

Captain William Ward Burrows II

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Throughout history, many voices are lost to the wind, whether it's through time or the lack of next of kin. The purpose of original research is to rediscover those who have been lost and to bring them back to life in a new way. William Ward Burrows II is one such voice. Having died at a young age away from family, he had nobody to carry on his story and legacy. As such his voice died at sea along with him. This research has brought him back, carried to life through the tales of his adventures and heroics and finally brought to public attention and recognition.

William Ward Burrows II was born on October 6, 1785 to William Ward Burrows I and Mary Bond Burrows. He was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He was one of three children, Sarah Burrows Thompson being born in 1784 and Frances Harriott Burrows Nelson being born in 1798.¹ His father, William Ward Burrows I, was appointed as Major Commandant of the Marine Corps by President John Adams after its formation on July 12, 1798.² As a result of his father's military career, William Burrows II most likely felt pressure to enlist in the military himself. As a result, he ended up going to sea and joining the US Navy at a very young age. In 1799, at the age of fourteen, William W. Burrows II joined the Navy.³ The next year, he sailed to France aboard the ship "Portsmouth".⁴

Beginning his naval career in a humble way, William Ward Burrows II was appointed as a midshipman aboard the USS Constitution in 1803.⁵ The captain of the USS Constitution at this time was Commander Edward Preble.⁶ Commander Preble took a liking to Burrows and appointed him as acting lieutenant aboard the USS Constitution.⁷ The USS Constitution, with Burrows onboard, is most notable for its involvement in the Barbary Wars and, in particular, its action at the Battle of Tripoli Harbor. The goal of this battle was to protect American merchant ships from Barbary pirates. Seeing that approaching the harbor with several large gunships

would only result in the destruction of the naval fleet, Commander Preble decided to instead only take the USS Constitution, surrounded by several smaller gunships, into the harbor.⁸ The attacks went on for weeks, finally ending with the Tripolian gunboats destroyed and many prisoners having been captured.⁹ During this fight, although specifics are unclear, it is noted that William Burrows II notably distinguished himself in battle and would soon be appointed to a higher position.

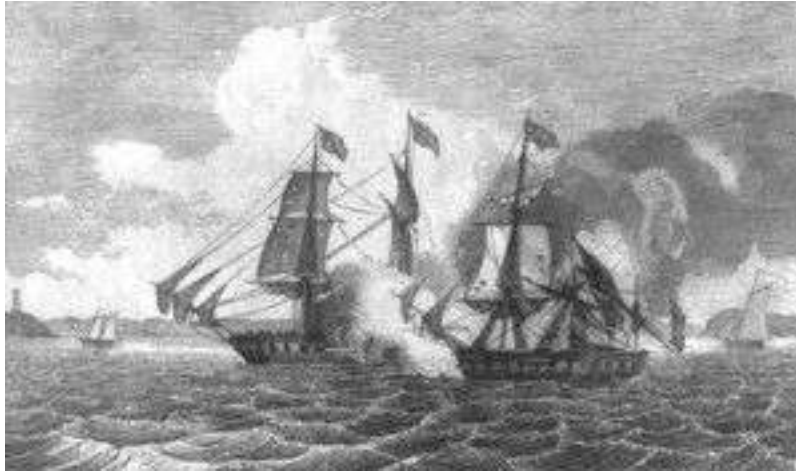


'Decatur boarding the Tripolitan gunboat,' painting by Dennis Malone Carter, Source: Photographic Section, Naval History and Heritage Command, Photo # NH 44647-KN.

Through the next few years, Burrows served in several, less important naval positions. In 1808, he was put in command of Gunboat 119, a gunboat with the explicit goal of enforcing

embargo law.¹⁰ After only a year, he was appointed as first lieutenant of the “Hornet”.¹¹ Burrows, put in a position where those who were under his command officially outranked him, attempted to resign. Secretary Hamilton, however, rejected his resignation, causing him to remain in service.¹² Instead, Burrows was granted a year-long furlough, during which he sailed to India.¹³ Upon his return, he was assigned as the captain of the USS Enterprise, still fully intending to resign from service.¹⁴

William Ward Burrows II was unaware, but he would never get the chance to resign. On September 5, 1813, the USS Enterprise spotted a British ship, the HMS Boxer, off the coast of Pemaquid Point, Maine.¹⁵ After several hours of maneuvering off the coast of Monhegan Island, the two ships finally engaged in combat.¹⁶ At the beginning of combat, the crew of the HMS Boxer nailed their flags to the mast in order to show that they would not surrender.¹⁷ Only minutes into battle, a shot from a cannon hit the British captain, Samuel Blyth, going straight through his body and shattering his left arm.¹⁸ At about the same time, a musket ball hit and mortally wounded Burrows.¹⁹ After only half an hour of battle, HMS Boxer gave in and surrendered, bringing Commander Blyth’s sword to the American ship. Burrows, still alive at this point, refused to take the sword, ordering that it be returned back to its deceased owner.²⁰ Only eight short hours after being shot, Lieutenant Commandant Burrows died on 5 September, 1813 at the age of 28.²¹



Print Commemorating the Enterprise and Boxer Battle

Edward McCall, the new captain of the ship, brought the HMS Boxer and USS Enterprise to Portland, where he formally wrote the results and casualties of the battle.²² Captain Burrows and Captain Blyth were given a dual funeral in which both of their heroics and bravery were recognized. They were then buried beside each other in Portland, Maine.²³ Burrows was posthumously awarded the Congressional Gold Medal with instructions that it be given to his next of kin.²⁴ The citation for this Congressional Gold Medal reads:

“That the President of the United States be requested to present to the nearest male relative of lieutenant William Burrows, and to lieutenant Edward R. McCall of the brig Enterprise, a gold medal with suitable emblems and devices; and a silver medal with like emblems and devices to each of the commissioned officers of the aforesaid vessel, in testimony of the high sense entertained in the conflict with the British sloop Boxer, on the fourth of September, in the year one thousand eight hundred and thirteen. And the President is also requested to communicate to the nearest male relative of lieutenant Burrows the deep regret which Congress feel for the loss of that valuable officer, who died in the arms of victory, nobly contending for his country's

rights and fame.”²⁵



Image of the Memorial Erected on the Grave of William Ward Burrows II

Although William Ward Burrows II did not have many primary sources, particularly ones written by him, the information given about his location allow for a general image of his life to be understood. Burrows' life can be pieced together through the events that he was a part of rather than by his own personal accounts. This creates a shattered image, only depicting those parts of his life which were seen as significant for both military and national history. As a result, this voice of a lost captain is incomplete, and part of his legacy is still lost, possibly never to be found. A lack of kin makes it particularly difficult to recover any semblance of the young sailor and his life story.

Endnotes

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