

This Day in History... February 16, 1804

The Burning of the USS *Philadelphia*

On February 16, 1804, Stephen Decatur led a surprise assault on the captured USS *Philadelphia* in Tripoli.

In the early 1800s, pirates from the Barbary states (Morocco, Algeria, Tunis, and Tripolitania) frequently raided US ships in the Mediterranean Sea. The sailors and their ship's contents were often captured and then ransomed back to the US for a hefty price. President Thomas Jefferson sent the US Navy to the area to put an end to this in 1801, leading to a series of minor sea engagements that started the First Barbary War. Then, in June 1803, a small US expeditionary force attacked Tripoli harbor (in present-day Libya) and major fighting began.

That October, the US frigate *Philadelphia* ran aground near Tripoli harbor. The ship's captain, William Bainbridge, attempted to get the ship back in the water by dumping cannons and other heavy cargo to make it lighter. When all attempts to free the ship failed, he ordered his crew to drill holes in the bottom of the vessel, dampen the gunpowder, and destroy anything else the enemy could find useful. They were captured shortly after.

Though the *Philadelphia* was badly damaged, it could still be repaired, or used as a model for new enemy ships. The Americans knew they couldn't let the Tripolitans use the *Philadelphia* to their advantage, so Lieutenant Stephen Decatur led a mission to recapture or, as a last resort, destroy the *Philadelphia*.

Decatur's daring actions began on the evening of February 16, 1804. Around 7:00 p.m., under the cover of darkness, Decatur led the *Intrepid* into Tripoli harbor, while leaving the *Syren* out to sea to provide supporting fire during and after the assault. Among the 80 volunteers Decatur brought with him was Thomas Macdonough Jr. (also pictured on US 791), who had previously served on the *Philadelphia* and knew its layout very well.

The *Intrepid* was disguised to look like a merchant ship from Malta with British colors. While most of the attackers hid in the lower deck, the men up top were Sicilian volunteers who spoke Arabic to avoid suspicion. Pretending to be in distress, they told the crew guarding the *Philadelphia* that they had lost all of their anchors at sea. The lie was believed, so they casually floated the *Intrepid* next to the *Philadelphia* and tied the ships together. Then Decatur shouted "board!" and the volunteers emerged from the *Intrepid*, attacking the surprised crew aboard the *Philadelphia*. Decatur's men, dressed as Maltese and Arab sailors, carried swords and boarding pikes, and were ordered not to fire their guns unless absolutely necessary. Within 10 minutes, they killed 20 Tripolitans, captured one, and forced the rest to jump overboard. The Americans didn't lose a single man and only suffered one injury.

Unfortunately, the *Philadelphia* was too badly damaged to set sail, and too large to be towed by the *Intrepid*, so Decatur ordered his men set it on fire. When they were done, Decatur was the last man to leave the *Philadelphia*. As the flames heated the *Philadelphia*'s loaded cannons, the unmanned ship began firing into the town. Shocked at what had happened, the Tripolitans gathered on the shore and filled small boats to fire on the escaping Americans. But with supporting fire from the *Syren*, Decatur and his crew escaped unscathed.

Decatur instantly became a national hero and was dubbed "Terror of the Foe." British Vice Admiral Horatio Nelson described the attack as "the most bold and daring act of the age."



Both of the men pictured on this stamp (Decatur and Macdonough) participated in the burning of the Philadelphia.



America's permanent Navy was established in 1794 after a series of run-ins near Algiers, Algeria, between American merchants and pirates.



The First Barbary War began when Jefferson refused to pay a tribute of \$225,000 to the leader of Tripoli.

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