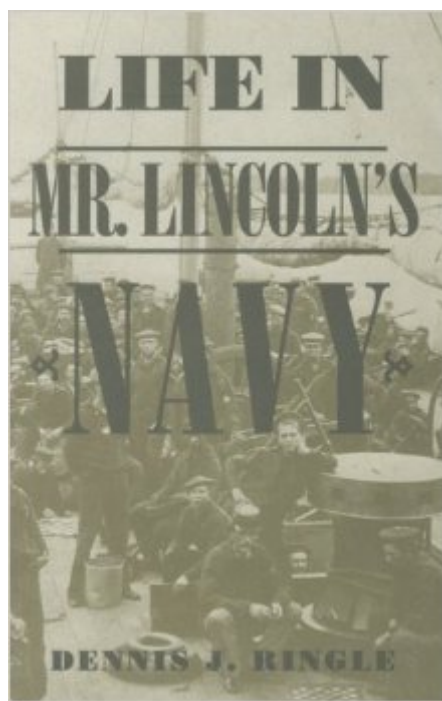


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# Life In Mr. Lincoln's Navy



## Synopsis

Every aspect of the common sailor's life in the Union navy—from recruiting, clothing, training, shipboard routine, entertainment, and wages to diet, health, and combat experience—is addressed in this study, the first to examine the subject in rich detail. The wealth of new facts it provides allows the reader to take a fresh look at nineteenth-century social history, including issues like racial integration in the military. As he examines daily life in the Union navy, Dennis Ringle also calls attention to the enlisted sailor's enormous contributions to the development of the U.S. Navy as it moved from wood and sail to steam and iron. A marine engineer with more than twenty years of naval experience, Ringle describes the lives of the steam engineers whose work later proved critical to the success of the ironclad monitors and the development of the powerful predreadnought warships. His focus is on the sailors assigned to the western river vessels, the ships enforcing the blockade, and those dispatched to destroy Confederate commerce raiders. To reconstruct daily life, he draws on a large number of published and unpublished diaries, journals, and letters. To put the information in context, he compares the sailor's life to that of a soldier's, including health conditions to explain why, for example, fewer sailors died from disease than soldiers. Ringle's efforts to gain respect for the courageous Union sailors who helped save the nation are certain to bring them recognition, just as Bell Wiley's landmark studies *Billy Yank* and *Johnny Reb* did for the Civil War soldiers.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Lieut. Ringle is among the first to examine the many aspects of sailors' lives during the American Civil War. He examines topics such as the recruiting efforts of the U.S. Navy, compensation and promotion, training, entertainment, and disease to name but a few. This book is not the most eloquently written piece, but the extensive research and sheer fact that this is one of the first books to examine this aspect of CW naval history makes it a must for any American naval library. I find it valuable as a reference for topics that are difficult to find sources on (recruitment, etc.).

Endless treatments on the Civil War touch on everything about the armies, the men, and the campaigns they fought. Few books exist examining the naval facet of the war; an unforgivable omission since the navy played an integral component in the war's outcome. Dennis Ringle's *Life in Mr. Lincoln's Navy* is the first monograph to delve into examining the Yankee seaman. He discusses a variety of issues, from the type of men who enlisted, their training, food, medical care, social activities, integration with African Americans, shipboard and battle routine, and most importantly, their role in proving the new technological innovations of the ironclad. Dennis Ringle's book is a good, though brief, view of the Union seaman, his role in the war, and the evolution of naval technology. He provides a tantalizing glimpse into the hardships endured by the naval leadership to build and recruit a fighting force. The seaman endured periods of boredom, punctuated by happy social times and terrifying bouts of battle horror. Ringle points out several areas where the army failed, but where the navy succeeded. One is in medical care and he makes a blanket statement that army surgeons had lacked in professional reading and competency. This is not true. Having read extensively Alfred Bollet's "Civil War Medicine: Challenges and Triumphs," H.H. Cunningham's "Doctors in Gray," and George Adams' "Doctors in Blue," the army dwarfed the navy in size and, thus, naturally (proportionally) incurred higher casualties and disease (amongst other issues). The army did possess a core of incompetent doctors, but eventually weeded them out through examination boards. Additionally, many surgeons were well read. Many were aware of scurvy, the use of hypodermic needles, and many instituted very remarkable treatments for disease and wounds. Ringle's statement leads a reader to believe army surgeons were generally incompetent. Historians today continue to try and counter this fallacy (as evidenced by the three previously mentioned books, which are exceptional treatments on Civil War medicine). What should be challenged was not competency, but the willingness of army leadership to actually listen to the surgeon and sanitary aid commissions' recommendations on health care, something that would happen, but only after the passage of some time. Nevertheless, Ringle's book is an excellent primer on understanding the navy seaman. Incorporating a variety of diaries, correspondence, and official

records, the reader departs with several important views. One, the tenacity and determination of those charged with outfitting and testing the dangerous new technologies of steam and ironclad laid the framework for war's success. It also laid the framework for the modern day navy. Second, the monitor-class warships were the war's greatest naval innovation, spawning further technical innovation and experimentation. Third, that racial integration amongst men could work. The navy needed the black man and in turn gave them equal footing with their white shipmates. Overall, the seaman was similar to his army brethren and can lay rightful claim in having performed just a vital a role in the war's outcome as the infantryman.

Bottom Line first: Factual if dull. Navy Commander Dennis J. Ringle's *Life in Mr. Lincoln's Navy* follows the life of a Navy man from enlistment to death or discharge. Given the title, the book is almost exclusively about the Union Navy with their southern serving counterparts left to incidental comments or another author. Topics are covered in a logical order and backed with some scholarly research. There are some grand claims about; for example the quality of the food, mostly well documented and the quality of medical care, perhaps a bit over stated. This is a good book, just not a lively read. For the high school or undergraduate student, it is a good enough research tool. A more advanced student may properly feel that topic coverage tends to be shallow. *Life in Mr. Lincoln's Navy* lacks style or personality. Commander Ringle writes rather like an engineer. Factual, systematically and with research to back his major claims. The Commander served much of his Navy career in the engineering department, his style may not be entirely accidental. The American Civil War is understood to be a time of important innovation and more immediately the proving ground for a number of technological advances in engineering. Steam engines did not just augment sail powered, in many ships it was the only propulsion. Muzzle loading cannon firing mostly solid shot gave way to breech loading rifled guns, firing solid or explosive shells from behind iron and or from inside revolving turrets. Much of the Union Navy's War was inshore, on rivers and near to supply depots. This meant that re-victualing could be conducted with exceptional regularity. Ringle does well in noting how well Navy command organized to fulfill this mission. However the use of ice to preserve fresh meats represented a major step forward in the movement and handling of perishables. More time could have been spent describing the collection and storage of ice from the rivers and lakes of the north, packed in straw or sawdust such that it could last well into warmer seasons and climates. On the subject of entertainment, the Commander would have us believe that sailors stayed with sentimental or religious music and looked forward to shore leave for better restaurants, the occasional drink and not much else. His delicacy on matters

of sex, raunchy sea chanties, hazing or service and national rivalries creates an obvious gap in claims he may have exhausted his topic. The life of officers is not well documented. Between the officers of the engineering branch and the traditional sea service, would by Commanders Ringles early years be a mostly brothers in arms friction. However in the early years the ship's Chief Engineer was thought of as a lowly mechanic and may not have been welcome in the officer's mess. Beyond this there was no time spent on how a person might become an officer. If the Navy had political officers -meaning usually senior officers directly commissioned on the bases of political connections or the ability to raise a number of volunteers- Ringle does not say. Because the Civil War navy had ongoing problems providing trained sailors to man her ships, foreign nationals, and freed slaves can be found mixing in all part of the enlisted crew, though very rarely as members of the Officer's Mess and perhaps not even the Chief's, or senior enlisted mess. We learn little about these Chiefs or Warrants in any form and consequently less about the likelihood of advancement for sailors of color or of foreign birth. Life in Mr. Lincoln's Navy is an ok book. Given the writing style perhaps it is good that it is short. It is not all there is to know about the American Civil War Sailor.

The book is good, but it a lot flatter than I had hoped. Perhaps a few personal stories could give its heartline a little beat. It is interesting and easy to read, but too matter-of-fact. This book is not begging me to pick it up - but its history now.

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