

1794 Lieutenant Piper.

Destination unknown

Hans Boon

2026

Destination unknown

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The strong westerly wind had driven *Champion* far out into the Bay of Biscay. The ship, rigged as a sloop-of-war with her three masts, behaved extremely poorly on the long ocean swells and treacherous chop. It was cold on this gray November day. To starboard over the horizon, lay the Iberian Peninsula, England's official ally in the struggle between Revolutionary France and several European countries such as Prussia, the Netherlands and Spain. Captain James Lloyd did not wish to take any risks approaching too close to the dangerous northern coast of Spain. However, Lieutenant Alexander Piper, first officer, felt that *Champion* was sailing too far ahead of the storm towards the French mainland. However, it was not his place to criticize the captain in any way, nor for anyone else aboard this warship, carrying some one hundred and forty men in the service of the King of England, George III. On this ship, Captain James Lloyd is answerable only to God. Upon returning in England, he had to account for his actions to the Admiralty Board, but for many commanding officers, often of noble rank, that was a concern for later and perhaps not the most important. There were numerous known cases of clear culpability, complete failure and sometimes even criminal conduct by captains, and yet the officer in question was 'rewarded' with the position of harbor admiral. Admittedly not a truly honorable position, but the steady income and secure existence compensated greatly for the many failures. No, Captain Lloyd could sail ahead of the storm at will, more like 'floating' actually, under only a heavily reefed foresail on the foremast and a small jib on the bowsprit. This was called 'under bare poles'. A major disadvantage is that the ship catches the heavy waves with the stern, which is flat above the waterline. This is where the large windows of the captain's cabin are located, and that part is not designed to absorb waves. No, Piper felt that this relatively small sloop-of-war, or corvette, with a hull length of 98.5 ft and twenty guns, would be better off facing the waves and the wind in this storm, head on. This would allow

the sharp bow to absorb the powerful waves and the ship would also be much calmer. Now the entire ship pitched and rolled with each heavy roller, and each time, a huge amount of water was poured over her, this course was certainly not without danger. Captain Lloyd stood, seemingly unmoved and not aware of the danger to the ship, by the side of master Pearce and the helmsmen. Standing is too strong a word for their position, swaying and holding on to the safety ropes stretched across the deck. Without those ropes, they already would have been washed off the deck. And in this situation, *Champion* had been sailing for over five hours now and Lloyd seemed quite content with this course. Andrew Franklin, the youngest midshipman, staggered down the stairs to the lower deck as best he could to the little group by the wheel. He tried something resembling a salute.

“Captain..., sir!”, he gasped, “we’re taking on water, with every wave over the stern...,” he had to take another deep breath, “... more water is coming over the deck and through the stairwell into the lower deck and the bilge!! The pumpmen can’t keep up!”

“What are you implying, Mr. Franklin?” Lloyd barked back.

“Nothing, Captain..., sir! Just that the pumps...” He wiped the water from his face.

“The pump men cannot keep up ...” He didn’t know how to say the ship was in danger. Lloyd apparently reconsidered and turned to Master Pearce.

“What is your opinion, Mr. Pearce?” Pearce took time to think of his response, first wiping his face dry. He was helped by a large breaking wave. Lloyd nearly lost his balance, but Piper managed to keep him on his feet. The master had used the time to formulate a tactful response.

“She’s having a very difficult time, Captain...” he played his trump card.

“Too difficult...” He was a man of few words, this master from Gosport , with a thick head of curled hair and a gray beard. A fisherman who had volunteered for the Royal Navy. He had never told Piper, who liked him for his skill and outgoing nature, the reason for his enlistment. Piper and

the master made a good couple, better than Piper and Lloyd, with his extremely rigid and utterly unfriendly demeanor. At the thankfully sparse dinners of the officers and the captain, a forced and awkward atmosphere hung in the air. No, the officers preferred to dine with Pearce occasionally and listen to his juicy tales of sailors and fishermen. Piper could still vividly recall Pearce telling him the story of two Scotsmen that had gone fishing. It is well known, he said, they are very frugal with words. At one point, this first Scotchman has a beautiful mermaid on the hook! He lifts her into the boat, looks at her, and throws her back in the water! The other Scot says: "Why?" The first one shrugs and replies: "How?" The wardroom had almost literally vibrated with laughter. A smile came to Piper's face as he recalled it. But he appreciated Ned Pearce not only for his humor but certainly for his skill. He was the master of any ship, from cutter to three-decker ship of the line, Piper was certain of that, even though he wasn't yet the skipper on *Victory* but on a humble corvette. This type was rigged roughly the same way as a ship of the line and a frigate, with three masts and square sails on each mast, but all considerably smaller. Yet, compared to the aforementioned ships, *Champion* was faster and quite a formidable opponent with her twenty 9-pounders and four 24-pounder carronades. Any armed enemy merchant ship she encountered, wouldn't stand a chance. No, Master Pearce would one time seize his chance, Piper knew that. Convinced. Just as he himself would love to have his own ship, but then again, the Navy has its own rules. Examinations of a lieutenant to become a captain are mandatory and involve a great deal of theoretical knowledge, often leaving candidates at the mercy of the examiners, who are almost without exception noblemen. After that, having reached the rank of captain, seniority or having 'friends in the upper echelons' is an absolute necessity for advancement to your own command and ultimately to the rank of captain. Piper looked at Lloyd, wondering how he had become captain. He pulled Piper out of his thoughts when he cleared his throat excessively and, holding onto the ropes stretched across the deck as handholds, made

his way to the stairs leading to the lower deck.

“Hopefully, he’s going to check on the pumps...”, Piper thought. Pearce gave him a knowing look. Their faces spoke volumes. A moment later. Boatswain Chisholm emerged from the stairwell.

“This ain’t no good, Mr. Piper!”

“Thank you, boats! We know that too!” A boatswain’s mate rung the bell and the watch was changed. Second officer Nicolas Davenport became officer of the watch, relieving Piper. Davenport was a fine fellow officer with his excellent navigational skills, calm demeanor, and leadership. He looked younger than his age, with his cheerful face and blue eyes.

“Course now: due east!”

“Thank you, I have the watch now, Mr. Piper.” Piper remained on deck to be on the safe side, he didn’t trust the situation. Another large wave crashed against the aft deck, burying the group at the helm. The helmsman went down, but together they held the helm and lifted the it back up. The ship wasn’t built to handle waves with her stern. Moreover, the waves steered the ship at will from left to right, causing it to roll violently, uncontrollable by the crew. The sails and their position relative to the wind are the most important part of a sailing ship’s steering ability. They were now carrying so little sail that this steering function was no longer available, and with the relatively small rudder, the ship was essentially out of control.

At two bells in the forenoon watch, around 9.00 a.m., Captain Lloyd came to the quarterdeck. He looked at the officers and the master. Struggling to keep above the wind he shouted:

“Mr. Pearce, course west by north!! We will take the storm ‘head-to-wind’, this is too dangerous ...!” He seemed relieved by his self-made decision.

“Aye, aye, sir!” Davenport addressed the boatswain.

“Pipe up the watch, please, Mr. Chisholm!”

“Quickly call the carpenter and four men and have them prepare a

floating anchor!", Piper added.

"I'll await you on the forecastle!" He made his way there as best as he could, clinging to the safety lines, each time being washed over by another wave. But he didn't care, the course was finally been changed. Now all that was needed was to turn the ship and get her bow into the wind and the waves. A little later the carpenter and four men with planks and beams arrived. These were tied together in a messy pile and then thrown overboard from the bow on a long line. This arrangement acts like an anchor, but a floating one, a sea anchor. Very slowly, *Champion* turned behind this anchor until she remained bearing into the wind. Immediately, the ship calmed down, and the waves splashed against the bow instead of the vulnerable stern. The reefed foresail was stowed, only a small jib remained to maintain pressure on the bow. Piper breathed a sigh of relief and satisfied he walked back to the quarterdeck reporting to Captain Lloyd.

"Thank you, Mr. Piper and Mr. Pearce!" He nodded, but not wholeheartedly.

"I will be below, if you need me!"

Piper followed Lloyd below, hesitating whether to say anything more about the decision to alter course. But the captain made no move to engage in conversation. He wasn't like that, Piper had noticed during the voyage from Sheerness, where they had met Britain's new ambassador to Portugal. Lloyd had almost the entire voyage only spoken and dined with the distinguished guest. He had only shared the course instructions, and much later, the destination, with his first officer. No, he was not an easygoing man. And, to be fair, Piper didn't think he was a good sailor either, but an officer, like any soldier, must never question his commanding officer. This usually works out well thanks to strict discipline and severe punishments, but occasionally officers, forced to take the drastic step of deposing their captain and taking command. Such was the case in 1789, when William Bligh, captain of *Bounty*, was deposed by first officer Fletcher Christian and was put in a rowboat with

a few loyal sailors in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. The mutineers all met a sad end because Bligh had accomplished the near-impossible and managed to reach the Dutch East Indies, a voyage of thousands of miles. Ultimately, he managed to return to England to report and an expedition was sent out to find the mutineers. HMS *Pandora* found a number of the mutineers in 1791. However, on the return voyage, the ship was wrecked, and only a small number of the recovered mutineers were returned to England and sentenced to death.

Piper had no desire to follow their example. He entered the small long room, the officers' quarters, and gathered some dry clothes. Whether his wet clothes would dry, was most uncertain. The entire ship was now soaked with moisture, and there was practically a permanent layer of water in the hold. The purser in charge of the food supplies had been busy keeping his goods dry by moving them to drier areas of the ship. Supplies were even stacked in the corridors and even in the ward room; the officers and midshipmen had to sacrifice some of their quarters for the cause. Piper had assigned two of the twenty-five marines to the watch. The gunner was also busy keeping his powder and weapons dry. There was a knock on the door, first midshipman Frederick Orville entered.

"Did you succeed, sir? Did you convince the captain?"

"No, Mr. Orville, the captain made the decision himself! And you should not comment on that!" Orville was startled by his bold question, apologized and quickly turned away.

But anyway, it was high time; this could not go on for long. Besides, they were now deep in the Bay of Biscay; the last reading was 44° north and 3° west. Piper noted it in his 'own log', a private diary. Then he stepped out into the corridor and hung his wet overcoat over a line as best he could.

"Do you think the coat will dry, Mr. Piper?" It was the passenger of *Champion*, the new ambassador to Portugal, Lord Melville. Lloyd was to escort him to Lisbon. He had spent almost the entire voyage with him in the captain's cabin. Lord Melville slept in Piper's small cabin.

“Perhaps better than in my cabin, my lord.”

“I think I noticed, the ship is a bit calmer ... is that right?”

“Indeed, my lord, you are right!” Jack Delong, steward and private cook to Captain Lloyd, staggered into the hall with a tray of food.

“I’ll bring the captain and you, Lord Melville, dinner now. Afterwards, Mr. Piper, the officers can have their meal in the wardroom within half an hour!” he said with a distinct accent. ‘Half’ sounded like ‘alv’ and the accent of ‘wardroom’ was on the last syllable. His real name was Jacques Delon and he fled to England during the French Revolution. He had been servant to a noble family living on an estate near Montreuil. He managed to escape when the revolutionaries ravaged the estate and executed the residents, as he put it. He had an English niece in Southampton, an acquaintance of Mrs. Lloyd. That’s how he ended up on board *Champion*. “What is it today, Mr. Delong?”

“Chicken, sir.” It sounded like ‘chic’. The officers were amused by his accent, but the cook made it worse by suggesting he couldn’t understand them properly. He wasn’t an unpleasant man, but that didn’t count when joking around. Every newcomer received such treatment, especially a Frenchman; apparently, there was a reason for the war, with the ‘frogs’, as the French were sometimes called. Yet, he could confirm the rumor that a purge had taken place among the navy personnel. Experienced officers, apparently because of their doubtful loyalty to the ideas of the Revolution, had been dismissed, and there were not enough capable replacements to maintain the fleet at its previous strength. Officers had to be declared revolutionaries. Obviously, it would take several years before the new batch would have sufficient experience. Lord Melville and the cook entered the captain’s cabin, and Piper hung up his clothes as best he could. He grabbed a reasonably dry coat from his closet and went to the hold to ask the men at the pumps how things were going. In the midship hold, six men were constantly pumping out water. Under normal circumstances, there’s always a small amount of water, and the pumps just are manned for a few hours a day. A wooden ship always leaks

somewhat, but with these heavy waves and the resulting incoming water, continuously pumping was necessary. In these circumstances the men had to work shifts of two hours. They reported things were better now and hoped to be back to normal levels that evening.

II

As the evening and night progressed, the wind seemed to ease and by sunrise, it had dropped considerably. Midshipman David Fisher was officer of the watch when Piper came to the helm around 7.45 a.m. to take over the morning watch. Piper checked the log and saw that *Champion* was now on a southwesterly course. The ship was making good progress with the wind north west. The sea was still quite rough, but the wind was much lighter than the previous night. Captain Lloyd hadn't yet been on deck, the crew had already had their breakfast. Piper grabbed a pair of binoculars from the rack and scanned the horizon behind them and over the port bow. Nothing to be seen. So the French were still in harbor, yet he had to remain alert when the captain was below. He hoped the lookout was wide awake and had sharp eyes.

"Very well, Mr. Fisher, I'll take over the watch from you. You can go and have breakfast now!" This second midshipman, at nineteen, was already a good sailor who could be relied upon. Whether he would make a good officer remained to be seen. Since their departure from Southampton on September 29th, he had made a good impression on Piper, but two weeks were not enough to get to know him fully. He seemed slightly shy, but that might have been modesty. In the small class with the other midshipmen, he didn't really stand out, except for his mathematics, which was better than the others. A shout from the masthead brought Piper out of his thoughts.

"Sail on the port bow!", shouted the lookout.

"Call the captain, Mr. Franklin!" Piper turned his binoculars to port. He scanned the horizon intently. There! One masthead, somewhat later he

saw two more, lower down, one ahead and one behind the first. By now, the other officers were standing beside him and Captain Lloyd also joined them.

“Ship on the port board bow, sir!” Piper pointed in the direction.

“Three fully rigged masts!” came the shout from the masthead. On deck, the officers saw a square-rigged mainmast and somewhat later, the foremast and mizzenmast. What would she be? Friend or foe? Neutral? Not a ship of the line, apparently... But a frigate or a corvette, it wouldn't take long to find out, because the ship was sailing almost before the wind on a course that would directly cross that of *Champion*. The stranger could easily sail towards her, should that be her captain's wish...

“She's certainly French!!!”, someone shouted. Lloyd hadn't spoken a word yet, but now he grumbled something, perhaps to himself. It was now clearly visible that it was a three-masted ship with topgallant masts and upper topsails, making good speed and heading straight for *Champion*.

“Prepare for battle, Mr. Piper!”, Lloyd said. Piper relayed the order and went to his station. Whistling, immediate running and shouting filled the ship. Boatswains were urging their watches, gun crews were manning their canons, officers and midshipmen were taking up their posts, the deck was being strewn with sand, nets were being stretched across the deck, marines were taking up positions on the topmasts and along the bulwarks, the ship was abuzz with activity.

“Course, sir?”, master Pearce asked the captain.

“Hold your course, Mr. Pearce!”

Piper was standing at his post on the starboard side, in command of the ten 9-pounders and the two 24-pounder carronades, one on the foredeck and one on the quarterdeck.

“Load the carronades with shrapnel!!”, he shouted to the gun captains. Carronades can fire a heavy charge over short distances with devastating effect. The scrap cans explode, scattering hundreds of pieces of iron. He saw the other ship rapidly gaining ground. She was now visible over the

starboard bow. She was an enemy, a confrontation would be inevitable on these courses. Piper stared intently at the hull, which was now quickly becoming fully visible. This reinforced his conviction that it was a Frenchman. He counted the roughly distinguishable gunports on the port-side: fourteen, by the looks of it. The rigging wasn't typical for a French naval vessel, more like a privateer... A confrontation could end badly for *Champion*. Unless His thoughts were interrupted by the captain's harsh voice.

"Put those men to work, Mr. Davenport!" Lloyd shouted to the second lieutenant commanding the port-side battery; several men peered intently at the enemy, now clearly visible to the naked eye. The two ships were still on a collision course.

"Hoist our ensign, Mr. Orville ! We'll see what she is!" Piper scanned the enemy's quarterdeck with his binoculars, he saw no shiny uniforms, swords, or hats ... No uniforms in the fighting tops either ... A flag went up, and then another! First a French one, and below that, a red one! A privateer! They might have a chance, he thought. These privateers might have fast ships, but their discipline wasn't as good as a naval vessel and their armament was often no match for the English ships. A cheer had erupted, which was immediately suppressed by commands from the boatswains. The Frenchman was getting closer and closer.

"Open the gunports and run out!" So Lloyd had no intention to wait or flee. The latter was pointless; this privateer was a fast ship, almost certainly faster than *Champion*. The Frenchman's gunports opened as well, albeit somewhat chaotically and unevenly. Piper was startled; they looked like 12-pounders! That promised nothing good.

"Heave to and come about, Mr. Pearce!" That would be a close call, but Lloyd opted for surprise. The crew worked with all their might to turn the ship and regain speed. The Frenchman was surprised and tried to come about too. As *Champion* gathered speed, the Frenchman was still turning and came directly in front of Piper's battery.

"Fire!", Lloyd shouted and Piper repeated the command. One by one, the

9-pounders fired. It was the maximum range for the guns, or perhaps not even that. Piper saw most of the rounds land in the water off the bow; he saw one hole in the jib. Unfortunately, the salvo had not much effect. "Reload!!", he shouted. By now, the privateer had turned completely and was sailing parallel to *Champion*. Seconds later, a salvo followed, and Piper felt the force of the impacts all around him. Splintered wood and rope fell everywhere, several men fell and lay bleeding on the deck, a boatswain's mate crawled to the starboard side without his right arm. The ringing in his ears slowly subsided, he coughed violently from the smoke, and for a moment he thought he might be getting dizzy. Luckily he was able to stay on his feet and saw through tearful eyes that the privateer had now come close enough for the 9-pounder guns to be effective. Lloyd gave the order to fire and Piper shouted to David Franklin to be ready to fire the carronade on the quarterdeck, he himself ran to the one on the foredeck. If they could get close to the Frenchman, the two carronades could have a devastating effect and they would have a chance. Piper saw that the last salvo had had some effect; the mizzen yard was leaning to one side and there were large holes in the mizzen as well. He saw no damage to the hull. Some of the Frenchman's guns fired, he heard the impact on the quarterdeck and the screams of wounded men. While he watched the privateer, the quarterdeck carronade fired. Perhaps to early but now Piper also ordered to fire his carronade. The impact of the two 24-pound canisters filled with scrap metal must have been enormous. Many wounded and dead would lie on the deck. He barely noticed one of the cabin boys shouting to him and tugging at his sleeve.

"Sir, the captain's wounded!"

"I'll be right there!" On the quarterdeck, Lloyd sat with his back against the bulwark, his left arm pressed against his bloodied chest, blood streaming from his forehead as well. He looked blankly at Piper.

"Abort, abort...!", he muttered. Master Pearce had come to stand beside Piper. He gave him a blank stare Abort? Piper looked through the drifting smoke at the Frenchman. A single shot rang out and a cannonball

slammed into the bow. Piper hesitated. What to do?

“Take him to the sickbay! Quick!!” Two sailors lifted Lloyd up and carried him away down the stairs.

“Abort, Mr. Pearce ! We’ll try to get her to turn away under cover of the smoke.” He saw David Fisher coming towards him.

“Take my watch on the starboard side, as we turn, the captain is wounded!” Slowly the ship turned and the Frenchman was vaguely visible over the starboard bow.

“Fire as you bare!!”, he shouted as loudly as he could to the gun crews. Fisher repeated the command. One by one the guns fired and the smoke obscured the privateer. Most likely the salvo scored no hits at all but he wanted the smoke to obscure the ship. Meanwhile, Pearce gave orders, and *Champion* slowly turned further to port. After ten minutes the wounded corvette was on her new course, away from her adversary.

“I’m going down to see the captain!”, Piper shouted to the master.

“Steer as far south as possible! Mr. Orville, keep a close eye on the privateer!” As he walked to the steps, he could hardly see the Frenchman through the smoke from his own guns, only the main mast top. She didn’t seem to be making much speed. In the long room Ned Maguire, the ship’s surgeon, was very busy taking care of the wounded. The sailor without one arm that Piper had seen was half covered by a cloth, probably dead already ... Piper looked at Maguire, his clothes covered with blood. He was actually only an assistant surgeon, *Champion* didn’t have a qualified surgeon on board. Maguire did what he could. Captain Lloyd lay on the table with his shirt cut open and a bandage around his head, apparently unconscious.

“How is the captain, Mr. Maguire?” The doctor looked at his ‘assistant’, cook’s mate Henley, who was missing a leg, and then back at Piper.

“He has a serious wound from his rib cage down to ... eh ... his ... abdomen ... , lost a lot of blood.” He struggled to tell Piper exactly what was going on. Piper was staring at the bloody rags that were being stuffed into and onto his body like a kind of wad.

“Is the captain fit for command?” Maguire shook his head in despair as Piper looked at him intently. The expected answer came almost without hesitation. Piper swallowed and looked around. At least a dozen wounded men were scattered about.

“How many dead so far?”

“Four ...”, said a soft, subdued voice behind him. It was Lord Melville, making himself very useful here in the ward room serving as sickbay.

“Thank you, Lord Melville! I am very grateful for your help.”

”Oh, well. I couldn’t stand it in my cramped cabin, you understand, and I didn’t want to get in the way on deck.” Piper looked around again, idly, and said generally:

“I will take command until we know more about the captain’s condition. Do what you can, doctor!”

On deck, he saw Davenport standing at the helm, talking with Pearce, the midshipmen, marine lieutenant Alan Percival and boatswain Chisholm.

“What about the Frenchman?” He looked over the stern but did not see the privateer.

“She seems to be lagging behind, sir!”, replied Orville, pointing slightly aft.

“Mr. Pearce, what’s your opinion?”

“I’m not sure, but it looks like we’ll stay ahead of her. The wind is certainly favorable if we maintain this course.” Piper nodded.

“Thank you, gentlemen! By the way, did anyone manage to read our opponent’s name?”

“One of my marines said he thought he saw the name, something like ‘Peter’!”, lieutenant Percival interjected.

“Thank you. I’ll ask Mr. Delong whether that name appears in French.”

He cleared his throat a few times, perhaps a little too loudly, hesitated, looked at the group of officers and petty officers, and spoke rather solemnly:

“Captain Lloyd is very seriously wounded and... uh... is unable to command the ship, he’s unresponsive and... uh... frankly, I’m not very

optimistic about his situation. He has a severe chest and abdominal wound and has lost a lot of blood. Therefore, I'll have to take over. We'll have to wait and see how his condition develops. The captain's orders were to break off the engagement, I assume so that Lord Melville could be brought to Lisbon without delay."

"But the Frenchman lay defenseless..." Nicolas Davenport began.

"I know what you're thinking, Mr. Davenport, but the captain decided otherwise!" Sure, the privateer lay seemingly defenseless in the water, but the remaining crew could have inflicted many casualties before being defeated. Circling the ship with her better and heavier French 12-pounders? Little chance. And then, if the privateers had finally surrendered? Putting a prize crew on board there? Under whose command? With what officers and what crew on a ship with unwilling enemy prisoners? No, it had been Lloyd's only right decision. Piper braced himself and quickly got down to business.

"Mr. Chisholm, have a boatswain's mate and the carpenter quickly inspect the damage to the hull and have them make the necessary repairs. Check the masts and sails yourself and repair any running rigging!"

"Mr. Pearce, are we ready to sail with this wind and course? Will we be able to make it through the night?"

"Yes, certainly, Mr. Piper, we will do what is necessary to keep her on this course and head south as quickly as possible!"

"Very good, Mr. Pearce, thank you! Mr. Davenport, you will take over my duties, and you, Mr. Orville, will be acting second lieutenant."

"Yes, sir!! Thank you, sir!" The young lad's face shone by the thought of his promotion!

"See to it, that Mr. Fisher quickly masters the signal system. The watches will remain as they are for the time being. Get to work, gentlemen!"

Everyone nodded and Piper got a big wink from the master.

"And Mr. Chisholm, put a good man on the lookout, we don't want to be caught off guard!"

III

By dawn the next day, the wind had shifted sufficiently to their advantage, allowing them to set a course for Cape Ortegal and then, hopefully, Cape Finisterre, allowing them to sail to Oporto. Reaching Oporto was Lloyd's only chance of receiving proper medical care. Piper realized that chance was slim. He wasn't a medic, but everyone could see that Lloyd was very seriously injured. Fortunately, they were able to maintain a southeasterly course, but care was essential. Once, the lookout thought he had spotted a ship to the north, but nothing more was seen. Immediately after formally taking command, Piper had informed Lord Melville of the plans to reach Oporto as quickly as possible to give proper care to the captain. After the battle, the ambassador had kept vigil with Lloyd all evening and night. Piper spent most of the morning at the captain's office, reviewing the necessary paperwork and consulting with the petty officers. That afternoon, Piper presided over the care of the five deceased crew members. He was busy again the next morning when, around noon, the watch came to the captain's cabin to say that Lord Melville wanted to see him. A little later he came in, along with Ned Maguire, shaking his head slightly, making it immediately clear what had happened: Lloyd had not made it. Even though they knew how bad the captain's condition was, it still came as a shock: the finality of Lloyd's death, the consequences for the entire ship and its crew and for Piper, the captain's replacement. He ordered the body of the captain to be washed, dressed in proper clothing and placed in Piper's cabin until they reached Oporto for burial. A seaman's grave for a captain had to be avoided unless the ship's position made it impossible to bury him on land. But whether they would arrive in Oporto in time remained highly questionable. It might take too long. Given the rising temperature, the body would quickly begin to decompose. In that case, the body would have to be put overboard, for reasons of hygiene on board the relatively small ship. Piper insisted that Lord Melville would sleep in the captain's

cabin for the remainder of the voyage. Melville refused, but Piper remained adamant. Piper asked the guard to ask the boatswain to assemble the crew in an hour. He noted the date and time of death in the logbook. He immediately decided to write a letter to his wife and daughter. Lloyd was an unpleasant but not bad person.

When the entire crew had lined up, the boatswain whistled and Piper spoke.

“Men, it’s another sad day. After saying goodbye to five of our comrades yesterday, our captain succumbed to his wounds today. He fought for a long time and our doctors and Lord Melville did everything in their power, but to no avail.” He picked up the Bible and opened it to the page he had marked with a ribbon.

“Let the passage from Psalm 23 be a comfort to us and to the captain’s soul. *‘Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff they comfort me’* This should encourage us, in life and in death, as we do our duty for our King and for the Lord.” He looked around, taking in the silent crew.

“And from psalm 46 *‘God is our refuge, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth shakes and the mountains plunge into the depths of the sea.’* Captain Lloyd did not shake, and neither will we.” He paused again.

“We will not give the captain a seaman’s grave. The doctor and I have decided to preserve his body as best we can so that we can bury him in the first major city in Portugal, Porto.” Again he looked at the crew. Some looked questioning, others nodded in agreement. He cleared his throat and continued;

“From now on, I am your commanding officer. We...” and he looked back at the officers, “... count on you! I consider it my personal mission to finish our task. Mr. Davenport will be first officer and Mr. Orville second. Get to work, get ready!” Chisholm whistled, the men dispersed.

Piper and Lord Melville ate together. Sitting at the large table by the stern windows, Piper was overcome by a deep gloom. It now truly dawned on him that he from now on, just 42 years old, was responsible for the ship and all the men aboard and moreover, for the safe delivery of Lord Melville as the king's representative. Well, he didn't think the last part was the hardest. The responsibility for the people weighed on him the most. Certainly, he already performed many duties related to the ship's operations but ultimately, the captain was still accountable for them. Now he was and only him. A small mistake, a sign of weakness at the wrong moment, a fatal storm, an encounter with a much stronger opponent, the loss of ship and lives, would end his career. It felt like a huge weight on his shoulders. He opened a window and sucked in the fresh air. In the distance, a heavy, grayish-white band of clouds was just visible, and a horizon barely distinguishable from the waves. What lay ahead for him? A glorious career as commander of a King's Ship, or demotion and beggary? He was tempted to take a stiff drink to bolster his spirits, but wisely decided against it. After the meal, Lord Melville wanted to go on deck. Piper picked up the orders again and then spread out the chart. He had to draw up the order quickly, no mistakes now... There was a knock on the door, the marine guard came in.

"You're wanted on deck, Lieu ... , eh, ... Captain!" The word 'captain' hit him unexpectedly hard; yes, he was now captain of *Champion*, for better or for worse. But this was the position of lieutenant-commander, not the rank of captain. Even though he was now a commander, an appointment to the rank of captain was far from certain and could easily take another decade. The fact that a large number of lieutenants in the Navy were fifty years or older, clearly demonstrated that the career ladder had many obstacles. Climbing the ranks was far from certain. Upon returning, he could easily become a third lieutenant on an old 74'-ship of the line. But an appointment as a captain on the list of captains would have a completely different consequence: a higher salary but with corresponding responsibility, a position and seniority on the captain's list,

a continuation of his career, but also the risk of failure and a court-martial. A lieutenant would always have a captain above him who could be held accountable. There is the case of Herbert Wilberforce, first lieutenant on *Najade*, who committed a serious error that resulted in his captain being court-martialed and found guilty. So, for example, if lieutenant Davenport were to make a serious mistake and the ship were to be dismasted and overpowered in plain sight of the enemy, Piper could be held responsible. ‘The privilege of command...’ but also ‘the consequence of command...’ now rested upon him. Upon his return, glory, approval, or condemnation might await him. On his way to the quarterdeck, he literally shook off these strange and dangerous thoughts. The men and the ship were now his responsibility and he would not step aside. On deck, he was greeted by a spray of seawater.

The next day, all the officers, Lord Melville and the master sat down to a simple meal. Piper began the meal with a word to those present, emphasizing their unconditional service to him and the ship. In return, he pledged his full support. He paid particular attention to midshipman Frederick Orville, who now had to fulfill the difficult and responsible task of second officer.

“Difficult, but honorable!”, Piper exclaimed, and the officers responded with a heartfelt “Hurrah!”. Orville smiled from ear to ear. David Franklin, as was customary for the youngest midshipman, proposed a toast to the King. Lord Melville was more forthright than ever. He had actually dined only with Captain Lloyd in the past few weeks, except for one evening when all the officers and Pearce were present. There was a somewhat forced, ‘jovial’ atmosphere, which only really began when Lloyd ordered a second bottle of wine to be opened. But even then, Lord Melville had been extremely distant. Now he spoke more openly, but dejectedly. He admitted that he had had absolutely no impression of life aboard a ship like *Champion*, especially not of the conditions during battle. He now expressed his admiration for the behavior of the crew, which, after all,

consisted of more than half of the men forced to serve on a king's ship. Before the end of the meal, he apologized, saying he wanted to spend a moment with captain Lloyd. The others then finished their meal as well. Piper glanced into the captain's cabin where Lord Melville sat quietly beside the coffin. The carpenter had made a coffin that could be securely sealed, the doctor had wrapped Lloyd's body in wet cloths, liberally moistened them with alcohol and placed it in the coffin in Piper's cabin. Fortunately, he was not superstitious, but he did not sleep soundly after his watch ended at 4:00 a.m.

The next day , the wind had picked up considerably and shifted to the south. After just two days, it was clear they would not be able to keep captain Lloyd's body on board until they reached Portugal. The stench grew steadily worse and was simply unbearable. Maguire said it could also be hazardous to the health of the crew on this relatively small ship, crammed with crew. Wet clothes hardly dried, vermin swarmed everywhere. Deep down, in the bilge, there was always a layer of stinking water. Piper consulted with Lord Melville, representing the government, and with Nicolas Davenport. They decided that the body would remain wrapped in canvas in the coffin, weighted with cannonballs, would be lowered overboard. Piper recorded the ship's position at that moment as accurately as possible in the logbook. After a short ceremony, during which Lord Melville and Piper gave brief speeches, the coffin was hoisted overboard. Before the ceremony began, the wind died down completely and after the coffin disappeared beneath the surface, some sailors shouted that they had seen a whale. The superstitious sailors quickly made the sign of the cross; they knew the biblical story of Jonah.

IV

For four days *Champion* had to sail close hauled before they reached Cape Ortegal. The wind remained unfavorable and it had become cold. Only after Cape Finisterre the weather improved slightly and they were

able to set a southerly course with the southwesterly wind for Lisbon. Once a Portuguese fishing boat was hailed and Piper bought a large quantity of fresh fish. It turned into a feast and the mood visibly improved. The 300 miles to Lisbon went smoothly thanks to the steady westerly wind. When the lighthouse at Cabo Raso came into view, Piper had the ensign hoisted. Less than an hour later the lookout hailed the deck.

“There’s a boat coming out of the harbor towards us!”

Officer of the watch Andrew Fisher called Piper.

“Well, Mr. Fisher?”

“A schooner flying the Portuguese flag, sir!”

Lord Melville had also appeared on the quarterdeck, and like Piper, he was watching the ship with a telescope.

“We’ll see what the authorities want”

“Indeed, Lord Melville, I see an officer dressed in gold and ornaments!”

“Are you familiar with the political situation in Portugal and at the court where I will be representing His Majesty, captain Piper?”

“Eh, no, not really, My lord.”

“Maria I is Queen of Portugal and Brazil. Until 1783, Portugal was a member of the Russian-initiated ‘League of Armed Neutrality’, which was set up to resist or break British naval power. After the Peace of Paris, relations between our countries improved.” He hesitated before continuing.

“Maria married Peter, the youngest brother of her father, Joseph I ... She has been a widow since 1786, and her mental... er... health is not good. She is actually no longer capable of managing state affairs. It is an open secret that her eldest son, Prince John Mary, essentially makes all the decisions for his mother.” He hesitated again, looked intently at Piper, and made a decision.

“Last year, he joined forces with Spain against France, but it is questionable whether they will hold out. King George is very keen that the alliance remain and that Lisbon becomes a British naval base!”