

Now for the Contest:Coastal and Oceanic Naval Operations in the Civil War

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Review

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Roberts, William H. *Now for the Contest:Coastal and Oceanic Naval Operations in the Civil War.* University of Nebraska Press, \$39.95 hardcover ISBN 803238614

War on the High Seas and Harbors

An Overview of Naval Campaigns

The Civil War may, as is often claimed, be the most written-about conflict in history, but little of that output has been devoted to the naval dimension. As confirmation of this lopsidedness, a quick experiment of subject-searching with the phrase United States—History—Civil War on 20 May 2006 generated 5561 records from the University of Alabama online library catalog. When the qualifier Naval Operations was added, however, the number plummeted to less than 200.

Yet naval power undoubtedly played a critical role not only in the war's outcome, but even in the manner in which it was waged. The Union blockade clearly had ruinous consequences for the Confederacy's export-driven economy and must be accounted the decisive factor in the South's hyper-inflation and financial collapse which helped bring the war to a close. Likewise, dominance of coastal waters enabled the North to mount major assaults against the Confederacy's principal harbors and ports, beginning with Port Royal (November 1861) and ending with Wilmington (January 1865), and similar dominance of internal waterways allowed Union troops to penetrate into and be supplied within the Southern heartland with far greater speed and facility than would have been the case otherwise. Less obvious, but no less critical, that control also made possible not only McClellan's unsuccessful peninsular foray in 1862, but the whole of Grant's 1864-65 campaign: the supplies for the siege of Petersburg came by water. Had they not, the Army of the Potomac would have faced a situation analogous to that which sapped Napoleon's armies in Spain, as Confederate bushwhackers (terrorists in today's parlance) wreaked havoc on its

communications and logistics.

So why has the war at sea and on the rivers attracted so little attention? Part of this relative neglect can be easily explained; operations ashore involved far more men and both the scope and the number of major land campaigns and battles was considerably greater. No naval engagement during the war came close to the epic scale of the Battles of Chattanooga or Shiloh, to pick two examples at random. Indeed, the most famous clashes afloat were either between single ships (*Monitor* versus *Virginia*, *Kearsarge*, versus *Alabama*) or patently unequal affairs in terms of vessels engaged (New Orleans, Mobile).

I suspect, though, another reason is that, along with the paucity of eyewitness accounts and equivalents to the profusion of regimental histories, the war at sea and on the rivers has not attracted authors with the literary talents of Bruce Catton, Douglas Southall Freeman, Shelby Foote, or James McPherson. This is not by any means to suggest that all historians of the war ashore are similarly gifted writers, rather that, on a subject about which, as George Rable has observed, no book is so bad as to be un-publishable, the odds of coming up with a winner must increase, however infinitesimally, in proportion to the overall number. Far fewer books have been written about warfare afloat, ergo, the number of worthwhile and well-written ones is necessarily far smaller.

In that select group **Now for the Contest** warrants inclusion. As a volume in the University of Nebraska Press's Great Campaigns of the Civil War series, its *raison d'etre* is furnishing an overview of the war at sea, and William Roberts has succeeded in exemplary fashion, combining wide-ranging scholarship, balanced coverage, judicious assessments, and lucid prose. Moreover, he has managed to compass an impressive topical breadth in a succinct 172 pages of text and challenge a number of received verities along the way. Most importantly, in contradistinction to its subtitle, this volume is far more than a narrow, old-fashioned battle history, as Roberts incorporates the political and administrative realms, grand strategy, economics and industrial infrastructure, even labor allocation, in contextualizing his operational narrative. Thus, readers can find concise accounts of the trials and tribulations of the Union's *Monitor*-building program, the logistics and tactics of blockade-running, and manpower shortages in both navies, to cite but three examples, in addition to the *de rigueur* treatment of battles and leaders. Throughout, Roberts's account is buttressed by extensive research in both primary and secondary sources, as the more than 600 endnotes testify.

Roberts concludes his survey with a brief chapter entitled *Winners and Losers*, in which he assesses the performance of both sides' naval leadership and their respective accomplishments. At the top of the list of successes he places the Union blockade, the analysis of which serves as a healthy corrective to the tendentious, one is tempted to say mendacious, arguments of Frank L. Owsley and other Lost Cause mythologists. The blockade, Roberts states unequivocally on page 164,

begged the Confederate government by reducing its foreign exchange and increasing the price of its imports. It disrupted Southern coastwise trade, forcing the Confederates to rely on their inadequate rail net, and then helped to overload and ruin the Southern railroads by forcing the South to transport cotton far from the cotton belt. It limited vital imports: the rails and rolling stock the South needed to maintain its railroads, the machinery it needed to be industrially self-sufficient, the armor plate and steam engines it needed to challenge the blockading fleets.

Likewise, he explicitly links the blockade to the runaway inflation which helped doom the Confederacy.

Not surprisingly, the Union naval effort and its prime movers generally receive high marks. The strategy enunciated by Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles in 1861—blockade, coastal assault, and suppression of Confederate commerce raiders—was successfully carried out, along with the riverine campaign, which was later added to the Navy's brief. To be sure, not all of the Union's naval undertakings were crowned with success and Roberts can be and is at time critical of its performance, especially with regard to the administrative snafu that eventually engulfed and paralyzed the *Monitor* program.

His take on the South's naval effort, and in particular the performance of Confederate Secretary of the Navy Stephen Mallory parts company with the historical consensus, which has by and large depicted Mallory as more sinned against than sinning: a man who did about as well as he could with the bad hand—deficient industrial infrastructure and shipbuilding facilities, coupled with lack of influence within Jefferson Davis's administration—dealt to him. While acknowledging these impediments, Roberts nonetheless argues that Mallory made the situation worse by failing to appoint a chief engineer or a naval constructor until 1862, by failing to establish a bureau to oversee and coordinate

construction and repair until 1863, and by excessive deference to senior officers. Elsewhere, too, Roberts is not chary of challenging conventional wisdom, suggesting for instance that Samuel Du Pont deserves more positive judgment than traditionally accorded him.

A handful of minor criticisms can be made. For instance, while Roberts's argument for Mallory's shortcomings is generally persuasive, one element of it—that he focused too much on the long term, to the detriment of immediate needs—seems less well supported than the others. Moreover, Roberts may not have placed enough emphasis on the South's diabolical shipbuilding, machinist, and dockyard labor problems, which stemmed in part from industrial labor shortages and in part from the Army's refusal to release skilled workmen from its ranks for naval purposes, a deficiency that in turn points back to serious administrative flaws within the Confederate government.

Such criticisms, however, are few and none undermine the book's far more numerous strengths. The greatest weakness stems from the decision, presumably made by the series editors, to relegate riverine operations to a separate volume. That the division of brown water from blue water operations is wholly artificial is implicitly but unmistakably driven home by Roberts' brief discussion of David Farragut's undertakings on the Mississippi River following New Orleans' capture. It is to be regretted that he could not incorporate the riverine dimension into his story.

That, however, should not detract from Roberts' accomplishment. It can only be hoped that the companion volumes—Stephen Engle's *Struggle for the Heartland: The Campaigns from Fort Henry to Corinth* and William Shea and Terrence Winshel's *Vicksburg is the Key: The Struggle for the Mississippi River*—are of the same level of scholarship and presentation. Roberts has set the bar high.

John Beeler's latest book is the first volume of the papers of British Admiral Sir Alexander Milne, which was published by the Navy Records Society in 2004. He is currently at work on the second volume, which will focus on Milne's activities as Commander in Chief of the Royal Navy's North America and West Indies Station from 1860 through 1864.