



Mission: History

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1864: Farragut Carries Day at Mobile



FARRAGUT CLIMBS THE SHROUDS to see over the smoke of battle. *Hartford* scrapes by *Tennessee* after the two ships nearly rammed each other head on. Detail from *An August Morning with Farragut*, W. H. Overlander.

1798: Nelson's Victory over French At Nile Strands Bonaparte in Egypt

The picture was bleak for England in 1798. She had lost her American colonies in a costly war and now her age-old enemy France, under an all-conquering Napoleon Bonaparte, threatened her from across the English Channel and had driven her fleet from the Mediterranean Sea.

Though John Jervis had won a signal naval battle off Cape St. Vincent in 1797, that good news was driven from the national consciousness by the horror of the Channel and Spithead ships — the nation's line of defense against Bonaparte — being in mutiny.

The news that Napoleon had viewed the cliffs of England

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Navy's First Rear Admiral Earns Another Star by Defeating Rebels

David Glasgow Farragut was taken into the Navy in 1810 by his foster father, Commodore David Porter. Farragut was nine years old at the time, and went to sea the following year. When he was 12, he saw his first action as his ship, the frigate *USS Essex*, Porter commanding, engaged and captured *HMS Alert* on 13 August 1812. The 20-gun sloop was the first British warship taken in the War of 1812.

Farragut was still with *Essex* when Porter took her around Cape Horn and into the Pacific, where she virtually destroyed the British whaling fleet, taking 12 prizes in 1813. But her time was running out and in early 1814 she was trapped in a cove near Valparaiso by two British ships, *Phoebe* and *Cherub*, under Captain James Hillyar. It was not an even match, 64 guns against Porter's 32, and all but six of those were carronades, of limited range and of no use against British oak.

After two and one-half hours of pounding, and with his crew decimated, Porter struck his colors. *Essex* had lost 58 men killed, 65 wounded and 31 missing. The British had five killed and 10 wounded.

Hillyar paroled the surviving Americans, put them in one of Porter's prizes and gave them a safe passage to New York. Farragut would not face shot and shell again for just over 50 years.

Promotion came slowly in the peacetime Navy, but Farragut progressed steadily — lieutenant in 1825, commander in 1841 and captain in 1855. During this period, he built the Mare Island Naval Shipyard and served in other mostly shore functions.

Shortly after the outbreak of the Civil War, it was with some misgivings that Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles on 23 December 1861 selected Farragut, an obscure captain, thirty-seventh on the unassigned Navy List, to command the Gulf Squadron, charged with blockading Confederate ports from Pensacola to the Rio Grande.

Farragut did not disappoint. He was promoted to rear admi-

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‘Damn the Torpedoes! Full Speed Ahead!’

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ral (captain was still the highest grade in the Navy) when he captured New Orleans and turned it over to the Army, and he opened up the Mississippi River to Union shipping. And he fought and won the Battle of Mobile Bay, for which he is remembered.

MOBILE BAY

The entrance to Mobile Bay is narrow — about two and one-half miles across — and guarded by Fort Morgan on a spit of land on the right hand and Fort Gaines on the left. A ship channel about three-quarters of a mile wide hugs the right, under the guns of Fort Morgan. That had been further narrowed by the Confederates who had built an obstruction extending into the mouth of the bay from Fort Gaines and had sown mines, which were called “torpedoes,” from the obstruction into the deep water.

Farragut’s force was formidable, consisting of seven wooden steamers and eleven wooden gunboats, seven of which he ordered lashed to the port side of the larger ships. He also had two ocean-going monitors and two river monitors. The Rebels had fewer ships, but one of them was the monster ironclad *Tennessee*, the most dangerous Confederate ship built in the war. Farragut was faced with passing the forts and then engaging *Tennessee*, one battle followed by another. The Union’s only rear admiral would fight these battles on 5 August 1864, beginning at daybreak.

Because they were slower, the Union monitors were sent ahead with instructions to hug the right-hand shore and pound Fort Morgan. The squadron followed with *Brooklyn*, Capt. James Alden, leading the flagship *Hartford*, Fleet Capt. Percival Drayton. Five more steamers trailed with their Siamesed gunboats alongside.

Fort Morgan’s first target, at 0650, was *Brooklyn* — a single shot that missed — and Alden replied with a round from his 100-pounder. Then everyone began firing. Rebel fire ripped through *Brooklyn*’s rigging and she responded with a broadside at the fort. *Hartford*, a hundred yards behind, began firing on the batteries as well.

Ahead of the ships lay *Tennessee* and three other Confederate ships, their guns trained on the ship channel, and they joined the battle. By now, a layer of smoke covered the scene, so Farragut climbed the rigging of his ship for a better view.

One of the Union monitors, *Tecumseh*, wanting to engage *Tennessee*, at-



tempted to pass *Brooklyn* to port, only to strike a torpedo and sink within two minutes. Alden saw *Tecumseh* sink and he saw *Tennessee* in his path. He first veered to port, dangerously near the minefield, and then backed his engines. Farragut decided to take the lead.

‘DAMN THE TORPEDOES’

The admiral’s only choice was to brave the minefield. As *Hartford* came abeam of *Brooklyn*, Drayton hailed Alden, asking what his problem was. “Torpedoes,” came the reply, and Farragut heard it. “Damn the torpedoes! Full speed ahead! Drayton, hard a starboard! Ring four bells!”

The triggers on the torpedoes, hardly as waterproof as those on modern mines, had decomposed during their long submergence and Farragut led his squadron into the bay. Now the fight with *Tennessee* would begin and, as we will see, the admiral was not through uttering pithy remarks.

The Confederate ships were com-

manded by Admiral Franklin Buchanan, who Farragut had known since the 1820s. They were enemies this day and Buchanan, whose flag was in *Tennessee*, was bent on ramming *Hartford*, even if the collision sank both ships. That turned out to be impossible, for the wooden Union ships were far more maneuverable than the ironclad.

Fire from *Tennessee*’s 7-inch rifles did little damage to the wooden ships, but broadsides from *Hartford* and others simply bounced off the Rebel ship’s iron armor in a battle that was becoming a free-for-all.

Captain Thornton Jenkins in *Richmond* had followed *Hartford* past the forts and now she fired three full broadsides from her 11-inch Dahlgrens, at ranges between 50 and 200 yards. They were observed to scratch the surface of *Tennessee*’s plating. *Lackawanna*, Captain John B. Marchand, was next — same effort, same result.

When the Confederate wooden ship *Selma* surrendered at 0910, the first phase of the battle was over, but *Tennessee* was still there, relatively unscathed and seemingly invincible, and lying under the protection of Fort Morgan’s guns. With Farragut having gained the middle of Mobile Bay, it appeared to some as though *Tennessee* were trapped, but not to Buchanan, who thought he had Farragut trapped. “Follow them up, Johnston,” he directed the iron-clad’s captain, “We can’t let them off that way.” *Tennessee* steamed toward the Union squadron. One ship against twelve.

Farragut attempted to signal his ships to ram *Tennessee* but his signals could not be read and instructions had to be carried to the ships in a small boat. One steamer that got the message was *Monongahela*, Capt. James R. Strong, and she did ram the Rebel ship, but obliquely. She tore off her own bow and knocked everyone on Buchanan’s ship to his knees, but that was all. Then *Lackawanna* tried, with the same result. Next was *Hartford*, with the admiral in

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'For God's Sake, Get Out of the Way...'

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the rigging. As she bore down on *Tennessee*, Buchanan turned to meet her head on.

At the last moment, Buchanan eased to starboard and the two ships scraped by each other, firing as they went. Again, *Tennessee* was unharmed. Farragut had Drayton circle for another try and, in doing so, *Hartford* collided with *Lackawana*. Farragut was not lost for words.

Of his signalman, he asked "Can you say 'For God's sake' by signal." The reply was affirmative. "Then say to *Lackawana*, 'For God's sake, get out of the way and anchor.'"

Now *Chickasaw*, Lt. Cdr. George H. Perkins, one of the river monitors, moved on *Tennessee*, hanging on her stern quarter and pounding her with 11-inch shot. *Chickasaw's* relentless and rapid fire sealed *Tennessee's* after ports, shot off her funnel and tore away her steering chains. That damage eventually forced the Rebel iron-clad to surrender.

Farragut returned to New York, where he was feted to an extent that taxed him almost as much as his naval

exertions. On 21 December, Congress created the new grade of vice admiral for him and President Lincoln signed it the following day. Following the assassination of Abraham Lincoln on 14 April 1865, Andrew Johnson acceded to the presidency. The following year he recommended that Farragut be promoted to full admiral. On 25 July 1866, Congress established the new grade and placed Farragut in it. He had now become the Navy's first rear admiral, first vice admiral and first admiral.

No naval engagement in the history of the United States had been as important as, or had captured the public imagination to the extent of, the Battle of Mobile Bay, and none would until the Battle of Midway during the Second World War.

Mission: History is indebted to Chester G. Hearn for his recent biography, Admiral David Glasgow Farragut, which added much detail to information available from standard sources. Mr. Hearn's very readable book was published by the U.S. Naval Institute Press in 1998.

Invasion of England Tabled, Napoleon Decides to Move

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from the coast of Northern France in early 1798 did nothing to soothe the British breast, but Bonaparte knew he could not cross the channel until he dominated the Royal Navy. The French would twist the Lion's tail, not its head.

Bonaparte would go east, first to Egypt and possibly to India. Such a move, mostly on land, would menace British trade with the Indies and force the Royal Navy to spread its resources over half the globe.

With Bonaparte's plans a closely guarded secret, work went ahead in ports from Marseilles to Genoa assembling the forces for this eastern move. The British wanted to know more and Jervis was ordered to send a squadron to find out what was going on.

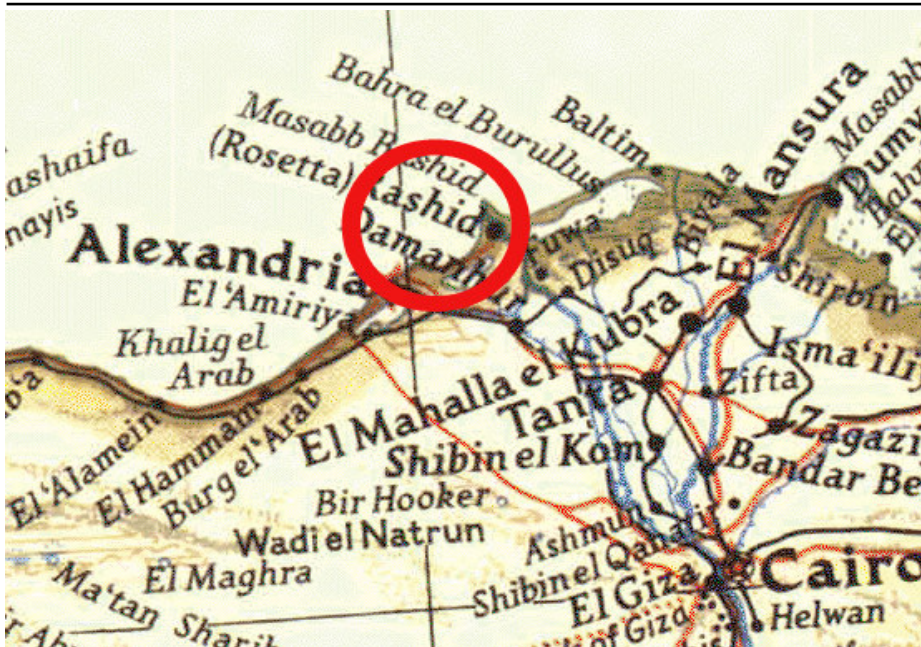
When Jervis had earned his earldom at St. Vincent, a young commodore had turned out of the line, without orders, and brought the surrender of two French ships. That was Horatio Nelson, who was wounded in the battle. When he returned to Jervis as a rear admiral, the commander remembered his initiative and gave him three ships of the line, two frigates and a sloop and sent him to investigate the French.

Nelson entered the Mediterranean on 8 May and within a week a gale in the Gulf of Lions nearly did him in, dismasting his flagship, *Vanguard*, and scattering his fleet. He refitted his ship at sea and was joined by ten more ships and went in search of Bonaparte.

The Corporal had taken Malta on 9 June, plundered its treasure, and sailed on, but to where? Nelson called his senior captains together — Sir James Saumarez of *Orion*, Sir Thomas Troubridge of *Culloden* and Henry Darby of *Bellerophon*. The consensus was that Bonaparte would attack Egypt and to Egypt Nelson took his fleet. He passed the French in the night, found Alexandria empty and returned to Sicily complaining that "the devil's children have the devil's luck."

On his second run to Egypt, Nelson found the French transports at Alexandria and on the afternoon of 1 August 1798 sighted the French fleet at anchor in Aboukir Bay, just east of that city.

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ABOUKIR BAY, now called Abou Qir, is not even named on this National Geographic map. It is the cove extending from Alexandria to the point named Masabb Rashid. The French Admiral Brueys had anchored his ships of the line across the entry to the cove, point-to-point.

Nelson Finally Finds French Fleet Anchored in Aboukir Bay; Decides to Attack Immediately

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Nelson's three-month search had been spent in training — in forging his “Band of Brothers” — and every captain knew he would attack the French that day. The captains further knew that Nelson had taken that phrase from Shakespeare's *Henry V* and would expect from them nothing less than the Bard had produced in the heroes at Agincourt.

The French, under Admiral François Brueys, in the 120-gun *L'Orient*, had formed a strong defensive position, its ships of the line anchored land to land and its frigates inshore. It seemed an impregnable line, with *L'Orient* in the center.

Nelson had the wind and enough time before darkness to form his attack. With *Goliath*, Capt. Thomas Foley, in the van, he sailed at the front half of the French line, into the broadsides of his enemy. As the English neared the French line, Foley saw there was room to pass around the head of the French line and attack from inshore. He was followed by Capt. Samuel Hood in *Zealous*. At the same time, other captains noted that by skilled seamanship, they could squeeze through the French line, raking ships on either side as they did so. Brueys was soon fighting ships to both port and starboard.

L'ÉPREUVE L'ORIENT

Darby in *Bellerophon* took on the French flagship -- 74 guns against 120 -- and did his duty. After 90 minutes of fierce fighting, *Bellerophon* was a dismantled hulk and Darby and every other officer was either dead or wounded. But *L'Orient* was burning and she was seriously damaged, easy prey for *Alexander* and *Swiftsure* who took her on from either side. A cannonball cut off both of Brueys' legs and, with tourniquets in place he directed the French battleline from a chair placed on the poop.

At about this time, Nelson himself



FLAMES CONSUME the French flagship, 120-gun *L'Orient*, and would soon reach her stores of powder. The concussion from the resulting explosion would cause sailors on every ship in Aboukir Bay to believe that his vessel had been hit by another.

was wounded as *Vanguard* engaged *Spartiate*. He thought he might not live but his injury was not serious. He returned to the quarterdeck in time to witness the denouement of the battle.

At about 10:00 p.m. *L'Orient* blew up in a thunderous explosion that sent flaming debris throughout the two fleets, setting fire to sails and parting lines. The concussion was such that men in every ship in the bay thought their own vessel had been struck. All firing stopped for about five or ten minutes as if in respect for the now-vanished *L'Orient*. When the battle did resume, only two French ships of the line and two frigates remained, and they were sailing from the bay. Nelson grudged them their escape.

Nelson was the first English captain who did not judge a battle won or lost by comparing the number of ships taken or sunk. His objective was to annihilate the enemy, and of the Battle of the Nile he wrote to Lord Howe that “Victory is not a name strong enough.”

His tactic of sailing *at* the enemy instead of parallel to it and concentrating on a point or two in the enemy line is considered brilliant. His captains set standards by which officers of the royal Navy are judged today and Nelson, himself, in the words of Joseph Conrad

“brought heroism into the line of duty.”

Tactics aside, Alfred Thayer Mahan in his *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History* (1890) felt the strategic effect of Nelson's victory was stupendous. With his communications severed, Bonaparte's design on the east was thwarted and his huge army marooned for a time off European soil.

Napoleon's soldiers were not idle in Egypt, however. In 1799, a party of soldiers discovered the Rosetta Stone. Today, many accounts of the Battle of the Nile say it took place in the bay of Abou Qir, near the Rosetta mouth of the Nile.

How to Get in Touch

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Submissions are not encouraged because of constraints on the time available for editing. If such are sent, they should be sent as e-mail attachments in Microsoft Word 6.0 or as type-written copy, double-spaced, accompanied by a 3½-inch diskette containing the submission in MS Word 6.0 for Windows.

Quite welcome are suggestions of events for coverage. Please offer suggestions two months ahead of the anniversary of an event.