

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

D. Alan Harris, Anne B. Harris. *The Voyage of the CSS Shenandoah: A Memorable Cruise*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005. xi + 255 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8173-1451-4.

Reviewed by Will Elsbury (Humanities and Social Sciences Division, The Library of Congress)  
Published on H-CivWar (June, 2006)



## A Memorable Cruise for Some, for Others a Very Bad Trip

The cruise of the CSS *Shenandoah*, “that English corsair” as she was sometimes called, is memorably recounted in the journals of various officers who served on it. One such journal was kept by Lt. William Conway Whittle, the ship’s executive officer, and is reproduced in *The Voyage of the CSS Shenandoah: A Memorable Cruise*. His journal was rediscovered in the 1980s in a family attic. Included in this book is an introduction by editors D. Alan Harris and Anne B. Harris furnishing a valuable summary of Lieutenant Whittle’s journal and the career of the *Shenandoah*, giving it depth and making this not just a published journal, but one with an accompanying narrative that perhaps tempts readers to discover more about the *Shenandoah* and the men who served in it. The introduction inspired me to investigate just how the *Shenandoah* affected Northern and foreign attitudes and continued to affect personal and political affairs decades after the war. The journal entries are largely uniform in that they include date, location, course, weather conditions, and a narrative summary of the day. The journal is more detailed than the one kept by the *Shenandoah*’s captain, James I. Waddell, and edited by James D. Horan, *CSS Shenandoah: The Memoirs of Lieutenant Commanding James I. Waddell* (1996). A useful addition to the Whittle volume would have been a glossary for the many nautical terms Whittle constantly uses. This is a minor inconvenience for landlubberly readers and did not detract from the interest and enjoyment experienced in reading Whittle’s journal entries.

Praised as one of the most successful vessels of the

Confederate States Navy, feared as one of the most successful Civil War commerce raiders, and vilified as one of its most notorious pirates, the CSS *Shenandoah* was a ship that faced long odds but ultimately executed its orders to attack Northern shipping. In *A Memorable Cruise*, Whittle vividly portrays the *Shenandoah*’s difficult birth and ongoing struggle as a lone underdog facing a much more powerful foe. With an undermanned crew, young and inexperienced officers, no regular means of supply, and complete separation from the homeland, the *Shenandoah* performed remarkably well. The fact that the ship inflicted much of its damage to Northern shipping after the Confederacy fell adds a bittersweet feel to the story.

William C. Whittle was born in Norfolk, Virginia on January 16, 1840. He continued the family tradition of pursuing a naval life, beginning in 1854 as an acting midshipman. He was just twenty-four years old when the *Shenandoah* began its career in October 1864 and he proved to be a promising young officer (p. 3). Virginia’s secession changed the path of Whittle’s career but did not derail it. Early war duty whetted his appetite for service on the high seas, though he would have to wait several years in various postings, including one that led to his brief capture and exchange in August 1862 (p. 7). Late spring of 1864 found Whittle languishing in Paris, awaiting orders with other Confederate naval officers. When the CSS *Alabama* put into Cherbourg for repairs, he attempted to join her crew but was prevented from doing so by French police, Yankee agents, and an uneasy friend on board the ship who warned him off (p. 10).

The *Alabama* would soon be sunk in combat by the USS *Kearsarge*. Whittle did not record his thoughts on having avoided the *Alabama*'s demise, but he would soon have a place on a commerce raider when Confederate naval agents finally procured a ship they had long been eyeing. The *Sea King* had been built as a British military troop transport. James D. Bulloch, primary naval agent of the Confederacy in Europe, managed to purchase the vessel and convert it into a replacement for the recently lost *Alabama*. Bulloch and other agents quickly worked to man the ship with officers. William C. Whittle would finally get his chance to inflict damage on the Northern war effort (pp. 11-12).

The idea of hitting the hated Yankees in their pocket-books pleased Whittle and he hoped to see the *Shenandoah* capture and destroy many Northern merchantmen. Having no love for the Yankees, he stated in his journal: "It is to me a painful sight to see a fine vessel wantonly destroyed but I hope to witness an immense number of painful sights of the same kind, and I trust that the *Shenandoah* may be able to continue her present work until our foolish and inhuman foes sue for peace" (p. 62).

Most notably, the *Shenandoah* cut a swath through the Yankee whaling fleet. Despite repeated news from various Northern and neutral ships that the war had ended months before, the *Shenandoah* continued its attacks. The captain and other officers did not believe their country could have surrendered. They hoped the news was exaggerated. Reports in Northern newspapers emphasized the notion that Capt. James Waddell was carrying on his attacks with full knowledge that the war had ended. Whittle's journal entries show how the officers and crew struggled with this possibility and carried on in hope that the news was not quite as bad as it sounded.

Throughout the summer and fall of 1865, American and British newspapers carried accounts of ongoing attacks by the "pirate *Shenandoah*." Even though Captain Waddell had ended the *Shenandoah*'s war career in early August, delayed reports of continued attacks on shipping served to further anger a war-weary Northern public and government, as well as exasperate foreign observers. The *London Times* echoed these sentiments:

"It is impossible not to share the indignation so loudly expressed on the other side of the Atlantic at the continued depredations of the *Shenandoah* on the northwest coast of America. Several months have now elapsed since the American war terminated *de facto*.... Capt. Waddell was still burning and plundering American merchantmen in the name of the Confederate States." [1]

In an age of relatively slow communications, a delay of weeks or months for fresh news at sea was common. This, combined with the distrust *Shenandoah*'s crew may have felt regarding news obtained from neutral and enemy sources, as well as the flicker of hope that such news was exaggerated, led Captain Waddell to continue his ship's cruise until early August 1865. News received from the British ship *Baracouta* confirmed the end of the war (p.182).

Support for an end to the *Shenandoah*'s cruise reflected the British public's sympathy for the North. There was also a desire by the British government to forestall, or minimize, a precedent that might allow Fenian rebels and other unfriendly forces and governments to acquire American-built commerce raiding cruisers. Confederates and their sympathizers had argued that the North conveniently developed amnesia concerning the use of commerce raiders during America's wars with England and had only deemed Confederate raiders "piratical" when Northern shipping was being attacked. Having tacitly backed the wrong horse in the American Civil War, the English government now sought to lessen the consequences of its actions. Eventually it would pay for the destructive acts of the Confederate cruisers. In 1873 British Ambassador, Sir Edward Thornton presented a certificate of deposit in the amount of \$15,500,000 to Secretary of State Hamilton Fish, decided in the 1872 Geneva Award for settling the cruiser claims. The award resulted from efforts of the Joint Tribunal of Arbitration in Switzerland, which was created as a result of the Treaty of Washington to settle the matter of British-built Confederate cruisers.[2]

Recurring themes in *A Memorable Cruise* speak to the fact that life at sea could be both monotonous and a portal to actions that could get a sailor in deep trouble, such as fighting or drunkenness. Whittle's desires for more Yankee ships to be captured during slow times, his sadness at being separated from family and friends, his fears for their safety, and his assigned duties, such as maintaining ship's discipline, are repeated often. The gnawing fear for his dear ones was achingly repeated in his journal entries, for he was powerless to aid them except perhaps in carrying on the war effort far from home. He believed the hated Yankees would certainly exact revenge on his family for the *Shenandoah*'s actions. Whittle saw swift and severe punishment as the best cure for insubordination among the crew. He took this duty very seriously and performed it with extreme efficiency. Tricing up was an often used punishment in which the offender's hand were shackled behind his back and he was then suspended with a rope or cable through the shackles until

only his toes touched the deck. Many a sailor was triced up for infractions, often ascending in the punishment obstinate and unrepentant, but alighting as lambs, as Whittle often said (pp. 80, 87, 189). Lesser punishments meted out included reduction of rank, confinement, and loss of the grog ration. Sailors were not to hoard their tot for drinking sprees. Whittle saw to it these offenders no longer participated in “splicing the main brace,” (receiving their grog ration) (p. 23).

The monotony of life at sea was forgotten when a potential prize was sighted. On December 29, 1864, Whittle narrated the capture and demise of the Northern merchant ship *Delphine*: “Saw a bark astern coming up with us and waited for her to come up.... All hands thought she was a Frenchman. We ran up the English flag and she, to our great surprise, hoisted the Yankee colors” (pp. 97-98). The *Delphine* was one of thirty-eight vessels captured during the *Shenandoah*'s career.

The capture of the *Delphine* marked the beginning of a long, tiring odyssey for the ship's builder, Eliah Wight Metcalf, who worked to recoup his losses in the burnt *Delphine*. Metcalf hoped to gain a share of the Geneva Award, and he spent nearly twenty years seeking compensation for the loss of the ship on that day in late December 1864.[3] Metcalf saw himself and his fellow petitioners as dual victims: victims of a piratical vessel fully abetted in its actions by the English government and victims of a slow-moving bureaucracy holding back compensation. He emphasized both points in an 1882 angry missive to Congress, summarizing his long struggle to gain compensation, which had still not been distributed from England's long paid award.[4]

Following the end of their cruise, the *Shenandoah*'s crew suffered for association with their ship, some being exiled for years after the cruise ended. After the *Shenandoah*'s surrender, the father of one of the ship's officers looked into the possibility of obtaining pardons for several officers, including Whittle. He was told that the men were considered pirates. Whittle spent the next few months looking for work in several countries, with the most promising opportunity seeming to be in Argentina. He and several other officers spent the next few years mostly in Argentina, while efforts were continued to obtain pardons (pp. 41- 42). Whittle would not again feel the firm ground of Virginia under his feet until December 1868.

Upon his death on January 5, 1920, William C. Whittle was hailed by a local newspaper as having the greatest record of Norfolk's wartime sons (p. 44). He had served

his ship and nation well, and remained a devoted and loyal officer. His journal portrays his strong expressions of heart and mind through defense of, and opposition to, fellow officers, through affection for his men and through the strict brand of discipline he showed them, as well as his fierce devotion to duty.[5]

William Whittle's diary in *The Voyage of the CSS Shenandoah: A Memorable Cruise* is a valuable addition to the study of the Confederate naval service. With the inclusion of introductory material that summarizes the careers of Whittle and the *Shenandoah*, this book will serve its readers well by providing a window into further research of the ship, its crew, and the circumstances and effects of its memorable cruise.

#### Notes

[1]. *London Times*. “The Shenandoah.” September 11, 1865.

[2]. Murray Cromwell Morgan, *Confederate Raider in the North Pacific: The Saga of the CSS Shenandoah, 1864-65* (Pullman, WA: Washington State University Press, 1995), pp. 320, 324.

[3]. Metcalf argued in his petition, “Your committee can have no doubt that the persons who ought first to be considered in this distribution are those who suffered losses while carrying on the commerce of the country, and have received no indemnity whatever therefor. We are clearly of that class of persons.” “Geneva Award Petition of E. W. Metcalf.” *Ship Delphine, 1874(?)*, pp. 28, 31.

[4]. E. W. Metcalf, *Exculpated Cruisers* (Washington, D.C.: s. n., 1882), p. 29. Metcalf stated: “It cannot be possible that this great nation, having fully endorsed our claims and used them to gain national advantage, worth many times their amount, will not compensate individuals for losses, even though the U.S. government has already received payment under the Geneva Act.” He asked rhetorically, “Can it be possible that you are willing to increase our hardship by permitting further delay?” Congress established the U.S. Court of Commissioners of *Alabama Claims* and this court heard the claimants cases. Claim number 521 was assigned to Metcalf, and two other claim numbers represented others seeking reimbursement for the loss of the *Delphine*. *U.S. Court of Commissioners of Alabama Claims: Rules, Opinions, Orders, Circulars, Official Communications, from July 13, 1882 to December 31, 1885*, p. 37 (index), p. 8 (Second court list of vessels). The court was created on June 23,

1874 by an act of Congress. Claim 522 was filed by E. P. Nichols; claim 1108 was filed by E. S. Jones.

[5]. Whittle wrote of his men a dozen years before his death: "These men were not politicians, but when the war clouds gathered felt bounded by every sense of duty, love, and devotion, many of them against their judgment as to the judiciousness of disruption, and all of them, against their professional hopes, aspirations, and pecuniary in-

terests, when their mother states withdrew, to rally to their standard, resigned and tendered their services.... No more loyal men lived on earth. Let no slanderous tongues or libelous pens impugn their motives. Let not their reputation for purity of purpose, as they saw their duty, be handed down to posterity with any stain, but let their children have perpetuated in their minds and hearts the fact that their fathers were neither knaves, fools, cowards, nor traitors" (pp. 46- 47).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-civwar>

**Citation:** Will Elsbury. Review of Harris, D. Alan; Harris, Anne B., *The Voyage of the CSS Shenandoah: A Memorable Cruise*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. June, 2006.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11891>

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).