

BATTLE WITH CHINESE PIRATES

19 October 1855

“The boats of the RATTLER and POWHATTAN had a desperate encounter with pirates near Kulau on Saturday, and had eight seamen and marines killed, and fifteen or sixteen wounded, some of them, it is feared, mortally. Captain Fellowes, Lieutenant Grando, and other officers were blown up in a junk, but fortunately were but little hurt. Ten pirate junks were taken and destroyed, the greater portion of their crews having belonged to the EAGLET’s convoy. Sixteen of the smaller pirate junks escaped.” The above paragraph is taken from the Recorder’s shipping list, but the subject is worthy of a much more extended notice than is there given.

Last week we mentioned that a lorcha and three junks, (it should have been two lorchas and five junks) under convoy of the steamer EAGLET, had been cut off by pirates, who displayed such a formidable battery and determined front that Captain Caldwell was unable to rescue them, and had to apply to Captain Fellowes, of her Majesty’s ship RATTLER for assistance. This was readily granted, and the RATTLER, with Captain Caldwell on board, started for Kulan, near which they sighted the pirates, and followed them as far into the bay as the depth of water would permit. The pirates, quite aware of their advantage in light draught, and conscious of their ability to resist successfully any attempt that might be made upon them by the boats of the steamer, fired a few harmless broadsides in defiance, and stood in towards Kulan. Capt. Fellowes thereupon returned to Hong Kong, and invited the cooperation of the United States steamer POWHATTAN, now in this harbor under repair; when it was determined that the RATTLER, with three boats and a hundred officers and men of the American steam frigate, should form the expedition, Capt. Caldwell volunteering the use of his steamer to tow the boats up the bay. Accordingly, the RATTLER, with the EAGLET, in tow, and the POWHATTAN’s boats astern of her again, left the harbor on Friday, about 3 o’clock, the first Lieutenant (Pegram,) of the POWHATTAN, with Lieut. Jones and his marines, taking passage in the RATTLER, and the blue jackets in the EAGLET. The steamer arrived close to Kulan before midnight, the EAGLET anchoring a couple of cables’ length in-shore of the man of war. At 5 next morning the launches were sent alongside the RATTLER for the marines, and then, with the POWHATTAN’s cutter, and three boats from the RATTLER, besides the Captain’s gig, made fast astern the EAGLET, which, everything being ready, steamed slowly up the bay. At Kulan only one junk was to be seen, and it was feared the birds had flown; but Captain Caldwell descried a lorcha at anchor at the head of the bay, and steered in that direction. The lorcha got under weigh, apparently with the intention of escaping, when Captain Fellowes dispatched the RATTLER’s pinnacle and POWHATTAN’s cutter to intercept her, and these had unfortunately got beyond recall before the pirate fleet with their prizes, numbering in all some thirty-six sail, were observed at anchor in the narrow and shallow passages from which the lorcha had started. As the steamer approached, the junks hoisted their sails, but without getting under weigh, until several Congreve rockets, discharged from the EAGLET’s quarter deck by Mr. Pile, the gunner, and two marine artillerymen from the RATTLER, and two or three well-directed shots from a 32-pounder: fired by Mr. Randall, her chief officer, startled them from their fancied security; for up to that time the pirates had either not observed the boats, or thought they would not have the temerity to attack them. In this, however, they soon discovered their mistake, for the boats, which had at first made for a narrow neck of land, bore up for and rounded the point, and then from the deck of the steamer was witnessed as bold an attack as was ever made in these waters. The pirate fleet formed a dense mass, the larger and heavier armed junks bringing up the rear, every now and then yawning round and firing their broadsides at the boats, from which, in reply, tiny puffs of smoke arose as the howitzers in their bows discharged their more deadly contents, the shrapnel bursting over the junks, and making frightful havoc among their crews. The boats soon neared the pirates, Lieutenants Pegram and Rolando, with the launches of the POWHATTAN, first, by volleys of musketry clearing the decks of the two largest, then boarding and driving the pirates overboard at the point of the bayonet. This, however, was not done without a hard struggle, for the miscreants fought with the fury of despair; but they had of course no chance with the marines and blue jackets. Meanwhile, the other boats were far from idle, and though small in comparison with the launches, performed their share of the work with the utmost gallantry—officers and men vying with each other for the post of danger and of honor, so that five or six more junks were soon secured. Mr. James, the boatswain of the RATTLER, particularly distinguished himself, having, with five seamen and a few marines, in a whale-boat dignified with the title of second cutter, boarded and carried a junk that seemed fully a match for either of the launches. Lieutenant Pegram, in the first launch, was hastening to their assistance, but seeing the battle nearly won, would not interfere with their well-earned laurels, and turned his attention elsewhere. The pirate chief’s junk, after being shelled by the first launch, was boarded almost simultaneously by her crew and that of the RATTLER’s gig, and Captain Fellowes was fortunate enough to secure the chief’s flag. The chief himself—Lee Afye, a principal leader of the Whampoa “patriots,”—was shot by an English marine, who had jumped on deck from the POWHATTAN’s launch, and four women threw themselves overboard, and were drowned. The ammunition on

board the pirate fleet may be judged of from the fact that this junk alone is believed to have nearly 100 kegs of English gunpowder, besides stinkpots, cartridges and loose powder. Up to this time, only one serious casualty had happened to the attacking force—a young American marine, named Adamson, having been shot with a musket-ball in the groin; but two other fatal accidents followed in quick succession. The RATTLER's first cutter, in charge of Paymaster Brownsdon, ran alongside a large junk. Several stinkpots thrown at them missed, but at last one, hove from the raised poop of the pirate by a woman with a child slung to her back, fell into the boat, and being followed by others the crew were compelled to jump overboard, where two men were speared, and a third was wounded and drowned. One of these, a marine, who had been wounded by a spear-thrust, called to his comrade to save him, and the other being an excellent swimmer, got hold of him for that purpose. The Chinese then threw a mat over them, and the marine, still holding on to his wounded friend, dived below, and came up clear of the mat; but, as soon as he was observed, several stinkpots were pitched at him, one of which struck him on the head, and, though not much hurt, he was stunned for a second or two, and lost sight of the man he had displayed such a determination to save. The brave fellow's name is Wm. Robinson. The other fatal accident was the blowing up of a junk which for a time had offered the most determined resistance to the gig, in which were Captain Fellows and Assistant-Surgeon Wilson, with five men, but which was ultimately taken possession of by Lieutenant Rolando and his launch. Either a train had been laid before the crew left, or some determined scoundrel fired the junk, for she blew up with a tremendous explosion, and both officers and men were hurled into the water. Three of the men were killed, and several others frightfully scorched, one of whom died the same night, while another is not expected to live; but the officers miraculously escaped, though Lieutenant Rolando was burned, and Captain Fellowes uninjured by the falling spars. The survivors were, however, all picked up by Mr. Craig, master's mate of the POWHATTAN, who had luckily gone into the boat the moment before the explosion took place. In this junk was an immense quantity of treasure, said to amount to \$200,000, and the desperation with which her crew fought may be judged of from the fact that, even after the Americans gained the deck, they were encountered hand to hand. One man made himself particularly conspicuous, and, notwithstanding several wounds, continued to throw stinkpots, but ultimately he ran below, and is believed to have fired the train which blew up the vessel.

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