

A Confederate Adventure Tale

Charles Read's Raider

By Phil Leigh

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On May 6, 1863, the same day that Gen. Joseph Hooker's Union Army retreated northward over the Rappahannock River following defeat at Chancellorsville, Va., Second Lt. Charles Read of the Confederate commerce raider Florida began one of the most astonishing adventures of the war.

His journey began thousands of miles to the south, in Brazilian waters. Earlier that morning the Florida captured the Baltimore-bound brig the Clarence. At Read's request, the Florida's captain, John Maffitt, gave the Mississippi-born lieutenant approval to take command of the Clarence with 20 volunteers and a small howitzer. Two weeks before his 23rd birthday, the Annapolis graduate converted the brig into a miniature Confederate raider disguised as a harmless sailing vessel.

His plan was audacious: Read figured that her genuine registry papers could get the Clarence past the blockade and into Hampton Roads, Va., which was typically crowded with Union supply vessels. Once inside, his crew might capture an unsuspecting gunboat and do what damage they could in the target-rich harbor before escaping into the Atlantic.

Once underway, it became apparent that the Clarence was slow because her bottom was fouled with barnacles and the copper plating was working loose. It would take weeks to reach the Virginia Capes, and her crew began to grumble. In order to sustain discipline, Read put the men to work making Quaker guns, which were wooden mockups painted black to resemble authentic cannons. They could alternately augment the Clarence's warlike appearance or be hidden to restore her otherwise innocent facade. She was transformed into an ancestor of the famous German raiders of the two world wars, Wolf and Atlantis, that masqueraded as merchant ships.

Photo

Second Lt. Charles W. ReadCredit The Navy Department Library

On June 6, off the North Carolina coast, Read captured and burned his first victim, a ship carrying coal to Admiral David Farragut's New Orleans Squadron. The next day he stopped and released a Yankee-owned schooner bound for Matamoros, Mexico, with a cargo of weapons and clothing for Confederate trans-Mississippi armies. (Matamoros is across the Rio Grande from Brownsville, Tex., and was commonly used by shippers — including numerous Northerners — to avoid the Union blockade, thereby enabling the ships to conduct profitable arms-for-cotton trade with the Confederacy.)

His third victim, the *Mary Alvinia*, was set ablaze on June 9, but Read transferred her logbook and manifest to *Clarence*. It was quick thinking on his part: the following day he was stopped and boarded by a Union Navy steamer. While his prisoners from previous victims were isolated and ordered to remain silent, he gave the leader of the boarding party the *Mary Alvinia*'s papers as his own. The Union officer let the *Clarence* sail on.

By June 12, the *Clarence* had captured four more commercial vessels, including the *Tacony*. Since the *Tacony* was a much better ship, Read abandoned the Hampton Roads scheme and transferred his crew and armament to her. In fact, the *Tacony* was so fast that he could capture her only with trickery; as she approached, the *Clarence* hoisted an inverted American flag, a universally recognized distress signal, which compelled the *Tacony*'s skipper to stop and, consequently, be captured.

Once the *Tacony*'s captain made it back to shore, he reported the presence of the deceptively modest raider along the Mid-Atlantic coast. For newspapers, he exaggerated a story that Read himself had fabricated about how the *Florida* and other raiders would soon form a Confederate "armada" off the Eastern Seaboard to ravage coastal shipping. (In truth, the *Florida* did appear, nearly capturing one of the Union ships searching for Read before the outgunned federal escaped into a fog bank.) Within three days nearly 40 Union warships were hunting Read's vessel. Even the yacht *America*, winner of the *America's Cup*, was drafted into the search. But the raider's whereabouts remained a mystery until she burned another victim 300 miles off the Delaware River on June 15.

Over the next several days two federal warships stopped the *Tacony*, but both failed to detect her raider status, either because they were looking for the *Clarence* or because they were simply unable to imagine the unexceptional craft as an enemy. Instead they asked Read whether he had seen "the pirate brig." He deceptively replied that he had, and volunteered phony location and heading directions. By June 24 the *Tacony* had chalked up 12 more victims, including one carrying 350 Irishmen to join the federal Army as paid substitutes for draft avoiders. He released the passenger ship on a \$150,000 bond to be paid to the Confederacy upon ratification of a peace treaty between the two belligerent countries. That evening Read transferred his crew a second time to the 20th victim, the mackerel schooner *Archer*.

While federal warships searched for the raider off the New Jersey coast, Read took Archer to Portland, Maine. After capturing two lobstermen in a dory who assumed he was a smuggler who would pay them for assistance, he learned Portland's only sea-ready warship was a Treasury Department revenue cutter named the Caleb Cushing. Carrying no engines, she was entirely dependent on sails for propulsion. That night in two boats, under muffled oars, Read captured the surprised cutter without a gunshot. By daylight he was five miles outside the harbor, underway with a freshening breeze.

When the city's port collector awakened to find the Cushing inexplicably missing, he incorrectly assumed the cutter's Georgia-born skipper had switched sides. Two steamers were commandeered to take up pursuit and quickly armed with a couple of small cannons and soldiers from a nearby fort. They caught Read's cutter about 20 miles from shore.

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The engagement might have been disastrous for the impromptu Portland navy, except that the Cushing mysteriously seemed to have only five rounds in her magazine, although there was plenty of powder. The rebels were unaware of a hidden reserve ammunition chest, which none of the cutter's captured crew had volunteered to identify. After missing their targets with the five available projectiles, a crewmember came on deck with a ball of Dutch cheese, which was stuffed into the 32-pounder cannon barrel. Unlike the earlier rounds, this one hit one of the pursuing steamers, splattering cheese fragments over her bewildered defenders.

Nonetheless, few sailing vessels could escape self-propelled steamers. Read ordered his crew into lifeboats while setting Caleb Cushing afire to scuttle her. Around midday she exploded.

In three weeks the Confederates had captured 21 prizes armed with nothing more than a modified field-mounted howitzer shooting 12-pound projectiles about the size of softballs. Exaggerated press coverage and false sightings created hysteria up and down the East Coast, amplified by Robert E. Lee's simultaneous invasion of Pennsylvania.

While the rebels were marched through town, angry Portlanders threatened to lynch the "pirates." But an earlier exchange of Masonic signs between selected federal soldiers and their captives motivated the guards to keep the prisoners safe.

Read was imprisoned in Boston's Fort Warren. Together with another prisoner, he worked for months to enlarge the diameter of a chimney servicing their cell. Eventually they got out and found a small fishing boat anchored offshore. They swam to it and set sail for Canada, but were captured within 24 hours. Another incarcerated crewman, having read "The Count of Monte Cristo," tried to escape three times. Finally, Read was exchanged in October 1864 and sent to Richmond.

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Sources: Stephen W. Sears, "Chancellorsville"; Robert A. Jones, "Confederate Corsair"; Ralph A. Wooster, "Lonestar Blue and Gray: Essays on Texas in the Civil War"; Chester G. Hearn, "Gray Raiders of the Sea"; Virgil Jones, "The Civil War at Sea," Vol. 2; Raimondo Luraghi, "A History of the Confederate Navy."

Phil Leigh is an armchair Civil War enthusiast and president of a market research company. He is preparing an illustrated and annotated version of the memoirs of Confederate Pvt. Sam Watkins, which will be released by Westholme Publishing this spring entitled "Co. Aytch: Illustrated and Annotated."