Author Interview--Charles D. Ross (Breaking the Blockade) Part 1

Discussion published by Niels Eichhorn on Thursday, April 22, 2021

Hello H-CivWar Readers:

Today we feature Charles D. Ross to talk about his new book **Breaking the Blockade: The Bahamas during the Civil War**, published by the University Press of Mississippi in December 2020.

Charles D. Ross holds a Ph.D. from the University of Virginia in Materials Science and Engineering and is professor of physics at Longwood University. He is author of **Trial by Fire: Science, Technology, and the Civil War** and **Civil War Acoustic Shadows** and coauthor of **Never for Want of Powder: The Confederate Powder Works in Augusta, Georgia**.

To start the interview, I was curious how you became interested in the blockade runners and the intrigues at Nassau?

CDR: About ten years ago, my wife Julie and I were on a cruise to Bermuda and during a tour of St. George we came across the Confederate museum there. Unfortunately it was a holiday and the museum was closed but I found it really intriguing to stumble across a Civil War museum in Bermuda. From my earlier work on the Augusta Powder Works I was aware of the importance of Bermuda and the Bahamas to the Confederate war effort but didn’t know too many details.

In 2014, during the Civil War sesquicentennial, I gave the keynote speech at the University of Mississippi’s Conference on Science, Medicine and Technology in the Civil War. After the speech, Craig Gill of the University Press of Mississippi contacted me and asked if I had anything I was working on that might be headed toward publication. The idea of writing about the role of the Bahamas in the Civil War and in particular what had happened in Nassau during that time sprang immediately to mind. I wrote a short proposal, Craig indicated that they were interested and so I set to work.

I have to do a quick follow-up since you opened the door, how many “research” trips to the Bahamas did you do to complete this book?

CDR: Actually, I only made one research trip to the Bahamas. My wife and I had been there years before and in fact got married there, not far from where the Royal Victoria Hotel once stood. I was very well prepared for the research trip as I had already spent two years on the book at that point. I was in their archives for three long and productive days and then I visited as many of the sites on New Providence that were relevant to the book as I could manage.

What do you argue in **Breaking the Blockade**?

CDR: I argue that blockade running through Nassau transformed that city in a remarkable way. Because of the astronomical fortunes to be made and Nassau’s proximity to the Confederate coast, the city became a magnet for every type of hustler and con man in the Western hemisphere. The
streets were filled with sailors with money to spend and Confederate and Union spies eyeing each other. The amazed British government in Nassau, seeing this previously forgotten tropical outpost suddenly flush with custom fees paid by the hundreds of boats coming and going, took a decidedly Confederate viewpoint on things. The series of hapless United States consuls sent to put a lid on the activity were subject to terrible harassment. By the end of the war, many in Nassau had lost everything while others made off with millions.

Your book is extremely well written with beautiful prose, were you planning the book for a general audience?

CDR: Thank you very much for that compliment. Yes, while I wanted the book to be based on rigorous scholarship and stand up to peer review, I wanted it to flow easily for the general reader. It is such an interesting story that I thought it would be a shame if people were put off by an overwhelming “academic” feel and I wanted it to be widely read and not gather dust in university libraries.

My first and most important filter for the accessibility of the writing and the development of the characters was my wife. She had perused my other three books but science and technology are not her main interests. As she read this manuscript she became very interested in the story and honestly it’s the only one of my books she actually read start to finish. My model for how this book would look and flow was Barbara Tuchman’s The Guns of August, one of my favorites. As in that book, one particular thing that I insisted on and that University Press of Mississippi agreed to was the use of unnumbered endnotes.

The book was quite enjoyable to write and perhaps that shows in the prose. I became enthralled with the various characters myself. My goal was to have a scholarly work that flowed like fiction. A number of the characters in the book were previously just known as names on letters in the Official Records and I did my best to bring them to life as human beings. When I did my contract for the book, I asked for and was given the majority of the film rights. Perhaps one day we will see Tom Hanks playing Sam Whiting or Henry Adderley?

Why Nassau? What attracted Confederates to the Bahamian port?

CDR: While other ports like Bermuda, Havana, Matamoras were important to the Confederacy, Nassau played a central role for a few important reasons. There was an established merchant class that was ready to jump on the opportunities presented by the war. Despite claims of British neutrality, there was also a governor and legislature who went out of their way to make things easy for the Confederates.

The geography of the Bahamas was also important. The proximity to the southeastern coast of the Confederacy was obviously desirable. Parts of the Bahamas are only 90 miles from Florida. And some supplies continued to arrive from Florida and Georgia throughout the conflict. The key blockade running ports of Charleston and Wilmington were only about two days from Nassau by steam-powered ship. These two ports were close to Lee’s armies in Virginia where much of the fighting was going on. Nassau was about the same distance from Wilmington as Bermuda was and Nassau was considerably closer to Charleston than Bermuda was. Closeness mattered as every part of
the ship that wasn’t needed for coal could be used for contraband.

The nature of the Bahamas archipelago was a critical advantage to the blockade runners. International law did not allow for Union ships to harass blockade runners within three miles of a neutral country’s shores. With thousands of islands scattered over hundreds of miles, a blockade running ship being pursued could easily slip into neutral waters. This potentially gave them a head start of a hundred miles or more from Nassau to Wilmington and Charleston.

As I have so many more questions, let’s start with the nature of the vessels. You mentioned already that there was a careful balance of coal and cargo and you have pictures in the book, what size of ships are we talking about here? Smaller coastal traders or large ocean-going ships?

CDR: The blockade running ships evolved as the blockade tightened and became more effective. In the beginning of the war, pretty much any ship would do and even ships powered solely by wind were able to get through. Small sailing vessels were able to sneak through to some extent throughout the war but as the US Navy went to steam power the larger blockade runners needed steam to outrun them.

The ships made use of early stealth technology in the blockade runner’s efforts to be invisible during their approach to Confederate ports. Anthracite coal was preferred on approach to shore since it did not produce smoke. The ships were painted, often in Nassau, to be the gray color of the sea. They were built with low profiles. The best blockade runners, usually built in Glasgow, were close to 300 feet long, displacing nearly 1000 tons and with speeds of over 15 knots.