

# The battle of hampton roads

War



The Battle of Hampton Roads had caused an unprecedented disaster to the United States Navy until the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. With the events following the battle, traditional naval war had been forever changed. Ironclad battleships had, for the first time, been used in a naval battle and the people involved had found its place in American history.

As the Union found it necessary for a blockade of the main ports to weaken the Confederate economy and win the war with as little bloodshed as possible, the Confederate had to find a way to prevent Union domination of the coastlines.

Both the Union and Confederate forces had found themselves in the middle of a naval arms race at the earlier stage of the American Civil War. Although the Union naval supremacy would not be complete until four years later, this naval arms race would be decided at that momentous battle on March 9, 1862, through the face-off between the Confederate's Virginia and the Union's Monitor. Beginnings of Civil War The tension between North and South states on the question whether to allow new states for the expansion of the Union to be slave or free states caused the beginning of the Civil War.

After winning the independence, America sought to expand their nation. The issue was a manifestation of the conflict over the future direction of national development: " Would America move toward a free-labor capitalist economy and a democratic policy in all regions, or would a slave-labor plantation economy and a heirarchical society persists in half of the country? " When Abraham Lincoln won the election in 1860, he pledged to keep slavery out of the new territories towards the ultimate extinction of slavery everywhere in the United States.

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This naturally worried the South states and caused them to secede and formed a new nation they called the Confederate States of America. The Lincoln administration and the North states, on the other hand, refused to recognize the legitimacy of the secession as it would discredit the idea of a majority-rule democracy. Both the North and South were willing to fight despite the risks of casualties of war. Both “ considered the very survival of their respective nations and societies to be at stake.

” In his second inaugural address, Abraham Lincoln explained the beginning of the civil war: “ All dreaded it—all sought to avert it. Both parties deprecated war; but one of them would make war rather than let the nation survive; and the other would accept war rather than let it perish. And the war came. ” The Naval Conflict Before Hampton Roads Lincoln's first order for the Navy was to set a blockade of the southern coasts. This was an adoption of Winfield Scott's Anaconda Plan, to win the war with as little bloodshed as possible.

The blockade served to disable South's economy. Controlling the Mississippi River would also effectively split the Southern states in two. The difficulty, however, rests on the amount of the Union's warships: they had only fewer than 90 at that time and there were about 3, 500 miles of southern coastlines. The North had to purchase shipping vessels, strengthened their decks, loaded them with guns, and sent them to serve on the blockade. Note that the North did not need a cutting-edgetechnologyor sophisticated warships to serve in the blockade.

They did not have to worry about keeping the Confederate fleet confined in their ports for the Confederacy had none to begin with. The blockade ended

international shipments to and from the Confederacy which caused shortages in food and other goods for the South and ruined their economy. Furthermore, the North had been increasing the size of their fleet through the purchases they made which the Confederacy had no hope of matching. They had relied on commerce raiding through the acquisition of raiding vessels that destroyed more than 150 Union merchant ships.

But the Union Navy would get its way by targeting coastal fortifications. This prompted the Confederacy to find a way of supplementing coastal forts with a few ships that could stand up to a whole fleet of Union battleships and prevent them from dominating the coastlines. For the remainder of the war, the navy would be used to gain advantage to the opposing side. The war itself has had made its mark in history, and the battles that were fought within it. One such battle would be in Hampton Roads, a battle that was described in Craig Symonds' book, *Decision at Sea: Five Naval Battles that Shaped American History*.

The Confederate Plan: The CSS Virginia Confederate navy secretary Stephen R. Mallory hoped to supplement the coastal forts by acquiring a few ships whose defensive characteristics were such that they could stand up to a whole squadron of conventional Union warships. He wrote to his wife: "Knowing that the Union could build one hundred ships to one of our own, my policy has been to make such ships so strong and invulnerable as would compensate for the inequality of numbers.

" Angus Konstam explained that Mallory " realized that it was almost impossible for his Navy to break the Union blockade by conventional means, so he adopted a more radical approach, placing his faith in ironclads and <https://assignbuster.com/the-battle-of-hampton-roads/>

rifled ordnance. " Mallory has urged the Confederate Congress to authorize the construction of an ironclad warship as early as May 1861. He wrote: " I regard the possession of an iron-armored warship, as a matter of first necessity. Such a vessel at this time could traverse the entire coast of the United States, prevent all blockades, and encounter, with fair prospect of success, their entire navy.

" The Confederacy's lack of technology to create such a vessel caused a difficulty for Mallory's plan to succeed. He, however, sought a way to fulfill this and found the Merrimac. It was a steam frigate with a partially burned hull left and was raised from the bottom of the Elizabeth River. Mallory's plan was to build an iron casemate atop the wooden frame of the Merrimac. It was Lieutenant John Mercer Brooke who urged Mallory the construction of an iron-plated warship and submitted to him an initial design.

Mallory wanted technical advice for the feasibility of the concept and sought the opinion of Naval Constructor John L. Porter, who happened to have a design of his own similar to Brooke's. Mid-July found the reconstruction of Merrimac into the first operational ironclad. " Porter supervised the refit as carpenters cut away the charred timbers and began to erect a frame for the casemate. Williamson focused on repairing the cranky engines. Brooke designed the rifled guns that would make up the ship's armament, and he took charge of procuring the iron plate that would constitute its armor shield.

" The confederacy renamed it the CSS Virginia. Symonds explained that " officially the Virginia was rated as a 'ram. ' A fifteen-hundred-pound cast iron prow had been bolted onto the ship's bow just below the waterline, and though it protruded only a few feet from the ship's stem, it made the

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ship itself, as well as its guns, a potentially lethal weapon. " To command Virginia, Mallory chose Captain Franklin Buchanan. Buchanan had been a naval officer most of his life, have served in the US Navy for fifty years prior to Hampton Roads.

Mallory had chosen him because he believed that Buchanan had the perfect combination of realism and boldness. He had hoped for great things to the experimental vessel and expected Buchanan to sieze the initiative, of which he was not failed. The Union Plan: The USS Monitor The Confederate's plan to build an ironclad battleship was no secret to the Union. News of the rebel activity reached Union's Navy Secretary General Gideon Welles. Southern newspaper also kept Welles up to date on the progress of Merrimac's reconstruction. He decided that the Union needed to construct a counter-weapon.

The Congress approved an appropriation of \$1. 5 million to construct three experimental ironclad warships and created the Ironclad Board. Welles and Mallory began a " naval arms race for the control of a strategically critical body of water. " Cornelius Bushnell presented a design of a " more or less conventional frigate with iron plating. " The Ironclad Board, however, were skeptical such that Bushnell sought the opinion of " the nation's most gifted maritime engineer. " Instead, John Ericsson showed Bushnell a floating battery that he himself designed.

Bushnell reported to Welles that " the country was safe because I had found a battery which would make us master of the situation as far as the ocean was concerned. " A few months later, the Union ironclad battleship construction was underway. They dubbed it the USS Monitor. The key feature

of this ironclad battleship was that it had a novel revolving turret with two high-calibered guns. It was the entire ship's armament, but since the turrets could revolve, the guns could be pointed in any direction independent of the ship's orientation. The Battle of Hampton Roads: March 8, 1862

Union Navy at Newport News Point found themselves being approached by what naval soldiers called the “ thing” on the morning of March 8, 1862. The Confederate ironclad Virginia had “ crept menacingly out of the Elizabeth River” to test its potential against the Union battleships. Its approach was not defined with stealth. Indeed, it run only with a speed of five knots in plain view and Union blockade could have easily avoided battle had they wanted to. The Virginia announced its coming with a black smoke emerging from its single stack. Unlike conventional battleships, it had no masts and no sails of any kind.

A Union officer described its approach with “ the water hisses and boils with indignation as like some huge slimy reptile she slowly emerges from her loathsome lair. ” Symonds noted that “ to most of the hundreds of observers watching from the shoreline, this smoke-belching, iron-plated 'thing' was neither vessel nor creature but a machine: a giant, self-propelled, armored engine of war. ” The Union Navy prepared for an impending battle. Symonds explains that “ whatever the soldiers felt internally, outwardly they displayed confidence and grim determination.

” Even men on the Virginia felt the same, for most of the crew would only have combat in a ship for the first time. Eugenius Jack, a third assistant engineer aboard Virginia wrote in his memoirs which spoke a general feeling of men in combat: “ there are few men who do not feel some symptoms of

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fear when going into battle; pride has kept many a man's face to the foe, when his heart would turn it away. " The Union had two major battleships: The USS Cumberland and the USS Congress. These battleships mounted a total of seventy guns, as compared to the Virginia's ten.

Buchanan had the Virginia approach directly at Cumberland, intending to ram his vessel into the enemy battleship. Cumberland had two ten-inch pivot guns which Buchanan feared would be able to penetrate his vessel's iron shield. During the Virginia's lengthy transit, the Cumberland was able to fire several shots at it, while the Virginia was only able to return fire from one bow seven-inch rifle. The Battle of Hampton Roads on the morning of March 8, 1862 marked not only the battle between an ironclad and wooden battleships, but of men on ships and men in a ship.

Men inside the Virginia could only imagine what was really happening outside. Jack described the events that followed: " the suspense was awful... the dull reports of the enemy artillery, and an occasional crack and tremor of the ship told that we had been struck... [I heard] the sharp reports of our own guns... [then] there came a tremor throughout the ship and I was nearly thrown from the coal bucket upon which I was sitting... The cracking and breaking of her timbers told full well how fatal to her that collision was. "

The Confederate ironclad Virginia had collided with the Union battleship Cumberland with such a force that men on both ships were knocked off their feet and caused a gaping hole at the side of Cumberland. A junior officer aboard Cumberland noted: " the once clean and beautiful deck was slippery with blood, blackened with powder and looked like a slaughter house. "

Despite the damage, men in Cumberland continued to fire shots at Virginia

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while the ship was literally sinking. The crew on Virginia, on the other hand, had little time to celebrate yet.

Symonds explained that “ for a few anxious moments it seemed likely that the Cumberland would take her assassin down with her. The Virginia's ram had plunged so deeply into the Cumberland that, although Buchanan had immediately ordered all astern, the ironclad remained embedded in the side of its sinking victim. ” Virginia was alarmingly tilted forward. It was saved when the current of James River swung its stern slowly to starboard, and with the “ resulting torque on the ships ram caused a section of it to break off”, allowing it to “ extricate itself from its mortally wounded foe.

” One hundred twenty-one of the 376 aboard the Cumberland has been killed outright from the fatal attack. The river current had pushed Virginia downstream, and crewmen aboard the other battleship, Congress, thought that the Virginia was fleeing. Much to their dismay, Buchanan was not yet done. “ His goal was to destroy the entire Federal squadron,” as Symonds explained. He managed to turn his ship back to reenter Hampton Roads after forty minutes of hard maneuvering and steadied for a course directly towards the Congress.

Having witnessed the destruction of Cumberland, men aboard the Congress no longer doubted the seriousness of the threat and saw no hope of standing up against the rebel ironclad. The captain, Lieutenant Joseph Smith, Jr. , ordered to raise the anchor and steered the ship into shoal water where Virginia could not follow and was safe from ramming. Virginia, however, had still guns to use. It pounded heavily on the Congress until it was “ so utterly wrecked” to render it useless and caused them to surrender. The surrender

of USS Congress should have not posed a problem had the traditional naval warfare been observed.

Buchanan ordered lieutenant William H. Parker aboard the gunship Beaufort to accept the surrender and burn the ship, of course, after letting the surviving crew escape and harboring the wounded, but when Parker complied, soldiers on shore began firing at them. Symonds explained that army troops were not “ impressed by the traditions of the sea. ” Brigadier General Joseph K. Mansfield growled “ I know the d----d ship has surrendered,... but we haven't,” when a Federal lieutenant tried to stop him from firing at Beaufort. With Buchanan's urging, Bob Minor volunteered to take the remaining boat aboard Virginia to burn the surrendered ship.

To make sure there was no misunderstanding, Minor raised the white flag of truce, but no sooner was he under way when the army at the shore began firing at him. Enraged, Buchanan ordered to reopen fire on the already disabled and helpless Congress. Symonds wrote that “ the Virginia fired three deliberate rounds of 'hot shot' into the grounded hull of the Congress” which caused the sun-baked hull to kindle fire. “ Soon the Congress was burning briskly, the flames running up its rigging and lighting up the roadstead, and at last the firing ceased, though the Congress continued to burn through the twilight and into the evening,” Symonds continued.

A total of 120 of the ship's 434 had died that day. Symonds explains that “ each side felt the fury of violated honor” to the events that followed the surrender of the USS Congress. He wrote: “ To the Confederates, the Yankees were the guilty party, since they had fired on a white flag while officers attempted to take possession of a lawful prize. To the Federals, the

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Confederates were at fault, since they now opened fire on a grounded vessel full of helpless men, a vessel that was flying not only one but two white flags of surrender.

This was where the time-honored traditions of the Age of Sail collided with the realities of total war in a mechanized age. For the rest of the war, and for decades afterward, each side would point an accusing finger at the other to charge that in Hampton Roads on March 8, 1862, the traditional rules of naval warfare—indeed the very ideals of chivalry and humanity—were sacrificed to a new template of modern war; a mechanized war without rules, without restraint, without mercy, and without honor. ” The Virginia exchanged long-ranged shots with the USS Minnesota after dealing with the Congress.

Although there were still a few hours of daylight left and there were three more Union warship in the roadstead, it had already been a long day and the crew was exhausted. Buchanan agreed for a break and ordered the Virginia to be anchored at Sewall's Point, “ from which point it could renew the attack the next day. ” The Battle of Hampton Roads: March 9, 1862 The next morning revealed the devastation caused by Virginia's rampage in Newport. It resumed its attack, this time targetting Minnesota. At this time, the Monitor, which arrived shortly after the battle the previous day, now made her appearance.

William Swinton wrote that “ it was a moment of anxiety on the little craft, for there had been no time for drilling the men... ” It engaged the Virginia with exchanges of shots, both of which proved to be futile as both ships appeared undamaged and unfazed from the firing. The Confederate Military History <https://assignbuster.com/the-battle-of-hampton-roads/>

records that “ after some time, the Merrimac succeeded in ramming the Monitor, but her prow had been broken off in ramming the Cumberland the day before, and she did no harm. ” To the surprise of the crew of Virginia, the Monitor run off into shoal water where they could not follow.

Having consumed most of its coals, Virginia was forced to retreat. To compare, “ the Confederate ironclad carried more guns than the Union Monitor, but it was slow, clumsy, and prone to engine trouble. The Union prototype... was the faster and more manueverable ironclad but it lacked the Rebel vessel's brutish size and power. ” Neither ironclad caused serious damage to the other and the battle ended without a decisive victory to either side. However, the timely appearance of the Monitor prevented the Virginia from attacking more of the Union's wooden battleships and destry the blockade. Conclusion

Although the Battle of Hampton Roads ended without a decisive conclusion, it marked a new age of naval warfare. Neither ironclads seriously damaged the other, but for the Union, it was a success because it prevented the Confederate to break the blockade. Having seen the potential of their prototype, the Union made several copies of the Monitor to win the war altogether. Symonds put it: “ in a contest where weapons of war required the application of industrial productivity, the Union states had an overwhelming advantage over their southern counterparts. ” Bibliography “ Battle of Hampton Roads. ” Available from <http://www.civilwarhome.com/CMHHampton%20Roads.htm>. Internet; accessed 29, July 2008. Catton, Bruce and James M. McPherson, The Civil War. Mariner Books, 2004. “ Hampton Roads: Battle of the Ironclad. ” Available from <http://www.https://assignbuster.com/the-battle-of-hampton-roads/>

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