

A stylized graphic in white and teal. At the top, a white curved shape resembling a ship's hull or a stylized 'e' is set against a teal background. Below it, a white triangular shape points downwards, with a series of teal diagonal lines representing a wake or speed lines extending from its right side.

LORDS OF THE OCEAN

JAMES NELSON

TRANSWORLD
BOOKS

About the Book

A new instalment in the enthralling REVOLUTION AT SEA saga.

It is the summer of 1776 in the former Crown Colony of New York. A fleet of British transport ships are looming off Staten Island, while on Brooklyn Heights the remnants of General George Washington's army are huddled behind hastily constructed fortifications. There, Captain Isaac Biddlecomb seeks Washington's help - only to find that Washington is preparing for the final destruction of the Continental army.

Biddlecomb, commanding the brig-of-war *Charlemagne*, receives a monumental order. He is to transport to France the most dangerous secret weapon in the country's arsenal: scientist and philosopher Benjamin Franklin. Leading a new crew through the wintry North Atlantic, braving the cordon of the Royal Navy, Biddlecomb's seemingly simple mission to deliver Franklin to the court of Louis XVI is just the first volley in a grand scheme. While Biddlecomb is boldly raiding the English coast and Franklin is discussing strategy at Versailles, they both conspire to blow French neutrality out of the water - and turn the colonial uprising into a full-scale war.

A novel of epic scope and staggering adventure which is as commanding and as vivid as history itself.

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Lords of the Ocean

The Revolution at Sea Saga Book Four

James Nelson

In Memoriam

Ronald E. Johnson

*They that go down to the sea in ships
And do their work on great waters
These see the works of the Lord
And his wonders in the deep.*

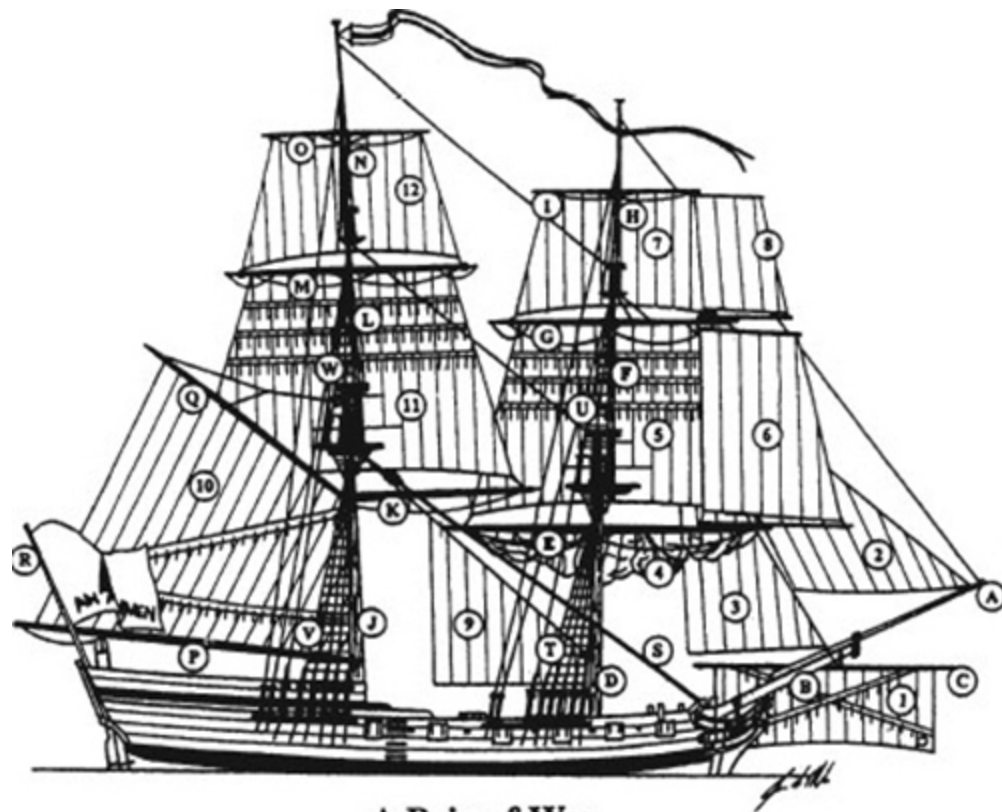
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Our Cartel goes on, a second Cargo of American Prisoners 119 in Number being arrived and exchanged. Our Privateers have dismissed a great Number at Sea, taking their written Paroles to be given up in Exchange for so many of our People in the Gaols.

We continue to insult the Coasts of these Lords of the Ocean with our little Cruizers . . .

—BENJAMIN FRANKLIN
DISPATCH TO THE
CONTINENTAL CONGRESS
OCTOBER 4, 1779



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



CHAPTER 1

*After three days men grow Weary,
Of a Wench, a Guest, & Weather Rainy.*

—*POOR RICHARD'S ALMANACK, 1733*

CAPT. ISAAC BIDDLECOMB stood in the pouring rain, his shoes firmly fixed in the thick mud underfoot, the water running in three rivulets out of the corners of his cocked hat. His clothing was soaked through entirely, right down to his skin. He was more wet than he could recall ever having been while on land – it could not be called dry land – and had it been any later in the season, he might have been chilled as well, which would have made his discomfort complete.

Fortunately it was only the twenty-ninth of August, the end of the summer of 1776, and the evenings were still fairly warm in the former Crown colony of New York, which meant he was spared the misery of being both wet and cold.

He stood in the gathering dusk, confused and uncertain, while around him rushed dozens of men, hundreds of men, all of them even more confused and uncertain than he, an army apparently in full retreat. They were heavy laden with haversacks and cartridge boxes and soaked blankets tied in bundles, and they clutched muskets rendered useless by the rain.

‘13th Pennsylvania, form up here! Form up!’ a sergeant cried, waving his hat over his head to attract the attention of the men who streamed by, but no one paid any attention to him.

‘Pardon me . . .’ Biddlecomb took a step toward the sergeant, and as he did so, he was bumped hard from behind. He stumbled but his shoe stayed put, held fast in

the mud, and his now stocking-clad foot came forward and sank inches deep in the muck. 'Son of a bitch . . .'

'Keep clear, you stupid whoreson,' said the man who had bumped him. The man rushed on past, bearing the head of a litter on which lay a soldier, thrashing and moaning, his formerly white breeches soaked with dirt, rain, and blood.

Biddlecomb extracted his foot from the mud, pushed it back into the shoe, and made his way over to the sergeant, who had managed to round up three of the 13th Pennsylvania and was calling for more.

'Pardon me, pardon me, where might I find General Washington's staff?'

The sergeant did not look at him but jerked his thumb over his shoulder. 'Tent, over yonder.'

Biddlecomb looked in the direction the sergeant was pointing. A cluster of tents stood one hundred yards away, a group of smaller ones surrounding one much larger. They looked gray and indistinct through the rain and the failing light. 'Thank you.'

'If you see anyone of any rank worth piss,' the sergeant said, meeting Biddlecomb's eyes, 'tell him my men skirmished with some pickets that was thrown out in front of the sappers. Them saps are extending out northeasterly, about three hundred yards now, and they're still digging like fucking badgers.'

'Yes, indeed . . .'

Biddlecomb began to ask for an explanation of the sergeant's words, less than half of which he understood, but the man had returned to calling for his troops, so Biddlecomb left him and made his way toward the distant tent.

He was on the Brooklyn Heights, the high, wooded ridge that stood between the little town of Brooklyn, which he could see in glimpses through the trees down and to his right, and the rest of Long Island to his left. From where he stood he could just see the East River, but Manhattan Island

and the harbor of New York were both lost in the poor visibility.

Still, he knew what was there. He knew that on Manhattan Island, behind hastily constructed fortifications, were huddled the few reserves from Washington's army, those who had not been thrown into the battle on Long Island. And he knew that in the harbor by Staten Island there were dozens of British transports, while just through the Narrows in Gowanus Bay were ten British ships of the line, twenty frigates, and hundreds more transports, the greatest expeditionary force ever mounted by the British military.

He had seen them both that morning, and had heard about the fleet beyond the Narrows, during a break in the weather, as he stood on the landing at the tip of Manhattan trying with great difficulty to find someone to ferry him across the river to Long Island.

It had taken him five days to get that far, five days from Philadelphia, which was not above ninety miles away.

The first part of the journey had been undertaken by coach, the coach that was supposed to go clear to Manhattan, crossing the Hudson at Jeffery's Hook, well north of the known British positions. The driver, however, had gone as far as Harlem and refused to go farther, swearing that he would not risk getting killed or having his horses requisitioned by plunging into the middle of a fight between them damnable German murderers and them godforsaken Whig rascals.

Biddlecomb had then been forced to walk the length of Manhattan Island, only to be stopped from his mission of seeing General Washington by the East River, which stood between him and the commander in chief.

'You don't want to go over there,' said the soldier guarding the landing, turning and spitting into the East River in the general direction of Long Island. 'Goddamned army's on the run. Goddamned Cornwallis marched right around the left

flank, sent the bastards running. I'm just thanking the Good Lord that I ain't over there, and you should too.'

But in point of fact Biddlecomb did want to go over there. He had come all of that way to see General Washington and he would not be stopped just short of accomplishing that.

Of course, when he had left Philadelphia, it had not occurred to him that he would find the general in the midst of such a crisis. After all, the British and the Americans had done nothing but stare at one another across New York Harbor for almost two months now. Only during his trip had he begun to hear disquieting rumors about British activity and the possibility of actual fighting. But he had not been dissuaded then and he would not be now.

A few hours short of nightfall, he managed to find a boat to take him across the fast-moving river.

And now, at long last, General Washington was in sight. Or General Washington's tent, at least.

He trudged on across the great expanse of mud that had once been a grassy field, pausing to let a column of men march past. They shuffled and muttered curses and their shoes made squishing sounds in the mud, but they possessed the closest thing to military order he had seen since reaching Long Island.

He could see the flare of a lantern being lit in the big tent, and then another, and soon the canvas glowed from within, an image of warmth and dryness. He looked at it longingly.

The column of men moved past and Biddlecomb continued on. He very much wanted to get in that tent and get some relief from the incessant rain, rain that he had endured with only brief respites for two solid days.

He entered the cluster of tents and crossed, it seemed, some invisible divide. On the battlefield it was all confusion and disorganization, with wounded and frightened men rushing in panic. But in the cluster of tents a calm if urgent efficiency seemed to prevail. Messengers hurried in and out, and majors issued orders to captains, who issued orders to

lieutenants, who moved frenetically through the headquarters. But there was no sense of panic, no sense of pending disaster. There was only the need to see things done, and quickly.

Biddlecomb paused outside the big tent, unsure whether he should enter. He took a breath and pushed the flap aside and stepped in, out of the driving rain and into the lantern light and the musty air within.

The tent was crammed with small tables, ringing the edges of the space, and at each sat a clerk scratching out copies of orders. Another dozen men at least milled around, talking in low tones, water running off their long cloaks and mixing with the mud with which the floor of the tent was evenly coated. And sitting at a big desk in the middle of the tent, enunciating orders to a lieutenant who stood before him, sat Maj. Edward Fitzgerald.

Biddlecomb pushed through the crowd of men and stood to one side of the desk, waiting for Fitzgerald to finish with the young officer. It had been almost a year since he had last seen the major, an aide-de-camp to General Washington. Fitzgerald had been instrumental in dispatching Biddlecomb to Bermuda to capture a British store of gunpowder in what had turned out to be nothing more than a plot to capture him.

The major had won no small degree of glory in driving off a British regiment that was attempting to take back the British merchantman that Biddlecomb had captured and brought into Boston Harbor, and though the major would not say as much, Biddlecomb also believed that the major had personally killed the traitor who had engineered the trap.

Fitzgerald was intelligent and charming, the loftiness of the Southern aristocracy coupled with a handsome face and athletic bearing. But despite those irritating qualities, they had become friends during Biddlecomb's time in Cambridge.

'Yes, I am in no doubt that Fort Putnam is well manned,' Fitzgerald was saying to the lieutenant, 'but you go and tell

General Putnam that General Washington wants him to personally make certain there are troops clear to Wallabout Bay. That left flank must be anchored down thus or Cornwallis shall steal a march on us again. Now go.'

The lieutenant swept off his hat in salute, then spun on his heel and was gone. Fitzgerald turned to Biddlecomb with an expression of a man ready to deal with yet another annoyance. Then he frowned and his eyebrows came together. 'Isaac Biddlecomb? Capt. Isaac Biddlecomb, could it be? What in all hell . . .?'

He stood and extended his hand and Biddlecomb shook it with pleasure. 'What in all the world are you doing here, sir?' Fitzgerald asked, smiling, quite in contrast to his expression of a moment before. 'Of all the people I would have thought would have enough sense to keep clear of this debacle!'

'I'm . . . actually, I must have a word with General Washington.'

'The general is out on the lines at the moment, left me here to deal with this nonsense.'

'I understand things have not gone well these past days?'

Fitzgerald smiled. 'You could say that. General Sullivan failed to hold the Jamaica Pass. Hell, he failed to even try to hold it. Cornwallis marched right around our left flank, and before we knew it, his whole damned army was in our rear. It was a rout. They drove us clear back to the Heights with the damned East River at our backs. We lost a great deal of men, good men.'

'Sir? Sir?' A drenched, muddy soldier stepped up to Fitzgerald's desk and saluted. His cheek was smeared with blood that was diluted to a thin red wash by the rain. 'Corporal Mulligan, sir, 13th Pennsylvania. Lieutenant says for me to report to you that we had a skirmish with some pickets protecting the sappers, sir. The saps is three hundred yards long now, extending northeast, and they're still digging.'

‘Thank you, Corporal,’ Fitzgerald said, and the soldier saluted again and left.

‘Oh, yes,’ said Biddlecomb with a flush of guilt, ‘what does all that mean?’

‘General Howe is digging regular approaches to get at us. By that I mean saps . . . trenches . . . and breastworks, getting his troops closer.’

‘But it appeared to me as if the Continental Army was in full retreat. Are the British not in close pursuit?’

‘What? Oh, do you mean the men out there? No, they are just stragglers, wounded men or men separated from their companies or skulkers. The main part of the army is still well entrenched. Please, Captain, have a seat.’ Fitzgerald gestured toward a chair in front of his desk. Biddlecomb sat and Fitzgerald did too.

‘And Cornwallis is digging approaches?’ Biddlecomb asked. ‘I should think he would prefer a headlong assault, with his greater numbers.’

‘Apparently he had a bellyful of frontal attacks at Bunker’s Hill and we can thank the Lord for that. Had he pressed his attack of the other day, he would have overrun us. He still could, especially in this rain, as we have precious few bayonets amongst us. Fortunately he does not seem inclined to try. But tell me, how has it been with you? I heard some of the captains were court-martialed for that affair with the *Glasgow*? I would wish you were not one of them.’

‘I was not,’ said Biddlecomb. The affair to which Fitzgerald alluded was a night battle, one that pitted the entire American fleet, two ships, three brigs, and a sloop, against the British frigate *Glasgow*. And despite the overwhelming odds the *Glasgow* had managed to inflict considerable damage and then escape.

‘Apparently my chasing the *Glasgow* nearly into Newport, as stupid and ill-considered as it was, was thought valiant enough to put me above suspicion. It was Whipple that was court-martialed, at his own request, to quash the bloody

stupid talk of cowardice that had started. If ever there was a man who was not a coward, it is Abraham Whipple. He was acquitted of course. Hazard of the *Providence* was cashiered, as well he should have been. Hopkins was just censured by Congress a few weeks ago.'

Fitzgerald nodded. 'So the fleet is still in Providence?'

'For the most part. The first on *Alfred*, a Scotsman by the name of Jones, has command of *Providence* now in Hazard's stead and he has been cruising, as has *Andrew Doria* and *Cabot*. I have mostly been tied up with business in Philadelphia.'

'Not so tied up, I should hope, that you have been unable to see Virginia? Virginia Stanton?'

Biddlecomb smiled at that. Virginia was the daughter of his mentor, William Stanton. He had been courting her, to the extent that his time ashore and his courage would allow, for almost two years. Fitzgerald had met her, during the Bermuda affair, and Biddlecomb was not insensible to the effect that she had had on him. She had that effect on most men.

'Yes, I have seen her,' said Biddlecomb, 'though I fear you mistake her name. She is no longer Virginia Stanton. She now goes by the name Virginia Biddlecomb.'

At that, Fitzgerald's fine-tailored composure fell apart, to Biddlecomb's delight. The major sat forward and his mouth hung open. 'I . . . I . . . ' he stammered while Biddlecomb leaned back and folded his arms, savoring the moment.

And then he was back in Philadelphia, a hot, humid July day. And then he was back in her bed, their bed, her lithe body moving under him, and despite the heavy, soaked clothing he felt a warmth inside, the beginnings of arousal.

'Well, man, congratulations!' Fitzgerald said at last, his usual cool demeanor returning. 'You are married? Why, you lucky dog! I am with child to hear the particulars, though I fear this is not the time or place.'

‘Indeed.’ Biddlecomb shook his head, like shaking off comforting sleep. He was again aware of the pelting of rain on the roof of General Washington’s tent as he stared at the flame in the lantern, flickering and dancing in the many and conflicting drafts. ‘Forgive my distraction, I beg. I find the memory more pleasing by far than the present circumstance.’

‘Of course you do. I do too, and I wasn’t even there. But pray, what is it you wish with the general?’

‘Oh.’ Biddlecomb hesitated. It seemed such a silly thing, given the predicament in which the United States Army found itself. But he had come all that way.

‘The fact is this. You recall Ezra Rumstick, my first officer during the Bermuda affair? Well, the Marine Committee has failed to recognize Rumstick’s seniority based on the commission that the general issued him last summer. I have been to every person I can think of, and none feels willing or able to help in this measure. I thought perhaps that if the general could write a letter to the committee . . .’

At this, Major Fitzgerald burst out laughing. Not a smile or a chuckle of mirth but a full-bellied laugh that made everyone in the tent look over at him. Biddlecomb shifted uncomfortably, wanted to tell Fitzgerald, ‘Pray, sir, shut your bloody gob.’

‘Captain, forgive me,’ Fitzgerald began when his laughter had subsided enough for him to speak. ‘Your request is entirely proper, but I must say, as fortunate as you are in matters of the heart, you have the damndest luck when it comes to military affairs. And once again you show the most exquisite timing.’

‘Well, sir, allow me to point out that there was not even a hint of the present battle when I left Philadelphia five days ago.’

‘I understand, Captain. However, I fear that the general will not have the time tonight to write your letter, and by this time tomorrow I fear you will no longer require it.’

‘And why not?’

‘Because,’ Fitzgerald said, now sounding resigned rather than amused, ‘once Howe completes his approaches, I believe you shall witness the entire destruction of the Army of the United States.’

CHAPTER 2

*Cold & cunning come from the North:
But cunning sans wisdom is nothing worth.*

—POOR RICHARD'S ALMANACK, 1743

'WELL, INDEED,' SAID Biddlecomb, and for a moment he could think of nothing more to add. 'It seems we're to witness a prodigious amount of history this season. The beginning of American independence and the end of it, all in the space of two months.'

Fitzgerald nodded. 'It would seem so.'

'But surely there is something that can be done? Must the army just wait here to be overrun?'

'We will fight, of course, and hope for the opportunity to break out. But as it stands we are surrounded by the British and the Hessians in the front and water behind and on either flank.'

The mention of water made Biddlecomb brighten. It was his element, and the thought of its proximity gave him a spark of optimism, as baseless as it might be. 'Of course. Why do you not just ferry the men back to Manhattan? There are no men-of-war in the river to stop you now, nor can there be as long as this wind holds northeasterly. Glover's regiment from Marblehead is here, is it not? They should be more than able to handle the boats.'

'Ah, therein lies the rub, as the old boy said,' Fitzgerald replied, leaning back in his chair. 'We've but a half dozen boats. Less, actually, I believe. Those boatmen we hired to bear the army over fled with their precious boats at the first sign of fighting. We had considered an evacuation, and we would do it, gladly, but for want of boats.'

Biddlecomb frowned and stared into the flame. 'You have searched along the island, I presume, and on Manhattan?'

'We have. We have hired every boat there is for hire. Half a dozen.'

Biddlecomb felt his thoughts wandering, sailing out across the black, rain-swept harbor. To most it was a frightening and dangerous place, but to him it was a sanctuary. On the water one could not become trapped as easily as one could on land. On the water there was always someplace to run, and once clear of the constricting land one could circle the globe on the contiguous seas.

But those thoughts would not save the Army of the United States. It seemed that nothing would, save for boats.

And the irony of the thing was that there were boats aplenty, hundreds of boats, not above eight miles away. Unfortunately they were British, part of the great armada off Staten Island and anchored in Gowanus Bay.

He glanced down at his coat – blue with white facings and cuffs – and his white waistcoat and breeches, now quite splattered with mud. It had not occurred to him until that moment that his outfit was all but identical to that of a lieutenant in the Royal Navy. Certainly on a night such as this there would be no distinguishing the two. He felt the first stirrings of an idea, the telltale tingling on the soles of his feet.

'It occurs to me, Major, that perhaps there are more boats to be had,' he said before he had given any thought to the words.

'Pray, Captain, go on,' said Fitzgerald, leaning forward. 'We might save the entire army but for want of boats.'

So I shall once again rescue the fine Mr Fitzgerald, shall I? Biddlecomb thought. He pictured his friend Fitzgerald in slaverish gratitude, and the image was warm and gratifying.

'Well, sir, it occurs to me that there are a great number of boats to be had among the British fleet. It wants only a

good, big boat of our own, well manned with sailors, which are to be had in abundance from Colonel Glover's men . . .'

It was eight miles by water to Staten Island, eight miles to the roadstead where a small portion of the fleet of British transports lay moored in what little shelter they could find. And across that stretch of water known as New York Harbor sailed a single boat, crammed to the gunnels with men, quite invisible in the dark and the rain.

Biddlecomb sat in the stern sheets, wrapped in a borrowed boat cloak, the tiller held lightly in his left hand. There was quite a bit of wind for an open boat, gusting to twenty-five knots, but it was nearly dead astern, and with the big boat's mast and lugsail rigged they were making six knots at least through the water, and with the ebbing tide even more than that over the ground.

The crew, thirty well-armed men, sat huddled together in the bottom of the boat, attempting to keep their powder dry and on occasion bailing a few scoops of water back into the harbor. They were well outfitted in oilskins and tarred hats, lashed fast under bearded chins. They were handpicked men from the 14th Continental Regiment, Colonel Glover's regiment from Marblehead in Massachusetts.

The 14th Continentals were sailors to a man, fishermen mostly, bred to the sea, who had joined the militia when the British restrictions on fishing had ruined their livelihood and left them with little to do beyond seeking vengeance. They sat calmly now, quite unperturbed by the wild motion of the boat as it pounded through the chop or the rain that came in lashing gusts and blotted out everything ten feet outboard of the boat.

It had not taken Biddlecomb long to convince Fitzgerald to allow him to give his idea a try. Indeed, there was little for the army to lose, and survival to gain, if he was able to secure boats for the evacuation of Long Island.

A messenger was dispatched to Glover with orders for thirty of his best men while Fitzgerald and Biddlecomb made their way to the ferry landing to survey the boats that were available.

Biddlecomb had little difficulty choosing the one that he wanted. Only six boats were there. Two of them were little bigger than yawls, and one already had six inches of water in the bottom that he did not believe to be the result of rain.

But one of them was ideally suited to the purpose. Though Fitzgerald did not know its origins, Biddlecomb suspected that it had once belonged to a British man-of-war. Twenty-five feet in length, it looked very much like one of the barges carried by the smaller ships of the Navy. And if that was not enough, it mounted in its bow a small swivel gun, and beneath the forwardmost thwart, kept perfectly dry in an iron box, were cartridges, round shot, and grape for the same.

Glover's men arrived, led by a sergeant, Noah Wilbur, who looked and acted much more like a veteran Navy boatswain than the sergeant of infantry he purported to be.

'You men, get this sailing rig set up,' he growled, nodding with his chin toward the boat, and with a speed born of an intimate knowledge of their task the Marbleheaders stepped the mast and rigged the lugsail and jib.

No more than fifteen minutes later, the Americans were under way, running down the East River to New York's Upper Bay. Governors Island loomed on the starboard bow, the wind- and tide-driven water flashing white as it piled up on the weather side. A moment later they left the island astern as Red Hook hove into view to larboard.

Biddlecomb felt the wind build in a sudden gust, felt the bow dig in as the boat tried to round up, and he tightened his grip on the tiller.

'Let's stand by to jibe, men,' he called out, the first words he had spoken since getting under way. The water that streamed down his face, half rain and half spray, filled his

mouth as he spoke and made him sputter, but he could see hands reaching automatically for the sheets of the jib and the lugsail.

He shifted in his seat, waiting for the gust to diminish a bit. It blew again, harder, heeling the boat away, and then, as if it had expended its breath, eased off to its former strength.

Biddlecomb eased the tiller over and the stern swung up into the wind and the men at the lugsail sheet hauled with a will, dragging the canvas toward the centerline of the boat until the wind caught the sail on the other side and snapped it over.

The men at the jib eased away the larboard sheet as the starboard took up the strain, and the men at the lugsail sheet eased that away too, until the sail was well out over the starboard side and the boat began its run down bay.

What a pleasure, Biddlecomb thought, to work with these men! After having one crew after another of landsmen aboard the *Charlemagne* who needed to be trained in the very basics of seamanship, it was such a joy to have with him a boatload of men – men with whom he had never sailed before – who could jibe a boat in a driving storm, at night, with never a word spoken. If he could have an entire crew of such men, what a burden would be lifted from his shoulders.

He leaned outboard and peered forward through the dark. Five miles distant he could just see the twinkling of the anchor lights from the fleet of transports anchored near Staten Island. That would be the place to get boats, from the lightly manned merchantmen who were more likely to be cowed by the officious demands of a lieutenant of the Royal Navy, or someone whom they took for such.

He felt the boat heel and glanced down at the small compass by his knee, noting the heading that would take them to the fleet. He looked up again, but now another squall was on them. He felt the speed of the boat increase,

heard the strain of the rigging on the light mast, and then all visibility was gone as the brunt of the storm rolled over them.

It was one of those moments – he had had them before, many times – as he sat in the dark, driving the boat by instinct through the rain-swept night, that he wondered what in all hell he had been thinking. This was insane. He was seriously intending to sail straight into the British fleet and demand the use of their boats.

But what made it most insane was his motive for doing it. It was not for the cause of independency, not because he was brave, not out of concern for the men trapped on Long Island.

He was doing it because Major Fitzgerald had annoyed him by laughing at his request for a letter from Washington, because Major Fitzgerald always annoyed him, always made him feel as if he had to prove himself. He had undertaken this mission primarily to show the major up. And that was not much of a reason to get killed, he knew, or much of a reason to get these other men killed along with him.

Well, he thought, *the reason is of no matter*. If he could pull it off, then he would have done a good thing, a great thing, of enormous benefit to his country, his own silly motives notwithstanding. And then he could get Washington to write the god-damned stupid letter for which he had come.

The chop grew steeper and the wind stronger as they left Red Hook astern and headed out across the open water of the Upper Bay. The boat pitched and yawed in the following sea, and the waves on occasion broke over the gunnels, forcing the Marblehead men to bail in earnest. But the wind was a blessing now, hurling them across the bay. On their return trip it would be a curse as they would be forced to row straight into it, while with any luck towing at least two dozen empty boats.

They were in blackness, a wild, wet, buffeting blackness where nothing could be seen beyond the tiny orb of light from the sheltered glim that illuminated the compass. Biddlecomb pulled his watch awkwardly from his pocket and held it near the light. It was near ten o'clock, just over an hour since they had left from the ferry landing on Long Island. By his reckoning they would be in among the fleet of transports momentarily.

'We're almost there,' he said to the men huddled in the bottom. 'Let's strike this sailing gear and approach under oars.' He thrust the tiller over, easing the bow of the boat up into the wind. The canvas snapped and flogged until the men cast off halyards and wrestled it down.

The squall, with its poor visibility, would be a good thing now, Biddlecomb realized. It was cover, another impediment to their being discovered.

And then with that vindictive, malicious caprice with which all weather systems seem to operate, the squall blew past. The rain eased away, and with it the fog, and in less than a minute they went from their dark and watery tomb to a good two miles of visibility at least. Only the strong wind was left, the one thing that was pure hindrance to them.

'Well, thank the Lord that's blown past, at least,' Biddlecomb said, trying to sound sincere. Just off the larboard quarter, two hundred yards away, the anchor lights of the transports burned like a city at night. The Marbleheaders, without a word, dropped the oars in the tholes and took them up, double banked because of the great number of men aboard. Biddlecomb pushed the tiller over and they resumed their course toward the transports.

He steered past the first ship - he could see no boats on her booms nor any floating alongside. This, to his thinking, did not bode well. But the ship moored astern of her and closer to shore had two boats bobbing under her counter.

Biddlecomb called, 'Toss oars!' and the two banks of oars came up with a precision that was as good as anything one

might expect from the British Navy.

‘The transport, hoay!’ he called out. He had thought at first to just steal the boat, but if he was discovered doing so, then the game would be up. Better to try to bluff the transports out of dozens of boats than to just steal a few.

A moment later, having received no response, he called again. ‘The transport, hoay!’

At length a figure appeared over the bulwark of the quarterdeck. ‘What do you want, then?’

‘Beg your pardon,’ Biddlecomb said, trying to sound clipped and officious, ‘I’m from the flag. We’ve need of the use of your boat.’

‘Use of our boat? You’ve already got near every boat in the fleet. Ain’t you got bloody boats of your own?’

‘Yes, but we’ve need of more. We are shifting troops by water.’

‘What, on a night like this?’

‘If you think it unwise, I suggest you speak with Admiral Howe about it, but I haven’t the time to discuss it. Now by your leave I shall take the boat. You should just be glad I have no need of men as well.’

‘Oh, bloody hell. You give me a receipt for that, them boats is dear, we don’t get ‘em free like the bloody Navy.’

Biddlecomb nodded at the oarsmen and the oars came down. ‘I’ve no time to give out receipts for each boat. I’m keeping a log of which boat we get from whom. What ship is that?’

‘*Elizabeth Clare* out of Plymouth.’

Biddlecomb brushed his boat cloak aside, enough to give a glimpse of his ersatz uniform, the blue coat with white facings and the white waistcoat and breeches. Across his chest was a leather shoulder belt, also white, from which was slung his sword. The belt was adorned with an oval-shaped brass plate that sparkled as the light from the various lanterns glinted off the water beaded on the metal