

Tinclads in the Civil War: Union Light-Draught Gunboat Operations on Western Waters, 1862-1865

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Review

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Smith, Myron J., Jr. *Tinclads in the Civil War: Union Light-Draught Gunboat Operations on Western Waters, 1862-1865*. McFarland & Company, Inc., \$55.00
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A study of Union Tinclads

Noted American naval bibliographer Myron Smith has once again turned his attention to the Civil War. Following his biography of gunboat commander Le Roy Fitch (2007) and his examination of the woodclads *Tyler*, *Lexington* and *Conestoga* (2008), Smith offers this detailed analysis of tinclads that expands what we know about these often-neglected warships and makes their contribution to the larger war effort abundantly clear.

Ironclads, especially the seven vessels of the City class, are much better known for their contributions to the war in the West, but there were far more tinclads. Some were purpose-built as warships, but most were converted civilian steamboats housing artillery pieces in armored casemates. Despite their name, tinclads carried light iron armor that was only thick enough to provide protection against small arms fire. Their shallow draught let them operate where their larger brethren could not go, giving the Union much-needed power projection capabilities.

Smith's narrative deliberately avoids, with a few notable exceptions, tinclad participation in major military operations. Instead, he focuses on the central role tinclads played in protecting Union lines of supply and communications. Poor road and rail networks, coupled with the susceptibility of the latter to disruption by Confederate regular and irregular forces, meant that Union military operations depended heavily on the regional river system. Not surprisingly, steamboats carrying men and materiel as well as those engaged in the civilian river trade were almost immediately targeted. The solution, which was developed over time, was a convoy system and regular patrols to disrupt

Confederate activity along the rivers. The tinclads served as mobile artillery platforms, driving off cavalry patrols and insurgents, shepherding military and civilian transports, and challenging the mobile shore batteries that never really seemed to go away. In the end, Smith convincingly argues that the war in the West would not have been possible without the protection of these workhorse warships.

As the tinclads' presence expanded beyond the Ohio and Mississippi rivers to the Cumberland, Tennessee, Red, Yazoo, White and Black rivers, and ultimately to coastal patrols along the Gulf Coast, the navy became more organizationally sophisticated, creating flotillas and divisions where regular traffic demanded a constant presence. It also found that effective operations in this theater required consistent coordination with the army. Both organization and cooperation improved over the course of the war, but inter-service coordination was always problematic. This comes out quite well in Smith's narrative on the local and regional levels; what could have been emphasized more was how the Union's naval leadership, especially the Secretary of Navy's office, understood the tinclads' mission and organization in the overall context of the war.

For all of its merits, this is not a book for the casual Civil War enthusiast. Smith assumes a general knowledge of the Western theater's major campaigns, personalities and events. At several points in the text, he refers readers to other authors who can provide more detail, which is useful, but some will find the lack of context frustrating. The book is richly illustrated with photographs, portraits and maps, but the utility of the latter is mixed. The maps of specific incidents are well-chosen and placed appropriately throughout the text, but the lack of good, clear theater maps is frustrating. This detail-rich narrative, brimming with relatively obscure place names and directional references, catalogs a large number of minor skirmishes and engagements. Anyone who really wants to follow Smith's story will be forced to resort to external maps. Veteran researchers will also be frustrated by the irregular use of citations, especially when the narrative clearly reveals that Smith is making excellent use of relevant source materials. The research is impeccable, but it is not necessarily accessible.

Tinclads in the Civil War is not for everyone, but those with an interest in the Western theater will find it informative and thought-provoking. If nothing else, Smith's emphasis on the importance of water-borne logistics makes this book well worth reading. He has also done much to rescue the tinclads from

obscurity, giving them their proper due for services well rendered. For that, we can be grateful.

Kurt Hackemer teaches at the University of South Dakota, where his research focuses on Civil War military and naval affairs. He is currently working on a history of Dakota Territory and its interaction with the external but omnipresent Civil War.