

THE NAVAL CAREER OF REAR ADMIRAL JOHN LORIMER WORDEN  
(1818-1897)

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John Lorimer Worden, "Jack" to his family and friends, was a modest man in the height of glory, a courageous patriot at the supreme test of duty, and an admirably honest person in the face of the physical and mental anguish that periodically confronted him. He was born in humble surroundings in a farmhouse near the Sparta section of the Township of Sing Sing (now Ossining), Westchester Co., New York, on March 12, 1818.<sup>1</sup> He lived with his family in Scarborough on the Albany Post Road until the spring of 1827 when he moved to Swartoutville, Dutchess Co. New York.<sup>2</sup>

Jack Worden was described later in life by one of his fellow naval officers as "tall, thin & quite effeminate looking, notwithstanding a long beard hanging down his breast ...he is white & delicate...& never was a body the possessor of a smaller or more delicate hand, but if I am not much mistaken he will not hesitate to submit our iron sides [i.e., the Monitor] to as severe a test as the most warlike could desire. He is a perfect gentleman in manner."<sup>3</sup>

His long naval career began on January 10, 1834 when he was appointed a Midshipman from Fishkill, Dutchess Co., New York. He served initially with the Brazil Squadron on the Sloop-of-War Erie (June 20, 1834 - September 20, 1837) and was then transferred to the Sloop-of-War Cyane of the Mediterranean Squadron (May 7, 1838 - December 2, 1839). After a tour at the Naval School in Philadelphia (December 23, 1839 - July 20, 1840), he was raised to the rank of Passed Midshipman on July 16, 1840.<sup>4</sup>

With his promotion in hand, John Lorimer Worden went on to serve with distinction in the Pacific Squadron, first on the Storeship Relief (October 13, 1840 - September 6, 1842) and then on the Sloop-of-War Dale (September 6, 1842 - October 23, 1843). His next tour of duty was at the Naval Observatory in Washington, DC from April 7, 1844 to May 28, 1846. On August 13, 1846, he was promoted to Master and soon thereafter (on November 30) to Lieutenant.

Lt. Worden's next assignment was as the Executive Officer of the Storeship Southampton of the Pacific Squadron (February 5, 1847 - May 1848) during the Mexican War. He continued to serve in the Pacific Squadron, successively on the Independence (May 1848 - July 13, 1848), the Warren (July 13, 1848 - September 12, 1848) and the Battleship Ohio (September 12, 1848 - April 29, 1850). In October 1850, he was ordered back to the Naval Observatory where he served until March 15, 1852. Lt. Worden returned to sea duty in April 1852 serving on the Frigate Cumberland (April 1852 - February 15, 1855) and the Sloop-of-War Levant (February 15, 1855 - May 1855) of the Mediterranean and Caribbean Squadrons, respectively. For a third time, he returned to the Naval Observatory in Washington where he served from October 24, 1855 until March 1856 when he was placed on duty at the Brooklyn Navy Yard until July 1, 1858. He then served as the First Lieutenant on the Frigate Savannah of the Home Squadron (July 1, 1858 - November 20, 1860). He was subsequently ordered to Washington, DC "for special duty connected with the discipline and efficiency of the Naval Service."<sup>5</sup>

The special duty was in fact a mission of great military importance and a consequence of the secession movement. On April 7, 1861, Lt. Worden was sent with secret dispatches to Fort Pickens, FL. He committed his orders to memory and

destroyed the papers directing the commander of the U.S.Navy fleet off Pensacola to reinforce Fort Pickens.<sup>6</sup> His mission accomplished, Lt. Worden returned north by rail but at Montgomery, AL, he was apprehended by Confederate troops and thus became the first prisoner of war of the Civil War. He was imprisoned for 7 months although many of his friends among the Southerners, those who had served previously with him, tried to intervene. In ill health, he was finally exchanged in Richmond for a Union prisoner. On November 16, 1861, he started for New York City to recover and to begin the most renowned phase of his career as commanding officer of the Ironclad Monitor.<sup>7</sup>

Lt. John L. Worden was said to have not only left his sick bed "against the protests of his physician and the entreaties of his family," but also risked his life and reputation by volunteering to take command of the Monitor, an experimental ironclad then being built at the Continental Iron Works, Greenpoint, Long Island, New York.<sup>8</sup> An interesting genealogical coincidence, perhaps never noted before, is that Lt. Worden and John F. Winslow, leading proponent of the concept and manufacturer of the Monitor's armor plate at the Albany Iron Works, were distantly related, so distant that it is doubtful that they knew of the connection.<sup>9</sup>

The Monitor was Lt. Worden's first command and he had a volunteer crew to go with it. On March 6, 1862, the Monitor sailed under tow for Hampton Roads, VA and its famous encounter with the C.S.S. Virginia (formerly the U.S.S. Merrimack). Lt. Worden's valorous command in the battle was well proven by his going out on the deck at the height of the action, at the peril of being killed by the Virginia's sharpshooters, to inspect the effects of direct hits on the Monitor's armor. He took note of his vessel's weak spots as each was tested by the Virginia's fire and it was in the weakest, most vulnerable spot of all that he received serious wounds. About three hours into the battle, Lt. Worden, the quartermaster and the pilot were crowded into the tiny wrought iron pilot house. As he peered through the open one inch slits to observe the effects of the Monitor's shots, a shell from the Virginia exploded directly outside the pilot house with a force that partially raised its heavy iron cover. Of the 23 times the Monitor was struck, this was the only direct hit to the pilot house and it left the ship's commander blinded in the left eye and his face scarred.<sup>10</sup> John Worden himself described years later the injuries he received: "My head was all knocked to pieces at Hampton Roads. For three months, I lay unconscious and when I woke to life again, I was a mental wreck. Since then I have never known the time when I wasn't suffering both physical and mental pain."<sup>11</sup>

After the battle, Lt. Worden was taken by way of Baltimore to Washington to the home of Captain Henry A. Wise, an old family friend.<sup>12</sup> President Lincoln immediately came to visit him and thank him for his efforts to save the country. He spent 11 weeks recovering and in May, he and President Lincoln were the guests of honor at a reception on the deck of the Monitor which was then being reconditioned at the Washington Navy Yard. President Lincoln "cordially acknowledged his indebtedness to Lt. Worden, and he hoped the whole country would unite in the feelings of obligation."<sup>13</sup>

After being ordered to take command of the New Ironsides, he was relieved of that duty and allowed to spend part of the summer recuperating at his home in Quaker Hill, New York. During that summer recovery, Lt. Worden and the Monitor crew were lauded for their "skill and gallantry" in a Joint Resolution of Congress. On July 16, 1862, by special authorization of Congress, he was promoted to Commander and in August, took the assignment as an assistant to Admiral

Gregory in the supervision of building ironclads in Brooklyn.<sup>14</sup> At his own request, he was given command of the Ironclad Montauk, the flagship of four ironclads and part of the South Atlantic Blockade Squadron. He returned to Hampton Roads with the Montauk the same day (December 29, 1862) that the Monitor left under tow and its fateful sinking off Cape Hatteras.

Commander Worden attacked Fort McAllister on the Ogechee River in January 1863 and destroyed the famed blockade runner Nashville on February 28. In April 1863, he participated in Admiral DuPont's ironclad attack on Charleston, SC. In the meantime, he was promoted to Captain (February 3, 1863). After Charleston, Captain Worden went back as Admiral Gregory's assistant until after the end of the war.

From February 1, 1866 to May 23, 1866, Captain Worden commanded the Steamer Idaho and then was on ironclad duty from June 2, 1866 to August 6, 1866. He then commanded the Steamer Pensacola of the North Pacific Squadron (August 6, 1866 - May 8, 1867). Finally, he was put on "special duty" which consisted of his being advanced to Commodore and given six months leave with permission to visit Europe.<sup>15</sup>

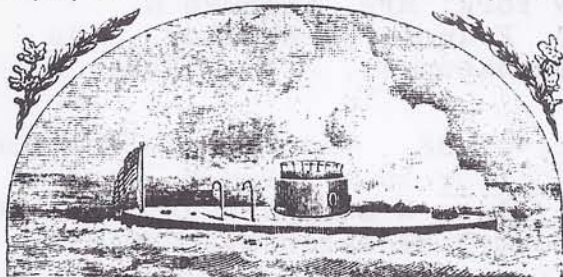
From December 1, 1869 until September 22, 1874, Commodore, and after November 20, 1872, Rear Admiral Worden served as the Superintendent of the United States Naval Academy. In 1874, he also served concurrently as President of the prestigious United States Naval Institute. During this period, personal sorrow struck Admiral Worden when his son, John Lorimer Worden, Jr., a United States Military Academy graduate, committed suicide on May 4, 1873.<sup>16</sup> From December 24, 1874 to October 5, 1877, Rear Admiral Worden held the command of the European Squadron with his headquarters in Dresden, Saxony. "There in the sight of other navies he was full of enthusiasm for its work and for breadth of naval education," according to one of his biographers.<sup>17</sup> While on a cruise in the Mediterranean in 1877, his flagship was threatened by one of the belligerents during the Russo-Turkish War. When a warning shot was fired from a Turkish fort, he turned his ship broadside toward the fort as a silent threat of retaliation. He did this at great risk to himself, his ship and his country's neutrality but won a great moral victory by calling the bluff of the potential enemy and received an official apology from the Turkish Government.<sup>18</sup>

In the last years of his career, Admiral Worden served as president of both the Naval Retiring and Examining Boards and on December 23, 1886, after 52 years of naval duty, he retired at full sea pay. He spent his last summers at Quaker Hill and the winters at his home at 1428 K Street Northwest, Washington, DC. During these years in Washington, he served as president and governor of the Washington Metropolitan Club. A later tribute was to read that "He was one of the best-known and most popular residents of the Nation's capital" while another said that "probably no man was better informed upon current events or reviewed them with better judgment."<sup>19</sup>

Rear Admiral Worden died suddenly of pneumonia on Monday, October 18, 1897 at 1:30 pm at his K Street home. It was reported that he had been "in good health up to Saturday" when he suddenly became ill.<sup>20</sup> This man who had "electrified the world" in 1862 was eulogized as "one of the few remaining heroes of that old regime which made the United States Navy so glorious in its achievements and helped make such an indelible mark of prowess and patriotic devotion upon the pages of his country's history."<sup>21</sup> A state funeral was held for him at Saint

John's Episcopal Church on October 20, 1897 with President William McKinley, many members of the Cabinet and numerous military leaders in attendance.<sup>22</sup> His remains were conveyed by a Pennsylvania Railroad train to Pawling, New York where they were laid to rest in a grave next to his son and namesake.

A life such as that led by John Lorimer Worden could have much said about it. There is, in one of his biographical sketches, a few words which summarize many thoughts about the man. "From the quality of his patriotism," it was said, "we judge him to have been one of the best fruits of our civilization...he gloried in the rush of American life, in the youthfulness of American blood...he would insist that a man's grandest equipment in life is to be American." And, finally, Admiral Worden was said to have "believed in religion...He believed in the promise of God."<sup>23</sup> From Midshipman to Rear Admiral, from farmboy to hero of his country, John Lorimer Worden brought pride to his family, to the Worden name, and to his country...and this he did by putting to its best use that "grandest equipment" and belief in the "promise of God."



\*(The above was written for WORDENS PAST by subscriber, Robert L. Worden, 30 Murray Ave., Annapolis, MD, 21401. "The Descendants of Rear Admiral John Lorimer Worden" and "A Collateral Line of Descent From Rear Admiral John Lorimer Worden" will follow in future issues.)

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> "Admiral Worden: Commanded Monitor," The Citizen Register (Ossining, N.Y.), March 16, 1962

<sup>2</sup> Ernest Freeland Griffin, Westchester County and Its People, A Record (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Co., 1946), vol. I, p. 374.

<sup>3</sup> Letter of Acting Paymaster William Keeler to Anna Keeler, February 9, 1862, in Robert W. Daly (editor), Abroad the USS Monitor: 1862, The Letters of Acting Paymaster William Frederick Keeler, U.S. Navy To His Wife, Anna (Annapolis, Md.: United States Naval Institute, 1964), p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> References to Admiral Worden's naval service cited were taken from Lewis Randolph Hamersly, The Records of Living Officers of the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps (Philadelphia: L. R. Hamersly & Co., 1894), pp. 39-42.

<sup>5</sup> Abstracts of Service Records of Naval Officers (1798-1893), National Archives, M330, Record Group 24.

<sup>6</sup> "Monitor Routed Merrimac. . . and 4 Area Men Helped," The Poughkeepsie Journal, July 9, 1961

<sup>7</sup> Joel Tyler Headley, Farragut and Our Naval Commanders (New York: E. B. Treat & Co., 1867), pp. 513-514. Also see Clarence Edward Macartney, Mr. Lincoln's Admirals (New York: Funk & Wagnalls Co., 1956), pp. 172-199; John Howard Brown, America's Naval Heroes (Boston: Brown and Company, Publishers, 1899), pp. 475-483; and Headley, Heroes and Battles of the War of 1861-65 (New York: E. B. Treat & Co., 1891), pp. 512-527.

<sup>8</sup> John Lorimer Worden, Samuel Dana Greene and H. Ashton Ramsay, The Monitor and the Merrimac, Both Sides of the Story (New York and London: Harper & Brothers, 1912), p. 4; and Greene, "In the 'Monitor' Turret," The Century Magazine (New York), vol. XXIX, no. 5, March 1885, pp. 754ff. Also see Edgar Stanton Maclay, A History of the United States Navy, From 1775 to 1901 (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1901), vol. II, p. 243. Maclay notes (p. 241) that Monitor designer John Ericsson said his ironclad "will. . . prove a severe monitor to those leaders [of the Southern Rebellion]" as an explanation of the ship's name.

<sup>9</sup> John F. Winslow (1810-1892) was the great-great-great grandson of Kenelm Winslow (1599-1692), the uncle of Kenelm Winslow (1635-1715) who married Mercy Worden (c. 1641-1688), daughter of Peter Worden (1609-1681) and Mary Sears Winslow. See David Parsons Holton, Winslow Memorial (New York: Mrs. Frances K. Holton, Publisher, 1888), p. 821; and Francis B. Wheeler, John F. Winslow, LL.D. and the Monitor (Poughkeepsie, N.Y., 1893), p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> Daly, Aboard the USS Monitor, p. 38. The best collection of articles and bibliography on the Monitor is William M. Darden (editor), Project Cheesebox: A Journey Into History (Annapolis, Md.: Department of History, U.S. Naval Academy, Research Manuscripts, 1974), 3 volumes.

<sup>11</sup> The Sunday Courier (Poughkeepsie), June 2, 1895, p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> Wise, a naval scientist, had been a Midshipman with Worden in 1834 and in 1862 was Chief of the Bureau of Ordnance.

<sup>13</sup> Worden et alia, The Monitor and the Merrimac, p. 5.

<sup>14</sup> Hamersly, Records of Living Officers, p. 40.

<sup>15</sup> Abstracts of Service Records, May 27, 1868, National Archives.

<sup>16</sup> Francis Bernard Heitman, Historical Register of the United States Army, From Its Organization, September 29, 1785, to September 29, 1889 (Washington: The National Tribune, 1890), p. 713. Also see New York Times, May 6, 1873, p. 4 and The Evening Star (Washington), May 6, 1873, p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> "Rear Admiral Worden: Lessons From His Life and Character," 7 page pamphlet in Naval Biography, vol. 3, no. 11 in 5 volume Naval Miscellany, Rare Book Collection, Department of Navy Library, Washington, D.C. This reference is on page 2.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>19</sup> New York Times, October 19, 1897, p. 4 and The Evening Star, October 18, 1897, p. 1.

<sup>20</sup> The Evening Star, October 18, 1897, p. 1.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., October 20, 1897, p. 8.

<sup>23</sup> "Rear Admiral Worden: Lessons From His Life and Character," pp. 1 and 6.