



Stephen Decatur and Purpose

Handout A: Narrative

BACKGROUND

The United States officially became a nation at the conclusion of the Revolutionary War in 1783. However, the country soon learned that being a nation on paper meant little in the violent world of international politics. The young republic would soon need to prove to the rest of the world that it could defend itself. The United States had trade interests all over the world that it was now responsible for defending. The continent of Europe became embroiled in war following the French Revolution in 1789. By 1793, nearly every nation in Europe was at war, including two of the United States' largest trading partners, Great Britain and France.

Officially neutral, the United States attempted to continue normal trade relations with Great Britain and France. However, both European nations attempted to prevent the other from trading with the United States. The new country began building a navy to protect its trade.

The first United States Navy consisted of six large frigates. One of its first major conflicts was with the Barbary States in North Africa. This association of independent cities subsisted on piracy, ransoms, and the bribes that major nations would pay to ensure the safe passage of their ships.

When United States commercial ships and sailors began to be seized by the Barbary Pirates, the Navy was dispatched to protect citizens and their property. One of the members of this expedition was a young Stephen Decatur.

NARRATIVE

Stephen Decatur was born in 1779 to a naval family in the midst of the American Revolution. His father, Stephen Decatur Sr., served with the fledgling United States Navy during the Revolutionary War and later became a merchant captain. Stephen was introduced to the sea from an early age. As a young boy, he began to develop an ailment which his father hoped a voyage would cure. Whether it was the sea air or the sense of adventure, Decatur Jr. was cured, and his love of the ocean was born.

After he returned from his voyage, Stephen enrolled in school. However, studying did not sit well with the young man, and by the age of 17 he had dropped out of school and set off to make a career on the high seas. In 1798, Decatur was given a commission aboard the frigate, *U.S.S. United States*. Frigates were one of the primary fighting ships of the age. Entirely propelled by the wind alone, the American frigates were the pinnacles of warship technology.

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They carried forty-four muzzle loading cannons and a crew of approximately 450 officers and men. Frigates were sleek and fast ships but still maintained defensive capabilities. In fact, the United States' sister ship, the *U.S.S. Constitution*, was given the nickname "Old Iron-Sides" after cannon balls were seen bouncing off of her.

Decatur served as a midshipman, the lowest rank for commissioned officers, during the so-called "Quasi-War" with France. His frigate sailed up and down the East Coast of the United States and the Caribbean, patrolling for French privateers likely to prey upon American ships.

Life aboard these wooden warships was anything but comfortable. They were utterly dependent upon the wind and ocean currents for movement. The frigate could be stuck in a port for days due to a lack of a breeze. On the other hand, when storms hit, the United States could be completely thrown off course. The crew only ate food that could be preserved for months at sea such as salt beef, dried peas, and hard tack biscuits. They slept in cramped quarters within inches of their shipmates who, because fresh water was precious, had not bathed in weeks or months.

However, these ships also represented a sort of freedom – the ability to sail around the world to see foreign ports. For a generation of people who, for the most part, never went more than a few miles from home for the duration of their lives, this life was extremely appealing. It was this freedom of movement that the sea had to offer which captivated Decatur.

By 1799, Decatur had been promoted to lieutenant, and he set sail in May of 1801 to take part in the First Barbary War. The Barbary States, the collective name given to Tripoli, Algiers, Tunis, and the Sultanate of Morocco, had been capturing United States ships and sailors and holding them for ransom. The United States navy blockaded Barbary State ports and engaged in a few minor skirmishes with the pirates' ships. However, neither side won a decisive victory.

In October 1803, the American frigate *U.S.S. Philadelphia* ran aground on an uncharted reef at the entrance to the Tripoli harbor. After several failed attempts to get off the reef, the ship and its crew were captured by Tripolitan soldiers. The *Philadelphia* was then turned into a battery to protect the harbor against American forces.

By February of 1804, the U.S. government decided that the *Philadelphia* needed to be taken out of enemy hands. The assignment would be dangerous and required a group of men to sail in under cover of darkness to where the *Philadelphia* rested. While Decatur's crew would have the element of surprise, the darkness would make navigation and communication very difficult. The men would have to get aboard the ship and take it without alerting the port authorities of their actions, lest they come under the concentrated fire of the surrounding forts. They would be isolated from their comrades and have no chance of reinforcements or escape should they fail.

There was one man who knew it was his purpose to take command of this daring attack: Lieutenant Stephen Decatur. Decatur gathered a diverse group of men which included Sicilian volunteers and a man who spoke Arabic alongside American sailors.

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Prior to the mission, Decatur briefed his men on which part of the deck they were to assault. Armed with swords, axes, and boarding pikes, the crew would only use firearms as a last resort. Decatur's crew navigated through the narrow straits of the Tripolitan harbor on the night of February 16, 1804. As they came into the harbor, their Arabic translator called out to the Barbary sentry boats. Claiming to be a fishing crew in need of repair, the Arabic speaker requested permission to anchor to the Philadelphia for the night. The ruse worked.

After docking next to the captured frigate, Decatur gave the order to board. His sixty men rushed up the steep sides of the Philadelphia, taking the pirates onboard entirely by surprise. His men quickly secured the ship and Decatur began to assess the situation.

He had been ordered to refloat the beleaguered frigate and sail it out of the harbor, if possible. Decatur quickly realized that this course of action would be impossible. With the rigging in shambles and the weight of all the cannon and ammunition aboard, there was no way the ship could be lightened fast enough, let alone sailed, before dawn broke. Decatur had been ordered to burn the ship where it stood if this was the case.

The young officer ordered his men to spread flammable materials around the ship. He set the blaze and then ordered his men over the side. Only after the rest of his crew escaped did he leave the doomed vessel to make his escape. As the fire spread, it heated the guns onboard the ship, causing them to fire blindly into the night. These rounds began to splash around Decatur and his men as they fled in the boat they had arrived in. The Tripolitans on shore, now knowing something was amiss, commenced firing upon the escaping Americans from their forts. Finally, after several hours of slow sailing, Decatur and his men were free from the harbor. They had accomplished their mission dramatically, all without losing a single man.

Stephan Decatur would go on to have an extraordinary career in the United States Navy. His bold actions and coolness under fire would forever be his hallmark. Sailing into the harbor that night, Decatur clear knew his purpose. The enemy capture of the *Philadelphia* threatened not only the American effort against the Barbary States but also damaged the infant Navy's reputation. A bold stroke was needed to show the world that the United States was not a young upstart power that would quickly fade into irrelevancy. Instead, with Decatur's courage and determination, the world was shown that the United States was a resolute nation who would not be bowled over by pirates and would act energetically and effectively in its own defense.