THE NAVY IN THE CIVIL WAR

WEEK TOPIC

1 The U.S. Navy in 1861. Response to the war and institution of the blockade
The U.S. Navy had only 90 vessels of all types in 1861, most were laid up in ordinary and
would take months to make them ready for sea duty. Lincoln’s Secretary of the Navy
Gideon Wells, set up a planning board to come up with a plan to utilize the Navy in
support of crushing the rebellion. Adopting Gen. Scott’s Anaconda Plan, the Navy
established blockade zones to close down southern shipping. The Navy lacked the ships
and men to close off all southern ports in 1861.

2 Naval commanders, DuPont, Farragut, Porter, Dahlgren.
The U.S. Navy was blessed with a set of experienced senior officers who were capable
and would command the U.S. blockading fleets. This session is a series of brief
biographical sketches of Admirals DuPont, Dahlgren, Farragut, Goldsborough and David
D. Porter

3 Combined Operations I: the Port Royal Expedition and the North Carolina expedition
1862.
The first successful combined Army-Navy operation in the Civil War was the reduction
of the South Carolina barrier island forts by Naval bombardment and the seizure of Port
Royal Sound as a coaling station for the south Atlantic Blockading squadron. DuPont
followed up this victory with a bloodless seizure of Fernandina as another advanced base.
The third successful expedition led by Brig. Gen. Burnside and Flag Officer
Goldsborough assaulted Roanoke Island, then took Ft. Macon and proceeded up the
Neuse River to New Bern where the Navy supported Burnsides’ forces against the
Confederate Army.

4 New Naval technology: long range cannon, ironclads
The Civil War was the occasion of great technical changes in the U.S. Navy. John A
Dahlgren invented a long range rifled cannon, the Dahlgren gun that replaced old-
fashioned broadside cannon on most Navy ships. U.S. shipyards built ironclad warships
that were of two types: the monitor, low freeboard vessel with revolving turret and
ironclad steamships modeled after the French laGliore with traditional broadside
batteries, e.g., U.S.S. New Ironsides. James Eads of St. Louis produced a third variety of
ironclads, converted shallow draft river boats shielded by light armor. Eads fleet was
assigned to clear the Mississippi.
The first combat test for ironclad ships occurred in March, 1862. The C.S.S. Virginia, a Confederate broadside ironclad steamed out of Norfolk and attacked the Union blockading fleet on the James River, sinking the Congress and running the Minnesota aground. The U.S.S. Monitor was towed from New York to Hampton Roads to engage the Virginia. The epoch battle of ironclads in Hampton Roads showed that wooden ships were obsolete.

Opening the Mississippi I. Capturing New Orleans and Island 10
Adm. Farragut commanded the naval vessels that successfully ran the batteries of Confederate Fts. Jackson and St. Philip and seize New Orleans without Army help. Meanwhile, the Eads gunboats commanded by Flag Officer Foote bombarded Island Ten in the Mississippi driving off the Confederate garrison.

Opening the Mississippi II For Henry & Fort Donelson
In February 1862, Flag Officer Foote supported the U.S. Army commanded by Brig. Gen. U.S. Grant. Grant seized Ft. Henry on the Tennessee River after Naval bombardment drove Confederate gun crews out of their fortifications. Grant marched overland to besiege Ft. Donelson on the Cumberland. Foote’s gunboats were unable to silence Confederate batteries at Ft. Donelson, Foote’s vessels were badly damages and withdrew.

The Blockade and blockade runners
The U.S. blockade frustrated ordinary trade between the Confederate States and Europe, but did not prevent Confederate captains from taking shiploads of cotton out of Wilmington, Mobile and other ports in fast steamers. These same vessels returned with cargoes of munitions, medicine and expensive consumer goods. The blockade runner was a specially designed sleek steamer capable of outrunning most U.S. Navy vessels. The Navy tried to shut off the blockade runners without great success.

The Confederate States had its own navy. Rather than attempt to buy warships, the Confederate agents in England and France bought fast commercial steamers and armed them with a polyglot of British and French naval cannon. Their mission: to prey on U.S. commercial shipping. The most successful raiders were the Florida, Alabama and Shenandoah.

Combined Operations: Mobile Bay
Adm. Farragut led a naval task force that successfully ran the forts at the mouth of Mobile Bay in support of Maj. Gen. E.R.S. Canby’s army assigned the mission of seizing Mobile. Mobile Bay was defended by the C.S.S. Tennessee and a mine field that the U.S. S. Tecumsha, a monitor hit a mine and sank in 2 minutes. Farragut sent his wooden
warships through the same minefield. His ironclads and his river gunboats attacked C.S.S. Tennessee and drove her ashore. The Navy stayed in Mobile Bay to cooperate with Gen. Canby’s army.

11 Combined Operations: Fort Fisher. The entrance to the port of Wilmington was guarded by the most massive Confederate fort erected during the war. Fort Fisher employed a construction system that made the fort’s gun positions gigantic sandbags that absorbed cannon balls and detonated shells harmlessly. After the closure of Mobile Bay, Wilmington became the most important Confederate seaport. In December, 1864 General Grant ordered Maj. Gen. Benjamin Butler to provide an expeditionary force to seize the fort, supported by the Navy. Admiral David D. Porter commanded the largest amphibious fleet of the Civil War. Porter and Butler contrived to send a ship loaded with gunpowder close in to the sea face of the fort and explode the ship, hoping to wreck the fort. The ship grounded too far to sea. When it blew up, the blast did not damage the fort. Butler’s expeditionary force was landed, then withdrawn because Butler thought Ft. Fisher too strong to be captured by assault. Butler was relieved and Gen Alfred Terry commanded the second expedition which captured the fort after prolonged bombardment and a suicidal rush by sailors on the northeast bastion.