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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.

Reviewed by Donald S. Frazier (McMurry University)
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Because Robert J. Schneller, Jr., is a little faster on the draw than I, this will be the second review of *The Alabama & the Kearsarge: The Sailor's Civil War* most H-CivWar subscribers will see (the first crossed listed from H-War on January 17). Schneller's thoughts on the book were well-conceived and well-presented. His background in naval history gave him a perfect vantage point from which to view and consider this work. He showed the H-War and H-CivWar audiences where this book fits into the historiography of the conflict, and he described its contents accurately. I agree with almost every point he made in his review.

This review, on the other hand, is from a decidedly landlubber perspective. For a native West Texan, as I am, life aboard an ocean-going vessel–at any period of time, for any period of time–seems like an alien and ill-fated endeavor. William Marvel has removed much of the mystery surrounding life aboard a blue-water warship in *The Alabama & the Kearsarge.* At the same time, he has confirmed most of my beliefs regarding life before the mast. One must consider that the naval history of Texas involves bastardized riverboats, a few lucky shots from shore batteries, and a dreadnought that had, for decades, been cemented to the bottom of the Houston Ship Channel. It is from this fairly untainted and un-naval perspective that I approached this book. And, like many academics, I snapped up the opportunity to review this book as a chance to provide some economical Christmas break reading.

As a book read for enjoyment, *The Alabama & the Kearsarge* is extremely entertaining and informative–in fact, one of the best I have come across recently. I ran through it in a few days, and enjoyed *almost* every page of it (Marvel's repeated use of "ennui" to describe the boredom weariness, and discontent aboard ship did become mildly distracting). I was struck by a number of things revealed by Marvel as I contemplated my personal reaction to his prose. First, life aboard the U.S.S. *Kearsarge* would have been an absolute nightmare to me. The vessel spent more time undergoing repairs than contributing to the Union war effort. Fruitless cruises from Spain to the Azores constituted the bulk of the ship's action, with the exception of the climactic duel with the C.S.S. *Alabama* off Cherbourg. Marvel was hard-pressed to make this ship interesting. I did find his description of the construction of the vessel extremely informative. The author ably presented the frigid air and water of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, as a dramatic backdrop to the rather mundane task of assembling a ship of war. Even the naming process revels much about the nature of the U.S. government that prosecuted that war. The recruitment of the crew, the modification of the ship's hull to incorporate chain armor like the Mississippi River fleet, and other such details are fascinating.

At the same time, he introduces Raphael Semmes in a warmer climate as he led the C.S.S. *Sumter* out to sea from the Mississippi. Its wheezing engines and ill-defined objective provide little initial confidence in the Rebel campaign of commerce raiding. His second vessel, the *Alabama*, was a well-bred killer. This book speeds along when the author describes the creation of this raider. The *Alabama* snaps up unsuspecting merchant men and lights the horizon with blazing whale oil to mark another victim's point of disaster.

This technique, of jumping from one ship to another to provide comparison and contrast, is the principal vehicle Marvel uses throughout the book. Mostly it works. Often, though, there are just too many coal heavers, doughty marines, drunken New Englanders, conspiring Southerners, scrappy Lilliputians, and illiterate Germans to keep up with. In the end, only one name jumps out: Semmes. The swabbies aboard the *Kearsarge* are almost as anonymous as their uniforms are shapeless, and the crew of the *Alabama* is as unsavory, mercenary, and English as I assumed they would be before I started the book. Then again, maybe that is precisely the point. Bell Wiley did not want the reader to know Billy Yank and Johnny Reb as individuals, but rather as "everyman" templates.

In the same way, Marvel presents the deep water sailors of the Civil War in such a way as to leave the reader with an impression of life aboard ship.

The author attempts to breathe life into the characters who narrate the story, but the severely tedious nature of their lives works against him. Over and over the reader must endure superficial tales of sailors overstaying shore leave, being dragged back to the ship drunk, or just jumping ship entirely. An unsavory lot, to be sure, and reminiscent of many a person I have met at truck stops from Sweetwater to Big Spring. But, like the aforementioned denizens of modern-day I-20 ga-gro-grills (gas, groceries, and grill), the people Marvel describes all blend together into a particular, and memorable, type. As such, the overall effect is perfect in its ability to provide a sense of the "sailor's Civil War" without lapsing into anecdotal history.

Alas, the poor *Alabama*. While the *Kearsarge* suffered from mind-numbing boredom, it did have well-maintained boilers, a well-scraped hull, and a well-disciplined crew. Its Rebel adversary was long on adventure but lacked all the requirements necessary to keep it afloat. These ships serve as allegories for the war as a whole. The *Kearsarge* was all Yankee. Not flashy, not beautiful, but very proper and very deadly when it came time to go to work. The *Alabama*, despite the country of origin of most of its crew, was all Southerner. Impetuous and striking, it lived fast and fought hard until finally it became a victim of its own hard cruising. When it finally slumped into Cherbourg, this vessel's problems were terminal, with rotted timbers, scaly boilers, stale gunpowder, and surly crewmen. The *Kearsarge*, still fresh from years of good maintenance and light usage, provide the *coup de grace* that put the defiant Rebel out of its misery and allowed it, and Semmes, to pass from the world's oceans with typical Rebel bravado. A great show, but an inevitable end.

The story of the *Alabama* and the *Kearsarge* is not new to most Civil War historians. For a quick and informative look at the prowling of the *Alabama*, for instance, Spencer Tucker of Texas Christian University has just published *Raphael Semmes and the Alabama* as part of Grady McWhiney's Civil War Campaigns and Commanders series. This short book handles the high points admirably. Marvel, on the other hand, has provided a wealth of details for those who cannot get enough of this amazing story, and he has given us as close a look at his two subject ships and their crews as we are likely to see. In doing so, he has enriched our sense of what the Civil War was like in human terms and exposed some readers to an aspect of the war the have never known.

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