

**The Second National battle ensign of C.S.S. *Alabama* worn during the latter part of the action against U.S.S. *Kearsage* on 19 June 1864 and subsequently presented to English merchant Hugh Rowland Beaver by an officer of the ship.**

## The Action

On 19 June 1864, after months of harrying enemy shipping, the Confederate cruiser *Alabama* was engaged by the Union vessel *Kearsage* in the English Channel off Cherbourg. The ensign flown by *Alabama* into action that day was shot away early in the action. Unable to prolong the fight without showing colours, the captain Raphael Semmes, in his own words, ordered the lost flag to be 'immediately replaced by another at the mizzen mast'<sup>1</sup>. When it became apparent that *Alabama*—after prolonged and devastating fire from the superior *Kearsage*—could no longer sustain the fight, Semmes ordered the colours struck and his men to abandon the sinking ship. Semmes himself stripped down and after throwing his sword into the sea to avoid its capture as a trophy<sup>2</sup>, plunged into the water after his crew.

One of the three last men to abandon ship was Lieutenant Arthur Sinclair. He later explained his reluctance to leave the sinking ship by declaring his 'inability to grasp the fact that the *Alabama* was gone!'<sup>3</sup> However, he also admitted that he had been trying to secure some gold sovereigns in a cloth around his neck before evacuating the ship; a scene witnessed by Second Assistant Engineer Matthew O'Brien who shoved the lieutenant into the water before diving in himself.<sup>4</sup> As the men swam away they witnessed the final moments of their ship as the bow shot high out of the water before sliding to the bottom of the sea.

## The Aftermath

Captain Semmes, Lieutenant Sinclair and other officers from *Alabama* were rescued from the water by the English yacht *Deerhound*. They were taken to Southampton where they variously sought assistance from English friends and acquaintances sympathetic to the Confederate cause. Semmes eventually found refuge with the Reverend Tremlett at Belsize Park in London who then accompanied the captain on a short tour of the Continent before Semmes made his way back to the Confederate states.

Meanwhile, Lieutenant Sinclair was given sanctuary in London by the English merchant Hugh Rowland Beaver (1842-1879). From a prosperous cotton mill owning family in the north of England, Beaver was instinctively supportive of the Confederate cause. Moreover, as a partner in the Singapore based trading firm Cumming, Beaver & Co., which represented Confederate interests in the East, he had lent vital assistance to *Alabama* and her crew during the ship's brief stop at the colony six months earlier in December 1863. Captain Semmes described Beaver as 'a clever English merchant [who] came on board, and offered to facilitate us all in his power, in the way of procuring supplies'.<sup>5</sup> Semmes had then passed an evening at Beaver's country residence marvelling at the merchant's 'luxurious style' of living. Lieutenant Sinclair, together with other officers, also enjoyed Beaver's lavish

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<sup>1</sup> Semmes, 757

<sup>2</sup> Robinson, 143

<sup>3</sup> Sinclair, 272

<sup>4</sup> Sinclair, 279

<sup>5</sup> Semmes, 714



hospitality. 'Nothing was left undone for our amusement', he recalled, 'Our ship's affairs were in his able hands; and through him the labours of our industrious paymasters were reduced to a minimum, and all the intricacies of bargain and trade carried out. To the officers on pleasure bound he was adviser and guide, and when the labours of the days were over with him, and the round of pleasure and sight-seeing with us, his home was the haven where our rest and refreshment awaited us. Indeed we could not very well have dispersed with his care, and have achieved a tithe of the enjoyment he managed to secure for us.'<sup>6</sup> When *Alabama* eventually steamed out of Singapore harbour, Sinclair felt 'indebted to [Beaver] for many attentions and delicate evidences of sympathy and friendship'.

Now, under very different circumstances, the two men met again at Beaver's London residence where Sinclair found the 'same completeness of hospitality.'<sup>7</sup> Since assisting *Alabama* at Singapore, Beaver had travelled back to England ahead of his marriage on 12 July 1864—barely three weeks after the action in the English Channel—to Mary Jane Robins. Sixty years later, Beaver's cousin Sir Hugh Beaver stated that it was Captain Semmes who now gave Hugh Rowland Beaver the Second National Confederate flag saved from *Alabama* before she sank. In fact, it is more likely that it was Lieutenant Sinclair, already spotted taking souvenirs from the sinking ship, who presented Beaver with the flag during his stay with the merchant after the battle. Sinclair's motivation for gifting such a precious relic to Beaver was manifold. Not only would it repay the obligation he felt for the Englishman's earlier hospitality in Singapore but it also recognised the vital aid afforded to him in the days after the battle when Sinclair faced an uncertain future marooned in a foreign country. Moreover, like Semmes' disposal of his sword, giving the flag to a trusted friend in England reduced the risk of it falling into enemy hands as a trophy. It also lessened the likelihood of Sinclair facing inconvenient questions about his own possession of the flag, a reason which may explain the lack of any mention of the flag's fate in Sinclair's autobiography.

## The Legacy

Hugh Rowland Beaver returned to Singapore and died there aged 37 on 23 December 1879. Without children and his wife having predeceased him, his estate, including the *Alabama* flag, passed to his younger brother Robert Atwood Beaver (1846-1901). It was from Robert Atwood Beaver that Sir Hugh Beaver (1890-1968) most likely heard the story of the flag which he later recounted in 1928 in an article for *Transactions of the Anglesey Antiquarian Society and Field Club* where he unambiguously described the flag as having been 'saved' from the sinking ship<sup>8</sup> and 'probably the only tangible relic of one of the great raiders in naval history'. The provenance was further confirmed by Robert Atwood Beaver's great great granddaughter Mrs Leach in a letter to the *Mariner's Mirror* in 1973.<sup>9</sup> Then owner of the flag, on Mrs Leach's death the flag passed to her son Robin Leach who consigned the flag for sale at Sotheby's New York as Lot 157 in *Fine Books and Manuscripts*, 17 June 2011.

## Conclusion

The historical account, personal testimony and unbroken family ownership associated with the Second National flag of C.S.S.*Alabama* sold by Sotheby's on 17 June 2011 confirm, beyond reasonable doubt, that the flag was flown by the ship during the engagement with

<sup>6</sup> Sinclair, 210

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>8</sup> *Transactions*, 59

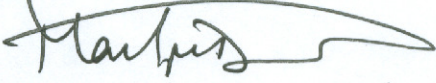
<sup>9</sup> *Mariner's Mirror*, Vol.59, No.3 (August 1973) p.351.



U.S.S. *Kearsage* on 19 June 1864 and that it was subsequently saved from the sinking ship before being gifted to Hugh Rowland Beaver. This conclusion is further supported by the conclusions of a *Report on the Construction and Condition of a Third National Confederate Flag from the Alabama, 1864* completed by Poppy Singer, Textile Conservator, in June 2010 in which she states that the archaeological residues and staining on the flag are 'consistent with general smoke absorption and possible blood staining'.

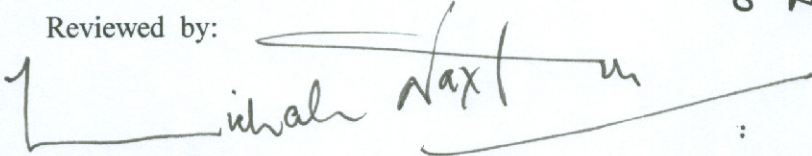
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