FORT FISHER -- THE GIBRALTAR OF AMERICA

ANNIVERSARY OF THE CAPTURE OF FORTIFICATIONS

The Assault on Fort Fisher Described

Gast Tuesday, January 15, was the anniversary of the fall of Fort Fisher. It is appropriate to reproduce at this time extracts of the battles there from Admiral Robley B. Evans' book, "A Sailor's Log," which was handed The Dispach by Capt. Edgar D. Williams, who is very much interested in the construction of an improved road all the way to Fort Fisher. Captain Williams has appeared before the Board of County Commissioners a number of times in behalf of the proposed roadway and says that he expects to attend and present the matter at every regular meeting until he gets favorable action. He expects to present to the national government the matter of making Fort Fisher a national park, which project was extensively advocated here some years ago. The extracts from Admiral Evans' history, reproduced on this page, will doubtless be read with interest.

Admiral Potter was not willing to give up so easily, and on his representations concurred in by General Grant, the second expedition was organized. The fleet was ordered to Beaufort, North Carolina, and such vessels as could do so entered the harbor; the rest anchored outside, and all hands worked day and night coaling and filling up with ammunition and stores. Any one who has served on that coast in the winter months will know the difficulties with which we had to contend; to those who have not, no adequate idea can be given. Gales of wind were of almost constant occurrence, and, as we were in the open sea, the vessels rolled so that frequently we had to use life lines on our decks to prevent the men from being washed overboard. On many occasions vessels had to slip their cables and go to sea to ride out the storms.

Notwithstanding all this, in two weeks we were ready to try it again, and this time success seemed to be in the air. That gallant soldier, General Alfred Terry, was in command of the army contingent; his men were enthusiastic and anxious for the fight, and he and Admiral Porter were working in harmony—a fact of itself promising the very best results. It was agreed between the commanders that a naval brigade be landed to assist the army in the assault, by attacking the sea face of the fort, while the army went in on the northwest angle. Volunteers were called for from the navy for this service, and it was gratifying to see the officers and men come forward, almost in a body, for a job they knew would be a desperate one. So many volunteered that finally a detail had to be made from each ship, and there were many sorely disappointed ones when the names were published.

It was my good fortune to be officer of the deck when the order came on board directing the movement, and so I had my name put first on the list of those who volunteered. At this time there were four classmates on board—Harris, Kellogg, Morris and Evans. All volunteered, and as only two could go, we agreed that Harris and Kellogg, being in the first section of the class, should have one chance between them, and Morris and I being in the section section, should have the other chance. Harris won his chance on the toss of a penny; but I, being a Virginian and having no particular family ties, insisted that I should go rather than Morris, who came from New York and would be sadly missed if he were killed. To all of this Morris naturally objected, and we seemed a long way from any conclusion, when he suggested that we leave the selection to Lieutenant-Commander George Bache, who was to command the men from the Powhatan, which was done, and Bache selected me.

January 13th found us again in front of Fort Fisher, and this time we came to stay. The fleet opened on the fort, and kept up a constant and accurate fire. We soon found a great difference in the garrison from the one we had fought in the first attack. They stood up and fought their guns most gallantly, and would not be driven into the bombproofs. A division of gunboats was sent close in to cover the landing of the troops, which was done by the boats of the fleet in a sea heavy enough to make care necessary. I was in charge of the commodore's barge, a very handsome, large, able boat, fit to carry thirty-five or forty men. We made the first landing with over two hundred boats, and the sight was a notable one as we pulled in, an occasional shell splashing among us, and the bullets spluttering on the surface of the water.

As soon as the order was given to land we went for the beach at full speed, and, after passing the first breakers, turned our boats and backed them in until our passengers could land almost with dry feet but to get them out of the boats at the right moment was almost impossible. They would wait too long, and as a result most of them were rolled up on the beach by the surf, soaking wet. But once on shore it was glorious to see how they knew their business and the way they did it. As soon as they got their feet they spread out into a skirmish line, and the rifles began to crack. When I came in with the second load those on shore had captured some cattle, and were skinning them, and did not seem the least bit worried by the fire of the skirmishers, only three or four hundred yards away. Before dark we had all the men landed, and enough ammunition and stores to make them safe and comfortable in case it should come on to blow. During the night we completed the landing of stores and supplies and some thirty-pound Parrott guns, which were immediately put in position facing General Bragg, who was coming from the direction of Wilmington to re-enforce the garrison of Fort Fisher. The bombardment was kept up during the 14th while the army got into position for the assault, which had been fixed up for the afternoon of the 15th.

The premonitions that men have before going into battle are very curious, particularly when they come true. We had on board the Powhatan a fine young seaman named Flannigan, who came from Philadelphia. On the night of the 14th of January, he came to my room with a small box in his hand, and said to me, "Mr. Evans, will you be kind enough to take charge of this box for me—it has some little trinkets in it—and give it to my sister in Philadelphia?" I asked him why he did not deliver it homself, to which he repled, "I am gong ashore with you tomorrow, and will be killed." I told him how many bullets it required to kill a man in action, and in other ways tried to shake his conviction, but it was no use—he stuck to it. He showed no nervousness over it, but seemed to regard it as matter of course. I took the box and, after making proper memorandum, put it away among my things. On the afternoon of the next day when we were charging the fort and just as we came under fire, at about eight hundred yards, I saw Flannigan reel out to one side and drop, the first man hit, with a bullet through his heart. I stepped quickly to his side and asked if he were badly hurt; the only reply was a smile as he looked up into my face and rolled over dead. The box was delivered as he requested, and I afterwards assisted in getting a pension for his sister.

January 15th proved a beautiful day for our work, clear and warm enough, with a smooth beach for our landing. At early daylight the whole fleet opened on the fort and poured shells in on it at a feaful rate. After a hasty dinner at noon the signal was made at one o'clock, "Land naval brigade." In a few minutes we were off, cheered by our shipments, and pulling for the shore, where we landed unopposed and without serious accident, about one mile and a half from the northeast angle of Fort Fisher. On the way ashore some evilly disposed person fired a shot at us, which struck the stroke oar of my boat, cut it in two, and sent the handle spinning across my stomach with such force that I thought I was broken in two. On landing we were quickly formed in three divisions, with the marine battalion in the lead.

During the forenoon a force of firemen had landed under Lieutenant Preston to dig rifle pits, well to the front, and these were to be occupied by the marines, who were to keep down the rebel fire until the sailors, armed with cutlass and revolver, reached the parapet. When the division were formed, we advanced until we reached a point about twelve hundred yards from the fort, where we halted and waited the signal to charge, which was to be the blowing of the steam whistle on the flagship, repeated by other vessels of the fleet. All the guns that we could see had been dismounted or disabled in the bombardment, but after we landed there was one large rifle that opened on us and did some damage. The shells generally struck short of us, and would then ricochet down the level beach, jumping along for all the world like rabbits. To avoid this shell fire the divisions had been marked by the flank to take advantage of what shelter the slope of the beach offered. It thus happened that the three divisions forged on abreast of each other, and we charged in this formation—three columns abreast, the marines leading. While we were waiting for the army to report ready, our men had a good rest, and seemed to be in excellent spirits. The rebels were firing at us slowly, but doing no damage to speak of. Curious little puffs of sand showed where the Enfield rifle balls were striking, but they only hit a man now and then by accident.

At 3 o'clock the order to charge was given, and we started for our long run of twelve hundred yards over the loose sand. The fleet kept up a hot fire until we approached within about six hundred yards of the fort, and then ceased firing. The rebels seemed to understand our signal and almost before the last gun was fired manned the parapet and opened on us with twenty-six hundred muskets. The army had not assaulted, so the whole garrison concentrated its fire on us. Under the shower of bullets the marines broke before reaching the rifle pits that had been dug for them, and did not appear again as an organization in the assault. Most of the men and many of the officers mixed in with the column of sailors ,and went on with them. About five hundred yards from the fort the head of the column suddenly stopped, and, as if by magic, the whole mass of men went down like a row of falling brick; in a second every man was flat on his stomach. The officers called on the men, and they responded instantly, starting forward as fast as they could go. At about three hundred yards they again went down, this time under the effect of canister added to the rifle fire. Again we rallied them, and once more started to the front under a perfect hail of lead, with men dropping rapidly in every direction. We were now so close that we could hear the voices of the rebels, and what they said need not be written here. The officers were pulling their caps down over their eyes, for it was almost impossible to look at the deadly flashing blue line of parapet, and we all felt that in a few minutes more we should get our cutlasses to work and make up for the fearful loss we had suffered.

At this moment I saw Colonel Lamb, the Confederate commander, gallantly standing out on the parapet and calling on his men to get up and shoot the Yankees. I considered him within range of revolver, so took a deliberate shot at him. As I fired a bullet ripped through the front of my coat across my breast, turning me completely around. I felt a burning sensation, like a hot iron, over my heart, and saw something red coming out of the hole in my coat which I took for blood. I knew, of course, that if a bullet had gone through this portion of my body I was done for; but that was no place to stop, so I went on at the head of my company. As we approached the remains of the stockade I was aware that one particular sharp-shooter was shooting at me, and when we were a hundred yards away he hit me in the left leg, about three inches below the knee. The force of the blow was so great that I landed on my face in the sand. I got a silk handkerchief out of my pocket, and with the kind assistance of my classmate, Hoban Sands, soon stopped the blood, and again went to the front as fast as I could.

About this time the men were stumbling over wires which they cut with their knives—they proved to be wires to the torpedoes over which we had charged, but they failed to explode. My left leg seemed asleep, but I was able to use it. The stockade, or what remained of it, was very near, and I determined to lead my company by the flank through a break in it, and then charge over the angle of the fort, which now looked very difficult to climb. I managed to get thorugh the stockade with seven others, when my sharpshooter friend sent a bullet through my right knee, and I realized that my chance of going was settled. I tried to stand up, but it was no use; my legs would not hold me, and besides this I was bleeding dreadfully, and I knew that was a matter which had to be looked to. I heard some one say, "They are retreating!" and looking back I saw our men breaking from the rear of the columns and retreating. All the officers, in their anxiety to be the first into the fort, had advanced to the heads of the columns, leaving no one to steady the men in behind; and it was in this way we were defeated, by the men breaking from the rear. Two minutes more and we should have been on the parapet, and then—nobody can even guess what would have happened, but surely a dreadful loss of life. As the men retreated down the beach they were gathered up and put into the trenches to oppose Bragg, and there served until after the fort was captured. Of the eight of us who went inside the stockade all were shot down; one, the colour bearer of my company, was halfway up the parapet when he received his death wound.

When I received the wound in my right knee I began at once to try to stop the flow of blood. I used for the purpose one of the half dozen handkerchiefs with which I had provided myself, but I was so tired and weak from loss of blood that I was some time doing the trick. In the meantime my sharpshooter friend, about thirty-five yards away, continued to shoot at me, at the same time addressing me in very forcible but uncomplimentary language. At the fifth shot, I think it was, he hit me again, taking off the end of one of my toes, tearing off the sole of my shoe, and wrenching my ankle dreadfully. I thought the bullet had gone through my ankle, the pain was so intense. For some reason, I don't know why, this shot made me unreasonably angry, and, rolling over in the sand so as to face my antagonist, I addressed a few brief remarks to him; and then, just as some one handed me a freshly loaded musket, I fired, aiming at his breast. I knew all the time that I should kill him if I shot at him, but had not intended to do so until he shot me in the toe. My bullet went a little high, striking the poor chap in the throat and passing out at the back of his neck. He staggered around, after dropping his gun, and finally pitched over the parapet and rolled down near me, where he lay dead. I could see his feet as they projected over a pile of sand, and from their position knew that he had fought his last fight. Near me was lying the cockswain by my boat, Campbell by name, who had a cannister ball through his lungs and was evidently bleeding to death. When he saw the result of my shot he said, "Mr. Evans, let me crawl over and give that —— another shot." He was dead almost before I could tell him that the poor fellow did not require any further attention from us.

One of the marines from the Powhatan, a splendid fellow named Wasmouth, came through the stockade, quickly gathered me up under one arm, and before the sharpshooters could hit him laid me down in a place of comparative safety; but a moment afterwards the fleet opened fire again, and the shells from the New Ironsides and the monitors began falling dangerously near us. Occasionally one would strike short and, exploding, send great chunks of mud and pieces of log flying in all directions. Wasmouth again picked me up, and, after carrying me about fifty yards, ped me into a pit made by a large shell. Here I was entirely protected dropped me into a pit made by a large called to him to take cover, but he said each time, "The bullet has not been made that will kill me." I was very drowsy and almost asleep when I heard the peculiar thug of a bullet, and looking up, found poor Wasmouth with his hand to his neck, turning round and round, and the blood spurting out in a steady stream. The bullet had gone through his neck, cutting the jugular, and in a few minutes he dropped in the edge of the surf and bled to death. He certainly was an honour to his uniform.

Just as our men began to break, the army made their charge, and were able to make a lodgment on the northwest portion of the works before the rebels who had taken us for the main assaulting column, saw them. When they disered them, however, they went at them with a savage yell, and for seven hours fought them desperately, the same bombproof in several cases being captured and recaptured five or six times. A number of sharpshooters remained on the sea face and northeast angle, and shot at every moving thing. No doubt this was owing to the fact that quite a number of marines were scattered about the beach wherever they could find cover, keeping up a steady fire.

After Wasmouth was killed I soon fell asleep, and when I awoke it was some time before I could recall my surroundings. The tide had come in, and the hole in which I was lying was nearly full of water, which had about covered me and was trickling into my ears. I could see a monitor firing, and apparently very near, and the thought came to me that I could swim off to her if I only had a bit of plank or driftwood, but this I could not get. It was plain enough that I should soon be drowned like a rat in a hole unless I managed to get out somehow. Dead and wounded men were lying about in ghastly piles, but no one to lend me a helping hand. By this time I could not use my legs in any way, and when I dug my hands into the sides of my prison and tried to pull myself out the sand gave way and left me still lying in the water. Finally, I made a strong effort, and rolled myself sideways out of the hole. When I got out I saw a marine a short distance away, nicely covered by a pile of sand, and firing very deliberately at the fort. I called to him to pull me in behind his pile of sand, but he declined, on the ground that the rebel fire was too sharp for him to expose himself. I persuaded him with my revolver to change his mind, and in two seconds he had me in a place of safety—that is to say, safe by a small margin, for when he red, the rebel bullets would snip the sand within a few inches of our heads. If the marine had known that my revolver was soaking wet, and could not possibly be fired, I suppose I should have been buried the next morning, as many other poor fellows were. As soon as I could reach some cartridges from a dead sailor lying near me I loaded my revolver, thinking it might be useful before the job was finished.

When I was jerked in behind this pile of sand, I landed across the body of the only coward I ever saw in the naval service. At first I was not conscious that there was a man under me, so completely had he worked himself into the sand; he was actualy below the surface of the ground. The monitors were firing over us, and as a shell came roaring by he pulled his knees up to his chin, which hurt me, as it jostled my broken legs. I said, "Hello! are you wounded?" "No, sir," he replied, "I am afraid to move." "All right, then," I said; "keep quiet, and don't hurt my legs again!" The next shell that came over he did the same thing, and the next, notwithstanding my repeated cautions. So I tapped him between the eyes with the butt of my revolver, and he was quiet after that. The poor creature was so scared that he would lie still and cry as the shells flew over us. As I said before, he was the only coward I ever saw in the naval service.

From my new position I could see the army slowly fighting its way from one gun to another, and it was a magnificient sight. They knew their business thoroughly, these gallant fellows from the Army of the Potomac, and in the end, at ten o'clock that night, won a victory that will live as long as heroic deeds are recorded. I can recall to this day the splendid courage of General Curtis, leading his brigade; he seemed to stand head and shoulders above those around him; and while I looked at him he went down, but was soon on his feet, only to go down a second time, shot in the eye. As darkness approached and the cold began to be felt, our men seemed to fight with more desperate determination, and the advance was more rapid. The Confederates were doing, and had done, all that human courage could do, but they were wearing out, and the arrival of fresh brigades on our side discouraged them.

The scene on the beach at this time was a pitiful one—dead and wounded officers and men as far as one could see. As a rule, they lay quiet on the sand and took their punishment like the brave lads they were, but occasionally the thrist brought on by loss of blood was more than they could bear, and a sound-wave would drift along, "Water, water, water!" and then all would be quit again. It was one of the worst of the awful features of war. Just as the sun went down, and it did not seem to go very slowly that afternoon, I saw an officer coming up the beach dressed in an overcoat and wearing side arms. As he approached me I recognized Dr. Longstreet, and begged him to lie down, as the bullets were singing around his head. He took a canteen off a dead marine and gave me a swallow of sand and water, and did the same for another wounded man. Then, turning his face toward me, he said, "We will have you all off the beach tonight," and was moving on to the front, when a bullet struck him in the forehead. He sprang several feet in the air, fell at full length on his back, and lay quite still and dead. His resignation had been accepted a week before, and as soon as this fight was done he was going home to Norfolk to be married.

After the death of Dr. Longstreet I saw another man coming toward me; but he was taking advantage of all the cover he could get, and arrived without accident. He was a reman from the gunboat Chicopee, and said he had come after me, but had only a coal shovel with which to aid me. He said if I could sit in the coal-shovel he could drag me off! The twilight was deepening, and it seemed improbable that a sharpshooter could hit either of us, so I managed to get seated on the shovel, and the fireman, with both hands behind him on the handle, started to pull me off, but had gone only a few steps when a bullet struck him, passing through both arms below the elbows. That ended my trip on a coal-shovel, and I spent the time until dark making my friend as comfortable as possible. Then I heard some one calling my name, and in a few minutes two men came who said Captain Cushing had sent them to find me and bring me off. They had only their hands, but they used them most willingly and tenderly. One would put me on his back and carry me, while the other held me on. When the first one was tired, the two would change places; and thus I was carried, shot through both legs, a distance of a mile and a half.

The outfit for the care and comfort of the wounded consisted of a large fire made of cracker boxes and driftwood, a fair supply of very bad whiskey and a number of able and intelligent medical officers. To the vicinity of this blazing fire, I, among a large number of wounded men, was carred, and stretched out on a piece of plank with my head on a cracker box, where I enjoyed the warmth, which was very grateful in the chill of the January evening. My clothing was saturated with blood and salt water, and thoroughly filled with sand. My wounds were in the same condition. A rebel gunboat in the bayou back of the fort was using our fire as a target, and finally succeeded in landing a shell fairly in the middle of it, much to our discomfort. When the shell exploded several men were killed, and the fire blown about over the rest of us. The doctor finally got to me, and after cutting off my trousers and drawers well up on my thighs, split them down the sides and threw them into the re. Then he ran a probe, first through one hole, then the other, said I was badly wounded, gave me a stiff glass of grog, and passed on to the next man, leaving me practically naked. A brother officer, seeing my condition, took the cape off his overcoat and wrapped it about my legs, and this, with the assistance of the grog, soon made me comfortable.

About half past nine that night Captain Breese, who commanded the brigade, succeeded in getting a lifeboat in through the heavy surf breaking on the beach, and at once wounded officers were tumbled into her, while the crew stood in the water holding her head on to the seas. My turn came at last, and two friends landed me in the boat with my legs hanging over the stern; then the crew jumped in, the cockswain sat down calmly on my knees, gave the men the word, and out we went through the surf in beautiful style. The boat was from the gunboat Nereus, Captain Howell commanding, and to her we were taken. We found her rolling in the trough of the sea, but the officer of the deck had all the preparations made, and we were quickly hoisted up to the davits, and willing hands soon transferred us to the deck. Just as they were putting me on a cot, before taking me below, I saw a signal torch on the parapet of the fort calling the flaship, and a moment later I read this signal: "The fort is ONE"—and then everything broke loose! Nobody waited for the completion of the signal; all hands knew what that last letter would be. There was a great burst of rockets and blue lights, and the men manning the rigging cheered as the guns roared with saluting charges. Long after I was comfortably swung in the wardroom I could hear the fleet rejoicing over the downfall of the great rebel stronghold.

The officers of the Nereus, from the captain down, spent the night doing all in their power to make us comfortable. We had a good supply of whiskey and a pitcher of morphine and water, and they gave us plenty of both. Shortly after daylight signal was made to transfer all wounded men on board to the Santiago de Cuba, and for vessels having dead on board to hoist colours at half-mast. I shall never forget the sight that greeted me when I was carried on deck to be put in the boat. The fleet lay just in the position in which it had fought the day before, and it seemed to me that every ship had her flag at half-mast lazily flapping in the drizzling rain. The weather was cold and raw, and our wounds were stiff and sore, and every movement of those helping us caused indescribable suffering. In the excitement of the charge, getting wounded was fun, but we had a different problem to solve, and it required real nerve to fact it.

The First Fort Fisher Campaign

Admiral Porter assumed command in November, and at once began assembling a powerful fleet. Every preparation was made for active service. Boilers and machinery were overhauled, magazines, shell rooms, and storerooms replenished, and constant target practice was had with all guns. By the end of November the largest fleet ever seen under the American flag was assembled in Hampton Roads, all classes from the largest monitor to the small gunboat, being represented. Our destination was a secret, carefully guarded; but we surmised from what was taking place that some important move was contemplated, and in this we were not mistaken. It was evident from the daily target practice that the admiral meant we should hit something when the time for action came, and the landing of the men on the beach for drill was an indication of possible shore service.

The Tichonderoga, anchored near us, was firing at target one morning, and making such good practice that we were all watching her with great interest, when one of her pivot guns, a large calibre Parrott, was fired. There was a terrific report, as if the shell had burst at the muzzle of the gun, a great cloud of smoke, and just then something struck close to her, making a great splash in the water. At the same time, or shortly afterward, the shot she had fired fell near the target. About two feet of the muzzle of the gun had blown off straight up in the air, and come down within twenty feet of the ship. It was the most curious of the many accidens we had then and afterward with the Parrott rifles. This particular gun, though two feet shorter than it was intended to be, was continued in service, and did good work.

Early in December the troopships arrived—thirteen thousand men under General B. F. Butler—and still our destination was a secret.

About this time I received a letter by flag of truce from my brother, who was serving as a captain of scouts on General Lee's staff, in which he said, "We will give you a warm reception at Fort Fisher when you get there!"—showing that our intended move was not so much of a secret to the rebels as it was to us. The information must have been sent from Washington, as no one in the fleet, outside the admiral's immediate official family, knew anything about it. When I showed the letter to Commodore Schenck, which I was required to do by the regulations, he seemed much surprised, and sent me with it at once to Admiral Porter, who was very indignant when he had read it. For myself, I thought my brother had only made a good guess; there were only a few important places on the southern coast remaining in the hands of the rebels, and, as our preparations surely indicated an important move, he guessed, and guessed correctly, that we were after the most important of the lot.

Toward the middle of December all our preparations had been completed, and we put to sea under sealed orders. It was a grand sight as we passed Cape Henry; all the water as far as one could see was covered with ships, and among them the flower of the navy. Commodore James Findlay Schenck commanded the thrid division of the fleet, and flew his flag on the Powhatan. The fleet was formed in three columns, the transports and storeships in the centre.

After passing Cape Henry we experienced beautiful weather, and got around Hatteras in almost a dead calm, much to the delight of the troops, who were dreadfully crowded on the troopships. On December 22d the fleet, having parted company with the transports, anchored in column thirteen miles off the mouth of Cape Fear river, and then, of course, we know what we had in hand. That afternoon it came on to blow hard from southeast, and when the sun went down the sight was a grand and threatening one. The seven monitors at the head of the column held on well at their anchors, but would disappear entirely from sight as the heavy seas swept over them. The ships soon began to drag, and all hands were kept on deck during the entire night, ready to do what was possible in case of collision. When daylight came the monitors were still in place, but the rest of the fleet was scattered over a space of sixteen miles, and nowhere could we make out a single transport. At sundown of the 23d the fleet was again anchored in good condition, none the worse for the shaking up it had had; but still we wondered what had become of the transports, as none of them showed up. It turned out later that they were safely anchored well inshore of us, waiting for the stragglers, who had been blown out of place in the gale to come up.

Before leaving Fortress Monroe General Butler had proposed a "powder boat," by the explosion of which he hoped to seriously injure the forts on Federal Point, including Fort Fisher. Indeed, he was confident that he would dismount most of the guns and level the works. An old steamer, the Georgania, had been loaded with several hundred tons of powder, and turned over to the navy to explode at the proper spot. A crew of volunteers, commanded by Captain A. C. Rhind, had her in charge, and on the evening of December 24th took her in for the final act in her career. No man in the navy believed for a moment that she would do much harm, but none of us anticipated how little injury would come from the explosion.

At eleven o'clock that night Admiral Porter steamed about the fleet in his flagship, the side-wheeled steamer Malvern, and made signal: "Powder boat will blow up at 1:30 a. m. Be prepared to get under way, and stand in to engage the fort!" After that there was no sleep for any one; we stood and watched and waited as the hours slowly dragged by. Half past one came, and no explosion, and we were fearful of some mishap; but just as the bells struck two o'clock it came. At first a gentle vibration, then the masts and spars shook as if they would come down about our ears; and then came the low rumble like distant thunder, while the sky to the westward was lighted up for a few seconds and then great masses of powder smoke hung over the land like thunder clouds. The powder boat had blown up surely, and as the fleet rapidly formed for battle there was great curiosity everywhere to see what the effect had been.

At daylight we were heading in for the fort, and almost in range, when we saw General Butler's flagship coming in at full speed, heading straight at Fort Fisher, which looked to us very grim and strong, and totally uninjured. Everything was very quiet until the general got fairly within range, when there was a flash from the fort and a prolonged roar, and all the guns on that face of the work opened on his ships. If he had had any notion that he could land unopposed he was quickly undeceived, and the way that ship turned and got offshore spoke well for the energy of her fireroom force! The last we saw of her she was running East as fast as her engines could carry her. The powder boat had proved a failure, and the general was grievously disappointed. A rebel newspaper reported that a Yankee gunboat had blown up on the beach and all hands lost.

The fleet stood on in column, the monitors leading until in position, when the leader anchored; and then the rest anchored in succession as they reached their places. It was a beautiful evolution and beautifully performed. As soon as the monitors came in range, all the guns that would bear opened furiously; and as the range was only seven hundred yards, the hits were frequent. The rebels seemd to conclude very quickly that they would do nothing with the ironclads, so they held their fire for the wooden ships. Then the Minnesota took her place, and as her anchor went down her batteries opened, first a broadside from the spar deck, and then her gun deck broadside roared its Christmas greeting. At the same moment all the rebel guns replied, and the ship was completely enveloped in the smoke from her own guns and the bursting rebel shells. For a moment it looked as if she must be disabled, but then her guns began to speak out with a welcome sound, and we knew she was all right. The Wabash and the Colorado, followed the Minnesota, and quickly dropped into their places, opening as they did so with their tremendous batteries. In rapid succession each vessel of the fleet passed them on the off side, firing through the intervals between them, and thus the battle line was formed. At times the shower of shells coming over the vessel engaged gave us a foretaste of what was in store for us, but the losses were wonderfully few.

Just as the Powhatan dropped her anchors an incident occurred which caused much bitter comment afterward. The Brooklyn, the next ship to us in line, was commanded by Captain James Alden, whose conduct at the battle of Mobile Bay had not met the approval of Admiral Farragut. In taking his position in line he held his fire until his anchor was down, when he red a broadside very smartly, which brought from the admiral the signal "Well done, Brooklyn!" the only signal of commendation made during the fight. The general feeling was that it was a theatrical performance, and that the signal did injustice to many veteran officers who had handled their ships with consumate skill. However, the signal undoubtedly went far toward removing the stigma of Mobile Bay, and the friends of Captain Alden rejoiced over it.

We had been up, many of us, all night, and our only breakfast had been coffee and hard-tack. As we approached our position Commodore Schenck sent me aloft with a pair of glasses to locate, if possible, some

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