ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

David Glasgow Farragut

By **Professor Emeritus Lawrence Lee Hewitt**, Southeastern Louisiana University

David Glasgow Farragut was born on July 5, 1801, at Campbell's Station, a few miles southwest of Knoxville. Despite his Scottish sounding name, his father was Spanish and his mother of Irish descent. In 1807, the family relocated to New Orleans and his mother died the following year. His last visit with his father occurred in 1810, when the father and an older brother joined the navy and nine-year-old David became the dependent of Commander David Porter, then commander of the New Orleans naval station.

David was appointed a midshipman on December 17, 1810, at the age of nine. Though not the youngest ever appointed, when he sailed with Porter aboard the *Essex* in 1811, Farragut became--and remains--the youngest officer ever to serve in the United States Navy. Early during the War of 1812, Farragut found himself master of one of the *Essex*'s prizes and the child-captain recorded in his diary: "This was an important event in my life and when it was decided that I was to take the ship to Valparaiso, I felt no little pride at finding myself in command at twelve years of age." At the age of thirteen he fought the longest and bloodiest battle of his career, being aboard the *Essex* when, in violation of international law, it was attacked in the neutral harbor of Valparaiso, Chile, by two British vessels. A paroled prisoner for the next eight months, Farragut saw no further fighting for the remainder of the War of 1812.

The next eight years witnessed considerable schooling, some service abroad, a promotion to lieutenant, his first command of a U.S. warship, and his settling down in Norfolk, Virginia. He married Susan Caroline Marchant on September 2, 1824. They had no children at the time of her death on December 27, 1840. Promoted to commander the following year, he married Virginia Dorcas Loyall on December 26, 1843. She gave birth to their only child, Loyall, on October 12, 1844. He saw little action in the Mexican War and, whether on active duty or leave of absence, he spent most of the following decade in Norfolk. In 1854 he was selected to establish the Mare Island Navy Yard, the first such facility of the United Sates on the Pacific coast. Promoted to captain in 1855, he remained in California until 1858. After a brief cruise off the Mexican coast, Farragut spent the winter of 1860-61 awaiting orders in Norfolk.

Now in his sixtieth year and having spent fifty of them in the navy, Farragut soon faced the task of choosing between his adopted state of nearly forty years or his country.

Experiencing none of the agony suffered by Robert E. Lee and others, Farragut never wavered in support of the Union. He headed north the day after Virginia seceded, accompanied by his wife and son. He settled in Hastings-on-Hudson, fifteen miles upstream of New York City. Though the country needed men of his experience in the ensuing Civil War, his life-long association with the South made his loyalty to the United States questionable, and he remained ashore throughout 1861.

But fate had dealt the cards. When a suitable commander for the expedition directed against New Orleans was needed in December of 1861, Farragut could be termed the most available officer who had demonstrated those characteristics deemed necessary for success. The final selection was made by Assistant Secretary of the Navy Gustavus V. Fox, and he chose Farragut, noting that the captain's prompt departure of Norfolk showed "great superiority of character, clear perception of duty, and firm resolution in the performance of it."

On January 9, 1862, Farragut was officially appointed to command the West Gulf Blockading Squadron. His area of responsibility stretched from St. Andrew's Bay, Florida, to the Rio Grande, as well as the coasts of Mexico and Yucatan. Ordered to "proceed up the Mississippi River and reduce the defenses which guard the approaches of New Orleans" on January 20, Farragut departed Hampton Roads, Virginia, on February 2. He steamed aboard his flagship *Hartford*, one of the newest and finest vessels in the navy. He dropped anchor off the place of rendezvous, Ship Island, Mississippi, on February 20. Nearly two months would pass before everything was in readiness to proceed up the Mississippi.

The struggle for New Orleans commenced on April 18, when the Union mortar flotilla opened fire on Forts Jackson and St. Philip, which were located across from each other about forty miles upstream from the mouth of the Mississippi River. The failure of the mortar vessels to significantly diminish the defensive capabilities of the two forts came as no surprise to Farragut. After several days he decided to attempt to pass the forts before they were reduced--a truly momentous and bold decision because such a movement went against his orders from the Navy Department and the wishes of many of his ablest officers, including a son of his former guardian, David Dixon Porter. Farragut wrote his wife: "As to being prepared for defeat, I certainly am not. Any man who is prepared for defeat would be half defeated before he commenced. I hope for success; shall do all in my power to secure it, and trust to God for the rest." This statement reflects Farragut's philosophy of combat: "I have to take this place. The chances are that I shall lose some of my vessels by torpedoes or the guns of the enemy, but with some of my fleet afloat I shall eventually be successful. I cannot lose all. I will attack regardless of consequences, and never turn back."

Before first light on April 24, Farragut advanced with seventeen vessels in a line divided into three divisions, with Farragut leading the second division. Despite a terrific fire from the Confederate batteries and the threat of destruction from fire rafts, fourteen of the vessels succeeded in passing above the forts. There they engaged the Confederate

fleet, the enemy losing eleven vessels, including the ram *Manassas*, to Farragut's loss of only a single ship.

Farragut reached the levee at New Orleans on April 25 and the city surrendered without a single round being fired from a Union cannon. Three days later the Confederate garrisons at Forts Jackson and St. Philip surrendered, and Union control of the Confederacy's most important city was secure. Farragut's victory, which was truly his because his audacity made it happen, is seldom given its rightful position in Civil War historiography. One chronicler of that event entitled his account *The Night the War was Lost*. While this presumption may be a bit much, the PBS documentary on the Civil War took the other extreme and completely ignored the impact the fall of New Orleans had on the possibility of European intervention.

Farragut's capture of New Orleans alone made him the foremost naval officer in the United States, a prominence he held until his death. On July 11, 1862, President Abraham Lincoln approved a Congressional Resolution thanking Farragut and all who participated in the expedition. This praise was followed on July 30 when Lincoln commissioned him a rear admiral to date from July 16, making Farragut the first officer ever to hold this commission in the U.S. Navy.

Farragut received another honor, of sorts, as a result of his capture of New Orleans. Union Major General Benjamin F. Butler had a problem during the early days of Federal occupation of New Orleans--how to discipline the ladies of New Orleans who constantly insulted the officers and men of his command. Butler hoped the behavior would cease of its own accord because any action he took would likely lead to a riot. Unfortunately, instead of curtailing their insolent behavior, they continued along the same path until the unsuspecting Farragut fell victim to them while walking down the street one Sunday. Farragut and his companion were showered by a woman with the contents from her chamber pot. It was this incident that finally caused Butler to issue his infamous "General Order No. 28" on May 15, that stated: "As the officers and soldiers of the United States have been subject to repeated insults from the women (calling themselves ladies) of New Orleans, in return for the most scrupulous non-interference and courtesy on our part, it is ordered that hereafter when any female shall, by word, gesture, or movement, insult or show contempt for any officer or soldier of the United States, she shall be regarded and held liable to be treated as a woman of the town plying her avocation."

Farragut's association with this episode has been overlooked or ignored by every one of his biographers. Without doubt, Farragut was glad to leave the Crescent City and return to the safety of his cabin aboard the *Hartford*.

Had Farragut been left to plan strategy for the Gulf region following the fall of New Orleans, he would have departed the Mississippi River and steamed eastward and attacked the defenses of Mobile, Alabama. Peremptory orders, however, dictated a movement up the Mississippi River and he would not be able to return to New Orleans until late July. For the balance of 1862 Farragut was able to turn his attention toward

what he considered his most important objective--the closing down of Gulf ports. By the end of the year, he had secured every port except for Mobile.

Eighteen sixty-three, however, brought a different story. The Confederates recaptured Galveston and Sabine Pass, the CSS *Alabama* sank the USS *Hatteras*, and the CSS *Florida* managed to escape from Mobile. Farragut took these reverses personally, and, feeling as he did, was quick to assume responsibility for each of them. Undoubtedly, when he learned of each additional victim of the *Florida*, thirty-seven in all, the news struck more than one of his emotions. But there was little he could do.

During early 1863, Farragut was again committed to operations on the Mississippi River, specifically against Port Hudson, Louisiana. Although Farragut did not consider operations above New Orleans to be part of his activities in the Gulf, he had no choice. In March the Federals planned a combined naval and land attack against the Confederate bastion overlooking the Mississippi River. Farragut's squadron would run past the river batteries and knock them out. Once above Port Hudson, his vessels could close off the Red River and stop the flow of supplies to Port Hudson. Simultaneously, Major General Nathaniel P. Banks' army would march up from Baton Rouge and threaten to attack the land defenses. It was hoped that his diversion would draw men and cannons away from the river batteries, thereby easing the passage of Farragut's vessels up the river. If Farragut succeeded, then Banks' men would cut off Port Hudson from the east, forcing the evacuation or surrender of the garrison.

Banks' army marched out of Baton Rouge on the morning of March 13. The advance continued the next day, and the troops were in position that afternoon. Assured that the infantry would make their demonstration when needed, Farragut scheduled his attack for just before dawn on March 15. He would make his movement with seven vessels. Three steam sloops would advance with a smaller gunboat lashed to their port (left) sides. If the larger vessel were disabled or ran aground, the smaller ship could pull it to safety. The pairs were the *Hartford* and *Albatross*, *Richmond* and *Genesee*, and *Monongahela* and *Kineo*. One vessel, the *Mississippi*, had no consort because of her large, side-wheel paddle boxes.

Late on the fourteenth, Farragut revised his timetable, thinking it better to risk navigating the bend in the river in darkness rather than Confederate gunners in daylight. Banks claimed he could not make a supporting diversionary attack at that time, but the irritated admiral decided to proceed anyway. The squadron began its run about 11:20 P.M., and the Confederate batteries opened fire almost immediately. Confederate soldiers on the west bank of the river lighted bonfires to outline the enemy vessels for their gunners. The earth shook for miles with the exchange of fire and the concussions of exploding shells.

Fairly early in the battle one of those strange Civil War incidents occurred. Lieutenant Colonel Marshall J. Smith of New Orleans was the commander of the Confederate heavy artillery. He had served under Farragut in the navy before the war. During the fighting, he stationed himself at one of the batteries and intended to give the

Federals a warm reception. Farragut's flagship, the *Hartford*, came in close to the bluffs near this battery. Smith wrote that the vessel "came so near to our battery that a pistol shot would have taken effect on her deck." To pay his respects to his old commander, Smith had the two columbiads in the battery double shotted. He then personally aimed one of them at the *Hartford*. "When he gave the order to fire, both friction primers failed. Replacing them, again Smith gave the order to fire. Once more, both primers misfired." The *Hartford* passed the battery unharmed.

Only the *Hartford* and her consort, the *Albatross*, got past the river batteries. Both the *Richmond* and *Monongahela* ran aground on the west bank and were severely damaged by the Confederate cannon fire before getting free. The two sloops, with their consorts, had to turn around and seek safety below. The *Mississippi* also ran aground and was set on fire by hot shot. She was evacuated by her crew and eventually slid off the shore back into the river. The current carried her almost half way to Baton Rouge before the fires exploded her magazines, destroying her.

Farragut's attempted passage of the Port Hudson batteries was a failure. The Confederate gunners had won a strategic and tactical victory. Farragut's two vessels had to remain together for mutual protection against the Confederate flotilla up the Red River. Consequently, when they had to go upriver for coal, steamboats in the Red River availed themselves of Farragut's absence to continue to deliver foodstuffs to Port Hudson.

Instead of attacking Port Hudson, Banks initiated a new campaign. He moved most of his army west of the river to drive Confederate troops out of south Louisiana. Consequently, Farragut's ocean-going vessels remained in the Mississippi. Finally, in early May, Banks decided to move again against Port Hudson. From above and below Port Hudson, Farragut's vessels bombarded the Confederate bastion in support of the army's operations to capture the stronghold. When the garrison surrendered on July 9, the entire Mississippi River was under Union control. For his efforts, Farragut was allowed a respite in New York. He departed New Orleans on August 1. Not until early January of 1864 did he return to duty, sailing from New York for the engagement he had longed for since April of 1862--an assault upon the defenses of Mobile. It would prove to be his most famous engagement.

Offensive operations were slow to get underway, however, as he had to await the arrival of the necessary ironclads and the movements of the army. The entrance to Mobile Bay, thirty miles from the Gulf, was defended on its east side by Fort Morgan; and nearly three miles distant on its west side by Fort Gaines. Close under Fort Morgan was an open channel used by blockade runners. The rest of the passage was obstructed by a double row of mines, then known as "torpedoes." Farragut's fleet consisted of four ironclads and fourteen wooden ships. Early in the morning of August 5 it steamed down the channel under Fort Morgan, the ironclads leading, followed by the wooden ships lashed in pairs. The *Hartford* was about the middle of the line, carrying the admiral, who had taken an elevated position in the main rigging of his ship, in order to observe the battle from the best vantage-point. At 6:45 A.M. the *Tecumseh* fired the first shot. Soon

the forts answered, and then the Confederate flotilla. Off Fort Morgan the *Tecumseh* struck a torpedo and went down, carrying with her nearly all her officers and crew. The other ships fell into confusion. The *Brooklyn* in front of the *Hartford* stopped. Hesitating for a moment at this crisis in the battle, Farragut decided to go on and ordered the *Hartford* to be driven ahead at full speed. A warning cry came from the *Brooklyn*, "Torpedoes!" "Damn the torpedoes! Four bells! Captain [Percival] Drayton, go ahead! [Lieutenant Commander James E.] Jouett, full speed!" shouted the admiral, as the *Hartford* took the lead. Her bottom scraped the torpedoes as she passed over them, but none exploded, although their primers snapped. Soon the whole fleet had safely passed the forts, above which the Confederate flotilla was encountered and dispersed. On August 7 Fort Gaines surrendered, and on the twenty-third Fort Morgan. The Battle of Mobile Bay was the crowning event of Farragut's life. He had reached a position as preeminent in the American navy as that of Nelson had been in the British navy. On December 23 President Lincoln approved a bill creating the office of vice-admiral and Farragut was immediately named to fill it. On July 26, 1866, he was commissioned admiral, a grade especially created for him.

Following the Battle of Mobile Bay, the Navy Department selected Farragut to command the naval forces that were to be employed against the defenses of Wilmington, North Carolina. When it was learned that Farragut's health had been undermined by his long service in Southern waters, he was relieved from the Wilmington assignment and granted a leave of absence. Returning to New York, he was formally welcomed by the city on December 12. A few days later some of the city's some prominent residents presented him with $50,000, with the understanding that he would use the funds to purchase a house in the city and make it his permanent residence, which he did.

In early 1865 Farragut served briefly on the James River in Virginia, his last active service during the Civil War. He commanded the European Squadron between April of 1867 and November of 1868. He suffered a heart attack in 1869, from which he never fully recovered. He died in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, on August 14, 1870, in his seventieth year.

Farragut was an efficient administrator despite an almost lust for combat. He handled the bureaucratic red tape, especially that involving trade through the opposing lines effectively. His strategy was flawless except for the Port Hudson campaign. His tactics were marred by only two mistakes, one at New Orleans and one at Mobile Bay. Both involved an altering of the desired deployment of the fleet in order to accommodate the personal feelings of subordinates. The need to maintain harmony between one's subordinates is understandable, but in each case where Farragut wavered from his original plan for this reason it cost the United States Navy a vessel: the *Cayuga* below New Orleans and the *Tecumseh* at Mobile Bay.

Although the names of Lee and Grant, Sherman and Jackson, and numerous other army commanders remain almost household words, Farragut and the representatives of the opposing Civil War navies have almost vanished into obscurity. He deserves better.

James Glasgow Farragut (Farragut changed his first name from James to David while sailing with Commander David Dixon Porter, who had informally adopted him, on the *Essex* during the War of 1812.)

Born	July 5, 1801 Campbell's Station (now Farragut), Tennessee
Died	August 14, 1870 Portsmouth, New Hampshire
Buried	September 30, 1870 Woodlawn Cemetery, Bronx, New York
Father	George Anthony Magin Farragut
Mother	Elizabeth Shine
Career Milestones	Youngest midshipman ever to serve in United States Navy | received thanks of United States Congress for capturing New Orleans, Louisiana | first Rear Admiral, Vice Admiral, and Admiral in United States Navy.

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