As he stepped onto the deck of the ship, Napoleon Bonaparte received none of the usual pomp and circumstance. Turning to the captain, Napoleon took off his hat and announced, “I have come to throw myself on the protection of your Prince and laws.” Shortly after being shown his cabin aboard HMS *Bellerophon*, Napoleon insisted on a tour of the large 74-gun ship. Although the British initially refused, Napoleon was soon inspecting every aspect of the ship. Trudging through the decks, Napoleon constantly bombarded Captain Frederick Lewis Maitland with questions, “particularly about anything that appeared to him different from what he had been accustomed to see in French ships of war.” After examining the gun sights, Napoleon “asked the weight of metal [of the guns] on the different decks, disapproving of the mixture of different calibers on the quarter-deck and forecastle.” When taken aboard Admiral Henry Hotham’s flagship the following day, Napoleon continued to inquire about the ships, even questioning “the Admiral and [Captain Maitland] very minutely about the clothing and victualing of the seaman.” As Maitland would later write, “his enquiries were generally much to the purpose, and showed that he had given naval matters a good deal of consideration.”

Just as Napoleon’s firm grasp of naval affairs awed Captain Maitland, this image of Napoleon would probably surprise most people today. With the exceptions of the Battles of Aboukir Bay and Trafalgar, most works on Napoleon have neglected his other naval endeavors. Napoleon’s astute nautical knowledge, however, should be expected from a man whose childhood and early career constantly involved interaction with the navy and whose assumption of power in France placed him at the head of the second most powerful navy in the world. Challenged with the colossal task of revivifying a navy weakened by the neglect of the Bourbon monarchy and battered by the turbulence of the French Revolution, Napoleon plunged into the minutiae of naval affairs with the same vigor as he did for the army and every other matter of state. As the commander in chief, Napoleon personally devised much of France’s naval strategy and designed many naval operations with the advice of several trusted naval officers. Over the course of his fourteen and one-half years as ruler of

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France, Napoleon developed an astute command of the use of sea power. At the outset, he routinely launched risky operations that promised prodigious results if successful, but which ultimately decimated his navy. Constantly tinkering with his naval strategy, Napoleon eventually formulated a robust “fleet-in-being” strategy aimed at draining British coffers while he reconstituted his enervated navy. As his empire was collapsing in 1813, the French navy was on the verge of renewing its challenge to Britain’s control of the seas.

Born on the island of Corsica some 100 km off the coast of France, Napoleon spent most of his first ten years in the port of Ajaccio where the Bonaparte family home stood just a hundred meters from the quays of the harbor. After the French army defeated the Corsican Republic under Pasquale di Paoli in May 1769, Napoleon’s father, Carlo Bonaparte, opted to support the new French administration. This enabled Carlo to eventually obtain a scholarship for Napoleon to study at the military preparatory school at Brienne. Supposedly influenced by Count Charles Louis de Marbeuf, the French governor of Corsica and benefactor of the Bonaparte family, Napoleon initially pursued a career in the navy. As part of their training, Napoleon and the other students even slept in hammocks.2 Napoleon’s mother, Letizia, in particular, worked to dissuade him from a naval career with the warning: “My child, in the navy, you have to combat the fire and the sea.”3 The sous-inspecteur for the royal military schools, Reynaud des Monts, praised Napoleon’s mathematical abilities in 1784, concluding that “he will be an excellent sailor.”4 Napoleon, however, eventually abandoned his pursuit of a naval career, switching to the artillery branch of the army.5 Although never formally trained as a naval officer, Napoleon still

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3 Ibid.
5 There are a number of proposed theories behind Napoleon’s decision. Napoleon recounted in his memoirs that Keralio was going to recommend Napoleon in 1783, but he “died suddenly.” Keralio did not die, but rather retired in May 1783. Napoleon’s father blamed the chevalier de Keralio, who retired without securing Napoleon a slot as a naval officer at the École Militaire. With Napoleon’s younger brother Lucien coming of age for school, Carlo asked the minister of the army to allow Napoleon to move to Paris to free up the scholarship, as rules dictated that only one son could be at the school at a time. Napoleon’s older brother Joseph, however, believed his own decision to join the artillery had led Napoleon to do so as well. See Emmanuel de Las Casas, Memoirs of the Life, Exile and Conversations of the Emperor Napoleon (London, 1823), 77–78; Arthur Chuquet, La jeunesse de Napoléon (Paris, 1898); A. du Casse, ed., Mémoires et correspondance politique et militaire du Roi Joseph (Paris, 1853), 1:27.