

William Bainbridge and the Barron-Decatur Duel: Mere Participant or Active Plotter?

ON THE night of March 8, 1820, a visitor was rowed out from a lower Chesapeake bay to where 74-gun *Columbus*, a ship of the line, was swinging quietly at anchor. Captain Jesse Duncan Elliott clambered aboard and was soon conversing with Commodore William Bainbridge, the battleship's commandant. Their business was potentially lethal, for they were meeting to draw up the terms for a duel between Commodores James Barron and Stephen Decatur, the culmination of a sequence which had started on June 22, 1807, when Barron's 38-gun *Chesapeake* had been savagely mauled by 56-gun H.M.S. *Leopard*. The humiliated American was eventually tried and convicted by a court-martial on the charge of "neglecting, on the probability of an engagement, to clear the ship for action."¹ Captains Bainbridge and Decatur had sat as Barron's judges, while Midshipman Elliott had testified for the defense. These three would be implicated, one way or another, in the consequences of this affair until Barron killed Decatur thirteen years later.

Barron's punishment had been draconic: he received a five-year suspension from the Navy without pay, commencing in 1808. He had to endure years of the harshest poverty, picking up only an occasional mercantile voyage out of Virginia before entering the European carrying trade. His suspension ended during the War of 1812 while he was stranded in Denmark, and he applied for reinstatement on active service. But his request was ignored, as the Secretary of the Navy had evidence that Barron had made unpatriotic remarks to a British diplomat in Brazil during 1811 and

¹ U.S. Navy Department, *Proceedings of the General Court-Martial Convened for the Trial of Commodore James Barron . . . , in the Month of January, 1808* (Washington, 1822), 350.

had recently sailed under a British license after war had been declared, the former allegation very probably and the latter certainly untrue. Barron continued to eke out a living of sorts in Copenhagen, chiefly from some mechanical inventions, until 1819 when he finally returned home. For the rest of his life he insisted that his long absence had been caused solely by his inability to afford the trans-Atlantic passage. He found that because of official hostility in Washington his pleas for active reassignment, were ignored, and he was forced to rusticate on half-pay in Virginia.²

The embittered Barron turned for advice to Elliott, his one close friend in the service. That vindictive Marylander, intriguer par excellence of the early Navy, has been aptly described as always "at or near the storm center of most of the controversies and bitter feuds which troubled the American Navy during the otherwise quiet years after the War of 1812."³ He had first come to public attention by providing the only glimmer of pride during the inept American campaign to conquer Canada. Late in 1812 he had audaciously captured one British sloop and destroyed another in front of enemy fortifications on the Niagara River, for which he was promoted and bemedalled. Nevertheless, he was superseded on Lake Erie by Oliver Hazard Perry, certainly an unforgivable affront to the vengeful Elliott. At the battle of Put-in Bay on September 10, 1813, Elliott, claiming the thin excuse of contrary winds, kept his 20-gun brig *Niagara* well to the rear for the first two hours. This permitted the combined British flotilla to concentrate on 20-gun flagship *Lawrence*. After his command had been well shot to pieces, and over fifty per cent of his people had been killed or wounded, Perry rowed to *Niagara*, sent Elliott off on a nonessential errand, and returned to rout the already well-battered enemy. It seems likely that the only explanation for Elliott's otherwise inexplicable behavior is that he hoped Perry would be killed in action, following

² William O. Stevens, *An Affair of Honor: The Biography of Commodore James Barron* (Baltimore, 1969), *passim*. This work, long unpublished, is a well-researched and indispensable biography, although excessively sympathetic to its subject.

³ Allan Westcott, "Commodore Jesse D. Elliott: A Stormy Petrel of the Navy," *United States Naval Institute Proceedings*, LIV (1938), 773. A biography of Elliott is much needed, but only a psychohistorian, with a special emphasis on abnormal psychology, should attempt the task.

which he could take command and win victory laurels for himself. Certainly his career proved that he was no coward.

In his post-combat euphoria, Perry made the regrettable error of praising Elliott in his official report, writing that the other had "gallantly" demonstrated "his characteristic bravery and judgment"⁴—a remark which may, of course, be interpreted in two ways. Perry's real opinion was revealed when he simultaneously told a colleague that it was better "to screen a coward than to let the enemy know that there is one in the fleet."⁵ But during the court-martial of the defeated British commander in 1815, *Niagara* was described as "making away from the battle." To clear his name, Elliott demanded that Perry support him, but by this time the latter was convinced that the former had meant to get him killed, so he refused. Elliott asked for and received a court of inquiry about the matter, and was cleared, but his dispute with Perry kept simmering.

In 1816 Perry was commanding the Mediterranean Squadron on his flagship, 44-gun *Java*. He formed a most negative opinion of the lazy and insubordinate John Heath, his Marine Captain, and during an altercation the Commodore admitted that "passion became predominant, and I gave him a blow." Subsequent courts-martial found both officers guilty of various delinquencies, but sentenced each to no more than official reprimands, a decision which Heath's friends considered a total whitewash.⁶ Here was a situation ideal for Elliott's exploitation. On their return home, he picked away at Heath until that Marine challenged Perry to a duel. Their bloodless encounter near Hoboken, New Jersey, on October 19, 1818—Perry refused even to fire—must have sorely disappointed Elliott, who promptly commenced trying to maneuver Perry into a face-to-face encounter. Instead of agreeing, Perry preferred charges of cowardice, negligence, and falsehood against his foe, loftily announcing that,

⁴ Samuel Eliot Morison, "Old Bruin": *Commodore Matthew C. Perry, 1794-1858*... (Boston and Toronto, 1967), 44-48. Morison's short account of Lake Erie is superb.

⁵ Alexander S. Mackenzie, *The Life of Oliver Hazard Perry* (New York, 1840), I, 281.

⁶ Perry to Decatur, Jan. 18, 1818, in Irving Anthony, *Decatur* (New York and London, 1931), 282-283; Leonard F. Guttridge and Jay D. Smith, *The Commodores* (New York, 1969), 283-284. Guttridge and Smith are trailblazers in describing early Navy officers as they were, rather than as they have been imagined.

until the other had been cleared by a court-martial, no "gentleman" could meet him on "the field of Honor."⁷

Prior to Perry's departure for Venezuela on a diplomatic mission a few months later, he had stayed at the home of Stephen and Susan Decatur. There, according to Susan, he asked her husband to guard the papers which proved his accusations against his arch-enemy, remarking that, "Elliott is so regardless of truth" that someone must be on hand "to keep him in check."⁸ Perry caught yellow fever and died in Venezuela on August 23, 1819, thereby robbing Elliott of a chance to kill him. But that worthy immediately began pipelining some of his endless pool of malice toward Decatur, somehow holding him responsible for his unfulfillment. He proceeded to use James Barron as his instrument of retaliation, although Decatur himself would provide thorough, if unwitting, cooperation in bringing about his own sudden demise.

Barron's association with Decatur dated back to 1798 when both served aboard 44-gun *United States*, and apparently hostility between them was lacking until 1806 when Barron made an innocent, if tactless, remark about Decatur's love life, to which the younger man took a quick and lasting exception.⁹ From that moment Barron could only view Decatur as unrelentingly inimical. He had been loud in his public condemnation of *Chesapeake's* unreadiness in 1807, had tried to be excused from Barron's court-martial as biased against the accused, and had unhesitatingly voted for his conviction. Once Barron had returned from Europe in 1819 his sparks were fanned into flames by Elliott, who passed along the information that Decatur was not only opposing Barron's reinstatement, but advocating that he should be dropped from the Navy altogether. Any question of Elliott's central casting in the coming tragedy was provided by Barron himself. Without mentioning

⁷ Mackenzie, *Perry*, II, 184. Elliott was never tried on these charges. Probably President James Monroe pigeonholed them, preferring to bury such evidence of intraservice hostility.

⁸ Susan Decatur, "Memorial, 24 November 1849, to the President and Members of the Senate," in Charles L. Lewis, *The Romantic Decatur* (Philadelphia, 1937), 199; Westcott, 775. A modern biography of Decatur is to be desired. Both Lewis and Anthony skip over his hubris, the one major flaw in his otherwise sterling character.

⁹ John C. Emmerson (comp.), *The Chesapeake Affair of 1807* (Portsmouth, Va., 1954), 174; Stevens, 57; Guttridge and Smith, 148-149.

Elliott's name, there can be no doubt as to whom he meant when he wrote years later: "I consulted a friend in whom I had entire confidence, and from whom I learned much which had been circulated to my prejudice. . . ." ¹⁰

Barron was thus impelled during the spring of 1819 to write Decatur: "Sir, I have been informed in Norfolk, that you have said that you could insult me with impunity, or words to that effect. If you have said so, you will no doubt avow it, and I shall expect to hear from you." ¹¹ Decatur's answer, less than a week later, should have terminated the entire affair: "Whatever I may have *thought, or said, in the very frequent and free conversations I have had respecting you and your conduct*, I feel a thorough conviction that I could never have been guilty of so much egotism as to say that 'I could insult you (or any other man) with impunity.' " ¹² Barron clearly thought that this was apology enough; he wrote back: "Your declaration, if I understand it correctly, relieves my mind that you had so degraded my character, as I had been induced to allege." ¹³

Tragically, Decatur felt some kind of compunction to keep the surface roiled. No one could have ignored his next communication: "I meant *no more* than to disclaim the specific and particular expression to which your inquiry was directed, to wit: That *I* said that I could insult you with impunity. As to the motives of . . . your informants . . . [they are] a matter of complete indifference to me, as is [*sic*] also your motives in making such an inquiry upon such information." ¹⁴ In Decatur's behalf, it should be accentuated that he was wholeheartedly convinced that Barron, by his unreadiness on *Chesapeake* and his prolonged absence during a war even after his suspension was over, had disqualified himself from retaining a Navy commission.

¹⁰ James Barron, Aug. 11, 1842, *The History of a Transaction which ought never to have been occasion for*, part 2, Barron Papers, box XI, #97, College of William and Mary. This ineptly titled long memorandum shows that Barron's memory was keen about events which had occurred from twenty-two to thirty-five years before.

¹¹ Barron to Decatur, June 12, 1819, *Correspondence Between the Late Commodore Stephen Decatur and Commodore James Barron, Which Led to the Unfortunate Meeting of the Twenty-Second of March* (Washington, 1820), 5.

¹² Decatur to Barron, June 17, 1819, *ibid.*

¹³ Barron to Decatur, June 25, 1819, *ibid.*, 6.

¹⁴ Decatur to Barron, June 29, 1819, *ibid.*

Four months then elapsed without further contact, and Decatur probably complacently imagined that he had put to flight a craven. But during this interim, Barron had been ill, and his convalescence was surely enlivened by Elliott's further sowing seeds of animus. An undated and unsigned letter among Decatur's papers has the space for a name left blank. It reads: "That _____ is the sole instigator of the renewal of the correspondence, and will prevent any sort of adjustment if he can do so." This was printed in Alexander S. MacKenzie's *Life of Stephen Decatur*, published in 1846, and carries the explanation that the note contains no "odium to any living person."¹⁵ Jesse Duncan Elliott had died the year before. As always, Mrs. Decatur was more forthright in expressing an opinion. She wrote a private letter in 1821, stating that she wished to expose "to the world the real character of Captain Elliott as some punishment for the base and assassin-like part that he acted toward my beloved husband, in artfully inciting Commodore Barron to the measures he pursued, and in urging him on under the assurance that he would have the affair amicably settled. . . ."¹⁶

In any event, not until the following October did Barron pick up his pen, but then he wrote with so much sulfurous resentment that a contest with Decatur became practically a certainty, unless Decatur should openly express regret for charges which he had been making for more than a decade: "scarcely had I set foot on my native soil, ere I learnt that the same malignant spirit which had before influenced you to ruin my reputation was still at work, and you were ungenerously traducing my character whenever an occasion occurred which suited your views. . . . I am also informed that you have tauntingly and boastingly observed, that you would cheerfully meet me in the field and hoped that I would act like a man. . . ."¹⁷

Three interminable letters, two from Decatur sandwiching one from Barron, of five, nine, and three printed pages respectively, passed between them from late October to December. It is profitless to replot their sterile terrain, marked by Barron's glowering sense

¹⁵ Mackenzie, II, 315.

¹⁶ Susan Decatur to Daniel Smith, Jan. 16, 1821, in Lewis, 215.

¹⁷ Barron to Decatur, Oct. 23, 1819, *Correspondence*, 7-8.

of injury which neared paranoia, and Decatur's sneering contempt which kept it aflame, any more than to say that charges and counter-charges flew back and forth about their early association, Barron's surrender of *Chesapeake*, Decatur's behavior on the ensuing court-martial, Barron's alleged unpatriotic statements in Brazil, his sailing under a wartime British permit, and his failure to come home before 1818.¹⁸ Yet for some reason, probably pride, Barron never explained to Decatur that his long absence abroad had been due to no more than poverty.

In their exchanges, both made pertinent comments about duelling. Decatur said: "I do not think that fighting duels, under any circumstances, can raise the reputation of any man . . . but, in my opinion, the man who makes *arms his profession*, is not at liberty to decline an invitation from any person, who is not so far degraded, as to be beneath his notice. Having incautiously said that I would meet you, I will not now consider this to be the case, although many think so, and if I had not pledged myself, I might reconsider the case."¹⁹ If Decatur had uttered nothing else, that last gratuitous observation, according to contemporary mores, would have compelled Barron to challenge. He replied that he also considered duelling "a barbarous practice that ought to be exploded from civilized society; but, sir, there may be cases of such extraordinary and aggravated insult and injury, received by an individual, as to render an appeal to arms, on his part, absolutely necessary; mine I conceive to be a case of that description. . . ."²⁰ During late January they decided to resort to that activity they deemed so savage, so useless, and so essential. Barron issued and Decatur accepted a challenge to the field. The latter's choice of a second would have been impossible a few months before—William Bainbridge.

The single most enigmatic question for a Bainbridge biographer to answer is: did he merely swim along in an inexorable current set in motion by Elliott, or did he actively plot with that latter-day Iago to manipulate Barron into killing Decatur? There is evidence both ways, although it tends to arrive at a verdict of guilty rather

¹⁸ Decatur to Barron, Oct. 31; Barron to Decatur, Nov. 30; Decatur to Barron, Dec. 29, 1819, *ibid.*, 8-12, 14-25.

¹⁹ Decatur to Barron, Oct. 31, 1819, *ibid.*, 12.

²⁰ Barron to Decatur, Nov. 30, 1819, *ibid.*, 22.

than innocent. To support Bainbridge as no more than a current-rider, prior to 1815 his relations with Decatur could not have been more amiable. Bainbridge had a most sizable debt of gratitude to repay, and he could never have forgotten it. Joseph Bainbridge, William's younger brother, and Decatur had been shipmates when they stopped off at Malta in 1803. Joseph had first been insulted and then jostled at a Valetta theater by James Cochran, private secretary to Sir Alexander Ball, Governor of that island; the American knocked him down. Cochran, called a "sure shot at ten paces," challenged, and Decatur acted as the young Midshipman's second. Knowing that his principal was relatively unversed in small arms, Decatur insisted that the distance be set at a murderous four paces—twelve feet. Unbelievably, both missed on the first exchange, Joseph's shot piercing the Englishman's hat. Decatur then offered the pertinent advice, "Aim lower, if you wish to live." On the second fire Cochran was instantly killed by a bullet through the forehead.²¹ Perhaps partly in gratitude for this indispensable aid to his brother, and partly by the memory that Decatur (as well as Barron) had been on the court of inquiry which cleared him of blame for *Philadelphia's* loss, Bainbridge's pre-1815 letters are sprinkled with references to "the gallant Decatur" or similar descriptions. As Susan Decatur emphasized, Bainbridge had "frequently been our guest for weeks at a time! and declaring that he loved my husband as much as he did his own wife and children."²²

Yet the theory of Bainbridge as an active plotter is supported by the fact that he had hated Decatur from 1815 until at least late in 1819, and with ample cause. Hardly was the conflict with Great Britain over than Congress declared war against Algiers (with Tunis and Tripoli perhaps to be added later) for continued depredations against American commerce and for unneutral, pro-British activities during the War of 1812. Here was Bainbridge's golden opportunity to repay these Barbary powers for earlier humiliations which they had heaped upon him. In 1801 the Dey of Algiers had compelled him to haul down the American flag and run up the

²¹ Charles O. Paullin, "Duelling in the Old Navy," *United States Naval Institute Proceedings*, XXXV (1909), 1164-1165.

²² Susan Decatur, "Memorial, 24 November 1849," in Lewis, 216.

Algerian on 32-gun frigate *George Washington* in order to carry a tributary mission, replete with gifts (including an entire menagerie), to the Turkish Sultan in Constantinople. In 1803 Bainbridge had run aground 38-gun frigate *Philadelphia* in Tripoli Harbor and been forced to endure nineteen months of captivity at the hands of Bashaw Yusuf Karamanli.

In 1815 Bainbridge commanded 74-gun *Independence*, America's first ship of the line, and officially requested permission to lead a squadron to dispose of the Barbary menace once and for all. He could anticipate that his previous embarrassments in North Africa, his seniority, and his brilliant victory on 44-gun frigate *Constitution* over 38-gun H.M.S. *Java* off Brazil late in 1812 would ensure the granting of his request. But he failed to anticipate how Decatur, with consummate selfishness, would elbow him aside and seize for himself the distinction of ending the wars with the Barbary states.

Decatur had long been at the pinnacle of national acclaim, both publicly and officially. Personally he could not have been more attractive—handsome, affable, intelligent, and merciful, beloved by sailors above all other officers, for he had an ability to enforce discipline without resort to the lash. Professionally he had demonstrated sterling courage in hand-to-hand gunboat strife off Tripoli, daring skill in incinerating captured frigate *Philadelphia* in front of the Bashaw's Castle, and calculated efficiency in picking to pieces and bringing in as a prize 38-gun H.M.S. *Macedonian* in 1812. But then his career soured. During 1813 his squadron had been trapped by the British in Long Island Sound, and frigates *United States* and erstwhile British *Macedonian* had to be laid up in New London for the duration of the war. Even worse, early in 1815 he had been forced to surrender 44-gun frigate *President* off New York, and, although the enemy force was superior, many thought that his decision to surrender had been premature. On his return home he resolved that he must clear his name of this taint. He wrote a naval colleague that, "I have lost a noble ship, but I hope it will be considered that there has been no loss of honor." He reread that sentence and crossed out "I hope that it will be considered" to substitute, "I shall satisfy the world."²³ He met

²³ Guttridge and Smith, 271.

with author Washington Irving who urged him not to "lose the opportunity of emerging from the cloud which had come over his celebrity by the loss of the *President*; that here was a chance for a brilliant dash; that he should precede Bainbridge, who was fitting out at Boston, and . . . 'whip the cream off the enterprise.'"²⁴

Secretary of the Navy Benjamin W. Crowninshield was even more helpful in enabling Decatur to bring about Bainbridge's abasement. Mary Crowninshield wrote her husband from Salem, Massachusetts, during mid-March that she hoped he would not give the Mediterranean assignment to Bainbridge, "as some think Decatur is the most fit for it—this is what I pick up here and there."²⁵ For whatever the reason, Crowninshield caved in completely, writing Decatur: "In short, my dear sir, your wishes are to be consulted; any service or any station that is at the disposal of this department, rely on it, you may command."²⁶ In response to Decatur's request for the Mediterranean, the Secretary gave him 44-gun frigate *Guerrière* as his flagship, command of another squadron to be outfitted in New York, and ordered him to depart "without delay."²⁷ The Navy Department then sped ships, supplies, and men to Decatur at the expense of Bainbridge and other commanders.

Rumors about the rapid naval build-up in New York must have reached Bainbridge in Boston, but obviously he could not bring himself to believe that his double cross would be so total. Even as late as March 19 he could still refer in a private letter to "the noble conduct of the gallant Decatur."²⁸ But by the first week in April he finally began to realize what was being done to him, writing a close personal friend: "I do not think the Secretary has acted [well] toward me in keeping me in utter *Ignorance*, as the *feelings* of an

²⁴ Anthony, 246–247.

²⁵ Mary Crowninshield to Benjamin W. Crowninshield, Mar. 11, 1815, Crowninshield Papers, box 8, Peabody Museum, Salem, Mass.

²⁶ Crowninshield to Decatur, "early in March" 1815, in Alexander S. Mackenzie, *Life of Stephen Decatur, A Commodore in the Navy of the United States* (1846), 243.

²⁷ Crowninshield to Decatur, Mar. 24, 27; Apr. 8, 1815, U.S. Navy Department, Letters Sent by the Secretary of the Navy to Officers, reel 12, pp. 78, 80, 96, National Archives.

²⁸ William Bainbridge to L. W. Tazewell, Mar. 19, 1815, James Lawrence Papers, "Miscellaneous Manuscripts," New-York Historical Society.

Officer justified.”²⁹ When he received official confirmation that the New York squadron would precede him to North Africa,³⁰ he charged that Decatur had been anything but “courteous” toward him, and that he had become “disgusted with our *Premier*, and the neglectful manner I have been treated.”³¹ It is easy to appreciate the consummate indignation with which Bainbridge must have received the news that Decatur had sailed on May 20. It was, if anything, further exacerbating to his pride when he was ordered to follow with a second squadron to the Mediterranean, mourning that “I am totally indifferent to going out.”³² But, of course, he had no choice except to comply, sailing from Boston on July 2 and arriving at Gibraltar on the 31st.

Suffering from an attack of measles, Bainbridge was further prostrated by the news that Decatur had already captured two Algerian warships before going on to the enemy capital where he had slapped together a make-shift treaty. He next dashed on to Tunis and Tripoli, forcing both countries to pay damages. The United States Consul at Gibraltar perceptively noted the reason for “the haste in which he brought matters to a conclusion,” commenting that Decatur “would *sacrifice his best friend to aggrandize his own fame* [italics added]—had Bainbridge not been close at his heels, be assured that reasons for continuing the war would not have been found wanting.”³³

Meanwhile Bainbridge had no option but to follow his instructions and show his fleet at all the Barbary capitals, complaining that: “Peace having taken place prior to my arrival . . . I have been deprived of the opportunity of either *Fighting or Negotiating*.”³⁴ He practically sped past Algiers, Tripoli, and Tunis before putting into Gibraltar on September 29. Both squadrons had assembled

²⁹ Bainbridge to David Porter, Apr. 8, 1815, William Bainbridge Papers, Naval Historical Society Collection, folder 3, *ibid*.

³⁰ Bainbridge to Porter, June 5, 1815, *ibid*.

³¹ Bainbridge to Porter, June 13, 1815, Simon Gratz Autograph Collection, case 5, box 30, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

³² *Ibid*.

³³ G. Henry to John Rodgers, Dec. 12, 1812, John Rodgers Correspondence, reel II, New-York Historical Society.

³⁴ Bainbridge to Porter, Sept. 6, 1815, William Bainbridge Papers, Naval Historical Society Collection, folder 3, *ibid*.

there, with Decatur's flagship the only missing vessel. Just as Bainbridge was putting out for home on October 7, *Guerrière* swung into the harbor, sailing past the cheering sailors. But the aggrieved Bainbridge kept *Independence* full speed ahead, forcing Decatur to chase and overhaul him in a boat. What happened when he went on board is conjectural but at least it was short. Bainbridge's only reference to their meeting is a single curt sentence in his official report: "As I was standing out of the Bay of Gibraltar, the *Guerrière*, Com. Decatur, was going into that port for a supply of provisions."³⁵ Many years later Susan Decatur remembered what her husband had told her about it. Bainbridge had "received him as a *total* stranger!—never asked a single question relative to our affairs! and never offered him the slightest hospitality! This is the person who had frequently been our guest for weeks at a time! . . ." She claimed that from that moment, "until a *very short* time before the awful sacrifice of my beloved husband's life in 1820, they never recognized each other when they met!"³⁶ Naturally Susan Decatur could not possibly realize that their former house guest had been most cruelly exploited by her "beloved husband."

On that same day Bainbridge led most of both squadrons out of Gibraltar; a few hours later Decatur also slipped away on *Guerrière*, coming into New York on November 12, three days before Bainbridge arrived at Newport, Rhode Island. There was yet another spasm of agony in store for Bainbridge: how the exploits of each were judged by the press, for Decatur indeed had fulfilled Irving's advice about "whipping the cream off the enterprise." Two comments in the same Philadelphia newspaper sum up admirably the difference. In one article, Decatur was said to have given the Barbary powers "an electric shock as it was never before discharged from a Christian Battery. . . . This is a glory which never encircled the brows of a Roman Pontiff; nor blazed from an imperial diadem."³⁷ The other read in toto: "We are happy to announce the arrival at Newport on Monday of the U.S. Squadron under the

³⁵ Bainbridge to Crowninshield, Nov. 15, 1815, U.S. Navy Department, Captains' Letters, reel 47, #46.

³⁶ Susan Decatur, "Memorial, November 24, 1849," in Lewis, 216.

³⁷ Poulson's *American Daily Advertiser*, Nov. 18, 1815.

command of Com. BAINBRIDGE.”³⁸ A modern work pinpoints well why Bainbridge had every right to view Decatur with smoldering resentment: “Looking back, there is a ruthlessness about Stephen Decatur’s audacity at this period which clearly stems from his determination to ‘satisfy the world’ of his untarnished renown. To his self-vow may be traced the manipulation of a pliant Secretary, the brazen confiscation of personnel and equipment ordered for other commands, the calculated indifference to fellow officers, and the embarrassing confusion thus brought upon a senior commodore.”³⁹

This crushing disappointment for Bainbridge was only the beginning; his purgatory continued for the next few years. Contrary though it may be to normal psychological patterns, his correspondence appears to show that the previously warm, affectionate, considerate, and generally optimistic man turned into a churlish, unhappy misanthrope. He met with one frustration after another from his two *bêtes noires*, Secretary Crowninshield and Stephen Decatur, the latter having joined Commodores John Rodgers and David Porter on the newly established Board of Navy Commissioners. Bainbridge was checked in several efforts to oust Commodore Isaac Hull from command of the Charlestown, Massachusetts, Navy Yard; castigated for making a temporary naval appointment; and criticized for ordering minor alterations on *Independence’s* gun carriages. As he had no personal relationship with Decatur, he poured out his wrath on Rodgers, with whom he had never been close, and Porter, formerly his chief naval friend, thereby starting a rift which would later become unbridgeable. Not until 1819 did matters begin looking better to him, for he received command of 74-gun *Columbus*, to be outfitted for a Mediterranean cruise.

By that time an amazing transformation had taken place in the erstwhile Bainbridge-Decatur relationship. Susan Decatur recalled that during late 1819 her husband was strolling along a Washington street when a carriage suddenly stopped and Bainbridge leaped out, running over to clasp the other in a two-handed grasp, while exclaiming, “Decatur, I behaved like a great fool, but I hope you

³⁸ *Ibid.*, Nov. 20, 1815.

³⁹ Guttridge and Smith, 277.

will forgive me; but you always contrive to reap laurels from my misfortunes." Somewhat nonplused, Decatur replied, "I have never done anything but what I believed to be my duty, and if you are convinced of that, go home with me and take a glass of wine." Bainbridge pleaded another appointment, "but would return to Washington and would then come and take up his *abode* with him as usual." She continued: "I said to my husband that it seemed to me an act of great assurance to invite himself to be our *guest* after allowing five years to elapse without speaking or writing to him when there had been no cause for offense . . . and I was afraid that he had some other motive than that of repentance. But I had no idea that he would come—he, however, did come, probably just after Christmas [1819] and remained with us two or three weeks."⁴⁰

Shortly thereafter, Decatur accepted Barron's challenge. The latter immediately selected as his second Elliott, who doubtless anticipated with relish a potential retribution for whatever wrongs he imagined had been done to him by the Perry-Decatur clique. Decatur had no such facile solution, for he was turned down for the same capacity by Commodores Charles Morris, John Rodgers, and probably David Porter. Finally Decatur asked his house guest to stand up with him, and Bainbridge accepted with alacrity. Early in February Decatur asked his second to proceed with the necessary arrangements for the duel, leaving to him "entirely the choice of weapons and distance, as also the time."⁴¹ On March 8 Bainbridge and Elliott met on *Columbus*, and agreed that the meeting would occur at 9:00 A.M. on the 22nd of that month at Bladensburg, Maryland, just outside the District of Columbia, "and the weapons shall be pistols; the distance eight paces, or yards; that, previous to the firing, the parties shall be directed to present [aim], and shall not fire before the word one is given, or after the word three; that the words one, two, three, shall be given by Com^{re} Bainbridge,"⁴² These arrangements may raise eyebrows on two counts: they made probable a fatal conclusion, and very much worked to the advantage of Barron.

⁴⁰ Susan Decatur, "Memorial, November 24, 1849," in Lewis, 216.

⁴¹ Decatur to Bainbridge, Feb. 10, 1820, in Mackenzie, *Decatur*, 426.

⁴² Decatur, "Memorandum," Mar. 8, 1820, Decatur Letter Book, #809, Stephen Decatur Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

First, at least ten paces usually separated the duellists, and any curtailment of that already short span from thirty to twenty-four feet considerably increased the possibility of death or serious injury. In the typical hostile encounter under the *code duello*, the principles stood at attention, facing one another across the stipulated distance,⁴³ either with arm cocked and the pistol at head level, or else with the arm relaxed and the gun hanging by the side. At the signal each would have to level and aim before firing, ensuring that misses would be frequent. But the Bainbridge-Elliott conditions had them present arms first, so that each was drawing a bead on the other and at the word had only to press the trigger.

Second, the terms also helped Barron, for Decatur was far more experienced in private war, having fought one duel, having been talked out of another, and having seconded three times. Barron, prior to 1820, had never participated in an engagement. Furthermore, he was notoriously nearsighted, and the shorter the distance from his opponent, the better for him. Under these conditions it is understandable why Elliott would try to even the odds in this particular, but how was Bainbridge helping his man by acceding to them? He made the self-incriminating admission to Decatur that, "Captain Elliott dwelt much on Barron's defective sight, but [it] had no influence on my mind, for I had resolved a month since in my mind that the distance should be eight paces."⁴⁴ Why? How does a closer range help the superior marksman with sharper eyes? In fact, this provision impelled Decatur to alter his entire strategy for the encounter. He had earlier told friends that at ten paces he planned deliberately to miss his antagonist, but at eight he dared not; he must at least wound him.⁴⁵ Susan Decatur knew for sure why these terms so contrary to her husband's interests had been set: "The whole affair was gotten up through the malice and cowardice on the part of one of the seconds, Captain Elliott, and ac-

⁴³ The modern stereotype of a duel places the combatants back to back to walk the agreed number of paces away from each other, whirling at the signal to shoot. This method was used very seldom, for such an untidy arrangement simply has too many opportunities to go awry for the seconds to control. The Perry-Heath confrontation was one of the few to follow this procedure.

⁴⁴ Mackenzie, *Decatur*, 318.

⁴⁵ Paullin, "Duelling in the Old Navy," 1182.

completed through the envy and jealousy of the other, Commodore Bainbridge."⁴⁶

With one pertinent exception, the tragic details of what transpired at Bladensburg on March 22, 1820, are so well known as to need no recounting here. Suffice it to say that at the word "fire," Barron and Decatur both slammed home their bullets into the other's hip at approximately the same spot near the socket. But Decatur's struck just to the outside of Barron's ilium, ricocheting down into the thigh, inflicting a severe, painful, but not mortal wound. Barron's hit a hair's-breadth to the inside of Decatur's socket, and glanced off into the groin, severing arteries. As both toppled to the ground, Decatur gasped softly, "Oh Lord, I am a dead man!", dying in terrible agony at 10:00 that night. But it is worth noting that just before the deadly exchange Barron suddenly violated "the code of honor," which held that once a challenge had been given and accepted, no communication should pass between the principals before they exchanged bullets. He called, "Now Decatur, if we must meet in another world, let us hope that we shall be better friends." He later explained that this infraction of duelling etiquette was "to give Commodore Decatur a chance to acquit himself of an act for which he had no earthly provocation."⁴⁷ This is precisely what occurred when Decatur answered, "I never was your enemy."⁴⁸ Here is the moment when seconds Bainbridge and Elliott should have halted the entire proceedings in order to explain to their principals that if someone challenged as an enemy specifically denied that designation, and had, in effect, apologized for a misunderstanding, the very reason for the duel had been erased. But Bainbridge kept silent, and Elliott, probably terrified that his chosen means of retaliation against Decatur might be checked, shouted, "Gentlemen, back to your places," thus speeding along his opportunity for vengeance.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Susan Decatur, "Memorial, November 24, 1849," in Lewis, 317.

⁴⁷ Following the publication of his correspondence with Decatur, public opinion swung to Barron's side. He was reinstated in the Navy during 1824, placidly commanding navy yards and presiding over the Naval Asylum (a home for retired mariners) until his death in 1851, having been senior officer of the service since Rodgers' death in 1838.

⁴⁸ Barron, History of a transaction . . . , 9, Barron Papers, Box XI, #97.

⁴⁹ Stevens, *An Affair of Honor*, 140; Guttridge and Smith, 296-297.

News of this sorry event plunged Washington into a combined dismay and outrage. Rumors abounded that both seconds would soon be arrested; at any rate they made a hasty retreat from the capital, Elliott going into seclusion ashore,⁵⁰ while Bainbridge confined himself to the decks of U.S.S. *Columbus*. It is difficult to analyze Bainbridge's true emotions in regard to the fatal event and his responsibility for it. He referred to it remarkably seldom. In scores of his later letters examined, only two short references to the occurrence have been unearthed. A week after the meeting he asked his correspondent to excuse the brevity of his note, as he felt so "deeply the death of my lamented friend Decatur."⁵¹ Three days later he told a colleague that, "I have been much affected in the death of my friend Decatur," adding stoically, "However, the vicissitudes of my life has [*sic*] fortified my mind for trying events."⁵²

It is possible to defend Bainbridge against Susan Decatur's implacable certainty that he had secretly worked with Elliott to kill her husband.⁵³ In addition to the aforementioned events when Decatur had earned Bainbridge's undying gratitude, it is entirely comprehensible that the sullen rage with which he had reacted to Decatur's outright theft of his opportunity for vengeance and lasting acclaim against Barbary would burn itself out within five years. Hence, his impromptu reunion with the other late in 1819 could have emanated from no more than an honest desire to renew a valued friendship. One close observer reported that on the very morning of the duel, Bainbridge had told him of his intention of giving his firing instructions so rapidly as to make twin misses

⁵⁰ Elliott continued to be a trouble-maker of the first water. After Commodore John Shaw had been court-martialed and suspended on charges brought against him by Commodore Isaac Hull in 1822, Elliott tried to egg on Shaw into challenging Hull to a duel, writing, "Your case could be a second Barron's." He suffered his own trial and suspension in 1840 for many delinquencies, but returned to active duty, presiding over the Philadelphia Navy Yard when he died in 1845.

⁵¹ Bainbridge to Porter, Mar. 28, 1820, Rodgers Family Papers, Naval Historical Foundation, Library of Congress.

⁵² Bainbridge to Luther Bradish, Mar. 31, 1820, Bainbridge Papers, Naval Historical Society Collection, New-York Historical Society.

⁵³ Although her husband left her a fortune, Susan Decatur frittered it rapidly away through extravagance and unwise investments. She had to endure degrading poverty for almost forty years until dying in a Georgetown convent in 1860, perhaps kept alive by her unrelenting hatred of Elliott and Bainbridge, referring to them in a letter to Henry Clay during 1827 as "my husband's murderers!"

likely, thereby bringing about a reconciliation.⁵⁴ Nor does he seem to add up as one who could have been responsible for such underhanded and malevolent conduct ascribed to him by Decatur's widow. As his clashes with Navy superiors during and after 1815 show, when he thought that he had been wronged, his response was anything but subtle, for he carped and complained at the top of his voice. It would have appeared far more in character for him to have baited and taunted Decatur into a duel, rather than to nurture a silent hatred for years, prior to joining Elliott in sub rosa and despicable maneuverings to murder him through the agency of a third party.

Yet there is abundant evidence the other way—that Susan Decatur's suspicions were justified. There can be no mistaking the anguish which Bainbridge felt in 1815 when it finally sank in that Decatur had used Secretary Crowninshield as his instrument in order to slake an unquestionable thirst for glory. Bainbridge would unquestionably have held his new enemy at least partially responsible for his steady succession of personal frustrations by the Navy Department from 1815 to 1818. If a spur of the moment reconciliation, even with one who had double-crossed him, is by no means unlikely for one with Bainbridge's generally affectionate nature, its timing could hardly have been more suspicious. By late December 1819 many naval officers knew that the acrimonious communications which went back and forth between Barron and Decatur had made a duel practically a certainty. And coincidence is raised to improbability when Bainbridge darts from a carriage to accost Decatur, invites himself to be his house guest, and promptly becomes the second of the man whom he believed had surreptitiously stolen from him an almost positively guaranteed place in history as the one who had single-handedly terminated three decades of North African abasement of his country. Bainbridge had, with an Elliott whose culpability in the affair seems beyond doubt, set the terms for the duel so as to make a lethal consequence for Decatur most probable. When the interchange between the combatants moments before they fired had given the best of reasons for sidetracking the proceedings, Bainbridge said nothing, allowing Elliott to hasten matters along to their deadly conclusion. Further-

⁵⁴ Samuel Hambleton, "Memorandum," Mar. 22, 1820, in Mackenzie, *Decatur*, 411.

more, if furtive moves against an adversary are uncharacteristic of the pre-1820 Commodore, later that decade Bainbridge appears to have used a couple of younger officers in efforts to seize for himself command of the Charlestown Navy Yard.⁵⁵

A final item is even more damaging. In the archives of the New-York Historical Society lies a special unpublished edition of James Fenimore Cooper's *History of the Navy of the United States*. Not only does it contain many holograph letters of famous American naval officers, but it is beautifully illustrated by John S. Barnes, Bainbridge's grandson by marriage. One volume contains Barnes' handwritten note explaining that an invoice which he had found was one of the few papers saved from the "holocaust" of Bainbridge's personal correspondence. He goes on to state that after the death of his widow, Susan Heyliger Bainbridge in 1857, the Commodore's daughters decided to burn his "most valuable letters."⁵⁶ Barnes gives no reason for their action. For what purpose would they have so acted unless his letters contained material damaging to his historical reputation? It is barely conceivable, from the point of American Victorian mores, that evidence of some delinquency, criminal or amatory, might have to have been destroyed, although there is nothing in the vast mass of material about Bainbridge which has survived to suggest such a necessity. Otherwise, with the possible exception of his efforts to push Hull out of Charlestown, anything else in his life which would have required such protective action seems nonexistent. Hence his daughters' conflagration gives credence to the belief that his private files held damning evidence about his complicity in Decatur's death. But obviously this conclusion cannot be stated categorically; perhaps the most useful verdict might be that pronounced in some Scottish trials—"not proven."

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⁵⁵ Bainbridge never again cruised after his return from the Mediterranean in 1821. He headed the Charlestown and Philadelphia Navy Yards, and, racked by constant pain from a host of diseases, turned to narcotics for relief late in life. By the time he died in 1833, he had become an addict.

⁵⁶ John S. Barnes, "Memorandum, 1882," found in Cooper's *Navy*, I, pt. 3, 180, New-York Historical Society.