SILAS WRIGHT TERRY

A feat worthy of a knighthood

Ricky Dale Calhoun

U.S.S. *Ticonderoga* with Lt. Commander Silas Terry aboard arrived at Boston on Monday evening, April 19, 1869, after 33 months in Europe and the Near East. Americans were living through the troubled aftermath of the Civil War. Next day's edition of the Boston *Evening Transcript* reported, "Murder by the Ku Klux Klan. New York, 19th. An Atlanta special says, Dr. Benjamin Ayer, one of the Georgia delegation to Washington, the oldest member of the Legislative and a staunch Republican, was brutally and inhumanely murdered near his home, in Jefferson county, by the Ku Klux Klan, on Thursday night last. He was found in the public road shot through the head. This is the first of the Georgia delegation who has "perished by the wayside," according to the expressed wish of the (Atlanta) New Era."

Silas must have felt some trepidation when a few days later he was granted leave and set out to Cadiz. He was now 27 years old. Eleven years had passed since he last saw his mother and siblings. His brother-in-law Henry Cornelius Burnett, whom Silas defied when he refused to return to Cadiz and enlist in the Confederate army, died of cholera in October 1866. His brothers fought for the South and survived the war. Trigg County had endured military occupation and vicious guerrilla warfare. Political control of the county was now in the hands of ex-Confederates and non-combatant secessionist sympathizers among its social elite. Its Union veterans were marginalized, and many were leaving to start new lives on homesteads in the West.

The journey home to Cadiz was easier and quicker than the trip was when Silas left for the Naval Academy at Annapolis in 1858. The Boston newspaper advertised the fastest, easiest route, "On every Sunday ... cars will leave the Old Colony & Newport Depot, corner of Keenland and South streets, at 6:30 p.m., for New York, stopping for passengers at South Braintree, Taunton, and Fall River, connecting with the new and elegant steamer *Providence,* which leaves Newport (R.I.) at 9 o'clock p.m., arriving at New York on Monday morning. Tickets and state rooms for New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington, and all points North-west, South, and South-west, for sale in the

Agent's office... Baggage checked through and transferred in New York, for passengers holding tickets beyond."

Upon arrival in New York, passengers transferred to a ferryboat that took them across the Hudson to Newark in time to board the Atlantic & Great Western Railroad's morning express train to Cincinnati before its 9 o'clock departure time. The Port Jervis, New York, *Evening Gazette* of July 8, 1869, described accommodations on the train: "This is the only line running the celebrated Broad Gauge Sleeping Coaches through without change. These cars are built of the finest walnut and oak, ornamented with silver, and Rose and Japan woods; richly upholstered with crimson plush, and furnished with the finest hair mattresses and pillows; and each section hung with costly damask curtains. The staterooms, of which there are a number in each car, furnish sleeping accommodations equal to the best hotels, at night, and in the day time are light, pleasant and comfortable rooms to sit in, where families can enjoy the quiet, comfort and seclusion of their homes."

Dining cars eliminated the need to stop for meals. The train's red and yellow coaches rolled westward all day, through the night, all day the next day, and into the following night. It stopped briefly at Owego, Genesee, and Salamanca, in New York; at Meadville, Pennsylvania; and at Greenville, Ravenna, Levittsburg, Ravenna, Akron, Mansfield, Galion, Urbana, Springfield, Dayton, and Hamilton, in Ohio, on its way to Cincinnati. It arrived at Cincinnati's riverfront terminal at half past 10 o'clock in the evening, after 25 hours and 30 minutes travel on the rails. A steam ferryboat was waiting to whisk travelers headed for destinations in Kentucky and Tennessee across the Ohio to Covington. At Covington's riverside transfer station passengers boarded the Louisville, Cincinnati, and Lexington Railroad's "Moonlighter" night train to Lexington, Frankfort, and Louisville. The train delivered them to Louisville in time to board the Louisville & Nashville Railroad's morning train to Memphis that ran on the tracks through Elizabethtown, Horse Cave, and Glasgow to Memphis Junction south of Bowling Green, where the Nashville and Memphis tracks joined. The railroad to Memphis – the former Memphis, Clarksville, and Louisville, construction of which was underway when Terry left home – passed through Guthrie, where its tracks crossed those of the Evansville, Henderson & Nashville Railroad that had been laid northward from Nashville to

Hopkinsville in the summer of 1868. Silas Terry arrived in Hopkinsville on the evening of his third day of travel.

Upon arrival in Hopkinsville after the fast trip from Boston, Terry was confronted by a bit of irony. Travel from Hopkinsville to Cadiz was now less convenient that it was before the coming of the railroad. The Bowling Green to Columbus stagecoach that ran daily before the Civil War was no more. Instead, a local stage made the trip from Hopkinsville to Cadiz three times a week: Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.

There is no record of what transpired between Silas Terry and his brothers at their first meeting. The Civil War embittered relations within border state communities and in some instances even within families for a generation. Published sources, family tradition, and local folklore give conflicting accounts about the bitterness, if any, that the Civil War engendered between Silas and other members of his family. Folklore holds that the bitterness was so great that Silas and his brothers never again met. Reports in Hopkinsville newspapers from the 1883-1908 time frame disprove this, however. David P. Dyer, a cousin from Missouri who also fought for the Union, was welcomed into the homes of Benjamin and George Terry when he visited Cadiz in 1867. Dyer reported that the Terry brothers had “returned from the Confederate army sadder but wiser men.”

Following his leave, Silas Terry became an instructor at the U.S. Naval Academy during the 1869-70 and 1870-71 academic years. In March 1871 he was assigned to the staff of Admiral Samuel P. Lee, commander of the North Atlantic Fleet, on whose staff he had briefly served as a junior aide during the summer of 1863. Lee’s flagship, the U.S.S. *Severn*, was a 3,000-ton wooden screw steamer launched in 1867. *Severn* spent most of her time at Hampton Roads, but occasionally cruised along the United States east coast and to Cuba. Advances in naval guns firing explosive shells had already made wooden warships like the *Severn* obsolete before she was launched, and the ship was decommissioned on Dec. 31, 1871.

Terry was promoted to commander in January 1872 and became executive officer on the U.S.S. *Worcester* under command of Capt. J. B. Creighton. The *Worcester* was a 2,000-ton wooden steam sloop that was hurriedly built during the Civil War with unseasoned oak timber and equipped with defective boilers. One of those boilers burst and killed three crewmen a few weeks before Terry reported aboard.

Worcester made an uneventful month-long cruise to the West Indies immediately after Terry became her second in command and then went into dry dock at the Boston Navy Yard for overhaul. Her return voyage to Hampton Roads after the refit was anything but routine. The *Boston American* reported: "Fortress Monroe, Va., Oct. 19, 1872 – The United States steamer *Worcester* ... which sailed from Boston on the 12th instant, arrived here yesterday afternoon and anchored in Hampton Roads just above the Fort. ... The *Worcester* encountered severe weather during the entire passage. On the second day out she encountered a very severe gale from the southwest, which caused the vessel to roll heavily and strained her upper works severely, causing her to take considerable water. The *Worcester* had been supplied with a new propeller at Boston, which in rough weather did not work as smoothly as the old one, and as the gale was too fierce to carry much canvas, she experienced a pretty severe shaking up."

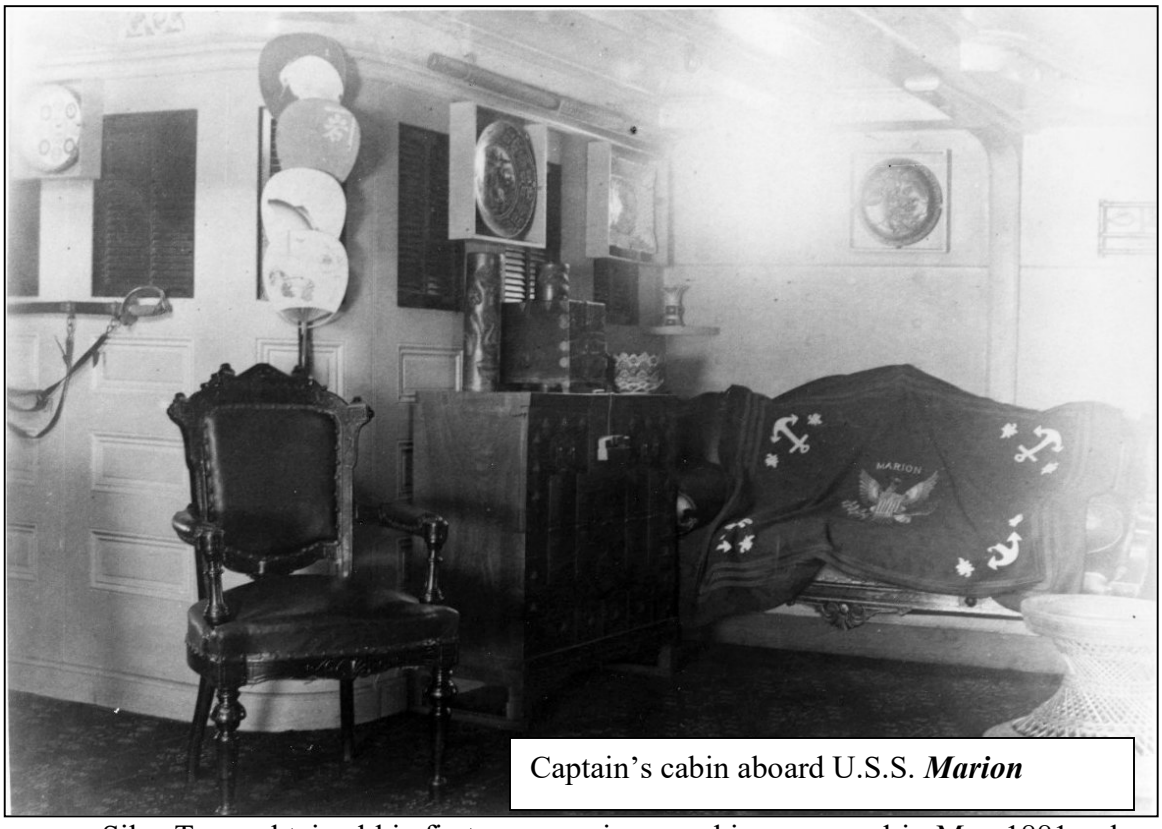
Three notable officers served under Terry aboard the *Worcester.* Lt. Cmdr. Charles Dwight Sigsbee, who became captain of the battleship *Maine* and was aboard when she exploded in Havana harbor in 1898, was next below Terry in the chain of command. Sigsbee survived the *Maine*'s sinking and eventually retired from the Navy as a rear admiral. Lt. Charles S. Sperry became an admiral and commanded the "Great White Fleet" during its round the world cruise in 1907-08. Alfred Thayer Mahan, whose scholarly work was later to have a profound influence on the development of sea power, was one of Terry's junior lieutenants.

Terry was assigned to the Naval Observatory in June 1873. It marked the start of a nine-year hiatus from sea duty that gave him the opportunity to marry and begin a family. On Oct. 14, 1873, he married Louisa Mason, the 29-year old daughter of Judge John Thomson Mason, a justice on Maryland's highest court. Like the Terry and Dyer families, the Mason family had ancestral roots deep in colonial Virginia. The newlywed couple went on a six-month excursion to Europe that combined honeymoon and Navy business. The marriage produced two children. The eldest, son J.T. Mason Terry was born Dec. 25, 1875, and daughter Eleanor in 1883.

In 1875 the Terrys relocated to the Naval Academy at Annapolis, where Silas taught marine engineering. In the summer of 1876 he served as executive officer aboard the frigate *Constellation* during the ship's practice cruise with midshipmen along the

Atlantic coast. On July 4, the ship participated in the U.S. Centennial celebration in New York harbor. One of the midshipmen aboard was William S. Benson, who would become an admiral and first Chief of Naval Operations during World War I. Another was Albert Gleaves, who was destined to become Admiral Gleaves and command the U.S. Navy's Cruiser and Transport Force that carried the American Expeditionary Force to Europe during World War I, and then, in 1919-22, commander of the U.S. Asiatic fleet.

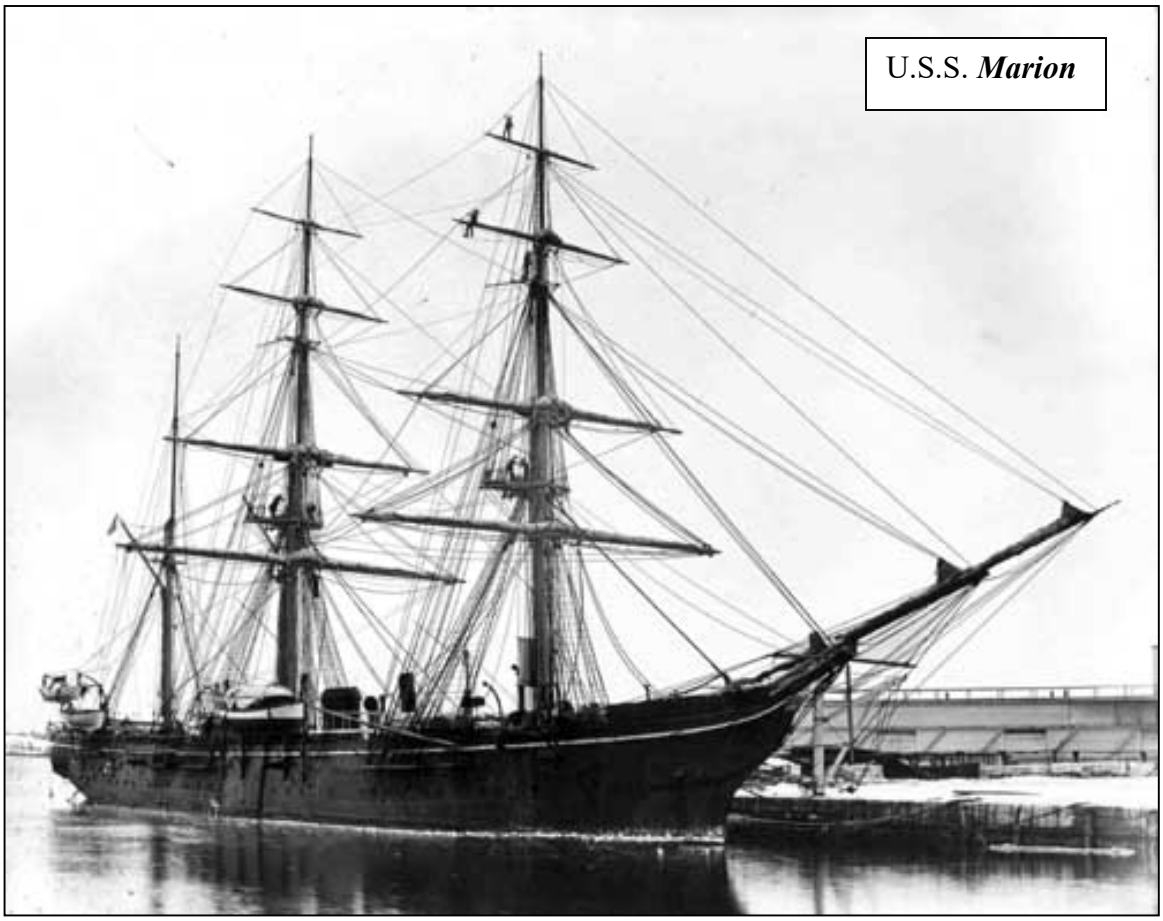
In July 1877 Terry became Inspector of the Fifth Lighthouse District. In that capacity, he was responsible for the lighthouses and other aids to navigation along the Atlantic coast from Havre de Grace, Maryland, south to Cape Lookout, North Carolina. His duties included occasional time in coastal waters aboard the U.S. Lighthouse Service tender *Heliotrope* that serviced buoys and carried supplies to isolated offshore lighthouses.



Captain's cabin aboard U.S.S. ***Marion***

Silas Terry obtained his first ocean-going warship command in May 1881, when he was made captain of the U.S.S. *Marion.* The *Marion* was built in 1839 and then so extensively rebuilt during the Civil War as to be for all practical purposes a new ship. *Marion* was a 117 feet long, 32 feet beam, 566-ton three-masted sailing ship that had an

auxiliary steam engine and screw propeller. The ship relied on her sails for long distance cruising. In the event of war with a foreign power the *Marion*'s task would have been to roam the oceans destroying the enemy's merchant shipping. Limited only by the amount of food and water that could be carried and the endurance of their crews, hybrid sail-steam warships like the *Marion* could stay at sea for as long, and travel as far without touching at a port, as a modern nuclear powered vessel. Though made obsolescent by the advent of ironclads, wooden sailing ships with auxiliary engines similar to the *Marion* continued to patrol and police the distant oceanic empires of Great Britain, France, and Germany until the First World War.



U.S.S. ***Marion***

The *Marion* was at anchor in the River Plate at Montevideo, Uruguay, on Nov. 10, 1881, when Terry received an urgent telegram from the Navy Department instructing him to proceed at once to Heard's Island, one of the Kerguelen Islands located in the southern Indian Ocean 3,000 miles southeast of the Cape of Good Hope. Heard's Island is a bleak, uninhabited sub-Antarctic volcanic island about 30 miles long and 15 miles in

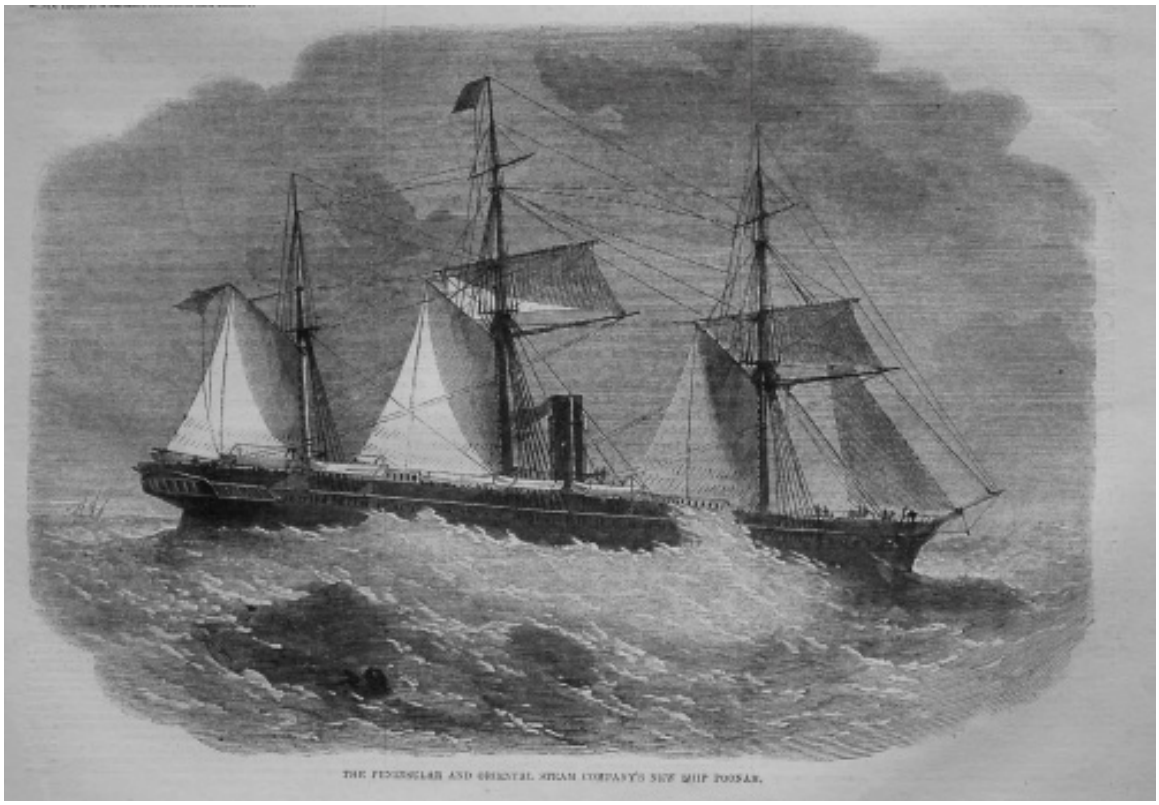
width. Terry's orders were to search for survivors of the *Trinity*, a whaler that had met an unknown fate in the area sometime after Sept. 4, 1880, when the ship left letters in a whalers' mail drop on uninhabited Desolation Island, another island in the Kerguelen group. Terry got the *Marion* underway immediately and arrived at Cape Town, South Africa, after 28 days at sea. After taking on supplies and coal and obtaining a British Admiralty chart of the search area, Terry and his crew departed Cape Town on Christmas Eve bound for one of the least known, coldest, stormiest, and most inhospitable expanses of ocean on earth. Terry knew that he had only a narrow window of opportunity to conduct the search and return before the reasonably good weather and round-the-clock sunlight of the brief southern hemisphere summer gave way to an Antarctic winter of intense cold, ferocious gales, and perpetual darkness.

Marion's lookouts sighted McDonald's Island, a barren cluster of rocks that is an outlier of Heard's Island, on the morning of Jan. 12, 1882. At around 4 o'clock that afternoon they sighted the cloud cloaked mile-high peak of Mount Emperor William, the steaming active volcano that gave rise to Heard's Island. As the ship cautiously approached the dangerous rocks that surround the island, lookouts sighted smoke from a fire fueled by seal blubber burning on shore. Then, from a distance of four miles, the lookouts sighted three crude huts and several men waving to them.

Terry ordered the *Marion*'s battle flag hoisted to let the stranded men know that the U.S. Navy had arrived to rescue them. Just then, at the very moment the *Trinity*'s men thought that their rescue was at hand, a fierce gale and snow squall struck. The *Marion* was suddenly in danger of being driven onto the rocks, the same fate as had befallen the *Trinity* on Oct. 26, 1880. Terry turned about and steamed out to sea until the storm passed. The weather improved enough the next morning for the *Marion* to send boats ashore and rescue 33 joyous castaways. In what seemed like a miracle, all but two of the *Trinity*'s 35 crewmen had survived for more than a year stranded on the nearly barren island.

The *Marion* arrived back at Cape Town on Feb. 20, 1882. Terry granted his crewmen a well earned liberty ashore. The sailors did not get to enjoy their time off the ship, however. The next day, British authorities asked Terry to render assistance to the *Poonah*, an immigrant ship bound for Australia with over 300 people aboard that had

gone aground near Table Bay and was in danger of being battered apart on the rocks. The British steamship *City of Liverpool* and a Royal Navy warship had already tried to rescue the stranded *Poonah* but failed. Terry hurriedly gathered his crew and steamed to the scene.



The *Poonah,* an iron-hulled screw propelled steamship equipped with auxiliary three-masted barquentine sails, was, at 349 feet long and 2,250 tons, four times larger than the *Marion*. The big ship had a draught of nearly 29 feet – 13 feet greater than the *Marion* – and she had run aground amid a field of submerged rocks. Waves were breaking over the rocks and causing dangerous currents to swirl round them. There was too little room for a ship to reach the *Poonah* and then turn around and return to the open sea.

With engines turning in reverse and proceeding slowly backwards, Terry steered the *Marion*, which was smaller and more maneuverable than the British ships that had been unable to reach the *Poonah*, safely through the dangerous, rocky shoals to within a cable's length of the stranded ship's stern. After some difficulty in the rough seas, *Marion*'s boat crew connected a hawser to the *Poonah*. With black coal smoke roiling

from her funnel and engines turning at full power, the *Marion* pulled the larger *Poonah* free and towed the ship and her passengers to safety.

The senior Royal Navy officer on scene wrote in his report of the incident, "As a sailor of nearly thirty years experience I have never seen work carried out in a better manner than was done on the 23d February on board the United States corvette *Marion* under Captain Terry's command." Terry's action in saving the *Poonah* earned official praise from the British government and a note of thanks from Queen Victoria. A British newspaper commented, "Had Captain Terry been a British subject, the rescue of the *Poonah* would have earned him a knighthood."

In a note published in the *Army & Navy Journal* acknowledging the many thanks and commendations that he received, Terry wrote modestly, "In going to the assistance of the *Poonah* I was but performing a duty that every sailor owes to another."