San Francisco Harbor Defense
During the Civil War

By Benjamin Franklin Gilbert

The commercial and strategic importance of San Francisco and the Mare Island navy yard during the Civil War focused attention on the defense problems of the bay area. Confederate privateers and raiders were threatening California gold shipments, vital to the North; and suspicious operations were being carried on by foreign warships. As a result, the duties of the U. S. Pacific squadron, in defending the coastline and performing customary diplomatic missions, were greatly increased at a time when federal warships were urgently needed to blockade the Confederate States. San Francisco authorities, both military and civic, dreading attack from either or both of these sources, continually petitioned the federal government for more adequate defenses.

As early as January 19, 1861, the war department ordered Gen. Albert Sidney Johnston, commanding the department of the Pacific, to divert two companies of artillery from Fort Vancouver to San Francisco. Soon thereafter, the 3rd U. S. artillery, commanded by Capt. John H. Lendrum, occupied Fort Point at the southern entrance to the Golden Gate. Meanwhile, an emergency order discontinued all construction work at the fort, and the civilian mechanics and laborers were discharged. Then General Johnston ordered 10,000 rifled muskets, accouterments, and ammunition to be stored on Fort Alcatraz; heavier guns were to be shipped to Fort Point.

At this time Alcatraz Island was a prime fortress, garrisoned by 120 soldiers. It had a belt of encircling batteries, a massive brick guardhouse, and a barracks, three stories high, with accommodations for 600 men. Three bombproof magazines each held 10,000 pounds of powder. The lighthouse, with a Fresnel lantern, was visible for twelve miles; and in foul weather an automatic fog-bell struck every fifteen seconds. Other buildings included a large furnace for heating cannon balls, and
a 50,000-gallon cistern for fresh water, the water being transported to the island from nearby Sausalito.3

When the news of the firing on Fort Sumter reached California, the people as a whole pledged loyalty to the Union, but alleged secessionist plots to win California for the Confederacy aroused the authorities and citizens to take precautionary measures. From time to time, rumors circulated that Mare Island navy yard would be subjected to an assault by Confederate banditti. A modern touch is contained in a letter, dated August 26, 1861, from Gen. Edwin V. Sumner, Johnston's successor, to Capt. William H. Gardner, commandant at Mare Island, stating that several secessionists were employed at the yard: "I would respectfully and earnestly represent to you," said Sumner, "the danger of keeping these men in your command. It is not right that any man should draw his bread from a Government that he is denouncing, and no man with any pride would do it." Apparently the commandant believed that the general was attempting to give him orders, for, in a second letter, Sumner said that the naval officer was mistaken in assuming that he had been dictatorial; his only purpose in writing to him was to furnish intelligence which he thought the commanding officer of the navy yard should know.4

In September, Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles requested that the war department furnish a company of soldiers to garrison Mare Island, since there were no marines stationed there for guard duty. Stowed in the powder magazine at the naval base was a large quantity of powder and ammunition. Secretary Welles had information that the magazine was in an exposed condition, and he considered that the guard, consisting of two civilian watchmen, was insufficient for security purposes.6

On December 12, 1861, Gen. George Wright, Sumner's replacement, addressed a letter to Col. René E. De Russy, chief engineer, requesting that he devise a defense plan to circumvent any attack by land or sea upon San Francisco; Wright felt that the city would be unable to defend itself, in the event of war with a foreign power.7 After completing an inspection of the fortifications at Fort Point and Alcatraz, General Wright reported to the war department that the forts were in good order. However, he stated that it would be necessary to double the number of guns in order to achieve full armament; San Francisco would be the obvious point of attack in case of a foreign war, and both Oregon and Washington Territory were virtually defenseless.8
San Francisco Harbor Defense, 1861-65

In a letter dated January 7, 1862, from General Wright to Sen. Milton S. Latham of California, Wright stated that the defenses of the Pacific coast were satisfactory for peacetime conditions, but war would subject the entire coast to a series of assaults. He advises that the number of guns in the various harbor defenses be doubled, and hopes "that the united delegation from this coast will bring the subject before the Department and Congress." On January eleventh, Wright wrote to Gov. Leland Stanford informing him of Colonel De Russy's survey of the defense requirements of San Francisco. He concludes with the statement:

In case of a war with a maritime nation, the immediate attention of the enemy would most certainly be directed to this city, the great entrepôts of our possessions on the Pacific coast. To prevent the ingress of ships of war, we have the forts at Fort Point and on Alcatraz Island with 140 heavy guns now in position at commanding points. Batteries can readily be thrown up, and with such naval force as could be concentrated in the harbor, it is believed this city would be safe. The General Government has but a small amount of funds at present available for defensive works on this coast, but I apprehend no embarrassment on this account, not for a moment doubting that the loyal and Union-loving people of California will most cheerfully respond to any call which may be made on them, whether for men or money to defend their State from foes without or traitors within.

About a month later, Colonel De Russy, after completing a preliminary reconnaissance, made a report to General Wright. He proposed placing twenty guns in a temporary battery on a beach near Fort Point and mounting ten 42-pounders on a nearby hill. Opposite Fort Point in a cove at Lime Point, a battery of twenty guns was to be erected. These additional guns at the entrance to the harbor would provide a total of 181 guns bearing on the Golden Gate. As a second line of defense, De Russy proposed constructing a battery of an additional twenty guns on Alcatraz, and one of ten guns at Blunt's Point on Angel Island. To forestall an enemy vessel from passing through Raccoon Straits toward the navy yard and Benicia arsenal, he recommended erecting batteries at Stewart's Point on Angel Island with twenty or thirty guns. In order to prevent a warship from reaching the anchorage between Yerba Buena Island and the city itself—a location which would be out of the range of the guns on Fort Alcatraz—the army engineer proposed that guns be placed at a commanding position on Yerba Buena. He also recommended certain interior fortifications to protect the upper stretches of San Francisco Bay. These proposals were De Russy's temporary plans for the defense of the harbor.
General Wright's problem was to obtain the necessary guns and appropriations for their installation. On March 12, 1862, he wrote to Capt. Julian McAllister, chief of ordnance at Benicia arsenal, stating that he was unable to obtain guns from the east. Therefore, he said: "We must establish a foundry, cast our own guns, projectiles, &c., and be prepared to meet any emergency." Captain Gardner of the navy yard placed eighty-nine guns from his ordnance department at Wright's disposal. Then Wright wrote to Gen. Lorenzo Thomas at the war department as follows:

I propose to use every gun I can command for the defense of this city and harbor. Although there are several points on the Pacific Coast that are exposed to capture by a hostile fleet, yet, in case of a war, San Francisco would first attract the enemy's attention. The loss of San Francisco and harbor involves also the loss of our navy-yard and our military arsenal at Benicia. In fact, it destroys for the time all our commerce on the Pacific. Hence this place should be made impregnable.

In a letter addressed from Mare Island on April 4, 1862, Admiral Charles H. Bell, commanding the Pacific squadron, described the defenses of San Francisco to Secretary of Navy Welles. He pointed out that there was only one fort on the southern side of the harbor entrance and none on the northern side, but that Alcatraz was fortified. Admiral Bell lamented that these were the only fortifications; he asserted that, in the event of war with a maritime power, a few large steamers could easily pass the forts. "... the City of San Francisco is the Key to the whole of California and this place, once in the possession of a formidable power, the State might be lost to the Union." Admiral Bell suggested assigning a single steam-ram to the harbor, with a few heavy guns mounted on it. As a temporary measure he recommended using the hulk of the old warship, U.S.S. Independence.

Late in April, it was reported that a band of secessionists planned to seize the powder magazine at Mare Island navy yard, and Admiral Bell ordered a guard of marines to the yard. At the suggestion of Capt. Gardner, navy-yard commandant, the U. S. coast-survey steamer, Active, commanded by Benjamin F. Sands, was ordered by telegraph to proceed from San Francisco to Mare Island. Sands had been placed in charge of a government survey to the Pacific coast, his two sons, William and Preston, being given appointments under him. At an earlier date, the Active had been used as a dispatch boat, but more recently she had participated in an Indian war in Washington Territory. To ready her for her new assignment, the Mare Island yard equipped her with a
battery of 32-pounder guns, and supplies of small arms and ammunition were put aboard. Then the vessel, her crew drilled, was anchored at the lower end of Mare Island so that her guns could command the approaches to the powder magazine.17

Admiral Bell wrote to Secretary Welles that Mare Island was in no real danger as long as his flagship, the U.S.S. Lancaster, was at the yard. However, he was apprehensive as to what would happen once the vessels were withdrawn. Bell stated that the lands near the yard, formerly held by Gen. Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo, were presently occupied by squatters. The admiral apparently was suspicious of the squatters, for he requested a guard of one hundred marines.18

On May 29, 1862, Bell reported to Welles concerning the strength of British and French naval forces along the coast.19 He listed the names and types of thirteen British warships, and commented:

A number of the English vessels on this list were sent from India and the China Seas immediately after the "Trent" affair, in order to be prepared for hostilities with the United States. In the present state of the defences of this harbor, one half of this force could command the city of San Francisco and take possession of this yard.20

Despite the recommendations by military authorities on the scene, adequate defenses for San Francisco seemed to be only proposals on paper. In September 1862, Capt. William A. Winder, commanding Fort Alcatraz, complained that his storehouses were not sufficient in number, his prisoners were too numerous, and his water supply was insecure in the event of an enemy attack.21 The additional batteries at the various forts, as proposed by Colonel De Russy, were not erected. On January 26, 1863, General Wright requested Capt. Thomas Oliver Selfridge, the newly appointed commandant at Mare Island, to moor a vessel with heavy guns at the entrance to the Golden Gate. Wright related how a rebel steamer might, during the night or in fog, slip past Fort Point and Fort Alcatraz and, beyond the reach of their guns, command the city.22 Three days later, Captain Selfridge replied that he had no command over any vessels except those at the navy yard. He related that the only available ship, suitable for heavy guns, was the U.S.S. Independence, presently used as a barracks for marines. The U.S.S. Saginaw was undergoing repairs and temporarily was not available. Selfridge suggested that the city or state purchase a steamer and arm it, but he said that the Cyane would arrive within a month and he would direct her commander to lie in the harbor, in order to aid the forts in the event that a Confederate raider should attempt entering.23
In February 1863, the sailing sloop, *Cyane*, arrived in San Francisco, and her commanding officer was ordered to aid in the defense of the harbor at a location not covered by the guns of Fort Alcatraz. General Wright, worried still, preferred to have an ironclad steamer instead of the sloop. However, the *Cyane* did arrive at an opportune time, for on March fifteenth she captured the Confederate privateer, *J. M. Chapman*, which had been outfitted by Asbury Harpending and Ridgley Greathouse for the purpose of intercepting California gold shipments.

A new wave of fear gripped San Francisco. The authorities renewed their efforts to improve harbor defenses, serious study being given to the erection of fortifications on Yerba Buena Island and Rincon Point, in order to protect the inner harbor. Colonel De Russy made another survey of defense sites. He proposed constructing a battery on Rincon Hill at the center of Harrison and Beale streets. He also recommended the installation there of another battery of twelve 32-pounders and a magazine, and planned to erect two batteries at the western end of Yerba Buena. The heavy guns on the island and on Rincon Hill were to afford a cross-fire, extending from the shore of the island to the city's shoreline and capable of commanding the bay anchorage.

On July 31, 1863, General Wright informed Captain Selfridge that he planned to build the batteries proposed by De Russy. These fortifications would supposedly protect the city if any hostile vessel succeeded in eluding the primary line of defense at the Golden Gate. Eighteen guns were to be placed on Yerba Buena and twelve guns on Rincon Hill. In his letter, Wright requested that Selfridge station an armed vessel in the harbor until the batteries were completed.

The next month the war department appropriated $100,000 for the batteries. On August fourteenth, Frederick F. Low, collector-of-the-port, Mayor Henry Perrin Coon, William Chapman Ralston, Frederick McLane, and five other prominent citizens sent a telegram to President Lincoln, expressing in the first sentence their gratitude for the appropriation. Then in the second sentence they stated: “We are exposed to a great danger, and it is criminal to neglect the means of defense.” The citizen committee requested that the steamer *Active* be purchased to serve as a signal and reconnaissance ship outside the harbor entrance, and that the steamship *Herman* be purchased for service both in and out of the entrance. The group stated that the steamers would cost $115,000, and assured the President that the owners of the vessels were unaware of their intentions to make the purchase. Immediately the committee
wired Sen. John Conness of California: "An important dispatch has just been sent the President. Go to him and ask that our careful judgment in the premises be accepted and that the necessary orders be telegraphed."  

However, money was not appropriated to purchase the vessels; and indecisions over where to erect the additional batteries delayed reaching the goal for an impregnable defense. Finally, it was decided to locate batteries on Point San Jose and Angel Island, instead of on Yerba Buena and Rincon Point. The new batteries were concentrated on Angel Island, but almost a year passed before they resembled completed fortifications.  

On October 1, 1863, H.M.S. Sutlej, commanded by Rear-Admiral John Kingcome, stood into San Francisco, and a gun from the batteries of Fort Alcatraz fired a shot, which fell within 300 yards of the vessel. The Daily Alta California described the incident as follows:  

The Sutlej is anchored off Saucelito. She entered the port on the north side, and on reaching Saucelito a blank cartridge was fired from Alcatraz, the Sutlej not complying with the port regulations. This was not respected, so a shot was fired across her bows, which went ricocheting over the water and dashing the spray on her. This was hint sufficient, and a salute of 21 guns was fired by her, which was received as a full acknowledgement.  

Capt. William A. Winder explained his reasons to his superiors for firing on the British warship in the following manner. At the time, the U. S. revenue cutter Shubrick, which had been guarding the Golden Gate, set sail for Point Reyes to render assistance to the shipwrecked Russian corvette Novick. In the absence of the Shubrick, Captain Winder assumed responsibility for ascertaining the identity of all ships entering the harbor. He observed the Sutlej, an armed ship, being towed by small boats towards Raccoon Straits. He believed it unusual for a ship to sail in that direction, and as he could not determine her nationality he fired a blank charge. Receiving no response, he fired an empty shell 200 to 300 yards ahead of the vessel. Then the warship fired the proper salute, and Captain Winder returned the recognition with the national salute of twenty-one guns. However, Admiral Kingcome of the Sutlej did not accept the explanation as satisfactory. He complained that he had not been informed of the port regulations, and considered the incident a neglect of the usual courtesies extended to a foreign warship: his ship's neutral character could easily have been ascertained prior to the firing. Before Kingcome's complaint could be answered by Gen-
eral Wright, the *Sutlej* sailed from San Francisco on October eighth, and the military commander sent a communication to the disgruntled naval officer through the British consul.35

Early in 1864, another of many rumors concerning privateers circulated in San Francisco. It was reported that the city would be bombarded by an "Anglo-Chinese fleet" of six vessels, sailing in consort with the dreaded raider *C.S.S. Alabama*. These ships supposedly were constructed in England for the Chinese emperor, but had been sold to the Confederacy.36 About this time, the revenue cutter *Shubrick* was stationed near the Golden Gate, in order to aid Fort Point and Fort Alcatraz in guarding the harbor entrance. General Wright asked that a warship be placed outside the harbor for additional defense. However, the navy could not comply with such a request. The *U.S.S. Saranac*, commanded by Commodore Charles H. Poor, was but half-manned, and, when a crew became available, she was scheduled to sail for service elsewhere. The only other warship in San Francisco Bay was the *U.S.S. Narragansett*, but she was undergoing repairs at Mare Island.37

Throughout the war the citizens and military leaders of San Francisco expressed their desire to have a warship for the exclusive use of harbor defense. As early as February 27, 1863, word was sent by the war department that the *Comanche* was being shipped to the Pacific coast for duty at San Francisco. This vessel was an ironclad monitor whose parts had been manufactured in the east and were to be assembled at Peter Donahue's Union Iron Works in San Francisco. The parts of the vessel were shipped around the Horn aboard the *Aquila*. On July 12, 1863, the contractors, Donahue, Ryan, and Secor, commenced the task of assembling the *Comanche*. The work progressed satisfactorily until a severe storm hit San Francisco on November fifteenth. Wharfs were blown down and ships in the bay dragged their anchors. Several vessels collided with one another, resulting in costly damage. The *Aquila*, as well as the parts for the *Comanche*, sank next to Hathaway’s Wharf. San Franciscans were, indeed, disheartened, for the *Aquila* had weathered hurricanes and had eluded Confederate raiders in order to transport the long-sought monitor to their harbor. Attempts to raise the *Aquila* failed, but the parts of the monitor were salvaged. A year later, on November 14, 1864, the ironclad was finally launched in the presence of several thousand spectators. However, the vessel was never used for defense of San Francisco, and it remained at a Mare Island wharf until 1899.38
Meanwhile, in July 1864, the batteries on Angel Island neared completion, but local authorities still felt that the harbor was not properly defended. This feeling of insecurity was revealed in a telegram, dated August fifth, written by Gen. Irvin McDowell, Wright's successor as commander of the department of the Pacific. He wired Gen. Richard Delafield, chief of the engineer corps, as follows:

I am struck by the fact that at this time, in this distant port and in the present unsettled and delicate state of our affairs, there are now lying English, French, and Russian men-of-war covering the shipping and town completely, and that we have not a single gun, either ashore or afloat, bearing or that can be brought to bear on them, to require them to leave should we wish them to go. I think we need earth batteries on Yerba Buena and at the foot of Rincon Hill to control the harbor should vessels pass the lower lines.39

Delafield replied to McDowell that ordnance was not available for arming Yerba Buena and Rincon Hill. As a remedy he suggested a harbor regulation, requiring all foreign warships to anchor in designated areas where they could be within the firing range of existing fortifications, as was the custom in many European ports. Delafield concluded by stating that $177,000 had been appropriated for perfecting the land defenses to the rear of Fort Point.40

The goal of impregnable defenses for San Francisco was not reached during the Civil War. Funds were not readily appropriated to defend a port so distant from the actual scene of battle. Nevertheless the defense ring around the entrance to the Golden Gate was tightened by providing additional batteries at Fort Point and Fort Alcatraz, and, in the closing months of the war, the completion of the batteries on Angel Island afforded protection for the approaches to Mare Island navy yard. Actually, little danger from Confederate depredations existed on the Pacific coast; if an attack had been made on San Francisco, it would have been on a small scale, and probably could have been repelled with the existing defenses.

Even as federal troops marched victoriously into Richmond during the last days of the Confederacy, Adm. George F. Pearson, Bell's successor as commanding officer of the U. S. Pacific squadron, wrote to Secretary Welles, expressing disappointment that he had no warship to match a fast privateer, and requested "some fast destroyers."41 On May 17, 1865, Admiral Pearson acknowledged the navy department's general order concerning Lincoln's death, and wrote as follows in reply:

On the arrival of this ship (U.S.S. Lancaster) at San Francisco, I found that
city draped in mourning and all the flags at half-mast. On learning of the death of our late President I ordered twenty-one minute guns to be fired, with the colors half-masted, and have instructed the officers under my command to wear the usual badge of mourning for six months, as a manifestation of their respect for the exalted character, eminent position and inestimable public services of the late President.42

The last occasion for alarm in San Francisco occurred when the whaleship Milo entered the harbor on July 20, 1865, with prisoners from the British-built raider, C.S.S. Shenandoah.43 The Daily Evening Bulletin of the previous day correctly assumed that the Shenandoah had operated in the Arctic.44 Despite the war's end, it was still believed that the raider would commit additional depredations, for she had captured already twenty-nine American whalers in the Pacific and Arctic. In fact, Capt. James Iredale Waddell of the Shenandoah planned to plunder the city. From the San Francisco newspapers, found on captured whalers, he was aware of the weak defenses of the city. Waddell realized that there was only one vessel guarding the harbor. He expected to ram it at night, and then command the city the next morning. However, Waddell first intended to communicate with a ship recently out from San Francisco before attempting the daring project.45 On August second, the Shenandoah spoke the English bark Barracouta of Liverpool, thirteen days out of San Francisco. Waddell at last had definite news of the overthrow of the Confederate government, and decided to terminate hostilities and return to England.46

Meanwhile, the shipping interests, underwriters, and merchants of San Francisco were anxious to capture the raider. For several months, warships of the Pacific squadron, spurred on by an editorial in the Daily Alta California of July 21, 1865, had scoured the ocean in a fruitless search for the Confederate ship. The editorial was entitled, "The Piracies of the Shenandoah," and the writer asked:

And why is it that we have no national vessels on this coast, fit and ready to go and chase down this pirate? What has become of the great American Navy, of which we have heard so much? Are the shores of the Pacific unworthy of protection? Does the Secretary of the Navy know that San Francisco is the third, if not the second seaport in the United States?
NOTES

5. Ibid., pp. 591-92.
6. Ibid., p. 628.
7. Ibid., p. 760.
8. Ibid., pp. 788-89.
10. Ibid., p. 802.
11. Ibid., pp. 863-64.
12. Ibid., p. 921.
13. Ibid., p. 938.
15. Idem.
16. Ibid., April 25, 1862.
18. Pacific Squadron Letters (as in note 14 above), Bell to Welles, April 25, 1862.
19. Ibid., May 29, 1862.
22. Ibid., pp. 294-95.
23. Ibid., p. 297.
25. Rebellion ... Armies (as in note 21 above), pp. 532-34.
26. Ibid., pp. 546-47.
27. Ibid., pp. 559-60.
28. Ibid., p. 568.
29. Ibid., pp. 568-69.
32. *Alta California*, idem.
35. Ibid., p. 650.
40. Ibid., pp. 936-37.
42. Ibid., May 17, 1865.