



History

JOHN BARRY –

FATHER OF THE AMERICAN NAVY

This September 14 will mark the 205th Anniversary of one of the leading patriots of the American Revolution and one of the foremost of a countless Irish American who has served this country in war and peace, Commodore John Barry. Though widely respected and revered as “The Father of the American Navy” in his own time, Barry’s contribution is often overlooked.

Born in County Wexford in 1745, little is known of his early life. His father was a poor Catholic tenant farmer who was evicted by his landlord, forcing the family to relocate to Rosslare. There Barry’s uncle was a captain of a fishing skiff, apparently imparting to young Barry a love of the sea. Barry signed on as a cabin boy at an early age and must have shown great aptitude as a seaman; he obtained his first command, The Barbadoes out of Philadelphia, at the age of 21. He quickly earned an impressive reputation as a ship’s master and was soon sought out by the leading merchants of Philadelphia. As captain of The Black Prince, Barry set the record for the fastest day of sailing ever recorded in the 18th century.

When war with England appeared imminent in 1775, Barry immediately offered his services to the fledgling congress. He was given the important task of outfitting merchantmen as the first Continental Navy Ships and readying them for sea. Among those converted was his own Black Prince, rechristened Alfred. It was aboard the Alfred that a Lt. John Paul Jones would be the first to hoist the flag of the new nation aboard a ship of the Continental Navy.

Barry’s efforts at creating the first ships of the Continental Navy were soon rewarded with his own command, the Lexington, which was the first in a series of successful commands he was to hold during the Revolution. Space does not permit a full account of all of Barry’s service during the revolution, but in summary:

- Barry was the first to capture a British war vessel on the high seas
- Barry captured the most ships (prizes) of any captain during the revolution.
- When deprived of a ship when the capture of Philadelphia seemed imminent, Barry formed a regiment of sailors and marines and fought at the battles of Trenton and Princeton
- Barry captured two British ships after himself being severely wounded
- Barry fought the last naval action of the Revolution

Barry’s most famous naval encounter, and the one that most truly shows his character, was while commanding the Alliance where he fought the two British Sloops Atlanta and Trepassy. During the battle, Barry received several wounds and was taken below deck for treatment. Barry’s second in command soon appeared before him to tell him that the ship was severely damaged and asking permission to strike the colors. A furious Barry replied, “No Sir, the thunder! If this ship cannot be fought without me, I will be brought on deck; to your duty, Sir.” At that point the battle dramatically turned, and both British ships surrendered. The British Commander was brought to the wounded Barry and presented him his sword. Barry received it and then immediately returned it; “I return it to you, Sir. You have merited it, and your King ought to give you a better ship. Here is my cabin, at your service. Use it as your own.”

After the Revolution, Barry would become the first commissioned officer of the United States Navy. It would be under his direction that the great frigates of the United States including the USS Constitution would be built. Under his tutelage, the great naval heroes who checked the most powerful navy in the world in the War of 1812 would be trained. Barry was also well known for his charity, supporting funds for the care of widows and orphans of sailors and a leading member of the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick. Barry would die in 1803 from the complications of Asthma. Dr. Benjamin Rush, a signer of the Declaration of Independence gave his eulogy and fittingly summed up Barry’s life and service: “He fought often and once bled in the cause of freedom, but his habits of War did not lessen in him the peaceful virtues which adorn private life.”

The paternity of the US Navy is often hotly debated. In fact, the U.S. Navy explicitly states that no one man can be the Father of the US Navy, this may be the only battle the Navy has ever shied from. The case of Barry and Jones both have merit, but if a father is someone who stands by and cares for their “child” until it is self sufficient, then certainly Barry has the better claim. Irrespective of titles, we as Irish Americans must ensure that the patriotism and devotion of John Barry to his country is never eclipsed.

John King, Historian

Did you Know that....

- The first sea action of the American Revolution occurred when private citizens under Jeremiah O’Brien, an immigrant from Cork, seized the British Armed Sloop Margareta in 1775.
- The battle between the Bonhomme Richard and the Serapis, where John Paul Jones famously said “I have not yet begun to fight”, turned to the Americans favor when one of Jones’ marines was able to throw a grenade into an ammunition magazine on the Serapis. Like the Bonhomme Richard, the marines were provided by France; they were members of the Regiment de Walsh-Serrant, part of the Irish Brigade of France.
- In WW II, flying from a carrier bearing the same name as Barry’s Lexington, Edward “Butch” O’Hare would thwart a Japanese attack on the fleet shooting down five Japanese aircraft in less than four minutes. He was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor and O’Hare Airport is named in his honor.
- The United States Navy’s first commissioned submarine was the USS Holland, named for her Irish-American inventor, John Philip Holland.