

= Action of 1 August 1801 =

The Action of 1 August 1801 was a single @-@ ship action of the First Barbary War fought between the American schooner USS Enterprise and the Tripolitan polacca Tripoli off the coast of modern @-@ day Libya .

As part of Commodore Richard Dale 's Mediterranean Squadron , Enterprise had been deployed with the American force blockading the Vilayet of Tripoli . Enterprise , under the command of Lieutenant Andrew Sterett , had been sent by Commodore Dale to gather supplies at Malta . While cruising towards Malta , Enterprise engaged Tripoli , commanded by Admiral Rais Mahomet Rous . Tripoli put up a stubborn fight , and the engagement lasted for three hours before the polacca was finally captured by the Americans .

Although the Americans had taken the vessel , Sterett had no orders to take prizes and so was obliged to release her . Enterprise completed her journey to Malta , and received honor and praise from the squadron 's Commodore on her return to the fleet . The success of the battle boosted morale in the United States , since it was that country 's first victory in the war against the Tripolitans . The opposite occurred in Tripoli , where morale sank heavily upon learning of Tripoli 's defeat . Despite Enterprise 's triumph , the war continued indecisively for another four years .

= = Background = =

Following the recognition of the independence of the United States ( US ) in 1783 , the new country 's early administrations had elected to make tribute payments to the Vilayet of Tripoli to protect American commercial shipping interests in the Mediterranean Sea . Tripoli , nominally a subject of the Ottoman Empire , was practically autonomous in conducting her foreign affairs , and would declare war on non @-@ Muslim states whose ships sailed in the Mediterranean in order to extract tribute from them . In 1801 , the payments demanded by Tripoli from the United States were significantly increased . The newly elected administration of Thomas Jefferson , an opponent of the tribute payments from their inception , refused to pay . As a result , Tripoli declared war on the United States , and its navy began to seize American ships and crews in an attempt to coerce the Jefferson administration into acceding to their demands . When word of these attacks on American merchantmen reached Washington , D.C. , the Jefferson administration gave the United States Navy the authority to conduct limited operations against Tripoli . As part of the American strategy , a squadron under Commodore Richard Dale was dispatched to blockade Tripoli .

By July 1801 , Dale 's force had begun to run low on water . In order to replenish his supplies , Dale dispatched the schooner USS Enterprise , commanded by Lieutenant Andrew Sterett , to provision at the British naval base on Malta , while the commodore himself remained off Tripoli with the frigate USS President to maintain the blockade . Soon after leaving the blockade , Enterprise came upon what appeared to be a Tripolitan cruiser sailing near her . Flying British colors as a ruse , Enterprise approached the Tripolitan vessel and hailed her . The Tripolitan answered that she was seeking American vessels . At this Enterprise struck the British colors , raised the American flag , and prepared for action .

The Tripolitan vessel , Tripoli , and Enterprise were quite evenly matched . Enterprise , with a complement of 90 , was a 12 @-@ gun , 135 @-@ ton schooner built in 1799 that had seen action in the Quasi @-@ War . In contrast , Tripoli , a lateen @-@ rigged polacca with two masts , was crewed by 80 men under Admiral Rais Mahomet Rous and armed with 14 guns . Although the Tripolitans held a slight advantage in firepower , Enterprise had to its advantage the larger crew and the element of surprise . The Americans were also significantly more experienced in gunnery action than the Tripolitans , who preferred to attack by boarding and taking over their opponents ' ships .

= = Battle = =

Shortly after Sterett had the American colors raised , he had his men open fire upon the Tripolitans at close range with muskets . In response , Tripoli returned fire with an ineffective broadside . The

Americans returned fire with their own broadsides , which led Rous to break off the engagement and attempt to flee . Neither able to fight off the American vessel nor outrun her , the Tripolitans attempted to grapple Enterprise and board her . Once within musket range , Enterprise 's marines opened fire on the Tripoli , foiling its boarding attempt , and forced Tripoli to try to break away once more . Enterprise continued the engagement , firing more broadsides into the Tripolitan and blasting a hole in her hull .

Severely damaged , Tripoli struck her colors to indicate surrender . As Enterprise moved towards the vessel to accept its surrender , the Tripolitans hoisted their flag and fired upon Enterprise . The Tripolitans again attempted to board the American schooner , but were repelled by Enterprise 's broadsides and musketry . After another exchange of fire , the Tripolitans struck their colors a second time . Sterett once more ceased firing and moved closer to Tripoli . In response , Rous again raised his colors and attempted to board Enterprise . Enterprise 's accurate gunnery once more forced Tripoli to veer off . As the action continued , Rous perfidiously feigned a third surrender in an attempt to draw the American schooner within grappling range . This time , Sterett kept his distance , and ordered Enterprise 's guns to be lowered to aim at the polacca 's waterline , a tactic that threatened to sink the enemy ship . The next American broadsides struck their target , causing massive damage , dismasting her mizzen @-@ mast , and reducing her to a sinking condition . With most of his crew dead or wounded , the injured Admiral Rous finally threw the Tripolitan flag into the sea to convince Sterett to end the action .

= = Aftermath = =

At the end of the action Tripoli was severely damaged ; 30 of her crew were dead and another 30 were injured . The polacca 's first lieutenant was among the casualties and Admiral Rous himself was injured in the fighting . In what amounted to a total American victory over the Tripolitans , Enterprise had suffered only superficial damage and no casualties . Sterett , whose orders did not give him the authority to retain prizes , let the polacca limp back to Tripoli . However , before setting her free , the Americans cut down Tripoli 's masts and sufficiently disabled her so that she could barely make sail . Sterett then continued his journey to Malta and picked up the supplies for which he was sent before returning to the blockade .

After Enterprise left , Tripoli began its journey back to the port of Tripoli . On the way it ran into USS President and asked for assistance ; Rous falsely claimed that his vessel was Tunisian and that it had been damaged in an engagement with a French 22 @-@ gun vessel . Dale suspected the vessel 's true identity and merely provided Rous with a compass so he could find his way back to port . When he finally arrived at Tripoli , Rous was severely chastised by Yusuf Karamanli , the Pasha ( ruler ) of Tripoli . Stripped of his command , he was paraded through the streets draped in sheep 's entrails while seated backwards on a jackass before suffering 500 bastinadoes .

Enterprise 's victory over Tripoli had very different consequences for the two nations involved . In Tripoli , the defeat , combined with severity of the Rous ' punishment , severely hurt morale throughout the city , and led to significant reductions in recruitment for ships ' crews . In the United States , the exact opposite occurred , with wild publicity surrounding the arrival of news that the Americans had won their first victory over the Tripolitans . The American government gave a month 's pay as a bonus to each of Enterprise 's crew members , and honored Sterett by granting him a sword and calling for his promotion . Fanciful plays were written about the victorious Americans , and morale and enthusiasm about the war reached a high point . The victory did not have any long @-@ term consequences in the conduct of the war , however . Dale 's blockade of Tripoli was ineffective in preventing ships from entering and leaving the port , and was equally ineffective in altering the Pasha 's diplomatic stance toward the Americans . Dale 's squadron was relieved in 1802 by another under Richard Morris , and the war continued until 1805 .