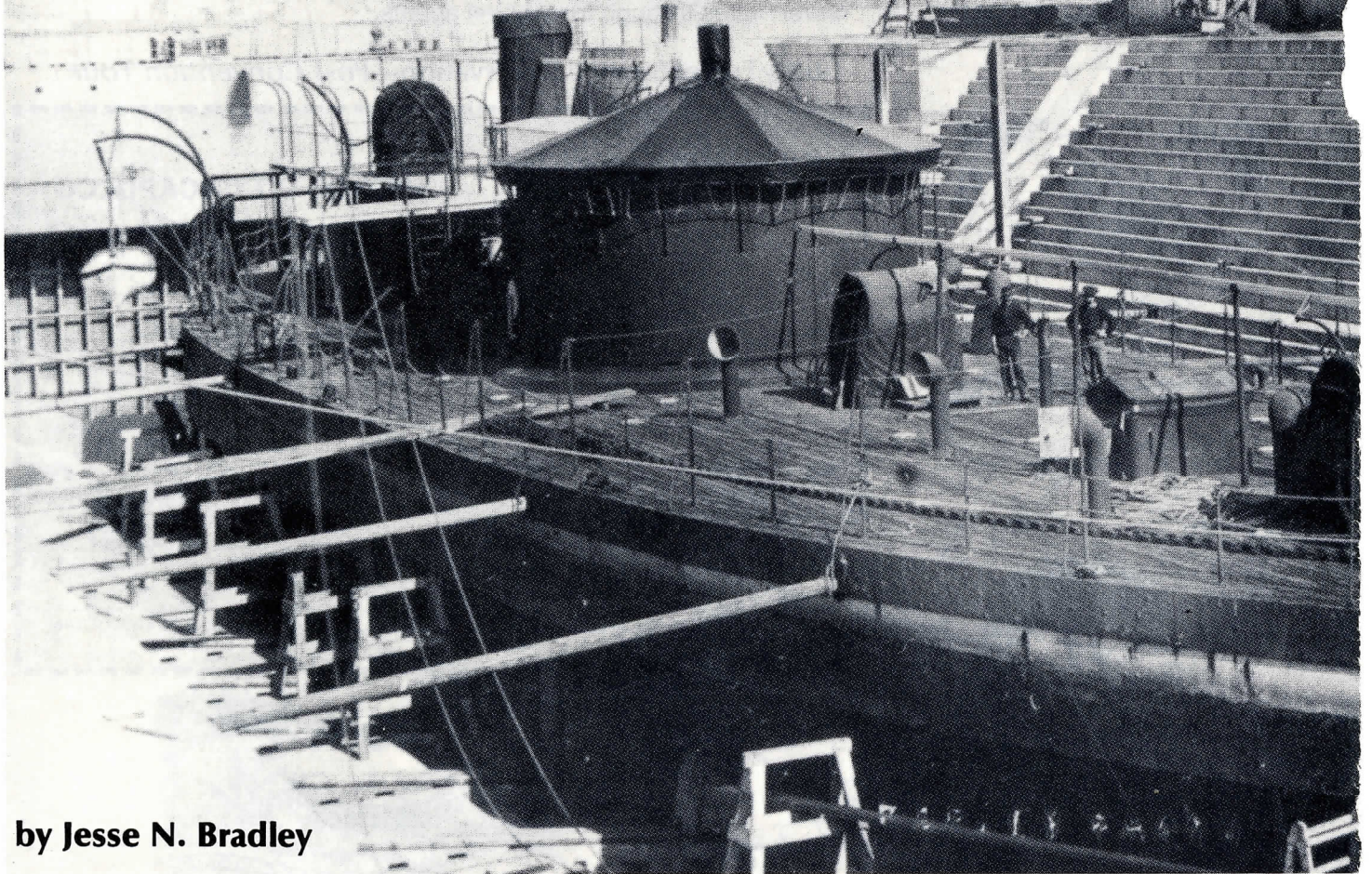


U.S.S. Camanche: The Snakebit Monitor



by Jesse N. Bradley

IS IT POSSIBLE for a ship to sink before being launched? The very words of the question are contradictory, a reversal of the normal sequence, yet there on the bottom of San Francisco Bay was the monitor *U.S.S. Camanche*, a year before her official launching. Maritime history is full of bizarre incidents, but the story of the *Camanche* is surely one of the strangest.

When the Civil War began, the land and sea defenses for the West Coast were clearly inadequate to protect the goldfields and Pacific shipping from any serious Confederate action. Furthermore, any of the Russian, French, or British warships which called frequently at San Francisco could have destroyed the city if their government had decided to intervene on the Confederate side.

In October 1861, to meet these real or imaginary dangers, California's Governor Downey dispatched James T. Ryan to Washington to express the homefolk's concern to their Congressional delegation, and to lobby for the assignment of an ironclad to the Pacific. No such vessel existed, but the Navy had big expansion plans on the drawing boards, awaiting official commitment.

On March 9, 1862, an impetus was provided. The *U.S.S. Monitor*, John Ericsson's famous cheesebox on a raft, fought the Confederate ironclad *Virginia* (formerly *U.S.S. Merrimack*) to a standoff at Hampton Roads. The inconclusive engagement was quickly acclaimed in the press and official circles as a decisive victory; and the *Monitor* was hailed as the naval wave

of the future, in spite of some glaring defects as a seagoing war vessel.

Two days after the battle, the energetic Mr. Ryan accompanied the Naval Committee to Hampton Roads to see the miracle ship. He came away greatly impressed. Navy Secretary Gideon Welles was also highly pleased. He was convinced that the principle of aiming the guns instead of the ship; that is, the use of the revolving turret instead of the conventional broadside, more than compensated for the poor nautical qualities.

In late March, the Secretary authorized ten new Ericsson type monitors which came to be known as the *Passaic* class after the first of the lot. Six were to be built by Ericsson and four by other builders. The *Camanche* was one of the latter group.



USS Camanche (monitor) in dry dock at Mare Island Navy shipyard, Calif. Courtesy Mare Island Navy shipyard, Calif.

James Ryan and the California congressmen now intensified the pressure. The war arena was in the East and the Navy desperately needed armed vessels to blockade the Southern ports, but in a democracy, political considerations are nearly always a factor in military decisions. The new monitor *Camanche* would be allotted to the Pacific Squadron when completed.

Building the Camanche

The California gentleman then decided to parlay a little profit from his patriotism. Although he knew nothing about shipbuilding, he quickly put together the partnership of Donahue, Ryan, and Secor, formed for the sole purpose of entering a bid to build the *Camanche*. Peter Donahue, owner of Donahue's Foundry (later Union Iron Works) in San Francisco would put up

\$50,000 in seed money; James Ryan would provide the political muscle to get the contract; and the Jersey City shipbuilder Francis Secor would furnish the technical know-how. Their bid of \$589,165.31, by coincidence or design, was the only bid, and the new firm was in business.

The West Coast did not have the industrial facilities to produce the heavy armor plate, ordnance and propulsion machinery; therefore, the monitor would have to be built in the East. However, the low freeboard and general unseaworthiness made steaming or towing the finished craft around Cape Horn impossible. Donahue, Ryan, and Secor's imaginative proposal easily solved the logistics problem. They would assemble the ironclad in New Jersey, tear it apart into numbered sections, ship it to San Francisco

aboard a freighter, reassemble the pieces, and collect their money.

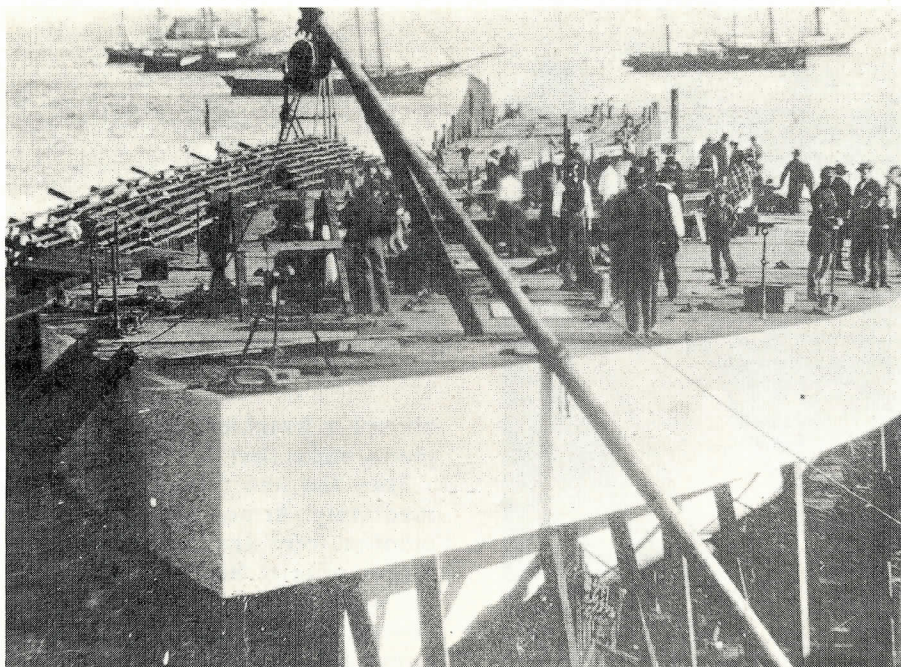
They ran into trouble almost immediately. Armor plates for their monitor were diverted to others of higher priority Eastern assignment; and when sister ship *Weehawken* broke down at Port Royal, the machinery was commandeered right out of *Camanche's* nearly completed hull. Moreover, public and official confidence in the monitor type suffered a severe blow when the original *Monitor* foundered in a heavy gale off Cape Hatteras Dec. 30, 1862, carrying 16 officers and men down with her.

Nevertheless, in the spring of 1863, the Navy inspector reported "all work finished, painted, and ready for shipment," and the knocked down components were loaded aboard the square rigger *Aquila*. The odd ship-within-a-ship cargo sailed from New York May 30, 1863.

Normal westward passage around Cape Horn for a sailing ship was 110 to 120 days; the *Aquila* took 166. Many of the waiting Californians had given her up as lost when the prodigal vessel finally entered the bay on Nov. 12 and moored off North Point Dock where the partners hoped to unload and assemble the *Camanche*.

However, that berth was unavailable because of the long delay, and the harried contractors had to scurry around to find another work site. On the 14th they moved the *Aquila* to Hathaway's Wharf at Rincon Point, a more exposed location with a hard shallow bottom. It was a disastrous choice.

The next day, Sunday, Nov. 15, a southeast gale, in the words of partner Ryan who was aboard at the time, ". . . blew a perfect hurricane, and caused a tremendous sea which struck the *Aquila* on her starboard side, and made her thump and labor very badly." By three in the morning it was all over—the *Aquila* had sunk at the dock with the crated *Camanche* still aboard.



USS *Camanche* nearly completed at San Francisco, 1865. Courtesy Mariners Museum, Newport News, Va.

The loss of their own private ironclad was a tremendous blow to the morale and civic pride of the people of San Francisco. The *Daily Alta California* of Nov. 17, 1863, reported, "The community could scarcely believe that a vessel containing so precious a cargo would, after having so successfully run the gauntlet of piratical craft (Confederate commerce raiders), storms, accidents, etc., and reached her destined haven, go down to ingloriously and ignominiously within a stone's throw of our business thoroughfare."

"Rescuing" the Ship

At first glance, the shallow water salvage job did not appear difficult. In a moment of unwarranted optimism, partner Ryan vowed to remain unshaven until the *Camanche* was launched. Numerous schemes for raising the wrecked ship and cargo were enthusiastically offered: one proposed to drive overlapping rows of piles around the wreck to make a watertight cofferdam and dry workspace; another would somehow worm cables beneath the hull, and lift with hydraulic jacks; and the most novel was to hook on large hot air balloons—lightly dismissed in the press as "too gassy."

A more conventional method was adopted. Divers were sent down to repair the hull so water could be pumped out and the *Aquila* refloated. However, the damage was too great, the vessel could not be made watertight enough to be raised intact, and the initial salvage effort failed.

In mid-January 1864, Capt Israel E. Merritt arrived in San Francisco with a crew of professional wreckers from New York. There was some local resentment at the importation of outsiders, but the expert help paid immediate dividends. The divers first enlarged *Aquila's* hatches, then began hoisting out the *Camanche*—one piece at a time. Thirty tons of iron plate were raised the first day; by June, the rapid workers had finished the salvage recovery phase, including refloating the *Aquila*. The dock and nearby assembly yard were piled high with monitor parts and machinery being reconditioned to remove the salt water damage.

The project now degenerated into a confused tangle of legal claims and counterclaims. The insurance underwriters, some 40 companies, claimed their liability had ended with the *Aquila* tied up at the dock. In any event, they should not have to pay for assembling the scattered parts. The Navy would not accept delivery of a piecemeal warship, and had seized the insurance policies as surety for money already advanced.

The owners of Hathaway's Wharf sued the owners of the *Aquila* for \$75 a day to cover dock rental and damages. Captain Merritt secured a federal court lien on the *Camanche* to insure payment for his divers and wreckers. And finally, the partner-contractors, whose profits had vanished into the incredible sequence of delays, inflation, litigation, and hard luck, threatened to

walk away from the whole mess unless someone granted them \$60,000 in gold coin to pay for assembling the dismembered monitor.

The public and press were disgusted and indignant at this bureaucratic impasse. Thundered the *Daily Alta California*, "... and as none of the parties yet consulted, the Contractors, Underwriters or Government, will assume the responsibility, it now comes to the point that the people must do it themselves or let the *Camanche* rust away before their eyes."

Without legal authority, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors and the Chamber of Commerce agreed to pay the \$60,000, and the contractors began at once to fit together the pieces of their seagoing jigsaw puzzle.

Finally, the *Camanche* was ready. On Nov. 14, 25,000 people gathered at the waterfront in a spontaneous display of public interest, to hear the customary patriotic speeches and martial music; 150 selected guests rode the deck as the vessel slid down the ways. One tragic incident marred the happy occasion. A restraining cable snapped, and the viciously whiplashing end shattered the ankle of prominent citizen John P. Buckley, one of the on-deck guests. The foot had to be amputated, and Mr. Buckley died a few days later from post-operative complications. However, the *Camanche* was afloat at last, and James Ryan triumphantly shaved off his year's growth of beard.

More Problems

The final fitting-out took two more months. The machinery, turret, pilot house, and battery were installed without problems. When she tried to leave the dock for the first time, however, the hard luck monitor stuck fast on a mud bank. On Jan. 21, 1865, she was "butted, bucked, pulled and hauled some two hundred feet out toward deep water," until the high tide could lift her free from the muck.

The delivery cruise up the bay to Mare Island was more a celebration than a business trip. There were 200 guests aboard, a band, and an escort of several smaller vessels. Mr. Leland of the Occidental spread a "bountiful collation" in the wardroom, and the happy hungry passengers "did ample justice to the viands and liquids." The new engines churned up an unspectacular but steady seven knots, bringing the *Camanche* to the Navy Yard in five hours.

There was one more small river to cross—the commandant had not re-

ceived authority from the Navy Department to accept delivery of the delinquent dreadnaught! Politely but firmly, Peter Donahue and James Ryan said to him in effect, "We have finished our contract. Here is your monitor. Goodbye."

The new ship of war was officially accepted Feb. 11, after a trial run around the bay. LCdr Charles McDougal, Naval Academy 1856, reported for duty March 16 as the first commanding officer. Oddly enough, he was the son of the commandant of Mare Island.

By this time, the Confederacy was reeling helplessly toward Appomattox and final defeat, and the need for a West Coast monitor had vanished. The ironclad had been so long a-building, the war had passed her by. The strain and concern, the labor and expense, seemed somehow pointless and wasted. Nevertheless, on Aug. 22, 1865, months after hostilities had ceased, the Navy finally commissioned the *Camanche* as a sort of symbolic faith-keeping gesture to the people of California.

The war-weary nation disarmed rapidly into its usual placid peacetime posture, and the powerful naval war machine so laboriously put together was quickly dismantled. The sailors went back to farm or factory; the ships to scrap or storage. The jinx-ship *Camanche*, however, was destined to outlast most of her more notable fleet-mates.

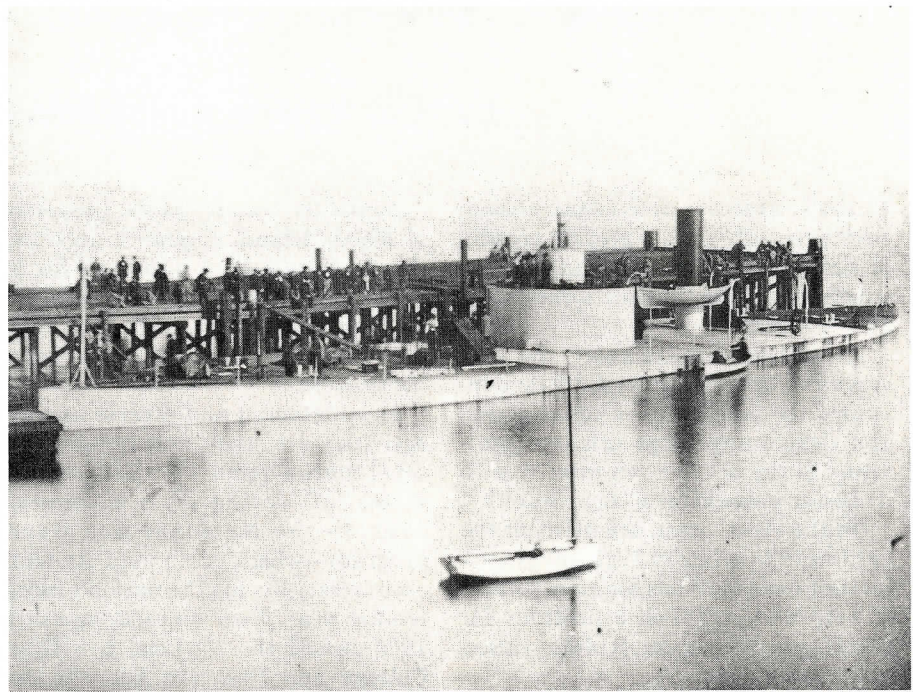
She was decommissioned in September 1866, and then laid up in storage at Mare Island for 30 years. In the summer of 1896, like a maritime Rip Van Winkle awakening to a bewildering new nautical world, she was resurrected as a training vessel for the California naval militia. Surprisingly, the engines and machinery were in working order, and the civilian sailors were able to rotate the turret and run the guns out in simulated firing.

Years later, Chief Engineer W. T. Bonney recalled, "The boiler and engine room was so hot it was almost unbearable . . . it was hard to tell whether a bearing was hot or not; everything you touched was hot. Her bottom was foul with barnacles, her speed was four knots. On one occasion she was unable to breast wind and tide in the bay."

Active Once More

In 1898, the United States stumbled into war with Spain, and the Navy pressed the *Camanche* into active service, although the rusty old relic could

USS *Camanche* being assembled at San Francisco, 1864. Courtesy Mariners Museum, Newport News, Va.



not have been seriously considered by anyone as an effective fighting unit. Fortunately, the Spanish navy proved to be no greater threat to the West Coast than the Confederate Navy had been, and the ancient 15-inch muzzle loading smoothbore Dahlgren guns were still not fired in anger.

Two wars were the limit, though. The monitor was too old and decrepit to survive her second postwar cutback. On March 22, 1899, she was sold for \$6,581.25 to the Oakland salvage firm of Pantoskey, Bercovich, and Livingston.

The end was not yet; somehow she escaped the wrecker's hammer. For the next 35 years the local records give a few tantalizing glimpses of her continued useful existence in the Bay Area—then silence.

The *Oakland Tribune* of March 26, 1926, reported her tied up at the foot of Market Street, used as a coaling hulk by the King Coal Company, visited occasionally by inquisitive school children.

She was still being used in that capacity on Aug. 16, 1935, when the *San Francisco Chronicle* printed a short sentimental history of the venerable vessel. "What has a humble coal barge to do with the pageantry of Harbor Day?" the article began. "Why should she tug rebelliously at her moorings in the Alameda estuary as the great, gray ships of the Pacific fleet steam down the bay? Perhaps, like an old charger, she is eager to join the parade. For this is a barge with a past . . ."

A final glimpse comes from another old clipping furnished by the San Francisco Maritime Museum. The paper is not identified and the item is undated, but it is likely about 1937 vintage. It states, "Her rusted remains now lie at the east end of the Bethlehem yards." However, Bethlehem Steel Corporation could not supply any information about the disposition of the *Camanche*.

Here the trail grows cold. An extensive year-and-a-half correspondence with libraries, newspapers, Navy, and other likely sources cannot answer the question, "What finally happened to the *Camanche*?" It is as if the Bay Area mists and mudflats had simply swallowed her.

Perhaps she was sent to Japan as scrap and returned as shells at Guadalcanal or Okinawa. Perhaps her rusty bones were tossed into an American smelter. Or perhaps the answer is merely that old ships, like old soldiers, sometimes just fade away.



Jesse Bradley, who freelances in his spare time, is an electrical engineer for NASA. After flying 35 missions as a B-24 gunner with the 15th Air Force (WWII), Bradley attended Vanderbilt University. His last article for TRO was titled, "Where Did They Go From Battleship Row?"