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Cutting Through the Ranks: the Navy's Forgotten Legacy

Cameron T. Sauers
Gettysburg College

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Cutting Through the Ranks: the Navy's Forgotten Legacy

Abstract

The bearer of this sword was a member of a United States Navy that rapidly grew in power during the Civil War, increasing its enlistment 500% and developing the first ironclad ship. However, even as the Navy was in the midst of its transition, one thing remained in place: The U.S. Model 1852 Navy Officer's Sword. The sword is still used in the Navy today, albeit for ceremonial purposes. Yet, for all that this sword symbolizes, very few scholars have given much attention to it or the sailors who used it in the Civil War. The common soldier has received much more attention than the common seaman and his officers. While there were considerably more men serving in the Army than the Navy (the Navy started the war with 7,600 sailors and grew to 51,500 by the end, whereas the Union Army boasted about 2.2 million enlisted men), the Navy was still an important part of the Union war effort and therefore deserving of attention. An analysis of the U.S. Model 1852 Navy Officer's Sword provides a window into the complicated power dynamics between naval officers and enlisted seamen. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Gideon Welles, Navy, sword

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Cutting Through the Ranks: the Navy's Forgotten Legacy

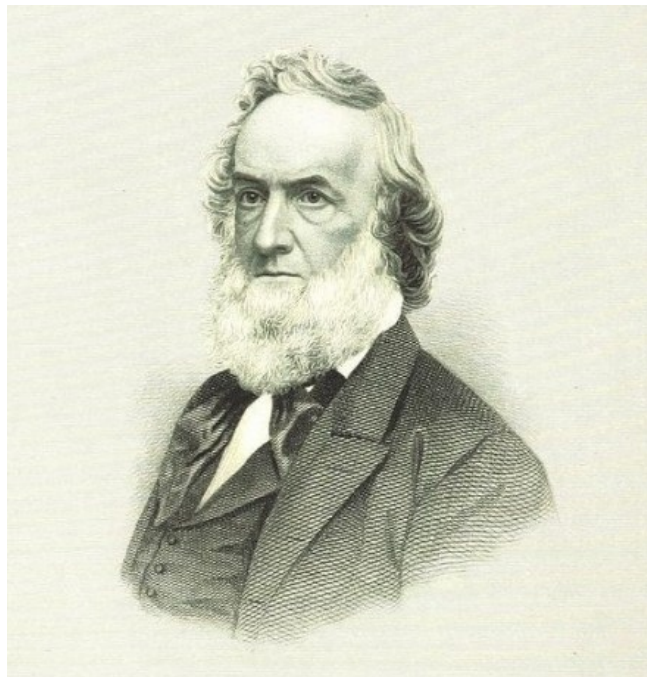
By [Cameron Sauers '21](#)



For all officers, Swords shall be a cut-and-thrust blade, not less than twenty-six nor more than twenty-nine inches long; half-basket hilt; grip white. Scabbards of black leather; mounting of yellow gilt. – 1864 US Naval Dress Regulations
(photo via Smithsonian)

The bearer of this sword was a member of a United States Navy that rapidly grew in power during the Civil War, increasing its enlistment 500% and developing the first ironclad ship. However, even as the Navy was in the midst of its transition, one thing remained in place: The U.S. Model 1852 Navy Officer's Sword. The sword is still used in the Navy today, albeit for ceremonial purposes. Yet, for all that this sword symbolizes, very few scholars have given much attention to it or the sailors who used it in the Civil War. The common soldier has received much more attention than the common seaman and his officers. While there were considerably more men serving in the Army than the Navy (the Navy started the war with 7,600 sailors and grew to 51,500 by the end, whereas the Union Army boasted about 2.2 million enlisted men), the Navy was still an important part of the Union war effort and therefore deserving of attention. An analysis of the U.S. Model 1852 Navy Officer's Sword provides a window into the complicated power dynamics between naval officers and enlisted seamen. Furthermore, such an analysis also highlights the naval officers' often contentious relationships with officers from other military branches, who frequently clashed over who was in command of joint naval-army operations. The sword also begs the question as to what types of individuals may have possessed, or fallen under the authority of, such swords, why they joined the Union Navy in the first place, and the challenges of command that confronted naval officers.

During the Civil War, change happened in nearly all aspects of the Navy, from the types of ships deployed down to the small arms used by sailors, all with the aim to transition the Navy from a small force into a global power. One of these changes was a move away from heavier broadswords towards a new cutlass modeled after the French naval cutlass, which would be the last naval sword issued to common sailors. However, the new naval cutlass lacked the beauty and authority of the 1852 Naval Officer's Sword, which was not altered during the Civil War. The sword was one of the few holdovers from the weak antebellum Navy, which would be transformed into a powerful force during the Civil War. When Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles assumed his post in March of 1861, he needed to rapidly mobilize ships and men to serve on them. The officers and seamen who served on naval ships created a unique maritime culture and experience different from what soldiers serving in the Army experienced. Enlisting in the Navy was an individual activity and lacked the theatrical or grand patriotic displays of enlistment traditionally associated with the Army. Army regiments marched off to war with flags made by wives and sweethearts and often participated in parades through hometowns before they went South for battle. Historian Michael Bennett argues that since ships were only able to be operated by collective groups of men, and not a singular individual, naval warfare clashed with the public's belief that a singular individual could turn the tide of battle with their heroism. Thus, there were no grand send-offs for Union sailors. Enlisted sailors also represented a slightly different demographic from those in the Army. The "common sailor" was 26 years old and hailed from a major city along the Atlantic coast. He was also likely an unemployed worker from the laboring class seeking relief from an unemployment crisis among the skilled trades. The Navy also had significantly higher percentages of African-Americans and immigrants than did the Union Army.



Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles
(via Wikimedia Commons)

In contrast to his men, the naval officer who would have carried this sword with him was likely a native born, middle-or upper-class man who understood that the Navy was a hierarchy that functioned much like aristocracy. Unlike the Army, the Navy was not beset by problems of politically appointed officers because no politician was brazen enough to believe they could adequately command a warship, let alone a fleet or squadron. Commander J. A. Winslow wrote that the Navy would not accept “useless officers” in exchange for enlisted men. The Navy thus saw itself, especially its officer corps, as a uniquely professional service where experience was necessary. Graduation from the antebellum Naval Academy could take between 5 and 7 years, and with the first class of graduates joining the Navy in 1854, it was clear that experience could not be compensated for. However, the difference in background between officers and common seamen made it difficult for them to understand each other, leading to clashes and tests of authority.

This sword was a key symbol of authority for naval officers who continually found themselves in a struggle to maintain power over their men. Since officers and enlisted sailors came from different social classes, they frequently clashed over behavioral habits. Officers hated sailors’ penchant for rum, swearing, and brawls because such habits were unacceptable in the polite society to which they were accustomed. This disapproval, in turn, made officers appealing targets for the oaths of seamen – the phrase “swear like a sailor” fit in the Union navy. The two groups frequently complained about each other, with sailors snarking that officers were incompetent and officers lamenting that their sailors were inefficient with their labor. Rear Admiral David Dixon Porter complained to Rear Admiral Andrew H. Foote that “they send us all rubbish here; we want good men.” The clanging of this expensive sword, however, would have sent procrastinating sailors back to work, perhaps with an ensuing string of oaths about their upper-class officers. Even just sitting at the officer’s hip, this sword acted as a stark reminder of the status difference between the wealthy officer and the poor seamen he commanded. This sword is 39.25” inches long and, unlike the standard naval cutlass, was manufactured by Ames. The grip is wrapped in sharkskin and the blade is etched to show a fouled anchor, acanthus leaf, and U.S. shield. The elaborate designs continue onto the scabbard, including the drag of a dolphin. This sword is substantially more ornate than the traditional naval cutlass and would have cost much more than the average sailor could ever afford—a fact that intimidated some sailors into compliance, while making others bristle at the aristocratic displays of their officers. While army officers regularly clashed with some of their enlisted men, they truly feared any serious attempts to undermine authority onboard their naval vessels, as such behavior could spark a mutiny that could prove especially dangerous for the entire crew. Thus, it was imperative that naval officers remind the seamen, by action and by sword, that they possessed unquestionable authority, through experience, class, and social rank, over the ship.



Sword detailing (via [The Horse Soldier](#))

While an officer's sword would help him assert his authority over sailors, it was less effective in asserting naval authority when performing joint operations with the Army. At the start of the war, there was no protocol for who was to command joint naval and army operations, which hampered Union efforts because neither branch's officers were willing to concede their own authority. This often left both parties in an uncomfortable dilemma. Some of these standoffs were either awkwardly or aggressively resolved, as was the case in 1862 during the joint Peninsula Campaign in Virginia, when Secretary of the Treasury Salmon Chase watched the initial contest for Hampton Roads stagnate because neither the army nor naval officers would concede authority in rolling out the campaign plans. The stalemate was resolved only when Chase subsequently received permission from President Lincoln to order the operation forward by invoking President Lincoln's name, as the President is the sole individual with inherent authority over both Army and Navy. Historian Craig L. Symonds argues that for joint operations, cooperation was encouraged and perhaps expected, but it could never be mandated from officers, who were held accountable for their actions alone. Ultimately, the success of such operations was more dependent on the meshing of personalities than on any one side's material or behavioral display of authority.

Unlike many Army officers, Union Naval Secretary Gideon Welles believed firmly in running the Navy as a meritocracy where officers were "energetic, resourceful, uncomplaining and ruthlessly aggressive," which contributed to Army-Navy tensions. Naval officers' inclination toward risk-taking produced a near-Navy-wide disdain for Army colleagues who received their postings through political jockeying instead of achievements in battle. Hence, when it came time for joint operations, naval officers felt they deserved command because they had the experience necessary to make important decisions about bold battle plans. Meanwhile, politically appointed Army officers may have felt they deserved command because they raised entire regiments of men themselves, and thus felt that their subordinates deserved to go into battle under the

command of the man they signed up to fight under. Army officers also resented the fact that, if they made a mistake in battle that sacrificed the regiment they had raised, they would likely be cashiered or court martialed from the service. But if a naval officer had one of his ships sunk, his men would likely still survive, as they could simply be rescued by nearby boats or escape to land, as often happened, and, naval officers were more likely to simply be reassigned after such a failure, rather than discharged. No matter their politics, or wherever their command was, naval officers had a sword representative of their station. Unlike for Army officers, these swords were an unmistakable symbol of an individual's military merit and not their political connections. Even so, naval officers routinely found that the authority invested in them through their swords, and all that these prized possessions symbolized, was tested at nearly every turn, on land and at sea, by army officers as well as enlisted seamen.



Admiral David Dixon Porter
(via Wikimedia Commons)

As the Navy moved forward into the age of ironclad ships, traditional naval blades were eventually left behind alongside the outdated age of wooden battle ships. With the military efficiency afforded by ironclads, there was no longer a need for boarding parties, or for a blade to cut rigging down, and so the cutlass was phased out. The regal naval officers' sword, however, remained, and is still used for ceremonial purposes today. Long celebrated as a "gentleman's weapon," the naval sword resisted retirement partially due to the reverence its bearers held for its symbolic appeals to uniquely naval

traditions, as well as its symbolic celebration of military merit, social rank, and class distinction. The cold steel of the sword has been permanently enshrined in marble at the Naval Peace Monument, which was erected in 1877 on the grounds of the U.S. Capitol building. A dove (now missing) on the monument “once nested upon a sheaf of wheat in a grouping of a cornucopia, turned earth, and a sickle resting across a sword.” The sword is part of a monument that reminds viewers that “They died that their country may live.” Although the authority of the sword’s bearers was consistently tested, both on land and at sea, the sword’s featured placement on the monument stands as a lasting testament to the authority, influence, and distinction with which navy officers and the men they commanded served in order to ensure the successful prosecution of the Union war effort.

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