Lincoln

STEVEN SPIELBERG’S NEW MOVIE HAS BEEN HAILED AS A CINEMATIC MASTERPIECE. BUT DOES IT HOLD UP AS A PIECE OF HISTORY?
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The brief clash between CSS Alabama and USS Hatteras was over in minutes. But the “sharp fight” off the coast of Galveston, Texas, in January 1863 changed the course of the war in the Gulf of Mexico.

By Andrew W. Hall and Edward T. Cotham Jr.
The new naval vessel was commissioned in October 1861 as USS Hatteras, and fitted with four 32-pounder smoothbore guns, naval artillery that was fast becoming obsolete. A rifled gun firing a 20-pound shell was soon mounted on a pivot to the ship’s forward deck. This added considerably to her firepower, but Hatteras was still likely to be outmatched by a proper warship. Two 30-pounder rifled guns were added later.¹

Hatteras spent her first few months of service with the U.S. Navy’s South Atlantic Blockading Squadron, one of several squadrons that each enforced a zone of the blockade. In January Hatteras was transferred to the Gulf Blockading Squadron, where she continued intercepting and snapping up small vessels attempting to run the blockade on a regular basis—10 in all, through the summer of 1862. That fall, Lieutenant Commander Homer Crane Blake, a 22-year Navy veteran, took charge of Hatteras after her original commander transferred to another vessel. Immediately after joining the West Gulf Blockading Squadron at Pensacola on October 27, Blake was assigned to join Henry H. Bell’s squadron on blockade duty off Mobile.²

Five days after the Confederacy opened fire on Fort Sumter at Charleston in April 1861, Abraham Lincoln declared a blockade of Confederate ports. It was a key element in the grand Union strategy known as the Anaconda Plan. Just as the South American constrictor suffocates its victims, Lincoln and his advisors hoped the strategy would gradually squeeze the life out of the rebellion by cutting off commercial activity.

But the blockade was far easier to plan than to establish. In the spring of 1861 the U.S. Navy possessed only a few dozen serviceable vessels. Navy Department agents fanned out in New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and other ports, buying up civilian ships idled by the conflict and vessels still under construction. One of them was the iron-hulled steamer St. Mary, purchased new from her builder for $110,000. The ship measured 210 feet long, and was outfitted with a hurricane deck and wooden cabins. Propulsion was provided by a pair of enormous side wheels, driven by a single-cylinder steam engine. The vertical motion of the engine was transferred to the side wheels by a pivoted, diamond-shaped iron frame, known as a “walking beam,” that rocked back and forth as the wheels turned, like a leviathan child’s teeter-totter.

S. NAVY COMMODORE Henry H. Bell was worried. Four hours before, in the late afternoon, he had dispatched one of his blockade steamer, USS Hatteras, to investigate a strange sail that had appeared southeast of his position off Galveston, Texas. Then, at about 7 p.m., his lookouts spotted gun flashes reflected on clouds to the southeast, followed by the bass rumble of a fierce cannonade miles away. The firing had lasted almost 15 minutes, followed by silence. Now with his own flagship, USS Brooklyn, pounded southeast into the chilly darkness in the direction of the flashes on a January night in 1863, Bell and every man aboard understood that Hatteras had encountered a serious foe. Bell would continue searching through the night, to no avail. Until it grew light, he could only wait, and watch.

Bell would soon learn that he had been a long-distance witness to the destruction of USS Hatteras by an infamous Confederate commerce raider, CSS Alabama. Although the engagement is little remembered today, it was then seen as a sensational defeat at the hands of a vessel widely dismissed in the northern press as a “pirate.” At the end of the battle, Alabama went from being merely an inconvenience to commercial activity to a feared enemy warship, a vessel that might appear at any moment to sink other U.S. Navy ships. The lopsided, 13-minute engagement between Hatteras and Alabama would have repercussions on both naval operations and the overall strategy of the war itself, effects that went far beyond the understanding of those who watched that night.

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WHILE HATTERAS WAS MAKING life difficult for the Confederates along the eastern part of the Gulf coast, another ship was being rapidly constructed on the banks of the River Mersey, opposite Liverpool in the United Kingdom. The few shipyards in the South were blockaded and occupied building vessels for local defense, so the government in Richmond invested heavily in the construction of warships in Europe. The vessel being built at John Laird, Son & Co. was a warship that would eventually achieve fame as CSS Alabama. Just as the Union’s Anaconda Plan was intended to restrict southern
commercial activity, Alabama’s mission would be as a commerce raider, to wreak havoc among the North’s merchant shipping on the open sea.

Laird’s construction of a Confederate warship was an open secret in Liverpool. In the absence of verifiable information about the ship and her plans, though, wild rumors filled the vacuum. One of the more clever and persistent was that the ship was known as “290” for the number of Liverpool merchant ships who had pooled their resources to pay for her construction and outfitting. In reality, the raider was Laird’s 290th vessel, and until the company’s vessels were formally turned over to their owners and christened, they were known simply by their sequential construction numbers.³

The new raider would, in fact, be very similar in size to Hatteras, just 2 feet longer than the converted passage steamer, and two feet narrower in beam. But the similarities between the converted steamer and this true warship ended there. Alabama’s composite construction hull—wooden timber over iron framing—was better suited to withstand gunfire than Hatteras’ thin iron plates. Where Hatteras was built with a large engine exposed to gunfire in the upper part of the hull, with a vulnerable walking beam engine exposed above that, Alabama had a compact engine that sat low in the hull, away from enemy gunfire. Above all, Alabama would be armed with very heavy naval artillery, including a seven-inch rifle and an eight-inch smoothbore cannon, both fitted on pivoting mounts. All of Alabama’s guns firing on one side amounted to 274 pounds of shot and shell; Hatteras’ broadside weight was only 114 pounds.

The new ship was launched on May 14, 1862, and christened Enrica—though everyone still referred to her as “290.” She sailed on the last day of July 1862, with her destination reported in the newspapers as the Bahamas. In fact, the ship sailed to the Azores in the North Atlantic, where final preparations could be carried out in secret. Her guns had been sent ahead in another ship; they were swung aboard at a secluded anchorage, along with ship’s stores, coal, and other provisions. The raider’s appointed commander, Captain Raphael Semmes, and other officers made the passage from Britain to the Azores on another vessel. On August 24, Semmes raised the Confederate ensign and announced to his crew that the ship would henceforth be known as Alabama.⁴

From the Azores, Semmes set a course to the west, skirting dangerously close to New England on the U.S. Atlantic coast. But the busy shipping lane proved to be very successful hunting grounds, and Alabama seized a dozen or more Union merchantmen. As 1862 drew to a close, Semmes set his course south and east, almost to the coast of Venezuela, then north and west again through the Caribbean. More captures followed, and word spread through the region that the infamous “290” was in the region. Five days before Christmas 1862, Semmes’ lookouts spotted Cape Catoche, the northernmost point of the Yucatán Peninsula. Alabama was now loose in the Gulf of Mexico.⁵

The fall of 1862 brought a wave of Federal naval operations against the Texas coast, including the October 9 capture of Galveston, the most important port in Texas and the terminus of a railroad system that extended through Houston to rich inland agricultural areas. With Galveston in Federal hands, it would be only a matter of...
The Union fleet was focused and resolute. One crewman on board USS *USS* passed the forts at the entrance to Galveston Bay. The mood in the morning. If all went well, the Federal fleet would then attempt to with the bombardment of Galveston to be renewed on Monday¹/uni2070 to retake Galveston was now deemed complete.

At about p.m. on January zero, as the last shots of the day's bom bardment were fired, *Batteries* on one occasion shooting away a fort's Confederate flag. In the night he intended to steam at full speed through the fleet, pouring fire from both broadsides, sinking and burning as he went.⁷

But as *Alabama* sailed northward for the Texas coast, the situation at Galveston changed dramatically. Early on the morning of January 1, 1863, a combined Confederate land and sea attack under the command of Major General John Bankhead Magruder managed to recapture the city of Galveston, taking one Federal warship and destroying another in the process. Through a combination of extem porization, audacity, and luck, Magruder had cobbled together an unlikely military force that reclaimed the only Confederate port re taken from the Federals during the war. Admiral David G. Farragut, the Union naval commander in the Gulf of Mexico, called it the “most shameful and pusillanimous” incident in the history of the U.S. Navy.⁸

Believing that the disaster at Galveston was not only a major strategic setback, but also an insult to the navy's honor, Farragut lost no time in ordering Commodore Bell and a fleet of six gunboats to Galveston to recapture it. Bell arrived with the first vessels on January 7 to find the Confederates already busy building earth works and fortifications surrounding the city. As he waited for the rest of his gunboats to arrive, Bell exchanged fire with the shore batteries, on one occasion shooting away a fort's Confederate flag. At about 4 p.m. on January 10, as the last shots of the day's bombardment were fired, *Hatteras* arrived off Galveston, followed by USS *Clifton* two hours later. The fleet of Federal gunboats needed to retake Galveston was now deemed complete.¹⁰

Bell's plan was that Sunday, January 11, would be a day of rest, with the bombardment of Galveston to be renewed on Monday morning. If all went well, the Federal fleet would then attempt to pass the forts at the entrance to Galveston Bay. The mood in the Union fleet was focused and resolute. One crewman on board USS *USS*...
THE BATTLE

Although no one in the Federal fleet knew it then, the unknown vessel that Hatteras was chasing was Alabama. Semmes, knowing that Galveston had been taken weeks before by the Federals, expected to find dozens of Banks’ transports anchored in the roadstead. Instead, the lookout at the masthead reported only a few vessels, all of them apparently warships. Semmes puzzled on this for a moment until the lookout reported that one of the ships had fired a shell that burst over the city. Semmes now realized that Galveston had been retaken, and was in Confederate hands.³ The captain was still pondering his next move when the lookout reported one of the Federal steamers coming out to meet him. Alabama would not have been likely to prevail against four or five Federal warships at once, but this was a situation that suited him well. “It was just the thing I wanted,” he later recalled, “for I at once conceived the design of drawing this single ship of the enemy far enough away from the remainder of her fleet, to enable me to decide a battle with her before her consorts could come to her relief.”¹¹ He ordered the ship’s head swung around, out again into the Gulf and into the growing darkness. He also ordered Alabama’s propeller lowered into position and engaged, to give the raider an extra bit of speed in the light air; he didn’t want the Yankee blockader to come up to him too soon.

On Hatteras, Blake and his officers were becoming increasingly suspicious. They knew of Alabama’s captures in the Caribbean, and

USS Hatteras (foreground) and CSS Alabama exchange fire in Tom Freeman’s painting “The Fatal Chase.” The engagement would prove to be as brief as it was sharp.

PAINTING BY TOM FREEMAN
realized the suspect steamer might be “290” herself. Shortly before dark, the unknown vessel came into clear view and began to maneuver in a way that alerted the officers on board Hatteras that what they were chasing was no skittish, unarmed blockade runner. Henry Ogden Porter, Hatteras’ executive officer, remarked to Captain Blake, “[T]hat, sir, I think is Alabama. What shall we do?” Blake’s reply was immediate and direct: “[T]hat is Alabama we must fight her.” Blake ordered his ship cleared for action and directed Porter to make sure that all guns would be trained on the other vessel.¹⁰

When Hatteras had closed the range to about four miles, Blake saw that the stranger had stopped and was lying broadside on to his vessel, waiting for him to come up. By now it was about 7 p.m., and getting quite dark. Hatteras continued on, and ran close alongside the unidentified vessel. Blake hailed the other ship, asking, “What steamer is that?”

The reply shouted across the water from Alabama was that the raider was a British warship—Blake noted that the name given was Vixen, while Semmes later said Petrel—and Semmes asked for the identity of Blake’s ship. Semmes couldn’t make out the name, but the first words he heard, “[T]his is the United States Ship,” were enough. A pause ensued while both vessels jockeyed for position. Blake, following standard procedure, asked for permission to send a boat with an officer to verify the other ship’s identity. Semmes, still trying to maneuver for best advantage, politely agreed and Hatteras’ boat, with a junior officer and four seamen aboard, was soon dancing over the water. Alabama, meanwhile, had made a steaming turn to the east and was running up alongside Hatteras’ port side, less than 100 yards off.

Satisfied with his position and that all was ready, Captain Semmes turned to his first lieutenant and asked, “Are you ready for action?” Kell replied, “[T]he men are only waiting for the word.” Semmes said, “Don’t strike them in disguise; tell them who we are and give the broadside at the name.” Kell raised his speaking trumpet and announced, “[T]his is the Confederate States Steamer Alabama!” And then, to his crew, he gave the simple order: “Fire!”¹⁶

Even before Alabama fired that first broadside, Captain Blake had concluded that the other vessel must be an enemy. He’d noticed the way it kept maneuvering as if trying to get into a better firing position. Even while going through the formal process of learning the ship’s identity, Blake had carefully kept Hatteras turning, preventing the mysterious steamer from getting squarely behind him.¹⁷

When Alabama finally revealed her identity, the Confederate steamer was located on the port quarter (left rear) of Hatteras, about 75 yards away. The first broadside went high, passing harmlessly over Hatteras. Blake immediately ordered his aft guns, the only guns that would bear, to return fire and rang the bell to direct Hatteras full speed ahead. He also turned the ship to port to get into a position where he could fire all of his port guns at Alabama. On the deck below, the moment Alabama fired, Executive Officer Porter of Hatteras also realized that his suspicion about the identity of the enemy ship was correct. Not waiting for Blake’s orders, he yelled, “Alabama! Boys, now give it to her!” and the gun crews on Hatteras began firing away.¹⁸

A running fight followed, with the two ships exchanging broadside after broadside, Alabama firing to starboard and Hatteras firing to port. Alabama’s first officer, Kell, later described the action as “a sharp fight.” At some points the ships were only 25 yards apart, and men with small arms on the decks of both vessels joined the fray. The gunners on Alabama soon found their targets and began pouring an enthusiastic fire into the port side of Hatteras. Although Alabama’s officers were mostly southerners, her enlisted crewmembers had to be recruited in the U.K., and were almost all British. Semmes had shown them one of the captured New York newspapers that described them as the “scum of England.” This was a chance, then, for the “scum” to get their revenge, and they took full advantage of it. Besides shot and shell, they hurled angry invective across the water. “That’s into you!” “Damn you! That kills your pig!” A boatswain’s mate was heard to shout, “[T]hat’s from the scum of England!”¹⁹

Blake soon realized that Alabama had the advantage of heavier guns, and tried to turn his ship to enable Hatteras to get alongside and possibly board the enemy vessel. But Semmes used his ship’s superior speed and maneuverability to keep Hatteras at a distance.²⁰ About eight minutes after the action began, a shell entered Hatteras above the water line forward, and burst a quantity of stored turpentine, setting that part of the ship on fire. Soon after, another shell hit the forward part of the “walking beam” and knocked it out of alignment. The walking beam was a critical part of the connection between the steam engine and the paddle wheels, and the damage caused Hatteras to slow its forward motion. At almost the same time, a shell entered amidships and set fire to the vessel near the magazine. Yet another shell had entered the engine works and damaged part of the steam machinery.²¹

Captain Blake had only a limited understanding of the battle’s effect on his vessel and her crew. He had spent the entire battle on the upper, or “hurricane,” deck, where he could see Alabama very well but could not directly observe his men operating guns on the deck below. Occasionally, Blake could hear the forward gunners sing out “Give it to her boys!” or “Stand by the captain!” but otherwise, he had to rely on reports from his officers. Blake would later complain about the ship’s hurricane deck, noting that in battle he “was under great disadvantages from the construction of the vessel.”²²

Hearing the labored movement of the walking beam, Executive Officer Porter went below to ascertain the extent of the damage and report back to Blake. As he headed for the engine room, Porter encountered the ship’s engineer. When asked about the condition of the machinery, the engineer simply replied, “[W]e are pretty near played out I think.” Water was rushing into the engine room through holes in the hull so large that the crew had been forced to plug them with hammocks. As Porter surveyed the damage below deck, he noticed that an entire iron plate had been knocked

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¹⁰: Unidentified steamer from getting squarely behind him.
¹¹: Confederate States Steamer Alabama.
¹²: Confederate States Steamer Alabama.
¹³: Confederate States Steamer Alabama.
¹⁴: Confederate States Steamer Alabama.
¹⁵: Confederate States Steamer Alabama.
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¹⁷: Confederate States Steamer Alabama.
¹⁸: Confederate States Steamer Alabama.
¹⁹: Confederate States Steamer Alabama.
²⁰: Confederate States Steamer Alabama.
²¹: Confederate States Steamer Alabama.
²²: Confederate States Steamer Alabama.
off the port side of the ship, and part of the paddle wheel was protruding inside the hull of the vessel. Porter headed back up the ladder to Captain Blake to report the bad news.

There were no doubt several heroes on board Hatteras that night, and one of them was below deck at that point. He went unmentioned in any official report, but after the war, Blake described the actions of an unidentified African-American steward in Harper’s New Monthly Magazine. The man knew of a small locker of arms and ammunition under a passageway off the wardroom. When the ship caught fire and the compartment filled with smoke, the steward remained at his post, continually dashing the ammunition with water. When he was later asked whether he found his position dangerous, the steward replied that he had, “but I knew if the fire got to the powder they gentlemen on deck would get a grand hoist.”

By this time, the “gentlemen on deck” could tell that Hatteras was in a desperate condition. Fearing that the fire was about to ignite the magazine, Captain Blake ordered that two feet of water be pumped into the compartment. As this was being done, a shot knocked a hole in the engine’s steam cylinder, where steam generated by the boilers is concentrated and used to power the vessel’s machinery. The hole allowed the steam to escape, flooding the engine room and deck nearby with scalding steam. The ship’s enormous engine, which was all above the water line, ground to a halt, having been struck six times in different places. Hatteras was dead in the water and began to roll steeply to port.

Blake ordered that a lee gun, facing away from the enemy, be fired to signal his surrender. Unfortunately, in the darkness, Semmes did not realize that Blake was signaling his capitulation, and it took two more repetitions before Alabama ceased firing.

It was an eerie scene. The sea was as smooth as glass as Alabama passed silently into the darkness. Blake and Porter both knew that Hatteras was doomed; their concern now was that Alabama would leave them to sink, without making any attempt to rescue survivors. Hatteras had rolled so far over on her port side that it appeared she might capsize completely. Blake claimed later that he authorized the port-side guns to be thrown overboard to lessen the weight on that side; Porter maintained that he did not wait for the order but directed the dumping of the guns on his own authority. However the order came, it was easily accomplished. Hatteras
was heeled so far over that the men did not even have to use block and tackle to coax the guns over the side. Freed of the weight of the port-side artillery guns, the ship righted herself at once. But she continued flooding, and was sinking rapidly.

Porter could not believe that Alabama had left a disabled foe. He yelled into the darkness, demanding that Alabama send boats to help take away the crew of Hatteras. Porter did not know it but Captain Semmes was dealing with his own difficulties. Just before Hatteras fired its first lee gun, a shot from Hatteras had struck Alabama’s funnel, wounding one man in the cheek. Alabama was not seriously injured, but Semmes—not knowing when or where he might make repairs to his own ship—was hesitant to return until he knew his opponent was completely defeated.

Finally, Porter heard a voice in the distance crying, “Halloo!” Porter shouted back that Hatteras was sinking and needed boats. Semmes quickly dispatched two of his boats to help transfer Hatteras’ crew, now prisoners, to Alabama. As Porter supervised the orderly loading and launching of the boats, Captain Blake carefully counted the men leaving the ship. When everyone other than Porter and Blake had been evacuated, two crewmen last seen in the coal bunkers were still unaccounted for. The captain and executive officer tried to go below to search the bunkers, but the smoke and fire stopped them; Porter even burned off the
bottom of his shoes. Finally, Blake concluded that the missing men could not be recovered and reluctantly left for Alabama to formally surrender to Semmes. Ten minutes after they reached the enemy ship, Hatteras went down, bow first. Blake watched as the water extinguished the flames.89

Hatteras would remain undisturbed until 11 a.m. the next day, when a worried Commodore Bell would come searching in USS Brooklyn. He would find the wreck in water about 9 fathoms (57 feet) deep, shallow enough that her two masts were sticking above the surface, with the gunboat’s U.S. commissioning pennant still “gaily flying.”90

IMMEDIATELY AFTER BRINGING HATTERAS’ survivors on board, Semmes had his ship’s clerk write out a parole document for Blake and his officers to sign. It was a common practice of the time; the officers pledged their “sacred word of honor that we will not bear arms or in any manner serve against the Confederate States during the present war, or until regularly exchanged.” After signing, Blake and his officers were assigned space in the cabins of their counterparts, Blake in Semmes’ cabin, and the officer prisoners in Alabama’s wardroom. Hatteras’ enlisted crew members were put in irons.91

Semmes’ success over Hatteras brought with it a set of problems. First, the more than 100 prisoners roughly doubled the number of men on board the Confederate raider. They took up space, consumed rations and fresh water, and had to be guarded. More important, every available Federal warship in the Gulf of Mexico would now be sent to find and engage Alabama. He could not be assured of a quick victory the next time, and even if he prevailed, such an encounter would almost certainly result in damage that would jeopardize his primary mission as a commerce raider. Semmes needed to leave the Gulf of Mexico and dispose of his prisoners quickly. Havana or another Spanish port on the Cuban coast was too close to risk stopping, so Semmes set a course southeast for Jamaica, south of Cuba. Alabama anchored off Port Royal, across the harbor from Kingston, after dark on January 20, nine days after the encounter with Hatteras. Semmes put Blake and his crew ashore and, after taking a few days to refit and reprovision his ship, slipped away on January 25 for points unknown.92

THE AFTERMATH

As with every loss of a U.S. naval vessel, there was a formal court of inquiry regarding the loss of Hatteras. Blake and his officers testified at the proceeding, which was held at the Navy Yard in Brooklyn. The court concluded that Blake had discharged his duties as commander “in an efficient and praiseworthy manner” and stated that his conduct after the battle “was altogether commendable and proper.” The court also found that, with the exception of two junior officers who had misbehaved or not fulfilled their duties after the battle, “the conduct of the officers and crew of Hatteras was good, and every effort [was] made by them to defend and preserve the vessel in this very unequal contest.”93

Though Blake and his officers were formally cleared, others inevitably assigned blame. One notable example was Admiral David Dixon Porter, elder brother of Hatteras’ executive officer, Henry Porter. In his Naval History of the Civil War, written in 1886, the elder Porter argued that the error was Commodore Bell’s, for not sending sufficient force to investigate the vessel sighted on the afternoon of January 11. Two ships, he argued, would have made quick work of the Confederate raider. Admiral Porter suggested, perhaps in subconscious reference to his younger brother’s involvement in the embarrassing incident, “never send a boy on a man’s errand.”94

After leaving Port Royal and Hatteras’ crew astern, Raphael Semmes set a course east and then north, through the Santo Domingo Channel between the islands of Hispaniola and Puerto Rico, into the North Atlantic again. Then Alabama headed south, along the coast of Brazil, where Semmes took a dozen ships in the spring and early summer of 1865. After an extended refit at Cape Town, South Africa, the raider continued east, across the Indian Ocean, through the Sunda Strait and into the Java and South China Seas. After another long call at Singapore for repairs and provisions, Alabama sailed west again, skirting the Indian subcontinent, following the west coast of Africa, around the Cape of Good Hope and again north into the Atlantic. By the spring of 1865, Alabama had been at sea for most of the past 18 months. She and her captain had been continually hunted, always just a step ahead of their pursuers. Both Alabama and Semmes were worn out. Semmes would later write that “poor old Alabama was not now what she had been then. She was like the wearied fox-hound, limping back after a long chase, foot-sore, and longing for quiet and repose.”95

Semmes’ analogy was wrong in one respect: Alabama was not “the wearied fox-hound,” but the wearied fox, and the hounds were closing in. Alabama anchored at Cherbourg, on the Channel coast of France, on June 11, 1864. Semmes intended to put his ship into dry dock for a major overhaul, but there were no commercial docking facilities available at Cherbourg, only those of the French navy, which was reluctant to provide such a service to a belligerent’s warship when France was determined to stay neutral in the conflict. Then, three days after Alabama’s arrival, the sloop-of-war
In the late summer of 2012, the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) organized a cross-disciplinary team of scientists, researchers, educators, and archaeologists to document the wreck of USS Hatteras, sunk in the Gulf of Mexico during her brief engagement with the Confederate commerce raider Alabama on January 11, 1863. Participants included representatives of a dozen or more public agencies and private organizations, led by Dr. James P. Delgado, Director of Maritime Heritage for NOAA’s Office of National Marine Sanctuaries. Funding and support for the project was provided by the Edward E. and Marie L. Matthews Foundation, ExploreOcean, and Teledyne BlueView.

The wreck site of the former Federal warship—the only one sunk in single-ship combat in the Gulf of Mexico during the conflict—had been discovered by sport divers in the 1970s, who wanted to collect and sell artifacts from the wreck. The federal government sued, claiming that the sunken ship, which was never formally decommissioned, remains U.S. Navy property. The ruling in that case, Hatteras Inc. v. the USS Hatteras (1894), helped establish the legal doctrine that the U.S. Navy maintains ownership of its lost ships and aircraft until and unless it formally relinquishes them.

Today, the Hatteras wreck site lies about 20 miles south of Galveston, in federal waters administered by the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) and the Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement (BSEE). Several state and federal agencies work in close coordination to monitor the site on an ongoing basis.

Most of the iron-hulled warship remains intact under the sand and mud, about 60 feet (18m) below the sea surface. Visits by divers monitoring the site in 2010 and 2011 indicated that more of the wreck had been recently exposed, probably due to the effects of Hurricane Ike in 2008. This gave investigators an ideal opportunity to examine the site more closely. Near the wreck site, a Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement (BSEE) pipe was discovered, protruding above the seabed, including the stern and rudder (right), and the paddlewheel shaft and paddles (left). In this BlueView image, portions of Hatteras protrude above the seabed, including the stern and rudder (right), and the paddlewheel shaft, engine machinery, and paddlewheels (left).

USS Kearsarge appeared off Cherbourg and took up a position outside the entrance to the harbor. Alabama was trapped.

Semmes had few options. He could disappear his crew and turn the ship over to French authorities; he could sit at anchor indefinitely while Alabama slowly rotted beneath his feet; or he could make a break for the open sea and face Kearsarge, a vessel of comparable size and armament but in better shape and with a fresh crew.

Semmes chose the last option. After a few days of furious preparations, on June 19 Semmes steered Alabama out through the Cherbourg breakwater and into the English Channel, where Kearsarge and her captain, John Winslow, were waiting. Alabama fired first, and the two ships began circling each other, starboard broadside to starboard broadside. They circled for an hour until Alabama, holed repeatedly below the waterline, began to fill and sink. Semmes struck his colors. Around 40 of Alabama’s crew were killed in action or drowned. Another 70 were picked up by Kearsarge’s boats. Semmes, his first officer and some others were fished out of the water by a British steam yacht that had been lingering just outside the range of the ships’ guns. Semmes would sleep that night in a fine Southampton hotel, celebrated as a gallant underdog in an unfair fight against Kearsarge. Semmes did all he could to encourage that belief; when he learned that Winslow had fitted curtains of chain cable amidships to protect his vessel’s machinery, Semmes complained that Kearsarge had thus been “armored,” and that his ship’s munitions had deteriorated over the two years since they were first brought aboard.

Controversy has since surrounded Semmes’s decision to engage Kearsarge. Part of his rationale, no doubt, was that Alabama had been so strikingly successful in her fight with Hatteras, the only other warship that Semmes and Alabama had faced in direct combat. Semmes employed similar tactics and chose to fight with his starboard guns in both encounters. But the case of the 1863 victory would help pave the way to the 1864 defeat.

The battle between Alabama and Hatteras had important repercussions that lasted far beyond the 15 minutes of gunfire. Had Alabama sunk instead, she would have been unable to continue her fabled career as a commerce raider, going on to burn, capture or destroy more than 30 ships after her encounter with Hatteras.

In addition to the toll on Union commerce that Alabama would inflict, the ease with which Alabama sank Hatteras stunned many in the U.S. Navy. Alabama was seen not just as a nuisance pirate
vessel to be chased, but as a formidable warship in her own right. For the next year and a half, Union ship captains worried that Alabama or a similar Confederate vessel might appear out of the sea behind them and leave them a sinking wreck. This caused commanders to be overly cautious and, on some occasions, fail to achieve military objectives.

The loss of Hatteras also had an immediate and significant impact on the larger conduct of the war. At the time of the battle, Bell’s squadron was preparing to recapture Galveston and use it as a stage to invade Texas. They would very likely have been successful had they proceeded as planned, but worried that Alabama and other Confederate ships might still be lurking out of sight, naval officials delayed, giving the Confederate garrison critical time to fortify the city. Galveston would survive as the last major Confederate port, not surrendering until June 1865, two months after Appomattox and the assassination of President Lincoln.

The short clash between Alabama and Hatteras was more than just a rehearsal for the battle that would end Alabama’s famous career. The 1863 battle had its origin in a scheme that, if successful, would have dealt a substantial blow to Union military plans on the Texas coast. Although Captain Semmes’ plan

**ENDNOTES**


3. Philadelphia Inquirer, February 16, 1863; Rafael Semmes, *Memoirs of Service Afloat During the War Between the States* (Baltimore, 1869), 400-01.


8. Ibid.


14. Ibid., 542


17. Court of Enquiry, Blake testimony, 30-32.

18. Court of Enquiry, Porter testimony, 109-II.


20. Court of Enquiry, Blake testimony, 32-34.

21. Court of Enquiry, Blake testimony, 33-34; Porter testimony, III-12.

22. Court of Enquiry, Blake testimony, 40-41.


25. Court of Enquiry, Blake testimony, 35-37; Covert testimony 200-201.


27. Court of Enquiry, Blake testimony, 38-39; Porter testimony, III-17.


29. Court of Enquiry, Blake testimony, 44-45; Porter testimony, III-19.


to steam boldly through the middle of the fleet firing broadsides in both directions did not materialize, Semmes did indirectly play a major role in postponing Union plans to capture Texas. The very fact that there was never a major invasion of the interior of Texas can be traced in part to the “sharp fight” in which Alabama defeated Hatteras.  

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of McClernand’s failure to submit the order through army headquarters and relieved him of his command on June 18. Reporting his action to the authorities at Washington over a week later, he explained that he had tolerated McClernand “long after I thought the good of the service demanded his removal.”

Grant’s timing was impeccable. It would have been a mistake to relieve McClernand during the winter or early spring, given Grant’s own uncertain standing. Nor was it necessary to remove McClernand during the move against Vicksburg, although it was certainly helpful to have Dana serve as a conduit for criticism. But now, with his army in ideal position and his reputation as secure, Grant could do what he wanted, knowing that the administration would not remove an army commander on the eve of a great success.

That success came soon. On July 3 Pemberton sent out a flag of truce and met with Grant to negotiate terms; the following day Grant entered Vicksburg. News of the victory electrified the North, and Lincoln, admitting that he had erred in his assessment of what Grant should have done, warmly congratulated his commander. As Halleck had promised, Grant won a major generalship in the regular army, giving him the job security he had craved. His final victory came a month later. Dana returned to Washington singing Grant’s praises, while Grant had Rawlins hand-deliver his final report of operations to his superiors so that the chief of staff could answer any questions. The mission must have proven a success, for when McClernand protested his removal to Lincoln, the president declined to act, pointing out that he could not remove a successful general.  

Vicksburg is known today as a prime example of Ulysses S. Grant’s military skill, and deservedly so. What few appreciate is that the victory was equally due to Grant’s skillful management of criticism and his deft handling of a disloyal subordinate. At Vicksburg Grant not only secured the Mississippi and split the Confederacy; he also safeguarded his future as a general who had battled doubters and gossip and prevailed. In both cases, his conduct of the campaign was masterly.

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