



THE drum roll

398th Regular Meeting Volume 40 Number 10 June 2, 2023



The May meeting will be in person at the Arlington Hts. Library on Friday, June 2, 2023 and on ZOOM, at 7:00 P.M.

THE KEARSARGE AND THE ALABAMA

Among the most storied naval clashes of the Civil War was the June 1864 duel between the Confederate raider Alabama and the Union sloop Kearsarge. On May 5, current Vice President Wayne Rhine regaled the Round Table with the back story of this combat. As Rhine pointed out, the MOST famous naval duel of the war was between the ironclads Monitor and Virginia in 1862. This one, however, was probably the second-most famous.

The USS Kearsarge was named after Mount Kearsarge, in the state of New Hampshire. She was laid down and launched in 1861, and commissioned January 24, 1862. Her armament was two 11-inch Dahlgren smoothbores. Four 43-pound smoothbores, and one 30-pound rifle. In the battle to come, her captain would be John Winslow, a career Navy

officer who had entered service as a midshipman 1822. During the war with Mexico, he had served aboard the USS Cumberland in the fleet off of Vera Cruz. Kearsarge's first assignment was in international waters off Spain, where she took part in blockading the first of the Rebel commerce raiders, CSS Sumter – commanded by one Raphael Semmes.

Semmes, after abandoning the Sumter and escaping back to the Confederacy, would skipper CSS Alabama. He too was a career US Navy officer pre-war – and in fact had been Winslow's cabin mate on the Cumberland in Mexico! His new raider began life as Hull #290 in Liverpool, England. To skirt international law about neutrals supplying weaponry to belligerents, she was launched in July 1862, then sailed to the Azores, where she was armed (with 6 32-pound smoothbores in broadsides and two rifled Blakely pivot guns) and commissioned Alabama on August 24. From there she commenced the most successful career of any Confederate commerce raider, destroying 65 merchants worth approximately \$5.8 million in 1860s dollars. (Her success – and that of a couple other raiders – drove many US merchant vessels to change their registration to foreign flags; as Rhine mentioned, some historians hold that the U.S.

Merchant Marine never fully recovered from this.) Alabama even defeated a US Navy warship, the side-wheeler USS Hatteras, off Galveston, Texas.

In June of 1864, Semmes brought Alabama into harbor at Cherbourg, France, for repairs and maintenance. Union operatives got word to U.S. officials of the arrival. Winslow, on patrol within striking range, was ordered to Cherbourg as well, putting in while Semmes was still in port. This created a great deal of trouble for the Rebel captain. Under international law his stay in Cherbourg was limited, and he knew his chance of slipping past the watchful Kearsarge was slim at best. Thus, Semmes challenged Winslow to a duel, to which his former cabin-mate readily agreed.

It would not be an even match. Although Alabama's Blakely rifle was longer-ranged than anything Kearsarge possessed, the powder aboard the Rebel raider was defective, and her crew was not well-drilled in gunnery. (Winslow's crew underwent extra gunnery practice while enroute to Cherbourg.) Crew quality itself was another disadvantage for Semmes, whose mostly amateur seamen would face well-drilled regulars under Winslow's command. As an aside, Rhine mentioned that the US Navy was well ahead of the US Army in integration; Kearsarge's crew included 13 African Americans. Adding one more edge, Kearsarge had been draped with 720 feet of 1.7" chain armor over key positions.

On June 19, both ships departed Cherbourg harbor into international waters. Thousands of spectators thronged the shores to watch the duel, while a French ironclad warship took station to ensure there would be no neutrality violations. Once out of French waters, the vessels confronted each other, both attempting to rake (fire while the other vessel presented bow or stern to them.) The fight quickly became unbalanced. Winslow closed to within his own guns' range; the longer-range Blakely on Alabama scored a couple of hits (neither of which exploded), but in general the Rebels fired high – plus the extra chain armor on Kearsarge was proving vital. Winslow aimed low for waterline penetration, striking Alabama's rudder and penetrating to the engine room.

As Alabama took on heavy damage, Semmes tried to guide her back to safety in French waters, but Kearsarge was able to block. Finally, after about an hour's fight, Alabama struck her colors, and a

whaleboat was rowed to Kearsarge to formally surrender. Meanwhile, the rest of the crew abandoned the sinking vessel. Of these, 32 (including Semmes himself) were picked up by the British yacht Deerhound; the rest were rescued by Kearsarge. The raiding career of CSS Alabama was at an end.

Union casualties were extremely light: three wounded, one mortally. Alabama suffered nine killed, ten drowned, and the rest rescued (of which 21 were wounded). Semmes himself made it to England, and thence back to the Confederacy; he was promoted to Rear Admiral and put in command of the small James River squadron outside of Richmond (then, when the city was evacuated, commanded a land contingent of Marines during the retreat.) Winslow remained in the Navy, reaching rear admiral in 1870. As for Kearsarge, she would be decommissioned and recommissioned a number of times, finally being stricken in 1894. As Rhine pointed out, a number of US Navy vessels have since borne the name, among the most prominent a battleship in the Great White Fleet and an Essex-class aircraft carrier.

On behalf of the Round Table I would like to thank Wayne Rhine for a fascinating look at a famous duel at sea.

Pat McCormick

June 2, 2023, Presentation

David Zarefsky is the Owen L. Coon Professor Emeritus of Argumentation and Debate and Professor Emeritus of Communication Studies at Northwestern University, where he taught for 41 years starting in 1968. He is the author of 15 books, including *Lincoln, Douglas, and Slavery: In the Crucible of Public Debate*, and over 125 book chapters and journal articles, including several on Lincoln's public discourse. He also served in administrative positions, including eight years as Chair of the Department of Communication Studies and 12-1/2 years as Dean of what is now the School of Communication. He is a past president of both the National Communication Association and the Rhetoric Society of America, and has received awards for distinguished scholarship from both organizations.

The First Inaugural Address is often seen as Lincoln's attempt to conciliate the South and thereby to avert civil war. While he would have been pleased with that result, he thought it highly unlikely. He constructs the

positions of North and South in order to cast the South as the aggressor in the event of war and to justify the Federal Government in taking a military response in self-defense. He does this by arguing that peaceable secession is an impossibility and hence that no state can get out of the Union on its own say-so. He emphasizes the minimal nature of the Federal demands and casts resistance to such reasonable demands as “insurrectionary or revolutionary, depending on circumstances.” The resulting war would not be “a war between the states,” but an attempt by the federal government to defend itself against its attempted overthrow.

Please come to our June meeting for this presentation. Because of unforeseen circumstances we were forced to cancel the banquet plans at the last minute.

Speaker lineup:

- Sept. 9: Laurie Schiller. The 29th USCT at the Crater
- Oct. 7: Jerry Allen. 8th Wisconsin
- Nov. 4: Phil Angelo. Morgan’s Raid
- Dec. 2: Dave Powell: Tullahoma
- Jan. 6: Pat McCormick. North Anna
- Feb. 3: Mary Abroe. Civil War Centennial, Rhetoric, Reality, and the Bounds Of Selective Memory
- Mar. 3: Rob Girardi. TBA
- April 7: Michael Wynne. The Real Story of The Rock Island POW Camp. This Program will be on ZOOM.
- May 5: Wayne Rhine. The Kersage
- June 2: Banquet. David Zarefsky. The Strategy of Lincoln’s First Inaugural Address

At the Kenosha Civil War Museum until June 4, 2023, the exhibition “Loyal to the Union: Ohio in the Civil War” is being presented.

For anyone interested, especially those going to Gettysburg this fall, I have a packet that was donated to us and includes maps, battle plans, several pamphlets, several short books, and a few other things—all about Gettysburg. It includes the invoice from the bookstore that put it together, \$60.00. Several items were added since the purchase. For a modest donation to the NICWRT, I will see that you get it. I will bring it to the meeting on May 5. You can reach me at 847-420-1639, Jerry Rodosky.

Please email Laurie or Wayne if you are interested in volunteering for an open position. Also, please think membership! We need new people!



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Appointed Positions

Book Raffle	Vacant
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Upcoming Events

As a note the board has decided not to collect dues for the 2022-23 year.

We hope you have a great summer!!!!