

DEFENCE OF FORT WAGNER.

MORRIS ISLAND, 8 JULY, 1863.

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THIRTY-FIRST N. C. REGIMENT.

The following sketch has been prepared largely from report of Major Robert C. Gilchrist, together with the personal recollection of the writers, who were participants.

BATTERY WAGNER, S. C.

Skirting along ship channel, the main entrance into Charleston harbor, and commanding the only approach for large vessels to the city, is Morris Island, forever prominent in the history of the United States for being the site of the battery that fired the first shot in the war between the States; still, later for giving to the world its first lesson in iron-clad armor, and more than all, for being the theatre of a defence of an earthwork more stubborn and grave, of a siege as memorable and bombardments the most formidable in the annals of war.

This island is three and three-fourth miles long, and varies in width from twenty-five to one thousand yards.

At its northern extremity it is flat, and with the exception of a low line of sand hills is only two feet above high tide.

At the northern extremity (Cumming's Point) was situated Battery Gregg. The marsh on the west, at a point about three-fourths of a mile from Gregg encroached upon the sea face of the island leaving a narrow strip of 250 yards. At this point was located the famed Fort Wagner. The island is composed of quartz sand, which has no cohesion and weighs when dry 86 pounds per cubic foot. To its power in resisting the penetration of shot and when displaced of falling back again to the very spot it had occupied, is due the comparative invulnerability of the works erected on the island, advantageous alike to its defenders and assailants. It is distant from

Fort Sumpter 2,780 yards. Wagner was an enclosed earth-work measuring within the interior slope from east to west six hundred and thirty (630) feet, and from north to south in extreme width two hundred and seventy-five (275) feet. The sea face measuring along the interior crest two hundred and ten (210) feet, contained a bomb-proof magazine, twenty by twenty feet, forming a heavy traverse to protect the three guns north of it from the land fire. Behind the sea face was the bomb-proof, thirty by one hundred and thirty, within which could not be accommodated more than 900 men, standing elbow to elbow and face to back (not 1,500 to 1,600 men, as General Gilmore said), and this capacity was further reduced by cutting off more than one-third for hospital purpose.

The Confederate force which had been doing such arduous service, were now relieved by the Fifty-first North Carolina Regiment, 687 men under Colonel H. McKethan; detachments from Captains Buckner's and Dixon's companies of the Georgia artillery; Captains Tatem's and Adams' companies of First South Carolina artillery; one section of howitzers, DeSaussure Artillery, Captain DePass; one section Blake Artillery, Lieutenant Waties; Charleston Battalion, Lieutenant-Colonel P. C. Gaillard, and Thirty-first Regiment North Carolina Troops; Brigadier-General William Taliaferro in command of the whole.

ASSAULT OF 18 JULY, 1863.

About daylight on 18 July, the Federal mortars commenced their practice which they kept up at intervals until noon. The new *Ironsides*, the monitors *Montauk*, *Catskill*, *Nantucket*, *Weeharcken* and *Patapsco*, the gunboats *Paul Jones*, *Ottawa*, *Seneca*, *Chippewa* and *Wissahickon* steamed in and took position abreast of Wagner. At 12 o'clock M., all the land and naval batteries opened a "feu d' enfer" upon the devoted work. For eight long hours it was as a continued reverberation of thunder, peal followed peal in rapid succession. Nine thousand shells were hurled against Wagner—twenty each minute. It ceased only when darkness came on, as its further continuance would have involved the

slaughter of the assaulting column of the enemy, now massing in column in front of the fort. It now became evident that the assault would be made at dark, so all the guns were loaded with double charges of grape and canister, trained so as to sweep the beach about 500 to 600 yards in front. Thus the guns on the fort being prepared for the attack which was soon to come, paid no attention to the fleet, preferring to save their ammunition and their range for the more deadly conflict soon to be enacted. Battery Gregg and Fort Sumpter were made ready to fire over Wagner on the advancing column, and the batteries on James Island to enfilade its face. General Hagood was ordered to be in readiness to support or relieve General Taliaferro and proceeded to reinforce the garrison with the Thirty-second Georgia Regiment, Colonel Harrison.

On the part of the Federals Brigadier-General Strong's Brigade was to lead the assault. It was composed of the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Regiment, Colonel Shaw; the Sixth Connecticut Regiment, Colonel J. L. Chatfield; a battalion of the Seventh Connecticut Regiment, Colonel Barton; the Third New Hampshire; the ~~Forty-eighth~~ New York Regiment, Colonel Jackson; the Ninth Maine Regiment, Colonel Emery; and the Seventy-sixth Pennsylvania Regiment, Colonel Strawbridge, and was to be supported by Colonel Putnam's Brigade, composing his own Regiment (the Seventh New Hampshire), Lieutenant-Colonel Abbott; the One Hundredth New York Regiment, Colonel Dandy; the Sixty-second Ohio Regiment, Colonel Pond; and the Sixty-seventh Ohio Regiment, Colonel Voris. Brigadier-General T. Seymour was to command the assaulting column and to arrange the details for attack.

Some time before sunset these regiments were formed on the beach in rear of their batteries, in columns of eight companies, closed at half distance. The Sixth Connecticut Regiment was to lead and attack the southeast salient angle of Wagner. The ~~Forty-eighth~~ New York was to pass along the sea front and facing inward, to attack there; the other regiments of the brigade to charge the south front, extending inward toward the marshes, on the left; the Fifty-fourth Massa-

achusetts (colored), 1,000 strong, was in advance of all and to be the "*enfans perdus*." They formed in two lines ahead of the brigade. Their commander was Colonel Robert G. Shaw. He was slender and under the medium height, with light hair, a beardless face, and looked like a boy of 17 years, when seen at daylight the morning after the assault, cold and stiff in death on the very top of our breastworks and at the muzzle of our best Columbiad with three mortal wounds, either of which must have been a death wound, a bullet wound through the forehead, another through the lower body, and a bayonet thrust in his chest. His Adjutant lay dead only three feet to his right, and his Sergeant Major about the same distance to his left. Had the supporting column of 6,000 come to the relief Wagner would have undoubtedly fallen that night, but the dreadful slaughter of the assaulting column, their cries of agony and death so paralyzed them that they broke in great disorder and fled to the rear. Colonel Shaw with his colored troops, led the attack. They came forward at a "double-quick" with great energy and resolution; but on approaching the ditch they broke, the greater part following their intrepid Colonel, bounded over the ditch, mounted the parapet and planted their flag in the most gallant manner upon the ramparts, where Shaw was shot and bayoneted to death; while the rest seized with a furious panic acted like wild beasts let loose from a menagerie. They came down first on the Ninth Maine, and then on the Seventy-sixth Pennsylvania, and broke them both in two. Portions of the Ninth and Seventy-sixth mingled with the fugitives of the Fifty-fourth (colored), and could not be brought to the front. The Sixth Connecticut (Colonel Chatfield) succeeded in passing through the deadly fire, and made a furious charge on the southeast angle and took it and held it for three hours, no support having dared to follow across the fatal stretch before the fort. To retreat was worse than to advance.

During the three hours that this portion of the works was held by Colonel Chatfield (it was on top of the bomb-proof about thirty feet above the heads of the defenders) several of our men were shot in the back, while standing ready to defend the fort from any other advance; when this became known,

as it did in a few moments, General Taliaferro, in command of the fort, called to a Federal soldier on the bomb-proof and told him to say to his commanding officer that he wished to speak to him. In a moment an officer came to the edge of the bomb-proof, inquired what was wanted of him. General Taliaferro said to him in substance: "Your men have fired into the backs of my men from your position on the bomb-proof, and have wounded several. Now what I wish to say is this: 'If another shot is fired into my men, I will put to death every officer and man I find up there. You are my prisoners. If you do not consider that you are, you have my permission to make your escape, and not one man will be able to reach his lines.'" This quieted matters, and in a short time the Thirty-first Georgia Regiment and two companies of the Charleston Battalion deployed along the western face, when the Sixth Connecticut surrendered.

The assault was bravely made, but was doomed to failure from the onset. The demoralization of the negro troops at the supreme moment threw the ranks of the Federals into disorder. The converging fire of the artillery and infantry on the narrow approach prevented a rally. Few could move within that fatal area and live. The situation of the works forbade any feint or diversion, so that the garrison could concentrate their attention on one point alone. Besides the increasing darkness rendered more dense by the smoke of conflict, added to the confusion of the assailants, and helped the assailed, and thus the fortunes of war once more smiled on Fort Wagner, giving to the Confederates a complete victory and to the Federals an overwhelming defeat.

Language has not the power to describe the horrors of the night of the assault. The shattered column of the enemy was driven back to the shelter of the sand hills. Four thousand men had been dashed against Fort Wagner; when reformed within the Federal lines only 600 answered to their names. Brigadier-General Strong was mortally wounded and Colonels Chatfield, Putman and Shaw were left dead within our lines. A desultory fire of small arms with an occasional discharge of grape and canister was kept up for a time at an unseen foe from the ramparts of Wagner. Soon silence and

stillness reigned supreme, broken only by the moans of the wounded and dying. At last the long night was ended and the sun of a peaceful Sabbath rose revealing the sickening scene. "Blood, mud, water, brains and human hair matted together; men lying in every possible attitude, with every conceivable expression on their countenances; their limbs bent into unnatural shapes by the fall of twenty or more feet, the fingers rigid and outstretched as if they had clutched at the earth to save themselves; pale, beseeching faces looking out from among the ghastly corpses, with moans and cries for help and water and dying gasps and death struggles. In the salient and on the ramparts they lay heaped and pent up, in some places, three deep.

All of Sunday was employed in burying the dead. Eight hundred were buried by the Confederates in front of Wagner. The wounded and dead more remote from Wagner were cared for by their friends. We took prisoners, including wounded and not wounded, about six hundred.

For fifty-eight days Wagner and Gregg with a force never exceeding sixteen hundred men, had withstood a thoroughly equipped army of eleven thousand five hundred men, the *Iron-sides*, eight monitors and five gunboats. For every pound of sand used in the construction or repair of Fort Wagner, its assailants had exploded two pounds of iron in the vain attempt to batter it down. At the end of the bombardment, as at the commencement, Wagner stood sullen, strong and defiant as ever.

Federal history calls the capture of Battery Wagner a great victory. Victory? Seven hundred and forty men driven out of sand hills by eleven thousand five hundred. Two months in advancing half a mile towards Charleston, they made their boast that Sumpter was demolished over Wagner. This only teaches the world that sand batteries are more impregnable than the most solid masonry, especially when men are behind them who know how to fight in them by day and repair them by night.

To-day that famed fort is leveled, its bomb-proof, parapets and traverses are blotted out; not by the iron hail of hostile batteries, but by the wind of heaven and the tides of ocean.

What the wrath of man could not accomplish, the "still small voice" of the Almighty has done.

Ere long the sea with its white capped waves will sweep athwart the page of our country's history, which has been written in blood; even the site of Fort Wagner will be gone. Not so its name and fame. Sooner will Thermopylæ, Marathon, Salamis, Sebastopol and the other places where in the past men have dared, endured and died, be lost to memory, than will be forgotten the heroic patience and devoted courage of the soldiers who manned the defences of Morris Island.

In consequence of the great importance of a proper defence of Wagner, the command devolved on some officer of high rank, as for instance during this siege by General W. B. Taliaferro and Colonel Graham, General Johnson Hugood, General A. H. Colquitt, General T. L. Clingman (of our brigade), Colonel Geo. P. Harrison and L. M. Keitt succeeded each other in command, serving generally about five days each.

The Confederate forces engaged in repelling this famous assault on 18 July, 1863, was as follows: The Fifty-first North Carolina Regiment; detachment of Captains Buckner's and Dixon's companies of Sixty-third Georgia Artillery; Captains Tatum's and Adams' companies First South Carolina Infantry (as artillery); section of howitzers of DeSaussure Artillery, Captain DePass; section of howitzers Blake's Artillery, Lieutenant Waties; Charleston Battalion, Lieutenant-Colonel P. C. Gaillard, and Thirty-first North Carolina Regiment, General W. B. Taliaferro in command—about fifteen hundred men all told.

E. K. BRYAN,
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NEW BERN, N. C.,
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