

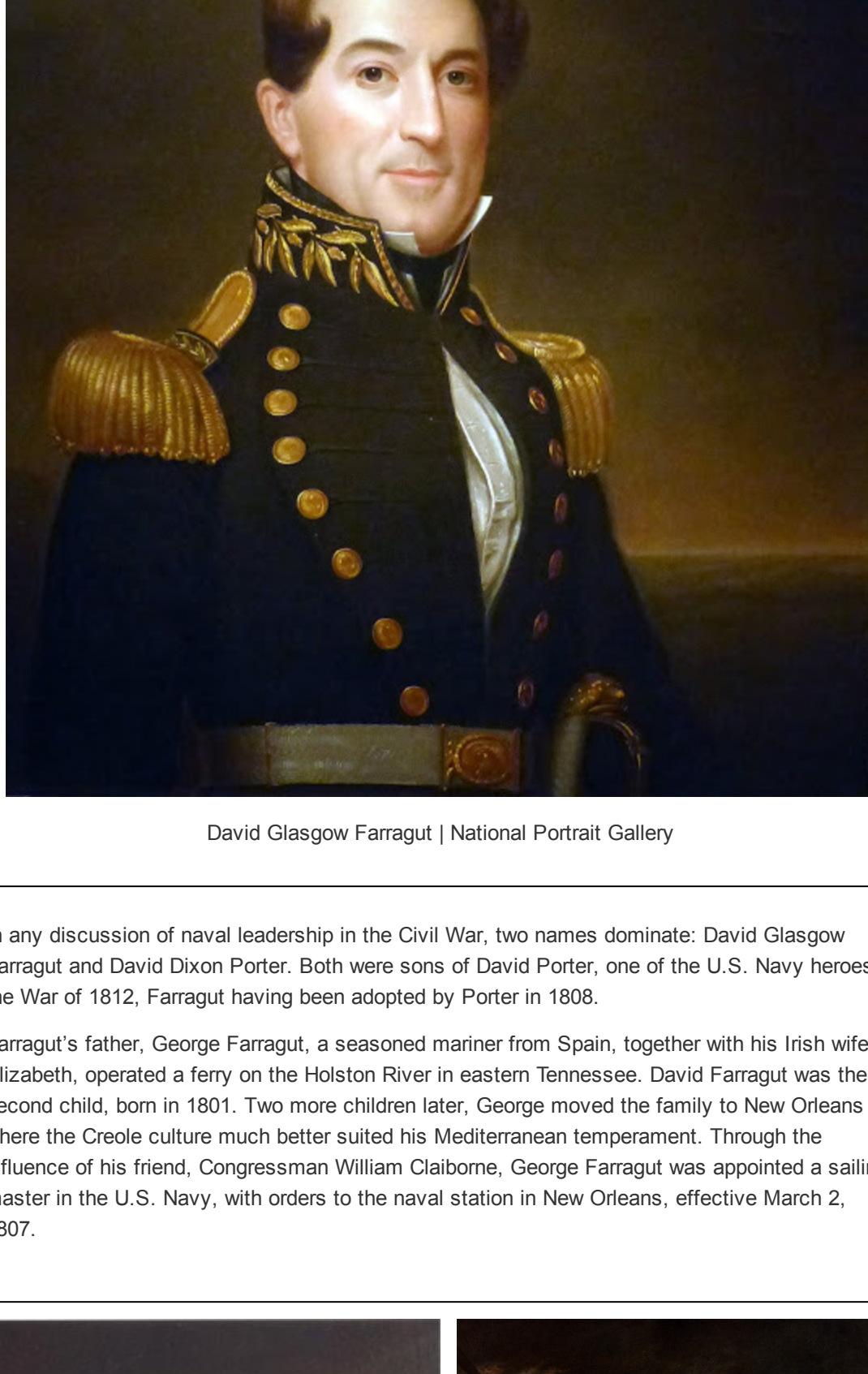


BLUE AND GRAY DISPATCH

The Legacy of Commodore David Porter, USN: Midshipman David Glasgow Farragut

Part One of a three-part series

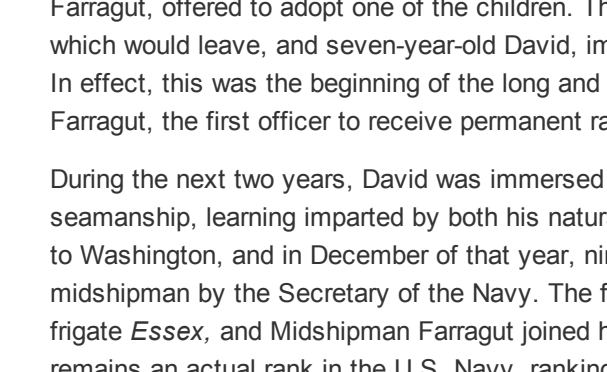
Vice Admiral Jim Sagerholm, USN (Ret.), September 15, 2020
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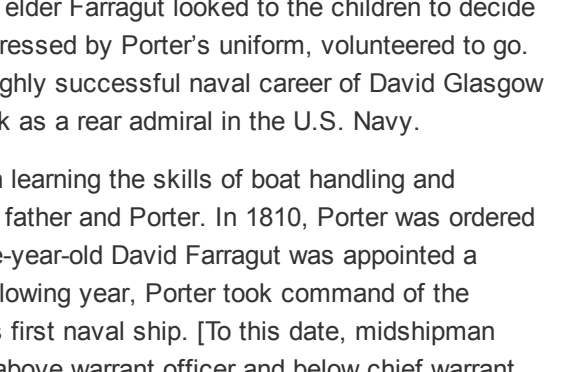
David Glasgow Farragut | National Portrait Gallery

In any discussion of naval leadership in the Civil War, two names dominate: David Glasgow Farragut and David Dixon Porter. Both were sons of David Porter, one of the U.S. Navy heroes in the War of 1812, Farragut having been adopted by Porter in 1808.

Farragut's father, George Farragut, a seasoned mariner from Spain, together with his Irish wife, Elizabeth, operated a ferry on the Holston River in eastern Tennessee. David Farragut was their second child, born in 1801. Two more children later, George moved the family to New Orleans where the Creole culture much better suited his Mediterranean temperament. Through the influence of his friend, Congressman William Claiborne, George Farragut was appointed a sailing master in the U.S. Navy, with orders to the naval station in New Orleans, effective March 2, 1807.



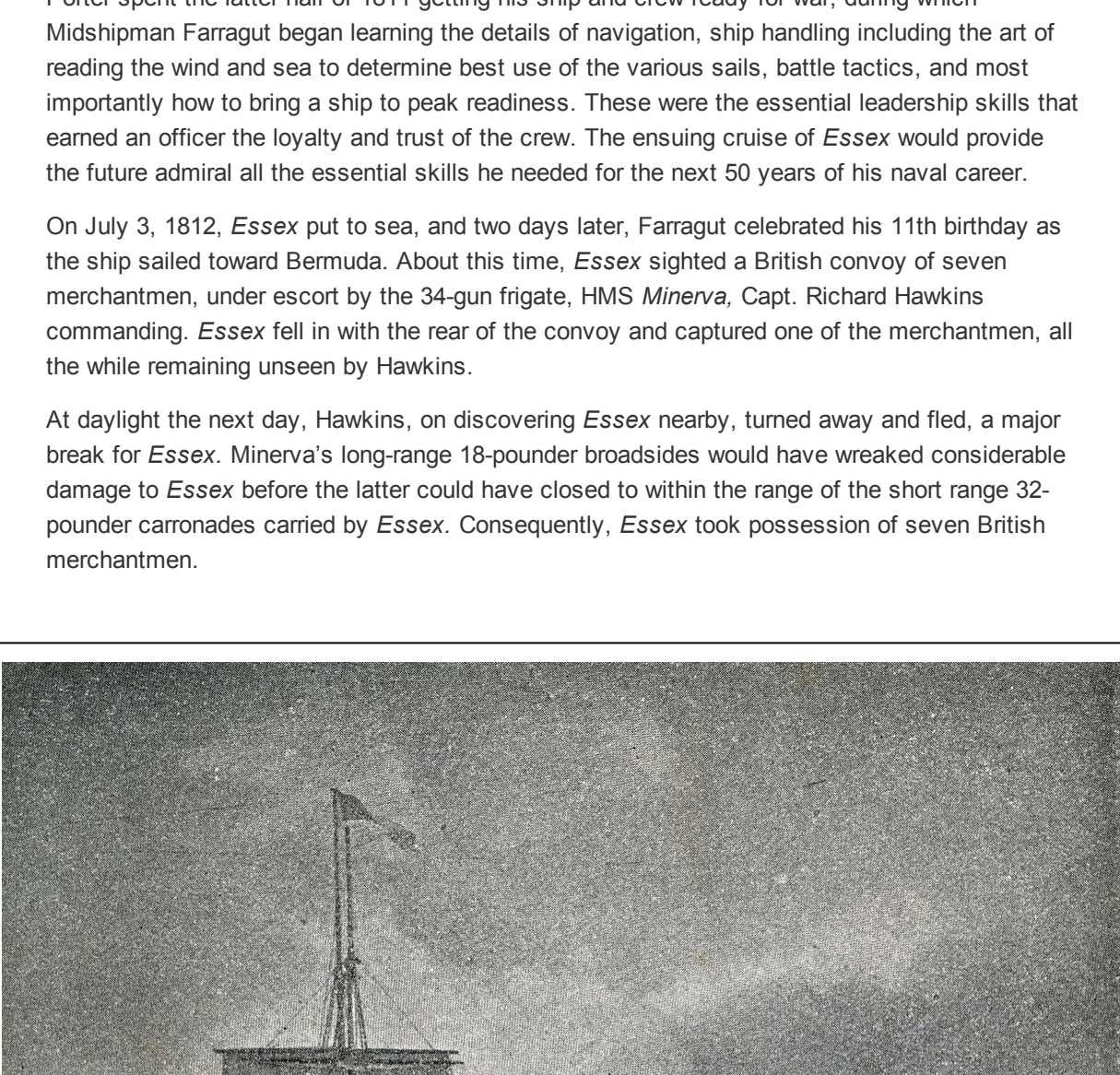
George Farragut | National Museum of American History



David Porter | U.S. Naval Academy Museum

The elder Farragut traveled to New Orleans by horseback, but his wife and four children had to go by flatboat with the family belongings, a long and tortuous trip lasting several months. A year later, Mrs. Farragut died from yellow fever, leaving George with five young children to care for. The newly arrived station commanding officer, Commander David Porter, out of sympathy for Farragut, offered to adopt one of the children. The elder Farragut looked to the children to decide which would leave, and seven-year-old David, impressed by Porter's uniform, volunteered to go. In effect, this was the beginning of the long and highly successful naval career of David Glasgow Farragut, the first officer to receive permanent rank as a rear admiral in the U.S. Navy.

During the next two years, David was immersed in learning the skills of boat handling and seamanship, learning imparted by both his natural father and Porter. In 1810, Porter was ordered to Washington, and in December of that year, nine-year-old David Farragut was appointed a midshipman by the Secretary of the Navy. The following year, Porter took command of the frigate *Essex*, and Midshipman Farragut joined his first naval ship. [To this date, midshipman remains an actual rank in the U.S. Navy, ranking above warrant officer and below chief warrant officer. Cadets at West Point and the Air Force Academy are not ranked in the Army or Air Force.]



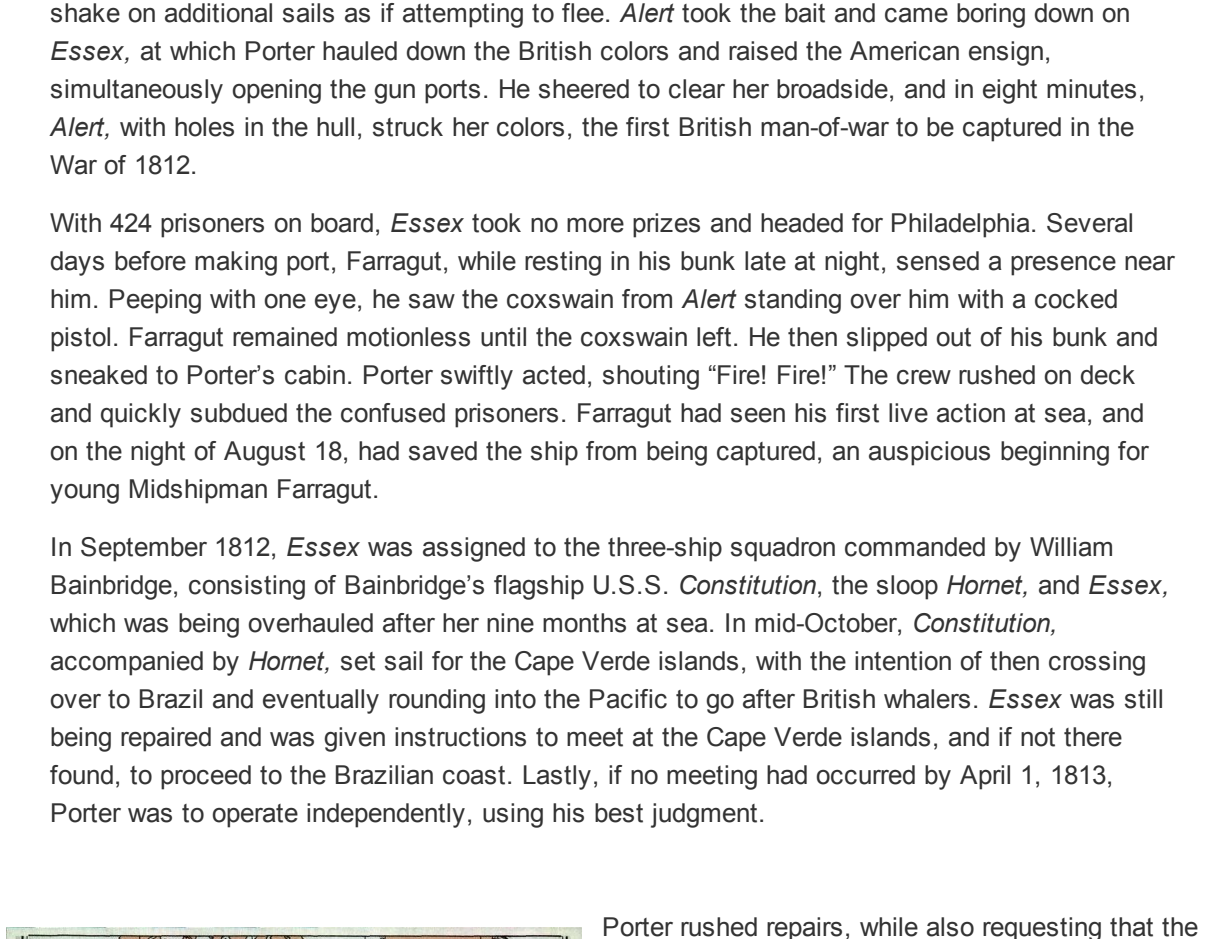
The Frigate Essex | public domain

It was 1811, and anti-British feelings were growing in the United States, due largely to the practice of the Royal Navy of impressing seamen who were American citizens. The controversy took place because the tars held identification that showed they were born in Great Britain, thus the British press gangs treated them as British citizens liable for service in His Majesty's Royal Navy.

Porter spent the latter half of 1811 getting his ship and crew ready for war, during which Midshipman Farragut began learning the details of navigation, ship handling including the art of reading the wind and sea to determine best use of the various sails, battle tactics, and most importantly how to bring a ship to peak readiness. These were the essential leadership skills that earned an officer the loyalty and trust of the crew. The ensuing cruise of *Essex* would provide the future admiral all the essential skills he needed for the next 50 years of his naval career.

On July 3, 1812, *Essex* put to sea, and two days later, Farragut celebrated his 11th birthday as the ship sailed toward Bermuda. About this time, *Essex* sighted a British convoy of seven merchantmen, under escort by the 34-gun frigate, HMS *Minerva*, Capt. Richard Hawkins commanding. *Essex* fell in with the rear of the convoy and captured one of the merchantmen, all the while remaining unseen by Hawkins.

At daylight the next day, Hawkins, on discovering *Essex* nearby, turned away and fled, a major break for *Essex*. *Minerva's* long-range 18-pounder broadsides would have wreaked considerable damage to *Essex* before the latter could have closed to within the range of the short range 32-pounder carronades carried by *Essex*. Consequently, *Essex* took possession of seven British merchantmen.

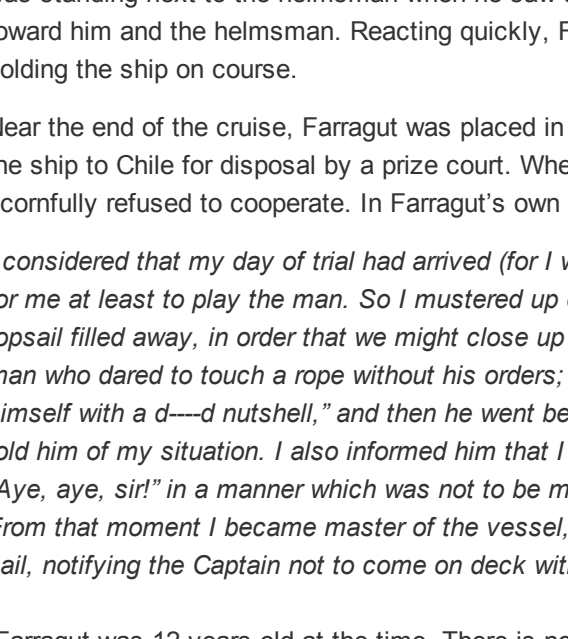


The Essex in the War of 1812 capturing the Alert, by Murat Halstead (1898)

On August 13, an *Essex* lookout spotted a sail on the horizon. While studying the contact Porter had *Essex* disguised as a slow-moving unaccompanied merchantman showing British colors. When Porter saw that the 16-gun sloop HMS *Alert* had sighted him, he had sailors go aloft and shake on additional sails as if attempting to flee. *Alert* took the bait and came boring down on *Essex*, at which Porter hauled down the British colors and raised the American ensign, simultaneously opening the gun ports. He sheered to clear her broadside, and in eight minutes, *Alert*, with holes in the hull, struck her colors, the first British man-of-war to be captured in the War of 1812.

With 424 prisoners on board, *Essex* took no more prizes and headed for Philadelphia. Several days before making port, Farragut, while resting in his bunk late at night, sensed a presence near him. Peeping with one eye, he saw the coxswain from *Alert* standing over him with a cocked pistol. Farragut remained motionless until the coxswain left. He then slipped out of his bunk and sneaked to Porter's cabin. Porter swiftly acted, shouting "Fire! Fire!" The crew rushed on deck and quickly subdued the confused prisoners. Farragut had seen his first live action at sea, and on the night of August 18, had saved the ship from being captured, an auspicious beginning for young Midshipman Farragut.

In September 1812, *Essex* was assigned to the three-ship squadron commanded by William Bainbridge, consisting of Bainbridge's flagship U.S.S. *Constitution*, the sloop *Hornet*, and *Essex*, which was being overhauled after her nine months at sea. In mid-October, *Constitution*, accompanied by *Hornet*, set sail for the Cape Verde islands, with the intention of then crossing over to Brazil and eventually rounding into the Pacific to go after British whalers. *Essex* was still being repaired and was given instructions to meet at the Cape Verde islands, and if not there found, to proceed to the Brazilian coast. Lastly, if no meeting had occurred by April 1, 1813, Porter was to operate independently, using his best judgment.



Map of Essex's cruise where she rounded Cape Horn February 14, 1813, the first American warship to sail into the Pacific Ocean. It also shows all of the ports where Porter and *Essex* sailed for the next year. | U.S. Army

Porter rushed repairs, while also requesting that the Secretary of the Navy transfer him to command of the frigate *Adams*, citing as reason for doing so his intense dislike of the short-range carronades and the poor sailing characteristics of *Essex*, which Porter claimed made *Essex* the worst frigate afloat. His request unanswered, Porter sailed twelve days later for the Cape Verde islands where he missed Bainbridge by one day. Not finding Bainbridge at Brazil, and it now being near the end of March 1813, Porter resolved to attack the British whaling ships operating in the southern Pacific high latitudes. The passage around Cape Horn provided Midshipman Farragut another lesson that could only be learned at sea, the tremendous power of wind and sea.

Fighting gale-force winds and mountainous seas, *Essex* took 22 days to reach the Pacific, during which the ship came close to foundering, saved by all hands manning the pumps and bailing continuously for over 24 hours, together with a merciful shift of the wind to the southeast. Farragut saw his sailors fall to their knees at one point, praying for God's mercy, cut short by the Boatswain, roaring orders to man the yards and trim sail. It was shortly thereafter that the wind shifted, impressing young Farragut with the efficacy of prayer, combined with doing your duty and persevering.

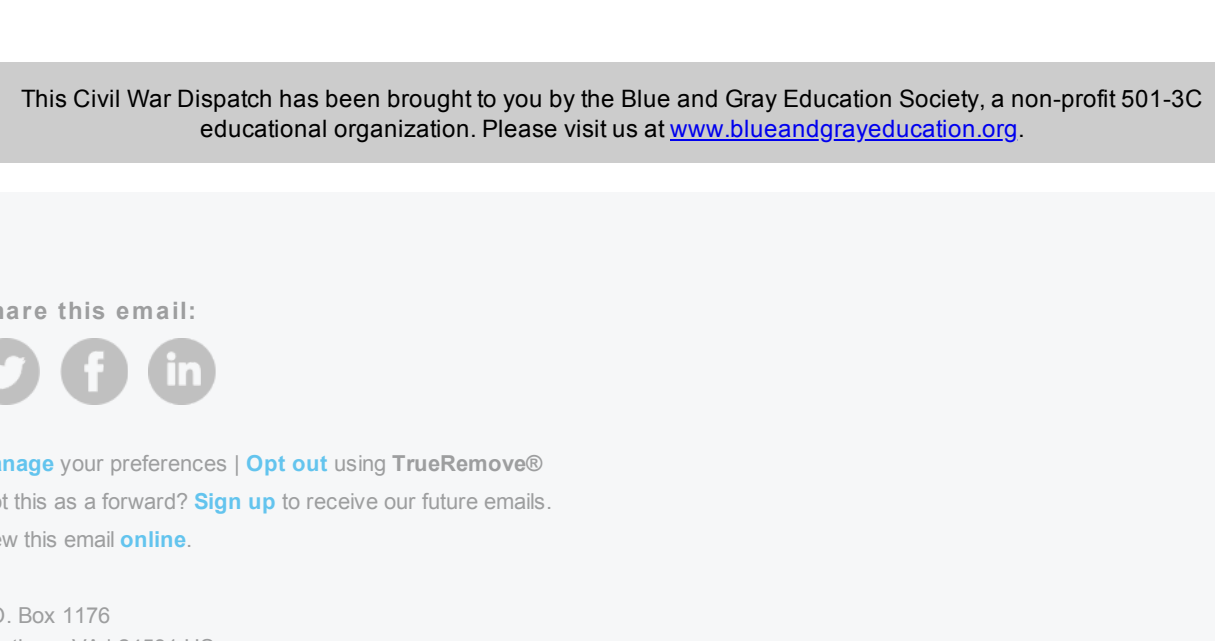
Once in the Pacific, Porter made for Mocha Island off the coast of Chile, where they spent three weeks making repairs and replenishing water and meat, the latter from the wild hogs that the islanders kept. The recreational break and respite for the crew from the toils of sailing markedly improved their morale as well as their performance when once again they put to sea.

During the next seven months, Porter inflicted serious damage to the British whaling industry, fighting armed whalers and taking them captive, several of them American whalers that had been taken by the British, their American crews now the captors. Another incident where Farragut was the difference between disaster and survival occurred during the battle between *Essex* and a well-armed British whaler. Farragut was standing next to the helmsman when he saw a cannon ball bouncing down the deck, headed directly toward him and the helmsman. Reacting quickly, Farragut shoved the helmsman clear while successfully holding the ship on course.

Near the end of the cruise, Farragut was placed in command of one of the whalers, with instructions to take the ship to Chile for disposal by a prize court. When Farragut went on board, the grumpy old ship's captain scornfully refused to cooperate. In Farragut's own words:

I considered that my day of trial had arrived (for I was a little afraid of the old fellow). But the time had come for me at least to play the man. So I mustered up courage and informed the Captain that I desired the main topsail filled away, in order that we might close up to the Essex Junior. He replied that he would shoot any man who dared to touch a rope without his orders; he "would go his own course, and had no idea of trusting himself with a d—d nutshell," and then he went below for his pistols. I called my right-hand man . . . and told him of my situation. I also informed him that I wanted the main topsail filled. He answered with a clear "Aye, aye, sir!" in a manner which was not to be misunderstood, and my confidence was perfectly restored. From that moment I became master of the vessel, and immediately gave all necessary orders for making sail, notifying the Captain not to come on deck with his pistols unless he wished to go overboard.

Farragut was 12 years old at the time. There is no record of the captain's response, if any.

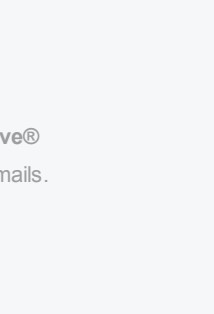


Capture of the Essex, drawn by Essex Capt. David Porter, USN

Porter was unaware that the British Admiralty, under pressure from the whaling nabobs, had instructed "his majesty's ships of the South Sea" to "respect no neutral port in which the *Essex* should be found." And so it was on March 28, 1814, that Porter found his ship trapped in the neutral waters of Chile, unable to escape the long-range guns of the British. His surrender marked the end of a most remarkable cruise, one that well prepared a young midshipman for the fate that lay some 50 years in the future.

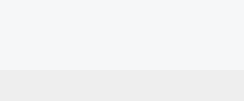
Part 2 will be published October 20 and Part 3 November 10.

About the author: Vice Admiral Sagerholm is a graduate of the United States Naval Academy. He held numerous command positions including what is now the U.S. Fourth Fleet and retired after serving as the Commander of U.S. Naval Training Command. A longtime member of BGES, he lives in Maryland.



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