# How the U.S. NAVY Won the American Civil War

*by*

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Received wisdom suggests that the Civil War was an almost all-army affair, with the navies reduced to an occasionally spectacular but ultimately moot sideshow.[1] Certainly the majority of participants fought on land: about 3.6 million men served in the armies as compared to a mere 137,500 sailors.[2] Soldiers' experiences comprised the bulk of diaries, letters, and official correspondence, as well as being the basis for later research. But does this sea of ink hide an historical truth--one that was recognized at the time but later forgotten?

What relegated the Union Navy to a seemingly secondary role was the absence of an opponent on a scale with itself. This is not to say that the rebel navy did not fight, but that its role and structure differed from that of the USN. This was dictated in part by circumstance: the South did not have the manufacturing capacity to create and maintain a high seas fleet. But the decision not to attempt construction of a large navy was a conscious one made by Secretary of the Navy Stephen Mallory. To win the Civil War, the South need only defend what it had, demonstrating that it could survive until recognized by foreign powers. The rebel navy focused on the defense of harbors and rivers, undertaking local attacks as a means to this end rather than as part of any grand offensive strategy.[3]

Because the operations of the rebel navy did not much impact those of the Union Army it is easy to overlook the roles played by the Union Navy. These included blockading the ports of the South, pursuing Confederate commerce raiders, patrolling the rivers behind the front, and directly engaging the rebel army--usually in conjunction with the Federal army, but often independently. Of these roles two are relevant to this thesis: the blockade and direct combat (with tactical as well as strategic consequences).

## The Blockade
*"Great scarcity of even the necessaries of life"*

In simplest terms, the Civil War was a race between the North's will to win and the South's capacity to wage war. The Confederacy's weakness was neither lack of ability nor, initially, manpower, but material resources. In 1860, the South produced barely one-tenth of the manufactured goods in the nation; there was more factory capac-

ity in New York City than in all the South. To remedy this, Richmond turned to Europe for its weapons. Interdicting this supply line was the job of the US Navy.

Starting with 7,000 men and forty functioning ships, the Navy expanded to 51,500 men and 670 ships by 1865--500 of which were on blockade duty.[4] Such a force would seem sufficient to bottle up the limited number of Southern deep-water harbors, but only the capture of a port ensured its closure. The steamers of the Confederate Ordnance Department managed to deliver 80% of the $12,250,000 worth of equipment purchased in Europe, while $200 million is the accepted figure for the value of private shipments.[5] Through the blockade came 60% of the South's arms, 33% of its bullet lead, 75% of its gunpowder, and most of their leather and uniforms.[6] A single ship could make a difference: In Nov. 1861 the runner *Fingal* brought in sufficient munitions to enable the rebels to fight the battle of Shiloh the following April.[7] As supplies came in, cotton went out: Of 10,412 bales shipped by the Confederate Treasury Department before November 1864, only 1037 were captured--less than 10%.[8] Bales that went for 8-9¢ a pound at home sold for 80-90¢ in Europe, providing hard currency for the South.

And yet, the blockade was a success--not in the number of ships intercepted or contraband taken, but in its effect on the Southern economy. Although the odds of evading Union warships were never lower than 50-50, the *possibility* of capture made the enterprise a risky one. This alone would have raised prices, but the situation was worsened by the Southern elite's insistence upon maintaining its pre-war lifestyle. Navy reports routinely list cognac, wine, rugs, furniture, jewelry, silk, and corset stays among captured cargoes. The greatest profits for officers aboard runners came not from salaries but from private shipment of such luxury goods. The Confederate government sought to limit this merchandise, but their efforts were largely ignored. Profits from luxuries were too alluring, and hull space that could have been devoted to foodstuffs, medicines, clothing, and weapons was not. The effect on the rebel economy was felt as early as May 1861 and became catastrophic, as illustrated by the rise in the cost of salt--an important commodity in a pre-refrigeration age. A 200 pound bag that went for 50¢ in pre-war New Orleans doubled to $1 by summer 1861 and then rose to $6 (Richmond); in 1862 it jumped to $25 (Savannah) and peaked at $100 (Richmond); from 1863, the price "settled" at $50 to $75.[9] Other foodstuffs were similarly affected: between May 1863 and the end of the war, bacon rose from $1 to $4 a pound and beans from $4 to $30 a bushel.[10] Families of soldiers being paid $14 monthly were in dire straits. The clamor for food began in autumn 1862 and grew into riots the following spring. Union Admiral DuPont reported on 23 April 1862, "I had abundant evidence of the stringency of the blockade in the great scarcity of even the necessaries of life, and the very high price demanded for both food and clothing, further shown by the prices current as given in the Southern papers, the most essential articles being continually on the rise."[11] Demoralization at home, communicated in letters to the front, contributed to the increasing rate of desertion in Confederate armies, which suffered heavily after 1863.

The lack of a reliable infrastructure for distributing the resources of the South is cited as the root cause of its shortages. But the problem began on the docks, not at the railheads, and affected exports, too. While stopping only a *relatively* small percentage of shipped cotton, in *absolute* terms the blockade cut that export by two-thirds: From 1858-1861, an average of 1 million bales of cotton a year shipped from Southern ports; the last 3 years of the war together saw only 1 million bales shipped. This alone would have led to inflation as the Confederacy used up its supply of hard currency, but the situation was worsened by the trade in luxury goods demanded by the aristocracy.[12] Inflation devastated the lower and middle classes and undermined Southern credit overseas. Gen. W. T. Sherman is often credited with instituting total war by targeting the enemy home front, but his was only a more dramatic version of a battle the Navy had begun three years earlier.

## The Battlefield: Shiloh
*"Gunboats, which alone saved him from complete disaster"*

In addition to waging economic war, the US Navy directly engaged rebel armies. Twice in 1862 Union gunboats saved major armies from

defeat--denying the South victories that would have ended the war.

The first of these took place on 6 April at Shiloh, Tennessee. Rebel forces under A. S. Johnston surprised the Union army of U. S. Grant, pushing it back against the Tennessee River. The crisis took place at dusk as the rebels rallied for what many believed would be the final charge. Although present for much of the day, the gunboats *Tyler* and *Lexington* had been unable to take part in the day's fighting due to the broken and overgrown nature of the ground. But, as Grant recorded, "about sundown, when the National troops were back in their last position, the right of the enemy was near the river and exposed to the fire of the two gunboats, which was delivered with vigor and effect."[13] Rebel Gen. Beauregard reported "It was after 6p.m. ... when the enemy's last position was carried, and his forces finally broke and sought refuge behind a commanding eminence covering Pittsburg Landing, not more than half a mile distant, and under the guns of the gunboats, which opened on our eager columns a fierce and annoying fire with shot and shell of the heaviest description."[14] The rebel attack was stopped. Following the battle, Beauregard commended his men for driving the enemy "from his camps to the shelter of his iron-clad gunboats, which alone saved him from complete disaster."[15] Even Union Gen. Halleck, "in spite of his contempt for the Navy, concluded that only the gunboats had kept Grant's army from being destroyed." Nor did the Navy's contribution end with the repulse of the Southern army:

[Grant] After nightfall, when firing had entirely ceased on land, the commander of the fleet informed himself, approximately, of the position of our troops and suggested the idea of dropping a shell within the lines of the enemy every fifteen minutes during the night. This was done with effect, as is proved by the Confederate reports.[16]

[Beauregard] During the night the rain fell in torrents, adding to the discomforts and harassed condition of the men. The enemy, moreover, had broken their rest by a discharge at measured intervals of heavy shells thrown from the gunboats; therefore on the following morning the troops under my command were not in condition to cope with an equal force of fresh troops . . . in the immediate possession of his depots and sheltered by such an auxiliary as the enemy's gunboats.[17]

Following the battle, Leonard Swett, friend of Abraham Lincoln, spent three days riding the field.[18] His letter to the president stated:

From all I could learn I believe the gunboats *Lexington* and *Tyler*, commanded by Lieutenants Shirk and Gwin, saved our army from defeat. At least it is within bounds to say that they rendered us invaluable services.[19]

The vital contribution of the gunboats was well recognized in the South. On 18 April 1862 the New Orleans *Daily Delta* hit upon the key to Union victory—and wrote what may pass for the epitaph of the Southern war effort:

[The battle at Shiloh] has taught us that we have nothing to fear from a land invasion of the enemy if he is unsupported by his naval armaments. It has taught us that the right arm of his power in this war is in his gunboats on our seacoast; and that our only assurance of saving the Mississippi from his grasp is to paralyze that arm upon its waters.[20]

## The Battlefield: Malvern Hill
*"The great obstacle . . . is the presence of the enemy's gunboats"*

Almost three months later, in Virginia, another Union Army stood on the brink of defeat. Union Gen. G. McClellan's Peninsular Campaign to capture Richmond had turned sour when Robert E. Lee took command of opposing Confederate forces. In a week-long series of battles, Lee succeeded in pushing the invaders away from the capital, harrying them as they retreated along the James. At the end of June, the victorious rebels were poised to push the Yankees into the river. Sensing disaster, McClellan sought refuge under the guns of the Navy near Malvern Hill, sending the following:

I would most earnestly request that every gunboat or other armed vessel suitable for action in the James River be sent at once to this vicinity... for the purpose of covering the camps and

communications of this army. May I urge that not an hour be lost and that you telegraph to the Navy Department reporting the request I make.[21]

The local naval commander, Commodore J. Rodgers of USS *Galena*, echoed McClellan's plea:

The enemy presses the army; it rests upon the James River and needs all the support which gunboats can give. Please send all of them which you can spare. Please also send up ammunition immediately... No tiring at the present moment.[22]

Privately, Rodgers described the situation in grimmer terms:

The army is in a bad way; the gunboats may save them, but the points to be guarded are too many for the force at my disposal. To save the army... demands immediately all our disposable force. The use for more gunboats is pressing and immediate. Now, if ever, is a chance for the Navy to render most signal service, but it must not delay.[23]

The majority of histories credit Union Gen. Porter (McClellan being absent the field)[24] with laying a trap for the over-eager Lee, using the Union artillery "mounted hub-to-hub atop the hill" to decimate the oncoming rebels.[25] While this did inflict heavy losses among the Confederates, it was naval gunfire that overwhelmed the attackers. The Washington *Intelligencer* reported:

The previous roar of field artillery seemed as faint as the rattle of musketry in comparison with these monsters of ordnance that literally shook the water and strained the air... They fired about three times a minute, frequently a broadside at a time, and the immense hull of the *Galena* careened as she delivered her complement of iron and flame. The fire went on . . . making music to the ears of our tired men... Confederate ranks seemed slow to close up when the naval thunder had torn them apart...[26]

Neither side had previously seen the effects of 8-, 9- or 10-inch shells on massed infantry. While the Navy rounds may have been "music to the ears" of Northerners, for the Southerners they were totally unnerving. The rebels could not respond to the ships[27] and often could not even see them: range and target data were communicated by men of the Signal Corps ashore and afloat--making this one of the first instances of indirect fire on shore targets.[28] Brigade after brigade rushed across the half-mile field toward the Union lines, only to be mown down by the terrible fire. By the end of the battle, over 5,000 Confederates lay dead or wounded; Union losses had been barely half that number.

The attacks were uncoordinated between divisions, such that all of the Union guns could bear upon each column in turn; despite this, the Southerners managed to reach the Yankee lines and capture a number of batteries. Without the naval support, they could certainly have gone further--an opinion evidenced in eyewitness accounts. Marine Corporal J. Mackie, aboard *Galena*, recorded "It is universally admitted by all those who participated in those terrible battles that the energetic action of the Navy saved the Army."[29] A captain aboard one of the army transports said, "McClellan's army would have been annihilated but for the gunboats."[30] From the Confederate side, British observer Col. G. Wolseley reported "Everyone in the South will tell you that McClellan's army was saved, first by Gen. Lee's orders not being accurately executed, and, secondly, by his gunboats..."[31] In his report to President Davis, Lee himself pinned the Union victory on the Navy ships: "The great obstacle to operations here is the presence of the enemy's gunboats, which protect our approaches to him and ... prevent us from reaping any fruits of victory and expose our men to great destruction."[32]

## The Turning Point: New Orleans
*"New Orleans is gone, and with it the Confederacy!"*

The July 1863 Battle of Gettysburg is the accepted turning point of the Civil War. Yet the capture of New Orleans in April 1862 had a far greater impact upon Southern fortunes.

New Orleans was the largest city in the South, its population of 160,000 dwarfing the 6,850 of the capital, Richmond. It was home to a host of machine shops--including the Leeds Foundry, one of only two modern foundries in the South.[33] As the transshipment point for the produce of the southwest and prairie states, as well as being a