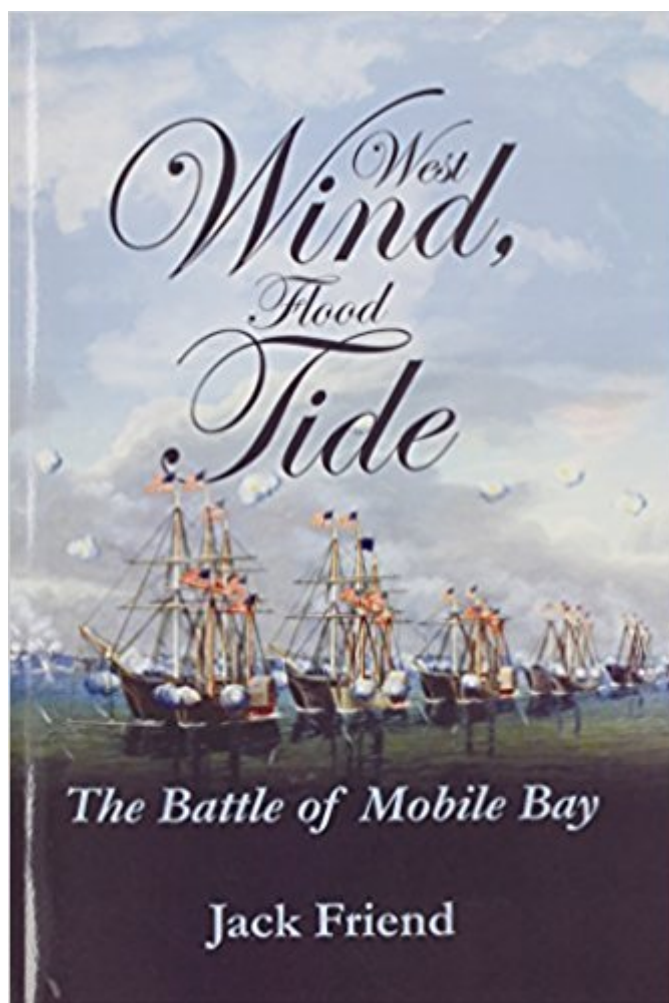


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West Wind, Flood Tide: The Battle Of Mobile Bay



Synopsis

Immortalized by David Farragut's apothegm, "Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead," the Battle of Mobile Bay remains one of history's great naval engagements, a contest between two admirals trained in the same naval tradition who once fought under the same flag. This new study takes a fresh look at the battle—the bloodiest naval battle of the Civil War—examining its genesis, tactics, and political ramifications. If the Confederacy had been able to deny the Union a victory before the presidential election, the South was certain to have won its independence. The North's win, however, not only stopped the blockade-runners in Mobile but insured Lincoln's re-election. Although the Union had an advantage in vessels of eighteen to four and an overwhelming superiority in firepower, it paid dearly for its victory, suffering almost ten times as many casualties as Franklin Buchanan's Confederate fleet. The author traces the evolution of the battle from the time Farragut took command of the West Gulf Blockading Squadron in February 1862 until the battle was fought on 5 August 1864. He then continues the narrative through the end of the war and explains how the battle influenced ship design and naval tactics for years to come.

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Customer Reviews

"... good and useful and well written." -- The Journal of Military History, 2005 "...provides 'rattlin' good' tactical details [and] a solid education in the conduct of naval operations during the Civil War." -- The NYMAS (New York Military Affairs Symposium) Review, Summer 2004 "...the most definitive volume ever written on the Battle of Mobile Bay." -- Mobile Register, February 10, 2004 "This book will please anyone interested in naval warfare." -- The Charlotte Observer, March 21, 2004 --This

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Winner of the North American Society for Oceanic History John Lyman Book Award for 2003 (U.S. History) --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Jack Friend has written an engrossing account of the campaign and Battle of Mobile Bay primarily from the naval perspective. The book begins slowly with a review of the complex political situation, but this is necessary for understanding why the attack was delayed for so long. After setting the stage the author presents a long and satisfying account of the preparation and action. The narrative is richly detailed with first hand accounts of various officers. This is combined with descriptive tours through key warships making it easy to visualize where the participants were during the action. The actions of the infantry and artillery are not deeply explored--forgivable because the decisive action and most direct casualties occurred on the water. The narrative's tone is commendably balanced and fair to participants of both sides. The author has provided plentiful and excellent sequential maps of the naval action. The land action following the naval fight receives little more than summary coverage and that is a weakness. It would have been helpful to have more detailed diagrams of the forts, particularly Fort Powell, since it was the Achilles heel of the Lower Defenses. It also would have been wise to include the siege battery positions for the bombardment of Fort Morgan. In the interim, there is a pamphlet titled "The Defenses of Lower Mobile Bay" by Dale Manuel that contains some diagrams and information about the forts. Additionally, "The Official Military Atlas of the Civil War" can be consulted for positions of the siege lines and batteries. Similarly, there is not a detailed table for the order of battle for the forces engaged, or a detailed breakdown of casualties of the land forces in the various phases of the campaign. (This is in stark contrast to Stephen Wise' book about the 1863 Charleston Harbor campaign with its extensive tables and appendices.) I hope the author one day chooses to revisit the siege/garrison artillerist and infantry aspects and expand the work accordingly. Despite these flaws, I still consider this the definitive book on the subject. Mobile, Alabama was the Confederacy's only remaining Gulf port east of the Mississippi and was one of the last critical blockade-running links. USN Admiral Farragut faced a tremendous challenge in 1864 when he was finally able to obtain ironclads and army support to attack Mobile Bay's defenses. In order to pass into Mobile Bay he had to breach three formidable obstacles simultaneously: a mine field (mines were referred to as "torpedoes"), the heavy guns of Fort Morgan, and a small rebel fleet featuring a very powerful armored ram, the CSS Tennessee, under the aggressive and experienced command of CSN Admiral Buchanan. In preparation for the naval attack, the army landed on

Dauphin Island on the opposite side of the channel and advanced against its defensive work, Fort Gaines. Farragut had a bold plan to force the clear passage only a few hundred yards from the guns of Fort Morgan. This would allow him and the army to isolate and reduce each of the three fortifications of the Lower Defenses. He expected a hard fight and was prepared to lose as much as a third of his fleet in passing the forts. The admiral planned the attack meticulously, giving detailed instructions for preparation of the vessels, as well as the roles of each vessel throughout the attack. He took every advantage that the situation offered. As the title of the book indicates, he attacked during flood tide, so any ships that lost steam would still be carried into the bay on the tide. He also considered the wind direction critical, as it would carry the cannon smoke toward Fort Morgan's defenders, obscuring their view of his vulnerable wooden steamers. Instead of dashing in at high speed, he had the fleet proceed at a moderate pace with low steam pressure. In this way, a hit to the boilers would not produce as many casualties among the crew. The reduction in speed was also needed so that the swifter wooden vessels would not overrun their slower ironclad brethren who were leading the attack. Still, Farragut's careful planning was nearly undone when the movements of his own ironclads blocked his fleet's path. The waiting CSN gunboats and ironclad ram crossed the tee of the Union fleet and pounded away mercilessly. Farragut's fleet ran the risk of being shredded by heavy guns from land and sea. The monitor USS Tecumseh turned to engage the CSN vessels, but struck a mine and sank in less than three minutes. Then in a calculated gamble, Farragut famously forced the passage by ordering his wooden warships through the minefield. That was not the end of the naval engagement, for the CSN gunboats remained. The lighter rebel boats were rapidly driven away, sunk, or captured and the CSS Tennessee withdrew to reassess. Short on coal, her commander turned to take the fight to the US fleet now in the bay, rather than sit passively under the guns of Fort Morgan. The USN's wooden warships took a beating and suffered high casualties in close range fighting and ramming, but the 15" guns of the Federal ironclads eventually rendered the Tennessee defenseless by damaging her stern gun ports and steering. The seriously wounded Admiral Buchanan permitted surrender of the flagship. This concluded the major naval engagement, but it did not guarantee Federal victory, for the warships could not be supplied without seizing Fort Powell at Grant's Pass. Unfortunately for the defenders, all of the works had various degrees of vulnerability from within the bay and Fort Powell's were greatest. Farragut's success demoralized Fort Powell's commander, and brief bombardment by a monitor was sufficient to convince him to evacuate the work that evening. Fort Gaines demoralized garrison surrendered after a brief bombardment, but Brig. Gen. Page stubbornly held Fort Morgan for over two weeks, until a tremendous bombardment knocked out his artillery and made the defenses untenable. While

the Union had effectively closed the port, it lacked the resources to take the city of Mobile for the time being. I can recommend this book to all students of the Civil War, and particularly those interested in Civil War naval history. While narrower in focus it is presently the definitive account and preferable to Bergeron's brief "Confederate Mobile."

Very good history of the campaign and battle of Mobile Bay, Alabama, in 1864. It is unlikely we'll see one better at this stage. Admiral David Farragut, USN, had to shut down one of the Confederacy's last functional Gulf of Mexico ports. You can almost feel the frustration of this tough sea-dog as "friction" repeatedly foiled his attempts to assemble a fleet strong enough (and secure enough Army cooperation) to fight past Fort Morgan, dare the torpedo field, and take on the CSS Tennessee. Admiral Franklin Buchanan, CSN, had to hold that blockade-runner port open for the Confederacy, and though greatly outnumbered, no mean antagonist was he, for those long odds had no meaning to him. The lead up to this long-delayed battle is well told, but the battle itself is the best part. Good explanation of why Tecumseh's skipper chose to cross the torpedo field. Best on the close-quarter action between the Union fleet and the all too lethal (judging by the lopsided casualty figures) CSS Tennessee. Mr. Friend makes the valid point that, in August 1864, with Grant and Sherman apparently stalemated outside Petersburg and Atlanta, respectively, much hinged on Farragut's success or failure influencing President Lincoln's re-election prospects. Many excellent maps of Mobile Bay (with depth lines - important information, because although Mobile Bay was huge, only a very restricted area was deep enough in which to maneuver deep-draft warships), the Confederate Lower Defense Line, and track charts of the battle. Nice USNI edition. Numerous photos and a biographical appendix of the main characters round out this fine battle study.

An exceptional book! Friend, a Mobile native, brings an historian's sense of detail with his own local knowledge to tell a compelling story of perhaps the premier naval battle of the Civil War. The only shortcoming in the book is that not enough of them were printed. It is difficult to find anywhere at a reasonable price!

The Battle of Mobile Bay is best known for Farragut's "Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead." Less well known is the fact that this was a very important battle. Mobile was an important base for blockade runners, and was one of the victories that helped Lincoln be re-elected. Jack Friend has studied this battle for literally years. Among other things, he talks about just how effective the Confederate torpedoes (mines in today's terminology) really were. He begins in 1862 when Farragut

took command of the Union's West Gulf Blockading Squadron and continues through the end of the war. It covers the people, the tactics, the battle itself, the aftermath of the battle and the associated capture of Mobile. This is and will probably remain the definitive book on this battle.

this is simply an excellent book! I believe it to be by far the most descriptive book on the Battle of Mobile Bay that exists. The book is incredibly thorough in its descriptions of the battle plan as well as the political effects it had. A must read for Civil War or Naval history buffs.

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