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Book Reviews

These are some reviews from a recent issue of *The Civil War News*:

Waters of Discord: The Union Blockade of Texas During the Civil War

by Rodman L. Underwood.

Illustrated, maps, notes, bibliography, index, 200 pp., 2003. McFarland and Co., Publishers Inc., P.O. Box 611, Jefferson, NC 28640, \$43.95 ppd.

The federal blockade of Texas, while something of a sideshow to the great drama and events taking place elsewhere in the United States and Confederate states further east, had more than a local impact on the course of the war. The lack of a free passage for vessels sailing from Texas ports would be felt in all the Confederate states that made up the Trans-Mississippi Department.

Stretching some 325 miles from Sabine Pass to the Rio Grande, the Texas coastline offered challenges to blockad-ers and defenders, both of whom were stretched for resources. However, as the war proceeded, the Union was able to make more and more resources available in its attempt to strangle the Confederate Trans-Mississippi Department and more especially Texas, “the dark corner of the Confederacy.”

Besides the logistics of maintaining the blockade — finding the ships and men and then keeping them on station — there was the physical geography and hydrography of the Texas coastline. Most of the Texas coast is protected by sandy barrier islands that protect the coastline. These islands are cut by passes in various places that can, depending on their depth, allow anything from small boats to ocean-going ships safe passage to the Texas coast. However, the physical action of the sea due to wind, waves and currents can change these passes and islands overnight making knowledge of the local waters — or a local pilot — a must if a vessel is to blockade without running aground.

It is significant to the story, though obviously not to the war effort, that vessels were running the blockade from Galveston to Havana (an eight- to 10-day trip) well after

Appomattox. The Owl, a 230-foot steamer with a beam of 26 feet, sailed for Havana on May 3, with 478 bales of cotton, and departed Havana about May 21 bound for Galveston. The Wren and the Lark, two steel-hulled light draft steamers, cleared Galveston for Havana on May 13 or 24.

Another problem facing a Union blockader was the Rio Grande, the waters of which near its mouth could be ei-ther: 1) Mexican or French, depending on which side of that particular Mexican fracas you were on or rooting for; 2) neutral (based on the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo which ended the Mexican War); 3) international (depending on how far the vessel was off shore); or, of course, 4) Confederate. Keeping track of just where you were on a basically featureless coast, before the days of radar, electronic charts and Global Positioning System was an exercise in sea-manship.

If you made an error in the log, in taking a bearing, or in computing compass error when capturing a prize, an Admiralty Court stood ready to release it and, more importantly, a neutral country stood ready to make an interna-tional incident out of it. Serving a country that had already fought one war over freedom of the seas and which needed no distractions while fighting what was becoming a life or death struggle with the Confederacy, a Union Navy captain had to be a diplomat, fully conversant with international maritime law, and a fine seaman to boot.

But the blockade was more than ships and the sea and the various land and naval actions to enforce, strengthen or relieve it. The effects of the blockade were felt throughout Texas and the Confederate Trans-Mississippi Department. The author spends a great deal of time covering economic and logistical impacts of the blockade, particularly the Confederate efforts to export cotton and finance the war effort (basically the same thing).

Not surprisingly much effort was given to shipping cotton across the Rio Grande into Mexico, far from any block-ading vessels, where the cotton was then loaded in Mexican waters for further shipment. Weapons and other supplies of war were correspondingly brought into Mexico and shipped across the Rio Grande into Texas.

Waters of Discord is an excellent picture of Union efforts to blockade Texas and the Confederate efforts to break the blockade and nullify or work around whatever effects the blockade had on the area. Well documented and with many photographs and drawings, it is an easy read which will be of special interest to Civil War naval enthusi-asts and those whose interests lie in Texas and the war in the West.

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