

# Preparing to Board or be Boarded

Small arms and tactics used to defend the Union's ships.

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## The Ship's Crew

During the Civil War most ships and naval stations had marine detachments. The marines were drilled in manning all the guns. When the ship's company was called to quarters, some marines could be distributed among the gun divisions, or could comprise an entire gun crew. The marines perfect at large as with small arms. They usually formed into a single division under their lieutenant on the spar deck. From there, the captain could order them into the rigging as sharpshooters, to support boarding parties or repel enemy boarders on the spar deck, or conduct operations ashore. Although they participated in few major land battles, marines from the blockading squadrons conducted numerous raids along the Confederate coast throughout the Civil War.

The whole crew had to be proficient in executing tactics that would enable them to fight, as the naval manuals said, "by land and sea," by exercising the guns, handling small arms, pikes and cutlasses, and manning the boats. They also had to be ready to execute hasty repairs of battle damage, fight fires, and keep the ship afloat while continuing to sail. Every man had to know his assigned duty, as well as those of several comrades, should they become casualties. The survival of the ship and men depended on it.

Training the crew was no easy task. Both officers and men had a lot to learn about their new professions. To prevent monotony and improve readiness for action, the captain would vary the training sequences, so no two days' schedules were alike. Drills could be called at any time.

## Battle Alarm

General Quarters was the alarm to man battle stations and prepare the ship to fight. With the sound of the drum roll and alarm rattles, boatswains' whistles, and the shouted order for "all hands prepare ship for action," men ceased routine activity or sprang from their sleep to perform those duties that their training had made second nature to them.

In battle, a warship's main strength was found in her "great guns. Each gun crew was responsible for a pair of guns: one on the port side, and its opposite number on the starboard. While the gun crews assembled at their guns and prepared them for firing, the rest of the ship's company were reporting to their stations.

The carpenter's and sail maker's departments reported to the Powder Division, but worked under the direction of their respective warrant officers. They removed stanchions and bulkheads, and placed gratings over the hatches to facilitate handling the guns and minimize the effects of flying splinters. They then secured all portholes, prepared the pumps for controlling leaks, rigged the fire engine, and checked the flood cocks. During a fight, they stood by with plugs and patches to repair shot holes, clear wreckage, and fight fires. The master-at-arms and his corporals extinguished galley fires and all unauthorized lights, and ensured the safe use of lamps where they were required. They had loose gunpowder swept from the deck, or dumped from passing boxes over tubs of water, to prevent accidental ignition.

The surgeon, along with his assistant surgeons, steward (petty officer), and nurses (lower enlisted men) of the Surgeon's Division established an aid station in the cockpit, a section of the hold below the waterline. They prepared tourniquets for controlling the bleeding of the wounded and distributed them to the various divisions. The paymaster secured the cash, books, and stores in the wardroom, while his steward safeguarded the property in his custody in his compartment, and kept an eye on the spirit room.

The Division of Marines formed ranks on the quarterdeck, loaded their muskets, and fixed bayonets. Under the command of their lieutenant, they stood by to execute the captain's orders to fire into the opposing ship, repel boarders, man cannons, or lead an assault that would take the fight to the enemy.

Pistols, cutlasses, muskets, boarding pikes and battleaxes were distributed to sailors from the armory. Each man knew his position and function in the event of any contingency. In addition to their duties on the guns, each member of a gun crew was designated as members of either the First or Second Division of Boarders. In a close-in fight, the second half of the gun crew of each piece, and all petty officers on the spar deck except the quartermasters at the wheel and on the conn, were First Boarders, armed with pistols and cutlasses. The first halves of each gun crew were the Second Borders. When the order to "Board the Enemy" was given, the broadside guns continued to fire with depressed elevations to damage enemy's gun deck and hull. The spar deck guns were loaded with grapeshot and the howitzers with canister to sweep the enemy's deck. The marines and musket equipped seamen fired at visible enemy personnel. The borders then attacked to seize the opponent following a hail of gunfire.

If an enemy attempted to board, the order "Prepare to Repel Boarders" would be given to defend the ship. One fourth of the men in each gun crew, and the remainder of the master's division, except those designated as boarders or on the wheel, were assigned as Pikemen. The pikemen formed behind those crewmen armed with cutlasses. The marines, with bayonets fixed, formed behind the pikemen to cover them. At the command "Repel Boarders," grape and musketry was brought to bear upon the enemy as they prepared to attack. Men remaining on the broadside guns continued to fire, and stood by with pikes to repel enemy attempting to enter through gun ports or quarter galleries. The howitzers, charged with canister, stood ready should the enemy gain a foothold on the spar deck. When the emergency became desperate enough to call all hands from below, the pikemen took up muskets, and left their pikes for the members of the powder division to use as they came on deck.

One member of each gun crew was designated a Fireman, and equipped with a fire-bucket and battleaxe to extinguish flames and clear wreckage.

The number, type and frequency of drills were vital to the ship's defense and the survival of the crew. The realism that went into the training enhanced the crew's motivation and learning ability. The constant drilling, day and night, molded the crew into a well-trained unit as it developed into an efficient fighting team.