

Commodore Jones' War

1842



In this year when California is celebrating the Centennial of the discovery of gold, it is interesting to recall an incident which occurred in Monterey in 1842. There, for one day, the flag of the United States flew over the leading city of California.

After Texas became an independent republic in 1836, the United States government became uneasy that European nations had designs on California. One of the duties of the United States naval squadron in the Pacific was to keep watch on the Pacific naval forces of these European nations.

The United States Pacific squadron, commanded by Commodore Thomas Ap Catsby Jones, lay at Callao, Peru, in September, 1842. The unexplained departure of a British squadron sent Jones and a part of his fleet off to Monterey. The ensuing events are best described in the words of Jones himself. In a letter written from Monterey Bay,

October 22, 1842, to Waddy Thompson, Minister of the United States to Mexico, he said:

“Early in September I received a letter, dated 22d of June, from John Parrott, Esq., our consul at Mazatlan, enclosing the Mexican gazette ‘El Cosmopolita’ of the 4th of June, containing three highly belligerent official declarations against the United States.

“These documents reached me at Callao, Peru, at the moment of the departure of the English squadron from that coast on secret service; which circumstance, connected with other information relating to the affairs of the United States, Mexico, and England, left no doubt on my mind that there would be war with Mexico immediately. . . . Under these impressions, it at once became my duty to secure some point on this coast, whereat the citizens of the United States in California, and our whale ships, &c., in the Pacific, might rally for protection against Mexican privateers and enemies’ cruisers.

“This port was selected, as having some advantages, and which, by a quiet and rapid movement, I entered on the 19th instant, and immediately summoned the authorities of the place to surrender to the United States forces under my command, (present the frigate *United States* and the sloop *Cyane*,) which was immediately complied with, without a moment’s hesitation, although I gave 18 hours for consideration; nor did the governor even ask for any reasons for my making the demand, appearing and in fact professing not to know of any difficulties existing between the two countries.

“The day after the capitulation, I ascertained satisfactorily that, as late as the 25th of August, 1842, no act of hostility had been committed against the United States by Mexico, from which I inferred that the crisis in our dispute with that country had terminated amicably; whereupon, I immediately restored the Mexican flag and authority over Monterey, **IN ALL DUE FORM AND CEREMONY**, and interchanged friendly salutations and visits. It is a source of great satisfaction, that, notwithstanding what has happened, no angry word or

unkind expressions have been used by either party; and that, although we had one hundred and fifty seamen and marines on shore for thirty hours, not one private house was entered, or the slightest disrespect shown to any individual; nor was any species of property, public or private, spoiled, if I except the powder burnt in the salutes, which I have returned two-fold." (House Document 166, 27th Congress.)

The Mexican government made so much diplomatic palaver out of this incident that Jones was recalled by our government as a conciliatory gesture. His recall carried no official censure.

At the end of the Mexican war, Commodore Jones was again put in command of the Pacific squadron, in October, 1847. He remained on the Pacific Coast for several years and became well known in California before and after the discovery of gold in 1848.

William H. Myers was twenty-six years old and had apparently seen naval service before he enlisted in the United States Navy in July, 1841, as a gunner on board the United States sloop of war *Cyane*. His ship was part of the Pacific squadron under Commodore Jones which left Norfolk in November, 1841, for a three-year-cruise to the Pacific. Myers was back in California in 1847, as a gunner on the *USS Dale*, when California was again taken by United States forces. On this last tour of duty he made a series of water color drawings which eventually came into the collection of President Roosevelt and were published by Random House in 1939 as "Naval Sketches of the War in California." The originals are now in the Roosevelt Library in Hyde Park.

On his first visit to California in 1842-43, during which "Commodore Jones' War" occurred, Myers kept a day-to-day illustrated log. Included in this log book was the illustrated letter reproduced here. Myers wrote this letter to his friend William Hancock, from Santa Barbara, ten days after the Monterey incident.

K. K. BECHTEL

DECEMBER 1948

5BT 102

Letter reproduced from the original in the collection of K. K. Bechtel.

PRINTED AT THE GRABHORN PRESS

SAN FRANCISCO

1948

Dear Will or
Billy

{ Santa Barbara. October 30th 1842 -
West California - -

You will have heard probably before this reaches you, of our famous victory at Monterey, the subject of the taking of the place was never mentioned until we were almost in the harbor. We left Callao expecting to go to Valparaiso, but from our course afterward thought that the island was our destination every thing as to our whereabouts was a perfect mystery after a 43 days passage we met a barque standing out of the Harbour, we hoisted English Colours boarded and took her, a few hours previous we were informed in a bombastic speech from the Commodore, that Mexico we was to consider as the enemy of our Country, and we were to take every place upon the coast, we entered Monterey found 1 barque 1 brig and a schooner, sent a summons on shore for a surrender leaving them the alternative of giving up the town or of being cannonaded the next day by eleven o'clock, a flag of truce flying during these negotiations, at 11 AM on the 20th Oct the flag was hauled down, our decks randed guns shotted match burning and all the paraphanelia of horrid war the boats and the Marines and small arm cannon pulled ashore, but of all the humbugs, however the flag was hauled down and ours hoisted, we had now a fort of 14 guns plenty of powder, balls round grape double head & canister, 2 barques a brig and a schooner brims full of hides and tallow \$100,000 dollars on board the barque Toucoira, all Mexicans the next day at sun down every thing was given up - Dam the C - - and we were informed there was no war existing, from here we left and are now a Santa Barbara, where upon the news of our arrival and the capture of Monterey, they spiked their guns and removed inland, the governor made the longest tracks, but every thing is now going on very decently if the lubberly Mexicans had only fired they might have cut us to the fat, and bred a war at any rate, but I don't believe there is fight in them, but of deer, ducks, wild cattle bears &c keep dark there are more on this coast than you could begin to think of counting, or shooting I am sure we expect to stay on the coast all winter, I consider that the Commodore has abstracted from my pocket no less than 3000 dollars for we could have taken Monterey, St Francisco, St Gabriel, St Luis St Barbara, St Jago, St Blas, Mazatlan, Mismas Acapulco & many other places besides ships & extra robbing churches but it has all vanished - As I am much hurried, I can say but little at present

I send this by the Northwest man Barnstable who puts it on board
 the ship's alert ready for home, by which you will receive it
 I do not expect to see any letters or hear from them
 for at least 2 years by that time I shall be home
 I have given you a slight representation of Monterey
 and our valourous Ships Companies - but I cannot delineate
 a portion of my anguish at my lost prize money except
 by a faint print No 4 You will oblige me by giving my
 respects to all inquiring friends particularly Capt Wheeler and
 family and also to mother and sisters and believe me yours
Wm. H. Meyer

1
 Hancock Esq
 No 4
 1795
 Boston
 Third Street
 Philadelphia
 G. L.

Oysters are very scarce here, when you eat always think
 of me and the luxuries I have lost, to obtain glory
 rancid butter and salt junk. I thought it was bad
 enough to have a wife but a clotting Commodore is far
 worse upon my soul, this 3 years of glory and dirty
 shirts will soon pass over, then hey for home and
 damn the Coast, but there are very beautiful women
 here notwithstanding, if it was not for them I should
 have been dead long ago give my best to trucks.
 Yours respectfully
 Wm. H. Meyer
 Blue Blazes



My brave associates, partners of my toil, my feelings, and my fame, Can Moan's words add vigor to the virtuous energies which inspire your hearts no! you have judged as I have the baseness of the crafty plea by which these bold Mexican would delude, you, they seek time only for the villainous purpose of enslaving you, even now the horrid note of preparation for scenes of deeper carnage is stealing silently on - the blood stained banners of Mexico wave their ensanguined folds o'er the chains of the Noble and the brave, I think I see them now, ah - - - - - horrid sight - - - - - give me some gin to revive me - forward and storm the works there is only one soldier in the fort - March
 Music strike up



Taking of Monterey Oct 20th 1842 by the
 Frigate United States & Sloop of War Cyane - Lat 36° 30' N in West Galapagos