



Lt. Cmdr. John J. Cornwell, U.S.N.

Biography by Timothy R. Brookes

A recent MI article described the 1866-1867 trans-Atlantic voyage of the double-turreted monitor *Miantonomoh*, a mission intended to impress European powers with New World naval technology. [Swan Song," by Jerry Harlowe, July-august 1999.] One of the *Miantonomoh's* officers, a man born far from the scent of the sea, was fated to lose his life on the diplomatic voyage. His body would be laid to rest in French soil, far from his home in eastern Ohio.

John J. Cornwell was born in new Lisbon, Ohio, in 1834. His family enjoyed a fair degree of local prominence and he was raised near other New Lisbon families whose names would add color to the upcoming Civil War years, including the McCooks and the Vallandighams. Unlike these other land-bound notables, Cornwell fancied a naval career. He received an appointment as a Midshipman at Annapolis on February 1, 1847, when he was not quite thirteen years old.

Records indicate that Cornwell passed to Midshipman's status in June, 1853, and became both Master and Lieutenant in 1855. He would wait seven long years for his promotion to Lieutenant Commander in July of 1862.

During the first two years of the Civil War Cornwell served on a variety of vessels but, at the end of August, 1863, he would assume command of the monitor *Nahant*, then part of the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron stationed off Charleston, South Carolina.

A published diary by one of Cornwell's new subordinates presents a less-than-flattering impression of the new captain. Alvah F. Hunter, an officer's mess room attendant holding the rank of First Class Boy, kept a detailed record of his service on *Nahant* starting with her commissioning in December of 1862. Evidencing great affection for Cornwell's predecessor, Commander John Downes, Hunter wrote that Downes was both a

“gentleman” as well as an officer and that his removal due to illness was a loss of an officer of the highest type.

As for Cornwell, Hunter stated that: “Captain Cornwell felt that the rather modest salary of a Lieutenant Commander did not warrant his keeping up a full establishment of cook, steward and cabin boy, so he asked him to join the wardroom mess at meals. This change made considerable difference to the wardroom boys, as the new captain soon manifested a disinclination to get up to breakfast and ordered that the meal be served to him in his berth, a proceeding which distinctly lowered respect for the captain and weakened discipline among the crew.” A surviving compilation of Cornwell’s reports while in command of *Nahant* begins with a statement dated September 17, 1863, at which point Cornwell had been in command for eight days. He reported that since July 10th the vessel’s fifteen-inch gun had been fired 170 times and the eleven-inch gun 276 times. During her service to that date *Nahant* had been hit 69 times by enemy fire but was stated to be in good general condition.

Later reports dealt with such matters as the recovery of a floating “torpedo” [naval mine], the slow deterioration of Ft. Sumter as Union shelling reduced its masonry walls, and regular reports on sightings of Confederate ironclads inside Charleston harbor. By late October, Cornwell sought permission to seek repairs at the Port Royal machine shops, including engine and boiler work, replacement of numerous

turret rivets, and installation of a new sleeve on the pilot house which had been heavily damaged in the ironclad attack on Fort Sumter in April, killing one officer and wounding two others. On December 30, 1863, Cornwell’s report commented on the bad weather

encountered during the time since the refit, stating that “no class of vessel could ride easier” while at anchor, but that in rough seas the monitor lacked sufficient “motive power.”

As a result of his service during the war, Cornwell was made a Commander in July of 1866, at which time he was executive officer on *Miantonomoh*. The twin-turreted monitor was then on her European tour, which commenced in May. After visiting ports in England, France and several Baltic capitals, *Miantonomoh* set

course for the Mediterranean in October.

While the vessel was at Toulon, France, the 33 year-old John Cornwell died without warning on February 12, 1867. Surgeon W.E. Taylor listed the cause of death as “congestion of the brain,” further stating that he considered the fatality to be “induced by the great amount of necessary labor and over-excitement incidental to his position and duties as Executive Officer of this ship during her remarkable cruise of the past nine or ten months.”



Tim Brookes is a frequent contributor to these pages.

