

Engineer in Gray: Memoirs of Chief Engineer James H. Tomb, CSN

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Review

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Campbell, R. Thomas, Editor *Engineer in Gray: Memoirs of Chief Engineer James H. Tomb, CSN*. McFarland & Company, \$45.00, hardcover ISBN 786419911

Mysterious Tomb

Successful engineer provides sparse memoirs

Civil War history is populated with a multitude of niche books that address little reported on aspects of this much-studied conflict. Due to a paucity of information, documents, and first-hand accounts, little has been written about the Confederate's use of unconventional Navy weapons such as torpedoes--today called naval mines--and small torpedo boats. **Engineer in Gray: Memoirs of Chief Engineer James H. Tomb, CSN** attempts, but fails, to shed light on this aspect of the Civil War.

William Tomb entered the Confederate Navy as a 3rd Assistant Engineer soon after his native state Florida seceded from the Union. Reporting to New Orleans for duty 1861, Tomb served aboard *CSS Jackson* and *CSS McR* in a number of engagements. Most notably, he took part in the defense of Island No. 10, New Madrid, Missouri, and Gen. John Pope's Mississippi River crossing at Commerce, Missouri. Unfortunately, Tomb does not provide any new or even interesting insight into these engagements. Instead, he records mostly mundane observances on selected aspects of these events--something that he does throughout most of his memoirs.

Taken prisoner after the Battle of New Orleans, Tomb was shipped to Fort Warren in Boston Harbor until paroled. During his stay there, Tomb provides some interesting insight to prison life--the mess arrangements, how he and his comrades received money, clothing, food, and even gin. Again, Tomb recorded only a few brief vignettes that actually create more questions than they answer. It is even unclear how long he remained in custody.

Eventually, Tomb received his parole and took a steamer to Hampton Roads, Virginia, and from there went to Florida to find that his family had been forcibly relocated. Tomb began his most important war service after receiving orders to report to *CSS Chicora* at Charleston, South Carolina. While he took part in *Chicora's* attack on *USS Keystone State* on 31 January 1863, Tomb spent most of his time in Charleston working on torpedoes and torpedo boats. On the night of 5 October 1863, Tomb was one of four men who took the steam-powered torpedo boat *CSS David* into the Union Fleet, then blockading Charleston Harbor, and successfully attacked the North's most powerful warship, *USS New Ironsides*. While *New Ironsides* did not sink, it sustained significant damage and had to leave station for extensive repairs. Once again, Tomb records very little about the attack, the near abandonment from the damaged *David*, and how he got the boat's engine running after its fire went out. For his actions though, Tomb earned a promotion to Chief Engineer, making him one of only 12 Chief Engineers in the Confederate Navy and the only one who received his promotion for gallantry in combat.

Tomb received command of *David* soon after the attack on *New Ironsides* and spent most of his time either redesigning the boat's spar so that it could lower the torpedo below ironclads' metal sheathing, or towing *CSS Hunley* around the harbor and out to sea on mostly abortive assaults against the blockading force. *David*, with Tomb in command, attempted two more attacks, one against *USS Memphis* and *USS Wabash*, but neither proved successful.

For the remainder of the war, Tomb worked in and along the Savannah River, sewing and then removing torpedoes. After failing to find profitable employment after the armistice, he took part in the War of the Triple Alliance working as a scout and advisor for the Brazilian Navy. Holding true to form, Tomb provides very little insight into the military and civilian aspects of his time in South America and very little of use can be gleaned from his writing.

In an attempt to provide more insight into the Confederate's use of torpedoes and torpedo boats, editor R. Thomas Campbell includes four appendices of dubious value. Two are written by Tomb and provide only slightly more information than his memoirs, one is by Commander William T. Glassell, CSN, *David's* commanding officer during the attack on *New Ironsides*, and the last is penned by General P.G.T. Beauregard. All four previously-published works deal with the application of unconventional weapons and offer precious little new

information.

In his introduction, Campbell writes that Confederate's application of torpedoes and small, steam-powered torpedo boats changed forever the course of naval warfare. He is, of course, correct in this assertion. However, one would not get that impression from Tomb's memoirs. To try and offset Tomb's lack of detail, Campbell uses his own research and extensive quotes from other participants. While this does help to fill in some gaps, Tomb's memoirs, even when bolstered by outside research, simply do not contain enough insight to significantly add to our understanding of the South's use of these new technologies. Though not a complete waste, this reviewer would be hard pressed to find more than a small handful of readers who would happily to pay \$45 for such an empty book.

Mr. E. Rory O'Connor holds a Master's degree in History from Louisiana State University and works as a Flag Writer / Public Affairs for Team Submarine, the United States Navy's submarine research, design, acquisition, and maintenance organization. The views expressed by the reviewer do not necessarily represent the views of the Navy or the United States.