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# A CIVIL WAR INCIDENT ON TAMPA BAY: TWO CONTEMPORARY VIEWS

by Robert A. Taylor

## INTRODUCTION

Historians constantly find themselves facing conflicting recollections of past events. As a result, they must carefully shift and weigh evidence in order to reconstruct the most accurate picture of past occurrences. The Civil War, with its abundance of eyewitness accounts preserved in letters, diaries, and newspapers, provides scholars with numerous examples of contradictory testimony. Even under the clear Florida skies, the so-called “fog of war” often descended to cloud memories of those Union and Confederate combatants fighting for control of the peninsula.

The following are two divergent accounts of one small skirmish fought on the shores of Tampa Bay in March 1863. A landing party from the Union blockader *U.S.S. Pursuit* was ambushed by a force of Confederate soldiers on Gadsden’s Point near where MacDill Air Base is today located. While it is evident that both versions recount the same incident, there are obvious contradictions. For example, the reports vary as to the numbers of men actually engaged and casualties suffered by both sides. The rebel version of what took place eventually appeared in the *Mobile Advertiser and Register*, while the captain of the *Pursuit* recorded the experience of his men in a statement published in the *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion*. The modern reader is left to divine what really happened on the beach at Gadsden's Point from the following descriptions of the action.

\* \* \* \* \*

From the *Mobile Daily Advertiser and Register*, April 23, 1863:

The following, from a letter to the Florida paper (we have mislaid the credit) is an account of an affair already briefly noted:

On Wednesday (March 25th) a steamer and bark came in sight and anchored some eight miles below town in the bay. In the evening the steamer weighed anchor and returned down the bay, leaving the bark occupying her bold and defiant position right in our face. So our commander, Capt. J. W. Pearson, concluded to try what virtue there might be in a “Yankee trick” to entrap a Yankee crew; so consequently, on Thursday (26th), he detailed eighteen of his men and placed them under command of Lieut. Harrison (son of Dr. Harrison, a Methodist minister, formerly of Wankeenah), and directed them to proceed to Gadsden’s Point, opposite the bark, on Thursday night, and conceal themselves near the beach, and next morning send some three of their number, blackened and dressed as negroes, to the edge of the water to make signals as fugitive slaves. So, yesterday, we were all on tiptoe here to see the result. By and by, like the deluded trout by the varnegated bob, they struck at the supposed butterfly. A barge with twenty six men, well armed, was sent from the bark, to convey on board Abraham’s ship of war with due military honors, these sable sons and daughters of Ham.

When within some forty or fifty yards of the supposed Cuffey and wife Doreas and their sweet little ebony darter Phillis, just now in her teens, one exclaiming to the other: "Now we'll be free!" "Only listen," says a fellow in the barge, "how these poor devils already rejoice in anticipated liberty." But alas! There is in many a slip between the cup and the lip, and so did these poor deluded creatures of Abe find it; for at this juncture the barge grounded, and our boys emerged from their concealment and formed on the water's edge – Lieut. Harrison, at the same time, demanding a surrender of the boat's crew.

The commander of the barge, said to be a fine looking man, splendidly dressed, pulled out his white pocket handkerchief, began to wave it and demanding respect for it – but all the time kept urging his own men to "back! back!" evidently intending to make use of that as a ruse; to get out of the reach of our boy's guns. This parley continued for some five minutes, when the Lieutenant perceiving their design and penetrating their treachery, ordered his men to fire! The commander and several of his men fell at the first fire, and out of the twenty six that left the bark, but two left to work the oars when they had got out of reach. So that twenty four were either killed or disabled. Three fell overboard when shot – two were dragged in but the other was left. The commander fell overboard on his face with his hand outside: they saw his handkerchief fall into the water from his hand. Strange to say, although the enemy fired some twelve to fifteen guns at our boys, and the bark commenced shelling them immediately, yet on our side "nobody" was hurt.

\* \* \* \* \*

From U.S. Department of War, *Official Records of the Union and Confederate navies in the War of the Rebellion*, 26 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1901), Series 1, vol. 17, 393-99.

U.S. BARK PURSUIT  
Off Gladsden's Point, Tampa Bay  
March 27, 1863.

Sir: I am obliged to report an act of shameful treachery committed by the rebels under a flag of truce. The circumstances are as follows: Last night, at about 10 P.M., a small fire was discovered on the beach at Gadsden's Point, which bears N. 1/4 W., 2 miles distant. Supposing it to have been made by escaped contrabands who were desirous of coming to the ship, I was about to send a boat; but on further consideration I deemed it more prudent to wait until daylight. In the morning no signs of anyone could be seen on shore. About noon, however, a small smoke was discovered on the beach, and three persons were seen waving a flag of truce. It being evident that they wished to communicate with the ship, I sent the first cutter with an armed crew, under charge of Acting Master Henry K. Lapham, who pulled toward them with a white handkerchief flying as a flag of truce. On nearing the beach two of the persons were found to be clothed in female apparel; their faces were blackened, and one of them appeared to be overcome with joy, wringing her hands and repeatedly exclaiming, "Thank God! Thank God! I am free!" As soon, however, as the boat touched the beach it became evident that it was a white man in disguise, for he threw off a shawl and picked up a musket. At this signal about 100 men arose from ambush and demanded the surrender of the boat. Mr. Lapham replied, "Be honorable. Respect the flag of

truce.” They again said, “Will you surrender?” Mr. Lapham replied, “No never.” Whereupon they fired a volley of musketry, severely wounding Mr. Lapham and three of the boat’s crew. The fire was returned and two of the rebels were seen to fall (one in female costume). Mr. Lapham ordered the crew to jump overboard and keep the boat between them and the shore, which they did, some of the wounded assisting in dragging the boat, while the others continued to fire until the ammunition became wet. As soon as the rebels fired on the boat I sprung the ship, fired four shells among them and sent the third cutter with Acting Assistant Surgeon H. K. Wheeler to assist the sinking boat. The wounded are all on board receiving the most careful attendance and the surgeon’s report of casualties will be forwarded to you by the first opportunity.<sup>1</sup>

I beg leave to state that I witnessed the whole affair, and deem it most miraculous that any of the boat’s crew should have escaped, as the rebels were no less than 100 in number, and not over 30 yards distant from the boat. She could easily have been captured were it not for the cool and determined manner in which she was defended. The only comment that I can make on the conduct of Mr. Lapham and the boat’s crew is that they have proved themselves to be truly brave men.

Regretting my inability to communicate more briefly a faithful detail of the events, I have honor to remain,

Very respectfully, your obedient servant,  
Wm. P. Randall, Acting Volunteer Lieutenant, Commanding.

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<sup>1</sup> The surgeon of the *Pursuit* reported that Acting Master Lapham received a wound in his left arm, while Seaman Edward K. Smith was struck by a ball that impacted on his lower jaw. Two other sailors suffered from wounds to the head and back.