

The Best Station of Them All: The Savannah Squadron, 1861-1865

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Review

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Mellon, Maurice *The Best Station of Them All: The Savannah Squadron, 1861-1865*. University of Alabama Press, \$69.95 ISBN 978-0-8173-1763-8

Showing the Importance of a Lesser Known Naval Squadron

Few historians write about the naval aspects of the Civil War. Those that do tend to concern themselves with high profile events and combats such as the duel between the USS Monitor and CSS Virginia, the Mississippi Squadron, and Confederate privateering activities. Maurice Melton contributes to this void in Civil War naval historiography with his new book *The Best Station of them All: The Savannah Squadron, 1861 – 1865*, which should remain as the definite history of this flotilla for some time to come. The author writes a detailed and linear history of the squadron from the beginning of secession, through Georgia's brief state navy, ending with the surrender of a few squadron members who operated with Robert E. Lee before Appomattox. Melton's over 400 pages of text is not just an account of the squadron's actions, but also a look into Georgian society, the lives of officers and sailors, and the results of a naval policy that was all but second-thought to the Confederate government.

The lack of an introduction serves as the first surprise Melton has in store for readers. One of the few shortcomings of this study, the author dives right into secession and skips laying out his thesis. While it is not necessary that every book have a theoretical guiding light, this book might have benefitted from a clearly defined central argument and more setup to secession. Instead, the reader becomes familiar with the background of naval service in the antebellum south through the brief histories of the individual officers that the Savannah Squadron picked up along the way. In this manner, the book reads more like a novel, and at times Melton delivers with a bit of literary flair unseen in many similar overarching projects.

As one may have guessed, the importance of the Savannah squadron was to protect the Confederacy's second most important Atlantic port; and less possible, the coasts of both South Carolina and Georgia. Originally belonging to the state of Georgia, the squadron, under Captain Josiah Tattnall, began as a modest operation of converted merchant steamers. Like other Confederate squadrons, the intent to defend inland waters, rather than project naval power into the open ocean, laid the foundation for the small fleet's service at Savannah. Melton's painstaking research (spanning decades and many states) has allowed him to piece together the reasoning why many officers chose to leave the service of the United States Navy. He focuses on the that class early in the book, and it seems that for most of 1861 the flotilla acted less in the capacity of a traditional naval squadron at war and more the pleasure cruise for many of these young gentlemen who socialized up and down the waterways of Georgia and the Atlantic coast.

The carefree life of this particular group of southern mariner diminished, however, as the war raged on and the comprehensive Union blockade began to take formation. Tattnall's small flotilla, which had grown only slightly in number since the beginning of the war, while able to delay Union attacks on the South Carolinian coast and later at Fort Pulaski in November of 1861, was unable to keep the fortress from falling in April of the following year. At this point it became evident that not only the squadron would begin to suffer from the blockade, but so too would the people of the coastal region. Melton's attention to social circles, local politics, naval politics, and building programs, highlights the stresses that the war exacted from the citizens of Georgia.

The heart of this book is the two main ironclads of the squadron – the *Atlanta* and the *Savannah*. The former, a refitted blockade runner, launched in 1862, Meanwhile, the CSS *Savannah* was launched in 1863. Both vessels allowed the flotilla to continue to harass the growing Union fleet. Any perceived equalization of the regional flotillas vanished when the new squadron leader, Commander William Webb, lost the CSS *Atlanta* to two Union monitors in June 1863. The most successful action of the Savannah Squadron came in June 1864, when in a daring raid, the flotilla captured the USS *Water Witch*. Melton covers every facet of this engagement in his study, and leaves the reader with one of the better narratives of the dynamics of small-ship action during the Civil War. The addition of this vessel strengthened the squadron, but not enough to create any real threat to the blockaders. By the end of 1864, most of the small flotilla was destroyed and William T. Sherman had come to Savannah. Thus, when the fortunes of war turned against Richmond, the crews were split up and many of

those that remained enlisted transferred into the Confederate army.

This book has very few maps; the reader will need to look elsewhere for a geography lesson in order to understand the surroundings the Savannah Squadron operated in. Despite this omission, Melton has included other visual aids including woodcuts and photographs. Another interesting feature of this book is the companion website, where Melton urges the reader in the acknowledgments to visit frequently as new information about the squadron comes to light. As of the date of this book review, the website is still in its infancy. Nevertheless, an interactive companion web portal is a novel idea for a detailed study in history.

Most historians, students, and enthusiasts that pick up this book will appreciate what Melton has written. At times, his work digresses and strays from the main narrative. Nevertheless this fault in writing style does not infringe on the overall value of this book. This study establishes a window into a less documented aspect of the war that will be useful to any reader.

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