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Disaster in Damp Sand: The Red River Expedition

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succinct, and broad ranging in scope. Not surprisingly, the United States appears only peripherally in these sidebars; American naval ascendance is still on the horizon as the book comes to a close.

Ironclads at War is not the last word on the subject, but it does have much to offer. Those with an interest in ironclad operations outside the United States will find it a valuable resource that synthesizes scholarship otherwise unavailable to most American readers. Specialists might not always agree with the authors' conclusions and will want to consult more focused monographs, but the tradeoff, a global perspective, makes this book a worthwhile contribution to naval history.

KURT HACKEMER
University of South Dakota

Anders, Curt. *Disaster in Damp Sand: The Red River Expedition*. Carmel: Guild Press of Indiana, 1998. 175pp. \$21

The Red River expedition? Why would anyone want to write a book about that? Whoever heard of it? Curt Anders has chosen to write about a little-known yet actually significant episode in the American Civil War. His is an absorbing account of a campaign that failed.

The purposes of the expedition, as defined by the general in chief, Henry Halleck, to General Nathaniel P. Banks in November 1862, were to open the lower Mississippi by capturing Vicksburg; destroy the railroad yards at Jackson and Marion, Mississippi; and open the Red River as far as it was

navigable to provide an outlet for the sugar and cotton of northern Louisiana. Halleck also suggested that the Red River in Union possession would be the best base for operations in Texas.

The campaign opened in February 1863 with a strike by Confederate general Richard Taylor (a protégé of Stonewall Jackson) against a Federal installation west of New Orleans. Banks retaliated by attempting to encircle and annihilate Taylor, which permitted some cotton and commodities to get through to New Orleans but delayed Banks's operations in furtherance of his mission. By May 1863, Banks was finally ready to start, with an assault against Confederate fortifications. He had a three-to-one advantage, but his vague orders resulted in failure and heavy Union losses. General Ulysses S. Grant's success at Vicksburg, however, caused the Confederate commander at Port Hudson, southeast of the juncture of the Red River and the Mississippi, to surrender. However, General Taylor, in almost guerrilla warfare style, stymied further Union advances. This led Banks to a variety of operations in western Louisiana, including a failed amphibious attempt on Galveston, Texas, and a land movement via the Sabine Pass at the Texas-Louisiana border in September 1863. The balance of 1863 and the period up to May 1864 was taken up with a series of assaults, retreats, successes, and disasters, up and down and around the Red and Sabine Rivers. When Taylor was transferred east of the Mississippi in the summer of 1864, the generals and troops he left behind kept Banks and the Yankees from making any more attempts for the balance of the war in the Trans-Mississippi. They

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would have destroyed the Union army had it not been for the ineptness of the Confederate theater commander, Edmund Kirby Smith. Rivers and other waters were essential parts of the war. However, the problem with water in this expedition was that there was too little of it. Hence the book's title, *Disaster in Damp Sand*.

General Banks's conduct during the campaign was so bad as to be ludicrous. It is hard to believe that someone so inept could have gained a generalship, much less retained it. But he had, and Anders makes skillful use of quotations from Banks's subordinates to show that he was not only unable to come up with a good plan but could not stick to the one he chose.

The Navy comes out well. It is hard to believe that it sailed on damp sand, but sail it did. Time and again it came to the rescue in tight situations, and when it failed, Admiral David Porter did not seek to evade responsibility. In that he was a refreshing change from the generals, most of whom were constantly finding fault with everyone and every thing but themselves and were most proficient in advancing their own causes and reputations.

The Red River expedition was significant as the final undoing of a general whom Lincoln had appointed for political reasons and had then been stuck with too long. Its failure also provided the Radical Republicans with grist for their mill. It is, however, regarded as the last decisive Confederate victory in the Civil War.

Anders's book makes dramatic use of the participants' own words, as taken from official Union and Confederate

records. Particularly effective is the testimony given before the joint congressional Committee on the Conduct of the War. Here we are introduced to the nefarious "Bluff" Ben Wade, chairman of the committee, leading witnesses and documenting conclusions in favor of the Radical Republicans, who were in charge of the committee. Happily, Congress does not do that any more.

The author's use of quotations and excerpts from primary sources does not hamper the flow of the book, as so often happens. I have observed the author's talent in the use of sources in his other works. It is one of the hallmarks of his writing, and an effective one. We can rely on Curt Anders as a historian.

He is also the author of *Hearts in Conflict* (a one-volume history of the Civil War), *Fighting Generals*, *Fighting Confederates*, and a soon-to-be-published biography of Henry Halleck, *Henry Halleck's War: A Fresh Look at Lincoln's General-in-Chief*.

Disaster in Damp Sand is a good read. It moves along, and it tells about the Red River expedition from a viewpoint different from that of previous accounts: "As was the case with better-known battles—Shiloh, Fredericksburg, Stones River, Chancellorsville—the Red River Campaign settled nothing, at enormous cost."

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