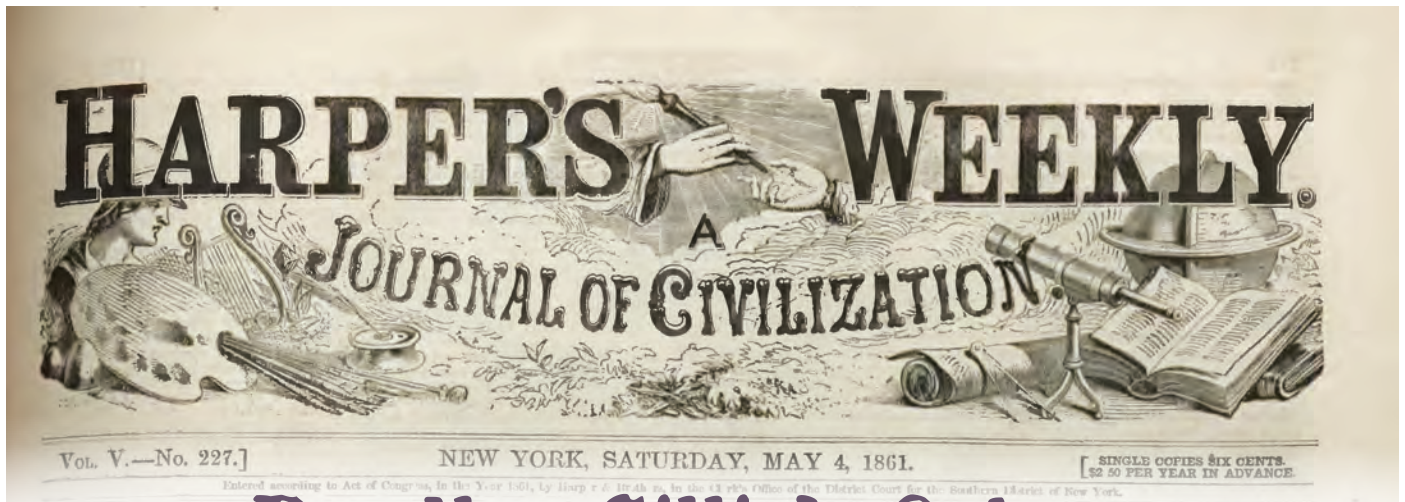


Naval Illustrators



Bradley Sillick Osbon: Sailor-Journalist-‘Special Artist’ for Harper’s

By Gary McQuarrie

BRADLEY SILLICK OSBON (1827-1912) was the son of a poor Methodist minister, born August 16, 1827 at Rye, West Chester County, New York (his birth year was so noted in his memoirs, but varies into the 1830s, depending on source, and he himself reported several different birth years on various documents throughout his lifetime). His great-grandfather, whose surname was Osborne, manufactured corn brooms—the burning-brand used to mark the brooms was misinterpreted by the maker of brands in Boston to be “Osbon,” and so the family surname was changed to fit the burning-brand to avoid the costs and time of correction. Osbon is most commonly known as ‘Captain Bradley S. Osbon,’ referring to his attainment of commander of various vessels during the merchant marine years of his career and not to an actual rank achieved in the U.S. Navy. During his appointments in the U.S. Navy, Osbon served as clerk and/or signal officer.

Though Osbon was a man of short stature (5 foot, 6 inches), he led a far-ranging, adventurous, and rather ‘outsized’ and remarkable life detailed at length in his personal memoirs, *A Sailor of Fortune* (The McClure Company, 1906). Over his lifetime, Osbon managed to interact with and become well acquainted with many famous naval officers and officials, politicians, and notable figures of his era.



Captain Bradley S. Osbon. From: Rudolf Kersting. *The White World: Life and Adventures Within the Arctic Circle Portrayed by Famous Living Explorers* (New York, NY: Lewis, Scribner & Company, 1902), p 360. Osbon’s cap is not Navy regulation, nor is the cap’s device—rather, the cap and device appear to be put together to suggest a formal U.S. Navy commander’s rank, which he never achieved.

The memoirs were a self-narrative of his life's history as told to the book's editor-author and at times present a somewhat confusing narration of events and self-serving perspectives apparent to a reader—in addition, although the memoirs apparently detail his life chronologically, very few dates are attached to most of the events.

Osbon's life on the water began early as a child, learning to canoe while at his great-grandfather's farm in Saratoga County, New York. He first ran away from home at age 11 to enlist on a canal boat, but this was short-lived and he was returned to his parents in New York City. This was followed by additional episodes of running away for the next three years that included working on a pilot boat in New York Harbor and working on local tugboats. At the age of 13, his father finally arranged for an official assignment aboard *Cornelia*, a packet ship transporting emigrants from Liverpool to New York. After this assignment, Osbon remained at home and briefly attended a private school to study navigation. He resolved to join the Navy and

was placed on the receiving ship *North Carolina*. He became a gunner's mate, but was generally disappointed with his promotion and his father helped him secure a regular discharge.

Over the next two decades of his life before the Civil War started, Osbon's naval experience was quite an odyssey full of daring adventures. He sailed on the whaling ship *Junior* (late 1847-1849) that took him around the world to New Zealand's whaling grounds, down to the coast of Antarctica, along the coast of Australia, into the South Pacific, up to the Arctic, and then a stop in Hawaii—in Honolulu, Osbon left *Junior* for the bark *Swallow*, which sailed to Australia. In Sydney, he joined the whale ship *Joseph Maxwell*. He traveled back through the South Pacific and returned to Sydney, where he joined *Oneco*, bound for Manila and then for Hong Kong, encountering a battle with a pirate vessel. Seeking even more adventure, Osbon joined the Anglo-Chinese Navy, consisting of 40-foot boats with a howitzer and crew, hunting pirate vessels. Following the



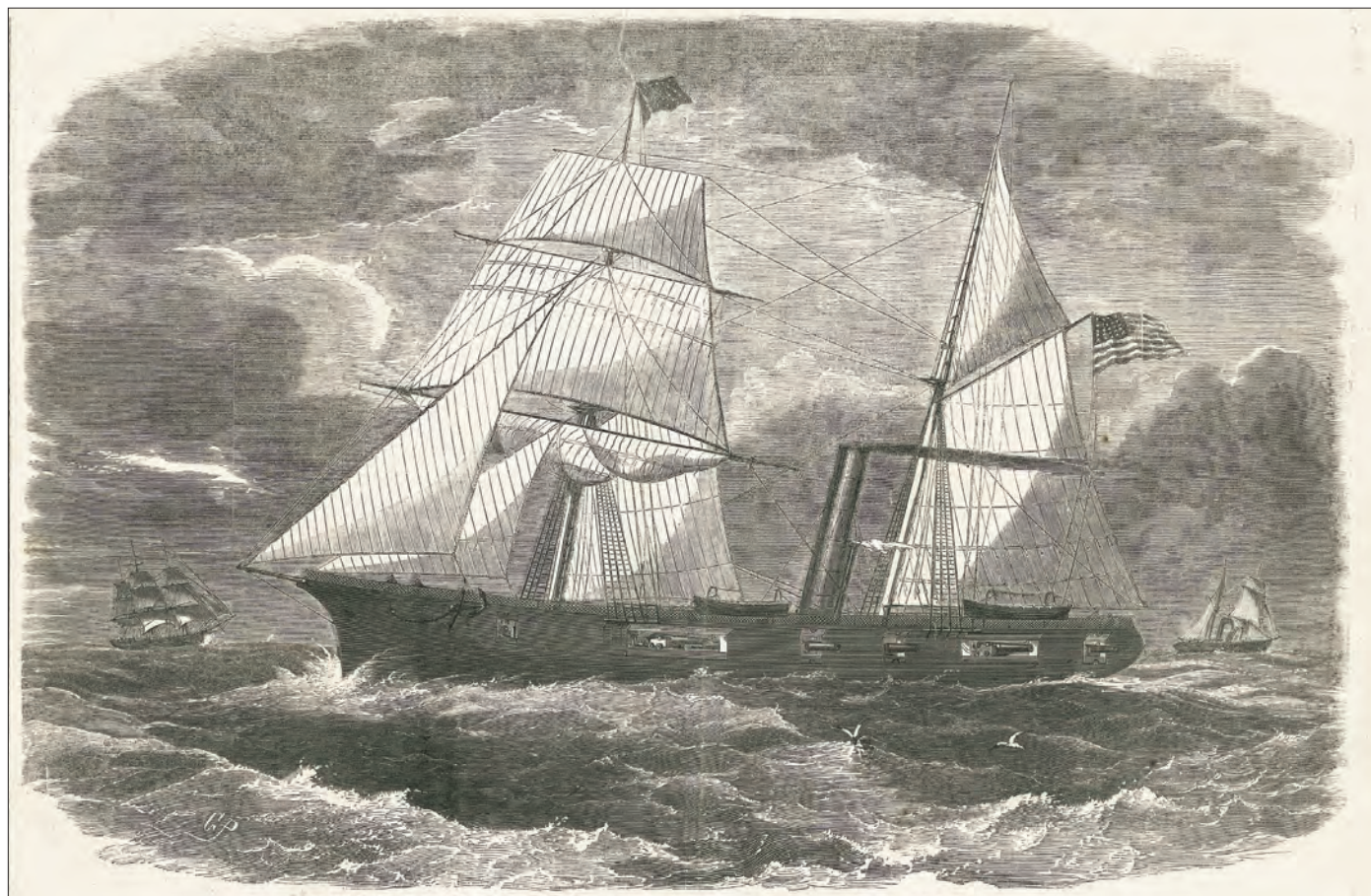
Stevens's Bomb-Proof Floating Battery. Illustration based on a sketch by B.S. Osbon published in *Harper's Weekly*, Volume V, No. 227, p 284, May 4, 1861. Osbon reported (reprinted from the *World*): "...It is said, when completed, there will be nine shells or plates of iron, with space between, making a wall twenty-seven inches in thickness. Being sharp at the bow, she can be used for cutting a vessel in two. She was designed to carry thirty guns of the heaviest caliber on her gun-deck, and mount four Paixhan guns on her spar deck, and furnaces for heating red-hot shot were to be placed in different parts of the ship. Thus built, she would prove a valuable acquisition to our harbor defenses. She will have no masts, and will probably be about 6000 tons burden." (*Harper's*, p 285).

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capture of a large pirate junk involving some personal heroics, he was put in command of one of the boats and then as division commander over a group of the boats (1851). From Hong Kong, Osbon then joined the crew of another vessel named *Swallow*, which sailed into the Bering Sea and became trapped in the ice until the following spring in 1852. Reaching the Sandwich Islands, Osbon left *Swallow* and joined *William Henry Harbeck*, which sailed for Liverpool. After a short stay there, Osbon joined *Henry Clay* packet and sailed back to New York, having left almost six years earlier. On arrival, he located his grandparents and then traveled to reunite with his parents. In late 1853, Osbon traveled to Havana, Cuba, where he joined as second mate *Margaret Eliza*, a frigate vessel bound for Argentina. Off Buenos Aires, Osbon joined the Argentina Navy in a fight against revolutionaries. After a battle, he was made commander of a schooner. Eventually, he and his commander

resigned the Argentine Navy and Osbon returned to New York, where he joined the Irish bark *Louisa Kilham* and became her captain. The age of steam ships was on the rise and Osbon was caught in a transition. He arrived back in New York in 1858 and concluded his career in the merchant marine. The Civil War was approaching and soon his life would take a new and unexpected turn.

After a serendipitous request to give a lecture as a stand-in for an absent speaker, Osbon began lecturing for a number of months in New York City, “...I now found myself following a walk of life which in my wildest dreams I had never even contemplated—that of a public lecturer.” During this period, he was often asked by editors to provide written accounts of his talks and so his accounts were published by a number of city newspapers. Osbon decided he greatly enjoyed this new



The Iron-Clad War-Steamer Now Building at Mystic, Connecticut.—Sketched from the Original Drawings by B.S. Osbon. Illustration published in *Harper’s Weekly*, Volume V, No. 251, p 669, October 19, 1861.

avenue and became one of the first reporters for the newly established *World* newspaper (formed in 1860), “I now surrendered all other ambitions for newspaper work. I liked it and I found it easy.” One need only read a few random pages of Osbon’s memoirs to appreciate his “inimitable” ability to captivate and tell a story with his words, phrasing and inflections, and subtle humor and occasional hyperbole (as aptly noted in the foreword by the author-editor of his memoirs). One of his first significant achievements as a journalist was to be the first to report a description of the Stevens Bomb-Proof Floating Battery then under construction in Hoboken, New Jersey—a report that caught the attention of the managing editor of the *New York Daily Herald*, who was soon to become his employer.

Having just missed traveling with the *Star of the West* on the first mission to resupply Fort Sumter in January 1861, Osbon applied for permission to travel with the supply vessels aboard the Revenue Service Cutter *Harriet Lane* on the second mission in April 1861. The captain appointed Osbon as his clerk and signal officer to conform with regulations, and Osbon became the only newspaper reporter in the flotilla. The mission ships were unable to cross the Charleston bar and reach the fort and took fire from the shore batteries. Ultimately, they observed surrender of the fort by Major Robert Anderson. Both Anderson and his troops boarded *Baltic* for the return to New York, and Osbon transferred to this vessel to interview Anderson for the *World*. Osbon remained with the financially troubled *World* for several weeks after the Sumter expedition. At this point, the managing editor of the *New York Daily Herald* sought Osbon and offered him a position as naval editor, which he gladly accepted, along with a significant raise in compensation.

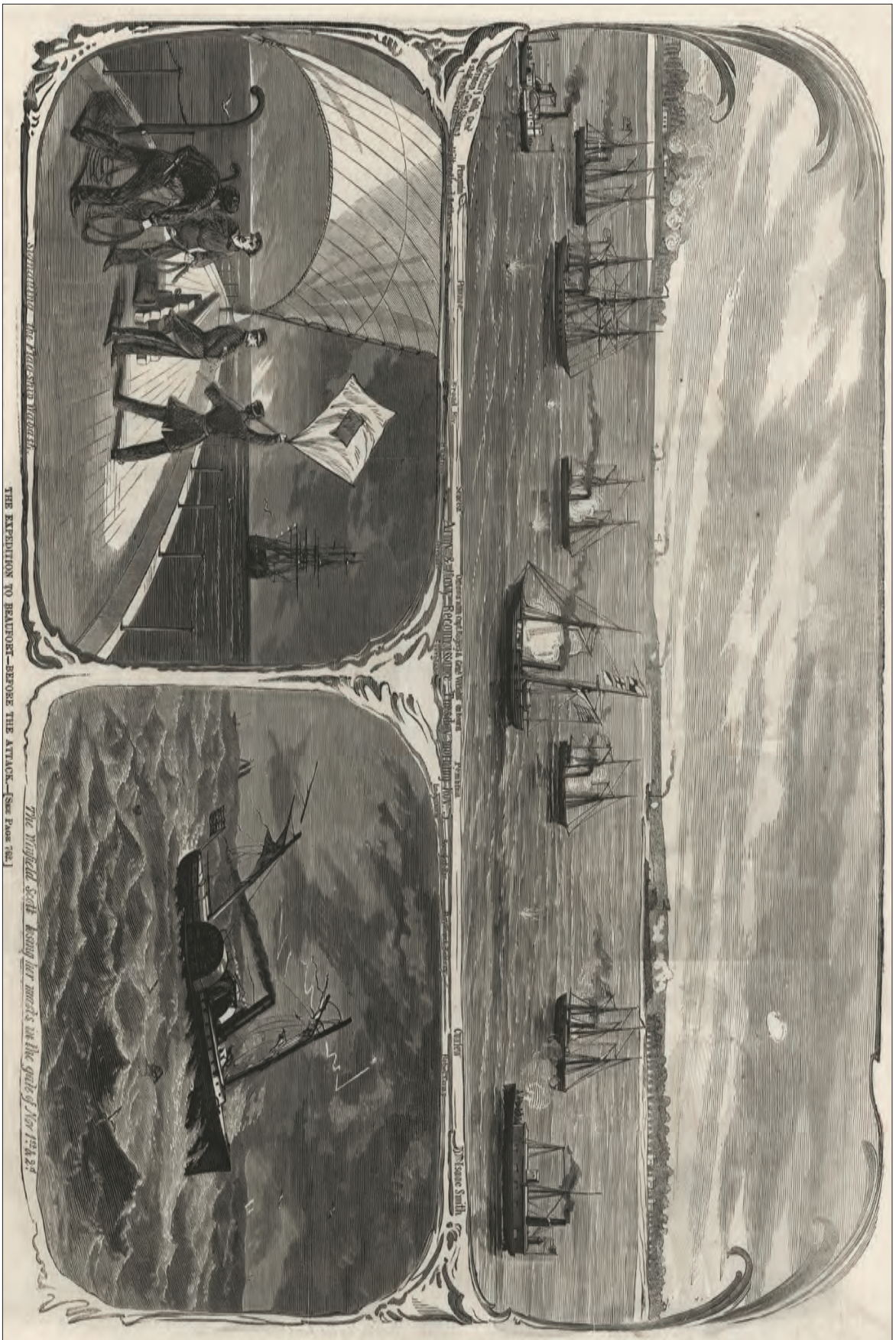
As several months with the *Herald* passed, Osbon believed it would be beneficial to be in the midst of the widening naval operations. He met with Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles to seek a commission in the Navy. While Welles offered him an acting master’s mate position, Osbon indicated that he would like to continue his journalistic activities and received a letter from Welles granting permission for him to accompany naval expeditions southward and allowing commanders to

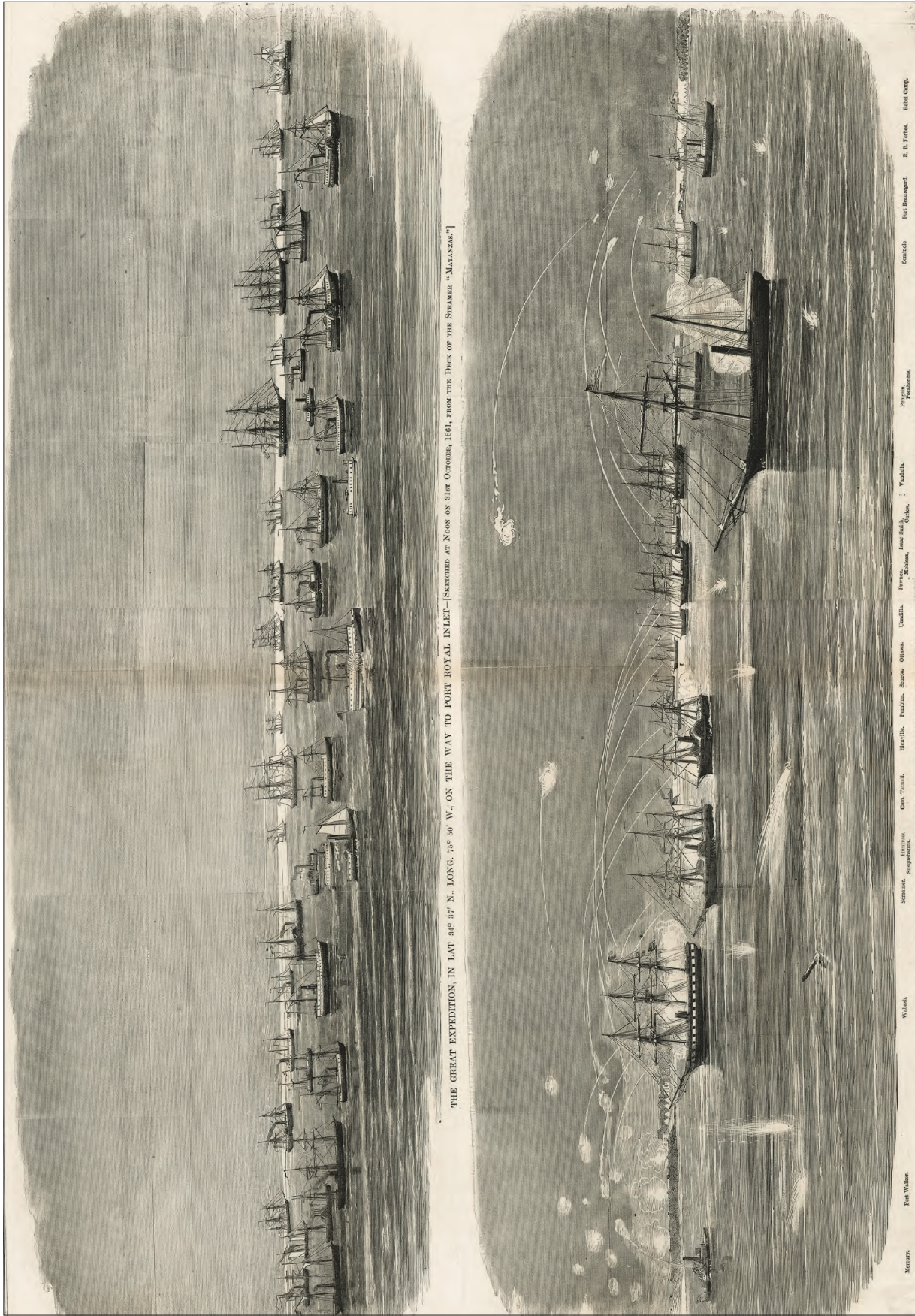
appoint him to a staff capacity provided it did not interfere with the regulations of the Navy. In October 1861, preparations were underway for “The Great Naval Expedition” to sail to a secret target in the South (Port Royal, South Carolina) and Osbon was given permission to accompany the expedition from Hampton Roads and a letter to this effect to the Flag-Officer Samuel Du Pont. While Osbon initially boarded *Wabash*, Du Pont’s flagship, he was transferred (to fill a staffing need) to *Matanzas* before departure. The expedition sailed October 29. Following a gale off Hatteras and arrival on station, Osbon returned to *Wabash*. On November 4, Osbon boarded the smaller *Mercury* that was sent forward to draw the shore battery fire to help assess the Confederate armament and firing distances. Osbon made multiple sketches for *Harper’s Weekly* (which published four full pages of his illustrations in its November 30, 1861 issue, some shown nearby) of the expedition and the subsequent attack occurring on November 7, and Osbon provided significant eyewitness reporting of the expedition and the naval victory. Afterward, he returned to New York aboard *Bienville*, and his story of the battle filled two full pages in the *Herald*.

Apparently in late November or early December 1861, Osbon traveled to Fort Monroe, obtained a pilot boat, and at night stealthily rowed to near Craney Island to observe and report on the appearance of the newly converted Confederate ironclad, *Merrimack* (CSS *Virginia*); he got an excellent view, reported on it for the *Herald* and made a sketch and sent it to *Harper’s* (shown nearby).

As Commander David Dixon Porter’s plan to reduce Forts Jackson and St. Philip so that a force might ascend the Mississippi River and capture New Orleans developed in late 1861, Osbon applied with Porter for an appointment as his secretary and fleet signal officer, with the privilege to continue his newspaper work—Porter approved and Osbon was to board *Harriet Lane* when the flotilla was ready to sail. In January 1862, David G. Farragut was appointed flag-officer for the expedition and Porter recommended that Osbon accompany Farragut instead and gave him a letter for Farragut. Farragut welcomed him to the flagship, *Hartford*, and

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(Top) The Great Expedition, in Lat. 34°, 37' N., Long. 75° 50' W on the way to Port Royal Inlet. (Bottom) Signaling the Flag-Ship Wabash. (Bottom) The Bombardment of Forts Walker and Beauregard, Port Royal Inlet, South Carolina, November 7, 1861. — Sketched by Our Special Artist on Board the "Mercury." Illustrations based on sketches by Osbon published in *Harper's Weekly*, Volume V, No. 257, p 760-761, November 30, 1861. Osbon reported (reprinted from the *Herald*) on the bombardment, Fort Walker, and General Wright's Headquarters (*Harper's*, p 762-763).

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The Iron-Clad Frigate “Merrimac,” and Sloop of War “Germantown,” off Craney Island.—[From a sketch by Our Special Artist.] Illustration based a sketch by B.S. Osbon published in *Harper’s Weekly*, Volume VI, No. 268, p 100, February 15, 1862.

tendered him the position of clerk on January 20th. While sailing to assemble the flotilla, Farragut became better acquainted with Osbon and his previous naval service and made him signal officer of the flotilla. In his memoirs, Osbon chronicles in detail the reconnaissance and preparations for the passage of the forts and the entirety of the actual passage and engagement with Confederate gunboats on April 24 and subsequent capture of New Orleans. Osbon performed his signaling duties admirably during the entire engagement. In addition, he performed a heroic feat that came to be known as ‘Osbon’s Prayer.’ In the midst of the action with passing the forts, the Confederate ram *Manassas* had shoved a blazing fire raft under the port quarter of *Hartford*, catching the rigging and side of the vessel on fire. Farragut saw Osbon kneeling nearby and not understanding what he was doing, said “Come Mr. Osbon, this is no time for prayer!” But Osbon was in the process of rolling three 20-pound rifle shells up to the side of the ship—he deftly uncapped the shells and threw them over the side into the fire raft—they exploded, tearing out the sides of the raft, which quickly sank. The flames on *Hartford* were then extinguished and the

vessel saved. Later, Farragut told one of his officers that Osbon was “one of the most useful persons onboard, intelligent, and full of resources.”

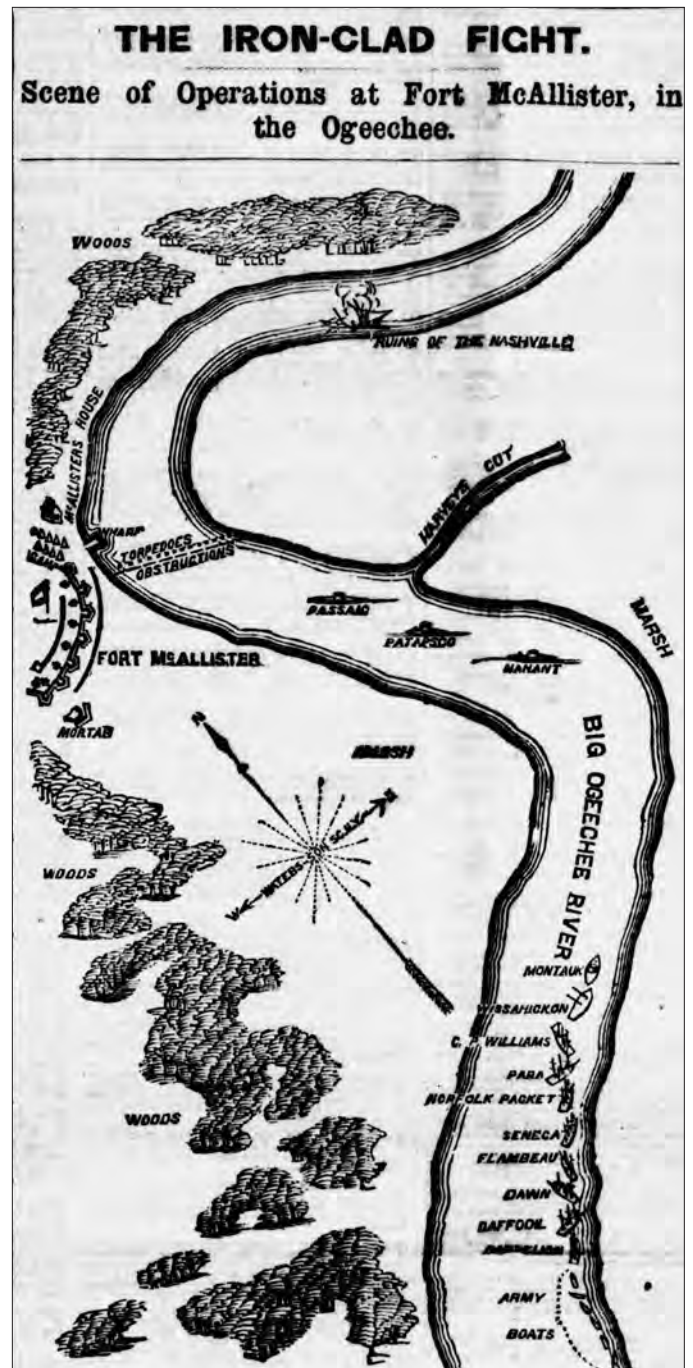
After the capture of New Orleans, Osbon was permitted by Farragut to accompany the two officers dispatched to Washington aboard *Cayuga* on April 29 to report the news to Lincoln and the Navy Department (some documents indicate this timing as his “resignation” from the Navy as April 30, 1862 in New Orleans). After a stop at Fort Monroe, *Cayuga* sailed on to Baltimore. On May 10, Osbon’s report of the action below New Orleans occupied nearly three pages of the *Herald* and two weeks later his illustrations were published in *Harper’s Weekly* (three full pages) in its May 24, 1862 issue (one of the pages shown nearby), along with very detailed descriptions by Osbon (p 327 of the issue). Shortly after his return to New York from the South, Osbon experienced gastric fever and so was unable to return to further accompany Farragut—he took some time to recover and made occasional trips to Fort Monroe or to the war front for a couple months.

In December 1862, Osbon applied with Commander

John L. Worden for position of clerk and signal officer on the ironclad monitor *Montauk*. Rear-Admiral Du Pont gave him special instructions to be the eyes of Worden (whose eyes had been injured in the action at Hampton Roads) and to keep detailed notes on the ironclad's actions and performance. *Montauk's* objective was to destroy or capture the steamer *Nashville* up the Ogeechee River that lay under the protection of the guns of Fort McAllister. On January 27, 1863, *Montauk* sailed and anchored below the fort and exchanged fire with the guns of the fort. It returned on February 1 and again engaged the fort. During this exchange, a tremendous shot from the fort hit the pilothouse, loosening some plate bolts that struck Osbon on the shoulder, while another of the bolts displaced his kneecap and broke two ribs. Another shot struck the ironclad shortly after and the concussive effect knocked Osbon unconscious. *Montauk* remained part of the blockading fleet for several weeks afterward, still hoping to destroy or capture *Nashville*. On February 27, *Nashville* was steaming downriver and became stuck on a bar—on the 28th, *Montauk* approached and began firing on *Nashville*, striking her and setting her afire and she ultimately burned and exploded. On her way back downriver, *Montauk* struck a Confederate torpedo but the damage was minor and repaired and she continued on. Osbon hurried to Port Royal to report to Du Pont. On March 13, Osbon's *Montauk* story and map filled the front page of the *Herald*.

Osbon retired from the *Herald* in the latter part of 1864 and established a bureau of naval intelligence, essentially a syndicated naval news reporting service. During 1864, Osbon compiled the *Hand Book of the United States Navy: Being A Compilation of All the Principal Events in the History of Every Vessel of the United States Navy From April, 1861 to May, 1864* (New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1864). In December 1864, he prepared and distributed to a group of newspapers a story on the coming attack on Fort Fisher, North Carolina, with the proviso it was not to be published until news of the attack was received; however, one newspaper did not wait and published it, prompting his arrest and imprisonment pending trial. A court-martial was held, but Osbon was acquitted. In July 1871, Osbon established the *Nautical Gazette*, the first weekly maritime

newspaper—it experienced a degree of commercial success for 13 years before he ultimately sold it. He was also elected secretary of the National Board of Steam Navigation. Osbon was also a charter member and served as the National Association of Naval Veterans' senior officer for two consecutive years, first elected in



The Iron-Clad Fight: Scene of Operations at Fort McAllister, in the Ogeechee. Map drawn by B.S. Osbon published in the *New York Daily Herald* (New York, NY), Whole No. 9676, p 1, col 3-4, March 13, 1863. Osbon's full report occupied the entire front page of the *Herald* and concluded on p 8, col 1-5 of the newspaper.

Bradley Sillick Osbon: Sailor-Journalist-‘Special Artist’ for Harper’s



(Top) Flag-Officer Farragut's Gulf Squadron, and Commodore Porter's Mortar Fleet. — From a Sketch by Our Special Artist on Board the Flag-Ship. (Bottom) Reconnaissance of Forts Jackson and St. Philip on the Mississippi. By Gun-boats from Flag-Officer Farragut's Squadron. — Sketched by Our Special Artist with the Squadron. Illustrations based on sketches by B. S. Osbon published in *Harper's Weekly*, Volume VI, No. 280, p 293, May 10, 1862.

THE EXPEDITION AGAINST NEW ORLEANS.—Secured by our Special Artist.—[See Page 287.]



Rebel Forts.
BOMBARDMENT OF THE REBEL FORTS JACKSON AND ST. PHILIP, APRIL 24, 1862.

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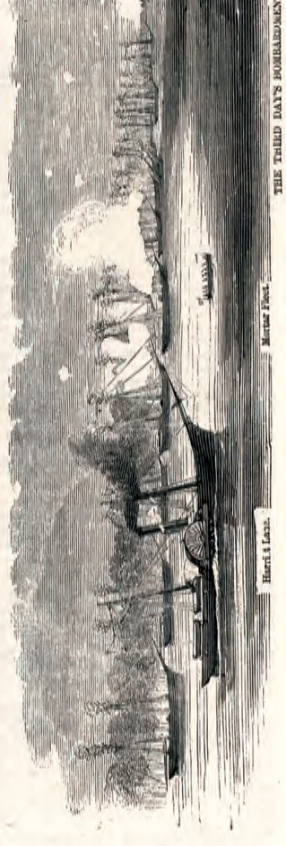
Rebel Forts.
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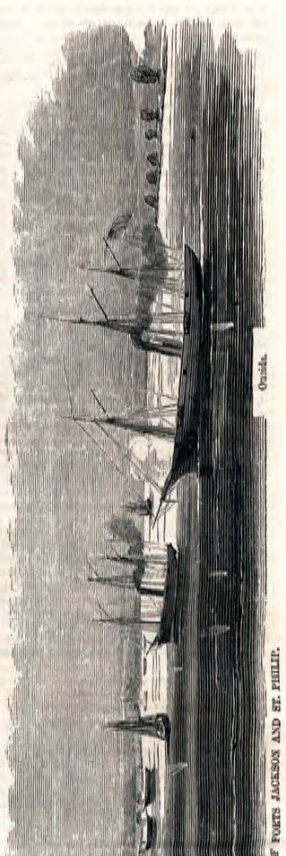
THE UNITED STATES STEAMER "MISSISSIPPI" CRIPPLING THE RAM "MANASSAS," APRIL 24.



THE UNITED STATES STEAMER "MISSISSIPPI" CRIPPLING THE RAM "MANASSAS," APRIL 24.



FIRE-Raft SENT DOWN BY THE REBELS, APRIL 24.



THE THIRD DAY'S BOMBARDMENT OF FORTS JACKSON AND ST. PHILIP.

The Expedition Against New Orleans.—Sketched by Our Special Artist. (Top) Bombardment of the Rebel Forts Jackson and St. Philip, April 24, 1862. (Middle, left) Fire-Raft Sent Down by the Rebels, April 17. (Middle, right) The United States Steamer "Mississippi" Crippling the Ram "Manassas," April 24. (Bottom) The Third Day's Bombardment of Forts Jackson and St. Philip. Illustrations based on sketches by B.S. Osbon published in *Harper's Weekly*, Volume VI, No. 282, p. 324, May 24, 1862.

Bradley Sillick Osbon: Sailor-Journalist-‘Special Artist’ for Harper’s



The War on the James—The Union Fleet off City Point, Va., Ready to Meet the Rebel Rams.—From a Sketch by B.S. Osbon. Illustration published in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, Volume XVIII, No. 455, p 201, June 18, 1864.

September 1892 and then reelected in September 1893. He also served as the initial commander of the Farragut Association of Philadelphia, serving for five terms, and was a charter member (and senior officer for one year) of the Farragut Association of New York. Osbon characterized his remaining years of life and fortunes as “varied and often peculiar,” a rather typical Osbon understated characterization. During the Spanish-American War, he reported to the Navy Department his observations of the Spanish Fleet off and in the port of Curaçao. Other varied and, sometimes unusual, undertakings, travels, and meetings with various dignitaries are detailed at length in his memoirs.

Osbon married Elizabeth Balfour at Brunswick Chapel, Liverpool, England, on February 15, 1868. Osbon had been previously married to Mary Esther Drummond, but they were not officially divorced until September 16, 1868. Osbon lived most of his adult life in New York City with his second wife. An initial application in 1892 for a disability pension for injuries received while serving on the *Montauk* was denied for inadequate documentation of his naval service—he subsequently sought and received a multitude of testimonial letters from former naval officers with whom he had served to support his

naval experience. He applied again and received a navy disability pension in 1904. In their final years, the Osbons became financially destitute. Osbon, who suffered from arteriosclerosis and interstitial nephritis, died from bronchopneumonia at Post-Graduate Hospital (although some obituaries report he died at home) at the age of 84 on May 6, 1912, in New York City after experiencing several months of a significant decline in health. He was interred at White Plains Rural Cemetery, White Plains, Westchester County, New York. His wife, Elizabeth, applied for a navy widow’s pension after he died—however, her application process was lengthy and legally complicated by both her and Osbon’s previous marriages and questions relating to their divorces and whether she was now indeed a qualified widow by law. Elizabeth’s physical and mental health was very poor and declining, and she was hospitalized before transferring to the Home of the Good Shepherd in Saratoga Springs, New York, as a charitable case. She was finally approved for a widows’ pension in September 1913 and died just a few years later on April 2, 1916. Together, the couple reportedly had seven children, all of whom had died before Osbon’s death in 1912. His personal life was not described in his memoirs.



Explosion of the Gun Whilst Saluting the U.S. flag at Fort Sumter. From a sketch by Bradley S. Osbon, Special Correspondent of the "World." The explosion resulted in the death of Private Daniel Hough and injuries to others in the gun's crew. Illustration published in the *New-York Illustrated News*, Volume III, No. 78, p 405, May 4, 1861. From the collections of the New York State Library, Manuscripts and Special Collections, Albany, New York.

Osbon had a total of 28 drawings published as illustrations in *Harper's Weekly* (as identified by the author), one in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* (Volume XVIII, No. 455, p 201, June 18, 1864), and three in the *New York Illustrated News* (Volume III, No. 78, p 405, 412, 416, May 4, 1861). Osbon had a significant talent for observation and the ability to provide detailed reporting of these observations for some important newspapers during the war, as well an ability to draw accurate sketches of naval vessels and scenes, although few of his original drawings survive. His early experience on the seas and a lifetime of naval experiences prepared him well for the journalistic reporting career of his midlife. His U.S. Navy appointments during the Civil War allowed him to observe firsthand some of the key early naval actions of the war. While other 'Special Artists' had significantly more naval illustrations published, only a small group of them produced portfolios of wartime naval illustrations comparable to or larger than that of 'Captain B .S. Osbon.'

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Gary McQuarrie is Managing Editor of *Civil War Navy—The Magazine* and resides in New Hope, PA.