A Battle Sail
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“Hands aloft to cast off the gaskets,” cried the first mate. I scrambled up the ratlines, wary of the weathered boards. Only they kept me from plummeting to the deck below or into the cold waters of the strait. Up and up I climbed, past the platform set half way up the foremast, until I was at the top of the shrouds. I clipped my harness onto the foot rope. “Stepping on,” I called as I put my feet onto the lower yard and leaned onto the back rope. Opposite my perch on the starboard yardarm, Heather did the same.

On the deck below us, the rest of the crew was engaged in setting the remainder of our sail. Calls to haul away and make fast carried easily in the light wind. The Amazing Grace was an agile flyer with all of her sail, from the great mainsail to the flying jib that crowned her bowsprit. Her two-thousand square feet of canvas easily carried her thirty ton displacement sprightly through the deep, blue waters.

I loosed the slender line that bound the square topsail to the upper yard in a neat furl. Quickly coiling it into small loops, I finished the bundle into an aptly named “gasket coil” and let it freely hang until the sail was to be furled again.

Heather was ahead of me and working on her second of the two coils. “Easing off the back rope,” I called. The back rope for each side of the yard was connected near the mast, so if either of us made a sudden move the rope on their mate’s side would slacken or tighten oppositely. I finished my second coil just as we were leaving the harbor, and the waves of the open straits rocked us to and fro.

“Isn’t this awesome?” Heather said as she leaned back comfortably, her dark hair dancing lightly in the playful breezes that filled the sails. She looked over the horizon at the gray mountains of Washington, then back at me with her cheerful grin.

I smiled and nodded as I took a moment to reflect. Ever since I had first conquered my fear of the height by climbing the shrouds at the beginning
of the summer, I was eager to volunteer for the experience of going aloft whenever possible. Heather was just as enthusiastic, so we often did the task as a pair. Sometimes it even seemed like a friendly competition, and it was almost disappointing when we had to allow someone else to gain the experience of going aloft.

The moment didn’t last long, as each crew member was essential to sailing the 83-foot schooner. Our crew was small with only seven or eight hands at any given time. With eight sails to trim we needed everyone to pitch in.

My feet hit the deck just as Peter, our lanky first mate, called out for hands to set the upper topsail that we had just unfurled.

“Let go bunts and clews, haul away sheets,” came the order. Vince, a native Californian with an easy smile, and Jenny, a young school teacher, quickly moved to comply.

“Stand by the halyard,” Peter ordered, his blonde hair peaking through the back of a red bandana.

“Ready on the halyard,” I replied from the portside fife rail.

“Haul your halyard.”

The coarse rope piled on the deck at my feet as I reached over my head and pulled the line down with both hands, causing the upper yard to move up the foremast. Vince helped me sweat the line and we made it fast to a pin. We looked at each other and laughed, both of us favoring our raw hands and thinking about blisters.

The upper topsail was sheeted home and the sleek black and white of the hull cut through the waves. Steve, the skipper and owner of the Grace and Peter’s father, stood at the helm. His firm hand rested casually on the wheel, with black sunglasses set on his face against the glare. Having sailed since boyhood in the south Puget Sound, Steve was comfortably in charge.

Peter scrutinized the sails, pointed out a few adjustments for proper trim, and then headed aft to confer with his father. Extensive sailing experience coupled with their relationship as father and son evoked efficiency and professionalism from the Grace and her crew. When Peter was just a boy, they had sailed together through the Caribbean and part of the Pacific.

The rest of us mingled among the two dozen passengers that had purchased tickets for the sailing. Seated on various deck boxes and hatch
covers, they were enjoying the British Columbia summer in shorts, sunglasses and floppy sunhats. On this trip, however, they were also referred to as hands and played an active part in the performance of the schooner. If the skipper wanted the boat to heel, or lean over, to take better advantage of light winds, he would call for a number of hands to move to starboard or port. In many cases this had allowed us to sail in virtually nonexistent breezes.

The wind was a light three or four knots. This was usually to our advantage, because the efficiency of our sail-to-displacement ratio benefited us in lighter wind. We needed any edge we could get, as we were about to be engaged in a battle with three other sailing vessels, all bigger than us and with substantial guns.

A few hundred yards off our port beam was the Lady Washington, a 112 foot, 210 ton ship boasting two sizable cannons and a pair of swivel guns. With a pearl white hull and beautifully weathered square sails, she looked the part of an 18th century tall ship. Even her crew wore the garb of traditional sailors.

Beyond Lady was her sister ship, the Hawaiian Chieftain. Both out of Grays Harbor, Washington, they sailed in tandem. The Chieftain had an odd blue and brown color scheme, but her unique rigging and character had led to the gaff-rigged topsail ketch becoming my favorite at 2008 Tall Ships Festival in Victoria.

Our final opponent in the battle royale was the sleek and dangerous Lynx. The Baltimore Clipper schooner appeared similar to the Grace, but her raked dark masts and green flag declaring “Live Free or Die” had me in awe. Earlier in the week, we had seen her hove to, motionless in the water without anchor by letting some sails push the schooner forward while others were backed by the wind. There was no doubt that her crew and skipper were skilled sailors. I felt intimidated as I and most of the crew had only learned to sail earlier that summer.

Although the “battle sails” were not judged or officially won in any way, there was a definite competitive drive to outmaneuver and outshoot each other, all while putting on a good show for the guests. The most highly desired shot was one straight into the stern, or more specifically the transom. The idea was to destroy a ship’s rudder and leave her crippled in the water. As the ball traveled through the length of the ship, it would possibly strike a mast
or kill ship’s officers.

We only had a light armament of two swivel guns mounted on either side of the helm, and a third mounted forward of the foremast. Our hope was to use our agility to be able to fire a stern shot while also protecting our transom.

I was in the midst of discussing this with a guest when concussive sound cut all conversation on the deck to a halt. The Lynx had taken the first shot in a pass at the Lady. The two ships glided past each other through the gray cloud of the battle, all cannons eagerly erupting in fire and smoke.

Peter came striding forward with excitement apparent in his sunburned face. He gave orders to come up on the wind, so we readied ourselves to sheet in all sails. The plan was to fire on the lonely Chieftain and then beat up wind to catch the Lynx and Lady off guard as they focused on each other.

We closed in on the Chieftain, her deck full with guests and crew. It became apparent to our captain that we would not be able to maneuver around their stern, so he called for a broadside.

“Prepare for cannon fire,” came the cry, signaling all to protect their ears.

“Fire!”

Our starboard guns sounded with an admirable bang, but the echoing boom from the Chieftain left no doubts as to which ship would have suffered more in an actual engagement.

Upwind, the Lady was exchanging fire with the Lynx. We hauled our sails in close and moved towards them. The two larger vessels were sailing into another pass for a broadside and seemed more intent on each other than on our approach.

As the thunder of their broadsides echoed off the hills of Vancouver Island, we neatly passed right between the ships as they sailed apart. The Lady’s vulnerable transom lay off our port beam just as the stern of the Lynx lined up with our starboard gun.

“Fire,” yelled Peter with a delighted cry.

The guns sounded with smoke and flames, and our imaginary shot struck each ship in turn, possibly crippling their rudders. Our guests cheered in pride, as they were really into the battle and at times were more competitive than our crew.
Now that we had her attention, the Lady came about and bore down on us. As she drew near, we realized that our short lived victory was hollow in the face of her significantly larger cannons. The Lady's guns were seated on her higher deck, and we were heeled so that her shot would smash down through our deck and damage the hull below.

"I'm sorry to do this to your beautiful boat!" yelled the gunner before she touched a burning match to the cannon. The Grace had probably been hulled by that shot and was taking on water. Fortunately it was a mock battle.

For the rest of the three-hour battle we played tag with the other tall ships and put on a show for the guests. At the conclusion of the battle each crew cheered the other vessels as they came alongside, in a friendly reminder of our mutual enjoyment of sailing.

We made our way back into Victoria Harbor and helped the guests ashore. Virtually everyone was smiling and thankful for the experience. I realized how fortunate I was to be able to crew the Grace and be a part of the Tall Ships Festival. Traditional sailing was quickly becoming a lost art, and many people throughout the world would live their entire lives without experiencing it.

The cohesion of wind and water and the harnessing of the power they contain make sailing a unique experience. However, it is also humbling because we have no control over those forces. In a dead calm we cannot sail; in heavy winds we risk damage to our vessel and rig. This is why sailing is a great metaphor for life. We do what we can, but ultimately we have to surrender to authority greater than us.
For more information about each tall ship:

**Amazing Grace**
http://www.amazinggracetallship.com/

**Lady Washington**
http://www.historicalseaport.org/web/lady-washington.html

**Lynx**
http://www.privateerlynx.com/

**Hawaiian Chieftain**
http://www.historicalseaport.org/web/hawaiian-chieftain.html