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Robert P. Watson. *The Ghost Ship of Brooklyn: An Untold Story of the American Revolution.* Boston: Da Capo Press, 2017. 312 pp. $28.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-306-82552-1.

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The plights of prisoners of war constitute many of the darkest chapters in the annals of military history. Horrific accounts of physical and emotional abuse and deprivation at the hands of sadistic enemy guards abound. Tragically, the passage of time and more recent (and better documented) examples of this type of brutality have obscured the ordeals of captive American combatants during the War of Independence. In his latest book, historian Robert P. Watson brings much-needed attention to this neglected aspect of the American Revolution. With stirring prose, he recounts the harrowing experiences of five individuals who, at shockingly young ages, were incarcerated aboard the most infamous of the British prison ships, the HMS *Jersey*.

As in previous and subsequent wars, the prevailing side, already hard-pressed to provide for its own military personnel, suddenly had to contend with massive numbers of captured enemy soldiers and sailors. After driving the Continental army out of Long Island and Manhattan in the summer and autumn of 1776, the British army "found (itself) in possession of roughly four thousand American prisoners and did not know what to do with them" (p. 29). Soon, another thousand joined the ranks: civilians suspected of supporting the rebels' cause. The fire that burned nearly one-third of the buildings in lower Manhattan on September 21-22 exacerbated the housing problem. The British improvised detention facilities, first using abandoned sugar storage houses, and then old, decrepit warships that were hulked (in other words, stripped of sails and masts) for the purpose. Most of these vessels were moored in Wallabout Bay, off the northwestern tip of Long Island. Unfortunately for the prisoners, the guards were often cruel and corrupt individuals who regarded their charges, especially former privateer crew members, as little more than common criminals, deserving of harsh punishment. Indeed, Britain did not officially recognize them as prisoners of war until March 1782. Consequently, as the war dragged on, these prisoners were crowded into the interiors of the rotting hulks, and routinely denied food, water, fresh air, and medical attention. As a result, the death toll was appalling. Although the exact number of victims may never be known, Watson cites various sources that say that over eleven thousand perished aboard the *Jersey* alone, more than twice the number of American combat fatalities during the entire war. The prisoners' predicament only marginally improved as American battlefield victories yielded British prisoners of war, who, General George Washington warned his counterparts, would receive similar treatment. Periodic prisoner exchanges availed little, too, since the British usual-

ly released only the sickest individuals, and American commanders were loath to relinquish healthier captives.

To illustrate this horror, Watson follows five individuals (Thomas Andros, Thomas Dring, Ebenezer Fox, Christopher Hawkins, and Andrew Sherburne) who endured imprisonment on the *Jersey* and lived to tell about their ordeals. All were in their early twenties or younger when they joined privateer crews out of patriotism and desire for adventure; Fox, the youngest, was only twelve years of age. All suffered from inadequate and spoiled rations, and brutal treatment by sadistic guards. Further, all experienced recurrent bouts of serious illnesses while locked below decks, although Dring managed to self-inoculate against smallpox shortly after boarding the ship. Ultimately, Andros and Hawkins escaped, while Dring and Sherburne finally benefited from prisoner exchanges late in the war. Fox was coerced into serving in the Royal Navy, one of many who were "shipped to distant waters, where they had little incentive to escape and virtually no chance of ever making it back home" (p. 151). (Hawkins's descendants recently donated the journal that he subsequently wrote about his experiences to the Museum of the American Revolution in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.)

Although the British intended the rotting hulks to also serve as deterrents to those who would join the rebel cause, Watson demonstrates how, with increasing newspaper reporting of the abuses inflicted on the prisoners and the damning testimonies of survivors, they instead galvanized patriot resistance in the final years of the war: "for every colonial worried about the threat of imprisonment aboard the ghostly ship (*Jersey*), several others were inspired by British cruelty to take up arms" (p. 184). Watson also salutes the courageous civilians in the area, who, despite the threat of British or Loyalist reprisal, provided much-needed supplies to the people languishing aboard the ships and assisted those who were fortunate enough to escape.

Despite the important role they played in bolstering patriot resolve, those who suffered and perished aboard the prison ships soon faded into obscurity, despite aging survivors' attempts to remind their fellow Americans of their sacrifice. Efforts to build a memorial to the victims were fitful, seemingly dormant until physical reminders of the tragedy emerged, whether bones of people buried in mass graves or the remaining wooden skeleton of the *Jersey*, which was scuttled at war's end and rediscovered during construction at the Brooklyn Naval Yard over a century later. A proper monument was finally unveiled in 1908 in a ceremony in which the found bones of the martyred Americans were reinterred in a crypt in Brooklyn's Fort Greene Park.

Watson has given us a compelling account of an aspect of the American Revolutionary era that is finally regaining the attention it deserves. Through the stories of the five individuals on whom his book focuses, he makes tangible the horrific ordeals that they and their comrades endured. He has done them, and us, a tremendous service.

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