

U.S.-Greek Naval Relations Begin: Antipiracy Operations in the Aegean Sea

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Introduction

This paper discusses the U.S. Navy's campaign against Greek pirates who interfered with American shipping in the Aegean during the second decade of the nineteenth century.¹ This campaign was not a particularly important one in the overall history of the U.S. Navy, nor did it strongly influence subsequent Greek-American naval relations. Nevertheless, it illustrates some key aspects of the nature of the Greek war for independence, and of the republic in North America that had itself won its independence less than half a century earlier.

America's war for independence spawned many small American naval forces—national, state, and private. Some had acquitted themselves quite well against the Royal Navy, but all had disappeared once American independence had been won. The new United States of America, however, quickly became a major international shipping power during the last decades of the eighteenth century, capitalizing on American knowledge and resources as well as European involvement in the several wars of the French revolution and of the Napoleonic Era. A particularly profitable trade had grown up between American ports and Smyrna. America's huge new merchant fleet, however, periodically became prey to French or British warships and privateers, as well as the corsairs of the Barbary States of North Africa. Therefore, in 1798 the United States commissioned a new Navy to protect its burgeoning commerce.²

This Navy quickly became embroiled in America's early wars with France, Britain, and the North African states.³ Although peace was achieved with all of these countries within two decades, America retained a strong Navy to show the flag and protect its extensive commerce throughout the world. American warships cruised throughout the world's seas, a small squadron remained on permanent station in the Mediterranean, and a major and successful campaign was waged

¹ The author would like to thank Dr. Sarandis Papadopoulos and Captain Patrick Roth, U.S. Navy (Retired) for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

² On the early history of the American merchant fleet, see K. Jack Bauer, *Maritime History of the United States: The Role of America's Seas and Waterways* (Columbia SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1988).

³ The war with France ("The Quasi-War") was almost exclusively a war against French privateers in the Caribbean. The war with Britain ("The War of 1812") included privateering operations on both sides.

against piracy in the Caribbean.⁴ In 1820, the brig *Spark* became the first American warship to visit Smyrna.⁵

The first operation

When the Greek War for Independence erupted in 1821, American sympathies were naturally with the Greeks.⁶ The frigate *Hellas* – flagship of the Greek Navy fleet – was designed and built in America⁷. In the wake of the 1823 Greek naval defeat at Bodrum, however, the Greek Navy turned to privateering to support the revolt, and attacked merchantmen—including American merchantmen.⁸ This the United States would not countenance, and so the American Secretary of the Navy dispatched a powerful reinforcing squadron, which arrived in the Mediterranean in 1825.⁹

This squadron was built around the ship-of-the-line *North Carolina*—America’s first battleship—and the famous frigate *Constitution* (still on display today in Charlestown, Massachusetts – near Boston). The squadron commander was Commodore John Rodgers, who at the time commanded the strongest U.S. Navy force in the world. His tasks were to protect American commerce and to negotiate a trade treaty that would increase American access to the Ottoman Empire. Accordingly, he escorted American merchantmen to Turkey, visited Greek ports, and made contact with Ottoman officials. His initial operations in the Aegean in 1825 appeared to accomplish the first task—to deter piracy—but he was unable to conclude the treaty desired by President John Quincy Adams.¹⁰

⁴ For an analysis of the global U.S. Navy antipiracy operations of the U.S. Navy during the second and third decades of the nineteenth century, see Robert Greenhalgh Albion and Jennie Barnes Pope, *Sea Lanes in Wartime: The American Experience, 1775-1945* (reprinted by Archon Books, 1968), 139-47. For an analysis of the deployment of the U.S. Navy’s overseas squadrons throughout the nineteenth century, see Albion, “Distant Stations,” U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings* 80 (March 1954), 265-73. For the campaign against piracy in the Caribbean, see Francis B.C. Bradlee, *Piracy in the West Indies and its Suppression* (New York: Library Editions Ltd, 1970) (originally published in 1923); and Richard Wheeler, *In Pirate Waters, Captain David Porter USN and America’s War on Piracy in the West Indies* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1969).

⁵ James A. Field, *America and the Mediterranean World: 1776-1882* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 120.

⁶ Field, *America and the Mediterranean World*, 120-26; Robert W. Love, Jr., *History of the U.S. Navy, 1775-1941* (Harrisburg PA: Stackpole Books, 1992), 146.

⁷ Field, *America and the Mediterranean World*, 124.

⁸ Love, *History of the U.S. Navy*, 146

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 146-7.

The second operation

After the reinforcing squadron retired from the Aegean in 1826, Greek piratical attacks on American shipping began anew. In response, the American Mediterranean Squadron established a regular convoy system from Malta to Smyrna. Also, in February 1827, Lieutenant Lawrence Kearny sailed from Boston on the new U.S. Navy sloop-of-war *Warren* to actively seek to put a stop to Greek piracy against American ships. Small, speedy sloops-of-war were the destroyers of their day, and were better suited for counter-piracy operations than the big cruiser-like frigates and battleship-like men-of-war.

Warren joined a convoy in September 1827, then left it to escort convoys and hunt for pirates throughout the Cyclades. In October, *Warren* captured her first Greek-flagged pirate ship, then cruised for three weeks between Cape Matapan and Carabusa. At the end of October, she ran a pirate brig aground on Cimolus, and cut away her masts and rigging. She then recovered an American and an Austrian merchantman that had been seized by pirates, captured a pirate 40-oared *tratta*, and landed on Mykonos, where a pirate boat was burned and the town fired upon in a successful attempt to force the return of captured American cargo.¹¹ *Warren* conducted further antipirate operations and landings on Andros and Milos, and convoyed eight American merchantmen from Milos to Smyrna in December.¹²

Meanwhile, also in 1827, Lieutenant Louis Goldsborough successfully led a small detachment from the American Mediterranean Squadron sloop-of-war *Porpoise* to board and capture a Greek-occupied former British brig.¹³

Such tactical operations eased the Greek pirate threat to American commerce, but did little to eliminate its root causes: The breakdown of law and order in the Aegean; the desperation of the Greek rebels fighting for their nation's freedom from the Ottomans; and the reluctance of the European naval powers to intervene. As Lieutenant Kearny

¹¹ Field, *America and the Mediterranean World*, 128.

¹² For the exploits of the *Warren*, see *Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships*, Vol. VIII (Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1981), 106-7; and Love, *History of the U.S. Navy*, 147.

¹³ David F. Long, *Gold Braid and Foreign Relations: Diplomatic Activities of U.S. Naval Officers, 1798-1883* (Annapolis MD: Naval Institute Press, 1988), 200.

noted, “piracy has . . . the present seat of the Greek government, for its fountainhead.”¹⁴

The end of Greek piracy

This situation began to change in 1827. By the Treaty of London, the three great European naval powers—Britain, France, and Russia—agreed to support Greek autonomy. Later that year, the combined fleets of these three powers destroyed a Turkish-Egyptian Ottoman naval force at Navarino. In the short run, the allied victory at Navarino actually caused an increase in Greek pirate incidents, since the destruction of the Ottoman naval threat merely freed up Greek sea forces from the need to fight the Turks, and enabled them to focus on attacking neutral shipping. Once that result became apparent, however, the Great Powers decided to take direct action themselves. In January 1828 an allied fleet descended on the main pirate base at Carabusa, destroyed it and most of the pirate flotilla, and then conducted similar operations farther north.¹⁵

By the end of 1828, Secretary of the Navy Samuel L. Southard tactfully reported that “due to the restraints of the existing authorities in Greece; and the system of convoy,” the threat to American commerce from the Greek pirates had been eliminated.¹⁶ *Warren*, however, remained deployed in the Mediterranean until the next year, guarding American commerce. Also, as one of the service’s largest forces, the U.S. Navy’s Mediterranean Squadron continued to protect American interests and commerce in the Mediterranean into the twentieth century.¹⁷ Meanwhile, by 1830 widespread piracy had been finally eliminated in the Caribbean, while on the other side of the world American warships were embarking on a new antipiracy campaign, this time against Malay pirates threatening American commerce in the Straits of Malacca.¹⁸

¹⁴ Love, *History of the U.S. Navy*, 147.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 148.

¹⁶ *Annual Report of the Navy Department* (Washington DC: 27 November 1828), 134.

¹⁷ The U.S. Mediterranean Squadron remained on station through most of the nineteenth century, with occasional breaks. After the American Civil War, its name was changed to the U.S. European Squadron.

¹⁸ On the U.S. Navy’s antipiracy campaign in the East Indies, see Robert Erwin Johnson, *Far China Station: The U.S. Navy in Asian Waters, 1800-1898* (Annapolis MD: Naval Institute Press, 1979).

The U.S. Navy and Greece in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries

The suppression of Greek piracy and the achievement of Greek independence in 1830 did not, however, mean the end of Greek-American naval relations, nor of U.S. Navy operations to suppress global piracy. While the frigate *Hellas* was blown up in 1831 during an internal Greek revolt, in 1914 the United States sold to the Greek government the U.S. Navy battleships *Mississippi* and *Idaho*, which became *Kilkis* and *Lemnos*. U.S. Navy ships helped evacuate Greek refugees from Smyrna in 1922.¹⁹ From 1945 through 1949, U.S. Navy warship visits and naval advisory assistance helped keep Greece free from Communism during the Greek Civil War.²⁰ Since Greece joined NATO in 1951, U.S. Navy and Greek Navy warships have participated together in numerous bi-lateral and multilateral allied exercises over the decades, as well as serving together since 1992 in NATO's Standing Naval Force Mediterranean (STANAVFORMED). U.S. Navy warships provided humanitarian relief to Greek citizens following the earthquakes of 1953 and 1955, and have routinely assisted the crews of Greek-owned merchant ships during disasters at sea.²¹

Also, during the 1990-1991 Gulf War, Greek Navy warships operated in the strait of Tiran alongside ships of the U.S., French, and Spanish navies, to enforce the United Nations embargo of Iraq.²² A decade later, the Greek Navy participated in the international war on terrorism by providing logistic support at Souda Bay and by helping to patrol the Eastern Mediterranean and Arabian seas following the Al Qaeda attacks on New York and Washington on September 11, 2001.²³ Thus, the U.S. Navy and the Greek Navy have continued to

¹⁹ Henry P. Beers, "U.S. Naval Detachment in Turkish Waters, 1919-1924" (Washington DC: Department of the Navy, 1943).

²⁰ There is a large literature on the U.S. Navy and Greece during the early days of the Cold War. See especially Stephen Xydis, *Greece and the Great Powers, 1944-1947: Prelude to the Truman Doctrine* (Thessaloniki, 1963).

²¹ Adam B. Siegel, *A Sampling of U.S. Naval Humanitarian Operations* (Alexandria VA: Center for Naval Analyses, November 1990).

²² Edward J. Marolda, "A Host of Nations: Coalition Naval Operations in the Persian Gulf," in *Selected Papers From the 1992 (59th Annual) Meeting of the Society for Military History*, Donald F. Bittner (ed.) (Quantico VA: Marine Corps University, May 1994), 265-84.

²³ David Brown, "All Nations On Deck," *Navy Times* (13 May, 2002); "Fact Sheet: International Contributions to the War Against Terrorism" (Washington DC: U.S. Department of Defense, Office of Public Affairs, May 22, 2002).

operate together, carrying out the policies of their governments and demonstrating the congruence of those policies on many occasions.

Epilogue

The scourge of piracy continues to threaten the peaceful sea transport of goods throughout the world, so necessary for the continued expansion of the global economy and growth in world prosperity. After the Al Qaeda attacks of September 11, U.S. Navy frigates—like the frigates of old—began once again to conduct antipiracy patrols in the Straits of Malacca, assisted this time by warships from the Indian Navy and other like-minded navies.²⁴ The American merchant marine long ago ceased to be one of the leaders in the field, replaced by the merchantmen of other countries, like Greece.²⁵ Nevertheless, the U.S. Navy, as the world's leading naval force, continues to take seriously its mandate to maintain the freedom of the seas for all.

²⁴ William N. McMichael, "U.S. Vessels Patrol for Pacific Pirates," *Navy Times* (17 June 2002).

²⁵ The United States today ranks only twelfth among the world's shipping powers. Greece ranks third. Greece has almost twice the number of merchant ships and almost four times the merchant tonnage of the United States. U.S.-domiciled investors, however, own or control what amounts to the fourth largest fleet in the world. See Robert H. Pouch and Captain James McNamara, "The U.S. Merchant Marine and Maritime Industry in Review," U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings* 129 (May 2003), 110-18.