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From the Rebel Raiders

By Joseph F. Callo

Among the Confederacy's most successful responses to the Anaconda Plan—the Union's Civil War strategy to blockade Southern ports and simultaneously advance down the Mississippi River to cut the Confederacy in two—was guerre de course ("war of the chase," or commerce raiding). The burgeoning global trade in the mid-19th century made busy Union merchant ships particularly tempting prizes. Thus the Confederacy granted interested privateers—the owners of private warships—"letters of marque," or government permission, to attack enemy vessels for a share in the profits. While most European nations had outlawed this practice with the 1856 Paris Declaration, a lack of broad international recognition of the Confederate States of America brought the legal status of its letters of marque into question.

Though the South commissioned little more than two dozen naval raiders, its privateers played a significant role in the naval conflict, initially sinking or capturing between 50 and 60 Union merchantmen and by war's end accounting for more than 230 Union merchant ships. The South's depredations prompted many U.S. companies to transfer their ships to foreign registry.

CSS Sumter, a bark-rigged steamer commissioned in June 1861, was the first ship the Confederacy had converted into a raider. In its prewar career the steamer (Habana) had operated as the South's privateers. By the end of Sumter's first cruise, in early 1862, Semmes had taken 18 prizes. After Union ships penned in Sumter at Gibraltar, Semmes was transferred to the command of CSS Alabama, a sloop of war built in secrecy in England.

Launched in July 1862, Semmes' second command was also the Confederacy's most successful raider. The captain joined Alabama in the Azores, where crews had loaded the ship with coal and fitted it out. After 65 successful attacks over 21 months Alabama put in to Cherbourg, France, for repairs.

While the raider was in Cherbourg the U.S. minister in Paris telegraphed Alabama's location to the captain of the Union sloop of war USS Kearsarge, which lay in port in the Netherlands. When Alabama left Cherbourg on June 19, 1864, Kearsarge—equipped with a protective belt of chain cladding, two 11-inch Dahlgren guns and four 32-pound cannon—was waiting. It was the kind of mismatch raiders had sought to avoid, and Alabama did not survive the encounter. The clash marked the beginning of the end of Rebel commerce raiding.

Lessons:

- The economic benefits of maritime trade are offset by the strategic vulnerability of that trade in war.
- The cost/benefit ratio of commerce raiding is deceptively tempting for countries facing a superior naval force.
- Deterrence of commerce raiding requires a high level of naval command and control.
- Commerce raiding absent the full range of naval power is not a winning strategy.
- A single well-operated warship can often elude even the most determined pursuer.
- In naval warfare the side with the larger industrial base has an overwhelming advantage.