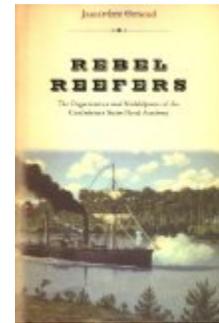


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

James Lee Conrad. *Rebel Reefers: The Organization and Midshipmen of the Confederate States Naval Academy*. Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2003. x + 214 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-306-81237-8.

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The Confederate Naval Academy

The Confederate Naval Academy is a somewhat inflated moniker for the school ship C.S.S. *Patrick Henry* which did double duty during the last two years of the Civil War as a training vessel for Confederate midshipmen and a sometime member of the James River Squadron. Nevertheless, it is a subject that has attracted two authors in five years. In 1998 R. Thomas Campbell published *Academy on the James: The Confederate Naval School*, and now comes this slim volume from Air Force Colonel James Lee Conrad and Da Capo Press, a publisher better known for its useful reprints of nineteenth-century books.

Though the two books cover many of the same topics and use mostly the same sources, there is a difference in format. Campbell quotes at considerable length from the principal sources, letting the officers and midshipmen tell the story themselves, while Conrad's book is more of a synthetic monograph in which he provides a topic-by-topic overview of the naval school including a description of the physical characteristics of the *Patrick Henry*, as well as the uniforms, quarters, food, course work, exams, and leisure time activities of the midshipmen. Conrad supplements these sources by offering generic descriptions of life aboard a ship of war in the mid-nineteenth century and then extrapolating from that a picture of the kind of activities most likely assigned to midshipmen on the *Patrick Henry*.

The naval school was founded in mid-summer of 1863 in the wake of (one might almost say in spite of) the twin

disasters of Gettysburg and Vicksburg, and it existed for less than two years before the *Patrick Henry* was scuttled and burned during the evacuation of Richmond. In that time, a total of 180 young men spent time on board, and 40 of them graduated to bear the title of Passed Midshipmen. Conrad notes that it may seem odd that the manpower-strapped Confederacy "even bothered to establish a naval academy" (p. 104), but Stephen Mallory, the Confederacy Navy Secretary, saw the institution as an essential first step in the professionalization of the C.S. Navy, and he continued to support it as a pet project up to the last days of the Confederacy.

Though the primary purpose of the *Patrick Henry* was to provide instruction to the fifty or so midshipmen at a time who lived and studied aboard her, the strapped resources of the Confederacy frequently caused those midshipmen to be called away from their studies to participate in active operations against the enemy—many of them in the North Carolina Sounds—and Conrad includes a discussion of several of these expeditions. Readers seeking tales of naval derring-do will find these sections the most interesting. They include cutting out the U.S.S. *Water Witch* in June 1864, attacks on the cities of New Bern and Portsmouth, and the capture and destruction of the U.S.S. *Underwriter*. After such adventures, it must have seemed anticlimactic to those midshipmen who returned to the *Patrick Henry* in order to take exams in July 1864, but twenty-six middies passed those exams and graduated from the school ship into the regular C.S. Navy.

Conrad's subtitle indicates that he is interested in illuminating not only the history of the Academy but the life of Confederate midshipmen, including those who were not students on the *Patrick Henry*. Indeed, separating the history of the *Patrick Henry* from the history of the James River flotilla caused Conrad some problems. He includes, for example, a description of Captain John K. Mitchells's unsuccessful attempt to fight his way past Trent's Reach with the ironclads of the James River Squadron to assail the Union base at City Point in late January of 1865, though the only connection this event had with the *Patrick Henry* or the naval school is that, as Conrad notes, the midshipmen "were undoubtedly aware" of it (p. 84).

For those midshipmen still on board when Richmond fell in March-April of 1865, surely the most unforgettable part of their time at the naval school was their role as mounted escorts for the Confederate treasury during the

evacuation of the rebel capital and the flight southward. Both Campbell and Conrad rely heavily on William H. Parker's published *Recollections* (1883, reprint 1985) to describe this adventure, though Campbell lets Parker tell the story himself by simply quoting him for thirteen pages while Conrad employs a variety of sources.

Both Campbell and Conrad include a number of appendices, including a list of the midshipmen. Conrad's list is longer; it includes sixty more names than Campbell's list. But Conrad includes all "Acting Midshipmen" in the C.S. Navy, whether they served aboard the *Patrick Henry* or not. Both authors also include the entire text of the "Regulations for the Naval School" written by Parker in 1863, and this material takes up virtually a third of the book.

Between them, these two books probably contain all the information we are likely to have on the Confederate Naval Academy.

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