The Officers of the CSS Shenandoah. by Angus Curry. (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2006. Cloth cover, Pp. 448, $59.95)

The C.S.S. Shenandoah is often considered one of the most effective vessels in the Confederate Navy during the later years of the Civil War. Unfortunately, scholarship to date has been somewhat limited in its accuracy, due to the lack of available primary source materials. Agnus Curry’s examination of the mission of the Shenandoah and her crew is a riveting account of the details of such an overwhelming mission. Curry’s primary argument is the idea that experience changed the lives of her Southern officers.

Curry opens the book with a very detailed examination of what he considers to be the most disregarded portion of the story, explored by historians to date. His examination of the crew, and the condition in which they found themselves and their military careers before the war, provides wonderful insight to the struggles which they would face along the journey. First hand accounts come from the Shenandoah’s executive officer Lieutenant William Whittle, the sea journal of Lieutenant Francis Chew, and the personal diaries of Surgeon Charles Lining and Midshipman John Mason, which, according the Curry, are previously unreferenced sources in past historical research. From these sources and other biographies, Curry tells the personal stories of each of the Southern officers. In the third and fourth chapters of the book, Curry explores the hardships of the crew at the beginning of the voyage. The C.S.S. Shenandoah was converted from the British merchant steam ship Sea King. Like many of the converted Confederate warships, she was not initially equipped for her mission of preying on Union merchant vessels. Curry explores the conversion of the ship in spite of the skeleton crew aboard and the lack of resources with which to prepare such a ship for the mission at hand. Additionally, the author inspects the nature of the crew’s morale throughout much of the mission’s first year, noting the changes in command structure, which seem to have influenced the officer’s morale in particular. The Officers of the CSS Shenandoah notes the strained interpersonal relations of the officers and especially explores the tensions with their commanding officer, Lieutenant Waddell. In his final contribution to the early stages of the voyage, Curry explores the crew’s stay in Melbourne and the somewhat hostile response from the Union sentimentalistic public. Chapters seven through nine explore the crux of the mission, the Shenandoah’s hunt for whalers in the northern Pacific, and the respective naval engagements to devastate the Union resources. It becomes evident, through Curry’s research and the personal notes and diaries, that at this point in the voyage the general morale of the officers had collapsed under the failing leadership of their commander. Certainly the crew was not to the point of mutiny, but much of their writings seemed to expose the break down in communication of the Southern officers. In concluding his research, Curry examines the post-war mentality and how the officers handled the Confederate defeat.

Curry’s exploration of the lives of the Southern officers aboard the C.S.S. Shenandoah during the last years of the Civil War is enlightening. To date no one historian has been able to paint a complete picture of the events surrounding the last Confederate unit to surrender. Throughout the monograph Curry takes an interest in the personal journeys of the men aboard. This attention to detail has provided some insight into the lives of the men and has shifted the view of the mission from a strictly historical event to a central moment in the lives of the officers. This is truly an insightful work, which has changed the way we will look at the mission of and events aboard the Shenandoah during the Civil War.

Will Coleson
Oklahoma Christian University