

RUNNING THE BLOCKADE

From the novel *Southern Seahawk*, based on memoirs of Admiral Raphael Semmes, CSN, by Randall Peffer

June 30, 1861, CSN *Sumter*. Mississippi Delta. Bound for the sea. Blazing sun, thick haze.

The eyes of Commander Raphael Semmes are burning, and there is nowhere to turn for relief. It's high tide at Head of the Passes, his only chance to break from the cage Abe Lincoln's sea boys have built round him and New Orleans. And right now the South's little bark-rigged raider, the ship channel ahead, the marsh grass . . . they all look aflame.

Turning his long glass south, Semmes finds the Federal blockader *Brooklyn*, a full-rigged screw sloop of 2,900 tons, six times the size of *Sumter*, billowing clouds of coal smoke. She is crowding on stunsails to enhance her working canvas. Gun crews swarm over their cannons. To the east lightning flashes, the blur of a squall, blot out sun and sea.

"What think you of our prospects, gentlemen? Can we outrun her?" The captain has his lieutenants with him at the taffrail.

The luff, Kell, shakes his head "no." The *Brooklyn*'s a 12-knot ship.

“Then we must play the fox. Helmsman, take her up as close to the wind as she can stand. Set every sail. Give us the courses and spanker. On the double. Aim her right for that squall.”

The officers look dumbfounded.

“Mr. Kell, tell the crew we’re bound for heavy weather. You have the deck. I’m going below to see how Mr. Freeman fares with his confounded foaming boilers. If ever there was a time for him to lay on the coal . . .”

The second and third officers cock questioning eyes at each other. They had never seen such a commander. Semmes is breaking all the old rules. Driving into a squall by choice with all sails set. Leaving the deck to visit the engine room with disaster threatening from all quarters. Is this madness or something else?

He descends into a dungeon where heat burns the inside of his nose. Visibility drops to just a few yards in the smoke and steam. Light comes only from the glow of the open fire boxes. Men are mere shadows. The hiss of steam and the racket of pounding rods and pistons make his ears throb.

When he finally finds engineer Freeman, he shouts his questions at the man in the red bandana. But instead of answering, Freeman shakes his head no like a man lost in his own hell. He points to gray gobs of wax in his ears and shoves a small slate and stick of chalk into the captain’s hands.

Semmes writes: “How go the boilers? We must lay on coal. Yank like to chew on our tail!”

The engineer sucks the insides of his cheeks, scribbles.

“Foam gone from boilers. We’re hell on wheels!”

“Aye, that we are. Full speed ahead!!!”

Just as he reaches the main deck, the squall hits with a burst of wind, laying *Sumter* on her beam ends. In his mind he sees the *Somers* again, driven down on her side by the norther off Veracruz, down-flooding through her hatches, sinking beneath his feet as the helmsman tries without success to bring her up into the wind. *More than 30 dead. Not again.*

“Keep her on the wind!” he screams at the helmsman. “She’ll rise.”

The lee rail disappears beneath white foam. All over the deck, men claw their ways up to the windward rail. Cling to anything they can lay a hand on.

Semmes braces himself against the side of the binnacle. The wind shrieks in the rigging. He turns his back to the rain cutting through his uniform, watches the *Brooklyn* disappear astern in the fury, waits for his ship to rise. The engine shaking the deck with each revolution. A greasy cloud of coal smoke swirls over the *Sumter* so that no one can see if the sails have torn away. He feels the screw take a hard bite into the sea. The ship gives a shudder, almost as if she has struck a bar, then veers up into the wind a point.

“She’s answering. She’s rising!” The helmsman’s shout almost a cheer.

The screw bites again, drives her up another notch to windward. Decks rise out of the sea, torrents of water spill from the gun ports.

“Steady as she goes now. We’re going to ride this monkey.”

In his mind he bows down before his god.

*

*

*

At last the *Sumter* breaks into the sunshine. But he barely has time to ring the water out of his cap before the *Brooklyn* emerges from the storm. Now she’s less than three miles off, nearly within shooting range.

The wind has clocked nor’west, howls. Water roils over the starboard-side decks as the ship struggles to stay on her feet.

“Strike t’gallants?” the luff asks. It is simply the prudent course of action to save the sails and rig.

Semmes has a wild look in his eyes, seems like he wants to swing on somebody or something.

“Not on my life, Mr. Kell. Welcome the breeze, sir! We haven’t come this far just to be supper for some damn Yankee. Trim her full and by. Keep her hard on it, man! We aim to eat the Yankee out of her wind.”

Sumter buries her starboard bulwarks in the foam, plows east. Green seas break over the larboard bow in sheets. He does not take his eyes off the sails. He prays that all the fresh canvas he had the sailmakers sew up for the new rig will hold, says ten Hail Marys that the new, taller topmasts he has given his ship will not carry off to leeward any second . . . or that the crucial headsails will not shred themselves to ribbons.

“Look to the *Brooklyn*,” calls a lookout from aloft.

The heads of more than 50 men who have taken shelter under the windward bulwarks crane to look astern.

“She strikes! Lord God Almighty, she strikes, captain.”

The Yank’s rig is a shambles of back-winded and flogging canvas, slowing her as she begin to strike her sails.

“Long live the *Sumter*!” shouts a sailor from the masthead. Just before smoke bursts from the Yank’s pivot gun.

Semmes hears the buzz of the shell. “It has only just begun, boys.