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The Ghost Ship of Brooklyn: An Untold Story of the American Revolution

Robert P. Watson. Boston, MA: DaCapo, 2017. 304 pp. Illus. Index. $28.

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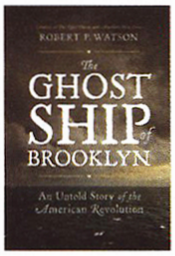

The Ghost Ship of Brooklyn is not for the faint of heart, but it *is* a book for those willing to examine a less familiar and viscerally unpleasant—but important—phase of America's War of Independence.

This disquieting narrative illuminates the horrific British treatment of prisoners of war during the Revolution. In the process, it also tells the story of the former HMS *Jersey*, one of the hulks used to house American POWs during that conflict.

Author Robert Watson doesn't pull punches, and at the beginning of his narrative he warns that at the heart of his story the reader will encounter POW abuses of the worst sort. Overcrowding, beatings, rotten food, rampant disease, vermin infestations, nauseating lack of sanitation, and psychological torture were part of the suffering heaped on soldiers and sailors incarcerated in the prison ships anchored in New York City's harbor. As a result of the horrific conditions, an estimated 13,000 U.S. prisoners of war died in New York's "Hell ships," about three times the number of casualties suffered by the colonials in combat.

Early in its narrative, *The Ghost Ship of Brooklyn* illuminates a basic reason for British use of the loathsome prison ships. In New York City, the center of British colonial activity during the Revolutionary War, there were not enough large buildings to house the American soldiers and sailors captured during the conflict. There were only two jails in the city, and rapid growth, plus a great fire that destroyed approximately a third of the city, contributed to the shortage of large structures adaptable for use as military prisons.

As a result, the British used naval hulks to house the fast-rising population of Revolutionary War POWs. The former HMS *Jersey*, which served as a 60-gun warship during the War of Jenkins' Ear, was anchored in New York City's Wallabout Bay, now a part of Brooklyn, along with approximately 15 other prison hulks. The *Jersey* became the foremost of the nefarious floating dungeons, and she is a focus of Watson's book.

Apart from the practical factor of a building shortage, additional reasons are advanced by Watson for British use of floating hulks for war prisons. One was the reality that roughly half of the American colonies' population considered those fighting for independence to be traitors to their country, as did the British colonial government in New York and the British government in London.

Thus, those deemed to be traitors were beyond the established British codes of warfare, and that included the treatment of prisoners of war. The colonials' use of civilian privateers to attack Britain's seagoing commerce and the colonials' reliance on militia forces that frequently fought more like guerrillas than professional soldiers trained to meet their opponents in "the field of battle" reinforced the British belief that they had license for prisoner of war abuse.

The third reason for the use of hulks as POW prisons was the belief by the British military in the United States—led by General William Howe—along with their government leaders in London, that the horrors of the hulks would be a psychological factor in defeating their American adversaries.

That belief in the effectiveness of the prison ships as a military deterrent turned out to be only one of several strategic misconceptions on the part of King George and his Whitehall counselors who were significant determinants in the outcome of the Revolution.

At several points Watson indicates that the terrible treatment of the colonial POWs actually provided additional motivation for the American patriots, who were convinced they were acting on British principles of liberty established at Runnymede in 1215 in the Magna Carta.

The Ghost Ship of Brooklyn provides significant food for thought about our own times, and how treatment of prisoners of war can have significant unintended consequences.

Rear Admiral Callo wrote the award-winning biography *John Paul Jones: America's First Sea Warrior* (Naval Institute Press, 2006). His latest book is his memoir *The Sea Was Always There* (Fireship Press, 2012). He also wrote three books about the Royal Navy's Vice Admiral Lord Horatio Nelson.