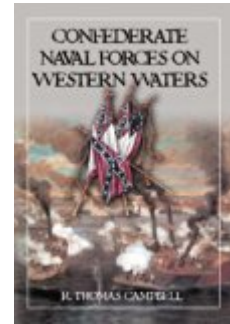


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

R. Thomas Campbell. *Confederate Naval Forces on Western Waters: The Defense of the Mississippi River and Its Tributaries*. Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2005. v + 272 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7864-2203-6.

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## Vexing the Father of Waters

Much has been made of the impromptu nature of the Confederate military during the Civil War. The South did not possess the means of carrying out a war, including any means of defending the waterways that divided the nascent country. The Mississippi River, most important of these waterways, saw a continued flurry of activity throughout the war. R. Thomas Campbell's book, *Confederate Naval Forces on Western Waters: The Defense of the Mississippi River and Its Tributaries*, chronicles the attempts to create an impromptu naval force, capable of contending with the Federal Navy, from scratch as well as the actions that the new force was involved in against the U.S. Navy.

The vast majority of Campbell's book is a battle history of the Confederate Navy in the West. Campbell deftly weaves a tale of smoky combat upon the Mississippi and its lesser tributaries. The reader can feel the cramped nature of sailors working within the gun ports, blinded by smoke and deafened by the roar of the guns. Campbell's writing is so vivid in places that one can almost see the decks awash in blood and smell burning powder lingering in the air.

The theme of first chapter of Campbell's book differs from the rest of the book in that it illustrates the rise of privateering in Confederate naval strategy and the importance of New Orleans as a privateer base prior to its fall to Union forces. The first half of the chapter revolves around the *CSS Sumter* and its role as the first Confederate command of Raphael Semmes. Campbell explains the

Southern letters of marque system and its importance to the rise of commerce raiding ships sent forth to harass Union shipping. He also deals with the fortification and action at Ship Island in the Gulf of Mexico. While these add a certain depth to the book by expanding the theater of naval operations, they seem to deviate from the stated nature of the work by moving focus away from the Mississippi River and actual naval actions on that body of water.

Campbell concentrates on the major points of conflict along the Mississippi. The actions at Island Number Ten, Vicksburg, and New Orleans are the major ones in this book, as well as those on the White River and the bayous around Vicksburg. Each chapter provides an insight into a different engagement. Some sections of the book follow certain vessels as a large narrative, but by and large the chapters are separate entities in and of themselves. By and large the action of this book is ship-to-ship combat, but there are rare glimpses of the Confederate bombarding Federal land forces, including action at Belmont, Missouri, and Galveston, Texas.

The documents chosen for use in this book are an interesting mix of primary and secondary items. Sources range from Raimondo Luraghi's 1996 *A History of the Confederate Navy* to various postwar remembrances and memoirs. Campbell also utilizes the papers of three Confederate naval officers to personalize his narrative. The most intriguing document set used is a Confederate congressional report from an investigation into the Navy De-

partment and its management, held in 1863. Campbell cites the report at various points, but he never states if the failure of the Confederate Navy in the West played a role in the call for this investigation or what the joint commission accomplished.

Despite the in-depth detail given to various engagements, the author pays little attention to the development of some crucial aspects of naval warfare. The invention of torpedoes plays only a small part during the actions around Vicksburg. The only major technological innovation covered in Campbell's book is the development of ironclads, which were cobbled together from seized or purchased civilian steamboats. Here he primarily focuses on the use of iron and steel rails to cover the boats and the procurement of guns. There is also some discussion of the various types of rams developed to counter Federal ironclads, but again, there is a lack of depth.

As stated earlier, Campbell's book is almost entirely a battle history. *Confederate Naval Forces on Western Waters* leaves the reader wondering what naval policy the South pursued in the West. There is no detailed discussion of what direction commanders on the Mississippi re-

ceived from Richmond, nor is there a discussion of anything that occurred on shore. Campbell writes about the scramble to procure or construct vessels and raise a force to man them as a sidelight of actual combat. He discusses naval actions in a very fluid manner that draws in the attention of the reader. A misfortunate oversight is the presence of very extensive appendices that remain uncited in the main body of the book. Much of the material included in the appendices supplement the corresponding chapters well, but it is entirely up to the reader to explore them.

*Confederate Naval Forces on Western Waters* offers the casual reader or interested academic an introduction into the naval war in the West. The author weaves a narrative tale that winds through the book, relating the adventures and bravery of the men of the Confederate Navy in the West. If one is looking for policy decisions or a social history of the men who served in the ranks of the impromptu force the reader must look elsewhere. For the informal reader, however, R. Thomas Campbell paints a picture of naval combat vital to the Confederate war effort.

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