

Bluejackets and Contrabands: African Americans and the Navy

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Review

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Tomblin, Barbara Brooks *Bluejackets and Contrabands: African Americans and the Navy*. The University Press of Kentucky, \$39.95 ISBN 9780813125541

Fighting for Themselves

Barbara Brooks Tomblin states that “there has been no full-length treatment of the relationship between the Union Navy and African Americans, especially contrabands” by historians and scholars of the Civil War period (6). She has corrected this omission by supplying the missing pages to the literature on the role and contributions of black Americans to the United States Navy with the publication of her book, *Bluejackets and Contrabands*. The author maintains that one cannot underestimate “the vital contribution of African Americans to the operation and success of the Union Navy’s Potomac Flotilla and the North and South Atlantic Blockading Squadrons during the Civil War” (6). Tomblin’s work is a fascinating study of the interaction between the Navy Department and fugitive slaves during the conflict. The concept of mutuality among the aforementioned parties emerges as a principal theme in this monograph. In exchange for the Union Navy’s role in helping the runaways secure freedom, they provided the bluejackets with a number of valuable services. While Tomblin does not ignore the other states along the Atlantic seacoast, it is apparent that the focal point of her narrative is South Carolina.

As the destitute slave refugees made their way to Federal vessels, the question of what to do with them perplexed navy commanders. At the start of the war the Union lacked a definitive policy regarding the status of black fugitives who attached themselves to the United States Army. In May 1861 General Benjamin F. Butler defined runaway slaves as “contrabands of war” thereby providing the justification for not returning them to their Confederate masters. As the war progressed, President Abraham Lincoln took advantage of opportunities to move against slavery itself and in the process the federal government’s policy on contrabands gained clarity. The enactment of the

Confiscation Acts and the Emancipation Proclamation decree removed the confusion that had characterized the contraband phenomenon for months.

In 1863, Gideon Welles announced that sanctuary awaited both former slaves and free blacks on board blockading vessels. This decision by the navy secretary not only deprived the planter aristocracy of their workers, but also replenished the ranks of his department. According to Tomblin, "The Union Navy's policy toward African American fugitives, tentative at the beginning of the Civil War, now not only welcomed black runaways but also actively encouraged them to desert their masters and seek Union protection" (28). It should be noted that the appearance of slaves aboard northbound vessels was not unusual because they had frequently used waterways as avenues of escape prior to the outbreak of hostilities.

The author explores the motivations behind the slaves' decisions to desert their owners. She finds that the desire of the slaves to attain freedom was the paramount reason why they abandoned their southern planters. The overwhelming number of slaves were "freed by military operations" not by running away. Enslaved men and women on plantations and farms located near the coast found their path to liberation less difficult than that of their fellow bondsmen who lived a distance from the Atlantic Ocean and took a different avenue to freedom. Tomblin, however, makes it crystal clear that even under the most favorable conditions, fleeing bondage was still a dangerous practice. To the bondsmen, northern soldiers represented an army of liberation. Tomblin points out that "these Union bluejackets admired the contrabands for their persistence and courage and were shocked and appalled by their stories of slavery" (62).

The Union Navy, by establishing contraband camps or colonies along the southern coast, particularly in South Carolina and Georgia accepted the responsibility of protecting and defending the fugitives from Confederate assaults. The former slaves enjoyed a measure of autonomy in the contraband settlements. Union military officials encouraged the contrabands to be as self-sufficient as possible by cultivating crops and engaging in other kinds of work. The settlement dwellers and the navy, however, were fully aware of the danger of refugees being captured by Rebel troops and remanded to slavery. Notwithstanding, the number of contraband communities continued to grow with increasing frequency. Tomblin asserts that one way in which the Navy Department handled the large number of liberated slaves was to send them to northern cities. By the thousands, contrabands were sent to New York,

Philadelphia, Boston and other cities where they worked in navy yards. The nation's capital was not immune to the influx of refugees. According to one estimate, more than 40,000 ex-slaves had settled in Washington before the end of the war.

Tomblin is extremely insightful when discussing the substantial contributions of the contrabands to the Union military effort. The labor of the runaway slaves was their greatest asset to the squadrons. Without hesitation, they offered their services as mechanics, cooks, stevedores, and teamsters. The contrabands could be found building roads, bridges, and fortifications, and performing fatigue duty. The refugees proved useful to the navy as sailors, spies, guides, nurses, orderlies, and producers of food. Tomblin maintains that one of the most important contributions of black Americans to the navy was their service as coastal pilots. Their knowledge of rivers and streams was a valuable asset to naval officers. The slave Robert Smalls of South Carolina was the best known African-American pilot of the Civil War. In May 1862, the resourceful Smalls captured the Confederate steamer the *Planter*, which was anchored in Charleston harbor and delivered it to Samuel F. Du Pont's blockading squadron. This daring act by Smalls paved the way for him to become a pilot in the Union Navy.

African-American refugees were especially valuable to the Union Navy as informants. They provided reliable intelligence to the commanders of the Potomac Flotilla and the North and South Atlantic Blockading Squadrons about Confederate fortifications, troop movements, blockade runners, and the location of torpedoes and gun batteries. John A. Dahlgren, Du Pont, and other high ranking naval commanders expressed confidence in the information reported to them by runaway slaves. The author devotes a chapter to the joint army-navy operations along the coast. The army often provided support to the navy as it carried out its primary mission of maintaining and enforcing the blockade of southern port cities. Tomblin posits that "these joint operations offered black sailors a rare chance to meet and fight with their African American counterparts in the Union Army" (229).

Tomblin does not plow any new ground with her examination of the racist attitudes of officers and enlisted men of the navy. The Union Navy routinely provided black sailors with inferior supplies and assigned them dangerous and menial work. By the time General William T. Sherman reached Savannah in December 1864, several thousand emancipated slaves had attached themselves to

his victorious army. The ill-treatment of contrabands in South Carolina by the unsavory elements of Sherman's huge army reminded the refugees that liberation did not insulate them from harassment and abuse. Tomblin also points out that white sailors like the overwhelming majority of northerners were convinced that freed slaves were not entitled to political and civil equality. Nonetheless, Union commanders recognized the need to uplift the contrabands socially through education. The leading example of this effort was the "Port Royal Experiment" which occurred on St. Helena Island in South Carolina. Northern philanthropists provided money for the construction of several school buildings and the purchase of supplies for the students.

This volume is rich with anecdotal material and projects an unmistakable human quality. The author identifies many of the refugees by name and allows them to speak for themselves. *Bluejackets and Contrabands* is thoroughly researched, elegantly crafted, and firmly grounded in analytical content. This monograph is illustrated with several photographs and maps. With this publication, we now have a much better understanding of and appreciation for "the relationship between the Union Navy and African Americans" of the Civil War era. The author also succeeds brilliantly in chronicling the contributions of contrabands and free blacks to the Union squadrons during America's most devastating conflict. Tomblin concludes that "the vital contribution of thousands of African American men and women" combined with their "service and loyalty to the Union cause helped make a Union victory possible in the Civil War" (279). As the men of the United States Navy looked through the telescope of retrospect, they could take comfort in knowing that, through their efforts, thousands of southern blacks had been freed. Without the assistance of the navy, those liberated African Americans in all likelihood would have continued to languish in slavery.

Leonne M. Hudson is associate professor of history at Kent State University and the author of The Odyssey of a Southerner: The Life and Times of Gustavus Woodson Smith. He has also published several articles on the Civil War.