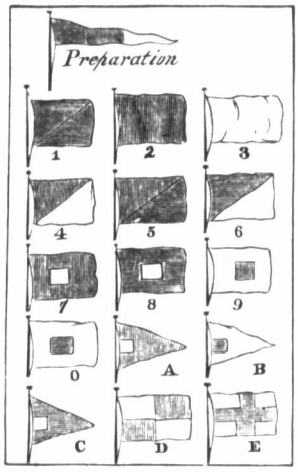

SIGNALS.—NO. 5.

but the breeze slackened, and night fell upon the waters before the two vessels were near enough to each other to discern their respective characters.

At twenty minutes past eight in the evening the *President* brought-to on the weather-bow, or a little forward of the beam of the stranger, and, when within about a hundred yards of her, Rodgers hailed, and asked "What ship is that?" No answer was given, but the question was repeated from the stranger, word for word. After a pause of fifteen or twenty seconds Rodgers reiterated his inquiry, and, before he could take his trumpet from his mouth, was answered by a shot that cut off one of the main-top-backstays of his vessel, and lodged in her mainmast. He was about to order a shot in return, when a gun from the second division of his ship was fired.[1] At almost the same instant the antagonist of the *President* fired three guns in quick succession, and then the rest of her broadside, with musketry. This provocation caused the *President* to respond by a broadside. "Equally determined," said Rodgers, "not to be the aggressor, or suffer the flag of my country to be insulted with impunity, I gave a general order to fire."[2] In the course of five or six minutes his antagonist was silenced, and the guns of the *President* ceased firing, the commander having discovered that his assumed enemy was a feeble one in size and armament. But, to the surprise of the Americans, the stranger opened her fire anew in less than five minutes. This was again silenced by the guns of the *President*, when Rodgers again demanded "What ship is that?" The wind was blowing freshly at the time, and he was able to hear only the words, "His majesty's ship—" but the name he could not understand. He immediately gave the name of his own vessel, displayed many lights to show his whereabouts in case the disabled ship should need assistance, and bore away.

At dawn the *President* discovered her antagonist several miles to the leeward, and immediately bore down upon her to offer assistance. Lieutenant Creighton was sent in a boat to learn the names of the vessel and her commander, to ascertain the extent of damage, offer assistance, and to express the regret of the commodore that necessity on his part had led to such results. Lieutenant Creighton brought back the information that the ship was the British sloop-of-war *Little Belt*, 18, Captain A. B. Bingham, who had been sent to the waters off Charleston, South Carolina, in search of the *Guerriere*, and, not finding her, was cruising northward for the same purpose, according to his instructions.[3] Captain Bingham politely refused aid, because he did not need it, and sailed away to Halifax, where he reported to "Herbert Sawyer, Esq., Rear-admiral of the Red," the commander-in-chief on the American station.[4] The *President* proceeded on her voyage toward New York, and "off Sandy Hook," on the 23d,[a] Commodore Rodgers wrote the dispatch to the Secretary of the Navy from which the foregoing facts have been drawn.

[a] May, 1811.

The reports of the occurrence by Rodgers and Bingham were utterly contradictory

[1] Two English seamen, who professed to have been deserters from the *President*, testified at Halifax that this gun was discharged by accident.—*London Times*, December 7, 1811.

[2] Rodgers's dispatch to the Secretary of the Navy, May 23, 1811.

[3] These instructions were dated at "Bermuda, this 19th day of April, 1811," signed by H. N. Somerville, by command of Admiral Sawyer, and addressed to "Arthur Batt Bingham, Esq., commander of his majesty's sloop *Little Belt*." In the instructions he was enjoined to be "particularly careful not to give any just cause of offence to the government or subjects of the United States of America; and to give very particular orders to this effect to the officers you may have occasion *to send on board ships under the American flag*."

[4] Bingham reported his vessel much damaged in her masts, sails, rigging, and hull; many shot through between wind and water, and many shot imbedded in her side and all her upper works, with the starboard pump shot away. He told Creighton that he had all necessary materials on board for making sufficient repairs to enable him to reach Halifax.