



The Civil War on the Mississippi: Union Sailors, Gunboat Captains, and the Campaign to Control the River by Barbara Brooks Tomblin.

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Review by Robert L. Glaze, Georgia Military College (rglaze@gmc.edu).

While the American Civil War's naval operations have an ample historiography, they have never garnered as much academic or popular attention as those of the Union and Confederate armies. Episodes from the war's naval history are remembered mostly for their novelty, such as the clash between the ironclad USS *Monitor* and CSS *Merrimack* (*Virginia*) at Hampton Roads (8-9 Mar. 1862)¹ or the tragic launch of the Confederate submarine *H.L. Hunley*, rather than their historical significance. Nevertheless, historians have persuasively shown that the Union Navy played a pivotal role in the Western Theater. With *The Civil War on the Mississippi*, prolific naval historian Barbara Tomblin has made a compelling addition to this literature.

While important leaders like Andrew Foote, David Farragut, and David Porter are discussed and evaluated, Tomblin's focus on junior officers, midshipmen, and ordinary sailors is the distinguishing feature of her work. She builds her narrative around the letters and diaries of lower-ranking Union seamen. The result is a study that chronicles both operational history² and the lived experiences of Union sailors.

The authors of these diaries, memoirs, and letters range in rank from fleet captain to first-class boy.... Their letters and journal entries often echo the official reports, but they also write about going ashore on foraging parties, shoveling snow from an ironclad's deck, assisting the surgeon in amputating a fellow crewman's arm, and liberating supplies of whisky from a captured enemy vessel. They also offer candid assessments of their commanding officers, observations about the people living along the river, relationships with African Americans and personal views of a war that lasted far longer than many expected or hoped and became increasingly cruel. (12)

To their credit, Tomblin argues, Union leaders recognized the Mississippi's significance from the beginning of the war. Control of the "Father of Waters," however, proved to be a daunting task. Throughout the war, the Mississippi River squadrons suffered from manpower shortages and the need to rely on inexperienced and poorly trained recruits. Their often hastily constructed vessels were sometimes technologically incapable of completing their missions. For example, the deep-draft ships of Farragut's fleet struggled against the unpredictable depths of southern waterways. Furthermore, "snags or sawyers, collisions, and falling trees, and the swift current" made the river itself the navy's "enemy" (288). Aside from death or injury in battle, individual sailors were plagued by heat, mosquitoes, disease, shoreline snipers, and mechanical malfunctions like exploding boilers. Torpedoes (i.e., mines) were the bane of Federal ships and sailors.

Despite the myriad challenges it faced on the Mississippi, the Union Navy's superiority to its Confederate counterparts was always probable. During the war's first two years, Federal fleets

1. See, further, Jonathan Beard, "Civil War Clash of Ironclads," *MiWSR* 2019-10.

2. For which Tomblin makes good use of the *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion* (Washington: GPO, 1894-1922).

made consistent progress toward controlling the river and, thus, bisecting the Confederacy. While the Rebel Navy at times offered stout resistance, its technical and material limitations in the face of the skill and resources of the Federal fleet made a southern victory on the Mississippi unlikely. Moreover, Union captains and sailors proved to be an ingenious and driven lot. Like their army counterparts, many Union Navy officers had cut their teeth during the Mexican-American War and found opportunities to distinguish themselves and gain promotions early in the Civil War.

Here, as in her *Bluejackets and Contrabands*,³ the author shows that escaped slaves proved to be valuable assets to the Union Navy. Much like the army, the navy was a de facto agent of liberation along the Mississippi right from the war's outset. African Americans came to the navy in droves searching for freedom and sanctuary. While not always greeted with open arms, some refugees became laborers or crewmembers. Others provided valuable intelligence about Confederate movements and activities or served as nurses on hospital boats. Given the confined spaces aboard Civil War-era naval vessels, true segregation was impossible—despite the insistence of some Union officers.

Tomblin makes it clear that the Union's brown-water navy—and its cooperation with the army—were essential to subduing the Confederacy. In her conclusion, she aptly quotes Adm. David Dixon Porter's judgment that "The services of the Navy in the West had as much effect in reducing the south to submission as the greater battles fought in the East" (290).

Barbara Tomblin's discerning account of the Mississippi River campaigns from the conception of Winfield Scott's "Anaconda Plan" to the fall of Vicksburg features ample contextualization, a smooth narrative style, and a thorough command of primary sources and relevant Civil War naval scholarship. These virtues will make *The Civil War on the Mississippi* instructive and absorbing reading for specialists and general readers alike.

3. Subtitle: *African Americans and the Union Navy* (Lexington: U Pr of Kentucky, 2009).