

All Hands On Deck: Rediscovered Vignettes And Drawings Of The Union Navy

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Review

ALL HANDS ON DECK

Rediscovered vignettes and drawings of the Union Navy

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Grattan, John W. and Schneller Jr., Robert J. *Under the Blue Pennant: Or Notes of a Naval Officer 1863-1865*. John Wiley & Sons, ISBN 471240435

In July 1864 as Confederate general Jubal Early's 14,000-man army threatened to invade Washington, D.C., the Union naval ship *U.S.S. Malvern* hurriedly steamed up the Potomac River to aid in the national capital's defense.

When she arrived on July 14, no enemy could be seen, so a party of the ship's officers "marched bravely through the city's streets and safely arrived at Williard's [Hotel], where we made a few inquiries of the barkeeper," wrote the author of this account of the Civil War.

Finding no rebels to oppose, the officers quickly repaired to the billiard room for a "furious engagement" of pool-shooting, fueled by ample amounts of spirits, keeping "several waiters on a constant run" to the bar.

If this comic picture of gathering intelligence from a bartender and playing billiards while the enemy rattles the gates of the city strikes the reader as bizarre, this little episode also illustrates the value of this previously unpublished memoir by a junior staff officer in Abraham Lincoln's navy. **Under the Blue Pennant** is a rare type of Civil War history, a naval memoir that observes the war-on-the-water from the perspective of a relatively low-ranking participant.

In contrast to the outpouring of diaries, letters, and post-war reminiscences of Civil War soldiers, North and South, relatively little has been published from the pens of sailors and naval officers. While this book is little more than a series of interesting snapshots of the naval war, it helps fill that memoir gap by offering the experiences and insights of a young admiral's clerk who wrote with enthusiasm, eye for detail, and a blend of excitement and amusement.

The book is limited in its perspective and time period. Acting ensign John W. Grattan, 20 years old when he became an admiral's clerk aboard the flagship of the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron in October 1863, wrote about the final 18 months of the war. He saw action only along the Virginia and North Carolina coasts and navigable rivers, but that included important engagements around Richmond, Norfolk, and Wilmington, North Carolina, among others. Grattan's writing is vivid and detailed. His subjects range from enforcing the Union's naval blockade of the South to important joint army-navy engagements.

Grattan also contributes fascinating vignettes of shipboard life (and death), ranging from the picture of the ship's officers dressed in "scanty feminine wardrobe" dancing in drag in the wardroom, to the grisly images of seamen blown to pieces by incoming shells. The author offers interesting personal glimpses of admirals Samuel Phillips Lee and David Dixon Porter, for whom he worked, and sharp opinions on such figures as Union general Benjamin Butler, whom he brands as an incompetent coward.

A lengthy, 50-page introduction by naval historian Robert J. Schneller, while feeling a bit overlong, helps sketch Grattan's background and places Civil War naval operations into a larger perspective. For lovers of naval minutiae, there is a highly detailed appendix giving the specifications of every ship mentioned in the volume. The book is excellently illustrated, including sketches of ships and battles drawn by Grattan himself. The major shortcoming of this book is its lack of adequate maps; the few small, hard-to-read maps included here are little help to the reader trying to puzzle out battle actions in unfamiliar rivers, bays, and coastlines.

Under the Blue Pennant is a small, long-submerged treasure that will reward those willing to give in to the unfamiliar waters of the Civil War's naval history.

Journalist and historian James P. Gannon is author of Irish Rebels, Confederate Tigers: A History of the 6th Louisiana Volunteers, 1861-65.