

Episode 125: The War Continues with Fighting on the Water

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Coordination between Army and Naval forces during the war was frequently very imperfect. On the Mississippi in February 1863 Union General Nathaniel Banks and Admiral David Farragut attempted a coordinated operation in which Banks' unseasoned troops would attack Port Hudson from the land which would allow Farragut's ships to slip by on the riverside in the confusion. As a prelude to the operation Banks sent a force to load confederate prisoners being held at New Orleans on ships where they would be transferred to union prison camps at Baton Rouge. British Historian Amanda Foreman describes the result:

“As word spread through the city rebel officers were being escorted onto steamboats, thousands of well-wishers, most of them women and children, ran down to see them off. Mary Sophia Hill was among them. Weeping and cheering, they waved red handkerchiefs in mass defiance of the order against displays of Confederate sympathy. The Union troops soon lost control of the crowd, which heaved and swayed with emotion. Panicking, the Federal officer in charge sent an urgent request for more troops, who arrived with bayonets fixed. They came ‘at a canter,’ recalled Mary. ‘The guns were rammed and pointed at this helpless mass of weakness.’ The women were literally beaten back from the levee. ‘As I never yet ran from an enemy,’ she continued, ‘but always faced them, I walked backwards with others, to some warehouses, where we were again chased by Federal officials in uniform.’

“No one was killed, but there were cuts and broken bones; and with every retelling the officers became more brutal and the danger more desperate. Once again the Northern occupiers had succeeded in presenting themselves in the worst light. Southern newspapers sarcastically labeled the affair the battle of the handkerchiefs.”

A more serious blow to the Union Navy on the Mississippi in February was the sinking of the Federal gunboat Indianola. She was attacked by four Confederate vessels. Rammed seven times by the Queen of the West, the Indianola surrendered and then sank. The water was shallow, however, and the loss of life was not great.

Off the island of St. Thomas in the West Indies U.S.S. Vanderbilt fired on and seized the Peterhoff, a British blockade-runner. The Peterhoff was carrying contraband but her captain claimed she was sailing for Matamoros, Mexico and not for a Confederate port. This nearly caused an international crisis between the North and the British Admiralty. Eventually courts ruled the United States Navy could not halt shipping, no matter the war cargo, into a neutral country's port.

A day after the Vanderbilt action, at Vicksburg, on the Mississippi River, it was the turn of the Confederate Navy to be humbled. That evening, after dark, the Confederate ram Queen of the West, the recent victor in her fight with the Indianola, spotted a huge, dark hulk floating down river from the Federal fleet. It appeared to be a Union effort to float unseen past the defense of Vicksburg. The Confederates attempted to foil this by blowing up one of their own vessels and blocking the channel in front of the Union ship. That was quickly done, so quickly that all that was saved from the sacrificed Confederate vessel was her supplies of wine and liquor. Great was the Confederate embarrassment when it was discovered at dawn that the awesome enemy was an old Union coal barge fitted up by the Federals to resemble an ironclad and sent down the river as a joke.

Next day, Saturday, February 28, 1863, further east, on the Ogeechee River in Georgia, Federal Navy Captain J.L. Worden, who had won fame as the commander of the Monitor the previous spring, was now in command of the new Union monitor Montauk. Worden sailed

unnoticed up the Ogeechee River, south of Savannah, Georgia, and surprised the C.S.S. Nashville, the guard ship at Ft. McAllister. Montauk's accurate shelling ran the Nashville aground, set her on fire and she exploded.

By the end of February, 1863 the weather began to hint of spring and the winter bound armies began to move.