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Military Order 
of the
Loyal Legion
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COMMANDERY OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA.

WAR PAPER 4.

“A Sketch of Our Second Bombardment of Fort Fisher.”



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COMMANDERY OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA.



WAR PAPERS

4

“Our Second Bombardment of Fort Fisher.”

PREPARED BY COMPANION

Rear Admiral

DANIEL AMMEN,

U. S. Navy,

AND

READ AT THE STATED MEETING OF NOVEMBER 2, 1887.

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Our Second Bombardment of Fort Fisher.

I propose a brief sketch of the second bombardment of Fort Fisher and the taking of it by assault, and some remarks as to the value of spherical-shell guns in attacking earthworks. Comrades will remember that we had bombarded Fort Fisher three weeks previously; the second time we came to stay, no matter what the enemy might do to discourage us. Had the assault failed, the troops would have continued to occupy the sand spit north of the fort, and torpedo and other launches would have been taken into the river. By the aid of calcium lights, steamers could then no longer have passed up the river to Wilmington. Fort Fisher, thereafter, would have served the enemy no better purpose than if situated miles away at sea. I have reason to believe that such were the intentions of General Grant had the assault failed.

On the morning of the 13th January, '65, one hundred vessels (in round numbers) were at anchor twelve miles east of Fort Fisher. About three-fourths were vessels of war of all grades; the remainder were army transports carrying 12,000 men, under the command of General Terry. About sunrise they all got under way—the ironclads to attack the fort, and the wooden vessels of war, and the transports, to land the troops, with as much despatch as possible, some five miles north of the fort, on an open sand beach.

The *Ironsides* led four vessels of the monitor class: the *Monadnock*, with two turrets and four guns; the *Canonicus*, *Mahopac*, and *Saugus*, with two guns each, making ten 15-inch spherical-shell guns. The *Ironsides* carried in broadside seven 11-inch guns and an 8-inch rifle in broadside, a formidable battery against a sand fort, making, with the monitors, eighteen

available guns. As soon as they were within 1,800 yards, the fort opened fire on them, which was quite disregarded until they anchored as near the beach as their draught would permit. The *Ironsides* was then about 1,000 and the nearest monitor 700 yards from the fort. Then a shell or so was thrown from each vessel with a carefully studied elevation, and they then opened fire, which was actually maintained by some of them, without cessation, for three days and two nights.

In the meantime the wooden vessels of war and the army transports had anchored near the beach, and the process of debarkation went on rapidly. A few shells had been previously thrown into the brushwood, to arouse any lurking enemy. At once a large herd of cattle, frightened at the bursting shells in the wood, rushed wildly to the beach. They had been provided for the garrison of the fort, but surrendered unconditionally, and were doubtless found useful auxiliaries.

At 2 P. M. half of the army force had landed. The second line of vessels, led by Alden in the *Brooklyn*, and followed by twelve gunboats, left soon after and anchored in position outside of the ironclads and a little to the northward, so as to destroy the guns on the land face—the intended line of approach of the land force in making an assault. The arrival of our line was the cause of increased activity in the batteries of the enemy; they had sobered down a good deal, under the discipline of the ironclads, since the morning. The heavy vessels of war left the landing of the troops and got into position only a little before sunset, having been delayed an hour by the fouling of the screw of the *Minnesota*, the leading vessel, commanded by Lanman. The third division and the reserve line, composed of the weaker vessels, remained to complete the landing of the troops and all of the stores, which was effected by noon of the next day.

I recall no sight during the war more superbly grand than the

bombardment of that evening. As the sun went down and the shadows fell upon the waters, the waning light made the bursting shells flash out in the obscurity, as did the guns of the enemy—so far as they were served against such odds. Far above, on the fleecy clouds, rested the rosy hues from the departed sun; and underneath, in heavy masses, not high above the fort, laid the smoke clouds of battle. It was superlatively grand. But soon the shadows darkened into obscurity, and the wooden ships were withdrawn from action. All that livelong night did the ironclads send their shells, slowly and effectively, and, as found necessary, they were supplied with ammunition from tugs, during that and the following night.

In the forenoon of the next day the wooden vessels of all classes came in on the lines assigned them, the frigates about a mile from the fort, and double-enders forming another line, stretching away towards the entrance of the river, where the Mound and Buchanan batteries were located. The fleet, as before, directed their fire at the particular guns assigned them; the commanders of the vessels were satisfied and gratified at the effect of the shells on parapets, traverses, and the guns of the enemy; 15-inch shells with bursting charges of 13 pounds, 11-inch with bursting charges of 6 pounds, did their work superbly, and even 9-inch shells with bursting charges of only 3 pounds were not to be despised, and, besides, there were a great many of them. Where the shells fell a crater would appear, and the ability to fight the guns was in a large degree destroyed by the masses of sand continually thrown around them. As the result, some of the guns of the enemy were feebly served, and the greater number were silent. When the fort no longer replied to the guns of the fleet, signal would be made to fire slowly; one gun at a time from every vessel would then be directed as at target practice, against the particular object. The enemy at

times would be induced by this slow firing to open fire again, but only to receive such a storm of shells, in return, as to squelch him. One of my Confederate friends, who was in the fort, recently told me that the effect of the fire was so damaging and overwhelming that they literally could do nothing; great logs of wood, fifty feet in length, on the parapet, would be thrown from their bed and tossed in the air by a shell that had buried itself in the parapet. When night-fall of the second day came, and the wooden vessels were again withdrawn, certainly the fort had a sorry appearance, and many of the guns had been rendered useless.

In an interview that night, Admiral Porter and General Terry agreed upon an assault at noon on the next day. A naval contingent of 1,600 blue-jackets and 400 marines was to assault the sea face; the movement was to be made from the northward along the beach to the northeast bastion.

The third day, until the time of the assault, which was about three o'clock, the fleet maintained a slow but constant fire on the fort without being favored with a reply. During the night the army had made an extended line of pits close up under the stockade of the fort on the land side, and occupied them. When the assault came, the movement was begun from them; the troops were managed in the most courageous and dexterous manner, and carried the seven most westerly traverses with little loss; then followed the most stubborn fighting from traverse to traverse, the huge shells of the ironclads clearing the spaces between the traverses as the troops advanced, and thus the battle raged, when daylight no longer served for firing shells; our troops had then carried the bastion and a traverse, or more, on the sea face. It was not until ten o'clock that the enemy laid down his arms.

The blue-jackets and marines under Breese moved as soon as

the army began the assault; a certain number, as a skirmish-line, had dug trenches and pits at some distance from the north-east bastion, and occupied them in the forenoon. The body of the naval force landed later, and advanced over a considerable stretch of open beach, and, of necessity, in masses; the loss was heavy, and although a part of the force actually reached the stockade at the bastion, its greatest use, unhappily, was to divert a very considerable number of the enemy from the land face, upon which the army attack was made. The fort was gallantly taken, although the naval assaulting column, did not reach the parapet.

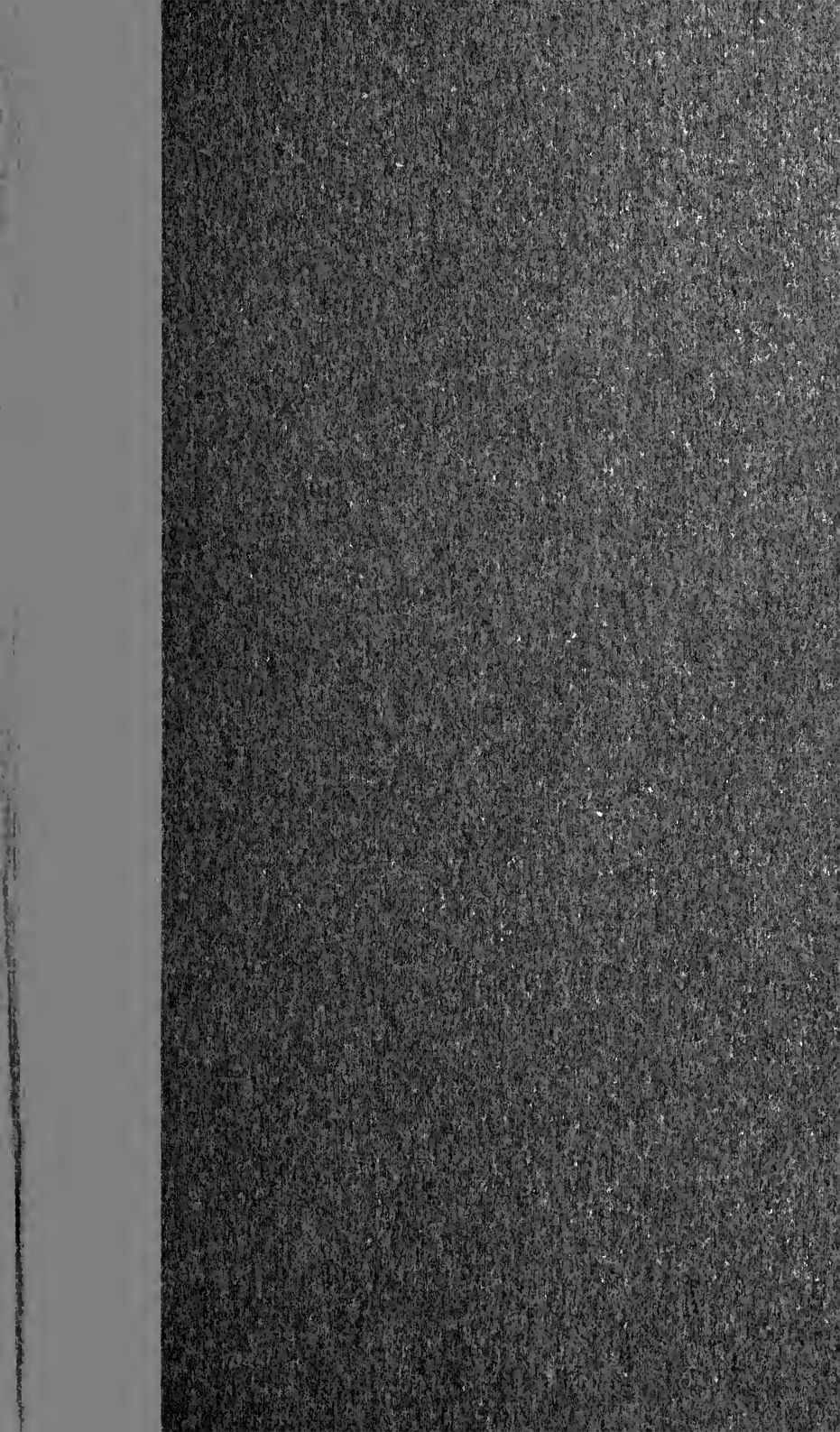
All that night, in the distance, the sky was lurid with the flames of the burning works, abandoned by the enemy. Although the battle was over, the hand of the destroyer yet lingered. At sunrise, on the 15th, the main magazine of the fort exploded, burying 200 or more persons, friends and foes alike, beneath the falling masses. The supposed cause is asserted, that some drunken men entered the magazine with a light, expecting to find liquor. The army loss in killed and wounded is given at 700, and the navy loss at 383, including 20 missing, supposed to have been blown up by the explosion.

Fort Fisher was regarded as one of the strongest earthworks ever constructed as against ships. It mounted some 40 guns, almost without exception of heavy caliber; 15 of them were permanently disabled, generally on the land face. In the first bombardment a number of our Parrott guns burst, causing a serious loss of life. In the second bombardment, the Admiral issued an order forbidding the use of rifles. Against earthworks when employed within 2,000 yards, spherical shells serve a more effective purpose, in my belief, than the same weight of projectiles from rifles; the latter have too much penetration and the bursting charges are too small to form craters.

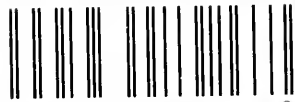
There were thrown by the fleet into Fort Fisher 22,000 spherical shells, containing heavy bursting charges and weighing no less than 2,200,000 pounds.

As we all know, a brick or stone fort can soon be destroyed by rifled guns of inconsiderable power at a distance of 4,000 yards or more. Nevertheless, the superiority of spherical-shell guns against earth or stone works, when within a mile, is established in the belief of most naval men, and they would say the more guns are brought against the earthwork the better. We have reason to believe such batteries as we fought are quite within the control of the numbers of guns that can readily be brought against them by even an insignificant naval power. Perhaps for this reason naval officers of high rank in our service, without exception, so far as I know, regard favorably for land defence revolving turrets of large dimensions, known popularly as the "Timby system." Had our forts such appendages, there would be no enfilading them, nor would it be possible to cover the guns with sand when shelled, as is the case with sand-batteries. To ensure the turrets working satisfactorily, it seems to me that they should be water-borne, which would be the least expensive foundation possible for such weights. These ideas are given for the reason that the Loyal Legion cannot be indifferent as to the best coast defence, and if our naval operations during our civil war have afforded any lessons, as at Fort Fisher, we should carefully weigh their import.





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