

THE CAPTURE OF USS ESSEX OFF VALPARAISO, CHILE, MARCH 1814

David G. Farragut

from *The Life of David Glasgow Farragut*,
Embodying His Journal and Letters, by *Loyall Farragut*

In his *Journal of a Cruise* (1822), David Porter wrote: “Finding Captain Hillyar determined to yield none of the advantages of his superior force, and being informed there were other ships bound into the Pacific Ocean in pursuit of me, I secretly resolved to take every means of provoking him to a contest with his single ship. . . . On the 28th of March, the day after this determination was formed, the wind came on to blow fresh from the southward, when I parted my larboard cable and dragged my starboard anchor directly out to sea. Not a moment was to be lost in getting sail on the ship.” When a sudden squall cracked and splintered *Essex*’s topmast, Porter was forced to retreat into a small bay and to watch helplessly as *Phoebe* closed in, with *Cherub* close behind. Porter’s adopted son, twelve-year-old David G. Farragut, was aboard *Essex* that day, and several years later recorded his memories in a journal, published by his family in 1879.

During the action I was like “Paddy in the cat-harpins,” a man on occasions. I performed the duties of Captain’s aid, quarter-gunner, powder-boy, and in fact did everything that was required of me. I shall never forget the horrid impression made upon me at the sight of the first man I had ever seen killed. He was a boatswain’s mate, and was fearfully mutilated. It staggered and sickened me at first; but they soon began to fall around me so fast that it all appeared like a dream, and produced no effect on my nerves. I can remember well, while I was standing near the Captain, just abaft the mainmast, a shot came through the waterways and glanced upward, killing four men who were standing by the side of the gun, taking the last one in the head and scattering his brains over both of us. But this awful sight did not affect me half as much as the death of

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the first poor fellow. I neither thought of nor noticed anything but the working of the guns.

On one occasion Midshipman Isaacs came up to the Captain and reported that a quarter-gunner named Roach had deserted his post. The only reply of the Captain, addressed to me, was, "Do your duty, sir." I seized a pistol and went in pursuit of the fellow, but did not find him. It appeared, subsequently, that when the ship was reported to be on fire he had contrived to get into the only boat that could be kept afloat, and escaped, with six others, to the shore. The most remarkable part of this affair was that Roach had always been a leading man in the ship, and, on the occasion previously mentioned, when the *Phœbe* seemed about to run into us, in the harbor of Valparaiso, and the boarders were called away, I distinctly remember this man standing in an exposed position on the cathead, with sleeves rolled up and cutlass in hand, ready to board, his countenance expressing eagerness for the fight: which goes to prove that personal courage is a very peculiar virtue. Roach was brave with a prospect of success, but a coward in adversity.

Soon after this, some gun-primers were wanted, and I was sent after them. In going below, while I was on the ward-room ladder, the Captain of the gun directly opposite the hatchway was struck full in the face by an eighteen-pound shot, and fell back on me. We tumbled down the hatch together. I struck on my head, and, fortunately, he fell on my hips. I say fortunately, for, as he was a man of at least two hundred pounds' weight, I would have been crushed to death if he had fallen directly across my body. I lay for some moments stunned by the blow, but soon recovered consciousness enough to rush up on deck. The Captain, seeing me covered with blood, asked if I was wounded, to which I replied, "I believe not, sir." "Then," said he, "where are the primers?" This first brought me completely to my senses, and I ran below again and carried the primers on deck. When I came up the second time I saw the Captain fall, and in my turn ran up and asked if he was wounded. He answered me almost in the same words, "I believe not, my son; but I felt a blow on the top of my head." He must have been knocked down by the windage of a passing shot, as his hat was somewhat damaged.

When my services were not required for other purposes, I

generally assisted in working a gun; would run and bring powder from the boys, and send them back for more, until the Captain wanted me to carry a message; and this continued to employ me during the action.

When it was determined to surrender, the Captain sent me to ascertain if Mr. —— had the signal-book, and, if so, to throw it overboard. I could not find him or the book for some time; but at last saw the latter lying on the sill of a port, and dashed it into the sea. After the action, Mr. —— said he was overboard himself, trying to clear the book from some part of the wreck where it had lodged—a very unfortunate story, as I had seen it sink into the depths below.

Isaacs and I amused ourselves throwing overboard pistols and other small arms, to prevent their falling into the hands of the enemy. At length the boarding officer came on board, and, running up to Captain Porter, asked him how he would account to somebody (I do not remember who) for allowing his men to jump overboard, and at the same time demanded his sword. "That, sir," replied Porter, "is reserved for your master." The Captain went on board the *Phœbe*, and I followed half an hour later.

I have already remarked how soon I became accustomed to scenes of blood and death during the action; but after the battle had ceased, when, on going below, I saw the mangled bodies of my shipmates, dead and dying, groaning and expiring with the most patriotic sentiments on their lips, I became faint and sick; my sympathies were all aroused. As soon as I recovered from the first shock, however, I hastened to assist the surgeon in staunching and dressing the wounds of my comrades. Among the badly wounded was one of my best friends, Lieutenant J. G. Cowell. When I spoke to him he said, "O Davy, I fear it is all up with me." I found that he had lost a leg just above the knee, and the Doctor informed me that his life might have been saved if he had consented to the amputation of the limb an hour before; but, when it was proposed to drop another patient and attend to him, he replied, "No, Doctor, none of that; fair play is a jewel. One man's life is as dear as another's; I would not cheat any poor fellow out of his turn." Thus died one of the best officers and bravest men among us.

It was wonderful to find dying men, who had hardly ever attracted notice among the ship's company, uttering sentiments, with their last breath, worthy of a Washington. You might have heard in all directions, "Don't give her up, Logan!"—a sobriquet for Porter—"Hurrah for liberty!" and similar expressions. One of the crew of a bow gun told me of a singular act of heroism on the part of a young Scotchman, named Bissley, who had one leg shot off close to the groin. He used his handkerchief as a tourniquet, and said to his comrades:

"I left my own country and adopted the United States to fight for her. I hope I have this day proved myself worthy of the country of my adoption. I am no longer of any use to you or to her, so good-by!" With these words, he leaned on the sill of the port and threw himself overboard.

Many of our fine fellows bled to death for want of tourniquets. An old quarter master, named Francis Bland, was standing at the wheel when I saw a shot coming over the fore-yard, in such a direction that I thought it would strike him or me; so I told him to jump, at the same time pulling him toward me. At that instant the shot took off his right leg, and I afterward found that my coat-tail had been carried away. I helped the old fellow below, and inquired for him after the action, but he had died before he could be attended to.

I escaped without injury, except the bruises from my fall.

Lieutenant Wilmer, who had been sent forward to let go the sheet anchor, was knocked overboard by a shot. After the action his little negro boy, "Ruff," came on deck and asked me what had become of his master, and when I imparted to him the sad news he deliberately jumped into the sea and was drowned.

Mr. McKnight still lived, and with Midshipman Lyman was to go to England, or to Rio de Janeiro, to give evidence in regard to the capture of the ship. Cowell was dead, and Odenheimer was the only lieutenant left with us. Barnwell, the acting master, had been wounded in the breast, but was doing well. Isaacs, Ogden, Dusenberry, and I were all who remained of the midshipmen who were not seriously injured.

Doctors Hoffman and Montgomery escaped unhurt, although

some of their patients were killed by flying splinters while under their hands. These gentlemen exhibited great skill and nerve in their care of the wounded.

It is astonishing what powers of endurance some men possess. There was one instance of a man who swam to the shore with scarcely a square inch of his body which had not been burned, and, although he was deranged for some days, he ultimately recovered, and served with me in the West Indies. He was the same old boatswain's mate, Kingsbury, who distinguished himself off Cape Horn, for which he had been made boatswain of the Essex Junior. He accompanied Captain Downes on board in his boat, as he said, "to share the fate of his old ship." Another seaman swam ashore with sixteen or eighteen pieces of iron in his leg, scales from the muzzle of his gun. He also recovered, without losing his leg.

I went on board the Phœbe about 8 A.M. on the morning of the 29th, and was ushered into the steerage. I was so mortified at our capture that I could not refrain from tears. While in this uncomfortable state, I was aroused by hearing a young reefer call out:

"A prize! a prize! Ho, boys, a fine grunter, by Jove!"

I saw at once that he had under his arm a pet pig belonging to our ship, called "Murphy." I claimed the animal as my own.

"Ah," said he, "but you are a prisoner, and your pig also."

"We always respect private property," I replied, and, as I had seized hold of Murphy, I determined not to let go, unless "compelled by superior force." This was fun for the oldsters, who immediately sung out:

"Go it, my little Yankee! If you can thrash Shorty, you shall have your pig."

"Agreed!" said I.

A ring was formed in the open space, and at it we went. I soon found that my antagonist's pugilistic education did not come up to mine. In fact, he was no match for me, and was compelled to give up the pig. So I took master Murphy under my arm, feeling that I had, in some degree, wiped out the disgrace of our defeat.

I was sent for by Captain Hillyar to come into his cabin, where Captain Porter was, and asked to take some breakfast,

when, seeing my discomfiture, he remarked in a very kind manner:

“Never mind, my little fellow, it will be your turn next, perhaps.”

I said I hoped so, and left the cabin to hide my emotion.

We were all soon put on parole, and went on shore; our wounded from the ship being moved to a comfortable house hired for their accommodation. I volunteered my aid to our Surgeon as an assistant, and I never earned Uncle Sam's money so faithfully as I did during that hospital service. I rose at daylight and arranged the bandages and plasters until 8 A.M.; then, after breakfast, I went to work at my patients. I was employed thus until the 27th of April, when Captain Porter succeeded in making arrangements with Captain Hillyar for the transportation of our crew to the United States in the *Essex Junior*. That vessel was accordingly disarmed, and we embarked in her for New York.