

## **Union Naval Intelligence in the American Civil War: Moving Toward a Global Intelligence System**

*Matthew E. Skros*

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**Also important in the history of the Civil War are the naval engagements that took place both in American territorial waters and around the world. These engagements . . . were precursors to the global engagements that future generations would experience.**

*Editor's Note: The following student essay was selected as the winner of the Walter Pforzheimer Award for best student essay submitted in 2018.*

For the four bloody years of the American Civil War, the two sides slugged it out on the field of battle, pitting brother against brother and friend against friend in a conflict that would cost over 600,000 lives. Gettysburg, Antietam, Petersburg, and Chancellorsville are well known because these battles were keys in war's outcome.

However, also important in the history of the Civil War are the naval engagements that took place both in American territorial waters and around the world. These engagements, while small in scale relative to the fights on historic battlefields, were precursors to the global engagements that future generations would experience and introduced American naval strategists to the role worldwide intelligence would play in order to ensure success. In those future engagements. In that sense, these naval battles underscored what might not be so obvious to casual observers today: global commerce and its defense were crucial to the new nation, and challenges to that commerce were a paramount security concern.

Thus, as the meager Confederate fleet attempted to defend the South's ports, blockade runners with holds

full of valuable cotton goods and war materials dodged Union warships, while across the globe, US warships as far away as the French coast and the Pacific Ocean hunted down Confederate raiders.

Vital to the outcome of many of these engagements was the collection of naval intelligence that would allow Union commanders to make tactical decisions and win victory. In this article I will examine two Civil War naval campaigns and the role intelligence played in them: the battle of Mobile Bay and the global hunt for the *CSS Alabama*.

I will detail where, when, and how intelligence was collected and how that intelligence helped determine the outcome of these battles in the Union's favor. Finally, I will briefly look at how the decentralized methods of the Civil War morphed into the centralized Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI) in 1882 and address the impact that centralization had on the US Navy.

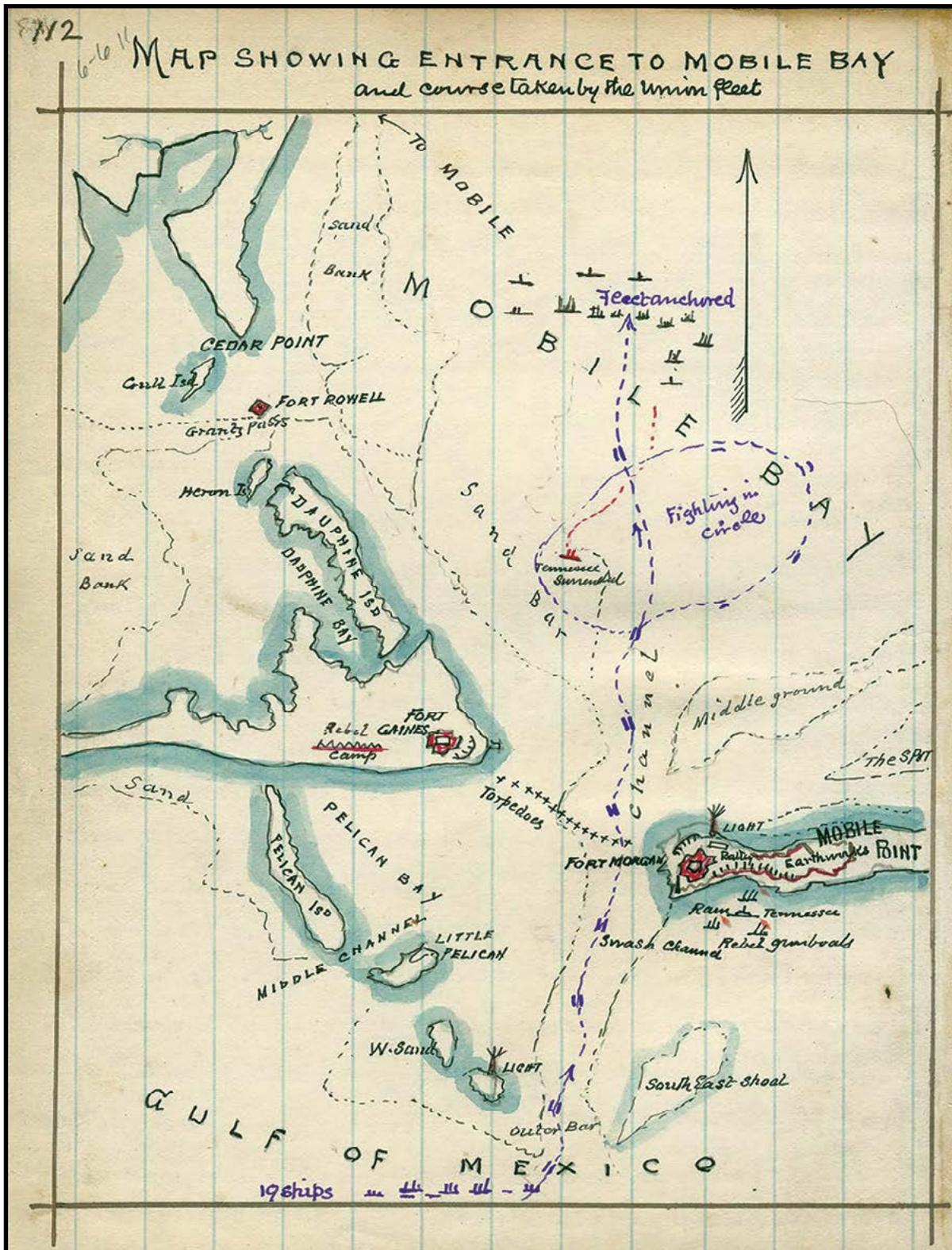
My purpose is not only to offer a deeper understanding of the clandestine side of naval intelligence in the American Civil War, but to show lessons from the past that may serve modern day naval intelligence professionals in the vital work of our nation.

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The Battle for Mobile Bay and the Hunt for CSS Alabama



Map produced by Robert Knox Sneden (1832–1918) during 1964–65. Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/gvhs01.vhs00200/>.

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***Intelligence at the Battle of Mobile Bay-Local and Technological***

On 19 April 1861, days after the Confederate attack on Fort Sumter, President Lincoln declared a naval blockade of southern US ports to restrict Confederate commerce.<sup>1</sup> Keeping those ports closed, or seizing them, was an important component of Union strategy against the Confederate States. Without them, the South's largely rural economy could not sustain a war that required the industrial wherewithal to sustain tens of thousands of troops in combat.

A Tennessee-born captain named David Glasgow Farragut would figure most prominently in the implementation of this strategy. Already a veteran of 50 years in the naval service, Farragut rose to prominence for his masterful capture of New Orleans in 1862, an action that earned him a promotion to rear admiral. He also was present during the fall of Vicksburg in 1863.<sup>2</sup> After that action he sailed to New York to refit his flagship the USS *Hartford*, and then returned south to orchestrate the assault on Mobile Bay, by 1864 one of the last Confederate ports the Union had not captured.<sup>3</sup>

The commander of Mobile Bay's defenses, Adm. Franklin Buchanan had had ample time since 1861 to fortify the entrance to Mobile Bay, making a naval assault an extremely difficult and dangerous task.<sup>4</sup> Farragut, who arrived in the vicinity of Mobile Bay on 18 January 1864, knew he would need to thoroughly analyze the enemy's defenses to enter the bay successfully.<sup>5</sup> To do this, he needed intelligence.

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***"Damn the Torpedoes"***

Admiral Farragut had to address three threats before he could breach Mobile Bay. One of the deadliest was the torpedo field. What today would be referred to as a naval mine, a torpedo in the 1860s was a submerged gunpowder-filled explosive device that could do serious damage to any ship that happened to collide with it. Prisoners, deserters, and other sources had all reported the torpedoes' existence, but Admiral Farragut needed details on specifically the kinds of torpedoes he was facing, how they were laid out in the channel, and how long they had been submerged.

For this information, he turned to a Confederate deserter who claimed to be a citizen of the state of New Hampshire trapped in Mobile when the war broke out. To escape conscription into the Confederate Army or Navy, the man volunteered to assist in building Mobile's defenses as a civilian; he surrendered himself to Union forces at Pensacola on 15 January after being granted temporary leave to visit his father.<sup>6</sup> As a US citizen with Northern birth and with his intimate knowledge of the bay's defenses, he proved a reliable and valuable source of intelligence for Farragut. His report on the torpedoes was very specific:

*From the end of the piles that cross the flats from Fort Gaines, about three months ago, thirty torpedoes were laid down on a line bearing S.E. by compass across the Main Ship Channel; they are shaped like can buoys, with a chamber in each and 75 pounds of powder. They are*

*anchored with mardla rope, with about the third of a bar of railroad iron. A number of them broke adrift and floated up the bay."*<sup>7</sup>

More intelligence on the torpedo threat was gleaned from a Swedish POW named William Ihlo, who had served in the Confederate Navy as seaman. After his capture on 18 February, he volunteered to give testimony about his work on Mobile Bay's defenses. Ihlo reported that the deployed torpedoes were made of sheet iron and many had sunk or rusted through, with seawater ruining the powder charges. However, he did report that new copper-sheathed torpedoes had been prepared in Mobile, but the Confederate navy was not going to deploy them unless a massing of Farragut's ships indicated an assault was imminent; therefore, it was important that Farragut keep his assault plans secret.<sup>8</sup>

Captured blockade runners became another important source of information about the placement of torpedoes. Because they regularly navigated the channel, the captains of these blockade runners had valuable insights into safe passages in and out of the bay. One such instance of this came on 30 April, when the USS *Conemaugh* captured the steam frigate *Judson*. The *Judson*'s captain, L.H. Thompson, gave the following details of the torpedo placement:

*A buoy is placed about 100 yards west by south at the end of the sand spit under Fort Morgan, and that between this buoy and the western channel bank of the main channel are placed 60*

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**Men on the ships could hear torpedo primers firing in the water—every single one of them failing to set off a torpedo.**

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*torpedoes about 50 yards apart, leaving the only clear channel way into Mobile Bay under the sand spit at Fort Morgan, and not more than 100 yards wide.*<sup>9</sup>

In subsequent nights before the assault in August 1864, Admiral Farragut ordered Lt. John C. Watson into the harbor on several night reconnaissance raids by rowboat to determine the torpedoes' exact locations. Watson was unable to determine exactly where they were anchored, and which buoys still carried functioning payloads, but with the intelligence Farragut had from deserters and prisoners, he felt confident ordering his ships into battle.

On the day of the battle, Farragut's 18 ships were to sail in a line, one trailing the other, with four ironclad monitors led by the USS *Tecumseh* on the starboard (right) side of the wooden-hulled ships to draw Fort Morgan's fire.<sup>10</sup> Farragut planned to pass through the narrow channel outlined by the captain of the *Judson*. However, the ironclad *Tecumseh* struck a functioning torpedo and began to sink, causing the captain of the trailing ironclad, the USS *Brooklyn*, to halt his advance. As the rest of the fleet slowly began to stack up behind the *Brooklyn*, Farragut sensed disaster and ordered his flagship to take the lead through the channel, bypassing the stopped *Brooklyn*. In order to pass the ship, the *Hartford* had to steam through the torpedo field; it was at this point the Admiral uttered his famous "Damn the torpedoes" exhortation.

Later, summarizing the torpedo threat, Farragut wrote: "We had been assured by refugees, deserters, and others of their existence, but believing that from their having been some time in the water, they were probably innocuous, I determined to take the chance of their explosion."<sup>11</sup>

History records that the fleet sailed through the torpedo areas with Farragut on the *Hartford* in the lead and passing the sinking *Tecumseh*. Men on the ships could hear torpedo primers firing in the water—every single one of them failing to set off a torpedo.<sup>12</sup> Without the intelligence about the deteriorating weapons, Farragut might have ordered his ships to withdraw or, stalled by the sinking of the *Tecumseh*, his squadron would have been subject to the firepower of Forts Gaines and Morgan, the second of his major obstacles to victory.

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***The Forts of Mobile Bay***

The forts had been constructed by the US government and were further fortified by the Confederates after the war broke out. While the channel between the two forts was almost three miles wide, its many sand banks and shoals restricted ship movement to a series of deep, narrow troughs.<sup>13</sup> With the added threat of the torpedoes, Farragut had to thread a needle to get his ships into Mobile Bay. To do this, he needed intelligence on the threats the forts posed to his assault.

Once again, he turned to deserters and prisoners for information; however, he also obtained the information through clandestine collection. As the

intelligence on the torpedoes and other channel obstacles began to trickle in, it became clear to Farragut that Fort Morgan was the main obstacle. It was closest to the torpedo-free channel, and the its armaments were formidable. To gather more intelligence on Fort Morgan, Farragut ordered a detachment of sailors from the USS *Oneida* ashore on the evening of 22 July to capture a picket who had been seen pacing the beach on guard duty. The small party, led by Lt. Charles S. Cotton and Acting Ens. John L. Hall, was successful in capturing a single picket.<sup>14</sup>

Upon hearing from the prisoner that his unit was not far away, Ensign Hall led a party of sailors to the location, surprised and captured the detachment, and brought them back to the *Oneida*.<sup>15</sup> Eugene Orr, a sailor on the *Oneida*, wrote of his personal recollections of the mission in a 1903 *National Tribune* article:

*In the latter part of July 1864, Admiral Farragut wanted some information in regard to the rebel preparations for his reception in August, and the only way to get it was to go after it, as there were no rebel deserters or intelligent contrabands coming off to the fleet.*<sup>16</sup>

Orr then recounts what happened to the prisoners once they were brought back to the fleet:

*At the time the party were taking to their boat, the fort had become alarmed; but they were too late. The prisoners were turned over to Admiral Farragut the next morning, and I presume that he obtained all the information that he desired from them.*<sup>17</sup>

Farragut does not write in his official correspondence what he was able to obtain from them. However, one can assume the information regarding Fort Morgan was consequential enough that he arranged his battle plan to focus heavily on the fort's guns. He planned to attack on a day when the winds off the bay would blow cannon smoke back onto the fort, thus obscuring his fleet from the view of Fort Morgan's cannon spotters.<sup>18</sup>

He also ordered his four ironclads to sail to the starboard of his line and cover its advance into the bay.<sup>19</sup> Without the critical intelligence Farragut received about Fort Morgan, he could have drastically underestimated its strengths and allowed his fleet to sail unprepared to face the guns.

### ***The Confederate Ships***

And, of course, the final threat Farragut faced in Mobile was the Confederate squadron itself. While en route to Mobile in January 1864, he made a brief stopover at Pensacola; there, Farragut found the naval base, less than 60 miles east of Mobile, awash with rumors that the Confederates had built an ironclad ram that could outmatch the famous CSS *Virginia* and that it would be put to sea in Mobile Bay by the end of the month. This ship would later be identified as the CSS *Tennessee*. Other Union commanders told Farragut that the Confederates had five such ships in Mobile Bay and were planning to use them in a grand attempt to retake New Orleans. Deserters and prisoners, however, provided information that contradicted these fantastical claims.<sup>20</sup>

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### ***The aforementioned, unnamed deserter from New Hampshire also had much to say about the state of the Confederate fleet.***

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The aforementioned, unnamed deserter from New Hampshire also had much to say about the state of the Confederate fleet. His report noted that the Confederates had three lightly-armed small gunboats—the *Morgan*, *Gaines*, and *Selma*. They also had a small armored ram named the *Baltic*, which was little more than a modified tugboat and which the Confederate Navy considered “unfit for service.” There also were five floating armored turrets in the harbor. These were modified scows and could maneuver under their own power, but the New Hampshire man remarked that they “cannot withstand the shock of an 8-inch shell.”<sup>21</sup> Farragut's paramount concern became the whereabouts of the *Tennessee* and the other reported armored rams. Surely the 1862 battle of Hampton Roads, in which the CSS *Virginia* easily destroyed several wooden Union vessels, weighed heavily on his mind. Without armored reinforcements, his wooden ships would be no match for the heavily armored Confederate ram.

Farragut soon learned from deserters that the Confederate Navy was struggling to float the heavy *Tennessee* over a large sandbar in the Dog River along which she had been constructed. A deserter who arrived in Pensacola in early January provided the following assessment:

*The Tennessee is on Dog River Bar; on her way to the Bay, and*

*the camels<sup>a</sup> made to float her over have to be made larger.*<sup>22</sup>

Farragut acted on this intelligence by writing to the Navy Department in Washington to procure some ironclad “monitor” type warships to counter the Confederate ram. He felt confident that the CSN would struggle for many more weeks in its attempts to float the *Tennessee* over the bar, and that his position at Mobile remained secure for the time being. Despite an early March “ram scare” in which Union forces supposedly spotted the *Tennessee* in the bay, the ram remained stranded upriver until 17 May, when she was finally floated over the bar.<sup>23</sup>

On the morning of 5 August, after the sinking of the *Tecumseh*, Farragut's fleet had to contend with the *Tennessee* without the assistance of the powerful Union warship. Farragut originally intended to pursue the Confederate warship with his remaining three ironclads and leave the rest of his ships in the safety of the bay, but Confederate Admiral Buchanan chose to launch a daring attack on Farragut's whole fleet with only the *Tennessee*.<sup>24</sup>

Since their guns had little effect on the heavily armored *Tennessee*, Farragut ordered his ships to turn their efforts to ramming the ironclad in hopes of causing enough damage to sink her or force the crew to surrender. While Farragut does not

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a. A “camel” is a flotation device designed to lift a ship with a deep draft over a sandbar it would not be able to pass over otherwise.

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specifically cite the use of intelligence in informing this choice of tactic, information provided to him about the construction of the *Tennessee* may have influenced it.

Dated 7 July, a report from the US Army Department of the West Mississippi outlines intelligence from an unnamed informant that cast doubt on the seaworthiness of the *Tennessee*:

*To close ports the shutters are allowed to fall back by their weight. The Tennessee with guns and stores on board floats very low, carrying her ports hardly 2 feet 6 inches above the water line. It is the opinion of the informant that she cannot endure serious collision. In his phrase, she has no bearings*

*below her bearings, and would be very easily pressed under.*<sup>25</sup>

It is reasonable to assume Farragut used this intelligence in his decision making, given that he ordered his ships to ram the *Tennessee* rather than engage in an artillery duel. After sustaining several hits from Union ships, *Tennessee* surrendered as the USS *Ossipee* bore down on her to strike another ramming blow.<sup>26</sup> This final action concluded the Battle of Mobile Bay.



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**II. USS *Kearsarge* versus the CSS *Alabama*—Global Intelligence at Play**

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In 1861, the Confederate navy’s immediate—and Herculean—task was to build a force that could both defend the South’s vast coastline and harass Union commerce. In addition to domestic construction efforts, the Confederate Navy dispatched agents to other countries to acquire the necessary ships. One such agent was James Bulloch, who was sent to Liverpool, England, in July 1861. His orders from Confederate Secretary of the Navy Stephen Mallory were, blunt: “Get us some ships. Buy them, build them, or whatever you find necessary.”<sup>27</sup>

This task was by no means covert. Union newspapers reported Bulloch’s departure from America and even how much money had been allocated for his mission.<sup>28</sup> When information reached Washington of his departure, State Department officials relayed the information to Thomas Haines Dudley, US consul for the port of Liverpool, who was assigned the task of reporting on Confederate activities

in the port. Bulloch was carefully watched by Union intelligence sources, who then informed Dudley.

Dudley’s first report came in March of 1862. In it he wrote that a sloop-of-war called the *Oreto* was being armed in Liverpool. The first mention of the CSS *Alabama*, then known as Gunboat No. 290 (she was the 290th ship built by Laird & Co.), comes in this report:

*Since [Bulloch] returned, he has taken an active part in superintending the building, equipment, and fitting out of another steam gunboat, known as No. 290, which has lately been launched by Laird & Co. of Birkenhead, and which is now lying, as I am informed and believe, ready for sea in the Birkenhead docks.*<sup>29</sup>

Most of Dudley’s intelligence seems to have come from Matthew Maguire, a Liverpool-based British detective who testified to seeing Bull-

och around the Laird & Co. shipyard and observing him giving orders to workmen outfitting the 290.<sup>30</sup> US diplomats in England urged Washington to ask the British government to seize the 290 under the Foreign Enlistment Act, an act of Parliament that forbade British citizens from crewing, providing, or equipping ships for either the Union or the Confederacy.<sup>31</sup> However, the State Department did not think Maguire’s evidence was enough to persuade the British government, so the 290’s construction continued unimpeded.

In May 1862, the 290 was launched from the Laird & Co. yard. Upon her launch, she was christened *Enrica*, in hopes that Union officials would believe she was a Spanish vessel rather than a Confederate one.<sup>32</sup> The Laird brothers had initially assumed the ship was going to be a merchant steamer rather than a warship. When Bulloch insisted that openings resembling gun ports be cut into her sides and swivel sock-

ets added to the railing, the Lairds suspected they had been duped into violating the Foreign Enlistment Act.<sup>33</sup> Bulloch, lying through his teeth, explained that she was indeed going to be a merchant ship, but that he hoped to sell her one day and that making her easily convertible to a ship of war would make her more valuable.<sup>34</sup> While this claim seemed dubious, it was enough to protect the Laird brothers in court. Her sea trials were completed, minor repairs made, and the 290 was prepared to set sail on her mission for the Confederacy.

Detective Maguire, however, was watching the progress in the Laird facility and feeding intelligence to Dudley. Maguire discovered the number of guns the 290 was to carry and that some of her crew were to come from another Confederate warship named the *Sumter*. With this information, Dudley wrote to Lord Russell, the foreign secretary, demanding that British authorities seize the ship. Lord Russell ordered the ship searched, but the search revealed no significant evidence of the ship being built for the Confederacy. Dudley would try several more times to have the ship detained but to no avail.

The 290 sailed out of Liverpool, escorted by the steam tug *Hercules*, in August of 1862. The captain of the *Hercules*, Thomas Miller, offered sworn testimony a few days after. He observed that the ship was loaded with coal supplies and that Laird & Co. workmen were outfitting her in the bay.<sup>35</sup> He also reported that he had ferried some 25-30 of her new crew to the ship. He did not report the presence of any armaments or ammunition on board.

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In late July of 1862, facing increased diplomatic pressure and overwhelming evidence that the 290 was indeed a Confederate ship of war, Lord Russell finally recommended seizure of the ship. However, it was too late, and the 290 moved farther away from Liverpool and into the Mersey River. She then sailed to the Portuguese Azores, where she met a Confederate steamer carrying her armaments and ammunition. A newspaper report from the islands also reported the arrival of the steamer *Bahama*, which had departed Liverpool several weeks before.<sup>36</sup>

The assistant collector of customs from Liverpool interviewed the sailing master of the *Bahama* once the ship returned to port, and the sailing master gave their cargo list from the voyage (most of which was equipment for the operation of heavy cannon, such as sponges and ramming rods). The sailing master also gave the following information regarding the 290:

*Off the Western Islands he spoke to the Confederate gunboat Alabama, (No. 290 built at Mr. Laird's yard, at Birkenhead), heavily armed, having a 100 pound pivot gun mounted at her stern, which he believes is intended to destroy some of the seaport towns in the Northern States of America.*<sup>37</sup>

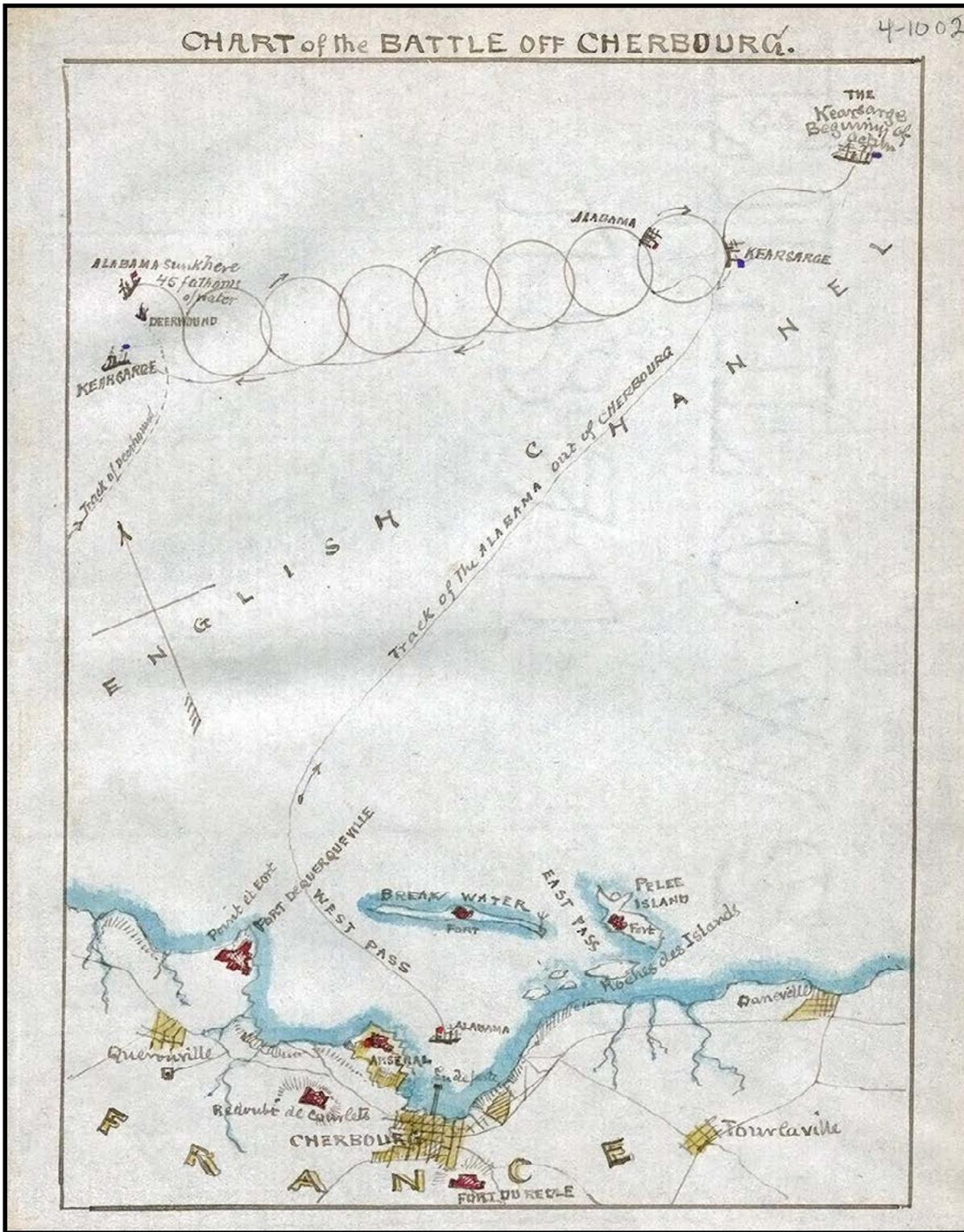
This report is the first mention we have of the *Alabama* bearing her true name; from then on we see her referred to as such in reports. It also appears in this report that she had

completed the armament rendezvous and was sailing out to begin raiding operations. This intelligence was relayed to Washington and the Navy Department via diplomatic correspondence—a communication that could take two weeks or more to arrive.

Once outfitted, the *Alabama* began to prey on US whaling ships in the western Atlantic. Two Union cruisers, the USS *Kearsarge* and USS *Tuscarora*, arrived in the Azores in late 1862 to search for the *Alabama*, only to find they were several weeks behind her and no one could tell for certain where the Confederate raider was heading. Almost every sail on the horizon or ghost ship in the distance was believed to be the *Alabama*, and Gideon Welles soon found himself overwhelmed with reports of the Confederate raider (many of them false). The commanding officer of the *Tuscarora* had come into possession of a letter indicating the *Alabama* was going to meet a British merchant ship with a coal shipment.<sup>38</sup>

Meanwhile, the commander of the USS *San Jacinto* made inquiries on the island of Dominica but did not find any conclusive information on the *Alabama*, as no one could identify her with certainty.<sup>39</sup> More reports from the *San Jacinto* indicated the *Alabama* took on coal on the island of Blanquilla in the Caribbean, or so testified the captain of the Royal Mail steamer *Trent*.<sup>40</sup> Other Union ships scoured the oceans, boarding ships and making inquiries, usually to no avail. Reports would come in from

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Map produced by Robert Knox Sneden (1832–1918) during 1964–65. Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/gvhs01.vhs00168/>.

survivors of the ships *Alabama* had destroyed, and Union ships would give chase, but the *Alabama* would disappear almost as quickly as she had arrived.

Over the next year and a half, the *Alabama* would cruise as far as China and India, burning Union commercial ships and evading capture. Meanwhile, as finding the *Alabama* proved to be difficult, the *Kearsarge* and other Union cruisers began to hunt other Confederate raiders. Oddly enough, what compromised the *Alabama*'s location was not the dedicated work of a Union intelligence informant, but open source reporting—namely, the writings of journalists in Dover, England. When Capt. John A. Winslow of the *Kearsarge* put into port there in late April 1864, he picked up a couple of newspapers. These papers pointed out the whereabouts of four Confederate cruisers, one of which was the *Alabama*.<sup>41</sup> The paper reported that she was sailing from Cape Town for the English Channel, and Winslow gave chase in hope of finally running down the elusive cruiser. In his report to Gideon Welles, he stated:

*Secret agents for a month or more asserted that the Alabama had orders to return to the English Channel or some place of rendezvous for her consorts, and it was contemplated to make an attack on some of the eastern towns.*<sup>42</sup>

Because the US Navy already had intelligence regarding the plans of these cruisers, the newspaper reports corroborated the intelligence and

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made it actionable. Unfortunately, the historical record does not give us information on the agents or how they obtained such intelligence.

Additional intelligence regarding the *Alabama*'s location came when the USS *St. Louis* arrived in Tangier Bay on June 16th. She received a packet of dispatches from Navy Department officials and diplomatic officials, with orders to rendezvous with *Kearsarge* and give them to Captain Winslow. One item is a newspaper clipping titled “nautical intelligence” read:

*The Kent, from Melbourne, arrived in the English Channel 7th instant; reports that on the 24th of April, in latitude 15 degrees South, longitude 32 degrees West, she was boarded by the Confederate steamship Alabama, which had burned on the previous day the Rockingham, from Callao [Peru] to Queenstown [Guyana], laden with guano.*<sup>43</sup>

However, before this nautical intelligence could be given to Captain Winslow, a definitive report on the *Alabama*'s location came from the US consular agent in Cherbourg, France, who reported to the US minister to France that a Confederate steamer had just docked in the harbor.<sup>44</sup> US Minister to France William Dayton, having been advised in late May that the *Kearsarge* would utilize

Flushing, Holland, as a temporary station, sent a telegram to the ship with the consular agent's report.<sup>45</sup> Captain Winslow then set out at full steam to trap the Confederate raider in Cherbourg.

Within two days the *Kearsarge* came to anchor just outside the breakwater of the harbor to wait out the *Alabama*. On the morning of 19 June 1864, Captain Raphael Semmes of the CSS *Alabama* and Captain Winslow prepared their ships for battle. After being escorted out of Cherbourg by a French warship, the *Alabama* opened fire on the *Kearsarge*. The two ships circled each other several times. While the *Alabama* managed to score several hits on the *Kearsarge*, most of the shells failed to explode, giving *Kearsarge* the critical advantage. Soon, Captain Semmes ordered his crew to strike his ship's colors, and the *Alabama* surrendered shortly before sinking.

In the end, while the actual battle came down to gunnery—as battles usually do—the hunt for the *Alabama* succeeded thanks to a network of intelligence and diplomatic operatives the Union had spread around the world, a network that despite the challenges of international and maritime communication systems shared information as effectively and rapidly as possible. It also provided an exemplar of the kind of intelligence network that would be required very soon after the war.



### *III. From 1865 to the Office of Naval Intelligence and a Global Intelligence Network*

After the Civil War ended, according to US Navy Historian Wyman Packard, the US Navy underwent a rapid demobilization, and its strength was soon a shadow of what it had been during the war. Congress barely budgeted adequate funds for the upkeep of existing vessels, not to mention the advancement of naval research or the construction of new ships.<sup>46</sup> Meanwhile, European navies—propelled by their own rivalries within Europe and for the expansion and defense of their distant colonies—actively sought new methods of ship construction, naval gunnery, and seamanship—developments of which US Navy officers were keenly aware.

The years immediately after the Civil War saw many advancements in technology, global commerce, global telecommunications, and colonization by European powers. It was also an era of the emergence of strategic thinking in Europe and the United States, especially in the US Navy. This meant that, while the US Navy could not compete financially with Europe's growth, the Navy Department was nevertheless keen to monitor it and stay informed of developments in technology and global developments.<sup>47</sup> Thus, as American warships cruised the world's oceans, Navy officials instructed officers and personnel to gather information on the capabilities of other navies.

Although the wisdom of these efforts is, in retrospect, notable, the Navy's initial organization for managing and coordinating them was problematic. In those early post-war years, multiple different entities within the Navy (including the

secretary himself) dispatched officers on intelligence-gathering missions. Navy Chief Engineer James King, on the behalf of the Bureau of Steam Engineering, made visits to Europe to examine propulsion technology.<sup>48</sup> Another officer, Lt. Theodorus Mason, became quite seasoned in the work of intelligence, even volunteering to tour Europe on his own time to gather useful information.<sup>49</sup>

Mason saw the US Naval Institute—which had only been created in 1873 as a forum for addressing the concerns of a declining naval force and other naval matters—as a potential repository and collection center for naval intelligence.<sup>50</sup> However, the institute was not an official Navy or government entity. Without a centralized organization and with several bureaus all running their own collection efforts, the naval intelligence business was a mess of bureaucracy and confusion. The Office of Naval Intelligence rose to fill the need to address this and to begin to efficiently collect, analyze, and disseminate a wide array of information.

By 1882, Secretary William Hunt had support in congress for a naval reconstruction project and included in his reconstruction plans was a new center for naval intelligence to handle all intelligence collection. On 23 March of that year, he issued an order creating an "Office of Intelligence" within the Navy's Bureau of Navigation; this office would soon be known more explicitly as the Office of Naval Intelligence.<sup>51</sup>

The death of President James Garfield led to Hunt's removal as secretary and the appointment of

William Chandler by President Chester Arthur. After he took office in 1883, Chandler rewarded Mason's dedication by appointing him as the first director of ONI; Mason soon established a naval attaché network, recruited a staff of analysts, and created a system for managing and archiving collected intelligence.<sup>52</sup> This intelligence was then accessed by the various Navy bureaus as the need arose. The centralized ONI provided streamlined collection, meaning that intelligence could be shared effectively with different Navy departments, and as Presidents Chester Arthur and Benjamin Harrison subsequently called for naval rearmament and modernization, ONI supplied the necessary intelligence to engineers to design new warships.<sup>53</sup>

Through its growing network of attachés in Europe, ONI was able to organize collection and analysis to inform planners of new developments. For example, new armored ships were constructed and added to the fleet, to counter reports (supplied by ONI) of similar developments in South America.<sup>54</sup>

Secretary Benjamin Tracy remarked in 1889 that ONI's work had "been of incalculable assistance in the work of reconstruction."<sup>55</sup> Without the centralization ONI provided, naval engineers may have had a much more difficult time of navigating the Navy's intricate bureaucracy, thus hampering their ability to develop the most technologically advanced ships.

The first combat test of the new ONI, came as an 1895 insurrection in Cuba threatened to spark war between the United States and Spain.

When it became apparent that the Cuban unrest might lead to war, ONI began to ensure that its files on Spain's naval capabilities were as up-to-date as possible. It also forwarded regular reports on the Spanish fleet and other navies to US warships stationed around the globe.<sup>56</sup> When war broke out in 1898, ONI's staff of naval officers advised the Naval War Board on Spanish naval movements and Spain's technological capabilities. The network of naval attachés provided valuable intelligence, not only because of their attachés' expertise but because of the network of secret agents they often employed.<sup>57</sup> ONI served as the aggregator of all the encrypted reports from these officers; it received some 800 reports from officers around the globe during the war and encrypted 300 outgoing messages.<sup>58</sup> This network allowed the US Navy to effectively track the movements of the Spanish Navy and helped the secretary (at that time,

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former Massachusetts governor John Long) direct reconnaissance missions and dispatch warships.

Decentralized intelligence operations of the Civil War may have provided enough to win the day at Mobile Bay and Cherbourg. However, ONI's establishment in 1882 allowed the US Navy to efficiently collect intelligence as well as utilize it. That intelligence served more than just squadron commanders and officers on the ground who managed to collect it—it was able to serve wider strategic initiatives through its centralization.

Without ONI serving as the central repository for naval technical intelligence, the US Navy's engineers would have struggled to gather

necessary information from various naval bureaus, and the Navy's rearmament might have resulted in a technologically inferior force in the war against Spain and other potential international competitors of the day. In combat, ONI's position as the central point from which intelligence was received allowed for a better sharing of information between naval authorities. The office's efficient structure kept the secretary properly informed of Spanish naval movements, helping him think strategically and plan movements to intercept the Spanish fleet. Through this centralization and specialization of the Navy's intelligence structure the US Navy become more effective at advancing American power abroad and defending America's growing interests in distant places.



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### Endnotes

1. Bern Anderson, *By Sea and by River: The Naval History of the Civil War* (Da Capo Press, 1989), 26.
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4. David D. Porter, *Naval History of the Civil War* (The Sherman Publishing Company, 1886), 567.
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6. *Ibid.*, 35
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Official Record*. Series 1, Volume 21. 106.
9. *Ibid.*, 221.
10. Chester G. Hearn, *Mobile Bay and the Mobile Campaign: The Last Great Battles of the Civil War* (McFarland, 1998), 80.
11. *Official Record* Series 1, Volume 21. 417.
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13. Mahan, *Admiral Farragut*, 247.
14. *Ibid.*, 382.
15. *Ibid.*, 383.
16. Eugene Orr. "A Successful Landing Party," *National Tribune*, July 1903. Accessed via Library of Congress, Madison Reading Room.
17. *Ibid.*
18. Hearn, *Mobile Bay and the Mobile Campaign*, 85.

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20. Hearn, *Mobile Bay and the Mobile Campaign*, 63-65.
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24. Ibid., 100.
25. *Official Record*. Series 1, Volume 21. 362.
26. Hearn, *Mobile Bay and the Mobile Campaign*, 113.
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28. Ibid.
29. Ibid., 385.
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33. Ibid., 26.
34. Ibid.
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37. Ibid.
38. "Operations of the Cruisers," *Official Record*. Series 1, Volume 1, 575.
39. Ibid., 582.
40. Ibid., 592.
41. Gindlesperger, *Fire on the Water*, 207.
42. "Operations of the Cruisers," *Official Record*. Series 1, Volume 3, 19.
43. Ibid., 55.
44. Ibid., 51.
45. Ibid., 42.
46. Wyman H. Packard, *A Century of U.S. Naval Intelligence* (Office of Naval Intelligence & Naval Historical Center. 1996), 1.
47. Ibid., 1. See also Commodore Foxhall A. Parker, USN, "Our Fleet Maneuvers in the Bay of Florida, and the Navy of the Future," in the first issue of the *US Naval Institute Proceedings*, 1874.
48. Packard, *A Century of U.S. Naval Intelligence*, 1.
49. Scott Mobley, "The Essence of Intelligence Work is Preparation for War: How 'Strategy' Infiltrated the Office of Naval Intelligence, 1882-1889," *International Journal of Naval History* 12, Issue 3 (December 2015). Available online at [www.ijnhonline.org/2015/12/06/the-essence-of-intelligence-work-is-preparation-for-war-how-strategy-infiltrated-the-office-of-naval-intelligence-1882-1889/](http://www.ijnhonline.org/2015/12/06/the-essence-of-intelligence-work-is-preparation-for-war-how-strategy-infiltrated-the-office-of-naval-intelligence-1882-1889/).
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53. Ibid.
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