Battle of Hampton Roads

Under the command of Flag Officer Franklin Buchanan, the ironclad CSS Virginia (also known as the Merrimack) headed straight for the USS Cumberland off Newport News.

Around 2pm on March 8, 1862, the CSS Virginia struck the Cumberland with its 1,500lb iron ram, smashing a huge hole in its wooden hull, but in doing so the lethal iron ram broke off and sank.

With one opponent vanquished, the Virginia turned its sights on the nearby USS Congress. Seeking to avoid the same fate as the Cumberland, the USS Congress ran aground. Unable to deliver a ram attack, the CSS Virginia maneuvered to a point 200 yards away and pounded the frigate with its powerful cannon. Unable to maneuver, the Congress was quickly wrecked by the Confederate fire.

During the night The USS Monitor, a radical new ship commanded by Lt. John L. Worden, prepared to defend the rest of the Federal fleet from the seemingly invincible Virginia.

The next morning the Virginia prepared for another assault against the USS Minnesota. As the Virginia approached the Minnesota it noticed a strange raft-like vessel by its side. The Confederate ironclad shifted its fire to the Monitor and the two ironclads then settled down to a close range slug fest where both ships fired into each other with little effect.

After several hours of close combat the USS Monitor disengaged and headed for the safety of shallower waters.  Lt. Worden, who had been in the forward pilot house on the Monitor, had been temporarily blinded when a shell from the Virginia exploded near the viewing slit of the pilothouse.   Despite its temporary advantage, the CSS Virginia, broke off the engagement and headed for the safety of Norfolk.   The world’s first battle between steam-powered, ironclad warships ended in a draw, but its impact on the future of naval warfare would be profound as all other navies now needed to have iron ships or be obsolete.