

CUSHING'S TORPEDO



Sinking of CSS Albemarle



CSS *Albemarle*, which had been built in a cornfield beside the Roanoke River in 1863–1864, helped drive the U.S. Army from Plymouth in April 1864 and defeated seven U.S. gunboats in May. The ironclad ram seemed invincible, but 21-year-old U.S. Navy Lt. William B. Cushing devised a plan



to sink it using a “torpedo” (a tin powder keg with an internal percussion cap) on the end of a wooden spar projecting from the bow of a steam-powered launch. First, however, he hoped to board and capture *Albemarle*.

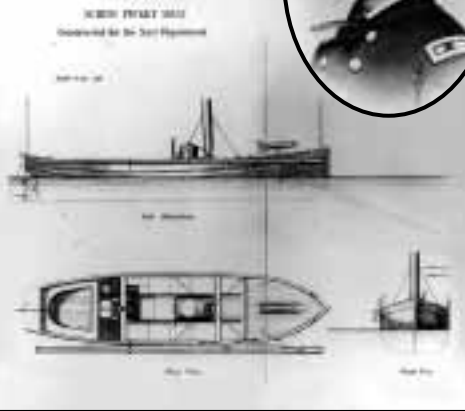
The Confederate ironclad had been moored here in Plymouth for repair since its last engagement, and a floating log barrier protected it from torpedo attack. Late on the night of October 27, Cushing set out in his launch and, after he spotted *Albemarle*, decided to seize it. Before he got close enough to board, however, a dog’s bark alerted the Confederate guards, who opened fire. Cushing ordered the launch toward the ironclad at full steam. When he saw the log barrier, he rode over it, but the launch stuck instead of penetrating to the



Cushing sinking the CSS *Albemarle*

ironclad. Cushing, with a wounded hand and bullet-riddled clothes, lowered the torpedo beneath *Albemarle*’s wooden hull and pulled a lanyard that dropped a grapeshot on the detonator. The explosion sank *Albemarle* but also swamped

the launch. Cushing and his crew swam for their lives. He and a sailor escaped, but two drowned and the rest were captured. Cushing received the “Thanks of Congress” and became a Union hero for his daring exploit.



Cushing torpedo boat, Lt. William B. Cushing (inset)