

NEWSPAPER ARTICLE ON THE BLOCKADE OF THE CHESAPEAKE BAY IN FEBRUARY 1813 CONTINUED

A narrow escape

Designed to blunt the American invasion of Canada by attacking the Chesapeake, the advance elements of the British expeditionary force appeared without warning.

Among those who saw it first was Capt. Charles Stewart of the frigate USS Constellation, which had arrived from Annapolis the night before and anchored off Hampton Roads.

Early the following morning, Stewart woke to hear that British warships had entered the bay. But not long after weighing anchor and setting course to investigate, he came about and raced back for the channel at Old Point, straining to escape a lopsided clash with two ships of the line, three frigates, a brig and a schooner.

When the tide and wind turned against him, the Constellation seemed lost. But Stewart doggedly dragged his becalmed frigate out of reach by kedging across Hampton Roads: Hauling in the anchor, carrying it forward by rowboat and then dropping and hauling it in again and again.

His crew labored for hours, struggling to pull themselves out of harm's way. Even after grounding in the mud flats at the mouth of the James River, they toiled on, lightening the Constellation until it refloated on the evening tide and found refuge under the guns of Fort Norfolk.



IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ROYAL MUSEUMS, GREENWICH

British Rear Adm. George Cockburn was reviled in America for burning Hampton and other Chesapeake Bay towns during the War of 1812. But he was celebrated in Britain, with this post-war painting showing him standing before the flames of Washington, D.C.

"It was a pretty close call," says Williamsburg historian Stuart L. Butler, retired assistant branch chief of the National Archives' Military Archives Division and author of the new book "Defending the Old Dominion: Virginia and Its Militia in the War of 1812."

"He almost didn't escape — and he knew he could never take on a force like that in battle."

A call to arms

That was the same conclusion Lt. Col. Henry Howard of York County reached after debriefing a cavalryman who had seen the British fleet come in and assemble some 8 miles from his post at Buckroe.

Sizing up his volunteers from Elizabeth City, York and James City counties in the face of this dire threat, Howard warned Gov. James Barbour on Feb. 5 that the "situation is truly alarming.

"The Militia of the 115th Regiment (are) not half of them armed and without a cartridge to defend themselves..." he reported.

"I do not know of a single barrel of powder that can be procured on any terms."

Despite such widespread un-

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preparedness, Barbour called out some 2,000 militiamen on Feb. 6, ordering them to muster at Williamsburg and Smithfield before deploying to defend Hampton and Norfolk.

In addition to riflemen from Elizabeth City, York and James City counties, the force included Gloucester artillery and Williamsburg cavalry as well as units from Isle of Wight, Nansemond, Norfolk, Princess Anne and as far as Orange, Patrick, Pendleton and Culpeper counties.

Though poorly trained, equipped and provisioned, these farmers, tradesmen and shopkeepers would defend Hampton Roads largely without regular army troops, who President James Madison decreed couldn't be spared from the invasion of Canada.

"It can't be expected that I can defend every man's turnip patch," Madison insisted.

Still, under Brig. Gen. Robert

Barraud Taylor, a prominent Norfolk attorney born in Smithfield and educated at the College of William and Mary, the American defenses at Norfolk became more organized and formidable than expected.

Working closely with Stewart and his crew, Taylor reinforced the artillery batteries overlooking the Elizabeth River at Forts Norfolk and Nelson with a third series of guns at Craney Island commanding the river's mouth. Then Stewart bolstered this new position by transforming the Constellation and 19 gunboats into a floating wall that blocked both the channel and the flats.

Guns and gunners from the frigate made Craney Island still stronger, as did Army Corps of Engineers Capt. Walter K. Armistead, who improved the earthworks at Taylor's invitation.

"It would have been a disaster if the British had taken Norfolk," Butler says.

"But Taylor was quite an organizer, and he had great oratorical skills. The governor thought he was the perfect man for the job — and it seemed that he was."

Blockade, raid, burn

Looking on from as close as Newport News Point, the British fleet continued to grow, adding four more massive ships of the line as well as numerous frigates and sloops of war to a force that all but shut down American shipping.

So effective was their blockade that Virginia's exports collapsed, dropping from an annual figure of \$3 million to \$170,000.

"Not a vessel can pass from Hampton Roads, either up or

down the bay without being intercepted," the Richmond Enquirer reported. "Not a vessel bound for sea can escape capture."

Still, as the British commanders learned from their frustrating failure to capture the Constellation, their largest, most heavily armed ships faced strict handicaps in the shoal waters of the Chesapeake, making it impossible to exploit their firepower near the shores.

They also discovered right away that the bay's shifting sands made it tricky as well as shallow.

"The utmost possible endeavors and perseverance were exerted night after night by all the boats of the squadron to find and buoy off ... the channel into Elizabeth River," reported Rear Adm. George Cockburn, whose charts were all outdated or mistaken.

"But so intricate and difficult is it that all our efforts proved vain."

Cockburn soon invented the weapon he needed, however, to begin carrying out the raids that led to the burning of Havre de Grace, Md., and Washington, D.C., as well as the "rape of Hampton."

Loading as many as 2,500 Royal Marines and infantrymen into scores of shoal-draft boats — each one bristling with oars — he soon found himself commanding a dangerous amphibious attack force that could strike virtually anywhere it wanted.

"This was an unusual concept back then," says historian Gordon B. Calhoun of the Hampton Roads Naval Museum, describing the fear that gripped the countryside as the assaults began.

"But the British were here to raid and burn — and Cockburn was the perfect person to prosecute that kind of offensive.