

## One Action, Two Views: Fog of War on the Pamunkey, April 16, 1863

### A brief encounter from Northern and Southern Perspectives

Transcribed and Annotated by William A. Palmer, Jr.

*Report of Lieutenant Commander J. H. Gillis,<sup>1</sup> U.S. Navy, to Rear Admiral S. P. Lee,<sup>2</sup> commanding North Atlantic Blockading Squadron, regarding a reconnaissance to West Point, in York River. U.S. Gunboat Morris,<sup>3</sup> off Yorktown, April 17, 1863.*

SIR: I respectfully submit the following report of a reconnaissance which I made yesterday with this vessel and the *Crusader*<sup>4</sup> up the York River as far as West Point and about a half a mile up the Pamunkey River.

I got underway at 11 o'clock with General Keyes<sup>5</sup> and part of his staff on board and proceeded to within about 5 miles of West Point, carefully scrutinizing the shore, to see if there was any evidence of batteries having been erected by the rebels, without discovering any. When about opposite to Ware Creek a schooner was discovered standing down the Pamunkey and came to anchor at a place called Taylor's Landing, and as I had seen no signs of any rebel batteries coming up and everything around West Point looking as though no enemy had been in that vicinity I determined to try and capture or destroy the schooner, but soon after I had passed the wharf at West Point and when about half a mile above I was opened upon by a battery of three guns directly ahead of us and just below where the schooner had anchored; at the same instant the sharpshooters along the shore commenced firing upon us. I immediately opened upon the battery with my rifled 100-pounder, and at the same time stopped my vessel and started back, not deeming it prudent or justifiable to run the risk of having my vessel disabled and any of my crew killed. I fired nine shots, with what effect I am unable to say. The enemy fired about thirty-five shots, about twenty of them being while we were in range of their guns and falling all around us, but I am happy to be able to state without hitting us once, although almost every shot was an excellent line shot.

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<sup>1</sup> James Henry Gillis (May 14, 1831–December 6, 1910) was born in Ridgway, Pennsylvania, and graduated from the United States Naval Academy in 1854. During the Civil War he served with the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron and on the Red River Campaign. He had a distinguished postwar career, serving as captain of the U.S.S. *Lackawanna* and mediating, in 1881, civil strife in Samoa. He retired as a rear admiral in 1893.

<sup>2</sup> Acting Rear Admiral Samuel Phillips Lee (February 13, 1812–June 7, 1897) was commander of the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron, 1862–64. A Virginian by birth and third cousin to Confederate commander Robert E. Lee, S. P. Lee nevertheless remained loyal to the Union.

<sup>3</sup> U.S.S. *Commodore Morris* was a steam sidewheel ferryboat acquired by the United States Navy in 1862. The 532-ton vessel was 154 feet in length and carried a crew of 106 officers and men. It was armed with a 100-pounder rifled gun, a nine-inch smoothbore gun, and four 24-pounder howitzers.

<sup>4</sup> U.S.S. *Crusader* was a screw steamer built in 1857 and acquired by the United States Navy in 1858. The 545-ton vessel was 169 feet in length and carried a crew of 92 officers and men. It was armed with four 32-pounder guns, eight 24-pounder guns, and one 12-pounder gun.

<sup>5</sup> Major General Erasmus Darwin Keyes (1810–1895) was serving as commander of the Union VII Corps.

The officers and men behaved well and were anxious to continue the fight, but as we had gained the object of the reconnaissance and found that the reports that there was a rebel battery in the vicinity of West Point were true, and General Keyes being anxious to return, I did not think it advisable to do so, and therefore continued on down. The battery was apparently composed of two Whitworth<sup>6</sup> 20-pounders and one smoothbore, of what caliber I am unable to say. One shot that expended itself under our bows gave me an excellent opportunity of judging the caliber and character of the guns. It was in all probability a flying battery, there being no signs of an earthwork there, and I did not think the result of driving them away from their position to reappear at some other point warranted the expenditure of ammunition that it would have required. I received information to-day that nearly the whole of the rebel General Wise's force was encamped there, and as the railroad is supposed to be in working order to that place, I am inclined to give some credit to the report.

*April 16, 1863—Affair on the Pamunkey River near West Point, Va.  
Report of Major Peyton Wise,<sup>7</sup> Forty-sixth Virginia Infantry, to Brigadier General Henry A. Wise, commanding Wise's Brigade. Headquarters, White House, Va., April 19, 1863.*

GENERAL: I have just returned from Taylor's Quarter, 2 miles from West Point, to which place I was called on Thursday evening last by occurrences of which the following shall be a report. Permit me only to premise that this should have been sent to you earlier, but that a dispatch which reached me at the place just named, and other reports which came

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<sup>6</sup> The Whitworth was a British-made steel artillery piece imported by the Confederacy and valued for its range and accuracy. Major Wise, however, states that the two weapons in his battery were not Whitworths but of the "Blakely pattern." Several models of the Blakely rifle also were imported by the Confederacy from Britain. Although 20-pounder Blakely guns are unknown, 12- and 18-pounder versions were used by Confederate artillerymen. Both Gillis and Wise agree that the duel opened when the *Commodore Morris* had come up into the Pamunkey River about one-half mile, which means that the ship and battery were about one and a half miles from each other. This would have put the Blakely pieces at the extreme limit of their range; it's likely that the Confederates fired prematurely. The Southern battery, however, was well within the 7000–8000-yard range of *Morris's* 100-pounder gun.

<sup>7</sup> Peyton Wise (February 9, 1838–March 29, 1897) was born in Accomack County, Virginia, and raised in Washington, D.C. He studied law in Philadelphia before returning to Virginia at the outbreak of hostilities and raising what would become Company H, 46th Virginia Infantry. He served with this regiment in the Peninsula and Roanoke Island campaigns, rising to the rank of major in 1862. The commander to whom this report is addressed was Brigadier General Henry Alexander Wise (1806–1876), former governor of Virginia and his maternal uncle. Peyton Wise, as lieutenant colonel of the regiment, was wounded in June 1864 and captured on October 31, during the Petersburg campaign.

In a letter to his wife, dated October 31, 1864, Union commander George Gordon Meade wrote, "In our recent move we captured Peyton Wise, Lieutenant Colonel Forty-sixth Virginia Infantry. You may remember him as Mrs. Tully Wise's bright boy, when we were first married. I did not see him, as he was taken to City Point before I knew of his capture, but I sent word to General Patrick, the Provost Marshal, to treat him as well as possible and furnish him with a little money. He wrote me a letter full of thanks, and expressing a great deal of very proper feeling. I understand that if our men had gotten a little further into the enemy's works, they would have captured General Wise [brother-in-law of Mrs. Meade], as he was not far from the place where Peyton was taken."

After the war Peyton Wise resided in Richmond, where he was active in the tobacco business. His involvement in politics resulted in a September 20, 1881, duel with Judge Lunsford Lomax Lewis near Warrenton. Neither man was injured, but this contest is regarded by many historians as the last political duel in American history. Wise also was active in Confederate veterans' organizations.

to me tending to show that you had retired from Williamsburg, left me in ignorance of your whereabouts.

On Thursday evening last a dispatch reached me by courier from Captain Abbitt<sup>8</sup> (stationed at Taylor's Quarter, on the Pamunkey River, with his own company and that of Captain Huffman<sup>9</sup> and a section of artillery under Lieutenant Hudgin) that two gunboats were descried in York River slowly approaching West Point. I immediately telegraphed this fact to General Elzey,<sup>10</sup> and then, after sending an order to Captain Haynes<sup>11</sup> (stationed at Canton, in King William County, near Mattaponi River, with a company of cavalry) to scout the Mattaponi River down to its mouth, with a view to watch out for and prevent, as far as possible, any attempted landing of the enemy above us on that river, or any raid of gunboats, I proceeded directly to Taylor's Quarter. This was the scene of the little action which I shall relate to you.

The two gunboats referred to were steam propellers, one of large size, the other of dimensions not so great but respectable, and both conveying troops. The fact that they bore troops is distinctly vouched for by citizens at West Point, who were not only close enough to both to see with ease what was on board of them but were not so far removed from the smaller of the two as that they could not hear voices on it. The larger of the gunboats lay off abreast the point and near the opposite shore, on which is the "brick house." The smaller one passed West Point up into the Pamunkey about half a mile. At this distance she was opened upon by our artillery, which consisted of two small guns (of the Blakely pattern) with round shot. The first shot was ineffectual, but the second and third, following in quick succession, went rearing and crashing right through her. It is supposed that she was struck twice afterward, but certain it is that after an action of about three-quarters of an hour she retired, evidently with the greatest difficulty and very badly damaged. As she repassed West Point groans and screams of the most heart-rending description, heard with the utmost distinctness at the Point, told not only of damage done to vessel but that her crew had experienced the effect of the iron hail. When this gunboat rejoined her consort they both steamed down York River and have not been heard of since.

Next day at as early an hour as possible General Elzey was informed of what had been done. Colonel Duke<sup>12</sup> was informed of it with equal promptness by his pickets (Captain

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<sup>8</sup> George W. Abbitt (June 19, 1828–June 25, 1912) served as commander of Company B, 46th Virginia Infantry. He came from Appomattox County and would lead the regiment during the latter stages of the Petersburg Campaign.

<sup>9</sup> Guy Dingus Huffman served as commander of Company K, 46th Virginia Infantry. He came from Craig County, where he served as a constable prior to the war. He was taken prisoner March 30, 1865, at Hatcher's Run, during the Petersburg campaign. He returned to Craig County after the war, where he farmed and served as a postmaster until his death in 1910.

<sup>10</sup> Major General Arnold Elzey (1816–1871) was commander of the Department of Richmond.

<sup>11</sup> Possibly Thomas Witt Haynes, commander of Company H, 9th Virginia Cavalry. Haynes was born in King and Queen County in 1827 and attended the University of Virginia. He was wounded at Upperville on June 21, 1863. A bullet passed through his body in a skirmish at Manassas on October 15, 1863, leaving him permanently paralyzed.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Thomas Walker Duke (June 6, 1822–July 2, 1898) was born near Charlottesville and graduated from the Virginia Military Institute in 1844. He received a law degree from the University of Virginia in 1850. At the outbreak of hostilities he was serving as commonwealth attorney for Albemarle County and

Hill's<sup>13</sup> company) at Eltham, who were witnesses of the whole transaction. I shall leave you to judge, sir, what was the destination of the troops on board these vessels, but to enable you to form as correct a judgment as possible permit me to state that I am now firmly convinced that the only object of the small gunboat in entering the Pamunkey River was the capture of a large schooner which was pushing its way down the river and was near Eltham. The larger one, too, went toward the Brick House Landing and lay near it. Can these troops have been destined to flank you? If my command, while performing the special service assigned to it, has been indeed instrumental in protecting your rear, you need scarcely my assurance that no one is more grateful for it than your obedient servant.

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"Richard Thomas Walker Duke"  
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became colonel of the 46th Virginia Infantry. Following the war he served both in the Virginia House of Delegates (1879–80) and the United States Congress (1870–73).

<sup>13</sup> James Christian Hill (May 29, 1831–1906) was born in Charles City County and became the proprietor of a lumber business in Scottsville prior to the war. He served as commander of Company E, 46th Virginia Infantry, and was elected regimental major on March 28, 1864. While leading the regiment at Harrison's Creek on June 17, 1864, he was critically wounded (the long-term effects of this wound required the amputation of his arm in 1874). Returning to Scottsville after the war, he became a newspaper editor there.

“USS Commodore Morris (1862)”

“USS Crusader (1858)”

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