

Rapport du Captain Winslow, Commandant USS Kearsage

*U. S. S. Kearsage,
Cherbourg, France, June 19, 1864*

Sir,

I have the honor to inform the Department that the day subsequent to the arrival of the Kearsarge off this port, on the 14th instant, I received a note from Captain Semmes, begging that the Kearsarge would not depart, as he intended to fight her and would not delay her but a day or two.

According to this notice, the Alabama left the port of Cherbourg this morning at about 9:30 o'clock.

At 10:20 a. m. we discovered her steering toward us. Fearing the question of jurisdiction might arise, we steamed to sea until a distance of 6 or 7 miles was attained from the Cherbourg breakwater, when we rounded to and commenced steaming for the Alabama. As we approached her within about 1,200 yards she opened fire, we receiving two or three broadsides before a shot was returned. The action continued, the respective steamers making a circle round and round at a distance of about 900 yards from each other. At the expiration of an hour the Alabama struck, going down in about 20 minutes afterwards, and carrying many persons with her.

It affords me great gratification to announce to the Department that every officer and man did his duty, exhibiting a degree of coolness and fortitude which gave promise at the outset of certain victory.

I have the honor to be, most respectfully, your obedient servant,

*J. N. C. H. Winslow,
Captain,*

to Hon. Gideon Welles,

Rapport annexe du Captain Winslow, Commandant USS Kearsage, de l'engagement contre le croiseur CSS Alabama

U. S. S. Kearsage,
English Channel, July 30, 1864

Sir,

In obedience to the instructions of the Department I have the honor to make the following supplementary report of the action between the Kearsage and the Alabama. On the morning of the 19th ultimo, the day being fine, with a hazy atmosphere, wind moderate from the westward, with little sea, the position of the Kearsage at 10 o'clock was near the buoy which marks the line of shoals to the eastward of Cherbourg, and distant about 3 miles from the eastern entrance, which bore to the southward and westward. At 10:20 o'clock the Alabama was descried coming out of the western entrance, accompanied by the Couronne (ironclad). I had, in an interview with the admiral at Cherbourg, assured him that in the event of an action occurring with the Alabama the position of the ships should be so far offshore that no question could be advanced about the line of jurisdiction. Accordingly, to perfect this object, and with the double purpose of drawing the Alabama so far offshore that if disabled she could not return, I directed the ship's head seaward, and cleared for action with the battery pivoted to starboard. Having attained a point about 7 miles from the shore, the head of the Kearsage was turned short round and the ship steered directly for the Alabama, my purpose being to run her down, or if circumstances did not warrant it, to close in with her. Hardly had the Kearsage come round before the Alabama sheered, presented her starboard battery, and slowed her engines. On approaching her, at long range of about a mile, she opened her full broadside, the shot cutting some of our rigging and going over and alongside of us. Immediately I ordered more speed, but in two minutes the Alabama had loaded and again fired another broadside, and following it with a third, without damaging us except in rigging. We had now arrived within about 900 yards of her, and I was apprehensive that another broadside, nearly raking us as it was, would prove disastrous. Accordingly, I ordered the Kearsage sheered, and opened on the Alabama. The position of the vessels was now broadside and broadside, but it was soon apparent that Captain Semmes did not seek close action. I became then fearful, lest after some fighting he would again make for the shore. To defeat this, I determined to keep full speed on, and with a port helm to run under the stern of the Alabama and rake, if he did not prevent it by sheering and keeping his broadside to us. He adopted this mode as a preventive, and as a consequence the Alabama was forced with a full head of steam into a circular track during the engagement.

The effect of this maneuver was such that at the last of the action, when the Alabama would have made off, she was near 5 miles from the shore, and had the action continued from the first in parallel lines, with her head inshore, the line of jurisdiction would no doubt have been reached. The firing of the Alabama from the first was rapid and wild. Toward the close of the action her firing became better. Our men, who had been cautioned against rapid firing without direct aim, were much more deliberate, and the instructions given to point the heavy

guns below rather than above the water line and clear the deck with the lighter ones was fully observed. I had endeavored with a port helm to close in with the *Alabama*, but it was not until just before the close of the action that we were in position to use grape. This was avoided, however, by her surrender. The effect of the training of our men was evident. Nearly every shot from our guns was telling fearfully on the *Alabama*, and on the seventh rotation on the circular track she winded, setting fore-trysail and two jibs, with head inshore. Her speed was now retarded, and, by winding, her port broadside was presented to us, with only two guns bearing, not having been able, as I learned afterwards, to shift over but one. I saw now that she was at our mercy, and a few more guns, well directed, brought down her flag. I was unable to ascertain whether they had been hauled down or shot away, but a white flag having been displayed over the stern, our fire was reserved. Two minutes had not more than elapsed before she again opened on us with the two guns on the port side. This drew our fire again, and the *Kearsarge* was immediately steamed ahead, and laid across her bows for raking. The white flag was still flying, and our fire was again reserved. Shortly after this her boats were seen to be lowering, and an officer in one of them came alongside and informed us that the ship had surrendered and was fast sinking. In twenty minutes from this time the *Alabama* went down, her mainmast, which had been shot, breaking near the head as she sank, and her bow rising high out of the water as her stern rapidly settled.

The fire of the *Alabama*, although it is stated that she discharged 370 or more shell and shot, was not of serious damage to the *Kearsarge*. Some thirteen or fourteen of these had taken effect in and about the hull, and sixteen or seventeen about the masts and rigging. The casualties were small, only three persons having been wounded; yet it is a matter of surprise that so few were injured, considering the number of projectiles that came aboard. Two shot passed through the ports in which the 32's were placed, with men thickly stationed around them, one taking effect in the hammock netting and the other going through the port on the opposite side; yet no one was hit, the captain of one of the guns being only knocked down by the wind of the shot, as supposed. The fire of the *Kearsarge*, although only 173 projectiles had been discharged, according to the prisoners' accounts was terrific. One shot alone had killed and wounded eighteen men and disabled the gun; another had entered the coal bunkers, exploding, and completely blocked up the engine room, and Captain Semmes states that shot and shell had taken effect in the sides of the vessel, tearing large holes by explosion, and his men were everywhere knocked down.

Of the casualties in the *Alabama* no correct account can be given. One hundred and fifteen persons reached the shore, either in England or France, after the action. It is known that the *Alabama* carried a crew (officers and men) of about 150 into Cherbourg, and that while in the Southern Ocean her complement was about 170; but desertions had reduced this complement. The prisoners state that a number of men came on board at Cherbourg, and the night before the action boats were going to and fro, and in the morning strange men were seen who were stationed as captains of the guns. Among these there was one lieutenant (Sinclair), who joined her in Cherbourg.

The *Alabama* had been five days in preparation; she had taken in 350 tons of coal, which brought her down

in the water. The Kearsarge had only 120 tons in, but as an offset to this, her sheet chains were stowed outside stopped up and down as an additional preventive and protection to her more empty bunkers. The number of the crew of the Kearsarge, including officers and sick men, was 163 and her battery numbered seven guns two 11-inch and one 30-pounder rifle, and four light 32-pounder guns.

The battery of the Alabama numbered eight guns one heavy 68, of 9,000 pounds, one 110-pounder rifle, and six heavy 32-pounder guns. In the engagement the Alabama fought seven guns and the Kearsarge five, both exercising her starboard battery until the Alabama winded, using then her port side with one gun, and another shifted over.

The collateral events connected with this action have already been laid before the Department. I enclose a diagram, showing the track which was described during the engagement, by the rotary course of the vessels.

I have the honor to be, very respectfully, your obedient servant,

*J. N. O. Winslow
Captain*

*to Hon. Gideon Welles,
Secretary of the Navy, Washington, D. C.*

Rapport du Captain Semmes, Commandant le croiseur confédéré CSS Alabama

Southampton, June 21, 1864

Sir,

I have the honor to inform you, in accordance with my intention as previously announced to you, I steamed out of the harbor of Cherbourg between 9 and 10 o'clock on the morning of June 19 for the purpose of engaging the enemy's steamer *Kearsarge*, which had been lying off and on the port for several days previously. After clearing the harbor we descried the enemy, with his head offshore, at a distance of about 9 miles. We were three-quarters of an hour in coming up with him. I had previously pivoted my guns to starboard, and made all my preparations for engaging the enemy on that side. When within about a mile and a quarter of the enemy he suddenly wheeled, and bringing his head inshore presented his starboard battery to me. By this time we were distant about 1 mile from each other, when I opened on him with solid shot, to which he replied in a few minutes, and the engagement became active on both sides. The enemy now pressed his ship under a full head of steam, and to prevent our passing each other too speedily, and to keep our respective broadsides bearing, it became necessary to fight in a circle, the two ships steaming around a common center and preserving a distance from each other of from a quarter to half a mile. When we got within good shell range, we opened on him with shell. Some ten or fifteen minutes after the commencement of the action our spanker gaff was shot away and our ensign came down by the run. This was immediately replaced by another at the mizzenmast-head. The firing now became very hot, and the enemy's shot and shell soon began to tell upon our hull, knocking down, killing, and disabling a number of men in different parts of the ship. Perceiving that our shell, though apparently exploding against the enemy's sides, were doing but little damage, I returned to solid shot firing, and from this time onward alternated with shot and shell. After the lapse of about one hour and ten minutes our ship was ascertained to be in sinking condition, the enemy's shell having exploded in our sides and between decks, opening large apertures, through which the water rushed with great rapidity. For some few minutes I had hopes of being able to reach the French coast, for which purpose I gave the ship all steam and set such of the fore-and-aft sails as were available. The ship filled so rapidly, that before we had made much progress the fires were extinguished in the furnaces, and we were evidently on the point of sinking. I now hauled down my colors to prevent the further destruction of life, and dispatched a boat to inform the enemy of our condition. Although we were now but 400 yards from each other, the enemy fired upon me five times after my colors had been struck, dangerously wounding several of my men. It is charitable to suppose that a ship of war of a Christian nation could not have done this intentionally. We now turned all our exertions toward the wounded and such of the boys as were unable to swim. These were dispatched in my quarter boats, the only boats remaining to me, the waist boats having been torn to pieces.

Some twenty minutes after my furnace fires had been extinguished, and the ship being on the point of settling, every man, in obedience to a previous order which had been given to the crew, jumped overboard and

endeavored to save himself. There was no appearance of any boat coming to me from the enemy until after the ship went down. Fortunately, however, the steam yacht *Deerhound*, owned by a gentleman of Lancashire, England (Mr. John Lancaster), who was himself on board, steamed up in the midst of my drowning men and rescued a number of both officers and men from the water. I was fortunate enough myself thus to escape to the shelter of the neutral flag, together with about forty others, all told. About this time the *Kearsarge* sent one and then, tardily, another boat.

Accompanying you will find lists of the killed and wounded, and of those who were picked up by the *Deerhound*. The remainder there is reason to hope were picked up by the enemy and by a couple of French pilot boats, which were also fortunately near the scene of action. 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 chains 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 armor 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 effectively guarded, however, in this section from penetration. The enemy was much damaged in other parts, but to what extent it is now impossible to tell. It is believed he was badly crippled.

My officers and men behaved steadily and gallantly, and though they have lost their ship they have not lost honor. Where all behaved so well it would be invidious to particularize; but I cannot deny myself the pleasure of saying that Mr. Kell, my first lieutenant, deserves great credit for the fine condition in which the ship went into action, with regard to her battery, magazine, and shell rooms; also that he rendered me great assistance by his coolness and judgment as the fight proceeded.

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 ironclad. Our total loss in killed and wounded is 30, to wit, 9 killed and 21 wounded.

I have the honor to be, very respectfully, your obedient servant,

R. Semmes,
Captain.

to Flag Officer Samuel Barron, U. S. S. Navy, Paris