

### Southern Service on Land & Sea: The Wartime Journal of Robert Watson CSA/CSN

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## Review

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**Campbell, R. Thomas, Editor** *Southern Service on Land & Sea: The Wartime Journal of Robert Watson CSA/CSN*. University of Tennessee Press, \$37.00  
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From the Florida Keys to Havana

A Confederate journal of service

The steady publication of letters, journals and diaries written by participants and observers of the American Civil War has given historians and enthusiasts a firm basis for understanding, to some degree, the complexities of the human experience during the conflict. At first glance, one might wonder how much new information might be gleaned from yet another journal, but **Southern Service on Land & Sea** demonstrates that there are undiscovered and interesting stories out there told from uncommon perspectives.

After leaving Federal-controlled Key West in the fall of 1861, carpenter Robert Watson made his way via the Bahamas to the Florida mainland, where he enlisted in a Coast Guard unit assigned to protect the waterborne approaches to Tampa. His descriptions of his coastal defense duties bring to print a side of the war one rarely sees, one which readers will find very interesting. By early 1862, Watson found himself and much of his unit transferred to the 7th Florida Infantry, which was sent north later that summer to reinforce the Confederate Army of Tennessee. As an infantryman, Watson saw action in Tennessee and Kentucky throughout 1862 and 1863. Here he recorded, with amazing consistency, the monotony and sporadic terror of an infantryman's life. There never seemed to be enough food, there generally seemed to be enough liquor, and conditions in the field were generally harsh, especially for Watson, who had a difficult time staying healthy. None of this is particularly new in the realm of published soldier materials, and had this constituted all of Watson's service his journal would not have made for very interesting reading.

After spending the winter of 1863-1864 in Dalton, Georgia with the retreating Confederate Army, Watson and his companions found themselves reassigned to the Confederate Navy, probably through the intercession of fellow Floridian Stephen R. Mallory, the Confederate Secretary of the Navy, to whom they had submitted an appeal while in the army. The men were sent to Savannah, Georgia to join the naval squadron there, where Watson found himself assigned to the ironclad *CSS Savannah*. There, his quality of life improved almost immediately. Watson's naval service was relatively routine for the rest of 1864, and his experiences and duties provide insight into life in a blockaded port city. Most of Watson's time was spent repairing and maintaining the *Savannah*, especially when he made his carpentering skills known.

As William T. Sherman's army approached Savannah in late 1864, Watson's service entered its most interesting period. When Confederate naval authorities found they could not extricate the *Savannah* from its home port, Watson and the crew set charges to the ironclad and evacuated the city. This began Robert Watson's personal tour of the Confederacy's downfall. From Savannah, he was sent to Fort Fisher, the main fortification defending the approaches to Wilmington, North Carolina. There he participated in that fort's unsuccessful defense, escaping just as Union forces captured it. He remained in the Wilmington-area defenses just briefly before being sent to Drewry's Bluff on the James River, which protected Richmond, Virginia from naval attack. Fleeing west after the fall of Richmond, Watson was captured by Union troops on April 8, 1865. After being paroled, he made his way to New York City, where an acquaintance helped him obtain passage to Havana. This is where his journal comes to a close.

Journals like Watson's can be both enlightening and frustrating for the modern reader. The real value of this journal is its consistency; for the most part Watson wrote almost daily and there are few significant gaps in his record of his wartime experience. However, his daily entries are often short, especially while serving in the infantry, and describe only his immediate surroundings. Extended reflective or analytical passages are very rare in this journal, forcing the reader to find clues here and there that collectively make for an interesting portrait of one man's wartime experiences but individually may not seem initially to contain much substance. The fact that Watson spends so much time writing about the mundane is significant in of itself, but one wishes he had been a better recorder of events around him. There are tantalizing glimpses of officer-enlisted relations, significant military operations, and the social environment in which he lived,

fought and survived, but they are only glimpses. Watson's entries written after his transfer to the navy contain more descriptive nuggets, and readers will find themselves drawn into his life at this point, especially between the defense of Savannah and Watson's capture.

Editor R. Thomas Campbell provides essential context for the journal in his chapter introductions and notes and is to be commended for his frequent use of appropriate maps and illustrations. His efforts will be greatly appreciated by those who read this interesting and unusual account of Robert Watson's varied service to the Confederacy.

*Kurt Hackemer, an associate professor at the University of South Dakota, is the author of The U.S. Navy and the Origins of the Military-Industrial Complex, 1847-1883 (2001). He is currently working on the letters of William T. Shepherd, a Union soldier who served as both an artilleryman and ordnance clerk in the Mississippi River Valley. Professor Hackemer can be contacted at khackeme@usd.edu.*