

The Last Naval Battle of the American Revolutionary War

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Few historians celebrate the fact that the same Continental Captain who fought the British in the last naval battle of the American Revolutionary War was also the Continental Captain to which a British vessel first struck her flag in battle and was returned to an American port as a prize. That Continental Captain was John Barry.

The Last Naval Battle

Captain John Barry left France on December 8, 1782, and arrived in the port of Martinique on January 8, 1783. There he received orders from Robert Morris, dated October 11, 1782, sending him to Havana to pick up “specie for Congress” and deliver the cargo to Philadelphia. Despite the long wait for the orders, Captain Barry prepared his ship for the journey.¹

Along the way during his cruise to Havana, the *Alliance* had spotted various vessels just off the horizon, but was never quite able to identify them or give chase. Ultimately he realized that several British vessels were patrolling the waters and more than once he had to use the speed of the *Alliance* to avoid capture. Upon his arrival in Havana, Captain Barry found the *Duc de Lauzun* in port with identical orders for Robert Morris. Mr. Morris had earlier acquired the vessel and sent her under command of Captain John Green, an old acquaintance of Captain Barry’s.² The specie, 72,000 Spanish milled dollars, had already been loaded upon the *Duc de Lauzun*, so the captains agreed that the *Alliance*



John Barry

would convoy with her to secure the delivery in Philadelphia.

The ships were delayed under “secret orders” of an embargo upon the port by order of the King. We know that all in the area knew the “secret orders” were merely to allow the French and Spanish fleets to join in force and sail to Jamaica. When the embargo lifted and the Spanish fleet departed on March 6, 1783, the captains joined with the Spanish fleet for a time, but not knowing their ultimate direction, they broke from them on March 7, 1783, and made way toward the Gulf of Florida.

The *Alliance* was clearly the faster of the two vessels. As would ultimately be shown, Captain Barry was clearly the better captain as well. As they approached the Great Bahama bank, they spotted two sails to the southeast. Captain Barry slowed his vessel to allow Captain Green to get within hailing distance and the two discussed the sails and their response. Captain Green favored a run to the north, but Captain Barry realized that would give the advantage to the enemy to sail upon a short angle and give chase. His esteem for Captain Green fell considerably. Captain Barry recommended a

southwest course to lure the ships back to the Spanish fleet. This was the course they followed and when the British ships caught sight of the Spanish fleet, they broke off the chase.

The *Alliance* and *Duc de Lauzun* remained in sight of the Spanish fleet until March 8, 1783, when they broke off again, heading along the coast of Florida. Captain Barry constantly had to slow his ship to allow the *Duc de Lauzun* to catch up to him. Finally on March 9, 1783, the captains had a “consultation” that lasted four hours. At its end, and much to the dislike of Captain Green, they agreed to move a great majority of the specie from the *Duc de Lauzun* to the *Alliance*. By this time they were through the Gulf of Florida and between Florida and the Bahamas, off the coast of what would be Fort Pierce, Florida, today. The transfer completed, they continued northward.

During this time, the two British ships that had given chase, *Alarm*, thirty-two gun frigate, Captain Charles Cotton and *Sybil*, twenty-eight gun frigate, Captain James Vashon, met up with the British sloop-of-war, *Tobago*, eighteen gun, Captain George Martin. These three British ships, south of Cape Canaveral, began cruising southward, spotted the American ships and gave chase.

Captain Barry spotted the British ships that morning, March 10, 1783, and also noticed another sail to his southwest. This later vessel tacked away from them, so it was little concern. His focus was squarely with the three vessels rapidly descending upon them.

The decision was made to make for the Spanish fleet again and the American vessels changed course to the southwest. As usual, Captain Green lagged far behind, with the *Duc de Lauzun* some two miles

behind, she signaled that the pursuing ships were British frigates, vessels of superior force. Captain Barry, knowing he had the majority of the specie on his vessel, decided to place the safety of his vessel and cargo as paramount. He gave the signal for each to “shift for herself” and he unfurled the Stars and Stripes.

The gap began to widen between the American vessels, when Captain Green signaled the need to speak with Captain Barry. This was a risky proposition given that the *Alarm* was only one and a half miles off the windward stern of the *Duc de Lauzun*. Nevertheless, Captain Barry lowered his sails to slow his ship. He noted the *Alarm* did likewise in order to allow the other British ships to catch up to them and join in any fight.

When the two American ships came abreast of each other, Captain Barry was shocked by Captain Green’s words. He claimed that the ships were merely privateers and could easily be taken by them. Captain Barry realized that some other cargo aboard the *Duc de Lauzun* was seriously clouding the captain’s judgment. Captain Green was obviously willing to sacrifice the *Alliance* and its public cargo, in order to protect his own private interests and his ship. One can only imagine how lowly Captain Barry regarded the captain at this point.

Captain Barry held off his disdain and simply disagreed with Captain Green’s assessment of the ships, pointing out that they were clearly frigates, with the closest descending upon them carrying thirty-two guns. He implored Captain Green to throw his cannon overboard to lighten his ship and make speed away from the British vessels. This was done and all but the stern guns were thrown overboard. Again showing a lack of sailing prowess, rather than making the prudent maneuver to port and

thus getting more wind behind him, Captain Green maintained his southwesterly course. The ships were closing rapidly.

Honor prevented Captain Barry from completely abandoning the *Duc de Lauzun*. He quickly considered the possibilities of saving her and his own vessel. While considering his very limited options, he again spotted the lone sail off to the southwest that had been standing just off from them. It had now turned toward them. Captain Barry saw the British frigate, *Alarm*, break off from the pursuit of the *Duc de Lauzun* and thus guessed that the ship to his southwest was either French or Spanish.³

In a bold move, Captain Barry committed to the fight. He was convinced that with one vessel now approaching, the *Sybil*, and with help on the horizon, he could buy enough time for the *Duc de Lauzun* to escape to safety. Given the situation he was confident that he could engage the single British ship and avoid a fight with all three.

Captain Barry gave orders to raise sail and turn hard to starboard. His decision was to deliberately place his ship between the *Duc de Lauzun* and the oncoming *Sybil*. The *Sybil* continued firing her cannon and the *Alliance* took several shots, one that smashed into the captain’s cabin killing a master’s mate and wounding several others. Captain Barry left the quarter deck and personally walked from cannon to cannon encouraging and cautioning his men to not fire until he gave the order himself. He wanted to lure the enemy in as close as possible, “half a pistol range.” *Alliance* even took a full broadside from the *Sybil* and still did not fire her cannon. The discipline of the crew paid off in this crucial time of the battle.

Captain Barry ordered the main topsail hove to mast and this positioned the *Alliance* directly abreast of the *Sybil*. “Open fire!” came the order from Captain Barry and the full fury of his ship was unleashed upon the *Sybil*. The British guns went silent after forty minutes of close fighting; she lost two sails and had considerable damage to her hull. Reports conflict, but it seems she raised distress flags to the other British vessels, which had not joined in the fight due to the French ship on the horizon. Her casualties were reported to range up to thirty-seven killed and forty wounded. In any event, the *Sybil* quickly broke off from the fight and fled back to the other vessels.

Captain Barry, knowing he had saved the *Duc de Lauzun* as well as the *Alliance*, did not give immediate chase. Instead he questioned the French captain why he had not come to their aid faster. The captain meekly replied that he had a valuable cargo of gold and feared the whole enterprise was a trick to draw him in and capture the vessel. At that point the *Alliance*, *Duc de Lauzun*, and the *Triton*, a sixty-four gun ship, gave chase to the British, but after eight to ten hours they lost sight of the ships in the dark.

Afterwards, Captain Barry was met rather coolly by Captain Green, and after somewhat heated discussions, Captain Green eventually agreed to transfer the remaining Spanish dollars to the hold of the *Alliance*. At noon on March 11, 1783 the ships continued on their journey northward without any other encounters. On March 18, 1783, the *Duc de Lauzun* became separated from the *Alliance* off the coast of Hatteras. This proved fortuitous because as the fog lifted the next morning, Captain Barry spotted two British ships off the Delaware capes who immediately gave chase. The speed of his vessel saved him

yet again. He drew the vessels northward and allowed the slower *Duc de Lauzun* to safely sail into Philadelphia.

The next day, March 20, 1783, the *Alliance* sailed into New Port, Rhode Island, abandoning the plan to return to Philadelphia given the strong British presence. A few days later news reached America that on February 3, 1783, the peace treaty had been ratified – the war for independence was over. Thus the last naval battle of the Revolutionary War was fought and won off the coast of Florida, just south of Cape Canaveral – sealing an American victory.⁴

The Florida Society's Historic Marker and Commemoration

On March 10, 2007 the Florida Society will commemorate this historic American Revolutionary War Naval Battle at Cape Canaveral, Florida and we invite all of our fellow compatriots from all State Societies to join us in this commemoration, and the unveiling of the Florida Historic Marker which is entitled “The Last Naval Battle of the American Revolutionary War.” We plan to celebrate not only the last naval battle, but also the honorable, gallant, brave, and unwaveringly loyal service of Captain John Barry and the brave men who sailed with him, to the cause of freedom. They are truly deserving of only the highest honors. Further details relating to the ceremony can be obtained at: www.flssar.org.

Endnotes and Sources

¹ Clark, *Gallant John Barry*; Gurn, *Commodore John Barry: Father of the American Navy*. Interestingly, Captain Barry reported to the local newspaper editor that peace preliminaries had been signed in Paris. By the time that news was filtered and exaggerated back to America, the Boston newspapers were reporting that the peace treaty had been signed in December 1782. Formal hostilities were not ended until January 20, 1783, in Versailles.

² From British records we know that these encounters and the ultimate battle were not by chance. The British ships were watching the maneuvers of the French fleet. It was known that the Spanish and French were preparing a joint assault on Jamaica and the British needed the intelligence. British spies had also learned of the valuable cargo of the *Alliance* and the *Duc de Lauzun*. The British ships were waiting for the right opportunity to seize the cargo of the vessels.

³ We know that the *Alarm* had recognized the ship's colors as French and surmised that the vessel was turning to give support the American vessels. Captain Barry did not have the same vantage, but was correct in his supposition that the ship was not British.

⁴ Clark, *Gallant John Barry*; Gurn, *Commodore John Barry: Father of the American Navy*.