

The Monitor & Merrimack's Second Battle?

The Battle of Hampton Roads, between the *Monitor* and the *Merrimack*, in 1862, is one of the most important naval skirmishes in history. After that historic confrontation on March 9—which most historians agree was a draw—the two ships never got a second chance to match guns or armor. The Union's *Monitor* went down in a storm later in the year, drowning sixteen of her crew. But what happened to the *Merrimack*?

The ship the Confederates called the *Virginia*, built from the hull of the *Merrimack*, spent the rest of her life in the lower Chesapeake. Captain Tattnall and the crew of *Merrimack* were frustrated that they could not lure the *Monitor* into another one-on-one shootout.

Unwilling to run the gauntlet of Union guns ready to pound the ironclad if the crew chose to make a run for the open sea, the *Merrimack*'s Captain Tattnall devised another plan.

In order to escape up the shallow James River, the crew pried off much of ship's legendary heavy armor, dumped most of her coal overboard and even tossed out all the crew's food and provisions.

When the captain realized that the undressed *Merrimack* was still too heavy to make it to safety, he ordered that the ship should be burned and the ironclad's 300 crewmembers should escape into the nearby woods. As he stepped from the burning ship, Midshipman Hardin Littlepage quickly dumped out his backpack and crammed in the weathered Confederate



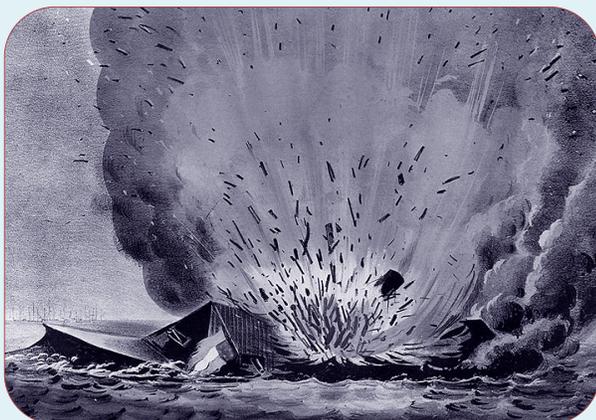
Her banner waving proudly, the *Merrimack* takes on the Union fleet, 9 March 1862
Courtesy of the U.S. Navy Art Collection
U.S. Naval Historical Center

banner that had flown from the ship's flagstaff during its famous battle with the *Monitor*, two months earlier.

At 4:45, on the morning of 11 May 1862, flames reached the ship's powder magazine and the *Merrimack* exploded with a tremendous roar. The most famous ironclad in history was gone—but her crew was still intact and itching for a second chance at the *Monitor*. That chance would come two days later.

With *Merrimack* gone, President Lincoln personally ordered the *Monitor* to steam up the James River to attack Richmond, the Confederate capital. Although their ship was no longer intact, the *Merrimack*'s crew was. And they were ready and waiting for the *Monitor*.

The men of the *Merrimack* had marched along the James River to set up a line of cannons, protected by fortress of mud and logs, on the bluffs above the water. As the *Monitor* appeared from around the bend, *Merrimack*'s crew went to work. They handled the guns well and pounded *Monitor* so soundly that she was forced to retreat down river. As rebel cheers echoed from the bluffs, the *Merrimack*'s men gazed up at the Confederate flag waving above their makeshift (but successful) fort. It was the very flag that Halden Littlepage had rescued from the deck of the *Merrimack*. Her crew had done it again.



Merrimack's own crew is forced to destroy her on 11 May 1862
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Confederates fire on the *Monitor* from above. May 1862
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