

NAVAL ACTIONS

OF

THE WAR OF 1812

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1896

NEW YORK
HARPER & BROTHERS PUBLISHERS

IN recording the actions of the war of 1812 that gave lustre to our navy and added to the records of its heroes, we have already included two in which the results were defeat and capture of American ships. The *Essex* and the *Chesapeake* are here referred to, the latter being the only case in which the opposing forces approached an equality. There is one other action still to be touched upon, which, though disastrous, cannot but reflect honor upon those connected with it.

Stephen Decatur, the idol of the American service, had been given the command of the frigate *President*, which had been refitting in the harbor of New York.

On the evening of the 14th of January, 1815, he sailed into the lower bay, intending to make his way to sea under cover of the night, as it was known that a heavy squadron of the English had been hovering along the coasts of New Jersey and Long Island.

In leaving the harbor near Sandy Hook, owing to some mistake of the pilot, the *President* grounded heavily on a sand-bar, and for an hour and a half she struck continually in her efforts to escape, breaking several of her rudder-braces and straining

her seams so badly that she commenced to leak very fast. Decatur determined to return to the harbor, as he suspected, what was afterwards proved to be true, that the *President* had carried away part of her false keel, and was badly hogged (*i. e.*, broken and bent near her keelson). Owing to a strong wind rising, it was found impossible to put the *President* about, and the tide being at the flood, it became necessary to force her over the bar at all hazards. By ten o'clock that night she had succeeded in freeing herself, and shaped her course along the shore of Long Island, steering southeast by east.

Shortly after daybreak three ships were discovered ahead. The *President* hauled her wind and passed two miles to the northward of them. As the morning mist disappeared, it was discovered that four ships were in chase—one on each quarter and two astern. The leading ship, from the height of her towering masts, was made out to be a razee. She commenced firing, but at such a distance that the shot fell short.

At twelve the steady breeze which had been blowing became light and baffling. The *President*, despite her crippled condition, had left the large vessel far behind, but the next ship astern was proving herself a faster sailer, and was gradually gaining—creeping up with every puff of wind. The *President* sat deep in the water, and plunged downward into the sea as if she had been waterlogged. Immediately all hands were occupied in lightening

the ship, starting the water in the butts, cutting away the anchors, throwing overboard provisions, cables, spare boats, and every article to be gotten at, while the men aloft were hoisting buckets and keeping the sails wet from the royals down.

At three o'clock the large ship, which had been joined by a brig, came up rapidly. It was the *Endymion*, mounting 50 guns, and she commenced to fire as she neared with her forward battery, while Decatur replied with his stern-chasers. Thus it continued for two hours, when the Englishman obtained a position on the starboard quarter at less than point-blank range, and maintained it so cleverly that neither the *President's* stern nor quarter guns would bear. For half an hour the vessels sailed on, firing occasional guns, and keeping back their broadsides, the Englishman wishing, no doubt, to capture the *President* without crippling her, while Decatur hoped to be able to close, as he had had his boarders waiting for some time. It became evident, however, that the Englishman did not wish close quarters; and as it was growing dusk, Decatur made up his mind to alter his course farther to the south, for the purpose of bringing the enemy abeam. Meanwhile the ships astern were approaching, and would soon be within range. For two hours and a half longer the Englishman and the *President* sailed side by side, and the action gave cause for some pretty writing and press controversy afterwards, as all unfinished international contests will.

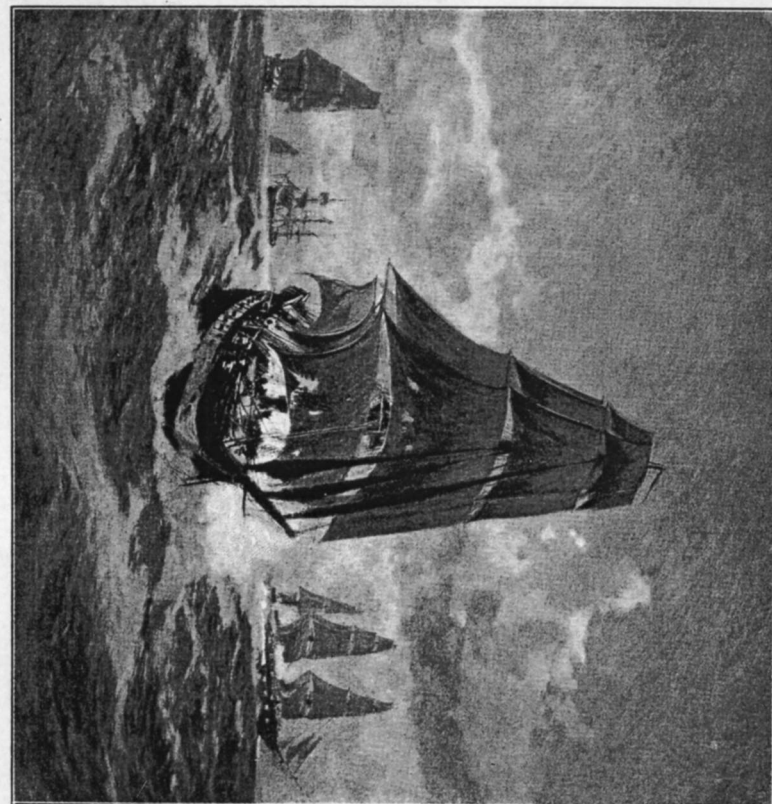
However, there is no question whatever that the *President* during the running fight completely disabled her antagonist, and at last left her drifting round and round helplessly before eight o'clock had passed.

It was growing dark, but the other ships of the squadron could be made out by their signal-lights, and to lower a boat to take possession of the *Endymion* was impossible. One more attempt Decatur made to avoid capture, and to accomplish this he sailed close to the *Endymion* and exposed himself to a raking fire, being within range for over half an hour, but not a shot was heard. The Englishman had been placed entirely out of the combat.

At eleven it had lightened considerably, and two fresh ships of the enemy had crawled up within gunshot. They were the *Pomone* and the *Tenedos*, heavy frigates. When within musket-shot the *Pomone* opened fire on the larboard bow, and the *Tenedos* swung across the *President's* wake, taking a raking position on her quarter.

With a breaking heart the gallant Decatur saw that there was nothing for it but surrender. One-fifth of his crew had been killed or wounded, the ship was crippled aloft and leaking badly, and he hauled down his flag.

The joy of the English officers when they found who it was that had yielded to them was great, and it must be recorded that they did everything in their power to make it comfortable for the wound-



THE "PRESIDENT" ENDEAVORING TO ESCAPE

ed, and that their treatment of the officers was courteous and kindly. For twenty-four hours after the action it fell a dead calm, and the crews of the squadron were kept occupied in repairing the crippled ships. As if to enforce the idea that the *Endymion* had not surrendered, Decatur was placed on board of her, a cabin prisoner.

On the 17th a tremendous gale came from the eastward, which played havoc with the late combatants, the *President's* masts going by the board, and the *Endymion* losing her bowsprit, fore and main mast, and mizzen-topmast, being compelled to throw overboard all her upper-deck guns. It had been impossible for Decatur to ascertain the exact number of the killed and wounded, but he speaks of his great sorrow at the loss of three of his most trusted lieutenants — Babbit, Howell, and Hamilton, the last being the son of the late Secretary of the Navy. It was he who had had the honor of conveying the news of the capture of the *Macedonian* to Washington, and who had appeared, as we have recorded, at the ball given by Dolly Madison wrapped in the colors of the captured ship.

Decatur and his officers were given the freedom of the island of Bermuda, and crowds swarmed to visit the captured *President* as she lay decked with British flags in the harbor.

Captain Hays of the *Majestic*, to whom Decatur had surrendered his sword, returned it at once, and proved to be a friend who was worth the gaining.

Upon the investigation of the action Decatur was honorably exonerated, and Alexander Murray, the President of the Court of Inquiry, expressed himself in the following words:

"We consider the management of the *President* from the time the chase commenced until her surrender as the highest evidence of the experience, skill, and resources of her commander, and of the ability and seamanship of her officers and crew. We fear that we cannot express in a manner that will do justice to our feelings our admiration of the conduct of Commodore Decatur and of all under his command. . . . In this unequal conflict the enemy gained a ship, but the victory was ours."

Referring to the press comments at the time, a very interesting circumstance occurred, which may prove to be well worth the reading, especially as showing that contemporaneous press notices taking only one view of a question are untrustworthy recorders of history. A Bermuda paper, the *Royal Gazette*, published on the 2d of April a scurrilous and unwarrantable attack, false in its every statement, that impugned the character of Decatur and cast a slur on the name of each one of his officers. The article, in giving the reports of the capture, stated that the *President* had *struck* to the *Endymion*, and that after she had done so Commodore Decatur concealed sixty-eight men in the hold of the *President* for the purpose of rising on the prize crew and recapturing her. On the appearance of this account

Captain Hope of the *Endymion* immediately sent an officer to Commodore Decatur, disclaiming any participation in the article, and the governor of the island demanded of the editor of the *Royal Gazette* that he should immediately retract the statement. This the editor, much against his will, did, but inserted a foot-note in large print stating that the retraction was inserted "merely as an act of generosity and a palliative for the irritated feelings of prisoners of war." He asserted that what he had said at first was correct, and declared that the deception he had referred to was planned and authorized by Commodore Decatur. It is of interest to quote an extract from an official letter sent by the Governor and Commander-in-Chief of Bermuda to the editor of the *Royal Gazette* upon the appearance of this second article.

The governor's secretary writes for his chief as follows:

"The Editor of the *Royal Gazette*:

"Your publication of Thursday imposes it upon His Excellency the Governor, as a duty to himself, to Captain Hope, and to the British nation, and in common justice to Commodore Decatur, who is not present to defend himself from the aspersions that you have cast upon him, not to admit of such a document standing uncontradicted in a paper published under the immediate authority of His Majesty's government. His Excellency is thoroughly aware of the great importance of preserving to the utmost extent perfect freedom of discussion and the fullest liberty of the press in every part of the British dominions. Undoubtedly, therefore, nothing could be further from his intentions than the most distant desire to compel a British editor to retract a statement founded on truth;

but when a statement is founded on falsehood, His Excellency conceives it to be incumbent on him equally, in duty to the British public and in support of the true character of the British press, to demand that that falsehood, whether directed against friend or foe, should be instantly retracted, or that the paper which thinks fit to disgrace its columns by persevering in error should no longer be distinguished by royal protection."

Some weeks later, in an issue of March 2d, the following extract attracts attention in a Bermuda journal:

"On Wednesday evening last Mr. Randolph, of the United States Navy, late of the *President* frigate, in company with some other officers of the ship, attacked the editor of the *Royal Gazette* in a most violent and unprovoked manner with a stick, while he was walking unarmed. The timely arrival of some British officers prevented his proceeding to further acts of violence, and, the guard shortly after coming up, the officer decamped, and the next morning, we understand, he was hoisted into a boat at the crane from the Market Wharf and absconded. An honorable way, truly, for an officer to quit a place where he had been treated with civility and politeness."

However, it will not do to leave the subject without quoting from a letter which the Mr. Randolph referred to wrote over his own signature and sent to the editors of the *Commercial Advertiser*, after his return to New York, in which he observes, after reference to the Bermuda *Royal Gazette*, the affair of the stick, and the "acts of violence," as follows:

"As soon as I read the scurrilous remarks in the *Royal Gazette* of the fifteenth ult., in relation to the capture of the late U. S. frigate *President*, I walked to the King's Square with the determination to chastise the editor. I soon fell in with him, and executed my purpose in the most ample and satisfactory manner. There was no

American officer in the company except Midshipman Emmett, and Mr. Ward, the editor, was accompanied by Lieutenant Sammon, of the Royal Navy, but by neither of these officers was I interrupted or assisted in the operation.

"Having previously obtained my passports, and being advised that the editor of the *Royal Gazette* was taking measures to employ the civil authority against me, I left the island the next day for the United States.

"I am, Gentlemen, etc., etc.,

"R. B. RANDOLPH, Midshipman,

"Late of the U. S. frigate *President*."

Upon Decatur's return to the United States he was treated as a hero, and received the usual ovation given to victors when they return to their native land. The *President* was spoken of by her captors as a model of naval architecture, and her method of construction recommended to British ship-builders.