“On 16 February 1804 an American brig, the Intrepid, commanded by Stefano Decatur, taking advantage both of the darkness and the offshore wind, approached the Philadelphia Frigate, which had just been refloated, captured the guards and set it on fire”. This was happening in the middle of a winterly month, in 1804, in a place which was definitely uncommon, the harbour of Tripoli, but certainly appears somewhat singular that an American brig set fire to an American frigate with its 36 cannons.

And still what was curious was that an American brig, the leading one in the enterprise, was commanded by a man from Messina, as we know from Ettore Rossi. How did then the pilot Salvatore Catalano, coming just from Messina, get to handle an American ship next to the future American national hero Stephen Decatur?

To understand this peculiar war event, and how the two men, the Sicilian and the American, could get to fight side by side, we’ll need to take several steps back and look to the wider picture of a Mediterranean determined by the age of Napoleon, and the first appearance of the American Navy in this area. Getting back to Tripoli it gets interesting to follow the way that scene is being reported nowadays by the scholars, especially by the American ones, who have been interested in the conflict between the United States and the Maghrebin Regency. Decatur and Catalano bold enterprise was suggested by captain Bainbridge, chief of the unlucky “Philadelphia” Frigate, imprisoned by the Tripolitans on 13 October, 1803, since when his big ship, giving chase to an enemy xebec, ran aground on a reef just opposite Tripoli
That day captain Bainbridge, “a child of adversity”, as he will name himself, surrendered to the Tripolitans, but before that he and his crew had managed to jettison all the weapons and cannons. However the Tripolitans succeeded in refloating the Frigate and regained the arms. Gaining such a powerful ship was definitely a dream to them, an American ship able to add its firepower to the defence of the port of Tripoli, already assured by the cannons of the Castle.
Bainbridge’s captivity was probably not that strict, since he and commodore Edward Preble, a gruff though reasonable commander in chief of the American fleet in the Mediterranean since May 1803, had found a way to exchange letters and information. Bainbridge wrote a lot about his plans to bother the enemy. In one of his letters, dating 6 December 1803, he suggested to destroy the “Philadeplhia”, since the Tripolitans were repairing her in order to let the ship sail again. There was no doubt the ship was going to be used as a cruiser as soon as the good season would have arrived.

The capture of the “Philadelphia” and of his 300 men, both officers and mariners, let astonished the whole Mediterranean world. News of it had already reached Leghorn on 24 November. In January 1804, the American consul in the port of Leghorn, Appleton, was “fearing Tripolitans could arm the ship to use her in the war”.

“Preble was in Syracuse”, he wrote to Washington, “and I informed all other consuls in the Mediterranean”.

The fact that the Tripolitans had such a Frigate as the “Philadelphia”, built thanks to a collection of money raised among the citizens of Philadelphia, was worrying commodore Preble so much that he decided to destroy her. Leaving such a Frigate in the hand of the enemy was a dishonour, besides she could also be used against the Americans as Appleton was afraid of.

Commodore Preble then gave full attention to Bainbridge suggestion to make a raid and destroy the ship. He talked of it to the young promising officer Stephen Decatur who, in his opinion, could have been in the “right mood” for it. The expedition, a sort of a “special operation”, was then entrusted to Stephen Decatur’s passionate temper, who, in the meanwhile, had gained a plundered ship, and so could count on one more precious mean to accomplish the mission. The lieutenant, in charge of his schooner “Enterprise”, on 23 December, 1803, captured the “Mastico”, a Tripolitan ketch, a small two-masted sailing ship with four cannons, which could also be used as a rowing ship. So the ship, Stephen Decatur in
command, temporarily in Syracuse, was taken into the U.S. Navy and renamed “Intrepid”.

Taking advantage both of the darkness and the shape of his ship, definitely familiar to the enemy, the 25 year old Decatur with confidence and shrewdness will leave on 16 February, 1804, to attack Tripoli harbour and destroy the American frigate, now into the enemy’s hands. With Decatur, 74 men, officers, sailors and marines volunteering for what will have been considered as one of the most heroic act of the U.S Navy.

Easy to say, accommodation on board of the “Intrepid” was not the best one could expect, so many people crowding a 40-50 tons vessel. The situation got even worse when the pantry ran out of work, the meat then got spoilt, and there was not much bread or water left. However weather was not bad and wind was favourable, so the “Intrepid” in company with the brig “Siren” arrived in the afternoon of February 9th. In order to prevent any suspicion the “Intrepid” was sailing ahead.

Decatur’s orders were simple and clear: first organize the main deck, then the one with the cannons, and at last distribute the troops to settle the fire. To add tons of colour, some assert commander had his men disguised in Arab dresses. Others point out he had just a few men in Maltese dresses with a British flag flying over their head.

At seven p.m. when the small ship was about to enter Tripoli harbour in the moonlight, the African night was turning into something between grey and blue. At that time the “Intrepid” reached the eastern entrance of the bay and the passage through rocks and shallows. Wind was lightly blowing from east and the American ketch, thanks to the skills of his pilot Salvatore Catalano (who, according to another observer, was not from Messina but from Palermo), was well directed by a light breeze to the stern of the frigate.

As soon as Decatur’s ketch was closed enough to see the slipway, the big Frigate was also visible, almost one mile far from the entrance of the harbour, swinging in the wind, close to the city, with the castle cannons towering above her.
His fore mast, cut and taken away when she was still on the reef, was not yet replaced, while the mainmast and the mizzen top mast were lowered, his lower yards were yet on the ship rails: a stunted ship, with no sail and no strength. Rigging and cordage however were in their own places and, as it was later verified, her cannons were still loaded.

Next to the Frigate were two corsairs vessels with some gunboats and one or two galleys.

Up in the sky a new moon was shining, and while the bold sailors were slowly moving forward to the enemy harbour, all around them was calm and peaceful. For about two hours and a half they were secretly advancing, wind was then gradually ceasing, and any movement was just slightly perceptible. At some distance, as a stop to their trip, a fearful rocky Castle was standing high, with its thick walls, and its 115 big cannons stucked into like a porcupine.

Most of the officers and men on the ship had been ordered to lie down on the boat deck, where some small walls, the windward roofing and all the various objects standing on the vessel could hide them. Since it was used to have a lot of men even in the smallest boats, was no risk to have ten or twelve men standing visible, so twelve of them were not lying down. The commander was instead standing by the pilot, Mr. Catalano, and that was the right moment for him to show all his skills.

Till then, thanks probably to past experience, Catalano had well leaded the ship through the reef and shallows of the port entrance. But from then on he would have been also used by the Americans as an interpreter. The pilot was then told to point straight to the sides of the frigate bow, meaning to approach the ship from there, as the best way to attack and avoid the fire shot from the frigate.

The “Intrepid” was still distant from the “Philadephia”, when someone asking “who goes there?” was heard coming from the frigate and soon after that two shots were fired up into the air. Men on board of the ketch knew one wrong answer to that could cost their life. The Sicilian pilot, cool as he was, speaking Arabic or using
“lingua franca”, answered the ship was coming from Malta, travelling for trade purpose, and had almost sank and lost its two anchors in the last storm.

He also asked for permission to stop beside the frigate for the night. The conversation was going on while Decatur suggested to tell those people about their cargo in order to distract them. While Catalano was still talking to them, the “Intrepid” was slowly moving forward. 20 mt from the frigate the ketch stopped just in front of “Philadelphia” cannons. Americans were holding their breath. But suddenly the wind began to blow in another direction and pushed the ship back. This unexpected effect took the ketch just right under the broadside of the frigate, 40 mt far from where she was so quietly anchored. There, by the side facing the harbour, slowly drifting, the vessel was dangerously exposed to the enemy cannons.

Still it seemed they had no suspect, although the scene was completely enlightened by moonlight, and some of the crew was coming to see what was happening. Turks, totally misled by Decatur’s behaviour, lowered a boat and pushed her ahead carrying a large cord. In the meanwhile a few men from the vessel had as well taken a rowing boat to go and get the hawser, which was fixed to the backside of the frigate, in order to tie it to the vessel. The cords were therefore passed to the men still on the ketch, so that they could somehow manage to drag the “Intrepid” by the “Philadelphia”, without getting on it yet.

But as soon as the “Intrepid” was closed enough, Turks found out her anchors, gave the order to leave immediately and started cutting the hawsers. All this was happening in just one instant, straight after Turks were all shouting: “Americanos”.

People from the “Intrepid” took the ship quickly by the Frigate, right where she was anchored. Till then not one whisper had revealed the presence of men hiding on the vessel. Commands had been too clear, remain quiet till they would have been told to get out, no rush was needed, even in that difficult moment, so the plan was not ruined.

According to a version of the facts, a mythical one, the Sicilian pilot Salvatore Catalano, panicking, may have started screaming: “attack, captain, attack”, but
another voice, one deep and calm, had answered: “no order has to be followed if it doesn’t come from the captain”. This version which sees Stephen Decatur jr. on the leading role, dressed up in a Maltese costume, standing cold-bloodedly on deck, waiting some endless seconds till the ketch finally touched the “Philadelphia”.

Commander Decatur was standing ready for a spring, with Mr. Laws and Morris right next to him.

As soon as they got closed enough, he jumped at the frigate's chainplates, and while clinging to the ship himself, he gave the order to board. The two midshipmen were at his side, and all the officers and men of the “Intrepid” arose and followed. The three gentlemen named were in the chains together, and Decatur and Mr. Morris sprang at the rail above them, while Mr. Laws dashed at a porthole.

To the latter would have belonged the honour of having been first in this gallant assault, but wearing a boarding-belt, his pistols were caught between the gun and the side of the porthole. Mr. Decatur’s foot slipped in springing, and Mr. Charles Morris first stood upon the quarter-deck of the “Philadelphia”. Just the time to recover from these funny inconvenients and soon Commander Decatur and Mr. Laws were at his side, while heads and bodies appeared coming over the rail and through the portholes in all directions.

The surprise appears to have been as perfect as the assault was rapid and earnest. Most of the Turks on deck crowded forward, and all ran over to the starboard side, as their enemies poured in on the larboard. A few were aft, but as soon as charged they leapt into the sea. Indeed, the constant plunges into the water gave the assailants the assurance that their enemies were fast lessening in numbers by flight. It took but a minute or two to clear the spar-deck, though there was more of a struggle below. Still, so admirably managed was the attack, and so complete the surprise, that the resistance was trifling. In less than ten minutes Mr. Decatur was on the quarter-deck again, in undisturbed possession of his prize.

There can be no doubt that this gallant officer now felt bitter regrets that it was not in his power to bring away the ship he had so nobly recovered.
Not only were his orders on this point peremptory, however, but the frigate had not a sail bent, nor a yard crossed, and she wanted her foremast. It was almost impossible, therefore, to remove her, and the command was given to pass up the combustibles from the ketch.

The duty of setting fire to the prize appears to have been executed with as much promptitude and order, as every other part of the service. The officers distributed themselves, agreeably to the previous instructions, and the men soon appeared with the necessary means. Each parts acted by itself, and, as it got ready. So rapid were they all in their movements, that the men with combustibles had scarcely time to get as low as the cock-pit and after storerooms, before the fires were lighted over their heads. When the officer entrusted with the duty last mentioned had got through, he found the after-hatches filled with smoke, from the fire in the wardroom and steerage, and he was obliged to make his escape by the forward ladders.

The Americans were in the ship from twenty to twenty-five minutes and they were literally driven out of her by the flames. The vessel had got to be so dry in that low latitude that she burned like pine: and the combustibles had been as judiciously prepared, as they were steadily
The last party up were the people who had been in the storerooms, and when they reached the deck they found most of their companions already in the “Intrepid”.

Joining them, and making sure all was ready, the order was given to cast off.

Notwithstanding the daring character of the enterprise in general, Mr. Decatur and his party now ran the greatest risk they had incurred that night. So fierce had the conflagration already become, that the flames began to pour out of the ports, and the head-fast having been cast off, the ketch fell astern, with her jigger flapping against the quarter-gallery, and her boom foul. The fire showed itself in the window at this critical moment; and beneath was all the ammunition of the party, covered with a tarpaulin. To increase the risk, the stern fast was jammed. By using swords, however, for there was not time to look for an ax, the hawser was cut, and the “Intrepid” was extricated from the most imminent danger by a vigorous shove. As she swung clear of the frigate, the flames reached the rigging, up which they went hissing, like a rocket, the tar having oozed from the ropes, which had been saturated.
with that inflammable matter. Matches could not have kindled with greater quickness.

The sweeps were now manned. Up to this moment, everything had been done earnestly, though without noise, but as soon as they felt that they had got command of their ketch again, and by two or three vigorous strokes had sent her away from the frigate, the people of the “Intrepid” ceased rowing, and as one man they gave three cheers for victory. This appeared to arouse the Turks from their stupor; for the cry had hardly ended when the batteries, the two corsairs vessels, and the galley poured in their fire. The men laid hold of the sweeps again, of which the “Intrepid” had eight of a side, and favoured by a light air, they went rapidly down the harbour.

The spectacle that followed is described as beautiful and sublime. The entire bay was illuminated by the conflagration, the roar of cannon was constant, and Tripoli was in a clamor. The appearance of the ship was, in the highest degree, magnificent; and to add to the effect, as her guns heated, they began to go off. Owing to the shift of wind, and the position into which she had tended, she, in some measure, returned the enemy’s fire, as one of her broadsides was discharged in the direction of the town, and the other toward the English Fort. The most singular effect was however on board, where the flames having run up the rigging and masts, collected under the tops, and fell over, giving the whole thing an appearance of glowing columns and fiery capitals. When the flames reached the Santa Barbara, she exploded and the ship blew up.

The success of this daring exploit laid the foundation of the name which Mr. Decatur subsequently acquired in the Navy. The country generally applauded the feat; and the commanding officer was raised from the station of a lieutenant to that of a captain. Most of the midshipmen engaged were also promoted, and Commander Decatur received a sword.

Decatur’s exploit was brilliant and somewhat legendary, still it was vain, as a matter of fact Commodore Preble would have never succeeded in taking Tripoli.
That night, 16 February 1804, is now being reconsidered, since September 11
2001. Twin Towers collapse has raised it from the oblivion in which it had fallen,
however it as been set in an historiographic context looking like the Mediterranean
waters, which were so limpid and transparent at the age of those facts and so
polluted and rotten at the beginning of the XXI century. All around that night in
Tripoli are now revolving terms as “terrorism”, “civilization conflict”, “Saddam
Hussein”, “attack”, “export democracy”, all distorting the truth and therefore
becoming a case of history abuse. Myths creation can only use arrogance and surely
does not help explaining where that event was actually coming from and where it
was leading to.