

# **The USS *Camanche*: First Monitor of the Pacific**

**by Robert Ryal Miller**

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# The *Camanche*: First Monitor of the Pacific

By ROBERT RYAL MILLER

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DURING THE CIVIL WAR the defenses of the Pacific Coast were augmented by “one of those new-fangled monitor-things,” as one Californian expressed it. The bizarre history of this ironclad vessel, the U.S.S. *Camanche*, began in 1861 when military officials and residents of San Francisco, California, petitioned the Navy Department in Washington to provide a floating battery for San Francisco Bay. Persistent rumors and occasional incidents indicated that Confederate warships and privateers were operating in the Pacific threatening gold shipments vital to the Union cause. The peril was magnified by the fact that the United States Navy in 1861 had only seven small wooden sloops-of-war to defend and patrol the Pacific Ocean from Panama to China.<sup>1</sup> The great number of foreign ships that visited San Francisco posed an additional threat, as noted in a report of the general in command of the Department of the Pacific:

I was 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. . . .<sup>2</sup>

Although gun emplacements on Alcatraz Island and Fort Point offered some protection of the harbor, mobile defenses were needed because parts of the bay were out of range of the existing forts.

James T. Ryan, California state senator, was a prime mover behind

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ROBERT RYAL MILLER, who received his Ph.D. degree from the University of California at Berkeley, is an associate professor of history at New Mexico State University. Professor Miller has contributed scholarly articles to the *Pacific Historical Review*, *California Historical Society Quarterly*, *Indiana Magazine of History*, and *Hispanic American Historical Review*.

the demand for additional coastal protection. In the fall of 1861 he went to Washington where, through California Congressmen, he endeavored to persuade Navy officials to augment the Pacific Squadron. In March, 1862, two days after the battle between the *Monitor* and the *Merrimack*, Senator Ryan accompanied a naval committee to Hampton Roads, Virginia, for a firsthand view of the famous Union ship, "the tin can on a shingle." Subsequently the government authorized an ironclad monitor for the Pacific Coast and invited bids for constructing the vessel. Anticipating this, Ryan formed a partnership with Francis Secor and Peter Donahue, the former a New Jersey shipbuilder and the latter head of the Union Iron Works of San Francisco. Ryan's firm submitted the only bid for the West Coast monitor and was awarded the contract for half a million dollars.<sup>3</sup>

The proposal of Secor, Ryan, and Donahue called for prefabricating the vessel in sections in New Jersey, then transporting the pieces to San Francisco for reassembly there. This unusual plan was carried out, but only with a great number of difficulties as will be seen. The ironclad was one of ten vessels of the monitor class ordered by the government under plans and specifications furnished by John Ericsson, designer of the original *Monitor*. Ericsson named the California-bound craft *Comanche*, but somehow the spelling was changed, and in the official Navy records it always appears as *Camanche*. Perhaps the name was derived from an earlier steamship named *Camanche*, also built on the East Coast and transported to California in sections, a sidewheeler which operated on the Sacramento River from 1851 to 1858.<sup>4</sup>

The California warship was larger than the prototype *Monitor*, and her turret mounted two fifteen-inch guns in place of one. The *Camanche* displaced 1,875 tons, was 200 feet long, 46 feet wide amidships, and had a depth of 11 feet 6 inches. Principal modifications involved relocating the pilot house atop the turret, improved ventilation for the crew, and an armored smokestack. She had nine engines operating from two steam boilers: two for propulsion, two for rotating the turret, two for ventilation fans, two for pumping, and one for vacuum. The ship was capable of making nine knots, maintaining this speed for twelve consecutive hours; and her bunkers carried a week's supply of coal steaming at that rate. The deck and sides above the water line were plated with wrought iron from one to six inches thick, while the rotating turret was

formed from iron plates eleven inches thick. Quarters for the crew of fifty men and eight officers, the galley, and holds for stores and ammunition were located in the forward sections. The total cost of the *Camanche* was \$589,165.31.<sup>5</sup>

California newspapers followed the construction of the *Camanche* and printed numerous articles under the heading, "Our Monitor." In December, 1862, the Sacramento *Union* carried a long article on iron-clads; the romantic nineteenth-century prose is typical:

As the building of vessels of this class is such a sudden novelty, it finds the country all unprepared for its exigency, and yards, depots and various works have all sprung up as by magic in the different cities where the vessels are built. . . . But now a vast battery of peculiar and novel implements of mechanical skill, immense stores of iron, in plates and bars, and the various machines which emergency and ingenuity have called suddenly into being, cumber the ground . . . while every iron furnace in the land glowed with fiercer heats and the iron mines of Pennsylvania rang with redoubled blows, busy brains and hands were fashioning the tools which were to deftly turn the ductile metal into the novel shapes required. . . . And no iron but American iron is used in this defense of American industry and American homes.<sup>6</sup>

It took about nine months for the construction and disassembly of the *Camanche* in New Jersey, whereupon the sections were put aboard the sailing ship *Aquila* for the trip around Cape Horn to California. Convoyed as far as Brazil by the United States Gunboat *Ino*, the *Aquila* left New York on May 30, 1863, and arrived at her port of destination five-and-one-half months later. While docked at Hathaway's Wharf in San Francisco Bay, a storm arose which sank the *Aquila* on November 16 with all the material of the *Camanche* aboard. Californians were shocked and disappointed, but they were heartened by the news that the ship and cargo were insured. Senator Ryan of the contracting firm pledged not to shave until the *Camanche* was salvaged and launched.<sup>7</sup>

Sadness and humor surrounding the accident was reflected in San Francisco newspapers. One writer commented that the sinking "is a calamity. It is annoying, vexatious, costly and delaying." Another pointed out that the *Camanche* was already famous since it had sunk a vessel even before being launched, while the *Daily Alta California* called the *Aquila* "the greatest of war vessels" because "she was the first to sink one of our monitors."<sup>8</sup>

In addition to editorials attributing the sinking to negligence and incompetence, the newspapers carried dozens of articles and letters suggesting methods of raising the *Aquila* or rescuing the parts of the *Camanche*. E. L. Fell's plan involved driving a row of piles around the sunken ship and placing chain cables under the ship connected to hydraulic jacks. The author of this plan claimed to have moved "dozens of large brick buildings" using hydraulic presses. W. H. Irwin averred that "a simple coffer dam, making the bottom tight, is all that is necessary. The ship . . . by this means can be raised, and the entire job accomplished in twelve days time, and at an expense of from \$60,000 to \$90,000."<sup>9</sup> The most original idea came from a gentleman who proposed to raise the ship by means of balloons. The *Alta California* editor commented, "We hope he doesn't desire to make light of the matter. It is rather a gaseous proposition at best."<sup>10</sup> A foreign offer of aid came from Admiral A. Popoff, whose Russian Pacific Naval Squadron was then in the bay: he volunteered four diving suits and men to help get the *Camanche* afloat.<sup>11</sup>

Meanwhile attempts to raise the *Aquila* failed. Mr. Horace Cole's offer to raise the ship for \$100,000 was accepted by the insurance underwriters, but his efforts to caulk the leaks, pump her out, and raise her were unsuccessful. In December the underwriters announced that they were sending a salvage crew from New York to raise the ship. San Franciscans were nonplused and disappointed; one editor commented, "We believe that we have here men just as competent and well fitted to conduct this work as any who can be forwarded to us from abroad."<sup>12</sup>

About this time a dispute arose over the ownership and liability of the *Aquila* and *Camanche*. The insurance underwriters claimed that their liability had ceased when the ship docked at its destination and that the government was now responsible. However, the Navy said it would prefer to build a new improved monitor rather than raise the *Camanche*. As the argument continued, nervous San Franciscans proposed that the city put up the money to raise the monitor:

Here she is in the mud, at the bottom of the bay, and all our fond hopes of an iron monster to defend our harbor, in the deep bosom of the ocean buried. . . . Let us get her out of her present pickle, and not let her remain salted down. . . . Let it be done by subscription, by a joint stock company, by individuals, or an association of capital in some shape, so it is done quickly.<sup>13</sup>

A chamber of commerce meeting was held December 19 to discuss the matter, but the next day the agent of the underwriters stated that the companies and the Navy had tentatively agreed to act together in salvaging the ship.<sup>14</sup> Then Secor, Ryan, and Donahue attempted to nullify their contract due to increased labor and costs in renovating the damaged pieces of the ironclad. The firm also maintained that there had been a 30 per cent decrease in the value of currency since signing the contract and that they would be "out of pocket" should they finish the job. On top of all this, the owners of Hathaway's Wharf filed suit against the *Aquila* for dock fees and damage, demanding \$75 a day.<sup>15</sup>

In the middle of these legal troubles the salvage crew from New York arrived in San Francisco on January 17, 1864, aboard the steamship *Golden City*. Headed by Captain Israel E. Merritt, the wrecking party consisted of ten professional wreckers and four divers with the necessary equipment. After a survey of the wreck Captain Merritt estimated that 2,600 tons of water pressure was exerted upon the decks of the *Aquila* at low tide. He said that even if attempts at pumping out the ship had been successful, it could not have been raised because the decks would have collapsed.<sup>16</sup> Salvage operations were delayed ten days by the United States Naval agent, Richard Chenery, who had received no information as to which government officer should receive the pieces of the *Camanche*. It was finally decided that the contractors would receive all the parts except the guns and munitions, the latter were to be sent to the Naval Shipyard at nearby Mare Island for safekeeping.

Finally at the end of January, 1864, the work of raising the *Aquila* and her cargo got underway. The divers worked in short shifts, cutting away sections of the *Aquila* and attaching hoist cables to parts of the *Camanche*. Thirty tons of iron plates and other cargo were raised the first day. As each piece of the monitor was raised, it had to be identified, cleaned of rust, the rivet holes reamed out and surfaces repainted. In March several additional experienced divers arrived from New York, doubling the work force. By May 27 the *Aquila* itself had been raised, but it was June 15 before the last of the freight aboard her was discharged.<sup>17</sup>

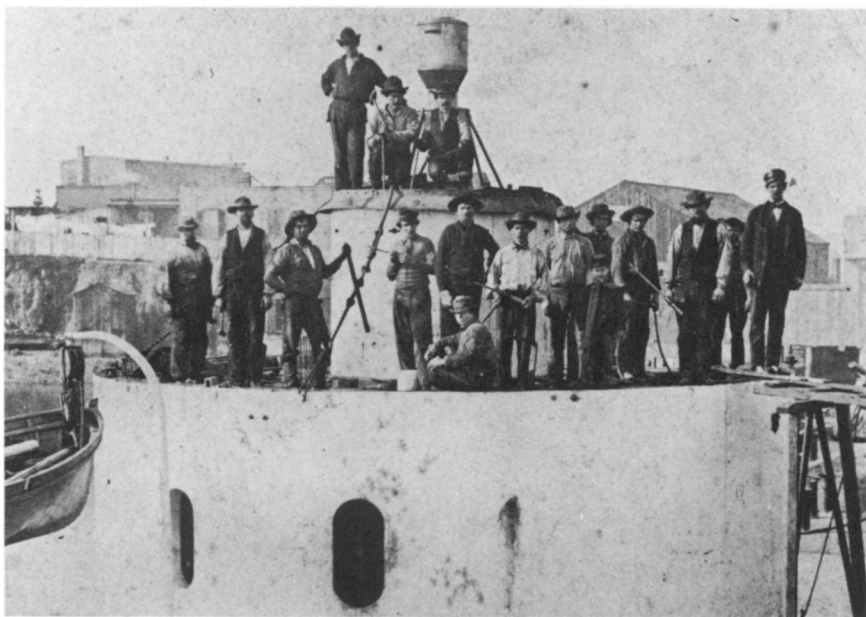
Although the engines and parts of the *Camanche* were in the contractor's shipyard, they refused to assemble the warship until they were guaranteed \$60,000 additional in gold coin for damage done by the salt

water to the woodwork, sails, instruments, and perishable articles. The contractors did not expect the government to pay this amount: the insurance underwriters were liable in their view. But there were forty different insurance companies involved, and it appeared that long and expensive litigation would be necessary before the claims would be honored. Whereupon the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce and the Board of Supervisors met jointly and agreed that the city would guarantee the \$60,000. The *Alta California* editor commented:

It is better for us that the *Camanche* should be set up at once. There is not much danger we will ever have to pay one dollar of the \$60,000. . . . Who will object to such an outlay, when the consideration is the monitor *Camanche* steaming around the Bay with the muzzles of her 15-inch guns protruding from her turret ready to vomit thunders, the like of which were never heard till this war of ours commenced, on the appearance of any foe?"<sup>18</sup>

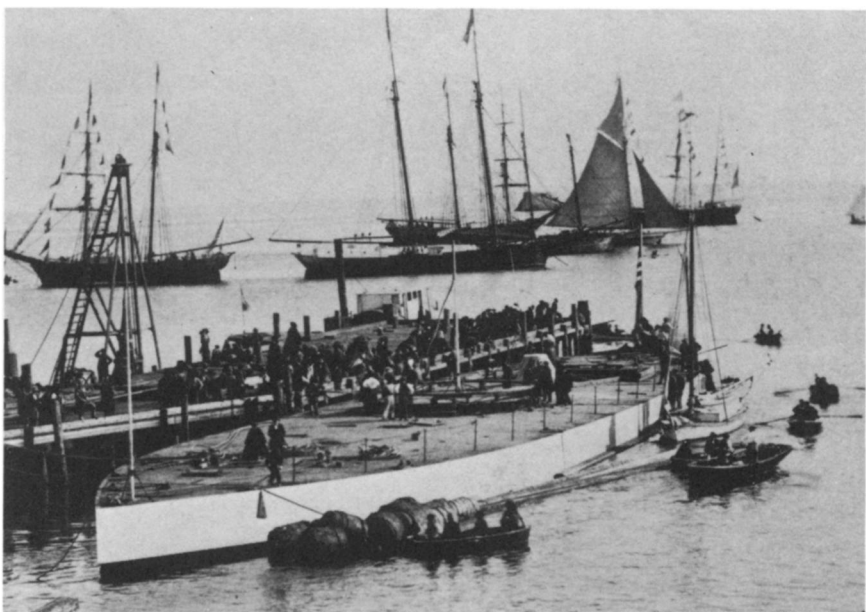
But the city of San Francisco did have to pay the \$60,000. And although the contractors endorsed the insurance policies over to the city, it is doubtful that the city was ever compensated, because sixteen years later and after many lawsuits a report of the board of supervisors noted that "the question of reimbursing the city for the outlay appears to be as undecided as ever notwithstanding all the efforts made."<sup>19</sup> However, as soon as the additional money was guaranteed, Ryan and Donahue began the work of reconstructing the *Camanche*.

By the middle of November, 1864, a year after the wreck of the *Aquila*, the monitor was ready for launching. About twenty-five thousand people including the old pioneer John A. Sutter crowded into temporary bleachers at the foot of Third Street to witness the well-advertised event. Two special sight-seeing boats filled with prominent people arrived too late, as the launching, scheduled for 11:30, actually occurred seven minutes early. The celebration was further marred when first the champagne bottle refused to break, then during the launching the *Camanche* collided with a wharf, and finally the stern went under water for a time threatening the party on board. Far more serious was the accident that cost the life of State Senator John P. Buckley, a member of the official party on board the monitor. Buckley's foot became tangled in the ropes coiled on deck, and the injuries sustained by him led to his death two days later.<sup>20</sup> But in general the launching was a successful and happy affair.



*Courtesy of San Francisco Maritime Museum Association*

Men working on turret of U.S. monitor *Camanche*, 1864



*Courtesy of Bancroft Library*

Launch of the *Camanche*, San Francisco



Launching festivities lasted most of the day with naval salutes, speeches, patriotic cheers, an army band concert, and tours of the monitor. Some six hundred invited guests assembled in a building at the wharf where the contractors provided refreshments. "Wine, wit, and general good feeling followed the repast," according to a contemporary account. Cheers were given for the contractors, the inventor of the *Monitor*, the Union, the flag, and President Lincoln. One speaker called the *Camanche* "a link in the chain which binds us to the Union, and a guarantee of the inviolability of our soil from foreign invasion and protection against domestic traitors."<sup>21</sup> Late in the afternoon a member of the San Francisco opera troupe sang "The Flag of Our Union," and the guests all joined in singing the "Star Spangled Banner." As a final note, Senator Ryan shaved off his year's growth of whiskers.

For two months following the launching, workmen were busy installing the engines, pilot house, turret, and other components of the monitor. Finally in mid-January of 1865 the *Camanche* was ready for a trial run and delivery to the Naval Yard. The occasion called for a celebration; therefore two hundred guests came aboard the monitor for the trip to Mare Island. Two tugs, two steamships, and a revenue cutter accompanied the ironclad, and as they moved along the waterfront, flags of different vessels were dipped, bells rung, cheers shouted, and salutes fired. A *Camanche* passenger noted that "A bountiful collation was spread in the ward room," and he added that the guests did "ample justice to the viands and liquids in the shortest possible space of time."<sup>22</sup> The armada reached the Navy Yard at six in the evening where they discovered that the commandant had no orders or authorization to receive the vessel. Nevertheless, he took possession in the name of the government and ordered a party of Marines aboard to guard the monitor. The contractors and their party returned to San Francisco that evening aboard the revenue cutter. "The band played air after air to the crowd on deck, dances were improvised, and, with a laugh and song, the hours glided merrily away."<sup>23</sup> The maiden voyage of the *Camanche* was considered a success both in the ship's performance and the enjoyment of those who participated.

Official tests of the monitor's maneuvering ability and of her turret and guns took place in February, 1865:

The *Camanche* . . . was found to answer the helm admirably, enabling her to turn in all directions with the utmost ease and rapidity. . . . Each gun was fired once with shot and twice with shell . . . a fifteen-inch shell was fired directly into the bank. It buried itself deeply in the earth, and exploded with tremendous force, lifting several tons of soil and rock into the air, and sending up a dense volume of smoke from the crater formed by the explosion.<sup>24</sup>

The tests proved entirely satisfactory, but now that the ship was ready for service the need for a floating battery no longer existed.

Although a recent book on the Civil War in the West says that the *Camanche* patrolled the waters of the Golden Gate during the final months of the war, the truth is that the war ended some months before the gunboat was ready for action. Daily entries in the log of the *Camanche* begin on May 24, 1865, but the monitor was not commissioned until August 22 of that year. A brief note of that event in the ship's log reads, "12 M. Mustered all hands and put the ship in Commission, and hoisted the colors."<sup>25</sup> During the following year the monitor made several trips around San Francisco Bay but spent most of the time at the Mare Island pier. It is interesting to note that the first captain of the ship was Lieutenant Commander Charles J. McDougal, son of the commandant of Mare Island Naval Shipyard, Captain Douglas McDougal. Irish names predominated among the *Camanche* crew members: the roster included Flynn, Regan, Flanigan, Sullivan, Brennen, Donovan, Sweeney, Lynch, Farley, O'Brien, Brophy, and Muldoon.<sup>26</sup>

Most entries from the log of the *Camanche* resemble those of other Navy ships:

Called all hands, scrubbed berth deck; crew employed in general ships duty; exercised crew at great guns, small arms, single sticks, fire quarters, and armed boats; crew employed washing clothes; inspected all hands and read Articles of War; twenty men permitted to go ashore until sundown; confined James Berry, Seaman, in double irons on bread and water (Drunk).<sup>27</sup>

A few items in the log are of unusual interest, such as the entry dated June 1, 1865, "No work done today on account of a general fast being ordered by the President for the death of Abraham Lincoln." Lists of provisions are also in the log; they reveal some aspects of life aboard a Civil War monitor. Food items received the week of August 3, 1865, were 19 sacks of dried beans, 3 sacks of rice, 5 barrels of flour, 4 barrels

of sugar, 3 barrels of dried apples, 5 barrels of pickles, 3,600 pounds of salted beef and pork in barrels, 400 pounds of coffee, and 43 bags of bread. In addition to fresh water and coal taken aboard, other stores included a barrel of sperm oil, 5 pounds of lampwick yarn, 2 gallons of neatsfoot oil, 1 barrel of coal tar, 5 pounds of beeswax, 10 gallons of turpentine, 5 gallons of linseed oil, 2 pounds of copper rivets, and 5 gross brass screws.

Demobilization and budget cuts at the end of the Civil War forced the *Camanche* into retirement. Her decommissioning at Mare Island took place on September 3, 1866, only a year after the commissioning ceremony. The monitor's munitions and stores were unloaded, and the men transferred to other ships or duty. For the next thirty years the *Camanche* rode at anchor as part of the Mare Island "moth-ball fleet." By 1880 she had acquired a new wooden superstructure complete with shingled roof and served first as a warehouse then later as a barracks for Marines. Towed to San Francisco in 1896, she became a training vessel for the state naval militia. The monitor was in good repair except for the deck which, according to a contemporary account, was "rotten as punk, but as the planking is laid upon an iron deck, there is no danger of the naval reserve going down below through the seams."<sup>28</sup> The deck was then covered with a thick coating of tar and sawdust giving it the appearance of a prize ring. During the Spanish-American War the *Camanche* formed part of the Pacific fleet "ready to defend San Francisco, Portland and other cities from Spanish privateers."<sup>29</sup> But the Spanish navy never threatened the Pacific Coast, and the war ended before the antique guns of the warship could be replaced with modern ones.

The government career of the *Camanche* ended in March, 1899, when she was sold to the firm of Pantesky, Bircovich, and Livingston for \$6,581.25. Said Mr. Pantesky, "We had a survey made of the *Comanche* [sic] and decided that she was just the boat we wanted for a freight ferry."<sup>30</sup> Her turret, engines, and some iron plates were removed, but the timbers below deck were eliminated in a novel way—they were set on fire. "Flames and smoke rolled out of her hull . . . making her a picturesque sight in the Alameda moonlight. . . . It was a grand sight and a great finish for the old warship."<sup>31</sup> After installing hoisting machinery the hull served as a collier around San Francisco Bay until junked in the 1920's.

The curious history of the *Camanche* covers more than sixty years. Jinxed from the beginning when she was sunk before being launched, the monitor never left San Francisco Bay, and her guns never fired a shot except in practice or as a salute. In addition to serving as a warship she also functioned as a warehouse, barracks, training ship, and coal barge. But the *Camanche* deserves to be remembered as the first and probably the last monitor of the Pacific.

#### NOTES

1. Pacific Squadron vessels listed in U.S., Congress, Senate, *Report of the Secretary of Navy*, 1861, 36 Cong., 2d Sess., Senate Exec. Doc. 4, pp. 27-28; 37 Cong., 2d Sess., Senate Exec. Doc. 1, pp. 10-11. See also the article by Benjamin F. Gilbert, "San Francisco Harbor Defense During the Civil War," *California Historical Society Quarterly*, XXXIII (September, 1954), 229-240.

2. General Irvin McDowell to Chief, Army Engineer Corps, San Francisco, Aug. 5, 1864, U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Series I, Vol. L, pt. II, pp. 929-930.

3. *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion*, Series II, Vol. I, pt. 1, "Statistical data of Ships, United States Vessels," p. 50, hereinafter cited as *Official Records, Navies*. Ryan's sojourn in Washington described in a newspaper clipping, Bancroft Scrapbook No. 105, p. 10, Bancroft Library, University of Calif., Berkeley.

4. *New York Post*, September 17, 1862; *New York Times*, September 16, 1862; see also Robert MacBride, *Civil War Ironclads; the Dawn of Naval Armor*, pp. 23-26. The *Camanche* is not mentioned in the engineer's biographies: William Church, *The Life of John Ericsson*; Ruth White, *Yankee From Sweden, the Dream and the Reality in the days of John Ericsson*. The riverboat *Camanche* described in Jerry MacMullen, *Paddle Wheel Days in California*, pp. 20, 135; *San Francisco Daily Alta California*, November, 1851; *Sacramento, California, Union*, May 1, 1858.

5. *Official Records, Navies*, Series II, Vol. I, pt. 1, p. 50; *Alta California*, August 1, 1863. Scale drawings of sister ship, *U.S. Monitor Montauk*, Record Group 19, Bureau of Ships, National Archives.

6. *Sacramento Union*, December 30, 1862.

7. Report and comment on the shipwreck in *Alta California*, "November 17, 1863; see also the article by Homer C. Votaw, "The Curious Case of the *Camanche*," *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, Vol. 82 (July, 1956), 792-793.

8. *Alta California*, November 17, 27, 1863.

9. *Alta California*, December 5, 1863.

10. *Alta California*, December 5, 1863.

11. *Alta California*, January 10, 1864.
12. *Alta California*, December 6, 1863.
13. *Alta California*, December 16, 1863.
14. *Alta California*, December 20, 1863.
15. *Alta California*, December 12, 1863.
16. *Alta California*, January 18, 1864.
17. *Alta California*, January 29, March 30, May 27, 1864.
18. *Alta California*, July 12, 1864.
19. *San Francisco Municipal Reports for the Fiscal Year 1880-81*, Appendix, pp. 67, 78; *Alta California*, June 30, 1864.
20. *Alta California*, November 14, 15, 18, 1864; Votaw, "Curious Case of the *Camanche*," p. 793.
21. *Alta California*, November 15, 1864; see also *Alta California*, November 14, 16, 1864.
22. *Alta California*, January 22, 1865.
23. *Alta California*, January 22, 1865.
24. *Alta California*, February 11, 1865.
25. Log of *U.S. Monitor Camanche*, August 22, 1865, Record Group 45, National Archives. Votaw, "Curious Case of the *Camanche*," p. 793, gives commission date as August 11, and *Official Records, Navies*, Series II, Vol. I, pt. 1, p. 50, says ship commissioned May 24, 1865. The account of the *Camanche* by Oscar Lewis in *The War in the Far West: 1861-1865*, pp. 241, 243, is full of errors.
26. List of crew members, Log of *Camanche*, August 22, 1865.
27. Selected entries, Log of *Camanche*.
28. *The San Francisco Call*, March 15, 1896.
29. *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 13, 1898; *The San Francisco Call*, March 29, 1898.
30. *The San Francisco Call*, March 26, 1899.
31. *The [San Francisco] Examiner*, July 24, 1899; *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 28, 1899.