

Under Fire

Under Fire, the *Star of the West* found itself in a dire situation as it approached Fort Sumter, coming under fire from a hidden battery positioned on the shoreline. Captain McGowan, stationed aboard the ship, meticulously documented the dangerous circumstances, noting the way cannonballs ricocheted off the vessel's hull. One shot narrowly missed the pilot-house, while another struck the side of the ship, intensifying the growing threat to the vessel. Given the ship's large size and lack of experienced gunners—fifty cadets manned the cannons, many of whom had little combat experience—it became an easy target. The cadets' shots were wild and largely ineffective, further escalating the tension surrounding their mission. This situation demonstrated the vulnerability of the *Star of the West*, and highlighted the lack of preparedness for such a critical engagement in the face of mounting aggression.

As the attack on the *Star of the West* continued, the crew attempted to signal for assistance from Fort Sumter by raising and lowering their flag. Lieutenant Doubleday, stationed at the fort, quickly observed the distress signals and acted with urgency, alerting his garrison to prepare for action. Meanwhile, Major Anderson, the fort's commanding officer, was forced to grapple with the complex reality of his position. Anderson was torn between responding to the attack on the U.S. flag by ordering a return fire and the dire consequences that would follow, especially if such actions led to a full-scale civil war. His internal struggle was fraught with the gravity of the moment; retaliating could spark conflict, yet inaction could send a message of weakness, endangering the fort's credibility. Anderson's careful consideration of these competing factors underlined the immense pressure he faced as tensions rose rapidly.

The pressure from his officers, including Lieutenant Jefferson Davis, who called for decisive action, increased Anderson's sense of urgency. Davis and others believed that striking back was the only way to preserve the honor of the Union and protect Fort

Sumter from further provocation. Anderson, however, was increasingly torn, divided between his duty to the Union and his sympathy for the Southern cause, which had many supporters within the fort's ranks. As Anderson grappled with the reality of escalating tensions, Lieutenant Woods aboard the *Star of the West* was faced with a difficult decision. The ship was under constant fire, and the risk of being captured or grounded in hostile waters was becoming more apparent with each passing moment. Woods ultimately decided that retreat was the safest course of action, choosing to withdraw from the harbor to avoid a potentially disastrous confrontation.

Despite the overwhelming danger, the *Star of the West* was able to retreat from the harbor, although Lieutenant Woods knew that time was running out. If the ship failed to move with the tide, it would be vulnerable to attack, and their escape would become even more perilous. This realization further highlighted the impossibility of their mission, as the ship's approach had been anticipated by the local Southern forces. The element of surprise, which had been the Union's last hope, was lost, and they were left scrambling to regroup. This shift in momentum underscored the changing dynamics of the conflict, as the South's military strength grew stronger and more organized, leaving little room for Union advances in this critical moment.

As the *Star of the West* made its retreat, the garrison at Fort Sumter, though initially hopeful for a timely response, was left in a state of uncertainty. The situation at the fort, as well as aboard the ship, reflected the broader tensions within the nation. On the one hand, the defenders of the fort were doing their best to maintain a stance of defiance, while on the other, the political and military landscape was rapidly shifting toward a full-blown confrontation. Anderson's refusal to take immediate action in response to the Southern aggression was seen by some as a failure to defend the honor of the flag, while others viewed it as a necessary restraint to prevent further escalation. The *Star of the West*, caught between these competing forces, became a symbol of the deepening divide between North and South, and the uncertainty of the future.

The chapter captures the dramatic clash of loyalty, duty, and political pressure faced by those stationed at Fort Sumter and aboard the *Star of the West*. It sheds light on the complexities of the individuals involved, who were all caught in the middle of a brewing conflict that would soon engulf the nation. The looming threat of civil war was no longer a distant possibility, but a present reality, as every action taken during this period had lasting consequences. The vulnerability of the *Star of the West* and the growing hostility from the South underscored the broader challenges that the Union would face in the coming months. The chapter poignantly illustrates the delicate balance between military decision-making and the political forces at play, capturing the uncertainty and anxiety that permeated this fraught moment in American history. Through the lens of these tense moments, the stage was set for the explosive conflicts that would follow, forever changing the course of the nation.