

LOSS OF THE *PHILADELPHIA*

Captain Bainbridge to Robert Smith, Secretary of the Navy

Tripoli, 1 November 1803

Misfortune necessitates me to make a communication the most distressing of my life, and it is with the deepest regret that I inform you of the loss of the United States' frigate *PHILADELPHIA*, under my command, by being wrecked on rocks between four and five miles to the eastward of the town of Tripoli. The circumstances relating to this unfortunate event are: At 9 AM being about five leagues to the eastward of Tripoli, saw a ship, in shore of us, standing before the wind to the westward; we immediately gave chase; she hoisted Tripolitan colors, and continued her course very near the shore; about eleven o'clock had approached the shore to seven fathoms water; commenced firing at her, which we continued, by running before the wind, until half-past 11; being then in seven fathoms water, and finding our fire ineffectual to prevent her getting into Tripoli, gave up the pursuit, and was bearing off the land, when we ran on the rocks in twelve feet water forward, and seventeen abaft; immediately lowered down a boat from the stern, sounded, and found the greatest depth of water astern; laid all sails aback, loosed top-gallant sails, and set a heavy press of canvass on the ship, blowing fresh, to back her off; cast three anchors away from the bows, started the water in the hold, hove overboard the guns, except some abaft to defend the ship against the gun-boats which were then firing on us; found all this ineffectual; then made the last resort, of lightening her forward, by cutting away the foremast, which carried the main top-gallant with it; but labor and enterprise were in vain, for our fate was direfully fixed. I am fully sensible of the loss that has occurred to our country, and the difficulty which it may further involve her in with this Regency; and feel, beyond description, for the brave unfortunate officers and men under my command, who have done everything in their power, worthy of the character and stations they filled; and, I trust, on investigation of my own conduct, that it will appear to my Government and country consistent to the station in which I had the honor of being placed.

Striking on the rocks was an accident not possible for me to guard against by any intimation of charts, as no such shoals were laid down in any on board, and every careful precaution (by three leads kept heaving) was made use of in approaching the shore, to effect the capture of a Tripolitan cruiser; and, after the ship struck the rocks, all possible measures were taken to get her off, and a firm determination made, not to give her up as long as a possible hope remained, although annoyed by gun-boats, which took their position in such a manner that we could not bring our guns to bear on them, not even after cutting away a part of the stern to effect it.

When my officers and self had not a hope left of its being possible to get her off the rocks, and, having withstood the fire of the gun-boats for four hours, and a reinforcement coming out from Tripoli, without the smallest chance of injuring them in resistance, to save the lives of brave men, left no alternative but the distressing one of hauling our colors down, and submitting to the enemy whom chance had befriended. In such a dilemma, the flag of the United States was struck; however painful it will be to our fellow-citizens to hear the news, they may be assured that we feel in a national loss equally with them. Zeal of serving our country, in doing our duty, has placed us in that situation which can be better conceived than described, and from which we rely on our country's extricating us.

The gun-boats, in attacking, fired principally at our masts; had they directed the shot at their hull, no doubt but they would have killed many.

The ship was taken possession of a little after sunset; and, in the course of the evening, myself, and all the officers, with part of the crew, were brought on shore, and carried before the Bashaw, who asked several questions. From his palace, the officers were conducted to the house which Mr. Cathcart lived in, where we lodged last night, and this day the Minister has become the guarantee to the Bashaw for us officers, and we have given him our parole of honor.

Enclosed you will receive a list of the officers, and a few of the people to attend them, who are quartered in the American Consular house, and are to be provided for by such ways and means as I can best adopt, which will be on as economical a plan as possible; the remainder of the crew will be supported by the Regency.

We have all lost everything but what was on our backs, and even part of that was taken off; the loss of the officers is considerable, as they were well provided in every necessary for a long station.

Mr. Nissan, the Danish Consul, has been extremely attentive, and kindly offers every service of assistance.

I trust, sir, you will readily conceive the anxiety of mind I must suffer. After the perusal of the enclosed certificate from the officers, on my conduct, should you be pleased to express the opinion of Government, you will much oblige me.

PS—Notwithstanding our parole, we are not permitted to leave the house, or to go to the top of it, and they have closed our view of the sea.

List of Officers and Men Quartered at the American Consular-House at Tripoli

Wm. Bainbridge, Captain; David Porter, Jacob Jones, Theodore Hunt, and Benjamin Smith, Lieutenants; Wm. S. Osborn, Lieut. of Marines; John Ridgely, Surgeon; Keith Spence, Purser; Wm. Knight, Sailing Master; Jonathan Cowdery, and Nicholas, Harwood, Surgeon's Mates; George Hodge, Boatswain; Bernard Henry, Daniel T. Patterson, James Gibbon, Benj. F. Reed, William Cutbush, Wallace Wormley, Robert Gamble, Richard B. Jones, James Renshaw, James Biddle, and Simon Smith, Midshipmen; Joseph Douglass, Sailmaker; Richard Stephenson, Gunner; William Godby, Carpenter; William Anderson, Captain's Clark; Minor Forentan, Master's Mate; James C. Morris, Ship's Steward; Ottis Hunt, and David Irvine, Sergeants of Marines; William Leith, Ship's Cook; James Casey, Master-at-Arms; Peter Williams, Corporal; John Baptist, Lewis Hecksener, Frederick Lewis, Chas. Mitchell, Peter Cook, Leonard Foster, William James, William Gardner, and William Kemperfill—43.

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264

307 total of crew