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The ravages of The American Civil War and its aftermath was not limited to the Southern American States. The impact was felt in Great Britain too. After all, the most celebrated Confederate raider, CSS Alabama, was built at Merseyside, England. In 1862 the Alabama slipped into international waters before the British government could restrict it to port and it managed to capture and destroy 64 ships containing Union material during its life as a marauder.

After the war, the American Federal government demanded reparations from Britain; \$15.5 million. The story you are about to read is not about reparations but a celebrated US Navy pilot of WWII, the grandson (formally a resident of Huntsville) of Captain Rafael Semmes, the CSS Alabama's notorious

Raphael Semmes' Long Flight Home

By Captain John A. Rodgaard, U.S. Navy Reserve

After dodging Japanese Zero floatplanes, a Navy aviator with a famous name turned his SOC Seagull eastward and set out on a daring two-day flight over the cold North Pacific and rocky Aleutian Islands.

According to Rear Admiral Samuel Eliot Morison, the Aleutians in World War II could easily be termed "the Theatre of Military Frustration. . . . Sailors, soldiers and aviators alike regarded an assignment to this region of almost perpetual mist and snow as little better than penal servitude. But for a Navy aviator named for a famous ancestor, the remote northern island chain would be the setting for an exciting "Aleutian Adventure" that included eluding Japanese planes and flying 600 nautical miles to base.

Raphael "Rafe" Semmes Jr., the great-grandson and namesake of the commander of the Civil War raider CSS *Alabama*, grew up in Huntsville, Alabama, the son of a banker. After graduating from high school, he attended the Marion Military Institute for a year before entering the U.S.

Naval Academy in 1934. Although not known for his academic prowess at Annapolis (his lowest grade was in navigation), Semmes graduated in 1938 and was commissioned an ensign in the Navy. His first assignments were in the USS *Louisville* (CA-28) and *Somers* (DD-381), but in 1940 he reported to Pensacola, Florida, for flight training.

By late 1941, nearly 80 years after his famous Confederate ancestor had sailed the oceans in search of Yankee merchantmen, Lieutenant (junior grade) Semmes was soaring over the Pacific as a scout-plane pilot assigned to the USS *St. Louis* (CL-49). "My aviation unit (the *St. Louis* 'Air Force') . . . was not exactly a grave threat to the Japanese," he later wrote in an unpublished memoir about his Aleutian service, "but then it was all we had and was not completely without merit in its own way. We had four scout seaplanes, in which we daily trusted our lives without a great deal of thought on the subject."

The aircraft were Seagulls—three Curtiss SOC-3s and an SON-1, the equivalent plane built by the Naval Aircraft Factory. Although they were credible for their scouting and observation roles, Semmes knew all too well that the planes were woefully obsolete compared to Japanese aircraft. He recalled that "they seemed comically antique; biplanes of another era held together with struts and wires trying to live in the same air with the sleeker new fighters of a later day."

Catapulted off the *St. Louis*, an SOC would fly its scout or observation mission and land in the calm-water slick created by the turning cruiser. The plane would then taxi onto a cargo-net mat attached to a sled towed by the ship. A hook on the bottom of the Seagull's large centerline float would catch on the mat, allowing the cruiser to pull the seaplane toward her. The ship's stern-mounted crane would then lift the SOC back onto the vessel.

Early Wartime Action

On 7 December, the *St. Louis* was one of the few ships to make it out of Pearl Harbor during the Japanese attack. Semmes, however, was not on board at the time. Earlier, the cruiser's four seaplanes had been sent to Ford Island, and before the ship got under way on the 7th, her captain ordered the *St. Louis* aviators to report there. "The way turned out to be hitching a ride from a passing motor whaleboat," Semmes later recounted. "[We] witnessed the capsizing of the *Oklahoma*, then made our way past battleship row, then aflame and sinking." The next day he had to dodge U.S. machine-gun fire on his return to base after participating in an unsuccessful 10-seaplane search for the Japanese fleet.

The *St. Louis* mainly escorted convoys during the subsequent months. That routine, however, was broken when she participated in the first U.S. offensive action of the war—the 1 February 1942 raids on the Marshall and Gilbert islands. While planes from the USS *Yorktown* (CV-5) hit targets in the Gilberts, the cruiser's Seagulls flew low-level patrols, defending against torpedo-plane attacks that never materialized.

On 17 May the *St. Louis'* convoy duties finally ended when she pulled into Pearl Harbor. Companies C and D of the 2d Marine Raider Battalion (Carlson's Raiders) embarked, along with a 37-mm antiaircraft battery. Accompanied by the USS *Case* (DD-370), the *St. Louis* steamed at high speed for Midway Atoll. On the 25th, the cruiser delivered the battery and Marine reinforcements to Midway and then immediately headed northward. The opening countermoves against the anticipated Japanese assaults on Midway and the Aleutians were under way.

Dispatched to the Far North

On the 27th, while the *St. Louis* was enroute to Kodiak, Alaska, Semmes had an experience that took his

mind completely off what he might face in battle. It happened during a scouting mission in which he was also

qualifying another pilot in navigation. Semmes planned to let the junior aviator take the lead during the outbound and return legs of the flight. Radio silence was to be strictly enforced, and the SOCs had no homing aids to help the aviators find their way back to the cruiser.

When the pair of aircraft were 110 miles from the *St. Louis*, they began their turn for a cross leg. Semmes added a slight amount of throttle to his *Seagull's* engine to hold his trailing position during the turn. However, he was surprised to discover that "there was no change in engine



The Seagull, Semmes aircraft (an artist concept)

response. I pushed the throttle wide open—the engine purred on at something less than cruising speed. I looked at the air speed indicator—70 knots was showing. All instruments readings were normal."

The pilot slowly reduced throttle, and again nothing happened. By then the other plane was pulling away. Semmes' Seagull was also losing altitude and soon flying only about 100 feet above the gray ocean. The lieutenant directed his crewman, Radioman Second Class Hal Norman, to use the Aldis signaling lamp to attract the attention of the lead plane's crew. After what seemed forever, the SOC dropped back, and Semmes' plane took the lead for the return trip, during which the malfunctioning Seagull needed 50 miles to gain 500 feet of altitude. With the *St. Louis* finally in sight, Norman signaled for an immediate pick up.

The next challenge was for Semmes, who still could not control his SOC's throttle, to land the plane. His only option would be to cut the engine. After positioning his Seagull for a run to the *St. Louis*, he flipped off the ignition switch. With the Pratt & Whitney engine backfiring mightily, the plane glided down to the water. After it landed in the cruiser's slick, Semmes turned the switch back on, and the wind milling propeller restarted the engine, giving the Seagull enough taxi speed to catch the ship's tow sled. "As soon as I hit the rope sled I cut the switch once more and prayed for the hook to catch," Semmes recalled. "She caught and I relaxed for the first time since discovering the trouble."

Back on board, mechanics discovered that a cotter pin had broken or never been inserted in the throttle control rod, and a nut had backed off the shaft, disconnecting it. "Beginning that day there commenced a rechecking of all planes for control linkages and general structural integrity. I was in no mood for unsatisfactory maintenance to dump me into a cold sea."

The *St. Louis* had been assigned to the main body of Rear Admiral Robert A. Theobald's Task Force 8 (Tare), which was assigned to defend the Aleutians. On 1 June she joined Theobald's flagship, the USS *Nashville* (CL-43), and early on the 3rd, the main body's five cruisers and four destroyers finally all rendezvoused. By that time, however, Japanese carrier aircraft had attacked the naval air station at Dutch

Harbor, more than 500 miles away near the eastern end of the Aleutians. Over the next several days, Japanese forces occupied Kiska and Attu islands, at the chain's western tip.

The remainder of June and all of July was a frustrating time for the U.S. forces in the far north. As Semmes later wrote, "Results of the bombing of Kiska by Army and Navy planes proved so inconclusive that it was early decided to try the effect of gunfire by surface forces of Task Force Tare." The bombardment was set for 22 July, but bad weather forced its postponement to 27 July and then to 7 August.

On 2 August the cruiser-destroyer force's aviators were briefed on the overall plan of action and their part in the operation. Semmes recalled that the plan called for "three coordinated bombardments of the shipping in Kiska Harbor and adjacent shore establishments. The four destroyers . . . were to approach to ranges of 14,800 to 14,500 yards. The light cruisers . . . were to engage at a range approximately 16,800 yards, while the heavy cruisers . . . were to commence firing at 19,500 to 18,900 yards."

Because the gunfire would be indirect, each of the five cruisers was ordered to launch two SOCs to act as spotters. At the end of the action the ships would recover the aircraft if the tactical and/or the weather conditions permitted. Otherwise, the planes were to proceed to Dutch Harbor, more than 600 miles away. The distance was beyond the range of the Seagulls, so they would rendezvous with a small seaplane tender near Atka Island, halfway to Dutch Harbor. After refueling, they would continue eastward. On board the *St. Louis*, Semmes, who had been promoted to lieutenant, and Lieutenant (junior grade) Ray Moore were selected to fly the mission, along with their crewmen, Hal Norman and Radioman Third Class W. Gibbs, respectively.

At 1630 on 7 August, the task force was steaming 30 miles south of Kiska when it ran smack into a thick fog bank. Continuing toward the island, the warships alternately passed through clear patches and fog banks. "Periodically, the planes would be warmed up so they would be kept ready to go on short notice . . . we were beginning

to get a little nervous with anticipation," Semmes later wrote. "Would we go, or wouldn't we? Well, we were all beginning to sweat. We had on heavy winter flight suits and boots over our aviator greens. That and the excitement made it hard not to sweat though the outside temperature was in the forties."

The Adventure Begins

At about 1800, Semmes' and Moore's planes, as well as the other cruisers' SOCs, were finally launched. The two *St. Louis* Seagulls climbed together into the low-hanging, thick cloud layer and soon broke through into the sunshine. They were joined by two SOCs from the *Honolulu* (CL-48), and together the planes circled above the task force, waiting for it to steam into an area clear of cloud cover. But when the clouds finally opened up, the four Seagulls were over southern Kiska Island. Semmes broke radio silence and passed Kiska Harbor's bearing to his ship. With his plane leading the four-plane formation, Semmes then flew to the position where he thought the task force would be and circled until the ships cleared the fog bank, approximately ten miles off Kiska's southern coast.

Shortly thereafter, at 1955, the bombardment began when the destroyers opened fire, and by 2000 the light and heavy cruisers' guns were also firing salvos. While Semmes could hear the ships' guns over the roar of his Seagull's radial engine, cloud cover obscured his view of the targets. He and Moore flew their planes over Little Kiska Island, just east of the harbor, hoping for a better view of the falling shot. Instead, the pair of Seagulls were spotted by two Japanese Zero floatplanes, which promptly dove toward them.

"Norman, my rear seat gunner, was doing a fast swivel with the rear gun trying to keep one of the planes in his sights," Semmes later wrote. "I now commenced a flight maneuver which the instrument instructors at Pensacola had told me to be sure never to do. I made a steep wrapped up power spiral through the overcast and leveled off at 200 feet to find that the fighters had not followed." Semmes

found his plane in the clear and flying toward the formation of U.S. destroyers. The *St. Louis* aviators were fortunate. The other SOCs were badly handled by the Japanese floatplanes; one was lost and three others had more than 100 bullet holes.

After the brief bombardment ended at 2021, Semmes and Moore flew back to the *St. Louis*, whose anti-aircraft batteries and machine guns were intermittently firing at Japanese planes. Because of their presence and the appearance of fog ahead, the ship signaled her planes to "proceed as previously directed." About ten minutes later, however, the cruisers were ordered to recover aircraft independently. The *St. Louis* hoisted recall flags and attempted to locate her *Seagulls*, but they were nowhere in sight.

The Seagulls Head Eastward

Semmes, Moore, and their radiomen were on their way up the Aleutian chain to Dutch Harbor; however, they did not have enough time to reach Atka Island during daylight for refueling, and landing on water in the dark was extremely dangerous. "There was nothing to do but get as far along our course as we could before nightfall so we continued to climb until we broke out of the overcast," Semmes wrote. "Thus Ray and I were alone now on our Aleutian Adventure and Dutch Harbor was 600 nautical miles away."

After 170 miles and with darkness fast approaching, Semmes led a descent through the clouds. Seeing a break in the overcast, he spotted the rocky shoreline of Tanaga Island. Landing there to float out the night, however, was too dangerous, and the *Seagulls* continued their eastward journey to the next island, Kanaga.

Fortunately, the two pilots found a hole in the cloud cover. After spiraling their planes down, they landed on the water at around 2230. Semmes arranged with Moore via radio to try for a 0700 takeoff the next morning, and then, with the two *Seagulls* floating about 100 feet apart on the cold North Pacific waters, the aviators slept as best they could.

Setting out on time the next day, the fliers continued toward Atka Island and their rendezvous. After some searching, they spotted the seaplane tender USS *Hulbert* (AVD-6). Semmes recalled that "a more beautiful sight than her I have never seen. . . . She refueled us (we were now down to 5 gallons-enough for about 12 more minutes flying). Also welcome was hot coffee and sandwiches which the captain sent aboard." The pilots also received the weather forecast: "fog all the way to Dutch Harbor, now about 300 miles away."

The *Hulbert's* captain offered to take the aviators aboard and, after sinking the SOCs, return them to the task force's base at Kodiak. It was a tempting proposition, but Semmes and the others thought that after 21 hours in their Seagulls eluding Zeros, flying through the Aleutian fog, and spending the night adrift, that was not the way to end their flight.

At around 1515 they were ready to take off. But before they set out, Semmes recalled, "Ray and I made what was for us the most momentous decision-to split up and take different routes back to Dutch Harbor." Semmes, Moore, and their crewmen wished each other good luck and said they would see one another again at the naval air station.

Once airborne, the Seagulls flew their separate ways. Semmes' plane was soon at 6,000 feet heading eastward between two layers of dark gray clouds. Before long, the view became "very dreary and depressing. . . . No sign of the earth below or the blue heavens which must be above somewhere," he later wrote. At 1810, the pilot spotted a funnel-shaped hole in the clouds through which he could see the ground, specifically Umnak Island, where an Army Air Forces base was located. Not wasting a moment, Semmes dove his Seagull as fast as he dared before the shrinking hole closed. He pulled out at 500 feet and for the rest of the flight was able to stay under the clouds and hug Umnak and Unalaska islands' coastlines. According to his logbook, Semmes landed at Dutch Harbor at exactly 2000.

After the Seagull was tied up at a buoy, its pilot and radioman made their way ashore and were finally able to

feel solid ground beneath their feet. Waiting dockside for them was Ray Moore, who greeted Semmes by asking, "Who do you think you are, Lindbergh?"

Semmes, Moore, and their crewmen remained at Dutch Harbor for a few days before receiving orders to rejoin the *St. Louis* at Kodiak. The two planes flew there together without incident. To Semmes and the others, their arrival seemed anticlimactic after their earlier 600-mile journey.

"As we sighted Kodiak ahead, I felt my Aleutian Adventure drawing to a close," Semmes wrote. "It had been a great experience, frightening at times, but rewarding. There flashed through my mind the hide and seek with the Jap Zeros at Kiska followed by the long night on the open sea; then a search through shrouded deserted bays for a ship which must be hiding there somewhere; a life-giving replenishment of fuel and food from her when found; long unmarked miles of flying between cold gray layers, then a God-sent funnel leading down 6,000 feet to safety."

As the pair of floatplanes neared the entrance to Kodiak Harbor, their crews were surprised to see the *St. Louis* steaming into it. With Semmes' SOC in the lead, both Seagulls flew toward her, and as the aircraft passed by the cruiser, the lieutenant saw his ship blink a simple message: "Welcome Home."



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- Captain Rodgaard is coauthor of *A Call to the Sea: Captain Charles Stewart of the USS Constitution* (Dulles, VA: Potomac Books, 2005).