

ON THE BOOKSHELF

“The Ghost Ship of Brooklyn: An Untold Story of the American Revolution”

By Robert P. Watson (Da Capo Press)

This is a true story: not of ghosts or evil spirits, but of miserable British prison ships during our War for Independence, run by evil men. The truth is more horrible than any fictional account.

The terrible account of prison ships in the Revolution has been largely forgotten, but approximately twice as many men died in those British prison ships than died in battle during the war! 11,500 American POWs. It happened largely because the Brits so despised those they considered “traitors” that they deliberately mistreated them to discourage others from continuing the fight.

In many cases, those men charged with overseeing the prison ships included men who were vicious sadists. This was also deliberate, a way to punish Americans who were unfortunate enough to be captured and to act as a deterrent toward any others considering military service against the British.

Every horror plagued the prisoners: putrid food, polluted water, disease, lice, lack of hygiene, lack of fresh air, starvation, and even lack of proper burial. The heat in summer made the below decks even more insufferable. Often corpses were thrown to swine to be eaten! The commandants often walked the decks, beating the inmates with a whip.

There were a few who managed to escape. Reprisal was brutal and often lethal. The tragedy in the waters of Brooklyn’s Wallabout Bay “is not featured in museums, taught in schools, or evoked with reverent pride or solemn remembrance during Independence Day ceremonies.”

The most notorious of the British prison ships was the HMS *Jersey*, which contained more than a thousand prisoners at a time aboard. A dozen men a day died of smallpox, dysentery, typhoid, yellow fever, malnutrition, drinking polluted water, and torture. The British command intended for the *Jersey* to be a weapon of terror, yet it “quickly emerged as a powerful symbol of British oppression and cruelty.” The rotting ex-warship was nicknamed “Hel Afloat” or simply “Hell” by her unfortunate inmates, a reputation she richly deserved.

American politicians and generals urged the British to exhibit some human compassion and allow those miserable wretches to be traded for British POWs. It was to no avail. The British had plenty of soldiers, and they knew we would not treat their men like they treated ours. The Brits mistreated the POWs from privateer craft worst of all.

When lands near Brooklyn were dug up in the late 19th century, the bones of dead POWs were unearthed by the hundreds. The rotten hulk of the *Jersey* sank in 1783, becoming a ghost ship on the harbor bottom. The story of the suffering of its inmates is finally being told in this well-researched expose.