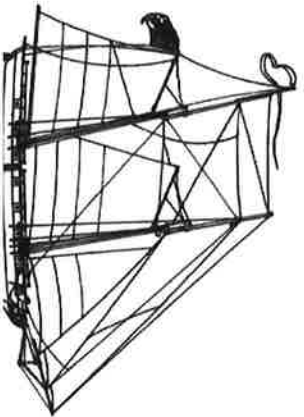


USS SHARK



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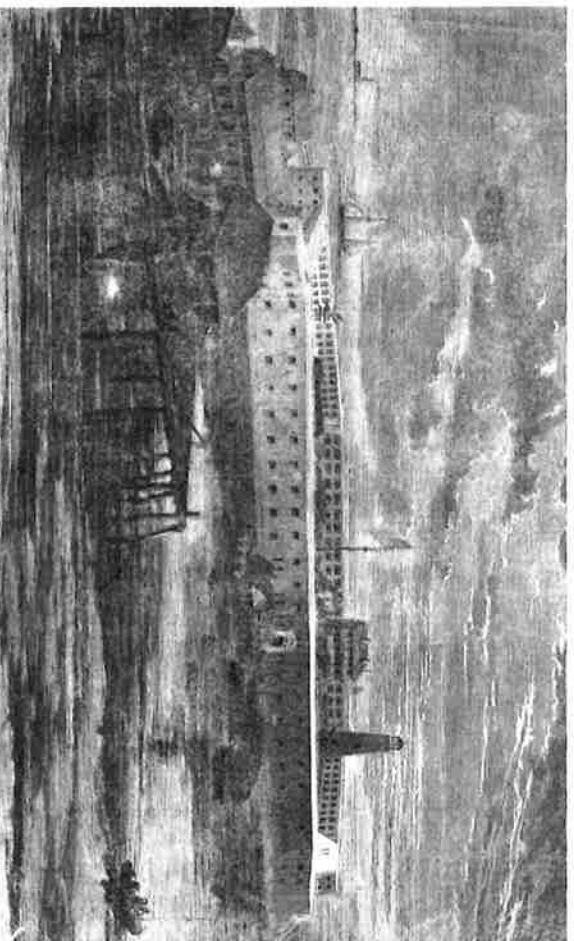
During the summer of 1864, the wife of the post surgeon at Fort Jefferson in the Dry Tortugas made the following entry in her journal.

My husband now took the entire medical charge of the prisoners; his sympathies were aroused when treated them during the illness of the regimental doctor, and he found them in a terrible condition from the effects of scurvy. His first inspection occupied five hours, and every corner of their quarters and every man was examined. He found nearly two hundred with the loathsome disease, many too ill to rally.

The term "loathsome" is aptly applied to a disease that does terrible things to the human body. William Hutchinson, an 18th Century British seaman, contracted scurvy on his first voyage (1738-1739). The gruesome details of his affliction were still vividly etched in his mind when he wrote his memoirs 50 years later.

... my armpits and hams grew black but did not swell, and I pined away to a weak, helpless condition, with my teeth all loose, and my upper and lower gums swelled and clotted together like a jelly, and they bled to that degree that I was obliged to

Scurvy The Loathsome Disease



Fort Jefferson 1861. Photo credit: Monroe County Library.

lie with my mouth hanging over the side of my hammock, to let the blood run out, and to keep it from clotting so as to choke me ...

Scurvy has stalked mankind ever since the human species evolved, but the disease became a major maritime problem in the 15th Century when extended voyages began to be undertaken for exploration, trade, and far-ranging military missions. For almost four hundred years the "loathsome disease" inflicted staggering losses on crews regardless of age or race. According to author Stephen Bown, scurvy killed more sailors than all battles, storms and other

diseases combined from the 15th to the mid-19th centuries. The Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama lost two thirds of his crew on a voyage to India in 1499. Magellan lost more than 80 per cent of his crew while crossing the Pacific in 1520. Commodore George Anson commanded a squadron of five British men-of-war carrying 2,000 men when he left England in 1740 to attack Spanish shipping in the Pacific. Three years and nine months later when Anson returned to England, his squadron had been reduced to one ship and 1,300 of its men had died, most of them

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