

The Bashaw of Tripoli, regarding as trifling the proposed annual payment of \$10,000 for his friendship, again refused the American offer of a peace treaty to end his war on Yankee merchantmen in the Mediterranean and to ransom captives. Not content with continuing to punish Tripolitan intransigence with a passive blockade, Navy Captain Edward Preble now thought it “absolutely necessary to our National and Naval Character in the Eastern World, that we humble that Regency and bring the Bashaw to our own terms.” To accomplish this, Preble decided on a “bold Stroke against Tripoli—One successful dash at them [which] will effect a peace, and make them remember the war.”

On the afternoon of 3 August 1804, a small American squadron of brigs and schooners led by the frigate *Constitution*, under the command of Preble, launched the first of a series of five attacks against the port of Tripoli. Mounting only thirty 24-pounders on her gun deck and six borrowed long 24-pounders on her spar deck, the *Constitution* and her consorts faced a walled city protected by forts and shore batteries that mounted 115 heavy guns. These were supplemented by numerous gunboats, each armed with a single 24-pounder. Under cover of the frigate, the smaller American vessels advanced within point-black range of the shore batteries and engaged the enemy’s gunboat flotilla. In an action that lasted two hours, the smaller craft engaged the Tripolitan flotilla in heavy fighting, which at times involved hand-to-hand encounters with heavily armed enemy seamen.

On board the flagship, while seamen on the gun deck fired broadside after broadside into the city, Marines under Captain John Hall and Lieutenant Robert Greenleaf left their normal battle stations in the fighting tops to man the long 24-pounders on the spar deck. Their accurate fire, which—Preble noted—helped drive the

“Tropolines out of the castle and brought down the steeple of a mosque,” merited the “highest encomiums.”

With every cannon ball hurled against the crumbling walls of Tripoli during the remainder of August, the Bashaw’s demands seemed to tumble. But Preble, who was not disposed to make any payment whatever, was soon replaced by newly arrived Captain Samuel Barron who, with the aid of Tobias Lear, chief American diplomatic representative in the area, negotiated a treaty with the Bashaw that called for the payment of \$60,000 in exchange for friendship and the release of American prisoners.