



2012-007

Stephen Budiansky, *Perilous Fight: America's Intrepid War with Britain on the High Seas, 1812-1815*. New York: Knopf, 2010. Pp. xvi, 422. ISBN 978-0-307-27069-6.

Review by Ralph M. Hitchens, Poolesville, MD (rmhitchens@netscape.net).

This is a book for anyone interested in the War of 1812. Its subtitle is misleading, since Budiansky has written a broad (not purely naval) history of the war, placing it firmly in its domestic and international political contexts and drawing evocative portraits of many of its participants—both famous and long-forgotten. Though the naval engagements seize the imagination today as they did long ago, the book also gives careful treatment to trade policy and the impressment of seamen that pushed the young American republic into war with Great Britain. And while names like Stephen Decatur, Isaac Hull, and William Bainbridge will forever be remembered in the US Navy, Budiansky gives other important but less familiar figures their moment in the sun—among many others, the peerless shipbuilder Joshua Humphreys and the highly capable (if reluctant) Secretary of the Navy, William Jones.

Budiansky is an accomplished journalist and author who has published on an eclectic variety of topics, including military history.<sup>1</sup> He brings his considerable narrative gifts and exemplary research to his account of the War of 1812 and its principal characters: especially, those famous naval commanders who won public acclaim as well as grudging respect from their supercilious Royal Navy opponents—what a diverse and often fractious crowd they were! There was the dashing Stephen Decatur, always on the verge of drawing his sword over an imagined slight, victor in one great frigate duel but forced to surrender to a British squadron near the end of the war. We learn about the pompous, self-assured, and thoroughly unpleasant William Bainbridge, whose earlier professional disgraces and unpopularity among peers and subordinates alike were offset by the surprising skill he displayed during USS *Constitution's* victory over HMS *Java*. There was the ever-jealous and unlucky John Rodgers, who carried the war against British commerce to the edge of the Arctic. And perhaps most memorable, the self-effacing yet exceptionally competent Isaac Hull, certainly one of the finest commanding officers the US Navy produced, an enduring example of military professionalism.

Nor is the war's elaborate backstory neglected. The infant American Navy was forged during the long, frustrating, and distant Tripolitan (or First Barbary) War (1801-5), when the officers who confronted the Royal Navy a decade later learned their trade under the able Commodore Edward Preble. The author recounts the famous USS *Philadelphia* incident (1804), in which an American frigate surrendered after running aground near Tripoli harbor—a major embarrassment for Captain Bainbridge, one that would have ended his career in any other navy. Instead, Bainbridge, who did less than his utmost to extricate his ship from its predicament, lived under comfortable house arrest with his officers, while his men were starved and mistreated by their captors. The subsequent burning of the *Philadelphia* in Tripoli harbor by the young Decatur was a spectacular feat, praised even by Royal Navy officers, who were accustomed to such heroics in their long war against France.

Also described is the infamous *Chesapeake* incident (1807), when a larger British frigate fired without warning on the USS *Chesapeake*, intending to board her and retrieve deserters. HMS *Leopard* pursued the American frigate after leaving the Royal Navy's anchorage in Lynnhaven Bay—sovereign US territory in Virginia, just inside the mouth of Chesapeake Bay. This was only one of several harbors where the Americans were powerless to prevent the British fleet from maintaining a presence before and during the War of 1812. A similar embarrassment for the US government was the willingness of many American merchants to con-

1. *Battle of Wits: The Complete Story of Codebreaking in World War II* (NY: Free Pr, 2000); *Air Power: The Men, Machines, and Ideas That Revolutionized War, from Kitty Hawk to Gulf War II* (NY: Viking, 2004); *Her Majesty's Spymaster: Elizabeth I, Sir Francis Walsingham, and the Birth of Modern Espionage* (NY: Viking, 2005); *The Bloody Shirt: Terror after Appomattox* (NY: Viking, 2008).

tinue transatlantic trade with British military forces in ostensibly neutral Spain and Portugal during the war, under prewar licenses honored by both state officials and the Royal Navy, which refrained from seizing the merchant ships as prizes. Nor could the US government stem the huge influx of British goods smuggled in from various overseas ports, a practice winked at by US customs officials colluding with powerful local commercial interests.

Budiansky summarizes, too briefly, the renowned frigate duels that earned an enduring reputation for the American Navy, which won three of four engagements. The capture of USS *President* by HMS *Endymion* late in the war did not involve a single ship-to-ship duel and is thus usually ignored in the popular imagination. Likewise the capture of USS *Essex* in the Pacific by two British warships is seldom counted. In the latter case, the American Navy had unwisely armed the *Essex* primarily with short-range carronades, which left her vulnerable to the long guns of the British vessels. Budiansky downplays the significant technical superiority of the largest US vessels—the forty-four-gun frigates *Constitution*, *United States*, and *President*—over their Royal Navy counterparts, most of which were rated at thirty-eight guns. He notes that inferior iron used in American cannonballs gave their twenty-four-pounders only a slight firepower advantage over the eighteen-pounders on most British frigates. However, the larger size and more robust construction of American frigates, comparable to sixty-four-gun ships of the line, made them far more resistant to battle damage. The *Constitution* and the *United States* were in fact far superior to the Royal Navy frigates they defeated: *Guerriere*, *Java*, and *Macedonian*.

The American Navy excelled its opponent in other respects as well. The British captains were complacent and often unprofessional, after two decades of consistent success against the French Navy and its allies. During the court-martial of the surviving officers of the sloop HMS *Peacock* after its capture by USS *Hornet*, the court forthrightly attributed the loss to “want of skill in directing the Fire, owing to an omission of the Practice of exercising the crew in the use of Guns for the last three years” (219). The American captains Hull, Decatur, and Bainbridge handled their ships with great skill and made the most of their size and firepower advantage, as the disparate casualty rates for the opposing sides clearly prove. The Royal Navy redeemed some of its reputation in 1813 when the thirty-eight-gun HMS *Shannon*, ably commanded by Capt. Philip Broke, easily defeated USS *Chesapeake*, a frigate of comparable size and firepower. Still, those serious early losses prompted the Admiralty to order its captains to avoid single-ship engagements with the Americans, and to try instead to bring a squadron to bear, or to blockade ports where US warships were sheltering.

Budiansky does not neglect the British side of the story. We see the frustrations of the Royal Navy’s diplomatic but diffident commander-in-chief on the North American station (expanded to include the two Caribbean stations), Adm. Sir John Borlase Warren who, like his predecessors in the American Revolution, found it nearly impossible to enforce a complete blockade of the long coastline. His energetic subordinate, Rear Adm. George Cockburn, would soon excite American enmity to an extraordinary degree. Budiansky recounts in great detail the virtually unopposed yet ultimately fruitless rampage of Cockburn’s squadron up and down the Chesapeake Bay, which featured brief amphibious incursions (to include the burning of Washington) and the famous bombardment of Fort McHenry that gave America its national anthem. Admiralty orders are frequently cited, and we come to know their author, the tart-tongued John Wilson Croker, Secretary to the Admiralty Board—a young politician with no naval experience but considerable administrative ability and, as the war dragged on, a clear understanding of what the Royal Navy’s strategy ought to be. Rushing toward his conclusion, Budiansky touches only lightly on the belated and completely miscarried New Orleans campaign. This is regrettable since it featured yet another of the Royal Navy’s spectacular amphibious failures during the Napoleonic era, failures too often swept under the historical rug.

So who won? America went to war to protest the seizure of its merchant ships, to uphold its right as a neutral country to trade freely with belligerents during wartime, and to stop the Royal Navy’s impressment of US seamen. American negotiators at Ghent in 1815 ultimately had to forgo these aims, making the peace treaty a somewhat shameful reversion to the status quo ante bellum. But the British had in fact learned some hard lessons. Never again did the Royal Navy press American seamen, and the Treaty of Paris (1856)

formalized the immunity of neutral ships against seizure. During the war of 1812, Britain had driven American merchant ships from the seas and captured or penned up most of the Navy, but a handful of American warships and a host of privateers eviscerated British trade in return, making the war increasingly unsustainable. Both sides were eager to make peace.

The only significant problem with this book, as I have mentioned, is that it endeavors to cover the whole war, with the result that naval combat gets short shrift. Those craving more details about the great frigate and sloop engagements, Perry's fleet action on Lake Erie, Macdonough's on Lake Champlain, the amazing seesaw struggle and shipbuilding duel on Lake Ontario, Porter's long sojourn to the far side of the world, and the ravages of American privateers in Canadian and English waters must be referred either to Theodore Roosevelt's great book on the war<sup>2</sup> or to other more recent and more scholarly studies.<sup>3</sup> *Perilous Fight* is nonetheless a masterful narrative that explains much about a long-overlooked war.

---

2. *The Naval War of 1812, Or the History of the United States Navy during the Last War with Great Britain to Which Is Appended an Account of the Battle of New Orleans* (NY: Putnam, 1882; 4th ed. 1889).

3. E.g., George C. Daughan, *1812: The Navy's War* (NY: Basic Books, 2011).