

Minor Adventures on the Water

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With the middle of winter bringing stormy weather and bad roads, the armies on land took time to lick their wounds, get rest and supplies and begin to plan for spring operations. Military operations on the water continued year-round, however, and this week there were a couple of interesting small-scale events involving the two navies.

Off the coast of North Carolina, the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron continued to patrol Confederate waters to prevent passage of boats bringing supplies to the beleaguered nation. During this week, a particularly intense storm hit the area off of the Carolinas and on January 13 one of the blockading squadron's ships, the *USS Columbia*, ran aground off Masonboro inlet near Wilmington.

Less than six months before, the ship had been in Confederate service but had been captured on August 3, 1862 while attempting to run the blockade off of Florida. By December the steamer had been outfitted, renamed and pressed into service on the other side of the conflict. After running aground, the ship's commander, Lt. Joseph P. Couthouy, ordered the ship burned to prevent its recapture by the Confederates. After the men had succeeded in destroying the ship, they struggled to get through the rough surf to shore. All forty men aboard survived, but were all captured three days later by the Confederates.

On January 16, there was some action on a western river. A flotilla of Union ships, under the command of Brigadier General Willis Gorman began to make their way up the White River. The flotilla contained several low-draft ironclads built especially for weaving their way through the sometimes tortuous Mississippi tributaries. On January 13, the expedition captured the town

of St. Charles. Leaving the *USS Cincinnati* there, Gorman continued north, capturing DeVall's Bluff on January 18. This town and its neighbor, Des Arc, were prime outposts located on the river and about halfway between Little Rock and Helena. A railroad line linked the two cities to Little Rock and Helena. The *USS Romeo* and *USS Forest Rose* continued on and captured Des Arc on the same day.

Though Gorman was able to capture a significant number of supplies on the expedition, his commanding officer Major General John McClernand, ordered him back downriver as his men were needed there. The two important outposts would return to Confederate control until later in the summer of 1863 when they would be recaptured by Union forces and held for the duration of the war.

Strangely enough, though winter was normally a time for hibernation in land-based warfare, back in Virginia Ambrose Burnside was still convinced that he could take the town of Fredericksburg. He felt this despite the disastrous attempt in mid-December 1862 that led to the slaughter of more than 10,000 Union soldiers. On January 19, he ordered his Army of the Potomac to once again begin a maneuver that would allow them to attack Fredericksburg from multiple directions. Unfortunately for Burnside, there were two things he had not counted on. First, was a tremendous rain storm that began almost as soon as the troops started marching and turned the roads into an impassable quagmire. Second was insubordination in the ranks, as two of his officers had met with Lincoln earlier in the month to describe their feelings about the sorry state of the army and its leadership. These two things together would quickly bring Burnside's command of the Army of the Potomac to an end.