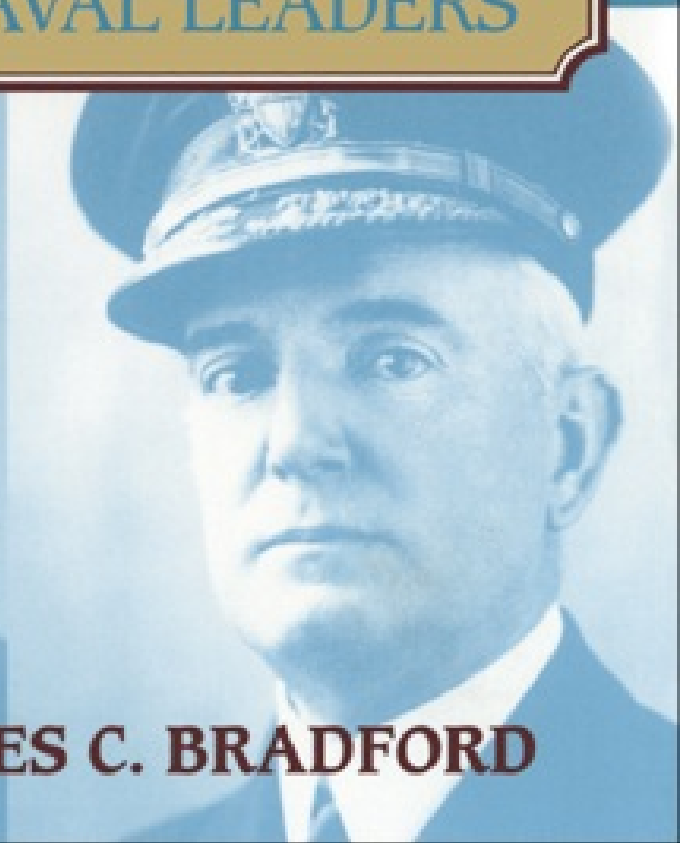
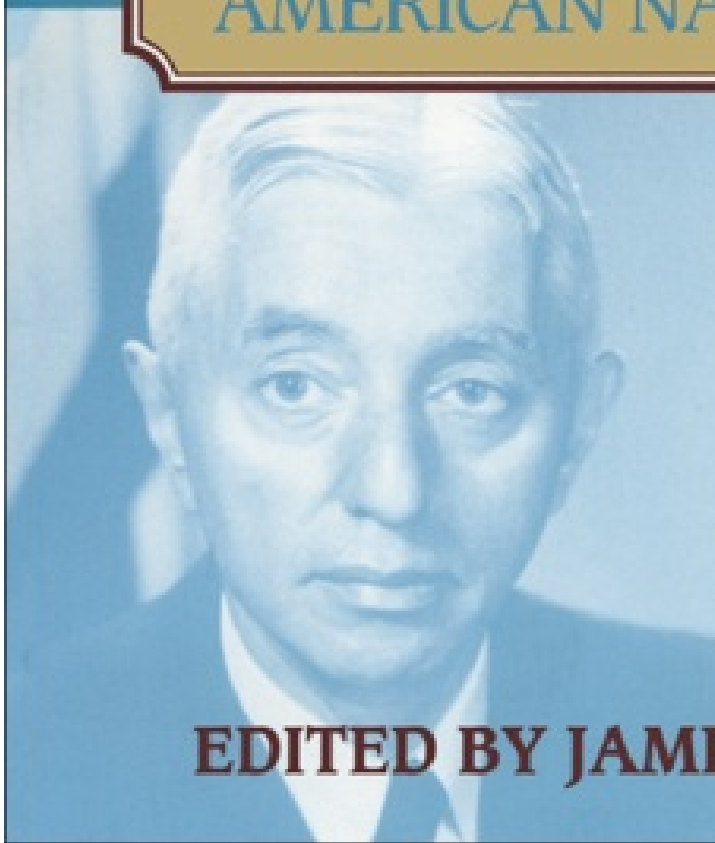


QUARTERDECK & BRIDGE

Two Centuries of
AMERICAN NAVAL LEADERS



EDITED BY JAMES C. BRADFORD

Quarterdeck and Bridge

This book has been brought to publication with the generous assistance of Marguerite and Gerry
Lenfest.

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NAVAL INSTITUTE PRESS ☆ ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND

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Preface

STRATEGICALLY AN ISLAND, THE UNITED STATES HAS ALWAYS REQUIRED A NAVY to bar enemies from its shores. Economically a trading nation, it has also needed a navy to defend its trade. The size and type of navy have always been debated. So has the way in which a navy should carry out its responsibilities. Prior to the twentieth century, the U.S. Navy did not need to exercise command of the sea or naval mastery, or even to vie for such exalted strategies, but it had a key role to play in defense of the Republic and the protection and expansion of its commerce.

The Continental Navy was established during the Revolutionary War with the anticipation that it could help win independence and because Americans knew that sovereign nations have navies. Similar thoughts led most of the states to establish navies of their own and both state and national governments to license privateers. The nation's founders did not discuss naval strategy. They simply assigned tasks to the fledgling service—capture supplies for George Washington's army, transport diplomats to Europe, bring munitions from the West Indies, raid British commerce, help to defend American ports—and the officers of the navy responded as best they could with the limited resources available to them. Independence achieved, many Americans believed that a navy was no longer needed or at least that the nation could not afford one. For a decade, the Stars and Stripes were carried to sea only by merchant vessels.

When attacks on those trading vessels became more than Americans could bear and a new constitution gave the government the ability to support a navy, one was reestablished. At virtually the same time, Europe returned to war. Coalitions led by Britain and France fought a life-and-death struggle, in which neither side showed much respect for the rights of neutral commerce espoused by the United States. The young Republic was not a passive observer of that great war but followed a policy of belligerent neutrality, which twice led it into the European conflict, first into the Quasi-War against France, then into the War of 1812 against Britain. Because the war with France was conducted entirely at sea, the burden of defense fell on the U.S. Navy. The war against Britain was fought equally on land and sea, but it was the Navy's frigate actions in 1812 that avenged the nation's honor and earned its enemy's respect, and its victories on Lakes Erie and Champlain in 1813 and 1814 that helped to secure the status quo antebellum Treaty of Ghent, which ended the war.

During the decades following peace with Britain, the United States obtained Florida, settled its northern and western borders, and marked the Caribbean as within its sphere of influence. The Monroe Doctrine proclaimed the principles of U.S. foreign policy to the rest of the world, and Britain gave tacit recognition to the equality of U.S. interests and authority in the Western Hemisphere by signing the Clayton-Bulwer Treaty in 1850.

It fell to the U.S. Navy to execute this policy and to protect American commercial interests around the world. From the 1770s to the 1840s, most of the Navy's squadrons, cruising the Atlantic, Mediterranean, and Caribbean, showed the flag, and suppressed piracy and the slave trade. When periodic visits by naval vessels failed to deter infringement of American rights, officers turned

retribution and punished those who mistreated shipwrecked mariners, seized the property of merchants, discriminated against American commerce, or dishonored the American flag.

During the 1850s, various interest groups demanded that the Navy do more and its officers eagerly accepted increased responsibilities. The Navy's role was expanded from merely defending commerce to exploring new lands and trade routes, identifying opportunities for trade, collecting nautical and commercial information, negotiating diplomatic agreements, and opening areas previously closed to American merchants. Matthew F. Maury's collection of data on wind and ocean currents; Charles Wilkes's United States Exploring Expedition of 1838–42; Matthew Calbraith Perry's "opening of Japan" and conclusion of the Treaty of Kanagawa in 1854; the North Pacific Surveying and Exploring Expedition of 1853–55; and Robert Shufeldt's globe-encircling voyage of 1878–80, during which he opened U.S. trade relations with Korea, epitomize these new roles.

The Civil War interrupted but did not change American policy or significantly alter how the Navy operated. When the South seceded from the Union, all U.S. Navy squadrons, except the one operating off Africa, were called home. Additional ships were leased, purchased, and constructed, and the U.S. Navy grew exponentially. During almost four years of operations, its forces made significant contributions to Union victory by blockading the Southern coast and joining with U.S. Army troops to subdivide the Confederacy along the Mississippi River and to capture all of its major ports. After Appomattox came a return to traditional U.S. policies, the maintenance of stability, and the reestablishment of the Navy's squadrons.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the Age of Sail was drawing to a close. For three centuries, ships and weapons had remained basically unchanged and developments had been evolutionary in nature. Then, in only a few decades, propulsion changed from sail to steam, hulls from wood to iron and steel, armaments from muzzle-loading smoothbore cannon to breech-loading rifle guns, and projectiles from solid shot to exploding shells. Such revolutionary developments appeared to demand changes in both strategy and tactics, but the nature of the changes required was unclear. Fifty years of uncertainty followed.

Before the impact of technology could be clarified, the Navy was called on to assume new and quite different roles. During the previous century, the Navy's expanding commercial role had been neither planned nor envisioned by naval officers or government leaders, though a foreign visitor Alexis de Tocqueville, divined the future. The observant French traveler predicted the twentieth century when he observed, "When I contemplate the ardor with which the Anglo-Americans prosecute commerce, the advantages which aid them, and the success of their undertakings, I cannot help believing that they will one day become the foremost maritime power of the globe. They are born to rule the seas, as the Romans were to conquer the world."¹ By the 1880s and 1890s, Americans were beginning to look outward, beyond the Western Hemisphere, and both political leaders and naval officers began to measure the U.S. Navy by comparing it with the navies of Europe's great powers rather than by its ability to defend and serve American commerce. America's maritime empire had developed without the benefit of a clearly defined peacetime naval policy.

During the 1880s and 1890s, American naval and political leaders began debating what types of vessels should be built and where and how they should be deployed. The ABCD ships (the protected cruisers *Atlanta*, *Boston*, and *Chicago* and the dispatch vessel *Dolphin*) of the 1880s represented new technological developments but not a new role. They remained—like the sloops and frigates of the sailing Navy—primarily commerce defense and raiding vessels to be scattered among the Navy's several squadrons during peacetime. A decade later, the United States built its first true capital ship. Alfred Thayer Mahan lobbied for keeping them together in a battle fleet whose primary role was

engage the enemy's fleet, not its commerce. By the turn of the century, the Navy developed a systematic body of thought that would guide it for at least the next fifty years. It was a heady time for American naval officers as their service competed with the navies of Britain, Germany, and Japan for supremacy. At the same time, they sought to protect America's new possessions in the Pacific; police its informal empire in the Caribbean; and expand the economic and political interests epitomized by the Open Door Notes, in which the United States committed itself to maintaining the equality of trading and investment opportunity for all foreign nations in China plus defending the territorial and administrative integrity of China.

Victory in the Spanish-American War brought the Navy great popularity at home, and the writings of Mahan achieved great influence abroad. Leaders in all maritime nations read and, with only a few exceptions, accepted the ideas of Mahan, the "Prophet of Sea Power." His writings provided the intellectual underpinning of American maritime strategy. Though he was neither the first nor the only person to identify "timeless principles" from the study of naval history, he stated them well and often in his trilogy on Anglo-American naval history and in scores of magazine and newspaper articles. Indeed, Mahan's ideas or the inferences drawn from them by world leaders led to actions that resulted in some historians blaming them for the naval race that helped to precipitate World War I. The United States entered that race with gusto. By 1910, it had twenty-seven battleships in service and six more building, which made it the world's second or third strongest naval power. Less than a decade later President Woodrow Wilson served notice of American intent to build "a navy second to none" and with World War I in progress, Congress appropriated funds toward that end.

American participation in the war was relatively brief and its direct contribution to Allied victory modest, but the nation emerged from the conflict with its economy strengthened, ready to challenge all nations for naval supremacy. But, support for a large navy evaporated as the American people demanded a return to "normalcy." That meant a reduction in taxation and, consequently, the curtailment of naval building. A return to normalcy also implied a retreat from international involvement, which, together with the desire for retrenchment in naval expenditures, led to the Washington Conference of 1921–22 and naval arms limitations. For the next decade, the Navy appeared to languish, just as it had following most previous wars. The U.S. Navy did not even build to the level allowed by the Five Power Pact of the Washington Conference, but its failure to do so did not mean that no progress was made; there were advances, particularly in the field of aviation.

The rise of aggressive regimes in Italy, Germany, and Japan and pressures to create jobs in the depression-stricken United States led to the construction of new ships during the 1930s. Funds had been appropriated for most of the major combatants used by the U.S. Navy to wage World War II even before Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. During the first six months of that global conflict, the Navy reeled before the onslaught of German U-boats in the Atlantic and Japanese advances in the Pacific. Then it reorganized, identified effective commanders, developed sound tactics, and devised a winning strategy. Taking the offensive in late 1942 and early 1943, it began to rid the Atlantic of the Nazi submarine menace and to drive Japan backward until the United States and its Allies triumphed over the Axis Powers in mid-1945.

The United States emerged from World War II with unchallenged supremacy at sea. The war destroyed the multipower system of the past, as Germany, Italy, and Japan were vanquished and the economies of Britain and France were ruined. There emerged a bipolar world, in which for half a century the United States used its navy to counter the land-based power of the Soviet Union and support friendly governments around the world. Ever more rapid technological change brought nuclear weapons, atomic-powered submarines, and intercontinental ballistic missiles, which, combined with

other factors, escalated the cost of defense immensely. Those costs contributed to the implosion of the Soviet Union in the 1980s that laid the basis for a new world order, one whose contours will take time to clarify. Nor is the role of the U.S. Navy in that new order clear. What is certain is that the Navy will continue to be more than machines. Innovations in technology, or even new roles and missions, do not change everything. “Without officers what can be expected from a navy?” Thomas Truxtun asked Secretary of War James McHenry in 1797. “The ships cannot maneuver themselves.”² Almost two centuries later, Admiral James Calvert expressed a similar thought, “Important as ships are, naval history is made by men.”³

These words speak to the purpose of this book, whose biographical essays trace the history of the U.S. Navy from its roots in the War for Independence to the postnuclear present. They tell the Navy's story through the lives of the officers who forged its traditions and stand today as the models against whom the leaders of tomorrow will be measured. Selection of subjects for this volume was not easy. The officers chosen were neither “representative,” in the sense of being average or common, nor were they only the “great men” that a Thomas Carlyle or Sidney Hook might choose. Influence and importance are not necessarily linked to fame or battle command, and a number of the selections, Esek Hopkins and Robert F. Stockton, for example, are not obvious. The exclusion of other officers, such as Thomas Truxtun, Raymond Spruance, and George W. Anderson, Jr., is not a judgment of their importance. The selection criteria focused on choosing individuals who set precedents, reached particular heights of achievement, or had careers reflecting the main currents of naval development and the roles played by the U.S. Navy during its two centuries of operations. In selecting the subjects, an effort was made to avoid Whiggish anachronism. That is to say, the events of the Navy's early history did not lead inexorably to the present. The U.S. Navy was not predestined to become the world's supreme sea power. The adoption of nuclear power and the wedding of its use in submarines to ballistic missiles was not preordained. Lessons of seamanship, strategy, and tactics drawn from events of more than a century ago are unlikely to be directly applicable to conditions today, but there are connections, however allegorical, between the eras.

Few would deny the crucial importance of leadership in naval affairs or that many of the qualities of effective leadership—moral courage, technical competence, trustworthiness, loyalty upward and downward, self-confidence—are timeless. The question of whether leadership is innate or learned is insoluble, and no attempt is made here to answer it.⁴ The men of the Continental Navy received their training in the merchant marine and only entered the Navy in time of national peril. The next generation of leaders, men such as Stephen Decatur, David Glasgow Farragut, and David Dixon Porter, also learned their profession at sea while serving as midshipmen during the Barbary Wars and the War of 1812. The establishment of the Naval Academy in 1845 was a turning point in officer education. For the first time, young officer candidates received the rudiments of their education and training on shore before serving at sea. Four decades later, the Naval War College was founded by Stephen B. Luce, and henceforth most senior officers received a postgraduate professional military education to prepare them for high command. Seniority and command at sea were virtually the only avenues of promotion in the Old Navy, but within the last century, Luce, Mahan, William A. Moffett, and Hymen G. Rickover rose through special talents in education, training, and engineering. Thus, this collection contains essays on a variety of officers.

The victors in great battles—John Paul Jones at Flamborough Head, Oliver Hazard Perry at Lake Erie, Porter at Vicksburg, Farragut at Mobile Bay, George Dewey at Manila Bay, and William B. Halsey at Leyte Gulf—are included, as are such dashing characters as Decatur battling the Barba

Corsairs, Raphael Semmes raiding Union commerce, and “31-Knot” Arleigh Burke devising destroy tactics in the Solomons. But, the Navy is more than broadsides and battles. Essays on reformers (Matthew Perry, William Sowden Sims, and Elmo R. Zumwalt, Jr.), thinkers (Luce and Mahan), those who exercised high command (Hopkins, Chester W. Nimitz, and Ernest J. King), and technical innovators (Stockton, Moffett, and Rickover) round out the volume.

The essays are not merely short biographies but also interpretive studies that assess the roles of their subjects as establishers, practitioners, and exemplars of the American naval tradition. For that reason authors have been selected whose knowledge of America’s naval heritage extends beyond the individuals about whom they write. Some have written on their subjects before, but all offer more than distillations of views presented elsewhere. I made no attempt to impose a uniformity of interpretation on the essays. The authors’ views are their own, and each contributor provides suggestions for additional reading to guide those whose interest they arouse.

Certain patterns do emerge. All the officers had great self-confidence. In combat or times of danger, most had courage and were aggressive, as illustrated by John Paul Jones uttering “I have not yet begun to fight,” Matthew Perry sailing boldly into Tokyo Harbor to “open Japan,” and Arleigh Burke leading his destroyers against superior Japanese forces. Such personality characteristics are to be admired in times of danger, but, at other times, they can lead to less desirable traits, such as the hypersensitivity exhibited by Stephen Decatur, which ended in a tragic duel, and the impetuosity of the sort demonstrated by Raphael Semmes when he rashly pitted his *Alabama* against the more powerful *Kearsage*. Many of the officers, and not just the reformers, faced strong opposition within the Navy but refused to retreat from foes. Jones fought the parochialism and nepotism represented by Hopkins; Moffett opposed the entrenched admirals of the “Gun Club.”

Navies, like other institutions, reflect the societies they serve. Few individuals better illustrated the spirit of the young republic than Decatur, the romanticism of the Confederacy’s “Lost Cause” than Semmes, or the hatred of the Japanese brought by Pearl Harbor than Halsey. The officers who guided the Navy, shaped its character, and set its course for two centuries were products of their times. Much has been demanded of them by the American people. Some met the challenges, and others did not, but all were makers of the American naval tradition. This book presents their stories and, in doing so, tells the story of one of the finest military services that the world has ever known.

NOTES

1. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 2 vols., edited by Phillips Bradley (New York, 1945 [1835]), 1:447.
2. Truxtun to McHenry, 3 March 1797, James McHenry Papers, Huntington Library, San Marino, California.
3. James Calvert, *The Naval Profession* (New York, 1965), 6.
4. Early in this century, Alfred Thayer Mahan, *Types of Naval Officers* (London, 1904), and Charles B. Davenport, *Naval Officers: Their Heredity and Development* (Washington, D.C., 1919) investigated the problem. Influenced by the social scientific thinking of the day, Davenport classified officers by “temperament,” “juvenile promise,” and “hereditary traits.” More recent studies include Oliver Warner, *Command at Sea: Great Fighting Admirals from Hawke to Nimitz* (New York, 1976), and John Horsfield, *The Art of Leadership in War: The Royal Navy from the Age of Nelson to the End of World War II* (Westport, Conn., 1980).

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THIS BOOK, LIKE ANY COLLECTION OF ESSAYS, IS A COOPERATIVE EFFORT. I could not have had a more congenial group of authors to work with and to them goes my deepest debt of gratitude. Fourteen of the essays first appeared in previous collections that I edited: *Command under Sail: Makers of the American Naval Tradition, 1775–1850* (1985); *Captains of the Old Steam Navy: Makers of the American Naval Tradition, 1840–1880* (1986); and *Admirals of the New Steel Navy: Makers of the American Naval Tradition, 1880–1930* (1990). The authors of those essays made minor revisions where necessary, particularly in adding to the suggestions for further reading the works that have appeared since they wrote their essays. Robert Seager so revised his essay for this book as to make it virtually a new work. The authors of the six essays especially written for this book bore with good humor my sometimes heavy-handed commentary and acquiesced to my pleas for brevity. At the Naval Institute Press, our editor, Paul Wilderson, provided encouragement, and our manuscript editor, Terry Belanger, saved us from infelicities and inconsistencies of style, and our proofreader, Barbara Johnson, caught a number of errors which eluded the contributors and the editor.

During the 1995–96 academic year, the Air War College provided an atmosphere most congenial to this undertaking. David Curtis Skaags shared his knowledge of the early navy, Mark L. Shulman offered his views of the “New Navy” of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and both applied their critical eye to the preface. Our dean, Rear Admiral Ronald Kurth, USN (Ret.), contributed more than he realized through stimulating conversation shared over lunches. Alexander Cochran, chairman of the Department of Strategy, Doctrine, and Air Power, saw to it that I had time for this and other projects.

At my home institution, Texas A&M University, Judy Mattson typed the revised sections of “Further Reading” and Joseph G. Dawson made valuable suggestions to improve the preface.

This book is dedicated to my wife, Judy, who makes all possible and all worthwhile.

Quarterdeck and Bridge

☆ ☆ Esek Hopkins

☆ Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Navy

by William M. Fowler, Jr.



U.S. NAVAL INTITUTE COLLECTION

IN THE SUMMER OF 1797, JOHN ADAMS, THE NEWLY INAUGURATED President of the United States, was on his way home to Quincy, Massachusetts. En route he decided to spend an evening in Providence, Rhode Island. The arrival of the President caused quite a stir. A company of dragoons escorted him to the Golden Bull Tavern where a gala reception, complete with pealing bells and sounding cannon fire, was offered. Never indifferent to public accolades, Adams was pleased at his warm reception.

After an evening of innumerable toasts and endless feasting, Adams and his family retired to their quarters. An unexpected knock at the door brought a servant who announced that a gentleman begged to see the President. In the anteroom, the President “found an old man bowed with years and infirmities.” His visitor was Esek Hopkins, late commander-in-chief of the Continental Navy.

He came, he told the President, to pay his respects and to tell him how grateful he was that Adams had stood in his defense twenty years before when his enemies in Congress had sought to destroy him. Old, wan, and barely able to walk, this man was hardly the vigorous and sharp-tongued seaman Adams remembered from those heady days of the Revolution. The veil of age obscured the traces of a naval career that had begun most promisingly many decades earlier.

Esek Hopkins was born on 26 April 1718 into a large and well-known Rhode Island family. Two of his older brothers had gone to sea before him, when, at age twenty, upon the death of his father, young Esek left the family farm and signed on board a merchantman out of Providence. Within a very few years he had his own command in the West Indies trade and was a frequent visitor to Surinam and the

neighboring sugar islands. Married at twenty-three to Desire Burroughs, daughter of a prosperous Newport merchant and shipmaster, Hopkins moved to his wife's town and continued his voyaging. Two years later, in 1743, sensing greater opportunities in Providence, he returned home.¹

By 1750, Hopkins had settled easily into the predictable lifestyle of a Yankee shipmaster: frequent voyages to the West Indies; a good and respectable marriage at home; numerous children (five in the first seven years of marriage); and growing investments and responsibilities shoreside. In 1754 he joined many of his Rhode Island shipmates and went "a privateering" against the French during the French and Indian War (1754–1763). He quickly proved to be as good a warrior as a trader, increasing both his fame and fortune.

Like most other colonials, Hopkins celebrated the peace and looked forward to reestablishing the old trade. Events in America and England precluded that, and, in the dozen tumultuous years from the end of the war to the battles at Lexington and Concord, Esek Hopkins found himself enmeshed in local affairs. He served on several town committees and in the General Assembly. Most important, however, his elder brother Stephen was elected governor, and, in the rough and tumble of Rhode Island politics, Esek became his close ally, sharing both his friends and his enemies.

At the summons for the First Continental Congress in the fall of 1774, Rhode Island, not surprisingly, elected Stephen Hopkins one of its delegates. From the moment the body came to order it was clear that sectionalism would play a pivotal role in decision making. For his part, Stephen Hopkins was loyal to Rhode Island and New England. He allied himself closely with his New England colleagues and struck up a particularly close association with John and Samuel Adams. Never one to forget his friends, Hopkins emerged as a key member of Congress, accustomed to using his influence on behalf of his constituents.

With the outbreak of hostilities, Rhode Islanders quickly discovered their vulnerability by sea. In Newport, Captain James Wallace had been busy terrifying the populace from his frigate, HMS *Ros*. In reaction to Wallace, the Assembly commissioned two small vessels to patrol the waters of Narragansett Bay and, in October, appointed Esek Hopkins a brigadier general and placed him in command of Rhode Island's defenses. In Philadelphia too there was action. On 26 May 1775 Congress resolved that the colonies be put in a state of military readiness so that they might be able to defend their rights and liberties; on the twenty-ninth it called upon the people of Canada to join the rebellion of the colonies in their common cause. By the end of June, Congress had voted to raise and equip an army, appointed George Washington as commander-in-chief, and voted to issue two million dollars in bills of credit to finance the new government's operation. In July, Congress entered into negotiations with the Indians and elected Benjamin Franklin postmaster general.² Although the Declaration of Independence was still more than a year away, the Continental Congress was taking on the power of a sovereign body. In one noticeable area, however, its members held back. They did not authorize a navy.

Congress was skeptical of creating a navy. It was one thing to appoint a commander-in-chief over a rabble in arms surrounding "ministerial Butchers" in Boston. After all, that could be justified on strictly defensive grounds. But a navy was another matter, for the mobility and striking capability of armed vessels give them an inherent offensive character. This factor, plus sectional politics and concern over the high cost of a navy, prevented Congress from acting on a naval program.

Congress's inaction distressed Rhode Island, and, on 26 August, the General Assembly resolved:

this Assembly is persuaded, that building and equipping an American fleet, as soon as possible, would greatly and essentially conduce to the preservation of the lives, liberty and property, of

good people of these Colonies and therefore instruct their delegates, to use their whole influence at the ensuing congress, for building, at the Continental expense, a fleet of sufficient force, for the protection of these colonies, and for employing them in such manner and places as will most effectively annoy our enemies, and contribute to the common defense of these colonies.³

On 3 October 1775, the Rhode Island delegation presented the resolution to Congress. Four days later, when the resolve was put on the floor for debate, it was obvious Rhode Island had set off a powder keg. Samuel Chase of Maryland called it “the maddest Idea in the World to think of building an American fleet.” Others, mainly southerners, chimed in, calling attention to the huge expenses involved while alluding to the fact that the region most likely to benefit from the creation of a navy was New England, whence both ships and men might come.⁴

As tempers in Congress heated up, events were taking place at sea that made some kind of action unavoidable. Washington’s forces were in desperate need of supplies. The quickest and most direct source for the Americans were the British themselves, who, believing the rebels could not harm them at sea, were sending out unarmed and unescorted store ships. These were ideal targets, and, on 1 October, Congress agreed to fit out two vessels “to cruise eastward, for intercepting such transports which may be laden with warlike stores.”⁵

A committee was appointed to prepare a plan. With a bit of clever politicking, the pro-navy faction took control and brought back a report that startled Congress. Instead of two vessels, the committee called for ten. It was too bold a plan for the temper of Congress; instead of ten, it authorized four. Nevertheless, this was a great victory for the New England navalists, who had secured twice the number of vessels originally debated and, more important, now had a naval commitment from Congress.

To manage this fleet of four, Congress elected a seven-man committee. The Naval Committee consisted of Stephen Hopkins, Joseph Hewes of North Carolina, Richard Henry Lee of Virginia, John Adams of Massachusetts, Silas Deane of Connecticut, John Langdon of New Hampshire, and Christopher Gadsden of South Carolina.

Eager to get under way, the committee arranged for quarters in a local tavern and agreed to meet every evening at six to conduct its business. The meetings were productive, lively, and convivial. John Adams remembered his service on the committee as “the pleasantest part of my labors . . . Congress.” With unusual nostalgia he recalled the men he had met with on those fall and winter evenings of 1775, especially Stephen Hopkins, “Old Grape and Guts” as some called him. According to Adams, the old gentleman greatly enlivened the meetings with his wit and wisdom, and after adjournment many remained behind with him until very late—smoking, drinking, and swapping stories in a room swimming with the heavy warm odor of port and rum.⁶ These sessions were more than social, however. In the weeks to come, Hopkins’s influence in the committee would become abundantly clear as Rhode Island reaped the benefits of those late-night meetings.

On 2 November, Congress granted the committee one hundred thousand dollars to fit out four vessels and “to agree with such officers and seamen, as are proper to man and command said vessels.”⁷ As the committee scouted for commanders, the assignment turned out to be a family affair, the jovial storyteller Hopkins displaying all his political dexterity. Esek, still busy in Rhode Island, was made commander-in-chief of the fleet. His son, John Burroughs Hopkins, was commissioned captain, as was another Rhode Islander and kinsman, Abraham Whipple. Whipple and Esek Hopkins had sailed together on many privateering voyages. A third captain was a Connecticut mariner, Dudley

Saltonstall, brother-in-law to Silas Deane. The fourth and only non-New Englander and unrelated officer was Nicholas Biddle, a well-known Philadelphia captain. All in all, the appointments were a marvelous manifestation of Hopkintonian influence.

Having appointed officers, Congress next needed to provide rules and regulations by which the infant navy was to be governed. For reasons that are not altogether clear, the Naval Committee assigned that task to John Adams. Although a lawyer and a man reasonably acquainted with maritime law, he had no seagoing experience. Nevertheless, with his usual passion for detail, Adams undertook the duty, and, on 28 November, Congress approved Adams's "Rules for the Regulation of the Navy of the United Colonies." In general, they followed the pattern of the Royal Navy but tended to be less severe.⁸ In Rhode Island, Esek Hopkins received the news of his appointment with glee. However, it can hardly be said that he rushed to his post. He spent several weeks tending to private and public business and did not arrive in Philadelphia until very early in January.

In the absence of the commander-in-chief, Congress had not been idle. Neither time nor funds permitted the construction of new warships, so the Naval Committee sent agents on the prowl seeking likely merchantmen to be converted to warships. They found four: the *Black Prince*, renamed the *Alfred* and given to the command of Saltonstall; the *Sally*, renamed the *Columbus*, given to Captain Whipple; the *Andrea Doria*, given to Nicholas Biddle; and the *Cabot*, given to John Burroughs and Esek Hopkins. These four, considered to be the most powerful members of the fleet, were joined by four additional lightly armed vessels: the *Wasp* and the *Fly*, eight-gun schooners; the *Hornet*, a ten-gun sloop; and the twelve-gun sloop *Providence*, formerly the *Katy* of the Rhode Island navy.

On 4 January 1776, with Hopkins on board the *Alfred*, of twenty-four guns, the fleet cast off and moved out into the Delaware. This first movement lasted only long enough—about four hours—to go over to Liberty Island, where they tied up again to avoid ice flows coming down the river. The next day Hopkins received two sets of orders from the Naval Committee.⁹ The first were general in nature, setting out procedures and protocols. He was addressed as "Commander in Chief of the Fleet of the United Colonies," leading some to suggest that Congress intended to place him on a par with George Washington. However, closer scrutiny reveals otherwise, for in a key paragraph he was told: "You are by every means in your power to keep up an exact correspondence with the Congress or Committee of Congress aforesaid, and with the Commander in chief of the Continental forces in America."

Clearly, in Congress's mind Hopkins was subordinate to Washington, though the relative rank of the two officers was never seriously contested and thus not clearly defined.

The second set of orders Esek opened on 5 January were his sailing instructions, outlining his first mission. For reasons of strategy and politics, this Yankee fleet was being sent south to rid those coasts of British raiders.

You are instructed with the utmost diligence to proceed with the said fleet to sea and if the winds and weather will possibly admit of it to proceed directly for Chesapeake Bay in Virginia and when nearly arrived there you will send forward a small swift sailing vessel to gain intelligence. . . . If . . . you find that they are not greatly superior to your own you are immediately to enter the said bay, search out and attack, take or destroy all the naval force of our enemies that you may find there. If you should be so fortunate as to execute this business successfully in Virginia you are then to proceed immediately to the southward and make yourself master of such forces as the enemy may have both in North and South Carolina. . . . Notwithstanding these particular orders, which it is hoped you will be able to execute, if bad winds, or stormy weather, or any other unforeseen accident or disaster disable you so to do, You are then to follow such Courses as your

best Judgment shall suggest to you as most useful to the American Cause and to distress the Enemy by all means in your power.

It took more than six weeks to get the fleet to sea. Ice in the river as well as difficulty in filling of the crew delayed Hopkins until 18 February, when, with a fair wind blowing, men were sent aloft “loose the Fore topsail and sheet it home.”

An experienced mariner, Hopkins knew the risks of a winter sail. He was not disappointed. Gale force winds out of the north bore down on the fleet. The *Hornet* and the *Fly* proved to be poor heavy weather boats and were separated from the remainder of the fleet. The other six plowed on.

Ignoring his orders, Hopkins bypassed both Chesapeake Bay and the southern coast; instead he laid a course offshore that took him to the Bahamas. Because nowhere in his orders were the Bahamas mentioned (unless one construes them to be included in the “best Judgment” clause), it is difficult to divine the commodore’s motives. Later, when he was questioned about his change of plans, he laid his decision to the fact that so many of his crew were sick. A far more likely explanation is simply that sailing the southern coast was, in his judgment, too risky. In Chesapeake Bay, Lord Dunmore, former royal governor of Virginia, was busy terrorizing the folks along the shore. Although the governor’s force was technically inferior to Hopkins’s, the American commodore knew full well that in combat his ersatz navy would most likely collapse at the first sight of the Royal Navy. As for the southern coast, Hopkins had already taken a beating just getting off soundings; coming along the shore would have meant hazarding Cape Hatteras. Esek Hopkins had no desire to challenge either the Royal Navy or nature.

It was a bad decision. Hopkins was behaving more like a privateersman whose main concern was to minimize danger and maximize profits. By completely bypassing the southern coasts, he displayed a callous disregard for southern interests and reinforced southern suspicions about a Yankee navy. Hopkins’s insensitivity to sectional and political concerns ill-suited him for command of a navy created by a Congress where these elements counted so heavily.

On 1 March, the fleet came to anchor on the lee side of Abaco Island, where for the next two days the Americans took on water and made preparations for an assault against Nassau on New Providence Island, only a few more miles to the south. Hopkins hoped to catch the garrison by surprise and carry away its reportedly large supply of gunpowder.

On Sunday, 3 March, the Americans landed on the northeast tip of New Providence about forty miles to the west of Fort Montague.¹⁰ After firing a few token shots, the garrison left the fort and retired to the town of Nassau. The Americans spent the night in the fort and the next day marched on the town and Fort Nassau; neither offered any resistance.

With everything secured, Hopkins brought his ships into the harbor and went looking for gunpowder. Herein lay disappointment. While the Americans were spending their evening at Fort Montague, the governor of the Bahamas had been busy moving his gunpowder out of the magazine and into the hold of a commandeered sloop that had taken off for another island. By the time Hopkins’s men broke into the fort, all they found were twenty-four barrels. However, some solace could be taken from the fact that their opponents had not had enough time to remove their cannon and various other military supplies. It took two weeks to load the booty.

On the same day that the British were evacuating Boston, 17 March 1776, Esek Hopkins evacuated Nassau. At first, according to his testimony, the commodore gave thought to taking his fleet to Georgia to help rid that coast of enemy ships. Whether he really intended to undertake such a cruise is questionable; at any rate, he gave up the idea when he learned that the enemy was there in force.

Instead of Georgia, the American captains were ordered to keep company with the *Alfred* and, separated, then to sail alone and rendezvous in Block Island channel. Clearly Hopkins was headed home to Rhode Island.

Homeward bound, the men and the commodore stayed alert for any signs of enemy shipping. They saw none until 4 April, when the fleet drew near to the east end of Long Island. Cruising in the same area was the schooner *Hawk*, tender to the *Rose*. She was spotted and easily overtaken by the American force. The next day, a second British vessel, the bomb brig *Boston*, was sighted and pursued. She proved to be a tartar and put up a fierce resistance until, finally, the Americans overwhelmed her.

The *Hawk* and the *Boston* were only small fry. On 6 April, a truly worthy foe came into view: HMS *Glasgow*, a twenty-gun ship under the command of Captain Tyringham Howe.¹¹ Howe, apparently unaware that the Americans were in the area, came down toward the rebel fleet. It was not until they were within hailing distance that he realized his mistake. He then made a run for it, with Hopkins in hot pursuit. Although the *Glasgow* was greatly outnumbered and outgunned, she managed to inflict heavy damage on the Americans, to elude them, and to escape into the safety of Newport. Captain Howe had shown himself to be not only a fine fighter, but a clever ship handler as well. The engagement with the *Glasgow* showed the Americans, for their part, to be neither.

In the first place, Hopkins had not bothered to disperse his ships in a proper squadron formation. If he had done that, he might well have trapped the *Glasgow*. Furthermore, during the battle, which lasted for several hours, Hopkins made no attempt to control or coordinate the movement of his fleet. It was a typical privateering operation—that is, every man for himself.

After breaking off the engagement with the *Glasgow*, Hopkins ordered the fleet onto a southwestward course intended to bring them into New London. Despite thick fog, on Sunday afternoon, 7 April, the Americans came abreast of New London Light and dropped anchor, and the commodore finished his dispatches for Congress.

His report was well received, as it deserved to be. After all, with marginal warships and inexperienced men, he had managed to sail into enemy waters, land his forces, and return with a considerable store of material. The brush with the *Glasgow* was not a particularly proud moment; but considered in the context of the entire cruise, it was, if not excusable, at least understandable to the members of Congress.

What was neither excusable nor understandable was the commodore's subsequent behavior ashore. Unlike Washington, who once he took command of the army seemed to rise above sectional politics and petty disputes, Esek Hopkins never was able to make that leap. Whatever he might have thought about Congress, the commander-in-chief of the army always consulted with it and kept its members informed of his decisions. Hopkins, on the other hand, seemed more inclined to find ways to annoy them. At New London his ships were crammed with military stores that were continental property. Instead of asking Congress for its pleasure, Hopkins went ahead and wrote to the governors of Rhode Island and Connecticut and offered those gentlemen the stores for the defense of their colonies. It was a foolish and graceless move.

Compounding his problems with Congress were mounting vexations within the fleet. Only a day after the ships arrived at New London, the first wisp of trouble appeared when the crew of the brig *Cabot* presented Hopkins with a round-robin petition asking to be paid. That stir among the enlisted men was soon followed by a storm among the officers.

Ever since they had landed, rumors had circulated about the alleged cowardice or incompetence of certain captains during the engagement with the *Glasgow*. Among them was Hopkins's old and dear friend Abraham Whipple. In the face of these allegations, Whipple asked his commander to summon

court-martial to clear his name. Hopkins agreed, and in its finding the court determined that, indeed Whipple had made an error during the battle but the fault was “in Judgment and not from Cowardice.”¹²

Whipple’s trial was only the beginning. Two days after rendering the decision on him, the same court, with the acquitted captain now joining it as a member, heard charges against John Hazard. Hazard was not so fortunate; after hearing the evidence, the court found “The Prisoner, John Hazard Esqr., had rendered himself unworthy of holding his Commission in the Navy of the United States of North America. . . .”¹³

Deserved or not, the spate of courts-martial, petitions, and nagging rumors of unrest put Hopkins in a poor light. Nor was his situation improved when, on the same day that Hazard was being cashiered, Congress had decided to conduct its own investigation into Hopkins’s conduct. By congressional order, Hopkins’s orders of 5 January were read on the floor and then sent to a special committee to determine if the commodore had in fact complied with them. Southern resentments over his failure to protect the coasts were surfacing and slowly merging with an already festering anti-New England sentiment.

Had Hopkins been able to point to a naval success, he might well have survived the gathering storm. Such was not the case. His fleet was so weakened by disease that he had to “borrow” nearly two hundred soldiers simply to bring his fleet around from New London to Providence. When Washington, who was facing a disaster of his own at New York City, asked for the return of his men, the commodore naturally complied but had to report that their loss made his fleet “useless.” He did manage, by stripping all his other ships of men and supplies, to get the *Andrea Doria* and the *Cabot* to sea.

Not the least of Hopkins’s problems was the fact that he had moved his fleet to Providence. Aside from the obvious reason that it was home, it is not clear why he decided to make the move. In fact, he probably would have been better off had he remained at New London. In December 1775, Congress had authorized the construction of thirteen frigates; two of these, later to be named the *Providence* 28 and the *Warren* 32, were ordered built in Providence. The construction of these vessels, among the largest yet built in America, consumed huge amounts of money, men, and supplies. Within a short time, the Providence waterfront witnessed a threeway struggle for men and material among Hopkins’s fleet, the frigates abuilding, and voracious privateersmen. With such competition, the opportunities for profiteering were enormous, and the local merchants were not slow to take advantage. In the face of such greed, Hopkins was helpless; while others outbid and outmaneuvered him, he could only lament “that Private Interest bears more sway than I wish it did.”¹⁴

Having invested heavily in the Navy, Congress was in no mood to listen to Hopkins’s excuses explaining why he and his fleet were still snug in the harbor. After all, other continental captains—John Paul Jones, Nicholas Biddle, and Abraham Whipple—had managed to get to sea during this time. On 14 June, President of the Congress John Hancock, acting on the instructions of the full body, summoned Hopkins, Saltonstall, and Whipple to appear in Philadelphia to answer for their “frequent Neglect or Disobedience of Orders” and the “numberless Complaints against them.”¹⁵

Saltonstall appeared and was let off, the charges being not “well founded.” Whipple received a mild rebuke and was told “to cultivate harmony with his officers.” It was for Hopkins that Congress saved its full fury. Having been forced to cool his heels for several days, on 12 August he was finally called to defend himself. It was an unpleasant experience. Recalling the scene, John Adams remarked that the affair was yet another example of the rising “Anti New England Spirit, which haunted

Congress.” Still, even in defending the commodore, Adams had to admit that while he “saw nothing in the Conduct of Hopkins, which indicated Corruption or Want of Integrity . . . Experience and Skill might have been deficient, in several Particulars. . . .”¹⁶

Lawyer Adams and other New Englanders skillfully defended Hopkins. They were successful in preventing the commodore from being cashiered but not in preventing a grave humiliation: on 1 August, Congress voted “That the said conduct of Commodore Hopkins deserves the censure of the house, and the house does accordingly censure him.”¹⁷ With that, Congress sent the commodore back to Providence to resume command. It might better have dismissed him from the service, for his authority and reputation were now so severely eroded that his effectiveness as a commander was reduced to virtually nothing.

For his part, Hopkins vented his wrath on Congress. With great indiscretion, he referred to the gentlemen in Philadelphia in highly unflattering terms, cursing them and calling them “ignorant fellows—lawyers, clerks, persons who don’t know how to govern men.” He even went so far as to swear that he would not obey the orders of Congress. Naturally, such actions were quick to come to the attention of Congress, where not even his friends could defend the old man’s intemperance.”¹⁸ On 26 March 1777, Hopkins was suspended from command. He was kept in that limbo until 2 January 1778, when he was summarily dismissed from the service.

Bitter at his firing, but hardly surprised, Hopkins retired to his farm in North Providence. He continued to serve his state as a member of the Assembly from 1777 to 1786 and served as a trustee of Rhode Island College, later renamed Brown University, from 1783 until his death. Never again, though, did he go to sea, and by the time of his death on 26 February 1802, few aside from his neighbors and friends remembered him as the commander-in-chief of the Continental Navy.

Esek Hopkins was an ordinary man who had the misfortune to live in extraordinary times. He was, at heart, a provincial person, loyal to his relatives, friends, and state. His localism blinded him to the greater needs of the revolutionary cause and made him insensitive to the legitimate concerns of other regions, as well as the prerogatives of Congress. Hopkins’s decision to attack New Providence rather than the enemy forces harassing the southern colonies, together with his presenting the captured munitions to Connecticut and Rhode Island rather than to the continental government, combined to heighten southern hostility toward the Navy. His infelicitous manner of dealing with Congress compared very unfavorably to Washington’s deference, a comparison many were wont to make.

As a commander, Hopkins failed in many respects, but nowhere were his shortcomings more apparent than in his inability to bridle his temper and tongue in the face of congressional control. It was his intemperate behavior toward his civilian superiors more than his failures at sea that eventually caused his professional demise.

Despite his failures, Hopkins ought not to be judged too harshly. His provincialism was perhaps no greater than that of many of his contemporaries. Most of those who fought in the Revolution thought of themselves as Virginians, Georgians, Rhode Islanders—the concept of being an American was still in its infancy. Furthermore, it is difficult to imagine how any officer in Hopkins’s position could have effectively controlled the pack of rascally privateersmen put under his command. The debacle with the *Glasgow* was a product of both his and his officers’ inexperience, whereas the scandalous business in Providence was not of his doing.

In attempting to create a naval force, Congress was trying to build a preposterous structure on a pitiful foundation. Navies are expensive and complex; the Americans had neither the material resources nor the manpower to put an effective force to sea. It is true that the American Revolution

was decided at sea but not by the American cockleshells; rather, the decisive battles were fought by the wooden giants of Great Britain, France, and Spain.

If the Continental Navy had never existed, it is hard to see how the outcome of the Revolution could have been any different. But a citation of failures should not be read as a condemnation of the effort. As a contributor to the American naval tradition, Esek Hopkins ought to be remembered as a man who was asked to do the impossible and failed.

FURTHER READING

There is only one full-length biography of Esek Hopkins: Edward Field, *Esek Hopkins, Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Navy during the American Revolution, 1775–1777* (Providence, R.I., 1898). It is, unfortunately, a very uncritical work written more as a defense of Hopkins than as an examination of his life. This ought to be supplemented by William James Morgan, *Captains to the Northward: The New England Captains in the Continental Navy* (Barre, Vt., 1959), a series of very good biographical sketches.

Field drew quite heavily upon the Hopkins manuscripts at the Rhode Island Historical Society which were later edited by Alverda S. Beck and published as *The Letter Book of Esek Hopkins, Commander-in-Chief of the United States Navy, 1775–1777* (Providence, R.I., 1932), and *Correspondence of Esek Hopkins, Commander-in-Chief of the United States Navy* (Providence, R.I., 1933). These papers also provide the source material for several articles written about Hopkins, but none of these is particularly useful. The best brief treatment on Hopkins and the Nassau expedition is by John J. McCusker, Jr., Alfred: *The First Continental Flagship* (Washington, D.C., 1973).

Published documentary material for the Continental Navy is in good supply. First among the sources is the superb William Bell Clark and William James Morgan, eds., *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, 10 vols. to date (Washington, D.C., 1964–). Scholars interested in Hopkins should also consult Charles Oscar Paullin, ed., *Out-Letters of the Continental Marine Committee and Board of Admiralty, August, 1776–September, 1780*, 2 vols. (New York, 1914), and W. C. Ford, ed., *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774–1789*, 34 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1904–1936), supplemented by the National Archives microfilm edition of the *Papers of the Continental Congress*. The Rhode Island Continental Congress political settings are discussed in the author's *William Ellery Channing: A Rhode Island Politico & Lord of Admiralty* (Metuchen, N.J., 1973).

NOTES

1. Edward Field, *Esek Hopkins, Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Navy during the American Revolution, 1775–1777* (Providence, R.I., 1898) 1–35.
2. W. C. Ford, ed., *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774–1789*, 34 vols. (Washington D.C., 1904–1936) 2:15, 68–70, 89, 91, 93, 209 (hereafter cited as *JCC*).
3. John R. Bartlett, ed., *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations in New England*, 10 vols. (Providence, 1856–1865) 7:347.
4. L. H. Butterfield, ed., *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, 4 vols. (New York, 1964) 2:198.
5. *JCC*, 3:293–94.
6. Butterfield, *Diary*, 3:350.
7. *JCC*, 3:315–18.
8. *Ibid.*, 378–87.
9. William Bell Clark and William James Morgan, eds., *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, 10 vols, to date (Washington, D.C., 1964–) 3:636–38 (hereafter cited as *NDAR*).
10. John J. McCusker, Jr., “The American Invasion of Nassau in the Bahamas,” *The American Neptune* 25 (1965): 189–217.
11. For reports detailing the *Glasgow* engagement, see *NDAR*, vol. 4, *passim*.
12. Court Martial of Abraham Whipple, *NDAR*, 4:1419–21.

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