

Conspicuous Dash': New Biographies Log One Bold Confederate's Naval Exploits

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Review

CONSPICUOUS DASH'

New biographies log one bold Confederate's naval exploits

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Summer 2000

Jones, Robert A. *Confederate Corsair: The Life of Charles W. Savez Read*. Stackpole Books, 2000-07-01. ISBN 811715329

This review is also available under the following title:

Sea Hawk of the Confederacy: Lt. Charles W. Read and the Confederate Navy

In a recent issue of this journal a reviewer rightly observed, "Biographies of Civil War-era naval officers are a scarce commodity and those of Southern officers are even more rare." That is why the publication of **Sea Hawk of the Confederacy** and **Confederate Corsair** is worthy of note. The fact that they are about the same naval officer, and a junior officer at that, makes the event even more interesting and rare. Charles Read is unquestionably one junior officer who rates a biography.

Read's Civil War career is so fascinating that it reads like a novel. It certainly is the kind of story that should attract some movie producer. Although the books' titles, "Sea Hawk" and "Corsair," suggest that Read was a pirate (another earlier biographer, Bob Weems, called him a "Buccaneer"), in reality he was a naval officer whose activities were well within the bounds of legitimate warfare, namely the destruction of an enemy's sea-going commerce. A good bit of his brief career had nothing to do with the destruction of the Union's oceanic commerce, but riverine operations (both on land and water) defending the Confederacy.

His early life gave no indication of the most capable naval officer that he would become. He was born in 1840 in Yazoo County, Mississippi. Nine years later his father departed for the California gold fields where he subsequently

died, leaving a 10-year-old Read virtually on his own. Jones writes that Read was "impulsive," and his shifting career interests seem to support this characterization. At first attracted to journalism, he became bored with it and took up acting. He portrayed a sailor in a play before running away from home, intending to really ship before the masts on a sailing vessel out of New Orleans.

Young Read clearly was interested in a nautical career, which led his mother to seek successfully congressional assistance to get her son admitted to the United States Naval Academy. He was one of 52 who made up the class of 1860, of whom only 25 would graduate. His academic career at the Academy, however, was mediocre at best, ranking last in his class. Last he was, but there were classmates who even then recognized his potential. George Dewey and Winfield Scott Schley, both of whom served in the Union navy during the Civil War and became heroes in the Spanish-American War, were well acquainted with Read at the Academy. Admiral Schley later wrote that Read's class ranking "was in no sense the measure of his intellectual worth, but arose from his lack of application to study. He possessed in high degree common sense - or ought I to say uncommon sense, as everyone does not possess it - that underlies success in every calling. . . . He had sublime courage, he had conspicuous dash, he had great originality, and was aggressive in all that he did."

His career in the United States Navy was short-lived. When Mississippi seceded, he resigned his commission. At that time he was attached to the steam frigate *Powhatan* deployed off the coast of Mexico. He waited until the frigate returned to New York in the middle of March before departing for the South. The Confederate Navy Department ordered him to the *McR'*, then fitting out as a warship in New Orleans. It was on the *McR'* that he first acquired his reputation as a cool but aggressive officer. The *McR'* was involved in a number of engagements from the Head of the Passes at the mouth of the Mississippi River to New Madrid, Missouri.

But it was the Battle of New Orleans in April 1862, when Flag Officer David Farragut bypassed the forts guarding the city, that Read first distinguished himself. As executive officer, and later commanding officer when his captain was mortally wounded, Read fought Farragut's fleet until the *McR'* was disabled. He then joined the crew of the ironclad ram *Arkansas*, fitting out at Yazoo City, Mississippi. In charge of the ship's stern battery, he participated in various actions as the ironclad fought powerful Union naval forces on her way down the Yazoo. Once on the Mississippi, the *Arkansas* moored at Vicksburg and near

Baton Rouge, where she eventually had to be destroyed because of engine failure.

Read then spent several weeks directing a battery of heavy guns at Port Hudson on the Mississippi before being assigned to the Confederate raider *Florida*, which at that time was in Mobile. Serving as a lieutenant and boarding officer he persuaded the ship's captain, John Maffitt, to allow him to convert and command one of the prizes, the Union brig *Clarence*, into a raider. This inaugurated the exploit that made Read famous or infamous depending on one's allegiance. Sailing up the Atlantic seaboard to Maine, Read and his handpicked crew successfully captured and armed the *Tacony*, *Archer*, and revenue cutter *Caleb Cushing*. All told, he seized 16 vessels before finally being captured himself. Incarcerated at Fort Warren, Massachusetts, he was paroled and exchanged in October 1864.

Assigned next to the James River Squadron, he directed a river battery and commanded the squadron's torpedo boats. In February 1865, Confederate Secretary of the Navy Stephen Mallory assigned him to command the side-wheeler *William H. Webb*, then at Shreveport, Louisiana. Read's audacious and desperate plan was to run the gauntlet of Federal ships and sortie into the Gulf of Mexico where the *William H. Webb* would become another one of the cruisers. By the time that he reached Shreveport and readied the ship, the War was virtually over. Nevertheless, he headed downstream and was able to pass New Orleans before his way was blocked, forcing him to destroy his vessel. Read would live until 1890, working an assortment of maritime jobs, his last being a New Orleans pilot.

The biographies by R. Thomas Campbell and Robert A. Jones describe in graphic detail Read's extraordinary naval career. Readers of these two lively and readable books will find plenty of naval action and adventure. They should certainly appeal to the general reader. With the exception of some details of Read's life, however, there is really nothing new revealed in the books. Both authors depend heavily upon published secondary and primary works for their information, although Jones cites considerably more primary sources than does Campbell, including unpublished documents from the Naval Archives.

Reviewing biographies of the same individual simultaneously leads to some interesting discoveries. The contents at times can be surprisingly different. For example, Campbell briefly discusses the Naval Academy's curriculum at the time

Read was there, while Jones describes a typical daily schedule. Both authors in their notes and bibliographies include information and evidently manuscripts about Read obtained from his descendants, but with one exception they come from different descendants. Both volumes are heavily illustrated - Jones with 32 and Campbell nearly a hundred - but again, with a few exceptions, they used different sketches and photographs.

Jones's bibliography is far longer and does indicate that his research was more extensive.

This reviewer has some minor concerns about unsubstantiated statements, erroneous information, and some inadequate notes that are found in both books. There are a few publications not cited by either author that would have been helpful, particularly Richard Winslow III's *'Constructing Munitions of War': The Portsmouth Navy Yard Confronts the Confederacy, 1861-1865* and Katherine Brash Jeter's *A Man and His Boat: The Civil War Career and Correspondence of Lieutenant Jonathan H. Carter, CSN*.

All in all, **Sea Hawk of the Confederacy** and **Confederate Corsair** are worthy additions to the literature on the naval side of the Civil War.

William N. Still, Jr. is professor of history emeritus and former director of the Program in Maritime History and Underwater Archology at East Carolina Univerhsity. His publications include Confederate Shipbuilding (1969), Iron Afloat: The Story of the Confederate Armorclads (1971), and The Confederate Navy (1997).