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LFM: Stephen Decatur, U.S. Naval Hero

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 devotion gave, in the words of Lincoln at Gettysburg, *the last full measure*.

Intro: A Moment In Time with Dan Roberts.

Content: Among the most distinguished early U.S. Naval officers, Stephen Decatur displayed

courage under fire and a political astuteness that, save for his death by duel, marked him for high office, perhaps even the highest. Decatur was born in Maryland during the Revolution and educated at the University of Pennsylvania. He first came to national attention during the War with Tripoli. President Jefferson had ordered the U.S. warships into the Mediterranean to get at the pirates who were raiding U.S. ships from bases in the so-called Barbary states, Morocco, Algeria, Tunis, and Tripolitania.

In October 1803, an American frigate, Philadelphia ran aground in the harbor of Tripoli. Decatur led a

group of his men all disguised as Maltese sailors onto the stranded ship, overcame the guards, set it the ship on fire.

It later blew up, but Decatur and his men escaped with no casualties. British Admiral Horatio Nelson called the adventure the “most bold and daring act of the age.” Decatur was promoted to Captain.

His career went from triumph to triumph and culminated in the defeat of Algeria in the Second Barbary War (1815) when then Commodore Decatur forced the Dey or ruler to treat for peace. When he returned to America an honored hero he was feted at every opportunity.

At one such banquet he made a hubristic toast that in the modern ear sounds to many as pretentious and chauvinistic, but it marked him as an astute American politician in any age. “Our country! In her intercourse with foreign nations may she always be in the right; but our country, right or wrong!” Decatur served as a Navy Commissioner and enjoyed a prominent and satisfying social life in Washington after his naval career. He was marked by many for future high office.

In his rise to prominence, however, Decatur had made enemies. One of those was Commodore James

Baron. Decatur was instrumental securing the suspension of Barron's commission and resisted his return to service after the War of 1812.

After more than a decade of ever-increasing bitterness in these disputes Barron received false information as to Decatur's true involvement from another naval officer hostile to Decatur, Jesse Duncan Elliott. This pushed the obsessed Barron over the brink and he challenged Decatur to a duel. At first Decatur resisted, but Barron re-issued the challenge.

They met near Bladensburg, Maryland on March 22, 1820. During the duel, both men were

wounded, but Decatur's wound was fatal. His death brought to a tragic end to Decatur's brightening political career. He was 41.

Barron apparently was horrified by his actions. He was re-instated into naval service, but lived out his career under the shadow of this incident as the man who had killed the hero. Elliott continued his troublemaking until his career ended in courts-martial in 1844.

At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

Resources

De Kay, James Tertius. A Rage of Glory: The Life of Commodore Stephen Decatur, USN. New York: Free Press, 2004.

**Shilts, Randy. Conduct Unbecoming: Gays and
Lesbians in the U.S Military: Vietnam to the
Persian Gulf. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993.**

**Williamson, Gene. "The Court of Last Resort,"
American History 33 (6, February 1999): 34-40.**

<http://www.history.navy.mil/bios/decatour.htm>

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