

The Civil War On The Mississippi: Union Sailors, Gunboat Captains, And The Campaign To Control The River

John Schroeder

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Schroeder, John (2017) "The Civil War On The Mississippi: Union Sailors, Gunboat Captains, And The Campaign To Control The River," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 19 : Iss. 1 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.19.1.20

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol19/iss1/15>

Review

Schroeder, John

Winter 2017

Tomblin, Barbara Brooks *The Civil War on the Mississippi: Union Sailors, Gunboat Captains, and the Campaign to Control the River*. University Press of Kentucky, \$50.00 ISBN 9780813167039

The Union Navy's Campaign to Control the Mississippi River

Although it has received less attention than the major land battles of the Civil War, the Union campaign to control the Mississippi River is well known and recognized as having played an important role in the Union's victory over the Confederacy. Known as the Anaconda Plan, the initial Union strategy to win the war called for a Union blockade of the southern coast and for Union control of the Mississippi River. In addition to seizing New Orleans, Union forces would advance down the Mississippi from St. Louis, capture Confederate strongholds and convert them into Union bases. Control of the Mississippi would allow goods, military material and men to flow freely along the river while cutting the Confederacy in two.

In *The Civil War on the Mississippi: Union Sailors, Gunboat Captains, and the Campaign to Control the River*, historian Barbara Brooks Tomblin has added a new level of factual detail to this familiar historical ground. This monograph focuses primarily on the Navy's efforts from the summer of 1861 to just after the fall of Vicksburg in the summer of 1863. The narrative is organized chronologically and details the Navy's role in numerous minor engagements and skirmishes in addition to well-known battles such as Ft. Henry, Ft. Donelson, Island No. 10, Memphis and Vicksburg. In her narrative, Tomblin introduces the major naval officers in the campaign, summarizes their respective activities, and explains how they cooperated with their army counterparts to win control of the Mississippi.

Tomblin also describes the creation of the Union's new brown water Navy. When the war began in 1861, the United States did not have a naval force on the Mississippi or Ohio Rivers. Since existing deep-draft, ocean-going warships

were not useful on much of the Mississippi, the Navy Department scrambled to create an effective river force by building or purchasing and converting shallow draft vessels. The result was the Western Gunboat Flotilla which consisted of three converted commercial side-wheel steamers known as timberclads because they were fortified by timber bulwarks. The Navy also built seven city class small ironclads known as “Pook Turtles,” several large ironclads, a number of small ironclads dubbed as tinclads and various other vessels including mortar bearing barges. Collectively these vessels furnished a functional and effective force which was renamed the Mississippi Squadron in 1862.

Finding recruits to fully man these ships was a major challenge since service in the brown water Navy was neither attractive nor glamorous. In addition to the threat of death or injury, Union forces suffered from disease and fevers as well as monotony and boredom. Since recruitment of American volunteers was always difficult, the Navy turned to foreigners, free African Americans, fugitive slaves and even some Confederate prisoners of war. Fugitive (or contraband) slaves were accepted into Union naval service beginning in the spring of 1862, but their service was not warmly welcomed. Confronting the typical racial prejudice of the day, both free and contraband African Americans nevertheless made a significant contribution to Union success on the Mississippi.

On the Mississippi, Union forces faced various challenges including Confederate steam powered rams, gunboats and torpedoes (or mines) as well as gunfire from enemy forces on shore and a hostile population in some towns along the river. Union forces fought several engagements with Confederate vessels in addition to bombarding and exchanging fire with Confederate fortifications and gun batteries on numerous occasions. The river itself was also a powerful force of nature which produced dangerous hazards. Spring and winter rains brought flooding while warm weather produced low water.

The most important contribution of this study is Tomblin’s research which includes some new primary sources from common sailors, junior officers, reporters and local observers living along the river. These personal diaries, memoirs, letters and newspaper accounts collectively furnish a fresh view of everyday life in the brown water Navy. The reader gets firsthand accounts of everyday occurrences, combat experiences and candid judgments on commanding officers. These letters and journal entries include first-hand descriptions of foraging parties on shore, shoveling snow from an ironclad’s deck, the amputation of a crewman’s arm, and the capture of a whiskey supply

from an enemy vessel. They also include candid observations about the civilians living along the river, relationships with African Americans, and personal views of the river war.

The Civil War on the Mississippi is a well written, logically organized and clear account of the naval war on the Mississippi. Its coverage is thorough, and its research is impressive. As such, it is likely to stand as the standard history of this important subject. While most of its operations were not glamorous or well celebrated by history, the achievements of the Union's brown water Navy were critical to victory in the west. In the judgment of Admiral David Dixon Porter, the "services of the Navy in the West had as much effect in reducing the south to submission as the greater battles fought in the East." (p. 290)

John H. Schroeder is Chancellor Emeritus and Professor Emeritus at the University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee. He is the author of several books on American naval history, the most recent of which is The Battle of Lake Champlain: A "Brilliant and Extraordinary Victory" published in 2015.