

# BATTLE OF IRONCLADS

**The Battle of Hampton Roads March 8 and 9, 1862**

*By Marcus W. Robbins, Norfolk Naval Shipyard Historian*

*As the spring of March 1862 approached the nation had been at civil war within itself for almost a year. No place held more strategic importance in eastern Virginia's theater of war than the harbor known as Hampton Roads.*

This vast natural deep water harbor receives the rivers Nansemond, James and Elizabeth before exiting into the Chesapeake Bay and afforded miles of shoreline for each side to establish defenses. Both the Northern Federal and Southern Confederate forces realized that control of this waterway would be vital to their individual cause.

The Federal forces occupied Newport News Point with a heavily reinforced Camp Butler, the man-made Rip Rap island found at the channel entrance otherwise known as Fort Wool which gave the Union forces a great forward observation point. Most importantly, Fortress Monroe functioned as a secure base for both land and sea operations.

On the southern shores of the Hampton Roads harbor, the Confederate forces established reinforcements at Pig Point, Craney Island and Sewell's Point. Also they held control of their grand prize of

the war that was abandoned by the Union burning of April 1861, found by sailing 10 miles down the Southern Branch of the Elizabeth: the Gosport Navy Yard.

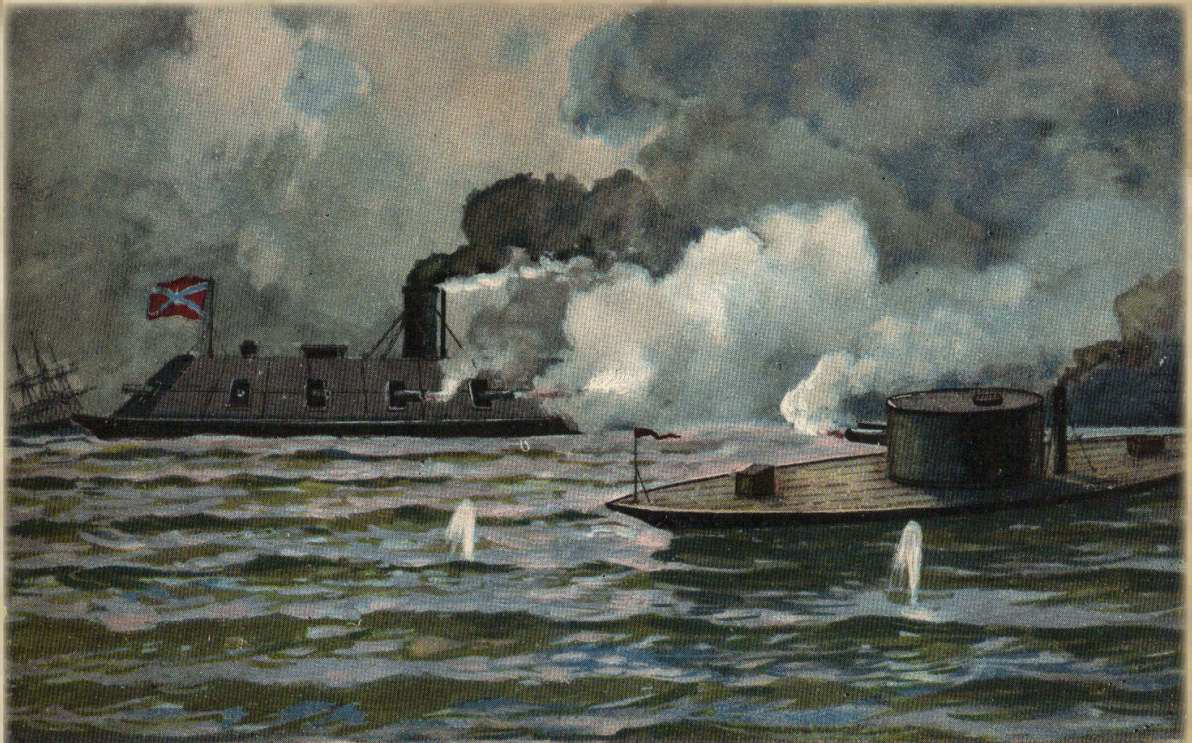
Sides had been drawn, the center harbor cleared and in a matter of time the contestants would appear to do battle.

The South, lacking material resources and a robust industrial base, had raised and converted the burnt hulk of the steam frigate USS *Merrimac*. Torched and sunk by the Union abandonment at Gosport, the new ironclad Confederate States Ship, CSS *Virginia*, was commissioned in about nine months, yet it was still incomplete at time of sailing. Although not ideal, the South was forced to use what it could. To support the goal of survival by holding both Norfolk and Portsmouth--and ultimately Richmond--the South needed control of Hampton Roads and to break the Union blockade.

*Virginia* drew a great depth of water which would restrict operations and also required much room to



*Monitor  
Commander  
Lt. Worden*



*Merrimac and Monitor Duel. First battle of Ironclads. Hampton Roads 1862.*



turn and maneuver by the very size of the hull. Given marginal performance of the steam engines, *Virginia* made up for any shortcomings by way of firepower between two seven-inch Brooke rifled guns, six nine-inch Dahlgren smoothbores and two 6.4-inch Brooke rifled pivot guns. It sailed with a casemate of two alternating layers of bolted two-inch iron bars over a 24-inch wooden backing all configured at a 35-degree angle in order to best deflect shot. *Virginia* also had an iron ram mounted to the bow, a feature that would be soon tested with much success against wood.

On the morning of March 8, 1862, *Virginia* slipped away from Gosport and sailed into history. Flag Officer Franklin Buchanan commanded his flagship against the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron consisting of the USS *Roanoke*, USS *Minnesota*, USS *Congress* and USS *Cumberland* which had escaped certain destruction the year prior by being towed away from Gosport as the inferno began under the Union match.

With certain direct maneuver, Buchanan set his target upon *Cumberland* with a goal of sinking by a massive broadside hit of the ram. It has been said that the resulting impact was wide enough to let in a horse and a cart. Still yet, *Cumberland* and *Virginia* exchanged fire as she sank, her flag still flying with honor.

Next *Virginia* turned attention back to *Congress* which up to this point had only received some passing shots and continued to pour shot upon the ship until the white flag was raised. *Virginia* ceased fire so the smaller vessels of the Confederate James River fleet could approach *Congress* to remove the surviving officers as prisoners before burning the ship. The Newport News shore batteries would have nothing to do with the surrender and began to fire a hail of



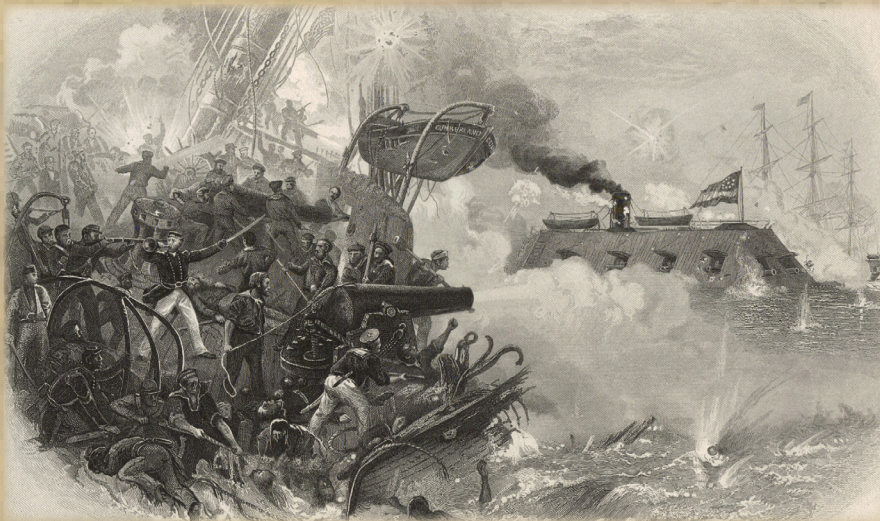
Catesby ap C. Jones, shown here visiting Mariners Museum, is great-grandson of Catesby R. Jones, Commander of CSS *Virginia* that fought USS *Monitor* (photo by William E. Lockridge)

bullets from the shore. It was at this time that Commander Buchanan was hit by rifle shot in the leg and was taken out of action. Buchanan's last order was to heat shells and send hot shot into *Congress* until the ship was burned. Shortly after midnight the *Congress* exploded and ceased to exist as the ruins slipped into the deep.

Lieutenant Catesby ap R. Jones, *Virginia*'s Executive Officer now found himself in command. With falling tide, proper attention could not be made to the USS *Minnesota* so Jones took up anchor under the guns of Sewell's Point for the night. March 8, 1862 is recognized as the demise for the age of sail and wooden vessels against an ironclad; the Union fleet suffered terrible losses.

On the morning of March 9, 1862, naval warfare would be changed forever, for it would now be ironclad against ironclad on the second day of the Battle of Hampton Roads.

As the fog burnt away on Sunday morning something strange was seen alongside of the *Minnesota*. Described as a cheese box on a raft, it was the USS *Monitor*, the invention of Swedish designer, John Ericsson. The ship had made the voyage from the Brooklyn Navy Yard



The sinking of *Cumberland*

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leaving Thursday at 11 a.m. and entered into Hampton Roads at 9 p.m. Saturday evening in time to witness *Congress* on fire.

*Monitor* was an experimental first of its kind vessel, featuring a round rotating turret that was covered by eight inches of rolled iron plate. Inside the turret were two 11-inch Dahlgren cannon that could be trained in any direction by rotation of the turret. Given the shallow draft required and it being somewhat shorter in length, *Monitor* had greater maneuverability than *Virginia* in Hampton Roads.

Lieutenant Worden was Commander of the *Monitor* from her commissioning till the time of his wounding as the result of a direct hit while he was peering out the observation slit in the pilot house near the close of the battle that Sunday afternoon.

Much has been written pertaining to the first ever battle between two iron-clad vessels, but in summary after four hours it was

a tactical draw, a stalemate. There was no loss of life or damage to either ship and although worse for the battle, the *Minnesota* was saved and the Federal blockade remained. Each side claimed its own victory.

For us today, we can observe actual various artifacts from the ships involved in the Battle of Hampton Roads. Various relics from the CSS *Virginia*, USS *Monitor*, USS *Congress* and USS *Cumberland* are on display at various local museums and parks in eastern Virginia.

One only needs to travel on either of the two bridge tunnel complexes that cross the Hampton Roads harbor and consider that they act as a natural picture frame



(Above) 32 pounder 6" solid shot from the Hampton Roads harbor, circa 1862 (author's collection)



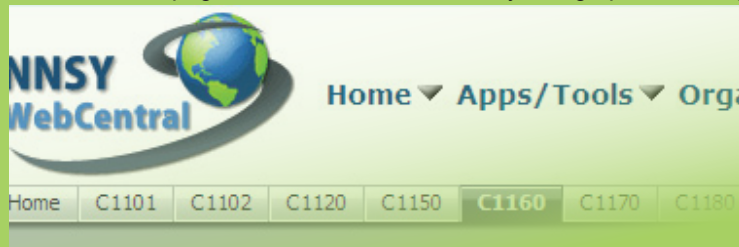
(Right) Rifle minié balls from the Hampton Roads harbor, circa 1862 (author's collection)

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