

The *USS Essex* during the War of 1812

The *USS Essex* was an American naval frigate launched in 1799 and served in the Quasi-War with France and the Barbary Wars. But it was in the War of 1812 where the *Essex* under the command of Captain David Porter achieved legendary status as a raider wreaking havoc on British whaling ships. The wooden hull ship was built in Salem, Massachusetts, by Enos Briggs, following a design by William Hackett, at a cost of \$139,362. The ship was 138ft 7 in length by 37 ft, 3½ in width with a displacement of 850 tons. The fully-rigged ship was capable of speeds of 12 knots and carried forty 32 pound carronades with a crew, which varied up to over 150 men and boys. Launched on 30 September 1799, the *Essex* was presented to the fledgling United States Navy and placed under the command of Captain Edward Preble. Joining the *Congress* at sea to provide a convoy for merchant ships, the *Essex* became the first American war ship to cross the equator and sailed around the Cape of Good Hope in both March and August 1800. After the initial voyage, Captain William Bainbridge assumed command in 1801, sailing to the Mediterranean to provide protection for American shipping against the Barbary pirates. For the next five years the *Essex* patrolled the Mediterranean until 1806 when hostilities between the Barbary States ceased.

The American Navy was small when the war broke out—seven frigates, nine other crafts suited for sea duty (brigs, sloops, and corvettes), and some 200 gunboats. Porter was thirty-two and in command of the *Essex* in 1812. Originally from Boston, he grew up in Baltimore and entered the U. S. Navy in 1798 as a midshipman. He had served with distinction in the Mediterranean and had captained both the *USS Constitution* (acting) and the *USS Enterprise* after his release from being captured off Tripoli in 1803. In 1806 Porter achieved the rank of master commander. Porter also commanded naval operations in New Orleans. Among the crew of the *Essex* was ten-year old midshipman David G. Farragut, the future first admiral of the U. S. Navy. The *Essex* was larger, faster, had a larger crew, and was more heavily armed than most British ships. In July of 1812 *Essex* captured her first ship near Bermuda, a British troop ship. On 13 August Porter, commanding the *Essex* under the pretense that it was a merchant ship, easily engaged and took the British sloop *HMS Alert* as prize. A month later the *Essex* had seized ten prizes, menacing British merchantmen and shipping up and down the Atlantic coast.

Taking back to sea, the *Essex* patrolled the South Atlantic until she rounded Cape Horn in February 1813— becoming the first American warship to sail into the Pacific. At that period the Pacific world offered great economic opportunities, and Porter was a forward thinking seaman with sights set on America's standing beyond the War of 1812. The richest market was the Pacific whaling industry, and the *Essex* virtually destroyed British whaling over the next several months, taking thirteen British whalers, even converting one (*Atlantic*) into the *Essex Junior* under the command of John Downes, Porter's executive officer—Porter even put a marine lieutenant and a chaplain in command of prize ships. Other prizes (captured ships) were used as supply ships or turned into prisoner ships and sailed for British ports. Many were sent off to the U. S. where the crew of the *Essex* would split profits with the American government when the ships and cargo were auctioned as prizes. Prize auctions were a way for naval captains to augment their income, but none of these ever made it to an American port as all were recaptured by the superior British Navy.

But these voyages came at a high toll, and Porter set into harbor at Valparaiso, Chile, in January 1814 for repairs, refitting, and resupply. Meanwhile the British Navy was so disturbed by the legend of Porter and the *Essex* that they set out to find and destroy *Essex* and restore Britain's economic advantage in the Pacific. *HMS Phoebe*, a 36 gun frigate, and *HMS Cherub*, an 18 gun sloop, were among British ships sent to challenge American expansion in the Northwest Territory when *Phoebe* Captain James Hillyar caught wind of *Essex*'s raids. Still targeting the northwest coast of North America, the two British vessels also kept watch for the *Essex*, a search that found fruition at Valparaiso in February 1814.

Porter and the *Essex* spent much of the winter of 1813-1814 refitting at the Marquesas Islands in the South Pacific, a ten small island string located northwest of Chile—Porter even claimed the Marquesas as a U. S. possession. Contemporaries and naval historians have called Porter bold and daring, audacious, and at times foolish. Captain Porter often went looking for a fight even though he faced the disadvantage of having his long guns replaced by 32 pound carronades in an 1809-1810 refit—a move Porter personally opposed. Porter sailed into Valparaiso in early 1814 to find the *Phoebe* and *Cherub* already in port. Chile was in the midst of a revolution of its own and the respective captains agreed to recognize the port as neutral. Porter challenged Hillyar—the *Essex* crew even sang insulting chants to the British sailors—but the British refused the bait and a month long peaceful standoff occurred. Hillyar was a career naval officer experienced in naval conflict with France throughout the Napoleonic Wars. After hearing word of additional British ships set to join Hillyar, *Essex* made a break for the open sea on the afternoon of 28 March 1814. But timing and luck were against the American ship and *Essex* lost her topmast during a brief squall. Porter set in toward shore for repairs in what he considered neutral waters, but the *Phoebe* and *Cherub* pursued opening fire on the helpless *Essex*. Without long guns Porter's earlier warnings proved prophetic. In what historians labeled a "naval bloodbath", the *Essex* was pounded for two and a half hours by the two British ships out of range of his 32 pound short guns. Half of the *Essex*'s crew of 250 were killed or wounded. British losses were light—ten dead and five wounded—and the Americans were forced to strike their flag. The Battle of Valparaiso was more slaughter than battle. Porter and his crew including young Farragut were captured then paroled aboard a disarmed *Essex Junior* headed for New York harbor. Porter sharply criticized the British over an attack in neutral waters and assailed them for continued fire after the *Essex* struck her colors. The *Essex* was eventually repaired and commissioned into the Royal Navy but never saw action. The now *HMS Essex* was used as a transport and a prison hulk after 1823. She was sold at auction in June 1837 for £1230, an inglorious ending for a decorated frigate—the most famous American warship of the new republic.

Porter and the *Essex* captured the imagination of a new nation with high-seas exploits that fascinated a population feeling disrespected by Britain. The *Essex* recorded a number of naval firsts—the first warship to round Cape Horn and the Cape of Good Hope and the first American warship to sail into the Pacific. *Essex* is generally credited with opening Pacific markets to American merchants. Nearly half a century before American Captain Matthew Perry sailed into Japan, Porter sought President James Madison's approval to head a scientific naval expedition to explore the Pacific and open Japanese markets. After Porter claimed the Marquesas as a naval base for the United States the government failed to approve the annexation—yet Porter's foresight cannot be denied. His detailed sketches of the Galapagos Islands are yet another

example of a captain and seaman whose vision for the growth of American interests paralleled Thomas Jefferson's acquisition of the Louisiana Territory. Porter recorded his war time experiences in *Journal of a Cruise to the Pacific Ocean* (1815), an excellent source for the saga of the *Essex* at war. None other than Herman Melville wrote of Porter, although not in such a kind light. In *White-Jacket* (1850) Melville criticized Porter over his hesitance to surrender at the Battle of Valparaiso, questioning Porter's concern for his crew and country. After mixed reviews for *Moby Dick* (1851) and facing financial difficulty, Melville penned ten short stories for serialization in *Putnam's Monthly Magazine* in 1854, known as "The Encantadas," which later became the most successful of his *Piazza Tales* (1856). In "Sketch Fifth" Melville favorably recounts the *Essex* in the Pacific and the Galapagos. As late as 1984 English historical novelist Patrick O'Brian based *The Far Side of the World* (1984) on *Essex's* raids on British whalers in the Pacific. The film *Master and Commander* (2003) is loosely based on O'Brian's novel. Literally dozens of paintings and sketches of *Essex* at sea and in battle have been produced over the years and have appeared in books and magazines for nearly two centuries. Finally, the name *Essex* has adorned other naval vessels over the years including a highly decorated World War II aircraft carrier (1942-1969) and an amphibious assault ship (1992) still in active service.

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FURTHER READING:

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