

life that exert control over the destiny of countries and individuals.

In February, 1831, Malay pirates captured a Boston cargo ship in the pepper trade. The first officer and two crew were killed. President Jackson dispatched the frigate USS Potomac under Commodore John Downes to demand financial compensation and restitution. Downes' negotiation was the use of marines and bluejackets (sailors deployed ashore as infantry) to destroy several local forts at Quallah Batoe, Sumatra. About 150 warriors and a rajah were killed in the bombardment and ensuing hand-to-hand combat. In further bombardment of the remaining fort and the town itself, more than 300 natives were killed. It was restitution writ large. Downes lost two troops with another eleven wounded. Upon his return to the U.S., via a circumnavigation, Jackson and most Americans publicly backed his heavy-handed action. An early blow was struck for increasing "respect for our flag in those distant seas" (or, a more accurate message: 'do not mess around with Americans'). An account of the punitive expedition was published by Downes' accompanying secretary, Jeremiah Reynolds, and received wide circulation. (As an interesting historical footnote, Reynolds used the journey to gather material for a second story, a vivid account of a real-life albino sperm whale. The whale was said to have survived perhaps

Sumatra he found that a friend, recent Navy Secretary Samuel Southard, was now a New Jersey Senator and Chairman of the Committee on Naval Affairs. Gathering endorsements from scientific societies, Reynolds got the committee to sponsor a bill in 1836 for an expedition to the Pacific, giving stirring testimony to the sitting House of Representatives on the merits of such an undertaking. In May, both houses of Congress did what the 1828 Congress had failed to do. They approved \$150,000 of public monies for a voyage, in part because of Reynolds' persuasion and also because of a coalition that included agricultural states looking for new markets. Jackson, coming to the end of his second term, saw a legacy in the offing and added his support.

A sloop of war, the Peacock (1813), had been decommissioned and rebuilt as USS Peacock (1828) for the earlier iteration of the voyage. With the funding in place in 1836, it took two years of dithering and cross-purposes government intrigue for another three ships plus two tenders to be readied. At long last, 175 years ago on the afternoon of August 18, 1838, the United States South Seas Exploring Expedition weighed anchor with 433 men.

The story of the many changes in command (and refusals of Captaincy) before the expedition set sail is a book in itself.

The remit of command was wider than the experience of any standing U.S. naval officer: exploration, contact with native peoples, practical and thorough surveys and charge of a civilian scientific corps of botanists, a geologist, a taxidermist, naturalists, artists and others. Suffice to record here that the Secretary of War, Joel Poinsett (of the flower fame) had been authorized by President Van Buren to offer command to a junior officer, Lieutenant Charles Wilkes, USN. Wilkes had, like Reynolds, long harbored a desire, and had also labored, for such a journey. Self-trained in marine surveying, he had done admirable work on the Georges Bank, had traveled to Europe to discuss instruments with leading scientific figures as head of

the Navy's Department of Charts and Instruments and had pushed for U.S. sponsored exploration to the Pacific. Lacking any senior officers' acceptance, Lt. Wilkes, age 40, won the prize, and headache, of command. The decision came to define his life.

The U.S. Ex Ex or, as it has come to be called, The Wilkes Expedition, beat, close hauled, to windward, crossing the Atlantic to the Madeira Islands, stopped for repairs, sped



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100 skirmishes, taking harpoons, crushing boats and evading capture near Isla Mocha off southern Chile before finally, alas, being slain. I used to own a copy of this sensational story: Mocha Dick: Or The White Whale of the Pacific (1839.) Reynolds may not have entered the annals of literature but his little book served as inspiration for an author who did.)

Jeremiah Reynolds had long been an active promoter of an exploratory expedition to the Pacific. When he returned from