

response of US Marine batteries to Japanese cruisers at Wake Island. *Japanese Combined Fleet* is a fine contribution to a new series and sets the standard for other historical Fleet books to follow. This small primer is packed with information and will appeal to readers interested in the opening months of the Second World in the Pacific and the rise and fall of Japanese naval power.

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Henry Willis Wells, edited by Robert M. Browning Jr. *I Am Fighting for the Union: The Civil War Letters of Naval Officer Henry Willis Wells*. Mobile, AB: University of Alabama Press, www.uapress.ua.edu, 2023. xxix+334 pages, illustration, maps, notes, bibliography, index. US \$43.95, paper; ISBN 978-0-8173-6105-1. (E-book available.)

This is a collection letters written by Henry Willis Wells to his family during the American Civil War while serving in the Union navy. This robust collection offers a rare insight into a junior officer's experience of the war, the men he served with, and the ships in which he sailed. The letters highlight social dynamics, both of a son gone off to war relating to his family, and life aboard the smaller vessels in the Union navy. The letters are arranged in chapters based on the ship Wells served in, and where that ship was located. Browning's brief annotations give short bios of people, provide appropriate contextual background, and define unique terms. His introduction lays out Wells' biography, describes the larger collection from which these letters were drawn, and remarks on the editorial process for the collection.

A Massachusetts native, Henry Willis Wells was 20 years old when he joined the Union navy as a masters' mate, with five years of service in merchant ships. Upon joining the navy, Wells worked hard for promotion. His first ship, the screw-propelled *Cambridge*, spent time patrolling in the Chesapeake and off the coast of North Carolina. While attempting to retrieve stranded sailors, Wells was captured, passing through Libby Prison before being paroled and exchanged. Returning to service on the USS *Ceres*, he fell seriously ill, requiring hospitalization at Norfolk. Three months later he arrived in Florida serving in the *Gem of the Sea*. This six-and-a-half-month period in Key West was perhaps the most trying as the ship rarely left its anchorage. The boredom, heat, and mosquitos were relentless. For a young man seeking glory and promotion, inaction was more than irksome.

There are glimpses of Civil War battles, such as the *Merrimack's* attack on Union ships and the battle between it and the *Monitor* (pp. 71-4) and some details of raids in which Wells was involved (pp. 157-59). But his letters are

far more personal and family-focused. Most are to his mother Elizabeth, with others to his sisters Louisa and Eliza. There are occasionally staid letters to his father, often sending money owed for things sent to Wells.

Correspondence was critical to Wells; he apologized for gaps of two or three weeks between his letters. He chastised his mother for not writing every week and was critical of his sisters if they didn't write as often as he thought proper. He sought news of the people he knew and of family activities. The exchange of portrait photographs was significant. Wells collected and traded photos of his family, friends, and shipmates. Political discussion was limited, although he vehemently opposed the rebellion and its promoters, considering them traitors to the United States. He liked Lincoln, but not as much as some of his senior officers, whom he called "Lincoln men." Wells' mother sent clothes, books, magazines, newspapers, cakes, preserves, among other items, in a near constant stream of boxes. His father sent guns that Wells requested in one package. Considering the number of men under arms on both sides, hundreds, if not thousands, of wagons would have been needed to haul the packages to various forts and embarkation sites.

The letters indicate that Wells formed friendships with the officers in every ship in which he served, but also that there were officers and seamen that he felt did not belong in the navy (p. 149). Wardroom dramas appear to have been common. Wells condemned Captain William Parker, US Steamer *Cambridge*, as "...nice enough but in my opinion [he] is not fit to command a man of war in these times he has no energy & will take no responsibility which is not forced upon him" (p. 83). Of the captain of *Ceres* Wells writes, "Our Captain especially is about as disagreeable a man as one often meets, sweet as honey one minute & sour as a crab apple the next" (p. 155).

The ships in which Wells served were former civilian craft adapted to war. The steam ferries with iron plating bolted on for protection sailed poorly, had nearly constant mechanical troubles, and were far from comfortable. The crews were often inexperienced. Long stretches of boredom were broken with short bursts of excitement, mainly chasing a potential blockade runner, with a few riverine skirmishes. Music, singing, and dancing offset the dullness. Smoking was a major activity for many, especially for Wells, who developed serious lung issues from the amount he puffed. Alcohol appears as self-medication and a major issue for some of the sailors, though Wells seems less of a drinker than most.

On slavery, Wells was a definite abolitionist, seeing it as plainly wrong, but he was not open to accepting Black Americans as equals. Wells expresses bigoted assessments of former slaves he met during the war (pp. 21-2, 138, 229-30, and 246-48). Only a handful of the refugees he encountered were judged to be active, intelligent or worthy men (p. 57). Wells' expressed prejudice is a

stark reminder that freeing people from slavery would not end the segregation and discrimination aimed at Americans of African descent.

The last group of letters by Henry Wells concern his experience as acting ensign, commanding the sloop *Rosalie* in September 1864 and the schooner *Annie* three months later. He clearly thrived in this position, enjoying a certain independence and more action looking for blockade runners along the Gulf Coast of Florida. But this is a short section, for only a month after taking command of the *Annie*, there was a catastrophic explosion which killed everyone on board. The final chapter contains letters by naval officers answering inquiries from Wells' distraught mother seeking confirmation of her son's death and the circumstances.

The main text is unbroken by illustrations or maps. These are found in the front of the book. The maps help locate Wells' areas of activity from the Chesapeake, along the North Carolina shoreline, and in the area of Key West. The illustrations include two from his letters: one of the siege of Washington, NC, and the other the US Steamer *Ceres* (p. xxix).

This is an immensely important contribution to those studying the Union navy during the American Civil War. This collection of letters illustrates the social dynamics aboard ships and a sailor's daily life in this era. There are more letters and journals that now reside in the Library of Congress. This is a volume to have on the shelf.

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