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The Naval War in Mississippi

Gary D. Joiner

The Union campaigns and battles to wrest control of the Mississippi Valley were, by necessity, combined operations. The U.S. Navy played a greater role in this arena than in any other throughout the war, and the state of Mississippi saw more naval action within its borders and along its western boundary than any other state during the course of the war. Prior to 1861, the U.S. Navy possessed no armed vessels to use in guarding or patrolling the inland waters of the nation. After secession, the Union Navy was not interested in these internal rivers and instead contended that the fresh water streams were the purview of the U.S. Army. In assuming this role, army commanders in the West recognized that the rivers provided a convenient method by which military units that were yet to be formed could be transported into places that were exceedingly remote.

The Confederate government, which possessed no semblance of a navy at the beginning of the war, was handicapped in building a matching naval force by a severe shortage of the necessary manufacturing infrastructure. Its plan instead was centered on point defense. Simply put, Confederate military leaders identified the most important points along the coast and on the inland rivers to protect them by creating massive fortifications and building local naval units to thwart any Union incursions. As a result of this strategy, primary Confederate bastions on the inland waterways of the Mississippi River Valley were located at Columbus, Kentucky; Island No. 10 on the Missouri-Tennessee state line on the Missouri side of the river; Fort Pillow north of Memphis, Tennessee; Forts Henry and Donelson guarding the lower stretches of the Cumberland and Tennessee rivers; Fort Hindman, guarding the lower portion of the Arkansas River; Forts Jackson and St. Philip below New Orleans; and the primary fortifications at Vicksburg, Mississippi, and Port Hudson, Louisiana. The Vicksburg and Port Hudson positions were by far the most formidable on the Mississippi River.

Both sides relied on new, often untested, methods of creating new war craft on the inland rivers. The preferred form of defensive armament involved iron-cladding boats and then arming them with siege guns. Northern efforts to build and arm an inland fleet were based in St. Louis, Missouri, and Cairo, Illinois. The latter shipyard was located on a small but strategically important position at the confluence of the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers. The mastermind behind the Union efforts was James Buchanan Eads, arguably the best nautical engineer of the nineteenth century, who promised to build seven gunboats and deliver them in sixty-five days. Eads personally financed the entire operation.¹ At the same time, Union Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles dispatched Commander John Rodgers to Cincinnati, Ohio, to assist the commander of the Western Department, Major General George B. McClellan.² Soon after his arrival, Rodgers began converting fast steamboats into wood-augmented vessels, called “timberclads,” which were named the *Conestoga*, *Lexington*, and *Tyler*.³

In contrast to Rodgers’s work, Eads specialized in totally new boats that became the most fearsome vessels on the rivers. His gunboats constituted a separate class of boats, known variously as the “Cairo Class” or “City Class” vessels. Captain Andrew Foote, the commander of the new flotilla, built by Eads, named the gunboats to recognize the towns and cities that were located nearby or associated with the boats’ construction. The vessels would be named *Cairo*, *Carondelet*, *Cincinnati*, *Louisville*, *Mound City* *Pittsburg*,⁴ and *St. Louis*. Eads, who delivered the city-class boats that were delivered to the Navy between the end of September 1861 and the last days of January 1862,⁵ also built other ironclads, including the *Essex* and the massive *Benton*. Before 1862 ended, he had constructed the *Neosho*, *Osage*, and *Ozark*.

¹ John M. Barry, *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 22–31.

² U.S. War Department, *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion* (Washington, DC, 1895–1929), 22: 277–280. Hereafter cited as *ORN*.

³ *Ibid.*, 284, 285.

⁴ William M. Fowler, Jr., *Under Two Flags: The American Navy in the Civil War* (Annapolis, MD: Avon Books, 2001), 134–35, 139. The vessel’s name was spelled “*Pittsburg*.” Although the spelling of the city name was, and is, “Pittsburgh,” the federal government and other entities periodically dropped the “h” that was not officially added until 1911.

⁵ Paul H. Silverstone, *Warships of the Civil War Navies: 1855–1883* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2001), 151–155.

As the need for action in smaller streams became evident, smaller light draft gunboats came into service; these were dubbed “tinclads” because of their thinner, lighter armor. These vessels carried large ordinance for their size and proved decisive in later campaigns. Although the Confederate strategy of relying upon point defense seemed reasonable considering the huge distances between major population centers and the Confederacy’s limited military force concentrations, Union countermeasures wreaked havoc on the southern plans. Using combined arms operations, with the Navy taking the lead and units of the Army of the Tennessee and other forces finishing the work, Union forces bypassed the Confederate defenses at Columbus, Kentucky, and moved instead against Fort Henry on the Tennessee River, which quickly fell in February 1862. Before surrendering, the Confederate defenders had managed to deploy a new weapon, the “torpedo” or mine.⁶ Weeks later, Union forces captured Fort Henry’s companion defense point to the east, Fort Donelson. Following an attack by the Navy,⁷ the ironclads were not prepared for plunging cannon fire on their unarmored decks.⁸ In addition, Foote, who had been elevated to Flag Officer, was wounded during the battle. He would not command his flotilla again and was succeeded by Captain Charles H. Davis.⁹

With the Tennessee and Cumberland rivers now vulnerable, Union forces moved to take Corinth, Mississippi. In March, units under the command of Major General Ulysses S. Grant encamped at Pittsburg Landing, Tennessee, were attacked by General Albert Sidney Johnston’s Confederate forces on April 6–7. The two-day Battle of Shiloh, in which the Union Navy participated by firing rounds from the *Lexington* and *Tyler* timberclads into the southern positions was the bloodiest fight in the war to that date.¹⁰

Although both sides considered Island No. 10 to be all but impregnable, a daring night run past the gauntlet of guns by Captain Henry

⁶ Naval Historical Division, *Civil War Naval Chronology 1861–1865* (Washington, 1971), part 2, 15–17.

⁷ Henry Walke, “The Gunboats at Belmont & Fort Henry,” *Battles and Leaders* (Secaucus, NJ: Castle, n.d.), I: 362.

⁸ B. F. Thomas, “Soldier Life: A Narrative of the Civil War.” Privately printed, unpaginated. Archives and Collections of Shiloh National Military Park library.

⁹ *ORN*, 22: 316.

¹⁰ O. Edward Cunningham, *Shiloh and the Western Campaign of 1862* (New York: Savas Beatie, 2007), 312–13; Gary D. Joiner, “Soul-Stirring Music To Our Ears,” in Steven E. Woodworth, ed., *The Shiloh Campaign* (Carbondale, IL: Combined Books, 2009), 96–109.

Walke in the *Carondelet*, which occurred simultaneously with the Battle of Shiloh, placed forces above and below the island.¹¹ With Island No. 10 eliminated, Memphis, which was guarded on the north by Fort Pillow, became the next target for the Union Navy. Using rams and gunboats to defend the river at Fort Pillow and Memphis, the Confederates¹² attacked the *Cincinnati* near Fort Pillow on the morning of May 10. The engagement grew until most of the Union ironclads were involved. The *Mound City* and *Cincinnati* sank in shallow water, and the Confederates lost several vessels before withdrawing to the protection of Fort Pillow. When Union ironclads were quickly repaired,¹³ the Confederate vessels retreated to Memphis and abandoned Fort Pillow where their position had become untenable.

Before the push on Memphis could be launched, the Union flotilla was augmented by the Mississippi Ram Fleet, a hybrid command not under Davis's control and therefore not welcomed.¹⁴ The rams, however, proved to be very effective in the destruction of the remaining Confederate vessels at Memphis on June 6, 1862.¹⁵

While this lightning campaign unfurled, the blue water warships under Flag Officer David Glasgow Farragut moved up the Mississippi River against New Orleans. After a major ship-to-shore naval battle against Forts Jackson and St. Philip, Farragut anchored the Union fleet near the levees of New Orleans at the end of April.¹⁶ He quickly moved upstream and took Baton Rouge and Natchez, Mississippi. Soon thereafter Farragut's advance vessels reached Vicksburg, but

¹¹ ORN 22: 730, 734–35; Larry J. Daniel and Lynn N. Bock, *Island No. 10: Struggle for the Mississippi Valley* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1996), 142; Spencer Tucker, *Andrew Foote: Civil War Admiral on Western Waters* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2000), 188.

¹² ORN 23: 3–4.

¹³ ORN 23: 13–17; Silverstone, *Warships of the Civil War Navies*, 170; Jack D. Coombe, *Thunder Along the Mississippi: The River Battles That Split the Confederacy* (New York: Bantam, 1996), 125.

¹⁴ William D. Crandall, and Isaac D. Newell, *History of the Ram Fleet and the Mississippi Marine Brigade in the War for the Union on the Mississippi and Its Tributaries, The Story of the Ellets and their Men* (St. Louis, MO: Press of Buschart Brothers, 1907), 9–13.

¹⁵ Walke, *Battles and Leaders* 1: 452–62; Bern Anderson, *By Sea and By River: The Naval History of the Civil War* (New York: Knopf, 1962), 113–14; H. Allen Gosnell, *Guns on the Western Waters: The Story of the River Gunboats in the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1949), 94–99; U.S. War Department, *War of the Rebellion: The Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, DC: 1890–1901), vol. 10, 906–910.

¹⁶ John D. Winters, *The Civil War in Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1963), 85–102.

the Confederate leaders in the heavily fortified bluff town refused to surrender. Farragut, who could not connect with the Western Gunboat Flotilla, moving down the river from Memphis, withdrew to Baton Rouge. Farragut's decision prompted the Confederates to immediately begin strengthening the fortifications at Port Hudson, approximately twenty miles northwest of the Louisiana capitol.

The brown water flotilla massed north of Vicksburg, was challenged on July 15, 1862, by the surprise attack of the ironclad CSS *Arkansas*. The hastily constructed vessel steamed out of the Yazoo River, created panic within the Union fleet and then sought safety under the guns at the bluffs at Vicksburg. The Union ironclad *Essex* and another vessel had engaged the intruder and, after vicious attacks by both sides, had become separated from the fleet below the Confederate guns.¹⁷ The *Arkansas* was damaged, but not seriously. The *Essex* steamed south to join Farragut at Baton Rouge. Confederate leaders unwisely opted to have the *Arkansas* to participate in an attack to retake Baton Rouge. The attack on August 5 almost worked but the *Essex* and other vessels pounded the southerners. The *Arkansas*, with very poor engines, approached Baton Rouge to assist, but engine failure forced its officers and crew to set the ironclad afire before it could be captured.¹⁸

The Confederates still held the Mississippi River between Vicksburg and Port Hudson, and the Union fleets were unable to unite. Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles decided that the Western Gunboat Flotilla should become a major command with squadron status. He transferred the capable Flag Officer Charles Davis to Washington and promoted him to Acting Rear Admiral.¹⁹ His replacement, David Dixon Porter, was elevated to Acting Rear Admiral with an appointment date that preceded that of Davis.²⁰

After sorting out his command responsibilities, Porter planned an attack up the Yazoo River to approach Vicksburg from what he hoped was an undefended front. Porter's plan called for his acting in concert

¹⁷ Anderson, *By Sea and By River*, 133.

¹⁸ Coombe, *Thunder Along the Mississippi*, 162.

¹⁹ Effective to full rank February 7, 1863. William B. Cogar, *Dictionary of Admirals of the U.S. Navy: Volume I 1862–1900* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1989), 41–42, 1331–33. The timing of Davis's promotion was important for his rank of rear admiral technically made him the third man to hold that rank, following his successor, David Dixon Porter, who was made acting rear admiral on October 15, 1862, with effective full rank on July 4, 1863.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

with an advance by General Grant striking down the interior of Mississippi. Grant created a large supply base at Holly Springs, Mississippi, and then moved south. Confederate forces under General Earl Van Dorn raided the base on December 20. Grant's supply depot in Memphis was destroyed almost simultaneously, and although Grant was forced to retreat, he issued no recall orders for General William T. Sherman, who had been dispatched to join Porter's naval operation.²¹ Grant's decision left Porter and Sherman and his men in the dark without knowledge of the setback occasioned by Van Dorn's surprise attack.

One month after Porter assumed command of the squadron, he and Sherman began operations. Porter sent two gunboats up the Yazoo from its mouth to investigate water depth and to search for the presence of torpedoes. They found them. The second attempt up the Yazoo, which began on December 12, 1862, was made by two ironclads, the *Cairo* and *Pittsburg*, two tinclads, the *Signal* and *Marmora*, and one of the Mississippi Marine Brigade rams, the *Queen of the West*.²² Slowly picking their way to gain access to dry land below Chickasaw and Haynes' bluffs in order to counter the Confederate defenses, the flotilla encountered obstructed stream channels and minefields. The lighter vessels made sweeps, and ironclads sometimes assisted.²³ During this operation, the *Cairo* struck a torpedo and sank immediately. It could not be raised and remained in the river for almost exactly one hundred years.²⁴

Yet another attempt to move up the Yazoo was made in the fourth week of December. The flotilla continued to near Haynes' Bluff, where Sherman, supported by the ironclads and tinclads led by the *Benton*, suffered a crushing defeat at Chickasaw Bayou.²⁵ The *Benton*, which received considerable attention from the Confederate gunners, lost her captain, and nine crewmen including the executive officer were killed or wounded.²⁶ Following the Confederate repulse of Sherman,

²¹ Terrence J. Winschel, *Chickasaw Bayou: A Battlefield Guide* (National Park Service, n.d.), 1.

²² ORN 23: 546–47.

²³ David D. Porter, *Naval History of the Civil War* (Secaucus, NJ: Castle, 1886), 284–85.

²⁴ ORN 23, 550; John C. Wideman, *The Sinking of the USS Cairo* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1993), 26–31. For the recovery efforts, see Edwin C. Bearss, *Hardluck Ironclad: The Sinking and Salvage of the "Cairo"* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980).

²⁵ ORN 23: 571–72, 574, 576; William L. Shea and Terrence J. Winschel, *Vicksburg is the Key: The Struggle for the Mississippi River* (Omaha: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 45, 51–52.

²⁶ ORN 23: 574, 576.

the Union gunboats and transports carrying the troops retreated. To continue attacking the Confederate river defense points and to boost flagging morale, Porter and Sherman then made a successful attack on Fort Hindman on the Arkansas River.²⁷

Following the capture of Fort Hindman, Porter and Sherman returned to the main task, Vicksburg, where the defenses had grown stronger with each passing day, and the prospects of a frontal assault, at least from the river, appeared nonexistent. At the same time, the Confederates were fortifying two strong positions downstream at Grand Gulf and Port Hudson. On February 2, 1863, Porter sent Colonel Charles Rivers Ellet, aboard the ram *Queen of the West*, past the Vicksburg batteries. The ram carried cotton bales over its wooden sheathing to absorb or deflect the solid rounds from the Rebel artillery. The *Queen* made it past the batteries and then proceeded to wreak havoc below Vicksburg before steaming up the Red River on February 13 to reconnoiter.²⁸ It was disabled and captured at Fort DeRussy, the southernmost static Confederate defensive position on the Red River.²⁹ The ram was then used by the Confederate forces to disable the USS *Indianola*, which had run the batteries at Vicksburg to assist the *Queen of the West*.

The loss of the *Queen of the West* and the *Indianola* forced Porter to test how the Vicksburg batteries would react to a brazen daylight run past them. He concocted a dummy ironclad made of wood and fabric, which sailed past the gauntlet and forced the Confederates to destroy the *Indianola* in order to prevent its being recaptured.³⁰ At roughly the same time, Admiral Farragut tried to compromise the Port Hudson batteries but only succeeded in stranding his own flagship *Hartford* and an escort upstream of the fortifications and in losing the USS *Mississippi*.³¹

²⁷ Charles Edmund Vetter, *Sherman: Merchant of Terror, Advocate of Peace* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Company, 1992), 150; David D. Porter, *Incidents and Anecdotes* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1885), 129.

²⁸ *ORN*: 24: 320, 217–20.

²⁹ For a thorough history of Fort DeRussy, see Steven Mayeux, *Earthen Walls, Iron Men: Fort DeRussy, Louisiana, and the Defense of Red River* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2007).

³⁰ *Vicksburg Whig*, March 5, 1863; *ORN* 24: 397.

³¹ The best accounts of Port Hudson siege operations and the naval operations against the Confederate fortifications are found in Lawrence Lee Hewitt, *Port Hudson: Confederate Bastion On the Mississippi* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986) and O. Edward Cunningham, *Port Hudson Campaign 1862–1863* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991).

Porter's projected contorted path would, if successful, put his flotilla in the Yazoo between Yazoo City and the Confederate defenses at Haynes' Bluff and Fort Snyder to the south. Porter could turn north, if he chose, and go past Yazoo City and attack the Confederate Fort Pemberton near Greenwood. The Fort Pemberton defenses had earlier stalled Grant's ill-fated Yazoo Pass campaign. Porter, however, never reached Yazoo. Thwarted by the narrow Deer Creek and Confederate resistance, Porter had to back his ironclads out of Deer Creek into Black Bayou, Steele's Bayou, and finally back into the Yazoo where he had started his adventure. His men had to remove trees cut by Confederates to trap his boats, and Porter even made preparations to scuttle the boats if necessary. But the Confederate troops in the area failed to act aggressively, and Porter received infantry support at the Rolling Fork from William T. Sherman. The Confederates lost a great opportunity to capture the ironclads.

Porter's campaign, along with the failures of the Grant-Williams Canal, the Lake Providence operation, the ultimate abandonment of the Yazoo Pass expedition, and the unsuccessful Duckport Canal strategy spelled the end of Grant's efforts to reach Vicksburg from the north.

General Grant determined that a march down the Louisiana side of the Mississippi River to a suitable point to cross was the only way to take Vicksburg by a landward attack. Admiral Porter and his squadron were instrumental in this effort. The only way the Navy could support Grant was to run the gauntlet of the Vicksburg defenses.

Porter divided the squadron into two flotillas. One was to run the batteries, while the other was to remain above Vicksburg and support a deception operation to draw off some of the Vicksburg defenders from Grant's amphibious assault. The first group would reduce the Grand Gulf fortifications before Grant's infantry could cross the Mississippi. That task alone was monumental and could not be adequately planned before the fate of the flotilla was known. Grant asked his agents to collect yawls and barges in St. Louis and Chicago to transport men across the great river.³²

The passage began at 9:15 p.m. on the night of April 16 with little moonlight and the vessels making just enough steam to keep the

³² ORN 24: 241.

paddle wheels turning, thereby allowing the river current to move them along. Porter hoped that the batteries would not notice them until the flotilla was well underway, but Confederate scouts spotted the massive dark shapes moving in the night. They lighted dry wood and several abandoned houses on the Louisiana side to backlight the gunboats. The pitch wood fires from the west bank cast a thick pall of smoke, which only the bright yellow and orange flashes punctuated as the guns fired. As the slow, majestic procession moved south, it was perfectly silhouetted for the Confederate gunners. The batteries began firing on the gunboats with great accuracy from seemingly every gun on the bluffs, from the waterline batteries up to the heights of Fort Hill, and down to Warrenton on the southern end of the defense line. Porter's ironclads returned fire, and soon the sky around Vicksburg glowed yellow and orange. Amazingly, Porter only lost one vessel, the transport *Henry Clay*, to the batteries.³³

As the Mississippi Squadron's mortar craft pounded the Vicksburg defenses, the last great effort was to get Grant's Army across into Mississippi. Porter fought a major ship versus shore engagement at Grand Gulf, which forced Grant to reconsider his launch and landing points. The ironclads and tinclads suffered greatly from the Confederate fire, but the landings from Hard Times Plantation rendered the Grand Gulf forts irrelevant.³⁴

As the noose tightened around Fortress Vicksburg, the Mississippi Squadron would lose two ironclads, the *Cincinnati*, which was raised to fight again and the *Baron DeKalb*, which still rests below the Yazoo waters. Vicksburg surrendered to General Grant on July 4, 1863. Port Hudson surrendered five days later. The Mississippi River was open to the Union at last.

³³ Ibid., 553, 556–58, 682.

³⁴ Ibid., 607–8, 610–11, 613, 615–23, 625–26; Edwin Cole Bearss, *The Campaign for Vicksburg* (Dayton, OH: Morningside House, 1986), II, 311; U.S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1982), 317.

