

Bombardment of the Fortifications of Federal Point During the Debarkation of [Major] General Butler's Army, December 25, 1864.—[Sketched by John Everding.] Detail from illustration published in *Harper's Weekly*, Volume IX, No. 422, p 56-57, January 28, 1865.



First Strike: The U.S. Navy in the Battle of Fort Fisher, 1864

The text of this article is adapted and excerpted from the author's book *The Wilmington Campaign: Last Rays of Departing Hope* (Campbell, CA: Savas Publishing Company, 1997).

By Chris E. Fonvielle Jr.

IT WAS A SIGHT TO BEHOLD! Sixty-four U.S. Navy warships steaming slowly but steadily through a gray mist that blanketed the Atlantic Ocean's surface to take up their battle stations on Christmas Eve morning 1864. Their target? Fort Fisher, an imposing earthen fortification that protected Wilmington, North Carolina, the Confederacy's major seaport and most important city. "A grander sight than the approach of [the Union] armada towards the fort was never witnessed on our coast," exclaimed Fort Fisher's commander, Colonel William Lamb, CSA. "With the rising sun out of old ocean there came upon the horizon one after another, the vessels of the fleet, the grand frigate leading the van, followed by the ironclads heading toward the Confederate stronghold."¹

Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant later described the naval task force, headed by Rear Admiral David D. Porter, as "the most formidable armada ever assembled for concentration upon one given point." It comprised the navy's largest steam frigates—USS *Minnesota*, USS *Colorado*, USS *Wabash*, USS *Susquehanna*, and USS *Powhatan*—and an array of steam sloops, double-enders gunboats, and captured Confederate blockade runners, such as the *Ad-Vance*, converted into warships. The fleet also contained the monitors USS *Canonicus*, USS *Mahopac*, USS *Monadnock*, and USS *Saugus*, as well as USS *New Ironsides*, the navy's most powerful vessel—she was a massive, tortoise-shaped behemoth, her casemates covered with strips of thick iron plating and batteries armed with 20 mammoth cannons, including fourteen XI-inch Dahlgrens. Yet *New Ironsides's* guns

were only a fraction of the 630 pieces of artillery on board the ships. As evidence of the Confederate gunners being far outmatched, the 50-gun frigate *Colorado* contained more ordnance than Fort Fisher's 47 mounted cannons. Porter believed his fleet's overwhelming firepower would be necessary to ensure the mighty stronghold's reduction.²

At 12:40 p.m., *New Ironsides* "opened the ball" by firing one of her XI-inch Dahlgren guns, followed closely by *Canonicus* which added to the thunderous peal by sending a huge 15-inch cannonball toward the fort. Lamb answered the Federal opening shots with a 10-inch smoothbore columbiad, the spherical shell ricocheting off the ocean's calm surface and bouncing through the smokestack of *Susquehanna*.

This rather harmless if loud exchange initiated the greatest Union naval bombardment of the Civil War against the Confederacy's largest and strongest seacoast fortification, and it was only the beginning.³

Wilmington and the Blockade

Soon after the guns at Fort Sumter cooled in April 1861, President Abraham Lincoln proclaimed a naval blockade of the South's seaports. He knew the rebellious states would need logistical support from the outside world as their lack of manufacturing facilities placed them at great disadvantage to wage war. Lincoln believed that an effective blockade would hinder the South from procuring badly needed equipment, supplies, and provisions and impede its ability to export trade commodities, mainly cotton. Predictably, the burgeoning Confederacy turned to Europe, especially Great Britain, for aid. The U.S. Navy officially placed Wilmington under blockade on July 21, 1861, under the watchful eye of the steamer USS *Daylight*.⁴

Yet for most of the war the Lincoln administration and U.S. War Department paid scant attention to coastal

operations, focusing instead on capturing Richmond, Chattanooga, Atlanta, and other strategic cities in the South's heartland. Of the region's seaports, only New Orleans, Louisiana, and Charleston, South Carolina, attracted much popular and political interest. Union forces captured New Orleans, as well as the Outer Banks and towns along Albemarle and Pamlico Sounds and their tributaries in eastern North Carolina by April 1862. They recaptured Norfolk, Virginia, in May of that year, and placed Charleston under siege in spring 1863.

Wilmington then became the Confederacy's major seaport along the Atlantic seaboard, and the closest one to the increasingly important Virginia battlefield.

The blockade-running trade at Wilmington benefitted greatly from geography and good lines of transportation. The town was located 28 miles from the mouth of the Cape Fear River which was accessible by two entryways—Old Inlet, the main channel to the south, and New Inlet six miles to the northeast. The dual passageways, separated by Bald Head Island and Frying Pan Shoals, offered Confederate commerce vessels a choice of entrance and exit and lessened their chances of detection, capture, or destruction by Union blockading vessels. As a result, blockade runners enjoyed an astounding overall success rate of about 80 percent at Wilmington. At least 106 different steamships and an undetermined number of sailing vessels brought more military equipment and supplies, as well as civilian goods, into the Confederacy by way of Wilmington than any other Southern seaport. At least 50 percent of everything the Confederacy used and consumed came in through the Union blockade.⁵

The Cape Fear River was navigable for light-draft vessels to Fayetteville, North Carolina, approximately 85 miles northwest of Wilmington. More importantly, three railroads tapped the seaport with other key cities in the Carolinas and Virginia. The most important was the Wilmington and Weldon Railroad, which ran from

The U.S. Navy in the Battle of Fort Fisher, 1864



Map of Wilmington and Its Approaches. Prepared by Daniel Ray Norris. ©Chris E. Fonvielle Jr. Reproduced from the author's book *Fort Fisher 1865: The Photographs of T.H. Sullivan* (Wilmington, NC: NC Starburst Press, 2011), p 7.

Wilmington to Goldsboro to Weldon, North Carolina, where it connected with the Petersburg and Weldon Railroad. The Wilmington and Weldon Railroad became General Robert E. Lee's main supply route and popularly known as the "Lifeline of the Confederacy."

In early January 1863, Lee stated that "Wilmington should be defended at all hazards."⁶

To protect the port, the inlets, and the railroads, Confederate engineers designed and constructed a vast network of forts, batteries, and fieldworks. Artillery batteries ringed Wilmington, while a series of outer defenses guarded against the threat of an overland assault by U.S. Army troops based in New Bern, North Carolina, 90 miles to the north. They also shielded a landing by Union soldiers and Marines on Wrightsville Beach only nine miles east of Wilmington.

The strongest and best-armed forts were built at the entryways to the Cape Fear River. Forts Caswell and Campbell and Battery Shaw on Oak Island and Fort Holmes on Bald Head Island defended Old Inlet. Old Inlet served as the main bar, but blockade runners preferred entering the river by way of New Inlet, as it was too shallow for heavier Union warships to follow and well protected by Fort Fisher.

Fort Fisher

Union and Confederate observers alike considered Fort Fisher virtually impregnable. They likened it to Malakoff Tower, the imposing Russian fortification that defended the port of Sevastapol against French and British siege operations during the Crimean War in 1855. Confederate engineers, using soldiers and enslaved and free African American and some Native American laborers, built Fort Fisher on Federal Point peninsula (renamed Confederate Point by Southerners during the war) near New Inlet, 20 miles south of Wilmington on the Cape Fear River. Its namesake was Colonel Charles F. Fisher, 6th North Carolina Infantry, the state's first field-grade officer to be killed in action at the Battle of First Manassas (First Bull Run) on July 21, 1861.⁷



Colonel William Lamb, CSA., Confederate commander of Fort Fisher, 1862-1865. Image cropped and tinted by the author. Chris E. Fonvielle Jr. Collection.

Despite the flurry of construction on Federal Point during the first year of the war, the defensive works remained scattered, relatively weak, and poorly armed when local military authorities assigned William Lamb, the newly elected colonel of the 36th Regiment North Carolina State Troops (2nd N.C. Artillery), control of them on July 4, 1862. "I thought on assuming command that, as a defense against a Federal fleet, our works amounted to nothing," he observed. "One of the Federal frigates could have cleaned it out with a few broadsides." An aristocratic lawyer and newspaper publisher from Norfolk, Virginia, and a largely self-taught military engineer, Lamb determined at once to build a fortification of such immense size and strength that it could withstand the heaviest naval bombardment.⁸

Under the direction of his superior officers, especially Major General W.H.C. Whiting who

The U.S. Navy in the Battle of Fort Fisher, 1864

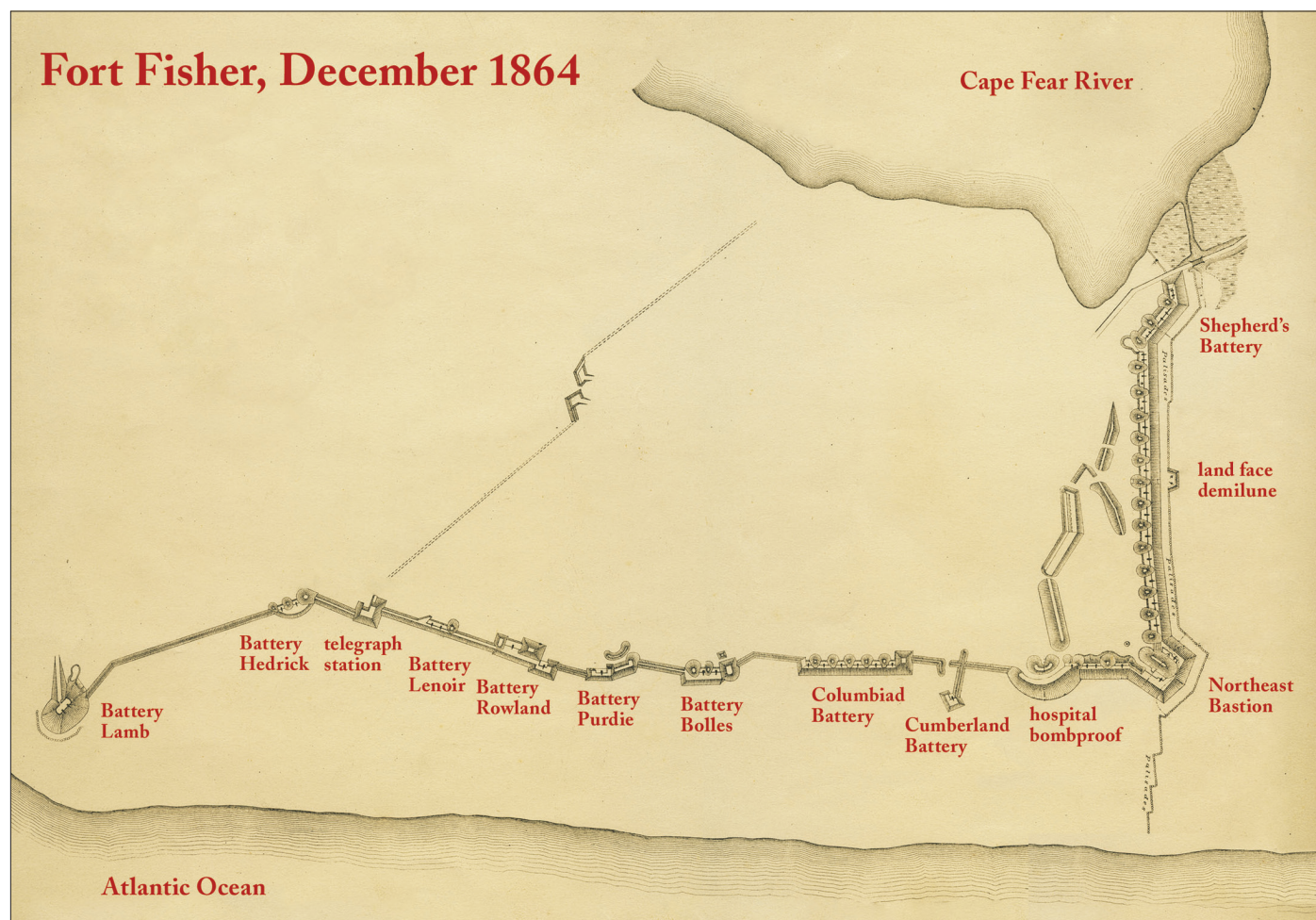
headed the District (later Department) of the Cape Fear for most of the war, the young colonel spent two and a half years bolstering, altering, and expanding Fort Fisher into a seemingly invincible stronghold.

It was a massive two-sided work made of beach sand and heart pine timber that, from a birds-eye view, looked like a giant number “7.” Both stems featured a series of self-contained, elevated artillery batteries.

The short shank, armed with 23 heavy cannons, stretched 682 yards from the Cape Fear River to the oceanfront and guarded against an infantry assault from

above of the fort. The artillery chambers were carved into a broad rampart that stood 24 feet in height and 25 feet thick at its base. On their flanks rose traverses, mounds of sand that stood nine to ten feet higher than the crest or parapet of the works, and underneath which were alternating bombproofs and ordnance magazines. Soldiers placed square-foot blocks of marsh grass dug along the river’s edge to mitigate erosion.

The short and long sandy shanks intersected at an enormous 32-foot-high half bastion in the fort’s northeast corner, in which an 8-inch Blakely rifle cannon and an 8-inch columbiad smoothbore were emplaced. At the so-called Northeast Bastion, the line turned abruptly southward, paralleling the shoreline for 1,898 yards. The majority of the sea face batteries, armed with a total of 24 big seacoast guns, were designed for ricochet firing across the ocean’s surface. Fort Fisher’s



Fort Fisher, December 1864. ©Chris E. Fonvielle Jr. Reproduced from the author's book *Fort Fisher 1865: The Photographs of T.H. Sullivan* (Wilmington, NC: NC Starburst Press, 2011), p 12.

most famous piece of artillery was a British-manufactured 8-inch, 150-pounder Armstrong mounted on a rosewood and mahogany carriage with brass fittings. Its crew claimed that it looked more like a piece of parlor furniture than a weapon of war.

At the far south end of the sea face batteries towered a 43-foot high conical work named Battery Lamb in honor of the fort's commander, but dubbed "the Mound" by the garrison. On top were mounted a 10-inch columbiad and 6.4-inch rifled 32-pounder rifle cannon for plunging fire, and a light for signaling Confederate blockade runners at nighttime.⁹

Despite its best efforts, the U.S. Navy seemed powerless to halt maritime trade at Wilmington. "It was very much like a parcel of cats watching a big rat hole," observed one high-ranking Union naval officer; "the rat often running in when they are expecting him to run out and visa [vice] versa."¹⁰

Northern Plans to Close Wilmington

The U.S. Navy Department, headed by Secretary Gideon Welles, proposed several plans for closing Wilmington to blockade running in 1862 and 1863, but failed to generate the necessary political backing from the Lincoln administration and logistical support from the U.S. War Department. The shoal waters along the Carolina coast prevented large warships from getting close enough to shore to reduce Confederate fortifications, including Fort Fisher. "The importance of closing Wilmington and cutting off Rebel communication is paramount to all other questions," Welles maintained. "It has been impossible to get the War Department and military authorities to enter into the spirit of the [coastal] war. They do not appreciate it." The navy desperately needed the assistance of a U.S. Army expeditionary force to close the Carolina seaport to blockade running.¹¹

In mid-summer 1864, Welles finally convinced Lincoln to support a combined operation against Wilmington.

On August 5, Rear-Admiral David G. Farragut's flotilla of warships sealed Mobile Bay, Alabama, the last port on the Gulf of Mexico coast, to blockade running in the war's most dramatic naval battle. That left Wilmington as the only major Southern seaport open to overseas trade. With the war going badly for the Union in Virginia, Lincoln needed victories to shore up his faltering campaign for reelection in November 1864. The capture of Wilmington might go a long way toward convincing a war-weary Northern electorate that there was light at the end of the dark tunnel. Lincoln gave Welles the green light to plan a campaign to close Wilmington to blockade running, but deferred final approval of it to Grant.

Combined Operation to Attack Fort Fisher

Grant initially expressed little enthusiasm for committing an expeditionary force to assist the navy. In his opinion, the troops should remain in Virginia to keep the pressure on Lee. Since the late spring of 1864, Grant's operational forces—the Army of the Potomac and the Army of the James—had been slugging it out with Lee's Army of Northern Virginia for possession of Petersburg, second only in importance to Richmond in the Old Dominion. Despite the heavy fighting, neither side had been able to break the deadlock. Grant saw little reason to detach the estimated 10,000 troops for an amphibious assault 240 miles away in southeastern North Carolina when they were more needed in his ranks. Appreciating Lincoln's political dilemma and perhaps his own future role as commander of U.S. Army forces, however, he agreed to supply the troops at the right time.

With both Lincoln and Grant's implicit support for the mission, Welles quickly sought an aggressive commander to head the naval task force in the combined operation to be led by the U.S. Navy. He first approached Farragut, but the rear-admiral turned him down as the fighting at Mobile had left him exhausted and in dire need of rest. After considering other qualified officers, Welles warily offered command to Porter, head of the

The U.S. Navy in the Battle of Fort Fisher, 1864



Rear Admiral David Dixon Porter, USN, Commander, North Atlantic Blockading Squadron, on the main deck of his flagship, USS *Malvern*, December 1864. Porter is leaning on a heavy 12-pounder Dahlgren smoothbore howitzer mounted on a slide carriage. Photographed by Alexander Gardner. NH 91416 courtesy of Naval History and Heritage Command.

Mississippi River Squadron. “[Porter could not always] be depended upon if he had an end to attain, and he had no hesitation in trampling down a brother officer if it would benefit himself,” Welles observed. Indeed, other naval officers considered Porter narcissistic, arrogant, and thorny. He was also capable and tough, just the kind of fighter needed to get the job done.

“Porter is probably the best man for the service,” Welles concluded.¹²

The Navy Department considered an alternative plan for attacking the forts at Old Inlet and then moving up the Cape Fear River to strike Fort Fisher from the rear, but Porter argued that capturing Fort Fisher at New Inlet

would deny access to Wilmington through either passageway. Blockade runners that entered Old Inlet could not ascend the waterway to Wilmington’s docks once Fort Fisher and New Inlet were in Federal hands. Moreover, capturing the South’s strongest seacoast fortification defending its only open seaport and, by late 1864, most important city would undoubtedly provide the U.S. Navy with an abundance of favorable publicity. As far as Porter was concerned, a big win at Fort Fisher would also bring a promotion and more fancy gold-laced insignia on the cuffs of his navy-blue uniform.

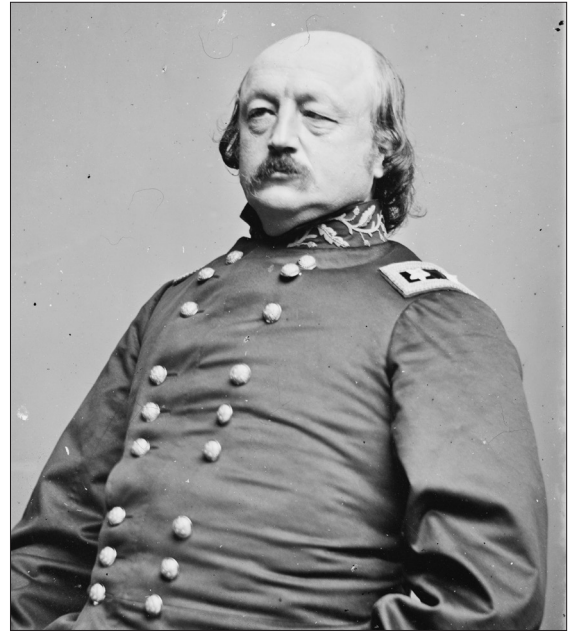
While the U.S. Navy gathered its forces for the campaign and waited on Grant to provide troops for the expeditionary force, blockade runners continued to trade at Wilmington on a regular basis. Even so, captures of them occurred more frequently in the fall of 1864, as the U.S. Navy now had only the Tar Heel seaport with which to concern itself. By November, an intense dragnet of 33 blockaders hovered close to Old Inlet and New Inlet or cruised the shipping lanes off the Cape Fear coast.¹³

Sound intelligence reached Whiting that Union forces were indeed planning to strike Fort Fisher. Whiting and Lamb also received a dire message from Lee at Petersburg. “If Wilmington falls I cannot maintain my army,” he warned. The message was clear. The survival of the Army of Northern Virginia and thus the Confederacy depended upon Wilmington’s survival as a blockade running seaport.¹⁴

Rather than leave Wilmington and Fort Fisher’s security in the hands of the man most responsible for planning and supervising the construction of the Lower Cape Fear’s formidable defenses, however, Davis replaced Whiting with General Braxton Bragg, the most vilified officer in the Confederate army. Whiting had a reputation for drinking liquor at inopportune times and being insubordinate to his superiors. Even Governor Zebulon B. Vance of North Carolina lobbied President Davis to make a change in command. When the *Richmond Enquirer* caught wind of the news, it reported: “We suspect that Gen. Bragg is going to Wilmington. Good bye, Wilmington.” Few Southerners placed much faith in Bragg who was considered “not a fighting general.” Yet when all was said and done, Davis was the only person whose opinion mattered. Bragg was in and Whiting was out. Whiting and his men were devastated and their morale sank as Bragg arrived in the city in late October to assume command at Wilmington and the Department of North Carolina.¹⁵

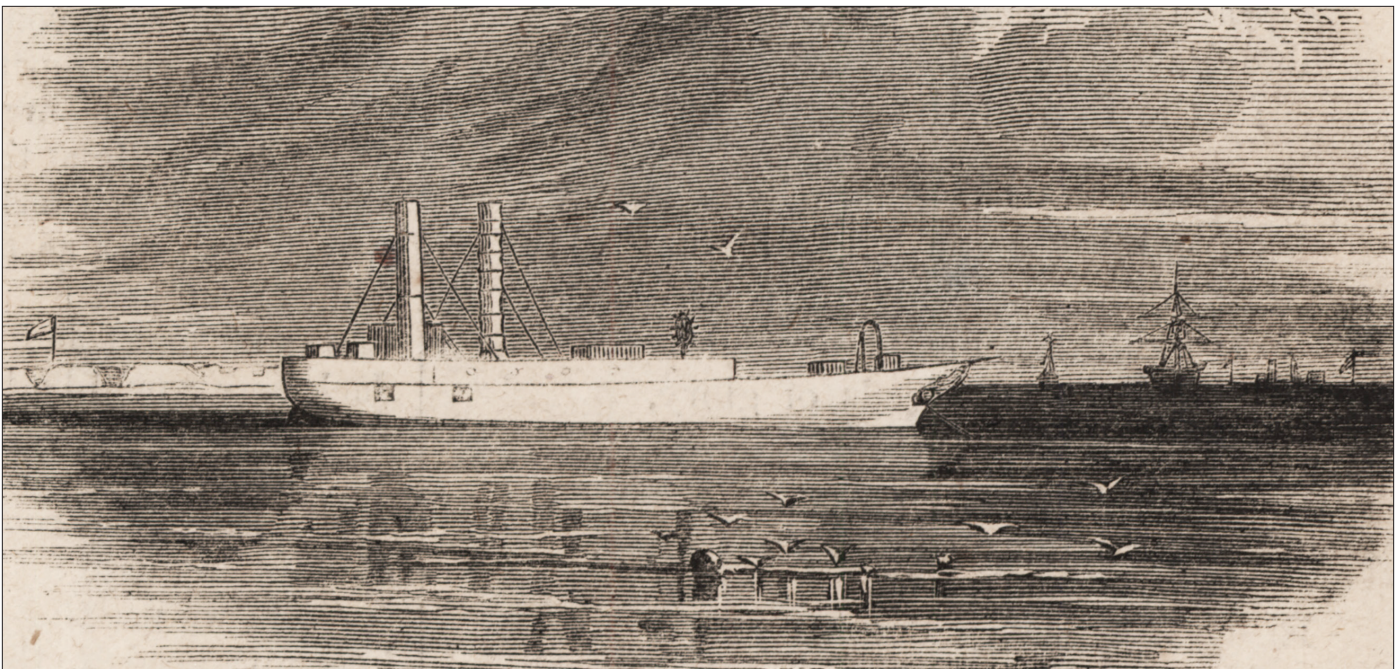
The politics of command also haunted Federal forces. Grant had handpicked Major General Godfrey Weitzel to lead the 6,500-man expeditionary force in the Fort Fisher operation, but Weitzel's superior officer, Major General Benjamin F. Butler, commander of the U.S. Department of Virginia and North Carolina, finagled his way into taking over effective command. Grant was inexplicably intimidated by Butler and did not intervene on Weitzel's behalf, much to Porter's chagrin. Bad blood existed between Porter and Butler going back to the 1862 campaign at New Orleans in which Butler had criticized Porter's role as commander of a flotilla of mortar boats in Farragut's fleet. Success in the imminent attack on Fort Fisher depended on harmony between the U.S. Navy and U.S. Army, and yet the two service branch commanders intensely disliked each other. It did not bode well for the mission's success.

Porter was eager to proceed toward the target, but the army dillydallied. Butler had recommended a novel feature for the attack—a giant floating bomb. He proposed to pack a ship to the gunnells with hundreds of tons of gunpowder, steam it ashore at Fort Fisher, and detonate it. Butler believed that the simultaneous explosion of such an immense quantity of gunpowder would create tornado force winds capable of blowing down the sand walls of the supposedly impregnable fortress, stun its defenders, and allow U.S. Army troops to march in and mop up. As farfetched as it seemed to some ordnance experts, to others it was a plan worth



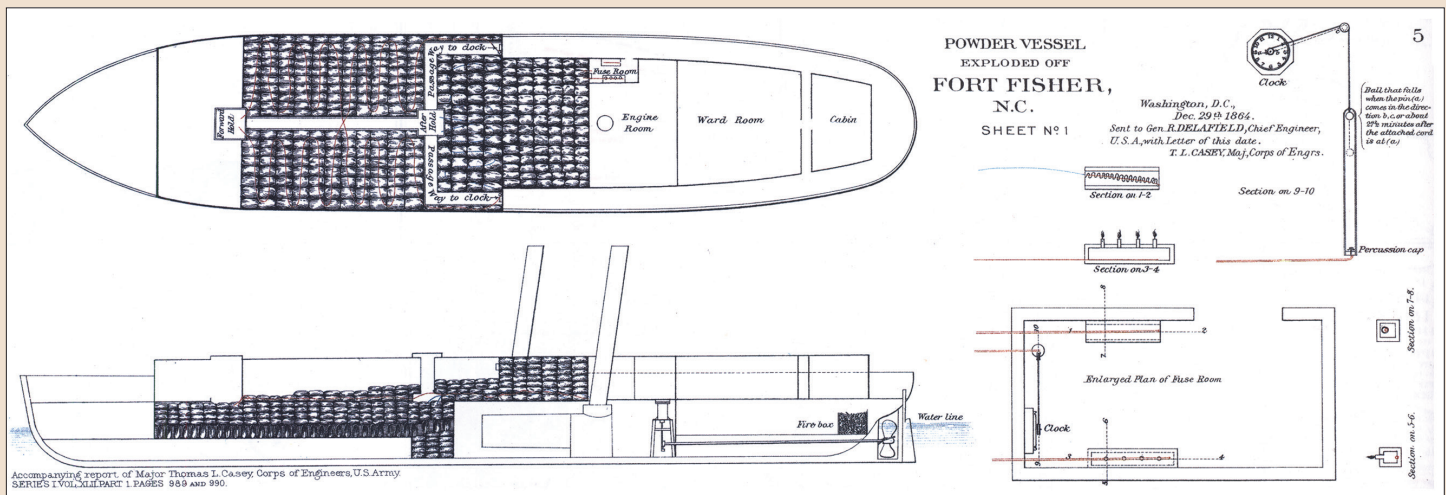
Major General Benjamin F. Butler, U.S. Army. Library of Congress (LC-DIG-cwpb-04894).

trying, especially if it saved the lives of good Union men. USS *Louisiana*, a patrol boat in the sounds of North Carolina, was chosen for the suicide mission. Butler spent much of the autumn preparing his pet project.¹⁶



The Powder Ship "Louisiana." [Sketched by (Acting Master's Mate) C(harles) F. Ellmore.] Illustration published in *Harper's Weekly*, Volume IX, No. 422, p 57, January 28, 1865.

The U.S. Navy in the Battle of Fort Fisher, 1864



Drawing accompanying the report of Major Thomas L. Casey, Corps of Engineers, U.S. Army, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Series I, Volume XLII, Part I—Reports, p 988-993 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1893). From: George B. Davis, Leslie J. Perry, Joseph W. Kirkley. *Atlas to Accompany the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1891-1895), Plate LXVII, No. 5.

For further reading on the *Louisiana* Powder Boat, see:

Correspondence concerning the powder boat U.S.S. Louisiana exploded near Fort Fisher, N.C., December 24, 1864. ORN, Series I, Volume 11, p 207-245.

Chris E. Fonvielle Jr. *The Wilmington Campaign: Last Rays of Departing Hope* (Campbell, CA: Savas Publishing Company, 1997), Chapter 4: The Experiment, p 93-128.

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A.C. Rhind. The Last of the Fort Fisher Powder-Boat. *The United Service: A Quarterly Review of Military and Naval Affairs*, Volume I, p 227-236 (Philadelphia, PA: Lewis R. Hamersly & Company, 1879).

Story of the Powder-Boat. *The Galaxy*, Volume IX, No. 1, p 77-88, January 1870.

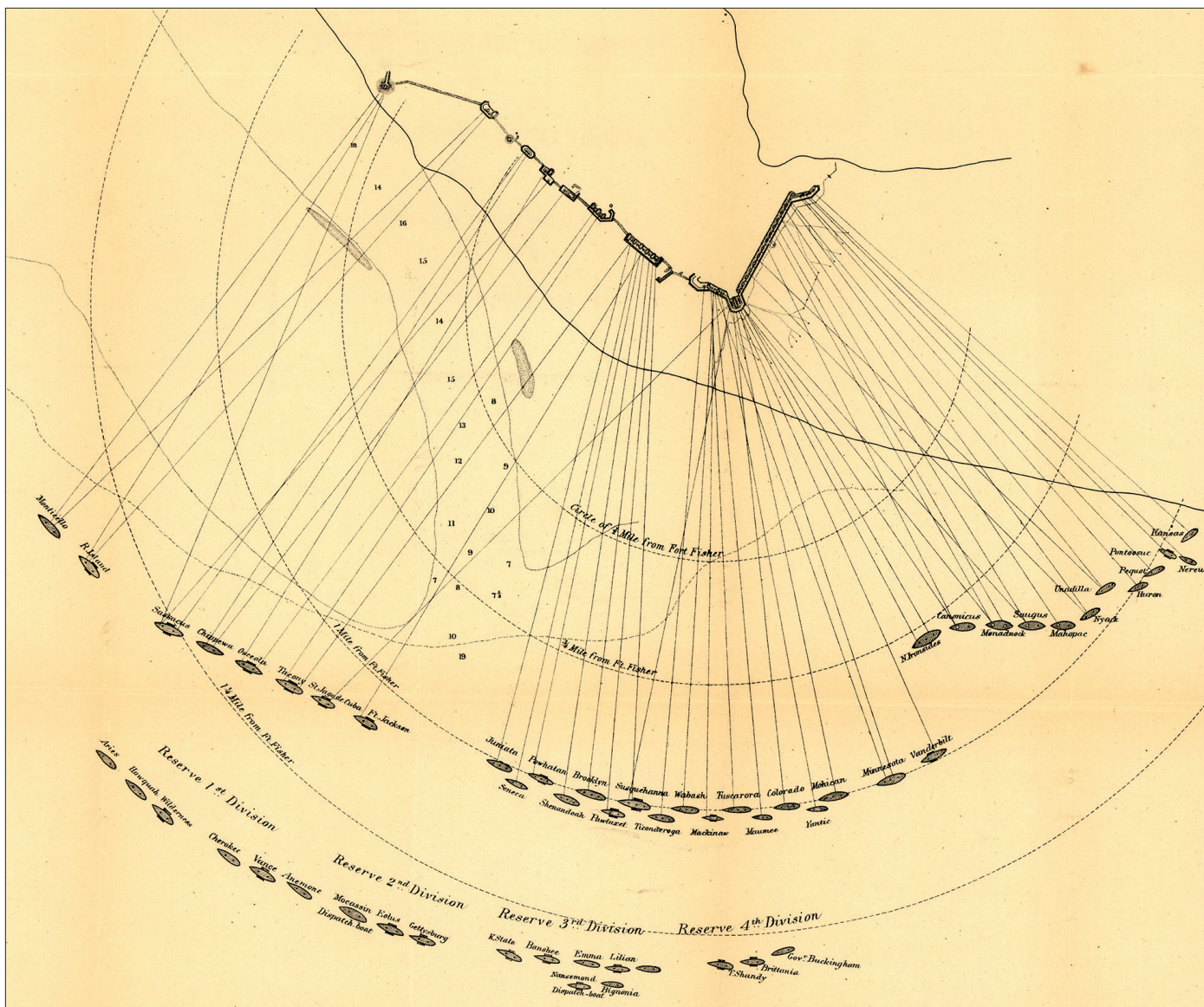
Porter's grand armada of 64 warships and Butler's army transports finally sailed from Hampton Roads, Virginia, on December 13, 1864, with plans to meet off Cape Fear a few days later. The need to take on more supplies and ammunition at Beaufort, North Carolina, delayed the navy's arrival at the rendezvous point. Butler's vessels enjoyed three days of good weather and calm seas before a gale blew in on December 20. They tried to ride out the giant waves and deep swells, but eventually had to put into Beaufort to replenish their stocks of coal and water and allow seasick soldiers to recover.¹⁷

As Butler's transports refurbished, Porter's warships steamed southward toward Fort Fisher. When Butler did not soon reappear, Porter launched the attack without him. Hoping to steal some of his rival's thunder, Porter deployed the powder vessel *Louisiana* that had been towed down the coast. It was a win-win situation for the flag officer. If it succeeded, and Porter was cautiously

optimistic that it would, the navy was on hand to reap the laurels of success.

If it failed, Porter could blame Butler for wasting valuable time, money, and resources in the ludicrous scheme.

As it turned out, *Louisiana* did nothing more than make enough noise to awaken Fort Fisher's slumbering garrison when it was detonated after midnight on Christmas Eve. "There's a fizzle!" remarked Commander Alexander C. Rhind of USS *Agawam*. "The powder boat proved an ignominious failure," added Lt. Commander Thomas H. Selfridge of USS *Huron*. Critics later dubbed the failed experiment "Butler's Folly."¹⁸



Detail from First Attack Upon Fort Fisher, by the U.S. Navy under Rear-Admiral David. D. Porter, December 24 and 25, 1864, Showing the Position of Vessels and Line of Fire. 39th Congress, 1st Session, Annual Report of the Secretary of the Navy, 1865, p 10. Library of Congress (Control No. 99447467).

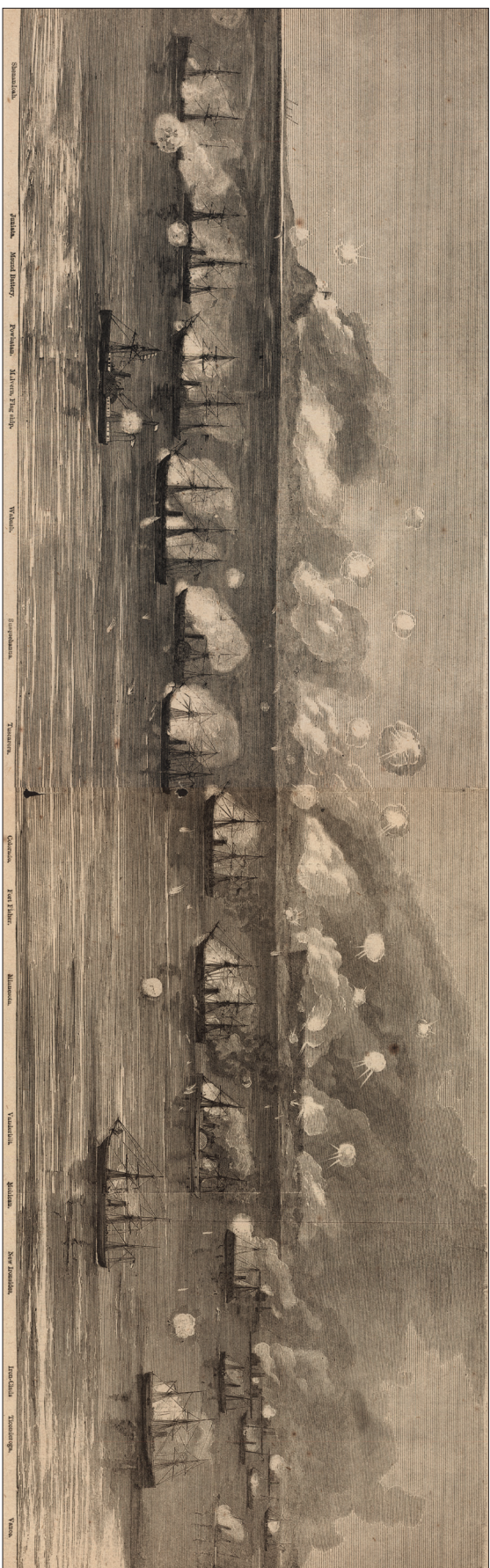
Porter then determined to reduce Fort Fisher the good old-fashioned way—heavy naval bombardment. Once they reached their battle stations, the warships unleashed continuous broadsides for two days—Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. The heavily armed vessels blasted Fort Fisher with nearly every type of projectile in the navy’s arsenal, from 3-inch rifle bolts to 15-inch cannonballs weighing more than 300 pounds, firing more than 20,000 projectiles during the 2-day bombardment. The deafening peals of the massive

ordnance reverberated across the sea’s surface with such stunning violence “that the ocean fairly trembled,” exclaimed a participant. “Bang, bang, bang, whiz, whiz, whiz, clash, clash, clash, all the time,” wrote a reporter groping for words to describe the indescribable scene. The roar was “like the rattling of a thousand railway cars,” observed one sailor. The air was filled with shrieking projectiles, puffs of white smoke from exploding shells, and the pungent odor of sulfur.

The U.S. Navy in the Battle of Fort Fisher, 1864



Landing of General Butler's Army Under Cover of the Gun-Boats, December 25, 1864. — [Sketched by John Everding.] Detail from illustration published in *Harper's Weekly*, Volume IX, No. 422, p 56-57, January 28, 1865



Bombardment of the Fortifications of Federal Point During the Debarcation of [Major] General Butler's Army, December 25, 1864. — [Sketched by John Everding.] Illustration published in *Harper's Weekly*, Volume IX, No. 422, p 56-57, January 28, 1865

“It was a splendid yet wicked sight,” remarked Acting Ensign Benjamin F. Blair of USS *Mohican*.¹⁹

Surprisingly, the warships’ cannons created more noise than damage to Fort Fisher. Bursting shells demolished Lamb’s brick headquarters and set ablaze the garrison’s wooden barracks, but otherwise caused little harm to the fort’s artillery and few casualties. As Lamb and Whiting intended, both the stout defenses and defenders held their own. Whiting went to Fort Fisher as a volunteer advisor to his protégé. His presence inspired the gray-clad soldiers who admired and respected the man they nicknamed “Little Billy” due to his small stature.

After the failure of his powder-boat experiment, Butler was in no mood to cooperate with Porter who, the general believed, had deliberately sabotaged the project to make him look foolish. Consequently, after returning from Beaufort, Butler put ashore only one-third of his infantry near Fort Fisher on Christmas Day.

A reconnaissance force, personally led by Weitzel, advanced down the beach toward the fort but soon reported that, despite the intensity of Porter’s naval bombardment, neither Fort Fisher nor its armament had been damaged enough to justify a ground assault. A frontal attack against the still strong defenses, Weitzel concluded, would be suicidal. Still seething with anger at Porter, Butler considered Weitzel’s report and decided to abort the mission. He withdrew his soldiers from onshore and steamed back to Virginia with his troops close behind.

Southern Response and Expectations

Lamb and Whiting were shocked to see the Union army retreat just as it seemingly prepared to attack the fort, and just as surprised to observe the withdrawal of the enemy’s fleet two days later. The Confederates realized that the battle was over, for the time being at least, and that they had won. A great celebration followed inside the fort and at Wilmington.

Bragg, who took credit for the victory even though he had remained in Wilmington during the battle, received a new gray uniform from local admirers. Two weeks later, he staged a grand review for civilian dignitaries of Confederate reinforcements, Major General Robert F. Hoke’s division of more than 6,400 troops that had arrived from Virginia to help defend Wilmington. But Bragg’s overconfidence worried Lamb and Whiting, both of whom were convinced that the Federals were not yet done with Fort Fisher. They fully expected a renewal of the Union attack at an early date.

Northern Responses to the Failed First Attack

In the North, the failed expedition sparked a firestorm of controversy that led to a Congressional investigation as to the causes, as well as the dismissal of Butler from the army. Disappointed by Butler’s timidity, Grant relieved him from command and sent him packing to his home in Massachusetts. Then, Grant got serious about renewing the attack on Fort Fisher.

Although indifferent to the first mission, Grant now took a keen interest in taking Wilmington. The December debacle at Fort Fisher had been offset by a concurrent victory on the Georgia coast. After capturing Atlanta in early September 1864, Major General William T. Sherman led a 60,000-man legion virtually unopposed across the state and into Savannah. He symbolically presented the city to President Lincoln as a Christmas gift.

Glad to see Sherman safely on the coast, Grant was eager to transfer his army by sea to Virginia to reinforce his own armies at Petersburg. But Sherman had another plan in mind. He proposed to march to Virginia by way of the Carolinas, destroying supply caches and railroads along the way as he had done so successfully in his March to the Sea. If need be, he could strike Wilmington from behind. At any rate, Sherman believed that his advance would force Lee to abandon his entrenched position at Petersburg and into open ground where Grant and Sherman together could converge on and defeat him. Sherman’s plan and confidence in it greatly

The U.S. Navy in the Battle of Fort Fisher, 1864

encouraged Grant. The crowning achievement might well be the defeat of the Confederacy and the end of the long, bloody war. He authorized Sherman to begin his “northern Expedition” (or Carolinas Campaign as historians call it) as soon as possible.

Having agreed to Sherman’s bold plan, Grant determined to guarantee its success by furnishing his trusted ally with reinforcements and supplies or a haven on the seacoast halfway between Savannah and Petersburg where he could retreat to if he met stiff Confederate opposition in the Carolinas. Wilmington now took on a whole new meaning for Grant. Possession of the Cape Fear River and the city’s railroads would enable him to forward men and supplies to Sherman once he reached North Carolina.

Wilmington must be captured!²⁰

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11. Gideon Welles. *Diary of Gideon Welles: Secretary of the Navy Under Lincoln and Johnson*, 3 Volumes (Boston, MA and New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1991), Volume II: April 1, 1864 through December 31, 1866, p 146.
12. William N. Still. “Porter... is the Best Man,” *Civil War Times Illustrated*, Volume XVI, No. 2, May 1977, p 4-9, 44-47; William E. Gienapp and Erica L. Gienapp, Editors. *The Civil War Diary of Gideon Welles: Lincoln’s Secretary of the Navy* (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield, IL: The Knox College Lincoln Studies Center and the University of Illinois Press, 2014), p 505, 705.
13. List of vessels in the North Atlantic Squadron, and their disposition, November 1, 1864. *ORN*, Series I, Volume 11, p 39-40.
14. Lamb, Battles Fought at Fort Fisher, *SHSP*, p 287.
15. “The News: From Wilmington (Via. Charlottesville.),” *The Daily Richmond Enquirer* (Richmond, VA), October 26, 1864, p 1, col 5. For Gen. Braxton Bragg’s notorious role in the battles for Fort Fisher, see: Chris E. Fonvielle Jr., “Unlucky in War: Braxton Bragg’s Return to Field Duty at Wilmington, North Carolina, 1864-65.” In: Lawrence Lee Hewitt and Arthur W. Bergeron Jr, Editors. *Confederate Generals in the Western Theater: Essays on the Civil War*, Volume 4 (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 2018), p 250-289.
16. [Telegram.] D.D. Porter, Rear-Admiral, Fortress Monroe, Va., November 20, 1864—11:30 p.m., to G.V. Fox, Assistant Secretary of Navy. *ORN*, Series I, Volume 11, p 78; William N. Jeffers, Lieutenant-Commander, in charge Executive Department, Navy Ordnance Yard, Washington City, to Commander H.A. Wise, Chief of Bureau of Ordnance, November 23, 1864. *Ibid*, p 215-216.
17. Letter from Rear-Admiral Porter, U.S. Navy, to Major-General Butler, U.S. Army, regarding the departure of United States vessels from Hampton Roads for Beaufort, N.C., North Atlantic Squadron, U.S. Flagship Malvern, Hampton Roads, December 13, 1864. *ORN*, Series I, Volume 11, p 191.
18. Additional report of Commander Rhind, U.S. Navy, regarding explosion of powder vessel, U.S.S. Agawam, Navy Yard, Norfolk, Va., February 2, 1865. *ORN*, Series I, Volume 11, p 230-232; Statement of Commander Rhind, U.S. Navy, in contradiction of evidence given by Major-General Butler, U.S. Army, before a committee of Congress, New York, November 16, 1865. *Ibid*, p 237-240; A.C. Rhind. The Last of the Fort Fisher Powder-Boat, *The United Service: A Quarterly Review of Military and Naval Affairs*, Volume I, No. 2, April 1879, p 227-236.
19. “From Fort Fisher,” *Fayetteville Observer Semi-Weekly* (Fayetteville, NC), January 2, 1865, p 3, col 3-4; B.F. Blair to Mother, December 27, 1864, Chris E. Fonvielle Jr. Collection, U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle, Pennsylvania.
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