much of our maritime history is captured in modest documents, written by the men and women whose lives and work created that history. Few of these authors’ efforts produced works that approach the literary merit or historical acuity of a Richard Henry Dana Jr., but their words allow us to view the American epic at sea through a slightly different lens. By studying their experiences through their firsthand accounts, we can better understand the broader history of life at sea in the Age of Sail.

John Odell Falkinburg’s diary is a humble, unpretentious document, full of curiosity, keen observations, and useful information. He kept diaries from his experiences at sea between 1866-70, but his journal of the year 1867 is one that reveals particularly well the marvels of being at sea for the first time and observing strange and exotic cultures in new lands, intertwined with the tedium of the watch system and routines that changed little from day to day in normal weather. This essay draws principally on John Falkinburg’s diary for 1867, as well as other diaries and additional papers.

Falkinburg’s youth was a disjointed affair, moved here and there in the Midwest and raised by various relatives following the death of his mother, a year after his birth. His father worked as a tailor, then a clerk, and even though he remarried, he seemed unable to provide a stable home for John. Young Falkinburg and his stepmother did not get along well, and, when his father died in 1852, the principal of the local school was appointed his guardian. Perhaps it was from him that Falkinburg learned to keep a diary, for little else in his desultory schooling would seem to have prepared him for future literary endeavors.

Falkinburg’s journal begins as the United States was refocusing its attention and military might away from its own recently-ended Civil War and more toward international affairs. The interest in events beyond America’s borders surfaces in a brief early entry while Falkinburg is still in port in New York: “The US Frigate ‘Susquehanna’ came into port from her mission of carrying Gen. Sherman and Col. Campbell to Mexico.” The opening of Japanese ports to foreign trade was part of the expansion of American commercial presence in East Asia and a useful employment of the substantial naval force built up by the Union. Falkinburg had seen action in the Civil War aboard Union “tin clads” operating on the Mississippi River, where he “had charge of all stores belonging to the engineers department.” He made it as far as New Orleans before the war ended. Finding “life on the gunboats so pleasant,” Falkinburg set out to find another ship. He decided to participate in the next chapter of American history—one that would take him from New York to Rio de Janeiro, Cape Town, Aden, Bombay, Singapore, Manila, Hong Kong, Nagasaki and Hiogo (Kobe), Japan.

In the summer of 1866, John Falkinburg left his Waynesville, Ohio, home, determined to join the blue-water navy. Traveling by train to Cleveland, where “for the first time [I] saw Lake Erie,” he continued on to Buffalo. There, he hoped to find the USS Michigan, a warship he had heard might accept his enlistment. Not finding her in port, he continued east to New York. On 19 July he enlisted at “the Naval rendezvous, corner of Market and Henry streets...for three years for general service.” He was assigned to the receiving ship Vermont and reported for duty at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. There, he waited. And waited—six months with “nothing of importance occurring on board.”

The waiting ended on 7 January 1867: Falkinburg had been
I even able to walh back to his old ship. On 29 January, the crew undertook one of a warship's more dangerous tasks. "In the afternoon all fires and lights were put out; the ammunition boat came alongside and we took on our load of shell and powder." Two days later, she weighed anchor and put to sea, bound for Japan.

"Today, at last, after six months of waiting...I left the Navy Yard.... At six bells both anchors were fished and we started down the East River." As they made for the open sea, the first pangs of seasickness were upon him. "[I] was oblivious to everything except the fact that I was very sea sick. Among other things I forgot that it was my birthday and that I was nineteen years of age."

The Iroquois was built in the New York Navy Yard in 1859. She was rigged as a three-masted barque and equipped with auxiliary steam power. At 1,016 tons, she measured nearly 199 feet in length, 33 feet 10 inches on the beam, and drew 13 feet of water.

Falkinburg noted that she was "pierced for ten guns, but only carried four nine-inch guns, one one-hundred pounder rifled Parrot pivot gun, and one sixty-pounder rifled and a crew of about a hundred and fifty men." The Iroquois was built for speed more than fire power. She could make eleven knots when the wind and her power plant held up. The captain once got her up to 15 knots in a stiff breeze off the wind, but engine failure and shaft/propeller problems were more typical for this single-screw ship. Such problems would prompt the captain to tinker constantly with the balance between steam and sail: "December 1st. At about two o'clock the rod of the feed pump to the main engine broke and for a time disabled the engine, so we set all sail and altered our course, but the engine soon being in running order we furled everything and stood on our original course under steam." Using both steam and wind power, the Iroquois headed south, and John Falkinburg's initiation into shipboard life began. He was still seasick when he witnessed one of the age-old tragedies of the sea:

A man names James Harry belonging to the U.S. Str. "Wyoming" while performing some duty on the top gallant forecastle was swept overboard. This ship was brought to, the life buoy cast adrift and the life boat lowered, but he was drowned before assistance could reach him.

Falkinburg recovered from his seasickness by his fourth day at sea. Ten days out from New York, he experienced his first violent storm:

In the afternoon a violent storm arose and we wore ship and stood off to the North East. Got up steam but owing to some derangement of the propeller could not use the engines. During the storm the life boat was washed away and lost. Toward evening the gale subsided.

Two weeks at sea: "divine service was held, prayers being read by the first lieutenant, Lieut. Com. Mahan." That was none other than Lieutenant Commander Alfred Thayer Mahan, who would ultimately become a celebrated naval historian and author of the enormously influential volumes, The Influence of Sea Power upon History. Mahan's experience onboard undoubtedly gave him valuable first hand knowledge of life on a navy ship, but his cruise in USS Iroquois convinced him that his calling was not on the decks of ships but rather in strategizing what to do with them. Other than commanding officers and the accused at courts martial, few names appear in Falkinburg's journal—so we might assume that Lieutenant Commander Mahan made something of an impression on his young shipmate.

Eighteen days out: the ship dropped anchor off Pointe-a-Pitre, Guadeloupe. The French Caribbean island held no attraction for Falkinburg, despite "the tropical fruits to be had in great quantity and at prices that to a Northerner seem wonderfully cheap." As the ship continued to work its way south, some members of the crew found conditions ashore more tempting. By the time they reached Brazil, he remarked that "large bounties are being offered here for recruits, fifteen hundred for the army and eleven hundred for the navy all in gold. The English vessels in the harbor are short of hands, most of their crews having deserted." The call of gold and the lure of the tropics provided more temptation than Falkinburg's shipmates could withstand. On the night of 22 March, four crewmen deserted; the next night, another. One of the crew, already in irons for trying to desert at Guadeloupe, slipped his shackles and escaped with a shipmate. Desertions would continue to plague the ship, but the problem seems to have been foreseen by its commanders. Supernumeraries had signed onboard in New York. They were not normally involved in the operation of the vessel, but they could expect to be called upon as the forces of attrition—desertion, disease, and death—reduced the ship's company during her three-year voyage. The ship also recruited along the way. On 21 June, at Cape Town, Falkinburg noted that: "We are enlisting men nearly every day here, to replace those who have deserted."

On several occasions, Falkinburg noted a fact that might explain their high rate of desertion—the high proportion of non-Americans in the crew of a US Navy warship. By the time the Iroquois reached Nagasaki, Falkinburg would note that:
Out of our whole crew but 58 are Americans, or hail from there, though it is doubtful about a number of them. Very nearly as many more come from Ireland, and the rest from almost every European nation, though Germany has the largest proportions next to Ireland, and France is the next.

Desertions reduced not only the crew's numbers, but its morale as well. Particularly for someone like Falkinburg, a young seaman with few acquaintances aboard, such losses were particularly devastating. "While we lay at Bombay we lost by desertion six of our crew and among them were three of my most intimate friends... It seems strange that no sooner do I get on terms of intimate friendship with any one, than they must needs desert." The journal also conveys the emotional impact on young Falkinburg of some of the hardships aboard a warship.

Today died John Harrigan second class fireman, of Organic disease of the heart after a long illness. He was one of the supernumeraries that we are taking out for the U.S.Str. "Wyoming." He was buried in the evening. Two bells the word was passed "All hands bury the dead." It was the first time that word has been passed since going into commission. The officers and crew being assembled the former aft, the latter forward of the port gangway. The beautiful and impressive burial service of the Episcopal church commencing "I am the resurrection and the life" etc. was read by the first lieutenant. At the words "We commit the body of our brother to the deep" the corpse, which was lying in the port gangway sewed up in his hammock with a round shot at his feet and wrapped in the Union Jack, was dropped into the sea and the ceremony was ended. The colors in the meantime were hoisted at half mast. May we never be called upon to participate in another of the kind.

One set of events is curious for its absence of emotional comment, especially considering this period in history. From 24-29 July the Iroquois visited the Comoro Islands off Madagascar, whose inhabitants he described as "quite civilized and very intelligent [and] are nearly all slaveholders." Despite having just fought a long and bloody civil war ostensibly over the issue of slavery, Falkinburg found the local rulers charming and hospitable, even as he observed slaves at work "making sugars, which they exactly do as in the States though on a smaller scale." Neither the sight nor the plight of slaves seemed to arouse any ire or empathy. When a ship came in rumored to be loaded with slaves, he noted that "as we are lying in port, of course we could not touch her.

Mail day was an important day on any ship and aboard USS Iroquois there was no exception. Falkinburg wrote daily in his diary, but he also wrote letters home to family and friends. In return, he expected—or at least hoped—to receive mail from home. In August, the Iroquois arrived in Aden, "the great mail depot for Asia. We can receive letters here from the United States but three weeks old if close connexion is made.... In the afternoon our mail came on board but any friends if I have any seem to have forgotten me, for I received none, nor have I received any since we left Rio [de] Janeiro." Most of the time, mail call had nothing for him.

One of his more poetic entries occurs just after departing from Aden—"Fire in the sea."

Last night the sea presented the most beautiful appearance that I have ever seen of the kind. The night was dark and the sea rather rough and it was covered with countless millions of medusae or jelly fish which flashed and glittered with a phosphorescent light. Standing at the bowsprit and looking down it seems as though we were sailing through a sea of fire. At the gangways whenever a wave would strike the vessel it would be light enough to read large print, and looking over the gunwale the side of the ship seemed to be encrusted with fire.

John Falkinburg surely kept a diary for himself, but he clearly had in mind his family and friends, who would want to learn about his life and travels. In this vein, he offers a description of the daily routine aboard his ship:

For the benefit of any friends who may hereafter read this and who may be unacquainted with the routine of life on board of a man-of-war, I will here give a description of one days life on board. In the first place the crew are divided into two equal watches, called respectively the starboard and port watches. One of these is always on deck and the time is so arranged that the time that one watch is on deck one day is taken by the other on the next. This is done by dividing the twenty four hours into six equal watches of four hours each and subdividing the watch from four o'clock in the evening to eight into two watches of two hours each called dog watches. This of course gives each watch the same hours on duty on alternate days. As the men from each part of the ship mess together, the messes are called the starboard and port forecastle, fore top, maintop, mizzen top, and afterguard messes, and each mess consists of from fifteen to twenty or even more men. At sea but one watch have their hammocks at night each watch having theirs alternately. In the morning at six bells (7 o'clock) the watch below is called. At seven bells they get their breakfast. This consists of hot coffee, and hard tack besides such other articles as they themselves may buy, each mess generally buying at each port in which we touch a sufficient quantity of potatoes or other vegetables to last them to the next. Half an hour is allowed for breakfast and at eight bells (8 o'clock) this watch goes on duty and the other goes to breakfast. Theirs over, all hands clean up and polish the brightwork on the guns and their battle axes, cutlasses, and whatever articles of brass work there is around the ship, such as the taffrail, capstan head etc. I forgot to state that the deck is scrubbed every morning early by the watch on deck, as the watch on duty is always called. At nine o'clock comes quarters, and this is followed on most fine days by drilling either at great guns, small arms, or single sticks. This over, if the weather is fine there is nothing to be done and the men sew, read, play checkers, dominos, etc until noon when watch goes to dinner. This on four days of the week consists of pork and beans, once canned meat and duff, once salt beef and duff, and once of canned beef and rice. We also draw during the week, butter, molasses, vin-
Iroquois. On 5 November in Hong Kong: "the American mail steamer of the Pacific Mail Steamship Company (PMSS), whose Colorado had inaugurated steamship service connecting San Francisco, Hong Kong, and Japan that same year. On 14 November the newest PMSS ship would arrive on her initial sailing to the Far East: "In the afternoon, the United States mail steamer 'China' came in from San Francisco having our American mail on board. I was not fortunate enough to get anything from home, nor have I since we left Bombay. The weather is most delightful at present."

That same week, he noted that "the American mail steamer of the line from San Francisco to China recently established is expected in here daily, being now overdue." This would have been the Pacific Mail Steamship Company (PMSS), whose Colorado had inaugurated steamship service connecting San Francisco, Hong Kong, and Japan that same year. On 14 November the newest PMSS ship would arrive on her initial sailing to the Far East: "In the afternoon, the United States mail steamer 'China' came in from San Francisco having our American mail on board. I was not fortunate enough to get anything from home, nor have I since we left Bombay. The weather is most delightful at present."

The year 1867 ended with the Iroquois lying off Hiogo (now part of Kobe) in Osaka Bay alongside four other American warships: Hartford, Wachusett, Aroostook, and Oneida. There were also ten English men-of-war in the harbor, plus one French warship, with a constant coming and going as the two main fleets were relieved or reinforced. As they headed into the new year, the year of the Meiji Restoration, one feels the tension building, preparatory to opening the port of Osaka.

From all accounts there seems to be a probability of a serious fight at the opening of the port of Osaka [sic], which will take place about the first of next month. The Tycoon or Emperor has been all along favorable to the opening of the ports and in this he has been supported by a few of the seaboard Daimos, or princes, who perceive the benefits of foreign intercourse, but most strongly opposed by the mass of the princes who reside in the interior. We have the news now that the Tycoon has been deposed and afterwards assassinated and a new emperor chosen, who, backed by the hostile Daimos, has determined to hold the ports. There will most probably be a civil war over it and we will probably be drawn into it, as according to the treaty made by the Tycoon with the American, English, French and Dutch ministers, the port was to be opened, and the naval commanders of the respective countries have determined that it shall be opened, peaceably if possible, forcibly if necessary. To this end there will be present at the opening of the port all the men of war that can be gathered in these waters, over every squadron and nation.

The last entry in the journal begins the year 1868: January 1: In the morning after quarters all hands were called to muster and this being the first Wednesday in the month, the Articles of War were read, after which the captain made us a little speech in which he complimented us on the manner in which everything was carried on when the Admiral was on board, and informed us that the affair at Hong Kong was forgotten, that he should give us money every month and liberty as often as he could. He then read some of the squadron orders of the Admiral, and the proceedings of a General court martial held on the "Wachusets" some time since in the case of a couple of deserters, as a warning. He then performed an act of clemency which we did not expect, viz. released two prisoners who deserted at Nangasaki [sic], and were recaptured. They were both down for a general court martial, and would almost certainly have been sentenced to two years in the Penitentiary and loss of pay. He finished up by rating a number of the crew, and when he piped down all considered that we had received a very good New Years present.

So ended what must have been the most eventful year in John Falkinburg's life. The next year he was transferred to the Piscataqua (soon renamed the Delaware) and continued to see duty off Japan, China, and the Philippines. Station duty was tiresome—the only shots fired were touched off as salutes to dignitaries. The journals of those years well convey the tedium. The Delaware returned to New York in 1870, and Falkinburg returned to Ohio. He became a school teacher and principal, a pillar of his community, and never left—but he left us a journal of that marvelous first year at sea. 

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