

Harriet Tubman's Great Raid

It is arguably the most beautiful scene ever recorded in war. Two Union gunboats, the Harriet A. Weed and the John Adams, converted ferryboats, churning up the Combahee River with their big side paddlewheels. Steam whistles signal, while in the bow of the Adams, a small, powerful woman is... singing. From all around, hundreds hear Harriett Tubman's call and run for the boats, for freedom. At least 727 men, women and children escape, mothers carrying babies, including one pair of twins: the largest liberation of slaves in American history.

Perhaps half a million slaves escaped to the Union Army during the war, and in the end the war itself liberated nearly four million. But Harriet Tubman's achievement on the

Combahee River 150 years ago was unique. And it wasn't just her singing.

She was already famous for her work on the Underground Railroad – leading at least 12 missions from her home in Cambridge, on Maryland's Eastern Shore, bringing nearly 100 people (most of them her relatives) out of slavery and into Canada. One abolitionist, Thomas Higginson, met her in Boston. “The greatest heroine of the age,” he called her. “Her tales of adventure are beyond anything in fiction and her ingenuity and generalship are extraordinary.”

But Higginson, whom she would meet again on the Combahee, did not expect that she would live long: “She will probably be burned alive whenever she is caught, which she probably will be, first or last, as she is going again.”

Yet Tubman, despite all the odds, lived to the age of 93 — the centennial of her death in 1913 was celebrated earlier this year in Auburn, N.Y., where she was living when the Civil War broke out. Her friends in the abolitionist movement, notably Gov. John Andrew of Massachusetts, reached out to the Union Army to find a place for her.



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Tubman

Just what that place was, and what she was to do, was obscured, even at the time. Ostensibly – particularly when it came to the federal government's paying her – she was just a cook and a nurse, who did a little instruction for liberated slaves in the refugee camps along the coast of South Carolina.

But her role was always more than that. On Feb. 19, 1863, the Union general David Hunter – a friend of Governor Andrew – gave her something remarkable for a civilian: “Pass the Bearer, Harriet Tubman, to Beaufort and back to this place, and wherever she wishes to go, and give her free passage at all times.” That's not a pass for a cook and nurse.

Like Andrew, Hunter was an abolitionist. So was Gen. Rufus Saxton, and now-Colonel

Higginson, the first commander of a black regiment, as well as the Kansas jayhawker James Montgomery, who commanded the Combahee raid. So many self-declared abolitionists stocked the officer ranks along the occupied South Carolina coast that it is hard not to conclude that Lincoln wanted it that way.

Harriet Tubman understood why these men were needed there, even before Lincoln did, telling a friend in January 1862: “God won’t let Master Lincoln beat the South until he does the right thing. Master Lincoln, he’s a great man, and I’m a poor Negro but this Negro can tell Master Lincoln how to save money and young men. He can do it by setting the Negroes free.”

By January 1863, Lincoln understood: the Emancipation Proclamation declared that,

wherever the rebellion ruled, the slaves were free. It was more than a symbolic or moral move; Lincoln saw the proclamation as partly a military measure. “I have reliable information that there are large numbers of able-bodied Negroes,” he was told, “who are watching for an opportunity to join us.” But that didn’t mean they would come on their own. The Union needed to do more to encourage them.

Meanwhile, the war was not going well for the North in June 1863. In May, the Union suffered its worst defeat in the First Battle of the Wilderness, Robert E. Lee’s masterpiece victory; that July, the Confederacy crested at a small Pennsylvania crossroads called Gettysburg. Though the Union won that battle, at the time all people knew was that the Confederacy had the power to invade the North, making the war’s outcome anyone’s

guess. All slavery needed to prevail was Lincoln's defeat in 1864.

That's why the Weed and the Adams went chugging up the Combahee: so that slavery would not prevail.

But the reason the Combahee raid prevailed was Harriet Tubman. She gave the Union Army solutions for all the special problems posed by the raid.

It's no exaggeration to say that the Combahee raid was unique in American history. All Union operations in slave territory, especially as the Emancipation Proclamation become well known, yielded the self-liberated by the hundreds. But the Combahee raid was planned and executed primarily as a liberation raid, to find and free those who were unable or unwilling to take the enormous risks to reach

Union lines on their own. That's how Tubman conceived of it. That, too, is unique – because for the first and only time in the Civil War, or for that matter any American conflict before this century, a woman (and a civilian at that) played a decisive role in planning and carrying out a military operation.

But South Carolina was not like the Eastern Shore, so the Combahee was not like the Underground Railroad. It does not diminish Tubman's heroism to recognize that Cambridge was perfect for her: there were actually more free blacks than there were slaves, so people were used to seeing blacks traveling without restrictions. Eastern Shore slavery was small-scale, mostly house servants and artisans, without the large-scale discipline that characterized Deep South plantations. Tubman primarily went back to get family

members, and she relied on her local knowledge and an extensive network of support.

She had none of that in South Carolina. Despite all the Black History Month stories and seventh-grade book reports, her role on the Combahee was not leading an elite commando unit, as some, including [a lengthy entry](#) on Tubman at the C.I.A.'s Web site, have portrayed her. She wasn't walking the back roads gathering intelligence. "They've told a story about her. It's a great story," says Jeff Grigg, who knows as much about the Combahee raid as anybody. "But it's the wrong story."

Grigg isn't a professional historian. He's a boat mechanic. His shop with a dozen or so watercraft in various stages of salvage in the yard has sat at the crossroads of the raid for 25

years. “When they talk about wading through the swamp gathering intelligence, carrying a musket on her back – they belittle her,” Grigg explains as his truck slithers down Stocks Creek Road, still unpaved. “This was the road. She’d have stood out like a sore thumb. Nobody would have known her and the overseers would have seen that in an instant.”

What’s more, Tubman did not speak Gullah, a language common among coastal slaves. As Tubman herself says of a crucial moment in the raid: “They wasn’t my people ... because I didn’t know any more about them than [a white officer] did.” And these were slaves who worked mostly in the fields, men and women who trusted “house” slaves as little as they trusted whites, even white Yankees.

In other words, the amazing thing about Tubman’s role during the raid was not that she

was in her element, but that she was so far outside it.

Yet it's clear that it was Tubman who visited the camps of liberated slaves along the coast and recruited the 10 scouts named in Union records, 9 of whom had escaped from nearby plantations. Lieutenant George Garrison, posted to one of the Northern-raised black regiments, said, "She has made it a business to see all contrabands escaping from the rebels, and is able to get more intelligence than anybody else."

Yet she didn't need them to listen to her; the Union needed her to get them to talk to her. Hunter gave her money, which she paid for good information. "There would be slaves coming out, this guy coming from Newport, that guy coming from Heyward [Plantation], taking maybe a couple weeks to get to the lines,

hiding in the swamps taking their chances, moving at night,” Grigg says. “The others would talk to them, and say, you need to go see Miss Harriet. She’ll give you money for good information. So they would tell her – there are 350 slaves at Newport, there are 538 slaves at Heyward, if you land here and here you can take them off.”

The Second South Carolina, which carried out the raid along with white troops from Rhode Island, was made up of liberated slaves, many from the Combahee area. It was officially created on May 22, less than a fortnight before the gunboats chugged up the winding Combahee. Sadly, like Tubman herself most of the slaves could not read or write, so the best stories are lost to history. Still, looking at the results of the raid, it is hard not to hear Tubman asking potential recruits, who wants

to go burn Nichols' [plantation] library?

The raid's official record is sparse. As Montgomery wrote soon after,

I have the honor to report that, in obedience to your orders, I proceeded up the Combahee River, on the steamers John Adams and Harriet A. Weed, with a detachment of three hundred (300) men of the Second South Carolina Volunteer Regiment and a section of the Third Rhode Island Battery, commanded by Captain Brayton. We ascended the river some twenty-five (25) miles, destroyed a pontoon bridge, together with a large amount of cotton, rice, and other property, and brought away seven hundred and twenty-seven slaves, and some fine horses. We had some sharp skirmishes, in all of which the men

behaved splendidly. I hope to report more fully in a day or two.

The Confederates knew that the raid was coming, and that it was intended to liberate slaves. The local slave owner William C. Heyward reported that at dawn on June 2 “the driver, who was with the hands at work in lower fields, sent up word that there were three Yankee boats coming up the river. Immediately got up and sent word to him to bring up the hands and take them back into the woods.”

The Second South Carolina was not made up of veterans. The men had far more in common with Tubman than with their own officers. That’s why she went with them on the raid. Yet Tubman wasn’t a passenger. The intelligence she gathered, the soldiers she recruited, indicate that she actually planned the raid with Hunter and Montgomery: three landings on

the right, one on the left.

But it was Captain Hoyt of the Third Rhode Island, not Tubman, who led the Second South Carolina onto the shore and a mile inland to burn the Heyward plantation. It was Isaac and Samuel Heyward, self-liberated scouts with family there, who showed their comrades where to go, since Tubman wouldn't have known.

As the troops finished their demolition work, the fleeing slaves started to reach the boats, many more slaves than there was space available. "When they got to the shore," Tubman recalled later, "they'd get in the rowboat, and they'd start for the gunboat; but the others would run and hold on so they couldn't leave the shore. They wasn't coming and they wouldn't let any body else come."

That's when a white officer told Tubman to sing to "your people." Even decades later, when she would regale white audiences with the Combahee story, she said she resented that – a surprisingly modern sensitivity. But she did sing. And it worked. "Then they threw up their hands and began to rejoice and shout, glory! And the rowboats would push off."

It's hard to understand how the song Tubman recalled singing – about how "Uncle Sam is rich enough to buy you all a farm" – could have persuaded those left behind to let the boats go. Did she intentionally omit the fact that she threatened to shoot anyone who tried to back out from escaping? Meanwhile, the Confederates set upon those on shore with dogs and guns; at least one young girl was killed. But hundreds escaped.

The raid did not yield as many new recruits as

the Union was hoping for: Tubman claims credit for just 100 enlistments (for which she was not paid) afterward out of more than 700 liberated. That may explain why Hunter was relieved of his command, then his replacement cancelled Tubman's free pass and nothing quite like the Combahee liberation raid was tried again.

And yet – like the Emancipation Proclamation that made it possible, the Combahee raid is essential to the meaning of the Civil War. It did not save the Union. But coming between the fiasco of First Wilderness and the grim glory of Gettysburg, Harriet Tubman's Combahee Raid indelibly illustrated what made the Union worth saving.

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Sources: “Letters and Journals of Thomas Wentworth Higginson, 1846-1906”; William Friedheim, with Ronald Jackson, “Freedom’s Unfinished Revolution”; Gen. Rufus Saxton to Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, March 6, 1863; Jean M. Humez, “Harriet Tubman: the Life and the Life Stories”; Frederick Denison, “Shot and Shell: the Third Rhode Island Heavy Artillery Regiment in the Rebellion, 1861-1865”; [“Black Dispatches”](#) at [cia.gov](#).

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