



U.S. SHIPS VINCENNES AND COLUMBUS LEAVING JEDO BAY, JULY, 1840
 The Vincennes, commanded by Captain Hiram Paulding, is the left-hand ship and the lines by which the ships are being towed out of the harbor may be plainly seen. This unsuccessful expedition to Japan marked the first attempt by our government to break down the wall of Japanese isolation.

Courtesy Naval War College

THE VINCENNES, WORLD TRAVELER OF THE OLD NAVY

By LOUIS H. BOLANDER

THE *Vincennes* has been selected as the subject of this narrative because few other ships in the history of the service typify more vividly the services of the Navy to the nation in the early days of the Republic. For she carried our flag to both polar oceans and surveyed uncharted seas above the Arctic Circle and below the Antarctic; she carried our flag to lands and peoples who had never seen the Stars and Stripes; she promoted American trade in the Orient and aided in the establishment of that great epoch in the American Merchant Marine when our clipper ships were known wherever men of the sea foregather; she rescued stranded American seamen from lonely and unfriendly shores; she drove the sea robbers from the West Indies; she patrolled the coasts of Guinea and saved many a black man from the horrors of the Middle Passage; and yet it was not until near the close of a long and useful career that she ever fired a shot against an enemy in actual warfare.

In many ways her record in the Navy is unique. She was the first ship of our Navy to circumnavigate the globe; with the ship-of-the-line *Columbus*, she was the first to visit a Japanese port; the first to visit our island possession, Guam; the first vessel of any nation, as far as we can discover, to penetrate to a point farthest north in the direction of Wrangell Land; she was the second United States man-of-war to visit China; and she had the distinction of being selected as the flagship of two of the Navy's earliest and greatest polar expeditions, one to the Antarctic, and the second to the Arctic. In all she made six voyages to the Pacific.

Her history covers over forty years, for she was laid down at the Brooklyn Navy

Yard in 1825, and was not sold until two years after the Civil War. One of the last acts of James Monroe as President was to approve an act authorizing the building of ten sloops-of-war, a type of vessel corresponding roughly today to a light cruiser, somewhat lighter than a frigate and still lighter than a huge ship-of-the-line, progenitor of the modern battleship. This act was passed on March 3, 1825, and on the same day, Samuel L. Southard, Secretary of the Navy, wrote to Commodore William Bainbridge, President of the Board of Navy Commissioners:

A law having passed which authorizes the building of ten sloops-of-war, it is important that immediate measures be taken to carry it into execution, especially so far as it can be done with the materials now on hand. You will be pleased to give the necessary orders upon the subject, and complete as many as circumstances will permit in the course of the spring and summer.

Southard was a go-getter and wanted action as soon as the Congress and the President gave him the power to go ahead. He must have had ready co-operation from the Navy Commissioners, for by 1828 all were launched. The navy yards all along the Atlantic seaboard were pressed into service to hurry up the construction. At New York were launched the *Lexington* (1825), the *Vincennes* (1826), and the *Fairfield* (1828); at the Charlestown Navy Yard, Boston, were launched the *Boston* (1825), the *Warren* (1826), and the *Falmouth* (1827); the *Natches* (1827) was built at Norfolk; the *Vandalia* (1828) at Philadelphia; the *St. Louis* (1828) at Washington; and the *Concord* (1828) at Portsmouth, N. H. Of these ten sister-ships, only five were afloat at the time of the Civil War. The *Warren* and the *Fal-*

month took no active part in the war and were sold in 1863; the *Vandalia* had been rebuilt and equipped with a steam engine and a screw propeller and so was virtually a new ship, so that the *Vincennes* and the *St. Louis* were the only vessels of the original ten to take an active part in the blockade of Southern ports.

It will be noted that these ten sloops-of-war were all named after cities and towns, and that the *Vandalia* and the *Vincennes* were the first ships of our Navy to be given names from towns in the old Northwest Territory. The *Vincennes* of course took her name from Vincennes, Indiana, the site of old Fort Vincennes, which had been captured during the Revolution by George Rogers Clark, and in turn had been named for her French builder, Sieur de Vincennes.

In the 1828 *Navy Register* the *Vincennes* was rated with 18 guns but she usually carried 20. She was 127 feet between perpendiculars with a beam of 33 feet, 9 inches, and a displacement of 700 tons. She carried a complement of 190 officers and seamen. Her chaplain on her first voyage round the world, the Rev. Charles Samuel Stewart, wrote, when he first went aboard her:

The *Vincennes* . . . is said to be the most beautiful vessel of her class and the fastest sailer in our Navy. She appears in admirable order. The cabin is quite a pavilion of elegance, and the ward-room as neat and comfortable as a parlour at home.¹

In September, 1826, she began her maiden voyage from New York under the command of Master Commandant William Bolton Finch in company with the frigate *Brandywine*, both under the command of Commodore Jacob Jones. The two vessels rounded the Horn and proceeded into the Pacific to protect American merchantmen and whalers and to promote American trade. There both vessels

remained until 1829, when the Secretary of the Navy sent Finch special orders, dated January, 1829. They were forwarded by the frigate *Guerrière* and did not reach him until June. He was to visit the Society Islands, and thence proceed to the Sandwich Group. After spending a few weeks cultivating the friendship of the Hawaiians he was to weigh anchor and sail for some Chinese port, thence home by the way of the Cape of Good Hope and the Island of St. Helena.

The Secretary had a definite purpose in mind in ordering Finch to make this roundabout cruise. It was distinctly not an aimless pleasure jaunt. American shipping interests were becoming increasingly aware of the profits to be made in Far Eastern trade. He knew Finch to be a clever, intelligent man and well-suited for his purpose. He was to cultivate the friendship of native chieftains, to win their liking and respect for our flag, and to find in what articles of commerce our merchants could profitably deal. In fact he was to be an 1829 version of "An ambassador of good-will." One of his duties was to rescue and reclaim American sailors who had been wrecked and stranded or who had deserted from American ships and were living as beach combers on some Pacific island. He was to persuade the native chiefs to discourage this practice of deserting ship, a source of great annoyance and loss to American shipowners. Finch carried out his orders as directed and was able to correct some glaring errors made in surveys by earlier navigators. In fact, he sailed over the spot named on the chart as Caroline Island, north of the Society Group, and two nameless islands westward of the Sandwich Group. The *Vincennes* left Honolulu late in November and anchored before Macao about the first of the year 1830, the second American warship to visit a Chinese port. Here Finch inquired of resident American merchants concerning the prospects for American

trade and received a detailed written reply. The reply ended with the remark that "Occasional visits by vessels of war will have the most beneficial results."

From Macao the *Vincennes* sailed for Manila and arrived there January 29, 1830. Ten days later Finch sailed for Cape Town and arrived 56 days later. He sailed for home via St. Helena and dropped anchor in New York Harbor, his starting point, on June 8, 1830, almost four years after his departure, having sailed his ship clear around the world, the first American man-of-war to accomplish this feat. Finch summed up his voyage thus:

The *Vincennes'* voyage will serve to correct a very general and common error, that it is an easy one to a vessel, and of a duration to be computed with precision; neither is a fact. None is more trying to a ship's qualities, hull, rigging, and spars, and only such vessel as is most perfect in every respect, ought to undertake it. (Summary of the cruise of the U. S. Navy Sloop-of-War *Vincennes*, under the command of Master Commandant William Bolton Finch.)²

Nevertheless, it is evident that in spite of her long and arduous voyage she reached home in remarkably good repair, for she was soon ordered to the West Indies to aid in ridding those waters of the pirates who infested them. In this work she was engaged the next two years under her new commander, Edward R. Shubrick.

This was the most uneventful service of her whole career. She reached Pensacola, Florida, March 31, 1831. In May she visited Cuba and Jamaica and returned to Pensacola in July. On this short cruise several of her men were taken down with the dreaded yellow fever. For nearly a year Shubrick and his men remained at this port, while the fever exacted a frightful toll of death. In the summer of the next year she was ordered to come North and on July 29, 1832, dropped anchor at Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Here at the

Navy Yard she was given a thorough overhauling, and it was not until 18 months had passed that she was again put in commission, under the command of Commander A. S. Wadsworth. With him she rounded the Horn for the second time in her career, and for the second time sailed into the Pacific. At Callao she was turned over to Master Commandant John H. Aulick, who was ordered to make a cruise in the Pacific and visit the Fiji and Pelew Islands, China, and Sumatra. He was ordered to pick up any stranded American seamen and whalers, and in particular to rescue the survivors of the New Bedford ship *Mentor*, Captain Edward C. Barnard, which had been wrecked on one of the Pelew Islands in May, 1832. He was to visit Macao and Quallah Battoo. Aulick set out on this cruise following a more southerly route than had been taken by any other American naval commander. Instead of sailing north and stopping at Honolulu he sailed almost directly west, calling at Guam, the first American naval officer to visit this, our present possession. After many adventures he reached Singapore on January 24, passed through the Straits of Malacca and reached Quallah Battoo on February 15. On his return voyage he stopped for a few days at Cape Town to take on fresh water and provisions and again at St. Helena, reaching Hampton Roads, June 5, 1836, thus completing the *Vincennes'* second voyage around the world. Shortly after reaching the United States he prepared a full report of his cruise for the Secretary of the Navy.³

Again she was put in dry dock and given a thorough overhauling and repair, and for two years remained at Norfolk "in ordinary."

But by this time the *Vincennes* with her long, successful voyages had gained a reputation for herself as a staunch, de-

¹ C. S. Stewart, *A Visit to the South Seas*, vol. 1, pp. 120-21.

² *Annual Report of the Secretary of the Navy*, 1830, pp. 202-203.

³ This is published in full in the *Naval Institute Proceedings*, September 1910, pp. 716-34.

pendable, seaworthy craft that could be relied upon under any circumstances. Hence when the famous Exploring Expedition to the South Seas was planned, the *Vincennes* was selected as the flagship of Lieutenant Charles Wilkes, leader of the expedition. With her for her companions were selected the *Porpoise*, *Relief*, and the tenders *Flying Fish* and *Sea Gull*. The *Sea Gull* vanished in a heavy storm off Cape Horn and neither she nor her crew was ever seen or heard from again, one of the unexplained mysteries of the Navy. The expedition left the United States August 18, 1838, and for nearly four years disappeared into the South Pacific and the Antarctic. Little news of the expedition reached the outside world, but many uncharted areas were surveyed and new lands discovered. The story of this expedition has been told many times, the longest and best account by Lieutenant Wilkes himself, and there would be no purpose in recounting it here. But the *Vincennes* again brought her crew safely home, reaching New York, June 10, 1842. This completed the third voyage of the ship into the Pacific.

On her return home she was placed in the Home (North Atlantic) Squadron. Her command was given to Franklin Buchanan, destined three years later to become the first Superintendent of the Naval Academy. Buchanan sailed her to the West Indies, thence to Vera Cruz where he assisted the American Minister in protecting the lives and property of American citizens. He also called at Pensacola and San Domingo to protect American interests in that island. Off the coast of Texas he rescued two British brigs that had run aground, and received the thanks of Queen Victoria's government for his services. While off the coast of Texas he was ordered to do everything possible to prevent an invasion by Mexico of the new Republic of Texas. But there was little that a naval commander in his position

could do. He returned with the *Vincennes* to Hampton Roads, August 15, 1844, where his ship was put into dry dock at the navy yard. Here she remained until the next spring while she was made ready for still another long voyage into the Pacific.

This voyage was her fourth on that ocean, and was perhaps the most noteworthy of her career, for it marked the first attempt on the part of the government of the United States to break down the wall of isolation with which Japan had surrounded herself. On June 4, 1845, she left the United States under the command of Captain Hiram Paulding, in company with her flagship, the ship-of-the-line *Columbus*, under the command of Captain Thomas Wyman. This little squadron, if such it could be called, was under the command of Commodore James Biddle, one of the most colorful figures of the old Navy. Their first port of call was Rio de Janeiro. Thence they crossed the South Atlantic, rounded the Cape of Good Hope, and so on to Macao, China. The logs of these two ships make interesting reading, but a still more fascinating account of the voyage was written by one of the crew of the *Columbus*, a first-class boy named Charles Nordhoff. Nordhoff on his return to the United States wrote a detailed account of the voyage from the day they left his native shores until his return. The account was published under the title of *Man-of-War Life* and in a later edition as *Nine Years a Sailor*. Mr. Nordhoff became one of the leading figures in the publishing and literary world of the mid-nineteenth century, and wrote a number of other books on a variety of subjects, but this experience of his youth is probably his most noteworthy literary production.

To Biddle had been entrusted a letter written by John C. Calhoun, Secretary of State, to deliver to Caleb Cushing, our commissioner to China. This gave Cushing full power to treat with the Japanese

government, but Cushing had left China before Biddle's arrival, so that the duty then devolved upon Alexander H. Everett, his successor. But Everett was in poor health and turned his authority over to Biddle. Calhoun had given Biddle permission, if the commissioner should not care to make the attempt, to go to Japan alone and undertake to open negotiations.

On July 7, 1846, the two American ships sailed from the Chusan Islands near Shanghai for Yedo, Japan, and arrived before that place on the 19th. Neither Biddle nor his men were allowed to land though the ships were supplied generously with wood, water, and provisions without cost. His ships were surrounded with Japanese boats at all times and all attempts to open negotiations were politely but firmly rebuffed. On the 27th there was delivered to him a letter stating that it was the policy of the country to refuse to trade with foreigners. "We are aware that our customs are in this respect different from those of some other countries, but every nation has a right to manage its affairs in its own way." There was no possible answer to such a plain, dignified, courteous statement of policy, and there was nothing left for Biddle to do but to accept it with the best possible grace. On July 29 they weighed anchor, the *Columbus* to return to the United States by way of Honolulu and Cape Horn, and the *Vincennes* to remain another year on the China Station. She reached New York April 1, 1847, was put in dry dock, and remained "in ordinary" until 1849. It will be seen that she was in the Far East or in dry dock throughout the War with Mexico.

On November 12, 1849, she again sailed from New York for her fifth Pacific voyage, under Commander William L. Hudson. This time she rounded the Horn, and sailed northward along the west coast of South America. On July 2, 1850, she lay off Guayaquil, Ecuador, where a

revolution was in progress. One of the revolutionists, General Elizalde, finding his life in danger, sought refuge on board the American vessel, where his family were allowed to visit him, but none of his fellow-revolutionists. Three days later he took passage on a British vessel for friendlier and more healthy surroundings. From Guayaquil she sailed north to San Francisco, where the gold fever was at its height. Hudson wrote that "34 men and boys and 2 marines have deserted." The lure of gold had spread to the *Vincennes'* crew. Hudson also wrote that she was an "excellent sea boat and easy on her rigging." He again cruised along the South American coast keeping a watchful eye upon the revolutionary activities of the South American governments. Hudson, whether he was conscious of it or not, was possessed of a considerable sense of humor which betrays itself in the usually dry-astud reports that were sent to the Secretary of the Navy. On April 5, 1851, he wrote from Panama: "I have been particular at all the ports visited to tender an exchange of National salutes and this has been cheerfully accepted and carried out wherever the place possessed the means of returning the courtesy." Very possibly powder was at a premium and could hardly be wasted on the formality of salutes in some of the poverty-stricken ports that Hudson visited. Hudson was then directed to replenish his supplies at San Francisco and make a friendly visit to Hawaii where he was to encourage friendly trade relations. After fulfilling this mission he sailed under orders to the coast of Oregon, reaching Puget Sound February 2, 1852. Here he "visited Olympia, a small settlement of 16 or 18 houses, of 65 Americans, 12 of whom are females." Hearing from them that the neighboring Indians were disposed to be none too friendly, he "Took occasion to exercise the great guns with shot and shell, believing it would leave a powerful impression on the Indians, and prove bene-

ficial to the settlers." Thus the *Vincennes*, with her manifold missions, came close to being an Indian fighter. After a stay of some days she returned to San Francisco, and thence by way of Cape Horn to New York, arriving at the scene of her launching September 21, 1852.

In that year the Navy Department was planning an expedition for "The exploration and survey of the China Seas, the Northern, Pacific, and Behring's Strait." The Secretary, John P. Kennedy, wrote: "I have accordingly put the *Vincennes*, one of our staunchest and best sloop-of-war, in the lead of the expedition." Her immediate commander was Lieutenant Henry Rolando who brought her to Norfolk on May 13, 1853. She bore the broad pennant of Commodore Cadwalader Ringgold, who was in charge of the whole squadron, consisting besides the *Vincennes* of the *John Hancock*, the *Porpoise*, and the *Fenimore Cooper*. The squadron left Norfolk, June 11, 1853. They charted many Pacific islands and shoals, and reached China in March, 1854. This voyage made for the *Vincennes* her sixth Pacific cruise. In China Ringgold delayed to protect foreigners from revolutionary disturbances and suffered a severe attack of fever which weakened him mentally and physically. Commodore Matthew Calbraith Perry, who was his superior in rank, returning from Japan, reached Canton in July. Noting Ringgold's weakened condition he ordered a medical survey which pronounced him insane. Perry put the command of the expedition under Lieutenant John Rodgers and ordered Ringgold home on the *Susquehanna* on September 4, 1854.

Rodgers sailed with his squadron from Hongkong to the Bonin and Ladrone Islands for surveying purposes and returned in February, 1855, except for the *Porpoise*, which disappeared and was never heard from again. It was believed that she foundered in a heavy typhoon that raged about

a month after her separation from the *Vincennes*. Like the *Sea Gull* she became one of the vanished ships of the Navy. The expedition again left Hongkong in March, 1855, and surveyed the islands between Luchu and Japan, the Kurile Islands, and thence north to Petropaulski, where the vessels of the squadron separated. The *Vincennes* sailed from Petropaulski and entered Bering's Strait. Rodgers left at this point a party under Lieutenant John M. Brooke. He stood to the north to verify the position of land in about 72° North and 175° West placed upon the Admiralty charts by Her Majesty's Ship *Herald*. He ran northward over this same land as given in the Admiralty charts, and came to anchor in Lat. 72°, 5 min. North and Long. 174°, 37 min. West. No land was in sight. Rodgers was sure that the land sighted by the Admiralty officers did not exist and that the British officers had been misled perhaps by some field of ice. Thence he ran for Wrangell's Land, which had never been seen by Europeans, but within ten miles of its position he was stopped by ice barriers. The *Vincennes* had penetrated farther in the direction selected than had any other American or European ship. Rodgers then turned south, picked up Brooke and his party, and with the other ships of his squadron reached San Francisco early in October, 1855. The *Vincennes* under the command of Rodgers returned to New York by way of Cape Horn, reaching that port July 13, 1856. As the *Vincennes* and her squadron had gone out to China by way of the Cape of Good Hope, this voyage completed her third circumnavigation of the globe.

She was again placed in dry dock at the New York Navy Yard where she remained throughout the year 1857. After this last, long, and arduous voyage she was very much in need of a thorough overhauling.

In 1858 she was sent to the coast of Africa under the command of Commander

Benjamin L. Totten. His orders were to cruise off the mouth of the Congo River on the watch for slavers of any nationality, to co-operate with British cruisers on the same service, and to visit the slave markets whenever possible. On this voyage she was by no means a "happy ship." Not only was the climate excessively hot, the ship being for most of the time within five degrees of the equator, but Totten proved to be both unsociable and tyrannical. The ship's officers were harassed by him and frequently placed under suspension. A marine officer was confined to his cabin for a month in the frightful heat for some supposed infraction of discipline. Fresh water had to be carried in tanks as distilling plants were still unknown. The daily allowance to each officer was one gallon for washing and drinking, and one-half gallon to each enlisted man for drinking and cooking. A marine sentry stood at the scuttle butt to see that no man exceeded his allowance. A number of natives were carried on the ship and borne on the purser's books for the purpose of supplying the ship with water. The purser, not being able to spell or pronounce their native names, gave them all sorts of fantastic cognomens, such as Tom Dollar, Jack Ropeyarn, John Peasoup, and Jimmy Frying Pan. At the regular Sunday muster of the crew these natives answered to their fanciful names with real pride.

In 1860, the *Vincennes* was ordered home and placed in ordinary at the Charlestown Navy Yard in Boston. When the Civil War broke out she was recommissioned (June 29, 1861) and sent to the Gulf of Mexico where she formed part of the West Gulf Blockading Squadron under the command of Admiral Farragut. Before the capture of New Orleans her duty was to guard the passes of the Mississippi River against blockade runners. She served on blockade duty in the gulf throughout the war. It is doubtful if she could perform effective service against swift, steam-driven blockade runners, fast sailer that she was. Farragut himself claimed that sailing vessels were too slow to be of any great value in this duty. Nevertheless, he kept her in service throughout the war. After the surrender of the South she was ordered to return to Boston, and was placed in ordinary August 28, 1865. She was sold October 5, 1867, for \$8,600.

Comparisons with the records of the hundreds of ships in our Navy's history are difficult and all but impossible. But it seems safe to assume that few of the ships of the Navy, except the *Constitution*, ever have performed more varied service, have visited as many distant ports, or have sailed a greater number of miles than did this redoubtable little sloop-of-war, the *Vincennes*.



NO MAN is so much disliked as the man who talks down to his men. Condescension breeds curses. Popularity with our men is a mystery. . . . The sure way to lose popularity is to seek it.—SIR IAN HAMILTON, *The Soul and Body of an Army*.