

Lieutenant Dowling's Report on the Battle of Sabine Pass

Fort Griffin, Sabine Pass, September 9, 1863.

Captain: On Monday morning, about 2 o'clock, the sentinel informed me the enemy were signaling, and, fearing an attack, I ordered all the guns at the fort manned, and remained in that position until daylight, at which time there were two steamers evidently sounding for the channel on the bar; a large frigate outside. They remained all day at work, but during the evening were re-enforced to the number of twenty-two vessels of different classes.

On the morning of the 8th, the U. S. gunboat Clifton anchored opposite the light-house, and fired twenty-six shells at the fort, most of which passed a little over or fell short; all, however, in excellent range, one shell being landed on the works and another striking the south angle of the fort, without doing any material damage. The firing commenced at 6.30 o'clock and finished at 7.30 o'clock by the gunboat hauling off. During this time we had not replied by a single shot. All was then quiet until 11 o'clock, at which time the gunboat Uncle Ben steamed down near the fort. The U. S. gunboat Sachem opened on her with a 30-pounder Parrott gun. She fired three shots, but without effect, the shots all passing over the fort and missing the Ben. The whole fleet then drew off, and remained out of range until 3.40 o'clock, when the Sachem and Arizona steamed into line up the Louisiana channel, the Clifton and one boat, name unknown, remaining at the junction of the two channels. I allowed the two former boats to approach within 1,200 yards, when I opened fire with the whole of my battery on the foremost boat (the Sachem), which, after the third or fourth round, hoisted the white flag, one of the shots passing through her steam-drum. The Clifton in the meantime had attempted to pass up through Texas channel, but receiving a shot which carried away her tiller rope, she became unmanageable, and grounded about 500 yards below the fort, which enabled me to concentrate all my guns on her, which were six in number—two 32-pounder smooth-bores; two 24-pounder smooth-bores; two 32-pounder howitzers. She withstood our fire some twenty-five or thirty-five minutes, when she also hoisted a white flag. During the time she was aground, she used grape, and her sharpshooters poured an incessant shower of Minie balls into the works. The fight lasted from the time I fired the first gun until the boats surrendered; that was about three-quarters of an hour. I immediately boarded the captured Clifton, and proceeded to inspect her magazines, accompanied by one of the ship's officers, and discovered it safe and well stocked with ordnance stores. I did not visit the magazine of the Sachem, in consequence of not having any small boats to board her with. The C. S. gunboat Uncle Ben steamed down to the Sachem and towed her into the wharf. Her magazine was destroyed by the enemy flooding it. ...

Thus it will be seen we captured, with 47 men, two gunboats, mounting thirteen guns of the heaviest caliber, and about 350 prisoners. All my men behaved like heroes; not a man flinched from his post. Our motto was "victory or death."

I beg leave to make particular mention of Private Michael McKernan, who, from his well-known capacity as a gunner, I assigned as gunner to one of the guns, and nobly did he do his duty. It was his shot struck the Sachem in her steam-drum.

Too much praise cannot be awarded to Maj. [Col.] Leon Smith for his activity and energy in saving and bringing the vessels into port. . . .

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Fort Griffin, Sabine Pass.

Capt. F. H. Odium,

Commanding Post.

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