

The Chesapeake-Leopard Affair (1807)

On 22 June 1807 the British warship *HMS Leopard* attempted to halt the American frigate *USS Chesapeake* shortly after it cleared port in Norfolk, Virginia. The American master, James Barron, refused to yield to British demands to search his vessel for Royal Navy deserters. When Barron attempted to move his vessel onward, the *Leopard* fired a shot across the bow of the *Chesapeake* and then delivered three broadsides directly into the American frigate. Barron, with three men dead and eighteen wounded, struck his colors, surrendering to Sir Salusbury Pryce Humphreys. After searching the *Chesapeake*, Humphreys seized four alleged deserters and sailed away, leaving the Americans to limp back to port.

The incident off the coast of Virginia was one of many outrages in American eyes illustrative of the dispute between the United States and Great Britain over trade rights in the context of the Napoleonic Wars. The two nations disagreed over many things before Congress finally declared war on Britain in 1812. The disagreement over the right of search at sea and Britain's continual impressment of American sailors into its naval service directly contributed to both the *Chesapeake* 'affair' and the War of 1812.

The wars of Europe, fueled by the ascension of Napoleon Bonaparte to power in France, placed Britain on a war footing and greatly expanded the Royal Navy. Britain's naval forces nonetheless lost as many as 10,000 men annually to desertion, a problem of great significance considering the ease with which Napoleonic France rolled over its continental neighbors. To compensate for such losses, Britain regularly pressed seamen into its navy and searched to recover deserters. Britain's efforts to recover deserters fueled the diplomatic impasse with the United States. Officially neutral, the U.S. rejected British claims that deserters remained subjects of the realm no matter where they went. British deserters easily found work in an expanding American merchant marine, setting the stage for conflict between the two nations. At the heart of the matter was the issue of citizenship. Britain argued that citizenship could not be changed—those born British would always be British. The U.S. took the opposite position, arguing that it was possible, through expatriation, to change one's citizenship. Thus, Britain, in pressing American sailors into its service, violated American sovereignty while breaking international laws by forcing citizens of a neutral nation into its navy.

The diplomatic tumult lay unresolved when Sir George Berkeley, commanding British forces from Halifax, ordered naval commanders to bring back deserters even if doing so required the use of force. The stage was set for the *Leopard* and the *Chesapeake* in 1807. The four men taken from the *Chesapeake* represented the smallest fraction of men pressed into British service thus far, but the incident both stirred public outrage and American demands for war. President Jefferson responded with an all-out embargo, prohibiting American vessels from sailing to Europe, because he believed that economic pressure could bring diplomatic results. Britain responded to American outrage over the affair, recalling Berkeley, offering reparations for American losses, and returning three of the four sailors taken from the *Chesapeake*. (The three men, Britain admitted, were American citizens; the fourth man had already been hanged for desertion.) Despite Britain's willingness to make amends for the incident, the *Chesapeake* 'affair' did not reach its diplomatic conclusion until the end of 1811. Just a few months later, the United States declared war on Britain.

Eugene Van Sickle
Assistant Professor of American History
University of North Georgia

FURTHER READING:

Budiansky, Stephen. *Perilous Fight: America's Intrepid War with Britain on the High Seas, 1812-1815*, New York: Vintage Books, 2011.

Hickey, Donald R. *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989.

Stagg, J.C.A. *The War of 1812: Conflict for a Continent*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Taylor, Alan. *The Civil War of 1812: American Citizens, British Subjects, Irish Rebels, and Indian Allies*, New York: Vintage Books, ,2010.