

H-Net Reviews

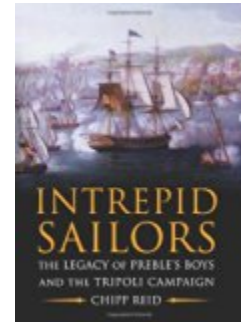
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Chipp Reid. *Intrepid Sailors: The Legacy of Preble's Boys and the Tripoli Campaign*. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2012. xii + 295 pp. \$35.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-61251-117-7.

Reviewed by Greg Rogers (University of Maine)

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey



The last decade has witnessed a renewed interest in the history of the United States' conflict with the Barbary pirate states of North Africa.[1] In addition to the bicentennial of the First Barbary War (1801-1805), the events of September 11, the subsequent War on Terror, and the spate of pirate attacks off the coast of Somalia have served to turn the attention of historians and the reading public alike to early nineteenth-century struggles that went understudied for the past half century or so. The result has been the publication of works interested in a variety of topics and themes, ranging from parallels to the twenty-first century War on Terror to the role of American diplomacy and capitalism. Similarly, the authors of this body of literature have targeted academics, military history buffs, general audiences, and everybody in between.

Chipp Reid's 2012 *Intrepid Sailors* offers a narrative where the "great deeds" of "great men" had very real effects on not only the institutional development of the United States Navy but also the international standing of the new Republic a generation after its birth (p. ix). At the core of his narrative are Commodore Edward Preble and his relationship with his young upstart officer "cubs," principally Stephen Decatur Jr., Richard Somers, and Charles Stewart. Reid combines a keen interest in these and other actors with a traditional military history focus on tactics and arms and an eye for diplomatic and political factors.

The book is organized into twenty-four focused and succinct chapters. After providing a helpful background history on the fledgling United States Navy, including its action in the Caribbean during the Quasi War and President Thomas Jefferson's two previous failed campaigns to

pacify Tripoli's ruler, the Bashaw Yusuf Karamanli, who had declared war on the United States in 1801, Reid introduces readers to Commodore Preble. As with the myriad of other officers in the text, he provides a biographical sketch of the man in charge of Jefferson's third Mediterranean fleet. His character, which Reid argues as being an integral part of the commodore's success, is that of a temperamental strict disciplinarian who expected his orders to go unquestioned. However, his sternness proved useful in his unwavering positions in both war and diplomacy.

Preble's fleet of seven ships, having learned the lessons of previous Mediterranean campaigns, employed both large and powerful frigates, like the commodore's own *Constitution* and William Bainbridge's *Philadelphia*, and smaller, spryer schooners and brigs, such as the *Vixen* and *Nautilus*. Before a base of operations could be established at the port of Syracuse on Sicily, tragedy struck the *Philadelphia* in the form of a hidden reef off of Tripoli. The stranded frigate, which had been on blockade duty, became an easy target for pirates operating out of Tripoli and that city's shore batteries. Despite frantic efforts to refloat the vessel, Bainbridge was forced to surrender. Reid utilizes Bainbridge's correspondence and the captivity narrative of marine Private William Ray to extend his account beyond the actions at sea to the trials and tribulations of the prisoners ashore and the actions of their captors.

Despite this major setback, the American fleet would find some redemption in the daring raid on Tripoli harbor led by one of Preble's protégés, Decatur. A vessel that had been caught trying to run the blockade of Tripoli was refit and disguised as a local trader and dubbed the

Intrepid. The *Intrepid* successfully slipped into the harbor on the night of February 16, 1804, and its crew boarded and destroyed the *Philadelphia*, which was being refit for the bashaw. The daring attack, which Horatio Nelson called “the most bold and daring act of the age,” not only denied Karamanli a powerful ship but also renewed the morale of Preble’s fleet and served to resurrect the United States’ wounded national pride (p. 106).

For the next several months, Preble enforced a blockade of Tripoli that resulted in the capture of multiple prizes. Unaware of Preble’s successes after the loss of the *Philadelphia*, Jefferson, with the backing of Congress, increased naval funding and dispatched additional ships, including the *John Adams*, to reinforce and relieve Preble. After multiple failed attempts at diplomacy, the Mediterranean fleet attempted its last attack on Tripoli before the arrival of new leadership. This time it would have the assistance of recently acquired gunboats and mortars. In August of 1804, Preble and his cubs succeeded in destroying and capturing several of the bashaw’s ships while dealing a heavy bombardment to the city and its various forts and batteries.

Despite scoring the first victory in three years of war against Tripoli, the destruction wrought by the fleet failed to secure the release of the prisoners or bring about the surrender of the stubborn Barbary ruler. Preble’s final gambit was to refit the *Intrepid* as a fireship under the command of the recently promoted Somers. Unfortunately for the Americans the ruse ended up being a mysterious tragedy and the last action of the campaign. It would not be until the victory scored under William Eaton nearly a year later that Tripoli would be pacified and the American captives were set free.

Reid’s recounting of these events is both highly detailed and stirring, showcasing the author’s ability to provide historical details from multiple cited primary sources while presenting an engaging narrative. Although the minutiae of such campaigns may prove overwhelming in the hands of other writers, the details gleaned from both personal and governmental sources lend weight to Reid’s arguments about the essential role played by a cadre of young officers and their mentor and the importance of their mission. By better understanding the tactical, logistic, and diplomatic obstacles that they faced, one comes to appreciate the “aggressive spirit” and infectious pride of Preble and his “ability to take on any

mission and succeed” young lieutenants, such as Somers, Stewart, and Decatur (p. 194).

In addition to examining the actions of individuals, Reid’s book also touches on larger issues and themes. Personal quests for honor and glory are linked to an emerging American nationalism and concern for the new Republic’s global standing. He points out that “the stakes were high” in the Mediterranean campaigns, with the issue of national character not far from the minds of those involved in naval operations (p. 154). However, this emphasis on American interests does not obscure the international dimensions that characterize most maritime histories. The diplomatic role of Danish consul Nicholas Nissen; Preble’s working relationship with the British governor of Malta, Sir John Acton; the shadowy dealings of the merchant Gaetano Schembri; and the role of Neapolitan material and manpower are all accounted for, making for a history that is not limited to purely American subjects.

If Reid’s work can be improved in any one way it would be the incorporation of more numerous and recent secondary sources. His discussion of nineteenth-century notions of honor ignores the rich historiography on this topic while his portrayal of the Tripolitan regime and its soldiers and sailors tends to be rather one-dimensional. While most English-language works tend to portray the Barbary pirates as stock villains, more depth concerning their motivations could have been used from Robert B. Parker’s 2004 *Uncle Sam in Barbary: A Diplomatic History*. Despite these minimal shortcomings, Reid’s *Intrepid Sailors* is a highly recommended read for anyone interested in the Barbary Wars, early American naval history, or just in search of a first-rate story.

Note

[1]. This body of literature includes, but is not limited to, Joseph Wheelan, *Jefferson’s War: America’s First War on Terror, 1801-1805* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 2003); Richard B. Parker, *Uncle Sam in Barbary: A Diplomatic History* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004); Joshua E. London, *Victory in Tripoli: How America’s War with the Barbary Pirates Established the U.S. Navy and Shaped a Nation* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2005); Frank Lambert, *The Barbary Wars: American Independence in the Atlantic World* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2006); and Richard Zacks, *The Pirate Coast: Thomas Jefferson, the First Marines, and the Secret Mission of 1805* (New York: Hyperion, 2006).

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