

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

Rebel Gibraltar: Fort Fisher and Wilmington, C.S.A.

By **James L. Walker, Jr.**

Next to North Carolina's most significant contribution to the struggle for Southern Independence, her 127,000 men, of whom about 40,000 perished, her second greatest contribution was Fort Fisher. Situated at the end of Federal Point (Confederate Point during the War) some 25 miles south of Wilmington between the Cape Fear River and the Atlantic, Fort Fisher was the guardian angel of the blockade-running fleet. Protection was accorded to the supply line from Europe, primarily Britain, by virtue of the heavy seacoast guns of the large and formidable Fort Fisher. That fort, with her dependent forts and batteries up and down the coast, north of Confederate Point's New Inlet, on Bald Head Island (Smith's Island during the war), and at Southport (Smithville during the war), Fort Caswell and the beaches south of Caswell, protected the blockade-runners that plied the waters daily from the Bahamas and Bermuda, from attack by Union gunboats. Those blockade-runners, the fastest and most sophisticated vessels of their day, owned mostly by British shipping merchants and the Confederate government, carried an endless supply of all kinds of weapons and materiel to sustain the Confederate war effort. The first all-steel vessels to cross the Atlantic, the ships were camouflage-painted dull gray to blend with the water, built as low to the water as possible to present a minimum silhouette at a distance, and were propelled by strong paddlewheels or propellers that drove them through the water at 15-20 knots or more.

From late 1861, and especially by the summer of 1862 after Colonel William Lamb took command of Fort Fisher, blockade-runners brought a constant stream of food, clothes, shoes, coffee, rifles, ammunition, percussion caps, cannon, medicine, uniforms, accoutrements, and virtually anything to sustain an army and a people. Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia, the most successful of all the Confederate armies, was the primary recipient of those supplies. Fort Fisher's success in protecting the blockade-runners from Union gunboats likely kept the Confederate States alive for at least a year beyond the time the nation would have survived without those supplies. One Union Naval officer, a veteran of blockading duty off the Cape Fear, wrote in September, 1864 with remarkable prescience, based on his observation of numerous blockade-runners entering the Cape Fear River past Fort Fisher, that, "If this port is taken, the rebellion will not last

three months.”¹ Fort Fisher fell to Union combined arms, the largest such Navy-Army operation of the entire war, on January 15, 1865, and the Army of Northern Virginia surrendered at Appomattox on April 9, 1865.

North Carolinians in the Cape Fear region were more inclined to secession than the rest of the State. Soon after Lincoln’s election in November, 1860, citizens’ meetings in Thalian Hall in Wilmington, and in other towns such as Smithville, called for the State to consider leaving the Union. After South Carolina seceded in December, even more meetings and stronger calls for secession were heard. Cape Fear men even seized Federal Forts Caswell and Johnston at Smithville in early January, 1861, upon hearing that those forts were to be reinforced and provisioned. Upon the orders of Governor John Willis Ellis, those forts were returned to Federal authorities, however, as the State was still in the Union. Once Fort Sumter had been attacked in April, 1861, and Lincoln’s administration called on the states left in the Union to furnish troops to put down insurrection in the seceding states, North Carolina’s secession was a foregone conclusion. Even most pro-Union men changed their position, once Federal authorities called for troops to invade the South.

State authorities recognized early on the importance of guarding and securing the Cape Fear River from the Federal Navy. When North Carolina’s Ordinance of Secession was signed on May 20, 1861, the Wilmington Light Infantry, commanded by Captain William Lord DeRosset, had already been on the peninsula of Federal Point for three weeks. Captain DeRosset had his men erecting batteries of earthen and sand fortifications, and mounting guns. As spring gave way to summer, working parties of the Eight North Carolina continued the process of raising larger and ever heavier sand batteries. These small and relatively insignificant positions would eventually become Fort Fisher, which acquired that name in the late summer of 1861. The fortification was named for the commanding officer of the 6th North Carolina State Troops, Colonel Charles Frederick Fisher of Salisbury, North Carolina. Colonel Fisher had died on July 21, 1861, leading his troops in an assault on Union troops during the latter stages of the Battle of First Manassas.

By the fall of that year, one Union Naval officer reported that the fortifications on Confederate Point consisted of one battery of twelve guns, a casemate earthwork of six guns, a small battery position armed with three guns, and another battery on Zeke’s Island mounting four guns. Approximately 1,400 troops were believed to be stationed in this area, building fortifications and manning them, and that the batteries consisted of 32-pounder cannon. There was also a battery of horse artillery with four guns. In the fall and winter of 1861, blockade-runners ran past the Federal gunboats and Fort Fisher to bring in cargoes, but the number of vessels would rapidly grow as the months passed into spring and summer of 1862.

¹ United States Navy Department, *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1894-1927), Series I, volume 10, p. 433 (hereafter cited as *O.R.N.*, I, 10, 433).

In addition to rising fortifications, geography alone made the Cape Fear River tough for the Federal Navy to close to incoming vessels. Smith Island was centered in the very mouth of the river, with New Inlet entrance to the river north and east of the island, which Fort Fisher protected. Old Inlet or the Western Bar, was the entrance to the west, and just up the river from Old Inlet was Smithville. At the end of the island was the Cape of Fear, shortened to Cape Fear, a dangerous sandbar formation that jutted out from the point of the island for some distance into the ocean. And projecting even further out from the cape was Frying Pan Shoals, a shallow sandbar formation that ran for slightly more than 20 miles out to sea, at some places no deeper than waist-high in the ocean, even if a sailor were standing on the bar so far out he couldn't see land. Those sandbars, of course, made it extremely dangerous for deep-draft gunboats in the Union Navy to navigate over, forcing them to sail or steam some 50 miles distance, to get from New Inlet over to Old Inlet. Communication, then, between two separate wings of what would become the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron, was both dangerous and very time consuming.

In late April, the blockade-runner *Nashville* ran past the Union cordon of vessels stationed off Fort Fisher and Confederate Point, bringing in more than 6,000 rifles. Additionally, Major Josiah Gorgas, chief of the Confederate Ordnance Bureau, reported that in a little over three months in early 1862, steamers running the blockade into Charleston, Savannah and Wilmington had brought in a total of 48,510 rifles and muskets.

Purchasing agents for the Confederate government were hard at work negotiating contracts for weapons and supplies in Europe. Captain Caleb Huse, Richmond's purchasing agent based in London, closed a contract in Vienna, Austria in early 1862, for 100,000 rifles of the most current Austrian pattern, as well as for ten batteries of six guns each of field artillery. All harness and essential artillery accoutrements were furnished, and the weapons were shipped to Bermuda from Hamburg, Germany. They ran the blockade out of Bermuda into the Confederacy. Captain Huse was also able to negotiate a contract for Enfield rifles produced at the London Armory Company. Tens of thousands of Enfields made their way to Wilmington via the blockade-runners, and by rail from there to the Army of Northern Virginia. Enfield rifles were some of the finest, possibly the best, shoulder weapons to be used by Confederate infantry during the war.

Early in the summer of 1862, the *Modern Greece*, a large British blockade-runner with a substantial cargo of weapons as well as all types of civilian commodities, was driven aground by Federal gunboats, and beached herself one-half mile north of Fort Fisher. The Union gunboats did their best to destroy the propeller-driven vessel, but the heavy seacoast guns of Fort Fisher and the adjacent batteries kept the Federals at a distance. Confederate shells found their way into the Union vessels firing on the beached blockade-runner, shrapnel bursting over and around them. The Union commanders decided it wasn't worth the risk, so pulled their ships back further from the beach.

A week later, one of the most positive changes to Confederate command on the Cape Fear that would occur during the war took place. On the 4th of July, William Lamb

of Norfolk, Virginia, was appointed commander of Fort Fisher. He was a 26-year-old cigar-smoking, no-nonsense Confederate Colonel of the 36th Regiment (2nd Artillery) North Carolina Troops, who had been in command at Fort St. Philip, several miles upriver from Fisher. The 36th Regiment comprised the bulk of the Fort Fisher garrison for the war. Lamb would later write that he fully inspected all the forts, batteries and positions on Confederate Point by the end of the day on which he was appointed. He was not impressed by what he saw. Fort Fisher itself, he said, was “a small work, part of it constructed of perishable sand bags and its longest face was about one hundred yards. Out of its half dozen large guns, only the two eight-inch Columbiads were suitable for seacoast defense. One of the Federal frigates could have cleaned it out with a few broadsides.”²

There were four other separate batteries on Confederate Point, Meade, which was a “credible casemated battery of four eight-inch Columbiads”, Bolles, Hedrick and Cumberland. There were, however, only “seventeen guns of respectable caliber, including thirty-two pounders. There was on Zeke’s Island a small two-gun battery subsequently washed away by the sea. I thought on assuming command, and experience afterwards demonstrated, that as a defense of New Inlet against a Federal fleet, our works amounted to nothing.”³

Lamb decided he would build a fort of tremendous proportions, one capable of withstanding the heaviest fire the Union warships could dish out. He had seen the effects of 11-inch shells and studied the effects of the 15-inch shells, and believed that their penetrating power was well formidable. Heavy, high, thick, palmetto-reinforced sand earthworks, connected one to the other by traverses, covered ways and bombproofs, would be his driving goal for the next two and one half years. He commenced what he dubbed the “new” Fort Fisher within days of assuming command.

One of his first acts as commander was to give notice to the Federals that things would be run differently at Fort Fisher than in the past. He noticed a Union gunboat lying not two miles from the forts, and asked if the vessel was not abnormally close to the beach. When told it was not, and that sometimes the Federal warships drove working parties from their assigned tasks, he told his men it would never happen again. He hurried a detachment of troops to the long-range rifled gun in Cumberland Battery, which Lamb said contained the only modern piece of heavy ordnance at Confederate Point, and ordered them to open fire on the Union ship. The USS *Monticello* quickly hauled up her anchor, and got underway as fast as possible. Henceforth, Union warships would keep their distance from the forts on Confederate Point.

The next significant step Lamb took in securing his position, was to send parties of troops out to the beached blockade-runner *Modern Greece*, to haul out valuable weapons. He had learned that the vessel contained thousands of rifles and several

² William Lamb, *Colonel Lamb’s Story of Fort Fisher: The Battles Fought Here in 1864 and 1865*. (Carolina Beach, NC: Blockade Runner Museum, 1966), 60-61.

³ *Colonel Lamb’s Story*, 61.

hundred tons of powder, and four British 12-pound Whitworth rifled cannon in her cargo, and he meant to have them. The Confederates salvaged at least four thousand rifles and two hundred tons of powder, as well as the four Whitworth cannon. The Colonel went out with his party of men, and under trying circumstances, as waves were already washing through the vessel's hull, hauled the cannon up from the hold and into their boats. The Whitworths were the most modern rifled fieldpieces of their day. Breech-loaders, they were capable of firing a long conical shot a maximum distance of seven miles, and were deadly accurate up to five miles. With those Whitworths, Lamb and his men saved many vessels, and inflicted numerous casualties on the Union Navy.

The first real battle between Lamb's artillerists and the Union Navy took place on October 11, 1862. Two Union warships had on the day before driven off working parties engaged in leveling the sand hills four miles below Fort Caswell, on the Smithville side of the Cape Fear River. Colonel Lamb and his Whitworth artillerists were called on for help. Two of the deadly fieldpieces were brought over the river and set up back off the beach. They opened up on two Union warships midmorning. Aboard the USS *Maratanza*, two sailors were killed outright, another seriously wounded, and several others less severely. Even at four and one half miles off the beach, Rebel shells passed over the stricken vessel. Rear Admiral Samuel Phillips Lee reported that the guns used in the shelling of the *Maratanza* were two Whitworths taken off the *Modern Greece* and brought from Fort Fisher, and that "the Rebels are constantly at work enlarging the fort and mounting guns."⁴

A month after the Confederate firing on the *Maratanza*, early November 1862, Brigadier General William Henry Chase Whiting was reassigned from the Army of Northern Virginia to command the defense of the Cape Fear River. Like the assignment of William Lamb as commander of Fort Fisher, the assignment of Whiting to command the District of the Cape Fear was of great benefit to the Southern Cause. Whiting was a brilliant engineer and very familiar with the area, having worked on navigation improvements of the river as an officer prior to the war, and had even married a girl who grew up in Wilmington and Smithville. His heart was in his assignment, as he loved the area and the people, and he would do all in his power to improve the defenses and increase troop strength in the area. The General became a close personal friend of William Lamb, and promoted and favored all the Colonel's ideas of enlarging and enhancing the works on Confederate Point. Whiting took command with headquarters in Wilmington, just as the dreaded yellow fever epidemic was ending.

Immediately upon inspecting his district, he requested more troops. He would in November 1862 and for the rest of the war, ask for at least 10,000 effective infantry, along with 5 or 6 batteries of field artillery. These troops would be needed in addition to the several thousand artillerists who manned the guns at Fort Fisher, Fort Caswell, and the many other dependent batteries and forts that would rise in the coming months. Unfortunately, 4-6,000 total troops, including the artillerists, was the usual number of men on duty in the Cape Fear District during the war.

⁴ *O.R.N.*, I, 8, 152.

Yellow fever stalked the sub-tropical South for three hundred years. The virus is carried by the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito, so coastal and tide-water populations were naturally prone to epidemics, especially as summer temperatures and humidity rose. The illness was first noticed in Wilmington in late summer of 1862, when a blockade-runner from Nassau, the *Kate*, brought in crewmen who had apparently been infected, and some died in town. Soon after, in early September, a Wilmingtonian died from the illness. Some people naturally associated the disease reaching town with the blockade-runner's arrival, but thousands of the *Aedes aegypti* breed of mosquito could well have been living at the river's edge before the *Kate* ever arrived. Within a month, the few reported cases had become a full-blown epidemic.

Joseph Piram King, a 14-year-old Wilmingtonian, remembered years later coming down with the fever. Very few people could be seen on the streets, when he would wake up from his delirium and managed to look out the window. The "few vehicles that could be seen, were hurriedly carrying out the dead, delivering coffins and carrying other things necessary. I heard that many bodies lay for days unburied at the cemetery."⁵ Joe's brother Isaac, wounded out of the war from shrapnel taken at Malvern Hill, Virginia, came and got him from his and their grandmother's home in town, and took him in a buggy to his own home at Myrtle Grove Sound. Joe's mother was there, and she gave him a concoction for nine days, of a glass of one teaspoon of pulverized sulfur, the yolk of an egg, and a wine glass full of new corn whiskey. Joe survived the yellow fever, and lived for many more years.

Over 1,500 people in the Wilmington area caught the yellow fever from late August through early November. Over 650 died of the disease, and the town sank into the depths of despair by the deaths and privations brought on by the suffering. Hundreds were buried in a large mass grave in Oakdale Cemetery without ceremony or cenotaph. Others in surrounding counties caught the fever, between 15 and 30 people dying in Smithville. By the middle of November, with the onset of colder weather and the first frost, and the subsequent dying out of mosquitoes, the fever ended.

It didn't take long for blockade-running commerce, suspended during the epidemic, to resume in Wilmington after the fever abated. Captain John Wilkinson, commander of the *Giraffe*, brought in a valuable cargo of Enfield rifles, ammunition, uniform cloth, medical supplies, and other goods in late December, 1862. Wilkinson noted that the steam cotton presses were running full tilt on the flats across the river, preparing bales for the waiting blockade-runners. Thousands of bales and many tierces of tobacco, the primary commodities used to purchase supplies for the Confederacy, awaited loading, along with hundreds of barrels of turpentine. "More than a dozen blockade runners," noted Wilkinson, "hung at anchor in the stream or loaded alongside, the cotton stowed almost stack-high on their decks. Some were painted a light buff, the rest a dull

⁵ Joseph P. King, "Personal Recollections of Joseph Piram King." (Unpublished manuscript, author's collection of great-grandfather's papers).

gray, and most of them looked fast, capable of getting through to Nassau, Bermuda and Halifax, the main cotton-receiving ports, without much trouble.”⁶

Blockade-running was fast becoming a major source of supply for weapons, ammunition, percussion caps, medicine and uniforms. Since the fall of 1861 up to winter of 1863, slightly over a year, blockade-runners had brought into the Confederate States 131,129 small arms, most of which were the excellent Enfield rifles. One hundred and twenty-nine cannon of various calibers, including smoothbores, howitzers and Blakely rifled guns had come in, along with 18,680 shells for those guns. Thirty-two Austrian bronze rifled cannon with caissons and almost 11,000 shrapnel shells for them, and other types of cannon, artillery harness, shells and fuses, had also run the blockade. Over 16,000 cavalry sabers, 5,392 cavalry saber belts, 40,000 gun slings, 34,655 knapsacks, 4,000 canteen straps, 81,406 bayonet scabbards, 357,000 pounds of cannon powder, 94,600 pounds of musket powder, and more than 4,000,000 cartridges had also come through the Union cordon of vessels.

Most of these commodities had come into Wilmington, partly because the blockade was becoming tighter at Charleston (that port was effectively closed by spring 1863), the fact that Savannah was already closed, but largely due to the efficiency of Fort Fisher in guarding the blockade-runners. Young Englishman Thomas Taylor knew well Fort Fisher’s effectiveness in protecting vessels from Union gunboats. As supercargo (loadmaster) for the Liverpool based Confederate Trading Company, with offices in Nassau, Taylor became warm friends with William Lamb. Taylor said Lamb was most popular with blockade-runners’ captains and crews, that he was “always on the alert and ever ready to reach a helping hand, he seemed to think no exertion too great to assist their operations, and many a smart vessel did his skill and activity snatch from the very jaws of the blockaders. He came to be regarded by the runners as their guardian angel; and it was no small support in the last trying moments of a run to remember who was in Fort Fisher.”⁷

An April, 1863 battle for a blockade-runner underscored Tom Taylor’s assessment. At daylight on April 23, two blockade-runners, *Merrimac* and *Eagle*, were spotted by the Union fleet a few miles north of Fort Fisher. One runner was very fast, and quickly steamed past the Union gunboats, running into New Inlet under Fort Fisher’s protection. The other vessel had initially been run aground, but soldiers from the fort helped remove cargo to lighten her, so she could get off the beach. She did, and ran down the shore riding the breakers, as Union gunboats tried to sink her.

Lieutenant James Trathen of the USS *Mount Vernon* reported that they opened fire at 8:00 a.m. on the blockade-runner, “and a general engagement ensued between the three batteries situated, respectively, 1, 2, and 2 ½ miles north of Fort Fisher, and Fort

⁶ James L. Walker, Jr., *Rebel Gibraltar: Fort Fisher and Wilmington, C.S.A.* (Wilmington, NC: Dram Tree Books, 2005), 81.

⁷ Thomas Taylor, *Running the Blockade: A Personal Narrative of Adventures, Risk and Escapes during the American Civil War* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1896), 55-56.

Fisher on the one side, and on the other the Union ships *State of Georgia*, *Florida*, *Penobscot*, and *Mount Vernon*.” Another Union commander said that even though the Union vessels maintained a running fire, “she kept on close in with the shore, the English flag flying, until passing safely inside of Fort Fisher, she hoisted the rebel flag. . . The fort fired up the coast, the Whitworth guns passing over us even after we had come out from under the shore.”⁸

Taylor was so appreciative of this type of protection given by Fort Fisher, that he urged his employers to present the Colonel with something mutually beneficial to the Confederacy and Taylor’s Confederate Trading Company. They presented Lamb with a new battery of six Whitworth rifled guns, “of which he was very proud; and good use he made of them in keeping the blockaders at a respectful distance. They were guns with a great range, which many a cruiser found to its cost when venturing too close in chase down the coast. Lamb would gallop them down behind the sand hills, by aid of mules, and open fire upon the enemy before he was aware of his danger.”⁹

Another severe battle fought by Colonel Lamb and his mobile artillerists occurred on Smith Island in July, 1863. The blockade-runner *Kate*, coming out of Nassau, was driven to shore July 12, when Federal blockaders chased her. She had originally been scheduled to run into Charleston, but because the blockade had become so tight there, the captain of the ship decided to bring her into Wilmington. The two inlets on either side of Smith Island, New Inlet at Fort Fisher and Old New Inlet at Fort Caswell and Smithville, made it more difficult for Federal gunboats to close, and Fort Fisher’s ever expanding batteries and heavy guns made it even harder.

The Federal gunboat *Penobscot* sent a party of sailors to the *Kate* after her crew evacuated the blockade-runner but the Federals were unable to tow her off the beach. The sailors were ordered to set a fire with powder nearby, to blow up the vessel. As the bluejackets worked vigorously to get the fire going, William Lamb and his artillerists from Fort Fisher began arriving on Smith Island. Lamb had sharpshooters as well as artillerists, and his men fired at several Union vessels with one of his Whitworth guns, driving off four Union steamers. Colonel Lamb reported that “nearly every shot took effect and the blockaders could not afford to be seriously damaged in the contention over a craft they expected at any moment would be blown up.”¹⁰ Lamb and some of his men climbed aboard the blockade-runner and put out the fire before the powder blew. Much cargo as well as machinery from the vessel’s innards was saved.

Just a month following the fight for the *Kate*, Chase Whiting wrote to his boss, Confederate Secretary of War James Seddon, that he believed Wilmington had by now become, “quite as important as Vicksburg was.” He knew of no place in the Confederate States where a large body of veteran troops was more needed. He said that with the heavy

⁸ *O.R.N.*, I, 8, 821,823.

⁹ *Running the Blockade*, 56.

¹⁰ Walter Clark, *Histories of Several Regiments and Battalions from North Carolina in the Great War, 1861-1865*, 5 vols. (Goldsboro, NC: Nash Bros. Printers, 1901), 2:632.

Union investment and siege of Charleston, “as a Confederate port it has well-nigh ceased to belong to us.” With the value of Wilmington as the major port of entry for supplies, he pleaded that troops be sent there. Very few reinforcements were sent.¹¹

At eight o’clock in the morning of October 10th, 1863, the North Carolina owned *Ad-Vance* ran right through the middle of the Union blockaders for the protecting guns of Fort Fisher. An intense duel took place between the fort and three gunboats over the blockader-runner. One of the crew of the *Ad-Vance* noted that the blockade-runner was in tight straits, trying to make a run in broad daylight. He said that the gunboats’ shells were going over them as they got closer to shore, “when Colonel Lamb’s Whitworth guns began their firing upon the fleet, one large steamer, supposed to be the ‘State of Georgia’, came rapidly towards us, and when in dangerous proximity, was about to turn to bring her broadside guns upon the ‘Ad-Vance’, but a well-directed shot from a 10-inch Columbiad from the northeast salient of the fort crashed into her bow, when she rapidly backed water and withdrew from the chase, enabling the ‘Ad-Vance’ to get safely in, amid the shouts of the garrison and the cheers of the officers and crew and the waving of handkerchiefs by those on deck of the blockade runner.”¹²

The cargo carried in the *Ad-Vance*’s hold was of much value to soldiers and citizens, especially with winter coming on. The ship carried over 1,700 blankets, 5,040 pairs of hose, more than 8,600 yards of army cloth, 2,000 pair of shoes, 960 dozen buckles, 516 dozen buttons, over 1,100 pair of cotton cards, 52,536 yards of cotton bagging, 7,329 pounds of rope, 38 bundles of iron 2 cases of steel, 20 reams of paper, 72 dozen pencils, 84 dozen awls, 750,000 water-proof musket caps, and 15,696 gun nipples.

Massive quantities of supplies would increase over the coming months, as blockade-runners in 1863 and 1864 became faster and even more sophisticated, and Confederate fortifications became larger, heavier, and mounted more rifled ordnance. Fortifications seemed to spring up out of the sand, as Confederate soldiers, slaves and free men of color worked constantly on Fort Fisher, on Confederate Point for miles north of the fort itself, on Smith Island, at Fort Caswell and west of Caswell, at Smithville, as well as all around the north, east, and south side of Wilmington. One Federal ship commander in the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron bemoaned their inability to stop the seagoing traffic of material coming into Wilmington. He noted dejectedly that the flags of the Rebels seemed to constantly wave defiance in their faces, while their seacoast guns of prodigious range forced them to stand off and further out to sea, allowing for the ingress of the runners almost at will.

Appropriately, the finest blockade-runner built was named for the commander of Fort Fisher, and she represented the ultimate in that type of vessel. The *Colonel Lamb* was launched in spring of 1864 in Liverpool, from the shipyard of Jones, Quiggin &

¹¹ United States War Department, *War of the Rebellion: Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Series I, volume 29, part 2, p. 697,703 (hereafter cited as *O.R.*, I, 29, pt. 2, 697,703).

¹² *Histories of Several Regiments*, 5:337.

Company. She was the largest steel merchant ship ever built for the trade. She was a fine paddle-wheel steamer, 281 feet long, 36 feet beam, and between 15 and 17 feet depth of hold, drawing only about 8 feet of water when fully loaded with cargo. She could steam at 17 knots, or about 19 miles per hour. No Union warship could run her down.

By late summer of 1864, frustration on the part of Union naval officers was acute. On the September 6, Captain O.S. Glisson, commanding the New Inlet Division of the North Atlantic Squadron, wrote to his superior of “another side-wheel steamer, with two pipes and one mast,” passing into New Inlet past Fort Fisher. He was convinced that nothing would stop blockade running except an attack. “The taking of Fort Fisher is perfectly feasible with 20,000 men, and the port of Wilmington is the only hope of rebeldom.” Glisson was convinced, “that if this port is taken the rebellion will not last three months.”¹³

Glisson was right on target, having seen the almost daily arrival of blockade-runners steaming into the Cape Fear River past Fort Fisher. He understood the vast quantity of supplies that were getting into Wilmington, and being transshipped to the Army of Northern Virginia. George Alfred Trenholm, Confederate Secretary of the Treasury, understood it, too. He reported to Jefferson Davis in the fall of 1864, of the success of blockade-running during the past year. From November 1, 1863 to October 25, 1864, blockade runners brought in 1,490,000 pounds of lead, 1,850,000 pounds of saltpeter, 6,200,000 pounds of meat, 408,000 pounds of coffee, 420,000 pairs of boots and shoes, 292,000 blankets, and 136,832 rifles, carbines or muskets. With Charleston effectively closed to blockade-running since spring of 1863, virtually all these supplies came in through Wilmington.

Additionally, and despite the increasing numbers of Union gunboats off the coast in the fall of 1864, from October 31 to December 6, twenty-eight more runners arrived in Wilmington, one ship for almost every day. Those vessels bore such varied cargoes as 222 cases of rifles for the Ordnance Department shipped from Bermuda, 1,270 cases of preserved meat for the Commissary Department, also out of Bermuda, 7 bundles of vises and 13 anvils for the Quartermaster Department, shipped from Nassau, and hundreds of tons of other commodities. So long as Wilmington remained open to commerce, it seemed, the Confederate States could be sustained indefinitely.

In the fall of 1864, the Union high command decided they were finally in a position to close the harbor. Planning began for a combined Navy-Army assault on Fort Fisher, which was going to be a tough nut to crack. Ulysses Grant had been reluctant for some time to transfer troops from Virginia. By the fall of 1864, the Army of the Potomac had finally pinned down Robert E. Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia in the trenches at Petersburg and Richmond, and Grant was not receptive to their being sent elsewhere. But when he learned of the transfer of Confederate troops from the District of the Cape Fear to Savannah, he decided the time had come to try to take Fort Fisher. Union Navy officers, such as Captain Glisson, had been suggesting it for some time.

¹³ *O.R.N.*, I, 10, 433.

Unfortunately for Wilmington's and the South's fortunes, Confederate President Jefferson Davis made a change in command in the Cape Fear District, at the same time as Union planning for an assault on the stronghold was commencing. On October 15, he appointed Braxton Bragg overall commander of the Cape Fear defenses, superseding General Whiting, who would remain in Wilmington as Bragg's second in command. It was a considerable risk to take with the Confederacy's most important port, considering Bragg's record so far during the war.

By the fall of 1864, no general officer in the South was as vilified as Braxton Bragg. In the Battle of Shiloh in April, 1862, he had squandered the lives of many soldiers in ill-advised attacks on a Union stronghold called the "Hornets' Nest", when that position could have been, and later was, flanked and turned. In the Kentucky Campaign of summer and fall 1862, he had failed to bring all his available forces to the field at the Battle of Perryville. Even though his outnumbered troops outfought their Union adversaries and actually won the battle, Bragg retreated from Kentucky. At the Battle of Murfreesboro, he again squandered the lives of many of his troops in a suicidal assault on January 2, 1863. He had retreated from middle Tennessee, seemingly befuddled as to how to stop the Union advance toward Chattanooga, and was outmaneuvered from that city into the mountainous country of North Georgia. After his Army of Tennessee won the Battle of Chickamauga, September 19-20, 1863, he failed to properly follow up the bloodily-won and most resounding Southern victory in the West. He marked time, besieged the Federals in Chattanooga, parceled out his forces, and was defeated at the Battle of Missionary Ridge in November 1863. He resigned his command and was brought to Richmond as military adviser to the President.

Bragg's reassignment to Wilmington in October 1864, brought consternation to many. Virginia newspapers reported hearing that Bragg was headed to the Cape Fear District, and quipped laconically, "Goodbye, Wilmington!"¹⁴ Colonel William Lamb wrote that his men were bitterly disappointed at the change in command. They believed no one was as capable of commanding the defenses of the Cape Fear as General Whiting, who had spent the last two years doing so, and encouraging and recommending the building of dependent batteries and forts all up and down the beaches, on the river, and all around the city itself. Whiting himself later wrote that he never understood what Bragg was sent there for in the first place.

While Bragg inspected the Cape Fear defenses, the new Admiral in command of the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron, David Dixon Porter, commenced planning for the assault on Fort Fisher. A novel idea he adopted from a suggestion of Union General Ben Butler, who would command the Army of the James expedition, was for a powder boat to be blown up near Fort Fisher. The *USS Louisiana* was an old derelict that would be used for the scheme. Loaded with several hundred tons of gunpowder, the ship would be towed most of the way toward shore, and then released to steam on its own power closer to Fort Fisher.

¹⁴ *Wilmington Daily Journal*, October 31, 1864.

The explosion of the powder vessel, it was hoped, would knock down many of the heavy sand parapets, traverses and covered ways of the now tremendous bastion that was the South's largest and most powerful fort. A half-mile in width and nearly a mile in length, it was armed with 47 heavy seacoast guns and mortars, as well as additional lighter field artillery. The likelihood of destruction of such a formidable fortification was in serious question. But as fall waned and early winter came on, the Federals decided to give it a try. They would follow up the explosion with naval gunfire never before seen in history, and follow that by an assault of over 6,000 Union infantry of the Army of the James on the fort itself.

By December 15, the Army transports carrying the Union infantry arrived off Cape Fear. The Union Navy under Porter arrived three days later with over 60 warships carrying more than 600 heavy guns, and the powder boat. A strong gale blew in the day the Navy arrived, however, delaying the explosion and the attack.

It was fortunate for the Confederates the attack was delayed, for it gave Robert E. Lee time to order Major General Robert Frederick Hoke's Division out of the Richmond lines, to move south to reinforce Wilmington and Fort Fisher. The gale that was howling and disrupting the Union attack extended north to Virginia. North and South Carolina troops boarded trains in Richmond in freezing rain, and rode in and on top of boxcars and flatcars in the most inclement weather many had ever experienced. Some would die of exposure on the way south. When they finally began arriving in Wilmington early morning of Christmas Eve, the gale was subsiding as the Union attack was about to commence.

The USS *Louisiana* was towed in fairly close to shore and released to the crew aboard to take it in closer. Several methods of igniting the powder in a delayed manner, so the crew could exit the vessel prior to explosion, were employed. None worked properly, and sometime after 1:30 a.m. the powder boat exploded in flame and concussions, but in several separate explosions, none of which were severe to troops or Fort Fisher. Colonel Lamb thought it might have been a blockade-runner exploding after running aground, or the firing of a 10" Columbiad gun from the fort.

Sometime after noon on December 24, the Union fleet began the bombardment of Fort Fisher. The gale having subsided the day before, the water was calm, and the weather almost Indian summer warm. The stability of the heavy warships while firing was excellent with such a calm sea, and the ironclads and frigates opened the heaviest naval bombardment on land positions in world history. The firing of the fleet's more than 600 heavy guns was incredible, according to North Atlantic Blockading Squadron Commander David Porter, who estimated that approximately two shells per second were fired at Fort Fisher for hours on end. The roar of the cannonade was deafening. Midshipman Clarence Cary, one of the youthful Confederate naval officers manning a gun at the Columbiad Battery of the fort on the sea face, wrote that, "with the continuous

roar of the firing, and the scarcely frequent reports of bursting shell, the aggregate noise was not unlike that of a rolling, volleying, long sustained thunder storm.”¹⁵

The problem for the Union Navy and especially the Army, however, which would have to assault the fort, was that the warships seemed to be firing at random, apparently at no particular targets other than just to hit the fort somewhere. The heavy seacoast guns and the mammoth sand traverses and parapets were not being targeted. Many of the shells, according to Colonel Lamb, were arcing over the fort and landing in the Cape Fear River. Despite that fact, the interior of the fort itself was being pummeled. The garrison’s wooden barracks were obliterated, and the fort’s stables were knocked to pieces. The terrified horses galloped up and down the fort’s interior until the Navy’s shells destroyed them all. The explosions of so many projectiles sprayed hot, jagged chunks of iron in all directions, blanketing Fort Fisher with a hailstorm of deadly flying metal.

A number of the huge 100-pounder Parrott Rifles aboard the ships proved to be faulty. Some exploded after being fired several times, killing and wounding Union sailors, eventually inflicting more casualties than would be received from Fort Fisher’s return fire.

William Lamb had his men strictly conserve ammunition, each gun in the fort being ordered to fire only once every 30 minutes. The fort had a total of just 3600 rounds when the fight began, and the Colonel wanted to reserve his fire for the expected attempt of the Navy’s run past the batteries into New Inlet, to get into the fort’s rear. That had been done in other attacks on Confederate forts during the war.

Major General Henry Chase Whiting arrived at the fort from Wilmington late in the afternoon of Christmas Eve, not to take command from Colonel Lamb, but to assist him and share the fate of the garrison. At about the same time, Brigadier General William Whedbee Kirkland’s North Carolina Brigade of Robert Hoke’s Division began arriving at the Sugar Loaf defenses, four and five miles north of Fort Fisher. There were heavy guns as well as Whitworth rifles in some of these extensive sand fortifications, and Kirkland planned to make a stand against the expected Union landing, if he could. As the afternoon wore into dusk, the fleet withdrew from the battle to rest for the night.

Around 10:00 a.m. on Christmas morning the fleet returned, and commenced shelling the fort at a furious rate of fire. Also, three and four miles north of Fort Fisher, about twenty Union vessels moved into position to bombard the Confederate defense positions known as Battery Gatlin and Battery Anderson. The Confederates knew that somewhere in this area Union infantry would be landed, to begin their move southward for the assault on Fort Fisher.

Shortly after 2:00 p.m., the Union infantry began coming ashore from gigs and launches of the transports. Brigadier General Newton Martin Curtis’ Brigade of Adelbert Ames’ Division landed and began to form up to advance on the fort. These men were part

¹⁵ *Rebel Gibraltar*, 264.

of Major General Godfrey Weitzel, XXIV Corps in Major General Benjamin Franklin Butler's Army of the James. Two other brigades of Ames' Division came ashore and remained near the landing area, skirmishing with some of Kirkland's men who moved out to contest, if only feebly due to paucity of numbers, the Union landing.

About 500 men under Curtis, accompanied by General Weitzel, moved south down the beach. Some 800 yards north of Fisher, Weitzel stopped to study the fortifications with his field glasses. He did not like what he saw. He counted 17 guns on the land face still mounted on platforms bearing on the beach. Intact traverses rose high and thick above the gun platforms. He could plainly see that the fort had not been materially injured by the heavy fire of the fleet. Wietzel had a "distinct and vivid recollection of the bombardment of Fort Jackson, of Vicksburg, of Charleston, and of Fort Wagner." He recalled the two unsuccessful assaults on Wagner, both of which had been made under "four times more favorable circumstances" than those under which they were now placed at Fort Fisher. He reported back to Ben Butler, aboard the gunboat *Chamberlain*, and "frankly reported to him that it would be butchery to order an assault on that work under the circumstances."¹⁶

As Martin Curtis' troops got to within about 100 yards of the fort, the fleet lifted its fire. William Lamb immediately dispatched his garrison on the land face from bombproofs up to the ramparts to man their guns. Other troops, many of them North Carolina Junior Reserves, were ordered to hustle down from the parapets to man a heavy log palisade fence about 50 feet north of the base of the fort. As Curtis' men came within good musket range in the growing darkness, some 800 troops behind the palisade opened a heavy musketry, while the artillery blasted away with canister and grapeshot. Ben Butler, observing the twilight action from aboard the *Chamberlain*, wrote that, "the guns of the fort were fully manned, and a sharp fire of musketry, grape, and canister swept the plain over which the column must have advanced." He called the attack off. Division commander Adelbert Ames concurred with his decision. "Had the attack been made it would have failed," he said.¹⁷ William Lamb later wrote that Butler's decision was the right one, as the Federals would have been slaughtered, as Godfrey Weitzel said they would. Additionally, the fleet had exhausted its ammunition of all things, and was forced to leave the Cape Fear coast and return to Beaufort, North Carolina to replenish its supply.

Though David Porter tried to lay the blame for failure on Butler, and General Curtis would years later allege the fort could have been taken, the cause of the withdrawal was the ineffectiveness of the Navy, and thereby, its commander, Porter himself. That the fort's land face guns and protecting sand mound traverses were still intact, was due to lack of specific orders to fire on them. The fleet's fire had been scattered and diffused, each ship's commander apparently firing on the fort as he saw fit, not specifically targeting the guns on the land face. Fort Fisher was the largest fortification in the Confederate States, almost a half-mile in width along the land face,

¹⁶ *O.R.*, I, 42, pt. 1, 986.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 968, 981.

and a mile in length down the sea face to the large Mound Battery, which itself was about 50 feet high. There was also a lot of ground in the interior, which had received a tremendous amount of shelling of no value to the Federals, and many of the projectiles had sailed over the fort to land in the river. The upshot was that the majority of the fleet's ammunition had been wasted, causing minimal damage to the fort and garrison.

The Federals re-embarked 2,800 of their 3,500 troops that had landed. The balance, 700 men, were stranded for two days as another gale blew in, forcing the transports to move far offshore. Despite having several thousand Confederate troops at hand in their rear, Braxton Bragg did not order an assault on the Federals stranded on Confederate Point. General Whiting almost insubordinately told him by dispatch to, "Press their rear."¹⁸ Bragg did not, and the Federals got safely off by December 27.

Though most Confederates down to the lowest private seemed to realize that the Federals would be back, and probably soon, Braxton Bragg did not. Instead of keeping Hoke's Division down on Confederate Point, where it should have been extending and strengthening the fortifications along the Sugar Loaf defenses out to Myrtle Grove Sound and the beach, as well as in the tree line back from the beach in the area of expected landing, Bragg called the division back to Wilmington. His underlying reason was to prepare for a Confederate attack on New Bern, of all things at this time, with Federals about to return to the Cape Fear. Kirkland's Assistant Adjutant General, Captain Charles Elliott, said that Bragg did not expect the Federals to return and attack Fort Fisher.

For the second expedition, Butler was relieved, and U.S. Grant chose Major General Alfred Howe Terry to command 9,000 troops of the Army of the James. David Porter would again command the Navy. This time, however, his orders were more precise. This time the fleet's guns were to aim specifically at Fort Fisher's guns and traverses. "The angle near the ships has heavy casemates; knock it away", he ordered. "Concentrate fire always on one point. With guns disabled the fort will soon be ours. Commanders are directed to strictly enjoin their officers and men never to fire at the flag or pole, but to pick out the guns."¹⁹ Traverses were also to be targeted, and shells were to be timed to burst in the traverses with the intention of destroying bombproofs below.

As the fleet and army transports began assembling off Fort Fisher late afternoon and evening of January 12, Braxton Bragg, who had been notified several days earlier by Robert E. Lee of the fleet preparing to head for the Cape Fear, decided that Hoke's Division should participate in a review for the townspeople. This, rather than being down on Confederate Point to strengthen fortifications and preparing to do battle with Union infantry as they tried to wade ashore. That night, Colonel Lamb observed with his field glasses the large, gathering armada, and notified headquarters in Wilmington. Finally, with definite word from William Lamb of the Federal presence, Bragg decided it was time to order Hoke's men back to Confederate Point.

¹⁸ *O.R.*, I, 42, pt. 3, 1312.

¹⁹ *O.R.N.*, I, 11, 426.

Shortly after 7:00 a.m. on the January 13, the fleet commenced shelling the woods and beach area four miles north of the fort. The intent was to soften up Confederate resistance that might be in the area, in preparation for landing the infantry. A swarm of boats from the Navy surrounded the transports by 8:00 a.m., and soon began to row ashore about 9,000 troops of the Army of the James. They met with no resistance, as only one brigade of Hoke's Division of 6,400 men, Kirkland's, was in the Sugar Loaf trenches across Myrtle Sound from the landing, and they were insufficient in number. The adjutant of the Sixty Sixth North Carolina, George Rose, said that, "If Hoke's Division had been where, it seemed to the officers it ought to have been, this landing of troops could never have been made."²⁰

As Alfred Terry's men landed and moved south away from Hoke, David Porter's ironclads opened a furious bombardment on the land face and the formidable juncture of the land and sea faces known as the Northeast Bastion. Lamb's chief of artillery noted a significant difference in the fleet's shelling this time. "Their firing was slow and deliberate" he wrote, "and directed upon the land face of the fort, evidently with a view of dismounting our guns and breaking down the palisades in front of the work. Our guns, under my immediate command, replied steadily and with accuracy."²¹

As the bombardment continued through morning and afternoon, huge guns were destroyed and dismounted, traverses and parapets were degraded, and the palisade fence began to be destroyed. During the height of the cannonade, General Chase Whiting arrived in the fort from Wilmington, having come down the Cape Fear once again, to share the fate of William Lamb and his garrison. In addition, several more artillery battalions arrived in the fort as reinforcements, bringing the total troop strength to 1,500 by the morning of January 14.

Through the night of January 13 and into the next morning, the Federal ironclads continued to hammer the fort. They were systematically destroying the land face guns and sand mound traverses and parapets. All through January 14, the fleet continued the pounding, as the Union infantry north of the fort consolidated its position. Entrenching from the beach to the river, the Federals now spanned the width of the peninsula just two miles north of Fisher. Some troops faced north, to impede attack by Hoke's Division to relieve Fort Fisher, while most of them began a gradual and methodical movement in the direction of the fort.

By mid-afternoon, Martin Curtis' Brigade of Adelbert Ames' Division was positioned 600 yards north of the fort. The overall commander, Alfred Terry, was with them, as was the Chief Engineer, Colonel Cyrus Ballou Comstock. These men headed south until they were only a quarter-mile from the fort. The officers pulled out their field glasses, to study the fort. They could plainly see that the fleet's bombardment had been of significantly more value this time than the last. Cyrus Comstock wrote that, "the palisading in front of the work had been seriously injured by the navy fire. Only nine

²⁰ *Histories of the Several Regiments*, 3:215,694.

²¹ *O.R.*, I, 46, pt. 3, 407.

guns could be seen on the land front where sixteen had been counted on Christmas day.” The continued shelling of the fleet kept the Confederates from firing artillery or musketry on Terry and Comstock’s reconnoitering party. “It seemed probable that troops could be got up within 200 yards of the work without serious loss.”²²

The Union officers had seen what they needed, and moved back a couple hundred yards to the entrenched camp of Curtis’ Brigade. Terry and Comstock left the troops to confer that night with Admiral Porter, to insure the Navy’s close fire support for the infantry assault determined upon for the next day, January 15.

The Admiral decided that 1,600 sailors and 400 Marines from the fleet would also participate in the attack, by charging against the Northeast Bastion on the eastern end of the land face. They would do this at the same time as the infantry assaulted the western end.

As darkness descended on January 14, Curtis sent forward skirmishers and sharpshooters. These men were armed with rifles and shovels, with orders to advance as close as 175 yards from the fort, and dig trenches for protection. When that had been accomplished, Curtis dispatched forty of his best marksmen, with orders to pick off Rebel gunners who came out on the parapets next day.

Sunday, January 15, 1865, dawned bright and cold. By this time, Colonel Lamb reported, 200 of his garrison had been killed or wounded in the first two days. He also said that only three or four of his land guns were serviceable. Despite the continued shelling all through the night, as the morning sun rose, so did the fury of the fleet’s bombardment. Sometime after noon, about 350 reinforcements of South Carolina troops of Brigadier General Johnon Hagood’s Brigade, braved the fleet’s fire as they ran from Battery Buchanan, where they had been landed, up to Fort Fisher. Upon arriving, they sought shelter in bombproofs. Allowing for 200 casualties already suffered out of 1,500 troops already there before the South Carolinians arrived, that gave William Lamb now about 1,650 troops unhurt in the fort, to repel the infantry attack.

General Terry summoned the brigade officers of Adelbert Ames’ Division that morning. Martin Curtis, Galusha Pennypacker, a 20-year-old colonel, and Colonel Louis Bell, would lead their brigades, one coming in behind the other, in the attack on the western end of the land face. When in proper alignment, with Curtis’ men 250 yards north of the fort, Pennypacker’s 250 yards behind Curtis, and Bell’s 250 yards behind Pennypacker, General Ames would report their readiness to Terry. The plan was for the troops to be prepared to go forward by 3:00 p.m. Brigadier General Charles Paine’s Division of U.S. Colored Troops, and Colonel Joseph Abbott’s Brigade of the XXIV Corps would be in reserve on the defensive line two miles north of Fisher, and could be brought forward if needed. With some 4,200 infantry and 2,000 sailors and Marines set to attack, it was not felt more troops would be needed.

²² *Ibid.*, 407.

Lamb observed the massing of troops north of the western end of Fisher, and hustled some of his men to that end of the palisade fence, as well as the sally port, next to what was called Shepherd's Battery, as the fleet continued its merciless pounding. Sergeant Thomas McNeill of the First Battalion North Carolina Heavy Artillery, wrote that, "All the land face now looked as if wrapped in flame and smoke, the screaming, exploding shells tearing the earthwork, making holes in the traverses, and in all the history of war it is doubtful if a more infernal fire ever fell upon a fort."²³ And, indeed, up until that time, none had.

At 3:25 p.m. the Union infantry was lined up in order and ready to attack. General Terry signaled Admiral Porter, who passed the word, and soon steam whistles of the fleet blew long, loud, shrill blasts, to notify all vessels it was time to lift their fire from the land face to the sea face only, to prevent killing their own men. "It was," Colonel Lamb wrote, "a soul-stirring signal both to the besiegers and the besieged."²⁴

It was time for the Federal infantry to move out, but before they did, the sailors attacked first. By orders, the Navy was to wait until the Army had gone over the parapet of the west end of the fort. In the pandemonium, confusion and excitement of battle, however, Lieutenant Commander Kidder Randolph Breese stood up at the head of his men on the beach, and yelled for them to charge. Charge they did, right into the face of some of the heaviest fire the Rebels would dish out. It was a turkey shoot for the Confederates.

Colonel Lamb dispatched about 500 soldiers to the ramparts and mounds of the Northeast Bastion, against which the tightly-compacted sailors, armed with pistols and cutlasses, were ordered to charge. The poorly armed sailors were slaughtered, as they assaulted the highest piece of ground on the land face. Several hundred Marines were part of the naval assault, and their sharpshooters were supposed to pick off Confederates on the mounds, but Commander Breese had launched the attack prematurely and without proper preparation, and few of the sharpshooters made it to their rifle pit positions from which to fire.

As Lamb concentrated most of his men and attention on the Northeast Bastion, Martin Curtis ordered his brigade to rise and move out on the run. They did so, keeping alignment and moving fast, until they were met by a galling fire from the soldiers on the west end of the land face. Lamb said he had about 300 men on this end of the fort, and those troops sprayed volleys of musketry, and some grape and canister from a few remaining guns. As the naval assault was repulsed, reinforcements ran over from the Northeast Bastion to add to Lamb's defense in the Shepherd's Battery area.

Unlike the Confederates on the Northeast Bastion, the men on the western end were not on the crest and top of the mounds with firing position superiority, but waiting

²³ *Histories of the Several Regiments*, 4:309.

²⁴ *Southern Historical Society Papers*, 52 vols. (Richmond, VA: Virginia Historical Society, 1876-1959), 21:280.

on the Federals in the gun emplacements and sandbag revetments. The Federals were not long in getting to them. Very quickly, the battle degenerated into a face to face, clubbed musket, bayonet to knife gruesome slugfest. Lamb and Whiting ran to the left as the Federals gained a strong hold on the leftmost gun chambers. About 4:00 p.m., General Whiting went down with two bullets in his leg. He died two months later in a New York prison camp.

At about the same time Whiting was hit, Pennypacker's Brigade rushed into the fort in support of Curtis. Soon Louis Bell's Brigade swarmed in past the western end and over the parapets. The Federals now had over 4,000 infantry in the fort, bludgeoning their way slowly eastward down the land face. Colonel Lamb rallied as many men on the left as he could, perhaps 400-500, to battle ten times their number. Using the traverses, broken gun carriages, the broken and dismounted guns themselves, boxes, and even shell holes from the bombardment for cover, the Confederates fought with a ferocity that spoke volumes about their grim resolve to hold at all costs.

The guns on the sea face were turned and aimed at the western end where the Federals had gained a foothold. The Mound Battery at the end of the sea face as well as Battery Buchanan, joined in targeting the same area, in some cases killing friend and foe alike. At the very tip of Confederate Point on the riverside of New Inlet, Lamb and his men had completed a huge fortification in November of 1864, and the fortress, named after one of the South's great naval officers, Franklin Buchanan, was manned by sailors and Confederate Marines. Buchanan was considered the final citadel for Fort Fisher's garrison to head to, in the event the fort itself was captured.

As Lamb encouraged his men in the battle, he was also sickened at the carnage he saw on the ramparts. "Great cannon broken in two, their carriages wrecked, among their ruins the mutilated bodies of my dead and dying comrades."²⁵ Lamb had his men holding the Federals at bay about halfway down the land face, when he rallied them to charge the attackers. As he rose to rush forward, he was hit with a Minié ball that slammed into his hip, and drove him to the sand with a grievous wound. He was carried to the fort's hospital bombproof to join the wounded General Whiting. He told one of his officers to keep up the fight and hold the enemy in check. It was now about 4:30 p.m.

The battle continued, and despite their tremendous numerical superiority, by the time the sun was setting, the fort had not been taken and Ames' Division had suffered over 550 casualties in killed and wounded. Additionally, Martin Curtis had been critically wounded, Louis Bell had been mortally wounded, and the 20-year-old Galusha Pennypacker severely wounded. With all three brigade commanders down, the advance was seriously retarded. Now Abbott's Brigade was called on for reinforcements, to join those Federals already in the fort, while Charles Paine's U.S. Colored Troops held the fortified line facing north. Robert Hoke's Division should have been attacking from the Sugar Loaf defenses, but only light skirmishing occurred from that quarter. When

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 286.

Abbott's men arrived in the fort, the Federals had probably 5,000 effective infantry, allowing for casualties already suffered.

Because of the fierce resistance of the possibly 200-300 effective Confederate soldiers remaining to defend the land face, the Federals were actually entrenching from the parapets down across the interior of the fort. General Terry arrived in the fort soon after dark, and saw that Ames' Division was shot to pieces, and had lost heavily in officers besides just the brigade commanders. Ames actually told Terry he thought they should continue digging in, and finish the attack in the morning. Terry was not receptive to that, knowing the Confederates had suffered terrible casualties from the three day, two night shelling from the fleet, and the infantry attack that had been in progress for several hours. He knew the Rebels had to be on their last leg. Assaultants and defenders continued to trade volleys, neither gaining ground, until Terry ordered Abbott's men to move forward about 9:00 p.m.

At that time, various regiments began working their way around the flanks of the traverses behind which the Confederates continued to fire. "Never did soldiers display more desperate bravery and brilliant valor," said Captain George Towle of Terry's staff, in describing the Rebel soldiers' defense that day and night against overwhelming odds.²⁶ The Union reinforcements took their toll on the few hundred Confederates left who had any ammunition, and the Federals soon captured the Northeast Bastion, and not long after that, the sea face batteries.

General Whiting and Colonel Lamb were carried to Battery Buchanan on the riverside of New Inlet, and the remaining 600 men of the garrison who were unhurt or uncaptured and could get away, headed there, too. It was believed that the guns, Marines and sailors of Buchanan could hold off the Federals at least long enough for the troops who had retreated from Fisher to be evacuated. By the time Lamb, Whiting and the 600 men arrived there, however, the guns had been spiked and Buchanan's garrison had left. There was only one thing left to do. At 10:00 p.m., Major James Reilly, who was now in command, surrendered the remnants of the garrison to General Alfred Terry himself.

As word of Fort Fisher's capture spread among the Federals, the fleet fired off hundreds of rockets and roman candles in celebration, and the infantry filled the air with wild cheers and huzzas from thousands of victorious troops. The officers and men of Robert Hoke's Division at Sugar Loaf ground their teeth in humiliation and disgust, knowing the high command, primarily Braxton Bragg, should have sent them into combat to relieve the attack on the fort. Many of them would regret it the rest of their days.

The Federal victory was costly. The Army of the James lost a total of 955 men killed, wounded, or missing. The U.S. Navy lost 386 sailors and Marines. After all reinforcements had arrived in Fort Fisher, Colonel Lamb said he had a total of 1,900 men. Of that number, more than 350 were killed outright, while another 200 were mortally

²⁶ G. F. Towle, "Terry's Fort Fisher Expedition," in *Our Living and Our Dead*, S. D. Pool, ed. (Raleigh: Southern Historical Society North Carolina Branch, July to December 1875), 474.

wounded. That total of 550 deaths, for a 29 percent death rate of those engaged in Fort Fisher's defense, was among the highest casualty rates experienced in Civil War battles. Based on normal ratios of wounded to killed, it would be expected that at least 800 to 1,000 other men had been wounded and lived.

Bragg ordered forts across from Fisher, such as Holmes on Smith's Island, Fort Pender at Smithville, Forts Caswell and Campbell below Smithville, as well as other batteries, to be destroyed and abandoned. Though heavy skirmishing and rearguard actions would take place over the next month on the eastern and western sides of the river, the fall of Wilmington on February 22, 1865, was inevitable with the loss of the primary, linchpin fortification of the area.

With their capture of Fort Fisher, the Federals had won one of the great victories of the war. Never again would blockade runners have access to New Inlet and Wilmington. Without that access, Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia, the most successful of all the Confederate armies, had permanently lost its most important supply line from the outside world, a supply line that kept the army and the Southern nation alive. As Captain O. S. Glisson had predicted would happen in the late summer of 1864, the Confederate States surrendered three months after the fall of the Gibraltar on the Cape Fear.
