

Sailing the Star

Larry was deeply engaged in reading Patrick O'Brian's book titled, *H.M.S. Surprise*, one in a series of historical novels about the Napoleonic wars. The stories were exciting, swash-buckling sagas of a fictitious Admiral Nelson-like British sea captain by the name of Jack Aubrey, who successfully fought the French in a square-rigged sailing ship, like the *Star of India*, anchored at the embarcadero in downtown San Diego. Larry had been aboard the *Star* several times and had begun to recognize the complexity of sea battles fought in the early 1800s. He identified with Jack Aubrey, the fictitious sea captain, who commanded the *Surprise*. As he read, his imagination transformed him into the role of Captain Jack:

"Jack, captain of the *Surprise*, Stourton, his lieutenant, and Etherege, commander of the marines, were on the quarterdeck. Harrowby, the executive officer, stood a little behind them, conning the ship; the other officers were at the guns, each to his own division. Every man silently watched the *Berceau* as she ran down, a beautiful, trim, little ship, with scarlet topsides. She was head-on now, coming for the *Surprises'* broadside, and Jack, watching closely through his glass, could see no sign of her meaning to bear up. The half-minute signal gun beside him spoke out again and again and again, yet still the *Berceau* came on into the certainty of a murderous raking fire. This was more determination than ever he had reckoned on. He had once done the same himself, in the Mediterranean: but that was against a Spanish frigate.

Another two hundred yards and his heavy carronades would reach the *Berceau* point-blank. The signal-gun again; and again. 'Belay there,' he said; and much louder, 'Mr. Pullings, Mr. Pullings -- a steady, deliberate fire, now. Let the smoke clear between each shot. Point low on her foremast.'

A pause, and on the upward roll the purser's gun crashed out, the smoke sweeping ahead. A hole appeared in the corvette's spritsail and a cheer went up, drowned by the second gun. 'Steady, steady,' roared

Jack, and Pullings ran down the line to point the third. The ball splashed close to the corvette's bow, and as it splashed she answered with a shot from her chaser that struck the mainmast a glancing blow. The firing came down the line, a rippling broadside: two shots went home in the corvette's bows, another hit her chains, and there were holes in her foresail. Now it began forward, and as the range narrowed so they hit her hard with almost every shot or swept her deck from stem to stern -- there were two guns dismantled aboard her, and several men lying on the deck. Broadside after deliberate broadside, the whole ship quivering in the thunder -- the jets of flame, the thick powder-smoke racing ahead. Still the *Berceau* held on, though her way was checked, and now her bow-guns answered with chain-shot that shrieked high through the rigging, cutting ropes and sails as it went. 'Can he mean to lay me aboard?' thought Jack. 'Mr. Pullings, Mr. Babington, briskly now, and grape the next round. Mr. Etherage, the Marines may --' His words were cut off by a furious cheer. The *Berceau's* foremast was going: it gave a great forward lurch, the stays and the shrouds parted, and it fell in a ruin of canvas, masking the corvette's forward guns. 'Hold hard,' he cried. 'Maintop, there. Let go.'

The *Surprises'* topsail billowed out, came down, collapsed, and across the water they heard a thin answering cheer from the shattered corvette. A forward gun sent a hail of grape along the *Berceau's* deck, knocking down a dozen men and cutting away her colours. 'Cease fire there. Rot you all in hell,' cried Jack. 'Secure those guns. Mr. Stourton, hands to knot and splice.'

'She struck,' said a voice in the waist, as the *Surprise* swept on. The *Berceau*, hulled again and again, low in the water and by the head, swung heavily around, and they saw a figure running up the mizzen-shrouds with fresh colours. Jack took his hat off to her captain, standing there on his bloody quarterdeck seventy yards away; the Frenchman returned the salute, but still, as his remaining larboard guns came to bear he fired a ragged broadside after the *Surprise*, and then, as she reached the limit of his range, another in a last attempt at preventing her escape. A vain attempt: not a shot came home."

Larry looked up from his book as he heard something strike the front porch. First, he thought it was a stray cannon ball, but upon recognizing the familiar red-painted front door of his living room as he emerged slowly from the images of a naval battle on the *Surprise*, he realized it was just the evening edition of the San Diego Union Tribune hitting the screen door, thrown by the paperboy. He reluctantly tore himself away from the drama of vanquishing a French war ship, opened the screen, picked up the paper, and quickly glanced at the front page. He was about to toss the paper aside and return to the Napoleonic era, when his eye caught a glimpse of the *Star of India* just below the fold of the front page.

The image of the old three-masted schooner always stirred his pulse a bit, so he looked closer at the short article below the picture. As he read the first few lines the following words popped out:

THE STAR IS RECRUITING CREWMEN. REPORT FOR SIX WEEKS OF TRAINING IN APRIL AND MAY. TWENTY NEW CREWMEN TO BE SELECTED.

"You've got to kidding, " he thought. "The *Star* is recruiting new crew members? That's incredible! I thought they would've had more than enough volunteers to "man" the ship the few times she goes to sea each year."

The *Star* was normally tied up at the dock along the embarcadero in downtown San Diego where tourists could visit her each day. Once or twice a year, on special occasions, however, she was towed ten miles out of the harbor past Point Loma where she sailed for a couple of hours. Although the USS Constitution is the oldest square-rigged sailing ship still afloat, she doesn't actually "sail" when towed out to sea -- she's too fragile because her old wooden beams can't stand the strain. The *Star*, on the other hand, being constructed of iron, is strong enough to get under way with full sail.

When she "flies" the *Star* is a magnificent sight to see on a sunny day -- a cloud of white over the blue of the ocean; from jibs in the front, foresails, mainsails, and mizzen sails in the middle, to the spanker in the stern; and from staysails near the deck, to topsails, and topgallants above -- some twenty sails in all. It takes a crew of over fifty sailors to hoist and adjust the sails when under way.

"Maybe this is my chance to actually sail on a 'tall ship' as large, old sailing ships are called," Larry thought. "I'll get my name on the list right now." So, Larry signed up and was told to report for duty at 9 a.m. on the first Saturday in April for the five following Saturdays.

Arriving on the deck of the *Star* that first day was glorious! There were men running everywhere getting everything shipshape. Hundreds of ropes lay coiled on the deck and tied to the rails. Sails were fluttering in the breeze. Excitement was in the air. Larry was going to become a crewman on the *Star of India!*

But then, the hard work began. Volunteers were broken into four groups that rotated between instructors, so each person could get more hands-on training. One group was taught how to tie knots; a second group learned "the ropes", that is, how to coil a rope and what sails they were tied to; a third group memorized the names and functions of over twenty sails; and the fourth group attempted to pass the qualifying physical tests.

Larry knew he was in trouble when he learned what the qualifying tests required. The first test was to be able to lift a 200-pound bag of sand to a shelf fifteen-feet above the floor with a pulley. He passed that test easily, but the second was harder -- 30 pull-ups in less than two minutes. And, the third was harder still -- climbing a two-inch rope, thirty feet above the floor. He hadn't done either of these exercises since high school forty years before and was barely able to do it then. He tried and failed tests two and three for several weeks, and it eventually became evident, it wasn't going to happen. Finally, he quit after the fifth week, after realizing his upper body strength just wasn't enough to pull his 250-pound body up the rope. The sad part was that he never even got to try the fourth test -- climbing up the rigging into the Crow's nest, leaning 45-degrees outward beneath the platform.

It was painfully apparent that if he couldn't manage to climb a vertical rope, there was no way he could ever get into the crow's nest! A major part of being a sailor was climbing the rigging to unfurl the sheets 75 feet above the deck. Such work was dangerous, and everyone aloft needed to be in tip-top condition!

It was good that the tests were rigorous to avoid unqualified sailors in the rigging. But, it was hard giving up the dream of standing on the spars ready to

respond to the captain's command to, "Drop the sheets!" or being part of a crew assembled to sing sea chanties as they raised the anchor or lifting the sails by pulling on ropes together. Oh, well, maybe the sailor's life was meant for younger, lighter men.

Larry and Jeannette watched from shore as the *Star* sailed on July 4th, the first time after he missed the cut to be a crewman. He and Jeannette watched her from Point Loma as she headed to open water, raised her sails, and floated across the waves. What a beautiful sight. Larry had missed a wonderful opportunity to experience a bit of history.

But, a few weeks later Larry received a letter from the San Diego Maritime Museum, the organization that administered the maintenance and operation of the *Star*. He figured it was an appeal for funds and almost dropped it in the trash. But, then he thought better of it when he noticed the envelope was gilded in gold.

He opened the letter and was shocked to read the following:

Mr. Vardiman your name was selected in a drawing of those persons who tried for crew on the Star of India in April of 2001. You are invited to be our guest with a friend for a special sailing on September 16, 2001.

"What! That's incredible," he shouted to Jeannette from the front of the house. "We're sailing on the *Star*, " he yelled. "And, I don't have to crew the ship -- we're guests on the quarterdeck!"

When the day came to sail on the *Star*, they arrived early, presented the invitation, and were welcomed aboard. It was a glorious day! They were treated as royalty. Throughout the day oysters on the half shell, fresh boiled shrimp, crab, and lobster were served on ice in the galley. Preferred seating near the rails was available when the crew wasn't running lines across the deck. And, he didn't have to raise a finger to hoist a sail or the anchor.

They were towed by tugboat out past Point Loma and sailed free as a bird for two hours on the briny deep. Finally, they made their way back to port after blocking the way of a U.S. Navy missile cruiser in the harbor while the crew practiced lowering and raising the anchor in the center of the channel.

The day would have been even better if it had not been clouded by a disastrous event earlier in the week. The sailing occurred on Sunday following the destruction of the Twin Towers in New York City the previous Tuesday. The decision had been made to sail the *Star* even with all the fear, uncertainty, and confusion of the week. The atmosphere was tense and peculiar, mainly because no commercial flights flew in or out of Lindbergh Field next to San Diego Bay. However, there were many military aircraft from North Island Naval Air Station and Miramar on patrol. They felt like the *Star* was part of an armada protecting San Diego from an unknown threat.

The voyage on the *Star* was Larry's only venture into swashbuckling, but it was enough. He has been more than satisfied to swashbuckle from his easy chair at home with Patrick O'Brian for the past twenty years.

(Thanks to Patrick O'Brian for the short narrative from *H.M.S. Surprise*)