

# PATRIOTS

## IN HELL

“Their sickly countenances and ghastly looks were truly horrible...Some swearing and blaspheming; some crying, praying and wringing their hands, and stalking about like ghosts; others delirious, raving, and storming; some groaning and dying---all panting for breath; some dead and corrupting—air so foul that at times a lamp could not be kept burning.”

No, it's not an imaginary passage from Dante's *Inferno*; it was the way Robert Scheffield described the world he had just escaped in July of 1778. It was one of more than 16 prison ships that were moored just offshore in Wallabout Bay on New York's East River. We don't know which of these awful ships Scheffield was on, as its name was never mentioned, but we know it wasn't the worst. That distinction would go to a prison ship that would not begin service for another year.

After the fall of New York in 1776 the British found they did not have enough room to hold all of their prisoners, especially with the large numbers of American privateers they were capturing. So they turned to converting some of their aging ships into floating prisons. All of these ships were awful, but the worst of them was the HMS Jersey. Most called the ship “The Old Jersey” but those who were imprisoned there called it “The Hell.” It had started life as a 64-gun ship in 1735, 144 ft long on deck and 41 feet wide. The masts and rigging were cleared away and the ports were made into 20-inch openings with crossed iron bars imbedded. Below decks it was dark, filthy and stagnant. Often there were over 1000 prisoners, mostly privateers, packed into the rotting hull of the Jersey.

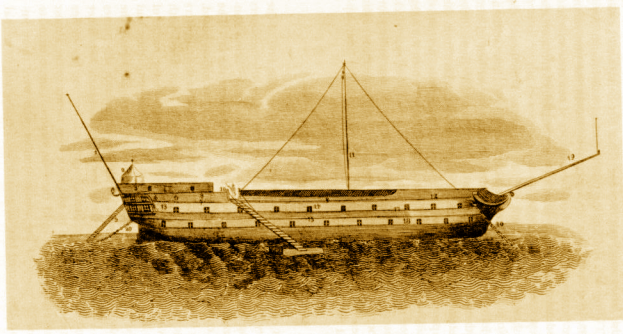
Privateers were really the first American Navy. A fast, privately owned ship would be outfitted with guns and receive a letter of marque from the Continental Congress to intercept and capture British shipping. The Continental Navy had a total of 64

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ships throughout the war; there were close to 1,700 privateers. The Navy captured 196 ships; privateers captured 2,283. A successful cruise on a privateer could make a young man's fortune. Many of the privateer sailors had already served as soldiers in the Army and now wanted to have a chance at profit while they fought for liberty. The rewards were high, but so were the risks. Approximately 50% of the American privateers commissioned were captured. Some prisoners were sent to England, captured Black privateers were often sold into West Indies slavery, but most privateers went to the hated prison ships.



Day began on the Jersey with the guards opening the hatches and calling “Rebels turn out your dead.” Jersey prisoner Christopher Vail wrote, “When a man died he was carried up on the forecastle and laid there until the next morning at 8 o'clock when they were all lowered down the ship sides by a rope round them in the same manner as tho' they were beasts. There was 8 died of a day while I was there. They were carried on shore in heaps and hove out the boat on the wharf, then taken across a hand barrow, carried to the edge of the bank, where a hole was dug 1 or 2 feet deep and all hove in together.” The next part of the morning was spent listening to a British officer, telling them daily that they had been abandoned and left to die by their countrymen. The standing offer made every day was release from their suffering if they would join the British forces. Some, undoubtedly, did take the offer.



5. THE "OLD JERSEY" PRISON SHIP, 1782

We know from records that most would not betray the cause of liberty even as they starved, sickened, and died. At nine o'clock, the cook's bell would ring and the prisoners lined up for their rations. Those charged with providing food to the prisoners were said to have grown rich by starving the living and feeding the dead. These provisioners were paid by the meals they provided and would count dead prisoners as live ones they had fed on their accounts while they would feed the living only a small portion of the food they were supposed to (and usually rotten food at that), getting paid as if they had provided full meals. Water was drawn up from along side the ship and poured into a giant rusted copper pot where the meat was boiled. This description by a prisoner shows how even these terrible conditions were made worse: "The Jersey, from her size, and lying near the shore, was embedded in the mud; and I do not recollect seeing her afloat during the whole time I was a prisoner. All the filth (read sewage) which accumulated among upwards of a thousand men, were daily thrown overboard, and would remain there until carried away by the tide. The impurity of the water may be easily conceived, and in this water our meat was boiled." After food rations came a work party, which allowed some men up onto deck to perform cleaning and maintenance; the majority it seems were kept inside. As the sun went down, those few who had been working on deck faced returning below. By the report of a prisoner named Dring, "The working-party were soon ordered to carry the tubs below, and we prepared to descend to our gloomy and crowded dungeons. This was no sooner done, than the gratings were closed over the hatchways, the sentinels stationed, and we left to sicken and pine beneath our accumulated torments, with our guards above crying aloud, through the long night, 'All's well!'" By all reports the nights were the worst time onboard with no light, foul air and little sleep to be had amidst the sounds of the sick and dying.

On July 4th 1782 the prisoners tried to celebrate their independence as best they could in their condition. Once on deck for their morning indoctrination, the displayed 13 little flags they had made. The flags were immediately torn down and trampled by the guards. Ignoring their captors, the Americans began to sing patriotic songs, give speeches and raise cheers. The guards quickly tired of this and drove the patriots below at the point of bayonets, closing the hatches above them. The singing continued until 9 o'clock at night, when the enraged guards charged below with lanterns and cutlasses. The patriots drew back, but with so many so close they could not move far. The guards fell upon them, mercilessly hacking and slashing at everyone within reach before returning above and locking the hatches. The hatches did not open again until noon the next day. The prisoners had been without water for almost 24 hours, were given small, uncooked rations and found that ten prisoners had been killed with many more badly wounded.

A few prisoners, like Robert Scheffield, mentioned in the beginning of this article escaped from the nightmare of the prison ships. Some prisoners would in time be exchanged or their release bought for them, but of those brought aboard these floating horrors, only one in four would survive. One of the Jersey's prisoners who was exchanged and recaptured a year later said only two or three of those he had been imprisoned with before were still alive when he returned to the Jersey. In fact, more American Patriots died on the prison ships than all the Revolutionary War's battlefield deaths put together. On any day they could have saved themselves by simply entering the service of our enemies. They chose to remain Patriots, even in Hell.