

**Volume 1**

**Number 107**

**Steven Ramseur Witnesses History in  
the Making**

**Lead: On two days in 1862, Steven Ramseur witnessed the death of the wooden Navy.**

**Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts**

**Content: Ramseur was a 24-year-old major of artillery who in his service with the Confederacy rose to the rank of major general, the youngest West Pointer to receive that rank in Confederate service. He happened to be in Norfolk on court-martial duty in March 1862 on the day**

**the CSS Virginia went out to attack the northern blockade fleet. Three days later he sat down to write his brother-in-law and describe the exciting battle. What he witnessed was no less than the transformation of naval warfare.**

**The Virginia itself was a masterpiece of improvisation. In its haste to evacuate Norfolk, the Union Navy had scuttled a steam frigate built in the north whose name was Merrimack. The Confederates salvaged the ship, sliced off the upper hull, constructed a barn shaped superstructure and armored it with iron. The re-christened Virginia was a bit clumsy and required half an hour to turn around in the water, but on**

**March 8, 1862, all her bulk seemed to be in her favor as she cut up the Union Navy in just a few hours. Supported by other Confederate vessels and shore batteries, the Virginia decimated the Union blockade fleet. The Cumberland was destroyed, the Congress was in flames, the Minnesota run aground and two other blockaders had fled to shallow water.**

**The next morning a heavy fog covered Hampton Roads and it was not until mid-morning that the Virginia made her move. Her crew expected to make short work of the remaining Union ships but they had a little surprise. Moving out from behind the Minnesota was a vessel Ramseur called "the famous Erricson iron**

**battery." It was in fact the USS Monitor. Back and forth the two odd shapes passed on opposite courses, their inexperienced crews firing away. Each ship inflicted some punishment but neither penetrated the armor of the other. About noon the Monitor withdrew after its Captain was blinded by flying iron splinters. By the time it came back out the Virginia had retreated back to the Confederate shore.**

**The fight had been a tactical draw, but actually the Monitor was the victor for it had saved the federal fleet to continue its blockade. It sank in a storm off Cape Hatteras on December 31, 1862.**

**The Virginia never fought again. When the Confederates abandoned Norfolk later that spring she was abandoned and scuttled for the second time.**

**At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.**

#### Resources

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