

CONFEDERATE LIKE ME *p. 60*

13 MINUTES IN THE GULF *p. 38*

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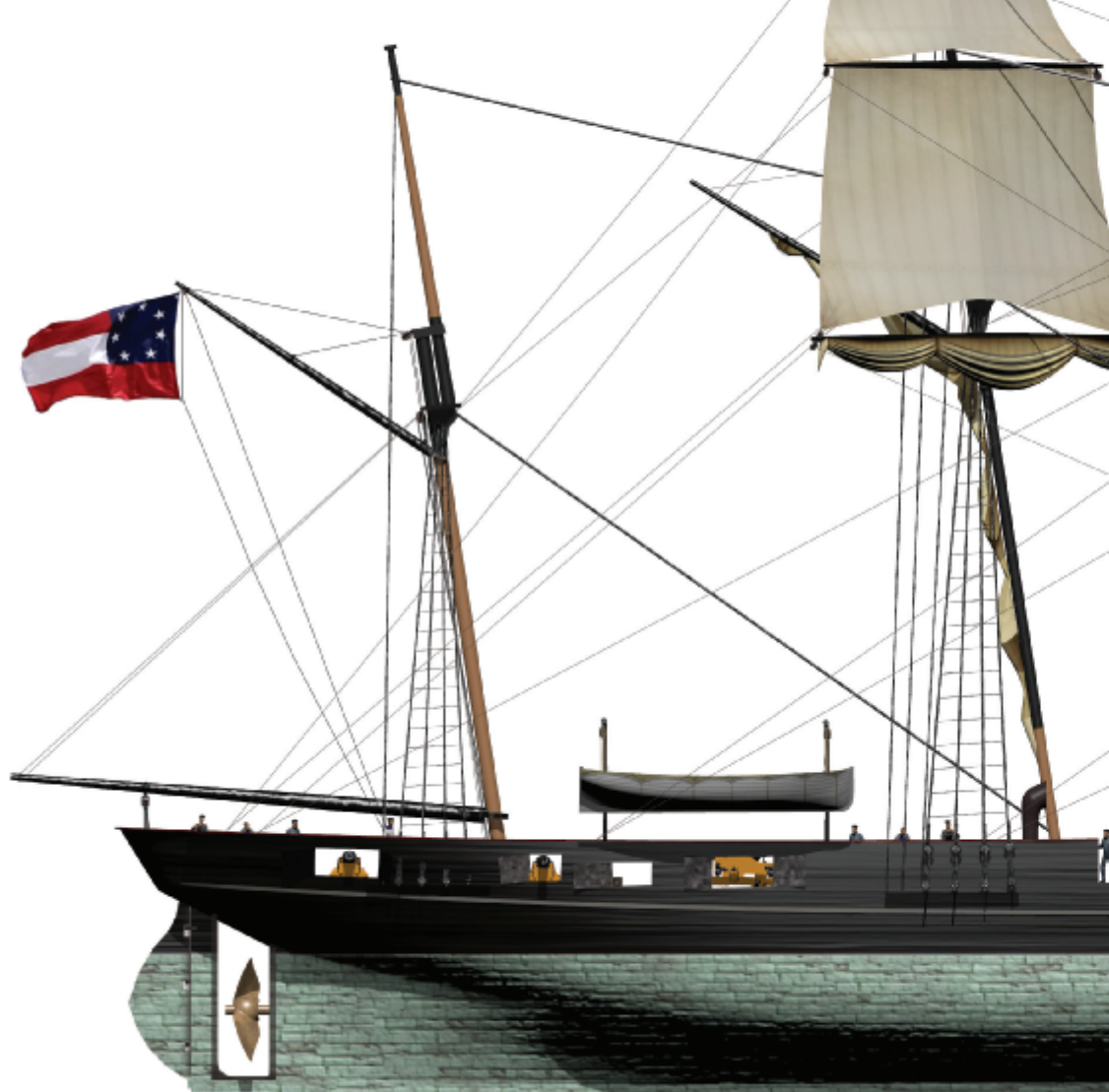
Lincoln

STEVEN SPIELBERG'S NEW MOVIE HAS BEEN
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13 MIN





MINUTES

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.



S. NAVY COMMODORE Henry H. Bell was worried. Four hours before, in the late afternoon, he had dispatched one of his blockade steamers, 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*, pounding 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 inconvenient burden on 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.

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.

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



Above: Captain Raphael Semmes (right) and First Lieutenant John M. Kell pose on the deck of CSS *Alabama*. Opposite: Lieutenant Commander Homer Crane Blake, commander of USS *Hatteras*.

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

NAVAL HISTORY & HERITAGE COMMAND, WASHINGTON, DC (ALABAMA IMAGE); EDWARD T. COTTAM JR. (BLAKE IMAGE)

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 merchants 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

THE COMBATANTS



 **USS HATTERAS**

 **CSS ALABAMA**

Built (year)	Baltimore (1861)	Birkenhead, England (1862)
Cost	\$110,000	\$250,000
Tonnage	1,126	1,050
Length	210'	212'
Beam	34'	32'
Draft	18'	14'
Speed	6.5 knots (7.5 mph)	12.8 knots (14.7 mph)
Broadside Weight	114 lbs.	274 lbs.

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



time before that port served as the staging area for a major invasion of Texas. Indeed, northern newspapers soon reported that in New Orleans, Union general Nathaniel Banks was outfitting a force of 20,000 men, the “Banks Expedition,” destined for Galveston.

On *Alabama*, Semmes monitored the war as closely as he could. From every enemy ship he captured, Semmes seized and eagerly read any newspapers on board. On December 7, 1862, while cruising off Cuba, *Alabama* captured the California mail steamer *Ariel*, carrying recent newspapers from New York. From these, Semmes learned of the Banks Expedition and the rumor that the invasion force intended to start its inland push from Galveston sometime around January 10, 1863.

Alabama’s campaign against northern civilian shipping had been a great success so far, but Semmes desired to inflict a more direct blow against the enemy. The reports about the planned Banks Expedition seemed to provide the perfect opportunity to do this. To supply an operation of the scale described in the papers, Semmes believed, there would have to be a large fleet of transports and supply ships anchored off Galveston—40, 50, or more, most of them anchored in deep water outside the harbor. Semmes determined to head for Galveston, intending to take *Alabama* into the middle of that transport fleet at night and destroy as many vessels as he could.⁶

John Macintosh Kell, *Alabama*’s executive officer, considered this plan “the boldest of all the bold schemes of Captain Semmes.”⁷ Interviewed about it long after the war, Kell was still amazed by his captain’s daring strategy. “His plan was to wait until the fleet anchored, when the provision ships and the men-of-war which escorted them would be carelessly left together in fancied safety. In the night he intended to steam at full speed through the fleet, pouring fire from both broadsides, sinking and burning as he went.”⁸

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 extemporization, audacity, and luck, Magruder had cobbled together an unlikely military force that reclaimed the only Confederate port retaken 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.⁹

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 earthworks 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



New London confidently wrote to his father that “Galveston is a doomed town.”¹¹

Sunday, January 11, dawned clear and beautiful in Galveston. Observers on the Federal ships reported seeing Confederates moving guns at the fort near the entrance to the bay. The Confederates clearly anticipated the Federal attack scheduled for the following day. In the Union fleet, the day was spent preparing for action and monitoring the enemy’s movements on shore. At about 2 p.m., an unidentified ship was spotted approaching from the southeast. Commodore Bell ordered *Hatteras*, the closest ship, to chase the unknown vessel and ascertain its identity. By 3 p.m., *Hatteras* was in pursuit.¹²



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.

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.¹³ 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."¹⁴ 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

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: “[I]f that 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.¹⁵

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 recalled 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, “[D]on’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

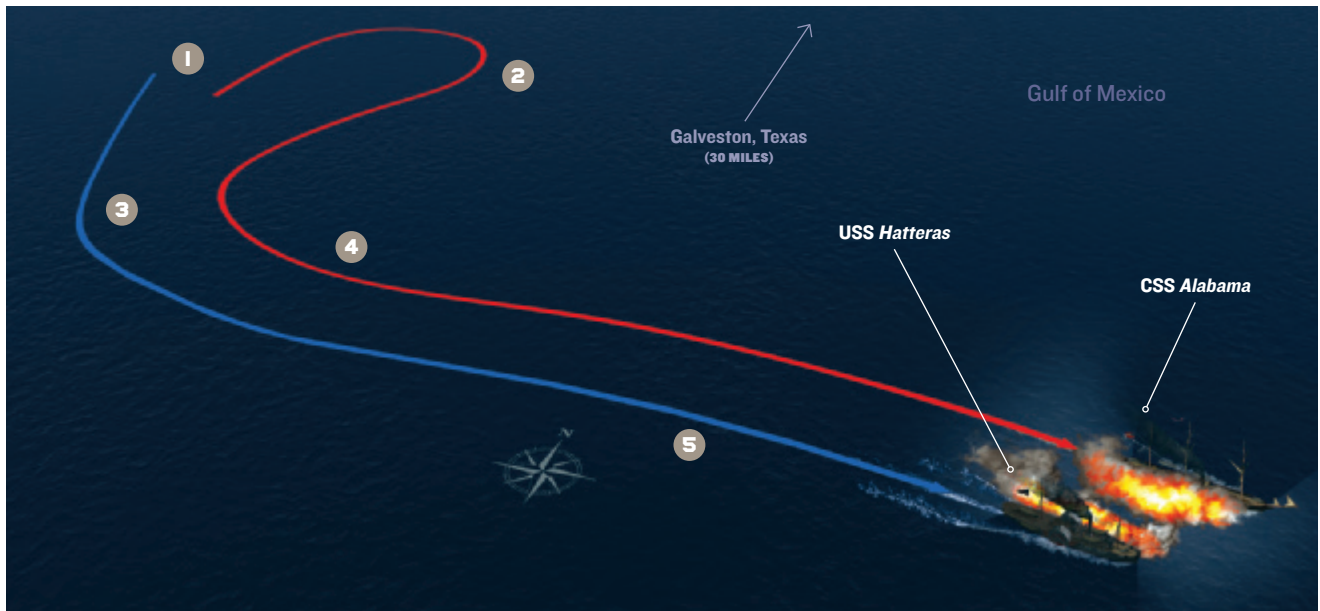
Blake soon realized that *Alabama* had the advantage of heavier guns, and tried to turn his ship to enable *Hatteras* to get alongside and possibly board the enemy vessel. But Semmes used his ship’s superior speed and maneuverability to keep *Hatteras* at a distance.²⁰ About eight minutes after the action 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

13 MINUTES IN THE GULF

USS *Hatteras*' encounter with the Confederate raider *Alabama*



No track chart of the encounter between *Hatteras* and *Alabama* is known to exist. This diagram, based on written accounts by Captains Homer Crane Blake and Raphael Semmes, and testimony at the U.S. Navy's inquiry into the loss of *Hatteras*, reconstructs the ships' movements, which ended in a 13-minute cannonade that sealed the fate of the Union gunboat. ❶ *Hatteras* comes up on *Alabama*, about 30 miles south of Galveston. When asked the identity of his ship, Captain Semmes replies with the name of a British warship. *Hatteras* launches a boat with a boarding party to verify the mystery ship's identity. ❷ *Alabama* gets under way, steaming first north, then east, then back toward *Hatteras*. ❸ Captain Blake, now fully convinced of the other vessel's malevolent nature, gets under way to avoid a raking shot. ❹ Now running up from behind *Hatteras*, *Alabama* hoists Confederate colors and opens fire. ❺ Recognizing he's badly outgunned, Blake attempts to bring *Hatteras* closer to *Alabama* in order to board, but Semmes is able to use his superior speed to keep his distance. A running fight ensues that will end with *Hatteras* on the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico.

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.²³

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 them gentlemen on deck would get a grand hoist."²⁴

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 maga-

zine, 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 beginning to roll steeply to port.²⁵ 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.²⁶ *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*



FRANCIS H. SCHELL, "DESTRUCTION OF THE U.S.A. GUNBOAT HATTERAS BY A REBEL CRUISER OFF GALVESTON, TEXAS," COURTESY OF THE BECKER COLLECTION, BOSTON, MA

A badly damaged USS *Hatteras* lists toward port in this contemporary sketch by Francis H. Schell. Within 10 minutes of the crew's successful evacuation, *Hatteras* disappeared from sight, sinking bow first into the Gulf.

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.²⁷

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.²⁸

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.²⁹

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 9½ 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."³⁰

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.³¹

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.³²

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."³³

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."³⁴

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 1863. 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 1864, *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."³⁵

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



Admiral David Dixon Porter, elder brother of *Hatteras*' executive officer, Henry Porter, blamed Commodore Henry H. Bell for sending *Hatteras* out alone to investigate the mysterious vessel that turned out to be CSS *Alabama*.

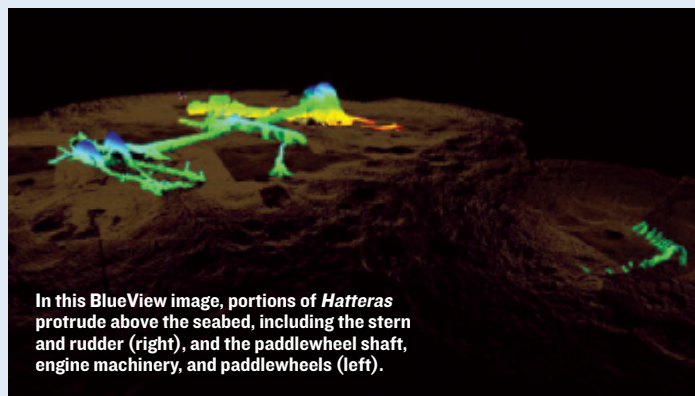
REDISCOVERING HATTERAS

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* (1984), 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 use a new underwater imaging technology, called BlueView, to compile an accurate, three-dimensional record of the exposed portions of the wreck. The BlueView system uses sonar to create point clouds of submerged objects, even in conditions with very low visibility. The resulting high-definition images can be used by researchers to take measurements, plot complex spatial relationships, and reveal features that are often not visible to divers working on the site. It also produces vibrant, compelling imagery, as can be seen in the image below.

There are no plans to excavate the wreck of USS *Hatteras*, but NOAA and its partners continue to look for opportunities to study the site. Lying as it does in relatively shallow water, *Hatteras* may prove to be an ideal site upon which to evaluate new technologies like BlueView. Underwater archaeology is a logistically complex, slow, and expensive undertaking, and as a result relatively few historic shipwrecks are studied in any detail. But the September 2012 expedition to the *Hatteras* site may point the way to a new way of recording and studying them. *Hatteras'* naval career was brief, but her contributions to science and history may only be beginning.



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 disperse 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.³⁶

CONTROVERSY HAS SINCE SURROUNDED Semmes' 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 ease 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 13 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

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ENDNOTES

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