Ladies and Gentlemen,
It is my honor and privilege to provide you with the history of the Battle for New Orleans, of the Medal of Honor and the fight aboard the USS Varuna. I am Mike Movius, vice president of the Puget Sound Civil War Roundtable.

Let’s start with the medal... Early in the Civil War, a medal for individual valor was proposed to General-in-Chief of the Army Winfield Scott. But, Scott felt medals smacked of European affectation and killed the idea.

The medal found support in the Navy, however, where it was felt recognition of courage in strife was needed. President Abraham Lincoln signed public Resolution 82, containing a provision for a Navy medal of valor, into law on December 21, 1861. The medal was "to be bestowed upon such petty officers, seamen, landsmen, and Marines as shall most distinguish themselves by their gallantry and other seamanlike qualities during the present war."
Shortly after this, a resolution similar in wording was introduced on behalf of the Army. Signed into law July 12, 1862, the measure provided for awarding a medal of honor "to such noncommissioned officers and privates as shall most distinguish themselves by their gallantry in action, and other soldier-like qualities, during the present insurrection."

Although it was created for the Civil War, Congress made the Medal of Honor a permanent decoration in 1863. Almost 3,400 men and one woman have received the award for heroic actions in the nation's battles since that time.

**Battle Leadership**

As to Flag Officer David G. Farragut who conceived and led the Union forces, you probably think of him as the guy who shouted, “Damn the Torpedoes! Full Speed Ahead!” at the Battle of Mobile Bay in 1864. But, New Orleans occurred in 1862 when there were no admirals in the US Navy.

And, you may not know that New Orleans was the largest and wealthiest city in the Confederacy. So, to think about capturing this strongly fortified city on the Big Muddy with blue water navy ships was extremely imaginative and daring.
So, what was the **Union Strategy**? The Union Navy’s plan for capturing New Orleans involved an extended bombardment of the Confederate forts guarding the lower Mississippi by 19 mortar schooners under the command of Commander David D. Porter, then a dash past the forts under cover of darkness by Farragut’s warships. Once safely past, the vessels would then steam quickly to New Orleans without reducing the forts.

The fleet at Farragut’s disposal consisted of 17 heavy, steam-powered warships carrying 192 guns. Opposing this force were two of the strongest forts in the South. Fort Jackson on the west bank, mounting 74 guns, and Fort St. Philip nearby on the east bank with 52. The small naval force supporting the forts consisted of four Confederate Navy gunboats, two gunboats belonging to the Louisiana State Navy, and six lightly armed rams belonging to the army’s River Defense Fleet, carrying a total of 40 guns. Included in this flotilla was the ironclad ram Manassas (one gun) and the ironclad Louisiana (16 guns), which was used as a floating battery due to her unfinished condition. Also available to the Confederates were fire rafts, which could be pushed by small tugs or set adrift in the current. The fight wasn’t going to be easy
The Battle for New Orleans
After slipping through an opening in the Confederate river obstructions, Farragut’s fleet had to pass through a gauntlet of cannon fire from the two forts. Although the forts had endured six days of bombardment by the mortar fleet, they had suffered few casualties and only minimal damage. The Confederate gunners fired vigorously on the Union ships as they steamed past and inflicted the majority of the casualties suffered by the Federals. Said one of the Confederate artillerists, “I do not believe there ever was a grander spectacle witnessed before in the world than that displayed during the great artillery duel which then followed...The guns on both sides kept up a continual roar for nearly an hour, without a moments interruption, and produced a shimmering illumination...beautiful and grand...”

As the heavy Union warships worked their way past the Confederate forts, they came under assault from not only the land, but from a variety of seaborne craft. With mortar rounds steaming sparks overhead, and a galling fire coming from guns ashore, various Confederate ships tried to halt the stubborn Federal advance. The inexperienced and poorly lead River Defense rams were quickly disposed of, but other ships pushed
the attack forward. The tiny tug Mosher was heroically pushing a fire raft against Farragut’s flagship the Hartford. The thinly plated, one gun ram Manassas, though stymied by a lack of speed, was moving forward to ram the big Union warships. The cannon blasts, the fire rafts and the bonfires lit ashore to illuminate the attacking Federals, combined to cause both sky and river to flow as if afire. It was, Farragut would later write, “as if the artillery of heaven were playing on the earth.”

Lieutenant A. F. Warley commanded the small ironclad ram CSS Manassas. As the Union ships pushed past the fort, Warley fearlessly threw the thinly plated ram at the larger and faster warships. After missing the USS Pensacola because of the ram’s slow speed, the Manassas struck the USS Mississippi a glancing blow, at the same time firing her one small cannon in the big Union sidewheeler’s stern. Warley then rushed at the USS Brooklyn, striking her fairly amidship and ripping a five-foot hole in her hull below the waterline. Only the Brooklyn’s full coal bunkers prevented her from being totally injured. The shock from the ramming also damaged the Manassas’ lone gun, but Warley nevertheless, followed the union vessels as they passed the Confederate forts. When the Mississippi turned back to attack the pesky ram, Warley realizing he could not
oppose the heavily armed Union ship, ran the Manassas ashore and escaped with his crew. The Manassas was riddled by two broadsides from the Mississippi, then slipped off the bank afire and exploded.

**What happened on the USS Varuna?**

The following is the report of Executive Officer of the USS Varuna:

U. S. S. BROOKLYN,
Off New Orleans,
April 29, 1862.

SIR: in accordance with your request, I beg leave to submit the following report:

On the night of the 24th, after all hands had been called to quarters, I visited the different divisions to see that all the men were at their stations... the men were quiet and orderly... When abreast of the forts we fired the starboard battery in broadside, then, loaded with 5-second shell. After the first discharge we loaded and fired with grape and canister as rapidly as possible, according to orders received from you.

On arriving above the forts, and clear of their fire, we found ourselves among a number of the enemys [sic] gunboats that commenced at once to open fire upon us.
The order was then given to work both sides and to load with grape. Our guns were trained for extreme lateral train forward, and as we brought them to bear successively on the enemys [sic] vessels, ranged in succession on either side of the river, we fired, the guns having been first pointed with the greatest care. As far as my own observation showed me, in no case did we miss the object aimed at, and the effect of our firing seemed to keep the enemy aloof.

During all this time the forward and after pivots were doing all in their power to injure the enemy.

Finding that we were getting too far from the enemy for the use of grape, we loaded with 5-second shell and fired. One of these shells struck a steamer and, bursting, carried away his port wheelhouse and exploded his boiler.

Three other steamers were set on fire and driven ashore by our shell. We had passed nearly through the fleet of the enemys [sic] gunboats when we discovered one of them, then engaging the Oneida, heading for us, apparently with the intention of running us down. Owing to the small amount of steam we then had, 17 pounds, he soon began to come up with us and finally struck us twice, once abreast the mainmast and again abreast the smokestack. He did not escape the second time without receiving the contents of the starboard broadside,
which, as the captain afterwards told me, swept his decks of nearly every living object. Before striking us he fired his forward gun, a rifled 32-pounder, which raked our decks, killing 3 men and wounding several. Up to this time we had passed the forts and gunboats without having a single man injured, although the ship had been struck several times. The steamer that first struck us I have since learned was the Governor Moore, ironclad on the bow, and commanded by Beverly Kennon, formerly a lieutenant in the United States service.

Hardly had we recovered from the shock of these two blows before we were struck on the port quarter by a vessel, the Stonewall Jackson, constructed for this purpose. We received so much injury from this blow that we made such a quantity of water that it was impossible to keep her afloat, and she was run ashore and every effort made to save the wounded and crew, which I am happy to say was accomplished with the friendly aid of the boats of the vessels then up with us.

The Governor Moore was subsequently run ashore and burned by her commander, now a prisoner. There is no doubt that the effect of our shot and that of the Oneida forced him to this extremity. Nor did the other vessel get off without feeling the effect of our battery, as we fired into her twice. Of the
extent of her injuries I have not learned.

Our ship kept up a continual fire on these two vessels until the water drove the men from their guns.

I desire to call your attention to a few of the officers and men whose conduct fell under my own personal observation. Acting Masters Childs and Leonard fought their guns with coolness and precision and were never absent when required. I recommend them to your consideration, as well as Masters Mates Bevins and Foster, who fought with great bravery, being an example of coolness and determination to the men. Messrs. Blauvelt and Fitch deserve the greatest praise for the handsome manner in which they served their division. Mr. Henry, and in fact the whole engineer department, should come also for a full share of praise, as there was no possible delay, but each vied with the other to do his best. I would particularly recommend that Mr. Thomas H. Fortune be appointed in the regular service for the prompt manner in which he delivered powder during the action. On the part of the men, I would call your attention to Bourne, McKnight, Martin, and Greene, captains of guns, who did their duty through the thickest of the fight with great coolness and danger to the enemy. Nor would I forget the two brave men, McGowan and Bradley, who stood at the wheel the whole of
the time, although guns were raking the decks from behind them. Their position was one of the most responsible on the ship, and they did their duty to the uttermost. George Hollah and Oscar E. Peck I desire also to mention as deserving great praise. If any names have been omitted that should have been mentioned, it is not because they do not deserve such mention, but because their conduct did not fall under my immediate attention.

Very respectfully, your obedient servant,

C. H. SWASEY, Capt.

**Conclusion**
After a five day bombardment of the Confederate forts Flag Officer Farragut and his flotilla fought their way up the Mississippi. In the slugfest that followed, most of the Southern ships were destroyed and the USS Varuna was rammed and sunk. The following day, the city of New Orleans surrendered and, on April 28th, the isolated forts hoisted the white flag. With the loss of its largest and wealthiest city, it was a devastating defeat for the Confederacy.

Twenty Union officers and men received the Medal of Honor for valor during the battle.
USS Varuna (6 men & 2 boys)
- Seaman Bourne
- Landsman Bradley
- Captain of the Forecastle Greene
- Third Class Boy Hollat
- Seaman Martin
- Quartermaster McGowan
- Coxswain McKnight
- Second Class Boy Peck (Powder Monkey)

USS Mississippi (1 man)
- Seaman Brennan

USS Brooklyn (1 man)
- Quartermaster Buck

USS Owasco (1 man)
- Quartermaster Farrell

USS Pensacola (3 men & 1 boy)
- Boy Flood
- Seaman Lyons
- Captain of the Foretop McLeod
- Quartermaster Richards

USS Pinola (1 man)
- Gunner’s Mate Frisbee

USS Cayuga (3 men)
- Captain of the Afterguard Parker
- Quartermaster Wright
- Boatswain’s Mate Young

USS Wissahickon (1 man)
- Captain of the Forecastle Shutes

And, as for Flag Officer Farragut, on July 16, 1862, in recognition of his part in the capture of New Orleans, he was promoted to rear admiral, the first officer in the US Navy to hold that rank, and received a vote of thanks by a grateful Congress.