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A. J. Gontier, Jr.

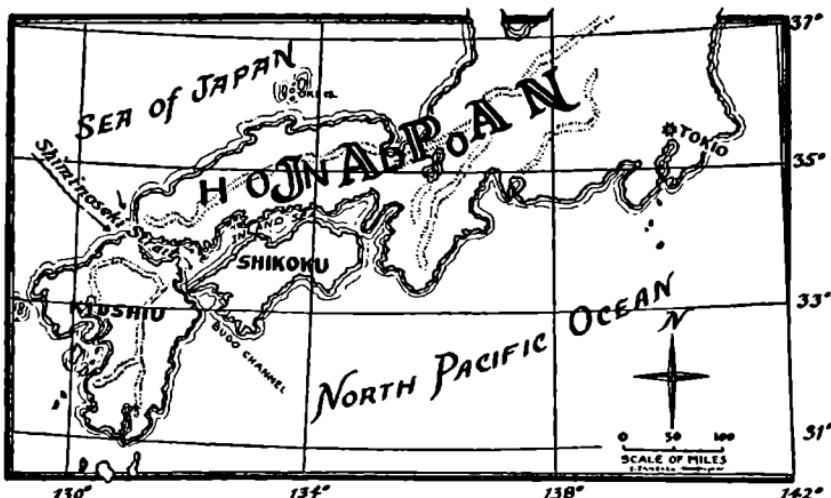
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Action at Shimonoséki

by ALLEN P. WESCOTT

THE RECENT BOMBING of the *Panay* of the Yangtze river patrol was not Japan's first attack upon an American warship. In 1863—just three quarters of a century ago—the U. S. S. *Wyoming* was attacked, but in the battle which ensued, the *Wyoming* sank two Japanese ships, disabled a third, destroyed one land battery, damaged six others, and emerged with but trifling losses although heavily outnumbered both in men and metal. While this action, judged from either skill or audacity, rivals such famous sea fights as those between the *Bonhomme Richard* and the *Serapis*, the *Constellation* and *La Vengeance*, or the *United States* and the *Macedonian*, and while the *Wyoming's* commander, David Stockton McDougal, certainly possessed all the valor, and the ability as a seaman, of Jones, Hull or Decatur, the battle in the Straits of Shimonoséki, occurring as it did on the

far side of the globe and at a time when we were involved in the Civil War, passed virtually unnoticed, and this daring exploit of the *Wyoming*, her gallant crew and commander, is all but unknown today.

The *Wyoming* was a sloop-of-war, second class, built at Philadelphia in 1858, and a sister ship to the renowned *Kearsarge* launched at Kittery, Maine, a bit later. She was long, narrow and fast with a tonnage of 726 and a displacement of 1560. She was about 200 feet in length with a 33-foot beam and a draught of about 16 feet. A screw ship of 843 horsepower and bark rigged, her speed was probably eleven or twelve knots. She mounted six guns—four 32-pounders and two 11-inch Dahlgren pivot-guns. Her crew numbered 160 officers and men. The two pivot-guns, one forward and one aft, were, in those days, among the heaviest of naval ordnance. They weighed about

17,000 pounds each and fired shells weighing 136 pounds which were propelled by 15 or 20 pounds of powder. Their range, when elevated 15 degrees, was some 3600 yards. McDougal, who assumed command early in 1861, was then fifty-four and a veteran of thirty-two years service including, of course, the Mexican War.

Fearful that the British-built Confederate privateers might extend their depredations to the eastern seas, the *Wyoming* was ordered to the Pacific where the *Alabama* had already destroyed some whalers.

While Japan became known to Europe through Marco Polo in the 13th Century, she was exclusive and nonprogressive and there had been little intercourse with other nations until Perry's visit to Yedo (now Tokio) ten years before the *Wyoming*'s exploit. Japan was still hostile to "barbarians" and the Mikado Koméi was determined to again close the ports, drive all aliens from the islands and return to the former hermit-like existence. The situation in Japan seventy-five years ago was not unlike that in China at the beginning of the present century when the "Boxers" rose against the "foreign devils." A wave of assassination and incendiarism swept the island empire and in April, 1863, while at Hong Kong, McDougal received word from the American minister at Yokohama urging him to bring the *Wyoming* and "be ready to use her guns for the protection of the Legation and American residents in Japan." Upon arrival McDougal found that a state of terror existed and the *Wyoming* afforded a safe haven for French, British and other nationals as well as Americans.

Japan was governed dually by the Mikado and a Shogun (Tycoon or military ruler), but the various provinces were largely controlled by *daimios*, or feudal nobles, who frequently acted independently of the Tokio government. Such was Choshu, lord of Nagato and guardian

of the Straits of Shimonoséki, who determined to wage an anti-foreign crusade on his own hook. These straits lie between the islands of Hondo and Kiushiu and form the western entrance to the inland sea. They are three miles long and vary in width from half a mile to a mile and a half, though the navigable channel is but a few hundred feet wide. The straits are crooked with numerous submerged rocks and shoals and the tides rush through at a rapid rate. Shimonoséki, the town at the entrance, has been called the "Gibraltar of the Japanese Mediterranean." To close these straits, the Choshu men had fortified the bluffs overlooking them, erecting seven batteries each consisting of from two to seven guns. In all there were about 30 pieces which were mounted on *ho-dai* (cannon platforms) 50 to 100 feet above sea level. These guns were mostly modern, foreign ones of large caliber. A few were 12- and 24-pounders but most of them were 32-pounders and there were several 8-inch Dahlgrens. These American cannon had been presented to Japan by the United States as a gesture of friendship.

TO AUGMENT these defenses, the Japanese had purchased and armed three ships. One was the iron steamer *Lancefield* of 600 tons obtained from an American firm. Another was the *Lanrick*, a clipper-built brig formerly used in the opium trade, while the third was the *Daniel Webster*, an American bark. The *Lancefield* was rechristened the *Koshin* while the *Lanrick* became the *Kosei*. The combined armament of the three men-of-war was 20 guns—mostly brass 24-pounders. The artillery then, of both ships and shore batteries, was about 50 guns and the combined personnel—the crews of the ships and the gunners ashore—probably totalled fully 1200 men. This was the force which McDougal was later to attack

with a 6-gun sloop and a crew of 160.

As soon as the forts had been constructed and the merchant ships converted to men-of-war, the Japanese underwent a thorough course in gunnery as they lay in wait for their first victim. They had not long to wait. On the 25th of June an American merchantman, the steamship *Pembroke*, entered the straits enroute to Nagasaki and Shanghai from Yokohama. She carried a native pilot furnished by the Japanese government and her skipper had no suspicion of hostilities until suddenly fired upon by the *Koshin* and the *Kosei*. The *Pembroke* escaped in the darkness retreating to the Pacific via the little-used Bungo channel. She disappeared so suddenly that the Japanese believed that they had sent her to the bottom and it was so reported at the American legation.

A couple of weeks later the French ship *Kien-chang* appeared at the straits and was immediately taken under fire. She was badly damaged and a number of her crew were killed, but she was able to make Nagasaki though in an almost sinking condition. Three days later the *Medusa*, a 16-gun steam frigate of the Dutch navy, entered the straits. She had not progressed far when she found herself subjected to concentrated fire from both ships and shore. The Dutchman kept up fire for half an hour but owing to his deep draught he dared not attack directly so gave it up and went his way. The *Medusa* had been hit 31 times and had suffered considerable damage, with nine casualties in her crew. Later a French gunboat, the *Tancrède*, was fired upon and damaged and a Satsuma steamer, mistaken for a foreign warship, was sunk. There was nothing wrong with Japanese gunnery!

On the 11th of July McDougal was informed of the supposed sinking of the *Pembroke*. He hastily put aboard stores and proceeded to the straits. McDougal had two Japanese pilots but was without a

chart of the waters or plan of the batteries. However he did know the draught of the *Koshin* and he believed that the *Wyoming* could go into any shallow waters that were sufficiently deep for the ex-*Lancefield*. He was undoubtedly fully aware of the odds against him, and that in the event of defeat he would have no choice but to fire the magazine and destroy his ship and men. Even against these odds, McDougal's attack was no rash plunge and while it required nerve and courage it was carefully planned and skilfully executed. He knew his ship and had confidence in himself and his crew. With his decks cleared for action, he sailed boldly into the straits via the Bungo channel which is a sort of side entrance to the east of the islands.

EARLY in the forenoon the *Wyoming* rounded the Monshi promontory and came within sight of the town, the batteries and the three Choshu ships. A welcoming shot fired at the *Wyoming* struck just above the engine room cutting away a windsail halyard. Quarters sounded and the hands took their places at the guns. The Japanese ships were just ahead. Kedge anchors hung from the *Koshin*'s yardarms to be used as grapples when the Japanese closed to board. The *Wyoming* was still in the narrow channel but despite the protests of the frightened pilots who feared he would ground her, McDougal left the channel and headed straight for the three ships, one of which, the *Koshin*, had steam up and was preparing to move. As the American approached, the shore batteries opened fire. The *Wyoming* instantly replied and one of her broadsides completely destroyed a battery though the Americans were unaware of it at the time. As the *Wyoming* came abreast of the bark the latter fired a broadside, killing two American seamen. A marine was also killed by a shot from the Sennenji battery. The *Wyoming* con-

tinued on and as she forged ahead of the brig she received another broadside. She was so close to her adversaries that the gun muzzles almost touched as they passed. Firing rapidly, the ships were fairly wrapped in flame. The Japanese gunners, firing furiously, were able to pour three broadsides into the *Wyoming* as she steamed past. One shell entered her just under one of the 32-pounders, killing or wounding all but three of her gun crew. A wounded seaman continued to work a gun alone until late in the action when he received reinforcements.

McDOUGAL had entered the passage against the tide and the strong current in the narrow straits made manoeuvre difficult, but despite this and the shot and shell rained upon the *Wyoming* she was not doing badly herself. Every shot fired at the bark and brig had taken effect and the latter was now in a sinking condition. Thus far the *Koshin* had taken but a minor part in the conflict. Now her anchor was up and she was preparing to manoeuvre. Just then the *Wyoming* ran aground. Under the heavy fire of six batteries and two ships, she struggled desperately to free herself. She wriggled loose just before the *Koshin* got close enough to ram or grapple her and the fight was resumed. The *Wyoming* had now traversed nearly the entire length of the straits and McDougal might have passed between Shimonoséki and Modji and out to the open sea but instead he swung her 'round again and ran the gauntlet a second time, now directing most of his attention to the *Koshin*.

BOATSWAIN'S mate Frank Wyatt was in charge of one pivot-gun; Peter King commanded the other. "Cut loose and provide! Run in! Shift Pivot to the right! Serve vent and sponge! Load! Run out! Prime! Point! Ready

—Fire! Another shell was on its way. One struck the *Koshin Maru*, the Prince of Choshu's own ship, entering just above the water line, piercing plates and boiler and tearing a great hole in the far side; then continuing on its way, it finally exploded among the houses in the town beyond. A moment later there was an explosion on the stricken ship. A great column of water rose skyward like a geyser carrying wreckage and debris with it. Fire broke out on the doomed steamer and her sailors leaped into the sea where the *Wyoming*'s sailors picked them off with revolvers until McDougal stopped them. About 40 of the *Koshin*'s crew were lost.

The shore batteries still continued their bombardment as did the bark whose crew was firing as fast as they could serve her six guns, but she was soon riddled and many of the guns ashore were silenced. The *Wyoming* was so completely enveloped in her own smoke that visibility was difficult, but she succeeded in dropping shells within the batteries despite this handicap. The artillerymen ashore had no difficulty in finding the *Wyoming* since her topmasts stuck up through the smoke, and besides she always passed at known and expected ranges.

As in the case of the *Constitution* and the *Guerriere*, fifty-one years before, this action lasted 70 minutes. The *Wyoming* had lost but five killed and six wounded. She was still in good condition to fight though she had been hulled seven times, her foremast and mainmast had each been struck four times, her funnel was riddled, and her rigging badly cut. In a brief report to Gideon Welles, Lincoln's Secretary of the Navy, McDougal said modestly, "I hope we taught them a lesson."

The *Alabama*, for which the *Wyoming* was primarily in search, was located the following June off Cherbourg by the *Wyoming*'s sister ship, the *Kearsarge*, which defeated and destroyed her.