

Ask the Expert

"Take Heed the Monitor!"



Another fine question from one of our readers, this time, Bob Darbo of San Francisco, CA:

"Why does the Olympia have a battering ram AND torpedo tubes?"

Ask and ye shall receive, Bob:

Arguably the most important naval battle of the Civil War, the largely ineffectual two-day scrum between the ironclads Merrimack and Monitor at Hampton Roads in 1862 left an indelible impression on international shipbuilding. Given that the two iron ships were nearly impervious to one another's cannon, but were able to do some damage with their rams, military planners added rams into the design of warships, including the Olympia, for the remainder of the century. The relatively recent invention of pendulum and hydrostatic control in torpedoes encouraged planners to outfit her with torpedo tubes as well. In the last quarter of the 19th century, naval designers were scrambling to embrace new technologies while incorporating a back-up plan, and the American Navy of the time reflected this.