

**THE OUTSTANDING AND HISTORICALLY IMPORTANT 1812 WAR INTEREST NAVAL GENERAL SERVICE 1793 MEDAL AWARDED JOHN SPEED, PURSER OF H.M.S. MACEDONIAN DURING THE HEROIC TWO HOUR ACTION AGAINST THE LARGE AMERICAN FRIGATE UNITED STATES. BEFORE STRIKING, MACEDONIAN WAS DISMASTED AND LOST OVER 40% OF HER CREW KILLED AND WOUNDED. THE CAPTURE OF MACEDONIAN CAUSED A SENSATION IN AMERICA AND SHOCK AND OUTRAGE IN BRITAIN, FOR SHE WAS THE FIRST BRITISH FRIGATE TO BE BROUGHT INTO AN AMERICA PORT AND SUBSEQUENTLY TAKEN INTO AMERICAN SERVICE. ON ROUTE TO AMERICA, MR SPEED WAS RELEASED BY UNITED STATES CAPTAIN TO TAKE CAPTAIN CARDEN'S DESPATCHES BACK TO BRITAIN, WHICH WOULD BE THE FIRST NEW OF THE CATASTROPHE. DURING HIS REMARKABLE SERVICE SPEED WAS TWICE TAKEN PRISONER AND THREE TIMES SHIPWRECKED**



NAVAL GENERAL SERVICE 1793, 2 CLASPS EGYPT, SYRIA 'JOHN SPEED, PURSER'

John Speed was born in Castle Carey in Somerset in 1777 and came from a large family of that name in the area; some later adopted the additional surname "Andrews" so that John Speed sometimes occurs in later accounts as "John Speed Andrews"; his eldest son, also John, became a Naval Purser and Paymaster in his turn. Speed senior joined the Royal Navy apparently as a seaman circa 1795/6, progressing quickly to Captain's Clerk, serving in this position aboard the famous *Renown*, 74-gun flagship of Sir John Borlase Warren, for the Egypt campaign of 1801 and also served during those operations on the *Florentina*. After a period ashore during the short-lived Peace of Amiens in 1802-3, he received his "passing

certificate” as Purser in April 1803 (a fairly rapid promotion), before joining the 14 gun ex Privateer, H.M.S. *Suffisante* later that year. His service aboard *Suffisante* was brief for his ship was wrecked off Spike Island in Cork Harbour in December 1803

In his Pursers service record, which frustratingly doesn't give dates, Speed lists service on *Hind*, a 28 gun Frigate. Navy lists post 1807 have been searched but he doesn't appear on *Hind*, so service will have been between 1804 and 1806. Post 1807 until late 1810, Speed's service is unclear.

### **H.M.S. MACEDONIAN**

However, Speed's greatest experience must have been as Purser of the *Macedonian*, which he appears to have joined in late 1810 or early 1811. This was a fine, new 38-gun frigate, regarded as something of a “crack” ship, launched in 1810 and in 1812 was under the command of Captain John Surnam Carden.

By this time Britain and the America were approaching war, though it did not stop Carden fraternising with the locals in Norfolk, Virginia, during one mission – where one of his frequent dinner guests was the American naval commander Stephen Decatur. In September 1812, *Macedonian* was ordered to escort an East Indiaman as far as Madeira and then cruise in search of prizes for as long as supplies held. Leaving Madeira on 22nd October, *Macedonian* had only been at sea for three days when near Cape Henry she had the misfortune to run into the American frigate *U.S.S. United States*, commanded by none other than Stephen Decatur.

What followed was a vastly unequal battle, in which after a heroic resistance of two hours and ten minutes, *Macedonian*, in a totally un-masted state, all the guns on the quarter-deck and forecastle disabled except for two and a over a 100 holes in its hull, Captain Carden was forced to surrender his ship. From a crew of 254 men, *Macedonian*, lost 104 in killed and wounded. The *United States* lost just 12 men from a crew of 474.



The *United States*, sister-ship to the famous *Constitution*, was one of the “large” US frigates, mounting 44 guns, with a broadside capability of 864 pounds of metal shot to the *Macedonian*'s 528. The superiority was made clear during the crew's Court Martial in 1813;

Captain Carden telling how the *United States* was more akin to a 74 gun ship of the line, minus its upper deck of guns than a frigate.

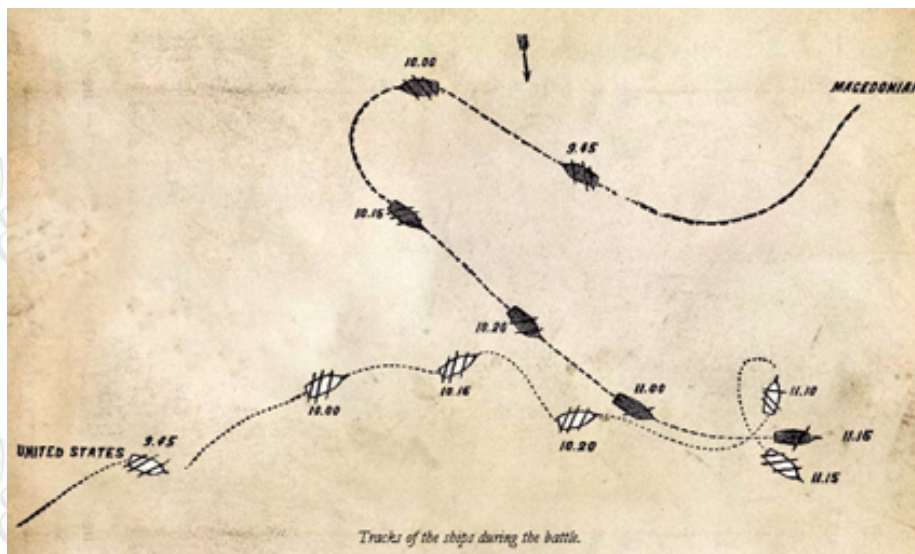
*Macedonian* was to be first British frigate captured and brought into port by the American Navy and when taken to New London, the *United States* was treated to a rapturous welcome, having the very unlikely sight of a captured British frigate in tow.

#### **THE ACTION BETWEEN THE MACEDONIAN AND THE UNITED STATES FROM BATTLES OF THE ROYAL NAVY BY ALLEN:**

*“On the 25th of October, the 18-pounder 38-gun frigate Macedonian, Captain John Surman Carden, being in latitude 28° 50' north, longitude 29° 30' west, the 44-gun frigate United States, Commodore Stephen Decatur, hove in sight, bearing north by east, distant about twelve miles. The Macedonian, with a strong breeze from south-south-east, immediately bore up, and made all sail to close the enemy. At 7h.30m. a.m., the two ships having arrived within three miles of each other, hoisted their colours, and Commodore Decatur his broad pendant. Captain Carden then became fully aware of the force of the enemy ; but so little did British sailors think of defeat, that the announcement was most gratifying.*

*On the other hand, Commodore Decatur mistook the Macedonian for a larger ship, probably for a cut-down 64-gun ship, and therefore wore round on the starboard tack, and bore up. The Macedonian continued under all sail in chase, and as she rapidly overhauled the American, Commodore Decatur fell into the opposite error, and took the Macedonian for a 32-gun frigate, whereupon he wore round on the larboard tack, and hauled up to meet her. At 9h. a.m. the Macedonian, having hauled to the wind, was on the weather beam of the United States, and the two ships passing on opposite tacks, exchanged broadsides. The Macedonian being then abaft the American frigate's beam, wore, and at 9h.20m. was on the enemy's larboard and weather quarter, on the same tack with her. In the course of a few minutes the Macedonian lost her mizen-topmast, and the United States her mizen topgallant-mast. The sailing of the two ships was thus nearly equalized, and the United States took advantage of the circumstance, and retained her position on the lee bow of the British frigate, keeping up a continued and severe fire.*

*At 10h. 15m, the United States squared the main-yard to allow the Macedonian to close ; but it was then too late. At a little past 11k the Macedonian lost her mizenmast, fore and main-topmasts, and mainyard ; her lower masts were badly wounded, and the standing and running rigging destroyed. To render her state more defenseless, the wreck of her mizenmast fell over the starboard side, thereby disabling those of her quarter-deck guns which were not previously useless from the imperfect fitting of the carronade slides. Having nothing to steady her, the Macedonian now rolled the muzzles of her main-deck guns in the water; and under the circumstances, further effectual resistance was impossible. As a last resource, however, the determination to attempt to board the American frigate was come to, and the Macedonian's helm was put hard a-port with the intention of carrying it into effect. Captain Carden was the more induced to resort to this plan by seeing the United States make sail. But the execution of the design was frustrated by a shot, which, having cut the lee fore-brace, the ship would not pay off, and the United States crossed the Macedonian's bows without firing a shot, having, as it afterwards appeared expended all her cartridges. It was at first supposed that the United States had given up the contest ; but having filled more cartridges and rove new running rigging, she made sail, and at noon arrived under the stern of the Macedonian ; when Captain Garden, having no further means of resistance, ordered the colours to be hauled down.*



The loss sustained by the British, out of 254 men and boys, amounted to James Holmes, boatswain, Thomas J. Nankivel, master's mate, Dennis Colwell, schoolmaster, twenty-three seamen, eight marines, and two boys killed; and Lieutenants David Hope (severely) and John Bulford (slightly), Midshipmen Henry Roebuck and George Greenway, and Francis Baker, volunteer 1st class, fifty seamen, nine marines, and four boys wounded; making a total of thirty-six killed and sixty-eight wounded. The United States sustained comparatively slight loss, amounting to five killed ; two mortally and five severely, besides many, not included, slightly wounded.

The Macedonian mounted the forty-six guns of her class; but the quarter-deck carronade slides, being fitted on a new and defective principle, rendered those guns very inefficient. The force of the United States has already been described ; but, unlike the Constitution, she retained her 42-pounder carronades, to which may be attributed the early fall of the Macedonian's masts and the carnage on her decks. Captain Carden and his officers were treated with respect by Commodore Decatur, but every temptation, and even threats, were used, to induce the crew to enter the American service; but the overtures were treated with the disdain they merited. The Macedonian was conveyed to New London, where she arrived on the 4th of December. Captain Carden and his officers were subsequently tried by a court-martial at Bermuda, the sentence of which was "an honorable acquittal" and the court expressed their very high sense of the loyalty of the seamen, which caused them to disregard the base offers of the enemy."

#### **SPEED RELEASED AND SENT TO ENGLAND WITH DISPATCHES**

Purser Speed had an interesting time as a result of the action, for before *United States* arrived home with her prize, Mr Speed was released by order of Captain Decatur and sent aboard an American vessel bound for Cadiz, carrying Captain Carden's dispatches and the news of the disaster. This ship was intercepted by the *Benjamin* which took Speed to Bristol. The first official account of the action and loss was of course widely circulated and caused shock and disbelief; how could the Royal Navy could suffer such a loss to a nation that had a navy a fraction of the size! It was not the first loss the Royal Navy against a more powerful American frigate but was the most humiliating.

In an action off the Faroes two months earlier, the British 38 gun frigate; *H.M.S. Guerriere*, fought the *United States* sister ship; *U.S.S. Constitution*. Though lasting half the time and the *Guerriere* suffering fewer casualties than the *Macedonian*, the damage to *Guerriere* was so great that it was burnt shortly after its surrender (much to the disappointment of the captors). The fact that *Macedonian* was repaired and taken back to America; then to be renamed *U.S.S. Macedonian*, caused a sensation in America and outrage in Britain, for it was the first such prize to be taken in the War of 1812. Captain Decatur was very well aware of the significance of the capture of a British Frigate intact and the effect it would have at home and in Britain, indeed it seems releasing Mr Speed to take news of the disaster home at his first opportunity, more to rub the British noses in it as soon as possible, rather than anything else!



In March 1813, Captain Carden and crew were shipped to Bermuda on parole, for transport home on and two months later a Court Martial of Captain, officers and crew for the loss of *Macedonian*. The Court of Enquiry exonerated the Captain, officers and crew; finding that the *Macedonian* had been overwhelmed by greater fire-power and “*was unable to bring the United States to close action until she had received material damage*”; they recorded that no blame for the loss could be attributed to the officers and crew “*who in every instance throughout the action behaved with the firmest and most determined courage, resolution and coolness and that the colours of the Macedonian were not struck until she was unable to make further resistance*”.

What Mr Speed actually did and where he was posted during the action is unknown, he wasn't called as a witness during the Court Martial; those being called, being those who at one time or other were on the quarter deck. However Pursers were frequently called on to take charge of sections of guns during such actions and with the casualty rate so high, its likely he would have been stationed on the main deck

## PUBLISHED ACCOUNTS

There are not many first hand British accounts of the action between *Macedonian* and *United States*, bar Captain Carden's initial dispatch and another written by one of the crew, Samuel Leech, in his *A Voice from the Main Deck*. The latter records that when action was over, many men broke into the Purser's stores and stole his stocks of clothes, whilst others headed for the spirit locker! However the transcript of the Court Martial (92 pages) has been digitally copied from the National Archives and comes with the research of this medal. Along with this a series of Admiralty dispatches recording the absolute shock at the taking of the *Macedonian*, as well as the clear worry of the superior strength of the American 44 gun Frigates. Within these pages contains many interesting and unpublished accounts, which make fascinating reading. A letter written by Admiral John Borlase Warren at Bermuda on 29 December 1812 illustrates this perfectly:

*"..I consider it my duty to acquaint their Lordships that the ships of war belonging to the American government are of a very large class and altho' classed as frigates, are constructed to carry 24 pounders on their main deck, with another tier of guns along the quarter deck. Gangway and forecastle, and manned with from four hundred to upwards of five hundred prime seaman and gunners, from which their superiority in sailing and the number of riflemen and musketry, give them a manifest advantage over any of our single frigates and as the American cabinet from the recent captures of the Guerrier, Macedonian and sloops of war have obtained a confidence and are actively employed increasing their marine and seducing our seamen into their service by every art and means in their power and as may possibly receive aid from some of the detached squadrons escaping from France...."*

## LATER SERVICE

On 14 March 1814, Speed was appointed to the 38 gun *Frigate Nisus* (38) and later that year to another 38 gun *Frigate Statira*. On 1 November 1814, *Statira* departed for America, taking Sir Edward Pakenham, Major-General Gibbs and other military officers to New Orleans. After the failed attack, She was sailing with a convoy from Bermuda to the Ile Dauphine to join Sir Alexander Cochrane in February 1815 when she struck an uncharted rock off Cuba on the 26th. When all efforts to save her failed, the officers and crew were removed into a transport belonging to the convoy and she went down after half an hour. Mr Speed returned to England as a passenger in the *Asia* and was and would have been present at the subsequent court martial for the loss of *Statira*

With the post-war reduction in the Royal Navy, Speed remarkably, then abandoned the sea altogether for fully 21 years, when he ran his family pub (which he eventually inherited), the Britannia Inn at Castle Carey, now still surviving as The Horse Pond Inn, and fathered a large family via two wives. Then, for some unexplained reason, in the mid-1830s he expressed a desire to return to naval service – and it says something about him or the state of naval service in those days that after 21 years' absence from the sea and the complexities of his former naval appointment, he was indeed taken back in the rank of Purser in 1836.

He was appointed to the great 84-gun *Asia*, serving aboard her from 1836-41 and taking part in the operations in the eastern Mediterranean which would earn him the *Syria* clasp and the Turkish St Jean d'Acre medal in silver; his final active service came in the Mediterranean aboard *Queen* between 1845-49. But he continued to seek sea service even after that; his last "survey" as Purser and Paymaster came as late as 1852, when he was 74 years old! This records that he was "*fit and desirous to serve*" and "*though he has a cataract in his right eye he is otherwise in good health and considers himself fit for the performance of his duties.*" In the event – perhaps unsurprisingly – he was not recalled to service but spent his last days in Stonehouse, Devon, where he died in Caroline Place on 25th January 1859, aged 81. Notices

of death appeared in *The Morning Chronicle* and *The London Standard*. His Naval General Service medal remains as a testimony to a remarkable and varied naval career.



BUST OF JOHN SPEED HELD IN THE NATIONAL MARITIME MUSEUM GREENWICH COLLECTION

<https://www.rmg.co.uk/collections/objects/rmgc-object-61623>

### **THREE TIMES SHIPWRECKED AND TWICE A PRISONER**

During his service, Speed seems to have been somewhat unlucky in his choice of ships; during his long career and was by his own account twice taken prisoner and three times shipwrecked. He confirms being shipwrecked whilst serving as Purser of *Suffisante* and *Statira* and taken prisoner when *Macedonian* was captured

The first time Speed was shipwrecked and the first time he was taken prisoner was most probably on the same date. This must have been prior to his service as a Purser as he only lists the ships he served on as a Purser in his 1852 service circular (ADM 11/42). A search of ships musters prior to joining *Renown* and back to 1795/6, should reveal these missing events, as well as fill the gaps in his service.

## PURSERS

One of the ships Wardroom Warrant Officers, Pursers, along with Masters, Surgeons and Chaplains messed in the Wardroom with the Commissioned Officers. In 1814, Pursers were granted the same rank as Surgeons. Though often thought as a soft rating, the rank of Purser was anything but that. Like all members of a ships crew of the time, you are just as likely to see a Purser on cutting out actions (or similar) as each member of the crew, regardless of rank would be expected take part in such actions. During ship to ship actions Pursers were frequently called on to take charge of sections of guns. This is borne out in the number of Pursers found on casualty lists or mentioned for gallantry in the pages of the Naval Chronicle of the period. The same can be said Surgeon's, Clerk's, Carpenters etc etc



Condition GVF with an attractive patina. Sold with digital copies of the Court Martial of the Macedonian's crew an Admiralty correspondence. Also a file of copy research.

An extremely fine and rare medal, the last medal to be seen on the market to one of Macedonian's crew was to one of the Lieutenant's at DNW in 2004 (£12,400)