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BLOCKADE RUNNERS

by ALICE STRICKLAND

DURING the Civil War Confederate blockade runners played a dangerous and exciting game of hide and seek with Union gunboats off the Florida coast. President Lincoln had proclaimed the blockade on April 19, 1861, with the intention of closing the Atlantic ports of the Confederacy to trade with other nations. The South, therefore, was faced with the problem of running the blockade in order to bring in the necessities of war.

At first, due to its policy of isolation, the United States Navy had few ships with which to enforce the blockade, but by the end of the war the Federals had six hundred vessels at their command. The Confederacy was also short of ships and began blockade running with old sailing vessels and small schooners, but as the war progressed swift iron steamers were made in Liverpool for this trade and eventually a steel ship, the *Banshee*, was built, and was the "first steel commercial ship to cross the ocean and the second one ever to be built.

The many inlets, lagoons, rivers, and bays of the Florida coast were ideal for the purpose of the daring blockade runners who made the thrilling, danger-packed dash to the ports of Nassau or Cuba and delivered cotton in exchange for arms and ammunition. Two Union blockading squadrons patrolled the waters of the Florida coast in an effort to halt this defiant running of contraband. The South Atlantic Blockading Fleet patrolled the ocean from Cape Canaveral north, and the East Gulf Blockading Squadron kept a vigilant eye on the waters from Cape Canaveral south, and to the west coast as far as St. Andrews Bay.

The Federals early in the war captured Pensacola, Cedar Key, and Fort Myers on the west coast of Florida, and Fernandina, Jacksonville, and St. Augustine on the east coast were occupied by the Federals in order to close these important ports to the Confederates. Key West at the southernmost tip of Florida had been occupied by the Federals early in the war and was headquarters for one of the Federal blockading squadrons. Un-

daunted by the strangle hold the Federals had on their most important ports, the Confederate blockade runners, stripped down to sleek swiftness, and often camouflaged in an eerie off-white paint, continued to make successful trips to Nassau, Havana, and Bermuda.

It has been estimated that a blockade runner made about three or four trips to sea before capture, but, several unusually lucky ships made eighteen runs. If a blockade runner sighted the smoke or sail of a Federal gunboat, orders were given to pile on the coal for a speedy departure from danger. When, as sometimes happened, the coal ran out and the Federals were still in close pursuit, the captain of the blockade runner would order the cargo of cotton to be soaked in turpentine and used as fuel. This would give intense heat with little smoke. When the cotton was used up it was not uncommon to use as fuel every piece of available wood on board, including the mainmasts and deck cabin. If captured, the crew of a blockade runner were treated as prisoners of war. However, if they resisted, "even a single blow, or shot, against the Federals, was considered an act of piracy upon the high seas, and death was the penalty if blood was shed." The blockade runners who could not outrun the Federals tried to scuttle or fire their ships and put out to sea in small boats. It was reported that the captain of the blockade runner *Elizabeth*, captured in Jupiter Inlet, escaped up the river in a small boat, taking with him his own small prize of a bag of coffee and a case of gin.

The Federal policy was not to sink or destroy blockade runners if they could be captured without resistance. Each man on a Union ship had a share in the captured Rebel prize, which was turned over to the Union Navy or sold by the Admiralty Court in Key West. The captured ship, the *Memphis*, paid \$510,914.07 in prize money to her Union captors, and the *Banshee*, captured by the *Fulton* and *Grand Gulf*, paid \$104,948.48 to their lucky crews.

Some of the captured Rebel ships were taken to Union-held Key West to await buyers, not only from the north but from the West Indies. Many mysterious transactions occurred at Key West when captured blockade runners were sold. Sometimes the ships would disappear for a time, then turn up later

as blockade runners again, in the service of the South. It was reported that one blockade runner, the *Dart*, was captured twice by the Federals, and each time returned to sea under Confederate command, as a blockade runner. During the Civil War the Federals captured over one thousand prizes and about one seventh of these were taken along the Florida coast.

Some of the blockade runners took great risks to run the blockade, especially if their ships carried highly explosive ammunition. If they tried to outrun a Federal gunboat and were fired upon, one well-placed shot would blow them to eternity. However, for their patriotic services, if successful runs were made, they received high wages and great profits. According to "The History Of Our Navy" by John R. Spears, the captain of one blockade runner received five thousand dollars per month; first officer, six hundred dollars, second officer, two hundred and fifty dollars; third officer, one hundred and seventy; the engineer and three assistants received thirty five hundred a month and the cook received a hundred and fifty dollars. Added to these handsome wages were the profits received from privately owned cargo. One firm, the Frasers of Charleston, are said to have cleared \$20,000,000 from blockade running.

Many northern interests secretly entered this profitable "three-cornered trade", as it was often called, (meaning the South, the West Indies and Europe or the North"). The manufacturers stamps on northern goods were covered with the stamps of English manufacturers and thus entered the blockade trade. Ship loads of pistols from Boston were often packed in barrels of lard. Besides a cargo of arms and ammunition many of the blockade runners carried luxury items such as fans, parasols, cloaks, childrens toys, ladies shoes, and other commodities which yielded enormous profits. This "luxury trade", and indeed, blockade running itself, was condemned by Governor Milton of Florida. He believed it, "tended to lower the value of Confederate securities; that it took from the South much of wealth of primary importance to exchange for articles of luxury, that it encouraged speculation in trading detrimental to social welfare . . . that it invited invasion in retaliation by the Federal Government." In spite of Governor Milton's hostile view of blockade running,

the Confederate government favored it, as it was an indisputable fact that the blockade runners were the only source of trade bringing in desperately needed arms, ammunition and medicines, without which the South could not fight.

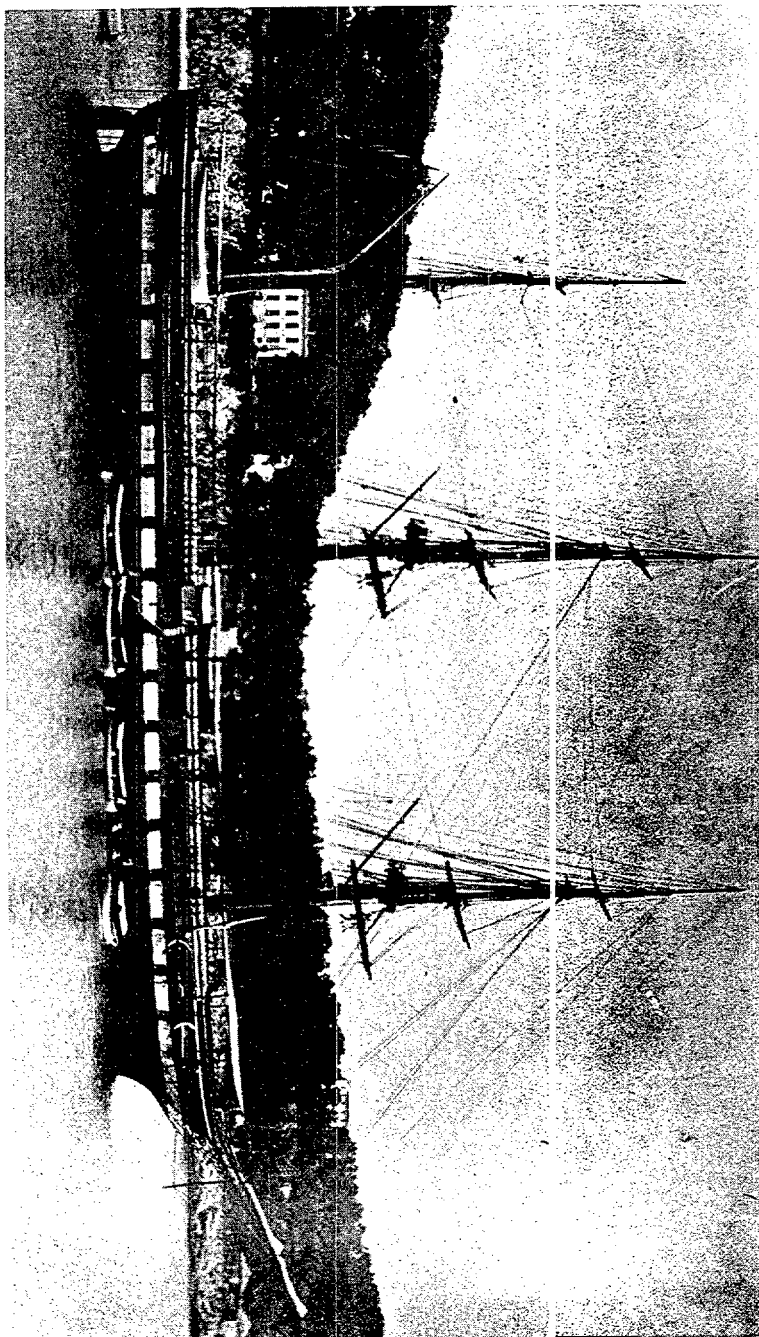
Not all the vessels engaged in blockade running were sleek, swift ships of special design. Some of them were small boats no larger than a whaleboat, manned by brave men whose only purpose was to serve the Confederacy. One example of these patriotic and heroic men was Henry Sheldon of New Smyrna on the east coast of Florida who sailed a small boat from Mosquito Inlet, (now Ponce de Leon Inlet), to Nassau, with a cargo space which only permitted the carrying of one bale of cotton. This could be sold in Nassau, and in exchange Henry would bring back quinine, needles, and other necessities.

It was at Mosquito Inlet on the east coast of Florida that the Federal South Atlantic Blockading Squadron under the able command of Commodore S. F. Du Pont, kept a vigilant watch. Into the inlet slipped blockade runners carrying arms and goods for the South. After being unloaded there the cargo was hauled in wagons to the St. Johns River. From the St. Johns it was put on small steamers which proceeded up the winding Ocklawaha River to Fort Brooks. From Fort Brooks the arms and ammunition went by wagon to Waldo and from there to Georgia and other parts of the Confederacy.

A blockade runner, the *Carolina*, while anchored inside the bar at Mosquito Inlet, near New Smyrna, was having her cargo removed when the Federals received word of her presence. Taking four small boats from the steamers *Penguin* and *Henry Andrew*, manned by forty-three men, the Federals planned to take over the *Carolina* and destroy the salt works south of New Smyrna. The Confederates, warned of their presence, abandoned the *Carolina* and prepared an ambush for the Federals. The unsuspecting sailors from the Union gunboats placed a prize crew aboard the *Carolina* and then proceeded up the river, never knowing that the Rebels were watching from their hiding place. Returning from their successful destruction of the salt works, the sailors attempted a landing near some earthworks. They never completed their mission for suddenly the hidden Confederates fired upon them with such



COMMODORE SAMUEL F. DUPONT; U.S.N.



FEDERAL BLOCKADE SHIP, U.S.S. *Wabash*

disastrous effect that seven sailors were killed, three made prisoners and about thirty were wounded, (according to Confederate reports.) Some of the sailors managed to get the boats away with the exception of "two launches in which all were killed or disabled", which drifted some distance from shore. An Irishman on the Confederate side asked permission to swim out and bring them in. In one of the boats the lucky Irishman found a keg of whiskey and it was reported that it was a long time before he could be induced to bring in the captured boats.

The bodies of two of the Federal officers, Captain Budd, and Lieutenant Mather, were returned under a flag of truce to the gunboats, and some of the Federal dead were buried by the Confederates. A runaway Negro slave who had acted as pilot for the Federals was captured and hung. Years later one of the surviving seamen from the Federal gunboats wrote that he was wounded in the skirmish, and that a Rebel, believing him to be dead, cut off his belt in order to steal his money, and almost buried him alive. The sailor's groans as he returned to consciousness startled the Confederate who muttered, "This son-of-a-gun ain't dead", as he dragged him from the premature grave.

In retaliation for the Federal losses at New Smyrna, "the fleet drew off and shelled the town and drove all the people out." This was the first shelling of New Smyrna, and on July 26th, 1863, the Federal ships, *Sagamore*, *Wabash*, *Beauregard*, and *Oleander*, came in to the inlet and also shelled the town. This time the shelling struck the Sheldon House which was built on top of a shell mound. The house consisted of about forty rooms and was used as a hotel. It was owned and occupied by the widowed Jane Sheldon and her family. The late John Sheldon, her husband, had been a scout for the army during the Seminole Indian War. Their crippled son, Henry, was the daring young blockade runner who sailed his small boat, loaded with a bale of cotton, from Mosquito Inlet to Nassau. It was reported that the Sheldon family were just being seated for dinner when a shot from the gunboats crashed through the house. Fortunately, none of them were harmed but they fled outside and sought shelter in the woods. It began to rain and a fire was lit which attracted the attention of the gunboats, and again

the Sheldon's were subjected to fire from the Union ships and they were forced to flee once more.

Not satisfied with the shelling, the Federals sent in two boatloads of sailors who completed the destruction of the Sheldon House by setting it on fire. However, before firing it they helped themselves to some of the furnishings, but on their return to the boats with their loot, hidden Confederates opened fire on them and they were forced to drop everything and run for their lives.

During the shelling of New Smyrna another small drama was taking place. A young man from New York, eighteen year old Jacob Harry Dressner, who had been working in Tallahassee, had arrived in New Smyrna, seeking a possible means of returning to his home in the north. He had worked his way down from far-away Tallahassee by boat, walking, or begging rides on wagons. As the shelling ceased for a time he waded out into the river, waved his shirt to attract the attention of the *Oleander*, and then waited anxiously for some sign that he had been seen. Eventually the *Oleander* put out a small boat which picked him up and took him aboard the gunboat. On board he was summoned into the captain's presence and given a severe reprimand for signalling the boat. The captain explained that a firing squad had been lined up on the deck ready to fire at any Rebel who might put in an appearance, and it had just been luck that the captain had looked through his glass and discovered that it was only a boy who was signalling the ship. Just in time the captain had ordered the firing squad to hold its fire.

Young Dressner was thoroughly questioned and finally allowed to return as far north as Charleston on the *Oleander*. On the trip northwards Dressner either lost some of the gold and money he had hidden on his person, or it was stolen from him by some of the Negro crew aboard. Later some of it was recovered and returned to him by one of the sailors from the *Oleander*.

Another member of the intrepid Sheldon family of New Smyrna, Rolly Sheldon, was returning in his small boat from Nassau with a cargo of quinine and needles when he was captured by a Union gunboat. So small was Sheldon's boat that it

was easily lifted to the deck of the Union ship and its cargo disposed of. Then without further ado, Sheldon, still in his boat was put overboard and left to the tender mercies of the wild Florida coast, of which a Federal officer had once said, "The greatest punishment for a blockade-runner would be to take his vessel and put him ashore in the state of Florida." Rolly Sheldon eventually made his way back home safely.

Brief skirmishes occurred between Federals and Confederates along both Florida coasts during the war. In 1863 the blockade runner *Scottish Chief* and the sloop, *Kate Dale*, were destroyed by the Federals in the Hillsborough River by an armed expedition from the U. S. Gunboats *Tahoma* and *Adela*. The gunboats opened fire on the fort and town of Tampa in order to divert attention, while a small force was dispatched, under cover of darkness, to destroy the *Scottish Chief* and *Kate Dale* as they were being loaded with cotton. The Federal force made a circuitous march, (to avoid houses and creeks), and arrived on the river bank, opposite the unsuspecting blockade runners. When the Confederates discovered they were prime targets for the Federal guns they yielded to a demand to send over a boat in which the Federals could bring back prisoners. However, several of the Rebels managed to escape and give the alarm to the Confederate garrison. After setting fire to the blockade runners the Federals with their prisoners started back to the *Adela* and *Tahoma*. When nearing the beach an armed group of Rebels attacked them. A brief skirmish ensued and the Federals captured two prisoners. The beach was finally reached and while waiting for boats to take them back to their ships the Federals were again attacked by a detachment of Rebel cavalry and two of infantry. Under fire from the Rebels the Union sailors and their officers eventually returned to the *Adela* and *Tahoma* after suffering some losses.

When not chasing blockade-runners or destroying salt works the Federals found blockade duty a tedious, boring, and sometimes dangerous job. For days and weeks Federal gunboats would lie at anchor near an inlet or in some lonely river waiting for their prey. They in turn became prey to the hordes of mosquitoes and sandflies which often brought fevers and death, For recreation, and a chance to add variety to their diet, the

officers and men from the Federal gunboats made forays ashore to hunt and bring back game and livestock. The Federals came to appreciate the splendid beds of oysters in Apalachicola Bay and other Florida waters, and there was always grumbling when the gunboats lifted anchor and sailed into less profitable waters.

During the hot summer months fevers killed many men aboard the Federal ships, and there is a tragic account of one of these fever ships lying at anchor off the Indian River. Nearly every man aboard was ill or dying of a mysterious fever that the ship's doctor could not diagnose or treat effectively. Finally a boat from Key West went to their rescue with doctors and ice but one of the men who had survived the horrors of those terrible weeks on a fever-ridden ship went mad, jumped overboard, and was drowned.

One of the methods for fumigating a Federal ship against the ravages of yellow fever was described by an officer as follows: "hatchways of ship all closed up tight and the ship thoroughly fumigated with burnt tar by sticking hot iron pokers into buckets of tar every few days, and when we came to open the hatchways there would be such a thick black smoke of tar about that one would almost think the ship was on fire. Kept up this fumigation for some time, it being considered a great purifier, and we thought it drove the yellow fever from the ship."

In direct contrast to the lonely and monotonous existence of most of the men of the Union Blockading Fleet was the gay and exciting life of the adventurers, spies, blockade runners, and cotton buyers, in the suddenly teeming port of Nassau. Into the safety of Nassau's blue-green harbor came the daring blockade runners, sometimes with a Federal gunboat snapping at their stern. Cotton was king in Nassau, and "warehouses, old buildings, and even porches were bulging with it." On the famous wide verandas of the luxurious Royal Victoria Hotel, guests played toss-penny with gold eagles. Amongst the colorful, restless crowds, Federal spies sought to discover the sailing time of blockade runners, and agents from the cotton mills in Lancashire bid eagerly for cotton for their firms in England. From this Caribbean glamour port the blockade runners began their short but dangerous return journey to the Florida coast. As they set sail for the west,

the feverish gaiety of the port they had left behind was soon forgotten. Ahead of them were dangerous waters where a grey trail of smoke on the horizon might mean a matter of running or hiding, of life or of death. As he grimly scanned the sea around him the blockade runner may have thought of the warning in the verse which was popular in those times and read as follows:

Stand firmly by your cannon
Let ball and grape-shot fly,
And trust in God and Davis,
But keep your powder dry.