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## Sea Dangers: the Affair of the Somers

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## 150 Naval War College Review

from students of naval warfare and naval affairs.

*Ships of the Panama Canal* contains more than photographs and interesting captions. There is an illustrated introduction which reviews the construction of the Panama Canal and even describes how ships' toll charges were computed. The bibliography at the end of the book, though short, is good, and there are also several appendixes, including one which lists the volume of Canal traffic for the years 1915-1939 and another which gives some all-time Canal records through 1985 (did you know that the highest toll ever paid was \$99,065.22 by *Queen Elizabeth II* on 20 January 1985?). The book is more than a collection of fascinating trivia, however. It is also a striking and valuable record of the tools of seapower three and four generations past.

THOMAS HONE  
Washington, D.C.

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McFarland, Philip. *Sea Dangers: the Affair of the Somers*. New York: Schocken Books, 1985. 308pp. \$19.95

On 1 December 1842, three hooded men with nooses about their necks stood beneath the main yardarm of the U.S. Navy brig *Somers*. The ship was homeward bound to New York from a training cruise to the West Coast of Africa and the executions took place about 525 miles from the West Indian island of St. Thomas. At Captain Mackenzie's command, a cannon fired, and the three men were

hauled skyward. As their bodies rotated aloft, the commanding officer delivered an edifying address to the crew assembled before him.

The dead men were executed on charges of planning a shipboard mutiny. The *Somers'* officers and many of the crew were to be killed, control of the ship passing to the mutineers who would then turn pirate and prey on West Indian shipping.

Planner and leader of the proposed action was 18-year-old Midshipman Philip Spencer, son of Secretary of War John Canfield Spencer. Elisha Small, seaman, confessed his guilt, as did young Spencer. Boatswain's Mate Samuel Cromwell, died protesting his innocence.

Spencer had a bad reputation, a "young punk" as Samuel Eliot Morison judged him in his 1967 biography of Matthew C. Perry, *Old Bruin*. At the time of the incident, Perry was commandant of the Naval Shipyard, Brooklyn, home port of the *Somers*. Brother of Oliver Hazard Perry, the hero of Lake Erie, Matthew Perry would later command the "black ships" that opened Japan to the West. "Old Bruin" also happened to be brother-in-law to Commander Mackenzie, skipper of the *Somers*.

At sea aboard the brig-of-war, Spencer had approached Purser's Steward Wales and disclosed his plan. Wales told his superior who reported the plot to the second in command, Lieutenant Guert Gansevoort who in turn informed the captain. Alarmed at the prospect of mutiny aboard his

overcrowded vessel (designed for a complement of 90, the 125-foot *Somers* carried 120 on her training cruise, three-fourths of them under 20 years of age,) the mildmannered Mackenzie had Spencer arrested, ironed to the deck, his effects searched. A list of names and other evidence turned up after which Cromwell and Small were arrested and confined on deck. Following interrogations of the accused by himself and Gansevoort, Mackenzie consulted his officers in a body—three of the seven were midshipmen—and asked for their judgment. Apparently divining Mackenzie's mind, they unanimously recommended immediate penalty of death. After an interval of letterwriting and Bible-reading, the sentences were duly carried out. There had been no trial; Mackenzie lacked authority to convene a court-martial.

On the *Somer's* return to New York, Mackenzie was at first acclaimed as a hero, but soon questions were raised in the press. The New York *Herald* published a series of letters signed "S" (almost certainly by Secretary of War Spencer) accusing Mackenzie of murder. A court of inquiry cleared Mackenzie, and so did a later court-martial requested by Mackenzie himself. But the decision of the latter was not unanimous. At issue, why did not Mackenzie bring the accused men home and have them court-martialed? Or, if he feared imminent mutiny, why did he not put the accused ashore at a West Indian port for transfer to the United States? Mackenzie's defense, backed

by his officers, rested on his conviction that his ship stood in clear and present danger and that prompt action against the conspirators ended the threat.

The *Somers* affair turned into an uproar in New York and Washington. Friends and literary acquaintances rallied to Mackenzie's defense or backed off. Washington Irving supported him; James Fenimore Cooper remained unrelentingly critical. The Navy Department gave Mackenzie generous leave but delayed further command appointment.

In 1846, President Polk employed Mackenzie as confidential envoy to Mexico and Cuba. Eventually he received command of the *Mississippi*, a steam frigate that later carried Commodore Matthew Perry on his second visit to Japan. In 1846 the *Somers*, under a different commanding officer, sank in a sudden squall while blockading Vera Cruz, carrying half her crew with her to the bottom. Mackenzie retired to his home in Tarrytown, N.Y., in 1848 and died of a heart attack the same year.

All this and more is told in compelling narrative detail by Philip McFarland in *Sea Dangers*, a book that should be welcome in every naval library, service or personal. Radical reform in the training of midshipmen followed hard upon the *Somers* incident. Secretary of the Navy George Bancroft took over the obsolete Fort Severn at Annapolis and in October 1845 the U.S. Naval Academy opened its doors to the education of midshipmen.

A notable literary consequence of the *Somers* affair was Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*, a tale inspired at least in part by the sea drama in which Melville's first cousin, Lieutenant Guert Gansevoort played an important supporting role. Unlike the mutineers of the *Somers*, Melville's Billy is a supremely good young sailor whose hanging takes place aboard a British naval vessel in time of war. But there is more than a superficial resemblance between the personal character of Slidell Mackenzie (McFarland devotes a solid chapter to the man and his background) and that of Melville's fictional Captain Vere. Both commanders enjoy a high reputation for military and personal integrity; both have strong literary inclinations. Both combine a passion for instant justice by death with a near-maudlin fatherliness toward the young men they have so quickly condemned. Both pay a heavy price in mental suffering subsequent to the executions.

The affair of the *Somers* and Melville's *Billy Budd* raise profound psychological questions as well as important issues of naval justice and discipline. It remained to Melville to elevate the problem to the plane of the metaphysical and moral, staging in art the drama of the eternal conflict between the order of grace and the order of necessity.

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Parfit, Michael. *South Light: A Journey to the Last Continent*. New York: Macmillan, 1985. 306pp. \$17.95

Antarctica is the earth's most far-off place, submerged like an iceberg in the U.S. consciousness. Fewer than one person in 250,000 goes there annually. The less fortunate but still curious rely on books and photographs to appreciate this huge landmass, its volcanos and wildlife. Out of the region's pristine elegance emerges *South Light*, Michael Parfit's vivid, 9-month affair with the "last continent."

He embraces it eagerly, without inhibitions. Unencumbered by equipment or uniforms he observes research programs and people with a fine eye for detail, and a refreshing outlook on the last unspoiled place on earth. ". . . You stepped out and were dazzled for life. You emerged in Antarctica."

By ship and aircraft he probes the continent—watching science, measuring commitment, immersing himself in unique experiences. Strongly encouraged by a Navy helicopter crew, he even becomes a member of an elite swimming club in water at 31 degrees.

Parfit's first impression reflects what those before him already knew: "It was white, endlessly and frighteningly white," is his outlook after a harrowing flight on a C-130 into a whiteout (virtual blizzard) at McMurdo Station. Past the point of safe return, the resigned Navy flight crew manages a safe landing, mindful that the continent's resolute grip upon them precludes any other option.

He then shifts forward in time to a voyage on the USCG icebreaker *Polar Sea*. While the varied chronol-