

“Precisely Appropriate for the Purpose”: A Hero, a Motto, a Flag, and the American Character

By Zachary Kopin*

When America went to war in 1812, it did so to protect its maritime trade. For the young country, this cause was not new. The international relationships and entanglements of the previous quarter century had, for the most part, been contested on the high seas. The United States fought both the Quasi-War with France (1797–1801) and the war with Tripoli (1801–1805) for the right to sail and trade freely without harassment. From those wars emerged naval heroes, such as Thomas Truxtun, Edward Preble, and Stephen Decatur, whose exploits a patriotic nation would avidly follow in the newspapers.

In 1812 when the United States went to war again in defense of free trade and sailors’ rights, the American people took comfort knowing that their shores would be protected by naval heroes. The naval history of the War of 1812 is usually told as a story of maritime heroics: The successes of the U.S. frigate *Constitution* and the decisive victory of Oliver Hazard Perry on Lake Erie thrilled Americans during a time when the war on land was going poorly. It was the death of one hero, however, that set the tone of American naval exploits during the war. James Lawrence, losing his life in combat, set a standard of sacrifice for the young nation, signifying what it meant to do one’s duty.

Lawrence had served in the United States Navy since the days of the war with Tripoli. His star shone most brightly during the early days of the War of 1812 when, in February 1813, as commander of the U.S. sloop of war *Hornet*, Master Commandant Lawrence captured HMS *Peacock*. Having returned to the United States with his prize, he was promoted to captain and given command of the U.S. frigate *Chesapeake*.

Chesapeake was launched 13 years earlier as one of the original six frigates of the U.S. Navy and carried with it all the prestige and honor due to a capital ship of the American fleet. Yet, misfortune followed in *Chesapeake*’s wake, bringing with it a reputation for bad luck, most notably caused by the *Chesapeake-Leopard* affair of 1807 in which the British Navy crew of HMS *Leopard* boarded *Chesapeake*, with little resistance, and searched her for deserters. It was not only the ship’s ill luck that set it apart, but also its size. Whereas the U.S. Navy’s largest frigates, *Constitution*, *President*, and *United States* rated 44 guns, *Constellation* rated only 36.

When Lawrence sailed *Chesapeake* out of Boston Harbor to meet HMS *Shannon* on 1 June 1813, the two ships were statistically, at least, evenly matched. Like *Chesapeake*, *Shannon* was rated at 36 guns. The British frigate carried a complement of 330 officers and crew, compared with *Chesapeake*’s 379. However, whereas Lawrence commanded men who were mostly new to each other and the ship, Captain Philip Broke’s *Shannon* had been under his command since her launch seven years before. This experience became a deciding factor in the outcome of the engagement.

The combat between the two frigates lasted less than 15 minutes, ending in the capture of *Chesapeake*. The discrepancy in casualties is striking: Against *Shannon*’s 56 wounded and 23 killed stand *Chesapeake*’s 99 wounded and 48 killed, among them Captain Lawrence. Though the loss of sailors and the frigate impaired America’s war effort, what Lawrence reportedly said as he lay mortally wounded in the final moments of the engagement had a more lasting significance. His utterance, “Don’t give up the ship,” has come to represent far more than the last order of a defeated captain.

News of the battle was quick to spread; Lawrence’s phrase, however, traveled more slowly. The first report of the engagement, obtained from observers on shore and at sea, was printed in a Boston newspaper the next day, 2 June 1813.¹ That same day, Captain William Bainbridge, commanding at the Boston Navy Yard, wrote to Secretary of the Navy William Jones recounting the bravery of the men aboard *Chesapeake*. The eyewitness and Bainbridge accounts make no mention

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of Lawrence's uttering the phrase, "Don't give up the ship." This omission, however, is understandable. It would have been impossible for outside observers to know what transpired aboard *Chesapeake* in its entirety, and precise details would remain unknown so long as the surviving crew was held by the British.

This delay, however, could not stop the legend of bravery aboard *Chesapeake* from spreading. By 8 June, Bainbridge's letter to the secretary of the navy was being printed in Washington newspapers and the civilian accounts were being reprinted in New York papers.² The next day, 9 June, Washington's *Daily National Intelligencer* editorialized that "Lawrence and his men were of approved courage" and that they hoped there would be "no lamentations of regret—no lamentations of loss" because of the captain's noble sacrifice.³ This glorification existed before knowledge of Lawrence's words had spread beyond Halifax. Although Lawrence was hailed as a national hero from the time of his death, it would be his defiant phrase that would set him apart from the others.

The first public mention of Lawrence's order appeared on 26 June 1813, when the *Portsmouth* [New Hampshire] *Oracle* printed the letter, dated 19 June, of an American sailor released from captivity in Halifax which reported that, when the wounded Captain Lawrence could speak, he would say "Don't give up the ship."⁴ Following that publication the story spread quickly, enhancing Lawrence's heroic stature. On 3 July, the *National Intelligencer* reported that, "even in his delirium," Lawrence would repeat the phrase, "Don't give up the ship." The reporter judged, "such an exclamation was offspring of true valor, the noblest trait of the soul," and proposed that, "perhaps a stranger and more honorable instance of the prevalence of the ruling passion, to the last, is not to be found."⁵

That the process of linking Lawrence's heroic death with his heroic phrase was a work of time, if even only of a few weeks, is evidenced by an obituary published in New York on 6 July that recounted Lawrence's life and naval exploits without making mention of the phrase.⁶ In short order, however, newspaper editors and politicians would make the man and his phrase inseparable in national consciousness.

During the Independence Day celebrations at the Washington Navy Yard that year, a local politician requested a moment of silence in Lawrence's memory, pledging "his name shall never be forgotten, while departed merit shall shed a tear."⁷ To this politician, the loss of Lawrence was a national tragedy, worth crying over. Lawrence's death was more than another regrettable wartime loss, but rather an example of what, as made evident by its association with the nation's birthday, made America noble. Lawrence was a national hero because he represented something about the national character.

The question of what, exactly, Lawrence represented to the country was answered a week later by Baltimore's *Niles Weekly Register*. In an article entitled "The Eternal Motto of Every American," the paper recounted the engagement between *Chesapeake* and *Shannon*, characterizing the phrase, "Don't Give Up the Ship," as Lawrence's "expiring motto." The article goes on to exclaim that the phrase has "become the watchword of our sailors" and that it should become such for every American.⁸ In this newspaper's version, Lawrence dies before captivity rather than in captivity, in a defiant stand with a last wish for others to take up the banner and continue the fight. Here is where legend displaces fact. Up until this point, Lawrence had merely been a sailor lost at sea, another casualty of war. Now, he becomes a motivator, a martyr for the cause.

Lawrence's martyrdom, however, did come at a price. Not only had the nation lost one of its few and precious frigates, but the capture of the ship's signal book risked the safety of innumerable ships and their crews by enemy deception. This price caused some to see the loss of *Chesapeake* as dangerous and unnecessary and Lawrence as culpable of folly. It would take another naval hero to, quite literally, pick up the phrase "Don't give up the ship" and once and for all cement Lawrence's place in the American pantheon of patriot heroes.

On 19 July 1813, Oliver Hazard Perry, commander of the American naval forces on Lake Erie, received orders from the Navy Department regarding the ship names for his fleet already in construction. One of these ships was to be named in honor of Captain Lawrence and was, as was its namesake's due, to be the flagship. Noting that Perry did not have a motto flag that would motivate his men, one of Perry's staff officers, Purser Samuel Hambleton came forward with a suggestion. In light of the flagship's new name, Hambleton suggested the ship display on a flag Lawrence's motto, "Don't Give Up the Ship," observing in his diary, "These are said to have been the last words of the gallant officer whose name our ship bears. It struck me precisely appropriate for the purpose." The flag gained inspirational effectiveness by bearing the dying words of a naval martyr. In placing this phrase on the flag, Perry and Hambleton consciously created a national relic.⁹

The Battle of Lake Erie, fought on 10 September 1813 and won under the banner carrying Lawrence's immortalized phrase, reinforced Lawrence's legend. On 16 September, just six days after Perry's victory, Washington's *Daily National Intelligencer* reported the return of Lawrence's body for reburial in New York City, referring to the body as a "most sacred relic" because of Lawrence's dying words, here elaborated as "Don't give up the ship boys while my flag still waves." By adding to the phrase reference to the national ensign, the notice implied that Lawrence died for his country. "The dying admonition of the lamented hero," noted the newspaper, "is becoming the watchword of our soldiers and sailors. We trust it will become the watchword of the nation."¹⁰ By winning the Battle of Lake Erie, Perry solidified Lawrence's position as national martyr. The name "Lawrence" became synonymous with the phrase, which also became Lawrence's epitaph,¹¹ that transcended the moment it was uttered and entered the American lexicon of patriotism.

The War of 1812 was the great trauma of America's youth. And like any youthful trauma, its triumphs and travails left an indelible mark on the American memory. Beyond the bombardment of Baltimore and the Battle of New Orleans, these events helped to define the reality of who Americans are in contrast to who they hoped to be, as in the Revolution. The phrase "Don't give up the ship" echoes through the annals of American history not because of the significance of Lawrence's death, or of the loss of *Chesapeake*—both relatively inconsequential to the war's outcomes—but rather because it symbolizes defiance in the face of tremendous adversity. The contemporary press portrayed Lawrence in his death throes in ways that made him seem comparable to Britain's Lord Nelson. Why? Because it allowed Lawrence's death, however insignificant, to become part of a much larger national drama. By placing Lawrence among America's great national martyrs, patriots made Lawrence's story not just one of the loss of a fine officer and a fine ship, but also the story of a nation forging its identity. Lawrence's phrase was, as Purser Hambleton noted, "precisely appropriate for the purpose."

1. *Columbia Centinel*, Boston, 2 June 1813.

2. "Letter to the Secretary of the Navy," *National Intelligencer*, Washington, D.C., 8 June 1813; "Chesapeake and the Shannon," *The War*, New York, 8 June 1813.

3. "Loss of the Chesapeake," *Daily National Intelligencer*, Washington, D.C., 9 June 1813.

4. *Portsmouth Oracle*, Portsmouth, N.H., 26 June 1813.

5. "Don't Give Up the Ship," *National Intelligencer*, 3 July 1813.

6. "Capt. Lawrence," *The War*, New York, 6 July 1813.

7. "Fourth of July Celebrations—Navy Yard," *Daily National Intelligencer*, 7 July 1813.

8. "The Eternal Motto of Every American," *Niles Weekly Register*, Baltimore, Md., 10 July 1813.

9. Samuel Hambleton Diary, 19 and 30 July 1813, MS-983, Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore, Md.

10. "The Return of Lawrence's Remains," *Daily National Intelligencer*, Washington, D.C., 16 Sept. 1813.

11. "Monument to Lawrence at Trinity Church," *Niles Weekly Register*, Baltimore, Md., 11 May 1816.