



**John H. Schroeder.** *Commodore John Rodgers: Paragon of the Early American Navy.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006. xvi + 255 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-2963-4.

**Reviewed by** Jennifer Speelman (Department of History, The Citadel)

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## A Forgotten Naval Hero

If students of naval history do not immediately recognize the name John Rodgers, it is not surprising. John H. Schroeder's book is the first treatment of the little-known officer since Charles O. Paullin's 1910 work.[1] Although Rodgers failed to acquire the military glory of contemporaries such as Isaac Hull, Stephen Decatur, and Edward Preble,[2] Schroeder argues that his forty-year naval career made him "the preeminent and most influential naval officer of his generation" (p. xiii). During that time, he proved an able leader, seaman, diplomat, and administrator, making him one of the most well-rounded officers in the early U.S. Navy.

A Maryland native and experienced merchant sailor, Rodgers joined the Navy in 1798. During the Quasi-War he honed his leadership and seamanship skills on board the frigate *Constellation* under Captain Thomas Truxton. In its famous duel with the *L'Insurgente* on 9 February 1799, the first lieutenant successfully boarded the enemy vessel and sailed the prize ship back to St. Kitts. Rodgers was rewarded with his own command during the Barbary Wars and between 1802 and 1805 participated in the blockade against Tripoli. During the War of 1812, Rodgers hunted British merchant vessels and eluded the Royal Navy throughout the Atlantic and Caribbean. Even when the British bottled up other American warships, Rodgers still managed to slip out to sea in 1813. Rodgers was disappointed not to have engaged in ship versus ship action that would have enhanced his post-war reputation, but Schroeder notes that Rodgers "remained a mature and prudent commander, one who had refused to blunder into an unequal, albeit glorious engagement" (p. 126).

Rodgers also played a significant role in the 1814 defense of Baltimore. He lent his naval expertise—as well as a contingent of 300 sailors, officers, and marines—to General Samuel Smith, the Commander

of the Baltimore Militia. His men assisted with the defensive fortifications guarding both the overland and water routes to the city and instilled confidence and determination as only veteran troops can. Their combined efforts halted the British advance on the 13-14 September 1814 and saved Baltimore from the fate that had met Washington, D.C.

In addition to his military leadership, Rodgers acted, as did many U.S. Navy officers, in a diplomatic capacity. In June 1805, the Bey of Tunis exhibited increasingly belligerent behavior toward the Americans. John Rodgers and Consul Tobias Lear were dispatched to open diplomatic negotiations. To aid those talks, Rodgers brought ten American naval vessels and several gunboats as a demonstration of American military force. The negotiations continued until August, when Rodgers convinced the Bey to back down without the use of military force. Rodgers' actions had "laid the basis for subsequent stable relations between Tunis and the United States" (p. 50). In 1826 the Commodore was once again asked to play the role of diplomat. Rodgers' aim was to secure a commercial treaty with Turkey in the midst of the Greek Revolution. In July Rodgers gave the Capudan Pasha a tour of his flagship the *North Carolina* and conducted negotiations to the satisfaction of both sides. Schroeder noted that "Rodgers's diplomatic mission had gone even better than he could have expected" (p. 181).

Finally, Rodgers became an efficient naval administrator. It was perhaps in this role that he made his most significant contribution. After the War of 1812, Congress created the Board of Navy Commissioners to oversee the technical aspects of the service such as construction, equipment, and ordnance. Rodgers assumed the presidency of the board in 1815 and he held the position until 1825, and then again from 1827-1837. The impact of the board was enor-

mous in “bringing improved order, efficiency, and system to the administration of the Navy” (p. 152). As president, Rodgers played a large role in setting this standard through his own tireless work ethic.

Schroeder’s biography gives readers a compelling reason to include Rodgers’s name in the pantheon of U.S. naval heroes. His thorough research, including the records of the Board of Navy Commissioners and the personal correspondence between Rodgers and his wife Minerva, reveals an intensely patriotic officer who devoted his life to the service of the country. Rodgers admirably fulfilled the multiple roles of leader, seaman, diplomat, and administrator. Schroeder’s examination of his career gives us a better understanding of the challenges that faced

the fledgling American navy and the contributions of those officers charting its early course.

Notes

[1]. Charles O. Paullin, *Commodore John Rodgers: Captain, Commodore, and Senior Officer of the American Navy, 1773-1838* (Cleveland: The Arthur H. Clark Co, 1910).

[2]. Linda M. Maloney, *The Captain from Connecticut: The Life and Naval Times of Isaac Hull* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1986); Spencer Tucker, *Stephen Decatur: A Life Most Bold and Daring* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2004); Christopher McKee, *Edward Preble: A Naval Biography, 1761-1807* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1972).

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