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The Union's Atlantic blockade campaign of the South during the first year of the American Civil War is analyzed in the general context of operational art and with a view to lessons learned. The joint operations of Union forces are described at the operational level. Tactical descriptions of the first two engagements are detailed only as necessary to understand operational movements. Flag Officer Silas Stringham and Major General Benjamin Butler led a joint expedition to gain Federal access to the North Carolina interior waterways. Flag Officer Samuel Du Pont and Brigadier General Thomas Sherman led a second expedition to establish an ideal base of operations at Port Royal, South Carolina. The combination of overwhelming force and sound tactics at key decisive points led to important Union victories that opened the door to effective follow-on operations. The campaign as a whole significantly tightened the Union blockade of the South, and helped to establish the economic, political, and military context for ultimate Union victory in the Civil War.

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THE UNION'S ATLANTIC BLOCKADE CAMPAIGN OF 1861

by

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CDR, U.S. NAVY

A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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Abstract of

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The Union's Atlantic blockade campaign of the South during the first year of the American Civil War is analyzed in the general context of operational art and with a view to lessons learned. The joint operations of Union forces are described at the operational level. Tactical descriptions of the first two engagements are detailed only as necessary to understand operational movements. Flag Officer Silas Stringham and Major General Benjamin Butler led a joint expedition to gain Federal access to the North Carolina interior waterways. Flag Officer Samuel Du Pont and Brigadier General Thomas Sherman led a second expedition to establish an ideal base of operations at Port Royal, South Carolina. The combination of overwhelming force and sound tactics at key decisive points led to important Union victories that opened the door to effective follow-on operations. The campaign as a whole significantly tightened the Union blockade of the South, and helped to establish the economic, political, and military context for ultimate Union victory in the Civil War.

BACKGROUND

President Lincoln announced the Union blockade of the Confederacy on April 19, 1861, as a response to Jefferson Davis' public offer to authorize privateers for attacks on Northern commerce.[1] Since the South had no substantial merchant fleet, but conducted its trade by use of foreign vessels, the only way to effectively respond to Davis' move was to outlaw this trade by instituting a blockade. While a naval presence off key ports might be enough to establish a legal blockade and thus end legitimate foreign commerce, only a rigorously-enforced blockade could hope to discourage illegal trade.

The U.S. Navy was in no shape to establish any kind of blockade of the South in April, 1861. Three hundred twenty-two naval officers had just defected to the Confederacy.[2] The Navy had a total of 42 commissioned vessels, most of which were stationed overseas and took six months to recall.[3] Most ships were unsuitable for a close-in blockade, being either obsolete sailing vessels or steamers of such deep draft as to preclude them from entering most Southern ports, let alone the shallow inland waterways along the coast. Finally, the delicate political situation in the months prior to the war had kept the government from taking any action that could be construed as provocative to states still hesitating on the question of secession. The result was a small, scattered fleet, and the loss of all operating bases in the entire 3,500 miles of Southern coastline, except for Hampton Roads, Pensacola, and Key West.

The new Secretary of the Navy, Gideon Welles, took immediate steps to expand the force. All but three ships were recalled from overseas assignment. Civilian vessels that could be modified for naval service were purchased in large numbers, expanding the Navy by 137 ships as of December, 1861.[4] Construction of new warships and several classes of gunboats began almost immediately. Experienced seaman were recruited from the merchant marine, almost tripling the number of Navy personnel by December 1861.[5]

The Confederacy's naval situation was even worse than the Union's. The South began the war without a single warship, very few experienced seamen, and only two shipyards.[6] It had only one foundry capable of casting heavy guns, and had it not been for the capture of U.S. Navy ordnance supplies at Norfolk, the South's early coastal defenses would have been seriously deficient in firepower.[7]

As quickly as Union vessels and crews could be gathered, they were rushed out to patrol the South's nine key ports. At first, only Norfolk and Pensacola were blockaded, but over the next three months enough forces were found to cover the others. It was literally a race to get forces on station before a major European power could test the blockade. If on-scene inspection found it to be ineffective, neutral countries could legally ignore the blockade and resume normal trade with the South.

The Union won the race by a nose. On July 14, 1861, the blockade was put in place off Wilmington, North Carolina, thereby establishing at least a minimal force at the last of the South's key ports.[8] The British warship Gladiator arrived for the first foreign inspection in early July, and its captain found no trace of a single blockader along the entire North Carolina coastline. Fortunately, on his second cruise two weeks later, CAPT Hickley found six vessels on blockade duty in the same stretch of coastline. Despite this inadequate force, the cessation of normal commerce due to the blockade announcement -- combined with an undeveloped contraband trade -- led Hickley to report that trade off the North Carolina coast was stagnant.[9] The Union blockade had survived a critical period of vulnerability, but Southern attempts to convince Europe of the blockade's ineffectiveness would continue to exert a strong influence on Union strategic ¡lans.

Lincoln's proclamation appears to have been reactive, preceding any strategic plans for conducting the blockade. The first suggestion for employing the blockade in an overall strategy appears to have been made two weeks later by General Winfield Scott.[10] Finally, in June, a joint board of officers (with one civilian expert) met to consider how to make the blockade

more effective. The Blockade Board issued three reports, outlining the geographical features of the coastline, suggesting how best to blockade it, and comparing options for establishing operating bases in theater. Two of the Board's recommendations were the creation of a harbor of refuge at Hatteras Inlet, North Carolina, and the establishment of one or more coaling stations from among four possible sites located in South Carolina and Florida.[11]

THE NAVAL CAMPAIGN OF 1861

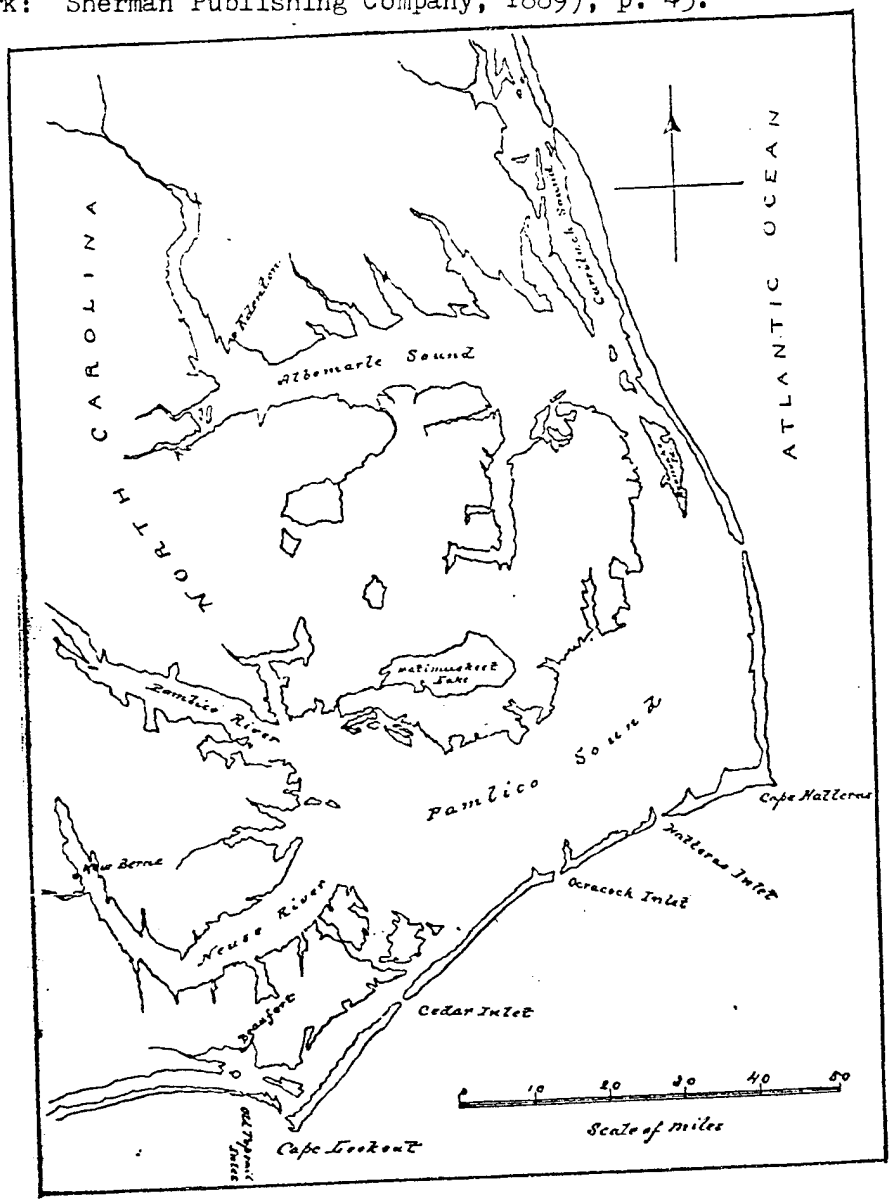
The primary thrust behind early operational planning was the need for coaling bases. However, despite the blockade of Norfolk, the Confederate capital and primary industrial region at Richmond still had an important sea link to the outside world by way of connecting rivers, canals, and railroads to the North Carolina sounds. Cutting off Richmond's "back door" was thus the first order of business.

The Blockade Board had noted that Hatteras Inlet was the only access point through the North Carolina barrier islands that might be deep enough to be used by a sizable warship. On August 26, Flag Officer Silas Stringham and Major General Benjamin Butler led a joint task force to capture it. The Northern flotilla consisted of seven warships carrying about 150 guns, two transports, and a force of 900 soldiers. Defenses consisted of two earthworks, Forts Hatteras and Clark, which were held by a total of 670 soldiers and two dozen cannon. While Fort Hatteras was well-designed, it was not finished, and Fort Clark was a small battery of only five guns. The defenders were outgunned even by the rule of the day, that one gun on land was worth five on shipboard[12], and that rule would soon prove obsolete due to a combination of steam-powered vessels and rifled cannon.

Stringham began his bombardment on the morning of August 28, steaming his warships in an oval pattern during the battle. A landing party of 300 soldiers was sent ashore to attack the forts after the bombardment. The Confederates abandoned Fort Clark during the night of the 28th, and the Federal ground force occupied it. The bombardment of Fort Hatteras resumed the next morning, and it surrendered before noon. The plan had been to block the inner bar by sinking stone-laden schooners, and to use only the anchorage as a refuge for blockading ships.[13] However, Stringham and Butler realized the inlet's importance as an entrance into the interior sounds, and the possibilities of a close-in blockade by lighter-draft gunboats. Butler garrisoned the forts, Stringham left some of the smaller warships to protect

Figure 1

Reproduced from David D. Porter, The Naval History of the Civil War (New York: Sherman Publishing Company, 1889), p. 45.



THE SOUNDS OF NORTH CAROLINA.

them, and together they returned to Hampton Roads to persuade naval authorities to revise the plan.[14]

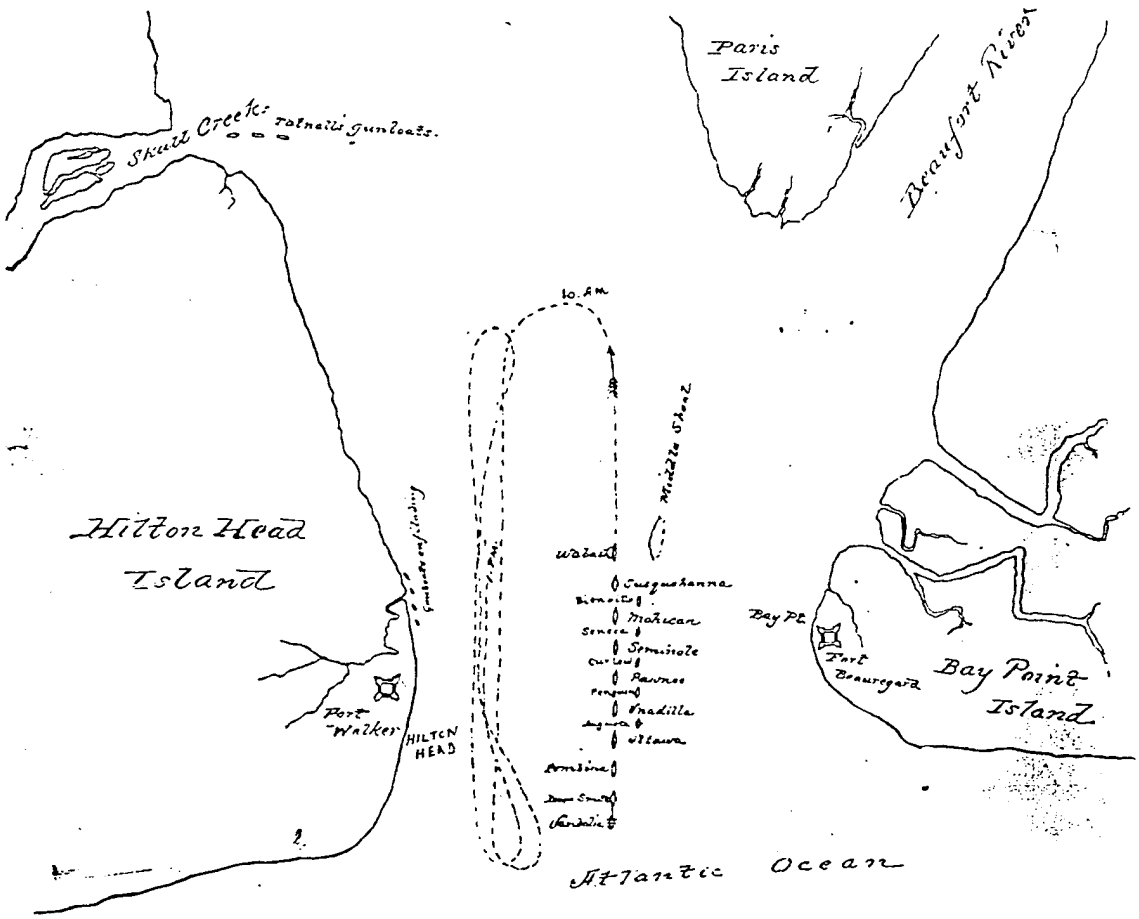
With the key to Richmond's back door in Union hands, the need for operating bases again became a top priority. At this point, Atlantic blockading ships spent as much time going to and from Hampton Roads for coal as they did on station.[15] Furthermore, any close-in blockade would have to be done by shallow-draft gunboats that could not remain long at sea and would need regional bases to operate effectively.

The Atlantic theater had by now been divided into two sub-theaters, and Flag Officer Samuel F. Du Pont, as Commander, South Atlantic Squadron, was assigned the next major operation. His mission was to carry out one of the recommendations he had made as the president of the Blockade Board: the seizure of at least two defensible harbors to serve as bases. The Department of the Navy had adopted the Board's preference for Fernandina, Florida as the first base, but Secretary Welles left the final choice of targets to Du Pont, suggesting the need for agreement between Du Pont and the Army commander assigned to the expedition, General Thomas W. Sherman.[16] There were several delays in putting the expedition together, one of which required Presidential intervention when General McClellan strenuously objected to troops being raised and trained for any purpose other than reinforcing the Army of the Potomac.[17] The delays moved the expedition back into late October, when the storm season might threaten its success.

Du Pont decided to capture Port Royal, South Carolina, the deepest of the South's Atlantic ports and located almost midway between Savannah and Charleston.[18] With 17 warships, 33 troop transports, 25 colliers, 12,000 infantry, and 600 Marines, Du Pont and Sherman left Hampton Roads on October 29 with what was then the largest naval task force in U.S. history.[19] After losing two ships in a storm that jeopardized the entire expedition, the scattered fleet gathered outside Port Royal only to find that the Rebels had been alerted to the plan, despite all attempts at secrecy. Four of the smaller gunboats were sent out to chase away an improvised Confederate force

Figure 2

Reproduced from David D. Porter, The Naval History of the Civil War (New York: Sherman Publishing Company, 1889), p. 54.



PLAN OF THE ATTACK ON FORTS WALKER AND BEAUREGARD, NOVEMBER 7, 1861.

of three warships under Flag Officer Josiah Tattnall. Defenses consisted of two strong forts, one at either end of the two-mile channel: Fort Walker, the stronger of the two, on Hilton Head Island to the south, and Fort Beauregard to the north on Bay Point.

On November 7, after passing his fleet through the center of the channel and returning fire from both forts, Du Pont moved his ships in close to Fort Walker to engage it alone. One broadside from the flagship U.S.S. Wabash ended Confederate thoughts of a sea engagement, and Tattnall withdrew his gunboats out of the fight. Du Pont had his ships steam very slowly in an ellipse pattern within 600 yards of Fort Walker, so as to maximize the effectiveness of his massed fire. Smaller gunboats were anchored near the corners of the fort, in blind spots in the fort's defenses. The enfilading fire of these gunboats hampered Rebel attempts to respond to the devastating attack of the larger warships.[20] In four hours it was over: Fort Walker fell and Fort Beauregard was abandoned immediately thereafter.

The Union forces consolidated their hold on the Port Royal area over the next few months, primarily by building strongholds on Hilton Head Island and sending gunboats into inland waterways to reconnoiter enemy positions. Tybee Island, a key to the port at Savannah, was seized on November 24. Major General Robert E. Lee had just been put in command of Atlantic coastal defenses and arrived on scene shortly after the fall of Port Royal. His review of the situation led him to pull Confederate forces back from the coast in order to strengthen defenses at the major ports, and to protect the Charleston and Savannah Railroad, which ran within 20 miles of the coast.[21] With nothing near the Federals' corp-sized force at Port Royal, Lee feared that he could not successfully oppose a Union attack aimed at severing the railroad or capturing either Savannah or Charleston from the rear.[22]

Fortunately for Lee, Du Pont and Sherman were focused on seizing easily-defensible operating bases and preparing to begin a close-in blockade of the intercoastal waterway, and had no plans to capture large port cities or cut railroads.[23] In fact, the easy success at Port Royal had surprised both

sides, leading to a panic-stricken flight of civilians from the coastal areas, and a lack of Union follow-on plans to exploit the evacuation.[24]

As 1861 drew to a close, a joint expedition was forming up in the North Carolina theater to exploit the Hatteras Inlet opening and seize Roanoke Island, which commanded the interior entrances into the sounds. To the south, Du Pont was exploring the intercoastal waterway and planning to establish another base at Fernandina. He would find this excellent port abandoned, due to Lee's withdrawal strategy. Furthermore, with Tybee Island in Federal hands, the land-based bombardment of Fort Pulaski would prove to be an easy affair, and Savannah's seaborne trade would be effectively ended in April, 1862. The same strategy applied by Union forces in the Gulf of Mexico would yield similar results, and lead to the capture of New Orleans -- the Confederacy's largest and richest city -- in April, 1862.

ANALYSIS

The establishment of the Union blockade demonstrates a classic example of the use of operational art. In general terms, operational art seeks answers to four questions:

1. What military conditions must be produced in the theater of operations to achieve the strategic goal?

2. What sequence of actions is most likely to produce that condition?

3. How should the resources of the force be applied to accomplish the desired sequence of actions?

4. What is the likely cost or risk to the joint force in performing that sequence of actions?

The risks to the joint force conducting blockade operations were fairly low for several reasons: 1) the blockade strategy enabled the Union to enjoy the benefit of exterior lines to attack the South at any point of its choosing, while denying the South the usual advantage of interior lines in massing its naval forces for resistance; 2) the weak Confederate naval threat; and 3) the lack of manpower available for coastal defense caused by the need to meet Federal armies in three land theaters. Therefore, only the first three operational art questions will be considered, followed by a discussion of lessons learned.

The strategic goal was a "complete blockade",[25] that is, the interdiction of all coastal trade within the Confederacy as well as trade between the South and foreign countries. In considering the first question, the Blockade Board determined the desired military conditions to be: blockading forces off the coast of each key port, a close-in blockade of the inland waterways between ports, and patrols along the coastline between ports.

As to the second question, although the Board did not discuss a particular sequence of actions to achieve the desired military conditions, the actual events show the Union plan to have been as follows: 1) establish a deep water blockade off each of nine key ports in the Atlantic and in the Gulf

of Mexico; 2) obtain defensible bases with good harbors in sparsely-populated coastal areas; 3) use these bases for greater efficiency in the port blockades and to allow shallow-water gunboats to establish a close-in blockade of the inland waterways between ports; and 4) gradually strengthen the blockade by a tight patrol of the entire coast, and eventually, by patrols off the coast of the primary Caribbean havens for blockade runners.[26]

The third question, concerning the employment of resources to accomplish this sequence of actions, required the careful use of limited assets at the outset, while assuming the availability of shallow-draft gunboats and greater numbers of warships in the latter part of 1861. The actual employment of resources followed this pattern: 1) deep-water ships were rushed to take up station off the key ports; 2) joint expeditions were sent to attack decisive points in order to close off alternate approaches to key ports and to establish operating bases along the coast; 3) as they became available, shallow-draft gunboats were used to operate from these regional bases to attack coastal defenses and set up a close-in blockade of intercoastal waterways; 4) as more forces became available, joint expeditions were sent to attack the defenses of key ports, either occupying them or sealing off their harbors from all seaborne traffic; and 5) patrols were begun off the coast of the key trade centers in the Caribbean to seize ships believed to be bound for the Confederacy or carrying cargoes intended for the South, and then to haul them in before U.S. prize courts.[27]

The Union plan showed a clear understanding that the key ports were the operational centers of gravity for a strategy aimed at choking off trade and communication between the South and the outside world. (Due to the transportation infrastructure and population centers in the South, most foreign commerce went through these few ports of entry.) By first rapidly moving to meet the minimum legal requirements for a blockade, immediate success was achieved by ending legal trade with neutral governments. Although a tighter blockade could be executed after new ships became available, the South could also be expected to improve coastal defenses. Thus, the choice of

decisive points for the first engagements was critical to the early success of the campaign to establish an effective blockade, rather than one that was merely legally-sufficient.

Union strategists chose well. By capturing Hatteras Inlet first, only vessels of the lightest draft could escape to foreign ports from the North Carolina barrier islands, and once shallow-draft gunboats were available, even domestic trade could be shut down by controlling the inland waters. Likewise, Du Pont's decision to capture Port Royal first -- rather than Fernandina as originally planned -- paid handsome dividends. In addition to serving as a desperately-needed coaling base and harbor of refuge for deep-water blockading vessels, Port Royal was a central location for gunboat operations in the interior waters between Charleston and Savannah, as well as an ideal staging point for attacks on those ports.

What had taken twenty-four hours with greater relative strength against unfinished defenses at Hatteras Inlet took only four hours against more powerful defenses at Port Royal. Du Pont recognized that the greater maneuverability afforded by steam power and the greater precision and range of rifled cannon had changed the relative strength between warships and fixed fortifications. By bringing his warships in close, steaming more slowly than Stringham had done, and massing fires on one fort at a time, he maximized his advantages in firepower and maneuverability to overwhelm strong defenses with an efficiency that surprised both sides.

The blockade campaign of 1861, though effective, might have better exploited the strategic situation after Port Royal. The improved accuracy and firepower of warships gave them a new advantage over then-existing coastal fortifications. Had the Union strategy shifted its focus from gaining command over interior waterways to using the offensive capability of joint expeditionary forces directly against the operational centers of gravity before defenders could adapt, it is likely that the same kind of massed fires that overwhelmed Port Royal could have overpowered harbor batteries at Charleston, Savannah, and Wilmington in a short campaign. Instead, the attack

on Savannah's defenses at Fort Pulaski was not launched until April, 1862, and by the time Charleston and Wilmington were attacked, Confederate defensive schemes incorporated ironclad warships, underwater mines, sunken obstacles, range markers, and improved gun batteries that gave defenders a fighting chance against almost any naval force that could be massed against them.

Key lessons learned from the 1861 blockade campaign include:

1. "Jointness" is more than interoperability: it is a team approach to warfare that allows for the maximum use of complimentary capabilities. While a commendable team approach characterized Union campaigns at the operational level, both on the coast and on the Mississippi River, it was not always so at the strategic level. Arguably, the Union lost an excellent opportunity to improve its strategic position after Port Royal. Had more land forces been made available to exploit the gains at Port Royal, strategic ports such as Charleston and Savannah might have been taken from the rear. However, McClellan was so concerned with massing troops for land operations in the distant future that it took President Lincoln's intervention just to keep Du Pont's joint expedition together.

2. Cumulative strategies such as naval blockades have a gradual effect which can be hard to measure, but they can be used to great advantage if patiently applied. The 1861 operations alone turned a paper proclamation into an internationally-recognized blockade that substantially reduced the South's foreign trade and, by year's end, was intercepting one of every ten vessels still attempting transit through Southern harbors. By 1865, the blockade would net one of two.[28]

3. The use of operational art in military planning cannot be overemphasized, particularly where resources are limited. By carefully identifying operational centers of gravity and decisive points for attacking those centers, actions can be sequenced for maximum effect. Without assets for entering the North Carolina sounds, the Union effectively employed its few deep-water ships to seize a foothold at Hatteras Inlet which could be exploited as soon as light gunboats were built. Follow-on operations greatly

constricted the sea links between the Confederacy's capital and primary industrial area and the outside world. Then, Port Royal -- the "finest natural harbor on the southern Atlantic coast"[29] -- was taken, allowing for follow-on actions that dramatically increased the blockade's effect.

4. Branches and sequels are key elements in any campaign planning process. The Federals were unprepared for the magnitude of their success at Port Royal, and gave insufficient attention to the possibilities after the initial victory. For example, logical sequels should have included cutting the vital railroad near the coast. Furthermore, a careful study of possible branches might have made Du Pont, Sherman, and higher authority more aware of the opportunity to capture key port cities, and could even have resulted in the opening of a major land theater in the deep South. The cost of inflexibility (due to the lack of branches) was that a window of opportunity was lost to capture critical ports and deal a powerful blow to the South.

5. In the same vein, centers of gravity -- both strategic and operational -- must be clearly identified and kept as the focus of operational planning throughout the campaign. A clear understanding of where force should be directed against the enemy is vital for timely changes to initial campaign plans where necessary to meet either unexpected opportunity (such as the situation immediately following the capture of Port Royal) or disaster.

6. The need for a "surge capacity" must be maintained if the United States is to be prepared for greater emergencies than the foreseeable regional contingency. History shows that wars are not always foreseeable until almost too late, and then political conditions may hinder the quick, large-scale military build-up required to meet the new threat. During the Civil War, had it not been for the U.S. merchant marine, the Navy would have had no pool of experience from which to man the expanding blockade fleet. Rather than simply acknowledging today's shrinking U.S. merchant marine as a serious problem, steps should be taken to preserve this and other vital surge capacities.

CONCLUSION

The impact of the Union blockade has long been debated. However, it is estimated that approximately 8,000 trips were made through the blockade during the four years of war, as compared to over 20,000 in the four years preceding it. Since blockade running vessels were designed for speed rather than capacity, it is fair to say that the blockade cut Southern seaborne trade to about one-third of pre-war levels.[30] In addition, joint blockade operations in the West eventually gained control of the Mississippi River, thereby stopping the flow of supplies which had avoided the coastal blockade from coming into the primary operations theaters through Mexico. Since requirements in war always exceed those in peacetime, there can be little doubt that the blockade seriously degraded the Confederate economy and its ability to make war.

The severance of normal trade between the Confederacy and Europe forced the latter to find new sources for cotton in Egypt and India[31], thereby gradually decreasing the relative importance of Southern trade as compared to that of the North. Despite strong movements in England and France to intervene in the Civil War on behalf of the Confederacy, the growing relative importance of Northern trade and the Union's wartime naval strength resulting from the blockade helped to lessen the likelihood of foreign intervention as the war progressed. The naval campaign of 1861 created the international context for these developments by winning legitimacy for the blockade from its very inception, and the Union victories at Hatteras Inlet and Port Royal demonstrated Northern determination to strengthen it.

Besides its economic and diplomatic benefits, the blockade strategy harnessed Union military strengths against Confederate weaknesses. It gained control of the sea, which greatly assisted naval and amphibious operations throughout the war. The blockade's pressure on the Southern economy and its psychological impact, due to the feeling of isolation from the rest of the world, caused morale problems which would logically affect desertion rates.

The joint coastal operations of 1861 and thereafter forced the Confederacy to withhold troops from the front for territorial defense. Perhaps most importantly, they also bolstered sagging Northern morale with incremental victories -- including the first two Union victories of the war -- during the critical two years when the North was losing most of the major land battles.

Arguably, the most successful Union campaigns of the war prior to the last six months of Southern collapse were those in which the Army and Navy combined their capabilities. Both in the coastal blockade campaigns and in General U. S. Grant's movement down the Mississippi River, the services proved that they were better as a team than when operating independently. By that example, today's continuing effort to increase the level of jointness of U.S. armed forces simply makes good sense.

The joint operations of 1861 set the stage for more victories in 1862, and led Admiral David D. Porter to later write:

> "So efficiently was the blockade maintained, and so greatly was it strengthened from time to time, that foreign statesmen, who at the beginning of the war, did not hesitate to pronounce the blockade of nearly three thousand miles of coast a moral impossibility, twelve months after its establishment were forced to admit that the proofs of its efficiency were so comprehensive and conclusive that no objections to it could be made."[32]

NOTES

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4. Soley, p. 18.

5. Porter, p. 37; Soley, pp. 9-11.

6. Soley, p. 22.

7. U.S. Navy Dept., Civil War Naval Chronology: 1861-1865 (Washington: 1971), p. I-10; Porter, p. 32.

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11. "Reports of Conference for the Consideration of Measures for Effectually Blockading the South Atlantic Coast," Navy Official Records, ser. 1, v. 12, pp. 195-206.

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16. Letter from Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles to Flag Officer Samuel Du Pont, 12 October 1861, Navy Official Records, ser. 1, v. 12. p. 214.

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21. Catton, p. 99.

22. Ibid., p. 101.

23. Navy Official Records, ser. 1, v. 12, pp. 214-215; Catton, p. 100.

24. Catton, pp. 96-98.

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26. James M. McPherson, Battle Cry of Freedom (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988), p. 379.

27. McPherson, pp. 379, 386-387; Soley, pp. 36-42.

28. David Donald and J. G. Randall, The Civil War and Reconstruction, 2nd ed. (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath and Company, 1969), p. 502; McPherson, p. 380.

29. McPherson, p. 371.

30. Ibid., pp. 381-382.

31. Ibid., p. 386.

32. Porter. p. 17.

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