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Barbara Brooks Tomblin. *Bluejackets and Contrabands: African Americans and the Union Navy.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2009. Illustrations. viii + 373 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-2554-1.

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A Historic Rivalry?

In her new work, *Bluejackets and Contrabands*, Barbara Brooks Tomblin explores an important but often overlooked story in the history of the American Civil War: the role of black seamen in the Union navy. Through her examination of official navy orders and the papers of prominent naval officers, Tomblin uncovers the importance of escaped slaves, officially known as "contrabands," to the navy and their primary job of enforcing the blockade of Southern ports. Escaped slaves and free blacks served as sailors, pilots, spies, and guides, as well as stevedores and crewmen. Black seamen provided vital intelligence information regarding Southern waterways and Confederate blockade-runners. Given the crucial service of black seamen, Tomblin argues that the navy's active recruitment of contrabands, which began almost as soon as the war did, became a model for the army's later and much more hesitant enlistment of black men into the ranks.

The driving force behind the navy's policy to enlist black seamen was Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles. In July 1861, Welles "set the tone for the navy's initial response to runaway slaves," when he declared that returning escaped slaves to their owners was both "impolitic and cruel" and suggested to his commanders that they instead use fugitives as crewmen aboard their vessels if possible (p. 10). Echoing General Benjamin F. Butler's "contraband" policy that was issued in May, Welles's decision to employ fugitive slaves seems not to have attracted the negative outcries that Butler's did. In fact, the navy in Tomblin's account seems insulated from Washington politics. Abraham Lincoln, whose meddling in army affairs irritated his generals to no end, appears to have left the navy entirely to Welles's direction. By September 1861, Welles had authorized the enlistment of contrabands "under the same forms and regulations as apply to other enlistments," which included daily rations and monthly pay of ten dollars (p. 17). Unfortunately, Tomblin offers no explanation for the latitude Welles seems to have enjoyed or to any reaction outside the navy of his seemingly progressive stance toward the enlistment of contrabands.

Contraband seamen performed a wide array of duties for the navy. Most important, they served as pilots, who guided Federal ships through many of the South's unchartered waterways, and as spies and scouts gathering intelligence about blockade-runners. In fact, the navy's topographical knowledge of the Southern coastline and waterways was so limited that they were often more familiar with the features of *foreign* coasts and ports than with southern ones. They also lacked enough qualified pilots to navigate blockading vessels through the South's narrow and winding rivers and tributaries. Black pilots filled this need superbly. In the navy's records, however, most of these men remain nameless. It appears that although the navy frequently used the expertise of black pilots and credited them with many successes, these men were not, in fact, officially enlisted as navy seamen. As was the case in the army, the navy's initial recruitment efforts were slow. By the end of 1861, Tomblin notes that only three hundred black men had enlisted (about 6 percent of the total naval force). In total, an estimated eighteen thousand African Americans served in the Union navy, but because enlistment records do not list prewar status, it is difficult to ascertain how many of these seamen had been slaves (pp. 189-190).

In addition to detailing the importance of black seamen to the Union war effort, Tomblin makes an important contribution to the literature on the destruction of slavery. The chapter entitled "Going to Freedom" tells the story of how the "long-established pathways" along the South's rivers, streams, and swamps allowed slaves to make the journey to freedom once the war began (p. 6). Taking a cue from David Cecelski's study of enslaved waterman in North Carolina, *The Waterman's Song* (2001),

Tomblin demonstrates how slaves along the eastern coast possessed an impressive knowledge of the area's waterways that in turned allowed them a level of mobility that helped them to plan and execute their escape. While some notable black sailors, like the famous pilot Robert Smalls, commanded sturdy riverboats, most escaping slaves made their way to Union vessels on anything that could float. One navy officer reported that two slaves had escaped in a leaky vessel "caulked with strips of guano bags" as one man bailed out the water that seeped in while the other one rowed (p. 39). This image epitomizes the determination of Southern slaves to reach Union lines and seize the opportunity of freedom that Yankees presented them.

This contribution, however, is not Tomblin's primary goal. She aims not only to demonstrate the importance of black seamen and sailors to the Union war effort but also to suggest that the navy was more welcoming of blacks, and thus more egalitarian, than the army. To this end, Tomblin offers little in the way of conclusive evidence. Her strongest evidence consists of Welles's orders and the letters of a few prominent navel officers, particularly Samuel F. Du Pont, who spoke of how his contact with contrabands convinced him of slavery's immorality and the need for abolition (p. 12). She makes the curious claim that "Du Pont's antislavery views were shared by many Union Navy officers and men as well as Union Army soldiers and southern civilians" (p. 13). Without much substantiating evidence–she offers none from non-officers in the navy, much less from Southern civilians, who were notorious for their attempts to hang on to their fleeing property at all costs–this seems a gross overstatement. Chandra Manning's *What This Cruel War Was Over* (2007) casts doubt on any claim that there were widespread antislavery feelings among the army ranks, especially in the war's early years. Would the navy be any different? Tomblin thinks so, if only because there had been black sailors in the navy prior to the war, but she does not tell us how many. Furthermore, she cannot say for certain how antebellum black sailors were treated. Were they were singled out for punishment, such as flogging or court martial, more often than white soldiers? She does mention that the antebellum navy typically assigned black sailors "as mess boys, stewards, and wardroom attendants, menial jobs the navy considered more appropriate for persons of color" (p. 17). In this respect, the antebellum navy appears little better than the wartime army, which also begs the question: did the tradition of assigning black sailors menial jobs continue during the war? The answer appears to be yes. Tomblin notes that Welles's own policy dictated that "contrabands will not be shipped or enlisted in the naval service with any higher rating than that of landsmen." What is a landsman? Tomblin does not tell us, but we are to assume it is a low rank since landsmen could be promoted, upon demonstrating proper qualification, to "the ratings of seaman, ordinary seaman, fireman, or coal heaver" (p. 17). Is the reader to assume that being a "coal heaver" constituted a position of respect akin to a combat soldier in the army? Tomblin acknowledges Joseph Reidy's admonition that a black sailor was "'in, but not necessarily of,' the crew with which he served," but her repeated attempts to cast the lowly status of black sailors in a more positive light edges near the outrageous at the end of the chapter on black sailors (p. 197). There she claims that "in addition to serving the navy as servants, wardroom stewards, cooks and stokers, black sailors played a role as entertainers and morale boosters to Union officers and crews, who enjoyed and often commented on their singing and dancing" p. 227).

This is a heroic narrative told almost exclusively from the perspectives of white naval officers and officials, like Welles. Tomblin says that this is because black sailors left little or no written record of their wartime experiences. One wonders, however, if those limited sources could be read with an eye toward uncovering the everyday struggles of black sailors and seamen against the forms of violence, coercion, and prejudice inherent within the armed forces, including the navy? In much the same way that historians who have worked extensively with army records have teased the contradictory experiences and views of black soldiers and contrabands from the words of white officers and soldiers, so too might historians of the black naval experience read deeper into the existing sources.

Although this book contributes to our understanding of black sailors in the Civil War, seeking to prove the navy to be more welcoming and egalitarian toward blacks than the army–an argument with which many naval historians seem to be preoccupied–it misses bigger, tougher questions about the ways that African Americans have used the military as a vehicle for liberation throughout the nation's history and the efficacy of that strategy for attaining citizenship rights. Unfortunately, Tomblin's story ends abruptly in 1865, and we are left wondering how black naval veterans entered the post-emancipation world. Did they join their army comrades at state and national conventions for civil rights? Did they become political leaders in the postwar South like many army veterans? How did their time in the navy shape their understandings of freedom? These are the questions I hope future historians of black sailors will take up.

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