

## ***Battle of Portland Harbor, Part One***

***Posted on January 14, 2015 by Ryan Quint***

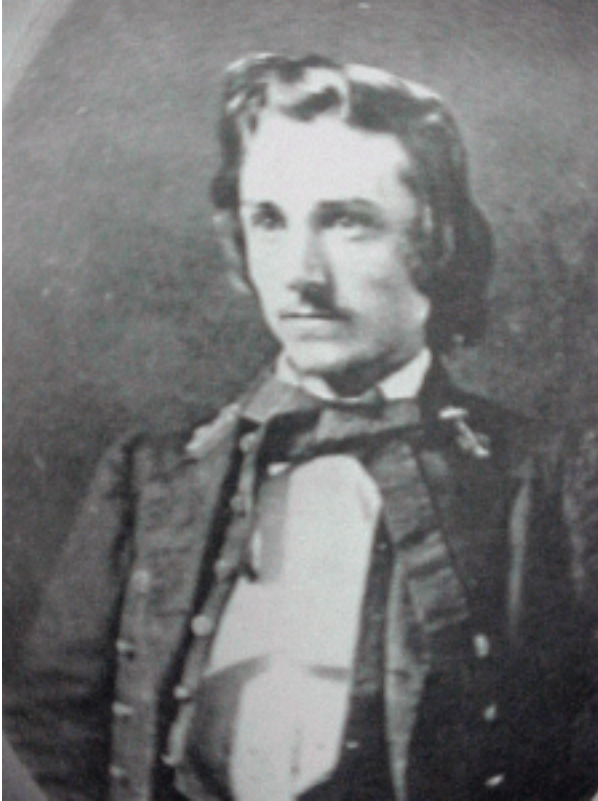
*A shout-out belongs to Chris Mackowski, who recognized this story's drama much sooner than I did, and has been asking that I write this series for over a year now—I should have followed his advice much earlier. I grew up in southern Maine, only about a 10-minute drive from Portland, and even with my interest in the Civil War that started at an early age, I did not know about the battle of Portland Harbor, which occurred on June 27, 1863. Perhaps ironically, it was not until I came to Virginia for college, about 600 miles from home, that I learned about the battle that occurred just a hop, skip, and a jump away from my house.*

*This post, part one of a series, serves as a prologue.*

The story of the Battle of Portland Harbor begins on May 6, 1863 and close to 4,000 miles from where it ends. Off the coast of Brazil, near the Cape of Saint Roch, the C.S.S. *Florida* captured the supply ship *Clarence*, bound for Baltimore. The *Clarence* was a brig, weighing 253 tons, with an overall length of 114 feet.[\[1\]](#)

Aboard the *Florida*, Second Lieutenant Charles Read got an idea. Read, just six days shy of his 23<sup>rd</sup> birthday, graduated last from the Naval Academy at Annapolis in 1860 but then, like so many other southerners, resigned his commission upon secession. As the second-in-command on the *Florida*, Read was looking to make his own impression in the ongoing war. On the same day as the *Clarence*'s capture, Read wrote to his superior, Commander John Maffitt, also aboard the *Florida*, "Sir: I propose to take the brig which we have just captured, and, with a crew of twenty men, to proceed to Hampton Roads and cut out a gunboat or steamer of the enemy."[\[2\]](#)

Read's suggestion of swooping into Hampton Roads, even to capture just one ship, was daring. Since the creation of the blockade in 1861 Hampton Roads had served as the "main base" for the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron; there were ships and the heavy guns of its forts that could reduce Read's attack into splinters of wood and blood.[\[3\]](#)



Second Lieutenant Charles W. Read

But Read saw a way to avoid detection, continuing in his proposal to Maffitt, “As I would be in possession of the brig’s papers, as the crew would not be large enough to excite suspicion, there can be no doubt of my passing Fortress Monroe successfully.” Armed with the *Clarence*’s pass as a Federal supply ship in other words, Read planned to attack Hampton Roads as a wolf in sheep’s clothing.[\[4\]](#)

Maffitt was impressed with his subordinate’s plan. The same day he received Read’s proposal he responded, “The conclusion come to is that you may meet with success by centering your views upon Hampton Roads.... The proposition evinces on your part patriotic devotion to the cause of your country, and this is certainly the time when all our best exertions should be made to harm the common enemy and confuse them with attacks from all unexpected quarters. I agree to your request... Act for the best, and God speed you.”[\[5\]](#)

Transferring to the *Clarence*, Read took twenty men from the *Florida*’s crew, along with one 12-pounder howitzer. To supplement his small arsenal, Read’s new crew constructed a number of wooden “Quaker guns” that, at a

distance, would look real and maybe dissuade any notions of combat. With his orders, Read set sail and moved north. In the Windward Islands Read “chased several vessels, but failed to overhaul them on account of the inferior sailing qualities of the *Clarence*.”[\[6\]](#)

The *Clarence*'s fortunes changed, though, on June 6, off the coast of North Carolina. Seeing the *Whistling Wind*, a ship carrying coal, Read used a bit of deception. Hiding the howitzer and bringing in the fake guns, Read ran up an American flag, upside down in a sign of distress. When the *Whistling Wind* heaved to and pulled up alongside the *Clarence*, Read's men quickly jumped aboard, captured the unarmed crew, and transferred the Federal's ship's supplies back to the *Clarence*. Then, as night fell, the *Whistling Wind* was set on fire.[\[7\]](#)

The following day Read captured a second ship, the *Alfred H. Partridge*. Reading the dispatches from both the *Whistling Wind* and *Alfred H. Partridge* Read came to the conclusion that, “I derived such information as convinced me that it was impossible to carry out the instructions of Commander Maffitt. No vessels were allowed to go into Hampton Roads unless they had supplies for the U.S. Government, and they were closely watched.” But Read also refused to call off his expedition, changing his objective “to cruise along the coast and try to intercept a transport for Fortress Monroe and with her to endeavor to carry out the orders... and in the meantime to do all the possible injury to the enemy's commerce.”[\[8\]](#)

With his new plan, Read sailed further north, continuing his spree of capturing Federal ships. On June 9 the *Clarence* captured and then destroyed the *Mary Alvina*. The Confederates continued sailing north, and on June 12, Read captured the *Tacony*, a bark weighing 296 tons. Read recognized the *Tacony* as faster than the *Clarence*, so once the 23-year old had transferred his crew, provisions, howitzer, and Quaker guns, he burned the ship that had been his home for the past month and six days.[\[9\]](#)

Now in the *Tacony*, Read continued his already impressively destructive voyage. In the fast *Tacony*, Read captured another fifteen vessels, and, on June 24, 1863, captured the sixteenth, the *Archer*. Since leaving the *Florida* on May 6, Read had captured and destroyed twenty vessels, some carrying coal for the blockade squadrons, others arms and provisions for the variety of Federal field armies. His adventure and copious amounts of captures now brought the daring lieutenant off the coast of Maine.

Read's exploits had not gone unnoticed, however. Word of his captures got out and Read later wrote, "As there were now a number of the enemy's gunboats in search of the *Tacony*, and our howitzer ammunition all expended, I concluded to destroy the *Tacony*, and with the schooner *Archer* to proceed along the coast with the view of burning the shipping in some exposed harbor...."[10]

The exposed harbor that Read chose was Portland, Maine's largest commercial city. On June 26 Read picked up two fishermen, again hiding his cannon and menacing crew, and the civilians "who, taking us for a pleasure party, willingly consented to pilot us into Portland." The *Archer* sailed past Portland Head Light, still one of Maine's most-popular tourist attractions, and glided into Portland Harbor.[11]



Portland Head Light. One of the most iconic structures in the state of Maine, Read's men passed by this on the afternoon of June 26, 1863.

Photograph by Ryan Quint

Making conversation the fishermen, still unaware of Read's true intention, let the Confederate know that, "the revenue cutter *Caleb Cushing* was in the harbor of Portland...."[12] Read immediately had his next target. Come nightfall, under the cover of darkness, he would attack the *Caleb Cushing*. Though Charles Read did not know it, it was that decision that would start the Battle of Portland Harbor.

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[1] Paul H. Silverstone, *Civil War Navies: 1855-1883* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 162.

[2] *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion, Ser. 1, Vol. 2*, 644. (hereafter cited as OR Navies). This is the naval addition to the more-popular *The Official Records of the Union and Confederate Records*– the famous “ORs”.

[3] Ivan Musicant, *Divided Waters: The Naval History of the Civil War* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 136.

[4] OR Navies, 644.

[5] *Ibid*, 645.

[6] *Ibid*, 655.

[7] David W. Shaw, *Sea Wolf of the Confederacy: The Daring Civil War Raids of of Naval Lt. Charles W. Read* (New York: Free Press, 2005), 108-110.

[8] OR Navies, 655-656.

[9] Silverstone, 162; OR Navies, 656.

[10] OR Navies, 656.

[11] *Ibid*.

[12] *Ibid*.

## **The Battle of Portland Harbor, Part Two**

**Posted on February 2, 2015 by Ryan Quint**

Charles W. Read’s 4,000 mile journey from the coast of Brazil culminated as he sailed the *Archer*, a captured fishing schooner, into Portland, Maine’s harbor after nightfall of June 26, 1863. The small *Archer* had its prize crew of about twenty Confederate sailors along with the one howitzer Read had

brought along and made good use of over the past near two months. As Read sailed underneath the guns of the forts surrounding Portland's bay, he spotted his target: the revenue cutter *Caleb Cushing*.

The Revenue Cutter Service in the 1860s acted much like a precursor to the modern day U.S. Coast Guard. With an overall length of 100 feet, the *Caleb Cushing* was armed with a single 32-pounder, a gun that appealed immensely to Charles Read as he was still relying on the small howitzer he had brought along from the CSS *Florida*. As Read prepared his crew to take the cutter as quietly as possible, he had no idea how fate had played right into his hands; around the time that the *Archer* sailed by Portland Head Light, the *Caleb Cushing*'s captain, George Clarke, died of a "disease of the heart." Clarke's death meant that, one: most of the cutter's officers were ashore taking care of funeral arrangements for their deceased commander, and two: a large portion of the *Caleb Cushing*'s crew had used their captain's death to avail themselves of leave in Portland's busy streets. Left on the *Caleb Cushing* on the night of June 26 was a small remnant of the crew along with acting commander, Lieutenant Dudley Davenport, a Georgian by birth and, by happenstance, an old classmate of Read's from their days at the Naval Academy.[\[1\]](#)

Sometime around 1:30 AM, now June 27, Read's Confederates used two small boats to row up alongside, jump aboard the *Caleb Cushing* and, before any of the cutter's crew really knew what was going on, captured it. Lieutenant Davenport, sleepily roused from his bed, had a brace of pistols aimed at his head and his old classmate Read snarled, "Keep quiet and we will not harm you. Make a noise and you are a dead man! You are a prisoner of the Confederate States of America." Then, apparently recognizing Davenport, Read insulted, "You ought to be ashamed of yourself for deserting the South."[\[2\]](#)



Portland Harbor. The map has been labeled to identify the approximate location of the 7th Maine as well as the location of Fort Preble.

Taking possession of the *Caleb Cushing* was the easy part; now the Confederates needed to get the cutter away from the dock and sail it out of the harbor without arousing suspicion. Finally releasing the cable docking the *Caleb Cushing*, the Confederates then had to deal with light winds and a low tide. Read was forced to utilize his two small row boats in order to tow the *Caleb Cushing* out of the harbor. [3]

By 10 AM the rebels and their stolen ship were only twenty miles out of Portland's inner bay. At that time, in the distance, Read could see ships approaching, and while the *Caleb Cushing* was at the mercy of the light wind with its sails, the Confederate lieutenant saw smoke pumping furiously from the oncoming ships' stacks. It did not take long for Read long to realize that they were Federal ships, hastily in pursuit. The morning of June 27, as Read's men and their captured prize fought against the light wind, Portland's Custom Collector, Jedediah Jewett, was alerted that the *Caleb Cushing* was gone around 8 AM. Hearing of the incident Jewett initially thought that Lieutenant Davenport, the Georgian-native, had decided to switch sides in a dramatic way. [4]



### Jedediah Jewett

Jewett acted quickly and sent out two messengers. One messenger made his way across the harbor to Fort Preble, currently headquarters to the 17<sup>th</sup> United States Infantry under the command of Major George L. Andrews. Though Andrews and the 17<sup>th</sup> U.S. were stationed in Maine for the time being, they had seen their fair share of action. Just under two months before, in some of the opening shots of the Battle of Chancellorsville, Andrews' men had deployed to protect the Federal army's advance down the Orange Plank Road. The Regulars' brigade commander wrote, "I desire to mention by name... Maj. George L. Andrews, Seventeenth Infantry, for the skillful manner with which he covered the advance with his line of skirmishers." Being posted to Maine many of the Regulars may have presumed they were leaving the combat zone, but war had found them again.[\[5\]](#)

Getting word of the *Caleb Cushing's* capture, Andrews delegated the Regulars' response to Captain Nathaniel Prime. Prime and his subordinates, along with some 30 Regulars, picked up their rifles and made their way aboard the *Forest City*, which was currently gathering steam. As the *Forest*



*City* prepared to make way, Andrews also ordered that a 6- and 12-pounder be lashed aboard, transforming the side-wheeler into an ad-hoc gunboat.[\[6\]](#)

While Jewett's first messenger made his way to Fort Preble with all that entailed, the second courier raced to Camp Lincoln, the bivouac for four companies of the 7<sup>th</sup> Maine Infantry. Located along the Fore River, in what would later become the city of South Portland, the detachment of the 7<sup>th</sup> was on recruiting duty, while the majority of the regiment was just days away from engaging at Gettysburg. In charge of the Maine volunteers was Colonel Edwin Mason and just like his Regular counterpart Andrews, Mason reacted with haste to Jewett's plea for help.



Colonel Edwin Mason

According to Jewett, in about fifty minutes' time of getting the message, Mason had his regiment formed, "including his band," and boarding the steamers. Mason's transport was the *Chesapeake*, which much like the *Forest City*, was also readied as an impromptu gunboat, its armament totaling two 6-pounders. Joining Mason's blue-clad volunteers were citizens from Portland, who, hearing of the commotion, grabbed weapons from the State Arsenal and jumped aboard.[\[7\]](#) Joined by the *Casco*, carrying more

eager citizens, and a tug, intended to tow the *Caleb Cushing* back into the harbor, the small armada steamed out of the bay.

With Jewett hearing of the *Caleb Cushing*'s capture around 8 AM, and an hour to get the response ready, it was close to 10 AM when the Federal chase got underway. The steamships would prove crucial in catching up to Read's Confederates, who were still struggling with the light wind in their sails. A morning of excitement was about to turn into an even more dramatic afternoon. Four Federal ships left the harbor, chasing two Confederates—the stolen *Caleb Cushing* and the *Archer*. By day's end one of those ships would go to the bottom of the ocean in an explosive fireball.

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— [1] *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion*, Ser. 1, Vol. 2, 322 (hereafter cited as OR Navies); Harry Gratwick, *Mainers in the Civil War* (Charleston: The History Press, 2011), 95.

[2] Winfield M. Thompson, "A Confederate Raid", in *The Rudder*, edited by Thomas Fleming Day, Volume 16, 1905, 244; *Mainers in the Civil War*, 95.

[3] Charles L. Dufour, *Nine Men in Gray* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 145.

[4] OR Navies, Ser. 1, Vol. 2, 323.

[5] *The War of the Rebellion: a Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Vol. 25, pt. 1, 533.

[6] OR Navies, Ser. 1, Vol. 2, 326.

[7] OR Navies, Ser. 1, Vol. 2, 323; Thompson, 245.

### **The Battle of Portland Harbor (Conclusion)**

Posted on February 12, 2015 by Ryan Quint

It had been a hectic morning on June 27, 1863. Under the cover of darkness, rebel privateers under the command of Charles Read first jumped aboard the *Caleb Cushing*, a revenue cutter tied-up port within Portland, Maine. Read's men captured the small crew aboard the cutter and then started to make their way out of the harbor, but were stalled due to small winds that barely caught

the *Caleb Cushing*'s sails. At first light, discovering that the cutter had been captured, Portland's fortresses and garrisons were abuzz, and about an hour after first learning of the *Caleb Cushing*'s capture, a small armada of ships steamed after Read's prize.

By the time that the Federal ships caught up to Read, the Confederates had managed to only get about 15 miles out of the harbor. Seeing the oncoming Federals, Read decided to fight it out. Except the Georgian-born Lieutenant Dudley Davenport, in temporary command of the *Caleb Cushing* at the time of its capture, was not cooperating.

Aboard the *Caleb Cushing* Read's men found enough shot and powder for about ten discharges from the large 32-pounder. This would not be nearly enough to fight off the oncoming vessels, but Davenport steadfastly refused to give up the location of the keys that would open the *Caleb Cushing*'s powder magazine. Deep in the hold of the *Caleb Cushing* were almost ninety rounds of solid and case shot with accompanying powder stores and yet, for all he threatened and roared, Read was not able to coerce Davenport into giving up the keys.[\[1\]](#)

With his limited supply of shot and powder, Read chose nonetheless to fight. Heaving to, and at a range of about two miles, the rebels aboard the *Caleb Cushing* fired their first round from the 32-pounder. The shot roared across the waterline; first the Federals saw a puff of white smoke and then, a moment later, the deep rumble of the cannon. Aboard the *Forest City*, the closer of the ships, Nathaniel Prime of the 17th U.S. was hesitant to fire back, and even if he had wanted to, his subordinate recorded that "my pieces were too light at that distance, and I did not want to wish to show their small size...."[\[2\]](#)

Prime also had to reckon with the skittish civilian pilot of the *Forest City*. As more shots rang out from the *Caleb Cushing*, the rounds bounced along the water like skipping stones. Though none of the shells struck, the *Forest City* was completely unarmored; a single round into one of its paddle wheels would be catastrophic. With little recourse, the *Forest City* hung back, waiting for the *Chesapeake*, which was speedily chugging up to the scene.

While the *Chesapeake* was armed similarly to the *Forest City* in terms of cannon, it at least had some semblance of protection. Earlier in the morning, as the 7<sup>th</sup> Maine and citizens piled aboard, someone had had the frame of

mind to throw against the sides of the *Chesapeake* about “50 bales of cotton for barricades.” Though not much, the cotton bales were better than the entirely unprotected *Forest City*.[\[3\]](#)

While Read fired more shots from the 32-pounder, still not hitting anything, the *Chesapeake* and *Forest City* pulled up alongside each other. Now only about a mile separated the two Federal ships from the *Caleb Cushing*, which was quickly running out of shots because of Davenport’s tenacious refusals to Read’s demands. Picking up steam, the *Chesapeake* made its way towards the *Caleb Cushing*, evidently with the intent of ramming the captured cutter.[\[4\]](#)

As the *Chesapeake* rushed ahead, Charles Read knew he was running out of options. The 32-pounder fired one last time, scattering a load of grapeshot across the water in what was entirely a final symbol of resistance. With his largest asset now useless, Read gathered the *Caleb Cushing*’s captured crew on deck and herded them and his prize crew into small rowboats. Before abandoning the cutter, though, a slow match was set on fire and the flames began to crackle around the ship.



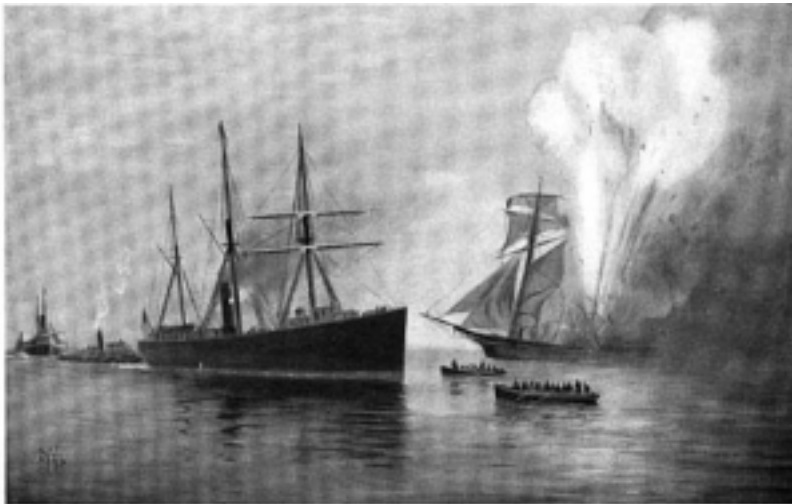
The “Caleb Cushing” burns in a print from the July 11, 1863 edition of “Harper’s Weekly”.

Aboard the *Forest City* one officer armed with a set of field glasses spotted the ever-growing flames and the curling black smoke. “Expecting every

moment to see her blown to atoms,” the officer wrote, “I advised the [ship’s pilot] to bear away...”[5]

With Read and his men in one boat, and the *Caleb Cushing*’s crew in another, the two were soon scooped up by the *Forest City* and the *Chesapeake*, respectively. Aboard the former a witness wrote that the rebels surrendered by “frantically displayed white handkerchiefs and masonic signs...” though Regulars aboard the *Forest City* were not about to take any chances. One rebel wrote that the soldiers “had their muskets aimed directly at us, as if about to fire...”[6]

As Read’s men were captured and the *Caleb Cushing*’s crew liberated, the revenue cutter exploded. After burning for only a few minutes, the flames reached the powder hold, estimated by one officer to contain about 500 pounds worth of powder, sometime around 2:00 PM. At first there was a bright flash, and then, a moment later, a “fearful explosion,” which made the cutter almost instantly “[disappear] from our view.” A rebel added with more detail that there was a “terrific explosion that shook the little fleet standing by, and caused a disturbance on the surface of the sea. The whole deck of the vessel seemed to fly upward, and a burst of flames and vast column of smoke rose from her shattered hull. Fragments of iron, blackened timbers, bits of plank and spar, and innumerable cinders flew out of them and fell into the sea around...”[7]



The “Caleb Cushing” exploded around 2 PM on June 27, 1863.  
(Image from “The Rudder”, Vol. 16.)

The explosion of the *Caleb Cushing* and its rapid sinking proved to be the climatic finish to the Battle of Portland Harbor. The *Archer*, Read's captured prize that he had sailed into Portland Harbor the day before, was nearby and trying to slink away but the *Forest City* quickly caught up and, with one shot fired across its bow, convinced the smaller ship to surrender. The Federals returned to Portland and Read with his men were temporarily imprisoned in Fort Preble, the headquarters for the 17<sup>th</sup> United States Infantry.[8]

Read did not stay in Portland for long, however. Major George Andrews, commanding the Regulars at Fort Preble, wrote to his superiors, suggesting that the rebels be moved away from the harbor because of the "present excitement." Andrews elaborated, "I would respectfully suggest that the prisoners be sent from here as quietly and expeditiously as possible, as I do not think it safe here for them to be placed in the custody of the citizens...."[9] Agreeing with Andrews, higher commands arranged for Read and his rebels to be moved to Fort Warren in Boston Harbor a short while later.[10]



Confederate prisoners at Ft. Warren. Charles Read is sixth from right.

Almost as quickly as it had begun, the Battle of Portland Harbor was over. Read's adventure, from leaving the CSS *Florida* off the coast of Brazil to his capture off the coast of Maine, lasted 52 days. He captured or destroyed close to twenty ships, including in a grand finale, the *Caleb Cushing*. Read would remain as a prisoner at Fort Warren until being exchanged in September, 1864.[11]

As far as the Federals were concerned, their military victory in capturing Read, albeit at the expense of the *Caleb Cushing*, came almost entirely because of the quick actions of the custom collector, Jedediah Jewett. Jewett's initiative and rapid-fire directions was what, ultimately, captured the rebel privateers. Speaking of Jewett and Mayor Jacob McLellan, who armed citizens at the state arsenal, one man wrote, "life was worth living that morning if only to see the tremendous energy of those two men."<sup>[12]</sup>

The Civil War had come to the coast of Maine, and, then, in the blink of an eye, was gone again.

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<sup>[1]</sup> *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion*, Ser. 1, Vol. 2, 329 (hereafter cited as OR Navies).

<sup>[2]</sup> OR Navies, 328.

<sup>[3]</sup> OR Navies, 323.

<sup>[4]</sup> OR Navies, 325.

<sup>[5]</sup> Ibid.

<sup>[6]</sup> OR Navies, 326; Winfield M. Thompson, "A Confederate Raid", in *The Rudder*, edited by Thomas Fleming Day, Volume 16, 1905, 246.

<sup>[7]</sup> OR Navies, 326; Thompson, 246-247.

<sup>[8]</sup> OR Navies, 326.

<sup>[9]</sup> OR Navies, 327.

<sup>[10]</sup> Charles L. Dufour, *Nine Men in Gray* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 147.

<sup>[11]</sup> *Register of Officers of the Confederate States Navy 1861-1865* (Washington: Government Printing Press, 1931), 161.

[12] Members of Bosworth Post, *Portland Soldiers and Sailors: A Brief Sketch of the Part they took in the War of the Rebellion* (Portland: B. Thurston & Co, 1884), 33.