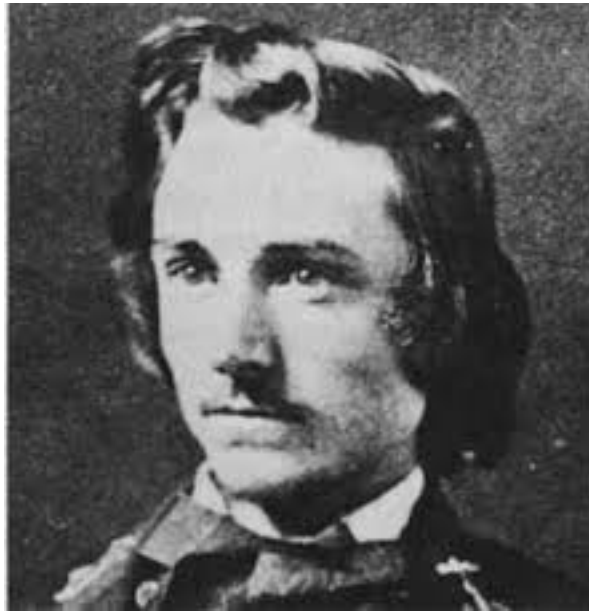


## Charles Read CSN



‘Sea Hawk of the Confederacy’ or the ‘Confederate Corsair’ – two appellations often applied to Charles Read, one junior officer who certainly rates a mention on these pages.

Like many of his contemporaries, Semmes, Maffitt, Waddell etc., Read's Civil War career reads like a novel. Some suggest that Read was a pirate or buccaneer - but in reality he was a naval officer whose activities were well within the bounds of legitimate warfare, namely the destruction of an enemy's sea-going commerce. Yet a good bit of his brief career had nothing to do with the destruction of the Union's ocean going commerce; but was instead riverine operations (both on land and water) defending his beloved Confederacy.

Charles Read was born in 1840 in Yazoo County, Mississippi. Nine years later his father departed for the California gold fields where he subsequently died, leaving a 10-year-old Read virtually on his own. Read had inherited his father's impulsive nature and his shifting career interests in later years indicate this remained the case. At first attracted to journalism, he became bored and became an actor. He once portrayed a sailor in a play before coincidentally, running away from home, to serve before the masts on a sailing vessel out of New Orleans.

Young Charles Read was clearly suited for a nautical career and his mother sought Congressional ‘assistance’ to get her son admitted to the United States Naval Academy. He was one of 52 who made up the class of 1860 - but of whom only 25 would graduate. His academic career there was disappointing, mediocre at best; and he ranked last in his class. Fortunately there were amongst his classmates those, who even then recognized his potential. George Dewey and Winfield Scott Schley, both of whom served in the Union Navy during the Civil War, were well acquainted with Read at the Academy. Admiral

Schley later wrote that Read's class ranking 'was in no sense the measure of his intellectual worth, but arose from his lack of application to study'.

Read's career in the United States Navy was short-lived. When Mississippi seceded, he immediately resigned his commission whilst attached to the steam frigate 'Powhatan' deployed off the coast of Mexico. He was forced to wait until the frigate returned to New York in the middle of March before departing for the South. The Confederate Navy Department ordered him to the *CSS McRae*, then fitting out as a warship in New Orleans. It was on the McR' that he first acquired his reputation as a cool but aggressive officer. The 'McRae' was involved in a number of engagements from the Head of the Passes at the mouth of the Mississippi River to New Madrid, Missouri.

It was at the Battle of New Orleans in April 1862, when Flag Officer David Farragut bypassed the forts guarding the city, that Read first distinguished himself. As executive officer, (and later commanding officer when his captain was mortally wounded), Read fought Farragut's fleet until the 'McRae' was disabled. He then applied to join the crew of the ironclad ram *CSS Arkansas*, fitting out at Yazoo City, Mississippi. Here, in charge of the ship's stern battery, he participated in various actions as the ironclad fought powerful Union Naval forces on her way down the Yazoo. Once on the Mississippi, the 'Arkansas' moored at Vicksburg and near Baton Rouge where she eventually had to be destroyed because of engine failure.



Charles Read could not be idle, volunteering he spent several weeks directing a battery of heavy guns at Port Hudson on the Mississippi before being assigned to the Confederate raider 'Florida', which at that time was in Mobile. Serving as a Lieutenant and boarding officer he persuaded the ship's captain, John Maffitt to allow him to convert and command one of the prizes, the Union brig 'Clarence', into a raider. This inaugurated the exploit that made Read famous or infamous depending on one's point of view? Cruising north along the Atlantic seaboard to Maine, Read and his handpicked crew successfully

captured and armed the *'Tacony'*, *'Archer'* and the revenue cutter *'Caleb Cushing'*. All told, he managed to seize thirteen more vessels before finally being captured himself. Incarcerated at Fort Warren, Massachusetts. (See photo right) He was finally paroled and exchanged in October 1864. More than any other Confederate 'captain', Read truly brought the war home to New England merchant owners. In the end, this is what the *'guerre de course'* strategy was suppose to do - make the war too expensive for the upper class merchants to seek to continue the war.

Photo # NH 43135 "Burning of the Rebel Ram 'Webb' Below New Orleans, April 24, 1865"



BURNING OF THE REBEL RAM "WEBB" BELOW NEW ORLEANS, APRIL 24, 1865.—SKETCHED BY H. WEIR.—[SEE PAGE 207.]

Read's next assignment was to the James River Squadron. Here he directed a river battery and commanded the squadron's torpedo boats. In February 1865, Confederate Secretary of the Navy, Stephen Mallory placed him in command of the side-wheeler *CSS Webb* formerly the *'William H. Webb'* then at Shreveport, Louisiana. Read's audacious and desperate plan was to run the gauntlet of Federal ships and sail into the Gulf of Mexico where the *'Webb'* would become yet another of the feared cruisers. By the time that he reached Shreveport and readied the ship however, the War was virtually over. Undeterred, he headed downstream and was able to pass New Orleans before his way was blocked, forcing him to destroy his vessel. Charles Read would live until 1890, working an assortment of maritime jobs, his last being a New Orleans pilot.