

## “Lincoln Sinks the Merrimac”

From the article, “Lincoln and the Navy”, by Craig L. Symonds

When my oldest son was a boy, he received a book about the designer-engineer of the Monitor. I mention this personal story because the subject has some relation to the Merrimack (or CSS Virginia) – as both were the first iron ships of the Civil War. As a brief on this memory, the engineer was Swedish-born John Ericsson; he had “black-balled” from business with the U.S. Navy because of being falsely accused for the explosion of a cannon some years prior; but with the advent of war – and maybe more like the introduction of the Merrimac – the interest in “his services – was re-invigorated. Much could be added to the description of the vessel but, to get to the battle and Lincoln, I’ll turn *her into the wind*.



Only two months prior, the Merrimac and Monitor had clashed in Hampton Roads. Still lurking in the area, the Confederate ironclad represented a threat to federal activity in the area and, most notably, Fort Monroe. Consider the circumstances of the war at this time and, despite obvious advantage, the lack of progress and victory for the Federals. As part of the advantage, the Federal Navy was strangulating the south with its blockade; but as a possible threat, the ironclad had made its presence known.

Traveling with several members of his staff, Lincoln was entering the “war zone” to prod his commander, McClellan, into action. The objective was to light a fire under the Federal army of the Potomac; but as Lincoln would discover, the spirits had been dampened by the lack of direction by the corps. The reservations at the top had spread to the rank-and-file.

After a tour of the Monitor, the President prepared for some ship to shore bombardment that afternoon. In this engagement was also a second encounter of ironclads – though cut short by the surprising withdrawal of the Merrimac. Clearing the way for further bombardment of nearby Confederate batteries then enabled the plan for a landing on Norfolk – the port city of the Merrimac and other vessels. What the Federals would find was that the defense and fortifications at Norfolk had been abandoned –leading to a unchallenged capture. Culminated by the mayor’s ceremonial surrender, Norfolk was now in the hands of the Federals...and the Merrimac had no where to port.

Along with infantry, the Merrimac had taken flight when the Naval engagement and landing underway. Because of a 19 foot draft, the ironclad could not traverse the

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James River in route to Richmond; beached or immovable, the vessel was scuttled by the captain – rather than abandoned as bounty for the Federal navy.

Would the attack (or landing) have occurred if the President had not come? To depend on the media at the time would be to conclude that not only would it have not occurred but, in that it did occur, Lincoln (and his adjoining staff) was the impetus or driving force. Was Lincoln responsible for the end to the much maligned Merrimac? Again, the media would favor such a possibility but the military might want some credit too.

Ironically, this scuttling of the Merrimac (or Virginia) was not the first time the ship had been burned (or set aflame); as the hull had been salvaged from the conventional, mast ship following in the prior year.



The President is also the Commander and Chief, of course; but even so, is not necessarily trained or experienced in military strategy, tactics and warfare. Relying instead on selected staff and the relationship of the military brass, he is able to influence or leverage his power. Why the commanding general was reluctant to engage the enemy is beyond me – and evidently confused the Presidential staff too. In a matter of urgency – and even necessity – with respect to the public, Lincoln would have to move in order for the army to move. Taking a chance with some further need to gain an understanding of the “warfront”, he took a boat trip...to Norfolk and its passing ironclad.