



The Shining Sea: David Porter and the Epic Voyage of the U.S.S. Essex during the War of 1812 by George C. Daughan.

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George Daughan's latest book on the naval war of 1812¹ focuses on a minor campaign that stirred great interest at the time and still resonates two centuries later. The voyage of the *Essex* fascinates due to a technical oddity: the vessel's unique armament. Readers will either despise or pity her captain, David Porter Jr., a fine seaman and an officer of unquestioned courage, but also staggering hubris. His boundless vanity and self-delusion cost the lives of far too many of his crew and turned an initially successful mission into an abject failure. And yet, upon his return to the United States as a paroled prisoner, Porter was everywhere hailed as a hero! Such was the fickle nature of public opinion in early nineteenth-century America.

The *Essex*, a 32-gun frigate² displacing only about 850 tons, was commissioned in 1799. By the outbreak of the War of 1812, her small size and unusual armament rendered her less useful than other ships in the tiny US navy. *Essex* originally carried twenty-six 12-pounder long guns on her main (gun) deck, supplemented by ten 9-pounder cannon on her upper (spar) deck and quarterdeck. Between 1806 and 1809, however, the ship was "in ordinary" (withdrawn from active service), undergoing overhaul at the Washington Navy Yard; it was also being rearmed, principally with carronades: short-barreled, smoothbore weapons, much lighter than regular cannon. These guns fired a very heavy ball that carried only a few hundred yards at most. They were designed for close engagement—"yardarm to yardarm"—where their projectiles had tremendous smashing power. But, Daughan writes, "Carronades were most effective as supplements to a main battery of long guns; they were not intended to be a frigate's primary weapon" (47). Long guns, depending on size, had much greater ranges of accurate fire, over a mile in some cases. Why the unfortunate decision was made to equip *Essex* with forty 32-pounder carronades, supplemented by just six 12-pounder long guns is unknown, for "Records verifying exactly what was done were lost when the British sacked the capital on August 24th, 1814" (54).

The sea was in David Porter's blood. His father had served afloat with distinction during the Revolution, and the younger Porter had learned his trade as a teenager in the merchant service, narrowly escaping Royal Navy press gangs. He joined the reestablished US Navy as a midshipman, upon the outbreak of the "quasi-war" with France in 1798. He served heroically in that war and, after promotion to lieutenant, he further distinguished himself in the Tripolitan War aboard a number of warships, including the ill-fated frigate *Philadelphia*, which ran aground and was captured by the Algerians. Porter endured nineteen months of captivity, but was later promoted to master-commandant, assuming command of the *Essex* in 1811. Promoted to captain at the outset of the war, he achieved the US Navy's first capture of a British warship, the 20-gun sloop HMS *Alert*, a converted collier armed with carron-

1. He is also the author of *1812: The Navy's War* (NY: Basic Books, 2011).

2. A warship's "rate" was measured by an (often notional) number of guns. In most cases, the rate particularly of frigates and ships of the line did not correspond to the number of their long guns and carronades. E.g., The USS *Constitution* was rated as a 44-gun frigate but mounted as many as fifty-four guns during much of the War of 1812.

ades. Soon afterward, the *Essex* was assigned to a three-ship squadron commanded by Cdre. William Bainbridge, Porter's former captain on the *Philadelphia*.

Command and control in the age of sail was problematic, relying heavily on a captain's initiative. Bainbridge's squadron left the United States in late October 1812 from different ports, but upon reaching successive rendezvous points, the *Essex* never found the Commodore's ship, the USS *Constitution*. Working his way down the Atlantic coast of South America, amid rumors of British warships hunting the American squadron, Captain Porter followed the discretionary language in his orders, which instructed him to "act according to your best judgment for the good of the service on which we are engaged" (16). In general, he was expected to "annoy" the British by destroying their commerce. He decided to do so by fulfilling a longtime obsession—to sail around Cape Horn to seek out the British Pacific whaling fleet, a lucrative and vulnerable target. He was also determined to engage a British warship of equal force during this long cruise. His unflagging lust for glory—common among naval officers of the period—was to be his undoing. During the War of 1812, most Royal Navy frigates displaced about 1,100 tons and carried main batteries of 18-pounder long guns. Unless an enemy captain foolishly engaged the *Essex* at close range, the latter had no chance of winning a duel with a well commanded British frigate. Yet Porter dreamed of little else.

After rounding Cape Horn in record time despite punishing storms, the *Essex* reached its first port of call at Valparaiso, Chile. Arriving in March 1813, Porter found that various factions of Chilean rebels had taken arms against the Spanish crown. Since Spain was an ally of Great Britain, the dominant rebel faction welcomed the Americans enthusiastically. After refitting his ship, Porter put to sea and the *Essex* went on a rampage among British whalers working near the Galapagos Islands. He captured several prizes, but eventually the hunter became the prey. The Royal Navy had dispatched Capt. James Hillyar in the 36-gun frigate HMS *Phoebe*, accompanied by two sloops, including the 24-gun HMS *Cherub*, and a transport vessel, with orders to seize the American trading post at Astoria, in present-day Oregon. Hillyar was approaching the equator when he learned of the *Essex*'s depredations of the British whaling fleet. Sending the sloop HMS *Raccoon* to attack the American outpost, he took *Phoebe* and *Cherub* south to the Galapagos, in search of *Essex*.

Porter, however, had flown the coop in early October 1813. Needing another refit, he elected to sail west some 3,200 miles to the Marquesas Islands in present-day French Polynesia. Despite the enormous distance involved, Porter's decision made sense: he could refit his ships in safety and give his crew some pleasant shore leave, far from the searching eyes of the Royal Navy. Upon arrival, however, Porter again gave in to his impetuous, vainglorious nature and allied himself with one of the native factions on Nuku Hiva, largest of the Marquesas, and attacked a rival tribe, in the deluded belief that it was within his mission to annex the islands for the United States. Daughan comments,

he had no mandate from Washington to conquer Nuku Hiva; it was an outlandish idea... Nothing compelled him to attack these innocent people other than his determination to annex the island. No military purpose was served. Fighting them had nothing to do with refitting and supplying his ships. Slaughtering these people had only one objective—his own aggrandizement as the conqueror of Nuku Hiva. (205)

Although he neither gained a decisive victory nor unified the tribes, Porter was satisfied with what he accomplished. He wrote that the tribes "all gave me the strongest assurances of a disposition to remain on good terms, not only with me and my people, but with one another..." (207). His capacity for self-deception was breathtaking.

Leaving behind a small garrison, Porter sailed east in December 1813 with the *Essex* and *Essex Junior*, a converted British whaling vessel now mounting twenty guns taken from other prizes; it was manned by American sailors from *Essex* and volunteers of various nationalities from the captured Brit-

ish ships. He should have steered directly for Cape Horn, avoiding the South American coast where British warships might be lurking. Once in the Atlantic, he would have had a reasonable chance of reaching the United States unscathed. Alas, Porter instead

insisted that seeking out the British hunters was the best way to fulfill his supreme responsibility to annoy the enemy. Actually, his orders were to engage in commerce-destroying, which implied that he only fight an enemy as powerful as the *Phoebe* if absolutely necessary. Seeking out a British squadron that was bound to be superior was contrary to the policy of the president, not to mention common sense. (215)

Porter was less than honest with his subordinates:

He liked to point out that since the *Essex* was the inferior ship in point of firepower, his government would not countenance him looking for a fight, but if one came his way, he would eagerly grasp it. Not only would he jump at the opportunity, but the chance of a battle was the reason he had returned to Valparaiso in the first place. He did not need to be there. No military purpose was being served. He was there to have a fight. He might not initiate an engagement, but he would do everything he could to provoke one. (222)

Porter wrote in his private journal: "I had done all the injury that could be done to the British commerce in the Pacific, and still hoped to signalize my cruise by something more splendid before leaving that sea. I thought it not improbable that Commodore Hillyar ... would seek me at Valparaiso.... I therefore determined to cruise about that place" (238). The stage was set for a showdown that could only have one outcome.

Essex reached Valparaiso (3 Feb. 1814) with *Essex Junior*, commanded by Porter's capable lieutenant, John Downes. *Phoebe* and *Cherub* soon arrived and, after an exchange of courtesies (Hillyar and Porter had known each other while serving in the Mediterranean a decade earlier), the British ships took stations outside the neutral harbor. On 28 March, Porter made a run for it, but soon turned back and anchored just outside the harbor in what he thought were neutral waters. Hillyar, no longer willing to observe niceties, positioned his ships to pour fire into *Essex* from outside the range of the US ship's carronades. Porter moved three of his six 12-pounder long guns to stern gunports and fired with some effect, but not enough to counter the broadsides from *Phoebe*. *Essex Junior* could offer no meaningful support and, after a one-sided battle of about two and a half hours, Porter struck his colors. His wrecked ship had drifted aground. Of his 255 crewmen, 58 were dead with nearly a hundred more wounded or lost trying to swim ashore. British casualties totaled a mere five killed and ten wounded. Hillyar generously paroled Porter and other American officers and sailors, allowing them to return home on *Essex Junior*, now a "cartel ship."

The aftermath was typical of that bombastic age. Captain Porter went uncensured for losing his ship and many of his crew in a bloody, avoidable battle—"The *Boston Gazette* spoke for most of the country when it declared, "The American Navy loses nothing of its justly acquired renown by this loss [of the *Essex*]" (251). Even President James Madison added to the mythology of Porter's ill-fated Pacific cruise, declaring in his 1814 message to Congress that "This officer and his comrades have added much to the rising glory of the American flag, and have merited all the effusions of gratitude which their country is ever ready to bestow on the champions of its rights, and of its safety" (264).

Porter's naval career, however, eventually ended in self-imposed disgrace. Commanding the Caribbean squadron in 1825, he became embroiled in a dispute with Spanish authorities in Puerto Rico. No real harm was done, but President John Quincy Adams insisted on a court-martial that found Porter guilty of disobedience, conduct unbecoming an officer, and insubordination. The court offered him a slap on the wrist—suspension from active duty for six months with full pay—but the outraged Porter resigned from the Navy in 1826. A succession of presidents tried to find a suitable position for him, and

eventually he became the American “minister resident” in Constantinople, where he died in obscurity in 1843.

George Daughan skillfully taps relevant primary and secondary sources in his clear and detailed narrative. Readers in thrall to glorious sagas of the age of sail will applaud *The Shining Sea*. The book is also an instructive indictment of bad decisions made by naval officials (arming the *Essex* with carronades) and, on a personal level, during the rise and fall of David Porter Jr., a man whose admirable professional qualities were overshadowed by an unquenchable ego.