



Burning of the frigate Philadelphia in the harbor of Tripoli, February 16, 1804, by Edward Moran, painted 1897.

It was 1804- the Barbary War. The USS Intrepid sailed into a friendly port in Sicily. Standing in her bow and at the helm was young Salvatore Catalano, the Italian pilot. He was returning from one of the most daring feats in naval history- the planned destruction of the U.S. warship Philadelphia. The American vessel had been captured by Tripoli and was a serious threat in the hands of the Enemy.

among them. The Intrepid, a small Moorish vessel, left Sicily on February 3, 1804, with 69 handpicked officers and men, including a detachment of "Leath-ernecks." ( Hence, the second line of today's Marine Hymn, " To the shores of Tripoli." )The Intrepid entered the Barbary harbor on the night of February 16 with Catalano, the pilot, disguised as a Maltese, Lt. Decatur next to the pilot, and a half dozen crewman – also on deck in disguise.

The Philadelphia could be seen in the moonlight. As the Intrepid came within hailing distance of the captive American ship, a sentry on board called out in Tripolitan. It was the crucial moment. Catalano yelled in the sentry's dialect saying they were Maltese traders and their anchors had been torn away in a storm - could they tie up for the night?

The deception went off perfectly, with the Intrepid now tied to the Philadelphia . Catalano continued to speak with the sentry as a diversion for the raiding party, who were quickly aboard the ship. The alarm was sounded: " Amerikani!" but it was too late. Caught by surprise and in panic, most of the Tripolitans jumped overboard to escape; those who did not were cut down. Within minutes, the Philadelphia was blown to smithereens. Catalano was soon steering the Intrepid out of harm's way. However, it seemed all of Tripoli was awakened as the big guns at the fort opened up. The Intrepid took one hit, but not a single man was lost.

For Salvatore Catalano, a new life opened up. The hero landed in America in 1805, was voted immediate citizenship and served in the U.S. Navy, rising to the rank of Sailing Master.

The previous October, the 38-gun Philadelphia had run aground pursuing Barbary pirates, and was rendered helpless, forcing the surrender of its 200 officers and men. The Philadelphia now appeared unapproachable since it was moored close to the formidable Tripolitan shore batteries. American Captain Preble determined that the Philadelphia could be destroyed by a small raiding party of select men. The risks in reaching the captive ship were great, to be able to blow it up would be amazing, and to get away from the shore batteries fast enough would be nothing short of miraculous. The mission called for a cool, resourceful and courageous pilot who knew the treacherous Barber waters and the Moorish tongue.

Many Italians, particularly from Sicily and Naples, worked and fought under the American flag during the Barbary War. Salvatore Catalano, a Sicilian was