

1996

From Cape Charles to Cape Fear: The North Atlantic Blockading Squadron during the Civil War

Frank Uhlig Jr.

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

Recommended Citation

Uhlig, Frank Jr. (1996) "From Cape Charles to Cape Fear: The North Atlantic Blockading Squadron during the Civil War," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 49 : No. 1 , Article 28.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol49/iss1/28>

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.

- Monty never lost a battle . . . and never forfeited the affection of his soldiers or the respect of his officers.

- Without an Ike to weld the coalition together, and keep it together, and without a Monty to convert OVERLORD from a blueprint into reality, victory might never have been achieved.

- OVERLORD was basically Monty's plan . . . which brought about the victory in Normandy . . . and brought the allied armies to the frontier of Germany. Without the grinding battles of Monty's Anglo-Canadians, Patton would never have made his triumphant, almost painless, scamper across France.

- As for the still unresolved issue of broad front versus narrow thrust, the verdict remains unproven with the balance tilting away from Monty.

Horne and Montgomery's book is not intended to be a comprehensive biography. That was done in the 1980s by Nigel Hamilton in his special three-volume effort, which was summarized and published as *Monty* by Random House in 1994. This book is superbly written, interesting, nicely focused, and balanced. Monty was indeed, as the subtitle states, "the lonely leader." He was also one of the few Great Captains of the twentieth century.

DOUGLAS KINNARD
Professor Emeritus
University of Vermont

Browning, Robert M., Jr. *From Cape Charles to Cape Fear: The North Atlantic Blockading Squadron during the Civil War*. Tuscaloosa, Ala.: Univ. of

Alabama Press, 1993. 453pp. (No price given)

The biggest task the U.S. Navy attempted during the Civil War was to blockade the South's ports and thus halt the flow of guns, ammunition, and other supplies the Confederate armies needed to survive and fight.

Numbed by the fact that the country it served had broken into two hostile parts, at first the Navy stumbled. However, after President Lincoln proclaimed the blockade, the Navy gained in vigor and self-confidence; but it was unjustified self-confidence, because the Navy was profoundly unprepared to face the task before it. The problems were those, first, of distance—the hostile stretch from Brownsville, Texas, to the Virginia Capes was enormous; second, of logistics—each ship off an enemy port needed constantly to be replenished, repaired, and, in the new age of steam, refueled; third, of ships—eventually hundreds would prove necessary, whereas when the war opened the Navy had only dozens; and finally, of men—those that had been sufficient to man forty-odd ships were not enough for nearly fifteen times that number.

Quickly the Navy organized its main seagoing force into four separate blockading squadrons: the East and West Gulf and the North and South Atlantic. *From Cape Charles to Cape Fear* focuses on the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron, whose responsibilities lay between the lower Chesapeake and North Carolina's southern border. Robert Browning, historian of the U.S. Coast Guard, describes the pivotal struggle in Hampton Roads in 1862 (which was a long drawn-out series of operations in the James River that ended only with the

154 Naval War College Review

war's end); the operationally incomplete campaign in the North Carolina sounds; and the attempt to close the port of Wilmington, North Carolina, to enemy traffic, which was not fully successful until the capture of Fort Fisher near the end of the war.

Browning's choice of subject is first-rate, for until now, no one had concentrated an entire book on the problems, failures, and accomplishments of any of the four blockading squadrons, and thus none have been able to dig deeply and broadly enough to explore the roots of the blockade's problems, failures, and successes.

When the war began, most of the Navy's ships were deep-draft seagoing vessels with a full suit of sails; half of them also had auxiliary steam with which to maneuver when the wind failed. As it turned out, only the steamers proved useful, but the most powerful drew too much to play a big part in the shoal-water struggle. So a whole new fleet of shallow-draft steamers had quickly to be designed and built, and until they were ready the Navy had to make do by arming small merchant steamers and harbor ferries. With such inadequate instruments of war the Navy penetrated the South's rivers and sounds. With them it also tried to carry out the blockade. Although ill suited, they drove the efficient, capacious, slow-sailing merchant vessels out of the trade with southern ports. But Rebel entrepreneurs and their British commercial allies replaced the sailing ships with slender, shallow-draft, low-freeboard, swift and handy steamers. Though able to carry only a small load, these ships had a much better

chance of getting that load to its destination than did any sailing ship.

One of the most useful things that Browning does is to make plain that though the blockaders found steam to be indispensable, it was also a great weakness that the Navy was never able to overcome. The difficulty lay in the fact that the engines of those days were so inefficient and unreliable, and the engineers so inexperienced, that the small blockading ships had hardly returned to their stations from the fuel dock or the repair yard when they had to go back again for one reason or another. Thus though the squadrons would have a lot of ships, few would be on station at any one time. To stretch their endurance, blockaders often anchored; but then, of course, especially at night, they were unready to apprehend a swiftly moving blockade runner.

In bringing to the fore these long hidden issues that were central to the course of the Civil War, Browning performs a major service. But his work suffers from some problems, most of them unnecessary. The book reads like a first draft, not a finished product. Its organization, with later events described before earlier ones, is confusing. Some of the sentences are incomplete, and the author misuses words: "illusive" cannot substitute for "elusive," nor "movement" for "maneuver." The word "terrain" means one thing, "waters" means another, and "gunboat" describes neither a sloop of war nor a monitor. Big, bold statements such as that in eastern Virginia "the navy kept communications open between the army and its supply bases, made a safe movement of

troops possible, and, more importantly, made their weak positions strong," deserve support and elaboration. Other statements, such as the "*Delaware* moved to the wharf and prepared to anchor," leave one with the sense that the sea is a foreign place to the author. There are numerous maps that are clearly marked but lack many of the place-names mentioned in the text, and not one has a scale—one must guess, or seek out an atlas, to determine the distances. A good editor could have spared both the author and his publisher such embarrassments.

Still, Browning keeps getting better, and if his early chapters were as good as his last two they would have been very good indeed. Most importantly, those who have read this book will better understand the Civil War.

FRANK UHLIG, JR.
Naval War College

Taylor, John M. *Confederate Raider: Raphael Semmes of the Alabama*. New York: Brassey's, 1994. 317pp. \$24.95

John Maxwell Taylor, author of several well received biographies, has written an objective and critical biography of Raphael Semmes, the "daring," "petulant," "flinty," mustache-twisting skipper of CSS *Sumter* and CSS *Alabama*. "The most successful practitioner of the naval strategy of commerce raiding," Semmes was lionized by Southerners as "the Stonewall Jackson of the sea" and scorned by Northerners as a pirate.

Do we really need another biography of Semmes? Surprisingly, the

answer is yes. Although several biographers have already written about him, their works are either stilted in style, pro-Southern in outlook, or not comprehensive.

Taylor has done a marvelous job filling in the gaps on the life of the Confederate Navy's most colorful character. Born in Maryland, Semmes pursued a dual career as a U.S. naval officer and lawyer. During the Mexican War he lost his ship, the *Somers*, in a storm. He "went south" during the Civil War because he viewed the struggle as a holy war of good against evil—the exploitative, intolerant "puritans."

The bulk of the book covers the cruises of the *Sumter* and the *Alabama*, during which Semmes personally accounted for 36 percent of the U.S. merchant ships destroyed by Confederate raiders. After the war Semmes worked as a college professor, newspaper editor, and lawyer, and became the "first citizen" of Mobile, Alabama.

Some readers might be disappointed that the book does not address broader questions, such as whether Semmes's actions had any subsequent impact on maritime law. However, Taylor does just what a biographer is supposed to do—focus on his subject. Rather than develop a thesis or central argument, Taylor concentrates on Semmes's personality and exploits and does not fall into the biographer's trap of becoming too fond of his subject. The author's writing is lively and engaging. He has a knack for using just the right anecdote to illustrate his point. For example, Semmes could be a hypocrite. His Mexican War memoir denounced commerce raiders crewed by foreigners,