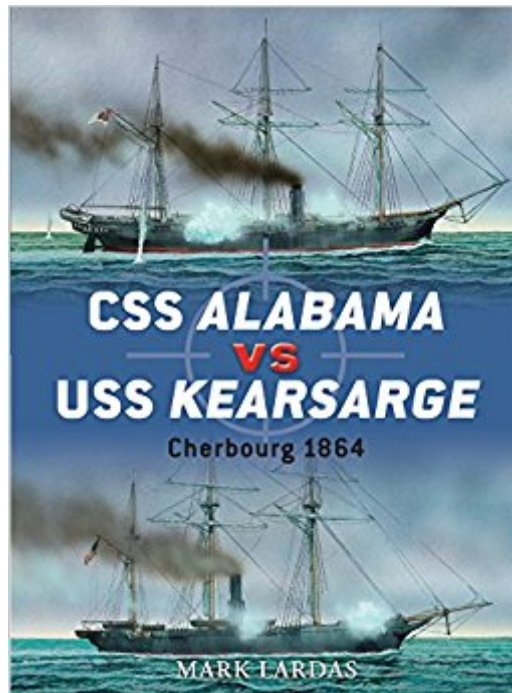


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# CSS Alabama Vs USS Kearsarge: Cherbourg 1864 (Duel)



## Synopsis

By the time of American Civil War things had changed from the Age of Fighting Sail - steam power and explosive shells were transforming naval warfare. Iron was beginning to supplant wood. Britain had just finished HMS Warrior, an iron-hulled warship and coastal ironclads dominated the waters off the United States. The changes meant that ships sank, during battles instead of afterwards. The fights were no less bloody, but in addition to flying splinters, a host of other dangers were added - burst steam boilers, fire due to exploding shells, and the burst from the shells themselves. But, just as in the age of sail, warship captains that won one-on-one battles with another warship became as famous as modern sports stars. During the course of the American Civil War, three single ship actions were fought between Union cruisers and Confederate raiders: CSS Florida vs. USS Wachusett, CSS Alabama vs. USS Hatteras, and CSS Alabama vs. USS Kearsarge. This book will present those, with an emphasis on the most famous battle: Alabama's fight with Kearsarge. Next to the battle between USS Monitor and CSS Virginia, no other naval duel of the American Civil War drew as much interest. That story is told from the eyes of the participants filtered through the lens of historical analysis available since the battles were fought. This includes archeological studies of wrecks of some of these ships, making this book an indispensable guide for anyone interested in Civil War and naval history.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Naval warfare during the American Civil War was in a period of great flux, with new technology

forcing a re-think of tactics. In *CSS Alabama vs. USS Kearsarge 1864*, in Osprey's *Duel-series*, naval historian Mark Lardas brings some of these changes into sharp relief through the lens of Union attempts to bring elusive Confederate raiders to heel. The *CSS Alabama* is at the forefront of this account, but the *CSS Sumter*, *Shenandoah* and *Florida* are also featured. The author mounts his narrative atop two pillars - a discussion of evolving naval technology and a tactical dissection - although other aspects of this duel are covered, as well. Overall, this is an excellent, engaging narrative and should be in any Civil War library. In the opening section on design and development - which is very well written and understandable - the author discusses how three revolutionary technologies (steam power, iron construction and percussion fuses) dramatically changed warships just prior to the Civil War. He notes that although many Civil War warships looked superficially similar to earlier warships, they were in fact quite different. He notes that changes in armament, such as rifled barrels and explosive shells, as well as the shift to fewer but larger guns had a big impact upon naval combat. Ships were also becoming double the size of previous warships, but with smaller crews. He then discusses the specific evolution of Union cruisers and Confederate raiders, and provides a side-view plate of both *CSS Alabama* and *USS Kearsarge*. The author provides a 5-page section on the strategic situation, which includes a map of raider operations in 1863-65. Unfortunately, this map is not very useful because it does not depict Union Navy anti-raider deployments or ports where the raiders could expect to purchase coal or areas where Union shipping was attacked. I was also disappointed that there was no discussion of how the Union Navy went about hunting raiders; he simply says that they sent a few cruisers in pursuit, but there is no mention how they went about this. Nor is there any real discussion of efforts by the US Navy to compile information from sightings of raiders from various sources. Indeed, a duel such as this has a vital strategic/intelligence component which was omitted. Following this section, the author discusses the technical specifications (armament, structure, and propulsion) of the major participants. A 10-page section discusses the combatants, including profiles of Raphael Semmes and John Winslow. The section on combat is 17 pages in length and focuses on three actions: *Alabama vs. Hatteras*, *Alabama vs. Kearsarge* and *Wachusett vs. Florida*. There are three color plates by Peter Dennis and one map to support this section. The author's combat narratives are succinct but incisive. I particularly liked the way that he dealt with the controversy surrounding the end of *CSS Alabama* (Confederate gunnery just not very good, Union "chain armor" not a major factor). The combat section is followed by a 6-page section on statistics, which provides data for each action. As the author notes, victory depended upon accuracy rather than volume of fire, as it did in times past. Overall, *CSS Alabama vs. USS Kearsarge 1864* is an excellent volume, although

there were some areas that I felt came up short. Graphically, the volume is a bit weak, even with the Peter Dennis artwork; the previous New Vanguard title had much better artwork on Alabama. As mentioned, the strategic aspect of the duel was barely touched. Finally, the author makes a big point about the role of gunnery in the duel and cites the CSS Alabama for inadequate gunnery training, but missed an opportunity to discuss gunnery training in the combatants section. It would have been useful for him to discuss how gunnery training was conducted (what ranges? What types of ammunition?) and more specifics about gunnery in combat, such as how do you "aim" a weapon with no sights? Issues such as roll of the ship would also seem to be important, since CSS Alabama kept "shooting high." Were they timing their salvos wrong? Nor does he discuss whether guns fired individually or in salvos or how fire was directed. To be sure, these are tiny distractions from any otherwise excellent volume, but they do invite further research and writing on this topic.

CSS ALABAMA vs USS KEARSARGE: CHERBOURG 1864  
MARK LARDAS  
OSPREY PUBLISHING, 2011  
QUALITY SOFTCOVER, 80 PAGES, \$17.95, CHARTS, GRAPHS, TABLES, PHOTOGRAPHS, MAPS, DRAWINGS

During The War Between The States, the Confederacy's commerce raiders sought to weaken the United States by driving U.S. merchant shipping from the seas. Many Northern shipowners, fearing the loss of their vessels, quickly sold their ships to foreign neutrals. Rapidly rising maritime insurance rates put other shipowners out of business. Stephen R. Mallory, formerly chairman of the U.S. Senate's Naval Affairs Committee and now the new Secretary of the Navy for the Confederacy decided to commission a number of deep water cruisers to seek out and destroy the Northern merchant fleet. The pinnacle of commerce raider design, the CSS Alabama, enjoyed considerable success in this endeavor, capturing 65 merchant vessels. One of the U.S. Navy's most advanced warships, the cruiser Kearsarge, spent most of the war hunting these Confederate raiders, culminating in an epic clash with the CSS Alabama off the coast of France in June, 1864. This book, CSS ALABAMA vs USS KEARSARGE: CHERBOURG, 1864 is a well-written and nicely illustrated account on one of the South's most well-known ships-its voyages, its capture of Northern vessels, and its final defeat at the hands of the USS Kearsarge. While this is an excellent primer in regard to the CSS Alabama and the USS Kearsarge, there were a few mistakes that need to be pointed out to the reader:

- \*Page 20-The correct specifications for the USS Kearsarge are:  
Launched-5 October 1861  
Displacement-1,570 tons  
Length Between Perpendiculars-198 feet 6 inches  
Depth Of Hold-15 feet 9 inches  
Crew-160 men  
Armament-Also carried a small 12-pounder boat howitzer  
Maximum Speed-11.2 knots under steam power
- \*Page 24-The correct specifications for the CSS Alabama are:  
Built-John Laird Sons and Company at their

shipyards at Birkenhead, Cheshire. Launched-15 May 1862 Extreme Breadth-31 feet 9 inches Depth Of Hold-14 feet Crew-144 men Armament-Added a 110-pound rifled gun while in Capetown in August, 1863.\*Page 44-Semmes' book was published in 1852 not 1851. The CSS Florida was built by William C. Miller & Sons of Toxteth, Liverpool. The CSS Sumter was a converted packet. Semmes didn't abandon the CSS Sumter in Havana but paid it off in Gibraltar. It then entered British service as the Gibraltar and served as a blockade runner. Upon his return to the Confederacy, Semmes was commissioned a brigadier general in the Army of Northern Virginia and was given command of a naval brigade. He then marched his brigade to General Joseph E. Johnston's Army of Tennessee where they surrendered at Greensboro, North Carolina on April 26, 1865.\*Page 45-Semmes would be charged with violating military codes by escaping from the CSS Alabama after she had struck her colors. U.S. Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles planned to try him before a military commission but the U.S. Supreme Court denied the jurisdiction of the commission and Semmes was released.\*Page 49-Winslow's service was far from undistinguishable-it was his ability to organize effective crews that attracted the U.S. Navy's attention. Winslow was promoted to captain in July, 1862 not July, 1863. His career was cut short because while leading a section of gunboats from the USS St. Louis in 1862, his left arm was almost severed due to flying fragments from an anchor train. He refused to relinquish command and spent only a few weeks on medical leave. It was Winslow's aggressiveness that got him command of the USS Kearsarge but it also helped when the U.S. Navy relieved the then ship's commanding officer, Captain Charles W. Pickering for not vigorously pursuing Confederate commerce raiders. There were at least 25 Union warships tasked with searching for the CSS Alabama at one time.\*Page 64-Assistant Surgeon D. Herbert Llewellyn drowned because he couldn't swim after the CSS Alabama had been sunk. He was later awarded the Confederacy's Southern Cross of Honor.\*Page 75-Captain John A. Winslow is the third person from the left in the photograph.\*Page 77-USS Kearsarge also had the advantage of chain strung over the vital middle parts of the ship to protect its engines, boilers, and magazines from enemy fire. This technique had proven itself in fighting along the Mississippi River. An outward sheathing of one-inch thick wood painted the same color as the rest of the hull concealed this from Confederate observation. The French had informed Semmes about it though, but he elected instead not to use chains from the CSS Alabama's lockers for the same purpose. This book is an excellent primer on the development of the Confederacy's commerce raiding force and the ships the Union sent against them; covering three dramatic warship duels: CSS Alabama vs USS Hatteras, CSS Alabama vs USS Kearsarge, and CSS Florida vs USS Wachusett. Lt. Colonel Robert A. Lynn, Florida Guard Orlando, Florida

The research and the writing are excellent. I knew it was a short book when I bought it and that's OK. I am happy to have it in my Civil War library for those reasons. But.... I would have liked to have given it a minimum of 4 stars, if not 5. I did consider 2 stars and settled for 3. The formatting is dismal. There are illustrations with no captions, sequential blank pages, and the battle maps are not readable, except for the legend section, which is sometimes larger than the battle path, making the legend the only readable part. When it isn't, you get a nice battle path, and have no idea of what you are looking at. The pastel colors are too close together in the original to have enough differentiation in a 3G Kindle. They are all blurry shades of gray, and too small to see, let alone read. It's an either or situation. Either you can read the legend and can't see the battle path, or you can see the battle path, and can't read the legend. It's extremely frustrating. Yes, it is "optimized" for larger Kindles, but many of us do not have 3D Fires. I tried deleting it and downloading it again as suggested, and I still have uncaptioned illustrations and consecutive blank pages. suggested the Kindle Mac App, and that helped some with the battle maps, and some of the captions appeared as well. It's not only confusing to have 4 or even 5 consecutive blank pages, it's irritating. I don't think blank pages necessarily need to be reproduced, at least not 4 or 5 in a row. I'd recommend the actual book, from what I can see of it online.

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