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William Marvel. *The Alabama & the Kearsarge: The Sailor's Civil War.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996. x + 337 pp. $34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2294-4.

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People fascinated by the common soldier of the Civil War have never been deprived of things to read. Veterans' writings began to pour out of publishing houses even before the last echoes of gunfire faded away, and although the torrent abated as the veterans died off, a steady stream of memoirs, collections of letters, diaries, and biographies about even the most obscure soldiers still flows onto the bookshelves. Bell I. Wiley's encyclopedic descriptions of the lives of "Johnny Reb" and "Billy Yank" are the first good assimilations of the primary material.[1] Recently, studies by Gerald Linderman, Reid Mitchell, Joseph Glatthaar, and James M. McPherson have offered penetrating analyses of why soldiers went to war, what motivated them to fight, and what the fighting was like.[2]

In comparison to the mountain of literature on the land side of the Civil War, little has been published on its naval aspects. Of the Union navy's four major blue-water squadrons, for example, only the North Atlantic and East Gulf Blockading squadrons have had monographs written about them.[3] You can't swing a saber in a bookstore without hitting a new biography about Sherman or Lee, but you have to be pretty lucky to find the life of any naval figure at all. Until a year ago, there was no biography of Rear Admiral John A. Dahlgren, the famous commander of the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron who presided over the Union navy's greatest disappointment during the war, the failure to capture Charleston.[4] There is not even a recent life of Farragut in print. This relative dearth of literature is partially explained by the perception that the naval war was a sideshow, and by the fact that many fewer people served in the navies than in the armies. To be sure, literature abounds on commerce raiding, ironclads, and a familiar litany of battles: New Orleans, Forts Henry and Donelson, Vicksburg, Mobile Bay, Fort Fisher. One glance at Paolo Coletta's recent bibliography will convince nobody that Civil War naval history has been totally neglected.[5] But it is safe to say that there is still plenty of room for original work on Civil War naval logistics, joint operations, naval administration, and naval social history–and even on naval operations and biography.

The CSS *Alabama* is one of those few naval topics over which much ink has been spilled. The *Alabama* was the most successful commerce raider in American history, and her mustache-twisting skipper, Raphael Semmes, was the Confederate navy's most colorful character. In the nineteenth century, *Alabama* officers and their contemporaries produced numerous accounts of their shipboard experiences, culminating in the famous battle with the USS *Kearsarge*. In the twentieth century, writers have produced more than a dozen volumes on Semmes and the *Alabama*, including at least three children's books. John M. Taylor has written the best Semmes biography; adequate histories of the *Alabama* have emerged from the typewriters or word processors of Charles G. Summersell, Norman C. Delaney, and Charles M. Robinson III.[6] Most *Alabama* books fall within the "drum and bugle" genre of military history–operational or diplomatic accounts–and are all written from Semmes's point of view.

But the lives and experiences of the common sailors on board the *Alabama*, the *Kearsarge*, or any other Union or Confederate warship, for that matter, remain obscure to the majority of Civil War enthusiasts. Most of what they do know comes from a pair of articles by William N. Still,[7] or from a handful of excellent published firsthand accounts.[8]

As his subtitle implies, William Marvel[9] attempts to unmask Jack Tar. Marvel builds the narrative on a traditional operational framework, but tells the story of the *Kearsarge* and the *Alabama* from the point of view of the common sailors whose diaries, letters, and other papers have survived. The bulk of his twenty chapters is based on unpublished manuscripts, most of

which are preserved in repositories across New England, Washington, D.C., and North Carolina. Marvel's focus on the common sailor and his reliance on unpublished primary material–and mostly that penned by *Kearsarge* crewmen–distinguish this book.

Marvel's interpretation becomes clear in the preface. "Namelessly clad in dark, baggy uniforms, the seamen of either side led an uncomfortable, exhausting, and monotonous existence and returned home with little if any fanfare, often succumbing at an early age to ailments encountered aboard ship. They tended to be poorer than their rifle-toting counterparts, and their lives ashore more often ended in obscurity" (p. ix).

The narrative opens exactly three years before the fateful rendezvous in the English Channel, with the Confederate commerce raider *Sumter*, commanded by Raphael Semmes, steaming down the Mississippi on 19 June 1861. Marvel then traces the *Sumter*'s career, the building and maiden voyage of the *Kearsarge*, and the construction, launching, and outfitting of the *Alabama*.

The bulk of the narrative jumps between the decks of the *Alabama* as she carved through the Atlantic and Indian Oceans, leaving dozens of unarmed Yankee merchantmen burning in her wake, and the decks of the *Kearsarge* as she made her rounds among various ports in Spain, France, Britain, and the Azores, watching for Confederate vessels and awaiting opportunities to destroy them. And waiting and waiting and waiting.

Sailors walking the decks of both ships experienced soul-numbing boredom resulting from the tedium of routine. Every day at sea in fair weather, the men cleaned their respective ship, subsisted on a diet based on heavily salted meat, and tried to sleep in hammocks slung above damp, unheated decks. Men on the *Alabama* often went weeks without seeing land. Periods of intense activity from the destruction of several merchant ships in a short space of time punctuated long stretches of fruitless encounters. *Kearsarge* crewmen endured shorter stints at sea, but spent longer intervals in port while the cruiser underwent repairs. Though anchored within rowing distance of shore, *Kearsarge sailors found themselves confined to the ship when the officers grew tired of their fighting or reporting on board drunk when they did receive liberty.* Alabama *crewmen behaved even worse, for a greater proportion deserted, and they stood more often on the brink of mutiny than their* Kearsarge_ counterparts.

Sailors on both vessels chafed at the large gulf existing between officers and enlisted men during that era. Officers frequently mustered the crew for a reading of the articles of war. This reminded the sailors not only of the penalties for infractions of discipline, but also of their superiors' autocratic power. Sailors were punished more severely than officers for the same infraction, and received far less liberty ashore. A gulf also existed between officers of different rank. Line officers jealously guarded their privileged status relative to the engineers, and the engineers bridled over it.

The experiences of the two crews may be compared to a watch spring that wound down with the passage of time. Months at sea extracted a toll. Sailors suffered from the cumulative effects of seasickness, diarrhea, respiratory ailments, and bad food. They also had to endure sleep deprivation arising from uncomfortable berthing spaces and long hours standing watches, and interminable periods of boredom punctuated by brief moments of intense stress during storms or certain operations. On the *Alabama*, the frequency of fruitful encounters declined precipitously after 1863, and the crew grew more restless, the discipline got harsher, and the desertion rate increased. For the crew of the *Kearsarge*, morale plummeted and boredom, homesickness, and insubordination soared with the march of time.

The watch spring also wound down for the *Alabama* herself. By the spring of 1864, the Rebel raider's green English timbers had cracked, her seams had opened, her boilers had corroded, her hull had become more fouled, and her gunpowder had decayed. Meanwhile, the governments of England and France had distanced themselves from her cause. It was clear to Semmes soon after he pulled into Cherbourg harbor on 11 June, that the *Alabama*'s commerce raiding days were over.

It was a different story for the *Kearsarge*. While the Rebel raider had deteriorated with time, the Yankee cruiser had enjoyed relatively unhindered access to repair facilities and fresh supplies. Chains hung over the hull and concealed by thin planks protected her machinery. Her sailors had spent many more long hours at gunnery drill than had their counterparts on the *Alabama*. When the Yankee cruiser's skipper, Captain John A. Winslow, announced that the ship would steam to Cherbourg to confront Semmes's vessel, the crew greeted the news with cheers and excitement, for the *Alabama* was the Rebel raider that Yankee seamen most wanted to get.

Soon after the *Kearsarge* arrived in the French port, Semmes challenged the cruiser to a duel. Marvel only speculates about why the Rebel skipper decided to fight.

The longer Semmes remained in Cherbourg, Marvel observes, the greater the chance that more Union vessels would gather to bottle her up. Semmes might have discharged his crew, but instead sought battle, perhaps because of instinctive aggressiveness or a reluctance to avoid a stand-up fight after destroying so many unarmed ships. Marvel argues that Semmes remained unaware of the *Kearsarge*'s "chain-cladding" until after the battle.

On 19 June 1864, the two ships steamed out into the English Channel and fought one of the Civil War's most storied naval engagements. After an hour-long duel, the Yankee cruiser sent the Rebel raider to the bottom. In keeping with the focus of the rest of the book, Marvel's account of the battle focuses on the experiences of the sailors.

After the fight, Semmes discharged most of the *Alabama*'s survivors, many of whom died as paupers. Several *Kearsarge* crewmen succumbed shortly after the Civil War to pneumonia, tuberculosis, and consumption, diseases that Marvel argues were probably acquired on the ship. Those who lived joined the *Kearsarge* Naval Veterans Association, which ceased to exist in 1921 when the last veteran died.

Marvel's book at once satisfies and frustrates. His writing is lively and engaging and he spins a good yarn, but he offers nothing in the way of a thesis statement beyond this bleak conclusion:

The *Alabama*'s principal service to the Confederacy appears to have been its effect on Southern morale, for it offered false hope of victory at sea and spread sympathy for the cause around the globe. It diverted few Union vessels from the stifling blockade, which it never had any hope of breaking. And the *Kearsarge* crewmen achieved perhaps even less in a practical sense, despite their victory. Even Raphael Semmes had seemed to predict the end of his crippled ship's career as it approached the Cotenin Peninsula, and increasing European discomfort over Confederate vessels would have sealed its fate before long, anyway. The battle against the commerce raiders was really won by the foreign ministers, and no one needed to die in the channel except to appease Southern honor (p. 265).

One would like to think that the travails these sailors faced and the suffering they endured has a deeper meaning.

Through the technique of having several individuals reappear throughout the book, almost like characters in a novel, Marvel breathes life into the two ships. Most of the *Kearsarge*'s crew hailed from New England. The lives they led, the frustrations they experienced, and the indignities they suffered at the hands of their officers are given voice by men like Charles Fisher, the officers' African American cook, and coal heaver William Wainwright. The *Alabama*'s population came largely from the British Isles, like the ubiquitous Michael Mars, but also included Southerners like the scoundrel Clarence Yonge. Marvel does not plumb the full depth of his characters' personalities as do biographers or novelists. This perhaps reflects the limitations of his sources, for diaries, memoirs, and letters sometimes fail to reveal fully the personalities of their authors. Marvel's sketches of the flamboyant Semmes or the prosaic Winslow are superficial compared to those found in other *Alabama* books, but Marvel might deliberately have under-written them so as not to divert readers' attention from the sailors.

Marvel's book is long on description and short on analysis. Its scope allows him to tell the story of the sailors on the *Alabama* and *Kearsarge* in great depth and detail. But that same scope also prevents him from drawing broader conclusions about Civil War sailors. Was life so dull and bleak for sailors on a fast ship intercepting blockade runners off Wilmington, or on a monitor engaged in bombarding Charleston's fortifications, or on a paddlewheeler interdicting illegal commerce along the Potomac? Nor does Marvel compare the sailors' experiences to those of civilians living ashore, soldiers, or merchant mariners. Although he never intended to portray life on the *Alabama* and the *Kearsarge* as the experience of Civil War sailors in microcosm, a broader context would have enriched his assessment of the quality of life on these two famous ships.

Nevertheless, Marvel succeeds in what he set out to do. His book paints a vivid picture of what life was like for the sailors on the *Kearsarge* and the *Alabama*.

Notes

[1]. Bell I. Wiley, *The Life of Johnny Reb: The Common Soldier of the Confederacy* (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1943) and *The Life of Billy Yank: The Common Soldier of the Union* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1952).

[2]. Gerald F. Linderman, *Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War* (New York: Free Press, 1987); Reid Mitchell, *Civil War Soldiers: Their Expectations and Their Experiences* (New York: Viking, 1988); Joseph Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle: The*

Civil War Alliance of Black Soldiers and White Officers (New York: Free Press, 1990); James M. McPherson, *What They Fought For, 1861-1865* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

[3]. Robert M. Browning, Jr., *From Cape Charles to Cape Fear: The North Atlantic Blockading Squadron during the Civil War* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993); George Buker, *Blockaders, Refugees, and Contrabands: Civil War on Florida's Gulf Coast* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993).

[4]. Robert J. Schneller, Jr., *A Quest for Glory: A Biography of Rear Admiral John A. Dahlgren* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1996).

[5]. Paolo E. Coletta, "A Selectively Annotated Bibliography of Naval Power in the American Civil War," *Civil War History* 42 (March 1996): 32-63.

[6]. Norman C. Delaney, *Ghost Ship: The Confederate Raider Alabama* (Middletown, Conn.: Southfarm Press, 1989); Charles M. Robinson III, *Shark of the Confederacy: The Story of the CSS Alabama* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1995); Charles G. Summersell, *CSS Alabama: Builder, Captain, and Plans* (University: University of Alabama Press, 1985); John M. Taylor, *Confederate Raider: Raphael Semmes of the Alabama* (Washington: Brassey's, 1994).

[7]. William N. Still, Jr., "The Common Sailor, Part I: Yankee Blue Jackets," *Civil War Times Illustrated* 24 (February 1985): 24-39 and "Part II: Confederate Tars" (March 1985): 12-19.

[8]. For example, William Frederick Keeler, *Aboard the USS* Monitor*: 1862; the Letters of Acting Paymaster William Frederick Keeler, U.S. Navy, to his Wife, Anna*, ed. Robert W. Daly (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1964) and William Harwar Parker, *Recollections of a Naval Officer, 1841-1865*, ed. Craig Symonds (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1985).

[9]. Marvel is a freelance writer living in New Hampshire. His best-known books include a well-received, well-researched biography of Ambrose E. Burnside and an award-winning history of Andersonville. *Burnside* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991); *Andersonville: The Last Depot* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

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