THE CONFEDERATE STATES MARINES
AT WILMINGTON, 1864 - 1865
by David M. Sullivan

FORT FISHER: THE FINAL BATTLES
(Continued from Previous Issue)

In early November, 1864, Battery Buchanan, a five-gun, solidly built earthwork situated a few hundred yards to the rear of Fort Fisher, was placed under the control of the C.S. Navy. A portion of the garrison was made up of C.S. Marines idled by the loss of the ironclads. Five non-commissioned officers and twenty privates were detached by Captain Van Benthuyzen and ordered to the battery under the command of 2nd Lt. John Deb. Roberts, CSMC. No Marines were stationed at Fort Fisher at this time. However, when the first of the great Federal armadas appeared off Cape Fear, the sea-soldiers of Captain Van Benthuyzen’s Wilmington detachment were quick to reinforce the army garrison command by Col. William Lamb, CSA.

The initial Battle of Fort Fisher was a curious affair. It confounded military logic and, inexplicably, gained the support of otherwise traditionally thinking Union commanders. The plan of attack was devised by Maj. General Benjamin Butler, former Democratic Party big-wig from Massachusetts, who held his rank and commission solely to his political associations and not to his military skill. His genius for the battlefield was largely a product of his fertile imagination and recognized only by himself. His plan proceeded accordingly.

Butler’s scheme called for a massive naval bombardment of Fort Fisher followed by the insertion of a ship filled with tons of gunpowder close to the Confederate works. The detonation of the explosives would, in Butler’s plan, certainly cause the total destruction of the fort. His troops, landed some distance from the scene in order to shield them from the effects of the blast, would, at their leisure, merely stroll into the demolished battlements and make prisoners of the dazed and demoralized survivors. Butler’s drama, however, did not play according to his script.


At 1:00 P.M., December 24, 1864, the initial salvoes were fired by the Union fleet; their compliments immediately replied to by the Confederate gunners in Fort Fisher. Among the latter was a contingent of twenty-nine officers and men led by Lt. Francis Roby, CSN, which had double-timed from Battery Buchanan. The naval troops were stationed at the Brooke guns near the “Mound

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LOWER CAPE FEAR HISTORICAL SOCIETY

BULLETIN
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PRESIDENT’S MESSAGE
As I write this letter to you, we have just finished the Candlelight Tour and due to the superb leadership of Ed Turberg along with Janet Seapker, his gallant assistant, it was a great success. I hope that everyone of you took the opportunity to go on the tour. It was a perfect weekend with the weather just cold enough to feel Christmasy and with all the houses and churches ready for the holiday season. I would like to mention every single person who in some way made the Candlelight Tour better than ever, but if I did there would be room for nothing else in the Bulletin. Many, many thanks to you all.

Now to look ahead—the Latimer House will be re-opened February the second after its annual January vacation. On February the fifteenth we will have our general meeting at the Latimer House. Thomas Price, Chairman of Wilmington’s 250th Anniversary Committee, will be our speaker. A reception will follow the meeting.

Saturday, March 21st, the Lower Cape Fear Historical Society will offer for a small fee for an evening of poetry and music. This event will start at eight o’clock and last approximately one hour. At the reception afterwards, you can meet the N.C. Poetry Society members and our local poets who gave the program. The theme of the reading will be the poems written to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the coming of the English to America.

As your president, I urge each of you to participate in the activities of the society and if you have any ideas or suggestions as to how the society can improve or change, I am always happy to hear from you.

I look forward to seeing you soon.

Jean Anne Sutton

GIFTS TO THE IDA B. KELLMAN MEMORIAL ARCHIVES
The Society gratefully acknowledges the following gifts:
Ralph L. Hobbs
Hobbs & Related Families, Volumes I and II compiled by Ralph L. Hobbs.
George Slaton
Xerox copy of a typescript of the Civil War Diary of Mary Dudley of Wilmington, N.C., 1862.
Columbus County Historical Society, John McNeiill, Pres. Columbus County: Recollections & Records, edited by Anne Little.
Lt. Col. Charles Gault
Eleven postcards of old Wilmington scenes including eight by Claude Howell.
France Daniell Hough
Xerox copies of letters written by Major-General Robert Howe when he was superintendent of West Point; one letter from George Washington to Major-General Howe, 1783.

MEETING
Date: Sunday, February 15, 1987
Time: 4:00 p.m.
Place: Latimer House
Speaker: Thomas A. Price, Jr., Chairman of Wilmington’s 250th Birthday Commission
safety of the "Pulpit Battery." Colonel Lamb immediately ordered troops to the point of danger; the palisaded sea wall at the angle of the fort. Suddenly the bombardment ceased and, for a moment, silence prevailed. Then, the shrill howl of scores of steam whistles from the fleet signalled the naval column forward. 1,600 cutlass and pistol wielding bluejackets and 400 U.S. Marines sprang to the attack and raced across the sand, headlong into a hail of death. The concentrated rifle fire of the Confederates and a hail of canister from the few artillery pieces still functioning blasted the charge to a standstill. Unable to rally, the union sailors and Marines broke and ran. A rebel yell of triumph rose in the wake of the fleeing bluecoats.

But the danger was far from over. The charge of the naval column was a failure but provided a diversion which proved pivotal in the success of the Federal campaign. As the naval troops were falling back in disarray, the jubilant defenders turned to see the flags of the second enemy force being planted on the land face of the fort. Leading a force to seal off this penetration, General Whiting, who had returned to Fort Fisher to share its fate, was cut down with two chest wounds. Savage hand-to-hand fighting broke out as the antagonists came to grips near the fourth gun chamber. Shortly afterward, Colonel Lamb was also rendered hors de combat.

In the thick of the fray were the C.S. Marines, stubbornly fighting the enemy from gun chamber to gun chamber. The cost of their gallantry was high as an increasing number of casualties were suffered. The bravery of the outnumbered rebels, prolonging the action in hope of being rescued by Confederate troops being held in reserve by General Braxton Bragg at Wilmington went unanswered. No help came from that quarter. Finally, with resistance collapsing, Captain Van Benthuyen rallied a group of his Marines and made plans to escape the debacle. Although wounded himself, Van Benthuyen took a few of his men and gathered up the incapacitated General Whiting and Colonel Lamb. Hoping to escape across the Cape Fear River, the Marine Captain led his troop in a desperate race to the wharf beyond Battery Buchanan where boats were known to be tied up. When they reached the water, the boats were gone - prizes to the naval garrison of Battery Buchanan who had seen the end of the battle quickly approaching and saved themselves. An exhausted and thoroughly miserable group of Confederates had no choice but to await the arrival of Union troops and surrender.

During the course of the battle, four of the six Marine officers had been wounded, more or less seriously. Of the enlisted men, no accurate casualty figures have ever been tallied. Since the army at Fort Fisher suffered nearly 30% casualties, it is safe to say that the C.S. Marine Corps fared proportionately. Those who survived the battle were ferried north to prison camps; the officers to Forts Delaware, Columbus and Monroe and the enlisted men to Elmira and Point Lookout. All the officers, save Pratt, were paroled, exchanged and restored to duty by early March. It appears that only a handful of enlisted Marines were exchanged before the dark days of April, 1865, the rest remaining behind the barbed wire for weeks after the last guns had fallen silent.

A few weeks after the fall of Fort Fisher, the City of Wilmington fell to the troops of Maj. General John M. Schofield, USA, her chapter in the history of the War Between the States finally brought to a close. But when that chapter was being written, a hardy band of regulars, the Confederate State Marines, earned, with courage and blood a place of honor and distinction. The memory of those faithful few must be preserved.


"Among the saddest events which occurred were the execution of deserters. The condemned ride to the stake upon their coffins, (the band playing the death march), are blindfolded when shot, and are usually tied to the stake unless they request otherwise. The weapons are loaded by the ordnance sergeant, one with a blank cartridge so that no soldier detailed is positive that his gun is loaded with a ball when he fires.

All three shot at Fort Fisher had been farmers and were married..." From an address made by Colonel William Lamb, Wilmington Messenger, June 15, 1893.
Gifts to the Society
Continued from page 2

Dr. and Mrs. John Cashman
Mary Chestnut’s Civil War, edited by C. Van Woodward.
Blackbeard the Pirate: A Reappraisal of His Life and Times by Robert E. Lee.
Dr. R. E. Treadwell
Spikes from old Carolina Beach Railroad

In Memoriam
William Alexander Whitehead
1908-1986

Fort Fisher: The Final Battles
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Battery” on the extreme southern extension of Fort Fisher.40

Rushing down from Wilmington to render assistance came Captain Van Benthuysen and his Marines including a much irritated Lieutenant Doak who saw his furlough ended by the crisis.41 These Marines, highly skilled artillers whose experience at the heavy guns in some cases dated back to the early days of the Corps at Pensacola and service aboard CSS Virginia at Hampton Roads, were a valuable addition to Colonel Lamb’s troops.42

The duel of the 24th lasted until 5:30 P.M. when the fleet withdrew to hatch the second phase of Butler’s grand design. Under the cover of darkness, the powdership was run inshore and set afire. Shortly after midnight, a huge detonation startled the citizens of Wilmington out of their sleep as the very dwellings shook with the tremor.43 The worst was feared for the men at Fort Fisher.

Surprisingly, the troops at the fort took little notice of the explosion! Lieutenant Doak recalled that his sleep was undisturbed 44 while Colonel Lamb reported the incident as one of the enemy’s gunboats accidentally running aground and blowing up.45 The sunrise of Christmas morning revealed to a crestfallen General Butler an intact Fort Fisher, “Stainless Banner” fluttering at her masthead, ready to renew the contest.

During the early afternoon, a force of Union soldiers was landed some distance from the fort. Led to believe the detonation of the powdership would do all their work for them, an attack by the dispirited northerners was easily repulsed.46

The failure of the powdership weakened Butler’s resolve. No further attacks were intiated and orders were issued to evaluate the troops. By noon of the 27th, the beach was cleared and the Federal soldiers back aboard ship. The next day, the sea in front of Fort Fisher was empty of Federal ships.47

The Marine detachment performed admirably and won the plaudits of Maj. General William C. Whiting, commander at Wilmington.48 The danger passed, the seamen and soldiers were ordered back to their posts: Van Benthuysen’s contingent to Wilmington and the Marine Guard of Battery Buchanan, now under the charge of 2nd Lt. J. Campbell Murdoch, CSMC,49 returned to its former duties.

Shortly after the turn of the year, a detachment of Marines arrived on the scene under the command of 2nd Lt. Thomas St. George Pratt, CSMC,50 These wanderers had once formed part of the Marine Guards aboard the ironclads CSS Georgia and Savannah at the Savannah, Georgia Naval Station. They had been on the move since being ousted from their home port by Maj. General William T. Sherman’s forces on December 21, 1864. Pratt and his Marines served briefly at Fort Johnson, James Island, South Carolina, before being sent to Fort Fisher.

A combined force of between eighty - ninety enlisted Marines and six officers was called upon to augment the defenders of Fort Fisher when the enemy fleet returned on the night of January 12, 1865; Capt. A.C. Van Benthuysen with 2nd Lt. John DeB Roberts and the Wilmington detachment; 2nd Lt. J. Campbell Murdoch and his guard from Battery Buchanan; 2nd Lt. Thomas StG. Pratt and his recent arrivals and, finally, 1st Lt. David Bradford and the remnant of his guard from CSS Chickamauga.

On the morning of January 13, the Union fleet commenced firing. A crescendo of shot and shell rained upon Fort Fisher until several explosions of shot and shell rained upon Fort Fisher until several explosions per second tortured the defenders. The furious naval bombardment continued for the next two days, abating only slightly during the night. Screened by the heavy shelling, thousands of Federal troops were landed unopposed. 8,000 soldiers took up positions on the Cape Fear River side of the peninsula while 2,000 soldiers and United States Marines dug in on the sea front.

By mid-day of Sunday, January 15, nearly every heavy gun in the fort had been dismounted and the garrison reduced in casualties by one-fourth. The battery manned by Doak and his Marines was among those rendered unserviceable early on by the bombardment. Pressed into service at a mortar battery, the Marines had found the range of the enemy rifle pits when a shell from the fleet exploded amidst the crew. Nine Marines were killed or wounded, including among the latter, Lieutenant Doak.51

About 2:30 P.M., Marine Pvt. Arthur Muldoon, braving the hurricane of deadly missiles, peered over the parapet at his post and saw the Federal Marines and sailors formed in column and prepared to advance. Passing the word to Colonel Lamb, Muldoon dropped back to the
FOOTNOTES

34 Battery Buchanan was placed under the command of Lt Robert T. Chapman, CSN.
35 Order, Hq Res., CSM Detacht., October 3, 1864. A C. Van Bethuyse, Capt., CSMC, to J.D. Roberts, 2d Lt. CSMC. ZB file of John Deh Roberts. John De Berniere Roberts (7/4/1843-4/28/1880) served as an enlisted man in Company G of Hampton's Legion and had been wounded in action. His commission as a 2d Lieutenant of C.S. Marines was dated to rank from June 16, 1864.
36 NOR, Series I, vol. 11, 369.
37 Document. 39.
38 A letter written by one officer of Marines to his father stated that, "...in truth, in their proper sphere they (Marines) are simply Artillerists..." Lt Ruffin Thomson, CSMC, to "Dear Pa," Camp Beall, Drewry's Bluff, Va., March 14, 1864. Thomson Papers, Ascension 3315, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina.
40 Ibid., 40.
41 NRO, Series I, vol. 11, 245.
42 Ibid., 367.
43 Ibid., 368
44 Ibid., 365. The services of the C.S. Marines at Fort Fisher were not totally appreciated by the men of the Sussex Reserves. When two Marine officers were not recognized as such and were arrested by the guard of the Sussex troops, General Whiting had to order their release from jail and profusely apologize to Naval Commandant R.L. Pinckney. Letter, H.Q. Wilmington, January 10, 1865; W.H.C. Whiting, Maj.Gen Commdn. to Flug Officer Pinckney, Commdnt C.S. Naval Forces Present, Van Bethuyse, for Murdoch had relieved Roberts as guard commander at Battery Buchanan some time during the month of December, 1864. "List of Officers and Crew of the C.S. Navy Battery Buchanan for the Month of December, 1864." CSN (Lucian Jones) Papers, Georgia Historical Society, Pkg. 3-E, Folder 17, Item B.
40 Thomas St. George Pratt (ca. 1837-1/7/1895) was the son of former Governor and Senator from Maryland, Thomas G. Pratt. Prior to accepting his C.S. Marine Corps commission as a 2d Lieutenant on February 11, 1864, Pratt had been a private in Company A, 2d Battalion, Maryland Infantry. Before his Wilmington experience, Pratt had served as guard commander aboard the ironclad CSS SAVANNAH.
41 Document 40-41.
43 Ibid., 652-653. See also OR, Series I, vol. 46, pt 1, 439-440.
44 Scharf, from the account of William R. Mayo, former Midshipman, C.S. Navy and participant in the Fort Fisher actions. 420.
45 OR, Series I, vol. 46, pt 1, 440.
46 Captain Van Bethuyse - serious gunshot wound to the head. 1st Lieutenant Bradford - contusion to the left hip by a shell fragment. 2nd Lieutenant Doak - wound to the leg by a shell fragment. 2nd Lieutenant Pratt - wound to the foot by a rifle bullet. Carded Records of Confederate Military Personnel, 1861-1865 and Hospital and Prison Records of Persons Serving in the Navy and Marine Corps, 1862-65, Record Group 109, War Department Collection of Confederate Records, National Archives. Hereinafter referred to as Carded/Personnel/Hospital and Prison Records.
47 Ibid., see also, Crenshaw, March 7, 1865.
48 Carded Personnel/Hospital and Prison Records, The last of the Fort Fisher captives from the C.S. Marine Corps was released from confinement on July 11, 1865.
