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**Des Moines
Civil War
Roundtable**

**September 2025
Headquarters District Iowa
General Order No. 503**

- The **First meeting** of the Fall campaign will **September 3** at the **The Machine Shed**
- The bar will open at 5:30 with the meal served at 6:30.
- Our program *Professor Brian Jordan (Sam Huston State University)*
Marching Home: Union Veterans and Their Unending Civil War.
- Meal choices **Old Fashioned Pot Roast and Stuffed Pork Loin** at
\$26.00
- **Reservations & payment** will be accepted until **August 31.**
By command of Brigadier General Gordon McKenzie

Our web address www.dmcivilwar.com

Ronald R Nurmi
Colonel & Adjutant
email- dmcwrt@gmail.com
1424 E Walnut St #4 DM 50316

We have a price increase for the meal to **\$26.00.**

It is time for many to renew your membership the dues are the same this year

\$30.00 for Newsletter via PDF

\$35.00 for Newsletter via USPS

\$40.00 for families

If you have any question please contact me at dmcwrt@gmail.com or 515491-3626

USS *Camanche*'s Construction Odyssey

by **Neil P. Chatelain** Posted on August 11, 2025

When it comes to the Civil War, there was a recognized industrial advantage the United States held over the Confederacy. The loyal states had more factories, railroads, shipyards, and natural resources fueling industrial output. The Confederacy had these things, but in fewer numbers. As the war continued, the United States never had problems arming its soldiers or keeping them relatively supplied. Warships were constructed at record pace, including dozens of ironclads. That does not mean that the United States was impervious to gross delay and unforeseen challenges. USS *Camanche*, a *Passaic*-class ironclad monitor, provides a great case study in the traditional challenges of getting a ship to sea, as well as how the unforeseen can significantly inhibit construction programs.

If you have not heard of USS *Camanche*, there is a reason. It did not besiege Charleston, enter Mobile Bay, or conquer the Mississippi River. In fact, depending on what you use as a measuring stick, it was not even commissioned as a warship during the Civil War. That was because of its mission, and the odyssey it underwent to be constructed, launched, and commissioned.

The *Passaic*-class monitors were built following USS *Monitor*'s performance at the battle of Hampton Roads. Following that battle, John Ericsson made numerous improvements on the overall design and the Navy Department ordered ten of these. They were intended to lead assaults against Confederate ports. For example, seven of the ten participated in the failed April 1863 ironclad assault against Fort Sumter. *Camanche* was not among those however, as its mission was not to assault Confederate ports. Instead, it was envisioned to guard San Francisco.



Camanche was constructed by Secor and Company, a shipyard in Jersey City, New Jersey, for the sum of \$613,164.98. Built in 1862, it immediately ran into a problem. Since *Camanche* was allocated to California,

it was deemed less of a priority. When the *Passaic*-class monitor *Weehawken*'s engines failed in testing, replacement machinery was "commandeered right out of *Camanche*'s nearly completed hull."

Finished by early 1863, there was another problem. The only way to get to San Francisco was to bring it down around South America, and then up the Pacific coastline to California. The journey of thousands of miles was not something anyone looked forward to, especially considering USS *Monitor* foundered in a storm off North Carolina in December 1862. The small ironclad, only 200 feet long and displacing some 1300 tons, it was only 40% of the length and 15% of displacement of a modern *Arleigh Burke* class destroyer. It would never survive the trip.

There was a solution! Though, it meant going back to square one. *Camanche* would get to San Francisco, but not on its own. Instead, the completed ironclad was disassembled piece by piece. The separate parts were loaded in crates onto the merchant ship *Aquila*, which would make the journey. Detailed reassembly instructions were prepared, turning the ironclad into the equivalent of a massive Civil War Lego project. But if things went well, the ship would be assembled and ready for battle by early 1864.

The need to protect San Francisco was apparent. In March 1863, as *Aquila* was preparing, Confederate sympathizers were captured in San Francisco Bay. The group had purchased the sailing vessel *J.M. Chapman*, collected a crew, and were preparing to take the vessel to sea as a Confederate privateer. Thanks to good intelligence-gathering, *Chapman* was seized the morning of its departure by sailors from USS *Cyane*, port officials, and San Francisco police officers. Though the privateering threat was eliminated, desperate calls to boost the bay's defenses grew in furor with each passing day. *Cyane*'s

captain was advised to exercise increased caution in guarding the bay: “While at anchor you must guard against sudden surprise, particularly from steamers at night, drilling your men so that they may be prepared at a moment’s notice to come on deck with arms ready, without the delay of dressing.” *Aquila*’s arrival was highly anticipated, but it took 166 days for the ship to reach California. The steamer’s master had special instructions “to sink his ship” if Confederate raiders “hove in sight, and thus prevent the rebels from capturing a most dangerous and valuable prize.” The ship encountered no enemies however, and reached San Francisco in November 1863.

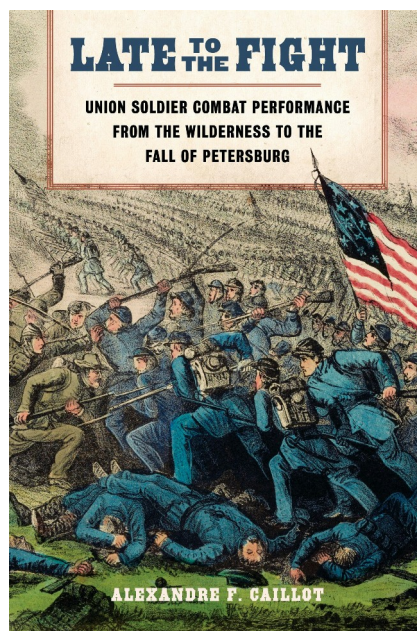
Disaster struck again when a heavy gale hit San Francisco Bay on November 15, 1863. There were some reports that a British ship got loose and rammed *Aquila*. Others said the cargo ship smashed against the wharf. Regardless, *Aquila* sank “with only about twenty-five feet of the after-hull and deck visible, the sea sweeping through and over her decks.” In efforts to contain the situation, *Aquila* was “made fast to the dock by chain cables, to prevent her listing seaward.”

Camanche was officially launched on November 15, 1864, “in the presence of many thousands of spectators,” with the ironclad’s deck packed with officials, and with “hundreds of little boats” looking on. The launching went off without a hitch (except some paint scraped off after it hit the drydock), one year and one day since *Aquila* first sank.

Outfitting took another six months, and *Camanche* was not officially commissioned as a warship until mid-1865. Many considered it just in time, as San Franciscans worried about the Confederate commerce raider *Shenandoah*.

On August 3, Navy Secretary Gideon Welles wired a short but clear message to California’s naval officers: “*Shenandoah* making depredations in Pacific. Department relies upon you to effect her capture.” *Camanche* stood ready guarding San Francisco, should *Shenandoah* launch an attack. Instead, the Confederate raider, upon learning of other Confederate surrenders, disarmed itself and steamed to England to surrender.

Great pains were undertaken to get *Camanche* ready to fight, but it never fired its guns in anger. The ship remained in San Francisco Bay, and was disarmed and sold after the Spanish American War. It became a coal collier in the bay, a job *Camanche* continued doing until the 1930’s. Envisioned to defend San Francisco, it turns out that USS *Camanche*’s greatest trial was instead simply being built.



Late to the Fight: Union Soldier Combat Performance from the Wilderness to the Fall of Petersburg. By Alexandre F. Caillot. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2025, Hardcover, 310 pp., \$50.00. Reviewed by Tim Talbott

In 1897, Frank Wilkeson published his *Recollections of a Private Soldier in the Army of the Potomac*. In it, Wilkeson, who enlisted in the 11th New York Battery during the winter of 1863-64 and before he was sixteen years old, presented an unflattering picture of his fellow enlistees as far as their motivations and level patriotism. After signing up in Albany, Wilkeson went to “the penitentiary building,” which apparently served as temporary housing for the new recruits. “There, to my utter astonishment, I found eight hundred or one thousand ruffians, closely guarded by heavy lines of sentinels, who paced to and fro, day and night, rifle in hand, to keep them from running away,” Wilkeson recalled. The impressionable Wilkeson noted that “A recruit’s social standing in the barracks was determined by the acts of villainy he had performed, supplemented by the number of times he had jumped the bounty.” Wilkeson filled the story of his journey to join the army at Brandy Station via steamboat and railroad with tales of gambling, thievery, and other moral shortcomings practiced by his fellow late-war recruits.

Images of those who historian Alexandre F. Caillot calls “later arrivals” have often been portrayed collectively in ways not much different from Wilkeson’s derisive descriptions. However, with *Late to the Fight: Union Soldier Combat Performance from the Wilderness to the Fall of Petersburg*, Caillot attempts to show that certainly not all of those who enlisted late in the war were conscripted bounty-jumping criminals devoid of patriotism.

Late to the Fight joins a recent trend in scholarship reappraising the quality and accomplishments of the men and units who either finally experienced combat or were recruited to fight in the second half of the Civil War. *Late to the Fight* follows studies like Edwin P. Rutan II’s *High-Bounty Men in the Army of the Potomac: Reclaiming Their Honor* (Kent St. University Press, 2024), as well as his earlier “*If I Have Got to Go and Fight I am Willing*”: A Union Regiment Forged in the Petersburg Campaign (RTD Publications 2015), and Edward Altemos’ *From the Wilderness to Appomattox: The Fifteenth New York Heavy Artillery in the Civil War* (Kent State University Press, 2023).

In his study, Caillot focuses on the combat performance of two Ninth Corps regiments—the 17th Vermont and the 31st Maine Infantry—who fought in the same brigade from the Battle of the Wilderness to the fall of Petersburg. Caillot claims, “examining untested units comprising primarily greenhorns provides a better means of assessing their fighting ability, as rookies in this case would be less influenced by guidance from or tension with veterans.” (4) Using a blend of soldiers’ primary sources and scholarly secondary sources allows Caillot to analyze “the soldiers’ lived experience while highlighting their achievements and missteps in combat.”

Unlike much of the literature on Civil War soldiers, which focuses on motivations, Caillot looks “instead on how well they perform under fire.” To assess their performance, he examines three factors: cohesion, combat power, and casualty rates. Cohesion is “obedience to commands and the ability to

engage the enemy as a unified force.” Combat power boils down to the unit’s “degree of success in completing tactical objectives.” Within proper understanding and context, casualty rates can also provide a good measure of combat effectiveness.

Caillot organizes *Late to the Fight* into five chapters. The initial chapter covers “Raising the Regiments,” which provides helpful information about the makeup and background of the 17th Vermont and 31st Maine. The next two chapters cover the regiments’ performance in the Overland Campaign; one chapter covering the Wilderness and Spotsylvania and the other North Anna and Cold Harbor. Similarly, the final two chapters cover the Petersburg Campaign, with actions of the First Offensive and the Battle of the Crater examined in Chapter 4 and Peebles Farm and the Ninth Offensive (April 2, 1865) comprising Chapter 5.

The evidence for these two regiments, and surely many other “later arrivals,” shows that they did well. As Caillot puts it: “These Federals overcame challenges in recruitment and training to perform well in eight major engagements.” However, as he also makes clear, “This finding does not speak to the experiences of all later arrivals, a population of some 820,000 men who donned the blue uniform between 1863 and 1865.”

Late to the Fight serves as an excellent, important, and corrective reminder of the potential pitfalls of using broad brushstrokes when interpreting any area of Civil War history; but particularly when it comes to labeling all later enlistees as unpatriotic and ineffective due to bounty incentives. Many “later arrivals” were simply too young to enlist in 1861 and 1862, while others had obligations that limited their participation earlier in the war. The methodology and analysis Caillot uses to determine unit combat performance are instruments that additional scholars will hopefully incorporate when examining other similar late war units.

