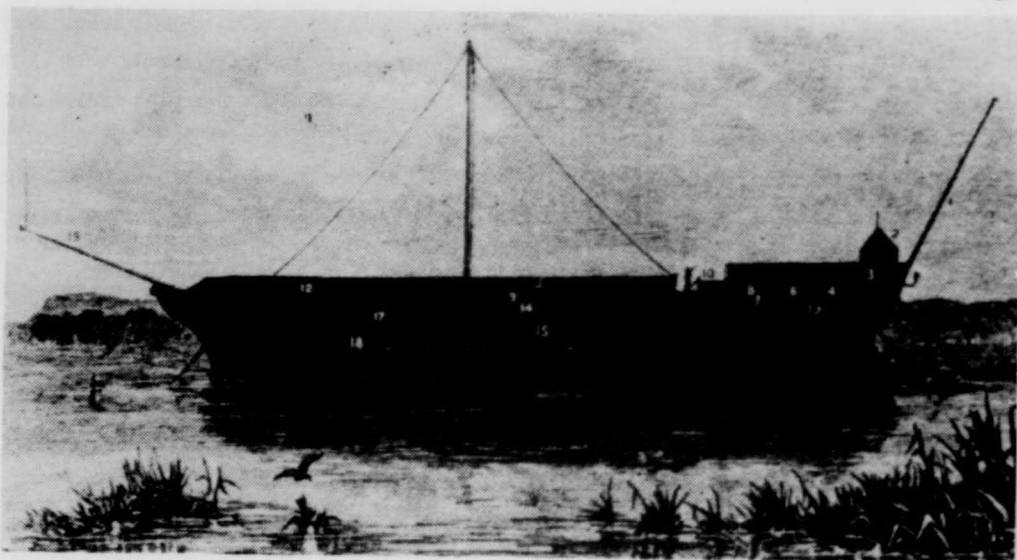


Tory David Sproat of Pennsylvania and the Death of American Prisoners of War

Philip Ranlet
Hunter College



The Old Jersey Prison-ship

America's historical memory is very fragile. Today few recall the fate of American naval prisoners held in New York during the Revolutionary War. Of course, people of the 1780s and 1790s had a vivid scene in New York to jog their memories. Near the location of the notorious British prison ships, skeletal remains of dead American captives were visible for years. Gradually destroyed by natural elements, the scattered remnants were collected only in 1792. And in the early years of the twentieth century, excavations for a subway tunnel disclosed still more bones assumed to belong to American prisoners of war.¹

These pitiful traces notwithstanding, scholars have tended to attack the credibility of the numerous personal accounts—mostly memoirs—that claimed to portray conditions on board the floating prisons. In 1909 James Lenox Banks, in an essay on Pennsylvanian David Sproat, who was responsible for naval prisoners for some years, insisted that the memoirs presented “unproved charges” of brutality

based on anti-British sentiments. Several decades later, Philip Davidson, in his well-regarded book, *Propaganda and the American Revolution*, devoted some attention to the prison ships. He dismissed the revolutionaries' attacks as "war propaganda" and quoted some extreme examples as evidence. Davidson noted that during 1778 Elias Boudinot of New Jersey, who then investigated the matter, found the treatment of American naval prisoners to be acceptable. Significantly, Davidson's book was published in 1941, the year when the United States and Great Britain were to join in an alliance to destroy Nazi Germany.² Although Davidson's opinion about the earlier outbreak of the Second World War is unknown, it can be guessed. His book amply demonstrates that he was not anti-British; he surely hoped that his book, by weakening anti-British sentiment generated by the Revolution, would sap the strength of the isolationists.

British historian Olive Anderson, writing at the height of the Cold War, carried Davidson's theme forward. The "American propagandists," she declared, had damaged "Anglo-American relations." Examining the situation of American captives in England, she stated that they were well treated. She did hedge a bit about the situation in the rebellious colonies themselves, although she called the patriot memoirs "tales" never "subjected to critical examination."³

Such criticism of the memoirs has had a major effect upon scholarship relating to the American prisoners of war. In 1911, Charles E. West could relate, with complete confidence, that over 11,000 Americans perished aboard only one prison ship, the infamous *Jersey*. His mathematical attempts to demonstrate this estimate's truth no longer seem very persuasive. Howard H. Peckham in 1974 offered another estimate, which reflected the scholarship of Davidson and Anderson. The death toll for all confined patriots (not just those in New York City) was a "conservative" 8,500. But this calculation has to be as wrong as West's number.⁴

The time seems ripe for a re-examination of the treatment and fate of the American naval prisoners in the Revolutionary years. Recounting the unpleasant facts of over two centuries ago can have no real impact upon the Atlantic Alliance or the now expanded free world. This essay will delve into British policies toward the captives and will focus upon David Sproat, an American loyalist from Pennsylvania. The only work centering on Sproat is James Lenox Banks's 1909 essay, which is so sympathetic to Sproat that it has all the earmarks of a descendant defending his wronged ancestor. Banks's printing of several items relating to William

Lenox, one of Sproat's nephews, and Banks's middle name suggest that the author's opinions were affected by his own ancestry. Sproat deserves more attention. Furthermore, this article will attempt to shed new light on an old historical dispute—how many American prisoners of war died in British-occupied New York.⁵

* * *

Arriving in Philadelphia from Scotland during 1760, Sproat pursued a career in trade and created, in his own words, "a pritty little fortune." He also speculated in land. Along with British royal official Lord Dunmore and such prominent Pennsylvanians as James Wilson and Robert Morris, Sproat joined the Illinois-Wabash Company. When John Paul Jones came to the city in 1775, Sproat, who was from the same area of Scotland as Jones, helped smooth his way in Philadelphia. Later, when Jones sailed for the Continental Navy, he chose Sproat as his Philadelphia agent.⁶

But Sproat and Jones followed different paths in the Revolution. Sproat became disturbed over the movement toward independence. In May 1776, when separation from Britain was being hotly debated in Philadelphia, he publicly attacked the idea of independence before the Associators, a military force, and was "hiss'd" for his trouble. He later claimed to have taken no part "in any" of the patriots' "proceedings" despite his having, in November 1776, sought the patriot Council of Safety's assistance in collecting a debt. Sproat remained among the rebels until June 1777, when, fearing imprisonment, he fled to the British. He would assist the British invasion of Pennsylvania by taking care of captive Americans at Brandywine. For his aid to the British, Pennsylvania attainted him on May 21, 1778, and his home was auctioned off the following year.⁷

When the British conquered Philadelphia, Sproat returned there. In 1778 Joseph Galloway, a fellow Pennsylvanian who had rejected independence and was administering the British-controlled city, made him the public auctioneer or "Vendue Master." Because of the eventual "unhappy evacuation" of Philadelphia by the British, Sproat had to leave his home a second time.⁸

By January 1779 Sproat was in British-occupied New York City as a refugee. Trying to make ends meet, he keenly felt the drastic decline in his living standards. He refused to admit defeat by returning to Scotland. Instead, he asked Galloway to procure for him a position in an admiralty court created in an area conquered by the British. To keep up his spirits, Sproat joined the Refugee Club, presided over by

William Franklin, the deposed royal governor of New Jersey. No doubt influenced by Franklin and other embittered Refugee Club members, Sproat complained to Galloway about the "kind treatment" meted out to rebels "when taken prisoners in the very acts of Rebellion and Murder." Given Franklin's record of hostility to captives, it is fortunate for American naval prisoners that Sproat was not overly influenced by that bitter exile.⁹

Before Sproat became responsible for American naval prisoners of war, British policy had taken several different twists. In 1775 General William Howe at Boston wanted American naval captives punished, but he could not do so because he feared retaliation by the rebels, a technique of prisoner protection going back to Sir Francis Drake, if not earlier. When New York City was captured in 1776, the revolutionaries appeared to be finished. With no prospect of retaliation, Howe's captives held there died in large numbers. On March 12, 1777, a patriot stated that one thousand Americans perished during this period. Only after the capture of John Burgoyne's army, a looming target for retaliation, and Howe's replacement by Sir Henry Clinton, did conditions improve for Americans who were prisoners of the British Army.¹⁰

American naval prisoners remained a subject of contention much longer. Maritime prisoners in New York were held on various prison ships. Their inmates included not only men from New York and New England, but also sailors from other states such as Pennsylvania and even Georgia. American seamen caught by the British in the West Indies were also dispatched to New York's prison ships, which were dreadful places in 1776-1777.¹¹

Conditions on board the prison hulks were bad for a reason. The Royal Navy hoped to enlist as many American captives as possible to lessen its need for sailors. The British navy had depended upon the thirteen colonies for thousands of hands and the missing supply had to be made good somehow. Impressment was utilized in New York and upon redeemed British maritime prisoners because of the need for men. In 1782 a group of such former prisoners (who had been held in Boston) knew what their fate would be if they reached New York. Therefore, they seized control of their truce ship and diverted it to Bermuda, where they ran away and merged with the population. Faced with such resistance to service, the Royal Navy, even late in the war, depended upon enlisted American prisoners.¹²

The horrors of the prison ships brought forth a threat of retaliation from George Washington. However, in 1778 there was a definite improvement both in

the attitude of British naval commanders and, consequently, in life aboard the floating prisons. During February 1778, patriot Elias Boudinot was permitted by General Clinton to visit New York to examine the British prisons. Boudinot found Commodore William Hotham to be receptive about improving the situation of American naval prisoners of war.¹³

Admiral James Gambier may well have been a "Penurious Old Reptile" as one loyalist called him, and David Sproat shared the great distaste for Gambier as naval commander. But Gambier treated American captives well, which the patriots noticed. In November 1778 John Adams was informed: "The treatment [of American prisoners] Att Halifax latterly is much worse than att [New] York, for since Admiral Gambere [Gambier] has been there he has treated Our people with great humanity, Allowed by all that comes from there." Still, many incarcerated Americans died on the prison ships. On July 24, 1778 Henry Laurens gave an estimate of five to six deaths per day. Another patriot, in August 1779, put the number of mortalities at three to eight daily.¹⁴

In August 1779 Admiral Marriot Arbuthnot took command of the Royal Navy at New York, and on October 13, 1779, he made Sproat the commissary-general for naval prisoners—perhaps the only good thing Arbuthnot did while in command. Quickly, Sproat began to organize his office and made sure addresses of parolees were accurate.¹⁵

Sproat declared what he did in his position for American prisoners of war. "Since my appointment," he insisted to Pennsylvania's President John Dickinson, "I have at all times contributed as much as it has been in my power to relieve their distress and make confinement as comfortable to them as possible." This involved rather extreme measures, such as when he provided for Pennsylvanians ignored by that state's agent because they had served upon a South Carolinian vessel. When Sproat made other, similar comments, no patriot disputed them. As an attainted loyalist, Sproat could easily have had his revenge by allowing the rebels to rot in their prisons. He chose, however, to act more humanely.¹⁶

Exchanges were handled in a similar spirit. Sproat preferred to release as many men as possible, even if the patriots seemed to be getting the better of the deal. Soon, the Americans owed the British some 800 captives. There are several possible reasons for Sproat's generosity. He made reference to such things as the Garden of Eden and purgatory and quoted from the Bible, so he was presumably a religious

man. Perhaps some lingering affection for John Paul Jones reminded him that not all American seamen were fiends. Finally, there is no reason to doubt Sproat's own statement: "I sincerely sympathize with the poor prisoners on both sides in distress. . . ." His attitude was surely strengthened by the fact that his patriot nephew, Captain David Lenox, had been a prisoner of war from November 1776 to May 1778. But Sproat's leniency in exchanges contrasted sharply with British naval policy. For the Royal Navy, an exchange was simply another weapon of war. The British Navy was accustomed to manipulating exchanges to give itself an advantage over its enemy. Such use of exchanges, Olive Anderson has pointed out, "in the eighteenth century not only reflected but actively assisted Britain's rise to maritime supremacy." Sproat's ignoring such military use of exchanges eventually brought the gaze of Admiral Arbuthnot upon his office.¹⁷

When a historian mentions Arbuthnot, the word incompetent is often used as a descriptive adjective. Admiral Arbuthnot is not a favorite of scholars. Arbuthnot assuredly was not a great sailor; he was an administrator. In 1775 he was sent to Halifax and handled the administration of that important naval base. He was a "port admiral," who supervised every task that had to be performed. This role suited him. Then during 1776 he was appointed Lieutenant-Governor of Nova Scotia. As the colony's governor was summoned to Britain, Arbuthnot administered Nova Scotia's government until August 1778.¹⁸

Arbuthnot's attitude towards the American captives at Halifax was in sharp contrast to the humanitarian policy pursued by Sproat. In September 1777 Arbuthnot complained about the American prisoners there, who appear to have been under the care of the army. His complaint was not that eight to ten of them were dying per day, but that they refused to join British forces to save themselves. On September 30, 1778, after Arbuthnot had been replaced as lieutenant-governor, a British doctor at Halifax protested about the horrid conditions the Americans had to endure in both their prison and even their hospital; he compared them to "Herrings salted up in Casks." Yet, it seems only when he stated that the prisoners' diseases might spread to a hospital used by the British did London order the mess cleaned up. Arbuthnot had known about this horror. If anything, he approved of it. During December 1777, he had seen the jailed Americans as a security risk. Logically, the fewer prisoners there were, the less the risk.¹⁹

When Admiral Arbuthnot took the helm at New York, he learned that Gambier

had greatly weakened the post by his departure. Taking the most fit vessels with him, he left behind those in disrepair. Sproat himself criticized Gambier for departing with such strength, which was apparently done to gain some prize money for the admiral on the ocean passage. But Gambier had done still more. Arbuthnot learned that his predecessor had removed the most fit seamen from the remaining ships and sailed away with them. Suddenly, the warships at New York were very short of men, which brought on impressment.²⁰

Inevitably, Arbuthnot would think about what Sproat was doing with the prisoner exchanges. Arbuthnot's underlings could sometimes maneuver around the admiral and get their own way, but Sproat held a sensitive position. Prisoners of war, if recruited, could help end Arbuthnot's shortage of hands. Sproat had been exchanging numerous rebel sailors, which lessened the potential number of recruits. By September 1780, according to David Lenox Banks, Sproat resigned, supposedly because of an argument over who would succeed him. That rationale is complete nonsense. Admiral Lord Rodney revealed what really happened. In Rodney's words, "the Person" (Sproat) serving as commissary "had his Warrant (as he told me) taken from him by Mr. Arbuthnot's Secretary, and never return'd to him again." The plain fact is that Arbuthnot fired Sproat for releasing so many rebel prisoners. Arbuthnot was concerned over how the Admiralty might react if it learned what Sproat had been doing under his very nose. On January 23, 1781, Arbuthnot tried to explain away the incredible shift in the exchange statistics. From the British owing the rebels "several hundreds," by that date the British were due what the Admiral revealed were "near a thousand" mariners. To counter any raised eyebrows in London, he wrote that this result had come about because of the efficiency of his warships in capturing the enemy. Sproat's efficiency went unmentioned.²¹

Sproat was saved by luck. To avoid hurricanes, Admiral Rodney arrived at New York in September, 1780 with his fleet from the West Indies and used his seniority to bump Arbuthnot from his command. While Arbuthnot sulked, Rodney surveyed the situation in New York and learned what had happened to Sproat. Not knowing anyone else able to do the job, Sproat, whom Rodney learned was honest, was his choice to perform the duty. It took some convincing by Rodney to get Sproat to stay on. Rodney appears to have used his influence to obtain for Sproat a firmer hold on the office.²²

Nonetheless, there was to be an important change. The prisoner exchanges

were to stop until the deficit had been wiped out. Rodney's fleet had seized many rebel privateers and had taken 1400 prisoners. He believed that by not exchanging them, the revolutionaries' weak navy could be crippled. Besides, Rodney explained to the Admiralty, "The Wretches with which their Privateers are Mann'd have no principal whatever, they live by Piracy." In the past, when they were exchanged "out of humanity to return to their families and live by honest Industry, they forget the Mercy that had been shown them, and instantly return to renew their Acts of Piracy." Because the rebels then had few naval prisoners to trade, the captive Americans would be held in New York. The prospect of these rebels being incarcerated for a long time gave Rodney "pleasure."²³

The changing of Sproat's generous exchange policy meant that far more American prisoners would be confined at New York. Having determined that the prison ships being employed were in "extreme bad Condition," Rodney decided to use the *Jersey*, then a hospital ship, as a floating prison. Although "unfit" and "totally useless" for a hospital, it was still good enough to confine American sailors. Thus the *Jersey* started its notorious service as a prison. In addition, as H.M.S. *Yarmouth* was to be repaired in Great Britain, Rodney took advantage of its departure to send a batch of American captives to the mother country. This action was in line with British policy toward privateer crews as promulgated on January 10, 1778.²⁴

Rodney finally left New York during November, 1780, after again praising Sproat in a letter to British officials. Arbuthnot was back in command, but he abandoned his old plan of removing Sproat. Exactly why is unknown. The admiral would manage to explain away the generous prisoner exchanges as related above. And in January, 1781, in an obvious gesture to please his superiors, Arbuthnot imitated Rodney and sent another group of prisoners to Britain. Presumably, Arbuthnot believed that he had cleverly eliminated any danger of criticism of himself over what Sproat had done and that the erring commissary would cause no more problems. On the other hand, Arbuthnot had spent so much time arguing with Rodney that replacing Sproat may have been forgotten.²⁵

But the commissary of naval prisoners could not forget what had transpired; Sproat could not revert to his old practice. On December 26, 1780, Abraham Skinner, the patriot officer who handled prisoner exchanges, related what to him was a surprising turn of events. His talks with Joshua Loring, who handled army exchanges and was Sproat's immediate superior, went without a hitch. The

discussions with "our friend Sproat," however, were a complete puzzle to Skinner, who of course knew nothing about what Rodney had decreed. First, Sproat denied having anything to do with the *Yarmouth's* carrying patriots away. Second, despite admitting that Philadelphia had sent in some British seamen, he refused to release confined men from that city in exchange. Disturbed by this "unreasonable" stance, Skinner "could not help abusing him," which apparently flustered Sproat so much that he agreed to release the Pennsylvanians. Sproat probably managed to do so and finagled the "gullible" Arbuthnot yet again. By December 10 at least some exchanges had been resumed. Still, Skinner's assessment of Sproat is a realistic one—"he is a creature without power." Though he was powerless, Sproat's continuance in his office implicated him in all that was to follow, which surely burdened his conscience. During the loyalist's remaining years in New York, he had to adjust to a different role, that of propagandist for the British navy.²⁶

The prisoner of war issue was brought to a head by the *Yarmouth's* transfer of men to Europe. On January 5, 1781, the Continental Congress resolved that retaliation be employed against British captives. Then on January 17 a Philadelphia journal published a statement by George Batterman, a prisoner who had witnessed men being sent to the *Yarmouth*. He also listed what he thought were intolerable conditions on board the *Jersey*. Sproat felt compelled to refute this statement. He declared "That very many" of the captives "are sick and die is true," a damaging admission. Yet he insisted "I will not allow that their disorders proceed from any other cause than dirt, nastiness and want of clothing." Arbuthnot himself, back in 1779, had ordered him "to accomodate the prisoners as well as circumstances would admit." Sproat had then made changes on one of the floating prisons and even put stoves on it for the captives. And what did these ungrateful men do? These rebels "wilfully, maliciously and wickedly burnt the best prison ship in the world." Sproat did not try to explain why the Americans would set fire to a ship while they and their comrades were imprisoned on board it. Propaganda does not necessarily make sense. What undoubtedly happened was that fire from a stove, by accident, spread to the ship itself.²⁷

Meanwhile, George Washington had been notified of Congress's resolution. On January 25, 1781, he wrote a letter to Arbuthnot (which arrived in New York on February 1) suggesting that "an officer of confidence on both sides"—meaning a Continental officer—examine the prison ships and see what the truth was. The

investigation would demonstrate whether the charges were false or, Washington generously allowed, some underling was responsible for bad conditions. Washington wrote as well to Sir Henry Clinton urging him to look into the matter. Clinton, however, claimed to have no authority over the prison ships and dispatched the letter to the navy.²⁸

Washington did not obtain the response from the Royal Navy that he expected. Captain George Dawson, as senior officer present, was commanding in Arbuthnot's absence, and he bluntly refused to permit a Continental officer to see the prison ships. He did send Washington a curious report of an investigation conducted by himself, another naval captain, and two army officers. Dawson used prisoners for propaganda purposes in this so-called "enquiry," a common enough tactic in the twentieth century, but rare in the eighteenth. Various prisoners on the *Jersey* signed a statement that everything was fine on board. Furthermore, Dawson insisted that all the other prisoners agreed with them. The British officers declared "that the sickness at present among the prisoners arises from a want of cloathing and a proper attention in themselves in their own cleanliness." This was the same explanation Sproat had given, strongly suggesting that he had been mouthing official British dogma. The "extensive and impartial Enquiry," as Dawson called it, had a result that he surely did not expect. The enquiry listed the amount of food the Americans received. Washington promptly ordered retaliation upon captive British seamen. They were to receive no more food than the American sailors in New York obtained.²⁹

Only on April 21 did Arbuthnot finally enter the fray and reveal that he had ordered the investigation conducted by Dawson, who had only come to New York on February 1, the same day Washington's letter had reached its destination. Apparently, Arbuthnot had given orders that such a propagandistic investigation be performed when a suitable occasion—such as Washington's letter—presented itself. "I give you my honor," the Admiral assured Washington, "that the transaction was conducted with such strict care and impartiality that you may rely on its validity." Then Arbuthnot decided to make some propaganda points by attacking the treatment of British prisoners of war at the Philadelphia prison, which surely failed to move the Americans very much. In New York some 1100 incarcerated captives (including some French allies) perished in the winter months of 1780-1781. The Americans, therefore, did not consider the prison ships at New York a closed matter. Nor did the departure of the ill Arbuthnot from the scene end the controversy.³⁰

The year 1781 saw the collapse of British fortunes in the thirteen colonies with the surrender of the forces of Lord Cornwallis at Yorktown. In September 1781, too late to help Cornwallis, Rear Admiral Robert Digby took command of naval forces at New York. Later, during 1782 Sir Guy Carleton became British commander-in-chief. Under the administration of these two officers, the floating hulks became less horrible and even in the worst periods the prisoners were treated more humanely. However, enlistment of naval captives still took place.³¹

There was to be a sudden shift in British policy involving naval exchanges which was caused by the rebels' capture of Cornwallis's army. As Washington commented in December 1782, "there is scarce any price which they would not give for their veteran Troops now prisoners." The veterans would be of great use to the British against the European allies of the United States. On January 25, 1782, Sproat transmitted Digby's request that the rebels send 500 British soldiers in exchange for already released American seamen. The admiral, Sproat alleged, was motivated by the "distressed Situation" the soldiers faced "at this inclement Season." Without a doubt, the British planned that this small soldier for sailor exchange would be a precedent for more swaps involving many more of Cornwallis's soldiers. In order to obtain these troops, the Royal Navy began to seize "every thing that floats on the face of the Waters," to quote Washington's words of July. The result was, as Sproat stated, a "very great increase of prisoners." And every seized American privateer added still more sailors who could be exchanged for Cornwallis's men. If the stratagem failed, the royal governor of New York, General James Robertson, planned to lobby Digby to allow recruitment of the captives for military service in the Caribbean.³²

When the sailor-soldier exchange was suggested, Washington saw the idea as merely a British ploy. Britain would receive a lopsided advantage by it, as very few of the incarcerated American seamen belonged to the Continental Navy. Washington hoped to secure the mariners' release by centralizing the administration of British naval prisoners. Not surprisingly, discussions between the two sides on this sailor-soldier trade collapsed in April, 1782.³³ But the British did not give up the idea and soon unleashed another propaganda barrage to put pressure on the Americans. The chief weapon of the British onslaught would again be the American prisoners themselves.

On June 1 Sproat wrote to Skinner requesting new clothing for the captives

and to ask his counterpart to urge his commander-in-chief to agree to their exchange for British soldiers. Meanwhile, Digby sent two American prisoners on parole to tell Washington about the "Sufferings" their comrades were experiencing on the prison hulks. When Washington wrote to the admiral to complain about the "Infectious prison Ships," Digby parried the letter by insisting Washington could alleviate the poor sailors' plight by immediately exchanging them. The only way that he could have done that would have been to agree to the British plan of swapping seamen for soldiers.³⁴

Skinner responded to these broadsides by offering to exchange "seaman for seaman," which would leave a large "balance" due to the British. This balance would be dealt with as British mariners were captured. Then Skinner warned Sproat that the many British soldiers held by the Americans might become victims of retaliation. Their treatment might be changed to parallel that of the Americans upon the floating prisons. Digby rejected Skinner's offer and was not concerned that the threatened retaliation would actually happen.³⁵

Washington's anxiety for the captives had to have been heightened after Skinner wrote him on June 11. During a trip into occupied New York, Skinner was not allowed to visit the men on board the prison ships; even a trek to the British hospital ships was ruled out. Although the enemy was placing numerous seamen upon isles within the harbor and medical care was being provided, many of the sailors seemed doomed to die. Not surprisingly, recruitment of the prisoners was ongoing.³⁶

But Washington had to have been surprised by the propaganda attack unleashed upon him the next day in Tory printer James Rivington's British-controlled newspaper. In it, Sproat wrote to several American prisoners to tell them that their comrades' trip to Washington was a failure. He rejected exchanging sailors for soldiers. Furthermore, in two letters of John Cooper and other captives that were printed, the men lamented that they had been "deserted by our own countrymen." Unless swapped soon for British soldiers, they declared, they were certain to die like so many others.³⁷

These letters started a heated exchange between Skinner and Sproat. The British strategy, the patriot wrote, was readily apparent. It was designed to depress the captives, make them think they had been abandoned, and so get them to enlist with their jailers to escape from imprisonment. Complaining that the infamous hulks had not been cleansed at all since they had become prisons, Skinner made a

point of mentioning that he had been denied access to the vessels because the British did not want him to view the "graves of our seamen." Sproat's response was to brand Skinner's letter as an attempt "to shut the mouths of your injured countrymen." The patriot had not wanted to go to the ships, the loyalist insisted.³⁸

The British had still another use of rebel prisoners for propaganda purposes. Some American sea captains who had been paroled by the British had asked permission to see the conditions on the floating prisons for themselves. Permission was granted and Sproat escorted them aboard five ships which included both hospital ships as well as prisons. The captains' report was a startling approval of the vessels, one of which was the *Jersey*, which was quite clean. None of the prisoners had any gripes to report except their need for clothing and, of course, their desire to be exchanged. A patriot later insisted that he could prove that the paroled captains had never even gone aboard the vessels. However, it is far more likely that the British simply gave the prison ships a quick sprucing up before the visit.³⁹

Despite the propaganda value of the captains' report, the Americans did not change their stance about exchanges. Sproat kept trying to demonstrate that the conditions on the prison ships were created by the rebels' stand on exchanges. The captives' personal hygiene was no longer worth mentioning. And as late as December 1782 Digby was also still attempting, without any success, to convince the American authorities to trade seamen for soldiers. There was just no argument that would convince the patriots to give in. Soon it became a moot point as the war staggered to a conclusion. Sproat certified that the prison ships were emptied of their inmates on April 9, 1783; a small number of naval captives confined ashore were set free the following day. Finally, some patriots who had been ill left British hands on May 3.⁴⁰

Five days after the final release, Continental General William Heath recorded what he felt to be incredible. He had learned the number of deaths of American captives in New York. "It was said," Heath wrote, "that 11,644 American prisoners had died during the war in the prisons, and on board the prison-ships at New York." This "surprising number," the general stated, "evidences that if their treatment was not severe, they were too much crowded, or not properly attended to in other respects."⁴¹

Heath's accounting has remained a puzzle. He gave no source for his information, for example. And the number is about as specific as one could get, as if it came from some official listing of mortality. But the captains of the prison

ships logged only a very sporadic record of deaths, if they did so at all.⁴²

Nonetheless, it is readily apparent that David Sproat was an efficient record keeper. When he attacked the credibility of American prisoner George Batterman, Sproat was able to give the date the man first came onto the *Jersey* as well as the day he left the hulk as part of a prisoner exchange. Even more germane, in 1782 Governor John Hancock of Massachusetts sent to the British a list of men from his state and requested their exchange. Next to one of the names, Sproat put down the sad verdict: "Dead a few days ago." Without question, Sproat had access to records that specified names of captives with death dates. He may have helped to compile this data. It is very likely that Joshua Loring, Sproat's superior, possessed such information for both deceased sailors and soldiers who had been held in New York. Such records no longer exist.⁴³

Oddly enough, Thomas Jefferson provided a document that clarified how many died. Jefferson might seem like a curious source for such information. However, during the Revolution a prominent Virginian had been seized by the British and incarcerated in one of the floating hulks. When he returned to his home state, he told everyone he met, including Jefferson, what he had experienced. This man's vivid description of the prison ships made a deep and lasting impression on Jefferson. During his stint as American minister to France, he freely informed the French about the cruel Englishmen.⁴⁴

On August 17, 1786, in Paris, Jefferson took a deposition from Richard Riddy, a Pennsylvania trader then living in France. Riddy revealed that during January, 1783, a vessel he was on was captured by the British, who brought him to New York City. "While he was there," the deposition went on, "David Sproate Commissary general of prisoners to the British army informed him that upwards of eleven thousand American prisoners had died on board the prison ship the *Jersey*, and shewed him the registers whereby it appeared to be so." ⁴⁵

The credibility of this deposition is greatly enhanced by the seemingly false reference to Sproat as being in charge of army prisoners. At the time Riddy was in New York, Sproat was also handling British soldiers. During November 1782, Loring left for the mother country, never to return. Sproat had taken over Loring's position and exchanged British army and navy prisoners until the end of the Revolution. Loring's permanent departure meant that Sproat had free and unhindered access to records such as death registers, the existence of which is hereby

confirmed. Riddy's deposition is the only known document mentioning official British records. Riddy is therefore the likely mysterious source for Heath's official-sounding death toll of 11,644. The Pennsylvanian, who was probably released soon after examining the registers, was obviously not shy in telling what he knew. Heath's number must be the total mortality of American captives as of January, 1783.⁴⁶

On the other hand, there are two problems with the Riddy statement. First, he gives an estimate of 11,000 deaths, not 11,644. This discrepancy is explained by the deposition having been given three years afterward. Memories do tend to fade with the passage of time. Second, the deposition states that all the deaths were on the *Jersey*. Riddy may have been one of the sources for the numerous accounts that gave a similar number for mortality on the *Jersey*. (Jefferson, incidentally, seems to have been among the first persons to make that allegation). But, again, the passage of time probably accounts for Riddy's mistake. What Sproat likely said to him was that many (perhaps even most) of the deaths were on the *Jersey*. Sproat's filling of Loring's job strongly suggests that the total was for all prisoner deaths, not just those on the *Jersey* or other ships.⁴⁷

Still, there is one major unanswered question. Why would Sproat tell Riddy such an important thing? David Sproat must have become a very anguished man. With prisoners dying right and left, there was little he could do. How frustrating it had to have been for Sproat to be limited to posting official notices about rations amidst a sea of human misery. He may have felt a need to confide in someone. Riddy was a fellow Pennsylvanian in the same profession. Perhaps they had known each other in quieter times. Riddy was almost certainly a non-combatant aboard a trading vessel; such individuals were supposed to be released according to British policy set in 1778. All in all, with the war nearly over Sproat may have let his guard down.⁴⁸

The Riddy deposition provides one other piece of evidence for a high mortality level for American captives. When the document arrived in America, it was perused by Henry Remsen, Jr. A New Yorker who had served on revolutionary committees there, Remsen in 1784 had been appointed a clerk to what would become the State Department. Serving until 1792, Remsen would be on good terms with Secretary of State Jefferson.⁴⁹

After Minister Jefferson sent Riddy's deposition to America, Remsen wrote on the document: "There is a person living now on Long Island [New York], who

informed me that the number of American prisoners who were buried from on board the *Jersey* prison ship, along the shore on his land, could not be less in number than 10,000." The so-called "Remsen farm" was the location of the graveyard; the source was a relative of Henry Remsen, Jr. Although the prisoners' cemetery was clearly for deceased captives from all the prison ships, and not only the *Jersey*, this statement is further evidence backing the Heath estimate of deaths.⁵⁰

If, indeed, the mortality rate on the prison ships was very high, what then was the chief cause of death among the captives? The likely culprit was overcrowding. As Heath observed, "Those who have seen know, and others can easily conceive, that where men are closely confined in great numbers in prison-ships, or in gaols, that without frequent airing and cleansing, the air in such places becomes putrid and poisonous, and produces almost certain death."⁵¹

Everything does seem to suggest that crowding was the greatest factor behind the high total of deaths. In August, 1781 Washington complained about the then-crowded state of the floating prisons. Royal Navy captain Edmund Affleck, then in command, responded with a partial admission:

I take leave to assure you, that I feel for the distresses of mankind as much as any man, and, since my coming to the naval command in this department, one of my principal endeavours has been to regulate the prison and hospital ships. The government having made no other provision for naval prisoners than shipping, it is impossible that the greater inconvenience, which people confined on board ships experience beyond those confined on shore, can be avoided, and a sudden accumulation of people often aggravates the evil.⁵²

Of course, the American side is not completely blameless. The Continental Congress did a great deal of politicking on prisoner exchanges, which complicated them. Yet scholars should remember that congressional interference cannot excuse British responsibility for what happened in New York. It is essential to consider how British prisoners fared in the care of the revolutionaries. Although those soldiers captured at Yorktown, for example, experienced problems in obtaining food rations in Virginia, they did not become ill and die. Instead, they decided to escape, which they did in hordes. In 1782 Governor Hancock pointed out that in Massachusetts there was only a "very small proportion of Prisoners that have Sickened and died

among us." The same is true elsewhere. There are simply no cases among the rebels of heavy mortality of captured enemy personnel. This fact should not be forgotten.⁵³

But what of Sproat's fate? In December, 1783, on the verge of leaving America forever, he wrote to Robert Morris, whom he had met. The departing loyalist asked that he be reimbursed for over £550 of his own funds he had spent to aid the American prisoners of war. Sproat had been assured, he informed Morris, that he would not "suffer by so humane an action." Morris sent Sproat's request on to the Congress, commenting that paying the loyalist would be a helpful precedent encouraging good treatment of American prisoners in the future. Eventually, Congress called for an audit and sharing of the cost by the states whose citizens were involved. Whether Sproat was paid is unclear, although there is a strong likelihood that he was.⁵⁴

Sproat did not fare as well with the British government, which provided compensation to loyalists. Trying to obtain something for his lost personal property and assets, he submitted a claim for £2,043. To Sproat's undoubtedly great surprise, he received only £105. The Pennsylvanian exile returned to his old Scottish home. By so doing, Sproat implied acceptance of what in 1779 he had felt to be an admission of failure. He died in 1799.⁵⁵

The various British admirals who commanded in New York bear the lion's share of blame for the excessive number of deaths upon the prison hulks. And the British government in London must also share some responsibility. The true purveyor of propaganda about the American captives was Britain's Royal Navy and not the American rebels.

Notes

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