

## **Episode 193: The C.S.S. Alabama**

**Week of June 15-June 21, 1864**

From the late summer of 1862 until the late spring of 1864, one particular Confederate ship wreaked havoc with Union merchant ships across the globe. The *C.S.S. Alabama* was a terror on the high seas, burning sixty-five Union vessels during this period.

The ship was built in England early in 1862 through an arrangement set up by Confederate agent James Bulloch. Bulloch worked out the details through the offices of a British cotton firm that supported the Confederate cause. Although Union sources gathered the information that a ship was being built for the South, Bulloch was able to slip the ship out of Liverpool without incident in late July. He had secured a civilian crew to transfer the vessel to the Azores off of Africa. Two weeks later Bulloch arrived in the Azores with Raphael Semmes who was to be the new ship's captain.

Semmes had been in the U.S. Navy before the war and had promptly joined the Confederate Navy when his home state of Alabama seceded in 1861. During the first year of the war he had successfully captained the *C.S.S. Sumter*, sinking eighteen Union ships. In early 1862, the *Sumter* had been trapped in Gibraltar by the Union navy and Semmes was forced to sell the ship. Now in the summer of 1862 Bulloch tasked Semmes with outfitting and captaining the as yet unnamed new ship. By late August she had been outfitted with numerous cannons and could travel under sail or the power of two steam engines.

Now named the *C.S.S. Alabama* in honor of his home state, the boat was led by Semmes out first in the Atlantic around the Azores and then across to New England. The ship then turned south to the Gulf of Mexico, having her first military action, sinking the *U.S.S. Hatteras* off the

coast of Texas. Traveling from there to the waters off Brazil, then to South Africa, she finally made her way to the Indian Ocean and South Pacific. During this time she sunk or burned dozens of U.S. merchant ships, always making sure the crews were transferred unharmed to neutral ships or shore.

Finally, by June 1864 the *Alabama* had returned to Europe, docking in Cherbourg, France for rest and repairs. Unfortunately, Semmes had been pursued by the *U.S.S. Kearsarge*, which set up outside the neutral harbor and called for reinforcements. Semmes did not wish to have a repeat of his experience two years earlier with the *Sumter* and vowed to fight.

On June 19 the *Alabama* steamed out to meet the *Kearsarge* and the battle began. Traveling in circles around each other, the superior guns and ammunition of the Union vessel began to tell. Semmes did not know until the fight started that the *Kearsarge* had been outfitted with chain mail armor draped over her sides, making her fairly impervious to the Confederate ships guns. A little over an hour after the battle began, Semmes took down his flag in surrender. Although a number of the crew were picked up by the *Kearsarge*, Semmes and many others were picked up by an English yacht and taken to England.

Semmes made his way back to Richmond, Virginia by way of Cuba and Texas and took over the James River Squadron of gunboats protecting the Southern capitol. When Richmond fell, his sailors were turned into infantry and in the last days of the war he served in the Confederate army as a Brigadier General.

The wreck of the *Alabama* was located in the 1980's and since then a number of her guns and other artifacts have been brought to the surface and conserved in museums. During her time at sea, she was responsible for the loss of more than six million dollars in losses, or more than one hundred million dollars in current value.

