

DESTRUCTION OF THE PHILADELPHIA

Stephen Decatur, Jr. to Commodore Edward Preble

On Board the Ketch INTREPID, At Sea, 17 February 1804

I have the honor to inform you that, in pursuance of your orders of the 1st instant, to proceed with this ketch off the harbor of Tripoli, there to endeavor to effect the destruction of the United States' late frigate PHILADELPHIA. I arrived there in company with the United States brig SYREN, Lieutenant Commandant Stewart, on the 7th, but, owing to the badness of the weather, was unable to effect anything until last evening, when we had a light breeze from the NE. At seven o'clock I entered the harbor with the INTREPID, the SYREN having gained her station without the harbor in a situation to support us in our retreat. At half past 9, laid her along side the PHILADELPHIA; boarded; and, after a short contest, carried her. I immediately fired her in the store-rooms, cock-pit, and berth-deck, and remained on board until the flames had issued from the spar-deck-hatch-ways and ports, and before I got from along side the fire had communicated to the rigging and tops. Previous to our boarding, they had got their tompions out and hailed several times, but not a gun was fired.

The noise occasioned by boarding and contending for possession, although no fire-arms were used, gave a general alarm on shore, and on board their cruisers which lay about a cable and a half's length from us, and many large boats filled with men lay around, but from whom we received no annoyance. They commenced a fire on us from all their batteries on shore, but with no other effect than one shot passing through our top-gallant sail.

The frigate was moored within half gun-shot of the Bashaw's castle, and of their principal battery. Two of their cruisers lay within two cable's length on the starboard quarter, and their gun-boats within half gun-shot on the starboard bow. She had all her guns mounted and loaded, which, as they became hot, went off; as she lay with her broadside to the town, I have no doubt but some damage has been done by them. Before I got out of the harbor, her cables had burnt off, and she drifted in under the castle where she was consumed. I can form no judgment as to the number of men that were on board of her—there were about twenty killed—a large boatful got off, and many leaped into the sea. We have made one prisoner, and I fear from the number of bad wounds he has received, he will not recover, although every assistance and comfort has been given him.

I boarded with sixty men and officers, leaving a guard on board the ketch for her defence; and it is with the greatest pleasure I inform you I had not a man killed in this affair, and but one slightly wounded. Every support that could be given, I received from my officers, and, as the conduct of each was highly meritorious, I beg leave to enclose you a list of their names. Permit e, also, sir, to speak of the brave fellows I have the honor to command, whose coolness and intrepidity was such as I trust will ever characterize the American tars.

It would be injustice in me, were I to pass over the important services rendered by Mr. Salvador, the pilot, on whose good conduct the success of the enterprise in the greatest degree depended. He gave me entire satisfaction.

The following is a list of the officers employed on board the ketch INTREPID, under my command, in boarding and destroying the frigate PHILADELPHIA, in the harbor of Tripoli, on the 16th instant:

- Lieutenants — James Lawrence, Joseph Bainbridge, and Jonathan Thorn.
- Surgeon — Lewis Herman.
- Midshipmen — Ralph Izard, John Rowe, Charles Morris, Alexander Laws, John Davis, of the Constitution; Thomas M'Donough, of the Enterprise; and Thomas Oakley Anderson, of the Syren.
- Mr. Salvador, pilot, and sixty-two men.