



ALL THE BRAVE FELLOWS

JAMES NELSON

TRANSWORLD
BOOKS

About the Book

The triumphant finale to the REVOLUTION AT SEA saga.

It is 1777, and captain Isaac Biddlecomb, together with his wife and child, is bound for Philadelphia aboard the brig *Charlemagne*. His orders are to take command of the newly-built frigate *Falmouth* and take her out to sea before she is taken by General Richard Howe's invading army. Unknown to Biddlecomb, the entire British fleet stands between him and the new nation's capital. Forced to run his beloved brig aground, Biddlecomb comes face to face with his mortal enemy, Lieutenant John Smeaton.

Meanwhile, General Washington has yielded Philadelphia to Britain's might. As Biddlecomb and his crew battle to reach the prized *Falmouth*, only shipwright Malachi Foote and a ragtag band of deserters stand between the vessel and the seemingly unstoppable British army.

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ALL THE BRAVE FELLOWS

The Revolution at Sea Saga Book Five

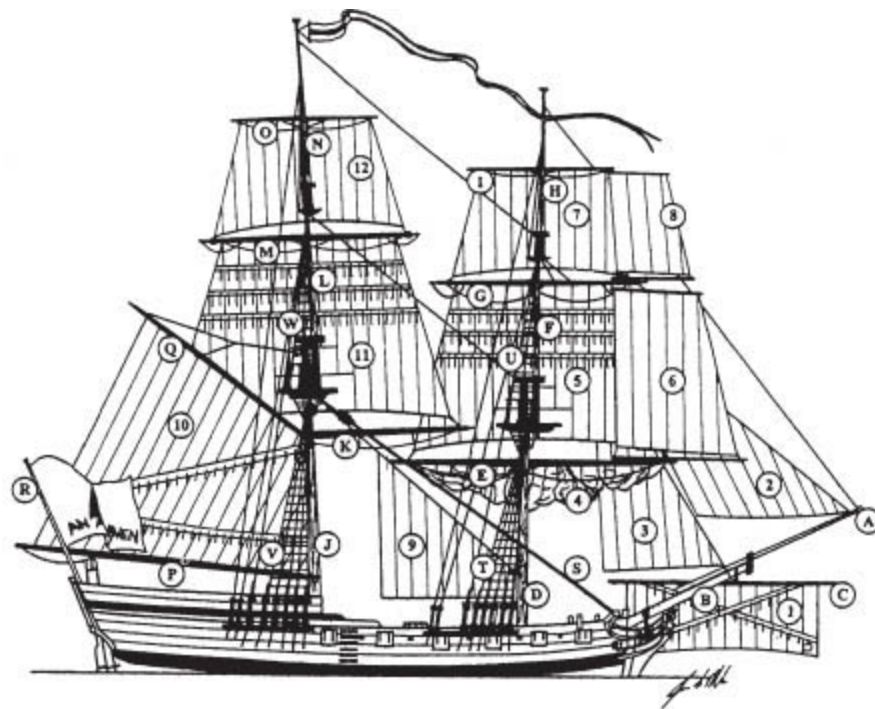
James Nelson

*To Nathaniel James Nelson,
who was kind enough to wait until
Daddy was done writing this book
before being born.*

*And as always,
to Lisa,
whom I love*

The several Commanders ... will have ... a chance of immortalizing their own names besides enriching all the brave fellows under their command.

—RESOLUTION OF THE MARINE COMMITTEE APRIL 29, 1777



A Brig of War

Sails

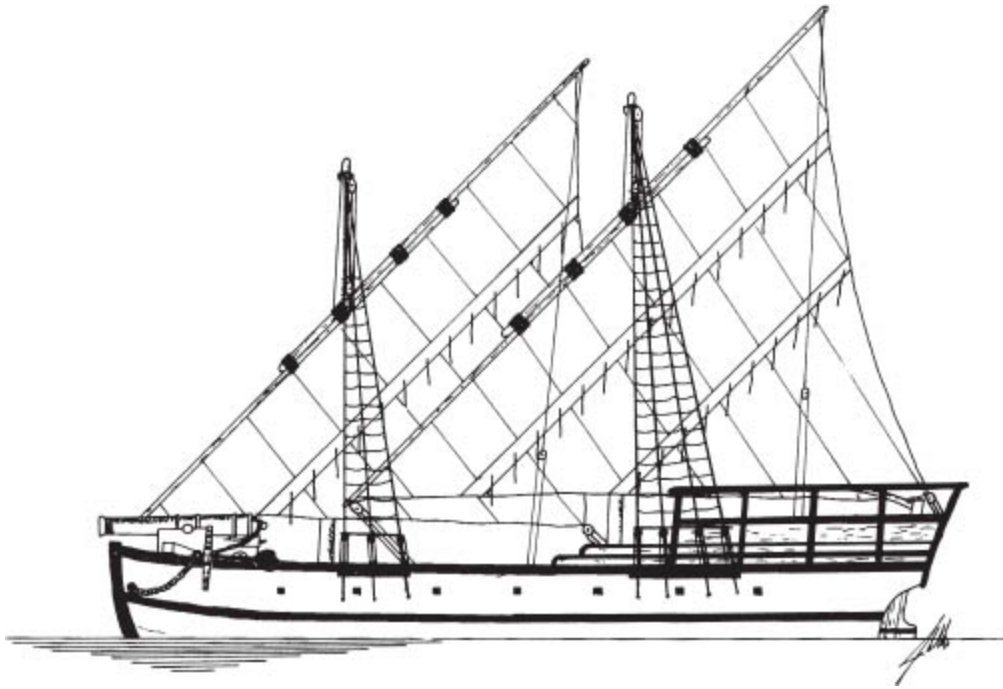
1. Spritsail
2. Jib
3. Fore Topmast Staysail
4. Foresail (clewed up)
5. Fore Topsail
6. Fore Topmast Studdingsail (removable)
7. Fore Topgallant Sail
8. Fore Topgallant Studdingsail (removable)
9. Main Staysail
10. Mainsail
11. Main Topsail
12. Main Topgallant Sail

Spars and Rigging

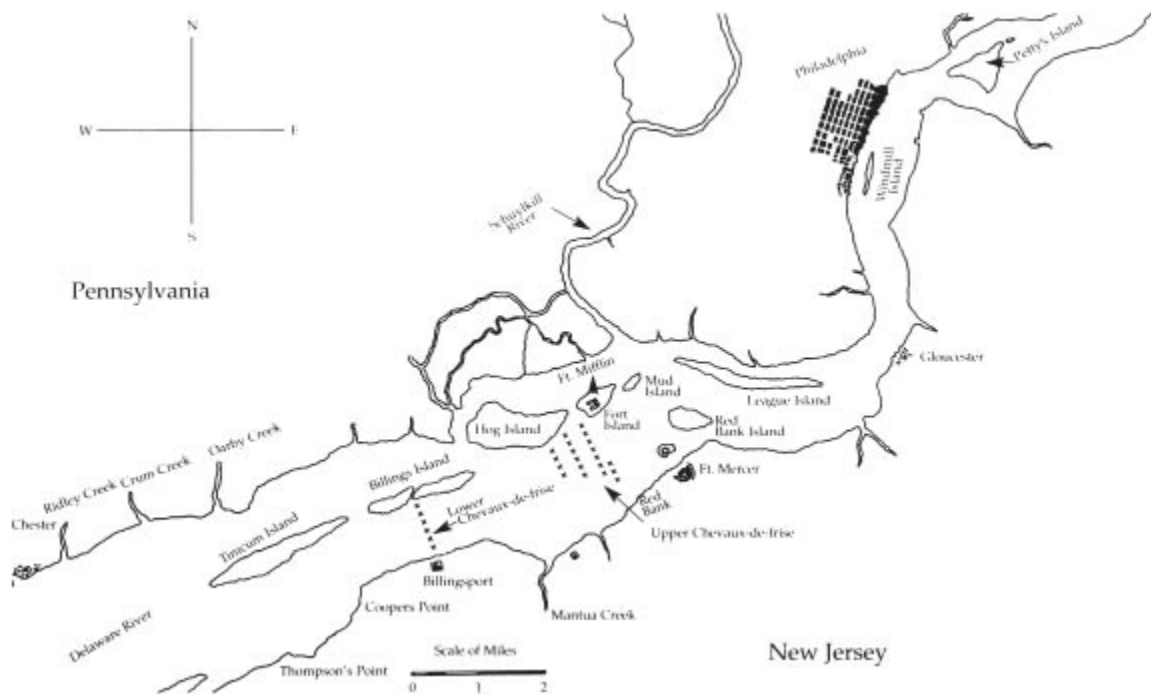
- A. Jibboom
- B. Bowsprit
- C. Spritsail Yard

D. Foremast
E. Foreyard
F. Fore Topmast
G. Fore Topsail Yard
H. Fore Topgallant Mast
I. Fore Topgallant Yard
J. Mainmast
K. Mainyard
L. Main Topmast
M. Main Topsail Yard
N. Main Topgallant Mast
O. Main Topgallant Yard
P. Boom
Q. Gaff
R. Ensign Staff (removable)
S. Mainstay
T. Fore Shrouds and Ratlines
U. Fore Topmast Shrouds and Ratlines
V. Main Shrouds and Ratlines
W. Main Topmast Shrouds and Ratlines

* For other terminology and usage [see Glossary](#) at the end of the book



The Continental Navy Xebec *Expedient*



CHAPTER 1

I am now Applying myself with all diligence to the Business of the Navy Board ... but I think it peculiarly Unhappy that we Enter on this Business when the Circumstances of the Fleet are far from being such as promises any Hopes that we can gratify the Expectations of the people ...

—JAMES WARREN WRITING TO JOHN ADAMS SEPTEMBER 7,
1777

THE WIND BLEW cold, steady and strong, striking the New Jersey coast at an oblique angle and sending up a line of breakers miles long. The Continental brig-of-war *Charlemagne* was half a league off the coast, far enough to be beyond the immediate threat of the breaking surf, but close enough for her people to be wary and concerned.

The sky was ugly, gray, the color of boiled meat. The sea was gray as well, taking its mood from the muffled daylight, and covered over its surface with whitecaps that flashed in long rows extending seaward to the horizon.

The hair was white, pure white.

Capt. Isaac Biddlecomb leaned closer to the mirror, one hand on the washbasin to steady himself against the roll of the ship, bits of shaving soap still clinging to his chin.

There it was, nestled among the long, black hairs that swept back along his head and were bound up in a queue. A white hair. A ghostly harbinger of creeping age. He was only thirty-one. It seemed altogether too early for that sort of thing.

‘Have you only now noticed that?’ Virginia Biddlecomb, his wife of just over a year, sat on the locker aft, her back

against the weather side of the great cabin, her feet against the big table, which was in turn lashed to the deck. In that position she held herself motionless against the roll and plunge of the brig, as casual as if she were sitting on her porch. Virginia was entirely at home on shipboard.

Biddlecomb turned and met her eyes. Her look was mischievous, teasing. In her lap, a great bundle of cloth and lace, and in the center of that, two-month-old Jack Biddlecomb. All that Isaac could see of his only child was a tuft of dark hair, a pink cheek, and a tiny ear as the baby took his breakfast at Virginia's breast. The sight no longer made Isaac uncomfortable, and he congratulated himself on that.

'Yes, it is the first I have seen of it,' Isaac replied, 'though the great wonder is that I am not entirely gray, with all I carry on my shoulders. Ship captain, husband, father ...'

Virginia gave him a pouty expression. 'Surely your family is not a burden to you? I should think we would be a great comfort to you in your time of trouble.'

'You are, my dearest. You are always a comfort to me.'

'And you, sir, I pray, are a better sailor than you are a liar, or we shall never see Philadelphia.'

Biddlecomb smiled and wiped the remaining soap from his face. He stepped aft and kissed Virginia and kissed his son on the head, though the boy took no notice of the gesture.

'In any event, my love,' said Virginia, 'did Shakespeare not say that "infirmity, which decays the wise, doth oft make the better captain"?''

'Something to that effect. But I had thought that misquoting Shakespeare was my province.' He leaned low and peered out of the salt-stained windows at the portion of sea that lay astern of them.

Two vessels were in view, one about two cables astern of the *Charlemagne*, the second two cables astern of the first.

They were plunging along in the brig's wake, their sails shortened to avoid overtaking the battered naval vessel.

They were both privateers, newly built and fitted out in Boston. The nearer of the two was a brig, the farther ship-rigged, what they would call a sloop of war in the naval service. They were sailing in company with the *Charlemagne*, in hopes of aiding the American cause and, more importantly sharing in any prize that might come the way of the often fortunate Capt. Isaac Biddlecomb.

'We've a regular little squadron here,' Isaac observed, 'at least until we fetch Cape Ann. Still, I think we will have no opportunity to make use of them.'

But Virginia's mind was no longer focused on the fight for independence, and the passion she had once had for politics had now mostly yielded to motherhood. 'Isaac, do you think the sleeping cabin aboard the *Falmouth* will have room enough for our bed as well as a hanging cot for Jack? If the fitting out should require some months, then it would be well to have it thus arranged.'

'We should be able to figure that easily enough.' Isaac crossed the cabin and from a shelf crammed with charts withdrew a roll of paper nearly a yard long, thick and heavy. He unrolled it on the table, carefully setting various objects down to keep it from rolling up again. 'Let us just see what the dimensions are of the sleeping cabin.'

'Isaac, do not for one moment pretend that you have got that draft out just to answer me. In truth, you are using my question as an excuse to leer at the thing again. I swear, if you looked at a woman the way you look at that paper, I would have her eyes out. And yours.'

Biddlecomb looked up at his wife. He smiled. She was right. As usual. 'You know me too well, dear, too well by half. But if it is of any comfort, I confine my longings to you and the frigate.'

The frigate, the *Falmouth*, lay stretched out across the table in two dimensions, a black-and-white rendering of

what was to be the next command of Isaac Biddlecomb, Captain, Navy of the United States.

She was not one of the original thirteen frigates, ordered in those heady days of December 1775, when John Adams and Stephen Hopkins were leading the charge in the naval line. Of those thirteen, only four had got to sea. Of those four, the *Hancock* had already been captured and the *Randolph* was languishing in Charleston, dismasted and crippled. As for the other nine, the *Congress* and the *Montgomery* had been burned to avoid capture on the Hudson, and the balance remained in various states short of completion.

But despite that, and seemingly despite the ugly face of reality, Congress had ordered more ships late in the year '76: a brig of eighteen guns, five frigates of thirty-six guns, and most unbelievable of all, three seventy-four-gun ships of the line.

And along with that, and almost as an afterthought, the *Falmouth* of twenty-eight guns. William Stanton, Biddlecomb's father-in-law, and now chair of the Navy Board of the Eastern Department, told him that the contract was a payoff, a plum thrown out to a political crony of one of the committee members.

That was fine. Biddlecomb did not care about the ship's parentage, did not care about the circumstances that caused her to be raised up on the stocks. He ran his eyes over her lines as they had been drawn, the beautiful, fine entry, the gentle deadrise, the elegant sweep of her stem and cutwater, the suggestion of tumblehome at her gunwales. Stanton had got him the drafts from the designer, Joshua Humphreys, and now Biddlecomb was in love, like falling in love with a woman's portrait. He was seaman enough to know how sweet a vessel the drafts represented, if properly built.

He had received his orders a month before: proceed to Philadelphia where the ship was building in the yard of

Wharton and Humphreys; assume command; see to her rigging, armaments, and final fitting out. Then get her to sea, quickly, before the British were able to seal her up in the confines of the Delaware River.

No sooner had he set his eyes on the drafts than he was anxious to be rid of the cramped and tired brig that he had been commanding for two years. Every time he unrolled the plans, the *Charlemagne* seemed to grow smaller and more inadequate.

Biddlecomb picked up his dividers, adjusted them against the scale of the draft, held the points against the drawing of the sleeping place. 'Yes, I think there shall be ample space for all the Biddlecombs to bunk,' he said, thinking of the restless nights in his future. Every time little Jack called out, it jerked Isaac out of his sleep; every time he bawled for his mother, which was often, Isaac was up as well.

'I fear we will have to share the cabin with the great guns, though,' Isaac continued, caressing various features of the draft with the brass dividers. 'Though I will be much surprised if there are guns aboard her now.' He stared at the black ink squares that represented the *Falmouth's* gunports. Twenty-eight twelve-pound guns. Just one of the frigate's broadsides would throw a greater weight of iron than the entire pathetic armament aboard the *Charlemagne*. What he would do with that.

'I do so hope that the British have not taken Philadelphia,' Virginia said. 'I long to see that city again, and to show off little Jack to Sophia and Mrs Clark and the rest.' It was as if they were having two different conversations.

'I do not know, my dear,' Biddlecomb said. He laid one of the divider's points against the *Falmouth's* gun deck, measured the distance to the overhead. He would have standing headroom. He would be able to stand upright unimpeded anywhere in the great cabin. Such luxury.

He scowled at the *Charlemagne's* deckhead, under which he stooped. 'Before we sailed I had heard no more than those rumors of a fight along the Brandywine Creek, and the word was that things had not gone well. As they generally do not.' Twenty-eight big guns, he thought.

'If the British have taken Philadelphia, then surely they have taken your silly frigate as well,' Virginia observed. Isaac looked over at her, guessed that the words had come out more bitter than she had intended.

'I think not.' Isaac carefully rolled the drafts up again. He was learning the limits of Virginia's patience. 'I have it on good authority that the British fleet is still in the Chesapeake, and if they do not control the Delaware Bay and the river, then it is unlikely they were able to capture the frigate. I have no doubt but she was moved to some place of safety.'

'That is if she was launched, which you do not know.'

'That is true.' Isaac had not thought of that. The last he had heard, she was still on the ways, all but ready for her launch. It was quite possible that the British had taken the city and found the *Falmouth* high and dry, vulnerable as a beached whale. They might have burned her or taken her for themselves. The thought frightened him, and he was annoyed with Virginia for having brought it up.

'I'm sorry, my beloved,' Virginia said sincerely. 'I have no doubt that your ship is in a safe place, waiting for you to sail her away.' Her contrition was genuine, but the truth of her earlier observation could not be denied, and so Isaac was not much comforted as he crossed the cabin and they kissed in mutual apology.

Jack was at last finished and Virginia handed him to his father, who took him up in his arms, stealing a glance at his wife's lovely breasts as he did. 'Good morning, my little man,' he said, tickling the baby under the chin, marveling at the tiny features, only now losing their newborn wrinkles.

Jack blinked wide, stared up at his father. He was not yet quite in control of his facial muscles, and his eyes opened and closed, and his mouth twisted in the oddest expressions, which made Isaac laugh, delighted. The baby seemed entirely at ease with his surroundings, though his world swooped and rolled and yawed, creaked and slammed around him.

'I had thought ...' Virginia began when she was cut off by a voice, faint through the skylight, singing out from the mainmast head those words that superseded all others on board a man-of-war: 'Sail, ho!'

Virginia kept silent, listened as intently as Isaac. 'Where away?' came the booming voice of Ezra Rumstick, the *Charlemagne's* first officer, a great bear of a man, Biddlecomb's oldest friend.

A pause, and then the first note of the lookout's reply, and then Jack let out a yell, tiny in its volume but quite enough to drown out what the man aloft had reported. Isaac sighed in exasperation and handed the baby off to Virginia, who put him over her shoulder and patted his back, coaxing a surprisingly loud belch from his tummy.

Biddlecomb heard footsteps through the gunroom outside his cabin, a knock, and then the door was partially open. 'Midshipman Gerrish,' the marine sentry announced, and Biddlecomb said, 'Come.'

The *Charlemagne* had been a regular naval vessel, complete with a marine contingent, for over a year and a half - indeed, for as long as there had been a navy of the United States - and Biddlecomb was at last becoming accustomed to the formalities of the service.

Not quite so was Mr Midshipman Samuel Gerrish, who, in his midthirties, was on the old side for a midshipman. He stepped into the cabin, looked around, squinting through round spectacles. At last he looked up at Biddlecomb, as if surprised to find him there, and said, 'Mr Rumstick's compliments, sir, but a sail has been sighted, ship-rigged,

bearing due south on a starboard tack with single-reefed topsails.'

'Indeed.' Biddlecomb considered the information. The ship would be sailing roughly parallel with the coast, making toward his little ad hoc squadron, would most likely tack soon and claw off the coast, before his leeway set him down on the beach. Biddlecomb had been considering just that thing himself.

'No colors that the man could see?' he asked, and Gerrish said, 'No, sir.'

'Very well, then. Pray tell Mr Rumstick that I shall be up directly, and please take a glass aloft and see what you can see.'

'Aye, sir,' Gerrish said, making a poor job of disguising his feelings about going aloft on that cold, wet morning. He saluted and disappeared and Isaac turned to his wife.

'Duty, and all that,' he said as he pulled on his coat and his greatcoat over that.

'Of course, my love. Your scarf is on the sideboard. Please put it on before you go on deck.'

Isaac smiled, wrapped the scarf around his neck. He had been all of thirteen when his mother had died. He was not accustomed to such feminine concern, and was not sure if he liked it.

The difference between the great cabin and the quarterdeck was startling, a sudden shift from the comforts of domestic life to cold and ugly war, as if the cabin that housed his wife and child and the deck that supported the officers, men, and guns of the brig were two entirely different places, and he had somehow gone instantly from one to the other. It took genuine effort for Biddlecomb to shift his concerns from Jack's need to be burped to his ship's need to be driven into battle.

The *Charlemagne's* officers - Rumstick, Second Lieutenant David Weatherspoon, Marine Lieutenant Elisha Faircloth - gave their 'Good mornings' to the captain and

retreated to the leeward side, save for Rumstick, who saluted and said, 'Strange sail's just visible now, sir, on the rise.' He nodded in the direction of the *Charlemagne's* larboard bow and Isaac followed the gesture.

The gray sea was rising up before them, a moderate swell that came even with the brig's rail as the vessel twisted and sank into the trough. Then she shuddered as her bluff bow hit the bottom and began to rise, coming up and up as the roller passed under them.

And on the crest of the wave Biddlecomb was able to catch a glimpse of the distant vessel; spindly topgallant masts and yards, dark against the gray sky, like bare trees in winter, topsails full and hard, shortened by the length of a single reef, their weather leeches distorted by the pull of bowlines, the better part of a jibboom with fore-topmast staysail set and drawing. The distant rig dipped, as if nodding a greeting, as the vessel went down in some unseen valley of water. And then the *Charlemagne* went down herself and the stranger was gone.

'Indeed,' Biddlecomb said quite involuntarily. He stared blankly at the horizon, examined the image that was fixed in his mind. Such a brief glimpse did not tell him much, so he had to assume the strange sail was not friendly.

'Ferguson,' Biddlecomb called out to the fore-topman who, among other things, assisted Gerrish with the signal flags, 'signal the privateers "strange sail in sight," and once they have acknowledged that, do "tack in succession" and "clear for action."'

'Aye, sir.' Ferguson began to bend the bright flags to the halyard.

The *Charlemagne* began her rise again, the fast swooping motion of a ship coming up on a wave, the motion that causes so much distress to the stomachs of those unaccustomed to it. And on the top of the rise Biddlecomb could see the sails of the distant vessel begin to flog in

disarray, and from aloft Gerrish called out, 'On deck! Stranger's coming about!'

'Sir, I beg your pardon.' Lieutenant Faircloth, commanding officer of the Second Battalion, Fourth Company, of American Marines, the *Charlemagne's* marine division, stepped up on the slanting deck and saluted. 'I had thought to have my men see to mending their uniforms. Would this not be a good time?'

Biddlecomb turned, considered the marine officer. He was dressed, as was his custom, in his immaculate bottle-green uniform, his small cocked hat pushed down on his head. He was a wealthy man, and he and his men were always tricked out in high style. Faircloth took seriously the equipment, training, and welfare of the marines under his command. And that, as far as Biddlecomb could tell, was the only thing he took seriously.

'Pray, Lieutenant,' Biddlecomb asked, 'how long have you been formulating that question?' Faircloth was not concerned with uniforms, he was probing to see if Biddlecomb thought there might be a battle.

'About ten minutes, sir.'

'Very subtly done. In reply, let me say that, no, I do not think this is a good time to mend uniforms. This fellow has come about, and if he does not then run off to the south'ard, I think we can presume him to be of the Royal Navy.'

'Very good, sir. Or, I should say, "Aye, aye," keeping in the nautical vernacular, and such.'

'Privateers have acknowledged "tack in succession," sir,' Ferguson reported.

'Very good. Mr Rumstick, hands to station for stays.'

The order was shouted forward, and Mr Sprout, the boatswain, made his pipe squeal as he called men to their places for putting the brig about. Biddlecomb pulled his eyes from the horizon. Virginia was making her way aft, her arms uncharacteristically unencumbered.

‘Jack is asleep in our cot,’ she reported, and Isaac felt his one life overlapping the other. ‘What of this strange sail?’

‘We know nothing yet, my dear,’ Isaac said. The *Charlemagne*’s officers were all making a great pretense of not listening to their captain’s conversation. ‘But to be cautious we are going to come about, gain some more sea room, and then clear for action.’

‘And then?’

‘And then we shall do the one thing that this service has best prepared us to do. We shall wait. And wait and wait and wait.’

CHAPTER 2

Our main difficulty will be to procure hands - as we are daily robb'd of our men by both privatiers, & merchant men & the Extravagent wages given by the Latter, & the great Encouragements given by the former.

—CAPTAIN HECTOR MCNEILL TO THE CONTINENTAL MARINE
COMMITTEE OCTOBER 9, 1777

FOR THE NEXT five hours they waited, tense at first, and then bored, and then with a real and growing sense of anticipation.

With the American squadron and the strange sail on opposite tacks, they found themselves sailing almost directly away from one another, both clawing their way off the New Jersey coast. The *Charlemagne* making north by east, the stranger almost due south, until at last she was lost to sight, her skeletal top-gallant masts dipping below the horizon.

Not wishing to lose contact with the distant ship, and judging his ships to be far enough offshore to have a reasonable margin of safety, Biddlecomb tacked the squadron again, and in less than an hour they had the stranger in sight once more.

The stranger had tacked as well - she was not trying to escape - and now the four vessels were once again closing, four ships plunging toward that place on the sea where they would come together and do battle for supremacy of that patch of gray water.

Biddlecomb did not know what was going on aboard the privateers - he had not talked with the captains of those

ships since leaving Boston – but he had to imagine that they were as excited as he was by what must be a pending fight. In times of war, merchant ships did not go out of their way to close with other ships of unknown nationality. The stranger had to be a man-of-war, and the sheer number of vessels that the Royal Navy had in North American waters made it likely that she was British.

‘On deck!’

Biddlecomb craned his neck to see the lookout aloft, as did all the officers on the quarterdeck and all the men forward. ‘Deck, aye!’

‘She’s just hull up now, sir! Looks to be a sloop of war, no bigger!’ A pause, then: ‘She’s broke out colors, sir! She’s British!’

The officers exchanged smiles, nods of congratulations, as if they had already taken her as a prize.

‘Gentlemen,’ Biddlecomb said, ‘you are all of you veterans of a number of bloody campaigns. I would think that your past experience would be enough to inform you of the folly of celebrating victory even before the iron has begun to fly.’ And then, because he wanted to calm the officers’ ardor but not quash it, he added, ‘Still, I’ll warrant we have every reason to be optimistic.’

Nor was he lying in that assessment. This ship with which they were closing was a sloop of war, probably eighteen to twenty guns, probably six-or nine-pounders. She was more powerful than any one of the three American vessels, but she was no match for the three of them together, and the privateers were nimble and heavily manned. They could all lay off the bows and quarters of the enemy, pound away at her, and then, if the seas permitted, board with their overwhelming numbers. As a prize, the sloop of war would not be as valuable as a fat merchantman loaded with military stores, but the action would be worth ten times that in glory.

‘Mr Gerrish, let us have our ensign aloft. This will be our first opportunity to carry it into battle.’

Gerrish removed the flag, wrapped tight for hoisting, from the canvas-covered locker and bent it with great care to the halyard running to the truck of the mainmast. It was a new ensign, just that summer designated by Congress, and sewn by Virginia as her present to the ship. The *Charlemagne* had only flown it on a few occasions.

Gerrish hauled away until the bundle bumped to a stop at the masthead. Then the midshipman jerked the halyard and the bundle broke open. Thirteen red and white stripes with a blue canton and thirteen white stars in a circle spilled out, caught the breeze, and fluttered to leeward.

‘Lovely, lovely,’ Biddlecomb said with enthusiasm.

‘Thank you, Captain,’ said Virginia. ‘Now I think I shall take Jack and retreat to the breadroom.’

The last time Virginia had been on board during a fight, Biddlecomb had not been able to drive her below, had had to endure the sight of her standing fully exposed to the enemy’s broadside, firing at a British frigate with a pistol. Now the mother bear would defend her child with the same callous disregard for her own desires, her own life.

‘I think that would be best.’

He had not wanted to expose her and Jack to this kind of danger. Indeed, he would not have allowed them to accompany him if he had thought that they might run into a fight. But Howe was in the Chesapeake and Biddlecomb had reckoned it unlikely they would meet a man-of-war, the *Charlemagnes’* hopes notwithstanding.

But here it was, and Virginia knew better than to ask him to avoid the coming battle for her and Jack’s sake, or to say something foolish about his promising there would be no trouble. Instead she kissed him, full on the lips, despite the gawking cadre of officers, wished him Godspeed, and hurried below.

Biddlecomb turned and looked at the two privateers astern, his anxiety and guilt concerning his family swept away with the tide of tactical considerations. The privateers had their ensigns streaming at their mastheads; plain fields of red and white stripes. Like the *Charlemagne* they had put their boats over the side and were towing them astern to avoid the horrible splinters that would result from their being hit with round shot. They had set more sail and were gaining rapidly on the *Charlemagne*, plunging through the quartering sea and sending up great sheets of spray as they drove into battle. They would attack in force, not line ahead, just as they had discussed over many a glass in the *Charlemagne's* great cabin, swinging at the hook in Boston harbor.

Biddlecomb could see the crowds of men on their decks. With their short enlistments, easy discipline, and promise of great monetary rewards, privateers had no trouble attracting the best seamen, all to the detriment of the United States Navy. And just as attractive to potential recruits, privateers did not generally go after the enemy's naval vessels. They confined their interests to merchantmen, a strategy that carried considerably less chance of bodily injury.

The Continental Congress's 'Instructions to Commanders of Privateers' specified that at least one-third of their crews had to consist of landsmen, in order that some seamen be left for the navy, but Biddlecomb doubted that that regulation was strictly followed. It was irritating, but if those men would not join the United States Navy, at least today they would assist.

He turned and looked down on to the waist of his own command. With sixty men aboard, the *Charlemagne* was undermanned, but not by much. He had lost a number of hands after their late return from France, some lubbers whose backsides he was glad to see, some able-bodied seamen whom he missed dearly.

Nor was it only foremast hands who were eagerly joining the private men-of-war. He had lost his purser, which was a great annoyance, and his surgeon, Grim, which generally did not matter, except in those few instances when he was needed, and then it mattered very much.

Still, Biddlecomb's good fortune in the matter of prizes, and the fame he had achieved through no plan of his own, had made recruitment easier for him than for most captains in the navy. They did not flock to him as to a privateer, but when he sent his men around Boston to paste up the recruitment posters offering 'Great Encouragement for Seamen' who would rendezvous at the sign of the Green Dragon, they came in sufficient numbers. There were some captains who could not leave port for lack of men.

The Charlemagnes stood at quarters, checking over equipment, craning necks to see the enemy, stamping the deck and blowing on hands to keep warm.

We'll be warm enough directly, Biddlecomb thought, then turning to the helmsmen said, 'Let us fall off a few points,' and to the officers, 'We shall come up on the leeward side of this fellow, let the privateers attack from the weather gauge.'

He was yielding the most advantageous position to the privateers, not from any sense of consideration, but because he was not certain of how steady they would be in a fight. The captains of the two ships were all fearsome bluster over brandy, but that did not convince Biddlecomb of how they would perform when the cannonballs began to fly.

Not that the coming fight would be any great test of courage. The odds were so lopsided that Isaac did not think there would be much of a fight at all. His greatest fear now was that the commander of the British sloop would smoke that fact, turn on his heel, and run. It would be the most reasonable thing for him to do.

Lieutenant Faircloth crossed the deck, steadied himself on the binnacle box. 'Do you reckon, sir, that there is too big a sea running to board?'

'Too big by half, I should think,' said Biddlecomb. 'I believe your marines would be put to best use in the tops.'

'Aye, sir.' Faircloth turned to the sergeant in the waist. 'Sergent Dawes, let us get the men aloft, if you will, and those fellows aft that are designated for the quarterdeck.'

Biddlecomb watched the marines as they formed queues on the deck and climbed one after the other into the shrouds. Their regimental coats were all new, all a uniform shade of green. Faircloth had replaced them after the *Charlemagne's* return from France. Though Washington's army was clothed in rags there were always merchants ready to sell scarce supplies to men with Faircloth's cash.

They climbed slowly, muskets slung over their backs, round black hats pushed down on their heads, their shoes polished and gleaming dull in the gray light. Their breeches and cuffs and lapels were bright white.

Biddlecomb thought of his white hair again. He was not just Jack's father, he thought. He felt like a father to all of these men. And when he had command of the *Falmouth*, it would be much worse, all of the same problems increased in proportion to the size of the vessel.

But despite that undeniable fact, the thought of the frigate brought on the tingling in the soles of his feet, gave him a thrill akin to the anticipation of his wedding night.

'Fall off another point!' Biddlecomb called to the helmsmen. 'Sail trimmers, a little sharper up! That's well! Belay!'

The first of the privateers, the brig, was abeam of them now, half a cable off, and quickly overtaking. Even if she was not carrying more sail, she would have been faster than the *Charlemagne*, with her clean bottom and new sails and rigging.

The captain of the privateer stood alone at the weather rail, man-of-war fashion. He turned, gave Biddlecomb a half-hearted wave, and then shifted his attention back to his ship and the approaching enemy.

Biddlecomb did likewise. The British sloop of war was half a mile distant, her canvas reduced to topsails and jibs. Fighting sail. Her big guns were already run out.

'Look at this son of a bitch, bold as brass,' Rumstick offered, nodding toward the enemy. 'Oh, God, but we will do for him! Oh, yes, we will!'

Biddlecomb looked over at his first officer. The big man was rubbing his hands, literally rubbing his hands in anticipation. Isaac looked to see if a line of drool was hanging from Rumstick's lips. Biddlecomb would not have been surprised.

Rumstick seemed to sense he was being watched. He paused, met Biddlecomb's eyes, dropped his hands to his side. 'We'll ... we'll take the bastard's lee bow, is it, sir?' he asked sheepishly.

'Yes, Mr Rumstick. Pray go see to the great guns.'

Rumstick hurried forward. Biddlecomb swung himself up into the main shrouds, ran his eyes over the tactical situation. The first privateer was past them, the second coming up fast. The *Charlemagne* was moving away from them both at an oblique angle. The three ships were crocodile jaws, opening up and welcoming in the British sloop of war. And still the enemy came on, a quarter of a mile now. Whatever the captain of that ship lacked in discretion, he made up for in courage. And that had been enough to win the day on more than one occasion.

'Run out, Mr Rumstick!' Biddlecomb called. His hand moved automatically to the hilt of his sword, the beautiful weapon he had taken off of a British lieutenant. The brass wire binding the grip was cold and damp. It felt good under hand.

The deck trembled as the *Charlemagnes* hove the big guns out, straining to pull them up the slanting deck. The privateers were running their guns out as well. Fifteen minutes, perhaps less, before they would be locked in it, pounding away at each other. A whole day's maneuvering leading up to this moment, then half an hour of thundering terror, and then the weird quiet after the fight. Biddlecomb had seen it before. But this time Virginia was aboard, and their son.

'This time it is three ships on one,' Biddlecomb said.

'Yes, indeed, sir,' Lieutenant Weatherspoon agreed.

'Yes.' Biddlecomb had not meant to speak out loud and he tried to cover the fact. 'Please see the sail trimmers at stations, Mr Weatherspoon. I think we shall heave to under this fellow's lee bow, let the privateers lie to on his weather side.'

'Aye, sir.' Weatherspoon hurried forward, leaving Biddlecomb alone with his thoughts, his plans.

A cable length away now. Soon the first privateer would be broadside to broadside with the enemy. Then the *Charlemagne* would round up and rake him fore and aft. Then the second privateer, every inch as big as the enemy, would be alongside as well. Biddlecomb did not think this would take as much as half an hour.

'Enemy's falling off!' Weatherspoon shouted, bounding back up onto the quarterdeck with the energy of his eighteen years.

The sloop of war was turning, turning her bow toward the *Charlemagne*, bringing her broadside to bear on the privateer. The British commander would not let the Americans call the tune.

'Fall off!' Biddlecomb shouted, and the *Charlemagne* turned as well, keeping her same position relative to the sloop.

Then the British ship fired her starboard broadside straight into the big privateer one hundred yards away. Her