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The War Fifty Years Ago

Admiral Farragut Runs the Gantlet of Fire at Port Hudson---The Flagship Hartford Gallantly Clears the Confederate Batteries---Two Ships in a Fleet of Nine Get Through---Four Retreat, Badly Battered and One Is Destroyed---Lieutenant George Dewey, the Present Admiral, an Officer on the Ill Fated Ship. Heavy Losses on the Federal Side.

By Captain GEO. L. KILMER, Late U. S. V.
MARCH 14, 1863, Farragut made a desperate attempt to dash past the Confederate land batteries at Port Hudson, on the Mississippi river below Vicksburg. Out of nine ships which started to run the gantlet of fire two got through, one was destroyed, four retreated badly battered and two came off uninjured.

The stretch of river between Port Hudson and Vicksburg was used by the Confederates as a waterway tapping the rich agricultural country up the Red river. The Confederate garrison at Vicksburg, which Grant was aiming to subjugate, drew its supplies from the region west of the Mississippi by steamers plying the Red river.

In February the Federal steam ram Queen of the West, under the gallant boy commander, Charles Rivers Elliot, was captured while attempting to put an end to the steamboat traffic down the Red river and added to the Confederate fleet in those waters. The Federal ironclad Indianola followed the Queen in the daring enterprise and was also overcome and destroyed.

The news of the disasters to the Queen and Indianola set old Farragut's blood on fire. He originally went to the lower Mississippi with orders to open up that channel to the head of navigation and keep it clear of the enemy's ships. Now Grant's whole enterprise at Vicksburg was at stake. At Port Hudson the Confederates had nineteen guns in position on the bluffs to rake the channel up and down the river, and an army of 20,000 men lay in strongly fortified lines to cover the fort from land attack.

In order to deceive the garrison as to the real movement menacing the post General Banks marched his army of 17,000 men from Baton Rouge to Port Hudson to threaten an attack on the rear. Banks intended to open on the fort with his cannon and draw fire

the Kineo, which tried to go ahead alone, but also grounded under fire. Owing to the dense smoke the pilots of these ships could see nothing, and the vessels lay under the guns of the enemy, which soon got the range and quickly disabled the batteries of the stranded ships. A shot struck the bridge of the Monongahela, and it went crashing to the deck with Captain McKinstry in the wreckage.

Stranded Under Fire.

The Kineo finally got loose from the bank and returned to the aid of the Monongahela. Making fast, she pulled her consort from the mud, and the two again started upstream. In a short time the crank pin of the Monongahela was so heated that the engines stopped, and the ship, being wholly unmanageable, drifted out of range.

At 12:20 o'clock the old Mississippi reached the bend at the upper batteries, where the leading vessels had met with mishap. Just where the effect of the shore guns was greatest she grounded and heeled to port. With his starboard guns firing as though nothing had happened, Captain Melancthon Smith ordered the port guns drawn in to lighten that side of the ship. Even then the vessel did not come to an even keel, and the engines were unable to budge her from the bank. Captain Smith then decided to fire his own ship and save his men.

The Confederates kept up a terrible fire on the luckless vessel, but her own gunners at the starboard pieces still fired as though all was well on board. The flash of the enemy's guns on the bluff 100 yards away was the only guide for the Federals.

All the guns not at work in the fight were thrown overboard, also the small arms and everything that could be recovered and used by the enemy. After smashing the engines three fires were lighted in the storeroom, but a

confusion he struck out toward shore, but, seeing his mistake, turned back and reached the ship.

Captain Smith said in his report: "I consider that I should be neglecting a most important duty should I omit to mention the coolness of my executive officer, Mr. Dewey, and the steady, fearless and gallant manner in which the officers and men of the Mississippi defended her and the orderly and quiet manner in which she was abandoned after being thirty-five minutes aground under the fire of the enemy's batteries. There was no confusion in embarking the crew, and the only noise was from the enemy's cannon." Lieutenant Dewey was then twenty-five years old.

Farragut's Losses Heavy.

The Mississippi really had the hardest end of the struggle to bear. By the time she reached the bend where all the vessels came to grief the smoke made it impossible for her pilots or her gunners to see beyond the ship's rail. Moreover, the Confederate gunners had found the range upon the point where the Federals grounded. Doubtless their range had already been fixed there as



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LIEUTENANT GEORGE DEWEY, U. S. N., AN OFFICER ON THE MISSISSIPPI.

the one place where the ships would be most exposed to difficulty in making out the channel. Whatever the cause, their missiles reached the target with deadly accuracy for night fighting.

The ironclad Essex did not go far enough to come under fire of the shore guns, but lay back with some mortar boats, which kept up a fierce bombardment on the fort all the time the ships were disputing the passage. Farragut's total loss was 113 at Port Hudson, nearly as many as the whole fleet had sustained when he passed Fort Jackson and Fort Philip at the mouth of the Mississippi during the famous attack on New Orleans in April, 1862. His flagship, the Hartford, lost two killed and six wounded, the Richmond three killed and twelve wounded and the Monongahela six killed and twenty-one wounded. The Mississippi, following the others and last in the order named, lost twenty-five killed and thirty-nine wounded, the result to each vessel showing that the Confederate aim grew more deadly as the fight progressed.

Farragut steamed on up the Mississippi with the Hartford and Albatross and blockaded Red river. This being the object of his wild dash past Port Hudson, the enterprise was a success in spite of the disaster to the other ships.

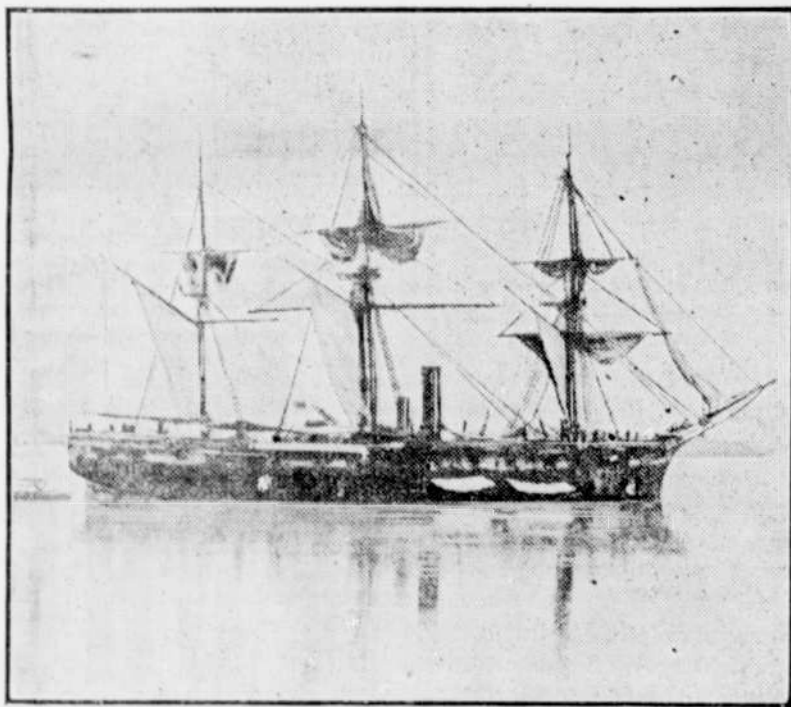
Banks was some time in doubt as to the fate of Farragut, but as soon as he learned his whereabouts and condition the army was withdrawn from Port Hudson to Baton Rouge to await a more favorable time for attacking the batteries. The most that Banks accomplished in support of Farragut at this time was to engage the Confederate skirmishers outside of their works. Even this may have simply aroused the Confederates and made them more alert for the fleet.

Other Events of the Week.

On the morning of the 14th of March, 1863, an attack was made by Confederate troops under General D. H. Hill upon Fort Anderson, an unfinished work on the bank of the river Neuse, opposite Newbern, N. C. The post was garrisoned by a single regiment of Federal volunteers of General J. G. Foster's command. There were no guns mounted in the fort, and the troops were unable to offer strong resistance.

Opportunistly, the gunboats Hunchback and Hetzel, assisted by the steamer Shawsheen and some smaller vessels, moved to the defense of the fort and by a well directed fire silenced the Confederate artillery, consisting of fourteen guns. A nine inch shell from the Hetzel dismounted a Confederate gun, killing many of the gunners. Hill finally retreated up the Neuse, where the Federal light draft vessels followed and harassed the march.

On March 16 General U. S. Grant ordered General W. T. Sherman to go at the head of a pioneer corps on a scouting trip into the bayous east of Vicksburg. Sherman set out that day with the Eighth Missouri regiment and a band of pioneers. He was to cut a way through the narrow channels, obstructed by sunken or overhanging trees, and, if possible, join a fleet of gunboats which Admiral D. D. Porter had with difficulty taken into Steele's bayou, intending to steam on into the Yazoo.



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FARRAGUT'S FAMOUS FLAGSHIP HARTFORD.

upon himself to spare the ships, but he was deceived by a false map and failed to bring his artillery within range.

Battle Line of Wooden Ships.

Farragut formed his line with the old style war sloops Hartford, Richmond, Monongahela and Mississippi at the front, followed by the new river ironclad Essex and the gunboats Albatross, Genesee, Kineo and Sachem lashed to the port side of the sloops away from the Confederate fire. All told, these ships mounted 121 guns.

The night was dark and heavy. Soon after 9 o'clock the fleet started slowly up the channel, and shortly two signal rockets on the bluff gave warning that the movement was discovered. Almost immediately the Confederates opened fire, the fleet answering in kind and steaming steadily on. By the time the Richmond reached the upper batteries the smoke was so thick that the pilot could not see beyond the end of the ship. Huge bonfires of pine, lit up on the bank by the Confederates, sent up clouds of black smoke which settled over the river.

The Hartford grounded once and in backing away narrowly escaped collision with the Richmond, which was close behind. Finally the Hartford, with her consort, the Albatross, cleared the batteries. They had been under fire one hour. None of the other ships was able to follow. The Richmond, after getting clear of the Hartford, was struck by a shot in the safety valves which upset them and made her engines useless. The Genesee, lashed to the Richmond, tried to pull her wounded consort through, but her power was too weak against the strong current. These two turned back and anchored below the batteries.

The Monongahela ran aground on the west shore just as the Confederates opened fire. The shock of striking tore loose the lashings of her consort,

Confederate shot cut through the hull below water, letting in a flood which put out the flames.

Meanwhile the wounded had been lowered into boats. Fires were started between decks fore and aft, and soon the grand old Mississippi, which had been Perry's flagship in the war with Tripoli, was a mass of flame. At last the crew was all in the boats, the underofficers with them, and Captain Smith, with his lieutenant, spiked the still smoking starboard guns and left the vessel to its fate.

Having lost so much of her weight by the abandonment of her crew and the destruction of arms, the ship soon floated and drifted down stream in the wake of the vessels which had retreated. Collision was avoided, and she passed on, her magazines exploding at 5:30 in the morning with a detonation heard for miles, much to the joy of the Confederates.

The Mississippi lost sixty-four men killed and wounded in this encounter, a very heavy casualty list for the hardest naval battle and greater than that of all the other ships in the fleet that morning combined. She also did more execution than all the others, for while she lay aground her guns plowed the Confederate works on the hill. Her officers and men remained cool throughout the trying ordeal, never forgetting that they should fight the enemy's batteries so long as their guns could bear upon them.

Farragut had given his ship commanders instructions when setting out that morning to maintain an incessant fire while passing up past the fort not only for self defense in each case, but in order to worry and baffle the enemy for the benefit of the consorts following. When the Mississippi grounded the shock threw her lieutenant commander, George Dewey (later the hero of Manila bay), into the river. In the

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