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NAVAL ENGAGEMENTS IN TAMPA BAY, 1862

by FRANK FALERO, JR.

DURING THE CIVIL WAR, the Union Navy's primary mission was to prevent the South from marketing her products and to prevent her from obtaining arms. To accomplish this dual mission, the North stationed a considerable number of ships in blockade positions along the Gulf and Atlantic seaboard. The majority of these blockade vessels were small in size as well as firepower. There were two main reasons why the Union used small ships as blockaders. The first reason being that their adversaries likely would be small, shallow-draft vessels with limited firepower, and second, the larger more powerful ships were needed to seek out and destroy the many large, well-armed blockade runners, such as the *Alabama* and the *Florida*.

Throughout the Civil War, the South was successful in commissioning foreign shipyards to build and equip vessels to serve as blockade runners. That these vessels were successful is attested to by the fact that the damages resulting from their operation was very nearly the cause of a war between the United States and Great Britain, and finally resulted in Great Britain paying the United States \$15,000,000 for these damages. Despite the activities of the blockade runners, the Union Navy maintained control of the seas, and it was able to cut off the greater portion of the arms and supplies which the Confederacy needed to prosecute the war. The tremendous success of the Union Navy in carrying out its orders and performing its mission is further shown by the great devastation it caused to the southern plantation economy.

Florida, with its many bays, harbors, inlets, and rivers was a virtual haven for blockade runners. For these very same reasons, Florida was a very difficult territory to keep blockaded. The Civil War in Florida was waged predominantly from the sea with bombardments, landing parties, and raids. Three encounters of this type occurred in Tampa Bay during the Civil War.

The first two engagements were quite similar and in close proximity. In both, Union ships shelled Tampa after demanding its surrender. Due to the circumstances regarding the recording of

these two engagements, there is some doubt as to whether both battles ever took place, or if both activities are not actually one and the same.

On February 6, 1862, the *Ethan Allen*, a wooden sailing vessel armed with six thirty-two-pounders, one twelve-pounder, and a twenty-pounder Parrott rifle,¹ received a refugee, a Mr. J. E. Whithurst, from the blockaded town of Tampa. According to the official report, he was "claiming protection from the Government, and stating that he was in fear for his life from the secessionists at Tampa, for the reason that he refused to join the Army and had expressed his intention of fighting for no flag but the one he was brought up and had always lived under."² Living only eight miles away, Whithurst had brought with him extensive information about the garrison and the general situation in Tampa. He told Acting Volunteer Lieutenant William B. Eaton, captain of the *Ethan Allen*,³ that "some thirty-eight of his neighbors and friends who reside within a circuit of 6 miles around him are Union men," and that they had refused to help the Confederacy.⁴ Pertaining to Fort Brooke, Whithurst reported that there were "two twelve-pounders and two six-pounders mounted in battery there, and a force of 200 or 300 men."⁵ He stated that there were "seven or eight schooners and sloops and one steamer" in Tampa Bay.⁶ This information, along with a report that the greatest hardship prevailed in Tampa and that the troops manning Fort Brooke were cowardly, led Lieutenant Eaton to conclude that "it would be a very easy matter to capture the town of Tampa, destroy their battery, and retake the Key West fishing vessels."⁷ The lieutenant outlined a plan in which a steamer, presumably from the East Gulf Blockading Squadron operating out of Key West, would tow the *Ethan Allen* into position for a bombardment of Tampa. In his report to Flag Officer W. W. McKean, commander of the East Gulf Blockading Squadron, Eaton suggested that if a steamer was unavailable, he would try to do the best he could by himself.⁸

1. *War of the Rebellion: Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies* (Washington, 1890), Series II, Vol. I, 80.

2. *Ibid.*, Series I, Vol. XVII, 85.

3. *Ibid.*, 84.

4. *Ibid.*, 85.

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*, 86.

The next day, the lieutenant dispatched a boat, at Whithurst's request, to the home of a Mr. Girard, "who lives on the seashore outside of the bay."⁹ In concluding his case for an attack on Tampa, Eaton noted that Girard was a "former pilot at this place and has resided here for some twenty-five years and ran a steamer from here to Indian River and Key West in the Indian War, so that he has an intimate knowledge of all the channels and of the whole bay, and states that he can take this ship with ease within 1½ miles of the town, which he readily volunteered to do at any time that I should send for him."¹⁰

On April 8, 1862, Lieutenant Eaton received approval for the raid on Tampa Bay, and a schooner, the *Beauregard*, arrived with orders to cooperate if it seemed "advisable to make a demonstration at this point."¹¹ On April 14, 1862, the *Beauregard* "proceeded up the bay to within 1½ miles of Tampa, sounding out the channel and laying down a few buoys. . . ." ¹² Lieutenant Eaton, under a flag of truce, dispatched the following ultimatum to the Major R. B. Thomas, commanding officer of the Confederate garrison at Tampa: "Sir: I demand in the name of the United States the unconditional surrender of the town of Tampa, Fla., together with all munitions of war and ordnance stores contained therein. If these terms are not complied with I will give you twenty-four hours to remove all women and children to a proper distance and then proceed to bombard the town."¹³ To this ultimatum, Major Thomas replied: "I cannot accept the proposition to surrender, though for the sake of humanity, I accept your terms in regard to the removal of the women and children."¹⁴

Twenty-four hours later, the *Ethan Allen* and the *Beauregard* began shelling the fort and its immediate vicinity. The attack, while intense, was of short duration, and after a few hours both vessels moved back out into the mouth of Tampa Bay. For some unknown reason, the attack on Tampa did not meet with Admiral McKean's approval, and he wrote Lieutenant Eaton a letter to that effect.¹⁵ In attempting to justify his actions, Eaton pointed

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*, 215.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*, 216.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.* This letter was presumably lost and is not available in the official naval records of the period.

out that the *Ethan Allen's* crew had been inactive for over six months and that he felt that this naval action had served as a good training exercise as well as a morale booster for his men.¹⁶

Whether or not this battle ever took place at the time and place cited is actually a question that is not easily answered. There is no mention of any engagement of April 13, 1862, at Tampa in the *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*. There is, however, a reference to a very similar engagement, involving different participants, on June 30-July 1, 1862. According to the *Official Records*, it was the *Sagamore* and not the *Ethan Allen* that was involved; her captain was named Drake not Eaton; the Confederate officer in charge was Captain J. W. Pearson and not Major R. B. Thomas; and the shelling lasted two days not just a few hours.¹⁷ This information as found in the army records is verified by a diary kept by a young naval medical officer, Walter K. Scofield, who was on board the *Sagamore* at the time of the engagement. His diary very clearly dates the battle being fought on June 30-July 1, 1862, and his description fits very closely with that of Captain Pearson.¹⁸ According to both of these sources: "On Monday morning, June 30, the gunboat hove in sight in the bay, . . . turned her broadside to us, opened her ports, and then started a launch, with a lieutenant and 20 men, bearing a flag of Truce, toward our shore."¹⁹ The Confederate officer met the Union sailors in the bay, and there received the ultimatum to surrender or be shelled. Rejecting this demand, the officer denied that his side understood "the meaning of the word surrender." Each party returned to its respective place to prepare for action. The women and children were moved out a mile or so, and at six o'clock the *Sagamore's* guns opened up on the Confederate defenses.²⁰ The attack lasted an hour.

At about ten o'clock the next morning, the *Sagamore* again opened fire. It was not returned by the Confederates, however, because of the limited range of the guns at Fort Brooke.²¹ At about

16. *Ibid.*, 217.

17. *War of the Rebellion: Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, 1890), Series I, Vol. XIV, 111.

18. William J. Schellings, ed., "On Blockade Duty in Florida Waters: Excerpts from a Union Naval Officer's Diary," *Tequesta*, XV (1955), 55-72. This is further verified by Samuel Proctor, *Florida A Hundred Years Ago*, July 1, 1862 (Florida Civil War Centennial Commission, 1962).

19. *War of the Rebellion Armies*, Series I, Vol. XIV, 111.

20. *Ibid.*

21. *Ibid.*

noon the ship ceased firing, and everything was quiet until two o'clock when the Confederates raised a flag over the fort, which according to the southern report, "seemed to float so proudly and beautifully, showing its broad side to them, it made them furious. They then fired at us two powerful shots in rapid succession, then weighed anchor, and in a few minutes showed us her stern, and left us in peaceful possession of the town. . . ." ²²

But there is no mention in the naval records of any battle in Tampa Bay which occurred in June or July 1862. However, the *Sagamore* was the only Union vessel on blockade duty in Tampa Bay at that time, and her captain was named Drake. ²³ These complexities lead to the formation of an "either or" conclusion. Either there were two battles fought in this area between April and July 1862, or one of the official sources is wrong. Short of consulting records in their original form, it is difficult, if not impossible to determine if a mistake has been made.

The third clash in Tampa Bay, the only one for which there seems to be little confusion in the historical records, began at nine o'clock on the morning of October 16, 1863. The USS *Adela*, a side-wheel steamer, ²⁴ and the USS *Tahoma*, a wooden steamer, ²⁵ moved into Tampa Bay from their positions as blockade ships outside the bay in the Gulf of Mexico. They steamed within 2,000 yards of Fort Brooke and opened fire on the town and fort. This shelling continued intermittently until four in the afternoon when the *Adela*, commanded by Lieutenant L. N. Stodder, in obedience to signals received from the *Tahoma* under Lieutenant Commander A. A. Semmes, ceased fire and put forty men and three boats into the water. ²⁶ These men were part of a landing force which was soon to be put ashore for a daring raid. The *Tahoma*, by placing stakes in the ground several miles from the intended point of landing, deceived the defenders as to the actual point of assault. After night fell, the landing party, composed of sixty officers and men from the *Tahoma* and forty officers and men from the *Adela*, landed at Ballast Point. The purpose of the raid was to destroy the blockade runners *Scottish Chief* and *Kate Dale*, which "were loaded with cotton and ready to run the blockade. . . ." ²⁷

22. *Ibid.*, 112.

23. *War of the Rebellion: Navies*, Series I, Vol. XVII, 268.

24. *Ibid.*, Series II, Vol. I, 28.

25. *Ibid.*, 219.

26. *Ibid.*, Series I, Vol. XVII, 576.

27. *Ibid.*, 572.

According to the report of Acting Master T. R. Harris, officer in charge of the raid: "At 11 p.m., October 16, having quietly landed on the western shore of the bay in six boats, I took up the line of march for the Hillsboro River, carrying along a small boat to be used in crossing the river or any creek should it be necessary to do so. I avoided the roads and houses as much as possible so as to prevent discovery. After marching 4 or 5 miles we were obliged to abandon the boat, she delaying us too much, and I had her concealed about a quarter of a mile from our trail. After this we moved very rapidly under the direction of our excellent guides, and reached the banks of the Hillsboro River about 4 a.m. October 17, having marched about 14 miles. Having stationed look-outs, the party lay down till daylight. Shortly after daylight we discovered the steamer and the sloop on the opposite side of the river about 2 miles above us. The force was immediately moved to a point opposite where they lay and those on board ordered to send a boat to us. When the boat reached us I sent Acting Ensigns Randall and Balch, with a suitable number of men, on board of the vessels, where they made prisoners of all except two, who escaped on the Tampa side. Hauling the vessels over, I fired both effectively."²⁸ The mission completed, all that now remained for the federals was to return to their ships safely.

The return trip was uneventful until the raiding party neared the beach. There it found an armed party of civilians, on foot, which was disarmed and captured without a single casualty. After placing pickets to prevent its being surprised, the raiding party waited for the boats from the *Adela* and the *Tahoma* to pick them up.²⁹ In the meantime, at about eight o'clock on the morning of October 17, the *Adela* had run aground as it attempted to get closer to the battery at Fort Brooke.³⁰ From this position, those on board saw the federals returning from the raid and signalled this information to the *Tahoma*. Both vessels immediately put small boats in the water which started for the shore.

While the boats were on their way, a unit of Confederate cavalry happened on the scene and engaged the Union sailors. The *Adela* began showering the cavalry positions with grape and shot to protect the completely exposed sailors, and consequently the

28. *Ibid.*, 575.

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ibid.*, 576.

Confederates were unable to attack until the boats had reached shore and the sailors were climbing in them.³¹ Because of the quick thinking of the *Adela's* commander and the indecision of the cavalry officers, the Union sailors suffered relatively few casualties—three dead and twelve wounded.³² The report of Captain John Westcott, commander of Fort Brooke, claimed fifty wounded and many dead, and he says the Northerners were thwarted in their efforts to burn the two Confederate ships.³³ In reporting this incident to his commanding officer, Admiral Theodorus Bailey, Lieutenant Commander Semmes observed that he felt, “a great degree of satisfaction in having impressed the rebels with the idea that blockade-running vessels are not safe, even up the Hillsboro River.”³⁴

31. *Ibid.*, 575.

32. *Ibid.*, 574.

33. *War of the Rebellion: Armies*, Series I, Vol. XXVIII, Part I, 735.

34. *War of the Rebellion: Navies*, Series I, Vol. XVII, 572.