

THE SURRENDER OF GALVESTON AND THE BATTLE TO WIN IT BACK: RUSSELL CUSHMAN'S *BATTLE OF GALVESTON* MURAL

BY BLAKE R. RICHARDS

1ST PLACE FRESHMAN CATEGORY

Close your eyes and imagine the icy breeze chapping your skin. It is New Year's Eve, 1862. The wind is whipping across Galveston Bay and pushing the water up on the deck of the cottonclad steamer, *CS Bayou City*. Hell on earth has come to Galveston, Texas. The city is burning as Union Navy ships get closer and closer to Kuhn's Wharf to pelt the Confederate Troops with cannon fire. The Confederate Troops hope the blue belly sailors come a little closer; they have a surprise waiting them. "The Confederate Army has taken field artillery and used the freight elevator and moved it to the third floor of the Hendley Building to defend Galveston" (1). Up until now, there had not been Confederate field artillery positioned to reach the Union Navy ships. Open your eyes. That chill is just the air conditioner blowing inside of the Museum of Southern History at Houston Baptist University. It's easy to let your imagination run a little wild here. As you stand beside a life size cannon from the Civil War movie *Glory*, you face a stunning image. Texas artist Russell Cushman has created a thirty-foot mural that realistically depicts The Battle of Galveston. The mural is the centerpiece of a life size diorama. If you stand behind the cannon it's easy to imagine feeling the icy breeze hit your face. You can feel like you are on the deck of the *CS Bayou City*. The Civil War had thousands and thousands of battles but few started with a peaceful surrender.

Mr. Cushman's mural is a beautiful piece of art that realistically depicts the battle. "Cushman based this battle scene on exhaustive research" (2). A still image only tells part of the story. Galveston was a source of trade for the Confederate States. Cotton was transported to Galveston and then shipped to Havana for trade with Europe. To choke off supplies and commerce for the Confederacy, the Union Navy tried to blockade all ports of trade. The Battle of Galveston reached its conclusion on January 1, 1863. The first shots and death that led up to the depiction of this mural occurred at Galveston inside the bay on a hot August afternoon in 1861. The Union Navy deployed a screw steamer gunship, the *USS South Carolina* to lead the blockade of Galveston. A large crowd of men, women, and children had gathered on Galveston Beach to witness the *South Carolina* use a previously captured Confederate pilot schooner for target practice. The *South Carolina* maneuvered within artillery range of Galveston's Southern Battery. As they sank the schooner, the Southern Battery did fire upon the Union Ship. Captain James Alden took this gunfire as a challenge and he turned the cannons and guns of the *South Carolina* on the City of Galveston. Alden made no attempt to be selective of his target. The innocent crowd scattered quickly but not before "a man named Fisher – who was variously described as either Portuguese or Italian – was shot through the body and killed instantly" (3). As noble as the reasons are for war, the consequences are often the same. Our society has tagged them casualties of war. That is why it is so important for us learn history. Eighteenth Century English Statesman Edmund Burke stated, "Those who don't know history are doomed to repeat it". To their credit the Union Navy did not attack Galveston civilians again.

In the fall of 1861, the *South Carolina* was replaced by the *USS Santee*, a frigate commanded by Henry Eagle. Captain Eagle was determined to increase the pressure of the blockade on the Galveston Confederates by launching preemptive attacks on Confederate ships while in the harbor. The increased pressure was an indication that stopping Galveston trade was of growing importance to the Union. Without an outlet to trade cotton, Southern States would have even more pressure to surrender to Union forces. On May 17, 1862, Captain Eagle sent an ultimatum to Colonel Joseph Cook, commander of the Galveston Confederate forces. "To prevent the effusion of blood and destruction of property which would result from the bombardment of your town I hereby demand the surrender of the place, with all arms and munitions of war"(4). Colonel Cook refused, saying that he would delay his decision to surrender until Union forces arrived. It wasn't until October 4, 1862, when substantial Navy reinforcements arrived, that Captain Eagle made a second demand for the surrender of Galveston. Once again Colonel Cook refused. Many women, children and non-residents remained in Galveston so the Union armada gave the Confederate forces four days to evacuate Galveston before they took it by force. Captain Eagle was determined to not make the mistake of Captain Alden by firing on women and children. By October 8, 1862, Confederate forces had withdrawn from Galveston and many of the residents had retreated to Houston. The city was transferred to Union control without a shot being fired.

The news that the Texas Confederate Commander Paul Hebert had surrendered Galveston to Union control was concerning to the Confederate Governor of Texas, Francis Lubbock. At the end of August, General Hebert had informed Governor Lubbock that he was requesting a transfer to command regiments in Arkansas. Governor Lubbock must have thought that Hebert had personally given up. By October 12, 1862, Governor Lubbock was at Virginia Point, the Confederate stronghold, to see how he could help. Virginia Point is the mainland peninsula connected to Galveston Island by a bridge. Confederate Command in Richmond, Virginia had arranged for help to arrive by assigning a very capable commander, General John Magruder. Texas Ranger, John Salomon Ford wrote in a letter that Magruder "was equal to the addition of 50,000 men to the forces of Texas"(5).

From the moment General Magruder arrived he began making plans to do what the Union never expected: attack! Magruder was fortunate to have the counsel of two brilliant men. On his way to Texas he stopped off at Sabine Pass to consult with Captain Armand Wier of Cook's Regiment of Heavy Artillery. Captain Wier proposed a night attack and volunteered his artillery to help in the battle. When Magruder arrived at Virginia Point he met Caleb Forshey an engineer by training and a previous instructor at a military school in Galveston. Professor Forshey had an aggressive plan to sail three ships down the channel directly to Galveston at night. General Magruder was known for outlandish plans, and this one just suited his goals to retake Galveston. Work began in Houston to refit two ships, the *Bayou City* and the *Neptune*. The ships were equipped with artillery from Captain Wier's regiment and reinforced with bales of cotton thus gaining the nickname of "cottonclads". The bold plan was to sail the Confederate ships directly into the Union armada and ground troops would attack the Union forces stationed at Kuhn's Wharf. Volunteers went ahead of the invasion force to spy and make detailed maps of the Union positions.

On December 31, 1863, the *Bayou City* and the *Neptune* accompanied by three other support ships began to make their way from Harrisburg on Buffalo Bayou through Trinity Bay into Galveston Bay. Ground troops met at Virginia Point and began to make their way across the bridge with their artillery and munitions. It was a very long trip at one point delayed because the

mules refused to cross the bridge. The soldiers had to uncouple the mules and pull the nearly three-ton cannons across the two-mile bridge. The Confederate naval forces had been spotted by the Union's gunship, *Harriet Lane*, but this did not deter them. By about 4:00 a.m. all the Confederate ground and navy forces were in place. General Magruder fired the first shot and is quoted as saying "Now, boys, I have done my best as a private, I will go and attend to that of a General" (6).

If you are standing in front of the Cushman mural in the Museum of Southern History that depiction is where we are in the battle. By about 6:00 a.m. on New Year's Day, 1863 the *USS Owasco*, the *USS Corypheus*, and the *USS Sachem* were pummeling the Confederate ground forces into retreating. The *USS Westfield* tried to turn and lucky for the Confederates it became grounded. The *Bayou City* and the *Neptune* were attempting to ram the *Harriet Lane* to board her but failed in their first attempt. The situation was not looking too good for the ground troops or the Confederate ships. In the first attempts to fire the cannons on the *Bayou City*, Captain Wier missed horribly hitting a ship not even in the battle. On the third attempt the wrong charges were loaded into the *Bayou City's* cannon and exploded "killing the gallant Captain Weir and two of his men were blown overboard and never seen"(7). The tide of the battle quickly turned with the crippling of the *Harriet Lane*. On a second pass, the *Neptune* inflicted heavy damage on the *Lane* and suffered severe damage too. The *Neptune's* Captain grounded the ship as it started to sink. The *Bayou City* had successfully flanked the *Lane* and became tangled in her paddle wheel. Shots continued to be exchanged between the ships. The *Lane* had been so damaged; they raised a white flag for a truce. All of the Union ships had suffered considerable damage and their commanders were either dead or badly wounded. Captain R.L. Law of the *USS Clifton* requested a three-hour truce to meet with the other Union commanders and discuss their surrender. As the truce came to a close, the Union soldiers from the *Owasco* and the *Clifton* rowed back to their ships presumably to surrender. As they boarded their ships the paddles began to slowly turn and the ships began to slowly slip away from the battle. The Confederates fired on the ships but were in no condition to pursue them. Robert Franklin, one of the soldiers from the cottonclad steamboats summed up General Magruder's part in the Battle of Galveston. "Texas owes much to the memory of the gallant Magruder. Proud by nature, haughty of men, 'Prince John' as his old West Point comrades dubbed him. He was far from perfection. Neither was he endowed with those traits of character that command the love of men, as well as their respect, yet he was a gallant soldier, honest and true to his country"(8).

NOTES

(1) Ron Strybos, "Battle of Galveston." *The Battle of Galveston*. Galveston Historical Foundation, 30 Oct. 2013. Web. 4 Dec. 2014. <<http://youtu.be/0-ElpzR1NXs>>.

(2) Russell Cushman, "The Battle of Galveston," *The Art of Russell Cushman*. Fine Art Studios Online. Web. 4 Dec. 2014.

(3) Edward T. Cotham, "The Blockade Begins," *Battle on the Bay the Civil War Struggle for Galveston* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 41.

(4) Cotham, "The Blockade Begins," 72.

(5) Thomas Michael Settles and Kimberly Curtis Campbell, "High Tide, Low Tide in Texas," *John Bankhead Magruder a Military Reappraisal* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009), 244.

(6) Cotham, "The Blockade Begins," 140.

(7) Robert Franklin, *Battle of Galveston, January 1st, 1863* (Charleston, SC: Nabu, 2010), 14.

(8) Franklin, *Battle of Galveston*, 18.