THE CHASE OF THE PHANTOM.

A BLOCKADE RUNNER THAT WAS FINALLY BEACHED.

THE CONNECTICUT HUNG CLOSE TO HER HEELS AND OTHER FEDERAL SHIPS SURROUNDED HER—HER MACHINERY UNTOUCHED AS LONG AS SHE REMAINED AFLOAT.

CHARLESTON, S. C., Nov. 12.—The chase of the blockade runner Phantom by the United States steamer Connecticut was one of the longest and closest runs in the course of the war. The Phantom was commanded by William Porter, a cousin of Admiral David D. Porter of the Federal Navy. Porter was one of the pluckiest of a score of nervy blockade runners. The spirit of recklessness seemed to possess him to an extraordinary degree, and it was well known that he would take chances in running down a blockaded coast when more discreet runners would keep under cover off shore.

One morning in the early Spring of 1864 Porter's Phantom was sighted off Cape Lookout by the Connecticut. It was blowing fresh from the southward and eastward, just the wind to raise a nasty sea on the Carolina coast, and the waves were running full 15 feet high. The Connecticut carried a heavy battery, and her crew numbered full 200.

It was just 9 o'clock when one of the lookouts on the foremast shouted down in a rattling voice: "Black smoke two points on the port bow, Sir!" The Connecticut's people needed no other command to send them to their quarters, and inside of one minute from the time of the first call the Federal ship was standing over in the direction of the stranger, and with every man aboard of her at his station for action. The stranger's position was plainly visible from the long streak of black smoke stretching away from his decks. The Connecticut butted her way against the head sea for more than an hour before being able to catch so much as a sight of the hull. The strange craft, it was apparent, was standing to the westward, and when finally a glimpse of him was had from the Federal ship he was seen rolling his decks under to almost every sea. The Connecticut's high sides enabled her to make much better weather of it, though against the head sea the forecastle deck was as wet as if permanently under water.

The Federal steamer had now approached to within a mile range of the blockade runner, and still the latter held on across the former's bows. He was apparently determined to get himself between the shore and the Federal ship, and now, having accomplished this, he could be seen hauling up to the southwest. The Connecticut, by constantly going in a little closer toward the shore, was soon on about the same course as the vessel ahead, and the race, a straightaway one, had now fairly begun.

Down the North Carolina coast the two ships ran, plunging and rolling at a frightful rate. The only gun the Connecticut could bring into action was her Parrott rifle, a sixty-pounder, on the topgallant forecastle, but with the ship's head plunging into the seas almost up to her foremast it was all the forecastle gun's crew could do to maintain their footing. As for the blockade runner, not a soul could be seen about her decks save one man, and that man walked back and forth on her bridge, paying apparently not the slightest attention to the ship behind him.

The Connecticut, with her powerful engines, was making good speed, and after the first half hour it was plain that the blockade runner would be overhauled. In two hours' time the Connecticut was within 300 yards of the Phantom and firing her forecastle Parrott as fast as the gun's crew could load it. But what with the frightful sea running accuracy was out of the question. A shot would fly 100 feet above the blockade runner and again be hurled into the sea not more than fifty yards distant. Musketry was brought into play, but there was only one man to fire at, and that man seemed to bear a charmed life.

It is nearly ninety miles from Cape Lookout to the Frying Pan Shoals off Wilmington Bar. Porter's object was to reach Wilmington Bar some time about 8 o'clock that night. With the wind and sea then on, the Connecticut was not making more than nine knots an hour, and the Phantom was certainly not doing more than eight, if indeed she was doing as much. It was a curious sight to see the big Federal war ship within easy rifle shot of the blockade runner and firing frantically her rifle gun and not able to make the slightest impression. Throughout it all Porter alone kept the deck of the Phantom, while down in the fire room all the deck force was assisting the firemen and coal passers in handling coal.

The chase had continued fully two hours when the Federal commander hauled to abeam of the Phantom in his endeavor to use broadside pieces. An occasional shot was now gotten in from the nine-inch Dahlgrens in broadside, but with no better success than was attending the work of the forecastle gun. It was evident that the Connecticut's Captain feared to ram, nor would he dare to run across the Phantom's bow. The latter ship held doggedly on her true course for Wilmington Bar, the very course that was giving the heaviest of the rolling.

At 12 o'clock the chase had run twenty-five miles to the southwest of Lookout Shoals. The wind was moderating slightly, though the sea still continued to run high. At 1 o'clock the Connecticut was hanging on to the Phantom's port quarter and not more than 100 yards distant. She was managing now to get in an occasional shot. A nine-inch Dahlgren shell had pierced the Phantom's upper works just forward of the bridge. A sixty-pounder Parrott shell had exploded in a handsome fashion close to Porter. A second Dahlgren shell had plunged through the starboard rail, carrying away some five feet of bulwark, and still another had pierced the smokestack. So far, no damage had been done to the blockade runner, but to Porter it was evident that the Yankees were accustoming their guns to the sea then on. His belief was strengthened when a second later a sixty-pounder Parrott shell went crashing through the pilot house, barely missing the wheel and the two helmsmen.

Still Porter kept the Phantom plunging and wallowing along. At 3 o'clock two Federal ships of war were made out on the port bow. Here was a mess for Porter, sure enough! He had hardly counted on finding a Yankee ship so close in shore with such a heavy sea running, and it was for this very reason that he had been hugging the coast so closely. The Federal men-of-war made out the chase almost as soon as they were themselves seen, and both very promptly took positions on the off-shore side and a little outside of the course of the Connecticut.

Not even an eighth of a point did Porter swerve from his own course. He could see that he would have to run to within 300 yards of the enemy before the new arrivals would be compelled to so much as turn their engines over.

And now, as was to be expected, Porter made out the Federal ships laying themselves easy to the sea in order to give their guns' crew a steady platform. Down the Phantom swept, her boilers all the time seeming to breathe under the tremendous steam pressure carried. A half mile away lay the two Federal ships, and it was at this distance when the nearest one of the two opened up from an after gun. The result of the shot was to send a projectile whistling fore and aft over the Phantom's deck and not more than two feet above Porter's head. This gun was the signal for both, and with one accord the two ships threw into action every gun that could be brought to bear.

For ten minutes the Federal ships played crash and smash aboard Porter's vessel. His starboard rail had been carried away for a distance of nearly fifty feet. The spar deck was ripped up for forty feet abaft the engine-room hatch. The foremast had been struck twice and was barely hanging by the rigging. The bridge also had been hit twice, and the engine-room hatch struck once, but, with it all, not the shadow of injury had been done the engines or steering gear, and, until these gave out, Porter determined to hold on.

It had become a chase by three ships of one, and better artillery work was apparent every instant. Down the coast they all went, the indomitable Porter looking every now and then with disdain at his pursuers. For two hours this sort of thing lasted, and within two hours more, thought Porter, night would be on. It was night that Porter was looking for, and had he not had three sleuthhounds on his track, he thought he would now be slowing down to make sure of not reaching the vicinity of the bar until well into the night. Porter had not calculated on the Federal ships being so much scattered along the coast or he would have run into Wilmington directly from sea.

At 6 o'clock the Phantom descried a fourth Federal ship, and, a little later, still another. At 6:30 there were eight ships about her and three right ahead. The firing was now in whole broadsides, and to make it worse the sea had so much moderated in the last four hours as to make the gun work very accurate. In the engine room the terrible strain of the last nine hours was plainly telling. The steam was not being kept up as evenly as during the forenoon, and now, with the firemen almost fagged out, the air shrieked with the roar of bursting shells, while the ship herself quivered again and again from the shock of projectiles. There was no telling at what moment a shell might strike either the engines or boilers, and if the boilers were struck there was little hope of any man below decks escaping death.

In the terrible strait in which Porter found himself it looked well-nigh impossible to succeed in reaching Wilmington. The bar, he knew, was covered by more than twenty-five Federal ships of war, and his approach was known by this time by the heavy firing rolling down the coast. To pierce the Federal lines could only be done successfully under surprise. Surprise was now out of the question, and to hold on longer meant a rich prize to the Federals. A number of Federal ships had worked their way above the Wilmington bar in response to the cannonading that was plainly to be heard to the northward. A fleet of six fast ships had thrown themselves in Porter's path, so close, in fact, that he could not pierce their line unless he was determined to ram. This resolve, Porter saw, would probably result in fouling the Phantom, and then nothing would stand in the way of preventing a couple of hundred or more Yankee bluejackets from tumbling on board.

Porter saw all this at a glance, and without any hesitation ran the Phantom into shoal water and inside of thirty minutes had the line old craft pounding her life out on the beach of North Carolina. Despite the heavy sea running, the crew of the Phantom were successfully gotten through the surf and on shore. The Federal ships gave up the chase as soon as they saw Porter headed for the beach, and, strange to say, the Phantom had no sooner touched the shore than two heavy shells crashed into the machinery, demolishing the working parts in a frightful fashion. All this the engineers of the Phantom saw as they rushed on deck, and they laughed even then to think that what the Connecticut had been endeavoring to do all day had been accomplished just at a time when Porter had no further use for his ship.

The Phantom was fired by her crew before they deserted her. She burned to the water's edge, and was a total loss to all. It was not many years ago that her old boilers could be seen on the shore whenever the tide was particularly low. Porter and his men made their way to Wilmington, and succeeded in reaching that place only after great privations. After the war Porter returned to his old calling in the merchant service. He was quite a young man when he commanded the Phantom, not more than thirty-two years of age, so the old blockade runners say, and one of the greatest dare-devils in the business. None of the blockade runners still living appears to be able to tell what finally became of him. The impression is that he died in some foreign waters. He was an American through and through, they all say, and always gloried in being able to do with his commands what no British blockade running Captain would dare attempt.

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