

The chief engineer of the *Merrimac*, Mr. H. Ashton Ramsay, had been a shipmate with me in the last cruise of the *Merrimac* in the Pacific. He was then a passed assistant engineer. He knew the engines well, and I doubt if another man in the Confederate Navy could have gotten as much out of them as he did. He deserved all the credit Admiral Buchanan afterwards gave him. The draft of water of the *Merrimac* upon her first appearance in Hampton Roads was about 21½ feet. After she was docked on the 9th of March and more iron put on, she drew about one foot more. When she went down to the Roads on the 8th of March she steamed about seven knots an hour. Ramsay and I agreed that she steamed quite as well as when we made our cruise in her. After docking, her speed was reduced about one knot per hour. She carried a full complement of officers and 320 men—among the latter were not many regular man-of-war's men. She was christened the *Virginia* by the Confederate authorities and was officially known by that name; but I shall continue to call her by the name which has become historical.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

THE FEDERAL SHIPS IN HAMPTON ROADS—THE "MERRIMAC" AND HER CONSORTS LEAVE NORFOLK—THE BATTLE OF HAMPTON ROADS—THE SINKING OF THE "CUMBERLAND"—ARRIVAL OF THE JAMES RIVER SQUADRON—THE BATTERIES AT NEWPORT'S NEWS—THE FRIGATES "MINNESOTA," "ROANOKE" AND "ST. LAWRENCE" COME UP FROM OLD POINT—THEY GET AGROUND—SURRENDER OF THE "CONGRESS"—FIRE FROM TROOPS ON SHORE—INCIDENTS OF THE BATTLE—THE FEDERAL LOSS—THE CONFEDERATE LOSS—THE RAM AND IRON-CLAD—CONFEDERATE GUNBOATS—SERVICES OF THE WOODEN VESSELS IN THIS BATTLE.

ABOUT the 6th of March, 1862, the *Merrimac* being ready to go out, the Norfolk papers published an article to the effect that she was a failure, and would not be able to accomplish anything. It was intended, of course, to deceive the enemy, who we knew regularly received our papers. The Federal squadron then in Hampton Roads, consisted of the following vessels, viz.: the *Congress* and *Cumberland*, lying off Newport's News; and the *Minnesota*, *Roanoke* and *St. Lawrence*, at anchor below Old Point. There were also at Old Point the store-ship *Brandywine*, the steamers *Mt. Vernon* and *Cambridge*, and a number of transports and tugs; these, however, took no part in the subsequent engagement. The *Congress* was a sailing frigate of 1867 tons, mounting 50 guns, principally 32-pounders, and a crew of 434 men; the *Cumberland* was a large corvette (a *raze*) of 1700 tons, mounting 22 nine-inch guns, and a crew of 376 men; the *Minnesota* was a steam frigate of 3200 tons, mounting 43 guns, of 9-inch and 11-inch calibre, and a crew of about 600 men. The *Roanoke* was similar to the *Minnesota*, and the *St. Lawrence* to the *Congress*.

Newport's News is 6½ miles from Old Point and 12 miles from Norfolk. It is on the left bank of the James river, and above Old Point. The enemy had a large number of guns

mounted there to protect the mouth of the river, and it had a large garrison. At Seawell's Point,  $3\frac{1}{2}$  miles from Old Point, the Confederates had a powerful battery to protect the entrance to the Elizabeth river. It also, in a measure, commanded the approach to Newport's News; but the main ship channel is at a distance of 2 or  $2\frac{1}{2}$  miles from it. At Seawell's Point was mounted the only 11-inch gun we had in the Confederacy.

Everything being ready, it was determined by Commodore Buchanan to make the attack on the 8th of March. The night before, he sent for me and gave me my final orders. The last change made in our signal-books was that if the Commodore's flag was hoisted under number "one," it meant "sink before you surrender." Mr. Hopkins, who had formerly been my pilot, came on board the *Beaufort* as a volunteer, and Midshipman Ivy Foreman, of North Carolina, reported to me as volunteer aid. They both rendered excellent service the next day.

At 11 A. M., March 8, 1862, the signal was made to sail, and the *Beaufort* cast off from the wharf in company with the *Merrimac* and *Raleigh*, and stood down the harbor. The weather was fair, the wind light, and the tide half flood; the moon was nine days' old. Nearly every man, woman and child in the two cities of Norfolk and Portsmouth were at the same time on their way to Seawell's Point, Craney Island and other points, where they could see the great naval combat which they knew was at last to take place. Some went by land, others by water. All the batteries were manned; all work was suspended in public and private yards, and those who were forced to remain behind were offering up prayers for our success. A great stillness came over the land.

Flag Officer Forrest who commanded the station, accompanied by all the officers of the navy yard went down with us in the *Harmony* as far as Craney island,  $4\frac{1}{2}$  miles below Norfolk. Everything that would float, from the army tug-boat to the oysterman's skiff, was on its way down to the same point loaded to the water's edge with spectators. As we steamed down the harbor we were saluted by the waving of caps and

handkerchiefs; but no voice broke the silence of the scene; all hearts were too full for utterance; an attempt at cheering would have ended in tears, for all realized the fact that here was to be tried the great experiment of the ram and iron-clad in naval warfare. There were many who thought that as soon as the *Merrimac* rammed a vessel she would sink with all hands enclosed in an iron-plated coffin. The least moved of all, were those who were about to do battle for the "Cause" they believed in. On board the *Merrimac* the officers and men were coolly employed in the multifarious duties that devolved upon them, while the men of the *Beaufort* and *Raleigh* were going into battle with the same careless *insouciance* they had exhibited in the battles of Roanoke island and Elizabeth City.

The James river squadron, consisting of the *Patrick Henry*, *Jamestown* and *Teaser*, under the command of Captain Tucker, had been previously notified by Commodore Buchanan that the *Merrimac* would go out on the 8th, and Tucker was directed to come down the river as close to Newport's News as he deemed prudent, so as to be ready to dash by the batteries and join our division when the action commenced. The commodore could not have given the order to a better man—eager to engage the enemy, Tucker, the most chivalric and bravest of men, ably seconded by his gallant captains, Nicholas Barney, Webb, and Rochelle, was only too ready to fly the Confederate flag in Hampton Roads. At daylight that morning he was at anchor off Smithfield Point—some ten miles above Newport's News—and in full view of the enemy, as afterwards reported by Lieutenant George Morris who, in the absence of her commander, fought the *Cumberland*. As we got down towards the mouth of the Elizabeth river, about 12.30 P. M., the *Beaufort* took a line from the port bow of the *Merrimac* to assist her in steering—being very near the bottom she steered very badly. Mr. Cunningham, one of her pilots, came on board at the same time by order of Commodore Buchanan. This gave the *Beaufort* three pilots; the *Merrimac* remained with three, and the *Ral-*

*eigh* with one. We turned up the James river. The *Congress* and *Cumberland* were lying off Newport's News and were riding to the last of the flood tide. They had their "washed clothes" up at the time we saw them, I remember, which shows how entirely unexpected our appearance was—in fact the captain of the *Cumberland*, Commander William C. Radford, was at this time on board the frigate *Roanoke* below Old Point attending a court-martial. Lieutenant George Morris was left in command, and the ship could not have been better fought by any officer of the U. S. navy.

The *Cumberland* was lying at anchor just above Newport's News, and the *Congress* abreast the Point. As soon as our vessels turned up the James river the enemy saw that our attack would be made upon the frigates, lying off Newport's News, and the two ships there commenced getting ready to receive it.

At 1.30 P. M. we cast off the line from the *Merrimac*, and all three vessels steamed for the enemy, the *Beaufort* maintaining her position on the port bow of the *Merrimac*; and exactly at 2 P. M. we fired the first gun of the day, and at the same time hoisted the battle flag we had used at Roanoke island at the mast-head. This flag resembled the French flag—it was, I think, the colors reversed. It was devised by Commodore Lynch and was used by his squadron. I had not thought of referring the matter to Commodore Buchanan; but I determined to hoist it "for luck," and I will not deny that I had some superstition in connection with it. The men were all for hoisting it, and that decided me. I do not wonder that Captain Marston of the *Roanoke* said in his report: "It was the impression of some of my officers that the rebels hoisted the French flag."

The *Merrimac* now hoisted the signal, "close action," and from that time until the surrender of the *Congress* she made no signal, nor did she answer one. I mention this particularly as it caused me to consider that I must use my own judgment during the battle—only recollecting to obey the signal for close

action—and I know that other officers commanding gunboats thought as I did.

The fire of the *Cumberland* on the *Merrimac* was so heavy while it lasted that it was impossible for a man to stand on her upper deck and live—so perhaps was the fire of the *Congress*. I only mention the fact stated; and I have no recollection of seeing a man on the deck of the *Merrimac* from the beginning of the fight until after the *Congress* surrendered. During the afternoon, in the heat of the action, the *Raleigh* came alongside me and her commander, Lieutenant Alexander, told me the carriage of his gun was disabled and he could not fire a shot. He said he could not get his signals answered by the *Merrimac*, and wanted to know what he should do. I directed him to return to Norfolk. This is in corroboration of what I have said above. Fortunately Alexander repaired the damage and did not have to leave the fight.

As we approached the enemy, firing and receiving their fire, the *Merrimac* passed the *Congress* and made for the *Cumberland*—which vessel was either just turning to the ebb tide, or had her broadside sprung across the channel. The *Beaufort* and *Raleigh* engaged the *Congress* and shore batteries, and the firing became fast and furious. I took up a position on the port quarter of the *Congress* and used the rifled gun with effect. The *Merrimac* rammed the *Cumberland*, striking her just forward of the starboard fore channel—firing and receiving a heavy fire in return—and stove her bow in so completely that she at once commenced to go down. As she took the bottom she turned over on her beam-ends. She made a gallant defence, her crew fighting their guns to the last, and went down with her colors flying. This was at 2.40 P. M. precisely. Boats went off from Newport's News to save the drowning men. The *Merrimac* reversed her engines immediately upon ramming the *Cumberland*, and had some difficulty in extricating herself—indeed her bow sunk several feet. When free, she proceeded a short distance up the river to turn round, having done which she stood for the *Congress*.

As soon as the *Congress* observed the fate of her consort she slipped her cable, set her fore-topsail flying, and with the assistance of a tug, ran on shore below Newport's News. At this time I observed the James river squadron coming gallantly into action; they were under a very heavy fire while passing the Newport's News batteries, but got by without receiving much damage. All of our vessels now directed their fire upon the *Congress*. I took up a position on her starboard quarter and kept it until she surrendered. The fire on this unfortunate ship was perfectly terrific. She returned it with alacrity, principally from her stern guns, and was assisted by the batteries on shore.

We saw now the frigates *Minnesota*, *Roanoke* and *St. Lawrence* coming up from Old Point to the assistance of the *Congress*, towed by powerful tugs. They were under a heavy fire from the batteries on Seawell's Point as they passed, and received some damage. The *Minnesota* received a rifle-shot through her mainmast, "crippling it," according to her captain's report. Strange to say all three of these vessels ran aground; the *Minnesota* about one and a half miles below Newport's News, the *St. Lawrence* farther down, and the *Roanoke* below her again. The *Minnesota* was near enough to take part in the engagement and the *St. Lawrence* fired a few broadsides. The *Roanoke* and *St. Lawrence* were soon pulled off by the tugs and made the best of their way back to Old Point. They took no farther part in the battle. The *Minnesota* remained aground. The *Congress* made a gallant defence and did not surrender until one hour and twenty minutes after the sinking of the *Cumberland*. Her decks were running with blood, and she bore the brunt of the day. At 4 o'clock she hoisted a large white flag at her mainmast head, and as it went up, Midshipman Mallory in charge of our bow-gun, waved his cap and exclaimed: "I'll swear on the Bible that we fired the last gun!" So the *Beaufort* fired the first and last gun in this memorable battle. When I saw the white flag I immediately lowered a boat, and sent Midshipmen Mallory

and Foreman with a boat's crew of three men to take possession of the prize and bring her commander on board the *Beaufort*. As the boat approached the *Congress* a marine at the gangway levelled his piece, and threatened to fire; but Mallory told him he was ordered to board the vessel, and was "bound to do it," and pulled alongside. He and his companions got on board, and Midshipman Foreman hauled down the colors and brought them to me.

The firing having ceased, the *Merrimac* signalled me to come within hail, which I did. Commodore Buchanan then ordered me to "go alongside the *Congress*, to take the officers and wounded men prisoners, to permit the others to escape to the shore, and then to burn the ship." I went alongside her in the *Beaufort*, at the port gangway, and sent an officer to direct her commander to come to me, at the same time sending my men aboard to help to get the wounded men to the *Beaufort*. I did not think it proper to leave my vessel myself as I had but two young and inexperienced midshipmen with me, and I saw an enemy's gunboat not very far off. In a few minutes Lieutenant Austin Pendergrast came down the side of the *Congress* accompanied by an officer whom I took to be the purser or surgeon of the ship. It proved to be Captain William Smith who had been in command until a few days before, when he had been relieved by Lieutenant Joseph B. Smith. Lieutenant Smith was killed in the action, which left Pendergrast in command. Captain Smith was acting as a volunteer; but this I learned afterwards. These two officers landed on the hurricane deck of the *Beaufort* where I was standing, and surrendered the ship. As they were without side-arms I thought it proper to request them to return to their ship and get them. This they did, though Pendergrast delivered to me a ship's cutlass instead of the regulation sword. I now told Pendergrast my orders and asked him to get his officers and wounded men on board as quickly as possible as I wanted to burn the ship. He said there were 60 wounded men on board the frigate and begged me not to burn the vessel. I told him my orders were per-

empty. While we were engaged in this conversation the wounded men were being lowered into the *Beaufort*, and just then the *Raleigh* came alongside me. Lieutenant Tayloe came on board and said Captain Alexander had sent him to me for orders. I directed him to take the *Raleigh* to the starboard side of the *Congress* and assist in getting off the wounded men. I had scarcely given him the order when a tremendous fire was opened on us from the shore by a regiment of soldiers—Medical Director Shippen says it was the 20th Indiana. The firing was from artillery as well as small arms. At the first discharge every man on the deck of the *Beaufort*—save Captain Smith and Lieutenant Pendergrast—was either killed or wounded. Four bullets passed through my clothing; one of which carried off my cap cover and eye glass, and another slightly wounded me in the left knee, precisely in the spot where my friend Fauntleroy had accidentally wounded me at the siege of Vera Cruz. Lieutenant Pendergrast now begged me to hoist the white flag, saying that all his wounded men would be killed. I called his attention to the fact that they were firing on the white flag which was flying at his mainmast head directly over our heads. I said I would not hoist it on the *Beaufort*; in fact I did not feel authorized to do so without consulting Commodore Buchanan. I said: "Tell your men to stop firing;" he replied: "They are a lot of volunteers and I have no control over them." This was evident. The lieutenant then requested permission to go on board the *Congress* with Captain Smith and assist in getting the wounded down. This I assented to; in the first place, I was glad to have their assistance; and secondly, I would not have been willing to confine them in my cabin at a time when the bullets were going through it like hail—humanity forbade it; I would not have put a dog there.

I now blew the steam-whistle, and my men came tumbling on board. The fire of the enemy still continuing from the shore, I cast off from the *Congress* and steamed ahead so that I could bring my bow gun to bear. I had no idea of being

fired at any longer without returning it, and we had several deaths to avenge. We opened fire, but could make little impression with our single gun upon the large number of men firing from intrenchments on shore. The sides and masts of the *Beaufort* looked like the top of a pepper-box from the bullets, which went in one side and out at the other. Being much encumbered with the prisoners, five of whom were wounded, and having no medical officer on board, I ran alongside the steamer *Harmony* and delivered them to Flag Officer Forrest. They consisted of Master's Mate Peter Hargous and 25 men. We then steamed immediately back and joined the other vessels in the attack on the *Minnesota*, which vessel was still on shore. The air seemed to be full of shot and shell from this time till some time between 7 and 8 P. M., when we hauled off in obedience to signal, and anchored between Seawell's Point and Craney island. Dr. Herbert Nash kindly came off from the latter post and attended to the wants of the wounded on the *Beaufort*.

At midnight the *Congress* blew up. According to the report of Lieutenant Pendergrast she had been on fire from the beginning of the action; and Medical Director Shippen, who from his station would be likely to know, says: "We were on fire in the sick-bay, in the main-hold, and under the ward-room near the after-magazine. Some of these fires were extinguished, but the most dangerous one, that near the after-magazine, was never extinguished, and was the cause of the explosion, which, during the following night, blew the ship to pieces."

The results of this day's operations were the total destruction of the frigate *Congress* and corvette *Cumberland*, and the partial crippling of the frigate *Minnesota*. The loss in killed and drowned on board the *Cumberland*, as reported by her commander, was 121; and the surgeon reports 14 wounded, which makes 135 casualties. I find it difficult to ascertain from Lieutenant Pendergrast's report how many men the *Congress* lost in all. He gives the total number of killed and missing as 136; he then deducts 26 wounded, taken on shore,

which leaves 110. If there were 60 wounded men when I went alongside, as he said (and this number was certainly not exaggerated), and if he sent 26 on shore, these, with the 5 I had, would account for 31; which leaves 29 unaccounted for, or still on board; and there is reason to fear that some wounded men were left on board to be consumed by the flames, who would have been taken off by the *Beaufort* and *Raleigh*, under the flag of truce, had they not been fired upon by the troops on shore. The fire of these troops killed their own wounded men as they were being lowered over the side, and rendered it impossible for us to continue the work. The *Raleigh* did not take a man on board from the *Congress*. The *Minnesota* lost 3 killed and 16 wounded, and there were some casualties reported among the other vessels. From what I can gather, I think the loss in the Federal fleet in killed, drowned, wounded and missing amounted to nearly 400 men.

On our side the *Merrimac* lost 21 in killed and wounded; the *Patrick Henry*, 14; the *Beaufort*, 8; the *Raleigh* had Lieutenant Tayloe and Midshipman Hutter killed, how many men I do not know; nor have I any information as to the number of killed and wounded in the *Teaser*. The *Jamestown* had no casualties. Our total loss, however, did not exceed 60. On the *Merrimac*, Commodore Buchanan and his flag lieutenant, Robert D. Minor, were wounded. Captain Webb, of the *Teaser*, and Alexander of the *Raleigh*, received slight wounds, but not enough to disable them. Lieutenant Tayloe and Midshipman Hutter fell at the first murderous discharge from the shore, while the *Raleigh* lay alongside me; in fact, I had just assisted Mr. Tayloe to step over to the hurricane deck of the *Raleigh*, after giving him his orders, when he was shot. They were both killed under the flag of truce. Their loss was deeply felt by their comrades. Young and full of promise, it did indeed seem hard that they should fall at the end of a battle in which they had rendered such gallant service. Commodore Buchanan and Lieutenant Minor were sent to the Naval Hospital at Norfolk on the morning of the 9th, and the command of the squadron

devolved upon Captain John R. Tucker, of the *Patrick Henry*. He did not leave his own vessel, however, and Lieutenant Catesby Ap. R. Jones succeeded to the command of the *Merrimac*.

The result of this day's battle—which was to revolutionize the navies of the world, as showing the power of the ram and iron-clad—has immortalized the name of the *Merrimac*; this all will concede. But in all descriptions of this battle the *Merrimac* has so completely overshadowed her consorts that if they are alluded to at all it is in a light way; and the gunboats are frequently denominated tugs. Indeed the people on both sides formed such extravagant notions concerning the *Merrimac* that they seemed to think that from that time forward a gun could do no damage unless mounted upon an iron-clad vessel. The Confederate accounts of the battle were full of the *Merrimac*, the fire from her guns, etc.—and but little was said of the smaller vessels whose fire was equally effective. Justice to those who served in these vessels and especially to those who died upon their decks, requires that I should establish this fact. As Campbell sings:

“And yet, amidst this joy and uproar,  
Let us think of them that sleep,  
Full many a fathom deep,  
By thy cold and stormy steep, Elsinore,”

premising that it is difficult to make anyone at the present day understand what absurd and ridiculous men-of-war our gunboats really were. The magazine and boiler being above the water-line, and the hull of one-fourth inch iron, or one inch planking, a man serving in one of them stood a chance of death in four forms: he could be killed by the enemy's shot, (this was the legitimate form); he could be drowned by his vessel being sunk, (this might also be called a legitimate form); he could be blown up by a shot exploding the magazine, or he could be scalded to death by a shot passing through the boiler—the last two methods I always considered unlawful, and (strange as it may appear) strongly objected to!

To prove the services of the wooden vessels in the battle of Hampton Roads I shall quote only the Federal accounts. The italics are mine. The Secretary of the Navy, Hon. Gideon Welles, in his report of 1862 says: "Having thus destroyed the *Cumberland*, the *Merrimac* turned again upon the *Congress*, which had in the meantime been engaged with the smaller rebel steamers [the *Beaufort* and *Raleigh*,] and after a heavy loss, in order to guard against such a fate as that which had befallen the *Cumberland*, had been run aground. The *Merrimac* now selected a raking position astern of the *Congress*, while one of the smaller steamers poured in a constant fire on her starboard quarter. Two other steamers of the enemy also approached from James river firing upon the unfortunate frigate with precision and severe effect." The *Minnesota*, which had also got aground in the shallow waters of the channel, became the special object of attack, and the *Merrimac* with the *Yorktown* and *Jamestown* bore down upon her. The *Merrimac* drew too much water to approach very near; her fire was not therefore particularly effective. The other steamers selected their positions, fired with much accuracy, and caused considerable damage to the *Minnesota*." Captain G. Van Brunt who commanded the *Minnesota* corroborates the above. Lieutenant Pendergrast who commanded the *Congress* in his report says: "After passing the *Congress*, she (the *Merrimac*) ran into and sank the United States sloop-of-war *Cumberland*. The smaller vessels then attacked us killing and wounding many of our crew. At 3.30 the *Merrimac* took a position astern of us at a distance of about 150 yards and raked us fore and aft with shells, while one of the smaller steamers kept up a fire on our starboard quarter. In the meantime the *Patrick Henry* and *Thomas Jefferson*, rebel steamers, approached us from up the James river firing with precision and doing us great damage."

I think I have quoted enough to show that the wooden vessels bore an important part in this battle, and will only add that when Midshipman Mallory first boarded the *Congress*, Lieutenant

Pendergrast asked him the name of my vessel and said that a shot from her went into the starboard quarter of the *Congress* and, traversing the whole length of the gun deck, went out of the port bow. We took from the *Congress* 16 navy revolvers, 8 Minie rifles, 20 Sharp's rifles, and 10 cutlasses, which I believe is about all that was saved from her by either side. And here I will stop to say that we made a mistake in not trying to get the *Congress* afloat and towing her up to Norfolk. I thought of doing it at the time the *Raleigh* came to me; but my orders to burn her were imperative and I did not feel at liberty to try it. She went on shore at half tide and I think could have been pulled off at the next high water.

We had to regret the loss of Jack Robinson, the captain of our gun. Poor fellow! he was faithful to the last. When I first sent my men on board the *Congress* to assist the wounded, I saw him standing, with his arms folded, at the breech of his gun, and demanded to know why he had not obeyed the order. "Why captain," said he, pointing to a gunboat near by, "they can come and take you while we are gone." "Never mind that," said I, "I want your help here." He went, and I observed soon returned and took up his former position. He was killed at the first fire from the shore by a rifle ball passing through his body. In getting him below he suffered so much I had him taken to the cabin and laid upon my bed. We had no surgeon or medical stores, but that did not matter in his case as his wound was mortal. After the battle I went to see him and asked him what I could do for him. He said he would like a cup of tea and a pair of clean socks, which were given him. He died at 8 o'clock, quietly and resignedly; not the first sailor I have seen die in the same way.

"Yet, though the worms gnaw his timbers and his vessel's a wreck,  
When he hears the Last Whistle, he'll spring up on deck."