



A History of Ironclads: The Power of Iron Over Wood

John V. Quarstein

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One of history's greatest naval engagements, the Battle of Hampton Roads, occurred on March 8 and 9, 1862. On the first morning, the Confederate ironclad the CSS Virginia, formerly known as the Merrimack, sank two Union wooden warships, proving the power of the armored vessels over the traditional sailing ships. The next morning, the Virginia engaged the Union ironclad USS Monitor to a draw in a battle that significantly altered naval warfare. It was the first engagement between ironclads and ushered in a new era of warship construction and ordnance. The 25, 000 sailors, soldiers and civilians who witnessed the battle knew then what history would soon confirm: wars waged on the waters would never be the same. The seemingly invincible Monitor and Virginia were experimental ships, revolutionary combinations of new and old technology, and their clash on March 9, 1862, was the culmination of over 2, 000 years of naval experience. The construction and combat service of ironclads during the Civil War were the first in a cascade of events that influenced the outcome of the war and prompted the development of improved ironclads as well as the creation of new weapons systems, such as torpedoes and submarines, needed to counter modern armored warships.

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