

HAMPTON ROADS

Then far away to the south uprose
A little feather of snow-white smoke,
And we knew that the iron ship of our foes
Was steadily steering its course
To try the force
Of our ribs of oak.

Down upon us heavily runs,
Silent and sullen, the floating fort;
Then comes a puff of smoke from her guns,
And leaps the terrible death,
With fiery breath,
From her open port.

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Ho! brave hearts, that went down in the seas!
Ye are at peace in the troubled stream;
Ho! brave land! with hearts like these,
Thy flag, that is rent in twain,
Shall be one again,
And without a seam!

--Longfellow

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The naval battles of the Civil War possess an immense importance, because they mark the line of cleavage between naval warfare under the old, and naval warfare under the new, conditions. The ships with which Hull and Decatur and McDonough won glory in the war of 1812 were essentially like those with which Drake and Hawkins and Frobisher had harried the Spanish armadas two centuries and a half earlier. They were wooden sailing-vessels, carrying many guns mounted in broadside, like those of De Ruyter and Tromp, of Blake and Nelson. Throughout this period all the great admirals, all the famous single-ship fighters,--whose skill reached its highest expression in our own navy during the war of 1812,--commanded craft built and armed in a substantially similar manner, and fought with the same weapons and under much the same conditions. But in the Civil War weapons and methods were introduced which caused a revolution greater even than that which divided the sailingship from the galley. The use of steam, the casing of ships in iron armor, and the employment of the torpedo, the ram, and the gun of high power, produced such radically new types that the old ships of the line became at one stroke as antiquated as the galleys of Hamilcar or Alcibiades. Some of these new engines of destruction were invented, and all were for the first time tried in actual combat, during

our own Civil War. The first occasion on which any of the new methods were thoroughly tested was attended by incidents which made it one of the most striking of naval battles.

In Chesapeake Bay, near Hampton Roads, the United States had collected a fleet of wooden ships; some of them old-style sailing-vessels, others steamers. The Confederates were known to be building a great iron-clad ram, and the wooden vessels were eagerly watching for her appearance when she should come out of Gosport Harbor. Her powers and capacity were utterly unknown. She was made out of the former United States steamfrigate Merrimac, cut down so as to make her fore and aft decks nearly flat, and not much above the water, while the guns were mounted in a covered central battery, with sloping flanks. Her sides, deck, and battery were coated with iron, and she was armed with formidable rifle-guns, and, most important of all, with a steel ram thrust out under water forward from her bow. She was commanded by a gallant and efficient officer, Captain Buchanan.

It was March 8, 1862, when the ram at last made her appearance within sight of the Union fleet. The day was calm and very clear, so that the throngs of spectators on shore could see every feature of the battle. With the great ram came three light gunboats, all of which took part in the action, haraising the vessels which she assailed; but they were not factors of importance in the fight. On the Union side the vessels nearest were the sailing-ships Cumberland and Congress, and the steam-frigate Minnesota. The Congress and Cumberland were anchored not far from each other; the Minnesota got aground, and was some distance off. Owing to the currents and shoals and the lack of wind, no other vessel was able to get up in time to take a part in the fight.

As soon as the ram appeared, out of the harbor, she turned and steamed toward the Congress and the Cumberland, the black smoke rising from her funnels, and the great ripples running from each side of her iron prow as she drove steadily through the still waters. On board of the Congress and Cumberland there was eager anticipation, but not a particle of fear. The officers in command, Captain Smith and Lieutenant Morris, were two of the most gallant men in a service where gallantry has always been too common to need special comment. The crews were composed of veterans, well trained, self-confident, and proud beyond measure of the flag whose honor they upheld. The guns were run out, and the men stood at quarters, while the officers eagerly conned the approaching ironclad. The Congress was the first to open fire; and, as her volleys flew, the men on the Cumberland were astounded to see the cannon-shot bound off the sloping sides of the ram as hailstones bound from a windowpane. The ram answered, and her rifle-shells tore the sides of the Congress; but for her first victim she aimed at the Cumberland, and, firing her bow guns, came straight as an arrow at the little sloop-of-war, which lay broadside to her.

It was an absolutely hopeless struggle. The Cumberland was a sailing-ship, at anchor, with wooden sides, and a battery of light guns. Against the formidable steam ironclad, with her heavy rifles and steel ram, she was as powerless as if she had been a rowboat; and from the moment the men saw the cannon-shot bound from the ram's sides they knew

they were doomed. But none of them flinched. Once and again they fired their guns full against the approaching ram, and in response received a few shells from the great bow-rifles of the latter. Then, forging ahead, the Merrimac struck her antagonist with her steel prow, and the sloop-of-war reeled and shuddered, and through the great rent in her side the black water rushed. She foundered in a few minutes; but her crew fought her to the last, cheering as they ran out the guns, and sending shot after shot against the ram as the latter backed off after delivering her blow. The rush of the water soon swamped the lower decks, but the men above continued to serve their guns until the upper deck also was awash, and the vessel had not ten seconds of life left. Then, with her flags flying, her men cheering, and her guns firing, the Cumberland sank. It was shallow where she settled down, so that her masts remained above the water. The glorious flag for which the brave men aboard her had died flew proudly in the wind all that day, while the fight went on, and throughout the night; and next morning it was still streaming over the beautiful bay, to mark the resting-place of as gallant a vessel as ever sailed or fought on the high seas.

After the Cumberland sank, the ram turned her attention to the Congress. Finding it difficult to get to her in the shoal water, she began to knock her to pieces with her great rifle-guns. The unequal fight between the ironclad and the wooden ship lasted for perhaps half an hour. By that time the commander of the Congress had been killed, and her decks looked like a slaughterhouse. She was utterly unable to make any impression on her foe, and finally she took fire and blew up. The Minnesota was the third victim marked for destruction, and the Merrimac began the attack upon her at once; but it was getting very late, and as the water was shoal and she could not get close, the rain finally drew back to her anchorage, to wait until next day before renewing and completing her work of destruction.

All that night there was the wildest exultation among the Confederates, while the gloom and panic of the Union men cannot be described. It was evident that the United States ships-of-war were as helpless as cockle-shells against their iron-clad foe, and there was no question but that she could destroy the whole fleet with ease and with absolute impunity. This meant not only the breaking of the blockade; but the sweeping away at one blow of the North's naval supremacy, which was indispensable to the success of the war for the Union. It is small wonder that during that night the wisest and bravest should have almost despaired.

But in the hour of the nation's greatest need a champion suddenly appeared, in time to play the last scene in this great drama of sea warfare. The North, too, had been trying its hand at building ironclads. The most successful of them was the little Monitor, a flat-decked, low, turreted. ironclad, armed with a couple of heavy guns. She was the first experiment of her kind, and her absolutely flat surface, nearly level with the water, her revolving turret, and her utter unlikeness to any pre-existing naval type, had made her an object of mirth among most practical seamen; but her inventor, Ericsson, was not disheartened in the least by the jeers. Under the command of a gallant naval officer, Captain Worden, she was sent South from New York, and though she almost foundered in a gale she managed to weather it, and reached the scene of the battle at Hampton Roads at the moment when her presence was allimportant.

Early the following morning the Merrimac, now under Captain Jones (for Buchanan had been wounded), again steamed forth to take up the work she had so well begun and to destroy the Union fleet. She steered straight for the Minnesota; but when she was almost there, to her astonishment a strange-looking little craft advanced from the side of the big wooden frigate and boldly barred the Merrimac's path. For a moment the Confederates could hardly believe their eyes. The Monitor was tiny, compared to their ship, for she was not one fifth the size, and her queer appearance made them look at their new foe with contempt; but the first shock of battle did away with this feeling. The Merrimac turned on her foe her rifleguns, intending to blow her out of the water, but the shot glanced from the thick iron turret of the Monitor. Then the Monitor's guns opened fire, and as the great balls struck the sides of the ram her plates started and her timbers gave. Had the Monitor been such a vessel as those of her type produced later in the war, the ram would have been sunk then and there; but as it was her shot were not quite heavy enough to pierce the iron walls. Around and around the two strange combatants hovered, their guns bellowing without cessation, while the men on the frigates and on shore watched the result with breathless interest. Neither the Merrimac nor the Monitor could dispose of its antagonist. The ram's guns could not damage the turret, and the Monitor was able dexterously to avoid the stroke of the formidable prow. On the other hand, the shot of the Monitor could not penetrate the Merrimac's tough sides. Accordingly, fierce though the struggle was, and much though there was that hinged on it, it was not bloody in character. The Merrimac could neither destroy nor evade the Monitor. She could not sink her when she tried to, and when she abandoned her and turned to attack one of the other wooden vessels, the little turreted ship was thrown across her path, so that the fight had to be renewed. Both sides grew thoroughly exhausted, and finally the battle ceased by mutual consent.

Nothing more could be done. The ram was badly damaged, and there was no help for her save to put back to the port whence she had come. Twice afterward she came out, but neither time did she come near enough to the Monitor to attack her, and the latter could not move off where she would cease to protect the wooden vessels. The ram was ultimately blown up by the Confederates on the advance of the Union army.

Tactically, the fight was a drawn battle--neither ship being able to damage the other, and both ships, being fought to a standstill; but the moral and material effects were wholly in favor of the Monitor. Her victory was hailed with exultant joy throughout the whole Union, and exercised a correspondingly depressing effect in the Confederacy; while every naval man throughout the world, who possessed eyes to see, saw that the fight in Hampton Roads had inaugurated a new era in ocean warfare, and that the Monitor and Merrimac, which had waged so gallant and so terrible a battle, were the first ships of the new era, and that as such their names would be forever famous.