

Lincoln's Trident: The West Gulf Blockading Squadron During the Civil Ward

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Review

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Browning, Robert M., Jr. *Lincoln's Trident: The West Gulf Blockading Squadron during the Civil War*. University of Alabama Press, \$69.95 ISBN 9780817318468

Prosecuting the Union Naval Blockade

This book is the third installment of Robert Browning Jr.'s exhaustive history of the Union Navy's Civil War blockade of the South, previous volumes having surveyed the activities of the North Atlantic (1993) and South Atlantic (2002) Blockading Squadrons. Although Browning was the Coast Guard's official historian for the past three decades (he retired in 2015), the blockade has been the chief focus of his scholarly life's work: certainly he knows more about the subject than anyone else now alive, and probably more than anyone in the past, save perhaps Edward K. Rawson, and Charles W. Stewart, who between them were responsible for compiling and editing the *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of Rebellion (ORN)* volumes pertaining to the blockade.

Although both of the Atlantic Blockading Squadrons undertook major coastal assaults—Fort Fisher by the North Atlantic Squadron and Port Royal and Charleston by the South Atlantic Squadron—the West Gulf Squadron's service history was by a considerable margin the most eventful of the four squadrons, encompassing not only the assault on the forts guarding New Orleans and the Battle of Mobile Bay, but also prolonged and extensive operations on the Mississippi River in 1862-63. During the course of the latter the squadron's activities extended as far upriver as Vicksburg, Mississippi, some 350 miles north of New Orleans.

As has been the case with Browning's previous volumes, the greatest value of *Lincoln's Trident* rests less in his account of the squadron's best-known undertakings—the assault on Forts St. Philip and Jackson (April 1862), running the gauntlet at Vicksburg (July 1863) and Port Hudson (March 1863), and the

Battle of Mobile Bay (August 1864)—which have been recounted numerous times by other authors, but in the more mundane, but no less significant activities bound up in attempting to blockade more than 1,000 miles of the Gulf of Mexico's coastline from St. Andrews Bay, Florida to the Mexican border at the mouth of the Rio Grande River.

Moreover, while the blockade of the mouths of the Mississippi prior to New Orleans' fall, that of Mobile Bay until August 1864, and of Galveston, Texas have hitherto attracted the lion's share of historical attention, Browning's survey makes clear that the squadron's blockade was not confined to the major ports in the western Gulf of Mexico. Indeed, many of its activities focused on passes or inlets giving access to the interior via lakes, rivers, or sounds: Grant's Pass, east of the entrance to Mobile Bay, the mouth of the Atchafalaya River and Calcasieu Pass on the Louisiana coast, Sabine Pass on the Louisiana-Texas border, and San Luis Pass, Pass Cavallo, and Corpus Christi Pass on the Texas Coast.

Nor was blockading the sole, or even the principal undertaking of the vessels assigned to guard these outlets to the sea: in many cases Confederate naval forces were based in and operated from the interior, as was the case on Albemarle and Pamlico Sounds in North Carolina Sounds—as detailed in *From Cape Charles to Cape Fear*, Browning's study of the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron—and Union efforts centered on eliminating these threats. As a consequence, much of Browning's narrative of the squadron's activities in the Atchafalaya River, the Sabine Pass, and Matagorda Bay is devoted to small-scale naval and amphibious operations—raids, cutting-out expeditions and the like—rather than to blockading *per se*.

Another of the squadron's responsibilities falling outside the realm of blockading was monitoring activity at the mouth of the Rio Grande. Much of the trans-Mississippi Confederacy's external trade was conducted through Matamoros, on the Mexican side of the river. The US could not legally blockade a neutral port, nor could it even maintain a constant naval presence at the river's mouth, owing to inadequate logistical support, and commercial interests from Europe—especially Great Britain—and also from New York and Boston capitalized on the fact. The trade infuriated Northern officials, in particular Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles, and led to repeated seizures of merchant vessels on the grounds of carrying contraband of war or anchoring in US waters. Many of these seizures, especially those of British vessels, generated diplomatic furors between the US and foreign countries and led to protracted adjudication.

Browning provides a succinct overview of the situation at Matamoros and its legal and foreign-policy ramifications in the course of his larger survey.

He also deals extensively with the unglamorous but essential topic of logistics. Maintaining a steam-powered blockading force over such an expanse of coastline was not simply daunting: it turned out to be impossible. The main repair facility from 1863 onward, Pensacola, was situated near the command's eastern limit, and was thus poorly-placed to serve as a supply base for warships operating along the Texas coast. A major coal and provisions depot was established at Ship Island, off the coast of Mississippi, and the capture of New Orleans gave the navy access to its shipyards and shore-side infrastructure, but these facilities were also too far from the western extremities of the command to provide dependable support. David Farragut, commander-in-chief of the squadron from January 1862 to November 1864, had therefore to rely to a large extent on sailing vessels to patrol southwest of Galveston, with predictable consequences for the blockade's efficacy.

Nor does Browning neglect the human dimension. He examines the living conditions, recreations, food and other aspects of the squadron's seamen, as well as the squadron's chronic manpower shortage, a situation that led to the large-scale recruitment of African-Americans. Likewise, he assesses the quality of the squadron's leadership. Farragut, not surprisingly, gets high marks for his energy, resourcefulness, leadership, strategic vision, and ability to work harmoniously with the Union Army, although not for his administrative acumen (510-11). By contrast, David Dixon Porter comes off as a glory-hungry braggart, back-stabbing subordinate, and chronic liar (128, 142).

On the downside, the book would have benefited from more careful editing. A good deal of repetition could have been eliminated thereby. For instance, a 24 December 1861 encounter between the USS *Hunstville* and a Confederate gunboat off Mobile is described on page 21 and again on page 39; the capture of the blockade runner *Magnolia* is mentioned on pages 10, 15, and 37, and that of the *Caroline* recounted on page 208 and again on page 241. Other examples could be adduced. More attention to presentation would have made for a smoother and easier read.

Furthermore, some of the figures should have been checked for accuracy. Browning offers a table on page 514 detailing by year the amount of southern cotton reaching New York from 1861 to 1865. Adding together the four yearly

figures produces a total of 605,151 bales, but the text states the total figure to have been 808,151 bales. Likewise, a table in the endnotes giving the numbers of merchant vessels attempting to and successfully running the blockade year by year contains several errors of calculation and lacks any figures for 1865 (647-48).

While Browning's judgments are by and large sound, a few can be queried. His verdict on the blockade's effectiveness is an especially noteworthy case in point. Given that more than 80 percent of the attempts to run the blockade were successful, his remark that it leaked "like a sieve" is unexceptionable (513). Yet the claim that the squadron's "efforts to curtail blockade running failed" is contradicted by his own evidence (513). 1,723 attempts to run the blockade were made in 1861. The number dropped to 428 in both 1862 and 1863, to 108 in 1864 (647-48). While much of the decline doubtless owed to the capture of New Orleans and, later, the seizure of Mobile Bay, the fact remains that there were 758 more attempts to run the blockade in 1861 than in 1862-64 *combined*. As James McPherson, William Roberts, and others have argued, the blockade's effectiveness is best measured not by the number of ships that managed to run it, but by the number that did not try, coupled with the fact that those that did typically had limited carrying capacity. In this regard Browning's analysis seems wide of the mark, as does his statement that "[t]he South was able to export almost half of its cotton crop through the blockade" (514).

A few other small criticisms can be made. Maps are essential to a work of this sort, and while those supplied are serviceable, readers would be helped by a general map of the entire command as well as greater detail on the sectional maps. In regard to the latter deficiency, Berwick Bay, on the Atchafalaya River, is repeatedly mentioned in the text—it is listed thirteen times in the index—but is not identified on the relevant map of the Louisiana coast and interior west of New Orleans (26). And here and there Browning could have been more careful in his choice of words: "skylarking," for instance, is closer in meaning to "frolicking" or "horse-playing" than it is to "roughhousing" (388).

These, however, are minor quibbles. On the whole, *Lincoln's Trident* is a multi-faceted examination of the West Gulf Blockading Squadron's activities, actors, and achievements. It may not constitute the last word on the subject, but is unlikely to be superseded by a more comprehensive work. Browning's research ranges far beyond the documents printed in the *ORN*, encompassing the private correspondence of many participants both famous and obscure, as well as

public records. He consulted collections housed in no fewer than forty-six archives. The fruits of his research efforts are manifest in the 133 pages of endnotes and twenty-eight pages of bibliography. For all but Civil War naval specialists, this will be the only work on the squadron's doings that one need consult.

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