



GUNBOATS, MUSKETS, AND TORPEDOES: COASTAL SOUTH CAROLINA, 1861–1865

BY MICHAEL G. LARAMIE

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REVIEW BY LUKE CARPENTER

A valuable contribution to Civil War military operations, Michael G. Laramie's *Gunboats, Muskets, and Torpedoes: Coastal South Carolina, 1861–1865* offers a comprehensive look at military and naval operations studies in the South Carolina littoral. Although it is a companion volume to Laramie's earlier work *Gunboats, Muskets, and Torpedoes: Coastal North Carolina, 1861–1865*, readers can profit from reading either book independently of the other.

Laramie begins with a geographic overview, describing the features of South Carolina's coastal region and its initial Confederate fortification efforts. The first major military operation described is the successful Union expedition against Port Royal in November 1861, in which Port Royal Sound's fortifications fell to U.S. Navy Adm. Samuel F. DuPont's skilled tactics and naval ordnance. This expedition demonstrated the Navy's ability to defeat isolated coastal fortifications and land troops at will along the coast.

Confederate leaders reexamined their defensive plans in the wake of Port Royal's

fall, while Federal forces busied themselves with fashioning their prize into a forward operating base. However, Confederate forces repulsed an ill-conceived attack at Secessionville, just south of Charleston, in June 1862 with heavy losses for Federal troops. This defeat, combined with the failure of U.S. military expeditions against the Savannah-Charleston Railroad, demonstrated that Confederate forces could muster sufficient strength rapidly at threatened points to counter and defeat Federal incursions.

Confederate forces developed more effective systems of coastal fortification with the return of General P. G. T. Beauregard, a military engineer famous for leading the bombardment of Fort Sumter in April 1861. Beauregard embraced a strategy of abandoning exposed fortifications guarding coastal inlets, like the ones defeated at Port Royal, in favor of withdrawing defense forces into the interior along a line protecting the Savannah-Charleston Railroad. This conceded the initiative to Federal forces in choosing the time and place to make landings but also facilitated Confederate use of the railroad to concentrate troops quickly in response to those landings. The soundness of this flexible operational approach was demonstrated repeatedly, particularly at the November 1864 Battle of Honey Hill. Confused and dilatory Federal troop movements after the landings, combined with alert Confederate defense pickets and prompt communications, enabled the rebels to concentrate their troops and repel the U.S. incursion, albeit with substantial losses. This book's central focus is the U.S. Navy's efforts against Charleston. The "Cradle of Secession" invoked strong desires for revenge among Federal leaders and the public. After U.S. forces failed to capture Charleston via the back door at Secessionville, U.S. naval planning shifted focus to the use of a new type of weapon: ironclad warships. Ironclads joined modern naval ordnance with steam power and armor plating in a combination that, to naval leaders, appeared unstoppable. Despite Admiral DuPont's ambivalence regarding the effectiveness of ironclads against coastal fortifications, President Abraham Lincoln and his cabinet ordered DuPont to attack Charleston with an ironclad fleet in a bid to destroy the harbor fortifications, principally Fort Sumter, thereby gaining access to the inner harbor. This would enable the Navy to bombard Charleston directly and end the port's usefulness as a destination for blockade runners.

DuPont's assault failed against Beauregard's well-designed harbor defense. Naval power alone was insufficient. Subsequent Federal operations around Charleston under two new commanders, Gen. Quincy A. Gillmore and Adm. John A. Dahlgren, followed a different method. Gillmore, an exceptional military engineer credited with the reduction of Fort Pulaski outside Savannah, Georgia, in 1862, favored a siege approach to the Charleston problem. Dahlgren, an ambitious naval ordnance expert, was willing to provide whatever assistance the Army needed.

Federal efforts in South Carolina's littoral reached their peak in 1863. The target was Fort Wagner, a sand fortification on one of the barrier islands near Charleston's entrance. Taking Fort Wagner was, in Gillmore's view, the first step in reducing Fort Sumter and then gaining passage to the inner harbor. Two direct assaults by U.S. Army infantry on Fort Wagner failed in spectacular fashion, in spite of the valor of regiments such as the 54th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment, one of the first African American units in the Army. After settling into a siege, Gillmore's persistence and Dahlgren's outstanding naval gunfire support resulted in the fall of Fort Wagner in September 1863. Another failed Federal landing followed, this time by a boat attack against Fort Sumter made by sailors and marines. Dahlgren's blockading fleet suffered heavy personnel losses, reducing its effectiveness. Despite the reduction of Fort Sumter's artillery capabilities by Gillmore's siege artillery in a series of bombardments, it remained useful as an outpost and anchor for protecting underwater obstacles that barred Dahlgren's fleet from the inner harbor for the remainder of the war. Charleston defiantly resisted Federal forces until Sherman's overland invasion of the Carolinas in 1865, which prompted the city's abandonment by Confederate authorities.

Laramie does not ignore the varied naval aspects of the struggle for South Carolina's coast. He argues that concentrated Federal naval strength near Charleston did lead to a substantial drop in the level of blockade-running into and out of the port. However, this traffic reduction was due as much to vessels diverting to ports like Wilmington, North Carolina, as to Federal captures of blockade runners. Laramie also sheds light on torpedo warfare at sea, in terms of mines and spar torpedoes. In combination with

underwater obstacles, mines proved a simple yet effective barrier in denying Dahlgren's fleet access to Charleston's inner harbor. The success of Confederate torpedo rams and submersibles against U.S. Navy warships yielded mixed results, with a single vessel sunk and an ironclad heavily damaged, but both pointed to future possibilities.

Laramie excels at placing naval and military operations in a historical context. Comparing combat during the siege of Fort Wagner to trench warfare in the First World War is an overreach. However, the detailed background Laramie provides on siege theory and methods before the Civil War, especially in the book's extensive glossary, builds a scaffold for the reader to understand how troops conducted siege operations. His analysis of the U.S. Navy blockade's effectiveness is well-argued and backed by solid sources, as is his criticism of promising Confederate naval torpedo operations being undercut and under-resourced in favor of harbor ironclads. Laramie also highlights the role human foibles played in military operations, most notably in the failed boat attack on Fort Sumter, a demonstration of Admiral Dahlgren's ego and desire to reap naval glory trumping sound military planning. The book is not without faults. Inconsistent editing makes for a confusing read at times, with multiple ship or place names spelled differently or changed in the same paragraph. Despite his prominence in the narrative, no picture of Admiral Dahlgren is provided, although other personalities mentioned less frequently are featured in photographs.

Laramie delivers a comprehensive synthesis of Federal and Confederate operations on the South Carolina coast. Efficient use of modified nineteenth-century coastal survey maps enables the reader to follow military operations with ease. Laramie's analysis is judicious in using sources, logic, and a wry understanding of human nature to explain why events unfolded as they did. This book will appeal to readers seeking to deepen or expand their knowledge of Civil War military operations, to military professionals contemplating the complexities of littoral and expeditionary warfare against a far-flung hostile coast, and to theorists and scholars examining interactions between military theory and weapons development.

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