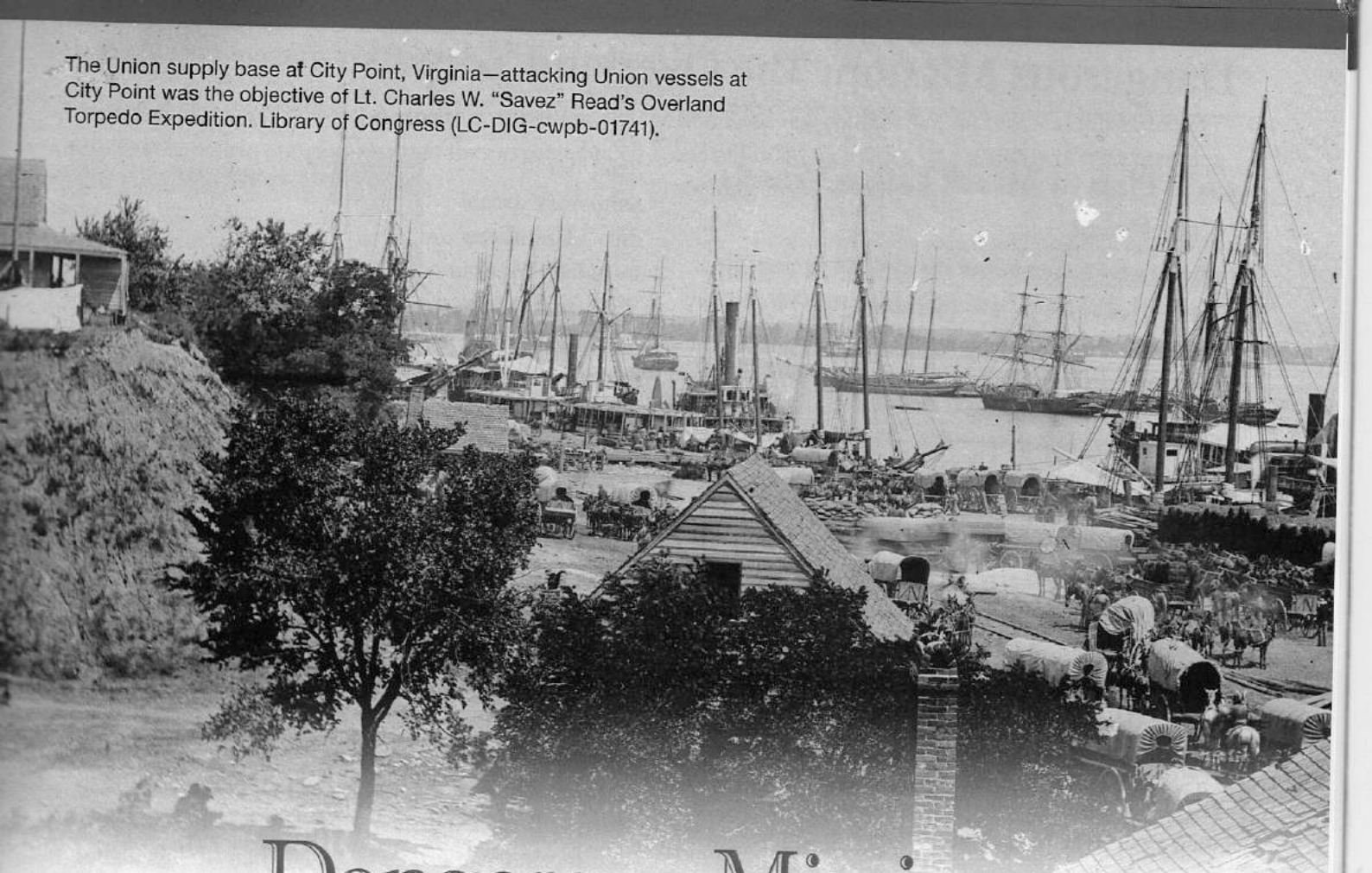


The Union supply base at City Point, Virginia—attacking Union vessels at City Point was the objective of Lt. Charles W. “Savez” Read’s Overland Torpedo Expedition. Library of Congress (LC-DIG-cwpb-01741).



Dangerous Mission: The Overland Torpedo Expedition

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By R. Thomas Campbell

THE FAILURE OF THE JAMES RIVER SQUADRON on January 23, 1865 to force its way downstream and attack the huge Federal supply base at City Point, Virginia was a bitter disappointment for the Confederate Navy. To make matters still worse, it had lost the tender *Drewry* and two of its three *Squib*-class torpedo boats. No doubt the commander of the lost torpedo boats, First Lieutenant Charles W. “Savez” Read, was convinced that if his commander, Captain John K. Mitchell, commanding the James River Squadron, had

acted quickly upon his report that the obstructions had been washed away, the ironclads and his torpedo boats could have raised havoc with the Federals. Maybe, just maybe, the destruction of the supply base at City Point would have necessitated the withdrawal of the massive army in blue that encircled Richmond and Petersburg. But now with the fall of Fort Fisher, the enemy’s ironclads would soon return, and it would be impossible to launch another attack with any hope of success.

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Read's Plan to Attack Union Vessels at City Point

For several weeks, even before the aborted attempt at Trent's Reach, Read had been pondering another method of attacking General Ulysses Grant's supply base. With the knowledge gained from small commando raids, and in light of the failed operations at Trent's Reach, he now took his proposal to higher authorities. With men from the James River Squadron, Read's plan was to transport four launches overland on wagon frames, which would travel southwest out of Petersburg and around General Grant's left flank. By this route, he felt sure he could gain the rear of the Union army without being detected. Once behind the Federals, he would turn his column east and continue on a course that would take them completely around the Union forces. His objective would be to cross the Blackwater River and attempt to arrive at the James River somewhere in Surry or Prince George County.¹

Upon reaching the river, Read planned on concealing his command along its marshy banks until an opportunity presented itself to capture one or more of the Union steam tugs that were constantly passing up and down the river. Perhaps, he argued, they might even be able to seize a Federal transport lying at anchor in Burwell's Bay.

After seizing the Union vessels, they would affix torpedo spars and torpedoes to the tugs and steam up the river to attack the Union vessels at City Point.

At the same time, upon a given signal, Mitchell would attempt again to force his way down the James River with his ironclads and join in the attack. A desperate mission, perhaps, but Read was convinced that it was time for such desperation.

Mitchell and Secretary of the Confederate States Navy Stephen Mallory gave their approval, and on February 1, a group of naval officers and 90 to 120 men (estimates vary) from the James River Squadron were assigned to

Read "for temporary special duty." The officers included First Lts. William H. Ward, William H. Wall, and John Lewis; Masters W. Frank Shippey and John A.G. Williamson; Acting Master's Mates William McBlair and James T. Layton; Midshipmen James A. Peters and Henry H. Scott; and Pilots E. C. Skinner and James Turner. The marine contingent of thirteen men was

under the direction of First Lt. James T. Thurston, Confederate States Marine Corps. Five assistant engineers and five first class firemen were also ordered to report to Read—they would be needed to operate the engines of the captured Federal vessels.²



Acting Midshipman James A. Peters, one of the officers on the Overland Torpedo Expedition. R. Thomas Campbell Collection.

The Mission Begins

Friday, February 3, 1865, dawned bitterly cold and overcast in Virginia. For the Confederate sailors and marines stumbling into formation at Drewry's Bluff, it must have seemed especially dreary. These were some of the same men who only a few days before had seen their navy's attempt at Trent's Reach fall apart when the two ironclads went aground. A few of the shivering sailors in the ranks may have come from the two torpedo boats that had been lost. They all understood how desperate the military situation had become for the Confederacy. They also knew that much would be expected of them.

No official record of Read's expedition, if one was ever written, is known to have survived, but history is indebted to Master W. Frank Shippey, the commander of the small gunboat CSS *Raleigh* who had been assigned to

the mission. Shippey kept a log during the expedition, and he wrote of the many dangers that they expected to encounter:

The expedition was a hazardous one from its incipiency, the enemy having declared their determination to show no mercy to prisoners taken on torpedo service. We had to operate in the rear of Grant's army—a handful of men, with an army of one hundred and fifty thousand between us and our friends—and every man on the expedition fully understood and appreciated the danger we ran. If we were successful in reaching the James River our dangers would have but just commenced, as we would have to board and capture an unsuspecting craft, of whose fitness for our purpose we would have to judge from appearances at long range; the capture might attract attention of the men-of-war and make us the captured instead of the captors, or our plan discovered, we would have a long way to retreat in order to reach a place of safety. Added to these difficulties, the weather was very cold, the roads rough, and the path before us a 'terra incognita.'³



First Lieutenant Charles W. "Savez" Read, CSN, in civilian clothes. R. Thomas Campbell Collection.

That Read was confident of success, was illustrated by one of his letters written to a member of the expedition not long after the war:

I am sure before they could possibly have known what was going on I could have run alongside and boarded a gunboat with my men, and, having thus captured the first gunboat, with this gunboat and my torpedoes, I could easily have sunk the rest of the gunboats...My plans were made known to General Lee, and were also approved by President Davis himself.⁴

The Long, Cold March

The Navy and Marine Corps veterans shivering in ranks on that bleak February morning had seen almost four years of war. Now, they were being asked to produce a miracle for the struggling Confederacy. With the inspection of their arms and equipment completed, four heavy wagons, each pulled by four mules, were driven up in front of the assembly. The wagon beds had been removed, leaving only the frame, axles, and wheels. A whaleboat was chocked in place onto each wagon frame, and spars, torpedoes, rations, and various other provisions were loaded and secured onboard the boats.

In mid-January, First Lt. John Lewis had been dispatched to reconnoiter the country and the route that Read intended to take.

Lewis's instructions were to meet the contingent at a ford on the Blackwater River, southeast of Petersburg, where he would guide them on to the James. With inspections concluded and everything loaded, Read and his men were ready to move out.⁵

Taking the rough frozen road south, the caravan left Drewry's Bluff, heading for Petersburg on February 3, 1865. Read, along with his second in command, First Lt. William H. Ward, took the lead with all of his sailors. Because most of these were crewmen from the ironclads that patrolled the James, marching over the winter roads would not be easy. Some may have reflected that serving on an ironclad warship in winter with steam up, while

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boring duty, meant that at least they could stay warm. About one hundred yards behind the sailors, came the wagon train commanded by Master Shippey. Behind the wagons, and acting as a rear guard, came the detachment of Confederate marines.

It is interesting to speculate on what the grizzled and hardened veterans of the Army of Northern Virginia must have thought as they witnessed this strange procession. Trudging along the frozen road through their midst were men in sailors' uniforms armed with cutlasses and revolvers. Mule teams dragged their boats behind them, followed by gray-coated marines carrying knapsacks and muskets—a strange sight indeed.

The weather, after such a gloomy beginning, had become bright and sunny, and the men made good time over the frozen Virginia roads. Arriving in Petersburg, Read turned his command southwest out the Boydton Plank Road. By evening, they had reached General Richard H. Anderson's headquarters on the right flank of the Confederate lines southwest of Petersburg. The men encamped for the night, and Read was satisfied that the first day had been a good beginning.⁶



Lieutenant-General Richard H. Anderson, CSA. MOLLUS-Mass Civil War Photograph Collection, Volume 85, p 4278.

west. About 10 miles southwest of Petersburg, just past Burgess Mills, Read turned his command toward the southeast. Keeping to unfrequented rural roads, the tired

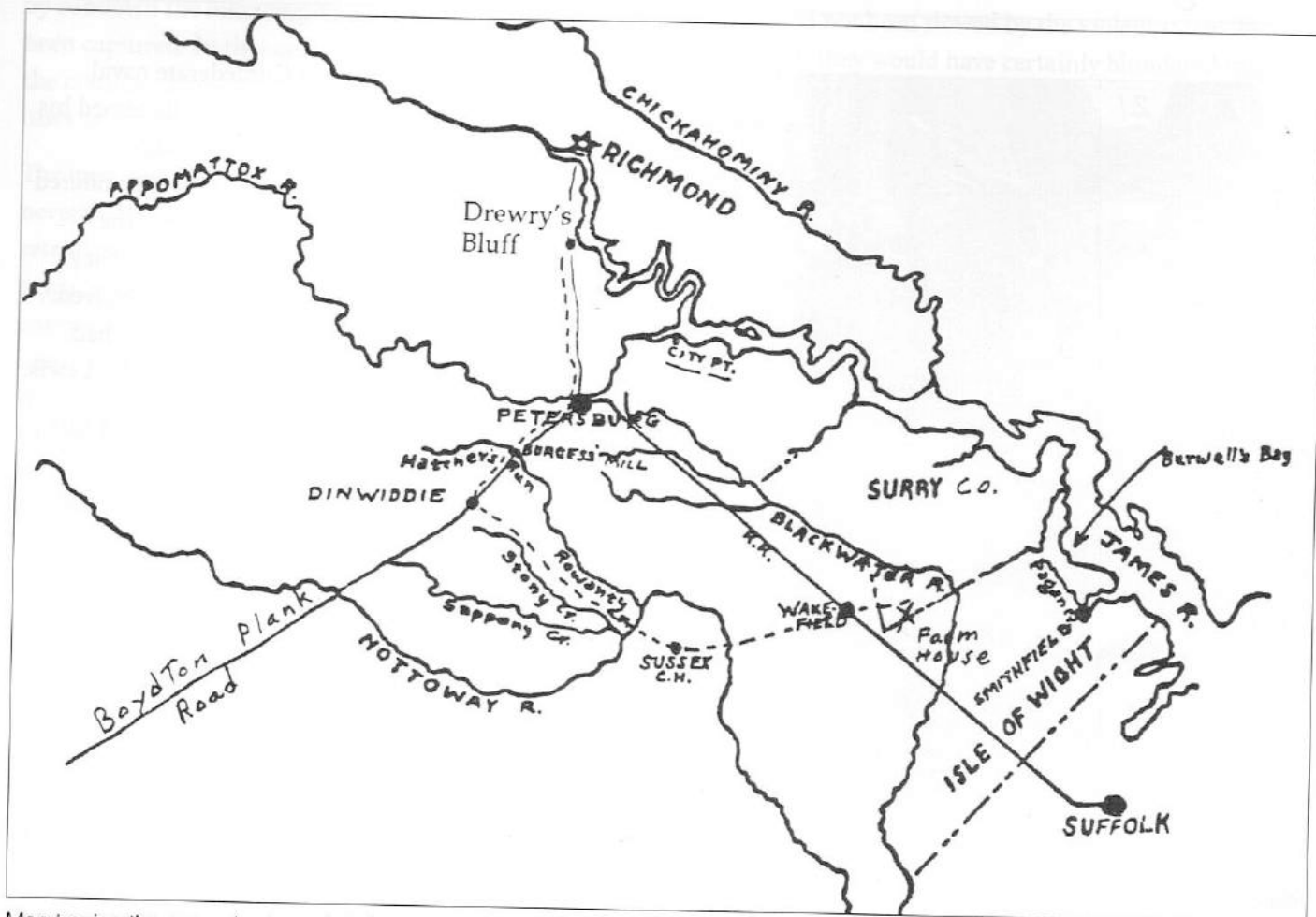
sailors and marines marched another 14 miles before halting for the night. They were now well behind Union lines. Fortunately, no Federal stragglers or foraging parties were encountered. Shippey recalled this first night behind enemy lines:

We were now fairly embarked on our expedition, pushing our way through the enemy's country and separated from our friends by his army. Indeed, we were out of the line of travel, the Federals did all their business at City Point, and there was little more to attract anyone to this part of the country than to the Siberian deserts.⁷

With high spirits and aching muscles, the men bivouacked for the second night.

Getting an early start the next day, Sunday, February 5, Read pressed his command forward over the rough country roads. The weather was clear and they made good time. Occasionally, someone would give an alarm that "Yankees" had been spotted, and the whole command would take to the woods. Fortunately, these all proved false, and they continued on. The wagon wheels clattered over the frozen ground as the sailors and marines, not being accustomed to long marches, began to feel the pain. At 9:00 p.m. that night they made camp, having covered an estimated 30 miles—a good day's march even for seasoned troops. When they built their campfires that night to cook their meager rations, it was with the realization that they were now deep within enemy-occupied territory.⁸

The following day, February 6, was uneventful, and other than an occasional alarm that again caused the command to take cover in the woods, they moved along at a steady pace. With the weather continuing cold but fair, they covered 15 miles before camping near Wakefield Station on the old abandoned Norfolk and Petersburg Railroad. They were now southeast of Petersburg, and the Blackwater and James Rivers were not much farther ahead. One more day's march and they would be at the banks of the James. The excellent weather that they had the good fortune to experience, however, was about to change. The night turned bitterly cold and toward midnight it began to snow. The men huddled closely around the fires in a futile attempt to



Map tracing the approximate route taken by Read's Overland Torpedo Expedition (dotted line). R. Thomas Campbell Collection.

keep warm...so close in fact that one of the junior officers, Master John A. G. Williamson, had a lively brush with "disaster." Shippey recalled with amusement:

He was lying close to a fire, and as I passed about midnight I saw that his coat-tail was on fire, and called him somewhat hurriedly from a sound sleep. He started up and rushed wildly through the woods, the fiery tail streaming out behind, and for awhile all efforts to stop him were futile, but we finally succeeded in capturing him, extinguishing the fire with the loss of one skirt of his coat. He afterwards cut off the other skirt and made it more 'uniform.'²⁹

As the gray morning light broke over the bleak and frigid Virginia landscape, the scene was truly miserable. It had snowed heavily since midnight, and was now alternating between snow, sleet, and freezing rain. As the shivering sailors and marines crawled out from under their blankets, they discovered that everything that had been exposed to the elements was covered with a thick coating of snow and ice. Breaking camp, the expedition

assembled in the road, and braving the storm, they began to move out. Each man, along with the wagons, took up his assigned position in the line, but progress was slow because the mules had difficulty pulling the heavy wagons on the slippery road.

Betrayal of the Plan!

As they struggled along, the wind gradually increased until it became a howling gale. Visibility was nil. Men and animals, their heads bent against the shrieking wind, became blinded by the driving sleet and little headway was made. Time and again a mule team would fall or a wagon would slide into the ditch along the road, blocking the way for those behind. With sleet stinging their hands and faces, the half-frozen sailors struggled to push the heavy wagons back onto the icy road. Once they had succeeded, the column would again move on slowly. After two hours of this pain and frustration, Read ordered the command to halt and take shelter from the raging storm in a nearby abandoned farmhouse.

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First Lt. Charles W. "Savez" Read, CSN (left) and Master John A. G. Williamson, CSN (right). Detail from a group of Confederate naval officers incarcerated at Fort Warren, Boston, 1864. From: Francis Trevelyan Miller, Editor in Chief. *The Photographic History of The Civil War* (New York, NY: Review of Reviews Company, 1911), Volume 10: Prisons and Hospitals, p 139.

They were now only a few miles from their rendezvous with First Lt. Lewis on the Blackwater River.¹⁰

Securing the mules behind the house and away from the biting wind, the men crowded inside where fires were built in the large stone fireplaces. Huddled around the smoky fires, they began thawing out and drying their clothes. Read, impatient to continue, paced the floor and decided that as soon as the storm subsided they would press on. While they waited and listened to the howling elements whistling around the corners of their dilapidated shelter, crushing and inconceivable news arrived. Someone called out to announce that a rider was approaching, and as Read stepped outside an exhausted gray-clad soldier rode up on a weary horse. The man was nearly frozen in the saddle and had to be helped from his mount and assisted inside. With anxious faces gathered around, he began to tell a tale that was almost unbelievable.¹¹

The nameless Confederate related how he had been a prisoner of war at Fort Monroe, Virginia, and on one of the long dreary days of his imprisonment, he had overheard from his cell window a

conversation between a Confederate naval officer and his guards. The officer informed his captors of a planned overland torpedo expedition to the James River, and even offered to lead a Federal infantry regiment to the crossing of the Blackwater River where they could ambush and capture all those involved. The Confederate naval officer whom he had overheard, he claimed, was First Lt. John Lewis.

Escaping from Fort Monroe shortly after this eavesdropping, the young soldier was determined to find the naval expedition and warn them of the awaiting danger.

Read was stunned. He simply could not believe this story of betrayal. First Lt. Lewis, although northern-born, had served the Confederate cause faithfully since the beginning of the war.

Being in the U.S. Navy and stationed at Norfolk when Virginia seceded, Lewis had resigned and joined the Confederate Army. Wounded at Manassas, he later resigned from the army in order to accept a commission on June 29, 1864, in the Confederate Navy as a first lieutenant. During the latter part of 1864, he had served on the CSS *Drewry* on the James River and the ironclad CSS *Albemarle* in North Carolina. Read was positive Lt. Lewis's loyalty was above question.¹²

There was only one way to determine if the young soldier was telling the truth—Read would have to go and see for himself. After a council with his officers, and fearful that they might be discovered in the farmhouse by Federal foraging parties seeking shelter from the storm, Read decided to take the men and boats back down the road about a mile and conceal them in the woods. If he was not back

by sundown the following day, it would mean he had been captured. In that case, First Lt. Ward was to turn the command around and attempt to regain Confederate lines by retracing their route.

The men, reluctant to leave the warmth of the fireplaces, nevertheless filed out, hitched up the wagons, and began retracing their steps. After backtracking what Read considered to be a safe distance from the farmhouse, the command turned off the road and made camp in the dense woods. The wagons were hidden and their tracks eradicated by utilizing tree branches. Putting on a "disguise" (probably a civilian overcoat) as Shippey described it, Read mounted his horse and set out on the lonely ride. Hopefully, he must have thought, he would prove the young soldier wrong.¹³

Although the sleet and snow had stopped, it had turned bitterly cold. The frigid wind howled through the forest causing tree limbs to crack and break under the heavy load of ice. Falling branches and chunks of ice became a real hazard for both men and mules. Because of the possible proximity of roving Federal cavalry patrols, Ward dictated that under no circumstances were campfires to be lit. The cold windy night passed drearily by, while the men huddled together in a feeble effort to keep from freezing to death. When the long-awaited morning light finally broke over the eastern horizon on February 8, Ward ordered the men to remain hidden and out of sight in the secluded patch of woods. Worried over their leader's whereabouts, the cheerless day dragged by, and still the men saw no sign of First Lt. Read. Shippey wrote, "the following day, though but a short winter one, seemed endless, so great was our anxiety for our leader, who had thrust his head into the lion's jaws."¹⁴

Anxiously, the men kept watch for their commander's return. At around 4:00 p.m., Read came riding down the road and turned off into their hiding place. His innermost fear had been confirmed—

there was an ambush waiting at the Blackwater River, and the Union cavalry was already out scouring the countryside searching for the torpedo boat expedition.

If they had not been slowed by the violent storm, he explained, they would have certainly blundered into the ambush and been killed or captured.

As an aside to this narrative, there is an interesting record in existence at the National Archives and Records Administration. The records of the Headquarters Detachment, 3rd New York Cavalry, show that a "Lieutenant Lewis of the C.S. Navy" was forwarded from Benvard's Mills, Virginia, to Portsmouth, Virginia, on January 20, 1865. The remarks section of this record state, "A deserter from the C.S. Navy, Lt. Lewis has horse & equipment." Evidently, the Federals did not trust him to lead the ambush, for he was forwarded from Fort Monroe to a prison in Washington, DC, on February 4, 1865.¹⁵

Precarious Retreat

Read knew that they had only two choices: they could either surrender to the Federal cavalry, or turn back and attempt to pass around the rear of Grant's whole army again in order to gain the right flank of the Confederate lines. With surrender being unthinkable, there was no hesitation, and the order was given to hitch up and move out.

They had come approximately 85 miles, and now they had to retrace those same miles to reach the safety of Confederate-held territory.

Avoiding the main roads that were patrolled by enemy cavalry, Read led his command along deserted and little-known farm traces. They marched all night, and concealed themselves during the daylight hours of February 9, to prevent being spotted by the Federals, who now seemed to be everywhere. The following night, the march was cautiously resumed. Every road seemed to be guarded by Federal pickets, and with hands nervously fingering their revolvers, the men carefully moved on. Unexpectedly, an elderly gentleman who was a resident of the area, approached the group and offered to be their guide. With little to lose, this offer was accepted and they continued the march. Traveling by night and hiding by day, and following the old man in

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the “stove pipe hat,” as Shippey described him, the command kept moving westward. Taking a more roundabout route, they proceeded by way of Sussex Court House, Stony Creek, and then to Dinwiddie Court House.

Approaching either Stony Creek or the Nottoway River (Shippey mistakenly referred to the Appomattox River, but that stream was well within Confederate-held territory), they found that the only way to cross was by fording. The temperature was hovering around the freezing mark, and the stream was covered with a thin coating of ice. With Union cavalry sniffing at their heels, they plunged into the chest-high water and pushed across. Shippey recalled:

It was not a pleasant prospect, that of taking water with the thermometer hanging around the freezing point, but it was better than falling into the hands of the Yankees, so of the two evils, we chose the least. My teeth chatter yet to think of that cold wade through water waist deep, covered with a thin coat of ice, but we passed it successfully, wagons and all, and then double-quickened to keep from freezing; our clothes freezing stiff on us as we came out of the water.¹⁶

Postscript

Finally, on February 13, having been out for 11 days, and having marched all the way around the Union army below Petersburg and back again, the weary column arrived back at their camps at Drewry’s Bluff. Except for First Lt. Lewis, every sailor and marine, every mule, and every wagon with its boat, had returned safely from the expedition.

Thus ended the Confederate Navy’s last attempt to clear the James River of the enemy.

“Savez” Read would go on to another adventure, this time in Louisiana, before he would be forced to lay down his sword. Some of his officers accompanied him, while others, along with many of the sailors and marines, ended the war serving with the Semmes Naval Brigade. The end would come for them in Greensboro, North Carolina, on April 28, 1865, when they were included with the surrender of General Joseph E. Johnston’s Army of Tennessee. Shippey recalls, however, that upon the evacuation of Richmond in April, 1865, that at least 75 members of the expedition were still in the Richmond Naval Hospital suffering from severe exposure.¹⁷

While the expedition was unsuccessful, it was illustrative of the audacity and courage of the men of the Confederate Navy and Marine Corps. With the return to Drewry’s Bluff, Read was back in command of his one torpedo boat, CSS *Wasp*. On the night of April 2-3, 1865, the *Wasp* would be destroyed as the last remaining Confederate troops stumbled across Mayo’s Bridge on their painful trek to Appomattox.

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