

IN  
PURSUIT  
OF THE  
ESSEX

HEROISM & HUBRIS ON THE  
HIGH SEAS IN THE WAR OF

1812



BEN HUGHES

# In Pursuit of the *Essex*



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A Tale of Heroism and Hubris in  
the War of 1812

Ben Hughes



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## Preface: Behind the Hyperbole

In the United States the story of USS *Essex*'s commerce-raiding Pacific cruise, perhaps the most daring exploit of the War of 1812, is relatively well-known. The truth, however, has been blurred by the prevailing fabrications of President Madison's incumbent Republican government and Captain David Porter's self-serving memoir released soon after his return. As the Bostonian would have it, his mission, despite ending in the capture of one of the United States' few remaining men-of-war and the death or mutilation of over one-third of his 300-strong crew, was a spectacular success. His claims of crippling the British whaling industry, making a fortune from captured prizes and diverting the Royal Navy's over-stretched resources on a year-long game of cat and mouse, do not stand up to close scrutiny, yet still form the basis of the generally-accepted narrative told to this day in the United States.

In Britain, Porter's story and that of the men of HMS *Phoebe* who defeated him is virtually unknown. Embroiled in a 23-year-long fight to the death with Revolutionary and Napoleonic France, the war with America was considered a sideshow. It received little attention from contemporaries and was soon all but forgotten. In modern times Patrick O'Brian revived the tale with his Jack Aubrey novel, *The Far Side of the World*. Although a thin veil is cast over the story (USS *Essex* becomes USS *Norfolk* and the final showdown takes place off the Galapagos Islands rather than in Valparaiso Bay), O'Brian's tale largely sticks to the facts, but his efforts have since been overshadowed by a recent Hollywood adaptation. *Master and Commander: the Far Side of the World* is an imaginative and entertaining amalgamation of naval lore, fact and fiction in which Russell Crowe stalks the Pacific seeking a French frigate rather than an American one.

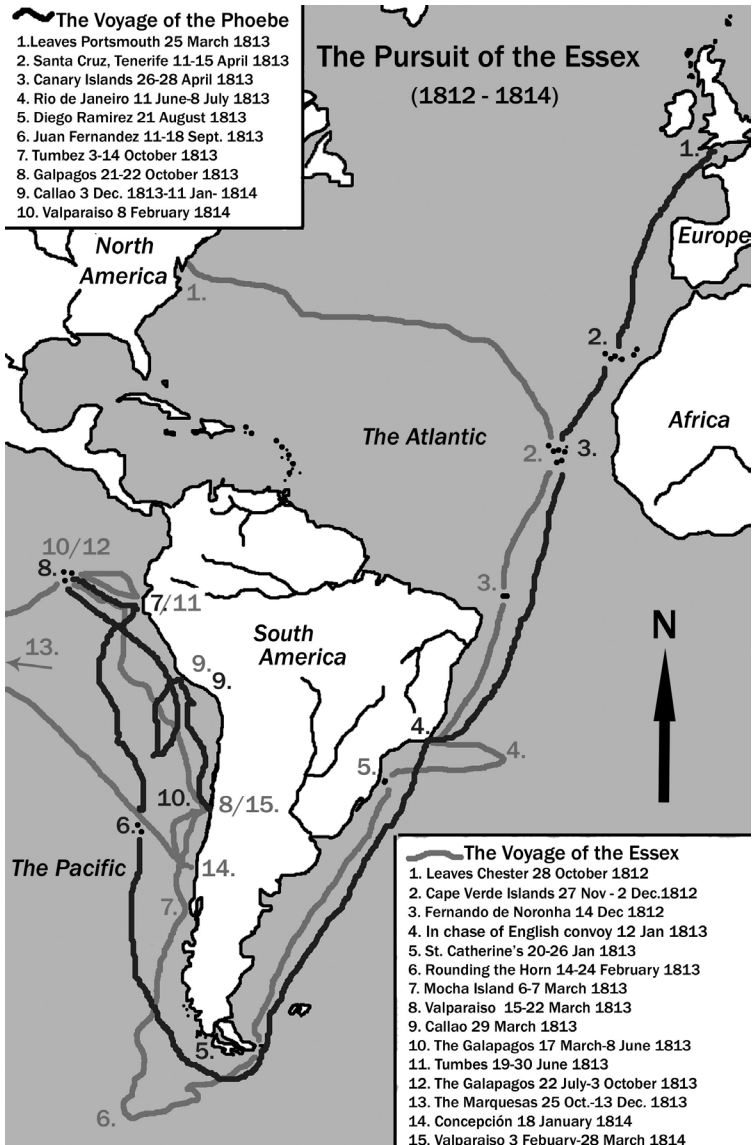
*In Pursuit of the Essex: A Tale of Heroism and Hubris in the War of 1812* aims to tell the true story. Dedicating equal coverage to the hunter and the hunted without regard for reputation, it immerses the reader in the world of the British and American seamen who struggled for supremacy in the sunset years of the Age of Sail. In compiling the narrative, I have exploited a variety of British sources hitherto untapped by the historians who have covered the subject. The National Archives in Kew and the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich hold a host of primary accounts. The masters' and captains' logs of the British ships; secret coded journals intended for the High Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty;

surgeons' notebooks; ships' musters and pay lists; courts martial records; and official correspondence, wills and personal letters penned by the chief protagonists all cast new light on the story as do several contemporary newspaper reports and the recently-published journal of Midshipman Allen Gardiner, an eyewitness to events from the moment HMS *Phoebe* left Portsmouth until the story's bloody denouement in Valparaiso Bay.

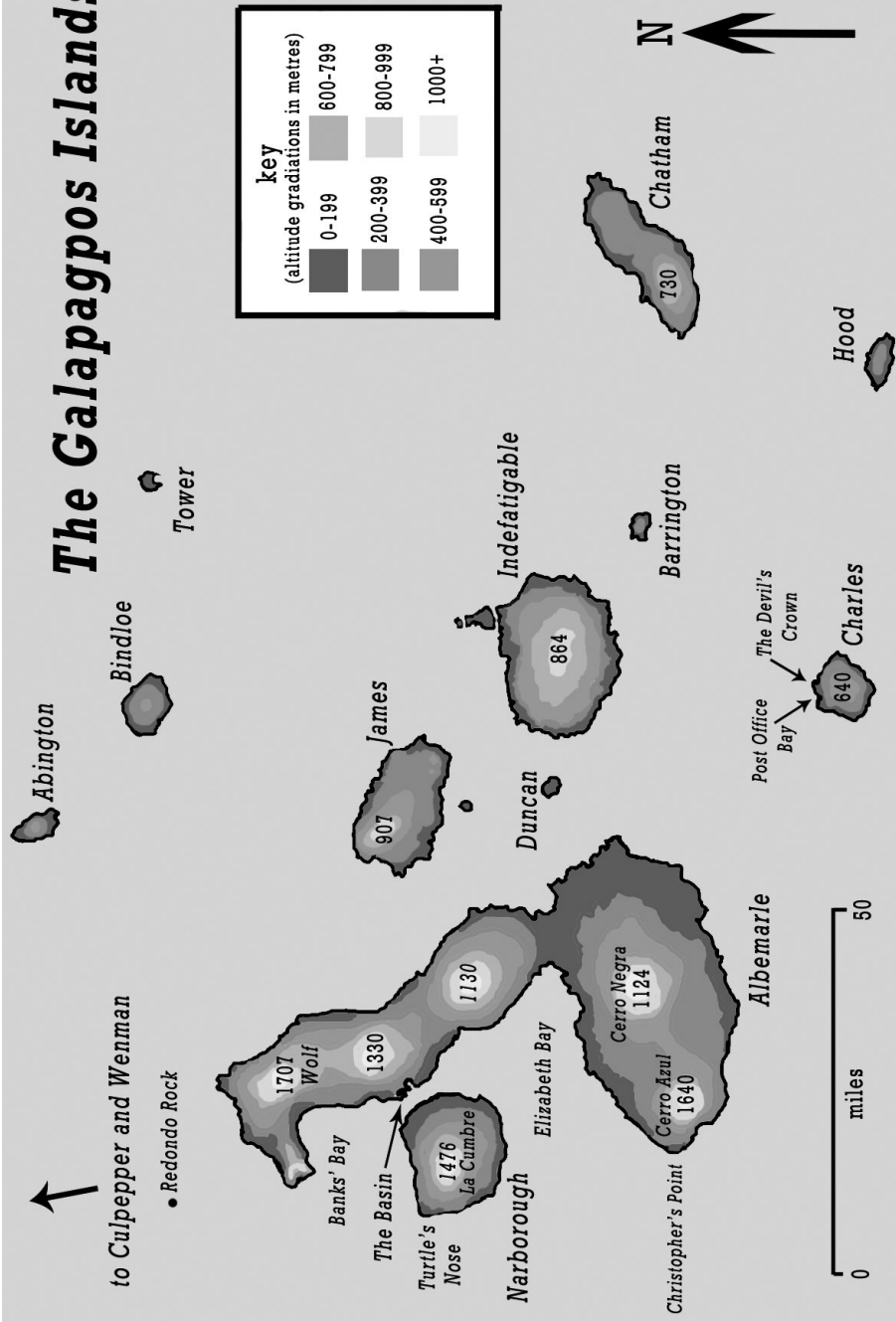
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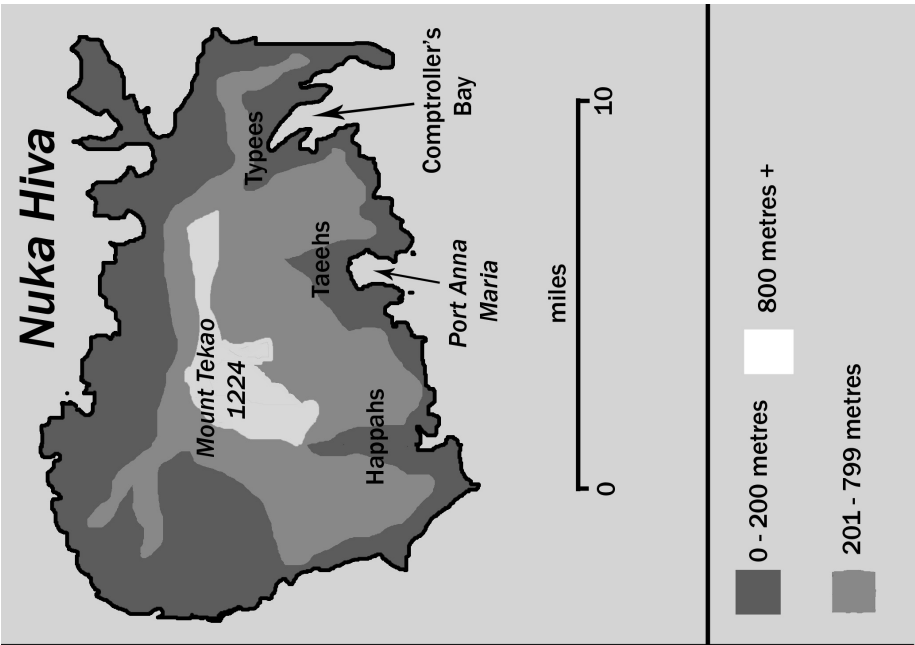
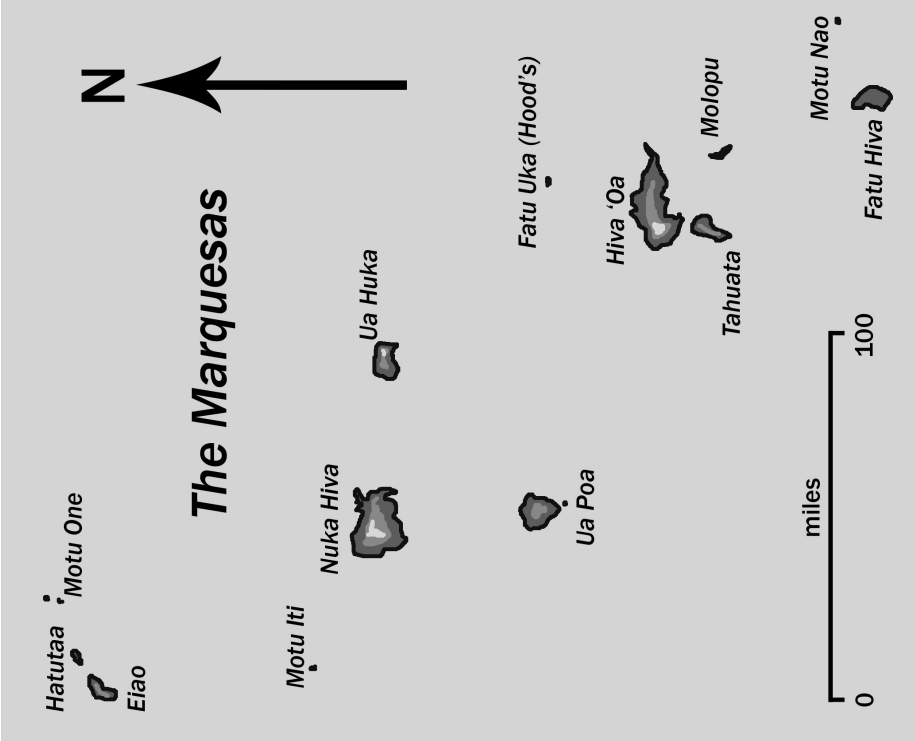
I would like to thank my editor, Rupert Harding, for his professionalism, kindness and encouragement; my parents, Dave and Jane Hughes and Stephen W. H. Duffy, author of *Captain Blakeley and the Wasp: the Cruise of 1814*, for their help in proof-reading and correcting the draft; and my wife and daughter, Vanessa and Emily Hughes, for their love and support.

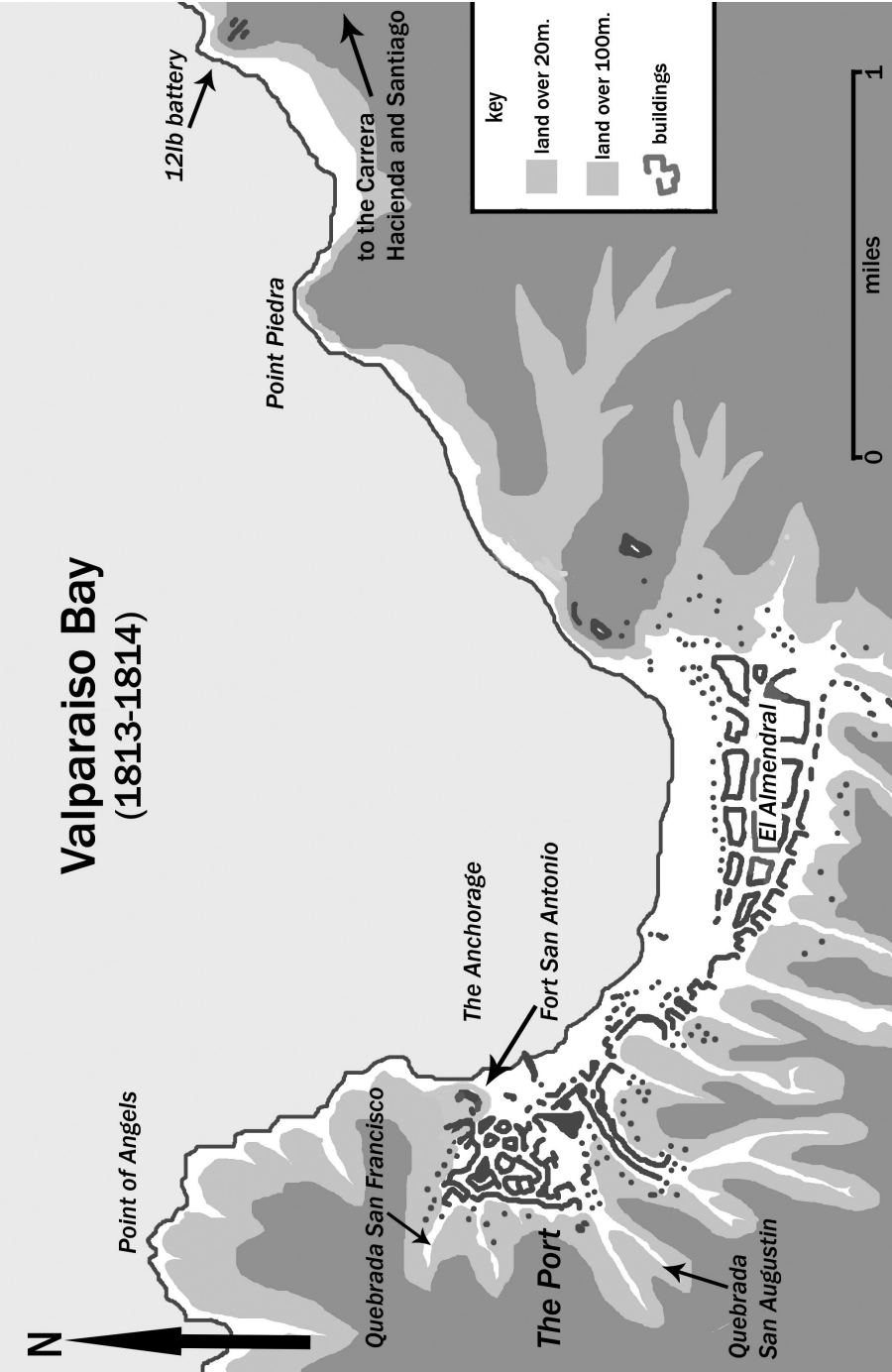
# Maps



# The Galapagos Islands



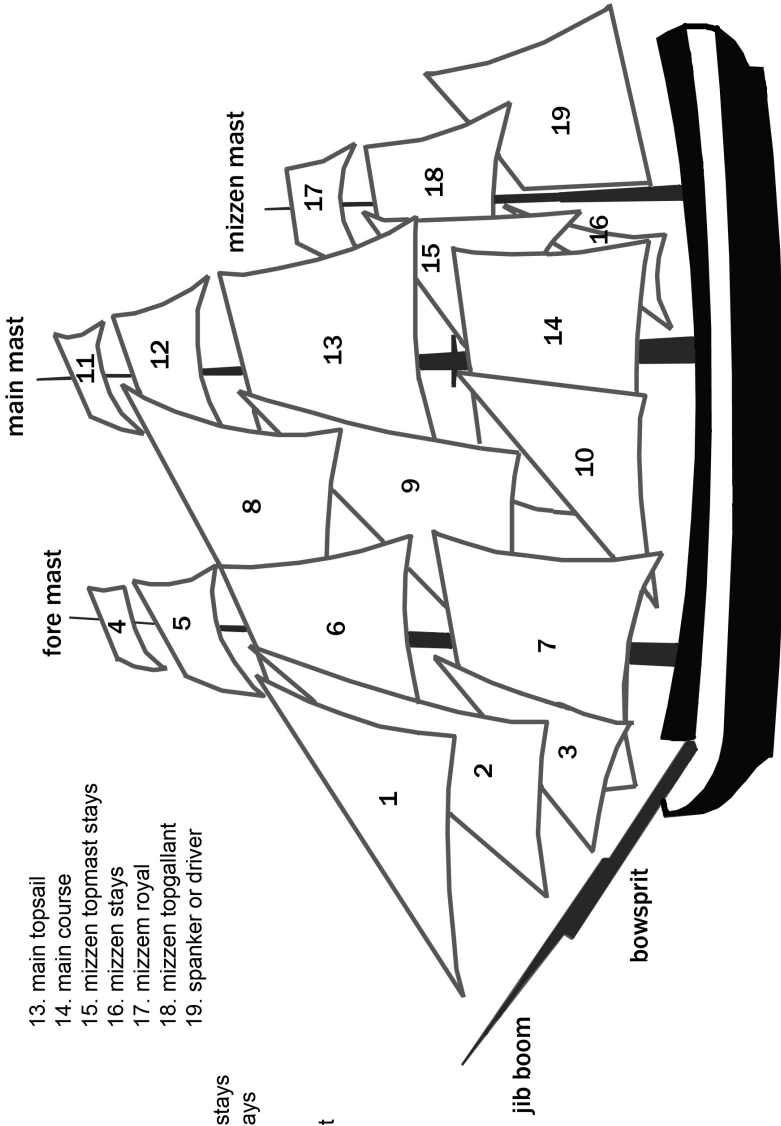




# sailplan of a Napoleonic-era frigate

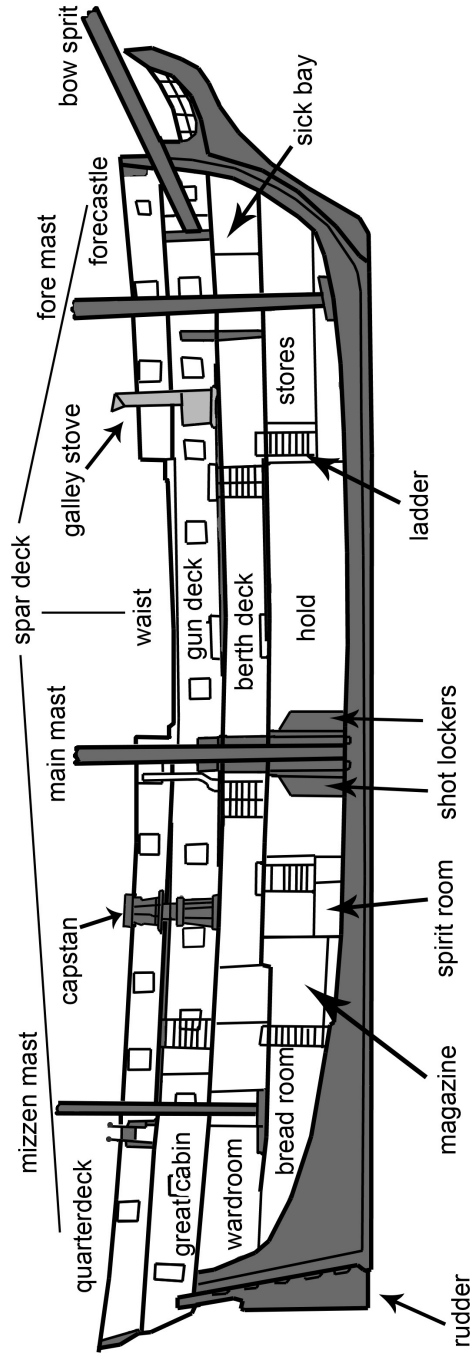
1. flying jib
2. outer jib
3. inner jib
4. fore royal
5. fore topgallant
6. fore topsail
7. fore mainsail
8. main topgallant stays
9. main topmast stays
10. main stays
11. main royal
12. main topgallant

13. main topsail
14. main course
15. mizzen topmast stays
16. mizzen stays
17. mizzen royal
18. mizzen topgallant
19. spanker or driver





# deck plan of a typical Napoleonic-era frigate



# Prologue: ‘A Prodigious Slaughter’: USS *Essex*, Valparaiso Bay, 6.30 p.m., 28 March 1814

His ears ringing from the concussion of two hours of cannon fire, Captain David Porter surveyed the scene. Dozens of dead were strewn amongst his frigate’s shattered spars. On the quarterdeck the bodies lay in heaps around three dismantled 12-pounders. Cut down as they had attempted to return the British fire, some of the men had been decapitated. Others were disembowelled. Many resembled pincushions, their flesh pierced by clouds of jagged wooden splinters punched through USS *Essex*’s oak sides. Limbs had been torn from sockets, fingers severed, flesh ripped open to the bone. Brains splattered the holed and blackened sails. The stench of seared flesh and gunpowder lay heavy in the air. Shredded rigging lay limp amongst blocks shot from the tops and rivulets of blood ran off the spar deck, down the hatches and into the hold from whence the sound of exploding cartridges emanated.

As tears began to roll down Porter’s sunburnt cheeks, a handful of British deserters staggered out of the hatchways. Lowering two boats, they abandoned the ship to escape their compatriots’ imminent revenge. Others dived overboard. Dodging wreckage, they braved the currents on the mile-long swim ashore. Below decks two teenage midshipmen threw small arms through the open gun ports. Another sheepishly emerged from his hiding place, while Ruff, a negro boy, searched for his master. Some of the wounded bravely mouthed defiance. Others wept or called for their mothers or rolled overboard, seeking oblivion in the swirling brine.

# Introduction: A Tale of Two Navies

At the turn of the nineteenth century the Royal Navy dominated the seas. Since the Seven Years War (1756–63), Britain's European rivals had been struggling to compete and repeated crushing victories over the French, Spanish, Dutch and Danish during the French Revolutionary War and early Napoleonic period saw all claims to equality quashed. After Trafalgar, the service's reach was all-encompassing: solitary cruisers patrolled the world's oceans and tried and tested battle fleets could be mustered with relative ease in the Mediterranean and on both sides of the Atlantic. Such was the respect that the service commanded, that the surviving French ships-of-the-line would spend the rest of the war blockaded in their home ports. From 1805 to 1812, aside from a few frigate squadron encounters in the Indian Ocean, the most serious threat the British faced at sea was from the French privateers which infested the English Channel and the cays and inlets of the Caribbean.<sup>1</sup>

Equally ubiquitous in the early nineteenth century was the US merchant marine. Lacking the blessing (or curse) of internationally-desirable resources, such as sugar, slaves, silver or gold, but gifted with excellent deep-water harbours and an enterprising population, between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries the ports of New England grew rich through 'the carrying trade'. Loading up with pork, beef, flour, rum and salted fish, the merchants of Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore and Providence, Rhode Island, sailed for the British colonies in the Caribbean. There the sugar monoculture employed on the plantations ensured American products fetched a good price.<sup>2</sup> At Kingston, Port Royal, Bridgetown, Charlestown and Saint John's the Americans loaded sugar destined for Britain where manufactured luxury goods were purchased for the North America market or guns, destined for the west coast of Africa, were stowed. In the Gulf of Guinea, off Cape Lopez or at the islands of São Tomé and Príncipe slaves were loaded to fuel the plantations of the Caribbean where molasses, a by-product of sugar manufacture, was purchased to be transformed into New England rum, thus completing this cyclical and highly-lucrative trade. The shipbuilding industry of New England, boosted by access to the virgin timber of the vast American interior, prospered hand-in-hand with the colonies' merchant class, while contacts with the British Caribbean saw the plantation system trans-located to Virginia and Carolina. In place of sugar, cotton and tobacco were grown.<sup>3</sup>

The European wars of the late seventeenth and early to mid-eighteenth centuries saw discontent arise between Britain and her transatlantic colonies. The North Americans saw no reason to stop trading with the French and Spanish just because London had declared them the enemy, especially when the molasses sold at Martinique, Guadeloupe and Hispaniola could be had for a third of the price demanded at Barbados, Jamaica, Nevis and St Kitts. The Navigation Acts of 1651 and 1660, the Molasses Act of 1733 and the Sugar Act of 1764, implemented to put a stop to such treasonous activities, merely led to a rise in smuggling and the seeking-out of legal loopholes, which in its turn, brought about the Royal Navy's increasingly heavy-handed policing of North American trade. With their mercantile interests blatantly subordinated to the economic priorities of the mother-country, in 1775 the North American colonies rebelled.

At sea the War of Independence went badly for the Americans. Despite their shipbuilding expertise, the colonists had little experience of naval warfare and their fleet was hopelessly outnumbered. Of thirteen American frigates built during the conflict, seven were captured and incorporated into the Royal Navy and four were destroyed to prevent them falling into enemy hands. Unwilling to run the risk of trading on the open seas, the American merchants turned their hand to privateering. With fast ships and experienced seamen, they enjoyed some success. On land the Americans grew in confidence as the war progressed. Despite convincing victories at Long Island and White Plains, the British had since struggled to get to grips with an elusive enemy and between 1778 and 1780, with the entry of the French, Spanish and Dutch into the war, Westminster began to view the conflict as a lost cause and started channelling resources into the protection of her Caribbean colonies instead. In 1783 the United States gained its independence, while, with the defeat of the French Navy at the Battle of the Saintes the previous year, Britain's all-important sugar plantations were retained.<sup>4</sup>

The post-war period saw a dramatic slump in the New England economy. Barred from trading with the British West Indies, whole seafaring communities went bankrupt. The shipbuilding industry suffered and a number of American sailors emigrated to Nova Scotia. Lured by financial incentives established by Westminster, some Nantucket whalers even crossed the Atlantic to set up business in London and Wales. To compensate, New England's merchants sought fresh markets overseas. In 1784 the *Empress of China* was the first US vessel to trade at Canton. Others exploited the opportunities offered by a still-independent Bengal or braved the pirate-infested waters of the Mediterranean; trade consuls were dispatched to nineteen foreign ports and commercial relations were established with Sweden, Prussia, Russia and the Dutch. The response of the French, however, was disappointing. Despite being Revolutionary Washington's principal ally, the trade policies of the tottering *Ancien Régime* mirrored those

of Westminster. Instead of welcoming American vessels, Versailles established a restrictive system to protect the interests of her own merchant class.

Everything changed with the French Revolution. At first the resulting European conflict played into American hands. With the French mercantile fleet devastated by the Royal Navy, Paris relaxed its trading laws and invited the Americans to take up the slack. Exploiting a legal loophole known as the re-export trade, New England's merchants were able to carry cargoes between France and her Caribbean colonies by stopping *en route* at American ports to briefly unload then re-stow the goods. In this way their cargoes could be reclassified as US products and therefore avoid confiscation by the Royal Navy. The US merchant fleet rapidly expanded, forcing its captains to take on an ever-increasing number of foreign, principally British, hands to whom they could offer wages in excess of what they would receive at home. A knock-on effect was that the Royal Navy believed itself increasingly justified in stopping and searching American vessels and pressing men whose nationality was suspect onto her men of war.<sup>5</sup>

In 1794 the situation changed once more. Worried that their policies were pushing the Americans ever further into the French orbit, the British agreed to trading concessions with the Jay Treaty. The terms saw US bottoms return to Britain's Caribbean colonies, in exchange for Washington's acquiescence in Westminster's anti-French naval policies. Anglophile at heart, appalled by the barbarities of the Reign of Terror and firmly believing that America's future would be fuelled by ocean-going trade with Britain and her colonies, the New England merchants were only too happy to oblige. The issue of impressment, however, remained unaddressed and as a result of the treaty an undeclared conflict known as the Quasi-War broke out in 1798 between the US and Revolutionary France. Fought entirely at sea, the conflict saw the rebirth of the US Navy. Supported by a number of armed brigs and sloops, the force was built around a dozen solidly-constructed and superbly-crewed frigates. The largest, which could outgun any ship of their class including those of the Royal Navy, mounted 44 guns, were built of exceptionally resilient live oak and boasted broadsides of heavy 24-pounders. Although small in number, the US Navy was highly efficient, her officers scored several morale-boosting victories in the Caribbean against French privateers and men of war and in 1800 the Quasi-War was brought to a negotiated close as the result of the more conciliatory stance adopted by the new French government led by Napoleon Bonaparte as First Consul.

In February 1801 Thomas Jefferson became the third President of the United States. As a Republican, his sympathies lay with the Southern landowners. He favoured inland expansion, opposed overseas trade, distrusted the Anglophile New England merchant class and discouraged the growth of the navy. Many promising young officers went on furlough into the merchant trade as a result, but within

months of Jefferson's appointment, the US found herself at war once again. This time her opponents were the Barbary States of North Africa: petty princedoms financed by piracy which had been a thorn in the side of Mediterranean trade for 500 years. While North American merchants had previously enjoyed the protection of the British flag, since independence US ships had been targeted and the late 1790s and early 1800s saw several highly-publicised cases come to light.

The First Barbary War saw the US Navy grow in experience and prestige. As the enemy's pirate galleys and feluccas were no match for the Americans' men of war, blockading, bombardment and cutting-out operations were the order of the day. The US performed well: a number of ships were captured; a young lieutenant named Stephen Decatur McKnight emerged with particular credit, receiving rapid promotion as a result; and the Bashaw of Tripoli was eventually forced into a negotiated settlement which saw the lucrative Mediterranean trade reopened to US shipping. Things were not entirely one-sided, however: the squadron's most powerful frigate, the 44-gun USS *Philadelphia* commanded by Captain William Bainbridge, ran aground while chasing two enemy ships into Tripoli harbour. Although Decatur McKnight later destroyed the *Philadelphia* in a daring night-time raid, her crew, which included a young lieutenant named David Porter, were only released at the conclusion of the conflict in June 1805 on the payment of a \$60,000 ransom.<sup>6</sup>

Four months later, the Battle of Trafalgar dramatically altered the balance of global naval power for a century. With French impotence at sea matched by the British army's inability to challenge Napoleon on land, both sides implemented policies to cripple their opponents economically. In May 1806 the British government placed the European coast between Brest and the Elbe under blockade, thus prohibiting neutral nations from shipping produce from France's colonies to her home ports. Napoleon responded with the Berlin Decree in November, excluding British trade from mainland Europe. One side-effect was a major disruption to the neutral carrying trade. By 1807 the US in particular was beginning to suffer. Combined with the Royal Navy's aggressive stance towards neutrals suspected of trading with France and the continuation of impressment, the governments of Britain and America became increasingly polarised. President Jefferson hit back by banning British imports, but this policy backfired: Britain was not about to let herself be influenced by the protestations of a 'minor nation' when engaged in total war. The end-result was an increase in smuggling and a rebellion which broke out along the US Canadian border where Jefferson's countrymen relied on international trade.<sup>7</sup>

In June 1807 the pressure intensified. Ordered to the Mediterranean to protect the US's mercantile interests, Captain James Barron of USS *Chesapeake* was intercepted by a British frigate a few miles east of his home port of Hampton,

Virginia. The commander of HMS *Leopard*, Captain Salisbury Price Humphreys, had received intelligence that several Royal Navy deserters were amongst the *Chesapeake's* crew. When Barron refused to allow the British to search his ship, Humphreys fired a warning shot across his bows. When this failed to have the desired effect, the British fired three broadsides in quick succession. Never suspecting that he would face combat so close to home, Barron was hopelessly unprepared and only managed to loose off a single cannon shot in return before striking his colours. Three Chesapeakes were killed and fifteen wounded. Going on board, the British identified four deserters. One was hanged, the others imprisoned.<sup>8</sup>

The *Chesapeake–Leopard* affair caused outrage. In Norfolk, Virginia, a mob prowled the streets looking for Royal Navy officers to lynch; the press called for war; the militia and inshore gunboat fleets were mobilised; President Jefferson demanded all British ships leave the US seaboard or face an embargo; and the American men-of-war cruising the Mediterranean were recalled for national defence. Barron was court-martialled in October. Found guilty of negligence and want of judgement, he was suspended for five years without pay. The British press was equally bullish. ‘Three weeks blockade of the Delaware, the Chesapeake and Boston Harbour would make our presumptuous rivals repent of their puerile conduct’, *The Morning Post* opined. The leading officers of the Royal Navy stood to make a fortune from US prizes, while the country’s merchant class was keen to see their transatlantic rivals humbled. Admiral Sir George Cranfield Berkley, the commander-in-chief of the Royal Navy’s North American Station at Halifax, also pressed for action to cow the ‘upstart Johnathons’, but eventually calmer heads prevailed. Westminster remained focussed on the threat of Napoleonic France, while the US was split between hawkish southern Republicans and the powerful merchant class of the Federalist states of New England who loathed the idea of entirely losing British trade.<sup>9</sup>

In 1809 James Madison was elected President. Putting an end to Jefferson’s embargo, Madison presided over a partial economic recovery, but the relationship with Britain remained strained. In 1811, with the US once again moving into the French orbit, two British ambassadors were obliged to retire from Washington in quick succession. The American representative at the court of Saint James’ followed suit and Madison enlarged the US Navy from 1,440 to 2,000 personnel and ordered four frigates to sea. Meanwhile, the third British ambassador to serve in Washington in a single year made it clear that his country had no inclination to concede ground on neutral trade restrictions and in May 1811 a second violent encounter occurred on the high seas. On the night of 16 May USS *President*, one of the country’s ‘super’ frigates, spoke HMS *Little Belt*, a 20-gun sloop, off the Virginia Capes. With neither captain willing to identify himself without first

knowing the name of his interrogator, a stalemate ensued. Accounts of who fired the first shot vary. The result was never in doubt. At 10.30 p.m., having had nine killed and twenty-three wounded and most of her guns disabled, Lieutenant John Creighton of the *Little Belt* struck his colours. A diplomatic spat ensued, but as both Commodore John Rodgers of the *President* and Lieutenant Creighton refused to accept responsibility, the question was left unresolved.<sup>10</sup>

In November 1811, the Republican War Hawks gained the ascendancy in Congress. Henry Clay, a charismatic Kentuckian who, at thirty-five, was too young to remember the horrors of the War of Independence, called for an increase in naval spending and an attack on British Canada which he blamed for inciting Indian attacks in the Northwest Territories. Former president Jefferson opined that the Canadians would be happy to join the US and claimed that the conquest would be ‘a mere matter of marching’. Madison backed the Hawks and in April 1812 announced a ninety-day embargo against British products to enable US merchantmen to return to their home ports prior to war. The British government, for its part, remained opposed to the conflict. Defeating the French remained the priority; rioting Luddites required 10,000 troops to be deployed at home; the recent assassination of the anti-American prime minister, Spencer Percival, had robbed the country’s hawks of their leadership, while Percival’s successor, Lord Liverpool, favoured peace. Neutral trade restrictions were relaxed and a move made towards conciliation. The news reached the US too late, however. Congress had already voted to go to war and on 18 June the bill passed through the Senate.<sup>11</sup>

Few in Britain took the threat seriously. Many thought that Madison’s declaration of war was mere bluster and that a truce would be called once news of Liverpool’s policy changes reached Washington. In the Royal Navy’s North American Station, Vice-Admiral Herbert Sawyer, Berkley’s successor as commander-in-chief, was wary of antagonising the enemy and ordered all captured US merchantmen released pending instructions from London. Anticipating a windfall from prize money, Sawyer’s junior officers were more bellicose, but their overblown sense of confidence and lack of respect for their new rivals would prove their undoing in the opening two years of the war. Interestingly, the officers of the US Navy would labour under their own psychological shortcomings. Desperate to prove themselves the equal of their highly-rated opponents, the Americans would throw themselves into the fray without due consideration of the impact on their country’s wider strategic goals which, due to their numerical disadvantage, required a more patient, measured approach.<sup>12</sup>

The Royal Navy’s overconfidence was mirrored in the British press. In a piece of rhetoric as provocative as it was ill-informed, *The Evening Star* dismissed the US Navy as nothing more than ‘a few fir-built frigates . . . manned by a handful of bastards and outlaws [with] . . . striped bunting flying at the mastheads’.



Nevertheless, such an attitude seemed justified when word of the initial land exchanges across the Canadian border reached London. Rather than the matter of 'mere marching' envisioned by Jefferson, the opening moves saw the senior US general, William Hull, a Revolutionary War hero who was well past his prime, surrender with 2,500 men to a British force of redcoats backed by militia of just a little over half his strength, while Fort Michilimackinac on Lake Huron was captured by the Governor-General of Canada, Sir Isaac Brock, without a single British casualty. Brock's success not only brought an important fur-trapping concern under British control but also assured the allegiance of the region's powerful Indian chieftain, Tecumesh and his numerous followers.<sup>13</sup>

By sea the initial exchanges followed a different course. Having convinced Madison that the US Navy's best chance was to take the war to the enemy, Commodore John Rodgers set sail from New York on 21 June. Amongst his five-strong squadron were two of the service's 44-gun 'super' frigates: USS *President* and *United States*. Rodgers' mission, to intercept the 110-strong British West Indian convoy as it made its way east across the Atlantic, would ultimately prove frustrating, but before he returned home USS *Essex* and *Constitution*, captained by David Porter and Isaac Hull respectively, would score the first of several stunning successes won by the US Navy in the first two years of the war. Porter's cruise of the Caribbean saw him take several British merchantmen between Bermuda and the Grand Banks and capture the sloop HMS *Alert* on 13 August. The *Essex* then sailed for the Delaware River where she arrived in early September having narrowly avoided a British blockading squadron led by Captain Philip Broke of HMS *Shannon*. Isaac Hull, meanwhile, had set sail from Boston on his second cruise of the war on 2 August intending to meet up with Rodgers' squadron in the mid-Atlantic. On 17 August, about 750 miles east of Boston, he sighted HMS *Guerriere* under Captain John Dacres, lately detached from Broke's squadron to return to Halifax for resupply. The two frigates closed rapidly. Displaying the over-confidence which typified British officers, Dacres assured his men that the contest would be won within thirty minutes. He was proved correct, but it was *Constitution* which emerged victorious. In a bloody encounter, *Guerriere* was shattered by 24-pound American shot while her own 18-pounders had comparatively little effect on *Constitution*'s solid live-oak sides. By the time Dacres struck, twenty-three of his men had been killed and fifty-six wounded. *Guerriere* was so badly damaged that Hull had little option other than to set her on fire after taking Dacres and the rest of the survivors on board.<sup>14</sup>

September saw a new commander-in-chief arrive at the Royal Navy's North American Station. Although Vice-Admiral Sir John Borlase Warren had been issued with orders to 'attack, sink, burn or otherwise destroy' enemy shipping, he had also been told to seek peace: his first official act was to write to President

Madison offering an armistice. The move was indicative of the lack of direction behind British policy. With Warren's hands tied, it would be some time before the full weight of British naval superiority would be brought to bear on the enemy. Meanwhile, the US Navy, unhindered by such considerations, was preparing for the second phase of the war. The fleet would be divided into three squadrons for commerce raiding. Commodore Rodgers would take the 44-gun *President* and the 38-gun *Congress* to cruise the Caribbean; Commodore Decatur would sail off the Cape Verde Islands and Azores with the USS *United States* and the brig *Argus*; while Commodore William Bainbridge would take the *Constitution*, supported by Captain Porter in the *Essex*, to the South Atlantic. It would prove the beginning of one of the greatest naval cruises of all time.<sup>15</sup>

## *Chapter 1*

# ‘Yankee Warriors True’: Captain David Porter and the *Essex*, 1 September 1812 – 25 January 1813

Throughout the autumn of 1812, the Pennsylvanian village of Chester was alive with activity. At anchor in the Delaware, the black bulk of USS *Essex*, an 850-ton Fifth Rate frigate, was preparing for her latest cruise. By the quayside, Lieutenant John Gamble’s marines kept guard as boats rowed back and forth with provisions. Flocks of geese splashed down near Chester Island in mid-river and some of the *Essex*’s 319 crew threw fishing lines into the sluggish brown waters to hook the white perch, catfish, shad, herring and giant sturgeon with which the Delaware abounded. Three hundred barrels of salt beef and salt pork, 200 gallons of vinegar, 100 barrels of molasses and quantities of anti-scorbutic lime juice were stacked in the *Essex*’s hold. Nearly 22,000lbs of hard tack filled the bread room and 1,700 gallons of spirits was packed in the liquor store. In the warrant officers’ storerooms on the orlop deck were ten boxes of spermaceti oil, seventeen of tallow candles and 50lbs of nails. Hundreds of gallons of paint, turpentine and varnish, sewing twine, fishing lines, fire buckets, barrel hoops and soldering irons had been squeezed on board; coal for the galley stove and forge was loaded and 500lbs of musket balls, a thousand flints, 100lbs of slow match, seventy cartridge bags, hundreds of roundshot, grapeshot and canister and several thousand pounds of powder were stacked in the magazine. Fresh fruit and vegetables were stored in net bags hanging from the rigging and each of the ship’s messes had penned chickens and tethered pigs on the spar deck for their private supply.<sup>1</sup>

Built fifteen years earlier by Enos Briggs of Salem, Massachusetts, to the design of Captain William Hackett, the *Essex* was a ‘tight little’ craft. One hundred and thirty-eight feet in length, with a beam of 37 feet and a draft of 12 feet 3 inches, she dwarfed the cutters, barges, shad boats and two-masted shallops circling around her. Unlike the original six frigates, which had been funded entirely by the government, the *Essex* had been partially built by public subscription. Half of the \$150,000 required had been raised in Essex County on the back of a wave

of patriotism inspired by the outbreak of the Quasi-War. Elias Hasket Derby and William Grey, the two principal shipping merchants in town, had donated \$10,000 each. The government had made up the shortfall. The 53-year-old Briggs was at the height of his powers when he began work in April 1799. After laying down a 128-foot keel cut from four mighty white oaks at Winter Island, Briggs placed an advert in *The Essex Gazette* calling on all 'true lovers of liberty' to supply the rest of the materials. The response was swift. Spruce and pine were cut for the spars, masts and decking. White oak was felled for the knees and structural supports in the wood lots of Danvers, Peabody and Beverly and dragged to the yard on ox-drawn sleds through the winter snows. Local hemp was used for the cables and rigging and the sails were cut from duck at Daniel Rust's factory in Broadstreet. Malleable copper spikes were obtained from Colonel Paul Revere while copper plating to protect the frigate's hull from barnacles, shellfish and the dreaded *teredo*, a wood-eating ship worm of tropical climes, was imported from England. At midday on 30 September 'the Stars and Stripes were unfurled on board' and, to the sound of a salute fired by the frigate's cannon arrayed on a nearby hill and the applause of a crowd of 12,000, the *Essex* was launched into Salem Sound.<sup>2</sup>

Thirteen years later, Captain David Porter, a darkly intense 32-year-old, was in command. Born in Boston into a seafaring family, Porter had grown up on his father's tales of sea-faring derring-do and had made several voyages to the West Indies as a merchant sailor in his teens. After twice escaping impressment by British men-of-war, he joined the US Navy in 1798, securing a midshipman's commission during the build-up to the Quasi-War. 'My son . . . is just entered his nineteenth year', his father wrote, 'he is active and promising . . . [.] understands navigation well [and is] a tolerable good scholar otherways.' Porter's first posting – midshipman on the 44-gun frigate USS *Constellation* – was under the fiery Captain Thomas Truxtun, a former merchant captain who had rounded the Cape of Good Hope three times and made a name for himself as a privateer in the Revolutionary War. 'Swear at you?' Truxtun had bellowed after Porter had complained about the harsh discipline on board. 'Damn it, sir, every time I do that you go up a round on the ladder of promotion . . . Go forward and let us have no more whining.' Porter took Truxtun's advice to heart.<sup>3</sup>

On 9 February 1799, eight days after his nineteenth birthday, Porter had his baptism of fire. Cruising the Caribbean during the Quasi-War, the *Constellation* took on *L'Insurgente*, a frigate of 36 guns, six leagues northeast of the Island of Nevis. In the chase *L'Insurgente's* main topmast was brought down by a squall. Principally armed with carronades and therefore reliant on forcing a close-range encounter, Captain Michel-Pierre Barreaut found himself at the mercy of Truxtun's long 24-pounders. In an hour and a quarter the American had hammered *L'Insurgente* into submission. With his ship wallowing and his

decks littered with twenty-nine dead and forty-one wounded, Barreaut struck his colours, giving the US Navy its first significant prize of the war. Porter was amongst those charged with bringing *L'Insurgente* and her 173 surviving crewmembers into the neutral harbour of St. Kitts, an achievement that helped bring about his promotion to lieutenant. Eleven months later Porter once more demonstrated the bullheadedness that would characterise his career. As second officer of the 20-gun schooner USS *Experiment*, the twenty-year-old was escorting four merchantmen when they were attacked by Haitian pirates. As his superior, Lieutenant Maley, countenanced surrendering, Porter assumed command and saved the *Experiment* and two of her charges. Maley, a long-term malingerer, was dismissed from the service. Porter was praised for his aggression and initiative, attributes which he possessed in spades.<sup>4</sup>

Twelve years on, on the eve of taking the *Essex* on one of the most remarkable cruises in US history, Porter remained as impulsive as ever. On 18 September 1812, whilst the crew awaited a set of replacement sails and rigging and a new bowsprit from the navy shipyard in Philadelphia, a traveller arrived at Chester bearing a challenge from Sir James Yeo, the commander of the 36-gun HMS *Southampton*, part of the British fleet blockading the coast. Yeo requested a 'tete-a-tete anywhere between the capes of the Delaware and the Havanna', a neatly-couched opening which was followed by the sort of tirade that Englishmen reserved for berating upstart Americans. After capturing the *Essex*, Yeo boasted, he 'would have the pleasure to break [Porter's] own sword over his damned head and put him down forward in irons'. Yeo's ire was no doubt provoked by his opponent's most recent success. While on a commerce-raiding cruise of the Caribbean on 13 August 1812, the *Essex* had captured HMS *Alert*, a 20-gun sloop-of-war, after an eight-minute exchange of fire – the first time the Royal Navy had lost a warship to the Americans.

His pride piqued, Porter promptly penned a reply. '[I] accept ... with pleasure [Sir James'] *polite* invitation', he began, '[and,] if agreeable ... would prefer meeting near the Delaware, where, captain P. pledges his honor ... [,] no other American vessel shall interrupt their *tete-a-tete*. The *Essex* may be known by a flag bearing the motto – FREE TRADE AND SAILORS' RIGHTS; and when that is struck to the *Southampton*, captain Porter will deserve the treatment promised.' As well as providing Porter with an opportunity to prove his own worth, accepting Yeo's challenge would allow him to perform a reconnaissance. It would not be long before Porter received orders to set sail and his first task would be to avoid the British fleet blockading the eastern seaboard. If he was to get amongst the rich prizes of the Atlantic, Porter would first have to get past the Royal Navy.

On 27 September Porter hoisted the cornet to call all officers back on board. The hemp mooring ropes were thrown off and the *Essex* set sail. Working a