

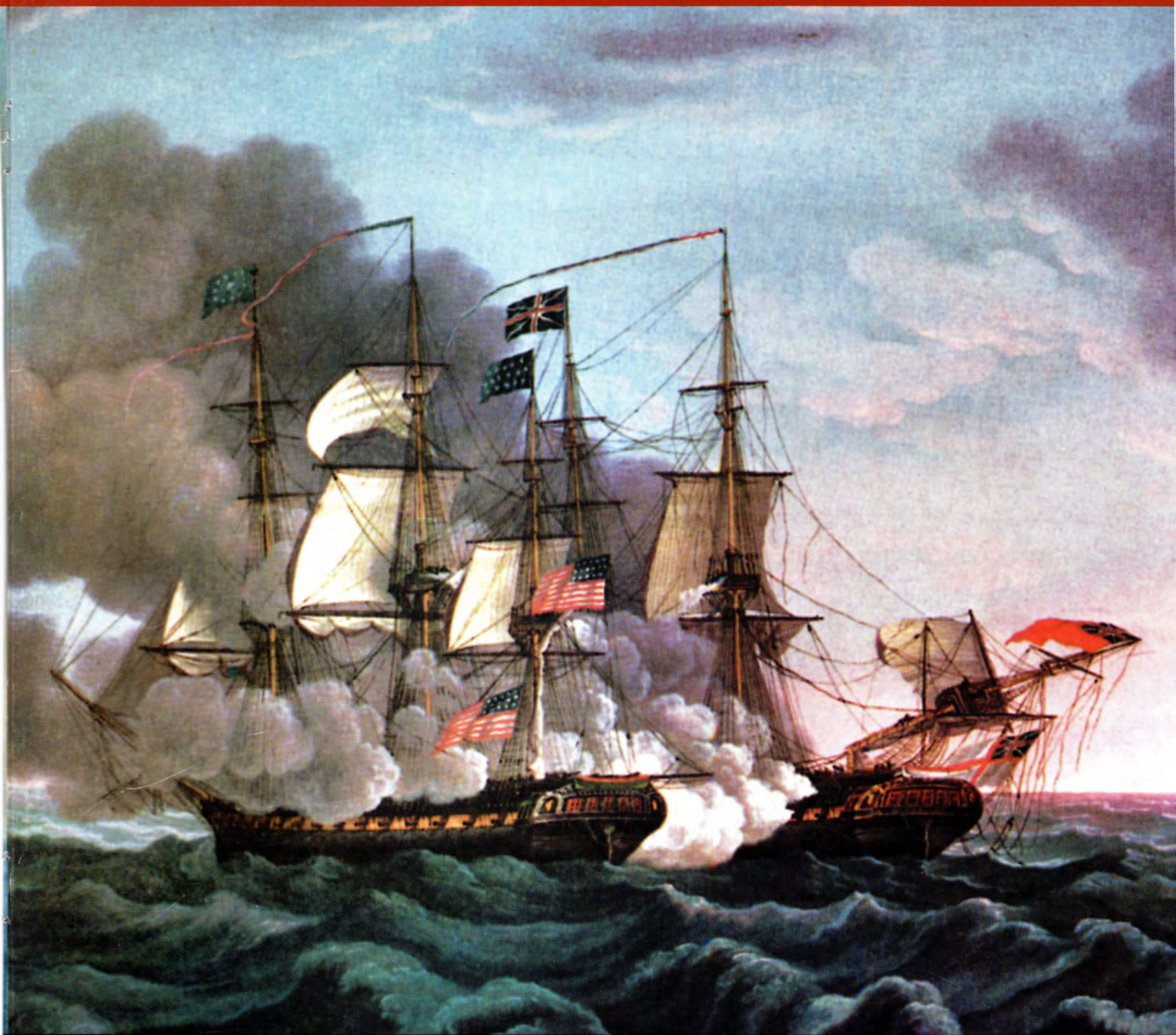
Maritime Museum of San Diego

MAINS'L HAUL

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Vol. 49: 3 & 4 Summer/Fall 2013

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Action between USS *Constitution* and HMS *Guerriere*, 19 August 1812,
depicts the two frigates firing on each other, as *Guerriere*'s mizzen mast goes over the side.

The War of 1812-1814

The Pacific Campaign

An Overview of the War of 1812

Tensions between the United States and Great Britain were on the rise in the early years of the 1800s, and were fueled by economic, free trade, and sailor's rights issues. Finally, in June 1812, war was declared by the United States, the first such action ever undertaken by the U. S. Congress.

Nearly all of the War of 1812 was fought along the U. S. East Coast, in Canada, in the Great Lakes or across the Atlantic. During the war, the fledgling U. S. Navy emerged as the key to victory amassing a record of stunning successes against the much more powerful Royal Navy. Similarly, a great many American privateers set to sea to destroy British commerce.

While American forces mobilized to invade Canada, the U. S. Navy scored two sudden and surprising frigate victories in the first months of the war with *Constitution's* defeat of HMS *Guerriere* and *United States's* capture of HMS *Macedonian*. This was followed in 1813 by Oliver Hazard Perry's victory over a British squadron in the Battle of Lake Erie. American triumphs at sea in the early days of the war stood in counterpoint to most other American campaigns on land that found little success.

By 1814, the Royal Navy clamped a dominating naval blockade on the American coast and British forces were bolstered with the addition of fresh troops freed by the end of the Napoleonic wars.

These troops attacked along the American East Coast, burned the nation's capital at Washington, D.C., and were finally turned away at Fort McHenry, in Baltimore harbor. Peace was finally in the air by the end of 1814, but not before Andrew Jackson won an impressive decision over British Regulars in the Battle of New Orleans.

Despite all the war's action along the East Coast and in the Atlantic, important wartime events occurred in the Pacific. Although largely ignored in the history books, these actions helped foretell and establish the course

of American westward expansion throughout the 1800s.

The War of 1812's Pacific actions revolved around three primary events that helped the United States expand its prolific ocean-going trade into China and the East Indies, it built the momentum that would end in the United States dominating worldwide whale oil production by the 1830s, and solidified important American claims to land in the vast Oregon country that helped the nation reach its Manifest Destiny.



Frigates *United States* and *Macedonian*, War of 1812



Striking painting of American frigate *Constitution* as painted by nineteenth century artist Thomas Birch



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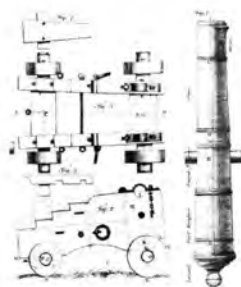
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Vol. 49: 3 & 4 Summer/Fall 2013

The War of 1812-1814: The Pacific Campaign



2

Ray Ashley, Ph.D.
From the Helm



4

Bruce Linder
The War of 1812-1814: The Pacific Campaign



18

Andrew Lambert
The British, the Pacific, and 1812



8

Mike Rees
The 1813-14 Voyage
of HMS *Raccoon*



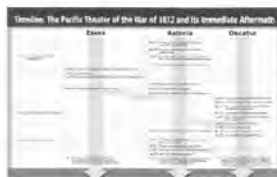
20

Andrew Lambert
The Challenge Excerpt



32

Bruce Linder
Decatur's Foray



44

Timeline: The Pacific Theater in the War
of 1812-1814 and its Immediate Aftermath



46

War of 1812
in Books

vibrant culture
vibrant city

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It was once a distant field of honor. As the appointed ground for deadly encounters, the behavioral tendencies of those who made such use of it over the centuries in duel after duel were ever predictable: brash opportunism, sensibilities easily outraged, recourse to violence on hair-trigger alert, and a thirst for reputation, even for glory, that could only be satisfied through spilt blood. For this, it was the greatest of all arenas in which to win fame and wealth by engaging in single combat. In an age associated with the advancement of reason, this was a place for which reason was habitually forsaken. But it was the requirement it imposed on choice of weapons that made it different from all other dueling grounds ever conceived, for in the Pacific, the sailing man-of-war reigned supreme and alone as the means by which nations demanded and received satisfaction.

In *Six Frigates*, Ian Toll's masterful work on the early days of the United States Navy, he pays particular attention to a cultural peculiarity among its naval officers that frequently led them to kill one another over the most trivial of differences. So irrationally pervasive was the temptation to duel that the resulting loss of officers ensued as a serious military handicap. Senior leadership attempted a phalanx of formal and informal policies to defeat it: dueling theoretically became a career destroying activity, a crime, and a dishonor. But efforts to discourage this behavior came to naught. Among the casualties, America's most laurelled naval hero, Stephen Decatur, died at the hands of a fellow officer, and a small plot in the Galapagos marks the resting place of Lt. John Cowen of the USS *Essex*, killed in a duel during the course of the epic Pacific cruise, recounted herein.¹

With narrative subtlety, Toll extrapolates from naval culture the emergence of an adolescent national character addicted to the duel, grounded by insecurity for its sovereignty, a brittle national honor easily offended, indulgence in fantasies of victory and revenge against long odds, and unrealistic notions of its own capabilities. Where other maritime nations found it economically expedient simply to mollify piratical Barbary Corsairs with bribes and ransom, the United States picked a naval fight with them at far greater expense with less dependable results. Rudely dismissed by the world's two great superpowers as they made war on each other, both riding roughshod over America's maritime rights in the meantime, the American government seriously considered declaring war on them both simultaneously.² In the end, the United States first fought an undeclared and unresolved war with France before shifting its attention, in Andrew Lambert's own dueling analogy, to the demand for satisfaction from a Britain believed to be so distracted by its Napoleonic fight for survival that it wouldn't much notice or respond. Given the apparent absence of pragmatism or even rational calculation in formulating strategy, it's perhaps most astonishing that this chain of decisions unfolded within the living memory and still under the influence of the founding fathers who drafted the United States Constitution, perhaps the most intellectual, articulate,

and rational group of political leaders ever assembled under one roof.

Not surprisingly, the tangible consequences, as noted herein, were negligible if humbling. The U.S. invasion of Canada failed, after a number of dramatic victories in single combat against British ships most of the U.S. Navy was either destroyed, captured, or neutralized by blockade, the capital of the United States was occupied and burned, and the maritime economy of the country was temporarily ruined. To that list may be added the first ominous references to possible secession, expressed not by the slave states of the future Confederacy, but by the bankrupted states of New England at the Hartford Convention.³ Indeed, some maritime outliers of the United States, notably Nantucket,

actually did announce their independent neutrality and made their own separate peace with Britain.⁴ In the end, as the following papers note, if the United States gained few or none of the objectives envisioned when issuing the challenge, the country was at least lucky to sustain no fatal or debilitating wounds in the contest.

But, these pages also argue, that in the Pacific, America did win advantages that were neither anticipated in the challenge nor even recognized for what they were when the duel was over. In what is often referred to as "the forgotten war," America also seemed to forget that others had sailed this way in centuries past, projecting national aspirations into a Pacific field of honor as a way of announcing the arrival and intensions of an upstart and ultimately a champion in the quest for seaborne empire. In successive waves, such duels had been fought by Drake and Cavendish, then by Dampier and Rogers, and finally in the most outlandish and costly of all such contests, by George Anson in his voyage of 1740-1744.

By the time USS *Essex* sailed into the Pacific and toward her contest with HMS *Phoebe* and *Cherub*, the empires of the wind were beginning to wane. When the Age of Sail began, the only nations capable of projecting seapower to distant oceans were Spain, Portugal, Britain, France, the Netherlands, and Sweden. Several centuries later, these same six nations were still the only ones capable of pursuing seaborne empire, of issuing a challenge to combat on a distant oceanic field or responding to such an affront. Then, at the very end, there entered a new dualist and the world took a different turn.

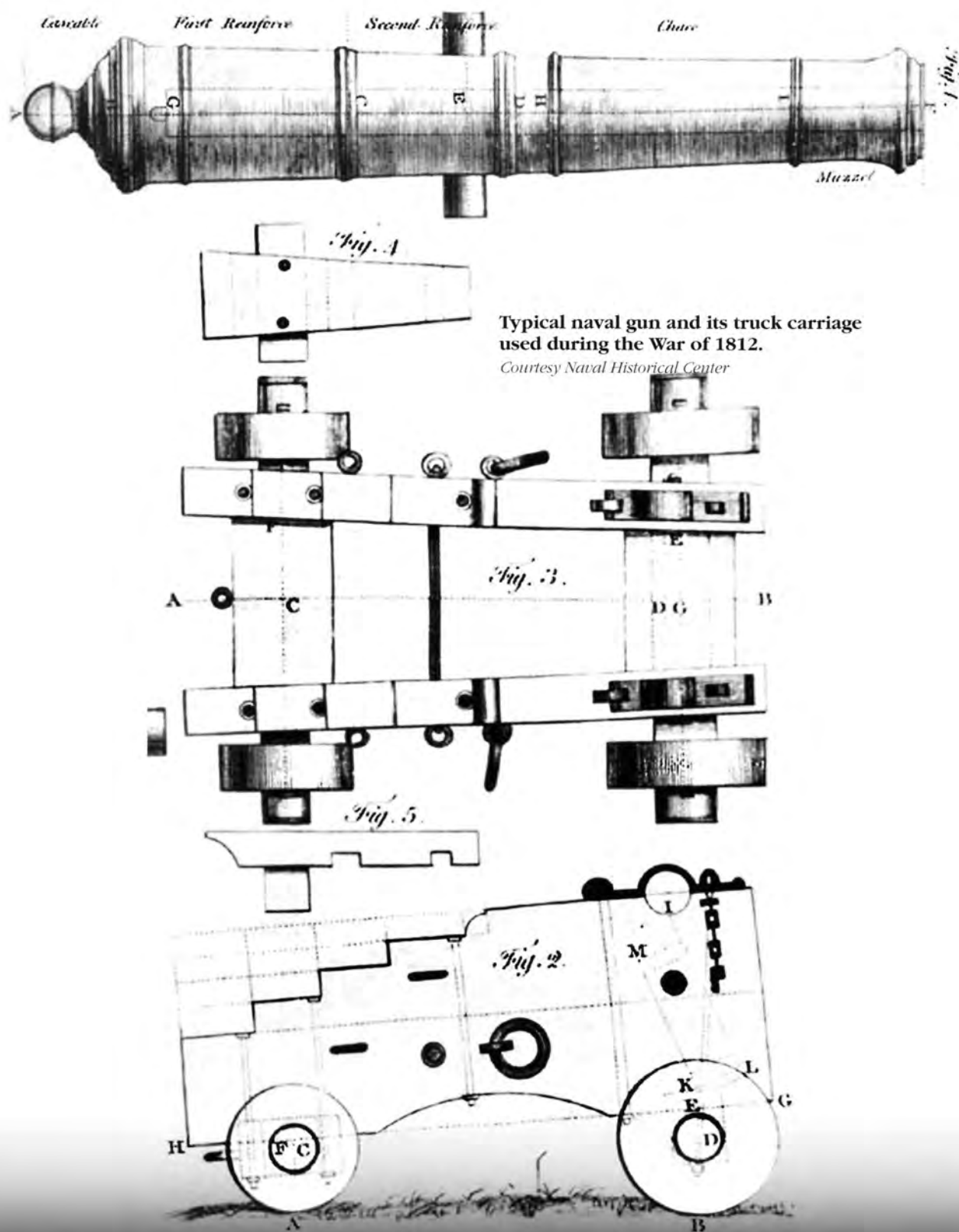
NOTES

- 1 Francis Diane Robotti and James Vescovi, *The USS Essex and the Birth of the American Navy* (Hoolbrook, Massachusetts: Adam Media Corporation, 1999), 191.
- 2 Ian Toll, *Six Frigates: The Epic History of the Founding of the US Navy* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), 327.
- 3 George C. Daughan, *1812: The Navy's War* (New York: Percy Books, 2011), 368-370. The deliberations of the convention, held in secret during the last days of 1814, were not especially seditious in nature, but they did emphasize the degree to which New England bore the consequences of the war differently than other regions of the country and portended the possibility of a separate peace if the war were not brought to a swift conclusion.
- 4 Eric Jay Dolin, *Leviathan: The History of Whaling in America* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007), 203.

FROM THE HELM

by Ray Ashley, Ph.D.

President and CEO,
Maritime Museum of San Diego



Typical naval gun and its truck carriage
used during the War of 1812.

Courtesy Naval Historical Center

The Maritime Museum of San Diego wishes to thank Contributing Editor, Bruce Linder, honored as the 2013 Robert and Laura Kyle Chair in Maritime History, for his contributions to this issue of *Mains'l Haul*, as well as acting as curator for the War of 1812 Exhibit currently onboard *Berkeley*.

The War of 1812-1814

by Bruce Linder

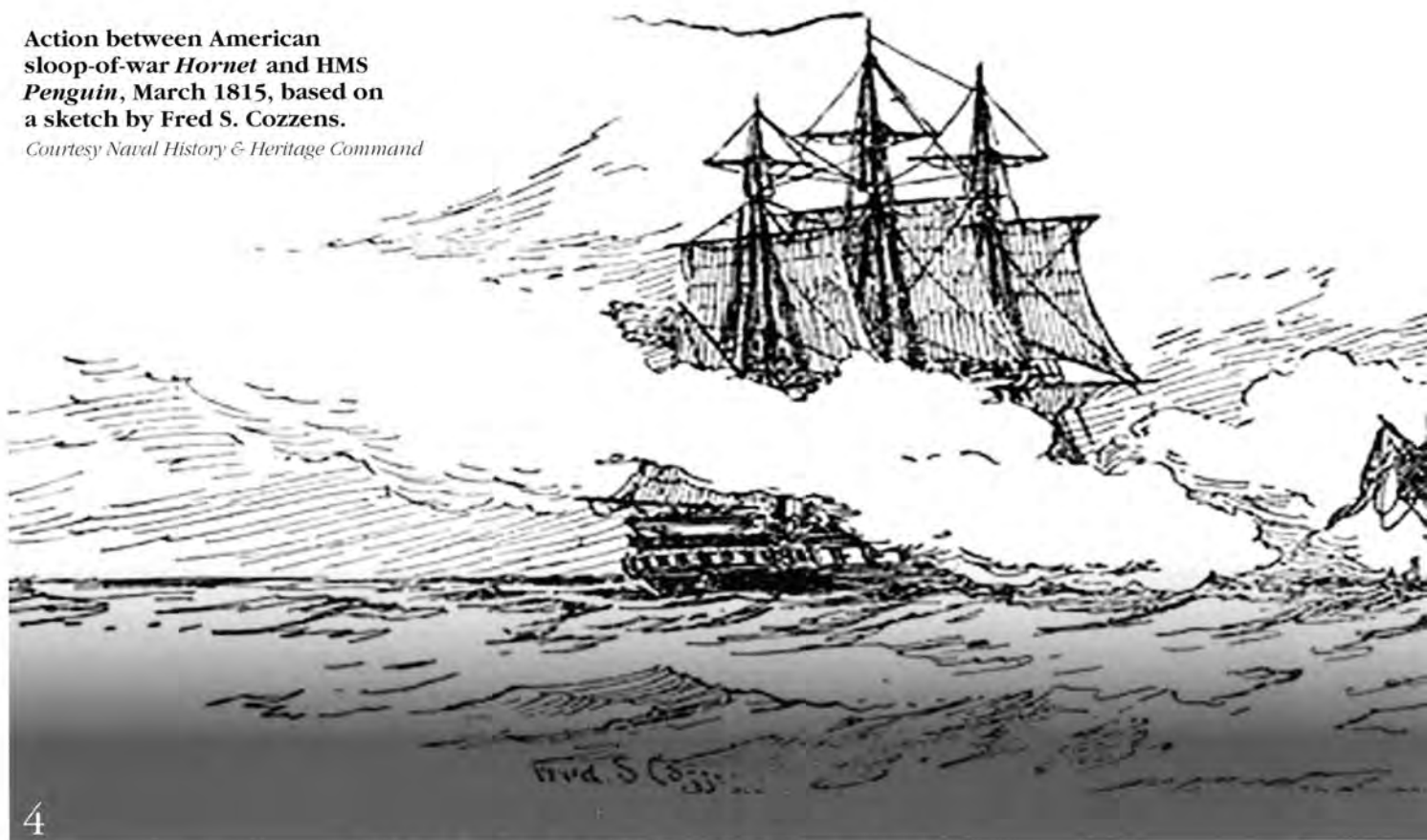
Across the many disciplines devoted to the study of history, there are few more exciting times than the discovery of new wrinkles for an old and well-remembered story. As the nation celebrates the Bicentennial of the War of 1812-14, this issue of *Mains'l Haul* sets out on its own expedition to more fully investigate what the Pacific Campaign of the war actually meant to the country.

The Pacific Campaign of the War of 1812 has proven to be an historical enigma. Barely mentioned in many books, the Pacific side of the War of 1812 ultimately influenced the long-range direction of American history much more than is commonly chronicled. Filmmaker Ken Burns once said he viewed history not so much about what we were before, but who we are now.

American goals at the start of the war were largely about protecting its commerce and its sailors against British pillage, defending American honor, and creating the prospect for national expansion into Canada, the Indian lands to the west, and into Spanish claimed regions to the southeast. Although the threat of war was widely opposed by Federalist New England,

Action between American sloop-of-war *Hornet* and HMS *Penguin*, March 1815, based on a sketch by Fred S. Cozzens.

Courtesy Naval History & Heritage Command



The Pacific Campaign

some factions in America hoped to benefit from a Great Britain much too busy elsewhere in the world to worry about events in the Americas.

Not a single American plan before the Declaration of War would play-out as envisioned and the number of positive wartime gains for the United States at war's end were minuscule. The morale, dignity and professionalism of the American Navy certainly benefited from the war (especially through the glorious retelling of their surprising single-frigate victories), American diplomacy successfully stood toe-to-toe with its European counterparts, and American efforts in the frontier West greatly reduced native American threats to expansion.

Beyond this, American arms largely failed during the war. The United States never successfully invaded Canada, rarely protected American seaborne commerce, and notably suffered the indignity of having its nation's capital burned. The young American Navy did take advantage of a thinly stretched Royal Navy at the beginning of the war (with Britain's best commanders and largest ships devoted to duty outside of French harbors, in the Mediterranean and along Britain's worldwide supply lines), but by 1814, Royal Navy concentrations were overwhelming along American coasts.



Contributing Editor Bruce Linder is a maritime and naval historian who writes, lectures, and researches across a wide spectrum of historical topics primarily focused on American naval history and maritime history in the Pacific.

He has published four books and has written widely for magazines and journals: His latest work is a book about the ship that discovered California, *San Salvador: Cabrillo's Galleon of Discovery*. He is currently at work on his latest project, a sweeping popular history of American Westward Expansion and how that history was shaped, to a large extent, from the sea.

Linder has also authored over sixty articles that have appeared internationally in a variety of magazines and professional journals, he holds the Robert and Laura Kyle Chair in Maritime History, has been awarded the Arleigh Burke Literary Award in naval history, and is frequently interviewed on radio and television.

Linder is an Annapolis graduate and has commanded a guided missile frigate and two major naval bases. He holds an advanced degree in Oceanography from the University of Michigan, he studied for a year at the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C. and worked for thirteen years with the firm of Booz Allen Hamilton in consulting assignments, primarily for the Defense Department.

Linder is currently the Executive Director of the Coronado Historical Association and lives in Coronado with his wife Deb. His two married daughters live in London and California.

By the time of the Treaty of Ghent that ended the war, historian Donald Hickey's take on the whole sorry war was that "the nation was lucky to escape without making extensive concessions."¹ But for all the bungled strategies and faulty leadership observed during the war, American seagoing successes would be the one remembrance held in greatest esteem across the country.

There weren't many big battles in the Pacific, no generals and admirals at work, no massive campaigns, or huge wartime spending. However, *each* of the events of the war that involved the Pacific turned out to have extraordinary, long-term, global consequences. They set into motion chain reactions that helped shape future American industry, American global commercial dominance, and American westward expansion. These events changed who we were then and had a big influence on who we are today.

The importance of the Pacific Campaign of the War of 1812, as history would later tell, lay not in the rumble of cannon at the moment, but in its longer-term impact. The Pacific War of 1812 accentuated the importance of American interests there, solidified American claims to vital lands along the west coast, and ultimately helped propel American industry ahead in the uneven years of the nineteenth century.

The three significant operations of the Pacific War of 1812, long considered mere footnotes to other more sweeping engagements, set all of this into motion – three faint splashes that sent ripples across the pond of all nineteenth century America. Each of these events provided a maritime or naval exemplar of the times. All involved the naval forces of the United States and Great Britain during the war, but each also encouraged the rapid growth of American maritime strength in the Pacific immediately after the war, including the rise of the American Merchant Marine, the transoceanic range of United States commercial interests, and the expanding domination of the American whaling fleet.

The United States could never begin to bring the Royal Navy into a fleet action during the war, but they could raid British commerce or pick off single British warships where they were encountered and, so, a pillar of both American and British naval strategies hinged on either getting raiders to sea or blockading them inside their own ports. The Pacific provided American cruisers the potential advantage of operating at a distant station far from concentrations of British warships, a benefit that David Porter, Stephen Decatur and Navy Secretary William Jones all rapidly realized.

Nothing in American war goals had anything to do with the Pacific and not a single strategy or war plan before the war involved naval or army action in that theater. The primary American naval campaign in the Pacific, the raiding voyage of frigate *Essex* commanded by Captain David Porter, happened by accident. Porter had never planned for a cruise around Cape Horn and yet *Essex's* classic deployment extended over half the duration of the entire war.

David Porter would prove the value of American naval presence in the Pacific and it was not long after the War of 1812 that a permanent Pacific station was established to protect American interests. The station's first flagship, somewhat symbolically, was frigate *Macedonian*, the former British warship taken by frigate *United States* during the war, and the station's first



commander, Commodore John Downes, was Porter's first lieutenant aboard *Essex*.

Naval strategies, during the Pacific War of 1812 also quickly intersected the purely commercial Pacific enterprise of one of America's great entrepreneurs and financiers, John Jacob Astor, in a way that would change American history. Fort Astoria, Astor's tenuous frontier trading center, at the mouth of Oregon's Columbia River, unexpectedly became an international flashpoint during the war. Both American and British envoys, largely ignorant of Astoria's significance before the war, transformed the middling, dusty settlement into an illusory glass castle that would become the *raison d'état* for substantial diplomatic wrangling after the war that would reshape the destiny of the United States, Great Britain, Canada and, arguably, even Russia.

Almost from the first day of peace following the War of 1812, the United States would benefit from the war's outcome.

The tremendous swell of pride across the U. S. Navy generated a spurt in warship building that noticeably increased the fleet's strength and energized American deployments around the world. Cracks in the wall of British territorial dominance throughout the Oregon Country began to appear, offering the opportunity for aggressive American activities to reestablish the importance of its own historic regional claims.

Peace also threw open the doors to a new and vast bounty for American whalers in the Pacific, while at the same time dashing the hopes of American whaling competitors. American and British whalers largely shared the Pacific before the war, with British whalers slightly in the competitive lead. Although American Commodore David Porter claimed that he had "destroyed" British Pacific whaling, he really didn't. He did, though, disrupt it, and following

the war American whaling interests never paused from a powerful upward trend that soon dominated the production, refining, distribution and sale of whale oil on a worldwide basis. Not only would this growing industry spur much of the expansion of what would become an American industrial colossus, but it would also position American businessmen to pivot

aggressively to dominate whaling's successor industry, petroleum. All of this was set into motion by Porter's expedition to the West.

At the beginning of the war the American government had little interest in anything "Pacific." By the end of the war, American commerce, territorial claims, settlements, naval deployments, explorations, and an early notion of American industry were all painted in Pacific colors. It was an astonishing turn of events that took place across a span of not quite three years. For historians, this is a historical consequence that holds a certain



American entrepreneur John Jacob Astor.

National Archives

degree of elegance. In books of the War of 1812, the chapter devoted to the war's Pacific theater has always been neglected. It is a chapter that now needs to be rewritten to fully focus on its many consequences.

If there had not been a War of 1812, or if the events that we have chronicled here involving the war's Pacific Campaign had not occurred, our lives today would be quite different. It's been said that, "we are not makers of history, we are made by history," and that, perhaps, is the best statement of the legacy left by the Pacific War of 1812.

NOTES

- 1 Donald Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 2.

1813-14 Voyage of H.M.S. *Raccoon*

Mission: To Capture Fort Astoria

by Mike Rees

Mike Rees grew up and was educated in London, England. In the late 1950s he immigrated first to Canada (Montreal), then to the United States. Settling in Seattle and working in the aerospace field, he quickly became interested in the history of the Pacific Northwest; in particular the early European exploration of the Lower Columbia River by the British. He has written articles for the Washington State Historical Society magazine "*Columbia*", and the Lewis & Clark Trail Heritage Foundation magazine "*We Proceeded On*". His research of previously unstudied documents at the United Kingdom Hydrographic Office, describing early voyages of Royal Navy ships to the west coast of the Americas, has led to publication of a book and this article on HMS *Raccoon*. Mike and his wife Jane, a retired faculty member of the University of Washington, divide their time between homes in Seattle and on the Columbia at Skamokawa, Washington.

HMS *Raccoon* battling the treacherous bar at the mouth of the Columbia River, December 1813.

Courtesy James Kochan Collection



Introduction

David Megrath, a Clatsop County Commissioner, was beachcombing on the north Oregon coast soon after a storm in December 1973, and came across a 20-foot piece of timber washed up on the shore. It was unusual in that parts of it were sheathed in copper with copper fastenings and pins like part of a wooden sailing ship's keel. The beam was recovered and, after some sleuthing by the Columbia River Maritime Museum's curator Michael Naab, it was concluded that it was probably part of HMS *Raccoon*,

which struck the bar upon leaving the Columbia River on 31 December 1813.¹ During the 1812-14 war between the United States and Britain, the Royal Navy sloop had been sent to capture or destroy Fort Astoria. Today that beam is displayed in the Museum at Astoria, Oregon, however the full story of the *Raccoon* is not well known, even though the consequences of this event were significant.

In October 2010, an archivist at UK Hydrographic Office in Taunton, England, handed me a volume of nineteenth century handwritten reports saying, "If you are interested in our early records of the Columbia

River, you might also take a look at this Remark Book of HMS *Raccoon*." With that said I was introduced to a fascinating 100-page account of the voyage of HMS *Raccoon* as recorded by the ship's captain, William Black, dated 1813-14. The Hydrographic Office is the British Admiralty's keeper of naval charts, maps, logs, etc., and this particular document, known as the ship's Remark Book, had probably remained on their shelves, rarely opened, for nearly 200 years. A "Remark Book" differs from the usual ship's log in that the latter is a detailed record of the ship's position, sea condition, weather, etc., the Remark Book records the details of sailing in and out of ports, anchoring marks, wooding and watering sites, possible provisioning, fortifications, etc., that is, what one might identify as "intelligence" about places the Royal Navy ships visited worldwide.

The fledgling American operation of John Jacob Astor's Pacific Fur Company at Fort Astoria, had been established in 1811 a few miles up-river from the mouth of the Columbia.²

The 1813 voyage of HMS *Raccoon* to the Pacific Northwest coast of America (during the 1812-14 war), and in particular the Columbia River, has been only briefly described by other authors.³ Subsequent publications related to Fort Astoria, the fur trade and early European endeavors in the Pacific Northwest at the beginning of the nineteenth century often included a short description of the *Raccoon*'s mission to the region.⁴ In 1958 a narrative of a portion of *Raccoon*'s voyage was published by the Book Club of California.⁵ That narrative was based on an unsigned "secret" document found in England. However, the recently identified and published Remark Book by Captain Black is part of the "official" story of the complete voyage.⁵

Although the voyage of HMS *Raccoon* was related to the tactics of the 1812-14 war, the particular events surrounding the *Raccoon*'s visit to the Columbia River had implications that were used in the negotiations that finally established the border between the United States and Britain, west of the Rockies, many years later.^{6 & 7}

The Voyage

In 1812 when the U.S. declared war on Britain over a variety of unresolved problems,⁸ a well established Canadian fur trading enterprise, the British controlled the North West Company (NWC) and saw an opportunity to eliminate its American competition on the Pacific Coast. After much persuasion in December 1812, the British government gave permission for a naval expedition to sail to the mouth of the Columbia and, if necessary, forcibly take over or destroy the American enterprise of Astor.⁹ A NWC ship, the *Isaac Todd*, accompanied this naval force to supply any newly established British fur trading post.



HMS Blossom, a Cormorant Class ship, similar to HMS Raccoon.

The National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, England

Characteristics of HMS Raccoon

The *Raccoon* was a Royal Navy 18-gun ship, sloop of the *Cormorant* Class. No illustration of the ship has been found to date. A painting of another *Cormorant* Class ship, the HMS *Blossom*, is shown below.

The *Raccoon* was built by John Preston of Great Yarmouth and launched on 30 March, 1808. She was re-rated a 26-gun sloop on February 1817, and by 1819 was being used as a convict hospital ship at Portsmouth. She remained in service to the Royal Navy until being sold on 16 August 1838. The plans for construction of the vessel have survived and are housed at the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, England. Her general characteristics included:

- Displacement 425 tons
- Overall length 108 ft. 4 in. (33.02 m)
- Keel length 90 ft. 9 in. (27.65 m)
- Beam 29 ft. 9 in. (9.06 m)
- Draught 9 ft. (2.7 m)
- Crew complement 121
- Armament:
 - Upper deck: 16 x 32 pounder carronades
 - Quarter deck: 6 x 18 pounder carronades
 - Forecastle: 2 x 6 pounder guns plus 2 x 18 pounder carronades.

The route of HMS *Racoon* 1813-14

Highlights of the *Racoon*'s voyage, with the original words from Captain Black's Remark Book in italics, are described below with editorial additions in square brackets []:

HMS *Racoon* and the *Isaac Todd*, along with Royal Navy warships HMS *Phoebe* and HMS *Cherub* gathered at the British Naval Base in Rio de Janeiro, in June 1813, with orders to sail for the Pacific and the west coast of America. The squadron left Rio on 9 July heading for Cape Horn.

[July] 19th – *A hard gale from S.W. to W. Latd. 34:34 S. Longe. 42:49 W. during the gale observed the Cherub to lose her larboard quarter boat from a heavy sea striking her; several of our half ports stove in during the gale which lasted two days – found the fore and main Trysails to answer very well, much easier set & taken in than staysails – Weather now getting very bad – Gales daily....*

On 29 July the *Isaac Todd* was unable to keep up with the three faster naval ships, and was left behind with the understanding they would all regroup at the Cocos Islands west of Costa Rica.

[August] 10th – *At day light saw Cape St. Juan Staten Island [Staten Island, Argentina] bearing S. by W. about 14 leagues...was agreeing with the Chronometers. Land entirely covered with snow – weather very cold – Ship company doing well at three watches, no Idlers – constant gales. Stood to the S.E. Thermometer fell 16 degrees below freezing – Ship entirely covered in ice....*

September 5 & 6th – *A hard Gale at N.W. this has been I think the hardest gale we have had tho' not near so cold, Sails, Rigging &c. suffered much during the very bad weather we have experienced on our passage round the Cape yet I do not think ever three Ships doubled Cape Horn at the same season of the year with so little loss.*

On 10 September, the three navy ships reached Cumberland Bay (Juan Fernández Islands) west of Chile.

[September 10-18] ...*The three Ships got 24 Bullocks, 20 Sheep and several pigs, also a few Fowls – Vegetables & Fruit must be plentiful in the proper season, as the Trees when we were there in September were in full bloom, we got a kind of Wild Raddish, the tops of which boiled in Soup or by themselves as greens were excellent*

...*As it was now determined by Capt. Hillyar that the Racoon should proceed alone to Columbia River*

she was here compleated to 6 months provisions from the Phoebe & Cherub received on board from the former Mr. McDonald one of the partners & 5 men belonging to the North west Company....

After leaving Juan Fernandez, the squadron separated with the *Racoon* proceeding north to the Cocos Islands for more provisioning and a possible rendezvous with the *Isaac Todd*, while the *Phoebe* and *Cherub* pursued the American warship *Essex*, which had been seizing British whaling ships in the Pacific.

[At the Cocos Islands October] 8th & 9th
Employed Wooding Watering &c. caught plenty of Fish for the Ships Company & got some Cocoa Nuts from the Shore – A number of Ships names cut out on a rock on the beach and on trees. His Majesty's Ships Discovery & Chatham 1795 very plain with many others....

Not finding the *Isaac Todd* at the Cocos Islands, Captain Black proceeded alone to the Columbia River. During this leg of the voyage a near disastrous accident occurred.

[October] 20th – *Excercised Great Guns & Small arm, and cleaned Cannonade Bolts which is always done on Wednesday when the weather will permit. As the Guns had been some time loaded and we had experienced much bad weather since, I ordered the first Lieut. To see them fired off shotted one at a time to try the breechings as some of them did not appear to be very good: in firing the 8th Gun starboard side of the main Deck from the Powder being damp it hung fire; whether the Captain of the Gun was attempting to prime it again I could not learn but the Powder Horn caught in his hand which communicated to a few other powder Horns & two Salt Boxes under the half deck having three Cartridges of Powder in them, by which unfortunate accident 21 Men & Boys were wounded, some of them very severely Thomas Sweetenham and James Campbell died during the night – I do not attach any blame to either Officer or Man on this occasion as the Guns were fired one at a time and everything secured as usual: I am of opinion it was the damp powder fizzing out of the touchhole that communicated to the powder born in the man's hand....*

Having survived the explosion, the ship continued onto the Island of Socorro (off Mexico), but did not remain long as no potable water was available. They soon arrived in the region of the Columbia River.

November 28th – *Heavy Gale at S.E. & S.S.E. with constant rain – Lat. 45°: 34'S. Long. 125°: 6' W. under close reefed Topsails running for Columbia [Columbia*

River, Washington/Oregon], *Keeping a very sharp look out – at noon very thick, the lookout man on the starboard side called out a boat a-head; I soon made it out to be a large tree with the root branches sticking a considerable height out of the water; I conceived by this we were right in our reckoning, as the tree must have drifted out of the River Columbia : a great many Wild Geese & Ducks for the last 24 hours have been seen all flying to the Southward – at sun set as the weather was very thick & no soundings hauld' off to the S.W. for the night.*

They sighted Cape Disappointment (Northern cape of the entrance to the Columbia River) the following day, but weather conditions did not permit them to attempt crossing the bar. They anchored offshore for the night.

[November] 30th – At day light weighed & made sail, fine breeze at E.S.E. very bazy over the land, run to the northward for Cape Disappointment, the surf breaking very high all along the shore: at 9 made out the Cape and Point Adams [Southern cape of the entrance to the Columbia River] very clearly, found the breakers off the later to run a long way out & to break very high. hauled close round them in 7 & 6½ fms. water the mouth of the river then opening bearing E. by N. also Mount St. Hellens entirely covered with snow and called by the natives the White Mount – The mouth of the Columbia River now appearing very clear, the water not breaking on the bar, between the breakers off Cape Disappointment & point Adams, tho' the swell was

very heavy, sent away two boats to sound & lay down buoys, having had then all ready for that purpose with buoys slung: the wind prevented them from getting in as fast as I wished being rather scant & its being just high water I hauled in for the Anchorage under Cape Disappointment having a plan of the mouth of the River by Capt. Broughton when in the Chatham Tender [Vancouver] tho' in a small scale I found it perfectly correct as to the land, tho' the banks inside have altered since that time: had no less than 4 fms. water on any part of the Bar – at noon anchored in 5½ fms. under Cape Disappointment, we picked up one boat up in running in, the Gíg with the Master in her did not get on board until we had been two hours at our anchor – Moored Ship, Cape bearing by Compass S.10°.E. ½ mile Point Adams S.48°.E. Chenooke Point [Chinook Point near Megler, Washington] S.85°.E. and Point George [Point George, just west of Astoria, Oregon] S.73°.E. 5 fms. good ground – The Channel between the breakers in coming in is about 1½ mile wide, & the Bar or Flat nearly two miles East & West, when it deepens to 7 & 8 fms. near the Cape – I think in summer in very fine weather a Ship drawing 19 or 20 feet may get in at the top of high water Spring tides but very great precaution is necessary in going either in or out at all times – Not being seen any boat or any stirring, at 2 after the people had dined sent 2 boats away one up the south side of the River, where we now saw smoke in several places, the other up the north side to reconnoitre and return by sun set – observed several guns to be fired at little above Point George on the south side of the River: at 4 the boat that went up the north side returned with a Canoe,

Fort Astoria as it appeared in 1813.



having a Mr. McDougal in her, who had formerly been a Clerk in the N.W. Company's service, but lately one of the Partners in the American Establishment here, where the Guns were fired. I soon learnt from him that the American settlement had been given up to a party of the British North-west Company who had come overland from Canada. How far Private Individuals may be authorized to treat with Enemies time must determine, but at present so ends our hopes of Prize Money at Columbia. The Americans gave up a considerable property to the N.W. Company, but I was assured by the latter there was not any American property then in the river....

December – began with very bad weather the wind blowing strong at S. and S.E. right in – the sea breaking violently across the Channel with constant rain – got the Sheet Anchor up out of the Main Hatchway & over the side ready if wanted – several of the Natives now visited us & brought a few Geese, Ducks & Salmon – Employed cutting Wood, compleating our water &c. as the Fort is 16 miles from Bakers Bay [a bay on the Columbia River just east of Cape Disappointment], & the weather had set in very bad our boats were not fit to carry the things we had on board belonging to the N.W. Company up – and as there was a small Schooner of 15 Tons burthed at the Fort I sent an officer & boats crew up to rigg her & bring her down for that purpose....

[December] 9th – The Schooner got down, & took away the articles belonging to the Company and Passengers – Wind at times blowing strong at S.S.E. constant rain – a heavy swell at and near high water....

[December] 12th – I went up to the Fort the weather being a little better, and on the **[December] 13th** Formally took possession of the Fort & Country in the name & for His Britannic Majesty, it having before been taken possession of by Mr. Thorn [Captain of the Tonquin, sent out by Astor to establish Fort Astoria]

12th September 1811 a Lieut. in the Naval Service of the United States sent out for that purpose: it was then called Fort Astoria. On my boisting the English Jack a Royal Salute was fired from the Fort, which I named Fort George, I was answered from the Racoon – The Fort I left in possession & charge of the N.W. Company – The Marines of the Racoon & the Company's people being drawn up fired three Vollies, when the bealth of His Majesty was drank on the occasion. The American Party had lately been unfortunate, one of their ships having been plundered & blown up by the Natives near Nootka [Nootka Sound, on the west coast of Vancouver Island, Canada] after murdering the Crew another had been lost on her passage out from America. They have now no settlement whatever either in this River or any part of the Coast – During the three days I remained at the Fort I was employed sounding the Channels & Surveying

the Banks as well as the weather would permit almost constant rain – I went some miles up Young's River [a small river west of Astoria emptying into the Columbia] the remains of the House built by Lewis & Clark from the United States who wintered there in 1806 still stands [Fort Clatsop, Southwest of Astoria:¹⁰ during the time they remained about the Columbia the natives & them were constantly at variance: the Indians have been very inveterate against the

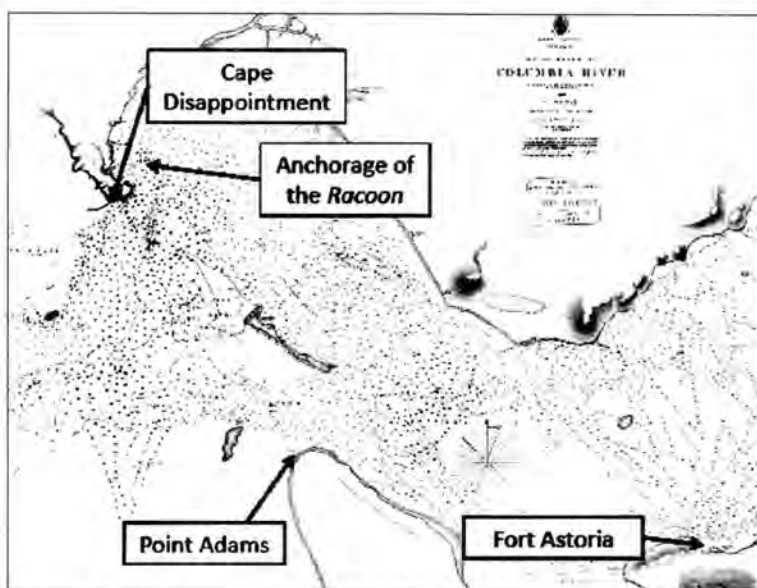
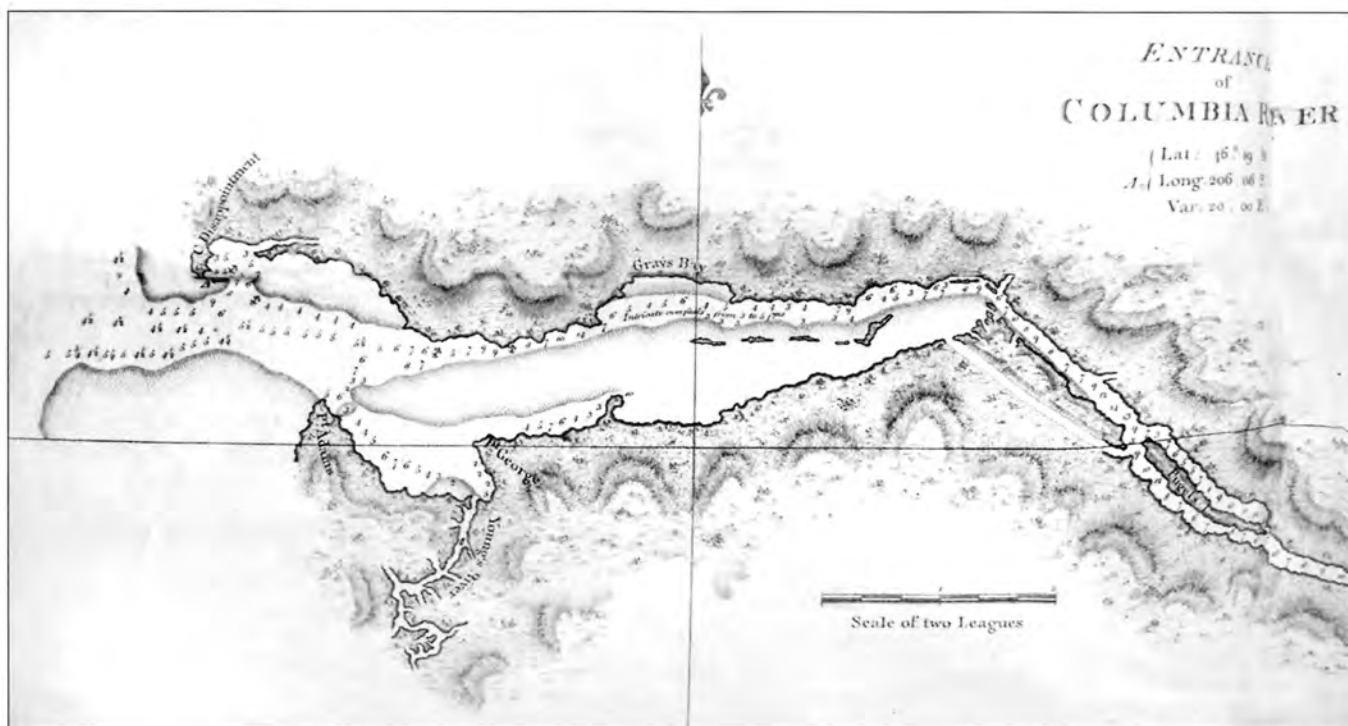


Chart of mouth of the Columbia from the survey by Captain Edward Belcher, RN, 1839.

Americans ever since – some of the natives had stolen a Horse from the party; the Thief was found & hung by the Americans: the Indians have never forgotten it, but take revenge whenever an opportunity offers – I understand it often happens with the N.W. Company to have a horse or horses stolen by the natives, they never themselves punish them for it, tho' they get their Chiefs at times to do so.

The N.W. Company now here came from Canada in two parties, crossed the Stony Mountains [Rocky Mountains] at different places and came into the great River Columbia by two different branches – The Americans used to cross the country farther to the Southward, where they were often cut off by the Indians.



At this point Captain Black devoted eleven pages to: *A Description of the Mouth of the Columbia River, North West Coast of America*, describing his experience of entering the river, the conditions between the mouth and the site of Fort Astoria, and observations about the native communities near the mouth, as well as where and how to obtain food, water, wood for spars, etc. The only information

Chart of the Entrance of the Columbia River published by Vancouver, 1798.

Courtesy of the Author

available to Captain Black regarding entering the Columbia was from Lt. Broughton's small scale chart of his entry and survey of the river in 1792, on board the HMS *Chatham*, as part of Captain George Vancouver's round the world expedition of 1791-95.¹¹



On display at the Columbia River Maritime Museum, Astoria, Oregon, is a 12-foot section of the keel of HMS *Racoon* lost when crossing the Columbia River bar, 31 December 1813. It washed ashore in 1973.

Courtesy of the Columbia River Maritime Museum

As is obvious from Captain Black's entries below, the weather at the mouth of the Columbia in December 1813 was particularly unpleasant.

Towards the end of **December** from the constant bad rainy weather, & having had but very little fresh provision, the Indians not being able to hunt, our Provisions, Bread and Spirits particularly, growing short, the scurvy in several cases making its appearance, & the Sick list daily increasing, it became absolutely necessary to get to Sea as soon as possible.

The Evening of the **30th December** being very fine with a light breeze E.S.E. I was determined to get out in the morning if possible. As the wind continued from the Eastward I sent Mr. Stevens the acting Master away in the morning of **31st December** a little before day break to view the state of the Bar & report whether he thought the Ship could get out with perfect safety: at half past eight he returned & said the channel was perfectly safe, not so much sea as when we got in, that it was quite smooth – as we had unmoored the Ship in his absence, on receiving this report I instantly weighed it being just then High Water made a few short Tacks to weather Cape Disappointment. when we got on the Bar the Tide having fallen but very little found a very heavy sea which soon increased as the tide made strong, when on the middle of the Bar the Sea broke very high and short: tho' in mid Channel the Ship Struck Twice, the first time rather heavy, not less than 4 fms. water tho' a fresh Breeze right aft even before the Ship struck it was with difficulty her head could be kept the right way: several seas broke over the Fore-castle, it was directly after shipping one of them the Ship struck close forward by pitching so deep, I did not think at the time she struck heavy enough to do any damage: the Tide was now running strong & soon drove us over into 7 fms. when I soon found the Ship was making a great deal of Water, & that the Leak was close forward about the Scarf of the Stem: got both Chain Pumps to work & soon got the Ship dry: from the Leak being close forward it was some time before the water found its way aft to the well & not before it had got into the magazine & damaged several Barrels of Powder – after getting the Ship quite dry & clearing the Lower Store rooms forward, about the Scarf of the Stem we found the water came in very fast; after doing all we could inside found the Ship to make at least four feet water an hour – The Pinnace had been kept out with a Kedge Anchor and Hawser in her in readiness if wanted in crossing the Bar, with the oars they only Kept her head to the sea she drove over the Bar with the Tide some time before the Ship: it was utterly impossible after we got near or on the Bar to have let go an Anchor as in the Shoal water the Ship must have gone over it, & in

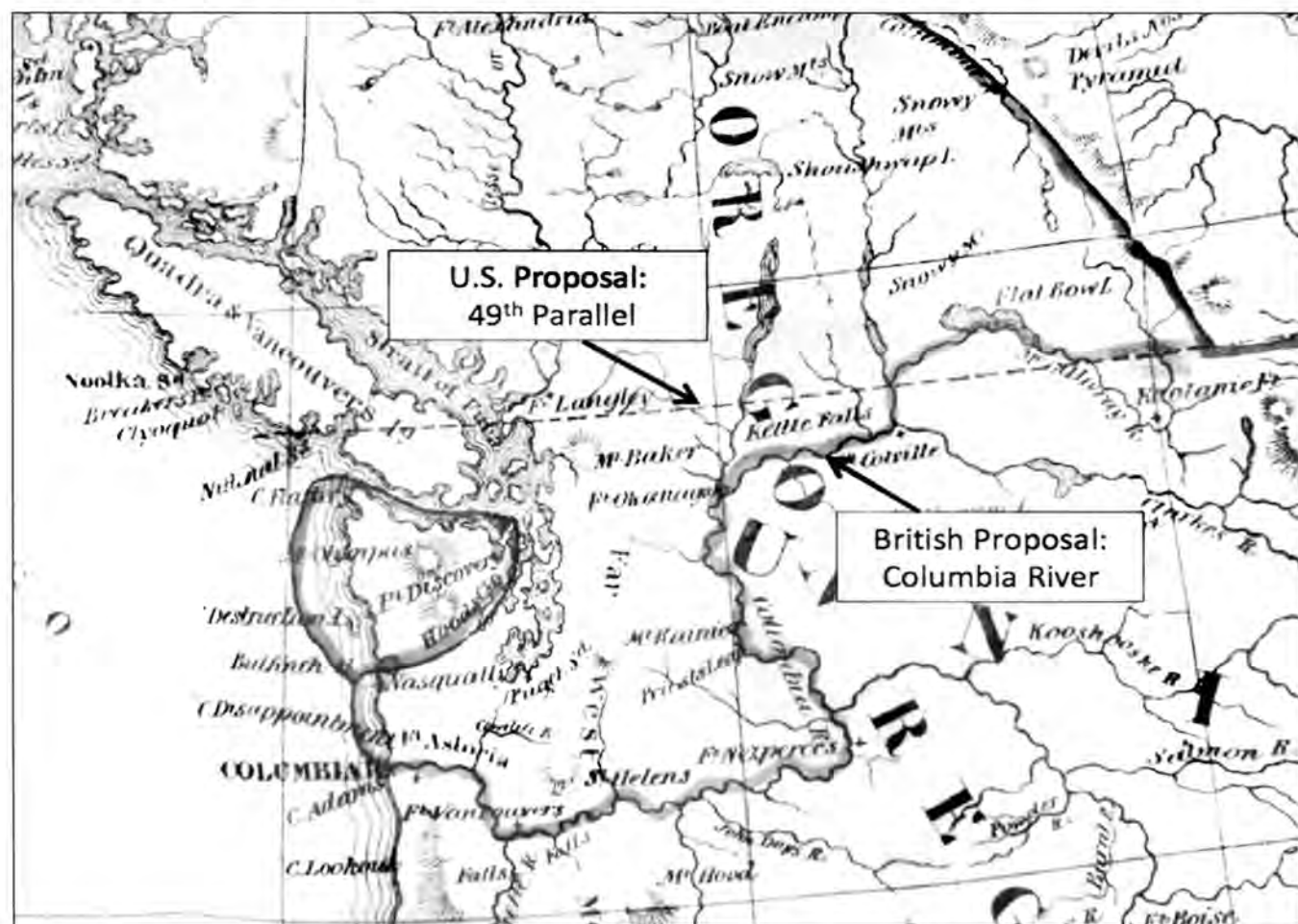
all probability it would have gone through her bottom which would have still been worse – After getting the Pinnace in & all as much rights as possible, finding the Leak to continue the same, the wind blowing fresh of the land, so that it was impossible we could with the strong current setting out of the River regain it had we tried to do so, I resolved to make the best of our way to St. Francisco in New Albion, where I hoped to be able to repair the Ship.

The *Raccoon* "limped" to San Francisco in very rough weather, eventually arriving there on 14 January 1814. In the shelter of the Bay the ship was beached in a cove of Angel Island and with the aid of the supply ship *Isaac Todd*, which arrived soon after, the *Raccoon* was repaired, made seaworthy and supplied by 19 April. During the stay in San Francisco Bay Captain Black wrote extensively of the life of the Spaniards and indigenous peoples in the region, and about the numerous Missions. After a short visit to Monterrey (looking for ship's deserters) the *Raccoon* proceeded to Hawaii (*the Sandwich Islands*), where he hoped to challenge American ships.

From the **28th April to 6th May** strong gale from the Northward, at times under storm staysails: seeing no chance of getting back to Monterey, & having good information that the Sandwich Islands was the most likely place to meet any of the enemy's vessels, made all sail for Owyhee – strong breeze at N.N.W. ship going 200 miles per day.

Captain Black wrote in detail of the Hawaiian islands, a meeting on board with King Kamehameha I, and the culture of the Hawaiian peoples, during their week-long visit. Finding no American ships to challenge or capture, the *Raccoon* set sail for Tahiti (*Otaheite*). After a short stay there, with a visit by King Pomarre and numerous missionaries, the *Raccoon* sailed on to Callao (port of Lima, Peru). Unable to obtain all the needed supplies in Peru, Captain Black sailed to Valparaiso, Chile, for a final stop before heading to Rio de Janeiro. They arrived on 23 December 1814, almost 18 months after their departure. The next day, far away in Europe, an armistice was signed to end the war between the United States and Britain (Treaty of Ghent). The agreement included provisions for returning all properties to their original owners at the time of the beginning of hostilities. The issue of the return of Fort Astoria (now known as Fort George) to John Jacob Astor was complicated by the "purchase" of the property by the British NWC during the war. Eventually, on 6 October 1818, Fort

The details of the boundary around Vancouver Island caused a further dispute between the U.S. and Britain in 1859 that became known as the "Pig War".¹² However, the final position of the boundary was settled in 1872 (without loss of life – except for a pig), to where it stands today.



George was officially returned to the United States during a ceremony at the Fort, but the British NWC continued to operate the establishment. William Black was promoted to Post Captain in January 1815, and continued to serve in the Royal Navy, eventually becoming an Admiral.

Conclusion

Today the town of Astoria, Oregon, is known as the oldest American settlement on the West Coast. By formally taking over the Fort in December 1813, Captain Black made it necessary to return the settlement to the United States in accordance with the Treaty of Ghent. This provided the United States with another justification for establishing jurisdiction over the Oregon Country since, in 1818, the British had no settlement on the Columbia River. Other rationale included having the first ship to enter the Columbia, (the American ship *Columbia Rediviva*, captained by Robert Gray in 1792)¹⁴ and the first

Map showing the 1844 U.S. proposal and the British proposal for defining the mutual border west of the Rocky Mountains.¹³

significant exploration by land of the lower Columbia (Lewis and Clark Expedition in 1805-1806.¹⁵ It appears that these events were sufficient to eventually persuade the British (in 1846) that they could not achieve a better compromise than the United States proposal of establishing the border at the 49th parallel, with a small adjustment to include the entire Vancouver Island as part of British territory.

It is interesting to speculate as to the results if the boundary were to have been set according to the British proposal, namely along the Columbia River. Much of present day Washington State, including Seattle, would have been part of Canada. Where then would have such businesses such as Boeing, Microsoft, Starbucks and Amazon originated?

Resolution of the Oregon Country question, and the boundary between the United States and British territories, west of the Rockies.

At the time of the 1812-14 war, the region known as Oregon Country had no internationally recognized jurisdiction.¹⁶ The region included all lands west of the Rocky Mountains and those between latitude 54° 40' N, (north of which were Russian settlements), and latitude 42°, (south of which was Spanish territory). Though it was generally agreed that the United States and Britain had primary interest and influence, neither had established any governmental controls, leaving it to private companies involved in the fur trade to manage themselves and their business with the native populations.

The actions of Captain Black and the *Racoon* in the Columbia combined with the armistice agreement of the 1812-14 war had far reaching effects. Attempts were made to resolve the issue of who had jurisdiction of the Oregon Country (the United

States or Britain) a number of times over the following thirty years. These negotiations were complicated by issues surrounding Fort Astoria (Fort George) and the events associated with HMS *Racoon*.

As a result of the Treaty of Ghent (December 1814) it was agreed: *that all territory, places, and possessions whatsoever taken by either party from the other during or after the war...should be restored without delay*. Since Captain Black of the *Racoon* had "captured" the American owned Fort Astoria and (see Remarks Book for 12 December 1813: *Formally took possession of the Fort & Country in the name & for His Britannic Majesty....*), the Fort was returned to the U.S. formally on 6 October, 1818.¹⁷ However, the return of Fort Astoria was symbolic, for the now Fort George was owned and managed by the NWC, thus it continued to be a British enterprise. Meanwhile in

New York, Mr. Astor was giving up hope of restoring his fur business on the west coast, and busy with new ventures in the mid-west.¹⁸ The issue of whether Captain Black had claimed the "Country" around Fort Astoria as British was not addressed because no one had a firm claim on the land before the war.

In 1818, the two governments decided to discuss the boundary location, with the U.S. proposing the 49th parallel from the Rockies to the Ocean together with free navigation of the Columbia River, with the British suggesting the 49th parallel west of the Rockies, only as far as the intersection with the Columbia River, then down the center of the Columbia to the ocean.¹⁹ Since neither proposal was acceptable to both parties, a compromise was agreed that allowed each to use the Oregon Country, west of the Rockies, for a period of 10 years, as follows:

NOTES

- 1 McCusker M. P., "Mystery of the Lost Keel," *Quarterdeck* magazine (Columbia River Maritime Museum, 1990).
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- 6 Greenhow R., *Memoir, Historical and Political, on the Northwest coast of North America, and the Adjacent Territories: Illustrated by a Map and a Geographical View of those Countries*. Department of State, Washington D.C., 1840). Digitized version (without map)
- 7 Calhoun J.C. and Buchanan J., *Oregon. The Claim of the United States to Oregon* (Wiley and Putnam, London, 1846). Digitized version (without map).
- 8 Black J., *The War of 1812 in the Age of Napoleon* (University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, Oklahoma, 2009).
- 9 Swan J. G., *The Northwest Coast or Three Years' Residence in Washington Territory* (Harper and Brothers, New York, 1857). Dolin E.J., *Fur, Fortune, and Empire* (W.W.Norton & Co, New York, New York. 2010). Ronda J. P., *Astoria and Empire* (University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln NB, 1990).
- 10 Moulton G.E., *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, Volume 6 (November 2, 1805 – March 22, 1806)* (University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, Nebraska, 1990).
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- 12 National Park Service., Web site for the Pig War: <http://www.nps.gov/historyculture/the-pig-war.htm> (2012)
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Convention between the United States of America and Great Britain, signed at London, October 20, 1818

ARTICLE 3. It is agreed that any country that may be claimed by either party on the northwest coast of America, westward of the Stony Mountains, shall, together with its harbors, bays, and creeks, and the navigation of all rivers within the same, be free and open for the term of ten years from the date of signature of the present convention, to the vessels, citizens and subjects of the two Powers; it being well understood that this agreement is not to be construed to the prejudice of any claim which either of the two high contracting parties may have to any part of the said country, nor shall it be taken to affect the claims of any other Power or State to any part of the said country; the only object of the high contracting parties, in that respect, being to prevent disputes and differences among themselves.

Because further negotiations in 1824 resulted in no compromise agreement, the parties at the 1827 Convention in London agreed to continue Article 3 of the 1818 agreement indefinitely, or until either party would give twelve months notice to “*annul or abrogate this convention*”. By this time, the HBC had merged with the NWC, and had established Fort Vancouver 100 miles upstream from the mouth of the Columbia. Fort Astoria, now Fort George, owned by the HBC was relegated to a minor position: the main Pacific Coast headquarters of the HBC being Fort Vancouver.

By 1825, the fur business from the west coast to China was in decline²⁰ and the HBC was beginning to consider other enterprises including lumber and fish, particularly the abundant salmon in the Columbia.

In the early 1830s, Britain (with the urging of the HBC)

was still very much interested in having full access to the Columbia and was concerned about the influx of American settlers into the region. Consequently, in 1836, a Royal Navy survey expedition of the west coast of the Americas included these orders:

*Political circumstances have invested the Columbia river with so much importance, that it will be well to devote some time to its bar and channels of approach, as well as to its inner anchorages and shores.*²²

As a result Captain Edward Belcher, in HMS *Sulphur*, with its supply ship HMS *Starling* visited the Columbia in 1829 and performed extensive surveying of the lower part of the river (Rees 2012). In 1844, the negotiations were reopened in Washington D.C., with the British plenipotentiary, reiterating the proposal that the border be along the Columbia, but also with a detached U.S. territory north of the Columbia (the Olympic Peninsula now in Washington State). Also, any British ports south of the 49th parallel and on Vancouver Island would be open to U.S. ships. Despite certain American elements urging pursuit of a northern boundary at latitude 54° 40' N (hence the slogan “54° 40' or fight”), the U.S. position was unchanged, namely continuance of the 49th parallel from the Rockies to the Pacific. In early 1846, an agreement was reached (very much as the U.S. had proposed) resulting in the Oregon Treaty. This finally established the boundary at the 49th parallel except that Vancouver Island, in its entirety, was recognized as British territory. The treaty also gave special considerations to the HBC, and for several years it continued to operate from its established bases in Oregon Country, before redeploying all its enterprises north of the 49th parallel.

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17 *Ibid*

18 Dolin E.J., *Fur, Fortune, and Empire* (W.W.Norton & Co, New York, New York, 2010).

19 Greenhow R., *Memoir, Historical and Political, on the Northwest coast of North America, and the Adjacent Territories: Illustrated by a Map and a Geographical View of those Countries*. Department of State, Washington D.C., 1840). Digitized version (without map).

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The British, the

by Andrew Lambert

An Introduction to Chapter 8 from
The Challenge: America, Britain and the War of 1812

Exclusive to *Mains'l Haul*

Andrew Lambert, B.A. (Law) M.A., Ph.D. is Laughton Professor of Naval History in the Department, of War Studies at King's College, London. After completing his research in the Department he taught at Bristol Polytechnic (now the University of West of England), the Royal Naval Staff College, Greenwich, and the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst. He is a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society and also Director of the Laughton Naval History Unit housed in the Department.

Although the major actions of the War of 1812 were fought in North America, the North Atlantic and the Caribbean, the conflict also reached more distant places, places where British and American ships and men were already engaged in economic and diplomatic competition. In the South Pacific those interests were dominated by rival whaling fleets, which provided the target for David Porter, the explosive growth of regional commerce, and the diplomatic opportunities created by the implosion of Spanish rule in Chile.

These were long-term developments. From the late sixteenth century English, later British ships, had sailed to the Pacific, beginning with Sir Francis Drake, to tap into the legendary wealth of Peru. The 'South Seas' were the theatre of dreams for British seafarers, a distant wonderland of silver. While the astonishing exploits of Drake, William Dampier, Woodes Rogers and Commodore George Anson linked the Pacific with bullion, the marooning of Alexander Selkirk on Juan Fernandez, between 1704 and 1709, pushed the ocean deeper into the British consciousness. Selkirk's story helped shape the narrative of Daniel Defoe's 1719 novel *Robinson Crusoe*, and all of these stores were part of the common intellectual heritage of the pre-1776 British Empire.

After independence Americans continued to view the Pacific through these older British approaches. As they pushed into the Chinese market, exchanging sea otter pelts from the Pacific North West, and fur seal pelts from South Pacific islands for tea, silk and porcelain, the Americans discovered this was a shared dream.

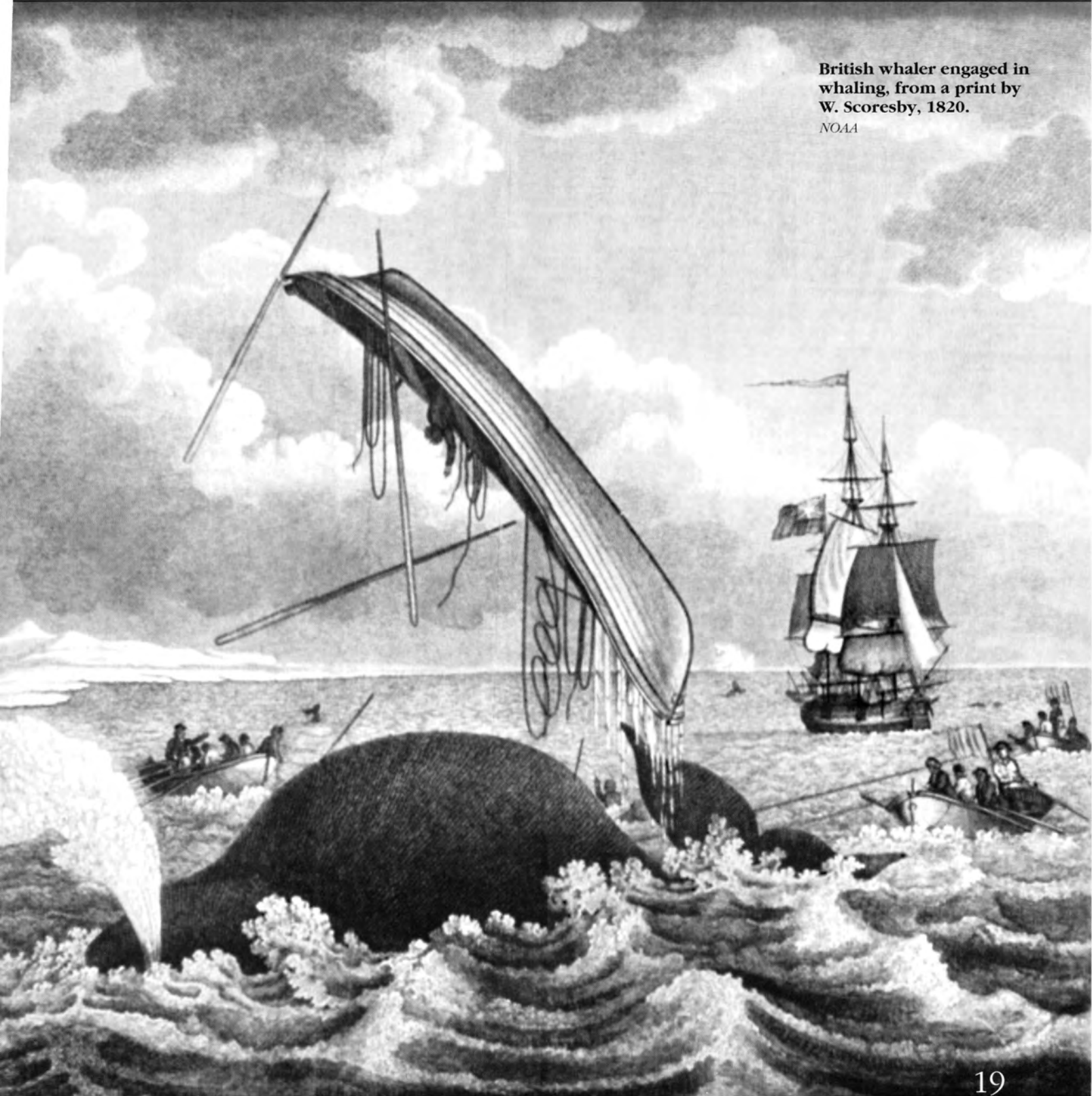
Following the loss of the thirteen colonies the British returned the focus of their empire to its maritime core, controlling trade with naval power and limiting the amount of overseas territory. The delusion of a Continental Empire had been overturned, in part by the three voyages of Captain James Cook, which gave the Pacific a more definite shape, and revealed a wealth of economic opportunities. After 1782, the British Government encouraged the development of Pacific trade in a truly global vision of imperial activity, both for profit and as a tool to undermine the Spanish Empire. By the mid 1790s British whalers were active on the South American Coast, smuggling into Chile and Peru, just as the French Revolutionary War forced Spain to withdraw manpower and resources to Europe. Illegal trade opened the door to revolt and independence, and maintained export volumes when Europe was closed to British trade. Pacific whale oil kept the lights of London burning, and lubricated the cotton spinning machinery of Lancashire. Given the distances and the risks the development of this trade was necessarily slow, but by 1812 it was too valuable to ignore.

By 1812 Anglo-American shipping dominated the South Pacific, they brought a combination of trade and political ideology that encouraged and sustained the independence of Chile. The Royal Navy arrived in the South Pacific in 1813 to support an attack on John Jacob Astor's fur trade settlement at Astoria, to protect British Pacific whale ships and to support the growing British trade through Valparaiso. That very similar ideas led David Porter to those waters was no coincidence. The only question was who would prevail.

Pacific and 1812

British whaler engaged in
whaling, from a print by
W. Scoresby, 1820.

NOAA



The Challenge: America, Britain and the War of 1812

by Andrew Lambert

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Chapter 8: World-Wide War

Editor's Note: Dr. Lambert makes the point early in Chapter 8 that the United States was attracted to raiding British trade in Asia, the Pacific, and the trade routes of the East India Company as they perceived that British defenses were less effective and the prizes potentially rich. In October 1812, Captain David Porter, USN, of frigate *Essex* was assigned to Commodore William Bainbridge's squadron with an aim of commerce raiding in the Atlantic. When a rendezvous with Bainbridge failed, Porter took independent action and traced a course into the South Atlantic, around Cape Horn and into the Pacific, making *Essex* the first American warship ever to travel that route.

In Lambert's words: ... *the Pacific remained a sea of aspiration and dreams – a vast empty canvas waiting for ships and men to make their mark, to impose an American vision. Early whaling and fur trade sorties held out the promise of limitless catches and massive profits. Nowhere were Thomas Jefferson's continental exceptionalism and Federalist commercial expansion closer than on the north-west coast, where settlement and*

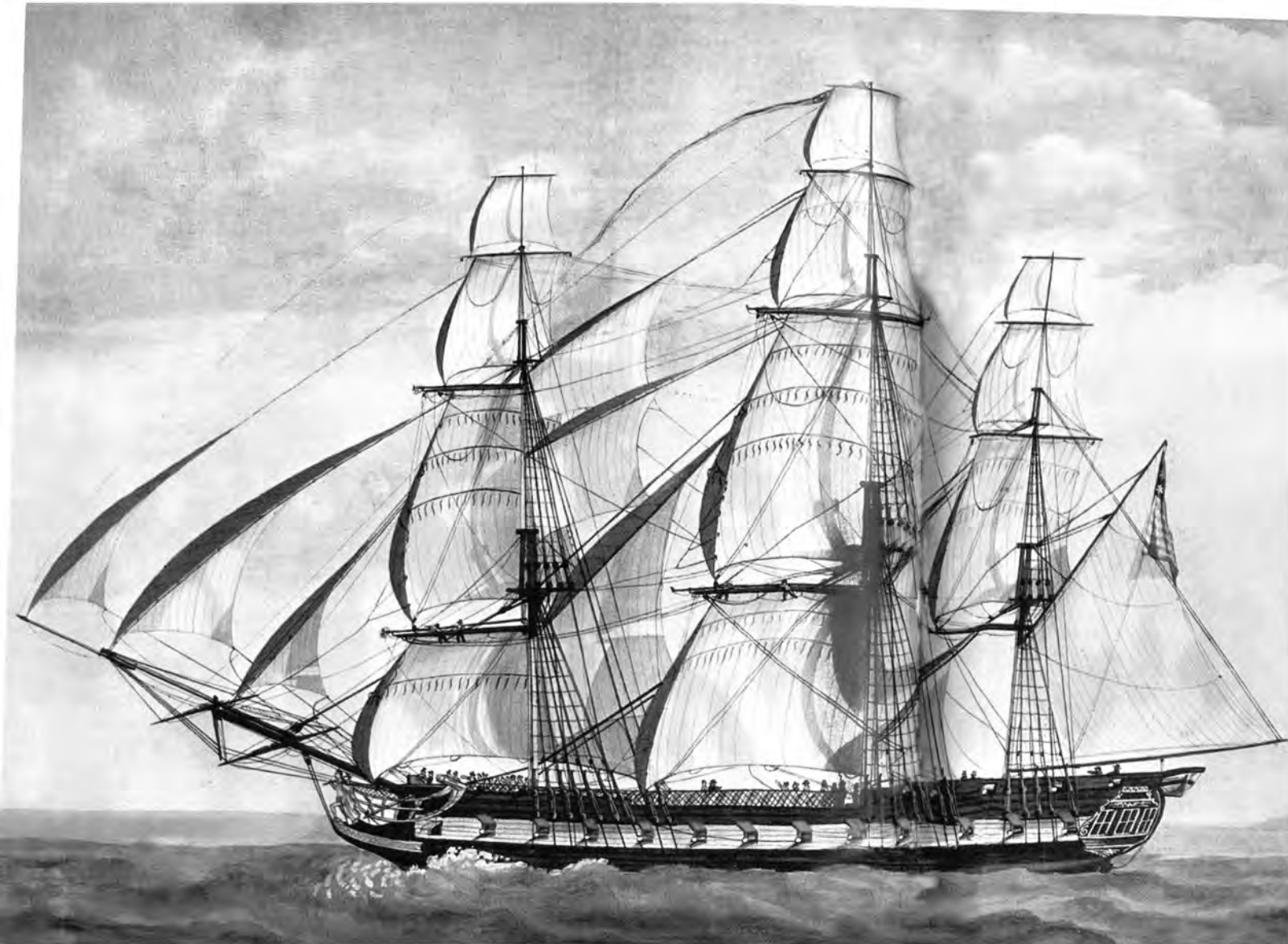
trapping depended on the Chinese fur trade for profits. Aggressive commercial expansion and commercial war provided alternative visions of success, and mutually beneficial skills. Knowledge gained in two decades of Asian trade influenced American strategy.



The Royal Navy's Brazil Station was commanded by Rear Admiral Manley Dixon, RN who received word that *Essex* had been seen off Rio de Janeiro in January 1813. British intelligence of American activities was vastly superior to any American counterpart. By June, Dixon's command included sloop-of-war HMS *Raccoon* and HMS *Cherub* and frigate HMS *Phoebe* (under the command of Captain James Hillyar, RN) that had been escorting the private armed vessel *Isaac Todd* of the North West Company to the Columbia River and the American Fort Astoria. Hillyar sailed from Rio in July 1813, accompanied by *Raccoon*, *Cherub* and *Isaac Todd*.

After rounding Cape Horn, Hillyar detached *Raccoon* to proceed to the Columbia River while *Phoebe* and *Cherub* searched for the American. While Hillyar searched from Cape Horn to the Galapagos Islands, Admiral Dixon dispatched a second frigate into the Pacific, HMS *Tagus*, in early 1814.

Commodore David Porter commanded American frigate *Essex* during her commerce-raiding voyage of 1813-14 to the Pacific, the first American warship to round Cape Horn.



After a rough passage around Cape Horn, *Essex* reached the Chilean port of Valparaíso on 15 March 1813. The ship and her captain received a warm welcome from the revolutionary regime, which Porter turned into food, water, and naval stores. He was preparing for a campaign against the whaling trade. After an eight-day refit he headed north, taking a Peruvian-based Spanish privateer that had attacked American merchant Pacific ships and recaptured an American whaler on his way to the Galapagos Islands. Once there he took twelve British whalers, between 29 April and 18 September. These were easy successes; the powerful frigate was too quick and too strong for any resistance. The prizes provided stores and food, but water was short. To increase the spread of his depredations, Porter armed two of his prizes as auxiliary raiders. Two old ships were returned to their captains, carrying the prisoners to Rio. Porter claimed that he inflicted damage worth \$5 million (over £1 million at the contemporary exchange rate of \$4.4 to the pounds), but only one captured ship reached the United States, the cartel *Essex Junior*, ex-*Atlantic*.

News of Porter's success reached Bowles [Captain William Bowles, RN, commanding frigate HMS *Aquilon*, later full admiral in RN and Third Navy Lord] at Buenos Aires early in September and was quickly forwarded to Rio and London.¹ By September 1813 the *Essex* needed a major refit, and Porter had picked up rumours that a British squadron was searching for him. To avoid detection while refitting Porter based himself at the little-known Marquesas Islands, far from the

American frigate *Essex* was built by the people of Salem, Massachusetts, in 1799, and presented to the U. S. Navy. Rated as a 36-gun frigate, she was smaller and more lightly armed than "Old Ironsides," but held a reputation for fine design, speed and excellent maneuverability.

U. S. Navy

American continent or any trade routes. He reached Nuka Hiva on 25 October, warped *Essex* into the bay and began a major overhaul of the ship and her rigging. While his crew waged a brief war on a recalcitrant tribe, or sweated at their work, Porter annexed the island to the United States, hoping the name of "Madison's Island" might persuade the Chief Magistrate to ratify the decision. It did not.

Having refitted *Essex*, buried an officer killed in a duel, and prepared his prizes to sail home, Porter fell victim to the besetting sin of American cruiser captains. Desperate for the personal glory of single combat he decided to "signalize my cruise by something more splendid before leaving." He sailed back to Valparaíso, expecting to encounter Captain Hillyar in HMS *Phoebe*. Enthralled by the prospect of heroic success Porter appeared oblivious to the fact that the pursuit of personal glory was entirely at odds with American national interests.

When Porter left Nuka Hiva on 13 December 1813, a small squadron of prizes, officers and men remained. Months later the American force collapsed in mutiny and conflict with local people; the last remnants were captured by the British in Hawaii, bringing David Porter's American empire to a chaotic end.

Essex arrived at Valparaíso, *Essex Junior* in company, on 12 January. His friends, the Carrera family, who had controlled Chile when he left nine months before, now languished in jail [Porter had great success during his initial stop in Valparaíso including diplomatic accomplishments led by American diplomatic agent Joel Poinsett]. A distracted, anxious nation, at war with itself, and facing a Spanish counter-attack, proved altogether less welcoming on his second visit.²

News of Porter's return soon reached Buenos Aires and Bowles reported it to Rio and London, along with reports of the fall of the Carrera family. One rumour suggested that Porter would embark Joel Poinsett and American property before heading home, possibly calling at the River Plate to attack Bowles' ship. Should they succeed, it would "produce a most prejudicial effect" on local opinion. James Hillyar picked up the rumour, but he gave it rather less credence; he had no intention of letting the *Essex* leave Valparaíso.³

On 3 February *Phoebe* sailed into Valparaíso, accompanied by the 18-gun ship-rigged sloop *Cherub*. Although originally sent to destroy the trade post at Astoria, Hillyar's mission had been modified at Rio, when Manley Dixon gave him additional force, and additional tasks including destroying the *Essex*.

After detaching the ship sloop *Raccoon* to Astoria, Hillyar anticipated Porter's next move. As befits a senior officer selected for a secret mission James Hillyar was careful, cautious, and capable. He was also a fine seaman, and proven tactician. To make matters worse for Porter, Chile realized Britain offered more useful diplomatic support than America. Having found the enemy, Hillyar's primary duty lay in stopping the Americans putting to sea. He watched the *Essex* and waited. And when it came to waiting, Hillyar possessed a major advantage over his aggressive, impetuous opponent.

David Porter found sitting still and waiting a torment, one that did nothing to improve his mood, or his temper. Knowing that he had willingly sailed into such an obvious trap only made his situation worse. Waiting for Hillyar to make a mistake was depressingly tedious. The situation might have been different if American reinforcements had been sent to the Columbia River, as Astor wished.

While *Phoebe* was slightly larger than the *Essex*, her conventional battery of twenty-six 18-pounders gave Hillyar a massive advantage at long range over *Essex's* all-carronade armament. Porter knew this only too well, having complained vociferously, if ineffectively about the dangers of such a battery. Furthermore, *Phoebe* was a proven battle-winner, having already taken two French frigates, both larger than *Essex*. She had participated in the hard-fought Anglo-French actions off Mauritius in 1811, under Hillyar's command. To make matters worse *Cherub* was vastly superior to the armed whaler *Essex Junior*. Then there was the personal factor. Porter had met Hillyar years before in the Mediterranean, and knew he had little chance of outwitting him.

On his arrival Hillyar found a British commercial community anxious to provide intelligence on the American ship, and on local politics. The *Emily* put to sea to intercept the inbound frigate and her master, one-time naval officer George O'Brien, proved very useful, being well acquainted with the port. Mr. Crompton and Andrew Bliss kept Hillyar up to date with the fluctuating political situation ashore, along with observations on wind and weather, while seeking Hillyar's support for their commercial concerns.

Most commentators describe Porter's decision to sail for Valparaíso as a mixture of quixotic ambition and sheer folly. In reality he knew that four British ships were coming; he even knew their names. He concerted tactics with the commander of the *Essex*.

Junior for a two versus two combat, a duel between ships, assigning the prize the job of drawing off the smaller British ship. He planned to negate the disadvantage of his short-range battery by closing under a Spanish flag.⁴ Yet, when Hillyar arrived, Porter at that stage with many of his men ashore, allowed *Phoebe* to come into the harbour, run close alongside and anchor without firing a shot. For his part Hillyar acting on the advice of George O'Brien, tried to provoke the American to fire first. However, while part of *Essex's* crew had earlier been ashore they had returned by the time Hillyar came alongside. Porter held his fire, but missed a fleeting chance to get away. Porter claimed that *Phoebe* came very close and that, just as Hillyar enquired after his health, the two ships almost collided. Despite being in neutral waters Porter threatened to engage, calling up his crew and hoisting kedge anchors to the ends of the yards to grapple the enemy.⁵ Recognizing that *Essex* was fully manned and ready for combat Hillyar hauled off.

Porter's forbearance, if such it was, cost him his only chance of success. The following day the two ships engaged in a boisterous display of nationalistic pride. *Essex* hoisted a large white banner marked "Free Trade and Sailors Rights" to the fore topgallant masthead, just like James Lawrence. To counter this "insidious effort to shake the loyalty of thoughtless British Seamen," *Phoebe* returned the compliment with a rather wordy riposte, sewn onto an English flag, "God and Country, British Sailors Best Rights. Traitors Offend Both."⁶ Later Porter paraded his men ashore with flags bearing well-worn American slogans. Hillyar reported that Porter's rather pathetic attempt at propaganda had no effect.

How far the men on board either ship were ready to die for abstract issues like Free Trade was, as Greg Dening has observed, open to question. The close-quarters loyalties that bind together messmates and ship's companies determine how men behave in battle. Camaraderie and exemplary leadership provide positive reasons to fight, but the depth and quality of training, the overriding impact of drills and routines, and the recognition that any man who ran away would be seen and punished made sure most sailors remained at their posts. Kings and Countries, Republics and Rights were soon forgotten in the maelstrom of danger and death. Hillyar's very public use of the word "Traitor" in his reply to Porter's squibs reminded the American crew that if they lost the British would be looking for deserters and other British subjects.⁷





Such anxieties may explain why they remained at their posts even when fight was clearly lost.

The exchange of words and symbol between two anglophone crews was inevitable, while they were within hailing distance. Both crews had reason to be proud of their ships, and their service. Porter's attempt to engineer a duel through increasingly desperate, wordy challenges proved futile, because imputations of dishonor cut no ice with Hillyar. He had the enemy in a trap, leaving Porter the victim in a deadly game of cat and mouse, looking for a way out. Several times Porter had *Essex* get underway, as if to fight, only to recover his moorings. Taking advantage of the neutral harbour the two captains even met on shore. Hillyar secured the release of several British seamen, whom he promised would not serve on his ships, in exchange for the same number of Americans to be released from British custody. In the process he confirmed *Essex*'s all-carronade battery and the strength of her crew, but failed to ascertain Porter's intentions.

Having replenished his water and victuals and with *Essex* showing signs of moving, Hillyar took both British ships to sea on the 14th.⁸ He feared Porter might exploit the neutrality of the port to have his ship detained for twenty-four hours after the Americans sailed.⁹ Lying offshore, the British still received fresh beef and water while Hillyar watched and waited, cruising 4 to 5 miles from *Essex*, normally anchored off the Point of Angels [the western headland of Valparaíso Bay]. On 25 February Porter towed the prize *Hector* to sea and burnt her, a very deliberate challenge. The Chilean governor was sufficiently annoyed by this violation of Chilean neutrality to let the British merchants know that his government might turn a blind eye if Hillyar finished the business in the harbour.¹⁰ When, some time after the action, Porter began to complain about violations of neutrality Hillyar pointed to the burning of the prize, the fact that *Essex* fired two shots at *Phoebe* from inside the harbour two days later, and Porter's attempt to board his ship on 12 March to prove the American had been the first to violate Chilean hospitality. Mr. Crompton had warned Hillyar about the boarding plan, another reason for the Chilean governor to be annoyed with Porter.¹¹ Midshipman David Farragut [David Glasgow Farragut, flag officer in the American Navy during the Civil War and the USN's first admiral] noted that Porter only gave up the attempt when he realized the British were expecting him.¹²

In accordance with contemporary practice Hillyar did not consider anywhere beyond the range of Chilean coastal guns to be neutral, while Porter did not show any intention of placing his trust in such questionable protection throughout the six-week stand-off. Both men were jockeying for advantage. On the evening of 27 February, *Essex* and *Essex Junior* had slipped their cables and set sail. Having cleared for action and spoken to the crew, telling them to be "steady and clear," Hillyar wore ship, denying Porter the opportunity of a close-range engagement. Porter responded by firing a signal gun for his consort, and two rounds at *Phoebe*, before tacking back into the port. Hillyar followed, but held his fire; the American rounds had been ineffective, and by the time he was within range the Americans were anchored under the Fort of the Angels. Porter did not mention this confrontation then or later, but his officers, including Midshipman Farragut did. They believed Porter had responded to a British challenge, in reality the accidental discharge of a gun while clearing for action, and criticized Hillyar for not engaging when *Essex* made sail.¹³ On 9 March a letter, supposedly from *Essex*'s crew to their British counterparts, offered single-ship action, the Homeric fair-and-equal combat of Porter's dreams. While Porter claimed the letter was a response to offensive letters from the *Cherub*, Hillyar was unimpressed by such petty tomfoolery.

Porter's dreams of glory faded. *Essex* was blockaded by a superior force, and a skillful opponent, in a foreign port where most officials were decidedly pro-British. Unwilling to abandon his dreams, Porter hung on, hoping to lure Hillyar into a favourable situation. A seasoned professional with an excellent war record, Hillyar had no need to take risks. He had won glory enough already, and knew the road to flag rank and further employment lay in completing his mission. He must take, sink, burn, or otherwise destroy the USS *Essex*, with a superior force he had no business taking risks. The stalled career of John Carden of the *Macedonian* [Captain John Carden, RN who lost an engagement against Captain Stephen Decatur, USN in frigate *United States* during October 1812] was ample warning that no one would thank him or any other British captain for another defeat. Porter's subsequent claim that *Essex*'s superiority in speed meant he could have escaped "at almost any time" suggests the imaginative streak noted by several contemporaries was deep-rooted. If *Essex* was so superior it was Porter's duty to escape, and carry on the task set him by the Navy Secretary. The British found no evidence of superior speed.¹⁴



While Porter waited for a chance to fight, the noose was tightening around his neck. In March 1814, Dixon sent a third frigate to the South Pacific. The Admiralty detached HMS *Briton* from the Channel on 31 December 1813 specifically for the Pacific. At Rio, Dixon directed Captain Sir Thomas Staines, RN, to make all speed to Valparaiso, where *Essex* had been reported. He would get more recent intelligence from Bowles, who he might encounter heading north from Buenos Aires, or from Hillyar returning around the Cape. Dixon also advised Staines that the three American 44s [the three strongest American frigates: *President*, *United States*, and *Constitution* were each rated at 44-guns] would put to sea in December, and one of them would try to link up with Porter. The Foreign Office informed Staines that a restored Madrid government had ordered local ports to admit British cruisers.¹⁵

After a month of cat and mouse Porter finally recognized that the only certainties were that Hillyar was not going to waste his decisive advantage, and more British ships would arrive. His sources confirmed that they were the 18-pounder frigates *Tagus* and *Briton*, both larger than his ship. Once Hillyar had two frigates, let alone three, Porter could expect an attack. He had to escape, and soon. Hillyar was equally focused, spending every night under sail only 3 miles to seaward of the Point of Angels, constantly looking for any sign that the enemy was moving. The British merchant community, desperate to resume profitable trade, warned Hillyar that Porter was planning to move on 23 March. It is unlikely Hillyar needed prompting.

Chart of Valparaiso Bay, 1838. Point of Angels, that played such an important part in the *Essex-Phoebe* battle is to the left; the battle took place in a small bay about 6 miles east of town.

Wikimedia Commons



Porter was preparing a collection of tricks to mislead his opponent. He began by sending his purser ashore to conduct further business on the 27th, ensuring this was reported to Hillyar. He hoped the British would lower their guard. Then on the night of 27/28 March, Porter sent Lieutenant Maury [LT John Maury, USN, brother of the great navigator Captain Mathew Fontaine Maury, USN] out to sea in a boat, loosing off rockets and burning blue lights to draw *Phoebe* to leeward, clearing the way for *Essex* to escape at daybreak. Maury carried out his mission. Hillyar shortened sail to investigate the lights off to the northeast; finding no ship he "supposed the signal made by Enemy's boats was a Decoy." Having spoken to *Cherub*, he resumed station, dead to windward of the *Essex*'s anchorage, a test of seamanship that required constant adjustment to the shifts and flaws of the seasonal weather.

At daybreak Hillyar could see the *Essex* at anchor. He may not have realized just how disappointed Porter was to see *Phoebe* and *Cherub* "close to the weather point of the Bay." He had expected them to be off to leeward, giving him a chance to escape. Hillyar wore inside the point, then wore out again, reminding the Americans that they were being closely watched by well-manned and well-handled ships. As the wind strengthened from the SSW Porter struck his royal masts and yards at 2:45 p.m. Soon after one of the *Essex*'s cables parted, Porter ordered a boat across from *Essex Junior* to take Joel Poinsett ashore while the other cable held. Once Poinsett was over the side, Porter cut the cable and made a run for the sea. Hillyar responded immediately, closing to cut off Porter's escape past the Point of Angels. Then *Essex* was hit by a heavy squall, which carried away the main topmast at the lower cap. Two topmen, Samuel Miller and Thomas Browne, were thrown into the sea with the wreckage and lost.

Hillyar observed the Americans putting to sea at 3:10, set his mainsail and bore up in chase with *Cherub* in company. Both ships hoisted a St George's flag emblazoned with the motto "God and Country. British Sailors Best Rights. Traitors Offend Both." As *Essex* attempted to round the point to weather on the British ships, Hillyar saw the main topmast fall and Porter's change of course. The damage ended Porter's fleeting hope of escape, without the main topmast and yards *Essex* could not out-run her opponent, and Porter had no chance to make repairs. He wore out of control. The sacrifice of canvas was essential, flapping sheets would hamper his attempt to work back into Valparaiso Bay. Judging that his crippled ship would be unable

to fetch her old anchorage inside Point of Angels, Porter bore up for a small bay on the other side of the harbour, 5 to 6 miles from the town, and at least 2 miles from the nearest Chilean fort (Castello del Barren). The fort was not in sight of the ship.

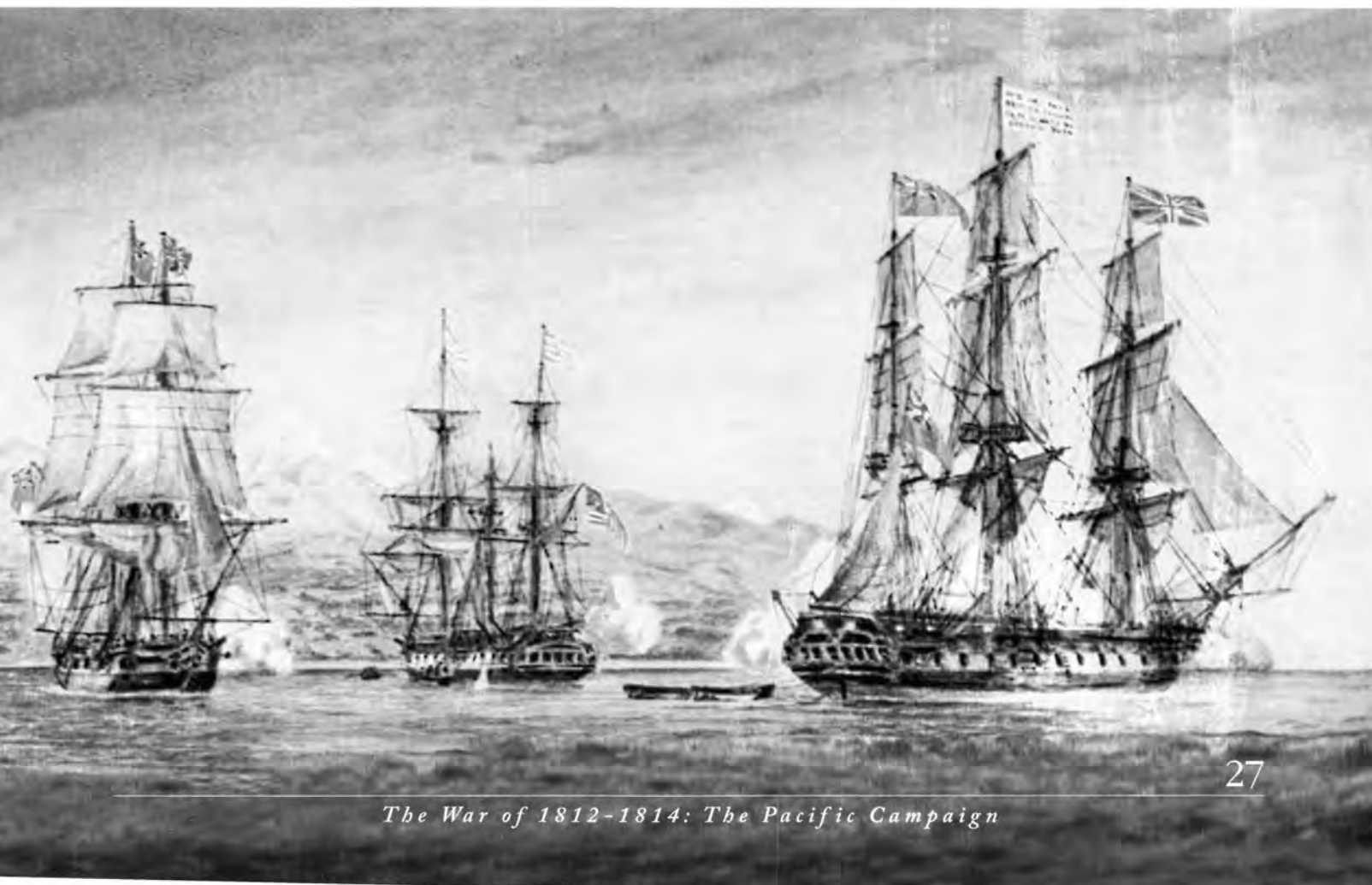
At 3:45 (4:00 on *Phoebe*) *Essex* dropped her spare anchor in the Bay, in 9 1/2 fathoms about 25 yards from the shore. Porter had two ensigns aloft, on the fore and mizzen tops: "Free Trade and Sailors Rights" and "God Our Country and Liberty, Tyrants Offend Them." Hillyar had time to note the mottos; he was in no hurry. With *Essex* crippled there was no need to run any risks. He considered that the enemy lay outside the limits of the port, and was therefore in international waters. At 4:10 he signaled *Cherub* to prepare to fight at anchor, roving additional cables to the anchors, so the ship could be veered round to bring the broadside to bear. This was sound practice. While the crew were working to deploy the cables and springs, George O'Brien joined one of *Phoebe*'s boats ashore and pushed for the ship. A second merchant ship master, Mr. Murphy of the brig *Good Friends*, also boarded *Phoebe*. This was no ordinary gesture; the sea was running high, and both boats were nearly swamped. Suitably reinforced *Phoebe* was ready to fight.

The initiative was now entirely with the British. They could sail and manoeuvre and *Phoebe* had a long-range main battery, and a more powerful second ship in support. To fail now would be abject, and unlikely. Hillyar headed into the bay, intent on bringing his ship up close under the American stern, the killing position. He may have intended completing the destruction of the American ship's rigging. Instead the squally weather pushed *Phoebe* further off, denying Hillyar his preferred station. He began the battle at 4:20 (3:55 on *Essex*) at half gunshot, about 250 yards, while still underway. *Phoebe* opened with both long guns and carronades on *Essex*'s stern and starboard quarter. *Cherub* fired on *Essex*'s starboard bow, until heavy, accurate return fire from the 12-pounders on *Essex*'s forecastle persuaded a badly wounded Commander Tucker [Commander Thomas Tucker, RN commanding *Cherub*] to shift his berth alongside the *Phoebe*. Despite his wounds, Tucker remained on deck throughout the action. Desperate to bring his broadside guns to bear on his tormentors Porter twice managed to get a spring rove onto his anchor cable, but each time it was shot away before it could be used. While he later downplayed the role of his 32-pounder carronades they proved very effective during this phase

of the battle. Damaging hits from these heavy projectiles persuaded Hillyar to open the range, and change his tactics. During the initial exchange *Phoebe's* popular and capable first lieutenant, William Ingram, was mortally wounded by splinters at his post alongside the captain. At 4:40 Hillyar ceased firing, wore round and pulled off the shore, which was very close, and came to on the larboard tack. He had not observed his fire produce any effect on *Essex*. By contrast Porter could see that *Essex's* shooting, primarily from the 12-pounder cannon in the stern, had been accurate and effective. They had fired into *Phoebe's* rigging, and by the time Hillyar hauled off his topsails were flying loose, the mainsail was much cut up, the jib-boom damaged and the fore, main and mizzen stays shot away. Once out of range *Phoebe's* crew quickly mended the rigging and furled the mainsail. Porter's men took the opportunity to reeve a third spring on their cable.

Before renewing the battle Hillyar hailed Tucker, advising him that, while *Phoebe* would fight at anchor, *Cherub* should keep under way and fire as occasion allowed. At 5:35 *Phoebe* closed in again, engaging with her bow chasers and receiving a steady return from *Essex*. By now the wind had fallen away, occasionally to a dead calm. Once again Hillyar carefully chose his position, off *Essex's* starboard quarter, where neither broadside nor stern guns would bear. This time he held a longer range, a little under half a mile, close enough to hit the *Essex* with almost every round from his long 18-pounders, but too far for the American carronades to be effective. He had yet to reach the position where he planned to anchor when the wind shifted to the landward. Porter seized one last, desperate chance to level the playing

Sloop-of-war *Cherub* (to the left) and frigate *Phoebe* (to the right) maneuver against the anchored *Essex* in their climatic battle. *Essex* took a tremendous pounding before surrendering, suffering from the accuracy and weight of longer-range British guns.



field, setting every remaining sail and cutting his cable, hoping to run alongside the *Phoebe* and board. At 5:50 Hillyar observed *Essex* cut her cable and set the job, foresail and foretopsail. While the moving target made it difficult to keep *Phoebe*'s broadside bearing, Porter's last gambit failed. Once again the wind played him false, dying away even as he cut the cable. It had always been a forlorn hope. Hillyar had a major advantage in manoeuvrability. *Essex*'s rigging had been shredded, leaving Porter with little control over the ship once underway. Now calm accurate fire from the British 18-pounders turned the action into a carefully controlled demolition job. *Essex* could only reply with three 12-pounders, their crews repeatedly scythed down by shot and splinters.

Throughout the action Hillyar targeted the American upper deck and standing rigging. After the battle Bosun Edward Linscott reported that *Phoebe*'s fire had cut away large portions of *Essex*'s rigging at the level of the chain plates and dead eyes.¹⁶ This was very good shooting. Having disabled the enemy, Hillyar could edge away, keeping his distance and pounding the shattered *Essex*. The consequences were catastrophic, *Essex*'s sailing master admitted, "we were now in a most dreadful situation as the enemy hull'd us every shot, and our brave fellows falling in every direction." The American carpenter's crew, desperately trying to plug shot holes and keep the ship in the battle, were wiped out. Hillyar could see his guns "gradually becoming more destructive," his crew, "if possible more animated." The British guns were well laid; many of Porter's guns had been disabled, and his gunners killed. The explosion of a small pile of powder charges near *Essex*'s main hatchway caused the morale of the shattered crew to falter the inevitable consequence of the devastating loss of life and limb that turned the ship into a slaughter house.

Always ready with an outside gesture Porter, like James Lawrence before him, wanted to destroy the ship rather than surrender.

He ordered *Essex* run ashore and blown up. Once again the wind let him down, and with many men too badly wounded to abandon ship he had no option but surrender. Even so, he encouraged the able-bodied to abandon ship; sixty to seventy Americans took the opportunity to head for the shore, most by boat. Some drowned, others were rescued from the sea by British boats, and about forty escaped. There must be a suspicion that some of these men were British. *Essex*'s flag came down at 6:00 p.m. by the *Phoebe*'s timepiece, 6:20 in Hillyar's version, and 6:30 according to *Essex*'s sailing master; either this last clock had gained several minutes, or the Master unilaterally extended the duration of the battle to emphasize that the "resistance had been worthy of the cause." Such was the chaos and confusion in the American rigging, and the profusion of flags and banners that Porter had hoisted that it took the British ten minutes to realize the colours had been lowered.¹⁷ Once the point had been confirmed Hillyar sent a boat to take possession of his prize, and secure her papers.

Essex's upper deck was a chaotic shambles of broken bodies and detached limbs. Overwrought by his exertions, largely a question of occupying his proper station beside the wheel, to show the men that he was not afraid, traumatized by the casualties, and humiliated by defeat, Porter openly wept as he boarded *Phoebe* to offer the victor his sword. Magnanimous in victory, Hillyar refused the customary gesture. The next morning the captains breakfasted together. By this time Porter had recovered his composure, debating the time the battle began, and the number of men who had swum ashore after the fighting stopped.

The civilities of war were resumed.

Porter's account of the decision to surrender composed three months later takes longer to read than he took to make up his mind. It conveys the impression that only an endless succession of misfortunes prevented him



from capturing a nervous, effectively beaten enemy. Such statements as "her capture was owing entirely to accident," required remarkable self-deception, while the accompanying smokescreen of imputations of dishonourable conduct, illegal action and inhumanity cast at James Hillyar reveal a growing anxiety that the court of inquiry might not be satisfied by his explanation of how he came to lose the United States Ship *Essex*. Blaming Paul Hamilton for his all-cannonade armament may have been warranted, but much of the rest smacked of special pleading. "I hope, Sir," he begged Navy Secretary Jones, "that our conduct may prove satisfactory to our country." Having defamed Hillyar throughout his essay Porter then switched tack, trying to ameliorate the abuse by praising his conduct after the battle, before complaining the British had plundered personal property. Praise for the elevated behavior of his own service read uneasily coming from the pen of an officer who allowed his men to tar and feather foreign sailors. Porter's exculpatory essay ended with a confused section alleging that the American government had a right to claim the restoration of the ship.¹⁶ Curiously these deluded, self-justificatory ramblings have become the basic version of the six-week stand-off and sanguinary combat at Valparaiso.

In marked contrast to Porter's self-serving sour grapes James Hillyar proved a gracious victor, praising the performance of the *Essex* which, "taking into consideration our superiority of force; the very discouraging circumstances of her having lost her Main Topmast; and being twice on fire, did honour to her brave defenders." Porter, he stressed, had only struck his colours when heavy casualties and damage to his ship made further resistance futile. As he was entitled to head money for every American sailor he was less than pleased by Porter's decision to urge his men overboard, claiming these men were, in honour, his prisoners. When Porter argued that the men only abandoned ship after the cartridge fire, Hillyar dropped the issue. He had to be content with Porter's claim that over 260 men were on board when the battle began, because none of the ship's books or papers survived. He had more luck with the impressive American chart collection.

Attributing success to God, Hillyar praised his officers and men, and echoed Tucker's commendation of *Cherub's* people, listing those promoted into death vacancies or recommended to their Lordship's attention. Finally, he suggested that George O'Brien might be restored to the Navy List.¹⁷

While the *Phoebe* lost 4 killed and 7 wounded, and *Cherub* 1 and 3 respectively, *Essex* suffered 60 per cent casualties, 58 dead and 65 wounded. At least the butcher's bill proved that David Porter was not James Barron [Captain James Barron of the USS *Chesapeake* infamously surrendered his ship to HMS *Leopard* after firing nary a shot in June 1807]. Both ships were damaged, but perfectly seaworthy.

Porter had directed his fire into the rigging, hoping to cripple the *Phoebe* and escape. Despite their disadvantages the American gunners had fired well, leaving *Phoebe's* main and mizzen masts: "... rather seriously wounded, – these with a few shot holes between wind and water, which we can get at without lightening [the ship]; and a loss of canvas and cordage, which we can partly replace from our well stored prize; are the extent of the injuries."

Hillyar found the *Essex* fully stored for a six-month cruise, and although much injured in her upper works, masts, and rigging, is not in such a state as to give the slightest cause of alarm respecting her being able to perform a voyage to Europe with perfect safety'. *Essex* had been hit over 200 times, her

stern smashed in, and a hole driven in the counter, the wheel and rudder damaged, all three masts had been hit, the figurehead shot away and the upper works heavily damaged. *Phoebe's* gunnery had rendered the American ship incapable of further resistance. The guns and gun crews on the larboard side had been devastated, 15 guns disabled, 55 gun crew dead, and 60 wounded.²⁰ *Essex's* men paid a terrible price for their captain's obdurate refusal to risk his honour. By a curiosity Porter remained entirely unharmed amid the slaughter. The human cost of battle would be embellished and turned into glorious rhetoric over the years: men who fought and died in battle were made to issue grammatically perfect patriotic effusions when they lost limbs. Nowhere was a moan or an expletive allowed to spoil the carefully contrived illusion of willing sacrifice and elegant death.²¹

Throughout the battle *Essex Junior* remained a motionless spectator. Porter must have expected her to draw off the *Cherub*, but even this proved to be beyond the small ship and her tiny crew. Captain Downes [Lieutenant John Downes, USN commanded *Essex Junior*; later rose to the rank of Commodore of both the American Mediterranean and Pacific Squadrons] of the *Essex Junior* finally boarded *Essex* to ascertain Porter's wishes just as he surrendered.

The day after the battle Hillyar moved the two captured ships into the main anchorage at Valparaiso, embarking forty-six American prisoners on the *Phoebe*. That afternoon they were transferred to a Spanish prison hulk in the harbour. On 2 April Hillyar repaired the shot holes below *Phoebe's* waterline, heeling the frigate over by moving her guns. On the 13th HMS *Tagus* arrived. On the 26th the British moved their prisoners to the *Essex Junior*, under a cartel agreement, and she sailed the following day. Hillyar followed up his victory by helping to reconcile the Peruvian and Chilean governments, a process rendered more pressing by the growing realization that the European war was over, and Spanish power might be restored. The Treaty of Lircay proved a useful, if strikingly short-term success, restoring good conditions for British trade.²² On 21 May, HMS *Briton* arrived at Valparaiso and ten days later *Phoebe* sailed for home.²³ There would be no more American operations in the Pacific during the war, leaving the British to police local conflicts and control their expanding markets.

News of the battle may have reached Buenos Aires as early as 20 March, and Rio on 19 May. Hillyar's despatches, which passed over the Andes, were in Dixon's hands by 20 June. The Admiral praised the 'watchfulness of the blockade' and the 'small loss...compared with the enemy'.²⁴ Dixon also confirmed the Treaty of Lircay.²⁵ He ordered Staines to keep *Briton* and *Tagus* in the South Pacific, along with *Cherub* to protect British whalers from American or Peruvian privateers.²⁶ The American privateer *Joel Barlow* had been taken by *Briton* on 3 July, completing the rout of American cruisers in Pacific waters.²⁷ In November Dixon sent HMS *Indefatigable*, Captain John Fyffe, to relieve one of Staines's frigates.²⁸ Soon afterwards HMS *Raccoon* arrived at Rio to report her proceedings at Astoria.²⁹

The *Essex* was quickly refitted and went home as a prize with her captor. The two ships reached Spithead on 13 November [1814], complete with a useful freight of much needed specie. Hillyar, rightly rewarded for his skillful handling of a difficult situation, enjoyed a long career. Initially the British spirit of fair play led many to downplay *Phoebe's* success, lauding the courage of Porter and his men. Exposure to Porter's self-serving

recriminations and exculpatory apologia changed the mood with striking swiftness. His obsessive attempt to prove British bad faith and unfair conduct led most analysts to wish it had been a single-ship action, perfectly satisfied that the result would have been the same. It is hard to disagree; James Hillyar was older, wiser and far more experienced. He had a better ship, longer reach, and no reason to take risks.

While he waited at New York Porter, assisted by his old friend Washington Irving, marshaled a powerful literary defense [David Porter and his surviving crew arrived at New York on parole aboard the disarmed *Essex Junior* in July 1814]. Porter effectively declared himself a hero, repeating the claims made in his letter of 8 July 1814 that he had devastated the British whale fishery, inflicted \$2.5 million in damage and cost the British \$6 million to counter his cruise, redeploying ships and men that could have been used to attack the United States. In truth the returns from his cruise were negligible: only one prize made it back to the United States. The first three British warships that rounded Cape Horn in pursuit of the *Essex* had all been assigned to that station anyway, making the *Tagus* and *Briton* the only real “diversions.”³⁰ The British had ample reason to reinforce their squadron on the west coast of South America, to protect their trade in the chaotic conditions caused by the Spanish – American revolutionary wars. Yet Porter’s version of the cruise of the *Essex* became a central pillar in the mythology of commerce-raiding, an antecedent of the *Alabama*, the *Emden* and the *Atlantis*. In fact all four ships were hunted down and destroyed by a dominant sea power; they did not challenge the ability of the British to use the ocean. The cruise of the *Essex* proved the soundness of Secretary Jones’s order to avoid fighting enemy warships.³¹ Porter had no business sailing to Valparaiso: his mission was to destroy British commerce. Hillyar’s task was to stop him and Porter made his job all too easy.³²

After the war British writers, led by William James, took a studied and considered revenge on Porter, lambasting his honour and integrity, while affecting to be outraged by the salacious tales of promiscuous liaisons with the native girls of the Marquesas Islands.³³ Even in defeat David Porter had a unique facility for making enemies, and he would acquire many more at home after 1815. He was not quite a gentleman, in victory or defeat.

NOTES

- 1 Winfield, R., *British Warships in the Age of Sail, 1793-1817: Design, Construction, Careers and Fates*, Seaforth Publishing, Barnsley, 2005, 200.
- 2 Bowles to Admiralty, 5 Sept 1813; Graham, G. S. & Humphreys, R. A. (ed.), *The Navy and South America, 1807-1823: Correspondence of the Commanders-in-Chief on the South American Station*, Navy Records Society, London, 1962, 105-6.
- 3 Crawford, M. (ed) *The Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History* (Naval Historical Center, Washington, 2002) III, 772-80 reproduces the key correspondence. Greg Denning’s chapter “The Face of Battle: Valparaiso 1814,” in *Performances*, 79-98, provides a Pacific perspective, but his decision to rename Hillyar as Hillyer prompts some concern.
- 4 Bowles to Admiralty, 19 Feb 1814. Bowles’ *Aquilon*, a venerable 12-pounder frigate of 1786, was no match for *Essex*, or any other American frigate. Hillyar to Admiralty, 28 Feb 1814; Graham, 129-33.
- 5 Porter to Downes, 10 Jan 1814; Crawford III, 711, suggests using the second ship was ‘a contingency Porter seems not to have anticipated.’
- 6 Porter to Navy Secretary Jones, 13 July 1814; Crawford III, 715-16. The ex post facto nature of the claim raises doubts and the failure of all those on the *Phoebe* to mention the matter suggests that Porter may not have recalled the events precisely.
- 7 Log book of HMS *Phoebe*, 8-9 Feb 1814; ADM 51/2675, f. 151; Crawford III, 712.
- 8 Denning, 87.
- 9 Hillyar to Admiralty, 28 Feb 1814; ADM 1/22, f.214-16, Crawford III, 714-15.
- 10 Bowles to Dixon, 11 Apr 1814 in Dixon to Croker, 14 Apr 1814; Graham, 137-9.
- 11 Log book of HMS *Phoebe*, 25 Feb 1814 & British Residents to Hillyar, 25 Feb 1814; Crawford III, 716-19.
- 12 Copies of all orders and letters by Captain James Hillyar: MSS NMM AGC/23/7.
- 13 Farragut, *Reminiscences*; Crawford III, 749. Farragut’s opinion carries weight: he became the first American admiral – in 1862.
- 14 Farragut, *Reminiscences*; Crawford III, 749-50.
- 15 Gardiner, R., (ed), *Frigates of the Napoleonic Wars*, Chatham, London, 2000, 147, based on contemporary sailing reports. Winfield, 189, records that *Essex* became a troopship in 1819, was hulked as a convict ship at Cork in 1823, and sold in 1837.
- 16 Winfield, 166. Dixon to Pipon, 25 Mar 1814, in Dixon to Admiralty, 30 Mar 1814, no. 146; Graham, 135-7.
- 17 Boatswain’s report, Crawford III, 741.
- 18 Denning, G., “The Face of Battle: Valparaiso 1814”, in *Performances*, University of Chicago Press, 1996, 92.
- 19 Porter to Navy Secretary Jones, 3 July 1814; Crawford III, 730-9.
- 20 Hillyar to Admiralty, 30 Mar 1814 & 26 June 1814, nos 264 & 300; ADM 1/1950. Log book of HMS *Phoebe*, 28 Mar 1814 ADM 51/2675, ff.173-4. Log book of the *Essex*, 28 Mar 1814, as published in the New York Evening Post, 8 July 1814; Crawford III, 719-30.
- 21 Carpenter’s report & gunner’s report: Crawford III, 742-4.
- 22 Denning, 97.
- 23 Graham, 141-97.
- 24 Log of *Phoebe*, a small format volume, probably Hillyar’s personal copy, well bound, with coastal views and charts, including Valparaiso, covering the period March 1813 to October 1814; MS87/026NMM.
- 25 Dixon to Admiralty, 10 June 1814, encl. Hillyar to Admiralty 30 Mar 1814; Graham, 145-6.
- 26 Dixon to Admiralty, 5 July 1814, encl. Hillyar to Admiralty, 11 May 1814; Graham, 145-6.
- 27 Dixon to Admiralty, 8 Sep 1814, encl. Hillyar to Tucker, 14 Apr 1814; Graham, 147-8.
- 28 Winfield, 166.
- 29 Dixon to Fyffe, 16 Nov 1814; Graham, 148-9.
- 30 Dixon to Admiralty, 24 Dec 1814, encl. Black to Dixon, 15 Dec 1813; Graham, 149-50.
- 31 Crawford III, 709, admits that the claims were excessive, but accepts the premise that the diversion worked.
- 32 Dudley, W., *The Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History* (Naval Historical Center, Washington, 1992) II, 296.
- 33 Long, D. F., *Nothing too Daring: A Biography of Commodore David Porter, 1783-1843*, USNIP, Annapolis, 1970, 162.
- 34 Long, Porter, 159, citing *The Times*, *Naval Chronicle*, the *Annual Register* and Marshall’s *Naval Biography*.

Decatur's Foray

by Bruce Linder

As the War of 1812 stumbled on toward its conclusion in the summer of 1814, momentum had decidedly swung toward Great Britain. The British blockade of American harbors had tightened with strong Royal Navy squadrons stationed outside nearly all American ports of commerce. In addition, American plans for action against Canada had sputtered, the government in Washington faced bankruptcy, and President Madison's cabinet openly talked about options for a less than satisfactory peace.¹ In August and September 1814, British army and naval forces swept up the Chesapeake Bay, burned Washington D. C., and attacked Baltimore, bringing the war directly to the major American cities of the middle Atlantic coast and further emphasizing the bleak future that American arms faced.



Stephen Decatur commanded the American frigate *United States* during its triumphant victory over HMS *Macedonian*, at the beginning of the War of 1812, a conquest largely determined by the longer-range guns of *United States*.

Naval Historical Foundation





It was in this setting that Navy Secretary William Jones, and Commodores John Rodgers, William Bainbridge, and Stephen Decatur began to plan for a large-scale naval breakout of blockaded ports. There had been little activity by major American warships in 1814, the result of the strangling blockade, the need to strip American sailors from frigates for duty in the Great Lakes, the increasingly desperate state of the government treasury, and Jones' preferred strategy of smaller cruiser thrusts against British commerce.

The primary goals of an American breakout were to raise the ante, doubling down on a final audacious strategy to disrupt British commerce and, in doing so, increase the cost of the war to England through ship losses and the expenses of the Royal Navy to protect them. With treaty negotiations ongoing, this American naval offensive played for favorable terms for the United States in the final rounds of consultations. Of particular interest to Secretary Jones was Decatur's push for a distant cruise to intercept major portions of the rich British East Indian trade – a move that hopefully would throw London financial markets into a tailspin.² For Secretary Jones, the effort to reconstitute the ships necessary for the breakout was no simple chore as crews had to be gathered, ship's prepared, and stores purchased during a time of near destitution for the U. S. Treasury.

Despite the obvious confidential nature of these developments in American naval strategy, British agents in New York and New England soon had figured out many of the details of American preparations.

American frigate *President* of 44 guns was considered by many to be the most powerful, fastest, and most handsome warship in the U. S. Navy during the War of 1812.

Naval History and Heritage Command

As British blockade commanders and the Admiralty sifted through clues from intelligent reports, troubling hints of deployments against the opulent East Indian trade of the Far East soon became clear. Captain Sir Henry Hotham, heading British forces from Halifax, and Captain John Hayes, the blockading squadron commander off New York, forwarded reports of American ships deeply laden with supplies, pilots with Asian experience joining American crews, and talk in American taverns of impending long voyages.³

On 18 December 1814, the *Constitution* (Captain Charles Stewart) was the first American frigate to escape, slipping out of Boston in the midst of a wintry gale. The British quickly mounted a powerful chase to intercept the star American frigate in mid-Atlantic or the Cape Verde Islands. Although there had been reports that *Constitution* would attempt to marry-up with frigate *Congress* or American privateers, she sailed singly. By 20 February 1815, her track had swung toward Bermuda, then Madeira, the Bay of Biscay, within sight of Lisbon, and finally again to Madeira taking several prizes along the way. Late that day the American frigate fell in with the small British frigate *Cyane* (Captain Gordon Falcon, RN) and the sloop-of-war *Levant* (Captain, the Honorable George Douglass, RN). In a spirited and complex engagement of maneuver, much of it in moonlight, *Constitution* forced first *Cyane* and then *Levant* to strike their colors. *Constitution* and her two prizes sailed to Porto Praya in the Cape Verdes to quickly refit from battle, but within a day the Royal Navy's pursuing squadron of frigates *Newcastle*, *Leander* (50), and *Acasta* (40) appeared on the horizon. With odds decidedly against *Constitution* – *Newcastle* and *Leander* were newly constructed to an advanced design to specifically counter the large American frigates – the Americans fled. *Constitution* finally returned to New York in mid-May to find the country at peace.⁴

Commodore Stephen Decatur's fast and powerful *President* (44) was the next part of the plan to test the British blockade. Decatur, probably the most dashing American naval figure of the era, had carefully marshaled a powerful American squadron in New York harbor consisting of frigate *President*, sloop-of-war *Hornet* (18) (Master Commandant James Biddle), sloop-of-war *Peacock* (22) (Captain Lewis Warrington), and stores ships *Tom Bouline* and *Macedonian* (owned by John Jacob Astor). On 14 January 1815, *President* moved into position off Sandy Hook in New York's outer harbor and anchored, waiting for the moment to sprint past Hayes' blocking squadron. Decatur's plan was that *President* and *Macedonian* would sortie first, slip past the blockade, and rendezvous with the rest of the American squadron at the remote South Atlantic island of Tristan da Cunha. From there, the squadron would rapidly cross the Indian Ocean picking off East Indianmen as they went, then sail through either the Malacca or Sunda straits, and raid throughout the China seas.

The intended voyage was not an idle fancy. Everyone recognized that English commerce in the Far East was a dazzlingly rich factor of the nation's economy. Boston privateers *Jacob Jones* and *Rambler* had scored particular

success in intercepting English China ships earlier in 1814 and Decatur intended to build on this important tactic.⁵ The strong American squadron had a good chance of overwhelming any British escorted convoy and victualing from captured ships, as Porter had done in *Essex*, ensuring that the squadron could operate indefinitely.

Decatur's orders also included one additional and important clause: "One object which you may possibly embrace with facility and with vast advantages to our territorial and commercial interests [is] the recapture of our post and settlement at the mouth of Columbia River on the Northwest Coast of America, now in possession of the enemy," wrote the Secretary of the Navy. "This you might accomplish by taking that route and returning home round Cape Horn.... It would be of great importance to the United States to be in possession of that settlement at the period when peace shall take place."⁶

The evening of 14 January brought perfect conditions for Decatur – a northwesterly gale swept through New York bringing snow showers and wind to an already dark night. The gale had blown Hayes' squadron momentarily off their blockading stations and out to sea. The blockading squadron was significant, consisting of four frigates: the *Majestic* (58) (a cut-down 74-gun ship-of-the line razée with heavy 32-pounder guns and 42-pounder carronades), the swift *Endymion* (armed with new, heavy 24-pounder "smasher" guns, and considered a match for *President*), and two light 18-pounder frigates, *Pomone* and *Tenedos*.

**American frigate *President*
battles HMS *Endymion*
in the moonlight
of 15 January 1815.**

US Navy

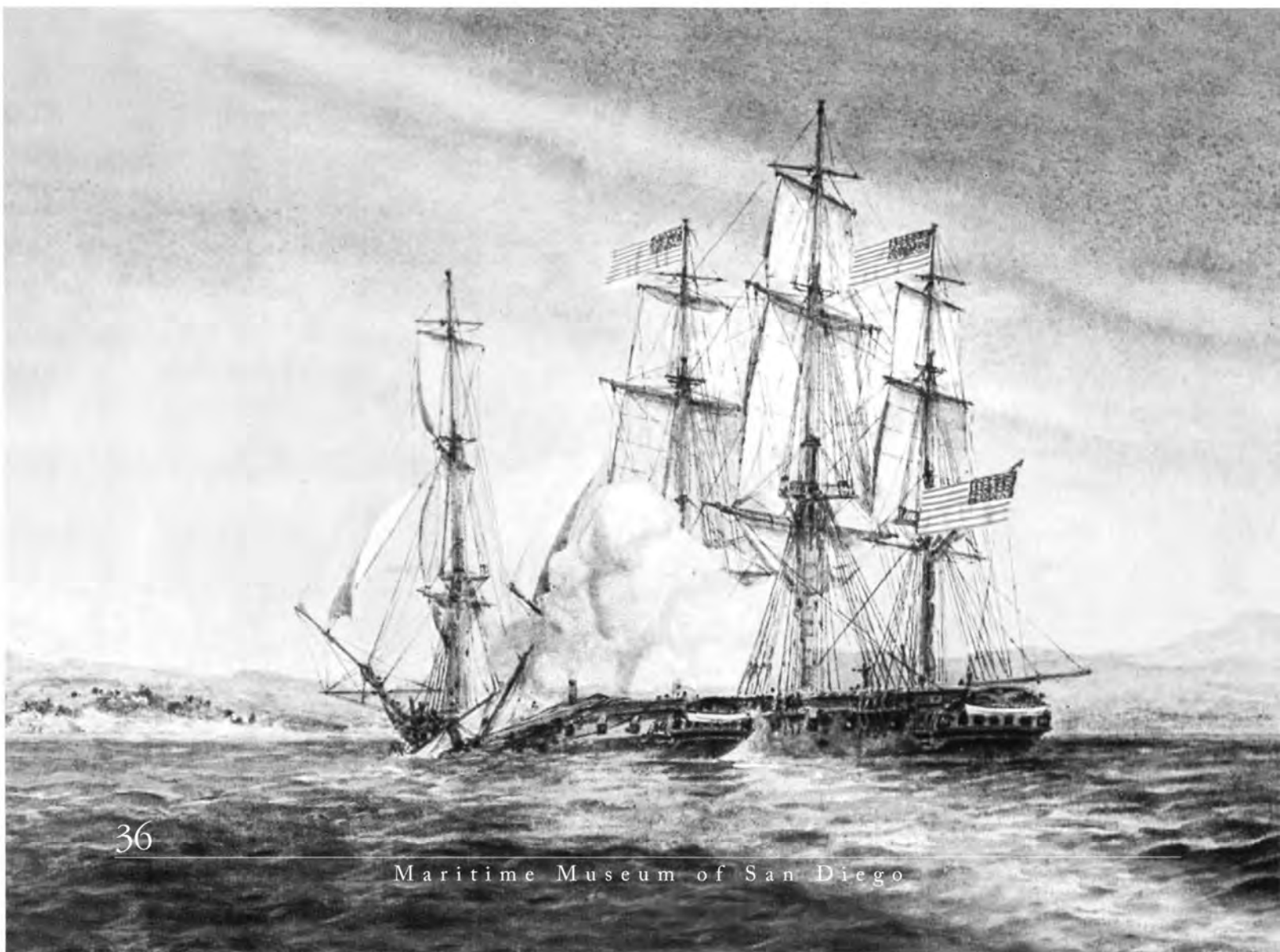


American sloop-of-war *Hornet* is shown here under the command of Master Commandant James Lawrence battling and sinking British sloop-of-war HMS *Peacock* off South America in February 1813. *Hornet* would later join Decatur's squadron under Master Commandant James Biddle.

Naval History and Heritage Command

Decatur's weather advantage proved to be double-edged the minute that he weighed anchor to sail into the darkness. In treacherously poor visibility and through either the incompetence of pilots or the mispositioning of guide boats, the deeply laden *President* ran hard aground, damaging her keel and springing her masts. After she finally refloated, the star-crossed frigate sailed eastward along the Long Island coast but at dawn found herself, bewilderingly, surrounded by the same four-ship British squadron she had sought to avoid. The British commander, deducing that the Americans might use the storm to breakout, had repositioned his ships along the anticipated route of best escape.

With the odds 4:1 against him, Decatur signaled *Macedonian* to scatter while *President* cracked on more sail to flee as the British ships closed. The wind at first favored the powerful *Majestic*, whose heavy guns held a decisive superiority over the American frigate. After a few long-range shots, though, she fell astern as *President* flexed her advantage of speed despite her damaged state. As the day progressed, the wind steadily decreased and then backed to the north and then north-northeast, a condition that favored the British *Endymion* who gradually gained to within gunshot range of *President*.



For five hours the two captains fenced, throwing fire across the dwindling distance, managing the occasional broadside, and maneuvering brilliantly. *Endymion's* fire was relentless and both ships fired full damaging broadsides. Three of *President's* top lieutenants died from the cannon fire and splinters injured Decatur.

By nightfall, it was clear that *President* could not escape. *Endymion* had fallen off from contact, but *Pomone* had closed within broadside range and *Tenedos* was not far away. With damage from her grounding, carnage suffered from accurate English fire, and the pervasive pressure from the remaining ships of the enemy squadron – Decatur surrendered. It had been a brilliant victory of maneuver and concentration of force by the Royal Navy. The best that Theodore Roosevelt could say of Decatur in his prize-winning book, *The Naval War of 1812*, was that the American commodore acted “rather tamely, certainly not heroically, in striking to the *Pomone*,” while a leading British naval historian crowed that *Endymion's* victory was “the greatest frigate battle of them all,” and stood as a reminder to Washington of “who was the master of the oceans.”⁷

Unknowing of the loss of *President*, the remaining ships of the American Far Eastern force sortied on 22 January in heavy weather that allowed them to evade British blockaders. The American squadron rendezvoused in the South Atlantic as planned, still eager to continue with the plan to sail to the Pacific. While awaiting arrival of *President*, *Hornet* fell in with brig HMS *Penguin* (18), who had been patrolling for American privateers.

Penguin represented exactly the circumstance that Decatur had planned for. Attached to the Royal Navy's Cape Station, the ship was but one cog in the system of English commerce protection and convoying that stretched around the world. The system was relatively effective against the occasional privateer, but Royal Navy defenders were necessarily stretched thin and any

significant concentration of raiding forces – such as that represented by Decatur's planned squadron – could easily overwhelm any single escorts with little the Royal Navy could do.

After close fighting for 22 minutes, *Hornet* prevailed over its under-gunned opponent. Captain James Biddle of *Hornet* ordered the heavily damaged *Penguin* scuttled and *Hornet* and *Peacock* proceeded in company again on course toward the East Indies, while *Tom Bowline* sailed to Rio de Janeiro with *Penguin's* prisoners.

It was not long before a new sail appeared on the distant horizon, soon identified as the British ship-of-the-line *Cornwallis* (74) also of the Cape Station. The *President* and two well-handed American sloops could handle a single British ship-of-the line, but without Decatur, the Americans scattered with the fast-sailing *Cornwallis* closing within gunshot of the fleeing *Hornet*. Captain Biddle ordered the ship's boats, guns, shot, spars and stores thrown overboard to lighten ship and slowly pulled away from the *Briton* in a dramatic chase that lasted 42 hours. Although she had escaped capture, *Hornet* was no longer of any use as a cruiser and she made sail for a return to New York.

Peacock continued eastward, now the sole remaining cruiser in the American plan to harass English China trade. After crossing the Indian Ocean, *Peacock* reached the coast of Sumatra and then sighted Java Head at the entrance to the Straits of Sunda. Just north of the straits in the Java Sea, on 15 June 1815, she sighted the armed East Indian Company brig *Nautilus* (14). When the English captain hailed with news of peace, the skeptical Americans demanded that she strike her colors. When *Nautilus* refused, a *Peacock* broadside quickly determined the fight and *Nautilus* became, briefly, an

American prize. Out of touch for so long, no one in the American squadron knew of the Treaty of Ghent that had been signed on Christmas Eve 1814 and ratified in February 1815.

The Decatur cruise largely came to naught, but it revealed two subtle elements of the



In contrast to its hesitant interest in Pacific settlements before the war and despite the murky status Fort Astoria (due to its forced sale), the American government took determined actions after the war to regain its possession of Astoria as part of the treaty's "restitution of territory" clause.¹¹

On July 18, 1815, Secretary of State James Monroe declared to the English chargé d'affaires in Washington, "As the Post on Columbia River was taken during the War ... The United States are, of course, entitled to its restitution; measure, therefore, will be taken to reoccupy it without delay."¹² The Navy, likewise, considered both the reclaiming of Fort Astoria and the broader aim of expanded American presence in the Pacific a priority, much different than the service's position before the war. Captain David Porter placed the sense of the American naval community into words in a long letter to President Madison in October 1815, recommending that the government fashion a naval expedition for a "voyage of discovery to the north and south Pacific Oceans." Porter's view encompassed both scientific goals as well as expansive actions worthy of a "great and rising nation," including reclaiming the rights to Fort Astoria and caught the attention of the President.¹³

Secretary of the Navy Benjamin W. Crowninshield identified frigates *Java* (Captain Oliver H. Perry) and *Congress* (Captain Charles Morris) for the expedition and set plans in motion for their sailing.¹⁴ Although *Java* would fall out when concerns about the Mediterranean surfaced, Morris received orders in June 1816 to "prepare for a cruise to the Pacific" with goals that Morris reported as "the formal reception of the fort at the mouth of the Columbia river from the English authorities and it was the intention of the government to occupy and arm it.... Another object, deemed of much importance, was to visit the different ports and harbors, and ascertain their resources and advantages for trade and to collect all other information that might facilitate commercial intercourse between them and our countrymen," as well as other scientific, charting and hydrography objectives. But the cruise never took place, as Morris explained: "Just as the ship was nearly prepared to commence the cruise ... a collision had taken place in the gulf of Mexico between one of our small vessels of war and one of those belonging to Spain ... [that might] interfere with the success of the pending negotiations for Florida. Ordered to send the *Congress*, forthwith, to the Gulf of Mexico, as that ship could be soonest prepared."¹⁵

While Commodore David Porter's plan for a naval expedition to the Pacific had fallen through in 1816, the government's heightened sense of concern for American standing in the Pacific Ocean continued. Once frigate *Congress* was freed of her mission to the Gulf of Mexico she readied again for a new Pacific cruise, this one for commerce protection of American trade in Asiatic waters under a new captain, John Henley. At about the same time, Captain James Biddle and State Department representative John B. Prevost were directed to proceed in sloop-of-war *Ontario* to the Columbia River, "to assert the claim of the United States to the sovereignty of the adjacent country, in a friendly and peaceable manner,



and without the employment of force.”¹⁶ *Ontario*’s voyage caused a flare up in London as the ship departed for the Columbia, deliberately or not, unannounced to the British.

Ontario arrived at the mouth of the Columbia on 19 August 1818, the first U. S. naval vessel to reach the American west coast. Biddle went ashore to ceremoniously take possession leaving a leaden plate or “a board” with the words: “Taken possession of in the name of, and on behalf of the United States by Captain James Biddle, commanding the United States ship *Ontario*, Columbia River, August 1818.” Importantly, Biddle left plates nailed up on both banks of the Columbia – a simple step but one that would appear time and time again in international negotiations throughout the ensuing thirty years. According to the journal of *Ontario*’s Lieutenant John Aulick, “Capt. Biddle was not authorized by his instructions to haul [the British flag] down.”¹⁷ Prevost later traveled aboard sloop-of-war HMS *Blossom* (Commander Frederick Hickey, RN) from Chile to the Columbia River to exchange formal letters of possession and to finally hoist the American flag over the fort.

USS *Erie* was part of a new and improved class of American sloops-of-war built in 1813. Among her sister ships (all sharing the same characteristics and design and a heavy armament of 22 guns) were *Peacock*, who sailed with Decatur’s squadron at the end of the War of 1812, and *Ontario*, who, under Captain James Biddle, reclaimed Fort Astoria for the United States in 1818, under the terms of the Treaty of Ghent.

National Archives

These actions significantly strengthened American claims in the Oregon Country and demonstrated clearly that the United States had not abandoned its interests there. Many in Britain loudly objected, including the English ambassador in Washington who wrote, "the territory itself was early taken possession of in his majesty's name, and had been since considered as forming part of his majesty's dominions."¹⁸ Notably, though, events in the wake of the War of 1812 – the unequivocal status of Astoria, the manner of territorial restitutions mandated by the Treaty of Ghent, and U. S. government's orders to *Ontario* – all served to raise Oregon's destiny from simple arguments of competing national claims to the status of serious international diplomacy. Captain James Biddle, who had played such a prominent role in the planned Decatur foray into the Pacific at the end of the War of 1812, now had completed the mission that he had been originally assigned – "the recapture of our post and settlement at the mouth of Columbia River on the Northwest Coast of America."

A few weeks after HMS *Blossom* sailed away from the Columbia, American and British representatives met to negotiate an international boundary for the entire Oregon Country west of the Continental Divide. In this contest of diplomacy, the British could no longer credibly claim the entire Oregon Country as their own and fell back, instead, on a proposal for a boundary along the natural course of the Columbia River with a Canadian dominion north of the Columbia River and American territory (including the site of Fort Astoria) to the south. Vehement in their territorial goals for Pacific settlement, American negotiators counter-proposed an extension of the existing British-American border along the 49th parallel of latitude all the way west to the Pacific Ocean (that would recognize American claims to Puget Sound and even the tip of Vancouver Island). When no immediate agreement could be concluded, both nations ultimately agreed upon the Anglo-American Convention of 1818 that recognized no overarching covenant except that both nations would accept joint occupancy by citizens of either country across the whole of the Oregon Country as well as joint sovereignty for an undetermined period until final agreements could later be reached.

Hence, across a span of just eight years, the United States had swung from an policy of not seeking officially sanctioned settlements anywhere along the Pacific coast, to one where American communities were possible across the entire stretch from the border of California at latitude 42° to the southern boundary of Russian-America claims at 54° 40'N. Conversely, across these same years, Britain had swung from commercial and military dominance across every inch of the Oregon Country to a circumstance where they potentially faced an approaching tsunami of American settlers from the Great Plains up the Oregon Trail. The War of 1812 had been the catalyst for this remarkable reversal in British fortunes, where now Great Britain could only seek, at best, an agreement of general equality with American intent.

NOTES

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- 2 Andrew Lambert, *The Challenge: America, Britain and the War of 1812* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012), 351.
- 3 Ibid., 332.
- 4 Tyron Martin, 201-206.
- 5 Timothy S. Good, ed. *American Privateers in the War of 1812* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co, 2012), 175.
- 6 Charles Oscar Paullin, "The Voyage of the *Ontario* 1817-19," *U. S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, February 1940, 213.
- 7 (Challenge, 456,460)(Roosevelt 145-148)
- 8 Thomas Jefferson ltr to John Jacob Astor, 9 November 1813, as quoted in Frederick Merk, *The Oregon Question* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1967), 14. Of note, Jefferson probably did not know Astor well and historians have described his tone here as rather neutral and non-committal. Astor's settlement did, though, align with Jefferson's broad vision that Americans would expand beyond the Rocky Mountains, probably to found independent nations that would align with the United States.
- 9 James Monroe ltr to American Plenipotentiaries, 22 March 1814, *British and Foreign State Papers 1812-1814*. (London: James Ridgway and Sons, 1841), I, 1641.
- 10 Barry M. Gough, *The Royal Navy and the Northwest Coast of North America 1810-1914* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1971), 22.
- 11 Merk, *The Oregon Question*, 7.
- 12 James Monroe ltr to Anthony St. John Baker, 18 July 1815, *British and Foreign State Papers 1821-1822*, (London: J. Harrison and Son, 1829), 459; Robert Greenhow, *The History of Oregon and California* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1845), 307.
- 13 Captain David Porter ltr to President James Madison 31 October 1815 "The North-West Coast," *Niles Weekly Register*, 10 March 1821, 24-25.; David F. Long, *Gold Braid and Foreign Relations: Diplomatic Activities of U. S. Naval Officers 1798-1883* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1988), 237.
- 14 James P. Ronda, *Astoria & Empire* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 309.
- 15 Charles Morris, *The Autobiography of Commodore Charles Morris* (Boston: A. Williams & Co., 1880), 75-76; David F. Long, *Nothing Too Daring* (Annapolis: U. S. Naval Institute, 1970), 174. The incident that Morris refers to was a misunderstanding involving Spanish warships off Vera Cruz, Mexico who fired on and captured USS *Firebrand* while she was escorting a known privateer. *Firebrand* was quickly returned but President Madison ordered two American warships to the Gulf of Mexico in response during a time of anti-Spanish sentiment.
- 16 Paullin, "The Voyage of the *Ontario* 1817-19," 214.; Charles Francis Adams, ed. *Memoirs of John Quincy Adams* (Freeport: Books for Libraries Press, 1969), IV:11.; Greenhow, *The History of Oregon and California*, 307. *Ontario* had been scheduled for a voyage to Chile and Peru to protect American interests when Secretary of State John Quincy Adams asked for additional tasking for the *Columbia* River to "take territorial possession at the mouth of the *Columbia* River." Biddle's orders dtd 30 September 1817 read: "Proceed to the *Columbia* River, with a view to assert, on the part of the United States, the claim to the sovereignty, by some symbolical or appropriate mode adapted to the occasion."
- 17 Paullin, "The Voyage of the *Ontario* 1817-19," 216; John H. Aulick, "Extracts from a Journal Kept on Board the U. S. Ship *Ontario* on a Cruise to the N. W. Coast," (Portland, OR: Oregon Historical Society, 1818), 19 August 1818.
- 18 Greenhow, *The History of Oregon and California*, 307.

Timeline: The Pacific Theater in the War

Essex



June 1812 U. S. declares war against Great Britain beginning War of 1812.



Oct. 1812 Capt. David Porter in *Essex* sails from Philadelphia for mission of Atlantic commerce raiding.

Feb. 1813 *Essex* rounds Cape Horn.

Apr. 1813 Porter captures the first of 12 British whaleships off the coasts of Peru and Chile decimating their fleet.

Nov. 1813 Porter declines appeal to defend Ft. Astoria but sends cannon.

Dec. 1814 Treaty of Ghent initialed and submitted for ratification.

Mar. 1815 War of 1812 ends with treaty ratification.



1819 British whaling never regains its standing in the Eastern Pacific. American whaling quickly restored, then built on substantial Pacific resources and U. S. rises to dominate worldwide oil industry by 1830s.

of 1812 and its Immediate Aftermath

Astoria



Decatur



Mar. 1811 Work begins on Ft. Astoria on Columbia River. First permanent American Pacific coast settlement raiding.

May 1812 Second Astorian supply ship arrives at Columbia R. solidifying American settlement.

July 1812 John Jacob Astor urges U. S. government to reverse previous policy and protect Ft. Astoria. Frigate *John Adams* considered for mission but never sails.

Sept. 1812 Frigate HMS *Phoebe* sails from England with *Isaac Todd* to capture Ft. Astoria.

Sept. 1813 HMS *Raccoon* proceeds to Ft. Astoria, *Phoebe* & HMS *Cherub* hunt for *Essex*.

Oct. 1813 Ft. Astoria sold to British Northwest Company in forced deal.

Nov. 1813 *Raccoon* arrives at the Columbia River — takes possession of Astoria and surrounding country.

Spring 1814 American privateers successful against British East Indian trade.

Fall 1814 Sec. of Navy Jones plans naval breakout to influence treaty negotiations.

Nov. 1814 *Hornet*, *Peacock*, join *President* in New York; Decatur plans foray against East Indian trade in Pacific.

Dec. 1814 *Constitution* breaks out of Boston to raid commerce in Atlantic.

Jan. 1815 Decatur in *President* sorties from New York for the China Seas with orders to recapture Ft. Astoria.

Jan. 1815 *President* captured by British blockading squadron

Jan. 1815 *Hornet*, *Peacock* sortie from New York.

Mar. 1815 By end of war, British dominate entire Oregon Country with multiple settlements.

Mar. 1815 Capt. James Biddle in *Hornet* captures HMS *Penguin*.

June 1815 *Peacock* captures HMS *Nautilus*; abandons Pacific cruise.

July 1815 Sec. of State Monroe declares American intent to reoccupy Ft. Astoria following terms of Treaty of Ghent.

Oct. 1815 Porter develops plan for American naval expedition to Pacific.

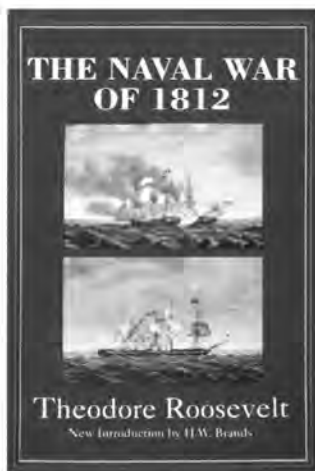
June 1816 Frigate *Congress* prepared for cruise to Pacific and Astoria but plan falls through.

Aug. 1818 Capt. Biddle in sloop *Ontario* takes possession of Astoria

Dec. 1818 American and British negotiators fail to reach agreement on overlapping claims to Oregon Country. Joint occupancy allowed until later final agreements. American presence slowly takes hold.

1819 U.S. Navy establishes permanent Pacific Station to protect commerce and whaling and extend American naval might into Pacific. Symbolically, first flagship is frigate *Macedonian* captured from British during War of 1812 and first Pacific commodore was John Downes, First Lieutenant on Porter's *Essex*.

War of 1812 in Books



The Naval War of 1812
by Theodore Roosevelt
(Naval Institute Press,
Annapolis) 1987.

An American classic. Before Teddy Roosevelt was an adventurer, war hero, Assistant Secretary of the Navy and President, he somehow found time to be a well-regarded writer and historian. The Naval War of 1812 was written just two years after his graduation from Harvard and stood as one of the strongest American counterweights to other more widely published works by British historians. Roosevelt's main impact was his careful analysis of not just tactics, but the strengths and weaknesses of gunnery and firepower in major engagements. For instance, his calculation and use of "weight of broadside" was one of the earliest use of this metric by naval historians.

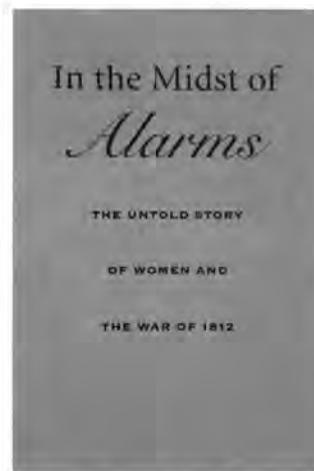
★★★★★



Six Frigates: The Epic History of the Founding of the U. S. Navy by Ian Toll
(W. W. Norton & Co., New York) 2006.

This is a richly detailed history of the first six frigates that formed the core of the U. S. Navy immediately upon their building in the 1790s. Each of these frigates played pivotal roles during the War of 1812 and Toll does a superb job of telling the broader story of the war from the perspective of the primary ships and commanders of the U.S. Navy.

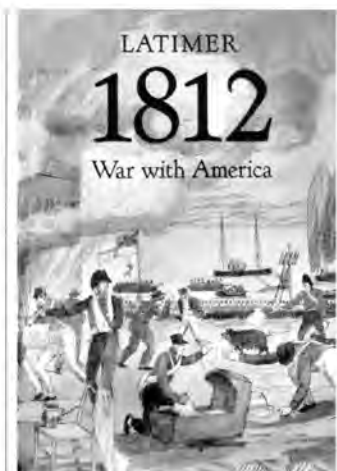
★★★★★



In the Midst of Alarms
by Dianne Graves
(Robin Brass Studio, Montreal) 2007.

A unique offering, certainly not the usual book of the War of 1812. Dozens of stories are portrayed of women at all levels of society and their views of the war and contributions on the battlefield. Research is broad-based with peeks into diaries, letters, and records of such strong women as Dolley Madison and Catherine Prevost.

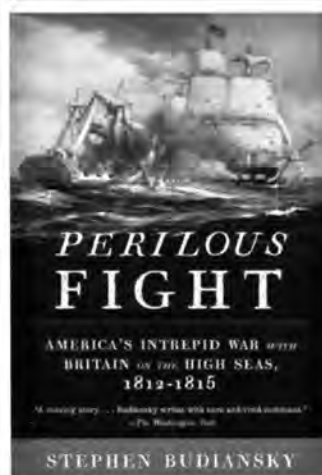
★★



1812: War with America by Jon Latimer
(Harvard University Press, Cambridge) 2010.

This is another history of the war written from the British perspective. It provides a compelling viewpoint of the war as one portion of the larger Napoleonic campaigns that dominated all British energy, strategies, political thought, and defense planning. His view of the Indian and Canadian campaigns of the war is comprehensive and little known.

★★★



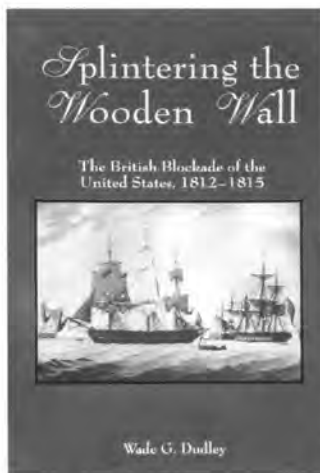
Perilous Fight: America's Intrepid War with Britain on the High Seas, 1812-1815

by Stephen Budiansky (Alfred A. Knopf, New York) 2010.

Very comprehensive and written in a smooth and insightful style that makes it an enjoyable read. It includes details on the broader war across North America and the diplomatic and political considerations in Washington, D.C., as well putting naval campaigns into their proper perspective.

★★★

With the Bicentennial in full swing, there has been an explosion of worthy books on the War of 1812, proving that quality research and interest in this topic is nowhere near saturation. These newer books (presented by Pub. date) are filled with fresh perspectives and nuances and largely bring new light on a topic that was once famously referred to as “the forgotten war.”



How Britain Won the War of 1812: The Royal Navy's Blockades of the United States, 1812-1815 by Brian Arthur (Boydell Press, Woodbridge, UK) 2011. ★ ★ ★ ★

and

Splintering the Wooden Wall: The British Blockade of the United States 1812-1815 by Wade G. Dudley (Naval Institute Press, Annapolis) 2003. ★ ★ ★

Would you read a whole book about tedious blockades – how about TWO books? Akin to watching grass grow? In this case you should, as the Royal Navy's blockading strategy for the War of 1812 was their *primary* naval strategy and British blockading efforts shaped everything the Royal Navy or their American counterparts attempted and led to much greater conclusions, such as the bankrupting of the American treasury. Both of these offerings are very insightful and wonderfully researched; Dudley is an American author, Arthur is from Great Britain.



The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict, Bicentennial Edition

by Donald R. Hickey (University of Illinois Press, Champagne) 2012.

Originally written twenty years ago, this book is so strong that it was brought back in a Bicentennial Edition. Authoritative and complete, it has a particularly well-written study of the complex peace negotiations at the end of the war.

Every author who has followed Hickey quotes him.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★



The Challenge: America, Britain and the War of 1812 by Andrew Lambert (Faber and Faber, London) 2012.

This is an accomplished work, well-researched, and dramatic. It is the best recent book written completely from the British perspective of the war and chock-full of direct research that the author conducted from Admiralty records. For better or for worse, it's obvious that the author has preconceived opinions of many of the primary commanders. This provides interesting color and, from the American perspective, controversy.

★ ★ ★ ★



The War of 1812 and the Rise of the U. S. Navy by Mark Collins Jenkins and David Taylor. (National Geographic, Washington, D.C.) 2012.

Probably the best illustrated and most visually impactful Bicentennial book produced commemorating the War of 1812. Very thorough and broadly aimed, it covers a host of elements of the war from fascinating tidbits and sidebars to broad sweeping strategies.

★ ★ ★ ★



Acknowledgements

Many have assisted in compiling material for this issue and in exploring and researching the historical record of the events portrayed across these pages. British publisher, Faber & Faber, generously granted permission to include a significant reprint from Andrew Lambert's recent thought-provoking book, *The Challenge: America, Britain and the War of 1812*, which is written from the British point of view. Dr. Lambert also graciously provides an additional perspective on the Pacific voyage of USS *Essex* with his introduction specific to this issue of *Mains'l Haul*.

The Columbia River Maritime Museum and the Northwest History Network were instrumental in guiding our search for quality material to tell the tale of Fort Astoria in Oregon. Historian and maritime researcher Mike Rees, who has presented breakthrough research on the voyage of the British sloop-of-war *Raccoon*, provides a unique perspective on that ship's pivotal role in the conflict. The National Museum of the United States Navy and the Naval History & Heritage Command orchestrated many of the nationwide commemorative events of the Bicentennial of which we were a part. The Maritime Museum's **War of 1812** exhibit was helped tremendously by the artistic contributions of noted maritime artist Hans Skalagard, with assistance from the U. S. Navy's Art Gallery in Washington, D. C.

With gratitude,

Bruce Linder, Contributing Editor

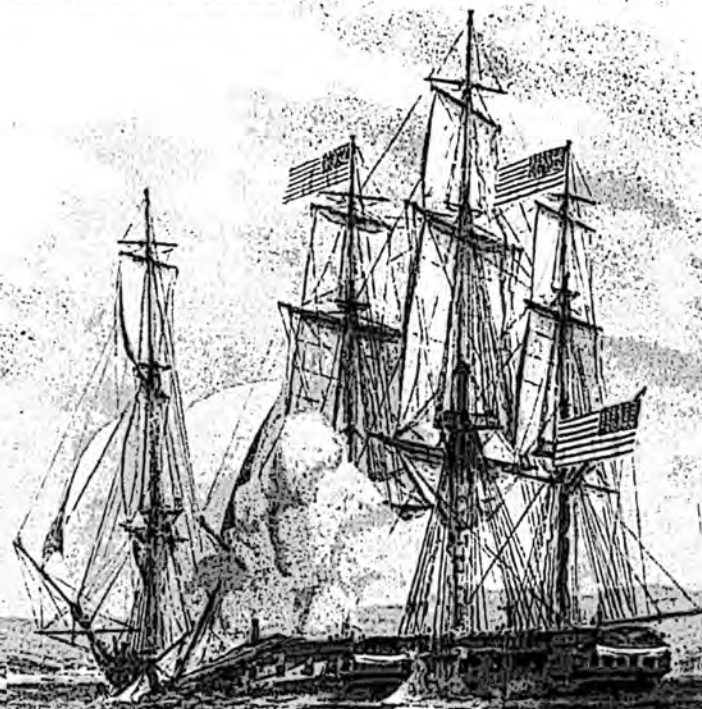
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Essex in the Pacific

In 1800, the *Essex*, a splendidly built Salem frigate of 32 guns, became the first United States warship to enter the Pacific when she escorted an American convoy home from the East Indies. When the War of 1812 began, she sailed from Philadelphia, under Captain David Porter's command, with orders to join frigate *Constitution* and attack British commerce throughout the Atlantic. Failing to rendezvous with *Constitution*, Porter proceeded independently to the Pacific. His target was unprotected British commerce, especially their whaling fleet that operated in the teeming whaling waters off Peru and Chile.

After a difficult rounding of Cape Horn, *Essex* refit in Valparaiso and then proceeded on her raiding cruise through the eastern Pacific, staying for a short time in the Galapagos Islands. He captured whaler after whaler, adding them to his growing flotilla or sending them into port as prizes. In all, he captured a dozen whale-ships, recaptured an American whaler, and ended the service of a Peruvian privateer.

Establishing a model that other commerce raiders would use in later years, he let his captures supply him with food, water and repair matériel. When more significant repairs were called for,



David Porter

he sailed to the Marquesas Islands where *Essex* could be fully refitted out of sight of British warships that were pursuing him.

After fifteen months and after inflicting considerable damage to the English whaling fleet, Porter finally sailed for the United States, stopping in Valparaiso one final time for supplies before attempting Cape Horn. It was here that two Royal Navy ships, frigate *Phoebe* (36 guns) and sloop-of-war *Cherub* (18), finally caught up with him in March 1814. Disadvantaged by the shorter range of his guns and storm damage to *Essex*'s main topmast, Porter was caught in a murderous crossfire and forced to surrender.

For fully half of the entire War of 1812, David Porter and *Essex* were loose in the Pacific preying on the commerce of Great Britain. Not only did he sail more miles and at a greater distance from the United States than any other American warship during the war, but Porter caused such damage to the British whaling fleet that they never recovered. Following the War of 1812 (and partially due to declining competition from Great Britain), the American whaling industry exploded with many new whaling ships and the discovery of fresh whaling grounds throughout the Pacific. By the middle of the nineteenth century, thanks in no small measure to *Essex*'s legacy, the United States dominated the international whale oil trade.



U.S. Frigate *Essex* battles HMS *Alert*



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The War of 1812-1814

The Pacific Campaign

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