

2012

The Perfect Wreck—“Old Ironsides” and HMS Java: A Story of 1812

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Recommended Citation

Meilinger, Phillip S. and Maffeo, Steven (2012) "The Perfect Wreck—“Old Ironsides” and HMS Java: A Story of 1812," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 65 : No. 2 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol65/iss2/11>

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BOOK REVIEWS

"OUR FIRST TRUE WAR"

Maffeo, Steven. *The Perfect Wreck—"Old Ironsides" and HMS Java: A Story of 1812*. Tucson, Ariz.: Fire-ship, 2011. 382pp. \$19.95

Singapore Harbor, 1845—Commodore Henry Ducie Chads, Royal Navy, is rowed over to an American frigate visiting the port where he is senior officer. Chads is met by the second in command of USS *Constitution* and ushered below to pay his respects to the captain. After a friendly chat, Chads notes that he has been on the ship before, in 1812. He had then been first lieutenant of HMS *Java*, and he had stood on that very spot while surrendering his ship to Commodore William Bainbridge. This opening scene is a poignant and accurate account of an actual meeting.

So begins this outstanding and fascinating novel by Steven E. Maffeo, a retired U.S. Navy captain and author of two previous books on the age of sail.

During the war between Britain and France, both countries routinely violated American neutrality at sea. The stakes were high, and the sensibilities of small powers were easily overlooked. The depredations of the British were much worse, however, than those of the French, and in June 1812 the United States declared war.

The two sides were not a match. The Royal Navy possessed 180 ships of the line—the battleships of the day, sporting at least seventy-four guns (some had over a hundred). The U.S. Navy had nothing so large, but its pride was six frigates, some carrying over fifty guns. The most famous of these was USS *Constitution*, nicknamed "Old Ironsides" during a victory over HMS *Guerrière* when British round shot bounced off its thick oak sides. The Royal Navy hoped to redress this embarrassment, but the frigate HMS *Java*, commanded ably by Captain Henry Lambert but saddled with a raw crew, left Portsmouth in November with a load of passengers and cargo, hoping to avoid a fight.

In contrast, *Constitution* was newly commanded by Commodore William Bainbridge. Not well liked, Bainbridge was known throughout the service as "Hard-Luck Bill." He had been the first U.S. Navy captain to surrender his ship to the enemy; indeed, within a period of five years Bainbridge "hailed down the flag of the United States *three times* in the face of the enemy—*without any fighting*." Nonetheless, *Constitution*

left Boston in late October to seek out and engage British shipping.

Maffeo alternates between the two vessels and their crews, providing an outstanding primer on the workings of a large warship two centuries past. He is adept at describing everything from victualing to lading and storage, rigging, discipline, sail maintenance, and gunnery. In a clever device, the author uses three British Army officers traveling aboard *Java* as props. These men—who were actually present on the voyage—are tutored by Chads on the strategy and tactics of naval warfare. The reader listens in on these chats and learns a great deal.

The climax of the book occurs on 29 December 1812, when the ships meet off the coast of Brazil. The description of the battle itself is masterful. Lambert worries about his largely untrained crew of “landmen,” but Maffeo implies that he had not trained his green crew nearly often or rigorously enough. Bainbridge, a stickler for discipline, had made no such mistake. The sea battle at close range, with heavy cannon disgorging round shot, grape, and canister—as well as the continuous musket fire of the marines on board both ships—takes a murderous toll. Although initially *Constitution* suffers worse and Bainbridge himself goes down twice with wounds, the battle slowly and inexorably reverses. The bigger guns and thicker sides of the American frigate, combined with its more seasoned crew, allow “Old Ironsides” to wreak havoc on *Java*. Dismasted and its bowsprit shot off, *Java*’s ability to maneuver is lost. Lieutenant Chads, taking command from his mortally wounded captain, sees that all hope is illusory—an attempt

to board *Constitution* so as to carry on the fight with cutlasses and pistols is skillfully thwarted by Bainbridge. *Java* is a perfect wreck and strikes its colors.

This ripping yarn fascinates, educates, and entertains. The exploits of the U.S. Navy in our country’s first true war after independence should never be forgotten. This terrific account is a must-read for naval personnel of all ranks.

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Vogel, Ezra F. *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap of Harvard Univ. Press, 2011. 928pp. \$39.95

For those seeking to understand China’s place in the world, Ezra Vogel has performed a great service through his meticulous decadelong work on this biography of Deng Xiaoping, who emerged as China’s leader following the death of Mao Zedong in 1976. Vogel may be overstating the case when he suggests that Deng was the most important world figure of the twentieth century, but it is hard to find a serious rival for the last quarter of that century.

Deng ruled China between 1978 and 1992, when he retired at the age of eighty-eight. Since his retirement, to the present day, Deng’s policies have continued, in contrast to the immediate changes that took place following the death of Mao. No Western scholar of China in 1976 predicted the “rise of China” that resulted from Deng’s leadership. How did Deng come to be central to the transformation of China?