

**REBELS AT THE GATE: CIVIL WAR SAN FRANCISCO AND THE
CONFEDERATE SEA-BORNE THREAT**

**A University Thesis Presented to the Faculty
of
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**In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in History**

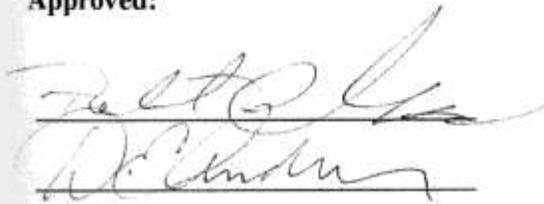
**By
Donald E. Bastin
June, 2001**

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Introduction

On the fifth of July, 1865, Captain James Waddell of the Confederate raider *Shenandoah* left the “gloomy fogs” and ice of the Arctic Ocean and turned the prow of his ship south-eastward, toward the California coast and the harbor of San Francisco. Behind him lay the burned hulks of much of the New Bedford whaling fleet. Ahead beckoned an even greater prize--the city of San Francisco. That great port city he planned to boldly attack and lay “under contribution.” Had Waddell done so, he would have validated the worst fears of the citizens of that city. For over four years, the merchants and civil and military authorities agonized over the possibility of attack from the sea. As Brigadier-General George Wright, commanding the Department of the Pacific, stated in a letter to the commandant of the Mare Island Naval Shipyard in early 1863:

Under cover of the darkness or a fog I have but little doubt that a steamer might pass the two forts without serious injury; at least the chances are decidedly in her favor. Once within the harbor she can take a position beyond the reach of the guns of Alcatraz island, and, of course, command the city.

Now Wright’s dire prediction seemed about to be tested, and the defenses of the city, consisting primarily of the brick fort at Fort Point, the emplacements on the islands of Alcatraz and Angel Island, and a single, untested iron-clad, were about to be tried against a lone Confederate war-bird.¹

But, of course, this encounter never happened. The Civil War was over, as Captain

¹ James Waddell, *C.S.S. Shenandoah: The Memoirs of Lieutenant Commanding James I. Waddell*, ed. James Horan (New York: Crown Publishers, inc., 1960), 174-6; Wright to Selfridge, January 26, 1863, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, (hereafter cited as *OR*), 128 vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901) Series I, vol. 50, part 2, 294. All references are to this volume unless otherwise noted.

Waddell learned after he prudently stopped a British sailing vessel that had recently left the harbor of San Francisco. With indisputable proof that the South was defeated, he abandoned his desperate scheme and sailed on to consider his own fate and the fate of his crew, now reduced to the status of country-less pirates.²

The military threat to California from the Confederacy was a gnawing concern of Unionists throughout the state during the Civil War. In particular, the harbor of San Francisco was seen as vulnerable to attack from the sea. This is the story of the measures taken, primarily military but also political, to defend the bay against hostile ships. In order to meet this threat, construction on the fortresses of the bay had proceeded amid pleas for money and guns, and the letters and telegrams of harried and anxious officials, generally solid and stable men, but who stared into the impenetrable fog of the California coast, and imagined the worst. In a state of perpetual anxiety regarding what they felt were inadequate harbor defenses, the military placed over 200 heavy guns around the harbor entrance (and would have placed many more had they been available); the navy ordered an iron-clad warship to patrol the bay; and the citizens of San Francisco warmly embraced as potential protectors the officers and men of a Russian squadron, visiting the bay in the winter and spring of 1863-64. However, no enemy entered the bay, and no shot was ever fired in anger from fortress guns or those on warships. Had such an event taken place, no doubt the history of California during the Civil War would have assumed a role of greater interest for scholars of that conflict. As it is, little is known about the history of California during the Civil War, and local residents, aside from historians and park rangers, know almost nothing about the history surrounding the relics which still stand as a reminder of that far-off time.

General histories of the Civil War pay little attention to the impact of California's

² Waddell, *Memoirs*, 175-77.

participation as a Union state. For most Civil War scholars, California is simply not a factor in either the outcome or the course of the war. For example, James McPherson's excellent *Battle Cry of Freedom* only mentions California in terms of the effect that the state's entry into the Union had on the delicate balance of power between North and South. Nothing at all is mentioned regarding California once the war commenced. Other historians may mention California, but only tangentially, perhaps with a brief reference to the actions of the Confederate Navy, and in particular to the operations of the *Shenandoah* in the north Pacific in the latter days of the war. Or some mention is occasionally made of the California volunteers--some 500 California citizens who served in Massachusetts regiments--but this is a rare exception. Even California historians generally give scant attention to the state during the Civil War years.³

The Elusive Eden, a general survey of California history, devotes a little over half a page to the Civil War, primarily to explain its effect on the building of the trans-continental railroad. Berkeley Professor Walton Bean's *California: An Interpretative History*, does better, devoting just over three pages to Civil War California. His comments are directed mainly at the exaggerated influence of secessionists and deal little with actual events. While he mentions the "California 500" and the 16,000 volunteers who served in the state, along with military operations in New Mexico, California's participation in the war he dismisses as "very limited." Other treatments are scarcely better, generally leaving the reader with the impression that California was simply not a player in the Civil War and remained uninvolved and unaffected by the conflict.⁴

³ James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 70-77.

⁴ Richard Rice, William Bullough, and Richard Orsi, *The Elusive Eden: A New History of California*, 2d ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1996), 259; Walter Bean, *California: An Interpretative History* (New York/San Francisco: McGraw-Hill, 1968), 177-181. Andrew Rolle devotes a total of 4 pages out of 535 to the Civil War in his general history of

This treatment of California as incidental or unimportant to the course of the Civil War is so pervasive as to be almost unquestioned. This is not to say that California was critical to the outcome of the war (though an argument can be made that it was), but that the emphasis placed on California's participation, if at all acknowledged, is on the wrong things. What is important is not so much what the state did or was, but what it was *not*. And what it was not was a Confederate state or, almost as injurious to the Northern cause, an independent republic. Historians tend to forget that, at the time of the war's outbreak, California appeared to be deeply divided as to its loyalties, and only later swung into the Union column as a solid bulwark of the North.

Indeed, Democrats dominated the state government in 1861, and in Southern California, according to historian John Robinson, "every local election between 1861 and 1864 resulted in victory for those who espoused the Southern cause." The slavery question that sundered the rest of the country was reflected in California by the schism in the Democratic Party, with the pro-southern wing supporting Senator Gwin, and the anti-Buchanan faction led by Senator Broderick. In the elections of 1860, the Northern and Southern Democrats succeeded in cancelling each other out, leading to the triumph of the Republicans and the election as President of Abraham Lincoln, who squeaked by with a plurality of just over one-third of the total vote. Thus, the loyalty of California to the Union cause appeared to be anything but a certainty in 1861.⁵

California, emphasizing the importance of California's gold, and the effect of the war on the state's integration into national life; see Andrew Rolle, *California: A History*, fourth ed. (Arlington Hts., Ill.: Harlan Davidson, inc., 1987) : 246-49. See also Ralph Roske, *Everyman's Eden: A History of California* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1968) : 303-320. This work is unusual in that an entire chapter is devoted to the Civil War, which contains good detail on events in the southwest.

⁵ John Robinson, "Colonel Edward J.C. Kewen; Los Angeles Fire-Eating Orator of the Civil War Era," *Southern California Quarterly* 61, no. 2 (1979) : 171, 160; Robert Chandler, "The Velvet Glove: The Army During the Secession Crisis in California, 1860-1861," *Journal of the West* 20, no. 4 (1981) : 36.

The attitude of California's citizens during the Civil War has been something of a puzzle to historians ever since the war ended and histories began to be written. Sometimes compared to a border state, California's population of Southerners has been estimated generally as something around three-eighths of the total, to as high as three-fifths. Professor Bean has scoffed at these figures, and from census reports determined that less than seven per cent of California's population came from the seceding states. In this assessment he echoes the finding of California historian Benjamin Franklin Gilbert, who, like Bean, feels that the state was never in serious danger from secessionists or proponents of a separate republic. As he puts it, "the census returns of 1860 are a more reliable indicator of Southern nativity than the wild assertions of certain hysterical eyewitnesses in 1861."⁶

Statistics, however, seldom tell the whole story, and often they are open to question and interpretation. For instance, at the time of its publication, the census report of 1860 was not universally received as necessarily accurate. As noted in the San Francisco newspaper, the *Alta California*, in December of 1862, "It is well known that the census Marshals did not perform their duties carefully in this State, and therefore we cannot expect to find accurate statistics of California in the published report." In addition, and perhaps even more intriguing, the report revealed that white males outnumbered white females by four to one, a fact that the newspaper recognized was inherently unhealthy politically and socially, being "as injurious to the people and the State, as it is unnatural." California was as yet a raw and unstable place, and arguments that it exhibited qualities of a border state, or was solidly Unionist all along, tend to over-simplify the reality of what was a unique area. Perhaps General Wright summed it up best in a letter to

⁶ Bean, "California: An Interpretative History," 178; Benjamin Franklin Gilbert, "California and the Civil War: A Bibliographical Essay," *California Historical Society Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (1961) : 293.

Brigadier-General Lorenzo Thomas in October of 1862. Drawing upon ten years of experience on the Pacific coast, he wrote:

It was not alone from the States of our Union that the people came; every quarter of the globe, as well as the isles of the ocean, contributed to swell the number. It will thus be seen that this country was overrun and occupied by people bringing with them and retaining all their home prejudices, and ill calculated to establish a colony of loyal citizens eager to promote the prosperity of the country. Time and contact have done much to harmonize and smooth down the discordant elements of this incongruous population, yet the outbreak of a formidable rebellion in our land had a tendency to revive those sectional sympathies and attachments, which have prompted men to glory not in the fact that they are Americans but that they are from such and such a State, to which their permanent allegiance is due.

California, at the beginning of the Civil War, was thus neither fish nor fowl, neither Union, nor Confederate nor border state, but something as yet unformed. It was the experience of the Civil War itself and the repeated threats of plots and attacks that drew the people closer to the Union cause.⁷

The effect of a Confederate (or independent) California to the Union effort can only be imagined. While California fielded only about 500 soldiers to fight in the East, something like 16,000 native troopers served on the Pacific coast, manning forts, guarding stage lines, fighting Indians, and engaging in active combat in the Southwest. These were men who did *not* have to be detached from critical duty in the East. In addition, the gold of California went to Federal coffers, and not to the severely strained economy of the Confederacy. Perhaps, most importantly, the immense coastline of the Pacific, and in particular, the incredibly fine harbor of San Francisco, was closed to ships of the Confederate Navy, which sailed freely on the high seas but were rarely able to find a friendly port in which to re-provision. Confederate Naval Minister to England, James Bulloch, writing after the war, stated the problem clearly:

⁷ *Alta California* (San Francisco), 21, 22 December 1862; Wright to Thomas, October 27, 1862, *OR*, pt. 2, 196.

A Confederate cruiser . . . had no home port for outfit or retreat. . . . She was compelled to be as nearly as possible self-supporting. . . . Once upon the seas, she could never hope to re-supply the continual waste of her powers of offence or defence, and could obtain but a grudging allowance of the merest necessities.⁸

California, and its principal port, San Francisco, would have been a godsend to the Confederacy, providing a much-needed roost for its birds of prey.

A British military scholar, writing some twenty-four years after the end of the Civil War concluded that, had the government at Richmond properly supported Confederate forces in Texas and New Mexico, sympathizers in California might have been able “to secure the all-important Pacific Coast, with its important gold supply.” Had this occurred, he states, “it is scarcely possible to overrate the difference which that would have made in the conditions of the war.” Asbury Harpending, a Confederate sympathizer and principal player in the “Chapman affair” (an aborted attempt to outfit a privateer to intercept California mail steamers), had the following to say regarding California’s importance to the Union cause:

The attitude of California was a matter of supreme moment, not understood, however, at the time. Had this isolated state on the Pacific joined the Confederate States, it would have complicated the problems of the war profoundly. With the city of San Francisco and its then impregnable fortifications in Confederate hands, the outward flow of gold, on which the Union cause depended in large measure, would have ceased, as a stream of water is shut off by turning a faucet. It was the easiest thing in the world to open and maintain connection through savage Arizona into Texas, one of the strongholds of the South. It does not need a military expert to figure out what a vital advantage to the Confederacy the control of the Pacific would have proved.⁹

⁸ James Bulloch, *The Secret Service of the Confederate States in Europe, or How the Confederate Cruisers Were Equipped*, Vol. I (New York and London: Thomas Yoseloff, 1959), 55.

⁹ General Viscount Wolseley, K.P., “An English View of the Civil War,” *The North American Review* 149, no. 395 (October 1889) : 451; Asbury Harpending, *The Great Diamond Hoax and Other Stirring Incidents in the Life of Asbury Harpending*, ed. James Wilkins, with a forward by Glen Dawson (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1958) : 16.

Considering how close the European powers, particularly Great Britain and France, came to recognizing the Confederacy, it can be argued that the possession, or at least the co-operation of a friendly California might just have been the added factor necessary to that recognition. With recognition, other factors inevitably come into play, calling into question the very outcome of the war. Once recognized as an independent State, the Confederacy would have been able to complete and purchase (with California gold) the armored rams contracted through British and French firms. The effect of these rams, combined with Southern boldness, could have resulted in the virtual lifting of the eastern blockade of Southern ports, leading to the import of much needed goods for both the military and citizenry. The lifting of the naval blockade was, in fact, a key element of Southern naval strategy and the Lincoln government was quick to recognize the importance of choking off the South's maritime trade. As Admiral David D. Porter has pointed out in his *Naval History of the Civil War*, "it might well be said that without the close blockade which was kept up by the Navy, the war might have been carried on indefinitely."¹⁰

The cascade of possible outcomes is stunning. Historian Robert Chandler, who frankly feels that California was staunchly pro-Union from the beginning of the war, nonetheless speculates that, had Southern sympathizers seized the San Francisco forts, a chain of events could have resulted in the forced exchange of Fort Alcatraz for Fort Sumpter, as a "trade for the security of California's gold." The surrender of Sumpter, he asserts, "most probably would have assured the triumph of secession and an independent Southern Confederacy."¹¹

The response of San Francisco authorities to a perceived threat, principally from the

¹⁰ Admiral David D. Porter, *The Naval History of the Civil War* (New York: Sherman Pub. Co., 1886; reprint, Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, inc., 1998), 18.

¹¹ Chandler, "The Velvet Glove," 40.

sea, must therefore be seen in its proper context. That context was one of general instability and a lukewarm allegiance to the Union. The benefits of being a state had yet to be fully realized by the general population. For all the bullion that had flowed out of California's streams and mountains, to swell the coffers of the federal government, there was little compensation to show for it. As Harpending noted, "for all the immense tribute paid, the meager returns consisted of a few public buildings and public works." In spite of all the chest-thumping and assertions of the state's loyalty, the authorities at San Francisco labored under a cloud of insecurity regarding the possibility of secessionist activity from within and Confederate naval activity from without. The tepid support of the federal government, which was frankly unable to meet the demands of its officers, only added to San Francisco's sense of isolation and vulnerability. In similar fashion, the very course of the war, especially at the outset, when federal arms were everywhere humiliated, naturally tended to create an environment in which rumor thrived and dangers abounded. It is in understanding this environment that the historian can appreciate the sense of frantic activity and frustration that surrounded the construction of the San Francisco fortifications, the amazing response to the Russian sailors visiting the harbor during the winter and spring of 1863-64, and the almost touching concern lavished on the fate of a small iron-clad vessel whose task it was to protect San Francisco from intruders from the sea.¹²

From early 1861 until well after the end of hostilities in April of 1865, San Francisco endured a roller coaster ride of anxiety concerning potential threats to the city itself and to the fortresses which defended it. Early on, while the sympathies of many of its citizens were still questionable, the principal concern revolved around the danger from inside, from secessionist plots to seize the cannon of Fort Point and Alcatraz, and to train them

¹² Harpending, *The Great Diamond Hoax*, 21.

on the city's waterfront. As these dangers appeared to subside, Californians paid more attention to the alleged sea-borne threat, and frequent alarms were sounded concerning the inadequacy of the defenses. As the war progressed, the boldness of the captains of the Southern cruisers *Alabama* and *Florida* chilled the blood of the local authorities, and called up nightmares of sudden attack under cover of night or fog, the destruction of the waterfront, the demand for ransom, and, worst of all, the potential of secessionist revolt. While these anxieties might appear to have been unjustified and irrational, to the people involved the response was only logical and prudent. Indeed, the attitude of San Franciscans during the Civil War was certainly no more hysterical than that of their descendants during World War II, who confidently, but in hindsight, irrationally, imagined an imminent Japanese attack on the California mainland following the attack on Pearl Harbor. While the Japanese never seriously contemplated an attack on the U.S. mainland, the attitude of the Confederate authorities toward California was never so benign. In fact it is, in part, the intent of this work to show that the threat to California, and especially to the harbor of San Francisco was not so fantastic as might be thought, even if not quite so serious as the overwrought imaginations of the local authorities and newspaper editors conceived.

No doubt the dangers of secessionist revolt were exaggerated during the conflict and in most histories written thereafter. As professor Bean has pointed out, "Pro-Confederate opinion and activities were more colorful than significant." Nonetheless, perception *is* important, for to understand the past one must understand the mentality of that past. A thorough understanding of historical events must include an appreciation of the viewpoint of the participants in those events. The question of California's actual importance to the Union cause should not submerge the reality that the people of California and especially of San Francisco saw themselves as very much a part of the war effort, and that their

efforts were important and, indeed, critical to the war's outcome. Moreover, scholars should avoid the tendency to describe events as somehow inevitable, or as a logical consequence of antecedent events. The drive for coherence should not be allowed to overwhelm the power of blind chance in historical affairs.¹³

In the case of San Francisco, the security of its defenses very literally hung by the thread of one man's sense of honor. Had Brigadier-General Albert Sidney Johnston, in command of the Federal Military Department of the Pacific in early 1861, not been a Union officer true to his sworn duty, he could easily have handed over his command to those secessionist elements who were pressuring him to do so. Such an action would not have been unthinkable. As Robert Chandler has pointed out, fortifications throughout the South had been surrendered by officers sympathetic to the rebellion. Alcatraz Island would have then become a Confederate Fort Sumpter, backed up by the cannon of Fort Point, but with far more formidable defenses than Sumpter and with little to oppose it in any case. While the course of the war, or even the attitude of Californians might not have been changed, still the local history would have been much more colorful. Chance event and the spirit and energy of individuals play a more important part in history than is commonly given credit. Local Union officials were energetic and active in suppressing what they thought of as dangerous activity. All over California, but particularly in San Francisco (and Southern California), the local authorities were diligent in preparing for a possible attack. Whether these efforts would have actually frustrated a concerted assault by a determined enemy is questionable, and this question will be examined. By the end of the Civil War, nonetheless, the fortifications around San Francisco bay and the defensive measures taken were, superficially at least, quite impressive, and had transformed that part of the bay defined by Fort Point, Alcatraz, and Angel Island into a

¹³ Bean, 178.

virtual “ring of fire.”¹⁴

The circle of forts that protected the harbor of San Francisco was the most obvious manifestation of the fear of sea-borne attack which animated the military and civil authorities. The remnants of these defenses still remain as a visible reminder to current inhabitants that the Civil War and its attendant dangers were not just problems for the Union states on the Atlantic seaboard. This work will open with an examination of the construction of the forts throughout the four years of the war, with the first two chapters devoted to this task. Proceeding in a roughly chronological fashion, chapter one will set the stage for an understanding of the problems-- political, military, technical, and financial-- that beset the military leaders and engineers in the accomplishment of their mission. Chapter two will open with an examination of an event occurring at the war's mid-point, the seizure of the Confederate privateer *Chapman* in the middle of San Francisco bay. Like cold water on a troubled sleeper, San Francisco was suddenly awakened to a tangible danger in its very heart. Work on the fortresses thus proceeded with a new sense of urgency and foreboding. Chapter two will follow the construction of San Francisco's harbor defenses to the war's end, and provide an understanding of their final layout.

The object of all this building and preparation was, as has been stated, the threat of attack by Confederate vessels. The question of the validity of that fear will be addressed in Chapter Three, with an analysis of Confederate naval policy and actions. Chapter four will examine an event seemingly unrelated to the Civil War, the visit to San Francisco by a squadron of Russian war-ships in the fall of 1863. Because of the anxiety of local authorities regarding a potential Confederate attack, the Russian officers and men were welcomed as warm friends and allies, and for some months there was even talk of a

¹⁴ Bean, *California: An Interpretative History*, 178; Chandler, “The Velvet Glove,” 40.

Russian-American alliance, as a counterweight to the political power of England and France.

The final chapter will follow the strange story of the monitor *Camanche*, which was sent by the Navy to guard the city and harbor of San Francisco. Unlike the forts, the little iron-clad is long gone and forgotten. But the tale of this craft sums up, as perhaps nothing else can, the energy and anxious fears that animated San Franciscans during the Civil War.

All the afore-mentioned stories can and have been told separately. But they are all of a piece. They are woven together with the thread of war-time fear and the inherent instability of a young and isolated land. What follows is an attempt to link this patchwork quilt of stories into something more of a tapestry, with the hope that the separate patches will be all the more understandable.

Chapter 1

California Nightmare

The Pre-War Years

The Gold Rush of 1848 changed the harbor of San Francisco literally overnight from a sleepy backwater to a booming port. In 1849, over 770 ships entered the bay, and docks and other facilities were rapidly being thrown up, including a navy yard at nearby Mare Island.¹⁵ Defense of what was becoming one of the most important harbors in North America suddenly became a military priority. But without the threat of actual war, work proceeded slowly, and by 1861, only two forts guarded the entrance to San Francisco Bay, and neither can be said to have been complete. Fort Point, located on the southern end of the entrance (directly under the present-day Golden Gate Bridge), had as yet no garrison and only a scattered collection of old cannon, mostly un-mounted. Alcatraz, on the other hand, had been occupied since late 1859, and by mid -1861 counted over eighty pieces of heavy ordnance, ready for action. Yet even here, batteries were still under construction and much work remained undone.¹⁶

Labor on both fortifications had begun late in 1853 and had been initiated as a result

¹⁵ For additional information on development of San Francisco Bay during this period, see Roger W. Lotchin, *San Francisco, 1846-1856: From Hamlet to City* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974). See also William Camp, *San Francisco: Port of Gold* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1947); Dianne Kirkby, "Gold and the Growth of a Metropolis: A Comparative Study of San Francisco and Melbourne, Australia," *Journal of the West* 17 (April 1978): 3-15; and Felix Reisenberg, *Golden Gate: The Story of San Francisco Harbor* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1940).

¹⁶ John Martini, *Fort Point: Sentry at the Golden Gate* (Golden Gate National Park Association, 1991), 7-10; John Martini, *Fortress Alcatraz: Guardian of the Golden Gate* (Kailua, Hawaii: Pacific Monograph, 1990), 29; Erwin Thompson, *Seacoast Fortifications: San Francisco Harbor* (Denver: U.S. Dept. of the Interior, May 1979), 50.

of a report issued by an Army-Navy board in November of 1850. This report clearly recognized the importance of San Francisco Bay to the security of the state and recommended that substantial defenses be placed on Fort Point, Lime Point (opposite Fort Point, on the northern side of the entrance to the Bay), and on Alcatraz Island. Additionally, subsidiary works were recommended to be placed on Angel Island, Black Point (or Point San Jose, on the San Francisco shore), and on Yerba Buena Island. These smaller fortifications would act as a “back-up” defense should an attacking ship or fleet succeed in passing the main fortifications.¹⁷

Construction of the two forts had proceeded somewhat fitfully, but overall steadily for around eight years prior to the beginning of the Civil War. The works, however, were quite dissimilar. Fort Point was a masonry construction, in the manner of Fort Sumpter, and of traditional design. Roughly rectangular in shape, it was built with four tiers, three “casemated,” or surrounded by heavy walls and ceiling, the fourth tier being open, or “en barbette.” In addition, two bastions projected outward toward the water, on the western and eastern ends of the fort. The fort was designed to accommodate over 120 heavy guns, many of which were pointed, not toward the sea, but toward the land, to repel an invasion from that quarter.¹⁸

Alcatraz, on the other hand, used the natural rock and earth as its defenses, and virtually all of its heavy armament was placed “en barbette.” Much of the labor involved reworking the island to fit the shape envisioned by the engineers. After an initial survey in August of 1853, excavation began the following month. Peaks were cut down and the natural rounded contours of the island were sheared off to form cliffs. This was done in order to discourage an attacking force from attempting a landing. By 1854, South and

¹⁷ Martini, *Fort Point*, 7.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 7-10.

Southeast Batteries, facing the City, and North Battery, facing Angel Island, were well under construction, and the first guns were delivered in September of that year. In 1856, construction began on West Battery, facing the Golden Gate, and the guardhouse. On July 9, 1857, the first deaths were recorded on the island, when two workmen were killed by a rockslide. An additional slide occurred a few weeks later, but, fortunately, no one was injured.

In July of 1859 work began on a “hot shot” furnace, which was a facility for heating solid shot to very high temperature, in order to set alight the wood, canvas, and spars of the ships of the time. Work stopped from November of 1859 until October of the following year, due to budget problems. Nonetheless, by 1860, four batteries were completed, and largely armed, and the island was home to the eighty-six men of Company H, Third U.S. Artillery Regiment, commanded by Captain Joseph Stewart.¹⁹

While Fort Point received the lion’s share of the funding, it fell behind Alcatraz in its allocation of ordnance. By July of 1857, Captain Tower, in charge of the fort, could count only thirty guns “on hand.” These were all smoothbores and all of an older design. The collection consisted of eight 8-inch and two 10-inch columbiads, and twenty 42-pounders (with barbette carriages). The total was far short of the 127 guns assigned to the work, and what made it worse was that the 42-pounders were assigned to the first (casemate) tier, and not to the fourth (barbette) tier, and were thus mounted on the wrong carriages. Tower was suitably concerned about the lack of hardware and noted in a communication to his superior that “there can be no doubt of the propriety of having these guns on the coast as soon as they can be shipped.”²⁰

¹⁹ Journal of Operations Pertaining to the Fortifications on Alcatraz Island, San Francisco Bay, August 1853-February 1861, Box 59A, Records of the Office of the Chief of Engineers, Records Group 77, National Archives, San Bruno, CA.; Martini, *Fortress Alcatraz*, 29.

²⁰ Tower to Capt. Wright, Chief of Engineers, July 3, 1858, Copies of Letters Sent By J.F.

Before any more guns were shipped however, Captain Tower was replaced by Captain J.F. Gilmer, who officially took command of Fort Point on February 24, 1859. Gilmer was also frustrated by the pace of construction and of the continual lack of money to keep the work going. In August of the same year he wrote that “we are making but moderate progress in the construction of defenses for this harbor, for the want of money.” With the available appropriation, the best he could do was to prepare for mounting the guns, “but the accommodations for the garrison cannot be perfected without an additional appropriation.” The need for money was a constant headache, and was to plague every commanding officer in the Department of the Pacific.²¹

Part of the problem was the unexpected expenses. For instance, one of the most aggravating and seemingly insoluble problems concerning the structure at Fort Point was the constant erosion of the foundation by the action of the sea. Gilmer recommended as early as July of 1859 that a seawall be built “entirely around the fort,” and noted that no money had been appropriated for this. He repeated his request in April of the following year, noting that the wall’s construction was absolutely necessary to protect the fort from “serious encroachments from the sea.” Gilmer’s entreaties went unheeded, however, and little attention was paid to the seawall until 1862.²²

Gilmer, Supervising Engineer, 1858-1861, Box 80, Records of the Office of the Chief of Engineers, RG 77, NA San Bruno.

²¹ Special Order No. 85, February 24, 1859, *ibid.*; Gilmer to Prof. Bache, Supt. of Coast Survey, August 19, 1859, *ibid.*

²² Gilmer to Col. De Russy, Corps of Engineers, Washington D.C., July 19, 1859, and April 5, 1860, *ibid.*; Martini, *Fort Point*, 15.

The Guns

Of all the problems confronting those responsible for the defense of San Francisco, none was as nagging or persistent as the inability to procure an adequate number of cannon, particularly cannon of an advanced design. The guns that defended the city of San Francisco were an amalgam of types and sizes, and were fairly typical of coastal ordnance of the time. A brief review of the capabilities and limitations of Civil War coastal artillery will assist in an understanding of the problems that beset the engineers attempting to solve the problems of San Francisco's defense.

At the time the Civil War began, the largest cannon emplaced at either Alcatraz or behind the walls of Fort Point was the columbiad, which was key to the defense of both installations. The columbiad was a heavy caliber weapon of long range and ideally suited to coastal defense, particularly of narrow channels. Most seaport cities of any size depended upon this weapon for protection. Almost without exception, columbiads were smoothbores. The columbiads of Fort Point and Alcatraz were of a standard size, having a bore of either eight or ten inches. These guns fired solid shot of about 65 lbs. and 125 lbs. respectively, and shells (hollow shot filled with black powder) of lighter weight. The smaller guns of the fortifications were identified by the weight of the solid shot which they fired, and ranged from 24 to 32 to 42 pounders. All were also capable of firing shells, and the 24 pounder "howitzers" were designed to be used with canister or grape shot for close-in defense against attacking troops. Mortars of 10-inch bore were also emplaced and were used to fire shells at very high angles of elevation, in order to pierce the decks of enemy ships.²³

²³ Warren Ripley, *Artillery and Ammunition of the Civil War* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1970), 71; Dean Thomas, *Cannons: An Introduction to Civil War Artillery* (Gettysburg, PA: Thomas Publications, 1985), 55; Martini, *Fortress Alcatraz*,

Virtually all of the columbiads emplaced in San Francisco harbor in 1861 were of the 1844 design, though an updated version was released in 1858. Due to inadequate understanding of the cooling dynamics of very large masses of metal, however, these guns had a disturbing tendency to blow up in the faces of their servicers. Therefore, when Lieutenant of Engineers, George Elliot, took over command of Fort Point from Captain Gilmer in July of 1861, he would report three months later that the ten columbiads on hand were “not serviceable, since the ordnance department has directed that they be used only for shells and with reduced charges.”²⁴

As the war progressed, more advanced pieces of ordnance were shipped to the west coast. These consisted principally of the 10-inch and 15-inch models of the “Rodman” gun. While not rifled, these guns were cast in accordance with principles developed by Army Lieutenant T.J. Rodman. Rodman developed a technique of cooling which resulted in the production of very large caliber weapons that could withstand the heavy charges they employed. They were clearly superior to the older model guns in range, power, and accuracy, though even by the end of the war their numbers were limited, particularly the 15-inch model. This behemoth was truly impressive, weighing close to 50,000 pounds and throwing a 440 lb. solid shot for a distance of three miles. But due to the distances between the forts in the Bay and the inherent inaccuracy of smoothbores, rifled guns were requested early on by the engineers whose duty it was to safeguard the city. Not until mid-1864, however, were any rifled cannon sent to the forts of San Francisco.²⁵

24.

²⁴ Ripley, *Artillery and Ammunition of the Civil War*, 78; Elliot to Brig. General Totten, Chief Engineer, Eng. Dept., Washington D.C., October 14, 1861, Copies of Letters Sent by Engineer Officers Gilmer and De Russy, Relating to Fortifications, 1861-1864, Box 80A, RG 77, NA San Bruno.

²⁵ Ripley, *Artillery*, 78; Thomas, *Cannons*, 55; Thompson, *Seacoast Fortifications*, 65.

As previously mentioned, seacoast artillery fired both solid shot and shell, shot being the simplest and oldest form of projectile. Heated in a furnace, “hot shot” was quite effective against wooden-hulled ships, usually being fired with reduced charges to prevent a deep penetration into the wood, which would tend to curtail combustion through lack of air. Shells were, of course, designed to explode upon reaching the target, but until the refinement of the conical, rifled shell, achieving this result was problematic. While some success was achieved with spherical shells that exploded on contact, by far the most common type of fuse during the Civil War was of the timed variety. In essence, the gunner calculated the distance to his target and cut the fuse, designed to burn at a predetermined rate, to the proper length. If all went well (a big “if”) the shell would explode at the appropriate moment. The fuse was ignited by the firing of the gun, and it was extremely important that the fuse not be pointed toward the blast, as this would invariably drive the fuse into the shell and explode the shell prematurely, usually with damaging results to both gun and men. To ensure that this did not occur, the shell could be either fitted with a wooden cylindrical holder, called a *sabot*, which kept the fuse pointed toward the muzzle, or the shell could be cast with depressions or “ears” on each side of the fuse-hole, into which a pair of tongs could be fitted, and the shell thus placed in the bore. By the time of the Civil War, these fuses had become quite sophisticated, the seacoast model being so designed that the shell could be skipped across the water to its target, without danger of the fuse going out. “Skipping” was, in fact, a favorite practice of naval and seacoast gunners, enabling them to strike an enemy ship at or near the waterline. This technique could not be practiced with rifled, conical shells.²⁶

However, a gunner’s success had a lot to do with chance and luck, and many things could go wrong. Fuses, for instance, deteriorated while in storage, and timing was no

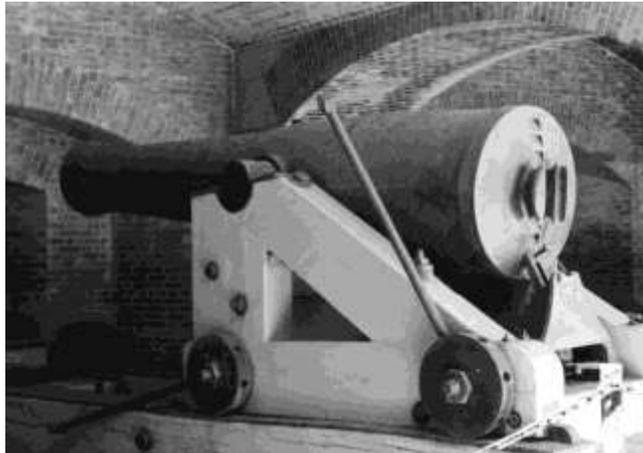
²⁶ Ripley, *Artillery*, 255, 258, 275.

longer reliable. In July of 1864, shells that had been stored for years at Fort Point were tested, and they “exploded in every instance within a few feet, or, at best, a few yards, of the muzzles of the pieces.” Upon inspection, it was found that the fuses had shrunk, and that the powder in the shell was “exposed to the direct action of the fire from the guns.” Prudently, an order was issued to inspect all the ammunition in all the forts of the bay “in case of an emergency we may not be caught with worthless weapons in our hands.”²⁷

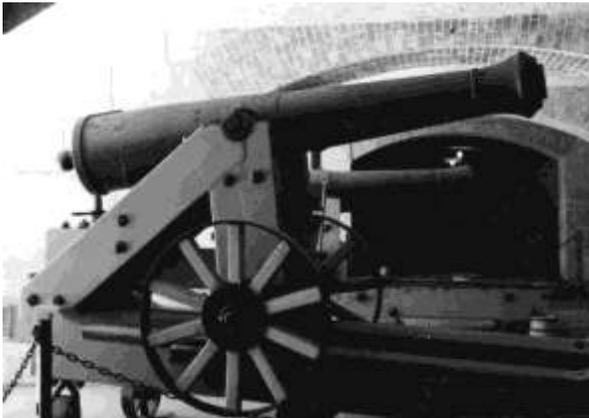
Seacoast guns were mounted, generally, on two types of carriages: barbette and casemate. The barbette carriage was further divided into two varieties: front-pintle and center-pintle. A front-pintle carriage pivoted, as the name implies, at the front, and limited traverse to 180 degrees. A center-pintle carriage, in contrast, pivoted in the center, and allowed for a traverse of 360 degrees. Casemate carriages were generally lower than their open-air brothers, and because the size of the embrasures limited both traverse and elevation, such carriages were fitted with wheels both at front and rear, ensuring maximum traverse under very limited conditions. The guns of the barbette (fourth) tier at Ft. Point were of the center-pintle variety, enabling the guns to be trained on the land behind the fort, if necessary. The guns of Alcatraz, anticipating the direction that coastal defense was to take in the future, were virtually all mounted on barbette carriages, and mostly of the center-pintle type, providing the maximum possible range of traverse and elevation.²⁸

²⁷ *Alta California*, 15 July 1864.

²⁸ Ripley, 205-210; Martini, *Fortress Alcatraz*, 25.



8" Columbiad, casemate carriage, Fort Point.



*32-Pounder, barbette carriage,
Fort Point*



*10" Rodman, front pintle barbette carriage
Black Point. Photos by author*

The Coming of the War

The growing clouds of war inevitably placed increased demands and stresses on the officers attempting to prepare the bay forts for defense. Paradoxically, while the secession crisis was building to a climax, Congress was shutting off the flow of funds to work on military defenses. In mid-January of 1861, Captain Gilmer reported to his

superior that he had only money enough on hand to pay for work already done through the end of 1860, but, assuming that it was not the government's intention that work be stopped, construction would continue in expectation of payment. He was proved wrong when, the very same day, the Secretary of War issued orders "that all operations of constructions upon the works under your charge be at once discontinued and that no further liabilities be contracted." These instructions were not received until the fifteenth of the following month. Nonetheless, Gilmer's monthly report for January, issued February 1, reflected the fact that all work on the fort at Fort Point had been suspended for lack of funds.²⁹

The same steamer that brought Gilmer his orders to cease construction also brought orders to Brigadier-General Albert Sidney Johnston, recently appointed to head the newly-created Department of the Pacific, to occupy the fortress at Fort Point with a company of artillery "with as little delay as practicable." Gilmer, with no funds on hand, and orders to do nothing to incur additional expense, was at the same time ordered by Johnston to "put the barracks and quarters of that work in a condition to be occupied and to place the fort in readiness for defence." Caught in the middle of conflicting orders and no money to proceed, he could only attempt to comply, pointing out that "this can only be done by inducing mechanics to work under a promise that every effort will be made . . . to have funds sent . . . to pay them for their services." Even under the best of circumstances, he could expect no money for at least two months. Somehow, the civilian laborers were induced to continue working, and the fort was occupied as ordered and on schedule. The money, considering the circumstances, was provided. On April 10, Captain Gilmer was able to report acknowledgement of a \$50,000.00 appropriation for

²⁹ Gilmer to De Russey, January 14, 1861, Copies of Letters Sent, 1861-64, Box 80A, RG 77, NA; Asst. Adj-General Mackall, Hdqtrs, Dept of the Pacific, to Gilmer, February 15, 1861, *OR*, Pt. 1, 444; Monthly Report, Letters Sent, 1861-64, Box 80A, RG 77, NA.

fiscal year 1861-62, and was estimating that the appropriation for the current year was “nearly sufficient.”³⁰

The Department of the Pacific was an enormous area, covering over one million square miles, and encompassing all the states and territories west of the Rocky Mountains. It was further divided into the military departments of California, Oregon, New Mexico, Utah, and Texas. Few troops were available for the security of this area, and in the Department of California on the eve of the Civil War, only a little over 1,500 men could be counted as present for duty. With this tiny force, in the words of Asbury Harpending, “little more than a shadow,” Brigadier-General Johnston was expected to ensure the security of the state and, with an even fewer number, the harbor of San Francisco.³¹

The threat to the harbor installations was, in fact, real, if a bit fantastic. Confederate sympathizers in San Francisco had pledged themselves, according to Harpending, “to carry California out of the Union.” The forts at Fort Point and Alcatraz, and the arsenal at Benicia were targeted: “We proposed to carry these strongholds by a night attack and also to seize the arsenals of the militia at San Francisco.” General Johnston was a key factor in these deliberations. Born in Kentucky, he later made Texas his home state and thus had a “double bond of sympathy for the South.” These sympathies were well known but, given Johnston’s “exacting sense of honor,” few of the conspirators felt that he

³⁰ Gilmer to Brig.-General Totten, Chief Engineer, Eng. Dept, Washington D.C., February 20, 1861, *ibid*; Asst. Adj.-General Lorenzo Thomas to Brig.-General Johnston, January 19, 1861, *OR*, Pt. 1, 434; Gilmer to Major Mackall, February 16, 1861 and Gilmer to Totten, April 10, 1861, Letters Sent, Box 80A, RG 77, NA.

³¹ Brigadier-General George Wright, “To the Loyal Citizens of the Pacific Coast,” June 21, 1864, *OR*, Pt. 2, 873; James Carson, “California: Gold to Help Finance the War,” *Journal of the West* 14, no. 1 (1975) : 31; Abstract from Returns of the Departments of California and Oregon for the Month of December, 1860, *OR*, Pt. 1, 428; Harpending, *The Great Diamond Hoax*, 20.

would betray his trust. This assumption was confirmed when Johnston was visited by a committee of three in order to gauge his sentiment:

I will never forget that meeting. We were ushered into the presence of General Albert Sidney Johnston. He was a blond giant of a man with a mass of heavy yellow hair, untouched by age, although he was nearing sixty. He had the nobility of bearing that marks the great leader of men, and it seemed to my youthful imagination that I was looking at some superman of ancient history, like Hannibal or Caesar, come to life again.

Hardly had the three men been seated when Johnston informed them that he had heard “foolish talk” about attempts to seize government strongholds. Knowing this, he stated flatly that he had already made preparations and would “defend the property of the United States with every resource at my command, and with the last drop of blood in my body. Tell that to our Southern friends.” The men sat in stunned silence until Johnston launched into an easy conversation, which lasted for an hour or so. After this meeting, the organization voted to discard their plans.³²

Whether one credits Harpending’s account, it cannot be doubted that General Johnston took vigorous measures to protect the installations under his command. On February 6, 1861, he requested an accounting of all the arms on hand at the Benicia arsenal. After receiving this report, he ordered that ten thousand stands of muskets along with 150,000 cartridges be sent from the arsenal to Alcatraz, “without delay.” He further ordered that a “suitable guard” accompany the arms and that, under no circumstances, would the arms be kept at the city wharf during the night. To Lieutenant Col. Merchant, commanding the Presidio of San Francisco, and exercising general supervision over Fort Point, he issued a set of fourteen instructions, to be strictly enforced, to guard against any possibility of attack, particularly from the land side. To the commander of Alcatraz he sent orders that

³² Harpending, *The Great Diamond Hoax*, 16-27.

he expected him “to maintain your post and defend Alcatraz Island against all efforts to seize it, from whatever direction such efforts may come.” By February 26, most of Johnston’s immediate instructions had been carried out, and adequate supplies of munitions were on hand in the forts. Any that remained outside the walls of Ft. Point, he directed, “may be left outside, provided the piles are under the fire of the fort.”³³

Despite his energy and activity, however, Johnston’s days as commander of the Department of the Pacific were numbered. Johnston’s southern sympathies were too well known not to arouse some anxiety in Washington officials, and Edmund Randolph, a prominent San Francisco attorney and, according to Harpending, a member of their conspiracy, apparently claimed to the editor of the *Sacramento Bee* that Johnston was a traitor. This information was forwarded to President Lincoln through Senator Baker, an old friend of the President.³⁴

Whether this accusation was given complete credence, prudence dictated that Johnston should not be left in command of such an important department so far from federal control, and on March 22, 1861, General Winfield Scott ordered Brigadier-General Edwin Sumner to sail for San Francisco to relieve Johnston. “For confidential reasons,” the order was to remain unpublished until he was on the Pacific Ocean. Arriving in San Francisco on April 24, Sumner officially assumed command the next day.³⁵

Because of his well-known Southern sympathies, legend has it that Johnston was

³³ Asst. Adj.-General Mackall to 1st. Lieut. McAllister, Commanding Benicia Arsenal, February 6, 1861, *OR*, Pt. 1, 438; Mackall to Lieut. Col. Thomas Swords, Dpty Quartermaster-General, Dept. of the Pacific, February 17, 1861, *ibid*, 444-45; Mackall to Lieut. Col. Merchant, Third Artillery, Commanding Presidio of San Francisco, February 18, 1861, *ibid*, 446; Mackall to Capt. Setwart, Third Artillery, Commanding Alcatraz Island, February 20, 1861, *ibid*, 448; Mckall to Merchant, February 26, 1861, *ibid*, 449.

³⁴ Chandler, “The Velvet Glove, 39.

³⁵ Scott to Sumner, March 22, 1861, *OR*, Pt. 1, 455; Special Orders No. 5, Headquarters, Dept. of the Pacific, April 25, 1861, *ibid.*, 469.

summarily relieved of command on the 24th, the day of Sumner's arrival. That this was the "purest fiction" (according to Harpending) is supported by the official record, and the newspaper accounts of the time. General Sumner in fact reported to Johnston on the day following his arrival, and noted that "the command was turned over to me in good order," and that Johnston "was carrying out the orders of the government," even though he had tendered his resignation two weeks before. Johnston had kept secret the fact that he had resigned, to avoid the appearance of a power vacuum. When the local newspaper reported Sumner's arrival on the steamer *Golden Age*, it noted matter-of-factly that Johnston no doubt would be transferred to command the Department of Oregon. Only the following day did the paper report Johnston's resignation, with clear signs of regret, and words of high praise: "A braver soldier, a more courteous gentleman, a more judicious commander, a purer patriot, or a more admirable man never trod the soil of our country."³⁶

There is clear evidence that even the authorities in Washington still had confidence in Johnston and wished him to remain in federal service. In April of 1861, Fitz John Porter, on duty in the adjutant-general's office in Washington, and a friend of the general, fearing the effect of his relief "upon a high-toned and sensitive officer," easily prevailed upon the Secretary of War to offer an appointment to the Military Academy at West Point. This message was speedily sent by telegraph and pony express. It was too late. In response, Johnston thanked Porter for his efforts, but indicated that he had already resigned the service and had "resolved to follow the fortunes of my State." Less than a year later, Johnston died at the battle of Shiloh, having received what appeared to be a minor bullet wound to the leg, but which in fact had severed an artery. Before his aides

³⁶ Harpending, 28; Sumner to Lieut. Col. Townsend, Asst. Adj.-General, Headquarters, San Francisco, April 28, 1861, *OR*, Pt. 1, 471; Martini, *Fortress Alcatraz*, 37-39; *Alta California*, 25, 26 April 1861.

had time to appreciate the gravity of his wound, Johnston bled to death.³⁷

Brigadier-General Sumner assumed command of the Department of the Pacific on April 25, 1861, and immediately went to work. In the same letter in which he expressed pleasure at the state of the defenses which were turned over to him by Johnston, he let it be known that much remained to be done and that he was “determined to re-inforce immediately and strongly the forts in this harbor.” His intentions were to increase the force on Alcatraz to 400 men, that of Fort Point to 150, place a battery at the arsenal at Benicia, and provide food and water sufficient to guarantee that the fortifications “will be independent and secure for six months.” These actions he was certain “will have the effect to foreclose at once all hopes on the part of the disaffected of their ever being able to precipitate matters here by seizing forts and arsenals.”³⁸

While certain that Union feeling was strong, Sumner noted that “the secessionists are much the most active and zealous party, which gives them more influence than they ought to have from their numbers.” He had no doubt that there was “deep scheming” to draw California out of the Union and he was particularly suspicious of the movement to create a “Republic of the Pacific,” which he interpreted as merely the first step in inducing California to join the Confederacy. The troops available would hold their position, but, in case of a general uprising, their numbers were insufficient to put it down. What was crucial to developments in California, he insisted, was the trend of events in the east: “So long as the General Government is sustained and hold the capital the secessionists can not carry this State out of the Union.” In case of disaster, he could

³⁷ Fitz John Porter, “Memoranda on the Civil War,” *The Century* 29 (February 1885) : 634-5; for a detailed account of Johnston’s death, see the account by his son, Wm. Preston Johnston, “Albert Sidney Johnston and the Shiloh Campaign,” *The Century* 29 (February, 1885) : 626-27.

³⁸ Sumner to Townsend, April 28, 1861, *OR*, Pt. 1, 471-72

make no promises.³⁹

Nonetheless, for all his energy and activity, General Sumner was clearly not happy with his new assignment, and within three days of assuming command, he was already asking for a transfer. Suggesting that Colonel Wright of the Department of Oregon would be a suitable replacement, he broadly hinted that his services might be “wanted elsewhere.”⁴⁰

News of the Confederate bombardment of Fort Sumpter reached San Francisco on April 24, the same day that Sumner arrived on the *Golden Age*. The General was nearly sixty-five years old and had spent over forty years in the military. Despite his age, he was an aggressive fighter and wanted to be in the east, where he knew the action was going to be. However important was the Pacific coast, there were no battles to be fought here and no glory to be won. The position of departmental commander was, in fact, a political one, which demanded those skills necessary to appease all the groups clamoring for protection against Indians, general lawlessness, and secessionist plots, real and imagined. With extremely limited resources, the Commander of the Pacific had to respond, or appear to respond to all these demands, and at the same time maintain a running battle with Washington to get what materiel he could, after the more important eastern priorities were served. He had to be tough on secessionism, or at least appear to be, lest he risk being labeled as a sympathizer, or “soft.” It was not a job to the liking of a military man, and both he and his successor George Wright wanted out. Only Sumner would get his wish, but not for some months yet. For now he had to spend his time shadowboxing with ephemeral dangers and hope that his request for relief would be honored. Luckily for him and for the State, Sumner’s political instincts were good, and

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

his hard-line policies generally affirmed by the loyal Unionists of the population.⁴¹

Pirates, Plotters, and Patriots

Hardly had the war begun than word of secessionist plots began to circulate within California. Talk of Confederate privateers on the Pacific coast was common, both in California and in Washington. On April 27, the commander of the Pacific Squadron was advised that “attempts may be made by privateers or lawless persons to seize one of the California steamers,” and that the port of San Francisco was a point of “special danger.” He was therefore to concentrate his forces on the route from Panama to San Francisco. Two days later, the president of the Pacific Mail Steamship Company wrote to the Secretary of War, Simon Cameron, that “owing to apprehensions . . . that steamers of this company may be captured . . . by privateersmen shipping as passengers,” he respectfully requested that the commanding officer in the Pacific be directed to detail a small guard of soldiers to each steamer, sailing three times a month from San Francisco. In a follow-up letter, he suggested that such a guard would also be helpful in training the crew “for the repulsion of any enemy from outside.” A few months later, the same company made a request for four 32-pounder guns, to augment the small caliber weapons already carried. Owing to the importance of the mail steamers, which carried not only mail but large amounts of gold, these requests, insofar as possible, were met.⁴²

⁴¹ Chandler, *Velvet Glove*, 39-42.

⁴² Gideon Welles, Secretary of the Navy, to Flag Officer Montgomery, Commanding Pacific Squadron, April 27, 1861, *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies 1861-1865* (hereafter cited as *ORN*), (Washington: Gov’t Printing Office, 1894), Series I, vol.1, 15; Allan McLane, President Pacific Mail Steamship Company, to Cameron, April 29 and 30, 1861, *OR*, Pt. 1, 474; Forbes & Babcock, Agent Pacific Mail Steamship Co.,

In mid-May, General Sumner issued general orders which summarily expressed his attitude toward his command and toward anti-union sentiment: “All officers charged with the care of public property will hold themselves in readiness at all times to protect it at every hazard.” To this he added his oft-repeated declaration that “no public property will ever be surrendered in this department.” In addition, any civilian employee expressing anti-Union feelings was to be “instantly discharged.” These orders were followed up with a command that all officers renew the oath of allegiance to the United States of America. “Special mention” would be made of any failure to comply.⁴³

Nowhere was secessionist feeling more strongly expressed than in Southern California, and Sumner was called upon to pay special attention to this area. As early as April 30, he was reporting the transfer of troops from Fort Mojave to Los Angeles, as “there is more danger of disaffection at this place than any other in the State.” Captain Winfield Scott Hancock, reporting from his post in Los Angeles, agreed with Sumner’s assessment, stating that “if there should be a difficulty in California it is likely that it will first show its head here.” He fervently requested the transfer of a 12-pounder field piece, noting that such a weapon would have a powerful “moral effect” on the secessionist element. From the editor of the *Weekly Patriot*, a southern California newspaper, came warnings of a secret organization of secessionists, and that “nothing but the presence of the U.S. troops prevents them from rising there.” The population was a singular one, he stated, being “composed of Mormons, Mormon apostates, who are even worse, gamblers, English Jews, and the devil’s own population to boot.”⁴⁴

Further to the south there was Mexico, which figured as a constant source of anxiety

to Sumner, and Drum to Forbes & Babcock, July 10, 1861, *ibid.*, 532.

⁴³ Special Orders No. 6, Headquarters Dept. of the Pacific, May 15, 1861, *OR*, Pt. 1, 486; Orders No. 7, May 18, 1861, *ibid.*, General Orders No. 12, June 4, 1861, *ibid.*, 498.

⁴⁴ Sumner to Townsend, April 30, 1861, *ibid.*, 474; Capt. Hancock to Maj. Mackall, May 1, 1861, *ibid.*, 477-8; Edwin Sherman to Sumner, June 3, 1861, *ibid.*, 496-7.

to the commander of the Department of the Pacific, and to Washington authorities as well. In a letter to Secretary of State William Seward came word that secessionists were planning to take possession of Lower California, the intention being to “cut off our commerce with Mexico, seize the Panama Steamers, and with the aid of the treasure so acquired to be able to extend their conquest to Sonora and Chihuahua at least.” Taking this warning seriously, Sumner was ordered on June 5 to “act in concert” with the commander of the Pacific Squadron, so as to prevent “any plans of the secessionists may attempt to execute for subjecting or annexing Lower California to the so-called Southern Confederacy.” That the Confederacy had interest in gaining control of northern Mexico there can be no doubt. The addition of French troops to the mix, from the point of view of the government at Washington and the military authorities in California, made the situation only more dangerous and complicated. While the several commanders of the Department of the Pacific might question the danger of secessionism within the state, there was genuine apprehension regarding the status of Mexico, resulting in frequent calls for military action there, and even for annexation of large portions of its territory.⁴⁵

Closer to home, General Sumner, having heard rumors of possible attacks on the arsenal at Benicia, issued orders that the guard be doubled at that facility, and called on the commanding officer for “untiring vigilance,” and reminded him that “this property must be preserved at all hazards.” He also apparently received word that the commandant of the naval yard at Mare Island had concerns about the security of his facility, and offered to send him a battery of artillery. David McDougal, Commandant, was a little surprised by the offer and politely declined it, professing “too much faith in the strong Union feeling now existing in California to believe for one moment that an

⁴⁵ Thomas Sprague, U.S. Commercial Agent at La Paz, to Secretary of State Seward, May 3, 1861, *ibid.*, 475; Townsend to Sumner, June 5, 1861, *ibid.*, 498-99.

effort of the kind would be even attempted.” However, when Sumner later requested that a ship’s cannon, a 24-pounder, be lent from the yard’s arsenal for use on the revenue cutter, *Joe Lane* (in accordance with his orders to act “in concert” with the Navy), the new Commandant, William Gardner, saw looming danger and suggested that “as self preservation is the first law of nature I deem it more prudent to keep for our own defense the limited means we have.” Sumner suggested that the Commandant take a broader view, “for it might be embarrassing to us to have vessels captured for the want of an armament that we could have furnished.” But to meet his concerns, the Benicia arsenal could exchange his gun with a similar one, on a field carriage.⁴⁶

From the moment he had assumed command of the Department of the Pacific, Brigadier-General Sumner had worked hard to place his command in a condition in which he could leave it to someone else. In early June of 1861, he repeated his request for a transfer, reminding his superior that “if he needs my services at the East I can make such arrangements that everything will be secure here.” If there was any doubt, he ended by saying that “I would not say this unless I knew I could do it.” The response that he got, two months later, was neither what he wanted nor expected.⁴⁷

While California was never called upon to furnish troops for service in the east, around 16,000 troops were enlisted for service in the Department of the Pacific. The first call for volunteers to guard the overland mail came in July of 1861. This was followed in August by a call for the mustering of five regiments (about 5,000 men) “to be placed at the disposal of General Sumner.” On August 24, 1861 Governor Downey of California released a proclamation calling for the raising of these troops. In the meantime, Sumner

⁴⁶ Mackall to Col. Seawell, Commanding Benicia Arsenal, May 9, 1861, *ibid.*, 481; Mackall to McDougal, May 9, 1861, *ibid.*; McDougal to Mackall, May 10, 1861, *ibid.*, 481-2; Sumner to Gardner, July 11, 1861, *ibid.*, 532-3; Gardner to Sumner, July 12, 1861, *ibid.*, 533-4; Sumner to Gardner, July 13, 1861, *ibid.*, 534-5.

⁴⁷ Sumner to Thomas, June 10, 1861, *OR*, Pt. 1, 507;

was informed that he was to command this force, on an expedition through Arizona, New Mexico, and into Texas, to put down the rebel forces in that area. He expressed himself as “flattered . . . especially on account of the almost insuperable difficulties.” But he was not happy with the command; no matter how important or successful it might be, it was still a sideshow. By now, however, the situation in California had changed. The federal disaster at Bull Run had stirred the cauldron of secessionism, and Sumner’s presence and the presence of the troops was needed where they were. This position was seconded by a long list of prominent San Francisco citizens, who on August 28 wrote to the Secretary of War, attesting to the “lively apprehensions of danger” should Sumner and his troops be sent out of the state. As far as these men were concerned, the officers of the state government, including Governor Downey, were “avowed secessionists” and were in “entire sympathy . . . with those plotting to sever California from her allegiance to the Union.” In light of these remonstrances, the Texas expedition was postponed, eventually falling under the command of Colonel Carleton, who led the “Column from California” with great success.⁴⁸

Whether or not Governor Downey was sympathetic to the Southern cause, when he failed to meet with General Sumner in San Francisco to “confer” regarding the raising of troops, Sumner wrote to him in a manner that seemed to question his patriotism. In a sharply-worded note, he expressed his displeasure that the governor did not find it “convenient” to meet with him, that he deemed the matter “very important” and that he required his assistance in selecting no officer “whose loyalty to the National Government there is the slightest doubt.” Downey, no doubt aware of the rumors regarding his secessionist leanings and flustered by the General’s tone, did some quick back-pedaling

⁴⁸ Cameron to Gov. Downey, July 24 and August 14, 1861, *ibid.*, 543, 569; Proclamation of Governor Downey, August 24, 1861, *ibid.*, 602-3; Sumner to Townsend, August 30, 1861, *ibid.*, 593-94; San Francisco Citizens to Cameron, August 28, 1861, *ibid.*, 589-91.

and stated that “notwithstanding the pressure of business now pouring in upon me, I will on tomorrow visit San Francisco for the purpose of having a free and frank interview with you on this subject.” A few days later, Sumner issued his General Orders No. 20, which re-stated, if there was any doubt, his feelings about his command and about secessionism: “No Federal troops in the Department of the Pacific will ever surrender to rebels.” He was not called “Bull” Sumner for nothing.⁴⁹

In the meantime, construction on the forts was proceeding slowly. Nonetheless, by August Lt. Elliot, at Fort Point, was reporting that the “main work” was substantially completed, though the central gallery was not yet paved “on account of the high price of cement.” Less than half the assigned guns had been mounted, mainly on the first and fourth tiers, and, as already noted, many of these were virtually useless due to their tendency to burst. Concerned about the inadequate state of harbor defenses, and almost daily receiving information regarding secessionist schemes, Sumner appealed to Captain Gardner, Commandant at Mare Island, to forego repairs on the revenue cutter *Shubrick*, in order that she might be utilized to protect the City. To lay up the only warship available seemed to the General “very unsafe and will certainly encourage attempts to resist the authority of the government.” Land defenses were, by their nature, inflexible, while a ship provided the element of mobility. The departmental commanders, in fact, had frequent occasion to request the services of a warship, and therefore had good reason to act “in concert” with the Navy.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Sumner to Downey and Downey to Sumner, August 27 and 28, 1861, *ibid.*, 587, 589; General Orders No. 20, September 3, 1861, *ibid.*, 603; James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 461.

⁵⁰ Elliot to Totten, August 12, 1861, Letters Sent, 1861-64, Box 80A, NA; Sumner to Gardner, July 26, 1861, *OR*, Pt. 1, 545.

The Pacific Squadron

Unfortunately, the Navy, if anything, had fewer resources than the Army. Six ships comprised the entire naval force in the Pacific in 1861. Two of them, the *Cyane* and the *St. Mary's*, were strictly sailing vessels. The *Cyane* had already been in service for twenty-four years, and had achieved fame for its service in the war with Mexico, and in California, raising the American flag at Monterey on July 7, 1846. The flagship, and the largest of the men-of-war, was the steam sloop *Lancaster*, carrying twenty-two guns, and displacing 2,362 tons. The *Saranac*, a steam frigate, carried nine guns and displaced 1,446 tons. The last two warships were the steam gunboats *Wyoming* and *Narragansett*, carrying six and five guns respectively, and each displacing less than a thousand tons. This tiny fleet of aging, wooden vessels was expected to patrol “the west coast of North and South America, the Sandwich Islands, Marquesan and Guano Islands, and the adjacent seas.” The distance between San Francisco to the tip of South America alone (not including the coastline from San Francisco to Canada) was over 7,000 miles. Of first importance, of course, was the protection of the mail steamers leaving San Francisco with heavy shipments of gold, but this was not all that was expected. As Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles put it in a communication to the newly appointed commander of the squadron in October, 1864:

Your aim and object will be, in a few words, to protect as far as the means in your command will permit our countrymen residing abroad, to preserve our commerce in the Pacific from the depredations of piratical cruisers, to maintain the honor and discipline of the Navy, and to advance by all proper means the interests of your government.⁵¹

⁵¹ ”The Navy of the United States,” *Continental Monthly* 3 (June 1863) : 661-63; Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, *Dictionary of American Fighting Ships*, Vol II,

Small wonder, then, that the flag-officer complained to the Secretary of the Navy that his force was “totally inadequate” for the protection of the Pacific coast, particularly, “should privateers make their appearance.” Not only was the squadron too small to begin with, but the constant activity meant that one or more ships was always under repair and, therefore, out of service. Word of a Confederate raider, perhaps the *Alabama*, would cause one of his ships to be ordered on a fruitless chase, as was the *Wyoming* in May of 1862, sent off for months to cruise Chinese waters. He therefore “earnestly” requested at least four additional steamers “at the earliest convenience of the Department.” He did not get them, at least not until the war was over.⁵²

Confederate privateers were not the only concern. Both England and France had sizeable navies on the Pacific Coast. The British had in fact increased their force following the “*Trent* affair.” For his part, Lt. Elliot, continuing his work on the fortifications at Ft. Point and having recently returned from a survey of the defenses on the Columbia River, felt that war with Great Britain was probable, noting not only an increase in their naval forces at Vancouver, but an increase in the British land forces as well. Not only was San Francisco at risk, due to inadequate harbor defenses, but he noted that to the south lay the “excellent harbor” of San Diego, “which would serve as a depot for an enemy fleet.” Flag-Officer Charles Bell, writing from the *Lancaster*, laid up at Mare Island Naval Shipyard in May of 1862, could not have agreed more. Speaking of the British squadron to the north, he stated that “in the present state of the defenses of this harbor, one-half of this force could command the city of San Francisco and take

(Washington, D.C.: Naval History Div., 1963), 226; “Our Navy,” *Scientific American* 4 (March 30 1861) : 198; Aurora Hunt, “The Civil War on the Western Seaboard,” *Civil War History* 9, no. 2 (1963) : 179; Secretary Welles to Commodore Pearson, October 4, 1864, *ORN*, Series I, vol. 3, 250-51.

⁵² Flag-Officer Montgomery to Welles, August 23, 1861, *ORN*, Ser. I, vol. 1, 71; Welles to Flag-Officer Bell, May 30, 1862, *ORN*, Ser. I, vol. 1, 391.

possession of this yard.”⁵³

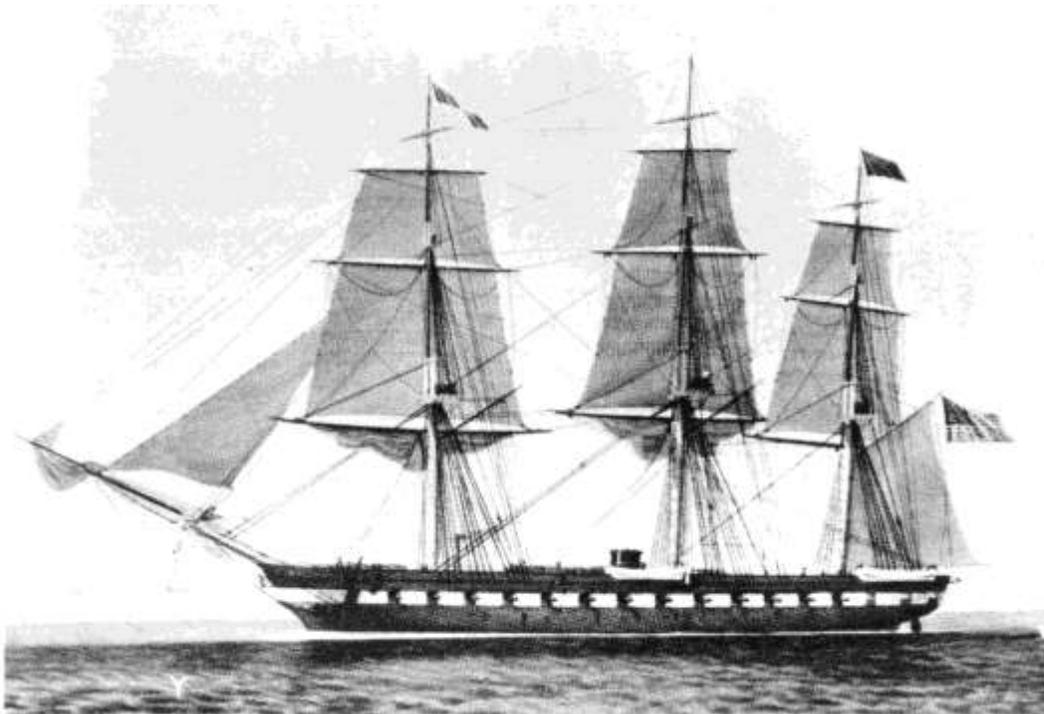
By late 1864, the ships of the Pacific Fleet were simply wearing out. In December of that year, the fleet commander wrote to the Secretary of the Navy that, without additional fast steamers, he had no hope of overtaking and capturing any steamer “which the pirates by banding together in some port might capture therein, and, proceeding immediately to sea, do considerable damage to our commerce.” The engines of two of his warships, including the flagship *Lancaster*, were so much in need of repair that they could not exceed a speed of six knots “under favorable circumstances.” Some months later, proceeding to San Francisco, the commander found that his ship was “losing ground” against the typical northwesterly winds of the coast, and was obliged to fall off under sail for a period of three days before reaching port. From San Francisco, he immediately reported on the “deplorable condition” of his boilers, and urged that the ship be sent home to be fitted with new ones, in the meantime, sending a “suitable flagship in her place.”⁵⁴

Steaming was actually something of a luxury for those ships equipped with engines. Not only was coal often difficult to find, but, as for all branches of the service at the time, economy was the watchword. The duties of an officer included not only management skills, but those of an accountant as well. Every penny had to be accounted for, and an officer was expected to operate within a very limited budget. The wind being free, captains were constantly admonished to use their sails when able and to economize on the use of coal. “By care on the part of the engineer,” Commander Bell wrote to one of his captains, “a large portion of the fuel now expended could be saved.” Such directions did

⁵³ Elliot to Totten, September 12, 1861, Copies of Letters Sent, 1861-64, Box 80A, RG 77, NA; Bell to Welles, May 29, 1862, *ORN*, Ser. I, vol. 1, 391.

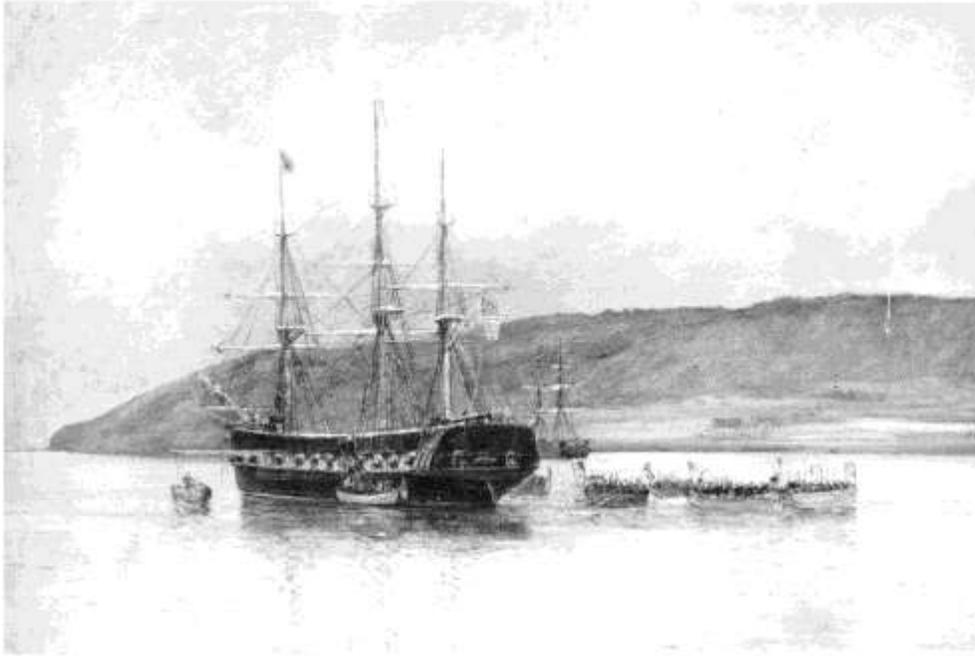
⁵⁴ Pearson to Welles, December 5, 1864, *ORN*, Ser.I, vol.3, 387; *ibid.*, May 10, 1865, 513.

perhaps have the effect of extending the life of the engines, but it circumscribed even further the ability of the captains to carry out their orders. Similar financial concerns plagued the Commander of the Department of the Pacific. Money, or rather, the lack of it, was central to the problems facing the Pacific coast officers, attempting to erect a defense against sea-borne marauders.⁵⁵

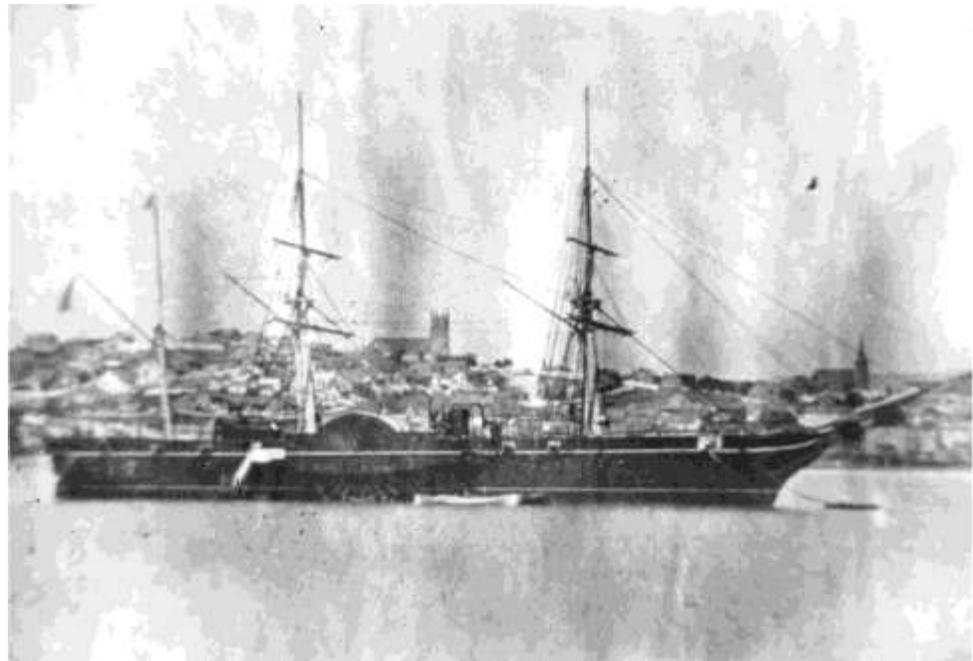


U.S.S. Lancaster, Flagship of the Pacific Fleet. Watercolor courtesy of S.F. Maritime Museum

⁵⁵ Bell to Capt. Stanley, September 8, 1862, *ORN*, Ser.I, vol.1, 471-72.



U.S.S. Cyane at San Diego. Illustration. Courtesy, S. F. Maritime Museum.



U.S.S. Saranac, Photo Courtesy, S. F. Maritime Museum.

Money

The engineering officers at work on San Francisco's fortifications not only had to contend with insufficient appropriations but also with the fact that the money provided was not the right kind--it was not gold. Even though greenbacks had become legal tender in the United States in February of 1862, gold was the standard by which all transactions were carried out in California. Its citizens were not familiar with the use of bank notes, and were understandably reluctant to accept them in payment. This reticence caused endless problems for the Army.⁵⁶

Simply put, paper money had a tendency to fluctuate in value. Contractors and workmen quickly realized that working at a fixed pay scale, in notes, was not a good deal, especially when the value of those notes dropped by fifty percent or more. Chief Engineer De Russy, for instance, was never able to solve the problem of obtaining stone for the seawall in front of Fort Point with any regularity or "at a reasonable price." He thought he had solved his problem in August of 1862, contracting with a Mr. Griffith, who had taken the oath of allegiance and was "known to be a good Union man." Patriotism was not enough to ensure delivery of the stone, however, and as the value of treasury notes dropped, Mr. Griffith found new excuses to delay his work. A month later, De Russy still had no stone, Mr. Griffith explaining that the water level at the port of Sacramento was too low for ships to get to the loading dock. When this excuse wore thin, De Russy resorted to personally asking the railroad superintendant at Sacramento to place "one or two cars" at the contractor's disposal, in order to ensure that he would have "no excuse for further delays." Finally giving up on this "good Union man," who two years later was still dragging his feet in delivering stone, De Russy hired a new

⁵⁶ Carson, "California: Gold to Help Finance the War," 38.

contractor, a Mr. Grant, in August, 1864. But, if anything, he was more of a problem than his predecessor, flatly refusing to enter into a written contract at all, since the value of greenbacks had fallen so low that it was no longer profitable to deliver stone for \$1.89 per ton. In frustration, De Russy suggested that the only way to solve the problem was by the Army purchasing or “taking possession” of a quarry.⁵⁷

During the Civil War, a general shortage of workers existed on the West Coast. For instance, when the Army advertised for laborers in August of 1863, they expected to get about fifty responses. They got six, due, thought De Russy, to “the harvest season and the mania for railroad making in this country.” The silver strike in Nevada and new gold strikes in the Oregon Territory did not help. The upshot was that workers could demand payment in gold or its equivalent. In July, 1863, the workers at Alcatraz and Fort Point were being paid in notes, but were guaranteed the value of gold. The government thought it could save money by capping any increase in pay to twenty-five percent above the going rate in notes, even though treasury notes had slipped fifty percent in value. When this information was transmitted to the workmen, De Russy telegraphed to Washington that “all the men left the works insisting upon their former pay--this puts a stop to the fortifications in this harbour.” Two days later, De Russy received a telegram from Washington stating that “the Secretary of War authorizes you and Capt. Elliot to pay the market rates of wages of mechanics and laborers.”⁵⁸

Civilian workers could go on strike if they chose, but not Army officers. In August, 1864, the commander of the Department of the Pacific, General Wright, was writing to headquarters that, since treasury notes were not used on this coast, the officers were

⁵⁷ De Russy to Totten, August 20, 1862, Letters Sent, 1861-64, Box 80A, NA; September 10, 1862; De Russy to S.R. Robinson, Supt. of Railroad, December 2, 1862, *ibid.*, De Russy to Chief of Engineers Delafield, August 6, 1864, *ibid.*

⁵⁸ De Russy to Totten, August 19, 1863, *ibid.*; De Russy to Totten, June 22 and June 23, 1863, and Totten to De Russy, June 25, 1863, *ibid.*

obliged to convert their notes into specie, at forty cents on the dollar. He wrote that “if the proceeds are sufficient to enable him to pay his mess bill he will be very fortunate.” Married men suffered even more. The pay for the prior month, Wright complained, “barely sufficed to pay for the board of myself and Mrs. Wright.” Without some means independent of their pay, the officers simply found it impossible to get along. Wright therefore earnestly requested that at least half the officers’ pay be in specie. This and similar requests fell on deaf ears. The Washington authorities simply could not understand why a different standard should be applied to California versus the rest of the country.⁵⁹

As Engineering Officer De Russy tried to explain to his superiors, “gold is the standard by which everything is bought and sold,” and even when paid in the equivalent value of notes, the workers were not necessarily happy. They could often make more on other projects and would leave their work on the forts at will. Limited as to what he could pay, De Russy, in May of 1864, tried to reason with his workmen, using the familiar argument that steady work at lower pay could be better than intermittent work at a higher rate: “If you take into consideration the advantage of constant occupation for every month you work, you will find it more to your interest to remain here at \$4 per day as long as you have employment than to go to the city at occasionally five dollars per day.” He also made clear that he had no intention of raising their pay.⁶⁰

No doubt the men were being paid the equivalent value of gold. The records for Alcatraz show that stone cutters, blacksmiths, carpenters, and brick masons were earning \$4 per day as early as October of 1862, and by May of 1864 this rate had risen to \$8.42

⁵⁹ Wright to Drum, August 1, 1864, *OR*, Pt. 2, 925-26; Thomas to Wright, March 17, 1863, *Ibid.*, 356.

⁶⁰ DeRussy to Totten, July 26, 1863, Letters Sent, 1861-64, Box 80A, NA; De Russy “To the Stone Cutters Employed on the Fortifications at Fort Point, Cal.” May 11, 1864, *ibid.*

per day. The rate of pay peaked in July of that year, reaching \$9.75, a truly remarkable figure. Even common laborers by the same date were earning over \$5 per day. At these rates, in mid-1864 a brick mason, working six days per week, was earning pay nearly equal to a full captain in the Navy. Such were the effects of the manpower shortage and the fluctuation in the value of treasury notes.⁶¹

Even the weather seemed to conspire to drive up costs. Officers were allotted a fuel (coal) allowance for periods of generally cool weather, but not, of course, for the summer months. This formula did not apply in San Francisco. In the spring of 1860, Captain Gilmer tried to explain to his superiors the inverted reality of the San Francisco climate: “The climate of San Francisco is a peculiar one, the summer months being often quite as cold as the early spring and fall.” The lack of fuel affected his ability to carry out his business, explaining that “it is impossible to do business in any office in San Francisco during May June July August and September without fires.” Health, of course, was affected. Colonel De Russy frequently reported that he was incapacitated by the effects of the inclement weather, which of course slowed work on the projects entrusted to him. Even Brigadier-General George Wright, who relieved General Sumner in October of 1861, complained that the weather of San Francisco adversely affected his asthma.⁶²

⁶¹ Returns of Officers and Hired Men at Fort on Alcatraz Island, 1862-86, Box 63, NA; “Our Navy,” *Scientific American*, 199.

⁶² Gilmer to Atkinson, April 4, 1860, Letters Sent, 1858-61, Box 80, NA; De Russy to Drum, January 16, 1862, Letters Sent, 1861-64, Box 80A, NA; Wright to Thomas, November 8, 1862, *OR*, Pt. 2, 211.

General Wright Takes Command

In late October of 1861, General Sumner finally got his wish, and was transferred to the east. There, in the battles of Antietam and Fredericksburg, he found the action he desired. But the unexpected scale of the slaughter seemed to quench the fires of his martial spirit. It was Sumner, uncharacteristically, who prevailed upon General Burnside to desist from further useless attacks upon the rebel defenses at Fredericksburg. In the reorganization that followed this disaster, he was transferred to the command of the Department of Missouri. He died en route.⁶³

Amidst a great deal of confusion, in which the new commander of the Department of the Pacific was initially assigned to the newly created district of Southern California, and then advised that he would be sent back to what he painfully referred to the “dark valleys” of the Columbia River, General Wright officially took command on October 20, 1861. Much of the disorder in communication no doubt stemmed from the distances involved, letters sometimes taking a month to reach their destination. By the time one set of orders was received, they often, unbeknownst to the reader, had been already superseded by a subsequent order. This all changed on October 24, four days after Wright’s assumption of command, with the completion of the Atlantic and Pacific Telegraph line. From this point on, California and its sister states to the east were linked in a way just as important as the railroad link established eight years later. At 50 cents a word, however, only the most important messages came through on the telegraph line. And communication with the east was frequently broken. Nonetheless, in a real sense, this was the beginning of the electronic and information age. San Franciscans could now

⁶³ Shelby Foote, *The Civil War: Fredericksburg to Meridian* (New York: Vintage Books, 1986), 42, 141.

pick up their daily newspaper and read of military events that had taken place the previous day. California, in one important sense, was no longer an isolated outpost of American civilization.⁶⁴

General Wright, as noted, was no happier on the West Coast than was his predecessor, and lost no time in making his wishes clear. On October 28, he reminded Washington that he had already spent nine years on the Pacific Coast, and “prayed” for a field command. The next day he followed up with a specific request that he be “ordered to the East.” It was not to be. His tenure as commander of the Department of the Pacific was to be the longest of any of the Civil War Generals. And upon his relief in late 1864, he would not be transferred to the east, but was ordered to remain in California.⁶⁵

Part of the problem was that Wright was a bit too level-headed for the radical Unionists of the state, and refused to be stampeded into imprudent action. During his very brief tenure as commander of the district of Southern California, he reported from Los Angeles that “the disunion feeling in that section of the State has been grossly exaggerated.” In fact he seemed mainly to be concerned about the high price of horses. Over the course of time, he developed a reputation as being soft on secessionism, which no doubt hurt his chances for a career change. On the other hand, he tended to go overboard on the subject of Mexico, advocating military action there without fully appreciating the attitude of his superiors in Washington, or the political implications of such a strategy. In little over a week from the date he assumed command, noting that it was “the fondly cherished hopes and aim of the rebels . . . to obtain a port on the Pacific,”

⁶⁴ Special Orders No. 180, September 25, 1861, Headquarters Dept. of the Pacific, *OR*, Pt. 1, 633; Special Orders No. 160, September 30, 1861, Army Headquarters, Washington, D.C., *ibid.*, 643; General Orders No. 28, October 20, 1861, Dept. of the Pacific, *ibid.*, 666; Arnold Lott, *A Long Line of Ships: Mare Island's Century of Naval Activity in California* (Annapolis: George Banta Publishing Co., 1954), 74-75.

⁶⁵ Wright to Townsend, October 28 and October 29, 1861, *OR*, Pt. 1, 685.

he was advocating throwing a military force into the Mexican state of Sonora, to capture the port of Guaymas. While the authorities in Washington shared his concern with the vulnerability of northern Mexico to Confederate intrusion, they were loath to become entangled in the affairs of another country, when they had more than enough trouble to deal with in their own.⁶⁶

Brigadier-General Wright may have downplayed the internal threat from Confederate sympathizers in California, but he was very serious indeed about the potential threat from the sea. After only little more than a month on the job, he was asking for a comprehensive defense plan “in view of the possibility of a hostile force threatening this city.” He was clearly disturbed about the state of defenses. After an inspection of the forts on November 9 and 13, he reported the troops to be in “high order” and the armament, “though incomplete . . . ready for any emergency.” But only a week after requesting De Russy’s report, he was complaining to Washington about the lack of heavy guns, and urgently requested that “the balance of the armament . . . be sent out as soon as practicable.” A little over a week later he was repeating his complaint that only half the guns assigned to Alcatraz and Fort Point had been mounted (the bulk on Alcatraz), and that “in case of foreign war the attention of the enemy would most certainly be directed to San Francisco as the most important point on the Pacific Coast.” He needed more guns. It was a request he was to repeat often.⁶⁷

On December 13, Colonel De Russy responded to Wright’s request, saying that he would take “great pleasure” in preparing the defensive plans for the General. By January 9, 1862, Wright still had no report and was becoming irritated. Part of his testiness

⁶⁶ Wright to Drum, October 7, 1861, *ibid.*, 647; Wright to Townsend, October 31, 1861, *ibid.*, 691.

⁶⁷ Wright to De Russy, December 12, 1861, *OR*, Pt. 1, 760; Wright to Asst. Adj.-General, Washington, D.C., November 19, 1861, *ibid.*, 731; Wright to Thomas, December 19 and December 28, 1861, *ibid.*, 771-72, 788-89.

stemmed from his hope that he might pry a little money out of the state government, and he wished to be able to lay this report at the doorstep of the state legislature, and the newly-elected governor, Leland Stanford. De Russy, due to “inclemency of the weather and bodily indisposition” had not been able to devote his full attention to the project. It may also have been that he was being asked to do too much, as Wright, not a naval man, seemed to be forwarding to his engineer every hare-brained scheme cooked up by well-meaning citizens for the defense of the harbor. For instance, on February 11, De Russy wearily commented on plans for a floating battery and a steam ram, noting politely that he had insufficient information to make an intelligent decision. Nonetheless, despite his illness and the press of duties, he promised, on January 16, to have something completed within a few days’ time. Having received nothing by February 12, Wright again wrote to the ailing engineer, pointing out that the governor had just called on him and that an appropriations bill was then pending in the Legislature. “These gentlemen are extremely anxious to have something tangible to base their calculations on,” explained the General, and “I will thank you for a report . . . as soon as possible.” Prodded to action, De Russy supplied what he called an “imperfect report” the following day.⁶⁸

De Russy’s report was an ambitious one. He proposed that thirty additional guns be placed at Fort Point, but outside the walls, twenty guns on the beach in front of the fort, and ten on the hill behind it. He recommended that twenty heavy guns be placed at Lime Point, directly opposite the fort at Fort Point. All told, these recommendations would add fifty guns at the entrance to the bay, and, including all the guns there mounted and to be mounted, would give “a total of 181 guns bearing on the pass.”

⁶⁸ De Russy to Wright, December 13, 1861, Letters Sent, 1861-64, Box 80A, NA; Wright to De Russy, January 9, 1862, *OR*, Pt. 1, 799-800; De Russy to Wright, February 11, 1862, Letters Sent, 1861-64, Box 80A, NA; Wright to Governor Stanford, January 11, 1862, *OR*, Pt. 1, 802; De Russy to Drum, January 16, 1862, *ibid.*, 807; Wright to De Russy February 12, and De Russy to Wright, February 13, 1861, *ibid.*, 861, 863-64.

At Black Point, opposite the island of Alcatraz, on the San Francisco side, he recommended the erection of a battery of at least twenty guns, and on Point Blunt, on Angel Island, a battery of at least ten guns. Upon completion, these fortifications would ensure a crossfire against vessels heading through either channel to the north or south of Alcatraz. Added to the seventy-seven guns that De Russy found already mounted on Alcatraz, a total of 107 guns would now bear “on that line.” Pointing out that a vessel might prudently seek to avoid this concentration of firepower and enter Raccoon Strait “toward the navy yard and Benicia,” a battery on Point Stuart on Angel Island “would be of great advantage.” As a third line of defense, he recommended that the island of Yerba Buena also be fortified.

Still, he was not satisfied. Should a vessel or vessels manage to clear these defenses, the navy yard at Mare Island and the arsenal at Benicia would be open to attack. To meet this threat, De Russy recommended that batteries be emplaced at the entrance to San Pablo Bay. He assumed, in addition, that the naval yard would be able to supply some ships “to cooperate with the batteries.”⁶⁹

Report in hand, General Wright immediately contacted Governor Stanford, following up the next day with a letter to Washington, explaining that the governor and legislature had “evinced much anxiety” on the subject of harbor defenses, and seemed, he felt, “disposed to afford all the aid in their power to place strong defensive works around the city.” He was frankly hoping for money from the state to help in this work, as “we are in the greatest embarrassment on account of the want of funds.” Just for good measure, though, he requested that 200 additional heavy guns be sent out, “as well as a supply of projectiles.” Knowing full well that such a request was out of the question, he noted that he had looked into the problem of casting the guns on this coast, and was assured by his

⁶⁹ Confidential Report, De Russy to Wright, February 13, 1862, *ibid.*, 863-64.

ordnance expert that such castings could be produced here. At the same time, he requested of the commandant at Mare Island an accounting of all the guns available there, explaining that “I can get none from the East, and have to rely upon the resources of this country.”⁷⁰

Captain Gardner responded promptly, indicating that he had on hand eight 8-inch guns, fifty-nine 32-pounders, and twenty 24-pounders, for a total of eighty-nine guns. He pointed out, however, that new carriages would no doubt have to be constructed, as they were equipped only with “common ship carriages.” Wright immediately forwarded this information to Washington. He noted that the Mare Island ordnance would “materially aid us in making up the armament for the batteries,” adding that he proposed to use “every heavy gun I can command for the defense of this city and harbor.” He repeated his previous warning that, while the entire Pacific coast was open to attack, it was San Francisco that would draw an enemy’s attention. He ended his letter ominously: “The loss of San Francisco and harbor involves also the loss of our navy yard and our military arsenal at Benicia. In fact, it destroys for the time all our commerce on the Pacific. Hence this place should be made impregnable.”⁷¹

A key element in the defensive plan of San Francisco harbor was still missing, however. Every report, including the initial study issued in 1850, had stressed the importance of Lime Point in the first line of defense. No one doubted that the arming of this rocky outcropping directly opposite Fort Point, on the northern shore, was crucial to the over-all defensive plan. The problem was, the army could never get title to the land.

⁷⁰ Wright to Stanford, February 26, and Wright to Thomas, February 27, 1862, *ibid.*, 893, 895; Wright to Gardner, March 12, 1862, *ibid.*, 921.

⁷¹ Gardner to Wright, March 15, 1862, *ibid.*, 926-27; Wright to Thomas, March 18, 1862, *ibid.*, 938.

Lime Point

As early as 1859, Captain Gilmer was negotiating with Mr. Throckmorton, the owner of the land at Lime Point, for its purchase. Throckmorton apparently sensed that the government was desperate for the land, and held out for substantially more than the government was willing to pay. Finally giving up in frustration, Gilmer reported that the probability of procuring the land on favorable terms was “very unforeseeable.” He was more prescient than he realized.⁷²

Making an end run around the owner, Gilmer appealed directly to the California legislature and Governor Welles for a special legislative act, requiring that, in cases wherein the government desired to purchase property and there was a disagreement about price, that the matter be referred to a jury to assess the value of the land. The state legislature indeed passed such a bill in early 1859, but Gilmer failed to get authority from Washington to proceed with the purchase until late in the following year.⁷³

When Throckmorton refused to sell his land for less than \$200,000, Gilmer pressed forward with preparations to take the matter to a jury trial, to have the land’s value assessed. In the meantime, the owner of the property made his own legal appeal, questioning the validity of the state law. In mid-March, 1861, the judge in this case decided against the government, holding that the act was “unconstitutional for the reason that a State Government cannot exercise the ‘eminent domain’ for the benefit of the United States.” The local newspaper declared this decision to be “absurd” and wondered how the construction of a defensive fort by the federal government was not of benefit to

⁷² Gilmer to De Russy, March 3, 1859, Letters Sent, 1858-61, Box 80, NA;

⁷³ Gilmer to Governor Welles, March 5, 1859, *ibid.*; Gilmer to De Russy, September 10, and November 20, 1860, *ibid.*

the people. In any case, the matter was appealed to the State Supreme Court, which, in June of 1861, reversed the lower court's ruling, allowing the legal assessment to go forward. Feisty as ever, Mr. Throckmorton filed yet another suit, alleging that the government was acting in "bad faith" for not paying the asked-for \$200,000, a figure he felt that, at some point, had been agreed to.⁷⁴

In July, 1861, the jury reached its verdict, assessing the value of the land at Lime Point at \$125,000. This was a bitter disappointment to the Army, as the government attorney had argued that the value of the land should be estimated "by the agricultural and grazing qualities of the land, the only uses to which it is now applied." On this basis, the value should have been between \$25,000 and \$28,000. Throckmorton, surprisingly, was no happier, and grumbled about moving for a new trial. Captain Gilmer, for his part, and again with a certain clarity of vision, suggested that the government bite the bullet and pay the \$125,000. He seemed to understand that legal troubles would tie up the acquisition forever. He was right.⁷⁵

In October, 1861, Mr. Throckmorton having pushed through his demand for a new trial, the State Supreme Court decided against the government in the initial assessment. Lt. Elliot, having taken over from Captain Gilmer, was uncertain what course would next be taken, but a new trial was possible. Indeed, on November 8 of the same year, Col. De Russy received authorization from Washington to pay \$30,000 for the land, and to take legal proceedings in case of refusal. At this point, however, the matter seems to have been dropped, not surfacing again until March of 1864, when Col. De Russy negotiated with a Mr. Yale for the purchase of the land, and, incredibly, willing to pay \$125,000,

⁷⁴ Gilmer to De Russy, January 31, 1861, Letters Sent, 1861-64, Box 80A, NA; Gilmer to Totten, March 20, 1861, *ibid.*; *Alta California*, 28 March 1861; Gilmer to Totten, June 26, 1861, Letters Sent, 1861-54, Box 80A, NA.

⁷⁵ Gilmer to Totten, July 13, and July 17, 1861, *ibid.*

assuming that the title is free and clear. Apparently, however, there were now questions as to who, exactly, owned the land, and the sale did not go through.⁷⁶

In the end, of course, the land at Lime Point was never purchased by the Army. It seems incredible that the whole defensive posture of the Bay Area could have been compromised by the intransigence of one individual, but such is the case. Because of this legal merry-go-round, a key element of the defensive plan of San Francisco Bay was never put into place.

Luckily, at least for the first two years of the war, any threat to the security of San Francisco's harbor existed primarily in the imaginations of the local authorities. But in March of 1863 the danger to San Francisco and its sea-borne trade became manifest in the shape of a little schooner riding quietly at anchor near the city front. The discovery of a Confederate privateer, boldly fitting out under the guns of Fort Point and Alcatraz, sent shock waves through the city and the state. The worry regarding Confederate designs on the California coast reached a new high, and spurred even more insistent calls for additional money and guns for the defense of its leading port city.

⁷⁶ Elliot to Totten, October 16, 1861, *Ibid.*; Thomas Scott, Acting Secty of War, to De Russy, November 8, 1861, *OR*, Pt. 1, 714; De Russy to Mr. Yale, March 26, 1864, Letters Sent, 1861-64, Box 80A, NA.

Chapter 2

Rude Awakenings

The Chapman Affair

In the early morning hours of March 15, 1863, the schooner *Chapman*, anchored in the stream off the city of San Francisco, was making ready to sail out of the harbor. Suddenly, two boatloads of marines pulled away from the *Cyane*, anchored nearby, and made for the *Chapman*. At the same time, a steam tug, filled with San Francisco police officers, pulled away from the wharf. On board the schooner, Asbury Harpending, who had previously been involved in the plot to seize the forts of the bay, held a frantic conference with his fellow conspirators, with the equally unlikely names of Ridgley Greathouse and Alfred Rubery. Sensing that resistance was futile, “for the gunners of the *Cyane* stood waiting orders to blow us out of the water,” the men hastily attempted to destroy incriminating documents, building a little bonfire in the main cabin. In a few minutes, and without bloodshed, the marines and police had secured the ship, and had taken the trio into custody, along with either seventeen or twenty men concealed in a forward compartment. The authorities also found “vast quantities of powder, shells, and ammunition.”⁷⁷

The *Chapman* was, in fact, a Confederate privateer, complete with letters of marque, signed by Jefferson Davis, being fitted out not in some remote South American

⁷⁷ All the official documents and the newspaper accounts refer to the privateer as the *J.M. Chapman*. Harpending however, in his account, insists that the name was “plain *Chapman*.” In addition, the official accounts and the *Alta* listed 17 men as found in the hold. Harpending stated there were 20. Interestingly, the March 16 issue of the newspaper lists the names of 15 men, and, in addition, 5 unnamed “sailors.” See Harpending, 48 and 53, and *Alta California* 16 March 1863.

anchorage but right under the muzzles of the harbor's cannon. The fears of the citizens of San Francisco and of the departmental commander appeared to be justified. But General Wright was feeling particularly vulnerable at this moment, due to the fact that much of the state's military resources and attention had been focused elsewhere.

During the spring and summer of 1862, General Wright's attention was drawn to the southwest. In a brilliantly conceived and orchestrated campaign, Colonel Carleton, with a force of around 1,700 men, cleared out rebel forces in Arizona and New Mexico, and forestalled any Confederate incursion into Mexico. With the successful completion of this expedition, the land route to California was closed to the Confederacy, and the dream of obtaining a port on the Pacific, through that avenue at least, was dashed. But threats to the internal security of the state, by secessionist sympathizers, remained. And the coast was no less vulnerable to attack from the sea. Now that he was able to concentrate on local concerns, General Wright found that he was short of troops. The expedition to the southwest had drawn about a quarter of the volunteer soldiers available to the general in California and Oregon, and in September of 1862, he requested that a new regiment of infantry be raised. "Our enemies are not idle," he reminded Washington, and "an emergency might arise requiring an increase." A few days later, he telegraphed Washington, asking that 20,000 stand of small arms be sent out as soon as possible, noting that "there is a large element of opposition on this coast, and that it is only by watchfulness, prudence, and prompt action in case of emergency that we can expect to preserve the peace." Small arms, in any case, were about all that General Wright could hope for, heavy guns being quite unavailable. But even this request was denied, but with the reassurance that "measures will be taken as early as possible to arrest any apprehended danger to the harbor of San Francisco." 1862 was a bad year for the forts of

San Francisco Bay.⁷⁸

By October of 1862, virtually no new guns had been mounted at Fort Point for a year. Ten 42-pounders were on hand, with their carriages, but could not be mounted because no pintles (the iron pin around which the carriage rotated) had been included. Colonel De Russy appealed to Captain McAllister, commanding the Benicia arsenal for any spares he might have, so that he could “at once complete the battery by inserting the pintles in the stone blocks and mount the guns.” Unable to provide immediate help, the guns remained un-mounted until February of the following year.⁷⁹

The yearly report, submitted in October, 1862, reflected almost the exact same conditions that existed a year before, with most guns mounted on the first and fourth tiers, and almost none on the second and third tiers. De Russy could only report that “the fort is sadly deficient in its armament,” with only fifty-five guns mounted out of a minimum of 120 assigned. “So long as Lime Point is not fortified,” he wrote, “the entrance into this harbor is but imperfectly defended.” To remedy this deficiency, he recommended that an “iron clad steamer . . . be either obtained or constructed in San Francisco which could be stationed between Lime Point and Saucelito.” He ended his report by lamenting that “there is at this time not even a revenue cutter to perform this function.”⁸⁰

General Wright shared De Russy’s concern. “I regret very much that we have not a ship of war in the harbor,” he wrote to the new commandant at Mare Island, in January,

⁷⁸ Special Orders No. 47, April 11, 1862, *OR*, Pt. 1, 1000; Abstract from Return of the Dept. of the Pacific for Month of June, 1862, *ibid.*, 1168; General Orders No. 30, August 11, 1862, *ibid.*; Wright to Thomas, September 15, 1861, *OR*, Pt. 2, 120; Halleck to Maj. Gen Allen, October 25, 1861, *ibid.*, 195.

⁷⁹ De Russy to Captain McAllister, September 17, 1862, Letters Sent, 1861-64, Box 80A, NA; Monthly Report for January, 1863, dated February 16, 1863, *ibid.*

⁸⁰ Memoir of Engineer Operations at Fort Point, October 14, 1862, *ibid.*

1863. He had recently been visited by a group of San Francisco businessmen, who “expressed much anxiety” regarding the possibility of an enemy steamer entering the Bay and placing herself in front of the city. He requested of Captain Selfridge that any available warship be sent, stating with assurance that with a heavily-gunned ship stationed under the guns of the forts, “we should have no apprehensions that a rebel steamer would venture within the Gate.”⁸¹

Selfridge’s response was not reassuring. All he could offer was the old razeed *Independence*, which had no engine, no masts, and was currently being used as a barracks. But it could mount guns. He suggested that the state or the city of San Francisco purchase a steamer, and arm it for defensive work. In the meantime, the *Cyane* was on its way to the harbor, and, upon arrival, he would order the captain to cooperate with the forces under General Wright. On February 21, 1863, Wright reported that the *Cyane* had arrived and taken up station in support of the forts. The ship was, in fact, just in time to participate in the seizure of the *Chapman*.⁸²

Harpending, in the book that he wrote many years later, described the plan:

We proposed to sail the *Chapman* to some islands off the coast of Mexico, transform her into a fighting craft, proceed to Manzanillo, exhibit our letters of marque and my captain’s commission in the Confederate Navy and then lie in wait for the first Pacific Mail liner that entered the harbor, capture her--peacefully if possible, forcibly if we must. . . . Then we proposed to equip the captured liner as a privateer and figured to intercept two more eastbound Pacific Mail steamers before the world knew what was happening, in those days of slow-traveling news. After that we proposed to let events very much take their own course.

The authorities, however, had long since gotten wind of the plot, possibly through the treachery or loose talk of the hired navigator, a man named Law, and had patiently waited

⁸¹ Wright to Selfridge, January 26, 1863, *OR*, Pt. 2, 294-95.

⁸² Selfridge to Wright, January 29, 1863, *ibid.*, 297; Wright to Thomas, February 21, 1863, *ibid.*, 320.

to spring their trap.⁸³

The capture of the *Chapman* naturally aroused the most intense excitement in the city. Though a small ship of only ninety-one tons, her capacity to do damage made the city fathers almost breathless with anxiety: “If she had gotten out it would have been in her power to annihilate the commerce of this port,” claimed the editors of the *Alta California*. They went on to remind their readers that, once at sea, the chances for the schooner’s capture were nil, considering the well-known performance of the Union Navy:

To be sure the government might dispatch some of its men-of-war after her, but our experience in the case of the *Alabama* does not furnish very satisfactory ground for the hope that the pest would by this means be speedily removed.

The state government was called upon to direct some money “to the protection of our harbor and commerce,” the paper advocating the purchase and arming of at least two steamers for the purpose. The San Francisco Board of Supervisors even voted to loan the State \$300,000, an unusual measure, but better, it was thought, than to “furnish the world with another illustration of the pig with knife and fork in its back, calling upon some person to carve and eat it.” “We are treading on a volcano,” the *Alta* ominously intoned, “which may at any time crumble to pieces the fabric upon which we have expended so much labor.”⁸⁴

On the 22nd of March, the *Alta* reported that the military officers of the Department of the Pacific were of the opinion that the harbor be placed in a “powerful condition of defence and offence,” which required more gun batteries and heavily armed warships:

Without such preparations, we are not in a condition to resist an attack; nor would we be able to drive off or capture a rebel privateer like the *Alabama*, from the immediate vicinity of the Heads. A vessel of her size and capacity could, by laying off the harbor, destroy our commerce, and blockade the port as effectually as a dozen vessels. At the same time, we would be as powerless against such a craft, not having a war

⁸³ Harpending, 48-49; *Alta* 16 March 1863.

⁸⁴ *Alta*, 16, 17 March, 1863.

vessel either heavy enough, fast enough, or strong enough to cope with her.

A few days prior to this editorial, having ascertained that cohorts of the conspirators might be awaiting the *Chapman* in the port of Manzanillo, General Wright requested of Captain Selfridge that the steamer *Saginaw* be at once dispatched to that location to search for their camp. The *Cyane*, it was understood, was to remain to protect the city. Initially assenting to this request, the order dispatching the *Saginaw* was abruptly countermanded on the 27th of March. The Commandant, it seems, was having problems of his own.⁸⁵

Among the documents found aboard the *Chapman*, some alluded to a plot to sever California from the Union, with an initial attack upon the Navy yard at Mare Island and the arsenal at Benicia. This attack, if successful, was to be followed up by an attack--with captured ships--upon San Francisco and its forts. Interestingly, just a few days after the schooner's capture, the Sheriff of Napa County informed Captain Selfridge of just such a plot. The information was sufficiently credible and disturbing to hold the *Saginaw* for defense of the Yard, and to form, out of about 175 employees, a military unit to back up the guns of the ship. It turns out that the men had little else to do anyway, since as of April 1, they had gone on strike for higher wages.

An investigator was sent to Napa, to report on secessionist activities. Little was found, either because no real danger existed or because the conspirators hastily disbanded. The irregular military organization on Mare Island continued to guard the facility, but as of April 6 they had less time to drill as they had returned to work, being promised the same rate of pay as the workers in San Francisco. Also on the 6th, Captain Selfridge requested that an army engineer be sent down to assist in selecting suitable points for batteries. General Wright responded favorably two days later, and on the

⁸⁵ *Alta*, 22 March, 1863; Wright to Selfridge, March 19, and Selfridge to Wright, March 27, 1863, *OR*, Pt.2, 357, 366.

fifteenth, Colonel De Russy directed Lt. Elliot to proceed to Mare Island for that purpose.⁸⁶

Even the Mayor of San Francisco was edgy, and felt that his police force lacked sufficient weaponry to quell any civil disturbance that might occur. He therefore requested of General Wright the loan of “eighty stand of arms.” Wright was sympathetic but explained that he could only issue guns to “troops mustered into the service of the United States.” Having thought the matter over for a few days, however, the General changed his mind and provided the arms to the city, with the provision that the city was responsible for their “safe-keeping.”⁸⁷

By April 14, General Wright was able to report that “the apprehensions of a disturbance of the peace in this State by persons sympathizing with the rebellion, which created much alarm in the public mind, have in a great measure subsided.” He also reported having made a “thorough inspection” of the forts and had found that the arrangements to meet any emergency “as far as practicable are perfect.” “As far as practicable” was clearly not good enough, however, and he therefore requested another report from Colonel De Russy. On April 21, De Russy reported to Washington that he was leaving the next day to examine possible battery sites on Yerba Buena Island and Rincon Point. These points together were to constitute a necessary third line of defense. General Wright was more than ever convinced that an enemy vessel or fleet could “without serious injury” pass the first and second lines of defense, and, taking a position out of range of the available guns, command the city. In addition, San Francisco must have a warship, or warships, on permanent station in the bay: “I deem it of the greatest importance that ships of war . . . should be sent to this harbor at the earliest moment

⁸⁶ Arnold Lott, *A Long Line of Ships*, 79-81; Wright to Selfridge, April 8, 1863, *OR*, Pt.2, 385; De Russy to Elliot, April 15, 1863, Letters Sent, 1861-64, Box 80A, NA.

⁸⁷ Wright to Mayor Teschmacher, April 10 and 14, 1863, *OR*, Pt.2, 389, 392-93.

practicable.”⁸⁸

General Wright, nevertheless, felt that the recent alarm had been “productive of the greatest good,” in that it had “aroused the whole of the loyal population of the State to a sense of their duty and to be prepared to crush out any attempt to disturb the peace of the State.” As if responding to a weak toxin, the body of the state had become more resistant to attack from within and without. As Wright put it: “This upheaving of the patriotic masses of California will have a happy effect in quieting the apprehensions of the people, as well as in striking terror into the hearts of the traitors.”⁸⁹

All this “upheaving” however, was placing a terrible demand on an already stretched-thin Pacific Fleet. Both the *Cyane* and the *Saranac* were now at San Francisco, each taking turns guarding the city, while the other was under repair. Without these vessels, Flag-Officer Charles Bell could no longer guarantee the protection of the Pacific Coast nor the safety of the mail steamers. As he tried to explain to the Secretary of the Navy:

There are a number of small harbors in Central America where a steam privateer could be prepared, make a dash at one of our mail and treasure ships, and, if successful, break up our communications between San Francisco and Panama for weeks before I could hear of it.

To add to the Admiral’s concerns, in June of 1863, he was informed that the Confederate cruisers *Alabama* and *Florida* had been sighted south of the equator, and that “the destination of one or both may be the Pacific.” “It therefore behooves you,” he was instructed matter-of-factly, “to be prepared for their appearance.” Just for good measure, he was alerted to the possibility of yet another Confederate raider recently let loose from England in April, though “nothing has been heard from her since.”⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Wright to Thomas, April 14, 1863, *ibid.*, 391-92; De Russy to Totten, April 21, 1863, Letters Sent, 1861-1864, Box 80A, NA;

⁸⁹ Wright to Thomas, April 20, 1863, *OR*, Pt.2, 407.

⁹⁰ Actg. Rear-Admiral Bell to Secty Welles, May 25, 1863, *ORN*, Ser. I, vol 2, 215; Welles to Bell, June 9, 1863, *Ibid.*, 262.

By August, Bell was beginning to show the effects of the impossible demands which had, if anything, increased since the capture of the *Chapman*:

I am receiving letters from envoys, consuls, and ministers resident from one end of the coast to the other, including the Sandwich Islands, also from San Francisco, each and all urging the necessity of the presence of a man-of-war, every one supposing they are neglected, and each one insisting that their position is of more importance than any other within the limits of my command.

On the last day of the year of 1863, Rear-Admiral Bell was informed that at last he would be getting an additional vessel, the *Wateree*, which was being dispatched within two weeks. Another vessel was promised “at an early day.”⁹¹

When the *Chapman* had been seized, the local paper called for the harshest punishment. While General Wright attempted to have the prisoners tried as pirates by a military court, they were eventually dealt with under federal law. Indicted for treason, under provisions of the Confiscation Act of July 17, 1862, the men faced a maximum penalty of ten years in prison and a \$10,000 fine. Fuming about possible lenient treatment at the hands of the law, the editors of the *Alta California* wrote that “if we cannot punish these pirates . . . who skulk about this town, we might as well give up all efforts to maintain a government here.” Within a year, however, all the men taken on the captured schooner were free men. The men found secreted belowdecks were released upon taking the oath of allegiance. Alfred Rubery had the good fortune to be the nephew of a famous Englishman by the name of John Bright, a powerful friend of the Union and of Abraham Lincoln. Bright prevailed upon Lincoln to pardon his nephew, on the condition he return to England. Greathouse and Harpending profited by a liberal interpretation of Lincoln’s Amnesty Proclamation, issued in December, 1863, and were released before spring had come to the new year. Greathouse was still a rich man, but

⁹¹ Bell to Welles and Welles to Bell, August 10 and December 31, 1863, *ibid.*, 422, 579.

Harpending's fortune, for the present at least, was gone, sunk completely into the *Chapman* affair.⁹²

The Elimination of the Third Line

While General Wright may have felt that the seizure of the Confederate privateer had been "productive" of some good, he also was increasingly anxious regarding the state of readiness of the bay forts, and anxiously awaited the report requested of his chief engineer back in April. He was particularly concerned that the existing two lines of defense, centered on Fort Point and Alcatraz were insufficient to stop a determined enemy, and that a third line had to be established, utilizing sites on Yerba Buena Island and Rincon Point. Finally on June 10, 1863, Col. De Russy submitted his report (the drawing shown below was included in the report). Rincon Point, on the San Francisco shore, he found to be a good site for a battery of twelve guns. Requiring only lumber to enclose earthen embankments, little expense would be involved in its construction. The main problem was related to the presence of the U.S. Marine Hospital, which in the case of conflict would be "too much exposed to the shots aimed at the battery." The best solution was the removal of the building, but in case of "real necessity," batteries could be constructed on either side of the building. Two sites were proposed for the Island of Yerba Buena, mounting a total of eighteen guns. The expense here would doubtless be

⁹² *Alta*, 16 March 1863; Harpending, 52-62; for a detailed account of the legal issues involved in this case and of Lincoln's amnesty policy, see Robert Chandler, "The Release of the Chapman Pirates: A California Sidelight on Lincoln's Amnesty Policy," *Civil War History* 23, No. 2, (1977) : 129-144.

greater, involving transportation to and from the island, and blasting of rock.⁹³



*Map of Harbor Defenses Submitted by Col. De Russy to Gen. Wright June 10, 1863.
Source: OR, Ser. I, vol. 50, Pt. 2, 533.*

Shortly after this report was issued, both Col. De Russy and Lt. Elliot were dispatched to the Columbia River to survey battery sites there. In their absence, General Wright assigned Major Williamson, an engineering officer in his own command, to “make immediate preparations” for constructing batteries at Rincon Point and Yerba Buena. Wright was extremely anxious to get moving on these projects and perhaps took advantage of the absence of De Russy, who he felt was too slow and was often incapacitated by illness. At the same time, Wright requested from Captain McAllister at the Benicia Arsenal an exact accounting of the guns available there and at “other points in this state.” In the meantime, as “much anxiety” existed with regard to the state of

⁹³ De Russy to Wright, June 10, 1863, *OR*, Pt. 2, 532.

defenses in the harbor, Wright wrote to Captain Selfridge, asking that the old *Independence*, loaded with heavy armament, be placed in front of the city “with a powerful steam tug to assist her movements.” At this point, Wright seemed to sense the desperation and impracticability of his plan, pointing out that “I know really nothing at all about ships, and my remarks are only the random thoughts of a soldier, and no sailor.” Needless to say, the *Independence* stayed put.⁹⁴

On August 1, 1863, Major Williamson issued his initial report, finding that the principal concern was the presence of a dozen or more houses, and forty to fifty people, who would have to be removed from the vicinity of Rincon Point. He therefore suggested that the battery site be moved to Steam-Boat Point. Total cost for site preparation he estimated to be \$4,467.50. He subsequently reported that Captain McCallister had informed him that eighteen 32-pounder and sixteen 24-pounder guns were available for use. Eighteen small 10-pounder Parrott rifles had also been recently received and were available. Williamson reported that he was ready to proceed with the work as soon as an initial appropriation of \$5,000 was approved.⁹⁵

At about the same time, General Wright was therefore extremely pleased to hear that \$100,000 had been appropriated for work on the harbor’s inner defenses. The “prompt action of the Department” he reported, was “highly gratifying to the loyal citizens of this city,” inasmuch as they had already pledged \$20,000 to commence the proposed works. One can only imagine Wright’s surprise and frustration when, on August 17, he was sent a telegram notifying him that “the works on Rincon Point and Yerba Buena Island will not be constructed at present.” The only batteries to be approved were those proposed on Angel Island and Point San Jose (Black Point). The engineering officers in Washington

⁹⁴ Wright to Adj.-General, Washington, D.C., August 14, 1863, *Ibid.*, 568; Drum to McCallister and Wright to Selfridge, July 31, 1863, *ibid.*, 546, 546-47;

⁹⁵ Williamson to Drum, August 1 and 12, 1863, *ibid.*, 548-49, 564.

believed frankly that, “while the defenses of the entrance of the bay of San Francisco are incomplete,” it did not make sense to build additional defenses. Recognizing that, while guns at Lime Point were most desirable, acquisition of this property was very uncertain. Therefore, immediate attention should be directed to construction of batteries on Angel Island and Black Point. As usual, few additional guns were available in any case, but the Department offered the use of a rifling machine, to increase the range of the existing guns.⁹⁶

Major Williamson was disgusted. He had already purchased some of the lumber for the battery on Steam-Boat Point and had arranged for the earth-work. In ten days, he estimated, the emplacements would have been ready for the guns. He pointed out that no guns at Black Point or Angel Island could be emplaced in less than “from one to three months.” He ended with the following warning:

No matter how many batteries may be placed between the entrance of the harbor and the city, a rebel vessel might enter during a fog , or even in fair weather, by flying a Union or neutral flag, and when Rincon Point is passed would be secure from any guns now in position.

General Wright backed up the assessment of his engineer, and tossed the responsibility for inaction back to the Engineering Department. If the batteries were not ready when needed, he wanted it noted that “no further responsibility will fall on me.” At the end of August Wright expressed his frustration in a letter to Col. Townsend in San Francisco:

I fear greatly that the masterly inactivity system and the time consumed in planning and deliberating as to best points for our batteries, and then going to work with permanent fortifications, slowness may be fatal. While we are meditating some morning, the first thing we shall know will be the enemy’s guns thundering against the city.

Having gotten that off his chest, Wright pushed ahead with the work on Angel Island and

⁹⁶ Wright to Adj.-Gen, Washington, D.C., August 14, 1863, *ibid.*, 568; Halleck to Wright, August 17 and 18, 1863, *ibid.*, 573-74, 575.

Black Point, and the next day ordered Major Williamson to begin preparations for batteries at both places. Major George Andrews and the Third Artillery were to be sent to the island as soon as sites for fortifications were determined upon.⁹⁷

Angel Island and Black Point

The suggestion to put batteries on Angel Island and Black Point was nothing new. The initial engineering report issued in 1850 had suggested the same thing. When Colonel De Russy had received Major Williamson's report on the Island, he reminded Asst. Adjutant-General Drum that he had made the same recommendations, for the same sites, in 1856. In 1860, the federal government had secured title to the island, over the claims of squatters, preparatory to converting it into an army post, and Captain Gilmer had noted at that time that "the importance of this island . . . is great," and "it will probably be necessary to the complete defense of this harbor that works be built at two points on Angel Island."⁹⁸

Major Williamson had completed his survey of Angel Island on August 24, suggesting that at least two batteries be erected, one opposite Alcatraz at Point Blunt, and the other at Point Stuart, commanding the entrance to Raccoon Strait. The very next day, De Russy made the same suggestion to Colonel Drum in San Francisco, also suggesting that ten 42-pounders, plus a hot-shot furnace, be at once placed at Black Point. Before work could begin, however, the military had to take physical possession of each site. Therefore, on

⁹⁷ Williamson to Drum, August 18, 1863, *ibid.*, 578; Wright to Adj.-Gen, Wright to Townsend, August 31, 1863, *ibid.*, 599; Drum to Williamson, *ibid.*, 600.

⁹⁸ De Russy to Drum, August 29, 1863, Letters Sent, 1861-64, Box 80A, NA; Gilmer to De Russy, May 3 and 9, 1860, Letters Sent, 1858-61, Box 80, NA.

September 10, 1863, Company B, Third Artillery, was directed to occupy Angel Island and to locate a camp at a place to be decided upon by Colonel De Russy and the company commander. Early the next month, General Wright was similarly directed to take possession of the land at Black Point, without concern to the persons living there. “The question of ownership,” Wright was told, “will be decided hereafter.” A week later, one company of the Ninth U.S. Infantry was directed to occupy the site, not without problems however, as Wright soon had to deal with a complaint regarding “the destruction of shrubbery” by the soldiers.⁹⁹

On September 12, Second Lieutenant John Tiernon and fifty-six men were transported to Angel Island and settled into the little valley lying between points Stuart and Knox. Camp Reynolds, as the site came to be known, was named after General John Reynolds, killed in the first day of fighting at Gettysburg. Tiernon was the highest ranking officer present, until relieved by First Lieutenant Louis Fine in early November. Major George Andrews took over command in January 1864, and held this position until after the end of the Civil War.¹⁰⁰

Work on quarters for the men and on the batteries began at the same time, with the soldiers supplying much of the labor. The civilian contractor, a Mr. Marston, proved to be unreliable, and the men had to spend most of the winter in tents. By March 18, 1864, however, the local paper reported that “comfortable barracks” had been constructed, along with a wharf to offload ordnance. In addition, one of the batteries (no doubt that on

⁹⁹ Williamson to Drum, August 24, 1863, *OR*, Pt.2, 588-89; De Russy to Drum, August 25 and September 10, 1863, Letters Sent, 1861-64, Box 80A, NA; Halleck to Wright, October 2, 1863, *OR*, Pt.2, 636; Special Orders No. 230, October 8, 1863, *ibid.*, 642; Wright to B.P. Brooks, Esq., October 16, 1863, *ibid.*, 649.

¹⁰⁰ John Soennichsen, “Settling In . . . The First Months at Camp Reynolds,” Unpublished Manuscript, Angel Island Association (1996) : 1-3; Elliot Evans and David Heron, “Isla de Los Angeles,” *California History* 66, No. 1, (1987) : 32-33.

Point Knox) was completed and ready for mounting of the guns. On the very same day, Captain McAllister at the Benicia Arsenal was ordered to send some heavy guns to the island. By early May, General Wright was able to report that substantial progress had been made at the sites on Angel Island and at Black Point, and that heavy guns were then being mounted, “affording increased security to the harbor of San Francisco.” The *Alta California* was willing to go a bit further in its assessment of the progress made, stating in late June that “our harbor defences will soon be sufficiently formidable to defy the attacks of the fleet of any nation in Christendom.”¹⁰¹

Three points were ultimately selected for battery placement: Point Stuart, at the entrance to Raccoon Strait, Point Knox, between points Stuart and Blunt, and Point Blunt, at the southeast tip of the island and opposite Alcatraz. By mid-July, Major Andrews was reporting that thirteen guns had been mounted. Eleven of these were 32-pounders, six located at Point Knox and five along the beach in front of the wharf. No guns were yet emplaced at point Stuart, but the battery was ready. The area available at Point Stuart was limited and could only accommodate a total of four guns. Point Knox was a work for ten guns. Three 10-inch Rodman guns were available, two to be placed at Knox and one at Stuart. One of the 10-inch guns was intended for the site at Point Blunt, but was offloaded at Camp Reynolds by mistake. In fact, many guns ended up at the wharf battery because they were sent, in error, to Camp Reynolds and not directly to Point Blunt. No one seemed to appreciate that there was no road to Point Blunt from the wharf so the guns could not be transported from one point to another. There being nothing else to do with the extra cannon, Andrews took it upon himself to erect the wharf battery. Though this fortification was never officially recognized by the Army, Major

¹⁰¹ Soennichsen, “Settling In,” 2-3; *Alta California* 18 March 1864; Drum to McAllister, March 18, 1864, *OR*, Pt.2, 792; Wright to Adj.-General, Washington, D.C., May 2, 1864, *ibid.*, 837-38; *Alta*, 27 June 1864.

Andrews was quite satisfied with the impromptu arrangement and, as an artillery officer, was of the opinion that the battery was “a very valuable one,” and that, “if a transfer of guns should be decided on that this battery be left alone.” By October 1, 1864, Andrews reported the completion of batteries Knox and Stuart, with all the guns in place and ready for service.¹⁰²

The work on the battery at Point Blunt, however, was not going well. While Colonel De Russy reported in September of 1864 that the battery at Point Blunt was ready for the installation of the seven guns planned for it, by December, the winter rains had caused damage to the earthworks. Then in February the barge carrying the guns for the site swamped on the beach. There seems to be some question as to whether the guns were ever mounted, though a report dated June 6, 1865 indicates that the guns were in place, but useless due to the settling of the embankment supporting the parapet. Fillings had repeatedly been made, but the settling continued. If in fact the cannon were mounted, they were likely never in a condition to be used.¹⁰³

The work at Black Point proceeded in parallel with that on Angel Island, and with its own problems. Two batteries, named West and East, of six guns each were eventually constructed on the site. The armament for this mini-fortress was quite formidable, with 10-inch Rodman guns assigned to West Battery and 42-pounder rifles assigned to East

¹⁰² Andrews to Drum, July 14, 1864, *OR*, Pt.2, 902; Williamson to Drum, July 16, 1864, *ibid.*, 906; Anderson to Drum, June 6, 1865, *Ibid.*, 1256-57; Andrews to Drum, October 1, 1864, *ibid.*, 984.

¹⁰³ De Russy to General McDowell and De Russy to Drum, September 22 and December 10, 1864, Letters Sent, 1861-64, Box 80A, NA; Thompson, *Seacoast Fortifications*, 58-59; Anderson to Drum, June 6, 1865, *OR*, Pt.2, 1256-57. While Thompson states that the guns at Pt. Blunt “were never mounted,” Inspector Anderson in his June, 1865 report to Drum stated that “the guns in this battery are all mounted.” Interestingly, this is substantiated by an article in the *Alta*, dated July 24, 1865, which not only affirms that four guns were in place, but that the site was garrisoned by a separate company, Company F, 8th Infantry, Captain Grant commanding.

Battery. The rifles were among the first such cannon to be emplaced in the harbor, even though Colonel De Russy had recommended a year before that “in a harbor like this one, where the defensive positions are a considerable distance from each other, it is evident that rifled guns . . . would be preferred.” These six guns, however, were among the very few rifles assigned to San Francisco, even well after the end of the Civil War.¹⁰⁴

The Rodman guns were delivered to San Francisco in April of 1864 and left “lying around loose in Front Street, near Broadway,” much to the annoyance of the *Alta* reporter, who noted that a “rascally secessionist” was free to spike them. Unfortunately, the guns could not be immediately transported to the fort, as the road could not bear their weight. By late June, the guns had been hauled up the hill, but could not be mounted, as the carriages had not arrived. The East Battery was quite ready for its guns, but, unfortunately, the rifles were “overdue at this port.” By June 30, the Rodmans had been finally mounted, and the rifled guns not long after. The magazines were complete, as was the barracks for the company of Ninth U.S. Infantry, under the command of Captain Mears. In late July, Captain Winder, along with the Third Artillery, replaced Mears and his company. Winder had been in command of the garrison on Alcatraz, and the transfer was “according to his own request.” Winder had, in fact, stirred up some trouble for himself by allowing some photographs of the fortress of Alcatraz to be published, which outraged officials in Washington, who ordered the pictures suppressed. Having a father in the Confederate Army didn’t help Winder’s reputation, which was cast under a cloud of suspicion. He was, however, stoutly defended by General Wright and the subsequent commander of the Pacific Department, General Irvin McDowell.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ *Alta*, 23 June 1864; De Russy to Drum, Letters Sent, 1861-64, Box 80A, NA.

¹⁰⁵ *Alta*, 16, 17 April and 23 June 1864; Thompson, *Seacoast Fortifications*, 59-60; Special Orders No. 162, *OR*, Pt.2, 920; John Martini, “Search and Destroy,” *American Heritage* 43, no. 7, (November 1992) : 98-103.

General McDowell, if anything, would prove to be more apprehensive about the state of San Francisco's defenses than his predecessor. And as a former commander of the Army of the Potomac, his calls for more money and guns could not so easily be ignored.

McDowell Takes Over

As early as mid-January, 1864, rumors were flying about that General Wright was to be replaced. Wright himself was probably aware of this movement as early as November of the previous year, when he wrote, defensively, to Col. Townsend that he was "not aware that during my command . . . a single charge has ever been made against me of malfeasance in office." On April 11, the *Alta California* reported receipt of a telegraph message that General McDowell was to succeed General Wright. The out-going general seemed to feel that the reason for his removal was the perception that he was "soft" toward secessionist dissent. In his farewell address, delivered in June, he made a point of singling out the press as the principal source of his problems, stating that "had I for a moment yielded to the insane demands of a radical press and its collaborators I should have filled my forts with political prisoners to satisfy personal hatred." But perhaps he was overly sensitive. McDowell may well have asked for the command, and as an out-of-work senior officer of some standing, his request could not have been lightly refused. In any case, Secretary of War Stanton wrote to McDowell that he would be "glad" to assign him to "the command indicated."¹⁰⁶

Major-General Irvin McDowell assumed command of the Department of the Pacific

¹⁰⁶ *Alta*, 14 January and 11 April 1864; Wright to Townsend, November 20, 1863, *OR*, Pt. 2, 677; "To the Loyal Citizens of the Pacific Coast," June 21, 1864, *ibid.*, 873-74; Stanton to McDowell, May 21, 1864, *ibid.*, 841.

on July 1, 1864. Few appointments to the position would have been as welcome as that of McDowell, reported the *Alta California*, as “he is a soldier and not a politician.” This was precisely his problem, as far as Lieutenant-General Ulysses Grant was concerned, who was quite aware of the political dimension of generalship, especially in a non-combat area like California. “McDowell is only a soldier and has never been anything else,” Grant telegraphed to Secretary of War Stanton on the August 15, 1864, “and is likely to do more harm than good where he is.” He was in favor of Halleck for that post. Stanton, having no wish or reason to remove McDowell after a little over a month on the job, but also wishing to satisfy Grant, who had reached the point in his career wherein nothing could easily be denied him, gently put him off, but at the same time expressed his readiness to “conform to your judgment.” Grant took the hint, and, admitting that he really did not know how well McDowell would do, deferred his removal for the present. Wright, in the meantime, was assigned to the Department of California, with headquarters in Sacramento. At least there, he would not be troubled by his asthma. After the war Halleck would indeed replace McDowell, and General Wright, never having gotten a field command, would find himself again commanding the Department of Oregon, where he had begun the war.¹⁰⁷

A few days after assuming command, McDowell announced his intention of making a “public inspection” of the harbor fortifications. Inviting something like fifty guests, including Governor Low and San Francisco Mayor Coon, he apparently expected to make a triumphal tour of the bay, looking forward to viewing the assemblage of forts in a high state of readiness and efficiency. Unfortunately, the day-long excursion, taking place on July 13, had, he said “an effect I was not calculating upon.” Rather than raising

¹⁰⁷ General Orders No. 31, *OR*, Pt.2, 886; *Alta*, 11 April, 1864; Grant to Stanton, Stanton to Grant and Grant to Stanton, August 15, 18, 20, 1864, *OR*, Pt.2, 945, 949, 951; Townsend to McDowell, June 27, 1865, *ibid.*, 1267.

the martial spirits of the guests, “it materially weakened the confidence which . . . had heretofore been enjoyed by the residents here in the sufficiency of water defenses themselves.” The obvious defects in the defensive system, so well detailed in previous reports by officers like De Russy and Williamson, were startlingly clear to the observant commander. Again it was pointed out that the prevailing winds and fog, blowing through the Gate, would make it easy for an enemy vessel to pass Fort Point. The lack of rifled guns was again bewailed as short-sighted in a harbor the size of San Francisco. The armament placed on Angel Island was, according to McDowell, insufficient to keep a determined raider from passing through Raccoon Strait and heading for the yard at Mare Island. And last, but not least, batteries were urgently needed on Yerba Buena Island and Rincon Point!¹⁰⁸

Though he did not know it, McDowell was flogging a dead camel. He was referred, by Chief of Engineers Delafield, to the engineers’ report previously sent to General Wright on the same subject, and which had determined that batteries on Yerba Buena and Rincon Point were not justified. Floating batteries would do a better job, he was told. Trying to be helpful, Delafield suggested that he institute a harbor regulation “requiring all foreign warships to anchor only within certain defined limits . . . where they will be subject to the fire of existing forts and batteries.” He did not bother to explain just why a hostile vessel or fleet would choose to obey such a regulation. He did, however, have something substantial to offer--more guns. He promised to request that very day that three 15-inch Rodman guns be sent out, as well as ten 100-pounder and two 200-pounder Parrott rifles.¹⁰⁹

In fact, heavier and more modern armament had been trickling in throughout the year

¹⁰⁸ Circular, Headquarters Dept. of the Pacific, July 5, 1864, *ibid.*, 891; *Alta*, 14 July 1864; McDowell to Chief of Engineers Delafield, July 27, 1864, *ibid.*, 921-23.

¹⁰⁹ Delafield to McDowell, August 10, 1864, *ibid.*, 936-37.

of 1864. Between December of 1863 and December of 1864, the total number of heavy guns assigned to California increased by thirty-eight. As early as October of 1863, De Russy had been informed that he would be sent ten 10-inch, five 8-inch, two 15-inch, and twelve 42-pounder “banded rifle guns.” These guns did not arrive, however, until the following May, aboard the ship *Guiding Star*. Shortly thereafter, the ship *Nesutan* arrived at Mare Island with four 15-inch and two 10-inch Rodmans aboard. Two of the larger Rodmans were destined for Alcatraz, and were there at the time of McDowell’s visit, but were not yet mounted. In February, 1865, Delafield informed McDowell that three more of the 15-inch and ten of the 10-inch Rodmans were to be sent out, along with eleven 100-pounder and three 200-pounder Parrott rifles. Some of these weapons were designated for the Washington coast, it should be noted, but by the end of June, 1865, Lieutenant Elliot was able to report that the two 15-inch Rodmans had finally been mounted on Alcatraz, along with two of the 200-pounder and five of the 100-pounder Parrotts. The weight of shot that could simultaneously be fired from Alcatraz now approached 7,000 pounds and the island fortress was as ready as it would ever be to encounter a hostile force.¹¹⁰

Work on Fort Point, during McDowell’s tenure, was sporadic and did relatively little to improve the efficiency of the fort. Few guns had been added since September of 1863, when Captain Stewart reported about eighty guns mounted and eight un-mounted. Most of the available armament was going to Alcatraz, which, by the end of 1864, had eight batteries mounting well over 100 guns. Increasing experience with the “objectionable” nature of masonry as a fortress building material meant that appropriations for Fort Point were, for the first time, lagging behind that for Alcatraz. At Fort Point, work on the

¹¹⁰ De Russy to Totten, October 19, 1863, Letters Sent, 1861-64, Box 80A, NA; *Alta*, 4, 29 May 1864; Delafield to McDowell, February 20, 1865, *OR*, Pt.2, 1137; Thompson, 65.

seawall consumed much of the appropriations. In September, 1864, De Russy reported that pumping to keep the foundation free of water was “continuous.” A wooden breakwater had to be constructed to protect the workmen from the sea, and this alone consumed a large portion of the available funds. But perhaps the biggest problem was De Russy’s health, which continued to deteriorate under the effects of the constant damp and cold. In early July of 1864, the aging engineer was forced to apologize to Captain Selfridge for failure to assist in the erection of batteries at the naval yard. He was simply too ill to make the trip. By the end of the month he was confined to his home, and had to request the help of an assistant. Though he continued to labor on the forts under his charge, his health would never recover, and he died, in San Francisco, on November 23, 1865. Though he lived to see the end of the war, the work to which he had devoted, and given, his life, remained unfinished.¹¹¹

At the end of four years of war, while the military authorities had doubts about the adequacy of all their preparations, nonetheless the fortresses surrounding San Francisco Bay were certainly in a better state of readiness to repel attack than in early 1861. Over 200 heavy guns sat ready to spit defiance to any hostile force. The two new fortifications built on Angel Island and Black Point were visible reminders to San Francisco’s citizens of the importance of their city to the Union cause, and greatly heightened their sense of security. As the editors of the *Alta* had noted, the harbor defenses stood ready to defy “the fleet of any nation in Christendom.” But of course, the harbor defenses had never been tested. No enemy warship had ever had ever entered the Golden Gate. The fear of

¹¹¹ Abstracts From Returns of Dept. of the Pacific, December 31, 1863 and 1864, *ibid.*, 711, 1109; Annual Report of Operations of Eng. Dept. for FY Ending June 30, 1864, *OR*, Series III, Vol. 4, 795; Stewart to Drum, September 2, 1863, *OR*, Pt.2, 601-02; Thompson, 53; De Russy to Delafield, September 22, 1864, Letters Sent, 1861-64, Box 80A, NA; De Russy to Selfridge and De Russy to Delafield, July 18 and 27, 1864, Letters Sent, 1861-64, Box 80A, NA; Thompson, 66.

attack by Confederate cruisers had not been realized. The result of such an attack can therefore only be surmised. What can be examined, however, is the actual nature of the Confederate threat. Was that threat, after all, purely ephemeral? Or was there a real danger to San Francisco and to California from Confederate forces, naval and otherwise? The nature of the Confederate threat will be taken up in the next chapter.

Chapter 3

The Confederate Threat

Confederate naval policy was twofold: First, to break the stranglehold of the Northern blockade of its Atlantic and Gulf coasts; second, to exact such a price on Union maritime trade that ship-owning interests would lobby strenuously for peace. To insure the success of the first element of this strategy, effective use had to be made of current technology. Confederate Secretary of the Navy Stephen R. Mallory was keenly aware of the importance of the imaginative use of technology to break the Federal blockade. Professor Luraghi, author of a history of the Confederate Navy, argues that “technology would be the tool that appeared to offer a breath of hope in facing a war that otherwise would be hopeless or lost before it began.” To assist him, Mallory obtained the services of James D. Bulloch, who acted as Confederate agent in Europe. Selected for his “thorough knowledge” of the subject of armored ship construction, Bulloch also enjoyed the respect and complete trust of his superior. Mallory was so confident of his agent’s ability that he was content to issue only the most general guidelines, “untrammelled by instructions.” The respect and trust were in fact mutual, and nowhere in their voluminous correspondence do we find a hint of personal animosity or injured pride. Both men submerged their own desires and frustrations and concentrated solely on advancing the cause of the Confederacy. Knowing, for instance, that his agent desperately wanted a command of his own, Mallory could only point out that, in truth, “there is not one to whom I could look to supply your place for us in England.” With greater resources, a more favorable political climate, and a bit of luck, there is little that these two men could not have accomplished. They were as potentially dangerous to the Union cause as the

best of the Southern generals. ¹¹²

The second element of Confederate naval strategy, at least insofar as its effect on Union maritime trade, was wildly successful, no doubt beyond the expectations of the Confederate Secretary or his agent. To effect his purpose of sweeping enemy commerce from the seas, Mallory foresaw that no great navy was required. Bulloch, for his part, has written that “the Confederate States cannot be said to have had a Navy at all,” relying instead on a few cruisers which constituted an “irregular marine force.” This irregular force, however, consisting primarily of the cruisers *Alabama*, *Florida*, and *Georgia* (and later, the *Shenandoah*), exacted a high price on United States commerce. As Bulloch wrote in his history of the Confederate Secret Service in Europe:

The effect produced upon the commerce and the shipping interests of the United States by two or three Confederate cruisers was a very striking peculiarity of the late war. While the *Alabama* was in the China Sea many American ships took shelter in the harbour of Singapore and other ports, and were partly dismantled and laid up at a time when trade was good, and there was an active demand for tonnage to all parts of the world. Semmes found on board a prize captured in the Straits of Malacca a copy of the Singapore *Times*, dated 9th September, 1863 containing a list of seventeen American ships, with an aggregate tonnage of about 12,000 tons, which were laid up at that port alone.¹¹³

The Confederate cruisers, according to Bulloch’s calculations, destroyed at least 175 vessels, but this “was not the whole of the injury inflicted upon American commerce.” American shippers, in order to forestall the capture or destruction of their vessels, rushed to change their registry. In 1860, for instance, two-thirds of the New York trade was carried in American bottoms, while in 1863, three-fourths was carried in foreign bottoms. In a January, 1864 speech, given by the president of the British Board of Trade, Bulloch

¹¹² Raimondo Luraghi, *A History of the Confederate Navy*, (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1996), 61; Secretary of the Navy Stephen Mallory to James Bulloch, May 6 and April 21, 1863, *ORN*, Ser. II, vol. 2, 416, 407.

¹¹³ James D. Bulloch, *The Secret Service of the Confederate States in Europe*, vol. 2 (New York and London: Thomas Yoseloff, 1959), 196; *ibid.*, vol. 1, 275.

quotes the speaker as saying that, for the prior year, trade between England and the U. S. had decreased by around forty-seven per cent. Insurance rates, of course, skyrocketed, further depressing U.S. commerce.¹¹⁴

The cruisers were so successful in driving their enemy's ships from the seas that they eventually found themselves searching for employment. In February of 1864, Bulloch was writing to Mallory that

there really seems nothing for ours ships to do now upon the open sea. Acting Lieutenant Commanding Low of the *Tuscaloosa* reports that in a cruise of several months during which he spoke over 100 vessels only one proved to be an American, and she being loaded entirely on neutral account, he was forced to release her after taking a bond. The *Alabama*, too, only picks up a ship at long intervals, although she is in the Indies, heretofore rich in American traffic.

The primary purpose of the cruisers' existence, that of destroying the enemy's commerce and thereby "to increase the burden of the war upon a large and influential class at the North," had been achieved. But a collateral purpose existed, that of drawing away the U. S. Navy's best ships from blockade duty, in order to pursue the raiders. But no substantial withdrawal of blockade ships occurred. The Union naval authorities correctly assessed that sending many ships in pursuit of the Confederates, or instituting any kind of convoy duty, was not possible with existing resources. Given the importance of maintaining an effective blockade, the loss to the country's commerce was simply chalked up as a cost of the conflict.¹¹⁵

Mallory, ever resourceful and imaginative, had no problem in conceiving new enterprises for his idle cruisers. The California trade had been little affected by the war and offered tempting possibilities. After suggesting to Bulloch, in February of 1864, that the ships make a dash at New England ports and commerce, he noted that "the

¹¹⁴ Ibid., vol. 2, 185; *ibid.*, vol. 1, 276; Luraghi, 232.

¹¹⁵ Bulloch to Mallory, February 18, 1864, *ORN*, Ser. II, vol. 2, 589; Bulloch, *Secret Service*, vol. 2, 197; Luraghi, 232.

interception of the California steamers offers good service.” Warming to his subject, he further expanded the possibilities when he wrote to Bulloch on March 21, 1864: “We have, it is true, inflicted a heavy blow and great discouragement upon the Federal foreign commerce, but the coasting trade and fisheries, embracing the California trade, has suffered but little from our cruisers, and it can and must be struck.” The idleness of the cruisers was due to a lack of imagination and “not because there is not a field for their enterprise.”¹¹⁶

Mallory had begun to conceive of the cruiser force as a kind of “naval light infantry,” that could assemble and disperse at will: “Such a system of alternate united and separate action--naval light infantry tactics--has never been adopted upon the sea,” noted the Confederate secretary, “simply because under sail it would be impracticable; since the application of steam to warships, the opportunity has never been offered. Let us be the first to put it to good account.” Heretofore untouched points, both geographic and commercial, were now open to attack. Mallory noted, perhaps over-estimating the influence of the New England fishing interests, that the enemy’s fisheries were intact, “and his coasting trade is immense, extending from Maine to California, and offers a fruitful field for enterprise.”¹¹⁷

By early 1864, Mallory’s hopes of securing a fleet of ironclads were fast fading. On February 18, he was writing to Bulloch that he was “convinced beyond a doubt that we can not get ironclads to sea.” Mallory’s thoughts turned more and more to the effective use of his cruisers. Their ability to range over the entire world’s oceans meant that no point on the enemy’s coastline, especially those areas which were lightly defended, were safe from attack. “I am extremely anxious,” he wrote to Bulloch on June 20, 1864, “to

¹¹⁶ Mallory to Bulloch, February 22 and March 21, 1864, *ORN*, II, 2, 593, 613.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, April 7, 1864, 622.

have at least six self-sustaining cruisers afloat.” He continued:

With a small fleet of *Alabamas* we could practice such ocean light infantry tactics as would inflict upon the enemy’s ports as well as commerce great injury. Alternately concentrating for attack and separating for defense, the entire Navy of the United States would be unable to prevent us from raising the blockade of some of our ports, sinking their shells of blockaders, and of successfully attacking certain seaports.”

The Confederate Secretary was advocating a style of warfare which would become common in the twentieth century, particularly in the use, by Germany, of submarines in just such a “light infantry” or “wolf-pack” configuration.¹¹⁸

The cruisers, however, by the nature of their design, lacked the heavy firepower and armor to seriously threaten the forts of a port city. Shortly after the beginning of the war, Mallory outlined the Confederacy’s requirements to his agent in England, noting that “large ships are unnecessary for this purpose,” and that “our policy demands that they shall be no larger than may be sufficient to combine the requisite speed and power, a battery of one or two heavy pivot guns being sufficient against commerce.” In addition, the economics of the situation argued for small ships, as a greater number could be afforded. Primarily sailing vessels, with an auxiliary steam engine, they were also too lightly armed and armored for serious blockade-lifting. Nonetheless, their ability to do serious damage to commerce was decisively shown, and it is clear that attacks on seaports were seriously considered, and that there is no reason that San Francisco would have been excluded from consideration. In fact, given the absence of a blockading fleet, and the weakness of the Pacific Squadron, the enterprise was worth the try. Certainly the Captain of the *Shenandoah* did not think the task impossible. Nonetheless, for the serious work of breaking the Northern blockade, armored ships were required.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Ibid., February 18 and June 20, 1864, 589, 674.

¹¹⁹ Mallory to Bulloch, May 9, 1861, *ibid.*, 64.

The Rams

On the subject of ironclad warships, Secretary Mallory was something of a fanatic. His letters pleaded with, cajoled, and exhorted his agents to build and purchase armored warships. As early as June, 1861, he wrote to James North (in cipher) that he should “buy an iron clad warship if possible; and upon any terms.” By early 1862, both North and Bulloch had succeeded in getting contracts, and in August work began in the Laird yards. Unnamed, the two craft under construction were simply referred by their numbers, 294 and 295. But to the world they have become known as the Laird Rams. Mallory was extremely anxious to get these craft to sea, and on the 8th of August, 1862, wrote to Bulloch that “I must impress upon you the great importance of completing ironclad vessels at the earliest possible moment.” If necessary, he was authorized to offer extra money for early completion. “Not a day, not an hour, must be lost in getting these ships over,” he wrote a month later, adding that “money is of no consequence in comparison with the speedy accomplishment of this work.” The fortunes of the Confederacy depended on acquisition of the rams. With the ironclads in Confederate hands, “we would go to New Orleans at once and regain the Mississippi.”¹²⁰

Washington was alive to the threat posed by the rams and exerted intense political pressure on the British Government to stall their construction or prevent their sale to the Confederacy. Assistant Secretary of the Navy Gustavus Fox believed that the Union would be quite unable to offer an adequate defense to the ironclads and considered the question of stopping them a matter of life or death. The threat was not only to blockading Union warships but to coastal cities as well. As early as February of 1862, Mallory was

¹²⁰ Mallory to North, June 28, 1861, *ibid.*, 107; Mallory to Bulloch, August 8 and September 20, 1862, *ibid.*, 235, 271.

writing to President Davis that a small number of such vessels would serve to “keep our waters free from the enemy and ultimately to contest with them the possession of their own.” Indeed, as far as the Secretary was concerned, not even Washington was safe from attack. In July of 1863, he suggested to Bulloch that “our ironclads could ascend the Potomac and after destroying all transports and gunboats falling within their reach could render Washington itself untenable.” Such a move would no doubt have a very positive effect on the Confederacy’s efforts to secure foreign recognition. Union cities could even be held to ransom, made to pay for the injury done to the Southern cause. “Suppose our two ironclads,” wrote Mallory in an imaginative descent upon the city of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, “should steam unannounced

into that harbor on some fine October morning, and while one proceeded at once to demolish the navy yard and all it contained the other should send a flag of truce to the mayor to say that if \$10,000,000 in gold and \$50,000,000 in greenbacks were not sent on board in four hours the city would be destroyed after the manner of Jacksonville and Bluffton.

Philadelphia was a city equally ripe and deserving of attack, suggested the Secretary.¹²¹

The fortunes of the Confederacy looked promising to the English press in the fall of 1862, with the Federal Army thrown behind the defenses of Washington. The existence of the rams, and the party for whom they were being built were also not unknown. Their formidable character seemed obvious to the *Liverpool Press*, and would no doubt add greatly to the military capability of the South:

It seems very clear, from the vigorous conduct of the Southern Confederacy, that the South, at no distant period, will possess an iron-clad fleet capable of coping as successfully with that of the North as its armies have triumphantly met those of the Federal Government, if but the same dashing spirits that lead the armies of the South can be found to command it.¹²²

¹²¹ Frank Merli, *Great Britain and the Confederate Navy, 1861-1865*, (Bloomington/London: Indiana University Press, 1970), 134-36; Mallory to President Davis, April 27, 1862, *ORN*, II, 2, 152; Mallory to Bulloch, July 9, 1863, *ibid.*, 456.

Southern dash was not in short supply; money was, however, and also the political will of the British Government. The consequent slowness in getting the rams built and in possession of the Confederacy was maddening to the Secretary of the Navy. “We want ironclads, ironclads, ironclads,” he wrote to Bulloch in June of 1863, though not in anger but in frustration. Bulloch was equally frustrated, but as the war continued, he found himself increasingly powerless to satisfy the request of his chief.¹²³

In the end, only one armored warship, the *Stonewall*, ever made it into the hands of the Confederacy. But its acquisition was too late to allow for service in the cause of the South. Thus, the effectiveness of the rams in breaking the Northern blockade or in assaulting Northern seaport towns was untested. It can and has been argued, however, that the possession of even a few armored warships could have succeeded in lifting, partially at least, the blockade. Arguably, that would have led to increased trade and increased likelihood of foreign recognition. With the opening of world-wide ports, and the consequent ability to provision and coal its raiders, the Confederate Navy could have become a navy indeed.

Mallory and Bulloch had a truly global perspective on warfare, and anticipated the developments of the first and second world wars. Had they been able to bring their plans to fruition, they no doubt would have extended that vision to include a more determined assault on the Pacific Coast. This does not mean that the Pacific coast did not figure into the plans of the Confederate Navy. Rather, the Secretary was forced to rely on single-ship forays, such as that of the *Shenandoah*, and on the clandestine operations of irregular persons more commonly referred to as privateers or “pirates.” In fact, an attempt to seize a mail steamer on the Central American coast, along with its shipment of California gold,

¹²² *Liverpool Press*, 10 September 1862, quoted in *Alta California*, 27 October 1862.

¹²³ Mallory to Bulloch, June 8, 1863, *ORN*, II, 2, 435.

very nearly succeeded.

The Salvador Pirates

There was perhaps no greater threat to the commerce of California, and to its gold shipments, than the attempts by Confederate sympathizers to obtain ships on the Pacific coast and convert them into privateers. Whether the ship was legally purchased, as in the case of the *Chapman*, or seized, the intent was the same: to do as much harm as possible to Pacific coast traffic, including whalers, and to capture bullion. Rumors of these attempts were common throughout the war, especially in Mexico, Central and South America, but were also not uncommon in the north. In fact, in February, 1863, a plot to seize the revenue cutter *Shubrick* was reported in the *Victoria Chronicle*. According to an informant, the intent was to overpower the officers, seize the vessel, and then “steer away for the southern coast to intercept the mail steamer.” The plot was uncovered, however, and the captain of the *Shubrick* made arrangements to place the conspirators in irons on reaching Port Angeles.¹²⁴

The most serious threat, however, and certainly as well-known as the *Chapman* affair, concerned an attempt by rebel sympathizers to seize the federal steamer *Salvador* and convert her to a privateer. The enterprise was under the command of one Thomas Hogg, who received orders from Secretary Mallory on May 7, 1864, to “proceed with the men under your command . . . to the port of Panama.” There he was to take passage on either one of the federal steamers at that port, the *Guatemala* or the *Salvador*. Upon reaching international waters, he, with his men, was ordered to “capture the vessel in the name of

¹²⁴ *Victoria Chronicle*, 24 February 1863, quoted in *OR*, Ser. I, vol. 50, Pt. 2, 323-24.

the Confederate States.” The idea for this enterprise was no doubt Hogg’s, as he had done this sort of thing successfully before, capturing the schooner *Joseph L. Gerrity* in the fall of 1863. Mallory needed little prodding though, especially at this stage of the war, and urged Hogg and his men to do “the greatest harm in the shortest time.” The California trade, with its bullion, was of course the primary target. But “whalemen” too, were included. In addition, Hogg was ordered to rendezvous, if practicable, with Captain Rafael Semmes of the *Alabama*, and “obey such orders as he may give you.” It was an ambitious plan.¹²⁵

The choice of the port of Panama was a logical one. Panama was the destination of the California steamers. Their cargo was shipped by rail across the isthmus to the port of Aspinwall, to be re-loaded on steamers for New York. The importance of this narrow piece of real estate was well appreciated by the authorities in Washington. “The large number of our citizens and the vast amount of treasure crossing the Isthmus of Darien,” noted Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles, “render it necessary that one of the vessels of the squadron should be always kept in the Bay of Panama to give aid and protection if at any time required.”¹²⁶

On September 12, 1864, out-going Pacific Fleet Commander Bell wrote to Secretary Welles regarding rumors of plans “for the plunder of our treasure ships on the Pacific.” He was contemptuous of such rumors, asserting that the people involved “have neither intelligence, enterprise, nor even courage to effect this object.” He was wrong about the enterprise and courage, but as far as intelligence (military or otherwise), he may have had a point. No matter how well planned or supplied, Confederate plotters seemed incapable of keeping a secret. As early as April of 1864, before the orders had even been written,

¹²⁵ Mallory to Thomas Hogg, May 7, 1864, *ORN*, Ser. I, vol. 3, 356; Hogg to Judah P. Benjamin, Secty. of State, May 3, 1861, *ORN*, Ser. II, vol. 3, 1111-12.

¹²⁶ Welles to Pearson, October 4, 1864, *ORN*, I, 3, 251.

rumors circulated regarding a Confederate plot to seize a federal steamer. By early October, the entire plan was known, in astonishing detail, the information being sent by Acting Consul-General Thomas Savage in Havana, to Alex McKee, U. S. Consul in Panama. How Savage got the information is not clear, but the early exposure of the plot followed a characteristic pattern of such enterprises of Confederate sympathizers.¹²⁷

In any case, the new commander of the Pacific Squadron, George Pearson, was alerted, and on November 2, informed Secretary Welles that he would use “all legal means to render this nefarious attempt abortive.” He planned to allow the plotters to board the *Salvador*, while he took the *Lancaster* out of the harbor. The captain of the *Salvador*, meanwhile, would follow in the flagship’s wake, to a point about three miles from land. At that point, Pearson informed Welles that he would seize “the pirates and their effects, thus protecting the vessel from capture and preserving our commerce from this foul attempt upon it.”¹²⁸

The actual responsibility for the capture of the rebels was turned over to Commander Davenport, captain of the *Lancaster*. He followed the explicit orders of the Admiral, as he said, “*verbatim et literatim*,” capturing the seven “pirates” on board the *Salvador* without a shot fired and hardly a scuffle.¹²⁹

Once the Confederates were aboard the Federal steamer, Davenport, along with four small boatloads of armed men, came alongside. The boats, through the unforeseen action of a tug captain, were clearly exposed to the view of the *Salvador*’s passengers. The conspirators seemed oblivious to any suggestion that the plot had been uncovered, however. “If their suspicions were aroused,” reported Captain Davenport, “they took no

¹²⁷ Bell to Welles, September 12, 1864, *ibid.*, 212; Bell to Captain Murray of the *Wateree*, April 4, 1864, *ibid.*, 5; Actg. Consul-Gen. Thomas Savage to Alex McKee, U.S. Consul in Panama, October 3, 1864, *ibid.*, 302-03.

¹²⁸ Pearson to Welles, November 2, 1864, *ibid.*, 345.

¹²⁹ Davenport to Pearson, November 12, 1864, *ibid.*, 354-55.

advantage of it.” Having arranged with the steamer’s captain to assemble all the passengers in the main cabin, ostensibly to check tickets, cabins and trunks were searched, and incriminating documents secured. Informing the passengers that he was simply a police officer, on board “to see that nothing was wrong,” Davenport explained that they were all under the protection of New Granada and free to go “whithersoever they pleased.” Completely unsuspecting, the Confederates remained on board, and the *Salvador* got underway, following in the track of the *Lancaster*.¹³⁰

By daylight the next morning, both the *Salvador* and the *Lancaster* were a good twelve miles to sea, and Captain Davenport ordered that the ensign be raised on the steamer. Now under the American flag and under his command, Davenport indicated to the passengers that he “desired the pleasure of the company of several of them on board my ship.” Unfortunately, he did not record their reactions.¹³¹

Secretary of the Navy Welles was clearly pleased with the outcome of the affair. Writing to Pearson on December 30, that “great caution and prudence appear to have been displayed throughout this whole affair in the preparations for capture, the quietness and success in accomplishing it.” The captives were originally to be sent to New York, via Aspinwall, but problems arose with the President of Panama, and Pearson decided to ship them to Mare Island, aboard the *Saginaw*, then in the harbor. There they arrived on December 31, but having no place to put them, Captain McDougal had them transferred to Alcatraz to await trial.¹³²

Among the papers found with the rebels was an oath, subscribed to by sixteen men. As only seven were captured, Commander Pearson logically inferred that the others

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Welles to Pearson, December 30 and Pearson to Welles, November 17, 1864, *ibid.*, 367, 365; McDougal to Welles, January 1, 1865, *ibid.*, 367.

remained at large, “having been sent to different places to establish coal depots and make other arrangements for the complete outfit of the *Salvador* when captured.” Due to the continuing danger, therefore, a high state of vigilance was maintained, and as far as the admiral was concerned, the entire incident had had a salutary effect:

The capture of the pirates from the *Salvador*, however, has opened the eyes of the agents and commanders of the packet steamers here generally to the danger of receiving strange passengers on board without a thorough examination of their luggage, and this will probably prevent the capture of any steamers at or near Panama in the future.

The seven “pirates” were tried in San Francisco, in May, by a military court-martial. Charged with “violations of the laws and usages of civilized war,” the men were found guilty and sentenced to hang. General McDowell reduced Hogg’s sentence to life imprisonment, and the rest to ten years. In early May of 1866, President Johnson ordered the release of all the prisoners. Thus, just as in the *Chapman* case, all the conspirators were free men within a year.¹³³

There is evidence that further attempts to seize Pacific coast steamers were contemplated by Mallory and Bulloch. On January 3, 1865, for instance, a William Allen, formerly a colonel in a New York regiment, wrote to Secretary of State Seward regarding a scheme to capture a mail ship “by the aid of a swift but small steamer, armed with one gun.” One or two of these vessels were to operate out of the number of small bays and inlets of Costa Rica. Seward thought enough of the message to forward it to Welles, who passed it along to Pearson on the 20th of January. A similar warning came from the U. S. Consul in London, who had learned from his agent in Paris that “a band of rebel conspirators are secretly organizing for the purpose of attempting to capture our

¹³³ Pearson to Welles, November 12 and December 5, 1864, *ibid.*, 353, 387; Benjamin Franklin Gilbert, “The Salvador Pirates,” *Civil War History* 5, no. 3 (1959) : 302-306.

California mail steamers in the Pacific.”¹³⁴

Such rumors may have had substance. Mallory, having given up on securing large, formidable ironclads, was concentrating on the building of small steamers and torpedo boats. On July 30, 1864, he sent specifications to Bulloch for just such craft, which were not only light and fast, but also had but one gun. By the end of September, Bulloch reported that work on these vessels was “advancing” and that they would be completed by January 1, 1865. Then, in a letter dated October 24, 1864, Bulloch alluded to a plan which was maturing “which will require aid from the Confederate States, but which cannot be executed until the early part of next summer.” The Confederate agent could not have been referring to the cruise of the *Shenandoah*, as that ship had already been sent out on her cruise. He went on to say that “I feel satisfied that if the war continues we can strike a severe naval blow in the coming June, but we must operate on an entirely new method.” He apologized for being enigmatic, but explained that “papers are scarcely safe anywhere.”¹³⁵

On Christmas Eve, 1864, Bulloch sent to Mallory a letter even more enigmatic. In it, he stated that he had “been engaged in arranging for an expedition far more formidable than anything yet attempted from this side.” He went on to say that “if we are blessed with success the fact will probably be known to you before this letter reaches Richmond, and it would therefore seem superfluous to report details when everything may fail.”¹³⁶

Whatever the nature of Bulloch’s expedition, or the plans for the small steamers ordered by Mallory, it can scarcely be doubted that both men had cast their eyes toward the Pacific. There lay the last hope of striking the enemy with the limited resources

¹³⁴ Wm. Allen to Wm. Seward, January 3, *ORN*, I, 3, 411; U. S. Consul F. Morse to Seward, December 30, 1864, *ibid.*, 455.

¹³⁵ Mallory to Bulloch, July 30, 1864, *ORN*, Ser. II, vol. 2, 695; Bulloch to Mallory, September 29 and October 24, 1864, *ibid.*, 730, 740.

¹³⁶ *ibid.*, December 24, 1864, 785.

available to them, and with some chance of success. The field of operation of the Confederate Navy had shrunk, due to its success in sweeping Northern commerce from the seas, and due to its impotence in dealing with the Federal blockade of Southern ports. The Pacific coast, therefore, loomed ever larger in the imaginations of the Secretary and his agent. There lay a coastline relatively undefended and through its waters plowed the ever-tempting gold ships. And, of course, there was the whaling fleet.

The Cruise of the Shenandoah

On August 10, 1864, Secretary Mallory wrote to Bulloch in England that “we can not obtain such ships as we specially want,” but at the same time “we must not therefore desist in our attempts and must do the best we can under the circumstances which surround us.” Though warships could not be purchased, ordinary vessels were yet obtainable, and could be put to good use on the Pacific: “The enemy’s distant whaling grounds have not been visited by us. His commerce constitutes one of his reliable sources of national wealth, no less than one of his best schools for seamen, and we must strike it, if possible.” Having adopted a view that saw the New England Yankee as the kernel of economic support for the war in the North, he heartily advocated a blow at this quintessential Yankee industry. “A blow at the whalemens,” he maintained, “is a blow at New England exclusively.”¹³⁷

Mallory expanded on his philosophy in a later communication to Bulloch, saying that he regarded “a vigorous attack upon this interest as one of the heaviest blows we can strike the enemy.” He believed strongly that the whale fishery was a peculiarly sensitive

¹³⁷ Mallory to Bulloch, August 10, 1864, *ibid.*, 701-02.

target for the following reason:

A ship is usually owned and fitted out in shares by numerous owners, a share not infrequently representing but a thirty-second part of the outlay; and thus the destruction of a whale ship usually touches the pockets of many families in the middle walks of life, and gives far greater discouragement to the trade than if the ships were held and fitted out by the representatives of large commercial capital.

Ever interested in the most possible damage for the least outlay and risk, Mallory saw the unguarded whaling fleet, based in Pacific waters, as a logical prize.¹³⁸

Federal authorities were not unaware of the danger to the whalers from Confederate raiders. As early as August, 1861, Commodore Montgomery of the Pacific Fleet advocated altering the steaming grounds of the *Wyoming* to coincide with the coming together of the whaling fleet in southern waters between the months of October and April. Failure to do this would subject “a large amount of American property liable, unless duly looked after, to capture or destruction.” In April, 1865, after word had spread that the *Shenandoah* had sailed from Melbourne, Australia, the U. S. Consul to Chile wrote to Commodore Pearson, pleading for a warship in the waters there. “If this report be true,” he wrote, “we shall doubtless soon learn of her presence in the waters of Chile, and the American whaling and merchant vessels trading at the south Pacific ports will be in imminent danger.” No one, however, seemed to appreciate the danger to ships plying the waters of the far north Pacific.¹³⁹

On August 19, 1864, Mallory wrote again to Bulloch, providing additional detail regarding the new cruiser that was wanted. He had spoken to a Mr. Carter, who described “a class of vessels built for a branch of the China trade which sail very fast, and have auxiliary steam power.” He named the *Sea King* as an example of this type, and

¹³⁸ Ibid., December 16, 1864, 779.

¹³⁹ Flag-Officer Montgomery to Captain David McDougal, August 9, 1861, *ORN*, Ser. I, vol. 1, 58; U. S. Consul Thomas Nelson to Pearson, April 16, 1865, *ORN*, I, 3, 511.

that it would make a “splendid cruiser.” Mallory, thoroughly convinced of the suitability of the craft, urged Bulloch to purchase two such vessels, which could operate in accordance with his “naval light infantry” strategy, separating and uniting for action “as circumstances might dictate.” As luck would have it, while the Secretary was penning this letter, Bulloch was examining the *Sea King* himself, for possible conversion to a Confederate cruiser. “It is an interesting coincidence,” he wrote on the 20th of October, “that while you were discussing her merits and fitness for conversion into a cruiser I was negotiating for her purchase at this distance from you.” Nothing could better illustrate the perfect harmony of these two minds than this incident.¹⁴⁰

Purchased in mid-September, the *Sea King* displaced 1,160 tons, was a full-rigged sailing vessel, fitted with a small auxiliary steam engine. The propeller was unique in that it could be lifted out of the water for enhanced sailing performance. Steaming speed was fair, reaching only eight knots in a flat calm. A fast sailer, however, the boat was occasionally recorded as reaching seventeen knots. Armament was moderate, consisting of four 8-inch smoothbores, two 32-pounder Whitworth rifled guns, and two small 12-pounders. Not as formidable as the *Alabama*, the *Shenandoah* was still perfectly suited to overhaul and overawe any commercial vessel that might be encountered. In addition, the armament was sufficient to deal with many federal warships, particularly the revenue cutters.¹⁴¹

Lieutenant James Waddell was ordered to report to Bulloch in Liverpool in early September. A month later he was directed to rendezvous, aboard the store ship *Laurel*, with the *Sea King* at the island of Madeira. “You are about to proceed upon a cruise in

¹⁴⁰ Mallory to Bulloch, August 10 and 19, 1864, *ORN*, II, 2, 708; Bulloch to Mallory, October 20, 1864, *ibid.*, 736.

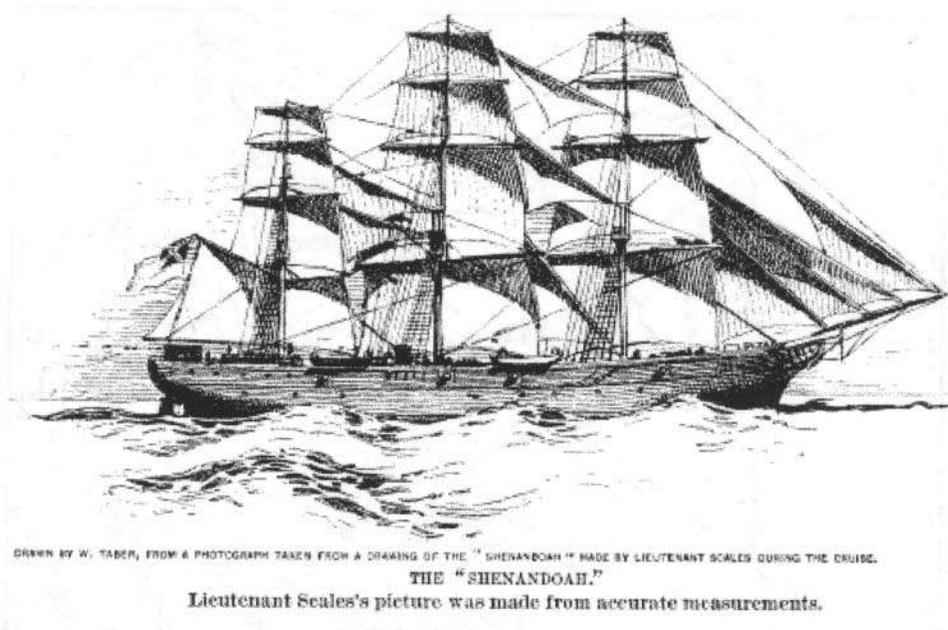
¹⁴¹ John Mason, “The Last of the Confederate Cruisers,” *The Century Magazine* 56 (August 1898) : 602; Mallory to Bulloch, October 20, 1864, *ORN*, II, 2, 736.

the far-distant Pacific,” he was advised, “into the seas and among the islands frequented by the great American whaling fleet, a source of abundant wealth to our enemies and a nursery for their seamen.” Though the “ultimate aim” of the cruise was “the destruction of the New England whaling fleet,” he was given freedom to act as circumstances presented themselves.¹⁴²

By October 19, stores had been transferred from the *Laurel*, and the *Sea King*, now renamed the *Shenandoah*, the last cruiser of the Confederate Navy, began her cruise. With the *Alabama* sunk and the *Florida* captured, both Mallory and Bulloch were anxious to get the new cruiser to sea. “The announcement . . . that another Confederate cruiser is at sea,” wrote Bulloch to Mallory on November 17, “can not fail to have a depressing effect upon the foreign commerce of the United States by increasing the rate of insurance in and upon American bottoms.” Waddell set to work quickly, his actions no doubt having a depressing effect on both ship captains and owners. Within ten days, he had taken his first prize, quickly followed by eight more. Most of the ships were destroyed, but a few were ransomed.¹⁴³

¹⁴² Flag-Officer Barron to Waddell, September 5, 1864, *ORN*, Ser. I, vol. 3, 749; Bulloch to Waddell, October 5, 1864, *ibid.*, 749-755.

¹⁴³ Bulloch to Mallory, *ibid.*, 757; Waddell to Barron, January 25, 1865, *ibid.*, 759-60.



Source: Mason, "The Last of the Confederate Cruisers," The Century 56, no. 4 (Aug. 1898) : 600

On January 25, 1865, Waddell anchored at the port of Melbourne, Australia, his arrival causing "quite an excitement." In his report to Flag-Officer Barron, he noted without comment the news of the re-election of President Lincoln, and cheerily sent his "love to all the ladies." Though his efforts at Melbourne to top up his supplies and recruit crewmembers was vigorously opposed by the U. S. Consul, he nonetheless successfully refitted and sailed for Pacific waters on February 18.¹⁴⁴

News that another Confederate raider was loose on the high seas, and perhaps headed for the Pacific, became a hot topic of conversation in San Francisco business circles. Speculation abounded as to the raider's intentions and destination. "She is most probably bound for this coast," noted the editors of the *Alta California*, but no concern was entertained for the safety of the city: "It is so thoroughly fortified that the appearance off

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.; Benjamin Franklin Gilbert, "The Confederate Raider Shenandoah: The Elusive Destroyer in the Pacific and the Arctic," *Journal of the West* 4 (1965) : 170.

the Bar of all the ships-of-war England and France could bring together in these waters would occasion very little alarm.” That was overstating the case, and was certainly not an opinion shared by the Department commander, General McDowell. Both the General and the newspaper shared concern over a lack of warships in the harbor, however. Only the revenue cutters *Saginaw* and *Shubrick* were available, and if the “pirate” chose to lie off the port and attack inward and outward bound vessels, little could be sent against her. As will be discussed in chapter 5, the Monitor *Camanche*, while assembled, was not yet commissioned and was sitting quietly and unready at Mare Island. Besides, the *Alta* noted that the vessel was “only intended for harbor defence, and it would not be judicious to send her across the bar.” The editors went on to complain that “we ought to have in the Pacific a fleet equal, at least, to the combined fleets of England and France.” Nothing more was heard of the raider for some months, however, and, with the end of the war, there was little more concern about harbor defenses and Confederate cruisers.¹⁴⁵

Finding that the whalers had moved northward earlier than expected, Waddell headed into north Pacific waters in late May, and took the bark *Abigail*. On the very same day that the *Abigail* was burned, the Assistant Secretary of the Navy was responding to a request by citizens of New London, Connecticut, for increased protection to the whalers in the Pacific. The Assistant Secretary assured the petitioners that Rear-Admiral Pearson had been informed of the danger, and would “exercise all vigilance upon the movements of the *Shenandoah* with the force under his command.” But Pearson had no idea of the whereabouts of the raider, and would certainly not have guessed that the ship was at that moment closing in on the whaling fleet in far northern waters. Blocked by ice in the Okhotsk Sea, Waddell entered the Bering Sea in mid-June, and proceeded to his work in earnest. In a few days, several ships were destroyed, and the *Shenandoah* was quickly

¹⁴⁵ *Alta California*, 30 March 1865.

crowded with prisoners. Occasionally, when the weather was fine, these reluctant passengers were put in small whale-boats and towed astern. On one calm day, no less than twenty-four boats were seen trailing behind the Dixie raider.¹⁴⁶

In order to rid himself of these unwanted passengers, and also “that the Richmond Government would know of our whereabouts,” Waddell dispatched the whale ship *Milo*, loaded with prisoners, to San Francisco on June 23. On the same day, the Confederate captain got the first intimation that the war was over. The information being inconclusive, however, he refused to acknowledge it. The fact that he was able to enlist nine men from the captured ships into his service also was seen as proof that there was no certain evidence of the South’s collapse, Waddell reasoning that “if they had heard any report of the military failure of the South, they considered it so unreliable as not to hinder their seeking service in the *Shenandoah*.”¹⁴⁷

The arrival of the *Milo* in San Francisco on July 20, with around one hundred ninety officers and men from the burned whalers, set off shock waves in the city. “Intense excitement” was aroused by the tales related by the released prisoners. One wide-eyed captive related that the rebel captain told him that, once the whaling fleet was wrecked, he intended to “sail for the American coast, destroy what he could of California bound ships, seize a mail steamer with treasure on board, and destroy things generally.” The same day, David McDougal, yard Commandant at Mare Island, wired Secretary Welles with the news of the *Milo*’s arrival, adding that the steamer *America* was that day dispatched to Panama, to carry the news to Admiral Pearson. Two days later, a petition, signed by numerous “merchants, shipowners, and underwriters” was delivered to

¹⁴⁶ Gilbert, “The Confederate Raider *Shenandoah*,” 173; Asst. Secty Gustavus Fox to Messrs. Williams & Haven (and others), May 27, 1865, *ORN*, I, 3, 532; Mason, “The Last of the Confederate Cruisers,” 608-09.

¹⁴⁷ Waddell, *Memoirs*, 166, 170.

McDougal, asking that he immediately telegraph Washington, requesting permission to send a Pacific Mail steamship, then in the harbor, after the rebel privateer. The same day, McDougal sent the following telegram:

Great apprehensions felt by mercantile community of San Francisco in consequence of depredations of *Shenandoah*. Merchant shipowners and underwriters have addressed a memorial requesting me to telegraph Department for authority to charter, arm, and man steamer *Colorado*, of Pacific Mail Company, to pursue that vessel.

Both this telegram and the one two days prior went astray, however, and Washington only responded, somewhat sheepishly, on the 19th of August. Permission was granted to charter the *Colorado*, but, by that time, she had long since left on her regular run to the south.¹⁴⁸

On June 26, the *Shenandoah* captured six whaling vessels, and burned five. The *General Pike* was spared, and, like the *Milo*, was loaded with prisoners and sent off to San Francisco. Two days later, Waddell collected his biggest haul to date, eleven ships found bunched together in a small bay. Flying the American flag, he steamed into the bay among the unsuspecting whalers. Once in position, he hoisted the stars and bars. “The hurry and confusion upon the decks of those vessels,” wrote the captain in his memoirs, “the consternation among the crews may be imagined.” Nine of the ships were fired, “presenting a picture of indescribable grandeur.” The remaining two were ransomed, packed with the crews of the now-burned hulks, and set free. By now thoroughly alarmed by fleeing whalers, the balance of the fleet had crept to safety in the ice floes of the Arctic Ocean. Attempting to follow, the *Shenandoah* spent only one day in this sea, and then steered southward, toward the tracks of the mail steamers and, if the

¹⁴⁸ *Alta*, 21 July 1865; McDougal to Welles, July 20 and 23, 1865, *ORN*, I,3, 569, 571; Welles to McDougal, August 19, 1865, *Ibid.*, 587; *Alta*, 3 August 1865.

signs were right, to the Golden Gate.¹⁴⁹

On August 1, the *General Pike* arrived at San Francisco, setting off another wave of semi-hysteria and outrage. The headline in the *Alta* shouted that the *Shenandoah* was still at “her infamous work,” burning ships at will, and accusing Waddell of sending the *Pike* off with the advice to “resort to cannibalism in case their provisions gave out.” There had been hope that Waddell had realized the futility of his actions and had “long ere this” abandoned his cruise and was heading for “a convenient neutral port into which to run and abandon his vessel.” Oddly enough, on July 25, the same day this comment appeared in the *Alta*, the *Shenandoah* was probably as close to San Francisco as any Confederate cruiser would ever be, either during or after the war. Not only that, the captain and his officers were enthusiastically looking forward to attacking the city, ramming and commandeering the *Camanche*, and demanding a ransom. Thus, in one of those odd coincidences of history, at the very moment when the city of San Francisco faced its most genuine threat from a ship of the Confederate Navy, after years of agonizing over just such a possibility, the danger went unrecognized. The main fear, in fact, seemed to be that the raider would escape, denying a Federal vessel the chance to overhaul the “pirate” Waddell, “and give him an opportunity to stretch hemp.”¹⁵⁰

On July 29, the steamer *America* arrived at Acapulco and delivered the message of the *Shenandoah*'s depredations to Commodore Pearson. Dissolving the court-martial in which he was engaged, he immediately dispatched the *Saranac* and the recently-arrived *Suwanee* in pursuit of the raider. A few days later he received official orders from Washington to do the same thing. Of course, no one really knew where the “pirate” was,

¹⁴⁹ Waddell, *Memoirs*, 168-69; Mason, “The Last of the Confederate Cruisers,” 609.

¹⁵⁰ *Alta*, 2 August and 25 July 1865; Waddell, *Memoirs*, 33. In his introduction to the *Memoirs*, the editor, James Horan mis-identifies the *Camanche* as the *Saginaw*. See *Memoirs*, 33.

and Pearson was simply ordered to rely on his “judgment and discretion to effect her destruction.” A rumor having placed the rebel off the Washington coast, the federal ships were sent in that direction. At about the same time, the *Shenandoah* had overtaken the British bark *Barracouta*, and Waddell and his crew had learned of the certain collapse of the Confederacy. “My life had been checkered from the dawn of my naval career, and I had believed myself schooled to every sort of disappointment,” recalled Waddell of that moment, “but the dreadful issue of that sanguinary struggle was the bitterest blow . . . I had yet encountered.” After some doubt and hesitation, and discussion with his officers, he decided to return to England, and so continued to steer to the southward, taking a wide loop around Cape Horn, finally dropping anchor in the Mersey at Liverpool, on November 6. The ships of the Pacific Fleet were of course heading in the opposite direction, but well inside the track of the *Shenandoah*, and never caught sight of the elusive raider. The fleet could not appear to be inactive, however, and continued to cruise for thousands of miles, pursuing rumors, accomplishing little more than the combustion of a great deal of coal. If nothing else, the weakness of the Pacific Fleet in the north Pacific was highlighted, and, in the south Pacific, it was found that coaling stations were needed.¹⁵¹

All told, the *Shenandoah* captured thirty-eight ships and burned thirty-two. Damage to Union commerce was officially judged at \$1,361,983. Terrified ship owners flocked to insure their vessels and cargoes against the “pirate.” In one day, the Atlantic Mutual Company received \$118,978 in premiums, the largest sum written by that company until the beginning of World War I. The company eventually paid out over \$1.5 million in

¹⁵¹ Pearson to Welles and Welles to Pearson, August 4 and 3, 1865, *ORN*, I, 3, 577, 576; *Alta*, 3 August 1865; Waddell, 175-177; Gilbert, “The Confederate Raider Shenandoah,” 178-79.

damages.¹⁵²

But the *Shenandoah* amounted to more than a tally of burned ships and insurance payouts. The rebel cruiser represented the last dying gasp of the Confederacy's attempt to change the course of the war. Significantly, it was in the Pacific that the final blow was struck. The importance of California gold and the commerce of the Pacific were not lost on Confederate authorities. That they were not successful in that theater, at least while the war was in progress, was more a combination of bad luck and lack of resources than a failure of vision. Had Mallory and Bulloch been able to field two cruisers to the Pacific, as they desired, or had they focused their attention on this area sooner and with more resources to call upon, the damage done could well have amounted to more than a collection of obsolete whaling ships.

The activities of the Confederate Naval establishment were a significant threat to the security of California's coastal defenses and trade. Confederate Secretary of the Navy Stephen Mallory and his agent James Bulloch were a formidable team, whose appreciation of the benefits of technology was a substantial danger to the integrity of the Union blockade and of Northern coastal cities as well (including Washington D.C. itself). Had the Confederate rams gotten to sea, the result can only be surmised, but foreign recognition of the legitimacy of the Confederacy is not out of the question. With foreign ports open to Confederate warships, no harbor, not even one as distant as San Francisco, was safe from a concerted attack.

Attempts to seize California coastal steamers persisted throughout the war. The affair of the schooner *Chapman* and that of the Confederate sympathizers who attempted to capture the Federal steamer *Salvador* are just the most well-known examples of this effort. That they failed does not disguise the fact that such activity could have been most

¹⁵² Waddell, 1, 33.

damaging to the California gold trade and the Union war effort.¹⁵³

Finally, the rebel cruisers constituted a genuine threat to San Francisco's security. Roaming freely on the world's oceans, they appeared to be everywhere and attempts to stop them were frustratingly ineffectual. California's coastline, considering the small size and poor condition of the Pacific squadron, was virtually undefended. As the cruise of the *Shenandoah* demonstrates, Confederate ships were able to operate in Pacific waters with little fear of capture or destruction.

¹⁵³ On November 27, 1862, Captain Semmes of the Confederate raider *Alabama* actually succeeded in capturing the California steamer *Ariel*, on a run between New York and the Panamanian port of Apinwall. However, the ship was outward-bound and had as cargo, not gold, but 500 passengers, mostly women and children. Unable to accommodate such a crowd, Semmes was forced to release the vessel. See Porter, *The Naval History of the Civil War*, 638-39.

Chapter 4

Dancing Bears

Fear of Confederate attack from the sea helps to explain the very positive response to the presence of not one ship, but an entire squadron. When the warships of his imperial majesty, Czar Alexander II, dropped anchor in San Francisco Bay in late 1863, they were welcomed, as was a similar squadron in New York, with an outpouring of warmth and brotherly affection that today can scarcely be credited. But in the middle of a rebellion whose end was clouded in doubt and in a Union surrounded by seemingly hostile or indifferent nations, the presence of a powerful friend, openly supportive of the North, was welcome indeed.

On September 24, 1863, a squadron of Russian warships, commanded by Admiral Lisovsky, entered the harbor of New York. On October 12, a similar squadron entered San Francisco Bay. In both harbors, the officers and men were welcomed with open arms, and heartfelt signs of affection and good will. During their months-long stay, the Russian vessels were refitted at local navy yards, and the officers feted at numerous ceremonies, including, at each place, a glittering ball at which thousands attended, including the highest civil and military officers in each state. From the moment the fleets dropped anchor, the local newspapers were full of effusive praise and admiration for their guests. And as the stay lengthened from weeks to months, the praise flowed into political currents, and there was much talk of a military alliance between Russia and the United States. For a month or more, this chorus of fraternal and political amity continued to swell, peaking in late November, following the magnificent festivity of the great ball. Thereafter, the expressions of mutual interest and fidelity began to fade, but did not die

away until the warships went home in late April, 1864. It was an amazing moment, and in a curious way reflected yet another side to the way in which San Franciscans responded to, and dealt with their anxiety regarding possible attack from the sea.

The Russian visit had reverberated powerfully in the capitals of Europe, especially in London and Paris. Arguably, this event led to the decision by the British government to halt construction of the Confederate rams, and helped to head off further movement toward English recognition of the Confederacy. In addition, the morale of Union sympathizers was undoubtedly given a lift, though the attitude of Americans toward the Russian presence in its harbors has been a subject of controversy and bears particular examination. Professor F. A. Golder, for instance, in his definitive article on the visit argued that American observers were unaware of the true political motives of the Russian government and assumed, incorrectly, that “the fleet came especially for their benefit.” This assumption has seemingly been unquestioned, but an examination of contemporary documents raises doubts as to its validity, and is an issue therefore deserving of further consideration.¹⁵⁴

At the outbreak of the Civil War, relations between Russia and the United States were good and had been so since the time of the Revolution, when Russia declared her neutrality in the conflict and thereby dashed Britain’s hopes for building an anti-American coalition in Europe. In 1815, Russian pressure helped to secure Britain’s acceptance of the Treaty of Ghent. And during the Crimean War, many Americans were openly pro-Russian, and the Whig press was already advocating a U.S.-Russian alliance.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁴ F.A. Golder, “The Russian Fleet and the Civil War,” *The American Historical Review* (1915) : 810.

¹⁵⁵ Konstantin George, “The U.S.-Russian Entente that Saved the Union,” *Executive Intelligence Review* (1992) {database online}; available at americanalmanac@yahoo.com.

From the beginning of the civil conflict in the United States, the Russian government made clear its sympathy with the Northern cause and its concern regarding any diminution of American power. For its own purposes, the maintenance of a strong federal union was of first concern to the Russian statesmen, providing as it did an effective counterpoise to the power of European nations, especially that of Great Britain. This concern was aptly expressed in a letter from the Russian minister of foreign affairs to his ambassador in Washington in early 1862, following the resolution of the *Trent* affair:

The event must have shown . . . how much these difficulties affect its political standing; how much they are of a nature to encourage aspirations connected with a diminution of the power of the United States, and how much consequently it is for its interest to get through with them at the earliest day.

The Russian government wished earnestly to see the United States “enter upon the condition of power and prosperity” formerly attained not only because of the “cordial sympathy” which united the two nations, but “because the maintenance of its power interests in the highest degree the general political equilibrium.”¹⁵⁶

“The two governments,” noted Professor Golder in his paper on the Russian visit, “had similar problems and the same European enemies and that was reason enough why they should feel kindly towards each other.” The possibility of an alliance was therefore taken seriously in European capitals. The threat, or even the appearance of a Russian-American alliance was, for both nations, a political ace-in-the-hole, to be flashed at appropriate moments in order to suppress the machinations of England and France. In mid-1863, as luck would have it, the stars aligned for both America and Russia and each nation decided to play the “alliance” card at the same time.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶ Foreign Minister Gortchakov to Ambassador M. Edward de Stoeckl, January 9, 1862, *OR*, Ser. II, vol. 2, 1200-01.

¹⁵⁷ Golder, “The Russian Fleet and the Civil War,” 805.

Russia was having problems in eastern Europe. Poland was restless under Moscow's domination, and many powerful European states, including England and France, tended to side with Poland. England and her allies demanded that the Polish question be submitted to international arbitration, to which suggestion Russia refused. Fearing that war might follow, Russian naval authorities deemed it important to remove the Russian fleet, much smaller and weaker than England's, to a safe harbor. If the fleet remained at home, it would likely be bottled up, and thereby rendered useless. From a neutral port, on the other hand, the few available ships would be free to make independent forays against the enemy, much in the manner of the Confederate cruisers. Great Britain was quite aware of the ability of the Southern raiders to do great damage to maritime commerce, and the existence of such vessels flying the Czarist flag must have given pause to her statesmen. Russian Adjutant-General Krabbe, in charge of the Navy in the absence of the grand duke, was of the opinion that a few ships, properly handled, could cause a great deal of harm. He advised the Czar that it was this fact which prompted England to avoid war with the United States.¹⁵⁸

The United States was having its own problems. Two years of war had led to no clear result, and England appeared ready to recognize the existence of the Confederacy. Any show of friendship at this moment, especially by a formidable power, could not fail to elicit the most enthusiastic response among citizens of the North. In San Francisco, not many months had elapsed since the *Chapman* affair had broken, and the citizens and authorities were still shaken. General Wright was frantically trying to throw up additional defenses, and pleading for a warship to be permanently stationed in the harbor. Wright was aware that an iron-clad warship was at that moment on its way to San Francisco (the monitor *Camanche*, the subject of the next and final chapter), but he also

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 800-803.

knew that it would be months before the boat would be ready for action. Thus, when Rear-Admiral Popov led his squadron into the bay of San Francisco on October 12, 1863, he was welcomed as something of a savior.

Popov had some latitude in his orders and was not limited to San Francisco as the only possible harbor in which to anchor. But the choice was a logical one. He had been to San Francisco in 1859 and 1862, had many friends in the city, and was certain of a friendly welcome. In addition, the availability of the naval yard at Mare Island was a strong calling card, as there were no Russian bases in the Pacific in which he could re-fit. San Francisco, therefore, was the ideal port in which to shelter his ships, while waiting for the situation in Europe to mature.¹⁵⁹

The expressions of good will began almost as soon as the anchor was down on Popov's flagship, the *Bogatyre*. On the day following his arrival, the Admiral was rowed three miles to the revenue cutter *Shubrick*, where he was received by Captain Scammon with a "handsome salute." According to the reporter from the *Alta California*, the "gallant Admiral" seemed greatly pleased with his reception and appreciative of "the kindly feeling entertained towards his country by the . . . Yankee Nation." Just a few days later there was already talk of holding a ball in honor of the squadron's presence, and to give the Russian officers a "marked evidence of the friendly feeling existing between the government of the Czar, and the citizens of the American Republic."¹⁶⁰

If the people of San Francisco needed any further inducement to feel kindly towards their guests, they found it in the Russians' response to a very destructive fire that occurred on the morning of Friday, the 23rd of October, when a large fire swept through the city front near the bay. Though fire was a frequent occurrence in San Francisco, with

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 805-08.

¹⁶⁰ *Alta California*, 14, 21 October 1863.

most buildings made of wood, this conflagration was particularly damaging and visible to all the ships in the harbor. Admiral Popov responded by sending a large contingent of officers and men to help suppress the blaze, several men being injured in the process. Fire Chief Scannell offered the “sincere acknowledgements” of the department to the Russian officers and men for their “invaluable services rendered in staying the progress of the fire,” and in performing “acts of daring which redound greatly to their credit.” The day following the fire, the *Alta* expressed the general feeling of the city in thanking the Admiral and his men, saying that their action was “another evidence of the cordial feelings which exist between the two people, and which are every day ripening into a solid, and, we hope, permanent friendship.” Following this expression of appreciation, the Board of Supervisors passed a resolution, thanking the Russians “for the timely and efficient services so nobly rendered by them.” The Czarist sailors were a hit, and hopes for a successful ball looked promising indeed.¹⁶¹

The grand ball was scheduled for the evening of November 17, in Union Hall. But Admiral Popov did not bring his force to San Francisco simply to engage in festivities, and as early as October 25, some of his ships had arrived at Mare Island for necessary repairs. By the 31st, carpenters, blacksmiths, and machinists were working on the steam corvettes *Bogatyre*, *Kalevala*, and *Gaidamak*. The next day, the gun boat *Abreck* arrived. The daily shipyard logs also recorded that on November 7 and 9, the bodies of two Russian sailors were interred in the Mare Island cemetery. No cause of death was noted, but as the *Alta* had reported that several sailors were injured in the recent fire, it is possible that their deaths were related to injuries sustained in that event.¹⁶²

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 24, 25, 27 October, 1863.

¹⁶² Shipyard Logs, Mare Island Naval Shipyard, 8/25/62-11/21/63, RG 181, November 7 and 9, 1863, Box 2, NA (not paginated). According to Lt. Comdr. Lott, six sailors died as a result of injuries sustained in the S.F. fire, and were buried at Mare Island: See Lott, *A Long Line of Ships*, 83.

By the second week of November, preparations for the ball were reported as “going forward rapidly,” though some of the invitations had been delayed, due to problems with the printer. Luckily, most of the invitations that had already gone out, reported the *Alta*, had gone to the ladies, “they requiring more time for preparation than gentlemen.” Two thousand four hundred invitations were sent out, and included both current governor Stanford and Governor-Elect Low, Mayor Coon of San Francisco, General Wright and staff, and ambassadors from various nations. Governors Stanford and Low had in fact already dined with Admiral Popov on board his flagship, on October 24, in company with Admiral Bell, commander of the Pacific Fleet. The “venerable Russian Admiral” was fast becoming the most popular man in San Francisco, if not the state.¹⁶³

The Ball

The grand ball was scheduled for the evening of November 17. At nine o'clock that morning the Russian corvette *Rynda* left the anchorage in front of the city, and steamed toward Mare Island. The day was calm and pleasant, following a violent storm the night before.¹⁶⁴ Arriving at noon, Admiral Popov and his staff left the flagship, *Bogatyre*, which was in process of being re-fitted, and boarded the corvette for the return trip to San Francisco. Leaving the Mare Island wharf at 1:45 P.M., the *Rynda* approached the city front just at dusk, receiving the salutes of the *Lancaster* and the *Shubrick*. The *Rynda*, responding in kind, the festivities were at this point marred by the death of a Russian sailor and the injury of another, caused by the premature discharge of one of the salute

¹⁶³ *Alta*, 14, 18 November and 26 October 1863.

¹⁶⁴ The storm sank the *Aquila*, the recently arrived vessel carrying the monitor *Camanche*. See pp 125-7 below.

cannons. The progress was delayed momentarily while a boat was lowered to search for the sailor's body, which had been blown overboard. The search was unsuccessful, and the *Rynda* quickly resumed its course to the Broadway wharf. There, the Admiral and his officers were witnessed by "an immense concourse of persons," who had apparently awaited the arrival for hours. "A plenitude of bunting," noted the *Alta* reporter, "floated at the mastheads of the shipping in the harbor." Repairing to waiting carriages, the entourage was escorted to the "Russ House," to rest and to prepare for their entrance to the ball, later that evening.¹⁶⁵

Union Hall was described in the *Alta* as "the largest finished public hall on the Pacific," and as having but "one or two superiors in size and elegance in the United States." Fitted with the latest gas fixtures, the resultant flood of light poured "over a galaxy of more beauty and loveliness than has ever been seen on the Pacific coast at any gathering . . . of the people of California." For three hours, from 9:00 until midnight, the crowd of guests flooded in, and included the highest military and civil authorities in the state. Aside from Governors Stanford and Low, Mayor Coon was in attendance, as was General Wright and Colonel W. C. James, Collector of the Port and the highest federal official of the executive department. Admiral Bell, commander of the Pacific Fleet, made an appearance, as did Judge Hoffman, who adjudicated the fate of the *Chapman* pirates.¹⁶⁶

The hall itself was lavishly decorated with both Russian and American flags, and paintings done up for the occasion. Singing canaries warbled through the evening, in cages suspended from arches garlanded with evergreens. At opposite ends of the hall were portraits of the Emperor and Empress of Russia, and, interestingly, not a portrait of

¹⁶⁵ *Alta*, 18 November 1863; Shipyard Logs, November 17, 1863, Box 2, NA.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

Lincoln, but one of Washington, bearing the inscription, "The Father of our Country." Evidently, the point being made was that Alexander II was considered to be the father of *his* country, or at least of the "new" Russia. Wall panels, draped with flags, declared the sentiments of the party-goers. The following are examples: "Russia and the United States--friends in peace, allies in war"; "The first Alexander advocated our peace in 1812, the second Alexander prevents war in 1863"; "The world has learned lessons of liberty from the Czar of Russia." This last sentiment was an apparent reference to Alexander's freeing of the serfs, a fact which was frequently raised to illustrate a commonality between Russia and the United States, which was just then attempting to free its slaves.¹⁶⁷

The dancing began almost as soon as the doors were opened at nine in the evening. The music was performed by two orchestras, and included, among other selections, polkas, quadrilles, waltzes, and cotillions. At 11:00 the door to the supper room was thrown open, and remained so until 5:00 the next morning. The menu included four varieties of oysters, turtle in wine sauce, a variety of game birds including quail, pigeons, and capons, and "Goose a la California," plus pyramids of fresh and preserved fruits, and an amazing variety of pastry and ices, and some "ornamental pieces," including an ice castle and a "temple representing the alliance between Russia and America." For hours, reported the *Alta*, men in tails and women in white and scarlet cloaks and with flowing trains "struggled and staggered onward up that stairs" to the supper room. Here there were to be seen flags of every state in the Union, and a fountain "which sent forth streams which glistened in the gas light like sparkling diamonds." Some irritation was expressed by the reporter, however, at the thoughtlessness of those at the banquet table in not moving along a little faster, in order to make room for those trying to get something to

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

eat.¹⁶⁸

At four in the morning of the 18th, the music stopped, but many of the attendees seemed loath to exit, and lingered in the hall. Gradually, however, a line began to form to the cloak-room, in order that hats and coats might be collected. With the large number of guests and too few attendants, a bottleneck formed. Perhaps nothing better illustrates democracy in action than the leveling quality of a line, and thus were seen the august personages of Admiral Popov, Governor Stanford, and Admiral Bell all patiently waiting for their hats, along with the more common gentry. Someone finally suggested substituting a “night-cap” for a hat, which apparently sounded like a reasonable alternative to standing in the interminable line, and which was instantly acted upon by the governor and two admirals. Others, in frustration, made a rush upon the door of the cloak-room to grab whatever they could. One man complained that the hat he was given was not his own. It is “a better one than your own,” someone retorted, and he was admonished to “be content.” Still others decided to enter the new morning without hat or coat, trusting that they would be retrieved later. The ball was over.¹⁶⁹

The affair was generally judged a triumph. One lady who had attended a ball given in New York in honor of a visit by the Prince of Wales, was of the opinion that “it was inferior in the style of decoration, and the dresses of the ladies, to the Russian Ball of San Francisco.” According to the *Alta*, the “ovation,” from the moment of Admiral Popov’s arrival at the San Francisco wharf to the last tune of the orchestra, was “universally declared to be a magnificent success.” Considering the level of international amity manifested by this event, can it be any wonder that powerful and credible rumors of a military and political alliance between Russia and the United States circulated freely

¹⁶⁸ *Alta*, 18, 19 November 1863.

¹⁶⁹ *Alta*, 19 November, 1863.

during the visit of the Czarist ships.¹⁷⁰

The Alliance

In order for an alliance between Russia and America to make sense, and to be palatable to American citizens, the obvious differences between the two nations had to be glossed over, while the parallels were emphasized. On the day following the Russian ball, the *Alta* wrote of the “parallelism of the two nations,” noting that both were making progress, economically and politically; both encompassed huge areas of territory, and together could be said to “encircle the earth;” both were just then involved in struggles which threatened their integrity; both had differences with the same powers (England and France). Both nations in addition were involved in a struggle to free a segment of their population from bondage--the North to free the slaves and the Czarist government to free its serfs. In addition, Russia and California shared some particular interests. Just then, for instance, work was going forward on a telegraph line between the Pacific coast and St. Petersburg. And San Francisco looked forward to increased trading opportunities to the east, “when the Amoor will, in its commerce, be the St. Lawrence of the Asiatic continent, and when this city will be the chief resort of its traders.”¹⁷¹

Politically, of course, the fact that both Russia and the United States were having difficulties with England and France was a powerful cause of attraction. In addition, there was a definite perception that the the English and French governments feared and were jealous of the growing powers to the east and west. In a review of a then current

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ *Alta*, 18 November 1863.

work on European affairs, the editors of the *New Englander and Yale Review* asserted that the cause of English and French hostility was the perception of their own waning power: “On the one side is rising Russia, and on the other the United States. These two powers must soon overshadow all others.” Thus, the apprehension of an alliance between these growing giants could not have helped but produce consternation in London and Paris. The editors of the *Alta* reported gleefully on the impact of the news in the British press, and quoted from several dailies, all of whom expressed alarm at the report of a possible alliance. “This movement of the Russian Navy,” noted the *Liverpool Journal* of October 10, “seems to countenance the report.”¹⁷²

The greatest fear harbored by English statesmen was that to British sea-power and commerce. Safe in American ports, the Russian squadrons, small though they were, were free to roam the high seas, much in the manner of the well-known *Alabama* and *Florida*. The attitude of the English government in allowing these vessels to get to sea would now be turned against them, with foreseeable and destructive consequences. Should an alliance be sealed, British shipping would then be at the mercy of Russian *and* American cruisers. As noted in the *Liverpool Journal*:

The friendly harbor of New York offered the best position that could be conceived for a station from whence at any moment a fleet of Russians and Americans could swoop down on our scattered squadron and our unarmed merchantmen.¹⁷³

The movement of the Russian fleet to American ports was, in fact, a brilliant political move, and had positive consequences for both Russia and the United States that became apparent as events progressed. “The time could not have been better chosen,” noted the

¹⁷² Review of “English and French Neutrality, and the Anglo-French Alliance, in their Relations to the United States and Russia,” *The New Englander and Yale Review* 23, no. 89 (Oct. 1864) : 718; *Liverpool Journal*, 10 October 1863, quoted in *Alta California*, 22 November 1863.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*

London Times of October 10, “the success could not have been more complete.” England and France had in fact, backed down in pressing the Polish question, and officers of the Russian Navy frankly attributed this change in attitude to the movement of their fleet. Golder, for his part, believes that there is “substance” to this argument. At the same time, the British government also made an about-face on its policy toward the Confederate Navy, and seized the Laird Rams, then a-building. The effect of the Russian visit on the international situation was summed up in an editorial which appeared in the *Alta* on November 20:

What is the situation today? There are rumors of an alliance between Russia and America, and there are Russian fleets in our Atlantic and Pacific ports. What is the result? England and France are growing very friendly, and particularly the former. Witness the seizure of the rams in England, and the mild address of Louis Napoleon at the opening of the French chambers.¹⁷⁴

Professor Golder has argued that “a great deal of importance has been attached to this event both in the United States and in Russia,” but that, curiously, neither side recognized that the visit “was of any consequence to the other.” As a result, Americans failed to appreciate that the visit of the Russian squadrons was a matter of calculated self-interest on the part of the Czarist government. While it may be true that later generations viewed the matter in this light, the participants clearly did not, and were quite alive to the over-all political dimensions of the event, and of the Russians’ motives. The editors of the *Alta* hit the nail squarely on the head in the following editorial appearing on November 18, 1863:

We suspect that they may have come here to seek our protection; that they are here so as to be ready for a war between Russia and France, or England, or both. During the Crimean War, the Russians were taken at a disadvantage. Their fleets were shut up in the ports of the Black Sea, the Baltic, and Manchuria; and they had neither

¹⁷⁴ *London Times*, 10 October 1863, quoted in *Alta California* 25 November 1863; Golder, “The Russian Fleet and the Civil War,” 810; *Alta*, 20 November 1863.

men-of-war nor privateers to attack the British and French in their most vulnerable place—their commerce. . . . The Russian Government, perhaps, does not intend to be caught now as she was ten years ago. Two fleets . . . have been sent to American ports, where they can neither be taken nor blockaded; and in case of hostilities, they can reach the open sea without difficulty.

There is nothing in this observation that suggests anything but a clear-eyed appreciation of the facts of the case. That the Russians were in American ports for their own reasons was taken fully into account. But what mattered was that Russia was a friend when a friend was needed. “We want, first of all,” stated the editors of the *Alta*, a national friend, and such we have in Russia.”¹⁷⁵

The possibility of a Russian-American alliance was a subject also taken up and advocated in the Russian press. For instance, the November 7, 1863 issue of the British magazine *Punch* quoted from the *Moscow Journal*, to the effect that negotiations should be entered into with America so that “she may be able to reckon upon us.” The commercial world of England “shuddered” at the presence of the Russian frigates on the open sea, noted the *Journal*, and the neutral ports of America provided a perfect haven from which to launch an attack on British commerce should war break out: “Our cruisers . . . will be the terror of the Commercial marine of hostile Powers and will compel any such to employ half their navies in guarding their merchantmen.”¹⁷⁶

The British reaction to rumors of a Russian-American alliance was fiercely negative and indicative of the anxiety which was thereby provoked. In a poem published in *Punch* in late October, 1863, we hear in the final stanza Abraham Lincoln responding to his brother “despot,” Alexander II:

Come to my arms, and let us be allies!
We’ll squelch John Bull, and scuttle Britain’s isle;
But let us go and liquor up meanwhile.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁵ Golder, 800, 808; *Alta*, 18 November 1863.

¹⁷⁶ *Moscow Journal*, quoted in *Punch*, 7 November 1863, 194.

¹⁷⁷ *Punch*, 24 October, 1863, 168.

In America objections to any alliance between Russia and the United States were dismissed generally as the mutterings of rebels, copperheads, or the French and English. To the European liberals, upset with the United States over the support of what was perceived as a despotism, the following reply, published in the *Alta*, was made:

If the struggle in which we are now engaged should become more gigantic than it is at present, by the intermeddling of England and France, we may need something more than sentiment to sustain ourselves. The Liberals of Europe do not control a ship or a regiment. They are in possession of the reins of government in none of the nations of Europe. It is not in their power to do more than wish us well, but in times like the present, something more tangible may by and by be required.¹⁷⁸

While Professor Golder asserts that his study exposes the “real” motivation for the visit of the Russian fleet (even though this reason was apparent to observers at the time), he is not blind to the substantial service that Admiral Popov and his officers were prepared to deliver should danger threaten the harbor of San Francisco. They were willing, he notes, to “fight the battles of the nation” if necessary, and “if the proper opportunity had come they would have done so.” In fact, Popov issued orders to his captains that, should a Confederate corsair enter the port, they were to “clear for action.” At the same time the following note was to be delivered to the captain of the hostile cruiser:

According to instructions received from his Excellency Rear-Admiral Popov, commander in chief of His Imperial Russian Majesty’s Pacific Squadron, the undersigned is directed to inform all whom it may concern, that the ships of the above mentioned squadron are bound to assist the authorities of every place where friendship is offered them, in all measures which may be deemed necessary by the local authorities, to repel any attempt against the security of the place.

In case the cruiser ignored the warning and opened fire, it was to be attacked. As Golder noted, “Russia came very near becoming our active ally.”¹⁷⁹

The Russian squadron remained at San Francisco until the late spring of 1864, when it

¹⁷⁸ *Alta*, 25, 20 November 1863.

¹⁷⁹ Golder, 808-09.

was recalled. The diplomatic situation had quieted to the point that concern for the ships' safety was no longer paramount. Likewise, the military situation for the Union was daily improving, as were relations with England and France, especially following the seizure of the Laird rams. By late February, repair work on the vessels was virtually complete, with only occasional references to Russian ships in the Mare Island daily logs thereafter. The final reference occurs on April 30, when some ordnance work was done on the *Bogatyre*. The ships left the port separately, Admiral Popov lingering until June, when the flagship steamed for Hawaii. "Our people will witness the departure of our Russian visitors with regret," noted the *Alta*, "and will look forward with pleasing anticipations of their return to our shores in the-we trust, not distant future."¹⁸⁰

The visit of the Russian fleet to the harbors of New York and San Francisco had a powerful effect on international politics and probably helped to shut down production of Confederate vessels in English and French yards, and also to stifle any further moves for Confederate recognition. In terms of moral support too, the value of this event to the Union cause cannot be questioned. In San Francisco, the citizens vied with their compatriots in New York to treat their guests in a manner unprecedented, and took gleeful joy in the sputtering responses of the disliked English and French. And at a time when San Franciscans anxiously expected the attack of a rebel cruiser, and were without the security of a powerful warship, the ships and men of the Russian Navy stood ready to move into the breach.

The arrival of the Russian warships in the waters of San Francisco bay coincided with an event also of great importance to the local inhabitants and military authorities. Only a few weeks passed before another vessel entered the Gate with a long-awaited cargo on board. Packed into the hold of the sailing ship *Aquila* was an iron-clad warship, ordered

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 810; Shipyard Logs, February-April, 1864, Box 2, NA; *Alta*, 29 June 1864.

by the navy to guard the harbor against attack from the sea. Once assembled, the monitor *Camanche* would provide, it was confidently expected, all the protection that the city required. The assistance of foreign squadrons would no longer be necessary. The strange story of the *Camanche*, a ship that came to represent the hope and pride of San Francisco, is the subject of the next and final chapter.

Chapter 5

The Odyssey of the *Camanche*

No matter how formidable the fortresses that surrounded the harbor of San Francisco, without a warship on permanent station, the defenses of the city were not considered complete. All the departmental commanders, especially General Wright, had keenly felt the lack of a floating battery to augment the inadequate and immovable guns of the forts. The presence of Confederate cruisers on the high seas and the proximity of the potentially hostile fleets of Britain and France demanded the acquisition of a formidable warship, preferably an iron-clad. And after the historic battle between the *Monitor* and the *Virginia* (a-k-a *Merrimac*) only an iron-clad of the monitor type would do.

Of all the technological wonders to have emerged from the fires of the Civil War, none has elicited the awe and fascination of John Ericsson's *Monitor*. It was not simply that the appearance of this little craft changed, for all time, the character of naval warfare, but that it did so in such a novel fashion. Plating a vessel in iron was not an uncommon practice by the beginning of the Civil War, but Ericsson's peculiar genius in solving the problems of offense and defense at sea went far beyond the simple bolting of iron plates on a wood hull, and imaginatively integrated all the technological possibilities of the time. It was this imaginative quality, this Jules Verne-like conception, that has helped create and preserve the enduring myth of the *Monitor*.

Designed to float with less than two feet of freeboard, all the living space for the crew--aside from the area in the turret--was under water. Underway, the deck was frequently awash, making the craft, in effect, a kind of submersible. And like a submarine, the boat had to be ventilated to keep the crew from suffocating. Separate steam engines, driven by two boilers, provided power for ventilation, propulsion, and for rotating the turret.

The *Monitor* was complicated, ingenious, and uncomfortable for those on board. It was also supremely well-suited to the job of defending a city's harbor. Reasonably fast and maneuverable, the monitors were designed to operate on the flat waters of bays and harbors. In their element, they were exceptionally formidable. Impervious to shot or shell, and presenting a small target, they could, with impunity, move to within point-blank range of their adversary and deliver a crushing blow with their guns, the largest then built. It was no wonder that port cities, like San Francisco, saw in the monitors the answer to their problem of attack from the sea. After the ship's debut at Hampton Roads on March 9, 1862, every Union city with a harbor wanted one.¹⁸¹

Shortly after the encounter between the *Monitor* and the *Virginia*, the California legislature, according to the *Alta California*, discussed appropriating a half of a million dollars for the construction of "a couple of monitors." The matter was dropped, however, "in consequence . . . of a rumor that the General Government was moving on the matter." No doubt the legislators had gotten word from one of their number, Senator James Ryan, who had traveled to Washington, D.C. in the fall of 1861 to press for ships to augment the Pacific Fleet. Staying long enough to see the *Monitor* for himself, Ryan was present when the government, duly impressed by little craft's performance, decided to authorize construction of additional monitors. The government at first had had grave doubts concerning the capabilities of Ericsson's novel design, but the outcome of the battle at Hampton Roads had, according to the December 1863 issue of the *Scientific American*, "triumphantly vindicated the principles of her construction."¹⁸²

The government ordered the construction of ten monitors and Ryan quickly formed a partnership with a Jersey City shipbuilder, Francis Secor, and the head of the Union Iron

¹⁸¹ "The Monitors," *The Scientific American* 9, no. 24, (December 12, 1863) : 372-73.

¹⁸² *Alta California*, 13 June 1861; "The Monitors," *Scientific American*, 373.

Works in San Francisco, Peter Donahue, in order to present a bid for the construction of one of the boats. Being the only bidder for the monitor destined for San Francisco, the newly-formed company was awarded the contract for a little under \$600,000. By mid-June of 1862, however, the people of San Francisco were still in the dark, as “nothing has been made public on the subject.”¹⁸³

That the ship--if indeed it were to be built--would be constructed on the west coast, was a matter “apparent to every reflecting mind,” according to the *Alta*. It was obvious that the dangers of a Cape Horn passage and the inevitable delay in such a voyage would preclude the boat’s construction on the Atlantic coast. As was frequently the case, the editors of the San Francisco newspaper were wrong. In fact, the firm of Ryan, Donahue, and Secor had hit upon the novel idea of building the vessel at the Secor works in Jersey City, New Jersey, and then breaking her down to send her in pieces on board a sailing ship to San Francisco. Donahue would be in charge of the re-assembly upon arrival.¹⁸⁴

The monitor designated for San Francisco’s harbor was named *Camanche*, and, as noted, was one of ten such craft authorized for the Navy. These vessels represented the second generation of monitors, the *Passaic* class. All were identical, and all differed from the original in many respects. They were larger and longer, being 200 feet in length and with a beam of 45 feet, as opposed to 173 feet and 41.5 feet for the *Monitor*. The monitors of the *Passaic* class had a more conventional, rounded hull, as opposed to the flat-sided and flat-bottomed hull of the original. The straight lines of the first monitor were in fact not part of the design, but a consequence of the need to save time in construction. These second-generation monitors were also more heavily armored, the turret employing eleven layers of one-inch iron plate, as against eight layers for the

¹⁸³ Robert Ryal Miller, “The *Camanche*: First Monitor of the Pacific,” *California Historical Society Quarterly* 45 (1966) : 113-115; *Alta*, 13 June 1862.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid*; Miller, 114.

Monitor. The turret itself was only a foot larger in diameter, 21 feet versus 20 feet, but carried much larger guns. The *Monitor* was armed with two 11-inch Dahlgren smoothbores; the monitors of the *Passaic* class were designed to mount one 15-inch gun plus one 11-inch gun, or a 150 pounder Parrott rifle. In fact, two 15-inch guns could be squeezed into the turret if desired, as this was the armament of the *Comanche*.¹⁸⁵

The turret was an ingenious affair, rotating about a fixed 12-inch shaft, and could be “keyed up” to ease the pressure on the deck ring and aid in its movement. The pilot house, unlike the original craft, was mounted on top of this shaft, and did not turn with the turret. The guns were mounted side by side and moved with the turret. Steam engines provided all the power, and two separate engines were used for propulsion. The main engines were identical to those on the *Monitor*, but the propeller was considerably larger, having a diameter of twelve feet, as opposed to nine feet.¹⁸⁶

By November, 1862, all ten monitors of the *Passaic* class were under construction. By February of the next year, however, no word had been sent to California regarding the shipping date of the *Comanche*. Therefore, on February 25 of 1863, the Adjutant-General of the State of California, W. C. Kibbe, telegraphed Secretary of War Stanton to inquire “whether the iron clad Comanche has been shipped for San Francisco.” General Wright seemed to know even less about the matter than the legislature, only learning “unofficially” that an iron-clad vessel was on the way to the coast, but not knowing the name. He was nonetheless happy to hear of the proposal to send an iron-clad to the harbor, as “the arrival of such a ship would quiet the apprehensions of the people.” On February 27, General Halleck telegraphed Kibbe and told him that “Comanche is being

¹⁸⁵ “The Monitors,” *Scientific American*, 372-73; Miller, 114. Frequently misspelled *Comanche* or *Commanche* the name in the official Navy records is always spelled *Comanche*: See *ORN*, Series II, vol. 1, Pt. 1, 50.

¹⁸⁶ “The Monitors,” *Scientific American*, 372-73.

shipped.” He did not say when, but the implication was that the vessel was already on the way. This certainly was Wright’s assumption when he wrote to Brigadier-General Lorenzo Thomas on April 30, that he was very happy to hear that the *Camanche* was “already on its way to this coast.” In fact, the disassembled monitor was still in Jersey City on April 30, 1863. The pieces of the iron-clad were subsequently stowed aboard the ship *Aquila*, which did not leave New York till the 30th of May.¹⁸⁷

Even by the standards of the time, the trip was a long one, taking just under five and one-half months. As noted in the *Alta*, “her consignees . . . as well as other citizens have felt rather uneasy at her non-arrival.” These citizens breathed easier when the *Aquila* arrived safely at San Francisco on November 10, 1863, after a dangerous and stormy trip around Cape Horn, in the middle the southern winter. “The heart of every loyal man in this city was made glad yesterday afternoon,” reported the *Alta* on November 11, “on the announcement of the first iron-clad vessel which has ever been seen in Pacific waters.” The ship quickly became an object of pride and affection, being referred to as “Our Iron-Clad.” Concern for her well-being was evidenced only a few days after the arrival of the *Aquila*, when it was suggested that the *Camanche* be assembled at North Beach, so that, “in the event of a rebel intruder running the forts on a foray,” and threatening the monitor, “she would be under the guns of Alcatraz.” It was assumed that many of the employees of the Donahue works would momentarily be employed on the craft’s speedy reconstruction. The general consternation can only be imagined when, only six days after the appearance of the *Aquila* in the protecting waters of San Francisco Bay, that vessel

¹⁸⁷ *Alta*, 12 November, 1862; Kibbe to Stanton, February 25, 1863, *OR*, Pt.2, 322; Wright to Thomas, February 21, 1863, *ibid.*, 320; Halleck to Kibbe, February 27, 1863, *ibid.*, 328; Wright to Thomas, April 30, 1863, *ibid.*, 416; Miller, 115. There is disagreement regarding the exact departure date of the *Aquila*, historian John Kemble giving a date of May 29. See John Haskell Kemble, *Camanche: Defender of the Golden Gate* (Los Angeles: Pomona College, 1964), 9.

lay at the bottom of the harbor, still moored alongside Hathaway's wharf, the *Camanche*, still in pieces, inside her hold.¹⁸⁸

"After having so successfully run the gauntlet of piratical craft, storms, accidents, etc., and reached her destined haven," reported the *Alta* on the 17th, it was unbelievable that the *Aquila* went down "so ingloriously and ignominiously within a stone's throw of our business thoroughfare." Lying along the wharf with the bow bay-wards, only about twenty-five feet of the aft part of the ship was visible. The bow, at high tide, was under about thirty-eight feet of water. Apparently, the stern had slammed repeatedly on the rocky bottom during a gale which had sprung up on Sunday night, the 15th, and which continued into the early morning hours of the 16th. By three o'clock in the morning, despite all efforts to save the vessel, the hull filled with water and she settled to the bay floor.¹⁸⁹

Other vessels were damaged in the storm, but none had sunk. The *Aquila*, noted the editors of the *Alta*, had braved the dangers of Cape Horn and escaped harm, only to be "tied up on a lee shore by stupidity." Why the ship was not anchored offshore during the storm, or run onto the mud flats when she began to leak, they could not answer. Ryan and Donahue tried to explain that they had only docked the ship after a previous storm had blown through, and had ascertained that "there was more water at Hathaway's wharf . . . than at any other wharf in the city." Being "anxious to put the *Camanche* up as soon as possible," the pilot was directed to take the ship to that dock. During the gale, every possible effort was made to save the *Aquila*, but the storm came up too suddenly and with unexpected force. Whatever the explanation, the sinking was a "calamity," moaned the *Alta*. It was not only a calamity, but "annoying, vexatious, costly," and, most of all,

¹⁸⁸ *Alta*, 11, 14 November 1863.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 17 November 1863.

“delaying.” If the monitor could be saved at all, it would not now be just a matter of weeks or months before she was plying the waters of the bay, but many, many months, perhaps a year or more. The editors of the *Alta* put it plainly and poetically:

It dashes our hopes of speedily having the *Camanche* in fighting order--fires all ready for lighting under her boilers, her big guns in order, her heavy shot and shell ready for execution; men and officers all on board, flying from the staff, smoke-stack up, pilot-house in order, turret “greased” to a turn, and everything else in condition for instant action.¹⁹⁰

Salvaging the Camanche

Initial attempts to salvage the *Camanche* involved first raising the sunken *Aquila*, and then hauling out the cargo in the normal fashion. Therefore, spars were cut away to create a clear working space, and then on November 20, two divers were sent down to inspect the bottom of the vessel. Encased in metal helmets and heavy suits, and fed air from hand-operated pumps, they were described as resembling “iron-clad warriors of olden time.” What they found was not encouraging. The keel had been ripped out from the stern to the middle of the ship, and the seams were “very open.” Nonetheless, it seemed possible that the leaks might be stopped, by placing heavy sail cloth over the openings, and then pumping out the hull. Alternatively, it was suggested that two hulks be sunk on either side of the *Aquila*, passing cables under the hull, and then pumping out the hulks, thereby raising the vessel. Yet a third plan involved raising the *Aquila* by the novel method of lowering the water by means of pumps within a coffer-dam, built entirely around the wreck. The first method, as the days went by, seemed to be the most

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

encouraging, as the hull, upon closer inspection, did not seem quite as damaged as first thought. Work therefore went forward in drawing sails under the stern, and massive steam pumps were assembled and prepared for their heavy work.¹⁹¹

By the first of December, the weather being fair and calm, three pumps, throwing powerful streams of water, were at last engaged. This first attempt proved a failure, however, as the water level was not reduced at all. Divers again sent down, more leaks were discovered and further attempts made to stop them. On the third of December, six pumps were engaged, the “sheets of water flying from the flumes resembling miniature falls of Yosemite.” Throwing out seven to eight thousand gallons per minute, the water in the hold of the *Aquila* began almost at once to fall, and success seemed to be assured. With the rising tide, however, the water began to gain on the pumps, and two more of the devices were added to the work. “It is safe to say,” wrote the reporter from the *Alta*, “that from no vessel was there ever a larger or more continuous body of water thrown than from the *Aquila* yesterday afternoon.” By the next day, however, it was evident that all this pumping was futile, as the flooding tide erased all the gains made in the previous hours. It was clear that the *Aquila* could not be raised with the monitor still inside, and that the pieces of the *Camanche* would have to be retrieved from the sunken hull where they presently lay.¹⁹²

Several local citizens submitted plans for the salvaging of the *Camanche*. One gentleman imaginatively suggested using balloons to lift the *Aquila*, which the editors of the *Alta*, not wishing to “make light of the matter,” felt was a “gaseous proposition at best.” Other suggestions were more practical, though no less imaginative. Even the Commander of a visiting Russian Squadron, Admiral Popov, offered to help, submitting

¹⁹¹ *Alta*, 19, 20, 21, 22, 24 November 1863.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 2, 4 December 1863.

his own plan to raise the *Aquila* plus the use of several experienced divers and diving equipment. But the salvage operation had now been turned over to a body of eastern contractors selected by the New York Board of Underwriters, much to the annoyance of San Franciscans: “Our own mechanics have been virtually snubbed,” griped one of the editors of the *Alta*, going on to describe these haughty easterners as phony “wise men” and “wiseacres” who “imagine that there is no talent or capacity among California mechanics to raise this vessel.” Whether or not the locals had the talent to do the job was no longer an issue for the moment, however, and work on the *Aquila* stopped while the city waited for the wrecking crew to make its long and tedious way to San Francisco.¹⁹³

Legal and money issues also stopped progress on the salvage operation. Besides some haggling among the underwriters as to the degree of liability of all the parties, the main problem had to do with the vexatious issue of the devaluation of the currency. Since the contractors had taken on the job of building, delivering, and re-building the monitor, the currency had dropped in value by some 30 per cent. As noted in the *Alta*, “the contractors would doubtless be out of pocket should they go on and finish the job.” Help from the Navy was unlikely, as the rate of technological improvement was so great that the *Camanche* was already obsolescent, and any additional funds would be more readily put into the construction of an improved version. If the additional money required to retrieve and construct the monitor were to be raised, it was evident to the prominent citizens of San Francisco that they must do it themselves, “or let the *Camanche* rust away before their eyes.” This could not be allowed to happen. “For over a year,” wrote the editors of the *Alta*, the people of San Francisco had waited anxiously for the coming of “our monitor.” The iron ship was to be their guardian against the terrors of the

¹⁹³ *Alta*, 5 December 1863, 10 January 1864; John Haskell Kemble, *Camanche, Defender of the Golden Gate*, 10; *Alta*, 7 December 1863.

Confederate Navy:

Visions of the *Alabama*, *Florida*, *Georgia*, or other pirates, have floated across our imaginations when thinking of our Monitor, and an anxious solicitude was felt for her safety. At last, through calm and storm, through the tropics' mild breezes and Cape Horn's dreaded gales, through the mild Pacific's waters the precious-freighted *Aquila* enters our harbor in safety. The balance we all know. Here she is in the mud, at the bottom of the bay, and all our fond hopes of an iron monster to defend our harbor, "in the deep bosom of the ocean buried."

In the end, the city of San Francisco did indeed come up with the money necessary to construct their iron defender, though legal and financial problems continued to plague the operation. In early January of 1864, for instance, Charles Hathaway, the owner of Hathaway's wharf, submitted a wharfage bill to the contractors for \$3,450. The contractors refused to pay, indicating that the rate charged per day was too high. It was confidently expected by the editors of the *Alta*, however, that this matter would not interfere with the work of the eastern divers, who were expected to arrive within a few days.¹⁹⁴

On January 17, 1864, the steamer *Golden City* arrived in the harbor of San Francisco. On board was the salvage crew from New York, consisting of ten professional wreckers and four divers. The crew was headed by Captain Israel Merritt. A little over a week elapsed before they began their work, but they quickly displayed a genuine ability to do the job expected of them. By the evening of January 25, the first day on the job, around thirty tons of iron plates, davits, and doors had been hauled from the hold of the *Aquila*, and lay on a barge alongside, "washed free from the slime which has accumulated on them while immersed in the foul waters of the Bay." A crowd of spectators thronged the wharf, eager to glimpse the operation of the divers, who went down in shifts, three and one-half hours at a time. Working at first through a hole cut in the after part of the deck,

¹⁹⁴ *Alta*, 12, 16 December 1863 and 16 January 1864.

intending to move forward as the work progressed, the divers skillfully attached lines through rivet-holes in the iron plates, weighing up to half a ton, after which they were hoisted out. Two men carefully operated a rotary hand pump, to force down air to the diver, “no more and no less than is required.” Working thus systematically, the *Alta* reporter had no doubt that the crew would “beyond question, succeed in their undertaking.” Added to this hopeful note was the observation that, aside from a necessary re-painting, the iron plates were “entirely uninjured.” Things were definitely looking better.¹⁹⁵

By mid-February, around two hundred and forty tons of cargo had been cleared out. The men had worked their way to the main hold, where the immense guns of the *Camanche* were stored. Captain Merritt had no plans for their immediate removal however, as it was deemed prudent to first take out the material from around the cannon, so as to prevent possible damage from the swinging of the 25-ton monsters. This was a disappointment to the citizens of San Francisco, who were in one of their cyclical states of panic, this time from the rumor of a combined Anglo-Chinese fleet, which had somehow been secured by the Confederacy and was even at that moment ready to descend upon the city. “If this be so,” warned the editors of the *Alta*, “instead of the *Wyoming* and the *Jamestown* seizing and destroying the *Alabama* at Amoy, these two vessels may be captured by the pirates.” Then San Francisco might be treated to the sight of the *Wyoming* appearing “off our port, the advance of the fleet, carrying the stars and stripes as usual, but with a rebel prize crew on board.” In order to meet this threat, could not the guns of the *Camanche*, which “could do more execution upon an invader than all the armament we have afloat,” be immediately hauled up and mounted? Again the suggestion was made to make use of the old *Independence*, anchored for years in the

¹⁹⁵ Miller, “The *Camanche*: First Monitor of the Pacific, 117; *Alta*, 29 January 1864.

Napa River, and long used as a barracks. Installed with a propeller and loaded with *Camanche's* guns, "we could laugh at hostile attempts from any and every quarter." It will be recalled that General Wright had made a similar suggestion to make use of the *Independence*, admitting at the same time that he really could not comment on the plan's practicality, as he was no sailor. It is a matter of debate as to who would have been doing the laughing had the old hulk been transformed into a floating battery, but in any case, the plan was never put into action. Captain Merritt continued his work as he believed it should be done, and the guns were among the last pieces of cargo removed from the wreck of the *Aquila*.¹⁹⁶

By the middle of March, work was progressing very satisfactorily indeed, the men hauling out up to forty tons a day. This rate greatly exceeded the contractor's initial estimate of eight tons per day, and it was now predicted that everything would be out by the end of April, at the latest. Indeed, by the end of March, fully three-fourths of all the cargo had been removed, the iron plates washed clean, and all the machinery parts polished and oiled. All parts related to the armament, such as carriages and shot and shell, were already being freighted to Mare Island aboard the yard schooner, which made a weekly trip. The guns would only be mounted after the craft was fully assembled, and officially turned over to the Navy, at Mare Island.¹⁹⁷

During April some of the heaviest items were removed, including the pilot tower, which weighed even more than the cannon. A setback occurred on the 5th, when during a gale the schooner *Potter* drifted across the wreck and threatened to become a permanent fixture. Luckily the work crew was able to break her free and this incident caused only a

¹⁹⁶ *Alta*, 19, 20 February 1864.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 12, 15, 29, 31 March 1864; Selfridge to L. Sanborn, Supt. of *Camanche*, February 6, 1864, RG 181, Misc. Letters Sent, 1862-1869, Mare Island Naval Shipyard, Vol. 1, Box 10, NA.

minor delay in the work, which included, finally, the removal of the guns. By April 26, the great cannon, weighing twenty-five tons apiece, had been hauled out. This was accomplished not without difficulty, as one gun had broken loose from its cable and rolled against its mate. The following day, according to the *Alta*, a Captain Fletcher telegraphed to the Secretary of the Navy that all the parts of the *Camanche* had been removed from the hold of the sunken *Aquila*. He was not quite right. In fact the *Camanche*'s boilers remained in the *Aquila*, and would not be taken out for another month and a half.¹⁹⁸

Once the monitor (less the boilers) had been removed, efforts commenced to at last raise the *Aquila*. Cables were passed under the hull and the vessel lifted from the bottom. This technique had not been attempted with the weight of the monitor on-board as it was thought that the hull could not stand the strain. In any case, on May 16 the *Aquila* was again afloat and was gradually worked into shallower water. A detailed inspection, found the ship to be so heavily damaged as to be beyond repair. On Saturday, July 30, 1864, the *Aquila* was auctioned off, "ship and all," for a little under \$5,000. The auctioneer, a Mr. J.O. Eldridge, who was making noted that it was the *Aquila*'s "immortal fame" to be known as the "first wooden vessel which had ever succeeded in sinking a monitor."¹⁹⁹

Resurrection and Rebirth

By the beginning of May, 1864, practically all the pieces of the *Camanche* had been

¹⁹⁸ *Alta*, 5, 7, 8, 15, 23, 26, 27 May and 15 June 1864.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 23 April, 17 May, and 31 July 1864.

hailed from the brine, washed and cleaned, and were ready for re-assembly. But once again legal and financial problems intervened and caused delay. The primary problem was still one of money. Much of the cost of the work done thus far was paid for in greenbacks, not gold, and the value of that currency continued to slide. The contractors now dug in their heels and demanded payment in gold for the work yet to be done. For \$60,000 they agreed to complete the job of assembling and launching the *Camanche*. The question was, who would pay? A month and a half passed while this question was debated, and no work was done. On July 13, in frustration, the editors of the *Alta* pointed out that dangers lurked outside the harbor, and a well-armed iron-clad was better defense than legal arguments:

Let us meet the invaders, if they should come, with a legal battery. Let us discharge Howard, and Pickering, and Gouverneur Morris at them, in the shape of grape and cannister. A demurrer, well sustained, might bar the entrance to the Golden Gate.

It turns out that this editorial salvo was not needed. Two days before, the Board of Supervisors had pledged the faith of the city for the sum of \$60,000. Work on the *Camanche* had already begun.²⁰⁰

By July 16, the keel of the *Camanche* was already laid up, and “substantial progress” was reported. Seventy-two men were already employed, and in a few days, one hundred and fifty were expected. It was noted that the New York Underwriters had commenced proceedings in the District Court, and an attachment was issued upon the “whole material.” By this time, however, the work was moving so well that only the briefest stoppage of work occurred. The project now seemed to achieve a momentum that would admit of no interference. Too many problems had been overcome to admit defeat now. San Francisco was too close to having “our monitor.” The editors of the *Alta* put it this

²⁰⁰ *Alta*, 8, 22, 24 June and 13 July 1864.

way:

The public have insisted that this much needed means of defence for our harbor must be completed; the contractors have commenced and are going with good effect, and must not be stopped. Let us have the boat, and that without delay. There has been talk enough, and all parties interested --insurers, agents, salvors and contractors--will do well to arrange their business without arresting the labor on the boat for a single hour.²⁰¹

Almost from the first day of work, anxiety was caused by the throngs of curious spectators who wandered among the workers. Not only was there danger of accident, but fear of sabotage. The contractors therefore asked that an enclosure be erected around the project, and even suggested that an entrance fee be charged, the proceeds to go not to the builders but to the Sanitary Fund. This suggestion was, in fact, taken up about a month later, and was quite successful. In the first week, \$400 was raised, and it was predicted that up to \$15,000 might be raised before the work was completed.²⁰²

By August 13, approximately 240 men were at work on the *Camanche*, and it was now estimated that “the monitor will be afloat in our harbor much sooner than we had hitherto anticipated.” A week later, 300 men were employed, and as was noted in the *Alta*, the “hammering, shouting, lifting, pulling and shifting things about generally, all at once; and the racket and confusion created are indescribable.” By late August, the hull was already being tested for water-tightness, and a week later, most of the heavy machinery was installed. “The wonder,” noted an *Alta* reporter, “is how such a mass of iron and dead weight can ever float at all.” Toward the end of September, the propeller and rudder were attached, and a few weeks later it was printed in the *Alta* that the *Camanche* “looks to our eye nearly completed.” The ways which would have to bear the immense weight of the hull had yet to be fully erected, however. But the main reason

²⁰¹ Ibid., 16, 17 July 1864.

²⁰² Ibid., 18, 20 July, 28 August, and 5 September 1864.

was concern over the depth of the water at the end of the ways. Without sufficient depth, the *Camanche*'s stern could well plough into the bottom of the bay. For this reason, the launch was scheduled to take place on November 14, when the flood tide would reach its highest point in months.²⁰³

Two days before the launching was to take place, another legal problem again threatened to delay the proceedings. A U. S. Marshall briefly took possession of the ship due to an unpaid claim of the Coast Wrecking Company of New York, in the amount of \$17,000. Peter Donahue, the San Francisco contractor, at once posted a bond (in gold) for the entire amount, and the guard withdrew. The *Camanche* was now free to enter her natural element, no longer entangled in legal snares, and only awaiting the tide.²⁰⁴

Poised on the ways, painted in white lead, the boat was a unique sight. "This strange piece of mechanism," wrote an *Alta* reporter, "this movable fortress--this monster of the deep--is the monitor *Camanche*." At last, San Francisco was to have an invincible guardian: "No danger can menace us while the strange craft now on the ways at the foot of Third Street rides the placid waters of our great inland sea."²⁰⁵

The Launch

High tide for Monday, November 14, 1864, was predicted to occur at 11:20 A.M. The launch of the *Camanche* was scheduled for 11:30. "Visitors desiring to witness this important event," warned the *Alta*, "will do well to be within the gates or in their seats . . .

²⁰³ *Alta*, 13, 19, 28 August, 5, 25 September, 9, 16 October, and 14 November 1864.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 13 November 1864.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

Nellie Maguire, a relative of Peter Donahue, broke the neck off a bottle of champagne and poured it onto the deck, where the turret was to go. The stern, lashed with empty casks to help keep that part of the vessel from ramming into the mud, entered the water with enough force to drive a wave perhaps thirty feet up the deck. Luckily, the 150 guests on-board were far enough forward to escape getting wet.²⁰⁷

State Senator John Buckley was not so lucky. Standing near the stern of the *Camanche*, he was assisting in keeping the guests within the lines designated for them. As the boat started to move, he shook the hand of the *Alta* reporter and shouted “Hurrah for the Union, we are off!” At that instant, a heavy line that had been secured to the stern, on the starboard side, gave way. This occurrence was planned, in order to sheer the vessel away from the new extension of the Third Street wharf, and preventing a heavy collision. What was not planned was that anyone would be in the way of the heavy rope, which flew backwards upon snapping and struck the Senator in the left ankle. The injury was grave, the left leg described as “shattered to pieces at the ankle.” Buckley was immediately carried to his home and, after a hurried consultation by his doctor and several surgeons, the foot was amputated later that afternoon. That evening, Peter Donahue visited the Senator, and was shocked to find that the foot had already been removed. He related that the patient was calm and had remarked that there were many more who were worse off, or who had died fighting for their country. “I lost my limb in the launching of a vessel intended to defend my country and sustain a glorious cause,” he is reported to have said, “and I have not a word of complaint to make.” Barring the onset of infection, the Senator was expected to survive, though he would be a “cripple for life.”²⁰⁸

²⁰⁷ *Alta*, 15 November 1864 and 22 December 1862.

²⁰⁸ Another version of the accident was printed in the *Alta*, alleging that the Senator’s leg became entangled in a coil of rope, which was attached to the moving *Camanche*. The

Aside from this grisly injury, the *Alta* reported that “nothing occurred to mar the success of the launch.” As the boat entered the water, the band played several airs, including, of course, The “Star Spangled Banner” and the ever popular “Battle Cry of Freedom.” Some people in small boats, who had placed themselves under the new wharf, got out just in time to escape the effects of the stern wave, which, had they remained where they were, would have caused them to have been “flattened into so many pancakes.” And just as the launch was completed, the steamer *San Rafael*, with about one thousand eager spectators on board, rounded Rincon Point. “Their disappointment, noted the *Alta* reporter, “can better be imagined than described.”²⁰⁹

Immediately after the launch, the tug *Goliath* towed the *Camanche* to the Third Street wharf, where she was secured. After hearty handshakes all round, a party of about 600 invited guests repaired to a machine shed where a Mr. Leland, owner of the Occidental Hotel, laid out “a most delicious and bountiful collation.” The wine, according to the reporter, “flowed like water,” and soon, “the flow of eloquence and wit commenced.” Mr. Ryan spoke, and so eloquently in behalf of the Union, that the editors of the *Alta* were made to “doubt whether he had ever advocated the cause of, or voted for any other man than President Lincoln in the late canvas.” He ended by thanking all the workers, “down to the humblest boy at the bellows.”²¹⁰

A Mr. Barnes made what was called a “glorious Union speech,” claiming that the launch of the *Camanche* was an event of “no ordinary significance.” In fact, San Francisco now possessed the power to settle some old scores:

Alta preferred the version of their reporter, as he was standing just a few feet away and this story was confirmed by other witnesses. Sadly, Senator Buckley only survived for a few days, succumbing to infection on the 17th. See *Alta California* 15, 18 November 1864.

²⁰⁹ Ibid, 15 November 1864.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

When this invulnerable engine of naval warfare touched the waters of the Bay of San Francisco, it spoke at once defiance to the fleets of France now engaged in the infamous work of treacherously destroying the liberties of a sister republic, and sent away up toward the dominions of John Bull the premonitory notice to prepare for the dread reckoning, the peremptory balancing of accounts which inevitably awaits the nation to which we owe more than to all other causes combined, the evils which have befallen us, and against which we have accumulated a debt of righteous hatred, which we are bound to discharge with interest in due time.

Aside from this bombastic salvo directed toward potential enemies north and south, Mr. Barnes made the more insightful point that the monitor was “a pledge of the sympathy and regard of the National Government and the people of the Atlantic States for us on the shore of the Pacific.” The *Camanche* was, in short, “a link in the chain” which bound California to the Union.²¹¹

The little monitor was, however, hardly ready to take on the navies of England and France. At this point, the boat was little more than an empty hull, and had not even been accepted as a warship by the United States Navy. Much work remained before the *Camanche* would be ready to protect the harbor and city of San Francisco. But so many difficulties had been overcome and the end seemed so near that no one doubted that the ship would soon be patrolling the waters of the bay.

Mare Island and Oblivion

The launch of the *Camanche* inaugurated the final chapter in the strange saga of this little craft. Though the builders and the navy did not know it, they were now in a race. The war was winding down and would soon be over. The question now was whether the monitor would be commissioned and plying the waters of the bay while the threat of

²¹¹ Ibid.

Confederate attack still remained.

Though launched and floating the *Camanche* was far from ready for service. The turret had yet to be mounted and the engines installed. But work proceeded quickly, and a little over a month after the launch, the heavy turret was in place and by mid-January, 1865, the engines had been installed and were being tested. The monitor was now in condition to be officially turned over to the navy. She was scheduled to steam, under her own power, to Mare Island Naval Shipyard on January 19. In the two months that the *Camanche* had sat secured to the wharf at the end of Third Street, however, a mud bar had formed toward the bow of the vessel, and “completely hemmed her in.” Repeated attempts to force the boat through the mud were unsuccessful, and the trip was postponed until the 27th of the month, when the tide would be two feet higher. The wait was not necessary. The *Camanche* bulled her way through the mud on the 21st, and steamed to the naval yard at Mare Island.²¹²

The first trip of the *Camanche* was well advertised, and many San Franciscans turned out to watch the ship leave their city. Monday, the 21st, was cold but clear, “with a sharp north wind roughening the Bay.” Despite the brisk weather, between one hundred fifty and two hundred invited guests showed up and boarded the monitor. The revenue cutter *Shubrick* was serving as escort and at 1:00 P.M. fired a gun to announce preparation for departure. At 1:30, *Camanche*'s anchor was up, and for the first time, the “mistress of the Bay of San Francisco,” began to move through the waters she was built to protect. “A slight tremulous motion,” noted the *Alta* reporter, “just perceptible and no more, was felt as the huge propeller commenced revolving.” Once fairly underway all vibration ceased, and “everything was as solid, steady, and quiet on board as on the land.” Moving slowly down the waterfront, flags flying, the *Camanche* was cheered by the crowd

²¹² *Ibid.*, 23 December 1864, and 15, 20, 22 January 1865.

assembled on the shore. Ships at anchor dipped their flags. The steamships *Golden City* and *John Stephens* each fired a salute, which was answered by the monitor's bell. Stopping briefly at the Market Street wharf, a band was brought on board by Mr. Leland, which began to play many of the same tunes rendered previously at the launching. Mr. Leland again provided lunch. The reporter noted that the "fresh air and exhilarating experience" induced a "keen appetite" among the guests, who proceeded to do "ample justice to viands and liquids in the shortest possible space of time." At 2:30, the *Camanche* passed Alcatraz and headed north toward the naval yard, "the last cheer from the crowd on the wharves dying faintly away in the distance." For most of the spectators, this would be the first and only time they would ever see their monitor in the waters off their city.²¹³

On the way to Mare Island, the *Camanche* achieved a maximum speed of around seven and one-half knots, though it was noted that the boilers were too new and untested to admit full pressure to be developed. Also, the boat was badly trimmed, the bow being three feet higher than the stern, on account of the forward magazine being empty. The craft was found to answer the helm quite well, taking only a "few seconds" to respond. The turret, as well, appeared to operate satisfactorily, and the air and water pumps were doing their job. "Taken in all," wrote the reporter, "the trial proved a grand success," and "all doubts of the perfect adaptability of the *Camanche* for the defense of our harbor . . . are now happily removed."²¹⁴

Arriving at the naval yard at around 6:30 P.M., still accompanied by the *Shubrick*, the contractors repaired to the residence of the Commandant, David McDougal--who was again in charge of the yard after a stint as captain of the *Wyoming*--and announced that

²¹³ Ibid, 22 January 1865.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

the terms of their contract were fulfilled, and that the boat was ready to be turned over to the Navy. Unfortunately, Captain McDougal had not yet received official authorization to accept the vessel, but was prepared to place a marine guard on board and take possession in the name of the government. A few days later, McDougal was sent the authorization he needed, and the Navy officially took possession of the *Camanche* on February 4, 1865.²¹⁵

While awaiting instructions from Washington, the records show that little work was done on the monitor. After the 4th, however, there was a flurry of activity. The ordnance was installed, coal was loaded, and the ship made ready for her first trial run as a warship of the U.S. Navy. The trial was set for February 10, and on that Friday, at 8:40 in the morning, the *Camanche* pulled away from the wharf at the yard, again accompanied by the *Shubrick*, and by the gunboat *Monterey*, with Captain McDougal on board.²¹⁶

The *Camanche* proceeded to enter San Pablo Bay and traveled as far as Point Pinole, during which time she was put through some basic maneuvers. The boat was found to answer the helm “admirably,” making a complete turn in five to six minutes. The guns were fired, initially with twenty pounds of powder, and no projectile. Finding no problem with the initial test, empty shells were loaded, backed by thirty-five pounds of powder. One shot was fired on the “ricochet plan” and was seen to skip on the water for two miles before sinking. No attempt was made to fire the guns using the maximum service charge of fifty pounds of powder, but a total of three loaded shells were fired. One of these shots was described by the *Alta* reporter:

Passing up the Straits of Carquinez, a fifteen inch shell was fired directly into the

²¹⁵ Shipyard Logs, 11/22/1863 to 8/19/1865, RG 181, Office of the Commandant, Mare Island Naval Shipyard, January 21, 1865, Box 3, NA, 427; *Alta*, 22 January 1865.

²¹⁶ Shipyard Logs, February 6, 7, 8, 10, 1865, Box 3, NA, 443-45, and 447; *Alta*, 11, 12 February 1865.

bank. It buried itself deeply in the earth, and exploded with tremendous force, lifting several tons of soil and rock into the air, and sending up a dense volume of smoke from the crater formed by the explosion.

At about the time that the *Camanche* was blowing holes in the shoreline, the warship was passed by the ferry boat *Martinez*, whose passengers gave three cheers, which were returned by those on board the monitor.²¹⁷

The engineer on board the monitor provided a detailed record of the day's performance to the editors of the *Alta*, and an examination of that record reveals some interesting facts regarding the operation of such nineteenth-century iron-clads. For instance, the boat never achieved a speed greater than 7.75 miles per hour, though no doubt she could have reached a higher speed had the throttle been fully opened, which it was not. In fact, the record shows that the throttle was never opened beyond three-eighths full. One and one-half hours elapsed between the time that the fires were started and steam was generated. Steam pressure in the boilers was a steady 24 pounds throughout the trip, and the boilers consumed an average of around 800 pounds of bituminous coal per hour. Other readings of a more technical nature were recorded, but, unfortunately, are difficult to decipher. In any case, "everything throughout the vessel," noted the engineer, worked "admirably."²¹⁸

At 4:30 P.M., the *Camanche* was again alongside the wharf at Mare Island. According to the *Alta* reporter, "the trial was pronounced, in all respects, entirely satisfactory." The guests were described as "well pleased" with the trip. San Francisco finally had a fully operating, armed iron-clad to protect her from the depredations of

²¹⁷ The *Alta* published two accounts of the trial trip, one by a reporter on February 11, and the engineer's report published the following day. There are several discrepancies in the accounts (for instance, the reporter states that both solid shot and shell were fired, while the engineer indicates that only shell, empty and loaded, were discharged). Where differences exist, the account of the engineer, being more detailed and likely to be inherently more accurate, is followed. See *Alta California*, 11, 12 February 1865.

²¹⁸ *Alta*, 12 February 1865.

Confederate cruisers and the fleets of hostile nations. All that was now needed was a crew.²¹⁹

Late in February, Captain McDougal received orders from the Secretary of the Navy to place either the *Camanche* or the *Saginaw* in service as a revenue cutter. As far as the monitor was concerned, the Commandant was unable to comply, as the former vessel was “without crew or the necessary officers.” Apparently feeling embarrassed and pressured, he quickly set about assembling a complement of men and officers, and on March 2, 1865, reported to General McDowell that a “portion” was now on board the *Camanche*. On March 10, he appointed his son, Charles, to the vessel’s command. Three days later he wired Secretary Welles, requesting permission to proceed with the commissioning of the iron-clad. Having problems forming a crew, on the thirteenth of the month he wrote to the Governor, requesting a state bounty to induce the enlistment of seamen. He added that the commander and some of the officers were already assigned to the *Camanche*, and that he was “daily expecting orders to put her in commission.”²²⁰

These orders never came. No doubt the attention of the Secretary, along with the rest of the government officers, was focused on the events rapidly unfolding in the east. Via the telegraph, those events were as quickly known in California as anywhere else in the country. The inauguration of the President, on March 4, was duly recognized at the naval yard, a 36-gun salute being fired in honor of the event. This was followed on April 5 by a “national salute” to commemorate the capture of Richmond. Six days later, a 100-gun salute boomed out over the island, “in honor of the capture of the rebel General Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia.” Amidst the general rejoicing of the collapse of the

²¹⁹ Shipyard Logs, February 10, 1865, 447. *Alta*, 11 February 1865.

²²⁰ McDougal to Charles James, Collector of the Port of San Francisco, RG 181, Misc. Letters Sent, 1862-69, February 25, 1865, Mare Island Naval Shipyard, Box 10, vol. 1; McDougal to McDowell, Misc. Letters, March 2, 1865; Shipyard Logs, March 10, 1865, 475; McDougal to Governor of California, Misc. Letters, March 18, 1865.

Confederacy came the mournful news of Lincoln's assassination, again, via the telegraph. On Sunday the 16th of April, a day "clear and pleasant," the guns of Mare Island boomed at intervals of every half hour, from sunrise to sunset. All work at the yard ceased until the following Thursday.²²¹

The Civil War was over, and though potential enemies still existed to the north and south, the removal of the thorn of the Confederacy seemed to soften even the image of these dangers. Interest in the *Camanche* fairly evaporated. Since her departure from the shores of San Francisco, hardly a mention was made of "our monitor" in the pages of the *Alta California*. And at Mare Island, the commandant still without orders for the vessel's commissioning, work proceeded in a desultory fashion. For the most part, the records show the workmen making hammocks for the crew, an awning for the turret, and for some reason, painting cloth bags.²²²

Work on the *Camanche* virtually ceased during the months of May and June, and part of July. Yard personnel were otherwise engaged, working to repair the French troop-ship *Rhin*, which had been damaged in a gale. The fact that the U.S. Navy was making its facilities available to the French fleet, which was operating in support of Napoleon III's forces in Mexico, was, as General McDowell pointed out in a wire to Stanton, a "subject . . . of deep interest to the entire coast and the cause of much feeling." It also caused something of an international incident, the Mexican Consul in San Francisco pleading with the general not to allow the French vessel to refit at that port. On April 7, the Consul, Jose Godoy wrote to McDowell that "My object is to beg you,

in the name of Mexico, whose nationality is in danger, for the justice which is due her, not allowing in this harbor, where the Republic reckons on so much sympathy, the French war ships to provide themselves with articles with which they are going to

²²¹ Shipyard Logs, March 4, April 5, 11, and 16, 1865, 469, 501, 507, 512.

²²² *Ibid.*, March through May, 1865.

continue the work of destruction which the soldiers of Napoleon have undertaken. Sympathetic, but unable to act on his own, McDowell wired Stanton for direction. Stanton replied simply that he was to provide the “usual courtesies” to the French vessels. On April 8, McDowell wrote Godoy that he regretted that he was “not authorized to take any steps to comply with your request.” Thus, work on the *Camanche*, whose task it was to protect San Francisco from potential adversaries, which included the French, stopped while a French vessel was repaired.²²³

In late July, work picked up on the *Camanche*, and by mid-August, McDougal, having still received no orders for her commissioning, took the bit in his teeth and on his own authority ordered the monitor into commission on August 22, 1865. In so doing, he respectfully noted that he hoped he “anticipated the wishes of the Department.” He also noted that, since her arrival in January, the *Camanche* had remained at the yard. He also made the suggestion that the monitor be stationed at San Francisco during the summer months, and at the yard in the winter.²²⁴

The *Official Records* report that the *Camanche* was commissioned on May 24, 1865. This date is clearly incorrect, though, as Robert Miller has observed, daily log entries did begin as of this date. Further evidence is found in the Mare Island Daily Logs, which show that Captain Charles McDougal was detached from duty on the *Camanche* on May 10, in order to take temporary command of the *Saginaw*. He did not re-assume command till June 2. Thus, on May 24, there was no commander on board the *Camanche*.²²⁵

The race to place the *Camanche* on station before the end of the war clearly had been

²²³ Shipyard Logs, May-July, 1865; McDowell to Stanton, April 6, 1865, *OR*, Pt.2, 181; Godoy to McDowell, April 7, 1865, *ibid.*, 1190; McDowell to Godoy, April 8, 1865, *ibid.*, 1192.

²²⁴ Letters Sent to the Secretary of the Navy, 1863-1907, RG 181, Mare Island Naval Shipyard, August 22, 1865, Box 1, Vol. 2, NA, 269.

²²⁵ *OR*, Series II, vol. 1, 50; Miller, “The *Camanche*,” 121; Daily Logs, May 10 and June 2, 1865, 536, 559.

lost. Not only that, yard records show that the monitor never moved from its berth at Mare Island from the time of the first trial run in February until the second run on September 25. Even the panic that had gripped the city of San Francisco in July and early August, with the arrival of the whalers *Milo* and *General Pike*, failed to generate any outcry by the citizens or authorities to place their iron guardian in a place where it might do some good. Incredibly, at the moment when attack by a Confederate cruiser became a near-reality, the only sure means of defense was ignored. Captain Waddell of the *Shenandoah*, had he decided to go ahead with his plan to attack San Francisco, would only have had, initially at least, the fortress guns to contend with.²²⁶

Shenandoah versus Camanche

Since such an event never happened, a description of an encounter between the Confederate raider *Shenandoah* and the monitor *Camanche* is completely speculative. But speculation, combined with known facts, can lead to an appreciation of probable outcomes. If after all the build-up to just such a possibility, it will not be considered amiss if an exercise in imagination is indulged.

A close reading of Waddell's log reveals that he was near San Francisco around the end of July or the beginning of August, and would therefore have entered the Gate around that time. Kemble, in his short work on the monitor, asserts that, had the *Shenandoah* entered the bay, "there is every reason to believe that *Camanche* would have finished her off." This assumption pre-supposes that the monitor would have been in a position to

²²⁶ Shipyard Logs, 8/20/1865 to 5/11/1867, RG 181, M.I.N.S.Y., September 25, 1865, Box 4, 39.

engage, but at that time, of course, the *Camanche* was still at Mare Island and had not been commissioned, so would not have been anywhere near San Francisco when the *Shenandoah* made its appearance. This fact presents a serious defect in Waddell's plan, which was to ram the iron-clad, quickly overpower the crew, and take possession of the vessel. "E'er daylight came," he wrote, "both batteries could have been sprung on the city and my demands enforced." His plan was bold, but he did not calculate it as too risky. He knew Charles McDougal personally, the two having served together on the *Saginaw*. The Confederate captain did not think much of his potential adversary. He was, he said, "fond of his ease."²²⁷

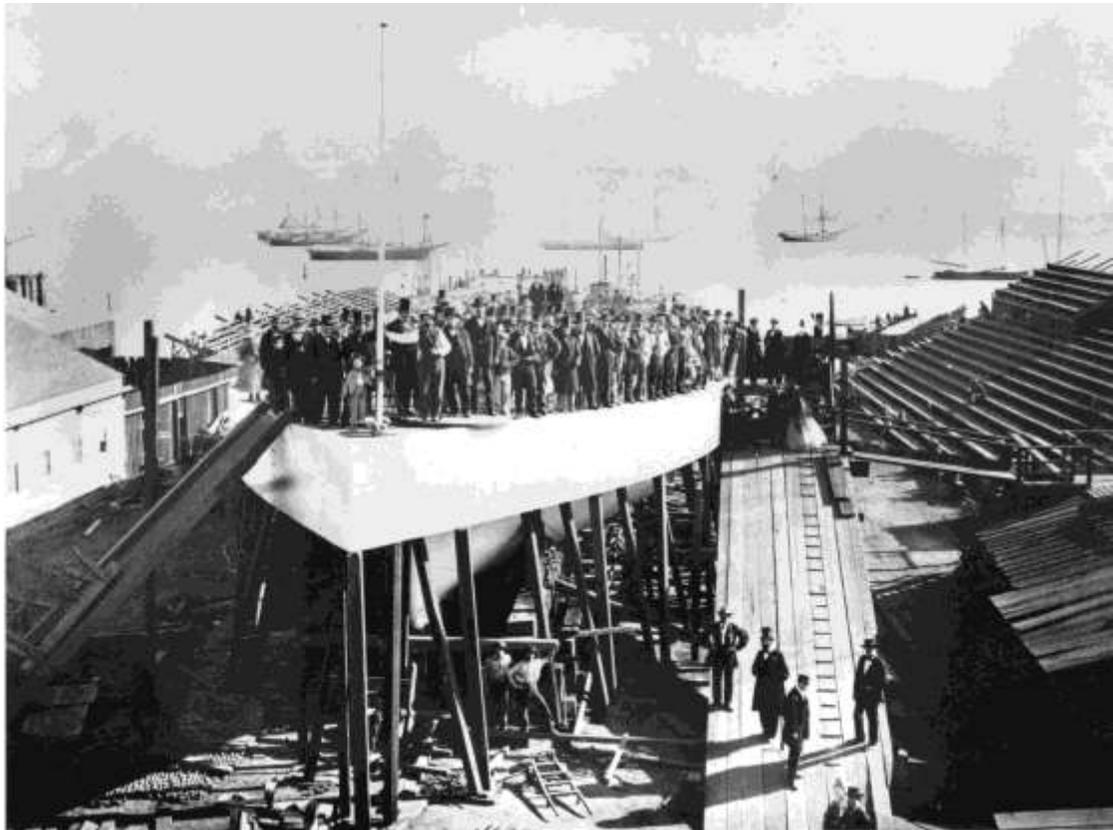
Since the *Camanche* was not on station as expected, Waddell could possibly have gotten past the forts in the bay and may have chosen to position his vessel off Rincon Point, just as Colonel De Russy, and Generals Wright and McDowell had warned. There he could have threatened the city, but not for long. Word would quickly have gotten to Mare Island, and the *Camanche* would have steamed out as soon as able, certainly in a matter of hours, or, at most, a day or two. Waddell was bold, but he was no fool, and at the approach of the iron-clad, the element of surprise gone, he would have beat a hasty retreat, possibly lobbing a few shells in the direction of the city for good measure. With the forts fully alarmed, however, his chances for escape would have been problematic. The *Shenandoah* could well have ended up at the bottom of the bay. Whatever might have happened, there would have been material for stories for decades to come, and the histories of the forts, and of the *Camanche* would be better known than they are today.

As it is, nothing, no physical artifact, as far as is known, remains to remind San Franciscans of the importance once attached to their little warship, and the memory of its presence has evaporated. Perhaps the rapid pace of technological change, already evident

²²⁷ Waddell, *Memoirs*, 175; Kemble, *Camanche*, 12.

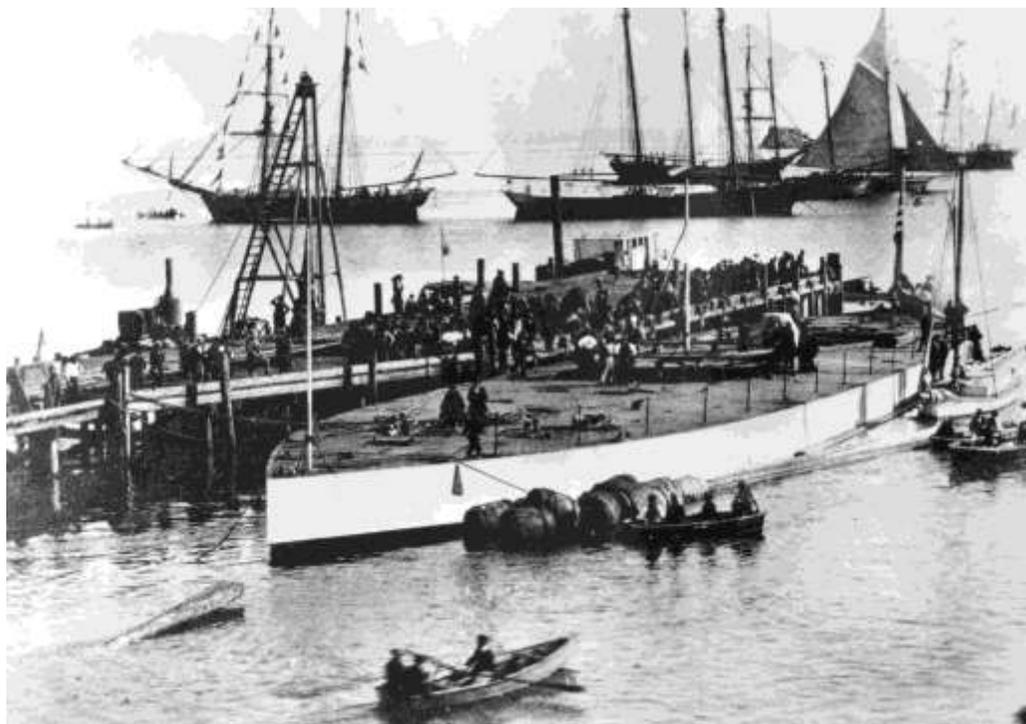
by the middle of the nineteenth century, is partly to blame. In a surprising flash of insight the *Alta* reporter covering the launch noted that time had already moved beyond the *Camanche*: “It is the realization of a modern idea not yet four years old, but in this headlong epoch, now almost an ancient craft.” Hardly had the guardian’s hull touched the water when the eyes of the city were moving on.²²⁸

As far as the legacy of the *Camanche* is concerned, perhaps the bombastic Mr. Barnes, who spoke on the occasion of the vessel’s launch, said it best. Like the telegraph and the railroad, the *Camanche* was just one more link in the chain which bound California to the Union.



Camanche, the day of the launch. Photo, courtesy National Maritime Museum Library, S.F.

²²⁸ *Alta*, 13 November 1864.



Camanche after the launch. Preparing to install turret.



Camanche in drydock at Mare Island, ca. 1890. Photos courtesy National Maritime Museum Library, S.F.

Conclusion

On the fourth of July, 1876, the country celebrated the one-hundredth year of its birth. All around the nation there were grand celebrations. In San Francisco the occasion was deemed sufficiently important that one day was not enough to give the honor it was due. The birthday was celebrated on both the 3rd and the 4th. In fact, the major event, a glorious military bombardment, employing the guns of the bay forts, and the guns of three naval vessels in the harbor, was scheduled for the 3rd. At 11:30 A.M. the city was to be treated to the spectacle of a sham naval battle. After all the years of planning, building, arming, and agonizing over the potential sea-borne threat to the city, the question of just what might happen in a real encounter was about to be answered. For the first and only time, the guns of fortress San Francisco would boom in chorus, and the effect of that symphony of shot would be witnessed by the population of the entire bay area. Thousands of spectators thronged the Presidio, the hills and beaches around the bay, and occupied front-row seats on small boats anchored off the city front.²²⁹

The morning of July 3rd opened to a city “overhung with a dark wide-spreading fog.” As the sun rose, the wind picked up, and the weather was described as “raw and chilly.” By 7 A.M. the downtown streets were jammed with people, trying to beat the crowds to the Presidio, where the best viewing was to be had. “Cars, carriages and horses were gaily decked with flags,” noted the *Alta* reporter, and “men wore miniature flags and rosettes on their hats, and fair maidens were decked with long streamers of ribbons in the red, white and blue.” Buildings were draped with bunting, “richly caparisoned steeds” dashed about, and little boys added to the colorful and noisy chaos with their own

²²⁹ *Alta California*, 3, 5 July 1876.

fireworks. Everyone was looking forward to the bombardment on the bay, and expectations were high.²³⁰

The most prominent target was a “mock monitor,” in actuality an old hay scow, loaded with flammable materials and anchored “in a line between Alcatraz and Lime Point.” A diamond-shaped target, twelve feet wide and fifteen feet high, was set upon the deck of the scow, to imitate the appearance of a monitor. Prudently, tugs were stationed nearby to drag the craft away should it break loose after being set afire. Three warships, the *Pensacola*, the *Portsmouth*, and the *Jamestown*, were to fire their guns at this target from a distance of about 2,500 yards. The fortress guns of Alcatraz and Fort Point were to fire at a painted rock just off Lime Point. The guns at Point Knox on Angel Island were to fire at Peninsular Point, to the right of Lime Point, and the cannon at Black Point were to fire blanks, “so as not to imperil the vessels that would crowd into that part of the bay.”²³¹

All eyes were trained on the scow, which was expected to burst into flame soon after the cannonade began. At 11:35, the firing commenced, and continued for close to two hours. When the smoke finally cleared away, the scow was, to all appearances, untouched and unruffled. Out of well over 100 shots fired by the three ships, none was seen to have struck the target. “Each particular shot was expected to demolish the target,” wrote a reporter in dismay, but “strange to say, nothing but spurts of water arising from all sides of the target . . . were visible.” The *Pensacola* seemed to “throw her ammunition in every direction,” while the shooting from the *Portsmouth* was even worse, most of the balls falling into the water halfway to the target. The *Jamestown*, with its last few shots, managed to reach the scow, but did no damage. Finally, in frustration, the

²³⁰ *Alta*, 5 July 1876.

²³¹ *Alta*, 5, 8 July 1876.

scow was deliberately set afire, the incident being described in the *San Francisco Chronicle* of July 4: “The Navy, having failed in their direct attack, had recourse to strategy, and under cover of a tremendous bombardment with blank cartridges, a tug-boat sneaked out to the victorious mud-scow and set her afire.”²³²

The shooting from the guns at Fort Point and Alcatraz was not all that bad. According to the *Alta*, of twelve shots hurled from the Fort Point battery, five hit the target and six were close. Even the 15-inch Rodmans, firing from Alcatraz over a distance of three miles, managed to score a few hits. The *Alta* editors took pains to explain to disappointed spectators that this distance represented the extreme range for these guns, and accuracy dropped off considerably after two miles. The time of flight from Alcatraz to Lime Point was fully seventeen seconds, and during that time the gusty winds blowing in the Gate clearly affected the accuracy of the shots. Two of the big Rodmans on the island were actually fired at the floating target, once the ships had expended their ammunition. A solid shot struck so close as to be considered by spectators a hit, while a shell unfortunately exploded prematurely. At this point, the day’s allotment of ammunition was expended.²³³

What seemed apparent to the onlookers was that, even under controlled conditions, and against an unarmed, tethered adversary, the harbor defenses had proved fairly hopeless. The *Chronicle* reporter believed that the display represented a “complete verification in the present defenseless condition of the harbor of San Francisco.” The big smoothbores were powerful, but ineffective and inaccurate at long ranges. The few rifled guns available were prone to burst, and so virtually unusable. “The five fifteen-inch guns

²³² *Alta*, 5 July 1876; *San Francisco Chronicle*, 4 July 1876.

²³³ *Alta*, 8, 5 July 1876; *Chronicle*, 4 July 1876. The actual number of shots fired is unclear. The *Alta* reported 120 rounds fired by all three ships while the *Chronicle* reported 132 shots fired by the *Pensacola* alone, the other ships firing “thirty or forty” rounds. See *Alta* 5 July 1876 and *Chronicle* 4 July 1876.

and the one seven-inch rifled gun,” complained the reporter, “together with a score of smoothbore columbiads and howitzers of no use whatever, go to make up the artillery armament of Alcatraz.” The armament of Angel Island amounted to “nothing,” and “a visit to Fort Point . . . is enough to disgust the most lenient critic.” Even given a “month’s notice,” he said, it was evident that “the city would be at the mercy of one or two well-appointed ironclads.” An old, familiar argument took shape when the reporter described the likely scenario following the appearance of an enemy vessel:

Once outside the bar she would take advantage of the fog and a flood tide to steam through the channel past the batteries at Fort Point . . . and thence by skillful maneuvering dodge the fifteen-inch guns of Alcatraz and pass Black Point with impunity, anchoring off the lee of Goat Island without a scratch. A single shot from that long deck turret gun would soon bring down to the wharves the Mayor and all the property-holders with all the money that was in the place, and after raising the deuce for a few days could weigh anchor and be off.

Eleven years after the end of the Civil War, this reporter’s sentiment echoes exactly the concerns of General Wright, Colonel De Russy, and General McDowell.²³⁴

The reporter from the *Oakland Tribune* was equally critical, noting that during the bombardment, “the descendants of the Revolutionary gunners who were a terror to the British were not on hand.” The whole display, he said, was “discreditable,” and showed that “a modern ironclad could enter the bay and destroy the city in spite of anything our forts could do to prevent it.”²³⁵

In its defense, the Navy pointed out that the range was too great for its ship-board guns, and the wind, which was strong and gusty, was blowing across the line of fire. In addition, according to the *Alta*, the men had had little practice, the powder was defective, and the fuses, as usual, burned erratically. The problem with these excuses, of course, was that none of these conditions were unusual. The wind blowing through the Gate was

²³⁴ *Chronicle*, 9 July 1876.

²³⁵ *Oakland Tribune*, 6 July 1876.

almost always strong and gusty; the men never had enough ammunition to train adequately; and gunpowder and fuses, lying around, inevitably aged and became defective. The 4th of July celebration, on San Francisco Bay, held on July 3, 1876, was, in fact, a fairly telling indicator of just what might have happened if the city of San Francisco had been attacked from the sea during the Civil War.²³⁶

De Russy, Wright, and McDowell were of course right when they complained to Washington of the harbor's inadequate defenses and of the need for a third line of defense. And as Col. De Russy had so often pointed out, rifled cannon were a necessity; the harbor was too large and the distances between fortified points too great for the abilities of even the largest smoothbores to handle. A single cruiser could, with prudent maneuvering, evade the fire of the fortress guns and, with relative impunity, attack either the city or the navy yard at Mare Island. Floating batteries, such as an armed, but anchored, *Independence*, would not have solved the problem, as the performance of the three anchored naval vessels showed. A mobile, armored gun platform, like the *Camanche*, actually made a lot of sense, overcoming most of the deficiencies of the fixed emplacements at relatively little cost. To be of any use, of course, the craft had to be manned and available for almost instant duty.

The *Tribune* reporter predicted that the embarrassing display of gunnery would have the "salutary effect" of drawing attention to the need for "training and practice." Also, the military authorities would be made aware of the need for improved harbor defenses. In this hope, both he and the city of San Francisco were disappointed. Congress had cut off funds for the country's fortifications. In fact, work on the existing fortresses had already ceased. Alcatraz was well on its way to becoming the prison that one now associates with the island, and the masonry fort at Fort Point was already recognized as

²³⁶ *Alta*, 5 July 1876.

dangerously obsolete. While new fortifications would be authorized in the late nineteenth century, the existing forts were already a part of history.²³⁷

Also a part of history was the monitor *Camanche*. The armored defender of the bay played no part in the centennial celebration. The craft was already mothballed. With the general demobilization and budget cuts following the end of the war, the *Camanche* was decommissioned on September 3, 1866, after only a year of official service. The boat remained, for the most part, anchored in the Napa River, alongside the Navy Yard, hauled out every now and then to clean the barnacles from the hull. The aging iron-clad was finally sold on February 15, 1899, to J. P. Bercovich & Livingston for use as a coal barge. The price was \$6,581.25.²³⁸

In August of 1914, the German cruiser *Leipzig* entered San Francisco bay, in need of coal. This warship of the Kaiser's navy was fueled by the coal barge *Camanche*. The encounter is described in the *Coast Seamen's Journal* of August 26, 1914:

The past and the present in the development in fighting sea craft were uniquely associated the other day in San Francisco bay when the coal barge *Camanche* lay alongside the German cruiser *Leipzig* and replenished the empty bunkers of the Kaiser's craft. Thousands of commuters and others attracted to the water front witnessed the sight, but few if any grasped the real significance of the situation. But there are many pioneers in San Francisco and California who remember the *Camanche* in the days when she was a fighting craft of much greater prowess in her time than the *Leipzig* ranks today among the world's craft.

The aging coal barge *Camanche* plodded on through the years, performing her prosaic duty. "As late as 1947," reports author John Kemble, "she was still afloat on San Francisco Bay, owned by the King Coal Co."²³⁹

One might argue that because the bay of San Francisco was never actually entered by a hostile vessel (unless one counts the *Chapman* in this category), no fortifications were

²³⁷ *Tribune*, 6 July 1876; Martini, *Fortress Alcatraz*, 73-76.

²³⁸ Miller, 122; *OR*, Ser. I, vol. 2, 50.

²³⁹ *Coast Seamen's Journal*, August 26, 1914; Kemble, 12.

needed at all. A great deal of labor and expense could have been avoided, since the dangers threatening the city were largely the product of overwrought imaginations (as military scares frequently are). This argument, of course, ignores political reality. California, and its principal harbor were simply too valuable to the Union war effort to ignore. Whether or not the Washington authorities believed that a substantial threat existed to the city and the Pacific Coast, an effort had to be made, insofar as possible, to treat San Francisco as the great and growing city that it was. As a city of importance, respect had to be shown, and that respect was manifested in the form of defenses and the visible appearance of guns and troops. The hundreds of thousands of dollars spent on constructing the forts, the guns sent to arm those forts, the ships of the Pacific Squadron that steamed in and out of the harbor, and the monitor, ferried at great expense in the hull of the *Aquila*, all were symbolic of the importance that Washington attached to California's participation in the Union cause. All were visible and tangible links that bound California ever closer to the greater whole.

Of course, Washington *did* believe that a substantial Confederate threat existed on the Pacific coast. From the earliest days of the war, rumors, both real and exaggerated, flew about, concerning rebel plots in the Southwest, in Mexico, in the many countries of Central and South America, in the northwest, in Los Angeles, and in San Francisco itself. Again and again, letters addressed to the Commodore of the Pacific Fleet spoke of the danger to the mail steamers and their precious supplies of gold. The harried ship captains wore out their vessels trying to respond to the incessant pleas for the security of a warship. Some of these calls were in response to no real danger, of course. Nonetheless, real danger existed.

At bottom, the fundamental problem facing the Confederate naval authorities was that of breaking the Federal naval blockade of Southern ports. The blockade, Secretary

Mallory understood quite well, was only legitimate if it was effective. A blockade shown to be ineffective in stopping Confederate commerce would carry more weight in European capitals, as far as raising the South's legal status, in terms of international law, from that of belligerent to full-fledged statehood, than almost any victory achieved on the battlefield. It is an ironic fact that, no matter how often General Lee trounced his opponents and made the Federal war effort in the east appear impotent, foreign recognition on that account alone could not be secured. It was evident to the savvy politicians in London that, however brilliant the Confederate military chieftains on land, the naval blockade of Southern trade was every day growing tighter. A state incapable of carrying on trade was not deserving of the name. It was for this reason that Secretary Mallory pleaded again and again for "ironclads, ironclads, ironclads!" Only armored warships could succeed in breaking the choke-hold on the Confederacy. Credit for the frustration of Mallory's intentions must go to the unflagging efforts of U. S. ambassadors in Europe, in particular to Charles Francis Adams, in London.²⁴⁰

The frustration of Mallory's plan to secure a fleet of ironclads naturally led both the Secretary and his agent in England to seek an alternative strategy, utilizing the proven success of the cruisers. Mallory envisioned a "fleet of *Alabamas*" that could range over the world's oceans, practicing "naval light infantry" tactics in order to attack profitable targets at will. As the war progressed, closing off potential fields for action, both Mallory and Bulloch came to see the Pacific as an attractive theater for their activity. Here too, they were frustrated by their increasing inability to secure ships and material. Ironically, it was the very success of their enterprises which led to the attention of federal agents and the consequent application of pressure on London by the government at Washington.

²⁴⁰ Merli, *Great Britain and The Confederate Navy*, 134-36; Bulloch, *Secret Service*, 62; Mallory to Bulloch, June 8, 1863, *ORN*, II, 2, 435.

Thus, one door after another was shut to the Confederacy. In order to get additional vessels to sea, novel approaches had to be found. Following the dispatch of the *Shenandoah*, for instance, Bulloch found that it was now virtually impossible to get even merchant vessels for his service. “Strange to say,” he wrote to the Confederate secretary in December 1864, “the path of success is the path to be avoided.”²⁴¹

It can be argued that the Confederacy would have been better served to have been more energetic in its efforts to secure California’s allegiance, or at least neutrality, to the Confederate cause. Had a strong military force been thrown into the Southwest early on, the route through Mexico to the Pacific coast might have given the South a Pacific port. Had Mallory put into practice his “naval light infantry” tactics early in the war, and seriously threatened Pacific commerce, he might have, at least, drawn forces away from the Atlantic blockade. The federal authorities might have been able to shrug off the destruction of its commerce on the high seas, but they could not have ignored the threat to the shipments of California gold. That gold, if taken by Confederate cruisers, would also have gone a long way to purchase more ships for the Confederate Navy.

The efforts of the California authorities and the commanders of the Department of the Pacific were also instrumental in frustrating Confederate designs. The military presence and the visible work on San Francisco’s harbor defenses tended to drive secessionist activity into clandestine and increasingly desperate avenues. The vigilance of Unionists and the ineptitude of Confederate agents also contributed to the frustration of secessionist plans, and naturally tended to cement popular enthusiasm to the Union cause.

California, at the beginning of the Civil War, was an unknown quantity. Its loyalty to the Union, despite some historians’ assertions that there was never any danger of California’s defection to the Confederacy, or becoming an independent republic, appears

²⁴¹ Bulloch to Mallory, December 16, 1864, *Ibid.*, 778.

to have been uncertain. Its distance from its sister states, both geographically and temporally, and its diverse and largely male population, made it inherently unpredictable and unstable. An atmosphere of uncertainty and anxiety therefore pervaded the actions of Union authorities and it is this atmosphere that must be understood in order to appreciate the actions of those authorities and of the people of San Francisco. The fear of Confederate attack was real. The threat of Confederate attack, though exaggerated, was also real, and the military officers in whose care the city and state were placed took that threat very seriously. Fortunately, California was already a Union state, and the shared experiences of the war forged a growing sense of bond to the Union. The fortresses in San Francisco bay were a visible reminder of the presence of the federal government and symbolic of that port's importance to the Union cause. This was a fact not lost on San Franciscans and the people of the state. Each gun emplaced, each brick cemented into a parapet served to link, like telegraph wires and railroad ties, the city of San Francisco and the state of California to the Union. Along with the stories of the forts were the stories of the visit of the Russian squadron and the monitor *Camanche*, which threaded together to form the larger story of San Francisco's response to the Confederate maritime threat during the Civil War. That story was part of the fabric of California's Civil War experience. By the war's end, partly because of that experience, there was no doubt of California's loyalty and of its future in an indissoluble Union.

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