

The early years of gunboats

The gunboats of the early 19th century were just small wooden vessels powered by oars or sails. They could bring a heavy cannon across shallow waters and up river estuaries in support of naval and land forces, where ships of the line were unable to venture. By the 1820's steam gunboats were operating in many military operations around the world, but the steam engine was still in its infancy and not very reliable. The cumbersome paddles took up valuable space and could easily be smashed by enemy shot. The wooden hulls proved to be too weak for the heavy steam plant and heavy artillery. Iron hulls were much stronger and flexible in ways that timber was not. Steam engines gradually became more efficient and now drove propellers, making gunboats fast, shallow draught vessels which could quickly respond to any emergency, regardless of wind and current.

In the Crimean War and the second Opium War (1856 - 60) steam gunboats hauled ships of the line into position from which their broadsides could engage shore batteries. The gunboats came to be known as the world's maritime policemen, policing such incidents as the small colonial wars, the protection of missionary outposts and consulates, British trade in foreign countries, piracy, and the slave trade. (In 1807 the traffic of some 80,000 to 130,000 slaves a year continued throughout the first half of the 19th century.)

Commanding officers of gunboats were expected to be familiar with International Law and the wide range of situations requiring good diplomacy.

The golden age of the gunboat lasted throughout the era of the British maritime supremacy, from the end of the Napoleonic Wars to the 1880's.

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