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Review

RIVER RAMS

Union rams and amphibious assault units were 'useless' and 'costly'

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Hearn, Chester G. *Ellet's Brigade: The Strangest Outfit of All.* Louisiana State University Press, 2000-05-01. ISBN 807125598

Chester G. Hearn is a prolific writer who has published an astonishing eight books in the past five years. Most of these concern naval aspects of the Civil War, and five of them, including this one, deal with the war on the Mississippi. **Ellet's Brigade** is the history of a curious - even bizarre - command that Hearn in his subtitle describes as "the strangest outfit of all."

The command of Charles Ellet, Jr., was not really a "brigade" at all except in name. It began in 1861 when Ellet, a 51-year-old engineer and bridge builder, tried to convince Navy Secretary Gideon Welles that a squadron of fast, unarmed river steamers, used as rams, could defeat conventional river warships. Welles was skeptical of both the idea and its progenitor, and rejected the proposal. But Ellet found a more receptive audience in Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton, who gave the eager but militarily inexperienced Ellet his chance.

Ellet purchased four side-wheel steamers (adding more later), reinforced their prows with heavy timbers, and took them to war, choosing several of his relatives as officers. Because his small squadron did not fit into the command structure of either the army or the navy, Ellet was practically his own master and virtually able to do whatever he wanted. Despite his command of warships, he bore the rank of colonel, though most of the time he disdained any uniform and wore civilian clothes on the bridge. His initial conception of a proper tactical doctrine for his rams was that they should smash themselves sacrificially into enemy gunboats on what amounted to suicide missions. Understandably, both the navy high command and many of those Ellet sought to recruit looked upon this whole enterprise with considerable skepticism.

Nevertheless, at the Battle of Memphis in June 1862, Ellet's unusual and aggressive tactics appeared to be justified when he charged past the U.S. Navy gunboats of Union Flag Officer Charles Henry Davis and into the midst of the enemy squadron, sinking the two largest Confederate gunboats and damaging others. Ellet received a leg wound in that battle and subsequently died of blood poisoning. Control of the ram fleet then devolved onto his brother Alfred, who was in command of the *Queen of the West* when it rammed the Confederate ironclad *Arkansas* under the guns of Vicksburg in July 1862. (Though William "Dirty Bill" Porter later claimed credit for the destruction of that vessel, Hearn argues that the critical blow was struck by the *Queen of the West* when, in the initial collision, it damaged the *Arkansas's* connecting rods, the subsequent failure of which forced the Rebels to abandon and destroy the vessel themselves.)

When David Dixon Porter took command of the Mississippi River Squadron that fall, Lincoln placed the ram fleet under the senior Porter's control. As compensation, Alfred Ellet was promoted to brigadier general, and saw to it that his teenage nephew Charlie became a colonel. Charlie took over command of the ram fleet while Alfred busied himself organizing a force dubbed the "Marine Brigade." The idea here was similar to current doctrine in the U.S. Marine Corps: an amphibious assault unit continuously embarked and therefore ready to descend at a moment's notice on an enemy position. Today this is called a Marine Amphibious Unit (MAU); Alfred Ellet called his command the "Mississippi Marine Brigade."

Alas, from this point on, the story loses some of its cohesiveness. Charlie Ellet's rams participated in a number of expeditions up the Yazoo and Red Rivers as well as on the Mississippi, but they did so as part of larger expeditions. The young colonel attempted to duplicate his uncle's feat by ramming the Confederate gunboat *City of Vicksburg* below the city, then incautiously ventured up the Red River where he ran his vessel aground and had to abandon it. That was pretty much the last independent action by the ram fleet, for Porter viewed Ellet's command not as a distinctive unit, but as a useful group of auxiliary vessels best used for transport or scouting.

In the latter half of the book, Hearn focuses increasingly on Alfred Ellet's Marine Brigade, which, like the ram fleet, tended to act independently. If 19-year-old Charlie was young and irresponsible, his uncle Alfred Ellet emerges in this narrative as unskilled and unreliable, even cowardly. He had trouble from

the outset. Recruiting was difficult because service in his unaffiliated command did not count against the state quotas in the conscription bills. As a result, he had to make promises to his recruits that he could not keep: no marching, clean beds, hot meals, etc. Once organized, his command of just under 1,200 men spent most of a year rampaging up and down the Mississippi, achieving little besides infuriating the locals, stealing cotton, and often running away at any sign of serious resistance.

The value of Hearn's coverage of these events is that it reminds us that the Civil War did not consist of a number of famous set-piece battles with long uneventful periods in between. Along the Mississippi, as elsewhere, it was a constant war of skirmishes and ambushes. In that war, Ellet's Brigade contributed little. The conclusion of Assistant Secretary of War Charles A. Dana was that Ellet's Brigade was "a very useless as well as costly institution," and a contemporary newspaper reported, all too accurately, that Ellet's men "were generally where they were not wanted and seldom at hand when needed."

The story of the creation and demise of this curious command offers insight into the ad hoc nature of the Union mobilization in the early years of the War. It was created in the first place due to the aggressive politicking of Charles Ellet, and subsequently sustained largely out of inertia. Hearn is a good storyteller, though the second half of the book lacks the narrative unity of the first. One other problem with the book is that its maps are all reprints of earlier, public domain sources and often do not include sites that are named in the text. Nevertheless, Hearn's many recent contributions, including **Ellet's Brigade**, successfully re-focus attention on the many-faceted naval side of the Civil War, including the conflict on the western rivers.

Craig L. Symonds is professor of history at the United States Naval Academy and the author of eight books on military and naval history including, most recently, Confederate Admiral: The Life and Wars of Franklin Buchanan (1999).