

International Journal of Naval History

October 2002

Volume 1 Number 2

Spencer C. Tucker, *A Short History of the Civil War at Sea*
(Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 2002)

Paper ISBN 0-8420-2868-4, \$17.95 Cloth ISBN 0-8420-2867-6, \$60.00

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This handsome paperback is part of “The American Crisis Series: Books on the Civil War Era,” No. 5 of seven volumes currently published from SR Books; a “concise overview” for “students of the Civil War, either those continuing or those just beginning”. Professor Tucker, whose works include *Arming the Fleet: U.S. Navy Ordnance in the Muzzle-Loading Era* (1989) and recent biographies of Raphael Semmes (1996) and Andrew Foote (2000), now offers a ‘short history’. At only 174 pages, in 7 chapters, Tucker’s Select Bibliography nevertheless draws upon the best building materials—from Frank Bennett and Donald L. Canney, to Raimondo Luraghi and Frank Merli, to William N. Still, Jr. and Craig L. Symonds—to fashion a smart ship which must move swiftly over a large subject. Endnote-references are sparse. The first and last chapters do not bother; the rest, however, are a judicious combination of secondary works, classic and current, and the Official Records (now even on CD-ROM; is there any excuse not to plumb these?). Graphics are a good blend of the standard O.R. illustrations, new computer maps, and a few contemporary photos direct from the Naval Historical Center, Washington Navy Yard.

A Short History of the Civil War at Sea is generally well-written, alternating between choppy, ‘bullet point’-type sentences and fairly lucid expositions of battle narrative. There are some awkward moments, however; “the upper deck of the [C.S.S. Virginia’s] casemate was a 2-inch-thick iron grating...The upper deck on top of the casemate had three 2-inch-thick iron gratings.” Factual errors also exist; low-, not high-velocity heavy solid shot was considered best against armor—‘smashing’ not ‘penetrating’; there were no Passaic-class monitors at Mobile Bay (Tecumseh and Manhattan were Canonicus-class); the C.S.S. Arkansas is correctly described as having a vertical casemate, port and starboard, but the accompanying illustration on the same page is Julian Oliver Davidson’s classic from *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, showing slanted sides.

Despite its slender size this work packs a large inventory of details, namely with warships and their armaments, perhaps reflecting Professor Tucker’s area of expertise.

This is often at the expense of other considerations. While nearly every photo is of a gundeck, for example, there is not a single portrait of a leading Civil War figure such as Gideon Welles or Raphael Semmes. Union or Confederate shipbuilding industry (private and government), logistics, manpower and recruitment, and departmental politics (between services or indeed within each Navy itself) are areas comparatively unexplored, not to mention the international element of the Civil War. Thus, “had it been prolonged, foreign powers might have entered the conflict or been inclined to provide additional military assistance to the South,” yet the very serious Trent Affair of December 1861 receives only two paragraphs of attention.

Larger questions or historical issues which are introduced are also left without obvious answers. One of these is the effectiveness of the Union blockade, which Tucker argues held two important functions for Lincoln: deprive the South of supplies and ruin its economy, and “demonstrate to foreign powers..[his]...resolve to crush the rebellion.” But there was at least a third function, more elemental: deter foreign (European) powers from intervening. That meant rapid construction of a fleet credible on the outside as well as within. This was problematic for the United States Navy, since the “most pressing need in the blockade...was for fast, smaller gunboats capable of operating effectively in coastal shoal water and along rivers.”

This leads to another concern: the ironclads. Confederate Secretary of the Navy Stephen Mallory counted on these to break the blockade from within (home-made) as well as without (European-built). What the Confederate Navy did not have and needed desperately to defend the South, Tucker obliquely suggests, therefore were large quantities of heavy guns, thick armor plate, and well-built, powerful marine engines. Britain could surely spare these. So why didn't she? This question is not asked by Tucker. Meanwhile, he writes, Confederate rams were destroyed on the stocks for want of plate, or the South's precious railroad network was torn up for want of manufactured iron. As a result, “Mallory's strategy was a failure.”

An enduring trap for any study of the American Civil War 'at Sea' is that it was paradoxically much more a 'continental' war, fought by coastal wooden steamships, protected by coastal ironclads. It is a misconception to somehow 'prefer' Union naval power, also spearheading the vital conquest of the Mississippi, otherwise. Statements like “unfortunately, the Civil War monitor craze inhibited the construction of seagoing ironclads,” therefore rather miss the point. The famous U.S.S. Monitor, which “revolutionized naval warfare”, was accepted by Gideon Welles' 1861 Ironclad Board not “only because of the threat posed by the Virginia and because Ericsson promised delivery so quickly”. She was a direct response to the recent Trent Affair—an international naval crisis which threatened the extinction of the blockade more profoundly than any Confederate ironclad. In a brief comparison with the Federal navy's only broadside-ironclad, U.S.S. New Ironsides, Tucker complains of their lack of firepower and protection. Yet these are the vessels he notes elsewhere whose fifteen-inch guns subdued the ironclads Atlanta and Tennessee. At Trent's Reach, a single monitor (the Onondaga) saved Grant's City Point supply base against three Confederate rams. Contrary to the author's assertion that “the only advantages of the monitors were their

more shallow draft and the fact that they represented such small targets” they were generally less expensive and quicker to produce (during a civil war), more manageable, faster, steadier gun platforms, and required a far smaller crew than the partially-protected New Ironsides. 11-inches of curved, laminated turret armor was also still stronger protection than 4½-inch iron slabs backed by wood. Though they were “heavily damaged” by Charleston’s defences on April 7, 1863, only 1 man was killed and several wounded aboard the monitors (from flying bolts), after absorbing several hundred hits from heavy guns from under 1,000 yards. The lightly-armored, dual casemate-ironclad Keokuk was sunk. The New Ironsides, a much larger target, received 90 hits that afternoon and did not even participate close in the action due to her unwieldiness and draft—a significant problem with European seagoing ironclads as well. In fact no Union monitor was ever penetrated by enemy fire, and the reason why Confederate gunners learned to concentrate their shore fire on the New Ironsides was not because of her ‘value’ to the Union blockaders, as Tucker suggests, but because they regarded trying to hit, let alone sink a monitor as a waste of their limited ammunition.



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