

## **The Hermione, the Ship, Life Aboard, and Notable Passengers**

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In 1780, aboard the *Hermione*, it took thirty-eight days to cross the Atlantic from France to Boston. This ship traveled at the speed of twelve knots or 1.15 miles per hour.<sup>1</sup> The *Hermione* was the fastest ship afloat on the high seas, yet such a voyage lasted more than a month!

Hundreds of artisans were commissioned by His Majesty Louis XVI, to build the frigate in 1779, and they built it within six months. In 2013, the reconstruction of this ship took eleven months.<sup>2</sup> The ship measured the length of sixty-six meters, with a principal mast of 56.5 meters. Its hull was constructed entirely of oak. It carried thirty-two cannons. The frigate *Hermione* sailed for fourteen years between America, France and the West Indies. On September 20, 1793, the ship struck some rocks at Croisic off the coast of Brittany and sank.<sup>3</sup>

While preparing for the millennium, the Association *Hermione-Lafayette* was formed. Its main objective was to construct a ship identical to the original, to the extent of using the same techniques of fabrication as used in the era of the *Hermione*, i. e. to use eighteenth century shipbuilding techniques.<sup>4</sup> Two thousand oaks were necessary for this task, before armament of the ship might begin. It necessitated researching archives, finding documents, and raising the wreckage of the original ship in order to reconstruct the puzzle of wood, iron and ropes that made up such a vessel.

About 400,000 pieces of wood and metal were needed to assemble the vessel. In the eighteenth century, about 8,000 to 9,000 workers were needed at the Arsenal of Rochefort, France, an arsenal built during the reign of Louis XIV. Drafted for such a task were specialists in carpentry as well as blacksmiths and caulk workers (floatation specialists). Included among the workers were convicted criminals, assigned to labor-intensive tasks.<sup>5</sup> Interior components that made up the frame for three decks were bolted and caulked before the vessel could be placed in the water. The reconstructed vessel or copy was begun in 1997.<sup>6</sup>

Every detail was important. Every structural fitting had to be able to withstand the force of the waves. The stern of the ship is elegant, a gilded Lion facing the ship's destination, while the rear stern carries multiple naval arms. It is the events and decisions in the past that help us understand and live in the present. Past history, made vivid and tangible by the reconstructed ship is a testament to the solidarity between men and nations in the quest to achieve independence and freedom.

What might life be like on a frigate like the *Hermione*? In the eighteenth century a life of minimal comfort, a simplistic body hygiene, a drastically reduced diet, and painful, labor-intensive work was your lot. In the case of bad weather, the harshness of the conditions would decimate the sickliest on board one by one.

Boys went on board at an early age, ten to twelve years old, and their escape from childhood quickly and violently moved them into the adult world. From the top man, carpenter, cook, to the ordinary seaman, each job was an essential link in a chain that ensured a smooth operation. No special treatment was given and mutiny was unthinkable. Poor behavior met with severe punishments, from water privation to shackling, time in the hold, thrashing, or capital punishment. All decisions about punishment were made by the captain.<sup>7</sup>

Stores and supplies were usually calculated for a six-month period. The belly of the ship was filled with supplies and various items, with big or small spare equipment for fittings, with sails and rope, with ordnance, gunshots and gunpowder, and with perishable food products, preserved in salt as best as possible. In addition there was livestock, and all kinds of liquids, such as water, wine, alcohol, oil, vinegar, etc. The principal difficulty was the preservation of fresh water. Water would hardly last more than one month. As it stagnated it took on various colorations, and emitted putrid odors. Worms and other bacteria accumulated which meant that diseases would germinate.<sup>8</sup>

Lack of proper diet while at sea invited diseases. Common diseases were: typhoid fever, caused by bacteria found in water; scurvy, a disease caused by a lack of vitamin C in food. Symptoms of scurvy include teeth falling out, a temperature, a weakened state most of the time. Some sailors, without knowing it, protected themselves by eating rat's liver, which has a high level of vitamin C. Also quite possible were smallpox, an infectious disease, extremely contagious and fatal in 15% of the cases; dysentery, due to gastric infections, causing painful and bloody diarrheas, or yellow fever, caused by mosquito bites and typhus is due to dirtiness and spread by lice. Other diseases might occur due to poor management of bruises. A sailor might be hit with a yard or with a twelve pound round shot. To forget their woes, to find relief and have fun, binge drinking would occur. Basically it was an abuse of "tafia" (biture in French), a sugarcane eau-de-vie (brandy). Finally, seasickness due to pitching and rolling hurt those susceptible. If death came while on board ship, the body was put into a canvas bag, sewn and ballasted, and after a short ceremony delivered by the chaplain on board, it was thrown into the sea<sup>9</sup>.

Mealtimes were announced by the bell. Breakfast on board was generally at 7:30 am in the summer and at 8:00 am in the winter. Lunch was always at 1:30 pm, while supper was at 6:00 pm in the summer and at 5:30 pm in the winter. The sailors were all subjected to rationing by groups of seven; they improvised their meager daily bread called "the dish" on the gun deck. They would gulp down the rancid food thoughtlessly and drink the water without smelling the rancid smell. Their only thought was to subsist and to stay alive whatever the price.<sup>10</sup>

At breakfast, a week's ration for a group of seven sailors was always the same: one biscuit of 180 grams each, a liter and a half of water per group, a half-liter of wine per group. Lunch meant sharing 1.7 kg (about 2 and 3/4 lbs.) of salted beef, with the liter and a half of water, and a half liter of wine to be shared. While breakfast never varied, lunchmeat would change from beef on Monday to 1.8 kg of pig's foot on Tuesday; 850 grams of codfish on Wednesday; 1,2 kg salted bacon on Thursday; 850 grams cod on Friday and Saturday; and 1.2 kg salted bacon on Sunday. In addition, on Sundays the ship's baker would send everyone some bread to cheer them up. The master cook would prepare 700 pints of soup in one large boiler only if the sea were calm. If weather were bad, the danger of a fire onboard was such a risk that the crew universally settled for a cold lunch.

Supper was usually light. On Monday, 850 grams of peas were shared; on Tuesday it was 850 grams fava beans; on Wednesday it was 850 grams fava beans; the same cycle of 850 grams of peas, beans, and fava beans to be shared by the seven was repeated for Thursday, Friday, and Saturday, respectively; on Sundays the men shared rice. Beverages at supper were always the same: a liter and a half of water, together with a half-liter of wine.<sup>11</sup>

Tafia was kept on board for special purposes, i.e. it was a universal anesthetic, and was a heartwarming drink for a sailor.<sup>12</sup> Faithful guests at a sailor's meal might be moths and weevils. Vermin of all kinds were a constant plague on ships.

In the staff officer's dining room, scarcity was not a problem. Cooking was as refined as possible with livestock and live poultry on board; wine from Cahors or Bordeaux brought aboard from personal wine cellars, daily bread and pastries prepared by the ship's baker. Rationing for officers was not an issue.<sup>13</sup>

One issue important to the modern sailor is hygiene. Eighteenth century hygiene for ordinary seamen was a rare commodity. No fresh water or soap, which was costly at the time, a permanent dampness, exhausting chores, inappropriate food, all combined to wither even the sturdiest. Fresh water was rationed and used to desalt food. Laundry was rinsed in brackish water. It did not dry well and caused painful skin infections. A hard rain or heavy showers helped ease the mind of such customary torments. The privy was located at the extreme front of the ship, under the eye of the figurehead, directly above the bowsprit: one commode bench was placed on each board which made for two seats for 296 men. Mercifully the waves were useful in erasing all traces that users may have left.<sup>14</sup>

Officers had their privy in a private closet. The little closed space contained one bench. Toilet paper appeared in the nineteenth century; during the eighteenth, various papers might be used but while at sea an officer used a piece of linen or a hempen cloth. In his cabin, an officer had a wall fountain dispenser for washing.<sup>15</sup>

Personal belongings for sailors included a clothing bag, a hammock, a blanket, a hat and/or a bonnet, two waist-shirts, two breeches, two pairs of stockings, one overcoat, two pairs of clogs one bowl of wood or half a coconut. Officers' personal belongings included trunks, caskets, a private cellar, a casual and ceremonial wardrobe, books, personal belongings, musical instruments, personal crockery, and personal artillery. To improve the possibility of promotions for officers, the needed time for continuing education was allotted.<sup>16</sup>

In the pervasive dampness, in almost total darkness, and in full lack of privacy, each seaman in the shelter of his rudimentary hammock enjoyed what he could of a restful sleep. Seamen were divided into two categories: those of the starboard watch and those of the port watch. While the men of the starboard watch were attending their business, the men of the port watch were at rest and vice versa. Depending on the day or the night, each seaman went to his post every four or every six hours to serve his watch.<sup>17</sup>

The captain was the only master on board after God, he owned a cabin that was isolated from the hammocks and had genuine bedding. The captain also had devoted servants who were responsible for the laundry and the dishes. The officers had bunks at the back of the "orlop," (ship's rear) away from the major part of the crew.<sup>18</sup>

Stopovers were essential to the survival of the crew who spent many months at sea. The priority on a stopover was to change water that had become rancid for fresh water. Bad water was often a cause of digestive diseases among the seamen.<sup>19</sup>

On April 27, 1780, the *Hermione* arrived in Boston with Lafayette on board.<sup>20</sup> Its captain was Louis-René de Latouche-Tréville. A true friendship was born between Louis-René and his already quite illustrious passenger, who accepted to be the witness at the marriage of his elder.<sup>21</sup> Lafayette had obtained from His Majesty, the necessary assistance for the American insurgents and was bringing this important news to them, to be followed by special military envoy on the way.<sup>22</sup> The *Hermione* was also the ship that Lafayette sailed in 1782, and upon which he penned the Declaration of the Rights of Man, a document used by the French at the time of their own Revolution.<sup>23</sup> In 1780, imbued with thoughts of freedom and social justice, Lafayette was a hero to the people of Boston.<sup>24</sup>

In his journal, Captain de Latouche noted that the capital of Massachusetts was a city of 24,000 inhabitants. The streets were paved and the houses solidly built.<sup>25</sup> Lafayette and the news that he brought were welcomed with enthusiasm. The engagement of France at the side of the Americans was a great boon. On writing to the Minister of the Marine in France, de Latouche stated, "I enjoyed a quite perfect satisfaction upon seeing the reception made to him [Lafayette] upon his arrival here; we witnessed the demonstration of a lively joy inspired by his presence. He received there the most distinguished honors and the people did no less than the notables of State in their lively welcome and the pleasure that they had to receive him. I also felt the particular mark of public satisfaction ..."<sup>26</sup> Until the arrival of the expeditionary corps promised by Lafayette, de Latouche was for several weeks, the highest ranking representative of the French Navy in the Colonies. His impressive size, he measured 1.77 meters, a notable height for the period and his features were regular.

Taking this role very seriously and coached by Lafayette, he desired to return the honors made by the Americans to the French. Louis-René hosted a luncheon for the principal members of the General Assembly of the state of Massachusetts. Numerous toasts, punctuated by canon shots were made. The following list show exactly how overwhelming and remarkable this luncheon proved to be:<sup>27</sup>

1. Twenty-one canon shots for the toast to the King of France
2. Twenty-one canon shots for the toast to the thirteen states of America
3. Twenty-one canon shots to the Queen of France
4. Twenty-one canon shots to the American Congress
5. Twenty-one canon shots to the King of Spain
6. Seventeen canon shots to General Washington
7. Thirteen canon shots to the American Army
8. Thirteen canon shots to the honorable council of Massachusetts
9. Thirteen canon shots to an eternal alliance between France and America
10. Thirteen canon shots to the success of this campaign

11. Thirteen canon shots to the memory of those who gave their lives to the American cause
12. Thirteen canon shots to the success of the Continental Navy and to an increase in its commerce
13. Thirteen canon shots to the Marquis de Lafayette

The first twelve salutes were decided by common accord between Lafayette and de Latouche. The last set, in salute to Lafayette, was at the initiative of de Latouche and a surprise to Lafayette.<sup>28</sup> The day after this sumptuous display and celebration, Louis-René de Latouche hosted a luncheon for the ladies of Boston. Ever sensitive to feminine charms, he noted in his journal that the ladies of Boston “have sparkle but it does not last. A woman of twenty-five years is past her prime.”<sup>29</sup> No information has become available to learn how he was able to finance such extravagant parties.

In March, 1781, the *Hermione* again reached the shores of the Colonies. De Latouche had important papers to place into the hands of La Luzerne, the Minister plenipotentiary of France, in Philadelphia.<sup>30</sup> While in the then capital, he was favorably impressed with the beauty of this city. He noted in his journal that the streets were wide and clean, lit by lanterns, and that they formed a checkerboard pattern. The streets did not have names but were numbered and the sidewalks were wide and about every fifty fathoms (one fathom equals six feet) there was found a water pump, surrounded by marble, like a column. At each crossroad a sentry box sheltered the night crier who was charged to watch for the rest and security of citizens. At every hour, a sentry marched from one box to the next, crying out the time and the weather. He carried a bell for rallying the men in case of disorder. Houses made of brick were two stories high. All religions had their own buildings of worship and the inhabitants of diverse beliefs maintained fraternal relations with each other.<sup>31</sup> Such commentary is a notable tribute to the early days of the city of Philadelphia.

After his errand in Philadelphia, Louis-René was sent to Newport but he returned again to Philadelphia on the thirtieth of April. On May 2, the Minister Plenipotentiary came aboard ship with great pomp and ceremony. He was greeted with three acclamations of “Vive le Roi,” (Long Live the King) and thirteen canon shots.<sup>32</sup> These salutations were followed by receptions, similar to those organized in Boston, but took place on the *Hermione*. On May 4, a luncheon for one hundred guests included all the members of the then US Congress, as well as the Council of the State of Pennsylvania, and the most notable citizens of the city, both civil and military. The ship was decked with flags. The president of Congress, Mr. Samuel Hurlington, received honors reserved for the *Maréchaux* of France. As in Boston, thirteen toasts, accompanied by canon salvos were offered. A few days later, de Latouche gave a reception for the notable ladies of the city. The members of Congress attended again. The reception took place in the evening on an illuminated ship. A nearby barge was utilized to shoot fireworks over the Delaware as entertainment.<sup>33</sup>

These excessive expenditures did permit the French to outshine those given by the English while in control of the metropolis. English receptions appeared shabby by comparison. De Latouche wrote to Vergennes at the Naval Ministry in France for funds to help his expenditures and debt of 8,000 livres (close to \$1,500). De Latouche never did receive any reimbursement for the expenditures which he undertook.<sup>34</sup>

De Latouche continued his service to the French Navy until his death. Imprisoned for a while during the French Revolution because of his service to the Crown, he triumphed over the English Lord Nelson three times. A true sailor at heart, when he fell ill in 1804, he refused to leave his ship for a hospital. His final words, “a sailor is too happy to die on his ship.” The *Hermione* under his command enjoyed distinctions known to no other naval vessel, whether French or American.

Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> Hales, Bradley; Dumousseau, Carol; “L’Hermione, Frégate de la Liberté,” Éditions Marcou, 2000, p. 32.
  - <sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 7.
  - <sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 5.
  - <sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 7.
  - <sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 10.
  - <sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 12.
  - <sup>7</sup> Georget, Didier, “La Vie à bord la Frégate Hermione,” Gulf Stream Éditeur, Saint Herblain, 2000, p. 8.
  - <sup>8</sup> Ibid. p.14-15.
  - <sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 30-31.
  - <sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 35.
  - <sup>11</sup> Ibid. p. 34.
  - <sup>12</sup> Ibid. p. 30.
  - <sup>13</sup> Ibid. p. 35.
  - <sup>14</sup> Ibid. p. 36.
  - <sup>15</sup> Ibid. p. 37.
  - <sup>16</sup> Ibid. p. 36-37.
  - <sup>17</sup> Ibid. p. 38.
  - <sup>18</sup> Ibid. p. 39.
  - <sup>19</sup> Ibid. p. 42.
  - <sup>20</sup> Monaque, Remi, “Les aventures de Louis-René de Latouche-Tréville, compagnon de Lafayette, commandant de L’Hermione,” SPM, Paris, 2000, p. 38.
  - <sup>21</sup> Ibid. p. 38.
  - <sup>22</sup> Ibid. p. 35.
  - <sup>23</sup> Hales, Bradley; Dumousseau, Carol; “L’Hermione, Frégate de la Liberté,” Éditions Marcou, 2000, p. 5.
  - <sup>24</sup> Monaque, Rémi, “Les aventures de Louis-René de Latouche-Tréville, compagnon de Lafayette, commandant de L’Hermione,” SPM, Paris, 2000, p. 38.
  - <sup>25</sup> Ibid. p. 38.
  - <sup>26</sup> Ibid. p. 39.
  - <sup>27</sup> Ibid. p. 39.
  - <sup>28</sup> Ibid. p. 40.
  - <sup>29</sup> Ibid. P. 40.
  - <sup>30</sup> Ibid. p. 41.
  - <sup>31</sup> Ibid. p. 60.
  - <sup>32</sup> Ibid. p. 60.
  - <sup>33</sup> Ibid. p. 62.
  - <sup>34</sup> Ibid. p. 62.

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**Levels intended:** all levels, either secondary or university.

**Purpose:** The article in question was presented in French. With Lafayette and his assistance to the Colonies underscored, It would be a useful tool for teachers of secondary or university as supplemental information regarding French and American alliances. For secondary teachers, the information might be shared with colleagues in Social Studies for collaborative projects with students. For college professors, it represents a valuable resource for supplemental work at any level that can be used to enrich language or civilization studies.