The Heroic Image of a Pennsylvania Sailor

Many United States sailors have died in service to their country, and most are remembered or mourned by family and friends, but time erodes the individual identities of countless men whose collective contribution is unmistakable and whose individual legacy is minimal. Only a few great leaders or controversial figures leave a more permanent or unforgettable imprint, thanks to biographers, historians, journalists and maritime aficionados.

This natural or at least predictable course has an interesting exception in the Baltimore affair of 1891–1892. Here the diplomacy of the imbroglio, which almost led to war with Chile, and the personalities and ploys of President Benjamin Harrison, Secretary of State James G. Blaine, Secretary of the Navy Benjamin F. Tracy, American Minister Patrick Egan and Captain Winfield Scott Schley have obscured the equally fascinating public reaction to the unfortunate and unproductive death of a Pennsylvania Boatswain's Mate. Patriotic defender of flag and country or instigator of a drunken brawl, Philadelphia-born Charles W. Riggin was, for a short time, so celebrated and honored that his death outside a bar in Valparaíso, Chile, was elevated to heroic proportions.

He served on the U.S.S. Baltimore, a cruiser of English design built at Philadelphia by William Cramp and Sons' shipbuilding works, at that time one of the largest in the nation. The ship was commissioned on January 7, 1890 (contracted in August 1885). Heavily armed and with a crew of 301, she displaced 4,600 tons. Her engines had 10,065 horsepower capacity, and could maintain a speed of 19.5 knots. Secretary of the Navy Tracy proudly remarked that “The Baltimore is undoubtedly the fastest ship of her
displacement in the world. She can whip any that can catch her and run away from any that can whip her.”

The *Baltimore*’s commander was Winfield Scott Schley, a lean man of medium height who parted his thick black hair in the middle. Known as a raconteur, the captain was impulsive yet amiable, unreserved yet seeking of public approbation, easygoing yet not one to shy away from a fight. Responding to a decision to send naval forces to protect United States interests in Chile during the revolution of 1891, Schley may have requested that the Secretary of the Navy order the *Baltimore* there. Shortly after the ship’s arrival at Valparaíso on April 7, 1891, Schley assured Washington that her presence contributed to the security of American residents. Rear Admiral W. P. McCann of the United States flagship *Pensacola*, also in Chilean waters, cabled Secretary Tracy that the *Baltimore* “has also had a very good effect in increasing the respect of these people for our navy and showing them that the United States had the power to protect the interests of her citizens should it become necessary to do so.”

During most of September and the first half of October the *Baltimore* was in or near the port of Valparaíso, and on Friday, October 16, a pleasant day with light airs and gentle fresh breezes from the south and west, Schley granted shore leave for twenty-four hours to 117 of his crew, “exactly the same as was being done by all of the foreign men-of-war in the harbor.” Perhaps his decision

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2 McCann to Tracy, #32, Apr. 29, 1891, General Area File (1775-1910), National Archives; J. F. Van Ingre to Second Assistant Secretary of State, #122, Jan. 14, 1891, State Department Consular Despatches, National Archives; *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States* (Washington, 1897), 93-94; Blaine to Tracy, Jan. 19, 1891, Naval Correspondence, *House Executive Documents* #91, 233; Tracy to McCann, Jan. 24, 1891, Naval Correspondence, *House Executive Documents* #91, 233; Tracy to McCann, Mar. 4, 1891, *ibid.*, 237. See also W. S. Schley, *Forty-Five Years Under the Flag* (New York, 1904), 192, 212; R. S. West, Jr., *Admirals of American Empire* (New York, 1948), 98-99, 166, 295-296; Peck, 264.
was unwise or indiscreet, owing to ill will that had developed toward Americans during the Chilean revolution. But it had been several months since the crew had enjoyed shore leave, and on the *Baltimore*’s arrival in April the Intendente of Valparaíso, Juan de Dios Arlegui, assured Schley there was no objection to his granting liberty.³

The men went ashore between 1 and 2 P.M., acquired local currency, bought tobacco, went to barbers, located places to spend the night, rode in carriages, and patronized various bars. As late as 5:30 P.M. they were reported by the officers who saw them as "orderly, sober, and well behaved to everybody they were meeting in the streets." Then, about 6 P.M., simmering hostility toward Americans erupted into a disturbance in the more rowdy neighborhood of the port.⁴

Boatswain’s Mate Charles W. Riggin and Seaman Apprentice John W. Talbot, had been roaming the western part of the city, first visiting a bar called the "Shakespeare," then passing a dance hall known as "Home of the Free," and finally entering the "True Blue" saloon, where they found a group of friends. After a while they decided to leave for a better part of town. Riggin went first, while Talbot remained, talking with the woman who worked at the bar. When Talbot reached the door he noticed Riggin in the middle of the street arguing with a Chilean man-of-warsman. Talbot ran across the street to ask what the problem was. Riggin reportedly "said something about the Chilean trying to pick a row with him or something like that." Apparently Talbot got between them and pushed them both aside, telling the Chilean to "go off," or "here, you shove off." The Chilean supposedly reacted by spitting in Talbot’s face, whereupon the latter responded by knocking him down. A moment later the street was filled with angry Chileans. Talbot and Riggin ran westward down the street, turned a corner, and sought refuge in a passing horsecar, which was then bombarded by the mob who heaved cobblestones and bricks. The sailors again sought to flee, but were immediately surrounded by the crowd.

³ U.S.S. *Baltimore* Log, Oct. 16, 1891; Schley, 221–222.
⁴ Reconstruction of the riot is taken from the inquiry conducted at Mare Island, California, printed in *House Executive Documents* #91, 341–610.
Talbot saw Riggin fall, but just at that moment he himself was stabbed in the back and bolted to escape the rioters. Riggin was left "face downwards in the middle of the street, and two or three policemen standing around him, and a mob of citizens, and they were stabbing him while he was lying down." Armorer James M. Johnson came to poor Riggin's aid, responding to his plea, "For Christ sake, Johnson, take me out of here before they kill me, or before I die." Johnson lifted him up, partly carrying and partly dragging him. He later testified that at that juncture a squad of Chilean police approached and that someone from the squad fired on them. One shot, fired at a distance close enough to blacken Johnson's face with the discharge, went through Johnson's neckerchief and shirt, hitting Riggin in the neck and killing him instantly. Johnson then dropped Riggin's body and ran. The riot lasted more than an hour and resulted in another death and serious injury to at least seventeen people. More than thirty American sailors were jailed for four days.

It is beyond the purpose of this essay to discuss the causes of United States-Chilean tensions, which may have led to the Baltimore affair, questions that arise from the conflicting Chilean version of the origins and events of the riot, or the diplomatic maneuvering that followed and almost led to war. What is interesting, and now all but forgotten, is the extraordinary tribute paid to the two dead sailors—particularly the Pennsylvanian Riggin—by their fellow countrymen.

The second death resulting from the riot was that of coalheaver William Turnbull, who had been returned to the Baltimore six days after the event in critical condition with a fever of 103.5. He was given a hypodermic of morphine and put on a diet of milk punch and eggs. The following day no change in his condition was reported, except that the morphine had freed him of pain so that he took some nourishment. The third day his fever began to rise. According to the Baltimore's medical journal, "during the evening of October 24 it was impossible to reduce his temperature below 101—it at times going up as high as 108. Pulse remained at 200. Respiration 50 and shallow. Was vomiting blood stained liquid constantly and dark splotches made their appearance before his death which occurred at 12:45 A.M. this morning." Assistant
Surgeon E. R. Stitt concluded that Turnbull had not died directly from wounds received in the disturbance; he attributed death to blood poisoning stemming from imperfection in antiseptic methods while Turnbull was cared for in a Valparaíso hospital. Arrangements were made for his burial, and on October 26 all hands were called for funeral services with Captain Schley officiating. A funeral party was then sent ashore with Turnbull’s remains.5

Riggin’s body meanwhile had been examined by Dr. Stitt who recorded his opinion in medical terminology and later disagreed with two Chilean physicians about the wounds and the sort of projectile that had caused death. On October 19, after the admiral of the French fleet in Chilean waters had sent an officer to extend sympathies, a funeral party went ashore to inter Riggin’s remains.6

Riggin and Turnbull were buried with military honors in the Cementerio de los Disidentes, or English Cemetery as it was known, located on the crest of a steep bluff, overlooking the city, with cobblestone roads leading up to it lined with picturesque but poor shanties that still, nearly a century after the Baltimore riot, appear in their typically nineteenth-century forms. The dead sailors’ shipmates purchased a large, handsome marble stone to mark their graves. Decorated with a cross and sculptured ivy climbing round, it stands on a massive marble block, on which is engraved:

Sacred
To the Memory of
C. W. Riggin
Boatswains Mate U.S.N.
Born in Phila U.S. of A.
Feb 10 1863
Killed in Valparaiso
Oct 16 1891
Age 28 Y 3 months

The opposite side bears an appropriate legend for Riggin’s dead comrade:

and
W. Turnbull
Coal Heaver U.S.N.
Born in P.E. Island
Oct 14 1867
Died Oct 25 1891
Of Wounds Received
Oct 16 1891 in Valparaiso
Aged 24 Years 11 days

The honor paid to the two young sailors did not end with the engraving of an ornate tombstone. The entire crew, but especially Riggin, was absolved of any wrong-doing or bad conduct while on shore. Indeed, Schley forcefully argued that the Chileans’ “attempt to create the impression that the *Baltimore*’s men were drunk and that the row was a drunken brawl of American sailors was malicious and untrue.” Captain Robley D. Evans of the *Yorktown* disagreed. “His men were probably drunk on shore, properly drunk; they went ashore, many of them for the purpose of getting drunk, which they did on Chilean rum paid for with good United States money.” Far to the north, in the United States, diplomats, politicians, and the public chose to accept Schley’s version. President Harrison in his Annual Message to Congress of December 9, 1891, and a special message on January 25, 1892, vigorously reaffirmed this point of view that the riot was a premeditated assault on the honor and dignity of the United States. At the formal court of inquiry into the circumstances of the attack eventually conducted at Mare Island, California, seventeen crew members of the *Baltimore* attested to Riggin’s sobriety as well as his efforts to restrain the alcohol intake of others. “Jerry, for God’s sake,” Riggin was reported to have said to a friend, “don’t drink anything to-day, because we expect to be mobbed.” Another testified that while Riggin’s shipmates all had a single drink “he took a lemonade.” While all the sailors admitted

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going ashore to enjoy themselves, Riggin was elevated to the position of temperance leader.  

Several months after news of his death reached the United States, the New York Recorder suggested a fund be raised by dime contributions, mostly from school children, from which were molded three silver statuettes of Riggin to be presented to Harrison, Blaine, and Tracy. One of them is exhibited at the Benjamin Harrison Memorial Home in Indianapolis, as the “Riggin Testimonial.” Though partly inaccurate (in Indianapolis the ship is erroneously referred to as the Charleston) the testimonial accurately represented the mood that surrounded the martyred sailor.

The statuettes were intended as testimonials from the American people, showing their appreciation of the prompt and patriotic action taken by the National Administration to uphold the rights of the United States. The statuettes were also designed to serve as mementos of the attack upon American sailors in the streets of Valparaíso, Chile, October 19, 1891 [sic]. Boatswain’s Mate Riggin was chosen as the model for the statuettes because he was the only native of the United States who lost his life in the affray. In addition, Riggin was considered by his superior officers as a model seaman and his record of twelve years in the service was untarnished.

Started with the Recorder’s article of January 31, 1892, the fund was closed on March 27, having received 25,274 contributions of dimes. Closing the fund did not stop their flow, which eventually brought the total to 26,382. According to the testimonial, “no fund had ever before received one-fifth the number of subscriptions in the same time.” The model for the statuettes was sculpted by Alexander J. Doyle of New York who did so as a “gratuitous contribution to the patriotic sentiment they embody.”

Riggin’s body did not rest long in Valparaíso. In February 1892, Secretary of State Blaine cabled the American minister in Santiago, Patrick Egan, that Riggin’s brothers and sisters desired to bring his remains back to Pennsylvania “for interment by the side of his

mother." Blaine instructed Egan to inquire what was necessary to obtain a permit of exhumation. At first there was some problem with the sanitary laws in Chile. Then, after Grace and Company agreed to attend to details, in July 1892 Secretary of State John W. Foster (Blaine had resigned in June) was scandalized by a telegram from Egan stating that "Grace house Valparaiso insultingly refuse to receive the body of Riggin." With the financial and organizational aid of the Philadelphia Inquirer, the remains ultimately were sent to Panama on the Chilean Cachapoal, and from there to New York on the American steamer Progress, at a cost to the government of $528.69.¹⁰

It appears that the Inquirer hoped its efforts on behalf of Riggin would help increase circulation. Between July 21 and August 15, 1892, Riggin was front-page news, illustrated with sketches of him and his curly-haired nephew who was always appropriately dressed in a sailor suit. Grand plans were made to demonstrate the nation's sympathy and gratitude to the Pennsylvanian. "The demonstration in this city . . . will be not merely a local affair," observed the newspaper: "There is no longer any question as to the character and extent of the honor that will be paid to the memory of Boatswain's Mate Charles W. Riggin—the murdered American sailor." The patriotic display was to be an extraordinary one in many respects. Secretary Foster approved of the military honors to surround Riggin's return, but hoped "that nothing will be said or done by the public oration or demonstration which would revive the unfortunate diplomatic incident and cause feeling among the Chilean authorities." The Inquirer and most of Pennsylvania's patriotic organizations agreed on the treatment Riggin would receive:

It will be the grandest demonstration in honor of the memory of a poor but brave American seaman that has ever been witnessed in Philadelphia. It will be one that will put to shame some carping critics and mousing owls that I find are disposed to assail the Grand Army of the Republic, the Patriotic Sons of America, the American Mechanics and other patriotic organizations . . . simply because they wish to pay all the respect that

¹⁰ Blaine to Egan, Feb. 11, 25, Mar. 4, 1892, State Department Instructions to Ministers in Chile, National Archives; Egan to Blaine, Mar. 5, 1892, Egan to Foster, July 11, Aug. 2, 1892, State Department Diplomatic Despatches, ibid.
within them lies to the man who lost his life at the hands of a foreign mob for no other reason than that he wore the navy blue of the United States.\textsuperscript{11}

The \textit{New York Times} of August 11, 1892, reported that United States Consul William D. McCreery and his daughter accompanied the body from Valparaiso and at New York made the formal transfer to a committee composed of representatives from the Navy Yard, Patriotic Sons of America, various naval posts, Grand Army of the Republic, Sons of Veterans, United American Mechanics, the deceased’s brother John L. Riggin, as well as reporters from the \textit{Inquirer} who wrote that “sunshine made the morning of the dead sailor boy’s home-coming a bright one.”\textsuperscript{12}

The episode, which meanwhile had led to an ultimatum by President Harrison and serious war preparation in Washington, had so elevated popular emotions that the return of Riggin’s remains was viewed as something akin to the return of a martyred secular saint. “By his death,” explained the \textit{Inquirer}, “a great principle has been vindicated—that the flag of the Union is to be respected everywhere, on land and sea alike . . . and no right-minded American citizen will object to paying due honor to the body of the seaman who fell at the hands of the mob that this great principle might be maintained before the eyes of the world.” In fact, the exaltation of Riggin reached such a height that upon request by a large number of military and civil associations and the \textit{Inquirer}, the mayor of Philadelphia consented that his body lie in state under the Liberty Bell in Independence Hall. Theodore Roosevelt, at that time a Civil Service Commissioner in Washington, and others thought the arrangements in Philadelphia a fitting climax to the dead sailor’s life, even if such journals as the \textit{Nation} and newspapers as the \textit{Philadelphia Press} questioned the propriety of an honor previously given in death only to extremely famous historical characters such as Abraham Lincoln. Critics contended that a mere Boatswain’s Mate did not deserve such high honor. The \textit{Inquirer}, however, insisted that calling Riggin only a Boat-
swain's Mate was an insult to Pennsylvania and the flag—a flag insulted when Riggin was killed. It was impossible to pay too much respect "to the man who in his country’s service was dragged from a car by a foreign mob and cruelly stabbed in the back and shot to death because he wore the American Navy blue. . . . Everything goes to show he was a faithful, sober man, and whether admiral or seaman his fellow citizens cannot honor him too highly."13

Whatever the appropriateness of Riggin's apotheosis, the ceremonies were altogether impressive. The *New York Times* of August 14 recorded that at Independence Hall "when the spectators, who had gathered in large numbers, were finally admitted they were allowed to file past the coffin, which was buried beneath the drapery and surrounded by the guard with fixed bayonets." The *Inquirer*, also of August 14, was much more emotional, emphasizing that the 28,140 spectators taught to sneering critics of the American seaman, in the very cradle of liberty—beneath the very bell that proclaimed freedom from kingly rule; within a dozen yards of the very spot from which the Magna Charta was read—that they, the many—not the few—must rule; that governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed; that the poor and lowly as well as the rich and mighty, have rights which must be held inviolate.

Six thousand representatives from Pennsylvania naval, military, civic, and patriotic organizations then joined in a funeral procession, and according to estimate "at least 300,000 others watched the cortege as it moved from Independence Hall to the Woodlands Cemetery, where several thousand listened to the funeral oration and sermon and witnessed the religious services at the grave.” Among those present was a military escort of 125 men from the First Regiment, Pennsylvania National Guard, 200 from the Third Regiment, fifty from the Gray Invincibles, seventy-two from Com-

pany D of the New Jersey National Guard, a long line of Grand Army Veterans, Sons of Veterans, Sons of America, Junior Mechanics, and naval veterans along with several dozen seamen and petty officers acting as an honor guard. The hearse, drawn by six black horses, was draped with a cloth of blue with white stars, in the middle of which was a cluster of shields surrounding a gold eagle. An Episcopal minister read the service, after which former Pennsylvania Assistant District Attorney William W. Ker described how Riggin was killed, emphasizing that "every wound that he received was given in the hatred, not of him, but of the country in whose service he was enrolled." The people sang "My Country 'Tis of Thee," and the Reverend Doctor Duncan MacGregor of the Centennial Baptist Church of Philadelphia, who had postponed a trip to the Poconos, "paid a glowing tribute to the dead seaman and to American patriotism, and the minister and relatives repaired to the grave, which was lined with evergreen and ivy, and after a brief service when the casket had been lowered, the firing squad fired three volleys."¹⁴

History may sometimes be made by great men whose mere presence or conscious response to particular situations will have vital consequences for society or even humanity. But it is also noteworthy to remember how the accidental confluence of events can set in motion forces that can alter society or simply its collective response to one man. It is simplistic to say that Riggin became a hero because he died. He was more a symbol of heroism—revered not for his accomplishments but for what people, particularly Pennsylvanians or at least as exemplified by them, wanted to think was his spirit of self-sacrifice. His meteoric popularity in death had no basis in any pragmatic criteria or achievement in life, and no known personality trait could have so enhanced his reputation.

The forces that enlarged Riggin’s heroism might be explained by political opportunism or even by the national psychic crisis theory

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of the late historian Richard Hofstadter—that societies in stress seek some person or thing, real or symbolic, to protect them. Perhaps United States society in 1891–1892 temporarily adopted the Pennsylvania Boatswain’s Mate as a sort of talisman for revitalization of or return to the values of a golden past that seemed threatened. Maybe the sanctifying or glorifying of Riggin’s squalid death simply showed that heroism is in the eyes of the beholder—that it is not the intent of the actor that is important, but the reaction of society to the act. It seems more tenable to this writer, however, that short-lived heroes like Riggin merely personify the historical event. The Baltimore affair, for all the bravado surrounding questions of honor and the imminence of war, was more like a national catharsis than catalyst for the contemporary currents in American thought and action at the end of the century. The image of Pennsylvania Boatswain’s Mate Charles W. Riggin momentarily served the expression of certain impulses that would be acted out more vigorously by the entire nation a few years later in 1898.

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