

**A View of the Fight with the “Alabama”
From a Rebel Stand-Point.**
in
Caremont, New Hampshire, *National Eagle* (July 9, 1864).

Courtesy of Terry Foenander
<http://www.tfoenander.com/cherbourg.htm>

“This excellent article from the July 9, 1864, issue of the *National Eagle*, a newspaper published in Claremont, New Hampshire was contributed by Richard E. Winslow III, of Rye, New Hampshire. Mr. Winslow knows of my avid interest in the Naval aspect of the Civil War, and regularly sends interesting accounts from Civil War era newspapers of his area.

“The article is rather interesting for the fact that it was published only about three weeks after the Naval battle at Cherbourg, France, and seems to be quite accurate in many respects. Some documentary notes are included..

“The revelation that the ship’s carpenter, William Robinson, shot himself in the breast, as well as that of a sailor who was shot by a superior, cannot now be verified, and is to be taken at face value.

“At this late point in time, it is practically impossible to identify the author of this account, as there were several English born seamen who served aboard the *Alabama*. It is possible to narrow down the names but the number would still be high enough to make positive identification impossible.” —Terry Foenander

A young Englishman aboard the *Alabama* gives the following account of the battle:

We came to Cherbourg from Cape Town to be paid off, and for the purpose of making repairs. The greater part of our copper was off the bottom. Our boilers were in a very leaky state. Our pay as able seamen was four pounds ten a month, and we were paid off yesterday.¹ We had received permission to go into the dock to repair, when we heard that the *Kearsarge* was outside. We came in here ship rigged, and so disguised that had we met the *Kearsarge* outside we intended to take her by surprise. We fully expected having a fight with her. As soon as we saw her outside, Captain Semmes ordered the after yards sent down and the vessel turned into her usual rig as a bark. This was immediately done.

He sent ashore at the same time for permission to coal, and intended to go outside and commence the fight without delay. We commenced coaling immediately, and were occupied three or four days in this. We finished coaling on Saturday afternoon, the 18th [June, 1864]. Capt. Semmes then prepared to go out the next day. We went to general quarters twice while in port, as a general drill, and the ship was put in fighting order. About 9

o’clock on the morning of Sunday we weighed anchor and stood outside. After getting clear of the breakwater we cast loose our starboard battery and ran out the guns loaded for action. The order was then passed for all hands to lay aft.

Capt. Semmes handed the clerk a written paper which was read to us. The substance of it was that we were going into action; that we were to fight in the English channel, the seat of so many important naval engagements, and recalled the acts we had already performed; said the eyes of all Europe were upon us, and that he expected every man to do his duty.² The men were enthusiastic and cheered considerably. The men had no idea but that they would gain the victory, and an easy one. The crew fully expected from the beginning that they would be led by Capt. Semmes close alongside the *Kearsarge*, so as to commence the action at close quarters and finish by boarding her.

It was expected that Semmes would lead the boarders in person; for though we had as fine a crew as any ship afloat, yet we had not a single competent gunner on board, excepting the captain of the forward pivot, a hundred

¹The monthly pay of a rated Seaman aboard the CSS *Alabama* in November, 1862 is shown as being four pounds ten (\$21.78), in a tabulated statement of pay rates, shown in the *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion*, series 1, volume 1, page 808.

²This statement about the address given by Captain Semmes, just before the engagement, is basically confirmed by executive officer, John McIntosh Kell, in his account titled “Cruise and Combats of the ‘Alabama,’” published in volume 4, *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War* - see page 600 of the Castle Books reprint edition, 1982.

pound rifle gun. He was an old English man of war's man trained in the British navy. The captains of the other guns were not competent gunners, though brave men. We came in sight of the *Kearsarge*, and she steamed toward us. We closed as rapidly as possible. The men were lying down at their guns, smoking and resting, the order having passed to make ourselves as comfortable as possible, and reserve our strength till the commencement of the action.

When the *Kearsarge* was within about one thousand five hundred yards of us we opened fire, each gun firing as soon as it was pointed and properly elevated. We fired three broadsides before the *Kearsarge* returned a shot. The first shell she sent came through near the forward rifle port, at which I was stationed. It caused many splinters, and struck a man at our gun. He leaped away with his leg smashed, and another man at the next gun fell dead. The shell caught our slide rack, and I think the man was killed by one of our shot, which was thrown against him by the shell of the *Kearsarge*.

The firing here became continual on both sides. We firing at least two shots to their one - we fired shells almost altogether. But a few solid shot were fired. At the after pivot gun, shortly after, two or three men were cut right in two, besides others being wounded. Then the crew of our after guns were ordered to fill up the vacancy at the pivot gun, which was the second gun from the stern; we were consequently then only fighting with six guns. For some time after there was very little damage done by the *Kearsarge*'s guns, their elevation being rather high, the shot passing over, and though not injuring our hull, greatly damaging our spars. About twenty minutes after the commencement of the action the spanker gaff, on which our colors was set, was shot away and the colors thus brought down nearly to the deck, the spar hanging and the colors hanging about twenty feet from the deck, the colors still remaining in sight.

About the same time our forward pivot gun sent two well directed shells, one of which struck the chains which protected the *Kearsarge*'s boilers, penetrating the chain, but doing no such damage as was expected. We supposed then that her engines were knocked to pieces, and that the *Kearsarge* would soon go down. We gave three cheers. The shell was fired from our hundred pounder forward rifle pivot, and would certainly have penetrated the chain, and entirely disabled the *Kearsarge* had our powder been good, as this gun would have carried the shell and taken effect at five miles with dry powder. Our powder had been a long time on board, and was dampened. The night before the action we threw seven barrels of damaged powder overboard, and had frequently thrown powder over.

The next shell we sent struck the sternpost of the *Kearsarge* without exploding. Had this exploded the *Kearsarge* would have been blown to pieces. At this time

we had received no serious damage. This was about half an hour after the fight commenced. After that the shooting on our part became worse, and that of the *Kearsarge* better. Our guns were too much elevated, and shot over the *Kearsarge*. The men all fought well; but the gunners did not know how to point and elevate the guns. Capt. Semmes, during all this time, was standing just forward of the forward rigging, with an opera glass in his hand, and leaning over the rail. The gunners were left to themselves to fight the guns, and no particular orders were given to the gunners during the fight. Capt. Semmes directed the manoeuvring of the ship.

The shellman belonging to our gun was cut right in two by one of the *Kearsarge*'s shots while he was bringing a shell to our gun. His name was James Hart. He was blown all to pieces, and nothing was found of him which could be recognized except the collar of his shirt. Several men were wounded and carried below. The first serious disaster we met with was from a shell which carried away our rudder. About the same time more shell came into our coal bunkers and penetrated the boilers, putting out the fires and burying several of the firemen under the coal. Some were killed and others dug out alive. The vessel was filled with smoke and steam. All our power of movement then was over.

The *Kearsarge* then gradually began to edge round on our port quarter. When she reached this position the order was given to lie down, as we expected to be raked fore and aft. A few minutes afterwards the sail trimmers were called away to loose the fore trysail and head sails so that she could be steered. She was then standing into shore. We then considered ourselves done for, as the *Alabama* was rapidly settling. I do not think our screw was damaged. The *Kearsarge* kept up a continuous fire on our port side, and we shifted over our guns to that side. Our men were then very fatigued and many disabled and wounded. We still fired as well as possible from the port side, though we knew the day was lost. When the head sails were loosed the leader of our pivot gun, John Roberts, a young Welchman, while engaged in the work, had the lower part of his body cut open, which caused his entrails to protrude. With his entrails hanging out he walked towards his gun, and fell dead on deck without uttering a word. Mr. Anderson, a midshipman, stationed in the after division, was knocked overboard, his leg, which was cut off, remaining on board. He was from Savannah, and was a son of Major Anderson.

Captain Semmes, about the same time, was wounded in the hand by a splinter. He tied his handkerchief round his hand, but never left his post.

The dead, of whom there were about eight, and the wounded, numbering perhaps twelve, instead of being carried below, were lying about the deck. The carnage was

awful, some of the men being literally cut to pieces. There was much confusion on board, though nothing like a panic, excepting on the part of one or two who were not Englishmen. One young Prussian stationed at a gun, having ran below and stated to the doctor that he was wounded, was ordered on deck, he not being wounded, and was immediately shot in the back by an old man named Hicks, an English seaman, who had been long in the English navy. He shot him with his revolver. he died soon afterwards.³

Our first lieutenant, Mr. Kell, seeing the battle was lost, ran to Semmes, and told him he must strike the colors, as the vessel was sinking fast. Semmes merely replied, "Try to get a little more headway on her," and to the last would not order the colors to be struck. The color halliards about this time were shot away, and the colors fell to the deck. The report was circulated fore and aft that they were down, and for a moment the *Kearsarge* ceased firing. When our men saw our colors were down they were enraged and most of them turned round on their officers. Several of them ran aft to Capt. Semmes with drawn cutlasses.

One of them told him that if he did not immediately hoist the colors he would cut him down. At the same time Mr. Sinclair, the fourth lieutenant, pointed a revolver at the man's head to shoot him dead in case he made an attack on the captain.

Capt. Semmes was perfectly cool, and did not even draw his sword. He said he admired the courage of the men but the colors were down, the vessel was sinking, and he did not wish any more lives should be lost. It was for their own benefit that he refused to raise the colors. As soon as the colors were shot away, by the orders of Mr. Kell, a white flag was held up as a signal of surrender. A man jumped up on the spanker boom and held it up the best way he could in his hands. This caused the officers of the *Kearsarge* to imagine that it was one of our men still persisting in holding up the Confederate flag. They continued firing, and poured at least three broadsides into us after the white flag was held up. We had also at this time fired a lee gun in token of surrender, but seeing the *Kearsarge* still firing on us, the word was passed along the

³ There is no record of a sailor with the surname Hicks serving aboard the CSS *Alabama* during the battle; however, there was a James Higgs, who was born in England, and was an 'old Liverpool sailor.' See William Marvel's *The Alabama and the Kearsarge: The Sailor's Civil War*, page 119. Additional accounts which seem to confirm many of the details in the article above can be found in the same volume, pages 251-258, as well as the article by John McIntosh Kell mentioned in note 2.

deck among us, "there's no quarter for us." Some of our guns were then fired again, particularly our foremost thirty-two, while the men were cutting away the boats.

Capt. Semmes gave orders for the wounded to be put in the boats as quickly as possible and taken away, refusing everything in the shape of a boat himself. The men were to be taken to the yacht *Deerhound*, if possible, if not, to the *Kearsarge*. At this time the wardroom was full of water, and the ship rapidly settling.

The chief engineer did not leave the engine room till he was up to his waist in water. While the men were cutting away the boats and putting in the wounded, Capt. Semmes walked down into his cabin without saying a word. His cabin was then partly filled with water.

Two of our boats pulled off, carrying the wounded - the *Kearsarge* having ceased firing - the remainder of our boats (we had six) being all seriously damaged. One of these boats took the wounded on board the *Kearsarge*, on which she left them, and then receiving permission to go and pick up more drowning and wounded men, instead of doing so pulled off to the yacht. This may not have been exactly right; but we were justified in anything after the *Kearsarge* had fired three broadsides at us after our colors were down. I was ordered down by the First Lieutenant to carry the wounded, and went away to the *Kearsarge*. In that boat were a few wounded men; Mr. Howell nominally occupying the rank of captain of marines (we had no marines on board); Mr. Wilson, third lieutenant; Mr. Bullock, master, and a few others. This boat went to the *Kearsarge*.⁴

Mr. Robinson, the carpenter, seeing that the fight was lost, drew a revolver and shot himself through the breast. He was afterwards picked up in one of the *Kearsarge*'s boats, and died soon after arriving on board. This makes three officers who were lost.⁵

We were all treated with every possible kindness on board the *Kearsarge*, for grog was given us as soon as we got on board, and we were treated much better than any prisoners had ever been treated on the *Alabama*.

On board the *Kearsarge* the crew were very much dispirited because they had not taken either Semmes or the *Alabama*. Capt. Semmes had never told us that we would be badly treated if taken prisoners. Capt. Winslow came forward among us and gave us dry clothing, and gave

⁴The writer seems to have erred here, as both Sailing Master Irvine S. Bulloch, and Lieutenant Becket K. Howell, were rescued by the *Deerhound*; whereas 3rd Lieutenant Joseph D. Wilson was captured by the USS *Kearsarge*.

⁵Only two officers did not survive the battle.

orders to treat us with every possible kindness.

When we came to anchor, we were called aft and paroled. We promised not to serve in any manner against the interests of the United States until honorably exchanged as prisoners of war. We then were sent on shore. We went to M. Bonafils, the Confederate agent, and he sent us to boarding houses. We saw Capt. Sinclair, a Confederate officer, who had come from Paris, and who is acting in place of Capt. Semmes.

We were yesterday paid off by M. Bonafils and Surgeon Galt. Most of the men belong to the original crew. There has never been any regular payment before, and, on an average, from a hundred and fifty to two hundred dollars a piece was due them. They have had liberty two or three times since the *Alabama* first went out, and on these occasions have received a little liberty money - never more than a sovereign each.

Many of the men have been heavily fined by sentences of court martial. It has been a custom to punish the men, sometimes for the most trivial offences by taking away their pay. On one occasion a man was fined five pounds for cutting a duck's throat taken out of a prize. Whenever we took a prize the officers always made a rush for all the good eatables and drinkables, while the men were not allowed a single article, and severely punished if they touched anything. When the bread was full of maggots, and the provisions in the *Alabama* of the very worst description, tons of the very best of provisions, taken from prizes, have been sunk rather than give them to the men. Semmes' idea was this: - If he allowed men to take anything from a prize he supposed the men who actually went to the prize would keep it wholly themselves.

The *Alabama* at this time was just going down, and Mr. Kell passed the order for the men to save themselves if they could. The greater part of them jumped overboard. Among them was Dr. Llewellyn, our assistant surgeon. He was an Englishman, and had long been on the sick list with

a sore leg, consequently, not depending upon his swimming power, he had lashed himself to a box, but the box turned, and, putting him under, he was drowned.

There were nineteen different nationalities on board the *Alabama*, principally Englishmen. There were not more than six American[s] on board. As a rule the crew liked and respected Semmes, but detested the first lieutenant, who was a low lived bully, and a man without any principle. The ordinary seamen of the *Alabama* were shipped at the rate of four pounds a month. They were promised prize money for every vessel that was ransomed, burned or sunk. Half the value of the vessels and cargoes destroyed was to be divided among the officers and crew of the *Alabama*. When we destroyed a vessel the value of herself and cargo was obtained from the captain and recorded in the ship's log. We were to receive this at the termination of the war, and it was to be paid by the Confederate government.

We have never yet received a cent in prize money or any articles of value. All money taken was kept by the captain for ship's use. All clothing, & c., taken from captured vessels, if furnished to us, were charged for. The number of officers and men on the *Alabama* was one hundred and fifty. The men, upon being paid off yesterday, were discharged from the Confederate service. I am afraid we shall never get any prize money. I do not think the majority of the men will reshuffle in the Confederate service. Captain Sinclair has already proposed to us to go on board the *Rappahannock* and merely do duty for the present. We would gladly go out with Capt. Semmes, to fight the *Kearsarge*. We generally believe that Capt. Semmes will soon have another vessel. There is no principle among the men, and little enthusiasm in the cause. They are mostly entirely mercenary. But we all think we have been swindled and will never get anything out of the promised prize money. If we get what has been promised us we shall all be rich men.