

The Civil War on the Water: Favorite Stories and Fresh Perspectives from the Historians at Emerging Civil War

Stacy Allen

Shiloh National Military Park, stacy_allen@nps.gov

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Allen, Stacy (2024) "The Civil War on the Water: Favorite Stories and Fresh Perspectives from the Historians at Emerging Civil War," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 26 : Iss. 3 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.26.3.08

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol26/iss3/8>

Review

Summer 2024

Allen, Stacy D.

Hughes, Dwight Sturtevant and **Chris Mackowski**, Editors. *The Civil War on the Water: Favorite Stories and Fresh Perspectives from the Historians at Emerging Civil War*. Savas Beattie, California, 2023. HARDCOVER, \$32.95, ISBN 9781611216295 pp. 336.

In my youth, as I delved more and more into the complex history of the American Civil War, it became obvious, despite the traditional rivalry of cadets vs. midshipman witnessed annually during the Army-Navy football game, that the better teamwork attained and exhibited between the dry-foot and the web-foot branches of military service, proved crucial – and ultimately decisive – in how the war was prosecuted and resolved. It was no coincidence to discover that Ulysses S. Grant, having concluded America’s most costly war as General in Chief of the Armies of the United States, thoughtfully dedicated the volumes of his classic 1885 *Personal Memoirs*, “to the American soldier and sailor.” This appreciation of the vital service rendered by the U.S. Navy and its sailors, by experienced U.S. Army personnel, was further reinforced, when, as a buck ranger with the National Park Service, I enjoyed a fascinating hour of engagement with retired U.S. Army General William C. Westmoreland, during a tour I gave for him onboard the preserved remains of the city-class river ironclad *U.S.S. Cairo*, exhibited at Vicksburg National Military Park in Mississippi. What transpired in the time we shared was an enlightening conversation on the pivotal service rendered by the United States Navy during the Civil War and throughout the history of the United States.

Over the minutes that passed far too quickly for me, Westmoreland offered experienced insight and appreciation for the meaningful naval performance in combined war operations witnessed throughout his military service, and particularly during the final war in which he

served – Vietnam – where U.S. forces afloat were effectively employed both in riverine operations and at sea. He was thrilled the *Cairo* survived and was available for public education, having been salvaged from her infamous sinking on December 12, 1862, where she fell victim to innovative Confederate water mines deployed in the murky waters of the Yazoo River north of Vicksburg. Westmoreland agreed the *Cairo*'s provocative presence, relevant compelling story, and involvement in the decisive Mississippi Valley Campaign, would enhance greater awareness, understanding, and appreciation of the achievements made by combined U.S. Army and Navy operations during the Civil War. Although the divisive conflict was extensively contested by more than three-million Union and Confederate soldiers on land, the preserved remains of the *Cairo* and her extensive collection of artifacts stewarded at Vicksburg, provide tangible evidence to the provocatively rapid transformation required of American maritime industry and naval operations from 1861-1865, as roughly one hundred forty thousand American sailors experienced the war on the divided nation's inland waters and the world's oceans.

The provocative essays compiled in *The Civil War on the Water* ably illustrate neither the National nor the emerging Confederate war governments were prepared for sustained naval conflict when fighting erupted in April 1861. However, over the next four years, respective Union, and Confederate war service afloat, whether at sea or upon America's vast inland waterways, expanded rapidly. By the spring of 1865, U.S. power afloat, having employed over four thousand vessels of all types to wage the war, had developed into one of the strongest and technologically advanced navies in the world. Wherever navigable waters existed, armed U.S. Navy gunboats and warships prowled the vast Confederate coastline, engaged southern forts and opposing warships, fought aggressively on inland rivers in successful combined operations with

U.S. Army forces, and both sailed or steamed the oceans to defend U.S. merchant vessels transporting commerce worldwide.

In the South, the Confederacy faced nearly insurmountable odds to float the navy required to defend its vital harbors, three thousand five hundred miles of coastline, and its navigable rivers from waterborne invasion, as well as try to defend its crucial maritime commerce to and from world markets. To accomplish this, the Confederacy applied innovative technologies to produce ironclads, submarines, and torpedoes (e.g., naval mines). It commissioned commerce raiders and privateer vessels, which it employed to make the war far too costly for the Union to prosecute by aggressively attacking northern merchant ships on the high seas. Confederate sea captains made running the cordon of U.S. warships stationed outside southern ports a useful tactic to lure the opposing vessels off blockade in pursuit of their own swift cruisers, raiders, and privateers.

Despite achieving some industrious results with a fleet of slightly more than four hundred vessels, Confederate efforts afloat ultimately failed, as the more effective U.S. blockade steadily reduced the flow of southern shipborne trade to and from world markets to only five percent of the commerce levels the South experienced annually before the war. Meanwhile, the loss of control of the inland rivers and much of the navigable southern coastline to the more successful U.S. Navy, forced the Confederacy to near total reliance on an increasingly limited railroad network. The success of National troops waging an increasingly destructive land war of exhaustion upon the South's weaker industrial framework, eventually forced the overburdened Confederate lines of rail supply to collapse.

The North's industrial superiority ultimately shipped a navy that would revolutionize and define the course of machine-age warfare on water for decades. This greater industrial capacity

would prove a decisive advantage as the war progressed, permitting the U.S. Navy to employ an ever increasing and more effective number of steam-powered and screw driven vessels afloat, from the Arctic to the South Seas. Northern iron mills produced the latest shell guns and rifled ordnance, along with rolling out tons of iron plating to armor U.S. warships, both at sea and on inland waters. Ingenuity in both navies witnessed effective development and successful use of riverine armed flotillas, submarines, torpedoes, and the rebirth of the naval ram as an effective destructive weapon against opposing warships.

With *The Civil War on the Water* the editors of the Emerging Civil War's 10th Anniversary Series have once again compiled a fine collection of relevant collaborative public history. This compilation of nearly four dozen, fascinatingly fresh essays, many mere pages in length, are authored by a distinguished group of eighteen public historians. The scholarly essays are arranged in thoughtful progression, revealing how the opposing navies, North and South, were hastily shipped, manned, and employed both strategically and tactically, whether at sea or on inland waters, to attack opposing warships, capture, defend, or blockade vital ports and harbors, support respective land forces ashore in combined operations, and captained effectively to seek out and destroy the opposition's merchant vessels on the high seas.

Many of the essays offer fresh assessments on more familiar aspects of naval industry, ship to ship and ship to shore battles, and on the sailors and leaders who rendered compelling service afloat. Several of the essays reveal lesser-known naval events, personalities, and inspiring stories, which help define the complexities of the war's maritime experience and offer lessons in leadership still relevant to those in service afloat today. The book is an enjoyable, educating read, which should interest anyone seeking greater understanding into this unique and pivotal period in the American experience.

Stacy D. Allen is Chief Park Ranger/Historian at Shiloh National Military Park, having worked the “cannon ball circuit” of the National Park Service since 1984. Beyond his public service, he is presently working on a regimental history based on his grandfather’s experience as a waggoner in World War I.