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NAVAL OPERATIONS

OF THE
WAR OF 1812-14.

CHAPTER X.

It will be remembered that the United States squadron commanded by Commodore Bainbridge, consisting of the Constitution frigate and Hornet sloop, in their contemplated cruise in the South Seas in 1812, were to have been joined by the Essex frigate off St. Salvador—how that vessel did not join and the cruise of the others terminated in the capture of the Java has been already narrated.

On the 27th October, 1812, the Essex sailed from Delaware bay but finding neither of her consorts off St. Salvador she proceeded alone around Cape Horn; and on the 14th March, having previously captured the British packet Norton with £11,000 sterling in specie on board, arrived at Valparaiso. The Essex was here refitted and provisioned and then proceeded to cruise along the coasts of Chili and Peru and amongst the Gallapagos islands till October, by which time 12 British whale ships had been captured. Having taken several American seamen out of a Peruvian pilot sloop, and induced some British seamen to join, the commander of the Essex in imitation of Lord Anson in his memorable cruises in those seas in 1739, armed and manned two of his prizes as cruisers—one of them, late the Atlantic but newly named the Essex Junior, was armed with 20 guns (10 long 6-pounders and 10 carronades 18-pounders); after cruising and refitting amongst the Marquesas the Essex and Essex Junior returned to Valparaiso in January 1814.

On the 8th February, the British 18-pounder 36 gun frigate Pheobe, accompanied by the 18 gun ship-sloop Cherub, while standing in towards Valparaiso in quest of the Essex and the three ships she was reported to have armed, discovered the Essex Junior off the port and shortly afterwards the Essex and two of her prizes at anchor within it. Strict neutrality being enforced any hostilities were out of the question within the prescribed distance of three miles from the

shore, the Pheobe therefore merely spoke the Essex and with the Cherub came to an anchor at no great distance from her. The force of the Pheobe was 26 broadside guns 18-pounders, 14 carronades 32-pounders on fore-castle and quarter-deck, 4 long 9-pounders, one swivel in the fore, two in the main, and one in the mizzen top, and her 18-pounder boat carronade; a 12-pounder had been fitted as a broadside gun at her gangway ports. The Cherub mounted 18 carronades 32-pounders on the main-deck, and on the fore-castle and quarter-deck 6 carronades 18 pounders and two sixes; the Pheobe measured 926 tons. The Essex mounted 24 carronades 32-pounders on her main-deck, 15 carronades 32-pounders on her quarter-deck and fore-castle; she measured 867 tons—her ship's compliment was 328 men.

A succession of manœuvres now took place, hostilities within the port or jurisdiction of Chili was out of the question, the American ships therefore tried every means to evade the British superior force and get to sea, when from their presumed superior sailing they would have probably reached a port in the United States; the British used every exertion to prevent any such escape. It is truly laughable to read the heroic bravado indulged in by the ships of both countries, the taunts, mottoes, and other little arts resorted to by men who had the service and honor of their respective countries in their charge and who should be supposed above personal weakness or spite, and although both faultlessly discharged their duty as gallant seamen, it detracts considerably from the personal respect attaching to each to find them indulging in such undignified acts.

Two or three attempts appear to have been made by the American ships to effect a retreat, but without avail. On the 25th February the Hector, one of the Essex prizes, was towed out to sea and set on fire, with two British ships in port. It is not easy to understand in what manner this was effected; it would seem that a little exertion would have recaptured the Hector or led to the final engagement some days sooner. Another attempt at escape was made on the

27th with similar results. After a good deal of manœuvring in order to allow the Essex Junior to escape, on the 28th of March the Essex put in operation a well concerted plan for freeing herself from the presence of her pertinacious enemy, which was to allow the Pheobe and Cherub to chase the Essex out of the bay and allow the Essex Junior to escape; the wind being to the Southward any scheme that would draw the British ships to the North East or lee side of the bay could not fail to facilitate the escape of the American ships; accordingly at about midnight and to 1 a.m. a quantity of rockets and blue lights were burnt and throw up in the North East and North, the Pheobe and Cherub chased in those directions, but finding no answer to the lights each hoisted, the Captains of both vessels at once suspected a ruse and again hauled to the wind. Daylight found the American ships at their moorings and the two British ships to leeward but too close to port to warrant an attempt at escape. During the forenoon of the 29th a fresh breeze sprung up from the South South-east and blew a regular gale at 3 p.m., so that the Essex parted her larboard cable and dragged her starboard anchor out to sea; sail was at once set on the ship and as the probability of passing to windward of the blockading force was considerably increased the good fortune of the Essex at being blown out of the harbor was looked on with envy and regret by the British ships; however, just as she was rounding the point at the West end of the bay, the accomplishment of which would have set her free, she was struck by a heavy squall which carried away her main top mast, she now bore up followed by both the British ships, and at 3h. 40m. p.m. anchored within half a mile of the shore in a small bay about a mile from Point Caletto. At 4 p.m. when the Pheobe was standing towards the starboard quarter of the Essex, at about a mile distant, a squall from the land caused the ship to break off and prevented her passing close under the American frigate's stern. At 4h. 10m. the Pheobe having fetched as near as the wind would permit, commenced the action with her starboard guns but with little effect, in five