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The Alabama and the Kearsarge: The Sailor's Civil War

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retired Royal Navy officer as its first commanding officer, the future was looking bright for the new service. However, little more was done through the 1950s and 1960s, and the Naval Service entered the 1970s with only one commissioned ship. The early 1970s saw a revival, with the purchase of more ships and the commencement of a building programme for offshore patrol vessels (OPVs). The entry of Ireland into the European Economic Community brought about a renewed interest in fisheries and, more importantly for the Naval Service, fishery protection. The 1980s and 1990s saw the completion of the OPV programme, the construction of one helicopter-carrying OPV, and the purchase of two fast patrol boats from the Royal Navy. The profile of the service increased as more and more law enforcement tasks in the marine environment were added to its list of roles, particularly the task of interdiction of illegal drug importations.

The book contains an interesting selection of illustrations, some of which are new to this reviewer, as well as important appendices containing ship lists and names of officers commanding the service. The book's strength is in the author's considerable amount of research. However, his lack of nautical background is apparent, especially when discussing incidents that depend on eyewitness verbal reports. The book's major weakness lies in its number of factual errors in the text and, particularly, in the appendices. For example, the hull of the *Deirdre* was not designed by the Netherlands Ship Design Organization, and the lists of officers commanding the Naval Service and

the officers commanding the Naval Base contain inaccuracies and one glaring omission. This is unfortunate in a book that, when it was published, was the only historical account of the Irish Naval Service.

The book's value is its collected archival and published material, which referred in passing to a quiet service, and brought it together in one publication. For this the Irish Naval Service owes McIvor a debt of gratitude.

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Marvel, William. *The Alabama and the Kearsarge: The Sailor's Civil War*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1996. 610pp. \$34.95

In recent years a number of excellent histories have examined virtually every aspect of the American Civil War. Surprisingly, virtually none has addressed the lives of the Union and Confederate sailors, who contributed so much to their respective war efforts. In *The Alabama and the Kearsarge*, noted historian William Marvel corrects this obvious imbalance. In the process, he succeeds admirably in presenting the most comprehensive coverage of the hardships of the common sailor during this country's deadliest conflict.

Marvel is no stranger to readers and students of the Civil War. His *Andersonville: The Last Depot* and his biography of Ambrose Burnside received high acclaim throughout literary circles. In his latest effort, Marvel focuses on

contemporary manuscripts, including ships' logs, and diaries and journals, to portray the sailors' Civil War. His approach is to present a parallel biography of the two ships destined to meet off the port of Cherbourg on 19 June 1864. In the ensuing engagement, the *Kearsarge* sent the most successful Confederate commerce raider to the bottom of the English Channel in less than an hour.

In the interim between its construction in Liverpool's Laird shipyard in the spring of 1862 and its sinking, the *Alabama*, commanded by Captain Raphael Semmes, captured sixty prizes and virtually ran the American merchant fleet from the high seas. In spite of Semmes's triumphs, however, life aboard the *Alabama* typified the hardships experienced by sailors throughout the war. Long voyages, meager rations, and recurring bouts of respiratory ailments, to say nothing of ever-present homesickness, led the *Alabama's* crew to near mutiny on several occasions. By the time the ship limped into Cherbourg harbor in June 1864, the damage caused by the *Alabama* had already reached its greatest extent. By the middle of 1864, notes Marvel, so many American vessels had been sold to foreign owners or registered under other flags that the international sea lanes offered few victims for Confederate raiders.

Sailors aboard the *Kearsarge* fared little better than their Southern counterparts. Commissioned in early 1862, the *Kearsarge* made its maiden voyage in February of that year. Designed principally to seek and destroy commerce raiders, the sloop spent the next three years at sea chasing the *Sumter*, *Alabama*,

and the *Florida*. The destruction of the *Alabama* was the culmination of the cruise, but even Semmes admitted that the end of his crippled ship's career was rapidly approaching by the summer of 1864. Semmes's decision to battle the *Kearsarge* seems to have been more a matter of Southern honor than of realistic hope that he could once again put to sea to continue his voyage of destruction. Even had he won, Semmes would have been forced to return to Cherbourg for lengthy repairs.

Marvel is best at describing the climactic battle between the two ships and placing the *Alabama's* contribution to the Confederate war effort in perspective. In his almost minute-by-minute account of the famous encounter, Marvel attributes the *Kearsarge's* victory more to superior gunnery than to Semmes's claim of defective munitions on board the *Alabama*. Of 370 rounds fired by the Confederate raider, only a dozen took effect in the hull of the *Kearsarge*, and only ten more clipped away pieces of the Union rigging. In contrast, the crew of the *Kearsarge* riddled the *Alabama*.

In the final analysis, the *Alabama's* principal service to the Confederacy appears to have been its effect on Southern morale, offering false hope of victory at sea and spreading sympathy for the Confederate cause around the globe. Marvel notes correctly that the commerce raiders diverted few Union vessels from the stifling blockade, which the South never had any hope of breaking without foreign intervention. With world opinion slowly turning against the Confederacy and its institution of slavery after

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1863, Marvel concludes that the battle against the commerce raiders was really won by the foreign ministers, and that no one needed to die in the English

Channel except to appease Southern honor.

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