



Portrait of Capt. George H. Perkins.

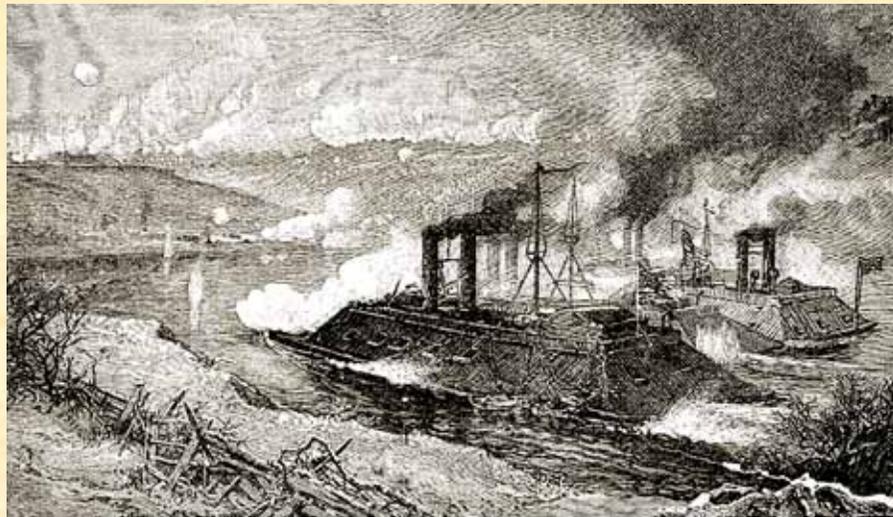
# LIEUTENANT PERKINS AND THE LOST GUNBOAT

*Some of the most bitter fighting between the Union and Confederate navies of the Civil War took place on the Mississippi River. Reputations were made overnight; but for the young Lieutenant Perkins, the New London episode was perhaps his most dangerous — and most embarrassing*

**BY CAROL W. KIMBALL**

Commodore George Hamilton Perkins always believed the most perilous adventure of his entire Navy career occurred on the Mississippi River on 10 July 1863 when his gunboat, the USS *New London*, simply disappeared.

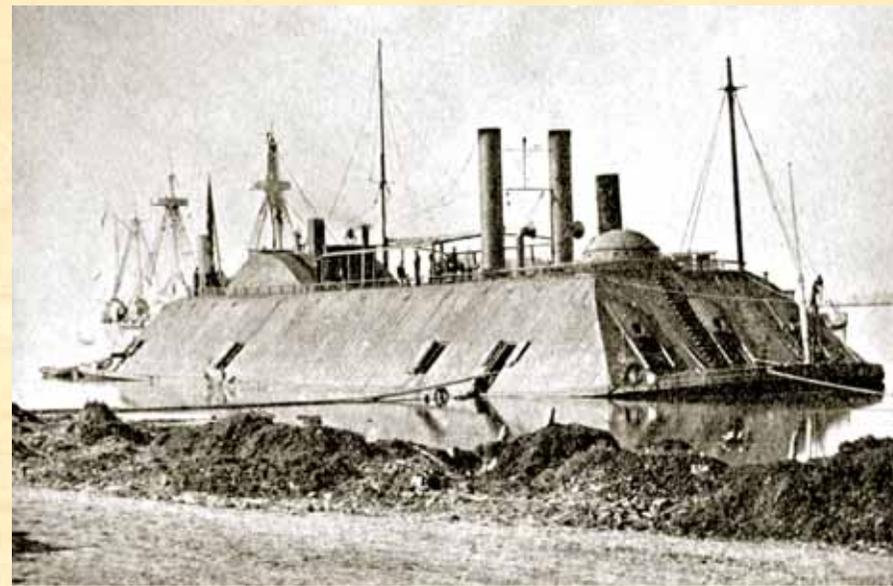
It wasn't a battle loss, nor did the vessel founder. The *New London* just vanished, causing her young commander many difficulties.



Union ironclad river gunboats assault Confederates at Fort Donelson during February 1862. Gunboats became some of the deadliest weapons of river warfare.



David Farragut's fleet passing Fort Jackson and Fort St. Philip, downriver from New Orleans in April 1862. The area remained a hot-spot for Union and Confederate forces.



The USS *Essex* was a 1000-ton ironclad river gunboat. Originally a steam-powered ferry, the vessel was acquired during the Civil War by the US Army and assigned to the Western Gunboat Flotilla. She was transferred to the US in 1862 and participated in several operations on the Mississippi River, including the capture of Baton Rouge and Port Hudson in 1863.



View of Ship Island, Louisiana, with *New London* second from left.

Perkins served 22-years in the Navy, ranging from the Congo River to Asiatic waters. Born in Hopkinton, New Hampshire, in October 1836, he entered the Naval Academy at 14, graduating in 1856. He saw plenty of Civil War action, including the battles of New Orleans and Mobile Bay, yet he felt he had never been in more danger than the day his sturdy wooden gunboat disappeared, stranding him in enemy territory.

In early summer 1863, the North and South were struggling for the Mississippi River. Farragut had taken New Orleans in April 1862, but was frustrated in his

attempt to secure control of the river by a strong Confederate stand at Vicksburg. After forcing Farragut back downstream, the Rebels built a powerful fortress at Port Hudson, some 200-mi below Vicksburg. Returning to New Orleans in disgust, Farragut left the Mississippi in Confederate hands as far south as Baton Rouge.

The Union did not give up. Some months later U.S. Grant began his famous Vicksburg campaign, and in May 1863, Gen. Banks began to move carefully against Port Hudson. Donaldsonville, 60-mi below Baton Rouge, was a Federal stronghold, but resourceful

Confederates managed to bypass Donaldsonville to erect strong batteries south of the city at Whitehall Point, threatening Gen. Bank's supply line from New Orleans.

Through the long sieges of Vicksburg and Port Hudson, guerilla warfare raged along the river banks. Bands of Confederate soldiers roamed the levees and adjacent countryside. Small companies of artillery trained guns on passing Union vessels. All travel on the river was risky; passing the Whitehall battery was most hazardous.

In early July, Gen. Banks sent word to Farragut in New Orleans that more powder was needed at Port Hudson. Knowing the perils involved, the Admiral selected the small 221-ton gunboat *New London* to carry the supplies. Built by the Greenman brothers at Mystic, Connecticut, for a passenger steamer to run on Long Island Sound between New London, Connecticut, and New York. She measured 130-ft x 26-ft x 8.5-ft. Her power was furnished by a four-blade propeller at the stern.

Wartime needs had quickly converted the vessel into a gunboat in October 1861. Lieutenant Abner Read commanded her, capturing dozens of blockade runners, making the *New London* the terror of Confederate shipping on the Mississippi Sound. She could float in less than 10-ft of water; her shallow draft made her highly maneuverable in shallow southern waters.

When Banks' request reached Farragut, Lt. Read had just transferred to the large new sloop-of-war *Monongahela*. Since a new skipper for the *New London* had not yet arrived, the Admiral placed Lt. George Hamilton Perkins temporarily in command to carry the powder to Port Hudson.

Young Perkins, 26-years-old, was eager, resourceful and ready for action. He faced a long dangerous trip, about 100-mi through enemy territory. Confederates ranged along the levees, firing into every Union vessel that passed, and a cargo of gunpowder was highly explosive.