One Ram Took on a Whole Fleet

AT 3 O'CLOCK on the sultry morning of July 15, 1862, Lt. Isaac N. Brown nosed the makeshift Confederate ironclad Arkansas down the Yazoo river to take on the Yankee fleet single-handed.

He soon discovered one of his screws had a habit of stopping while the other continued to turn. This gave the Arkansas a drunken stagger and at one point drove her ashore.

Skipper Brown was annoyed but not surprised. Mishaps were nothing new in the young life of the Arkansas.

Brown, an Annapolis graduate with a look of quiet determination in his wide-set eyes, had been skipper of a desk at Vicksburg, Miss., when a telegram from the Confederate navy department ordered him to take command of the Arkansas "and finish and equip that vessel without regard to expenditure of men or money."

The order soundedurgent— and was. The Union was closing a vise on Vicksburg. Yankee flag officer C. H. Davis had swept down the river, destroying the Confederate fleet at Memphis. Admiral David Farragut had steamed up the Mississippi, capturing New Orleans, Baton Rouge and Natchez. The combined fleets now lay before Vicksburg and the city was under siege.

The Arkansas at the time of the order was no more than a hull, an ironclad without armor, a gunboat without gun carriages, a steamer without engines. Brown ordered her towed to Yazoo City, less than 50 miles from the Union fleet, and pitched into the task of building a man-of-war.

He collected railroad iron from all over the state, used 14 blacksmiths to forge from nearby plantations to bend the rails for armor. His men worked around the clock, day under the blistering sun, at night by the light of huge bonfires.

Gradually the Arkansas took shape. The sides of the superstructure, which slanted inward at a 35-degree angle, were two feet thick and were covered with a double layer of railroad ties. The ship had three guns in each broadside, two fore and two aft. She was powered by twin screws that would drive her, theoretically, at a top speed of eight miles an hour.

AFTER FIVE WEEKS of almost incredible toil, the Arkansas was ready. Brown had set out at sunrise July 14 to do battle. But after proceeding 15 miles he learned that a steam pipe had burst, wetting the powder in the forward magazine. Expecting the enemy at any moment, he ordered his ship to the bank. The wet powder was spread on tarpaulins and raked. By sundown it was dry.

When the Arkansas went aground the next day, it took an hour to free her. And at dawn she was still 10 miles from the Mississippi, where the Yankee fleet lay. The rising sun revealed three Federal vessels bearing down on her under full steam. In the center came the ironclad Carondelet; flanking the Carondelet were the wooden gunboats Tyler and Queen of the West.

"Don't fire the bow guns!" Brown shouted. He was afraid that a salvo from the bow would diminish his speed and he was determined to ram the Carondelet. The two vessels lumbered toward a head-on meeting. Then, as Brown reported, "with less than half a mile separating us, the Carondelet fired a wildly aimed bow gun, backed around, and went from the Arkansas at a speed which at once perceptibly increased the space between us."

THE WOODEN SHIPS followed the Carondelet. The Arkansas zigzagged, firing broadsides into the Yankee ironclad, which opened fire with its stern guns. A shot crashed through the Arkansas pilot house, killing two men and ripping a gash on Brown's head.

The Arkansas poured round after round into the Carondelet. Blood streaming down his face, Brown watched with grim satisfaction as his shots penetrated the ironclad. The enemy's fire, on the other hand, moaned harmlessly into the air after striking the Arkansas' inclined superstructure.

The Union ironclad slowed under the pounding, and the Arkansas closed for the kill. The Tyler opened on the Confederate vessel with small arms. A Minie ball creased Brown over the left eye and he tumbled unconscious among the guns. Minutes later he scrambled back into the pilot house in time to see the Carondelet run around, her steering gear smashed and no fight left in her.

Sending a final broadside into the ironclad, the Arkansas set out after the wooden gunboats, now streaking toward the protection of the Union fleet.

Wallowing into the Mississippi 12 miles above Vicksburg, the Arkansas rode the current toward a forest of Union masts and smokestacks. She had gone into action with 120 pounds of steam in her boilers; the pressure was now down to 20 pounds, just enough to turn the engines. And she was making for the most powerful fleet yet assembled in the Western Hemisphere.

Brown sent two 64-pound balls booming into Farragut's flagship Hartford and the fight was on. As each enemy ship came into range, Brown let it have a broadside. It was dead calm. Blinded by acrid gunsmoke, the Arkansas' gunners fired at the flashes of the enemy's cannon. Actually, there was little need to aim at all; as Brown pointed out, the Confederates could fire in any direction "without the fear of hitting a friend or missing an enemy."

His own ship was taking plenty of punishment. The rain of the Union missiles hitting her sides set up a steady, almost deafening thunder.

A FEDERAL RAM closed from the stern, received two direct hits, lurched away. Another ram loomed ahead. Brown bellowed to his pilot, "Go through him, Broady!" But a shot from the low guns hit the enemy boiler. The ram exploded and sank, and the Arkansas plowed on through the crew struggling in the water.

Still another big ironclad bore down on the Confederate ship. Adroitly maneuvering his sluggish vessel, Brown slipped past the enemy's stern and slammend home a broadside that sent three lieutenants screaming through the Union vessel from rudder to prow.

At last the smoke thinned, and the Southerners, swelling in 120-degree heat, sighted clear water ahead. They had passed through the entire Federal fleet in one of the great naval feats of the war. When, a few minutes later, the Arkansas reached the protection of the Vicksburg batteries, Brown counted 68 holes in her stack.

During the next two weeks the Arkansas withstood repeated attacks of the most powerful ships the Union had. Some 50 men-of-war in the combined fleets were forced to burn mountains of precious coal keeping up steam around the clock to meet the threat of this one battered gunboat. At last on August 28, Farragut headed south with all his ships, and the fleet of flag officer Davis steamed northward. The Arkansas was left in control of 250 miles of the Mississippi, from Vicksburg to Port Hudson.

Submitted by James W. Elliott, P. O. Box 47, Russellville, Ala.

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