THE MISSISSIPPI FLOTILLA.

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In a conversation with the writer in 1880, General Grant remarked that "without the gunboats on the Mississippi and its tributaries any attempt of the army to wrest from the Confederacy the Mississippi valley must have proved futile; indeed, the Confederate states could have prolonged the war indefinitely but for the services of the Mississippi squadron."

It fell to the lot of that gallant officer, Commander John Rogers of the navy, to be assigned to the duty of forming the nucleus of the Mississippi squadron, which, though considered of little significance at first, was destined to become an indispensable force in the prosecution of the war. In May, 1861, he purchased at Cincinnati three river steamers—the Tyler, Lexington, and Conestoga. These he immediately had altered into gunboats by raising around them perpendicular bulwarks of oak, five inches thick, that should be proof against musketry and pierced for ports, but without iron plating. The boilers were dropped into the hold and the steam pipes were lowered as much as possible. The heaviest guns carried by these vessels were 64-pounder smooth-bore and 32-pounder rifled Parrott's. When completed they were at once taken to Cairo, Illinois, where they arrived in August, 1861.

A contract for the construction of seven ironclads was awarded to that universal genius, Captain James B. Eads. These were to be 175 feet long, plated with two and one-half inches of iron forward, backed by twenty-four inches of oak. As strange as it may now seem, they were left without plating in the after parts and stern, for the reason that it was intended that they should be fought head-on, and never expose their sides or sterns to the enemy. This circumstance alone shows how crude were
the ideas of even such men as Eads respecting the character of naval service on inland waters. This oversight in the construction of these vessels proved a source of weakness, and, hence, of danger, in almost every instance in which they were engaged with the enemy. The casements of each one of the seven were pierced for thirteen guns. The first armament was of very doubtful character, but the best a plundered and unprepared government could furnish.

The vessels were named after cities on the Ohio and Mississippi rivers, namely: Cairo, Carondelet, Cincinnati, Louisville, St. Louis, Mound City, Pittsburg. It may be said without reflection on other vessels that these, with the Benton, formed the main strength of the Mississippi squadron throughout the war. More pretentious vessels were built, but owing to extreme bad workmanship, or appearing too late upon the scene, bore no proportionate share in the fighting. The Benton had twice the tonnage of either one of the seven, was 202 feet long and well constructed, the latter being explained by the fact that she was not built by, but purchased for, the government. She was built for a snag boat. Her armament at first consisted of sixteen guns, the heaviest being 9-inch shell guns. Aside from her sluggishness she was without doubt the most formidable boat in the squadron. The Essex was next to the Benton in size, and superior to her in armament, but after the reduction of Fort Henry it was not her fortune to be identified with many of the important achievements of the Mississippi squadron. The ironclads, when finished, were turned over to the Quartermaster's department in December, 1861. It is amusing to reflect that gunboats, at the beginning of the war, were listed among quartermaster's stores. Just imagine a requisition on a Q. M. for one ironclad or one wooden gunboat!

The idea of a river navy in 1861 was so novel that the authorities seemed at a loss to know whether the "auxiliary," as they styled it, belonged to the army or navy. The idea was hooted at as an impracticable one by many of the most prominent officers of both branches of the service. The Secretary of the Navy, referring to the subject in his report as late as 1862, says: "The service was anomalous in its character, and there was with many great credulity as to the utility and practicability of gunboats in carrying on hostilities on the river, where it was be-
lieved batteries on the banks could prevent their passage." Neither department seemed willing to assume the responsibility of caring for and directing the novel force. Confusion and delay resulted from this condition of things. There was lack of interest in the enterprise, lack of money in carrying on the work, lack of men for crews and lack of armament. What men there were knew nothing of the duties aboard a man-of-war. They were of a very heterogeneous description, some being from the lakes, some from the steamboat service on the river and some from the army. An order was issued from Washington to detail 1,100 men from the army to supply the deficiency, but General Halleck would not consent to the detail unless the soldiers were accompanied by their officers, who should command them aboard the vessels.

Luckily at this juncture Captain A. H. Foote, one of the most level-headed men in the navy, succeeded to the command of the embryo squadron. He immediately set about placing the fleet in order, and sought to secure for it the recognition from the Navy Department which it subsequently received. He promptly refused to accept soldiers detailed from the army on terms proposed by General Halleck. The Secretary of War and Secretary of the Navy were both informed that it were far better for the vessels to go into action half manned rather than to have such an endless cause of confusion introduced into the flotilla. It was a fortunate circumstance that Foote was thrown into contact with General Grant as the commanding officer at Cairo just at this critical moment in the formation of the fleet. These two men were of the same general type of mind. They were both intensely practical and as free as possible from red-tape foolishness. Their happy co-operation overcame many obstacles and prepared the way for successes that would have been lost to the Union cause under less favorable circumstances. Neither Grant nor Fremont cared to exercise any control over the flotilla, and all the former asked was co-operation, which Foote gave promptly and heartily. It soon became apparent, however, that the "river navy" rightly belonged to the Navy Department and should be under its direct and absolute control. Accordingly Captain Foote was made a flag officer with the rank of Major General, which relieved him for the time being of a certain class of petty annoyances to which he had been subjected, and a few
months later the flotilla was formally transferred to the navy. Flag Officer Foote was now able to write to the Secretary of the Navy: "If the flotilla does not now accomplish something for the Union cause, it will be the fault of the Navy Department and the officer in command of the flotilla."

At the time Captain Foote took command of the fleet it was composed of three wooden gunboats, nine ironclads and thirty-eight mortar boats. Some of the latter were not yet finished. The mortar boats were rafts of blocks of solid timber, carrying each one 13-inch mortar. This was the beginning of a squadron which, before the war came to a close, numbered more than one hundred vessels.

While preparations were making for more vigorous work, the Tyler, Lexington and Conestoga were by no means inactive. They were constantly employed in reconnoitering up and down the Ohio and Mississippi, the Cumberland and Tennessee rivers. In these excursions they were present when Grant seized Paducah and Smithland; covered the advance of troops on the Missouri side in a feint on Columbus; drove a rebel gunboat under the batteries at that place; broke up a rebel camp on the Cumberland, killing several of the enemy and capturing considerable Confederate property, and did much to keep alive attachment to the Union where it existed along these streams.

On November 7, 1861, the Lexington and Tyler convoyed 3,000 troops, under command of General Grant, to Belmont, a point nearly opposite Columbus, where there was a Confederate camp. After a short and sharp fight the enemy were driven from the field and took refuge behind the high bank of the river under cover of the guns on the opposite side. The victory somewhat demoralized our soldiers, who scattered about shaking hands and congratulating each other upon how they had got away with the Johnnies. Some of the officers mounted stumps and delivered eloquent eulogies upon the gallantry of their men and upon the flag. While these remarkable performances were going on the enemy was throwing reinforcements across the river and taking advantageous positions. The cry soon ran through our little army that they were surrounded by the enemy. Unused to such predicaments our men thought the proper and only thing to do by an army thus surrounded was to promptly surrender. But Grant rode among his men and told them that as they had fought
their way in they certainly could fight their way out. Under the inspiration of this, to them, new idea they were ready to follow their leader anywhere. The enemy had succeeded in wedging in between our men and the transports so effectually that it looked very much as if he would gather in a pretty good run of shad. At this crisis the Tyler and Lexington got the range of the rebels, dropped shrapnel and five-second shell among them so recklessly that they fell back in confusion, and before they could reform for a second advance our men succeeded in reaching the transports and embarking. General Grant was the last one of the army to cross the gang-plank. The gunboats covered the retreat of the transports and succeeded in punishing the enemy a good deal. The transports had not gone far when it was discovered that forty men of the 7th Iowa infantry had been left behind. The Tyler returned, shelled the enemy back, made a landing and took the soldiers aboard. They had missed their course in getting back to the transports and found safety in secure hiding places in the jungle on the river bank.

The importance of this little fight centers in the fact that it was the first pitched battle of the war in the Mississippi valley proper: the first battle of the war in which General Grant commanded and the first battle in which the gunboats took part. And it should not be overlooked that the gunboats on this occasion not only rendered a service to the army and to the country in an ordinary sense, but, in the light of General Grant’s subsequent career, in a larger and more particular sense. It may be claimed in all fairness that at the very beginning of hostilities on the Mississippi river the gunboats by their great service embalmed their memory in glory and took their place in undying history.

Fort Henry was the next point fixed upon by General Grant and Flag Officer Foote for a combined attack of the army and gunboats. This fort was an earthwork with five bastions, situated on the east bank of the Tennessee river, on low ground, and so favorably located as to command the river below for a distance of three miles. There were mounted in the fort one 10-inch Columbiad, one 60-pounder rifle, two 42 and eight 32-pounders. The flotilla was in position below the fort at the time agreed upon, but the army was detained by heavy rains and mud. After waiting in vain for three days for the army to come up, Foote determined to attack the fort alone. A little after noon
on February 6, 1862, he advanced upon the fort in the following order: The armored vessels formed the first line and the wooden ones the second. Firing began at 1,700 yards, the vessels advancing to within 600 yards of the works. The fighting was sharp and decisive. In one hour and forty minutes after firing began the rebel flag was hauled down and General Tilghman surrendered the fort and garrison to the navy. Upon the arrival of Grant's army, a few hours after, the prisoners and all were turned over to it.

In this fight—the first one in which the ironclads were engaged—these vessels demonstrated their ability to stand the severest battering the enemy was able at that time to give them, provided the boats could fight "head-on." Some of them were struck fairly over thirty times, sustaining only slight indentures. But for a serious disaster to the Essex the fort would have been captured without loss on our side. A shot penetrated the port bow of the Essex, killing several people, passing through the middle boiler and causing the vessel to fill with scalding water and steam. All who could do so jumped overboard to escape a more horrible death. The fleet lost two killed and nine wounded, besides twenty-eight badly scalded, many of whom died. There were nineteen soldiers on board, nine of whom were scalded, four fatally. The fate of the Essex made fearfully apparent a class of accidents to which high pressure gunboats were liable. This was a handsome fight. The enemy's guns were about on a level with the boats, and hence, in the matter of elevation, neither held the vantage ground. The results were very encouraging to the officers and men of the flotilla, and the experience derived went a long way towards preparing them for the succession of fights in which they were soon to take part.

The Tyler, Lexington and Conestoga pushed on up the Tennessee river for the purpose of destroying a railroad bridge twenty miles up, and capturing some boats that were known to have sought safety in flight. In this they were successful, besides capturing the Eastport, a ram that the rebels were building, and destroying a rebel camp at Savannah. Part of the flotilla went round to Fort Donelson and assisted in the capture of that important point. From here the ironclads returned to Cairo and soon found employment at Island No. 10, while the Tyler and Lexington kept in hailing distance of Grant on the Tennessee.
Opportunity to serve that General and his army, much in the same manner as at Belmont, presented itself April 6th. That they performed their duty well is attested by the reports of both commanding officers, as also others officers who watched with eagerness the fortunes of the first day at Pittsburg Landing. Grant says: "At a late hour in the afternoon a desperate attempt was made to turn our left and get possession of the landing, transports, etc. This point was guarded by the gunboats. And in repulsing the enemy much is due to them." Unfortunately he does not say how much. Those who met the terrific and maddened onslaught of the enemy on the left, and who know that they could not have maintained their position without the aid of the gunboats, are competent to testify. General Hurlburt, who commanded on the extreme left, in his report says: "From my own observation and the statement of prisoners the fire of the gunboats was most effectual in stopping the advance of the enemy on Sunday afternoon and night."

The absolute truth is, the Tyler lay with her broadside at the mouth of the ravine upon which the extreme left of our army rested, and when the enemy hurled their dense ranks into this depression to reach our sadly weakened line she rained shell and canister and shrapnel upon him so thick and fast that he withdrew precipitately, leaving his dead and dying piled one upon the other in the ravine. Those who saw that winrow of mangled human forms after the battle needed no other proof of the awful havoc wrought by the fire of the gunboats at that critical moment. Beauregard says in his report: "The enemy broke and sought refuge behind a commanding eminence covering Pittsburg Landing, not more than a half mile distant, under cover of the gunboats, which kept up a fierce and annoying fire with shot and shell of the heaviest description." He gives as his reason for his army being unable to withstand the onslaught of our boys the next day to be that, "during the night after the first day's fighting, the enemy broke the men's rest by a discharge at measured intervals of heavy shells thrown from the gunboats." In other place he refers to the Union army as "sheltered by such an auxiliary as their gunboats." The impression among the Confederates was that the two gunboats saved Grant's army from capture. And our boys, who laid on the banks of the Tennessee in the rain and mud throughout that awful Sunday night, will
not withhold the statement that the screech of the 64-pound shells from the Tyler and Lexington, as they flew over their heads into the disturbed ranks of the enemy, was a sweet lullaby to them; that they felt secure for the time under the guns of the black watchdogs that moved up and down the river close behind them all that long night. I think it may be said in the light of all the testimony that Grant and his army were saved at Shiloh by the gunboats.

While the Tyler and Lexington were doing such important service at Shiloh the ironclads and mortar boats were co-operating with General Pope in operations for the reduction of Island No. 10 and the capture of New Madrid and Tiptonville. After bombarding the island for about a month circumstances warranted the hazard of attempting to run a vessel by the batteries on the island under cover of the night. With the support of gunboats below General Pope felt confident that he could bag the entire rebel army confronting him. In a dispatch to Foote he said: “The lives of thousands of men and the success of our operations hang upon your decision; with two gunboats all is safe.” Only one of Foote’s commanding officers favored the plan. Save Captain Walke all agreed in the opinion that any attempt to run a single vessel by six forts, under fire of fifty guns with the muzzles almost touching the vessel’s sides, must result in certain destruction to the vessel. Nevertheless, Walke was ready to make the venture. The passage of the Carondelet was a highly dramatic as well as daring event of the war. At 10 o’clock when the vessel swung loose and headed down stream on her perilous trip, a terrific thunderstorm came on; in the midst of thunder that almost drowned the noise of the enemy’s guns and with the lurid lightening playing all about her, she plunged down through the narrow and foaming channel, exposed alike to the fury of the storm and the enemy’s terrific fire; now wrapped in impenetrable darkness, now in the full blaze of the lightening’s glare, hardly knowing whither she was heading, yet held firmly in her course by the steady hand of her pilot, William R. Hoel, aided by Charles Wilson, who stood knee deep in the foaming water on the forecastle heaving the lead, crying “n-o b-o-t-t-o-m,” she made the passage in safety and well-earned glory.

It has been thought that the first feat of this character was accomplished by Admiral Farragut in his passage of Forts St.
Phillips and Jackson. But that event occurred three weeks after the event just described, and instead of several vessels co-operating to distract and confuse the enemy's fire, as was the case with Farragut's fleet, there was but a single vessel in this instance to face the peril of the passage. Later in the war such undertakings came to be looked upon as less dangerous, but this fact does not detract from the gallantry of Walke nor diminish the glory of the precedent set by his vessel.

The success of the Carondelet sent dismay to the heart of the enemy, which was shown by the confusion and indecision of his conduct. The Pittsburg followed the example of the Carondelet on the night of April 6th. With the aid of these boats Pope crossed his army and pursued the enemy to Tiptonville. Unable to escape on account of an impassable swamp in their rear and the river being in possession of the gunboats, the rebel army of 7,000 men and three general officers laid down their arms. The island surrendered to the navy that night. Thus within three days after the passage of the Carondelet the entire rebel force, with the batteries and a vast amount of property, were surrendered into our hands. Without any delay the flotilla proceeded down the river in hope of finding some rebel gunboats that were reported to be in the vicinity of Fort Pillow.

Fifty miles below New Madrid five of the enemy's armed vessels were sighted. But without showing fight they retreated under the guns of Fort Pillow. The "river navy" had now been tested as an immediate auxiliary of the army in battle, had fought single-handed a formidable fort, had run by a series of batteries under cover of darkness, and now it was hoped the time had come when she would be able to meet an enemy in open water. The Confederate gunboats, however, did not seem eager to meet our vessels, and the latter settled down to a regular bombardment of the fort. With the co-operation of Pope's army it was confidently hoped that it could be taken within a week. Plans had been agreed upon and the army was ready to do its part, when an order came from General Halleck, ordering Pope with his army northward. The flotilla continued to shell the fort by towing a mortar boat down within easy range, where under the protection of an ironclad it would throw a given number of shells, when a relief would take their places.

While this work was progressing Flag Officer Foote, whose
health had been seriously impaired by a stubborn wound received at Fort Donelson, turned the command over to Captain Charles H. Davis and went north to recruit his shattered health. He had taken the flotilla at its birth, organized and equipped it, proved its utility and gave it an honorable place in history. He was loath to leave it, even for a brief period. Bearing with him the love and admiration of his officers and men, he took his departure May 9, 1862, never to be permitted to return. The mental strain and draining wound so long endured was more than he could bear and he died within a year.

The enemy had eight gunboats and rams lying under the guns of Fort Pillow. They were officially known as the River Defense Fleet. On the morning of May 10 four of these vessels, the Bragg, Price, Sumter and Van Dorn, came up and attacked the Cincinnati, the latter being on duty guarding the mortar boat. The attack was characterized by spirit and dash. Owing to the fog the signals of the flagship were not seen or understood by the other boats, and a half hour elapsed before reinforcements came to the relief of the Cincinnati, who was making a most gallant fight with her four powerful antagonists single-handed. The Mound City, Carondelet, Pittsburg and Benton got under way and came down one at a time. They soon drove the enemy under cover, but not until he had done serious damage to the Cincinnati and Mound City. Whatever the damage done to the rams by our boats, they were all ready for action at Memphis a month later. Altogether the affair was not very creditable to the flotilla. The damages to the Cincinnati and Mound City were promptly repaired and, with the addition of the rams Queen of the West and Monarch, the flotilla was considered by Captain Davis the equal of any emergency the River Defense Fleet might thrust upon it.

Fort Pillow was evacuated June 5th, and the flotilla moved down the river immediately and came to anchor at the head of "Hen and Chickens," a group of islands five miles above Memphis. The rebel fleet, under command of Commodore Montgomery, was lying at the levee in front of the city. It consisted of eight boats, all fitted for rams, in addition to their armament. They were the Little Rebel, General Lovell, General Price, General Bragg, Sumter, Van Dorn, General Beauregard and Thompson. The Union fleet consisted of five ironclads and two rams.
They were the Louisville, Carondelet, Benton, Cairo and St. Louis and the rams Queen of the West and Monarch.

Early in the morning of the 6th of June the rebel vessels moved out into the stream and formed in double line of battle ready to meet our advance. The enemy had not long to wait, for our vessels were already moving down upon him. The heights were crowded with people who had gathered to see, as they doubtless hoped, the Yankee gunboats cleaned out. But in this they were doomed to sad disappointment. The Confederates fired the first gun. Our vessels reserved their fire till within certain range. In fact, we had some scruples about firing towards the women and children on the heights. But a few shots from the enemy dissipated these scruples and the enemy's fire was returned with liberal interest. The ironclads had hardly got down to business when, contrary to the plan of battle, the two rams, commanded by the impetuous Ellet, sped down through our fleet and dashed into the midst of the enemy, exposing themselves not only to the combined attack of his boats, but to our fire as well. The Queen made a dive for the Lovell and, striking her amidships, sent her to the bottom and out of sight. As she was rounding for a chance at the Price the Beauregard rammed her in the stern and sent her limping to the Arkansas shore. The Beauregard and Price made for the Monarch from opposite sides, but were not quick enough, and came together with a crash that cut the Price down to the water line, and she put into the Arkansas shore. The Monarch turned and successfully rammed the Beauregard; at the same time the Benton gave her a raking shot, and the Monarch towed her to the Arkansas shore, where the Little Rebel soon after went with her steam chest exploded and her plating pretty much all knocked off. The River Defense Fleet by this time had had all the defense punched and knocked out of it and the remnant lit out down the river, with the Monarch and ironclads close in their wake. The exciting chase continued for ten miles below the city and resulted in the destruction of all the fugitives save one—the Van Dorn. Thus the River Defense Fleet was literally wiped out of existence in its first encounter with our fleet. Naval history does not furnish an instance of a more complete victory or one that involved greater consequences.

This victory opened the Mississippi to the mouth of the
Yazoo and transferred the most important military operations from the outskirts to the very heart of the Confederacy. Had our flotilla been beaten the enemy could have laid siege to Cairo, Cincinnati, Louisville and St. Louis, and accomplished other mischief beyond calculation. Memphis surrendered the same day.

A few days after this decisive and important victory the St. Louis, Mound City, Lexington and Conestoga started for the White river to co-operate with General Curtis, who was coming down through Missouri and Arkansas. On the 17th of June the boats discovered two well built earthworks at St. Charles, eighty miles up the White river. An attack was immediately determined upon and the boats were formed in line, the Mound City taking the advance. This vessel had hardly entered the fight when a shot penetrated her casemate and exploded her steam drum. The scene that followed was heartrending in the extreme. The vessel filled with scalding water and steam, and her crew, to escape being cooked alive, jumped overboard. To make the scene yet more horrifying the heartless enemy fired upon the men who were struggling in the water. Out of a crew of 175 only three officers and twenty-two men escaped. The fight was continued to a finish, the works being carried by storm by Colonel Fitch, in command of an Indiana regiment, after the gunboats had dismounted several guns and otherwise damaged the works.

Joseph Fry, formerly an officer in the United States navy, commanded the works and the indignant manner in which he was treated by our officers after the surrender served to remind him of the heartless, cowardly dog that he was. The capture of St. Charles opened White river, and a few days later, July 1, the Mississippi flotilla shook hands with Farragut's fleet at Vicksburg.

Thus, in one year, one month and fifteen days after the first hammer was struck in the construction of a gunboat for service on the Mississippi river a navy had been created, which had saved Grant and his army at Belmont, had reduced Fort Henry, had co-operated with the army in the capture of Fort Donelson, had saved the day at Shiloh, had challenged the admiration of the world by its daring and dramatic passage of Island No. 10, which resulted in the bagging of an entire army of 7,000 men, had driven the enemy under cover at Fort Pillow, had destroyed the enemy's entire fleet at Memphis, and without stopping to take breath pushed on down into the very heart of the enemy's coun-
try, where it struck the heavy blows that compelled the surrender of St. Charles on the White river; and having opened the two rivers, thereby splitting the Confederacy asunder, it was ready to enter upon a career, with the mouth of the Yazoo as its base, which for novelty, desperate situations, grand achievement and duration is without parallel in naval history.