

(P.)

U. S. Steam Sloop "Oneida"
Off Mobile Oct. 10, 1862.

Sir—

Having now made a full and complete written
though several verbal reports, of the chase of the
rebel war steamer "Oreto" alias "Florida" by the "Oneida"
on the 4th of Sept. last, and circumstances having
occurred that require I should do so, I submit the
following.

On the 4th of Sept. the blockading force off
Mobile consisted of the "Oneida" "Cayuga" and "Wi-
nona", myself the Senior officer, a position I had
occupied since the 30th of Aug. when the Steam
Frigate "Susquehanna" left for Pensacola for re-
pairs. The Steam Gunboats "Kanawha," "Pinola"
and "Kennebec" all attached to this blockade
were also temporarily withdrawn and at Pensa-
cola for repairs or coal. The small and reduced
force left at my command, was thus distributed—
the "Winnona" to the N^d & E^d of the bar, to guard
the Swash Channel. The Cayuga to the N^d & W^d
to guard the western channels, and the "Oneida"
off and to the S^d of the bar, to guard the Main
Ship Channel. The evening previous I gave in-
structions to the "Cayuga" to go to the W^d in the
morning, take a look at Petit Bois and Horn
Isld passes which were necessarily unguarded,
get some fresh beef from Petit Bois and re-
turn as soon as these objects were accomplished.
Consequently the "Cayuga" was not in sight
when the "Oreto" ran in.

The evening previous also the Chief Engineer re-
presented to me the very bad and leaky condition
of the boilers, stating that an almost constant

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MMN # 74391

Date: September 4, 1862

Description: George Henry Preble addressed this report on the incident
in Mobile Bay when the Confederate ship Oreto (Florida) ran through the
blockade that Preble was defending.

use of the donkey pump, was necessary, in consequence, when the engines were not in motion. With some hesitation, though it had been the custom, to do so, with my predecessors on the blockade, I gave him permission to haul the fires under one boiler, the next morning at daylight, provided he would hurry up and complete his repairs before night, and ordering a full pressure of steam to be kept on the remaining boiler. About noon or soon after, I sent for him to ascertain how the work was progressing and receiving a satisfactory reply, congratulated myself that the work was nearly accomplished, and at 3.45 fires were started under the repaired boiler. When we got underway at 5.30. P.M. I fully believed, we had steam on both boilers. He was not however able to obtain a working pressure of steam on the repaired boiler until our return from the chase of the "Oreto" to our anchorage off the bar at 7.30 P.M. Consequently our usual good weather speed of ten to ten and a half knots, was very much diminished, and instead of sixty to seventy revolutions of the screw we were only able to make but 38 to 40, and an estimated speed of seven knots. During the chase the steam was run down from 34 lbs to 15. At daylight or soon after on the 4th a square rigged sailing vessel was observed to the S. and the "Winona" under general instructions went out in chase. At 2 P.M. another sail was reported which the Winona boarded. At 3.35 another sail was discovered to the

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S^d & W^d. The "Winona" then standing towards us and apparently not observing her, I fired our howitzer to attract her attention and then made signal to her: "To speak the strange sail and bring the Commander-in-Chief intelligence if any. If none, return to your station." She accordingly stood off to the S^d and W^d in the direction of the strange sail, which proved to be a schooner (the Rachel Seaman) and was returning towards the "Oneida" to communicate, when at 5.05 P.M. a sail was reported from aloft bearing S.E. 1/2 E. Soon made out to be a steamer and reported from aloft as the "Susquehanna," but generally supposed to be the "Connecticut," known to be at Pensacola, and momentarily expected. The strange steamer when discovered was standing directly for us, with her three masts in line or range and we could see she had square yards forward, though hull down. At 5.15 we saw she was burning bituminous coal and a slight yaw in her course showed me she was barkantine rigged. Impressed with the idea that she was an English Gunboat inspecting our blockade I made signal to the "Winona" to chase at discretion and got the "Oneida" immediately underway and stood towards her, thinking would look more vigilant to the English man of war to be underway and at quarters, when we met him. We accordingly furled awnings and were at general quarters, before we were in rifle range of the stranger, and over fifteen minutes before we fired our first shot at him.

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the stranger, who as we approached him, continued to steer directly for us and hoisted an English red Ensign. He had already up a short coach whip or night pennant. He could now see the carried quarter and waist boats - had a broadside of guns with tompions out - hammock nettings, air ports fore and aft, and in fact wore every appearance of being an English dispatch Gunboat. I believe every person on board the "Oneida" was impressed with this belief, being ignorant that the rebels had a vessel of war on the ocean, from the delay of the "Connecticuts" mail at Pensacola which received from her on the 6th gave us the first intimation we had of the "Oreto's" being at Cardenas and of "No 290's" having left England.

When near the supposed man of war we put our helm to starboard, so as not to pass him, and came round to the N^d and W^d, so as to lay about abeam of him, or perhaps a little across, or on her port bow. He was steaming very rapidly, and when within about 100 yards, perhaps nearer, the two vessels nearly abeam of each other, I hailed him but receiving no answer, directed a shot from the rifle fore-castle pivot to be thrown across his bow then another and then a third "close to his forefoot", all in rapid succession. As these guns produced no impression, I directed to fire into him, and almost simultaneously the whole starboard battery was discharged at him. The first shot however from the after XI inch pivot gun going just over his rail between his fore and main masts.

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As it was a shrapnel with fuse cut to a second and a quarter and fell into the water without exploding you can judge how near we were to him. My Clerk, who timed the firing states that the first gun fired across his bows was at 6 P.M. and the order given to fire into him at 6.03 P.M. At 6.05 he hauled down his colors and pennant and hoisted no others during the chase. Seeing no slackening up of his speed, I gave orders to continue our fire. About this time the "Winona" opened fire on him from her position astern - and soon after the Schooner which the "Winona" had boarded, stood in towards our bow and fired three or four shots at him, which was the first intimation I had of his being a friendly vessel of war, as she showed no colors before - after or during the continuance of the chase. I thought the spirit with which he attempted to assist in the capture of the rebel very praiseworthy, and approved of the judgment with which he tacked off shore when likely to embarrass our chase by getting under our bows.

Both vessels were gradually sheered in shore, the stranger evidently fast gaining upon us, so that we had to train our pivot guns sharp forward and yaw off to bring them to bear upon him. This and the smoke from our guns which hung between us prevented our firing as rapidly as we could have wished.

Soon after we opened fire upon him he attempted to make sail by loosing his foretopsail and foretop galltsail, but the ex-

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Explosion of one of our shell over his deck, hurried the men from aloft - they never got the sheets fairly home, and the sails were of little or no assistance to him, as the wind was light. We thought he trained his guns to bear upon us though he did not fire, and the Boatswain reported from aloft, that he was training his forward pivot gun, but he has since told me he was mistaken, and the men he saw were at work at the rigging of the sails loosed. At first he had from 20 to 30 men on deck, but after our firing commenced, the Boatswain could see from aloft but three or four - the man at the wheel, one forward, and one or two passing along the deck.

Continuing our fire as rapidly as circumstances would admit, and giving repeated orders to go faster, and to take better aim, not understanding at the time, why we could not keep up with the stranger, who was evidently gaining on us, I saw we were standing in towards the ruins of Sand Isld Light House and that the stranger was crossing the head of the S.E. Breaker on the Eastern side of the channel.

The leadsmen soon gave "three fathoms" of water and night closing around us I was reluctantly compelled to put our helm a port and abandon the chase at 6.27 P.M. and had the mortification of seeing the stranger cross the shoal without striking and haul up into the main ship channel - giving her a last shot from the forecastle rifle pivoted over to port, the only gun that would bear

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As we hauled off. The "Winona" chasing astern and using her gun pivoted on the port side, went in shore of her, and hauled off from the chase at about the same time, when, as her Commander informed me, in twelve feet of water. We continued the chase as long as it was prudent or profitable to do.

Finding the rebel had escaped me, I returned to the anchorage off the bar, where I was joined by the "Winona".

Believing it important you should have early intelligence of what had happened, I signalled the Capt. of the Winona to come on board, and writing my hurried and incomplete report of the 4th, I directed the Capt. of the "Winona" to take his station for the night and at early daylight proceed to Pensacola with my dispatch, accompanying which was the Gunners report of shot and shell fired, and enjoining him to acquaint you with all the particulars, such as I had no time to give. I then hurried him back to his station to the N^d and E^d fearing as it was then very dark, some thing might slip out. At 11 P.M. the "Cayuga" returned from Horn Isld. pass. Capt. Thornton returned to this blockade at 10 P.M. the 5th bringing me your letter of that date, in which you expressed the opinion I should have fired but one shot across his bows, and the next at him. Had I not been almost convinced he was an English man of war, I would undoubtedly have done so, but the deception was perfect and his unparalleled audacity in standing directly and boldly for us helped the deception

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I did not wish to break our neutrality or be wanting in courtesy with a friendly nation.

When we first ranged up in hailing distance, I could undoubtedly have boarded him or run him down, but it was too late for these manoeuvres, when his true character was discovered.

Thinking you were wrongly impressed as to the time occupied in firing across his bows and into him, I wrote you my letter of Sept. 6th informing you that it was only three minutes, and at the same giving you a few facts concerning the chase, but still no complete report, as I supposed Capt. Thornton had related to you all the particulars. Subsequently at Pensacola I had opportunity of explaining to you in person, when you remarked that you had omitted to the Secretary that you did not see that I was to blame, but the rebel steamers escape was owing to "bad shooting". Judge my surprise then, when I find myself suddenly and ignominiously dismissed from the Navy on your letter forwarding my first hasty statement of this affair. I told you that I did not claim to have hit their vessel at all, though our shot covered her and were very close ones. I could see with my glass no marks on her hull or spars. We have since learned she was hit several times, that an eleven inch shell went into her coal bunkers a foot from the water line, that her sides were pretty well peppered with grape, shrapnel and pieces of shell, and that she had one man killed

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and two wounded, as the rebel accounts say, out of a crew of thirteen, mostly sick, allowing her to have had twenty to thirty for a crew, this is a greater comparative percentage of casualties than happened to this Squadron in passing the Mississippi forts and greater also than it was each time the Batteries of Vicksburg were successfully run. Can it be considered remarkable that after those successful achievements of your Squadron, this rebel steamer, in humble imitation, should succeed in passing under the fire of two gunboats, without being sunk or materially injured.

That I did my whole duty in this matter, I fearlessly claim. That according to the tenth paragraph of the 3^d Article of War, I did not neglect to reasonably clear my ship for action, and that I used my utmost exertions to overtake, capture or destroy the vessel, and that I omitted no ordinary duty of an officer - I can prove, by the accompanying statements from all the officers of the "Oneida"

The President recommended me by name for the thanks of Congress, as one of the Commanding Officers in the passage of the Forts Jackson and St. Philip and subsequent capture of New Orleans, though action was not taken on it by Congress. He next by the recommendation of the "advisory board" promoted me to the rank, which had been justly my due for six months previous, and now on insufficient and incomplete evidence he directs that my name be stricken from the rolls of the Navy, and a record of my

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disgrace placed upon every log book, and
read to the assembled crews of every ship in
Commission. This is hard usage and small
consideration, for one, who to-day completes
his twenty seventh year of service.

I have been most cruelly
and unjustly treated, and I call upon you,
Admiral, as my immediate Commanding
officer, to aid me in obtaining justice

Very Respectfully -
Your Obedt. Servt.
Geo. Henry Preble
(P)

Rear Admiral.

David G. Farragut
Comdg. W. G. Blk's Sqdr.
Flag Ship "Hartford"
Pensacola.

Commander Preble's
Full report to Rear
Admiral D. G. Farragut
of the
Chase of the Rebel
War Steamer Oreto by the
U. S. S. Sloop Oneida
Sept. 4, 1862

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