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LEON SMITH: CONFEDERATE MARINER

JAMES M. DAY

"Gallant," "bold," "daring," "brave," these are adjectives used by the comrades-in-arms of Leon Smith in describing the man and his activities for the Confederate States Navy along the Gulf coast of Texas. To his opponents, Smith was something else again—"unscrupulous," "villain," "pirate," and "scoundrel," but even then his foes had to admit that he was a "man of enormous energy and capacity." By their own admission, then, it must have been so.

Leon Smith's antecedents are somewhat vague. D. J. Baldwin, a contemporary who visited with Smith at a wedding in 1861, stated that Smith was born in Connecticut, while C. W. Raines, usually a careful historian, recorded the birth at Alfred, Maine. No date is mentioned in either account. Leon Smith was reported to be a half-brother to Caleb Blood Smith, a lawyer and journalist who entered politics as a Whig and became a Republican in 1860. Caleb Smith served both in the Indiana legislature and in the United States House of Representatives and was strongly opposed to the annexation of Texas in 1845. Between 1861 and 1863, Caleb Blood Smith served as Secretary of the Interior in the cabinet of Abraham Lincoln. His brother, Leon, selected a different type of career.

Born near the ocean, Leon Smith chose to go to sea at the age of thirteen. By the time he was twenty, Smith was in command of the United States mail steamship Pacific, which plied between San Francisco and Panama. While engaged in shipping on the west coast of the United States in the late 1840's, he met John B. Magruder, with whom he was later to perform gallant feats of war on the Texas coast. During the 1850's, Smith shifted his sailing operations to the Gulf of Mexico and began work for the Southern Mail Steamship Company owned by Charles Morgan. Morgan's ships had sailed the Gulf from New Orleans to Galveston since 1835, and by mid-century, when Smith became associated with him, Morgan's firm was large enough for a congressional committee to state that his steamers did "all the business in the Gulf."

After the surrender of United States military posts in Texas by General David E. Twiggs at San Antonio on February 18, 1861, one of the first acts of the Committee of Public Safety of Texas was to send John S. Ford to Brownsville to receive the surrender of the United States commander there, Major F. J. Porter. Near mid-February, 1861, the Confederate Commissioner, General E. B. Nichols, contracted with J. C. Rans of the Southern Steamship Company for the General Rusk to transport Ford and his troops to the mouth of the Rio Grande. The ship sailed from Galveston on February 19, along with the steamer Union and the schooner Shark, carrying approximately 500 men. Two days later the vessels arrived at the mouth of the Rio Grande, which Ford called "the keys to the valley of the Rio Grande," and received the surrender of the Federal troops. In his official report Ford expressed his "many obliga-
tions to Captain [Leon] Smith of the steamer General Rusk for efficient service promptly rendered during the voyage."\[^{10}\] Six days later, on February 25, Ford and the Rusk returned to Galveston for additional troops. February 28 was loading day for the 300 men the steamer was to carry back to Brownsville. Seventy-five of these were from Galveston, with an equal number coming from Fort Bend, Houston, and Liberty. Captain Smith and the Rusk sailed at 9 p.m. on the evening of February 28, 1861. The following day they arrived at their destination.\[^{11}\]

Being a good business man and not having obligations at this point to either side in the conflict, Smith contracted with Major Porter to remove the Federal troops from Brownsville to New York. They were scheduled to sail from the Rio Grande on March 19 and were to be in New York by April 4, 1861. This act, if actually performed, was the last friendly deed Smith rendered to the United States during the course of the war. By mid-April he was back in familiar Gulf waters holding strong sentiments for the Confederate cause and preparing to back his feelings with daring action. The steamer General Rusk and her crew became "volunteers" in the Confederate navy.
The General Rusk's first opportunity for action came near mid-April in Matagorda Bay. United States Major Caleb C. Sibley was attempting to leave with his men from Indianola. Colonel Earl Van Dorn was sent by the Confederacy to intercept the Federal troops. Van Dorn commandeered the Matagorda and used it to carry his troops into Matagorda Bay. There he discovered a strange ship, which was by-passed in order to dock. The General Rusk was docked at the Saluria wharf, and after nightfall the Matagorda signaled for the General Rusk to come alongside. This was done, and Captain Leon Smith reported to Van Dorn that the strange vessel was the Star of the West, the same United States steamer which had been fired on at Fort Sumter when it sought to supply the garrison. Van Dorn decided to capture the Star of the West and Smith must have agreed, for the General Rusk pulled alongside the Star of the West under the pretense of wanting to transfer some "friendly" troops. After difficulty caused by a strong gale, the Confederates boarded the Star of the West and Colonel Van Dorn took command for the Confederate government. Contemporaries reported that the captain of the Star of the West "swore as none but a sailor can, and declared that a d---d ungentlemanly trick had been played upon him." The capture took place on April 17, 1861, and three days later the vessel arrived in New Orleans amid much elation. Major Sibley, left without transportation, surrendered to Colonel Van Dorn on April 26, 1861. The Star of the West was renamed the Confederate States Steamer St. Philip. The vessel served until March, 1862, when she was sunk in the Tallahatchie River opposite Fort Pemberton in Mississippi to block the channel.14 Leon Smith, still in command of the General Rusk, was firmly dedicated to the Confederacy as he continued to work in the Gulf waters.

By October, 1861, Smith had placed himself and his ship under control of Commander W. W. Hunter of the Confederate States Navy, and remained in this position until General Magruder came to Texas almost a year later. Of all the days involved in watching and waiting, possibly November 7, 1861, was the most eventful. Shortly after midnight, Smith's crew reported seeing the flash of firearms toward Point Bolivar across from Galveston. The crew was armed, ready for an attack, but none came. At 3:30 a.m. Smith saw a fire in the direction of the flashes, and boats were lowered. Upon arriving at the blaze, they discovered that it was the Confederate schooner Royal Yacht. The fire was quickly extinguished and the vessel investigated. A hard struggle had taken place, for some forty bullet holes were found in the ship, doors were broken open, and many objects destroyed. Twelve cutlasses, five boarding pikes, and twelve cartridge boxes were found on deck. On the cabin floor Smith found and officer's cap, a bloody sheet, and a colt dragoon pistol marked "2b. 1B. 2nd D." In summing up, Smith reported: "The whole state of the schooner showed that the vessel had been taken by surprise by an overwhelming force, but made a desperate resistance." The General Rusk then towed the remains of the Royal Yacht back to Galveston.14

By November 13, Commander Hunter and Smith were coordinating signals to alarm Galveston should the enemy approach by sea.12 December 7 found the General Rusk "near the old mill below Lynchburg" to report for purposes of defense to the military commander on Buffalo Bayou.16
On January 20, 1862, Smith and the General Rusk were at San Jacinto preparing to proceed down Buffalo Bayou to Morgan's Point. In his report to Hunter, Smith outlined the service status of the crew and included a note which partially explained why Smith was fighting with the southerners. He wrote: "I send you down the tobacco, the last of the Mohegans hope it may last you until peace is declared and the Confederate States are independent." When New Orleans was taken by the Federals on May 1, 1862, Smith encouraged Hunter. After informing his commander of the news, Smith wrote: "It is bad, but we must not give up the ship yet." By September, Smith and Captain Thomas Chubb were figuring on ways to remove the blockading Federal schooners at Sabine Pass. December 10, 1862 found Leon Smith at Niblett's Bluff, Louisiana. No doubt he was planning to assist General Magruder in the recapture of Galveston, which was perhaps the highlight of the careers of both men.

John B. Magruder arrived in Texas in November, 1862, while Federal ships were effectively blockading most of the Texas coast. When the Federal troops landed on Galveston Island on December 25, Magruder decided that Galveston would be the first point of attack in pushing back the enemy. In order to survey the situation, Magruder went to Virginia Point, where he met Smith, an old friend. In his official report Magruder wrote:

Meeting here Capt. Leon Smith, whom from my acquaintance with him in California I knew to be of great experience in steamboat management, I employed him in the quartermaster's department, placing him as a volunteer aide on my staff. I intrusted to his charge all the steamers on the Sabine River and in the bayous emptying into Galveston Bay, and at the same time directed that those on the Sabine should be fitted out forthwith. Learning subsequently that the enemy had landed at Galveston a considerable force (strength unknown), I directed Capt. Leon Smith, without delaying preparations on the Sabine, to fit up as gunboats the steamers Bayou City and Neptune, and to employ two others as tenders, for the purpose of supplying the larger vessels with wood. At the same time I received information that other Federal troops were on the way to Galveston. I therefore, directed that the work on the last mentioned steamer should be carried on night and day and that captains and crews should be forthwith provided for them.

Christmas day, 1862, proved to be of more than average importance in the life of Smith, for on that day Magruder sent directions to Smith to prepare the Bayou City and the Neptune for battle. In the instructions Smith was empowered to "make all the dispositions and perform all his functions" in Magruder's name. In two days, Smith was to have a 32-pounder rifled gun aboard the Bayou City and two 24-pound howitzers aboard the Neptune; cotton bales were to be stacked on deck as protective armor, and each vessel was to be armed with 150 volunteers. To complete the Confederate flotilla, the Lucy Gwinn and the John F. Carr were assigned as tenders.

The United States vessels in the harbor consisted of the Harriet Lane, commanded by Captain Jonathan Wainwright, the Westfield, the Owasco,
the **Clifton**, the **Sachem**, two armed transports, two barks, and an armed schooner, all under the command of Captain W. B. Kenshaw, U.S.N. This made a total of ten vessels as compared with four brought out on the Confederate side. In planning his attack, Magruder desired to have his two "cotton-clads" attack the Federal gunboats at the same time his army troops moved against the Federal forces. This coordination was difficult, since the vessels commanded by Smith had to travel approximately twelve miles from Half Moon Shoals to arrive at the battle. The attack was set at 12:00 o'clock midnight on December 31, 1862 with the fire from the land batteries being the signal for the cotton-clads to engage the enemy. General Magruder fired the cannon at about 4:30 a.m., and the fight was on. The engagement was at its height by daybreak, January 1, when, as General Magruder reported, "our gunboats came dashing down the harbor and engaged the **Harriet Lane**—in most gallant style." According to Magruder:

The gallant Captain Wainwright fought his ship admirably. He succeeded in disabling the Neptune and attempted to run down the Bayou City, but he was met by an antagonist of even superior skill, coolness, and heroism. Leon Smith, ably seconded by Capt. [Henry S.] Lubbock, the immediate commander of the Bayou City, and by her pilot, Captain McCormick, adroitly evaded the deadly stroke, although as the vessels passed each other he lost his larboard wheelhouse in the shock. Again the Bayou City, while receiving several broadsides almost at the cannon's mouth, poured into the **Harriet Lane** a destructive fire of small arms. Turning once more she drove her prow into the iron wheel of the Harriet Lane, thus locking the two vessels together. Followed by the officers and men of the heroic volunteer corps, Commodore Leon Smith leaped to the deck of the hostile ship, and after a moment of feeble resistance she was ours. The surviving officers of the Harriet Lane presented their swords to Commodore Leon Smith on the quarter-deck of the captured vessel. After the surrender the Owasco passed alongside pouring into the Harriet Lane a broadside at close quarters, but she was soon forced to back out by the effect of our musketry.

As Smith and the other volunteers leaped aboard the **Harriet Lane**, the firing by the Texas sharpshooters was deadly, with the result that both Captain Wainwright and his second in command, Edward Lea, were killed. The vessel was surrendered to Smith, who immediately sent Henry S. Lubbock to secure the surrender of the other vessels. The **Westfield**, which had run aground, was blown up by its commander, who lost his life, while the **Owasco**, the **Clifton**, the **Sachem**, and the **Corypheus** headed for the open sea with a flag of truce flying from the peak. Smith boarded the **John F. Carr** and attempted to catch the **Owasco**, but had no success. Galveston was once again in Confederate hands, and it remained so until the end of the war.

On the day of the battle, Magruder wrote to General Samuel Cooper, the Confederate Adjutant and Inspector General, that the "ships and artillery [were commanded] by Major Leon Smith, to whose indomitable energy and heroic daring the country is indebted for the successful execution
of a plan which I had conceived for the destruction of the enemy's fleet." In the next report which provided details of the attack, Magruder again praised his naval commander:

Although it may appear invidious to make distinctions, I nevertheless regard it as a duty to say that too much credit cannot be bestowed on Commodore Leon Smith, whose professional duty, energy, and perserverance amidst many discouraging influences were so conspicuously displayed in the preparation for the attack, while in the execution his heroism was sublime.

With the Harriet Lane captured, Smith was placed in command of her and all other Confederate ships along the Texas coast.

Much has been written concerning the death of Captain Wainwright and Lieutenant Lea and the burial of both. Since Leon Smith was involved in the controversy, details should be given. In his report the day after the battle, Magruder noted the death of the two seamen, stating that Leon Smith killed Wainwright at close quarters, and the New York Herald used the story in 1864 saying that Smith had "shot down Commander Wainwright after he had surrendered." Writing from Havana in December, 1864, Smith defended himself from this accusation by stating that it was impossible "owing to the darkness then prevailing to have distinguished her commander from any of her officers, particularly so, as he wore no uniform or insignia of his rank." Smith then gave his interpretation of the burial of Wainwright:

At the close of the action, I had the dead and wounded taken to shore and cared for. I assisted with my own hands in moving the corpse of Commander Wainwright to the headquarters of Gen. Magruder. While doing so, I was informed that he had been a member of an Order [Masonic] with which I had the honor to be connected. He was dressed in full uniform and laid out in state. I ordered the finest coffin that could be found, and paid for the same out of my own private purse. Although I met and fought him as an enemy, I admired his undaunted courage and bravery, and hence paid every respect to his remains.

He was buried with military and Masonic honors. I among many other Confederate officers followed him to his grave. I saw to the collection and safekeeping of all of his personal effects, including his two swords, which I placed in charge of the senior surviving officer; but they were subsequently sent out to Commodore Bell, at that time commanding the United States squadron off Galveston, with the request that they should be forwarded to his family in the North, to whom I have every reason to suppose they were safely delivered.

The issue was revived in 1895 by a Galveston Daily News article which claimed that the fatal shot was fired by a member of Green's Brigade. The article stated that Lt. James V. Riley received Wainwright's sword. This was answered by Leon B. Smith, the son of the naval commander, who stated that the sword was given to Ensign Jonah M. Wainwright, son of Jonathan Wainwright, by Leon Smith when the two men met in San Francisco after the war. According to this account Ensign Wainwright was wearing the sword at the time that he too met his death by fire from
the Mexican pirate ship *Forward*. Philip C. Tucker, III, in an article in the *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, also states that the bodies of both Wainwright and Lea were buried by Harmony Lodge Number 6, A. F. & A. M.30

With the Battle of Galveston won and the reports made, the Confederate States Congress passed a resolution of thanks to Magruder, Thomas Green, Leon Smith, and the other officers and men. While this was being done, Magruder and his command were off to perform other deeds.31

Smith was placed in command of the *Harriet Lane* by Magruder, but the Confederate States Navy saw fit to assign her to Lieutenant Joseph N. Barney, a regular line officer. Barney was in Galveston by February 13, 1863, to take command; but his presence was somewhat resented by Magruder, who informed the lieutenant that Leon Smith had been recommended for an appointment in the Navy.32 Magruder wanted Smith for the *Harriet Lane* and Barney was perfectly willing to concede. In summing up, Barney wrote to S. R. Mallory, the Confederate Secretary of the Navy:

> From all I can learn Major Smith is a thorough seaman, of correct habits, great energy and distinguished courage (as his deeds testify), and should the Government see fit to acknowledge his gallant services by acting upon General M.'s suggestion, I believe that in command of this ship, in connection with the rest of the vessels already commanded by him, it would be in his power to render more efficient service than I, under the circumstances, could do.33

Barney later explained that he made the recommendation because he felt that the presence of two forces afloat under different organizations and with independent commanders would tend to produce confusion and discord. Barney talked with Magruder and found that the general would not consider relinquishing command of the “cotton clad” fleet led by Leon Smith.34 The *Harriet Lane* was blockaded in Galveston some fifteen months before she escaped to Havana as a blockade runner loaded with cotton.35 As for Smith, he was given the title “Commander, Marine Department of Texas,” by order of General Magruder.

In June, 1863, when the Federal fleet blockading Galveston was increased and Magruder feared another attack, he ordered Smith to “cause all the gunboats lying in the waters to be prepared for action and directed to proceed to Galveston Bay.”36 In June Magruder once again recommended that Smith be appointed a Commander in the Navy, and once again no action was taken on the recommendation.37

In early August Magruder was uninformed on the movements of Smith, and he sent an inquiry to the Marine Commander. Smith was at Velasco, held in by a strong wind, but had prepared to “run the gauntlet of an enterprising enemy.” He was on his way to Matagorda Bay with the *John F. Carr*, the *Mary Hill*, and the *Alamo*, and had established a line of signal scouts along the coast to give warning in case of the appearance of the enemy.38 The report was penned on August 9, 1863, and one week later Smith had successfully moved to DeCrow’s Point, Matagorda Bay and had reported to the Commanding Officer at Indianola.39 He placed the steamer *John F. Carr*, commanded by Captain S. K. Brown, and the *Alamo* at Sa-
luria for defensive purposes. On the return trip to Houston, the Mary Hill was left at Velasco. For the remainder of the month Smith "inspected" his department. On September 5 he was at Orange and his objective was to report on the condition of the Texas and New Orleans Railroad.

That was the day that United States Major General William B. Franklin and 5,000 men sailed from New Orleans with the plan of attacking and capturing Fort Griffin and Sabine Pass. Two days later they arrived off the Sabine bar, and the following afternoon, on September 8, the Battle of Sabine Pass occurred. Lieutenant Dick Dowling was the Confederate officer commanding the garrison at Fort Griffin. Leon Smith was at Beaumont when he heard the news that nine Federal vessels were at Sabine Pass. He immediately ordered all Confederate troops—a total of 80 men aboard the steamer Roebuck—and sent them down the Neches River to battle. As heavy firing could be heard in Beaumont, Smith and Captain W. Spaulding Good raced to Sabine Pass on horseback, beating the Roebuck by some three hours. They arrived just as two enemy gunboats—the Clifton and the Sachem—came within range of Fort Griffin. Smith summarized the battle: "For one hour and a half a most terrific bombardment of grape, canister, and shell was directed upon our devoted, heroic little band within the fort. The shot struck in every direction, but thanks be to God, not one of that noble Davis Guards was hurt." In the end, the Federals were repelled, some four hundred prisoners taken, and two gunboats—the Clifton and the Sachem—captured. Dick Dowling paid tribute to Smith "for his activity and energy in saving and bringing the vessels into port."

Magruder, in his report to General Cooper, was more generous to Smith. Magruder wrote:

Commodore Leon Smith and Capt. W. S. Good, of the Ordnance department, arrived at the fort during the engagement, passing through the enemy's fire to reach it. Both deserve great credit for their gallantry. Commodore Smith, seizing the flags, stood with it upon the ramparts, and stimulated the men by his example and words. I cannot commend too highly this sensible, heroic, and useful officer."

The defeat at Sabine Pass was a humiliating one for the Federal forces and a great morale builder for the Confederates. Both the Clifton and the Sachem were put to use in Smith's "Marine Department" as he returned to Galveston.

In late September, Smith once again returned to Sabine Pass, this time to take charge of the captured schooner Manhasset. This he did to Magruder's satisfaction, with the result that the vessel was saved. By November Federal forces were threatening the lower Texas coast at Indianola, so once again Leon Smith was sent to the scene of action as Magruder's representative.

The instructions to Colonel W. R. Bradfute, the commander at Indianola, stated that Bradfute was to assemble the vessels along with "companies of sharpshooters" and artillery, and place them at the disposal of Leon Smith. Captain Edmund P. Turner, the adjutant, concluded the orders with: "Major General Magruder trusts that you will afford him [Smith] every facility that he may require." Some dissension developed
between Bradfute and Smith. On November 28, Federal troops laid siege to Fort Esperanza and the following day the Confederate forces retreated. Smith had two steamers in the bay, the John F. Carr and the Cora, and eleven small vessels. Aboard the Carr were thirty men, ten of whom were "Captain Rice's worst men, who cannot read a word of English," with the balance of the detachment coming from the "militia, who cannot tell their nostrils from a double barreled shot gun." Under these conditions, Smith chose not to attack. He fought defensively until December 11, 1863, when he was once again ordered to Galveston to take command of the naval forces in that area.48

Early in 1864 Brigadier General William Steele was assigned to command the defenses at Galveston, and, since his chain of command soon crossed with that of Leon Smith's Marine Department, Steele addressed an inquiry to Magruder's Chief of Staff, Brigadier General J. E. Slaughter, concerning the state of affairs with regard to water transportation. Steele found it difficult to reconcile the existing situation "with the ordinary rules of military propriety." He pointed out that his command was split and that steamboats were necessary to reinforce Bolivar Point and Pelican Spit. Steele went one step further in his protest when he explained that the forts were weakened when the artillery men were drawn from them and placed on duty with the gunboats. In summing up his request, the new commander stated that "Whatever may be the relations of the boats in the bay to my command, I cannot consent to have orders sent direct to officers under my command—nor can I permit citizen employes to give orders to officers under my command."49

General Magruder's reply to his subordinate General Steele was swift and straight:

Commodore Smith is a naval officer, and all the gun-boats are under his control, and of course the officers and men aboard her are subject only to his orders. For the sake of convenience, all the transports are also placed under the command of Commodore Smith, and when needed quartermasters are required to apply to him or his representative at Galveston. The captains of these gun-boats are necessarily seamen, and all persons on board must of necessity be under their orders. The civil law, if the military does not, covers this case, but heretofore no objection has been made by the officer on this duty to obeying the orders of the captains of the boats. In addition to this, the harbor police have been placed under the control of Commodore Smith.50

Correspondence on this subject reached Smith on March 30, and he ably defended his activities by stating that his personnel had rendered efficient service for one and one-half years and that they would continue to do so when weather permitted and the service did not conflict with orders from the commanding general.51 Official correspondence on the problem was closed, but no doubt hard feelings lingered.

The status of Leon Smith in the Confederate forces is an interesting question. Various referred to as lieutenant, captain, major, colonel, and commodore, Smith entered the Confederate service as a volunteer. Repeatedly recommended for a naval commission by General Magruder, Smith
was never mustered into either naval or army service. On several occa­sions Magruder mentioned his Marine Commander as a commissioned officer in the Confederate Navy, but Smith's name did not appear on the commissioned list. The position held by him rested entirely on his personal relationship with Magruder, who had the utmost faith in Smith's abilities. This feeling was cemented by the daring deeds attributed to Smith.

The Marine Department of the Military District of Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona consisted of small vessels which maneuvered along the coast of Texas and in the inland navigable rivers. Mostly they were used for coastal defense and for performing routine transportation duties. The departmental headquarters were at Houston, where Magruder and his staff were housed, while the three main sub-headquarters of the Marine Department were at Sabine Pass, Galveston, and Matagorda Bay. At these points Smith had Captain L. C. Irwin, Captain Henry S. Lubbock, and Captain S. K. Brown in charge of the respective waters. Smith himself shifted with the changing fortunes of battle, but, so far as can be determined, he remained a volunteer sailor to the end.

As the weary year 1864 passed, Magruder and his troops had con­structed the land fortifications to a point that Smith and his Marine Department were needed less and less for defense purposes. In March most of the Confederate troops were transferred from Texas to Louisiana for use in repelling Banks's Red River Campaign. On August 17, "Commo­dore" Leon Smith was, at his own request, relieved from duty in the Ma­rine Department and Captain Henry S. Lubbock appointed as his succes­sor. Smith was to report "by letter" to the Confederate Secretary of the Navy. Magruder took the occasion to give his old companion in arms a warm compliment:

The Commanding General deems this a fitting occasion to ex­press his high appreciation of the valuable services rendered the country by the Marine Department, its officers and men, under the able management of this gallant and distinguished officer, whose dauntless intrepidity, energy, and devotion to the best interests of our cause, have won for the Texas fleet a fame second to none in our Navy, and for himself an imperishable name upon the page of history.52

In printing the order, the Houston Daily Telegraph editorially endorsed Magruder's comments, with the belief that Smith's future career would be more spectacular than his past. The editorial mentioned rather casually that the Navy Department was sending Smith to London.53

This article was picked up by the newspapers of New York City, where it was read by one D. J. Baldwin. He fired a letter to William H. Seward, United States Secretary of State, who sent it on to the Navy Secretary, Gideon Welles. This letter indicates the depth of the enemy's feelings for Smith:

He is a very daring, skillful, bold, and successful villain, whom God has permitted and circumstances have formed into a pirate. For two years past, to my knowledge, he has had private subscrip­tions on foot in Texas whereby to procure and arm a very swift
steamship in England with which to prey upon the commerce of his native land and nation. He obtained all he needs of cotton from planters, and has now, doubtless, obtained all he needs for his purpose. He is a man of enormous energy and capacity, enterprising and unscrupulous; he will go into his piratical scheme with all the vim that secessh grafted upon renegade can promise. I write this to you, sir, because you can inform the minister in Britain to look out for the “Lion Smith:” and the Secretary of the Navy to put a tiger upon the lion's trail, or the rather, an honest man in an honest ship after the pirate scoundrel.

His scheme has been a favorite one since the opening of the rebellion, and if he ever gets to sea he will make the treasure ships of the California lines exceedingly scarce. He is a very good navigator, and one of the most dangerously capable men in the rebel category.  

The Federals believed that Smith was to get a steamer in London, return to the Pacific, and make short work of United States commerce and treasure ships along the coast of California.

After being relieved in the Marine Department, Smith did not immediately stop his military activities. He captured a United States schooner, the Florence Bearn, at the mouth of the Rio Grande in September, 1864.

From the Confederate side, the purchase of the steamer in England was actually conceived by General Magruder. The plan was for Smith to go to England, via Havana, acquire and arm the steamer, and return it safely to Galveston.

The mariner arrived in Havana in November, where his presence was noted by Thomas S. Savage, the United States Vice Consul. He immediately forwarded the message to Gideon Welles that Smith was to command a “Steamer of about 800 tons.” Welles sent the message to Commodore Thomas T. Craven of the USS Niagara but changed the place of departure to Liverpool. Craven was “enjoined to be vigilant” because Smith was said to be a “bold and enterprising man.” The departure date, according to Welles’ information, was to be between December 10 and 15, but as late as December 19 the commander of the Niagara cabled Welles that he hoped it was not yet too late to receive information to enable him to intercept the steamer fitted out by Smith.

The vigilance of the United States Navy was all for naught in this case, for Smith was detained at Havana. While there he found that the Confederate steamer Wren was without a pilot and that none of the crew knew the Texas coast. As the vessel was bound for Galveston, Smith ran the Federal blockade and piloted her in safely. He returned to Havana, and while he was thus engaged Magruder reported that “the steamer from England—arrived safely in Galveston with cargo.” Writing in April, 1865, Magruder had been informed that “Lieutenant Smith will bring in a valuable Confederate steamer, probably at the next dark of the moon.” This incident ends the known Confederate career of Leon Smith.

After the Confederate surrender he drifted to Havana, and then went to Pacific waters and San Francisco, where he and his wife and son were
living when the American government negotiated with Russia for the purchase of Alaska. On October 18, 1867, the great north country became the property of the United States. By March 1, 1869, Leon Smith and his family had settled at Fort Wrangel, Alaska, to trade with the soldiers and the Stickine Indians.

United States Trading Post at Wrangel, Alaska

The post at Wrangel was garrisoned by the Second Artillery battery commanded by Lieutenant William Borrowe. The unit was a part of the Military Division of the Pacific which was commanded by Brevet General Jeff C. Davis at San Francisco. Aside from the military, the area was inhabited by some 500 Stickine, or Stick, Indians as they were named by the Americans. The Indians lived primarily on fish and game and provided themselves with clothing by trading and trapping furs. For the most part they were an honest tribe and were well disposed toward the Anglo-Americans. The special Indian Commissioner in the area, Vincent Colyer, was quite disturbed at the influence the soldiers were exerting on the Indians through the use of liquor, but most of the time life at Fort Wrangel was harmonious, even though tempers did flare on occasion.

The Wrangel trading post and bowling alley was operated by a partnership of William King Lear and Leon Smith. No details of this operation are available but one can visualize the scene as soldiers and Indians mixed freely, drinking, playing cards, bowling, and trading with the proprietors. Beer and porter were the only intoxicants allowed legally on the post, but as was usually the case in such places, whiskey was on occasion smuggled in. In this atmosphere of the north country Leon Smith was truly a “Tyhee”—a man of importance.

Only one episode concerning Smith is known for this period of his life. On October 29, 1869, an Indian, who was passing the trading post, was grabbed by Smith and given a hard shaking. At the time Smith believed that the Indian had struck his son, Leon B., and the father wanted to insure that it did not happen again. Two drunken soldiers then took the Indian and beat him rather soundly. Colyer, the Indian agent, demanded
their arrest, but the investigating officer, Lieutenant M. R. Loucks, quieted the affair without arresting anyone. Later, Smith discovered that the Indian had not hit the boy after all.

As Christmas, 1869, arrived, Leon Smith could think back to that same day seven years previously when his commander and friend, John B. Magruder, gave him just two days to prepare a flotilla for an attack on Galveston. Little did he realize that this Christmas would be his last.

The trouble started late Christmas night as Mrs. Jacob Miller, a laundress and the wife of an army sergeant, shook hands with a Stick Indian named Lowan. For some strange reason, Lowan bit off the third finger of Mrs. Miller's right hand. When Lieutenant Loucks attempted to arrest Lowan, a fight ensued, and Lowan was killed. This apparently ended the affair, since Louck dismissed his men, but Scut-doo, a friend of Lowan's, had seen the incident and determined to get revenge. At 10 a.m. on December 26, shots were heard near the Smith and Lear trading post. Lieutenant Loucks investigated, and found Leon Smith "lying on his breast upon a low stump alongside the plank wall, with arms extended and a revolver pistol fallen from the grasp of the right hand." Smith was taken to the post hospital, where it was found that fourteen bullets had "penetrated the body on the left side, just below the heart, and three in the left wrist." He lingered on for some thirteen hours before he died at 11 p.m., December 26, 1869. Lieutenant Borrowe reported that "His sufferings were terrible, and death must have been a relief." Smith's body was put on the steamer Newbern and taken to San Francisco, where the burial took place.

Upon investigation the murderer was discovered to be the Stick Indian Scut-doo, who after some difficulty was delivered to the military forces for trial. The court-martial jury consisted of Lieutenants Borrowe and Loucks, William K. Lear, post trader, and Acting Assistant Surgeon H. M. Kirke. Scut-doo's status was never in doubt, since five chiefs of the tribe testified to his guilt. His hanging was decreed at mid-day, December 29, 1869. The execution was to take place in the presence of the troops, citizens, the five chiefs, and the body was to remain hanging until nightfall, when the Indian's friends could remove it. When the sentence was read, Scut-doo replied "very well, that he had killed a tyhee, and not a common man; that he would see Mr. Smith in the other world, and, as it were, explain to him how it all happened; that he did not intend to kill Mr. Leon Smith, particularly; had it been anyone else, it would have been the same."

FOOTNOTES


2Francis R. Lubbock (C. W. Raines, editor), Six Decades in Texas, or Memoirs of Francis Richard Lubbock (Austin: Ben C. Jones and Company, 1900), 482.


10John S. Ford to J. C. Robertson, February 22, 1861; February 25, 1861; March 6, 1861, *ibid.*, 651-652, 655.


15W. W. Hunter to Commander of Steamer General Rusk, November 13, 1861, *ibid.*, 850.

16*ibid.*, December 7, 1861, p. 858.


21 Magruder to Cooper, February 26, 1862, *ibid.*, 212.


37 Magruder's Recommendations for Promotions and Appointments, June 8, 1863, *ibid.*, 65.

38 Smith to Turner, August 9, 1863, *ibid.*, 155-156.

39 Smith to the Commanding Officer, Indianola, Texas, August 16, 1863, *ibid.*, 171.

40 Smith to Turner, August 20, 1863, *ibid.*, 174.

42Smith to Commanding Officer, Eastern Sub-District of Texas, September 8, 1863, ibid., 215.


47Turner to Colonel W. R. Bradfute, November 26, 1863, ibid., 446-447.

48Smith to Magruder, November 30 and December 1, 1863, ibid., 464-466; Special Orders No. 366, Headquarters District of Texas, December 11, 1863, ibid., 500.


50L. G. Aldrich to Steele, March 25, 1864, ibid., 1083.

51Smith to Aldrich, March 30, 1864, ibid., 1100-1101.

52General Orders No. 162, Headquarters, District of Texas, New Mexico and Arizona, August 17, 1864, in Houston Daily Telegraph, August 18, 1864.

53Houston Daily Telegraph, August 19, 1864.

54Baldwin to Seward, October 13, 1864, Official Records, Navies.

55Memoirs of John Salmon Ford, VI, 1116-1117 (typescript, Archives Division, Texas State Library).


58Craven to Welles, December 22, 1864, ibid., 398.


62Ibid., 6-7.

63Ibid., 7.

64This name is sometimes spelled Siwau.