

A True "Captain Kid"

AT 12 YEARS OLD,
HE WAS THE YOUNGEST OFFICER
IN THE U.S. NAVY.

Cape Horn, at the southern tip of Chile and often fraught with raging seas and howling storms, has been the graveyard of many sailing ships. Yet, in the late 1700s and early 1800s, vessels continued to round the Horn because the Pacific Ocean was alive with whales. New England seamen spent long months at sea to bring home cargoes of whale oil for lamps and baleen (a stiff, flexible material from the whale's mouth) for buggy whips, carriage springs, corset stays and skirt hoops, fishing poles, and umbrella ribs.

Whaling was making America prosperous at the time, but this continued only until the beginning of hostilities with Great Britain during the War of 1812. Then American whaling ships lay idle at the docks or fell prey at sea to powerful British sailing warships or privateers. Many American ships, however, were still in the Pacific Ocean hunting grounds, and it was to protect these that Capt. David Porter took the frigate *Essex*, a sailing warship, around the angry Cape.

Ever vigilant, Porter and his crew captured several British ships that had taken possession of American whalers. He then released the American crews.





On board *Essex* was “Jimmy,” a 12-year-old midshipman and son of a Spanish-American immigrant. He had been adopted by the captain’s family and lived with them from the age of 7, soon after his own mother had died. Porter was like a father to him.

Unbeknownst to Porter, the whaler *Barclay* had sailed from New Bedford, Massachusetts, in 1811, under Capt. Gideon Randall. While off the coast of Peru, the *Barclay* had been captured by the Peruvian privateer ship *Nereyda*. (At the time, Peru was Britain’s ally.) *Nereyda*’s captain removed Randall and his crew from the *Barclay* and put his own men aboard.

Soon after this takeover, Porter and *Essex* met and captured *Nereyda*, setting free Randall and his crew. *Barclay* was also recaptured.

Porter offered to return *Barclay*’s captain and crew to their own ship, but the crew refused to go. They felt safer aboard the well-armed *Essex*.

Instead, Porter chose U.S. Navy sailors from his own ship to crew *Barclay* and summoned Jimmy. “James,” he said, “you’ve been with me in the Navy for 3 years now. You should know by this time how to command a ship.”

The boy saluted and said, “Aye, aye, sir.” Then Jimmy’s eyes grew wide as he considered the captain’s words: “Command a ship?” He was about to have one of the greatest adventures of his life.

Placing a hand on Jimmy’s shoulder, Porter said, “I’m giving you

full command of *Barclay*. I want you to take her to Valparaiso, Chile, and meet me in the harbor there. Do you understand?”

Jimmy gulped as he saluted and answered, “Aye, aye, sir. I understand.” He then glanced at Randall.

Porter turned to Randall and the Navy men chosen to be *Barclay*’s crew. He explained Jimmy’s command. “You will take your orders from him,” Porter told his sailors, and added: “I expect that Captain Randall will render whatever navigational or other services he may be called upon to perform.”

Randall scowled and began to shake his fist. “Now, see here . . . !,” he began.

“That’s all, men,” Porter said—and walked away.

As the sailors prepared to board the whaler, Porter smiled down at young Jimmy. “Don’t worry. I have every confidence in you and your ability, or I wouldn’t have given you this command. Have faith in God and in yourself, and you’ll be all right, son.”

“Thank you, sir,” the boy said. “I’ll do my best.”

As *Barclay* prepared to leave the harbor, Randall walked over to Jimmy. “Boy,” he said, “maybe Porter thinks you’re going to Valparaiso with my ship, but if you ask me, you’ll find yourself off New Zealand swimming with the sharks!”

Jimmy was a little scared. Standing about 4 feet 8 inches tall and

weighing about 70 pounds, he felt tiny as he gazed up at the towering masts and the great sheets of canvas flapping in the breeze—and especially at the bearded face of Randall glaring down at him. But Jimmy was a midshipman in the Navy and he had a mission to perform.

Randall held back his words, went to the ship's rail, and stood looking out over the sea. Jimmy decided to try to make friends with him. The boy went to the rail and stood beside him.

"Captain Randall," Jimmy said, "do you think we should fill away the main topsail? We're not making—"

Randall turned swiftly and snapped: "We'll not fill the main topsail or any other sail without my orders!" He straightened up and cried out, "I'm the master of this ship and I'll shoot any man that lays a hand on a sail or a line without my orders!"

Some of the sailors were watching and listening, but none moved. Randall poked a finger into Jimmy's chest. "I'll chart my own course," he said. "I'm not trusting myself to any confounded, wet-nosed brat!"

He started to walk away, but then stopped abruptly and turned to face Jimmy again. "You heard me, boy!" He roared. "I'm going below to get my pistols. You'd better think twice before you give an order on this ship." He strode off, muttering to himself.

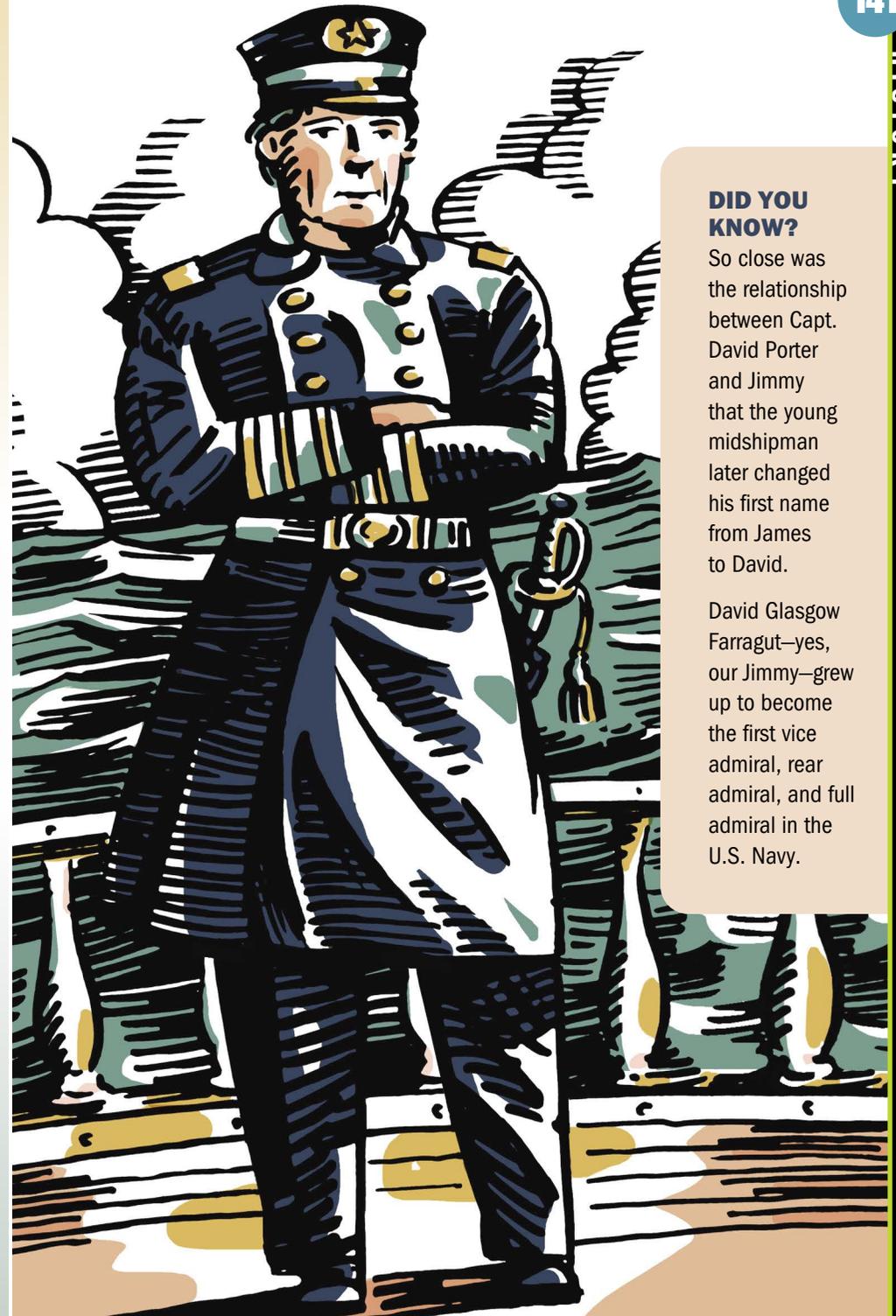
Jimmy saw the sailors watching him. He looked up at the white clouds floating beneath the deep blue sky, and he remembered the words of Porter: "Have faith in God and yourself . . ." Trying to be calm, he held up one hand and called to his first officer. The officer approached him and saluted.

"Fill the main topsail!" Jimmy said.

The officer saluted again. "Aye, aye, sir!" Then he turned and shouted the command to the crew.

As Jimmy saw his order being carried out, he grew confident. He was in the right. He went below to Randall's quarters and knocked on the door. Randall opened it. "Captain Randall," Jimmy said quietly, "if you come on deck with your pistols, I shall have you thrown over the side. That's all, Captain Randall." He walked away.

Randall never brought out his pistols, and Jimmy took *Barclay* safely to Valparaiso, where he rejoined Porter. Three days later, Jimmy celebrated his 12th birthday.



DID YOU KNOW?

So close was the relationship between Capt. David Porter and Jimmy that the young midshipman later changed his first name from James to David.

David Glasgow Farragut—yes, our Jimmy—grew up to become the first vice admiral, rear admiral, and full admiral in the U.S. Navy.