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*Donald L. Canney*

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## AFRICA SQUADRON

THE U.S. NAVY  
AND THE  
SLAVE TRADE,  
1842-1861

DONALD L. CANNEY



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**Donald L. Canney : Africa Squadron: The U.S. Navy and the Slave Trade, 1842-1861** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Africa Squadron: The U.S. Navy and the Slave Trade, 1842-1861:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Forgotten history  
By James D. Crabtree  
Although the United States Constitution outlawed the slave trade (while avoiding a discussion of slavery itself) the steps taken to eliminate this trade are rarely discussed in general works. This book addresses the Africa Squadron, a U.S. Navy unit organized to eliminate the slave trade (but primarily to protect legitimate American traders in the region). An interesting book and it is obvious that the author did extensive research. A good book, especially if you are interested in naval history.

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. A Scholar's Book - Useful but Tedious  
By David M. Dougherty  
The author is to be commended for writing a book on an obscure but important part of US naval history -- namely the formation and activities of the Africa Squadron of the US Navy in interdicting the slave trade from 1842 to 1861. The problem is that there was very little action to report and the squadron's effectiveness was severely limited due to the infighting in Congress over funding. This hardly makes for an exciting or even interesting work, in spite of the book's more than adequate coverage of the subject. It must be remembered that the US outlawed the slave trade and made the importation of slaves into the US illegal in 1807, long before the Civil War. The Royal Navy took up the heavy lifting to interdict the trade following their criminalizing of it also in 1807, and continued to act as the world's policeman in the Atlantic even after the American Civil War. The US enforcement of its law was delayed due to the War of 1812, and after that there was little funding for patrolling the Atlantic until 1839 when President Van Buren directed that a naval force be stationed off the African coast. This was duly accomplished in 1840 with the dispatch of two ships which returned in 1841. The key event that catalyzed the formation of a permanent Africa Squadron was the Webster-Ashburton Treaty with Great Britain in 1842, which required the US to establish a permanent squadron of eighty guns off the African coast to confront the slave trade. However, the orders to the squadron commander were written with the squadron's main mission to be the protection and futherance of legal American commerce and trade, and only secondarily the termination of the slave trade. In addition, the squadron was generally poorly supplied, given a territory to police that was far too large for its resources, and often the ships were the wrong type to be effective. The book goes into detail of each squadron commander's appointment and activities from 1842 to 1861 when it was terminated by Civil War necessities. The British were far more effective than the Americans, not the least due to employing steam ships in addition to sailing craft, and they were present in far greater numbers. Some of the commanders were mildly effective, other much less so. In general the effectiveness of the squadron was minimal and duty off the African Coast was seen as highly undesirable in the Navy. One of the principal negatives affecting the actions of ship captains was the legal problems surrounding the seizure of slavers. Several times slavers were seized and sent to the US for adjudication in American courts where the judges released the men and ships for various reasons, not always very defensible (sounds contemporary, doesn't it.) To make matters worse, the owners of the vessels then sued the captains personally for unlawful seizure, and the US Government refused to defend the captains (again, sounds like today.) Only after much political pressure and the passing of years while the captains faced ruin did the government pony up and take the captains off the hook. But the lesson was there -- if you enforced the law with rigor, you could pay severe personal consequences (I am reminded of the two border patrol officers in El Paso sentenced to long prison terms for wounding a smuggler several years ago and the smuggler was given immunity to testify against them.) Not suprisingly, enforcement lagged during this time. In 1859 the supply problem for the Africa squadron was finally solved and also steamers were dispatched to patrol in the doldrums where sailing vessels were often becalmed or ineffective in chasing the fast slavers. The number of seizures increased accordingly during the last two years before the Civil War ended the squadron's existence. The author includes drawings of the ships and slavers, also appendixes of lists of the navy ships, vessels seized, ships available for service and the secretaries of the navy. This is a scholarly work and it provides a very useful glimpse of the Navy's activities and problems during the time indicated. I recommend it to all who are interested in the detailed history of the US Navy during the 19th century or the slave trade, but most general readers will not fit this category.

1 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Detailed and dull  
By C. L. Veit  
"Africa Squadron" is incredibly detailed--perhaps too much so. Whole chapters are little more than the sewing together of the matter-of-fact deck logs of the ships on station in a given period. In this way, Canney has done an excellent job of portraying the tedium of the squadron's duties. Whole years could have been summed up with "Squadron patrolled, captured nothing, serving commander rotated home." Instead, the movements of every vessel are detailed--an excellent reference work, but tedious reading.

Donald L. Canney's study is the first book-length history of the U.S. Navy's Africa Squadron. Established in 1842 to enforce the ban on importing slaves to the United States, in twenty years' time the squadron proved ineffective. To officers and enlisted men alike, duty in the squadron was unpopular. The equatorial climate, departmental neglect, and judicial indifference, which allowed slavers back at sea, all contributed to the sailors' frustration. Later, the most damaging allegation was that the squadron had failed at its mission. Canney investigates how this unit earned a poor reputation and whether it is deserved. Though U.S. warships seized slave vessels as early as 1800, four decades passed before the Navy established a permanent squadron off the western coast of Africa to interdict U.S.-flag vessels participating in this trade. Canney traces the Navy's role in interdicting the slave trade, Great Britain's pressure on the U.S. government to curb slave traffic, the creation of the squadron, and how

individual politicians, department secretaries, captains, and squadron commanders interpreted the laws and orders from higher authorities, changing squadron operations. While famous ships and captains served on this station, none won distinction in the Africa Squadron. In the final analysis, the squadron was unsuccessful, even though it was the Navy's only permanent squadron with a specific, congressionally mandated mission: to maintain a quasi-blockade on a foreign shore. While Canney exonerates southern-born naval captains, who approached their work as diligently as their counterparts from the north, he demonstrates how the secretaries of the Navy—pro-slavery southern politicians—neglected the squadron.

From the Publisher Examines the squadron's ineffectiveness in countering U.S. citizen's involvement in the illegal slave trade Offers a major operational history of a neglected but important topic in U.S. naval history Clarifies the practical obstacles that naval commanders face in executing their missions About the Author Donald L. Canney a naval historian, is a prolific author whose books include Lincoln's Navy: The Ships, Men, and Organization, 1861–1865. He lives in Columbus, Ohio.