

Naval War College Review

Volume 51
Number 4 *Autumn*

Article 28

1998

Raphael Semmes: The Philosophical Mariner

Lawrence M. Burke II

Warren F. Spencer

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Recommended Citation

Burke, Lawrence M. II and Spencer, Warren F. (1998) "Raphael Semmes: The Philosophical Mariner," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 51 : No. 4 , Article 28.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol51/iss4/28>

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there is no apparent reason why it could not have been interspersed throughout the text. Publishers are often the potholes on the road to reader comprehension.

Hearn's history may not read as easily as Morgan's journalistic style, but it does contain some excellent examples of leadership at sea, both good and bad. Although men of iron have been superseded, to a degree, by pear-shaped people with bulging eyes glued to electronic screens, the problems of cramped living for long periods at sea have not changed. The experience of these American naval officers of a different era can still provide valuable lessons. These are the stories of *American* naval officers. Whatever the color of their uniform, they are still part of our naval heritage, and their history is our history.

Finally, if I were preparing for a long deployment, I would ensure that copies of these two books were available in the ship's library and in the wardroom library (for vessels that still maintain that noble practice).

H. W. HENZEL
Lieutenant Colonel,
U.S. Marine Corps, Retired

Spencer, Warren F. *Raphael Semmes: The Philosophical Mariner*. Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Press, 1997. 250pp. \$37.95

Mention the battle between the CSS *Alabama* and the USS *Kearsarge*, and one name springs to mind—Raphael Semmes, captain of the doomed *Alabama*. Who is Semmes that we should remember his name over that

of the captain of the victorious *Kearsarge*? Warren F. Spencer, emeritus professor of history at the University of Georgia and author of *The Confederate Navy in Europe*, has written a biography of Semmes drawing on previously unpublished diaries and other private papers. Integrating this new material with Semmes's published memoirs, Spencer fleshes out the life of the man who seems to arrive on history's stage for one brief battle before departing again.

Semmes was born in Maryland in 1809 and entered the U.S. Navy as a midshipman in 1826. As was common at the time, he had many long, unpaid leaves between assignments. He used this time to read law in his younger brother's office; when Semmes made lieutenant in 1837, he had already established himself as a lawyer. His early experiences serving on several ships and his own interest in "natural philosophy" (that is, natural science) gave Semmes knowledge that would later serve him well as a Confederate commerce raider. Likewise, his experience as a lawyer would be to his advantage.

Like many other military leaders on both sides of the Civil War, Semmes gained firsthand experience during the war with Mexico. He blockaded the Mexican coast, commanding the "unlucky" USS *Somers*, which fulfilled its reputation by sinking in a sudden squall. Instead of being censured for this loss, Semmes was given orders to meet with Mexican officials to try to negotiate the release of one of his captured midshipmen. In carrying out these orders, Semmes found himself attached to the U.S.

Army for a time. After the war, his well kept journals helped him write a popular book about his experiences.

Spencer paints an excellent picture of the events leading up to secession, as seen by the South and the "sea lawyer" Semmes, who resigned his commission in the U.S. Navy to follow his adopted home state of Alabama when it seceded in early 1861. Spencer also manages to convey the naive and somewhat confused atmosphere (so incomprehensible in hindsight) that gripped both Union and Confederacy between the secessions and the attack on Fort Sumter. During this period Semmes traveled through the Union attempting to purchase arms-producing machinery and other war material for the Confederacy.

Once fighting broke out, Semmes was given command of the steamer *Sumter*, supervising its long and arduous outfitting for use as a commerce raider. The seaweary *Sumter* eventually had to be abandoned in Gibraltar, after which Semmes continued his reign of terror among Union shipping in the British-built CSS *Alabama*.

At sea, Semmes used his knowledge of winds, currents, and trade routes to capture merchant vessels. His techniques for finding enemy shipping were so successful that Kaiser Wilhelm II was to require all his naval captains to read Semmes's *Memoirs of Service Afloat during the War between the States*. Semmes used his own background in international law to decide the status of ships he boarded and the cargoes they carried, releasing, burning, or bonding them as he deemed appropriate.

Almost two years after launching, the *Alabama* limped into Brest harbor needing an extended yard period. Denied

that by the French government, Semmes nonetheless accepted the challenge of the Union navy, which had finally caught up to him in the form of the USS *Kearsarge*. After a one-hour battle, Semmes, rescued from the water by a British yacht, managed to return to the Confederacy, where he commanded the James River Squadron until the fall of Richmond, after which he served as a commander of artillery with the army.

The life of Raphael Semmes, as related by Warren Spencer, is filled with episodes that would seem more in keeping with Horatio Hornblower, or Jack Aubrey and Stephen Maturin. The Civil War, as fought on the high seas, was as much the last gasp of the age of sail as it was a harbinger of twentieth-century warfare. Raphael Semmes was a man of similar complexity and contradiction.

And for those of you who may still be wondering, the captain of the *Kearsarge* was John A. Winslow.

LAWRENCE M. BURKE II
Bath, Maine

Ehrenreich, Barbara. *Blood Rites: Origins and History of the Passions of War*. New York: Henry Holt, 1997. 292pp. \$25

O'Connell, Robert L. *Ride of the Second Horseman: The Birth and Death of War*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995. 305pp. \$15.95

"Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the foundations of peace must be laid."