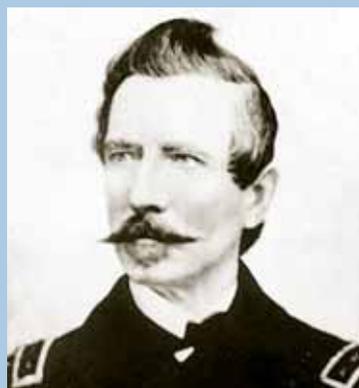


The famed captain — known as the “King of the Privateers” — of the Confederate ship *Alabama* is pursued and beaten by the USS *Kearsarge* but, with the help of British citizens, escapes to continue the Civil War

BY BUD FEUER

RAPHAEL SEMMES &

THE BATTLE OFF CHERBOURG



One of the more important battles of the Civil War was not fought on American soil, but rather off the coast of France in June 1864 between the Confederate privateer *Alabama* and the USS *Kearsarge*.

The captain of the *Alabama* was the cunning Raphael Semmes who set a record of piracy on the high seas that has never been equaled. More than 80 merchant vessels flying the American flag fell victim to this flamboyant “gentleman pirate.”

In 1861, at the age of 52, Semmes resigned from the United States Navy to take up the cause of the South. He accepted a commission in the Confederate Navy and was placed in command of the CSS *Sumter*. His orders were plain and simple — “to do the enemy’s commerce the greatest injury in the shortest time.”

In every respect, Raphael Semmes measured up to the qualifications. He looked, acted, and performed with a daring bravado that would have made

any pirate proud. Semmes had an uncanny knack for outwitting Union men-of-war sent after him, and sensing the sealanes and schedules of American merchantmen. He also had an authoritative air that permitted his ship to be readily accepted in foreign ports for repairs and supplies.

Semmes acquired the nickname of “Old Beeswax” because of his “Bluebeard”-style mustache. The *New York Herald* of 17 October 1862 stated: “Raphael Semmes may have had the appearance of a gentleman when he was an officer in the United States Navy, but he has

entirely changed. He now sports a huge mustache, the ends of which are waxed in a manner to throw that of Victor Emmanuel into the shade, and it is evident that it occupies much of his attention. His whole appearance is that of a corsair, and the transformation appears to be complete — from Commander Raphael Semmes USN to a combination of Jean Laffite and William Kidd.”

In the spring of 1862, the Confederacy contracted with the Lairds shipbuilders of Liverpool, England for the construction of a steam vessel, which became known as the *290*. The United States Minister to England, Charles Adams, protested that this act was a violation of neutrality, but work on the ship continued.

In the latter part of July, the British Government gave in to pressure exerted by Adams and issued an order of seizure. However, the builders were permitted to take the *290* on a test run.

In order to allay suspicion, a large party of men and women were invited for the trial trip down the Mersey River. At first, the excursion appeared peaceful and merry, with the joyful sounds of music and the popping of champagne corks. However, after the vessel had steamed a short distance down river, two tugs pulled up alongside and the

merrymakers were requested to leave the ship. Later that afternoon, the *290* anchored in a small inlet on the Welsh coast where about 100 men joined her crew. The next day, she raced around the north coast of Ireland and escaped to the Azore Islands.

Within a week, the *290* was joined by the British bark *Agrippina* that was loaded with guns, ammunition, and supplies for transfer to the new Confederate steamer. And on 20 August, the British sloop *Bahama* arrived on the scene with Raphael Semmes and his officers.

Semmes was in Nassau in June 1862, when he received orders to take over command of *290*. During his tour of duty aboard the *Sumter*, he had captured more than 20 merchant ships, and the

Confederate Navy Department decided that Semmes was the logical officer to command the South’s newest warship.

Raphael Semmes certainly looked very impressive as he stepped aboard the *290*. Dressed in his gray and gold uniform, with his dark mustache waxed to sharp points, he seemed every inch a pirate sailing the Spanish Main.



The crew was mustered on the forecandle and Semmes read aloud his commission as commander of the new Confederate steam-sloop *Alabama*.



Portrait of Capt. John Ancrum Winslow.

The battle begins in this painting by A. Jacobsen as the *Alabama* and *Kearsarge* engage off the coast of Cherbourg.

