

Speech by Dr. Ray Ashley, Director of the San Diego Maritime Museum, at the celebration of the Battle of San Diego Bay May 4, 2014

We are here today to commemorate what has become known as the Battle of San Diego Bay which took place March 22, 1803 between the American merchant brig Lelia Byrd commanded by Captains William Shaler and Richard Cleveland and the fort situated on the end of Ballast Point commanded by Don Manuel Rodriguez.

When first asked to speak on the subject, I had a difficult time thinking of what to say in a talk of 20 minutes, thus possibly taking longer to say it than the battle itself lasted. For in stories of epic duels between ships and shore batteries, the battle of San Diego Bay hardly ranks with occasions such as the battle of Mobile Bay, a pivotal action of the American Civil War. In some respects, of course, it was a perfect battle because no one got hurt, inevitably drawing the question, was it really a battle at all? And if not a battle, what was it and what are we to make of it?

I would like to suggest that the answer to that question, as in so many things, lies in something about the place itself, and what that place has meant over time. From its most important direction of approach, the sea, Point Loma is San Diego's most conspicuous feature. From the north and west, it projects as the terminus of a spine of mountains which run down the length of the coast. From the south, it rises from the horizon almost as an island and then on closer approach as a broad promontory that seems to offer shelter from the prevailing northerly and westerly winds. In fact, for part of its history, Point Loma technically was an island since the San Diego river which drained at some times into San Diego Bay and at others into Mission Bay sometimes drained into both of them concurrently, so that to get onto Point Loma from inland, you had to cross water. But before the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was not until you sailed relatively close in and almost under it, that that you saw Point Loma formed the sheltering arm of a large and protected crescent harbor.

That's how it looked to Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo on September 28, 1542 when he sailed into the bay and anchored. At that time Point Loma was wooded with pines and scrub oaks, and by late September the first of the season's grey whales may also have already begun to accumulate in the bay. In that season, around its shores there may have been as many as 20,000 people residing there so that in some respects, San Diego was already a city. Later, when Sebastian Viscaino arrived in 1602, those numbers might have dwindled down to no more 2000 people and San Diego would not again reach the peak of of its precontact population until well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century. When Cabrillo's three small ships dropped anchor, probably to the south of what we now call Ballast Point, it would be 65 years before

English landed at Jamestown and 78 years before any Pilgrims set eyes on Cape Cod, making this one of those sacred places in the American landscape where we can truly say, in a moment of first contact, America began here.

Cabrillo didn't name this harbor San Diego but gave it another name, San Miguel. At the time, the acceptable level of accuracy for navigation and ceremonies of possession was half a degree of latitude (or 30 miles). Good as he was at other things, Cabrillo evidently wasn't as good of a navigator because he was consistently in error by a degree up to two and a half degrees. So that when the next explorer, Sebastian Viscaino came along, he couldn't reconcile the descriptions of the places Cabrillo had discovered with the latitudes he assigned to those places, giving Viscaino the opportunity, despite orders not to do this, of renaming virtually every prominent feature to his own liking. By doing this, Viscaino seemed to erase Cabrillo from the map. As it turned out, all of Viscaino's place names stuck, including the name he gave to this place, San Diego, but its an irony that the name Viscaino itself appears virtually nowhere as a place name, while Cabrillo now has his name on more things: hospitals, churches, schools, parks, banks, theaters, shopping malls, national monuments, lighthouses, etc. than any other person in California's history.

Cabrillo would have noticed a promontory jutting out into the bay, but if he gave that place a name, the information has not survived. Given the way that the channel was scoured by the outflow of the river, its odd that such a promontory should exist at all. Yet its just here that the current of the river meets the height of the flood tide current, enhanced by the same north-setting eddy of the California current that causes sand to move from south to north along our nearby beaches. The currents of river and tide collide here to produce a powerful eddy inside the bay that still exists today and promotes the deposit of sediment, including rounded river stones or cobbles carried from the uplands by the San Diego River. Gradually, as the promontory of stones built up, the force of the current increased ever further, similar to what happens when one puts a finger over a hose to constrict the flow, the force of the flow increased and both scoured the channel deeper and built up the promontory more solidly until a point of cobblestones projected firmly at right angles out into the entrance of the bay. The Spanish would ultimately call the point Punta de Guijarros (Cobblestone Point) and the fort that would be built on it would also take that name. Later, when those cobbles became useful for ship's ballast, it became Ballast Point and so it remains, named for the need of sailing ships to adjust their trim and stability according to the size and weight of their cargo by taking on or depositing stones as ballast.

That promontory determined to no small degree what the future of San Diego would be. Beyond the point and further

into the Bay lies a cove sheltered by the headland and the point itself with access to the land and fresh water over a beach, the anchorage that came to be known as La Playa. As the flood tide rises, it turned the shallow river water brackish up some distance until you get to a point far enough up the river where the flood tide no longer reaches and the river water is always fresh. This is where what we now call Old Town is, the location with dependable fresh water closest to the anchorage. Thus situated, the anchorage and the town of San Diego were connected by an ancient trail, one of the most tenuous linkages ever to separate a seaport from its own waterfront. That trail, now Rosecrans street, is considered one of the oldest commercial thoroughfares in the United States. Old Town is there, while all the tall buildings we now see in downtown San Diego are elsewhere further down the bay because the beach at La Playa was not so handy a place to unload cargo directly ashore as a spot further down the bay, at about G street today, where deep water came right to the land. The problem was that no large sailing ship could get to that spot easily due to the complex and shifting shoals that cluttered the San Diego bay channel past La Playa, especially before dredging changed everything. But years later, any steamer (or a sailing ship assisted by steam tugs) found those shoals easier to negotiate and when a wharf that ships could come right up to was built at that point, and then railroad tracks built out on to the wharf, the center of commerce shifted from Old Town to Downtown. Thus our own spectacular and modern skyline was actually determined long before living memory, by shoals and tide, winds and current, and the evolution of maritime technology.

But all that would come later. Rosecrans street was still just an unnamed trail when the Spanish concluded that San Diego was a place worth defending and might actually need to be defended from something. From that observation, began San Diego's urban landscape. In 1796 an earthen fort was built on the point of cobblestones and ultimately ten pieces of artillery were mounted there – of which two still exist. One of these guns is now at Fort Stockton and the other still guards the plaza at Old Town.

From the fort situated at this point, it should have been possible to prevent even a powerful sailing ship from penetrating the harbor. Because the wind is usually northwest, even with a flood tide its not easy to work a big ship up into the bay and past the point – we always try to do this when we sail the Star of India and it almost always proves impossible without the assistance of tugs. But there were no tugs in 1797 and under artillery fire from the fort, it would have been a difficult thing indeed for a big ship to get in at all, and for any smaller handier ship, highly dangerous to try to do so against a hail of shot.

Potent as it was in keeping anyone from getting into the Bay, the situation of the fort would have been less effective in preventing a ship escaping from it. With an ebb tide and an afternoon wind that is almost always fair, any ship that manages to avoid getting sunk in sailing past the fort would have been carried out to sea and safety.

That was the situation which prevailed in 1803, among adversaries no one would ever have predicted when the Spanish first occupied San Diego and animated by an event that has always seemed slightly bizarre.

We tend to think of American history as an east to west story, beginning with Pilgrims and Jamestown and the story moving west with continental expansion. This version of American history as it is still taught in every school is essentially a projection of the Atlantic world and in that story, California doesn't even exist until the gold rush. But in parallel with that story there is another one, in which the Pacific begins to exert a formative influence on American history virtually from the first. In this case, the story takes form in the presence of Yankee traders lured to California by the possibility of great fortunes to be made.

When the ships of Captain Cook and Vancouver, Bodega y Quadra, and Malaspina explored the Pacific Coast in the late 1700's, they did so at a time when one of the most valuable commodities in the world were furs from the abundance of wildlife in North America. Most prominent and sought after among these were beaver, but as the trade in beaver fur was expanding to epic proportions the explorers discovered another creature that possessed a pelt of almost unimaginable density and suppleness – the sea otter. So coveted were these furs, especially among the Chinese, that Europeans with little else in the way of commodities that the Chinese wanted found that otter furs would bring spectacular sums. Following the Revolutionary War, when American ships were suddenly prohibited from trading within the British mercantile sphere they enjoyed during the colonial era, American merchants were compelled to send their vessels further and further in search of new markets and opportunities. Sailing from Ports like Salem, Boston, and New York, American ships began to trade to the Pacific, the Indian Ocean, and around the world, challenging even the mighty British East India Company. One of those far distant places was the west coast of North America, only recently explored and seemingly barely occupied by a European power that claimed nearly all of it, Spain.

One such ship was the brig Lelia Byrd, commanded by Captains Shaler and Cleveland, two young mariners in their 20's (the notion of co-captains was an odd arrangement, and it may have been more the case of business partners, one of them responsible for navigation and the other for commerce). But the Spanish Empire was a mercantile

system similar to the one America had just been evicted from and trade was supposed to flow only along internal channels. Thus it was forbidden under Spanish regulations for foreign ships to engage directly in trade for such things as otter pelts, which is of course is exactly what both the Yankee captains and the residents of nascent San Diego wanted to do. The American ship was granted permission to enter the bay on March 17<sup>th</sup> nominally to take on wood, water, supplies and do minor repairs, but not to barter. Evidently no sooner was the anchor down than a lively and forbidden trade for otter pelts ensued and continued for days. As the story goes, this was not appreciated by the Commandant and on the 22<sup>nd</sup> he ordered a party of American seamen on shore to be arrested. The Lelia Byrd responded with an armed rescue party of her own which not only liberated the American captives but apprehended their Spanish guards and took them back to the ship as hostages. At this point, the illicit exchange between individuals had now become a matter between nations.

The guns of the fort were manned, the Lelia Byrd weighed anchor, got under sail, and as the wind gathered strength, she stood down the bay, presumably with an ebb tide. From La Playa toward the entrance her course would take her right past the fort and its ten guns. Merchant vessels also carried guns in those days, so those of the Lelia Byrd were manned and as the ship sailed past the fort, both sides opened fire.

It didn't last long. Lelia Byrd is said to have suffered some minor damage to the rig and hull but no casualties, and no damage was reported to have been done to the fort. It's also said that the Lelia Byrd "silenced" the guns of the fort, but this sounds awfully much like an American perspective, encouraged perhaps by the willful imaginations of young men. The guns of the fort had an effective range of about half a mile, and a probable rate of fire of one round every five minutes (what one would expect from gunners who did not train constantly). If the Lelia Byrd had a decent wind and a decent ebb tide, there would be very little time before there wouldn't be much for the fort to shoot at and before the brig's guns would no longer bear on the target, explanation enough for why the shooting stopped. Before leaving the bay, the Lelia Byrd hove to (out of range one assumes) and sent her hostages back ashore. Of note, the boat that sent them went back and forth unmolested. So the battle ended.

But was it a battle? Lelia Byrd's people and the members of a tiny community in which everyone had to know what was going on were engaged in commerce for five days before the intervention of authority. Some of the principals involved were soldiers of the garrison who would man the fort. Everyone involved stood to benefit from the commerce, including those whose official duty was to prevent it. But if authority sometimes looks the other way, it also requires occasional conspicuous demonstration and more

importantly, a public record of it to document its enforcement. But whether the battle was an entertaining contrivance for the sake of appearances or a genuine acrimonious exchange the fact remains that in the exchange of artillery fire that day, the dignity of two flags was upheld.

So what else do we make of it?

One thing is certainly true: the efforts of governments to impose regulations and the efforts of individuals to circumvent those regulations has continued unabated in all the years since.

In the matter of scale it would be easy to trivialize the event. But remember, this event constituted an intersection between two great world forces, one an empire that had been in the Pacific for two and a half centuries and the other a young republic on the rise, both of them at the furthest extent of their reach. At this point of contact, though the actual intersection may have been small the momentum required by extremity of the projection from each source subsumed forces of global magnitude. Those forces came together here, in a mix of military and entrepreneurial exchange that provides a strangely prescient indication of things to come.

In 1803, the entrance of San Diego Bay needed to be protected from foreign incursion by the ten guns of Fort Guijarros and today every ship which enters or leaves San Diego bay still has to pass Ballast Point. San Diego is home port to as much as 20% of American naval strength, representing one of the greatest concentrations of naval power in the history of the world, still guarded symbolically at least, by this projection of cobblestones. The submarines based at this very place exert a dominating influence in the course of global events. Economically, San Diego today is the home of the largest cluster of maritime related enterprise in the world and that maritime related enterprise constitutes the largest component of the regional economy. In 1803, San Diego had to be a place defended, however modestly, from assault or economic intrusion from the sea. Today, San Diego projects both sea power and maritime enterprise in its many forms around the world.

The transformation is not only mind boggling, to anyone standing at Fort Guijarros, on March 22<sup>nd</sup> 1803 with the smell of gunpowder still in the air, watching Lelia Byrd stand out of the bay and shape her course to the distant horizon, what has transpired since would have seemed beyond all imagination. But to understand the course we have now all sailed since then to get here and to come to some idea of where it is all leading, we can not begin to grasp the present form without a look at its embryonic beginnings, rooted in our origin stories. One of those origin stories, evoking San Diego in embryonic form, is of course the Battle of San Diego Bay, a sea story.

Related to it, and to this place is an even older origin story of the sea. At this moment on the edge of that river, now much subdued, which once delivered its load of cobblestones to Ballast point our Museum is reconstructing Cabrillo's galleon San Salvador. Its our hope that she'll carry ballast stones from Ballast Point as so many sailing ships before her have done. A few months hence she'll sail past this very point with her antiquated battery manned. This time the ship will carry a Spanish flag and the fort will fly an American one and there will be no ambiguity of purpose in the benign salute exchanged, once more in rendering honors to the flags of two nations. Between 1542 of Cabrillo's voyage and 2015 when the San Salvador returns, the Battle of San Diego bay floats just about halfway, and in the range of our community memory, perhaps still just within reach of those guns. Their reports will reverberate across the bay, as they did in 1803 and just as they probably did in 1542, and in those distant echoes we may just be able to discern the distance we have sailed and by that course, the shape of the passage still ahead.