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The War Fifty Years Ago

A Novel Naval Dilemma In the Mississippi Bayous. Admiral D. D. Porter's Fleet Hemmed In a Narrow Channel---Confederates Block the Way, Bombard the Federal Ships and Force Them to Retreat---General W. T. Sherman Marches a Force Through the Swamps and Rescues the Imperiled Expedition From Capture---Porter Prepared to Blow Up His Vessels Rather Than Surrender Them to the Enemy.

Dy Captain GEO. L. KILMER, Late U. S. V. During the last week in March fifty years ago Admiral D. D. Porter's fleet of Federal ironclads stood in vital peril of capture by the Confederate land troops under circumstances which were novel in the extreme. They were hemmed in by trees felled by the enemy in front and rear across a channel so narrow in places that at times the ships' sides were only a foot from the bank. The ships were greased from stem to stern to prevent the nimble Confederates who were after them from clambering aboard, and sailors armed with pistols and cutlasses lined

In Steele's bayou the vessels often grazed the banks, and the channel was obstructed by rafts which had floated down and caught between the trees and the shore. Large quantities of cotton bales were stored along shore awaiting safe transportation to southern seaports, and this the Confederates set on fire the moment the fleet appeared, enveloping the boats in smoke and endangering them with flames.

Steering by the Light of Lanterns.

At the end of twenty-four hours the ships had made but four miles. Hearing the noise of chopping ahead, Por-

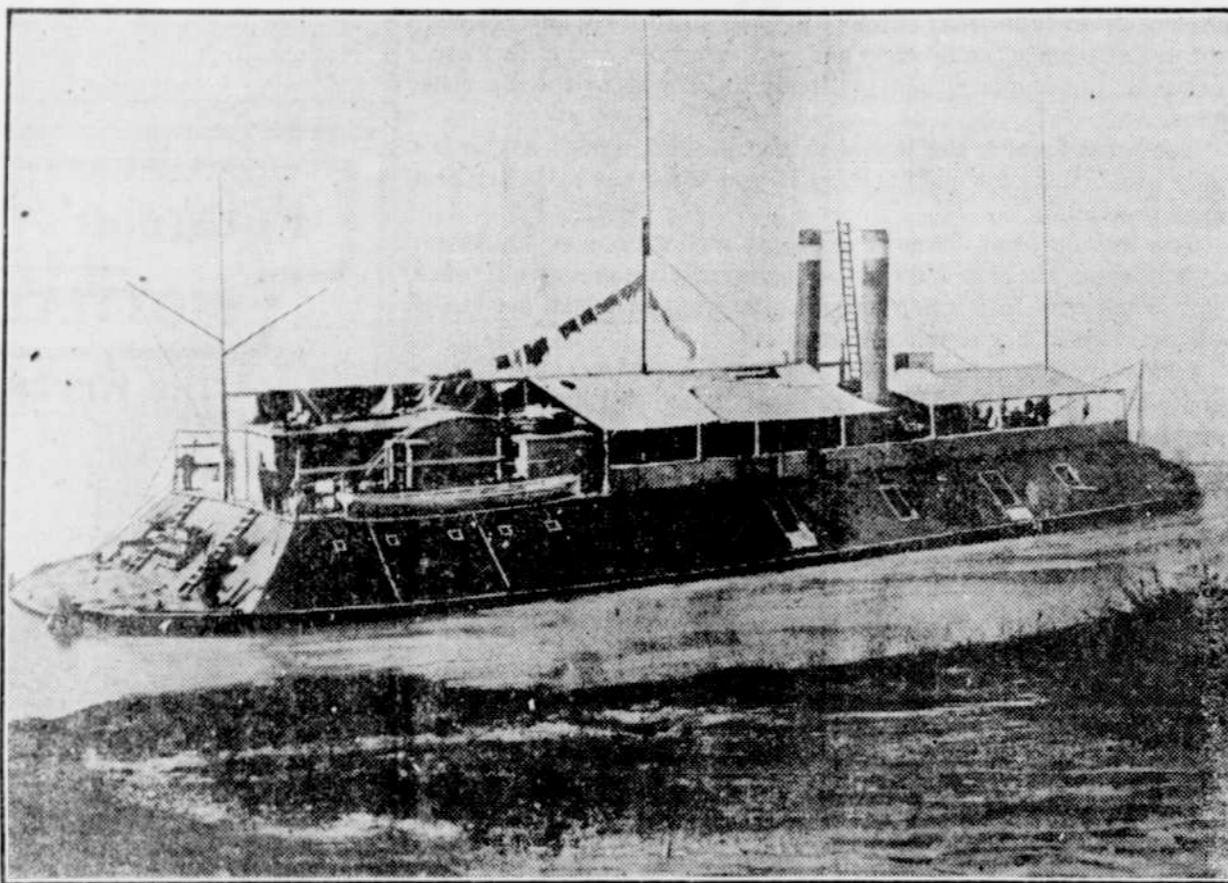
versed his opinion of that class of vessel. Hitherto he had condemned them. But he said they could batter down trees, uproot them and demolish bridges. He received warning days before Sherman was heard from that 5,000 Confederate troops had been sent into the region to destroy the expedition.

Face to Face With Calamity.

In order to avert such calamity at the hands of the foe Porter made arrangements in full detail to destroy the ships himself rather than let the enemy capture them. The machinery was to be broken to a scrap heap, trains of powder were laid to the magazines and signals arranged to warn all hands when the hour had come. The men were put on half rations and no lights allowed at night. They slept at the guns so as to be ready to repel boarders.

Finally the force prepared for a last stand. The sides of the vessels were covered with grease to prevent the Confederates from climbing the sides, the guns were loaded with canister and given the highest elevation possible. Once more the fleet came to a standstill before two large trees across the channel.

The Confederates rushed up to within fifty yards, and all the working parties of the boats were called in to defend their vessels. But before a shot was fired a rattle of musketry sprang up in the Confederate rear, the crews



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THE FEDERAL IRONCLAD CINCINNATI, FLAGSHIP OF THE FLEET.

the upper decks to guard against assailants leaping down from overhanging trees. All this took place in the sluggish waters of tributaries of the Yazoo river, an incident of General U. S. Grant's Vicksburg campaign.

Move to the Rear of Vicksburg.

Porter's unique experience was the result of Grant's desire to get in the rear of Vicksburg on the north. The Yazoo empties into the Mississippi close to Vicksburg, and the Confederates occupied the bluffs along that stream for fifty miles. The Yazoo itself is formed from the Tallahatchie, Sunflower, Yallahusha and Deer creek, all navigable and used for bringing Confederate supplies to the Vicksburg garrison.

Grant wanted to establish a secondary base for operations far up the Yazoo above the bluffs and cut off not only supplies, but re-enforcements coming from the east to the Confederates in and around Vicksburg. The Confederates had a newly constructed fort at the junction of the Tallahatchie and Yallahusha. By cutting a channel from the Mississippi to the Coldwater, a stream emptying into the Tallahatchie, Grant's engineer flooded the whole system of inland channels, and a fleet of Federal gunboats, with troops, after a tedious journey, reached Fort Pemberton, intending to reduce it.

Lieutenant Watson Smith commanded this naval force, which included two heavy ironclads, seven tinclads (light armor) and two wooden rams. Two brigades of soldiers, led by General L. F. Ross and General I. F. Quinby, accompanied the ships.

The Fort Pemberton expedition was in danger of collapse, and Porter devised a plan of relieving it with a fleet of ironclads, which he would take in through Steele's bayou, which opens from the Mississippi, thence through Deer creek, the Sunflower, Coldwater and Tallahatchie to the Yazoo above Fort Pemberton.

Obstructions In the Channel.

The channels in these streams were deeper than those followed by the first expedition, and five heavy draft ironclad gunboats were chosen for the relief expedition. At the same time General W. T. Sherman set out with a force of troops to penetrate the wilderness along Porter's route and cooperate with the fleet.

Almost at the start Porter found his way obstructed by a dense growth of overhanging bushes, and these had to be cut away as the boats moved ahead. Occasionally a stray tree would be found in midchannel, and this was uprooted by a charge of the ironclad at full steam. The line of boats was broken, each going its own way to open a channel, using saws and axes to remove the heavy trunks

ter sent a tug forward, and two newly felled trees were found across the channel. These were cut away, and the boats moved on by the light of lanterns carried along the shore. At one place there were twenty-five trees cut into with the intention of barricading the channel. This work had been skillfully done by General W. S. Featherstone's Confederate cavalry, which had been dispatched to head off and annoy the expedition.

Slowly as the fleet moved it kept ahead of Sherman's army. After four days of struggling Porter reached Rolling fork, which would take him into Sunflower river, where the channel would be easier. Suddenly the flagship Cincinnati, at the head of the line, ran into a bed of willows which blocked the channel for 600 yards. Going ahead with full steam on, the Cincinnati was caught in the withes of the willows, which twisted around her upper works and held her as in a vise. All the arts of seamanship could not displace this new obstacle. It would have required weeks to uproot that bed of willows.

The ships were now seventy miles from the starting point on the Mississippi. Moreover, they were in waters which not even flatboats had sailed for a generation or more. Inhabitants along the route marveled at the sight of ironclads bringing war home to the swampy recesses far inland.

Confederate Cannon Open on Shore.

For twenty-four hours men worked with saws, axes and cutlasses to hew the flagship loose. Suddenly a battery hidden in the woods opened on the fleet, driving the workmen to the cover of the ironclads. News of the desperate situation of the fleet had reached the Confederates at Haine's bluff, close to Vicksburg, and a brigade and a battery of artillery hurried away to get in the rear of Porter and capture his boats.

The Confederate commander, General Pemberton, repeatedly urged his subordinates to bold action. The boats "must be captured," he said. "Do it by boarding" and "hurry down boarders," were his demands. Suddenly the banks swarmed with sharpshooters, and the fleet came to a standstill before eight large trees newly felled across the channel in the rear of the boats.

Porter put 500 armed sailors ashore, who took to the trees to fight off the sharpshooters. Working below the banks out of the enemy's range, the sailors sawed away the trees and removed them with hawsers and tackles. Meanwhile the mortars and howitzers kept up a rain of fire into the woods.

In his report of the expedition the resourceful sailor declared that his experience with the clumsy ironclads re-

began cheering, while the Confederates, after a volley or two, beat a retreat up and down the river.

Sherman Arrives Riding Bareback.

Sherman had heard the first firing of the Confederate battery and made a forced march through the swamps to rescue Porter's fleet. He was in the nick of time, and when he rode forward to the very edge of the flagship the sailors greeted him with the wildest ovation of his whole career.

Sherman had marched the whole distance with the exception of a short stretch just at the close on foot. The unique experience is described in his "Memoirs" as follows: "The road lay along Deer creek, passing several plantations. Occasionally it crossed swamps where the water came up to my hips. The smaller drummer boys had to carry their drums on their heads.

"The soldiers generally were glad to have their general and field officers afoot, but we gave them a fair specimen of marching, accomplishing about twenty-one miles between daylight and noon. I ordered Lieutenant Colonel Rice to deploy his brigade as far into the swamps as the ground would permit and then sweep forward until he uncovered the gunboats.

"The movement was well executed, and we soon came to large cotton fields and could see our gunboats in Deer creek occasionally firing a heavy eight inch gun across the cotton field into the swamp behind. About that time Major Kirby of the Eighth Missouri galloped down the road on a horse he had picked up the night before and met me. He explained the situation of affairs and offered me his horse.

"I got on bareback and rode up the levee, the sailors coming out of their ironclads and cheering most vociferously as I rode by, and as our men swept across the cotton field in full view I soon found Admiral Porter, who was on the deck of one of his ironclads, with a shield made of a section of a smokestack, and I doubt if he was more glad to meet a friend than he was to see me."

General Featherstone's scouts intercepted a Sherman message to Porter by capturing his bearer. Sherman said he had 2,000 men with him. This made Featherstone both zealous and cautious, and in spite of his zeal the advance detachment of Federals under Colonel Smith of the Eighth Missouri stopped the felling of trees in time to save the fleet.

Featherstone said in his official report that to assume that the gunboats could be boarded from shore was a "visionary absurdity." His men couldn't cross six to ten feet of deep water between the bank and the ships, he declared.

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