

U.S. Navy Elgin Cutlass Pistol

by Rod Scott

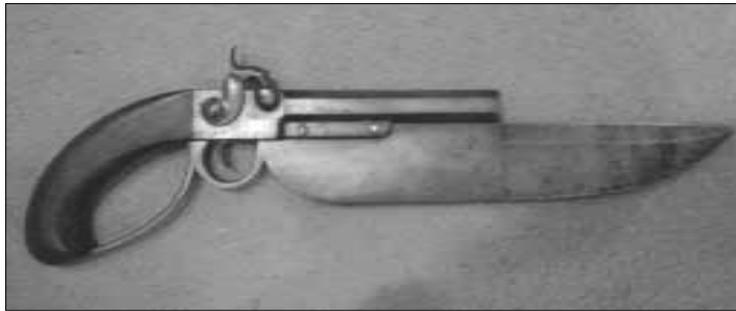
In 1837 the U.S. Navy sanctioned a South Seas Exploring Expedition under the command of Captain T.C. Jones. An order for 150 "cutlass pistols" was approved by Isaac Chauncey, President of the Board of Navy Commissioners, for delivery August 1838 at 20 dollars each including scabbard/ ramrods/ 3 spare nipples each/ 50 nipple wrenches. The order was placed with "N.P. Ames" to be manufactured by Cyrus Bullard Allen using George Elgins patent of 5 July 1837, No. 254 (illustrated right). This was during a particularly difficult financial period and it is not clear that all 150 were delivered, albeit at reduced price of \$17.50.

The expedition was quoted "to help whaling" and scientifically examine 280 islands over a charted course of 16,000 miles off the Atlantic coast. Certainly no ulterior motives were given!

Before the expedition started out Captain T.C. Jones was relieved of his command, which passed to Lieutenant Charles Wilkes. Lt. Wilkes appears to have given Ames every help to secure the full order of Elgin pistols. Inventory however shows a considerable shortfall when the expedition sailed with 6 navy ships in the fall of 1838, returning in 1842.

An inventory prior to 1861 shows 5 no. in U.S. Navy store and publication in the 1950's estimated approximately 20 no. known to exist.

My Elgin cutlass pistol is .54 bore



hexagonal 5" barrel over an 11" blade, 2" deep. It is number 99 and is one of two etched on both sides of the blade with scenes encountered on the expedition, eg. heavy snow, collecting ice for water, palm trees, etc. It has "P (= Patent) M (=Manf.) C.B. Allen, 1837" on the barrel and is in

excellent "nik" considering its history.

Its history may be even more colourful because it has with it 2 no. walrus tusks with 'scrimshaw' engraving.

The first carries a picture of the "Vincennes (Capt. Jones' ship) with sailors in rowing boats collecting ice for drinking

water and penguins looking on. The reverse is inscribed "VINCENNES TAKING ON WATER FROM ICEBERG IN DISAPPOINTMENT BAY. 67°43'0"S 147°30'E. BUILT 1826, 780 TONS, LENGTH 127 FT BEAM 35FT"

The second, smaller tusk, has a picture of the pistol surrounded by palm trees, and inscribed US NAVY ELGIN CUTLASS PISTOL C.1838. On the reverse is the potential provenance of No.99! JULY 1840 MALOLO ISLAND. MIDSHIPMAN WILKES HENRY ATTACKED BY FIJI CANNIBALS. SHOT ONE DEAD AND KILLED ANOTHER WITH CUTLASS BLADE BEFORE BEING KILLED BY CLUBS.

Perhaps there is room in the competition for original "Elgin pistol"? I might just win.

