

LESSONS FROM STEPHEN DECATUR

BY RICHARD H. WAGNER

(Originally published in *The Log*, Navy League of the United States, New York Council, Fall 2005)

On 14 September, the Council hosted the luncheon for the presentation of the nineteenth annual Theodore and Franklin D. Roosevelt Naval History Prize. The prize is given in conjunction with the Theodore Roosevelt Association and the Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Society and is awarded based upon originality, literature and style, readability, content, research, and the book as a physical object. Professor Spencer Tucker was honored at this year's luncheon for his work: Stephen Decatur: A Life Most Bold and Daring.

In his introductory remarks, Brigadier General Charles "Casey" Brower, U.S. Army (ret.), Academic Dean of the Virginia Military Institute, noted the importance of works on military history in educating today's officers. "The officers of today's armed services are the best educated, the most intellectual officer corps in our history. They are avid readers of military history. They read not the military history of drums and bugles that so dominated the field previously. . . They devour instead the newer military history that has emerged over the last three decades or so. Military history that recognizes war is the most complex and encompassing of all human endeavors." They read such works because they "recognize their duties as officers to be masters of their profession. They recognize that that mastery extends beyond the technical and tactical

competency so often associated with that mastery." Thus, "Spencer Tucker, as a military historian, has contributed substantially to the education of that officer corps."

Accepting the prize, Professor Tucker said that Stephen Decatur "was so important, second only to John Paul Jones, as a leader, as a model, as the greatest hero of the American sailing navy."

Decatur joined the Navy in 1798 and served as a midshipman on the frigate USS UNITED STATES during the undeclared war with France. However, he first came to prominence as a lieutenant during the first war against the Barbary pirates (sometimes referred to as the "Tripolitan War" 1801-1805) in the first years of the Nineteenth Century. In command of the schooner USS ENTERPRISE, Decatur captured an enemy ketch that had once been used as a transport in Napoleon's Egyptian campaign. Subsequently, on 16 February 1804, he used that ship, renamed USS INTREPID, for a night raid into Tripoli harbor where he boarded and burnt the frigate USS PHILADELPHIA, which had been captured by the pirates after running aground. The raid brought international notoriety with Admiral Lord Horatio Nelson commenting that the raid was "the most daring act of the age."

Eight years later, at the beginning

of the War of 1812, Decatur was a captain in command of UNITED STATES Cruising 600 miles west of the Canary Islands, Decatur sighted the British frigate HMS MACEDONIAN approaching. The UNITED STATES had superior firepower but MACEDONIAN had superior speed. Accordingly, Decatur engaged in a series of maneuvers designed to bring the two ships on parallel courses with UNITED STATES slightly ahead of MACEDONIAN. Taking advantage of the greater range of his guns, Decatur then began firing diagonal broadsides at MACEDONIAN. This damaged MACEDONIAN so that she lost her advantage in speed. Decatur then brought UNITED STATES across MACEDONIAN's bow, firing a devastating, raking broadside.

Decatur could have pounded his adversary into a hulk. However, he knew it would be better if he could capture MACEDONIAN and add her to the pitifully small number of ships that then comprised the U.S. Navy. Accordingly, after firing some additional salvos from off MACEDONIAN's quarter, Decatur circled MACEDONIAN without firing, demonstrating that he could cross the British ship's bow or stern at will. Rather than suffer another raking broadside, the British surrendered. The two ships lay along side each other for two weeks while repairs were made to enable the prize to sail to New York. MACEDONIAN became a U.S. ship, American morale received a much needed boost, and Decatur was again a national hero.

As the war progressed, Britain's superiority in number of ships allowed it to impose a tight blockade all but closing

U.S. ports. In one of the last battles of the war, Decatur was a commodore in command of a small squadron that was blockaded in New York harbor. His flagship, USS PRESIDENT, had been designed to be the fastest and strongest U.S. frigate, capable of out running any ship that could sink her and capable of sinking any ship that could catch her. Decatur's orders were to break out of New York and take PRESIDENT to the Indian Ocean where she was to fall on British trade with the subcontinent. A strong British squadron lay off New York but in January 1815, a winter storm blew it off station. Decatur saw an opportunity and proceeded to take PRESIDENT to sea.

Unfortunately, as PRESIDENT was attempting to leave, she became hung up on a sand bar off Sandy Hook. For hours, the ship's bottom thumped against the sand. Finally, tides and the crew's efforts at lightening the ship allowed PRESIDENT to sail over the bar. Although her keel was badly damaged, the tides and the winds prevented Decatur from returning to New York. Instead, he took the ship northeast along the coast of Long Island.

The next day, PRESIDENT was sighted by the British squadron, which gave chase. The British had a small ship of the line, three frigates, and a brig. With PRESIDENT's damaged keel, the British were able to slowly gain on the American and PRESIDENT came under fire from the bow chasers of the leading frigate. With his damage mounting and escape unlikely, Decatur decided to turn on his foes. At first, he planned to board the leading frigate, HMS ENDYMION, capture her, and use her as a vehicle for escape. When that maneuver failed, he used PRESIDENT's superior firepower

to knock ENDYMION out of action. But, Decatur's luck had run out. The remaining British frigates had come up and the ship of the line would join them shortly. Out gunned and already severely damaged, Decatur surrendered after another short attempt at escape.

After the war, Decatur was given command of a squadron that was sent to the Mediterranean to suppress the Barbary pirates who were once again attacking U.S. merchant ships and enslaving American citizens. (The Algerine War 1815-1816). Decatur engaged the pirate corsairs and forced Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli, to cease their attacks on American ships and to surrender all the Christians that they held in captivity.

Returning home, Decatur was made a member of the Board of Navy Commissioners. However, not everyone was glad to see the strong-willed sailor. In 1807, the frigate USS CHESAPEAKE, under the command of James Barron, was fired upon by the British ship of the line HMS LEOPARD when Barron refused to allow the British to search the CHESAPEAKE for British deserters. Decatur was a member of the court martial that found Barron guilty of failing to prepare his ship for action in time. Barron resented the verdict and the sentence, which had effectively ended his naval career. In 1820, the two men duelled and Barron fatally wounded Decatur.

Professor Tucker said: "What appealed to me about Decatur as I researched the book was his leadership and the leadership traits that I discovered. He, of course, had a tremendous drive to excel, as did most of the officers of the young American navy. He was blessed with great endurance and

indifference to fatigue. He led by example rather than by threat or intimidation He used the lash sparingly He placed the interests of his men first and, as a result, they followed him anywhere. They loved him. Many of the crews followed him from ship to ship. Also, he understood the need for intensive training. Finally, and not inconsiderably, fortune smiled upon him."

The biographical material on Decatur contained in this article was derived from a number of sources.