

Armadillos and Turtles

Steam Ironclad Science Fiction Warships

By Rob Morgan

Yes, it's time to revisit the Peter Pig 1/600th ACW naval list once more! I love the early Ironclad/ACW period. Warships were slower, more likely to be innovative individual designs and all-round oddities. Many of them didn't work at all. Previous conversions in this series have involved the massive Confederate warship *Nashville* which never seems to have steamed anywhere, and the *Manassas* -- one solitary brush with the Federals and she was gone! The thing is, those ships which in reality performed so badly, if at all, are just made for SF wargames afloat.

Verlinden Model of the Keokuk

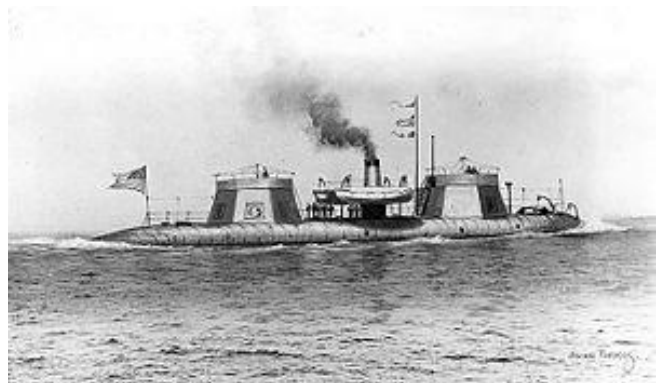


Take the *USS Keokuk*, for example. She's No.54 in Pig's ACW Range No.7 and priced at £4 for a one-piece all metal casting some 8cm long and 2cm wide. Nicely moulded too, looks like a monitor, but isn't, or wasn't. Buy one.

The *Keokuk*, by the way, is W112 in the Triton 1/1200th ACW range, and AU 26 in the same scale from Navwar, if you are interested, but the 1/600th knocks spots off them both for value and quality.

For those who know but little of *USS Keokuk*, she was a Citadel Ironclad, 160 feet long, with two 11-inch smoothbore guns mounted in static fore and aft gun housings, each with three ports, and she also had a small ram--often overlooked by historical naval wargamers, but one which could have done some damage to another ironclad.

The ship had 3 inches of iron laid horizontally, alternated with strips of oak, and covered in metal sheets. She was ordered in April 1862, launched in December, commissioned into the U.S. Navy in late March 1863, and sunk in the first week of April. Hardly lengthy service. She was put against the Confederate forts at Charleston, along with numerous real monitors and, after being hit and pierced almost 90 times, the unfortunate 9-knot ironclad filled with water and sank.



She was not missed by the fleet.

Take a look at the model. Remarkably little alteration will turn this into an effective SF warship in 1/300th, 1/600th or 1/1200th scale. Depending upon your preference, of course, it will also with a little effort turn into a 15mm scale SF of the semi-submersible type, but more of that in a moment.



Now, steam is a delightful form of propulsion; it's good science too, and in SF wargames the science must be right for the fiction to work. (Isaac Asimov said that!) It also requires replenishing, and limits the effectiveness of vessels appropriately. On we go

So, replace the *Keokuk's* pathetic little smoke-stack, by covering it with a length of biro tube *sans* ink. In 1/1200th scale 10mm or 12mm will do.

Cement in place. In this scale, the ship is 300' long and very wide, looking double-ended. Only the odd half-moon pilot housing shows "forward" from aft. I mounted a small searchlight on top of this, and drilled a hole for a pin pole mast in the centre of the rear gun house -- 8mm high. In this scale, you can add a couple of tiny ship's boats but the decks look better clear. The weapons protruding from each open gun port look tiny. Drill them out and replace with a small length of pin which protrudes at least 3mm, thus providing the ship with a big weapon, be it gun, flame projector or whatever, in the scale. It doesn't have to be able to fire from all three ports either. The ram bow, the possibility of a propeller and rudder at each end making her very manouvable are all options.

Don't make her too fast.

In 1/600th the ship will take a 15mm or 18mm funnel, or of course you can dispense with the funnel entirely, as was the case with the original *Monitor*. The same general rule applies to add-ons. The weapons in SF must look larger than life.

In 1/300th this becomes a small 80' long dumpy warship, 20' wide, more suited to closed waters or rivers than the seas. With a 20mm or 22mm funnel and tall mast drilled into the pilot house, place a circular column of sprue 3mm high in front of it as an alternative "con." Then add some odds and ends from other ranges, like *Scotia* or *Irregular* -- such as a free-standing deck gun and crew, or you could top each tower with a doctored tank turret.

The side ports become crew hatches in 1/300th, and I also added a spare goose-necked crane, 1/600th or 1/700th from a plastic kit, behind the funnel on the square hatch, facing aft. This is because my SF model in 1/300th has become a "mother craft" for a group of one man, semi-submersible torpedo boats, armed with a suicide weapon protruding about 3 or 4mm from the bow, rather like WWII *Marders*.

I made them from a pack of Mick Yarrow's MY Navy "generic" small subs, 3122 in the range at 70p for a pack of three boats. They go really well, the crane would be for servicing, arming the warheads, etc., but not recovery, naturally!

An option in any of the smaller scales covered might be to add a circular counter, 10mm diameter, on top of the after gunhouse, to take a balloon, or blimp, or an early a/a gun. Even a large steam weapon, perhaps like the WWII "Holman Projector." I found a couple of elderly Airfix "drop-tanks" in my spares box, and half each side of the hull, 24mm long, could represent a long-range fuel supply, weapon, or valuable cargo-pod.

The 15mm version is delightful, and based on the idea of the "Fenian Ram," which was an American-built Irish "secret weapon" intended to destroy the Royal Navy's control of the sea. In this case, the hull is a scale 30 feet long and 8 feet wide. Lose the funnel completely -- this is now a battery-powered boat -- and file the "open" faces of the gun houses flat, scoring down lines for the plating afterwards. Also file away some of the deck detail fore and aft to clean up the hull surface. Punch a piece of thin plasticard in a standard office punch, and this will give you a circular hatch. Trim one edge slightly to make it flat, and cement the flat edge of the hatch to the flat edge of the pilot position. Your hatch is open. In the space in front of this, you can cement a crewman, half a crewman actually.

This is, as you can easily tell, a two-man sub. The top half of a 15mm figure in suitable attire, or just head and shoulders, the top-hatted Lincoln in Peter Pig's ACW range is nice, or just dig an odd spare from the bits box. A second crewman in the after "turret" seemed a luxury, so I just added the circular punched card to it, and a small jack staff with a suitable flag, say red and black, whatever, attached. You now have a semi-submersible vessel, armed with a mysterious weapon, and one which though it can't really submerge properly, is clearly "...a danger to the civilised world, Watson!"

The paint job is all important of course and for SF models I favour the odd colours from Games Workshop, the greens, reds and blues are particularly useful, with detail touched up in brass or gold or silver perhaps. The 15mm model should be overall deep gloss black -- most sinister.

Rules, weapons, special effects can be as basic or as inscrutable as you wish. This is an armoured ship, but the armour could be as experimental and less than perfect as the real *Keokuk's* was. And don't forget at the same time, another U.S. warship had armour of rubber backing her iron, literally to make the shells bounce off -- now who thought that one up? The SF model looks very manoeuvrable, and that's a feature best kept, whatever speed you choose. The 15mm submersible however, lends itself to a number of very different games, or could be added to a real, historical pre-1900 force.