

CAPTURE OF *HMS JAVA*

Commodore Bainbridge, USN

USS CONSTITUTION, 1812

Wednesday, December 30th, 1812 (nautical time) in latitude 13 degrees, 6 minutes south, and longitude 39 west, ten leagues from the coast of Brazil—commences with clear weather and moderate breezes from east north-east, hoisted our ensign and pendant. At 15 minutes past meridian, the ship hoisted her colours, an English ensign having a signal flying at her main, red, yellow and red. At 1:26 PM being sufficiently from the land, and finding the ship to be an English frigate, took in the main-sail and royals, tacked ship and stood for the enemy. At 1:50 PM the enemy bore down with the intention of raking us, which we avoided by wearing. At 2 PM the enemy being within half a mile of us, and to windward, and having hauled down his colours, except an Union Jack at the mizen-mast head, induced me to give orders to the officers of the 3^d division to fire one gun ahead of the enemy to make him show his colours, which being done, brought on a fire from us of the whole broadside, on which the enemy hoisted his colours and immediately returned our fire. A general action with round and grape then commenced, the enemy keeping at a much greater distance than I wished, but could not bring him to closer action without exposing ourselves to several rakes. Considerable manouvres were made by both vessels to rake and avoid being raked. The following minutes were taken during the action.

At 2:10 PM commenced the action within good grape and canister distance, the enemy to windward, but much further than I wished. At 2:30 our wheel was shot entirely away. Two 40, determined to close with the enemy, notwithstanding his raking, set the fore and main-sail and luffed up close to him. Two 50, the enemy's jib-boom got foul of our mizen-rigging. Three, the head of the enemy's bowsprit and jib-boom shot away by us. Three 5, shot away the enemy's foremast by the board. Three 15, shot away his main topmast just above the cap. Three 40, shot away gaff and spanker boom. Three 55, shot away his mizen mast nearly by the board. Four 5, having silenced the fire of the enemy completely, and his colours in main rigging being down, supposed he had struck, then hauled aboard the courses to shoot ahead to repair our rigging which was extremely cut, leaving the enemy a complete wreck. Soon after, discovered the enemy's flag was still flying; hove to, to repair some of our damage. Four 20, the enemy's mainmast went nearly by the board. Four 50, wore ship and stood for the enemy. Five 25, got very close to the enemy in a very effectual *raking position*, athwart his bows, and was at the very instant of raking him, when he most prudently struck his flag, for had he suffered the broadside to have raked him, his additional loss must have been extremely great, as he laid an unmanageable wreck upon the water.

After the enemy had struck, wore ship and reefed the topsails, then hoisted out one of the only two remaining boats we had left out of eight, and sent lieutenant Parker, 1st of the CONSTITUTION, to take possession of the enemy, which proved to be his Britannic majesty's frigate *JAVA*, rated 38 but carried 49 guns, and manned with upwards of 400 men, commanded by captain Lambert, a very distinguished officer, who was mortally wounded. The action continued from the commencement to the end of the fire, one hour and fifty-five minutes. The CONSTITUTION had 9 killed and 25 wounded. The enemy had 60 killed and 101 certainly wounded; but by a letter written on board the CONSTITUTION, by one of the officers of the *JAVA*, and accidentally found, it is evident the enemy's wounded must have been considerably greater than as above stated, and who must have died of their wounds previously to their being removed. The letter states 60 killed and 170 wounded. The *JAVA* had her own complement of men complete, and upwards of 100 supernumeraries, going to join the British ships of war in the East Indies; also several officers, passengers, going out on promotion. The force of the enemy in number of men, at the commencement of the action, was no doubt considerably greater than we have been able to ascertain, which is upwards of 400 men. The officers were extremely cautious in discovering the number. By her quarter bill she had one man more stationed at each gun than we had.

The CONSTITUTION was very much cut in her sails and rigging and many of her spars injured. At 7 PM the boat returned with lieutenant Chads, the first lieutenant of the enemy's frigate, and lieutenant general Hyslop, (appointed governor of Bombay) major Walker and captain Wood, belonging to his staff. Captain Lambert of the *JAVA* was too dangerously wounded to be removed immediately. The cutter returned on board the prize for the prisoners, and brought captain Marshall, master and commander of the British navy, who was passenger on board, as also several other naval officers, destined for ships in the East Indies.

The *JAVA* was an important ship, fitted out in the completest manner, to carry lieutenant general Hyslop and staff to Bombay, and several naval officers for different ships in the East Indies, and had despatches for St. Helena, Cape of Good Hope, and every British establishment in the India and China seas. She had on board copper for a 74 and two brigs building at Bombay, and I expect a great many other valuables; but every thing was blown up in her except the officers' baggage, when we set her on fire at 3 PM on the 1st of January, 1813, (nautical time.)

John Brannan, ed. *Official Letters of the Military and Naval Officers of the United States During the War with Great Britain in the Years 1812, 13, 14, & 15 With Some Additional Letters and Documents Elucidating the History of that Period.* (Washington: 1823), pp. 499–501.