

James Lawrence Biography

James Lawrence

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Biography

James Lawrence (1781-1813), American naval officer, became a symbol of bravery to the American Navy during the War of 1812 with his dying words, "Don't give up the ship."

James Lawrence was born in Burlington, N. J., on Oct. 1, 1781, and was educated in the local grammar school. Disliking the law, which he had begun to study, Lawrence entered the Navy as a midshipman in 1798. He survived President Thomas Jefferson's naval cutback in 1801 and rose to lieutenant's rank by early 1802. Lawrence established his reputation during the Tripolitan War as second in command during Capt. David Porter's daring boat raid on Tripoli and again when Capt. Stephen Decatur burned the American frigate *Philadelphia*, which had been captured by the enemy.

Lawrence was promoted to master commandant in December 1811 and was captain of the *Hornet* at the outbreak of the War of 1812 with England. Under Commodore William Bainbridge, Lawrence met the British brig *Peacock* off the coast of South America on Feb. 24, 1813. The *Peacock* was comparable in size to the *Hornet* but carried about two-thirds of its armament. Fifteen minutes after the battle commenced, the *Peacock* surrendered and sank almost at once with part of its crew.

Lawrence had been promoted to captain before news of his victory reached America. In May he was ordered to Boston to assume command of the frigate *Chesapeake*. His orders were to sail at once in order to intercept badly needed British supplies bound for Canada. He unwisely disregarded these instructions, instead fighting the British frigate *Shannon*, then blockading Boston. Although the ships were matched in armaments, the *Chesapeake*'s crew was inexperienced and undisciplined. The *Shannon*'s crew was superior both in seamanship and gunnery practice. The battle, 30 miles off Boston Harbor, lasted less than 15 minutes. The *Chesapeake* was forced to surrender and was taken to Halifax as a prize.

As he was being carried belowdecks, mortally wounded, Lawrence called out, "Don't give up the ship," a rallying cry soon taken up by the American Navy and used as Capt. Oliver Hazard Perry's battle flag in the Battle of Lake Erie. Lawrence was buried with military honors in Halifax, but his body was returned to the United States under flag of truce and reinterred in Trinity Churchyard, New York City, on Sept. 16, 1813.