

# LOSS OF THE PRIVATEER *GENERAL ARMSTRONG*

## Samuel C. Reid

Fayal, 4 October 1814

With infinite regret I am constrained to say, it has eventually fallen to my lot to state to you the loss and total destruction of the private armed brig *GENERAL ARMSTRONG*, late under my command.

We sailed from Sandy Hook on the evening of the 9<sup>th</sup> ultimo, and about midnight fell in close aboard of a razee and ship of the line. They pursued till next noon, when they thought proper to give over chase. On the 11<sup>th</sup>, after a nine hours' chase, boarded the private armed schooner *PERRY*, John Colman, six days from Philadelphia; had thrown over all his guns. On the following day fell in with an enemy's gun brig; exchanged a few shots with him and left him. On the 24<sup>th</sup> boarded a Spanish brig and schooner, and a Portuguese ship, all from the Havana. On the 26<sup>th</sup> following came to in Fayal Roads, for the purpose of filling water; called on the American Consul, who very politely ordered our water immediately sent off, it being our intention to proceed to sea early the next day. At five PM I went on board, the Consul and some other gentlemen in company. I asked some questions concerning enemy's cruisers, and was told there had been none at these islands for several weeks; when about dusk, while we were conversing, the British brig *CARNATION* suddenly hove in sight, close under the northeast head of the harbor, within gun-shot when first discovered.

The idea of getting under way was instantly suggested; but finding the enemy's brig had the advantage of a breeze, and but little wind with us, it was thought doubtful if we should be able to get to sea without hazarding an action. I questioned the Consul to know, if, in his opinion, the enemy would regard the neutrality of the port? He gave me to understand I might make myself perfectly easy, assuring me, at the same time, they would never molest us while at anchor. But no sooner did the enemy's brig understand from the pilot boat who we were, when she immediately hauled close in, and let go her anchor within pistol-shot of us. At the same moment the *PLANTAGENET* and frigate *ROTA* hove in sight, to whom the *CARNATION* instantly made signals, and a constant interchange took place for some time. The result was, the *CARNATION* proceeded to throw out all her boats; despatched one on board the Commodore, and appeared otherwise to be making unusual exertions; from these circumstances I began to suspect their real intentions. The moon was near its full, which enabled us to observe them very minutely, and I now determined to haul in nearer the shore; accordingly, after clearing for action, we got under way, and began to sweep in. The moment this was observed by the enemy's brig, she instantly cut her cable, made sail, and despatched four boats in pursuit of us. Being now about 8 PM, as soon as we saw the boats approaching, we let go our anchor, got springs on our cable, and prepared to receive them. I hailed them repeatedly as they drew near, but they felt no inclination to reply. Sure of their game they only pulled up with greater speed. I observed the boats were well manned, and apparently as well armed; and as soon as they cleverly got alongside we opened our fire, which was as soon returned; but, meeting with rather a warmer reception than they had probably been aware of, they very soon cried for quarters and hauled off; in this skirmish I had one man killed, and my first lieutenant wounded. The enemy's loss must have been upwards of twenty killed and wounded.

They had now repaired to their ships to prepare for a more formidable attack. We, in the interim, having taken the hint, prepared to haul close into the beach, where we moored head and stern within half pistol-shot of the castle. This done, we again prepared, in the best possible manner, for their second reception. About 9 PM we observed the enemy's brig towing in a large fleet of boats. They soon after left the brig and took their station in three divisions, under cover of a small reef of rocks, within about musket shot of us. Here they continued maneuvering for some time, the brig still keeping under way to act with the boats, should we at any time attempt our escape.

The shores were lined with the inhabitants, waiting the expected attack; and from the brightness of the moon they had a most favorable view of the scene. The Governor, with most of the first people of the place, stood by and saw the whole affair.

At length, about midnight, we saw the boats in motion, (our crew having laid at their quarters during the whole of this interval;) they came on in one direct line, keeping in close order; and we plainly counted twelve boats. As soon as they came within proper distance we opened our fire, which was warmly returned from the enemy's carronades and small arms. The discharge from our long Tom rather staggered them; but soon reconnoitering, they gave three

cheers, and came on most spiritedly; in a moment they succeeded in gaining our bow and starboard quarter, and the word was board. Our great guns now became useless; we attacked them sword in hand, together with our pikes, pistols, and musketry, from which our lads poured on them a most destructive fire. The enemy made frequent and repeated attempts to gain our decks, but were repulsed at all times, and at all points, with the greatest slaughter. About the middle of the action I received intelligence of the death of my second lieutenant; and, soon after, of the third lieutenant being badly wounded. From this, and other causes, I found our fire had much slackened on the forecastle; and, fearful of the event, I instantly rallied the whole of our after division, who had been bravely defending, and now had succeeded in beating the boats off the quarters. They gave a shout, rushed forward, opened a fresh fire, and soon after decided the conflict, which terminated in the total defeat of the enemy, and the loss of many of their boats; two of which, belonging to the *ROTA*, we took possession of, literally loaded with their own dead; seventeen only escaped from them both, who had swum to the shore. In another boat under our quarter, commanded by one of the lieutenants of the *PLANTAGENET*, all were killed, saving four. This I have from the lieutenant himself, who further told me that he jumped overboard to save his own life.

The duration of this action was about forty minutes; our decks were now found in much confusion, our long Tom dismounted, and several of our carriages broken; many of our crew having left the vessel, and others disabled. Under these circumstances, however, we succeeded in getting long Tom in his birth, and the decks cleared in some sort for a fresh action, should the enemy attack us again before daylight. About 3 AM I received a message from the American Consul, requesting to see me on shore, when he informed me the Governor had sent a note to Captain Lloyd, begging him to desist from further hostilities. To which Captain Lloyd sent for answer, that he was now determined to have the privateer, at the risk of knocking down the whole town; and that, if the Governor suffered the Americans to injure the privateer in any manner, he should consider the place an enemy's port, and treat it accordingly. Finding this to be the case, I considered all hopes of saving our vessel to be at an end. I therefore went on board, and ordered all our wounded and dead to be taken on shore, and the crew to save their effects as fast as possible. Soon after this it became daylight, when the enemy's brig stood close in, and commenced a heavy fire on us with all her force; after several broadsides she hauled off, having received a shot in her hull, her rigging much cut, and her foretopmast wounded, (of this I was informed by the British Consul.) She soon after came in again, and anchored close to the privateer. I then ordered the *ARMSTRONG* to be scuttled, to prevent the enemy from getting her off; she was soon after boarded by the enemy's boats, and set on fire, which soon completed her destruction.

They have destroyed a number of houses in the town, and wounded some of the inhabitants.

By what I have been able to learn from the British Consul and officers of the fleet, it appears there were about four hundred officers and men in the last attack by the boats, of whom one hundred and twenty were killed, and one hundred and thirty wounded. Captain Lloyd, I am told by the British Consul, is badly wounded in the leg; a jury of surgeons had been held, who gave as their opinion that amputation would be necessary to insure his life. It is said, however, that the wound was occasioned by an ox treading on him. The fleet has remained here about a week, during which they have been principally employed in burying their dead, and taking care of their wounded.

Three days after the action they were joined by the ship *THAIS* and Brig *CALYPSO*, (two sloops of war,) who were immediately taken into requisition by Captain Lloyd, to take home the wounded men. The *CALYPSO* sailed for England, with part of the wounded, on the 2<sup>d</sup> inst., among whom was the first lieutenant of the *PLANTAGENET*. The *THAIS* sails this evening with the remainder. Captain Lloyd's fleet sailed to-day, supposed for the West Indies.

The loss on our part, I am happy to say, is comparatively trifling; two killed and seven wounded. With regard to my officers, in general, I feel the greatest satisfaction in saying they one and all fought with the most determined bravery, and to whom I feel highly indebted for their officer-like conduct during the short period we were together; their exertions and bravery deserved a better fate.

I here insert for your inspection a list of the killed and wounded.

Killed.—Mr. Alexander O. Williams, second lieutenant, by a musket ball in the forehead, died instantly; Burton Lloyd, a seaman, do., through the heart, do.

Wounded.—Frederick A. Worth, first lieutenant, in the right side; Robert Johnson, third do. left knee; Basilla Hammond, quartermaster, left arm; John Piner, seaman, knee; William Castle, do. arm; Nicholas Scalsan, do. arm and leg; John Harrison, do. hands and face, by the explosion of a gun.

It gives me much pleasure to announce to you that our wounded are all in a fair way of recovery, through the unremitting care and attention of our worthy surgeon.

Mr. Dabney, our Consul, is a gentleman possessing every feeling of humanity, and to whom the utmost gratitude is due from us for his great care of the sick and wounded, and his polite attention to my officers and myself.

Mr. Williams was a most deserving and promising officer. His country in him has lost one of its brightest ornaments, and his death must be sadly lamented by all who knew his worth.

Accompanied with this you will find a copy of my protest, together with copies of letters written by Mr. Dabney to the Governor of Fayal, our Minister at Rio Janeiro, and our Secretary of State. These letters will develop more fully the circumstances of this unfortunate affair.

We expect to sail to-morrow in a Portuguese brig for Amelia Island, who takes the whole of our crew; till when, I remain, gentlemen, your obedient humble servant,

*Annals of Congress* (15<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Session), 2487–2491.