

**The road to Savannah:
Fort Pulaski, Admiral Du Pont and the impact of traditional naval
strategy, January 1862¹**

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In March 1851, the House of Representatives asked Secretary of War M. Conrad to present a report on the situation of land defences. The intention was to establish whether or not the cost of fortifying the American coastline might be reduced by increasing the size of the Navy. Conrad consulted naval experts, one of whom was Commander Samuel Francis Du Pont.

Du Pont's submission, his *Report on the National Defenses* (November 1851), showed little sympathy for a navy that would be focused solely on defensive tasks. Instead, he argued a strong case for a 'blue waters navy'. In Du Pont's opinion, a naval power needed to be capable of delivering "aggression, [...] to carry the 'sword of the state' upon the broad ocean, sweep from it the enemy's commerce, capture or scatter the vessels of war protecting it, cover and convoy our own to its destined havens, and be ready to meet hostile fleets; in other words, to contend for the mastery of the seas".²

This opinion, articulated in a way that was easily understood by a wider audience, landed well with both the military and the political establishment. It was also well-aligned with contemporary naval strategy, as proven by the authorisation of steam-propelled frigates (*Merrimack*-class) and sloops (*Hartford*-class) in 1853. However, it is worth noting that Du Pont's report to the House of Representatives did not mention the role for or need to consider combined or joint operations. This was unusual, as Du Pont had previously been described as a naval officer with a sound strategic mind who

¹ This article was written as part of the coursework for the module Combined Operations of the American Civil War, MA in Military History, University of Wolverhampton. I would like also to thank Merryn Walters for her kindness in proofreading the original draft.

² Kevin J. Weddle, *Lincoln's Tragic Admiral: The Life of Samuel Francis Du Pont* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2005), p. 45.

was, in fact, keen on including combined operations in strategic planning.³ Rather, the report talked only of limited cooperation, such as a need to escort fleet or allied merchant vessels. At the time that view was not uncommon: freedom of action meant the Navy could strike anywhere, dismissing the role of land-based infrastructure or the army and its never-ending list of logistical needs.

Outside the confines of a consultancy role however, as chairman of the Blockading Board, Du Pont had already envisaged a combined operations capture of East coast locations to provide coaling stations for a blockading fleet. More importantly, according to Weddle, "[he] believed that these joint efforts could secure bases from which the army could launch operations that could have significant strategic impact."⁴ Had it been further developed at that early stage of the Civil War, this grand vision could well have translated into the occupation of the South's main maritime trading centers: Savannah, Charleston and Wilmington. This would have closed most of the supply routes needed to sustain the Confederacy's war effort.

It is worth exploring that recommendation to the Blockading Board, as it is widely accepted that a lack of naval combined operations in 1862 was a factor in prolonging the war. Closer examination challenges both the strategic validity of the report submitted to the House of Representatives report, and the level of Du Pont's personal convictions. After all, if Du Pont was sure that combined operations would, "[give] the Union a decisive advantage",⁵ it is surprising he accepted the naval command of the Royal Port expedition instead of staying in Washington to influence the creation of a joint command. However, Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevskii argued in 1926, this might have been due to the impact of Du Pont's report – thus manifesting why "[...] the strategic commander cannot personally organize combat".⁶

³ Weddle's opinion that, "Du Pont's report anticipated the writings of the late nineteenth-century naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan", seems exaggerated considering the fact that he was only recommending the creation of a blue-water fleet large enough to present some deterrence effect against potential European adversaries. Kevin J. Weddle, *Lincoln's Tragic Admiral*, p. 48.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

⁵ Weddle, *Lincoln's Tragic Admiral*, p. 124.

⁶ Shimon Naveh, *In Pursuit of Military Excellence: The Evolution of Operational Theory* (London and New York: Frank Cass, 1997), p. 11.

Some historians have seen the recommendations of the Blockading Board as the “inception of an Expeditionary Strategy”.⁷ Indeed, Weddle suggests that Du Pont’s actions between 1861, and his loss of command after the failure of capturing Charleston in 1863, “anticipated an influential naval strategist”.⁸ However, the limitations of that contemporary strategic thinking can be fully appreciated through the content of Du Pont’s letters to his wife, written after his promotion to flag officer as commander of the South Atlantic Southern Squadron. Du Pont longed to “be doing something” following the Union’s humiliating defeat at Bull Run: “I had been content to remain where the war found me and where I was doing quite as much good as I could blockading – probably a good deal more”.⁹ The emotions generated by that new position held the scent of a naval epic: “I never should have been satisfied to remain on shore, when the service on the ocean was changing its character from blockade to maritime war – and no service on shore, however useful, could be considered anything after the war.”¹⁰

Still, while Du Pont might have fantasized about “fleet-on-fleet actions” and his role in them, they simply did not happen.¹¹ Littoral warfare was changing, but not in the direction Du Pont predicted. From start to finish, the oceanic “game of cat and mouse” between “blockaders, runners, and raiders”, was focussed almost exclusively on, “economic, rather than more narrowly military, objectives”.¹² The Union Navy transformed into a “coastal-assault, largely ‘brown water’ navy that quickly cleared the way for “mere” volunteers and conscripted Federal soldiers”.¹³ Political pressure, plus the need for infrastructure to sustain the blockades for a lengthy period, forced the Naval and War departments to provide for an expedition against Port Royal. However,

⁷ Daniel T. Canfield, “Opportunity Lost: Combined Operations and the Development of Union Military Strategy, April 1861-April 1862”, *The Journal of Military History*, Vol. 79 (July 2015), p. 667.

⁸ This time Weddle compares Du Pont with Julian Corbett: “In this way the strategy Du Pont developed for the campaign of blockade was much closer to that later advocated by the early twentieth-century British naval strategist Julian Corbett”. Weddle, *Lincoln’s Tragic Admiral*, p. 124.

⁹ James M. Merrill, *Du Pont: The Making of an Admiral* (New York: Dood, Mead & Company, 1986), p. 260.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 262.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 245.

¹² Robert E. Bonner, “The Salt Water Civil War: Thalassological Approches, Ocean-Centered Opportunities”, *Journal of the Civil War Era*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (2016), p. 246.

¹³ Howard J. Fuller, “Stopping at the Water’s Edge? A review of *War on the Waters: The Union and Confederate Navies, 1861-1865* by James M. McPherson”, *Reviews in American History*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (2014), p. 435.

the combination of limited resources with a dearth of trained troops and the time pressures of assembling appropriate ships meant that only limited objectives could be considered. In short, “no preparations were made to march into the interior at all.”¹⁴

In addition, the easy capture of Forts Walker and Beauregard on 7th November 1861 had changed Du Pont’s understanding of both his own priorities and the limits of inter-service cooperation. He dismissed the idea of using all his resources to help the army go beyond the coastline, or to move forward against inland objectives, and took the position that “navy forces should be able to defeat enemy forts [and that] the navy could do it alone.”¹⁵ That said, the sluggish advance of the army towards Beaufort bothered Du Pont. It interfered with his desire to occupy more locations along the coast: “I am exceedingly anxious to get away to Fernandina... if I can get through that and some other points perhaps St. Helena, I can come back here and make a station of it.”¹⁶

Du Pont had shared Sherman’s opinion that the capture of Port Royal offered a strategic opportunity against Savannah, via the railway connecting with Charleston. He stated: “it would be wiser to prepare for a heavy movement of 50,000 men on Charleston.”¹⁷ However, Sherman’s views were more pragmatic. Sherman believed 10,000 reinforcements would be enough, along with siege and campaign artillery, field carriages and more engineers, together with six steam ferries and some 100 rowboats to transport the force.¹⁸ How the army decided to proceed on land, according to Sherman was “not my province”¹⁹. He focused on more rewarding objectives: “the mistake”, he said, “...is to consider these... volunteers an army.”²⁰

¹⁴ Herbert M. Schiller, *Sumter is Avenged! The Siege and Reduction of Fort Pulaski* (Shippensburg: White Mane Publishing Company, 1995), p. 12.

¹⁵ Weddle, *Lincoln’s Tragic Admiral*, p. 139.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

¹⁷ Weddle, *Lincoln’s Tragic Admiral*, p. 141. “I am firmly convinced an operation of this sort would not only give us Savannah, but, if successful and strong enough to follow up the success would shake the so-called Southern Confederacy to its very foundation”; Sherman quoted in Williamson Murray and Wayne Wei-Siang Hsieh, *A Savage War: A Military History of the Civil War* (Princeton: PUP, 2016), p. 128.

¹⁸ Schiller, *Sumter is Avenged!*, p. 15.

¹⁹ Weddle, *Lincoln’s Tragic Admiral*, p. 143.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

In late November 1861, Union forces in the same area became aware that Tybee Island had been abandoned by the Confederates. This was an important location. It facilitated an approach towards Savannah from the South inlets and, if necessary it could be used to siege Fort Pulaski – sitting, much like Fort Sumter, in the middle of the Savannah River mouth. That said, it is unclear why Du Pont didn't try to reduce the fort with his own fleet. Rather, he left the army on its own to do a job that would take almost six months.

Sherman presented Du Pont with alternatives to reach Savannah, bypassing Fort Pulaski by using either Walls Cut – between Turtle Island and James Island – or by taking a passage through the Wassaw Sound and Wilmington river. Du Pont met with Sherman on 15th January 1862, on the USS *Wabash*, and the two men agreed two forces would be needed. One would use Walls Cut, the other the Wilmington river; both would then join forces on Elba Island and proceed to destroy the old Fort Jackson.²¹

However, in retrospect, Du Pont was not sure enough naval fire power could be brought onto Fort Jackson, and he withdrew his support for the operation. Sherman did not give up though, and asked for transport so he could approach Fort Jackson from the rear. Du Pont refused. A concern for losing ships had been on Du Pont's mind since he'd found himself tied up with the army operations south of Port Royal. As he reminded Commander J. S. Missroon of the sail frigate USS *Savannah*, during the reconnaissance of Tybee Island, “[...] according to the memoir of the coast of Georgia, by A. D. Bache, the Superintendent of the Coast Survey, Wassaw Inlet “is difficult to enter, and has not been surveyed;” and, further, that the vessels of this squadron are about to be employed on other and important service. I enjoin it upon you, therefore, not to allow any risk to be incurred; neither from an encounter with batteries [...], nor from too near an approach to shoals and bars, the depths and currents of which have not been determined.”²²

²¹ Rowena Reed, *Combined Operations in the Civil War* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), p. 53. A detailed navigational map of the Savannah River and Wassaw Sound can be accessed on, https://geographic.org/nautical_charts/06_norfolk/11512_1_savannah_river_and_wassaw_sound.html

²² Du Pont to Missroon, 1 December 1861, *ODP*, pp. 76-77.

Du Pont's reticence to engage may have been due to a fear of the Confederate river obstructions. It could also have been because, "The rebels have themselves placed sufficient obstructions in the river at Pulaski, and thus, by the cooperation of their own fears with our efforts, the harbor of Savannah is effectually closed."²³ In short, Du Pont was unwilling to take any more risks than necessary. He was extremely cautious, so that, "the further prosecution of the original projects of the expedition is not crippled by the unnecessary exposure of the efficient vessels of the fleet."²⁴ These concerns were unfounded.

During a combined reconnaissance of Wilmington Narrows in late January 1862, Brigadier Horatio G. Wright and Lieutenant Barnes from the *Wabash* confirmed that within the depths of St Augustine Creek, running parallel to the Savannah river's South channel, "nowhere showed a less depth of water than 20 feet, and the width is sufficient for any of the gunboats. The piling above referred to was therefore the only obstacle to the passage of the gunboats so far as we penetrated, and this is no doubt practicable to remove."²⁵ The fact steam boats could definitely operate in this area is also demonstrated by the fact the naval component of this mission comprised the *Unadilla*-class (also known as the "Nineteen-days gunboats" due to its fast rate of construction), the *Ottawa*, *Seneca*, *Isaac*, *Potomska*, and *Ellen* gunboats, and the *Western World*, all of which had less than ten feet draft.

It is also worth noting that, just as the army party was reembarking, five Confederate gunboats appeared, sailing South towards Bird Island. The Union's fleet opened fire and apparently disabled the flag ship – the relevance being even more evidence that the Savannah river could be navigated, at least by low draft vessels. To Brigadier Wright, "it showed conclusively [...] that steamers might run the gauntlet, not without danger, but without any serious risk, even under so heavy and well-directed a fire as

²³ Du Pont to Welles, 25 Nov. 1861, *Official Dispatches and Letters of Rear Admiral Du Pont* (Wilmington: U.S. Navy, 1883), p. 74. ODP hereafter. <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/loc.ark:/13960/t5q81rf8m?urlappend=%3Bseq=84>

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Report by Brig. Gen. Horatio G. Wright, 29 Jan. 1862, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Series I, Vol. 6, p. 83. ORA hereafter. <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/coo1.ark:/13960/t1wd4fn8j?urlappend=%3Bseq=99>

that delivered by our gunboats.”²⁶ This event was also reported by General Lee, who told Richmond that, “if the enemy succeed in removing the obstacles in Wall’s Cut and Wilmington Narrows, there is nothing to prevent their reaching the Savannah River, and we have nothing afloat that can contend against them. The communication between Savannah and Fort Pulaski will then be cut off.”²⁷

The possibility to take Savannah was there. Du Pont knew that, after the quick and unexpected capture of Port Royal, the Confederates would reinforce the area. He later on confessed to his wife that, “both Savannah and Charleston could have been taken without loss after our blow here, [...] but then delays seem inherent on both sides. I do not blame the generals...”²⁸

In reality, he did blame both the Army and the War Department for the lack of support for Sherman, choosing to ignore his own responsibilities in narrowing windows of opportunity. Du Pont believed the wider public’s expectations of Sherman were disproportionate, and “surely I ought to be grateful to our merciful Father for enabling me to meet in any degree such a craving.”²⁹ Instead he chose easier operations, using December 1861 to simply move troops along the coast and take possession of undefended spots such as Otter Island and South Edisto, all of which had a strategic position for *future* operations against Charleston – but not against Savannah. Du Pont’s real objective at the beginning of 1862 was to disperse his fleet, “to hold every inlet and sound on the coast of South Carolina and Georgia, except, perhaps, Georgetown and Charleston, by having a sufficient number of vessels at anchor in them at all times.”³⁰ By the end of January, Du Pont had only one combined operation in mind, that of Fernandina, St Augustine and Jacksonville in North Florida.

²⁶ Report by Brig. Gen. Horatio G. Wright, 29 Jan. 1862, ORA, Series I, Vol. 6, p. 84.

²⁷ Reconnaissance of Wright River: Report of General Robert E. Lee, C.S. Army, 29 Jan. 1862, ORA, Series I, Vol. 6, p. 85. <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/coo1.ark:/13960/t1wd4fn8j?urlappend=%3Bseq=101>

²⁸ Merrill, *Du Pont*, p. 270.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Du Pont to Welles, 26 Dec. 1861, ODP, p. 89.

On 27th February, Sherman told the General-in-Chief, McClellan, that “the Savannah River is closed as tight as a bottle between Savannah and Fort Pulaski”.³¹ McClellan therefore decided to collaborate with the Naval Department in its operation against Fernandina. Everyone but Sherman was happy to dismiss Savannah as a strategic objective. McClellan wanted Sherman to capture Fort Pulaski and then move closer to Charleston; the Navy wanted to be liberated from Sherman so it could continue its own war of littoral conquest; and Du Pont wanted further glory in capturing Fernandina.

Throughout this period, Du Pont and Sherman maintained a cordial relationship, but the feeling among army officers and men was quite the opposite. They blamed Du Pont for not having taken Savannah – or at least giving it a try – and for their wasted efforts, clearing obstacles Wall’s Cut and Augustine Creek. “The day for taking Savannah has been allowed to slip away from us by the culpable inactivity of the Navy”, wrote First Lieutenant James H. Wilson, Sherman’s chief topographical officer, to his friend Lieutenant Colonel James B. McPherson. First Lieutenant Horace Porter, also in Sherman’s staff, had the same opinion, “They [the Navy] got near the river, then got scared about torpedoes, infernal machines, fire-rafts, & c. and positively refused all cooperation on the Savannah attack [...]. You can imagine how disgusted we all are.”³² “[I can] do little but simply garrison the coast”, in a letter to Brigadier General Lorenzo Thomas, Adjutant General of the Union Army, Sherman confessed: “I am not my own master.”³³

Du Pont’s decisions forced Sherman to disperse his force, increasing inefficiency on logistics, and demoralising the men who found themselves in the middle of nowhere with nothing to do but build defenses during the day and keep away from the mosquitoes at night. Troops were billeted on crowded steamers for weeks, waiting for the Navy to arrive. After 31 days at sea, the 6th Connecticut Regiment was left

³¹ Schiller, *Sumter is Avenged!*, p. 65.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 41.

³³ *Ibid.*

completely unoperational due to severe sickness and could not take part in the Fernandina operation.³⁴

In his article “Mind and Matter - Cultural Analysis in American Military History”, Wayne E. Lee believes that, “any exploration of the events of war, in or around a battlefield, must surely remain an exploration of choices”.³⁵ Lee then highlights that “room for improvisation” depends on the commander’s military culture, “[taking] us closer to understanding the reasons why they were made and the limits on the perception of alternatives.”³⁶ Du Pont, having joined the US Navy in 1817 as a fourteen years-old midshipman, was 58 years old in 1861. He had had plenty of sea experience, taking part in the War against Mexico and visiting Crimea as a naval observer. He worked for the naval administration, trying to change the promotion system, and he had lobbied in favor of a more powerful navy. However, whenever a situation demanded a risk-benefit analysis, Du Pont took the safest option. While “[Farragut] would willingly sacrifice ships to gain an important object if there was no other choice, [for example, a combined operation]”,³⁷ Du Pont would take the opposite step and protect his fleet as much as possible: the attack on Fort Sumter in 1863 is a good example.

Du Pont was probably convinced that blockading and capture of key coastal points would force the South to look for peace. It is possible that he was holding out for intense naval combat – but his risk-averse nature always came to the fore. In mid-January 1862, he shared with Sherman the feeling that Savannah could be taken, but then, “within thirty-six hours the naval commander changed his mind.”³⁸ James M. McPherson, author of the highly praised *Battle Cry of Freedom*, believes the US Navy “deserves more credit [...] than it has traditionally received” in the final victory of the Union over the South secessionist states.³⁹ However, if that is a valid opinion, it is in

³⁴ Schiller, *Sumter is Avenged!*, pp. 51-52.

³⁵ Wayne E. Lee’s article “Mind and Matter - Cultural Analysis in American Military History”, quoted in Andrew S. Bledsoe, “Beyond the Chessboard of War”, *Journal of the Civil War Era*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (2019), p. 282.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 287.

³⁷ Reed, *Combined Operations*, p. 61.

³⁸ Schiller, *Sumter is Avenged!*, p. 35.

³⁹ James M. McPherson, “The Rewards of Risk-Taking: Two Civil War Admirals”, *The Journal of Military History*, Vol. 78 (October 2014), p. 1226.

no way thanks to Du Pont or his lack of strategic vision and aversion to risk-taking during 1862. Despite the praise he received, including Lincoln's recommendation to the Congress for a vote of thanks,⁴⁰ Du Pont's input to the war effort, or lack of it, is a reminder that naval doctrine (and traditional naval commanders) operating in isolation do not bring victory closer: combined operations are the key to success.

⁴⁰ Craig S. Symonds, *Lincoln and His Admirals: Abraham Lincoln, the U.S. Navy, and the Civil War* (Oxford: OUP, 2008), p.70.