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The Cheese Box to the Rescue

Tags: Minnesota History

“No mortal man could have surmised what was afterward learned, but the Confederate Naval officers intended to destroy the Minnesota…”
Confederate Military History, volume 12

There have been only three United States naval ships that have borne the name Minnesota. The third of those was just christened on October 27, 2012 in Newport News, Virginia. The third Minnesota is technically a nuclear attack submarine. At 377 feet long and 7800 tons, the Minnesota is the tenth Virginia class submarine and is one of the most advanced. Able to dive to depths of 800 feet and cruise at 25 knots, it will be deployed on the frontline of maintaining our nation's superiority under the sea. The ship should be ready for full-service sometime in the summer of 2013. What the crew of the present-day Minnesota may not know is that the first ship to bear that name has a proud place in United States Naval history dating back to the Civil War and the famous naval battle of Hampton Roads.

As the morning dawned on March 8, 1862, none of the crew of the Civil War battleship "Minnesota" had any inkling they were destined to be witnesses to the changing history of naval warfare. The Minnesota was the first battleship to carry our state's name in the Navy and was originally built only five years earlier as a steam frigate -- a sailboat with steam engines. As all ships of those days, the Minnesota was built out of wood with a crew of 600 men and carried 43 guns. By this time of the Civil War, it already had a distinguished career by sailing on important diplomatic missions to most of the major ports of the Orient, but that would all pale in the next two days of battle.

By March 8 the Minnesota had been very successful in capturing several enemy ships along with its fellow Union battleships the Cumberland and the Congress, and they set sail for more conquests of the weaker Confederate fleet. As they moved into the mouth of the James River from the Chesapeake Bay on that fateful day, they encountered a strange vessel riding low in the water. It was the newly designed Confederate Ironside battleship, the Virginia, on its maiden voyage.

The Virginia was originally a large wooden steamer known as the Merrimac that Confederate engineers retrofitted with 4-inch iron plates surrounded 14 well-protected cannons. The three proud union battleships engaged the Virginia in fierce battle. The frigate Congress soon sunk and the Cumberland narrowly escaped with major damage. The Union sailors were horrified to see their cannonballs bounce off the side of the iron-plated ship like pebbles, inflicting no damage. As night fell, the valiant Minnesota, still engaged in the battle, ran aground trying to evade the cumbersome Confederate gunboat and was saved that first day only because of nightfall.

In the morning the Confederate Ironside set out with the intentions of destroying the grounded Minnesota. As the behemoth drew near to the Minnesota, the Confederate sailors noticed a small odd looking little vessel they described as having the appearance of a "cheese box" taking position between the two ships. It was the Union "Monitor", itself an iron-plated vessel. It was only a third of the size of the Virginia and had only two specially designed guns that provided rapid fire from a pivoting turret. The two vessels pounded each other for three hours without much damage to either vessel. The cannons at the time were only designed to penetrate wooden ships. The slower Virginia finally withdrew from the engagement giving the Minnesota time to escape at high tide.

The crew of the Minnesota was certainly thankful for timely arrival of the little cheese box. As a result, the Minnesota went on to have a long history of service within the U.S. Navy, being decommissioned in 1901. Neither of the two ironside ships had such a long career, both sinking as a result of mishaps unrelated to battle within a few months, but they changed forever how naval battles were fought as this was the first time that two iron ships met in battle. The crew of the Minnesota had the unwelcome distinction of having a front row seats to the historic event.

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