

THE MOBILE CAMPAIGN: JULY - AUGUST 1864

(John Mason)

At 3:00 a.m., August 5, 1864, Admiral David G. Farragut arose after a poor night's sleep. Already concerned that his fleet might not be able to meet its goal of forcing an early morning entry into Mobile Bay, it now appeared that even the weather had turned against him. Evening thunderstorms and rough seas posed potentially new problems for an attacking fleet. While dressing, he sent his aide topside to assess the morning situation. The aide returned to report that the skies had cleared and there was now a light, southwesterly breeze blowing across the calm waters of the Gulf of Mexico. Providence had smiled. Conditions could not have been better.

At 5:30 a.m., still sipping his morning coffee, Farragut turned to his Fleet Captain, Percival Drayton, and gave the classic, understated order: "Well, Drayton, we might as well get underway."¹ With that, the eighteen vessels of the Gulf Squadron filed into position and steered toward the Sand Island Channel. The Battle of Mobile Bay, the last major naval engagement of the American Civil War, had begun.

Closing Confederate ports was a Union goal ordered by President Abraham Lincoln on Friday, April 19, 1861. Because of its key location on the Gulf, Mobile became a major port in that scheme. George McClellan advanced a grandiose plan that would result in the capture of Mobile², but the ultimate blockade plan was formulated by aging General of the Armies Winfield Scott.

A Virginian by birth, Scott believed that the majority of Southerners had been misled by the firebrands. He believed that if they felt the dull reality of war without being pricked in their hot-blooded pride by the bayonet of a penetrating army, they would return voluntarily to the Union.³ From this evolved the Anaconda Plan.

Like its namesake, the plan was envisioned to envelop the South in the coils of a strict naval blockade, and then squeeze the life out of the rebellion. Down the eastern seaboard from Chesapeake Bay to the Florida Keys, and across the Gulf Coast from the Keys to Matamoros, his deep water blockade was intended to cut the South off from its European trading partners. Finally, he intended to take the force called for by McClellan and send them down the Mississippi River to cut the Confederacy off from its Texas breadbasket and any goods supplied through Mexico.

There were several small problems with this planned blockade that Union Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles was quick to point out. First, formally proclaiming a blockade would give national status to the Confederacy and make their recognition by European powers more likely. Second, and of infinitely more importance to Welles, it would be nearly impossible for his 90 vessels to guard some 3549 miles of enemy coastline.⁴ Nevertheless, the blockade remained in effect, and many southern seaports, like Mobile, remained in Confederate control until the last year of the war.

The Confederacy recognized the threat of blockade and countered with an ambitious plan to create a navy of ironclads. A major ironclad shipyard was established at Selma, Alabama in May 1862, and construction was begun on three vessels - the *Tennessee* and two floating batteries, *Huntsville* and *Tuscaloosa*.⁵ In August, additional shipyards were established nearby, and by the end of the month, seven ironclads were either under construction or being laid down.⁶

In April, 1862, New Orleans fell and Mobile became the last major Southern port on the Gulf Coast still under Confederate control. Farragut, newly promoted to Rear Admiral, began to prepare his plans for its capture. He believed that a quick,

concentrated attack by his entire fleet could force an entrance to the bay with limited casualties.

Farragut began to push for troops and ships to implement his plan, but actions elsewhere took priority. McClellan's Peninsular Campaign had gone badly, and Secretary Welles refused to release any ships from the James River Squadron to reinforce the Gulf Squadron. At the same time, Major General Benjamin Butler, army commander at New Orleans, refused to release the troops necessary to occupy Forts Morgan, Gaines, and Powell.⁷ Finally, Welles wrote Farragut "that an adequate naval force should be maintained in the Lower Mississippi, especially at New Orleans. That city must be held and our small army there must receive all necessary support from the Navy."⁸

In spite of this, Farragut continued to press for an attack. Besides the advantages additional time would give the Confederates to develop their defenses, he realized that Mobile Bay had to be occupied if blockade running was to be eliminated. With most of their other ports being closed, the Confederacy was concentrating its blockade runners in Mobile, Wilmington, and Charleston, where their operations continued to be successful. According to statistics kept by the British consuls in Mobile, 208 runners successfully eluded the blockade and entered the port there.⁹ This number probably does not include all of the smaller vessels that entered the bay across the shallow coastal flats, nor violations during slow periods when blockade running attracted little attention.¹⁰

In November, President Lincoln sent Major General Nathaniel Banks to New Orleans to relieve Butler. Farragut hoped the new commander would endorse his plan, but found him no better than his predecessor. The attack plan was shelved, and no further

Federal action toward Mobile, other than the ineffective deep water blockade, would be instituted until summer, 1864.

While Farragut waited for support in New Orleans, Confederate Admiral Franklin Buchanan concentrated on strengthening his position in Mobile Bay. Promoted on August 19, 1862, he had been given command of all naval forces in Mobile by Confederate Secretary of the Navy Mallory.¹¹ Although relations with his army counterpart were not, at first, productive, and resources were scarce, Buchanan forged ahead.

The arrival of Major General Dabney Maury in April¹² proved beneficial. The two men formed a working partnership with the single goal to keep Mobile open and functioning. In addition to standard means, they began to study the possibility of using some of the newer technology like torpedoes and submarines to augment their meager forces.

To best understand how their defenses would be employed, one must examine the geography of Mobile Bay itself. Approximately 30 miles long, it varies in width from 15 miles at the lower end to six miles at the upper.¹³ Ships entering the bay used the Main Shipping Channel which angles northeasterly from the Gulf of Mexico and closely skirts Mobile Point, a long sandy projection from the eastern mainland (see Figure 1¹⁴). To the west lies Dauphin Island. The Main Shipping Channel runs about 300 yards from Mobile Point and about three miles from Dauphin Island. A second channel, Grant's Pass, runs along the northern shore of Dauphin Island.¹⁵ Three forts protected the entrance to the bay - Morgan on Mobile Point, Gaines on Dauphin Island, and Powell in Grant's Pass.

Morgan, completed in 1834 and named after Revolutionary War hero Daniel Morgan, guarded the Main Shipping Channel and represented the greatest threat to the Union.

Commanded by Brig. Gen. Richard L. Page (also a Commander in the Confederate Navy), and staffed with 640 officers and men, Fort Morgan was:

A pentagonal bastioned work, built of brick and mortar and intended to carry guns in both casemates and barbets, but the Confederates had masked the embrasures of the curtains facing the channel and thrown up an exterior water battery before the northwest curtain. The main fort mounted seven 10-inch, three 8-inch, and 22 32-pound smoothbore guns, and two 8-inch, two 6.5-inch, and four 5.82-inch rifled cannon. Twenty-nine more guns were placed in the exterior batteries, the most formidable of which was the water battery armed with four 10-inch columbiads, one 8-inch rifle, and two rifled 32-pounders.¹⁶

Fort Gaines, commanded by Col. Charles D. Anderson with 864 officers and men, was of secondary importance due to its distance from the channel. Nevertheless, it too was well armed with three 10-inch columbiads, four rifled 32-pounders, and 20 32-, 24-, and 18-pound smoothbores.¹⁷

The final fort, Battery Powell on Tower Island, commanded by Lt. Col. James Wheeler and 140 men, was never actually completed. It did, however, mount a 10-inch and an 8-inch columbiad and four other rifled guns.¹⁸

In addition to the forts, a line of underwater obstructions stretched from the shallows off Fort Gaines to the Main Shipping Channel (see Figure 2¹⁹). These consisted of a line of closely driven piles going southeast from Gaines to the edge of the channel. These were sunk with their tops protruding above the water level to prevent shallow-draft vessels from crossing the flats. From the western edge of the channel to a point approximately 800 feet from Fort Morgan's water battery was a network of buoys and one-inch tarred manila rope designed to foul the paddles of side-wheelers or the propellers of screw-driven vessels.

In these ropes could be found a new weapon:

Placed in 24 segments 25 feet apart, each section was marked by eight hardwood buoys anchored by three or four pieces of railroad iron banded together. Each string of buoys stretched across 200 feet of water and trended with the tide, covering nearly a mile of channel end to end. About 180 torpedoes made of sheet iron and planted in triple rows had been connected to the ropes, but Confederates ... discovered that many washed away or became fouled by seawater. New torpedoes, made of copper, had been held in reserve to plant if or when a Union attack threatened.²⁰

This left a gateway into the bay about 100 yards wide, and provided Farragut a clear opening into the bay if he were willing to challenge the guns of Fort Morgan.

The final element of the Confederate defenses were the gunboats themselves. When Buchanan assumed command, he had five active vessels in his fleet - the wooden gunboats *Selma*, *Gaines*, and *Morgan*, the tender *Crescent*, and the small ironclad ram *Baltic*. Of the seven ironclads on order, only four - the side-wheeler *Nashville*, the floating batteries *Huntsville* and *Tuscaloosa*, and the ram *Tennessee* - would be available.²¹

The *Tuscaloosa* and *Huntsville* were each 150 feet long and armored with four inches of iron laid down in 2x10 inch bolted plates. They each mounted one 6-inch Brooke rifle and four 32-pounders in broadside. Unfortunately, their weight greatly overtaxed their undersized engines. At trials in April, 1863, they could only mount a top speed of two and one-half knots.²² As a result, Buchanan chose not to move them out into the bay, and they never participated in the battle. One of the great unanswered questions of this battle is: what damage could they have caused if Buchanan had anchored them just west of the channel where they could have raked Farragut's fleet as it entered the bay?

The *Nashville* never participated in the battle either because her armor plating never arrived from the foundry. She was a monster: 271 feet long, 63 feet abeam, mounting a casemate some 142 feet long, and powered by huge side paddlewheels, each

powered by its own engine.²³ She was lightly armed, however, carrying only three 7-inch Brooke rifles and one 24-pound howitzer mounted on a pivot. Her value would have been questionable anyway. Postwar review indicated that she was sloppily built and would never have withstood the weight of being fully armored.²⁴

And then there was the *Tennessee*, 209 feet long, 48 feet abeam, and drawing 14 feet of water. Her batteries were carried in a casemate 79 feet long, 29 feet wide at the roof, and eight feet high. The casemate was built with 25 inches of solid oak and yellow pine, covered by six inches of iron and angled at 45 degrees. A further four inches of iron covered her broadsides and extended two feet below the waterline to protect against being rammed. Her casemate carried ten gun ports with retractable shutters (2 on each side, 3 forward and 3 aft), though she never actually carried more than six guns. At each end, she mounted on a pivot a 7 1/8-inch Brooke rifle capable of throwing a 110 pound solid shot. Broadside, she mounted four 6-inch Brooke rifles capable of firing a 95 pound shot.²⁵ Commissioned in February, 1864, she was finally floated out into the bay, and on May 22, 1864, was made Buchanan's flagship and prepared for action.²⁶

The winter of 1863-64 saw some significant changes in the Federal application of strategy. Grant was to assume command over all Union forces, and he and Sherman were to begin employing their concept of total war against the Confederate civilian populace. Sherman sent a letter to Banks on January 16, 1864 suggesting a demonstration at the mouth of the Pascagoula, near the passage between Fort Gaines and the main shore, to keep Maury's forces in Mobile from moving against him²⁷ as he undertook a raid against Meridian, Mississippi. The campaign had finally begun.

On January 17, Farragut and the *Hartford* steamed into Pensacola Bay to begin a reconnaissance of Mobile preparatory to the attack. He was instantly concerned that only one ship - the *Richmond* - was on station and that the others were in Pensacola, either for repairs or refueling.²⁸ He quickly returned to New Orleans to hurry along the repairs on the rest of the fleet and to renew his correspondence with Secretary Welles, this time requesting ironclad support of his own.

Welles responded. On June 7, he ordered the monitor *Manhattan* to New Orleans. A 1034 ton screw steamer, she was 190 feet long and mounted two 15-inch Dahlgren guns in her turret.²⁹ At the end of June, he ordered the nearly identical *Tecumseh* there as well. On June 30, Admiral Porter begrudgingly released the 970 ton *Chickasaw* and *Winnebago* for Farragut's use. These were smaller, double-turreted monitors sporting two 11-inch Dahlgren guns in each turret.³⁰ The force was beginning to take shape.

On June 17, Major General Edward R.S. Canby (having relieved Banks after the disastrous Red River Campaign) arrived in Pensacola to help plan the final operations. While he did not have sufficient forces to spare for a full scale assault on Mobile, he did finally agree to send Major General Gordon Granger and enough troops to capture the forts.³¹ Once the monitors and land forces arrived and were outfitted, the attack could begin. This was the moment David Farragut had been waiting for for two years. On July 12, with the arrival of the *Manhattan*, *Chickasaw*, and *Winnebago*, he composed and distributed his General Order No. 10 detailing the preparations he expected. While this order did not mention the employment of the monitors, he had already decided on their use. On July 18, he wrote Commodore Palmer at New Orleans:

I propose to go in according to programme - 14 vessels, two by two, as at Port Hudson; low steam; flood tide in the morning, with a light southwest wind; ironclads on the eastern side, to attack the *Tennessee*, and gunboats to attack rebel gunboats as soon as past the forts. Ships run up into deep

water, seven vessels outside to assist the Army in landing on the beach and to flank the enemy; five or six in the [Mississippi] Sound to assist the Army to land on Dauphin Island. The signal to land will be the signal to form line, third order of steaming, and run in.³²

By July 25, Farragut had begun to get impatient, and he urged Canby to begin the ground assault against Fort Gaines. He had decided to launch his own assault as soon as the ground forces arrived with or without the *Tecumseh*. Fortunately, on the afternoon of the 28th, she at last steamed into Pensacola. All was now ready.

At the same time, Farragut had been carrying out an active reconnaissance against the defenses along his avenue of attack. He had a good idea of the location of the channel obstacles, and from July 25 to August 3, used the *Hartford*, *Monongehela*, and *Sebago* to sweep along the minefield and cut the torpedoes loose. Based on these actions, he issued General Order No.11 on July 29 detailing intelligence information and contingency instructions.

That same day, General Granger's forces loaded aboard steamers in New Orleans, and accompanied by the *Chickasaw* and *Winnebago*, sailed for Mobile. On August 3, these forces landed on the western end of Dauphin Island. Finally, everything was at last in place. All that remained was to fight the battle.

At approximately 6:00 a.m., August 5, 1864, the Gulf Squadron got underway, steaming off in the order shown in Figure 3.³³ Around 6:47, the *Tecumseh* and *Manhattan* began to engage Fort Morgan at long range. By 7:00, the first vessels of the fleet had entered the channel and the battle had been joined.

At about 7:30, the *Tennessee* sallied forth to engage the fleet. Commander Craven, captain of the *Tecumseh*, answered the call and changed course to a more westerly heading. This was a fatal mistake. He struck a torpedo amidships and sank in a

matter of minutes, taking 93 of the 114 men aboard, including himself, to the bottom.³⁴ Torpedoes had claimed their first victim.

At this point, Admiral Farragut took charge and ordered the *Hartford* out of line and into the lead. He charged through the minefield and into the bay. That none of his other ships were sunk is nothing short of miraculous. Crews could hear the primer fuses snap as the torpedoes brushed against the Union hulls, yet not one exploded. When the minefield was swept later in the month, 10 percent of the torpedoes were still functional. Farragut had been lucky.

Buchanan hoped that luck was about to change. In classic naval tradition, his fleet was aligned to cross the Federal T, delivering maximum firepower at close range. Having accomplished this, Buchanan turned *Tennessee* to port and steamed down the Union line, trying to ram first one ship and then the next. This forced the remaining Union monitors into action. Deploying themselves between Buchanan and the Union gunboats, they opened fire. At this point, Buchanan broke contact and steamed over to Fort Morgan, and anchored under the safety of her guns.³⁵ This left the three wooded gunboats, *Selma*, *Morgan*, and *Gaines* alone to fight the fleet.

By 8:00, the entire fleet was inside the bay. Farragut ordered the side-wheelers unlash so they could attack. The *Morgan*, relatively uninjured, retreated to Fort Morgan and anchored off the starboard side of *Tennessee*. *Selma* put up a spirited fight before being forced to surrender to the *Metacomet*. The *Gaines*, on fire and taking water, withdrew and ran aground. It was 8:30. Gulf Squadron occupied Mobile Bay.

Farragut sailed the fleet about four miles up the bay, anchored, and fed the troops their breakfast. He intended to rest and assess the damage. Buchanan had other ideas.

Recalling the scuttling of the *Virginia* in the James River without putting up a fight, an angry Buchanan vowed to never let that happen again. At 9:00, the *Tennessee* cast off to face the Union fleet alone. Federal warships responded, swinging into attack formation with orders to bring every gun to bear. Of the outcome, Farragut was later to write to Welles, "Then began one of the fiercest naval combats on record."³⁶ The gunfire was devastating. At ranges of only 10 to 50 yards, gunners discharged their weapons as fast as they could load and fire them.

By 10:00, the *Tennessee* had just about had it. Buchanan had been wounded, the steering cable had been shot away, and most of the gunport shutters had been jammed. But for another 30 minutes, the gallant ship continued to fight, suffering from a continuous fire to which she could not respond. Finally, at 10:30, *Tennessee* could take no more. She struck her colors. The battle was over.

With the bay in Federal control, the forts were unable to stand. That same afternoon, Fort Powell was blown up by its garrison. Anderson surrendered Gaines on August 7 without a fight. General Maury wrote to Secretary of War Seddon, "Forts Powell and Gaines surrendered. Can you spare any good infantry?"³⁷ Only Fort Morgan put up a struggle, but by August 23, being battered from all sides, she too could take no more and surrendered. The port of Mobile had finally been closed for good.

Although the Battle of Mobile Bay had little effect on the outcome of the war, it was the way that it was fought that makes it so important. Many of the technological advances that would change warfare forever - torpedoes, minesweeping, joint operations, naval combat between armored vessels, and even submarine warfare - were tested and proven within the small confines of this bay.

European powers studied the American Civil War in detail. While our Union was undergoing the pains of reconstruction, their armed forces underwent a technological revolution. Armored cruisers and heavy caliber guns replaced wooded warships. Submarines, mines and torpedoes were perfected and improved. In 1914, the technology applied on the battlefields in Europe found its roots in the innovations employed at Mobile Bay.

According to Hearn:

Had Farragut made his attack in 1862, Mobile might have missed the opportunity to preview many of the future changes in warfare. Known as the Gem City of the Gulf, Mobile had its place in the Civil War. Though overshadowed by grander and bloodier battles, [this] contest rise[s] in stature as a magnificent example of combined operations in which opposing commanders used the war's most advanced technology.³⁸

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