

Saturday, March 8, 1862, was an abysmal day for the Federal navy as the iron-plated Confederate vessel, christened the *Virginia* but better known as the *Merrimack*, threatened to destroy the entire Union fleet at Hampton Roads, Virginia. On this day the 3200-ton *Merrimack* chugged slowly toward the awaiting Federal ships. One Federal officer observed that the oncoming ship “looked like the roof of a very big barn belching forth smoke as from a chimney on fire.” In the melee that followed two Federal ships were grounded and a third, the *Cumberland*, foolishly stood its ground to take on the Rebel vessel. It was a serious mistake. The *Merrimack* fired her 7-inch bow gun, the shell wounding several of the *Cumberland*'s men. Her second shell exploded among a forward gun crew, killing everyone except the powder boy and the gun captain, who lost both arms at the shoulder. Another shell sheared off both legs of a Union sailor. The mortally injured man painfully made his way to a cannon on bloody stumps and fired a blast before he fell back dead from his wounds. A surgeon aboard the *Cumberland* described the terrible ordeal. “The sanded deck is red and slippery with blood and wounded and the dying...Delirium seizes the crew; they strip to their trousers; tie handkerchiefs around their heads, kick off their shoes; fight and yell like demons.”

The *Cumberland* valiantly fought back, but her shells merely glanced off the *Merrimack* whose crew had greased the sloped sides with hot pork fat. The *Cumberland*'s projectiles had no more effect, wrote a newspaper correspondent watching from shore, than “peas from a popgun.” The *Merrimack* finally built up enough speed to employ its 1500-pound cast-iron ram attached to the prow. “She looked like a huge half-submerged crocodile,” reported the *Cumberland*'s pilot, A. B. Smith. “At her prow, I could see the iron ram. It was impossible for our vessel to get out of the way.” A huge hole, “wide enough to drive in a horse and cart,” remembered Confederate Lieutenant John Taylor Wood, was ripped in the *Cumberland* near the waterline. The doomed ship listed badly toward starboard and slowly began to sink with the iron ram, which had broken free from the *Merrimack*, attached to it. Suddenly the *Cumberland* plunged downward with the hull hitting the bottom 54-feet below. Of the 376 crew members aboard, 121 perished. “No ship,” stated Lt. Wood, “had ever fought more gallantly.”

Citizens and politicians of the North were stunned and frightened. “The *Merrimack* will change the whole character of the war,” stated an outraged Secretary of War Edwin Stanton. “She will destroy...every vessel; she will lay all the cities on the seaboard under contribution.” Gazing out the window at the Potomac, he declared, “Not unlikely, we shall have a shell or cannon ball from one of her guns in the White House before we leave this room.” Afterward Stanton wired telegrams to the governors of seacoast states: “MAN YOUR GUNS. BLOCK YOUR HARBORS. THE *MERRIMACK* IS COMING.”

The next morning the *Merrimack* returned to finish the previous day's kill, but this time a new foe had arrived. A bizarre looking vessel appeared in the distance. A Confederate observer, approaching in a rowboat, later penned: “No words can express the surprise with which we beheld this strange craft, whose appearance was tersely and graphically described by the exclamation of one of my oarsmen, ‘A tin can on a shingle!’ ”

This month—**MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 29**—Larry Hathcock will present “The Battle of Hampton Roads: *USS Monitor* and *CSS Virginia*.” Larry, a longtime member of the MRRT, is a retired elementary school teacher in the Holly area. He spent six years in the Naval Reserve with half of those on active duty with the U.S. Navy. He was the American Legion “Teacher of the Year” in 1999, and in 1996, Larry was one of two teachers selected from Michigan to go on a “turn around” cruise aboard the *USS Constitution* in Boston Harbor. Mark your calendars; this should be a good one!

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The Michigan Regimental expresses its thanks to last month's speaker, Jim Epperson, for his provocative talk, "The Battle of the Wilderness, May 5-6, 1864."

FALL FIELD TRIP:

With no scheduled meeting in October, this month will be our last get together before the trip. It is EXTREMELY CRITICAL that all money be paid by this meeting. We still have two who signed up for the trip that haven't paid the \$65 bus fees. Another seven have not submitted their dinner money (\$40 or \$25 for vegetarians). Please have your checks made out to Carroll Tietz or Jerry Maxwell. (But give them to Jerry.) Because some folks have chosen to drop out, we still have room on the bus for a few more. Just let the Trip Chairman know of your interest. It has all the makings of an outstanding trip.

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QUIZ: All questions pertain to the navies.....

1. Which Confederate oceanographer and navigator was known as the "Pathfinder of the Seas"? And, which former Confederate general originated the use of land mines and was later placed in charge of the Torpedo Bureau?
2. Whose flotilla ably assisted U.S. Grant's capture of Fort Henry on February 6, 1862? And, which rear admiral had a distinguished naval officer and diplomat father, a brother who was a Commodore, an adopted brother who was an admiral, and a famous cousin who was a general?
3. Which U.S. vessel, named for President James Buchanan's niece who served as his White House hostess, was captured at Galveston, Texas on January 1, 1863? And, which 2 English-made vessels were built to destroy the U.S. blockade, but were never used by the Confederacy?
4. Which 2 British-held areas of the Caribbean were the major centers of Confederate blockade-running?
5. Which Union naval officer led an expedition that destroyed the powerful Confederate ram, *Albatross*? [Hint: his older brother was a famous artilleryman killed at Gettysburg.] And, which Union naval officer invented a standard weapon of Civil War navies and later headed the Bureau of Ordnance? [Hint: his son was killed in a failed raid on Richmond.]
6. On April 20, 1861, the Federals abandoned the principal port of Virginia while burning and scuttling several ships. Name the town and the Navy Yard which quickly fell into Confederate hands.
7. While lashed to the rigging of his flagship, Admiral David Farragut shouted his immortal words: "Damn the torpedoes! Full speed ahead!" Name his flagship and where this famous episode occurred.
8. Which U.S. gunboat played a significant role in the fighting at Belmont, Missouri, Fort Henry, Island No. 10, and Shiloh? And, what were the 7 Federal ironclad gunboats—*Cairo*, *Carondelet*, *Cincinnati*, *Louisville*, *Mound City*, *Pittsburg*, and *St. Louis*—collectively called? [Hint: they were named as a group for their designer.]
9. What do the vessels—*USS Alligator*, *USS Intelligent Whale*, *CSS Pioneer*, *CSS Pioneer II*, and *St. Patrick*—have in common? And, what do the ships—*Henry Adams*, *Olive Branch*, and *Pauline Carroll*—have in common?
10. Which U.S. naval battle was fought on July 16, 1863, in Japan? And, which U.S. ship was commanded by officer David S. McDougal in this battle?

Some "Did You Knows" about the *Monitor* and *Merrimack*:

The most damaging shot fired by the *Merrimack* came at a distance of 10 yards with the shell exploding on the forward side of the *Monitor*'s pilot house. Inside John Worden, commanding the *Monitor*, peered out of a 5/8-inch slit when the projectile struck. He staggered backward, temporarily blinded in his right eye and permanently in his left, with half of his face forever blackened. Worden survived, but Norwegian-born Peter Williams, assigned to the pilot house as a wheelsman, remained at his station and professionally steered the ship. For his act Williams was awarded the nation's first Medal of Honor.

When the Captain of the *Merrimack*, Franklin Buchanan, was wounded in the leg by a rifle shot on March 8, he turned his command of the vessel over to Catesby Roger Jones. Officer Jones handled his duties amazingly well. After the war Jones formed a business partnership with two former naval associates in which they purchased military supplies in the U.S. and sold them to foreign governments. Jones died on June 20, 1877, at age 56, after being shot by a Selma neighbor over a quarrel between two of their children.

During the summer of 1862, the engineering officer aboard the *Monitor* recorded temperatures as high as 128 degrees in the engine room, 164 degrees in the galley, and 120 degrees on the berth deck. Poor ventilation and oppressive heat below deck often forced the men to cook, eat, and relax on the main deck.

The low free-board design of the *Monitors* made them unseaworthy during operations, and the continual rolling and pitching of these small ships caused even the most veteran sailors to fall victim to seasickness. In March, 1862, during the *Monitor's* maiden voyage from New York City to Hampton Roads, most of the crew, including the commanding officer, became seasick. To make matters worse, seawater that had leaked through the turret packing soaked the poor sailors' hammocks hanging directly below the turret on the berth deck.

Because of the *Monitor's* small confines, it had no habitable compartment for use as a brig. While other vessels of its size placed offenders in double irons and then tossed them into the pitch-black coal bunkers, the *Monitor* used the damp confines of the chain locker. One evening, the steward aboard the *Monitor* had too much to drink before serving the officers their supper. To make matters worse, the officers had a distinguished guest aboard for the evening meal. The steward performed badly during the meal and as a result found himself in double irons and locked in the chain locker as his punishment. On another evening, while being escorted below decks in double irons, a drunken sailor jumped overboard and drowned. The navy found his lifeless body three days later and gave the deceased seaman a proper burial ashore.

Coffee was a favorite drink aboard ship, although one sailor admitted: "One thing I never got used to...was finding cockroaches in my coffee, although after picking a few out of my tin cup I would manage to worry the liquid down." The sailor's preferred beverage aboard ship was his daily grog ration. During the epic naval engagement between the *Monitor* and the *Merrimack*, Lt. John Worden ordered the paymaster to issue half a gill (two ounces) of whiskey to the crew.

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QUIZ ANSWERS:

1. Matthew Fontaine Maury and Gabriel James Rains
2. Andrew Hull Foote and David Dixon Porter
3. *USS Harriet Lane* and Laird Rams
4. Nassau and Bermuda
5. William Barker Cushing and John Dahlgren
6. Norfolk and Gosport Navy Yard
7. *USS Hartford* and Mobile Bay
8. *USS Lexington* and "Pook Turtles," named after designer, Samuel M. Pook
9. All were submarines and with the *Sultana*, all transported Federal exchangees up the Mississippi at war's end
10. Battle of Shimonoseki and *USS Wyoming*

Plan on being at the Farmington Public Library on **MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 29** for "The Battle of Hampton Roads: *USS Monitor* and *CSS Virginia*," as presented by Larry Hathcock. The Library is located at Grand River and Farmington Road. Meeting time is 6:30 P.M. Come early and enjoy the fellowship.

Try our website: <http://www.farmlib.org/mrrt/>.