

Sabine Pass: The Confederacy's Thermopylae

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Review

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Texans triumph

Confederates avoid a single casualty

On September 8, 1863, a group of less than 50 Irish-Confederate dock workers from Houston successfully defended Sabine Pass, Texas, from a much larger, better-equipped Union invasion force. For this action Lieutenant Dick Dowling and his Davis Guards received accolades from a Confederate people thirsty for success. In 1882 Jefferson Davis referred to Sabine Pass as the Thermopyl of the Confederacy, referencing the famous battle of 480 B.C. in which three hundred Spartans under Leonidas fought and died defending Thermopyl Pass against Xerxes and his Persian army. Unlike Thermopyl, Dowling and his Confederates succeeded without even suffering one casualty while capturing 350 Federals and disabling two gunboats.

In **Sabine Pass: The Confederacy's Thermopyl** author Edward T. Cotham Jr. does a wonderful job of chronicling this sometimes obscure chapter of the Civil War. The Battle of Sabine Pass originated in many places and among many people as Cotham readily points out by exploring the lives and careers of the major actors in this drama. Among those he explores are Admiral David G. Farragut who bore the responsibility of planning the naval portion of the Sabine Pass expedition and Lieutenant Dick Dowling, the Irish immigrant who commanded the Confederates in the battle. Mr. Cotham even goes so far as to explore the lives of engineers Valery Sulakowski and Julius Kellersburg who served on the staff of General Magruder and helped to design Fort Griffin, which Dowling and his men occupied during the battle.

Cotham also explores the strategic and military goals of Farragut, Abraham Lincoln, and others in the attack on the Texas Gulf Coast. Lincoln faced

pressures from industrialists in New England to gain control of a part of Texas in order to feed their need for raw cotton. In turn, Lincoln put pressure on General Nathaniel P. Banks and Admiral Farragut to permanently plant the Stars and Stripes on Texas. The aggressive Farragut planned to land an army component north of Sabine Pass and from there take Houston and Galveston from the rear, seizing control of the economic and transportation networks of Texas.

Increasing the urgency of the situation was the series of recent failures experienced by Union armed forces all along the Texas coast. Despite taking control of Galveston in late 1862, Confederates led by General John B. Magruder took back the town in a daring assault aided by cottonclads, gunboats fortified by placing bales of cotton along their sides to deflect incoming shells. A few weeks later another pair of Confederate cottonclads broke the Union blockade at Sabine Pass by chasing down the blockading ships and forcing their surrender. With Federal forces in retreat all across the Texas coast, pressure mounted to take back part of the Lone Star State.

In August, 1863, Farragut and Banks put the finishing touches on the planned invasion of Texas with the first step to capture Sabine Pass. They envisioned a joint army-navy expedition to first disable any Confederate defenses and then finish the job with an amphibious landing. Banks placed Major General William B. Franklin in charge of the 6,000 man infantry contingent of the expedition. In turn, Franklin chose General Godfrey Weitzel to command the 500 man force intended to land immediately and attack the Confederates. Franklin and Weitzel were to be accompanied by 22 transport vessels and four gunboats in the joint expedition.

The Federals planned a surprise attack for the morning of September 7, 1863, but events soon went awry, forcing them to move back the attack to the next day. Steaming into the pass, a mixture of bad luck and incompetence doomed the expedition. Dowling and his men, with their six small cannon, first disabled the Union gunboat *Sachem*, hitting the boiler and sending scalding steam and splinters through the wounded vessel. Next, the Federal *Clifton* ran aground, only to be bored through by shot after shot from Fort Griffin. The Union infantry support from Weitzel never materialized and the remaining gunboats hastily withdrew back into the Gulf of Mexico. Cotham attributes Weitzel's failure to carry out his orders to his inordinate timidity stemming from his extensive experience with engineering and fortifications.

In all, **Sabine Pass** is a superbly researched and written volume. In addition to his extensive research, Cotham also includes useful appendages such as a list of Union casualties and Dick Dowling's report of the battle. Though he admits that much of the impressive Federal firepower could not be brought to bear on Fort Griffin, in the end, Cotham likens Sabine Pass to Thermopyl, a classic struggle between a David and Goliath. His thesis is the one originally set forward by Jefferson Davis in 1882: that Sabine Pass was a great military triumph for the Confederacy against overwhelming odds. What he hints at but rejects is the idea that perhaps Sabine Pass should be considered more as a massive Union failure than as a signal Confederate victory. That said, **Sabine Pass** stands out as the first full-length treatment of this important and overlooked battle and for that it is a valuable contribution to Civil War literature.

John R. Lundberg is the author of The Finishing Stroke: Texans in the 1864 Tennessee Campaign (Abilene: McWhiney Foundation Press, 2002). He holds a B.A. in history from the University of Texas at Austin and is currently an M.A. candidate in American History at Texas Christian University.