
A Naval Ballad of the War of 1812

From the Toscan Papers in the New Hampshire Historical Society

EDITED BY KENNETH SCOTT

Ye honest tars of Yankee mould,
Whose gallant actions Fame has told!
Permit a brother tar to greet
The Flag of our "Musquito Fleet,"
Which ye have taught to triumph o'er
The Flag that rul'd the waves before!

Our *Constitution* first began
T'assert the equal "Rights of Man."
On that domain where Britain's pride
Those rights to other realms denied;
But Hull soon sent the *Guerriere's* bones
To seek a berth with "Davy Jones,"

Our little *Wasp* of mettle full,
Fear'd not the roaring of A Bull:
And being both alert and brave,
She took a *Frolic* on the wave:
But this so far impair'd her might,
A stronger "foeman" stopt her flight.

A happier victory the fates
Decreed for the *United States*:
Decature on that brilliant day
Might "veni, vidi, vici," say —
For Britain's naval empire shook
When he the *Macedonian* took!

Again the *Constitution* weigh'd,
 To distant realms our stares [*sic!*] display'd,
 And Bainbridge, fierd by manly zeal,
 Made arrogance his prowess feel:
 He ably foil'd his vaunting foe,
 And laid the *Java's* standard low!

And now another insect's name
 By Lawrence is consigned to Fame
 For he has taught our *Hornet's* sting
 To quell a Bird of proudest wing;
 And though the *Peacock* sunk to rest
 Her plumes shall long adorn his crest!

Our Ships are staunch — our Tars are brave
 As ever dared affront the wave
 Who wish when they abroad must roam,
 To bear the peaceful Olive home:
 But if insulting foes they meet,
 With laurels they will load our Fleet.

Superior traits of nautic skill
 Columbia's "Log Book" oft shall fill
 And splic'd to each commander's name;
 His worth this motto shall proclaim:
 "From equal force he'll never fly,
 "But conquer or most nobly die."

The handwriting of the ballad which celebrates the prowess of our navy in the War of 1812 resembles that of Frank Toscan, born at Portsmouth, New Hampshire, in 1795, the eldest son of Jean Toscan, French Vice Consul in Portsmouth, and of Elizabeth Parrott Toscan.¹ As a boy Frank worked on the farm, in 1810 assisted Dr. Goddard in his apothecary shop in Portsmouth, and in 1811-12 made a trip at sea under Captain Flagg.

During the War of 1812 Frank sailed from Portsmouth on 1 May 1814 as a midshipman in the sloop *Wasp*, Captain Johnston Blakely, with a crew of 173, almost exclusively New Englanders. The sloop proceeded to

¹ Cf. a letter written by Frank on 31 January 1812 from Charleston, S. C., to his mother.

the mouth of the English Channel, where for some weeks it wrought havoc with British shipping.

On the morning of 28 June *Wasp* sighted the English vessel *Reindeer*, Captain William Manners. At 3.17 in the afternoon *Reindeer* opened fire at less than sixty yards distance and after an action of twenty-seven minutes struck to *Wasp*. On the following day Captain Blakely burned *Reindeer* and put in at Lorient, France. Among those severely injured were the midshipmen, Henry Sherburne Langdon and Frank Toscan. Each, it is said, was wounded in the chest by a copper bullet. They were attended in the hospital at Lorient by Dr. William Clarke. Eventually they died as a result of their wounds and were buried in the cemetery at Lorient. A sword with gold scabbard was presented to the mother of each of the midshipmen, and Frank Toscan's mother received a pension for life and also, it is reported, some of the money from the prizes taken by *Wasp*.

Wasp departed from Lorient on 27 August 1814, and last was spoken in the South Atlantic on 9 October by the Swedish brig *Adonis*. Thereafter *Wasp* was never heard of again.²

The latest action mentioned in the ballad is that between *Hornet* and *Peacock* on 14 February 1813.³ The engagement between *Wasp* and *Frolic* on 18 October 1812⁴ is referred to, but not that between *Wasp* and *Reindeer*. Were the verses, then, composed after 24 February 1813 and before 28 June 1814, either by Frank Toscan or some other person?⁵ This is, however, impossible if, as would seem to be the case, the two lines,

‘But this so far impair’d her might,
A stronger “foeman” stopt her flight,’

refer to the final loss of *Wasp* at sea at some time after 9 October 1814. If the lines were actually composed after the disappearance of *Wasp*, the handwriting of the copy of the ballad among the Toscan Papers can be that of Frank Toscan only if he lived on at the hospital in Lorient for some considerable time after the month of October 1814.

² On the cruise of *Wasp* cf. Theodore Roosevelt, *The Naval War of 1812* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1897), pp. 321-332. A brief account of Frank Toscan may be found in James A. Spaulding's 'What I know about the Parrotts and Toscan's of Portsmouth, Greenland, Brookfield, Middleton, and Lancaster, all in New Hampshire,' (a typed MS in the New Hampshire Historical Society), pp. 80-82.

³ Cf. Roosevelt, *op. cit.*, pp. 166-167.

⁴ Cf. Roosevelt, *op. cit.*, pp. 100-103.

⁵ Frank may have seen the ballad in print or copied it down from some other source.