One-Ship Scourge of Union Shipping

PANIC SWPT through the Navy building in Washington, D.C., on the afternoon of Saturday, June 15, 1861. Gongs clanged. High officials rushed about shouting contradictory orders.

A frantic telegram had arrived. It warned that Confederate war raiders were burning Yankee ships off the Virginia coast and were poised to strike at New York and Boston.

The news crystallized apprehension that had been building for days. Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles had heard rumors of an impending combined attack by the raiders Alabama and Florida. Tense and anxious for news, he met President Lincoln in the White House. It was an historic meeting, and Lincoln was alarmed; it was feared the raiders might sweep the Potomac and seize Union vessels.

The Southerners were up to something!

Within hours, panic was widespread. Mayor of coastal cities demanded protection. President Lincoln was alerted; it was feared the raiders might sweep up the Potomac and seize Union officials.

THE RESPONSIBILITY for this mass hysteria lay with one small ship that was armed with a single battery six-pounder and five dummy guns. She was the USS Florida, commanded by Lieut. Charles W. Read, who looked more poet than sea captain.

After fighting in the futile defense of New Orleans, he had been named second in command of the raiders Florida under John N. Malosht.

When the Florida had captured the Tennessee, he was placed in command of the brig. The youngMississippian figured the ship's papers would enable him to pass Forts Monroe in Chesapeake Bay unchallenged. He could then press upon Federal shipping at Hampton Roads and Baltimore.

Malosht, a daredevil in his own right, was intrigued. He gave Read the go-ahead. Within days the young lieutenant had seized 22 Yankee ships and burned 13 of them.

Called a bluffer, Read used his "Quaker gun"—black-painted Krakouers in garrison duties—to intimidate shippers of merchandise. Doubles for more bravos except for some 20 women passengers who were aboard one of his prizes, the Kate Stewart. Unwilling to take them aboard the Clarence, he released their vessel, knowing full well that an alarm would be sounded the moment she reached shore.

It was thus the frantic telegram to the Navy department.

MEANWHILE, Read had transferred operations to a larger ship, mother ship, the Tecumseh. He moved northward, capturing and burning. On June 23, he rendezvous on the New England fishing fleet. For three days the seamen were aptly called his torches.

Thirty-eight armed vessels were searching for him. Union officials being sure the Alabama and Florida were joining in a vast attack.

On June 24, Read and his 22-man crew, still armed with their single cannon, captured the schooner Archer. The Southerners, realizing that descriptions of their previous command had been widely circulated, transferred to her. Read knew he would be caught eventually and figured he would be hanged as a "pirate." But he wanted to accomplish a grand test. The chances to do so came on June 29 when the Archer discovered two Unionmen who agreed to pilot the raider into the Portland, Me., harbor.

There, the Southerners set up the new revenue cutter Cushing and began to tow her out to sea. But they were detected, attacked, and—after a furious fight—captured. But not before they had blown up the Cushing.

Taxed into Portland, they were set upon by the men that tore their clothes off. Finally they were moved to Fort Warren, in Boston, where they concluded at last they would not be hanged. After a year's confinement they were exchanged as prisoners of war.

In his book, "Sons of the Confederacy," the story of Malosht, historian Edward Bearkin wonders why Read's story has remained so long in obscurity. Even when the Union branded him, a pirate, Federal Admiral David D. Porter said, "Read had the stuff in him to make a gallant naval commander." Today, few Americans would disparage that statement.

Subscribed by Jack Kyriss, 1271 North 2400 W., Salt Lake City, Utah.