

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

The Battle of Mobile Bay

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The Battle of Mobile Bay on August 5, 1864 pitted two powerful naval forces against each other for control of one of the Confederacy's last links to the outside world. Union forces won a decisive victory in less than four hours of fighting. The engagement was one of the iconic naval battles of the Civil War, and occupies a significant place in the American lexicon and national consciousness today. The clash at Mobile Bay also illustrates the fact that while naval warfare involves the intersection of policy, strategy, and technology, ultimately the human factor is decisive.

Background

Since the Civil War's outbreak in 1861, a primary Union objective had been to cut off Confederate ports from outside communications. To achieve this, U.S. Army and Navy forces combined in a series of campaigns to both blockade Southern ports and capture key points along the Confederate coast. By the spring of 1864, only two major Confederate ports were still open east of the Mississippi River: Mobile, Alabama and Wilmington, North Carolina.

Mobile sits at the northern end of Mobile Bay, an estuary 30 miles long by 24 miles wide with an average depth of 10 feet. The navigable part of the bay is shaped like a partially-inflated balloon, with the mouth entering the Gulf of Mexico through a narrow (3-mile-wide) channel between the mainland to the east and Dauphin Island to the west. Two prewar stone forts, Fort Gaines on Dauphin Island and Fort Morgan on the mainland, guarded the entrance. By 1864 Confederate mines (known as torpedoes) blocked almost the entire width of the channel except for a few hundred yards of open water next to Fort Morgan.

Up to this point in the war, Mobile had proven to be a valuable port for the Confederacy. It was a haven for numerous blockade runners and the commerce raider *Florida*, and her shipyards had serviced all of these ships in their activities. In addition, the Confederate garrison at Mobile blocked access to the roads and rivers Union forces needed to advance into southern Alabama and Mississippi. The splitting of the Confederacy by the surrenders of Vicksburg and Port Hudson in July 1863 only increased Mobile's value as a port and access point for Confederate trade.

The Union high command recognized Mobile's importance. Major General Ulysses S. Grant in 1863 proposed the city's capture, and Rear Admiral David G. Farragut, Union naval commander in the Gulf of Mexico, had been urging an expedition against Mobile since early 1864. Farragut needed ironclads to pass Fort Gaines and Fort Morgan, and Army troops to assist in capturing the forts themselves. By July 1864 both requirements could be met, and Farragut finalized plans for an attack.

Commanders and Ships

The Battle of Mobile Bay pitted some of the best ships in both Union and Confederate Navies under some of their most prominent officers. The attacking Union ships were part of Rear Admiral David Glasgow Farragut's West Gulf Blockading Squadron. The Tennessee-born Farragut, the U.S. Navy's first admiral, had first gone to sea at age 9 and held his first command at age 12 during the War of 1812. During the Civil War, he masterminded the capture of New Orleans and the blockade along the Gulf Coast. Of Hispanic descent, the 63-year-old Farragut struck an officer as "combining overflowing kindness with iron will and invincible determination." ¹

Farragut's squadron boasted several different types of ships. At its core were the wooden-hulled sloops-of-war *Hartford*, *Brooklyn*, *Richmond*, *Monongahela*, *Ossipee*, and *Oneida*, each mounting 20-22 guns in broadside configurations. Seven (three of double-ended design for river operations) wooden and partially-armored gunboats carrying 6-8 guns each accompanied the force. To engage the forts, Farragut had four ironclads, the oceangoing *Tecumseh* and *Manhattan*, each with a two-gun turret; and the riverine boats *Chickasaw* and *Winnebago*, each with 4 guns. ²

Defending Mobile was the responsibility of Admiral Franklin "Buck" Buchanan, the Confederate Navy's first admiral. Buchanan was from Maryland and was a distinguished sailor in the prewar U.S. Navy. He served as the first Superintendent of the U.S. Naval Academy, and later commanded one of the ships comprising Commodore Matthew Calbraith Perry's expedition to open Japan in 1853. He resigned his commission expecting Maryland to secede, and unsuccessfully tried to revoke the resignation when the state stayed in the Union. Buchanan went south and commanded the CSS *Virginia* in battle against the U.S. Navy, giving his former service its worst defeat until World War II. He suffered a wound at the end of the action and was put ashore, thus missing the *Virginia's* duel with the USS *Monitor*. After recovery Buchanan took command at

¹ John C. Kenney, "Farragut at Mobile Bay" in Robert Underwood Johnson and Clarence Clough Buel, eds., 4 vols., *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War* (New York: The Century Co. 1887-1888), 4:383.

² In a broadside configuration, all guns are arrayed along the sides of the ship, with half on one side and half on the other, as with sailing warships of previous eras. Double ended gunboats were side-wheeled ships containing turrets fore and aft. The bow and stern are identical in these ships, allowing them to steam back and forth without turning.

Mobile. A few months older than Farragut, Buchanan was a strict disciplinarian with a strong aggressive and emotional streak.

Admiral Buchanan commanded a small squadron of 4 ships, stationed near Fort Morgan to help protect the entrance to Mobile Bay. Buchanan had one ironclad, CSS *Tennessee*, and three wooden gunboats - *Gaines*, *Morgan*, and *Selma*. Each ship mounted six guns each, except for *Selma* which had four. In May Buchanan had planned a surprise attack on the Union blockading fleet, but problems getting *Tennessee* past the sandbar at Mobile delayed the operation. Finding the Union alerted to his presence, Buchanan cancelled the attack and took position near Fort Morgan to wait for Farragut's move.

Farragut's plan to attack Mobile Bay was simple yet daring. On August 3, a force of 2,000 soldiers under Major General Gordon Granger would land on Dauphin Island and engage Fort Gaines. The next day Farragut's seven large ships, each with a gunboat lashed to its port side for propulsion and protection, would run in line ahead past Fort Morgan into the bay itself, where the fleet would act as necessary to support Granger and defeat Buchanan. To support the run past Fort Morgan, the 4 ironclads—*Tecumseh*, *Manhattan*, *Winnebago*, and *Chickasaw* in order from front to back—would steam to the starboard of the column in an effort to draw fire from Fort Morgan and engage *Tennessee* and her consorts. Upon the unanimous advice and request of his captains, Admiral Farragut relinquished the lead position in line with his flagship *Hartford*, instead placing Captain James Alden's *Brooklyn* (with *Octorara*) in front. In order behind the lead ships were the parings of *Hartford* and *Metacomet*, *Richmond* and *Port Royal*, *Lackawanna* and *Seminole*, *Monongahela* and *Kennebec*, *Ossipee* and *Itasca*, with *Oneida* and *Galena* bringing up the rear.

Admiral Farragut expressed his objective to one of his officers on July 18: "I propose to go in according to programme - fourteen vessels, two and 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 . . . to assist the Army in landing on the beach and to flank the enemy." ³

Duel in Mobile Bay

The Union offensive started on August 3, 1864 with Granger's landing on Dauphin Island. By the next day his 2,000 troops stood arrayed opposite Fort Gaines, ready to attack. However, Farragut chose not to launch his part of the offensive; he preferred to wait for *Tecumseh*, which had been delayed an extra day at Pensacola.

³ United States Navy Department, *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion*, 31 vols. (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1894-1927), Series I, volume 21, p. 278 (hereafter cited as *O.R.N.*, I, 21, 318).

On the morning of August 5 Farragut was ready. As dawn broke over the eastern horizon, the Federal squadron formed and steamed northward toward Mobile Bay's entrance. "It was a weird sight as the big ships 'balanced to partners,' this dim outlines slowly emerging like phantoms in the fog," remembered Lieutenant John C. Kinney, an Army officer posted aboard *Hartford* to assist with signals between ship and shore. "The vessels were lashed together in pairs, fastened side by side by huge cables. All the vessels had been stripped for the fight, the top-hamper being left at Pensacola, and the starboard boats being either left behind or towed on the port side. The admiral's steam launch, the *Loyall*, named after his son, steamed alongside the flagship on the port side . . . Meantime a light breeze had scattered the fog and left a clear, sunny August day."⁴

At 6:47 a.m. Farragut's fleet entered Mobile Bay's mouth and the first shots came from *Tecumseh* against Fort Morgan. Alert Confederates in Fort Morgan returned fire, and more Federal ships joined the battle as Farragut's squadron progressed northward. Captain Tunis Augustus Macdonough Craven in *Tecumseh* disregarded orders and steered too far to one side of the channel; at 7:35 the ironclad hit a mine and sank in two minutes, leaving only 21 survivors of 114. Craven himself died when he stood aside at the escape ladder to let his pilot go first.

The sudden destruction of *Tecumseh* caused confusion in the Union line, as Alden panicked and began reversing *Brooklyn* to avoid the wreck and any other possible torpedoes. Behind *Brooklyn* the remaining ships slowed, bunched up, and dodged right under the guns of Fort Morgan. Confederate gunners lashed at the massed Federal squadron, and were finding the range. Defeat loomed minutes away.

Farragut watched all this from *Hartford's* rigging, where he had climbed for a view above the smoke and haze and been lashed for his safety. He shouted down to his flag captain, South Carolina-born Percival Drayton, on *Hartford's* deck. Farragut cried, "Damn the torpedoes! Drayton, four bells!" Turning to *Metacomet's* captain, Lieutenant Commander James E. Jouett, he called, "Jouett, full speed!" *Hartford* and *Metacomet* both put on maximum power, and their propellers lashed the water together. The two ships surged forward over the mines, bravely leading the fleet into the bay to engage Buchanan's squadron. Without hesitation, the rest of Farragut's ships followed their commander. Several Union sailors reported hearing clicks of torpedo detonators, but the devices were too waterlogged to explode.⁵

As the Federals passed into Mobile Bay, Buchanan's squadron approached from the east and opened fire. *Tennessee* attempted to ram, but her slow speed (5 miles per hour) enabled the faster Union ships to dodge her and escape while trading fire. At 8:05 Farragut signaled the gunboats to cut loose and engage *Tennessee's* consorts. "They steamed up the bay, engaging us with their stern guns, of which they had three each," remembered Jouett of *Metacomet*. "At 8:30 the *Gaines* retreated under cover of the fort in a crippled condition. At 9 the *Morgan* hauled off to starboard, and at 9:10 the *Selma*

⁴ Johnson, *Battles and Leaders*, 4:386.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 390-1.

struck her flag [surrendered] to this ship. I immediately dispatched a boat . . . to take charge of the prize." *Gaines* sank shortly after this action, while *Morgan* escaped to Mobile during the following night.⁶

Both sides now broke contact. Farragut retired northward, while Buchanan took shelter under the protection of Fort Morgan's guns. Farragut expected a break to regroup, and anchored his ships for damage assessment and repair and for his men to get refreshment. Suddenly a lookout reported *Tennessee* heading for them. "I did not think old Buck was such a fool," responded Farragut. The admiral turned to Drayton. "Get underway at once," he commanded. "We must be ready for him!"⁷

For the third time in the Civil War, Buchanan let his passion and aggression override his judgment; first by impulsively resigning from the U.S. Navy in 1861, wrongly anticipating Maryland's secession; second in 1862 by impulsively engaging in a musket duel with Union troops from atop the CSS *Virginia*, giving him a serious wound; and in Mobile Bay. By attacking Farragut's 17 ships, he started a fight he could not win, and surrendered all advantages to the Union.

For the next hour, a melee ensued as various Union ships rammed and fired at *Tennessee*, with the Confederates trying to give as good as they could. Faulty powder hurt Confederate shooting, but the presence of the three Union ironclads ultimately decided the issue. Accurate close-range fire from *Chickasaw's* and *Winnebago's* XI-inch and *Manhattan's* XV-inch guns destroyed *Tennessee's* stack, disabled her steering, wounded Buchanan, jammed many of *Tennessee's* firing slits closed, and cracked her armor. *Tennessee* struck her colors about 10:00; after just over three hours of maneuvering and fighting, Farragut had possession of Mobile Bay.

Aftermath

Farragut's victory was not without cost. Including the 93 lost in *Tecumseh*, the Federals lost 151 killed and 177 wounded in the battle. The Confederates lost 13 killed and 22 wounded on all ships, plus 1,587 captured on *Tennessee* and *Selma*. Except for the gunboat *Morgan*, Buchanan's powerful squadron had been wiped out.

After the casualties and stalemates on land so far in 1864, the Union Navy delivered a major victory just when it was most needed. President Lincoln proclaimed a day of thanks, and thanked Farragut and Granger for their "brilliant success" which has "won . . . the applause and thanks for the nation." Gideon Welles, Union Secretary of the Navy, told Farragut, "In the success which has attended your operations you have illustrated the efficiency and irresistible power of a naval force led by a bold and vigorous mind."⁸

⁶ *O.R.N.*, I, 21,442-3.

⁷ Johnson, *Battles and Leaders*, 4:407.

⁸ *O.R.N.*, I, 21,542-5.

In Richmond, Confederate Secretary of the Navy Stephen Mallory tried to rationalize the defeat. "Against the overwhelming forces brought to bear upon our little squadron defeat seems to have been inevitable," he wrote to the commander of *Gaines*. "But the bearing of our officers and men has snatched credit even from defeat; and . . . the triumph of the enemy leaves the honor of our service untarnished."⁹

Over the next days, Union Army and Navy forces sought to tighten their grip on the bay's mouth. Fort Gaines fell August 8, while Fort Morgan surrendered August 23 after a joint Army-Navy bombardment from the bay and Dauphin Island. These victories closed off Mobile from the outside world.

Union leaders considered a push for Mobile itself, but lacked sufficient ground forces to ensure success. However, the Federal forces at Mobile Bay's mouth remained a latent threat throughout the fall and winter of 1864. This Union presence forced 10,000 Confederate troops to continuously garrison the city against any possible Union drive northward. These Confederates were badly missed during the key battles in Georgia, Tennessee, and Virginia in the last months of 1864. Mobile itself fell in March 1865 to a Union expedition under Major General Edward R. S. Canby.

Farragut's and Buchanan's clash at Mobile Bay was the result of Union and Confederate policy and strategy, namely the enforcement of the blockade and attempting to cut off the Confederacy from outside trade. Both sides used some of their most advanced ships and experienced crews in the engagement. But in the end the battle turned on the human element—namely the actions and decisions of Admirals Farragut and Buchanan. This combination of elements, and the stakes of August 1864, gives the Battle of Mobile Bay its drama.

The Battle of Mobile Bay also is an enduring part of American culture, as today Farragut's "Damn the Torpedoes!" cry is a part of the American lexicon—a legacy of valor and leadership from the Civil War.

⁹ *O.R.N.*, I, 21,591.