

THE BLOCKADE RUNNER

Rosedale Farm, N.C.

Feb. 4, 1896

To Commemorate the wisdom and provident solicitude displayed by the late Governor Zebulon B. Vance (the great war Governor of the Confederate States) in behalf of the N.C. Troops in the field and the people at home during the dark days of 61-65, also as a tribute of admiration and love for his shipmates, who by their heroic daring shed luster upon the name of their native State and won respect for the Confederate flag abroad. These Sketches of the Blockade Runner Ad-Vance are contributed through the Guilford County Camp, to the Confederate Veteran Association of N.C.

By John B. Smith

(Private) Guilford County Camp C.V.A.

Formerly Lieutenant & Signal Officer, C.V.A.

One of the first acts of the Federal government at the commencement of the Civil War between The States, was to blockade our Southern ports. That meant the stationing of gun boats at the entrance of our harbors to prevent the Confederates from obtaining arms, and other munitions of warfare from Europe. In order to overcome the hindrance to the success of the Southern cause, the Confederate authorities purchased and permitted private corporations to purchase, fast steamships in England to be employed in carrying over Southern cotton to the West India islands, and to bring into our ports supplies for our army. Of course this was a very hazardous adventure for the Blockade Runners, as these vessels were called, because they were not permitted to carry an armament of any description, and were compelled to slip between the Federal vessels, called blockaders, stationed as before stated, at the inlet to Southern ports.

The crews of these Federal warships were stimulated to great vigilance by the hope of private money. For whenever a Blockade Runner was captured, both the vessel and its cargo were sold by the Federal authorities and a liberal part of the proceeds was divided among the officers and crew of the vessel that effected the capture. It was much less hazardous to run out from a port, than to run in, because these Blockade Runners all carried pilots familiar with the inlets or narrow channels which led from the harbors out to deep water, and if so fortunate as to escape the observation of the blockade fleet, or if chased by them, had the whole ocean before them to maneuver in. In seeking ingress, however, the difficulty was greatly augmented by the fact that the Confederates, to prevent the Federal fleets from entering, had taken up all buoys marking the inlets to our harbors, and destroyed all light-houses by which a ship's exact bearing could be taken by her pilot, who, while seeking some familiar landmark, was almost sure to be discovered by the sharp lookout from the Blockaders, who knew the exact position of the channel that the incoming vessel would have to enter.

Just after the seven days battle around Richmond, VA in 1862, I had been sent to assist in establishing signal communication between the forts at the mouth of the Cape Fear River, and was placed in charge of the signal station at Fort Fisher, which guarded the New inlet to that river. I soon observed the great difficulty a vessel encountered in her effort to enter our port, and at once began to study how this obstacle might be overcome. One day while in the ordnance department of the Fort, I chanced to spy a pair of ship starboard and port lanterns, and this thought flashed into my mind, "Why not by the arrangement of a sliding door to each of these lanterns, one being white, the other a red light, substitute flashes of red and white lights for the wave of torches to the right and

left, to form a signal alphabet and thus use the lanterns at sea as well as upon land.” I at once communicated my plans to Col. Wm. Lamb, commandant of the fort. They met his approbation and I was instructed to submit them to Gen. Whiting, commanding the department, who most readily gave me an order to the master of the machine shop at Wilmington, to render me aid in fitting up my lanterns. These, under my personal directions, were speedily fixed to my entire satisfaction. The General then referred me to Commodore Lynch, who ordered a commission of Naval Officers to investigate my mode of signaling by flash lights. This commission, after careful investigation, was so highly impressed with the system that upon recommendation it was adopted and ordered to be operated on all the Confederate Blockade Runners. To this end, a pair of my lanterns and a Signal Officer were placed on each one of them. Signal stations were also established along the coast, so that an incoming vessel, when she made our coast, would run along as close as possible and her Signal Officer, by flashing his light from the shore-side of the ship, could escape observation of the Blockaders, get the attention of the shore stations, and thus ascertain the position of his ship and send a message to the commandant of the fort to set range lights, by which the pilot could steer his vessel across the bar, and have the guns of the fort manual to protect the vessel if necessary. In this connection, I will state the fact, the advantage of this system of signaling by flash lights so impressed a British Ship Captain whom I met shortly after its adoption on our ships, that he urged me to go to England with him and take out letters patent from the British and other European Governments; he agreed to bear all expenses, in consideration of an interest in the patent. I declined his most liberal offer because it would, to my mind, look like deserting my country in her hour of need, although I was certain I might have obtained permission

from the Confederate Secretary of Navy to carry out this proposition, which most certainly would have been a source of great profit pecuniarily, as it has formed the basis of the present system now used in the Naval service generally.

The Ad-Vance was a Clyde built steam-ship, running between Dublin and Glasgow. Her name was the "Lord Clyde", and she was acknowledged to be the fastest of the many fast steamers sailing out of that river. Her record for speed was fully sustained in her new sphere, that of Blockade Runner, enabling her to beat the fastest steamers North Carolina capital and ingenuity could construct, until, in an unfortunate hour, her supply of Cardiff coal was taken for the use of the Privateer "Chickamauga", and she was compelled to use the Cape Fear or soft coal for the burning of which her furnaces were not adapted, and the dense volume of smoke it produced, rendered her track as easily followed at night as by daylight, and resulted in her being captured after a long chase by the Federal Cruiser, off the coast of Nova Scotia. I learned subsequently that she was converted by the Federals into a dispatch boat under the name of "The Frolic". The writer has in his possession a photograph, taken while the ship was on the way at Nassau, New Providence, to have her bottom scraped and painted. This shows her beautiful lines and, of course, is highly prized by one who encountered so many thrilling adventures aboard this bonny craft, in his boyhood days, some of which he is now engaged in writing out at the earnest solicitation of his children and young friends.

J. B. Smith

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