

"This Insulting Bravado":

William B. Cushing and the Martial Culture of 19<sup>th</sup> Century America.

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The Naval Career of William B. Cushing

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The Spanish gunboat *Tornado* apprehended the American vessel *Virginus* on the high seas near Cuba on October 31<sup>st</sup>, 1873. The *Virginus* had been running arms to Cuban rebels and the Spanish military governor, General Juan Burriel, had decided to make an example of her “pirate” crew. After a summary court-martial, thirty one of the 165 man complement were executed. The arrival of HMS *Niobe* on November 7<sup>th</sup> failed to stop a further twelve deaths. Of the fifty three executed, eight were United States citizens. The American Vice Consul in Havana, E.G Schmitt, desperately wired the Navy for aid. His pleas were answered by Commander William B. Cushing, commanding officer of the USS *Wyoming* and a 32-year-old career naval officer. Disgusted at the *Niobe*’s failure to save the *Virginus*’ remaining crew, Cushing steamed into Santiago de Cuba like a shark after the scent of blood. It was November, and the aura of tension that permeated the port city must have been even more stifling than the tropical climate. Cushing sent Burriel a curt letter demanding an audience and an immediate end to the “murders.” The general declined. Burriel must not have comprehended the sensitivity of his caller, for CDR Cushing was not one to take refusal lightly.

Cushing’s response shoved diplomacy off the table. He declared that if he did “not see General Burriel . . . and if any more prisoners are executed, I shall open fire on the Governor’s palace.”<sup>1</sup> While reading this threatening note, Burriel could have looked out of his window to see the *Wyoming* brought to battle stations and training her six heavy cannon on the closest Spanish property. Realizing that Cushing was ready to ignite an international conflict, Burriel reconsidered his initial stance and invited the pugnacious commander ashore. The two men met on the harbor pier. Burriel came forward to greet Cushing, his hand graciously extended. But the blue-eyed Yankee stared him down, keeping his hands clasped tightly behind his back. With

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<sup>1</sup> *The Sea Eagle* is Cushing’s memoir, written in late 1867 or early 1868. It is preserved in the Office of Naval Records Collection at the National Archives. William B. Cushing, *The Sea Eagle*, ed. Alden R. Carter (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009), 75.

no greeting or ceremony, Cushing demanded to know if any more prisoners would be shot. Taken aback by Cushing's abrupt query, the general uncomfortably replied that he would need authorization from Havana. "In that case, sir," Cushing replied "I must request that all the women and children be removed from the city."<sup>2</sup> The implication was unmistakable: Cushing intended to shell Santiago de Cuba. Something about the harsh manner of this upstart commander must have shaken General Burriel, for he agreed at once to halt the executions.

Though the Navy Department subsequently praised Cushing's intervention, Cushing himself displayed his disdain for diplomacy and fed the Department's worst fears when he openly predicted that "Spain will be driven from the West Indies. The shots which killed the passengers and crew of the *Virginus* have sounded the death knell of Spanish power in the Western Hemisphere."<sup>3</sup> This was a step too far, and Secretary of the Navy George Robeson dispatched CDR Daniel Braine to conclude the *Virginus* affair. Robeson's anxiety that Cushing might yet ignite a war was evident in the secretary's plea to Braine: "for God's sake hurry . . . We are afraid that Cushing will do something."<sup>4</sup>

Of all the Naval heroes to make a name in the American Civil War, Cushing was certainly the most likely to "do something." His career, which spanned eighteen years from the age of fourteen to his death at only thirty two, was defined by a string of daring raids, cunning reconnaissance missions, and narrow escapes. Cushing is unquestionably remarkable in the naval history of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. But to understand him and the time in which he lived, it is necessary to look beyond his heroics. Behind the hero was a deeply conflicted individual. In many ways, Cushing exemplified the ideal warrior and naval officer of the 1800's. The

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

characteristics that made him unique were merely a more extreme example of traits that were common and even cultivated within the officer corps of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. These exaggerated traits not only conveyed Cushing into fame, they also often brought him under the scrutiny of his superiors. Cushing counted manly virtue, fervent nationalism, reckless daring, and a maniacal defense of personal honor among this panoply of hyperbolic qualities. From the height of wartime renown to the drifting doldrums of peace, Cushing's career was defined by these behaviors. In placing him within the context of his time, the man behind the legend slides into focus and William B. Cushing becomes a fascinating porthole into the martial culture that dominated a heroic, yet stormy, life.<sup>5</sup>

One of the first virtues young William Cushing learned as he grew up in Fredonia was that of manliness which included a defiance of authority. His place as the youngest of four boys undoubtedly influenced this early lesson. From a young age, it was clear that any claim of authority meant little to Will unless it could be backed up by manly virtue and matching character. Cushing's tendency to resist any authority that did not live up to his code of character became a running theme throughout his life. At the age of ten he became captain of what he called Muss Company, which included "about all the small boys in the town."<sup>6</sup> Will had "trained his company to rush out of school, regardless of time or classes . . . whenever he gave a peculiar

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<sup>5</sup> It is important to note here that many of these values have been often categorized as particularly "southern," but Cushing reflected many of them as a New Yorker. He was therefore unaffected by the master-slave relationship that underpinned so much of the antebellum southern value system. But he did reflect the values of "(1) honor as immortalizing valor . . . (2) opinion of others as an indispensable part of personal identity and gauge of self-worth" as described by Bertram Wyatt-Brown in *Southern Honor*. To a lesser degree, Cushing proscribed to another element of Wyatt-Brown's formula for southern honor: "(3) physical appearance and ferocity of will as signs of inner merit." Cushing deviates in the realm of "(4) defense of male integrity and mingled fear and love of woman (5) reliance of oath-taking as a bond in lieu of family obligations and allegiances." Another link between Cushing and "southern" behavior resides in Kenneth Greenberg's assertion that "Honor and dishonor . . . were total conditions. A man was usually in one state or the other and only spent a brief moment in transition." Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 34; Kenneth Greenberg, *Honor & Slavery* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 62.

<sup>6</sup> E.M.H Edwards, *Commander William Barker Cushing of the United States Navy* (New York: F Tennyson Neely, 1898), 27.

whistle” for the “teacher of the public school had in some way incurred his severest displeasure.”<sup>7</sup> The company was dissolved after the furious educator complained to Mrs. Cushing, though she made sure to chide the principal for allowing a ten year old to disrupt his lessons. Young Cushing was certainly not above brawling to prove his machismo. He proved particularly “quick tempered and always ready to settle disputes with a fight” so long as “the best men won the battle.”<sup>8</sup> Though he was naturally slender, Will won his fights through an unrelenting ferocity, another aspect of his developing personality. While visiting an uncle in Silver Creek, Will returned home only after insisting he had “whipped every boy in town.”<sup>9</sup> While he may have beaten all of the local competition, Cushing would find himself in a whole new battleground when he was enrolled in the US Naval Academy on September 25, 1857.

Once the undisputed leader among his peers and subject to only the rules he chose to follow, Cushing found a rude awakening in Annapolis. The Academy’s strict regulations and demanding curriculum felt like a prison to the young adventurer. Among his mentors and professors, he found several role models who exemplified his belief in rugged masculinity. Foremost among them was Lieutenant Commander Charles Flusser, a Kentucky native who later served as Cushing’s commanding officer on the USS *Commodore Perry* during the Civil War. Cushing greatly admired the experienced Flusser while under his tutelage in Annapolis, and he was overjoyed to serve under him on the *Perry*. In a letter to his mother, Cushing described the commander as a “daring to the death . . . fighting man of the sounds.”<sup>10</sup> Flusser was later killed while in command of the double-ender USS *Miami* when she went hunting the CSS *Albemarle*. On that occasion, Flusser declared that “In fifteen minutes after we get to close quarters my

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Schneller, *Cushing: Civil War SEAL* (Dulles: Brassey’s, 2004), 7.

<sup>9</sup> Edwards, *Cushing*, 39.

<sup>10</sup>Schneller, *SEAL*, 43.

commission as commander is secure or I am a dead man.”<sup>11</sup> Within minutes, a shell he personally fired into the ram exploded against her armor, peppering him with shrapnel and killing him instantly. Cushing’s grief at his mentor’s death would help motivate his eventual attack against the ram.

In contrast to his near reverence of men like Flusser, Will disdained professors who did not live up to his personal code of virility. One of these hapless victims was Professor Henry Lockwood. A West Point graduate, Lockwood was in charge of infantry drill at the Academy, a very unpopular activity within the regiment of midshipmen. At one point, an effigy of the lanky professor was hanged and burned on campus while ranks of angry midshipmen protested at being treated like “sojers.”<sup>12</sup> Order was restored, but the midshipmen never forgave Lockwood. Their animosity towards him was only sharpened by the aging professor’s embarrassing stutter and timid nature. Cushing, ever on the lookout for an authority he deemed unworthy of his admiration or even obedience, shared his shipmates’ ire towards their stammering drill instructor. In March, 1859, Lockwood was running the midshipmen through artillery drill. As the formation of midshipmen, equipped with rifles and limbered boat howitzers, headed toward the banks of the Severn, Lockwood attempted to call a halt. He began stuttering and Cushing urged his classmates to keep marching. With Lockwood struggling to give an order, the entire detachment marched into the river, muskets, field guns and all.

As much as he despised the old drill master, Will’s disrespect of Lockwood paled in comparison to the running feud he held with Spanish Professor Edward Roget during his senior year. Unlike Lockwood, Professor Roget was well respected among his fellow scholars, but his dapper dress and mannerisms drew the displeasure of some midshipmen. They derisively called

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<sup>11</sup>John Hinds, *The Hunt for the Albemarle* (Shippensburg: Burd Street Press, 2001), 137.

<sup>12</sup>Cushing, *Eagle*, 13.

him “the Don” and viewed him as an “effeminate dandy.”<sup>13</sup> Roget’s apparent foppishness was more than Will’s manly pride could endure, particularly since he agonized through Spanish Recitation under “the Don’s” authority. One cold night, when Roget was headed into Annapolis in his finest wooing attire, Cushing balanced a bucket of water on a partially opened door directly in the oblivious professor’s path. Upon walking through the frame, Roget was completely drenched. “The Don” was furious but he could not prove Cushing’s guilt. The tiff between pupil and teacher widened irreparably when Roget was bitten by a cart horse outside the Academy. With his shoulder bandaged, Roget came into class and witnessed a knot of giggling midshipmen clustered around Cushing’s desk. To the professor’s dismay, the group was laughing at a crude cartoon Will had scrawled on his textbook flyleaf. The illustration depicted Roget biting a horse proclaiming: “The poor Don, he bit the hoss!”<sup>14</sup> The furious professor snatched the book, insisting that the horse bit him, thus driving the midshipmen into even more laughter. To Roget, this was the last straw. He took Cushing’s cartoon directly to the Naval Academy’s Superintendent, Captain George Blake. Though Captain Blake was not amused at Will’s antics, a caricature was not reason enough to separate a first class midshipman within months of graduation. Roget got his revenge when Cushing failed his Spanish Recitation mid-term exam and was subsequently forwarded for separation on academic grounds. Though it was “unusual proceeding to dismiss a first classman, standing high in his class, for being unsatisfactory in Spanish,” Cushing’s collection of offenses finally caught up with him and he was ordered to resign on March 23, 1861.<sup>15</sup>

Cushing’s radical take on personal honor also became apparent at the Academy. To Cushing, honor was more than just an undemonstrative code of conduct; it had to be proven

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<sup>13</sup> Schneller, *SEAL*, 22.

<sup>14</sup> Cushing, *Eagle*, 16.

<sup>15</sup> Ralph J. Roske and Charles Van Doren, *Lincoln’s Commando* (Annapolis: Naval Institute, 1957), 88.

through action and guarded unceasingly. His defense of even the tiniest scruple from any perceived insult separated him from his comrades. In the words of a sailor who later served under him, Cushing would be civil to those he liked but “he would go to any extent to injure his enemies, of whom he had plenty.”<sup>16</sup> His vitriolic guard over his own idea of honor nearly cost him his career on numerous occasions. While he was at the Naval Academy in January, 1861, Cushing took leave to visit a sick aunt in Washington, DC. Captain Blake assumed that this was the wife of Commodore Joseph Smith (the cousin of Cushing’s mother and a resident of DC). When Blake happened to ask Smith about his wife’s condition, Smith replied that she was in perfect health. The superintendent immediately suspected Cushing of an honor offense. Blake called Will into his office and charged him with lying. Outraged, the young midshipman insisted that it was Blake who was the liar. The misunderstanding was eventually sorted out, but the affair attached a particularly sour aura to the name “Cushing” in Blake’s mind, a bias that may have played a role in his eventual dismissal from Annapolis.

After his separation from the Academy and pleading his way back into the Navy as a Masters Mate, Cushing’s fragile career was once again thrust onto a precipice at the behest of honor. While on board the USS *Minnesota*, in August, 1861, an ongoing feud with a superior officer drove Cushing to submit a letter of resignation to Flag Officer Silas Stringham. The lieutenant had “been particularly offensive to Cushing and had lorded it over his junior officers.”<sup>17</sup> Regardless of how damaging the officer’s insults actually were, Cushing wrote his cousin that he had to resign “for the purpose of challenging a superior officer” to a duel.<sup>18</sup> Stringham was too busy to bother with Cushing’s letter and ignored it until mid-September.

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<sup>16</sup> “Fought With Cushing”, Contemporary newspaper clipping, William B. Cushing Papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

<sup>17</sup> Schneller, *SEAL*, 34.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*



Whether his feud with the lieutenant was still ongoing, Cushing's first reaction when his resignation was accepted was to try to get back into the Navy. Through the good graces of Blake and Welles, Cushing was reinstated as a passed midshipman on October nineteenth, 1861. But his personal brand of honor continued to burn as hot as ever while the war continued.

In addition to his adherence to manly virtue and a vitriolic defense of honor, Cushing also cultivated a powerful patriotism while at Annapolis. With the tides of civil war rising, 18 year old Will, as he was called by his companions, realized the Naval Academy sat astride the growing rift in American society. In a letter to his cousin Mary Edwards, Cushing remarked that "political affairs look decidedly squally at present . . . Men are arming in every portion of the state" while every Southern midshipman had received "orders to resign as soon as his state secedes."<sup>19</sup> Cushing lamented that "Matters cannot be improved except by a miracle, and unless that miracle happens, the 'Ship of State' . . . must go down."<sup>20</sup> Though the outlook was dark, Will resolved that he would "shed the last drop of my blood for the State of New York" proclaiming "Long live the Union! And forever live New York!"<sup>21</sup>

Once the war began, Cushing's patriotism evolved into passionate nationalism that was accompanied by a caustic disdain for his Confederate foes. While an officer on board the USS *Minnesota*, the Union blockading vessels off Virginia had captured several rebels attempting to run the cordon. Cushing mockingly labeled these "unarmed, ungrammatical, and dirty" individuals as refined Southern chivalry desperate to sell tobacco "for powder and shot . . . required for our slaughter."<sup>22</sup> During the war, Cushing's patriotism was usually well placed

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<sup>19</sup>Cushing to Mary Edwards, December 12, 1860, State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>Cushing to Mary Edwards, March 1, 1861 State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

<sup>22</sup>Cushing, *Eagle*, 19-20.

against his Confederate enemy. However; when dealing with foreign vessels, his muscular nationalism caused more than a few headaches for the Department of the Navy.

On July first, 1864, Lieutenant Cushing was commanding the USS *Monticello* on patrol off of Wilmington North Carolina. Lookouts spotted a small brig attempting to violate the blockade, and the *Monticello* maneuvered to overhaul her. She was the *Hound*, a British merchant ship, and she ignored the blockader's initial attempt to hail her. Instead of following procedure and firing a blank round to signal the fleeing brig, Cushing ordered his crew to fire a volley of live musket shots across her bow. This quickly brought the *Hound* to heel, but her crew proved less amicable. The sailors on deck hailed the *Monticello* in what Cushing described as "the most insulting manner" as Cushing sent an inspection party over to the *Hound*.<sup>23</sup> According to Cushing's report, when the boarding officer, Acting Ensign Joseph Hadfield, checked the *Hound*'s papers, the Englishmen greeted him with "language and manner . . . in the last degree improper both on deck . . . and below in the cabin."<sup>24</sup> The merchantman's papers were in order, and the boarding party returned back to their launch followed by insulting language from the *Hound*'s crew. When the flustered ensign returned to the *Monticello* and reported to his commander, Cushing became enraged at the British captain's behavior. He immediately ordered the *Monticello* to renew its pursuit.

The crew of the *Hound* must not have known what to think when the Yankee boarding party again came alongside. This time, Cushing ordered the sailors to bring the *Hound*'s skipper and papers over to the *Monticello* for inspection. Cushing later explained that it was his policy "to bring captain and papers on board in all cases where a spirit of malice is perceived."<sup>25</sup> Under

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<sup>23</sup>Cushing to Welles, September 2, 1864, U.S. Department of the Navy, *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1894-1922), Series I, Volume 10: 417.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

the *Monticello*'s battery of heavy guns, the *Hound*'s captain was brought face to face with the twenty-one-year-old Lieutenant. Cushing snatched the man's papers, informing him that he would inspect them at his leisure and that he was free to remain or return to the *Hound*. When the skipper elected to remain, Cushing grilled him on his conduct during the initial boarding. According to Cushing, the Englishman replied with "lame excuses and final retraction."<sup>26</sup> He then demanded that the captain apologize to Hadfield. Finding the papers were in order, Cushing finally sent the *Hound* on its way, insisting in his report that "a national ship must be treated with respect."<sup>27</sup>

The captain of the *Hound* refused to let Cushing's insolence go unreported. He filed a complaint through Sir Richard Lyons, the British Envoy to the United States, and Lyons confronted Secretary of State William Seward about Cushing's conduct. The pro-British Seward, ever ready to harass his rival, Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles, demanded an explanation from the Navy Department. Embarrassed and frustrated, Welles wrote to Cushing for a full report on the incident. Welles found "little in it to justify his conduct" and dashed off a condemnatory letter to the young lieutenant.<sup>28</sup> The Honorable Secretary fumed that there was no excuse for the use of live musket rounds and that the British captain "was brought on board the *Monticello*, unlawfully and unnecessarily detained."<sup>29</sup> On top of this, Cushing had "inflicted injury on the owners of the vessel" when he waylaid her a second time to merely "correct a discourtesy on the part of the master of the brig."<sup>30</sup> Welles warned that a repeat performance would "not fail to bring upon you the serious displeasure of your Government and result to your

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

<sup>27</sup>Cushing to Welles, September 2, 1864, ORN, Series I, Volume 10: 418.

<sup>28</sup>Welles to Seward, September 12, 1864, ORN, Series I, Volume 10: 461.

<sup>29</sup>Welles to Cushing, September 10, 1864, ORN, Series I, Volume 10: 452.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

regret and injury.”<sup>31</sup> Cushing, never tolerant of authority to begin with, no doubt fumed at the dressing down.

The chastisement did little good, however, for Cushing remained “keenly alive to the respect due an American officer, as representing his country” and any insult he perceived against himself he perceived against the flag he served.<sup>32</sup> While visiting Rio de Janeiro in 1867 as the skipper of the USS *Maumee*, a Brazilian naval officer in uniform mistakenly took Cushing for a civilian. Incensed, the thin skinned Yankee lashed out violently at the bewildered man. Indeed, Cushing’s reaction was so troubling as to convince Cushing’s commanding officer, Commodore Melancthon Wooley, to order the *Maumee* to sea immediately, fearing that “If that young man stays here, he will bring on an international war.”<sup>33</sup> In May, 1868, Admiral Stephen Rowan loosed Cushing’s aggressive nature on the pirates that prowled the South China Sea. The *Maumee* captured so many “suspicious” vessels that Cushing was ordered to “ease up before he totally disrupted the coastal trade.”<sup>34</sup>

The trait for which William Cushing is remembered above all others is physical daring. His bravery was incontestable and the Civil War offered numerous opportunities for him to prove his mettle. From expeditions to burn blockade runners to sounding channels under fire, Cushing’s list of audacious missions runs from his early days as a masters mate on the *Minnesota* to the attack on Fort Fisher in 1865, while he was a lieutenant commander. Among his fellow officers, he was hailed as a champion “whose name should be passed down to posterity and take equal

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

<sup>32</sup>Roske and Van Doren, *Commando*, 274.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 275.

<sup>34</sup>Cushing, *Eagle*, 71.

rank with all those naval heroes whose lives are perpetuated in the pages of history.”<sup>35</sup> To the men he led, Cushing was a strict disciplinarian and yet, “the sailors fairly worshipped him” some even offering a month’s pay for a chance to take part in one of his famed exploits.<sup>36</sup> At the time of Cushing’s death, Secretary Welles (even after all of the chiding he had delivered to the restless officer) remarked that “while no navy had braver or better officers than ours, young Cushing was the hero of the War.”<sup>37</sup>

Cushing’s first command was the USS *Ellis*, a small 100-ton gunboat captured from the Confederate States Navy on February 10<sup>th</sup>, 1862. She sported only two guns and a crew of twenty-eight, but Cushing was “justly . . . proud of having command of a steamer at the age of nineteen . . . a thing before unheard of in the service.”<sup>38</sup> Her six foot draft allowed Cushing to investigate every tributary of his sphere of responsibility in North Carolina’s New River. On November 23<sup>rd</sup>, Cushing brazenly steamed up to Jacksonville where he briefly occupied Onslow Court House, captured Confederate armaments, and the local mail. On the way down the river the next day, the *Ellis* drove off several encampments of Confederate troops, facing little opposition. Tragedy struck when she ran aground due to an error by her two pilots. Cushing found his first command trapped deep in Rebel country while every effort to refloat her failed. To make matters worse, Confederate artillery and cavalry had caught up with him. Night-fall ended a tense exchange of fire that left the *Ellis* riddled with shot, half her battery destroyed, and in the center of a swiftly closing trap. Determined not to surrender, Cushing used a captured schooner he had under tow to take his crew off to safety on the 25<sup>th</sup>. All hands made their escape in the captured boat save for Cushing and “six volunteers to remain . . . on board and fight the

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<sup>35</sup>John Grattan, *Under the Blue Pennant*, ed. Robert Schneller (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1999), 118.

<sup>36</sup>Grattan, *Pennant*, 143.

<sup>37</sup>Roske and Van Doren, *Commando*, 303.

<sup>38</sup>Cushing to Mary Edwards, October 18, 1862, State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

remaining gun.”<sup>39</sup> When Confederate forces attacked again, Cushing and his half dozen diehards continued to return fire. It wasn’t until enemy cavalry threatened to board and seize the *Ellis* that Cushing abandoned ship but, not before rigging the magazine to explode and destroy the stricken vessel. After seeing that the remaining powder was alight, Cushing and his volunteers leapt into the boat’s dingy; rowed out to the waiting schooner, and escaped to the USS *Hetzel* as the *Ellis* exploded. Though his first command was a fiery wreck, the senior officer in the North Carolina Sounds, Commander Henry Davenport, commended Cushing’s “courage, coolness, and gallantry.”<sup>40</sup> Rear Admiral Samuel Phillips Lee insisted that Cushing had “lost the . . . *Ellis* with credit. His representation of his conduct impresses me very favorably.”<sup>41</sup>

In February, 1864, Cushing again demonstrated his daring. After a series of reconnaissance missions launched from the *Monticello*, Cushing came to the conclusion that Fort Caswell on the Cape Fear River was vulnerable to attack. He proposed to capture the fort with 200 men, but his superior officer refused to take responsibility for the raid. “This, I confess provoked me,” Cushing later recalled. “I could not only do that; but if he wanted the Confederate General off to breakfast I would bring him.”<sup>42</sup> On the night of the 22<sup>nd</sup>, Cushing departed with twenty men in two boats to the Rebel headquarters at Smithville, North Carolina. Sneaking ashore, Cushing and a handful of his sailors managed to surround and enter the residence of General Louis Hébert. As Cushing crept around the house by match light, a bang startled him. He turned around just in time to see a shadow “in dishabille with a chair in hand as if to strike.”<sup>43</sup> Cushing tackled the figure, shoving his revolver against the man’s head. The prisoner revealed that he was the Chief Engineer of the defenses, a Captain Kelly. The

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<sup>39</sup>Cushing to Davenport, November 26<sup>th</sup>, 1862, ORN, Series 1, Volume 8: 231.

<sup>40</sup>Lee to Davenport, December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1862, ORN, Series 1, Volume 8: 232.

<sup>41</sup>Davenport to Lee, December 1<sup>st</sup>, 1862, ORN, Series 1, Volume 8: 245.

<sup>42</sup>Cushing, *Eagle*, 43.

<sup>43</sup>Cushing, *Eagle*, 44.

bewildered officer divulged that Hébert had gone to Wilmington for the night. Hébert's Adjutant General had run off upon hearing the Union infiltrators, and Cushing wagered it was only a matter of time before he roused the Confederate garrison housed across the street. As quickly as they could, Cushing and his sailors slipped back to their waiting boats still holding Captain Kelly at gunpoint. The next morning, the Rebel engineer became a hapless guest of the officer's mess. A brief truce was declared so Kelly's wardrobe could be brought aboard. Cushing used the opportunity to send a letter to General Hébert lamenting the fact that the General was not in when he called.

Cushing's raid on Smithville made him the Yankee "Boogeyman" of the Cape Fear River. A Confederate Major General remarked that the raid "was certainly very daring, and the actors deserve great credit."<sup>44</sup> The Confederate States naval officer in command of the approaches to Wilmington insisted to concerned army personnel that he was doing "all in my power to prevent a recurrence of the transaction."<sup>45</sup>

While such bold adventures kept Rebel officers up at night, the raid fueled a concerned exchange about the utility of Cushing's activities between Admiral Lee and Assistant Secretary of the Navy Gustavus Fox. "You say what a pity Cushing's undaunted bravery and good luck cannot be put to useful purpose in a manner to tell upon the enemy" wrote Lee, insisting that he always "encouraged [Cushing's] dash."<sup>46</sup> Fox replied that he meant "it was a pity [that] so much luck and dash had not brought fruits equal to the risks. You notice the department never finds fault with these exploits. I believe they ought to be encouraged."<sup>47</sup> Surely, Cushing's raids often ended with less than world changing results. But neither Fox nor any official up to President

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<sup>44</sup>Whiting to Lynch, March 2, 1864, ORN, Volume 9, Series I: 513.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid.

<sup>46</sup>Lee to Fox, April 4, 1864, ORN, Volume 9, Series I: 583.

<sup>47</sup>Fox to Lee, April 8, 1864, ORN, Volume 9, Series I: 589.

Abraham Lincoln himself doubted the effectiveness of Cushing's audacity after his next foray into enemy territory.

Cushing's greatest exploit, one which confirmed his penchant for physical daring, occurred in the fall of 1864. At that time, the CSS *Albemarle* was the unrivaled queen of the Roanoke River, a title she earned in blood. Built in a cornfield sixty miles up the Roanoke from Plymouth, the *Albemarle* was a 152-foot ironclad capable of a leisurely five knots under the power of her two steam driven propellers. Her construction, begun in 1862, had been supervised by a nineteen year old Confederate States Army lieutenant named Gilbert Elliot. For the shallow waters of the Roanoke, her eight foot draft and bulky 376 tons made the *Albemarle* difficult to maneuver. But what she lacked in speed and maneuverability, she made up for with offensive power. Her armament included two 6.4 inch double-banded rifled cannon and an iron shod ram of solid oak. Her two guns could be shifted to fire from any of the *Albemarle's* six cannon ports. At its thickest layer, the *Albemarle's* armor was an impressive four inches. The tough iron shell was in turn supported by sixteen inches of wood backing.

Early in the morning on April 19<sup>th</sup>, the *Albemarle*, under the command of Captain James Cooke, emerged from the river mists around Plymouth to face the Union blockade. She met the double-ender gunboats USS *Miami* and USS *Southfield*, under the command of Cushing's former instructor and commander, Charles Flusser. The Yankee ships opened the engagement with a barrage of cannon fire but the ironclad steamed steadily closer. With a crash, the *Albemarle* rammed her sharp prow into the starboard bow of the *Southfield*, a crippling blow that flooded the struggling gunboat; her guns still blazing desperately. For a moment, it looked as if the *Albemarle* was heading to the bottom as well. Her ram had lodged in the *Southfield*, and it was



only through an immediate command of all engines “back full” that she was saved.<sup>48</sup> After the stray shot that killed Flusser, the *Miami* retreated back down the river leaving control of the Roanoke firmly in the hands of the *Albemarle*.

Word spread quickly of the disaster at Plymouth. Without naval support, the Union garrison of General Henry Wessells was overwhelmed by Confederate Major General Robert Hoke’s division. As the Confederate Army pummeled the Yankees by land, the *Albemarle* shelled the hapless northerners from the river. “The ram has possession of the river” lamented Commander Henry Davenport as he begged for reinforcements from Admiral Lee.<sup>49</sup> Lee responded that “mere wooden gunboats would not be effective” and suggested the employment of torpedoes.<sup>50</sup> Before his idea could be acted upon, the *Albemarle* made an attempt to break from the river. On May 5<sup>th</sup>, she challenged four navy gunboats while escorting a troop ship into Bachelor’s Bay. In a pitched battle, the *Albemarle* managed to drive off or severely damage all of her foes and, with minimal damage to herself, she steamed back to Plymouth. A congressional investigation charged to determine “why the construction of said ram was not prevented” had already been authorized and now the quest for answers blazed ever hotter.<sup>51</sup> To top matters off, navy frustration with the ram was beginning to smack of cowardice as high ranking officers insisted any attempt “to attack the ram in the Roanoke River . . . would be attended with serious disaster.”<sup>52</sup> The navy needed a man who would “do something,” they needed William Cushing.

Cushing took special interest in the *Albemarle* after the death of Flusser, and he was more than willing to have a go at sinking her when Admiral Lee offered the mission to him on July 5<sup>th</sup>,

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<sup>48</sup>Robert Elliot, *Ironclad of the Roanoke* (Shippensburg: White Mane Publishing, 1994), 179.

<sup>49</sup>Davenport to Truxtun, April 20, 1864, ORN, Volume 9, Series I: 665.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid.

<sup>51</sup>Lloyd to Congress, May 9, 1864, ORN, Volume 9, Series I: 715.

<sup>52</sup>Smith to Lee, June 1, 1864, ORN, Volume 9, Series I: 763.

1864. After running through several possible plans, Cushing determined to dispatch the *Albemarle* with two launches equipped with howitzers and torpedoes. He hoped to capture the Rebel ram, but would destroy her should that prove impossible. Lee wrote that Cushing was “entirely willing to make an attempt to destroy the ram, and I have great confidence in his gallantry”; nonetheless, the admiral sent Cushing to present the plan to Fox in person for approval.<sup>53</sup> Fox elected to support Cushing, and the young lieutenant embarked immediately for New York to fit out torpedoes and boats. Cushing acquired two forty-five foot launches in a shipyard, and began experimenting with a spar torpedo. While his preparations were completed, Cushing visited Fredonia for what he thought could be the last time. As he set out south to meet his fate, Cushing could not keep his mission secret from his mother, and he icily warned her that failure in his next expedition meant she would “have no Will Cushing.”<sup>54</sup>

When the elements of Cushing’s raid were finally in place, disaster struck. As his *Picket Boat No. 1* and *Picket Boat No. 2* were steaming to meet Cushing at Fortress Monroe, Virginia, the volunteer ensign in command of *No. 2* mistook the Virginia side of the Chesapeake Bay for loyalist Maryland. Ensign Andrew Stockholm had pulled into Reason Creek to repair a mechanical failure on October 7<sup>th</sup> and then “a body of guerrillas attacked . . . with musketry from all sides.”<sup>55</sup> Stockholm and his crew put up a short fight, but were captured. Their launch was partially burned and fell into the hands of the Rebels. Cushing was furious at Stockholm’s mistake, but he took satisfaction to know “that he was taken prisoner.”<sup>56</sup> Undaunted, Cushing was determined to succeed with only his single open launch. Even after a series of delays and setbacks, Cushing found no shortage of volunteers once he reached the fleet. After a false start

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<sup>53</sup>Lee to Welles, July 9, 1864, ORN, Volume 10, Series I: 248.

<sup>54</sup>Schneller, *SEAL*, 76.

<sup>55</sup>Stockholm to Welles, October 26, 1864, ORN, Volume 10, Series I: 540.

<sup>56</sup>Schneller, *SEAL*, 77.

on October 26<sup>th</sup>, Cushing and fourteen fellow sailors set out from the USS *Otsego* at 2300 with a cutter of twelve extra volunteers in tow.

The night was obscured by a spitting rain and clammy mist as *Picket Boat No. 1* chugged up the Roanoke. Every man on board was silent and even the steam plant had been muffled. All hands undoubtedly felt the ominous press of fear as they passed the half submerged wreck of the *Southfield*. A Confederate picket on the waterlogged wreck remained blissfully ignorant of the Yankee raiding party. Near 0300 on the 28<sup>th</sup>, Cushing made out the massive bulk of the *Albemarle* moored to the pier at Plymouth. The minutes and seconds ticked by as *Picket Boat No. 1* pulled ever closer to the sleeping giant. Suddenly, a call rang out from the ram. “Who goes there?” shouted the picket. “We’ll soon let you know!” replied Cushing as bonfires were kindled by waking sentries. “The rebels sprung their rattle . . . and commenced firing . . . seeming much confused” as Cushing ordered his launch to full steam.<sup>57</sup>

Realizing the opportunity to capture the *Albemarle* was gone, Cushing detached the cutter to deal with the Rebel picket on the *Southfield* as he swung the torpedo into position. Standing high in the prow of his boat, Cushing’s clothes were torn by bullets as the fire increased. Arrayed around the *Albemarle* was a log boom, and Cushing saw it at the last second. He ordered the launch to turn around and build up more steam to vault the slippery obstacle. On this second approach, *Picket Boat No. 1* mustered just enough momentum to stumble over the boom. With Rebel fire raining around him, Cushing coolly began to work the complicated mechanism of his torpedo, keenly aware that the ram’s guns had been manned and he stared directly down the barrel of one of them. As he fiddled with the torpedoes release line, Cushing could plainly hear the gun crew preparing to fire. Just as Cushing pulled the detonating lanyard on the torpedo, the massive cannon discharged with an ear shattering crash. The launch was saved by

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<sup>57</sup>Cushing to Porter, October 30, 1864, ORN, Volume 10, Series I: 611.

the fact that it sat so low in the water, the *Albemarle*'s 100 pound charge of canister grazed over the heads of Cushing's crew. Almost simultaneously, Cushing's torpedo exploded with a muffled thud followed by a massive waterspout. With his launch swamped by the successive concussions, and trapped by the log barrier, Cushing ordered his men to save themselves before discarding his coat and diving into the churning water.

Of the men on the expedition only Cushing and one other sailor escaped. Two were killed, and every other sailor was captured. Cushing escaped by hiding in the fetid swamp outside Plymouth and stealing a small fishing skiff. He paddled more than eight miles back to the fleet, but only after confirming that he had sunk the *Albemarle*. Sure enough, the torpedo had put a hole in the ram that settled her in the deep river mud with no hope of easy salvage by her furious crew. Around midnight on the 28<sup>th</sup>, Cushing, exhausted and dehydrated, was hoisted onto the USS *Valley City*, where he had a chance to recuperate.

After Cushing recovered, the entire fleet celebrated his victory with fireworks and frolic. Rear Admiral David D. Porter had a general order read on every ship applauding Cushing's "heroic enterprise" and his "absolute disregard of death or danger."<sup>58</sup> The once shamed midshipman became the hero of the Navy almost overnight. Abraham Lincoln called for a vote of thanks from Congress. Congress obliged without hesitation, promoting Cushing to Lieutenant Commander and awarding the Medal of Honor to every sailor who participated in the attack. Cushing was then sent on a victory tour across the East coast. Though he was received by massive crowds in every city he visited, Cushing was particularly touched by the citizens of Fredonia who greeted his return with "a standing ovation and round after round of cheering" at the local concert hall.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup>Porter: General Order 34, November 5, 1864, ORN, Volume 10, Series I: 618.

<sup>59</sup>Schneller, *SEAL*, 85.

Woven into all of his daring exploits, nationalist outbursts, and macho tiffs, was Cushing's exaggerated sense of honor. It was a quality that permeated his entire life and worked its way into every other trait he exhibited. Surely, his touchy defense of honor could stand on its own, but, more often than not, it was infused into the varied incidents and traits that dotted his whirlwind career. In addition to exhibiting his own honor, he sought to impose punishment on activities by others whom Cushing deemed dishonorable. One example of this came in the spring of 1863, when Cushing was a lieutenant in command of the USS *Commodore Barney*, a New York ferry that had been converted into a shallow draft gunboat. In April, the Union garrison holding the swamp-girded town of Suffolk, Virginia, came under threat from Lieutenant General James Longstreet. Cushing and Lieutenant Roswell Lamson, captain of the USS *Mount Washington*, were rushed to the defense of the town. Along with several smaller vessels, the Union flotilla was under orders from Rear Admiral Lee to keep Longstreet's forces from crossing the treacherous Nansemond River. The situation was so tenuous that Lee decreed "in no event must [the gunboats] be surrendered . . . they shall be destroyed" first.<sup>60</sup> The fighting on the Nansemond proved challenging to the Navy thanks to the narrow width of the river and shifting shallows. Confederate troops typically employed masked batteries and ambushes in an attempt to entrap "those infernal gunboats."<sup>61</sup> On the 21<sup>st</sup> of April, a civilian waving a white flag on shore signaled a boat crew from the Union squadron. When the boat attempted to investigate the gesture, rebel soldiers sprang from cover and killed or captured the five sailors aboard.

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<sup>60</sup>Lee to Cushing and Lamson, April 12, 1863, ORN, Volume 8, Series I: 713-714.

<sup>61</sup>French to Shumaker, April 19, 1863, ORN Volume 8, Series I: 796.

Cushing was so infuriated at this dishonorable tactic that he “determined to so punish it that we should not suffer so in the future.”<sup>62</sup>

The next day, Cushing assembled a landing party of ninety sailors and several embarked soldiers, as well as a twelve pound boat howitzer. He personally led the small detachment ashore and recovered the bullet riddled boat and bodies from the previous day’s ambush. To punish what he considered ignominious actions of the Rebels, Cushing razed three houses and barns along the shore. But this was not enough; Cushing then led his detachment in an attack on the small settlement of Chuckatuck. By that afternoon, the bluejackets had driven in the startled Confederate pickets and Cushing was marching his men through the center of town. Suddenly, a forty man platoon of Rebel cavalry came thundering towards the Union trespassers. A captured mule towing Cushing’s howitzer ammunition bolted in fright, and the sailors seemed on the brink of panic. Undaunted, Cushing drew his cutlass and ordered a charge directly at the approaching enemy. The tactic worked and the sailors drove off the Confederate horseman, killing two and losing just one man. Though he had high praise for the conduct of his “tars” in the fray, Cushing fumed that he had been “obliged to threaten” the soldiers in the detachment to “make them do their duty.”<sup>63</sup> Cushing’s brutal reprisal proved his sensitive scruples left no tolerance for a dishonorable foe, and even less room for cowardly comrades.

Cushing’s intolerance of the lapses of others applied as well to transgressions by members of the U.S Army. In May of 1863, Cushing was directing supporting fire from the *Barney* to cover an assault by the 4<sup>th</sup> Rhode Island Volunteer Infantry when the soldiers “broke ranks and ran like sheep” at the first firing of an enemy battery.<sup>64</sup> Disgusted, Cushing “lent them

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<sup>62</sup>Cushing to Lee, April 23, 1863, ORN Volume 8, Series I: 771.

<sup>63</sup>Cushing to Lee, April 23, 1863, ORN, Volume 8, Series I: 772.

<sup>64</sup>Cushing to Lee, May 4, 1863, ORN, Volume 8, Series I: 788.

a howitzer with fifteen sailors and another advance was made.”<sup>65</sup> Again, the Rhode Islanders routed and ran while Cushing boasted that the “Sailors [were] . . . reported as the only troops who fought well” according to the regiment’s commanding officer.<sup>66</sup> Cushing penned a letter to Admiral Lee proclaiming that “officers should not use their legs at the expense of their honor” and declaring that he would henceforth aid the Army only by water. It was not unprecedented for officers of one service to criticize their counterparts in another service, but Cushing’s letter came close to assailing the Army’s honor. A series of brutal beatings dealt out by the fiery young officer over petty insults proved that his personal honor was deadly serious and on a dangerous hair trigger.

Nor did Cushing limit his outbursts in defense of what he perceived of as his honor to confrontations with military forces, ally or enemy. In November 1863, Cushing was the newly minted commander of the *Monticello*. While in Philadelphia fitting her for blockade duty, he went to check in to the Continental Hotel. At the time, there was a rumor, promoted by peace Democrats (“Copperheads”), that President Abraham Lincoln would use the military to gain influence in major population centers. Given that, it was not uncommon for uniformed soldiers and sailors to encounter the occasional jeer or crude remark. While Cushing signed his name into the guest register, a civilian sauntered up to the counter beside him. Pointing at Cushing and looking back to his friends, the man asserted that “here’s another one of Lincoln’s hirelings come to intimidate us at the election.”<sup>67</sup> Cushing concluded his business, turned calmly to the gentleman, and lashed him with his cane. The unexpected blow leveled the stunned politico,

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<sup>65</sup>Ibid.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid.

<sup>67</sup>David B. Parker, , *A Chautauqua Boy in '61 and Afterward*, ed. Torrance Parker (Boston: Small, Maynard, and Company, 1912), 76.

“cutting his face quite severely.”<sup>68</sup> When the police arrived on the scene, the lobby had been split into opposing mobs. Cushing stood at the forefront, “ready to engage in a row” with all comers.<sup>69</sup> He was promptly arrested, though “15 to 20 wealthy citizens went along to the station house” to pay his bail.<sup>70</sup> After a night in jail and a judicial rebuke, Cushing returned to freedom with a festering grudge and just as much fight as the day before. Cushing then sought out the drug store owned by the hapless civilian he had beaten. The druggist, already badly cut, must have been terrified to see Cushing standing in the door of his shop. He found himself “pulled from . . . behind the counter, and thrashed . . . severely” at the hands of this apparently mad lieutenant for the second time.<sup>71</sup> Cushing was back on the blockade before the police could get involved again. In this incident, Cushing proved himself unnervingly similar to the famous case of Congressman Preston Brooks, the South Carolinian who ferociously beat Senator Charles Sumner with a cane in Congress. Of course, Brooks was a member of the Southern Aristocracy that Cushing had mocked so freely during the war. Now, However, Cushing exercised nearly identical revenge for similar reasons: his own finicky idea of honor.

After his cruise on the *Maumee*, Cushing returned home to Fredonia, New York, to marry Katherine Forbes. The wedding brought a record crowd to Fredonia’s Trinity Episcopal Church and the elaborate gifts Cushing gave his new wife reflected his travels across the exotic Pacific.<sup>72</sup> While the newlyweds were on honeymoon in March of 1870, an editor of the *Jamestown Journal* published an article decrying Cushing. In it, Cushing was described as

“the most ineffable, idiotic young snob that ever trod leather . . . For a little upstart like him, who by an act of insubordination in the navy blundered into notoriety, to pompously

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<sup>68</sup>Ibid.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid.

<sup>72</sup>Ostentatious generosity was another aspect of Wyatt-Brown’s formula for southern honor.



order older and better men than himself to address him as ‘Lt. Com. Cushing, Sir,’ is disgusting, and papers [who] toady such and egotistical ass belittle themselves beyond degree. Flunkeyism is born in a servile soul, and will show itself.”<sup>73</sup>

The editor, a man named Coleman Bishop, made sure copies were sent to the Navy Department and select Fredonians who knew Cushing. It is hard to imagine what possessed the editor to write such a scathing article. If he knew anything about his subject’s demeanor, he should have realized the article put him at great physical risk.

Cushing’s delicate scruples could not ignore such a blatant insult. On April 21<sup>st</sup>, he and his father in law, “Colonel” David Forbes, strode into the offices of the *Jamestown Journal*. The two men entered the office of Mr. Bishop and Colonel Forbes introduced his son in law. Before the editor could say a word, Cushing drew a horsewhip and attacked the newspaperman. Colonel Forbes barred the door to prevent rescue as Cushing pursued Bishop up and down the room, beating him. It took half a dozen office workers to finally run the two men out of the building. Cushing and Forbes dusted themselves off and went for dinner and a drink at the Jamestown House tavern. A police officer soon arrived to serve the men warrants. Meanwhile, a curious crowd had gathered to cheer the belligerent war hero. Cushing thanked the populace of Jamestown for their support and finished his meal. The matter was eventually handled out of court, but Cushing had again proven the extremes to which he carried the generally accepted mores of personal honor. Moreover, the support of the crowd demonstrated that he remained close enough to contemporary notions of personal honor to remain a popular hero. He was more analogous to a Norse berserker than any naval officer; a gladiator in need of enemies and combat. Surely, the image of honor obsessed warrior was more akin to Southern plantations than the hamlets of Western New York in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

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<sup>73</sup>Roske and Van Doren, *Commando*, 280.

Cushing's exaggerated sense of manly virtue, nationalism, physical daring, and honor made him the Navy's premier "Storm Petrel" in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Like the legendary sea bird that forecast storms in its wake, Cushing's presence often foretold trouble and tribulations. It is easy to ask why Cushing is not remembered as a John Paul Jones or a Stephen Decatur. Surely, the answer resides in his tempestuous, exaggerated, nature. And yet, it is the same concoction of hyperbolic qualities that brought him success and renown. This delicate balance of achievement and scorn reached its zenith on the misty October night when Cushing sent the *Albemarle* to the bottom of the Roanoke River. No one could deny his victory or the fame that followed it. But when the war ended, Cushing found himself adrift in peace.

When news of General Robert E. Lee's surrender reached Fredonia, Cushing spoke to celebrating crowds only briefly before stealing away to the rural roads outside his hometown. Under the night sky, Cushing walked for miles. There is little doubt he reflected on his life of adventure and the options that lay at his feet. A peacetime military must have seemed like an uncomfortable place for "Albemarle" Cushing, but his love of the Navy won through any anxiety he may have felt. As the archetypical fighter without a fight, Cushing faded in the post war Navy. But that didn't keep him from making battles where he could. Cushing's prickly honor demanded it. And so, like an old lion whose pride was still keen and whose claws could still rend the unwary, Cushing challenged General Burriel on the dock at Santiago de Cuba. In one last ray of glory, Cushing mustered the full arsenal of his nationalism, manliness, daring, and honor to strike a final blow, not just for the country he loved, but for himself. Within months of returning home, Cushing's frail health gave in and he died in the company of his wife in Washington, DC. He was only thirty-two years old. Though his rash actions in Cuba saw his

role in ending the *Virginus* incident downplayed, Cushing's last bold act is a fitting close to the life he lived. Surely, so long as his deeds are remembered, Cushing will live on in spirit. But it is disrespectful to Cushing's legacy to neglect the complex and conflicted man behind the hero. And, if his deeds in life are any evidence, Commander William B. Cushing is not a spirit to be crossed lightly.