

The USS Essex and the Birth of the American Navy

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The Essex was a 32-gun frigate built in 1799 by the people of Salem, Massachusetts. It was known for its speed and beauty and came to maturity in the War of 1812. Her cruise against the British whaling fleet in the Gallapagos and her visit to the Marquesas inspired the maritime literature of Cooper, Melville and Edward Everett Hale.

Robbotti and Vescovi retell the Essex story in the context of the growth of the American navy. The Essex provided a training ground for many famous naval officers, and its brief naval service foreshadowed the globe-spanning presence of the U.S. Navy. The authors intersperse their story with nautical descriptions and provide anecdotes from early naval history. They begin with the Quasi-War with France (1798-1800)—the occasion for building the frigates in the first place—and move through the Barbary Wars to the War of 1812.

Nearly half the book is devoted to the cruise of David Porter. Robotti and Vescovi provide a broader context to the story so brilliantly told in Porter's own *Journal of a Cruise Made to the Pacific Ocean*, published in 1815. Their narrative is an analysis of the action that led to the capture of the Essex by the British vessels *Cherub* and *Phoebe* off Valparaiso in 1814. After six weeks of maneuvering and Porter's challenges for combat, the Essex departed only to be attacked in neutral waters.

Similar to that other great nineteenth-century ship the *Alabama*, the Essex ended her U.S. service amid controversy, but unlike the Confederate vessel she did not have the good fortune to sink. Instead, the Essex entered the British navy, served as a convict ship, a store ship and was finally sold for scrap in 1841.

A naval glossary, a list of the subscribers who pledged money for the building of the Essex, a brief bibliography, maps of the ship's voyages, blueprints of the vessel, contemporary illustrations of the ship in battle and an index are provided.

This is an enjoyable book for people who like stories of battle, courage and history. Its publication date coincides with the ship's 200th anniversary.

R. D. MADISON (May / June 1999)

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