

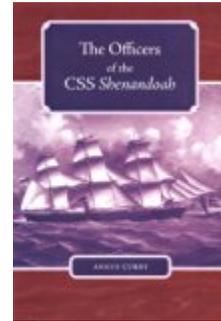
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Angus Curry. *The Officers of the CSS Shenandoah*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006. xiv + 428 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-2943-6.

John M. Taylor. *Semmes: Rebel Raider*. Dulles: Potomac Books, 2005. 124 pp. \$12.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-57488-543-9.

Reviewed by William H. Roberts (Retired U.S. Navy)
Published on H-CivWar (May, 2007)



Confederate Captains: Contrasts in Command at Sea

In a small ship, it is difficult to overestimate the effect of the commanding officer's personality, especially when intensified by long periods at sea and solitary operations. Because of that impact, these books can be viewed as studies in command at sea.

John M. Taylor's book is condensed from his full-length work *Confederate Raider: Raphael Semmes of the Alabama* (1994). *Semmes: Rebel Raider*, is a short, straightforward overview of Semmes's life, focusing on his seagoing command of the Confederate commerce raiders CSS *Sumter* and CSS *Alabama*. It provides a sound factual overview of the man the author calls "the greatest sea raider of all time" (p. 110). Born in Maryland in 1809, Raphael Semmes was an orphan at fourteen. He joined the Navy as a midshipman in 1826 and learned enough of the law while at sea to pass the Maryland bar in 1834. He married Anne Spencer in 1837 and served both afloat and ashore in the Mexican War. In 1841 he moved to Alabama and thereafter considered that state his home. By the time of the secession crisis of 1860, he had attained the rank of commander and was stationed in Washington, D.C. Semmes's adopted state of Alabama seceded on January 11, 1861, but Semmes did not enter the Confederate service until February 18, 1861. By April, he had taken command of the converted merchant steamer CSS *Sumter*, and on June 30, 1861, he slipped past Union blockaders to begin his first raiding voyage. After a cruise in which he disrupted Union commerce and

captured eighteen vessels, Semmes laid up the worn-out *Sumter* in Gibraltar and headed for the Confederacy.

Semmes reached Nassau before he learned that he was to command another raider. Returning to England, Semmes found the steamer *Enrica* being built under the supervision of the redoubtable Confederate agent James D. Bulloch. After the ship's timely escape from British authorities, the *Enrica* and Semmes met in the Azores, where, on August 24, 1862, Semmes commissioned her in the Confederate States Navy as the CSS *Alabama*. He began a twenty-two month odyssey that took the ship as far as Singapore and resulted in the capture of sixty-four Union merchant vessels and the sinking of a Federal gunboat, the USS *Hatteras*.

During this time, Semmes, with a predominantly British crew, demonstrated the qualities of seamanship, tactical skill, and leadership so vital to a warship, and even more so to a warship conducting independent operations. *Alabama* was a taut ship but a generally contented one; Semmes's officers clearly respected him and quickly formed a well-integrated team. Of course, the climactic incident of the *Alabama*'s career was her battle with the USS *Kearsarge* off Cherbourg, which ended with the *Alabama* on the bottom of the English Channel and Semmes safely in England. Engaging the *Kearsarge*, writes Taylor, "was one of the few instances in a long career in which Semmes demonstrated faulty judgment" (p.

12). The author's explanation of why Semmes decided to fight is, for this reviewer, the least satisfying portion of the book.

The author asserts that Semmes had three possible courses of action when confronted by the *Kearsarge's* arrival off Cherbourg: to attempt to escape in a ship "desperately in need of a refit" (p. 5); to lay up the *Alabama*; or to fight. Faced with these options, the author asserts that Semmes yielded to the self-defined primacy of honor and a "long[ing] for the glory of defeating a second U.S. warship" (p. 5). That analysis seems correct as far as it goes—Semmes, characterized as prudent by nature, but fully prepared to take risks, showed little prudence in this episode. Knowing that his gunpowder was bad and that only one in three shell fuses had worked properly in a recent exercise, Semmes still issued what amounted to a challenge, writing through intermediaries to Captain John Winslow of the *Kearsarge* that he would fight "as soon as I can make the necessary arrangements."^[1] Semmes's "faulty judgment," however, went farther than his tactical decision to provoke an engagement. However precarious the Confederacy's position in France, the *Alabama* was for the moment safe in a French port. That gave Semmes another option, unmentioned and unanalyzed by the author, namely to play the diplomatic game, refit the *Alabama*, and send her back to sea at an opportune time. The author neither answers nor asks a key question—what potential benefit would the Confederacy, as opposed to Semmes personally, accrue from a victory over the *Kearsarge*? How would that benefit compare to the effect of the *Alabama* as a raider "in being," ready to slip out of Cherbourg or of the *Alabama* again at sea? And since Semmes himself felt that the two ships were "so equally matched," what would be the effect of the *Alabama's* defeat, both in the Confederacy and in the Union?

It is hard not to agree with diarist Mary Chesnut, who wrote that Semmes was "a fool after all—risked the *Alabama* in a sort of duel of ships" (p. 97), since Taylor shows that Semmes had sought such a duel for some time. Sympathy for one's subject is common among biographers, and Semmes's many positive characteristics clearly outweighed his negative ones. However, Taylor does not explore the possibility that Semmes's concentration on "honor" was in fact selfishness and that his search for a suitable adversary distracted him from his mission—which was to disrupt American commerce, not to attack the Federal Navy one ship at a time. His decision to fight the *Kearsarge* is consistent with more of a thirst for glory than Taylor seems willing to admit—but perhaps

Semmes could not bear the thought of the *Alabama* at sea under someone else's command, another possibility that the author does not explore. The loss of the *Alabama* was traumatic. Semmes was clearly unable to face the facts of his defeat, claiming that Winslow had not fought fairly and that the Union ship was "ironclad." Taylor examines this issue in some detail, concluding that Semmes was both trying to "deprive [the Yankees] of any glory in victory" and to "[distract] attention from the *Alabama's* shortcomings and Semmes's own poor judgment in seeking battle." He notes, however, that Semmes's view of the battle as a duel meant that neither party should have an unfair advantage. "Such a view was anachronistic in wartime, but it was vintage Semmes" (p. 96).

After recovering from the loss of the *Alabama*, Semmes returned to the Confederacy, where in February 1865 he was promoted to admiral and placed in charge of the naval defense of Richmond. Taylor says almost nothing about Semmes's performance in this command, but upon the evacuation of Richmond, Semmes and his sailors escaped to join the fleeing Confederate cabinet. Semmes surrendered with Gen. Joseph Johnston's army and was paroled. After a stormy postwar career in education, journalism, and the law, Semmes died in 1877 as a thoroughly unreconstructed Confederate. Although by no means obscure, the Confederate Navy's second admiral has since been overshadowed by a myriad of generals in the predominantly land-oriented historiography of the Civil War. This volume, a condensation of a more extensive work, does not penetrate as deeply into Semmes's personality as this reviewer expected. However, it is a highly readable introduction to the man and his career that fully substantiates Taylor's assessment that Semmes was "not the first commerce raider of the nineteenth century; he was simply the best" (p. 108). Readers who need an introduction to Semmes and those who wish to refresh an earlier acquaintance will enjoy this book.

In *The Officers of the CSS Shenandoah*, Angus Curry examines the career of the Confederate raider CSS *Shenandoah* through a nuanced look at the ship's officers and their interactions, both during and after the Civil War. The well-annotated work relies heavily on primary sources, especially the diaries and logs kept by several of the officers. By comparing the accounts and integrating them with the information available from official documents, Curry has convincingly teased out the social dynamics of the wardroom. He exposes the frictions and divisions in *Shenandoah's* wardroom and shows how the officers "significantly reconstructed" the ship's story into a postwar narrative of "unity and nobility of purpose" (p.

315).

The *Shenandoah's* voyage is set within the same Confederate commerce raiding campaign as those of the *Alabama* and *Sumter*. Like most other Confederate cruisers, *Shenandoah* began as a merchant vessel. Purchased secretly and outfitted under Bulloch's supervision, the former *Sea King* was commissioned near Madeira on October 19, 1864 with Lieutenant James Iredell Waddell commanding. Bulloch's orders to Waddell were to sail east around the Cape of Good Hope to attack Union whalers in the North Pacific.

Waddell's officers were chosen by Commodore Samuel Barron from the relatively plentiful supply of Confederate officers in Great Britain and France. Unfortunately, Curry does not explore in depth the manner in which Waddell was selected for the command, mentioning only that it appears that Waddell was not Barron's first choice to command a cruiser. Other sources indicate that to compensate Barron appointed his own aide, Lieutenant William C. Whittle, as Waddell's Executive Officer (second in command). Another indicator that Waddell was not perceived to be the *beau ideal* of a captain is that his orders from Bulloch were more detailed and prescriptive than those given to other cruiser commanders.

As the last Confederate cruiser, *Shenandoah* operated under unique handicaps. One was the makeup of her crew. Waddell could persuade only twenty members of her merchant crew to enlist in the Confederate Navy, leaving the ship desperately short-handed. The manpower shortage meant that the officers had to perform hard manual labor alongside the crew, and even so, the ship took months to achieve efficiency. The shortage also precipitated a meeting between Waddell and his lieutenants in which he asked their opinion of whether to continue the cruise.

As Curry rightly points out, "this 'council of war' was a defining moment in the cruise" (p. 71). Waddell's involvement of his juniors in such a discussion was exceptionally rare, and a council of war was usually considered to be a sign of weakness. Besides giving his lieutenants "the impression that they would possess some influence" in the future (p. 72), it marked the first display of serious flaws in Waddell's command style—impulsive action, vacillation, and an unwillingness to trust his subordinates—that would markedly increase friction aboard the cruiser.

A later example is Waddell's treatment of Lt. Francis Chew in an incident that "underlines the clash between the officers' concepts of authority, rank, and honor" (p.

109). In mid-December 1864, *Shenandoah* encountered a gale that shook Waddell's confidence in his ship and his watchstanders. Waddell directed Whittle to replace Chew, refusing Whittle's offer to supervise the young lieutenant. Chew took offense, Whittle remonstrated with Waddell, and within a day, Chew had been reinstated. Waddell's impulsiveness and inconsistency and the officers' perception of his weakness continued to keep his relations with the wardroom tense.

The *Shenandoah's* visit to Melbourne, Australia, in January and February 1865 required the Confederate officers to balance their sense of personal and national honor against their ship's effectiveness. The *Shenandoah* was still short-handed when she arrived in Melbourne, and Curry establishes that the Confederates recruited seamen in deliberate violation of the British Foreign Enlistment Act. His discussion blends the Confederate records with contemporary Australian sources to paint a detailed picture of the many-layered ways in which Confederates, Unionists, and Australian factions each sought to turn the cruiser's visit to advantage. The cruiser departed Melbourne on February 18, 1865, and although the Confederates stoutly denied violating the Foreign Enlistment Act, forty-two "stowaways" enlisted as soon as *Shenandoah* left Australian waters.

The next three months brought tropical hardships with only five captures—four on April 1 and another on May 27. Entering the Bering Sea in mid-June, *Shenandoah* intercepted the whaling fleet on June 22 and took five whalers that day. Captured newspapers reported that Gen. Robert E. Lee had surrendered, but other papers reported that President Jefferson Davis had ordered Confederate forces to continue fighting. By June 28, the *Shenandoah* had burned or ransomed twenty-four whalers, and Waddell set course for North America, apparently hoping for more prizes and more news.

He received the news on August 2, when a British vessel confirmed the Confederacy's demise. Waddell promptly ordered that the cruiser's guns be dismantled and stored, but physical disarmament was the easy part. The Confederate officers were emotionally crushed—the North's victory rendered their ship stateless and their commissions void, and their destruction of the whaling fleet after the war had ended put them in legal jeopardy. "The question of authority aboard the cruiser, and its ultimate destination became points of strain in the officers' relations," as they negotiated a new set of expectations to replace the concepts of personal honor, revenge, and recognition and the sense of community that had sus-

tained them as naval officers (p. 234). The officers' sense of shared purpose disappeared as each began to think of what would be best for him as an individual.

The ship's destination became central to the "renegotiation" of authority aboard the vessel, now neither a warship under military discipline nor a regular merchant ship under civil law. On August 4, the crew petitioned Waddell to take the ship to an English port and agreed to support a return to Liverpool, and Waddell used the petition to gain the crew's public recognition of his authority. This recognition, in turn, helped him to counter a faction among the officers that favored going to Cape Town, South Africa. An officers' petition, a counter-petition, and yet another council of war combined with more ill-advised decisions about watchstanding and punishment to produce great discontent among the officers. Fortunately, the *Shenandoah* had an easy passage around the Cape Horn and a quick voyage to Liverpool, where she arrived on November 6, 1865. The British government allowed the officers and crew to depart as individuals on November 8, a "most miserable and inglorious conclusion to the *Shenandoah's* voyage" (p. 264).

Although most histories of the *Shenandoah* end with her surrender to the British, Curry takes the story into the postwar era. In his discussion, he highlights "the gradual changes that subtly transformed the tale of the CSS *Shenandoah*." The officers' public memories, modified to downplay embarrassing subjects, "allowed the CSS *Shenandoah's* story to conform to a broader Southern cultural memory of the Civil War" (p. 266).

The earliest public discussion of the cruise of the *Shenandoah* was an 1866 letter, published without Waddell's permission, in which the former commanding officer asserted that the conduct of his officers was "nothing less than mutiny" (p. 283). Although the officers were indignant, the only public reply was an 1867 novel written by Master's Mate Cornelius Hunt that blamed Waddell for poor judgment and duplicity. The officers' "unspoken mutual acknowledgement of the sensitivity of the subject" (p. 320) kept them silent until Waddell's memoirs were posthumously published in 1896.

Waddell's work, which Curry analyzes in detail, was conciliatory, and the responses of the officers were equally so. With few exceptions, recollections of the *Shenandoah* focused on the ship's achievements and omitted events that "might draw criticism upon either the officers, or the Confederate cause" (p. 311). The public memory of the *Shenandoah* was shaped, not by active collusion, but by the officers' individual modifications of events to conform to the "dominant Southern memory" of the war (p. 295).

The book displays a number of errors that should have been corrected in editing. For example, the abbreviation CSS is incorrectly translated as Confederate Steam Ship (p. 1). A glance at the U.S. Navy's rank structure shows that as a commander, William C. Whittle Sr. could not have been the service's "second- or third-highest ranking officer" (p. 18). The "battle for Fort Sumter erupted" on April 12, 1861, not in January 1861 (p. 30), while the raid by the Confederate ironclads *Palmetto State* and *Chicora* took place in January 1863, not April 1863 (p. 44). The British proclaimed neutrality and recognized Confederate belligerency in May 1861 and the French in June 1861, rather than "several months" after war began (p. 45). Twenty men plus twenty-four officers make forty-four persons aboard the newly commissioned cruiser, not forty-two (pp. 68, 69). On a more nautical plane, to "weigh" anchor means to raise it (p. 127). The editing lapses in the early chapters give the reader a bad first impression. Fortunately, Curry's scholarship is focused enough to overcome it.

The Officers of the CSS Shenandoah is worthwhile on many levels—as a corrective to the conventional narrative of the *Shenandoah*, as an exploration of the thinking of the mid-nineteenth century naval officer, and as a case study in command. Serious students of the Civil War at sea will want a copy.

Note

[1]. Semmes to Ad. Bonfils, June 14, 1864, *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion* Series 1, 3: 648.

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

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

Citation: William H. Roberts. Review of Curry, Angus, *The Officers of the CSS Shenandoah* and Taylor, John M., *Semmes: Rebel Raider*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. May, 2007.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13206>

Copyright © 2007 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.