

Horatio's Big Battle

By Josh Gulch • 3 January 2006

It was a lovely spring day at sea. Most days off-shore are not usually this nice due to a multitude of factors, the least of which include stubborn winds that refuse to catch the sails or seas with so much chop that a vessel can make no headway. But today was just exceptionally lovely. The breezes were strong, the sea fair, and the sun was shining, casting its warm rays upon the deck of the mighty vessel enjoying this fine weather. Lord Admiral Horatio's mind was stuck on this romanticism even as all hell was breaking loose around him. The crew had already been beat to quarters, the guns made ready, the course adjusted to favor the weather. Yet, even as an enemy cannonball shattered the bulkhead nearby, the sheer beauty of the day was never lost on the commander. He simply stood near the after companionway he had just come through until the view of the sea was replaced by the crazed eyes of Lieutenant Toshiro and his perplexed yet simple query: "Sir? Are you awake?"

"Mister Toshiro! I was simply admiring the day."

"It is quite lovely sir, but perhaps revelation could be postponed until after the battle is won!"

Toshiro was a good man. Maybe a bit too pious for Horatio's understandings, but he was clever and capable – perfect qualities for an officer on his way up the command ladder. Besides which, Toshiro knew his methods of flattering the captain with his frequent use of the word "sir." Unfortunately, one

thing wrong with Toshiro was that he simply could not sit back and enjoy a good battle. And on a day like this, why he must be mad.

“Mister Toshiro, perhaps you’re right. What is our current situation?”

“Not good, sir.”

“When is it ever?”

“We’ve sustained critical damage to the steering, we’re taking on water in the holds, and the topgallant’s been shot away.”

Horatio gazed aloft and sure enough, most of the mast was gone. That must have been spectacular to see, and Horatio kicked himself inwardly for being delayed on deck because he couldn’t find his battle trousers. The situation on deck was problematic at best. He had been doing a remarkable job of sailing the Holy Horatian Alliance flagship *Horatian Star* with a fairly small crew. Aside from himself and his five officers, there were also aboard twenty Horatlings who made up the workforce of the ship. Already four lay on deck amidst the debris. Alongside lay the combatant vessel, name and affiliation unknown but obviously with a chip on their shoulder. Attacked outright on the high seas! Not that it really mattered in a battle of ethics, since Horatio himself had ordered the ransacking of many a vessel in the past with little a shrug or a nod. He and his crew had been accused of being pirates, but Horatio despised the word. It was so juvenile, he thought, much preferring the term “occasional corsair.” His heart was in the right place, alright, in the right side of his chest, but sometimes it was just necessary to take supplies that weren’t offered, goshdarnit.

“Lieutenant,” he finally said turning to Toshiro, “go find the carpenter and have him shore up the hold.” With that Horatio turned on his heel and strode away down the deck. The battle was going along just fine, he thought. Why there’s Midshipman Keito, the most disobedient man on the high seas, duking it out with an officer from the enemy ship. Midshipman Lugbur, a giant fellow of great strength, had just punched a man from the combatant vessel so hard that he flew not only over *Horatian Star’s* bulwark but clear over the width of his own ship as well. Midshipman Ki was ... *singing*? He strode up to her in a huff.

“Miss Ki, what in god’s name are you doing? If I wanted an officer to flex her vocal cords in battle I would have hired the Hoy Metropolitan Opera for a tour abroad! As I’ve said dozens upon hundreds of times before, train with the bloody bayonet!”

It had taken some time, but Ki had gotten used to Horatio’s behavior. Professing as a bard before shipping out to sea, she had perfected her pitch and tone to such a degree that she could channel her voice into a weapon. Her captain didn’t have much faith in this idea, despite her proving its effect on countless occasions. Yet, he still hollered about bayonets like he was in the danged army. If Ki had wanted to join the army, she would have joined the army. So used to this conversation was she that she had taken to carrying a bayonet on her belt, to wave at Horatio when he had his fit. Not that she ever used it, and would always sing “Yes sir, I shall endeavor to use it to greater advantage sir” without ever losing her place in the song. Satisfied that he had made an effect

on the young officer, Horatio would always stroll away to direct the battle from another spot.

There were so many good spots to command a battle from, Horatio thought as he ducked a low-flying cannonball. He approached Keito, who was directing the loading of the starboard guns.

“Mister Keito!”

“Just a minute.” Keito raised his hand above his head to meet the eyes of the gun crews, swiftly bringing his arm down with the cry of “Fire!” A broadside of three guns exploded away at once. Not the most terrifying thing ever, but there wasn’t much of a crew to deal with this sort of thing. Still, it was something, and the three projectiles hit their marks on the neighboring vessel, tearing through ship and crew alike. Finally Keito turned to Horatio with “whadaya want?”

“Be wary of your insubordination, Mister Keito, lest I turn you over to a board of inquiry the next time we’re in port. Don’t think I won’t do it, mister, just because you’re the son of – “

“Your point being?”

“My point, Midshipman, is that I’m trying to find Miss Elle.”

“She’s on the other ship.”

“What? I gave no such order!”

“She took the initiative before you came out here. She’s actually been getting stuff done while you were looking for your favorite pants.”

If there was anyone that Horatio could have done without today it was Keito. But sometimes you need the little braggart when you can't find the person more qualified for the task at hand.

Elle (which was short for the ridiculously long Ellyjabella), was Admiral Horatio's executive officer. Of his entire crew, he expected her to be least likely to stab him in the back while he slept. No, that actually wasn't true. He trusted Toshiro, maybe even Ki, over that. But Elle had the know-how to get things done. Horatio knew that if he were incapacitated that Elle would probably be the most capable person to pick up where he left off. It didn't matter that she'd expressed great hesitation at that prospect. Basically it all boiled down to keeping Keito away from command for as long as possible. The mere thought of that ruffian assuming command was enough to keep Horatio up at night. Elle could handle Keito, and that's what was important. Selecting your chain of command can be tricky, but Horatio was certain he had arranged it properly. Elle had been given a field commission to the rank of commander along with her executive officer position. However, neither rank nor position tended to make themselves known, since Elle had another ability that extended beyond her seamanship. She had the unique ability to transform herself into pretty much anything. Some might think this odd. Horatio found it nothing less than insane. But it served a purpose and was a welcome addition since he could find tactical advantages for her form changing. She'd been given the belittling designation "R-1" by Horatio, to denote her use as a reconnaissance tool, and right now she was a very brave seagull perched atop the enemy's mizzen, quietly observing

crew movements to relay back to her ship. All she needed was some privacy and she could –

“COMMANDER ELLE!”

It was that idiot Horatio, she thought, looking over to him. Why did he always have to do this? He was staring straight at her from the *Horatian Star's* gunwale. He's the one who insisted on that stupid nickname, and yet he never let her actually complete her reconnaissance work. She ignored him. He'll go away.

“Commander Elle, you are needed immediately!”

Just don't move. He'll get the hint.

“Miss Elle, don't make me come over there!”

This should be good. Elle made herself comfortable.

Now this was simply too much for Admiral Horatio. It was bad enough that Keito was mocking him behind his back, but now his top secret rover wasn't paying any attention to him. Magic, he thought. That's what it is, she's gotten it into her head that her magical nonsense makes her better. Well, Horatio just wouldn't stand for that. If people were meant to be magical then the good Lord Mitch would have given everyone a wand for an arm. Or would He? Why would the Almighty care? Who knows, he thought. That's for Toshiro to wonder about. Right now there were other matters at hand, such as the yawning twenty foot gap between the two vessels. There was only one man who could solve this dilemma.

“Mister Lug! I'm going to need your hands.”

“Yes sir, would you like me to throw you over onto their deck?”

“No, that would be silly. Ready the dinghy for launch.”

Lugbur rolled his eyes and went to work uncovering the boat when Toshiro approached. “Sir, the carpenter says that the shoring in the hold is working, and that the tiller lines can be repaired within the hour.”

“Good good. Mister Lug is preparing a boat so I may have a chat with Elle.”

“Why doesn’t he just throw you over?”

“That’s a silly thing to do.”

But it was too late. The problem with this crew, thought Horatio as he was twenty feet above the water flailing through the air, was that they didn’t always obey simple, straight orders. Why, I could tell them to – It really doesn’t matter where he was going with that thought because he’d just hit the enemy’s mainmast and bounced down onto the deck.

That was the funniest thing that Lug had seen in a while, the image of Horatio sliding down that mast and hitting the deck. Never mind the precarious situations abounding, there was still something that tickled Lug’s funny bone (a bone which in Lug’s case weighed over thirty-six pounds) about it. Toshiro didn’t say anything, though Ki stopped singing for a moment out of surprise. Keito lost it. His month had been made. He might as well sleep the rest of it off. In fact, I just might, he thought. That is, as soon as ole What’s-His-Face over there gets back aboard and tries to issue orders. Then it’s nap time. Keito rubbed his hands together and grinned from these delicious delusions.

“Mister Toshiro!” the voice carried over the water, snapping everyone but Keito back into some semblance of reality. Horatio was on his feet and looking fairly dejected all alone and surrounded by the enemy, who were quite a bit shocked to see him on their own deck.

“Sir!” came the reply.

“Might as well form up a boarding party. I guess it’s about time for that.”

“Aye sir, we’ll be over in a jiff, sir!” Turning to the remaining crew, Lieutenant Toshiro took charge. “Boarding party form up! All hands not attending to saving the ship will follow me.” The five people whose job it is to keep the spirit of card games alive during battle laid down their hands and approached Toshiro, bayoneted rifles in hand. “Right then! Mister Lug.” Lug opened his arms to pick up a couple of Horatlings to throw but was stopped. “I think we’d best take the boat.” This was a pity for Lug. He so loved throwing people.

A ring of people formed around Horatio, all with a single thought in mind. That thought being, quite obviously, to kill Horatio. As if you needed to be told that. Elle was staring straight down at his head, the peculiar thought of not even having to move in order to hit him with some bird droppings floating through her mind. Never to be caught unarmed, Horatio whipped his weapon from the holster on his belt: a stainless steel frying pan with Teflon coating to prevent sticking. One side of the rim had been sharpened into a blade for dicing action. Horatio held the pan at ready, standing defensively in preparation for the first sailor to make their move. Horatio gave the fellow a good whack across the face

when the move did come, but as one might expect Horatio was quickly disarmed by the encompassing enemy. Elle gave a disappointed sigh when she realized how quickly that had happened. Now it was the time in every engagement where somebody has to bail Horatio's sorry butt out of trouble. She flew down to the deck.

Toshiro's boarding party in the dinghy rowed the short distance to the enemy ship and began looking for a point at which to scale the sides of the hull.

Lug and Keito were terribly bored. Now that Horatio had made a fool of himself and Toshiro's group was about to cause trouble, there wasn't much they could do. The enemy was too occupied by the situation on their own ship to fire on *Horatian Star*, and they didn't want to fire on the enemy for fear of hitting Toshiro or Elle. Even Ki was at a loss, and was occupying herself with nonlethal humming. The Horatlings were busy of course, having actual jobs to do while the officers "supervised." Repairs were coming along nicely now that new things weren't getting broke. Of the three, Lug was in command according to Horatio's grand chain of command. Since there was no way that Keito would be in command while blood still flowed through Horatio's heart that left Lug and Ki. Now, you might think that Ki would be a good person for this, but she forfeited her position and rank when she gambled her life away only to be resurrected. This was a peculiar day and another story better left for another time. So that left Lug. Not that there's anything wrong with that, but Lug just didn't care much about how a ship operated, given that he had a difficult enough time as it was reading the letters on the compass. Taking a look around him and surveying the

situation, Lug ordered *Horatian Star* to be pulled away from the enemy ship during this period of calm. The Horatlings were told to keep the ship intact, then he threw Ki and Keito across the increasing void following them a moment later with a super long jump, a skill at which he excelled.

Well this isn't how it's supposed to go! Horatio was never very good at calculating the odds and was more than a little surprised to find that his frying pan assault had failed. He now found himself pressed against the mainmast with a cutlass to his throat. How often he had been in this position, he thought. Too bad actions in life can't be as easy as rolling a die. The sword to his jugular swept back for a blow and then fell to the deck as its holder disappeared. Maybe disappeared is the wrong word, but he certainly went flying a long distance in a short time thanks to a well executed move from Elle, who was *Horatian Star's* resident kickboxing enthusiast. She flashed Horatio her best "I totally saved your butt again" smile, an expression which was beginning to etch lines into her face. In the best action-packed vein possible, Lieutenant Toshiro's boarding party arrived on deck at the very same instant that Keito, Ki and Lug landed. How's that for dramatic timing? As you might expect, a significant fight broke out amongst heroes and villains, the action of which was far too great to describe in extraordinary detail here. Horatio's pan busted some noggins, Lug's trusty great sword was unsheathed and undid several torsos, Ki's lungs of steel were pressed into action, Elle tossed some magic spells about to cause havoc, and even Keito assisted, brutally mangling anyone who got in his way and thereby earning his assassin merit badge once and for all. Long fight short, Horatio's

group won. But you knew that going in, didn't you? Come on, like they were going to lose.

The enemy captain stumbled as he ran across the deck towards the stern, finding himself trapped at the taffrail. There comes a time in the lives of most men where they're in a position of having to jump off the back of a ship into the ocean or else face the crew of the ship you attacked without warning. The ocean it was then! Now, either due to his brief hesitation or Lug's quick moves, the captain found himself caught midair and dragged back onto deck to receive the blade of Horatio's frying pan against his throat.

"Your surrender, sir?" the Lord Admiral asked.

"I ... I surrender," was sputtered. "I surrender." He held out his sword in defeat.

"Excellent! All in a good day's work then! Mister Keito, have at 'im."

The two ships, battered and scarred, drifted in the empty sea as Keito's morbid experience increased. Since everyone aboard this ship was now dead, there seemed little sense to leave it behind. After all, maritime law says that one can claim salvage rights to a vessel if there is no longer a living crew aboard.

"What should we call this one?" pondered Toshiro. "Maybe something from mythology? What's its name now?"

Elle checked the logbook. "This is the *Buttdodger*."

"What a horrible name."

"I've always thought that *Persephone* would be a nice name for a ship," Ki suggested.

But Horatio had already made up his mind. He stood separated from the group on the quarter deck, gazing across at *Horatian Star* some fifty feet off. His leg rested on the gunwale, his hand on his holstered frying pan. The air was fresh, the day still just as gorgeous as before. “*Victory*,” he said at last. “The *Horatian Victory*.” There were a few protests behind him, but his mind was already on the setting sun, casting pink hues across the sky. What an absolutely lovely day this had been.

The end.