

Myron J. Smith, Jr. *The Old War Horse. The USS Benton on Western Waters, 1853–1865.* Jefferson, NC: McFarland Publishing, www.mcfarlandbooks.com, 2023. vii+256 pp., illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. US \$49.95, paper; ISBN 978-1-4766-8689-9. (E-book available.)

By the start of the American Civil War, the Mississippi was a major conduit of the United States' internal trade, Minnesota being the last state through which the river runs to be admitted to the Union in 1858. It was, however, a temperamental and dangerous avenue of commerce. The water level of the river varied drastically by season while ice impeded navigation in the north, and in the summer diseases like malaria plagued sailors, passengers, and merchants alike further south.

Natural obstacles, from sandbars to sunken trees, were a perennial problem that contributed to the loss of many steamboats, as did fire, boiler explosions, and other accidents attributable to human error. In the 1820s, Superintendent of Western River Improvements Henry Shreve began building snagboats to dredge channels and clear logjams and rafts, the often massive obstructions of natural debris. The largest of the latter, the Great Raft, clogged 150 miles of the Red River. This made navigation somewhat safer, but losses remained all too common. Sunken boats and their cargos were rarely recovered from deeper stretches of the Mississippi and its tributaries until James Buchanan Eads began building "submarine" snagboats from which divers could descend in primitive diving bells to fasten hoists to the wrecks.

Eads launched his first submarine in 1842 and continued improving his designs through the late 1850s. The most celebrated of his vessels was *Submarine No. 7*, which featured a catamaran hull with a centerline paddlewheel and a massive superstructure rigged with pumps, winches, pulleys, and other lifting devices. When the Civil War began, Eads approached the Navy about converting the vessel to an ironclad. The transformation was complete by February 1862, when as the newly commissioned USS *Benton* it was commissioned into the Army's Western Gunboat Flotilla, which became the Navy's Mississippi River Squadron the following year.

The first four of the book's ten chapters cover the background to and history of *Submarine No. 7* through its metamorphosis into an ironclad. The last six detail the principal campaigns in which the *Benton* took part. These include the battle for Island No. 10, the capture of Fort Pillow and Memphis, the Yazoo River campaign, and siege of Vicksburg — with an entire chapter devoted to the short-lived but vexing career of the confederate ironclad

Arkansas — and the Red River campaign.

Smith has a good command of the archival record and quotes extensively from memoirs, letters, and contemporary newspaper accounts, which lends his account a water-level view of events. There were many complications of warfare on a powerful, variable river, fighting against an innovative enemy often entrenched on bluffs — the USS *Cairo* was the first warship sunk by a mine (torpedo). The material conditions for men and machines alike were dreadful. Ironclad speeds were often less than five miles per hour, coal was scarce, and in the summer up to half the crews of Union vessel might be incapacitated by malaria, heat rash, and gastrointestinal diseases.

In dwelling on particulars, however, Smith recreates the fog of war. While he reports extensively on damage to vessels, often offering up the number of shells expended as well as figures for hits and misses and casualties, the work of the Western Gunboat Flotilla/Mississippi River Squadron is not tethered to that of the Union armies, whose strategy drove the fleet's. Moreover, the accompanying maps contribute little to our understanding of the campaigns and omit many of the places discussed, like Grand Gulf, Fort DeRussy, and Fort Cobun. And none illustrate the Red River campaign.

The six maps, from five distinct sources, show the bend in the river around Island No. 10, provide an overview of naval operations on the Upper Mississippi (with a focus on the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers), and there are four showing various aspects of the Vicksburg campaign. The only overview of the last illustrates Grant's four failed Bayou Expeditions between February and April 1863. These are not discussed in the text and the map is all but irrelevant to naval operations.

While Smith's writing is generally formal, the editors let stand casual abbreviations like VIP, ASAP, CO, and XO, as well as two-letter postal abbreviations for state names. Curiously, he also uses "flagboat" rather than "flagship," the term found in the relevant volumes of the *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion*.

These problems aside, *The Old War Horse* provides a good foundation for understanding the challenges of navigation on the Mississippi and its tributaries, as well as of the Mississippi Campaign, the successful execution of which was key to the Union victory.

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