

Nate Lawton's War of 1812

THE KEY  
TO HONOR

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Royal Fireworks Press  
Unionville, New York

For a glossary of helpful terms, as well as several diagrams of ships, see the pages at the end of the book.

Also by Ron Wanttaja,  
published by Royal Fireworks Press:  
*The Price of Command*



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ISBN: 978-0-88092-270-8

Publisher: Dr. T.M. Kennitz  
Editor: Jennifer Ault  
Book Designer: Kerri Ann Ruhl

Printed and bound in Unionville, New York, on acid-free paper  
using vegetable-based inks at the Royal Fireworks facility. 18d19

## Chapter 1

# Boston, 1813

“Where’s your earring, boy?”

Nate Lawton paused, confused. “Huh?”

“Your earring. Ain’cha gonna get one afore you go aboard?” The speaker sat atop one of the dozens of bales stacked along Boston’s Long Wharf. The brown beard ringing his jaw was flecked with gray. Gray, too, were his eyes, nestled deeply in wrinkled skin. Blue smoke trailed from his thin ivory pipe. Beyond the tattered sleeves of his shirt, tattoos chased one another across his hairy arms.

Merchant ships’ masts towered overhead, casting short shadows in the May sun. Nate’s heavy blue broadcloth uniform wrapped his body like a steaming blanket. He lifted his cocked hat, wiped sweat from his forehead, and absently smoothed his close-cropped black hair before restoring his hat to its position.

“Why do I need an earring?” he asked.

The man pointed the pipe stem at Nate. “To pay for a Christian burial when your body washes ashore.” The sailor slid down from the bale. “You be looking for the *Chesapeake*, I wager. Brand new midshipman.” He leered at Nate. “Brand new officer. What are you, thirteen?”

Nate reddened. “Fifteen,” he snapped. People were always thinking that he was younger, and treating him like a kid, too. He wasn’t small—far from it. He was taller than other boys his age. There was just something about his face.

The man looked him up and down with a knowing wink. “Aye, I suppose you are. But you’re obviously new to the sea. You don’t know your way around a harbor. I could take you to the ship for five cents. I’m an old man-o-war’s man. I’ll make sure you know what to do when you get there. With old Tom Grimm and his boat, you’ll be on a fine start toward fame and glory.”

The old rage burst free before Nate could think. “I’m not after fame and glory! I want to kill the British!”

Grimm tilted his head back and laughed. “Sure you do, lad,” he finally said. His eyes were crinkled shut with mirth. “Other than the fact that we’re at war, what do you have against England? You’d...”

The old sailor stopped. He’d looked at the face of the boy before him. Instead of the flushed cheeks of an embarrassed boy, he found tight-set lips below narrowed, dark brown eyes—eyes that whispered of pain but screamed with hate.

Tom Grimm swallowed. “Beggin’ your pardon, sir. I didn’t mean nothin’ by it.”

Nate lifted his chin. “I don’t need your boat,” he said curtly. “The *Chesapeake* is a square-rigged frigate. Thirty-eight guns, three masts. Black hull, white stripe around the gunports.” He scanned farther up the wharf. A cluster of tall white masts stood out from the stumpy brown ones of the

merchant ships. “Those masts are hers, I bet. She’s tied to the wharf. I don’t know why I should hire your boat when I can just walk.”

Grimm gulped air. “I...I’m sorry, sir. I didn’t know you was an old hand. Most of the young gen’lemen who come by need some help....” He took an awkward step backward.

An odd scraping sound on the wooden wharf made Nate glance down. A cracked and peeling black shoe covered the old sailor’s left foot, but only a wooden peg showed underneath the fraying cuff of his right trouser leg. Anger fled Nate’s face. Faint red spots surfaced high on his cheeks. He cleared his throat. “It’s all right. Don’t worry about it.”

The man’s face relaxed. He lifted the knuckles of his right hand to his forehead in salute. “Thank’ee, sir.”

Nate grunted an acknowledgment and turned away. He started walking toward the tall white masts, but his eyes and his mind were far away. *What did he have against England?* the old sailor had asked. His hatred of the British had begun seven years earlier.

Elias Lawton, his father, had been second mate aboard a merchant brig bound for Cuba. On the way, the brig had been boarded by a Royal Navy frigate. A British lieutenant had declared that Elias Lawton and four other Americans were Englishmen and had forcibly impressed them into the Royal Navy. Since then, there had been no word from them. The American government had filed a strong protest, but the seaman-hungry Royal Navy had swallowed Nate’s father.

Elias Lawton wasn't the first American seaman pressed by the British, nor would he be the last. England was locked in a desperate struggle with Napoleon. The Royal Navy was England's only bulwark against invasion, and a seagoing fort needed men the way a land fort needed sandbags.

Nate was eight years old when they took his father. Elias Lawton could be dead; he could just as well be alive. But in seven years, there'd been no word.

The British would pay.

Nate became aware of a tap-tap-tap following behind him. He glanced over his shoulder.

The old sailor had followed him. The tapping was the iron thimble on the end of his wooden leg. Grimm smiled and nodded. "Mind you, sir, bein' an experienced officer and all, you probably know the lay o' the land. I'll just walk with you a spell, an' you can pay me as you find it worth it."

Nate rolled his eyes and kept moving.

Grimm gestured to the merchant ships tied to the wharf on either side of them. "Not much trade out of here since the British set the blockade. Before the war started, you could hardly take a breath with all the loadin' and unloadin'."

The war. A year earlier, America had finally had enough of British bullying. When Congress had declared war, Nate had immediately joined the Navy as a ship's boy, the lowest rank in the service. Two months at sea, a quick flurry of action, and now, eight months later, he was joining the *Chesapeake* as a midshipman.

Midshipman. Him, an officer. He shook his head at the wonder of it and fumbled uncertainly with the hilt of the dirk hanging at his side. The Baltimore tailor had insisted that Nate would need the long knife, had pressed him to purchase the crude-looking blade with its coarse wooden hilt. “Part of the uniform,” the man had said.

“Course, not that the Navy hasn’t been busy,” Grimm continued, unabashed by Nate’s lack of response. “The *Chesapeake* hasn’t had much luck, though. But Cap’n Decatur took the H.M.S. *Macedonian*, and Old Ironsides sank the *Guerriere* and the *Java*.”

Nate set his mouth in a thin smile. “I know. I was aboard when the *Constitution* took the *Guerriere*.” Guilt knotted his stomach.

Grimm grabbed Nate’s arm, stopping him. “You’re not just throwin’ the lead?” His eyes lit up. “Why, we’re practically shipmates! I sailed in her, back in ’04 when we knackered the Tripoli pirates!”

Nate tried to pull away from the man’s iron grip.

A stricken look crossed Grimm’s face. He dropped Nate’s arm as if it were on fire. “Sorry. Mortal sorry, sir. Dunno what came over me.” His fingertips brushed and smoothed the wrinkles on the midshipman’s blue sleeve.

“Fine, fine,” muttered Nate. He continued walking, trying to keep from grinning at the man’s appalled reaction.

The tap-tap of Grimm’s wooden leg followed. “I didn’t know you was a fightin’ sailor, sir. I’m mortal sorry for bein’

a bother. But ol' Tom Grimm'll do anything for a shipmate. Just give me a hail anytime, sir."

As they walked, the white masts of their destination rose higher. Exertion flushed Grimm's face. "Just around these bales, sir."

They stepped though a gap into a cleared area. There she lay: the United States ship *Chesapeake*. The black-painted hull towered above the wharf. A long white stripe gave her side a dashing look, if one ignored the black gunport lids.

Nate tilted his head to study the masts and rigging. The three masts stood like a military forest. Her mainmast soared a hundred feet high, the foremast and mizzenmast slightly smaller echoes fore and aft. The yards were crossed, the spars spaced at intervals on each mast. The sturdy, tarred standing rigging and the hempen running rigging formed a delicate but disciplined web overhead.

It was all so familiar and yet so different. Homesickness stirred in Nate's chest. In his short time aboard the *Constitution*, he had come to love the stout frigate deeply. He'd be a stranger here—friendless. Why had he accepted promotion? He'd be happier with his shipmates aboard Old Ironsides. What did he know about being an officer?

And the odds against them! When Nate originally joined the Navy, he hadn't realized the power of the enemy. Against Great Britain's three hundred great battleships, the United States Navy mustered its entire fleet—all seventeen ships. More than a hundred of the British ships were larger than Old Ironsides, and she was the biggest the U.S. Navy

had. Smaller frigates like the *Chesapeake* stood even less of a chance.

But the seventeen tiny ships had stepped up to the challenge. American warships had, so far, emerged victorious from every battle.

Now Midshipman Lawton was joining the fight. He ached for action, for revenge. He'd leave Englishmen in bloody heaps, screaming for mercy. But death was the only mercy he'd grant. The only mercy.

They reached the gangplank. "I'll be shoving off, then, sir," said Grimm. He held up one hand, palm outward. "Now, sir, no charge for an old shipmate. Remember, just yell 'Tom Grimm' if you need anything. Good luck, and prize money galore."

"Thank you," said Nate, twitching his coat straight. He stepped onto the gangplank, proud to be joining the crew of the *Chesapeake*. The thought came unbidden: *And would the crew be proud of the coward joining them?*

Nate stumbled slightly. He walked carefully up the cleats, his right hand resting on the hilt of his dirk.

The main deck lay curiously quiet. A few hands darned clothing in the foc'sle. Nate strode aft toward the quarterdeck. Several figures leaned against the rail. A man with a lieutenant's epaulet on the shoulder of his worn blue coat stood alone and stared out to sea. Nate stepped behind the officer and cleared his throat.

The man turned. He was short—shorter even than Nate’s five feet, four inches. His eyes were incredibly blue, like an arctic glacier. Their gaze locked onto the new midshipman with ferocious intensity. “Well?” he said with a voice like a cracking whip.

Nate pulled off his hat and stood bareheaded. The tin buckles of his best shoes shone as brightly as the brass buttons on his midshipman’s coat. “Midshipman Nathaniel Lawton, sir. Reporting aboard.”

The man’s face darkened. His eyes rolled upward. “Not *another* bloody young gentleman!”

## Chapter 2

# Guilty Memories

Nate stood dumbstruck. He opened his mouth, then closed it.

“Yes, another midshipman,” said the lieutenant. “Just what we need. No experienced hands, few master’s mates, only two experienced lieutenants, and what does the Navy send us?” The short man held his hands out. “More budding commodores. Lawson! D’you know the difference between the dolphin striker and the boom jaw saddle?”

Nate blushed from the soles of his feet to the tips of his hair. “Y-yes, sir, the dolphin striker—”

“Belay that! Unless you think I need lessons?” The lieutenant tilted his whole body back slightly to look Nate in the eyes. His mouth was set in a sardonic grin, but no hint of amusement reached his cold, icy blue eyes. Their intensity stole Nate’s breath away. The lieutenant sighed. “Very well, Lawson.”

“It’s Lawton, sir,” said Nate.

The man’s eyes locked onto him again. Nate felt fear for the first time since the battle with the *Guerriere*. His stomach knotted. Sweat dampened his palms.

“Very well, Lawton. I’m Westcott, second lieutenant. Do your duty, and I’ll try to make something of you. Dunnage?”

“One sea chest, being delivered later, sir.”

“Very well.” Westcott turned to a group standing by the mizzen fife rail. “Mr. Forsythe!”

A lean youth separated from the crowd and ran aft. Forsythe wore a midshipman’s “undress” uniform: a short blue jacket with long white trousers and a round, leather-billed cap. “Yes, sir?” His voice carried the barest touch of amusement. Though wearing an everyday uniform, the boy gave the impression of a dandy on a Sunday stroll.

“Mr. Nathaniel Lawton, Mr. Quentin Forsythe. Forsythe, Lawton.” Westcott drew a quick breath. “Mr. Forsythe, show Mr. Lawton the ship. Then introduce him to the gunroom.”

“One moment, Mr. Westcott.” A rich, cultured voice seemed to come from nowhere. Nate followed Westcott’s gaze to a glass-paned hatch set in the quarterdeck—the skylight to the captain’s cabin. Several panes were propped open for ventilation.

Twin gold captain’s epaulets rode the shoulders of the man faintly visible through salt-streaked glass. “Mr. Westcott,” the man said, “is that Midshipman Lawton?”

“Aye, sir,” said Westcott.

“Glad to have you aboard, Mr. Lawton. You remember, Mr. Westcott. This is the young man who saved Captain Hull’s life.”

“Yes, sir.” The black-haired lieutenant’s lip curled slightly. “The hero.”

Nate’s neck prickled. He sensed intense scrutiny from the men on deck. Beside him, Forsythe gasped.

“Succinct as ever, Mr. Westcott,” drawled the captain. “I’d like the pleasure of Mr. Lawton’s company during dinner.”

The lieutenant shot a stony glance toward Nate. “I’m sure he’ll accept, sir.”

“W-with pleasure, sir,” Nate stammered.

“Splendid. At eight bells, then. Carry on.”

“Very well, Lawton,” said Westcott. He glanced behind Nate. “Mr. Forsythe, pardon us for a moment.” His cool gaze flicked back to Nate. “So, Mr. Lawton, you come to us with some experience, eh? Just enough to try and make a fool out of your second lieutenant in your first five minutes aboard?”

“S-sir?”

Lieutenant Westcott nodded slightly. “Perhaps that wasn’t your intention. Perhaps you aren’t that bright—or that stupid. Nevertheless, Midshipman Lawton, watch yourself. You’re an officer now, even if you’re carrying a warrant instead of a commission. We’ll find if you’re worthy of the responsibility. And if not, we’ll have you back on the beach soon enough.” He paused and frowned. “Your dirk, Mr. Lawton. It should be worn on the left side.”

“Aye, aye, sir.” Nate slipped the scabbard around the front of the belt.

Westcott studied the rough hilt for a moment, his brow furrowed. Then he beckoned to Forsythe with an imperious finger. “Mr. Forsythe, Midshipman Lawton probably knows this ship better than you do,” said the lieutenant, “but show him around anyway. Truck to keelson, Mr. Forsythe.”

Forsythe cleared his throat. “Uh, aye, aye, sir,” he said.

The short lieutenant’s eyes narrowed. “A problem, Midshipman Forsythe?”

“Oh, no, sir,” the dapper midshipman said hastily. “Truck to keelson. Aye, aye, sir.”

Westcott glanced at the watchglass by the binnacle, then turned to Nate. “You’ve got about forty-five minutes.” He glanced up and down Nate’s uniform. “At least you’re already wearing formal uniform. Try not to let your guide get lost. Dismissed.”

Behind the mainmast and out of sight of the lieutenant, Nate stopped to draw a sleeve across his forehead. “Whew!”

Forsythe laughed. He pulled off his hat and ran his fingers lightly through his blond hair. “Old Wessie keelhailed you proper, that’s for certain,” he said, slapping his hat back in place. He stuck out his hand. “Call me Quentin.”

Nate grinned and shook the boy’s hand. “Nate’ll do. Is the second lieutenant always like that?”

Forsythe leaned forward and winked. “Oh, no. *You* he liked. When I arrived, he damned my eyes and threatened to send me back to New Haven in a dress. Said something about my being like a...a....” He screwed up his forehead in puzzlement. “A bumboat woman.”

“Why?”

The dapper midshipman shook his head dejectedly. “I don’t know. I’d no sooner climbed up from the boat—”

Nate blinked. “Boat?”

“I hired some crazy one-legged sailor to row me out here.”

Nate closed his eyes. “Uh, Quentin, how long have you been in the Navy?”

“All morning,” Forsythe said glumly. He looked at Nate timidly. “You’ve been...I mean, you’ve seen action?”

“Yeah.” Nate had hoped to keep it quiet, but the captain’s comments had squashed that. It was in Captain Hull’s report, after all. Not all of it, though. Only Nate knew the truth of what had happened that day. How would Quentin react if he knew? “I was a powder monkey when the *Constitution* took the *Guerriere*. Quarterdeck carronade.”

“A powder monkey?” Forsythe fidgeted with his dirk’s gold-encrusted hilt. “Just an ordinary sailor? I thought to become a midshipman you needed some influence. I mean....”

Nate shook his head. “Letting everybody in now, I guess,” he said lightly. Forsythe’s attitude irritated him somehow. He changed the subject. “Tell me about the other officers.”

“Don’t know much yet.” Forsythe lowered his voice. “But they’ve told me about Westcott. He’s short—did you notice that?”

Nate nodded. “Kinda hard to miss.”

“Well, don’t mention it in his hearing. He’s sensitive about it, and he’s eager to call out anyone who insults him.”

“Call out?”

“Challenge to a duel. One of the other midshipmen said he’s fought at least five times.” The dapper young man lunged clumsily forward with an imaginary sword. “Touché! I’d sure love to watch next time.”

“Forsythe!”

The blond boy clattered to attention in a panic. The second lieutenant stood beside the mizzenmast.

“I told you to show Mr. Lawton the ship, not give him dancing lessons. You still bucking for that dress, Mr. Forsythe?”

“Aye, aye, sir. I mean, no, sir. I mean—”

“Get on with it, then!”

Nate touched him on the elbow. “C’mon, let’s go aloft. Truck to keelson, remember.”

“Uh, what is the truck, anyway?”

“The very top of the main t’gallant mast. It’s as high as you can get.”

The color drained from Forsythe’s face. “How high?”

“A hundred feet or so.”

“Oh,” croaked Forsythe. “Well, we’d better get going.”

Nate watched him for a moment. “You haven’t done this before, have you?”

The other boy shook his head.

“Come on. It’s fun. I’ll help.”

Ten minutes later, they were back on deck. Forsythe had gritted his teeth, gripping spar and shroud with grim determination. They’d stood together on the main royal yard and clasped hands across the truck.

Forsythe sighed as his feet touched the deck again. “Now it’s just the easy part. I know my way around downstairs.”

“Belowdecks,” Nate corrected. “And they’re not ‘stairs’; we call ’em ladders.”

They walked to the main hatchway and started down the narrow steps. An incredible odor engulfed them. Sweat, barnyard, privy—the air stank of them all. Nate found it familiar and, surprisingly, comforting.

“Pfew!” said Forsythe below him on the ladder. “I’ll never, *never* get used to the smell. This is the gun deck.”

It was aptly named. Two rows of great cannon were lashed to the deck. Shot garlands filled with dull black cannonballs lined the inner hull. Dull sunlight filtered through the open gunports. The gratings set in the hatch above cast checkered shadows on the red-painted deck.

Confusion whispered in Nate's mind. At first glance, he could still have been aboard the *Constitution*. But little differences threw him. Colors were off; some equipment was installed in different places.

It kept Nate off balance. It was like coming home from school and finding the entire house repainted and the furniture redone—the same building, but not the same feel. He longed to go home to Old Ironsides.

Forsythe scanned the gun deck. “A dreary place. Why do they paint it red?”

Nate answered without thinking. “To hide the blood.”

The aristocratic young midshipman looked surprised for a moment. Then his eyes flashed. “Really?” He glanced around avidly.

“Yeah. Me ’n the other powder monkeys on the *Constitution* spread sand on the deck before action to help soak up blood so the gun crews could keep their footing.”

Nate glanced down. He remembered Billy Danforth, his best friend on Old Ironsides. He could still see Billy's blank, unseeing eyes when Nate had found him sprawled dead on the gun deck, the bloody sand beneath his body. He remembered the white-hot rage that had seared his heart,

that had sent him on deck looking for a gun, any gun, to kill Englishmen. He'd succeeded—and failed. Failed horribly.

“Seen enough?” Forsythe’s voice was cheerful. “C’mon, let’s go.” Forsythe clattered down the ladder. “This is the... uh...uh...spar deck.”

Nate hid a grin behind his hand. Forsythe was already lost. The spar deck was the upper deck, also called the main deck or the weather deck. “Berth deck, Quentin.”

“Oh, yeah. The gunroom is forward of here.”

They continued to descend. “Orlop,” announced Nate. “Powder magazine and other stores. The hold is at the bottom of the ladder.”

A new smell rose from below. Nate knew it well. Disquiet grew within him. Guilt, and pain. He paused at the top of the last section of ladder.

“Dark down here,” grumbled Forsythe from below. He stuck his head above the coaming. “Here, light that lantern for me, will you?”

Nate picked the battle lantern off its becket with nerveless fingers. He opened the door, turned up the wick, and struck the flint. “Here.”

Forsythe ducked back below. Nate followed slowly. He knew what he’d find.

They’d reached the bottom. The lantern barely held back the darkness of the hold, the lowest part of the ship. Forsythe stepped into a small cleared area. Around them lay

coils of thick, mud-caked anchor cable. The smell—stench, really—was overpowering.

*The cable tier. I'm back in the cable tier.* Nate's knees buckled. He sat heavily on the lowest step of the ladder. Every breath drew in rancid, musty air.

Forsythe coughed. He pulled off his soft, round undress cap and ruffled his blond hair. "As far as we go, I reckon." He coughed again. "Didn't think the smell could get any worse. Grant said it's from all the mud the anchor cable picks up from the harbor floor."

Nate barely heard him as memories of the *Constitution* flooded back. After finding Billy dead, he'd raced up to the main deck, looking for Britons to kill.

And, astoundingly, there they were. The British frigate had rammed the *Constitution's* quarterdeck. Enemy sailors in striped shirts had swarmed in the *Guerriere's* bowsprit rigging above the American ship's deck. Nate saw their muskets swing toward the *Constitution's* captain, who stood unprotected on the quarterdeck.

A swivel gun—a small cannon—lay unattended on the rail. Nate had leaped to it, turned it on the British sailors, and pulled the lanyard.

Grapeshot swept the enemy from the rigging like autumn leaves. One fell to the deck in front of him. Nate had cried out in horror.

After that, he remembered little. He'd regained his senses in the darkness of the hold, among the stinking coils

of anchor rope—here, in the cable tier, far from his post on the spar deck.

Nate had hidden from battle. He had deserted his post, had run away under fire to the one part of the ship that enemy cannon fire couldn't reach.

A coward.

A hand touched his shoulder. He jumped.

“Sorry, Nate,” said Forsythe. “You all right?”

Nate's lips pulled apart in a ghastly grin. “Sure.” Fortunately, his face lay in shadow.

Suddenly, he could stand it no longer. “C'mon, let's get to the gunroom.” He rose and turned. As he climbed the ladder, he remembered his return to the spar deck of the *Constitution* after hiding away. The unnatural quiet. The sight of the *Guerriere* rolling helplessly in the waves, all her masts gone. The burning shame as everyone smiled at him—*mocking the coward*, he'd assumed. Then the shock of Captain Hull's hearty thanks. The amazement at promotion. The shame—and the guilty elation.

Many had seen him save the captain, but no one had seen him run away.

Forsythe followed him up the ladder, past the orlop to the berth deck. The deck beams overhead were just high enough that they didn't have to crouch.

Now Nate scented familiar territory. “Ah!” he breathed, recognizing the screen door to the gunroom. Forsythe darted forward and opened it. “After you, sir.”

Nate removed his hat. “Thanks.” He shook clear of memories and stepped through into the midshipmen’s quarters. Dim light filtered through several open scuttles. A long, scarred table ran through the center of the cabin, and a ragtag assortment of chairs and chests lay strewn about.

Two young men sat below one of the scuttles. Sunlight fell on the chessboard between them. One glanced up, then returned his gaze to the game. Other, younger boys lounged around the crowded room.

“Gentlemen, may I introduce Nate Lawton,” said Forsythe. “Just come aboard. Lawton, your shipmates. Mr. Grant and Mr. Roebuck.” Forsythe gestured toward the chess players. One waved his hand languidly. Forsythe went on. “Wyndham, Beverly, Fincham, and that underaged pile of lard...,” he pointed at a young, pudgy boy eating a roll, “is Parr.”

“C’mon, quit it,” said the youngster. Nate couldn’t see how Parr could possibly be more than twelve.

Forsythe giggled. “If you’re ever shipwrecked, make sure Parr’s with you. He claims he can find food anywhere.” He bowed to the younger boy. “As long as he’s willing to share it with his pals.”

The mention of food reminded Nate of something. Far away on the spar deck, the ship’s bell clanged eight times. *The captain’s invitation!*