

The Battle that Revolutionized Naval Warfare

In March, 1862, I was engaged in the signal service of the Confederate Army, being stationed at this time near the mouth of the James River.

The morning of March 8th broke clear and balmy, giving promise of the approaching spring. Hundreds of feathered songsters filled the air with their anthems of praise which were rudely interrupted by the barbaric rattle of the reveille from the forts across the river, which sounded to our ears as notes of defiance and a challenge to mortal combat. After a visit to the operator on duty to hear his report, I took a stroll along the beach. As I did so, a beautiful panorama opened before me, one in which woods, water and sky blended into shades of beauty and curves of grace. All nature seemed in a state of peaceful repose, and all animated beings were in harmony, save he that bore the image of his great Creator. The same sun that tipped with gold the distant church spires at Norfolk gilded the spars of the ships of war at Newport News - churches for the salvation of men and ships for the destruction of men. The incongruity of the situation was very impressive. Presently I was called to breakfast. With keen appetites we assembled around our rude camp table. How sumptuously we fared in those days, with fish and oysters to be had for the taking, and we had never felt the pangs of hunger. Many a jest and banter enlivened the occasion and little we reckoned of the future that awaited us.

Breakfast over, the usual routine of receiving and dispatching daily reports to and from headquarters of our military departments fully occupied our time until ten O'clock

when I had time to look around. The sun was oppressively warm and those of us off duty lounged about the station until about twelve o'clock when the man on watch called, "Flag up at Pig's Point!" "All right, go ahead!" was waved back and the Pig's Point operator, prefacing his message with F.F. (official), proceeded to inform the commanders of troops and the gunboats up the James River that the VIRGINIA (the name by which the Confederate ironclad was officially known, otherwise she was always called the MERRIMAC) would leave her dock at three P.M. and proceed to attack the Federal fleet at Newport News.

This message made a wonderful transformation in our feelings and action; languor gave place to expectancy and speculation as to the result of the coming conflict. The optimists prophesied the destruction of the enemy's fleet in Hampton Roads and hinted even the capture of Fortress Monroe by a joint attack of the Confederate land and naval forces. On the other hand, pessimists had in mind the "superior armaments of the enemy's ships and training of their seamen against the inferior ordnance and inexperienced crew of the MERRIMAC, which latter is, as we know, made up largely of volunteers from infantry regiments in the department who had never been on a ship until a short time back. Besides all these advantages possessed by the Federal vessels, they are supported by the formidable land batteries on shore."

So great was our interest in the coming event that even the dinner signal lost its charm for us and with reluctance we obeyed that call and got through the form of eating, what on other days would have been an appetizing meal.

As the hour of 2 P.M. approached the suspense intensified and speculation gave place to anxiety. I closely scrutinized the enemy's ships and garrison with my glass to

detect any knowledge on their side of the impending attack. Not a sign could I observe of any apprehension of danger. On board vessels and ashore unusual quiet and inactivity prevailed. Even the elements of air and water seemed to partake of the spirit of repose, the only exception visible being a fish hawk circling in mid-air in quest of its finny prey.

Our group off duty had become restless and walked anxiously up and down the riverbank with eyes and ears alert. A small dispatch boat was observed to leave Newport News and steam in the direction of Norfolk. After running some five or six miles in that direction she returned to Newport News. It was now evident that the enemy had their suspicions aroused, for the little steamer was again dispatched in the direction of Norfolk. It was just two o'clock and we began to think the MERRIMAC would not come out that day. Excitement began to give place to disappointment with us when "Look at the dispatch boat!" exclaimed someone, and turning I saw she was steaming back to Newport News with signal flags set.

The loud rattle of drums sounded, the long roll came across the river, and instantly the garrison was in a state of excitement. Troops hastily fell into line and the gun crews double-quickened to their batteries, while aboard the two frigates discipline order admitted of no bustle and confusion, yet the clearing away of their decks and running out of guns betokened the coming conflict. "Look! She is coming!" exclaimed the man on the lookout.

With my glass I scanned the mouth of the Elizabeth River and got my first sight of the MERRIMAC, and a queer looking craft she was. I saw her slowly feeling her way out of the mouth of the river, more like a monster turtle vomiting dense volumes of smoke than any vessel I had ever seen before. As soon as she reached the deep water in

Hampton Roads, she shaped her course for Newport News. A signal message from up the river now announced the descent of the Confederate fleet from Richmond and in a few minutes appeared the great high decked hulls of the JAMESTOWN and PATRICK HENRY, which, before, belonged to the Old Dominion Line of steamboats between Richmond and New York, but were now made to do duty as training ships. They were as ill suited for gunboats as the MERRIMAC would have been for a passenger ship.

They were accompanied by two little tugboats, each having a thirty-two pound cannon mounted on its forward deck. Our eyes again turned to the Confederate ironclad that, as if confident of her own prowess, steamed deliberately on her mission of destruction, and then to the decks of the two frigates that, like huge mastiffs, guarded the mouth of the James River. Here, too, was displayed an object lesson in dignity and calm fortitude born either of consciousness of ability to repel the coming foe or of willingness to die at the post of duty. True, their hulls were only of live oak, but they had the best of rifle cannon and were manned by skillful seamen and expert gunners, besides being backed by the batteries on shore as before stated.

As I weighed all these advantages possessed by the Federals, my heart sank with apprehension for the success of the bold adventure on the part of the Confederate commander. The tension of excitement was intensified at the sight of my first battle, in which our Southern flag flying at the flagstaff of the MERRIMAC was to be pitted against the Stars and Stripes of the Federals in a mortal combat which was opened by the guns of the frigates upon the advancing foe from whom no response was made. Silently and grimly she steamed nearer and nearer to her objective point of attack. The guns from the shore batteries now joined in the engagement and shot and shell ploughed up the

water all about the Southern vessel. A solid shot struck a flash of fire from her iron coat and glanced over her into the river. Now, for the first time, I breathed easier and became more hopeful of our success.

The Confederate boats above us dropped down the river and commenced to shell the enemy's encampments, but kept well out of range of the shore batteries, except the little tugs which, like fies dogs while the big dogs were fighting, slipped to shore, fired their guns regardless of the rain of balls, and ran out to load again. As the MERRIMAC neared the Federal vessels they fired broadside after broadside at her, but without apparent effect, for not even did they elicit a reply from the Southern vessel until within close quarters with the frigate CUMBERLAND. Then she fired a shot from her bow gun into the hull of the vessel and, regardless of the rain of balls concentrated upon her, swung around and with her submerged prow rammed the CUMBERLAND below the waterline on her port bow. With some difficulty she backed off, fired again into the CUMBERLAND and steamed for the CONGRESS only a short distance away. The latter, seeing the havoc played with her consort (I presumed) ran up a white flag at her peak. I turned my attention to the CUMBERLAND again and saw that she was "settling by the head". Though aware of the fact, her brave crew fired their guns to the last and when her bow was under water the heroes fired a shot from their stern gun and with colors flying went down to a watery grave.

This scene thrilled my boy's soul with the admiration and so engrossed my attention that upon looking up I discovered two lines of battleships had turned Newport News Point and seemed to be coming to take a hand in the contest. Upon nearer approach, one of them had a French flag flying at her peak. The other was the MINNESOTA, one of

the most powerful vessels in the Federal Navy, a twin sister of the MERRIMAC. The latter vessel, which, since the surrender of the CONGRESS, had been devoting her attention to the shore batteries, now discovered the approach of her new antagonist and steamed to engage her at close quarters. Evidently the commander of the MINNESOTA sought to avoid such an encounter by steaming into a position up the river inaccessible to the MERRIMAC. I suppose the weight of her armor caused a greater draught of water by her than the MINNESOTA carried. At any rate she steamed slowly to a position apparently half a mile from her new foe. Then, until twilight, a continuous duel was kept up between these two vessels in which I inferred the MINNESOTA was badly crippled.

The engagement was now apparently over and one of the Confederate wooden gunboats was dispatched to receive the surrender of the frigate CONGRESS, but was fired upon by the crew aboard that vessel. This dastardly act so incensed the captain of the MERRIMAC that he steamed near and fired into the CONGRESS and set her on fire, for in a short time I discovered smoke issuing from her portholes between her decks. Not until the fire was well under way did the MERRIMAC leave the scene of her exploits and steam back to Norfolk, having in one afternoon broken the blockade of the James River, destroyed two lines of battleships, disabled one of the most formidable men-of-war vessels in the Federal Navy, and revolutionized the naval architecture of the world.

Twilight had given place to darkness, and the only objects visible were the burning frigate and the spars of her sunken consort. The heavens above, like an immense dome, was lit up with a lurid glare that extinguished the stars, and the waters were encircled in brilliant reflections causing the wavelets to sparkle like rubies as no earthly gem can do. Flames of living, consuming fire, like horrid tongues of some infernal monster, darted

from each porthole. Nothing broke the awful solemnity of the holocaust save the occasional boom of cannon set off by the heat of the floating furnace, like minute guns sounding a requiem for the souls of the dead.

The night grew apace. My body, wearying with the extra exertion, demanded rest; my mind, overstrained with intense excitement, pleaded for relaxation; yet my eyes for hours were held spellbound by some strange fascination to the burning ship. The firing of the cannon, supplemented by the explosion of shells in the doomed vessel, became more frequent. Nature at last asserted her right of domain and I fell asleep. No more did the panorama of death and destruction pass before my vision, nor the horrid screams and explosion of shot and shell deafen my ears, nor hope and fear struggle for supremacy in my breast. My dreams were of the green fields, the limpid streams, the peaceful scenes of my dear old home.

A tremor! A crash! The earth was convulsed as if in the throes of an earthquake. Dazed, bewildered, I staggered to my feet. The air was filled with fiery flying serpents. The ship's magazine had exploded.

J. B. Smith

Lieut. & Signal Officer on the
Blockade runner AD-VANCE

C.S.A.

Danville, VA