

### The Last Shot: The Incredible Story of the C.S.S. Shenandoah and the True Conclusion of the American Civil War

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## Review

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**Schooler, Lynn** *The Last Shot: The Incredible Story of the C.S.S. Shenandoah and the True Conclusion of the American Civil War*. HarperCollins (Ecco), \$24.95, hardcover ISBN 60523336

Flying the flag for the final time

The separation of a ship and its valley

The epic voyage of the *CSS Shenandoah* is an obligatory footnote in every thorough history of the Civil War. The commerce raider was the last fighting force to fly the Confederate flag and she wrought destruction against the U.S. whaling fleet more than two months after Appomattox. Only in November 1865 in Liverpool did the *Shenandoah* lower her flag for the last time.

Inherently fascinating, the story of the *Shenandoah* has particular appeal to Alaskans, for whom it is their most tangible link with the Civil War. It was in the waters east of Alaska that the *Shenandoah* performed most of her devastation, capturing and destroying 24 whaling vessels in less than a week.

Author Lynn Schooler recounts that he first crossed the wake of the *Shenandoah* in 1970 as a teenager in Anchorage when he read a short article about her voyage in an old issue of *Alaska Sportsmen*. His interest remained latent for 30 years while he established himself as a sailor, outdoorsman, and award-winning photographer and writer about Alaska and its wildlife. Alaska, the Aleutian Islands, and the surrounding waters are Schooler's home territory and he excels in relating the facts and the feel of the *Shenandoah's* operations there.

**The Last Shot** is part of a new wave of writing about the Shenandoah that includes the journal of her executive officer, Lt. William Whittle, edited by D. Alan and Anne B. Harris and forthcoming works by Tom Chaffin and Australian scholar Angus Curry. Intended for the popular history market, Schooler's work

follows in the footsteps of works by Stanley F. Horn (1947) and Murray Morgan (1948).

Although it is a relatively thorough and lively account of the ship's epic journey, **The Last Shot** may prove rather unsatisfactory to students of the Civil War. It lacks helpful features that Civil War enthusiasts expect to find, such as an index and reference notes.

The absence of notes is especially troubling given the number of minor factual errors with which the book is riddled. Many of the errors are apparently gleaned from an uncritical reading of flawed sources. For example, it refers to Acting Master Irvine S. Bulloch as the nephew rather than the half-brother of Cdr. James D. Bulloch, identifies Master's Mate John T. Mason incorrectly as the adopted son of diplomat James M. Mason, and hyphenates the middle and last name of Lt. Sidney Smith Lee.

More substantially, the book betrays relative unfamiliarity with Civil War naval history and general Civil War history. Schooler asserts incorrectly that the Confederacy had no naval academy. In his otherwise laudable attention to the sporadic news that the *Shenandoah's* crew received about events in America, Schooler does not adequately clarify the difference between reports and actual events. Thus, the details of Sherman's and Sheridan's campaigns in Georgia and Virginia become muddled, and Maj. Gen. Sterling Price's disastrous October 1864 Missouri Campaign stands as the route of the Arkansas garrison under General Price.

Back out at sea with the *Shenandoah*, Schooler is more the master of his craft. He relates dramatically how the ship's first days were almost her last, as her skeletal crew had to overcome a host of obstacles to convert her from a fast British merchantman and troop carrier to an armed commerce raider. He similarly details the eventful weeks early in 1865 when the *Shenandoah* was in Melbourne, Australia, undergoing repairs and getting caught in a diplomatic tempest that threatened to end her journey.

Although his writing is primarily descriptive, Schooler is not afraid to render judgments about the *Shenandoah's* officers, particularly the decisions of her often-embattled captain, Lt. James I. Waddell. He also offers occasional asides about the way the *Shenandoah* carried out her orders of destruction. Waddell and his subordinates said much about the honor of the Southern cause, Schooler

notes; but, on several occasions, events proved that the Confederates' honor was elastic. When it was pragmatic to do so, they lied.

The Southerners' own perspective on their mission is fairly, even cleverly, presented. Schooler describes the destruction that Sherman and Sheridan were wreaking in Georgia and Virginia. By the spring many of the Shenandoah Valley's residents would be starving and it was falling to the valley's namesake raider to balance the score. Attacking the Yankee whalers was the best way to do it. Ironically, on the very day (October 19) that the *Shenandoah* was commissioned in the South Atlantic, Confederate forces suffered a devastating defeat at Cedar Creek. Months would pass before the ship's officers learned of this defeat.

Ultimately, the *Shenandoah's* isolation from its namesake valley, from the Confederacy, and from the events that ended the Civil War is what defines the story of her epic voyage. Lynn Schooler's relative isolation from familiar Civil War lore (familiar at least to readers of *CWBR*) tarnishes his account of the *Shenandoah*, but his intimate familiarity with other aspects of the story will help Civil War enthusiasts better understand and appreciate the cruise.

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