



HMS *Shannon* and USS *Chesapeake* – 1st June 1813

The ships:

HMS *Shannon* was ordered on 24 October 1803, built by Brindley on the Medway, laid down in August 1804, launched 5 May 1806 and completed 3 August 1806 at Chatham Dockyard. She was taken out of service as a receiving ship in 1831, renamed HMS *St Lawrence* in 1844 and broken up in 1859.

USS *Chesapeake* was ordered on 27 March 1794, built by Josiah Fox at the Norfolk Navy Yard, laid down in December 1795, launched 2 December 1799, commissioned 22 May 1800 and captured on 1 June 1813. After repairs, she served in the Royal Navy as HMS *Chesapeake* until late 1815, then laid up and sold in 1819 to a timber merchant; the timbers were used (and can still be seen) to build the Chesapeake Mill in Wickham not far from Portsmouth.

	HMS <i>Shannon</i>	USS <i>Chesapeake</i>
Class	<i>Leda</i> -class frigate	38 gun frigate (rarely “36 gun”)
Tonnage	1,065	1244
Length	150.2 ft (gundeck)	152.6 ft (between perpendiculars)
Beam	39.9 ft	41.3 ft
Depth of hold	12.9 ft	13.8 ft
Complement	320 officers and enlisted	387 officers and enlisted
Armament	28 × 18-pounder long guns 4 × 9-pounder long guns 3 × 12-pounder long guns 16 × 32-pounder carronades	29 × 18-pounder long guns 2 × 12-pounder long guns 18 × 32-pounder carronades 1 × 12-pounder carronade
Weight of broadside	541 lbs	567 lbs

Situation in 1813:

Captain Philip Broke had commanded the *Shannon* since June 1806; his gun crew training was exemplary (and to some extents novel) and served as a model for the Royal Navy from the War of 1812 onwards. As Peter Padfield writes in *Broke and the Shannon*, 1968 (London: Hodder and Stoughton):

"The weekly routine at sea was for the watch on deck to be exercised at the great guns on Monday and Tuesday afternoons, and in the afternoons the first division of the watch was exercised at small arms. Wednesday and Thursday forenoons saw the watch on deck at the carronades, and in the afternoons the second division of the watch at small arms. Friday was reserved for the Midshipmen – great guns in the morning, small arms in the afternoon. Thus each man had one morning at the 18-pounders, one morning at the carronades and two afternoons with

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musquets in every week. Saturdays were reserved for washing clothes and scrubbing the berth deck in the afternoon. Sunday, apart from Church service and any necessary evolutions with the sails, was free."

Broke had been on the North American Station (both Halifax and Bermuda) since 1811, and in May 1813 was at sea on blockade off Boston having last watered and victualled on 25 March.

Captain James Lawrence took command of *Chesapeake* on 20 May 1813; he had recently been in command of the USS *Hornet* (18 x 32lb carronades, 165 complement) and had defeated HMS *Peacock* (12 x 24lb carronades, complement 122.) His ship was newly refitted, but he waited until he knew that the *Shannon* was accompanied by no other British ship.

On 1 June 1813, the *Chesapeake* left Boston harbour, clearing President Roads shortly before 13:00. The *Shannon* manoeuvred towards Cape Ann, some twelve miles Nor'nor'east, to avoid any interference from smaller American gunboats. Broke allowed Lawrence to approach from his stern and to windward at around 17:30, their relative speeds being 2-3 knots for the *Shannon*, about four knots for her opponent. Broke, expecting a longer range attack to his rigging (proven American tactics) held his fire, then by shortening sail forced Lawrence into a position where the better gunnery of the *Shannon*, directed solely at the *Chesapeake's* gun crews and command team at the wheel. The first shots were fired at 17:50 at a distance of about 100 feet. Within minutes, the *Chesapeake* was completely disabled, Lawrence, badly injured was carried below, no other officer was still alive on the *Chesapeake's* deck. When the *Chesapeake* started to drift down on him, Broke had no wind to avoid grappling which he conducted personally from his starboard bow to his opponent's stern, then, again personally, led his boarding party to victory. He was seriously wounded by a cutlass blow to his head, but his victory was complete within thirteen minutes of the first shot. Casualties on the *Shannon* were 24 were killed and 59 wounded; on the *Chesapeake* estimates vary slightly at 56 dead and around 90 wounded.

Much has been written of Lawrence's "famous battle cry" of "don't give up the ship", then "blow the ship up, sink her" which is historically inaccurate; Lawrence in fact muttered these words, probably several times, when he was down below in the cockpit being treated for his eventually fatal wound in the groin – he knew by that time that he had lost his ship and that he was dying. Even if Lawrence had thought that he was giving an order (rather than just delirious), he had no officers left standing on deck to carry it out.

The *Shannon* took her prize back to Halifax. Captain James Lawrence died during this trip and was buried with full honours in Halifax. Captain (later, 1830, Rear Admiral) Sir Philip Bowes Vere Broke, 1st Baronet, KCB was not expected to live, but against all medical odds he survived, returned with his ship to Portsmouth in the autumn of 1813 and retired from active naval service to his wife and family.

Whitehall, February 1, 1814.



His Royal Highness the Prince Regent, having, in the name and on the behalf of His Majesty, in consideration of the distinguished zeal, courage, and intrepidity of Philip Bowes Vere Broke, Esq. Post Captain in the Royal Navy, and Commander of His Majesty's ship the *Shannon* (particularly, displayed by him in his recent brilliant engagement with the United States frigate *Chesapeake*, of superior force, off Boston, on the 1st day of June last, when, after a most severe, arduous, and decisive conflict, the enemy were compelled in the short space of fifteen minutes to surrender to His Majesty's ship), been pleased to advance the said Philip Bowes Vere Broke to the dignity of a Baronet of the United Kingdom, by letters patent under the great seal, bearing date the 2d day of November last; and His Royal Highness being desirous of conferring upon the said Mr Philip Bowes Vere Broke such a further mark of His Majesty's royal favour, as may, in an especial manner, evince the sense which he entertains of his able conduct and signal intrepidity, in personally boarding the enemy's ship at the head of his men (on which occasion he was severely wounded), hath given and granted to him His Majesty's royal licence and authority, that he and his descendants may, as a memorial of his highly distinguished conduct and gallantry, bear the crest of honourable augmentation following; that is to say, issuant from a naval crown, a dexter arm, embowed, encircled by a wreath of laurel, the hand grasping a trident erect, together with the motto "Saevumque tridentem servamus;" provided the same be first duly exemplified according to the laws of arms, and recorded in the Heralds' Office : And also to order, that the said royal concession and especial mark of His Majesty's favour, be registered in His College of Arms. [*Gazette* Issue 16852 published 5 February 1814.]