

THE MONITOR – HISTORY AND REBIRTH

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For more than a century, no one knew the precise location of USS MONITOR. Even after the wreck site was located in 1973, few, except some intrepid divers, seriously expected to ever see the most famous warship of the Civil War. However, in just over six months, large sections of the ironclad and more than a thousand other MONITOR artifacts will be on display at the at Mariners' Museum in Newport News, Virginia.

Following the attack on Fort Sumter, President Lincoln declared a naval blockade of the Confederate states. Inasmuch as the South had no pre-existing navy to counter this move, the Confederacy rested its hopes of breaking the blockade on the emerging technology of ironclad warships. The remains of the steam frigate USS MERRIMACK became the focus of their attention. MERRIMACK, commissioned in 1856, had served in the Pacific, but she had been decommissioned in 1860 and placed in reserve at the navy yard in Norfolk, Virginia. During the crisis preceding Lincoln's inauguration, the Navy struggled to get her ready for sea but secessionists sank boats in the shipping channel blocking her escape route. Rather than let her fall into rebel hands, the Navy burnt MERRIMACK to the waterline and sank her. However, after

the Confederates captured the yard, they recognized that MERRIMACK was not a complete loss and salvaged the remains. The ship was then rebuilt as an ironclad ram according to a design prepared by Lt. J. M. Brooke, CSN, and commissioned as CSS VIRGINIA on 17 February 1862.

Word of the work on the VIRGINIA traveled north and the federal government established an Ironclads Board to oversee the development of ships to counter the VIRGINIA. One of the designs they approved was John Ericsson's innovative proposal for an ironclad he suggested calling "USS MONITOR" because it would "instruct" the South and her British sympathizers. The ship would be comparatively small - - only 173 feet long, with a beam of 41 feet and a tonnage of 987. However, rather than have rows of guns along the sides of the ship, the MONITOR's entire armament of two 11 inch smoothbore Dalgren guns would be housed in a revolving turret, allowing the ship to fire in any direction without changing course. In addition, the ship would have a very low freeboard - - in fact, the water would wash across her deck - - thus presenting a very difficult target for conventional ships. She would also utilize Ericson's design for a screw propeller. Because speed was of the essence, various parts

of the MONITOR were manufactured by different companies in what is now New York City. She was commissioned on 25 February 1862 and two days later left for Virginia. However, a steering failure forced her to return to New York. On 6 March, she again departed for Virginia, this time under tow.

MONITOR's departure was almost too late. On 8 March, VIRGINIA and a squadron of smaller ships left Norfolk to attack the blockading squadron of wooden ships at Hampton Roads. VIRGINIA sank USS CUMBERLAND by ramming her, sank USS CONGRESS with gunfire, and drove USS MINNESOTA aground. Most of the Federal shells bounced harmlessly off VIRGINIA. However, she did sustain damage to her ram, her smokestack and to two guns. Accordingly, as darkness fell, the Confederates broke off the engagement and returned to port.

The crew of USS MONITOR could hear the gunfire as they approached Hampton Roads but the Confederates had already left when the northern ironclad arrived. Lt. John Worden, USN, positioned his ship near MINNESOTA. As a result, when VIRGINIA and her consorts came the next day to finish off MINNESOTA, MONITOR emerged from her shadow and began a four-hour duel with the Confederate ironclad. Neither ship could damage the other and the battle ended in a tactical draw. However, since VIRGINIA's mission had been to lift the blockade, the MONITOR had achieved a strategic victory.

Subsequent to the Battle of Hampton Roads, MONITOR and the ironclads GALENA and NAUGATUCK participated in the Union Army's advance up the James River toward

Richmond. However, Confederate forces were able to stop them at Drury's Bluff with obstructions and cannon fire that heavily damaged GALENA. After the Confederate victory in the Seven Days, the ironclads covered the Union retreat back down the peninsula. MONITOR then took up blockade duty at Hampton Roads.

On Christmas Eve, MONITOR was ordered to proceed under tow to North Carolina for operations against Wilmington. Off of Cape Hatteras, the ships encountered a storm. With her low freeboard and shallow draft, MONITOR did not have very good seakeeping abilities and began to founder. Some of the crew were able to make it to USS RHODE ISLAND but those who chose to stay went down with the ship.

For more than a century, the exact location of the wreck was unknown. However, in 1973, scientists testing the application of geological survey equipment for underwater archaeological surveys pinpointed the site as being 16 miles off Cape Hatteras in 230 feet of water. In order to protect the wreck, the site was declared a national marine sanctuary under the protection of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's ("NOAA") management in 1975.

While the wreck now had legal protection, it did not have protection from the elements. Indeed, divers found that the wreck was rapidly deteriorating. It was not economically feasible to salvage the entire ship. Accordingly, a series of expeditions were conducted to bring portions of the ship to the surface. The most ambitious of these took place in the summer of 2002 involving some 300 Navy divers. The objective was to recover the ship's turret. This was no easy task as the ship had flipped over in

her descent to the bottom and the turret lay under a portion of the hull. In addition, the turret, made of eight one-inch layers of iron sheeting, weighed over 120 tons. Moreover, the Dalgren guns, debris, sediment, and even some human remains were inside. Because of the depth of the wreck, divers had to live in a deep saturation chamber onboard the recovery barge that maintained the same pressure as the wreck site. Nor did the stormy waters off of Hatteras cooperate.

The sections of the ship that were recovered and thousands of artifacts were brought to the Mariners' Museum, which has been designated by NOAA as the Principal Museum for the Monitor National Marine Sanctuary. Special tanks were built at the Museum to house the turret and various other recovered items in order to leach out the salt that had permeated them during a century in the ocean. In addition, a \$30 million USS Monitor Center is being constructed in order to display the collection, which includes the turret, the guns, the steam engine, a section of the propeller, and more than a thousand other items. Also included in the exhibits will be a full size replica of the ship. While visitors can arrange for a tour of the construction site and see some of the recovered items today, the Center will open to the public on 9 March 2007. Information on donations is available at www.monitorcenter.org.