back to the fleet. By dawn there was no sign of any of the *Intrepid's* men.

Taking the *Constitution* in as close as he could, Preble studied the harbor. He could make out the *Intrepid's* mast, tangled in her rigging, on the rocks of the western entrance. But her hull seemed to have disappeared.

What happened to the *Intrepid* remains a mystery. Perhaps one of the shore battery gunners scored a direct hit. Perhaps the *Intrepid* ran aground in the fog and came under fire from one of the gunboats. But there was the evidence of Lieutenants Carroll and Stewart—supported by a midshipman named Ridgely who also thought he saw the wavering light from his lookout in the rigging of the *Nautilus*. The *Intrepid* might have encountered an enemy gunboat, and Somers, in order to keep the Tripolitans from capturing all that powder and ammunition plus 13 more prisoners, might have touched off the explosion, sacrificing himself and his crew.

Preble chose this explanation, partly because he thought he could make out three badly damaged Tripolitan gunboats being towed ashore and partly because Somers had told him beforehand that he and Wadsworth planned to blow up the *Intrepid* if attacked. "They expected to enter the harbor without discovery," he wrote in his report on the incident, "but had declared that should they be disappointed, and the enemy should board them, before they reached their point of destination, in such force as to leave them no hopes of a safe retreat, that they would put a match to the magazine and blow themselves and their enemies up together."

Preble concluded, as he wrote Secretary Smith, that four enemy gunboats had come down on the *Intrepid*, that the Tripolitans of the first gunboat had boarded her, and that Somers had touched off his explosive cargo, taking the first Tripolitan gunboat with him and the *Intrepid* and severely damaging the other three. In his report Preble could not resist a lightly veiled dig at Bainbridge when the *Philadelphia* had been surrounded. Emphasizing the point in italics, he wrote, "The gallant Somers and heroes of his party, observing the other three boats surrounding them, and with no prospect of escape, determined, at once, to prefer *death* and the *destruction of the enemy to captivity and torturing slavery*, to put a match to the train leading directly to the magazine, which at once blew the whole into the air, and terminated their existence."³¹

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The charred remains of the *Intrepid's* hull were found by the Tripolitans on the rocks near the harbor entrance. Twelve of the 13 bodies were eventually recovered. Two were in the hold of the *Intrepid*, and one was in one of her two boats, which drifted ashore on the city's waterfront. The others washed onto nearby beaches or were picked out of the water.

On September 6 the bashaw permitted Captain Bainbridge and Lieutenant Porter to visit the beach and identify six of the bodies that had come ashore. Bainbridge wrote, "From the whole of them being so much disfigured it was impossible to recognize any known feature to us, or even [a revealing phrase] to distinguish an officer from a seaman."

As for Preble, the tragic and useless loss of 13 of his finest officers and men finally seemed to take the heart out of him. He prepared for yet another bombardment, but bad weather forced a postponement. With autumn the weather would only get worse. And his ulcers were as painful as ever.

He ordered the gunless *John Adams* and some of the smaller vessels to tow the vulnerable gunboats and bomb ketches back to Syracuse. He would remain on station off Tripoli with his flagship, the *Argus*, and the *Vixen* to await the arrival of the new commodore.

And as the *John Adams* led the slow flotilla back toward Syracuse, Bashaw Yusuf gave a banquet of thanksgiving to Mahomet in gratitude for saving his city.

On September 9, three days after the gunboats had left for Syracuse, the *Argus* signaled to the *Constitution*, about 15 miles off Tripoli: "Discovering strange ship N.E." Preble took the *Constitution* over, and both gave chase. A morning haze obscured the horizon to the north; Preble could see the *Argus* but not the other vessel. It was Sunday, and he went below for his weekly dinner with his wardroom officers. When he came back on deck, he was told that the *Argus* had been signaling the approaching ships and that they were not blockade runners but the frigates *President* and *Constellation*. Commodore Barron had finally arrived. Tacking upwind, the *Constitution* slowly closed on the *Argus* and the newcomers. Preble ordered his long commodore's pennant hauled down. A boat was lowered, and he was rowed over to the *President* to greet his successor.