

Alabama The Civil War Years

Mobile was a well guarded harbor during the war, but the Yankees set up a blockade and were planning to take Mobile from the Confederacy. Admiral Franklin Buchanan went out to protect the Mobile Bay with the Tennessee, the most powerful ironclad ship, and three other wooden gunboats. Admiral Davy Farragut soon attacked Mobile Bay and won. Later, Fort Gaines and Fort Morgan gave up, but Mobile city held out for nine months. Admiral Farragut soon evacuated the bay and returned to Washington. As Union troops won more battles, the Confederates abandoned Mobile. The Mayor surrendered and the last major Confederate city had fallen.

Behind the lines of defense, Mobilians spent most of the war years gay and confident. General Joseph E. Johnston had said Mobile was " the best fortified city in the Confederacy." And even the Yankees had to agree. Fort Gaines and Fort Morgan at the mouth of the bay guarded entrance to the harbor. No Union ship would dare to pass those fearsome portals. But the Yankees set up a blockade out in the Gulf. If they could not get in, at least they would keep Southern ships from getting out. Over the next few years, the blockade tightened. Admiral Davy Farragut who was reared just outside Mobile captured New Orleans in 1862, then set up headquarters on Ship Island while he brooded over a plan to capture the city.

Meanwhile, Jefferson Davis came to Mobile. He looked over the defenses, made a speech and went to Richmond. Then he sent down a famous old war horse to take charge of the defense of Mobile. Admiral Franklin Buchanan had won fame as the commander of the Merrimac. After his battle with the Monitor, Buchanan came to Mobile and teamed up with General Dabney Maury to lay plans for the defense. Tough, experienced, and fiery, Buchanan had been chosen by Davis not only for his naval skill but because he had an intimate knowledge of the ways and methods of the cunning Admiral Farragut, having been a former classmate of his. As the war dragged on, Buchanan and Farragut eyed one another across the Gulf waters.

During the stalemate, Sherman marched his army to Meridian from Memphis. From Meridian he was planning to attack Selma and then move down the river to invade Mobile. But his plans were thwarted by Nathan Bedford Forrest. Instead, Sherman turned toward Atlanta and began his famous march to the sea.

Across the bay General Grant had sent the survivors of the Vicksburg campaign. Under a flag of truce they were being cared for at the Grand Hotel at Point Clear. Grant's wounded were oblivious to a new contraption being built on the other side of the bay. Its designers were calling it a " submarine" but Buchanan was dubious of its value. The first one constructed sank but the second one blew up a coal barge in the Mobile River before it went to the bottom. Buchanan's interest was aroused but Mobile Bay was too shallow to put the underwater boat to any good use. The Admiral sent the contraption to Beauregard at Charleston where it sank the Housatonic. Mobilians were unaware that a new weapon had been invented under their very noses. They were still dancing and dining at Madame Le Vert's home when the most powerful iron clad ever built was towed

down the Alabama River and into Dog River. The Tennessee had been built at Selma the year before. When the finishing touches were added, she steamed out across the bay, followed by three impotent wooden gunboats, the Selma, the Morgan and the Gaines. With these vessels, Admiral Buchanan went forth to defend Mobile Bay.

Looking through his binoculars, Admiral Farragut caught sight of the Tennessee. He had made up his mind to attack but when he saw the Tennessee, he held back. The magnificent ironclad appeared to be too formidable an opponent for Farragut's wooden fleet. Quickly, he asked Lincoln for some ironclads, but the President was a long time replying.

While Farragut was waiting, an uneasy quiet settled over the city of Mobile. The ill wind bore increasingly bad tidings. Belle Boyd, staying at the Battle House, heard of the death of Stonewall Jackson. Then news came that Jeb Stuart had been shot off his horse at Yellow Tavern. Sherman had captured Atlanta and was burning his way to the sea. Lee was nearly surrounded at Richmond. But most depressing of all, news came that the great Mobilian, Admiral Raphael Semmes, had finally been trapped in the English Channel and the Alabama had been sunk. Could it really be so? The Alabama sunk? That most feared of all ships of the Confederacy, that ghostly galleon which had captured over seventy ships on the seven seas? Mobilians could hardly believe it. Some had halfway expected one morning, when the ring was closing in and Mobile was at her darkest hour, to look out over the horizon and see the banner of the savior ship sailing in at forty knots to rescue the lost city. As long as the Alabama sailed, there was hope. But now she lay at the bottom of the English Channel and a wave of gloom passed over the residents of Mobile as they somberly sipped at their coffee and nibbled at their grits.

They were rudely awakened on the morning of August 5, 1864. The big bell of the cathedral electrified the city! With quick, strong strokes the great gong sounded the alarm. The other bells over the city quickly followed suit and soon a nightmare of clangor brought the residents out of their homes and into the streets. They rushed to the edge of the bay, realizing full well that the long anticipated moment had arrived. Admiral Farragut had attacked!

Over the bay waters, the sounds of cannons rumbled across the waves. At the mouth of the bay, eighteen ships in a line, two by two, were moving straight forward, running the gauntlet between Forts Gaines and Morgan. Only one stood out-The Tecumseh. Alone, unprotected, she had fired the first shot of the battle. Now, within range of the big guns of Fort Morgan, her captain spied the Tennessee waiting patiently for her to break through the narrow channel. The Tecumseh moved forward, her crewmen anxious to be the first to attack the Tennessee. But as the monitor Tecumseh was nearly past the fort, a terrific explosion was heard. From Fort Morgan, the Confederates could see the rear end of the Tecumseh sticking up in the air with the propeller spinning furiously. A mine had exploded, sending huge clouds of smoke into the sky. But had the mine only camouflaged the catastrophe? Was it the guns of Fort Morgan or those of the Tennessee which hurled the death blow?

The men on the deck of the Brooklyn let out a mighty roar. The cheering soon spread to the Chickasaw and the Metacomet. The Yankees thought that the Tecumseh had sunk the Tennessee! When the smoke had cleared it was believed that the Confederate torpedoes had sunk the Tecumseh and the word was urgently delivered to Admiral Davy Farragut. The whole bay was laden with mines. Would it not be suicide to send defenseless ships against an invisible enemy?

Davy Farragut stood on the deck of the Hartford, looking straight ahead. Nearing sixty years of age, he was at the high water mark of a great career. Thus far, he had made a brilliant record in the service of his country. He had captured New Orleans and Biloxi and had been instrumental in the capture of Vicksburg. His reputation was secure. But if he blundered now, his record might be permanently blemished. He might be forever remembered as the buffoon who sent the greatest naval fleet ever assembled to a needless death. Now he must make a decision and he must do it quickly.

Looking ahead, Farragut saw the Brooklyn backtracking, her engines reversed. In a moment, the Brooklyn would ram the Hartford and the whole fleet would be hopelessly entangled, sitting ducks before the mighty guns of Fort Morgan. Quickly, Farragut signaled the Brooklyn. "Why are you backing?" he demanded.

"Torpedoes in the channel," the Brooklyn signaled back.

"Damn the torpedoes! Go ahead!" he ordered. It was too late to back up now. There would either be a great victory or a disaster. The Brooklyn again reversed her engines and the procession continued up the channel, past the fort, into the bay. As each pair of ships entered the bay, Admiral Buchanan on the Tennessee tried to ram them two at a time. They were too fast but the guns of the Tennessee damaged ship after ship as they entered the bay waters. As each ship cleared, she began the pursuit of the three Confederate gunboats. The Gaines was run aground, the Morgan fled to Mobile and the Selma surrendered. There was nothing left now but the Tennessee.

The Tennessee, outnumbered seventeen to one, was still a formidable opponent. Buchanan, thinking he was unsinkable, began a furious assault on each ship. He was successfully ramming one after another. Then his eye fell upon the Hartford. He would destroy the Hartford and Farragut with it, if nothing else. Straight forward in the direction of the Hartford, Buchanan pushed the Tennessee.

Apparently, Admiral Farragut had the same idea. With the battle at a stalemate, he would send his Hartford against the mighty Tennessee. If he could gather enough steam, perhaps he could run over the Tennessee and if he sunk himself, he would, at least, take the Tennessee down with him. Deliberately, the two captains steered their ships to a head-on collision as the great naval battle was coming to a climax.

Just when the two ships were upon each other, the Tennessee veered away and the Hartford bounced off her side and into an untenable position. The Tennessee let loose a volley of shell which tore through the Hartford's deck, killing and wounding a dozen

men. The Hartford was then knocked into the path of the oncoming Lackawanna and a collision resulted in the Hartford's side being crushed. Farragut, thinking he was on the verge of sinking, rushed to the deck just in time to see the Lackawanna begin another charge at the Tennessee. Frantically, he ordered his signalman to wave the Lackawanna aside but the signalman became so excited he whopped Farragut over the head with a flagstaff.

By the time Farragut recovered, the Chickasaw had rammed the Tennessee, knocking over her smoke stack and stripping away her steering apparatus. After two hours of battling the deadliest armada ever assembled, Admiral Buchanan, with his leg broken and his ship hopelessly adrift on the bay, hoisted the white flag. The Battle of Mobile Bay was over.

The next day, Fort Gaines surrendered and two weeks later Fort Morgan gave up. But the city of Mobile held out for nine more months. Admiral Farragut, unable to move his ships in close enough to bombard the city, finally evacuated the bay and returned to Washington to become the first full admiral in the annals of the United States Navy. Admiral Buchanan was taken prisoner and sent to Pensacola while his comrades in Mobile barricaded the city and stacked all the cotton bales in Bienville Square. Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox but Mobile still fought on. Then Blakely fell and the Confederates abandoned Mobile in hopes of joining Nathan Bedford Forrest at Citronelle. When Union troops waded ashore, the Mayor of Mobile hopped on a carriage and rolled down the bay road to surrender the city to General Canby, waving a little white flag in the wind. Mobile, the last major city in the Confederacy had at last fallen. A month later, news of Appomattox reached Forrest and he surrendered the last remnants of that once magnificent Confederate Army