

# ATTACK ON TRIPOLI

## Captain Edward Preble, USS CONSTITUTION

4 August 1804

Wind E b S. Standing off shore on the starbord tack, the signal out to come within hail. Spoke the different vessels and acquainted their commanders that it was my intention to attack the shipping & batteries. Directed the gun boats & bombs to be prepared for immediate service. At 12½ PM tacked & stood for the batteries. Backed the main topsail, at ½ 1 PM made the general signal to follow the motions of the Commodore. Filled the maintopsail & stood in towards the batteries, at ¼ past 2 made the signal for the bombs & gun boats to advance & attack the ships & batteries. ½ past 2 general signal for battle. The whole squadron advanced within point-blank shot of the enemy's batteries & shipping, our gun boats in two divisions the 1<sup>st</sup> consisting of 3 boats commanded by Capt Somers the 2<sup>d</sup> of three boats by Capt Decatur. At ¾ past 2 the action commenced on our side by throwing a shell into the town, and in an instant the whole squadron were engaged. The enemy's gun boats were anchored with springs on, in three divisions. The eastern or van division consisted of 9 Boats, the center of 7 Boats, and the western or rear of 5 boats. As the wind was from the eastward, our boats were ordered to lead in to windward and attack the enemy. The rear & center division of the enemy's boats are close under their batteries, & the van division, consisting of their largest boats, are within grape distance of the Bashaw's castle & Fort English. At 3 observed our gun boats engaged in close action with the enemy's boats, while a tremendous fire was kept up by this ship and the rest of the squadron. Capt Decatur with No. 4, Lt Trippe of No 6, & Lt Bainbridge of No. 5, & Lt James Decatur of No. 2 attacked the enemy's boats within pistol shot. No. 1 Capt Somers fell to leeward but fetched up with the enemy's rear of 5 boats, which he gallantly attacked, disabled, & drove in although within pistol shot of the batteries. No. 3 Lt Blake did not go into close action; had he gone down to the assistance of Capt Somers it is probable they would have captured the rear boats. Capt Decatur boarded and after a stout and obstinate resistance took possession of two of the enemy's gun boats, Lt Trippe boarded and carried a third. Lt James Decatur in the act of boarding to take possession of a fourth boat was shot through the head & mortally wounded; the officer next in command (Mr. Brown) hauled off. Lt Bainbridge had his latten yard shot away early in the action which prevented him from taking a boat but he galled the enemy by a steady fire within musket shot; indeed he pursued the enemy until his boat touched the ground under the batteries. The bombs kept their stations which were well chosen, by Lt Dent & Lt Robinson, who commanded them, and threw a number of shells into the town although the spray of the sea occasioned by the enemy's shot almost covered them. Three different times the enemy's gun boats rallied and attempted to surround ours. I as often made the signal to cover them, which was properly attended to by the brigs & schooners, and the fire from this ship not only had the desired effect on the enemy's flotilla by keeping them in check and disabling them, but silenced one of their principal batteries for some time. At ½ past 4 PM made the signal for the bombs to retire from action out of gun shot, and a few minutes after the general signal to cease firing and tow out the prizes & disabled boats. Sent our barge and jolly boat to assist in that duty. Tacked ship & fired two broadsides in stays which drove the Tripolines out of the castle & brought down the steeple of a mosque; by this time the wind began to freshen from NE at 4 ¾ PM. Hauled off to take the bombs in tow at 5 PM. Brought to, two miles from their batteries. Recd Lt James Decatur on board from gun boat number 2; he was shot through the head (in boarding a Tripoline boat which had struck to him). He expired in a few moments after he was brought into the ship. We lay to until 10 PM to receive the prisoners on board captured in the prizes, then made sail & stood off to the NE the wind veering to the ESE. We have all the surgeons of the squadron on board dressing the wounded.

During the action we fired 262 round shot besides grape, double head, & canister from this ship and were several times within 3 cables' lengths of the rocks & batteries where our soundings were from 10 to 16 fathoms. The officers, seamen, & Marines of the squadron behaved gallantly throughout the action. Capt Decatur in gun boat number particularly distinguished himself, as did Lt Trippe of number 6. Our loss in killed & wounded has been considerable, the damage we recd in this ship is a 24-pound shot nearly through the center of the mainmast 20 feet from the deck, main topgallant, r yard, & sail shot away, one of the fore shrouds and the sails & running rigging considerably cut. One of the 24-pounders on the quarter deck was struck by a 24-pound shot, which damaged the gun and carriage and shattered the arm of a Marine to pieces. Gun boat number 2 had her latten yard shot away, & the rigging & sails of the brigs and schooners were considerably cut. We captured 3 gun boats, two of which carried each a long brass 24-pounder & two brass howitzers and 36 men with a plenty of muskets, pistols, pikes, sabers, &c. The other mounted a long brass 18-pounder & two howitzers & 24 men. 44 Tripolines were killed on board of the 3 boats and 52 made prisoners, 26 of which were wounded, 17 of them very badly, 3 of which died soon after they were brought on board. The enemy must have suffered very much in killed & wounded among their shipping and on

shore. One of their boats was sunk in the harbor, several of them had their decks nearly cleared of men by our shot, and several shells burst in the town, which must have done great execution.

*Naval Documents Related to the United States Wars with the Barbary Powers.* (Washington, DC: 1942), IV: 338–340.