



4-20-2015

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Johnson, S. Marianne (2015) "Men and Machines: The Psychological Impact of Gunboats on the Fort Henry and Donelson Campaign," *The Gettysburg College Journal of the Civil War Era*: Vol. 5 , Article 5.  
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# Men and Machines: The Psychological Impact of Gunboats on the Fort Henry and Donelson Campaign

## **Abstract**

During the course of the American Civil War, 1861-1865, ironclad warships developed a fearful reputation as powerful commanders of the Mississippi River. With the ability to pierce deep into the heart of the South, destroy Confederate property, and pull out with amazing speed compared to land assaults, the early Western Flotilla became the symbol of Northern industrial invincibility, boosting Northern morale and seriously damaging Southern psyches. However, an analysis of the Fort Henry/Fort Donelson Campaign of 1862 reveals a different story than the one that went into legend. Using the official records of the Union and Confederate armies and navies, this study traces the psychological impact of the Western Flotilla ironclads and their journey into legend.

## **Keywords**

War, Civil War, Navy, Mississippi River, Psychological Impact of War

## Men and Machines: The Psychological Impact of Gunboats on the Fort Henry and Donelson Campaign

S. Marianne Johnson

In an age of steam and industry, the ironclad warship represents the pinnacle of the Industrial Revolution. Although ironclads had been in existence in France and Britain in the 1850s, the American Civil War demonstrated the first time these gunboats were put to use in ship to ship warfare en masse.<sup>1</sup> Today, ironclads are seen as one of the great technological achievements of the Civil War, but their conception and birth were surrounded by doubts and fears. Despite their intrigue, there has not been an in-depth study of the psychological effects of these revolutionary weapons on the men serving in and those opposing them. The closest study is Gary Joiner's chapter on the timberclads *Lexington* and *Tyler* at the Battle of Shiloh.<sup>2</sup> The bulk of the primary source material has come from the *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies* and the *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*. Tracing the planning, building, and deployment of the first gunboats in the Western Gunboat Flotilla from late 1861 through the Forts Henry and Donelson campaign in February of 1862 explains how the ironclads came to be remembered as a symbol of Yankee power and invincibility.

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<sup>1</sup> Ervan G. Garrison, "Three Ironclad Warships—The Archaeology of Industrial Process and Historical Myth," *Historical Archaeology* 29, no. 4 (1995), 27.

<sup>2</sup> Joiner's chapter has largely served as the template for this piece. Gary Joiner, "Soul Stirring Music to Our Ears: Gunboats at Shiloh," in *The Shiloh Campaign*, ed. Steven Woodworth (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2009), 96-109.

When Union General Winfield Scott introduced the Anaconda Plan, a design to isolate the Confederacy and squeeze it into submission, a crucial part of the plan was to control the Mississippi River and cut the Confederacy in half.<sup>3</sup> To do so, the Department of the Navy began to consider the possibility of ironclad gunboats to conquer and control the river. The Department sent orders to Captain John Rodgers on May 16, 1861, sending him to General George McClellan's Headquarters at Cincinnati "in regard to the expediency of establishing a Naval Armament on the Mississippi and Ohio rivers, or either of them, with a view of blockading or interdicting communication and interchanges with the states that are in insurrections."<sup>4</sup> The orders went on to state that this operation would be under the supervision of the Army and that Rodgers would be subordinate to McClellan.<sup>5</sup> After communicating with McClellan, Rodgers bought three steamships to be converted into timberclads, the *Conestoga*, *Lexington*, and *A. O. Taylor*.<sup>6</sup> Rodgers changed the name *Taylor* to *Tyler* due his personal aversion to President Zachary Taylor, viewed at the time as a part of the 'Slave Power Conspiracy' for his involvement in the Mexican Cession.<sup>7</sup> Rodgers purchased the ships for the "aggregate"<sup>8</sup> price of

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<sup>3</sup> Gary Joiner, *Mr. Lincoln's Brownwater Navy: The Mississippi Squadron* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007), 9.

<sup>4</sup> Orders from Department of the Navy to Captain John Rodgers, May 16, 1861. Rodgers Family Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>5</sup> Orders of Dept. of Navy, Rodgers Family Papers.

<sup>6</sup> A timberclad was similar in structure to an ironclad, but as its name suggests, was armored with thick planks of timber instead of iron plating.

<sup>7</sup> Report, June 8, 1861, Rodgers Family Papers.

<sup>8</sup> Report, June 8, 1861, Rodgers Family Papers.

\$62,000 and predicted that at least another \$41,000 would be necessary to strengthen and outfit them for battle.

In addition to timberclads, a contract for ironclad gunboats, later to be known as city-class ironclads, was announced.<sup>9</sup> In the summer of 1861, advertisements began to appear in newspapers across the North encouraging shipbuilders to submit their proposals for ironclads. The *Boston Daily Advertiser* announced on June 3, 1861 that shipbuilders should submit their proposals to the Navy Bureau of Construction by June 15.<sup>10</sup> On July 27, *The Daily Picayune* in New Orleans reported that plans had been accepted and the gunboats would be built at Cincinnati.<sup>11</sup> John Lenthall was the first to try to design the boats, but abandoned the project because of doubts. After withdrawing from the project, the task fell to his subordinate, Samuel Pook.<sup>12</sup>

In order to minimize vulnerability, Pook moved the single paddle wheel into the middle of the ship, inside the carapace. This provided decent protection at the expense of maneuverability; turning would be difficult. James Buchanan Eads won the contract to build seven ironclads using a layout similar to that of the timberclads based on Pook's designs at \$89,600 per ship, nearly four times what Lenthall had originally quoted.<sup>13</sup> In December of 1861, the

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<sup>9</sup> Joiner, *Brownwater Navy*, 25.

<sup>10</sup> "The New Gunboats," *Boston Daily Advertiser* (Boston, MA) Monday, June 3, 1861; Issue 131; col. D.

<sup>11</sup> "The New Gunboats to be Built at Cincinnati for the United States Government," *The Daily Picayune* (New Orleans, LA) Saturday, July 27, 1861; col E.

<sup>12</sup> John D. Milligan, "From Theory to Application: The Emergence of the American Ironclad War Vessel," *Military Affairs* 48, no. 3 (July, 1984), 126.

<sup>13</sup> Joiner, *Brownwater Navy*, 25; ORN 22:387; Milligan, "From Theory to Application," 127.

Department of the Navy asked Congress for twelve million dollars for the ironclad program, more than the Navy's entire budget for 1860.<sup>14</sup> The Western Flotilla began its journey as a project with dubious success producing immense cost for its day.

Despite disputes between the Army and Navy for who would pay these immense costs, preparations continued.<sup>15</sup> The gunboats were to be one hundred and seventy-five feet long and fifty-five feet wide.<sup>16</sup> They would have a draft of no more than four feet and the ironclads would be plated with sheets of iron two and a half inches thick and twelve to twenty-one inches wide joined with interlocking grooves.<sup>17</sup> The whole project was expected to be completed in six to eight weeks. However, constructing the timber and iron warriors would be harder than first imagined. These gunboats were on the cutting edge of naval warfare, and new technologies meant trial and error. The boats were originally contracted to have two large staterooms for senior officers, ten smaller staterooms for junior officers, and two eight by ten foot mess decks for the enlisted men. As work got under way, however, the contractors quickly realized there simply was not enough room on the boats to fit everything. Instead of twelve total staterooms, the *Conestoga* could only be outfitted with eight rooms, each six foot square.<sup>18</sup> Problems continued when it came time to arm the boats. Contractors found load-bearing beams where guns were supposed to go and

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<sup>14</sup> William Roberts, *Civil War Ironclads: The U.S. Navy and Industrial Mobilization* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 19-20.

<sup>15</sup> *ORN* 22:284-286.

<sup>16</sup> "The New Gunboats," *Daily Picayune*, June 27, 1861.

<sup>17</sup> "Iron Plating," Rodgers Family Papers.

<sup>18</sup> *ORN* 22:290-291.

had to find ways of working all the guns in without compromising the structure.<sup>19</sup> Lt. Seth L. Phelps, who would eventually command one of the gunships, was seriously concerned about the work being done; he reported the joiner work was sloppy and expressed doubts about their success.<sup>20</sup>

Recruiting had been going on since the end of June, but Rodgers found considerable difficulty in getting men to enlist. This new project was uncertain from the start; no one knew yet how effective these boats would be in repelling enemy fire. Rodgers acknowledged that “the boilers and engines cannot be defended against cannon shot. We must take our chances.”<sup>21</sup> No one knew exactly what would happen if a boiler was hit, and perhaps this danger kept men from enlisting.<sup>22</sup> As the months went on, Rodgers desperately requested that Gideon Wells send him men, but none were to be had. Rodgers was forced to make do out in the west.<sup>23</sup> The result was that the Western Gunboat Flotilla was crewed by a peculiar conglomeration of men who did not fit in anywhere else. Army transfers (or those who did not perform well in the infantry), rough riverboat pilots, and eventually former slaves and contrabands crewed the Mississippi gunboats.<sup>24</sup> The crews were brash and undisciplined, brawling in the streets, some even dying of alcohol poisoning before shipping out.<sup>25</sup> Lt.

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<sup>19</sup> ORN 22:290-291.

<sup>20</sup> ORN 22:292.

<sup>21</sup> ORN 22: 283.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Bennett, *Union Jacks: Yankee Sailors in the Civil War* ed. Gary Gallagher (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004) 79.

<sup>23</sup> Letter from Secretary of the Navy Gideon Wells to Capt. John Rodgers August 23, 1861.

<sup>24</sup> Bennett, *Union Jacks*, 80.

<sup>25</sup> Bennett, *Union Jacks*, 80.

Phelps again expressed his concern, telling Rodgers that he was displeased with the quality of the pilots.<sup>26</sup>

Uncertainties also arose over the time it took to complete the ironclads. The date by which the ironclads were to be completed came and went, and although unprecedented funds had been spent, it seemed there was never enough money or time to finally complete them. As Rodgers grew more and more impatient with the situation in the Cairo, St. Louis, and Mound City shipyards, Eads continued to assure him that it was only a matter of time until the ironclads were in the rivers. Finally, on November 19, 1861, Eads declared the ironclads ready for service. The names of the six were *Mound City*, *St. Louis*, *Pittsburg*, *Cincinnati*, *Benton*, and *Carondelet*.<sup>27</sup> In addition to these six, another vessel, the *New Era*, was converted to an ironclad and renamed the *Essex*.<sup>28</sup>

Once completed, the ironclads were anything but sleek and glamorous weapons of war. Squat and peculiar looking, they quickly gained the nickname “Pook’s Turtles”<sup>29</sup> for their resemblance to the animal. Cramped, noisy, and dirty are words that suited the ironclads well. The only way to get to the pilot house was through two round ladders and very small port holes that only “active men”<sup>30</sup> could fit through. The steam-powered engines worked around the clock causing constant rattling and noise. The vessels burned up to six thousand pounds of coal per day and belched black smoke, covering the vessels with a thick layer of black grime.<sup>31</sup> Inside the ironclads, average

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<sup>26</sup> ORN 22:293.

<sup>27</sup> ORN 22:387.

<sup>28</sup> Joiner, *Brownwater Navy*, 27.

<sup>29</sup> Joiner, *Brownwater Navy*, 21.

<sup>30</sup> ORN 22:290.

<sup>31</sup> Bennett, *Union Jacks*, 82-83.



temperatures hovered around ninety degrees but would swell above one hundred on hot days, earning them another nickname, the “federal bake ovens.”<sup>32</sup>

The Western Gunboat Flotilla was born amidst a storm of doubt and obstacle. In August and September of 1861, however, the storm began to abate. The completed timberclads arrived in Cairo, Illinois on August 16 and immediately were ordered to “make a demonstration down the River towards New Madrid.”<sup>33</sup> As the boats began to operate, newspapers across the North began to sing the praises of the new gun boats. The *North American & United States Gazette* reported on September 26 that the gunboats were “floating and formidable shape...impervious to point blank shots—a ball striking them horizontally will glance off like a hailstone from a steep roof.”<sup>34</sup> Two days later, the *Daily National Intelligencer* claimed that a test shot fired at one hundred yards did no damage to the iron and that instead, the ball itself broke in pieces.<sup>35</sup> It is doubtful that a solid shot actually did break into pieces, but these reports had considerable psychological effects on soldiers and civilians alike.

Newspapers convinced Northern citizens they had an impenetrable weapon. They promised that “If the new gunboats now building near St. Louis, prove to be as invulnerable as expected, they will be one of the most effective...in whipping the rebellion. She can’t be sunk,

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<sup>32</sup> Bennett, *Union Jacks*, 82.

<sup>33</sup> Report from Capt. S.L. Phelps to Captain John Rodgers August 16, 1861, Rodgers Family Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>34</sup> *North American and United States Gazette*, (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania) Thursday, September 26, 1861; Issue 25; col. I.

<sup>35</sup> “Western Gunboats,” *Daily National Intelligencer*, (Washington, D.C.) Saturday, September 28, 1861; Issue 15, 329; col. C.

burned, nor blown up.”<sup>36</sup> The reporter was referring the *New Era*, later renamed the *Essex*. W.B. Coleman, acting Paymaster of the *Tyler*, wrote in late September, “It is astonishing what a change...has brought about in Public Opinion in regard to these Gun Boats, they are positively quoted now as the safety guards...”<sup>37</sup> These praises only got louder as the boats continued to perform. On November 7, 1861, General Ulysses Grant decided to try to take Belmont, just across the river from the Confederate stronghold at Columbus, Kentucky. Belmont proved too strong, however, and he was forced to withdraw. During the retreat, the *Lexington* and *Tyler* were able to put up a strong enough cover fire to allow all of Grant’s forces to evacuate. Both Grant and the naval captains recognized that the gunboats had served a valuable purpose; had it not been for the well-directed cover fire, Grant’s men probably would not have been able to pull out successfully.<sup>38</sup> Belmont impacted Grant profoundly; there he learned the importance of joint army-navy maneuvers that would characterize the rest of his fighting in the west.<sup>39</sup>

Reports from the gunboat captains took on a more hopeful tone after Belmont and even more so throughout December and January of 1861-62. Earlier that fall, Rodgers was replaced by Flag Officer Andrew Hull Foote for disagreeing with Major General John C. Fremont, but he left behind the beginnings of a fleet “worth more than

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<sup>36</sup> *Bangor Daily Whig & Courier*, (Bangor, Maine) Saturday, November 16, 1861; Issue 118; col. A.

<sup>37</sup> W.B. Coleman, Acting Paymaster *U.S.S. Tyler*, September 29, 1861, Rodgers Family Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>38</sup> Captain Walke, Report on the Battle of Belmont, August 9, 1861, Rodgers Family Papers, Library of Congress; *ORN* 22:302.

<sup>39</sup> U.S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant* (New York: Charles L. Webster & Company, 1885), 279-280; Joiner, *Brownwater Navy*, 36

5,000 soldiers.”<sup>40</sup> The western crewmen were performing well and proving that they could make good artillerymen after all. Many were impressed by the boats’ ability to withstand heavy fire. Phelps’ report after the Battle of Lucas Bend was incredibly positive, reporting inflicting damage and receiving little in return.<sup>41</sup>

As the new gunboats commenced patrolling the rivers, Confederate horrors were only beginning. The rivers in the south cut straight to the core of the Confederacy, and the shallow gunboats were able to penetrate deeply into enemy territory with relative ease. This caused devastating psychological effects on Confederate citizens and soldiers alike. Appearing without warning, the gunboats represented a piercing type of invasion. Unlike the land armies, gunboats were incredibly mobile, seeming to materialize out of thin air and cause absolute terror in Confederate sympathizers. Images of vile Yankee gunboats preying on towns of old men and women supported the myth of the Vandal Yankee and infuriated Southern soldiers who could not effectively defend against them.<sup>42</sup> The *North American & United States Gazette* reproduced a section of the *Richmond Examiner* on September 2 expressing relief that the South had finally started work on their own gunboats to combat Yankees “prowling through our rivers and hovering about our harbors.”<sup>43</sup> Commander Strembel of the

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<sup>40</sup> ORN 22:319.

<sup>41</sup> ORN 22:324-325.

<sup>42</sup> John Beauchamp Jones, “Diary of John Beauchamp Jones, February 1862,” in *A Rebel War Clerk’s Diary At the Confederate States Capital*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1866), 110. accessed via The American Civil War: Letters and Diaries Database; Bennett, *Union Jacks*, 85-86.

<sup>43</sup> “Southern Gunboats,” *North American and United States Gazette*, (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania) Monday, September 2, 1861; Issue 25, 850; col. G.

*Cincinnati* claimed that two shots from the ironclad sent Confederate troops fleeing eight miles from the river.<sup>44</sup>

The Mississippi Gunboat Flotilla entered the Fort Henry and Donelson campaign as a weapon of terror. Although they had not yet fought a significant battle, both sides believed the ironclads to be impenetrable and undefeatable. For the North, this caused joy and confidence; for the South, fear and helplessness reigned. By early 1862, Grant had decided to attempt joint maneuvers to push up the Tennessee River and attained permission from Major General Henry Halleck to do so on February 1, 1862. Halleck, unsure of the success of such a mission, carefully crafted his orders so that if the mission should fail, all of the blame would fall on Grant.<sup>45</sup>

Nevertheless, Grant moved forward with his plans. Fort Henry sat low on the Tennessee River in a poorly chosen spot. It did not help matters any that in his frenzied attempt to turn Columbus into the ‘Gibraltar’ of the West, Major General Leonidas Polk had diverted resources for the fort’s defense to Columbus. The result was an unfinished and sloppily built fort that could be enfiladed by three or four points on the opposite shore.<sup>46</sup> Manned by 2,610 men, only a third of which were disciplined and properly trained, the fort was in bad shape by early 1862.<sup>47</sup> Most of the men were armed with shotguns and hunting rifles, and one of the better armed regiments, the 10<sup>th</sup> Tennessee, was using “Tower of London” flintlock muskets that had last seen action in the War of 1812.<sup>48</sup> As early as February 4,

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<sup>44</sup> ORN 22: 300.

<sup>45</sup> Joiner, *Brownwater Navy*, 39.

<sup>46</sup> ORN 22:556.

<sup>47</sup> ORN 22:557.

<sup>48</sup> Jesse Taylor, “Memoir of Jesse Taylor”, in *The Civil War Series Volume 1: Battles and Leaders of the Civil War* (New York: Century

soldiers inside the fort could see “as far as the eye could see, the course of the river could be traced by the dense volumes of smoke issuing from the flotilla.”<sup>49</sup> The soldiers in the fort knew attack was imminent.

In early February, 1862, Grant issued Field Orders No. 1 outlining the plan for the attack. The first division under Major General John McClelland was to occupy the road between Fort Henry and Fort Donelson, twelve miles away on the Cumberland River, to cut off the escape route and prevent reinforcements to Fort Henry. Meanwhile, two brigades under Major General C. F. Smith were to move up the west bank of the Tennessee while the Third Brigade, Second Division advanced up the east bank. One company of the Second Division was detailed to Flag Officer Foote to serve as sharpshooters on the gunboats, who would approach the fort straight on and engage.<sup>50</sup>

At 10:20pm on February 6, the ironclads *Cincinnati*, *Carondelet*, *St. Louis*, and *Essex* approached Fort Henry four abreast. Behind them, the three timberclad gunboats formed a second line. Fire opened at 1,700 yards and steadily advanced to within 600 yards.<sup>51</sup> Within the fort, Confederate General Lloyd Tilghman knew his force could not drive back the gunboats and made the choice to send most of his force to Fort Donelson, a much more defensible position. Tilghman retained only the heavy artillery to perform delay tactics until the bulk of his force

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Co., 1887), 370. Accessed via The American Civil War: Letters and Diaries Database.

<sup>49</sup> Taylor, Memoir, 369.

<sup>50</sup> General U.S. Grant, Field Orders No. 1, Rodgers Family Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>51</sup> *ORN* 22:537; H.W. Wilson, *Ironclads In Action: A Sketch of Naval Warfare from 1855 to 1895*, Volume 1 (London: Sampson Low, Marston and Company, 1896), 62. Accessed via GoogleBooks.

could reach Donelson. In his after-action report, Tilghman estimated that the enemy gunboats had about fifty-four guns as opposed to the eleven in the fort.<sup>52</sup> Tilghman managed to hold on until approximately 2:00 p.m.<sup>53</sup>

Tilghman's report rings with language of desperation and hopelessness. After sending the bulk of his force to Donelson, Tilghman was faced with the choice of leaving his men or staying with them. Ultimately, he recognized what a psychological blow it would be to his men to abandon them. He decided to fight and stay, although his language makes clear that he had no hope of successfully fending off the ironclads. First, his twenty-four pounder gun exploded, killing or disabling every man at the piece. Next, the vent of his ten-inch Columbiad clogged and refused to reopen. One by one, he recorded the loss of each gun with growing anxiety. After firing for close to three hours, his men were exhausted. General Tilghman himself stepped in for an exhausted gunner at one of the thirty-two pounders.<sup>54</sup>

Reading Tilghman's report leaves the one with the impression even the best gunmen the Confederacy could not oppose Yankee technology. Even if this is not accurate, the report is still a fascinating example of the Confederate dread of ironclads. One observer commented on the devastating effect the ironclads had on Confederate soldiers' morale: "Our artillerists became very much discouraged when they saw the two heavy guns disabled, the enemy's boats apparently uninjured and still drawing nearer and nearer. Some of them even ceased to work the 32-pounder guns, under the belief that such shot were too

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<sup>52</sup> *ORN* 22:557.

<sup>53</sup> *ORN* 22:559.

<sup>54</sup> *ORN* 22:557-559.

light to produce any effect upon the ironclad sides of the enemy's boats."<sup>55</sup> After the fort had surrendered, a captured Confederate gunner told a Federal sailor the *Carondelet* was the object of hatred and frustration among the gunners who, despite their well-aimed fire, could not disable her.<sup>56</sup> These incidents give the reader an image nearing futility; despite well-aimed Confederate fire, the ironclads just kept coming. Confederate accounts reveal the classic man versus machine dichotomy and give insight into the deeper psychological issues surrounding ironclads.

All told, the ironclads survived their baptism of fire quite well. The *Carondelet* and the *St. Louis* took six and seven hits respectively but reported no casualties. The *Cincinnati* took thirty one hits but reported only one killed and nine wounded. The *Essex* took fifteen hits, the last one piercing the boiler.<sup>57</sup> In addition to the Confederate soldiers, the psychological impact of the gunboats on the Federal sailors who served in them cannot be overlooked. Believing the newspapers, many gunboatmen went into battle with a false sense of safety because they believed their gunboats were impenetrable.<sup>58</sup> However, they were quickly disabused of these notions. Before an engagement, buckets of water and sand would be brought up to the deck. The water was for men to drink during combat; the sand was to absorb the blood. Seeing the sand forced men to confront their fears and the possibility of their injuries or deaths.<sup>59</sup> The combination of smoke from the engines and guns resulted in smoke so dark and thick that sometimes a man could not see the man working the gun next to him.

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<sup>55</sup> ORN 22:604.

<sup>56</sup> ORN 22:545.

<sup>57</sup> ORN 22:539.

<sup>58</sup> Bennett, *Union Jacks*, 183-184.

<sup>59</sup> Bennett, *Union Jacks*, 185.

The darkness and almost suffocating effect of the smoke was disorienting and made men vulnerable to panic and the heat was so intense often men would strip to the waist and sweat so profusely they related it to rain.<sup>60</sup>

Unlike a land battlefield, inside an ironclad, there was nowhere to go to escape the carnage short of jumping into the river. The plating on the gunboats negated the impact of musket fire; instead, men saw the impact of large guns, ripping holes and sending splinters of wood and other debris into the crew and inflicting horrifying, gaping wounds. Men fought amidst the blood, limbs, and all other horrors that covered the decks.<sup>61</sup> For Federal gunboatmen, combat became a waiting game. Some men found themselves counting the number of times shots hit certain areas of the boat, waiting for one to penetrate.<sup>62</sup> Although safe for a moment, at any time a shot could hit just the right spot and turn the boat into a floating death trap.

The *Essex* exemplifies how one well-placed shot could turn a gunboat into a nightmare. The officers and designers knew the gunboats were weak around the boilers and engines, but there was little that could be done.<sup>63</sup> The worst sound that could be heard on a gunboat in the Mississippi River was the sound of a shot hitting the boiler, a sharp crack followed by an intense rushing sound as scalding hot steam exploded in every direction. Steam from a boiler seared and boiled flesh and could even knock out teeth.<sup>64</sup> When the shot entered the *Essex*, it decapitated Acting Master's Mate S. B. Brittan before striking the boiler. Both pilots were immediately scalded to death and

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<sup>60</sup> Bennett, *Union Jacks*, 196.

<sup>61</sup> Bennett, *Union Jacks*, 189-190.

<sup>62</sup> Bennett, *Union Jacks*, 188.

<sup>63</sup> *ORN*, 22:282-283.

<sup>64</sup> Bennett, *Union Jacks*, 192.



almost thirty men were soon after “writhing in agony”<sup>65</sup> on the deck. Only about half of the wounded would recover.<sup>66</sup> Captain Porter dove through a gun port to escape the steam and was caught by Seaman John Walker, who held onto him with one arm and the boat with the other until help arrived.<sup>67</sup> The men on the *Essex* saw comrades literally boiled to death and from inside the fort Confederate Captain Jesse Taylor could see men throwing themselves “wildly” into the water to escape the steam.<sup>68</sup>

After the fort fell, the timberclads *Lexington* and *Conestoga* were sent upriver to pursue any Confederate vessels they came across. They overcame eight Confederate vessels whose crews were forced to set them on fire before they could be captured by Union sailors. Included in the destruction was a load of iron destined for the Tredgar Iron Works and the destruction of over \$100,000 of Confederate government property. At Florence and Tuscumbia, Federal troops broke into Confederate government warehouses and helped themselves to provisions but left civilian property alone.<sup>69</sup> Southern sympathizers reacted to the loss in horror. The new Federal gunboats seemed invincible. The fight was relayed by the *Daily Columbus Enquirer* as an almost completely one-sided affair. “The fall of the first-named fort[Henry], we have no doubt, is due to the superiority of the guns of the Yankees—their gunboats, we presume, standing off, as at Hatteras, beyond the effective range of

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<sup>65</sup> Wilson, *Ironclads in Action*, 63.

<sup>66</sup> Wilson, *Ironclads in Action*, 63.

<sup>67</sup> Jay Slagle, *Ironclad Captain: Seth Ledyard Phelps and the U.S. Navy, 1841-1864* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1996), 160.

<sup>68</sup> Taylor, “Memoir of Jesse Taylor,” 372.

<sup>69</sup> “Federal Invasion-Gunboats Destroyed-Return of the Gunboats,” *Daily Columbus Enquirer* (Columbus, Georgia) February 15, 1862; Vol. 4, Issue 63, 3.

the guns of the fort, and at this safe distance pouring into it a fire which ultimately compelled its surrender or evacuation.”<sup>70</sup> John Beauchamp Jones, a Confederate clerk, spun the invasion upriver as an attack on helpless, despairing women. As the boats continued their upriver raid, Confederates became terrified that the gunboats would be able to get into Alabama and Mississippi.<sup>71</sup>

For others, however, the gunboats had an interesting way of sorting out sympathies. Captain Phelps reported Unionists suddenly appearing on the river banks, telling stories of forced conscription, appealing to the gunboats as their liberators and begging them to stay. Often, the sight of gunboats would embolden Unionist citizens to unmask their sympathies, tearing apart the notion of the solid South. Phelps also reported that at least twenty-five young men clambered to the ironclads to enlist in the Union Army.<sup>72</sup> Once the gunboats departed, however, many of those same citizens hid those convictions because the gunboats were no longer there to protect them.<sup>73</sup> The morale boost in the North was astounding. Flag Officer Foote was praised for his action and when the *Cincinnati* steamed into Cairo with Fort Henry’s Stars and Bars flying upside down under the United States flag, the city erupted into joyous cheering.<sup>74</sup> Some declared that the war would soon be over, but Flag

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<sup>70</sup> ““The Situation” in Kentucky,” *Daily Columbus Enquirer* (Columbus, Georgia) February 10, 1862; Vol. 4, Issue 58, 2; Slagle, *Ironclad Captain*, 163-165, 167.

<sup>71</sup> Jones, *Diary of a Rebel War Clerk*, 110.

<sup>72</sup> Benjamin F. Cooling, *Forts Henry and Donelson: The Key to the Confederate Heartland* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987), 114.

<sup>73</sup> Slagle, *Ironclad Captain*, 170, 172.

<sup>74</sup> Myron Smith, *The U.S.S. Carondelet: A Civil War Ironclad on Western Waters* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2010), 68; Slagle, *Ironclad Captain*, 175.

Officer Foote mourned the losses on the *Essex* and vowed that “never again will I go into a fight half-prepared.”<sup>75</sup>

The victory at Fort Henry was much more important for its psychological effect than for its actual military achievements. Although at first glance it appears that the ironclads were able to pull off a stunning, single-handed victory, two key factors worked hugely to their advantage. First, the horrible positioning of the fort beneath the water line resulted in flooding and allowed the ironclads to pour direct fire into it. Secondly, the bulk force of the garrison had already been sent ahead to Fort Donelson and only a skeleton force remained behind to cover the retreat. These factors produced a skewed vision of the ironclads as invincible weapons of war.<sup>76</sup> The *Macon Daily Telegraph* glumly reported on the hard losses of the fort and the timberclad raid, misreporting that there was only one Federal casualty from the battle.<sup>77</sup>

The same newspaper, however, sought to minimize fear of the ironclads. One week after reporting on the hard losses, the *Macon Daily Telegraph* ran an article titled “Federal Gunboats Not Invulnerable.” The article misreported that the Confederates had been able to inflict one hundred Federal casualties and assured its readers that at least two shots had been able to penetrate the iron on the *Essex* and the *Cincinnati*. The article went on to predict that if the ironclads were to attack a better equipped, stronger fort, the outcome would be different.<sup>78</sup> The article ran on

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<sup>75</sup> Andrew Hull Foote, as quoted in Cooling, *Forts Henry and Donelson*, 110.

<sup>76</sup> Milligan, “From Theory to Application,” 129.

<sup>77</sup> “From Tennessee,” *Macon Daily Telegraph* (Macon, Georgia) February 13, 1862, Issue 630, 1.

<sup>78</sup> “The Federal Gunboats Not Invulnerable,” *Macon Daily Telegraph* (Macon, Georgia) February 19, 1862, Issue 635, 2.

February 19, two days after Fort Donelson fell, but Donelson is never mentioned in the article and the prediction seems almost prophetic.

Meanwhile, preparations were being made inside Fort Donelson for the coming attack. Reporting on the state of Donelson's defenses, Chief Engineer Lt. Colonel Gilmer felt confident in the fort's ability to withstand a land attack but remained concerned about the gunboats.<sup>79</sup> Brigadier General John Floyd, the commander officer of the fort, echoed similar sentiments. Floyd betrayed his anxiety, saying, "If the best information I can gather about these iron-clad boats be true they are nearly invulnerable, and therefore they can probably go wherever sufficient fuel and depth of water can be found, unless met by opposing gunboats."<sup>80</sup> Instead of waiting for orders, Grant capitalized on the opportunity and started immediately for Fort Donelson. Because the ironclads had performed so well at Fort Henry, Grant allowed them to attack without infantry support.<sup>81</sup> This would prove to be a mistake. Donelson was much better outfitted, manned by about thirteen thousand troops, and sat on one hundred and twenty foot bluffs, starkly different from the lowlands of Fort Henry.<sup>82</sup> On February 14, the ironclad assault was to begin in earnest. This was not the same fleet that had taken on Fort Henry; both the *Essex* and the *Cincinnati* were out for repairs. This time, the *Louisville* and the *Pittsburg* would join the *Carondelet* and the *St. Louis* along with the

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<sup>79</sup> *War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 1, 7: 608, hereafter cited *ORA*.

<sup>80</sup> *ORA* 1, 7: 865.

<sup>81</sup> Milligan, "From Theory to Application", 129; Cooling, *Forts Henry and Donelson*, 149.

<sup>82</sup> Joiner, *Brownwater Navy*, 41.

timberclads *Tyler* and *Conestoga*.<sup>83</sup> Foote himself was still not confident after the *Essex* boiler explosion and did not feel the Flotilla was ready to go into action again. Grant, however, disagreed, confident in their ability to deliver him another quick victory.<sup>84</sup> The night before the assault, the two men met to discuss their disagreement. Although much of the conversation has been lost, Grant emerged cheerful and sure of his impending victory.<sup>85</sup>

On the morning of the assault, Grant and his staff assembled to watch the spectacular ironclads at work. Freezing rain and snow had reduced visibility to only a few yards.<sup>86</sup> In order to prevent another *Essex*, the crew of the *Pittsburg* had stacked bags of coal, hammocks, and any other materials they could find around the boiler to protect it from direct fire.<sup>87</sup> As the ironclads steamed up to the fort with the timberclads in support, Confederate gunners managed to hold their fire until the ironclads got within a range of about four hundred yards and let loose a hail of fire simultaneously.<sup>88</sup> Very quickly, chaos broke out as the *Carondelet* started the assault by sending harassing fire into the water batteries.

Instead of demolishing the batteries, the Confederate gunners were instead able to inflict serious damage to the point where some believed they had sunk *Carondelet* after she drifted downriver.<sup>89</sup> The *Carondelet* had one of its rifled guns explode and was struck in the

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<sup>83</sup> *ORN*, 22:585; James Hamilton, *The Battle of Fort Donelson* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1968), 132-133.

<sup>84</sup> Grant, *Personal Memoirs*, 302.

<sup>85</sup> Cooling, *Forts Henry and Donelson*, 153.

<sup>86</sup> *ORA* 1, 7:174.

<sup>87</sup> *ORN* 22:592.

<sup>88</sup> *ORN* 22:606.

<sup>89</sup> *ORA*, 1, 7: 281.

wheelhouse, jamming the wheel and rendering the ironclad useless as she floated back down the river in need of extensive repairs.<sup>90</sup> The official after action battle reported also noted that the *Pittsburg* had struck off his starboard rudder and the *Tyler* accidentally hit his casemate with a shell. The *Carondelet* reported no injuries after Henry, but after Donelson the crew had suffered forty-six wounded and four killed.<sup>91</sup>

The *St. Louis* also suffered, taking a shot through the pilothouse that penetrated one and a half inches of iron and more than fifteen inches of oak timber.<sup>92</sup> Splinters from the timber wounded several, including Flag Officer Foote, who suffered an injury to the ankle.<sup>93</sup> As the ironclads got closer, the fort's batteries were able to fire directly onto their decks. Iron-plating on the decks was not very thick and the gunboats were mauled as shots penetrated the deck and wreaked havoc below. After only ninety minutes of firing, the ironclads were forced to retreat. The *Carondelet* alone sent one hundred and thirty-nine shells into the fort with minimal damage. Not a single Confederate gun in the fort was disabled and not one casualty was reported.<sup>94</sup>

The morale of the Confederate soldiers soared. After blowing off the smokestack of the *St. Louis*, one Rebel gunner reportedly shrieked out, "Come on, you cowardly scoundrels, you are not at Fort Henry!"<sup>95</sup> Brigadier General Gideon Pillow sent joyous telegrams declaring their success in the "fiercest fight on record" with

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<sup>90</sup> ORN 22:591.

<sup>91</sup> ORN 22:591.

<sup>92</sup> ORN 22:585; Cooling, *Forts Henry and Donelson*, 157.

<sup>93</sup> ORN 22:587; Grant, *Personal Memoirs*, 303.

<sup>94</sup> Miligan, "From Theory to Application," 129.

<sup>95</sup> Cooling, *Forts Henry and Donelson*, 157.

the ironclads.<sup>96</sup> A portion of the diary of Captain R.R. Ross, a commander of one of the shore batteries, reproduced in the *Confederate Veteran* in 1896, wrote that driving back the ironclads was in itself a great victory. Ross made it a point to show that the ironclads had failed and been soundly defeated.<sup>97</sup>

The failure of the ironclads disappointed Grant, who wrote in his memoirs that though at first the enemy had been demoralized by the assault, after seeing them driven off, their “jubilant” response made him sad. He planned to pull back and entrench until the flotilla could get the necessary repairs in Cairo.<sup>98</sup> General Floyd, however, had different ideas. On the night of the 14<sup>th</sup>, Floyd attempted a desperate breakout attempt, hitting the Union right. The Federals were able to hold their line but at the loss of an estimated 1,200 casualties. The next day, Grant ordered Major General C. F. Smith’s Division to charge the enemy’s right and then ordered a second assault by Major Generals John McClelland and Lew Wallace to commence on the enemy’s left.<sup>99</sup>

After the catastrophe of the ironclad assault, a demoralized and injured Foote had regrouped his flotilla downriver and was ready to drift back to Cairo for repairs. Grant, however, ordered any gunboats able should return to the fort and fire shells at a distance. Grant wrote that if the gunboats simply made an appearance during McClelland and Wallace’s attack, their presence alone could shift morale, save the reputation of the ironclads, and secure victory. When Commander Benjamin Dove, temporarily in

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<sup>96</sup> ORN 22:612.

<sup>97</sup> *Confederate Veteran*, Volume 4, 1896, 393. Digitized by Duke University.

<sup>98</sup> Grant, *Personal Memoirs*, 303-305.

<sup>99</sup> ORA 1, 7:159.

command since Foote's injury, received the message, he perceived its importance and immediately took the *St. Louis*, the only ironclad left in an operable condition and returned to fire on the fort.<sup>100</sup> That night, Brigadier General John Floyd, Pillow, and Nathan Bedford Forrest all broke out of the fort to avoid capture, leaving Simon Bolivar Buckner to surrender and sent a message to Grant requesting certain terms.<sup>101</sup> Grant, however, replied with the now-famous phrase, "no terms except an unconditional and immediate surrender can be accepted," forever earning himself the nickname "Unconditional Surrender Grant."<sup>102</sup>

The descriptions of the ironclads after the Fort Henry and Donelson Campaign are perhaps the most interesting of all the documents analyzed. On paper, the ironclads were embarrassed, destroyed, proven to be vulnerable and able to be beaten. That, however, is not the story that emerged from the aftermath reports and recollections. Instead, if anything, the reputation of the ironclads only became more invincible as time passed and memories began to form. General Lew Wallace later recollected after receiving devastating news that all of the ironclads had been disabled, he was overjoyed to hear the sound of their guns just as his men were about to assault the Rebel line. Wallace said, "While my division was engaged, the guns of the fleet opened fire again. I recollect yet the positive pleasure the sounds gave me. I recollect thinking, too, of the obstinacy and courage of the commodore, and how well timed his attack was, if, as I made no doubt, it

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<sup>100</sup> *The Papers of U.S. Grant*, Volume 4: January 8-March 31, 1862, ed. John Simon (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972), 214. Digitized by Mississippi State University.

<sup>101</sup> *ORA* 1, 7:281,284.

<sup>102</sup> Grant, *Personal Memoirs*, 311



was made to assist General Smith and myself...”<sup>103</sup>  
Returning to fire saved the “reputation for invincibility in the minds of both the national and rebel armies.”<sup>104</sup>

In these statements, Wallace helped to create and essential myth to the legacy of the Western Gunboat Flotilla. The Fort Henry and Donelson campaign is not remembered as a thrashing of the ironclads but instead as the triumph of Grant’s audacity and cutting edge technology. John Milligan has made the point that although Donelson proved the ironclads were not invincible, it did not matter; the psychological damage had already been done and the myth had been created.<sup>105</sup> In his *Memoirs of Service Afloat*, Ralph Semmes treated the events of February 1862 as a foregone conclusion, writing: “When the enemy, by means of his gunboats, could send armies up the Cumberland and Tennessee Rivers, to the heart of Tennessee and Alabama, it was folly to think of holding Bowling Green, with our limited forces.”<sup>106</sup>

Analyzing the Western Gunboat Flotilla’s performance and legacy during the Fort Henry and Donelson campaign yields interesting insight into both Union and Confederate reactions to the advent of ironclad warfare. Born out of uncertainty and doubt, the ironclads became a symbol of the invincibility of Yankee industry, even when that notion was proven false at Fort Donelson. Gunboat technology was still in its infancy in the early days of 1862 and yet, despite the trial and error, the ironclads loomed larger than life. For some, such as Lew Wallace’s infantrymen, this symbol produced inspiration and pride.

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<sup>103</sup> ORN 22:589.

<sup>104</sup> ORN 22:590.

<sup>105</sup> Milligan, “From Theory to Application,” 129-130.

<sup>106</sup> Ralph Semmes, *Memoirs of Service Afloat* (Secaucus: The Blue & Grey Press, 1987), 362.

For others, such as John Beauchamp Jones and Ralph Semmes, the ironclads came to represent industrialized Yankee villainy. The thrills and fears the ironclads on the Fort Henry and Donelson campaign inspired are far more essential to the understanding of ironclad legacy and memory today than their actual performance in the field.

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