



*By Charles Priestley*

By June, 1864, after nearly two years at sea and some 75,000 miles, the CSS *Alabama* was a tired ship. Her bottom was fouled, the copper sheathing peeling off her hull, her decks were leaking and there were holes in the tubing of her wheezing boilers. Officers and men were “*pretty well fagged out*”, as her captain put it<sup>1</sup>, and he himself had a bad cold which turned into a fever. “*Our bottom is in such a state that everything passes us,*” he had written in his journal on May 21. “*We are like a crippled hunter limping home from a long chase.*”<sup>2</sup>

The night of June 10 found the ship in the Channel in thick fog, but she was boarded by a Channel pilot off the Lizard and the following morning, Saturday, June 11, 1864, she arrived safely off the long breakwater marking the entrance to the great harbour at Cherbourg. At about 12.30, she came through the West Pass and anchored just inside the harbour.<sup>3</sup>

On duty in Cherbourg Harbour that day was the pride of the French Navy, the ironclad *Couronne*, under the command of a Breton officer called Jérôme Penhoat. Penhoat now sent off a boat to find out who the stranger was and what she wanted. The boat came back with an officer in a grey uniform who explained that the vessel was the CSS *Alabama* and that she wanted permission to land some 40 prisoners from the last two prizes she had captured. Penhoat replied that he was not authorised to give

<sup>1</sup> *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion* (Washington, DC, 1894-1927), Series I, Volume 3 (hereafter cited as ORN I:3), p.652: Semmes to Barron, June 14, 1864.

<sup>2</sup> ORN I:3, p.674: Extracts from the journal of Captain Semmes, C.S. Navy, commanding the C.S.S. *Alabama*, April 1 to June 16, 1864 (hereafter cited as Semmes Journal), May 21, 1864.

<sup>3</sup> ORN I:3, p.676: Semmes Journal, June 11, 1864.

permission, but would have to pass the request up to the Préfet Maritime. Meanwhile, however, the *Alabama* could come in and anchor in the inner part of the harbour, which she did.<sup>4</sup>

The title of Préfet Maritime is usually translated, by Semmes and others, as “Port Admiral”. In reality, however, it is very much more than that. The Préfet Maritime is responsible not merely for the port but for the whole of that particular part of the coast and everything that happens there.

The Préfet Maritime at this time was Vice-Admiral Augustin Dupouy, a career naval officer of 56 who, as captain of the *Napoléon*, had taken part, with the Royal Navy, in the bombardment of Sebastopol during the Crimean War. He was very much a technical man; he had invented a new naval gun carriage<sup>5</sup>, for example, and when he was finally able to visit the *Kearsarge* after the battle of June 19 and to talk to her captain, John Ancrum Winslow, he was clearly disappointed that Winslow was unable to answer his questions about the precise method of casting used on the *Kearsarge*'s 11-inch guns.<sup>6</sup>

Dupouy had been appointed only three weeks earlier, and he was just beginning to get the measure of his new responsibilities when the arrival of the *Alabama* presented him with his first problem. He was, after all, a sailor, not a diplomat, and he had absolutely no idea what to do in a case like this; his previous career had not prepared him for it. The chain of command went from Penhoat to Dupouy to the Minister of the Navy, Count Prosper Chasseloup-Laubat, and from Chasseloup-Laubat direct to the Emperor, Napoleon III, who was conveniently on holiday in Biarritz at the time. At 2 o'clock, then, Dupouy sent off a hasty telegram to the Minister, asking for instructions.<sup>7</sup> While Dupouy was still waiting for an answer, Semmes compounded the problem by sending ashore his Executive Officer, John McIntosh Kell, with a letter for the Admiral asking permission for the *Alabama* to enter the dock in order to carry out extensive but essential repairs. In desperation, Dupouy sent off a second telegram to the Minister, asking what he should do now.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, shortly after 7 o'clock that evening, an answer came to the first telegram: the prisoners must be released immediately! There was no response as yet, however, to the question of repairs.<sup>9</sup>

Semmes, delighted to be rid of his reluctant guests, loaded them into two of the *Alabama*'s boats and landed them at the Vigie de l'Onglet<sup>10</sup>, a former battery near the quay which was now a signal station and acted as a kind of airport control tower, as it were, regulating traffic in the harbour. Here they were discharged into the care of the U.S. Consul, Édouard Liais, a naval provisioning merchant from a prominent local family.<sup>11</sup>

The night before arriving in Cherbourg, Semmes had written in his journal these curiously final and prophetic words: “*And thus, thanks to an all-wise Providence, we*

<sup>4</sup> Paul Ingouf-Knocker, *Coulez l'Alabama!* (St.-Lô 1976, revised 2002), p.25.

<sup>5</sup> Ingouf-Knocker, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

<sup>6</sup> Service Historique de la Défense, Cherbourg: Le Vice-Amiral Préfet Maritime du 1<sup>er</sup> Arrondissement, Augustin Dupouy, à Son Excellence Monsieur le Ministre de la Marine et des Colonies, à Paris (hereafter cited as SHD, Dupouy to Minister), June 25, 1864.

<sup>7</sup> Ingouf-Knocker, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

<sup>8</sup> Admiral Raphael Semmes, *Memoirs of Service Afloat During the War Between the States* (Baltimore, 1869), p. 751; Ingouf-Knocker, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

<sup>9</sup> Ingouf-Knocker, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

<sup>10</sup> This little building still survives at the end of the rue de l'Onglet. It now houses the offices of a centre for water sports.

<sup>11</sup> *ORN* I:3, p. 676; Semmes Journal, June 11, 1864; Ingouf-Knocker, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

have brought our cruise of the 'Alabama' to a successful termination."<sup>12</sup> He expected the repairs to take a couple of months. His plan, as we know from a letter which he wrote two days later to the senior Confederate Navy officer in Europe, Flag-Officer Samuel Barron, was to pay off his officers and crew and give them an extended run on shore, as he put it, and for himself to ask to be relieved of his command.<sup>13</sup> As we know, however, it was not to be.

The next day was Sunday and a quiet day aboard the *Alabama*, with only a few curious visitors. Semmes reported in his journal that the weather continued cloudy and cool and that he was still suffering from his cold and fever. Nevertheless, he mustered and inspected the crew. There was still no answer from Paris, but at least officers and men could enjoy fresh food for the first time since they had left the Cape. It was the start of the strawberry season, and Semmes wrote appreciatively in his journal of the "very large and fine" berries, as well as of the good beef and mutton and the excellent Normandy milk and butter.<sup>14</sup>

Back on shore, meanwhile, the Admiral received a telegram from Paris. Was he certain that the mysterious vessel was indeed the *Alabama*? Might she not be the *Florida*, which had been in Brest for repairs from August, 1863 until January, 1864, when she evaded the *Kearsarge* and made for the open sea? After questioning the *Alabama*'s newly released prisoners and the pilot who had brought her in, Dupouy sent off a telegram to Paris confirming that the vessel was indeed the *Alabama*, and then a further one confirming that Semmes was her captain, following both telegrams with a letter the next day.<sup>15</sup>

The next day was Monday, June 13, and Semmes went ashore in the morning to see the Admiral and to explain what exactly he needed. He met Dupouy in his office in the Préfecture Maritime, a few minutes' walk from the landing-stage. The Admiral gave him a courteous welcome and was very friendly – until it came to the question of the repairs. What a pity, he said, that Semmes had not gone to a commercial port like Le Havre or Bordeaux, where he could easily have been accommodated. The problem was that Cherbourg was a naval base and the docks were naval docks. However, he had of course referred Semmes's request to Paris, and was waiting for a response. How unfortunate that the Emperor was away at the moment!

A rather frustrated Semmes took his leave, writing later to Barron about the need for patience "as all the Latin races are proverbially slow in their movements."<sup>16</sup>

It seems probable that he also took the opportunity that morning to visit the Confederate consular agent, Adolphe Bonfils,<sup>17</sup> another naval provisioning merchant

<sup>12</sup> *ORN* I:3, p. 676: Semmes Journal, June 10, 1864.

<sup>13</sup> *ORN* I:3, p. 651: Semmes to Barron, June 13, 1864.

<sup>14</sup> *ORN* I:3, p. 676: Semmes Journal, June 12, 1864.

<sup>15</sup> Ingouf-Knocker, *op. cit.*, pp. 27-28.

<sup>16</sup> *ORN* I:3, p. 652: Semmes to Barron, June 14, 1864.

<sup>17</sup> There has been much confusion over Bonfils's Christian name, probably partly because all the men in the Bonfils family appear to have had the same two first names, Joseph Marie, and were therefore known by their third name. Ingouf-Knocker (*op. cit.*, p. 24) refers to "M. Joseph Bonfils, vice-consul du Brésil" and says that his eldest son, Amédée, "est depuis peu investi de la charge d'Agent consulaire des Etats Confédérés" ("had recently been appointed Confederate consular agent"). Slidell, Confederate Commissioner to France, refers (*ORN* I:3, p. 661) to "Mr. Auguste Bonfils". Semmes, however, writes (*ORN* I:3, p. 648) to "Ad. Bonfils, Esq." and Bonfils signs himself "Ad. Bonfils" in a letter to Slidell (*ORN* I:3, p. 662). The full name of the Brazilian Consul at Cherbourg was Joseph Marie Adolphe Bonfils and he was generally known as Adolphe. There seems little doubt, then, that the same man was also the Confederate consular agent. He was born in 1800 and was thus 64 in 1864. His eldest son Joseph Marie Gustave Adolphe (born 1821), known as Gustave, signed the death certificates of the three Confederate dead after the

and a neighbour of Liais. Bonfils was also the consul of Brazil, but it is clear both from his actions and from the evidence of John Slidell, the Confederate Commissioner to France, that he and his sons took their responsibility to the Confederacy extremely seriously.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, Bonfils had written of his own volition to Slidell, on the very day that the *Alabama* arrived, asking him to apply direct to the Government for permission for her to go into dock.<sup>19</sup>

If Semmes did visit Bonfils that morning, though, it would have been of necessity a fairly short meeting, since the Imperial Brazilian Navy training-ship *Bahiana* was arriving that day on a courtesy visit, and Bonfils would have had to be on hand to welcome her.<sup>20</sup>

That afternoon, rumours began to circulate in Cherbourg that the USS *Kearsarge* was on her way from Flushing, so Semmes continued to keep the crew on board.<sup>21</sup>

The following day, Tuesday, June 14, these rumours turned out to be true. At about 12.30, the dark shape of the *Kearsarge* appeared off the breakwater. She made no attempt to enter the harbour, but anchored just outside the East Pass<sup>22</sup>. A boat then came out to the *Couronne* carrying her surgeon, Dr John M. Browne, who asked permission for her to enter the harbour. Penhoat, having signalled the Admiral, gave permission, but the *Kearsarge* made no move to come in. Instead, her captain, John Ancrum Winslow, came ashore at about 3.30 to speak to the U.S. Consul, Bonfils's neighbour Édouard Liais. Liais then informed the Admiral that the *Kearsarge* had come to pick up the *Alabama*'s former prisoners, whereupon the Admiral sent another telegram to the Minister, asking for instructions.<sup>23</sup>

At this point Dupouy's worst fears were realised, as Semmes decided to fight the *Kearsarge*.

It seems that he had come to this decision virtually as soon as he saw the *Kearsarge*. He called Kell into his cabin and discussed the situation with him, but his opening words were: "*Kell, I am going out to fight the 'Kearsarge'. What do you think of it?*" The meeting was thus similar to a certain type of business meeting, called simply to approve a decision already made. Kell could never have dissuaded Semmes, even if he had wanted to. He could, and did, point out the *Alabama*'s weak points, but, as he said, "*I stated these facts simply for myself.*"<sup>24</sup>

Later that day, Semmes wrote to Samuel Barron in Paris. "*As we are about equally matched,*" he said, "*I shall go out to engage her.*"<sup>25</sup>

To be continued ...

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battle of June 19, describing himself as "*Agent des Etats du Sud de l'Amérique*" ("agent of the Southern States of America").

<sup>18</sup> ORN I:3, p. 661: Slidell to Benjamin, June 30, 1864.

<sup>19</sup> ORN I:3, p. 647: Slidell to Semmes, June 12, 1864.

<sup>20</sup> Ingouf-Knocker, *op.cit.*, p. 24.

<sup>21</sup> ORN I:3, p. 677: Semmes Journal, June 13, 1864.

<sup>22</sup> See Penhoat's official report on the battle in *The American Historical Review*, Vol. XXIII (1917-1918), pp. 119-123: "*Le Kerseage se présente devant la passe de l'Est sans entrer*" (p. 121).

<sup>23</sup> SHD, Dupouy to Minister, June 15, 1864; Ingouf-Knocker, *op.cit.*, p. 50.

<sup>24</sup> John McIntosh Kell, *Recollections of a Naval Life, including the cruises of the Confederate States Steamers "Sumter" and "Alabama"* (Washington, D.C., 1900), p. 245.

<sup>25</sup> ORN I:3, p. 651: Semmes to Barron, June 14, 1864.