

# Battle of hampton roads essay sample



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A decade ago naval warfare changed forever in the two-day Battle of Hampton Roads between the Elizabeth and James River. Cannon shots rang out for endless hours and those present on surrounding shores witnessed history when, for the first time, two ironclad ships entered into battle. The Confederates, protecting their naval yard just south of Hampton Roads, decided to place their undefeatable ship, the CSS Virginia, at the mouth of the river. On the first day of battle this ship was responsible for the death of 400 hundred sailors while only losing two of its own. On the second day, hearing the booms of heavy cannon fire up river the USS Monitor, on a test run, changed course and moved to defend the union. The result was a terrific battle ending in stalemate as both ships claimed victory. Now, over ten years later the details of this historic encounter have finally been deciphered. The two ships have a vastly different history. The confederates, plundering an old Union shipyard that had been razed in a fire, managed to save an old steam powered frigate previously known as the USS Merrimack.

Hoping to beat the Union's far superior naval power the Confederate's secretary of navy advocated the idea of reinventing armor in battle. His engineers reused the intact steam engines of the burnt USS Merrimack and attached two-inch thick sheets of metal onto the wooden hull. In response the union decided that their own ironclad would need to immediately be created. Engineers designed three brand new ships to be built. The first to be finished was the USS Monitor. A unique design never seen before it was armed with a rotating turret in the center of the ship with a single 11inch cannon. The CSS Virginia began the battle on March eighth steaming into

Hampton roads at full speed backed by the Raleigh, Beaufort, James River Squadron, Patrick Henry, Jamestown and Teaser.

They were facing five Union War ships (each bigger than any of confederate ships apart from the Virginia) as well as few union tugs and supply ships. However, the Virginia needed no help. Within 12 minutes of union tugs firing upon the Virginia with no effect but to dent her armor the Virginia head on rammed the sloop-of-war USS Cumberland below the water line. 150 men died aboard the Cumberland as the crew continued to fire upon the Virginia until the last cannon sunk below water. The Cumberland then turned her attention immediately to the USS Congress that had been firing upon it from behind.

Seeing what had accorded to the Cumberland the captain of the Congress, Lieutenant Joseph Smith, in a last resort grounded his ship in shallow water where the Virginia could not ram them. Yet, under fire from the shell shot of the Virginia that could shed through wooden ships, the Congress surrounded within the hour badly damaged. Seeing two of the Union's prime ships taken down in only two hours a Union battery on a Northern peninsula of Hampton Roads opened fire on the Virginia in an attempt to cripple her and save the remaining union ships that had mistakenly run aground during maneuvers in the battle. In response the Virginia fired burning cannon balls into the Congress setting her ablaze and eventually reaching her magazine where she exploded. 110 of the Congress crew died from the attack. By the end of the day the Virginia had lost two guns, two sailors and had several iron plates had loosened while she had been responsible for 400 deaths and the

loss of two war ships. On the second day occurred the encounter between the two ironclads.

While the Virginia sat moored and undergoing repairs the USS Monitor arrived early in the morning and took up position protecting the USS Minnesota which had run aground accidentally the day before. Later that day the Virginia moved to attack the Minnesota and destroy yet another Union ship but found their path blocked by the Ironclad Monitor. Though the Monitor was half the size of the Virginia the ensuing battle did not favor either side. Neither ship had the ammo required to puncture the others armor (the Confederates had left their armor piercing shells on land and the Union did not use enough explosive strength in their cannon). The two encircled each other for hours firing back and forth at extremely close ranges. The Monitor, with its turret and superior ammo, was able to land more critical shots on the Virginia.

The Virginia however was the first to land a penetrating shot and splintered the front of the pilothouse, temporarily blinding the captain. With a blind captain the Monitor retreated, for they were not sure of the extent of damage the shot had caused, and seeing the Monitor retreating the Virginia assumed victory and returned to their mooring. Seeing the Virginia returning to the Confederate docks the Monitor assumed victory and also returned to their mooring. This battle was not just between these two ships. In the past decade many eyewitness accounts have come in describing more about the entirety of the battle. But the significance of the encounter between these two ships is far more important than the battle. Neither side gained or lost any land during the two days but instead they had assured in a new age.

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