

Faces Of The Civil War Navies: An Album Of Union And Confederate Sailors

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Review

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Coddington, Ronald S *Faces of the Civil War Navies: An Album of Union and Confederate Sailors*. Johns Hopkins University Press, \$32.95 ISBN 9781421421360

Humanizing the Fleet: A Look at the Men Who Crewed the Navy

Faces of the Civil War Navies: An Album of Union and Confederate Sailors by Ronald S. Coddington offers an interesting insight into the lives of those who served at sea during the Civil War through the use of photographic portraits. The Civil War was the first war in American History to be seen through the camera's lens. Photographers followed armies providing images of camp life and battlefields. It is also the first war to show us the faces of those who fought. The invention of the *cartes de visite* in the 1850s made photographic portraits accessible to the common man, in a format that provided multiple prints from one sitting. These portraits are at the core of *Faces of the Civil War Navies*. This is Coddington's fourth volume to use Civil War portraits, having previously looked at the Union Army, Confederate Army, and African-Americans. The purpose remains the same, "... to humanize the Civil War through the stories and images of men in the ranks and officers and through their lives and military experiences in order to increase our understanding of the revolution that resulted in a new America free of slavery and rededicated to equality for all its citizens." (xviii).

The layout of *Faces of the Civil War Navies* is rather simple, yet very informative on both the subject and the medium. To truly understand these sailors, it is important to learn why these men volunteered for naval service. In the Forward, noted Naval Historian Craig L. Symonds describes the makeup of the Civil War Navy. As the Navy grew to meet wartime demands it needed new officers and sailors to crew the growing fleet. To fill the need for officers, the Navy turned to sources beyond Naval Academy graduates – mostly volunteers from the merchant trade. As such the Navy, like the Army, had a number of

newcomers serving along veteran officers. Equally, about 80% of enlisted sailors were new to the service. The demographic of Civil War sailors differed from that of soldiers, with most enlistees coming from maritime states with established skills needed on ships (e.g. carpenters, mechanics, and clerks). Additionally, naval crews were more heterogeneous – encompassing individuals from different towns, states, and nationalities as well as race. Symonds also notes how sailors' portraits differed from their Army counterparts. Naval officers were more likely to visit photographic studios than sailors; hence the greater number of officers portraits in Coddington's study. Unlike soldiers, photographic studios did not have the tools of the sailor on hand, which resulted in less martial poses than one finds with soldier portraits. Symonds also explains the reason many posed with their hands in their vests – besides mimicking Napoleon it also kept the subject's hand still while the negative was being exposed.

Coddington's Preface discusses his organization of the study, and places the seventy-seven images used into the context of the Civil War. From an organizational and research perspective it is interesting to read how he found the images, making use of private collections, professional contacts, and images he personally acquired. Coddington also notes how the changes in digital scholarship influenced his research during this project. While researching the first three volumes, Coddington made use of message boards and online forums to track down sources and individuals. With the expansion of online resources (databases, historical newspapers, digital books, and finding aids) he was able to search for individual names across various formats, providing access to sources that would have proven time consuming in the past. Yet it is Coddington's depth of knowledge on the history of Civil War photography which really helps expand the readers understanding of why photography (particularly the *cartes de visite*) is so closely linked to the Civil War. Many of the men who fought in the Civil War had grown up with access to photography, with sitting for portraits a common experience. The *cartes de visite* format not only allowed for subjects to have their portrait taken, but to share copies with friends and family. As Coddington notes, "Cartes de visite were social media for the nineteenth century." (xxv) The *cartes de visite* format also had the advantage of providing ample room for the subject to write his personal information – allowing for future identification.

At the heart of *Faces of the Civil War Navies* are the seventy-seven portraits Coddington has compiled – consisting of sixty-two officers, and fifteen enlisted sailors (two of whom are African-American). The portraits are arranged

chronologically based on the biography of the subject. Each sailor's biography is short (two to six pages – depending on the sailor), focusing on his background, why he joined the Navy (either Union or Confederate), the most significant event he participated in, and his fate. While this might sound like a repetitive formula, Coddington's writing style and use of sources make for lively and interesting reading. None of the officers are above command rank – providing insight into the lieutenants, engineers, and masters mates of the fleet. Readers learn of Lt. Francis Winslow, USN, who was at his in-laws residence in North Carolina when the War began – having to find a way North to resume his naval career. Readers are presented with the experiences of five sailors who were at the Battle of Mobile Bay. Many of the biographies are from those who served on prominent ships such as the *Monitor*, *Kearsarge*, *Alabama*, and *Shenandoah*. One also reads of sailors with more mundane experiences – such as George Ormsbee who was underage when he enlisted – only to be retrieved by his parents before he even shipped out. Coddington is also not afraid to look at the lives of those with more tragic turns – including stories of suicide, and drug addiction. As such, in seventy-seven short biographies, one gets the full spectrum of naval experiences by both Union and Confederates sailors on a personal level.

Faces of the Civil War Navies is a notable addition to anyone's Civil War library – whether they are interested in the War's naval history or social aspects. Coddington does a worthy job providing scholarly biographies that are both interesting to read and informative. The scholarly nature of this work can be appreciated through the thoroughly cited entries, and extensive bibliography. In the end *Faces of the Civil War Navies* does accomplish Coddington's goal of adding the human story of the war at sea.

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