

of him when he assumed the command, which he did on the 29th of March, 1862. His appointment gave great satisfaction to the entire squadron; and our damages being now repaired, we began to look forward to another trial of strength in Hampton Roads.

## CHAPTER XXV.

OUR PLAN FOR BOARDING AND SMOTHERING THE "MONITOR"—THE MERRIMAC" CHALLENGES THE "MONITOR" TO BATTLE—WE CAPTURE THREE VESSELS—OPERATIONS IN HAMPTON ROADS ON THE 11TH OF APRIL, 1862—REMARKS ON—THE "MERRIMAC" DRIVES THE VESSELS EMPLOYED IN BOMBARDING SEAWELL'S POINT UNDER THE GUNS OF FORT MONROE—THE "MONITOR" DECLINES TO FIGHT THE "MERRIMAC"—AM ORDERED TO COMMAND THE "DIXIE"—EVACUATION OF NORFOLK BY THE CONFEDERATES—COMMODORE JOHN RODGERS—HIS ATTACK ON DRURY'S BLUFF—BLOWING UP OF THE "MERRIMAC"—COMMODORE TATTNALL'S REPORT—REFLECTIONS ON THE DESTRUCTION OF THIS SHIP—PILOTS.

WE now knew something of the *Monitor's* construction, and it was determined that in the next engagement she should be boarded, and an attempt made to wedge the turret with iron wedges, to throw hand-grenades down the turret, and to cover her hatchways and ventilators in the hope of smothering out her crew. In order that the attempt should have every chance for success four gunboats, of which the *Beaufort* was one, were designated for it. Each vessel had her crew divided into the proper number of parties so that if even one got alongside, every point considered would receive proper attention. At a meeting of the captains the night before going down, it was resolved that in the case of a vessel's being sunk in trying to board, the others should not stop to pick up the survivors. Lieutenant Commanding J. H. Rochelle commanded one of these gunboats, and Lieutenant Commanding Hunter Davidson another—the other captain I cannot recall, unless it was Alexander of the *Raleigh*.

On the 11th of April, a little over a month after our first engagement, the squadron, consisting of the *Merrimac*, *Patrick*



*Henry, Jamestown, Teaser, Beaufort, and Raleigh*,—with the *Harmony* and another tug-boat,—went down again to Hampton Roads. In Norfolk the same scenes were enacted as on the previous occasion—everybody who could get a conveyance went to see the fight. In the squadron we expected a desperate encounter. We knew the Federal fleet had been largely reinforced. The *Vanderbilt*, a powerful steamship fitted expressly to ram the *Merrimac*, we expected to see; and also the *Naugatuck*, a small iron-clad mounting one large rifle gun. Upon our arrival in the Roads we saw the fleet at anchor below Old Point, with the exception of the *Naugatuck*, which vessel was lying, I think, in Hampton Creek. There were present the *Minnesota*, bearing the flag of Flag Officer Goldsborough, the *Monitor*, several large frigates, and a large number of smaller vessels and transports. The *Vanderbilt* was not present in the morning, but arrived that afternoon. We took possession of the roads, but, to our extreme surprise, the enemy showed no intention of coming up to engage us; the vessels had steam up, but made no movement towards us.

Three merchant vessels caught unexpectedly in the Roads between Old Point and Newport's News were run on shore by their masters and partially abandoned. The *Jamestown* and *Raleigh* were sent to tow them off, which service was handsomely accomplished by Captains Barney and Alexander under the guns of the enemy. Their flags were hoisted Union down under the Confederate flag, to taunt their protectors and induce them to come up and endeavor to retake them. It produced no effect. An English and a French man-of-war were present in the Roads, and upon our arrival they slowly withdrew in the direction of Newport's News out of range, to witness the serious engagement which we, at least, anticipated. We passed and repassed them frequently during the day, as we steamed about the Roads between Newport's News and Fortress Monroe, and their crews waved their hats and handkerchiefs to us, and no doubt would have added their cheers if discipline had permitted.

It was our impression that torpedoes had been placed in the channel between Old Point and the Rip Raps to prevent the *Merrimac* from getting to York river, the base of General McClellan's operations against Richmond. It was said in Norfolk just before we went down that a French naval officer had given this information. This I do not for a moment believe; but it was reasonable to suppose they would be put down, and when we saw that Flag Officer Goldsborough did not advance, we thought his intention was to draw us down on his obstructions. I know that Commodore Tattnall was under the impression the channel was in some way obstructed; but even if it had not been, fighting the Federal fleet in the waters of Hampton Roads was one thing, and fighting it close under the guns of Fortress Monroe and the Rip Raps, with the additional danger from torpedoes, was another. He fairly offered the first, which he had every reason to suppose would be eagerly accepted. The gallant commodore made a short address to his men that morning, and concluded by saying: "Now you go to your stations, and I'll go to mine;" whereupon he coolly seated himself in an arm-chair on the upper deck. Had the enemy given battle he would have soon seen the difference between the shooting of *Mexican* and American sailors.

The squadron held possession of the Roads and defied the enemy to battle during the entire day (and for several days after in fact); but the Federal fleet declined it, and maintained its position under the guns of Fortress Monroe. The *Merrimac* passed the day in slowly steaming backwards and forwards between Newport's News and Old Point. She reminded me of a huge *centipede* crawling about. She certainly did not present an inviting appearance. A little before sunset as she was slowly turning in the channel for the last time that day she fired a single shot in the direction of Fortress Monroe. It was promptly replied to by the *Naugatuck*. I have reason to recollect this shot from the *Naugatuck* for it was the first of the long-range guns I had seen. I was talking to Hunter Davidson who was near me in his vessel when we heard the



whistling of this shot which dropped in the water between us. Much surprised I sent for my chart and found the distance to be  $3\frac{1}{2}$  miles. Long range guns were then just coming into use, and caused Bill Arp afterwards to explain: "Blamed if they wasn't shooting at me before I knew they were in the county!"

At sunset the squadron went in under Seawell's Point. The *Merrimac* had permanent moorings placed there for her. Just before the signal was made to go in and anchor, John Downard who had succeeded Robinson as captain of our gun came to me on the part of the crew with the request that I would go to Newport's News and "give them a few rounds." "What for?" said I: "Why," he replied, "they killed Jack Robinson!" I should not have been sorry myself to give them a "few rounds" as he expressed it, but of course could not do so. As the *Monitor* did not come out we did not have the opportunity to board her with the gunboats. If her turret was not loop-holed for musketry, and I believe it was not, we would probably have captured her. Once on her deck the men could easily have avoided the fire of her two heavy guns by running around the turret, and a light sail thrown over it would have blinded her commander and helmsman. At all events we intended to try it. A few days after this the squadron returned to Norfolk; the *Merrimac* for repairs of which she stood in constant need either to her engines or hull. Captain Catesby Jones says "Commodore Tattnall commanded the *Virginia Merrimac* 45 days of which time there were only 13 days that she was not in dock or in the hands of the navy yard."

On the 8th of May, only two days before we evacuated Norfolk, while the *Merrimac* was at the navy yard Flag Officer Goldsborough took advantage of her absence to come above Old Point with the *Monitor* and a number of other vessels and bombard Seawell's Point. When the news was telegraphed to Norfolk the *Merrimac* cast off her fasts and steamed down the harbor. As soon as her smoke was seen the entire Federal fleet fled below Old Point again, and was pursued by the *Merrimac* until under

the guns of Fortress Monroe. There is no doubt about the truth of this.

If, as Flag Officer Goldsborough said in his report of this affair: "she (the *Merrimac*) did not place herself where she could be assailed by his rams to advantage," what did she go down for? Where could a vessel drawing 23 feet, as the *Merrimac* did then, place herself so that "the *Baltimore*, an unarmed steamer of light draft," could not get at her? The flag officer says (the italics are mine): "The *Monitor* was kept well in advance, and so that the *Merrimac* could have engaged her without difficulty had she been so disposed; but she declined to do it, and soon returned and anchored under Seawell's Point." Returned from where? How could she return and anchor under Seawell's Point, when the Federal fleet was bombarding Seawell's Point? Well may the German cynic exclaim:

"When first on earth fair Truth was born,  
She crept into a hunting-horn;  
The hunter came, the horn was blown,  
And where Truth went was never known!"

From the facts I have stated, it is clear that after the battle of the 9th of March the *Monitor* several times declined to fight the *Merrimac*, and only ventured above Old Point when she knew the *Merrimac* was at Norfolk. Upon the appearance of the latter in Hampton Roads she would retire under the guns of Fortress Monroe. I can find nothing in the Federal reports in relation to what I have said of the occurrence in the roads on the 11th of April. If Flag Officer Goldsborough made a report it has been suppressed: but as to the truth of my statement, I am willing to abide by the log-book of the *Minnesota* for that day, and the testimony of the officers of the *Monitor*. It is not my intention to cast any imputations upon Flag Officer Goldsborough and his gallant officers. I have been told since the war that the Government had given positive orders that the *Monitor* should not fight the *Merrimac* unless forced



to do so. I only mention what came under my own observation, not doubting that the orders issued by the Government were based upon good grounds.

On the 12th of April I was detached from the *Beaufort* and ordered to command the *Dixie*, a new vessel just built at Graves' ship-yard in Norfolk, and fitting out at the Navy Yard. She was a pretty model and I think would have been fast. Her sister ship, which was about in the same state of preparation, was commanded by Captain John Rutledge.

We commenced early in May to hear something of the probable evacuation of Norfolk. The *Patrick Henry*, *Jamestown*, *Teaser*, *Beaufort* and *Raleigh* were sent up the James river to operate on the right flank of General Magruder's army, then falling back in the direction of Richmond. The *Nansemond* and *Hampton*, two gunboats built at the navy yard, were completed at this time and sent to Richmond. These vessels had saw-mill engines, and when they got underweigh there was such a wheezing and blowing that one would have supposed all hands had suddenly been attacked with the asthma or heaves. They ran by the batteries at Newport's News however without waking the sentinels up. Rutledge and I did our best to get our vessels ready so that we might follow their example; but the engines were not prepared and there was nothing left at the yard to tow us up. While preparations were being made by the army to evacuate the city, the captain of a small steamer in the quartermaster's employ ran off with his vessel to Old Point and gave the information. This was on the 9th of May, and precipitated matters. I was staying on board the receiving ship *Germantown* at the time, and on the night of the 9th we heard firing. Some of the midshipmen went aloft into the main top and saw shells bursting in the direction of Willoughby's Point, about 7 miles distant. This was about 9 P. M., and I came to the conclusion that the enemy were shelling the beach preparatory to landing a force. I went to the house of Captain Sidney Smith Lee, then commanding the yard, to report the fact. I found him about retiring. He

said he did not think it probable; that he had heard nothing from General Huger, &c—he rather laughed at the idea. I left him about 11 o'clock, and so satisfied was I of a "call" that I threw myself on my bed without undressing. Sure enough at daybreak we were all called to the commandant's office and given our orders in reference to evacuating the navy yard. We set fire to the buildings and ships, and tried to blow up the dry dock; in fact destroyed everything we could. I set my vessel on fire with much regret; a few more days and she would have been ready to go to Richmond. We continued the work of destruction until we heard the Federal troops were in Norfolk, and then took our departure in the cars for Weldon where we arrived the same evening at 8 o'clock. I went to Henderson for a day or two, and then proceeded to Richmond, arriving there on the 15th—the day Commodore John Rodgers attacked the fort at Drury's bluff with the *Galena*, *Monitor*, *Naugatuck*, *Port Royal* and *Aroostook*, and was beaten off. The gallant commodore, who was noted for his fighting qualities, handled the *Galena* to perfection on this occasion, and I take pleasure in introducing a few extracts from the narrative of boatswain Hasker who commanded a gun at the fort:

"The attack upon Drury's Bluff (or Fort Darling, as the enemy called it,) was on the part of the *Galena*, I think one of the most masterly pieces of seamanship of the whole war. She was brought into action in the coolest manner; indeed, she was brought to, and sprung across the channel in a much more masterly way than I have often seen at mere target practice. She steamed up to within seven or eight hundred yards of the bluff, let go her starboard anchor, ran out the chains, put her head in shore, backed astern, let go her stream anchor from the starboard quarter, hove ahead, and made ready for action before firing a gun. I could not but admire this manœuvre although executed to bring death or wounds to so many of my brave comrades. A six-inch gun, 33 cwt. 32-pounder, [63 cwt. ?] which had been rifled and banded at



the Gosport Navy Yard, did more damage to the *Galena* than all the rest of the guns on the bluff combined. This gun was manned by the crew from the *Jamestown*."

Considering the result of Rodgers' attack on Fort Darling, and the fact that Richmond did not fall till two years later, one cannot but be amused at reading the following extract from Flag Officer Goldsborough's letter to the Secretary of the Navy, under date from Hampton Roads, May 12, 1863:

"The *Monitor* and *Stevens* have both gone up the James river, with orders from me to reduce all the works of the enemy as they go along, spike all their guns, blow up all their magazines, and then get up to Richmond, all with the least possible delay, and shell the city to a surrender. With the above works reduced, I can keep our vessels supplied with coal, ordnance stores, provisions, etc., without difficulty."

When David Copperfield gave a dinner, his landlady said "what she would recommend would be this: A pair of roast fowls—from the pastry-cook's; a dish of stewed beef—from the pastry-cook's; two little corner things—from the pastry-cook's; a tart and a shape of jelly—from the pastry-cook's." "This," Mrs. Crupp said, "would leave her at full liberty to concentrate her mind on the potatoes, and to serve up the cheese and celery as she could wish to see it done."

"Ay me! what perils do environ  
The man that meddles with cold iron."

On the 10th of May, (the day we evacuated Norfolk) the *Merrimac* was lying at her moorings off Seawell's Point, and Commodore Tattnall who had not expected the evacuation so soon was taken by surprise. Why he was not "signalled" I do not know. Observing that the flag was not flying at Seawell's Point battery he dispatched his Flag Lieutenant, Pembroke Jones, to Norfolk for news. Lieutenant Jones returned at 7 P. M. with the information that the city was in the possession of the enemy. In his report to the Secretary of the Navy, dated Richmond, May 14, 1862, the commodore, after mentioning this, goes on to say:

"It was now 7 o'clock in the evening, and this unexpected information rendered prompt measures necessary for the safety of the *Virginia*. The pilots had assured me that they could take the ship, with a draft of eighteen feet, to within forty miles of Richmond. This, the chief pilot Mr. Parrish, and his chief assistant, Mr. Wright, had asserted again and again; and on the afternoon of the 7th, in my cabin, in the presence of Commodore Hollins and Captain Sterrett, in reply to a question of mine, they both emphatically declared their ability do so. Confiding in these assurances, and after consulting with the First and Flag Lieutenants and learning that the officers generally thought it the most judicious course, I determined to lighten the ship at once and run up the river for the protection of Richmond. All hands having been called on deck, I stated to them the condition of things, and my hope that by getting up the river before the enemy could be made aware of our design we might capture his vessels which had ascended it, and render efficient aid in the defence of Richmond; but that to effect this would require all their energy in lightening the ship. They replied with three cheers, and went to work at once.

The pilots were on deck and heard this address to the crew. Being quite unwell, I had retired to bed. Between one and two o'clock in the morning the First Lieutenant reported to me that after the crew had worked for five or six hours and lifted the ship so as to render her unfit for action, the pilots had declared their inability to carry eighteen feet above the Jamestown flats, up to which point the shore on each side was occupied by the enemy. On demanding from the chief pilot, Mr. Parrish, an explanation of this palpable deception, he replied that eighteen feet could be carried after the prevalence of easterly winds, but that the wind for the last two days had been westerly. I had no time to lose. The ship was not in a condition for battle even with an enemy of equal force, and their force was overwhelming. I therefore determined with the concurrence of the First and Flag Lieutenants, to save



the crew for future service by landing them at Craney Island, the only road for retreat open to us, and to destroy the ship to prevent her falling into the hands of the enemy. I may add that, although not formally consulted, the course was approved by every commissioned officer in the ship. There was no dissenting opinion. The ship was accordingly put on shore as near the main land in the vicinity of Craney Island as possible and the crew landed. She was then fired, and after burning fiercely fore and aft for upwards of an hour, blew up a little before five on the morning of the 11th. We marched for Suffolk, 22 miles, and reached it in the evening, and from thence came by railroad to this city.

It will be asked what motive the pilots could have had to deceive me. The only imaginable one is, that they wished to avoid going into battle. Had the ship not been *lifted*, so as to render her unfit for action, a desperate contest must have ensued with a force against us too great to justify much hope of success; and, as battle is not their occupation, they adopted this deceitful course to avoid it. I cannot imagine another motive, for I had seen no reason to distrust their good faith to the Confederacy.

My acknowledgments are due to the First Lieutenant, Ap. Catesby Jones for his untiring exertions, and for the aid he rendered me in all things. The details for firing the ship and landing the crew were left to him, and everything was conducted with the most perfect order. To the other officers of the ship, generally, I am also thankful for the great zeal they displayed throughout. The *Virginia* no longer exists, but three hundred brave and skillful officers and seamen are saved to the Confederacy.

I presume that a court of inquiry will be ordered to examine all the circumstances I have mentioned, and I earnestly solicit it. Public opinion will never be put right without it."

I am, sir, with great respect, your obedient servant,

JOSIAH TATTNALL,

Flag Officer Commanding.

HON. S. R. MALLORY,

Secretary of the Navy.

The blowing up of the *Merrimac* caused a howl to go up from the whole Confederate States, and Commodore Tattnall had to bear the brunt of it. What the people expected her to do after the evacuation of Norfolk, God only knows; but her destruction dispirited our people from Virginia to Texas. Suppose the *Merrimac* had gone up the river to Harrison's bar, what could she have accomplished there? She certainly could not have prevented the enemy's ships from passing and repassing her at night. Our vessels used to run by the batteries at Newport's News without the least trouble, and they could bring many guns to bear, while the *Merrimac* had but five in broadside. The result so far as I can see would have been that in less than a month her boats would have been shot away by the enemy's ships at long range, and she would have found herself out of provisions; the banks of the river on both sides in possession of the enemy; iron-clads and gunboats above and below her; all communication cut off from Richmond,—she would have been in fact in the position of a besieged fortress. The alternative would then have been to surrender the ship, or blow her up with all hands on board. Some people said the latter should have been done; but I do not remember that we blew up any forts with their garrisons to prevent their falling into the hands of the enemy. The fact is the evacuation of Norfolk involved the ultimate loss of the *Merrimac*; because it cut her off from supplies of all kinds—ammunition as well as provisions. This point does not seem to have been properly appreciated by the Confederate authorities. It was only a question of time. Commodore Tattnall should have clearly presented this to the Secretary of the Navy, and made him assume the responsibility—perhaps he did represent it. The *Merrimac* might have gone to York river, and would doubtless have inflicted some damage there by destroying transports, &c.; but she had not men enough to attempt to land a force, and some cool head would soon have discovered that it was only necessary to knock away her boats and then keep out of her way and await the action of time.



This is the view I always took of this matter, and I remember when it was rumored Norfolk was to be evacuated I asked one of the commodore's advisers to suggest to him the propriety of his putting the question fairly to the Confederate Secretary of the Navy: "What am I to do with the *Merrimac*," and insisting upon a written reply. The crew of the *Merrimac* arrived at Drury's bluff in time to assist in the defence of Richmond on the 15th of May.

One important point I will allude to before closing this chapter, and that is that in our naval battles the commanding officers were in a measure in the hands of the pilots. On the ocean the captain handles his own ship and relies upon his own judgment; but it is far different when battles occur on sounds and rivers—there the pilot becomes an important agent. I suppose there was not a commander on either side who did not find himself crippled by his pilots at some time in his experience. When the *Minnesota* was aground the pilots could not place the *Merrimac* nearer than a mile from her. The *Minnesota*, too, drawing as much water as the *Merrimac*. Why if the *Minnesota* was a mile from the channel she must have been up among the sand hills on the main. When the *Minnesota*, *Roanoke* and *St. Lawrence* started to the assistance of their consorts they all three got aground. Who put them there? Immediately after the battle of Roanoke island where I had my first experience with pilots, I saw the necessity of taking some steps towards having an organized body of them attached to the navy. I called Mr. Mallory's attention to it, and proposed that pilots should be divided into two classes and given a commission if they desired it. Their pay was to be very large, and in the case of their being killed in action their widows were to receive a pension. We could hardly expect men who were receiving very moderate pay and for whose families no provision was made in case of their death to stand in the most exposed place in a ship in time of battle, as it was necessary for them to do if they did their duty well. My proposition was never acted upon. I do not mean to say

that the pilots did not do good service in the war afterwards. They did. I saw many of them who performed their duties well and bravely, notwithstanding their small pay. What I mean to say is that the southern pilots, as a class, were not properly fostered and cared for by their government.