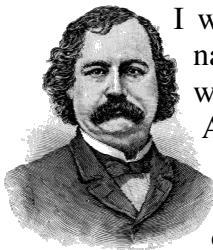




Reminiscences of Lieutenant John Wilkinson, CSN



I was ordered to report to Commodore W.C. Whittle, commanding the naval station at New Orleans, for duty afloat. A powerful fleet of ships of war and bomb vessels, under the command of Commodore (afterwards Admiral) D. G. Farragut, was then assembling at the mouth of the Mississippi, for an attack upon New Orleans, in which a large land force under General Ben Butler (afterwards called the *Beast*) was to cooperate. The citizens were under the impression that the place was impregnable. General J. Duncan¹, commanding Forts Jackson and St. Philip, below the city, was considered one of the best artillerists in the service ; and the land defense was entrusted to General M. Lovell, with a well appointed force under his command. The people of that gay city were occupied as usual in business and pleasure, and continued unconscious of their peril up to the very time when the Federal fleet passed the forts. But the condition of affairs, so far as naval defense was concerned, was lamentable.

The regular C. S. naval fleet consisted of the *CSS Louisiana* (Captain C.F. McIntosh²) and carrying the flag of Commodore Mitchell ; the steamer *McRae* (Captain T.B. Huger), carrying six light 32-pounders and nine-inch pivot gun ; the steamer *Jackson* (Captain F.B. Renshaw), with two pivoted smooth bore 32-pounders ; the small iron plated Ram *Manassas* (Captain A.F. Warley), carrying one 32-pounder carronade in the bow ; and two launches, each carrying a howitzer and a crew of twenty men. There were also present, at the time the passage was forced by the U. S. fleet, two Louisiana State gunboats, viz., the *Governor Moore*, Captain B. Kennon, carrying two 32-pounder rifled guns, and the *General Quitman*, with a similar battery.

These were converted sea steamers, with pine and cotton barricades to protect the more vulnerable part of their machinery. All of the above vessels, with the exception of the *Louisiana* and *Manassas*, were too slightly built for war purposes. The unarmed

¹ J.K. Duncan was a Brigadier-General (*Battles & Leaders*, vol. II, p.35)

² Wilkinson calls "captain" all the confederate officers in charge of a ship. (*id*)

steamboat, *Mozier*³, placed under Commodore J.K. Mitchell's command. In addition to the above force, there were six steamers carrying from one to two guns each, constituting what was called the *River Defense Squadron*, under the command of Captain J.A. Stevenson⁴. These vessels' boilers and machinery were protected by heavy timber barricades, filled in with compressed cotton ; and they were prepared with bar-iron casing around their bows to act as "Rams".

The *Louisiana* was pierced for twelve guns rifled six-inch ; and eight-inch shell guns, three in the bow, three in each broadside, and three in the stern. Her armor consisted of railroad-iron bars securely bolted upon the sides and ends of the long covered box built upon her nearly submerged hull. These sides and ends sloped at an angle of about forty-five degrees ; around the upper deck was a stout bulwark about five feet high, and iron plated inside, to resist grape shot, and afford a protection to the sharp-shooters stationed there in action.

The propelling power consisted of huge wheels, boxed up in the centre of the vessel ; and a propeller on each quarter. A more powerful and efficient ironclad called the *Mississippi* had just been launched from the stocks, but the passage of the forts was affected before her battery could be put on board.

After a few days' service on board the *Jackson*, I was ordered on board the *Louisiana* (as executive officer) then lying alongside the "levee" at New Orleans. Her battery was not mounted ; and the mechanics were at work upon her unfinished armor and machinery. Much was to be done, and with the most limited facilities ; but many obstacles had been surmounted and affairs were progressing favorably, when we received orders from Commodore Whittle to proceed down the river as far as the forts. Our wheels were in working order ; but a great deal was to be done to the propellers, and the crew were still engaged in mounting the guns.

But Commodore Whittle, though cognizant of our condition, was compelled against his judgment, to yield to the urgent telegrams of General Duncan to send the *Louisiana* down the river. We had been unable to man the ship with sailors ; for although many of this class belonged to the various volunteer companies around New Orleans, their commanding officers were not disposed to part with them ; nor were the "jack tars" themselves willing to exchange camp life for the discipline and subordination of the naval service. Our regular crew being too small to man the battery, we gladly accepted the services of the "Crescent Artillery", a fine volunteer company raised in New Orleans. Two river steamboats were assigned to the *Louisiana* for the purpose of towage, if necessary, and for the accommodation of the mechanics who were still at work on board.

We cast off from the "levee" on Sunday, April the 20th. It was a bright day, and a large concourse was assembled to witness our departure. Steam had been got up, and as our big wheels were set in motion in the rapid current of the Mississippi, torrents of water rushed through the crevices in the bulkheads and deluged the gun deck, while the *Louisiana* drifted helplessly down the river, feeling the effect of the wheels no more sensibly than if they were a pair of sculling oars. "*Facilis descensus Averno ; sed revocare gradum, hoc opus, hic labor est*". The aptness of the quotation will be appreciated by the reader who is in at the death of the *Louisiana*. We accomplished our object of getting down to the forts about seventy miles below the city, thanks to the current and our two transports ; but our artillerists were in a shabby plight while trying to work the guns knee-deep in water.

³ *Mozier ou Mosher.(id)*

⁴ *Capt. (Louisiana State Navy) J.A. Stephenson according to the Battles & leaders, vol. II, p.75.*

Securing the *Louisiana* by hawsers to the left bank of the river near Fort St. Philip, on the morning of the 21st, we continued our labors upon the machinery and on the battery. The bombardment of the forts had been in progress for several days and nights, and the shells from the fleet were thrown with beautiful and destructive precision (some of them occasionally falling in close proximity to the *Louisiana*) while the bomb vessels themselves were beyond the range of the fort's guns. The naval officers were quite sure that an attempt would soon be made by Admiral Farragut to force the passage, and that so far as the naval strength was concerned, it was apparent our means were inadequate to prevent it.

Commodore Mitchell, on our arrival below, had delivered to Captain Stevenson written orders from General Lovell requiring him to place all the "*River Defense Squadron*" under the Commodore's orders. Captain Stevenson, on receiving these instructions, addressed a written communication to Commodore Mitchell, to the effect that all of the officers and crew under his command had entered the service with the distinct understanding that they were not to be placed under the command of naval officers ; and that, while willing to cooperate with our forces, he would receive no orders from the Commodore nor allow any vessel under his command to do so ; reserving to himself the right of obeying or disobeying any orders the Commodore might issue. With this assumption of absolute independence, Commodore Mitchell's position was extremely embarrassing, but he did all that was then in his power. Not knowing at what moment an attack would be made, he endeavored to agree with Captain Stevenson upon a plan of cooperation ; and he states in his official report made after the action that Captain Stevenson "*seemed disposed zealously to second these objects in many respects*".

A few days previous to the action, I had been sent down the river to communicate, under a flag of truce, with one of the ships of the squadron ; and in the course of conversation with my old friend Captain J. DeCamp, the officer in command of a division of the fleet had been informed by him that they could force the obstructions across the river whenever they pleased, and intended doing so when they were ready. The interview took place in his cabin ; and although I indignantly repudiated the idea, I could not help feeling how confidently I would stake life and reputation upon the issue if our situations were reversed. I had noticed many familiar faces among the officers and crew as I passed along the deck a few moments before.

Every one was at his station ; the guns cast loose for action ; and it was in the nature of things, that I should contrast this gallant man of war and all this efficiency and discipline with the iron bound box and crew of "horse marines" which I had just left. But it was in no spirit of depreciation of the gallantry of my comrades, for I was quite sure that they would stand to their guns. The wretched "bowl of Gotham" which had no efficient motive power, and which could not even be got under way, when anchored, without slipping the chain cable, caused the misgivings. It is no disparagement to the prowess of the U. S. fleet which passed the forts, to assert, that they never could have successfully opposed our forces ; but the battle was won quite as effectually when they succeeded in passing beyond the range of the guns of the forts and the *Louisiana*.

After our official business was closed, DeCamp and I began to talk of the war ; and he expressed the opinions then entertained, beyond a doubt, by a majority of U. S. army and naval officers. They believed it to be the intention of the Government to bring the seceding States back into the Union, with their rights and institutions unimpaired. Since then a little leaven has leavened the whole lump, and the former doctrine of the extreme abolitionists has long become the creed of the dominant party. But some facts should be borne in mind by those who denounce slavery as the sum of all villainies ; for instance,

that the slave code of Massachusetts was the earliest in America ; the cruelest in its provisions and has never been formally repealed ; that the Plymouth settlers, according to history, maintained “*that the white man might own and sell the Negro and his offspring forever*” ; that Mr. Quincy, a representative from Massachusetts during the war of 1812, threatened the House of Congress that the North would secede “*peaceably if we can, forcibly if we must*” unless their demands for peace were acceded to ; and lastly that the abolitionists of a later age denounced the Constitution and canonized John Brown for committing a number of murders and endeavoring to incite servile insurrection in time of peace. Truly “*tempora mutantur*”, etc.

The river obstructions, above alluded to, consisted of a line of sunken vessels, and of heavy pieces of timber chained together, and extending from bank to bank. A few days before the attack was made, General Duncan was speaking rather confidently of his barricade, when Warley remarked, “*General, if I commanded a fleet below, and my commission lay above your obstructions, I would come up and get it*”. Most of us belonging to that little naval fleet, knew that Admiral Farragut would dare to attempt what any man would ; and for my own part, I had not forgotten that while I was under his command during the Mexican War, he had proposed to Commodore Perry, then commanding the Gulf Squadron, and urged upon him, the enterprise of capturing the strong fort of San Juan de Ulloa at Vera Cruz by boarding. Ladders were to be constructed and tied up along the attacking ships’ masts ; and the ships to be towed along side the walls by the steamers of the squadron. Here was a much grander prize to be fought for ; and every day of delay was strengthening his adversaries.

It was the general belief, indeed, at the time, that the admiral was in daily communication with the city by means of spies ; and the public indignation was so deeply roused against Mr. Tift, the constructor of the *Mississippi*, (“a Northern man with Southern principles”) who failed from time to time in launching that vessel as he had appointed to do, that he was in danger of “Lynch law” ; and it is at least a singular coincidence that the naval attack was made immediately after that powerful vessel was launched, and before the guns could be put on board. But the idea of any collusion between Mr. Tift and the enemy, or of treachery on the part of the former, was never entertained, I believe, except by a few bigoted zealots, blinded by hate and passion against every one born north of the Potomac.

This class, which ought to have acted more fairly, found many followers among the multitude ; from which little charity or justice can ever be expected. Nearly 1900 years ago the “plebes”, influenced by their leaders, demanded the release of a robber and murderer and crucified the Savior of mankind ; and history further informs us that 500 years before that era, a Greek citizen could be banished without special trial, accusation, or defense ; and that Aristides was sent into exile because people were tired of hearing him always called “the Just”. Social ostracism will continue to exist till the millennium. The gentlemen of northern birth who were so unfortunate as to occupy prominent positions during the war, were mercilessly held up to scorn and distrust, if they failed to come up to the public expectation. In truth, they occupied trying positions ; being regarded by many as aliens and mercenaries. “*Mens conscia recti*” will support us under many trials ; but it does not furnish armor of proof against the “poor man’s scorn, the proud man’s contumely”.

The interval between the 21st and 24th of April was occupied by Commodore Mitchell in organizing the force under his command, and in endeavoring to arrange some concert of action with the *River Defense* gunboats.

On board the *Louisiana* every effort was made to complete the works upon the propellers, and in mounting the battery, on which the mechanics worked night and day.

Our “Crescent artillery”, a detachment of artillery from the forts under Lieutenant Dixon and Captain Ryan’s company of Sharpshooters supplied the deficiencies in our crew. The Commodore was unsuccessful in his efforts to induce Captain Stevenson to employ one of his gunboats below the obstructions at night, to watch the U. S. fleet ; and we had no vessel suitable for that purpose ; the only one which would have answered (the *Jackson*) having been sent, with one of the launches, to watch the U. S. land forces near the Quarantine station, five miles above us. The only launch which remained to us was sent, by the Commodore’s orders, below the obstructions every night, but the officer in command afterwards proved either a traitor or a coward, failing to make the concerted signal upon the approach of the fleet, and never reporting himself on board the *Louisiana* afterwards.

General Duncan urged upon the Commodore, the first or second day after our arrival below, to take a new position with the *Louisiana* at the river bank just below Fort St. Philip, and under cover of its guns, from whence she might open fire with effect upon the mortar fleet. The Commodore declined the proposition, and his action was sustained in a consultation with all the commanding officers of the C. S. naval forces present, on the grounds, “*first, that the battery of the Louisiana was not in a condition for service ; second, that the completion of the propeller and other mechanical work in progress, was indispensable to the efficiency of the vessel, and that it would be interrupted if she were placed under fire ; and third, that placing the Louisiana in a position to receive the fire of the enemy, before her own battery could be served with effect, would be improperly hazarding, not only her own safety, but the security of the passage between the forts on which rested the possession of New Orleans*”.⁵

But on the afternoon of the 23d the work had so far progressed as to encourage the belief that the vessel might be moved to the point proposed, and the Commodore, after making a reconnoissance, had decided to do so, and notified General Duncan of this intention. Captain Stevenson was to assist with two of his gunboats which were especially well adapted to this purpose.

Commodore Mitchell, in his official report to the C. S. Secretary of the Navy, intimates that “*he fully appreciated and admitted the importance of the proposed change of position for the Louisiana, but contends that the state of the battery, independent of other weighty reasons, was sufficient to prevent its being made previous to the engagement of the 24th*”.⁶ One of these consists in the fact, that owing to the peculiar construction of the *Louisiana*’s portholes, her guns could not be elevated more than five degrees. The mortar fleet would have been beyond their range.

On the night of April 23d, the bursting of the shells was as incessant as usual. Toward daylight of the 24th, an ominous calm of brief duration was broken by the first broadside of the advancing fleet, which had approached so rapidly as to remove and pass the obstructions undiscovered, and before the launch on picket duty could get back to our fleet. For a few minutes the roar of the guns was deafening ; but objects were so obscured by the darkness and the dense smoke, that we could only fire, with effect, at the flashes of the ship’s guns. The *Louisiana*’s three bow guns (one rifled seven-inch and two seven-inch shell guns) and her three starboard broadside guns (a rifled six-inch and two eight-inch shell guns) were all that could be brought to bear during the engagement ; for being moored to the river bank, the stern and port broadside guns were useless. The U. S. fleet came up in two divisions, delivering their broadsides in rapid

⁵ From Commodore Mitchell’s official report to the Secretary of the C. S. Navy, dated August 19th, 1862.

⁶ Extract from Commodore Mitchell’s official report dated August 19th, 1862. “*The following is believed to be a correct list of the vessels that passed up by Forts Jackson and St. Philip during the engagement of the 24th April ; mounting in the aggregate one hundred and eighty-four guns, viz.,*

succession. One of the ships was set on fire by one of the fireboats (a number of which had been prepared) but the flames were speedily extinguished. It is said that the unarmed tug *Mozier*, under her heroic commander, Sherman, while towing a fireboat alongside a heavy ship, was sunk by a broadside delivered at short range, all on board perishing. One of the largest ships, believed to be the *Hartford*, came in contact with our stern, and received the fire of our three bow guns while in this position, returning a broadside, but she soon swung clear of us and continued on her way up the river.

When day fairly broke, the storm had passed away, leaving wreck and ruin in its wake. The river banks were dotted, here and there, with burning steamers, and a large portion of the U.S. fleet had succeeded in getting beyond the forts. A few vessels of the attacking force had failed to pass the obstructions before daylight, and were driven back by the guns from the forts. The *Louisiana* and the *McRae* were the only vessels left to the Confederates ; but the former was almost intact, her armor proving a sufficient defense against the broadsides, even when delivered at close range.

The eight-inch shells of the *Hartford* buried themselves about half their diameter in our armor, and crumbled into fragments. All of our casualties occurred on the spar deck; our gallant commander being mortally wounded there ; and many of the mechanics, who were quartered on board the tenders alongside of us, were killed or wounded. The *McRae* and the *Manassas* were in the stream in time to take an active part in the conflict, the former being considerably cut up. The *Manassas* struck two vessels with her prow, but did not succeed in sinking either. Having followed the fleet some distance up the river, and being hard pressed and seriously damaged, she was run ashore and abandoned. She shortly afterwards floated off and drifting down the river, sank between the forts.

The Louisiana State gunboat *Governor Moore* made a gallant fight, sinking the U. S. gunboat *Verona*. Kennon, in his official report, states his loss at fifty-seven killed and thirteen wounded out of a crew of ninety-three. He ran his vessel ashore when she was in a sinking condition, and set fire to her with his own hand. The *River Defense* gunboats, with the exception of the *Resolute*, were either destroyed by fire of the enemy's fleet, or by their own crews.

The *Resolute* was discovered ashore, after the action, about a mile above Fort Jackson and abandoned by her crew. Lieutenant Alden, with a party from the *McRae*, took possession of her, and endeavored to get her afloat as she was very little injured, but being attacked by one of the gunboats from above, which succeeded in putting several shots through her hull at the water line, Alden was compelled to abandon her after setting her on fire. Among the mortally wounded on board the *McRae* was her commander T. B. Huger.

The *Defiance*, one of the *River Defense* gunboats, escaped without material injury. She was turned over to the command of Commodore Mitchell by Captain Stevenson on the 26th, without any of her officers and crew, who refused to remain in her, and went ashore.⁷

Hartford, steamer, 28 guns, 1st class sloop
Richmond, 28 guns
Brooklyn, 28 guns
Pensacola, 28 guns
Mississippi, 21 guns
Iroquois, 10 guns, 2d class sloop

⁷ Extract from Commodore Mitchell's official report, dated Aug. 19th, 1862.

Oneida, 10 guns
Varuna, 11 guns
Cayuga, 5 guns
Penola, 5 guns
Wissahickon, 5 guns
Winona, 5 guns

How any controversy could arise as to which branch of the U. S. Service deserves the credit of the capture of New Orleans is a matter of wonder to those who were present at the time. The following article from the *Richmond Enquirer* of September 10th, 1875, written by an eyewitness of many of the scenes in the city, which he describes, would seem conclusively to establish the fact that the navy alone achieved the capture.

The question has again been raised as to whether the army or the navy is entitled to the credit of having captured New Orleans from the Confederates in April or May, 1862. It has been a mooted point in history ever since the event happened, and its discussion has caused no little angry feeling between the two branches of the service. Ben. Butler, of course, laid claim to the honors of the capture, and proclaimed himself "the hero" of New Orleans, completely overshadowing Farragut and his fleet, and the lying histories of the day, written in the Radical interest on the other side of the line, have perpetuated the fraud.

No citizen of New Orleans who personally knows anything of the circumstances of the fall of the city into the hands of the Federals has ever had any doubts as to who was or is entitled to the credit ; but the persistent efforts of Butler and his friends to claim the lion's share in that exploit, have at last called out the Hon. Gideon Welles, Secretary of the Navy in Mr. Lincoln's Cabinet, as the champion of Admiral Farragut and his gallant tars. In the course of an article in the *Hartford Times*, Mr. Welles shows that "*In January, 1862, the plan for the reduction of the forts below New Orleans and the capture of the city was fully matured in the Navy Department, Farragut receiving orders in detail for the work on the 20th of that month ; that the memorable passage of the forts was made, and the surly submission of the Mayor of New Orleans received by Farragut on the 26th of April, formal possession being immediately taken and the United States flag displayed on the public buildings ; that the army was not only absent alike from the plan and the execution of this great movement, but did not appear until May 1, when General Butler's troops arrived, and on the day following entered upon the occupation of the city captured by Farragut*".

Quite correct, Mr. ex-Secretary. Farragut passed the forts as stated, with the *Hartford* and one or two other vessels, destroyed the ram *Manassas*, and the other Confederate vessels of war, after a most desperate battle, in which at least one of his best ships was sunk, and then made his way in his flagship unmolested up the river. He arrived alone in front of New Orleans on the 26th of April, and at noon brought his guns to bear on the city at the head of Girod street. He immediately dispatched Lieutenant T. Bailey with a flag of truce to the authorities demanding the surrender, and giving them thirty-six hours in which to reply, at the expiration of which time he should open fire and bombard the place, if an answer favorable to his demand were not received.

The city at this time had been partially evacuated by General Lovell and his troops, and all authority had been surrendered by the military to the mayor. The terms submitted by Farragut were discussed for fully twenty-four hours by the Council, assembled at the Mayor's office, and all this time the city was in the hands of a wild, reckless and excited mob of citizens, while people everywhere were flying or preparing for flight, many even in such haste as to leave their houses open and valuables exposed

to the depredations of servants or the mob. Perhaps no more fearful scene of confusion was ever witnessed outside of Paris when in the throes of a periodic revolution. It was a novelty then for an American city to be captured or to fall into the hands of an enemy, and the people had some very queer notions about defending it to the last, and fighting the enemy with all sorts of weapons amid its ruins.

It was with the utmost difficulty the police could protect Bailey and his middies with their flag of truce. But on the following day, and before the time of grace expired, the Council determined that as they had no means of defense against the enemy's ships, which held the city at the mercy of their guns, it was best to enter into negotiations for the surrender. Farragut then demanded that as a sign of submission the Confederate flag should be hauled down from all points where displayed in the city and replaced by the stars and stripes, and in the meantime he would send a battery with his sailors and marines ashore to maintain order. But no one was found in the city to take the Confederate flags down, and hoist the starry banner in their place ; so a battery of ships' guns was landed and hauled through the streets till it reached the City Hall, and there it was placed in position to cover every point of approach. A young midddy, apparently about fifteen years of age, then made his appearance at the entrance of the City Hall, bearing a United States flag.

He was admitted without opposition, and was shown the way to the top of the building. The lad ascended to the roof, and in full view of an assembled multitude of thousands in the streets and on the housetops, deliberately undid the halyards and hauled down the Confederate, or rather Louisiana State flag ; then replacing it with the one he carried, hoisted it to the peak of the staff in its place, and the capture of New Orleans by the navy was complete. Many who witnessed the act of this daring boy trembled for his life, as a rifle shot from any of the houses surrounding, or even from the street, would have proved fatal and put an end to his young life at any moment. So excited was the crowd in the street, when the midddy came down, and so fierce the thirst for vengeance upon any object that might present itself, that it was found necessary to hurry him into a close carriage and drive with all speed through back streets, to keep clear of the pressing mob, who, in the blindness of their passion, would perhaps have sacrificed the youngster, had they caught him, to appease their rage.

After this the city began to quiet down. The foreign residents formed themselves into a police and took charge of the streets ; and had succeeded pretty well in restoring order, when, on the 2d of May, Butler landed at the levee from his transports, and marched to the St. Charles, where he established his headquarters and took formal possession of the city. Still he found it no easy matter to subdue the spirit of a people who did not hesitate to jeer at his soldiers or jostle them from the sidewalks as they marched through the streets. But he soon enough became master of the situation, and made the most for himself out of what Farragut had so readily placed in his hands. The navy was certainly entitled to all the credit of the capture ; one ship in front of the city with open ports was enough, it did what the entire army of Butler, had it been ten times as numerous, could never have accomplished. New Orleans never would have been taken by the army alone but the guns of a sloop-of-war in front of an open city are conclusive and irresistible arguments. If it was heroism to capture that city the Confederacy will always be as free to admit that Farragut was the hero of New Orleans, as that Butler was the tyrant, robber, and oppressor of its conquered people.

After landing the wounded, we continued the work upon the machinery of the *Louisiana*, buoyed up by the hope of soon being able to retrieve our disasters. Our number was increased by officers and men who had escaped from some of the

abandoned vessels. Many of them, to obtain shelter from the shells and canister shot of the Federal fleet, had taken refuge in the “bayous” which lie not far from the river in many places ; and they looked like half drowned rats as they came on board the *Louisiana*. One of the officers gave a ludicrous account of a poor girl, who had fled from her home on the river bank as the fleet was passing, with no clothing except her night dress, and no earthly possession but a lap-dog which she held in her clasped arms. She had sought the same place of refuge and as the shells and shot would whistle over her head she would dive like a duck under the water ; and every time she rose above the surface, the lap-dog would sneeze and whimper a protest against the frequent submersions. The officer at last persuaded her to let him take charge of her draggled pet and finally had the pleasure of seeing her safe back to her home before leaving her.

During the night of the 27th after unremitting labor, our machinery was at last completed, and we prepared to make the attempt to go up the river in pursuit of the fleet. Commodore Mitchell notified General Duncan of his purpose, and the latter seemed sanguine of a successful issue, assuring the Commodore of his ability to hold the forts for weeks. Orders were issued on board the *Louisiana* for the crew to have an early breakfast, and every thing to be in readiness to cast off from the river bank a little after sunrise. The situation justified the hopes entertained by us of at least partially retrieving our fortunes, when, shortly after day-light, an officer came across the river to us from Fort Jackson, with General Duncan’s compliments, and to say that General D. was about to surrender the forts to Commodore Porter.⁸

In nautical parlance, we were “*truck flat aback*” by this astounding intelligence. With the forts as a base of operations, we might repeat the effort, if the first were unsuccessful ; and would be able to repair damages, if necessary, under shelter of their guns ; but with their surrender we were helpless. The capture of the *Louisiana* would then become, indeed, a mere question of time, without the firing of a gun ; for we would have been unable to replenish our supplies either of provisions or coal when exhausted. The most sanguine spirits on board, in the light of their experience of the motive power of the *Louisiana*, did not believe that we could accomplish more than the control of that portion of the river within the range of our guns ; nor that the vessel could ever do much more than stem the rapid current of the Mississippi. The surrender of New Orleans was, indeed, inevitable ; but even that catastrophe would not involve complete possession of the river by the enemy while we held the forts near its mouth.

The gigantic efforts afterwards made by the Federal forces for the capture of Vicksburg showed the vital importance attached by the United States Government to the possession of the fortified positions on the Mississippi, while the equally desperate exertions made by the Confederacy to hold it, demonstrated our consciousness of its value to us. “*During the night of Sunday the 27th we had so far succeeded in operating the propellers that we expected early the next day to make a fair trial of them in connection with the paddle wheels, when at daylight an officer sent by Gen. Duncan came on board to inform us that many of the garrison at Fort Jackson had deserted during the night ; that serious disturbances had occurred ; and that the disaffection of the men was believed to be general on account of what appeared to them to have become the desperate character of the defense etc*”.⁹

Commodore Mitchell ordered his boat and proceeded with all haste to remonstrate with General Duncan ; but all was unavailing ; the General informing the Commodore that he had already dispatched a boat to the United States fleet, offering to surrender his

⁸ *idem*

⁹ *idem*

command under certain conditions ; disclaiming, in the offer, all control over the forces afloat. The Commodore's boat had scarcely got back to the *Louisiana*, when the quartermaster on duty reported one of the ships of the fleet below steaming up the river towards us, with a white flag flying at the masthead. General Duncan, it is said, stated to the citizens of New Orleans a few days afterward, that a large number of his guns had been spiked by the mutineers of the garrison ; and that he had no alternative but to surrender.

A hasty council of war was held on board the *Louisiana*, during which it was decided to transfer the officers and crew to our two tenders and to burn the ship. This was speedily carried into effect, and the two transports steamed across the river as the flames burst through the *Louisiana's* hatchway.¹⁰ Those who wished to make the attempt to escape through the bayous, received permission to do so ; and a few of the number, familiar with the locality, succeeded in evading the Federal pickets, and getting within the Confederate lines. The rest of us were entrapped ; passing several hours of very unpleasant suspense, while the forts were being surrendered. It was a grand spectacle when the flames reached the *Louisiana's* magazine. The hawsers, securing her to the river-bank, having been burnt in two, she floated out into the stream a few minutes before the explosion ; and at the moment of its occurrence, a column of pure white smoke shot rapidly high into the air from the blazing hull, wreathing itself at the top into the shape of a snow-white "cumulus" cloud ; and in a few seconds afterwards, huge fragments of the wreck showered down, far and wide, upon the river and the adjacent shore. The *Louisiana* had disappeared before the deafening report attending the catastrophe reached our ears.

"I at once returned on board and called a council of war composed of Lieutenants Wilkinson, (commanding) W. H. Ward, A. F. Warley. Wm. C. Whittle, Jr. R. J. Bowen, Arnold, F. M. Harris, and George N. Shryock, by whom, in consequence of the enemy's having the entire command of the river above and below us, with an overwhelming force, and who was in the act of obtaining quiet and undisturbed possession of Forts Jackson and St. Philip, with all their material defenses intact, with ordnance, military stores and provisions, thus cutting the Louisiana off from all succor or support ; and her having on board not more than ten days' provisions, her surrender would be rendered certain in a brief period by the simple method of blockade ; and that, in the condition of her motive power and defective steering apparatus, and the immediate danger of attack, she was very liable to capture, it was unanimously recommended that the Louisiana be destroyed, forthwith, to prevent her falling into the hands of the enemy, while it remained in our power to prevent it ; first retiring to our tenders".¹¹

Immediately after the United States flag was hoisted upon the forts, the steamer *Harriet Lane* steamed slowly toward us, and sent a shot over our heads as a summons to haul down the Confederate flag, which was then flying at our peak. The demand was promptly complied with, and we were prisoners of war.

Upon the pretext that we had violated the usages of war by burning the *Louisiana* while a flag of truce was flying, we were for a time subjected to unusual humiliations ; learning afterwards, indeed, that Commodore Porter had recommended to the Secretary of the Navy a continuance of harsh treatment toward us upon our arrival at Fort Warren, where we were destined. The reply to the charge brought against us is obvious, viz., we were no parties to the flag of truce ; nor were we included in the terms of the surrender ;

¹⁰ *idem*

¹¹ *idem*

General Duncan treating only for the garrisons under his command, and expressly disclaiming any connection with us.

We were kept for a few days in close confinement on board the United States gunboat *Clifton*, and were transferred from her on the 7th of May to the frigate *Colorado*, lying off the mouth of the Mississippi.¹² Here we found Kennon, who had been consigned to a "lower deep" than ourselves. He was placed under a sentry's charge behind a canvas screen on the opposite side of the gun deck from us ; and strict orders were given that no one should hold any communication with him. The charge against him was, that he had caused the death of some of his wounded crew by setting fire to his ship before their removal, a charge denied by him ; but even if it were true, or admitted, that some of his crew were unable to escape, he was only responsible to his own government. In a few days, however, he was released from solitary confinement, and many restrictions were removed from all of us. But humiliations or physical discomforts weighed as a feather upon our spirits compared with our reflections upon the consequences of the disaster which we had witnessed ; and our consciousness that this sad fate had been brought upon the country chiefly by treachery and want of concert. And, indeed, the extent of the disaster could scarcely be exaggerated. It gave the United States Government possession of the State of Louisiana, the almost complete control of the Mississippi river, and separated Texas and Arkansas from the rest of the Confederacy for the remainder of the war.

On the 9th of May we were transferred from the *Colorado* to the steamer *Rhode Island*, bound to Fort Warren. On board of this vessel we were "tabooed" even more completely by the officers, than on board the *Colorado* ; for the *Rhode Island* was officered, with the single exception, I believe, of her captain, by volunteers, who were not connected with us by any associations of friendship or congeniality of taste. The harsh order to hold no intercourse with us, had been evaded or violated, "sub rosa," on board the *Colorado* by old friends and shipmates. On board the *Rhode Island*, much to our satisfaction, it was strictly obeyed ; for we would have lost our patience to be "interviewed" by fledgling naval heroes, many of whom had reached the quarter deck through the hawseholes.

Upon one occasion, many years ago, when the question of increasing the United States Navy was under discussion by Congress, a rough western member, opposed to the measure, stated that his section of the country could supply droves of young officers whenever they were needed. The United States Government must have "corralled" lots of youngsters, without regard to their fitness or capacity, to send on board the ships of war during our civil conflict. The "noble commander" of the *Rhode Island* most of us had known of old as a prim little precisian, and a great stickler for etiquette, and by no means a bad fellow ; but so strict a constructionist that he would probably have refused to recognize his grandfather, if it were against orders. But he had a humane disposition under his frigid exterior ; and allowed us all the comfort and privileges compatible with discipline and safety.

¹² *The first and only time that I ever saw the notorious General B. F. Butler, who subsequently claimed for himself and the troops under his command, the honor of capturing New Orleans, was on board the "Clifton." He took passage in her to the city. No one who has ever looked upon that unique countenance can ever forget it ; and as his glance rested for a moment upon us, each one conceived himself to be the special object of the General's regard ; for owing to his peculiar visual organs, that distinguished individual seems to possess the Argus like faculty of looking steadily at several persons at one and the same time. With the pride that apes humility, or perhaps with the eccentricity of genius, he affected, upon the occasion, a rough costume ; wearing a slouch hat, and having his trousers tucked inside of his soiled boots ; and he carried in his hand a long stick like a pilgrim's staff. He preceded his troops to the city, however, and might therefore, with equal propriety and regard for truth, claim the sole glory of its capture.*

We touched at Fortress Monroe ; and while the vessel was at anchor there I received a gratifying evidence that this fratricidal war had not destroyed all kindly feelings between former friends and messmates. The executive officer of the *Rhode Island* called me aside to say that a friend wished to see me in his state-room ; and as he did not mention the name, I was surprised to find myself warmly greeted by Albert Smith. We had served together during the Mexican war, and our cruise had not been an uneventful one ; for the vessel to which we were attached (the *Perry*) after considerable service in the Mexican Gulf, was dismasted and wrecked, during one of the most terrific hurricanes that ever desolated the West India Islands.

Thirty-nine vessels, out of forty-two, which lay in the harbor of Havana, foundered at their anchors, or were driven ashore ; all of the light-houses along the Florida reef were destroyed, and hundreds of persons perished. The *Perry* lost all of her boats, her guns, except two, were thrown overboard, and she escaped complete destruction almost by a miracle. She encountered the hurricane off Havana, and after scudding for many hours under bare poles, describing a circle as the wind continued to veer in the cyclone, she passed over the Florida reef with one tremendous shock as she hung for a moment upon its rocky crest.

Her masts went by the board, but we had passed in a moment from a raging sea into smooth water. Captain Blake, who commanded her, achieved the feat of rigging jury masts with his crew, and carrying the vessel to the Philadelphia navy yard for repairs. Albert Smith and I had not met for many years. He offered me any service in his power, and pressed me to accept at least a pecuniary loan. The kind offer, although declined, was gratefully remembered ; and I was glad, too, to find that he, in common with many others, who remained to fight under the old flag, could appreciate the sacrifices made by those who felt equally bound, by all the truest and best feelings of our nature, to defend their homes and firesides.

On our arrival at Fort Warren we were assigned quarters in one of the casemates. Little more than a year had passed away since I had planted a signal staff upon its parapet to angle upon being then engaged, as chief of a hydrographic surveying party, in surveying the approaches to Boston Harbor. Then its garrison consisted of a superannuated sergeant whose office was a sinecure ; now it held an armed garrison, who drilled and paraded every day, with all the "pomp and circumstance" of war, to the patriotic tune of "*John Brown's body lies a-moulding in the grave, but his spirit is marching on*" ; and it was crowded with southern prisoners of war.

For a few days, in pursuance of Commodore David D. Porter's policy, we were closely confined ; but all exceptional restrictions were then removed and we fell into the monotonous routine of prison life. The following correspondence took place previous to the removal of the restrictions, and explains the reason of their withdrawal.

FORT WARREN, Boston Harbor, May 25, 1862.

"Sir, I was much surprised last evening on being informed by Colonel Dimmick that Lieutenants Wilkinson, Warley, Ward, Whittle and Harris, together with myself, have been, by your order, denied the "privileges and courtesies that are extended to other prisoners," on the ground that the act of burning the Confederate States Battery *Louisiana*, late under my command, was held by the United States Navy Department as "infamous." In my letter to the Department, dated on board of the United States Steamer *Rhode Island*, Key West, May 14th, 1862, and forwarded through Commander Trenchard on the arrival of that vessel in Hampton Roads, together with a copy of my letter to Flag officer Farragut, and his reply thereto, I felt assured that all the facts

connected with the destruction of the *Louisiana* were placed in such a light as not to be mistaken, nor my motives misconstrued. To render the affair still more clear I enclose herewith a memorandum of W. C. Whittle Jr., Confederate States Navy, who was the bearer of my message to Commodore Porter respecting my fears that the magazine of the *Louisiana* had not been effectually drowned. With all these statements forwarded by me to the United States Navy Department I am perfectly willing to rest the case with impartial and unprejudiced minds, as well as with my own Government, satisfied that nothing has been done by the foregoing officers, nor myself, militating at all against the strictest rules of military honor and usage.”

“Though I will not affect an indifference to the personal annoyance to us by the action of the United States Navy Department in our case as prisoners of war, yet my chief solicitude is to have placed on file in that office such a statement of facts as will, on a fair investigation, vindicate all the officers of the Confederate States Navy concerned from the odium of infamous conduct unjustly attempted to be fixed upon them by those of the United States Navy ; against which and the infliction of punishment as directed by the Navy Department I enter my solemn protest.”

“I most emphatically assert that the *Louisiana*, when abandoned and fired by my order, was not only not “turned adrift” or intended to injure the United States forces as charged by Commander Porter ; but that she was actually left secured to the opposite bank of the river and distant quite three-fourths of a mile from the said forces, for the very reason that they were flying a flag of truce, and for that reason I dispatched the warning message to Commander Porter respecting the magazine. That it is not only the right, but the duty, of an officer to destroy public property to prevent its falling into the hands of an enemy does not admit of question ; and in addition to all which, it must not be overlooked that the forces under my command flew no flag of truce, and that I was not in any way a party to the surrender of Forts Jackson and St. Philip.”

I have the honor to be Very respectfully your obedient servant,

(Signed)

JNO. K. MITCHELL, Commander C. S. Navy.

* * *

Hon. GIDEON WELLES,
Secretary of the Navy, Washington, D. C.

Copy in Substance.

NAVY DEPARTMENT, WASHINGTON, May 29, 1862.

“Sir, The explanations of Commodore J. K. Mitchell are satisfactory, and the restrictions imposed on him and his associates by the department’s order of the 2d instant will be removed, and they will be treated as prisoners of war. This does not relieve Beverly Kennon from the restrictions imposed on him.”

(Signed)

GIDEON WELLES.

* * *

Colonel JUSTIN DIMMICK,
Commanding Fort Warren, Boston. (Copy)

NAVY DEPARTMENT, June 25, 1862.

“Sir, The letter of John K. Mitchell of the 20th inst., concerning the restrictions imposed on you, by order of this Department, at Fort Warren, has been received. Will you please furnish the Department with the particulars of the destruction of the gunboat of which you had command in the engagement below New Orleans, with wounded men on board.”

“I am respectfully your obedient servant,”

(Signed)
GIDEON WELLES.

* * *

BEVERLY KENNON, Fort Warren, Boston. (Copy)

FORT WARREN, BOSTON, June 28, 1862.

Hon. GIDEON WELLES,
Secretary of the Navy, Washington, D. C.

“Sir, Colonel Dimmick, the commander of this post, delivered to me yesterday a letter signed by you under date of June 25th directed to me as “Beverly Kennon” and referring to a communication addressed to you on the 20th inst. by my superior officer, Commander J. K. Mitchell, of the Confederate States Navy, whom you are pleased to designate as “John K. Mitchell.”

“The purport of your letter is a request that I will furnish your Department of the United States Government with the “particulars of the destruction of the gunboat of which I had command in the engagement below New Orleans with wounded men on board.”

“When I destroyed and left the vessel which I had commanded on the occasion referred to, all the wounded men had been removed, the most of them lowered into boats by my own hands. I was, myself, the last person to leave the vessel. Any statements which you may have received to the contrary are wholly without foundation.”

“It would not be proper, under any circumstances, that I should report to you the “particulars” of her destruction ; that being a matter which concerns my own Government exclusively, and with which yours can have nothing to do. Should any charges be made against me, however, of which you have a right to take cognizance under the laws of war, I will with pleasure, respond to any respectful communication which you may address me on the subject.”

“Indeed I shall be glad of the opportunity to vindicate my character as an officer from the unjust and unfounded imputations which have been cast upon it in the connection to which you allude, and upon the faith of which I have already been disparaged by unusual restrictions and confinements, here and elsewhere, since I have been a prisoner of war, without having been furnished an opportunity for such vindication. But your

letter of the 20th inst. so studiously denies, both to Commander Mitchell and myself, not only our official designations, but those of common courtesy, that while I am unwilling to believe you would intentionally offer an indignity to prisoners of war in your power, I can not now make further reply without failing in respect to myself as well as to my superior officer and Government.”

“I am Sir, very respectfully, your obedient servant,”

(Signed)

BEVERLY KENNON,

Commander in Provisional Navy of the State of Louisiana in the Confederate service.

The restrictions were removed from Kennon in a few days after the close of this correspondence. Many distinguished political prisoners were at that time confined at Fort Warren ; and all of the officers captured at Fort Donelson. Among the former class, were those members of the Maryland Legislature, and of the Baltimore City Council, who had been arrested and imprisoned by the United States Government for alleged treason. It was my good fortune to be invited into this mess.

It is not my purpose to inflict upon the reader a detailed account of prison life during the war, which has been described by far abler pens than mine. All the members of our mess took their turns, either at carving or waiting upon the table, and guests were never better served. The graceful and accomplished old Commodore B. and General T. shone conspicuous as carvers ; while Colonels, Majors and Captains, with spotless napkins on their arms, anticipated every wish of the guests at the table.

Colonel Dimmick was honored and beloved by the prisoners for his humanity, and he and his family will ever be held in affectionate remembrance by them ; many of us having received special acts of kindness, while suffering from sickness. When his son was ordered to active service in the field I believe there was an unanimous prayer by the prisoners that his life would be spared through the perils he was about to encounter.

The prisoners, first giving their parole not to attempt to escape, were allowed the range of nearly the whole island during the day ; and not infrequently suffered to see relatives and friends who had received permission from the proper authorities to visit them. In happier “ante bellum” times, I had known some of the good people of Boston, and had spent a portion of a summer with several families at that pleasant watering place, Nahant. One of my most esteemed friends, Mrs. L., with the charity of a noble and Christian heart, wrote to me as soon as she learned that I was a prisoner ; but she was too loyal to the flag not to express regret and distress at what she believed to be a mistaken sense of duty.

The reader may remember the definition once given of “Orthodoxy” by a dignitary of the Church of England to an inquiring nobleman. “Orthodoxy, my Lord, is my doxy, heterodoxy is your doxy if you differ from me.” The same authority, it has always appeared to me, was assumed by a large portion of the Northern people. They demanded a Government to suit their ideas, and disloyalty consisted in opposing them.

We were permitted to write once a month to our friends in the Confederacy ; the letters being left open for inspection. There were a few Northerners among us, but I know of only a single case where the individual concerned so far yielded to the persuasion of his friends outside, as to renounce the cause, which he had sworn to defend. Aside from the confinement, and the earnest desire to be doing our part in the war, there could be no cause to repine at our lot. We were allowed, at our own expense, to supply our tables from the Boston market, not only abundantly, but luxuriously ; the

Government furnishing the usual rations ; and the prisoners grew robust upon the good fare and the bracing climate. A tug plied daily between Boston and the island on which Fort Warren is situated.

We were permitted to receive the daily papers and to purchase clothing and other necessaries, either from the sutler, or from outside ; and many of the prisoners were indebted to a noble charity for the means of supplying many of these needs ; of clothing especially, which was chiefly furnished by the firm of Noah Walker & Co. of Baltimore. The firm itself was said to be most liberal, not merely dispensing the donations received in Baltimore and elsewhere, but supplying a large amount of clothing gratuitously.

The policy of retaliation had not then been adopted. It is conceded that the United States Government, towards the close of the war, subjected the Confederate prisoners in their hands to harsh treatment in pursuance of this policy ; but in justice to the Confederate authorities it should be borne in mind that they repeatedly proposed an exchange of prisoners upon the ground of humanity, seeing that neither provisions nor medicine were procurable ; and, I believe, it is also a conceded fact that General Grant opposed exchanges.

It is not to be denied that the sufferings in Confederate prisons were fearful ; but they were caused by the destitute condition of the country ravaged by war, and the scarcity of medicines, which were not to be obtained. We were growing very tired of the monotony of prison life, scarcely varied except by the daily game of football and the semi-weekly reports of the capture of Richmond, when a rumor began to circulate of a speedy exchange of prisoners. It was about the time when General McClellan "*changed his base*" from the lines around Richmond to Harrison's Landing, on James River.

Early in August a large number of us, military and naval officers, were sent on board a transport bound to James River, where we arrived in due time, and thence, after taking on board a number of Confederates forwarded from other prisons, we proceeded up the river to Aiken's Landing. There was fighting near Malvern Hill as we passed by there, and the United States gunboats had been shelling the Confederate troops. The crew of one of them was at quarters, the men in their snow white "frocks" and trousers, the beautifully polished eight inch guns cast loose and ready for action.

The captain of one of the guns, a handsome man-of-war's man, looked at our party with a smile of bravado as we passed by, at the same time tapping his gun with his hand. Garrick or Kean could not have conveyed more meaning by a gesture. That handsome fellow's confidence in his pet was not misplaced ; for history records how frequently during the war the tide of battle was turned by that gallant Navy to which it is an honor ever to have belonged. We, who so reluctantly severed our connection with it, still feel a pride in its achievements ; and in our dreams are frequently pacing the deck, or sitting at the mess table with dear friends of "*auld lang syne*" from whom we are probably severed forever on this side of eternity.

We were put ashore at Aiken's Landing on the 5th of August. It was a hot, sultry day. Three or four poor fellows had died on board our transport while on our way up the river, and their bodies were landed at the same time with ourselves. While we were waiting for the preliminaries for the exchange of prisoners to be settled between the Commissioners, a large grave was dug in the sand with such implements as could be procured, and the "unknown" were consigned to their last resting place between high and low water mark.