**HMS Surprise**

**A Tale of Five Ships**

**HMS Rose (1757 – 1779)**

The *HMS Surprise* at the San Diego Maritime Museum was constructed in 1970 as a replica of the mid-eighteenth century British Royal Navy frigate *HMS Rose*. The original *HMS Rose* was built in Hull, England in 1757. At that period in naval history ships were divided by “rates”, first rate being the largest with 100 – 110 guns carried on three individual decks. The original *HMS Rose* was a sixth rate ship, the smallest class of ship that would be commanded by someone holding the rank of Captain. She was part of the *Seaford* class and carried twenty guns. She would not have participated in major fleet engagements except perhaps to relay messages. The job of a frigate was to operate as a scout ship for the fleet or to patrol the coasts of any belligerent country.

The original *HMS Rose* was built to fight in the Seven Years War, also known as the French & Indian War (1754 – 1763). At that time America was still happily a part of the British Empire. During the course of that war the *Rose* fought along the coast of France and in the Caribbean. In 1768 she was sent to the coast of New England where things were beginning to heat up due to the imposition of new British taxes intended to recover some of the costs of defending North America during the recently concluded war with France. She patrolled the New England coast “impressing”, or conscripting sailors from American merchant vessels whenever the opportunity arose and seeking out provisions for the British garrison at Boston.

In 1774 the *Rose* was sent to Narragansett Bay, Rhode Island to put an end to the lucrative smuggling trade which had made Newport the fourth wealthiest city in America. A combination of lax customs arrangements and the natural protection of Narragansett Bay allowed Rhode Island merchants to broker the best deals in the Colonies. Since the *Rose* was much larger than any American vessel of the time, and her captain was very efficient at his job (many Rhode Islanders considered him to be a brutal pirate) smuggling soon came to a relative standstill. This so decimated the economy of Newport that four-fifths of the population fled inland and Rhode Island’s powerful merchants petitioned their colonial legislature to create a navy to deal with the *Rose* and her captain. By petitioning Congress to form a Continental Navy to rid Narragansett Bay of the *Rose*, the creation of the United States Navy may be directly attributed to the presence of the *HMS Rose*. Rhode Island also declared her independence from Britain May 4th, 1776 two full months before the rest of the colonies.

In July of 1776 the *Rose* played a large part in the invasion of New York, shelling the land-based fortification and making forays up the Hudson. Her captain was knighted for his actions in helping to drive Washington and his troops from the city.

The original *HMS Rose* finally met her end in 1779 at Savannah, Georgia. At that time the British occupied the city and the French, who were now fighting on the side of the Americans, sent a fleet up the Savannah River to attack the British from the riverfront while Americans aided by other allies continued to assault from the rear. The British scuttled the *Rose* in a narrow part of the river channel, effectively turning her into an aquatic roadblock. Consequently the French fleet was unable to approach within range and Savannah remained in British hands until the war’s end. After the war the *Rose* was destroyed to clear the channel. Only a few artifacts, brought up in dredging operations over the rears, remain from what was once the British frigate *HMS Rose*.

The replica *HMS Rose* was built in Lunenburg, Nova Scotia in 1970 by Smith & Rhuland. She was the last vessel built by that shipyard. She was designed by Philip C. Bolger of Gloucester, MA for Newport, Rhode Island historian John Fitzhugh Millar as part of an ambitious plan to build a fleet of replica ships significant to the American Revolution for the 1976 Bicentennial celebrations. The original construction drawings from 1757 were obtained from the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, England and construction began with the Douglas fir keel laid down in June of 1969. Local woods (red & white oak, birch, beech, & maple) were used for the ship’s frames and planking. The ship was launched March of 1970 and completed May that same year. From the start the project was undercapitalized. To save money the ship was built without the engines that had been planned and did not participate in OpSail ’76, instead spending her first ten years in Newport, Rhode Island, largely as a dockside attraction.

By 1985 she was in serious disrepair and was sold to Kaye Williams who moved her to Bridgeport, Connecticut. There he formed the private, non-profit *HMS Rose* Foundation to restore & administer the ship and after extensive repair she was once again in sailing condition. In 1990 she toured the Great Lakes and in 1991 sailed the East Coast from Maine to Florida while displaying Rhode Island’s original draft of the Bill of Rights. In September of 1991 *Rose* was certified as America’s first Class-A size Sailing School Vessel by the US Coast Guard, making her the largest Sailing School Vessel in the United States. She operated as a Sailing school vessel until 2000.

In 2001 the 20th Century Fox. Fox movie studio purchased the replica *HMS Rose* to play the role of the *HMS Surprise* in the film “Master and Commander, Far Side of the World” based on the popular historical fiction series by Patrick O’Brien chronicling the adventures of British Royal Navy Captain Jack Aubrey and his friend Stephen Maturin during the Napoleonic Wars (1798 – 1815)

**HMS Surprise in Fact (1794 – 1802)**

The historical *HMS Surprise* was originally the 24 gun corvette *L’Unite* built from August 1793 to April 1794 by the French at Le Havre. She was originally armed with twenty four 8 pound long guns. The *L’Unite* was captured by the British on April 20, 1796 in the Mediterranean and her name was changed to *HMS Surprise*. French ships were much sought after by the British because of their maneuverability and speed. Because of their streamlined hull below the waterline they could outrun most ships. The new *HMS Surprise* was re-armed and classed as a 28 gun sixth rate ship although she actually carried twenty four 9 pound long guns on the upper deck, eight 4 pound long guns plus four 12 pound carronades on the quarterdeck, and two 4 pound long guns plus two 12 pound carronades on the forecastle. Her most significant service came on October 25, 1799 when her captain & crew attacked and cut out the *Hermoine* 32 from under the 200 pieces of cannon mounted in the batteries around the harbor of Porto Cavallo. The *Hermoine* had been handed over to the Spanish by her mutinous crew at La Guira in Sept.22, 1797. The real *HMS Surprise* was sold out of the service for scrap in 1802.

**HMS Surprise in Fiction (1805 – 1817)**

The fictional *Surprise* was the favorite frigate of fictional British Naval Hero, Jack Aubrey, whose adventures from 1800 to 1815 are chronicled in a twenty one volume series of historical fiction novels (the 21st book was unfinished) written by Patrick O’Brien. In the third book of the series “*HMS Surprise*” Jack Aubrey takes command of the *Surprise* for the first time in 1805 three years after the real ship was sold out of the service and broken up for scrap. It also mentions his service in her as a midshipman which would have required the ship to have been in service in the 1780’s, years before the real ship existed. Under Jack Aubrey the *HMS Surprise*, with her hull specially strengthened, typically carried a main battery of twenty eight 12 pound long guns. The *HMS Surprise* is featured in no less than eleven of the twenty one books.
**HMS Surprise Film Star (2001 – 2005)**

The replica sailing ship *HMS Rose* was purchased in 2001 by film studio 20th Century Fox and featured in the 2003 film “Master and Commander: Far Side of the World” as the *HMS Surprise*. Changes were made both to the hull and rigging. In the process of modifying her for her film role the ship lost her US Coast Guard Sailing School Vessel Certification. Copper was added to her bottom and the figurehead was changed to Pallas Athena (the Greek Goddess of Wisdom). Some of the modification work was done on the west coast at Southwest Marine and in Ensenada, BC, Mexico where much of the filming took place at the Fox Baja Studio. The title of the movie is a combination of the first and tenth books of the O’Brien series but some of the scenes are drawn from other books in the series as well. When the filming was finished the *Surprise* was temporarily stored the vessel at Shelter Island. The Maritime Museum of San Diego proposed an arrangement with 20th Century Fox to store & maintain the ship if the Maritime Museum could retain the revenue generated through museum admissions.

**HMS Surprise at Maritime Museum of San Diego (2005 - )**

In 2005 the Maritime Museum of San Diego purchased the *HMS Surprise* from 20th Century Fox and the museum crew and volunteers began a program of repair to prepare her to sail again. Rigging was tightened and adjusted, engine maintenance was conducted, and the ship was dry-docked at Southwest Marine (without Coast Guard inspection) in hopes of sailing her with the Star of India in 2006. The Coast Guard determined in 2006 that the *Surprise* would need Certification before it could be operated so sailing plans were canceled for that year until an underwater hull inspection and new stability letter could be obtained.

In 2007 the *Surprise* was hauled out of the water at the Marine Group in Chula Vista using their new 600 ton Travelift. The mizzen mast had to be removed for the ship to fit in the Travelift. The Coast Guard conducted a satisfactory hull inspection, hull valves were inspected and repaired or replaced, zins were replaced, the copper sheathing was removed, and the hull was painted. Repairs continued after her return to the museum and she received a conditional US Coast Guard Certification for Sail Training and as an Attraction Vessel.