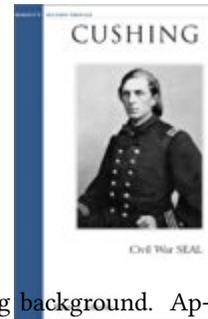


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Robert J. Schneller, Jr. *Cushing: Civil War SEAL*. Series Editor Dennis E. Showalter. Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, 2004. 119 pp. \$19.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57488-506-4.

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Robert J. Schneller Jr., a historian at the U.S. Naval Historical Center, offers a well-written and concise military biography of one of the most important naval figures as well as one of the Civil War's most intriguing and charismatic leaders, William Baker Cushing (1842-74). Part of Brassey's Military Profiles series, this biography is a superb short book in a valuable series that does not attempt to accomplish too much. Schneller has written several other books on the United States Navy, including *A Quest for Glory: A Biography of Rear Admiral John A. Dahlgren* (1996), for which he received the 1996 John Lyman Book Award in Biography from the North American Society for Oceanic History; and *Farragut: America's First Admiral* (2002), also part of Brassey's Military Profiles series.

Despite the important role played by both Confederate and Union navies, the navies are too often eclipsed by the Homeric scale of the land war. In fact, the *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion* (1894-1922) is less than one-fourth the size of the comparable *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (1880-1901) and less than one-half the size of the recently published supplement to the latter (*Supplement to the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* [1994]). None of the Civil War's naval engagements, for example, has garnered the attention of Gettysburg, and even the revolutionary clash between the USS *Monitor* and the CSS *Virginia* usually focuses on the transition from wood and sail to iron and steel rather than its effects on the overall campaigns. Yet, as Schneller indicates, Cushing, along with David Glasgow Farragut and David Dixon Porter, contributed as much to the final Union victory as did any other military figure.

Cushing did not have a seafaring background. Appointed to the United States Naval Academy from Wisconsin, he was the brother of Alonzo Cushing, a graduate of the United States Military Academy at West Point, who died a hero's death at the Battle of Gettysburg. Although the brothers shared many of the same qualities desired in a military leader, William was prone to an impetuosity that, at times, bordered on insubordination. He had a tendency to bully those with whom he disagreed, and he manifested a racist attitude toward blacks, which seemed extreme even for that era. He was appointed to the United States Naval Academy in 1857 but was forced to resign before graduating. With the outbreak of the war in April 1861, however, the navy's need for officers resulted in his appointment as acting master's mate on the USS *Minnesota*. Cushing found that life on a large ship of the line was too constraining as his overbearing personality often caused problems with his superiors. Nonetheless, his abilities had not gone without notice; he was promoted to lieutenant in July 1862. For the next two years, Cushing's flair for special operations was developed and honed to a fine perfection culminating with the destruction of the *Albemarle* and the elevation of his status as a legitimate U.S. naval hero. After getting past the chivalric duel between the CSS *Alabama* and the USS *Kearsarge*, perhaps the best-known naval event is the bold attack and sinking of the Confederate ironclad ram *Albemarle* by a small party of sailors led by Lieutenant Cushing on October 27, 1864. Cushing continued to serve with distinction for the remainder of the war and even led a ground assault of sailors and marines against Fort Fisher in 1865. After the war, he commanded the USS *Wyoming* to prevent Spanish authorities in Cuba from killing American sailors. In 1874, his health declined and he suffered a mental collapse, which soon was followed

by his death in December of the same year.

Unfortunately, the subtitle of this biographical sketch is misleading. I would correct the tendency to conflate nineteenth-century terminology with that of the present day. Such terms as "Seal" "Green Beret," etc., are best reserved for the historical contexts in which they were developed and used. Although the intention is generally understood, the term is a contemporary one that denotes a specific branch of Navy Special Operations in the current service. This service division did not exist during the Civil War, and it is best to use terms that are historically

accurate.

This minor issue of terminology should not detract from the value of this well-written and informative book. These types of biographical studies are useful contributions to the volume of works available to Civil War readers, whether amateur or professional historians. Adding greater depth than dictionary or encyclopedic entries, they provide insight and character development. Schneller has offered a concise and cogent biography of one of the war's most interesting warriors.

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