

By the Dawn's Early Light

by Sumi Watters

(497 words)

I am a prisoner, being held against my will aboard my own ship. My crime? Coming to the defence and negotiating the release of a friend, a decent family man wrongfully accused of espionage and betrayal.

The good doctor is not in favour of the war any more than myself. Beanes is a man of virtue, driven by what he deems right and wrong. Bringing those British deserters who'd ransacked his neighbours' farms to justice was not a display of American patriotism. He acted on principle. Nothing more. But the British army snatched him in the night anyway, and forced him aboard the HMS *Tonnant* in the Chesapeake Bay, where they held him captive—a prisoner of war.

Had my colleague Skinner and I arranged for Beanes's release sooner, we might've avoided the predicament we find ourselves in now. The negotiations and deliverance were civilised and amicable, as they ought to be amongst distinguished gentlemen. But we'd learnt far too many details of Admiral Ross's plan to launch an attack on Fort McHenry and, by extension, my beloved city of Baltimore and its harbour in the coming hours. They allowed us to return to the comforts of the *Minden* with one proviso: that our heavily guarded truce vessel be tethered securely to theirs and anchored some distance from the shore until the outcome of the battle was decided.

We are powerless, Skinner and me. Detained at sea, unable to warn our fellow countrymen of the imminent danger.

Ross's fleet of heavily armed battleships began its shock and awe assault on Fort McHenry in the early hours of 13 September. We watched in horror from *Minden's* deck as cast-iron bombs, each weighing as much as a well-fed farm boy, and Congreve rockets pelted down on the pentagonal fortress throughout the day. American forces, determined to protect its stronghold, bravely countered the attack by sending a deluge of artillery towards the masted ships.

By nightfall, ominous storm clouds had rolled in from the east. Rain fell in torrents, the wind picked up speed. But the battle continued. Lightning bolts and the rockets' red flares lit up the darkened sky, creating a brilliant display, both unnerving and mesmerising. Booming explosions persisted all through the night.

Until, at last, an eerie silence—an uncertainty—descended upon us.

As dawn broke, I peered through the mist rising from the sea. And there, rising gallantly above the ramparts: our star-spangled banner, in all its glory.

I've never claimed to be a poet. An amateur, at best. But in that moment, I was inspired. I withdrew a letter from my breast pocket and scribbled the first lines of a verse in its margins.

*O, say can you see, by the dawn's early light,
What so proudly we hail'd at the twilight's last gleaming.*

'Mr Key?' Skinner said, tapping me on my shoulder and drawing me out of my creative trance. 'The British have retreated. We are free to return to Baltimore.'

THE END

[Author's note: Francis Scott **Key** (1779-1843) was inspired to write *The Star-Spangled Banner* (originally titled *Defence of Fort M'Henry*) after seeing the American flag still flying at dawn after the British bombardment of Fort McHenry during the War of 1812.]