

The Great Gunboat Chase

A man. A plan. A boat. A Confederate Navy lieutenant's late-war adventure puts the Great Locomotive Chase to shame.

By MICHAEL L. GILLESPIE

Lieutenant Charles W. Read of the Confederate States Navy was not yet 25 years old in the spring of 1865. He was courteous and unassuming, a friendly lad whose piercing eyes and sly grin betrayed a ready sense of humor. Nothing in his appearance or demeanor hinted that he had accumulated one of the most astounding war records in the Southern navy — or that he was about to add to it.

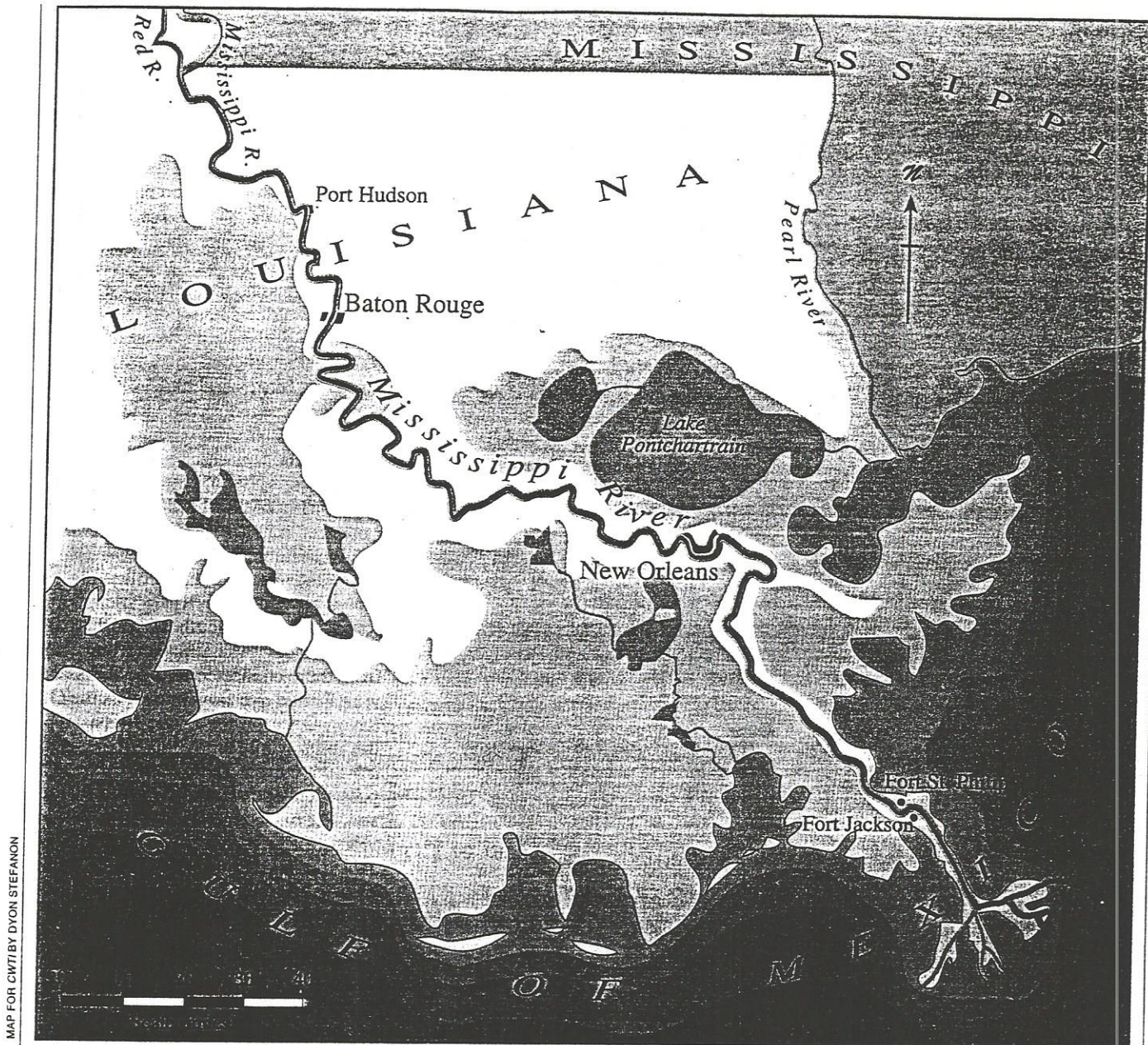
In April of 1862 this mere wisp of a fellow had taken command of the C.S.S. *McRae* in the midst of battle on the Mississippi River below New Orleans. His captain was mortally wounded and the young U.S. Naval Academy graduate fought his ship in a one-sided contest until she was literally sunk from beneath him. A few months later Read served as gunnery officer aboard the C.S.S. *Arkansas* during that gunboat's

spectacular escape from the Yazoo River in July, 1862. In November the navy assigned him to the C.S.S. *Florida*, then fitting out for a war cruise in the Atlantic. When the *Florida* captured a brig in the spring of 1863, Read took command of the prize and ran her as a privateer. His subsequent spree of commerce raiding off the East Coast scared perdition out of Yankee merchantmen and drew the unwanted attention of every available ship of the Federal navy and revenue service. Read was finally captured in June 1863, while trying to hijack the revenue cutter *Caleb Cushing* in the harbor of Portland, Maine. That indiscretion earned him 16 months in a Federal prison. He was wounded in an attempted escape, and finally went south in a prisoner exchange. These episodes might have deterred a lesser man from seeking further trials, but this youthful lieutenant was a daredevil at

heart and devoted to his cause — he had no intention of lying still.

Late in 1864, Read served the Confederacy as a battery commander on the James River defenses below Richmond, Virginia. He found the duty a bit dull and conjured up a mission to seize a Union gunboat by boarding it. He called off the venture only when one of his officers deserted to the enemy and betrayed his plan. Disappointed, but not beaten, Read worked up another project of high adventure and laid it at the desk of Navy Secretary Stephen R. Mallory.

Read's latest plan was quite an undertaking. The Confederate navy, he had learned, possessed one remaining operational vessel on the western rivers. It was the gunboat and ram *Webb*, and she was trapped somewhere up the Red River in Louisiana. Read proposed to load the *Webb* with cotton and run her — by stealth and cunning — out of the



MAP FOR CWT/ BY DYON STEFANON

The plan: Lieutenant Read's scheme called for the swift C.S.S. *Webb* to run the 300-mile gauntlet of the Union-held Mississippi River, past two major cities and a pair of formidable forts, and escape into the Gulf of Mexico.

Red River and down 300 miles of the Mississippi River, past an enemy fleet at New Orleans and two major forts below, through the Yankee blockading squadron at the river's mouth, and into the Gulf of Mexico. From there he would sail to Cuba, sell the cotton, purchase war material, then return again through the blockade and steam into the port of Galveston, Texas.

These were days of desperation for the Confederacy. Mallory knew Read's plucky reputation and believed that Read could do it if anyone could. He called Read to Richmond in February 1865, gave him sealed orders, and sent him west. Read set out at once for Alexandria, Louisiana, and his new command.

The *William H. Webb*, as she was known in pre-war days, was a 10-year-old sidewheel steamer. She had been built in New York as a harbor towboat. A New Orleans firm bought the *Webb* just before the war and brought her south. She performed brief service as a towing vessel, and then did war duty as a privateer at the mouth of the Mississippi River. The Confederate army had tried to purchase her for the River Defense Fleet in January 1862, but her owners wanted too much money. When New Orleans fell in April, the *Webb* was taken up the Red River to Shreveport, Louisiana. The government purchased her there and plated and reinforced her bow for service as a

ram. A sturdy craft, and surprisingly fast, she measured approximately 200 feet in length by 32 feet in beam, and drew 7 feet of water when light. She was identifiable by her small foremast, single smokestack and twin walking beams (the large rocker arms that connected the engines with the paddle-wheel cranks).

The *Webb's* only significant action prior to Read's downriver dash took place on the Mississippi in February 1863. With an army officer in command, and acting in concert with another ram, the *Webb* struck and disabled the United States gunboat *Indianola*. Other than that, she had remained bottled up in the Red River.



The man: Confederate Lieutenant Charles W. Read was a graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy. Here he wears his antebellum ensign's uniform.

Read took command of the *Webb* on March 31, 1865. The *Webb* lacked guns and fuel, but Read benefited from the full support of both army and navy commanders in getting his ship ready. Lieutenant General Edmund Kirby Smith, commanding the Trans-Mississippi Department, provided Read with cannon, carpenters and firearms. Navy Lieutenant Jonathan H. Carter, in charge of Red River defenses, energetically supplied explosive devices and hull modifications to make her truly oceanworthy.

In her final arrangement, the *Webb* carried a 30-pounder Parrot rifle as a bow pivot gun and two light 12-pounder cannon as boarding pieces. The vessel was painted white, thought by some to make it difficult to see at

night. The carpenters and boatswains rigged up a spar on the bow and suspended from it a 100-pound explosive torpedo. If it became necessary to attack a Federal ship, the crew would lower the torpedo into the water and the impact of ramming would drive it into the hull of the enemy craft, where it would do maximum damage when it exploded.

The *Webb* took on 190 bales of cotton — a cargo of substantial value given the scarcity of cotton outside the Confederacy at that time. The cotton served the additional purpose of protecting the machinery and crew. The ship also carried barrels of turpentine and resin as trade goods. The remaining spaces were filled with fuel: mostly pine knots, with some cord wood and

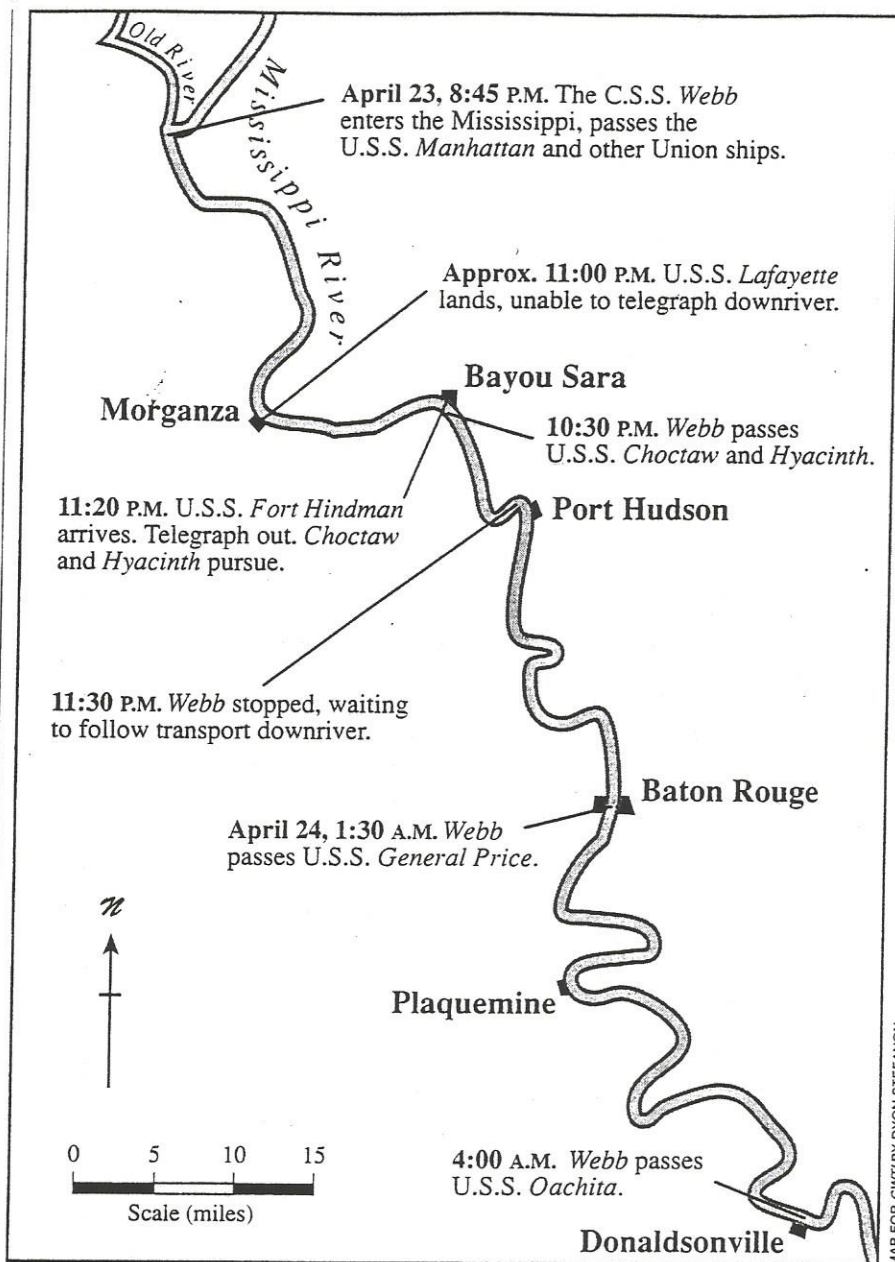
coal. She was a heavy boat now, drawing over 9 feet of water. Her paddle buckets extended well below the water line and at full speed they kicked up a lofty plume of spray.

During the night of April 22-23, the *Webb* lay moored at Alexandria, Louisiana, with a complement of 68 officers and crew — as ready as she would ever be for her sprint to the distant gulf. The crew was confined to the ship. They had no idea where they were going: the officers had withheld the object of the cruise, lest someone inform the enemy. A soldier on shore hollered the news that Abraham Lincoln had been assassinated, but the death of an enemy president brought no cause for grief. There was much more concern over the surrender of General Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia; they wondered how the Confederacy would survive without it.

Read sat in his cabin, collecting his thoughts. The Red River meandered some 110 miles southeastward to the head of the Atchafalaya River, and from there connected to the Mississippi via a 7-mile overflow known as the Old River. Once on the broad Mississippi, the *Webb* would enjoy the advantage of a 5-knot current, but would still have to pass enemy concentrations at Port Hudson, Baton Rouge, New Orleans and, worst of all, the heavy batteries of Forts Jackson and St. Philip, which commanded the river from opposite shores 80 miles below New Orleans. It was 325 miles from the Old River to the gulf, and the Yankees occupied in some manner virtually every mile of shore and every reach of river. The Mississippi actually narrowed as it flowed southward; the river was deep in the channel, but some handy steering was required to keep a vessel in the channel and off the grinding shoals.

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Read, now subdued though just as determined, scratched out his last letter to secretary Mallory. He acknowledged that Yankee gunboats were stationed at regular intervals along the 100 leagues of Mississippi that lay ahead. "I will have to stake everything upon speed and time," he wrote. Surprise and darkness would be his only allies. The enemy's ability to communicate information downriver via the telegraph would pose the greatest threat. The Yankees had possession of the telegraph lines on the eastern shore of the river. Those lines had to be broken to prevent a warning from getting out. Brigadier General Allen Thomas had agreed to



tree tops on the western shore. Something in the last trace of contrast had drawn Sinclair's attention: off to the north and west a faint smudge seemed to mar the evening sky. It appeared rather indistinct at first, like a storm cloud at a distance, but this cloud moved too quickly and it left a faded trail as it traced a dark path along the precise course of the Red River.

Sinclair was a veteran of naval warfare, and so was his ship. He knew it was always better to err on the side of caution. Instinctively he reached for the alarm gong, and in scarcely more than a minute the crew were at their quarters, the anchor chains let go, and the ship was cleared and ready for battle. Acting Lieutenant Robert B. Ely, captain of the *Manhattan*, stood now at Sinclair's side. There were seven other Union vessels astern of the *Manhattan*, but as Ely glanced down the dark river he could discern none of them. Sinclair pointed out the greasy trail of smoke above. Ely watched it for a time, then squinted into the darkness where the Old River joined the Mississippi. There it was, like a ghostly apparition: a side-wheel vessel, coming out of the Old River, 500 yards off the starboard bow. There were no Union boats assigned to that tributary; those were Rebel waters.

Ely ordered the boat howitzer fired as a warning to bring the strange ship to a halt. The intruder did not stop, but instead lurched forward, fairly flying downstream. Ely then directed his 15-inch turret-mounted gun into action. The turret swung around and trained on the column of smoke at midstream — the mysterious boat itself seemed to have disappeared into the blackness. The big gun fired; its flash left the crew momentarily night blind and no one could say whether the ball hit home. There was no chance for a second shot — the invader had already passed.

The crew of the United States gunboat *Gazelle* came up on deck as soon as the sound of *Manhattan's* cannon fire reached them. The *Gazelle* was anchored last in the line of seven craft, and fully two miles astern of the *Manhattan*. No one could see what had caused the commotion, and the *Gazelle's* captain thought it prudent to find out. The anchor cables were slipped and the *Gazelle* steamed forward. Signal rockets from the *Manhattan* arched through the sky. The lead ships were exchanging light and whistle signals as the *Gazelle* came alongside the *Manhattan*. An excited Captain Ely hailed

send troops across the river to cut the lines as far south as Plaquemine, Louisiana. From there down, Read would send his own crew ashore every 10 or 15 miles to take down whole stretches of wire. Read's first priority, he wrote, was to get out of the river, therefore he would not attack any vessel unless he perceived "a possibility of her arresting my progress." Finally, he enclosed a roster of his crew and a cipher key for future communication. He then put his pen down and ordered his two engineers to get some rest; they would be at their machinery without relief for at least the next two days.

The *Webb* left Alexandria at 4:00 A.M. on April 23, timed to reach the mouth of the Red just after dark. Read explained the mission to the crew and told them that the Yankees had at least

three ironclads and a gunboat stationed at Shreve's Cut-off, where the Red, via the Old River, flowed into the Mississippi. There the race would begin in earnest. The crew passed the day watching the Red River pass behind them, knowing that by nightfall they would find themselves where no Confederate vessel had dared to go in 20 months. Their fate lay in the hands of the high-stepping *Webb*.

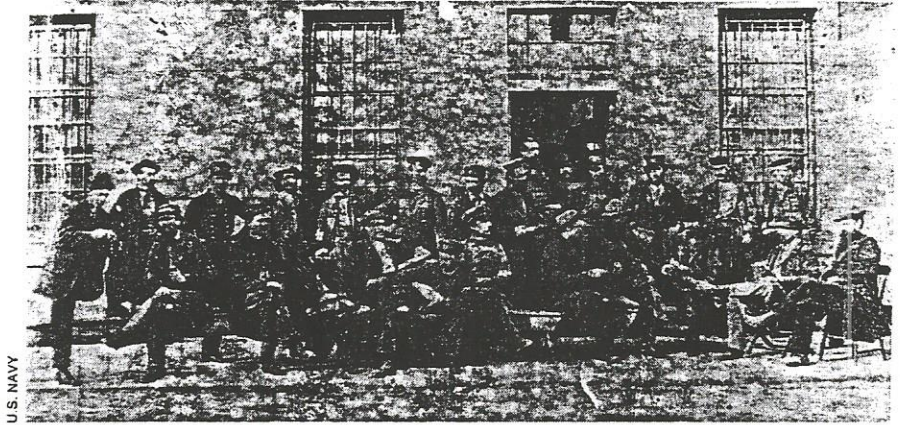
Acting Ensign Charles H. Sinclair stood the evening watch aboard the ungainly iron monitor U.S.S. *Manhattan*. A warm, gentle breeze wafted in from the west, portending a pleasant if somewhat humid night. The mile-wide sheet of water which marked the confluence of the Mississippi and Old Rivers had faded to absolute blackness, with only a pale outline marking the

the *Gazelle's* commander and told him to take his boat across the river and inform the other vessels positively that an enemy boat had just run by. Incredibly, the *Gazelle* had gone right past the *Webb* and had not seen a thing.

On board the *Webb*, Read directed his pilot to steer for the widest gap between Yankee vessels. The spirited *Webb* trembled with convulsions as the engineers widened the throttles. One crewman remembered that "every whistle in the Federal fleet was screaming, drums were beating, rockets were going up, and it seemed as if the very devil was to pay." Besides the *Manhattan* and *Gazelle*, the *Webb* drove past the stationary ironclads *Lexington*, *Lafayette*, and *Vindicator*, the armed steamer *Champion*, the repair boat *Samson*, and, 5 miles farther down, the gunboat *Fort Hindman*. In due time, the *Lafayette*, *Vindicator* and *Fort Hindman* turned downstream to give chase.

The chase must have resembled plowhorses going after a thoroughbred. The *Lafayette* could not achieve the *Webb's* speed and probably never saw her after the first few miles. The *Lafayette's* captain planned to steam for the telegraph office at Morganza, Louisiana, 25 miles below. The *Vindicator* was delayed at the start and then ran with badly leaking boilers and flues. Acting master D.P. Slatterly, temporarily in command of the *Vindicator*, allowed the thrill of pursuit to overrule better judgement. When his engineer told him that the boilers could not take more than 70 to 80 pounds of pressure, Slatterly ordered no less than 90 pounds, saying that he "would be officially responsible for any disastrous results." The boilers held, somehow. After several miles Slatterly passed the flagship *Lafayette* and was ordered off the hunt, probably to the great relief of his engine room crew. The *Fort Hindman* ran ahead of her consorts, but could only make two-thirds of *Webb's* speed.

Thirty miles below the Old River and perhaps two hours after the chase began, Lieutenant Commander James P. Foster clambered off the *Lafayette* at Morganza and ran for the telegraph office. The operator promptly told him that the line was not working and had not been for most of the evening; if it were such an extreme emergency he should try the next station down, at Bayou Sara. Foster rushed back to his boat and set a course for Bayou Sara, 15 miles below. There, too, the telegraph did not work. The ironclad *Choc-*



Lieutenant Read is the third seated figure from the right in this photo of Confederate prisoners at Fort Warren, Massachusetts, in 1863. After an unsuccessful escape attempt, Read was brought south in a prisoner exchange to resume his swashbuckling career.

taw and her tug *Hyacinth*, moored at Bayou Sara, then took up the race. It was about 11:30 P.M.

Ten miles below Bayou Sara, the *Webb* waited out a tight predicament. Approaching the Union fortifications at Port Hudson, the *Webb* had drawn astern of a slower military transport. Port Hudson, in Union hands, still bristled with shore batteries, and the gunboat *Naiad* lay anchored in front of the fort. It was not a good place to pass. Acting master Henry T. Keene stood on the deck of the *Naiad* and watched what he thought were two transports, "one apparently waiting for the other to land."

"It was hazy at the time," wrote Keene in his report, "and nothing indicated a suspicious character. The outer steamer seemed not willing to go in until the other came out. When the first did come out, the other followed her down the river without landing. I thought it strange that the commandant of the fort did not bring her to, as it is customary in such cases to do; but did not entertain the faintest suspicion of her hostile character."

The *Webb* followed and overtook the freighter in an isolated reach of the river. No one was the wiser.

Read had already devised a simple method of tomfoolery for passing Union vessels. Every warship in the Union's Mississippi River fleet displayed a coded set of recognition lights. Read, of course, had no idea how to interpret the array, or what the proper response should be. Guessing that a signal system involving dozens of vessels stretched over a thousand miles of river would naturally lead to mistakes and confusion, Read told his quartermaster

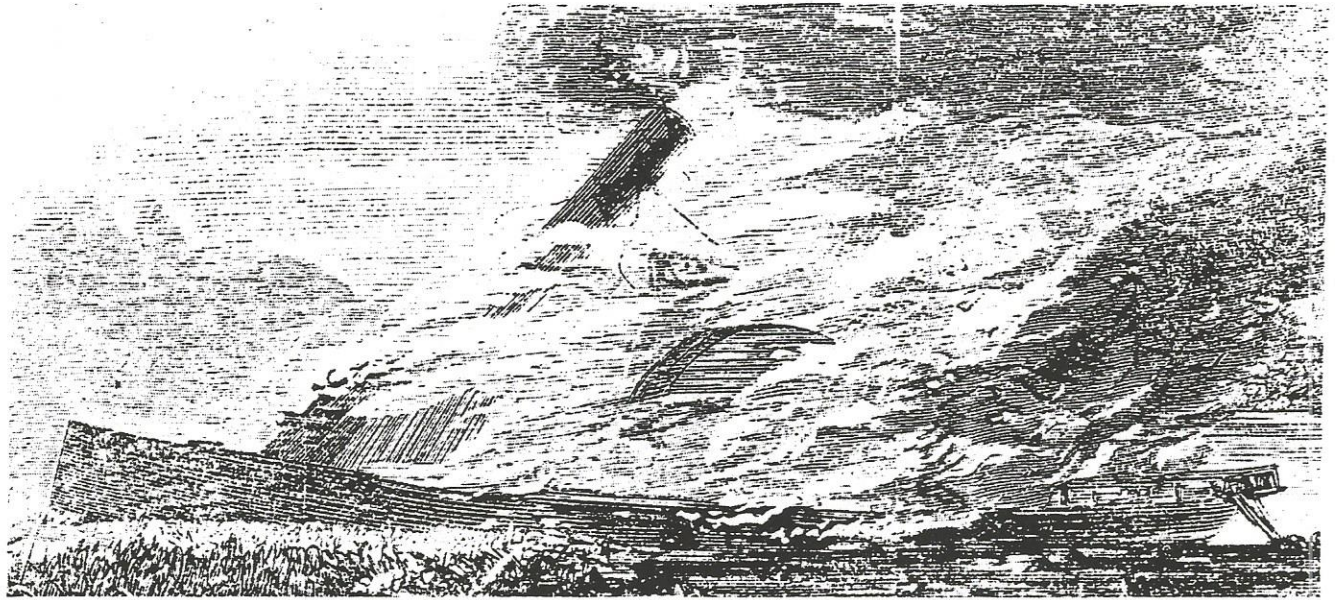
to wait till the last moment before passing, and then run up any kind of light. It worked; all that night every Yankee deck officer simply noted that the vessel passing down showed the lights of an ordinary transport.

Midnight found the *Webb* some 9 miles above Baton Rouge. The *U.S.S. Nymph*, with an eight-gun armament, rested an anchor near the right bank. An up-bound steamer blew her whistle at the *Webb* to signal a larboard-side passing. By custom, the *Webb* should have initiated the passing signal, for down-bound boats had the right-of-way, but the *Webb* remained silent. Captain Read had not wanted to announce his presence to the *Nymph*. The steamboat blew its whistle again. The *Webb* replied with one tap of its bell. That seemed to satisfy the pilot of the steamer and the two vessels churned past each other. An officer on the *Nymph* witnessed the meet and thought nothing of it.

The *Webb* slowed in the bend just above Baton Rouge. This was the very spot where the fabled *C.S.S. Arkansas* blew up in August 1862. The *Arkansas's* engines had broken down and her crew set her afire and abandoned her rather than let her fall into the hands of the enemy. When Read abandoned the *Arkansas* that day, he took nothing more than the clothes on his back.

In front of Baton Rouge at 1:30 A.M., April 24, the *Webb* slipped by the *General Price*, a former Confederate ram captured by the Union. An hour later the tug *Hyacinth* landed at Baton Rouge, her crew trying and failing to find a working telegraph terminal.

At 4:30 A.M. the *Webb* was 135 miles below the mouth of the Old River, at a



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The boat: the steamer William Webb was renamed the Webb when it was commissioned into Confederate service. This energetic view of her last moments is not necessarily an accurate rendering of her appearance. No photos of the boat are known to survive.

place known as Orange Grove. She stopped there and some of her crew took the dingy ashore to cut the telegraph — one of several such stops as they drew nearer to New Orleans. It was absolutely essential that no forewarning should reach the city, for the *Webb* would be passing New Orleans in broad daylight. An hour after sunrise the *Webb* stopped again some 13 miles above Bonnet Carre to cut the telegraph. As an added deception the landing party wore blue coats. They were seen by a Federal soldier on patrol and they told him that Confederates had just attacked New Orleans. The astonished soldier, thinking that the sailors were off a Union gunboat and doing their duty in a crisis, hurried back to his detachment to report the news. His lieutenant did not believe it and rode to Bonnet Carre just in time to see a suspicious vessel disappearing below. The officer tried to get a warning to New Orleans by wire, but the telegraph operator had just left his post. After a frantic search he was found at a coffee house. By the time he was unceremoniously returned to his keys, the line south was dead.

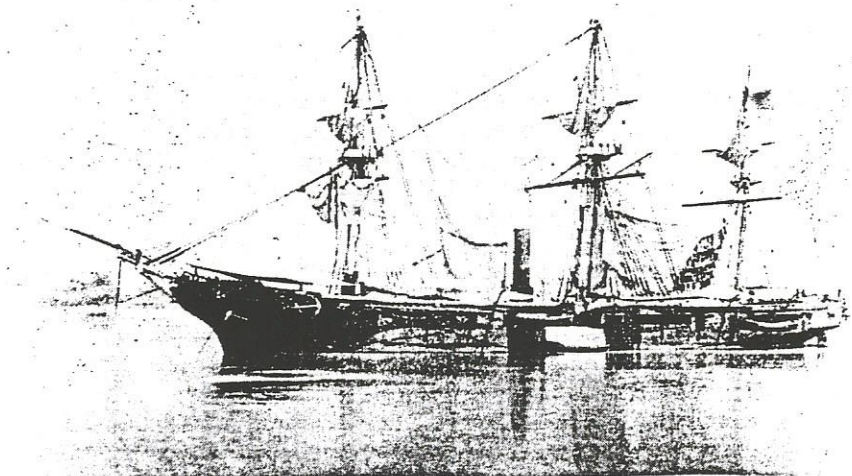
The story was different at Donaldsonville, Louisiana. The *Webb* had passed there without incident before dawn. Some two hours later the navy commander at Donaldsonville received his first news of the *Webb's* run and the fact that it had already passed. Like others, he tried to direct the telegraph to New Orleans and found it out of order.

But Donaldsonville had a second, inland line, and it worked. By 11:00 A.M. Acting Rear Admiral H.K. Thatcher, commanding Union naval forces at New Orleans, held the message in his hand, clear and confirmed.

At Twelve Mile Point, just above New Orleans, Captain Read prepared for his next deception. He brought the *Webb* to full speed and raised the United States flag to half-mast, in feigned mourning for President Lincoln. Some of his blue-clad sailors climbed on top of the cotton bales so the *Webb* appeared for all purposes to be an army transport coming down with a load of government cotton. One crewman recalled: "We were all feeling good,

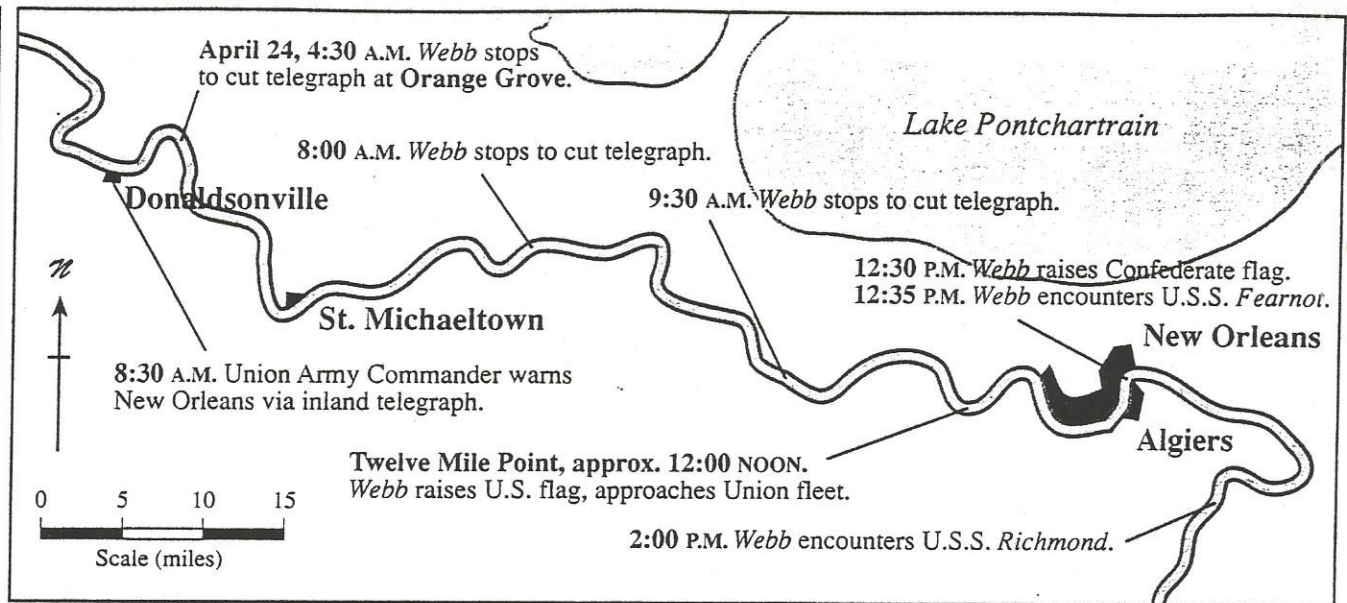
thinking that everything was all right, and that we were not expected." At half past noon, the *Webb* swept around the crescent at New Orleans and came in sight of 10 ships of the Union's West Gulf Squadron.

At first, nothing happened. Though ready for action, the Federal fleet expected to engage an armored gunboat; the cotton transport passing by obviously was not it. Not until the *Webb* came abreast the U.S.S. *Lackawanna* did someone recognize her. The *Lackawanna's* pilot had seen the *Webb* a few years before, and he told the captain that was her passing in front of their guns. The *Lackawanna* fired. One ball pierced *Webb's* hull above the water line, another



The formidable sloop U.S.S. Richmond lay in wait for the Webb below New Orleans. Read, deprived of the advantages of stealth and surprise, chose to abandon ship rather than face the Richmond in an unequal duel.

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er deflected off a cotton bale, a third severed a guy wire to the smokestack. Other ships fired, wildly, for the *Webb* made a difficult target at 25 miles an hour. Still more ships held their fire; they could not shoot without their spent projectiles coming down in the lower part of the city or across the river in Algiers. Civilians came running up on the levees to watch the spectacle. Word circulated that the *Webb* carried Rebel fugitives President Jefferson Davis and General Kirby Smith, and that John Wilkes Booth was at the helm!

Read stood coolly on deck, facing the ships as they fired. The Yankee flag had come down after the first shot. In its place waved the Confederate colors, begging defiance. It was time to engage the enemy.

Ahead, opposite the bend at Algiers, lay a warship that appeared to be a heavy frigate. Read ordered the crew to lower the torpedo spar into the water. As they did so, the spar broke and the armed torpedo dropped below the water's surface, still tethered by lines to the *Webb*. The Rebel stopped, under all the enemy's guns, while the crew frantically cut away the ropes, lest the bomb strike the *Webb's* own hull. The *Webb* then proceeded downriver, but veered away from the frigate. It was a stroke of providence that the spar broke, for the supposed frigate was in fact the loaded ammunition ship *Fearnot*. Ramming her with a torpedo would probably have killed everyone aboard both ships.

Three of the Union vessels turned to pursue the *Webb*; the one closest was the *Hollyhock*, a boat similar in design to the *Webb*. Read still had more than

90 miles of river to run plus Forts Jackson and St. Philip to pass. As New Orleans faded from view, Read gazed back at the *Hollyhock*. She was the only one in sight and apparently unable to overtake the *Webb*. Read wanted to delay his arrival at the forts until dark, and in order to do so he would have to turn back and ram the *Hollyhock*. He was about to put his thoughts into action when someone spotted a three-masted ship steaming below. Read carefully studied the ship and recognized it as the frigate *Richmond* — a most formidable foe. Read had tangled with the *Richmond* while serving on both the *McRae* and the *Arkansas*, and he had gained a healthy respect for her broadside guns. Read knew he could not engage her fire, nor could he pass her; there was but one thing left to do.

"Make straight for the *Richmond's* bow and ram!" he called to his pilot.

"I can't reach her bow because of a shoal," replied the steersman. "But I can come in under her broadside."

Read forced a somber smile. "I've been under the *Richmond's* broadside before," he said quietly, "and I don't wish to try it again."

Read knew the time had come to admit defeat. The young captain called his officers together and addressed them: "It's no use; it's a failure. The *Richmond* will drown us all, and if she does not, the forts below will. As it is, I think the only thing for us to do is to set the *Webb* on fire and blow her up."

Read ordered the gunner to start fires at various places on the boat as the *Webb* turned toward the eastern shore. Fifty yards out the *Webb* struck bottom, her prow rose 4 feet out of the water

and she came to rest hard aground. The crew climbed down lifelines and waded ashore. They split into groups and ran into the swamps behind the bordering sugar plantations.

The *Hollyhock* ranged alongside the burning *Webb* and put a hose on the fire. Some of the Yankee crewmen boarded the *Webb* and removed her flags and small arms, as well as two Confederate sailors who had remained on board. Then the *Hollyhock* backed away and waited for the inevitable magazine explosion. It came at 4:30 P.M., 19 hours and 230 miles from the start of the chase.

Within a day the crew members were captured and brought to New Orleans. Read was sent North as a prisoner of war for the second time. He was released a few weeks later when the last Confederate forces surrendered.

The *Webb's* attempted escape from the river was the last naval action on the Mississippi. The odds never favored Read and his ship, but it was not in Read's nature to give up without a spirited try. Even among the captured *Webb* crewmen there was no lasting sense of tragedy or regret. For one fact stood out which made the contest different from the many river engagements that had occurred before: the race of the *Webb* was a bloodless fight — not a single man was killed. ■

A father of six and a former high school teacher, Michael L. Gillespie lives in Lone Jack, Missouri. He is a graduate of the University of Missouri-Kansas City and has contributed to a number of history publications. This is his third article for CWTI.