

From Forecastle to Mother Lode: The U.S. Navy in the Gold Fields

by Dan O'Neil

ON MARCH 15, 1848, THE *CALIFORNIAN* carried a news item on the second page at the bottom of the third column under news of two fandangoes, a man drowned, the sale of fresh fish, a petition to remove the alcalde, the mail to St. Louis, and a horse race. The item noted that gold had been found in the newly made raceway of the sawmill on the American Fork of the Sacramento River and read, in part, "California, no doubt is rich in mineral wealth; great chances here for scientific capitalists."¹

The casual attitude was derived in part from the fact that it was well known that there was gold in California. Gold had been shipped from California for several years prior to its "discovery" in 1848. It had been listed in the exports of 1846: two hundred ounces of gold valued at seventeen dollars per ounce.²

On May 4, 1846, Marius Duvall had written that, at San Fernando near San Pedro, by washing the sand in a plate any person could obtain from one to five dollars per day. Gold had been gathered for two or three years, though few had had the patience to look for it. The gold mines under their previous owners probably would have continued as they had been; the Indians had always said that there were mines but would not show the white men their location, and the Californians had not chosen to look for them.³

Naval chaplain Walter Colton, the alcalde in Monterey, claimed that he had had prior knowledge of gold in the Stanislaus River for more than a year before its discovery on the American Fork. A wild Indian had come into Monterey with a specimen of gold which he had hammered into a clasp for his bow. It had fallen into the hands of W.R. Garner, Colton's secretary, who had shown it to Colton. The Indian had described the locality in which he had found it with so much accuracy that Garner could

identify the spot — which came to be known in 1849 as “Carson’s Diggings.”⁴

It was not until the richness of the finding became known that the true import of the news was realized and the reaction set in. The terms used in private and public letters as well as in newspapers were indicative of the reactions of most of the people; “gold fever,” “gold mania,” and “gold craze” were the most common. By the spring of 1848 almost everyone, from the highest station to the lowest, was on the way to the gold fields and the frantic exodus gained momentum in both Monterey and San Francisco as summer approached.⁵

Although the prosperity of San Francisco had dated from the occupation of the United States naval forces and the hoisting of the United States flag, in May 1848, less than two years later the site was a ghost town. never had the town presented a less lifelike appearance. Stores were closed, houses tenantless, and nowhere was heard the hum of activity. The editor of *The California Star* wrote, “Everything wears a desolate and sombre look, everywhere all is dull, monotonous, dead.”⁶ Those who stayed home in the spring of 1848 were either the very wealthy or those who did not have the five dollars to pay for passage up the river.

Alcalde Colton of Monterey determined to put an end to the suspense he felt by sending on June 6 a messenger to the South Fork of the American River. “We shall know then whether this gold is a fact or a fiction,” he wrote.⁷ On Tuesday, June 20, the suspense was replaced by intense excitement as the returning messenger produced and passed around samples of gold. Almost immediately, many of the townspeople packed and left.⁸

Colonel Richard B. Mason, governor of California, accompanied by Lieutenant William T. Sherman, had started from Monterey on June 17 for the mines. When he reached San Francisco, three days later, he found that nearly all its male inhabitants had already gone.⁹ By June 28, 1848, three-fourths of the houses in the towns of Monterey and San Francisco were vacant; blacksmiths, carpenters, and lawyers were leaving; brickyards, sawmills, and ranches were left unattended; and ships were daily losing their crews.¹⁰

One American captain had his ship ready to sail but changed his plans and promised to continue the crew's pay and food and paid their passage on a boat carrying them to the gold fields, furnished tools, and promised to pay them one-third of all the gold they found.¹¹

By July and August 1848, the effect of the gold rush on the military forces, both Army and Navy, was acute. With every bag of gold brought in from the mines there was another wave of desertion from the barracks and the ships. On July 25 Governor Mason, in an effort to check desertions, issued a proclamation stating that, if the men in the mining regions did not assist in apprehending deserters, they would be arrested. He wrote:

A dragoon force will soon be at the mining district and traverse it in every direction to arrest deserters from the Army and Navy and to apprehend any citizens who harbor them. The citizens will be tried before a military court and punished according to the laws of war.¹²

This, then, was the situation in Upper California when Commodore Jones arrived in Monterey on October 9, 1848. He had been forewarned, of course, while he was still in La Paz and had drawn up a set of regulations while on the passage from Baja to Alta California to cope with the situation. As early as July 28 he had decided that the suppression of desertion within ordinary times could be handled with ordinary methods, but to accomplish that end during the gold mania unusual measures had to be taken. One such measure planned was to keep the ships of the squadron at sea.¹³ Unfortunately, only one ship, the *Dale*, actually did extensive cruising, and it was no coincidence that she lost only one man through desertion while on Pacific Station.¹⁴

A second plan, which allowed the discharging in California of those men whose terms of service had expired, would have had a very good effect on the morale of the men.¹⁵ Many of the sailors, especially those with mechanical trades, preferred starting a life in California now that it was a part of the United States. Jones reasoned that with the acquisition of California to the United States, the increase in maritime activity would create a need for labor in all related fields such as building, repairing, and supplying as well as manning both private and public vessels. He requested authorization to carry out these discharge plans. He

was convinced that after the first frenzy had worn off the men would work the gold fields in the summer months and, when the winter months set in, return to the sea.¹⁶ The Secretary of the Navy, John Y. Mason, refused authorization of mass discharges on the Pacific Coast, but did sanction the use of an occasional discharge given as a reward for extraordinarily good conduct. He wrote: "This may be used as an incentive to good conduct and to restrain desertion, and you are authorized to do so, if in your judgment it will be productive of good results."¹⁷

The third phase of Jones's plans to prevent desertion was, with the sole exception of offering large rewards for the return of deserters, entirely negative and ultimately produced only rancor and discord among both the officers and men of the squadron. While still at sea, Jones had issued a memorandum¹⁸ to the officers containing precise orders for the handling of the ship upon the arrival at Monterey. Upon the approach to the roads of Monterey, a convenient berth, not nearer than three cables length, was chosen to moor the ships. The usual accommodation of a boat for each class of officers at stated periods of the day and for their return from shore at sundown was allowed, but no boat could leave the ship for shore after the final boat at sundown had left shore. Boats were not allowed to remain on shore at any time longer than was necessary to land persons or things, except boats employed in watering and taking off supplies. In all such boats at least two officers must be present. Further precautions against desertion were taken in the case of a boat waiting for an officer sent to shore on special duty, or the captain's boat awaiting his return to the landing. These boats with their crews and two officers had to anchor off in deep water and there await the officers' return.¹⁹

Not only were the movements of the boats carefully regulated, but also those of the men who manned them. No one who had purchased even small stores with the promise of future payment or who was indebted in any way to the United States Navy was allowed to man the boats plying back and forth between the ship and the shore, nor was he allowed to leave the ship in any capacity whatsoever without first giving sufficient security for the balance against him. This regulation involved most of the enlisted men. Few if any sailors were provident enough to save

their wages; consequently most of them drew on their prospective wages in varying amounts. Officers' stewards and servants were not permitted to go ashore except on special duty for their messes or masters, and then only when it was absolutely necessary and only for the length of time needed to accomplish their tasks.²⁰

The noncommissioned officers, although allowed on shore, were restricted in their dress to the uniform as prescribed by the regulations of the Navy at all times. Commissioned officers were allowed to hunt, fish, or attend sporting events without rigid adherence to uniform regulations.²¹

The rules regulating intercourse between ship and shore might have had some deterrent effect upon the desire of the sailors to leave the ship, except that it is hardly conceivable that any plan, no matter how well executed and enforced by the officers of the squadron, could have kept the "jacks" from heading for the gold fields at the first opportunity,²² sanctioned or not; curiosity alone lured many.

For over a week all went smoothly, and then on the evening of October 18 eight men deserted the *Ohio*. As a consequence, in addition to the usual sentinels posted — which was one on each gangway and one on the forecastle of each ship — a watch of officers was ordered to be kept on deck at all hours with muskets and pistols. They had orders to shoot to kill any person or persons in any boat passing through the squadron after dark without showing a light, provided that person did not immediately lay on his oars or come alongside the hailing ship at the first call. The officers were further ordered to shoot to kill anyone swimming in the water unless he was obviously making for the nearest ship.²³ In order to ensure a sufficient number of officers being on board at all times to carry out his orders, Jones restricted all watch officers to the ships, allowing no liberty at all on shore.

The officers felt that Jones had gone too far. In order to implement these regulations, they were obliged to spend most of their time performing this odious duty. A sea watch by day and a double watch by night, while riding safely at anchor in a sheltered port belonging to their own country, was tantamount to turning the Pacific Fleet into a squadron of prison ships.²⁴

From this time until the end of the cruise, Jones's rapport with his crews and his officers deteriorated. He had built up a reputation as the Old Man who was a stern disciplinarian but a just one; with his arrival in California, justice seemed to evaporate. Lest any captain of one of the other ships tend toward leniency, Jones had made the order universal. He wrote:

No captain can be justified in granting indulgences to his officers and crews, when in the Commodore's presence, nor indeed at any time, which under like circumstances would not be allowable or extended to the officers and crew of the Flag Ship.²⁵

In the meantime, on October 9, 1848, the USS *Ohio* had arrived in Monterey, and for the next several days Commodore Jones had made preparations for a visit to the gold fields. The requirements of the expedition called into requisition a number of the mechanics belonging to the ship and a considerable expenditure of public stores. Carpenters were employed refitting and repairing a horse cart on the main deck, and sailmakers were busy making a canvas top for the cart. Armorers started manufacturing picks and crow bars for digging gold, and fitting iron bands around two money chests — twenty-four inches long, twelve inches deep, and ten inches wide — that were intended for use as gold dust boxes. A working party of sailors was sent on shore to guard and train horses, and another to collect necessities for the expedition. The quarter and half decks were covered with saddles and bridles. Rowed back and forth between the ship and shore, the commander-in-chief frequently bestowed his personal attention on the preparations in progress.²⁶

This concern and interest evinced by Jones did not at that time strike the officers and men as incongruous with the tone and spirit of the orders which had been read on the quarter deck only days prior to all the activity.²⁷ They, also, were deeply involved in the successful outcome of the planned visit to the gold mines. Arrangements were made for a party of about fifteen persons, including a staff of one surgeon, one lieutenant, and one midshipman. Thus all levels of command were included: the commander-in-chief, one commissioned officer, one noncommissioned officer, and one warrant officer. Servants, guides, and men to guard the party against attacks of bandits and Indians made up the rest of the party.²⁸

The money chests which had been constructed contained varying amounts of money collected from the officers, the public funds, and Jones's private funds. With the exception of three to five hundred dollars set aside for the contingent expenses of the party, the money was to be invested in gold. Jones put twelve hundred dollars into the chest; Purser Forrest, one thousand dollars; and the wardroom officers of the *Ohio* collectively claimed two thousand dollars. The money was put into the hands of an agent, Lieutenant McCormick, Jones's Flag Lieutenant, to purchase the gold.²⁹

Then came the desertion of the eight men from the *Ohio* on October 18. This action changed Jones's plans to leave the ship, and brought about the stringent regulations which deprived the officers of shore leave. In many respects, the tighter security measures served to help the crew members to escape. The officers became so bitter at the restraints imposed on them that, with few exceptions, they neglected to apprehend deserters. Jones asserted that at no time did Captain Cornelius Stribling or any of the lieutenants of the *Ohio*, save only Lieutenants Armstrong and Emmons, manifest the slightest zeal or disposition to arrest desertion. In the whole squadron, Jones could single out only the two men named above from the *Ohio*, and later in 1849, Commander T.F. Johnson and Lieutenant Pickering of the *St. Mary's*, who had even volunteered to pursue and attempt to bring back those who had made successful escapes from their ships.³⁰

The state of affairs in the squadron had reached such serious proportions in the fall of 1848 that the officers had given up all pretense of stemming the tide of desertion. Sailors took their cue from the unguarded expressions of the officers of every grade who frequently, and without regard to the time or place or the presence of the crew, concluded that the temptation to desert was too great to be resisted, that the men would desert, and that there was nothing the officers could do to prevent it.³¹ The incident of the eight men, stealing a boat from alongside the *Ohio* and making good their escape, highlighted the ludicrous situation which had developed. It happened in this way.

The naval stores on shore were guarded by a party of sailors against the former New York Volunteers who had been discharged without pay and who had threatened to steal the stores as partial compensation. In turn, Navy lieutenants guarded the sailors to

prevent their deserting to the gold fields. In the yard of the naval storehouse were some horses which a marine guard protected from theft and who in turn was guarded by marine officers. Since there was no public house in which to eat, the officers came off to the ship each evening for their meals. On the night of October 18, the boat which came for them carried two or three officers to prevent the desertion of the boat's crew and to relieve the officers in charge of the guards upon landing. On the return to the ship, the officer of the deck, Lieutenant Joseph Marchand, neglected to have the boat hoisted, and the eight men who had composed the boat's crew left unimpeded.³²

The professional officers remained only through a sense of duty not shared by the petty officers and the enlisted men. By November 2, 1848, the *Ohio* was short one hundred and fifty men. Many of the deserters were the best petty officers and seamen in the squadron, some having but a few months to serve and leaving large balances due them, amounting in the aggregate to ten to twelve thousand dollars. Thomas C. Lancey, the coxswain of the *Dale's* gig, noted in his "Journal" that fifteen men had deserted from the storeship *Lexington*, several more from the *Warren* and the *Southampton*, and "a few nights ago, a corporal's guard stationed on shore at the custom house to guard the naval stores, deserted, taking with them their arms and ammunition."³³

Many applications, verbal and written, for furloughs and leaves of absence were submitted by the commissioned and warrant officers to the commanders of the ships for the purpose of going to the gold fields. When these were disapproved, resignations were tendered in their stead. The resignations were turned over to Commodore Jones as commander-in-chief. Jones did not have the authority to act on the resignations and he wrote to the Secretary of the Navy that, as all the ships on the station were already short of officers, he could not approve their acceptance. The tendered resignations were forwarded to the Secretary of the Navy, John Y. Mason, and the officers were kept at their duties "until the Department could review their cases."³⁴ This disposition on the part of the officers to quit the Navy had an additional disastrous effect on the morale of the men.

The restrictions on the officers' liberty produced, not only a

notable laxity toward desertions and a number of resignations, but also three letters questioning the honesty of purpose on the part of Jones in issuing the orders.³⁵ Commodore Jones could neither press charges against all the officers in the squadron, nor could he officially censure those who had tendered resignations, but on the third count, the letter writing, he acted.³⁶

His first move was to request Lieutenants Green and Marchand of the *Ohio*, and Lieutenant Craven of the *Dale*, to withdraw their offensive letters and make suitable apologies. When they refused, he threatened to bring them to court-martial on charges of writing contemptuous letters to their superior officer containing malicious falsehoods.³⁷

At this point, the proud old commodore found himself standing virtually alone. He had actually begged for one more tour of sea duty before retirement to recoup the loss of prestige he had suffered in 1842. Unfortunately, neither the years of 1848 and 1849 were the time, nor California the place, to effect such a goal. In vain he struggled to save the squadron. He could not do it alone, however, and before 1849 had begun he had alienated his officers. He wrote to the Secretary of the Navy:

Nothing, Sir, can exceed the deplorable state of things in all Upper California, at this time, growing out of the maddening effects of the gold mania. I am sorry to say that even in this squadron, some of the officers are a little tainted, and have manifested restlessness under moderate restrictions . . . as you will perceive by the enclosed papers.³⁸

The enclosed papers mentioned were the letters of the three young lieutenants. The matter might have ended there had not Jones's letter been published in a newspaper and carried to California. Whereupon Lieutenants Joseph Green and John Marchand secured affidavits from every officer aboard the *Ohio*, including Captain Stribling, to the effect that their opposition to the special orders restricting the freedom of the officers stemmed not from the gold mania but from a jealous regard for their honor and reputation as officers. Stribling wrote:

*It affords me sincere pleasure to state that I have always found you faithful and zealous in the discharge of your duty, and so far as I have observed, entirely uninfluenced by the prevailing Gold excitement.*³⁹

The same sentiments were expressed in written form by eleven other officers of the *Ohio*.⁴⁰ Only one, Charles M. Armstrong, first lieutenant, answered that in his present position and with his views of military propriety, he had to decline the request.⁴¹

The situation became very tense at Commodore Jones's reaction. Courts-martial increased; explosive, censoring proclamations berating the actions of the officers were issued; and the patience of the squadron was drawn to a thin fine line.

Captain Cornelius Stribling, acting in the double capacity of captain of the flagship *Ohio* and captain of the fleet, perhaps felt the strain more than any other single person in his role as liaison officer between Jones and his officers. He at first hinted and then openly suggested that the only remedy to the unhappy situation was to leave the coast of California for awhile. The suggestion evoked an emotionally-charged negative reaction on the part of Jones. The commodore was "mortified, nay deeply humiliated" at finding that an officer of high professional standing would suggest the craven idea of abandoning the coast altogether, rather than meet the discontent of officers and the desertion of the men if restrained in their liberty.⁴²

There were several valid reasons for remaining in California. The presence of the fleet served as the only real impediment to complete lawlessness. It really served more as a threat than as an actual force, however, and one or two ships would have filled this need.

A second reason for having naval ships in California was to protect the gold shipments. The United States Navy was the only protection afforded those merchants who exported large quantities of uncoined gold.⁴³ The *Lexington*, a Navy storeship, whose master was a junior passed midshipman, sailed on November 25, 1848, with \$300,000 worth of gold for New York, via Valparaíso and Cape Horn. The merchants had requested the protection of the United States Navy after reports of murder and mutiny aboard two ships, one an English schooner, the *Amelia*, and the second a barque bound from Valparaíso to China, both carrying large amounts of specie. Acts of piracy had occurred in the Pacific, and the amount of gold being shipped had soared. In November 1848, an estimate of the gold gathered from July to

November 1848, was placed at a value of not less than three to five million dollars.⁴⁴

In view of these developments, the merchants became highly agitated when Jones could promise only a limited cooperation, handicapped as he was by the already small number of ships and the loss of seamen he had suffered. Jones realized that if the acts of piracy continued, and the rates of insurance went up in both England and America as they would, that the loud cries of the American merchants would reverberate in the Navy Department in Washington and ultimately resound on the Pacific Coast. The alternative prospect was equally uninviting — that the gold be shipped in English naval vessels, resulting in a drain of gold from the United States. Jones requested the immediate deployment of six or seven ships to the coast of California for this purpose.⁴⁵

A third reason was advanced by Jones for remaining on the coast in December. This was the uneasy diplomatic relations then existing between the United States and the Sandwich Islands. Mr. Anthony Ten Eyck, the United States Commissioner, had been suspended by King Kamehameha III for allegedly having written and published articles ridiculing and disparaging the king and his ministers.⁴⁶ Jones reasoned that in the state of suspended diplomatic intercourse with the Hawaiian government, a visit from the United States squadron would only add to the embarrassment of all concerned, especially since in his opinion, “all the right is not on our side of the controversy.”⁴⁷

However valid the reasons for remaining in California were, the good effects of cruising were apparent in the case of the *Dale*. The *Dale* had arrived in Monterey in October 1848, with the rest of the squadron. While the *Dale* was in Monterey for three weeks not one man deserted. The commanding officer, Commander John Rudd, told Commodore Jones that if his men could not go ashore, then neither would he, and he did not, except on official business, for his entire stay in port. The *Dale*'s boat had the distinction of being the only boat in the entire squadron which did not carry an armed officer to guard the crew.⁴⁸ In November, when the squadron moved to San Francisco, the *Dale* sailed to Hawaii, where her officers and crew enjoyed a full liberty on

shore. She returned to San Francisco in February 1849, and received sailing orders for home on March 12, 1849.⁴⁹ The *Dale* was an excellent example of the highest rapport between officers and crew, coupled with ample shore leave, and these factors overcame the temptations of the gold fields.⁵⁰

The rest of the squadron was not as fortunate. Courts-martial increased and so did the rewards for deserters. Unfortunately, by their very nature, these two procedures did not alleviate the situation but merely provided for a course to follow after the acts of disobedience had been committed.

Forty thousand dollars, taken from a combination of the surplus of the military contribution fund and the wages which had been due those who had deserted, was offered as reward money for the apprehension and delivery of deserters from the squadron. The amounts offered varied from five hundred dollars for the first four persons turned in, to two hundred dollars for any others. The rewards were paid in silver dollars.⁵¹

When the Secretary of the Navy learned of these amounts, he ordered that the offer of such large rewards be discontinued and requested that a full account of the moneys of the military contribution fund be rendered as soon as practicable, and the balance paid into the treasury of the United States. Again, as with the Baja California refugees, Mason neither gave nor withheld his approbation of Jones's actions. He wrote, "The efforts which you have made to prevent desertions and apprehend deserters have been characterized by your usual energy."⁵²

Despite the stringent regulations aboard ship to prevent desertion, the high rewards to capture deserters, and the serious repercussions felt by those who aided deserters,⁵³ the men continued to leave the squadron at an alarming rate, and the courts-martial of the officers increased accordingly. The indeterminate status of the newly acquired territory of California gave rise to several points of law. The commander-in-chief of a naval force on a distant station was empowered to convene general courts-martial; the question was: did California belong in the category of a foreign station, or was it a lawful *port of the United States*.⁵⁴

Midshipman Isaac G. Strain, acting master of the *Ohio*, contended that it was not a foreign station, and he protested the

power of the commodore to convene a general court-martial in Monterey on October 23, 1848. Citing the thirty-fifth article of the "Act for the Better Government of the Navy," 1799, in his own defense, Strain said that a commander had no power to convene a court within the territorial jurisdiction of the United States.⁵⁵

Jones countered with his interpretation of the "Act of April 23, 1800, for the Better Government of the Navy." Punishment for all offenses, not capital or of the highest grade, against the rules and regulations of war were confided to the officers who legally assembled as a court-martial. When out of the United States, the power to construe law and apply it belonged to the superior and commanding officer of the squadron and he might convene courts-martial when in his opinion the interest of the public service would render the assembly of such tribunals necessary and proper.⁵⁶

Passed Midshipman Isaac Strain was charged and found guilty of conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman and also of disrespect to his superior officers. His appointment as a midshipman was revoked; a reprimand was issued by the commander-in-chief and read to the assembled officers of every ship in the squadron. He was then dismissed from the squadron. Strain took passage to the United States in the *Lexington*, upon which, according to naval custom, he could not be ordered to duty because the master of the *Lexington* was a junior officer.⁵⁷

Jones took the opportunity offered in writing the reprimand to give some fatherly advice to the officers. He denounced those who were not content to state a grievance in a plain manner, but who went off into a long legal argument to work out abstractions at variance with every rule of military discipline and subordination. He demanded that those who felt themselves aggrieved or oppressed should confine their appeals to the subject matter of the complaint set forth in unvarnished terms. "Grievances which need elaborate and sophisticated arguments to make a point had better be borne with," he said.⁵⁸

The grievances continued. One cause of disquiet was the arrival of the steamers with several naval officers on board who had been granted leaves of absence or furloughs from the Navy Department to pursue personal adventure. Lieutenant Fabius Stanley on board the *Ohio* understandably complained that those

who had served almost three years on the Pacific Coast were denied permission to visit the interior while officers from Washington were granted such leave. He, consequently, asked for either a leave or for such minimal duty as Lieutenant Revere or Chaplain Colton received. Either of these would allow him to visit the gold fields.⁵⁹ His request was denied.⁶⁰

Charges and countercharges filled the service record of almost everyone aboard the *St. Mary's*, from the captain to the junior midshipmen. Lieutenant Stanley was court-martialled for missing the "sundown boat." He had gone to a dentist to have a tooth extracted upon the advice of the ship's surgeon and had not returned to the ship until eight o'clock the following morning. When he reported aboard and told his story, he was instructed to make out a written statement, to which he replied: "Captain Long, I have made my report, you may put it in writing yourself, Sir."⁶¹

Lieutenant William Chandler was tried on charges preferred by Acting Surgeon Addison, and the surgeon was tried on charges made by Chandler. Both were found guilty. Commander Jacob Crowningshield preferred charges against Lieutenant Chandler who, in turn, countercharged Commander Crowningshield with profane swearing and scandalous conduct and drinking intoxicating liquids.⁶²

Commodore Jones did not make a decision regarding Commander Jacob Crowningshield until April 14, 1849. At that time, Commander Crowningshield was ordered to return home in the steamer *California*.⁶³ In order to reinforce his decision, Jones ordered that a medical survey be made on Commander Crowningshield.⁶⁴ In the medical report which subsequently was submitted to him, Jones read that Commander Crowningshield was "laboring under great nervous irritability which at times incapacitated him from discharging his duties."⁶⁵ Commodore Jones further decided that the Pacific Coast was not the place to untangle all the ramifications of the case, and he referred it to the Navy Department.⁶⁶ This breakdown of discipline and morale soon led to desertion.

The fate of those who had deserted the squadron was for the most part unknown; on occasion, however, news got back to the

ship. One sailor, a deserter from the *Ohio*, robbed a man who had set up a saloon in the Mokelumne diggings. He had successfully obtained two bags containing about five ounces of gold and was trying for a bag of silver dollars when the jingling of the coins awakened the owner. The sailor was caught and bound to a tree until morning. About nine o'clock the following morning a jury of twelve miners found the sailor guilty and sentenced him to be hanged. Others present objected to taking the man's life and instead proposed that he be shaven, his ears cut off, and he be given one hundred lashes.

The poor wretch was fastened by his hands to a branch of a tree, and the mob proceeded to shave his head, while some sailors of the party set to work manufacturing a cat. His feet were then tied together to the foot of the tree, and when his head had been shaved, a deserter lopped off his ears. He bled a great deal; but when the blood was staunched, they set to flogging him; and they didn't spare him, either. After this they kicked him out.⁶⁷

For those who stayed, there were some indications that changes were in process to modify the stringent regulations. Passed Midshipman Edward Beale arrived in San Francisco on the United States mail steamer, *Panama*, on August 18, 1849, carrying a welcome dispatch which changed the *Ohio's* route from one via the East Indies to a direct passage home. Prior news, that the home route was to be via the East Indies, had had the effect of prompting eighteen men from the *Ohio* to desert in a boat being manned to go to shore. They made good their escape through the crowd of shipping intervening between ship and shore. Ironically the *Ohio* had been used by merchant captains to guard the merchant seamen on several occasions.

The escape from the *Ohio* showed that no fear of punishment nor risk of success were too great to deter wholesale desertion rather than return home, especially by way of the East Indies. Commodore Jones indicated that the experiences of the Navy on the coast of California in the years of 1847, 1848, and 1849 showed that only one means could possibly keep the squadron manned on this coast — by shipping men for a term of not more than two years, with the condition that they be discharged in California if they so desired. As an added incentive to serving out

their full time faithfully, land or increased wages were necessary and should be given immediately upon an honorable discharge. Jones suggested that this plan, if adopted, should be retroactive to include the men presently serving in the Pacific Squadron.⁶⁸

Jones summed up the lot of the common sailor in California when he wrote that the Navy could justly claim California as the spoils of war, but what reward had the sailor received from his country so enriched by his labors?⁶⁹ He continued:

But where is the sailor's bounty land, where his extra pay? . . . The New York Volunteers, much associated with the sailors during the war, were promptly discharged from service on the return of peace [and were given]. . . bounty lands, extra pay, and the privilege of returning to the Atlantic States at the nation's cost.

The sailor remains without a guarantee that at expiration of his term of service he may not be required to perform a new voyage through dangerous seas and pestilential climes to take his ship home.⁷⁰

Under all these circumstances, is it any surprise that there were so many desertions? Is it not rather a wonder that the Navy retained any enlisted person who had the means of escape?

NOTES

¹*Californian* (San Francisco), March 15, 1848, p. 2.

²Thomas O. Larkin to Secretary of State James Buchanan, Monterey, April 20, 1846, Reports to the Department of State from Monterey, Alta California, February 20, 1834-November 15, 1848, National Archives, Department of State, General Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59, Consular Dispatches. Hereinafter cited as Consular Dispatches, Monterey.

³Marius Duvall, *A Navy Surgeon in California*, ed. Fred Blackburn Rogers (San Francisco: John Howell, 1957), p. 7.

⁴Walter Colton, *Three Years in California* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1949), p. 368. Hereinafter cited as Colton, *Three Years in California*.

⁵Owen C. Coy, *In the Diggings in 'Forty-Nine* (Los Angeles: The California State Historical Association, 1948), pp. 9-18, gives an excellent account of the progress and methods of the miners in 1848. Hereinafter cited as Coy, *In the Diggings in 'Forty-Nine*.

⁶*The California Star* (San Francisco), May 27, 1848.

⁷Colton, *Three Years in California*, p. 244.

⁸Thomas O. Larkin to James Buchanan, Monterey, July 20, 1848, Consular Dispatches, Monterey. Few Californians went to the mines until July 1848.

U.S. Navy in the Gold Fields

⁹Theodore H. Hittell, *History of California* (3 vols.; San Francisco: N.J. Stone & Co., 1897), II: 692.

¹⁰Thomas O. Larkin to James Buchanan, Monterey, June 28, 1848, Consular Dispatches, Monterey.

¹¹Thomas O. Larkin to James Buchanan, San Francisco, June 1, 1848, Consular Dispatches, Monterey.

¹²Governor Richard B. Mason to the People of California, Monterey, July 25, 1848, Letter Books of the Military Governors and the Secretary of State of California, March 1, 1847-September 23, 1848, National Archives, Department of War, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, Record Group 94. Hereinafter cited as Governors' Letters.

¹³Commodore Thomas ap Catesby Jones to Secretary of the Navy John Y. Mason, La Paz, July 28, 1848, Cruise of Commodore Jones, November 4, 1847-August 26, 1850, National Archives, Department of the Navy, Naval Records Collection of the Office of Naval Records and Library Record Group 45, Letters Received by the Secretary of the Navy From Commanding Officers of Squadrons, Pacific Squadron Letters. Hereinafter cited as PSL.

¹⁴Thomas C. Lancey, "Journal," entry for November 2, 1848; cited in "Thomas C. Lancey, Chronicler of '46," *Pacific Historical Review*, XVI (February 1947): 11-17. Hereinafter cited as "Thomas C. Lancey, Chronicler of '46." Also see Thomas ap Catesby Jones to Captain [John] Rudd, San Francisco, March 12, 1849, PSL.

¹⁵Thomas ap Catesby Jones to Secretary of the Navy John Y. Mason, La Paz, July 28, 1848, PSL.

¹⁶Thomas ap Catesby Jones to Secretary of the Navy John Y. Mason, La Paz, July 28, 1848, PSL.

¹⁷Secretary of the Navy John Y. Mason to Thomas ap Catesby Jones, Washington, February 15, 1849, PSL.

¹⁸Thomas ap Catesby Jones to Officers of the Flag Ship *Ohio*, At Sea, September 17, 1848, PSL.

¹⁹Memoranda, Thomas ap Catesby Jones, At Sea, September 17, 1848, enclosure marked C, Lieutenants J.F. Green and J.B. Marchand to Secretary of the Navy John Y. Mason, San Francisco, April 9, 1849, PSL, set forth eleven articles to regulate the conduct of the officers and men of the Pacific Squadron while at anchor in California.

²⁰Memoranda, Thomas ap Catesby Jones, At Sea, September 17, 1848, article seven, PSL.

²¹Memoranda, Thomas ap Catesby Jones, At Sea, September 17, 1848, article ten, PSL.

²²Colton, *Three Years in California*, p. 247, wrote, "I don't blame the fellows a whit; seven dollars a month, while others are making two or three hundred a day! That is too much for human nature to stand."

²³Special Orders, Thomas ap Catesby Jones, Monterey, October 18, 1848, enclosure marked B, Lieutenants J.F. Green and J.B. Marchand to Secretary of the Navy John Y. Mason, San Francisco, April 9, 1849, PSL.

²⁴Lieutenants J.F. Green and J.B. Marchand to Secretary of the Navy John Y. Mason, San Francisco, April 9, 1849, PSL.

²⁵Memoranda, Thomas ap Catesby Jones, At Sea, September 17, 1848, enclosure marked C, Lieutenants J.F. Green and J.B. Marchand to Secretary of the Navy John Y. Mason, San Francisco, April 9, 1849, PSL.

²⁶Lieutenants James Green and Joseph Marchand to Secretary of the Navy John Y. Mason, San Francisco, April 9, 1849, PSL.

²⁷On September 17, 1848, Commodore Jones had issued a memorandum to the officers of the squadron curtailing the usual liberties allowed at the port of Monterey. This was done as a precautionary measure against desertion to the gold fields; memoranda, Thomas ap Catesby Jones, At Sea, September 17, 1848, enclosure marked C, PSL.

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²⁸Thomas ap Catesby Jones to Secretary of the Navy John Y. Mason, San Francisco, April 9, 1849, PSL.

²⁹Jones planned to meet Governor Richard B. Mason at Sutter's Fort to discuss matters relative to the New York Volunteers whom Jones had transported to Monterey. The public funds in the money box were to defray the expenses of the party while on this official business. Thomas ap Catesby Jones to Secretary of the Navy John Y. Mason, San Francisco, April 9, 1849, PSL.

Jones eventually invested \$10,000 of the public funds in gold before his stay in California terminated. The fact that Jones and Forrest, the only two who had access to the public funds, had \$2,200 to invest, while the entire number of wardroom officers could muster only \$2,000 among them, leaves some room for suspicion that at least part of the money was borrowed. Jones was known to be "land and slave rich, and money poor" in 1848. Udolpho T. Bradley, "Contentious Commodore, Thomas ap Catesby Jones of the Old Navy" (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University, Department of History, 1933), p. 196.

³⁰Thomas ap Catesby Jones to Secretary of the Navy John Y. Mason, San Francisco, April 9, 1849, PSL.

³¹Thomas ap Catesby Jones to Lieutenants James Green and Joseph Marchand and others of their class, Monterey, October 20, 1848, PSL.

³²Thomas ap Catesby Jones to Secretary of the Navy, John Y. Mason, San Francisco, April 9, 1849, PSL.

³³"Thomas C. Lancey, Chronicler of '46," entry for November 2, 1848.

³⁴Secretary of the Navy John Y. Mason to Thomas ap Catesby Jones, Washington, March 1, 1849, PSL.

³⁵Thomas ap Catesby Jones to Secretary of the Navy John Y. Mason, San Francisco, April 9, 1849, PSL.

³⁶Thomas ap Catesby Jones to Secretary of the Navy John Y. Mason, San Francisco, April 9, 1849, PSL.

³⁷Thomas ap Catesby Jones to Secretary of the Navy John Y. Mason, San Francisco, April 9, 1849, PSL.

³⁸Thomas ap Catesby Jones to Secretary of the Navy John Y. Mason, Monterey, October 25, 1848, PSL.

³⁹Captain Cornelius K. Stribling to Lieutenant James F. Green, USS *Ohio*, April 3, 1849, PSL.

⁴⁰Those who wrote in praise of the two lieutenants were W.E. Boudinot, acting master of the *Ohio*; N.C. Barrabino, surgeon; M.K. Warrington, acting master; P.G. Clark, chaplain; E.J. Bee, assistant surgeon; J.S. Hardy, captain, United States Marine Corps; Sam Forrest, purser; James McCormick, lieutenant; Henry Eld, Jr., lieutenant; George F. Emmons, lieutenant. Letters received by Lieutenants Green and Marchand, Aboard the *Ohio*, San Francisco, April 1849, PSL.

⁴¹Lieutenant William Armstrong to Lieutenant Joseph Marchand, San Francisco, April 8, 1848, PSL.

⁴²Thomas ap Catesby Jones to Secretary of the Navy John Y. Mason, San Francisco, April 9, 1849, PSL.

⁴³Governor Mason sanctioned the use of California grain gold, if it could be wrought into convenient shapes, as a substitute for gold and silver coin. On August 8, 1848, Mason had to revoke this permission, having been informed that it was illegal to make coin. Richard Barnes Mason, Governor of California, to Walter Colton, Talbot H. Green, Thomas O. Larkin, Milton Little, D. Spencer, and others, Monterey, July 28, 1848, Governors' Letters.

⁴⁴Thomas ap Catesby Jones to Secretary of the Navy John Y. Mason, San Francisco, November 24, 1848, PSL. The actual gold yield for 1848 is difficult to estimate, for no accurate check was made. Hubert Howe Bancroft placed the figure at \$10,000,000. The official report for the year was \$2,000,000. Coy, *In the Diggings in 'Forty-Nine*, p. 20.

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⁴⁵Thomas ap Catesby Jones to Secretary of the Navy John Y. Mason, San Francisco, November 24, 1848, PSL.

⁴⁶*Sandwich Island News* (Honolulu), December 7, 1848, and R.C. Wyllie, Minister of Foreign Relations, to Anthony Ten Eyck, United States Commissioner, Royal Palace, December 14, 1848, enclosures in PSL.

⁴⁷Thomas ap Catesby Jones to Secretary of the Navy John Y. Mason, April 9, 1849, San Francisco, PSL.

⁴⁸"Thomas C. Lancey, Chronicler of '46," entry for November 2, 1848.

⁴⁹Thomas ap Catesby Jones to John Rudd, Sailing Orders, San Francisco, March 12, 1849, PSL.

⁵⁰The temptations of the gold fields were indeed difficult to resist. Governor Richard B. Mason reported that "a soldier of the artillery company, . . . having been absent on furlough twenty days, . . . made by trading and working . . . \$1,500.00 He made a sum of money greater than he receives in pay, clothes, and rations, during a whole enlistment of five years." Coy, *In the Diggings in Forty-Nine*, p. 20.

⁵¹Thomas ap Catesby Jones, "Circular," Monterey, October 18, 1848, PSL.

⁵²Secretary of the Navy John Y. Mason to Thomas ap Catesby Jones, Washington, March 1, 1849, PSL. It is not surprising that Secretary Mason was startled at the amounts being offered by Jones. In August and September 1846, the rewards offered for deserters ranged from twenty to fifty dollars, considerably less than Jones' offers. *Californian*, August 29 and September 12, 1846.

⁵³Article four of the "Regulations for the Harbors of California," July 25, 1848, read: "Any master of a merchant vessel who receives a deserter from the Army or Navy, or if such a deserter be found concealed on board his vessel, the vessel will be confiscated, and the master tried by a military commission, and punished according to the laws of war."

Article six stated, "Any person who shall aid a sailor belonging to any vessel on the coast of California to desert, or who shall aid or abet in such a desertion, or who shall knowingly receive or conceal such a person, shall on conviction before an alcalde or other civil magistrate, be subject to a fine not exceeding five hundred dollars, and imprisonment not exceeding sixty days," Governors' letters, Monterey, July 25, 1848.

⁵⁴Italics supplied.

Thomas ap Catesby Jones adopted the view which best suited his purpose of the moment. When Jones wished to convene a court-martial, he did so on the premise that California was a foreign station. General Orders, Thomas ap Catesby Jones to the Pacific Squadron, At Sea, November 15, 1848, PSL.

On the other hand, when advocating discharging men from the naval service, Jones took the position that California was a home port. Thomas ap Catesby Jones to Secretary of the Navy William Ballard Preston, San Francisco, August 23, 1849, PSL.

⁵⁵General Order, Thomas ap Catesby Jones to the Pacific Squadron, At Sea, November 15, 1848, PSL.

⁵⁶General Order, Thomas ap Catesby Jones to the Pacific Squadron, At Sea, November 15, 1848, PSL.

⁵⁷General Order, Thomas ap Catesby Jones to the Pacific Squadron, At Sea, November 15, 1848, PSL.

⁵⁸Thomas ap Catesby Jones to Secretary of the Navy John Y. Mason, San Francisco, November 21, 1848, PSL.

⁵⁹The presence of naval officers living on shore with almost unlimited freedom was a constant source of irritation to the officers confined aboard the ships. Notable in absentia in the otherwise minute observations of California is the lack of any detailed information in either Colton's *Three Years in California* or Revere's *Tour of Duty* regarding the morale of the squadron and the foreboding atmosphere surrounding the almost continuous courts convened.

⁶⁰Lieutenant Stanley had had fifteen years of naval service and had served 32 months on this cruise. Lieutenant Fabius Stanley to Thomas ap Catesby Jones, San Francisco, April 9, 1849, PSL.

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⁶¹Commander A.K. Long to Commodore Thomas ap Catesby Jones, San Francisco, March 7, 1849, PSL.

⁶²Thomas ap Catesby Jones to Secretary of the Navy John Y. Mason, San Francisco, April 24, 1849, PSL; also see Charges and Specifications of Charges against Commander Jacob Crowningshield, Commanding the USS *St. Mary's*, Lieutenant William Chandler to Commodore Thomas ap Catesby Jones, San Francisco, January 9, 1849, PSL.

⁶³Thomas ap Catesby Jones to Jacob Crowningshield, San Francisco, April 14, 1849, PSL.

⁶⁴N.C. Barracino and D.B. Phillips to Thomas ap Catesby Jones, San Francisco, April 20, 1849, PSL.

⁶⁵Report of Fleet Surgeons N.C. Barracino and D.B. Phillips to Commodore Thomas ap Catesby Jones, San Francisco, April 20, 1849, PSL.

⁶⁶There were charges and countercharges against every commissioned officer on the *St. Mary's* except the purser; most of the midshipmen had charges against them, and some of the warrant officers. Thomas ap Catesby Jones to Commander Jacob Crowningshield, San Francisco, April 14, 1849, and Thomas ap Catesby Jones to Secretary of the Navy John Y. Mason, San Francisco, April 24, 1849, PSL.

⁶⁷Thomas C. Lancey, "Cruise of the *Dale*," University of California, Los Angeles, Cowan Collection, typescript of the original MSS, p. 131.

Coy, *In the Diggings in 'Forty-Nine*, pp. 112-113, says that whipping, branding, shaving of heads, and the clipping of ears were common kinds of punishments.

⁶⁸Thomas ap Catesby Jones to Secretary of the Navy William Ballard Preston, San Francisco, August 23, 1849, PSL.

⁶⁹Thomas ap Catesby Jones to Secretary of the Navy William Ballard Preston, San Francisco, August 23, 1849, PSL.

⁷⁰The *Preble* had returned from her cruise to the East Indies with fourteen dead and forty-three seriously ill. Fleet Surgeon Hoover to Thomas ap Catesby Jones, January 11, 1850, PSL.