

Puritans Attack Fort Pequot, 1637

Major John Mason, author of this account, was the lead commanding officer of the Puritan militia that attacked the Pequot fort in 1637. Ishmael, the narrator in Herman Melville's novel, *Moby Dick*, briefly refers to the decimation of the Pequot tribe as the origin of the name of the ship, the Pequod. The allusion seems appropriate, considering Ishmael's description of the ship and the later events in the novel.

OUR council, all of them except the captain, were at a stand, and could not judge it meet to sail to Narragansett: and indeed there was a very strong ground for it, our commission limiting us to land our men in Pequot River; we had also the same order by a letter of instruction sent us to Saybrook But Captain Mason apprehending an exceeding great hazard in so doing, for the reasons forementioned, as also some other which I shall forbear to trouble you with, did therefore earnestly desire Mr. Stone that he would commend our condition to the Lord, that night, to direct how and in what manner we should demean ourselves in that respect, he being our chaplain and lying aboard our pink, the captain on shore.

In the morning very early Mr. Stone came ashore to the captain's chamber, and told him, he had done as he had desired, and was fully satisfied to sail for Narragansett. Our council was then called, and the several reasons alleged. In fine, we all agreed with one accord to sail for Narragansett, which the next morning we put in execution. I declare not this to encourage any soldiers to act beyond their commission, or contrary to it; for in so doing they run a double hazard. There was a great commander in Belgia who did the states great service in taking a city; but by going beyond his commission lost his life. His name was Grubbendunk. But if a war be managed duly by judgment and discretion as is requisite, the shows are many times contrary to what they seem to pursue. Whereof the more an enterprise is dissembled and kept secret, the more facile to put in execution; as the proverb, " The farthest way about is sometimes the nearest way home." I shall make bold to present this as my present thoughts in this case: In matters of war, those who are both able and faithful should be improved; and then bind them not up into too narrow a compass. For it is not possible for the wisest and ablest senator to foresee all accidents and occurrences that fall out in the management and pursuit of a war; nay, although possibly he might be trained up in military affairs; and truly much less can he have any great knowledge who hath had but little experience therein. What shall I say? God led his people through many difficulties and turnings; yet by more than an ordinary hand of providence he brought them to Canaan at last.

On Friday morning we set sail for Narragansett Bay, and on Saturday toward evening we arrived at our desired port, there we kept the Sabbath. On the Monday the wind blew so hard at north-west that we could not go on shore; as also on the Tuesday until sunset; at which time Captain Mason landed and marched up to the place of the chief sachem's residence; who told the sachem, "That we had not an opportunity to acquaint him with our coming armed in his country sooner; yet not doubting but it would be well accepted by him, there being love betwixt himself and us; well knowing also that the Pequots and themselves were enemies, and that he could not be unacquainted with those intolerable wrongs and injuries these Pequots had lately done unto the

English; and that we were now come, God assisting, to avenge ourselves upon them; and that we did only desire free passage through his country." Who returned us this answer, "That he did accept of our coming, and did also approve of our design; only he thought our numbers were too weak to deal with the enemy, who were (as he said) very great captains and men skilful in war." Thus he spake somewhat slighting of us.

On the Wednesday morning, we marched from thence to a place called Nayanticke, it being about eighteen or twenty miles distant, where another of those Narragansett sachems lived in a fort; it being a frontier to the Pequots. They carried very proudly towards us; not permitting any of us to come into their fort. We beholding their carriage and the falsehood of Indians, and fearing lest they might discover us to the enemy, especially they having many times some of their near relations among their greatest foes; we therefore caused a strong guard to be set about their fort, giving charge that no Indian should be suffered to pass in or out. We also informed the Indians, that none of them should stir out of the fort upon peril of their lives: so as they would not suffer any of us to come into their fort, so we would not suffer any of them to go out of the fort. There we quartered that night, the Indians not offering to stir out all the while.

In the morning there came to us several of Miantomo's his men, who told us, they were come to assist us in our expedition, which encouraged divers Indians of that place to engage also; who suddenly gathering into a ring, one by one, making solemn protestations how gallantly they would demean themselves, and how many men they would kill. On the Thursday about eight of the clock in the morning, we marched thence towards Pequot, with about five hundred Indians; but through the heat of the weather and want of provisions some of our men fainted. And having marched about twelve miles, we came to Pawcatuck River, at a ford where our Indians told us the Pequots did usually fish; there making a halt, we stayed some small time, the Narragansett Indians manifesting great fear, insomuch that many of them returned, although they had frequently despised us, saying that we durst not look upon a Pequot, but themselves would perform great things; though we had often told them that we came on purpose and were resolved, God assisting, to see the Pequots, and to fight with them, before we returned, though we perished. I then enquired of Onkos, what he thought the Indians would do? Who said, The Narragansetts would all leave us, but as for himself he would never leave us: and so it proved. For which expressions and some other speeches of his, I shall never forget him. Indeed he was a great friend, and did great service.

And after we had refreshed ourselves with our mean commons, we marched about three miles, and came to a field which had lately been planted with Indian corn. There we made another halt, and called our council, supposing we drew near to the enemy: and being informed by the Indians that the enemy had two forts almost impregnable; but we were not at all discouraged, but rather animated, insomuch that we were resolved to assault both their forts at once. But understanding that one of them was so remote that we could not come up with it before midnight, though we marched hard; whereat we were much grieved, chiefly because the greatest and bloodiest sachem there resided, whose name was Sassacous; we were then constrained, being exceedingly spent in our march with extreme heat and want of necessaries, to accept of the nearest.

We then marching on in a silent manner, the Indians that remained fell all into the rear, who formerly kept the van (being possessed with great fear); we continued our march till about one hour in the night: and coming to a little swamp between two hills, there we pitched our little camp; much wearied with hard travel, keeping great silence, supposing we were very near the fort; as our Indians informed us; which proved otherwise. The rocks were our pillows; yet rest was pleasant. The night proved comfortable, being clear and moonlight. We appointed our guards and placed our sentinels at some distance; who heard the enemy singing at the fort, who continued that strain until midnight, with great insulting and rejoicing, as we were afterwards informed. They seeing our pinnacles sail by them some days before, concluded we were afraid of them and durst not come near them; the burden of their song tending to that purpose.

In the morning, we awaking and seeing it very light, supposing it had been day, and so we might have lost our opportunity, having purposed to make our assault before day, roused the men with all expedition, and briefly commended ourselves and design to God, thinking immediately to go to the assault; the Indians showing us a path, told us that it led directly to the fort. We held on our march about two miles, wondering that we came not to the fort, and fearing we might be deluded. But seeing corn newly planted at the foot of a great hill, supposing the fort was not far off, a champaign country being round about us, then making a stand, gave the word for some of the Indians to come up. At length Onkos and one Wequash appeared. We demanded of them, Where was the fort? They answered, On the top of that hill. Then we demanded, Where were the rest of the Indians? They answered, Behind, exceedingly afraid. We wished them to tell the rest of their fellows, That they should by no means fly, but stand at what distance they pleased, and see whether Englishmen would now fight or not. Then Captain Underhill came up, who marched in the rear; and commending ourselves to God, divided our men, there being two entrances into the fort, intending to enter both at once; Captain Mason leading up to that on the north-east side, who approaching within one rod, heard a dog bark and an Indian crying "Owanux! Owanux!" which is "Englishmen! Englishmen!" We called up our forces with all expedition, gave fire upon them through the palisado; the Indians being in a dead, indeed their last sleep. Then we wheeling of fell upon the main entrance, which was blocked up with bushes about breast high, over which the captain passed, intending to make good the entrance, encouraging the rest to follow. Lieutenant Seeley endeavored to enter; but being somewhat cumbered, stepped back and pulled out the bushes and so entered, and with him about sixteen men. We had formerly concluded to destroy them by the sword and save the plunder.

Whereupon Captain Mason seeing no Indians, entered a wigwam; where he was beset with many Indians, waiting all opportunities to lay hands on him, but could not prevail. At length William Heydon espying the breach in the wigwam, supposing some English might be there, entered; but in his entrance fell over a dead Indian; but speedily recovering himself, the Indians some fled, others crept under their beds. The captain going out of the wigwam saw many Indians in the lane or street; he making towards them, they fled, were pursued to the end of the lane, where they were met by Edward Pattison, Thomas Barber, with some others; where seven of them were slain, as they said. The captain facing about, marched a slow pace up the lane he came down,

perceiving himself very much out of breath; and coming to the other end near the place where he first entered, saw two soldiers standing close to the palisado with their swords pointed to the ground. The captain told them that we should never kill them after that manner. The captain also said, We must burn them; and immediately stepping into the wigwam where he had been before, brought out a fire-brand, and putting it into the mats with which they were covered, set the wigwams on fire. Lieutenant Thomas Bull and Nicholas Omsted beholding, came up; and when it was thoroughly kindled, the Indians ran as men most dreadfully amazed.

And indeed such a dreadful terror did the Almighty let fall upon their spirits, that they would fly from us and run into the very flames, where many of them perished. And when the fort was thoroughly fired, command was given, that all should fall off and surround the fort; which was readily attended by all; only one Arthur Smith being so wounded that he could not move out of the place, who was happily espied by Lieutenant Bull, and by him rescued.

The fire was kindled on the north-east side to windward; which did swiftly overrun the fort, to the extreme amazement of the enemy, and great rejoicing of ourselves. Some of them climbing to the top of the palisado; others of them running into the very flames; many of them gathering to windward, lay pelting at us with their arrows; and we repaid them with our small shot. Others of the stoutest issued forth, as we did guess, to the number of forty, who perished by the sword.

What I have formerly said, is according to my own knowledge, there being sufficient living testimony to every particular. But in reference to Captain Underhill and his parties acting in this assault, I can only intimate as we were informed by some of themselves immediately after the fight. Thus they marching up to the entrance on the south-west side, there made some pause; a valiant, resolute gentleman, one Mr. Hedge, stepping towards the gate, saying, "If we may not enter, wherefore came we here?" and immediately endeavored to enter; but was opposed by a sturdy Indian which did impede his entrance; but the Indian being slain by himself and Sergeant Davis, Mr. Hedge entered the fort with some others; but the fort being on fire, the smoke and flames were so violent that they were constrained to desert the fort. Thus were they now at their wits' end, who not many hours before exalted themselves in their great pride, threatening and resolving the utter ruin and destruction of all the English, exulting and rejoicing with songs and dances. But God was above them, who laughed his enemies and the enemies of his people to scorn, making them as a fiery oven. Thus were the stout-hearted spoiled, having slept their last sleep, and none of their men could find their hands. Thus did the Lord judge among the heathen, filling the place with dead bodies!

And here we may see the just judgment of God, in sending even the very night before this assault, one hundred and fifty men from their other fort, to join with them of that place, who were designed as some of themselves reported to go forth against the English, at that very instant when this heavy stroke came upon them, where they perished with their fellows. So that the mischief they intended to us, came upon their own fate. They were taken in their own snare, and we through mercy escaped. And thus in little more than one hour's space was their impregnable

fort with themselves utterly destroyed, to the number of six or seven hundred, as some of themselves confessed. There were only seven taken captive, and about seven escaped.

Of the English, there were two slain outright, and about twenty wounded. Some fainted by reason of the sharpness of the weather, it being a cool morning, and the want of such comforts and necessaries as were needful in such a case; especially our chirurgeon was much wanting, whom we left with our barks in Narragansett Bay, who had order there to remain until the night before our intended assault.

And thereupon grew many difficulties: Our provision and munition near spent; we in the enemy's country, who did far exceed us in number, being much enraged; all our Indians, except Onkos, deserting us; our pinnacles at a great distance from us, and when they would come we were uncertain. But as we were consulting what course to take, it pleased God to discover our vessels to us before a fair gale of wind, sailing into Pequot harbor, to our great rejoicing.

* Mason, Major John. "The Taking of the Fort at Mystic" in A Library of American Literature from the Earliest Settlement to the Present Time. Edmund Clarence Stedman and Ellen MacKay Hutchinson, editors. vol. 1 of 11 volumes. New York: Charles L. Webster and Company, 1890. pp. 180-184.