

Privateering in the American Revolution

Compatriot Peddie portrayed, in character, Captain Jonathan Haraden of the Privateer Ship the General Pickering. He discussed the impact of Privateers and the sacrifices made by the sailors on these ships. Privateers were a major factor, since at the beginning of the war, there were few US vessels. In October, 1775, Congress voted to equip 7 ships to support General Washington. By 1777, there were still only 34 American cruisers. So, the United States depended on some state, and primarily civilian (privateers) ships to counter England's vast navy which effectively controlled the seas. Privateers operated under the authority of a Letter of Marque, which distinguished them from Pirates, allowing them to seize ships and shipments, greatly disrupting red coat supply shipments from England to the benefit of the American land fighting forces. The United States started issuing letters of marque in 1776 (prior issue was by states). 1,700 letters were issued during the Revolutionary War. Each letter was tailored to a specific ship only for attack on ships of one nation (in this case, England). United States privateers in the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812 fielded some 2,000 ships, and 17,000 men. They interdicted 16 British warships and 2,980 merchant vessels. More importantly, the material captured was subsequently used by United States forces. Since privateers were required to bring their prizes to their home port, it was a very lucrative business for communities, as well as owners/crews. For example, "Yankee" out of Boston took \$40 million in prizes. Most captured ships were recycled as privateers. Even Benjamin Franklin was involved. His 3 ships, "Black Prince", "Black Princess", and "Fear Naught" took 114 prizes. Thus, with the minimal U.S. Navy, privateers played a crucial role in the Revolutionary War. Privateer losses (deaths) at sea numbered over 13,000, greatly dwarfing the deaths due to land battles which were just over 4,000.