

**Volume 14**

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**The Last Full Measure (49) – John  
Barry, the Father of the American  
Navy**

**Lead: For 400 years service men and women have fought to carve out and defend freedom and the civilization we know as America. This series on *A Moment in Time* is devoted to the memory of those warriors, whose sacrifice gave, in the words of Lincoln at Gettysburg, *the last full measure*.**

**Content: Among his contemporaries John Barry was known as the "Father of the American Navy," but even today his**

**name is not well known. Barry was Catholic and an Irishman and in 19th century America those things tended to diminish the value of a leader's accomplishments. Nevertheless, Barry must be ranked among those who established the skills, reputation and fierceness of the tiny American Navy that faced almost insurmountable odds in its fight with the greatest Navy in the world during the Revolution.**

**He was an imposing man. In an era when the standard Captain's cabin ceiling was 5'5" high, he stood 6'4" tall. Little is known of Barry before 1775 save that he was born in Wexford County Ireland sometime between 1739 and 1745. At the**

beginning of the Revolution he was captain of the 200 ton *Black Prince*, a commercial vessel. Word of the deteriorating situation in the colonies reached him in England on the trading trip and he wheeled the *Prince* around and rushed home arriving in October 1775. His ship was the flagship and the first of five brigs bought or commissioned by Congress to become the core of the American Navy. With John Paul Jones as first lieutenant, *Black Prince* became *Alfred* and was the first to bear an American flag on an American warship. It was the "Don't Tread on Me" serpent flag.

While he awaited his own ship, *Lexington*, to be built, Barry served as Supervisor of the port of Philadelphia

where several new warships were under construction. On April 6, 1776, on her maiden voyage, under his command *Lexington* captured HMS *Edward* in the first enemy seizure by a congressionally commissioned warship, although colonial privateers had been attacking Royal ships as far back as 1772. His success earned him even larger commands. While awaiting the construction of another larger ship, he used rowboats to capture a Royal Navy schooner and for armed transports bringing much-needed supplies to the colonial cause. For this he was publicly and personally thanked by George Washington. Still without a ship, he served with the artillery at the Battles of Trenton and Princeton and through foraging on the

**Delaware brought much-needed supplies to feed the starving army at Valley Forge during the bitter winter of 1777-1778.**

**So powerful was his reputation that the British offered him a commission, a cash prize, and his own ship, but he remained loyal to his new country. His most famous encounter was the defeat by his ship, the 36 gun frigate *Alliance*, after both ship and Captain were severely wounded, of two British sloops, *Atlanta* and *Trepassey*, in becalmed waters off the coast of Newfoundland. Barry also triumphed in the final naval battle of the Revolution on March 10, 1783 in which he and *Alliance* successfully defended the Spanish transport**

***Lauzon* carrying 72,000 Spanish silver dollars en route to the ever-needy Continental Congress' coffers. The assault came from the British frigate *Sibyl* off the coast of Cape Canaveral, Florida.**

**After the Revolution, Barry went back into the commercial trade and fattened the family purse by bringing porcelain and other luxury items to Philadelphians from Asia. In the 1790s when the Navy was revived permanently to deal with the Barbary Pirates and in the so-called Quasi-War with France, Barry was invited back into service and made the senior captain of the Federal Navy. In this capacity he received the First Commission of the Navy and**

**supervised the construction of the first frigates built to fill out the line ranks, including his own 44 gun ship, USS *United States*. Barry held the courtesy title of Commodore and was squadron commander of the West Indies Fleet. In that capacity, he trained many of the leaders of the Navy who would prove so valuable to the United States in fending off the British Navy during the War of 1812.**

**As senior captain he successfully recommended a separate Department of the Navy with cabinet status and even under President Jefferson's military cutbacks he was retained in service. Barry died in 1803. Prejudice against Catholics was high in the 19th and early 20th centuries and so other**

**revolutionary naval heroes such as John Paul Jones received much more attention and accolades, but the work of John Barry is undeniable. Congress acknowledged his contributions to the Revolution on December 22, 2005. In a joint resolution Commodore John Barry was recognized and honored as the First Flag Officer of the United States Navy.**

**Research assistance by Erin Morgan, at The University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.**

## Resources

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<http://www.ushistory.org/people/commodorebarry.htm>

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