

Union Jacks: Yankee Sailors in the Civil War

William H. Roberts

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Review

Roberts, William H.

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Bennett, Michael J. *Union Jacks: Yankee Sailors in the Civil War*. University of North Carolina Press, \$34.95 ISBN 080782870X

The other boys in blue

Life of the Union mariner

Michl J. Bennett's extensive archival research has produced the best picture to date of the sailors of the Civil War. In this pathbreaking and readable book, Bennett writes about the origins, society, and culture of the men Abraham Lincoln called "Uncle Sam's web feet."

Soldiers dominated the nation's consciousness during the Civil War, and they have dominated the attention of later scholars just as fully. Scholars appear to have assumed that Union sailors were very similar to Union soldiers, assigning to them the same backgrounds, attitudes, and motivations.

Bennett's work destroys the validity of this assumption. Far from being nautical clones of the "Boys of '61," or even the conscripts of '64, Union sailors came disproportionately from the ranks of immigrants, former slaves, and working-class men. More likely than their soldier counterparts to enlist for pragmatic reasons, "Sailors were not the stuff of which patriots were made." Navy recruits were generally less educated and less ideological than their army counterparts, with less commitment to middle class "goodmen" values of gentility.

Sailor individuality started at the very beginning. Soldiers, especially early in the war, tended to enlist in units, serving with their friends and neighbors. Bursts of community patriotism, and enlistment bounties, which grew steadily larger during the war, sweetened the experience. By contrast, sailors enlisted one at a time, at "naval rendezvous" in the seamier areas of ports, and were sent randomly to ships. Although they could be generous and gregarious to a fault,

sailors carried more-or-less an attitude described in the modern Navy as, "To hell with you, Jack, I got mine."

In addition to being more individualistic, sailors tended to be more pragmatic. Being a sailor promised an experience that was, wrote one enlistee, "much more easy, nicer, and better than in the army." The average sailor's weather eye for safety and comfort, and his chance to earn prize money, did not go unnoticed by others. The Navy was generally thought to be a softer branch of service than the Army, but sailors, "brutally honest," seem to have shrugged off any feelings of being inadequately patriotic.

In describing sailor society, Bennett brings out the ways in which the Navy's social structure and the sailors' belief system clashed. Sailors believed strongly in individualism and personal freedom, while shipboard life demanded regimented attention to duty, close quarters living, and enforced teamwork. The peculiar circumstances of Civil War naval operations reinforced the sailors' sense of confinement. As a result, the dominant principles of sailor culture were escapism, freeing oneself from the confines of the ship physically or psychologically, and resistance, walking the "fine line between accepted defiance and chargeable insubordination." Sailors mastered a "dizzying display of subtle resistance, primarily aimed at officers."

Bennett also explores the way in which sailors evinced "a fanatical devotion to [their] limited sphere of rights." Sailors had little freedom to begin with, so it is not surprising that they became seriously disgruntled when they perceived that their rights were being trampled. "Rights," for example, were at stake when Congress abolished the grog ration in 1862, an action that caused widespread discontent and "hardened [sailors'] contrarian impulses." Rights were also at issue in related attempts to impose "middle class" morality upon sailors, such as trying to force them to stop using foul language. Sailors tolerated these initiatives only under duress, and if possible turned them to personal gain—voluntary attendance at church services, for example, turned almost universally into non-attendance.

Bennett addresses this particular issue in a chapter on religion that describes the lack of religious observance among sailors, the paucity of religious resources available to them, their generally cynical response to organized religion, and the conflicting imperatives of Sabbath and ship's duties. The U.S. Christian Commission sent literature and "delegates" to ships, impressing sailors that

"someone would board a ship to work for less than they did," but at war's end, the Commission admitted that work among sailors "is very peculiar work. . . . it might be termed difficult." There was no seagoing counterpart to the broadly based camp revivals that swept up both Union and Confederate armies.

The most serious challenge to the sailor's perceived rights, however, proved to be the Navy's integration of contrabands into its crews. The Navy had at first enlisted contrabands to perform menial jobs, at the lowest possible naval ratings. As such, white sailors generally accepted them; self-interested sailors preferred that other hands do the dirtiest work, even if the hands were black. Officers soon began to segregate sailors by race, especially in the Mississippi Squadron, but this became more difficult as contrabands' numbers increased and blacks began to prove themselves in the skills-based shipboard hierarchy. The Navy responded to Army competition for African-American recruits by raising the pay and status of black sailors, and this and the Emancipation Proclamation led to what white sailors called "frictions." Collective violence against contrabands was common and full-fledged race riots occurred.

A key factor in white sailors' lack of acceptance of their new shipmates was their social heritage. Coming primarily from working class backgrounds, sailors brought with them the pre-war fear of labor competition from slaves and free blacks. They were unusually sensitive to the cultural perception that being a sailor was "situational slavery" and thus keenly perceived the "feeling of racial demotion" that accompanied working, living, and competing with contrabands. Unlike soldiers, who appear to have finally accepted the Emancipation Proclamation as a war measure, Bennett concludes that most sailors "never, even grudgingly, accepted emancipation." The stress of shipboard life was a major reason; in the Army, "white soldiers did not live, fight, work, eat and sleep with former slaves in a cramped space for months at a time" — but class expectations played a major part.

Among Bennett's most penetrating insights is his discussion of combat and its effects on sailors. It was psychologically unbalancing for sailors to see "their home and workplace being taken apart," and "wood and iron did not offer the invincibility" they once thought. Against that, sailors benefitted from being part of a larger group, as do soldiers who man crew-served weapons (one might consider the ship as a whole as a crew-served weapon), and from the knowledge that there was no place to run. In contrast to the individual heroism that defined soldier courage, sailor courage presaged 20th century warfare — "how a man stood

up in the path of a faceless enemy."

Sailors' and soldiers' experiences of combat varied in other ways. Naval combat was much more episodic than combat on land, making death a far less common companion for sailors than for soldiers. Soldiers quickly became hardened, and, Bennett notes, sailors were troubled by the indifference that the soldiers showed to death, civilian casualties, and refugees. Unlike soldiers, who almost invariably marched away from the sites of battles, sailors could not physically distance themselves from death while the ship as a whole might move, its parts didn't, and a sailor whose shipmate had been killed, say, at number four starboard gun, had to pass the spot many times every day.

Union Jacks does have some flaws, primarily stemming from lack of nautical or technological context. Despite his impressive research, Bennett can be irritatingly unfamiliar with seagoing terms. For example, he refers to the "lucky bag" as a bag containing a sailor's personal belongings, but in fact the lucky bag was (and is) the ship's receptacle for "gear adrift." A sailor whose possessions wound up there would normally have to endure some mild punishment to get them back.

In asserting that greed led ships to use non-destructive tactics, Bennett notes that "gun crews often lobbed single shots or fired rounds of blank cartridges across the bows of unidentified ships in order to subdue, not destroy, blockade runners." The "shot across the bow" was a universal signal demanding that a vessel show her colors—firing directly into an unidentified ship would have violated international law. An analogous lack of technological nuance appears in, e.g., his discussions of the blockade runners' practice of jettisoning cargo when chased and the armor plating of the river gunboats.

Assertion occasionally goes beyond evidence, as in the statement that gunboatmen on the western rivers "often found guerrillas killed in clashes still bearing signed loyalty oaths in their pockets." The citation provided leads to a single letter that reports only hearsay. Some apparent contradictions might have been resolved with tighter editing—sailors evinced "disdain for personal cleanliness" and "unkempt bodies, but were inspected frequently and required to bathe daily.

Besides the conclusions it draws, **Union Jacks** is a sound foundation for future work. In particular, Bennett's "Rendezvous Sample" of recruit data should

provide an excellent way to study the changes in the Navy's sailors over time. How did the recruits of 1861 compare to those of late 1863 and early 1864, at the peak of the Navy's manpower crisis? The conscription law was changed in mid-1864, resulting in a stampede to Navy recruiting offices—how did these landsmen change the earlier demographic preponderance of immigrants and working-class men? Did the flood of (white) volunteers reduce the Navy's need and inclination to recruit contrabands? Of lesser import, 1864 saw the recruitment of "galvanized Yankees," former Confederate prisoners of war who enlisted in the Union Navy to escape prison camp. Did these men bring an "army outlook" to leaven that of the sailors, or were they closer spiritual kin to Union sailors than to the Union soldiers they had opposed?

For both the serious student of Civil War naval history and the casual reader, this is a must-have book.

William H. Roberts is a retired US Navy commander with a Ph.D. in history from Ohio State University. He is the author of Civil War Ironclads: Industrial Mobilization for the Union Navy, USS New Ironsides in the Civil War, and "Now for the Contest": Coastal and Oceanic Naval Operations in the Civil War, to be published in Autumn 2004 by the University of Nebraska Press.