

### Wolf of the Deep: Raphael Semmes and the Notorious Confederate Raider C.S.S. Alabama

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## Review

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**Fox, Stephen** *Wolf of the Deep: Raphael Semmes and the Notorious Confederate Raider C.S.S. Alabama*. Alfred A. Knopf, \$25.95 hardcover ISBN 9781400044290

### Raphl Semmes and the Naval War

Winston Churchill once wrote: "The advantage of sea-power used offensively is that when a fleet sails no one can be sure where it is going to strike." When Churchill wrote those profound words in 1949, he may have been thinking about a single Confederate warship in 1862, the *C.S.S. Alabama*. *Wolf of the Deep* is Boston-based, freelance historian Stephen Fox's fabulous story of the Confederate commerce raider that destroyed Union ocean shipping and took more prizes than any other raider in naval history, and its ruthlessly efficient captain, Raphl Semmes. This is Fox's seventh non-fiction book, following histories on organized crime, professional sports, American advertising, naturalist John Muir, and Samuel Cunard and his steamships. This, however, is his first book on the Civil War, and it proves to be a well-researched and smartly written addition to Civil War naval history.

Churchill's words, of course, referred to a naval fleet, but the Confederates did not have a fleet. They had coastal and river gunboats, blockade runners, and a few ironclads, but their most potent offensive naval weapons were fast, well-armed commerce raiders. The Confederates could not confront the powerful Union navy, but they could disrupt Union sea-going commerce, in what turned out to be their most effective naval strategy. *Wolf of the Deep* is an exciting naval adventure, a story filled with maritime warfare, political intrigue, treachery, dramatic sea chases, and a colorful portrayal of one of the South's most feared and admired naval heroes, Captain Raphl Semmes.

As Fox relates, by the time the Civil War began, Semmes had enjoyed an undistinguished thirty-five year career as an officer in the U.S. Navy. He resigned his commission and joined the Confederate Navy, an ambitious man

eager for independent command where he could truly demonstrate his leadership talents and nautical skills. Moody, susceptible to seasickness, and known by his men as "Old Beeswax" for his prodigious mustache, Semmes had two ships sunk under him before he was given command of a leaky, old steamship raider, the C.S.S. *Sumter*. He had surprising success as a commerce raider with the *Sumter*, but his greatest achievement was yet to come.

Fox tells how Semmes is ordered to Liverpool, England in July 1862, to take command of a new warship being built in a British shipyard. The vessel is the C.S.S. *Alabama*, a wooden-hulled, 3-masted, bark-rigged sail and steam warship, heavily armed, and built for speed and long ocean voyages. For twenty-two months Semmes and the *Alabama* would sail more than 75,000 miles, sinking one Union warship and capturing 65 prizes, creating havoc among the Yankee commercial merchant fleet and completely flummoxing the Union navy. It is estimated that Semmes and the *Alabama* destroyed more than \$3 million of Union shipping and cargoes, lighting up the Caribbean, Atlantic, and Indian Oceans with burning Union ships.

Fox tells of Semmes's clever plans, use of ruses and deception, and bold good luck in both luring victims and escaping Union pursuers. Oddly, while most of his officers were Americans, most of his crew was British, an undisciplined bunch of liars, thieves, and drunkards, as he called them, but still seafaring men who signed on for adventure and prize money.

Until June 1864, the *Alabama* had fought only one brief naval battle, all her other naval encounters were with unarmed merchant ships. Then that summer she was cornered by the U.S.S. *Kearsarge* at the port of Cherbourg, France, and pounded into a sinking hulk by superior gunnery and a steadfast Union captain who was once a shipmate of Semmes before the war.

Fox also tells vividly of the diplomatic and political intrigues and trickery between Richmond, Washington, and London that allowed the British to violate neutrality and build warships for a combatant, and how the British ultimately had to later pay reparations for their unabashed duplicity. Add spies, traitors, mutinies, sea storms, naval battles, marital discord, and audacious schemes, and Fox has put together a marvelous blend of leadership, seamanship, and naval adventure.

As Fox concludes, the voyage of the *Alabama* was an unqualified success. Her commerce raiding confounded the Union navy, making the Yankees go from simple incompetence to chuckleheaded farce, steaming in circles while the *Alabama* struck seemingly everywhere. Union merchant vessels either stayed in port or were sold to foreigners, losses were huge, costs rose, and no one knew where Semmes and the *Alabama* would strike next. Semmes and the *Alabama* would prove Churchill right.

For more great reading about Civil War naval history and another legendary Confederate raider, see Lynn Schooler's *The Last Shot: The Incredible Story of the C.S.S. Shenandoah and the True Conclusion of the American Civil War* (Ecco, 2005).

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