

A Most Unfortunate Encounter



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Almost two hundred years ago, on Thursday 12th November 1812, His Majesty's frigate *Java* (38 guns) under the command of Captain Henry Lambert sailed from Portsmouth, in the company of two East Indiamen, bound for Bombay.

Commissioned on August 17th that year for the purpose of carrying the newly-appointed Commander in Chief at Bombay, Lieutenant-General Thomas Hislop, to India, *HMS Java* was formerly the French Pallas Class 40-gun frigate *Renommée*, captured in May 1811 at the Battle of Tamatave off the island of Madagascar.

Java was rated by the Royal Navy as a 38-gun fifth rate frigate and normally carried a crew of 277 men. She was armed with 28 18-pounder guns, two 12-pounders, 18 32-pounder carronades and one 24-pounder carronade. A fast-sailing ship, built in 1805, she was in good condition and well supplied for the voyage. Her dimensions were very similar to those of *HMS Trincomalee*.

Besides Lieutenant-General Hislop, his staff and their not inconsiderable baggage, *Java* was also carrying a large quantity of naval stores; in particular copper for the hulls of three ships under construction for the Admiralty in Bombay – *Cornwallis* (74 guns) and two 10-gun sloops, *Icarus* and *Chameleon*. Among the documents entrusted to the care of Captain Lambert were the plans for two Leda Class frigates, intended to be *Amphitrite* and “if there are adequate means”, *Trincomalee*.

Although the practical aspects of commissioning *Java* went relatively smoothly during the early autumn of 1812, it seems that assembling a crew was proving more troublesome. Officers and a handful of petty officers were soon forthcoming, along with fifty Marines, though a third of these were raw recruits. The rest of the crew however consisted of sixty Irishmen who had never been to sea before in their lives, “a draught of fifty disaffected wretches from the 18-gun sloop *Coquette* lying at Spithead”, sundry pressed men and some former prison-ship inmates. Captain Lambert's protests were more or less dismissed with the assurance that a trip to India would soon turn the men into a good working crew, although he was given eight volunteer seamen from *HMS Rodney* (74 guns) who proved to be of great value on the voyage. Of Lambert's 300 men fewer than 50 had ever seen action, and a significant proportion had never been to sea before. Passengers and supernumeraries (including a number of “Marine Society Boys”) brought the total to 397. Accommodation on board must have been even more cramped than usual.

Making rather slow progress due to poor weather in the North Atlantic, *Java* had a stroke of luck after a fortnight's sailing, encountering and capturing an American merchant ship, the *William* on December 2nd. A master's mate and nineteen men were put onboard with orders to keep station and the little convoy sailed onward.

On Christmas Eve, aware that *Java* and *William* were running short of water, Lambert decided to alter course in order to put in to the port of Saõ Salvador on the coast of Brazil, about a thousand miles north of Rio de Janeiro. The two Bombay ships, unwilling to undertake a long detour, elected to part company with *Java* and continue without their escort.

With the Brazilian coast in sight on December 28th, the *William* was despatched to Saõ Salvador to take on water, and at 8 o'clock the following morning *Java*'s lookout spotted a sail on the horizon to the southeast. Making all sail, *Java* headed for the distant ship whilst *William* made for port.

As the *Java* drew closer during the course of the morning, it became clear that the ship, which had altered course and was now tacking toward them, was a large frigate. At 11.30, whilst about four miles distant, the unidentified frigate hoisted a signal not recognised by Lambert, and *Java*'s coded recognition signal in return was not acknowledged.



USS Constitution

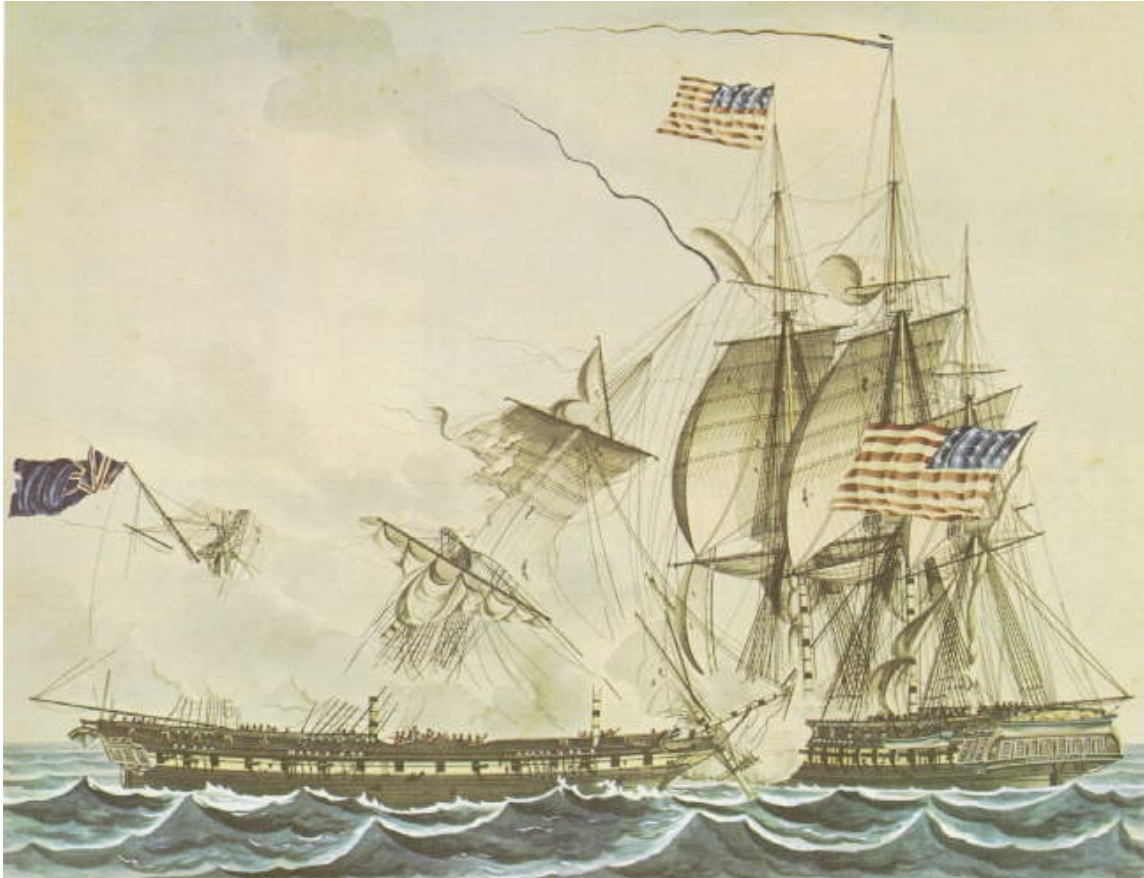


Captain Bainbridge

The ship encountered by *Java* was in fact the American *Constitution*, a heavy frigate with an experienced crew under the command of Captain William Bainbridge. Rated at 44 guns, but actually carrying 24 long 24-pounders, 30 32-pounder carronades and two 18-pounder bow-chasers, she had fought a highly successful action four months earlier against *HMS Guerrière*. On seeing that his private signal for the day had not been answered, Bainbridge set his mainsail and royals and tacked to seaward to draw *Java* away from neutral Portuguese waters.

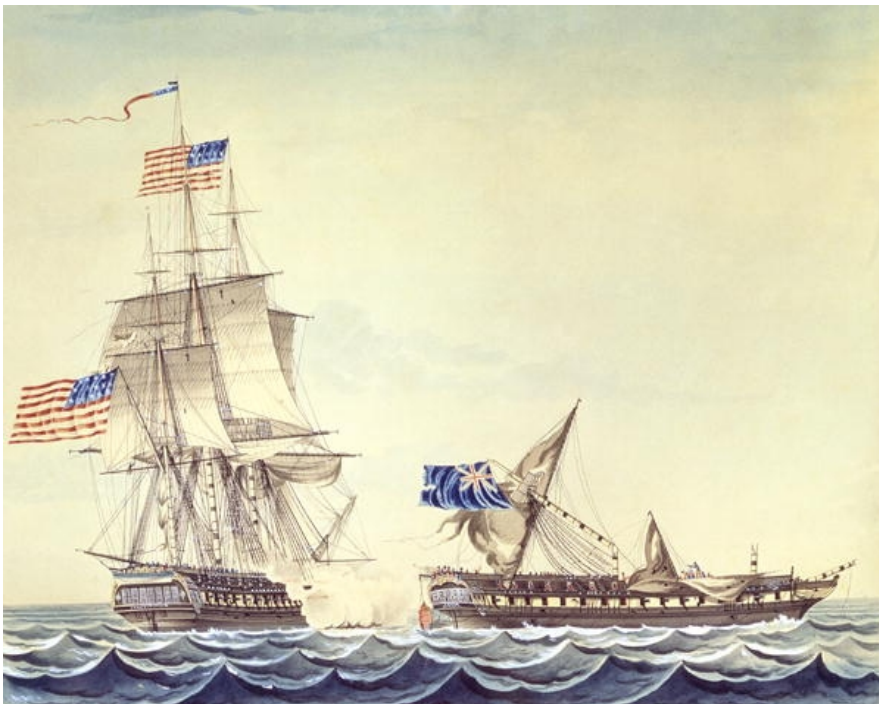
Wednesday December 30th dawned with clear weather and a moderate east north-easterly breeze. *Java* had closed the gap between the two ships and at 12.30 hoisted her colours and ensign. The large frigate hoisted the American ensign in reply. There being no longer any doubt about each other's identity, the two ships closed for action. Both were now sailing south-east. At ten past two *Constitution* fired a shot across *Java*'s bow from a distance of half a mile and *Java*, to windward, bore down on the enemy ship answering a hail of grape and round shot with a broadside when she was close enough on the enemy's weather bow, carrying away *Constitution*'s helm and severely wounding her captain in both legs.

For the best part of two hours both ships exchanged fire, each trying to out-manoeuver the other in order to gain the best position for raking fire. *Constitution*'s gunners appeared to concentrate on aiming high in an attempt to disable the faster ship's masts and rigging, and in this they were remarkably successful, carrying away first the head of her bowsprit and her jib boom, and at the moment that Lambert was trying to bring *Java* alongside with a view to boarding, bringing down her foremast and main topmast, the tangle of wreckage falling across her starboard side making the ship unmanageable and rendering her starboard guns unusable. During this melée Captain Lambert was gravely wounded in the chest by a musket ball fired from *Constitution*'s fighting top, and Lieutenant Henry Chads took over command. Soon afterwards *Java*'s mizzen mast was brought down, adding to the chaos on her decks.



HMS Java and USS Constitution

At four o'clock, with *Java* helpless and unable to fire more than two or three guns, *Constitution*, also badly damaged, but with her masts and yards largely intact, hauled off to a safe distance to repair her rigging, returning after an hour's respite to rejoin battle. In spite of the desperate efforts of *Java's* crew during this time to clear their decks of tangled wreckage and their attempts to raise some sail on the stumps of the foremast and bowsprit, the ship was still wallowing in the heavy swell, the mainmast having meantime collapsed to add to their miseries. *Constitution* was able to approach in a perfect position to rake *Java* with her guns.



Chads now realised the hopelessness of his situation, and the remaining officers agreed with him that with so many men killed and wounded, most of his guns useless, the hull badly damaged and the bowsprit and all three masts gone, they would not be justified in wasting the lives of his remaining men and at ten to six *Java* struck her colours from the stump of the mizzen.

*HMS Java dismantled by
USS Constitution*

On board *Constitution*, Commodore Bainbridge, who in spite of his wounds had remained in command on the quarterdeck, noted "Had the enemy suffered the broadside to have raked him previously to strikeing, his additional loss must have been extremely great, laying like a log upon the water, perfectly unmanageable. I could have continued raking him without being exposed to more than two of his guns (if even them)".

The crew and passengers of *Java* were brought on board *Constitution* but the American officers who boarded *Java* realised that she was little more than a mastless hulk and could not realistically be taken as a prize. After removing *Java's* helm to replace his own, Bainbridge ordered the hulk set on fire, and on New Year's Day 1813, as *Constitution* stood off to a safe distance, *Java's* magazine exploded and she sank, taking with her the plans of *Trincomalee*.



HMS Java explodes on New Years Day 1813

The prisoners and wounded (*Java* lost 22 men and had 102 wounded and *Constitution* nine men dead and 57 wounded, including her captain) were landed at Saõ Salvador on January 3rd. There they were reunited with their shipmates who had been aboard the *William*, now recaptured by the American sloop *Hornet*.

The gallant Captain Lambert died of his wounds on January 4th and was buried at Fort Saõ Pedro with full military honours. Captain Bainbridge expressed his deep sorrow for a commander he described as both brave and noble.

In April 1813 Lieutenant Chads and the other surviving officers, crew and passengers of *Java* returned to England. As was customary following the loss of one of His Majesty's ships, a court-martial was held on board *HMS Gladiator* in Portsmouth. As one would have hoped, Lieutenant Chads and his men were honourably acquitted. As for Lieutenant-General Hislop, who had remained on deck throughout the engagement with *Constitution* and was commended for his part in the fighting, he eventually reached India in 1814 and took up his post in Madras. He was made a baronet in the same year, but after an unpleasant incident in the Third Anglo-Maratha War when his troops massacred the entire garrison of a fort at Talnar he was severely criticised by the Governor-General of India, Lord Moira, and was removed from his command in 1820.

USS Constitution (also known as “Old Ironsides”) is still a commissioned ship in the US Navy, and is berthed at Charlestown Navy Yard, Boston. There is some dispute as to whether her helm is that taken from the *Java* or a later replacement. And as we know, *HMS Trincomalee* was eventually built at Bombay in spite of this early setback, and now, beautifully restored, lies proudly afloat in Hartlepool.

Nigel Hogg

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