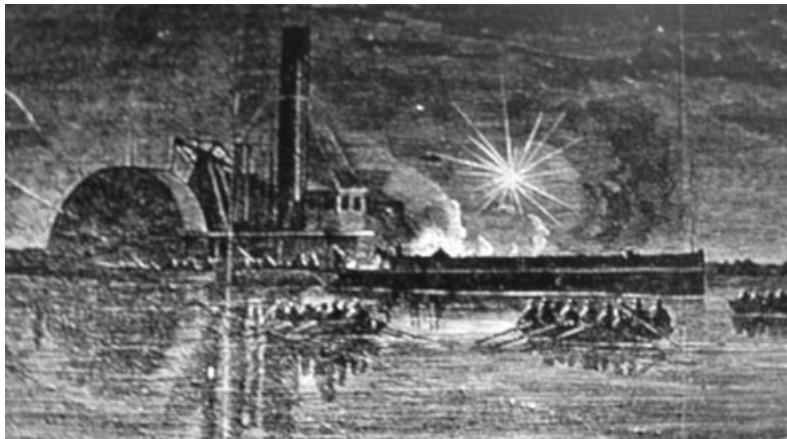# Underwriter, USS [1]

Underwriter, USS

by Paul Branch, 2006

The USS *Underwriter*, a navy gunboat [2], fought in the sounds and rivers of North Carolina during the Civil War [3]. Early in 1864 the *Underwriter* was in the Neuse River [4] at New Bern when Confederate forces under Maj. Gen. George E. Pickett mounted an attack to recapture the city. As part of the assault, about 250 Confederate sailors and marines in 14 boats and launches led by Cdr. John Taylor Wood secretly descended the Neuse River from Kinston and found the *Underwriter* anchored north of New Bern, close to the west bank of the river.

In one of the most daring encounters of the war, Wood's command boarded the *Underwriter* shortly after 2:30 a.m. on 2 Feb. 1864, and after vicious hand-to-hand fighting on deck, captured the ship and part of its crew. Five Confederates were killed along with nine Union sailors, including Acting Master Jacob Westervelt, the *Underwriter*'s commander. Many others were wounded. Unfortunately for the Confederates, however, the *Underwriter*'s fires were banked and it lacked sufficient steam to get under way. Once it was clear that the vessel had been captured, Union shore batteries opened fire on the ship. Wood had no choice but to burn it and retire back up the river, carrying with him the wounded of both sides and the Union prisoners. The *Underwriter* finally blew up and sank as the fire reached its magazine just before sunrise.

References:

John S. Carbone, *The Civil War in Coastal North Carolina* (2001).

T. J. Scharf, *The History of the Confederate States Navy from Its Organization to the Surrender of Its Last Vessel* (1887).

Royce Gordon Shingleton, *John Taylor Wood: Sea Ghost of the Confederacy* (1979).

Additional Resources:

"USS Underwriter Expedition." North Carolina's Civil War Story: North Carolina as a Civil War Battlefield. 2011. http://civilwarexperience.ncdcr.gov/biographies/underwriter.htm [5]

"Underwriter" Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships. U.S. Department of the Navy, Naval Historical Center. http://www.history.navy.mil/danfs/u1/underwriter-i.htm [6] (accessed June 6, 2012).

Conrad, Daniel B. "Capture of the USS Underwriter [7]." *Southern Historical Society Papers* 19. Richmond, Va., January, 1891.

Loyall, B.P. "Capture of the 'Underwriter' New Bern, 2 February 1864." *Histories of the several regiments and battalions from North Carolina, in the great war 1861-'65 Volume 5.* Goldsboro, N.C.: Nash Brothers. 1901. https://digital.ncdcr.gov/Documents/Detail/histories-of-the-several-regiments-and-battalions-from-north-carolina-in-the-great-war-1861-65-vol.-5/3931260?item=3936909 [8]

Gaines, W. Craig. *Encyclopedia of Civil War Shipwrecks* [9]. Baton Rouge: LSU Press. 2008.

Image Credits:

"Underwriter.jpg." North Carolina's Civil War Story: North Carolina as a Civil War Battlefield. 2011. http://civilwarexperience.ncdcr.gov/biographies/underwriter.htm [5]

Subjects:
Civil War (1861-1865) [10]
Military [11]
Ships [12]
Authors:
Branch, Paul, Jr. [13]
From:
Encyclopedia of North Carolina, University of North Carolina Press. [14]

1 January 2006 | Branch, Paul, Jr.