

# 'Romantic' War Also Fierce, Bloody And Surprising

BY MARJORIE MEGIVERN

Take a tour of nearby historic Fort Fisher today and see only remnants of a once-proud Civil War fortress, whose glory is now reduced to museum relics. A film in that museum documents the battle of 1865 when this last conduit for Confederate supplies fell to Federal forces.

Fort Fisher was even less impressive some 35 years ago when Rod Gragg played frequently as a child on its beaches, long before the state of North Carolina restored the site to reflect its historic importance.

Nevertheless, that little boy became so enamored of Civil War history and the critical Fort Fisher battle, he grew up to write about it with accuracy and passion. *Confederate Goliath*, just off the Harper Collins presses, is Gragg's third Civil War publication, the first that reads like a novel while it informs as thoroughly as a textbook.

The secret of success for this dramatic account of Fort Fisher's fall is Gragg's decision to make it a "people" book. When publishers dismissed it as "too regional," he took a fresh approach and focused on the personalities behind the guns and the strategy, even while maintaining precision in facts and figures. There is a dizzying succession of such facts, from weather conditions to armament and body counts, and one would swear this writer stood at the elbow of Confederate and Union generals as they mapped out battle plans.

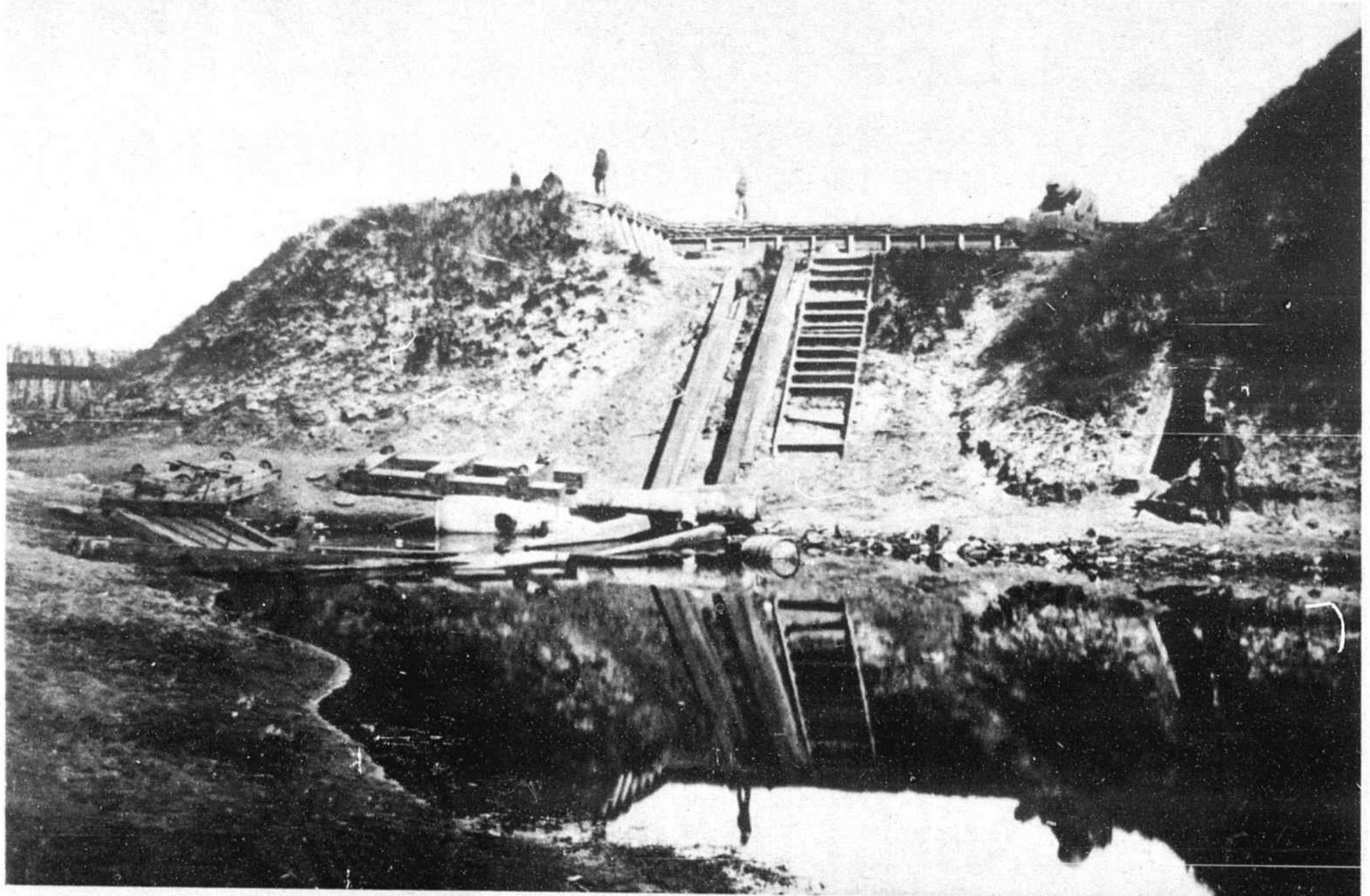
Despite its suspenseful and detailed account of every maneuver from Christmas Day of 1864 to Federal victory on January 16, 1865, one cannot read *Confederate Goliath* simply as a clinical battle report. Gragg does more by pulling his readers into the private lives of the men in uniform.

We get acquainted with such heroic figures as Col. William Lamb, charged with defending Fort Fisher, and Gen. Alfred Terry, his Union counterpart. We also meet less admirable characters: "muddle-headed" Gen. Braxton Bragg, believed by many to be responsible for the fort's demise, and the controversial Gen. Benjamin Butler, despised all over the South.

More than a dozen participants in the conflict are brought to life as Gragg describes their families, hometowns, careers and aspirations. We care about them and follow their fortunes attentively.

People, however, never take precedence over political and military events and Fort Fisher's role in the Confederate defense. As the South's last surviving seaport, it was the largest fortification along the coast, the lifeline to Confederate troops. Thus it became the target of the most massive naval bombardment of the war, followed by a fierce, bloody ground attack that left blue- and grey-clad bodies piled in every direction.

To read of the violent Civil War deaths and injuries met by 620,000 men, is to wonder that Americans ever again considered war a solution to any conflict. The brutality and blood were all the more sickening in light of the fact that brother often fought against brother, friend



AFTER THE CRITICAL battle, dismantled cannon are seen littering the rear of Shepherd's Battery. PHOTO COURTESY HARPER COLLINS

against friend.

This horror is vivid in *Confederate Goliath's* depiction of just one battle site. Gragg could write in graphic detail of the Fort Fisher campaigns because of the rich primary research sources available to him. Many officers involved kept diaries or wrote memoirs; all of them wrote descriptive letters home, and all these, along with ships' logs and newspaper accounts, resulted in a personal, eye-witness tone of authenticity that permeates Gragg's writing.

As a former journalist, his style is concise yet colorful, economic but comprehensive in telling the whole story. There is no hint of partisanship, either, despite Gragg's southern upbringing.

Narration and personality sketches aside, there is much of strategic interest in the book, even to readers like this reviewer, who studiously avoid books about war.

It is hard to resist the suspense of that first campaign launched on Christmas day, when, to all appearances, the taking of the fort by a fleet of more than 50 Union vessels would be a piece of cake. However, the initial explosion of a powder boat, intended to paralyze the garrison, fizzled, leaving the fleet faced with attacking an undamaged, armed fortress.

Gragg's crisp, powerful prose carries the story forward as overwhelming naval forces launch a bombardment that fails, as did the powder boat, to destroy the target. The landing of ground forces that follows leads to a horrible surprise for Gen. Terry. The beach was soon

## BOOK REVIEW

### *Confederate Goliath*

BY ROD GRAGG

strewn with bodies of Union soldiers, whose superior numbers were no match for the latest in military technology employed by Rebels defending the fort.

A hiatus in the conflict was spent in further strategizing on both sides, Col. Lamb pleading continuously with Gen. Braxton Bragg in Wilmington to come to his aid with additional forces.

The expected counter-attack never materialized, however, and soon Terry's forces were ready for a second campaign. The hard-fought battle of mid-January spelled the end of Fort Fisher as a Confederate stronghold and ultimately the end of the Confederacy.

This victory cost thousands of lives, many of whom Gragg presents in their tragic final moments:

Seaman James Flannigan, who told his friend, "I am going ashore with you tomorrow and will be killed," was the first man felled by a sharpshooter in the second campaign;

Lt. Benjamin Porter, racing for the fort's wall, took a Confederate bullet square in the chest, killing him instantly, and seconds later Lt. Samuel Preston pitched forward into the sand, struck in the groin with the femoral artery severed. These friends who had together endured

enemy prisons and escorted young ladies in port now lay near each other in death.

Assistant Surgeon William Longshaw, toting instruments and tourniquets among his fallen comrades, was shot to death and fell upon the body of the mortally wounded marine he was tending.

Word pictures of these individual lives and deaths are matched by descriptions of the ghastly scene of battle: "Dead lay in all directions and positions," a sailor wrote home. "It was a horrid sight to look at, some mangled terrible. The beach for 1,000 acres is covered with shot and broken shell."

Gragg has, however, balanced the horrors of war with its other aspects: both heroism and cowardice among the men, costly mistakes on both sides, faulty equipment, interfering weather changes, and men who found the whole thing an invigorating adventure.

Fort Fisher fell on January 16, and shortly after, Wilmington surrendered. This was the final act in the wartime saga of a fort whose name would pass from the recollections of most some 120 years later. Those publishers who "never heard of" Fort Fisher will now find their memories painfully jogged by this powerful book with its fresh perspective on America's first modern war. Undoubtedly they will wish this title could be among their publications of 1991, when war is very much an American obsession once again.

Complementing the words are dozens of photographs of key men in uniform, scenes of battle, the Union's impressive flotilla, and Fort Fisher's mighty ramparts.

With *Confederate Goliath*, Gragg has done a great service to the Blue and the Gray in recounting their valor and their agony with such objectivity, clarity and warmth.

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