

## **Duel of the Ironclads**

**<http://civilwar150.longwood.edu>**

As the winter of 1861-1862 began to wane, the armies in the Eastern theatre began to ready themselves for major action as the weather began to warm and muddy roads to dry up. The navies, however, were already busy. The second of week would see the most memorable naval engagement of the entire war. On March 9, the C.S.S. *Virginia* and the U.S.S. *Monitor* would fight the first battle of ironclad boats.

After Virginia had passed its ordinance of secession in the spring of 1861, the Union Navy had blockaded the state's main waterways including the Hampton Roads area where the James River meets the Chesapeake Bay. Union forces had abandoned the southern side of Hampton Roads, and in fact had left Norfolk and the sizeable navy yard at Portsmouth fairly intact. The Union controlled the northern side of the water, from Fortress Monroe to Newport News.

The *Virginia* had come about due to the vision of Confederate Secretary of Navy Stephen Mallory. He believed that the secret to Confederate naval success would come from making a small number of ships essentially indestructible. This would be the only way, in his mind, to offset the far superior number of ships in the Union navy. He believed that by covering ships with armor plating, that a small navy would break through the blockade. Such ships would require strong engines, and these would take time to create in Richmond's Tredegar Iron Works. In the meantime, Mallory suggested that they use the remnants of the USS Merrimack, left by the Union navy in the Norfolk's Elizabeth River after being burned to the waterline by the retreating forces. Her engines were still good, however, and the Confederates went to work plating her.

Word of this Confederate idea reached the north, and the Union went to work on their own ironclad boat. Theirs was built from scratch in Brooklyn from a design by inventor John Ericsson and named the *Monitor*.

On March 8, the *Virginia* went into action against a number of wooden naval ships docked off of Newport News. Though equipped with gun ports, the *Virginia's* metal ram proved more effective at first. While Union shots bounced off her hull, she rammed the USS *Cumberland* which sunk immediately. She almost took the *Virginia* down with her as the ram was stuck in the sinking ship, but broke off, freeing the southern ship. The commander of the *Virginia*, Captain Franklin Buchanan, then set his sights on the USS *Congress* and despite fire from batteries on shore was able to destroy the *Congress*, its powder magazine exploding.

The USS *Minnesota* had now entered the fray but darkness prevented the *Virginia* from engaging her. Though the iron plating proved generally effective, the *Virginia* limped back to Norfolk for the night for repairs. At dawn on March 9, *Virginia* took back to the water to finish off the *Minnesota* only to find the newly arrived *Monitor* blocking her way. *Virginia* took the first shot, missing the *Monitor* but hitting the *Minnesota* and the two ironclads went to battle. Unfortunately, neither was prepared to defeat another ironclad. The *Virginia*, expecting to meet only wooden ships, was armed with only solid shot and not armor-piercing shells. The *Monitor* had insufficient powder charges to penetrate the *Virginia's* armor. The battle that would begin a new form of naval warfare ended in stalemate, though both sides would later claim victory. The two ships would not fight again, the *Virginia* destroyed by the Confederates when they abandoned the Portsmouth navy yard two months later. The *Monitor* would sink later in the year while being towed to take part in the blockade off North Carolina.

While this naval battle was the most memorable event of this week, there was also an important land battle at Pea Ridge, Arkansas. The Union victory there gave the North control of Missouri and northern Arkansas for the remainder of the war.