



Commodore John Rodgers was in charge of USS *President* during the gun duel with *Little Belt*.

# the LITTLE BELT AFFAIR

THE CLASH BETWEEN AN AMERICAN FRIGATE AND BRITISH SLOOP WAS JUST ONE MORE SPARK LEADING TO THE WAR OF 1812

BY MALCOLM REEDLEY

During the early 1800s, relations between the United States and Great Britain were difficult at best — especially on the sea. On 1 May 1811, HMS *Guerriere* had stopped the brig USS *Spitfire* off Sandy Hook, New Jersey, and had impressed Maine citizen John Diggio, the apprentice sailing master of the *Spitfire*. Paul Hamilton, Secretary of the Navy, had ordered USS

*President*, along with USS *Argus*, to patrol the coastal areas from the Carolinas to New York and to keep a special watch for any Royal Navy vessels attempting to board American vessels and impress crew members.

On 22 June 1807, a naval engagement took place off the

coast of Norfolk, Virginia, between the British fourth-rate HMS *Leopard* and the American frigate USS *Chesapeake*. The crew of the *Leopard* pursued, attacked, and boarded the American frigate, looking for deserters from the Royal Navy. The *Chesapeake* was caught unprepared and after a short battle involving broadsides from the *Leopard*, the commander of the *Chesapeake*, James Barron, surrendered his vessel to the British. *Chesapeake* had fired only one shot.

Four crew members were removed from the American vessel and were tried for desertion, and one was subsequently hanged.

*Chesapeake* was allowed to return home, where James Barron was court-martialed and relieved of command.

In America, what became known as the *Chesapeake-Leopard* Affair (in which three Americans were killed

*President* engaging *Little Belt* on 15 May 1811. The brief engagement left *Little Belt* badly damaged.