

EDGE FREDERICK MILNES

AN ENGLISHMAN'S VIEW
OF THE BATTLE BETWEEN
THE ALABAMA AND THE
KEARSARGE

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An Account of the Naval Engagement in the British Channel, on Sunday June
19th, 1864:*

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The Alabama and the Kearsarge

The importance of the engagement between the United States Sloop-of-war, Kearsarge, and the Confederate Privateer, Alabama, cannot be estimated by the size of the two vessels. The conflict off Cherbourg on Sunday, the 19th of June, was the first decisive engagement between shipping propelled by steam, and the first test of the merits of modern naval artillery. It was, moreover, a contest for superiority between the ordnance of

Europe and America, whilst the result furnishes us with *data* wherefrom to estimate the relative advantages of rifled and smooth-bore cannon at short range.

Perhaps no greater or more numerous misrepresentations were ever made in regard to an engagement than in reference to the one in question. The first news of the conflict came to us enveloped in a mass of statements, the greater part of which, not to use an unparliamentary expression, was diametrically opposed to the truth; and although several weeks have now elapsed since the Alabama followed her many defenceless victims to their watery grave, these misrepresentations obtain as much credence as ever. The victory of the Kearsarge was accounted for, and the defeat of the Alabama excused or palliated upon the following principal reasons: —

1. The superior size and speed of the Kearsarge.
2. The superiority of her armament.
3. The chain-plating at her sides.
4. The greater number of her crew.
5. The unpreparedness of the Alabama.
6. The assumed necessity of Captain Semmes' accepting the challenge sent him (as represented) by the commander of the Kearsarge.

Besides these misstatements there have been others put forth, either in ignorance of the real facts of the case, or with a purposed intention of diminishing the merit of the victory by casting odium upon the Federals on the score of inhumanity. In the former

category must be placed the remarks of the *Times* (June 21st); but it is just to state that the observations in question were made on receipt of the first news, and from information furnished probably by parties unconnected with the paper, and desirous of palliating the Alabama's defeat by any means in their power. We are informed in the article above referred to that the guns of the latter vessel "had been pointed for 2,000 yards, and the second shot went right through the Kearsarge," whereas no shot whatever went through as stated. Again, "the Kearsarge fired about 100 (shot) chiefly 11-in. shell," the fact being that not one-third of her projectiles were of that calibre. Further on we find – "The men (of the Alabama) were all true to the last; they only ceased firing when the water came to the muzzles of their guns." Such a declaration as this is laughable in the extreme; the Alabama's guns were all on the spar-deck, like those of the Kearsarge; and, to achieve what the *Times* represents, her men must have fought on until the hull of their vessel was two feet under water. The truth is – if the evidence of the prisoners saved by the Kearsarge may be taken – Captain Semmes hauled down his flag immediately after being informed by his chief engineer that the water was putting out the fires; and, within a few minutes, the water gained so rapidly on the vessel that her bow rose slowly in the air, and half her guns obtained a greater elevation than they had ever known previously. It is unfortunate to find such cheap-novel style of writing in a paper which at some future period may be referred to as an authoritative chronicler of events now

transpiring.

It would be too long a task to notice all the numerous misstatements of private individuals, and of the English and French press in reference to this action: the best mode is to give the facts as they occurred, leaving the public to judge by internal evidence on which side the truth exists.

Within a few days of the fight, the writer of these pages crossed from London to Cherbourg for the purpose of obtaining by personal examination full and precise information in reference to the engagement. It would seem as though misrepresentation, if not positive falsehood, were inseparable from everything connected with the Alabama, for on reaching the French naval station he was positively assured by the people on shore that nobody was permitted to board the Kearsarge. Preferring, however, to substantiate the truth of these allegations, from the officers of the vessel themselves, he hired a boat and sailed out to the sloop, receiving on his arrival an immediate and polite reception from Captain Winslow and his gallant subordinates. During the six days he remained at Cherbourg, he found the Kearsarge open to the inspection, above and below, of any and everybody who chose to visit her; and he frequently heard surprise expressed by English and French visitors alike that representations on shore were so inconsonant with the truth of the case.

I found the Kearsarge lying under the guns of the French ship-of-the-line "Napoleon," two cables' length from that vessel, and

about a mile and a half from the harbour; she had not moved from that anchorage since entering the port of Cherbourg, and no repairs whatever had been effected in her hull since the fight. I had thus full opportunity to examine the extent of her damage, and she certainly did not look at all like a vessel which had just been engaged in one of the hottest conflicts of modern times.

SIZE OF THE TWO VESSELS.

The Kearsarge, in size, is by no means the terrible craft represented by those who, for some reason or other, seek to detract from the honour of her victory; she appeared to me a mere yacht in comparison with the shipping around her, and disappointed many of the visitors who came to see her. The relative proportions of the two antagonists were as follows: —

	ALABAMA.	KEARSARGE.
Length over all	220 ft.	232 ft.
" of keel	210 "	198½ "
Beam	32 "	33 "
Depth	17 "	16½ "
Horse power, 2 engines of 300 each		400 h. p.
Tonnage	1,040	1,031 ^[1]

¹The Kearsarge has a four-bladed screw, diameter 12-ft 9-in. with a pitch of 20-ft.

The Alabama was a barque-rigged screw propeller, and the heaviness of her rig, and, above all, the greater size and height of her masts would give her the appearance of a much larger vessel

than her antagonist. The masts of the latter are disproportionately low and small; she has never carried more than top-sail yards, and depends for her speed upon her machinery alone. It is to be questioned whether the Alabama, with all her reputation for velocity, could, in her best trim, outsteam her rival. The log book of the Kearsarge, which I was courteously permitted to examine, frequently shows a speed of upwards of fourteen knots the hour, and her engineers state that her machinery was never in better working order than at the present time. I have not seen engines more compact in form, nor, apparently, in finer condition; looking in every part as though they were fresh from the workshop, instead of being, as they are, half through the third year of the cruise.

Ships-of-war, however, whatever may be their tonnage, are nothing more than platforms for carrying artillery. The only mode by which to judge of the strength of the two vessels is in comparing their armaments; and herein we find the equality of the antagonist as fully exemplified as in the respective proportions of their hulls and steam-power. The armaments of the Alabama and Kearsarge were are as follows:

ARMAMENT OF THE ALABAMA.

One 7-inch Blakely rifle. One 8-inch smooth-bore (68-pounder). Six 32-pounders.

ARMAMENT OF THE KEARSARGE.

Two 11-inch smooth-bore guns. One 30-pounder rifle. Four 32-pounders.

It will therefore be seen that the Alabama had the advantage of the Kearsarge – at all events in the number of her guns; whilst the weight of the latter’s broadside was only some 20 per cent. greater than her own. This disparity, however, was more than made up by the greater rapidity of the Alabama’s firing, and, above all, by the superiority of her artillerymen. The *Times* informs us that Capt. Semmes asserts, “he owes his best men to the training they received on board the ‘Excellent;’” and trained gunners must naturally be superior to the volunteer gunners on board the Kearsarge. Each vessel fought all her guns, with the exception in either case of one 32-pounder, on the starboard side; but the struggle was really decided by the two 11-inch Dahlgren smooth-bores of the Kearsarge against the 7-inch Blakely rifle and the heavy 68-pounder pivot of the Alabama. The Kearsarge certainly carried a small 30-pounder rifled Dahlgren in pivot on her forecastle, and this gun was fired several times before the rest were brought into play; but the gun in question was never regarded as aught than a failure, and the Ordnance Department of the United States’ Navy has given up its manufacture.

THE CHAIN-PLATING OF THE KEARSARGE

Great stress has been laid upon the chain-plating of the Kearsarge, and it is assumed by interested parties that, but for this armour, the contest would have resulted differently. A pamphlet lately published in this city, entitled "The Career of the Alabama,"¹ makes the following statements:

"The Federal Government had fitted out the Kearsarge, a new vessel of great speed, *iron-coated*," &c. (p. 23).

"She," the Kearsarge, "appeared to be *temporarily* plated with iron chains." (p. 38.) (In the previous quotation, it would appear she had so been plated by the Federal Government: both statements are absolutely incorrect, as will shortly be seen.)

"It was frequently observed that shot and shell struck against the Kearsarge's side, and harmlessly rebounded, bursting outside, and doing no damage to the Federal crew."

"Another advantage accruing from this was that it sank her very low in the water, so low in fact, that the heads of the men who were in the boats were on the level of the Kearsarge's deck." (p. 39.)

"As before observed, the sides of the Kearsarge *were trailed all over with chain cables*." (p. 41).

The author of the pamphlet in question has judiciously

¹ *The Career of the Alabama*, "No. 290," from July 26, 1862, to June 19, 1864. London: Dorrell and Son.

refrained from giving his name. A greater number of more unblushing misrepresentations never were contained in an equal space.

In his official report to the Confederate Envoy, Mr. Mason, Captain Semmes makes the following statements:

“At the end of the engagement, it was discovered by those of our officers who went alongside the enemy’s ship with the wounded, that her midship section on both sides was thoroughly iron-coated; *this having been done with chain constructed for the purpose*, (!) placed perpendicularly from the rail to the water’s edge, the whole covered over by a thin outer planking, which gave no indication of the armour beneath. This planking had been ripped off in every direction (!) by our shot and shell, the chain broken and indented in many places, and forced partly into the ship’s side. She was most effectually guarded, however, in this section from penetration.”

“The enemy was heavier than myself, both in ship, battery, and crew, (!) *but I did not know until the action was over that she was also iron-clad.*”

“Those of our officers who went alongside the enemy’s ship with our wounded.” As soon as Captain Semmes reached the Deerhound, the yacht steamed off at full speed towards Southampton, and Semmes wrote his report of the fight either in England, or on board the English vessel. Probably the former, for he dates his communication to Mr. Mason – “Southampton, June 21, 1864.” How did he obtain intelligence from those

of his officers “who went alongside the enemy’s ship,” and who would naturally be detained as prisoners of war? It was impossible for anybody to reach Southampton in the time specified; nevertheless he did obtain such information. One of his officers – George T. Fullam, an Englishman unfortunately – came to the Kearsarge in a boat at the close of the action, representing the Alabama to be sinking, and that if the Kearsarge did not hasten to get out boats to save life, the crew must go down with her. Not a moment was to be lost, and he offered to go back to his own vessel to bring off prisoners, pledging his honour to return when the object was accomplished. After picking up several men struggling in the water, he steered directly for the Deerhound, and on reaching her actually cast his boat adrift. It was subsequently picked up by the Kearsarge. Fullam’s name appears amongst the list of “saved” by the Deerhound; and he, with others of the Alabama’s officers who had received a similar permission from their captors, and had similarly broken their troth, of course gave the above information to their veracious Captain.

The chain-plating of the Kearsarge was decided upon in this wise. The vessel lay off Fayal towards the latter part of April, 1863, on the look out for a notorious blockade-runner, named the “Juno.” The Kearsarge being short of coal, and, fearing some attempts at opposition on the part of her prey, the first officer of the sloop, Lieutenant-commander James S. Thornton, suggested to Captain Winslow the advisability of hanging her two sheet-

anchor cables over her sides, so as to protect her midship section. Mr. Thornton had served on board the flag-ship of Admiral Farragut, the "Hartford" when she and the rest of the Federal fleet ran the forts of the Mississippi to reach New Orleans; and he made the suggestion at Fayal through having seen the advantage gained by it on that occasion. I now copy the following extract from the log-book of the Kearsarge:

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