The odds were 349 to 1, although Dick Dowling and his Texans weren’t the type to let that figure stop them from fighting the most liquid battle of the Civil War.

THE WHISKY VS. FEARSOME WARRIORS FLEET

BY HART STILWELL AND GAYLE McNUTT

Illustrated by Tom Lovell

One night a hundred years ago, a Union fleet of five iron-clad warships and 18 transports loaded with 15,000 troops lay at anchor off the coast of Texas. And from a crude mud fort in the bulrushes at the mouth of the Sabine River, a Confederate garrison of 43 men, watching the flashing signal lights of the invasion force, acted for all the world like small boys at a fireworks display.

“Now here’s our orders.” The young lieutenant in charge made a grandiose gesture out of waving a sheet of white paper about, and a satyrlic grin spread above the short formal beard he wore. “I’ll read ‘em aloud if you like. But they’re no more than a fancy way o’ sayin’ we’re to spike the guns and get the hell out o’ here. And they’re signed by General J. Bannhead Magruder—old King John himself!” He frowned at the chuckling he’d caused, his bushy brows puckering. “I trust you low-down dock-wallopers realize he’s the supreme commander for the entire Southwest, includin’ all o’ the sacred soil o’ Texas.”

The mock severity in his voice brought another roar of laughter, and like a veteran minstrel-show interlocutor, he waited for quiet. As skillful as he seemed in holding the attention of his men, he wasn’t exactly holding them at attention; they were, in fact, very much at ease. All along the mounded dirt rampart and through the network of shallow trenches they were sprawled like a strange species of burrowing creature basking in bright
moonlight. Some lay flat on their backs; others rested on their sides with their heads propped up on their elbows. Except that all appeared to be the same color as the earthworks that lay between them and the sea, there were few signs of a uniform. But there was one thing about this particular garrison that strongly suggested it was composed of fighting men—even by moonlight, scar-streaked faces and broken, twisted noses hinted at lifetimes spent in constant battle.

"There's no reason for pretendin' we're any match for what's out there"—the lieutenant let his tone turn confidential and contemplative—"or even hopin' we can hold 'em up for long. But there's also no reason why their skippers shouldn't stay in the channel when they first head in, and with the little trick we set up this mornin' we just might get us a gunboat 'fore they come and take us. That's the shape of it, boys." He resumed his pitchman pose. "So what do we do? Obey His Majesty's order like good little Southern gentlemen? Or stay right here and fight?"

He knew exactly what he'd hear, even before the shouted responses of "Fight!" began blasting back at him. For after priming his six small cannon, he'd primed his garrison, too, using generous samples of his stock in trade—and his trade happened to be that of bartender and saloon-keeper. Furthermore, he knew his men well, having personally recruited them from the most rowdy of his regular customers. His name was Richard W. Dowling, and his command was a unit of the Davis Guards, called "Davies" by their fellow Texans and generally regarded as the scum of the Houston Irish quarter. But at the moment these 43 men, feeling no pain from mosquito bites after plastering themselves with mud on the outside and rye whisky within, were all that stood between Texas and an invasion army that would be invincible once it came ashore.

With the cast changed and the odds more than 10 times as tough, the stage seemed set for a comic-opera attempt at re-enacting the famous scene that had taken place 27 years earlier, when some 200 Texans had won death and immortality by holding off Santa Anna's 7,000-man army for a dozen days at a mission called the Alamo in San Antonio. But this drama of 1863 was destined to have a slightly different ending. Before they were done, Dowling and his dock-wallopers would write a chapter of military history so incredible, so impossible to explain, that most Civil War chroniclers have preferred to pretend it never really happened.

As fight-loving as this 25-year-old lieutenant may have seemed in rallying his men, he was by no means one of the fire-breathing sons of the South who'd rushed off to tangle with Northerners at the first hint of hostilities. Actually, he had more in common with the traditions of Yankee traders than with those of the Confederacy. An immigrant boy with a flair for clownish theatrics that belied his basic shrewdness, he'd left his New Orleans...
The Whisky Warriors vs. the Fearsome Fleet

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home, built up a fair stake as a roving gambler, then invested it in a Houston tavern at the age of 19. Renaming the place The Bank of Bacchus, he’d issued formal announcements on the financial pages of the newspapers that his institution was “chartered for the express purpose of dealing in the exchange of liquors for gold, silver and bank notes,” signing himself “President and Cashier.”

Homeowners had laughed at his antics but bought his whiskey. By the time the Civil War came, he’d prospered to the point where he could open three branch banks—a poolroom, a gambling hall and a public bath, each complete with a bar.

Although Dick Dowling had been lukewarm about defending such causes as states’ rights or the perpetuation of a cotton-planting aristocracy, he’d had some hot notions about the right of every man to defend his own property. And he’d winced at the thought of what would happen to the vaults of the Bank of Bacchus if a Northern army of occupation were ever settled on Texas, particularly one with a sizable sprinkling of his own countrymen. So when a homeguard militia was formed, with a special division for Irishmen, he’d accepted a lieutenant’s commission.

“We’re officially Company F, First Texas Regiment, Heavy Artillery, Confederate States Army,” he’d announced, preceding to the bar of his bank and addressing men he’d enlisted chiefly with the promise of free withdrawal privileges. “Now, has anyone here ever fired a cannon?”

No one had, but this had seemed fitting enough, since the cannon assigned them hadn’t been fired in years—four ancient smoothbores and a pair of Indian-war howitzers. Oiling and cursing the pieces into working order and learning their use by trial and error, Dowling’s detachment had some skirmishing and suffered casualties in January of 1863. The battle had been a successful attempt to drive Union blockaders from Galveston Island, but the casualties had come later, with the bearded lieutenant opening his vaults for a celebration.

“One more such victory, and we’ll need no defeats,” he’d moaned the next morning, looking back on a night-long brawl that had seen a man shot and another laid up with a broken leg.

Some news that would have been sobering for lesser men had arrived that same year. The Northern high command had finally turned its attention to Texas. In an effort to shut off the source of a large share of the beef and grain that fed the Southern armies, and to cut the vital lifeline by which cotton went out to foreign markets and munitions came in, a vast armada of 23 ships and 15,000 men under the command of Gen. William B. Franklin had sailed from New Orleans. With censorship non-existent and newspapers carrying detailed accounts of the entire operation, Confederate General Magruder, defending Texas, had known exactly what was coming, approximately when and very probably where. What he hadn’t borrowed was how, with a militia of old men, boys and a handful of discipline-defying Irishmen, he could be expected to do anything about it. He’d made the hopeless gesture of ordering his pathetic forces deployed at the most likely points of attack.

“King John wishes us to man the ramparts of old Fort Griffin,” the glib-tongued bartender had told his Davies, once again permitting unlimited withdrawals on the Bank of Bacchus. And the staggering artillery started the near-100-mile trip the next morning. But they’d arrived to find no ramparts to be manned. Union warships had thoroughly demolished Fort Griffin.

“This poses a bit of a problem,” Dowling had allowed, hurriedly dispatching an empty wagon back to his bank before his garrison had time to grow dispirited. He’d ordered some rough shelters built from the debris and a great wall of mound mud thrown up, then supervised a session of gunnery practice. But after watching water being splashed all over the bay, he’d been forced to face up to the fact that, as accurate as his boys might be with a throw bottle, their chances of hitting a moving gunboat were very remote. This had posed another bit of a problem, and the solution he’d devised was taught in no artillery school.

“If we can’t shoot where the ships are,” he’d reasoned, “we’ll just have to wait till the ships come where we’re shootin’.”

And all through the morning of September 7, he’d worked the cannon in on the two buoys that marked the harbor channel. Then, with the wagon back and little left but the waiting, he’d declared another dividend from the Bank of Bacchus. By the time the Union fleet had appeared, just before dark that day, the mud fort’s garrison had been so warmly fortified that the sight of a horizon lined solidly with enemy ships had failed to instill the slightest chill of panic. And late that night, when Magruder’s order to spike the guns and get out arrived, the Davies became roisterously indifferent at the very thought.

In the morning the bearded but boyish lieutenant made an honest attempt at sobering his men up, ordering great pots of black coffee brewed in a makeshift kitchen. But the Union gunboats refused to cooperate; they steamed in to send their long-range salvos shoreward and blew up kitchen and coffee alike with one of the first shots fired. Lying low before the incessant bombardment with hands grasping throbbing foreheads, the defenders were amazed to see their hastily erected rampart remaining intact. The distant booming became an unbroken thunder. Nearly 100 heavy balls thudded through the air in a barrage that would have demolished the thickest wood or stone wall. But the mounted mud absorbed them like a gigantic sponge.

The warships finally withdrew. Robbed of its coffee, the garrison had to treat its hangovers with the same medicine that had caused them. Then the morning dragged on by with no further move by
the enemy fleet. With the sun like molten metal above and the smell of the surrounding swamps sharp in the air, the waiting gradually grew even more unbearable than the pounding barrage had been.

"Let 'em come and get us," men began muttering in the heavy hush. "What the devil they waitin' for?"

Suddenly, just before noon, a sentry called down from a crest behind them. "Hey! Here's help on its way!"

Climbing the sun-baked mud and shading his eyes, Dick Dowling saw the gunboat Uncle Ben steaming downriver toward them, the Confederate flag flying proudly from her mast. "Look at her!" he observed happily. "Just like a brave old bulldog facin' a pack o' wolves. Let's cheer her on, boys!"

Just as that cheer sounded, the Union ship Sachem sidled shoreward. A distant blast sounded, and a geyser of spray erupted in the river. A second shot came, and a third. Then the Uncle Ben made a sharp U-turn and went hurrying back upstream.

"Well, I'll be a son-of-a-bitch," Dowling gasped, as the cheering cut out. All at once he broke out laughing. He couldn't help it—the sight was too comical. "Sort o' has her tail 'tween her legs now," he roared.

His hilarity was infectious, and a burst of high spirits returned, to be heightened a short time later when a group of patriotic ladies from the nearby town of Sabine brought out packed lunches and served them. With a feminine audience for the next few hours, the blarneying bartender was at his charm best—until a little past mid-afternoon, when he looked out to sea and suddenly turned grim and businesslike. "Get the women out o' here," he ordered.

Five of the Union ships had begun moving toward the gunboats Sachem and Arizona on the far side of the reef-split channel, their sister ships Clifton and Granite City on the near side, the big transport General Banks tight to their wake.

"Wait for the buoys," he reminded his men as the enemy gunners opened up. With seven cannon smoking, the lead ship Sachem pushed her prow across the far channel marker, 1,200 yards out.

"Fire!"

The first pre-aimed smoothbore scored a direct hit on the gunboat's foredeck, just as a fellow named Michael McKernan set the next gun blasting and sent a cannonball squarely into the Sachem's bowhead. A cloud of steam exploded from it, the shattered ship drifted helplessly toward the shallows.

"Watch it on the near buoy!" Dowling yelled. His barroom brawlers were so busy congratulating each other that they were not even noticing, steadily firing Clifton get past their sole line of sight. Three of the fort's cannon boomed at the last possible moment, and one lucky shot clipped a stern tiller rope. Veering wildly, the second gunboat drifted out of control.

Each of the shore battery's six pieces had now been fired; according to the artillery manual, all need cooling and

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swabbing. But both the Arizona and the Granite City were fast approaching the buoy, moving at full steam, with all guns blazing to cover their stricken sisters, and Dick Dowling threw the book away. Even under the lash of his shouts and curses, the fort's cannon were barely reloaded in time, and Dick Dowling had already gotten out of line from their own recoil. The second salvo splintered the deck of the Arizona, but some of the shots intended for the untouched Granite City hit the General Banks instead. "Load 'em!" Dick Dowling roared at the bearded lieutenant ordered. "Keep 'em firin' till they melt!"

The enemy captains had no way of knowing there were only two small spots in the entire Gulf of Mexico where this particular battery could do any damage. All three ships reversed engines, obligingly sending themselves directly back into the fort's limited line of fire. Spraying more and more water with each succeeding barrage but still scoring several new hits, the fort's guns kept firing. And yet selling subscriptions to True, Man's Magazine, and other leading publications can offer them.

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