

The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Volume 35
Number 1 *Parameters Spring 2005*

Article 1

3-1-2005

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Recommended Citation

Overton, J.. "From the Archives: Farragut's "Damn the Torpedoes!".*" The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 35, 1 (2005). <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol35/iss1/1>

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From the Archives

Farragut's "Damn the Torpedoes!"

J. OVERTON

On the morning of 5 August 1864, a flotilla of Union warships was preparing to enter and attack Confederate naval and artillery defenses at Mobile Bay, Alabama. Union ships, commanded by David G. Farragut, exchanged fire with Confederate shore cannon and gunboats. To better see above the heavy gunsmoke, Farragut climbed into the rigging of USS *Hartford* and was lashed to a shroud with a leadline to prevent falling to the deck below. The first ship to enter the harbor struck a tethered mine (called a torpedo in the 1860s), and sunk. The other ships cautiously slowed their advance. Farragut asked, "What is the trouble?"

Shouted through a trumpet was the reply "Torpedoes!"

"Damn the torpedoes!" Farragut exclaimed, followed by either "Full steam ahead!" or "Full speed ahead!" (Indeed, at least one source suggests his words were "Full sail ahead!") His ship then took the lead in steaming through the minefield, sustaining damage from Confederate guns but none from "torpedoes." The Federal Navy then fought and defeated the Confederates at Mobile Bay, cutting off a key Southern supply route.

"Damn the torpedoes!" is often used, incorrectly, to precede a reckless or foolish charge into the unknown. Farragut actually was taking a calculated risk. He had ordered a reconnaissance of the harbor the night before, which found no torpedoes, concluded that if any existed most of their firing mechanisms would be corroded by saltwater and rendered harmless, and he knew too slow and cautious an advance would subject his ships to more damaging fire. *Hartford* and several other Union vessels did strike mines, but all of them failed to explode.

Although a native Tennessean, Farragut remained with the Union and became the first Admiral in the United States Navy.

Sources: Bern Anderson, *By Sea and by River: A Naval History of the Civil War* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1962); US Library of Congress, "Today in History," <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/today/aug23.html>.