

MARYLAND

VOLUME 8 NUMBER 1

COVER. Maryland is the home of a unique new industry, production of painted floorcloths. Artist Pam Smith applies a new color by stenciling.

TOP LEFT. "Residents" of an unusual house in southern Maryland prepare for a night of haunting.

TOP RIGHT. Apple dumplings hold special significance at Frederick's Visitation Academy.

BOTTOM LEFT. Final finishing on Revolutionary War gun reproductions is being done in the National Park Service's Brunswick shop.

BOTTOM RIGHT. The Eastern Shore's Wye Plantation is home for one of the country's top herds of Black Angus cattle.

COVER — Richard Lippenholz

INSIDE FRONT COVER — Top left, David Harp; top right, C. B. Nieberding; bottom left, C. B. Nieberding; bottom right, Wye Plantation.

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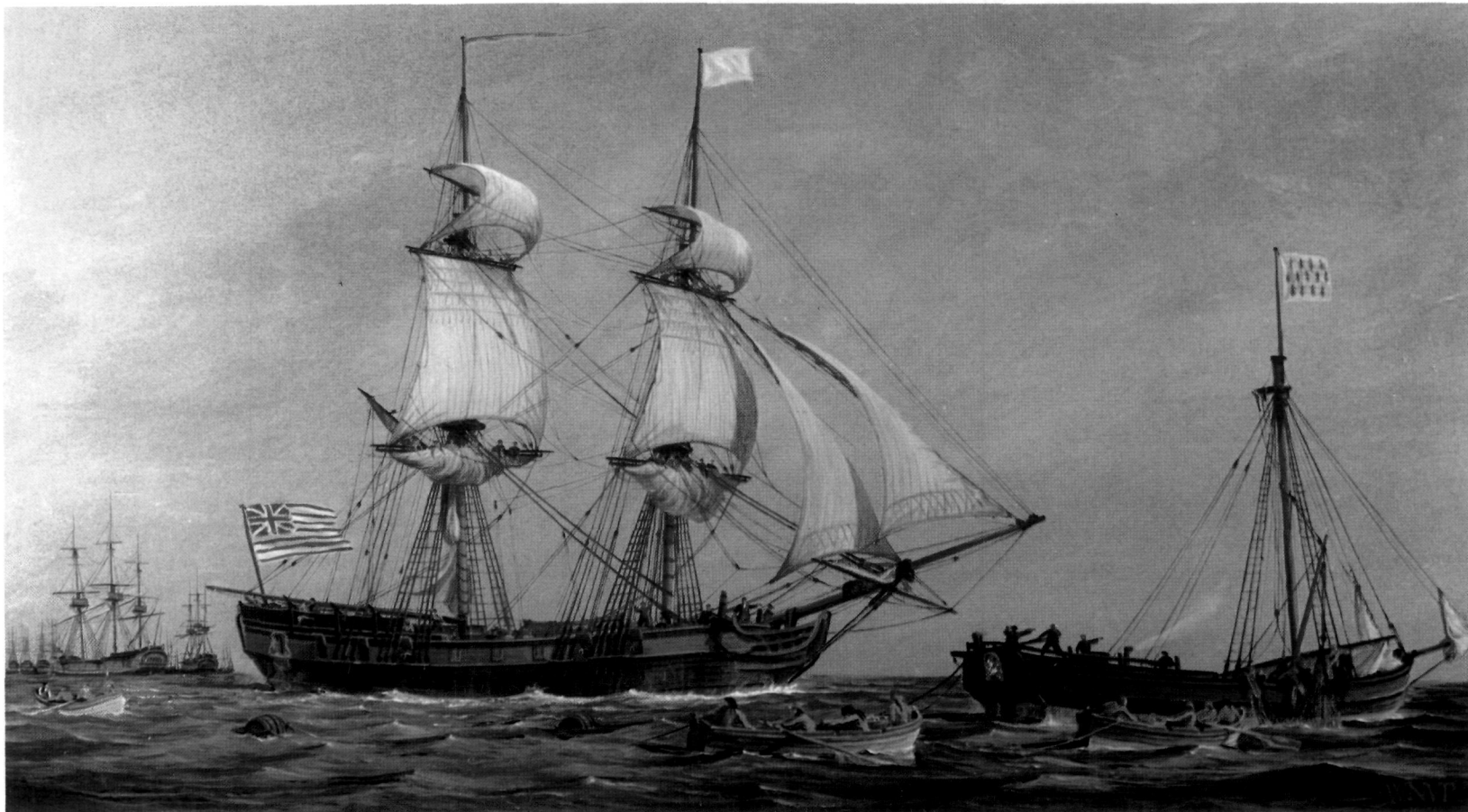
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Lambert Wickes and the Continental Navy

By NATHAN MILLER



The arrival of the Yankee warship, U.S. Brig *Reprisal* off the coast of France marked the first time that the flag of the new United States of America was seen in the old world. (Printed with permission of the artist, Nowland Van Powell.)

Rising and falling on the long swells, the Continental Navy sloop-of-war *Reprisal* bowled along with her sails bellying taut in the blustery wind. She had been cruising off Land's End at the broad entrance to the English Channel for several days when, on February 3, 1777, a lookout discerned the outlines of a large brig flying British colors. Excitement raced along the deck of the American vessel. Only a week or so before, the *Reprisal's* skipper, Lambert Wickes, had received word that the Lisbon-Falmouth packet *Swallow*, was at sea with a sizeable shipment of gold and he had been keeping a weather eye out for her. Examining the approaching brig with his telescope, Wickes must have smiled to himself. The seaborne game of hide-and-seek was over and he had won.

Snapping his glass shut, Wickes ordered the

Reprisal cleared for action. The ship shuddered beneath him as eighteen 6-pound cannon were run out her gun ports and trained on the packet. Oblivious to his danger, the captain of the *Swallow* made no attempt to flee from the strange vessel bearing down on him. Britain and her American colonies had been at war for nearly two years, but the Yankees had never been foolhardy enough to challenge the might of the Royal Navy in home waters. Of course, the Continental Congress had sent a raggle-taggle splinter fleet to sea, but any suggestion that it might be a menace to British shipping in the Channel was preposterous. The *Swallow* continued on her course. Suddenly, as her captain later reported, the stranger broke out "an unknown flag with thirteen stripes in it, and the Union in the corner." To his surprise, this was followed by a demand for surrender.

Although the packet was only lightly armed, the British refused. No one knows who fired the first shot, but a line of smoke and flame swept the side of the *Reprisal* when the packet failed to strike her colors. Determined to capture the *Swallow* rather than sink her, Wickes stood off and ordered his gunners to aim at her rigging and sails. But when one of his men was killed and two officers were wounded, he decided to put an end to the action. The *Reprisal* was laid alongside the *Swallow* and with sword in hand Wickes led a boarding party that quickly swept the packet's deck clear of her crew. Unfortunately, she was in ballast and carried no gold. A prize crew was placed aboard the *Swallow* and, in company of the *Reprisal* and four British merchantmen that had previously been snapped up under the nose of the Royal Navy, she sailed off to Lorient on the French coast.



These five vessels were the first to be captured in European waters by a Continental ship of war.

Wicke's arrival in the French port created a stir. France and Britain were still at peace and while the French were sympathetic to the American cause, they had no desire, as yet, to go to war with the English. Similarly, Britain wished to avoid any action that might give the French an excuse for joining the conflict on the side of the rebels. This was the state of affairs which Benjamin Franklin, the most prominent of the American diplomatic agents in Europe, was working behind the scenes to alter. From the moment he had arrived in France on the *Reprisal* a few months before, Franklin had been trying to maneuver the French into a war with Britain. With his usual craftiness, he envisioned an attack upon British commerce in home waters as the basic instrument of this policy. If it could be arranged so that there was an appearance of French collusion in the raids, so much the better. An outraged Britain would thus be forced to declare war on France. Franklin lived long before the age of psychological warfare, but he well understood its principles. Behind his benevolent smile lurked a master of intrigue, skillfully maneuvering the vacillating powers of Europe. The chosen instruments

of the old man's policy were Lambert Wickes and the *Reprisal*.

Today, few Americans have heard of Wickes, but this Maryland seaman probably played a more significant role in the winning of American independence than any other sailor, including John Paul Jones. Not only was he the first to sail a Yankee warship into European waters; his daring operations in the seas around Britain helped precipitate the entry of France into the struggle, tipping the eventual balance of victory to the American cause. Perhaps the reason so little is known today about Wickes' exploits is that he lacked John Paul Jones' consummate flair for publicity. And he mounted his raids upon British commerce at a time when secrecy shrouded the operations of American cruisers in European waters.

Wickes was born near Rock Hall on the Eastern Shore, probably about 1742, and went to sea as a boy. At the outbreak of the Revolution in 1775, he had completed an extensive apprenticeship and was a merchant skipper in the employ of Robert Morris, a prominent Philadelphia businessman who had considerable say in the selection of officers for the infant Continental Navy. Soon after his appointment as a captain,

early in 1776, he was given command of the *Reprisal*, a fast-sailing former merchantman. Lying low in the water, with three tall masts rising from her rakish black hull, she looked more like a privateer than a ship of war. Later on, Wickes was to find her speed an important asset.

The first task assigned to Wickes was to carry William Bingham, a newly appointed diplomatic agent, to his post on the French island of Martinique in the Caribbean. This island was a pivotal point during the Revolution for the shipment of arms and supplies from Europe to the rebellious colonies, and the Congress wanted a reliable agent there to represent the American cause and gather intelligence. Sailing south in bright summer weather, Wickes whipped his crew into shape, many of them until then, inexperienced landsmen. To help them overcome their fear of climbing the rigging, he may have resorted to an old trick of placing a cask of water and a cup in the main top. Any sailor who wanted a drink had to climb for it. (Dr. Franklin was a witness to how well Wickes succeeded in instilling discipline and seamanship into his crew. When the *Reprisal* carried him to France later that year, Franklin observed that she was "equal to... the best ships of the King's fleet.")

On July 27, 1776, the green peaks of Martinique were sighted. Wickes also found the British warship, *Shark*, standing out of the harbor of St. Pierre with cannon poking from her sides like stubby black fingers. Outgunned by the *Shark*, and his men as yet untried in battle, Wickes decided to accept the challenge. As the American vessel crossed the mouth of the harbor, the British captain hailed her.

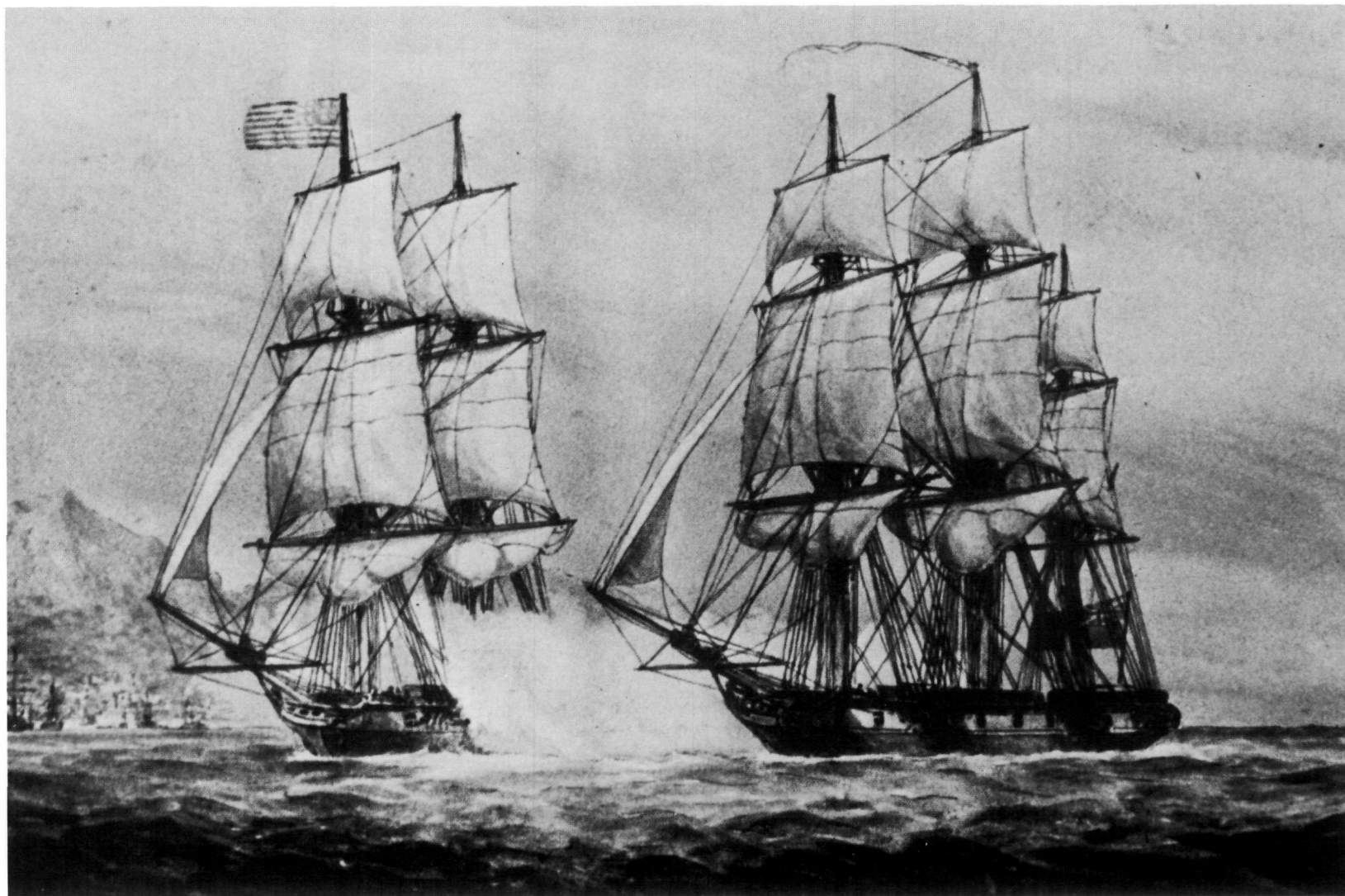
"This is His Majesty's ship *Shark*. Heave to!"

"This is the ship *Reprisal* from Philadelphia, belonging to the Honorable Continental Congress!" replied Wickes.

Both ships unleashed broadsides and clouds of smoke hid them from the crowd which had gathered on shore to watch the two men-of-war pound away at each other. For nearly a half-

OPPOSITE. Benjamin Franklin and his grandsons talk with Captain Lambert Wickes en route to France aboard the *Reprisal*. Franklin called the former Maryland merchant captain "a gallant officer and worthy man." (Printed with permission of the artist, Nowland Van Powell.)

BELOW. This water color rendering portrays the encounter between the American 16-gun brig *Reprisal* and the larger British sloop-of-war, *Shark*, off the island of Martinique in the summer of 1776. (Printed with permission of the Mariners Museum, Newport News.)



hour they dueled in the first naval engagement of the Revolution in foreign waters, with neither ship gaining an advantage. The battle ended when a French fort lobbed a pair of round shot at the British ship, neatly straddling her with geysers of water. The *Shark's* captain had no choice but to break off the engagement and head for the open sea.

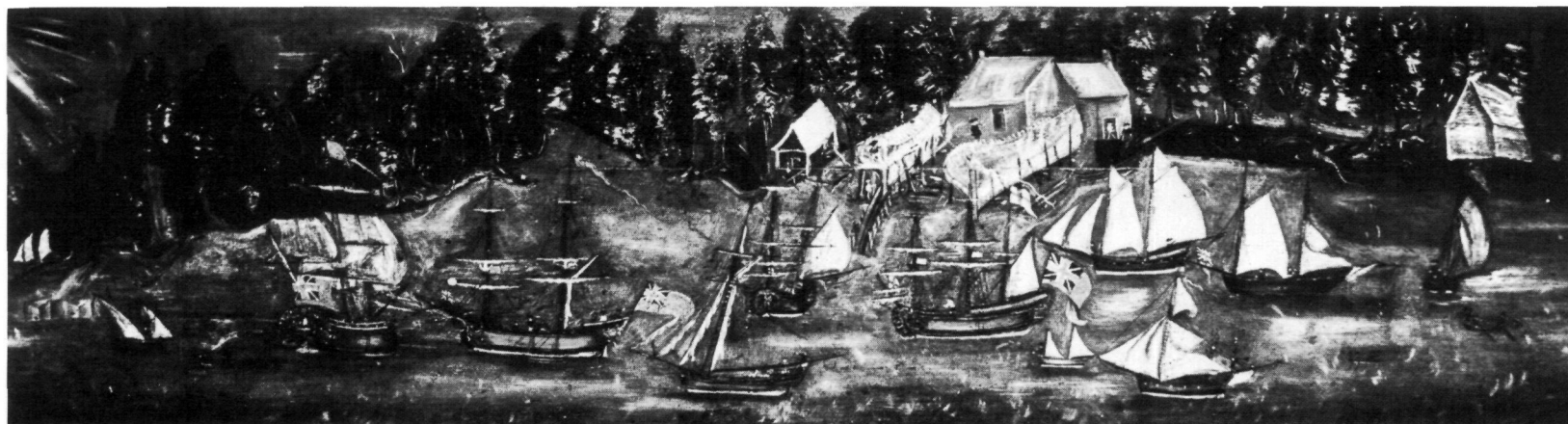
When Wickes came ashore, he was greeted by a wildly cheering crowd, making it completely clear where French sympathies lay. Taking advantage of the popular uproar, the diplomatic agent, William Bingham, called upon the governor that very evening. At the meeting, it was

revealed that it was the governor himself who had ordered the *Shark* fired upon because the British had committed a hostile act by challenging the *Reprisal* in French waters. The governor also agreed to receive Wickes, making him the first Continental naval officer to pay a formal call upon a representative of a foreign government. Even more important, the French agreed to provide convoys for American ships carrying supplies to Washington's army, at least until they were some distance from the island and out of reach of possible capture by British cruisers. Permission was granted Bingham to outfit privateers at Martinique and to bring in prizes of war for sale or other means of dis-

posal. Wickes returned to Philadelphia with this good news and a cargo of five hundred muskets and powder. Upon his arrival, he was ordered to carry Franklin to Europe, raising the curtain on a ponderous diplomatic ballet.

As soon as the *Reprisal* had sailed into the harbor of Lorient with the *Swallow* and the other captured British vessels in her wake, Lord Stormont, the British ambassador, lodged a strong protest with the Comte de Vergennes, the pro-American foreign minister. It was unthinkable that France should give shelter to pirates and brigands, Stormont declared. He demanded the immediate expulsion of the

BELOW. Lambert Wickes' family operated the Gravesend Creek Shipyard near Rock Hall, Maryland, in the eighteenth century. This rendering was painted on a wooden panel, once part of a mantelpiece in a gentleman's home. It is currently in the collection of the Maryland Historical Society's Maritime Museum. (Printed with permission.)



Yankee vessel with the hope that she might fall into the hands of British men-of-war lurking offshore. Soothingly, Vergennes replied that the *Reprisal* had been ordered to sail within twenty-four hours. Nevertheless, a week later, the British envoy testily pointed out that not only was Wickes still in port, but his prizes had not been returned to their rightful owners. In fact, several of them had been sold, to Frenchmen!

"There must be some mistake," replied Vergennes. "I assure you, sir, I know of no sale and none has been permitted." Two weeks later Stormont was complaining that the "American pirate" was still in port. This was indeed extraordinary, allowed Vergennes. He would take the matter up in due course with the Minister of Marine.

Throughout all this maneuvering, Wickes remained at Lorient, taking shelter behind a treaty which allowed ships in distress to stay in port until they had been refitted. He told the French authorities that he could not sail as ordered because his ship was leaky. A carpenter and caulker sent to inspect the vessel reported that she was in good enough shape to sail. Wickes was ordered to leave the next day. Overnight, something happened to the *Reprisal*. Next morning, the vessel was discovered to be taking on water. The order for sailing was rescinded and enemy cruisers waited in vain for Wickes and his ship to come out. Not until long afterward did the British Secret Service learn that he had rigged up a pump to flood the vessel.

By May 1777, three months later, Wickes was ready to take to sea again, this time as commodore of the Continental Navy's first squadron to sail in European waters. Accompanying the *Reprisal* were two smaller ships, the brigantine *Lexington* and the cutter *Dolphin*, commanded by Samuel Nicholson, a fellow Eastern Shoreman and a distant cousin. Within a few weeks, this pygmy squadron had captured eighteen British vessels in the Irish Sea and English Channel. Panic spread among mercantile interests. Merchants began avoiding British flagships like the plague and marine insurance rates climbed to unheard-of levels, even on such short hauls as from Dover to Calais. To meet the frenzied demands of the merchants, the Royal Navy was forced to divert warships from other pressing duties to convoy work in home waters. Elated by his success and running low on supplies, Wickes set a course for France. On June 26, they were off the coast of Brittany when a large vessel was sighted. Taking her to be an Indiaman laden with the loot of the East, Wickes fancied the capture of such a rich prize would be a fitting end to a successful raiding voyage. Not until too late did he discover that his intended prey had teeth. She was the *Burford*, a 74-gun battleship that could blow all three of his ships out of the water with but a single broadside. As the American skippers clapped on all sail in the hope of making a getaway, they could see a towering cloud of canvas billow out on the tall masts of the British ship.

Wickes quickly realized that the *Burford* was a

fast sailor. If his ships remained together they would all be captured, for the unseaworthy *Dolphin* would slow them down. If they scattered, at least two would escape. Wickes hailed his captains and told them to split up, fully realizing that the enemy would probably remain on his track because the *Reprisal* was the largest Yankee vessel. Just as he predicted, the captain of the *Burford* ignored the two smaller vessels and pressed on in pursuit of the *Reprisal*.

Hour after hour, the chase continued. Periodic shots peppered the sea about her as the British tried the range. Wickes resorted to every stratagem to coax a few more knots out of his ship, including the jettisoning of her guns to lighten her. But all appeared to no avail. The British vessel continued to gain on the *Reprisal*.

Darkness was closing in fast now and it looked as though it was all over for the Americans. Suddenly, Wickes noticed that the *Burford's* masts, which had been lined up during the chase, began to separate. She was turning away! The British captain had spotted a storm coming and was fearful of sailing so close to an unfamiliar shore with a storm brewing and nightfall closing in. The *Reprisal* scudded to safety in the nearby harbor of St. Malo.

Following this adventure, Lord Stormont stepped up pressure on the French to expel Wickes or face the consequences. On August 19, 1777, he presented Vergennes with an ultimatum: the Yankee ships must leave French

BELOW. This scene shows the *Reprisal* in port at Auray, Brittany, at the time of its arrival in France with Franklin. (Printed with permission of the artist, Nowland Van Powell.)



ports immediately "without convoy or escort of any kind" and must not be permitted to return. The French tried to temporize, but Stormont was insistent. Nothing less than full compliance would be accepted. So Vergennes issued orders for Wickes' departure by the date agreed upon. In St. Malo, Wickes stalled for time, hoping to make repairs to the *Dolphin*, but eventually even he ran out of subterfuges.

The *Reprisal* and *Dolphin* hoisted sail on September 15, 1777. Even before the vessels cleared the French coast it was obvious that the *Dolphin* was too unseaworthy to make an Atlantic crossing in rough weather. Wickes called the cutter

alongside and instructed her captain to return to port. Even if the vessel were interned, that would be better than having her founder at sea. The ships parted and the *Reprisal* headed out into the Atlantic and ... oblivion.

Months passed and no word was received of her. Not until much later was it learned that she had gone down in a severe storm off Newfoundland, taking with her Wickes and his crew of 130 men and boys.

"This loss is extremely to be lamented," mourned Benjamin Franklin, as Wickes "was a gallant officer and worthy man."

By then, however, a new era had opened in naval operations in European waters, an era for which Wickes had prepared the way. France had declared war on Britain and ports which had been officially closed to American commerce raiders now welcomed them. The way was now clear for John Paul Jones to win the fame that was denied Lambert Wickes.

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