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Black Sailors and Soldiers in the War of 1812

In 1813 Charles Ball, an escaped slave and self-declared “free man of color,” had a choice. He could row out to the British fleet moored in the Chesapeake Bay and offer his services to the King, or he could volunteer for the fledgling American navy and defend his country. Ball, whose dramatic bid for freedom is chronicled in *The Life of Charles Ball, A Black Man*, chose the latter and he was not alone.

Black Sailors during the War When Ball enlisted, African Americans made up at least fifteen percent of U.S. naval corps. Although official U.S. policy at the start of the war forbade the recruitment of black sailors, a chronic shortage of manpower compelled the navy to accept any able-bodied man. These black sailors had a reputation for fierceness in battle. When Captain Oliver Hazard Perry complained about having blacks on his ship, Commodore Isaac Chauncey replied, “I have nearly fifty blacks on this boat and many of them are among the best of my men.” Perry soon had the chance to test Chauncey’s recommendation. At the Battle of Lake Erie, where Perry’s fleet thwarted the British, his black sailors performed so well that he wrote to the Secretary of the Navy, praising their courage. Life at sea was, by necessity, an egalitarian existence. Living in small quarters, away from shore for months at a time, the men developed a camaraderie and mutual respect based on performance, not skin color. Black sailors made their mark on both official vessels and on the privateers, non-military ships sanctioned by the U.S. government to harass British merchant vessels. On some privateers more than half of the crew was black. These fast and heavily-armed raiders were frequently successful at seizing merchant ships, but just as frequently at being captured by the British. The sailors onboard, including the African Americans, were often sent to the infamous Dartmoor Prison, where the racial divisions they had left behind once again prevailed.

Fighting for Both Sides in the War Charles Ball, as a free man, was lucky enough to have a choice. Besides the Navy and privateering, there were even a few black battalions in the American army. But for most American slaves, the options were limited to the British navy. When the British fleet arrived in the Chesapeake Bay in March 1813, entire families of slaves made their way by canoe to the enemy ships. The British commanders had orders to welcome these refugee slaves, but also to take care not to encourage an outright rebellion against their white masters. The British did not want insurrection among blacks to spread to their own slave-holding territories in the West Indies.

The slave owners, naturally, were furious at the loss of what they thought of as “property,” and sent delegations to the British demanding that the slaves be returned. Even Charles Ball, a former slave, tried to convince escaped slaves to come back to U.S. soil. He “went amongst them” he records in his memoir, “And talked to them a long time, on the subject of returning home; but found that their heads were full of notions of liberty and happiness in some of the West India islands’.”

Ball would soon be fighting against some of the very black men he had tried to convince. As a seaman and cook, he served in the Chesapeake Flotilla under Commodore Joshua Barney. After Barney ordered the flotilla sunk to keep the boats out of the hands of the invading British, Ball marched to Bladensburg with Barney and served in one of his cannon crews. His memoir describes what later came to be called the Bladensburg Races:

“I stood at my gun, until the Commodore was shot down, when he ordered us to retreat, as I was told by the officer who commanded our gun. If the militia regiments, that lay upon our right and left, could have been brought to charge the British, in close fight, as they crossed the bridge, we should have killed or taken the whole of them in a short time; but the militia ran like sheep chased by dogs.”

The British Promise of Freedom Black soldiers and sailors were fighting valiantly on both sides of the war, but

the British promise of freedom for slaves gave the British a distinct advantage in the competition for recruits. There was another advantage. One British admiral suggested that a "Black Force ... could be managed and kept within bounds, and the Terror of a Revolution in the Southern States increased to produce a good effect in that quarter."

In April 1814 Vice-Admiral Sir Alexander Cochrane made the British position official: All those who may be disposed to emigrate from the United States, will, with their Families, be received on board of His Majesty's Ships.... They will have their choice of either entering into His Majesty's Forces, or of being sent as FREE Settlers to British possessions, ... where they will meet with all due encouragement. Cochrane then ordered Rear-Admiral George Cockburn to form the Colonial Marines, fighting units made up of refugee slaves.

All told, more than 4000 people were freed from slavery – the largest emancipation that took place in the U.S. until the Civil War. Three companies of Colonial Marines were formed, and their presence did inspire hatred and fear among the Americans. The corps took part in the burning of Washington, fought in the Battle of Baltimore, and skirmished against American forces all along the coast. The British commander-in-chief said they were "infinitely more dreaded by the Americans than the British troops".

At the end of the war Americans demanded the either the return of ex-slaves or monetary reparations for the loss of property. With few exceptions, the British refused. According to custom, a slave arriving on British soil was free; a British ship at war had the status of British land itself.

The British offered the Colonial Marines farmland in Trinidad in February 1816, nearly a year after the end of the war, when the marines refused to be transferred out of naval service into the army as soldiers in the West India Regiments. Their descendants live in Trinidad still, in freedom, and call themselves "the Merikans."