

The Path of a Lieutenant: The Aftermath



Edward spend the next several years in a Gaulish prison. He are not mistreated, precisely, but it's still a terrible experience. Finally, after years of waiting, he and his men are exchanged for some Gaulish prisoners. He finally return to H.M.S. Courageous, only to discover that the Captian has removed his status as an Acting-Lieutenant for failing to deliver the prize safely home. He resume service as a midshipman. Edward return to his duties as a midshipman on H.M.S. Courageous. The days pass much as before. He study under the ship's master, he run errands for the officers, and he command his small section of men in routine tasks. As a year passes, Edward have the opportunity to practice various skills that he expect to be tested on in the lieutenant examination. Finally, it is time for his lieutenant examination. Edward dess in his finest uniform and head over to a ship of the line, H.M.S. Dreadnought, where a board of captains has convened to examine a plethora of acting-lieutenants and midshipmen on the finer points of naval skills. Those who fails must spend at least another year at sea before trying again. After an interminable wait, Edward is called and he present himself to

“You are the officer of the watch on a square-rigged ship carrying a full spread of sail. The wind is strong and steady. The barometer drops suddenly. What do you do?”

Edward stammer for a while. Finally, one of the others captians cuts in.

“The correct answer is to reef sail. Falling pressure makes bad weather likely, and you do not want a full spread of sail in a squall.”

He then launches into another question that Edward stumble through. After ten minutes of agony, the captians confer privately and then inform he that he have failed the examination. It is with a bitter heart that Edward return to H.M.S. Courageous as a midshipman. If he had been a little better prepared, he would have passed. Three years pass before Edward finally a subsequent examination.

The responsibilities are much greater, and Edward's duties have changed significantly. Where previously he was often on deck as an assistant for the officer of the watch, he now takes his turns as an officer of the watch. His duties studying under the ship's master have completely ended. And where you previously commanded a small group of guns, he now commands a broadside.

"Ten minutes before eight bells, sir" the quartermaster reports. A steady breeze pulls Edward's ship inevitably west, bound for Kingsport.

"Very good" Edward responds. "Pipe the watch below."

The first lieutenant, Mr. Pigot, arrives promptly to relieve Edward of his dog watch.

"I relieve you, Mr. Smythe."

"Aye aye, sir. I stand relieve. Good night, sir."

"Good night, Mr. Smythe."

Not long after, Edward find himself lying in his cot, drifting off to sleep. Soon, he begin to dream. He find himself sitting for his lieutenant's examination. Three gigantic captians are looking down at him with terrible grins, larger than life.

“Good day, Mr. Smythe. My first question to you is as follows. You are in temporary command of a 36-gun ship, returning to Albion with maximum haste. The wind is with you, and you are at full sail. The barometer reports a sudden drop in pressure. What do you do next?” Edward admit that he don't know. The captians laugh cruelly. “Failing the exam already, Smythe? Any officer would know that a sudden drop in pressure indicates the arrival of a major storm! By the time you'd reef the sails, you'd probably lose a mast!”

“Here is your next question” the second captian says

“You are in temporary command of a 36-gun ship, returning to Albion with maximum haste. The wind is with you, and you are at full sail. The barometer reports a sudden drop in pressure. What do you next?”

“Did you asked that question before?” says Edward

The captians shriek with laughter, chilling Edward bones. “Even the most novice seaman would know that a drop in barometric pressure means an oncoming squall! You should have chosen to furl the sail!”

“This is your final question” the third captian says, disapprovingly.

“You are in temporary command of a 36-gun ship, returning to Albion with maximum haste. The wind is with you, and you are at full sail. The barometer reports a sudden drop in pressure. What do you next?”

“A storm is coming. Furl the sail to avoid disaster.” he responds

“Mr. Smythe, you have officially failed this lieutenant examination. This is the worst performance I have ever seen in an acting-lieutenant. Furthermore, it is the unanimous agreement of the examination board that you shall be disgraced and pressed into service as an ordinary sailor. Good day, ‘Mister’ Smythe!”

Edward awake with a start. Drowsily, he can hear Pigot call the watch; it’s midnight. The ship is heaving erratically. As he yawn deeply, his ears pop. The pressure has changed. And Edward go above deck. By the time he get himself dressed and on deck, he find that things are already going to hell. Last night’s steady breeze has become a gale; he feel the mist of rain on his cheek.

“Mr. Smythe” says Pigot, greeting Edward formally. It’s hard to see clearly, but he think he spy Jones up in the riggings, along with two other men. Edward think of telling Pigot to furl the sail, but he can’t just tell Pigot what to do! He’s his commanding officer. This violates every protocol of the Royal Navy. “But to hell with protocol! He could get us all killed!”

“What did you say to me, Mr. Smythe? You there” Pigot growls to the master’s mate, “Did you hear what he just said?”

“Aye sir?” the mate replies noncommittally - trying not to get involved.

“The Captian will hear of this. Return to your quarters” orders Pigot

Edward try to go wake the Captian: “If Pigot won’t listen. I’ll ahve to go over his head!” But he may not get his chance. Just at that moment, Captian Kent appears from his cabin. “Captian on deck!” yells Pigot. Just then, Jone falls from the riggings of the mizzen mast. Another sailor reaches out to cath him; the wind shrieks and the ship groans and leans precipitously. Edward hear a pop as someone’s arm dislocates. Before anyone can say a word, both sailors have fallen to the deck, one of them killed instantly on impact. The Captian takes over from here. After breakfast, all the officers of the ship gather together in the Captian’s cabin.

Pigot takes a moment to turn to Edward and hiss, "What were you trying to do last night - make it seem to everyone that I don't know my job? You'll pay for your insolence." Edward have no opportunity to defend himself before the Captian calls for everyone's attention.

"My question for you, Mr. Pigot" the Captian says, "is: why were there still men on the riggings when the storm arrived?"

"I could see from on deck that Master's Mate Jones hadn't reefed the sail correctly" replies Pigot, "so I ordered the men to return aloft to secure it properly"

The Captian counters "Jones says that you gave the order to reef the sail too late, and that he and Wilson were already under heavy weather."

"With all due respect, sir, Jones is an insubordinate and unskilled master's mate. I'm not surprised he has invented an excuse. I gave the order when it was needed."

“Sir” Edward interject, “may I ask a question?”

“Certainly” Pigot replies nervously

“The storm arrived quickly, as you said. How and when did you know that the sails needed to be reefed?” asks Edward

“Mr. Smythe, you must be quite inexperienced to have ask such a question. I knew the sails had to be reefed immediately when the wind picked up and the rain set in.”

And not when the barometric pressure dropped?” asks the Captian

There is a brief silence, as everyone in the room realizes that Pigot has just admitted to a serious blunder. He turns red with rage and embarrassment.

“I gave the order at the right time!” he insists, banging his fist on the table. “I demand that Jones be flogged for his error reefing the sails.”

“I’m sure he did the best he could under the circumstances” Edward suggest

“But his best was simply not good enough, and now two men are dead.” The Captian is silent for a moment, then says “Mr. Pigot, I will not mention you by name in my report on this to the Admiralty, but I will remember this as I prepare future reports. As for Jones, the bosun will administer twenty lashes under Mr. Pigot’s supervision.”

Bryce pipes up “Jones is still under the care of Dr. Miller.”

“Very well: his punishment will be postponed until such time as Dr. Miller agrees to allow it. You are dismissed.”

Once Edward are both out of earshot, Pigot leans in to whisper to him: “Mark my words, Smythe: your career in the Navy is well and truly finished!”

As soon as he's able to walk, Jones is laid out for twenty lashes. Pigot has the bosun beat him as hard as he can; he's immediatly returned to the surgeon's care.

Later that night, a midshipman wakes Edward from very deep sleep:

"Mr. Pigot's compliments, sir, and he's passing the word for you."

Because he is senior to Edward, he have no choice but report when he sends for him. Edward stagger out of bed, quickly pull on his uniform, and make his way to the deck, where Mr. Pigot awaits him with a nasty smile.

"Mr. Smythe, did the weather change at all during your watch?"

"Yes, sir" he reply, as clearly as he are able, "the wind changed twice during the evening. At the end of my watch the wind was favorable."

“Very well. You are dismissed.”

In the following day Edward find that he're a bit tired. He find it difficult to avoid yawning disrespectfully, but he're in the Royal Navy; he can manage it. But two days later, Pigot wakes he up again, in the middle of his sleep cycle.

“How many times did you throw the chip log to measure speed?” he aks

“Uh, three times, sir” he slur

“Come again, Mr. Smythe?”

“Sir, I said three times.”

“I see. Mr. Smythe, in my opinion, you appear to be inebriated with rum.”

“Sir, no sir” It's almost three bells; he's exhausted, but he's not drunk

“Well, I’ll see to it that this won’t happen again. You’re not to have another drop of rum until my order, is that clear?”

“Aye aye, sir”

“You are dismissed, Mr. Smythe”

Pigot wakes Edward again three days later, to ask whether the Captian gave him any standing orders that he should be aware of as the next watchanding officer. And again two days after that. Mr. Pigot wakes he at least once every two or three days for the next three weeks; sometimes he takes the opportunity to lecture for an hour on the importance of respect and good discipline on a ship. He’s doing everything in his authority to make Edward life hell.

The following evening, he catch himself nearly falling asleep on duty - an offense punishable by death.

Edward tries to speak with the Captian:

“Mr. Smythe, are you asking me to violate the chain of command?”

He hesitates before answering the Captain's question: he continues: “According to Mr. Pigot, you've been giving him incompleting reports.”

“Sir, I--”

“I'm not asking you a question, Mr. Smythe. I'm well aware of Mr. Pigot's behavior. You won't be the first junior officer who shares a grudge with him. But as long as he acts within his authority, I will not act to usurp it.”

“Yes, sir”

“On my ship, the officers are to behave as grown adults. You're a lieutenant now, Mr. Smythe. You are not a child who can come running to Big Daddy when you have a problem.”

“Aye aye, sir”

The next night, Pigot wakes he again at three bells. The following afternoon, Edward catch himself dozing during duty. It couldno't have been more than a few seconds and no one appears to have noticed this time. As he head below deck, he see a handful of sailors whispering together. As soon as they catch sight of Edward, they stop abruptly and go their separate ways.

Edward pulls one of the sailors aside:

“Allen, may I have a word with you?”

Edward move a little closer to his cabin. “What was that little gathering about?”

“With all due respect, sir, I don't think you want to know”

He swear to secrecy, but Allen don't say a word

“You can swear up and down, but there's nothing to tell. Sir” he emphasizes the word “sir” oddly

“Allen, if you don’t tell me the purpose of that assembly, the lash will be the least of your concerns!” He emphasize the word “assembly” evoking the nineteenth Article of War, the one about “mutinous assembly”

Allen’s face is now completely expressionless. “I don’t know what you mean, sir” he says, evenly, looking straight into Edward eyes. “If you will excuse me, sir, I have some duties to attend to.”

Edward go the faster he can and report a possibly mutiny to Mr. Bryce:

“Damnation! Do you really think it’s mutiny?”

“Yes, sir. Yes, I do, sir.”

“But you can’t be sure; it’s just a few whispers and your suspicions.”

“Yes, sir”

“Well. I’ll tell Pigot and the Captian to keep an eye out for suspicious behavior, then. If you’re right, we’ve got a royal mess on our hands!”

A few days later, another major storm hits. At almost four bells, Edward find himself wide awake, entirely against his will. Unable to return to sleep, he pull on his uniform and go above deck for some fresh air. On deck, he encounter a most unusual sight. The sky is pouring icy rain. Mr. Pigot is wrestling with two sailors on the edge of the deck. They are trying to push him overboard; they are trying to murder him. Another sailor is on deck, watching the fight, but not involved, Edward are pretty sure he hasn’t noticed he yet. Edward yell to get the sailors’ attention; they hesitate in their wrestling match. One of them slips overboard as Pigot regains his footing. Realizing that the plan has failed, the other sailor relents as Pigot backs away from the edge and orders the remaining mutineers locked up.

Under the testimony of both lieutenants, the remaining mutineers are convicted by a speedy court-martial consisting of the Captian and the lieutenants. They hang from the yard arm at dawn the following day. Edward get a full night's sleep that night.

The tropical sun is got even through Edward hat, and it glares painfully off the waters. Through his stinging eyes, he can see looming up ahead the cliffs of a little ilsand - a tiny place, uninhabited according to the charts. About halfway between the prow of Courageous and the island, the sea is marked by the white canvas sail of a Gaulish merchant ship - streaking towards the island as fast as she can go, running desperately away from Courageous's pursuit.

"More sail!" the Captian commands

Immediately the men jump to obey, feet pounding on the deck and shouts echoing from the rigging. Canvas snaps and billows overhead. But Edward can tell it isn't enough. The little Gaulish ship is faster under the light wind, and has too great a head start.

“I do not think we can catch her” Edward say quietly to Bryce

“We must catch her” Bryce replies, “before she gets much nearer shore. We can’t manuever Courageous in those shallow waters”

And, indeed, before very long the Captian is forced to call of pursuit, citing just that reason. Courageous stays a safe distance out, in deep water. Edward and many others stare resentfully at the escaped prize - nestled against shore in the company of another Gaulish merchant vessel, one that was already there. The Gauls must use this island often for resupply.

“Mr. Bryce! Mr. Smythe!” the Captian’s voice cuts through Edward reverie. “In my cabin, if you please!”

“We can hold them pinned here indefinitely” the Captian says “but we can’t get closer enough to engage them directly. Which means a cutting-out expedition is called for.” A group of men will be sent to approach the merchant ships in the dead of night, board them secretly, take them over, and sail them away from the island as prizes.

“There are two ships, so our force will be divided in two, Mr. Bryce, you will command on half; Mr. Smythe, you will comand the other. Expect that each enemy ship has a complement of thirty men. You will each have forty under your command.”

Few lieutenants get such a chance to prove their capabilities. Indeed, the Captian has clearly decided to pass over Mr. Pigot for this opportunity - a decision that Edward can hardly fault. If he are able to pull this off, it will be a significant boost to his career.

Edward feels thrilled. He have been waiting for this sort of opportunity for a while now. He have no doubt at all he will succed brilliantly and impress the Captian. Edward give serious thought to how he will organize his men, and then he go to brief the ones who have been assigned to him. They consist of two midshipmen and forty sailors.

“We will take two boats” he explain. “I shall command one, with Mr. Midshipman Stuart to assist me. Mr. Midshipman Mason will command the other. My boat shall come along the starboard side of the Gaulish vessel, and Mr Midshipman Mason’s along the port side. We will climb aboard secretly, and then attack from two sides with plenty of shouting to frighten the spineless Gaulish boys.”

The men grin. Edward pause. He know that one of the three officers must be made responsible for cutting the anchor cable, so that his men will be able to sail the Gaulish ship out to where H.M.S. Courageous waits. Another must be responsible for ascending the rigging and loosing the topsail to get the ship underway. And a third must be responsible for taking over the steering of the ship. There are three officers available - he and two midshipmen. He want the job of steering the captured prize back to Courageous, but his sailing skills aren't the best and for that reason he accept the job of cutting the cables.

“Once we are aboard. I shall cut the anchor cable to release the Gaulish ship from its mooring,” he continue. “Mr. Midshipman Mason, you shall ascend the rigging and loose the topsail, to set the ship in motion.”

Mason pales slightly, but nods.

“Mr. Midshipman Stuart, it shall be your task to make your way directly to the wheel, and steer the prize out of harbour once we have taken her.”

“Aye aye, sir,” Stuart says crisply.

“Now, you men - you’ll each be provided with a pistol and a cutlass. We will leave at four bells - you will be roused.”

“Dismissed!” Edward say

The next few hours pass nervously, as Edward go over his plan again and again. Finally, four bells sounds, and he hasten to the deck to take command of his party. Along the way, he encounter Bryce, who seems a little nervous too. “All set, Mr. Smythe?” he asks.

“Yes, sir, Mr. Bryce,” Edward says

“You’ve set someone to climb the rigging and loose the topsail, right? And someone to cut the cable?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And there’s an officer responsible for the steering?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You’ve told the men to keep their damned pistols half-cocked until you give the word? All we need is a premature shot to give away the game.”

“Oh.” That was the thing Edward forgot.

“I’ll tell them when we’re ready to go, sir. Wouldn’t them to forget.” Edward replies

Bryce raises an eyebrow at him. Edward are uncomfortably certain that Bryce knew he had forgotten, and isn’t overly impressed by his attempt to cover his error. “See that you do,” he says tersely. But then he manages a somewhat strained smile. “Good luck to you, Mr. Smythe.”

“To you too, sir,” Edward say, and go to shepherd your men into the boats.

“Now see here!” Edward order his men in a fierce whisper. “Not one sound from any of you once we’re out on the water! And keep those pistols of yours half-cocked until I give the order otherwise! Any man who disobeys will be kissing the gunner’s daughter tomorrow!”

They all nod, and Edward join them in the boat, satisfied that he covered his earlier mistake brilliantly. No one would ever guess he entirely forgot to give the order before. The oars skim smoothly over the water, and the men obediently keep quiet. He can feel his heart hammer in his throat as the great dark shapes of the Gaulish ships loom overhead, and he hope his hand doesn’t shake on the tiller. It is his responsibility to get the boat close enough to board the merchant vessel, without letting their lookout see anything. He hope his sailing ability is up to the task. Sweat pours down his face as he navigate up close to the starboard side of the Gaulish ship. To his profound relief, no one aboard notices a thing.

“Pistols cocked!” he order in a whisper. He look up above him, at the chains that snake up the ship’s side shining silver and then disappearing into darkness.

It’s time. “Follow me!” he whisper as loudly as he dare, and, springing to his feet, catch hold of the chains. Behind him, he can hear his men following as quietly and quickly as they can manage. He makes it to the top of the heavy chains, pull himself up over the side onto the deck - and come face to face with a wide-eyed, white-faced boy. He is too starled and frightened to shout now, but he will recover in no more than a instant - and most of Edward mens are still ascending the chains behind him.

Edward hit him across the face with his pistol, in the hope of kocking him out without killing him. He falls backward, making no more noise than a soft thump when he hits the deck, mouth open as if in surprise and blood running down his face.

Edward men pull themselves over the ship's side as quietly as possible. He wait until a good number are beside him, then take a deep breath. "For Albion!" he shout, and plunge into the confused mass of Gauls caught unprepared by his surprise attack. He cut to the left and the right with his sword, shouting as loudly as he can. At first, the Gauls scatter before him - but then they begin to regroup. One rushes to Edward from the left, and he turn and plunge his sword into his chest. He falls - but there is another diving in from the right, closing fast as Edward struggle to extricate his blade from his dead shipmate. Edward can't waste an instant. He abandon his sword, and turn to fight with his pistol. He let go of the hilt and spin around, leveling his pistol as his new opponent swings his sword. Steel whistles past Edward ear - he fire at point-blank range - and the Gaul falls to the deck, a smoking hole in the center of his chest. In a smooth motion Edward pick up the fallen Gaul's sword and pistol to replace his own.

His turn his attention back to the task at hand: fighting his way through the mass of bodies to the cable. He have almost reached his goal when he found his way blocked by two massive, angry Gauls standing shoulder to shoulder. He aim his pistol - and just then, out of the corner of his eyes, see Mason fighting a desperate duel on the other side of the deck. If Mason falls, his task will go uncompleted. On the other hand, if Edward spend his bullet to save Mason's life, he will be out of ammunition. And then he will have to fight both these Gauls with just his sword. If they cut him down, his task will go uncompleted. Edward is confident in his ability to win any swordfight, even two to one. And it is his responsibility to see to the safety of those under his command. He turn and fire at Mason's attacker. Mason's attacker drops like a stone. Mason looks over, wide-eyed - then gives Edward an awkward nod of thanks and scrambles to his task.

Edward, meanwhile, turn back to see two large Gauls with drawn swords charging at him. He howl an incoherent challenge and rush to meet them. Steel clangs against steel, and pain scores across his left leg as one of the Gauls lands a blow. He are not fighting by any honorable rules now, but desperately for his life, using elbows and knees as well as the blade of his sword. Edward manages to elbow one Gaul in the throat, and he falls back, choking curses. That gives him the opportunity he need to wound the other slightly and run before he recovers.

At last he pummel his way through the mass of bodies to the anchor cable, and hack through it with his sword. The Gaulish ship is drifting freely now. Edward look up, and pick out Mason's dark figure, very high up in the rigging. As he watch, the topsail flutters free.

He turn back to the fight. In no time at all, Gauls are surrendering all over the deck. He take prisoner those who still live, get the prize underway, and take her safely back to Courageous.

Bryce's prize beats Edward there by no more than a few minutes. He and Bryce meet on deck, and Bryce looks as flushed and giddy as Edward feel. Edward reach over to shake his hand, and he squeezes Edward warmly.

"Brilliant!" the Captian says in approval. "Very nicely done indeed, the two of you!" He orders Edward and Bryce to take command of the prizes and sail them to Albion - adding, with a smile, that he would be much surprised if Edward and Bryce did not receive a promotion to Commander. And indeed, the Admiralty promotes them to the rank of Commander. It is a proud moment indeed when Edward first walk down a street in Chesterport with an epaulette pinned to his left shoulder. And now he are eligible to command a sloop of his own, and to receive the courtesy title of "Captian."