



# **Give Me a Fast Ship: The Continental Navy and America's Revolution at Sea**

*Tim McGrath*

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**Five ships against hundreds—the fledgling American Navy versus the greatest naval force the world had ever seen...**

America in 1775 was on the verge of revolution—or, more likely, disastrous defeat. After the bloodshed at Lexington and Concord, England's King George sent hundreds of ships westward to bottle up American harbors and prey on American shipping. Colonists had no force to defend their coastline and waterways until John Adams of Massachusetts proposed a bold solution: The Continental Congress should raise a navy.

The idea was mad. The Royal Navy was the mightiest floating arsenal in history, with a seemingly endless supply of vessels. More than a hundred of these were massive “ships of the line,” bristling with up to a hundred high-powered cannon that could level a city. The British were confident that His Majesty's warships would quickly bring the rebellious colonials to their knees.

They were wrong. Beginning with five converted merchantmen, America's sailors became formidable warriors, matching their wits, skills, and courage against the best of the British fleet. Victories off American shores gave the patriots hope—victories led by captains such as John Barry, the fiery Irish-born giant; fearless Nicholas Biddle, who stared down an armed mutineer; and James Nicholson, the underachiever who finally redeemed himself with an inspiring display of coolness and bravery. Meanwhile, along the British coastline, daring raids by handsome, cocksure John Paul Jones and the “Dunkirk Pirate,” Gustavus Conyngham—who was captured and sentenced to hang but tunneled under his cell and escaped to fight again—sent fear throughout England. The adventures of these men and others on both sides of the struggle rival anything from Horatio Hornblower or Lucky Jack Aubrey. In the end, these rebel sailors, from the quarterdeck to the forecastle, contributed greatly to American independence.

Meticulously researched and masterfully told, *Give Me a Fast Ship* is a rousing, epic tale of war on the high seas—and the definitive history of the American Navy during the Revolutionary War.

**INCLUDES NINE MAPS AND SIXTEEN PAGES OF FULL COLOR ILLUSTRATIONS**

## **Give Me a Fast Ship: The Continental Navy and America's Revolution at Sea Details**

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# From Reader Review Give Me a Fast Ship: The Continental Navy and America's Revolution at Sea for online ebook

## Ryan says

Long and thorough; interesting but not hugely engaging. Well researched and clearly sourced but certainly narrative vice scholarly in tone and structure. Good but not great.

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## Big H says

Great historical facts, but SUPER dry.

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## Jim says

Some historians (e.g., Ian Toll on page 15 of "Six Frigates") concluded that "The Continental Navy, with few exceptions, was a wasteful and humiliating fiasco." Tim McGrath in this book tells a more balanced and detailed history of the Continental Navy. To be sure, there were fiascos like the British destroying a Continental squadron in the Penobscot River in what is now Maine. And many Continental ships were captured by the British. But there are many other sides of the story.

John Paul Jones' epic capture of the Serapis off Flamborough Head in England was an epic and bloody victory. Yet almost no one remembers the successful cruises of Gustavus Conyngham, the "Dunkirk Pirate", around the British Isles that preceded Jones' cruises in the Ranger and the Bonhomme Richard. Conyngham was captured and imprisoned twice in England but he escaped both times and returned to sail again and again. John Barry, Joshua Barney, Nicholas Biddle and other captains captured numerous British merchant and naval ships as well as privateers.

The Continental Navy was hampered by British blockading ships, a constant lack of money and a desperate need for sailors. Many sailors and officers (including several of the navy's leading captains at various times during the war) sailed in privateers where there was better pay. Several members of the Continental Congress invested in privateers so they had conflicts of interest.

One thing that I learned is that one of the first actions by the U.S. Marines wasn't on the shores of Tripoli, it was on the shores of one of the islands in the Bahamas during a raid on British forts and shipping.

This book is 425 pages long (not counting acknowledgments and source notes) but it's a quick and engaging read. I highly recommend it.

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## Matthew says

Very detailed and filled with a good deal of descriptive accounts of battles at sea and the trials of the early US Navy and its heroes. It gets long-winded at times and will make you forget exactly where you're at in the

timeline of events often. There are points where I found myself re-reading prior pages because I had glazed over the drier sections. (History isn't always glamorous). Regardless, a very nice read that helps explain much of where we get our Naval traditions and spirit from. Worth the time to read it!

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## **John says**

A difficult work to judge, in that while possessing the bones of a history it often reads more as a collection of stories (which I suppose history always is). In telling the story of the Continental Navy during eight years of revolution, McGrath writes in a way that is very uneven in tempo. He will introduce a naval action, catch you up to speed on another ship or captain, and then return you to the initial action, though sometimes described after the fact. One can sympathize with McGrath's requirement to cover a large amount of ground, both chronologically and geographically, as well as the need to introduce and describe the actions of dozens of sea captains and vessels. However, this is done in a frenetic style that leaves the reader jumping all over the globe, and not in a pleasing way. Likewise, McGrath could improve on his description of age-of-sail naval warfare. If it wasn't for my experience with Patrick O'Brian and Ian Toll, I would have been terribly confused.

While these faults take away from the experience as whole, McGrath is still capable of putting down some ripping good yarns. The Continental Navy fought scores of battles, many of them defeats, sure, but with enough victories to contribute to the ultimate victory. The fledgling United States was served by both excellent captains and fighters as well as those that were beyond hapless. American knowledge of local waters more often than not stood no chance against the skill, professionalism, and tenacity of the greatest maritime power in the world. While her most famous sailors, Barry and Jones, knew many victories and helped build the name and mythos of American seapower, the general experience was fraught with error, bureaucratic ineptitude (Arthur Lee, minister to France, has to be one of the chief serpents of American diplomatic history), and challenges of nature, both terrestrial and human. In this regard this work was very helpful: in helping the reader to better understanding the context in which the Continental navy fought. Whether it be the challenge of finding trustworthy sailors, or intricacies of prize rules, or the politicking of captains seeking commands, McGrath fills in much of the gray and ugly world that is often overlooked when examining the American Revolution at sea. So while less than satisfactory in its delivery, the stories and information found within this book are enough to create a positive reading experience.

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## **Tom says**

Boo! Sorry but if nothing lies like statistics, then the second caveat is no historian only tells one side of the story. I don't object to McGrath's research but his language which is so silly and hyperbolic that every English captain a condescending twit and every Loyalist a fool or a brigand. Sorry. Untrue. Yuck! As a better scholar once wrote, this was a "Cousin's War" and this sort of tomfoolery belongs in middle school story telling, not serious writing.

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## **Chris Kostenko says**

We hear very little about the continental navy. We hear a lot about the British Navy, the best in the world, some say. The image of hundreds of ships at anchor in Sandy Hook is one I often think of relaxing at that

beach.

The interesting thing is that the ships fought across the globe: in the Caribbean, at the sugar plantations, in the North Atlantic, around Scotland, around Ireland, in Spanish ports, and in French ports (long before there was a specific alliance).

I knew about John Paul Jones, but there were so many others: Connyngham, Barry... and did we ever think of Americans as privateers. Fact is the continental government had no money--there was no central government--and so privateering brought cash to the table. However, like the army, the sailors often went unpaid for the term of their service.

Interesting to see the way prisoner exchanges went. If you were an officer you were treated differently and you might find your way back to the battlefield if you were exchanged. Again, the privateers were the ones who made this possible, because they were grabbing the British officers as part of their prizes.

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### **Nick says**

This was a very good history of the Continental Navy during the American Revolution. It's certainly dense, and at certain points I felt that I needed a map to keep track of everyone. I did enjoy it, though, and anyone who enjoys tales from the Age of Sail will enjoy it.

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### **Alex Miller says**

Boy, this is a topic and an era that I have high interest in, and I was really looking forward to this. Unfortunately, although McGrath's research seems sound and exhaustive, his storytelling powers are lackluster, making this read very much like the proverbial history book. I couldn't finish it.

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### **Anne Beardsley says**

If I hadn't read *Six Frigates* and known what a book about war at sea could be, I would have given this book four stars instead of three.

It was...good. But it takes more than 'good' to justify more than 600 pages. Mr. McGrath's knowledge is encyclopedic, and he does a really rather good job of writing in an interesting, engaging way.

But by 200 pages in I still hadn't met any characters I felt I would recognize if I met them at the supermarket. By the end of the book, only John Barry and John Paul Jones met that standard. I also lacked the sense of breathless wonder, the hopes and fears that carried me through *Six Frigates* and other really five-star historical works.

Instead, I will damn by moderate praise: it was a good book. The subject was interesting, the important parts were all made clear, the writing was not dense or stilted, and the author knew his material.

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### **Jim says**

I am a huge fan of naval warfare nonfiction and fiction. I have a special affinity for the American Revolution war against England and with France. I have just finished GIVE ME A FAST SHIP by TIM McGRATH (ISBN 978-0451416100, \$26.95, hardcover). It was published the summer of 2014. This is non-fiction.

The author gives a blow by blow description of most of the major engagements between American and British warships. He describes the politics and economics of what was going on in England, France, Spain and America regarding America's fledgling Navy. The lives of the major players on both sides of the Atlantic and the Conflict are examined. There are numerous maps of important engagements and paintings showing the men and ships involved. Some heroes such as John Paul Jones the reader will recognize. Others lesser personalities will become more familiar. At the end of the book, McGrath gives additional information about the men and ships into the early 19th Century. The author also provides an extensive bibliography if you desire to read more.

This book is a must read for readers of American Revolution and naval history. There are references to "original sources".

GO! BUY! READ!

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### **Mike Stewart says**

Most histories of the American Revolution tend to begin and end with the Bonhomme Richard and neglect the exploits (and failures) of the Continental Navy. This book is a needed corrective. While interesting, the narrative lacks flow and is a little bit incoherent. The reader (at least this reader) has to keep looking back to keep the various captains straight and to remind himself what year events were taking place.

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### **Fredrick Danysh says**

This work follows the American colonies in their movement toward revolution against England and the creation of an American navy. It emphasis some of the early naval commanders and their ships. This is a good historical account of the early American navy.

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### **Jerome says**

A thorough and lively history of the Continental Navy. McGrath gives us a great portrait of a band of heroic sailors fighting against all odds against both the British navy and the ignorance of inept American political leaders. McGrath's book is smoothly written, with a dry humor and an eye for detail that will make it appeal to a wide audience. We learn of the exploits of all the expected heroes, like John Paul Jones, John Barry, Richard Dale, Edward Preble, and a good number of lesser-known naval commanders and privateer captains.

We also get a good history of British raids, blockades, and ship-to-ship engagements, as well as the expansion of the naval war to European waters.

McGrath gives us vivid portraits of all the major engagements and the characters involved, as well as all the relevant political, economic and diplomatic issues and how they related to the European and international situation at the time.

Inevitably, McGrath includes a boatload of eighteenth-century naval terminology that has long since been forgotten. More detailed maps may have been helpful. Also, many of the naval engagements might be difficult to follow, since McGrath's approach is both chronological and centered around the various naval commanders. The comings and goings of all the commanders and warships is daunting at times, but McGrath more than makes up for it with a dry sense of humor and firm grasp of the subject matter.

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### **Craig says**

Unfortunately, I have to mark this book as DNF. I wanted to enjoy this book. I love this period of history and hadn't read anything of the Continental Navy. Whether it was too many characters to track or not having a background in this area, the book felt inaccessible to me.

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