

The CSS Virginia: Sink Before Surrender

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Review

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Quarstein, John V. *The CSS Virginia: Sink Before Surrender*. The History Press, \$24.99 ISBN 978-1-60949-580-0

An In-Depth Look at a Confederate Naval Icon

Civil War naval history has never caught the fancy of the American public in the same fashion as land campaigns and battles. That is a shame. Personalities, combat, impact on the course of the war, not to mention the application of modern technology, mobilization of resources and joint army-navy operations are just as fascinating for the war afloat as the war ashore. Some great studies have been done and wonderful illustrations rendered of men and ships in combat. The most famous naval battle of the war between the *Monitor* and *Merrimac* was immortalized in J. O. Davidson's late nineteenth century painting for L. G. Prang's famous *War Pictures* set – now one of the rarest in that facsimile print series. But, not until now have readers had such a comprehensive book on the Confederate ironclad – USS *Merrimac* recast as CSS *Virginia* and how it changed naval warfare. John Quarstein's work fills a void in that regard.

First, the book is comprehensive and encyclopedic. Thirteen chapters carry us from the drawing board in the old navy to fame and demise in rebel service. Even the variations in title and spelling of the ship's name as well as CSS *Virginia* in memory and legend find treatment. Moreover, an additional thirteen meaty appendices make singular contributions for casualty listings, mini-biographies of designers, commanders, enlisted personnel from different services and sources, statistics and dimensions of the craft, even a chronology that Quarstein weaves around the personalities attached to the ship not the ship itself. Obligatory notes and bibliography suggest an almost reference tone to the book. Aside from its weighty dimensions, the only caveat might be made about many of the copious illustrations (the maps, ship drawings in particular) are illegible. Happily, pictures of people and events offset that weakness.

It is the *Merrimac-Virginia* story that will attract readers. Here is the consummate tale of Confederate wartime improvisation. Retrieval of an enemy hulk (the US Navy burned the *Merrimac* to prevent rebel use), re-outfitting thanks to skilled Confederate artisans and technical managers (including naval secretary Stephen Mallory) using adaptation for equipment and machinery, provisioning with an ersatz crew under an aggressive commander, Marylander Franklin Buchanan, and then steaming audaciously into the midst of a Yankee wooden fleet in Hampton Roads and rendering useless in an afternoon the whole history of wooden warships across the world – that is a fabulous story, told well by Quarstein. Of course, the success was short lived because the United States Navy had its own ironclad that provided its own twist to the naval revolution the next day: a more maneuverable iron and turreted warship that rendered makeshift craft obsolete in turn. Still, between *Merrimac-Virginia* and *Monitor* (plus a couple of other British and French counterparts), the world now had an amicable wedding of armored, steam-powered technology with land and sea applicability for warfare over the next bloody century, literally before the advent of aviation. Quarstein takes us in at the beginning and gives us a compelling story of a Civil War underdog with all the warts, gun deck and quirky personalities to make wading through a 591 page tome indescribably worthwhile.

B. F. Cooling is Professor of National Security Studies at the National Defense University in Washington. He also teaches a special course on Resourcing the Civil War and has authored or edited numerous books and articles in military, naval and air history, of which eight are directly related to Civil War studies. His latest two, Counter Thrust; From the Peninsula to the Antietam and To the Battles of Franklin, Nashville and Beyond seek a more holistic, integrative story of military, political, economic and socio-cultural affairs.