

SULTANA: Flaming Coffin of the Mississippi

The Civil War was over and the soldiers were coming home. But for the more than 2400 soldiers and civilians squeezed aboard the Mississippi packet Sultana, the worst was yet to come. Soon, 1547 would perish in the fiery horror that consumed the near-new sidewheeler, and the hell that had been the war between brothers would blanch in the flaming tragedy that became America's worst river disaster in history

BY CECIL RHODES II

When Johnny comes marching home again, Hurrah! Hurrah!
We'll give him a hearty welcome then, Hurrah! Hurrah!

The Civil War was over and the cannons at last fell silent after four long years of combat and strife. Once again the Billy Yanks and Johnny Rebs would unite under one flag as one nation. But as the nation rejoiced in the peace after Appomattox, there still were tears and sadness, for President Abraham Lincoln was dead — the victim of an assassin's bullet on 14 April 1865.

Nor were the tragic legacies of the war soon to be banished from the headlines of the nation's newspapers, for barely two-weeks prior to Lincoln's death, the troop-laden steamer *General Lyon* had burned to her waterline off of Cape Hatteras en route from Wilmington to Fortress Monroe. Aboard the steamer were more than 400 Union soldiers, many of them recently released Union prisoners, plus more than a hundred civilians. The fire was sudden and heavy winds soon had the ill-fated *General Lyon* enveloped in flames. Out of the 500 aboard that tragic night, only 20 survived the holocaust. One unit — the 56th Illinois — was nearly wiped out, losing eleven officers and 195 men.

The loss of the *General Lyon* and so many luckless soldiers who had endured so much in combat or southern prison camps shocked the nation. As the cries for a complete investigation into the tragedy began to mount the shocking news of Lincoln's assassination swept all mention of the *General Lyon* fire from the headlines.

While Lincoln's funeral train slowly crept westward, stopping at every town and hamlet to let stunned citizens pay their last respects to their fallen president, a new horror erupted in the headlines.

"Thousands Dead in Riverboat Fire," blared the *Baltimore Sun* on 1 May 1865.

"Calamitous Inferno On the River," headlined the *New Orleans Times*.

"Fire Sweeps the Packet *Sultana*," announced the *New York Tribune*.

A saddened nation already shocked by the untimely death of its elected leader was further stunned by the fiery holocaust on the Mississippi, not too far from the fertile soil where Lincoln was newly laid to rest.

The horror was not over-emphasized, for the country soon realized that the worst disaster in riverboat history had happened just outside of Memphis.

The time for national mourning was not yet passed.

On the bright, clear morning of 21 April 1865, the St. Louis and New Orleans riverboat, the 1700-ton two-year-old *Sultana* had cleared New Orleans for Cairo, Illinois. While her desirability as a passenger sidewheeler was hawked to river travelers, she was running this trip almost exclusively for the Army.

Emaciated, weary, half-sick Federal prisoners of war had assembled at Camp Fisk, on the environs of Vicksburg, Mississippi,

Dramatic painting of the *Sultana* after the boiler explosion set the ship completely ablaze. Many of the Union soldiers aboard could not swim.

