

The Civil War Sailor's Life



Cavalrymen were not the only warriors who went into battle as passengers, though they were far more plentiful than their "webfoot" counterparts. Throughout the Civil War the navies of both the North and the South suffered from a shortage of manpower. On both sides the demands of the armies were so persistent that there were never enough sailors, especially experienced men, to complete the crews of all the ships in service. This proved particularly true in the South, where the pool of available seamen was very small under the best of circumstances. Stephen Mallory, the Secretary of the Navy, got the Confederate Congress to pass a law in 1863 whereby any man serving in the army who volunteered for the navy was to be transferred. Mallory claimed that hundreds of men volunteered, but that their military commanders would not release them. In the North, trained seamen were diverted into the army by enlistment bonuses, by local competition to fill regiments, by a desire to try something different, and by the draft. Sometimes it became necessary in both the North and the South to divert soldiers into naval duty. Usually the soldiers were not too pleased by the assignment. Some became disciplinary problems or deserted, but a number adjusted to the demands of the war and gave a good account of themselves.

One part of the Confederate Navy, at least, had no difficulty in attracting men: the ships *Alabama*, *Florida*, *Shenandoah*, and other famous commerce raiders. The commanders of such ships completed their manpower needs by drawing on the crews of the vessels they captured. The Confederates paid high wages and in gold. Those factors and the prospect of being a prisoner made a crucial difference. But the result was that a high percentage of the crews of these famous ships were foreigners.

In the South a young man wishing to join the navy had to have the consent of his parent or guardian if he was under twenty-one years of age. His counterpart in the North needed parental consent if he was under eighteen. No one under the age of thirteen was to be enlisted in the North, or under fourteen in the South. Height requirements for the Union Navy were at least five feet eight inches; those for the Confederacy were four feet eight inches. At the other end of the spectrum, no inexperienced man was to be enlisted in the Union Navy if he was over thirty-three years of age unless he had a trade. If he had a trade, thirty-eight was the age limit. In the South an inexperienced man with a trade could join if he was between twenty-five and thirty-five. Inexperienced men without trades were shipped as landsmen or coal heavers. Free blacks could enlist in the Confederate Navy if they had the special permission of the Navy Department or the local squadron commander. Slaves were enlisted with the consent of their owners, and some of them served as officers' servants as well as coal heavers and pilots. Before the war the United States Navy had tried to restrict the number of black men in the ranks to one-twentieth of the crew. During the Civil War, however, the chronic shortages of men led Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles to suggest to the commander of the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron that he open recruiting stations ashore for the enlistment of blacks or contrabands. As a result of this and other activities, the Union Navy had a high percentage of blacks in the lower ranks. The normal pay scales in both navies ranged from \$12 a month for landsmen and other inexperienced hands to \$14 a month for ordinary seamen and \$18 a month for seamen. Boys were rated as third, second, or first class in ascending order according to their knowledge and physical ability. Third-class boys were paid \$7 a month, second class \$8, and first class \$9.

In both the North and the South it was customary to send the newly recruited men to a receiving ship. These were usually old frigates or

other sail-powered ships that were stationed at navy yards in the North and functioned as floating dormitories. In the South old merchant ships were used at Richmond and at other major Southern ports. A recruit arriving on board a receiving ship reported to the officer of the deck. His name and other details went into the ship's books, and he was sent forward. Usually he received only the clothing needed for immediate service. In the North no civilian clothing was allowed, though shortages of uniforms later in the war sometimes made it necessary to modify this rule in the South. When the recruit arrived at the forward part of the receiving ship, he was given a number for his hammock and another for his clothes bag and was assigned to a mess.

While on board a receiving ship the recruit learned the rudiments of navy life. He learned how to address and to respect his officers, petty officers, and shipmates. Much time was spent in various kinds of drills, such as learning to handle sails, rigging, boats, and cutlasses, as well as the procedures for repelling boarders. The manpower demands of the Union and the Confederate navies meant that the amount of time a recruit was on a receiving ship ranged from a few days to a few weeks. Anything not learned on the receiving ship had to be learned in the hard school of active service. Periodically the commander of the receiving ship would receive orders to send a certain number of men to a vessel preparing for active service, or as replacements for a ship that had lost men through death, illness, or desertion.

Once a man reported to a ship in the regular service, he was assigned to various stations at the guns, on deck, in the tops, in a boat, at a mess, and in a hammock. Each had a number to be remembered. So, on a man-of-war, a given recruit or veteran might define his niche in the following way: He belonged to the starboard watch, was stationed in the top of the mizzenmast; he belonged to the third division of the battery, attached to gun number eight, where he was the first loader. In the event of a need to board an enemy vessel, he was the second boarder in his division. When it was necessary to loose or to furl sails, his post was at the starboard yardarm of the mizzen topgallant yard. In reefing sails his position was on the port yardarm of the mizzen topsail yard. When tacking or wearing the ship, his place was at the lee main brace. If the anchor was being raised, his duty was at the capstan. In a boat he pulled the bow oar of the captain's gig. Until all these assignments became second nature to him, the recruit might forget his numbers and have to refresh his memory by consulting the station bill, where everyone's

position was recorded.

On gunboats and monitors all the duties associated with masts, rigging, and yards were eliminated, of course. These ships were also much smaller than a steam frigate or some of the merchant vessels converted to warships. But on these smaller ships there were still quarters, guns, and decks to be kept clean, and there were still watches to be kept. On all coal-burning vessels it was a constant problem to keep the ship and the guns clean. The actual work of coaling a ship left black dust everywhere. About the time that the dust was under control, it was time to recoal.

Any man with experience in the merchant service found life on a warship quite different, at least at times. In the merchant service, for example, when raising the anchor, the men at the capstan might sing a sea chantey. In the Navy this and other tasks were performed in silence lest some order from an officer not be heard. Loud talking by the men while on watch was frowned upon for the same reason. In warships of both the Union and the Confederacy, the shipboard routines were performed to the sound of shouted orders, boatswain's pipes, or a drum, depending on the situation covered.

Joining the crew of a warship was apt to be quite a memorable experience for the recruit. Here he found himself among a wide variety of men. There were some older, weatherbeaten types who had been at sea for many years. In contrast to these were the young men of seventeen, eighteen, or younger, away from home for the first time. There were foreigners, including some not many months removed from their old environments in Europe. There were black men, including many who had recently left the slave status. Also caught up in such groups was an occasional North American Indian, or a Pacific islander. In a very real sense a man-of-war was the world in miniature, especially on Union ships. Crews of Confederate gunboats and other vessels that defended Southern harbors, inlets, and rivers were apt to be more homogeneous, especially early in the war.

For the Northern recruit particularly, adaptation to the cross section of humanity that comprised the crew was often difficult. Their early weeks and months in the Navy might be marked by personality clashes, accusations and counter-accusations, and fights. Marines and officers had the duty of stopping any affrays. The man who struck the first blow might find himself confined to the brig, in irons and on a diet of bread and water for twenty-four hours, as a warning not to persist in such

conduct. A man who was wronged by another soon learned to settle his score indirectly rather than by fighting. His tormentor might find the rope of his hammock cut while he was asleep, or have a belaying pin dropped on his toes, or become the victim of other "accidents."

In the Union and the Confederate navies it was the specific duty of the commanding officer to see to it that ordinary seamen, landsmen, and boys were instructed in steering, in heaving the lead to determine the depth of the water, in knotting and splicing ropes, in rowing, in the use of the palm and needle to do sewing, and in bending and reefing sails. Mastery of these duties was necessary if the recruit hoped to qualify for promotion to seaman or to become a petty officer. Coal heavers with any intelligence at all could master the requirements necessary to become a fireman. In addition, the men were continually drilled in exercising the guns, in handling small arms and boats, and in using the boat howitzer. Anything not learned on the receiving ship was thoroughly learned on a ship in regular service. In the Confederacy, whenever the needs of war made it necessary to transfer from one ship to another, the men had to have additional training because no two ships had engines or guns that were exactly the same.

In both navies the daily routine was somewhat the same, depending on the size of the ship, the preferences of the captain, the season of the year, the needs of the moment. Sailors might begin their day as early as 4 A.M. if the ship had to be thoroughly cleaned or was scheduled to be coaled in the morning. Otherwise, a typical day might have gone as follows:

At 5 A.M. the marine bugler sounded reveille. The master-at-arms, or one of his corporals, and the boatswain's mate from the current watch ran around the berth deck shouting at the sleeping men and slapping hammocks. The men were ordered to get up and to lash up their hammocks and bedding into a tight, round bundle. These were then carried tip to the spar, or upper, deck. Here the hammocks were stored uniformly behind heavy rope nets, called nettings, along the bulwarks. Storing the hammocks here gave some small additional protection from gunshots and from wood splinters dislodged by cannon fire. The nettings also provided a barrier against boarders. In theory, a well-trained crew was supposed to rise, lash their hammocks, and deliver them to the spar deck in seven minutes. In practice, it may have taken that long to get some men out of their hammocks.

About 5:07 A.M. the crew got out sand, brooms, holystones, and

buckets and washed down the decks. Usually the berth deck was scrubbed with saltwater, and the spar deck was holystoned by teams of men working under the direction of a boatswain's mate. In addition to the decks, the brass fittings and other bright work were polished.

Metal tracks on which the gun carriages turned were burnished. The guns themselves were cleaned. On ships that carried sails, the rigging, halyards (ropes for hoisting yards or sails), and blocks were checked and maintained as necessary. Once the ship was cleaned, the sailors might fill the buckets with saltwater to wash themselves and to shave, if they so desired.

In a man-of-war, boys assembled at the port gangway at 7:30 A.M. for inspection by the master-at-arms. The boys were expected to have clean faces and hands, hair combed, and clothes clean and tidy. Their pants were supposed to be rolled up. After the inspection, each boy was expected to climb to the top of the masthead and come down. Each boy did his best to get up and down first. Sometimes the last boy down had to climb up and down again. The theory behind this routine was that it made the boys agile and gave them a good appetite for breakfast.

At 8 A.M. the boatswain piped breakfast. Cleaning equipment was put away and buckets were returned to their racks. Each man reported to his respective mess, which consisted of from eight to fourteen men. Members of a gun crew, coal heavers and firemen, and topmen would have their own messes, often determined by the watch to which they belonged. Marines and petty officers messed separately, and the boys were distributed among the messes. Each member of the mess took his turn as the orderly or cook, though sometimes one person would be hired by his messmates to do the job on a permanent basis. It was the job of the orderly to unlock the mess chest and take out the tableware and cooking utensils, as well as the food allotted to the mess each week by the ship's cook or by the paymaster. The individual kept track of his own knife, fork, spoon, and mug. For breakfast each man was served one pint of coffee without milk, as well as a piece of salt junk, or hard, salted beef. After breakfast the dishes were cleaned and returned to the mess chest.

Then, at 9:30 A.M. came the call to quarters. Guns were inspected to see that they were properly secured and ready for any emergency throughout the day. Once this was done, the men relaxed at their stations by writing letters, reading newspapers or books, or dozing.

Noon was the fixed time for lunch, so at that hour the men reported

to their messes. Now they had a piece of beef or pork, vegetables, and coffee. Cheese might enhance the meal from time to time. On blockade duty there were opportunities to acquire fresh provisions from the shore areas, and these broke the monotony of the average meal served at sea.

The crews of the Confederate cruisers usually ate well as a result of their captures of merchant vessels, but for the rest of the Confederate Navy, items like cheese, butter, and raisins, while technically a part of the ration, were never available. Tea and coffee could be obtained from blockade runners, but at a great cost. Even so, the Confederate Navy usually ate better than the Army. One and one-quarter pounds of salted beef, pork, or bacon was issued to each man every day. As late as 1864 the men of the James River Squadron got meat three times a week.

After lunch the men might return to the stations they had left, or portions of the afternoon might be filled by various kinds of drills. Blockade duty proved so monotonous most of the time that commanders had to exercise their ingenuity to keep the men occupied. Training sequences were not the same on any two successive days; thus there was no predicting what would come next on the agenda. As Charles K. Mervine, a boy attached to a blockading squadron ship, wrote in 1863: "The life of a sailor is not one of a real and regular work, his hours of rest may not be uniform but they are more or less regulated. The details of a progame [*sic*] of any day on shipboard cannot be as fixed as in other forms of labor, yet its original outlines are the same day after day."

At 4 P.m. a light evening meal was served by the various messes. In this and the other meals, the timing was related to the watch sequence of four hours on and four hours off. Mealtimes were when the watch was relieved. From a nutritional point of view, there were objections to this format because in a twenty-four-hour sequence all the meals were crowded into less than eight hours. Since the noon meal was the main meal, men who stood watch at midnight or in the early hours of the morning might be quite hungry.

On blockade duty individual captains could alter the watch routine by splitting the period from 4 P.M. to 8 P.M. into two 2-hour watch segments called dogwatches. This meant that there would be seven watches instead of six in a twenty-four hour period. If this was done, no watch would have to take the midnight to 4 A.M. shift for two nights in succession. An alternative was to divide the crew into three watches so

that each man would be on' duty for four hours and off for eight. Still other captains went so far as to use quarter watches, or one-fourth of the working hands, or half of each watch. In this system the watch would be divided into first and second parts, which would constitute the quarter watch. There were, however, those who believed that the use of quarter watches was unwise in dangerous waters.

The watch procedure was also used in coaling the ship. Such work might begin with the port watch and function in a prearranged order. Coaling might begin about 7 A.M. for the Union ships on blockade and be finished by noon, if the crew really worked at it. If they did not, and the work continued into the heat of the afternoon, the process could take as much as twelve hours. Because everything depended upon the time of arrival of the coal ship, there was no consistent time for the operation to begin. If the process began in the late afternoon, it might continue all night.

At 5:30 P.M. the sound of the drum called men to their quarters. Once again guns and stations were inspected to see that everything was ready for the night. This was especially important, for the hours of darkness were the times when the blockade runners were most active. Once the inspection was finished, the boatswain's pipe announced that the hammocks could be removed from the nettings and prepared for sleeping. Then came the period of relaxation for all who were not on watch. The men might write or read letters, or read newspapers and books. At this time and in other free periods during the day they repaired their clothing. Dominoes was a popular pastime. Cards were strictly forbidden. Gambling was also outlawed but went on covertly. It could range from simple games of calling odds and evens, matching money, or bets associated with daily activities, such as how long it would take them to overhaul another ship, to more formal games with dice.

At idle times in the afternoon or evening the men might also listen to music if they were fortunate enough to have a banjo or fiddle player on board. A larger ship might have some semblance of a band. On many vessels minstrel shows or theatricals were staged in the early evening, written and produced by the men themselves. Black crew members performed in minstrel shows along with their white comrades. On ironclads and monitors, of course, space was much more limited, and therefore so was the range of entertainment. In this as in every war, mail from home and from loved ones was looked forward to with great

anticipation.

The daily scrubbing the ship received tended to keep the lower decks somewhat damp. This, combined with the daily humidity on the Southern stations, especially in the summer, made for a generally stuffy atmosphere. On monitors and gunboats the heat of the engines warmed the metal plating and the decks. There was also the smell of burning coal and sometimes of sulfur. The men tried to enjoy the fresh air as long as possible before retiring, for during the night the atmosphere on the berth deck sometimes became so oppressive that they had to congregate around the hatches for a breath of air.

Those who wished to smoke went to the forward part of the ship. Cigars and pipes were lit by a taper from a whale oil lamp and carefully extinguished. Hand-rolled cigarettes had been introduced into the United States from Turkey in the late 1850's but did not become popular until many years after the war. Friction matches were strictly forbidden on ships because of the danger of fire, and no uncovered light was allowed in any storeroom or in the hold. Lamps were carefully chosen to avoid any that used explosive oils for fuel.

On some ships it was a common practice to allow time after dinner for general horseplay, tomfoolery, and skylarking as a means of relieving tension. Other captains thought that tension was relieved by scheduled boxing matches in the afternoon. On more sedate ships the hours after dinner were the time for a quiet smoke, for telling or listening to a yarn, or for writing and reading.

Problems relating to the abuse of alcohol were common on all ships and in all ranks. The enlisted man's daily ration of grog, or one gill of whiskey mixed with water, was abolished by act of Congress in September 1862. In the Confederate Navy the enlisted men were entitled to one gill of spirits or a half pint of wine per day. This continued throughout the war, though a man could receive money in lieu of the spirit ration if he chose. Originally this compensation was set at four cents a day, but it rose to twenty cents a day by the final years of the war. The Congress gave the Union sailor an additional five cents a day in lieu of the spirit ration. In both the Union and Confederate navies there were constant efforts to smuggle liquor on board ships, and some of these plans proved successful. Private vessels that sold food to the Union ships on blockade sometimes sold liquor in tins described as oysters or canned meats. Despite such ingenuity, the supply never matched the demand. When a man was discovered drinking or drunk,

the usual practice was to place him in irons in the brig. On some ships drunks had saltwater pumped on them until they sobered up.

For the Union ships on blockade duty, tattoo normally sounded at 8 P.m. This was the signal for the men to go to their sleeping quarters and retire. Lights and fires were put out and there was to be no noise. Elsewhere the usual rule was that when the sun set at or after 6 P.M., the tattoo was beaten at 9. When the sun set before 6, tattoo was at 8. For the men of the Union blockading squadrons, going to bed was often accompanied by the latent fear that the ship might be the victim of a torpedo attack before morning. This was especially true after the Confederate submarine *Hunley* succeeded in sinking the U.S. steam frigate *Housatonic*. Sleep might also be interrupted by reports of a blockade runner entering or leaving a harbor. At such times the ship sprang to life as it pursued or overtook a potential prize.

As the control of the Union Navy over the rivers and coastal waters of the Confederacy increased, the opportunities for appropriate Southern countermeasures decreased. Hopes placed in the submarine *Hunley* or the ironclad *Albemarle* as a means of weakening the blockade were soon dashed. Overseas the famous Confederate cruiser *Alabama* went down in a fight with the Union cruiser *Kearsarge* in June 1864. Time was running out for the Confederate Navy.

For the men of the Union Navy the biggest problem was boredom. Despite daily activities of scrubbing, painting, drilling, target practice, entertainments, and the duties directly related to war, time passed slowly. Changing stations, taking on coal and supplies, entering and leaving harbors all added a bit of novelty to a day. But the men eagerly looked forward to short periods of liberty when their ship was at some Union-controlled port in the South, or was being repaired or overhauled in the North. Any time ashore was an occasion for the pursuit of liquor, women, or both. Men returned from such ventures drunk and often with venereal disease. Fevers and diseases common to the region also took some toll of both Union and Confederate sailors. In battle men could be killed in a horrible fashion by being scalded with steam from shattered engines. Even peaceful steaming on a river could become a hazardous affair when a Confederate sniper opened fire. Shore leave could also be dangerous if a man ventured too far inland or away from Union-held territory. Yet virtually any distraction was a welcome change from the boredom of blockade duty.

Sometimes a man slipped into deep despair over his daily duty. One

naval surgeon called this condition land sickness. Those afflicted with it had a terrible urge to smell the earth and to breathe air far removed from the ocean. Sometimes a change of scene and some days ashore solved the problem, but for others the brief change did no- good. For such men discouragement and despondency led to real illnesses, and they had to be sent home. It was boredom, and all the other aspects of life in the blockading squadrons, that led a former paymaster's clerk to write that "there was no duty performed during the whole war, in either the land or sea service, that was attended with so much toil, exposure and peril as this duty compelled." All the ship-to-ship fighting put together totaled little more than one week of battle out of four years of war. For the Yankee and Rebel seamen it was indeed a war of watch and wait as they sat imprisoned on their ships.

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