

Nate Lawton's War of 1812

THE PRICE OF COMMAND

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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,
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Prologue

New York City, 1813

Midshipman Nate Lawton awoke sputtering as dust and gravel pattered across his face. A wagon had just passed on the road behind him, flinging the dirt of the sovereign state of New York into the ditch like a farmwife feeding hens. Nate sat up and shot an accusing glance at the back of the unsuspecting wagonmaster.

The fifteen-year-old rubbed his back and yawned mightily. The June sun floated low in the eastern sky. The sea breeze brought the tang of the harbor to his nose. He automatically tamped down his short black hair.

The boy yawned again, only to be stopped short by a tremendous growl from his stomach. He threw back the scrap of canvas doing duty as a blanket and fumbled for his coin purse. Just a touch was necessary—he knew to the penny how much it held.

His belly moaned again like a discontented cow. *All right*, he told it. *Today. We'll eat today.*

Maybe the dispatch would have arrived at the naval yard. Maybe by noon he'd be signed aboard a Navy ship, snug in the gunroom with his fellow midshipmen, eating beef, pork, peas, and soft tack. Maybe he'd get an advance on his pay

and buy one of the meat pies whose aroma made it so hard to pass the Merry Dutchman tavern on the way to the yard.

To the clerk's office at once, then. Nate's pillow had been a flaccid seabag. He dug into it and hauled out a brown coat—his hated brown civilian coat. He shrugged it on over his patched white shirt and blue trousers, then gathered his dunnage and headed toward New York Naval Yard.

Chapter 1

The Message

“Lawton? Lawton?” said the clerk, dressed all in black. “What kind of message?”

Nate groaned inwardly. The man behind the desk hadn’t been there on his previous visits. It had taken quite a long time to make the last clerk, the one with bushy ginger hair, understand his situation. There was nothing to do but go through it again.

“I’m on parole,” Nate explained. “I was captured by the British and released on the condition that I not serve until one of their midshipmen was returned.”

Not serve. At the time he’d accepted parole, Nate hadn’t realized what that would mean. He wasn’t allowed to perform any naval duties. He couldn’t even wear his uniform.

Worst of all, he wasn’t paid. Real officers held commissions and received half-pay when they weren’t on active service. So did real midshipmen. But Nate was an acting midshipman—one without a formal appointment from the Secretary of the Navy. He’d earned promotion on the U.S.S. *Constitution* almost a year earlier, after her victory over the British frigate *Guerriere*. But his appointment hadn’t yet been confirmed. As an acting midshipman, he served at the whim of the Navy Department. No assignment,

no pay. Nate's nineteen dollars a month would restart once he signed aboard a ship, but that could only happen when his parole ended.

He hadn't been on active duty long enough to put any money aside—just two weeks aboard the *Chesapeake* prior to its capture. Then the commander of the Boston Naval Yard had sent him to New York with dispatches; that counted as another ten days' duty. But he'd been in New York almost a month. What little he'd saved was almost gone.

His stomach growled again.

The clerk looked at him disapprovingly. "Nasty trait, young man." He lifted a handful of dispatches from a wooden tray on his desk and started skimming through them. "Lawton, Lawton...." He stopped. He tilted one bundle to the window alongside his desk. His lips pursed. "Midshipman Nathaniel Lawton?"

Nate's heart leaped. "Yes, sir!"

Nate's fingers quivered as they touched the proffered envelope. He broke the seal and read. It was from the Boston Yard commandant!

Sir,

I am pleased to inform you that the exchange of Midshipman Cecil Hampstead-Ross, Royal Navy, was carried out on the 20th of June, 1813. Henceforth, consider yourself returned to duty status.

"Yahoo!" Nate tore off his brown coat and emptied his seabag on the floor. Out came his blue uniform coat; out came the battered hat that Lieutenant Cox had given him to

replace his own. No more sleeping in a ditch! A nice soft hammock and food, food, food!

Out, too, came an oilskin-wrapped bundle. Nate peeled the cloth away carefully, almost reverently. Polished leather suddenly gleamed in the darkness of the office. Brass glistened at the end of a scabbard; a silver lion's head glittered on the butt of a knife so large it was practically a sword. Nate buckled the dirk, the emblem of a midshipman, on his left side, adjusting its position with a hand lightly placed on the ivory and silver hilt.

The clerk watched him with an arched eyebrow. "Beautiful weapon, sir," he said.

Nate drew himself to attention and locked his dark brown eyes on the man. "My parole is completed, sir. Which ships in harbor have a midshipman's berth available?"

The clerk's other eyebrow arched. "None."

"What?" Nate's knees quivered.

The clerk rose from behind his desk and slid a wooden chair forward. "Here, boy. Sit before you fall down."

"There...there has to be at least one ship that needs me."

A gust of fresh wind tugged across Nate's face as the clerk opened his window all the way. The smell of tar and tallow wafted around them. "I'm sorry, Lawton. Yes, there are probably ships in port that need a midshipman or two. But under normal circumstances, we don't assign them." The man sighed and settled behind the desk. "It's under the discretion of each ship's captain. They pick their midshipmen. And just between you and me, they usually

pick the sons of friends or influential politicians. Surely you noticed that on your last ship?"

"No, it wasn't that way. Although..." Nate trailed off. *Captain Lawrence had been assigned to the ship just before I reported aboard.* "Without a captain assigned, the Navy Department must have picked the midshipmen."

The clerk nodded. "Just so. The power in the Navy rests with the captains. It's their word that goes, be it in matters of life and death or in what victualler supplies the men's grub. You can't argue with the captain." The man chuckled. "It's called mutiny. It's not good for your career—or your neck." He studied Nate for a moment. "Now, if you have a dollar or two to spend, I might be able to get you some interviews—"

The door to the office banged open. "*Gamani geaun shaw!*" roared a figure silhouetted in the entry.

The clerk narrowed his eyes around the sudden glare. "What in all that's holy...?"

The newcomer strode into the office. He didn't have a neck, merely a wrinkled mound of craggy flesh on his shoulders—a mound that tapered to a wild patch of thinning brown hair. The shoulders themselves were broad—incredibly so. His body was on the stout side; his jacket bulged between buttons.

"That's 'God bless all here' for all poor souls not born Irish," said the man, a lilt strong in his voice. "Ned McCaffrey's the name, quartermaster by the grace of God and saloon-keeper thanks to my *Macedonian* prize money."

Nate remembered the H.M.S. *Macedonian*, captured almost a year earlier by the frigate *United States*. The

captured ship had been bought into U.S. Navy service, with the money going to the captain, officers, and crew of the victorious American frigate. “Prize money,” it was called—a standard practice in all navies.

It hadn’t come without cost, apparently. McCaffrey’s left hand was gone, replaced by a gleaming brass hook.

The quartermaster noticed Nate. He touched the hook to his forelock in salute. “Mornin’, sir,” he said.

Nate bowed slightly. “Good morning, quartermaster.”

McCaffrey flashed perfect teeth at him. “Aye, ’tis.” He turned to the clerk. “Now, my fine lad, I’m ready to give up the thrall of commerce to go back to sea. What’s the word around the scuttlebutt? C’mon, you’ve every chance to know. What ships might be needing an experienced timoneer?”

The clerk cleared his throat. He hooked a finger into his stock like it had suddenly constricted around his neck. “Well, like I was telling the midshipman here, the decisions are all up to the captains....”

The quartermaster slashed his hook negligently. “Sure, I know that, and so, I wager, does our young Decatur here. But you clerks are the spiders of the Navy, feeling the wee vibrations from every ship. All I and Midshipman, er....”

“Lawton,” supplied Nate, his hope growing.

“...Midshipman Lawton want to know is which ships might be undermanned. We’ll talk to the captains ourselves.” He looked pointedly at the black-clad office-dweller. “No intermediaries required, if’n you catch my drift.”

The clerk hemmed and hawed. “Well, to tell the truth, they’ve all got full, or even over-full, complements. The British blockade, you understand. No merchantmen are sailing, so the officers and men are without berths. They flooded onto the Navy ships months ago.”

The back of Nate’s neck burned. *The clerk wouldn’t have told me that outright. He wanted his bribe to string me along and bleed me paler than I already am.*

Hunger and despair gave Nate’s voice a sharp tone. “Well, then, I’ll be off.” He whirled around, then stumbled through the door to the brightness outside. The sun, coupled with his burning anger, hit him like a flaming timber. New York Navy Yard swirled around him.

“Vast, there, mate. You look ready to drop.” A hand grasped Nate’s arm. “Set your course by me.”

McCaffrey guided Nate to a stone bench under a tree. “A likely anchorage here, Mr. Lawton, darlin’. Bide here a wee bit.” The craggy face, like the map of some forbidding mountain range, swam before Nate’s vision. “When did you eat last?”

The answer came out before Nate could stop it. “Day before yesterday.”

“For the love of Mary! Stay here. I’ll get grub.”

The quartermaster returned a few minutes later bearing newspaper-wrapped packages. Nate’s quivering nose identified them quickly. *Meat pies!* He tore the first one open. Then guilt and pride arose. He looked McCaffrey square in the face. “I can’t afford to pay you back.”

The man waved his hook. “No need. Dig in, lad. You need it.”

Nate needed no additional encouragement. He wolfed down the first pie in moments while McCaffrey yarned about the *United States*’s battle with the British frigate—how he’d stayed by the wheel, even after his left hand had been torn off by the round shot that cut down two other quartermasters.

Nate unwrapped the second pie more leisurely. McCaffrey said, “You seem to have had some sea time, Mr. Lawton, darlin’. What ships?”

Somewhat nonplussed at being called “darlin’” for the second time, Nate replied, “*Constitution* and *Chesapeake*.”

The quartermaster was silent for a moment. “Were you on her at the end?”

Nate nodded glumly. The British frigate H.M.S. *Shannon* had captured them after a vicious fifteen-minute fight.

McCaffrey’s chin lowered to his chest. “Lost a lot of mates on the *Chesapeake*, I’ll wager.”

Memories flooded back: Captain Lawrence, mortally wounded early in the battle, screaming orders as they carried him below; most of the other midshipmen killed or wounded; and a man Nate had come to respect more than anyone else in his life, Lieutenant Daniel Westcott, impaled on a British boarding pike.

Somber thoughts became Nate’s other lunchtime companion. Almost unseen, McCaffrey gathered up the scraps of newspaper torn from the pastries. He paused for

a moment, scanning one page. “Well, speak o’ the devil. Here’s an account of the battle itself.”

Nate took the newspaper page. “The Death of Lawrence,” read the headline. “An Account by a Surviving Officer.”

The article was dated the 15th of June, from the British fleet base at Halifax, Nova Scotia. Nate scanned the story. Phrases popped out: “Pursuant to orders received from the Naval Department...First Lieutenant Borodin and the master cut down by round shot...Captain Lawrence directed the battle with blood pouring down his trousers until felled by a second wound.”

Nate read on and felt his face grow warm. “...A gallant, last-ditch defense of the forecassle by men under the command of Midshipman Nathaniel Lawton...colors struck at approximately 6:15...casualties are as appended....”

Then Nate received the start of his life. The report was signed “Lieutenant Daniel Westcott, United States Navy.”

Westcott hadn’t died! He was alive! Nate, his belly sated for the first time in days, began to laugh. He roared, clutching the newspaper page in one hand.

“What’s so funny, lad?” asked McCaffrey, a trace of a smile on his own lips.

All Nate could do was hold out the newspaper and point at the story.

A shadow fell. A hand snatched up the paper.

A lieutenant dressed in blue and gold glared down. “I see nothing funny about the death of the finest man in the United States Navy. Explain yourself, Midshipman!”

Chapter 2

“One, Sir! By the Mark, One!”

Nate rose to his feet, his mirth melting like ice on a griddle. He stammered a few times. “Uh, uh, sir, it’s not the captain—Captain Lawrence, that is. It’s Mr. Westcott. He’s alive! They’d run him through with a pike. I thought he was dead.”

The man looked at Nate quizzically. The gold epaulet on his left shoulder, the sign of his rank, glittered in the morning sun. “Dan Westcott? Ornery cuss was too contrary to die, even with a foot of British steel in his guts. How did you know him?”

“I was on the *Chesapeake*, sir.”

Recognition flashed across the man’s red face. “You’re... what’s his name? Lawton? The one who took command?”

“Aye, aye, sir.” Nate gestured toward his companion. “This is Ned McCaffrey, quartermaster, formerly of the *United States*.”

McCaffrey stood and saluted. “God be with you, Lieutenant Perry.”

The lieutenant nodded. Neat curls, all the current fashion, bobbed at his temples. He studied the beefy man for a moment. “McCaffrey, yes. We were on the *Enterprise* when I was a midshipman.” He turned back to Nate. “What ship, Mr. Lawton?”

“None, sir. My parole has been completed, but there don’t seem to be any berths available. For me or McCaffrey.”

A slow smile spread over Perry’s face. “Well, this is both our lucky day, then. I’m Lieutenant Matthew Calbraith Perry. My brother, Commodore Oliver Perry, is in command of the American fleet on Lake Erie. He’s desperately short of experienced men and officers and has written me to find him some. Interested?”

• • •

A British cannonball howled past. The scream of its passage brought back memories of the battle for the *Chesapeake*—memories that Nate ruthlessly pushed aside.

For one thing, the cutter *Truscott* was no frigate, and this was no fight between two equal ships. Their single-masted vessel was barely larger than the *Chesapeake*’s longboat. A single shot from either of the two British schooners chasing them would crush its flimsy scantlings. Nate, McCaffrey, and the cutter’s four-man crew would then be swimming in Lake Erie.

Nate and McCaffrey had arrived in Buffalo several days earlier, after a three-week trek with a supply convoy from New York City. To Nate’s surprise, most of the men and

supplies had been commandeered by Commodore Chauncey in Buffalo, rather than sent on to Lieutenant Perry's brother in Erie. Unlike the seamen with the convoy, though, the midshipman and the quartermaster carried orders specifically assigning them to Commodore Perry. They'd reported aboard the *Truscott* the previous morning. The cutter made a weekly round trip carrying official mail and smaller, more critical supplies that couldn't wait until a regular supply run.

The easterly winds weren't at the cutter's best point for sailing. The ship had clawed its way slowly west-southwest through the hot July sunshine and into the summer night. There were no "belowdecks" on the *Truscott*, just a shallow hold under the deck. Nate and McCaffrey wrapped themselves in blankets and slept on the foc'sle under the stars.

When the day dawned, they had only a few more miles to sail. But just when the Presque Isle Peninsula rose over the horizon, the lookout spotted the masts of several ships moving to cut them off.

The crack of a cannon brought Nate back to the present. The ball skipped across the waves, passing aft of the *Truscott*. The cutter was lightly loaded; the wind backed to the north'ard and allowed the young lieutenant in command to gain a few more knots. The mainsail lay braced hard over, and the jibsail and forestaysail stood iron-hard in the freshening breeze.

"We'll make it, lads!" shouted Captain LaChance at the tiller. The cutter was too small to be commanded by an officer holding a true captain's rank, or even that of a master-

commandant. Like the commander of any vessel, though, the lieutenant was called “captain.”

Nate saw no reason for the man’s optimism. The two schooners were already within gunshot. The entrance to Presque Isle Bay still lay a mile or more ahead of them. The *Truscott* couldn’t run to the south’ard; the shoreline was far too close already.

A different rumble came from leeward, followed closely by another. Two waterspouts erupted just ahead of the lead schooner.

Nate turned to scan the shore. A double cloud of gunsmoke eddied around a low fortification on a bluff.

“About bloody time the sojers got busy,” said McCaffrey. “Using us as bait to try an’ lure them into range, I reckon.”

The two British schooners turned sharply away. Their bows came around, and the booms braced over as they clawed to get out of the range of the new threat.

“Hands to station for entering harbor!” called LaChance. “Hanson, take in the jibs’l and forestays’l; then stand by the mainsheet. Peters, take the tiller. Devroot, to the bow with the lead.”

Nate climbed onto the bowsprit to get a better view forward. He could see the opening to Presque Isle Bay just ahead. The bay was shaped like an elongated C, with the opening narrow and shallow. But Erie was on the mainland to the south, and the tree-covered Presque Isle Peninsula would protect the fleet from the roughest weather.

The fleet! A year earlier, Nate had been aboard the *Constitution* when it had been ordered to join four other American frigates to form a raiding squadron in the West Indies. They had missed the rendezvous, though. Nate wondered what sailing in a powerful fleet would be like. He could imagine the big frigates to windward, sniffing out trouble, and the massive ships-of-the-line, with their powerful artillery. He was joining the biggest American fleet afloat!

Something splashed behind him. He turned in time to see the leadsman starting to haul his rope back onto the deck. The man glanced at the three strips of leather that had been just below the water's surface. "And a half, three!" called the leadsman. A fathom is six feet; three and a half fathoms meant about twenty-one feet of water below them.

"By the mark, three!" This time the leather strips had been right at the surface: eighteen feet.

"What d'ye draw, mate?" Nate heard McCaffrey's voice ask one of the crew.

"Four feet, or a bit more," came the reply. So at the last sounding, they still had at least fourteen feet below the keel.

"Helm a'lee," called Captain LaChance. "Bring her head to starboard three points. Hanson, mind the sheets."

They curved around to the northwest. Ahead, Nate could see a small bay on the easternmost tip of the peninsula. But Presque Isle Bay was off to their left. Several ships rested at anchor at the far end.

"And a half, two!"

They held their course as the small bay grew nearer.

“And a half, one!”

Nate gulped. Right now, he’d have to stoop to walk between the keel and the bottom of the lake.

“Helm a’weather,” called the captain. “Larboard, six points. Sheets!”

The bow of the *Truscott* swung hard to the left. The boom pivoted over as the crew frantically trimmed the sails to the new course.

“One, sir! By the mark, one!”

Captain LaChance cursed. “That damned east wind! It’s stolen the water from this end of the lake. Hanson, take in the mains’l quickly! Peters, strike the gaff! She’ll be dismayed if we ground at this speed!”

Men dived for lines. The cutter slowed as the men took in sail with desperate speed. McCaffrey relieved the captain at the tiller. The leadsman’s voice cracked: “A quarter less one, Captain.” Six inches under the keel!

The bowsprit jerked beneath Nate. He grabbed the timber with all his strength.

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph,” said McCaffrey. “We’ve touched.”

The spar shook again. Nate held his breath, but the cutter kept moving.

“Two, sir,” the leadsman said, almost laughing. “Two fathoms!” A pause. “By the mark, three, sir!”

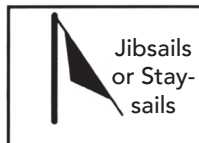
All across the little boat, men sighed with relief. The captain pulled off his round hat and mopped his forehead with a tar-covered handkerchief.

Nate turned his attention to the bay. A couple of schooners, some gunboats, two big brigs, and a smaller one lay at moorings. They could be scout ships for the fleet, but they were all a bit small. He walked back to the quarterdeck and lifted his hat to the captain. “When’s the fleet due back, sir?”

LaChance looked at him quizzically. He gestured forward to the tiny ships. “That *is* the fleet, Mr. Lawton.”

A Guide to Rigs

The rig of sailing vessel is determined by the number of masts, their positions, and the sails that can be set.



Sloop



Cutter



Schooner



Topsail Schooner



Ketch



Brig



Hermaphrodite Brig



Brigantine



Ship-Rigged



Barque



Barquentine



Erie, Pennsylvania and the Presque Isle Peninsula