Destruction of the C.S.S. Albemarle and More Fighting Around Petersburg

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The CSS Albemarle, a steam powered ironclad built at Edwards Ferry, North Carolina, protected the Roanoke River and Eastern North Carolina during the Spring and Summer of 1864. Commissioned in April of that year, the vessel was just over 150 feet in length, and armed with two powerful Brooke rifled cannon. Four inches of iron plating protected it from enemy fire, and it also boasted an eighteen foot long iron ram. The ironclad, commanded by James W. Cooke, played an important role in the Confederate capture of Plymouth, North Carolina, sinking one Union gunboat and damaging another. In May 1864, while enroute to take part in a Confederate attack on New Bern, the Albemarle engaged seven Federal gunboats, suffering damage which forced it to retreat up the Roanoke River where it could help defend Confederate-held Plymouth.

As the vessel remained a threat to Union blockaders, an effort was made in October to destroy the ironclad in a daring raid. Lieutenant William B. Cushing prepared a small steam-powered launch, to which was fitted a boom or spar with an attached torpedo. On the evening of October 27 Cushing and a small crew of sailors steamed upriver towards the Albemarle. As the Yankees approached they were discovered and fired upon by Rebel sentries. Cushing also found the Confederate ship protected by a boom of chained logs. Instead of stopping, he steered the vessel over the log barrier and then, through a hail of bullets, placed the torpedo against the Albemarle’s hull. The subsequent explosion destroyed the Union launch, but also caused the Confederate vessel
to sink. Most of Cushing’s crew was captured and several drowned, but the lieutenant avoided capture and eventually made his way back to the Union blockading fleet.

Following the Albemarle’s destruction, Federal forces were able to capture Plymouth. Cushing received promotion to lieutenant commander, a vote of thanks from the U.S. Congress, and the nickname “Albemarle Cushing.” As a result of this and other exploits, historian Chris Fonvielle, Jr. has written that “[n]o U.S. Navy officer emerged from the Civil War better known or more respected than William Barker Cushing.”

By mid-October 1864, the siege of Petersburg and Richmond was entering its fifth month. Ulysses S. Grant utilized the Army of the Potomac and Army of the James to probe Confederate defenses and force Robert E. Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia to lengthen its lines protecting the two cities. In late October, Grant launched his so-called Sixth Offensive. He sent elements of Benjamin Butler’s Army of the James against the Richmond defenses, while George Meade’s Army of the Potomac attacked the Petersburg line with a goal of capturing the Southside Railroad. Confederate General James Longstreet was able to extend his lines and stop the threat to Richmond, winning a victory at the Second Battle of Fair Oaks or Darbytown Road on October 27. To the south the Union Second Corps under Winfield Hancock, and the Fifth Corps under Gouverneur Warren, launched a movement towards the Boydton Plank Road and Hatcher’s Run near Burgess’ Mill. Southern cavalry, along with elements of A.P. Hill’s Corps were able to stop the advance before it threatened the vital Southside Railroad. The failure of Grant’s Sixth Offensive, at a cost of several thousand casualties, ended active campaigning near Richmond and Petersburg for the remainder of the year. Among those captured was Elisha Rodman Lamb of the 89th New York Infantry, who was
imprisoned at Salisbury, North Carolina before being released in early 1865—just one of several hundred thousand soldiers who suffered through captivity during the war.