



# Captain Frederick Lee and Cutter Eagle in the War of 1812

*“They did their duty as became American sailors”*

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On June 18, 1812, President James Madison signed a declaration of war against Great Britain, officially starting the War of 1812. At that time, the United States government faced the Royal Navy's 600 warships with seventeen navy vessels, a fleet of small U.S. Navy gunboats, fourteen cutters and several smaller revenue vessels.

While heavily armed American privateers and navy warships carried out a war against British ships on the high seas, the domestic maritime force of revenue vessels, navy gunboats and a few trapped American warships waged a defensive war against enemy ships patrolling U.S. shores. Throughout the war, the revenue cutters would serve as frontline units protecting American coastal shipping and combating British privateers, enemy warships and Royal Navy barges deployed for shallow water operations.

On the day President Madison signed the declaration of war, Treasury Secretary Albert Gallatin sent a one-sentence circular to his customs collectors who oversaw the revenue cutters, writing, *“Sir, I hasten to inform you that War was this day declared against Great Britain.”* He then ordered revenue cutters stationed along the East Coast to dispatch the news to underway U.S. Navy vessels.

During the conflict, the Treasury Department required the revenue cutters, such as the Connecticut-based *Eagle*, to enforce tariffs and trade laws, and protect American maritime commerce. Built in New Haven in 1809, the topsail schooner-rigged *Eagle* had a design

similar to several wartime revenue cutters, with dimensions of sixty feet in length on deck and eighteen feet wide, and an armament of muskets, small arms and six cannon. Connecticut native Frederick Lee, one of the most noted revenue cutter captains at the time, commanded *Eagle* out of its homeport of New Haven. Born in 1766, Lee was too young to see action in the Revolution, but he eventually became a shipmaster and received a cutter master's commission in 1809, at the age of forty-three.

One of the cutters' primary wartime missions was to apprehend British merchant ships as well as American merchantmen carrying illegal British cargoes. On August 7, 1812, *Eagle* seized



*A rare miniature portrait of Captain Frederick Lee painted by Revolutionary War hero Tadeusz Kosciuszko. This is the only contemporary illustration of a cutter captain known to exist (Madison Historical Society, Madison, Conn.).*



*A modern painting illustrating the gallant defense of Cutter Eagle by Captain Lee, his crew and militia forces. Recent research indicates that the actual uniforms of the day were less like navy garb and more akin to merchant seamen's attire (Coast Guard Collection).*

the brig *Harriot* of Bristol, England, and a brig from Liverpool, both bound for New York, and sent them into New London for adjudication. On October 3, 1813, *Eagle* also apprehended American brigs *Patriot*, *Harriet* and *Ann McLane* and sent them into New Haven laden with illegal British cargoes.

With U.S. naval vessels cruising far off shore and navy gunboats often stationed in port cities, revenue cutters became the military's most effective maritime intelligence gathering tools. They monitored enemy naval movements, identified British privateers, and provided the latest news regarding U.S. Navy vessels. Because of their speed and agility, the revenue cutters proved the most reliable source of this naval intelligence. *Eagle's* captain, Frederick Lee, gathered and shared this information with customs collectors, local officials, and military leaders. For example, on July 14, 1812, *Eagle* sighted a British squadron of four large warships patrolling off Montauk Point, Long Island, and transmitted their location by letter to the navy agent at New York City. In addition, on July 24, 1812, Lee first notified the New York navy agent

that famed frigate USS *Constitution* had narrowly escaped a British squadron of nine warships after a chase of four days.

During the conflict, cutters had to enforce over half-a-dozen trade restrictions passed by Congress. Revenue cutter officers and crew had to be well versed in the fine print of these numerous laws, for American merchants and ship captains would often challenge in court any seizures, forfeitures or detentions of ships they believed to be illegal or wrongful. These restrictions included the Non-Intercourse Act, which was in force throughout the war. On Sunday, October 10, 1813, *Eagle* apprehended the fast-sailing Boston to New York packet for "Breach of the Sabbath." All passengers and crew were indicted and incarcerated at Fairfield, Connecticut, and fined according to the Non-Intercourse Act.

One of *Eagle's* primary wartime missions was to protect American merchantmen against marauding enemy privateers and Royal Navy warships. After implementation of the British blockade of the United States in 1813, this mission became especially important to those coasting vessels navigating the sounds,



*A contemporary illustration of Royal Navy barges deployed from British warships for a shore attack similar to those units sent to beat back Captain Lee's forces (Library of Congress).*

bays and inland waterways of the East Coast. During the war, *Eagle* carried out the mission of escorting convoys of American merchantmen, a revenue cutter tradition established during the Quasi War with France in the late 1790s. In 1813 and 1814, *Eagle* regularly escorted convoys of merchantmen between Connecticut and New York that ranged in size from three vessels to as many as twenty. On June 17, 1814, a New York newspaper noted, "Yesterday at 4 P.M. Passed the New-Haven Revenue Cutter *Eagle*, Lee, from New York, with 20 sail of coasters under convoy, standing into New-Haven."

Under orders from the local customs collector, each revenue cutter took responsibility for the security of its homeport and surrounding coastal waters. On May 30, 1814, Captain Lee learned that the British privateer *Liverpool Packet* had captured a locally owned sloop just outside New Haven Harbor. Lee brought aboard his cutter forty-four volunteer militiamen and pursued the British privateer together with a merchant vessel hastily armed with field artillery. *Eagle* and its consort had to turn back after sighting a British frigate and

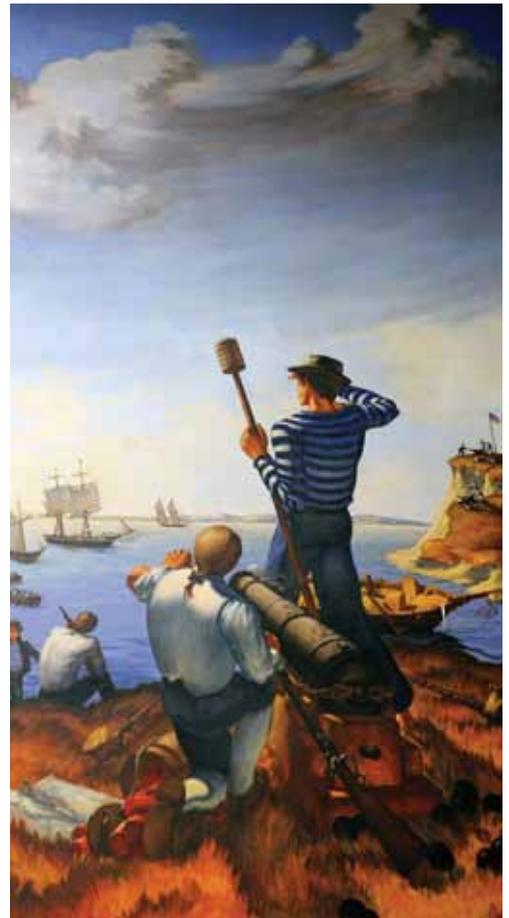
two other Royal Navy warships sailing in their direction and preparing to attack *Eagle* and the armed merchantman. The local newspaper stated "The spirit which animated all who embarked on the expedition, is worthy of praise and imitation, and renews a confidence that the sons of Connecticut will still perform their duty, spontaneously, whenever a fit occasion demands."

During the war, citizens periodically requested that the revenue cutters, which typically carried no more than six cannon, be armed more heavily and given greater responsibility for naval operations. However, the Treasury Department oversaw revenue cutter operations and tasked the cutters with protecting American merchantmen rather than carrying out ship-on-ship naval actions. On June 17, 1814, after receiving a request from the citizens of New Haven to better arm their cutter for naval operations, Treasury Secretary George Campbell replied to the New Haven customs collector, "the Cutter '*Eagle*' being exclusively intended for the protection of the Revenue, cannot with propriety be employed in the manner they wish."

*Eagle's* ability to protect American commerce would be put to the test within a few months of that letter. On October 10, 1814, news arrived in New Haven that a privateer in Long Island Sound had captured an American merchantmen. Despite the threat of Royal Navy vessels patrolling the Sound, Captain Lee showed no hesitation in pursuing the enemy. He assembled local militia to join his cutter and sailed into the night to re-capture the American vessel and take the British privateer as well. The next morning, Lee found his cutter dangerously close to the 18-gun brig HMS *Dispatch* and an armed tender; and he barely managed to escape rapidly pursuing enemy barges by running the cutter onto the northern shore of Long Island. The cutter's crew stripped the cutter of its sails and dragged *Eagle's* cannon up on the bluffs to duel with the British warships and armed barges.

With only four four-pound and two-pound cannon, and fifty men armed with muskets, Lee managed to fend off the two ships and their armed barges for another day. Of the battle, a contemporary newspaper account stated that *"Having expended all the wadding of the four pounders on the hill, during the warmest of the firing, several of the crew volunteered and went on board the cutter to obtain more. At this moment the masts were shot away, when the brave volunteers erected a flag upon her stern; this was soon shot away, but was immediately replaced by a heroic tar, amidst the cheers of his undaunted comrades, which was returned by a whole broadside from the enemy."* In all, the British shot away the cutter's flag three times, but volunteers from Lee's crew replaced it each time. After they exhausted their cannon shot, *Eagle's* gun crews tore up the ship's logbook to use as wadding and fired back enemy small shot that had lodged in the hill.

By October 12, the British ships departed to locate reinforcements, while Lee patched up and refloated his damaged cutter. In the early morning of October 13, at low tide, the British gun brig and its tender returned and brought with them the 32-gun frigate HMS *Narcissus*, so Lee's men ran the damaged cutter into shallow water again. Later that



*Painted by Aldis Browne, this mural image in the Henriques Room of Hamilton Hall depicts the heroic battle for Cutter *Eagle* by Captain Lee and his men (Coast Guard Collection).*

morning, the Royal Navy ships launched a boarding force of seven armed barges to capture the cutter. Lee's men kept up a brisk musket fire directed at the British barges and, according to Lee, *"Our guns were loaded nearly to the muzzle with grape and canister, and the fire reserved until they were within a handsome distance, and then discharged."* Lee's men fended off the British forces with withering cannon and musketry fire for nearly an hour. After that, the in-coming tide re-floated *Eagle* and the enemy secured a line to the cutter. At around noon on October 13, the barges finally took possession of the cutter, towing the vessel away from shore and out of range of Lee's cannon and riflemen. Lee's men survived nearly unscathed to fight another day and Lee later wrote, *"The officers and crew, together with the volunteers, on board the cutter, have done their duty as became American sailors."*

During the war, six cutters were lost, including one whose magazine exploded, another lost in a severe hurricane, and three captured by the enemy. *Eagle* was the last of the six cutters lost in the war. In November 1814, a month after the Royal Navy flotilla captured it, a Boston newspaper reported, "American revenue cutter, the *Eagle*, prize to H.M.B. *Dispatch*, sailed under convoy of the *Narcissus*." The captured cutter was bound for Halifax, Nova Scotia, but its ultimate fate has never been determined. On December 31, 1814, the New Haven customs collector paid the first installment of \$3,900 to build a new cutter named *Eagle* and the vessel began to serve the port of New Haven in March 1816. Frederick Lee would command the new *Eagle* until 1829, when the service replaced him with another cutter captain. Lee had served honorably for twenty years and retired from the service at the age of sixty-three.

On Christmas Eve, 1814, representatives of the United States and Great Britain signed the peace treaty, the Treaty of Ghent, at a ceremony in Ghent, Belgium. However, in North America the war remained in effect until February 1815. In the period between the treaty's signing and its senate ratification, nearly two months later, American forces commanded by General Andrew Jackson defeated a large British army in the Battle of New Orleans. This was the last major land battle of the war and a resounding success for U.S. forces. On February 11, the sloop HMS *Favorite* flew a white flag to deliver the peace treaty to New York City. The war officially ended when the United States Senate ratified the treaty on February 16.

Before the war, the revenue cutter fleet served primarily as the Treasury Department's maritime police branch, tasked with enforcing U.S. trade laws and tariffs, and interdicting maritime smuggling. However, *Eagle's* record in the War of 1812 helped solidify the cutters' new wartime missions, including port and coastal security, reconnaissance, commerce protection and shallow-water combat operations.

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