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A Forgotten Hero of the Revolution*

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AMONG the many heroes who fill almost forgotten graves, but who rendered genuine service to the cause of American Independence may be mentioned Captain Lambert Wickes of the Continental Navy. Captain Wickes was a native of Kent County on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. He was of a distinguished family and the great-great-grandson of one of the earliest pioneers of the Eastern Shore, Major Joseph Wickes who settled there in 1650.

When the Revolution broke out he was about forty years old and a bachelor. Little is known of his early career except that he was a seaman, and commanded ships out of Philadelphia a number of years before the Revolution. During this period he no doubt became acquainted with Robert Morris, the wealthy Philadelphia ship-owner and merchant, and it was probably through Morris' influence as a member of the Marine Committee that he obtained his first command in the youthful Continental Navy. He must have received a fair amount of education in his youth for his letters show a degree of facility in the use of his native tongue. We do know that he sought no undue recognition of his services, claimed no fantastic honors, nor hounded the Marine Committee and the Congress for rewards all out of their power to bestow. In this respect he compares most favorably with other naval officers of the Revolution, whose names are now household words on two continents. Yet he contributed substantially to the final success of the movement for American Independence, and would probably have accom-

*It has been the good fortune of "Americana" to receive recently two stories bringing to light the patriotic activity and achievements of Revolutionary heroes. One was "The Forgotten General" (Erskine), which ran serially in these pages in late numbers; while in the present article the same service is performed for a Naval figure. The fact that the author of this contribution is assistant librarian of the United States Naval Academy library is a point of additional interest and lends a touch of intimacy and pride to the notable record he outlines.

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plished much more had not the hazards of the sea brought his career to an untimely end.

On June 10, 1776, the Committee of Secret Correspondence of Congress by arrangement with the Marine Committee, issued orders to Captain Wickes who had been previously placed in command of the Continental brig "Reprisal" of 16 guns, to proceed to the West Indies and to bring from thence munitions of war for Washington's armies. He was ordered to take out Mr. William Bingham as a passenger. Mr. Bingham had been appointed as agent from the American colonies to Martinique, a French possession. From this time on until the day of his death sixteen months later, Capt. Wickes was to pass through such a period of constant and perilous adventure, as falls to the lot of few men in a much longer space of time.

With characteristic energy Wickes made his little vessel ready for the voyage, and passed down the Delaware from Philadelphia some time during the latter part of June, 1776, and was able to clear the river on July 3, just one day before the Declaration of Independence was signed. Before passing out into the Atlantic, however, he was able to render his first service to the American cause. Captain Montgomery of the Continental armed brig "Nancy" of six guns was just returning from St. Croix and St. Thomas with three hundred and eighty-six barrels of gunpowder, so badly needed by Washington's armies. Off the Delaware Capes he was sighted and chased by six British men-of-war. To save her from capture and to save a part at least of the valuable powder, he ran her ashore. Captain Wickes with his crew aided by Captain John Barry with his crew of the "Lexington" were able to keep off the boats sent from the H. M. S. "Kingfisher," and to save about two hundred barrels of powder. Before quitting the "Nancy," they laid a train of gunpowder which, when the "Nancy" was boarded, blew up with a large number of the British sailors. Some authorities place the number of British slain by this explosion to as high as eighty; however, one of Barry's officers who was present, Lieut. Luke Matthewman, says there were about thirty of the "Nancy's" captors killed. His estimate is probably more nearly correct. In the engagement, Wickes' third lieutenant, his own brother, lost his life.

Notwithstanding his grief over his loss, Captain Wickes at once put out to sea and cleared the Delaware Capes July 3rd. On July

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11th he had the satisfaction of falling in with the English merchant ship "Friendship" of 500 tons, Capt. Mackay. The "Friendship" was from Grenada bound to London, and carried a valuable cargo of rum, coffee, cocoa, and sugar. Wickes estimated her value at 35,000 pounds sterling. Wickes offered Capt. Mackay his liberty and private property, which he accepted. His crew voluntarily entered the American service. Two days later the "Reprisal" made a second capture of the English schooner "Peter," Capt. Muckelno, from St. Vincents bound for Liverpool, laden with sugar, coffee, cocoa, and cotton, and a hundred hogsheads of rum. He determined to send his prizes back to Philadelphia and have them sold there for the public account. He assigned one of his officers, John Parks, to the command of the "Friendship," and Jeremiah Holden to the "Peter." These two ships were driven by the British blockading fleet to take refuge on the Jersey coast at Egg Harbor, but finally reached Philadelphia safely on August 5, 1776. A third capture he also sent to the United States. This was the merchant vessel "Neptune" commanded by Capt. Patterson, an Englishman, bound from Antigua to Cork, Ireland, and laden with rum. A fourth capture was the "Duchess of Leinster," Capt. Carew, also with a cargo of rum from Antigua to Dublin. Wickes must have felt that the American colonists and the Irish had a common bond of sympathy, in that they both had felt the oppression of the government of George III, for when he found that the vessel was Irish property he told Capt. Carew that were their cases reversed he was sure that he would deal generously with him. Accordingly, he released the prize, and wished the good captain a safe and speedy voyage home. The "Duchess of Leinster" arrived in Dublin September 3rd.

Continuing his voyage he arrived off Martinique, July 27th, and was about to enter the harbor of St. Pierre, when he was hailed by the British man-of-war "Shark." The "Shark" had an armament of sixteen guns which just equalled that of the "Reprisal," but she had a full complement of men, whereas the crew of the "Reprisal" had been greatly weakened by sending off a number of men on each of the prizes. Capt. Chapman of the "Shark" reported to the Admiralty that at half-past five the afternoon of the 27th a ship was seen coming around the northern point of the bay, and was suspected of being an American. At seven the "Shark" slipped her cables and made sail. Half an hour later the "Reprisal" tacked.

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We wore and stood towards him & hailed him twice in French to which he made no answer; we afterwards hailed him in English, he continued to make sail from us & made no reply. At 9 fired a shot ahead of him and hailed him in English. Told him we was an English Man-of-War; he made no answer but bore down and fired a Broadside into us which we returned immediately and continued engaging $\frac{1}{2}$ an hour, then he back'd his Maintops & dropt astern & afterwards tack'd; $\frac{1}{4}$ past 10 we tack'd & stood towards him, at $\frac{1}{2}$ past ten they fired 2 shots at us from the shore, which occasioned us to bear away; he kept his wind and anchored in the bay.

Wickes' account of the fight was somewhat different. He claims he replied to both the French and English hail from the "Shark," and that the latter fired one shot at him at 10 o'clock, followed by three others in quick succession; the "Reprisal" returned four, after which the English made sail and withdrew as hastily as possible from the contest. The "Reprisal" then entered the harbor. Admiral Young, the British officer in command of the station, made a demand on the Governor of Martinique for the surrender of Wickes and his little vessel, which demand was promptly refused. Our gallant captain found himself in great favor among the Frenchmen of St. Pierre for his behavior in the affair with the "Shark."

Having landed his passenger, Mr. Bingham, and having secured a cargo of powder and arms, he left Martinique on August 26th, and after an uneventful voyage arrived in Philadelphia, September 13th. Four French military officers took passage with him, as they wished to secure employment with the American land service.

Eight days after his return from his voyage (September 21) he received an urgent letter from the Marine Committee:

This Committee being very desirous of sending the Reprisal under your command on immediate service—desire that you forward her outfit, take in provisions for two Months, and get ready for Sea with the utmost expedition.

But he was not told at the time the nature of the service he was to be called upon to render. Wickes at once set about getting his "Reprisal" ready for sea. On October 10, 1776, he received from the Continental Congress on recommendation from the Marine Committee an honor which must have been a source of great pride and gratification to him, though it no doubt caused among other officers not so fortunate feelings quite the reverse. For on that date the Congress established a list of captains for the Continental Navy,

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on which list his name was the eleventh. John Paul Jones' name was also on the list but only in the eighteenth place, and his wrath and jealousy must have been terrible to behold. Wickes never mentions this honor in any of his letters known to be now in existence, and it evidently came to him unsought though no doubt he had a powerful friend on the Marine Committee in the person of Robert Morris.

Wickes learned on October 24th that the purpose of his next cruise was to convey Benjamin Franklin to France, and the Committee ordered him, after landing Dr. Franklin safely, to put himself on the lookout for the English "Lisbon Packet" taking a station off Falmouth. He was directed to capture her, take what specie might be found aboard, carry it to France, and pay it over to the order of Dr. Franklin, Mr. Silas Deane, or Mr. Thomas Morris, the commercial agent of the "Secret Committee" at Nantes. The Committee indicated that "Congress will pay here (in Philadelphia) yours and the people's share of such money, as well as their share of any prizes or parts of prizes that may be sold there (in France) and the money applied to the public use."

The "Reprisal" with Franklin on board passed the Capes of the Delaware early in November and arrived off the French coast at Nantes on the 29th. Captain Wickes was the first American naval officer, and the "Reprisal" was the first American man-of-war to appear in European waters. On the passage Dr. Franklin had made the acquaintance of the captain, and had taken a great liking to him. With such an important passenger Wickes was not looking for trouble, and sought no encounters, but several times when he thought that the occasion demanded it he beat to quarters, pleasing Franklin greatly with his spirit and with that of his men. On the 27th and 28th just before sighting land he fell in with two brigantines under English colors, one bound from Bordeaux to Cork, and the other just out of Rochefort and bound to Hull. Both were richly laden. The two prizes were taken in to Quiberon Bay and disposed of secretly though with little difficulty to French merchants.

As soon as he had landed Dr. Franklin safely at Nantes, he employed himself in refitting the "Reprisal" and in securing his prisoners whom he hoped would serve to rescue many of his unfortunate fellow-countrymen from the dreaded English prisons, For-

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ton and Mill. He was also kept busy during the following winter in examining ships. Ships must be bought for the American Navy, and intent on making himself serviceable to his country, he made the rounds of the seaports of France examining such likely ships as he heard of. All these matters he reported in detail to Franklin. He seems to have conceived a great respect and liking for the great philosopher and referred to him all important matters that came to him for decision. He was not a man learned in international law, and he saw no reason why the French government should not allow him to sell his prizes in French ports, refit his vessel in French dockyards, and detain prisoners taken from his prizes on French soil until an exchange could be effected with his unfortunate compatriots in Forton and Mill. The French government winked at such proceedings as long as possible, as feeling in France was most friendly to the American cause. These really were gross breaches of neutrality, and the French were finally obliged to heed the bitter and really just complaints of the British Ambassador, Lord Stormont.

Captain Wickes set sail again about the middle of January, 1777, and probably cruised along the coast of Spain, in the Bay of Biscay, and the mouth of the English Channel. On February 5, 1777, he encountered the "Lisbon Packet," which he had been ordered to capture. The packet was two days out of Falmouth, was commanded by one Capt. Newman, and carried an armament of 4-pounders and a few smaller guns. She put up a hard fight but lowered her colors in forty minutes, but not until two of the "Reprisal's" officers had been seriously wounded, and one man killed. Stormy weather kept the "Reprisal" with its prizes nine days from port, but on February 14th he reached Port Louis safely. Besides the packet, on this cruise he captured the "Polly and Nancy" of 150 tons, Capt. Rontisbear, from Liverpool bound for Cadiz with 2000 quintals of dried fish; the "Hibernia" of 150 tons, Capt. Jefferson, from Dublin to Lisbon, with wheat and flour; the "Generous Friends" of 70 tons, Capt. Duncan, from the Orkney Islands to Cadiz with barley; the "Betty" of 150 tons, Capt. Campbell, from Bordeaux to Londonderry with brandy and wine; and the "Swallow" packet, Capt. Norman, from Falmouth to Lisbon was restored to her officers as she carried nothing of value. These prizes, exclud-

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ing the "Lisbon Packet" were sold for 120,000 livres tournois or about \$24,000, a substantial aid to the impoverished colonies.

The following two months were full of worry and strain for even as energetic a man as Wickes. Stirred to action by the bitter remonstrances of the British government, the French authorities ordered Wickes to leave l'Orient, whither he had sailed from Port Louis, in 24 hours. Wickes claimed the "Reprisal" had sprung a leak and should be careened for repairs. After several days bickering with the port authorities he gained his point, receiving permission to make his repairs, and thus gained a few weeks delay from carrying out the orders of the French government. He proved exceedingly fertile in excuses and was able several times to defeat the best intentions of the Frenchmen in charge of the port while he made ready for another cruise.

In April he was joined by the American armed cruiser "Lexington," 16 guns, under command of Capt. Henry Johnson, and the "Dolphin" sloop of 10 guns under Capt. Samuel Nicholson. On the "Lexington," serving as Master's Mate was the young Richard Dale, destined two years later to distinguish himself with John Paul Jones on the "Bon Homme Richard," and many years later while a man in middle life to command the first squadron of the new Navy under the Constitution to appear in European waters. These ships rendezvoused near the mouth of the Loire, and were joined there by the "Reprisal," where by arrangement with the American Commissioners, they were to constitute a squadron under the command of Wickes.

The Commissioners had first proposed that they cruise in the North Sea for the Baltic ships, as John Paul Jones did in 1779 with a much stronger fleet, or, as an alternative on the coast of Guinea. Wickes wrote the Commissioners from l'Orient on March 5th, 1777, that he was afraid their proposal could not be carried out successfully,

As neither I nor my officers are acquainted with those seas, nor have we any proper charts for those seas. Another objection is the certainty of being soon discovered, as there is such numbers of vessels passing and repassing continually; the consequences of which would be dangerous as the passages in and out are narrow, and we should be either blocked in or taken. . . . The coast of Guiney I think much safer and better; but there are such difficulties attending it as cannot be got over. Our ship will not carry water and pro-

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vision enough for that cruise, as it will be necessary to take four months' water and provision for that cruise, and we can not take more than two months' water and provision.

It was finally decided that his little squadron should attempt to intercept the Irish linen ships.

Wickes' orders to his captains showed shrewdness and good judgment. The ships were not to separate

“Unless we should be chased by a Vessel of Superior force & it should be Necessary so to do for our own preservation.” In such an event “You may continue your Cruize through the Irish Channel or to the North West of Ireland, as you may Judge Safest & best, untill you arrive off the Isles Orkney and there Cruize 5 or 6 days for the Fleet to come up & join you. If they do not appear in that time, You may make the best of your way back to Bilboa or St. Sebastian & there Refit as fast as possible for another Cruize.” In regard to taking prizes to French or Spanish ports, “The Prize Master must not Report or Enter her as a Prize, but as an American Vessel from a port that will be most likely to gain Credit according to the Cargo she may have on board.”

The three little vessels set sail together from St. Auzeau on May 28, 1777. They laid their course to the northwest in order to proceed around the British Isles and into the North Sea. Two days out they sighted the H. M. S. “Foudroyante.” She immediately gave chase and fired several shots at the “Lexington,” but fortunately no harm was done and all three vessels got away safely. On June 19th they reached the north coast of Ireland. At this point Wickes, because of contrary winds gave up his idea of proceeding on into the North Sea, and having missed the linen ships owing to his ignorance of their time of sailing, set his course toward the Irish Sea. Shipping was heavy in these waters, and many an unsuspecting craft fell an easy prey to the daring Yankee seamen. In entering the Irish Sea these men knew that they might be very well entering their death trap for here their escape could be easily cut off, but they cheerfully followed their intrepid leader, spreading consternation and fear in their wake.

On June 19th the squadron took the sloop “Merion” of Greenwich, Neal Taylor, master, in ballast. Her the captors sunk. Again on the same day they took the brig “Expedition,” Capt. Braithwaite, in ballast, and also sunk; and the “Bellisle,” Capt. Ribble

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McGomery, which was sent to France; a fourth capture was allowed to go free.

On the 20th, they captured the brig "Jenny and Sally" of Glasgow, William Drummond, master, and sent her to France; next, the sloop, "Jason" of Whitehaven, Capt. Josh Hutchinson, in ballast, and sent her to France; then the "Jenny and Peggy" of Irvine, William Howe, master, in ballast and sunk her; next the sloop "Edward and Ann" of Queensferry, Edward Brown, master, laden with wheat, and sent her to France.

On the 21st they captured the bark "John and Thomas" of Whitehaven, John Yowart, master, laden with deals, and sent her to France; on the 22nd they captured two brigs laden with coal, the "Graystock" and the "Favorite" and sunk them.

On the 23rd three ships were captured; the "Grace" laden with rum, sugar and tobacco; the brig "Peggy" laden with butter and hides; and the "Crawford" in ballast. By this time Wickes' squadron was loaded with prisoners, and an uprising among them might spell disaster to his expedition. Accordingly, on the evening of the 24th he loaded all his prisoners on the "Crawford" under the command of Capt. Yowart of the "John and Thomas," and sent them forward to Whitehaven. He well knew that these men would carry news of his wholesale captures to land and that the Admiralty would soon have ships hot on his trail. So he immediately stood down the Irish Channel. The next day they stopped long enough to take in the "John and Peter," an English sloop, but as she was in ballast and he could ill spare any more men for a prize crew he let her go. That afternoon he passed close to the English shore at Land's End. On the next day (June 26th) he captured his last prize, loaded with cork, and sent her to France.

At daybreak of the 27th Wickes sighted a large ship off Ushant, and stood for her. He soon discovered her to be an English 74 gun ship-of-war. She bore down rapidly and an exciting chase ensued. The "Dolphin" and the "Lexington" were better sailors and got away safely, but Wickes was obliged to cast all his guns overboard and even to saw away some of his bulwarks before getting clear. The British ship gave up the chase at 9 P. M. and Wickes reached St. Malo late that night in company with the "Dolphin." The "Lexington" had parted with them in the chase and put into Morlaix July 1st, 2nd, or 3rd.

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Though in this cruise they failed in their main object of capturing the linen ships, they sailed quite around Ireland, captured sixteen sail of vessels; most effectually alarmed England; prevented the great fair at Chester; caused insurance rates to rise; and deterred the English merchants from shipping merchandise in English bottoms at any rate.

Wickes at once reported his cruise to Franklin and the other Commissioners at Paris, giving unstinted praise to his associates, particularly Captain Johnson, whom he had never known before. In this he was most unlike John Paul Jones who preferred to share his glory with no one.

He had had a strenuous month and needed rest and a chance to refit his little fleet. Before he had completed refitting, orders came from Paris to detain his vessel and the "Lexington" until further notice. When they were permitted to leave it was with strict orders to sail at once for America. France could not risk her neutrality with England at that time by allowing privateers to fit out at her ports for depredations on English coasts. On Sept. 14th he left in his beloved "Reprisal" accompanied by the "Dolphin" for the United States. But he was destined never to see his country again for which he had fought so well. On about the first of October, 1777, his ship went down off the Banks of Newfoundland with all on board except the cook, who survived to tell of the disaster.

Thus closed a career distinguished for patriotism, gallantry, and humanity, for not a single charge of cruelty or harshness was ever breathed against him by any one of his many prisoners. Franklin, who knew him well, said of him. "He was a gallant officer, and a very worthy man."

