WORLD HISTORY
UNIT 1, SECTION 3: EXPLORATION
"The Death and the Triumph of Magellan"

And now Magellan abruptly changed course and sailed southwest across the Atlantic from the bulge of Africa to the bulge of Brazil. With fair winds the crossing took 70 days. His lookouts sighted Pernambuco – today's Recife - on November 29, and Magellan swiftly sailed south 2,000 miles along the Brazilian coast to the snug, almost landlocked bay of present-day Rio de Janeiro. Here the flotilla paused to take on water and fresh provisions.

The Guarani Indians were friendly and eager to barter with these strange visitors. The members of the expedition got some remarkable bargains, as Pigafetta reported. "The people of this place gave for a knife or a fishhook five or six fowles, and for a comb a brace of geese. For a small mirror or a pair of scissors they gave as many fish as ten men could have eaten." Pigafetta got the best bargain of all: "And for a king of playing cards, of the kind used in Italy, they gave me five fowles, and even thought they had cheated me."

The Indians, Pigafetta recorded, "sleep in nets of cotton, which they call in their language *Amache*" – the word has come down to us as hammock – and traveled in dugout canoes holding 30 or 40 men. The observant Pigafetta noted that "both men and women are in the habit of painting themselves with fire" – that is, tattooing – and went naked except for "a ring surrounded by the largest parrot feathers, with which they cover the part and backside only. Which is a very ridiculous thing."

With horrified fascination, the chronicler described how the Indians "eat the flesh of their enemies, not as being good for food, but from custom. They do not eat the whole body of the man taken but eat it piece by piece. They cut him up in pieces, which they put to dry in the chimney, and every day they cut of a small piece and eat it with their ordinary food to call mind their enemies."

The explorers remained in Rio for almost two weeks, and then on December 26, well furnished with fresh provisions, Magellan's flotilla sailed out of the bay and cruised on down the coast for another 400 miles. Magellan noted that the coastline tended westward as well as south; he interpreted this as a sure sign that he would eventually find a strait leading west into the mysterious ocean Balboa had called the South Sea. Magellan joyously believed he had found the strait when he came upon a vast estuary, today known as the Rio de la Plata. But on a two-day sail west along its course brought him to fresh water and disappointment: the "strait" was only a large river winding down to the Atlantic.

Magellan sent a well-armed landing party ashore to capture some of the Indians who had come down to the shore to gawk at the ships. But try as they might, his men were unable to capture a single Indian. The tall, fleet Indians easily outran the stumpy Europeans, for as Pigafetta noted, "they make more ground in one pace than we could in a leap."

At this point in the voyage, Magellan and his navigators calculated that they were at lat. 35 degrees S, more than 2,000 miles below the equator, deeper into the New World than any explorers had ever sailed before. The farther south they journeyed, the greater grew the fear and grumbling among the men, particularly the Spaniards. But Magellan

pushed inexorably on. On February 3, 1520, he turned his back on a headland he had christened Monte Vidi – today's Montevideo – and headed down along the coast to a place he named Bahio de los Patos, literally Duck Bay. The explorers had found their first penguins – flightless birds of a species that one day would be called Magellanic penguins, the most northerly representatives of a family widely distributed through Antarctica. Pigafetta reported that "we loaded all the ships with them in an hour. And these goslings are black and have feathers over their whole body of the same size and fashion, and they do not fly, and they live on fish. And they were so fat that we did not pluck them but skinned them, and they have a beak like a crow's."

It was now March, and the weather turned ominously colder as the Southern winter drew near. Still they sailed on, until they had reached a latitude "of 49 degrees toward the Antarctic Pole," as Pigafetta recorded. Here, on the afternoon of March 31, Magellan led his flotilla into a harbor on the southern coast of today's Argentina; he named the place Port St. Julian. As soon as ships were safely at anchor, Magellan announced to his officers and men that this cold, desolate, windy spot – more than halfway from the equator to the South Pole – would be their home for five months while they waited out the South American winter. He added that he was putting all hands on reduced rations.

There was an immediate clamor of protest. A spokesman for the crew angrily told Magellan that they had followed his commands for six long months, endured the savage storms of Africa, and had then crossed the Atlantic to a forsaken world that grew less and less hospitable the farther into it they penetrated. A number of men had already died from cold. They now believed Magellan was leading them all to their deaths. There was no passage from the Atlantic to the Indies. They would all perish on some icy rock. They demanded to return home.

But Magellan would not turn back. Endure the winter, he promised, and fame and wealth would be theirs.

Magellan's pledge stiffened the spines of many of the seamen. But it had no effect on five of his officers – all Spaniards – whose smoldering hatred for their Portuguese leader was about to burst into flame.

On the night of April 1, only a day after Magellan's speech, Gaspar Quesada, captain of the *Concepcion*, with two of his officers and some 30 still-disaffected crewmen, stole aboard the *San Antonio*, surprising her Portuguese captain, Alvaro de Mesquita, and clapped him in irons. When the *San Antonio*'s second officer defied the mutineers, Quesada murdered him with furious stabs of his dagger. The mutineers speedily disarmed the rest of the crew, and the ship was theirs.

As all this was transpiring aboard the *San Antonio*, another Spaniard, Luis de Mendoza, captain of the *Victoria*, sided with the mutineers. At the same time, the insolent Juan de Cartagena, whom Magellan had arrested, was freed by the mutineers and put in command of the *Concepcion.* When Magellan awoke in his flagship on the morning of April 2, three of his five ships were in the hands of rebellious officers. He remained in command only of his own *Trinidad* and the *Santiago*, the fleet's smallest vessel, captained by the Portuguese Joao Serrao, brother of one of Magellan's oldest friends.

It was by far the most desperate moment of a torment-filled journey that had already taken more than five times as long as Columbus' first voyage of discovery. The

odds were strong that the mutineers would execute Magellan. At the very least, they would force him to sail back to Spain, a captive in chains certain to endure slander and disgrace, his great dream forever shattered.

Magellan responded to the threat with cool daring. Quesada afforded him his first opportunity to counterattack by sending a skiff across from the *San Antonio* bearing a letter demanding that they immediately set sail for Spain. Magellan agreed to a parley – on the *Trinidad.* Quesada, fearing a trick, sent the skiff back again with a refusal.

But now as the boat drew up to the *Trinidad*, on a side screened from the *San Antonio*'s view, Magellan ordered his men to seize the craft and imprison its oarsmen. He quickly put six of his own men, led by the fleet's chief marshal, Gonzalo Gomez de Espinosa, into the skiff; concealed in their clothes were long daggers. At the same time, Magellan ordered 15 more armed men into his own ship's boat, which also lay on the far side of the *Trinidad*, hidden from sight of the mutineers.

Rather than attack the *San Antonio* at once, Magellan decided to move first against Mendoza's *Victoria.* From the skiff, Espinosa waved a letter as his five companions rowed rapidly across the distance separating the two vessels. As they reached the *Victoria*, Mendoza allowed them to come alongside and clamber aboard. It was reported that Mendoza smiled derisively upon reading Magellan's letter, which summoned him to the flagship. If so, the mutineer's mirth was short-lived, for Espinosa, obeying Magellan's order, whipped out his hidden dagger and plunged it into Mendoza's throat. Espinosa and his followers were now in danger from the other mutineers aboard the *Victoria*. But hardly had the mortally wounded Mendoza fallen than the 15 men in the *Trinidad*'s boat arrived and swarmed over the *Victoria*'s side with muskets and swords. In the face of such strength, the *Victoria*'s mutineers surrendered.

With that, the advantage swung to Magellan, three ships to two, and as night fell, he ranged the *Victoria*, *Trinidad* and *Santiago* across the mouth of the harbor to block the remaining mutineers' escape. Soon after midnight, Quesada in the *San Antonio* bore down on Magellan's flagship as if to make a run for the open sea. As he drew near, Quesada shouted orders from the *San Antonio*'s quarter-deck for the crew to open fire. No one obeyed. On the *Trinidad*, Magellan gave the word, and the flagship's guns spewed flame. It only remained to send a boarding party to the *San Antonio* and place the hapless Quesada in chains.

Only the *Concepcion* was left now and its temporary commander, Juan de Cartagena, surrendered the next morning.

Magellan's justice was swift and brutally instructive. Mendoza's body was taken ashore and accorded the ceremonial butchery metered out to traitors in the 16th Century, being hacked into four pieces. Quesada, who had murdered the mate of the *San Antonio*, was decapitated and also quartered. Juan de Cartagena, twice a mutineer, was not executed. Magellan condemned him to be marooned on the desolate Argentine shore when the flotilla departed; he was never seen or heard of again.

Magellan found 40 crewmen guilty of treason and sentenced them to death. But then, after allowing them to agonize briefly, he pardoned the lot, along with two officers who had taken minor parts in the uprising. It was brilliant psychology. Magellan's leniency turned the guilty men into devoted cohorts who would follow him to the ends of the earth – which is where Magellan took them.