

The a participant in the profitable privateering



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The birth of the United States Navy on 13 October 1775 formed a defensive measure in response to the growing need to protect the commerce of a developing nation from the then largest navy in the world, the British fleet.

Esek Hopkins, the brother of a powerful Rhode Island politician found himself selected as the first Commander in Chief of the Continental Navy. During the French and Indian War, Hopkins quickly emerged as an experienced merchantman as well as a participant in the profitable privateering of British commerce vessels. On Hopkins first mission as Commander in Chief, he found himself in a bind and resorts to his skills as a privateer rather than a Continental naval officer. Years later the United States continued to have problems with commerce raiders, this time with the Barbary Pirates of the Mediterranean Sea. A young man, the son of a Revolutionary privateer, became the answer to this problem; he was known as Stephen Decatur. Decatur led many successful missions in the Mediterranean and became famous for his leadership and heroism. A comparison of the careers of Hopkins and Decatur proves that the success of naval leaders depends not only upon their skill as mariners, but also upon experience, judgment, and luck.

Both Hopkins and Decatur came from seafaring families and were skilled sailors, but Decatur's experience as a naval officer gave him an advantage over Hopkins. After ten years as a shipmaster on the West Indies Route, Hopkins proved his naval prowess as a successful privateer during the French and Indian War, indicating that he was as good a warrior as a trader. However, his lack of experience showed in his battle with the Glasgow, where he exercised little control over the ships within his command,

operating as privateers rather than as a fleet. While Decatur had fewer years at sea, he had more military skill than Hopkins primarily because he garnered his experience within an organized navy rather than as a privateer operating independently.

As a result, one could expect Decatur to be more successful in organized naval battles than Hopkins. Decatur did not necessarily show better judgment than Hopkins, but his lapses of judgment seemed more popularly acceptable. Hopkins did not adequately consider political context in his decision-making. His actions in leaving the southern colonies unprotected in order to capture a fort in the Bahamas and his offering of the spoils to the northern colonies without consulting Congress showed his insensitivity to the need of the new nation to overcome separatism. Hopkins acted like a privateer, not like an American naval officer, by taking the more cautious action of sailing to the Bahamas instead of engaging the British Royal Navy. Hopkins made this decision to minimize danger and maximize profits and critics called him a coward for it.

In contrast, Decatur seemed to almost seek out dangerous situations. Lord Nelson characterized Decatur's actions to destroy the captured Philadelphia in Tripoli Harbor as the most bold and daring act of the age. In 1816, a British squadron off the coast of the United States forced Decatur to surrender the frigate *President*.

Decatur felt that command of a successful expedition to chastise the day of Algiers would give him an opportunity to defend his loss. Some naval historians have questioned some of his decisions-in particular his command

of the President-but these same decisions were supported by his peers.

Decatur's reputation was not harmed by the surrender of the President to the

British squadron in 1816. The public perceived Decatur's adventurous

behavior as heroic in part because those actions usually ended in success.

The perception of Decatur as heroic and Hopkins as a coward derived largely

from different situations in which they found themselves.

Hopkins led the first American navy, which existed not as a true navy, but as

a loose conglomeration of independent operators. Hopkins' first mission in his

new position involved proceeding south to the Chesapeake Bay and then on

to the Carolinas to provide protection from the pirating of Lord Dunmore,

although his orders also allowed him to use his best judgment to undertake

actions useful to the American cause and which would cause distress to the

enemy. Facing heavy ice, delays in