

A Civil War Biography

Charles William Read

Read was born 13 May 1840 in Sarartia, Yazoo County, Mississippi. Some sources claim he was born in Hinds County. He was appointed to the US Naval Academy at Annapolis in 1856. It was during his time at Annapolis that he was given the nick-name "Savez", the only French he mastered while graduating last in the class of 1860. When he heard that Mississippi had seceded from the Union, Read resigned his commission and offered his services to the Confederacy.

Read was commissioned a lieutenant in the Confederate navy in August 1861 and assigned to help construct batteries on the Potomac River near Quantico Creek. He was soon transferred west and assigned to George N. Hollins' upper Mississippi fleet as executive officer on the CSS McRea and saw action at Island #10. The McRae then moved below New Orleans where she was assigned to protect blockade runners near the mouth of the Mississippi. In April 1862 the McRae took part in the naval battle near Forts Jackson and Saint Philip during which her commander, Thomas B. Huger, was mortally wounded and Read succeeded to command. The McRae, badly damaged, was sent to New Orleans on 27 April 1862 under a flag of truce. She sank after her arrival there. Read, in June 1862, was assigned to aid in the construction of the ram CSS Arkansas. He served as a lieutenant on the Arkansas until 6 August 1862 when the ironclad, taking part in the attack on Baton Rouge, Louisiana, was destroyed by her own crew to prevent her from being captured after a machinery breakdown. On 4 November 1862 Read reported for duty aboard the commerce raider CSS Florida. In May 1863 he took command of the captured brig Clarence which he convinced naval authorities should be converted to a raider with him in command. On 6 June 1863 he captured his first prize. On 12 June he captured the Tacony and transferred his command to her, burning the Clarence. On 25 June he again transferred his command. This time to the Archer. He sailed the Archer into the harbor at Portland, Maine and seized the revenue cutter Caleb Cushing. When the commander of the Caleb Cushing reported his new command was unexpectedly sailing out of the harbor a Union fleet took off in pursuit. When Read ran out of ammunition he abandoned the vessel and on 27 June was captured. In the three week period he took 22 prizes. He was confined in Fort Warren in Boston Harbor and managed to escape but was recaptured. He was finally exchanged after being held for 16 months and subsequently participated in naval operations on the James River. He led an overland torpedo expedition in Virginia then in April 1865 was given command of the CSS William H. Webb with the rank of lieutenant commander. He attempted to escape with the Webb down the Red River to the Gulf of Mexico but was captured ending his civil war career.

Following the war Read settled for a time in New Orleans where he served as the harbor master. He died 25 January 1890 in Meridian, Lauderdale County, Mississippi. Although not widely heralded during his time, Read is now recognized for his exploits during the war. He is one of the recipients of the Confederate Medal of Honor, the award first presented in 1977 by the Sons of Confederate Veterans to recognize those that went beyond the call of duty in service to the Confederacy.

**(Source: Civil War Interactive
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