



The Privateer Yankee in the War of 1812

BY KENNETH SCOTT

ELEVEN days after war was declared on 19 June 1812, James De Wolf,¹ leading merchant of Bristol, Rhode Island, a prosperous seaport of some 2,800 souls, wrote a letter to the Secretary of War. He set forth that he had purchased an armed brigantine, built at Haddam, Connecticut,² of 160 tons burden, 18 guns, crew of 120, called *Yankee*, commanded by Oliver Wilson, then twenty-six years of age. De Wolf owned three quarters of the ship and John Smith one quarter. It was requested that the brigantine be granted a commission as privateer, and this was issued 13 July 1812.

According to the articles of agreement, the owners were to receive one half of the net proceeds of prizes taken, while the other half was to go to the ship's company. Captain Wilson was to obtain sixteen shares, the first lieutenant, Manly Sweet, nine shares, the second and third lieutenants, James Usher, 2nd, and Thomas H. Russell, and the surgeon eight shares each, prize masters, master's mate and captain of marines six shares each, carpenter, boatswain and gunner, four shares each, boatswain's mates two and a half shares each, while the residue was to be divided in equal shares, except that landsmen and raw hands were to draw one and a half shares each. Further, ten shares were reserved for the captain to be distributed by him to persons he deemed especially deserving.

Yankee, with a crew of 115, departed from Bristol 12 July and made for the coast of Nova Scotia. The log of this cruise, which lasted until 30 August, was kept by the master's mate, Johannes Forsberg, and in December 1883, was obtained, along with other documents concerning

¹ De Wolf, born Bristol, Rhode Island, 18 March 1764, had accumulated a considerable fortune by the age of twenty-five. He was active in the slave trade. In 1821 he was elected to the United States Senate, built a cotton factory, and died in New York City 21 December 1837 (see Wilfred Harold Munro, *Tales of an Old Sea Port* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1917], pp. 205-224).

² Some months before James De Wolf had found a little brigantine, built at Haddam, Connecticut (Wilfred H. Munro, *The History of Bristol, R. I.* [Providence: J. A. and R. A. Reid, 1880], p. 303).

Forsberg, by the Redwood Library in Newport, Rhode Island, as a bequest from Joseph J. Cook.³

Forsberg, a native of Gotenberg, Sweden,⁴ born about 1779, was about five feet six inches in height, light complexioned and marked with a scar on his left wrist. On 28 April 1811, at Portsmouth, Rhode Island, he married Frances Allen, daughter of Rowland Allen.⁵ At a court of Common Pleas of Newport County, held 18 May 1812, Forsberg had been made a citizen of the United States,⁶ and soon after he signed up for the first cruise of the privateer. His log, in addition to detailed notices about wind, weather, and supplies, affords the following account:

Yankee left Bristol Harbor at eleven in the morning of Sunday, 12 July, and three hours later anchored off the North Buoy abreast of the town of Newport, where a barrel of rum was broached. Monday and Tuesday the hands were employed at the rigging in preparation for the voyage and at six on Wednesday morning the brig got under way, at eight weathered Brenton's Reef and then bore away for the Vineyard, coming to at 2:00 P.M. at Holmes Hole. There the first lieutenant and master's mate went to Falmouth to do some recruiting. During their absence the vessel weighed anchor on Thursday at 6:00 A.M. for Falmouth and came to in the harbor at eight. At three that afternoon the two recruiting officers came on board, whereupon two guns were gotten off deck into the hold, and the crew was busied at the rigging and in making wads for the great guns.

At one o'clock on Friday afternoon *Yankee* set sail and at four the pilot left her. When at five the next morning a sail was sighted, it was chased until 10:00 A.M., when it was spoken and allowed to pass as it was American. For some days this pattern prevailed; a ship pursued three hours on the morning of the nineteenth proved to be American, *Tarn*, bound from Cadiz to New York, while the next day a schooner that was chased and boarded was also found to be American, *Trafalgar*, Captain Richards, likewise from Cadiz to New York.

After exercise of the great guns and small arms on Tuesday, the twenty-

³ The log and documents are used in this paper through the kind permission of the Directors of the Redwood Library. They are catalogued in that library as M6 / F7714A, and photostatic copies of all have been deposited with the New-York Historical Society.

⁴ See a certificate (in Redwood Library) given by Joseph Winthrop, Swedish Vice-Consul in Charleston, South Carolina, 11 November 1801, attesting that Forsberg was a subject of the King of Sweden and therefore not liable to be impressed into the service of any other power.

⁵ James N. Arnold, *Vital Records of Rhode Island* (Providence: Narragansett Historical Publishing Co., 1893), 4, p. 23.

⁶ Certificate of naturalization (in Redwood Library) dated 29 June 1812, and signed by Robert Rogers, Clerk of the Court.

first, a sail was sighted to the northward but, when overhauled, was discovered to be a Halifax schooner, prize to the American privateer *Buckskin* of Salem. The next five days were equally frustrating; a ship overtaken early on the twenty-second was the privateer *Regulator* of Salem, while a vessel overhauled some hours later was the brig *Jane* bound from Ireland to Boston; on the twenty-third a sail was sighted to eastward and chased without result; the next day *Yankee* spoke first an American vessel bound from Liverpool to Boston, then an American brig from Liverpool to Salem and after that *William and Martha* from Liverpool bound to the Amelia Islands; a further sail that was pursued was found to be an American privateer. On the twenty-fifth and twenty-sixth high seas were encountered but no ships overhauled.

On Monday, 27 July, *Yankee's* luck changed, for a brig that was sighted at 8:00 A.M. and overtaken at noon, with use of the sweeps, turned out to be the English vessel *Alfred*, James Trueman captain; she had sailed from 'Tenmouth' [Tynemouth?] bound for New Brunswick. After the most valuable materials, the water and provisions, had been removed, the prize was set on fire and *Yankee* sailed in pursuit of another ship. This was lost in a fog, and the whole of the following day the fog remained so thick that one could not see the length of the vessel.

On Wednesday, however, two English brigs, bound for Quebec, were sighted and captured, *Harmony*, William Gammel master, 257 $\frac{3}{4}$ tons burden, and *Henry*, Mathew Glover master. These were at once manned and sent off as prizes to the nearest American ports. Another sail was presently sighted and during the chase Cape St. Mary, Newfoundland, was seen at noon. On Thursday, 30 July, *Yankee* came up with her quarry, the brig *Mary*, 208 tons burden, from England in ballast, bound to Newfoundland. As this prize was of little value and as the American privateer now had on board four captains and forty-three seamen prisoners, Captain Wilson, with the consent of his officers and crew, presented the brig to his prisoners, binding them on oath not to serve against the United States until exchanged and not to touch any port of North America but to proceed directly to the Firth of Clyde in Scotland.

Friday *Yankee* chased a vessel to the northward, lost her during the night but later sighted two ships and also Cape St. Mary. The pursuit of one of the ships continued until Saturday, 1 August, when the ship showed English colors and engaged *Yankee* for about thirty minutes before striking her colors. At 4:00 P.M. *Yankee* took possession of the prize, *Royal Bounty*, Henry Gamble master, 600 tons burden, with ten guns and twenty-five men, bound from Hull to Quebec in ballast. On the

English ship the captain, both mates and the cook were wounded and one man was killed, while the privateer had two men wounded and suffered some damage to the rigging.

Despite this setback, *Yankee*, in company with her prize, stood north-west in pursuit of a brig. When they came up with her, she was found deserted by the crew, who had taken her boat and fled to the shore. As the brig was loaded with coal and was of no considerable value, she was set afire, as was *Royal Bounty*, after the most valuable articles had been removed. The British prisoners were given the ship's longboat in which to go ashore, but six who were Americans and Portuguese were joined to *Yankee's* crew.⁷

The following day, Sunday, 2 August, was uneventful except for the sighting of a large island of ice to the northward. Monday the crew was set to repairing the rigging damaged in the recent action and the ship passed close to Cape Race and ran into windy, foggy weather which continued until 6 August, when a sail was sighted to the east. *Yankee*, with all sail set and using the sweeps, made immediate pursuit and at noon, when the weather cleared, the vessel was seen to be three miles ahead. The next day, the seventh, at 2:00 P.M. the privateer came up with *Eliza Ann*, Joseph Eldrige master, an American ship loaded with English goods and bound from Liverpool to Baltimore. Her crew was taken on board *Yankee*, while a prize master and eight seamen were put aboard the ship with orders to take her to Bristol, Rhode Island.

Soon another sail, sighted to the eastward and pursued for hours, was finally spoken and proved to be a Portuguese ship on its way from Philadelphia to Oporto.

Saturday, the eighth, might well have proved disastrous for the privateer, for after pursuing one sail to no avail, *Yankee* sighted another to

⁷ Wilfred H. Munro, *The History of Bristol, R. I.*, 'On the first of August, 1812, the Yankee was cruising off the coast of Nova Scotia. At noon she saw a large ship on the lee bow, four miles distant, made all sail and prepared for action. The privateer, being to windward, ran down on *Royal Bounty's* weather quarter and gave her the first division; soon, as she doubled on the enemy, the whole broadside. The ship returned the compliment, and the action continued with spirit on both sides. The two vessels being near, the Yankee's marines kept up a continual fire, very destructive to the *Royal Bounty*. The Yankee's shot cut her sails and rigging to pieces and killed her helmsman. A few moments after, the ship became unmanageable. The Yankee then ran off a short distance and luffed to, athwart the bows of the *Royal Bounty*, gave a raking broadside, and at the same time poured in a constant shower of musketry which soon compelled the enemy to strike her colors. The ship proved to be the *Royal Bounty*, Captain Henry Gambles. She was a fine ship of 658 tons, mounting 10 guns, carrying 25 men, from Hull in ballast, seven weeks out for Prince Edward's Island. The privateer took out the prisoners and manned the prize for the United States. The Yankee had three wounded and her sails and rigging somewhat damaged. The *Royal Bounty* had two men killed, the Captain and six officers and seamen wounded. The action lasted one hour. The ship was terribly cut up in sails and rigging and all its boats were stove. More than one hundred and fifty shots passed through the sails or lodged in the hull and spars. The wounded prisoners were carefully attended by the Yankee's surgeon.'

the eastward and presently four more ahead. An hour's chase revealed them to be four British frigates and a ship of the line, so the privateer put about and was hotly pursued for two hours by two of the frigates, which, however, finally gave up.

Sunday was uneventful but on Monday, the tenth, a sail was sighted to the eastward and two hours later another appeared to the northwestward. *Yankee* gave chase to the second vessel, brought her to and found her to be the British brig *New Liverpool* of Quebec, 151 tons burden, James Ritchie master, loaded with wine, last from Gibraltar and bound for Quebec. The crew was taken out of the prize, and *New Liverpool* was sent to Bristol, Rhode Island, with a prize master and eight seamen aboard. *Yankee* then set out after a sail to the eastward but lost her during the night.

The next day, Tuesday, the privateer, using the sweeps, went after a sail which proved to be the brig *Rebecca Ann*, bound from London and loaded with dry goods. Unfortunately, she had been captured two days before by an American privateer from Baltimore and was proceeding to Boston, so *Yankee* let her pass and quickly engaged in pursuit of another ship which, however, managed to get clear off.

On the twelfth, thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth no ships were sighted and the same was true of the sixteenth, when the crew exercised the great guns and small arms. The next day, however, a ship appeared, but a heavy blow compelled the privateer to take in sail and abandon the chase.

On the morning of the eighteenth sails were sighted to the northwest, apparently frigates in pursuit of *Yankee*, about seven leagues away. The frigates followed, slowly reducing the distance, until the night of the nineteenth, when they disappeared. The next day no frigates were in sight. On the twentieth *Yankee* pursued a sail but, finding it to be a ship of war, gave up the chase, and for the next five days saw no vessels.

On the twenty-sixth the privateer fired at a schooner that refused to show her colors but she got away during the night. The following day *Yankee* chased and brought to a schooner, which proved to be the American ship *Ann* of New London, Captain King, bound from Cadiz to her home port. Before long *Yankee* again found herself being pursued, this time by five ships. On the twenty-eighth they had apparently given up, and the privateer chased and overhauled a ship, which turned out to be an American vessel in ballast homeward bound from Cadiz.

On Saturday, the twenty-ninth, *Yankee* had better luck, for, when she overtook a sail, it proved to be the American ship *Francis*, Captain Boyer,

of New Orleans, last from Liverpool, England, with a valuable cargo, bound to New York. As she had an English licence, Mr. Eldridge was put on her as prize master, and the two ships set sail for Bristol, Rhode Island. At six o'clock on Sunday morning No Man's Land was sighted and later in the morning, after speaking a sloop bound from New York to Nantucket, *Yankee*, accompanied by her prize, passed Newport. The privateer, after firing a salute of seven guns, which was returned by the fort with five, made for Bristol and anchored abreast of the town at about five in the afternoon.

Most American privateers were lucky to break even but not so *Yankee*. The cargo of its last prize, *Francis*, netted more than \$200,000 and the first cruise paid for the brigantine several times over and resulted in a dividend of more than \$700 per share.⁸

An enormous sum in prize money was suddenly brought into Bristol. Forsberg on 5 November 1812, purchased for \$700 an acre of land in Portsmouth, Rhode Island, from John Allen, yeoman, to whom on the same date he deeded two lots in the same town. Forsberg never again sailed on *Yankee* but early in 1813 as master took the sloop *Cosmopolite*, 60 tons, no guns, navigated by six men, Swedish built and sailing under Swedish colors, to Port Royal on the island of Martinique, with the following cargo: 4,000 hoops, 28 barrels of flour, 150 bushels of corn, 7,000 feet of white pine boards, 160 shooks, 2,000 white oak staves, 600 red oak staves, 700 bunches of onions, three hogsheads and two barrels of potatoes and 400 pounds of cheese. On 28 May Governor Charles Wale granted permission for Forsberg to land his cargo at Port Royal, subject to duty, and on the return trip to Rhode Island *Cosmopolite* cleared customs at Port Royal 23 June 1813, with a cargo of 95 hogsheads, nine tierces and 29 barrels of molasses, and one puncheon of rum.⁹ Very likely Forsberg was working for one of the two owners of *Yankee*. In any event, 28 February 1818, John Smith, owner of the brig *Toadfish*, wrote orders to Captain Forsberg to load the ship, then in the harbor of Providence, with molasses and proceed with vessel and cargo to Bristol, Rhode Island.¹⁰ It would appear that Forsberg was ailing from August 1844 to 9 December 1850, when he probably died.¹¹

⁸ Wilfred Harold Munro, 'The Most Successful American Privateer,' *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, N.S. 23 (1913), pp. 12-60. Munro's article has also supplied data on the owners, crew and articles of agreement.

⁹ License granted by Governor Wale and general clearance certificate of customs at Port Royal (both mss. in Redwood Library).

¹⁰ Letter in Redwood Library.

¹¹ Bill paid by Mrs. Forsberg 28 January 1853, to the estate of Dr. Keith (ms. in the Redwood Library).

Yankee, on her second cruise, which began 15 October 1812, and lasted until 12 March 1813, had orders to scour the west coast of Africa and return in the track of vessels bound for Europe from Brazil and the West Indies. Although less profitable than the first, it resulted in a dividend of \$338.40 for each share.¹² The third voyage, beginning 10 May 1813, and lasting three months, was even less fortunate. Seven prizes, however, were taken, one of which, *Thames*, with 287 bales of cotton aboard, was sold with its cargo for \$110,000, and each share paid \$173.54. A fourth voyage, on the track of homeward-bound vessels near the Grand Banks, netted only two prizes and yielded a dividend of but \$17.29 per share. It seemed that the privateer's luck was running out, so there was little interest in shipping on the fifth cruise, on which, indeed, a British man-of-war drove the privateer into the port of New Bedford, where most of *Yankee's* crew deserted. Only eight prizes were taken, all of which were retaken by the British except for *San Jose Indiano*, a full-rigged ship, that safely reached Portland, Maine, where it was sold for more than half a million dollars, so that the owners' share was \$233,313, while Captain Smith received more than \$15,000. A diary of this cruise was kept by the surgeon, Dr. Joseph Lowe Stevens.¹³

The sixth and last cruise of *Yankee*, which sailed from Bristol on 30 September 1814, lasted 105 days. Five prizes were taken, one of which, the brig *Courtney*, was sold with its cargo for \$70,000. Another, *General Wellesley*, an East Indian teak-built ship of 600 tons, 16 guns, and crew of 86, was estimated to be worth \$200,000. She was sent to Charleston, South Carolina, with James M. Blinn as prize master, but unhappily grounded on Charleston Bar. Despite this loss, the daring privateer had captured British property in excess of five million dollars and brought to the little town of Bristol a million dollars profit from the six cruises.¹⁴

¹² A journal was kept by Noah Jones, captain's clerk, and was published by Wilfred Harold Munro in *Tales of an Old Sea Port*.

¹³ See Wilfred Harold Munro, 'The Fifth Cruise of the Privateer Yankee,' *R. I. Historical Society Collections* 12 (1919), pp. 76-83 and 'More Tales from Bristol,' *R. I. Historical Collections* 11 (1918), pp. 114-115.

¹⁴ Wilfred H. Munro, 'The Last Cruise of the Privateer Yankee,' *R. I. Historical Society Collections* 13 (1920), pp. 66-68, and 'The Most Successful American Privateer,' *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, N.S., 23 (1913), pp. 12-62.

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