

Battle of the Ironclads Reading Comprehension

The Battle of the Ironclads, also known as the Battle of Hampton Roads, was likely the most important naval battle of the American Civil War. On March 8–9, 1862, Confederate forces attempted to break a powerful Union naval blockade that had isolated Norfolk and Richmond from international trade by deploying their ironclad warship, the CSS Virginia, which was originally the USS Merrimack.

After the secession of the Southern states, the Confederacy had gained control of the Gosport Navy Yard and all of its ships formerly under Union control. Nevertheless, Union naval forces remained in control of several forts in the region and staged a powerful blockade that the Confederacy was initially powerless to break. Because of the Union's naval and industrial superiority, Confederate engineers were forced to think of new ways to combat the Union advantage. The world's first ironclad ship had set sail in France in 1860, and Southern engineers believed they could duplicate the idea. Work began in 1861 on the Merrimack, which had been partially destroyed and which was recently raised from the bed of the Elizabeth River. The plan was to build an iron shell around the ship and to outfit it with an iron ram. It took seven months to complete. When it was done, the armor encasing the Virginia was two inches thick backed by two feet of iron and pine. It was equipped with ten guns and fourteen gun ports and was ready for action by February of 1862.

When Union intelligence learned of the construction of the Virginia, they scrambled to make their own ironclad warship. Union naval officials commissioned Swedish architect John Ericsson to design what would be called the Monitor, an ironclad warship to equal the Virginia. Even though Ericsson actually completed the Monitor before the Virginia was finalized, the Virginia would be activated first and would wreak havoc in Hampton Roads before the Monitor could arrive. On the morning of March 8, 1862, the CSS Virginia stormed into the waters of Hampton Roads where it immediately engaged the Union fleet, utterly destroying the USS Cumberland with the ram, sinking the ship, and killing 120 sailors. The Virginia next destroyed the USS Congress, resulting in its surrender. Union attempts to shoot at the Virginia proved completely useless. Only darkness saved the remainder of the Union fleet. Naval officers aboard the Virginia and its support fleet planned to finish the job on the morning of March 9.

The next morning, much to the surprise of the Confederates, the Union ironclad Monitor met the Merrimack on her way to dispatching the remainder of the Union fleet. The two ironclads fired at each other at close range for hours, neither side able to sink the other. Eventually, each ship withdrew, prompting both sides to proclaim victory. Surprisingly, neither ship would ever fight again. The Virginia was set afire by the Confederacy after she became stuck in the shallow water of the James River. The Monitor would sink en route to North Carolina on December 31, 1861.

Today, most historians believe the Battle of the Ironclads was a draw, even though the Confederates failed to break the Union blockade. One thing is for sure—the ironclad warships used in this battle influenced navies around the world to abandon the construction of wooden war ships in favor of iron ones.

1.) Why did the Confederacy decide to build the CSS Virginia?

- a.) For naval superiority over the Union.
- b.) To capture as many Union sailors as possible.
- c.) To intimidate the Union.
- d.) To break the Union blockade.

2.) Why was the Union blockade so harmful to the Confederacy?

- a.) It prevented them from building ships.
- b.) It prevented major cities in Virginia from trading with foreign countries.
- c.) Thousands of sailors were captured or killed.
- d.) It threatened Washington DC.

3.) Union forces...

- a.) had completely evacuated Hampton Roads.
- b.) were in control of all of the Hampton Roads.
- c.) were destroying southern port cities.
- d.) were in control of some Hampton Roads forts.

4.) What does an engineer do?

- a.) Figure out ways to build things
- b.) Sails ships
- c.) Figures out how to buy things
- d.) Decides what military tactics to use

5.) Which of the following is true about ironclad ships?

- a.) The CSS Virginia was the world's first.
- b.) The Monitor was the world's first.
- c.) The idea was first thought of by the Confederacy.
- d.) The first ironclad ship sailed in France.

6.) The CSS Virginia...

- a.) was equipped with 24 guns.
- b.) was equipped with iron plates four feet thick.
- c.) was equipped with 14 gun ports.
- d.) was ready for action in 1861.

7.) In its first combat, the CSS Virginia...

- a.) was destroyed by Union warships.
- b.) destroyed several Union warships.
- c.) was badly damaged.
- d.) broke the naval blockade.

8.) Who won the Battle of the Ironclads?

- a.) The Confederacy
- b.) The Union
- c.) Neither side
- d.) The Monitor

9.) Which of the following phrases best explains what happened to the CSS Virginia and the USS Monitor after the Battle of the Ironclads?

- a.) They both played an important part in the war after their initial battle.
- b.) They were both used after the war.
- c.) They both played no role in the remainder of the war.
- d.) They were both sold to other countries to improve their respective navies.

10.) The main effect of the Battle of the Ironclads was...

- a.) the devastation of the Confederate fleet.
- b.) the withdrawal of Union forces from their naval blockade.
- c.) an increase in iron manufacturing in the Confederacy.
- d.) a worldwide conversion of wooden naval ships to iron naval ships.