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THE DELIVERY VOYAGE OF THE “ALABAMA”

by Captain M J Butcher

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*The following account of how the **Alabama** was delivered from her builders at Birkenhead to a Confederate officer in the Azores was written by Captain M.J. Butcher in December, 1880. To whom the account was addressed is not known, but on 20th June 1923 it was posted in Edinburgh to Mr Dan Crawford, of Lamlash, Isle of Arran.*

I have much pleasure in complying with your request to give you in writing as circumstantial account as my memory will allow me to do of the escape of the Confederate cruiser **Alabama**, or '290' as she was called at the time, her intended name not having been made public. I must premise my relation by asking you to excuse the absence of dates, but I do not have my journal of that period with me and I cannot trust my memory to give them accurately.

It was in the month of May 1862 that while occupying the position of chief officer in one of the Cunard Company's steamers, then lying in Liverpool, I was sent for by a friend who said that he wished to see me on business of a special nature. On going to his office he told me that a steamer which might be adapted for war purposes was being built for a foreign government and that the agents of that government were desirous of obtaining the services of an English officer, who might be relied upon for prudence and good faith, to take command and, having fitted her out according to instructions which would be given by the accredited agents of the government for whom she was intended, to procure a crew and proceed to whatever place he might be ordered to; that a very liberal remuneration would be given and a commission in their navy also, if desired.

I at once felt quite sure that the government alluded to was the Confederate and I said that I would gladly take charge of the vessel but that I should not think of serving under a foreign flag. After some further conversation my friend said that if I would call on the following morning he would introduce me to those who had full authority in the matter and then a final decision could be arrived at. I accordingly went the next day and was introduced to the Confederate agent who had contracted for the building of the ship and after some half-hour's conversation with him we went to the builder's yard and there I saw '290' which had just been launched. I was introduced to the builder as the commander. I at once took charge and hastened the outfit as much as possible for even at that time we were aware that danger might arise from delay and a careful watch was kept on the course of events.

It was some six weeks after first taking charge and when I had just reached home on a Saturday afternoon, that a note was brought to me from the builder requesting my immediate attendance at the office. I lost no time in getting there as I felt sure that some intimation must have been received from London of intended action on the part of the government, and on arriving I found the Confederate commissioner and the superintending engineer of the builders. I was informed that a telegram had been received from London warning us that no time should be lost in getting the vessel away from Birkenhead as the American Minister, Mr Adams, had laid such evidence

of the ship being intended for war purposes before the officials of our government as had decided them upon taking immediate steps to prevent her departure.

A consultation then took place and it was determined to work night and day, by which means everything essential could be finished in 48 hours. Accordingly, on the Monday evening following we steamed out of the Birkenhead dock and anchored in the river, no one having yet molested us. On Tuesday morning we were to go outside the river for a trial of the engines and return during the afternoon to complete our outfit. After receiving a small party of ladies and gentlemen on board, and with a steam tug in attendance, we left the Mersey about 10am and spent a very pleasant day in the bay, the trials of the engines being very satisfactory and the speed of the vessel also. It was during this time and when some of the party were suggesting that it was getting time to turn homewards that it occurred to me that as the machinery was in good working order, and the work still remaining to be done was not absolutely essential, and as there was increasing danger in every hour of delay, that it would be the wisest to keep her out of port and remain at one of the numerous anchorages along the Welsh coast between the River Dee and Holyhead. As I had become as anxious as anyone for the success of the enterprise I made this suggestion to the Confederate commissioner who was on board, viz: that under the advice of the pilot we should fix upon an anchorage as unfrequented as possible, and that having done so we should induce the ladies and gentlemen on board to proceed home by the tug by telling them that we wished further trials of the engines which would delay our return until 8 or 9pm; that I would give the commissioner a list of all I required to complete the outfit of stores, and also the address of a man whom I had employed to engage a crew, and that he could procure the tug steamer to bring them out, not telling the master of the tug where he was going until he was out of the Mersey and it was quite out of his power to communicate with anyone.

The commissioner fell in with the idea at once and thought it would be decidedly the best thing if it could be done, if the pilot were reliable. I assured him that he need not fear on that account, and then calling the pilot we settled that Moelfre Bay, about thirty miles from the entrance to the Mersey, would be the best place. It was then intimated to the visitors that the ship would not return until late and that they had better take advantage of the tug, which was going back at once, which they all did, and I at once steamed away with the '290' to Moelfre, where we came to anchor at 8pm.

Now having placed the '290' in safety, I must relate to you what happened to the tug and how the commissioner prospered. On arriving in the Mersey they found a man-of-war's boat awaiting the return of the '290', with a warrant for her seizure, and as the ship did not return the tug was closely watched. The next morning the tug came to the landing stage, in obedience to instructions received from the Confederate commissioner, and proceeded to take on a small cargo of barrels, cases, bags etc, and also a number of sailors. The officer in charge of the man-of-war's boat boarded the tug and asked the master what it all meant and where he was going to. He replied that he neither knew or cared where he was going to, that he was engaged by the hour and knew that he would be paid and that was all he concerned himself about. Finding that no information could be extracted from the people connected with the tug, the officer made his boat fast to the stern of the tug, resolving to go wherever she went. Shortly afterwards the commissioner came on board and seeing that all the things ordered were

on board, he instructed the master of the tug to proceed out of the river. When the tugmaster told the commissioner of the inquiries made by the officer in charge of the man-of-war's boat, and of this boat having been made fast to the tug's stern, the commissioner suggested to him that he might oblige them to let go by setting on full speed, which he did, and those in the boat were glad enough to let go soon enough to save themselves from sinking. After leaving the Mersey the commissioner told the tugmaster to proceed as rapidly as he could to Moelfre Bay, where they arrived and came alongside '290' at about 10pm. The work of transferring the cargo commenced immediately.

Not having been able to engage a crew in the legitimate manner we next had to draw up a written agreement, giving it as much of the legal form as we could, and then assembling the whole crew read it over to them, in which the voyage was described as proceeding to Havana, and offering the usual advance wages and allotments to wives and mothers, and then called upon them to come forward and sign. Most of them did join but some 20 or 30 refused; however, I managed to get a crew of 97 all told. Seventeen of them had never been to sea before and many of those who had were a decidedly 'bad lot'. We did not get this matter finally settled until 2pm the following day when we left Moelfre Bay. We knew that the American frigate **Tuscarora** had been cruising in the St George's Channel for the last three days with the special intention of intercepting us if we succeeded in getting out of Liverpool, and so we sailed north. Again we had a very narrow escape as at 8pm, six hours after we left Moelfre Bay, the **Tuscarora** arrived looking for us.

Although the weather was bad we made rapid progress northwards through the night steaming at 13 knots, but the following morning the weather changed and became very fine and you may be sure that we felt much pleased with having got away so successfully. At 5pm we hailed a fishing boat off the entrance to the port of Londonderry, into which we put the Liverpool pilot and the Confederate commissioner who had accompanied us so far, and then steamed out into the Atlantic bound for Praia Bay and the island of Terceira, one of the Azores.

On the second day after leaving the Irish coast the weather became very bad, but the '290' proved herself to be an excellent sea boat and very comfortable. During our nine day passage we were employed into getting things into their proper places and finding out the character and capabilities of our crew. Although we had among our large number many that were worthless, yet we had many very good men and soon succeeded in getting something like order and discipline on board. Among the best and most reliable of the men were eight Savannah pilots who had formed part of the crew of a barque which had run the blockade of Savannah and arrived safely in Liverpool.

I must now tell you that the armament and ammunition for the '290', together with about 300 tons of coal, had been despatched about a month previously from London in a barque which had been purchased for the purpose, the master having orders to proceed as quickly as he could to Praia Bay and cruise about in the neighbourhood, if he found that we had not arrived. A code of private signals had been previously arranged so that each might recognise the other. As it happened I got there first and during the week that elapsed before the barque came in we were fully occupied in getting everything on board into good working order. Praia Bay is on the east side of Terceira, and as may be supposed a quite unfrequented locality, the

settlement being nothing more than a fishing village, having about 1,000 inhabitants. Of course, a Portuguese official boarded us immediately after anchoring and desired to know who we were and why we came there instead of proceeding to the proper port on the other side of the island. I asked him into the cabin and after setting wine and cigars before him, I informed him that she was a gunboat built in England for the Spaniards and that we were taking her to Havana for delivery. He evidently did not believe much of what I told him, excepting that she was a gunboat, and quietly remarked that she had a larger crew than seemed necessary just to navigate the vessel to Havana; to this I replied that the vessel had to be delivered within a certain time and that most of the men he saw were tradesmen who were there to complete work that was unfinished when we left.

The official told me that he hoped I would not allow any of my men to go ashore, and I assured him that I did not intend to allow such a thing; that I had only anchored there because the machinery was a little out of order and that after the engineers had made everything right we should proceed on our voyage. I also told him that I would be very pleased if he would arrange for the townspeople to sell me fresh meat, vegetables, fruit and fish, for which I would pay him or them in English gold as they were brought on board each day. This at once put him into good humour and seeing a stroke of profitable business to be done he became quite friendly and asked me if he could bring a few of his friends on board. I at once assented to this and accordingly, in the afternoon, entertained about a dozen of the inhabitants with champagne and cakes and sent them all back in a high good humour.

We had no official papers on board, not even a port clearance or register, and we could have been seized by a man-of-war of any nation and consequently a good lookout was kept night and day and steam always ready, and always prepared to slip the cable and be off for I had determined that if any attempt was made to seize us, and especially by a Federal cruiser, I would do my best to run into Lisbon and give the ship up to the senior English officer there. Happily, however, we were not disturbed and the only demonstration made against us was by the Portuguese authorities who, we observed on the second day, mounted three guns on a small and partly ruinous fort close to the town and within a quarter of a mile of where we lay, and for the rest of the time we observed that a sailor was always stationed there.

We lay at anchor for six days and on the morning of the seventh a sailing vessel was observed in the offing and you may be sure that she was anxiously watched and every preparation made for running away if anything looked suspicious. At last we could see that she was a barque steering in for the bay and having a signal flying. This, of course, raised our expectations greatly, for not only was I extremely anxious with regard to the final success of the enterprise but many of my crew were showing symptoms of discontent and some among them I knew were ready for any treachery, having been heard to wish that a Yankee man-of-war might come and capture us, and so I was greatly pleased to see at last that the signal was the one hoped for and that if the weather kept fine another important step towards success would be made by having arms, ammunition and coal on board.

As soon as the barque came in I went on board and arranged with the master to haul alongside at once and commence taking on board the guns. The Portuguese officials, seeing the barque come in and communications taking place between us,

became very excited, and came out to us and warned us that we were acting illegally and that they would lose no time in sending a messenger to the Governor regarding our illegal practices. This of course only made me more anxious than ever to complete the work and the fact that the weather was becoming unsettled and the wind, which had been westerly ever since our arrival, showed signs of veering round to the eastward, which would make it impossible to keep the barque alongside; so we worked with a will.

The first gun we got on board was the heaviest, weighing five tons, and while it was suspended in the tackles both ships began to roll a little and, as luck would have it, in opposite ways which, as the gun at this time was between the two ships and held by tackles from both vessels, put a very severe strain upon the gear and at one moment I thought certainly we should lose it. However we managed to land it safely on our decks and the rest came on board with comparative ease.

Each gun, carriage and implement was in a separate case, marked and numbered according to a list that I possessed and consequently I knew the contents of each case as it came on board. As the two vessels lay very uneasily together it was well into the second day before we got everything on board, and there still remained the coal. I was now getting very anxious to sight a steamer with Captain Semmes and his staff of officers to take over '290' and to commission her as a Confederate man-of-war. We had commenced coaling when the lookout reported a steamer's smoke on the horizon and you will understand just how anxious and excited we felt. At last, to my immense joy, I could make out the well-known signal to which, in answer, I hoisted the new Confederate ensign with which we had supplied ourselves in Liverpool and I went out in the boat and met the steamship **Bahama** as she came into the anchorage, and you can judge how pleased Captain Semmes and his officers all were when I told them how successful we had been in getting everything ready for them.

Captain Semmes returned with me to the '290' and inspected the vessel and armament which, I may as well say here, consisted of a 95 cwt or solid 68 lbs shot gun aft, a Blakely 100 lbs shot gun amidships and three 32-pounders on each side as broadside guns, making eight in all.

The wind had now come in from the east and though light caused sufficient swell in the bay to make it hardly possible for the vessels to lie any longer side by side and Captain Semmes proposed going round to the other side of the island to get smoother water. I should tell you that on asking Captain Semmes if he would take charge at once he said that he would rather that I should keep charge until I had completed the transfer of coal and then, when all was on board, he would relieve me of my responsibility.

We took the barque in tow and proceeded at about 6pm for the lee side of the island with a view to going into Angra do Heroismo, the proper port, for by this time I had found out that there was not even a Portuguese gunboat in the port, but there was a rumour that an American ship-of-war was due shortly. We were steaming slowly into the bay at about 8pm with the barque in tow, when without any previous warning, a gun was fired with the shot passing close to the foremast. Captain Semmes was standing not far from me on the bridge and I asked him if he would advise me to continue going into port, and he replied that he thought I might as well do so, until they showed further hostility. As soon as the gun had been fired, the barque let go her

ropes and sailed out to sea, and the steamship **Bahama**, which was following us, also turned round. Once more the gun was fired but we were not struck and afterwards all remained quiet. At daylight the following morning the barque returned to us, and the harbourmaster came out to ask what our business was. When we told him that we had purchased the barque's cargo of coal and only wanted to transfer the remaining part of it, he told us that it was against the port regulations and could not be done. As there was no object in setting the authorities at defiance, we made up our minds to tow the barque out of the harbour and finish our work under the lee of the island in the smoothest water we could find.

Before getting under way, however, a boat came off with three official-looking envelopes bearing the inscription 'On Her Majesty's Service' and addressed to the masters of the three vessels flying the British ensign, and calling upon us to bring our ship's papers to the British Consulate, and there to explain our conduct. I thought it would be as well to call and see the Consul, even though I could not offer any satisfactory explanation to him. This I did and had a very pleasant interview for, as it was out of his power to detain us, he accepted the situation very calmly. I then called upon the Portuguese Governor and complained that on the previous evening a shotted gun had been fired from the fort at a peaceful merchant ship under my command when entering port. The Governor was a very pleasant young man and was profuse in his apologies, declaring that the commander of the fort could not have been aware that the gun was loaded or he would never have ordered it to be fired, and that it was only intended to remind us that we should not enter the port after sunset.

When all the coal had been transferred from the barque to the '290' and the decks had been washed down, the hands were piped aft and Captain Semmes and his officers appeared in Confederate naval uniform. Then, mounting on the breech of one of the broadside guns, Captain Semmes made a very stirring speech, telling the men of the purpose for which the ship was fitted out and how well adapted she was for that purpose, and that he now took her over and commissioned her by the authority of his government as a Confederate man-of-war. At this time the Confederate ensign was hoisted and after three ringing cheers for the ship and the cause, Captain Semmes invited the men to come forward and enter the service by signing the articles which were laid out for that purpose by the paymaster's clerk; at the same time telling those who did not wish to join that they would be paid for the time they had served, and sent home to Liverpool in the steamship **Bahama**.

A very lively scene then took place and several of the officers went about among the men painting the nature of the service in glowing colours and recommending them to join, but in no case was there the least approach to compulsion or intimidation. At length a total crew of 84 was entered on the articles and as several of these had wives or mothers in Liverpool, allotments of half-pay had to be given to them and these enclosed in letters from the men for transmission by the **Bahama**. All this occupied some time and it was quite dark when we bade Captain Semmes and his officers 'goodbye' and heartily wished them success.

I should have said ere this that the Confederate commissioner met the **Bahama** on her arrival in the Mersey and accompanied Captain Semmes to Terceira. When all was finished, the mail bag made up and all our goodbyes said, the commissioner and myself left the now-called **Alabama** and took passage back to

Liverpool by the steamship **Bahama**, where we arrived in all safety after an uneventful passage of seven days. Thus began and ended my connection with the now celebrated **Alabama**.

Postscript

Ship No 290, named **Enrica** when she was launched by Laird Brothers at Birkenhead on 14th May 1862, sailed on trials from the River Mersey on 28th July; 29th July according to some accounts. She met the supply ship **Agrippina** at Terceira on 18th August and was commissioned by Captain Raphael Semmes as the Confederate warship **Alabama** on Sunday 24th August.

Although Britain officially took a neutral stance during the American Civil War, there was much sympathy in Liverpool for the Southern States which were the source of the cotton which arrived in the port for weaving in the mills of Lancashire.

During the next 666 days the **Alabama** roamed the world attacking and in most cases sinking some 64 vessels of the Union Merchant Fleet. On 11th June 1864 she put into Cherbourg for repair and was intercepted on sailing on 19th June by the Union warship **Kearsage**. In the ensuing engagement, which lasted just over an hour, the **Alabama** was sunk with the loss of 21 lives.

Britain's involvement in the affair was further compounded when a small English yacht, the **Deerhound**, which had sailed out from Cherbourg to watch the battle, picked up the **Alabama's** commanding officer, Captain Semmes, and 41 members of his crew, before the **Kearsage** could get to them.

The law suit which followed lasted from 1866 to 1871 and the outcome was that the United States was awarded \$15½million as compensation for the British Government's 'failure to use diligence in the performance of its neutral obligations'.

The wreck of the ship has now been found and the possibility of it being raised has provoked controversy between France, in whose waters it lies; the USA, who claim ownership through the state of Alabama; and Britain, through Wirral Borough Council within whose jurisdiction the ship was built. ■

For notes on Liverpool and the Confederacy, see Alan McClelland, *'The Bulletin'*,
Volume 44, No.4, March 2001, pp 12-14.