

The Battle of Fayal

by

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In September 1814 a notable battle took place between three Royal Navy ships and an American privateer in the harbour of Horta, on Faial island in the Azores. This battle, one of the last naval battles of the War of 1812 between Great Britain and the United States and one of the last naval battles between the two countries, came to hold a remarkable place in American history and became part of American folk history in the 19th century. It was widely accepted that this small naval action determined the outcome of the War of 1812, contributed to the defeat of the British army at the Battle of New Orleans, assured that the U.S. kept control of New Orleans and the Mississippi valley and ultimately resulted in the election of Andrew Jackson as President. It also led to a decades-long diplomatic dispute between the U.S. and Portugal. Theodore Roosevelt wrote about the battle in his book *The Naval War of 1812*. Today however, historians view the battle differently and are less inclined to accept that it played a crucial role the outcome of the war.

On the afternoon of September 26, 1814, a squadron of three British ships, Plantagenet, Carnation and Rota, *en route* from England to Jamaica, sailed into the harbour of Horta. The squadron was to rendezvous in Jamaica with other military forces in order to prepare an attack on New Orleans. Arriving in Horta, the British encountered the American privateer, General Armstrong, at anchor. The British squadron was formidable; Plantagenet had 74 guns, Rota 44 guns and Carnation 18 guns and around 2,000 men were aboard the three vessels.¹ The American ship, General Armstrong, under the command of Captain Samuel Chester Reid, had 7 guns and 90 men.² Seeking to avoid a confrontation with the much larger British force, Captain Reid sent a message to the Portuguese governor of the island appealing to the governor to remind the British that Horta was a neutral port. However, the British commander moved to try to capture the American privateer.

In his report of the battle, Captain Reid wrote that the British launched a series of attacks on the American vessel.³ In the first attempt, at about 8 pm, the British sent four boats of armed men toward the General Armstrong. Captain Reid hailed them, but they did not reply. As the boats drew alongside, the Americans opened fire, the British returned fire and a sharp skirmish took place. But the Americans succeeded in driving the British off and the British boats repaired to their ships. Captain Reid estimated that the British suffered around 20 men killed and wounded, while the Americans had one man killed and one wounded. The British regrouped and at about midnight began a more formidable attack with 12 boats, attempting to board the General Armstrong. The Americans opened fire with long 9-pounders and a swivel gun and the boats replied with their carronades. As the British attempted to board, Captain Reid described the scene, “Our great guns now becoming useless, we attacked them sword in hand, together with our pikes, pistols

¹ Rowan, Bob, *American Privateers in the War of 1812*, A paper delivered to The New York Military Affairs Symposium, October 19, 2001, City University of New York, published 2006

<http://nymas.org/warof1812paper/paperrevised2006.html>

² Ibid.

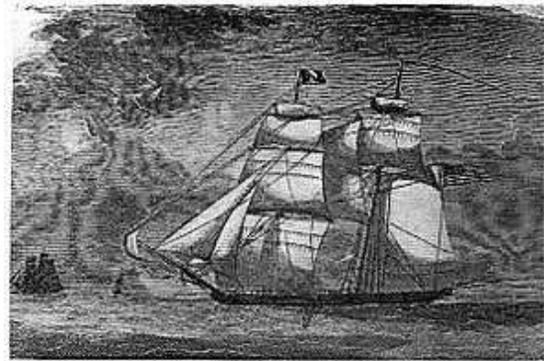
³ Coggeshall, George, *History of the American Privateers and letters of marque*, quoting a letter from Captain Reid, p.371

https://archive.org/details/cihm_07360/page/n457/mode/2up

and musketry...the enemy made frequent and repeated attempts to gain our decks, but were repulsed at all times, and at all points, with the greatest slaughter”.⁴ Captain Reid estimated that there were 400 British officers and men in the second attack, of which 120 were killed and 130 wounded.⁵ Other sources put the British casualties lower, at around 75. Two Americans had been killed and 7 wounded.



Modern-day view of Horta



THE PRIVATEER BRIG GENERAL ARMSTRONG
CAPTAIN S. C. REID, COMMANDER
Which fought a most thrilling battle in the harbor of Fayal.

The General Armstrong

As daylight broke the next day, September 27, the British ships maneuvered into position to begin firing their cannon on the General Armstrong. The Americans returned fire, damaging the British ships, but Captain Reid soon realized that his position was hopeless, so he scuttled his ship by firing a gun pointed down the hatchway, to blow a hole in the hull of his ship.⁶ The Americans retreated ashore and took refuge in an old convent.

The British squadron was seriously depleted in manpower by (depending on the source) from 75 to 300 sailors and marines and the British ships had suffered damage, which required repairs to be made, delaying them for some days in Horta. This delay, in turn, caused the squadron to be late in arriving at New Orleans with an effect on subsequent history.⁷

Theodore Roosevelt, in his book, *The Naval War of 1812*, said, “The British squadron was bound for New Orleans, and on account of the delay and loss that it suffered, it was late in arriving, so that this action may be said to have helped in saving the Crescent City (New Orleans)”.⁸ Others concurred. A U.S. Senate Report published in 1880 stated, “It is therefore evident that the heroic actions of Captain Reid and his brave officers and crew saved New Orleans from conquest by England; for had the British forces arrived even one week before General Jackson, they would have captured the city, which was then utterly defenseless....”⁹

Historian John Van Duyn Southworth. in *The Age of Sails: war at sea*, says:

General Andrew Jackson later told Capt. Reid that "If there had been no Battle of Fayal, there would have been no Battle of New Orleans." Reid had delayed the British expedition against New Orleans for

⁴ Ibid, p. 373.

⁵ Ibid, p. 375.

⁶ Rowan, op. cit.

⁷ Abdo, Joseph C., *The Dabney Family of Faial*, British Historical Society of Portugal, 28th Annual Report and Review, 2001, p. 93. <https://www.bhspportugal.org/library/articles/the-dabney-family-of-faial>

⁸ Roosevelt, Theodore, *The Naval War of 1812*, p. 70

⁹ Senate Report 1880, quoted in Rowan, op. cit.

*ten days allowing Jackson to arrive there earlier. Thus, Louisiana and the Northwest Territory might now be British if Reid had not engaged them in what has been called one of the world's most decisive naval battles.*¹⁰

When the Armstrong's crew returned to the United States, they were feted with banquets and speeches, up the East Coast from Charleston to Boston.¹¹ Andrew Jackson became a national hero and eventually President.

Certainly, the British had seemed prepared to occupy New Orleans permanently. General Pakenham, the commander of the British ground forces had with him a commission to act as governor.¹² The British fleet included administrators, tax collectors and other personnel to establish a government.¹³

Nineteenth-century American writers were extravagant in their praise for Capt. Reid and his crew. Some historians have pointed out that the Americans needed a narrative; it fit nicely with the theme of the underdog Americans twisting the tail of the British lion.¹⁴ The Battle of Fayal contained the elements of the classic David and Goliath tale. It served the need for an American narrative. But there is some doubt as to whether it is entirely correct. More-recent historians have come to a different conclusion from that of the 19th century writers. Notably, in 2001, Rowan researched the British plans for the invasion of New Orleans. He found that the original British plans stated the military forces "...should meet at the said rendezvous (Jamaica) not later than the 20th of November".¹⁵ The British squadron arrived in Faial on September 26, departed on October 5, eight days after the battle and arrived in Jamaica on November 4. The squadron delayed departing Faial for eight days, but did in fact arrive in Jamaica by November 4, in good time to join the forces assembling there. The British invasion force sailed from Jamaica on November 26, somewhat later than the November 20 date, but it is difficult to see that the arrival of the squadron from Faial would have necessarily delayed the entire force.

Repercussions stemming from the battle continued for decades. The British destruction of the General Armstrong led to a series of lawsuits which ran for over 40 years and at one point led to a diplomatic confrontation between the U.S. and Portugal.¹⁶ Eighteen years after the sinking of the privateer, her owners demanded compensation from the British government, which was refused. The owners also demanded payment of expenses from the Portuguese government for not protecting the vessel in a neutral port. The Portuguese government refused to pay, pointing out that any use of force on their part would have led to the destruction of Faial by the British. The case reached a crisis point in 1850 when President Zachary Taylor ordered the American Ambassador in Lisbon to deliver an ultimatum to the Portuguese government. In July 1850 the U.S. warships Independence and Mississippi entered the port of Lisbon and remained for 20 days, "with their cannon aimed on the city".¹⁷ However, when President Taylor died, on July 9, 1850, and was succeeded by President Fillmore, the new administration referred the case to international arbitration and, in 1853, Louis Napoleon of France decided in favour of Portugal.¹⁸ In 1882

¹⁰ Southworth, John Van Duyn, *War at Sea: The Age of Sails*. New York, Tawyne Publishers, 1968.

¹¹ Rowan, op. cit.

¹² Kilmeade, Brian and Yaeger, Don, "Andrew Jackson and the Miracle of New Orleans", Sentinel Press, 2017, p. 100.

¹³ Brands, H. W. "Andrew Jackson: His Life and Times", Anchor Books, 2006, pp. 272-273.

¹⁴ Rowan, op. cit.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Reid, Samuel C., "The History of the Wonderful Battle of the Brig-of-war General Armstrong With a British Squadron, at Fayal, 1814", 1893, Boston, Barta & Co, p. 54. (The author was the son of Capt. Reid.)

¹⁷ Mónica, Maria Filomena, "Os Dabney: Uma Família Americana nos Açores", 2009, Fundação Luso-Americana, p. 39-40.

¹⁸ Ibid.

the U.S. Congress voted to make a payment to the heirs of the owners.¹⁹ In the 1890s a Broadway play entitled *The Senator*, based on the efforts of the heirs to receive compensation for their claims for damages, enjoyed some success. The play was made into a movie in 1915, one hundred years after the battle.²⁰

In an interesting historical note, Captain Samuel Chester Reid was later active in designing the 1818 version of the American flag with 13 stripes and one star for each state.²¹ This adopted the rule of adding one star for each new state while keeping just 13 stripes. Until 1795, one star and one stripe had been added for each new state, but after this date the flag had remained unchanged as new states were added, until Captain Reid's design was adopted.²²

Whether or not the action in 1814 decided the outcome of the war, The Battle of Fayal underlined the strategic importance of the Azores for control of the North Atlantic. The Azores have featured in most conflicts involving the United States and European powers, from the War of 1812, the American Civil War and both World Wars.²³ Whenever there has been a need to move men and material over the North Atlantic attention has focused on the archipelago. This was demonstrated again in WWI when the U.S. maintained a naval presence in Faial to combat German U-boats and yet again in WWII when the British and the Americans used the airbases in the Azores to protect the movement of convoys from North America to Britain. The airbase in the Azores was also strategically important in the Gulf War and the conflict in Iraq.

It is perhaps appropriate to conclude with a quote from Mark Twain, who said, "Very few things happen at the right time, and the rest do not happen at all. The conscientious historian will correct these defects."²⁴

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Curtis Stewart is a retired American diplomat living in Portugal. He enjoyed overseas assignments with the Department of State in more than a dozen countries, primarily in Africa. His posting in the Azores, Rio de Janeiro and Canberra, Australia, helped in research for the articles appearing in this newsletter. In the course of his career he worked in the areas of economics, energy, mineral resources and science. He met his wife while serving in the Azores and has lived in Portugal since 2002.

Note on spelling: The 19th century spelling is Fayal, while modern spelling is Faial. The old spelling is retained in the title of this paper as it reflects the usage of the era and most historians use that spelling in referring to the battle.

¹⁹ Reid, op. cit. p. 58.

²⁰ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Senator_\(play\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Senator_(play))

²¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel_Chester_Reid

²² Leepson, Marc, "Flag: An American Biography", St. Martin's Press, 2006, chapter 6. Available online at https://books.google.pt/books?id=WeUCGbaOgKQC&pg=PT105&hl=pt-PT&source=gbs_toc_r&cad=3#v=onepage&q&f=false

²³ "The Confederate Navy in Portuguese Waters", British Historical Society of Portugal, Twenty-fifth Annual Report and Review, 1998, provides an excellent overview of the role of the Azores in the American Civil War.

²⁴ <https://quotes.yourdictionary.com/author/quote/608175>