

IRONCLADS AND GUNBOATS

The Mississippi River system was the highway of the western part of the Confederate and United States. At the beginning of the war, the South controlled the Mississippi from Cairo, Illinois, where the Ohio emptied into the Mississippi, to New Orleans. There were several important rebel strongholds along the Mississippi, including Memphis, Island Number Ten, on the Tennessee-Kentucky border, and Vicksburg, Mississippi. The Union realized that controlling the Mississippi River system was essential to their strategy because doing so would separate Texas, Arkansas, and Most of Louisiana from the rest of the South, which would limit troops and supplies from these western states.

The importance of an inland Navy

Having realized the importance of controlling the western rivers, the Union then realized that it needed an inland navy to do this successfully. The North commissioned James B. Eads, who had made a fortune before the war raising sunken ships from the Mississippi, to build ironclads specially designed for rivers. These Eads ironclads were designed by Samuel M. Pook. They were paddle boats with most of their armor and heavy guns in the front, with thinner iron plating and smaller guns on the sides. Eads built seven such ironclads for the Union. By the end of the war, the North had begun building twenty-four riverine ironclads and had commissioned twenty-two of them. The first task of this fleet of ironclads was to take Forts Henry and Donelson on the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers respectively. General Ulysses S. Grant, USA, and Commodore Andrew H. Foote, USN, who were in command of the western front of the war at the time, had planned for "Foote's Flotilla," as the group of ironclads were called, to shell the forts, and for the land forces to move in. Fort Henry was taken with ease on Feb. 6, 1862 before the ground forces had even arrived by four ironclads, the USS Essex, USS Cincinnati, USS Carondelet, and USS St. Louis. However, since Fort Donelson was perched on a high cliff, the ironclads sustain too much damage to be of any use in taking it in their attack on Feb. 14. This was accomplished by Grant's ground forces later. The method used by the ironclads in shelling the southern forces in most of the battles was simple. The ironclads would line up side by side with their heavily armored ends facing the object of their fire. They would fire in succession, with the one on the left firing, then the one next to it, and on down the line, until the end was reached, and the process started over. The advantage to this was that it enabled continuous fire, with one gun firing while the others reloaded.

Island Number 10

The next rebel stronghold heading south on the Mississippi was Island Number Ten on the Tennessee-Kentucky border. Island Number Ten was located at a double bend in the Mississippi River, shaped like the capital letter "N", with Island No. 10 at its southeast corner and the town of New Madrid, Missouri at its northwest corner. The Confederates had batteries on the island and on the east side of the river from the northwest promontory to the shore opposite the island. The promontory extending to the southeast corner of the "N" was a swamp. The Union knew that it wouldn't be able

to capture the island without first having the bank of the river south or east of it. The north had dug a canal through the swamp from the northeast corner of the "N" to New Madrid, which was deep enough for troop transports but not ironclads. Union troops were able to occupy New Madrid, but were unable to get across the river due the Confederate batteries there. They needed the aid of ironclads to get across the river, but the ironclads were unable to get past the island during the day because their flanks had no armor to protect them from the rebel fire from the island. So on April 3, 1862, the USS Carondelet was able to sneak past the island under the dark of night, followed by the USS Pittsburgh the following night. They then proceeded to destroy the rebel works on the promontory sticking into the northwest corner of the "N" so the troops could cross from New Madrid.

The next Confederate stronghold heading was Memphis, Tennessee. Fort Pillow was located eight miles above Memphis, and Foote's Flotilla of ironclads began shelling it on April 14. Despite attempts by a fleet of Confederate ramming ships, Foote captured Fort Pillow on May 4, followed by Fort Randolph, a little further down on the river. He was able to defeat these rams, which were essentially swift steamboats mounted with a few guns due to the aid of a similar group of eight Union ramming vessels with no guns and some iron plating under the command of Colonel Charles Ellet Jr. These ramming vessels were designed to outmaneuver slower gunboats and ram into them. The swifter Union rams combined with fire from "Foote's Flotilla" was able to sink the rebel rams Beauregard, General Bragg, Colonel Lovell, General Price, Little Rebel, Jeff Thompson, and Sumpter. On May 5, Foote defeated the rest of the rebel ramming ships, and subsequently took Memphis.

Vicksburg

Jefferson Davis said that Vicksburg, Mississippi was, "the nail that held the South's two halves together." Vicksburg was located high above the Mississippi on a cliff, and it was surrounded by bayous. On May 17, 1863, U.S. Grant laid siege on the city after months of circumventing the bayous and defeating many Confederate forces. Having done this, he ordered the flotilla of ironclads to begin shelling the city on May 21. On July 3, the Confederate forces surrendered to Grant's forces. These were the major victories of Union ironclads in the Mississippi River system. The other group of ironclads in the American Civil War were ocean going ironclads. There were three main ocean battles in the Civil War: Hampton Roads, New Orleans, and Mobile Bay.

The First Ironclad Battle

At Hampton Roads, the first battle between two ironclads took place. The USS Monitor fought against the CSS Virginia. The Virginia had once been the USS Merrimac, which was abandoned in Norfolk at the beginning of the war by fleeing Union forces. The South bolted iron plates to her, and she destroyed many Union wooden ships near the mouth of the James River, including the USS Minnesota and the USS Congress, among others. The Union sent the Monitor, which it had already begun building, down from New England to counter the southern monster which was tearing the Union navy to pieces. The Monitor

had only two guns compared to the Virginia's ten, but they were mounted on a rotating turret. Also, the Monitor had a very small surface area out of the water for the Virginia to hit. The Virginia, mounted ten guns, four on each side and on each end. However, only a maximum of four could be pointed at the Monitor at one time, and unlike the Monitor, the entire vessel had to be turned to aim the guns. The two ships shot at each other for a whole day on March 6, 1862, with neither ship being the least bit damaged. The rebels were forced to burn the Virginia while fleeing from Norfolk, and the Monitor sank off the coast of North Carolina in a storm. The Monitor and the Virginia had very little, if any effect on the outcome of the war, especially compared to the riverine class of ironclads used in the West. The existence of the Virginia did cause General McClellan to land his army at the mouth of the York River rather than the James, but this probably did not affect the amount of time it took them to get to Richmond. At the battle for New Orleans, Captain David G. Farragut's fleet, which did not contain any ironclads, was able to defeat a confederate naval force of thirteen ships, including two ironclads, the CSS *Mannasas* and CSS *Louisiana*, both of which were falling apart before the engagement, and did little to stifle Farragut's fleet.

The last battle

The last naval battle in the American Civil War to involve ironclads was the Battle of Mobile Bay, fought on August 5, 1864. Mobile Bay was littered with Confederate mines, so Farragut ordered that his wooden ships sail behind the four ironclads used in the battle for the North, so to clear a channel, for he thought they could withstand mine explosions better. The USS *Tecumseh* was sunk almost immediately, but the Union prevailed, capturing the CSS *Tennessee*, one of the South's most prized ironclads. Other southern ironclads were used in the engagement, including the CSS *Tuscaloosa*, CSS *Huntsville*, CSS *Nashville*, and the CSS *Baltic*.

One of the reasons the North was able to use ironclads much more to its advantage was the fact that at the beginning of the war, it already had several iron manufacturing plants built, unlike the South. The South had to use a great deal of its iron on artillery pieces, railroads, and other articles of war, so they were not able to build nearly as many ironclads as the north, and those they did build were of much lower quality. One thing that is interesting about the ironclads used in the American Civil War is that the two most remembered, the Monitor and the Virginia, had hardly any effect on the war, and the ones that did affect the war, like the riverine ironclads, are not remembered at all. There are two reasons for this. One is that their meeting was the first meeting between two ironclads in the history of warfare, so they aroused the attention of naval experts in both America and Europe. Also, about one hundred thousand people served on ironclads, which is a drop in the bucket compared to the millions who fought on the land. In all of the battles of the American Civil War in which ironclad ships were used, their contributions varied. However, the battles in which ironclads did affect the outcome had two things in common. One, they were usually involving control of the Mississippi River and its tributaries, and two, the ironclad's use benefited the Union, and hardly ever the Confederacy. The reason that the Union ironclads had more impact lies both in their greater numbers and their greater quality, and the results of these advantages are shown

in the Union victories due to ironclads, like Island Number Ten and Memphis, and the lack of Southern victories due to ironclads. Although ironclad ships did not dominate every battle in which they were used, they were essential to determining the outcome of the American Civil War.