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Blockaders, Refugees & Contrabands: Civil War on Florida's Gulf Coast, 1861-1865

George E. Buker

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Blockaders, Refugees & Contrabands: Civil War on Florida's Gulf Coast, 1861-1865 George E. Buker Blockaders, Refugees, and Contrabands chronicles the role of the East Gulf Blockading Squadron in creating civil strife and warfare along the west coast of Florida during the Civil War. This history illuminates the Squadron's impact on Florida - the Confederate state most susceptible to actions by the U.S. Navy - and the far-reaching effects of its activities on the outcome of the War. Initially the East Gulf Blockading Squadron gave no indication that, with its allies - Florida's refugees and contrabands (escaped slaves) - it would create a civil war within Florida. When the Squadron raided the mainland it found sympathizers ashore who helped the sailors cut out blockade-runners, harass the enemy, and destroy coastal salt works. As the number of refugees and contrabands increased they became a source of manpower for the Squadron. After Confederate conscripts and army deserters fled to the impenetrable swamps of Florida's Gulf Coast, they turned to the Squadron for succor and aid. In time the blockaders, refugees, and contrabands joined forces to participate in fluid partisan combat actions. When Federal control of the Mississippi River cut the South's supply of western beef, the Confederacy turned to south Florida. The Union army enlisted the Squadron's refugees into the U.S. Second Florida Cavalry to keep the beef from rebel armies. This action elevated the conflict from guerrilla to conventional war. Additionally, the Second Infantry Regiment, U.S. Colored Troops, fought beside the blockaders and refugees, freeing and recruiting contrabands. All blockading squadrons had contacts with refugees and contrabands, but only the East Gulf Blockading Squadron utilized these allies to fostera civil war. The subsequent salt and cattle raids struck blows that were felt beyond the state and had a devastating impact on the balance of the Confederacy and on the ultimate course of the Civil War.

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