

U. S. S. HARVEST MOON

Civil War Flagship of the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron 1864-1865.

On March 1, 1865 the Union Steamer Harvest Moon, Flagship of Admiral John A. Dahlgren, struck a confederate torpedo and sank in Winyah Bay 5 miles SSE of the city of Georgetown, South Carolina. To this day, the Harvest Moon rests where she went down, buried under the sands of Winyah Bay with her smokestack still proudly visible. The Harvest Moon had taken Admiral Dahlgren to Georgetown to inspect Battery White, recently abandoned by the Rebels. Prior to her departure a torpedo was assembled by Confederate Captain Thomas Daggett and placed in the channel where the Harvest Moon struck it as she steamed away from Georgetown. The resulting explosion tore out the bottom of the ship and the Harvest Moon sank within minutes taking the life of the Wardroom Steward John Hazard.

COURT OF INQUIRY REPORT

Sinking Of The U.S. Steamer Harvest Moon

Proceeding of a Court of Inquiry convened on board the U.S.S. Mingoe at Georgetown, South Carolina

10:00 AM April 27, 1865

The court met pursuant to orders from Admiral Dahlgren
Members Present: Lieut. Commander Stephen P. Quackenbush
Lieut. Commander William H. Dana
Acting Master Joseph W. Congdon
Acting Asst. Paymaster Charles A. Cable, Judge Advocate

The Judge Advocate having read the order concerning the court.
The court was then duly sworn according to law by the Judge Advocate,
and the Judge Advocate by the presiding officer of the court.

Acting Master J.K. Crosby was sworn as witness and according to law
to testify as follows:

Question by Judge Advocate: What is your name?

Answer: J.K. Crosby

Q: What is your rank?

A: Acting Master, USN

Q: State what you know in regard to the loss of the USS Harvest Moon.

A: On the morning of the first of March, 1865 the USS Harvest Moon, under my command was laying at anchor at Winyah Bay, SC, and bearing the flag of Rear Admiral Dahlgren, near and abreast of Battery White. I got underweigh at 7:15 AM in obedience to the Admirals orders and proceeded down the bay through Marsh Channel, having on board as pilots W.T. Uptegrove and W.S. Nany when about two miles from Battery White bearing NNW at 7:15 AM I heard a heavy explosion aft followed by a loud crash. At this time I was standing in the Pilot House. I immediately jumped out of the pilot and ran aft to see what the matter was, and as I was going aft I saw that the ship was sinking very rapidly and immediately gave orders to call away all boats and on making an examination I found a large hole, 10 by 12 feet square, stove through to the main deck fifteen to twenty feet aft of the shaft on the starboard side, caused I supposed by running on to an iron Rebel torpedo, and exploding under her bottom. Depth of water alongside where the ship sank, fifteen feet. I had no idea that there were any torpedoes in the channel.

Q: How long from the time of the explosion did it take for the vessel to sink?

A: Not over two minutes and one half.

Q: What was her draft when you got underweigh from Battery White?

A: Seven feet 10 inches

Q: At what speed were you running?

A: At about six and one half knots. The tide was at the first of the flood.

Q: What part of the vessel was above water after she sank?

A: The spar and hurricane deck was above water, and the gun deck one foot under water.

The testimony was read over to the witness and pronounced by him correct. The court having no more questions to ask, he was allowed to retire.

W.H. Bullis was then called as witness, and then being duly sworn,

testified as follows.

Question by Judge Advocate: What is your name?

Answer: William H. Bullis

Q: What is your rank?

A: Acting Ensign, US Navy

Q: State what you know in regard to the sinking of the USS Harvest Moon.

A: On the morning of March 1st, 1865, the US Steamer Harvest Moon was lying off Battery White, in Winyah Bay, SC. I received orders through the pilot to get underway. I got underway and asked the pilot where he was going. He said he did not know. We had been underway about 20 minutes standing down the river when I heard an explosion and felt a shock. Seeing her smokestack shake, I supposed her boiler had exploded. Upon going below, I found that a torpedo had exploded under her bottom on the starboard side aft, nearly under the ward room and steerage storerooms. The water was coming in rapidly, and the vessel sinking very fast. She sunk in about one and one half minutes from the time of the explosion, as near as I could judge. Nothing could have prevented her sinking. I know nothing about the channel through which we went, or whether it had been dragged for torpedoes or not, and did not anticipate coming in contact with any torpedoes. We were about 1000 yards from the eastern shore in about two and one half fathoms of water. Nearly half flood tide, the vessel going about six knots.

Q: What kind of a torpedo was it?

A: It was no-doubt a sunken torpedo, as I was looking out forward at the time, and had it been a floating one, I should have seen it.

Q: Do you know of any torpedo being found in the channel subsequent to the sinking of the Harvest Moon?

A: I do not.

Q: Was the channel dragged after the sinking of the Harvest Moon?

A: It was.

The testimony was read over to the witness and was pronounced by him correct. The court having no more questions to ask, He was allowed to retire.

W.J. Uptergrove was then called as witness and being duly sworn according to law testified as follows:

Question by Judge Advocate: What is your Name?

Answer: William J. L. Uptergrove.

Q: What is your Rank?

A: 2nd Class Pilot, US Navy

Q: State what you know in regard to the sinking of the USS Harvest Moon.

A: On the first of March, 1865, While the Harvest Moon was at anchor in Winyah Bay off Battery White, I was ordered by Fleet Captain Joseph M. Bradford to get the vessel underweigh and take her out to sea. I got underweigh at about 7:00 AM and stood down the Marsh Channel. I was forward and in the best position for conning the vessel. In about half an hour, while in the Marsh Channel, the vessel ran on a sunken torpedo, which exploded under her bottom just aft the wheel on the starboard side, the ship being in the deepest water in the channel. I took the Marsh Channel, it being the shortest way to sea, as I supposed the Admiral was in haste to get to Charleston. I did not expect to run over any torpedoes because I heard that the channel had been partly dragged for torpedoes by the USS Mingoe and I had previously passed down the same channel in the USS Wando. As soon as the explosion took place, the engine was stopped as I supposed to pick up a man that was overboard. The vessel sank in about four minutes in two and a half fathoms of water.

The testimony was read over to the witness and pronounced by him correct. The court having no more questions to ask, he was allowed to retire.

James A. Miller, was then called as witness, and being duly sworn testified as follows:

Question by Judge Advocate: What is your name?

Answer: James A. Miller

Q: What is your rank?

A: Acting 2nd Asst. Engineer, U.S. Navy

Q: State what you know in regard to the sinking of the USS Harvest Moon.

A: On the morning of March 1st ,1865, at about 20 minutes to 8 o'clock, I was in my room on board the Harvest Moon dressing myself. I opened my door to speak to the Paymaster and at that moment, I experienced a shock and saw a column of water and smoke passing up through the deck some 14 feet from where I stood. My first impression

was that a shell had exploded and I thought so until I reached the deck. I proceeded immediately to the engine room, and found the engine stopped. Upon subsequent inquiry, I ascertained that the engine made 5 or 6 revolutions after the explosion took place. It could not have been more than three or four minutes from the time of the explosion that I was informed by the man stationed at the lead that the vessel was on the bottom.

Q: Could this explosion have originated from any powder on board the vessel?

A: It could not.

The testimony was read to witness and pronounced by him correct. The court having no more questions to ask, the witness was allowed to retire.

Alna N. Bates was then called as witness and being duly sworn, testified as follows:

Question by Judge Advocate: What is your name?

Answer: Alna N. Bates

Q: What is your rank?

A: Acting Ensign, US Navy

Q. State what you know in regards to the sinking of the Harvest Moon.

A: On the morning, first March 1865 the Harvest Moon was laying at anchor, off Battery White, Winyah Bay, SC. I was Officer of the Deck from 4 to 8 AM. We got underweigh at about 7:00 and proceeded down the bay through Marsh Channel. When we were about 3 miles from the fort, the vessel struck a torpedo. I was standing on the forward part of the spar deck, near the man at the lead. I at first thought that the vessel struck a snag, as I felt a shock but did not hear any report. I went aft on the gun deck and saw a large hole through the starboard side of the deck, and the guards badly shattered. It being some distance from the magazines and shell rooms, I at once thought that a torpedo had exploded on the vessels bottom. The vessel sank in about one and a half minutes.

The testimony having been read to witness and pronounced by him correct, the court having no more questions to ask, the witness was allowed to retire.

F.W. Racoe was then called as witness, and being sworn, testified as follows.

Question by Judge Advocate: What is your name?

Answer: Fred W. Racoe

Q: What is your rank?

A: Acting 3rd Asst. Engineer, USN

Q: State what you know in regard to the sinking of the Harvest Moon.

A: I was on watch in the engine room of the Harvest Moon on the morning of the first of March, 1865. At one half past seven AM the vessel got underweigh and proceeded down Winyah Bay through Marsh Channel. At one half to eight I heard an explosion and felt a shock. I supposed it to have been done by a torpedo. In about 2 minutes the fireroom was full of water and the fires all out in the furnace. But it was only one half a minute from the time of the explosion that the fires were extinguished and the engine stopped.

The testimony having been read over to the witness and pronounced by him correct, the court having no more questions to ask, the witness was allowed to retire.

James Cluney was then called as witness, and being duly sworn, testified as follows:

Question by Judge Advocate: What is your name?

Answer: James Cluney

Q: What is your station?

A: Coxswain on board Harvest Moon.

Q: State what you know in regards to the sinking of the Harvest Moon.

A: I was in the starboard chains just forward of the wheel when the Harvest Moon got underweigh in the morning of the first of march, 1865, at one half past 6. About one half past 7, I saw the guards just aft of the wheel fly out in pieces and heard a dull explosion. The Captain came out of the pilot house and asked what the matter was and I told him that the vessel was struck by a torpedo. In about two minutes from the time of the explosion the vessel was on the bottom in two and one half fathoms of water.

The testimony having been read to the witness and pronounced by him correct, and the court having no more questions to ask, he was allowed to retire.

Patrick McGrath was then called as witness, and having duly sworn, testified as follows:

Question by Judge Advocate: What is your name?

Answer: Patrick McGrath

Q: What is your station?

A: Landsman, USN

Q: State what you know about the sinking of the Harvest Moon.

A: On the morning of March 1, 1865 at one quarter to eight AM I stood aft washing down the deck in front of the wardroom of the USS Harvest Moon. I was over on the starboard side of the ship when I was suddenly thrown overboard. I heard a report and thought that a gun in the gangway had burst. I was picked up by the US Tug Clover and told that the Harvest Moon had been sunk by a torpedo.

The testimony having been read over to the witness was pronounced by him correct. The court having no more questions to ask, the witness was allowed to retire.

There being no more required evidence the court, after due consideration, report the following facts:

That the USS Harvest Moon, having the flag of Rear Admiral John Dahlgren was accidentally sunk by a torpedo placed in the Marsh Channel, Winyah Bay, South Carolina, on the first day of March 1865.

That we fully and entirely exculpate from blame all on board said vessel at the time of the catastrophe there being no possible chance under the circumstances shown in the testimony of saving the vessel or preventing her from sinking.

S. R. Quackenbush, Lieut. Commander

W. H. Dana, Lieut. Commander

J. W. Congdon, Acting Master

Charles A. Cable, Judge Advocate

Thus the Harvest Moon has rested for almost a century, with her uppermost deck under three to six feet of mud, and her stack thrust from the shallow but concealing waters of Winyah Bay. Many people have passed and pointed her out during those one hundred years but only recently has this page from the old Navy been turned for re-examination.

In the fall of 1963, a field unit from the New England Naval and Maritime Museum , Newport, Rhode Island , visited the Harvest Moon and began an investigation that has aroused curiosity - but not capital - throughout South Carolina. The findings of the Newport group have been optimistic. Initial studies indicate that the Harvest Moon lies extraordinarily well preserved on the bottom of Winyah Bay. A group of Georgetown residents have formed the Southern Explorations Association, which has been chartered by the state, and whose primary mission is the salvaging and restoration of the old gunboat as a tourist attraction. Talk of raising and refurbishing Admiral Dahlgren's blockade flagship has brought her to the attention of present -day sailors, whose interest in missiles and nuclear warships long ago displaced any reminders of the Harvest Moon.

The final release of the wooden warship came on 18 February 1964, when Assistant Secretary of the Navy Kenneth E. BeLieu signed the formal abandonment document. Thus, after 99 years on the bottom of the Bay, the Harvest Moon left the service of the U.S. Navy and became available for private salvage. To date, she remains unclaimed. Abandonment of the gunboat by the Navy was followed closely by abandonment of plans by the Georgetown group to salvage her, due to lack of financial backing. (The salvage and restoration of another Civil War torpedo - destroyed gunboat, Cairo, from Mississippi's Yazoo River was estimated to cost from three to five hundred thousand dollars.)

Whether the Harvest Moon will rise again to serve the South is not known, but one thing is certain: As a representative of the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron, she belongs to an era that saw the U.S. Navy begin an ascension which has placed this nation at the pinnacle of sea power. The Harvest Moon remains a tribute to that era.