Sea of Glory

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CHAPTER I

The Great South Sea

MOST SAILORS did not refer to it as the Pacific Ocean. They called it the South Sea, a name that dated back to 1513 when Vasco Núñez de Balboa ventured across the sliver of mountainous, jungle-choked terrain known as the Isthmus of Panama. The isthmus runs west to east so that when Balboa first glimpsed water, it appeared to extend to the south. Quite sensibly, he dubbed his discovery the Great South Sea.

Seven years later, Ferdinand Magellan and his men, on their way to the first circumnavigation of the world, penetrated the mazelike strait at the craggy bottom of South America. After weathering the terrible gales typical of one of the most inhospitable places on earth, they found themselves in a quiet, vast ocean that Magellan called, with tearful thanks to God, the Pacific–a name that would not catch hold until the mid-nineteenth century.

Balboa found it, Magellan named it, but for any young boy taken with tales of the South Sea–like the young Charles Wilkes–the central figure had to be James Cook. It had been Cook who had first criss-crossed the Pacific, discovering islands at almost every turn. Cook had been a product of the Enlightenment's search for knowledge through the empirical observation of nature. Although not trained as a scientist, he was one of the most expert nautical surveyors in the British navy, a skill that served him well in his voyages to distant lands. First and foremost, however, Cook had been an *explorer,* and the Pacific had served as his route to glory. For the young Wilkes, the South Sea came to repre-

sent not only a means of escape from an unhappy childhood but, even more important, a way to win the praise and adulation he had been craving for as long as he could remember.

Wilkes was born to well-to-do parents in New York City in 1798. When his mother died just two years later, he was placed in the care of an aunt, Elizabeth Ann Seton, who would later convert to Catholicism, become an abbess, and eventually be canonized as America's first native-born saint. Wilkes's exposure to sainthood proved short-lived, however. At just four years old, he was sent away to boarding school. When he realized he was about to be abandoned at the school, Wilkes clung to his father's leg and refused to let go. "Young as I was," he wrote, "the impression is still on me & it is the first event of my life that I have any distinct recollection of."

For the next ten years, Wilkes was, in his own words, "a poor castaway boy," attending a series of boarding schools that he hated, always yearning to be at home with the father he loved. The one maternal figure in Wilkes's life was a nanny named Mammy Reed–a fat, dark-eyed Welsh woman who, in stark contrast to his earlier caretaker, had a reputation as a witch. Reed's gaze was so intense that Wilkes claimed, "It was impossible to meet her stare." Reed doted on her "Charley boy," a youngster with a black hole of loneliness at the center of his being. "I had no other companions than my books and teachers," he remembered.

But there was always the sea. Manhattan was surrounded by water, and hull to hull along the waterfront was a restless wooden exoskeleton of ships, their long bowsprits nuzzling over the busy streets, the eyes of even the most jaundiced New Yorker irresistibly drawn skyward into a complex forest of spars and rigging. This was where a boy might turn his back on all that he had once known and step into an exotic dream of adventure, freedom, opportunity, and risk.

The city's wealthiest merchant, John Jacob Astor, had made his fortune with these ships. For Astor, who became known as the Prince of the China Trade, it began, in large part, with sea otter skins procured in the Pacific Northwest–a trade made possible by Wilkes's hero, James Cook. After discovering countless Pacific islands and plunging farther

south than anyone else had ever gone, Cook headed out a third and final time in 1776 to find the proverbial Northwest Passage. Earlier mariners had unsuccessfully searched the east coast of North America for a waterway that connected the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. Cook, by now the most experienced and respected explorer in the world, would try the west coast. As the American Revolution raged on the continent's opposite shore, Cook traded for sea otter skins with Native Americans in the Pacific Northwest. At the time, he had no other intention than to use the skins to manufacture some winter clothing for his crew. Later in the voyage, after Cook was killed by natives in Hawaii, his men sailed for China and were astounded to learn that an otter skin purchased for pennies in Nootka Sound sold for a hundred dollars in Canton.

Internal trade policies made it difficult for English merchants to capitalize on this discovery. Britain's South Sea Company had a monopoly for trade on the west coast of America, while the East India Company controlled the Chinese market. For an English merchant to sell otter skins in China, he had to possess two expensive and hard-to-get licenses. Enter the Americans.

Soon after the secret of sea otter skins was revealed by the publication of the narrative of Cook's final voyage in 1784, American China traders, many of them from Boston and Salem, set out around Cape Horn bound for the Pacific Northwest. In the decades to come, it would be Astor, the New Yorker, who established the first permanent white settlement in the region, known as Astoria on the Columbia River, not far from where Lewis and Clark had wintered in 1805–6. The outpost served as a gathering point for Astor's fleet of ten vessels. One of these ships, the *Tonquin,* became part of the mythology of a frontier that for children of Wilkes's age was what the Wild West would become for subsequent generations of Americans.

On June 5, 1811, the *Tonquin,* under the command of Captain Jonathan Thorn, sailed from Astoria in search of otter skins. Not until more than a year later would the *Tonquin*'s native interpreter Lamayzie make his way to Astoria and tell the tale of what had happened to the missing ship. They had anchored somewhere in the vicinity of Vancou-

ver Island's Clayoquot Sound. Captain Thorn quickly angered the local natives by offering an insultingly low price for their otter skins. The following day, as the *Tonquin*'s crew began to weigh anchor and set the sails, the natives attacked. Almost all the sailors on deck, including Captain Thorn, were bludgeoned and stabbed to death. Some of the men in the rigging were able to lower themselves through an open hatchway down into the ship, where they secured some pistols and muskets and began firing at the natives. Soon they had cleared the decks.

The next morning several canoes made their way to the *Tonquin*. The night before a group of sailors had slipped away in the ship's launch and headed for Astoria. They would never be heard from again. The only man left aboard was a severely injured sailor who did not have long to live. The sailor waited until the *Tonquin*'s decks were thronged with Indians, then took a match to the ship's magazine of gunpowder. The *Tonquin* and approximately a hundred natives were blown to smithereens.

With the outbreak of the War of 1812, when Charles Wilkes was fourteen, a different kind of violence threatened Astor's commercial interests in the Northwest. A British naval vessel was dispatched to the region, and Astor had no choice but to sell his outpost to the English. Closer to home, however, the United States pulled off several stunning victories as the *Constitution* and *United States* bested British frigates in the waters off the East Coast. In the meantime, Captain David Porter rounded the Horn in the U.S. frigate *Essex* and proceeded to wage his own private war in the Pacific. Playing cat and mouse with the British navy, Porter and his men terrorized the enemy's whaling fleet. Porter's swashbuckling exploits climaxed in a bloody encounter with two British frigates off Valparaiso, Chile. Porter was ultimately defeated, but he and his men did much to proclaim America's rambunctious presence in the Pacific.

For a teenager of Wilkes's interests, it was a tremendously exciting time. Today it is difficult to appreciate the level of patriotism commonly felt by those of Wilkes's generation, many of whose fathers were fighting in the War of 1812 and whose grandfathers had fought in the Revo-

lution. Freshly minted naval heroes such as Stephen Decatur and Isaac Hull were regularly fêted in New York, and Wilkes became enamored with the glittering regalia of a captain's dress uniform. Mammy Reed, the Welsh witch, foretold that Wilkes would one day become an admiral. When he pointed out that the U.S. Navy did not grant a rank higher than captain (although the complementary title of *commodore* was used when a captain commanded a squadron), Reed insisted that her prediction would come true.

As the war drew to a close, Wilkes, now sixteen years old, began to press his father to apply for a midshipman's warrant. Under usual circumstances, the Wilkes family had all the social and political connections required to secure such an appointment. Wilkes's mother had been the daughter of William Seton, a wealthy New York merchant; his father was the grandson of an even wealthier British distiller. His father's uncle, John Wilkes, a member of Parliament, had gained international fame for his outspoken support of the American cause during the Revolution. Wilkes's own father, whose middle name was de Pointhieu, had aristocratic relatives in Paris with close ties to the French navy.

But in 1815 not even this impressive pedigree could guarantee a midshipman's appointment. With the end of the war, the navy found itself overloaded with officers. Prospects of peace meant that the number of naval vessels would only decrease. For decades to come the opportunities available to young naval officers would remain disappointingly meager. James Fenimore Cooper, the noted author and a former naval officer who would pen a history of the U.S. Navy, wrote Wilkes's father that there was, Wilkes remembered, "no more likelihood of my being appointed than the heavens should fall to catch larks."

The young Wilkes was receiving little help from his father, who wanted him to become a businessman like himself. By this time, Wilkes was enrolled as a day student at a preparatory school for Columbia College and was showing remarkable promise in mathematics and languages. But no matter how much his father attempted to convince his son that he should stay ashore, dangling before him the prospect of a promising job with his uncle at the Bank of New York, Wilkes's "hankering after naval life & roving life still grew stronger & stronger."

Wilkes began studying with Jonathan Garnett, the editor of the *American Nautical Almanac.* Garnett familiarized the boy with the various mathematical formulae, tables, and solutions associated with navigation; he taught him how to read nautical charts and how to use navigational instruments. He even gave Wilkes his own sextant, which the boy learned how to take apart and put back together. "[B]efore I put my foot on the deck of a vessel," he wrote, "I felt capable of navigating & directing her course." Thus was born an attitude toward the sea that Wilkes would subscribe to in the years ahead: book-learning, at least his version of book-learning, was more than a match for anyone else's practical experience.

Failing to secure an outright commission, Wilkes made an application for a midshipman's warrant contingent on his first gaining relevant sea experience in the merchant marine. Reluctantly, Wilkes's father agreed to let him go, hopeful that the contrast between New York society and the forecastle of a merchant vessel would bring the boy to his senses. "I shall never forget the first time I dressed in my Sailors Jacket & trousers," Wilkes wrote, "the vanity and pride I felt." When he showed the outfit to his father, he was "greatly astonished to see the tears starting from his eyes."

Just a few days into his first voyage aboard the *Hibernia,* one of hundreds of vessels carrying goods and passengers between America and Europe, Wilkes understood why his father had been moved to tears. "A more ignorant and brutal set of fellows could scarcely have been collected together," he remembered. His hands were continually bleeding; his bowels were reacting cataclysmically to the harsh shipboard fare; and even worse, the jacket and trousers he had taken such pride in were smeared with tar. "[C]ould I have set my foot on shore," he wrote, "I never would have again consented to be again afloat."

Despite his suffering, Wilkes could not help but be fascinated by the spectacle of a fully rigged ship under sail. "I had from my reading become acquainted with many of the maneuvers," he wrote, "and took great delight in watching how things were done practically." The captain heard that Wilkes knew how to perform a lunar–a complicated series of observations to determine a ship's longitude that required as

many as three hours of calculations and was beyond the abilities of many captains in the merchant service. "[A]lthough I had little practice at sea," Wilkes wrote, "I readily came to take good & satisfactory observations." The captain then proceeded to take credit for the young man's abilities, assuring the paying passengers that he would, in Wilkes's words, "make me a good navigator." Wilkes was infuriated by the captain's deception, but his time would come.

Not long into the voyage, the captain revealed to Wilkes that, incredibly, he had forgotten to bring his charts. He asked the boy if he might be able to draw a chart of the English Channel from memory. Revealing an early willingness to take on a seemingly hopeless task, Wilkes agreed to give it a try. "The next day I was called into the cabin and sheets of letter paper handed me." He hurriedly sketched out a fairly detailed representation of the English Channel–and stunningly, with Wilkes's map in hand, the captain was able to guide the *Hibernia* to Le Havre, France, without incident.

On his return to New York, Wilkes was still angry at the treatment he'd received during the voyage, especially from the captain. He'd been horrified by the ignorance and brutality of his fellow sailors, feeling "great disgust when I looked back on the troubles I had gone through and the low company I was thrown with." For the young Wilkes, it was now a matter of pride. In spite of, or perhaps because of, the adversity he had encountered, he would continue on until he received his commission. Years later he would write, "I have little doubt now that if the treatment I had received had been opposite to what it had been I would have abandoned the idea of following the sea life. I should have seen all its bad features and my tastes were not in unison with it." This was as close as Wilkes would ever come to admitting that his character–at once scholarly, aloof, and condescending–was ill suited to a life at sea.

Not until three years later, after several more merchant voyages, did Wilkes finally receive his appointment in the navy as a midshipman, primarily through the intervention of his father's friend Monsieur Hyde de Neuville, the French minister. After a brief visit to Washington, D.C., to thank de Neuville for his help, Wilkes returned to New York to discover that his father had died. "I never saw him after I entered the

Navy," Wilkes wrote, adding, "I shall not attempt to describe the feelings I experienced . . . and the desolation which home seemed to have undergone." A few weeks later, Wilkes was in Boston reporting to Commodore William Bainbridge and the USS *Independence*.

In Bainbridge, Wilkes found the embodiment of the ideal naval officer. More than six feet tall, Bainbridge radiated an undeniable sense of authority. "His presence was commanding," Wilkes remembered, "and when in full uniform he gave as well as he commanded respect." He was also an officer who was not shy about picking favorites. "He was very decided in his prejudices," Wilkes wrote; "while he encouraged those of whose characters he entertained a high opinion, he was a bitter enemy to the low and vulgar, and no officer could, if he lost his good opinion, expect to regain it." It was a model of command Wilkes would look to for the rest of his life.

Soon after being transferred to the *Guerriere* for a cruise of the Mediterranean, Wilkes discovered that not all naval officers carried themselves with the dignity of Commodore Bainbridge. "Debauchery and drunkenness in a Commander was the order of the day," he later remembered. "[W]hen in port conviviality turned to drunken frolics." In the boisterous camaraderie of steerage, where the midshipmen socialized in "messes," Wilkes–ambitious, solemn, and hardworking–was the odd man out. "I may have had but few friends," he remembered, "but I had no enemies or any that I was not in the best of terms among the officers."

After a nearly fatal bout with what was described as "African fever," Wilkes returned home to New York in 1821. He had been away for more than three years and discovered that since his father's death, "my family had been broken up." His older sister had married and moved to Albany, while two of his brothers, both lawyers, were living in New York. A twenty-three-year-old orphan in search of a home, Wilkes, who as a child had tended to socialize with girls instead of boys, began seeing a woman he had known since he was a child. Jane Renwick, "though not handsome," according to Wilkes, "showed great intelligence . . . and [was] ever open to administer to the wants of others."

The Renwicks had been close family friends of the Wilkeses, and there had been many times while growing up that young Charles had come to blows with Jane's brother James over his unmerciful teasing of his sister. For Wilkes, Jane Renwick was the love of his life.

The evenings Wilkes spent over the next few months with Jane and her mother turned out to be some of the happiest times he had ever known. "We had a never ending source of amusement," Wilkes remembered. "I often read aloud, and while they read I drew, and the hilarity and fun was charming." When he received orders to report to the *Franklin* for a cruise to the Pacific, Wilkes found it "hard indeed for me to return to duty and at the same time forego all the delights of the Society of those I was deeply in love with."

The *Franklin* proved to be just the ship for an officer of Wilkes's interests. On the gun deck there was a library, and Wilkes, with the help of an assistant, became the librarian. But perhaps the best part of the cruise was its destination: the newly established Pacific Station along the west coast of South America. Wilkes was about to encounter the ocean he had been dreaming about since he was a young boy.

When the *Franklin* reached Quilca, Peru, Wilkes was assigned to the schooner *Waterwitch* with dispatches for General Bolívar in Guayaquil, Ecuador. They were off the port of Paita when they encountered the *Two Brothers*, a whaleship from Nantucket. In most instances naval officers took a dim view of whalemen. Their crews were often as inexperienced as they were undisciplined; the ships smelled of putrid blubber, smoke, and grease; loaded down with massive brick tryworks, a whaler presented a most unseamanlike sight as it slogged slowly over the waves.

The evening before, Wilkes had read an account of the sinking of a Nantucket whaleship called the *Essex* (not to be confused with the naval frigate by that name) by an enraged sperm whale. When the captain of the *Two Brothers* introduced himself as George Pollard, Wilkes realized that he was speaking to the very man he'd been reading about—the former captain of the *Essex*.

Pollard proceeded to tell the midshipman a story of unbelievable

hardship, of how the crew took to their three small whaleboats and, fearful of cannibals on the islands to the west, began to sail against the trade winds for South America, almost three thousand miles away. All three boats would become separated from one another, and as the men began to die of starvation, the survivors realized that they had no alternative but to enact their own worst fears: they must eat the bodies of their dead shipmates. Pollard and a young Nantucketer were eventually rescued almost within sight of the coast of Chile after ninety-four days at sea. "I had by accident become acquainted with a hero," Wilkes wrote, "who did not even consider that he had overcome obstacles which would have crushed 99 out of a hundred."

As it would turn out, several months after his conversation with Wilkes, Captain Pollard once again encountered disaster. At night in a storm to the southwest of the Hawaiian Islands, the *Two Brothers* fetched up on an uncharted shoal. As the ship was being pounded to pieces on the coral, the order was given to take to the whaleboats. Pollard had to be dragged from the deck. The next morning all hands were saved by the whaleship *Martha* and taken to Oahu. Upon returning to Nantucket, Pollard lived out the rest of his life as the town's night-watchman.

What happened to Pollard on his final voyage was a frighteningly common occurrence in the Pacific, an ocean so huge that much of it was not yet adequately surveyed and charted. In addition to unmarked shoals that might crop up almost anywhere, there were hundreds of little-known islands surrounded by reefs of razor-sharp coral. In the absence of a published chart, a captain might rely on a handwritten map given him by a mariner who had recorded his not always trustworthy impressions; often he had only the island's latitude and longitude to guide him.

As a captain approached an unfamiliar shore, he prepared the ship's anchors to be dropped at a moment's notice in case he found himself trapped amid hidden rocks or shoals. He also ordered his men to heave the lead—a tapered cylinder of metal attached to a line marked in fathoms to ascertain the water's depth. In spite of all these precautions, a captain studied the water ahead with an intensity that few landsmen

could appreciate, scanning the surface for the dimples and swirls of an otherwise unseen current that might sweep the ship into the coral. He was also on the lookout for a change in color that might presage a sudden and disastrous change in depth. The night Captain Pollard lost his second whaleship in three years, he was standing on the rail, staring down worriedly at the waves after one of his officers reported that "the water alongside looked whiter than usual." Seconds later, the ship slammed into a coral reef that had been impossible to see in the murky darkness.

Two years after Pollard lost the *Two Brothers,* another Nantucket whaleship, the *Oeno,* disappeared without a trace in the Fiji Islands. Nine years later, the ship's cooper, William Cary, returned home to Nantucket and told of how the *Oeno* had been wrecked on an uncharted reef; how the crew had been massacred on Vatoa or Turtle Island, and how only he had escaped by hiding for weeks in a cave. Eventually adopted by a Fiji chief, Cary lived in the islands for several years, doing battle against rival tribes, and meeting, in an incredible encounter, an old schoolmate from Nantucket. David Whippy had deserted from a whaleship several years before and was now an adviser to a chief; and he made it clear to Cary that he was never going back. Not before enduring three more shipwrecks did Cary finally escape the Fijis and return to Nantucket.

Whalemen were not the only ones at the mercy of the uncharted hazards of the South Sea. As the sea otter population in the Northwest dropped catastrophically due to overhunting, New England merchants were forced to look elsewhere for trade goods. In the Hawaiian Islands they found sandalwood, prized by the Chinese for making incense and ornamental boxes. In less than a decade Hawaiian sandalwood was also approaching extinction, so it was on to the treacherous waters of the Fiji Islands, where, in addition to sandalwood, there were plentiful supplies of bêche-de-mer, a sea slug used for soups in China. The deadly reefs surrounding the islands claimed so many ships that it became impossible to buy insurance for a voyage to Fiji. In 1834, the East India Marine Society of Salem made a desperate plea to local and federal governments to provide their sailors with reliable charts: "The Feejee or

Beetee Islands, what is known of them? They were named but not visited by Captain Cook, and consist of sixty or more in number. Where shall we find a chart of this group, pointing out its harbors and dangers? There are none to be found, for none exist!"

American commercial ambition had taken U.S. vessels to parts of the world where not even Cook and dozens of subsequent European exploring expeditions had ventured. Of all the navigators to sail from the United States, it was the sealers who pushed this form of free enterprise exploration the farthest.

Sealers, many of them from Stonington, Connecticut, were a different breed from the sea otter traders. The otter traders never had to get their hands dirty. Sea otters were so difficult to pursue that only Native Americans in their canoes or Aleuts in their kayaks possessed the expertise to capture the fast-swimming creatures. Killing seals, on the other hand, was well within the abilities of any sailor. The rookeries in the Pacific were located on bleak, remote islands where, at least in the beginning, incredible numbers of seals were waiting to be slaughtered and skinned. It is estimated that over three million seals were exterminated on the Juan Fernandez Islands alone in just a seven-year period. In Canton a seal skin sold for in the neighborhood of a dollar, the payment often made in tea.

In the years after the War of 1812, practitioners of what was referred to as "the skinning trade" had reduced the seal population of the Pacific to disastrously low levels, forcing them to sail farther and farther south in pursuit of new rookeries. By 1820, sealers from both Britain and America had reached the South Shetland Islands–an eerie volcanic land of fog, ice, and seals almost six hundred miles below Cape Horn. Although the British claimed the honor of the discovery, the Americans, who subscribed to a policy of secrecy since they knew how quickly an island's seal population could be exterminated, insisted that they had known about the islands all along. In 1820, Stonington sealers took 8,868 skins in the South Shetlands; the next year they returned and killed over 60,000 seals.

It was during this cruise that the twenty-one-year-old Nathaniel Palmer, captain of the forty-seven-foot tender *Hero*, temporarily left the

company of the Stonington fleet and headed south in search of new sealing grounds. Not far below the South Shetlands he found a peninsula of rugged land. Surrounded by icebergs and swimming schools of penguins, he followed the coastline south until dense fog–so thick that he could not see the lookout on the forecastle–forced him to turn back. In the early morning hours of February 6, the fog lifted, revealing a surprising sight. On either side of the tiny tender were two Russian exploring ships under the command of Admiral Fabian Gottlieb von Bellingshausen.

The admiral was astounded at the tiny size of the American craft, just a third of the length of his own ship. "It was with great difficulty that I could make the old admiral believe I had come from U States in so small a vessel," Palmer later remembered. Through an interpreter, Bellingshausen told Palmer that previous to being blanketed in fog, he had assumed that he was the first to discover the lands that lay before them. But here was a vessel from America with a captain that was no more than a boy who told of lands even farther to the south. According to one account of the exchange, Bellingshausen told Palmer that "we must surrender the palm to you Americans," adding that he would name the new discovery Palmer's Land in the charts published by his government.

Not until the following century would it be established beyond question that the narrow panhandle of land Palmer had followed south was part of the Antarctic Continent. In the nineteenth century, the general assumption was that what we now call the Antarctic Peninsula was a group of islands just like the South Shetlands above it. There were at least two American sealers, however, who thought differently. In February 1821, Captain John Davis from New Haven and Captain Christopher Burdick from Nantucket independently recorded in their logbooks their suspicions that what they saw to the south was something bigger than an island. On February 15, Burdick wrote, "Land from the South to ESE, which I suppose to be a continent." Eight days earlier, Davis had even gone to the trouble of rowing to shore, and his log provides the earliest documented evidence of a landing on Antarctica. But sealers were more interested in finding seals than in publicizing their naviga-

tional accomplishments. Davis's and Burdick's voyages would go unheralded until the 1950s, when their logbooks finally came to the attention of scholars in New Haven and Nantucket.

By the mid-1820s, the South Shetlands had been stripped of seals, and commercial interest in the region waned. The question of whether a continent or a group of islands existed to the south would be left unresolved for decades to come. In the meantime, the sails of American whalemen and bêche-de-mer traders continued to whiten the waters of the Great South Sea. As the need for reliable charts grew stronger, communities up and down the Atlantic seaboard began to insist that it was time for the U.S. government to catch up to the achievements of its mariners. In 1828 the citizens of Nantucket drafted a memorial to the U.S. Congress: "Your petitioners consider it a matter of earnest importance that those seas should be explored; that they should be surveyed in an accurate and authentic manner, and the position of new islands, and reefs, and shoals, definitely ascertained."

In the tradition of Cook, it was time America launched an exploring expedition of its own.