

# American Naval Heroes

1775-1812-1861-1898

BEING BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES OF THE  
BRAVE MEN WHO HAVE GLORIFIED  
THE AMERICAN NAVY BY  
THEIR DEEDS OF  
HEROISM

BY  
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### III.

#### LAMBERT WICKES.

“The cruise of Captain Wickes has effectually alarmed England, prevented the great fair at Chester, occasioned insurance to rise, and even deterred the English merchants from shipping goods in English bottoms, at any rate, so that in a few weeks forty sail of French ships were loaded in the Thames on freight; an instance never before known.”—*Commissioner Deane to Robert Morris.*

Captain Wickes was the first officer in the American navy to carry an American armed vessel—a man-of-war, as she was classed at the time,—across the Atlantic, and present himself and his ship at the very gate of the British naval station.

He had just returned home from Martinique after a successful cruise on the *Reprisal* during which he had captured several prizes, and when near the French port the British sloop-of-war *Shark*, 16 guns, Captain Chapman, lay her close alongside and opened with a broadside that fairly staggered the *Reprisal*, which was the lighter craft. Captain Wickes was short handed as he had drawn from his crew to man his prizes. His defence was so gallant however, that the *Shark* drew off and Captain Wickes with the *Reprisal* and his prizes safely anchored in the port of Martinique. Hundreds had witnessed the fight from the shore and applauded the brave American navigator.

As this was early in 1776, before the Declaration of Independence had been proclaimed, the captain of the *Shark*, upon recovering from his surprise at the audacity of the American, followed into port with the *Shark* and demanded of the governor of Martinique that he deliver up the American ship as a pirate. This demand was refused by the governor who quietly requested Captain Wickes to leave the port.

Up to this time operations had been confined to American waters and directed toward the protection of commerce, the defence of seaport towns, and the capture of needed munitions of war on board incoming British vessels intended for the soldiers of King George.

The success of the little cruisers, and the building by Congress of formidable ships of war able to inflict serious loss, not only on British commerce, but as well on the proud British navy, had so emboldened the infant government that they entrusted Benjamin Franklin, their commissioner to the court of Versailles, bearing a letter from Congress to the King of France, to the American brig-of-war *Reprisal*, Captain Lambert Wickes. This act might have lost to the colonies their independence had the vessel been captured, as Franklin had already secured the friendship and aid of France, and this visit completed the desirable alliance.

Captain Wickes, however, did more than deliver his passenger in safety; he furnished to the commis-

sioner an object-lesson of the possibilities of carrying on an aggressive naval warfare in British waters, for on the voyage he captured two British brigs laden with cargoes of wine and brought them safely into port at Nantes, December 7, 1776, the first prizes that had entered a French port since the beginning of the American revolution. In the face of a defiant protest made by the British ambassador to the King, Captain Wickes sold his prizes, disguised his brig as a merchantman and cruised on the coast of England, during which time he captured three British merchantmen and a King's packet that plied between Falmouth and Lisbon, and brought them also into Nantes, trophies of his daring. To make a show of respect for the protest of the British ambassador, the King ordered Captain Wickes to leave the harbor, and sailing out upon the high seas, he there made a mock auction of his prizes and under new owners the ships all returned to port, the profits from the sales furnishing money to the American commissioners with which to purchase other vessels to strengthen their navy.

In April, 1777, the *Lexington*, under Captain Johnson, reached France, and the American commissioners planned an expedition bolder than any heretofore undertaken under the American flag. They directed Captain Wickes to proceed to sea with the *Reprisal* and the *Lexington*, together with the *Dolphin*, 10 guns, Lieutenant Samuel Nicholson, which had been intended as a dispatch boat between France and America.

The orders to Captain Wickes, who commanded the squadron, were to intercept a fleet of linen ships expected to sail from Belfast, Ireland. The fleet left Nantes early in June by way of the Bay of Biscay, and made the entire circuit of Ireland, leaving in their wake, scuttled or burning, every English craft they met, not of a greater force than their own.

As they approached the port of Nantes a line-of-battle ship gave them chase. The *Lexington* and the *Dolphin* outsailed their pursuer, the former finding refuge in the port of Morlaix, but Captain Wickes found the *Reprisal* so hard pressed that he threw overboard her heavy guns, sawed her bulwarks and cut away some of her upper timbers to lighten the ship.

This exploit placed the French government in a position where they could no longer cover their desire to help the American cause, but not being ready to accept war as an alternative the King felt obliged to punish the Americans caught in the piratical acts. Accordingly, he ordered the *Reprisal* and the *Lexington* held until the American commissioners would furnish security that they would peaceably quit the European seas. He also directed that the prizes leave port without delay and they were taken in the offing and sold to French merchants.

The *Lexington* left Morlaix in September and the next day encountered the *Alert*, a British man-of-war cutter, of about equal metal. With the rough weather that prevailed and the lightness of both vessels they

sustained a fire that lasted two and a half hours and the *Lexington* exploded most of her powder with but little damage except to the upper works of the *Alert*. This damage aloft enabled the *Lexington* to leave her, but after a stern chase of four hours the *Alert* came alongside and engaged her for another hour when Captain Johnson struck his flag to save the lives of his crew.

This ended the career of the *Lexington* on which vessel John Paul Jones had first raised the American flag and which under Captains Barry, Hallock and Johnson had fought two severe battles with war ships, had been twice captured and once re-captured, had sustained several contests with armed ships, and had captured many prizes.

The *Reprisal* had been even more successful than her consort and her fate was more tragic. According to orders Captain Wickes set sail for America, the condition imposed by the French government in order to satisfy the demands of Great Britain. Of the entire crew, only the cook lived to tell of the loss of the ship, her brave commander and gallant crew. She foundered on the banks of Newfoundland, and the country lost a useful vessel, and a gallant, prudent and efficient officer who promised much more of usefulness to the cause he had already so valliantly defended. •