

The Naval War Heats Up

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During late August 1861 naval activities increased, both on the western rivers and in Virginia and along the North Carolina coast, while Confederate President Jefferson Davis appointed diplomatic commissioners to represent Confederate interests in Europe.

In the west, naval Captain Andrew Foote was appointed commander of Union vessels of the riverine navy, which would provide invaluable assistance to the Union army in subsequent operations along the Tennessee, Cumberland, and Mississippi Rivers. The fifty-five year old Foote had toiled in the navy since 1822, serving in a variety of positions ashore, as well as in Asia and off the African coast. He commanded a naval vessel that had enforced the slave trade prohibition, and in 1856 he had stormed several forts near Canton, China that had fired on American ships. A no-nonsense career officer, Foote was also noteworthy for his religious conversion in the 1820s, which led him to command the first ship in the navy that prohibited the use of alcohol, and to support elimination of the spirit ration in 1862. He had commanded the Brooklyn Navy Yard at the beginning of the war, but was soon sent to take charge of the flotilla of naval gunboats that were being constructed or converted for use on western rivers.

Other naval activities during this week included the capture of two vessels by pro-Confederate sympathizers in Paducah, Kentucky on August 22, which undoubtedly contributed to the seizure of that location by Union forces within the next two weeks; and the bombardment that took place between two Federal ships, the *Yankee* and the *Release*, and Confederate batteries that had been established at the mouth of Potomac Creek in Virginia. It was an example of the

Confederate effort to harass shipping on the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries, which even included the partial blockade of the Potomac River in an effort to isolate Washington, D.C.

A more significant operation began on August 26, when eight naval and transport vessels carrying 900 army troops left Union-held Hampton Roads, Virginia enroute to Cape Hatteras, North Carolina. The expedition was commanded by Commodore Silas Stringham and General Benjamin Butler. Its objective was the capture of Forts Clark and Hatteras, Confederate-held positions that guarded the entrance to Hatteras Inlet. Reaching their objective the following day, they discovered that the Confederates had abandoned the former position, which the Federals occupied. The naval vessels traded artillery fire with Fort Hatteras, which remained in southern hands, and made plans to commence a full-scale bombardment the following day.

Finally, Confederate President Davis announced the appointment of three commissioners to negotiate with the major European powers. They were Pierre Rost to Spain, James Mason to Great Britain, and John Slidell to France. The goal of the diplomats was to obtain recognition of the Confederate government by the European powers, and also to obtain vital supplies, weapons, and equipment for the southern war effort. Several months later the seizure of Mason and Slidell by the Union navy as they attempted to reach Europe in a British vessel would lead to a diplomatic crisis that nearly brought about war between Great Britain and the United States.