DESTRUCTION OF THE GUNBOAT COTTON

She Guarded Bayou Teche From The Yankees

By Jim Bradshaw

One of the major Yankee goals in 1863 was to clear away any force that would be able to help defend Confederate strongholds at Port Hudson and Vicksburg on the Mississippi River, or that could threaten New Orleans if federal troops were moved from there to help the Union control the river.

The Yankees had taken New Orleans and Baton Rouge, destroyed Donaldsonville, and, in late 1862, had pushed the Confederates in south Louisiana back across the Atchafalaya into lower St. Mary Parish.

Union General Nathaniel Banks, commanding from New Orleans, knew that a Federal attack under General Ulysses S. Grant was planned for the spring at Vicksburg, and that he would be called on to help in that fight. That meant that Banks had first to ensure the safety of New Orleans by capturing or scattering Rebel forces in the Teche country. That would accomplish three things: It would allow him to campaign upriver without fear of attack from the rear, remove any Confederate threat to New Orleans, and it would open the Atchafalaya River to Yankee boats that could be used to threaten the Mississippi river forts "from the back door.

Banks' plan was to catch the Rebels in a pincer movement. While Union forces under General Godfrey Weitzel moved up the Teche, others under General William Emory were to march west from Plaquemine for an attack on Butte La Rose, where General Alfred Mouton had placed a battery of Confederate guns to command the Atchafalaya. Meanwhile, General Cuvier Grover was to lead the Yankee general began ferrying infantry, cavalry and artillery across Berwick Bay, landing them near Pattersonville (today's Patterson) where he formed up his battle lines. He brought with him seven infantry regiments, four full battery companies, and two cavalry companies. These were escorted by four Union gunboats - the flagship Calhoun, the Estrella, the Kinsman, and the Diana, all under the command of Lieutenant Thomas M. Buchanan.

Waiting were the Cotton and the Kinsman, manna under-gunned Rebel band, about 1,500 strong, under Mouton's command. They had dug in near Cornay's Bridge on Bayou Teche, about four miles above Pattersonville.

Weitzel's army, nearly 5,000 men, bivouacked on the night of January 13 at a place called Bayou's Point. At 7 o'clock the next morning they began to move up the Teche. The Federal battle plan was for the gunboats to go up the bayou first and to use its heavy guns to open the attack. At the same time, 60 volunteers sharpshooters would move forward to shoot down the gunners on the Cotton's decks. The gunboats and marksmen would be followed by the main Union line, moving up the west bank of the bayou, and by artillery on the east bank.

The firing began at 8 a.m. with an artillery duel between the four Federal gunboats and The Cotton. Shortly thereafter the four Union batteries were brought into play.

Here is a description from the Confederate account:

The two regiments out of whose ranks the volunteers had stepped, had marched up ... within supporting distance of the doomed boat. That on the west bank threw out its skirmishers in force. With these the volunteers, every man of them a sharpshooter, attacked The Cotton, shooting down every one in sight, and so, one by one, silencing her guns. The east bank was equally busy. Enfilading fire; from plantations parallel to the main road, batteries on the west bank threw out its skirmishers. As they drew near Cornay's Bridge, the Cotton's pilots were killed and the ship took fire.

Weitzel took fifty Rebel prisoners and, he bad been sent to do. He would wire to his superiors: "The Confederate States gunboat Cotton is one of the things that were." The Yankees lost one officer and five privates in the attempt. Another 37 enlisted men were wounded. Weitzel took fifty Rebel prisoners and, while there are no reliable numbers, it's thought that Confederate losses were considerably heavier than those of the North.

Now the battle turned ashore. On the east bank of the bayou, Yankees were able to temporarily drive the Confederates from their rifle pits. On the west bank, Weitzel's main force faced a barrage of shell, grape and canister from The Cotton and a few