



The Day Book

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March-April 1996

A Newsletter for the Supporters of the Hampton Roads Naval Museum

Beyond the *Monitor* and the *Virginia*

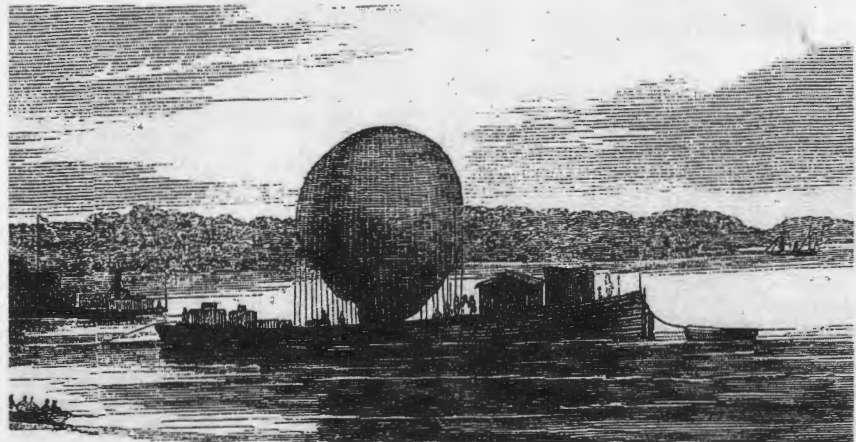
by Hunt Lewis

Besides USS *Monitor*, there were three other intriguing Union vessels which made use of new naval technology and served in and around Hampton Roads during the first part of the American Civil War. They were the ironclads USS *Galena* and *New Ironsides* and the balloon barge *G.W.P. Custis*.

The first observation balloons used during the Civil War suffered from mobility problems since they were inflated from city gas works and then slowly towed to observation sites. Professor Thaddeus S. C. Lowe solved this problem by developing a portable hydrogen gas generating system.

Since so much of the East Coast was accessible by waterways, Lowe suggested that balloons and supporting equipment be transported by water. A coal barge was converted at the Washington Navy Yard into the balloon barge *George Washington Park Custis*. A flat overhanging deck was added to provide space for balloon handling, gas generating equipment and a stern house.

Operation was an inter-service



No, that is not a radar dome, it is an observation balloon. The balloon is onboard the barge *G.W.P. Custis* which is pictured here on the James River in 1862. The Federals poured highly acidic sulfuric acid over hot iron filings to produce the hydrogen necessary to achieve lift-off for the balloon. The chemical reaction being $Fe + H_2SO_4 \rightarrow FeSO_4 + H_2$ (Sept. 6, 1862 Harper's Weekly engraving)

project. The Navy provided the barge and towing services, but the barge was manned by Army balloon handlers under Lowe's instruction. The first ascent from the barge was made by Professor Lowe and Gen. Daniel E. Sickles on Nov. 11, 1861 where they observed the construction of Confederate batteries on one of the Potomac's tributaries.

Credit for the first waterborne use of a balloon in the Civil War, however, belongs to John La Mountain who on Aug. 3, 1861 had his balloon towed by the armed transport *Fanny* from Fortress Monroe across Hampton Roads to see what the Confederates were doing at Sewells Point. There, La Mountain ascended to 2,000 feet and saw the Confederates constructing gun pits and embrasures pointing threatening Union forts and ships. Further observations were made of Craney Island and Pig Point. La Mountain drew sketches of the batteries and sent them on to Gen. Butler at Fortress Monroe.

La Mountain proposed using his balloons as offensive weapons, saying to the War Department "I am well convinced in my mind...that I can build a balloon in a month's time, and with it shell, burn or destroy Norfolk or any city near our camps." Gen. Butler advised the plan be given a trial, but the bombing expedition never took place.

Galena and *New Ironsides*

At the same time the Navy's Ironclad Board awarded the contract for John Ericsson's *Monitor*, it awarded contracts for two broadside ironclads. These broadside ironclads were essentially armored adaptations of conventional frigates. One of these was to prove a qualified success, the other an absolute failure. These ships were USS *New Ironsides* and USS *Galena*.

Cornelius Scranton Bushnell, a railroad entrepreneur, had previously sold two ships to the Navy. He prepared

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Springing Forward

The Director's Column

by Becky Poulliot

Springtime is upon us and as we dig out of the snow and ice, the museum has several exciting things happening.

In February, the museum opened a temporary exhibit called "To My Loving Mother," which displays postcards from the early twentieth century. The postcards present scenes of daily Navy life, the warships of the time and the Jamestown Exposition of 1907. The postcards give us a rare look at the Navy, and our nation on the brink of becoming a world power. The exhibit will run through May 31. Read more about the exhibit in this issue of *The Daybook* on page 4.


After many interviews and much discussion among the staff and docents, the museum has hired **Edward Lane** to become the new volunteer coordinator. Mr. Lane is a recent graduate of Norfolk State University and comes to us from Culpeper, Va. He has taken the job with great enthusiasm. You can find a picture of him on page 11.

We are in the process of assembling a speaker's bureau for the museum. The group will provide speakers ready to give a talk or presentation to interested outside organizations. The bureau will inform

the public on naval topics and also invite them to visit the museum. We already have a number of people signed up, but are always willing to accept new volunteers.

There are a couple of other events where we need participants. The Virginia Association of Museum (VAM) is holding its 1996 conference here in Norfolk, March 17-19. VAM is looking for volunteers to assist them with the conference. Contact the museum for more details. Also, on March 25 and April 11, the second and third parts of the "Wings Over the Bay" lecture series will take place. See page 9 for more details.

This issue of *The Daybook* focuses on three intriguing topics from the American Civil War. The article showcases the emerging naval technology as demonstrated in new ships and ideas. This issue also examines some of the personalities involved in the burning of the Gosport Shipyard in 1861. We also meet a dynamic Naval officer named William Cushing, one of the Civil War's more flamboyant characters.

As you can see, there are many things happening at the museum. We hope you will play a part. 

Protector of a Lifeline

by Bob Matteson

Editor's Note: As part of its education program, the Hampton Roads Naval Museum offers first person interpretation of historical characters. Two of these characters are a U-Boat commander and an escort commander. In this issue, we feature the escort commander.

My name is Cmdr. A.C. Murdaugh and I command a destroyer group. My ship, USS *Edison* (DD-439), is one of two Benson-class destroyers in my group. The two destroyers are relatively new. The Federal Shipbuilding and Dry Dock Company in Kearny, N.J. built both of them just before the outbreak of war with the Germans. The other two destroyers in my group are anything but new. USS *Lea* (DD-114) and USS *Berandou* (DD-153) are both old four piper, flush-deck destroyers from World War I. But times are tough and all available ships are needed.

The group operates out of Boston. On Feb. 19, 1942, the escort group of four destroyers picked up convoy ON-67 at the mid-ocean meeting point, just south of Iceland. Here, my group took over escort duties from a British force. Once the convoy was under my protection, I established communications with the convoy commander, a retired British rear admiral. One Canadian corvette, HMCS *Algona*, stayed with us.

ON-67 was now enroute to Halifax, Nova Scotia. It was made up of 35 empty freighters and tankers which steamed in eight columns, four miles across. Along with the escorts, the convoy also had a rescue ship called SS *Toward*. It carried special life saving equipment, hospital facilities and radio direction finding equipment (HF/DF). Anytime the U-boat commanders started to send a message to their headquarters, the HF/DF or, "huff-duff," would pick it up and we could track them down. *Toward* steamed at the rear of the convoy to pick up any survivors should one of the ships get hit.

As an escort commander, my mission was the safe and timely arrival of the *Protector* continued page 10

About *The Day Book*

The Day Book is an authorized publication of the Hampton Roads Naval Museum (HRNM). Its contents do not necessarily reflect the official view of the U.S. Government, the Department of Defense, the U.S. Navy or the U.S. Marine Corps and do not imply endorsement thereof. The HRNM is a museum dedicated to the study of 200 years of naval history in the Hampton Roads region. The museum is open Monday from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. and Tuesday through Sunday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

The DayBook's purpose is to educate and inform readers on historical topics and museum related events. It is written by the staff and volunteers of the museum. The newsletter takes its name from a 19th century Norfolk newspaper.

Questions or comments can be directed to the Hampton Roads Naval Museum editor. *The Day Book* can be reached at 444-8971, by fax at 445-1867, or write *The Day Book*, Hampton Roads Naval Museum, One Waterside Drive, Suite 248, Norfolk, VA 23510-1607. The museum can be found on the World Wide Web at <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~VAM/vamhome.html>. *The Day Book* is published bi-monthly with a circulation of 1,000.

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Brave or Just Plain Wacko?

Lt. William Cushing and his service to the U.S. Navy, part 1

by David Rawlings

In the museum's exhibit on the assault on Fort Fisher, there is a group photograph of Rear Adm. David Dixon Porter and his staff taken at the time of the expedition. Standing at the edge of the group is one of the Navy's greatest heroes and strangest characters. The gentleman in question is William Barker Cushing. This "Fighting Man of the North Carolina Sounds" is famous for his feats and bravery which made him the historical forerunner of today's Navy SEAL teams.

Raised by his widowed mother in upstate New York, Cushing established an early reputation for fearlessness. Enrolling in the Naval Academy before his 15th birthday, his strong sense of personal honor and propensity for pranks endeared him to his classmates but made enemies among the academy staff.

At the time that Cushing attended Annapolis, the academy had a reputation for being a place for drunk and chronic misbehaving midshipmen. Recognizing the need to reform the institution, the Naval Academy staff began to tighten regulations concerning midshipman conduct and academic performance. Cushing got caught by the reforms. On March 23, 1861, just a few months before graduation, the academy dismissed him for academic failure after he flunked Spanish. Some sources indicate that the instructor who caused Cushing to be dismissed had been an early victim of Cushing's practical jokes.

Frustrated at being denied an opportunity to serve as a Naval officer, Cushing lobbied hard to obtain some position in the U.S. Navy so that he could participate in the coming conflict. Several of his classmates from the academy encouraged him to join the Confederate States Navy. However, Cushing turned down this opportunity to take his chances on any billet in the Union Navy. Fortunately for Cushing, he received help in his cause from a high ranking officer. His mother's cousin was Commodore Joseph Smith, who was a



Harper's Weekly drew and published this portrait of Lt. William Cushing, one of the most interesting personalities of the Civil War. Many of his exploits were done in the Hampton Roads and Albermarle Sound regions. (Nov. 19, 1864 Harper's Weekly engraving)

member of the Navy's Ironclad Board and father of the commanding officer of the ill-fated frigate USS *Congress*. Smith convinced Secretary Welles to give Cushing a second chance by granting him the warrant officer rank of master's mate. Only a month after his dismissal from Annapolis, Cushing received orders for Hampton Roads aboard the screw frigate USS *Minnesota*, the flagship of the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron.


While stationed aboard *Minnesota*, he captained prize crews to ferry captured vessels and commanded the quarterdeck gun division during the capture of Fort Hatteras and Fort Clark in August 1861. He still, however, was not satisfied with being a warrant officer and continued his desire to be a line officer. After he challenged a troublesome lieutenant to a duel, he resigned his warrant and renewed his case to Secretary Welles. His gamble paid off and he received orders to return to Hampton Roads onboard the screw steamer USS *Cambridge* as a line officer. *Cambridge* was one of many vessels assigned to the laborious task of blockading Hampton Roads. This was not what Cushing had in mind and he became outright bored with the duty. He ignored all tradition and protocol and appealed directly to the commanding officer of the blockading squadron, Flag

Officer Goldsborough, demanding to join the Burnside Expedition which was heading south to capture Roanoke Island. "I have nothing to do here, because there are so many officers that there is not enough for them to do," Cushing wrote.

In March 1862, however, Cushing's boredom came to a sudden end with the sortie of the ironclad CSS *Virginia* and the Battle of Hampton Roads. *Cambridge* had been ordered to tow frigate USS *St. Lawrence* into action against the ironclad. However, like the *Minnesota*, *St. Lawrence* ran aground and was not able to participate. Cushing received a slight wound from one *Virginia*'s shells during the action. The wound became infected and his captain granted him leave to recover.

He returned to Hampton Roads two months later and served aboard *Minnesota*. Anxious to see more combat, Cushing tried to serve as a ground soldier with his brother Alonzo.

Despite Cushing's disrespect for his superiors, the Navy promoted him to lieutenant, skipping the rank of ensign, and then gave him a choice of assignments. Without hesitation, he elected to serve with his old mentor Charles Fisher aboard the gunboat USS *Commodore Perry* in the Carolina Sounds. While only 19 years old, Cushing's career was just getting interesting.

From his earliest service, Cushing displayed two traits which became his trademark: an incessant desire to lead in combat, and an open disrespect for his seniors and the sacred tradition of following the chain of command. The first trait would steer him into numerous close quarters with Confederate forces, often behind enemy lines in shore or riverine settings. The latter trait kept him in continual hot water with his seniors and he made enemies among some officers who interpreted his flamboyant actions as personal arrogance. 

The second part of William Cushing's story will continue in the next issue of The Daybook.

To My Loving Mother...

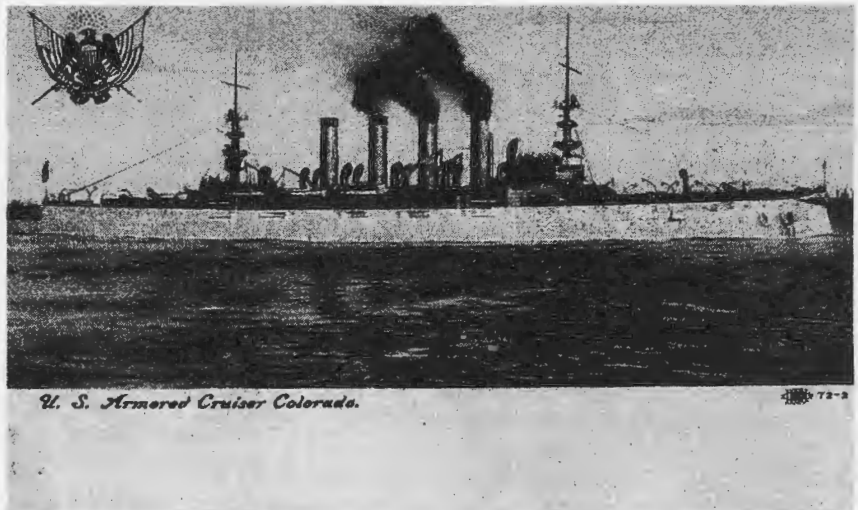
Naval postcards from the early 20th century now on display

by Harrell Forrest and Joe Judge

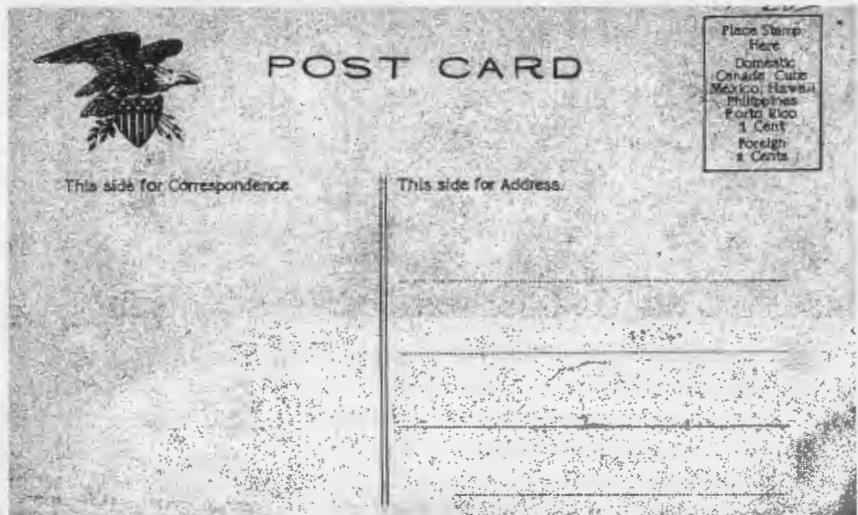
Postcards have established themselves as one of the most popular forms of communication in the last 125 years. Even in today's computerized world, it is still a thrill to receive the colorful picture of a far-away place, sent for an inexpensive price.

In the 19th century, populations were better educated and more literate than the pervious century. Writing was becoming a common method of communication. The need for a less expensive form of mail led to the creation of the world's first postcard in Austria in 1869. Other countries adopted the idea and authorized postcards, including the United States in 1873. The first postcards were simple cards with no illustrations, as the governments themselves issued the cards. They cost less to mail than regular letters and therefore were instantly popular. In the U.S., more than 60 million postcards were sold within the first six months of issue.

The 1893 Colombian Exhibit in New York spurred the use of color pictures on postcards for the first time in the U.S. The popularity of the new format led to other "picture postcards." At the time, the post office decreed that the term "postal cards" would refer to government-issued cards, while "postcards" were issued by private entrepreneurs. The active bureaucrats also decreed that term "POST CARD" be printed above the address on these non-government cards. The public loved the colorful cards. Many of them were printed in Germany where new methods of photo-lithography made the production of cards easy with beautiful results. Some cards even had gilt added. In the 1890s, in Europe and America, a postcard craze



This is a postcard of the armored cruiser USS Colorado (CA-7). Notice the white area below the picture. This area was available for correspondence. Legally, one was supposed to write correspondence in this area, and only the address on the back. However, as with many regulations, it did not reflect the reality of the situation as many people wrote correspondence on the back when the postcard publisher made space available (see below). By 1907, the Universal Postal Union changed the law and the white section of the postcard was removed. (1904 postcard picture drawn by William H. Rau)



was in full swing.

At first, postal regulations insisted that one side of the card be reserved for the address and only the address. This rule reflected the concerns that postmasters had with franking the cards. As the cards became more popular, postal authorities relented and the Universal Postal Union,

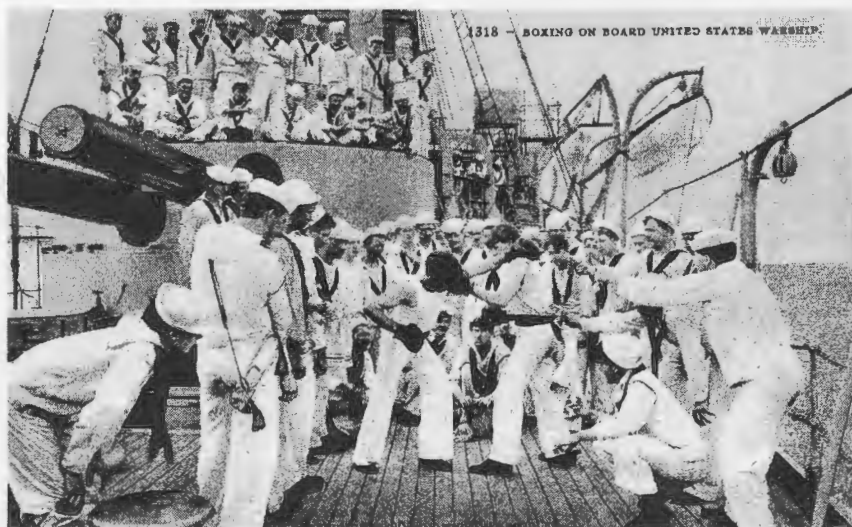
meeting in Italy, agreed to allow messages on the back of postcards in 1906. This change reached the United States in the form of new postal regulations set in October 1907. The new regulations allowed messages on the back of postcards.

Naval subjects were a perfect
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To My continued from page 4

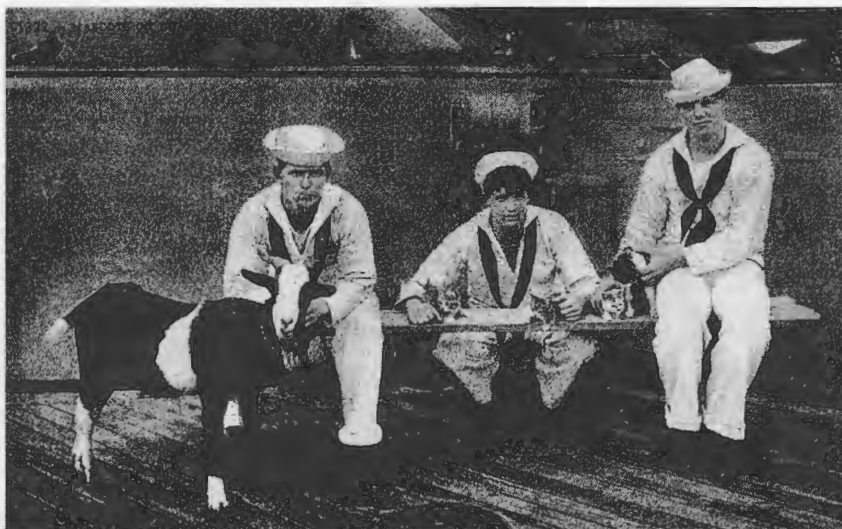
choice for the new medium. Naval ships at the turn of the century were dynamic, exotic and exciting, suggesting the power of the new twentieth century. Naval subjects were also patriotic, fitting for a country that had just emerged victorious from the Spanish-American War.

The museum exhibit features postcards that address five themes: ships, naval life, the voyage of the Great White Fleet, the 1907 Jamestown Exposition and naval stations in Norfolk. Almost every type of ship from the early twentieth-century Navy found itself represented on a postcard, from the large battleships like *Mississippi* (BB-23) to small gunboats like *Petrel* (PG-2). Early submarines like *Plunger* (SS-1), *Shark* (SS-8) and *Porpoise* (SS-7) were pictured, as were the remaining monitor-type coast defense vessels, redesigned after the Civil War. All of these portraits show clean, vigorous ships—the match of any European fleet.



"Boxing On Board United States Warship" An interesting side note to the postcards on display is the lack of officers in the pictures. For the most part, enlisted personnel and their activities are the subjects of the pictures. (1907 postcard drawn by Enrique Muller)

The postcard images of sailor's life concentrate on traditional naval activities and precious leisure time. The cards show sailors splicing rope, signaling and cooking, as well as playing cards, boxing and shaving. Appropriately enough, two of the




"Mascots On Board United States Warship" Mascots were a frequent sight onboard U.S. Navy vessels in the early twentieth century. Everything from dogs and monkeys to pigs named "Dennis" could be found alongside the working sailors. During the Great White Fleet voyage, the citizens of Aberdeen, Washington gave each of the 16 battleships a bear cub. In this picture, our sailors have posed with four adorable kittens and a goat. (1907 postcard drawn by Enrique Muller)

cards show sailors writing home and reading letters.

Events like the Great White Fleet and the Jamestown Exposition generated many postcards. When the Great White Fleet gathered in Hampton Roads in 1907, it was a sight that the American people had

progressed on their two-year journey. One card features the parade of sailors in Norfolk's Freemason neighborhood upon the fleet's return. The Jamestown Exposition postcards offer a colorful look at the attractions, exhibits and pavilions that were the talk of the town in 1907.

In the 20th century Navy sailors had to learn their craft at shore facilities, such as the St. Helena Naval Training Station and the Naval Operating Base. Postcards of these places let people at home know where their sons were, what the bases looked like and showed examples of what sailors did to train 



All the world for two pennies. If the writer addressed the card to North America or the newly acquired possessions of the Philippine Islands, the Hawaiian Islands or Puerto Rico, it would only cost them one cent. Anywhere else would cost two cents.

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the plans of *Galena* with the assistance of naval architect Samuel H. Pook and famed inventor John Ericsson. Bushnell returned the favor to Ericsson by helping to pave the way with the Ironclad Board for Ericsson's design of *Monitor*.

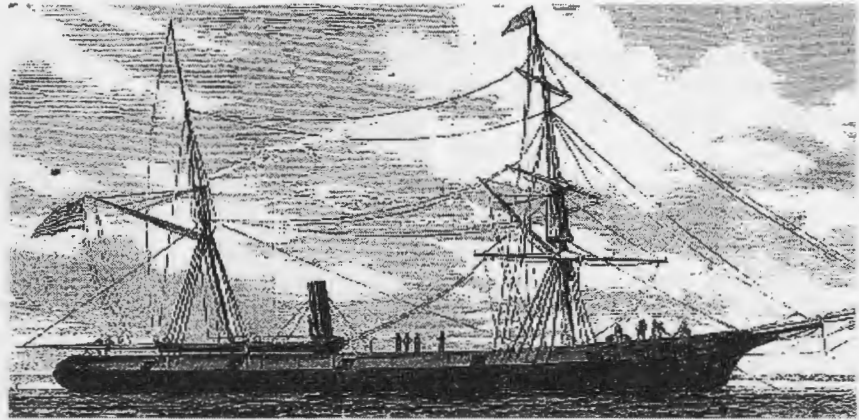
The hull of *Galena* was 181 feet long (210 feet overall) with an extreme beam of 36 feet and draft of 12 ft-8 inches. The hull had an extreme tumblehome (inward curvature) starting about a foot above the waterline. Three and a half inches of built-up armor in a complicated rail and plate system extended from about 20 feet from the stem to the same distance from the stern. The stem and stern areas were protected by a half-inch of armor. The weather deck consisted of a half-inch of iron over two and half-inches of wood.

Armament consisted of two 100-pdr rifles which could be shifted to either side of the ship and four 9-in guns in broadside on each side. Gunport shutters consisted of upper and lower sections with the same three and a half inch armor as the hull.

Galena was propelled by two engines of Ericsson design built by Delamater Ironworks. Four boilers provided a total of 800 horsepower to turn a single screw for an average speed of six knots. Built in Mystic, Conn. at the shipyard of Maxson and Fish, *Galena* was finished out at the New York firm of T. F. Rowland and commissioned April 21, 1862.

Under sail it made seven to eight knots but rolled heavily. It failed to make a good impression on arrival. Flag Officer Goldsborough, commanding the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron, ordered its spars cut-away and sheet iron installed to cover the nuts that were used to secure the armor. *Galena's* commander expressed grave reservations about its survivability in battle because of its light armor.

On May 15, 1862, *Galena* accompanied by *Monitor*, and the unarmored gunboats *Aroostook*, *Port Royal*, and *Naugatuck* attempted to reach Richmond in support of McClellan's Peninsula campaign. After successfully clearing some small Confederate gun emplacements, the squadron stopped at Drewry's Bluff due

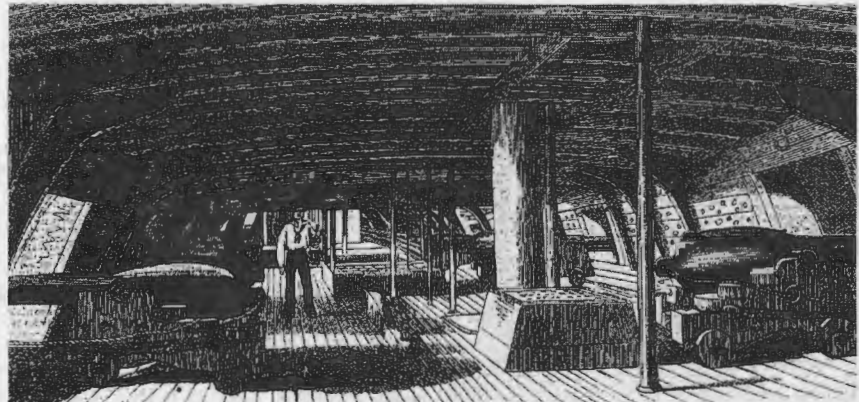


This is an engraving of the ironclad USS Galena just after it was launched at Mystic, Conn. Designed by railroad baron Cornelius Scranton Bushnell, Galena arrived at Hampton Roads in May, 1862 and patrolled the James River. Along with USS Monitor and a few gunboats, Galena would later unsuccessfully attempt to force its way past the guns at Drewry's Bluff. (Sept. 6, 1862 Harper's Weekly engraving)

to obstacles placed in the James River. *Galena* steamed within 600 yards of Drewry's Bluff then anchored where all its guns could engage the Confederate batteries located on the bluff. Of all the ships in the Union squadron, *Galena* was the only ship capable of firing at the Confederate fort. The Confederate gunners soon realized this and concentrated their fire on it. *Galena* bravely remained in position until almost all of its ammunition was exhausted. Meanwhile its armor was being

David Dixon Porter summed up his opinion on *Galena* by using words like "a so called ironside", "a slaughterhouse" and "a perfect failure as an ironclad."

USS New Ironsides, however, was a much more successful warship. Design of *New Ironsides* was credited to B. H. Bartol, superintendent of the Merrick & Sons works with the actual construction being done by William Cramp & Sons of Philadelphia. Construction took less than a year and the Navy accepted *New*



This is a view of Galena's gundeck. This ship carried four 9-inch Dahlgren smoothbores and two 100-pdr Parrott rifles. At the Battle of Drewry's Bluff, Galena's guns were the only ones which could elevate enough fire at the Confederate fort. The Confederate gunners soon realized this and turned all of their guns on the Galena. (Sept. 6, 1862 Harper's Weekly engraving)

continually penetrated by Confederate fire, which killed 13 and wounded 11 of its 150 man crew.

Subsequently, *Galena* was stripped of its armor except about its engine room. After extensive repairs, it was riggered as a sloop-of-war with a barkentine rig. *Galena* met its end by being condemned and broken-up in 1870. Rear Adm.

Ironsides on Aug. 21, 1862.

New Ironsides was 262 feet long, had a beam of 57 feet-6 inches and draft of 16 feet. Although a poor hull form for speed or handling, the unusually wide beam enabled it to carry heavy armor and armament while still being able to enter shallow southern harbors.

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The side armor consisted of four and a half-inch iron plates covering the 175 foot length of the ship's battery. Below the primary armor belt, a three inch iron belt extended the length of the ship.

To prevent damage from raking shots, the forward and after ends of gun and berth decks were protected by two and a half inch armored bulkheads. This created an armored box around the gun battery and berth deck. Each crosswise bulkhead was fitted with two four-inch thick iron doors on rollers operated by handwheels working a rack and pinion.

The spar deck was covered by one inch plate. During the attacks on the Charleston forts, its decks were covered with sandbags to provide additional protection from plunging shot and shells. The unarmored sections of the ship were reinforced with eight or nine feet of wetted sandbags from the deck to the ceiling frames. The pilot house was protected by 10-inch laminated plates.

The main battery consisted of 14 11-inch smoothbore cannons, two 150-pdr and two 50-pdr rifled guns all installed on the gun deck. This provided a broadside throw-weight of nearly 2,000 pounds. Although the throw-weight was not as great as some of the larger wooden frigates, *New Ironsides* could fend off explosive shells.

New Ironsides was propelled by four boilers supplying steam to two direct acting engines turning a 13-foot brass four-bladed propeller. Initially fitted out as a bark, its masts were removed and signaling poles substituted most of its career. It carried a crew of 460 men.

Because *New Ironsides* was expected to be sluggish in handling, an experimental two section articulated rudder was installed. However it did not help as *New Ironsides* remained unhandy and slow making a best speed of six and a half knots under sail and steam. Under steam alone, its best speed was a little under six knots.

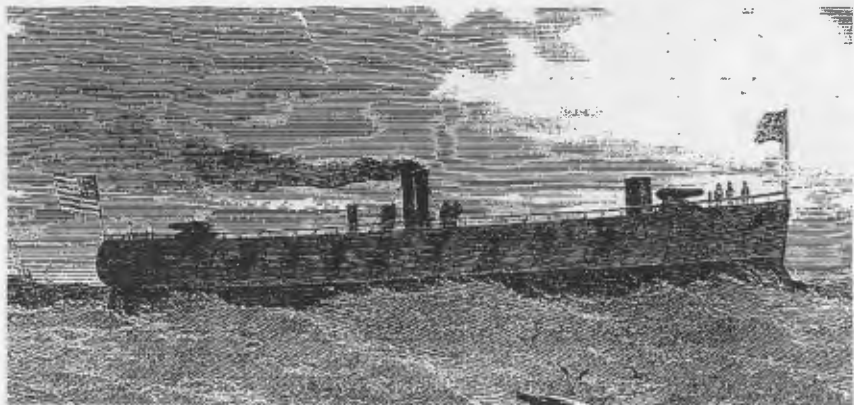
Charleston, S.C. was the ironclad's first big test. In Rear Adm. Dupont's first attack on Charleston on April 7, 1863, *New Ironsides* due to handling difficulties during the ebbing tide could be not brought close enough to Fort Sumter and Fort Moultrie for its guns

to be useful. *New Ironsides* fired only eight shots while absorbing upwards of 50 shots without damage. The seven accompanying monitors and experimental ironclad *Keokuk* took severe damage. In fairness to the monitors, however, *New Ironsides* suffered little damage not only because of its armor, but also because of blind luck. During the bombardment it had anchored itself over a 2,000 pound boiler mine which did not go off as someone had cut the triggering wire.

During the second attack on Charleston forts under Adm. Dahlgren, *New Ironsides* rate of fire was far greater than the monitors. Over one three hour period, it was able to fire an 11-inch shot about every three minutes for three successive hours. During an entire 17

water tight compartments. A ship without water tight compartments would automatically sink the instant that any part of its hull was breached. Today, this technology is standard aboard all warships and civilian merchant marine vessels. *New Ironsides* was able to remain on station for seven more months after *David* attack.

After a year's refitting, *New Ironsides* returned to service to participate in the two assaults on Fort Fisher which guarded the entrances to Wilmington, N.C. The ironclad supported the Union Army's attempts to take the fortress by delivering shore bombardment with deadly accuracy. In contrast to *Galena*, Adm. Porter had great praise for *New Ironsides*, especially after the Union forces finally captured Fort Fisher. "Not




While USS Monitor and its sister vessels were grabbing the newspaper headlines, USS New Ironsides was quietly gaining a reputation for being a better vessel in terms of firepower and protection. This ship had 16 to 18 guns as opposed to two, sloping armor and a higher freeboard. It was a major factor in the eventual suppression of the Confederate forts around Charleston, S.C. and the "Confederate Goliath" known as Ft. Fisher. (Sept. 6, 1862 Harper's Weekly engraving)

day period between July 18 and September 8, 1863, it fired 4,439 rounds at the forts with devastating effect on Fort Sumter and Fort Wagner.

Unable to sink *New Ironsides* by conventional means, the Confederates decided to use a semi-submersible torpedo boat, called *David*, to deal with the formidable ironclad. Armed with a spar torpedo, *David* rammed *New Ironsides* on its starboard quarter about six feet below the waterline. The explosion raised a large column of water and shook *New Ironsides* but caused only a small leak in the hull. *New Ironsides* suffered little damage thanks in large part to its armor and to a relatively new technology known as

withstanding (the soldiers') gallantry, they could not have passed from traverse to traverse without the aid of your guns," Porter wrote.

Decommissioned in April 1865, *New Ironsides* was destroyed by an accidental fire in December 1866 while laid up in Philadelphia.

Whether or not these three vessels had an immediate impact on the outcome of the Civil War is not so important as the valuable lessons learned to future ship construction and naval doctrine. Along with the ironclads of the Battle of Hampton Roads, these three Hampton Roads-based vessels provided lessons for the direction and future of naval warfare. 

The Man Who Lost Gosport

Commodore McCauley and the burning of the Gosport Shipyard

by Joe Mosier

In the early weeks of April 1861, Commodore Charles Stewart McCauley, USN, faced troubling and uncertain circumstances. The 68-year old commandant of the Gosport Navy Yard had served his country well since being commissioned 52 years earlier.

Son of a Philadelphia coopersmith, McCauley had received his midshipman's warrant in January 1809 through the influence of his uncle and namesake Capt. Charles Stewart. He had served under his uncle onboard the frigate *Constellation* and participated in the Battle of Craney Island during the War of 1812. After that conflict, he had risen methodically within the U.S. Navy, gaining a reputation for tact and steadiness. During the Mexican War, he had served as Commandant of the Washington Navy Yard. There he came to know the civilian head of the Bureau of Provisions and Clothing, Gideon Welles. Within the last ten years, McCauley had twice been senior officer on the spot when war had seemed imminent. Off Peru in 1852 and in Cuban waters in 1855, he had successfully defused the situation. Now, however, the potential enemies were his own countrymen. In the face of seemingly irreconcilable sectional differences, eight states had already left the Union following Lincoln's election. Virginia had voted against secession in February, but the political climate remained volatile.

Gideon Welles, recently appointed as Secretary of the Navy, worried about the vulnerability of the nation's most important navy yard. Besides its invaluable workshops and dry dock, Gosport housed 11 warships of which four could be quickly readied for sea: the steam frigate USS *Merrimack*, sloops of war USS *Germantown* and *Plymouth*, and the brig USS *Dolphin*. Recently arrived was the frigate USS *Cumberland*, scheduled to be flagship for the Home Squadron. On April 10, Welles

instructed McCauley that "in view of the peculiar condition of the country" the *Merrimack*, fairly new but with its engines in need of repair, was to be prepared for transfer to Philadelphia. While telling McCauley to "exercise your own judgment" in protecting shipping and stores, the secretary included a simultaneous desire that there be "no steps taken to give needless alarm" to the local residents. Similar communications followed almost daily with the same theme - take all precautions but do not inflame the public. This duality of instructions constantly repeated by Welles created an ambiguity that McCauley proved incapable of resolving.

The conflicting loyalties of some naval officers at the yard was another source of confusion for McCauley. Many were Virginia natives like Norfolk-born Cmdr. John Randolph Tucker, in command of *Pennsylvania*, the receiving ship at Gosport. Most in this position were honorable men determined to do their duty until formally relieved. The officers, however, had heard from their neighbors in Norfolk and Portsmouth excited talk and rumors of war. Although condemned after the fact as "traitors in disguise," those who would later resign appear to have been motivated more by an honest desire to avoid bloodshed. Their course of caution reinforced McCauley's methodical nature.

On the advice of Chief Engineer Robert Danby, McCauley wrote Washington that it would take a month to repair *Merrimack*. This contradicted the opinion of Chief Engineer Benjamin Isherwood who told the secretary only a week would be required. Perplexed, Welles ordered Isherwood to Norfolk on April 12 to resolve the problem. Again the Secretary coupled a demand for speedy action with the caution that the



At the outbreak of war in 1861, Commodore Charles McCauley already had served more than 50 distinguished years in the U.S. Navy. Congress forever destroyed his reputation for calm, competent leadership when they made him the scapegoat for the failures at Gosport. (U.S. Navy photo provided by Norfolk Naval Shipyard)

work should not create a "sensation."

Arriving April 14, Isherwood immediately contacted Danby and began a survey of *Merrimack's* condition. Although he found her engines "in a wretched state," Isherwood quickly hired workmen and began an around-the-clock attempt to repair it. By extraordinary effort, he was able to report by the afternoon of April 16 that the ship was ready to sail. McCauley decided the next morning would be soon enough.

Secretary Welles still felt uneasy after the departure of Isherwood. He ordered Commodore Hiram Paulding to Norfolk with a letter for McCauley. Additionally, he gave Paulding verbal orders that if he had doubts about the situation at the Navy Yard, he was to act for Welles to ensure its safety. Paulding spent only one day in Norfolk returning to Washington on April 18. He told the Secretary that McCauley was loyal and had the situation under control. He also reported that while, some Virginian officers wanted to

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be relieved, he felt they would act loyally until they could be replaced.

On April 15, President Lincoln had issued a call for 75,000 militia volunteers to suppress the rebellion. In response, Virginia voted on April 17 to secede from the Union. The next day, Governor John Letcher ordered Maj. Gen. William B. Taliaferro of the Virginia Provisional Army to take command of state forces in the Norfolk area and seize the yard. His forces only consisted of about 650 men in the Norfolk Blues and the Portsmouth Grays outfits. Simultaneously, Capt. Robert B. Pegram of the Virginia State Navy was directed to assume command of the naval station next to the yard and "to do and perform whatever may be necessary to preserve and protect the property of the commonwealth and of the citizens of Virginia."

After secession, William Mahone, president of the Norfolk and Petersburg Railroad, decided to act on his own. He hired tugs to tow two old light-boats to the entrance of the Elizabeth River where they would be sunk as block ships. In a *ruste de guerre*, he had his trains shuttle the same troops in and out of town. Hiding on the way out, they would cheer loudly on their return, successfully creating the impression that more and more troops were arriving hourly. Local militia seized the 2,800 barrels of gunpowder stored at Fort Norfolk. Seeing the rapid deterioration of the situation, Isherwood and Cmdr. James Alden (ordered to take over *Merrimack*)



The Gosport Shipyard as it looked when the Federals put it to the torch. The Navy lost several ships including the famous frigate United States (far left), the frigate Merrimack (back, center) and the 120-gun Pennsylvania (far right). The Navy also gave away over 1,100 guns and one of the world's finest drydocks. (Sept. 4, 1861 Harper's Weekly engraving)

quickly signed on a short-handed crew. They strenuously urged McCauley to let the ship depart with *Germantown* in tow. Welles' letter delivered by Paulding, however, contained a fatal escape clause. Welles warned that "perhaps" it might be better not to move the ship unless danger was actually imminent. Navy Yard staff officers argued that moving the ship would actually precipitate the danger they sought to avoid. Accordingly, McCauley ordered the fires on *Merrimack* drawn. Isherwood in disgust demanded endorsement of his orders and immediately left for Washington.

Isherwood's report to Secretary Welles flatly contradicted that of Paulding. He complained of indecision, hesitation and disloyalty on the part of senior officers at the yard. Moreover, he directly accused McCauley of drunkenness and senility. Although Alden and Paulding disputed the personal

attacks, Welles was moved to immediate action. He directed Capt. John A. Dahlgren, Commandant of the Washington Navy Yard, to forward sufficient combustibles and other equipment necessary to destroy all property at Norfolk. Commodore Paulding was ordered to return to Gosport in *Pawnee* to command a relief expedition. To buttress the 470 sailors and marines defending the yard, a regiment of Massachusetts militia was ordered there from Fort Monroe. Welles, perhaps fearing interception of such a volatile message, made the mistake of failing to inform McCauley by telegraph of this impending support.

Gen. Taliaferro, even with the arrival of troops from Richmond and Petersburg, felt he had insufficient force to directly attack Gosport. Capt. Pegram estimated that at least 5,000 men would be required. While his troop strength was

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The Museum Sage

Editor's Note: The Hampton Roads Naval Museum proudly presents installment number three of "The Museum Sage." As always, if you have a question write to the Editor of The Day Book c/o Hampton Roads Naval Museum, One Waterside Drive Suite 248, Norfolk, VA 23510-1607 or call (804) 444-8971.

We have a winner!


The editor of *The Daybook* has received a credible answer to last issue's "Sage Stumper" question. The question was about a clock with only 10 numbers on top of the battleship USS *Wyoming* (BB-32/AG-17). **Bruce Heimer** of Portsmouth, Va. discovered that the clock is called a concentration dial. Specifically, there are two hands on the clock, one for thousands of yards and one for hundreds of yards. Mr. Heimer found the answer in the Naval Institute's book about the battleship USS *Arizona* (BB-36). For his efforts, he receives the Executive Director of the Hampton Roads Naval Historical Foundation's sincere appreciation, who posed the question in the first place, and a Hampton Roads Naval Museum coffee mug.

The Navy flag has a ship with three flags, what are they?

President Eisenhower signed Executive Order 10736 on Oct. 23,

1957 authorizing the flag and its design for the Department of the Navy. It reads: "On a circular background of fair sky and moderate sea with land in sinister bases, a three-masted square-rigged ship underway before a fair breeze with after topsail furled, commission pennant atop the foremast, national ensign atop the main and the commodore's flag atop the mizzen." Every commissioned ship carries a commission pennant. This pennant has been on warships for several hundred years. According to legend, the commission pennant gets its shape from a long streamer that an English admiral hoisted in 1653 to symbolize that he "whipped his adversary from the water." Today, the commission pennant is either four or six feet long depending on the size of the ship. The national ensign is simply the American flag. The commodore's flag is hoisted on the ship where the commodore has placed his command.

When are the docents going to get a coordinator?!?

Be of good cheer and fear not docents as the museum has hired **Edward Lane** of Culpeper, Va. as the museum's new volunteer coordinator. He is pictured below. 



**The Hampton Roads
Naval Museum
proudly
presents...**

**"Jefferson
and the
Dambargo:
Norfolk and
the Embargo
of 1807"**



Presentation to be given
by HRNM docent
Joseph Mosier
Time: 7 pm, April 17
Place: Nauticus Living
Sea Theatre

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convoy, not the sinking of U-boats. When my group took over, I placed the two *Benson*-class destroyers on the port and starboard bow of the convoy and the two older destroyers on either flank. The corvette patrolled astern of the convoy. All the escorts patrolled about 4,000 yards away from the convoy. During the evening hours or other periods of reduced visibility, I ordered the escorts to tighten up the screen. The merchant vessels proceeded at eight and half knots, while the escorts steamed on their patrolling stations at 12 knots.

As the escort commander, I was feeling a little tense, but confident. After we joined the convoy, I practically lived on the bridge. For all intents and purposes, it was a 24-hour a day job. You felt like a sheep dog keeping the wolf away. The crew of *Edison* operated on a three section watch

bill, but we would go to general quarters just prior to sunset and sunrise, and anytime we picked up a contact. On the 21st, *Edison* picked up a sonar contact short after noon. We charged the contact and dropped a pattern of five depth charges, but failed to hit anything. *Toward* reported a HF/DF signal and *Lea* ran down the bearing, but did not pick up a contact. After five hours, we abandoned the search.

At 0305 the next morning, the night sky was lit up by explosions, as two of the convoy's ships were hit. U-boats had come up astern and picked them off from the rear. We searched for the subs, but there was no contact and the convoy proceeded. *Toward* and two of the escorts stuck around to pick up survivors. In an attempt to throw the U-boats off our trail, I altered the convoy's course at 0530 and

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growing with the planned arrival of units from North Carolina and Georgia, Taliaferro had only four bronze 6-pdr cannons for artillery, no match for the assembled cannon of Navy ships. The sight of rebel gun emplacements being dug, however, was the breaking point for Commodore McCauley. His attempt to avoid confrontation by moving slowly had obviously failed. The afternoon of the 20th, he commenced the destruction of yard property and the scuttling of all ships, except *Cumberland*. The cranes were cut down and cannon spiked. When this destruction commenced, those workmen and officers with Southern loyalties who had not already resigned, deserted the yard. As night fell, McCauley prepared to go aboard *Cumberland* thinking that if the rebels did attack the following day, he could destroy Norfolk and Portsmouth with its battery.


Before McCauley could make his way aboard, *Pawnee* arrived with the relief expedition. Paulding was shocked to find that the ships he had planned to save already rested on the bottom of the Elizabeth River. A quick survey of the scuttled ships revealed the hopelessness

of refloating any of them. Paulding rejected McCauley's plan to use the reinforcements "to defend the yard and property to the last." Instead the expedition turned its energies to preparing for the complete destruction of the yard. Combustibles were placed in all structures and onboard the scuttled ships. The drydock was mined with 2,000 pounds of powder. Attempts were made to disable all cannons, although the modern Dahlgren guns proved resistant. At 0200, the exhausted men moved aboard *Pawnee* and *Cumberland*, except for parties charged with commencing the destruction, and the ships moved out into the river. Paulding ordered a signal rocket to be fired at 0415, and the torch was applied to the yard.

The resultant blaze, although spectacular, proved less effective than the retreating Federal officers had hoped. Citizens of Portsmouth quickly began fighting the fires. The invaluable dry dock received only minor damage as the fuze train failed to work. The two large ship houses were burned to the ground. Many of the workshops, however, were only slightly singed and

were back in operation within weeks. Since the ships were scuttled and then burned, they were destroyed only down to the waterline. The Confederates raised and rebuilt *Merrimack* as the ironclad *Virginia*. Of most importance were the 1,195 heavy guns recovered that, with the gunpowder from Fort Norfolk, gave the Confederate Army an instant artillery branch.

At the end, Commodore McCauley, who had turned all supervision of destroying the yard over to Paulding, had been reluctant to leave. His youngest son reported anxiously to Paulding that his father refused to vacate his office. Only strenuous argument by Cmdr. Alden finally convinced him back aboard *Pawnee*.

Returned to Washington, he faced an atmosphere of vilification that destroyed the reputation for dependability and competence he had earned in his fifty plus years of service. After a Senate committee investigation of the loss of Gosport, the Navy quietly retired McCauley on Dec. 21, 1861. Charles Stewart McCauley died on May 21, 1869. He went to his grave remembered as "the man who lost Norfolk." 



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at 2130.


Things were pretty calm until the night of the 24th when the convoy was hit by five or six U-boats. I had the destroyers fire illumination rounds to light up the area so the guards on the merchant ships could fire. Before this attack was over, two more ships had been sunk and two damaged.

I became a little anxious after this latest attack and sent a message to the Chief of Naval Operations office requesting that either the convoy

disperse or make a drastic evasive course change. I received permission for a radical course change.

That afternoon, *Toward* had another HF/DF signal. One of the destroyers ran down the bearing and found two U-boats on the surface. It attacked and forced them down until dark. A second HF/DF signal was picked up and I sent the *Lea* 20 miles out on the starboard flank where it found a U-boat on the surface. It attacked and while the U-boat was able to submerge, *Lea*

reported that it may have been damaged.

After dark, the wolf pack closed. *Edison* picked up a sonar contact. The lookout saw a U-boat in the moonlight, but was unable to get a shot off before it submerged. *Edison* dropped six more depth charges, but once again, no hits. At 0205 on the 25th, one of my lookouts aboard *Edison* spotted a sub 200 yards out on the beam. Before we could turn to ram or shoot, it submerged. That afternoon, fog rolled in. *Bernardou* ran down an HF/DF signal. It dropped a depth charged pattern until it lost its contact. Shortly after the 26th, we entered Canadian coastal waters and were joined by USCG *Spencer*. No further incidents occurred and the remainder of the convoy reached Halifax. Once the convoy arrived in Halifax, we returned to Boston for repairs and new orders. 

The first person interpretation of Cmdr. Murdaugh is done by HRNM docent Capt. Pete Watson, USN (Ret).