Cruise of the United States Frigate Potomac

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Sir Mortimer Wheeler's dictum, "Dead archaeology is the driest dust that blows" is too often realized in ethnological specimens relegated to "storage" in large museums. Sterile and lifeless, artifacts lie in neatly arranged rows or hopelessly jumbled piles collecting the dust of time. That these objects were once part of dynamic, living societies—collected by living men—is often forgotten. In 1834, Sylvanus W. Godon, U. S. Navy, presented Mr. Peter S. D. Ponceau, president of the American Philosophical Society, with a small adze that he had collected in the Society Islands during a three years voyage to the Pacific. The adze, itself relatively unimportant archaeologically, led us to a tale of piracy and murder in the little-known port town of Quallah Battoo, Sumatra.

Adze collected by Sylvanus W. Godon during the cruise of the Potomac. The adze was first deposited with the American Philosophical Society in 1834, and transferred to the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia in 1871. It eventually found its way to the University Museum's Pacific collection during the early 1930's. The original description, found in the records of the American Philosophical Society, is as follows: "Hatchet from the Society Islands, not in use at present—they were formerly used for all purposes, such as cutting trees, building their houses, etc., the twine is made of the filing [sic] part of the Coconut, and is very strong—Some of these Hatchets are very large."
In February, 1831, an American merchant ship, the Friendship of Salem, anchored off the northwest coast of Sumatra, was attacked and plundered. When the captain, Charles M. Endicott, and several members of his crew went ashore to report the loss, a Malay pirate seized the opportunity to pirate the ship. Within minutes, the Friendship was overrun by natives who quickly gained control over the remaining crew. After killing the first officer and two seamen, and seriously wounding others, the Malays proceeded to remove everything of value aboard the ship. The total loss amounted to $12,000 dollars, 12 chests of opium, all the ship's paper, scrap sails, rigging, cabin furniture, chromatrons, nautical instruments, books, charts, and wearing apparel.

Except for a small cargo of pepper, the marauders managed to strip the Friendship of everything that was not bolted to her decks. With the help of a few friendly natives and three American ships anchored in a nearby harbor, Captain Endicott managed to regain control of his ship before the pirates could run aground. With the ship again under his control, Endicott could do little more than sail what remained of his command back to the United States as quickly as possible. Six months later, the captain succeeded in bringing her ragged vessel home to rest in Salem, Massachusetts.

The sight of an empty ship anchored in one of the nation's busiest ports aroused immediate interest and consternation. Within days, every newspaper in the country had published the story of the "Outrage against the Friendship." Alerted to the news, Secretary of the Navy Levi Woodbury later Justice of the Supreme Court launched an immediate investigation. Meanwhile, three gentlemen from Salem called on President Andrew Jackson to demand punishment of the culprits responsible for the Friendship's debacle. Acknowledging the request, Levi Woodbury emphasized that "every necessary preparation" was being undertaken to demand immediate reparation. By a fortunate coincidence, the U.S. Navy frigate Potomac, the nation's newest and most advanced 44-gun man-o'-war, was loaded and ready to sail for Europe on her maiden voyage, when the Friendship made its surprise appearance in Sumatra harbor. No less an honorable personage than Martin van Buren, President Jackson's newly appointed ambassador to the Court of St. James, was scheduled to accompany the Potomac on her first cruise. After reaching England, the Potomac was to sail round Cape Horn and assume the duty as flagship of the Pacific Squadron stationed in Valparaiso, Chile. In the midst of final preparations for sailing, orders from Washington reached the frigate, changing her itinerary. Instructions from the Secretary of the Navy directed the captain of the Potomac to make "all haste for Guayahatzattoo" along the north coast of the island of Sumatra.

On August 27, 1831, the Potomac, with orders to "vindicate our wrongs, ... in that savage out- rage," embarked on her historic mission. One witness to the launching, a highly romantic reporter from Philadelphia's National Gazette, noted that "with bowling sails swollen gently to the wind, the gathering force proudly bore [her] away, heaving up and dashed away the foamy billows from her bow."

Commanding the expedition was Commodore John Downes, a veteran of the wars against Tripoli and the Barbary coast in 1812. In 1815, while serving under Stephen Decatur during the "Algerian Crisis," he captured an Algerian brig carrying 22 guns and 180 men. Before his recent promotion to Commodore of the Pacific Squadron, he had captained ships in both the Mediterranean and the Pacific. A highly competent officer, Downe's past experience in both the martial and maritime arts would serve him well in his present assignment.

Sailing with the commodore was his ten-year-old son, John. It was common practice before the creation of the Naval Academy to train future officers directly aboard ships. Beginning as mid- shipmen, young boys would continue their naval training until deemed fit for promotion or released for incompetence. Since promotion to ensign never occurred before age twenty, a midshipman's training for sea duty was long and thorough. To complete their education, a midshipman always sailed with the boys to instruct them in scholar- ship. The schoolmaster responsible for the education of the seventeen midshipmen aboard the Potomac was Francis Warner. An aspiring author and man-of-letters, he succeeded in publish- ing his own book of travel, the three-year voyage that lasted after the frigate reached home port. John, the commodore's son, was to rise to the rank of commander before falling in the service of his country towards the close of the Civil War.

Another member of the cruise who had also begun his naval training at ten years of age, but had now risen to the rank of post- midshipman, was Sylvanus W. Godon. A native Philadelphia, he had been forced into the naval service as his only hope for an education after his impoverished father, a noted French mineralogist and member of the American Philosophical Society, became desperately insane. Godon eventually acquired the rank of rear admiral. After a long career, he retired in 1871 to live out the rest of his days at his ancestral home in Blois, France.

Other members of the Potomac's crew included Nathaniel Olver, private secretary to Downes and a long-time sufferer of consumption. As a last resort, he had taken to the sea in the hope of making a recovery, but the disease was too advanced and he died halfway through the cruise. He was buried with full military honors.

Of the three surgeons assigned to oversee the health of the crew, one was Jonathan M. Foltz, a native of Lancaster, Pennsylvania. He had once walked all the way from this city to Washington, D.C., to personally plead with the President for a pass to a naval ship. This example of determination and initiative characterized his entire career, culminating in the promotion of Foltz to Surgeon General of the United States Navy.

The men sailing with the Potomac from New York in August, 1831, totalled 500. Of those, 40 were officers, and 44 were marines. The rest consisted of seamen, petty officers, landmen, and boys. At least two members of the crew were black, but the exact percentage of integration is unknown. Nevertheless, at a time when slavery was the custom and the rule, the presence of even two free blacks aboard the Potomac is noteworthy. As the lighthouse gradually receded from view, the crew and officers set to the tasks at hand. Following the usual route pursued in those days for the Indian Ocean, the frigate sighted the Cape Verde Islands on September 21 and then sailed her course for the coast of Brazil. Three days later, a chance encounter with a supposed pirate ship provided the crew with an opportunity to relieve the monotony of their routine. Coming
One diarist mentions that the tale was often told of the sailors and the Indian woman who escaped from the coast and found her way back to her people. She directed them to the north, away from the British fort, and eventually they found their way back to their home.

During this period, reports of the activities of the Potomac and its allies continued to circulate. The Potomac and its allies were described as being a constant threat to British-held forts and settlements.

The Potomac continued to engage in armed conflicts with the British, and the British were forced to respond with similar tactics. This period was marked by frequent battles and skirmishes, with both sides suffering losses.

Despite the dangers of the era, the Potomac continued to be a force to be reckoned with, and its exploits were celebrated by many. Its importance in shaping the course of the war cannot be overstated.
Epexidion

Winter 1797

1. U. S. frigate Potomac at anchor in the harbor at Valparaíso during her circumnavigation of the world during the years 1831-34.

2. Extract from a letter sent to Congress from John Downes, on board the U.S. frigate

Frigate, Secretary of the Navy, the Honourable

LEVI WOODY.

2nd Admiral Department, August 9th, 1831

Circumstances have occurred since the last instructions to you, which require an immediate communication from me. It is highly probable you now doubt much of a character highly delicate and important. A most

warrant now exists on the lives and property of certain American citizens at Quaith Batto, a place on the western side of the island of Sumatra, on the 7th of February last, the particulars of which are contained in the documents annexed, marked A and B.

You are therefore directed to repair at once to Sumatra, by the way of the Cape of Good Hope, touching on the voyage thither only at such ports as the convenience and necessities of your vessel may render proper. On your arrival at Quaith Batto, you will obtain from the intelligent shipmasters, supercargoes, and others, engaged in the American trade in that neighborhood, full information as to the present condition and the operations of the government there, the practical character of the population, and the flagrant circumstances of the injury before mentioned. Should that information substantially correspond with what is given by these witnesses, or the guilty persons already apprehended, you will feel that the flag of the Union is not to be insulted with impunity, directs you to proceed to demand of the rajah, or other authorities at Quaith Batto, restitution of the property plundered, or indemnity therefor, as well as the injury done to the vessel, satisfaction for any other damages, and a speedy commitment thereon, and the immediate punishment of those concerned in the murder of the American citizens, Charles Knight, chief officer, and John Davis and George Chester, seamen of the flies. If a compliance of this demand be delayed beyond a reasonable time, you are authorized, in the following manner, to proceed with your vessel.

Firstly, having taken precautions, while making the demand, to cut off all opportunity of escape, from the individuals either concealed in that savage outrage, or protecting the offenders, or participating in plunder, you will proceed to seize the actual murderers, if they are known, and send them to the nearest port for trial as pirates by the first convenient opportunity; to relate such part of the stolen property as can there be found and identified, to destroy the boats and vessels and all kind of evidence of the transaction;

And if any other description of plunder, destruction or desolation, the injury done to the vessel, satisfaction for any other damage, or the immediate punishment of the persons concerned, or one of the American citizens at Quaith Batto.

Suggested Reading

Surgery of the Seas

Borde-Merrill Co.

Indianapolis, 1831

Reynolds, T. N.

Voyage of the United States Frigate Potomac

Hupper and Brothers

Philadelphia, 1838

Warriner, Francis

Civilized of the United States Frigate Potomac

Lippincott's New Co.,

New York, 1835

Credit

William Cloth

Dewees and Gidley

Portraits

Cottrell U. B. S. Bureau

of Ships

nship

Venn, Action of Quaith Batto, Brigantine

Valparaiso:

N. Reynolds, Voyage of the United States Frigate Potomac

Dove Ethel

Plan of Quaith Batto:

From Warrant, Crew of Quaith Batto

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Roy Baldridge