“A Very Singular and Disgraceful Collision”: Conflict Between the Confederate States Army and Navy in the Department of the Cape Fear, 1863-1865

by Ross St. George

In March of 1864, a long-simmering dispute between Confederate Army and Navy authorities in the Department of the Cape Fear boiled over into an armed confrontation pitting Rebel infantry against Rebel marines and sailors. The episode took place on the Wilmington waterfront and was the culmination of a year of growing estrangement between the local commanders of the two services; Maj. Gen. William Henry Chase Whiting and Flag-Officer William Francis Lynch. Though the incident ended without bloodshed, the animosity would linger and have a significant negative effect on the Confederate defense of the Lower Cape Fear in 1865.

To better understand the rift between the Confederate Army and Navy in Wilmington, it is useful to first consider the backgrounds and personalities of the local commanders of the two services. Maj. Gen William Henry Chase Whiting was the commanding officer of the Department of North Carolina with his headquarters in Wilmington. The son of a lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Army, Whiting was born in Biloxi, Mississippi in 1824 and attended the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, graduating first in his class in 1845 with the highest grades achieved by a cadet to that date. After graduation, Lt. Whiting served in the engineers, and among his assignments was a posting to the coast of North Carolina supervising river and harbor improvements. Whiting reached the rank of captain before resigning his commission in February 1861 in order to offer his services to the fledgling Confederate States of America.¹

Whiting entered the Confederate Army as a major and was soon transferred to Virginia, where he quickly rose to the rank of Brigadier General. He served at the Battle of First Manassas in 1861; and in Jackson’s Valley Campaign, the Peninsula Campaign, and the Seven Days Battles in 1862.² In the latter campaign he commanded a small division which distinguished itself by achieving the final breakthrough of the Federal line at the Battle of Gaines’ Mill on June 27, 1862. However, Whiting’s accomplishments were marred by his criticism of Stonewall Jackson’s conduct during the Seven Days campaign, which was perceived as jealousy.

Whiting was also stunned by accusations that he had been drunk at Gaines’ Mill.³ Allegations of a drinking problem would dog Whiting for the remainder of his military career.

After the Seven Days campaign, Whiting went on an extended sick leave. While Whiting was absent Gen. Robert E. Lee, not believing him suited to a field command, transferred him to North Carolina, where he could use his superior engineering skills to build a coastal defense system.⁴ Whiting would do a superb job designing and constructing the defenses of the Lower Cape Fear, but his pessimistic nature made him overly apprehensive of the Union threat to his department and he constantly bedeviled his superiors with calls for more troops and armaments.

Flag-Officer William Francis Lynch was born in Virginia in 1804. By 1861 he was a grizzled naval veteran, having joined the U.S. Navy in 1819 and having served around the world. Upon Virginia’s secession he was commissioned captain in the Confederate States Navy.⁵ He first commanded shore batteries at Aquia Creek in Virginia during engagements with Union gunboats in May-June, 1861,⁶ and then was put in charge of

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the small, outgunned Confederate fleet in Albemarle Sound, all of which was sunk in the battles for Roanoke Island and Elizabeth City in February, 1862. Lynch was next sent west to command naval forces on the Mississippi River, where he served until November, 1862, when he was promoted to Flag-Officer and transferred to North Carolina to assume command of all naval forces in that state.

The major responsibility of the new Flag-Officer was to oversee the construction and operation of five ironclad ships whose missions were to aid in expelling the Federals from their footholds on the coast, to defend the coast, and to disrupt the blockade. Lynch set up his headquarters in Wilmington, where two of the ironclads were being built. While Lynch was a good combat officer, he was ill-suited to his new, largely administrative duties. He was overly sensitive to encroachments on what he perceived to be the boundaries of his authority, and failed to recognize the subordinate role of his service in relation to the Confederate Army.

Flag-Officer Lynch made numerous enemies in North Carolina. Among them was one of the contractors building the ironclads, who complained to Governor Vance, "Lynch is universally looked upon in this state as incompetent, inefficient and almost imbecile..." Vance agreed with this assessment and wrote of Lynch to the Secretary of the Navy, "I am satisfied of his total and utter incapacity for the duties of his position." However, the most corrosive relationship which Lynch would develop in North Carolina would be with William Henry Chase Whiting, his opposite number in the Confederate Army and an officer with whom he needed to work closely. The situation was exacerbated by an uncertain division of command which invited dispute between the services.

The first sign of potential conflict occurred in February, 1863. Gen. Whiting sought to acquire more heavy guns for his defenses, and requested that his superiors send him the guns earmarked for the unfinished ironclads under construction in Wilmington for temporary use in the coastal fortifications. This request was made in response to an offer from the Secretary of the Navy of "co-operation of the Navy in guns and men." Apparently Flag-Officer Lynch was incensed at not being consulted and did not wish to allow the army even temporary control of naval guns. He made his objections known to both the Secretary of the Navy and to Senator George Davis of North Carolina, along with broader criticisms of Whiting’s actions as district commander.
These communications were referred to Whiting, who answered Lynch's charges on April 11, 1863 in a heated letter to Secretary of War James A. Seddon. Whiting was especially pointed in his answer to Lynch's request for authority from the Secretary to obstruct the river, which he then proposed to defend with the still unfinished ironclad North Carolina:

I am competent to give the authority asked and most cheerfully concede it in the same spirit in which I have always assisted and co-operated with the Navy and always shall, though I most respectfully suggest that I think the completion of the gunboats will be quite as much as the Navy authorities can attend to, the North Carolina not yet being ready for the purpose proposed on the 13th March. As to the defense, that is my affair. I will not further allude to the manifest impropriety of these letters...

Whiting's letter was apparently persuasive, for in two weeks he was informed by the Secretary of the Navy that the guns for the ironclad Raleigh would be sent to him as soon as they were ready. Lynch still fought to retain control of these guns. He first tried unsuccessfully to persuade Whiting to let him have the guns for emplacement on the Roanoke River, which was outside of Whiting's command. Thinking it more logical to keep the guns in the proximity of the ship for which they were designated, Whiting refused Lynch's request. In June, 1863 Lynch reported Whiting to the War Department for "insolence and breach of faith" because of his refusal to release these guns. The War Department took no action and the guns stayed in Wilmington, and in the aftermath of this dispute Whiting ceased all communication with Lynch except when necessary for carrying out his duties as department commander.

Work on Lynch's ironclads proceeded slowly, hampered by epidemics, strikes, and shortages of materials and transportation. The growing hostility between Lynch and Whiting, who controlled the railroads, increased the Navy's problems in securing already scarce engines and rolling stock to transport the heavy iron plating for the ships' armor. Whiting expressed his attitude toward the Navy in his department in a letter dated Aug. 26, 1863 to Brig. Gen. James Martin in Kinston:

As to the gunboat, I care very little. I never expect it to be finished, or if finished to do anything. So far the gunboats have caused more trouble, interfered more with government business and transportation, been bound up more business and transportation, been bound up more and accomplished less than any other part of the service. Here I do not permit them to interfere any longer. They must give place to more useful busi-

Transportation remained a serious problem for Lynch well into 1864. On March 6 he wrote to Navy Secretary Mallory:

The whole rolling capacity of the road, except passenger trains, has been monopolized by the army, and I fear the completion of the gun-boats will be delayed. . . . The rights of the Navy are not respected, its wants are utterly disregarded, and it is in the power of an acting assistant quartermaster to cause our transportation to be set aside at will.

It was in March, 1864 that the feud between Whiting, now a Major General, and Flag-Officer Lynch escalated to the point of a shooting war between the army and the navy. The issue in this instance was a government regulation which required all departing blockade runners to carry government owned cotton as a specified portion of their cargo. Unfortunately, agents from both the War Department, representing the army, and the Navy Department were present in Wilmington, each vying to place their own "government" cotton on the outbound ships. Naturally this situation led to another collision between the two services, as well as one between the Confederate government and the state of North Carolina.

The immediate issue was an action by the Navy Department's agent, Mr. William H. Peters, in detaining two blockade runners. The Alice and the Hansa, which had already been cleared to sail, were held in part until a specific quantity of Navy cotton could be loaded. These two vessels had three weeks previously been allowed to sail without any of the Navy's cotton with the understanding that the deficit would be made up on the following trip. The Navy then unilaterally increased the required amount of cotton to be carried from one-third of the ship's capacity to one-half. Whiting claimed that Peters only named the Alice as the vessel to be detained and made no mention of the Hansa. When the Hansa left the wharf on the evening of March 8 to make room for another vessel, Flag-Officer Lynch claimed the ship was trying to make its escape. He ordered a detachment of Marines to board the ship and move it alongside the nearly-
completed and fully-armed ironclad North Carolina. An angry exchange of notes followed between Whiting and Lynch. Whiting informed Lynch, "I will permit no interference with any vessel whatever in this department not belonging to the C.S. Navy by any authority but my own or by orders emanating from the War Department." Lynch refused to allow the ship to move from under the ironclad's guns. Whiting then sent Lynch a written order to remove the marine guard from the Hansa. Lynch ignored this order, and on the morning of March 9, an exasperated Whiting ordered a battalion from Martin's Brigade to take possession of the wharf and prevent any communication "between the fleet and the shore." At the same time two infantry companies were carried out to the Hansa aboard the Cape Fear, a steamer belonging to the Army Quartermaster Department, where they boarded the Hansa, ejected the marine guard, and brought the blockade runner back to the wharf. The following day, James Ryder Randall, the Flag-Officer's secretary, wrote a somewhat biased account of the conclusion of this episode:

At this stage of the proceedings, F. Officer Lynch came upon the ground, and attempting to board one of his own vessels, was challenged by a Sentinel, and might have been shot, had not the intrepid old man put aside the brute's musket with his walking cane and awed him by a look of command. Public opinion is very bitter and unanimous against Whiting for precipitating such an unfortunate issue, which might have been prevented had his vanity been less or his love for liquor in curb. . . . It was preposterous for a man who has behaved so admirably on many battle fields to march his regiment down against the ironclads - a single broadside from which would have scattered him and his miscreants to the winds. . . . It was almost a challenge for bloodshed, and a shame for liberty. Those who are disposed to be charitable say that he was drunk; those who hate him declare that it is only the freak of an insolent arrogance almost superhuman.

Whiting's actions were not as unpopular as Randall claims. One important ally was Governor Zebulon Vance of North Carolina. The state owned a partial interest in the Hansa and Vance complained of the Navy's action to Secretary of War Seddon, calling it "an unblushing outrage" and threatening to "fire the ship before I will agree to it." On the afternoon of March 9, both Whiting and Lynch received telegrams from President Jefferson Davis disapproving their conduct and ordering both to immediately report in person to the authorities in Richmond. Apparently neither officer received anything worse than a reprimand, for within a week both were on their way back to Wilmington, presumably traveling separately. Much of the blame for the incident was put on Navy Secretary Mallory for interfering with Whiting's command. A naval officer in Richmond wryly summed up the event, "Lynch and Whiting, you know, had a blow up there (Wilmington) and I hear that the President had them both here for a while. Bad boys to be growing in school!" Neither Whiting nor Lynch gained much satisfaction from the affair. Whiting had adamantly demanded Lynch's removal from his command, while Lynch had been forcibly reminded of the inferior status of his service in relation to the army. The government cotton requirement was quickly lowered back to one-third of a ship's capacity.

Within two months of the confrontation on the Wilmington wharf, Flag-Officer Lynch transferred his headquarters to Smithville, at the mouth of the Cape Fear River. On May 21, his secretary described him as being, "... snuggly ensconced ... planting tomatoes and okra." From here Lynch faded into obscurity, leaving no written records of his activities, except for his death in Baltimore in October, 1865. By the fall of 1864, Flag-Officer R.F. Pinckney had assumed command of
the Confederate Naval forces in North Carolina. The force he commanded was not very impressive. Whiting’s predictions about the ironclads were sadly accurate. Both the Raleigh and the North Carolina were finally completed in the spring of 1864. On the night of May 6 the Raleigh crossed the bar at New Inlet and attempted to engage the Union fleet, and succeeded in temporarily scattering the blockaders. Unfortunately, the ironclad ran aground near Smithville on its return, and in the falling tide the weight of the armor broke the ship in half. The North Carolina proved even more useless. Its engine was so weak and unreliable that it could not be hazarded on the ocean, so it was towed to Smithville where it was moored as a floating battery. It functioned in this capacity for only three months, before it sank at its moorings, its wooden hull eaten through by worms. By the time of the Fort Fisher battles, the Confederate Navy on the Lower Cape Fear consisted of a handful of small wooden gunboats and detachments of sailors and marines manning shore batteries.30

William Henry Chase Whiting also fared badly during the rest of 1864. In May, he was given his long-awaited second chance at field command, leading a division under Beauregard in the Bermuda Hundred Campaign in Virginia. At Drewry’s Bluff on May 16 Whiting was given the crucial assignment of blocking the withdrawal of Butler’s Army of the James which was being driven back in a pincer movement. Whiting became frozen in what was described as a trance-like state and failed to move his troops to their assigned positions, enabling Butler to escape. One of his brigade commanders claimed Whiting appeared drunk and had difficulty mounting a horse. Others blamed Whiting’s performance on abstinence from alcohol.31 He was relieved of his command and returned to Wilmington in disgrace. In the fall of 1864, a Union attack on Wilmington appeared imminent and the misgivings of President Jefferson Davis and Gen. Robert E. Lee about Whiting became magnified. On Oct. 15, 1864 Gen. Braxton Bragg took over command in Wilmington, and Whiting became his largely-ignored executive officer.32 Whiting would end up serving as a volunteer aide to Col. Lamb, the commander of Fort Fisher, and would be mortally wounded and captured there on January 16, 1865.

The Confederate Navy in the Lower Cape Fear continued to present problems for the army through the fall of Fort Fisher. One month after taking command, Gen Bragg offered this evaluation:

The navy here is a nuisance. All the drunkenness and rowdyism that I have seen, and there is much of it, has been by naval men. Garroting and robbery are not uncommon, and are invariably traced to them. They all remain up at the town of Wilmington instead of being down at the mouth of the river, where they could do effective service as picket guards and on boat duty, especially in saving Government property by wrecking, &c., a duty now devolved on soldiers who have more they can attend to in defending, guarding, and building works. I am informed they receive more than double the soldier’s ration, whilst doing no duty, and great complaint arises and collisions even occur. Indeed the two services are very hostile, and if the navy cannot be put on duty it would be better to remove them.33

Bragg did indeed move the navy men to the mouth of the river, assigning them to an earthwork at the tip of Confederate Point called Battery Buchanan. This was an enclosed work mounting four heavy cannon which commanded New Inlet and was approximately one mile south of Fort Fisher. A long wharf capable of docking steamers extended from Battery Buchanan into the river. The battery’s main function was to serve as a rallying point for the garrison of Fort Fisher if it was driven from the fort. At Buchanan the garrison could either receive reinforcements and try to recapture the fort, or be evacuated to the opposite side of the river.34

Once again friction developed between the army and navy. On the evening of December 3, 1864 the naval detachment apparently got spooked and sounded a false alarm that Yankees were attacking. In a December 5 letter to Flag-Officer Pinckney, Whiting called for an investigation of the incident and admonished Pinckney for the practice of having the naval detachment report through him instead of directly to Col. Lamb.35 Despite the problems, the naval detachment served creditably in the First Battle of Fort Fisher in December, 1864, though they were not heavily engaged nor was the fire of the Union fleet very accurate.36

The final disgrace of the Confederate Navy in the Lower Cape Fear occurred at the Second Battle of Fort Fisher on January 15-16, 1865. Toward the evening of the 15th, the garrison was forced to retreat after heavy fighting from gun chamber to gun chamber. Among the Confederate troops that distinguished themselves in this
action was a marine company under Capt. Van Benthuyzen, the only navy men to give a good account of themselves in the battle. Approximately 1500 Confederates retreated down the beach to Battery Buchanan only to discover that the naval detachment had spiked the guns, abandoned the fort, and taken all the boats across the river. The garrison of Fort Fisher had no choice but to surrender. Almost 2000 Confederates were captured at Fort Fisher, most of whom would die in northern prisons. 

Thus ended the Confederate Navy’s role in the defense of the Lower Cape Fear.

Relations between the Confederate Army and Navy in the Lower Cape Fear were never very good and only got worse. The conflict began with the local commanders of the two services; Whiting and Lynch, but over time the animosity came to pervade all ranks. This conflict crippled the naval forces and damaged the army as well. It finally led to the abandonment of the army garrison of Fort Fisher by the naval detachment upon whom they depended to make their escape. Even if the garrison had gotten to the opposite bank of the river, it would not have changed the ultimate outcome of the campaign; the occupation of Wilmington by Union forces, but it might have enabled the Confederates to mount a stronger defense and delay the fall of the city.

Notes


5. Sifakis, Who Was Who in the Civil War, 400.


8. Sifakis, Who Was Who in the Civil War, 400.


10. Ibid., 151.

11. Ibid., 152.


13. Ibid., 980-981.


15. Ibid., Volume 29, Part 2, 676-677.

16. Ibid., Volume 33, 1218.

17. James Ryder Randall to “Katie,” 10 March, 1864, Randall Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

18. ORA, Volume 51, Part 2, 829.

19. Ibid., Volume 33, 1219-1226. James Ryder Randall to “Katie,” 10 March, 1864, Randall Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

20. ORA, Volume 33, 1223.

21. Ibid., 1221. James Ryder Randall to “Katie,” 10 March, 1864, Randall Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

22. James Ryder Randall to “Katie,” 10 March, 1864, Randall Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

23. ORA, Volume 51, 828.

24. Ibid., 829.

25. James Ryder Randall to “Katie,” 16 March, 1864,

26. ORA, Volume 51, 833.

27. Ibid., Volume 33, 1229.

28. James Ryder Randall to “Katie,” 21 May, 1864, Randall Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

29. Sifakis, Who Was Who in the Civil War, 400.


33. Ibid., 1218.


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