

# THE WAR OF 1812 CONGRESSIONAL SWORDS

by Peter Tuite

In the United States the practice of Congress awarding swords and medals to military for gallantry began during the Revolutionary War. The first presentation sword awarded to a U.S. naval officer was given to Commodore John Hazelwood. He was commander of the naval force of the state of Pennsylvania and was charged with the defense of the Delaware River. The Continental Congress awarded his sword on November 7, 1777. The partial resolution reads:

*“for his gallant defense of his country against the British fleet, whereby two of their men-of-war were destroyed and four others compelled to retire.”*<sup>1</sup>

This was the only sword awarded to a naval officer for gallantry during the Revolutionary War. It is on display at the Washington Navy Yard Museum.

Later, on October 16, 1787, the Continental Congress would award a gold medal to Captain John Paul Jones for his defeat of the HMS *Serapis* nine years earlier on September 23, 1779.<sup>2</sup> This began a practice that would be adopted by the United States Congress and continue through the War of 1812.

Following the Revolutionary War there was some question as to whether a navy was needed. On March 27, 1794, Congress finally passed the legislation needed to form a navy, but it wasn't until May 28, 1798, that the bill authorizing a Navy Department was passed. Although there was some reluctance at first, Congress continued the practice of recognizing heroic exploits by members of the armed services and awarding them gold medals and swords.

The first gold medal awarded by Congress to a U. S. naval officer went to Commodore Thomas Truxton for a single ship action that took place during the quasi-war with France.<sup>3</sup> Truxton, while in command of the USS *Constellation*, defeated the French ship *l'Insurgente* on February 7, 1801, in the West Indies. Shortly thereafter, the U.S. Navy engaged the pirates of Tripoli and the first Congressional sword was awarded for the first single ship engagement with the Tripolitan pirates. On August 1, 1801, Lieutenant Andrew Sterret, in command of the schooner USS *Enterprize*, engaged and sunk a Tripolitan corsair off the coast of Malta. This first resolution for a sword, dated February 3, 1802, partially reads:

*“ That the President of the United States be requested to present to Lieutenant Sterret, a sword, commemorative of the aforesaid heroic action; and that one month's pay be allowed to all the other officers, seamen and marines, who were on board the Enterprize when the aforesaid action took place.”*<sup>4</sup>

The second resolution for a sword awarded to Captain Stephen Decatur was passed on November 27, 1804. This resolution partially reads;

*“...to Captain Stephen Decatur, a sword, and to each of the officers and crew of the United States ketch Intrepid, two months pay, as a testimony of the high sense entertained by Congress of the gallantry, good conduct and services of Captain Decatur, the officers and crew of the said ketch, in attacking in the harbor of Tripoli, and destroying a Tripolitan frigate of forty-four guns.”*<sup>5</sup>

The Sterret and Decatur swords were made in London and are without inscriptions of any kind; they are identical. Sterret had resigned from the Navy in 1807 due to Decatur having been promoted above him. He never received his sword. The Decatur sword is on display at the Preble Museum in Annapolis, Maryland. The Sterrett sword, which surfaced in the 1990's, is now in private hands.

Another award during this same period went to Commodore Edward Preble for commanding the U.S. forces in Tripoli. On March 3, 1805, Congress resolved:

*“ ... That the President of the United States be requested to cause a gold medal to be struck, emblematical of the attacks on the town, batteries and naval force of Tripoli, by the squadron under Commodore Preble's command, and to present it to Commodore Preble, in such manner as in his opinion will be most honourable to him. And that the President be further requested to cause a sword to be presented to each of the commissioned officers and midshipmen who have distinguished themselves in the several attacks.”*<sup>6</sup>

There is no record of the swords awarded to Preble's officers and midshipmen. Congress never allocated the funds for these awards.

During the War of 1812 Congress enthusiastically awarded 27 gold medals for valor to members of the armed forces. These included 16 medals for naval officers. The awards to naval officers began on August 19, 1812, when Captain Isaac Hull was awarded a medal for his command of the USS *Constitution* when it defeated the HMS *Guerriere*<sup>7</sup>. It ended on March 25, 1815, when Captain James Biddle was awarded a medal for his command of the USS *Hornet* when it defeated HMS *Penguin*.<sup>8</sup> They also passed four resolutions for swords. These resolutions were unique in that the senior officers received gold and silver medals and swords went to junior officers: the Sailing Masters (one per ship) and Midshipmen. These swords, typically referred to as “War of 1812 Congressional Swords”, are the subject of this article. They would be the last Congressional swords awarded by Congress.

## The Congressional Resolutions and Engagements

During the War of 1812 Congress awarded Congressional swords for the following four engagements with British naval forces:

- Battle of Lake Erie ..... September 10, 1813
- USS *Peacock* and *Epervier* ..... April 29, 1814
- USS *Wasp* and *Reindeer* ..... June 28, 1814
- Battle of Lake Champlain ..... September 11, 1814

These engagements and the swords that were awarded to junior officers in these engagements are discussed.

## Battle of Lake Erie<sup>9</sup>

The Battle of Lake Erie took place on September 10, 1813. A squadron of seven American ships under the command of Captain Oliver Hazard Perry (U.S.N. 1799-1817) defeated a squadron of six British ships under the command of Captain Robert Barclay giving the United States control of the lake. The order of battle

**Table 1. Order of Battle - Lake Erie engagement.**

American Fleet	Type	Tonnage	Crew	L. Guns	Carronades	Commander
<i>Lawrence</i>	Brig	480	136	2 at 12	18 at 32	Comm. O.H. Perry
<i>Niagara</i>	Brig	489	155	2 at 12	18 at 32	Capt. Jesse Elliot
<i>Caledonia</i>	Brig	180	53	2 at 24	1 at 32	Purser H. Macgrath
<i>Somers</i>	Schooner	94	30	1 at 24	1 at 32	SM Thomas Almy
<i>Ariel</i>	Schooner	112	36	4 at 12		Lt. John Packett
<i>Scorpion</i>	Schooner	86	35	1 at 32	1 at 32	SM Stephen Champlin
<i>Tigress</i>	Schooner	96	27	1 at 32		Lt. A. Conkling
<i>Porcupine</i>	Schooner	83	25	1 at 32		MS George Sennet
<i>Trippe</i>	Sloop	60	35	1 at 24		Lt. J. Smith
British Fleet	Type	Tonnage	Crew	L. Guns	Carronades	Commander
<i>Detroit</i>	Ship	490	160		8 at 9 6 at 12 1 at 18 pivot 2 at 24 1 at 24	Capt. R. Barclay
<i>Queen Charlotte</i>	Ship	400	135		18 at 24	Capt. Finnis
<i>Lady Provost</i>	Schooner	230	91	2 at 9	10 at 12	Lcdr. Buchas
<i>Hunter</i>	Brig	180	49	4 at 6	2 at 18	Lt. Bignall
<i>Chippewa</i>	Schooner	70	27	2 How		SM Campbell
<i>Little Belt</i>	Sloop	90	40	1 at 12 T	1 at 24	Lt. John Breman

for both squadrons on Lake Erie is shown in Table 1. The British fleet of six ships was commanded by Captain Robert Barclay (R.N. 1798-1824) on his flagship the *Detroit*, a 20-gun brig. Barclay had assumed command of the British station on Lake Erie, located at Fort Malden in Canada, in May 1813. Barclay's efforts included building the *Detroit*, a 20-gun sloop and converting merchant ships to warships. The *Detroit* was completed in July 1813.

ships, USS *Tigris* and USS *Porcupine* were completed. The schooner USS *Scorpion* would follow in May and the brigs, USS *Lawrence* and USS *Niagara*, and the USS *Ariel* were completed by early July. In the meantime, the three other ships in his fleet, USS *Somers*, USS *Trippe* and USS *Caledonia* were being converted from merchant ships. In July, Perry sailed his fleet to Put-In-Bay to await the British.



Figure 1. Perry transferring his flag to the *Niagara*, depicting the change in Perry's flagship during the Battle of Lake Erie. Copy after Daniel Huntington, Smithsonian American Art Museum.

On the American side, in Erie, Pennsylvania, Oliver Hazard Perry was constructing and gathering a fleet to engage the British. He began in February 1813 and by April, two of the smaller

On the morning of September 10, 1813, the British fleet was sighted. Aware of the nature of Barclay's fleet Perry devised a plan of action that provided for close engagement. *Lawrence* was to engage HMS *Detroit*, *Niagara* was to engage HMS *Queen Charlotte* and *Caledonia* was to engage HMS *Hunter*. There is no record of Barclay's orders to his captains. Barclay arranged his ships in a battle line led by HMS *Chippewa* with *Detroit* in second position, followed by *Hunter* and *Queen Charlotte*. Perry headed his fleet and proceeded toward *Detroit* to closely engage it and *Queen Charlotte*. Once engaged he waited for the *Niagara*, commanded by Captain Jesse Elliot, to come forward and engage with him. For some yet unknown reason, the *Niagara* stood off and engaged only with its single long gun. The *Caledonia*, supposed to engage the *Hunter*; also stood off only firing its long gun. Later *Caledonia* would go to the aid of *Lawrence*. The exchange between *Lawrence* and the three British ships, which now included *Hunter*, continued for about two hours. All four ships were severely damaged at this point and Barclay was seriously injured. Perry left *Lawrence* and made *Niagara*, unscathed during the battle, his flagship (Figure 1). Captain Elliott was dispatched to the *Somers* to take control of the gunboats. On the *Niagara*, Perry passed between the three British

warships and fired a port broadside at the HMS *Lady Prevost* and a starboard broadside at the *Detroit* and *Queen Charlotte*. The *Somers*, *Porcupine*, and *Tigris* then engaged *Queen Charlotte* until she struck her colors. The *Detroit*, *Prevost*, and *Hunter* struck their colors shortly thereafter. It was 3 p.m.

To reward the participants in this action, on January 6, 1814, Congress passed a resolution that partially reads:

*“That the President of the United States be requested to cause gold medals to be struck, emblematical of the actions between the two squadrons and to present them to Captain Perry and Lieutenant Jesse D. Elliott, in such a manner as will be most honorable to them...a silver medal to each of the commissioned officers...and a sword to each of the midshipmen and sailing-masters, ...”*<sup>10</sup>

This resolution awarded a gold medal to Captain Perry and swords to eight sailing masters, and twenty midshipmen. Silver medals inscribed around the periphery with their name went to all commissioned officers. It also awarded a gold medal and a sword to Captain Jesse Elliot for his actions during the engagement. Why Captain Elliot received an award of any kind has always been questioned since his actions during the engagement were not consistent with his obligations as a naval officer. In fact, Teddy Roosevelt’s later review of the battle considered his actions worthy of court-martial.



Figure 2. Sword Awarded to Midshipman John Clark.

The sword awarded posthumously to Midshipman John Clark (1793-1813) is shown in Figure 2. He is one of the two men killed during the engagement while sailing on the sloop *Scorpion* under the command of Sailing Master Stephen Champlin. John Clark’s father, Sanford Clark, wrote to his son’s commanding officer, Commodore Perry, regarding his son’s entitled prize money. Commodore Perry’s March 14, 1814, response to Sanford Clark is reads:

*“I have received your letter of the 6th last. In reply to your enquiries respecting your late son Midshipman John Clark’s share of prize money, wages etc. I beg leave to refer you to the purser, Samuel Hambleton Esq. now in Washington, who is the agent also for paying the prize money. Your son was buried on Edward’s Island, his grave is with those of the other officers, who fell in the action of the 10th of Sept. Your son behaved as became a brave officer and fell at his post supporting his country’s honor, I sympathize with you in his loss, he, no doubt had he lived would have been an honor to his friends and to his country.”*<sup>11</sup>

Sanford Clark also wrote to President Madison on June 9, 1814, requesting information on payment. He received a reply indicating that John Clark’s share was \$811.35. On February 10, 1814, Congress passed a separate resolution concerning Clark’s sword which partially read:

*“... be requested to present a Sword to the nearest male relation of Midshipman John Clark who was slain gallantly combating the enemy in the glorious battle gained on Lake-Erie under the command of Captain Perry.”*<sup>12</sup>

Sanford Clark wrote again to the President on January 1, 1817, which partially reads;

*“Permit me to remind your Excellency [sic] that it is now well nigh three years since the above resolution passed the National Legislature and the same has not been carried into effect.”*<sup>12</sup>

Sanford Clark was apparently a person of some influence. He finally received the sword shown above and the prize money and back pay sometime after his last letter to President Madison.

### Sloop USS *Peacock* versus HMS Brig *Epervier*



Figure 3. USS *Peacock* and HMS *Epervier* engagement. By Tomiro, Naval History and Heritage Command.

This was one of the many victorious single-ship actions that took place during the War of 1812. The USS *Peacock*, under the command of Master Commandant Lewis Warrington (U.S.N. 1800-1851), defeated HMS *Epervier* under the command of Captain Richard W. Wales off the coast of Florida on April 24, 1814 (Figure 3). The *Epervier* was an 18-gun (sixteen 32-pound carronades plus two 6-pound long guns) Cruiser class brig-sloop with a crew of 101 men.



When the war with England began in June 1812, Warrington was still on the USS *Congress*. He then served as first lieutenant with Decatur on the USS *United States* from March until July 1813. Decatur had recommended that Warrington be promoted to master commandant, and he was promoted on July 24, 1813. Warrington's first command was the *Peacock*. It was one of six sloops authorized by Congress in January 1813. She was 119 feet long with a beam of about 31 feet to be manned by a crew of 140 men. Her armament consisted of twenty 32-pound carronades and two 28-pounders. She was launched on September 19, 1813, and began fitting out. On March 12, 1814, Warrington put to sea with his new command bound for the naval station at St. Mary's, Georgia. After delivering supplies to that installation, he encountered the British brig HMS *Epervier* off Cape Canaveral, Florida. A British account of the ensuing battle follows:

*“Early in the morning of 28th April 1814, HMS Epervier and her convoy were sighted by the USS Peacock. The USS Peacock, although brig-rigged like HMS Epervier, was significantly bigger and was more powerfully armed. USS Peacock was half as large again as HMS Epervier and mounted a total of 22 guns as opposed to the 18 on the British vessel and 20 of those guns were 32pdr carronades. At 10:20 in the morning, both vessels opened fire, aiming high in attempts to bring down the others rigging. The American ship received only slight damage, but HMS Epervier lost her main topmast. After that, the American ship shifted her aim and began firing into HMS Epervier's hull. This had the desired effect and HMS Epervier's fire fell away. After 40 minutes, HMS Epervier's hull was peppered with 45 shot-holes and she had taken on 5 feet of water in her hold. As the vessels drew towards each other, Commander Wales ordered boarding parties to muster, intending to board the American and fight it out at close range, hand-to-hand. At that point, his fears were horribly realised as his crew refused to fight, laid down their arms and struck their colours, surrendering to the enemy.”*<sup>13</sup>

Warrington's letter to the Secretary of the Navy on April 29, 1814 on the action was more extensive and included:

*“...after an action of 42 minutes  
...would have been decided in much less time but for the circumstance of our fore-yard having been totally disabled by two round shot in the starboard-quarter from her first broad-side, ...  
...with one hundred and twenty-eight men, of whom eleven were killed and fifteen wounded,  
...Not a man in the Peacock was killed, and only two were wounded, neither dangerously...”*<sup>14</sup>

On October 21, 1814, Congress passed a resolution that partially reads;

*“...to present to Captain Lewis Warrington of the sloop of war Peacock, a gold medal, with suitable emblems and devices, and a silver medal with like devices, to each of the commissioned officers, and a sword to each of the midshipmen, and to the sailing-master, of the aforesaid vessel, in testimony of the high sense entertained by Congress of the gallantry and good conduct of officers and crew in the action with the British Brig Epervier, on the twenty-ninth day of April in the year one thousand eight hundred and fourteen, in which action the*

*decisive effect and great superiority of the American gunnery were so signally displayed.”*<sup>15</sup>

For this action, Warrington would receive a gold medal, his commissioned officers would receive silver medals and silver mounted swords would be given to his sailing master and eight midshipmen.



Figure 4. Sword Awarded to Midshipman Thomas Greeves.

The sword awarded posthumously to Thomas Greeves Jr. (U.S.N. 1813-1815) is shown on Figure 4. Greeves was a merchant seaman before the War of 1812 and received his appointment as midshipman on November 9, 1813 and was ordered to the USS *Peacock* the same day. He was furloughed on November 8, 1815, to sail in the merchant service and died in Charleston, South Carolina on August 25, 1817, at age 27. Greeves next of kin would not receive his sword until sometime after March 28, 1843.<sup>16</sup>

The Greeve's sword and the others awarded for the *Peacock* action are identical to those awarded for the *Wasp* action discussed below.

### Sloop USS *Wasp* versus HMS *Reindeer*



Figure 5. USS *Wasp* and HMS *Reindeer* engagement. By John Clymer, National Museum of the Marine Corps.

The second single ship action that resulted in swords being awarded to junior officers was the engagement between the sloop USS *Wasp* and HMS *Reindeer* that took place on June 28, 1814, off the coast of England (Figure 5). The *Wasp* was under the command of Master Commandant Johnston Blakely (U.S.N. 1800-1815) and the *Reindeer* was under the command of Captain William Manners. The *Reindeer* was a Cruizer class brig-sloop with a crew of 101 men. Her armament included sixteen 24-pound carronades plus two 6-pound long guns and one 12-pound long gun.

Johnston Blakely was appointed midshipman on February 5, 1800, and spent 10 plus years at sea under the command of some of the most prominent naval officers of the time.<sup>17</sup> The *Wasp* was his first command and coincided with his promotion to master commandant on July 24, 1814. All accounts of this engagement agree that it was quick and intense. Clearly the *Wasp* was superior in manpower and armament. HMS *Reindeer* was under the command of William Manners, an experienced and well-regarded captain in the Royal Navy. He left Plymouth under Admiralty orders to find and engage the *Wasp*. He also knew that the *Wasp* was superior, yet he was the one to pursue *Wasp* and press for the action.

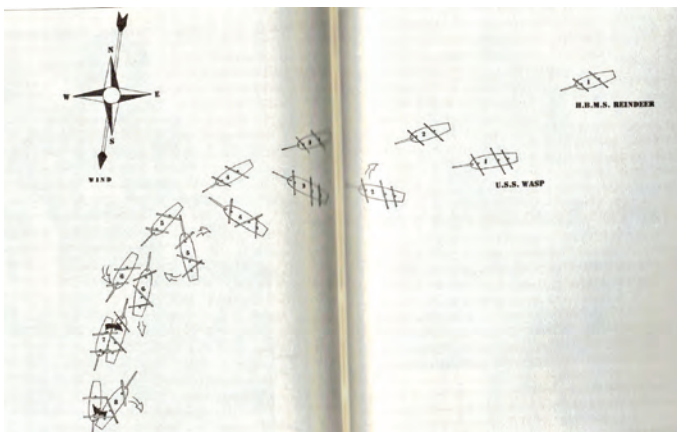


Figure 6. Movement of the USS *Wasp* and HMS *Reindeer*.<sup>20</sup>

It was about 4 a.m. when the *Wasp* first sighted two ships on the horizon, one was the *Reindeer*. The breeze was very light, and they were barely making way. The *Reindeer* approached. The action was brief, and Figure 6 shows the movement of the two ships. At about 2 pm the *Wasp* fired a single shot to challenge *Reindeer*, and she responded. The *Reindeer* was approaching the weather gage and after at least two hours of maneuvering, *Reindeer* retained this advantage. Despite this maneuvering, neither ship could gain a position where it could fire a broadside. The engagement finally began when *Reindeer* was 60 yards from *Wasp*'s quarter. Loaded with grape shot, *Reindeer*'s swivel carronade fired five unanswered rounds into *Wasp*'s stern over a 7 to 10 minute period. It was about 3:15 p.m. when the firing began. At this point Blakeley turned downwind to bring his portside to bear and both ships exchanged broadsides while neither ship had any headway. During this exchange the bow of the *Reindeer* got caught up with the *Wasp*'s starboard quarter and Captain Manners, who had already been wounded several times, ordered his men to board. He would be killed by musket fire from the *Wasp*'s tops where Blakeley had 26 marines firing onto the deck of the *Reindeer*. After the *Reindeer*'s boarding attempts were repelled, Blakeley ordered the *Wasp* crew to board and the *Reindeer* crew was driven below leading to the surrender. The *Reindeer* struck its flag at 3:45 p.m.<sup>18</sup> The following day, once the British crew and wounded were aboard, Blakeley removed the *Reindeer*'s swivel carronade for his own use and set the ship afire. They then set sail for the French port of L'Orient.

The November 3, 1814, Congressional resolution partially reads:

*"...to present to Captain Johnston Blakely of the sloop Wasp, a gold medal...good conduct of officers and crew in the action with the British sloop of war Reindeer...on the twenty-eight day of June in the year one thousand eight hundred and fourteen, in which action determined bravery and cool trepidity, in nineteen minutes, obtained a decisive victory, by boarding."*<sup>19</sup>

For this action, Blakeley would receive a gold medal, his commissioned officers would receive silver medals and silver mounted swords would be given to his sailing master and nine midshipmen

The sword awarded to the family of Frank Toscan is shown in Figure 7. Frank (Franc Liberte Egalite Toscan) was born in 1792 and was the eldest of seven children. He went to sea on a merchant vessel before the War. He received his midshipman appointment at age 20 on June 18, 1812. Three of his brothers would follow him into the U.S. Navy. Initially Frank was given command of a gunboat, but it was not to his liking and Isaac Hull, his then commanding officer, granted him permission to seek duty on either the USS Congress or USS *Wasp*. He was hanging out in Portsmouth when Captain Blakely happened to be looking for two more midshipmen for the *Wasp* and he signed on.

During the *Reindeer*'s attempted boarding's Toscan was severely wounded in the shoulder<sup>12</sup> (or chest depending on account). The *Wasp* anchored in L' Orient on July 6, 1814, and the wounded were hospitalized. On July 15, Frank Toscan would die of his wounds. He was buried in L' Orient. Blakeley would write:

*"It is with sincere sorrow I have to announce to you the decease of Midshipmen Henry S. Langdon and Frank Toscan. They were wounded in the severe action with the Reindeer and all our efforts to save them after our arrival were unavailing. It was their first essay and altho wounded remained at their posts until the contest was terminated...."*<sup>21</sup>



## Battle of Lake Champlain<sup>22</sup>



Figure 8. Macdonogh's victory on Lake Champlain, an engraving by B. Tanner in 1816, after a painting by Hugh Reinagle. Lake Champlain Maritime Museum Collection.

In October 1812, Lt. Thomas Macdonough was ordered to Burlington, Vermont to take command of the United States naval forces on Lake Champlain. He would spend the next two years building the fleet that would engage the British. In June 1813 he received permission to purchase the necessary vessels, men, material and munitions to keep control of the lake. He purchased the 50-ton merchant sloop *Rising Sun*, which was renamed *USS Preble*. On July 24 he was promoted to master commandant.

On December 21, 1813, Macdonough brought his fleet to Vergennes, Vermont, for winter quarters. Vergennes was chosen because of its shipbuilding capabilities. At Vergennes, he had six 70-ton row galleys built: the *USS Allen*, *USS Borer*, *USS Burrows*, *USS Centipede*, *USS Nettle* and *USS Viper*. Each was armed with one 24-pound cannon, and one 18-pound cannon. In late spring, the 26-gun brig *USS Saratoga* was built. His last ship, the brig *USS Eagle*, was launched on August 11, 1814. They also converted a steamboat hull partly constructed at Vergennes into the schooner *USS Ticonderoga*. His fleet was ready for battle (Figure 8). The order of battle for both squadrons on Lake Champlain is shown in Table 2.

The British fleet was commanded by Captain George Downie (R.N. 1790-1814) on his flagship the *HMS Confiance*, a 36-gun fifth-class frigate that had been launched in August 1814. Neither the ship nor the crew was battle-ready. He was accompanied by three other ships and ten gunboats. His plan was to round Cumberland Head tack to starboard and sail into the bay. *HMS Linnert* and *HMS Chubb* would engage *Eagle*, *HMS Confiance* would engage *Sarasota* and *Finch* and the gunboats would engage *Ticonderoga* and *Preble* keeping them away from the main actions of *Confiance* and *Saratoga*. Seeing that there was a light breeze, Commodore Macdonough had decided to fight the battle at anchor and set his four ships stem to stern about 100 yards apart, with starboard batteries facing the British fleet as it came up the Bay. His gunboats flanked this north-to-south line. (Figure 9). The battle began shortly after 9 a.m. with *Eagle* firing the first shot at Downie's approaching fleet – it missed. Downie stuck to his plan and as *Confiance* was coming into the Bay *Saratoga* opened fire killing Captain Downie. *Confiance* then maneuvered to within about 500 yards of the *Saratoga*, anchored, and fired its first double barrage. *Confiance* and *Saratoga* exchanged barrages from this position for



Figure 7. Sword Awarded to Midshipman Frank Toscan.

Exactly when the family received Frank Toscan's sword is unknown.

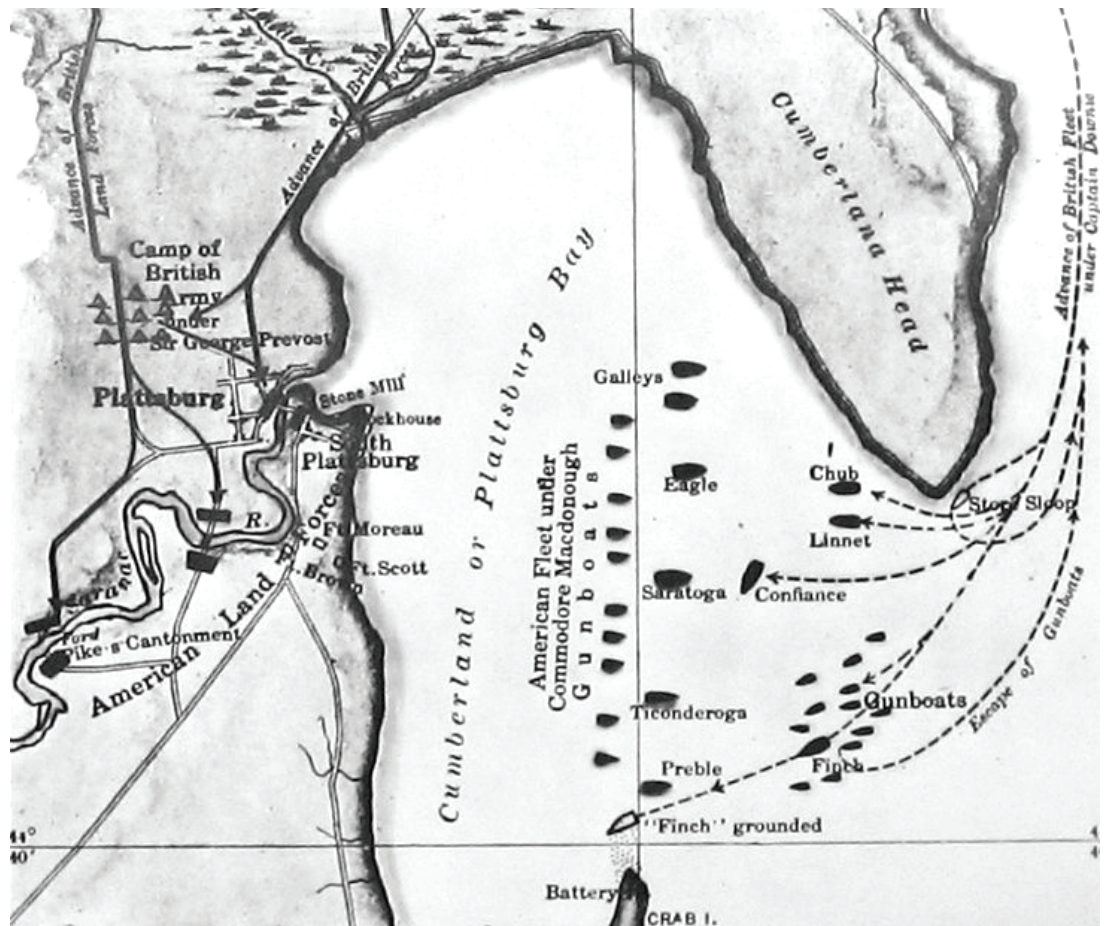


Figure 9. Master Commandant Thomas Macdonough's battle plan.

about two hours until neither ship could fire its starboard batteries. The damage sustained by both ships was extensive. At about this time, Macdonough winded the *Saratoga* enabling its port batteries to bear on *Confiance*. The port side battery barrages forced *Confiance* to strike its colors. *Saratoga* then engaged *Linnert* which struck its colors about 15 minutes later. Before this *Eagle* and the American gunboats shot out *Chubb's* rigging and it retired. *Linnert* engaged *Eagle* and *Finch* and the British gunboats engaged *Ticonderoga* and *Preble*. An hour into the battle *Ticonderoga* crippled *Finch* and she ran aground.

The sword awarded to Midshipman Charles L. Williamson (U.S.N. 1811-1842) is shown in Figure 10. Williamson received his Midshipman appointment on September 1, 1811, and rise to the level of master commandant in 1837. He would be cashiered by the Navy on October 27, 1842.

Williamson's name was not on the original list of recipients. In a letter dated August 13, 1817, from Navy Secretary Crowninshield to Harris, the secretary directed Harris to erase the name of James Baldwin on an existing sword and add Williamson's name. The acting Midshipman James Baldwin, sailing on the sloop *Eagle*, had been seriously wounded during the battle and would die of his wounds on July 22, 1815. Macdonough had specifically cited both men for bravery during the action and his letter to the Navy secretary describing the action partially reads:

*"Midshipmen Monteath, Graham, Williamson, Platt, Thwing, and acting midshipman Baldwin, all behaved well, and gave evidence of their making valuable officers."*<sup>23</sup>

In an October 17, 1819, letter, Secretary Benjamin Thomas directs Harrison to have a sword made for James Baldwin. The

family of James Baldwin eventually received his sword and it was on loan to the Smithsonian Museum for a long time.<sup>24</sup> A recent inquiry indicated it was no longer there and was returned to the family.



Figure 10. Sword awarded to Midshipman Charles Williamson.



**Table 2. Order of Battle - Lake Champlaign engagement.**

American Fleet	Type	Tonnage	Crew	L. Guns	Carronades	Commander
<i>Saratoga</i>	Corvette/Frigate	734	212	8 at 24	6 at 42` 12 at 32	Master Commandant T. Macdonough
<i>Eagle</i>	Brig	500	150	8 at 18	12 at 32	Lt. Robert Henley
<i>Ticonderoga</i>	Schooner	350	112	4 at 18 8 at 12	5 st 32	Lt. Stephen Cassin
<i>Preble</i>	Sloop	80	30 40 avg	7 at 9		Lt. Charles Budd
Six Gunboats	Galley		70	1 at 24	1 at 18	NA
Four Gunboats	Galley	40	25 avg	1 at 12		NA
British Fleet	Type	Tonnage	Crew	L. Guns	Carronades	Commander
<i>Confiance</i>	Frigate 5th	1200	325	1 at 25 30 at 24	6 at 32	Capt. George Downie
<i>Linnet</i>	Brig	350	125	16 at 18		Cdr. Daniel Ping
<i>Chubb</i>	Sloop	112	50	1 at 6	10 at 18	Lt. James McGhie
	Sloop	110	50	4 at 6	7 at 18	Lt. William Finch
Three Gunboats	Galley	70	41 avg	3 at 24	3 at 32	NA
One Gunboat	Galley	70	41	1 at 18	1 at 32	NA
One Gunboat	Galley	70	41	1 at 18	1 at 18	NA
Three Gunboats	Galley	40	26 avg	3 at 18		NA
Four Gunboats	Galley	40	26 avg		4 at 32	NA

As each of the above resolutions were passed the Navy Department would compile a list of the recipients and the Secretary of the Navy would transmit this information via letter to George Harrison. Figure 11 shows a partial list of the officers who were to receive medals for the Battle of Lake Erie. When this list was forwarded on January 16, 1816, Harrison was advised that the list for the battle of Lake Champlain would be forwarded shortly thereafter. The list for Lake Champlain was sent on February 5, 1816. Secretary Benjamin Thomas would supplement the Lake Champlain list in a letter to Harrison dated October 2, 1817. This letter also contained the list of recipients for the Peacock and Wasp engagements. The list transmitted for the officers who were to receive medals and swords for the *Wasp* engagement is shown on Figure 12.

The information concerning actual delivery of the swords to recipients is sparse. In a letter dated October 2, 1817, Secretary Thomas added three names to the Lake Champlain list: Midshipmen Ellery and Tew and Sailing Master Abbot. Shortly thereafter, on November 22, 1817, Secretary Crowninshield advises Harrison that the swords for Ellery and Tew were forwarded to the Agent at the New York Navy Yard for pickup. Since the first swords were made for the Lake Erie engagement, this would indicate that the swords of recipients for Lake Champlain and Lake Erie still in the Navy were distributed by this date. Recipients who were deceased or no longer in the Navy would receive their swords at a later date. Baldwin's sword for Lake Champlain was not ordered until October, 1819. Yet the Rogers Carter sword was probably made before this but would remain unclaimed until sometime after 1843.<sup>16</sup> No evidence has been found to date as to when the *Peacock* and *Wasp* swords were distributed. These would have been distributed

later since there were only two *Wasp* survivors. The sword made for Bonneville, one of the survivors who had resigned in 1816, remained unclaimed until sometime after 1843.<sup>16</sup> There is more research to be done (Figure 12).

### The Swords

A total of about 77 swords were made for midshipmen (58) and sailing masters (19). Each sword was accompanied by a red Moroccan leather belt with a gilded buckle depicting Neptune. Today, there are 29 swords extant. In the last three years, three swords have come out of the woodwork: Midshipman John Clark (Lake Erie) and Midshipman Williamson (Lake Champlain) are intact and are shown above Figures 2 and 10). A third sword, awarded to Midshipman Thomas Bonneville (*Wasp* survivor), is at the Fort Smith Museum of History in Arkansas. It is without a hilt or scabbard.

When the resolutions described above were passed, several descriptive letters were written to George Harrison by the secretaries of the Navy. The first from Secretary Jones dated October 5, 1814, partially reads:

*“For the citation on the swords for the warrant officers the name of the officer, designating place of action, or if between single ships, the name of the victor preceding that of the vanquished will be sufficient. There is no particular pattern dress sword. The \_\_\_ dress sword is a cut and thrust with yellow mountings. The scabbard belt/clasp \_\_\_ mounting shall be made as elegant and rich as the conditions will permit. Congress will soon vote more medals and swords for which \_\_\_ will also give you an order.”<sup>25</sup>*



*List of Commissioned Officers in the Action of 10<sup>th</sup> September 1813, on Lake Erie.*

Names	Rank	Vessel
Oliver Hazard Perry	Major Comd <sup>t</sup> boats	Lawrence
John S. Hamatt	Lieutenant	d <sup>o</sup>
Gulany Ferrist	Lieutenant	d <sup>o</sup>
Sam <sup>l</sup> Hambleton	Purser	d <sup>o</sup>
Sam <sup>l</sup> Horsley	Surgeon	d <sup>o</sup>
Usher Parsons	Surgeon's Mate	d <sup>o</sup>
John Brooks	Lieut <sup>t</sup> Marine	d <sup>o</sup>
Jesse G. Elliott	M <sup>r</sup> Comd <sup>t</sup>	Niagara
Joseph E. Smith	Lieutenant	d <sup>o</sup>
John S. Edwards	Lieut <sup>t</sup>	d <sup>o</sup>
Robert R. Parlon	Surgeon	d <sup>o</sup>
Humphrey Magrath	Purser	d <sup>o</sup>
Henry J. Brevoort	Capt <sup>t</sup> U.S. Army	d <sup>o</sup>
Daniel Turner	Lieut <sup>t</sup> Comd <sup>t</sup>	Caledonia
John Packer	Lieut <sup>t</sup> Comd <sup>t</sup>	Arvid
Robert Anderson	Lieut <sup>t</sup> U.S. Army	d <sup>o</sup>
Thomas Holdup	Lieut <sup>t</sup> Comd <sup>t</sup>	Trippe
James Blair	Lieut <sup>t</sup> U.S. Army	d <sup>o</sup>
John Henderson	Lieut <sup>t</sup> U.S. Army	d <sup>o</sup>
Augustus H. M. Conkling	Lieut <sup>t</sup> Comd <sup>t</sup>	Tigress
Thomas Proese	Chaplain	Lawrence

Figure 11. Partial list of officer recipients for Battle of Lake Erie.

*List of the Commission & Warrant Officers, on board of the U.S. Sloop of War Wasp, at the time of the Capture of the British Sloop of War Peacock June 28<sup>th</sup> 1814.*

Captain Johnston Blakely
Lieutenant James Peilley
Thomas G. Fillinghast
Surgeon William M. Clarke
Surgeon's Mate Thomas Rogerson
Purser Lewis Fairchild
Sailing Master James E. Carr
Midshipman Frederick Paury
David Geisinger
Henry S. Langdon
William C. Randolph
Wade S. Lovell
Frank Tescan
Ashton S. Hall
William House
Thomas A. Bonnevillie

Figure 12. List of recipients for Wasp engagement.



Figure 13. Comparison of different sword hilts and blades (left) and different sword grip sides (right). Wasp/Peacock swords are on the left in both images.



The second letter dated November 21, 1815, from Secretary Benjamin Crowninshield partially reads:

“...sword of appropriate shape, varied in size for Midshipmen combining the swords will be more anxiously expected and claimed by the young and aspiring Candidates for fame and honor to whom they have been awarded. The exact form of a dress sword is a matter of taste or caprice, and we are not bound by European etiquette, we may justly claim originality in the design. A handsome elegance and ..... will be as satisfactory as one copied

from the Models of ancient Knighthood.

You will be pleased to have them put in hand without delay”.<sup>26</sup>

With this information in hand George Harrison ordered the 77 swords and belts for the four engagements, presumably at a cost of less than \$250 each.<sup>4</sup>

The style of all the swords is similar but there are two distinct patterns: the smaller silver mounted swords awarded for the *Wasp* and *Peacock* engagements and the slightly larger brass mounted



Figure 14. Typical sword features – obverse and reverse hilts (top), guard front and underside (bottom left) and knuckle bow and pommel (bottom right).



swords awarded for the fleet engagements. Figures 8 and 9 illustrate the major differences between the two types of swords. As shown in Figure 13, the *Wasp/Peacock* sword hilts are smaller in scale and the blades widths are also smaller 7/8 inch for *Wasp* and 1 1/8 inch for the others. Figure 13 shows the sides of the grips of the same two swords – note that the *Wasp/Peacock* sword has plain sides with no top and bottom ornamentation and the larger sword has parallel lines with the same ornamentation that appears on the front and back of the grips. Another feature that is common to all the swords is the position of the guard – some are up and some are turned down. This feature appears randomly on both groups of swords. Figure 14 (above) shows a sword with the guard up and a sword with the guard down. Regardless of these differences the swords are very elegant and more than meet the desires of the two Navy secretaries – the swords are truly unique for their time. Figure 14 shows the details of the hilt, guard, knuckle bow and pommel.

**The Blades**

The blades are 32 inches long with a double edge and spear point. They come in two widths: 7/8 inch for silver-mounted swords and 1 3/16 inch for brass-mounted swords. The blades were made by Rose and the obverse ricasso is stamped either “I. Rose” or “W. Rose”. Not all blades contain the Rose stamp. Edward Meer was responsible for engraving the blades and his mark appears on the obverse (or reverse) ricasso of most blades. It appears as a stamped, “MEER”, or as a bright etched “MEER/Philada,”. Some blades are unmarked. The blades are engraved

right to their edges and there is a pattern of etching motifs that was followed by Meer’s workmen. This pattern of motifs applied to the obverse and the reverse blade is shown in Table 3.

<b>Obverse (21” to 23”)</b>	<b>Reverse (21” to 23”)</b>
Rose Mark	Meer Mark
Separator	Separator
Wreath with Arrow	Stand of Arms
Battle Scene	Separator
Wreath with Arrow	Motto
Separator	Separator
Name Plate	Floral
Separator	Floral Ending
Floral	
Floral Ending	

A panel that shows the recipient’s name and action are common among blades (See Figure 15 for typical name panels). A panel showing the motto “ALTIUS IBUNT AD/SUMMA NITUNTUR” (He who aims highest, rises highest) is also common among all blades (See Figure 16 for typical motto panels).



Figure 15. Blade comparisons – recipient name panels.



Figure 16. Blade comparisons – motto panels.





Figure 17. Blade comparisons – battle scene panels.

Figure 18. Blade comparisons – coats of arms panels.

The other features of each blade and its etchings are unique to a particular sword. These variables include ricasso length - 1/2 inch to 3/4 inch; etched panel separators - Greek key versus circular; battle scenes - two versus three ships; stands of arms - several different; floral designs - several different and geometric crosshatch designs. Figures 17-20 shows the variations in etching for the battle scenes, the coats of arms, the floral displays and cross hatch panels, respectively. These comparisons show several different etching styles indicating that Meer did not etch all the blades but probably supervised a group of craftsmen who actually did the work.

### The Belts

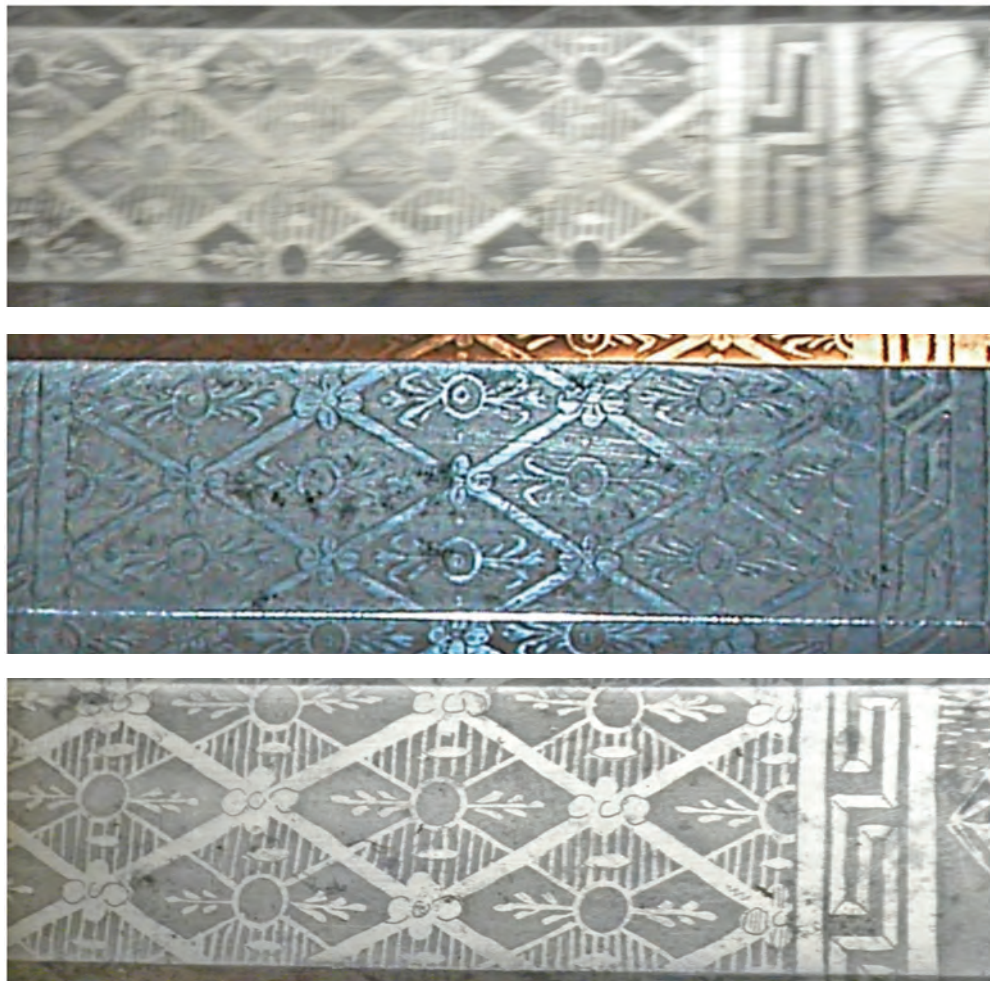
For many years, there was no record of the belts. The first picture of a belt appeared in John Hamilton's article on Congressional swords published in 1977.<sup>27</sup> The belt shown in the article had the classic buckle, but it was on black leather. It was part of the collection of the Shelburne Museum in Vermont and was accompanied by the sword given to Midshipman William Boden for his participation in the Lake Champlain engagement. Two other belts were discovered at The Preble Museum at Annapolis in 2011 as a result of a research project by the author for a book on naval belts



Figure 19. Blade comparisons – ending floral display panels.



Figure 20. Blade comparisons – geometric panels.



and plates.<sup>28</sup> The details of these belts can be found in this referenced book.<sup>28</sup>

There is only a single mention of the belts that accompanied each Congressional sword in the Harrison papers. In an April 19, 1817, letter from Crowninshield to Harrison, he states:

*“As respects the Sword Belts they may be either black or blue, if the former colour is preferred let them be plain. But should the latter be adopted, they may be ornamented near the edges with some Nautical emblems, as a rope or cable.”*<sup>29</sup>

Figure 21 shows the belt of Midshipman Thomas Brownell, one of the sailing masters on Lake Erie. It is neither black nor blue but Moroccan red leather. How it evolved from Crowninshields description would be an interesting research project. Until last year, three of these belts were known to exist. A fourth one appeared in a New England auction house amidst a group of items belonging to Gideon Welles. This fourth belt is possibly the only one known in private hands.

began the journey to find out more about them. With the help of John and others I presented my findings in a book published in 2003.<sup>28</sup> As part of this book project, Jim Cheever's, then the curator at The Preble Museum, gave me the list he had prepared and maintained showing the whereabouts of extant swords. With the help of John Hamilton, I updated this list and published it. I still maintain the list and today there are four more swords extant than there were in 2003. Others will undoubtedly surface. The swords are exchanged among collectors and those loaned to institutions go back to families. For example, I first photographed the Champlin sword (Lake Erie) when it was in the late Dick Johnson's collection. Now it is in the collection of another ASAC member. The Hill Carter (*Peacock*) sword was on loan to the Virginia Historical Society for many years. In 2008, it was returned to the family and is now on display at the Shirly Plantation in Virginia, Carter's ancestral home.

Figure 21. Typical belt accompanying Congressional sword.



This article supplements the 2003 findings. The George Harrison and William Jones papers at the Philadelphia Historical Society have provided further insights into the workings of the Philadelphia Navy Yard, the focal point for manufacture and distribution of these swords. A future review of the Crowninshield family papers at the Peabody Maritime Museum should shed some more light on some of the unanswered questions.

What do we know? Of the 29 extant swords, there are nine of the smaller silver mounted swords and twenty of the larger brass mounted brass swords extant. Yes, the swords awarded to those who participated in the single ship actions are all silver mounted. It's always been known that Rose made the blades and Meer etched them, but Meer was not the only one who etched the blades as indicated above. We also know that Frederick Widmann was involved in the manufacture of the scabbard mounts.<sup>30</sup>

What don't we know? We still don't know who proposed that swords be given to junior officers. More importantly we don't know who designed and manufactured the hilts. Why are some brass mounted, and others smaller and silver mounted? All we do know is that all the work was done in the Philadelphia and New York areas. We also don't know who designed and manufactured the belts and why they are so different from what Navy Secretary Crowninshield envisioned. And lastly, while the Harrison papers place a limit of \$250 on the cost of the sword, we don't know what they actually cost. This information is available somewhere.

Yes, there is more work to be done. Hopefully, this article will inspire someone to do the research to answer the remaining questions.

## Conclusion.

When I was first offered a Congressional sword in the 1990s, I called it a "sissy" sword and passed. Then I read an article written by John Hamilton<sup>27</sup> in 1977 that piqued my interest and by 2000, I had two of these swords in my collection. It was then that I

## /Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Shattuck, Gary, "7 Gold medals of America's Revolutionary Congress". *Journal of the American Revolution*, April 7, 2015
- <sup>2</sup> McBurney, Christian, "Presentation Swords for 10 Revolutionary War Heroes". *Journal of the American Revolution*, May 16, 2014.
- <sup>3</sup> Loubat, J.F., *The Medallie History of the United States of America 1776-1876*, N. Flayderman & Co., Inc., Milford CT, 1967, Gold medal award to Truxton, p. 128.
- <sup>4</sup> Tuite, Peter, *U.S. Naval Officers, Their Swords and Dirks*, Andrew Mowbray Incorporated, Publishers, Lincoln, RI 2004, p 119.
- <sup>5</sup> Lillian Goldman Law Library, Yale Law School, *The Avalon Project*, Congressional Resolutions- Barbary Treaties.
- <sup>6</sup> Tuite, pp 119-120.
- <sup>7</sup> Loubat, Gold medal award to Isaac Hull. p. 154.
- <sup>8</sup> Loubat, Gold medal award to James Biddle. p. 249.



- <sup>9</sup> The battle description was prepared from a variety of sources including the Captains report to the Navy Secretary (See Loubat p 178), the Royal Navy's description of the battle, and the history.navy.mil website. Squadron buildup information was primarily obtained from magazine articles.
- <sup>10</sup> Loubat, Lake Erie Congressional Resolution. p. 176.
- <sup>11</sup> Authors personal collection
- <sup>12</sup> The Papers of James Madison, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/03-11-02-0622>
- <sup>13</sup> Kent History Forum, Waterbodies & Maritime, *HMS/USS Epervier (1812-1815)*, Post by Bilgerat, September 01, 2012
- <sup>14</sup> Wilson, Thomas, *The Biography of the Principal American Military and Naval Heroes*, John Low, New York, pp 178-179
- <sup>15</sup> Loubat, *Peacock and Epervier* Congressional Resolution. p. 198.
- <sup>16</sup> A Navy Department Notice dated March 27, 1843 entitled "Swords Unclaimed" was published in the Daily Madisonian, No. 394, dated March 28, 1843. This notice identifies six Congressional swords that remain unclaimed that will be given to the nearest male relative of the recipient identified. The named recipients included: James Bliss (*Erie*), Alexander Storet (*Erie*), Rogers Carter (*Champlain*), Thomas Greeves, Jr. (*Peacock*), Richardson Brick (*Wasp*) and Thomas Bonneville (*Wasp*). Four of these swords are extant: Bliss, Storet, Greeves and Bonneville. Rogers Carter was the acting Sailing Master on the sloop *Preble* who was killed during the engagement. There is no record of a Midshipman Richardson Brick. It appears that the Navy Department Notice erroneously called Richardson Buck (USN 1812-1815) Richardson Brick. Buck's name appears on the original roster of recipients in the Harrison Papers.
- <sup>17</sup> Pratt, Fletcher. *Preble's Boys*. William Sloan Associates, Publishers, New York, 1950, Chapter 10. Pp 255-275.
- <sup>18</sup> James, William, *The Naval History of Great Britain*, London 1824, No. 79, Minutes of the action between U.S. sloop *Wasp* and H.B.M. sloop *Reindeer*. p. 347.
- <sup>19</sup> Loubat, *Wasp and Reindeer* Congressional Resolution. p. 201.
- <sup>20</sup> Duffy, Stephen W.H., *Captain Blakeley and the Wasp, the Cruise of 1814*, Naval Institute Press, Annapolis Md., 1960 Wounding of Frank Toscan, p 217.
- <sup>21</sup> Duffy, Blakeley letter to Jones dated August 27, 1814. p. 228.
- <sup>22</sup> The battle description was prepared from a variety of sources including the Captains report to the Navy Secretary (See Loubat, p. 201), the Royal Navy's description of the battle, and the history.navy.mil website. Squadron buildup information was primarily obtained from magazine articles.
- <sup>23</sup> Loubat, Macdonough action report to Secretary of Navy dated September 13, 1814. p. 192.
- <sup>24</sup> Belote, Theodore, R., *United States National Museum Bulletin 163, American and European Swords in the Historical Collections of the United States National Museum*, Government Printing Office, Washington, 1932, p. The Baldwin sword was lent to the Museum by Major Jerome Clark in 1925. It was returned to the family sometime in the last 5 years.
- <sup>25</sup> Harrison Papers, Philadelphia Historical Society, Navy Secretary Jones letter describing sword.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid, Harrison Papers, Navy Secretary Crowninshield describing sword.
- <sup>27</sup> Hamilton, John D. "So Nobly Distinguished, Congressional Swords for Sailing Masters and Midshipmen in the War of 1812", *Man at Arms*, Volume seven, number 2, March/April 1985, Andrew Mowbray Inc., Publishers, Lincoln, RI.
- <sup>28</sup> Tuite, Peter, *Eagles and Anchors, the Belts and Belt Plates of the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps, 1780-1941*, 2013, Schiffer Military History, Atglen, PA. Pp. 19-21.
- <sup>29</sup> Harrison papers, Op. cit., Crowninshield letter dated April, 19, 1817.
- <sup>30</sup> In a letter dated June 27, 1834, Frederick Widmann indicated that he was employed in 1817 working on Congressional swords. When Widmann's property was sold to Horstmann and finally sold to Fraternal Supplies. One of the items found in what was once Widmann's property included a pattern that was used to make the molds used to cast the drags for Congressional sword scabbards.

