

**THE STORY OF THE  
CONFEDERATE STATES' SHIP  
"VIRGINIA" (ONCE MERRIMAC):  
HER VICTORY OVER THE  
MONITOR**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649012954

The Story of the Confederate States' Ship "Virginia" (once Merrimac): Her Victory Over the Monitor by William Norris

Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilisation of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the permission of the publisher, Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd, PO Box 1576 Collingwood, Victoria 3066 Australia.

All rights reserved.

Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.  
Cover @ 2017

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form or binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

[www.triestepublishing.com](http://www.triestepublishing.com)

**WILLIAM NORRIS**

**THE STORY OF THE  
CONFEDERATE STATES' SHIP  
"VIRGINIA" (ONCE MERRIMAC):  
HER VICTORY  
OVER THE MONITOR**



°

THE STORY

OF THE

Confederate States' Ship "Virginia."

(ONCE MERRIMAC.)

---

HER VICTORY OVER THE MONITOR.

---

BORN MARCH 7th. DIED MAY 10th, 1862.

---

SIC ITER AD ASTRA.

---

BALTIMORE:  
JOHN B. PIET, PRINTER.  
1870.

1

THE STORY  
OF THE  
CONFEDERATE STATES' SHIP "VIRGINIA,"  
(ONCE MERRIMAC.)

---

AN article in the *Army and Navy Journal*, June 13th, entitled *The "Monitor" and the "Merrimac,"* is one of the very choicest specimens yet produced of the Northern mode of manufacturing history. A grand victory is claimed for the "*Monitor*," whereas a more palpable, undeniable defeat shall never have been recorded in naval history. The proofs are being prepared by those who were actors in the drama, who will produce facts and figures, chapter and verse, bearings and distances. In the meantime here is a brief statement (written hastily and from memory), by a Confederate soldier, who, from a *safe position* saw the fight. It is intended only as a light four-pounder rocket; several 200 pound chilled bolts, conical, will follow. We must *now* settle all disputed questions and reach the *facts*, for it is time that the great fight should pass into history.

It remains to be seen whether it would not have been wiser in the Federals to have remained content, with our tacit acquiescence (to our shame be it said), in their brazen claim, as at first slowly and insidiously set up, to a "drawn battle."

And here I would observe that the writer shows the stereotyped Yankee passion for ringing all the changes upon the word "Rebel" and its compounds. Now, we Confederates, often see in print "the foul dishonoring word" (only less offensive than traitorous renegade), and hear it sometimes used in a general collective way, but individually applied, and *viva voce*, we never hear it. Curious!!

And first, a few words as to the *Virginia*. The Federals, previous to their flight from Norfolk, had burnt all the United States

Government vessels; and we, taking from the mud the hulk of the frigate *Merrimac*, built over it a roof of two-inch iron plates, and cleaning up the hull and overhauling the engines, we formally named the new craft "*Virginia*," as we hauled her out of dock, and that model sailor and gentleman, the gallant Buchanan, took command. She was put up in the roughest way; but the fatal defect in her construction was, that the iron shield extended only a few inches below the water-line. A shell or two amidships, between wind and water (she had no knuckle), and her career was closed. She drew 22 feet of water, was in every respect ill-proportioned and top-heavy; and what with her immense length and wretched engines (than which a more ill-contrived, spraddling and unreliable pair were never made,—failing on one occasion while the ship was under fire,) she was little more manageable than a timber-raft.

In his report to Com. Tattnal, April 5th, '62, Chief Engineer Ramsay says: . . . . "The engines gave out yesterday, as I had occasion to report to you, after running only a few hours; and as I cannot insure their working any length of time consecutively, I deem it my duty to make this report. . . . Each time that we have gone down to the Roads I have had to make repairs, which could not have been done aboard ship very well, or, if done at all, would have required a great deal of time."

The quarters for the crew were damp, ill-ventilated and unhealthy; one-third of the men were always on the sick-list, and upon being transferred to the hospital, they would convalesce immediately. She steered *very* badly, and both her rudder and screw were wholly unprotected. Her battery was magnificent, of course, for Catesby Roger Jones had planned and equipped it; and that he had no peer in this branch of his profession (ordnance), I believe that every fair man in the "old navy" will concede.

The day after our return to Norfolk, in reply to the question, addressed individually, to every officer and seaman of each division, they said, to a man, that they were unable to suggest *any*,—the *slightest* alteration, which would increase the efficiency of the battery; not so much as by the twisting, or untwisting of a rope yarn.

After the *Virginia* had annihilated the Federal fleet, and beaten off the *Monitor*, our people, who, outside of naval circles, knew nothing whatever of her construction, expected her to accomplish all manner of impossible absurdities. She was first to take Washington,

then New York, and after raising the blockade of the Southern ports, she was to rival the splendid career of the *Alabama*. The truth was, that the ship was not weatherly enough, to move in Hampton Roads, at all times, with safety, and she never should have been found more than three hours sail from a machine shop. The wildest suggestions were gravely urged upon the Navy Department; but I remember that the *Monitor* was never considered the smallest obstacle to her movements, inland or seaward. We considered *her*, as she proved to be, *hors du combat*.

With this huge, unwieldy make-shift, then, and (so characteristic of Buchanan's *dash*, without the slightest trial or experimental trip for we had only warped her from dock to dock), officered with the very cream of the old navy, and manned by as gallant a crew as ever fought in a good cause—Southern born almost to a man—we steamed out on that beautiful Saturday morning, freighted down to the very guards, with the tearful prayers and hopes of a whole people, heroically struggling against overwhelming odds, to dissolve a hated political partnership, into which they had been inveigled, and which had now become *noisome* and *incestuous*—and fighting to the death, *only* that they might govern their own soil in their own way. Every man and officer well understood the desperate hazards of the approaching fight; the utter feebleness of their ship, and the terrible efficiency of the enemy's magnificent fleet. Most of them had taken, as they supposed, a last farewell of wives, children, friends, and had set in order their worldly affairs. All the lieutenants (Jones excepted) shortly before, and for the first time, had in their respective churches—Protestant and Catholic—publicly partaken of the Holy Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Of the devotedness, of the unselfish, patriotic purity of motive, which now led them, to give their lives to their Country, the Searcher of all hearts know.

She had been so crowded, with mechanics from the yard, that there had been little opportunity to drill or exercise the crew. Up to the very hour of sailing, she had been swarming with workmen, and she was *actually in motion* as the last of them, and the writer jumped ashore. Says Lieutenant Eggleston in a letter, "We thought we were going upon an ordinary trial trip. I know of no other officer except John Taylor Wood, who would have wound up a trial trip as our grand old Hero, Buchanan, did in Hampton Roads that day."



It had just gone three bells, and the vessel having passed the obstructions, Buchanan addressed his crew:—"Sailors:—In a few moments you will have the long expected opportunity for showing your devotion to our cause. Remember that you are about to strike for your country, for your wives, your children, your homes, for the right. Beat to quarters." And now, before fifty minutes have elapsed, we are at Newport News, where lie at anchor the *Cumberland* and *Congress*; hurrying up from Old Point in all "the pride and pomp and circumstance of glorious war," we see the splendid frigates *Minnesota*, and *Roanoke* and *St. Lawrence*. About 3 P.M., we began the fight with a shot from our bow gun; it killed and wounded ten men at the after pivot gun of the *Cumberland*. Our second shot killed and wounded twelve men at her forward pivot gun. Both guns were pointed and fired by Lt. Chas. Simms. We give the *Congress* a broadside as we pass, which was handsomely returned, but the pilot at the wheel has drawn a bead upon the *Cumberland*, and holds her true as the needle for the doomed ship. It is just a little past slack water, and the *Cumberland*, having swung around about three-quarters, is lying slightly athwart the stream and is just about tautening her cable to the young flood. She gives us another splendid broadside as we near her. Relentless as Fate we rush down upon her, and crushing through the barricade of heavy spars (torpedo fenders), we strike below the starboard fore chains and crash far into her hull. The chief engineer, waiting with intense anxiety to reverse the engines, as ordered, could not fix upon the instant of concussion, so slight had been the shock to us.

We back off, and now, the blue waters are rushing in, to fill the cavern, we have made in the beautiful frigate; she reels, and rolls, and staggers, and now the waves engulf her, carrying down that hated flag,—to us, the emblem of so much wrong, and oppression, and sorrow.

Delicious recollection! She was at the bottom within twenty minutes after we struck, and was so gallantly fought, that in *that time*, she did us more damage than all the rest of the Yankee fleet together—*Monitor* included. We head up stream a short distance, in order that we may turn and come down upon the *Congress*. In the hope that we had retired from the unequal fight, there was great Yankee cheering ashore and afloat. It was soon changed to lamentation and flight. Terrified at the fate of their consort, they make

it a case of *saue qui peut*,—did those skedaddling warriors, who with music and banners, had just now come sailing down so proudly to fight us. In their terrified flight, they plump the *Congress* and *Minnesota* ashore, the *Roanoke* and *St. Lawrence* succeed in making their escape. And now we have closed with the *Congress*, deliberately taking position just under her counter. Her flag soon comes down the by run. Two surrender flags are run up, and her officers delivering up their swords, entreat that they may return, to assist in getting their wounded out of the ship. Permission is given by Buchanan, but they *never return*.

In defiance of the usages of war as observed, even among savages, a sharp fire is kept up from the shore batteries, wounding Admiral Buchanan, Lieutenant Minor and five of their own men, now our prisoners. We reply to this outrage with hot shot and incendiary shell, and very soon the *Congress* makes a brilliant bon-fire to illumine the Roads. And now for the *Minnesota*. But just here a precious hour and more is lost through a distressing error on our side; and the pilots, nervous and timid, in the absence of all lights and buoys, insist upon bringing the ship to anchor while yet the daylight lasts. Our anchor is down under Sewell's Point, our ship *unscratched by a pin*, and in the hope that "all's well" with our noble old wounded Captain, the night wears tranquilly away. The fire of the *Cumberland* had killed two men and wounded fourteen, and had also carried away the muzzles of two guns, but we never ceased firing them, and the damage was wholly immaterial.

It was deemed of importance that no vessel of our little fleet should leave the Roads that night, and so, at about dusk, the writer, who had volunteered, took charge of the prisoners from the *Congress*. They were twenty-three (23), of whom five (5) had been badly wounded by the *Yankee fire*. After a long pull against a strong ebb tide, and a very anxious one—the *unencumbered* prisoners numbering eighteen (18), and the *encumbered* boats' crew numbering nine (9)—they were landed before midnight at the Naval Hospital in Norfolk, two of the wounded prisoners (marines) having died in the Signal Corps gig, just before reaching the landing stage.

In the early morning we land our Admiral, sorely stricken, but cheery and game as a lion, and as soon as the barge of the *Patrick Henry* returns from the duty, with our ship in "inspection order," Jones, who has succeeded to the command, gets

under way to finish the *Minnesota*. Next comes the *Patrick Henry* (once *Yorktown*), commanded by Admiral John Randolph Tucker, our Princely sailor Knight, "so stuffed with all honorable virtues," and next in the *Jamestown* comes our own gallant Barney, Baltimore born; and hovering about us are our dashing little mosquito fleet, under Webb, and Parker, and Alexander. We soon descry a strange-looking iron tower sliding over the waters towards us, but it bears a hated flag, and we dash at it. It is the *Monitor*, which, during the previous night, had come in from sea, and which, by the light of the burning *Congress*, had been seen and reported by one of our pilots. In the strong, Anglo-Saxon which all good pilots affect, he remarked to a midshipman of the watch, "There goes that d—d Ericsson," which we knew all about from *Yauke* newspapers.

She had been in momentary danger of foundering during the twenty-four hours passage from Sandy Hook to Cape Henry, and in in ordinary reef topsail breeze.

And now the great fight has begun, and Commodore Parker's account of it is substantially correct and fair. It will be remembered that this was the first engagement of iron-clads in the World's History. During the Crimean War two or three French ships had been partially shod with iron, but they were never brought into action, and the experiment had as yet, therefore, yielded no practical results. Old things had passed away, and in an instant, as it were, the experiences of "a thousand years of battle and of breeze" were brought all to naught—its lessons to be unlearned and forgotten. In a new volume and upon a virgin page was the art of naval warfare being recorded.

Nearly two hours have passed, and many a shell and shot have been exchanged at close quarters, with no perceptible damage to either. The *Virginia* is discouragingly cumbrous and unwieldy. To wind her for her broadside fire, each fire, fifteen minutes are lost; while, during all this time, the *Monitor* is whirling around and about like a top, and by the easy working of her turret, and her precise and rapid movement, elicits the wonder and admiration of all. The ships passed and re-passed very near each other; frequently we delivered our broadside at the distance of only a few yards, and with no greater perceptible effect than if we had thrown marbles at her.