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**The Revenue Cutter Service:  
Nine Cutters and the War of 1812**

By

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The War of 1812 is one of the more unusual and often overlooked wars fought in American History. One noted historian described it as “a silly little war, fought between creaking sailing ships and inexperienced armies.”<sup>1</sup> Another described it as America’s “most obscure war.”<sup>2</sup> It was obscure because there was no clear victor and no definitive cause. The Treaty of Ghent, which settled the terms of the war, returned the situation to status quo ante bellum; the state that was before the war.<sup>3</sup> No matter the outcome and no matter the cause, the War of 1812, often referred to as the Second War of Independence, firmly placed America on the path to expansion and minimized British influence over the still young country.

The Revenue Cutter Service (RCS) was one of the predecessors to the United States Coast Guard. At the outbreak of the War of 1812 the service was small and stretched thin. It had sixteen cutters, stretched from Maine to New Orleans, “averaging 125 tons and carrying from six to ten light guns, manned by fifteen to thirty men.”<sup>4</sup> Of the sixteen cutters, only nine actively participated. Of these nine, some achieved greatness and some suffered tragedy. Others simply faded into history.

During the war, the British Navy maintained an effective blockade over the American Coast. American trade was reduced to ten percent to that of pre-war levels and the blockade minimized America’s maritime mission to single ship encounters aimed at disrupting British

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<sup>1</sup> Walter R. Borneman, *1812: The War that Forged a Nation* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2004), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Donald R. Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict* (Chicago, Il: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>4</sup> Horatio Davis Smith, *U.S. Revenue Cutter Service: 1789-1849* (Washington, DC: R. L. Polk Printing Co., 1932; reprint, Washington DC: U.S. Coast Guard, 1989), 25.

shipping.<sup>5</sup> The RCS served alongside the Navy in the execution of this mission and the service's nine cutters proved active and effective in the execution of this task. As a whole, the Revenue Cutter Service performed valiantly. It did more with less and accomplished its mission with effectiveness and bravery.

#### IN THE FIRST WEEKS

The United States declared war on Great Britain on June 18, 1812. In that same month, the USRC *Jefferson* captured a British Brig that was traveling from the West Indies to Halifax and brought her into Norfolk.<sup>6</sup> Little is known about this capture, just a report from the Schooner *Washington* that appeared in the *New York Evening Post*. Also, during that same month the *Jefferson* captured the British Schooner *Patriot*. Again, the only record of this victory is noted in the *Columbia Centinel* on Aug 1<sup>st</sup>, 1812. "The British Schooner *Patriot*, captured by the *Jefferson*, advertised for sale."<sup>7</sup> These seizures attributed to the *Jefferson* are believed to be the first American victories over British shipping of the War of 1812.

The USRC *Jefferson* continued her triumphs in April 1813. Four barges under British control had taken the captain and crew of the American Schooner *Flight* captive. In a violent storm, the four barges were driven into the inland waters surrounding Norfolk. One barge surrendered to the USS *Constellation* while the other three retreated up the James River. Captain Ham and the *Jefferson* embarked a detachment of volunteer militia and a rifle company and gave

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<sup>5</sup> Irving H. King, *The Coast Guard Under Sail: The U.S. Revenue Cutter Service 1789-1865* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1989), 53.

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Coast Guard, *Record of Movements: Vessels of the United States Coast Guard: 1790 - December 31, 1933* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1934; reprint 1989), 119.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

chase. The *Jefferson* used her speed to overwhelm and capture the barges without a shot fired. The *New York Evening Post* stated that the barges “were overhauled so fast that they hove to and surrendered.”<sup>8</sup> The *Jefferson* freed the captive captain and crew as well as the stolen cargo, all while capturing 63 officers and crew.<sup>9</sup>

The origins of the USRC *Jefferson* are not completely clear. Some date her back to as early as 1802.<sup>10</sup> In another publication, the U.S. Coast Guard cites the *Jefferson*'s dates of service as 1805-1817.<sup>11</sup> In either case, the *Jefferson* was the oldest cutter to actively serve in the War of 1812. She served out of Norfolk Virginia and was commanded originally by Captain Francis Bright and later by Captain William Ham.<sup>12</sup> *Jefferson*'s long and prominent career ended without fanfare. On March 12, 1817, she was placed for sale at her homeport of Norfolk, VA.<sup>13</sup>

#### THE MOST IMPRESSIVE CAPTURE

The USRC *Vigilant* was built and equipped for \$8,500 in Newport, RI in 1812.<sup>14</sup> She served the RCS for 30 years and was initially commanded by Captain John Cahoon.<sup>15</sup> She was

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> King, 54.

<sup>10</sup> Donald L. Canney, *U.S. Coast Guard and Revenue Cutters, 179-1935* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1995), 7.

<sup>11</sup> U.S. Coast Guard, 463.

<sup>12</sup> Smith, 21.

<sup>13</sup> U.S. Coast Guard, 119.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

a 65-ton schooner, more than 60 feet in length with over 10 feet of draft.<sup>16</sup> Based in Newport, the *Vigilant* was taken into the Navy during the War of 1812 and patrolled the New England coast throughout. She is credited with achieving “the most impressive capture” during the war.<sup>17</sup>

The privateer sloop *Dart* was terrorizing shipping in the Long Island Sound throughout 1813 and had captured an estimated 20 to 30 vessels during her time in the Sound.<sup>18</sup> In October of that year, she pulled into Newport Harbor with her latest victims: two ships and their crews. As the *Dart* left port for Block Island, the *Vigilant*, supplemented by Navy crewmen, set chase.

Once again, the cutter used her speed and maneuverability to her advantage. “In spite of being outgunned by the *Dart*’s six 9-pound carronades and six swivels, the *Vigilant* closed with the sloop and gave her a broadside.”<sup>19</sup> Following the broadside, the *Vigilant* achieved a successful boarding. During the battle, the *Dart* lost her First Lieutenant and the *Vigilant* lost two crewmen to drowning.<sup>20</sup> The remaining crew of the *Dart* was captured and forwarded to the U.S. Navy Frigate *President* for “disposal.”<sup>21</sup>

The *Vigilant* continued a gallant career, capturing numerous vessels during and after the War. In 1830 she was relocated from Newport, RI to New Haven, CT. In 1835 she underwent and extensive overhaul and in 1842 the USRC *Vigilant* was sold in Boston for \$2,800.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Canney, 10.

<sup>17</sup> King, 54.

<sup>18</sup> U.S. Coast Guard, 120.

<sup>19</sup> King, 54.

<sup>20</sup> U.S. Coast Guard, 120.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 121.

## ADMIRAL IN DEFEAT

The USRC *Surveyor* was a 75-ton cutter, with a crew of 15 to 25, six 12-pound carronades, a total length of 68 feet, and nearly seven feet in draft. Robert Parsons of Baltimore built her in 1807.<sup>23</sup> By the time war had been declared, the USRC *Surveyor* had already achieved great success. In 1809, the *Surveyor* captured the Schooners *Martha* and *Susan*, and in 1810, she took a French privateer.<sup>24</sup> At the onset of the War of 1812, she captured a “valuable British ship from Jamaica.”<sup>25</sup> One year later, the *Surveyor*’s luck ran out.

On June 12, 1813, the *Surveyor* was anchored up at the mouth of the York River in the Chesapeake Bay. That evening, under the command of Captain Samuel Travis, the cutter made extra precautions due to poor weather.<sup>26</sup> He rolled her carronades into place and posted a guard boat in position to provide early warning. As darkness fell, the British Frigate *Narcissus*, under command of Lieutenant John Crierie, deployed a fifty man boarding team on two small boats to attack the cutter. By the time the cutter’s crew noticed the attack, the boarding team was inside the range of the carronades. The cutter’s crew opened fire with muskets. The crew defended the *Surveyor* with “stubborn courage in a desperate hand-to-hand engagement.”<sup>27</sup>

The British, using its more than two to one ratio, captured the *Surveyor* and her crew. Three of the attackers were killed with seven wounded while the *Surveyor* suffered five

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<sup>23</sup> Canney, 8.

<sup>24</sup> U.S. Coast Guard, 117.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> King, 57.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

wounded.<sup>28</sup> The ferocious and courageous defense of the *Surveyor* received the highest admiration of Lieutenant Crierie. In a letter to Captain Travis, Crierie wrote: “Your gallant and desperate attempt to defend your vessel against more than doubled your number, on the night of the 12<sup>th</sup> instant, excited such admiration on the part of your opponents as I have seldom witnessed, and induce me to return you the sword you have so ably used.”<sup>29</sup>

The *Surveyor* was then taken into service of the British and used to patrol the Chesapeake throughout the remainder of the war.<sup>30</sup> Captain Travis and his crew were held captive for over a year. Despite this tragic and bloody ending, the *Surveyor* served admirably and fought vehemently in defeat.

#### THE STAND

The USRC *Eagle* was the second of five cutters with the same name. She was purchased in 1809 with the stipulation that she was a “vessel not exceeding 130 tons burthen,” and a “crew not exceeding twenty-five men.”<sup>31</sup> Early in the war, the *Eagle* achieved moderate success. Under command of Captain Frederick Lee, the *Eagle* sent three vessels into New Haven for trading with the enemy: the *Patriot*, the *Harriet*, and the *Ann Mclane*.<sup>32</sup> Later, she successfully escorted convoys through Long Island Sound to New York.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> U.S. Coast Guard, 117.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Canney, 8.

<sup>31</sup> U.S. Coast Guard, 113.

<sup>32</sup> King, 59.

<sup>33</sup> U.S. Coast Guard, 114.

In 1814, the *Eagle* embarked on a mission that would mark her place in history. With her crew and thirty volunteers, she set to sea to rescue the crew of the merchant ship *Suzan*. “A sloop in disguise” had captured the *Suzan* as she transited from New York to New Haven.<sup>34</sup> The seas were calm with little to no wind as the *Eagle* set out of the Harbor and remained that way through the night. At dawn, the crew of the *Eagle* found themselves dangerously close to the British brig *Dispatch*. The *Eagle* attempted to flee into the shallow waters on the Long Island coast as the *Dispatch* deployed several barges to give chase. As the *Eagle* approached a small creek, fishermen on the shoreline signaled that the water depth would not be sufficient to allow her to enter, so in desperation, Captain Lee intentionally beached the cutter.<sup>35</sup> With assistance from locals, two 4-pounders and two 2-pounders were towed up to a bluff to prepare for the defense of the cutter. Musket and cannon fire persisted all day and all night as the *Eagle*’s crew successfully defended their ship. As ammunition ran low, the crew “tore up the logbook to make cartridges, and returned the enemy’s small shot which lodged in the hill.”<sup>36</sup>

The *Dispatch* and her barges abandoned their attack, allowing the local volunteers to leave the Captain and his crew. Captain Lee then succeeded in removing the *Eagle* from the beach and was making way for safety when the British returned and finally took possession of the *Eagle*. As reported in the *New York Evening Post* on October 18, 1814, the *Eagle* “was greatly injured, but it is expected that the enemy will be able to refit her to annoy us in the Sound.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> King, 60.

<sup>35</sup> Smith, 28.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>37</sup> U.S. Coast Guard, 116.

## A MOST AWFUL EXPLOSION

“Between the hours of ten and eleven yesterday forenoon, a most awful explosion took place in this harbor, on board the Revenue schooner *Gallatin*.”<sup>38</sup> That harbor was Charleston and that day was April 19<sup>th</sup>, 1813. The *Gallatin* had recently returned from a short patrol and Captain John H. Silliman had anchored the cutter just off Blake’s Wharf. Captain Silliman ordered his crew to clean and examine the weapons on the vessel while the Captain went to shore. Shortly thereafter, the vessel exploded and sank, killing many and injuring more. The horrific scene is captured in an article of the *Charleston Courier* of April 20<sup>th</sup>, 1813. “Some of the bodies were thrown nearly as high as the mast head of the vessel; others were driven through the cabin and lodged upon the main deck.”<sup>39</sup> Three crewmen were never recovered and the others apparently sustained sever injuries.

Prior to this tragic end, the *Gallatin* achieved several significant successes during the War of 1812. In conjunction with the cutter *Jefferson*, the *Gallatin* is credited with seizing the brig *General Blake*, the *Active*, the *Georgiana*, and the *Tom Hazard*. Solo, she is credited with taking the brig *William Blake*. In a section described as the *Intel from Lloyd’s List*, the *Edinburgh Advertiser* noted on September 15<sup>th</sup>, 1812 that “a letter of marquee from Jamaica to England has been taken by *Gallatin* American Revenue Cutter, after a sever engagement of 8 hours, and carried to Savannah.”<sup>40</sup> However, the *New York Evening Post* reported, “no such engagement

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<sup>38</sup> Smith, 29.

<sup>39</sup> Smith, 29.

<sup>40</sup> *The Edinburgh Advertiser*, September 15, 1812. Article on-line <http://www.newspaperarchive.com/PdfViewerTags.aspx?img=978886&firstvisit=true&src=search&currentResult=0>. (Accessed 21 September 2008)

has taken place.”<sup>41</sup> In either instance, the USRC *Gallatin*, brought into service in 1807, served the RCS admirably and ended her service with a dramatic and tragic end.

#### SEVEN-HOUR CHASE

The USRC *James Madison* is credited with numerous conquests in the early part of the War of 1812. Perhaps her biggest prize was the privateer brig *Shamrock*. On October 26<sup>th</sup> of 1812, *The Times* of London reported that “the *Shamrock*,” traveling “from London to Amelia Island, was taken the 25<sup>th</sup> of July, by the *James Madison* Schooner of 6 guns and 75 men, and carried to Savannah.”<sup>42</sup> The *Shamrock* was a 300-ton brig with six guns and sixteen men.<sup>43</sup> The *Madison* is also credited with capturing the *Snow* and the *Wade*, the former listed as also having six guns and the later reported to have possessed “\$20,000 worth of specie.”<sup>44</sup>

The *Madison*'s career in the RCS came to an end in August 1812. In October 1812, an extract of a letter written to John Wilson Croker, Esq. from Captain Huskisson of the HMS *Barbados* appeared in *The Edinburgh Advertiser*. In that letter, Captain Huskisson described the “seven hour chase” that ensued on August 22. At position 51 degrees north and 75 degrees west, the HMS *Barbados* “captured the Revenue Schooner *James Madison* commanded by George Brooks, pierced for fourteen guns, and had ten mounted, two of which were thrown overboard in

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<sup>41</sup> U.S. Coast Guard, 78.

<sup>42</sup> *The Times (London)*, October 26, 1812. Article on-line <http://www.newspaperarchive.com/PdfViewerTags.aspx?img=7403623&firstvisit=true&src=search&currentResult=0>. (Accessed 21 September 2008)

<sup>43</sup> Canney, 8.

<sup>44</sup> Smith, 30.

the chase, with a compliment of sixty five men.”<sup>45</sup> Captain Brooks and his officers were then taken to New York where they arrived on November 24, 1812.<sup>46</sup> The final fate of the cutter is not known. Some have speculated that the *Madison* was placed in service of the British under the name *Alban*, but others have disputed this.<sup>47</sup>

### THE THREE OTHERS

The three remaining cutters that fought in the War of 1812 had careers that brought credit to the RCS even though little evidence to their successes remains. The USRC *Commodore Barry* appeared to have the shortest career. Purchased in 1812 at Sag Harbor, NY, she was stationed in Passamaquoddy, ME under the command of Captain Daniel Elliott.<sup>48</sup> In August of 1812, the *Commodore Barry* was captured alongside the American privateer *Madison* by three British vessels, the *Maidstone*, the *Spartan*, and the *Plumper*.<sup>49</sup> Some reports have her serving as a British tender while another report had the *Commodore Barry* dismantled in St. John’s, Newfoundland.<sup>50</sup>

The USRC *Mercury* was built in North Carolina and served in Ocracoke, NC and New Bern, NC. The *Mercury* is most known for the events that occurred on the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> of July, 1813. The evening of the 11<sup>th</sup>, the *Mercury* anchored a mile from the Ocracoke inlet, between the

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<sup>45</sup> *The Edinburgh Advertiser*, October 27, 1812. Article on-line <http://www.newspaperarchive.com/PdfViewerTags.aspx?img=980737&firstvisit=true&src=search&currentResult=0>. (Accessed 21 September 2008)

<sup>46</sup> U.S. Coast Guard, 116.

<sup>47</sup> Canney, 9.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> U.S. Coast Guard, 122.

towns of Ocracoke and Portsmouth. That same day, Ocracoke residents discovered a fleet of eight British vessels under command of Rear Admiral Cockburn nearby.<sup>51</sup> As a precaution, the Portsmouth customs collector placed the town's money and bonds onboard the *Mercury*. At daybreak on the 12th, the *Mercury* set sail for New Bern. Cockburn's fleet also set sail and aimed at capturing the *Mercury* before she could warn the residents of New Bern as to their presence. The *Mercury* made a narrow escape, being chased for eight to ten miles into the sound, thus saving the funds and preventing an attack on New Bern by Admiral Cockburn's fleet.<sup>52</sup>

Even less is known about the USRC *Active*. We do know that she served with a Navy flotilla in New London, CT. She was under the command of Captain Caleb Brewster and served from 1812 to 1817.<sup>53</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The War of 1812 is an often-overlooked war with obscure causes and no clear victor. The Americans again stood up to a major European power and they held their own. Britain, mired in Napoleonic conflicts, maintained a foothold in the new continent, however shrinking it was. Canada rebuffed multiple attempts by the United States to invade the British Colony. The Native Americans, caught in the middle, continued to see their homeland shrink and their way of life vanish. The war was fought on land and at sea and took the resources of all the military of the United States.

The Revenue-Marine Service served admirably during the War of 1812. Her nine cutters are credited with numerous conquests and achieved success in disrupting British shipping. The

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>52</sup> King, 55.

<sup>53</sup> U.S. Coast Guard, 123.

cutters fought with bravery and demonstrated a resourcefulness that was vital in battling a Navy of such a superior number with such a higher quality of ships. Their efforts, combined with the U.S. Navy and the ground forces of the U.S. Army chipped away at British resolve and, with the Treaty of Ghent, cut America's remaining ties with Europe.

Figure 1: The nine cutters of the War of 1812

CUTTERS	YEARS OF SERVICE	CAPTAIN	SIGNIFICANT CAPTURES
ACTIVE	1812-1817	Caleb Brewster	
COMMODORE BARRY	1812	Daniel Elliott	
EAGLE	1809-1814	Frederick Lee	PATRIOT HARRIET ANN MCLANE
GALLATIN	1807-1813	Hugh McNeill J.H. Silliman	WILLIAM BLAKE *GENERAL BLAKE *ACTIVE *GEROIGIANA *TOM HAZARD
JAMES MADISON	1807-1812	George Brooks	SHAMROCK SNOW WADE
JEFFERSON	1802-1817	William Ham	Unknown British Brig PATRIOT
MERCURY	1807-1820	William Wallace	
SURVEYOR	1807-1813	William Travis	Unknown British Ship
VIGILANT	1812-1842	John Cahoone	DART

\*Captured in conjunction with the USRC Jefferson

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