

Marauders of the Sea, Confederate Merchant Raiders During the American Civil War

CSS *Florida*. 1862-1863. Captain John Newland Maffitt. CSS *Florida*. 1864. Captain Charles M. Morris

CSS Florida.

This ship was built by William C. Miller and Sons of Liverpool, and was the first contract negotiated by Captain James Bulloch as Naval Agent of the Confederate States. She carried the dockyard name of *Oreto*, by March 1862, the ship was ready for sea, an English crew was signed on to sail her as an unarmed ship, this arrangement was necessary to avoid any conflict with the neutrality regulations that obtained.

On the 22nd of March, she left Liverpool carrying as a passenger Master John Lowe of the Confederate States Navy, who had been ordered to deliver the ship to Captain J.N. Maffitt at Nassau.

The necessary guns and equipment to fit her out for a role as an Armed Raider were shipped to that port aboard the steamer Bahama.

During his total tenure in Britain, Bulloch was watched, and all his activities documented by Union people, so that as soon as *Oreto* arrived in Nassau, the US Consul was petitioning the British Governor to seize her as she was intended for Confederate service. He did just that twice, between April and August, but the Admiralty Court on the evidence submitted that documented her as British property, ordered the ship to be released.

Back at Nassau, the intended armament for *Oreto*, was placed in a schooner, which then met the proposed new Raider at Green Cay, 60 miles away from Nassau on the 10th. of August. There, *Oreto* was transformed into CSS *Floriida*, fitted out with two 7 inch and four 6 inch Blakely rifled guns.

Captain Maffitt had only 18 men on board, these included Lieutenant J.M.Stribling, three Midshipmen, Floyd, Bryan and Sinclair, and W.L. Bradford as the Acting Master, yellow fever struck the crew, only four deck hands and a single fireman were exempt from this scourge .The ship made for Cardenas, Cuba, and six men died, the Captain also fell ill with this fever, he was summoned to Havana by his Captain General.

The ship being neither properly manned nor equipped as she needed to be, and with stringent Spanish regulations in place, the Captain decided to take his vessel into Mobile. By the 4th. of September 1862 he was standing off the bar , and hoisted the British flag, hoping to deceive three blockading ships.

Florida was cleared to come close to them, but was now ordered to stop!

Captain Maffitt now hoisted his Confederate flag, this brought instant fire from the Union sloop *Oneida*, from point blank range, and his ship was in dire straits, until he could run in under the protective guns of Fort Morgan.

So close had been the range, two shells had passed right through his ship, one man was killed, a further 7 wounded, and her rigging torn to shreds. Having risen from his sick bed to fight his ship, Captain Maffitt made it into Mobile, where *Florida* was repaired, fully fitted out and properly manned.

Come the night of the 15th. of January 1863, the Captain's luck held, he crept out to sea, avoided the block ships, and then outran the Union gunboat *R.R. Cuyler*.

The combination of steam and sail had provided sufficient speed to allow this Confederate to escape, the screw could be lifted clear of the water which avoided any drag when the ship was using her sails alone.

Florida now carried the following officers:

Lieutenant John Newland Maffitt, in Command, Lieutenants, S.W. Averett (he had already been a Prisoner of War, but had been exchanged at Vicksburg in August of 1862) J.L. Hoole, C.W. Read, S.G. Stone, Midshipmen, R.S. Floyd, G.D. Bryan, J.H. Dyke, G.T. Sinclair, and W.B. Sinclair, Chief Engineer, A.M. Spidell, Assistants, Chas. W. Quinn, Thos. A. Jackson, and E.H. Brown, Surgeon Frederick Garrettson, and Paymaster Lynch.

Note; This list came from contemporary records, and perhaps a Paymaster was not considered important enough to warrant his initials being recorded, but, in those troubled times, I would have thought that the Paymaster, with his task of both obtaining sufficient funds, and husbanding the money to ensure the crew received their entitlements, was a most important member of the Captain's staff.

Although *Florida* had managed to escape from Mobile, we need to look at the outcry raised by the fact that she had managed to outrun the Union ships and enter Mobile. It had serious repercussions for Commander Preble in Oneida, he had to write about his failure to stop the Confederate ship to Rear Admiral Farragut, who in turn wrote a letter of censure to Preble.



Picture of Lieutenant John Newland Maffitt of CSS *Florida*

"Secretary of the Navy Welles was very cross about this fiasco, and the Union press were taking it upon themselves to seek dismissal of Commander Preble, they also pointed out how Bulloch in England was making Union ships look foolish with his ability to build and sail ships on behalf of the Confederate cause."

Now on the 20th. of September, Welles had written to Preble indicating:

"When submitting your letter to the President, I received from him prompt directions to announce to you your dismissal from the service. You will from this date cease to be regarded as an officer of the Navy of the United States."

A rather harsh reaction, but then Maffitt had made the Union blockade ships look like amateurs, and we have already seen what one Confederate ship could achieve, loose on the ocean, and plying havoc amongst American Maritime commerce.

After the elapse of a further 5 months, President Lincoln had second thoughts about Preble, he rescinded his dismissal order, and reinstated him in his rank of Commander. It did take until 1872, when Maffitt was before a Court of Inquiry in Washington, before Preble was exonerated fully.

Although *Florida* had eluded the Union blockade with its attendant acrimony, there were some officers of the Union Navy who extolled the feat achieved by her Captain, his ship and crew. Admiral David Dixon Porter noted in his Naval History:

"During the whole war there is not a more exciting adventure than this escape of the *Florida* into Mobile Bay, The gallant manner in which it was conducted excited a great admiration even among the men permitting it. We do not suppose there ever was a case where a man, under all the attending circumstances, displayed more energy or more bravery."

Back onboard the USS *Cuyler*, her Captain was remonstrating with himself:

"From fancying myself near promotion in the morning, I gradually dwindled to a court of inquiry at dark, when I lost sight of the enemy."

The fact that *Florida* had been allowed to escape from Mobile was debated in the Congress at Washington, and Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles, was given a hard time. Next we find the New York Times wanting to know why Commander Preble had been sacked for allowing the Raider to reach Mobile, but no one received censure for allowing this ship to get away again, this time escaping the waiting Union net. As we will soon learn, Welles would have plenty of opportunities to rue the fact that *Florida* was out, about, and operating with devastating effect.

This Raider of 700 tons had been designed and built for speed, during her escape run, with a following wind she had made 14.5 knots.

On the 19th. of January 1863, having sailed round the western part of Cuba she came upon the New York trader, the brig *Estelle*, on her way to Boston from Santa Cruz, her full cargo of molasses and honey. With the American flag flying, the Confederate was taken to be a Union gunboat, imagine his surprise to be abruptly and rudely stopped by the firing of a blank charge.

Captain Brown claimed that his cargo valued at \$130,000 belonged to a neutral, his crew were hastily transferred to *Florida*, and his ship set alight, as Maffitt did not accept this ploy.

Because the actual disposal of prize ships was a real problem, no neutral port would allow them entry, Union ships maintained a very stringent blockade over all Confederate ports precluding the sailing of prizes into Southern ports, this caused Captains of Confederate Raiders having to decide to release a ship, or put her to the torch. In some instances, cargo manifests were poorly written, in others they were forged, and that particular ship might escape.

In the case of *Estelle*, there was no mistake, she was an American vessel, she was trapped in International waters about 10 miles at sea from Spanish territory, and her cargo was owned by merchants from Boston, a genuine target of the Civil War for any Confederate warship.

In WW1 and WW2, German Armed Merchant Raiders had a continual battle to obtain suitable coal to feed their ship's boilers, and during the naval aspect of the Civil War, this problem also faced the Confederate Armed Cruisers, to predate their German counterparts by many years.

Right now, Maffitt had to decide where he might rebunker, and he made for Havana, the need for more warm clothing for his sailors was also an issue, he hoped that the local Confederate Agent, Major Charles Helm would solve both these problems.

We find the Union Consul in Havana Robert Schufeldt trying his utmost to stop any succour being provided to *Florida*, but for once, the locals were more intent on assisting the Southerners than listening to the US Consul.

By the 22nd. of January, *Florida* was again at sea, and on the prowl along the eastern coast of Cuba.

La Coquena, from Portland Maine managed to dash inside the 3 mile limit to seek immunity there, but then *Winward*, a New York brig, chock full of molasses from Matanzas was stopped, and burnt. Her crew abandoned ship, manned her boats and rowed safely to shore. This act, avoided *Florida* from having the problem of saving the crew, then housing them safely on board, always being careful not to allow any prisoners the chance to overthrow the Raider's crew, and above all, not having to feed the prisoners' of war.

Almost immediately, the next victim to be burned was the brig *Corris Ann*, her Captain complaining that Maffitt was raiding under British Colours. Over the long history of war at sea, it has always been a contentious issue as to "Just when a Raider, sailing under false colours, had actually declared her true identity by hoisting her actual National flag."

It was certainly no different to the past, the way Confederate Armed Cruisers operated during the American Civil War!

Florida's engineer was now complaining that the coal loaded at Havana, although expensive, was of poor quality, and it burned badly, so to find a supply of good steaming coal became the priority.

Although they were not aware of it, USS *Alabama*, under the command of our old acquaintance Raphael Semmes, was also operating in the same area, and both ships had sailed within 100 miles of each other.

Four Union ships, USS *Wachusett*, *Santiago de Cuba*, *San Jacinto* and *Sonoma* under the general command of Rear Admiral Charles Wilkes were scouring the area for the two Southerners, but as usual, they were just too late to nail these will of the wisps.

Now Maffitt decided to again chance his hand in Nassau, entering this port without having approval so to do, he quickly called upon the Governor to both apologise and pay his respects, and came away with approval to coal his ship over 24 hours.

The visit was not without it's drama, 26 sailors jumped ship to desert, and any recruitment there would violate the Foreign Enlistment Act, but 6 new men some how found their way on board. The US Consul did his damnest to prevent this coaling, but failed in his mission.

Florida had taken her fill of coal by 0600 (6 AM) on the 27th. of January, and

quickly sailed, again ready to harass any Union ship she came across, (and to use a phrase uttered by Lenin in his early revolutionary days "to ride the wave of history") Commander Stevens in USS *Sonoma*, who in turn stated that he had stumbled upon "A strange sail hoisting English colours" which he suspected was *Florida*, and at full steam and with all sails set, he took up the chase.

Over 300 miles and 34 hours later the Union warship followed it's quarry, several times it came close to be in a position to attack, but always at the vital moment, the Raider pressed on and again widened the range.

Stevens when later reptring to his Admiral, indicated that the blower belt parted three times just when he was in a position to attack. Finally, *Florida* proved to be too fast, disappeared over the horizon to escape once more. A fresh supply of coal was vital, and she made for New England, but ran into a full gale damaging her rigging, and opening up deck seams, forcing Maffitt to head southwards.

On the 5th. of February, although sailing in dense fog, a large steam ship loomed up close by, it appeared to be a side wheeler, armed with 11 inch guns, the Union *Vanderbilt*.

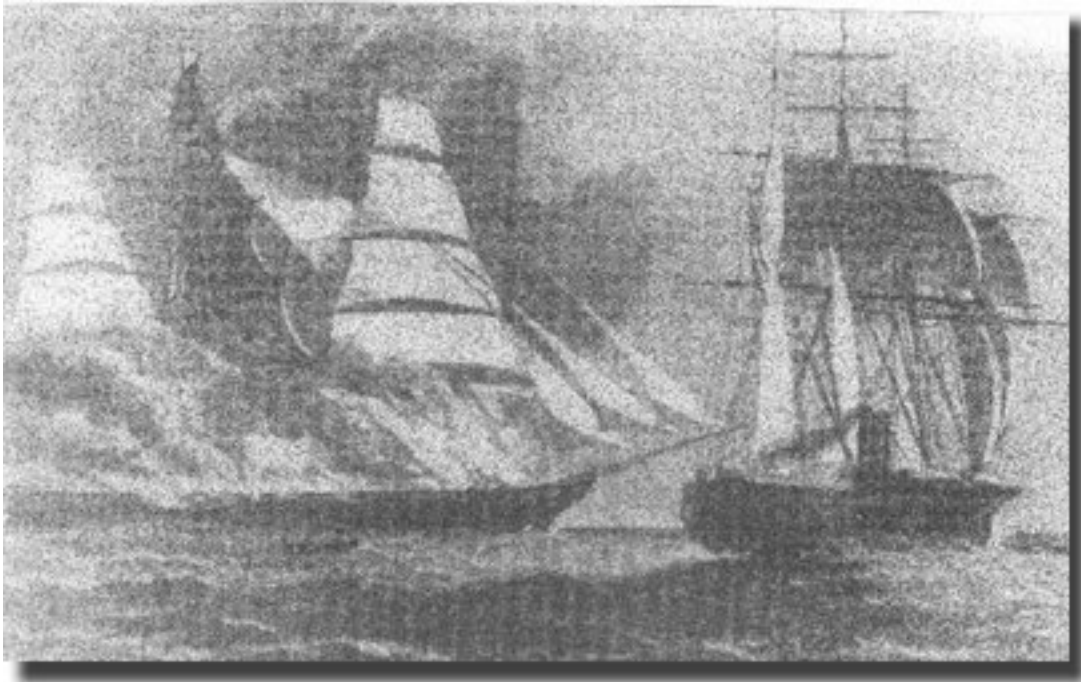
Florida's crew lowered their twin funnels, grateful for the anonymity of the fog, and tried to look like a simple West Indian trader. The Union warship sniffed at her find, made the decision, "nothing unto ward here" and sped off, much to the relief of all on board *Florida*.

Repairs to the rigging were made, and the Raider pressed on with her "seek and destroy mission."

The clipper, *Jacob Bell* on her way from China to New York was overtaken, her cargo of tea, camphor, 10,000 boxes of fireworks valued at \$1.5 Million, was the largest captured by any Confederate Raider during the Civil War.

Her 43 passengers including 2 women were taken on board, the ladies being housed in the Captain's cabin, until five days later, when all of the *Jacob Bell's* and passengers were transferred to a passing Dutch barque *Morning Star*, and taken to St Thomas.

The captured clipper, after being relieved of anything useful, was set on fire and destroyed.



CSS *Florida* disposes of clipper *Jacob Bell*, 13th. of February 1863.

USS *Vanderbilt* and USS *Alabama* assumed that *Florida* would seek out coal in the French port of Martinique, rather than try a British port where she had last coaled, so off to Martinique they raced, but no, wrong again, as on the 24th of February, *Florida* once more sought help from the British at Bridgetown in the Barbados.

There existed a 90 day provision, which insisted that after coaling in a specified neutral country, a ship had to wait 90 days before coal could be provided by that country again. But, the British government declined to issue Maffitt with a coaling permit, now *Florida's* Captain was persuasive, pleading special circumstances existed, the bad weather, his ship worn out, and received a permit to allow him to load 100 tons of coal.

As expected, the US Consul jumped up and down complaining, in vain, he now passed his complaints to the US Secretary of Navy, Seward in turn protested by expressing his displeasure to the British Foreign

Office, calling the Confederate cruiser a pirate, but all to no avail, his outpourings, simply ignored by the British authorities, I believe they quite enjoyed any discomfort they might help bring to the Union cause.

Whilst in Bridgetown, Maffitt let slip he was about to cruise off Panama, and when departing on the 25th. of February, he actually made for Brazil.

Rear Admiral Wilkes was suitably fooled, and took his Squadron in vain off to Panama.

By early March, Florida picked up the 941 ton Boston clipper *Star of Peace*, she had 1,000 tons of saltpeter from Calcutta, destined for the DuPont munitions works, where it had been intended to be turned into explosives for use against the rebels, but now never to be delivered.

Using incendiaries, she was set alight, and after 5 hours the saltpeter ignited, and an enormous fire onboard lit the sea to a distance of 30 miles.

A week later, the schooner *Aldebaran* ex New York, on her way to Brazil was captured, she was loaded with flour, and goodies from New England including brandy, rum, wine, whiskey, and a real treat, live lobsters in barrels packed with ice and seaweed. Her 30 crew now became prisoners and watched their ship burn from the deck of the Raider.

Maffitt wanted to be rid of his prisoners, and stopped several neutral ships including an Australian bark, all were loath to be burdened with extra mouths to feed and the responsibility of caring for the captured sailors. A few were off loaded, but it took 3 weeks before passage was obtained for all the POW'S in Florida.

Towards the end of March, and in mid Atlantic, coal was running out, a chance capture, the Boston bark *Lapwing* solved this dilemma, she carried a cargo of furniture but more importantly, smokeless coal, destined for Singapore and Batavia.

A bucket transfer of 10 tons of coal saved the day, and this ship was retained to act as a tender, Lieutenant Averett, 3 officers and 15 men were transferred, and a 12 pounder gun to supply some armament.

Lapwing was told to sail parallel to Florida, but to maintain a distance apart of about 8 miles.

On the 30th. of March, Averett reported a sail ahead, and watched his Captain steam by to disappear in the descending darkness, but Florida soon overhauled the *M J Colcord*. A New York bark bound for CapeTown, bearing a gift from the US to the British colony there, an early foreign aid programme, despatched with all the good will in the world, but through the unexpected whims of war, never to arrive.

A puzzled Danish brig stopped close by to watch stores being unloaded, her Master seduced by the offer to share the loot from the stricken *Colcord* providing he took onboard all the prisoners from her and transferred them to Santa Cruz. *Colcord* was soon burned, and the two rebel ships pressed on in company, only to lose contact, it was 2 weeks before they again came together, and more coal was loaded into Florida.

Mid April found the 1,300 ton clipper *Commonwealth* of New York, put to the torch, her cargo insured for the large sum of \$370,000.

Soon it was the turn of *Henrietta*, a bark from Baltimore, with flour, barrels of lard and candles, she was making for Rio de Janiro, her Captain, George Brown watched with amazement as her load of lard burnt, spewing out great clouds of black smoke. "Don't she burn pretty!" was his comment, adding, " Mr Whitridge was her owner, he is a great Union Man." No doubt this final announcement would have given

Lieutenant Maffitt a deal of satisfaction, as yet another Union vessel was destroyed. *Florida* was certainly stirring the pot, and making her presence felt as she roamed rampently across the Atlantic Ocean.

Henrietta had a family of four as passengers, Mrs Flories and her 3 children, and Maffitt gave up his cabin to this family.

Florida was obviously in a busy shipping lane, only the next day brought yet another large clipper, *Oneida* into her outstretched and waiting arms. Out of Shanghai for New York, she was hoodwinked by Maffitt flying a British flag, carrying tea and a Chinese cargo worth \$1 million. Fire was the medium to destroy this proud ship.

Florida was again awash with prisoners, and overtaking a French ship *Bremontier* allowed the Raider to get rid of them to the protesting Frenchman, who landed them at Pernambuco.

For the first and only time, Lapwing took a prize, the Union Kate Dyer, who quickly gave in at the sight of a large gun aimed in her direction, unaware that it was a dummy wooden one, painted black and made portable by mounting on large wheels.

This ship was neutral, bound for Antwerp, Averett bonded her for \$40,000 and released the ship to continue unhindered, whilst he made to rendezvous with his Captain at Fernando de Noronha, an island penal colony, 200 miles off Cape St. Roche.

Florida arrived first, just missing his fellow Confederate Captain Semmes in Alabama, which had left after a friendly visit. A new Brazilian Governor had just arrived, and he decided that to keep allowing the rebel ships to use his colony as a base would set a precedent that might be difficult to break. He gave Maffitt a mere 24 hours to gather supplies needed, and then to shove off. Already the Raider had shunted 32 prisoners they still held ashore.

To exacerbate this problem of rebel ships using the Brazilian colony as a base, Lapwing now arrived, *Florida* in dire need of some of her coal, towed her to a quiet spot, to take it on board. Maffitt changed her command by putting Richard S. Floyd in charge, ordering him to meet up at Rocas Island.

By early May, *Florida* had stopped the brig *Clarence* loaded with aromatic coffee, 300 bags were transferred, one of his Lieutenants Charles W. Read pleaded with his Captain to be allowed to man *Clarence* and operate her as an armed cruiser.

A 6 pounder gun was added to some small arms and Read took over his command, his plan to enter Chesapeake Bay, with her genuine papers and port of Registry, he hoped to make it through the Union blockade into the harbour, where he trusted he could destroy enemy ships and escape to rejoin *Florida*. It was such an audacious plan it may just come off.

By early June *Clarence* approached the American coast, her armament transformed, spars had been turned into dummy guns, mounted on wooden carriages, gun ports had been cut, and the 6 pounder providing a puff of smoke at the appropriate time, it did look as if a broadside had been fired.

On the 6th. of June, this pseudo Raider captured her first prize, the *Union Whistling Wind*, she was crammed full of coal to fill the bunkers of Admiral Farragut's ships stationed down on the Mississippi, but Read now burned this ship having seen this task performed many times by Maffitt.



Lieutenant Charles W. Read of *Florida* and *Tacony*.

Now Read came across a schooner *Alfred H. Partridge* from New York, her Captain claiming her cargo of arms and clothing were destined for the Confederate army in Texas, shipped via a neutral port in Mexico, she was bonded for \$5,000, and released to deliver, which her Captain faithfully did.

Read now captured *Mary Alvina*, a Boston bark, with stores for the US army, she was burned after taking some of the stores, and some recent newspapers. They gave Read some useful information, namely on entering Hampton Roads, all vessels were stopped, searched, and only those with cargoes earmarked for the Federal Government were allowed to dock. He thus realised that his initial intentions could not prosper, and he made for the coast, hoping to capture a faster ship than the rather sluggish *Clarence*, and one with proper clearance papers.

On the 12th. of June he sighted a sail running before a fair breeze, about 6 miles ahead, but he was too slow to catch her, and the modest 6 pounder too light to make any impression at that range. But in his heart, Read really knew he wanted such a ship, guile may do the trick, he closed the gun ports, hoisted the US flag upside down, an international signal of distress.

For *Tacony*, running from South Carolina to Philadelphia this posed a problem, her Captain, William Munday was worried, he did not like the look of this brig, but if she was genuinely in trouble, the law of the sea demanded he give her assistance.

The possibility of salvage money proved the spur to ease his vessel close to the brig, a boat with about 10 sailors in it bumped alongside *Tacony*, its occupants scrambled on board, and presented themselves, revolvers in hand, surprise was complete, and ownership of this American ship now changed hands.

Read decided to use this faster ship, and gave orders to transfer the armament and flag, a new vessel loomed up, a schooner *M.A.Schlinder*, Read again led the boarding party, I believe he was beginning to enjoy his new role of invading pirate.

It was soon alight, to attract the attention of yet another ship, *Kate Stewart*, but the 6 pounder was in a boat en route to her new ship, Clarence revealed her dummy broadside, enough to frighten Captain George Teague to utter, "For God's sake don't shoot, I surrender."

Kate Stewart was owned by the same company as was *Tacony*, but the former carried 20 female passengers, and Read decided that her Captain would take his 50 extra visitors and land them ashore, thereby ridding him of the difficult task of maintaining and guarding his prisoners, taken from his various ship conquests.

The converted *Tacony* soon proved her worth, on the first morning under her new management, the brig *Arabella* was captured with a neutral cargo. She was bonded for \$30,000, and the drifting *Clarence* having served her purpose, was set alight, soon the 8,000 bags of coffee still in her holds were wafting the aromatic smells of roasting coffee across the waves.

Read now sailed north to hopefully meet up with *Florida* and *Lapwing*, meantime Teague the former Master of *Tacony*, reached port on the New Jersey coast, and his report, planted by Maffitt, that a large Confederate Fleet was about to ravage the US eastern coast, in desperation the secretary of the Union Navy, Gideon Welles, issued orders that all available vessels should proceed to sea: "In search of this wolf that is prowling upon us."

Within 30 days, no less than 38 armed ships were out and on the hunt along the coast, seeking to catch up and destroy *Clarence*, which of course was not the ship they should have been looking for. Now on the 14th. of June, Welles discovered the new role for *Tacony*, but too late, all his US ships were already at sea looking for a ship no longer afloat. He was unable to communicate with them, desperate measures for desperate times; the Secretary now ordered ships be seized or chartered. "Put aboard an officer and a dozen men, arm them with small arms and 2 howitzers, and send them off in various directions," but still no sign of the elusive Read.

He remained unknown, until on the 15th. of June about 300 miles off the Delaware River he burned the brig *Umpire*, twice Read was stopped by Union warships who asked if he had spotted the pirate *Tacony*, on both occasions he responded positively, and gave bogus directions in which he had seen this Confederate ship sailing.

Read continued to be busy, wreaking havoc on Union ships, he stopped Isaac Webb carrying 750 new immigrants for America, there was no way he could cope with that many prisoners, so he extracted a \$40,000 bond, on returning to his command there was an inquisitive fishing schooner *Micabar* poking her nose into Confederate business, for his trouble, his ship was torched.

The next day, *Tacony* found the new clipper *Byzantium*, loaded with coal, although Read was tempted to retain her to coal *Florida* and *Lapwing*, he was beginning to worry about his superior and his ship, and burning was ordered.

Later that day more success, *Goodspeed* in ballast from Ireland to New York was also disposed of by fire.

On the 22nd. of June, it was the turn of New England fishing schooners, 3 were burnt, and a fourth was loaded with prisoners, bonded and sent off to take her load to port.

The next day, a further 2 fishing schooners were disposed of, and captured newspapers warned Read that the Union authorities now had a good description of his current Raider, and he was most likely operating on borrowed time.

He was due to move again to another vessel, the *Shatemuc*, crammed with Irish immigrants sailing from Liverpool to Boston was bonded for \$150,000. She was full of iron plate and supplies for the Northern cause, but burning her was out of the question, he had no where to place all the passengers, and was forced to let her go.

Now the mackerel schooner *Archer* became Read's 20th. prize, he had been successful beyond all expectations, the howitzer was out of ammunition, it was time to assume a new identity.

All the gear and the gun were transhipped to the 90 ton *Archer*, and the trusty *Tacony* was disposed of by fire, the new Raider aiming to burn whatever Yankee ships she might find, and hoping to cut out a merchantman to become his new home.

Archer lay off Portland Maine, two local fishermen drifting in a dory were rescued, after learning they had become Confederate prisoners, which took some time for them to accept, they were helpful with local knowledge, including the news that the fast passenger liner *Chesapeake*, was docked in New York and about to sail.

Read was never frightened about thinking and planning in a big way, he proposed to his officers, he wanted to grab *Chesapeake*, fire other ships in the harbour, and escape to sea in the confusion. But his engineer did not think his expertise would run to the management of the huge engines in this liner.

Instead, Read decided to go for the cutter *Caleb Cushing*, he sent *Archer* to sea with only 3 men, with 19 others in two boats he moved in on the slumbering crew in his target.

A new Captain was due the next day, the ship under the acting command of a young Lieutenant Dudley Davenport, all were having a good night's sleep, the next day they were off to search for the now non-existent *Tacony*.

The two deck watchmen were soon overcome, and the rest of the crew were surprised in their hammocks, by early morning *Caleb Cushing* was at sea, well clear of Fort Preble and her guns.

Davenport had been a classmate of Read's at Annapolis, and he was castigated as a Southerner for choosing the wrong side on which to fight in the Civil War.

On shore, it was thought that Davenport with his Southern background had merely stolen the cutter to take her over to the Confederate cause, the Port Collector, Jedediah Jewett gathered up a crew, manned the side wheeler *Forest City*, quickly adding two 12 pounder field howitzers to the ship, and took her to sea in pursuit of *Caleb Cushing*. *Chesapeake* was also pressed into service to join in the chase, two 6 pound field guns were lashed to the deck, an unarmed steam tug brought up the rear of this makeshift and quickly assembled motley pursuit fleet.

The ex US cutter, and now transformed into a Rebel Raider stood 20 miles out to sea, as the enemy approached Read let loose with the 32 pounder, but his gunners accuracy was astray, they soon ran out of shot, and could not locate the spare shot locker, and Lieutenant Davenport could not be prevailed upon to disclose its whereabouts.

It now appeared that Read had outlived his luck, the Union ships were fast approaching preparing to ram, everyone was ordered into the long boats and *Caleb Cushing* was set on fire.

This conflagration soon found the powder, and Lieutenant Read's 22nd. capture soon blew up, he had achieved a charmed run, had harried, pillaged and burned many Union vessels, even more, he had thrown their top brass into an absolute tizz, made the Secretary of the Union Navy look a fool, and shown how a little daring, and some fine planning could achieve so much in such a short time. In contemporary times, Winston Churchill would, I am sure, have warmed to Lieutenant Read of the Confederate Navy.

Read and his crew went into prison for a year, to be exchanged as POW'S. Read was to again fight, but not until the Civil War had almost run its course., Years later, Admiral Dixon Porter was to write:

“ A single Federal Gunboat, under an intelligent Captain, would have nipped Read's whole scheme in the bud!”

Back in Richmond, Mallory as the Confederate Naval Secretary wrote to Maffitt;

“ You are hereby informed that the President has appointed you.... a Commander in the Navy of the Confederate States, to rank from the 29th. of April, 1863, for gallant and meritorious conduct in command of the steam sloop *Florida* in running the blockade in and out of the port of Mobile against an overwhelming force of the enemy and under his fire, and since in actively cruising against and destroying the enemy's commerce.”

But back to *Florida*, who was in trouble, her engines had developed problems that only a spell in harbour could fix, and Maffitt made for Pernambuco, arriving in that port on the 8th. of May 1863, the Governor there under extreme pressure from the local US Consul, gave Maffitt a short 24 hours to make repairs, suggesting if the engines would not operate, *Florida* should put to sea under sail.

But, as we have noted in the past, Maffitt was not one to be easily brushed aside, he called on the Governor to appeal to him in person ,and came away with a letter which enabled the Rebel to extend its stay for four days, for repairs, coaling and getting food supplies. The ship sailed on the 13th. of May, and quickly destroyed the Boston clipper *Crown Point*, gaining 9 recruits from her crew.

Lapwing had waited 30 days for *Florida*, but at the wrong rendezvous, with food running out they made for Barbados, and on the 20th. of June, in sight of land, they set the ship on fire, abandoned her and rowed ashore. The 7 man crew booked a passage to Ireland, and in due course, with assistance from Confederate Agents in England, they rejoined *Florida* after she had sailed to Brest, France.

But at this stage, *Florida* had just left Brazilian waters, heading north, where on the 6th. of June she captured and burnt the 938 ton Southern Cross loaded with wood.

Next to become a victim of this intrepid Raider, on the 18th. of June was the 1,038 ton Boston clipper *Red Gauntlet*, some of the valuable coal she carried, was off loaded to *Florida*, before she too was burnt. Five of her crew decided to throw in their lot with those manning the rebel ship.

A captured Connecticut clipper, *Benjamin F. Hoxie*, claimed neutrality for a cargo of timber plus \$105,000 worth of silver bars, Maffitt decreed otherwise and in his words: “The silver bars, officers and crew I received on board, and burnt the vessel.”

The silver wound up in Bermuda where the Confederate Agent found out it did belong to an English Company, and it was then shipped off to its rightful owner.

The *Florida* was crammed with about 54 prisoners, the capture of the whaling schooner *V.H.Hill* from Providence, which was bonded for \$10,000 solved this dilemma, as the schooner hastened back to its home port to unload its human cargo.

On the 17th. of July, after capturing a packet ship *Suprise*, Maffitt learned from New York newspapers all about Read's success, and that Secretary Welles had 40 ships out at sea combing them for *Florida*.

Off New Jersey, Maffitt ran into USS *Ericson*, a four funnelled side wheeler, recently chartered by the US Navy, fog developed, which saved this ship from capture, as it made its escape into a murky fogbank.

The brig W.B.Nash just having cleared New York with 650,000 pounds of lard made a splendid bon fire, to be joined by the whaling schooner *Rienzi*, just returning from a whaling expedition in the South Pacific, she too ended up in flames, both vessels victims of the marauding *Florida*.

Maffitt now made for Bermuda where he hoped to both coal and dry dock his ship, his 24 hour stay extended to 11 days, was interrupted, when USS *Wachusett* steamed into harbour and anchored close by, making *Florida's* Captain nervous.

The Governor now reminded the US warship, that under the existing neutrality laws, it was forced to give the Confederate ship a 24 hour start, before it could begin the chase. On the 27th. of July, *Florida* went to sea shaping a course for Europe.

Florida had not been able to dry dock at Bermuda, and with continuing engine troubles, and the copper sheathing on her hull coming loose, it was now a priority to get the ship into a dry dock.

But Britain had changed her neutrality laws, precluding *Florida* from entering a British port for 90 days after leaving Bermuda, so Maffitt made for Brest, hoping for a friendly French response on his arrival there.

Not really being sure of Napoleon III's reaction, and being a prudent man, Maffitt lay off Cork in Ireland, and sent Lieutenant Averett ashore, giving him orders to proceed to France, contact the Confederate Commissioner John Slidell there, and set up the visit of his ship and her need to dry dock.

To give Averett time to carry out his mission, *Florida* again went on the prowl, and soon accounted for the 868 ton clipper *Anglo Saxon*, off to New York, out of Liverpool, with a hold full of coal.

On the 23rd. of August, Maffitt took his ship into Brest, and informed the locals he needed at least 18 days to make repairs, he was at this time in ill health, and wrote off to his Secretary of the Navy: "I regret to inform the department that in consequence of impaired health I shall be under the necessity of applying for a detachment from this vessel."

We have observed over a long period the dedication of Commander Maffitt, and can imagine his chagrin in being forced to give up his command, he was soon relieved by Commander Joseph N. Barney, in fact, Maffitt did not think too highly of his relief.

In the end, this was of little consequence, Barney never took his new command to sea, *Florida* languished at Brest for 6 months, her new Captain had health problems too, and was relieved of command on the 5th. of January 1864.

Lieutenant Charles M. Morris took over, and we are back to the point where her first Captain had been but a Lieutenant, in Command.

Maffitt had achieved much in only 8 months, captured 25 prizes, destroying another 19 ships and bonding a further 6. To this total must be added, another 22 vessels as the result of the activity of *Lapwing*, *Clarence*, *Tacony* and *Archer*, a remarkable 47 ships in all.

Bonding

As I understand the term Bonding, after a ship was captured and Bonded for a specific \$ total, the ship was set free, but the Union Government in due course would pay out the value of each Bonded Ship to the Confederate cause, they kept their ships and cargoes, but at a Dollar cost to them. And money was raised for the South.

Although we have noted Maffitt's success, it was British Ship owners who probably gained the greater benefit from *Florida's* rampage.

American ship owners started to panic, and their insurers were loath to insure both ships and their cargoes, many decided to cut their losses, and sold their vessels at bargain prices to the Brits. The ship yards in Britain were also bulging with orders for new ships, the Civil War became a boon for Britain and her shipping interests and ambitions.

But, when Bulloch made his contract with Laird's to construct *Florida*, she was registered under the Merchant shipping Act. This gave the British Board of Trade the inherent right to seize the ship, if it violated the Act.

This basically is the reason Maffitt did not take his ship into a British port for repairs, there is little doubt he would have been better served in a British Yard, rather than the slow: "Get it done in due course attitude of the French Dockyard."

As the Civil War progressed and the Confederate Raiders continued to destroy neutral cargoes, a change of attitude to the Southern cause was starting to surface both in England and in Europe.

The British Government now adopted a more neutral policy, as the Confederate cause was seen to falter, when they failed at Gettysburg, and then Vicksburg fell to the North.

Florida languishes at Brest

Repairs went along slowly and Maffitt discharges 59 crew members who went off by sea to land at Cardiff in Wales.

It seems likely that Maffitt suffered a heart attack, he was attended by a specialist from Paris, ordered to rest for at least three months, and to recuperate with some leisurely travel.

The local US officials maintained a close eye on *Florida*, and USS *Kearsarge* kept watch on her, sometimes anchoring close by in Brest, at other time watching one of the three exit channels out of the harbor and leading to the open sea.

Another Confederate ship, CSS *Georgia* also off France, gave Winslow, in command of *Kearsarge*, anxious moments, he had to leave *Florida*, and chase after *Georgia*.

To compound the Union problems, a British warship, now commissioned as CSS *Rappahannock*, had sailed into Calais, and Winslow had three ships to watch out for.

All the sea time that was necessary for *Kearsarge* in her watchdog role, placed much wear and tear on her, by the end of January 1864 her captain took her off to Cadiz in Spain for essential repairs.

Poor timing, on his return to Brest on the 19th. of February he found that *Florida* had flown the coop, and Winslow was never to sight her again.

Lieutenant Morris in Command of Florida.

Although *Florida* had been undertaking repairs at Brest over a 6 month period, her new captain was still

not happy, but the patience of the French was exhausted, the local Naval Chief Vice Admiral Count de Gueyton told Morris it was time for his ship to move on.

On the 10th. of February, the Confederate cruiser once more went to sea, nine days later, she met a steam tug off Belle Island, this ship was carrying ordinance supplies needed to make the Southerner a lethal weapon once, and she now set course for Madeira.

Florida's exit from Brest set all the Union ships around Europe in a lather, and Preble, still smarting from the earlier escape of Maffitt at Mobile, set off in *St Louis*, a 300 ton sailing sloop-of-war, for Madeira. On arrival, no *Florida*, but 4 days later she entered Funchal Roads, seeking to fill her coal bunkers.

Now we find much manoeuvring on both sides, the Americans urging the locals not to allow Morris to load either food or coal, and in turn, Morris pleading to be given the opportunity to restock with provisions and rebunker.

Finally, the Port Captain indicated that “ the necessary biscuit, water, and 20 tons of coal may be loaded, but the Governor expects you to quit this port by tomorrow evening.”

To avoid any international incident, Preble took the unusual course of unloading his guns, only to be later criticized by Secretary Welles for disarming his ship in the face of the enemy, poor old Preble could never seem to get it right as far as Welles was concerned.

Morris tried to wheedle a second 20 tons of coal out of the Governor, but he stood firm this time, and threatened to cut off the first 20 tons.

Florida crept out to sea, slipping past St Louis, before the moon rose, and made for Tenerife, hoping to ship more coal at that port, he let slip before sailing that Cadiz was the destination.

Preble for once was not fooled, and off to Tenerife he sailed, only to have *Florida* escape to the west, calm winds preventing the Union ship from intercepting its enemy.

Over two months on the way to Martinique, Morris did not come across a single American vessel, in port, the brothels were well patronised by his crew, and some desertions took place , also several officers were lost to illness, a Second Assistant Engineer showing signs of syphilis decided to resign.

On the 30th. of April it was time to get out to sea, money was short, and prizes were needed to top up the cash reserves.

Still no Union scalps when the ship entered Bermuda on the 12th. of May, Lieutenant Averett unwell from vertigo, was sent off to Richmond to plead for both new Engineering personnel, and funds to keep the Raider functional.

Back at sea the same evening, with grizzling engineers, a reduced crew, cruising close to Bermuda to await a response from Richmond. On the 18th. of May, success at long last, the 198 ton schooner *George Latimer* from Baltimore making for Pernambuco, with a cargo of bread , flour and lard, almost made to order.

After stripping this ship, taking her Captain and crew prisoner, she was destroyed by fire.

It took another month before Florida came across the 338 ton brig, *William C. Clarke* of Maine, her hold stacked with lumber, fire again was the medium for her demise.

Severe engineering problems continued to plague *Florida*, and Morris once more headed for Bermuda, arriving on the 19th. of June, and gained a stay of 5 days to effect repairs.

Lieutenant Averett had proven to be an effective messenger, five new engineers and a sight draft for \$50,000 arrived from Richmond.

The 1st day of July found the Raider capturing *Harriet Stevens*, another lumber carrier, but better still, 300 pounds of gum opium was also taken, now it was up to Morris to somehow trans ship this valuable medicine to the Confederacy.

The prisoners were put aboard a passing Danish bark, and the torch applied to the captive ship.

The gum opium was passed to a blockade runner *Lillian*, then on the 8th. of July, the 330 ton whaler, *Golconda*, almost home after a two year stint away, and brimming with 1,800 barrels of oil, was seized, and fire finished off her career.

The next morning a New York supply schooner was captured, she was in ballast, and was soon set on fire. Morris was starting to make his presence felt, and another ship was immediately sighted and run down, but proved to be the British schooner, *William Clarke*, her captain took aboard officers and crew members from the last two prize ships, bribed by the offer, and acceptance of pilfered stores.

This busy day was not yet over, a steamer towing a bark was sighted, the steamer cast off her tow, and hastily sped off, the bark was the 549 ton *Greenland* full of anthracite coal, unfortunately not suitable for burning in Florida's furnaces.

The runaway steamer was *America*, and would no doubt raise a hew and cry about the Raider on reaching port, the coal filled bark was set alight, and Morris headed towards the Capes of Delaware.

Now the 10th. of July, turned out also to be full of action, starting at 0300 (3AM), only 35 miles east of the Maryland coastline, the 469 ton bark *General Berry*, out of Maine bound for Fortress Monroe was captured, she had 1,202 bales of hay and straw for Union horses, and made a wonderful bonfire.

In another three hours, more results, another bark, the 559 ton *Zelinda of Maine*, now in ballast, but lookouts reported yet another sail, the prize was ordered to follow *Florida*, a shot from the pivot gun soon stopped the schooner *Howard*, loaded with fruit from San Salvador. But the cargo was owned by English merchants and exempt from destruction. A relatively light bond of \$6,000 was negotiated, on the condition that Howard accepted the 62 prisoners that were a burden to Morris. *Zelinda* was set alight.

Next came the neutral English schooner *Lane*, and she was left alone, now another chase developed, and three shots from the pivot gun forced the surrender of the new propellor steamer of 810 tons, *Electric Spark*. She carried US Mail, a valuable cargo, 43 passengers, and a crew of 36, she could maintain a constant 12 knots, and Morris coveted this ship, he really wanted her.

But firstly, he needed to dispose of the 79 new prisoners, putting Lieutenant Stone in charge of *Electric Spark* with orders to follow *Florida*, Morris set off to catch up with the fast receding *Lane*.

It took a two hour chase, and use of the pivot gun to stop her for the second time, her Captain quite irate, after some hard bargaining, including the passing over of \$720 in gold for Lane's deck cargo of fruit, the prisoners were transferred, and the ship sailed for New York, her deck now crammed with prisoners from *Electric Spark*.

Morris wanted to use a prize crew to take this new ship into Wilmington, but his two best engineers on boarding her, could not work out how to run her machinery. Alas, it was decided to scuttle her quietly,

Morris wanted *Lane* to believe that she would fly the Confederate flag, and trusted that this was the report the crew of *Lane* would spread on their arrival in New York.

The mail had been taken aboard *Florida*, but did not turn up any useful intelligence, stamps, and some money was retained, the rest of the cargo, later to be valued by her owners at \$800,000 went to the bottom of the Atlantic with this new ship.

One can but wonder if Commander Maffitt had still been in control of *Florida* at this time, would his resourcefulness have found a way of retaining *Electric Spark*, and turning her into a formidable Confederate Cruiser and Armed Raider?

Morris considered he would soon be hunted down by Union ships, and prudently set a course for Tenerife in the Canary Islands. He only sighted neutral ships, and arrived at Santa Cruz on the 4th. of August, coaled, provisioned, and set off to recross the ocean to the west.

It took 18 arduous days at sea before *Southern Rights* was captured, with 18,000 sacks of rice owned by British merchants, she was bonded for \$35,000, over a further 15 days another 12 ships were stopped, but not one American amongst them all.

The Captain of *Florida* after two months of boredom for his crew, without shore leave, was informed that a mutiny was imminent, several crew members faced charges of mutinous behavior, but eight men were acquitted. Two others faced a sodomy charge, they were fined three months pay, and discharged.

Florida now made for Bahia, and on the 26th. of September captured and destroyed her last victim, the Baltimore bark *Mandamis*, in ballast.

The ship entered Bahia on the 4th. of October, having spent 8 months on the run since escaping out of Brest.

Her tally, thirteen prizes, bonding but two. Of the eleven ships destroyed, six were taken in only three days of mayhem along the United States coast.

Morris had stopped as many ships as had Maffitt, but had struck many US built ships but serving under foreign flags with well documented cargoes giving them an immunity. He was a much more conservative officer, without the flair of Maffitt, who was more prepared to take risks.

None the less, Morris when in command of *Florida*, had served the Confederate cause well.

SOURCE:

Ahoy - Mac's Web Log

Naval, Maritime, Australian History and more

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