

Terror on Florida's Gulf Coast

The Union gunboat *U.S.S. Fort Henry* patrolled 50 miles of Florida's coastline, not only enforcing the blockade, but engaging Confederate infantry ashore.

By Lew Zervas, Clearwater

By late 1861, the Civil War was underway. With 140,424 people (40% of which were slaves), Florida was known as the "Breadbasket of the Confederacy" supplying the South with food, livestock and crops. The long coastline with numerous tributaries, allowed Confederate blockade runners to export cotton and return with desperately needed supplies for the South.

Some of the Gulf Coast's barrier islands such as Egmont Key, Sea Horse Key, Way Key, were controlled U.S. Navy and Army and were places of refuge for Florida's Unionists. These "Unionists" were opposed to Florida seceding and were treated savagely by their families and former friends and neighbors.

To enforce the "Anaconda Policy" policy along 3,000 miles of coastline, the U.S. Navy had to drastically increase the number of ships. The Navy's squadrons divided the coastline into sectors. Florida's Gulf Coast was part of the East Gulf Blockading Squadron (EGBS).

On March 25, 1862, a New York City side-wheel steam powered ferryboat was purchased by the U.S. Navy. The 150-foot long ship was fortified and armed six large guns, and named the "*U.S.S. Fort Henry*." Under the command of Acting Lieutenant Edward Yorke McCauley, it arrived at Apalachicola on June 25, 1862 for duty in the EGBS. The sector of coastline assigned to the *Fort Henry*, had shallow water, requiring all reconnaissance on the enemy or attacks by the crews to be accomplished by using the ship's small launches.



at reenactments

Lt. McCauley was truly a master and commander. He joined the navy at fourteen, served on "Old Ironsides," and traveled the world. He fought Chinese pirates off Asia, documented Commodore Perry's 1853 expedition to Japan, and was the navigation officer during the first trans-Atlantic cable laying - all before the Civil War. He enjoyed fencing, sparring, riding, hunting, and was also a skillful dancer and billiard player. Cultured, he spoke four languages, and adopted the ways and jargon of the sea.

McCauley was described as being stern on duty, a disciplinarian who had a major effect on the Gulf Coast.

One early reconnaissance by the *Fort Henry*'s men and boats took place on October 16, 1862. With the *U.S.S. Sagamore*, the latter sent her launch armed with a howitzer, the small boats went to clear the enemy off the river banks. At Apalachicola, men amid a crowd of women and children opened fire on the boats. The naval force did not return the fire until they had clear shots. Two "assailants" were seen to fall, and eventually the Confederate sloop *G. L. Brockenborough* and was brought out loaded with cotton and sent to Key West.

Admiral Bailey (EGBS) feared that the coast was filled with Confederate ships ready to run the blockade with valuable cargoes. On March 24, 1863, he ordered Lt. McCauley to meet with Lt. Commander English of the *St. Lawrence* and put together a plan to "scour the coast" between the Suwanee River and the Anclote Key. With McCauley in command, they were to use "as many boats from the ships" that could be spared, and clear the Suwanee, Crystal, and Chassahowitzka Rivers, and Bayport, capturing or destroying all vessels that they found, until they reached North Anclote Key.



The expedition started on April 2, with the six armed boats, two from each ship, the *St. Lawrence*, *Sagamor*, and the *Fort Henry*, plus a cutter ambulance. They arrived and anchored off Bayport and by daylight the next day were 2 miles off Bayport. With a strong wind and tide against them, it took two hours to reach the entrance of the harbor, giving the rebels time to make preparations. Two small Confederate schooners and two sloops were grounded on the banks of a bayou thickly covered with trees. A large schooner, laden with cotton was ready to sail but evidently had too great a draft to be moved.

The sailors carried their boats over the flats and captured the *Helen*, loaded with corn, then destroyed her by setting fire. Her crew was brought back to McCauley and they informed him that Bayport was defended by two canons and a company of rebel soldiers. As they approached within 900 yards the rebel canons opened on the Navy's launches. The woods around the harbor concealed riflemen, who kept up a brisk rate of fire on the sailors. After about 25-35 minutes under rebel fire, only one sailor was wounded. Getting closer, the launches opened fire with their howitzers. In about fifteen minutes the battery answered the launches fire with grape shot, but the shrapnel fire from the *Sagamore's* launch fell among the enemy, and they deserted their guns. The sailors turned their attention to shelling the riflemen in the woods.

After destroying the schooners and the clearing the enemy's guns, the Navy's pilot warned that if the ebb tide found them there they would be left aground. The expedition then set course for the mouth of the Chassahowitzka, which they barely reached at night, just in time to find a slight shelter against the violent storm which filled the small boats with water, dousing the ammunition. The seamen and officers spent that cold night baling water.

The launches got underway the next day and reached Crystal River. Not thinking it was wise to proceed in force up the Crystal River, McCauley sent two boats to reconnoiter. They reported the river clear of sail and the channel very shallow. The expedition left Crystal River in the afternoon and returned to the *Fort Henry* at 8 p.m. Tugging against head winds and adverse tides, the expedition traveled at least 75 miles in five days.

On June 15, 1863. McCauley, now a Lt. Commander, sent the *Fort Henry's* "guard" composed of six marines under the command of Sergeant Nugent, to reconnoiter six miles up the Crystal River. A log breastwork attracted Nugent's attention, so he landed with 4 men and drove a guard of 11 soldiers into the swamp capturing their arms and destroying their camp. A Confederate shot hit the sergeant's waist pouch, but the sergeant ordered no return fire as there was a woman among the fugitives. (Nugent was awarded with the Medal of Honor for this action at Crystal River.) Many papers were found, including one concerning an earlier deserter from the *Fort Henry*.

Numerous Confederate ships in this sector continued to be captured or destroyed by the men of the *U.S.S. Fort Henry* as well as the other blockading ships. In May, 1863, the sloop *Isabella* out of Tampa Bay; and a sloop was captured Waccasassa Bay. In June, a scow, also in Waccasassa Bay and the schooner *Anna Maria*, on the Steinhatchee River, (Cedar Keys) and in July, the sloop *Emma* off Sea Horse Key, bound for Havana. Their

cargoes, were usually cotton, corn, or tar, sometimes salt, coffee, soap, nails, gunpowder, or other merchandise. The captured crewmen were sent along to the prize court in Key West.

Reliving the U.S.S. Fort Henry

Based in the Tampa Bay area, the *U.S.S. Fort Henry* reenactors bring Civil War U.S. Sailors and Marines to life by participating in Civil War reenactments, living history impressions, presentations at schools, museums, memorial services, and other events.

Each reenactor contributes to the group's authenticity by sharing research and their ability to hand craft many of the replica items they use during their demonstrations and mock battles. They know the commands used during the Civil War. As the U.S. Navy played a large role during the Civil War, especially in Florida, so it is through reenactors like those with the *U.S.S. Fort Henry* that show how the sailors and marines served during the war.

For more information on them visit:
<http://www.knology.net/qed/forhenry.htm>



Photo depicts members of the U.S.S. Fort Henry and 97th PAVI reenactors at Fort De Soto in February 2004.

At daylight on July 20, the *Fort Henry's* launch was outfitted with ten days' rations and ordered to proceed off Bayport and keep out of sight during daytime and intercept blockade runners at night. McCauley, suspecting a significant enemy force nearby, forbade the ascent of Crystal River. Ascending the river with the Chief Boatswain's Mate in charge, the boat crew noticed a large amount of cotton floating downstream. The idea of making a good capture induced the Mate to move up river. Coming to a narrow part, they were fired into from both banks by about 50 or 60 rifles. Seamen Doran and Bishop sprang to their gun. Doran, shot through the neck, died instantly. Bishop was shot in the body and lived about

half an hour. Upon returned fire, the rebels departed and the launch pulled out of range and returned to the *Fort Henry* at midnight. The next afternoon, the deceased were buried in the cemetery on Sea Horse Key with the customary ceremonies.

On the evening of August 17, 1863 one of the *Fort Henry's* boats brought in two canoes with three deserters from Lee's army of Virginia and a deserter from Florida's Confederate force. They had escaped down the Suwanee River and were eventually sent to Key West. That afternoon, the *Fort Henry's* tender captured the British schooner *Martha Jane* off Bayport, bound for Havana loaded with 26,609 pounds sea-island cotton. The

captain and crew had gold, silver, U.S. Treasury notes, and Confederate money. All was forwarded to the prize commissioners at Key West.

On December 29, 1863, McCauley was reassigned and Acting Volunteer Lieutenant W. Budd assumed command of *the U.S.S. Fort Henry*. In Admiral Bailey's May 31, 1864 letter to Lt. Budd, he stated: "It was this zeal in Lieutenant-Commander McCauley when he commanded the *Fort Henry* that made that vessel the terror of the coast for 50 miles..." The *Fort Henry* continued on blockade duty along this sector through to the end of the war.