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PERSONAL REMINISCENCES

— OF THE —

MONITOR and MERRIMAC

ENGAGEMENT,

AND DESTRUCTION OF THE

CONGRESS and CUMBERLAND.

A PAPER READ BEFORE THE COMMANDERY OF NEW YORK, MILITARY
ORDER, LOYAL LEGION, UNITED STATES,

MAY 5, 1886,

BY

Companion Medical Director CHARLES MARTIN,

U. S. NAVY (RETIRED).

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OF COMPANY

ENGAGEMENT

OF THE

MONITOR AND MERRIMAC.

COMPANIONS: I will tell you what I saw at Newport News when the Merrimac destroyed the Congress and Cumberland, and fought with the Monitor. It was a drama in three acts, and twelve hours will elapse between the second and third acts.

“Let us begin at the beginning”—1861. The North Atlantic squadron is at Hampton Roads, except the frigate Congress and the razeed Cumberland; they are anchored at Newport News, blockading the James River and Norfolk. The Merrimac, the Rebel ram, is in the dry dock of the Norfolk navy yard; for, after the unsuccessful attempt at the outbreak of the rebellion to burn the yard and the men-of-war lying there, it was abandoned to the enemy, leaving them in possession of the accumulation of arms and ammunition which served as an outfit for the army of the Confederacy; and they utilized the half-burned frigate Merrimac, cut her down, gave her a short, powerful ram capable of doing much harm to our ships, they built over her a sloping roof of railroad iron, they made her a floating bomb-proof, and when afloat she looked like an old-fashioned barn submerged to the eaves. And, besides her three broadside guns, she had a port and a heavy gun in each gable.

The Monitor is building in New York City. She is a secret, and passes are given to visit the shipyard where she is building, and a young Copperhead takes advantage of frequent opportunities; he makes sketches and

notes of her dimensions, etc., he carries them with him down into Dixey. This treachery is indirectly a cause of safety to the Monitor. The notes show the Confederate Government that the ram of the Merrimac is too short, it cannot reach the hull of the Monitor under her overhang. They lengthen the ram, and are well aware that in doing so they have weakened it, and it is determined to keep the Merrimac in the dry dock, wait the arrival of the Monitor; send her out to meet her, and in the action it is positive that an opportunity will offer to pierce and sink her. The ram is a terror, and both sides say, "When the Merrimac comes out!" The last of February, 1862, the Monitor is ready for sea; she will sail for Hampton Roads in charge of a steamer. There is a rumor that she has broken her steering gear before reaching Sandy Hook. She will be towed to Washington for repairs. The Rebel spies report her a failure—steering defective, turret revolves with difficulty, and when the smoke of her guns in action is added to the defects of ventilation, it will be impossible for human beings to live aboard of her. No Monitor to fight, the Southern press and people grumble; they pitch into the Merrimac. Why does she lie idle? Send her out to destroy the Congress and the Cumberland, that have so long bullied Norfolk, then sweep away the fleet at Hampton Roads, starve out Fortress Monroe, go north to Baltimore and New York and Boston, and destroy and plunder; and the voice of the people, not always an inspiration, prevails, and the ram is floated and manned and armed, and March 8 is bright and sunny when she steams down the Elizabeth River to carry out the first part of her programme. And all Norfolk and Portsmouth ride and run to the bank of the James, to have a picnic, and assist at a naval battle and victory. The cry of "Wolf!" has so often been heard aboard the ships that the Merrimac has lost much of her terrors. They

argue, "If she is a success, why don't she come out and destroy us?" And when seen this morning at the mouth of the river, "It is only a trial trip or a demonstration." But she creeps along the opposite shore, and both ships beat to quarters, and get ready for action. The boats of the Cumberland are lowered, made fast to each other in line, anchored between the ship and the shore, about an eighth of a mile distant.

Here are two large sailing frigates, on a calm day, at slack water, anchored in a narrow channel, impossible to get under weigh and maneuver, and must lie and hammer, and be hammered, so long as they hold together, or until they sink at their anchors. To help them is a tug, the Zouave, once used in the basin at Albany to tow canal boats under the grain elevator. The Congress is the senior ship; the tug makes fast to her. The Congress slips her cable and tries to get under weigh. The tug does her best and breaks her engine. The Congress goes aground in line with the shore. The Zouave floats down the river, firing her pop-guns at the Merrimac as she drifts by her. The captain of the Congress was detached on the 7th. He is waiting a chance to go north. He serves as a volunteer in the action, refusing to resume command and deprive the first lieutenant of a chance for glory. The captain of the Cumberland has been absent since the 3d. He is president of a court-martial at this moment in session on board the Roanoke at Hampton Roads, so the command of both the ships devolves on the first lieutenants. On board the Cumberland all hands are allowed to remain on deck, watching the slow approach of the Merrimac, and she comes on so slowly, the pilot declares she has missed the channel, she draws too much water to use her ram. She continues to advance, and two gun-boats, the Yorktown and the Teazer, accompany her. Again they beat to quarters, and every one goes to his station. There is a

platform on the roof of the Merrimac. Her captain is standing on it. When she is near enough, he hails, "Do you surrender?" "*Never!*" is the reply. The order to fire is given, the shot of the starboard battery rattles on the iron roof of the Merrimac. She answers with a shell, it sweeps the forward pivot gun, it kills and wounds ten of the gun's crew. A second slaughters the marines at the after pivot gun. The Yorktown and Teazer keep up a constant fire. She bears down on the Cumberland. She rams her just aft the starboard bow. The ram goes into the sides of the ship as a knife goes into a cheese. The Merrimac tries to back out, the tide is making, it catches against her great length at a right angle with the Cumberland, it slews her around, the weakened lengthened ram breaks off, she leaves it in the Cumberland. The battle rages, broadside answers broad side, and the sanded deck is red and slippery with the blood of the wounded and dying, they are dragged amidships out of the way of the guns, there is no one and no time to take them below. Delirium seizes the crew; they strip to their trousers, tie their handkerchiefs round their heads, kick off their shoes, fight and yell like demons, load and fire at will, and keep it up for the rest of the forty-two minutes the ship is sinking, and fire a last gun as the water rushes into her ports.

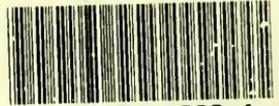
The order comes, "Save who can!" The ship sinks head foremost, she lists over to port, the water is ankle deep on the berth deck, the ladders unship, it is a scramble to the spar deck, a rush overboard, the boats pick up the swimmers. The after pivot gun, pivoted to starboard, breaks loose, it rushes down the decline of the deck like a furious animal, a man is in the track, he falls, the gun is on him, crushes him, bounds overboard; there is a mass of mangled flesh on the deck. The ship sinks to her tops. The boats pull for shore, a shell knocks away the head of the wharf as the boats approach it.

The saved land. Instead of a defeat, it is a victory. The whole camp is rushing to meet them, with cheers, with embraces; the soldiers bring to comfort them the first thing they lay hold of, many of them the panaceas whisky and tobacco. The sailors are clothed and fed and warmed—they have reached home. And no survivor will ever forget the loving kindness of our companion, the colonel of the Zouaves, and the officers and men of that regiment and of the Troy regiment stationed at Newport News—they gave their all, and gave it twice the way they gave it.

In every man-of-war exist Jonathan and David, Damon and Pythias friendships, called chummies. In the beginning of the action a man hopelessly wounded is lowered down into the cockpit; later on his chummy, with a flesh wound of his arm, goes below to have it dressed and to see his friend. As he leans over him, the dying man says, "Don't leave me, Johnny;" and Johnny sits down by him, takes him in his arms, stays with him, goes down with him—and surely much was forgiven them.

The Merrimac turns to the Congress. She is aground, but she fires her guns till the red-hot shot from the enemy sets her on fire, and the flames drive the men away from the battery. She has forty years of seasoning, she burns like a torch. Her commanding officer is killed, and her deck strewn with killed and wounded. The wind is off shore; they drag the wounded under the windward bulwark, where all hands take refuge from the flames. The sharpshooters on shore drive away a tug from the enemy. The crew and wounded of the Congress are safely landed. She burns the rest of the afternoon and evening, discharging her loaded guns over the camp. At midnight the fire has reached her magazines—the Congress disappears.

When it is signaled to the fleet at Hampton Roads that the Merrimac has come out, the Minnesota leaves



her anchorage and hastens to join the battle. She puts her aground off the Elizabeth River, and she lies there helpless. The Merrimac has turned back for Norfolk. She has suffered from the shot of the Congress and Cumberland, or she would stop and destroy the Minnesota; instead, with the Yorktown and Teazer, she goes back into the river. Sunday morning, March 9, the Merrimac is coming out to finish her work. She will destroy the Minnesota. As she nears her, the Monitor appears from behind the helpless ship; she has slipped in during the night, and so quietly, her presence is unknown in the camp. And David goes out to meet Goliath, and every man who can walk to the beach sits down there, spectators of the first iron-clad battle in the world. The day is calm, the smoke hangs thick on the water, the low vessels are hidden by the smoke. They are so sure of their invulnerability, they fight at arms' length. They fight so near the shore, the flash of their guns is seen, and the noise is heard of the heavy shot pounding the armor. They haul out for breath, and again disappear in the smoke. The Merrimac stops firing, the smoke lifts, she is running down the Monitor, but she has left her ram in the Cumberland. The Monitor slips away, turns, and renews the action. One P. M. —they have fought since 8:30 A. M. The crews of both ships are suffocating under the armor. The frames supporting the iron roof of the Merrimac are sprung and shattered. The turret of the Monitor is dented with shot, and is revolved with difficulty. The captain of the Merrimac is wounded in the leg; the captain of the Monitor is blinded with powder. It is a drawn game. The Merrimac, leaking badly, goes back to Norfolk; the Monitor returns to Hampton Roads.