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Seen and Heard in Many Places

Our recent talk about the battle of Sabine Pass, Texas, in September, 1863, in which, according to the official records, a Union force consisting of twenty-two steam transports and 15,000 picked men was defeated by Lieutenant Dowling, of the Davis Guards, with 42 men entrenched in a fort armed with six 32-pounder guns, with a resultant loss to the Union arms of 300 prisoners and two gunboats captured and two crippled, has led to a flood of communications. This is one of the conflicts of the late civil war that is dismissed in nearly every history of the rebellion with a contemptuous notice of a few lines. Brave men invariably give full justice to the courage of their opponents, so that it is not surprising to find men who wore the blue paying full tribute to the achievement of those who wore the gray upon the occasion referred to, despite the ignoring silence of most historians of the great American conflict. From the headquarters of the Veteran Association of the One Hundred and Sixty-first Regiment, New York State Volunteer Infantry, at Elmira, N. Y., comes a most interesting and fair-minded statement regarding the battle, and soldiers and the sons and daughters of soldiers, both of the North and of the South, will find it worth listening to. Our informant is a man of official position among his fellow-veterans, but chooses to disguise his identity under the nom de plume of "Horatius." This is what he says:

"A friend in Philadelphia kindly sent me The Times of November 18 calling attention to the article of 'Megargee' on the Sabine Pass expedition, September, 1863. It occurred to me that an article on this lamentable 'fiasco' by one who participated in it might be acceptable. For a proper understanding of this affair, it must always be kept in mind that it was a purely naval engagement, no troops being landed, and only a small number detailed as sharpshooters on the gunboats participated. My regiment, the One Hundred and Sixty-first New York Infantry, had been in active campaigning for over three months, being present at the siege of Port Hudson, and the battle of Cox Plantation, Donaldsonville, La., and had returned to our old camp at Baton Rouge for recuperation and refitting, about August 1. September 1 we were ordered to break camp and on the 2d we embarked for New Orleans, and became a part of the Sabine Pass expedition. On our arrival four companies were detailed as sharpshooters on the different gunboats. Companies A and B on the Arizona, Company E on the Granite City, Company D, consisting of 25 men under command of Lieutenant Lindsay, to the ill-fated Schem. Companies C, F, G and I, under command of Captain Craig, were detailed as a storming party and placed on board the transport General Banks. There was a similar detail from the Seventy-fifth New York. The storming party was in command of Captain Fitch, of the Seventy-fifth, as ranking captain. Then two officers were chosen as leaders on account of their heroic work in the assaults on Port Hudson, when each led storming parties. Companies H and K were held in reserve on the N. H. Thomas, under command of Lieutenant Colonel Kinsey. General Godfrey Weitzel, division commander, was on the boat.

"The convoy consisted of five or six gunboats of the West Gulf squadron, with Lieutenant Frederick Crocker, of the Clifton, as flag officer in command. The Clifton was an old New York ferryboat, both ends open, well equipped and well handled, as were all the rest of the squadron. The Schem was little better than a tub, not much larger than a canalboat and was commanded by Lieutenant Johnson. The Arizona was but little better under Lieutenant Tibbitts, and the Granite City was under Lieutenant Lamson. There were one or two more gunboats, whose names I cannot now recall or find among my war papers. One of them drew too much water and could not get over the bar at the Pass. We steamed from New Orleans on the night of September 4, convoyed by the Arizona, and steamed out of the Southwest Pass next morning. Off Berwick Bay we were joined by the Clifton and the Schem. On the morning of the 7th the leader concluded we had overrun our distance, and gone by the Pass, so the fleet put about and steamed back. Everything seemed to have gone wrong. This sailing up and down the coast with the large fleet, pouring forth immense volumes of dense black smoke, gave full notice of our approach and effectually spoiled all chance of surprise. Finally all got together on the night of the 7th. On the morning of the 8th a start was made, Crocker leading with the Clifton. The stream was divided with a reef or bar, making two channels. The Clifton took the west or Texas channel, going in lively and sending shots from her bow-chaser at very short intervals. The Schem and the Arizona took the western or Louisiana channel. The Schem bowled along at a lively pace letting go her guns at short intervals, all of which the Johnnies took in perfect silence, never answering a shot. All eyes were watching the plucky little Schem as she steamed ahead, but when directly opposite the fort, in short range, Dowling let go his guns, and the Schem got one of his shots through her boiler and it was all over with her. For a moment nothing could be seen but an immense white cloud of steam, and when it drifted away we saw the white flag at the masthead. The Banks, with the storming party, followed close in the wake of the Clifton. When right at the place where the storming party expected to land the Clifton struck bottom, and she was going at such speed that she was driven in the bottom, and while in this helpless condition she too got a shot amidships. Crocker worked what guns he could, but this only lasted a few moments, and the white flag fluttered at the masthead.

"The excitement was intense, the men on the transports cried with rage and disappointment but were perfectly helpless. The Banks, but without protection for her landing party, endeavored to steam out, but she grated the bottom as she turned, but fortunately did not stick. The channel was so narrow that the Arizona ran aground, and it was some time before she got away. To add to all the confusion and excitement the Confederate gunboat Uncle Ben came slowly down, and finally stopped alongside the crippled Schem. It has always been a mystery to me why the Uncle Ben did not come down for the Arizona and some of the transports. There was nothing but a lot of helpless infantrymen to stop him. I leave to your imagination the feelings of the men in their helpless condition, huddled together on the transports like a lot of sheep. There has always been a strong feeling among the men that there were a few minutes, possibly ten or fifteen, when they could have landed, and General Kinsey implored General Weitzel to allow

him to land with his little handful of men, swearing roundly that he could take the fort, but Weitzel peremptorily declined to allow it. Men felt that the opposing force was small and that the fort could have been taken easily had they been allowed to try it. I find the following memorandum among my war papers:

"Small dirt fort at bend of river, six guns, supposed to be a fixed battery run in for the occasion, manned by a company of Cook's Regiment of Texas Artillery, under command of Lieutenant Richard W. Dowling, numbering 45 men. The Johnnies got some 90 good guns from the Clifton and Schem, lost two companies of the Seventy-fifth New York on the Clifton and one, Company D, on the Schem. We chucked 175 mules and 225,000 rations into the sea to lighten the boats, and in getting out the commanders of the vessels seemed to work on the plan of 'every man for himself and the devil take the hindmost.'

"As stated, it was strictly a naval engagement on our side in which the gunboats were knocked out in the first round and cruelly beaten by a couple of chance shots before they had a chance to show what they could do. Lieutenant Dowling received the thanks of the Confederate Congress, and a few years ago the citizens of Galveston presented his daughter, Minnie, with a diamond-studded badge in commemoration of her father's heroic action. I am inclined to think the quotation sent in by 'J. C. G.' is more nearly correct than the report of General Magruder to Chief of Staff Robbs. I base this statement on the fact that those in position to know will not claim that General Banks had in the Department of the Gulf at that time more than 35,000 men of all arms. More than half, or at least that many, had been retained for garrison duty at important points within the department. New Orleans and dependent territory certainly absorbed at least 7,500, Port Hudson 5,500 or 6,000, Baton Rouge, a permanent camp from the start, at least 2,500 or 3,000, and there were small detachments along the river, and at Pensacola and Key West. However, let the number be less, it cuts no figure, as they did no fighting. I certainly think Lieutenant Dowling deserved more than the thanks of Congress at the hands of his government. Allow me to suggest that General W. B. Kinsey, ex-Register of Wills of your city, now located in the Drexel building, might be a good man to call on for a history of the battle. He commanded the One Hundred and Sixty-first during the most of its service, and it was with this regiment at Sabine Cross Roads, a few months later, that he won his star as a brigadier general."

General Kinsey can have the floor on this subject, if he wishes it, because anything he says is apt to be worth listening to.

MEGARGEE.