



Revolutionary War Naval Simulation

This lesson will demonstrate to students the ways in which the Continental Navy, American privateers, and merchant sailors contributed to the winning of the American Revolution.

Directions: Divide the class into three groups, designated as an American Navy frigate crew, a privateer crew and the crew of a merchant ship. Each group needs to select a spokesman to be “Captain”. (This is also a good time to mention the different authority structures on ships: in “real life” on the Navy ship, the Captain would make all decisions, the merchant crew might have more input, and the privateer would be very likely to have the most “democratic” system. For the simulation, though, crew votes will decide each ship’s course of action for each encounter.)

The **navy frigate crew** is part of the brand-new American Navy. Their priority is winning the war against Great Britain. A frigate is a fast, medium-sized sailing warship. Prize money is paid to navy crews who capture an enemy warship, but it’s not very much compared to the profits gained by a privateer. On the other hand, the naval ship is the most powerful of the three.

The **privateer crew** has a license to capture British ships, for profit. The ship is fast, well-armed, and specifically intended for pursuit and capture of enemy vessels.

The **merchant ship** is trying to carry on ordinary business, but also has a “letter of marque” (that is, legal permission) to capture British ships if it can do so. This can make a voyage extra-profitable, or tempt a Captain to unnecessary disaster. Remember delivering supplies is very important to the army, as well.

The teacher should assign a student to keep “score” of each group’s “War Winning”, “Fortune”, and “Misery” points on a blackboard.

Each group will be told that they encounter four different enemy ships: a **frigate** (warship), a **ship-of-the-line** (major warship), an enemy **privateer**, and a **merchant ship**. To be successful in the simulation, the students need to understand their own ships’ missions and capabilities.

A helpful aid would be a set of sailing ship silhouettes to hold up, indicating which kind of enemy each crew encounters each turn. The simulation improves if the teacher makes each crew encounter a different ship each turn: for instance, “Hmmm, it seems that the privateer crew has sighted a frigate. Merchants, you have a sail on the horizon,

too; an English ship of the line. And our American navy frigate has sighted an enemy merchant ship. What do you each do?"

It will add even more, if instead of referring to "privateer, frigate, and merchant", each ship takes a name: for instance, "Liberty", "USS South Carolina", and "Poor Richard". However, if you do this, make sure you AND your students are well aware which ship is which. Remember only the Navy ship should have "USS" in front of its name.

For each encounter, get the "crew" to tell you what they've decided to do: Fight, or Evade (run away). Read them the proper results from the table below.

First Encounter:
English Frigate

Navy: Fight: you have a ferocious battle; both ships are practically destroyed. An American naval legend is born when you limp back into port towing the ruined hulk of an English frigate. Each surviving crew member receives a small amount of prize money and stories they can tell their grandchildren. More importantly, the new Continental Navy gets more respect both from the enemy and from neutral countries.

War winning: +3 Fortune: +1

Evade: The Royal Navy sailors tell jokes up and down the coast about the so-called Continental Navy which turns tail at the smell of gunpowder. Congress reprimands the Captain, who takes it out on the crew.

Misery: +2

Privateer: Fight: The English Captain shakes his head in wonder at your unmitigated gall. You are massively outgunned, and it is only through clever seamanship and good fortune that you escape in your badly-damaged ship. Your investors are angry about the costs of repair although the newspapers write glowing accounts of your heroism. Crew members brag about your fighting qualities but secretly consider shipping out on a less reckless ship.

War winning: +1 Fortune: -1 Misery: +1

Evade: You easily outsail the larger ship and go on your way. The frigate sighted you, and a whole English squadron is diverted to look for privateers in this area, so even though you are long gone you kept the British navy very busy and frustrated.

War winning: +2

Smuggler: Fight: No, no, you were supposed to GET prize money, not provide prize money to the English. You are captured but miraculously escape to get a new ship and start over.

Evade: You get to the West Indies and pick up a crucial load of supplies. Looks like a fine voyage to come.

Fortune: +2

English Ship-of-the-Line:

ANY: Fight: this hopeless battle quickly lands your ship in Prize Court and your crew in a prison hulk in Boston harbor. Start over with a new ship and crew.

Evade.

English Privateer:

Navy: Fight: although she's a capable craft against merchantmen, this ship is an easy prize for you. You are commended for the capture and receive prize money, too. Her cannons are delivered to the Colonial army and assist General Washington in his next battle.

War: +2 Fortune: + 1

Evade: Alright, now, running from a mere privateer is NOT what they commissioned you to do. Seeing his chance, an ambitious junior officer gets you court-martialed so HE can take over the ship.

Privateer: Fight: an even match, but with superior Colonial cunning you take this English prize. You add her cannons to your own and sell everything aboard her, reaping a fine profit.

Fortune: +4

Smuggler: Fight: She's much better outfitted for fighting than you, but you successfully capture the English privateer. Unfortunately your ship and cargo are so damaged in the process that you are barely able to cover the costs of repair and replacement with your prize money.

Evade: You deliver a load of badly-needed military supplies, reaping an extravagant profit.

War +3, Fortune +2

English supply ship:

(Before the Navy decides what to do, inform them that the Captain's orders are to remain on post, and that if you pursue this ship you will almost certainly wind up violating these orders. Ships can "fight" or "ignore", rather than "evade", this time.)

Navy: Fight: you really shouldn't have left your post, but the prize was too juicy to turn down. An easy capture grants you and your crew reward money, but you are

censured because an English coastal raider was able to get through while you were off playing Long John Silver.

War: -1, Fortune +1

Ignore: Shortly thereafter, you prevent raid by British Marines through your watchfulness and attention to duty. The crew grumbles that they'd rather have prize money than thanks from Congress, but the officers are happy to be commended for their vigilance.

War: +2, Misery +1

Privateer: This is what you signed up for – fat British prizes stuffed with valuable goods.

War +1, Fortune +3

Smuggler: This is why you arranged for a Letter of Marque, and your profits from this voyage will be doubled.

War +1, Fortune +3

(OF COURSE these ships will decide to attack – if for some bizarre reason they do not, give them extra misery points – one for the smuggler, but four or five for the privateer.)

NB: Approximate outcome: if the ships did everything “right”, not counting random events, final score will be:

Navy: War 7, Fortune 2, Misery 1

Privateer: War 3, Fortune 7

Merchant: War 5, Fortune 6

In-between events:

-weevils in the biscuits: Misery +1

-receive a salute from a foreign fort in the West Indies: War +1

-mutiny (Naval) and discipline crackdown: Misery +1

-boring mission (Naval) Misery +1, war winning +1

-smuggle a loyalist spy out of the country: fortune +1, war -1!

-Royal Navy sailors desert and join merchant crew: War +1

Summary:

You can see how American sea power contributed to the Revolutionary War effort in three ways. The Navy protected American shipping and began to build the United States' reputation overseas; the privateers interfered with British shipping and distracted the Royal Navy; the merchants provided critical supplies.

For their trouble, the Navy certainly received the least financial reward.