

## International Journal of Naval History

---

August 2004/ December 2004

Volume 3 Numbers 2/3

Robert E. Sheridan, *Iron from the Deep: The Discovery and Recovery of the USS Monitor*. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2003.

Reviewed by Robert J. Schneller, Jr.

U.S. Naval Historical Center

---

While the literature on the famous Union ironclad as a *warship* is incomparably vast and irritatingly redundant, Robert E. Sheridan offers a rare study of the USS *Monitor* as an *artifact*. The author is a retired professor of marine geophysics and marine geology and was a member of the team that located the wreck of the *Monitor* off Cape Hatteras in 1973. His book provides accounts of how the *Monitor* was found and how portions of it were recovered, weaving an autobiography of his role in these processes into the narrative. Sheridan employs the author-date system of documentation and his references consist largely of archaeological and historic preservation studies.

The narrative's weakest part is the obligatory historical context section—focusing on the *Monitor*'s construction, part in the battle of Hampton Roads, and foundering. Here the author uses only a few secondary sources and many of his interpretations are outdated. In explaining the scientific, technical, and bureaucratic aspects of the *Monitor* as an artifact, however, Sheridan shines. His principal argument is that the *Monitor* could have and should have been raised in its entirety in the late 1970s, but bureaucratic infighting delayed recovery efforts.

The Navy abandoned ownership of the *Monitor* in 1953, to clear the way for parties interested in finding and recovering its remains. In the early 1970s, John Newton, marine superintendent of the Duke University Marine Laboratory and responsible for the research vessel *Eastward*, developed an interest in locating the *Monitor* while compiling

a topographic atlas of the seafloor off the North Carolina coast. In the fall of 1972, Newton discussed with Gordon Watts, a marine archaeologist with the North Carolina Division of Archives and History, the possibility of piggybacking a search for the *Monitor* onto an oceanographic expedition. In March 1973 the National Science Foundation approved a proposal for an expedition to study the origins of ridge and swale topography as well as to look for the ironclad. Newton knowing of Sheridan's interest in seafloor topography, invited him to participate. The National Geographic Society provided financial support. On 27 August, the *Eastward's* side-scan sonar picked up a promising contact. Watts later analyzed the data and concluded correctly that the contact was indeed the wreck of the *Monitor*; the vessel had capsized while sinking; the turret had separated from the hull; and the hull had come to rest atop the turret. On 4 May 1974, *Eastward* recovered artifacts from the site, including a deck light cover, a uniquely identifiable artifact constituting "ironclad proof of discovery," as a writer put it in *National Geographic Magazine*. (p. 92)

On 30 January 1975, the secretary of commerce designated the *Monitor* site the first national marine sanctuary, thus empowering the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) to manage activities within the sanctuary.

Thereafter various individuals, through their federal and state government and academic affiliations, vied with one another for control over the wreck. When Duke University declined to set up a *Monitor* research center, Newton in the fall of 1975 established a private foundation, the *Monitor* Research and Recovery Foundation (MRRF). Sheridan became an officer. The foundation then developed a master plan for the *Monitor*.

Instead of implementing this plan, NOAA established a *Monitor* Marine Sanctuary Advisory Council to coordinate and initiate planning. This decision opened the door for archaeologists, engineers, and historians from government agencies and academia to compete with one another in researching the wreck. In 1976 and 1977, NOAA permitted the MRRF to conduct a magnetic survey of the site, make current measurements, take a piston core, and capture the first horizontal photograph of the wreck.

The bureaucratic power struggle intensified over the decision of who should be in charge of the first diving expedition. Because NOAA lacked archaeologists and historians with expertise on the *Monitor*, it designated the North Carolina Division of Archives and History as a co-investigator and named Gordon Watts as the archaeologist in charge of the scientific and historical research. This decision, Sheridan argues, created “the worst possible ethical situation.” Government officials and researchers jeopardized the future of the MRRF by excluding the foundation from their research program, although they employed Sheridan and others as individual scientists. (p. 149)

The first diving expedition took place in the summer of 1977. Researchers visited the wreck by submersible and lockout dives, assessed the ironclad’s condition, studied its environment, and recovered artifacts.

In April 1978, several federal and state agencies co-sponsored a “National Conference on the *Monitor*” in Raleigh, North Carolina, to consider the future of the wreck. MRRF advocated recovery of the *Monitor*, arguing that substantial corrosion had already taken place and what remained would soon rust away. Government officials, however, argued the remains were stable and secure where they were. One of the meeting’s final resolutions stated that the *Monitor* couldn’t be raised in the near future if it was to be treated “in a scientific and technologically sound manner.”

Sheridan disagreed emphatically. “With the existing technology in 1978,” he declares, “the *Monitor* could have been moved to a secure location within a five year period using just ordinary diving and crane barge salvage.” (p. 179)

Frustrated by the government’s position and the floundering financial state of the MRRF, Sheridan resigned from the foundation in 1979. When John Newton died of a heart attack in 1984, the MRRF essentially died with him. Sheridan believes that Newton, frustrated by resistance to his plans for the *Monitor*, “died of a broken heart.” (p. 181)

Through an agreement with NOAA establishing a technical advisory committee, the North Carolina Division of Archives and History basically seized control of the *Monitor*, despite “conflict of interest issues.” (p. 183) In November 1982, the committee passed a resolution that “recovery of the vessel from the wreck site and its removal to an appropriate location for study, conservation, and display” should be a major goal in the management plan for the *Monitor* sanctuary. (pp. 183-84) Sheridan implies that the North

Carolina Cabal wanted to take charge of any recovery efforts and had argued against MRRF's recovery proposal at the 1978 Raleigh conference to undermine competition. During the 1980s, Sheridan protested the management of the *Monitor* site by lodging formal complaints with NOAA, writing to his congressmen, lecturing to interested groups, and initiating letter writing campaigns.

Meanwhile, archaeological research on the *Monitor* continued, including diving and artifact recovery expeditions. As the result of an expedition in summer 1993, NOAA officials reached the conclusion that the wreck was in a state of crisis—its deterioration had accelerated and the ironclad was rapidly disintegrating. Three years later, Congress enacted legislation directing the secretary of commerce to submit a plan for management, stabilization, preservation, and recovery of *Monitor* artifacts and materials.

The resulting plan, published by NOAA in 1997, recommended a six-phase effort to recover portions of the wreck and to stabilize what remained. The plan carried a price tag of \$10 to \$12 million for recovery and stabilization and another \$10 million for conservation. NOAA implemented the plan by mounting a series of summer expeditions to the site. Navy divers, NOAA divers, and volunteers retrieved the propeller in 1998, shored up the hull in 1999 and 2000, recovered the engine in 2001, and raised the turret in 2003.

Sheridan's narrative includes detailed descriptions of scientific research equipment, methodologies, and techniques—sometimes employing mathematical formulae—and provides blow-by-blow technical descriptions of various aspects of the search and recovery. The heart of Sheridan's narrative—the bureaucratic infighting—is colored by his own bias, yet Sheridan presents opposing points of view. Readers will salivate for biographical details and personality sketches of the protagonists to enhance the story's juiciness, but, alas, the author maintains professional decorum and doesn't provide any. NOAA's realization that the wreck was in a state of "crisis" is the narrative's pinnacle. Sheridan treats the recovery operations that followed as an anticlimax.

Despite his biases, Sheridan applauds the recovery work done so far. Although artifacts from the *Monitor* won't reveal much more than can be gleaned from the extensive documentation extant, he concludes, they have tremendous "inspirational"

value that can evoke a “tactile response” from viewers, enabling the past to “become more than mere words on pages in some musty history book.” (p. 242) Archaeologists, historic preservation professionals, and *Monitor* buffs will find *Iron from the Deep* an important and fascinating read.



The Editors  
International Journal of Naval History  
[editors@ijnhonline.org](mailto:editors@ijnhonline.org)

© Copyright 2004, International Journal of Naval History, All Rights Reserved