

1999

A History of the Confederate Navy

Charles Neimeyer

Raimondo Luraghi

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Neimeyer, Charles and Luraghi, Raimondo (1999) "A History of the Confederate Navy," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 52 : No. 4 , Article 24.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol52/iss4/24>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

though Lamson, having reached the edge of the sea parapet, was shot through the left arm and shoulder. The same day he wrote, "It had been a dreadful Sunday, but we have done *something* toward ending the war." Lee's surrender at Appomattox found Lamson en route to the Brooklyn Navy Yard, where he was to report for duty on the USS *Colorado* as Fleet Lieutenant of the European Squadron.

Like the enlisted men, Lamson found life in the postwar era anticlimactic. Rapid demobilization, coupled with curtailed promotions, led to his resignation in the spring of 1866. Declining health, marked by recurring bouts of malaria and a debilitating illness diagnosed as "locomotor ataxia," a spinal disease that caused partial paralysis of feet and legs, led him to apply for a pension in the decade before he died. Due to Lamson's distinguished service during the war, the Navy reappointed him lieutenant and placed him on the retired list in 1895. Lamson died on 14 August 1903.

Of the 2,200,000 men who fought for the Union, only 115,000 served in the Navy. Yet the U.S. Navy's contribution far exceeded that implied by the 5 percent of the Union force that it represented. Warships maintained an increasingly effective blockade of Southern ports and also protected coastal shipping lanes and inland rivers essential to logistical support of Northern armies. Most important, Army-Navy task forces won some of the most significant Northern victories of the war: Fort Donelson, Vicksburg, Port Hudson, Mobile Bay, and Fort Fisher. Additionally, the Navy won many important battles on its own: New Orleans, Fort

Henry, Hatteras Inlet, and Memphis. Ringle and the McPhersons are themselves pioneers in the belated recognition of the crucial role of the Union navy in the war's outcome.

COLE C. KINGSEED
Colonel, U.S. Army

Luraghi, Raimondo. Translated by Paolo E. Coletta. *A History of the Confederate Navy*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1996. 514pp. \$39.95

At long last, the much-needed modern history of the Confederate naval experience during the American Civil War has been written. What is unusual about this history is that it was done not by an American but by a very capable and distinguished Italian historian, who specializes in American history at the University of Genoa. Perhaps because of his international roots, the author was able to argue effectively his point that much of the Confederate navy had its origins in European shipyards. Thoroughly researched and meticulously annotated, Luraghi's work is a joy to read from start to finish.

Because Luraghi's purpose was to write a comprehensive history of the Confederate navy during the Civil War, he creates some inherent problems for readers who want to know more about a particular ship or naval campaign. For example, while he devotes an entire chapter to the famous and well-documented encounter between USS *Monitor* and CSS *Virginia*, he gives short shrift to the important exploits of the commerce raider CSS *Shenandoah*.

Moreover, he also neglects to chronicle the activities of Confederate naval forces as they attempted to assist land forces during the siege of Richmond in the spring of 1865. In fact, elements of the Confederate navy performed valiantly covering General Robert E. Lee's retreat toward Appomattox. Nevertheless, the author is able to offset such weaknesses with a deluge of detail on Confederate ship activity and various innovative ideas developed during the war.

Indeed, Luraghi effectively portrays the accomplishments of the Confederate navy as almost miraculous, when one considers that the Union possessed a huge advantage, qualitative and quantitative, in everything needed to create a navy. Led by the effective (but largely disliked) Stephen Mallory, the Confederate Navy Department was able to overcome its inherent deficiencies with some remarkable innovations, ideas that nearly turned the tide several times during the Civil War.

For example, it was Mallory's plan to unleash ironclads on a predominately wooden Union navy; it would negate the North's seagoing superiority over the South. The main problem with Mallory's ironclad schemes, as revealed by Luraghi throughout the book, was that the South placed too much hope in some miracle weapon. After the successful initial foray of the CSS *Virginia* against the wooden Union force blockading Hampton Roads, had it not been for the timely and rushed intervention of the Union ironclad USS *Monitor*, the *Virginia* might indeed have wreaked havoc on the North. The lesson learned by Mallory at Hampton Roads was the wrong one—that a single powerful

ironclad could sweep the seas of Northern ships.

On the other hand, the U.S. Navy also learned lessons at Hampton Roads. As the war wore on, more and more Union commanders requested and received ironclads mounting huge rifled guns capable of piercing the thickest Confederate armor. Further, aggressive Union commanders like David Farragut and David Dixon Porter found that by moving quickly against key objectives, they could force the Confederates to commit their ironclads before they were fully capable of combat, or even complete. Time and again Union forces frustrated Confederate commanders of ironclads (particularly in the West) and forced them by aggressive action to scuttle or destroy their ships lest they fall into the hands of the enemy. Yet, argues Luraghi, Mallory and others in Richmond insisted on building single ironclads at various points in the South—with underpowered engines, poor armor plating, and ordnance inadequate to confront a similarly iron-clad, numerically superior U.S. Navy.

This is not to say that Mallory was totally blind to strategic realities. By the second year of the war he had created a new strategy, it having become obvious that a "miracle weapon" was not within the South's means. His new policy was based on four essential pillars: armored ships, rifled guns, commerce destroying, and submarine weapons. Luraghi notes that it was in the areas of commerce raiding and submarine weapons that the South was largely (if only temporarily) able to negate the maritime superiority of the North. For example, even the inconsequential breakout of small raiders like the CSS *Sumter* caused

the North to dispatch its best ships to hunt them down, thus taking them away from the strategically more important blockade duty. The problem with the Southern commerce-raiding campaign was that there was no protected forward base to refit and repair ships, like the U.S. Navy was to have at Ulithi during World War II. Instead, the Confederate raiders were invariably forced into neutral European ports, from which powerful Union ships waited for them to put to sea to be picked off.

The South was much more successful with its underwater innovations, which had more to do with mining than with submarine craft carrying explosives. Such warfare bordered at the time on illegality, according to the international rules of war—a fact that did not seem to bother the Confederates. It was in the area of underwater torpedoes (mines) that the South had its greatest success, sinking the powerful first-class ship USS *Tecumseh* at the battle of Mobile Bay and causing no small amount of panic on the part of the U.S. Navy as it struggled to overcome this particular threat (which, incidentally, it still does to this day).

As Luraghi notes in his conclusion, despite the South's limited success at commerce raiding and submarine warfare, it was never able to make up for its huge gap in industrial infrastructure and overall insufficient maritime experience and tradition. These, more than anything else, proved to be the South's ultimate undoing. In fact, Northern superiority was so taken for granted, even during the early years of the war, that President Abraham Lincoln allowed the Italian navy to purchase from the U.S.

Navy two powerful warships built in 1862 in New York.

Luraghi chronicles every phase of Confederate naval strategy throughout the four-year struggle. It is a powerful history and will be referred to for years to come. Finally, thanks also should be given to Paolo Coletta, for his superb and nearly flawless translation.

CHARLES NEIMEYER
Naval War College

Morriss, Roger. *Cockburn and the British Navy in Transition: Admiral Sir George Cockburn, 1772–1853*. Studies in Maritime History, ed. William N. Still, Jr. Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1998. 338pp. \$39.95

Cockburn: a swashbuckling role model for Patrick O'Brien's Jack Aubrey, or an intransigent obstacle to progress that assumed Berlin Wall proportions? Who could fail to be intrigued by an insight of the man who was taught by Nelson, described by the Americans as "the *savage* Cockburn" (after he had attacked and burned Washington), who spent a year with Napoleon as his custodian in St. Helena, and then seventeen years in politics? Today we are bombarded with images through the media of characters who are either idolised or vilified for having achieved barely half of Cockburn's impact on international and domestic affairs, and rarely in such contrasting capacities.

Presented with the task of reflecting a period of such radical social and political change as that between the American War of Independence and the Crimean War, Morriss, currently at the