

Detail from Bombardment of Fort Fisher, January 15, 1865. Chromolithograph published by Endicott & Company, New York, New York, 1865, based on Thomas F. Laycock drawing. The Beverley R. Robinson Collection of Naval Battle Prints. Image courtesy of United States Naval Academy Museum (1951.007.720), Annapolis, Maryland.



Second Strike: The U.S. Navy in the Battle of Fort Fisher, 1865

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By Chris E. Fonvielle Jr.

THEY WERE BACK! The growing number of twinkling lights over the ocean was not stars slowly making their appearance in the darkening sky, but those from on board U.S. Navy warships. Confederate sentries quickly summoned Colonel William Lamb from his quarters to the Pulpit Battery on Fort Fisher's long line of sandbank defenses facing the sea. "I saw from the ramparts of the fort the lights of the great armada, as one after another appeared above the horizon," the fort's commander described. "I commenced at once to prepare for action." As Lamb both expected and feared, Rear Admiral David D. Porter's fleet had returned to renew its attack on Fort Fisher and less than three weeks after the first big one at Christmas 1864. Its second strike would undoubtedly begin soon after sunrise.¹

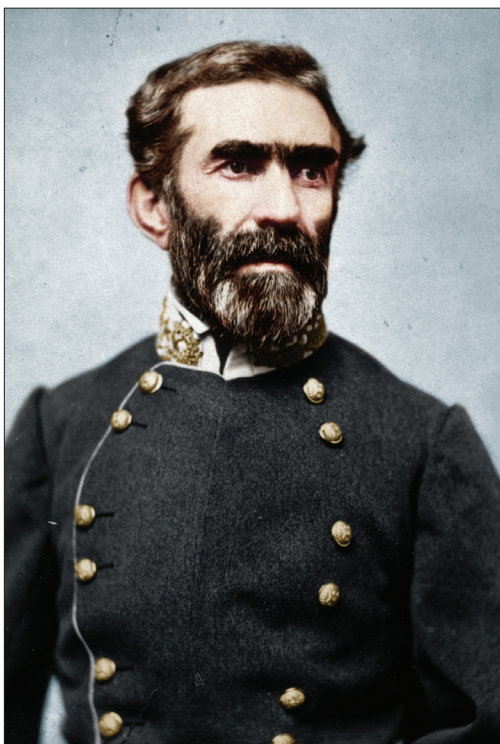
Reorganized Attack on Fort Fisher

As Major General William T. Sherman prepared for his advance from Savannah, Georgia, into the Carolinas in the winter of 1865, General Ulysses S. Grant finalized plans for another attack on Wilmington, North Carolina, with Fort Fisher being the first target. Its capture would close the Cape Fear River to blockade running, sever the major artery of supplies for General Robert E. Lee's army at Petersburg, Virginia, and establish a base of operations for supporting Sherman's campaign.

After dismissing Major General Benjamin F. Butler, the disgraced leader of the U.S. Army in the first failed attack on Fort Fisher, Grant replaced him with the affable but capable Connecticut-born Brevet Major



Major General Alfred H. Terry, U.S. Army.
Chris E. Fonvielle Jr. Collection.



General Braxton Bragg, CSA. Library of Congress (LC-USZC4-7984). Colorized by Daniel Norris. Chris E. Fonvielle Jr. Collection.

General Alfred H. Terry, commander of the XXIV Corps, Army of the James. Officially designated Terry's Provisional Corps, it comprised the same troops—the Second Division of the XXIV Corps and two brigades of U.S. Colored Troops from the XXV Army Corps in the Army of the James—from Butler's ill-fated mission. Terry bolstered the expeditionary force with his former brigade from the XXIV Corps's First Division and support personnel for a total of approximately 9,600 men.

The troop transports and Porter's warships reached Fort Fisher during the night of January 12, 1865.²

Confederate Response to Imminent Attack

Confederate authorities in Wilmington received a dire telegraphic message from Lamb about midnight, warning that a great many Union vessels were again gathering off the Cape Fear coast. It caught General Braxton Bragg, head of the Department of North Carolina and Southern Virginia, completely by surprise. He reckoned that the Federals' abortive attack at Christmas had provoked them into moving on to other targets. Bragg was wrong and Lamb was furious. "The fort was not even advised of the approach of the fleet, but its arrival reported from Fort Fisher to headquarters in Wilmington," he fumed.³

Bragg spent the predawn hours of January 13 rounding up the 6,400 soldiers of Major General Robert F. Hoke's Division that Lee had sent from Petersburg to help safeguard Wilmington, but were now scattered in and about the city, resting and "recreating." As soon as they assembled, Bragg marched them out of the city, but they did not reach Federal Point until that afternoon, too late to contest the Union army coming ashore. Instead of assaulting the enemy as they attempted to secure their beachhead, Bragg entrenched Hoke's infantry behind strong, previously constructed fieldworks known as the Sugar Loaf line, four and a half miles north of Fort Fisher. There the troops waited while Bragg dallied in Wilmington.

Landing of U.S. Troops and Covering Fire

Under the covering fire of a division of heavily armed U.S. Navy vessels, including the sloop of war USS *Brooklyn*, Terry's troops hit the beach several miles above Fort Fisher early on the morning of January 13. The only resistance they encountered was rough surf that soaked most as they disembarked the navy gigs. The tars' laughter at the drenched

The U.S. Navy in the Battle of Fort Fisher, 1865

landlubbers “grew into a roar that rivaled the noise of the breaking waves,” commented one amused officer. Unmolested, the Federals likened the hours-long landing to a picnic in the park.

With all of his men ashore by midafternoon, Terry marched them southward, establishing a defensive position roughly halfway between Sugar Loaf and Fort Fisher.⁴



Major General Robert F. Hoke, CSA. Chris E. Fonvielle Jr. Collection.

While warships shielded the army, the monitors USS *Canonicus*, USS *Mahopac*, USS *Manadnock*, and USS *Saugus* and USS *New Ironsides* pushed to within 700 to 1,000 yards of Fort Fisher’s Northeast Bastion where the land and sea face batteries intersected, somewhat closer than in the December battle. Porter hoped to lure the Confederates into revealing the precise location of their heavy artillery in the land front batteries so his warships could disable or destroy them, and provide Terry’s troops with a safer approach to the fort should they decide to launch a ground assault.

Chief Quartermaster Daniel D. Stevens tended *Canonicus*’s signal flag in order to communicate with other ships, and took soundings to prevent the monitor, weighing in at 1,034-tons burthen and with a draft of almost 14 feet, from grounding. The duty required him to remain topside and dangerously exposed to Confederate fire. Fort Fisher’s experienced artillerists soon found their range on *Canonicus* and struck it time and again. Lieutenant Commander George E. Belknap reported that “everything about the deck not shot-proof was badly cut up.”⁵ Except Stevens. Two times incoming shots tore away the *Canonicus*’s signal flag and both times Stevens replaced it, as solid iron cannonballs struck the turret behind which he sheltered, shells exploded overhead, and the occasional sharpshooter’s bullet whizzed by his head. For his meritorious service, Stevens received the Medal of Honor from the U.S. Navy.⁶

The monitors and *New Ironsides* fired about 100 projectiles each during the first day of fighting. “We aimed almost wholly at their guns, watching the effect of each shot, and waiting for the smoke to clear before firing another,” reported Commander Enoch G. Parrott of *Manadnock*.⁷ Being so close to the fort, they received



Storming Fort Fisher—Troops Landing from the Transports, Covered by the Naval Vessels. Colorized version of illustration published in *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, Volume XIX, No. 488, p 308, February 4, 1865. Chris E. Fonvielle Jr. Collection.

the brunt of the Confederates' counter-fire in what Porter described as "quite a spirited engagement."⁸ *Canonicus* took thirty-six direct hits, *New Ironsides* twenty-five, and *Saugus* eleven. Despite the enemy's excellent, if desultory, shooting, their projectiles merely dented the monitors' revolving turrets and *New Ironsides*'s thick iron plating. They inflicted no serious damage to the embattled titans or injury to their crews.

After covering the successful landing of Terry's troops, most of the fleet, slightly reduced from sixty-four to fifty-eight in number, took up their assigned battle stations abreast of Fort Fisher's sea face batteries by midafternoon. The vessels, including the steam frigates USS *Colorado*, USS *Powhatan*, and USS *Susquehanna*, unleashed heavy broadsides for about two hours, escalating their intensity as daylight dimmed.

"The bombardment was very rapid and severe," observed one naval officer.

Naval Fire: Targeting the Fort's Guns

During the Christmas bombardment the warship commanders, at their own discretion, allowed their gunners to attempt to establish an effective range of fire onshore by aiming at the most visible targets on Fort Fisher's ramparts and batteries—battle flags. Lamb soon figured out the Federals' intentions and personally planted a company standard on Shepherd's Battery at the far west end of the land face defenses. "My two hours' experience had taught me that the fleet would concentrate a heavy fire on it [battle flag], and I wanted to put it where it would do the most good by causing the least harm."⁹ Sure enough, the warships redirected much of their fire toward Shepherd's Battery, with many of their shells flying over the fort and into the Cape Fear River beyond. "Never since the invention of gunpowder was there so much of it harmlessly expended..." Lamb claimed. This time around Porter had instructed his officers "...never to fire at the flag or pole, but to pick out

the guns..."¹⁰ which they hit with increasingly deadly accuracy.

The warships withdrew to their anchorage farther offshore as darkness set in, but the ironclads continued shelling through the night.¹¹ They lobbed projectiles at the fort about every ten minutes to hamper the garrison's efforts to repair damages, and to protect Terry's Provisional Corps up the beach.

The blue-uniformed soldiers spent much of the night and early morning hours of January 14 digging entrenchments half a mile across Federal Point peninsula to guard against an attack from Hoke's Division at Sugar Loaf. Within twenty-four hours after coming ashore, they had thrown up a crude but formidable line of breastworks from the Cape Fear River to the Atlantic Ocean. The physical labor warded off the cold, which was made worse by a ban on campfires to prevent their positions becoming known to a lone Confederate combat ship on the lower Cape Fear River.

Confederate Naval Defenses

By 1865, CSS *Chickamauga*, the former blockade runner *Edith* converted into a gunboat armed with five cannons, all but comprised the Confederate Navy's Cape Fear squadron. Three smaller one- or two-gun vessels—*Arctic*, *North Heath*, and *Yadkin*—essentially served as floating batteries to protect the water approaches to Wilmington, twenty miles upriver from Fort Fisher.

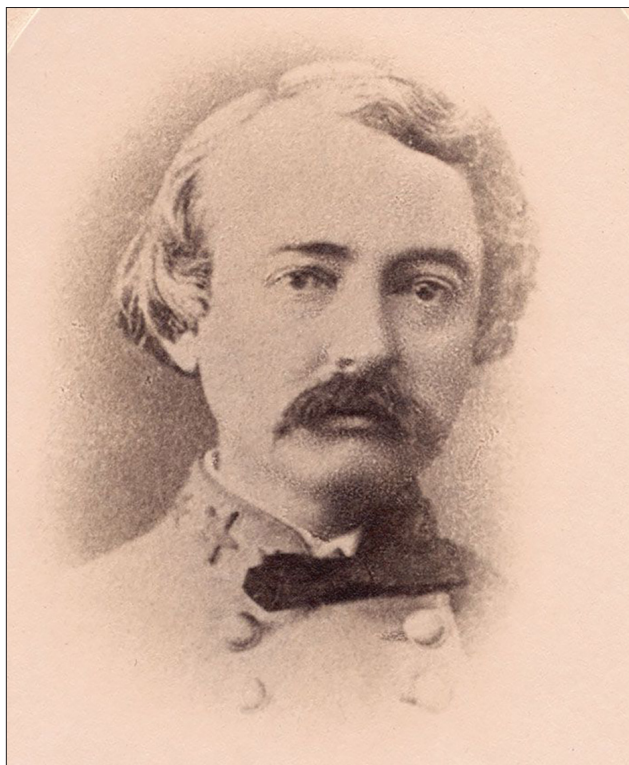
The Confederate Navy commissioned two Richmond-class ironclads, CSS *Raleigh* and CSS *North Carolina*, in Wilmington, but both had brief careers. *Raleigh* ran hard aground in the Cape Fear River near Battery Buchanan at the tip of Federal Point while returning from a brazen and modestly successful attack against Union blockading ships off New Inlet in early May 1864. *North Carolina* suffered an ignominious fate when teredo worms ate holes into her unseasoned pine hull, causing her slowly but surely to settle on the bottom of the river near Smithville (modern Southport) by late September. A third Richmond-class ironclad, CSS *Wilmington*, was currently under construction at a shipyard across the

The U.S. Navy in the Battle of Fort Fisher, 1865

river from the city's downtown commercial district, but only *Chickamauga* put out for combat duty. She harassed Union troops with cannon fire over the next several days, but kept out of firing range from the more powerfully armed warships on the ocean side of Federal Point.¹²

The Attack Continues: The First Day

Fort Fisher's defenders spent a sleepless night preparing for what they believed was an imminent Union infantry attack. Lamb and Major General W.H.C. Whiting, who returned to Fort Fisher as an advisor to his protégé and volunteer combatant, kept the men on constant watch. "The enemy have landed in large force," Whiting telegraphed Bragg. "You must attack them at once." When Bragg ignored him, Whiting restated his plea, "They will assault me to-night, or try to do it. You must attack."



Major General William H.C. Whiting, CSA. Chris E. Fonvielle Jr. Collection.

By 8:00 p.m., Whiting telegraphed again, "Enemy are on the beach, where they have been all day. Why are they not attacked?" Whiting was howling in the wind.¹³

Most of the Federal fleet remained silent until midmorning on January 14, another bright and balmy day. The monitors and *New Ironsides* maintained their rotation fire as the wooden gunboats of Line 1 of three battle lines steamed in close to Fort Fisher's land face batteries. From their battle stations about three-quarters to a mile offshore, they began a deliberate and relentless shelling to weaken that side of the defenses. "I could see that our fire had damaged some of their guns," Porter reported, "and I determined before the army went to the assault there should be no guns (within our reach) to arrest their progress."¹⁴

For more than seven hours the warships furiously pounded Fort Fisher with iron projectiles, or "blacksmiths' hops" as one Union musket-bearer referred to them.¹⁵ "The shower of shell was terrible to the extreme," recalled a Confederate soldier on the receiving end of the bombardment, "...one could no longer hear anything but one continuous roar that seemed louder than thunder."¹⁶ The terrible cannonade caused severe damage and heavy casualties inside the fort. By the end of the second day's fight, Lamb had lost all but three or four seacoast guns along the land front and at least 200 men killed and wounded, almost 11 percent of the 1,900-man garrison.

Unlike Bragg, who finally joined Hoke in the field at Sugar Loaf, Terry was fully aware of conditions at Fort Fisher. Covered by Colonel N. Martin Curtis's First Brigade of New Yorkers, Terry, Curtis, and Brevet Lt. Colonel Cyrus B. Comstock, the expeditionary force's chief engineer, sneaked to within 400 yards of Shepherd's Battery, taking cover underneath a low bluff along the edge of the Cape Fear River.¹⁷

The U.S. Navy in the Battle of Fort Fisher, 1865

Chickamauga soon spotted and fired at the officers, cutting the reconnaissance short. Even so, Terry saw enough to convince him that conditions appeared favorable for a ground assault. The navy's unabated bombardment had destroyed, dismounted, or damaged the vast majority of the land face cannons, blown open gaping holes in the wooden palisade, and kept the Confederate gunners largely confined to their underground bombproofs and unable to enforce their rapidly depleting heavy artillery capability.

Continued Bombardment and Joint Ground Assault

While the ironclads kept up their intermittent shelling of Fort Fisher during the night of January 14, Terry and Comstock rowed out to Porter's flagship, USS *Malvern*, to consult with the flag officer about a battle plan. Terry informed the veteran seaman of the telling effects of the warships' intense bombardment on the defenses and artillery, and proposed an infantry attack for the following afternoon. That would enable the navy to spend one more day disabling the remaining cannons in the land face batteries, further damaging the palisade, and exhausting the besieged garrison. At the ready, Brigadier General Adelbert Ames's three brigades of the XXIV Army Corps would make the attack, while Brigadier General Charles J. Paine's two brigades of U.S. Colored Troops manned the defensive line of breastworks north of Fort Fisher.¹⁸

Porter enthusiastically endorsed Terry's proposal, with one stipulation. He wanted to "share in the assault" by sending ashore a sizeable contingent of volunteer sailors and Marines from various ships of the fleet. After the first battle of Fort Fisher, Porter told Assistant Secretary of the Navy Gustavus V. Fox, that if the army failed again, the navy would "...show the soldiers how to do it...I can do anything with [my own good officers and men]," he boasted, and "you need not be surprised to hear that the webfooters have gone into the fort."¹⁹ Porter ordered that the sailors "...be armed with cutlasses, well sharpened, and with revolvers" and "board the fort on the run in a seaman-like way," while the Marines, equipped with Sharps & Hankins and Springfield rifles,

would provide covering fire for them.²⁰ The egomaniacal flag officer may have been trying to deflect unwanted attention from his grand armada's less-than-grand performance in the Christmas attack. Regardless of what Terry may have thought about Porter's unorthodox scheme, he remained silent. Filling his thoughts instead was Grant's order for a "unity of action" between him and Porter, which had been virtually nonexistent between Butler and Porter in the first battle. Grant told Terry, "...you can rely on his [Porter's] judgment and his nerve to undertake what he proposes."²¹

At the very least the commanders agreed that at the appropriate time Terry would signal Porter to change his warships' course of fire from Fort Fisher's land face exclusively to the sea face. Once the shelling had been redirected, the army would advance against the west end of the land front while the naval column attacked the east end, targeting the Northeast Bastion. There was, however, miscommunication about the time the ground assault would step off. Terry thought they agreed on 3:00 p.m., while Porter believed it was to occur an hour earlier. The confusion would prove costly.²²

The Third Day: Intense Fighting

Sunday, January 15, dawned bright and chilly. The ironclads increased their fire along the land defenses after sunrise, as Porter signaled the remainder of the fleet to steam in and join the battle. The warships dropped anchor and began firing by about 11:00 a.m., taking advantage of a glassy sea and sufficient practice to punish the fort and its beleaguered garrison.²³

"On Sunday, the fire on the fort reached a pitch of fury to which no language can do justice," reported Whiting.²⁴

By noon the powerful bombardment had dismounted, broken, or rendered unserviceable every seacoast gun in the land face batteries except for an 8-inch columbiad in the Northeast Bastion. The shelling also splintered the



The Bombardment of Fort Fisher, January 15, 1865. Illustration (engraved by Theodore Schussler) based on art by Julian O. Davidson (from a lithograph published by Endicott & Company) published in *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, Volume IV, p 656.



The War in America: Interior [of the North Eastern Salient] of Fort Fisher During the Second Bombardment [January 13-15, 1865].— From a sketch by Our Special Artist [Frank Vizetelly]. Vizetelly was the correspondent and sketch artist for *The Illustrated London News* and was present at the fort during the attack. Colorized version of illustration published in *The Illustrated London News*, Volume XLVI, No. 1306, p 249, March 18, 1865. Chris E. Fonvielle Jr. Collection.

The U.S. Navy in the Battle of Fort Fisher, 1865

palisade so as to make it useless for defense, and cut the cables from the fort's electric batteries to the torpedoes (mines) planted 200 yards out front.²⁵

Inside the fort, the casualty count "increased hourly" as the warships dropped projectiles with almost pinpoint accuracy into the artillery compartments. Lamb's men fought back desperately and courageously, but the overwhelming number of incoming missiles soon forced them to again seek shelter in the bombproofs. "The [shells] were falling and bursting faster than the ticking of a watch," stated one eyewitness.²⁶

Frank Vizetelly, correspondent and sketch artist for *The Illustrated London News*, witnessed all three days of the U.S. Navy's bombardment of Fort Fisher. "Never has the world seen a sight so fearful as the terrific concentration of fire brought to bear on the luckless sand work by the largest fleet armed with the most powerful ordnance yet

employed for the reduction of a fortress," he noted. "Etna or Vesuvius could not have belched forth their flames of destruction with more fury..."

The fleet reportedly fired 19,682 projectiles, about 600 fewer than during the Christmas battle, in the second largest concentrated naval bombardment of the Civil War.²⁷

Whiting repeatedly sent telegraphic messages to Bragg at Sugar Loaf about the worsening situation and conditions inside Fort Fisher. He implored the department commander to reinforce the weakening garrison, and to advance against the Union troops preparing to assault the works. "Attack! Attack! It is all I can say, and all you



The Assault and Capture of Fort Fisher, January 15, 1865. Shows Brigadier General Adelbert Ames's division of over 3,000 troops assaulting the western end of Fort Fisher's land face. Colorized version of illustration published in *Harper's Weekly*, Volume IX, No. 423, p 72-73, February 4, 1865. Chris E. Fonvielle Jr. Collection.

can do,” Whiting urged.²⁸ Yet Bragg inexplicably declined to make an aggressive move. Perhaps the victory during the Christmas battle had given him a false sense of security for the fort’s fate. “If defended, as I believe it will be, by your veterans and the former garrison,” Bragg informed Lee, “it cannot be taken.”²⁹ Whatever his reasoning, Bragg did not even attempt to reinforce Fort Fisher until January 15 (the third day of the attack).

A transport bearing one brigade of 1,300 South Carolina infantry docked at Battery Buchanan’s wharf shortly after noon. About 500 Palmetto State soldiers had made it to shore when their

vessel suddenly came under bombardment. Porter’s warships on the south end of the battle lines spotted the steamboat and redirected their fire from the Mound Battery toward it. Exploding shells quickly drove the vessel away from Battery Buchanan and across the Cape Fear River. No more was heard from Bragg during the battle.³⁰

Naval Shore Assault

More than 1,800 Union sailors and about 400 Marines from half the fleet’s vessels went ashore on Federal Point during the morning of January 15. Other than their shipmates, the seamen likely did not know many, if any, others in the landing party, and they had never trained together as a compactly organized, precision ground assault force. It did not bode well for success.

Under the overall command of Fleet Captain Kidder R. Breese of USS *Malvern*, the sailors organized into three divisions and waited for the attack time to arrive.³¹

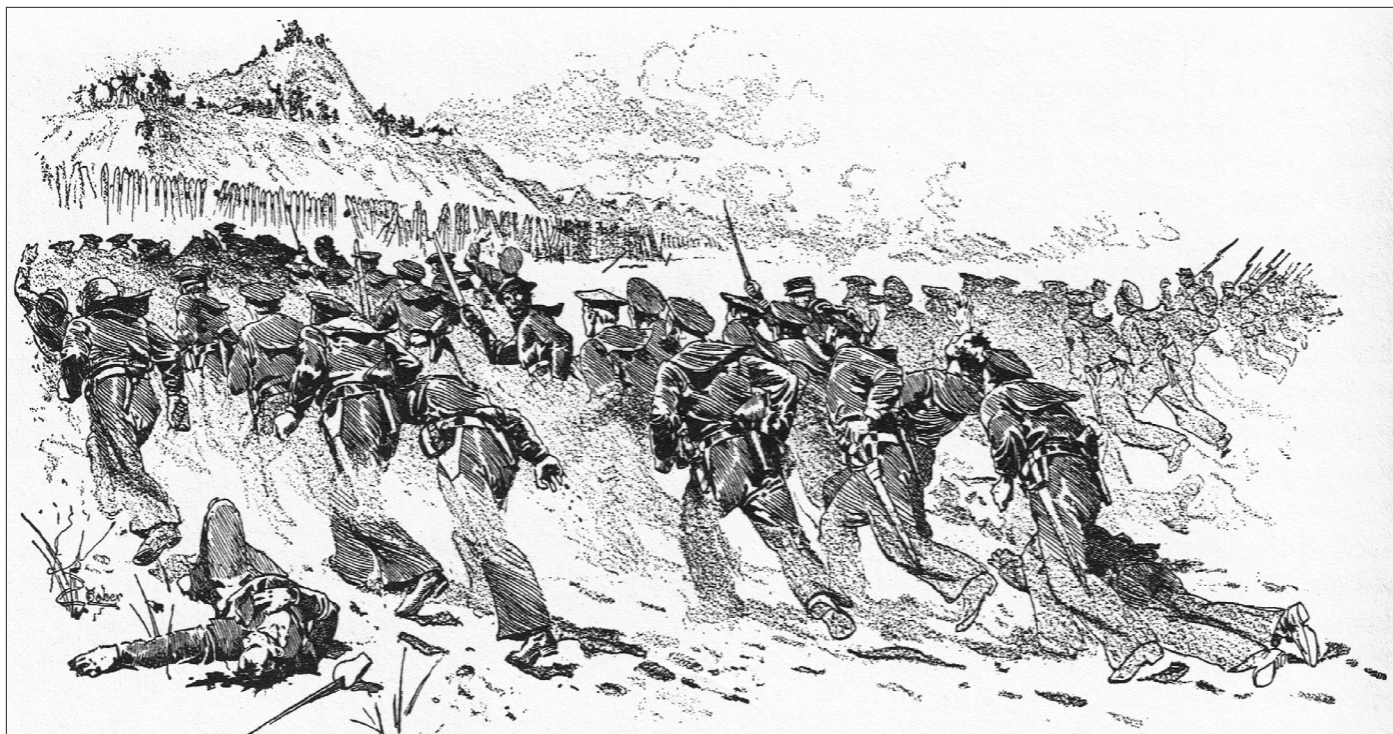


Lt. Kidder R. Breese, USN, fleet captain for Porter’s armada. Breese commanded the Union naval assault column that stormed Fort Fisher. Photograph was taken circa 1861-1862 before his promotion to lieutenant commander. Collection of Captain A.L. Clifton, USN (Medical Corps), 1939. NH 92565 courtesy of Naval History and Heritage Command.

As planned, the Marines, led by Captain Lucien L. Dawson from the steam frigate *Colorado*, advanced near the Northeast Bastion and dug in, expecting to fire on the Confederate defenders as the Union sailors made their assault. Yet when 2:00 p.m. came and went by more than an hour with still no signal to advance, a frustrated Breese instructed the Marines to withdraw to the beach. The order dumfounded Dawson whose sharpshooters were in position and already firing at Southern soldiers who dared show themselves on the fort. But the U.S. sailors grew anxious as casualties mounted from the fire of the columbiad in the Northeast Bastion, two cannons atop the Mound Battery at the far south end of the fort’s extensive oceanfront batteries, and friendly fire from the warships of Line 1 shelling the land face batteries. The Marines found the sailors nervously huddled along the shoreline, bewildered, and disorganized.³²

By 3:00 p.m., Terry’s troops were ready to go! As agreed, he notified Porter who immediately instructed his fleet to shift its fire from Fort Fisher’s land front to the sea face batteries. Then, at exactly 3:25 p.m., the warships simultaneously blew their steam whistles to signal the ground assault to begin. Brigadier General Adelbert Ames’s three brigades rushed in echelon across the broad sandy plain facing Fort Fisher.

The U.S. Navy in the Battle of Fort Fisher, 1865



Assault of the Naval Column on the North-East Salient of Fort Fisher. Illustration published in *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, Volume IV, p 658.

As the army charged Shepherd's Battery and adjoining works near the Cape Fear River, the naval column sprinted down the beach's hardpan in the direction of the Northeast Bastion. By the time the tars reached the stockade fence out front, they resembled a discombobulated mob. Flames of fire from rifle muskets in the hands of 500 Confederate soldiers, personally commanded by both Lamb and Whiting, massed along the fort's parapet, met them. "As soon as the shells from the fleet ceased to fall into the fort, [the Confederates] swarmed forth like bees from a hive while shooting rifles, and opened a very destructive fire upon us," wrote Ploudon Huggins, a Marine from the twin-turreted monitor, *Monadnock*. A 12-pounder Napoleon smoothbore cannon, deployed in a "demilune" earthwork protruding from the fort's sand walls halfway down the land front, contributed to the destructive fire by pouring double canister into the flank of the sailors and Marines. The Northeast Bastion's 8-inch columbiad also cut large gaps in their ranks.³³

A few sailors jostled through the splintered palisade or went around its ocean end, but not a single one scaled

the high ramparts to reach the top of the fort. "A murderous fire greeted them and swept them down," recalled Lamb.³⁴ The Unionists especially mourned the death of Lieutenant Benjamin H. Porter, flag captain of *Malvern*. Although not related to the fleet's commander, the young officer was respected and liked by U.S. Navy personnel. A Confederate bullet pierced his breast as he led the sailors' assault on Fort Fisher. Porter's good friend Samuel S. Preston, flag lieutenant, fell nearby only moments later. "Two more noble spirits the world never saw, nor the Navy ever two more intrepid men," boasted Breese.³⁶

In less than thirty minutes almost 300 dead, dying, and wounded Union seamen littered the beach, while the Confederates' intense, merciless fire forced the majority of the survivors to beat a hasty retreat.

"We witnessed what had never been seen before," Lamb wrote, "a disorderly rout of American sailors and marines."



Bombardment of Fort Fisher, January 15th 1865. View from the Mound Battery at Fort Fisher. Image from chromolithograph by James M. Alden, published by Endicott & Company, New York, New York, 1865. Prints, Drawings, and Watercolors from the Anne S.K. Brown Collection, Brown Digital Repository, Brown University Library, Providence, Rhode Island.

Union tars that found themselves caught at the front sought cover behind the palisade, sand hillocks, or in makeshift “gopher holes.” Among those who made it through the barrage of bullets was Carlisle Porter, Rear Admiral Porter’s seventeen-year-old son.³⁶

The terrible slaughter and shocking retreat of many of the navy’s best and brightest officers and men infuriated their comrades who watched the doomed attack from the decks of the warships. “It was hard to see our sailors and marines killed and wounded before our eyes,” wrote Archibald Dick of *Susquehanna*. “The men’s hearts were in their throats, not through any fear, but that they could not help their shipmates. The officers became so enraged that they opened fire contrary to orders, some shots falling amongst our own men, killing and wounding a few of them. Such a sight would make the blood creep in your veins.”³⁷

Despite the naval column’s disastrous assault, it served a useful purpose by distracting the attention of a goodly portion of the fort’s garrison and enabling Terry’s

infantry to establish a foothold on the works. The 250 North Carolina soldiers, outnumbered more than ten to one, could not halt the 3,200 Union troops storming up and over the ramparts on the land front’s less-well-defended west end. The 500 South Carolinians that entered Fort Fisher earlier that afternoon had taken refuge in a large commissary bombproof and ignored Lamb’s instructions for them to reinforce the Tar Heels defending Shepherd’s Battery and adjoining works.

Having repulsed the Union sailors’ and Marines’ attack on the Northeast Bastion, Lamb and Whiting were shocked to see U.S. Army flags planted on the ramparts and traverses near the Cape Fear River. Whiting led a fierce counterattack to drive the enemy from the fort, but two gunshots pierced his right leg as he grappled with a Union flag bearer near Shepherd’s Battery. Confederate soldiers rescued and took him to the already crowded post hospital in Battery Meade, just south of the Northeast Bastion. About thirty minutes later Lamb organized a retaliatory assault but also was shot and

The U.S. Navy in the Battle of Fort Fisher, 1865



[Rear] Admiral [David D.] Porter's Fleet Celebrating the Surrender of Fort Fisher. Tinted version of Illustration published in *Harper's Weekly*, Volume IX, No. 423, p 69, February 4, 1865. Chris E. Fonvielle Jr. Collection.

removed to the infirmary. There he found Whiting suffering terribly from his injury, but defiant and resolute about fighting to the last man.

Like Lamb, Whiting vividly recalled Lee's warning that if Wilmington fell, the Army of Northern Virginia, and thus the Confederacy, could not survive.³⁸

Capture of the Fort

Possession of Fort Fisher now became a soldiers' fight. Rifle musketry, cannon fire, and hand-to-hand combat raged for more than five hours on the ramparts and parade ground below. Fought mostly after dark, the battlefield took on an eerie aura as the continuous discharge of rifle muskets and cannons and exploding projectiles illuminated the ferocious combat and carnage. The pitched brawl became so violent that

"it was all too much even for demons," claimed one combatant of the 203rd Pennsylvania Infantry.³⁹

By 9:00 p.m., the last group of outnumbered, outgunned, and outlasted Confederates vacated the fort, taking the badly wounded Lamb and Whiting with them. The men withdrew to Battery Buchanan where they expected to be transported by a convoy of waiting boats to the west side of the Cape Fear River. But Southern sailors and Marines, commanded by Lt. Robert T. Chapman, had abandoned their post and taken off with the boats.

The garrison troops had little choice but to await their fate. The Union pursuers, including the 27th U.S. Colored Troops, caught up with the forlorn Confederates at 10:00 p.m. that night, capturing about 2,000 of them, including Lamb and Whiting. Terry personally accepted the surrender of Whiting who was lying on a stretcher.

After returning to Fort Fisher, Terry relayed the tidings of victory to Porter, but the navy had already heard the sounds of triumph from the loud and hearty cheers of the boys in blue onshore. Bright colors suddenly filled the heavens as the fleet set off a magnificent display of

Coston signal flares in celebration. “At once the sky was full of rockets and many colored lights, and as showers of red, white, and blue stars fell into the sea, we knew that the navy was proclaiming victory,” observed one U.S. Army officer.⁴⁰

Bragg’s Last Actions

“I am mortified at having to report the unexpected capture of Fort Fisher, with most of its garrison...,” Braxton Bragg telegraphed Lee, President Jefferson Davis, and North Carolina Governor Zebulon Vance on January 16. “Can you retake the fort?,” the president wanted to know. “If anything is to be done you will appreciate the necessity of it being attempted without a moment’s delay.” But Bragg did not “appreciate the necessity” and declined to counterattack, believing that the overwhelming firepower of Porter’s armada alone would decimate Hoke’s Division as it went forward from Sugar Loaf toward the fort.⁴¹

Bragg instead ordered the evacuation of the forts and batteries that guarded Old Inlet and the withdrawal of their garrisons to Fort Anderson directly across the Cape Fear River from Sugar Loaf. The department commander claimed that he now planned to defend Wilmington, although it possessed little value once Federal forces gained control of both Old and New Inlets and sealed the port to blockade running.

Further displaying his reputation for not being “a fighting general,” Bragg turned over field command to Hoke and departed Wilmington on February 10, traveling on the Wilmington and Weldon Railroad to Richmond to reorganize his military staff. The following day Union army forces, recently reinforced and resupplied, advanced up both sides of the Cape Fear River, while a flotilla of double-ender gunboats provided covering fire from the waterway. They captured Wilmington on February 22. As it was George Washington’s birthday, they considered it a good sign that the war was nearing an end.

Postscript

With the lifeline of the Confederacy now severed and arms, equipment, and supplies no longer able to reach

his besieged army, Lee abandoned his lines at Petersburg. Grant’s operational forces pursued him for a week, finally surrounding and forcing his surrender at Appomattox Courthouse on April 9, 1865, only forty-six days after Wilmington’s fall.

As one Southern soldier observed perceptively, “[Its capture] appeared to be the last rays of departing hope.” And so it was.⁴²

The Federals’ capture of the Confederacy’s strongest seacoast fortification guarding the South’s most important seaport and city by late 1864, proved to be of tremendous significance. The U.S. Navy provided overwhelming firepower that tipped the balance in favor of the Union in the second Battle of Fort Fisher. “We had some very important naval victories during the war, but none so important as Fort Fisher,” boasted Admiral Porter. “Its fall sealed the fate of the Confederacy.”⁴³

Sources

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The U.S. Navy in the Battle of Fort Fisher, 1865

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