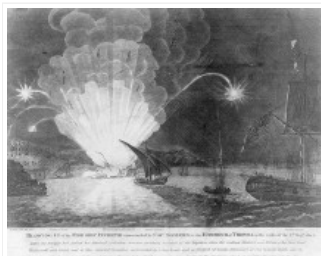


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Efforts to repatriate the crew of the Intrepid accelerate with events in Libya



Written by: [Eric Tegler](#) on June 13, 2011 
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"Blowing Up of the Fire Ship Intrepid Commanded by Capt. Somers in the Harbour of Tripoli on the night of the 4th Sepr. 1804" Contemporary line engraving. Text on the original, below the title line, reads: "Before the Intrepid had gained her Destined situation she was suddenly boarded by 100 Tripolines, when the Gallant Somers and Heroes of his Party, Lieuts. Wadsworth and Israel and 10 Men, observed themselves surrounded by 5 Gun-boats, and no prospect of Escape, determined at once to prefer Death and the Destruction of the Enemy, to Captivity & a torturing Slavery, put a Match to train leading directly to the Magazine, which at once blew the whole into the Air." U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command

"From the Halls of Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli" go the words to the hymn of the U.S. Marine Corps. The shores of Tripoli, Libya, are once again in the news, but there has been almost no reporting of 13 Americans left in mass graves there over two centuries. They are the men of USS *Intrepid*, lost in an action during the Barbary Wars, a conflict which in significant measure gave rise to the United States Navy.

The infamous Barbary Pirates of the North African states of Tripoli, Morocco, Algiers, and Tunis menaced merchant vessels in the Mediterranean during the 18th and 19th centuries, capturing ships, demanding ransom for the return of the vessels and crew and later monetary "tributes" for their safe passage. American merchant ships, under the protection of the Royal Navy until the Revolution, and the French Navy until the Treaty of Paris, became vulnerable in the 1780s. With a nascent U.S. Navy, America paid the Barbary tributes until Thomas Jefferson reversed the policy in 1803, ordering a "squadron of observation" to protect American shipping off Tunis, Tripoli and Algiers.

Commodore Edward Preble ordered the schooner *Vixen* and frigate *Philadelphia* to blockade the harbor at Tripoli. While chasing a Tripolitan vessel *Philadelphia* ran aground and was captured, its commander, William Bainbridge, and crew taken prisoner. To prevent the *Philadelphia*'s usage in Tripolitan hands, Lt. Stephen Decatur undertook a daring raid in February 1804. Posing as pirates using a captured Tripolitan vessel, *Intrepid*, Decatur and a crew of 80 managed to moor next to *Philadelphia*, surprise its Tripolitan crew, set it ablaze and return to *Intrepid*.

Decatur's success inspired another raid to destroy Tripolitan gunboats and influence the release of *Philadelphia*'s prisoners. On the night of Sept. 3, 1804, Capt. Richard Somers and a crew of 12 took *Intrepid*, loaded with seven tons of explosives, into the harbor, planning to ground her below the city, light fuses and get away. Instead, the vessel was detected by Tripolitans, fired on, and blown up, killing its commander and crew.

Their remains washed ashore and the Tripolitan Pasha (king) Yusuf Karamanli reportedly ordered their corpses dragged through the streets then fed to a pack of wild dogs while prisoners of war from *Philadelphia* were forced to watch. The remains of the crew, which included second-in-command Lt. Henry Wadsworth, uncle of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, were then dumped into a pit on the beach.

"That's where they laid until the middle of the 20th century, when a few were moved into a Protestant cemetery," Michael Caputo says. "Why, we don't know, but only five of the 13 were moved to the cemetery a



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stone's throw from where the original grave site is."

Caputo has been involved in the Intrepid Project (Intrepidproject.org) since 2004 when he first heard the story of the ill-fated mission while on business in Somers Point, N.J. The town is named for the for the *Intrepid* captain's father, a Revolutionary war colonel who served with George Washington.

The Somers family petitioned for the repatriation of the *Intrepid* crew immediately following the Barbary Wars and for two centuries thereafter. However they were repeatedly denied by the State Department and the Navy, which has a tradition of leaving the fallen where they lie, as evidenced by the *USS Arizona* and the beaches of Normandy.

"Of course none of those men were paraded through the streets, fed to wild dogs and then buried in a mass grave," Caputo points out.

An article written on the *Intrepid* in the 1970s for *The American Legion* magazine revived the repatriation effort, with the city of Somers Point joining, but no progress was made. Upon getting involved in 2004, Caputo suggested a different strategy.

"I said, make this a family-to-family negotiation. Contact the Gaddafi family as the Somers family and say, 'We want our men back. We did that and we met with immediate success.'"

Negotiations with the Gaddafi Family Foundation and Saif-al Islam Gaddafi progressed to the point where Libyan archaeologists, previously unaware of the original beach grave site, dug there and confirmed the remains via bone and brass button evidence.

Just as Caputo and Somers family members were about to board airliners for Tripoli in 2007, Israel went into Lebanon, and the negotiations were put on hold and subsequently lost momentum, in part due to unexplained opposition from the U.S. State Department.

On March 10 of this year, the Intrepid group received a phone call from Congressman Mike Rogers-R Michigan, chair of the House Intelligence Committee. Rogers had been in Libya in 2004 as an Intel committee member and was pulled aside at an embassy function in Tripoli and told of a small military party buried in the Protestant Cemetery. He visited it and became devoted to returning the men.

Rogers met with the Somers family and Somers Point civic representatives in April and introduced an amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act (HR 1497) ordering the repatriation of the *Intrepid* crew. The NDAA and the Rogers amendment passed on Thursday, May 26, and the full bill is now before the Senate.

"This amendment has brought these gentlemen closer to their home than [they] have been in 207 years," Michale Caputo says, although with some reservation.

He does so because the Senate is known for stripping amendments from NDAA for later negotiation or dismissal. The *Intrepid* amendment is thus in jeopardy. The American Legion and the Henry Wadsworth Longfellow Estate have joined the Intrepid Project, urging members to contact senators to champion the amendment. The Intrepid Project is committed to raising private funds for the repatriation which could go forward when hostilities in Libya cease. The Senate will act on the NDAA in mid June.

"When these hostilities cease we will have a window of opportunity to repatriate these remains," Caputo observes. "We know exactly where they are. But we believe that window may be brief. That's why passing the bill now and waiting for a cessation of hostilities is extremely important."

"Burning of the Frigate Philadelphia in the Harbor of Tripoli, February 16, 1804" Oil on canvas, 60" by 42", by Edward Moran (1829-1901), signed and dated by the artist, 1897. It depicts USS Philadelphia, previously captured by the Tripolitans, ablaze after she was boarded and set afire by a party from the ketch Intrepid led by Lt. Stephen Decatur. Painting in the U.S. Naval Academy Museum Collection. Gift of Paul E. Sutro, 1940. U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command photo

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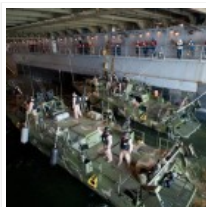
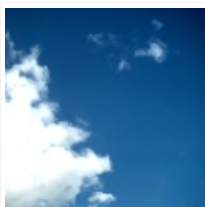
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