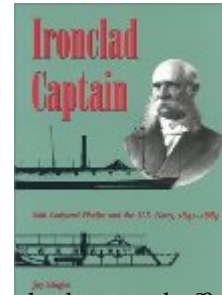


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jay Slagle. *Ironclad Captain: Seth Ledyard Phelps and the U.S. Navy, 1841-1864*. Kent, Oh.: Kent State University Press, 1997. xvi + 449 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87338-550-3.

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During World War II, Irving Berlin wrote a song entitled, "How About a Cheer for the Navy." "The army's great, the army's tough, but don't you think we've had enough? Now how about a cheer for the Navy!" wrote Berlin. As a navy vet (not of World War II), I appreciate Berlin's sentiment, and most Civil War historians, whatever their particular interest in the conflict, would probably acknowledge that we need more books about the naval war. A recent spurt of books has, in fact, focused on the Civil War navies. From biographies of hot shots like David Dixon Porter, to accounts of life aboard the fighting ships, to detailed studies of naval battles, to surveys of naval operations, many writers have in the past two to three years sought to give the navies their due.

Jay Slagle, a commercial helicopter pilot, has added to this naval renaissance with a biography of his great-great-grandfather, Lieutenant Commander Seth Ledyard Phelps. Actually, Slagle likes to think of his book as a form of autobiography. By drawing heavily of Phelps's surviving correspondence and official reports, Slagle allows the commander to tell his own story whenever possible. "I have attempted to use the very words written by Phelps and the men with whom he served," emphasizes Slagle, "to describe their actions, thoughts, and feelings—no one can tell their story better than they can" (pp. xv-xvi).

Phelps, a native of Ohio, joined the navy in 1841 as a midshipman and put to sea the following year. He was seventeen years old. By the time the Civil War came, he had served in the Mediterranean, in the Gulf of Mexico (during the war with Mexico), and off the coast of Central America (disrupting the activities of William Walker and his filibusters). In describing these antebellum years, Slagle gives us a good view of life in the old navy. Through

Phelps's letters to family, friends, and other naval officers, we come to appreciate the tedium and hardships of life on station. The most striking thing about many conditions is how similar they were to those in the old army. For instance, Lieutenant Phelps nearly resigned from the navy in 1858 because of the nearly non-existent chances for promotion in a peacetime navy.

Phelps was at the Gosport Navy Yard, Norfolk, when the war started, but he was soon transferred to Cincinnati, and he spent the rest of the war fighting on the western rivers. He saw his first action in September 1861, and from then until he resigned from the navy in October 1864 to pursue business opportunities in Mexico (having been passed over for promotion), he was in the thick of the war: Belmont, Forts Henry and Donelson, Island No. 10, Memphis, Fort Pillow, Vicksburg, the Red River campaign—Phelps saw it all. Having been raised in a navy of wooden ships, Phelps commanded a string of ironclads on the rivers. He soon found that the gravest danger came not from the enemy's ships but the rebel shore batteries and guerrilla snipers who prowled the river banks.

Slagle tells a good story, although he might have been more expansive. Sticking close to his "autobiography" format, Slagle misses a number of chances to go beyond Phelps's personal experiences and give readers a broader, more encompassing view of the naval war. Some subjects require more extended explanations, too, most notably those of naval "prizes" and the politics of the cotton trade along the Mississippi River. He might also have said more about the reaction of Phelps and other old navy officers to the "mongrel service" of ironclad gun boats (p. 146). And Slagle's admirable goal of allowing Phelps to tell his own story is sometimes a handicap. There are too many long block quotes, which tend to slow down the action.

Some of the most dramatic and entertaining portions of the book are where Slagle is forced to tell the story on his own. Overall, this remains a good portrait of a mid-range naval officer and how he fought the war.

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