The Cape Fear Civil War Round Table

John Taylor Wood: Man of Action, Man of Honor

By

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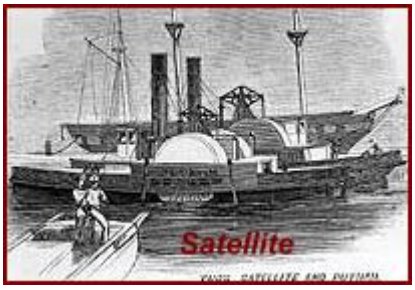
John Taylor Wood

On July 20, 1904, a short obituary note appeared on page seven of the *New York Times*. It simply stated, "Captain John Taylor Wood, grandson of President Zachary Taylor and nephew of Jefferson Davis, died in Halifax, N.S. yesterday, seventy-four years old." The note also stated that Wood served as a United States Navy midshipman, fought in the Mexican War, served as a Confederate army colonel on the staff of Jefferson Davis and Robert E. Lee's army, escaped the collapse of the Confederacy with General Breckinridge to Cuba, and was a resident of Halifax, Nova Scotia when he passed. In one paragraph, the obituary writer prepared the outline of the life of a man who participated in many of the major events of the American Civil War. John Taylor Wood's story was much more expansive and interwoven with the people and history of the Civil War era than the one paragraph credited to him by the *Times*.

This paper examined the events in which Wood found himself immersed and sought to determine his role in those events. The main focus of the paper was Wood's exploits during his service to the Confederate States of America. His unique relationships with the leadership of the Confederacy ensured that he was close at hand when decisions were made which affected the outcome of the South's gamble for independence. Was John Taylor Wood the Forrest Gump of his day? Was it mere chance that Wood was at Hampton Roads on March 9, 1862, at Drewry's Bluff on May 15, 1862, abroad the USS *Satellite* in August 1863, aboard the USS *Underwriter* at New Berne in February 1864, abroad the CSS *Tallahassee* in August 1864, or with Jefferson Davis on the "unfortunate day" in Georgia on May 10, 1865? Was it only his relationship with Jefferson Davis that saw Wood engaged in these

varied events? This paper examined these questions and sought to establish that it was Wood's competence and daring that placed him at the aforementioned actions and not Jefferson Davis's nepotism. This paper also examined the political consequences of the voyage of the CSS *Tallahassee* and sought to answer why Wood was not the captain of this vessel on its second cruise from Wilmington.



To understand the character of John Taylor Wood, it was necessary to understand the unique relationships that existed in his family. Wood was the son of Robert Crooke Wood, a United States Army surgeon from Rhode Island, and Anne Mackall Taylor, eldest daughter of President Zachary Taylor and Margaret Mackall Smith of Louisiana. Robert Crooke Wood served in the army with Zachary Taylor as did another young officer, Jefferson Finis Davis. Davis married Sarah Knox Taylor, second daughter of Zachary and Anne Mackall Taylor. John Taylor Wood was the grandson of a president of the United States and the nephew of the president of the Confederate States of America. Wood was also the nephew of Richard Taylor who became a Lieutenant General in the Confederate Army. John Taylor Wood inherited a belief in military service to his country; however, he chose to serve in the navy.

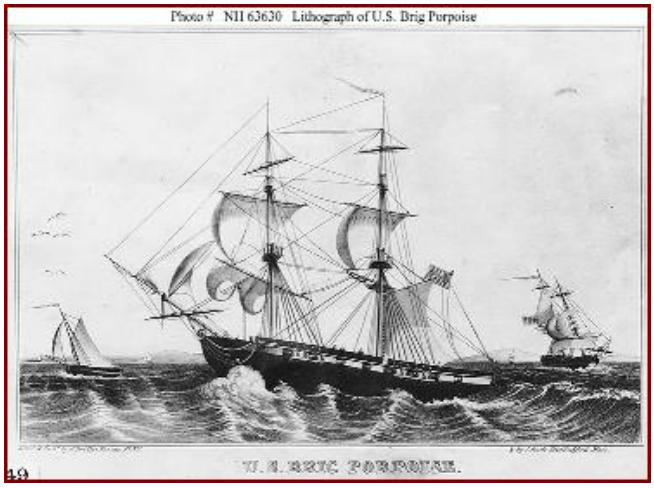
On August 13, 1830, John Taylor Wood was delivered by his father at Fort Snelling in the Northwest Territory near present-day St. Paul, Minnesota. Wood was thought to have been the first white child born in Minnesota. His grandfather and father served in the army that enforced military authority over the numerous Indian nations in the area that encompassed Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio. The Wood family moved between the isolated army posts located throughout the territory. Wood's first remembrance was of the gentle sounds made by his Winnebago nurse as she sought to comfort him. From 1832 until 1837, the Wood family was stationed at Fort Crawford at the junction of the Mississippi and Wisconsin Rivers. Young Wood experienced frontier life that included the dangers associated with the Black Hawk War.

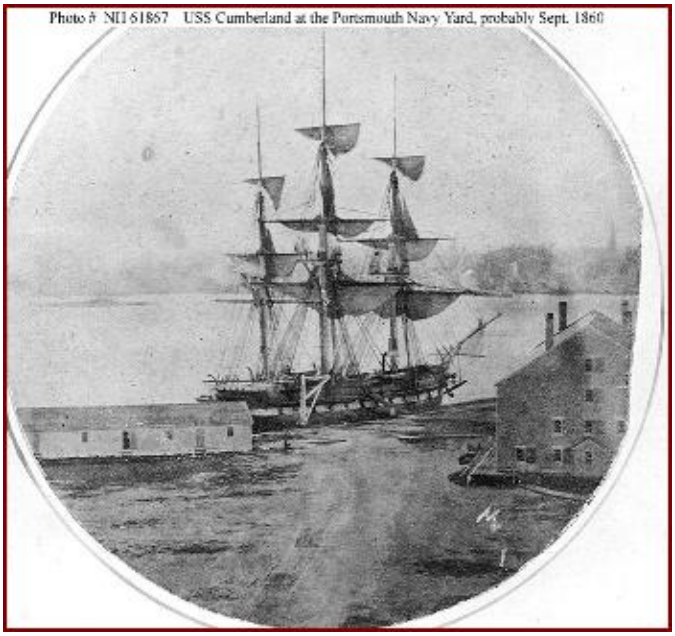
Wood's future appetite for water-born adventure may have had its roots in the 1837 trip made by the Taylor and Wood families from Fort Crawford to Fort Brooke in the Florida territory. The Seminole War raged and both officers were needed half-a-continent away. The families traveled through hostile Indian country by Mackinaw boat on an eighteen-day voyage down the Mississippi to St. Louis. After spending the summer in Kentucky with Taylor's family, the families boarded a flat-bottomed boat for an arduous trip down the Ohio River to Cairo. The next leg of the voyage involved travel on a relatively comfortable river boat to New Orleans. The families boarded a small brig for an arduous twelve-day voyage to Tampa Bay and their destination, Fort Brooke. In an unfinished manuscript found in Wood's effects after his death in 1904, he made mention of the excitement of the passage and how it remained in his memory.

During 1839, Wood's father became Post Surgeon at the Buffalo Barracks in Buffalo, New York. The Wood family lived uneventfully in their civilized surroundings until Robert Wood was called to duty with his father-in-law on the Rio Grande in 1846. Zachary Taylor commanded the forces embroiled in the initial stages of war with Mexico. Adventure was at hand and the young Wood wanted to experience the excitement encountered by his grandfather and father. As soon as John

turned sixteen, he pursued his fascination with the sea and sought appointment to the United States Navy.

Wood was appointed a midshipman in the navy on April 7, 1847. He secured an appointment from the Newport District of Kentucky in his grandfather's home state. After an initial training course at the Annapolis Naval School, Wood joined the crew of the frigate *Brandywine* for a voyage to Brazil. He soon transferred to the *Ohio* and sailed for the west coast of Mexico. Soon after arriving off the Mexican port of Mazzatan in late 1847, Wood experienced another event that shaped his future involvement with combined sea and land operations. He was part of a thousand sailor force that landed to capture the port city. It was here where Wood first experienced combat while commanding a gun crew that skirmished with an enemy force. With the end of the Mexican War in 1848, Wood returned to the *Ohio* and served in the new California territory. In California during the lawlessness of the gold rush, Wood saw first-hand the impact that a single man could have over the men he commanded. He was included in a seven-man party under the command of a lieutenant who entered a gambling parlor crowded with thirty drunken and armed men to arrest a navy deserter. The lieutenant's bold actions made an impression that stayed with the young midshipman. Wood took to heart the lessons of Mexico and California. An officer received command from his superiors but it was the officer's force-of-will that made command effective.





After nearly three years at sea on the *Ohio*, Wood's ship returned to Boston where Wood was granted a three month leave-of-absence. Zachary Taylor had become president during Wood's naval experiences. During the spring and summer of 1850, Wood was a frequent visitor to his grandfather's White House. His visits allowed him to observe the people and activities that were entailed by the presidency. Wood was able to visit Congress and listen to the heated debates surrounding the extension of slavery into the territories acquired after the

Mexican War. Wood saw the resolve of his grandfather to maintain the Union. In February 1850, Taylor had responded to threats by southern leaders to secede from the Union by promising to lead the army and to hang those found in rebellion. Taylor was to die in July 1850; however, Wood had experienced a unique opportunity to learn to inter-workings of the government. He was also exposed to the strong nationalism espoused by his grandfather. These were lessons that Wood was to confront again.


Photo # NH 85568-KN USS Wabash by Clary Ray

In the spring of 1851, Wood was with American and British naval forces cooperating off the coast of Africa in the suppression of the slave trade. He served on the *Porpoise*, a small brig assigned to capture slave ships. Operating in the Gulf of Guinea, the *Porpoise* overtook and captured a Spanish slave ship. Wood received command of the captured ship and he was ordered to proceed to Liberia to free his human cargo. This was Wood's first ship command. He was responsible for his ship, his crew, and three hundred and fifty prisoners. The three week voyage was storm tossed but Wood succeeded in reaching Monrovia with ship and passengers intact. Government officials denied Wood the right to land his cargo in the Liberian capital and he was forced on another one hundred and fifty mile voyage to Grand Bassa. Wood was again confronted by governmental obstacles to the execution of his orders. This time he asserted his authority and landed his human cargo. The twenty-one year old midshipman returned to the *Porpoise* with confidence gained from his independent command. Wood returned to Annapolis and his studies at the Naval Academy. On October 1, 1852, John Taylor Wood graduated second in his class. Wood served on the sloop-of-war *Cumberland* during a two year voyage in the Mediterranean. After returning to Annapolis in September 1855, he received promotion to lieutenant. Wood's return to Maryland enabled him to meet and subsequently marry the daughter of a prominent Maryland politician. John Taylor Wood and Lola Mackubin were married on November 26, 1856 and their daughter, Anne, was born on September 18, 1857. The addition of a wife and daughter made the subsequent eighteen month voyage on the *Wabash* especially difficult for Wood. He was devastated when in August 1859 his infant daughter died. When the *Wabash* returned to New York in December, Wood determined to alter the course of his navy career. John enlisted the support of his father, Colonel Robert Crooke Wood, to secure an instructorship at the Naval Academy. The Wood lobbying effort succeeded and he joined the faculty as instructor in naval gunnery. He would later add responsibilities for instruction of seamanship and naval tactics. Wood bought a small farm near the Naval Academy and took on the role of instructor and gentleman farmer. Wood viewed this period as an idyllic time in his naval career.

Wood's proximity to Washington allowed him to follow the troubling political events of the period. His grandfather had asserted the power of a sitting president to maintain the Union by any means necessary. President James Buchanan did not follow the strong stance of Taylor but demonstrated weakness that opened the House of Representatives and Senate to debates that further divided the country on the issue of slavery. Wood listened to the debates but the eloquent words of his uncle, Senator Jefferson Davis, seemed to pull him into the orbit of southern views.

Another uncle, Richard Taylor, was a delegate to the 1860 Democratic Convention in Baltimore. Richard allowed Wood to accompany him as the Democrats tried to resolve a growing split in the party. Richard Taylor's thoughts also seemed to sway Wood toward his southern kinsmen's positions. Wood initially tried to remain apart from the approaching sectional confrontation but he would find this a difficult position to maintain.

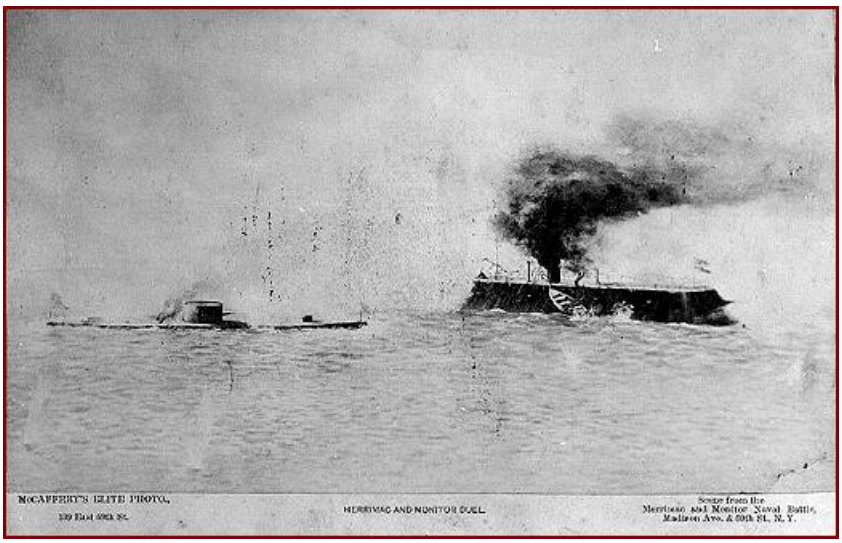
After the election of Abraham Lincoln on November 6, 1860, events unfolded quickly as the delicate fabric of the eighty-four year old republic unraveled. South Carolina seceded from the Union on December 20, 1860. Six additional states of the Deep South followed and a February 1861 convention created the Confederate States of America. Wood's uncle, Jefferson Davis, became provisional president after his election by the convention delegates as a moderate advocate for southern rights. Richard Taylor also cast his lot with the new nation. Robert Crooke Wood and Lola Mackubin Wood's family remained loyal to the Union. Wood's family was further divided when his brother, Robert C. Wood, Jr., followed Davis and Richard Taylor into the Confederate States of America. Davis appointed Robert as adjutant-general on Braxton Bragg's staff. Wood still retained strong feelings for his grandfather's love of the Union; however, he could not take up the sword against the South. His was a dilemma that many men faced who hoped to remain neutral in the mounting crisis.

The Confederate bombardment of Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861 saddened Wood. On April 13, Wood noted in his diary a passage that reflected his feelings, "War, that terrible calamity, is upon us, and worst of all among us. This news had made me sick at heart." Events in Maryland gave further alarm to Wood as the Lincoln administration took military actions to keep the state firmly within the Union. Benjamin F. Butler's military occupation of Maryland paid scant notice of civil liberties. Commandant of Midshipmen, Christopher R. Rogers moved the remaining portion of the Naval Academy to Newport, Rhode Island and he also tried to entice southern midshipmen to commit their loyalty to the preservation of the Union. Wood would not move to Newport as he saw that action as raising his sword against his family. On April 21, Wood felt compelled to submit his resignation to the navy department. He elected to take no course of action. On May 17, Colonel Wood informed his son that the resignation had not been accepted by the navy. The navy took further action against Wood by dismissing him from the navy effective April 2, 1861. This vindictive action by the Navy Department, deteriorating conditions in southern Maryland for suspected southern sympathizers, and mounting concerns for the safety of his family led Wood to reconsider his neutral stance. Wood made a much thought-out decision on September 3, 1861. With his wife and infant son, Wood headed south with a firm commitment to the southern cause.

John Taylor Wood became a lieutenant in the Confederate States Navy on October 4, 1861. Wood served at Confederate land batteries located at Evansport and Aquia Creek on the Virginia side of the Potomac. The Confederate batteries participated in a blockade of Washington and successfully sank transports and other vessels. Wood reported that his battery destroyed several ships, the 1200 ton *Rappahannock* was the largest.

In January 1862, Wood received orders to report to Commodore Franklin Forrest at the navy-yard in Norfolk. Wood was to be a lieutenant assigned to the C.S.S. *Virginia* then under construction from the remains of the frigate U.S.S. *Merrimac*. The *Virginia* was a revolutionary iron-clad vessel proposed by Lieutenant George M. Brooke and wholeheartedly backed by Stephen R. Mallory, Secretary of the Navy. Mallory proposed the iron-clad as a technological leap which would allow the Confederate Navy to counter the numerical superiority of the Union Navy. Wood was aware of the limitations of the *Virginia's* refurbished steam engines, her deep draft, and her Noah's Ark maneuverability. He was also aware that the ten guns mounted behind the iron casemate would be nearly impervious to the heavy guns of the Union's wooden fleet. Wood wanted to be in the midst of the experiment and to witness the *Virginia* in action against the Union fleet at Hampton Roads.

As construction of the *Virginia* progressed toward completion, Wood visited the headquarters of General John B. Magruder in Yorktown with orders to obtain a ship's crew from the army



personnel. Magruder gave Wood access to his command and allowed Wood to call for volunteers. Of the two hundred men who volunteered, Wood carefully selected eighty soldiers who had experience as gunners or seamen. Wood soon discovered that army and navy cooperation was not as forthright as it seemed. Only two of the men he selected were sent to him for naval John Taylor Wood **service, the other "volunteers" were unsuitable to the task. Wood immediately expressed his concerns to Magruder and to the commander of the *Virginia*, Captain Franklin Buchanan. In a letter to Buchanan, Wood expressed his displeasure with the men Magruder supplied, "They are certainly of a very different class of men from those I selected." Wood learned from this episode of the importance of personally selecting the best men for an assignment and securing his superiors support in ensuring that those men were committed toward his objective. Stephen R. Mallory knew that the *Virginia's* potential uses as an offensive weapon were in the hands of the Franklin Buchanan and his officers. He knew that Buchanan and his officers must be bold and daring. Mallory was a visionary whose ideas were sometimes out of reach to the realities of the present day. He expected much from "an untrained and untried crew, in an untested vessel, pitted against the undoubted mettle of a Federal fleet in Hampton Roads." On March 7, 1862 on the day before the *Virginia* would venture forth from Gosport Navy Yard, Mallory sent a confidential letter to Flag Officer Buchanan. Mallory's ultimate objectives for the Virginia were ambitious and far beyond**

the confines of Hampton Roads. He wanted to know Buchanan's views on a *Virginia* attack against New York City. "Such an event would eclipse all the glories of the combats of the sea, would place every man in it preeminently high, and would strike a blow from which the enemy could never recover. Peace would inevitably follow." Mallory would find boldness and daring in one of the *Virginia's* officers, John Taylor Wood. In the South's quest for independence, Mallory and Taylor would be linked in numerous bold and daring campaigns.

Wood wrote the following about the March 8, 1862 engagements in Hampton Roads between the *Virginia* and the Union wooden fleet, and on March 9 between the *Virginia* and the *Monitor*. It was, "in some respects the most momentous naval conflict ever witnessed. No battle was ever more widely discussed or produced a greater sensation. It revolutionized the navies of the world." The *Virginia* inflicted severe damage on the wooden ships but had been fought to a draw by the *Monitor*. After both ships withdrew for repair and refit, Buchanan sent Wood with a dispatch that informed Mallory of the two-day conflict. Buchanan also, "directed me to proceed to Richmond with it and the flag of the *Congress*, and make a verbal report of the action, condition of the *Virginia*, etc." Wood reported to Mallory and they went to President Davis's office where Wood related the events to the gathered members of the government. "As to the future, I said that in the *Monitor* we had met our equal, and that the results of another engagement would be very doubtful." That Wood was sent to Richmond to report the events showed that his observations were valued by Buchanan. While Wood was excited by the historical significance of the conflict, he was able to give an even-handed appraisal of the actions. Wood's detachment from the growing excitement about the capabilities of the *Virginia*, made his value as a reliable observer for Mallory and Jefferson Davis increasing important.

Wood returned to the *Virginia* and participated in her future actions against the Union fleet. As he observed, the unreliability of the *Virginia's* engines, the resulting slowness, and her depth of draft limited the ability to bring the *Monitor* into battle. The *Virginia* protected Norfolk but her survival was dependent upon the Confederate army's continued presence in the city. In April 1862, the threat of McClellan's Peninsula Campaign caused General Joseph E. Johnston to order the abandonment of Norfolk. The *Virginia* was too heavy to proceed up the James River to Richmond. Efforts to lighten her failed; hence, the navy ran the *Virginia* aground near Carney Island and set her ablaze on May 11, 1862. Wood and Lieutenant Catesby and R. Jones were the last to leave the ship that had generated such enthusiasm for the Southern cause.

With the loss of the *Virginia*, Wood and the crew became land forces who guarded the James River approaches to Richmond. This service was similar to Wood's experiences at Mazzatan during the Mexican War. On May 15, the gunners of the *Virginia* engaged the *Monitor* and *Galena* at the first Battle of Drewry's Bluff. Wood was recognized by Lieutenant Catesby Jones for his steadfastness in face of the enemy. The Union navy retreated under heavy fire from the *Virginia* gunners and the water-born threat to Richmond passed. After Robert E. Lee defeated McClellan in desperate battles around Richmond during June and July, Wood became disenchanted with routine service at Drewry's Bluff. His desire for action and advancement led him to look for new ways to strike at the enemy.

In a letter written from Drewry's Buff, Wood shared his feeling with Catesby Jones about the navy's need to promote officers for bravery and daring in battle and not through seniority alone. He was in agreement with a new law that offered promotion for deeds of valor. Wood viewed the seniority system as stagnation to the efficiency of naval operations. He had seen the effects of the

seniority system in the old U.S. Navy and he supported efforts to remedy its deficiencies in the Confederate Navy. "I am sorry for this, for I believe that promotion as a reward for distinguished service in battle will be the making of our service." Wood continued, "Put as many checks as you please on the law to prevent smuggling, but still promote for fighting; otherwise the Navy never can be kicked in into vitality." Wood was a man of action and not just words. He showed his superiors the merits of decisive action and the results gained through advancing the careers of men who demonstrated this type action. For recognition of his service on the *Virginia* and as recommended by Secretary Mallory, John Taylor Wood of Louisiana was promoted to first lieutenant on September 29, 1862. Wood saw limited opportunity for action afloat due to the large number of veteran officers who came from the U.S. Navy into the service of the Confederacy. All these officers competed for few available positions. Wood knew that the slow construction of additional ironclads meant that the wait for shipboard service would be lengthy. He may have remembered his days ashore during the Mexican War or he may have heard of the 1846 exploits of Fauntleroy's Company of California Dragoons who were organized by the navy as "sailors ashore" or "horse marines." Wherever Wood came up with the idea to mount-up sailors and boats for attacks on the Union navy in the rivers of eastern Virginia, he found a willing supporter in Stephen Mallory. Wood did not wait for action to come to him; he went to find action and the enemy on his own terms.

Beginning on October 1, 1862, Wood and his hand-picked sailors traveled with whale boats mounted on modified army wagons from Richmond to the Potomac River. Wood determined to use his force in a cutting-out expedition similar to Stephen Decatur's 1804 raid in Tripoli Harbor. Wood found a potential cutting-out victim anchored at Pope's Creek on Maryland side of the river. On the night of October 7, Wood led his men in an attack on the transport schooner *Frances Elmore*. The commandos were armed with swords and pistols. With the element of surprise, they quickly overpowered the hapless crew and took possession of the schooner. Wood stripped the *Frances Elmore* of useful items, removed the prisoners, and ordered the vessel burned. Wood returned to Richmond with his prisoners but he was soon on another cutting-out expedition. On the night of October 28, Wood and his men took a 1,400 ton merchant ship off Gwynn's Island on the Chesapeake. Wood stripped the *Alleganian* and set the vessel ablaze. He returned to Richmond on October 31st with captured stores and prisoners in tow. The actions of the Confederate raiders brought out warnings from Gideon Wells. Welles forwarded information about the raiders to Commodore A.A. Harwood, Commander Potomac Flotilla. "I transmit herewith a copy of communication from Captain Case, containing information of the designs of the rebels to surprise and capture some of our steamers in the waters of Virginia. The vessels of the flotilla should be cautioned." Wood took the fight to Welles's navy. His attacks alarmed the Federals and gave reason for optimism among the Southern populace.

On January 26, 1863, Jefferson Davis nominated Wood to be an aide on his staff with the rank and pay of a colonel of cavalry. Wood replaced another Davis nephew, Joseph R. Davis. The Senate advised and consented to Wood's nomination as aide-de-camp on February 9, 1863. Wood held rank in both the army and navy and as such served as a liaison between the services. His first assignment was to inspect coastal defenses, determine ironclad construction progress, and assess personnel at the various locations. Wood was to report his findings directly to President Davis. This freedom to bypass the chain-of-command was unusual; however, Wood never abused his position for self-promotion. On February 10, Wood left Richmond bound for Wilmington, North Carolina. According to Royce Gordon Shingleton, Wood's report that Wilmington needed additional heavy ordnance to protect the city was his most valuable contribution to the war effort. During May, 1863, Federal blockaders off Fort Fisher reported

heavy guns being mounted at the expanding fortifications. In his report submitted to Davis on February 14, Wood reported a delayed status of the *Raleigh* and the *North Carolina* caused by the yellow fever and continual threat of Union attack. He commented on the deficient engines and lack of iron plating that further delayed completion of the ironclads at Halifax, Tarborough, and Wilmington. Wood continued:

But the great want, the absolute necessity of the place, if it is to be held against naval attack, is heavy guns, larger caliber. With over 100 guns bearing upon the water, there is but one 10-inch, no 9-inch, and but few 8-inch; 24s and 32s form the armament of most of the batteries. Fort Fisher, at New Inlet, is a series of sand and palmetto works, which with proper weight of metal, could defy any water attack. Fort Caswell, much weaker, is in a transition state; the masonry as far as possible is being covered with sand, and on two faces of the work an inclined shield covered with railroad iron and sand-bags is being erected. The steamer Cornubia, on her second trip, has left for Bermuda, and this morning the Giraffe returned safely. There is a perfect accord between the military and naval commanders; both are working with spirit.

Wood was a master of understatement. In one short report, he reported the efficiency of Whiting and Lamb in preparing the defenses for the busy blockade running port. He reported the need for larger and more numerous guns. Wood continued on his inspection of other southern ports and he reported insightful observations from all locations. At this point in his career, Wood was among the most influential officers in the navy. Even though Wood was a nephew, Davis had an officer on his staff who spoke directly to the facts as seen by that officer.

After the completion of his inspection tour, Wood organized a third expedition in Virginia waters. Wood targeted Union gunboats because of their actions to suppress Confederate sympathizers among the people of eastern Virginia. Wood planned this expedition under a veil of secrecy to prevent any word reaching the Federals. Typical of Wood's secretive planning, he wrote to Lieutenant Frank L. Hoge on July 7, 1863, "Come up and see me this evening; I have something of importance to communicate." Wood consulted President Davis about the expedition but its planning was kept secret from Mallory or Davis's staff. He slowly gathered the equipment and supplies needed for the expedition. More importantly, he carefully selected the eleven officers and seventy-one men who would make this raid. Wood selected each member to perform a specific task that was necessary for the success of the mission. On August 12, 1863, Wood moved his special force out of Richmond. He alone knew the destination or purpose of this raid. Unknown to the raiders, Commodore A.A. Harwood, commander of the Potomac Flotilla, heeded Gideon Welles's advice and the Union gunboats were on alert. Wood established his base on the Piankatank River but the alert commander of the U.S.S. *General Putnam* discovered Wood's camp. The raiders repulsed a Yankee party but the discovery forced Wood to relocate his camp to the *Rappahannock*.

On the night of August 23, Wood found two Union gunboats anchored at the mouth of the Rappahannock. The ships proximity to each other required that both be attacked simultaneously. Wood led two boats against the U.S.S. *Satellite* and Frank Hoge led the other boats against the U.S.S. *Reliance*. Prior to the dangerous attack, Wood led his men in a prayer of deliverance. The raiders boarded the vessels and after hand-to-hand combat secured their capture. Wood removed the Union and Confederate wounded and turned his prisoners over to Colonel Thomas Rosser of the Fifth Virginia Cavalry. Rosser had been secretly ordered to

support Wood's raiders and secure Urbanna as a base from which Wood could operate the captured gunboats.

Using the *Satellite* as a raider, Wood ventured into the river on the night of August 24. Rosser supplied sharpshooters to *Satellite* to support Wood's sailors. The Confederates captured and returned the merchant schooners, *Golden Rod, Coquette,* and *Two Brothers* to Urbanna. Wood coaled the *Satellite* and returned to the bay to search for additional prey. Converging Union gunboats forced Wood to move his captures up river where he stripped and sunk the growing fleet. Wood wisely decided to remove his small force. The raid was welcome news for the Southern people who had endured military reverses during the summer of 1863. Wood received promotion to Commander effective August 23 for his actions associated with the Chesapeake expedition. More importantly, Wood's abilities as a leader of men attracted the notice of many. His careful attention to details and his fierceness in battle helped dispel thoughts of nepotism that resulted from his close association with Jefferson Davis.

On January 20, 1864, R.E. Lee presented to George E. Pickett, R.F. Hoke, W.H.C. Whiting, and J. Taylor Wood a combined-operations plan to take the Union garrison at New Berne, North Carolina. The goal was the return of eastern North Carolina with its agricultural bounty to Confederate control. The army was to launch a multi-pronged assault that would be supported by the navy. Lee called for Wood and his assembled force of thirty-three officers and two hundred twenty enlisted men to descend the Neuse River from Kinston and capture Union gunboats guarding the enemy forts along the river. Wood was to turn the gunboats against the fort garrisons and drive them from their defenses. Lee warned Pickett that success depended upon "secrecy, expedition, and boldness of your movements." Lee also assured Pickett that Wood "will attend his part."

Daniel B. Conrad, surgeon CSN, left an account of the naval expedition to seize Union gunboats at New Berne. Naval detachments from the Richmond, Charleston, and Wilmington stations received orders in January 1864 to detail provisions and report to J. Taylor Wood in North Carolina for further orders. Wood directed all units to converge on Kinston. Per Conrad, the naval units had no idea the object of the raid. Because of Wood's reputation, it was expected to be "nervous work" associated with a cutting-out expedition. On Sunday, February 1, 1864, Wood moved his raiders down the Neuse toward New Berne. The men camped on a small island in the river at about sunset. Wood gave orders to be the officers and men as to what was to be their objective. They were to capture a Union gunboat at New Berne and use that vessel to approach and capture other gunboats. "It was a grand scheme, and was received by the older men with looks of admiration and with rapture by the young midshipmen, all of whom would have broken out in loud cheers but for the fact that the strictest silence was essential to the success of the daring undertaking. In concluding his talk, Commander Wood solemnly said: "We will now pray." Conrad's account provided a description of Wood's growing skills as a daring leader of men.

At 4:00 A.M. on the night of February 1, Wood and his men searched the estuary at New Berne for enemy gunboats but none were found. With the approach of daylight, Wood ordered his force back up the Neuse to seek cover, rest, and await the cover of darkness. As night neared, the raiders made out the shape of a gunboat as it anchored off Foster's Wharf. At about the same time, Lieutenant George Gift's detachment arrived after being delayed in Kinston. With his force now at full strength, Wood assembled his men and prepared each crew for its task in the

attack. Wood again closed with a prayer. Palmer Saunders, a passed midshipmen from Norfolk, made a sobering comment about the coming attack, "I wonder how many of us will be up in those stars by tomorrow morning?" They waited with the firm knowledge that their commander had prepared them for the attack.

Wood split his force into three commands: Wood and Lieutenant Benjamin Loyall commanded two attack columns while Lieutenant George Gift commanded the reserves. At 2:30 A.M., the raiders silently approached the U.S.S. *Underwriter*. An *Underwriter* lookout hailed the approaching boats and the Confederates pulled hard to reach the vessel. Armed with cutlasses and pistols, the men under Wood and Loyall boarded the gunboat and began a furious battle to secure its capture. Surgeon Conrad described the hand-to-hand fighting and its deadly horror. "I could hear Wood's stentorian voice giving orders and encouraging the men, and then, in less than five minutes, I could distinguish a strange synchronous roar, but did understand what it meant at first; but it became plain: â€˜She's ours,' everybody crying at the top of their voices." The fighting had been vicious. Six raiders lay dead on the decks; among them was Passed Midshipman Palmer Saunders. He no longer wondered how many would join the stars before the morning.

Wood sent engineers below to get the *Underwriter* underway. They returned with news that the fires were too low to get up steam within an hour. Federal gunners in nearby Forts Anderson and Dutton turned their guns on the *Underwriter*. Wood could not pull the three hundred-fifty ton *Underwriter* with his boats and was forced to burn her. The loss of the *Underwriter* did not deter Wood from confidently believing New Berne could be taken with a combined assault. Ultimately the attack failed because of poor coordination between the multi-pronged army units to attack with energy and promptness. Hoke and J.G. Martin displayed enthusiasm and skill in their attacks; however, the Confederates wings commanded by Barton and Dearing displayed little offensive enthusiasm or skill. Pickett failed to heed Lee's direction to move his entire force with expedition, and boldness of movement. When the cautious Pickett decided to end his attack, Wood ordered his raiders back to their stations.

Even thought the raid failed, the capture and burning of the *Underwriter* brought praise for Wood's efforts. The Congress of the Confederate States of America passed a unanimous resolution that extended its thanks to Wood for capture of the *Underwriter* and for the commando raids against the enemy in the waters of Virginia. It recognized Wood for his "daring and brilliantly executed conduct." As cited by Bell, Lee praised Wood for his part in the attack, "Commander Wood who had the hardest part to perform did his part well." Praise from his superiors acknowledged that Wood's judgment could be trusted and he would be relied on for future expeditions. Praise from his subordinates acknowledged his skill as a leader.

Lieutenant George W. Gift wrote of the New Berne expedition:

I was with Wood in his late expedition to New Berne, N.C., which resulted in the cutting-out and destruction of the U.S. gunboat Underwriter. It was a bold design and well executed, and Wood deserves much credit. All is due to him and Loyall, as the bulk of the work fell upon the two leading boats.
I am all admiration for Wood. He is modesty personified, conceives boldlyand executes with skill and courage.

Modesty personified was a phrase little used to refer to men who risked all in expeditions to strike at their enemies.

Wood returned to Richmond and to his job as an aide-the-camp to President Davis. Jefferson Davis relied on Wood to be his eyes in the field. Wood reported to Davis the success achieved by Hoke with the capture of Plymouth on April 21, 1864. "Heaven has crowned our efforts with success. General Hoke has captured this point with 1,600 prisoners, 25 pieces of artillery, and navy co-operation." Davis's growing confidence in his aide would lead to Wood's involvement with two controversial missions during the summer of 1864: The Point Lookout raid and the voyage of the *Tallahassee*. These missions were gambles which raised either the hopes or the fears of the leaders of the Southern nation.

In May 1864, Grant moved the Army of the Potomac south across the Rapidan River. This began the overland campaign to take Richmond. Grant and Lee clashed at the Wilderness and Spotsylvania. Grant absorbed heavy casualties but kept moving his army south. On June 3, 1864, Grant launched a determined attack against Lee's entrenched troops at Cold Harbor located just ten miles out of Richmond. Grant lost nearly 7,000 men in a suicidal charged that lasted a mere ten minutes. As cited by Ferguson, Confederate General Evander Law referred to the ensuing slaughter of Union troops with "It was not war, it was murder."

Colonel Joshua Chamberlain, Twentieth Maine, noted that after the defeat at Cold Harbor, Union commanders did not call for reports of strengthen on hand. When Chamberlain asked why, he was told that if the country knew the true losses, they would not stand for it. "Stanton had laundered and delayed the news, and Grant tried to pretend that what happened was just another bump on the road south." The casualty lists ran for columns and columns in the Northern newspapers. Union morale suffered as casualties from Grant's campaign continued to escalate. Many in the North experienced war weariness as the casualty lists affected more and more homes.

Against this backdrop of increasing Northern disillusionment with the war, Abraham Lincoln faced the possibility that he would lose the November election. The popular George B. McClellan, former commander of the Army of the Potomac, appeared to be the potential candidate of the Democratic Party. The Peace Democrats used the horrors of the battlefield to further their arguments for a negotiated settlement with the Confederacy. During the summer of 1864, Lincoln and the Republican administration faced severe challenges on the battlefield, in the economy, and among home front families. Lincoln's enemies, inside and outside the United States, recognized his vulnerability and sought to gain advantage.

Jefferson Davis recognized the opportunity that Lincoln's difficulties presented for the cause of Southern independence. If Southern arms could inflict significant damages on the Northern home front, Davis thought the Northern populace would react by voting for the Peace Democrats and an end to the war. Davis and his advisors believed that any gamble that would adversely affect Northern public opinion was worth considerable risk. Truthfully, the Confederacy was at a point of near collapse on its own home front. Any successful actions by Southern arms would not only decrease Northern moral, it would provide a boost to sagging Southern morale. Davis supported an army offensive through the Shenandoah Valley into Maryland and Pennsylvania as well as a naval commerce raid against the northeastern coast. These actions, if successful, were capable of influencing the upcoming election and consequently increasing the possibility of

recognition of the sovereignty of the Confederacy by Great Britain. To win his gamble, Davis prepared to inflict damage on the Union with every available military means.

In July 1864, John Taylor Wood and G.W. Custis Lee were given command of a daring expedition to free and arm thousands of Confederate prisoners held at Point Lookout, Maryland. Lee was to command the land forces who would be dispatched from Jubal Early's army that had begun to move north on July 5. Wood was sent to Wilmington to ready crews and two steamers capable of capturing Union gunboats at Point Lookout. Wood was also to secure weapons to arm the prisoners who would join Early's attack on Washington. On July 9, the Honorable John Tyler wrote to Confederate General Sterling Price in Arkansas and outlined the complete details of the secret expedition. Tyler, son of the late U.S. president, exclaimed that this was "decidedly the most brilliant idea of the war." After the war, Captain John Wilkinson, of the Confederate navy, offered a different opinion of the Point Lookout expedition. "These futile projects for the release of prisoners, serve to show the desperate straits to which the Confederacy was reduced, for want of soldiers."

Also on July 9, Wood telegraphed Jefferson Davis, "Will try to get out to-night. Am badly off for officers, but hope for the best." On July 10, Davis responded to Wood in Wilmington, "Telegram of yesterday received. The object and destination of the expedition have somehow become so generally known that I fear the operations will meet unexpected obstacles. General R.E. Lee has communicated with you and left your action to your discretion." The Point Lookout expedition was compromised and Jubal Early's attack on Washington was turned back. To Wood's credit, Davis and Lee exhibited great confidence in his judgment. Davis and Stephen R. Mallory immediately decided to involve Wood in their most daring gamble.

On July 23, 1864, Stephen R. Mallory ordered John Taylor Wood to take command of the converted blockade runner, *Atalanta,* and conduct a raid on Union commerce along the coastline of the United States. Mallory's orders were in agreement with Jefferson Davis's plan to adversely influence the Northern public opinion in an attempt to deny Abraham Lincoln reelection in the 1864 presidential election.

Proceed to Wilmington N.C. and take command of the Confederate States Steamer â€˜Tallahassee,' formerly Atlanta, which has been fitted out at that place for a cruise against the enemy. Relying confidently upon your judgment and ability, and believing that the untrammeled exercise of your own wise discretion will contribute to your success, it is deemed unnecessary to give instructions in detail for your cruise. The character and force of your vessel point to the enemy's commerce as her most appropriate field on action, and it is hoped that her speed and capacity for carrying fuel will enable her to pay proper attention to the shores of New England and its fisheries.

Mallory continued the order and within it was an important directive that presented Wood with an important criteria for the mission of the *Tallahassee*

The strictest regard for the rights of neutrals must be sedulously observed, and upon all proper occasions you will endeavor to cultivate friendly relations with their naval and other authorities, and to present the character of our struggle in its true light.

Mallory, Wood, and the Confederacy needed the "wink and nod" of Great Britain's neutrality policies to continue as it had during 1861-1863. Without access to the port and provisions at Halifax, Nova Scotia, Wood's cruise would meet limited overall success.

The cruise of the *Tallahassee* began of August 4, 1864 when Wood took the vessel to New Inlet to attempt to run the blockade. In his report to Mallory, Wood provided the following account of the *Tallahassee's* actions until it reached Halifax.

After two days' ineffectual effort, on account of the water, to get to sea at the eastern bar on New Inlet, we succeeded in getting out on the night of the 6th instant at the western bar. Sighted five of the blockaders and were fired on by two.

The next day were chased at different times by four of the offshore fleet and fired upon by one; did not return it, as it would betray the ship.

Spoke and overhauled a number of vessels, but they were all European. Not until the 11th, within 80 miles of Sandy Hook, did we fall in with a Yankee. I enclose a list of the captures.

Remained off New York two days; then ran to the eastward, around Georges Banks, to the coast of Maine, going into the mouth of the Penobscot; thence to Halifax, Nova Scotia, for coal, where I arrived on the 18 with only 40 tons on board.

Again, Wood was a master of the understatement. He downplayed the action encountered by the *Tallahassee* in running the blockage, avoiding Union ships, and capturing Yankee vessels. He enclosed nothing but a simple list of the thirty-three ships taken during the cruise. Wood did provide considerable detail on his interactions with British admiral, Sir James Hope, and lieutenant-governor, Sir Richard MacDonnell. He noted that the initial meeting with Hope was uncivil and cold. MacDonnell displayed a more accommodating attitude toward Wood's request to take on coal and undertake repairs. MacDonnell's attitude grew quickly cold and unhelpful the next day. The *Tallahassee* received only sufficient coal to make a return cruise to Wilmington. Wood perceived the intention of the British authorities as rigid enforcement of the Queen's proclamation on neutrality. There was to be no "wink and nod." Wood sailed on the night of August 19 after being in port a mere forty hours.

Had I procured the coal needed, I intended to have struck the coast at the capes of the Delaware and followed it down to the Cape Fear; but I had only coal enough to reach Wilmington on the night of the 26th.

The reaction to the cruise of the *Tallahassee* was swift in the newspapers of the South and the North. The *Wilmington Daily Journa*l boasted of the status of the *Tallahassee* as a "ship armed, equipped, manned, and sailed from a Confederate port," and "commanded by the dashing and heroic Wood." The *New York Times* reported on "a rebel pirate off the coast," the "depredations of the *Tallahassee*," and of the "cowardly bravado of the pirates." The outrages committed by the rebel raider were reported daily in the *Times* and these reports continued until the vessel surrendered in Liverpool during April, 1865. The Times venomously attacked the actions of copperheads who "entertain an Englishman or Frenchman with abuse of Lincoln and the war, on the ground that it is pecuniarily damaging." Wood's exploits did create tension and animosity among the populace of the North. The *Times* reprinted a complete history of the *Tallahassee*

from accounts published in the *Richmond Dispatch*. The *Tallahassee* and its commander were news and they elicited strong reaction from friend and foe.

Wood received much praise for the cruise of the *Tallahassee*. The feat vindicated some of the stigma associated with the loss of the *Alabama* and the fall of Mobile Bay. Mrs. Anna Sanders in a letter to Jefferson Davis remarked, "I rejoice with you in the brilliant success of your brave and high-toned nephew. J. Taylor Wood." Edward Crenshaw, Confederate Marine officer who served on the *Tallahassee*, recorded in his diary the manner in which Wood exercised command of his ship. Crenshaw reported that Wood maintained strict "man-of-war discipline" and that Wood conducted frequent religious services during the cruise. Mary Chesnut, wife of Davis aide James Chesnut, kept an extensive diary that recorded the intimate details of life among the Confederate leadership. On August 23, 1864, Mary made the following entry concerning Wood, "John Taylor Wood, fine fellow in his fine ship, Tallahassee. He is all right."

All were not enthusiastic about the voyage of the *Tallahassee*. Wood felt the sting of criticism directed at Davis and Mallory for authorizing the use of commerce raiders from the last remaining port open to blockade runners. The cruise of the *Tallahassee* began a flood of correspondence between Davis, Mallory and their detractors. W.H.C. Whiting, Zebulon Vance, Samuel J. Person and even Robert E. Lee voiced their concerns with the use of commerce raiders out of Wilmington. These men were convinced that the policy of sending raiders from this port would draw increased Union diligence that would end the efficiency of the blockade runners. The detractors concluded that the fall of Wilmington and the end of blockade running would seal the fate of the Confederacy. Whiting harped about the real value of the ships taken by the *Tallahassee* and the urgent need to convert the raiders into defensive vessels to defend the river. North Carolina governor, Zebulon B. Vance was especially agitated about the use of Wilmington for *Tallahassee* and *Chickamauga* as commerce raiders:

I beg leave to enter my most respectful and earnest remonstrance against the sailing of the two privateers from the port of Wilmington. Ten or twelve valuable steamers have already been lost in consequence of the cruise of the Tallahassee, and among them the noble steamer A.D. Vance, which alone, I respectfully submit, has been of far more value to the Confederacy than all our privateers combined. For these and other obvious reasons I hope these two vessels may remain in the Cape Fear to assist in its defense.

Since the beginning of the war, Stephen Mallory developed a strategy to use commerce raiders against the North's merchant fleet. The voyages of the *Sumter, Nashville, Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Rappahannock, Chickamauga* and the *Tallahassee/Olustee* had virtually destroyed the merchant shipping under the U.S. flag. Davis supported Mallory in this overall strategy; however, the voyage of Wood and the *Tallahassee* were especially important to the gamble to influence the election of 1864. Davis responded to Vance's remonstrance with a defense of Taylor and the *Tallahassee*:

Our cruisers, though few in number, have almost swept the enemy's foreign commerce from the sea. Though the Tallahassee captured thirty-one vessels her service is not measured by, nor limited to, the value of these ships and cargoes and the number of prisoners, but it must be estimated in connections with other results: the consequent\ insecurity of the United States coastwise commerceâ€¦â€¦.

The unceasing criticism from his detractors led Davis to expend considerable efforts to defend this policy and his gamble. In a response to Samuel J. Person, member of the North Carolina Legislature, Davis responded in detail to the criticisms of Vance, Whiting, Lee and others. Davis objected to the reference to the destruction of "a few insignificant Smacks." Davis concluded with reference to the difficulties faced by the government and the peril to its citizens in denouncing the necessary policies to provide:

â€¦ hope of safety from the untold horrors of Yankee despotism -. And if now, gentlemen like yourself, who are true friends to the Government and the cause, shall, from any misapprehension, indirectly lend their countenance to these unhappy differences, it is easy to foresee the sad and disastrous results which must ensue.

The reaction to the *Tallahassee* was also forthcoming on the Union side. Gideon Welles and the United States Navy moved to strengthen the blockade at Wilmington. He was stung by criticism in the Northern press but continued his policy of blockade. Welles looked upon Wilmington with equal value as Richmond to the Confederate cause. He also renewed his efforts to get the War Department to endorse a combined operation to close Wilmington. The cruise of the *Tallahassee* was pushed into the background by the Northern press when Atlanta fell of September 2, 1864. The discontent with Lincoln's administration abated as Union victories mounted. "Rather than securing Confederate independence, the cruise of the *Tallahassee* helped make Wilmington a target of Union forces, fully supported by Northern politicians and people."

One question remained about the cruise of the *Tallahassee*. Davis, Mallory, and Wood had taken the gamble on the first voyage of the *Tallahassee*. They still believed in the correctness of their policy to send commerce raiders from Wilmington. The *Tallahassee*, renamed C.S.S. *Olustee*, made a second voyage from Wilmington. Why was John Taylor Wood not in command of that vessel?

The answer to the above question can be found in part in Mary Elizabeth Thomas's article, "The CSS *Tallahassee*: A Factor in Anglo-American Relations â€“ 1864-1866." The lack of encouragement encountered in Halifax by the government officials indicated the British attitudes and actions would not support the resupply of Confederate commerce raiders. Without a "wink and nod" to Confederate resupply, the limited range of the *Tallahassee* made future raids more problematic. This idea was substantiated by the diminished success of the *Olustee* and the *Chickamauga*. Wood was aware that the *Tallahassee's* cruise was a boost to Southern morale, a cause of alarm among Yankee shipping, but it had not been the demoralizing agent that Davis and Mallory had hoped. Wood was also aware that he was seen as a pirate by the Northern politicians and military leaders. The realization of diminishing chances of raider success and the possibility of strong reaction by Federal officials if the raider was caught probably influenced Wood's involvement in future cruises. As a dutiful and loyal officer, Wood would have followed orders. Was it possible that Davis and Mallory did not order Wood on a subsequent cruise

because they too realized that if Wood saw the reduced chances of success they must also admit that their strategic gamble had failed?

Wood remained in his role as aide to President Davis. He was involved in the battles around Richmond until the very end of the war. Wood was with Davis in church on the Sunday morning when Lee sent word that he could no longer hold his lines as Petersburg. Wood faithfully stayed with Davis as the Confederacy came apart. He continued to assist Davis as the government fled from Richmond and moved to escape to the west. On May 10, Wood was with Davis when Union cavalry caught up with the fleeing party. Wood took actions to assist Davis in a final escape but the presence of Davis's wife led the president to surrender to the Yankees. The Confederacy had ended in the woods of southern Georgia.

Wood, ever the man of action, asked his uncle for permission to attempt an escape. Wood was able to bribe a guard and make good his try for freedom. After a harrowing journey, Wood, John C. Breckinridge and a small party traveled the length of Florida and crossed the waters to Cuba to freedom. From Cuba, Wood went to Halifax, Nova Scotia and a new life.

What further can be said of John Taylor Wood? David Dixon Porter wrote after the war about the Confederate raid on the *Underwriter* in February 1864:

This was rather a mortifying affair for the Navy, however fearless on the part of the Confederates â€¦â€¦ The gallant expedition was led by John Taylor Wood, of the Confederate Navyâ€¦. Had the enemy attacked the forts, the chances are they would have been successful, as the garrison were unprepared for an attack from the river, their most vulnerable side.

To Wood, the master of understatement, this accolade from the master of the overstatement would have been too much. Rudyard Kipling described John Taylor Wood as well as anyone in his poem:

If

IF you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too;
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,
Or being hated, don't give way to hating,
And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise:

If you can dream - and not make dreams your master;
If you can think - and not make thoughts your aim;
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two impostors just the same;
If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,
And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools:

If you can make one heap of all your winnings
And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
And lose, and start again at your beginnings
And never breathe a word about your loss;
If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
Except the Will which says to them: 'Hold on!'

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue
, ' Or walk with Kings - nor lose the common touch,
if neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
If all men count with you, but none too much;
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And - which is more - you'll be a Man, my son!

Rudyard Kipling

Wood would have found this too much. To him he was just: John Taylor Wood: Man of Action, Man of Honor

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