

The Untold Story of Heroics & Daring that Changed the Course of Nation's Destiny

How Commodore Porter's Blockade of the Potomac Helped Win the War of 1812¹

by Robert Porter Lynch*

Note: This story is adapted to be a "stand alone" excerpt of one chapter in "None So Daring" – The Saga and Exploits of Commodore David Porter³

While many know of the famous exploits of Commodore David Porter and how he terrorized British shipping in the Pacific with the frigate *Essex* during the War of 1812, few know the rest of the story -- how Porter saved the nation and changed the course of history by one heroic feat that has gone virtually unrecognized in the annals of American naval history.

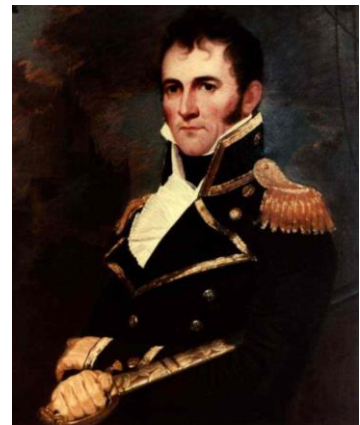
The End Game Strategy

After the victory over Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo, Britain's army and navy were both now freed to fight the War of 1812 in America. The British strategy to defeat the United States and bring it back under colonial rule was simple: divide and conquer:

One expeditionary force sent up the Chesapeake, first taking Washington, and then knocking out Baltimore, followed by Philadelphia, then onward to New York, splitting the north from the south.

Another force from Canada would come down the Hudson, joining the Chesapeake force in New York, hacking off New England from the Atlantic states.

A final attack group would be sent up the Mississippi then into the Ohio River, carving the east from the west.



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"None So Daring – a Saga of Forsaken Honor"

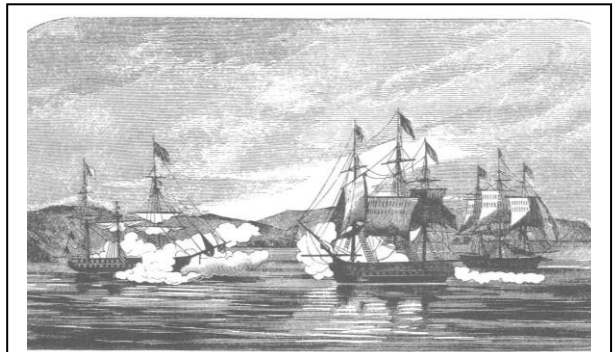
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The first wave of the British Fleet arrived in the Chesapeake in mid-August, 1814. What they didn't factor was their nemesis, Captain David Porter, who they thought was a defeated arch-rival, would resurrect to derail their strategy and save the nation from re-colonization.

Battle of Valparaiso and Porter's Parole

During 1813, the British had blockaded every American port, making it impossible to enter or exit. Porter decided, rather than risk losing his ship trying to run the blockade, he'd launch a daring odyssey, driving his frigate *Essex* under the treacherous Cape Horn into the Pacific – the first U.S. ship to attempt such a dangerous voyage fully laden with heavy cannon.

Once in the Pacific, he swept the seas, taking over a dozen English commercial vessels. Insurance rates for Pacific bound ships skyrocketed. The Admiralty reacted, sending a small squadron of British ships commanded by Captain Hillyar, a seasoned veteran of the Napoleonic wars, to intercept the American scoundrel. By March 1814, the British caught up with Porter, blockading him in Valparaiso harbor. After six frustrating weeks of being boxed in, Porter realized the rest of Hillyar's squadron would ultimately join Hillyar and destroy the *Essex*. Instead, Porter chose to run the blockade. But misfortune struck as a freak squall snapped his main top mast as he made a run for it.



Battle of Valparaiso

In the ferocious battle that ensued, the *Essex*, which was not equipped with long range guns, was picked apart as Hillyar's ships stood out of range of Porter's guns, bombarding at long range. It was a horribly bloody, one-sided battle. Outnumbered and outgunned two to one, Porter was forced to surrender. Out

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of his crew of 255 men, only 132 were left standing or remained alive, but wounded.

On board with Porter was his beloved adopted twelve year old son, young David Glasgow Farragut, a plucky midshipman at the time, who would later go on to become the U.S. Navy's first admiral during the Civil War, renowned for his "damned the torpedoes, full speed ahead" proclamation at the battle of Mobile Bay.

Rather than capture Porter and send him to the horrors of Dartmoor Prison, Hillyar, a courageous and honorable, yet merciful captor, chose to parole Porter in recognition of his honorable treatment of his many British captives. The terms of a parole were his freedom *if Porter agreed not to bear arms again during the war.*

Hillyar provided Porter with official parole papers and put him on one of the smaller merchant ships he'd captured during his Pacific sea raids.

In fact, Hillyar thought so much of Porter's conduct he wrote an open letter soon published in America stating,

"The defense of the Essex, taking into consideration our great superiority of force, the very discouraging circumstances of having lost her main-top-mast, and being twice on fire, did honor to her defender, and must fully prove the courage of Captain Porter."²

Forsaken Honor

Porter and his men sailed around Cape Horn, arriving off Sandy Hook in early July, 1814.

As expected, Porter's ship was intercepted by the British blockade off New York harbor, which had effectively prevented any sea going traffic or warships in or out of the major ports of the United States since early in the war.

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About ten leagues off Long Island the boarding officer of the frigate *Saturn* took Porter's parole papers to his commanding officer, Captain Nash, who immediately rejected them.

Porter demanded an explanation; the parole was signed and sealed by Captain Hillyar, a commander well known throughout the British command for his heroic actions in the face of the enemy.

Nash retorted, "Hillyar had no business to make such terms." Admiral David Glasgow Farragut, who as a twelve year old boy was there at the event, recounts in his memoirs:

"Whereupon Porter told [the boarding officer] that, according to the agreement made, if any of His Majesty's ships should detain him over twelve hours, by his delivery of his sword to the officer detaining him he would be considered a prisoner of war to that officer and absolved from all obligation to Captain Hillyar."

"Porter accompanied his remarks with the tender of his sword, to be conveyed to Captain Nash. This however, was refused. The last words of Captain Porter to the boarding officer were:

'Tell Captain Nash that, if British officers have no respect for the honor of each other, I shall have none for them, and shall consider myself, if detained all night, at liberty to effect my escape, if I can.'"

Honor, trust, and respect were paramount, even by combatants, in this era; it was part of time-honored chivalric code.

Porter's name was reviled in every seaport in England. Lloyd's of London wanted him captured because he had so altered the insurance equation in the Pacific.

A single, seemingly insignificant, deed of forsaken honor would turn the course of history, the destiny of nations, and the fate of millions of people for centuries to come.

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Nash probably thought smugly that capturing Porter would bring him glory. Imagine the great spectacle putting Porter on trial for war crimes in London.

Little did either know at the time that a single, seemingly insignificant, deed of forsaken honor would turn the course of history, the destiny of nations, and the fate of millions of people for centuries to come.

A decade prior, Porter had spent a year and a half as prisoner of war in the squalor of a Tunisian jail in the Barbary Pirates War, and, as a young man escaped a British ship after having been impressed into service. He was in no mood for a prisoner's fate, hoping to join his beloved wife, Evalina, and family while waiting out the end of the war peacefully.

Fuming, and undaunted by being held as a prisoner of war, Porter immediately started planning a daring escape. In the pre-dawn fog far off the coast, he and a small band of American sailors silently slipped into a small boat, hoisted sail, and were quickly out of sight before his captor's were aware of what had happened.

Acclaimed in New York and Philadelphia

After sailing and rowing about sixty miles, Porter made his way to Long Island, then to New York City, where he was hailed with a grand ovation.³ Banquets heralded him for his Pacific adventures, having captured more ships than any other captain during the war. Farragut recounts,

“As he rode through the streets, the crowd became so enthusiastic that the horses were taken from his carriage and it was drawn all over the city by the people.”

Concerned that his violation of the parole agreement had no official sanction, he appealed to Secretary of the Navy by letter to make his release from parole official.

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When Porter arrived in Philadelphia he was greeted in similar fashion.⁴ He stopped by to see his wife Evalina and children in Chester, outside of Philadelphia. There he received official notification from the Navy that his release from parole and penned a letter to the National Register newspaper August 13th citing a letter from the Judge Advocate had received word from the British Agent in charge of prisoners of war that

“the officers and crew of the late frigate Essex are null and the officers and crew are at liberty to serve in like manner as if they had not been prisoners.”⁵

For Porter it was a principle of honor for him to fight again without the shadow of broken honor hanging over him.

He continued on to Washington to report to the Secretary of the Navy, where he was offered command of the 44 gun frigate *Columbia*, which was being built in the Washington yards, where she was scheduled to be launched in September. Porter was delighted to take another crack at the British.

The heralding of Porter was short lived.

Call to Arms

Within days, a powerful British fleet of fifty ships anchored in Chesapeake Bay. In its cross-hairs were first: Washington, then: Baltimore.

Commodore Porter was back in New York conferring with Robert Fulton to build the first steam-powered warship.

Alarmed, President Madison sent an urgent call for help. From Washington the Secretary of the Navy wrote Porter an urgent message:

“The enemy has entered the Pawtuxent with a very strong force indicating a rapid movement toward this city.”

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Porter was told to gather any of his men from the *Essex* and rush to the aid of Washington. Assuming his release of the terms of parole, he gallantly answered the call to arms, rallying his men from the *Essex* under his personal banner of "Free Trade and Sailor's Rights." His orders were to protect the ship he was to next command, close to being finished, yet so vulnerable sitting in the ways.

He posted this notice throughout the city:

FREE TRADE AND SAILORS RIGHTS

-- to the crew of the old Essex. --

SAILORS, the enemy is about attempting the
destruction of your new ship at Washington, and
I am ordered to defend her. I shall precede
immediately, and all disposed to accompany me
will meet me at 5 o'clock this afternoon at the
navy agent's office.

D. PORTER *New York, August 22d*⁶

The race was on and time most critical. It was a long haul in hot weather over rough roads. Imagine the crew used to being at sea now jostled and jolted on horse and carriage. It must have made Cape Horn seem like stroll. They also had two major river crossings as well: the Hudson and the Delaware.

Porter picked up a few more men in Philadelphia and a few cannon, then stopped briefly at his home in Chester, on the outskirts just south of Philadelphia, to say farewell and goodbye to his beloved Evalina and his young family.⁷

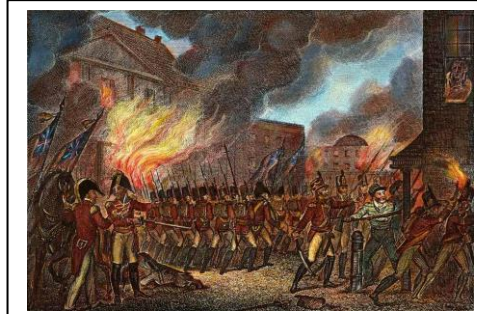
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It was a race to beat the clock. If Washington fell, the enemy would then attack Baltimore and on to Philadelphia. What's more, there were insufficient bulwarks around Baltimore, and certain not enough trained troops to fight the battle-hardened British, fresh from victory in Europe against Napoleon.

Burning of Washington

Meanwhile forty five hundred British regulars had landed, quickly routing an American militia and regulars amounting to seven thousand men at the Battle of Bladensburg, just east of the Capitol on 24 August.⁸ The

American forces turned tail and ran – the Army wouldn't fight, they turned tail and ran.



British Sack the Nation's Capitol

On 26 August, British troops then mercilessly burned the Capitol, the President's House, Treasury, War Office, and many other buildings, including personal residences, inflicting over \$2 million in damages – a massive sum in those days. Porter's new ship, the *Columbia* was scuttled in the ways⁹ to prevent her capture.

Once Porter and his crew reached Baltimore, where he had grown up, he found the city on the verge of panic. The citizenry had just learned the British had successfully attacked Washington. Baltimore was on edge. Citizens and the militia knew the difficulty in defending the area, with many unfortified locations where the British could land forces for an attack.

While Washington was apparently lost, Baltimore still had a razor thin chance, but time was quickly escaping. Digging bulwarks and bringing in additional forces for its defense was critical; if Baltimore fell, the rest nation would fall like dominoes.

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Upon reporting to his commanding officer, John Rodgers, Porter was soon notified of a change in plans.

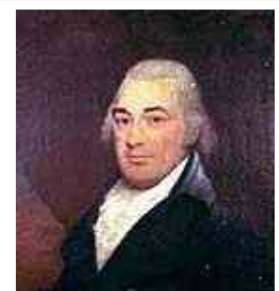
Admiral Cochrane in the Chesapeake had divided his forces, sending a squadron of ships up the Potomac River to raid the town of Alexandria, just south of Washington. When the raiding force dictated unreasonable terms of capitulation to the city council, sensible minds recoiled in shock, but nevertheless surrendered.

Secretary of the Navy, William Jones, directed by Vice President James Monroe, who was serving as acting Secretary of War, immediately dashed off orders to Rodgers in Baltimore dated 29 August:

“The terms of capitulation for the town of Alexandria are so degrading and humiliating, as to excite the indignation of all classes of people – those who have hitherto been the most vehement in their denunciation of the war and the administration, are no less ardent in their determination to defend [Washington] and Georgetown to the last extremity, than the warm advocates of both. The arrogant foe has required surrender of all articles of produce and merchandize..... together with all the shipping, whether afloat or sunk, to be delivered to him in perfect order, to carry off his immense booty, which he is now busily engaged in loading and preparing for departure.”



Remains of President's House after being burned by British



Secretary of Navy
William Jones

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“On receiving this order, the gallant veteran with his daring crew left Baltimore for Washington City” reported the *Niles Weekly Register*.¹⁰

Rodgers, with Porter and Oliver Hazard Perry, hero of the Battle of Lake Erie, and Captain Grayson of the Marines, proceeded with haste. Undoubtedly they realized Cochrane had created a tactical risk by dividing his forces. It was worth removing Rodgers from Baltimore to try to take advantage of this lapse in judgment caused by British arrogance.

Upon reaching Washington with his motley crew of naval gunners and a few small cannon, Porter found the city swirling in the aftermath of a torrential hurricane that had ripped through on the tails of the conflagration. The scene was eerie -- a blackened city, smoldering ruins drenched by heavy rains and high winds. It must have seemed like the British had provoked the ire and wrath of God.

Porter was incensed. He made his way to the Navy Yard on the Potomac to see his soon-to-be-launched *Columbia* in ashes to prevent its capture by the British. Marine Captain John Ord Creighton, who had assisted in the scuttling lamented,

“She was all ready to have her bottom coppered. Her masts, spars, tops, etc [were] almost finished in the mast house; her gun carriages nearly completed, her sails made and in the loft; her rigging fitted; blocks all made.”¹¹

The warrior spirit spilled over; Porter swore to strike back. He vowed to make the British pay for this crime; burning cities was an act of barbarism not suited for a civilized people. Public sentiment was appalled, as reflected in this editorial:

The British “conduct burning the capitol, the president’s house, and the public offices, is a disgrace ... The capitols of the greatest empires and kingdoms of the world were frequently

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captured by contending parties ... the outlaw Bonaparte entered Lisbon, Madrid, Amsterdam, Berlin, Vienna (several times), Moscow, Turin, Rome, Naples, and the capitals of ten or fifteen minor states of Europe, but never destroyed a public building.”¹²

Plundering of Alexandria

Creighton joined Porter to proceed to Alexandria, just down river on the Virginia side of the Potomac.

While a large portion of the British fleet stayed moored in the Chesapeake, a smaller squadron under the command of Captain James Gordon in the frigate *Seahorse* waded up the shallow Potomac in torrential rains and gale winds. Their objective: raid Alexandria, capture American ships and strip the stores, warehouses, and farms of any staples that could be scavenged for a prolonged winter they planned in Philadelphia.

Defending Alexandria and the city of Washington was Fort Washington (~~at the time the fort was recently been renamed from its original name “Warburton”~~) on the Maryland side of the river. Its ten-foot thick walls towered over forty feet above the river in a position on the river selected by George Washington himself to best protect the river approaches to the capitol. His own home, Mount Vernon, was a just three miles downriver on the opposite shore. At this point the river was only a half mile wide, and the fort's arsenal of twenty seven powerful cannon, including 52, 32, 24, 18, and 12 pounders could accurately target enemy vessels over two miles away. When fully manned, the fort could easily hold a squadron of enemy vessels at bay for days.

On Saturday afternoon, 27 August, as Gordon's seven ships carefully navigated the narrow channel up the Potomac against

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an unfavorable wind,¹³ past Mount Vernon, they were surprised to find no flag flying at the fort; not a shot was fired at them.

Captain Samuel Dyson, the fort's commander, had called a vote among his four junior officers. Rather than put up a fight against ships that could not maneuver into a line of battle, they decided to blow up the fort's ammunition while spiking its cannons, rendering them useless.¹⁴ Like the troops at Bladensburg, they cut and ran before Gordon had sailed past the fort's silent guns. Dyson chose to save himself, not the nation and was later court marshaled.¹⁵ No Spartan was he; his flag "furled in darkness." A pathetically shameful day in American history.

Gordon was incredulous, thinking it was just an American trick. His frigates fired away at the abandoned fort, thinking it must be full of troops. He then sent a land force to complete the destruction of any remaining armament, leaving everything in a pile of ruins. On Sunday, 28 August they began the plunder of Alexandria, several miles south of Washington and delivered the onerous terms of capitulation to the town fathers.

Two days later Porter and Creighton arrived, finding a place to cross the river at Georgetown ferry without being noticed. Mounted on horses they reconnoitered from a hillside on the outskirts of Alexandria. Both British and captured American ships¹⁶ were tied to the wharves, as troops ransacked every house and shop, pillaging and plundering like Attila the Hun in Rome. Both Porter and Creighton were enraged. As they were clearly outnumbered, they decided to enter the city dressed in gentleman's civilian attire to avoid detection.

Usually cool and calculating but daring under the pressure of combat, Porter was appalled to see the British trashing the capitulated city; he couldn't hold back his anger as they spotted a young midshipman standing gangway duty overseeing the loading of pillaged stores on King Street.

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Porter, an excellent horseman, raced down the hill with Creighton. The incident was reported in the Niles Weekly Register ¹⁷ the following week:

“While the enemy were employed in loading a vessel, Captains Porter and Creighton of the U.S. Navy make a dash into Alexandria on horseback, rode up to the midshipman who was super-intending the loading of the boat, and Captain Creighton seized him by the cravat and endeavored to take him off. But the cravat gave way and he escaped. The officers immediately galloped off leaving the inhabitants in great consternation.”

This put the town in a panic as alarm bells sounded and troops readied themselves for a battle that failed to come.

“The signal alarm was immediately given on shore to all those employed on the wharves who promptly embarked, and all hands were ordered to prepare for action.”

The British were infuriated, and erroneously attributed the incident to intelligence gathering by General Hungerford's Virginia militia that had been harassing Gordon with random fire during his trek up the river and had taken a position in the hills outside Alexandria. The mayor and his committee of vigilance was summoned to Gordon's flagship where they explained they had nothing to do with the attempted abduction of the midshipman, and that they doubted Hungerford would violate the terms of capitulation the mayor and the magistrates had signed the day before.

“The inhabitants apprehended an immediate destruction of the town; but a deputation being sent from the [city council] that the act was unauthorized by them, nor done by any inhabitant of the place, and promising that they would place guards at the intersection of each street leading to

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the water to prevent a similar occurrence, commanding officer [Gordon], said he would overlook it and the town was again quieted.”

Gordon magnanimously wrote off the incident as a high-spirited lark by junior officers, but warned that any more she-nanigans could result in destruction of the town. City officials appealed to Hungerford not to attack the city nor upset the delicate relationship with the British.

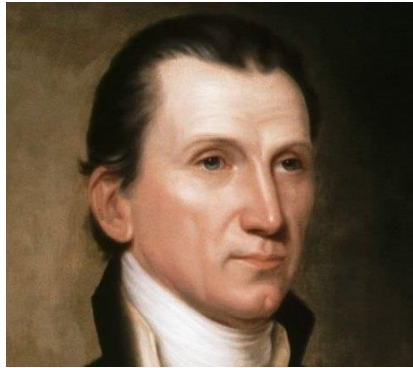
Who were the mystery riders? The townsfolk wondered?

Neither the Alexandrians nor the British knew at the time what they mistook as Hungerford's militia officers were really Britain's arch-enemy, the reviled Commodore Porter and his second in command, Captain John Ord Creighton.¹⁸

President Madison, recognizing his own lack of military experience, appointed his Secretary of State, James Monroe, who had fought in the American Revolution, acting Secretary of War (he was really *defacto* Commander in Chief).

Monroe ordered Hungerford to maintain a position overlooking Alexandria after the city was forced to capitulate under the stern edicts of Captain Gordon.

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Secretary of State James Monroe became defacto Commander in Chief. Two years later he was elected President.

For several days Gordon's forces gorged themselves, pillaging storehouses, farms, and livestock, as the citizenry dejectedly stood by to witness the sad event after agreeing to his stern terms of capitulation.

He would have stayed longer, but for learning on 1 September that a force of Americans had crossed at Georgetown to take "strong measures to oppose our

return" downriver and receiving a summons by his senior commander.

Gaining the High Ground

Realizing the urgency and importance of taking action, Monroe, convened his highest ranking Army and Navy commanders outside of Alexandria to map out the best strategy given their limited resources.¹⁹

Could they bottle up Gordon in the Potomac?

Recognizing Porter's capabilities and realizing the historic squabbles among ranking officers as to who was most senior and thus held supreme decision roles,²⁰ Monroe cut Porter free from the operational Navy command of John Rodgers, appointing him in charge of a joint Army-Navy expedition to entangle Gordon's escape. Monroe needed a proven leader who could fight and command men, regardless of their Army or Navy affiliation.

Commodore Rodgers, Porter's superior since his days as a midshipman under Truxton, was wise enough to bypass the protocols of seniority in favor of the larger mission.

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So too did the militia Generals who clearly outranked a naval Captain. Joining Porter was General Hungerford commanding the Virginia militia and General Young of the Washington (D.C) militia, whose troops crossed the Potomac at Georgetown Ferry with Porter the night of 31 August.²¹

The joint task force was directed to harass and attempt to blockade Gordon's escape by bottling up his squadron and flotilla of captured American ships in the narrow, shallow, and winding part of the Potomac, preventing them from joining the other ships in the Chesapeake, thus delaying the invasion of Baltimore, while that city bolstered its defenses.

The blockade plan called for setting up gun emplacements on the high bluffs at a place called White House Point down river from Alexandria and another location on the Maryland side where the channel was still narrow, limiting the maneuverability of the British sailing squadron. Porter's old friend and comrade, Oliver Hazard Perry would command the Maryland shore. They trusted each other and knew each would always put mission far above any lust for personal glory, which was a major character flaw in many military leaders at that time.

Everyone knew Gordon's plunder fleet could set sail anytime soon; there was no time to arrange calculated planning. .

On 1 September, Porter advanced his guns, along with the combined Virginia and District of Columbia militia under the commands of Generals Hungerford and Young, along the west side of the river in Virginia to a bluff on Belvoir Neck²² on the grounds of Ferdinand Fairfax. Commodore Perry would take aim from the east side in



Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry

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Maryland with a contingent of the Georgetown volunteers bolstered by a brigade from the army.

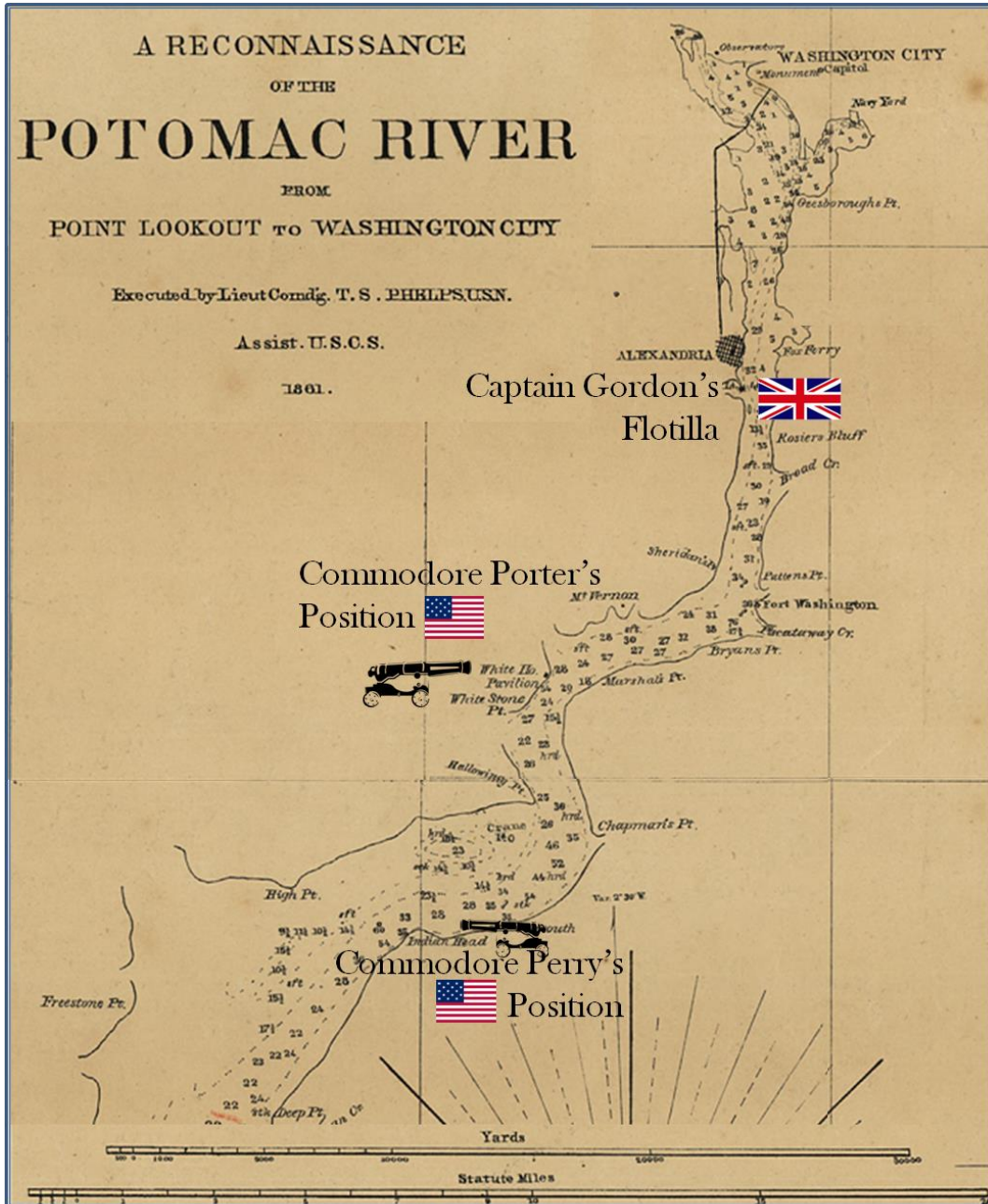
Despite their exhausting trek from New York, Porter's weary team of navy sailors sprang into action comrades in a unified force with the local militia. Hungerford's Virginia brigade, consisting of only infantry and cavalry units, with no access to heavy artillery, possessed only two or three light artillery fieldpieces to add to Porter's few guns. These were augmented by two medium range 12-pounders, supplied by General Young's D.C. militia.

Together the joint expeditionary force raced down the Virginia shoreline at breakneck speed, scrambling over twisted roads, darting through wooded hills, and fording muddy creeks. All the time they risked overturning the gun carriages, breaking limbs, or cracking wheels, which could then impede the accomplishment of their mission. Considering the expeditionary force of extreme importance, Monroe accompanied Porter, Hungerford, and Young on their rapid dash.

The lighter weaponry – horse-drawn 4-pound fieldpieces – travelled most swiftly, followed by two 12-pounders and lastly three rugged long range 18-pounders, which arrived nearly a day behind. These would be placed in the hands of Porter's crack shot naval gunners.

Always on the edge, Porter beat the British, taking his high ground position on a forty foot bluff overlooking a navigational landmark at the water's edge called White House Landing, four miles south of Mount Vernon on Belvoir neck,²³ (near what is now Fort Belvoir). The Landing consisted of several white-washed buildings, including a storage barn and fish house that had, for years, been a navigational landmark marking a bend in the river. While the river was nearly a mile wide at this point, the navigable channel ran close to the bluffs, forcing Gordon's flotilla to run a close-quarter gauntlet.

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Porter & Perry Take High Ground Positions Down River

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When Porter arrived late in the day, he was relieved to see the advance militia men quickly clearing the trees at the top of the bluff to have clear shots at the ships that would soon appear below.²⁴

A Spartan was Porter; caring not about odds; he fought with courage, wit and guile, knowing no other way. He kept his eye on the objective – blockade the river, harassing the British, preventing them from joining forces in the Chesapeake. He had experienced more combat engagements than any other army or navy officer of the war. Most importantly, he inspired the confidence of the Virginia militia, who had seen other commanders bolt under fire. Never a glory-seeker, he was always a patriot, and willingly gave credit to his Army comrades.

Commodore²⁵ Perry, on the opposite Maryland shore, first considered taking a position at Fort Washington, but determined it was indefensible. Instead he chose a more southerly emplacement on the east bank at Indian Head bluffs, just as the river began to widen, downstream from Porter.

Porter's biggest problem was his limited supply of light weapons with limited range. This was compounded by lack of gunpowder and cannon balls, which meant no shot could be wasted.

Assigned to find munitions was Navy senior supply clerk Mordecai Booth. Experienced at finding hard-to-get stores during the tough war years, he was resourceful – the kind of person Porter needed.

Having passed through his beloved Navy Yard in Washington, Booth was utterly dismayed to see it and his beloved ships under construction in smoldering ruins, along with many of the stores he so ardently stockpiled. However, the Navy was able to squirrel away some of the powder and ammunition.

Booth arrived in Alexandria on Monday, 29 August, angry and outraged, as he reported to his superior later:

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“My feelings [were] most sensibly excited on seeing the British flag waving triumphant....”as the British raid continued and they rounded up a flotilla of American cargo ships as booty in Alexandria.

When he learned the stores of gunpowder and heavy cannon at Fort Washington were destroyed by our own men, rather than moved out of the fort to safe ground, Booth was further enflamed. A supply clerk always tries to save munitions for another day in another fight, which the navy had prudently done before burning the Navy Yard.

Booth's difficult task to garner munitions was further complicated by his physical condition. His desk job did not prepare him for the arduous rides required. Apparently accustomed to riding in a carriage, the long horseback ride from his home in Falls Church resulted in festering boils on his thigh and hip and wrist, and a swollen leg and foot from chafing boots.

Despite the pain, Booth valiantly scavenged the landscape to support Porter and prolong his attack. Booth was able to find two wagon loads of gunpowder, each with twenty five barrels of the precious explosive. Porter also needed heavy duty 32-pound cannon to give them long range firepower to match the best of the British cannon. These proved incredibly scarce.

Meanwhile, back in Baltimore, the defenders worked feverishly day and night in the blistering heat and humidity to erect defensive positions, not knowing from where or when the British attack would come.

If enough time could be bought, the Baltimore commanders could build redoubts, bring in thousands more militia, and gain a numerical advantage over the crack British troops that had wiped out their opposition at Bladensburg a few days earlier. Could Porter's small crew of naval gunners armed with light

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artillery inflict any serious damage to Gordon's Potomac squadron and, just as importantly, buy that precious time?

Calm under fire, Porter had been face-to-face in combat and more victorious against his enemy than any other officer in the U.S. military. He knew his strengths and weaknesses, and had a battle hardened, trustworthy team from the *Essex*, disciplined and courageous under the toughest conditions.

Porter's small band of sailors, joined by an ever-growing brigade of local militia formed a fighting force. It would soon become clear these militiamen became more inspired to fight under Porter's leadership than they had under their old, tired commanders at Bladensburg.

The militia assisted Porter's set-up of the field cannon and protected his flanks in the event the enemy landed a shore contingent. Eventually over 1500 Virginian and District of Columbia militiamen joined Porter. These forces would later prove invaluable when the British tried to counter-attack by



Admiral James Alexander Gordon was the commander of the Potomac Squadron. Author C.S. Forrester would later use the stories of Gordon's career as the basis of *Horatio Hornblower* –
source: wiki commons

land. During impending engagement, the militia would use their muskets to take down any of the ship's crew manning the open cannon decks or launch boats.

Commanding the high ground, Porter counted on his ability to shoot downward on the British ships while giving him an added advantage: the British ships could not elevate their cannon high enough to return fire while running the gauntlet.

After feasting in Alexandria, the British flotilla prepared to wind its way down river under the command of Captain James

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Gordon. His naval fleet would consist of a combined armament of 173 cannons, plus bombs and newly minted rockets, along with a contingent of battle-hardened marines;²⁶ escorting over 20 captured American vessels. This force had already reduced what remained of Fort Washington to rubble on their way upriver. Gordon counted on his massive advantage in number of cannons, and a far greater advantage in the throwing weight of his armament to blast his way down river.

Porter was not gambling on the odds. Unlike the cowardly Dyson who abandoned Fort Washington based on poor odds, Porter relied on courage, determination, trust, surprise, excellent skills, calmness under pressure, a spirited and united fighting force, and superior positioning to gain advantage.

Just as importantly, 1 September marked the crossing of the British Northern Force beginning the attack from Canada to split New England off from its mid-Atlantic brothers, as noted later in the local paper:

The REPUBLICAN Plattsburgh [NY], September 1 – 10 o'clock A.M. The enemy's forces have advanced into our country – they last night encamped near Champlain. Their force is represented at 5,000 – eighteen or twenty pieces of artillery. Of this force 400 are said to be Indians, and 100-200 dragoons. It is believed they design to attack this place.²⁷

If the British Northern force were successful, they could be sitting in New York City by October. The Southern Force had already landed in Mobile and Pensacola the week before, where General Andrew Jackson began raising an army to resist.

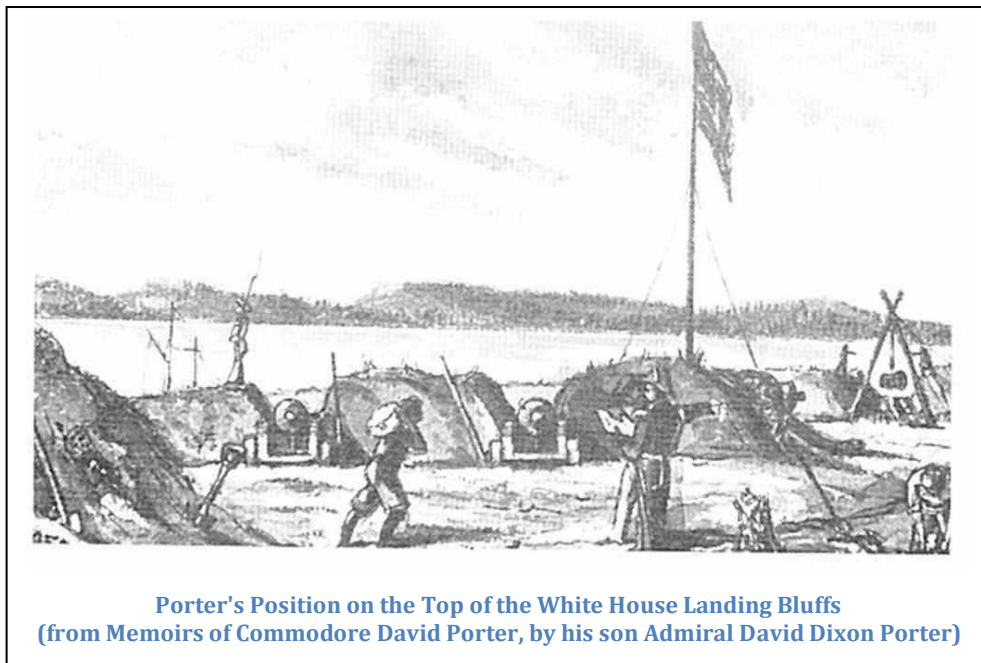
Becoming anxious to commence the attack on Baltimore, Admiral Cochrane, sitting placidly with half the fleet moored in Chesapeake Bay, ordered the brig *Fairy*²⁸ (with its sixteen 32-pound carronades and two 6-pound bow guns manned by a crew of 121 officers and sailors) to head upriver with dispatches summoning Gordon's immediate return to the main

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fleet, while helping escort Gordon's growing flotilla of 20 captured American vessels out of the Potomac.

Running the Gauntlet

On 1 September, about six in the late afternoon, Porter was just finishing putting two of his smallest 4-pound light batteries in place when *Fairy* rounded the bend, coming upstream in front of the White House Bluffs at river's edge.



There was no option for *Fairy*; she had to run Porter's gauntlet.

The channel was only three hundred yards wide (less than a quarter mile). Sailing vessels had to tack against an unfavorable wind, a complex and tricky sailing operation in a square rigged ship hauling lines, changing sail angles while changing course over one hundred degrees right to left, beating against the wind.

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General Hungerford's marksmen were concealed in the dense woods, positioned behind the cannon to make life difficult on deck for anyone handling lines, warping sails, or manning guns.

Porter counted on surprise, as he had in so many prior battles.

Fairy rounded the bend coming into firing range, clinging to the near shore, which was the safer, deeper side of the narrow channel. She had passed Indian Head Bluffs before Commodore Perry, downstream could set up his guns.

Now in close range of Porter's armament, the Americans were taken aback at the first sight of the ship; it was the crew's day for doing their wash. Her rigging and yard arms and sails were adorned like a floozy as the crew's shirts, trousers, and under drawers flapped and waved nonchalantly in the breeze.²⁹ No one on board was ready for what was to come, blithely unaware and unprepared for the impending onslaught.

Porter, a navy fish turned amphibian, seemed to relish his land commander role. He had his men lie prone to prevent being detected by the enemy. Musket rounds from the militia were aimed at the enemy gunners on deck, intending to prevent them from firing back.

Once the ship came within short range in front of the two small, hastily mounted 4-pounder gun emplacements, Porter ordered "open fire!" With such small bore cannon, and limited ammunition, every shot had to count; his crack-shot naval gunners stung swiftly.

Blissfully, the *Fairy's* crew seemed blasé to the opening rounds, thinking these were just scattered skirmishers on the shore, as Hungerford's musketeers had been randomly taking aim on ships downstream.

It didn't take long for Porter's naval gunners to show their skill. While the first shot missed, the second cannon in the volley split the signal flag hoist, then rounds began pounding *Fairy's* hull.

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A sense of urgency rushed through the *Fairy's* crew. Now recognizing the seriousness of their predicament, the *Fairy's* Captain called his men to arms, opened gun ports, and attempted to return fire. Making a gun operational would take over five minutes at best. Meanwhile, they were sitting ducks.



18 Gun British Brig of the period like *Fairy*
with 9 cannon per side mounted on an open deck

The militia marksmen rose behind Porter and leveled a volley of musket shot down upon the *Fairy's* crew. A musket ball careened into Porter's epaulette, blowing it off without injuring the swashbuckling captain, who coolly turned around and suggested the marksman be more careful next time.

As Porter predicted, *Fairy* could not elevate her cannon sufficiently to target their foe perched high above on the bluffs; their sole broadside from her nine guns heavy guns screamed harmlessly with a powerful thud into the river bank below. The Americans cried out with a triumphant "Huzzah!"

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More rounds peppered the crew on deck and tore holes in their laundry. Porter's next cannon volley blasts broke up decks, cut up the sails, and pierced into the wardroom smashing glass-ware, as the men on deck shrieked and scurried for cover.

The *Fairy*, bloodied and battered with several casualties, fortuitously was blessed by a fresh breeze, worming her way through the gauntlet. She then raced forward out of range of Porter's light artillery to warn Gordon's flotilla of the perils that lay ahead.

The militia marksmen followed the *Fairy* along the river, firing on her from the protection of their densely wooded positions.

On 1 September, a week after the Bladensburg defeat, Porter's Navy land-force with the support of the local militia, had won the first round.

But how long could Porter's rag-tag force hold out? Could he hold off the deadly retaliation that was sure to come? If the British attacked his flank with marines and his front by river, it would put him in a vice.

That night two longer range 18-pounders arrived, just in time. They had a range of nearly a mile, giving Porter a slight improvement against the long odds he faced. Gun crews worked into the night readying their new weapons for action along with the other field pieces. Powder and shot were still precariously sparse.

By now Gordon's squadron had swollen to 29 ships: his original flotilla of 7, plus *Fairy*, plus a booty consisting of 21 prize vessels loaded to the gunwales with 16,000 barrels of flour, 1,000 hogsheads of tobacco, 150 bales of cotton, and \$5000 of wine and other goods taken from Alexandria warehouses. More loot was left behind as future supplies for wintering over in Philadelphia. A bomb vessel and frigate stayed to the rear of the squadron close to Alexandria to

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protect the squadron's exit in the event of a river attack from the rear, which Commodore Rodgers was planning.

Fairy's dispatch boat delivered Admiral Cochrane's summons to return immediately to Captain Gordon late that night. Now facing the challenge of running a gauntlet, Gordon responded, immediately ordering the bomb vessels *Meteor* and *Aetna* downstream. These were capable of lofting high power bombs designed to burst overhead. Gordon also dispatched two gunboats.³⁰ The first gunboat, carrying a high-power long range 32-pounder, could hurl a 6 inch ball accurately from a distance of nearly a mile, while staying out of range of Porter's smaller cannon. During the night the other gunboat, mounting a large mortar capable of lobbing an arching shell or grenade into Porter's camp silently worked its way downriver creating a cross-fire.

At dawn, 2 September, the frigates *Seahorse* and *Euryalus*, along with the rocket-ship *Erebus* and the bomb-vessel *Devastation* left Alexandria to join the attack. *Fairy*, anchored down river from Alexandria, joined in to target Porter's easily spotted position at the top of the bluffs.

At dawn's light, bomb vessels *Meteor* and *Aetna* began showering Porter's position with ten and twelve inch shell, ascertaining the right angles of fire to increase the probabilities of hitting their targets. They stood just out of range of Porter's guns, whose range was destined to fall short of the British positions. In response, Porter moved one of his newly arrived 18-pounders up river about a mile, closer to Mount Vernon, where he could target the bomb vessels, as well as the brig *Fairy*, and another schooner anchored upstream.

It's improbable at this point that Gordon had identified his opponent. In the opening volley against *Fairy*, Porter had not time to fly his flag emblazoned with his personal trademark: *Free Trade and Sailors Rights*. Had Gordon known it was Porter,

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who was universally reviled among British ranks, Gordon would have been far more emphatic in his counter-attack.

However, based on the American retreat at Bladensburg, the sack of Washington, the abandonment of Fort Washington, and the capitulation of Alexandria, Gordon thought poorly of the American's military prowess and will to fight.

But one can only image Gordon's reaction when someone put a spy glass on the White House Bluffs, and spotted Porter's flag emblazoned with Porter's trademark motto. Their reviled nemesis had returned to haunt again. "Blast that Porter! I thought we'd never see the likes of that bloody scoundrel ever again. Who does he think he is, a General? Commanding land forces!" must have been Gordon's words of utter disdain. With Porter as his adversary, Gordon no longer could underestimate his opponent.

Under the pressure of urgency and gunfire, navigational errors on the errant river were magnified. In her haste to join the battle, the frigate *Euryalus* ran hard aground just one mile south of Alexandria, forcing her sister ship, *Seahorse*, commanded by Captain Gordon, to come about to give her aid. This took Gordon's most heavily armed ships out of action for the remainder of the day. Eventually *Euryalus* was pulled free and both frigates anchored off Fort Washington for the evening, out of range of Porter's guns.

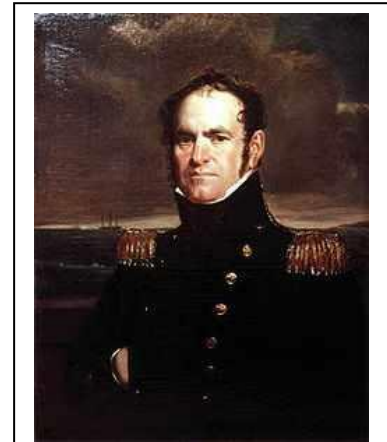
Bomb ship *Devastation*, after leaving Alexandria, also ran aground and was out of action. Gordon's two frigates came to her aid, but couldn't pull her off the flats. Later that night an incoming tide aided their efforts. Porter's disruptions had caused navigational errors (precisely what the Court Martial Board had expected Dyson cause by defending the river from Fort Washington). But most important, the confusion bought more time for reinforcements to flood into Baltimore.

When Commodore Rodgers caught wind of the plight of Gordon's ships aground, he was itching for action.

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A rugged man with a fierce visage and a temperament to match, Rodgers had been second in command of the gallant frigate *Constellation* under Captain Truxton in our quasi-war against France in 1798. He had distinguished himself in *Constellation's* victory over *Insurgente*. David Porter, just a midshipman at that time, was revered by Rodgers for his courageousness under fire while serving on *Constellation*.

Always a gentleman despite his fearsome looks, bushy eyebrows, and gruff temperament, he easily set his adversaries on edge. (His fiancé thought that if his looks could speak, "he must be a man of violent temper.")



Commodore John Rodgers

Under orders at that moment from Secretary of the Navy William Jones to harass and disrupt the British withdrawal from Alexandria, Rodgers quickly gathered his gig, four rowed troop transports carrying 15 musketeers each, and three fire ships, heading down river to inflict damage on the flotilla.

On 3 September, at 11 am, Rodgers cut loose his three fire ships, confident that he could knock out at least a couple of British vessels. But just as they neared their targets the wind dropped and the British countered with musket fire on the lead fire ship, compelling the transport boats to tow the fire ships out of harm's way. Now coming under fire from the heavy guns of the British warships, Rodgers and his small contingent were forced to retreat back up river. The next morning, he was forced to scuttle one fire ship to avoid its capture as its crew jumped overboard to keep from becoming prisoners of war.

While unsuccessful at destroying enemy ships, Rodgers' diversionary tactic attracted British attention and resources. They worried that more forces could be readying to attack their flanks and rear at any moment.

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On 3 September, the second day of the battle, while Rodgers was attempting to rain fire and destruction on enemy targets, the British barrage resumed full force. It started in the early morning and continued unabated all day and well into the hours after midnight. Five more light field pieces, consisting of 4 and 6 pounders, arrived and were added to Porter's limited arsenal.³¹ To gain greater advantage with limited resources, Porter built hot furnaces to super-heat his shot, enhancing their ability to trigger a fire on-board after impact.

Gordon had upped the ante, adding the bomb vessel *Devastation* once she broke free from the mud flats, while reinforcing his firepower with the large 18 gun square rigger *Erebus* fitted with the newly invented Congreve rocket.³² A potent predator, she was a fire breathing dragon. Her her solid fuel rockets had a range of over a mile, carrying a warhead of explosives, shrapnel, or incendiaries, along with a psychological noise-maker intended to trigger fear in the opposition.³³

It was the first intense use of rocketry against American forces, who didn't quite know what to expect; Gordon expected his foe would first be dazzled, then run.

Porter's new gun position and concentrated fire by the militia sharp shooters raking *Erebus'* decks drove the rocket ship off her mooring, forcing her to scurry back upstream out of range. *Erebus* attempted to launch two boats of marines but these too were repelled by militia musket fire.



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The river banks ricocheted with the boom of cannons and heavy smoke fogged the air. *Aetna* continued launching bombs until 2 am. Fortunately most of the enemy shot failed to hit their targets. Again a Porter's gauntlet frustrated Gordon.

At the end of the day the American force had suffered no major

casualties, and they were hardening to the massive sound and shock waves of British cannons, mortars, bombs³⁴ and rockets.

Most important, Porter gained another day while Baltimore's defenses continued to gather strength, now beginning to gain a critical mass



Erebus firing her rockets
She was the first "Cruise Missile launcher"

to beat impending superior British invasion force.

By 4 September, the third day of battle, with all his fighting ships fully operational, Gordon threw everything he had at his opponents. It was the most intense day of the fighting. Throughout the day, and well into the night, the British pummeled Porter, Hungerford and Young with barrage after barrage. With *Aetna*, *Meteor*, and *Devastation* lobbing bombs and mortars, *Erebus* hurling rockets, and *Seahorse*, *Euryalus*, and *Fairy* pummeling with large cannon at Porter's position, it seemed like the gates of hell were raining fire and damnation. The shock and awe effect of the Congreve rockets was at first quite unnerving.

"The rockets were at first a great terror to our soldiers -- they have frightful accounts of them...."

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they would consume anything they struck and the fire they created could not be quenched by water but the men soon became familiar with them," recounted Thomas Brown,³⁵ one of Hungerford's aides.

The score of captured American vessels from Alexandria remained far out of range, anchored near Fort Washington.

Erebus moved closer to Porter's bastion to gain a better shot. Porter parried Gordon's thrusts and countered. Now confident in his position and the quality of his combined naval and army forces, Porter sent more firepower upstream to an advanced position within range of the British ships, shifting a twelve pounder and two six pounders into closer position to retaliate. "Scarcely a shot missed his hull" Porter recounted. "The cool indifference of my sailors to the danger to which they were exposed was very remarkable, and the intrepidity of Captain Griffin of the Alexandria artillery, his officers and men merit the highest [praise.] They fought their six pounders until their ammunition was expended ... behaving ... with ... gallantry"³⁶

But Porter knew that such small caliber cannons could only cut up rigging, rip up deck fixtures, and tear holes in sails while having minor effect on the hard oak planking of a stout warship. All he could really inflict is minor damage with light artillery, unless he had a lucky shot that hit a powder magazine. He needed, but did not have, more eighteen, twenty-four, or thirty-two pounders to penetrate a British hull.

The entire British force retaliated in response; Gordon opened up all his available gun ports on Porter's gun emplacements and "for one hour we drew to this point of fire all the Enemies' force" wrote Porter. He assessed that the full force of eighty-five high powered cannon were concentrated on his position for an hour. But Porter's sailors held their ground, returning fire, never yielding, setting a potent example for the militia.

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Undeterred, Gordon again rowed two gunboats, one mounting a hefty thirty-two pounder and the other boasting a mortar into close firing range and began blasting Porter's battery.

Again the Americans held strong, and surprising, only light damage and a few casualties were sustained.

Buying another day, Baltimore continued to augment its defenses as more troops and munitions poured in from surrounding states. Maybe the defense of Baltimore might have a fighting chance.

By the fourth day of the battle, 5 September, Gordon was aggravated. Time and again, the frustrated Gordon had been stymied running Porter's gauntlet; meeting failure and frustration each day. He knew fleet commander, Admiral Cochrane, who had expected him to have rejoined the fleet in the Chesapeake any moment, was anxiously fuming; time was wasting as he received reports daily of the ever-improving Baltimore defenses.

5 September brought a brief lull in the fighting. Porter was relieved with the expected arrival of two hefty long-range 32-pound cannons and two mortars plus a large load of ammunition Mordecai Booth had secured from Washington. The 32 pounders, with the range of a mile would put Gordon's flotilla in deeper jeopardy. But the new weapons arrived with barrels only, no carriages, rendering them useless. Porter immediately ordered carriages to be constructed.

Ammunition for the useable guns had almost run out. Desperately Mordecai Booth scavenged the country-side, but munitions were as hard to find as snowflakes in summer. Most of the powder had gone to aid Baltimore, which was now beginning to exude some confidence in its capabilities as their leaders whipped their men into shape and built more bulwarks.

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Porter appealed down-river to Perry, who shipped a portion of his minimal munitions supplies to Porter's advanced location. That day Porter reported receiving "two mortars (without carriages), a large quantity of ammunition, and an abundance of shot and shells" along with two gunboats,³⁷ optimistically saying it was "everything promised... to continue annoying the enemy," trying to put a difficult situation in positive light.

After a brief interlude, Gordon ratcheted-up the intensity of the barrage, raining shells, rockets and 14 inch bombs day and night. The sound was so intense it could be heard a dozen miles away in Washington, where the citizenry prayed that the American forces would finally stand against their formidable foe. Word filtered back to the Baltimore defenders that finally a unified American battle unit was holding off the enemy's supposedly superior force.

Porter must have been disappointed beyond words when he realized no more large, long range cannon would appear. But the historical record shows no account of this reaction. He needed to maintain morale -- throwing a fit would not rally his men. Nonetheless, he must have quietly been reveling in vexing the British. He reported his adversary, commanding two frigates, three bomb ships, one sloop of war, one brig, and one schooner had thirteen times more firepower (173 longer range guns), held off by a few (13) smaller bore cannon³⁸ manned by a courageous band of fish out of water: skilled gunnery sailors, supported by the muskets of a part-time band of local volunteer militia-men from the neighboring country-side.

Gordon ordered the landing of troops to attack by land to spike Porter's guns, but the Virginia militia stood its ground. The Independent Blues of the Washington militia brigade rushed down the slopes to intercept the invading troop transports. A few were killed or wounded, but they held strong, successfully repelling the combat veteran British marines, who were forced to turn back.

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Sleep was out of the question. The American forces were thoroughly exhausted from the intensity and longevity of the constant bombardment. Thomas Brown, Hungerford's aide, had fallen into an almost comatose state from lack of sleep amidst the commotion of bursting bombs, flaming rockets, and men scrambling every moment trying to extinguish the flames. When he finally awoke from "the best night's sleep" he ever had, Brown was shocked to find himself amidst smoldering straw left from the prior night's fires.

General Hungerford escaped near brushes with death twice in one day during the barrage. The first time he was sitting on a pile of mattresses in his command tent dictating a letter when his orderly cried out "Ball Coming!" Hungerford dove for cover as a cannonball sliced through the tent cutting a swath exactly where he was sitting. Later, when riding his horse in the direction of the main battery, a bomb exploded overhead. Hungerford ducked for the cover of a large oak tree nearby as shrapnel sliced through the tree, barely missing him. Fortunately any premonitions of impending death were not fulfilled.

Often the black-powder smoke was so intense neither side could see the other while acrid fumes left the combatants coughing and wheezing. While a typical naval battle might last an hour or two; this engagement had now raged for days, testing the combined naval and militia force's stamina and ability to withstand incredible stress.

Porter returned fire, but knew time was running out. Still terribly low on gun powder and shot, and armed with underpowered weaponry, he could not pepper the British with a counter-barrage; every single precious shot must count.

By the fifth day, 6 September, Porter had bottled up a superior British force for the better part of a week.

Gordon decided enough was enough. He sensed the sparse return of fire meant Porter was low on ammunition and several of the batteries must have been taken out. He'd run the

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gauntlet again, this time differently and was willing to take some hits to get through while sailing on a fresh wind and following tide.

Gordon reconfigured his two big frigates, *Seahorse* and *Euryalus*, by re-ballasting them to heel-over thus elevating their armament to target the top of the bluffs. They now could be deployed for close range assault. Porter observed apparently the top of their gun ports were cut out and the inboard wheels of the gun carriages removed to enable higher elevation.

At noon before the flotilla passed by the bluffs, the two frigates led the squadron down the river on a favorable wind and tide. Gordon squared away with one frigate on the upstream flank of the bluffs and one down-stream. Together brandishing 48 heavy cannon in close range, the frigates beveled Porter's gunners in a withering crossfire, broadside after broadside, causing significant casualties and knocking many of Porter's remaining guns.

Had Porter's two large, high-power 32-pounders been operational at this point, Gordon's frigates would have been vulnerable, heeled-over with their soft underbellies exposed.

Gordon then sent down the rest of the flotilla, warships and captured prizes together, each of the naval ships in a battle line with all guns blazing.

Being in the cross-hairs of all their heavy guns plus rockets and bombs, the fire was so intense Hungerford could not redeploy his marksmen to better locations. Only a few the musket men, stationed in protected positions along the shore and behind trees, were still able to pick off the crew of ships on the decks, in the rigging, and behind port holes. Peppering their rounds with hot and cold shot, Porter's forces sustained their ground.

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The remaining warships and their convoy of captured American vessels filled with looted goods passed on the far side of the frigates, successfully challenging Porter's gauntlet.

The frigates' barrage damaged more of Porter's cannons as casualties mounted. Returning fire became extremely dangerous. After an hour and a quarter of abusive exposure, most of Gordon's fleet had passed through the gauntlet, while his frigates kept pounding way with broadside after broadside.

Porter, realizing he could no longer prevent the flotilla's escape, acted with discretion, seeking to preserve what was left of his honorable fighting force:

"As some of my men had already been killed or wounded, I determined not to make a useless sacrifice ... I directed the officers to retire behind a hill [out of the line of fire]."

Porter and what remained of his battered crew was forced to retreat from their roost to safer ground with whatever cannons could be salvaged as the enemy showered an avalanche of unreturned shot. Any salvageable cannon would quickly be redeployed to reinforce Baltimore. The militia riflemen continued to fire upon the enemy from the hillsides. Porter in his written report the following day recognized the enormous contribution with accolades to the many volunteers who had come to the unit's aid and personally assisted him.

In a parting shot, Porter deployed a torpedo designed by his friend Robert Fulton downstream at escaping flotilla. It blew up at nine in the evening, but it was too dark and far away to ascertain its damage.³⁹

Gordon had to be cautious heading downstream. Earlier, in their foray up the river, their fleet had scraped bottom, some had gone aground, and his own deep-draft frigate flagship, *Seahorse*, had briefly been stranded on a mud flat. Under the stress of fire, the chances of running aground escalated.

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While apparently no one ever estimated the number of shots fired by Gordon's squadron, it would be reasonable to estimate at least several thousand cannon, rocket, bomb, and mortar rounds were fired during the five days of battle.

The crew of the *Essex*, hardened under the baptism of fire and loyal to the end to Commodore Porter, had avenged their defeat in Valparaiso.⁴⁰ Writing his father's memoirs, Admiral David Dixon Porter stated:

The remnant of the *Essex's* crew had received, before this, a baptism of fire to which all others would seem feeble, and they stood to their guns like veterans as they were. Lt. Barnewell received on this occasion his third wound, and Dr. Hoffman, surgeon of the *Essex*, was shot in the head. The detachment of marines, under Capt. Grayson, forming a part of the naval force that had so much distinguished itself under Commodore Barney at Bladensburg, were anxious to do their part on this occasion to wipe out the odium of that defeat, and two of them were killed in their courageous but unsuccessful endeavor to stop the progress of the enemy."⁴¹

Once the remainder of the British vessels passed White House Bluffs, the two frigates weighed anchor to escort the flotilla of American prize vessels to a point down river out of range of the next obstacle: Oliver Hazard Perry's guns mounted on the high bluffs at Indian Head on the Maryland side of the river. With a depleted battery consisting of only one hastily installed 18-pounder and some light 6-pound artillery and little ammunition, Perry could have only a small impact against the powerful broadsides of the two frigates. Supporting Perry were contingents from the Maryland and Washington militia.

The rocket ship *Erebus* began the attack, but ran aground off Craney Island, making it a sitting duck, taking a multitude of hits from Perry while stranded on the sand bar. Perry's fire

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killed one, wounded nine, and damaged *Erebus*' topmast. Other enemy ships then opened fire on Perry with a powerful barrage to cover the long boats that finally towed *Erebus* free. Meanwhile the rest of the flotilla remained upstream.

Oliver Hazard Perry's Indian Head contingent was battered continually until sunset when his guns went completely silent, now out of ammunition. While Perry had the courage, he lacked the munitions and firepower to have any significant effect. His eighteen-pounder had the range and heft to inflict serious damage on an enemy ship, but he had only a sparse supply of powder and shot, which quickly ran out. His other two six-pounders were designed for short range infantry engagement. Like Porter's, they had little significant effect when lobbed at long range against a well armored target.

Shortly thereafter Perry wrote to Secretary of the Navy Jones complaining, "The battery under my direction at Indian Head was of too small caliber to make [any significant] impression on the enemy."⁴²

Perry wisely withdrew, taking his guns out of the combat zone for use in Baltimore. The man who brought victory in the Battle of Lake Erie lived to fight another day. He helped prolong the battle, gaining more time for the Baltimore forces to prepare.

The following morning, 7 September, Gordon summoned his ships to fulfill their complete escape, and was quite surprised when no shots were fired from Indian Head or any other position further down the river.⁴³

On the British side, they suffered 42 casualties: seven killed and thirty five wounded, according to a British reports.⁴⁴ The Admiralty declared the successful running of the blockade a noteworthy achievement and later granted the victors worthy of a Naval Service Medal for the Potomac campaign.

By typical standards of victory, which called for a decisive winner and loser, Porter and others were dismayed. Admiral

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Cochrane had divided his forces, and apparently the Americans were unable to exploit the opportunity.

Overlooked in the traditional decisiveness analysis of battle victories is something far more important. By the time Gordon finally got past Porter and Perry, the desultory mood in Baltimore that plagued the citizenry after Bladensburg and the Burning of Washington had been transformed, as evidenced in a letter from Major. Wm. B. Barney to General Smith dated Annapolis 8 September:

“The Committee of Vigilance and Safety commenced their labors to fortify the city on Sunday, August 27th. The work done demonstrates the zeal, to the astonishment of all who behold it. *Baltimore* has long been remarkable for patriotism and liberal spirit of her citizens; and her high character for these qualities is fully maintained by the free offering of *men* and *money* for the purpose of defense. In the mean time, volunteers and militia from the adjacent parts of *Maryland*, *Pennsylvania*, and *Virginia* have flocked to our aid.....The means of defense have given confidence to the people – many families who had left the city have returned – nothing is relaxed; everything goes on as though an attack were immediately expected....

“To our brethren who have flown to our assistance, we are greatly indebted... the whole [of the city and military forces] is acting in concert.”⁴⁵

Admiral Cochrane knew his optimum time of attack was rapidly waning. Desperate not to lose his advantage, the Admiral dispatched in second in command, Rear Admiral George Cockburn to expedite Gordon's return to the main fleet. George Cockburn was hated by Americans; he had been conducting raids in the Chesapeake area for months, and was

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personally responsible for the Battle of Bladensburg and the Burning of Washington.

Gordon still had an eighty mile journey convoying nearly thirty ships from Indian Head down the winding Potomac. Given the winds and tides, this could easily take three more days. And he had to make repairs to all his naval vessels to make them battle-ready for the impending conflict in Baltimore.

On 9 September Cockburn was at St. George's island, inside the mouth of the Potomac ready to fetch the waylaid Gordon and expedite his return to the fleet when he spied Gordon's battered by not defeated flotilla. Not long after, *Euryalus* again grounded on Kettle Bottom Shoals, a reenactment of her prior grounding on the same shoals on 17 August, making it her third grounding in three weeks.

The attack on Baltimore would not commence until 12 September, nearly three weeks after Bladensburg.

Potomac Aftermath

By casualty count it was a Pyrrhic victory for the British who could support the illusory claim they won the battle and ran the blockade. But clearly, by the following week, it became evident it had cost them the war. Desperately behind schedule, the British had fallen victim to Napoleon's wry observation:

"I can recover lost ground, but not lost time."

Ironically, while the British awarded the men of the Potomac campaign a medal for their gallantry, the response was

*Running
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...it cost them
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nonchalant in the United States. The heroism of the combatants is totally disregarded as no more than even a footnote to American history, despite the strategic impact on the destiny of our nation, as we shall see from what happened in the aftermath of Gordon's encounter with Porter's blockade.

In a report to "acting" Commander in Chief James Monroe, General Hungerford stated

"It was impossible for men to have conducted themselves with more intrepidity than the militia on this occasion ... the dreadful crossfire of every [type] by the enemy to which they were exposed."⁴⁶

One of Hungerford's senior officers, Major Banks expanded this view, holding his volunteer militiamen with the deepest respect, declaring,

"Our men behaved like veteran troops. Few of them had ever been to an action before and the bombs and rockets were perfect strangers to them....they stood to their posts like men who had been accustomed to face danger. No man ran -- yet they were militia -- if [we had such] troops at Bladensburg, [British General] Ross might have been taken -- our honor at least would have been saved."⁴⁷

Monroe's appointment of Porter to command the joint force of Army and Navy units had resulted in a powerful, united fighting force that inspired Americans in Baltimore. His personal example and those of the crew of the *Essex* multiplied into the militia ranks. The leadership factor is often overlooked by historians – courage is not like bravery – the brave don't experience fear, they thrive on the thrill of fight; the

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courageous fight with their hearts and souls for a noble cause, despite their fears and personal risks of endangerment.

Building Baltimore's Defenses

As America's third largest city at the time, Baltimore was now dead in the sights of Britain's divide-and-conquer strategy. The stakes were high. If Baltimore fell, Philadelphia was next to go. End game was approaching fast. Within months the fledgling nation could capitulate; the British would have won the American Revolution, forty years after Yorktown. The British had already triggered their northern and southern forces in up-state New York and the Gulf of Mexico. America's destiny was hanging in the fragile balance.

The problem for defending Baltimore was first, a *psychological* one; it had a defeatist attitude. On top of that was a *military* problem; it needed far better fortifications. Without curing the first, the second was irrelevant.

After the debacle at Bladensburg and the tragic fall of Washington, most in Baltimore were fatalistic and despondent, knowing they were the next target of the armada of fifty ships amassed in the Chesapeake.⁴⁸ Poised for attack was the best military force in the world.⁴⁹ Many in Baltimore were resigned to defeat, not even willing to put up a fight. Many fled in fear, convinced there was a plan to surrender the city to save it from destruction without a fight as had happened with Alexandria. Fresh blood with an inspirational vision was essential.

The Navy assigned its most senior officer, Commodore John Rodgers, seasoned with years of battle experience and a no-nonsense attitude. He was supported by over seven hundred sailors, marines, and their officers. General Samuel Smith, a veteran of the Revolutionary War, and successful entrepreneur, was appointed commander of the armed forces. He brought a well needed positive attitude and a clear plan for building the defenses which began neutralizing the gloom that

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had hung like a dark pallor over the city. In his book, *The Burning of Washington*, author Anthony Pitcher states Smith's objective,

*"Numbers alone did not give Smith the edge he sought. The advancing foe had shown backbone and muscle that had made American novices quake at Bladensburg. Samuel Smith need regulars who would not freeze with fear in the face of bayonet charges and the awful whine of airborne shells. He wanted tough men who had already grappled with well-trained British killers. He desperately needed fighting men who could give as good as they got. The American general knew that the men who fit the bill were the seven hundred gritty seamen and marines under Commodore Rodgers."*⁵⁰

When Alexandria capitulated in late August, Rodgers was ordered to take a force of seamen along with Captains Porter, and Perry to "aid and attack the enemy in his rear." Once the British Potomac Squadron escaped, Rogers, Porter, and Perry scampered back to Baltimore to continue leading defensive fortifications along with other distinguished naval officers.

While Rodgers was in Alexandria, Smith mobilized both the citizenry and the army into action. Residents were asked to contribute wheelbarrows, pick axes, spades and any other implements to enable the building of pits, bulwarks, breastworks, and trenches. Hordes of reinforcements converged into Baltimore, stretching its ability to house and feed the new troops.

Local banks loaned \$100,000 (a huge sum in those days) to the cause until the U.S. Treasury could get back on its feet.

By the time the British were ready to attack, the city was honeycombed with fortifications. Daily lookouts scanned the horizon to search for signs of the British fleet and the impending attack. A full week had passed with no invasion fleet in sight. It wasn't until the evening of Saturday, September

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10th after Gordon had rejoined the fleet that the city learned the enemy armada was finally amassing in the mouth of the harbor.

By then Baltimore's psychological and military transformation was complete. Baltimore was ready to put up the fight to save the nation. Confidence was running strong. The gloom and pallor that hung over the city a week before had lifted. Alongside the regular Army and Navy units stood militia brigades from the surrounding territory. 13,000 or more stood armed and ready to repel the enemy.

At Fort McHenry at the entrance to Baltimore Harbor, its commanding officer defiantly ordered a flag so large "that the British will have no problem seeing it from a distance."

Had Porter not bottled up a portion of the fleet up the Potomac, and Cochrane not divided his forces delaying the attack, there would have been insufficient time to build fortifications, too few trained troops, and no guts to confront their battle hardened adversaries.

Cochrane's Wrath

After Porter's daring escape from under the guns of the *Saturn* off Sandy Hook two months before, Captain Nash wrote a scathing report to the Fleet Commander in Chief, Admiral Cochrane, claiming Porter's escape was a breach of parole. Captain Porter's son, Admiral David Dixon Porter later recounted in his memoirs,

"Admiral Cochrane mustered the officers of his fleet on the quarterdeck, and declared Porter out of the pale of honor and must be treated accordingly."⁵¹

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The Potomac blockade's delay gave Cochrane something to stew about. Porter had devastated British shipping in the Pacific, escaped off Sandy Hook, and now, almost single-handed, thwarted the keystone of the British "divide and conquer" master plan to retake America.

As the fleet pulled itself together and sailed north toward Baltimore, two Americans came on board Cochrane's flagship, *HMS Tonnant*, under a flag of truce; John Skinner, U.S. agent in charge of arranging exchanges of prisoners of war and a young diplomatic lawyer, Francis Scott Key, who was trying to arrange for the release of Dr. Beanes, a prominent physician who had been abducted from his home during the invasion after giving care to wounded British and American soldiers.



Rear Admiral A. Cochrane

During dinner in the wardroom, Key and Skinner were invited guests. Commodore Porter's name came up in disgust. One senior officer began excoriating Porter, citing a time a decade earlier when Porter had flogged a British seaman who deprecated American heroism. They were keenly aware of Porter's exploits and thoroughly frustrated by their inability to corner and conquer this wily foe. Undoubtedly they wished they had Porter in irons as a prisoner of war, not the kindly Dr. Beanes.

Key and Skinner, while received cordially, were now temporary prisoners of war, as they were not to be released until after the attack for fear they might provide intelligence to the American forces. Cochrane had indicated to Key that once Baltimore, fell, like Washington, it would be plundered and burned.

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Attack on Baltimore

On Sunday, September 11th the British continued to marshal their forces, readying their invasion troops, but still established date for landings. The Americans counted 47 ships and estimated the British had amassed at least 6,000 soldiers, but had no idea where the enemy force would land.

Five hundred miles to the north the Battle of Lake Champlain was under way. American naval and ground forces converged to repel the invaders. General Andrew Jackson prepared troops in the Gulf States, preparing for an impending invasion.

Admiral Cochrane spied on the American fortifications through his telescope, but surmised that the redoubts and breastworks could be easily attacked because they lacked depth. General Ross, in charge of land invasion force, held the American defenders in contempt, boasting in public he didn't care if it "rained militia" as this would only add to the confusion and chaos already pervading yankee-doodle's ranks.

American General Smith deployed 3,000 men in advanced defensive fortifications, but held a large reserve force of over 10,000 behind the lines to be flexibly redeployed wherever needed as reinforcements. Cochrane and Ross had some idea of the magnitude of the reserves, but had badly underestimated their resolve. Unlike the defeat at Bladensburg, now the American force had about a 4 to 1 advantage in numbers, excellent leadership, a fighting spirit, and they were fighting to save their country.

In the early morning of Monday, September 12th, nearly three weeks after his victory at Bladensburg, and nearly two weeks since Gordon tried to leave Alexandria, Ross landed 4,700 troops and marines south east of the city. He believed Baltimore would fall by the end of the day. The Americans believed otherwise; Baltimore had been transformed from a cowardly city into a fortress.

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Upon the first wave of the attack, American reserve defenders rallied, converging on Ross's troops surrounding them as they marched five miles toward the city. By noon a sharpshooting American sniper with a flintlock rifle laid into Ross with a musket ball. It was the most important single shot fired in the entire war. The loss of the man considered a great leader sucked the energy out of his troops, emboldening his adversaries. To make matters worse, Ross arrogantly had not briefed his next in command sufficiently to fill the breach in leadership.

In fierce land fighting, the Americans were first forced to fall back, retreating but not defeated, as reinforcements behind the lines began to pour in, holding the British advance to a crawl.

The British plan of attack called for both land invasion and bombardment by sea. From the main fleet a squadron of seventeen attack ships was dispatched north into the harbor to lead the sea assault on the city. The day after General Ross landed his troops, the sea attack commenced as warships formed a battle line less than three miles south of Fort McHenry. Admiral Cochrane shifted his flag to the light frigate *Surprise* to command the advanced naval forces. Still detained, Key and Skinner remained at anchor far out of cannon range, but still in sight of the massive flag streaming gallantly over the fort.

Cochrane gave the signal to commence the assault. First he blasted Fort McHenry with Congreve rockets, followed by broadsides from the frigates, then bomb launches. The thunder of the guns, the bombs bursting, and the rockets roaring, amidst the dense smoke looked like hell's fires being poured onto the fort. They experienced the same terror as Porter's forces the week before. Cochrane's aim was to batter the fort mercilessly with his long range cannon from just out of range of the fort's batteries.⁵² Knocking out the fort would give the fleet clear access to pummel the city into submission just ahead of Ross's land force, then to enter the inner harbor attacking

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Fort Covington and the city itself. Fort McHenry's batteries roared back but Cochrane's ship's were positioned adroitly; the fort's cannon fire fell just short, splashing into the water without doing any damage.

The British bomb, rocket, and cannon attack bludgeoned the fort all day and then well into the night, inflicting serious damage. One bomb a minute arched into the fortress for hours on end. Each bomb was designed to blast several yards above ground, spraying deadly shrapnel in all directions.



Bombardment of Fort McHenry

It was the most powerful onslaught ever observed by spectators who described the scene as “the most awful spectacle of shot and shells and rockets shooting and bursting through the air,” “the most terrible of thunderstorms,” “like continued flashes of lightning” at night, as the awe-struck people of the city heard the cannon roar echo across the nearby hills and valleys. In Philadelphia, the inhabitants worried; if Baltimore fell they would have just 48 hours before needing to evacuate.

Would the defenses hold under such a withering attack, likes of which no defender had ever experienced?

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Before the battle began, Captain Porter had made his way back to Baltimore, taking command of a battery on Signal Hill a short distance north of the fort. He watched the fireworks perched on an observation tower his father had built years before.



Observation Tower on Signal Hill (now called Federal Hill)

Cochrane planned for the navy to attack into the night while pushing past Fort McHenry into the inner harbor, expecting Ross's land forces to have surrounded the city by then.

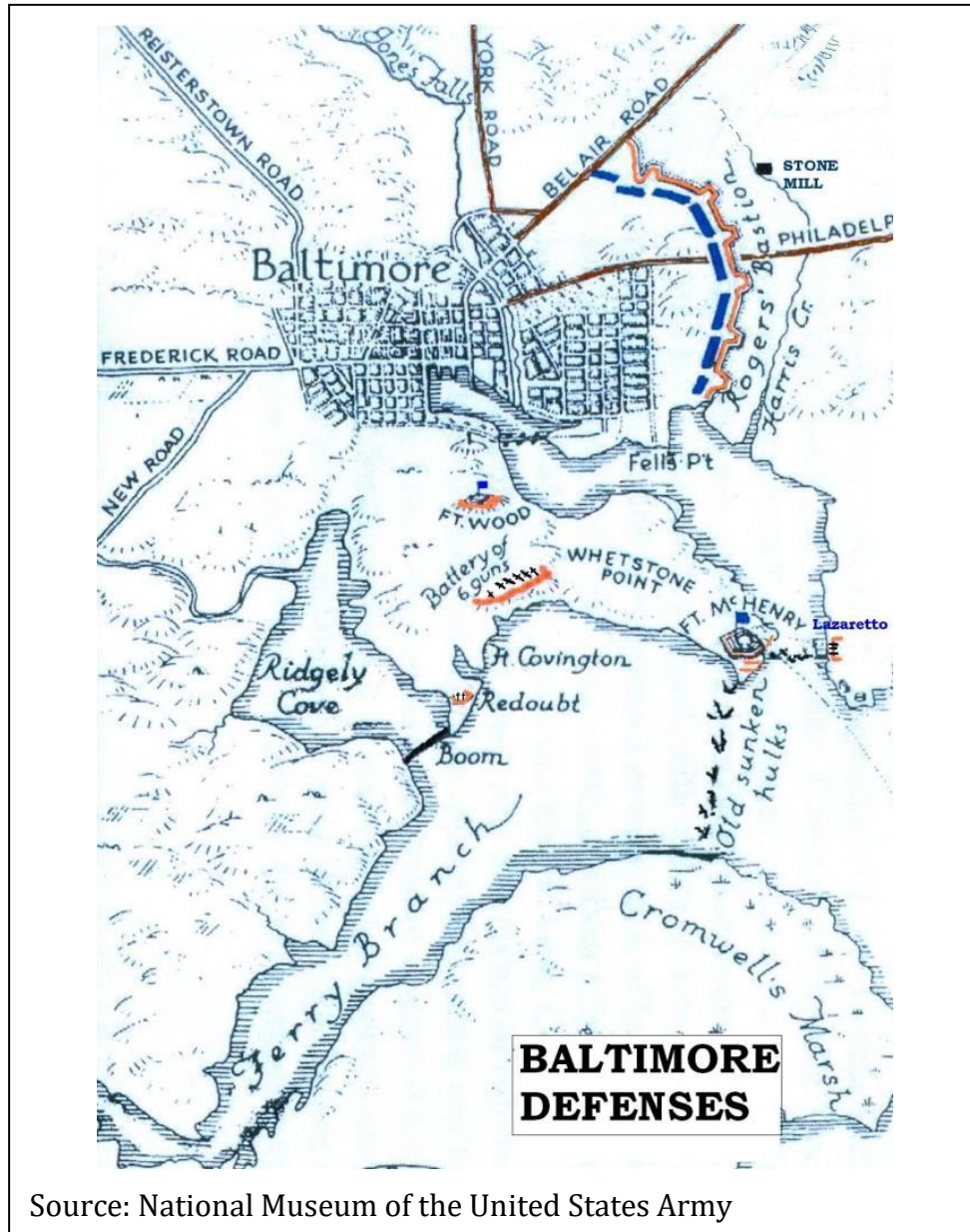
However the American defenders had scuttled a number of ships at the mouth of the harbor, within range of gun boats and the fort's batteries, making passage into the harbor perilous.

Coordination between land and naval forces for a joint attack on the city was now ruled out. With British intelligence now estimating the American land forces as high as 20,000, combined with superior fortifications, shadows of doubt were now cast among the British commanders; prior estimates that a loss of only 500 troops during the assault were thrown out, and revised upward.

Cochrane wrote to Col. Brooke, General Ross's replacement, that an unsupported land attack would be futile, doubting that Brooke's 3,500 regulars were a

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"force sufficient to defeat so large a number as it is said the enemy has collected, say twenty thousand



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strong. It will be only throwing the men's lives away ... as the enemy is daily gaining strength."

The fleet admiral could no longer envision a clear pathway to victory. His fears that time was not on his side were correct. Cochrane's decision to divide his forces, Porter's delaying action with the Potomac blockade, and one crack shot from a sniper changed the balance of power in the battle. ⁵³

Brooke conceded to Cochrane's caution, knowing that an assault unsupported by sea would likely fail; he'd suffer enormous casualties, or worse, disastrous capture of his entire invasion force, as he exposed his flanks and rear to a massive counter-assault. Brooke wisely decided to withdraw under the cover of darkness rather than risk heavy losses. ⁵⁴ At sea, Cochrane, as yet unaware of Brooke's fateful decision, resumed his relentless bombardment.

Francis Scott Key, not cognizant of Brooke's decision to withdraw his forces, and intensely aware of the resumption of the thunderous bombardment, could not sleep that night. The future of his beloved nation was at stake. He and agent Skinner, on edge and exhausted by the ceaseless blasting, clamored on deck to assess the situation. In the early morning hours of Wednesday, September 14th, there had been nearly twenty four hours of pummeling bombardment, broken only by two brief interludes.

As the mist cleared in the early dawn light, they peered through their spyglasses to assess the anticipated disaster. Instead the large Star and Stripes flag, tattered and torn, was proudly waving in the breeze. Swelling with emotion, Key was stirred to pen his famous words:

Oh, say can you see by the dawn's early light
What so proudly we hailed at the twilight's last gleaming?
Whose broad stripes and bright stars thru the perilous fight,
O'er the ramparts we watched were so gallantly streaming?

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And the rocket's red glare, the bombs bursting in air,
Gave proof through the night that our flag was still there.
Oh, say does that star-spangled banner yet wave
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave?

The Star-spangled banner.

*O say, can you see by the dawn's early light
What so proudly we hail'd as the twilight's last gleaming,
Whose broad stripes and bright stars, through the clouds of the fight,
O'er the ramparts we watch'd were so gallantly streaming?
And the rocket's red glare - the bomb bursting in air,
Gave proof through the night that our flag was still there?
O say, does that star-spangled banner yet wave
O'er the land of the free - the home of the brave? -*

At the indomitable fortress, Col. Armistead estimated Fort McHenry took a pounding, the target of fifteen to eighteen hundred shells, a quarter which actually did damage.

Admiral Cochrane reluctantly withdrew his forces, and the Union was saved. Only several days later did anyone learn that on Lake Champlain American Captain Macdonough's victory halted the northern British offensive.

With defeats at the Battle of Lake Champlain and failure in the siege of Baltimore, the British divide and conquer strategy was stopped dead in its tracks, forcing the British to make peace during the Treaty of Ghent negotiations in December which secured our borders and guaranteed claims to the Great Lakes.

Epilogue

One cannot resist asking the "what if" questions and scenarios. Had Porter's parole by Captain Hillyar been honored, Porter would have been out of the fight.

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Had the head-strong British not been consumed in avenging the unwise burning of the Canadian provincial capital, just a small village at the time, by American forces earlier in the war, they would have kept their eye on the target strategy, and not raised the ire of Americans with the burning of Washington. As has been learned time after time, the destruction of a revered landmark can boomerang causing heated animosity rather than demoralization. (e.g. Winston Churchill used Hitler's bombing of London to staunch British resolve in WWII)

Had the British not delayed their invasion plans and instead attacked right on the heels of the Bladensburg rout -- simply securing Washington without burning it, then attacking Fort Washington from the rear and securing stores in Alexandria with a small contingent -- from all accounts Baltimore would probably have capitulated, with Wilmington then Philadelphia next in line like a cascade of falling dominoes; the divide and conquer strategy would be in full force; British dominance would only be a matter of time, as a battle of attrition would decimate what was left of a struggling America beleaguered and blockaded by three hard years of war.

Had Baltimore and Philadelphia fallen, Secretary of State, John Quincy Adams, leading the American delegation at the Treaty of Ghent three months later in December, 1814 would have had virtually no cards to play, and would probably have been negotiating a peaceful reversion back to British colonial rule.

Had James Monroe not seen the tactical importance of the Potomac Blockade and not appointed Porter to command a joint expeditionary force, Captain James Gordon would have escaped with his flotilla virtually unhindered.

Had Gordon not gorged himself on the stores in Alexandria, and not puffed himself as conquering warlord, wasting precious time, he could have run his flotilla down river before either Porter or Perry could put up gun emplacements. Had he

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set sail on 1 September, not the next day, he would have exited the Potomac unimpeded.

The outcome of the Battle of Baltimore, and the entire war of 1812, would probably have been totally different without the additional week of preparations provided by Porter's heroic blockade of the Potomac against a force more than ten times his own. A combination of strategy, daring, resolve, Army-Navy cooperation, a well placed sniper shot, and trustworthy leadership made the difference in the outcome.

Perhaps, as the founding fathers came to believe through the travails of the Revolution, there was some force of divine guidance that influenced the choices that protected America -- *provided we acted with righteousness, integrity, and honor*; hence *In God We Trust* on our coins.

From another perspective, so many of the more glorified naval heroes of the war of 1812 – Hull, Bainbridge, and Decatur, among others – made little difference in the actual outcome of the war.⁵⁵ The Battle of Baltimore was the most important battle in that it definitively turned the tide of this nation's destiny against a powerful armada assembled to win back the nation lost in the American Revolution.

Why, then, is Porter's blockade so little known?

First, because it was wedged between the bookends of the dramatic burning of Washington and the defense of Baltimore, it is seldom even a footnote to history.

Additionally, because there was little actual damage inflicted and few casualties, its significance has been underplayed; assessing "damage incurred" overlooks the value of "time" versus the value of "destruction." We should be using a chronograph, not body count, as the proper measuring stick of success in this evaluation. Napoleon was right:

One can regain lost ground, but never lost time.

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At the time of the battle, Porter and his militia allies believed they had failed in their objective because Gordon eventually ran the gauntlet; an assessment reaffirmed, but not critically reexamined, by historians ever since.

In his speech to a joint session of Congress the week after victory in Baltimore, President James Madison said of Porter's exploits: "... In the blaze of heroism...Captain Porter... distinguished by daring enterprise and by fertility of genius ... [along with] his brave comrades have added much to the rising glory of the American flag, and have merited all the effusions of gratitude which their country is ever ready to bestow on the champions of its rights and of its safety."⁵⁶

Ironically these remarks were referring strictly to Porter's Pacific campaign; Madison did not mention Porter's role in the Potomac blockade.

Lastly, the story has, until now, existed in scattered fragments, never pieced together to understand its whole and true significance. Thus there has never been a holistic spectrum of light shed on the entire sequence of events and their implications.

In many ways, Porter's Spartan force at the Blockade of the Potomac, and the subsequent Battle of Baltimore successfully achieved what the Greeks attained against the Persians in the Battles of Thermopylae and Artemisium, which also turned the tide of history forever.

In all respects, the Potomac blockade is a classic example of a Pyrrhic victory for the British – winning a seemingly insignificant battle cost them the war and any chance of regaining its most prized colony.

England then turned its focus of empire-building to other places. With the British withdrawal as an enemy force, the U.S. shortly thereafter was emboldened to enact the Monroe

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Doctrine, aimed at keeping European powers from intervening in western hemisphere affairs.

In the end, this is a story about how a single person and a seemingly insignificant deed of forsaken honor can change the destiny of a nation and the fate of millions of people for centuries to come – something even Porter never realized.

Now you know “the rest of the story.”

-30-

Robert Porter Lynch (RobertLynch@warrenco.com)

Character becomes Destiny

-- Heraclitus c 500 B.C.

¹ General Sources:

- Life and Letters of Admiral D.G. Farragut, by his son, Loyall Farragut, Appleton, 1879
- Memoir of Commodore David Porter, United States Navy by Admiral David Dixon Porter, Munsell Press, 1875
- The Burning of Washington. The British Invasion of 1814 by Anthony S. Pitch, Naval Institute Press, 1998
- Nothing Too Daring, by Richard Long, United States Naval Institute, 1970
- Defending the Old Dominion: Virginia and Its Militia in the War of 1812 by Stuart L. Butler, University Press of America, 2013
- Official Report of David Porter published in Niles Weekly Register, Volume 7, 1814, pp 33-35
- National Park Service Internet files

² Source: Jamaican Chronicle, July 21, 1814, published later in Niles Weekly Register, Volume 7 Sept 10, 1814

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³ His close friends in New York City included Stephen Decatur, Robert Fulton, and Washington Irving.

⁴ According to the memoirs of Porter's son Admiral David Dixon Porter (another Civil War hero), Porter was greeted by the mayor and "escorted by an immense cavalcade of citizens of all ranks, and passed through the streets gaily decorated with flags, in his honor. When the procession arrived opposite Christ's church ... it was met by a large body of respectable seamen, who attached a rope to the carriage (from which people had removed the horses) and proceeded through the city with enthusiastic shouts. Upon arriving at the Mansion House Hotel, the sailors insisted on carrying the Captain in, on their shoulders, and these demonstrations continued until he reached Chester, where his family was residing."

⁵ Published in Niles Weekly Register, Volume 6, August 27, 1814

⁶ Published in Niles Weekly Register, Volume 7 Sept 10, 1814

⁷ He quickly bid adieu to his beloved wife Evalina his young son, and his adopted child, David Glasgow Farragut, who begged to go with Porter, but the Captain said he was "too young for land fighting."

⁸ Dolly Madison evacuated the President's House, (it wasn't called the White House then), saving the famed Gilbert Stuart painting of George Washington (that now emblazons the dollar bill) just ahead of the invasion force marching on Washington.

⁹ Commodore Thomas Tingey, navy yard commander, had orders to set fire property in the event of the British gaining a victory, to prevent it falling into the invader's hands. In different references this ship is referred to as *Columbia* and *Essex II*.

¹⁰ Reported in the Niles Weekly Register, Volume 7, Sept 10, 1814

¹¹ From Official Letter from Secretary of the Navy, William Jones to Congress, October 3, 1814, p 575

¹² Niles weekly register, Volume 7 September 10, 1814

¹³ According to Wikipedia, citing James, William; *The Naval History of Great Britain, from the Declaration of War by France in 1793, to the Accession of George IV.* (1837), Vol. 6, pp.312-317, the British suffered from several disadvantages. First, they lacked pilots that knew the Kettle-Bottoms, a difficult stretch of the river. Second, the winds blew in the wrong direction, slowing their advance. Consequently, it took ten days to reach the fort, and during the journey all the ships grounded [totaling] at least 20 times. For five successive days they had to warp [using their anchors and cables to haul their ships] over a distance of 50 miles [the distance is actually closer to 80 miles taking the twists and turns of the river into account.]

¹⁴ According to Wikipedia citing James (1837), Vol. 6, pp.312-317 as a source, "the following morning the British occupied the defenses. The principal fort contained two 52-pounder, two 32-pounder and eight 24-pounder guns. On the beach there was also battery of five 18-pounders;

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along with a Martello tower with two 12-pounders and a battery in the rear with two 12 and six 6-pound field guns. Before they fled the Americans had spiked the guns; the British landing party of seamen and marines completed the destruction, especially of the gun carriages. The loss of the forts and batteries left the town of Alexandria undefended." [RPL Note: It would be reasonable to guess that the 32 pounders received by Porter sans carriages were possibly from Fort Washington. When cannon's are "spiked" a large nail is driven into the fuse hole. It could take a day or more to drill out a large spike by hand.] Fort Washington is often referred to in military reports as Fort Warburton, its former name.

¹⁵ Dyson was later court-martialed and convicted of cowardice. He claimed in his defense that no officer should be considered a coward if the odds were not in his favor, reflecting the sense of desolation harbored by many American military commanders at that time. [RPL Note: Playing the odds is just one consideration in any battle, but should certainly never be the primary concern. Other factors, such as those cited by Sun Tzu, are more important. Bravery, courage, wit, timing, confidence, and valor are the qualities associated with "beating the odds," not "playing the odds."

¹⁶ Twenty one American ships were being loaded to the gunwales with looted flour, sugar, tobacco, cotton, wine, and coffee – all scarce cargo in a land blockaded by sea for two years. Their stash was so enormous they had to leave 200,000 barrels of booty on the docks for lack of transportation, to be reclaimed after the anticipated defeat of Baltimore.

¹⁷ Niles Weekly, Volume 7, Sept 1814

¹⁸ To this very day, Virginia military historians remain perplexed about the identity of the "mystery riders," apparently missing the account written after the battle. Sixty years later with the 1875 publication of Admiral David Dixon Porter's publication of the Memoirs of Commodore David Porter the story was retold and their true identity again revealed. At that time the nation was consumed with issues about the Civil War, and the War of 1812 was of little importance.

¹⁹ Butler, Stuart; *Defending the Old Dominion: Virginia and Its Militia in the War of 1812*: p 424. This account has Monroe accompanying the joint task force to the White House Bluffs, which is confirmed by Porter's account. This demonstrates either Monroe was worried the Army-Navy joint force would squabble, and/or he considered the expedition so important he would ensure its effective launch by his presence.

²⁰ Army and Navy officers often squabbled about rank and seniority, which frequently led to the oldest, but least capable, man being put in charge, resulting in military debacles. This happened at Bladensburg with a disastrous outcome. The problem was made more thorny because there was no rank in the navy comparable to an army general, as the navy had not

~~created an admirals rank at the time of the War of 1812. It's more than just~~

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coincidence that when the Navy finally created an admirals rank during the Civil War, the first two admirals were David Glasgow Farragut, Porter's adopted son, and David Dixon Porter, his real son.

²¹ Reported in letter from J. Mason to the Hon. Richard M. Johnson, in Military Affairs, 1814, p 595. It is not clear whether Porter crossed the river more than once during this time; apparently he did.

²² Butler, Stuart; Ibid; p 424

²³ The "White House" has no connection to today's Presidential residence. The land occupied by Porter's battery belonged to Fernando Fairfax's Belvoir estate. Today's "White House" refers to the white paint used to mask the scorch marks left on the building after being burned by the British.

²⁴ It is logical to assume that later that night these trees, along with any stones and earth would have been thrown together to form "breastworks" (usually 5 feet high) to shield the gunners and cannon. The artist's rendering of the fortifications supports this assumption).

To have a perspective on the size of armament, a 6 pound shot is the size of a tennis ball in cast iron, and a 24 pound shot is the size of a bowling ball.

²⁵ There was no rank of Admiral at the time of the War of 1812. The term "Commodore" was not an official rank in the navy. It was used informally as an honorary title among ranking captains that had commanded a squadron of ships, to distinguish them from a Captain who only commanded a single ship.

²⁶ In a report to Secretary of War Armstrong, it was reported the following armament: *Seahorse* rating 38 guns, *Euryalus* rating 36 guns, two rocket ships of 18 guns each, two bomb ships of eight guns each, and a schooner of 2 guns, plus *Fairy* with 18 guns. In Porter's report, which is probably more accurate given his naval expertise, he reported two frigates carrying a total of 96 guns, three bomb ships with a total of 30 guns, one sloop of war fitted as a rocket ship with 26 guns, one brig with 18 guns, one schooner with 1 gun and two barges (gunboats) with 2 guns for a total of 173 guns.

To put this level of armament against another perspective fifty years later: The entire Battle of Gettysburg lasted only three days (July 1-3) and is considered the bloodiest battle of the Civil War, with 55,000 casualties. The most famous attack was Pickett's Charge by Confederate forces, at which the Union Army Forces engaged are estimated at 6,500 facing a Confederate Infantry led by General Pickett of 15,000 men. Pickett's assault was preceded by an artillery bombardment of 150 Confederate guns, which is considered the "largest grand battery ever assembled on the North American continent." The majority of the artillery used by the Confederates in the barrage comprised 10 and 12 pound smoothbore "Napoleons" and rifled Parrott guns. Measuring the "hurling power" (# of guns - times - weight of shot), Gordon's squadron threw more "hurling power" at Porter

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miniscule battery than the entire Confederate Army did against the North preceding Pickett's Charge. What's more, Gordon's barrage lasted for days; the Confederate barrage lasted a little over an hour. (source: Gilmore, Mark: Artillery Employment at Battle of Gettysburg; Thesis for Master of Military Art and Science; Oregon State University, 1977

²⁷ Reported in *Niles Weekly*, Volume 7, September 1814

²⁸ *Fairy* has been referred to in the historical records by a variety of technical names by those not familiar with sailing nomenclature of the time. She was actually at "Cruizer Class Brig-Sloop." This is a confusing term to today's modern sailor, who thinks of a "sloop" as a single-masted vessel with a Bermuda or gaff rig. In the 1800s, a "brig-sloop" was a two-masted square rigged armed brig; (A "sloop-of-war" referred to a three-masted square rigger smaller than a frigate, sometimes called a *corvette*.) For the sake of modern reference, the *Fairy* is simply referred to here as a *brig*.

²⁹ The *Fairy's* long boat was taking soundings to prevent going aground, not paying attention to the pending attack.

³⁰ These gunboats as well as troop transports were often referred to in old maritime lexicon as "barges," which to modern mariners means a flat bottomed platform. The old meaning referred to a large rowed long-boat carrying guns, troops, munitions, or supplies. I have called them "gunboats" again for clarity for the modern reader.

³¹ These probably came from Captain Griffin's Alexandria Artillery

³² From Wikipedia: Erebus was equipped with a battery of 32-pound Congreve rockets installed below the main deck, which fired through portholes or scuttles pierced in the ship's side. She later was one of the rocket-ships that took aim on Fort McHenry.

³³ The British barrage foreshadowed Francis Scott Key's description of the soon-to-be-fought Battle of Baltimore with "bombs bursting in mid-air amidst the rocket's red glare."

³⁴ Each bomb had to be set by a separate fuze cord which was cut to a specific length before firing. The length of cord determined the moment the bomb would fire. Lack of bomb effectiveness is often due to an error in cutting the cord to the right length to fire at the optimum moment.

³⁵ Stuart, *Ibid*, p 426

³⁶ Porter, Official Report published in *Niles Weekly Register*, Volume 7, 1814, p 33

³⁷ While unclear from the report, these were probably supplied from Perry's cache at Indian Head.

³⁸ Porter reported on the morning of the 5 September he had operational 3 18-pounders, two 12s, six 6s, and two 4s. It is not clear, after the 6 September bombardment, how many weapons remained serviceable.

³⁹ Stuart, *Ibid*, p 428

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⁴⁰ The final toll for the six day battle is unclear, with different accounts shows thirty to forty eight American casualties, eleven to thirty killed and nineteen to thirty two wounded. Of those, the Essex's surgeon sustained a serious head wound and one of Porter's stalwart lieutenants received his third wound.

⁴¹ Porter, Adm. David Dixon; Ibid, p 260

⁴² Stuart, Ibid, p 429

⁴³ The *Federal Republican* decried the disgrace of not being able to provide sufficient arms and ammunition, "*The people of America will not believe it; the people of Europe will not believe it. There were men enough, ten, twenty times over, but there was a deficiency in the munitions of war.*"

⁴⁴ Official British Reports indicate during the run down the river the British had suffered only seven dead and 35 wounded, though one was Charles Dickson, *Fairy's* second lieutenant. *Erebus* alone lost two men killed and 16 men wounded; eight were severely. Commander Bartholomew, Lieutenant Reuben Paine and four others were slightly wounded.

⁴⁵ Extract of a letter from Major. Wm. B. Barney to General Smith, dated Annapolis 8 September, published in *Niles Weekly Review*, Volume 7, September, 1814

⁴⁶ Stuart, Ibid, p 430

⁴⁷ Stuart, Ibid, p 430

⁴⁸ London newspapers had earlier stated that Baltimore was a key target, particularly because it harboured so many privateers that had wreaked havoc on British shipping. In the eyes of the British, these dastardly creatures were no better than lowly pirates, and should be hung.

⁴⁹ In many ways it resembled the same predicament faced by George Washington forty years before.

⁵⁰ Pitcher, Anthony, *Burning of Washington*, P 185

⁵¹ Porter, Admiral David Dixon; Ibid, p243

⁵² This is the same tactic Captain Hillyar used on Porter's *Essex* in Valparaiso earlier in the year – shoot from a distance beyond the range of the oppositions cannons.

⁵³ Cochrane later reported to his superiors that he had to preserve his troop strength for his planned attack on the Mississippi later that year, now referred to as the Battle of New Orleans.

⁵⁴ It had been raining heavily all day, which may have been an added factor in his decision, as wet powder could diminish this infantry's effectiveness.

⁵⁵ Captain Macdonough's naval and Maj. General Izard's army victory over the British on Lake Champlain, which ironically happened September 11th, 1814, squelched any British plans to complete the divide and conquer strategy that fall with a set of attacks from Canada down the Hudson. It could be legitimately argued that this victory too affected the outcome of the war by thwarting the divide and conquer strategy. Later, on January 8,

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1815, General Andrew Jackson mounted a victory over the British southern expeditionary force. The battle, while being decisively won, had no impact on the outcome of the war because the Treaty of Ghent that ended the war was signed on 24 December, 1814 (but word had not yet been received in New Orleans when the battle was fought). Any strategic analysis of the Battle of Baltimore would give high probability to the scenario that, if the British won the battle, they would move on to Philadelphia, then the British would have redoubled their attack from Canada into New York, then onward to New York City. A detachment of British Army Regulars could be sent from Philadelphia to aid the northern force in its attack on New York City. The British had already been successful in blockading the port of New York; they could have sent additional ships into New York harbor to augment the assault. Fortunately this scenario never had a chance to play out.⁵⁶ President James Monroe, in his address to Congress Sept 20, 1814; State papers and [sic] public documents of the United States ... By President, United States. Dept. of State 1811-1815 page 535

General Reference (source: Wikipedia) Each of the round shot sizes with weights were standard throughout the British and American armies and navies. This table designates the standard specifications. 4/lb, 6/lb and so on. Because the weight of the shot is dependent on "volume," a small change in barrel diameter of a cannon has a massive impact on the volume (or Mass) of the cannon ball. The "throwing power" of cannon is based on the weight of the ball and the muzzle velocity (which is based on the load of powder and the length of the barrel).

From Newton's 2nd law, the integral of the force over the distance it moves the ball will equal the kinetic energy of the ball. Hence:

$$\frac{1}{2} mv^2 = \text{Force}$$

where: m = mass of the cannonball and v = muzzle velocity,

Range and accuracy of a gun is dependent upon the exiting muzzle velocity, the shape of the projectile, and whether the barrel is "smooth bore" imparting no spin on the projectile (like throwing a knuckle-ball), or "rifle bore" which imparts a spin (like throwing a football.)

Mass of Cast Iron ball (lb)	Diameter (in)
4	3.05
6	3.49
9	4.00

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12	4.40
18	5.04
24	5.55
32	6.10