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Eagle, Revenue cutter

THE DEFENSE OF THE REVENUE CUTTER

EAGLE;

OR A NEW VIEW ON NEGRO HEAD

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The stubborn defense of the Revenue Cutter Eagle by Captain Frederick Lee, her crew and a determined band of volunteers, was one of the few bright spots that relieved the gloom of the year 1814 for the people who lived on the shores bordering eastern Long Island Sound. No history of the United States Coast Guard fails to mention it and the artist Aldis B. Browne II, has recreated the incident as a section of a mural in the Coast Guard Academy's Satterlee Hall. Until recently there was just one common source for the account of the action, that of a single anonymous eyewitness account published originally in New Haven's Connecticut Journal for 17 October 1814, and as was the practise of the time, copied in varying stages of completeness by both New York and New London papers.

The narrative was first printed at length by Captain H. D. Smith in his Early History of the U. S. Revenue Marine, published by the Naval Historical Foundation in 1932, and most latterly referred to by Captain Stephen Evans in his The United States Coast Guard, 1790-1815, for the United States Naval Institute Proceedings in 1949. Smith erroneously assigned the

17 October date to the Negro Head incident, the date of the publication of the news account. Evans merely notes that the incident took place "late in the month of October." Actually, it took place on October 11, as will be seen hereafter.

Desirous of including the Negro Head incident in the permanent Coast Guard historical exhibition in the Smithsonian Institution's new Museum of History and Technology, the Division of Naval History undertook further research into the history of the Revenue Cutter Eagle. Investigation in the Admiralty Records of the Public Records Office in London, revealed fresh documentation relating to the Eagle, in the form of the logs of two vessels of the Royal Navy. The first of these belonged to H.M. brig-sloop Dispatch, (PRO Adm. 512296 Pt. 5), a vessel intimately concerned in the affair at Negro Head. The second log belonged to H.M. frigate Narcissus, (PRO Adm. 51267 Pt. 5), which took part in what may be called the denouement of the affair.

At first glance the material in the logs seemed largely corroborative of the printed newspaper narrative. However, closer inspection revealed certain new details and apparent anomalies which give an added dimension to the saga of the defense of the Cutter Eagle, as an incident in the history of the United States Coast Guard.

Never had the brief and turbulent annals of the United States come closer to being terminated than in the beginning of autumn, 1814, when the ultra-Federalists, disaffected by a disastrous war not of their choosing, moved in the direction

of secession. Their direst forebodings seemed to have been vindicated. Washington City had fallen in flames and even the successful defense of Fort McHenry hardly penetrated the pall of gloom which hung over New England. The bright news of McDonough's victory on Lake Champlain, while it might have relieved apprehension of a British invasion down the Hudson River Valley, was dulled by the ominous news of terror raids in the Province of Maine. The people of eastern Long Island Sound were convinced of the imminence of a new British campaign which would repeat the events in the Chesapeake. Fresh British fleet units arrived off the coast in a seemingly endless procession, now that European war had been liquidated.

British vessels maintaining the blockade of Naragansett and Buzzard Bays and the entrance to Long Island Sound, lazily patrolled under the Indian Summer sun. Nantucket Island had been figuratively forced into concluding a separate peace with his Britannic Majesty's government, in return for desperately needed supplies which had been offered as a <u>quid pro quo</u> by the blockading Admiral Hotham. British officers sauntered in the streets of Nantucket as though they were at home in England. The once teeming coastal waterways - the main avenue of Eastern commerce - lay all but deserted except for fugitive American privateers making or leaving port under cover of night. The only other American vessels abroad by day were more than likely busily engaged in trafficking with the enemy in fresh provisions, armed with passes generously supplied by Admiral Hotham. Testimony to such nefarious activities, as well as the lack of

enthusiasm abroad in New England for Mr. Madison's War, appeared in frequent notices, such as this for Wednesday, October 26, 1814, in the New London Gazette:

> On Friday last the Boat True Blooded Yankee, Burrows, took a sloop called the Nabby of Westport, in the Vineyard Sound, with Hay, &c. supposed to be bound to the enemy. She had a British pass, signed by Admiral Hotham. The crew consisting of three men, were brought here on Monday.

By the beginning of September, British patrol vessels had pushed deep into the protected waters of Long Island Sound, seeking to choke off even the occasional American vessel that still slunk along in the narrow waters west of Bridgeport. When a British sloop of war chased an American schooner into their harbor, the New Havenites flocked to help with the fortifications on Prospect Hill, and militia troops in the vicinity of Guilford and Branford were put on the alert. It was possibly this same sloop which sent a chill through other neighboring communities by making sudden landings at India Neck and Stony Creek, hauling off floating equipment from along shore, although offering no harm to the inhabitants.

On Thursday, October 6, and again on the following day, a sloop landed a party on Faulkner Island. Here was delivered a piece of British impudence, the sardonic humor of which seemed not entirely lost on the Yankee who reported it for the New London Gazette, Wednesday, October 12, 1814:

> The enemy landed at Faulkners Island & light-house on Thursday evening last, in consequence of the lamps not being lighted and enquired the cause. They

> were informed by Mr. Stone, the keeper, that it was in consequence of orders, and that he should not light them. They then went to the light-house and lighted it themselves, and departed. On Friday they landed and took away the lamps and the oil, and took Mr. Stone on board one of their vessels, where he was treated politely, and told that he might return and inform his employers that, if they would permit him to light the house, the lamps and oil would be returned or otherwise, they would be retained and the light-house destroyed.

Area newspapers tried to keep up a bold front. They printed inspirational poetry which breathed defiance of the sons of British Slaves, and snatched at every odd bit of news which might reflect the prowess of American arms. However, skyrocketing flour prices, the refusal of banks in Philadelphia and New York to pay specie for bank notes, and the depressing prospect of a winter short of food and firewood did not improve morale. The fate of Machias and Castine far to the eastward, and Stonington closer at hand, made each dispatch on the progress of the peace commissioners at Ghent read with increasing eagerness.

The will to resist, among a great part of the citizenry, was at low ebb. Yet, in spite of the menace of the present, there were, as there always will be, men who preferred the forlorn hope to a mere vacuity of existence. Such a man was Captain Frederick Lee, Commander of the Revenue Cutter Eagle, laying at New Haven on October 10, 1814; and so were the men who rallied around him that day to hear the excited report of an eyewitness to the latest outrage perpetrated by that cursed

sloop.

We know little about the dimensions of the Eagle. It is probable that she was built in the vicinity of her station at New Haven, possibly in that town, or at East Guilford, or even possibly along the Thames River. If the dimensions of her contemporaries, the Cutter Vigilant, stationed at Newport, or the Massachusetts II, stationed at Boston, may be taken as typical, the Eagle measured between 58 and 61 feet, with a beam between 17 and 19 feet, and a draft of approximately 10 feet. She was undoubtedly rigged as a foretopsail schooner, although she was designated as a brigantine. Some idea of her general appearance may be deduced from the vessels of the New England coast of the period. They seem to have been adaptations of the "Baltimore clipper" design, but of fuller body and flatter floors in the interest of greater carrying capacity. Through the account of the Battle of Negro Head, we know that the Eagle was pierced for six guns and that four of these were 4-pounders and two were 2-pounders.

We know little more about the Eagle's commander. Captain Lee was a native of East Guilford and apparently a citizen of some consequence in his community. In 1822, he was prominent among those who brought about the incorporation of the town of Madison. Indeed, he is credited with naming the town after the former president. Thus it is clear that Captain Lee could not be numbered among the adherents of the embittered ultra-Federalists who were foregathering at Hartford, to dictate terms to the Federal government, at the very moment when

the Eagle was preparing to put to sea to vindicate Sailor's Rights and Free Trade. Unhappily, his band of volunteers, some forty in number according to one account, remains anonymous.

The account that stirred Captain Lee to immediate action concerned the armed American merchant sloop Susan, Captain Miles, of and for New Haven. The day before, Sunday, October 9, in New York City, she had completed her valuable lading of flour and merchandise, estimated at $17,000.00, and had taken on sixteen passengers. Taking advantage of the flood tide, she made her way up the East River, threaded the Hell Gate, and opening up Long Island Sound beyond Throg's Neck, laid a course for New Haven, hugging the northern shore to take advantage of the land shadows.

At about nine o'clock in the morning of the 10th, having passed Westport, Connecticut, the Susan fell in with what appeared to be an innocent wood-sloop. Before those in the Susan could realize what had happened, the wood-sloop ran up British colors and threw off its disguise to reveal an armament of one 18-pounder, two 4-pounders and a crew of from forty to sixty men armed with muskets. The Susan struck her colors without firing a shot. The sloop proved to be a tender to HM frigate Pomone and under the command of a naval lieutenant. With a prize crew aboard the Susan, both vessels proceeded in company to the eastward.

Witness to this episode was a New Haven packet bound for New York. Making for the nearest land, the packet set

a passenger on shore at Mill River, who rode express to New Haven to inform Susan's owners and to alert the Eagle. It apparently took very little time for Captain Lee to make his decision to go out in chase of the Susan and her captor. The news account, hereafter referred to as the Narrative, mentioned that the wind was light, which is corroborated by the Dispatch's log. Six hours after the capture of the Susan, the Revenue Cutter, her crew augmented by the thirty to forty volunteers, moved out of New Haven harbor under tow. Captain Lee hoped that he could still intercept the tender and her prize before they should pass the harbor mouth.

Once clear of the harbor it appeared that the quarry had already dropped out of sight. The Eagle, making the best of the light and variable airs in the falling dusk, shaped a course to the south and east which would bring her under the Long Island shore, considered to be the most likely place to be made for by the tender and her prize. The Narrative reads, ". . . did not observe the sloop; at daybreak found themselves nearly under the guns of a sloop-of-war." This was HM brig-sloop Dispatch.

A discrepancy between the two accounts appears here. The Narrative states that with the coming of light the Pomone's tender and the prize Susan were nowhere to be seen. The Dispatch log is just as clear that both the armed sloop and her prize were not only being chased by the Cutter, but that she had taken them under fire.

There is a third, entirely uncorroborated account of

the action, which was printed by the New York Gazette on October 13, 1814. This report relates that the gunfire heard on the Sound on the night of the 10th, was from the Eagle's fight with the enemy barges, after the Cutter had recaptured the Susan.

When she sighted the Eagle, the Dispatch put two barges in the water to take the Cutter under attack while the brig slowly worked closer in the light air.

According to the Dispatch log, the Eagle was run ashore on Long Island while keeping up her fire at the brig's boats. At 8:15, the tender and her prize had apparently hauled off safely. It is important to note that shortly after this time the Dispatch observed "a number of soldiers with several pieces of cannon on the cliff endeavoring to protect the schooner." It was not until 9:00 a.m. that the Dispatch closed the range sufficiently to open fire. Forty minutes later she was so well within range that she anchored with a spring on her cable to better direct her fire at the schooner, the cliff emplaced pieces and the "Infantry" serving them.

The cliff referred to was Negro Head, a name which no longer appears on charts of the area. Blunt's American Coast Pilot shows the name in current use until the edition of 1830, when Horse and Lion and Friar's Head are substituted.

Negro Head rose above the 160-foot sand cliff to a total height of 240 feet above sea level. Just west of

Herod Point, which lies approximately 5 miles west of Negro Head, the sand cliff falls away abruptly to a sandy beach where the shoreline is pierced by a marshy inlet called Wading River. The approach to the shallow inlet is heavily encumbered with a delta-shaped shoal which runs out into the Sound for about 1.5 miles and spreads out to both east and west for a distance of about a mile along shore. The 1830 Blunt chart shows 3/4 to 3-1/2 fathoms of water over the shoal, while to the eastward it shows 6 feet of water over hard sand bottom some 1,000 yards off the shore line.

Returning to the Eagle's account of her sudden discovery of the Dispatch, we are informed that the Cutter attempted to make for Wading River to avoid being overpowered by the superior strength of the brig and her armed barges. It appears that fishermen working in the vicinity of the shoal warned the Cutter from attempting the inlet. With no further avenue of retreat, and with the west-northwesterly breeze threatening to make a lee shore trap of Long Island, it was decided to run the Eagle ashore to keep her from falling into the hands of the British. The Narrative explains that "the cutter was laid on shore under a high bluff nearly opposite the Falkland Islands, and the barges coming up, she [the Cutter] commenced a brisk fire on them with round and grape shot, which soon obliged them to sheer off."

If one is to take the Narrative quite literally, the Cutter was actually run on the beach itself. While, as it has been noted, the earlier charts and sailing directions

warn of shoals and obstructions in the vicinity of Negro Head, it is not until the advent of the Coast and Geodetic charts that sufficient detail becomes available to adequately appreciate the nature of the ground. On the chart for 1855, corrected to 1860, the sailing directions for the area is of interest:

> Friar's Head. (Negro Head) A shoal extends 2-1/3 miles NE x E from Friar's Head, and 1-3/4 miles from the shore, having 12 feet on it near its northern extremity, and 6 and 8 feet 3/4 of a mile from shore.

From the shore line out to the 3/4 mile line the chart shows depths in the vicinity of 4 feet. Along the shore line itself, rocks and boulders, both submerged and awash are indicated for tides of mean low water of spring tides.

Computation reveals that on October 11, 1814, high water occured in the vicinity of Negro Head at about 9:35 a.m., while low water occured at 3:48 p.m. With the transit of the moon at Greenwich occuring at 10:33 p.m. Greenwich Mean Time on October 10, the tides would be approaching spring range. The spring range for Herod Point and Jacob Point is 7 feet and 5.8 feet respectively, and we may use a mean spring range for Negro Head Landing at the foot of the cliff of approximately 6.4 feet. Thus, at 8:15 on October 11, Captain Lee would have been running the Eagle aground on a rising spring tide. This would have enabled him to clear the offlying shoals and deposit the ship well inshore. However, in view of the gradual shoaling and her 10-foot draft,

it is doubtful if the vessel could have been brought any closer to the beach than 100 yards. Curiously enough, the current Coast and Geodetic Chart No. 1212 shows a wreck lying about the same distance from shore close to the very spot where the Eagle may have lain.

Now we must remember that, according to the Dispatch log, the British brig was making her approach between 8;15 and 9:00 a.m., and that it was during this time interval that she reported being taken under fire by both the grounded Eagle and the guns emplaced upon the cliff and manned by a body of "Infantry," With these facts established, we can appreciate the series of events as related in the Narrative.

A scene of intense activity must have taken place along shore in the immediate vicinity of the grounded Cutter. While exchanging fire with the brig, the barges and Pomone's tender,which had reentered the scene, the Cutter's crew, her embarked volunteers, local fishermen and very likely, folk come out from Wading River village, perhaps seventy-five people in all, proceeded at the same time to strip the Eagle of guns, carriages, powder, shot, items of ships' equipment such as sails and cordage, to render her of small value to her captors. These considerable items were then manhandled up a 160-foot sand cliff, and up yet another 80 feet to the summit of Negro Head. There the pieces were emplaced, the national colors planted, and the British craft taken under fire.

If we are to accept the time interval noted by the Dispatch log, this impressive feat was accomplished within no

more than forty-five minutes! When one considers the time required merely to prepare the rigging to swing out the guns and their carriages into waiting boats, make the short passage to the beach, and off load them from the boats to the beach, forty-five minutes would still represent a spectacular time just for that much of the operation.

Two 4-pounders and their carriages represent an average weight of 900 to 1,000 pounds each, plus approximately 200 pounds more for each carriage. The 2-pounders weighed about 300 pounds each, including their carriages. Add to this the weight and bulk of gun gear, ammunition and shot, plus sails and oddments of rigging which still remained to be hauled up 240 feet of sand cliff under the fire of the enemy, and we are faced with no mean achievement, as any boatswain will testify! Yet, well within view of this frenzied activity, the Dispatch log is silent on the subject.

Could there indeed have been an independent battery planted on Negro Head as the British log clearly insists? The mention of "the people on shore" in the Narrative, suggests that the people from Wading River as well as from other scattered hamlets in the area may have maintained guns on the heights to cover possible landing places up and down the beach, but the size of the battery makes this improbable. On the other hand, while there seems to be no indication in local histories of the existence of such a battery, we are, however, aware of the existence of a shadowy organization known as the Long Island Sea Fencibles. This was a mobile striking force

utilizing whaleboats and designed to oppose enemy landings along the desolate shores of Long Island, much in the fashion of Baltimore's Sea Fencibles. These were ephemeral units and they left few traces of their history beyond occasional references in the newspapers of the day.

So, in view of more positive evidence to the contrary, one is constrained to believe that the guns, carriages, shot, powder, and considerable other gear from the Eagle actually were manhandled up the cliff as described in the Narrative, and in approximately the time indicated by the Dispatch log. The operation must stand as a most impressive accomplishment.

According to the Dispatch account, at 11:00 a.m., after having exchanged fire with the stranded Eagle and the guns on the cliff for over an hour, the brig weighed anchor and stood closer in shore. Standing on and off, she kept up a fire on both targets, aided by her barges and the guns of the Pomone's tender, which was still in the vicinity with her prize Susan.

The Narrative relates that firing slacked off from the British vessels about 2:00 p.m., when the tender and her prize drew off. The British had raked the Americans from almost every angle, sending her masts crashing and holing her hull as the ebbing tide exposed her underbody.

Apparently convinced that she had hammered the Eagle into a complete state of wreckage, the Dispatch detached the tender and her prize and sent them down to the blockader's rendezvous at Plum Island. She then resumed her former sta-

tion and anchored with a spring on her cable in 4-3/4 fathoms. Intermittent firing was resumed from both sides which lasted throughout the remainder of the afternoon.

The Narrative of the succeeding events of the evening and the night hours of October 11, tend to be confused. It states that the brig weighed at about 5:00 p.m., and stood off to the eastward, but then maintains that she launched further night attacks against the dismasted and shattered cutter.

T he Dispatch log, on the other hand, has no entry indicating that she got underway before 8:30 the following morning. Her entries say that the shore battery kept up an ineffectual fire until 7:00 a.m., and that in the early morning hours, with the tide on the ebb, she sent a boat to ascertain the condition of the Eagle, which proved to be "full of water." Perhaps convinced that the Cutter was beyond salvage, the Dispatch got underway at 8:30 a.m. With the wind variable between NW and WNW, she tacked across the Sound with Guilford Harbor as a destination, in order to set on shore the passengers who had been off the Susan, prior to her having been sent to Plum Island under escort.

At 1:00 p.m., the Dispatch anchored directly off the mouth of Guilford Harbor, and sent in a boat under a flag of truce to land the paroled passengers. When the boat returned at three o'clock, it was immediately dispatched to Falkland Island, possibly to devil poor Mr. Stone again, more probably, to take on provisions. At five o'clock, the Dispatch got

underway and shifted her anchorage to a point outside Falkland Island Shoal, and anchored for the night at six o'clock.

On the Long Island shore, the defenders of the Eagle had good cause to congratulate themselves. By dint of tremendous exertion, they had stood off the powerfully armed enemy, and if the Eagle were not destroyed, she was at least so badly damaged and stripped of so much gear as to be practically worthless to the enemy. All this, we are told, was accomplished at the cost of a single casualty, a slight wound suffered by the Long Islander, Captain Miles, while he was serving one of the Eagle's guns. One further casualty might be mentioned if it were not feared to be apocryphal, that of a calf grazing some distance off from the action on the bluff who was killed by a 32-pound stray shot from the brig.

The Narrative tells us that the Connecticut volunteers, feeling that they could do no more, and that their continued presence would only strain the slim store of provisions at the Negro Head camp, negotiated their passage back to New Haven. It was one of these volunteers who provided the eyewitness account for the Connecticut Journal.

If the Connecticut volunteers were satisfied that little more could be accomplished, such was not the case with Captain Lee. From what we may reconstruct of the events, it appears that as soon as the brig got underway, Captain Lee and his Long Island cohorts, took advantage of the rising tide, which would have been full about 10:30 p.m., to patch up the Eagle's

hull as best they could, pumped her out, and then towed her to deeper water, preparatory to getting her off to safety.

Captain Lee was doomed to disappointment. On Thursday, October 13, the Dispatch got underway at 5:00 a.m., and with a light breeze from WNW stood across the Sound for Negro Head. As dawn lighted the sky, a frigate was observed at anchor to the westward of Horton Point; an exchange of signals proved her to be H.M. frigate Narcissus. The frigate soon got underway and the two vessels converged on Negro Head, where they anchored, the Dispatch at 8:15, and the Narcissus at 9:00. There they were greeted by the sight of the Eagle, laying at anchor close under the shore, although the log of the Narcissus indicates that the schobner was apparently not yet fully afloat.

Immediately, the two British men-of-war got out all their boats which, when fully armed and supplied with hawsers, started inshore under the command of Lieutenant Scott of the Narcissus. At about this time, the Narcissus and the Dispatch were joined by the Pomone's tender, which the Dispatch had sighted earlier that morning, running down from Plum Island to rejoin the fray.

At 9:10 a.m., the battery on the cliff opened fire against the advancing flotilla, and as the boats closed on the Eagle, the battery was reinforced by musketry from the Long Islanders' boats. The Eagle appeared to be unmanned and her two remaining guns silent.

With the force employed by the British, the capture of the Eagle was a foregone conclusion. By 11:00 a.m., the

Cutter had been boarded, a hawser bent on and taken under tow out of the range of the cliff battery and anchored in company with the British vessels, with but a single British seaman wounded, as the total cost of the cutting out expedition.

It must have been a bitter Captain Lee, who watched the British vessels get their boats aboard and leisurely get underway at 11:30. At noon, the Dispatch, with the Eagle in tow, and accompanied by the Narcissus and the tender, passed within a mile of Negro Head as they shaped a course for Plum Island, to the eastward, as though to mock the efforts of the late defenders of the Eagle.

Such was the defense and loss of the Revenue Cutter Eagle. We do not know if the fears of the anonymous chronicler were realized, thet the enemy would be able to refit her and "to annoy us in the Sound." Efforts to ascertain whether the Eagle was taken into the Royal Navy, have thus far been unavailing, nor is it entirely clear whether or not the Cutter was eventually returned at the conclusion of peace.

Whatever the final fate of the Eagle, the United States Coast Guard may well take pride in what the men of her progenitor service accomplished during that frantic day at Negro Head. At a time when many New Englanders were gripped by black despair and defeatism, Captain Lee and his men did everything that could be required of men of courage and determination. They played out the game to the last card, knowing well from the very beginning that the trumps were overwhelmingly in British hands.

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