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An Odyssey through “Satan’s Kingdom”

MARINES AT THE 1863 NIGHT ATTACK ON FORT SUMTER AND THEIR EXPERIENCES AS PRISONERS OF WAR

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Abstract: The assault on Confederate-controlled Fort Sumter, South Carolina, ended in disaster, and the U.S. Marines who managed to land on its rubble-covered shores would end up in the worst prison in the Confederacy, a place from which most would never return. This article traces their journey and details their ordeal, throughout which Marines demonstrated the qualities and character traits that have defined their Service since its inception. They resisted their captors, largely supported their chain of command while imprisoned, refused to divulge information when interrogated, and sought opportunities to escape and rejoin the fight.

Keywords: Fort Sumter, Civil War Marines, prisoners of war, POWs, Confederate prisons

On the night of 8 September 1863, the U.S. Navy tugboat *Daffodil* (1862–67) towed 400 Marines and sailors from the naval brigade on Morris Island and the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron of the U.S. Navy toward Confederate-controlled Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor, South Carolina. The fort had been battered by a sustained Union Army and Navy bombardment with shells that weighed hundreds of pounds, reducing one side of the fort to a slope of crumbling rubble and dismounting almost all of the fort’s heavy artillery. Rear Ad-

miral John A. Dahlgren, the commander of the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron, thought that a swift amphibious assault by his Marines and sailors would secure the battered fortress and open the way for his gunboats to enter Charleston Harbor and capture the city. The assault ultimately ended in disaster, and the Marines who did manage to land on the rubble-covered shores of Fort Sumter would begin an odyssey that would take some of them to the worst prison in the Confederacy, a place from which most would never return.

The abortive Union assault on Fort Sumter was not foreordained to fail, but fail it did due to the inability of the Army and Navy commanders to work together to achieve the strategic and operational goals outlined by the president. Institutional stovepipes began at the top, with an intense rivalry between the War and Navy Departments that filtered down through their respective Services and often had disastrous consequences on battlefields where earth and water collided. Although there were instances of ef-

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fective local cooperation, such as Rear Admiral Andrew Hull Foote's effective working relationship with Major General Ulysses S. Grant and Brigadier General John Pope on the Tennessee, Cumberland, and Mississippi Rivers, the Charleston campaign was not one of these. Once the ultimate prize, Fort Sumter, appeared ripe for capture, the Union Army and Navy command relationship collapsed and the Marines and sailors at the tip of the assault suffered horrendously for the vainglorious ambition of their commander.

The Path to the Kingdom

The path that led to the naval assault on the night of 8 September 1863 began in 1828 when Congress passed the first appropriation bill to construct a masonry fort on the shallow shoal extending from James Island into Charleston Harbor. The fort was part of the Third System of Coastal Forts, initiated in 1821 with the intent of shielding the United States from future aggression by European nations. President James Monroe provided a summation of the intent behind the Third System fort in his second inaugural address:

By these fortifications, supported by our navy, to which they would afford like support, we should present to other powers an armed front from the St. Croix to the Sabine [rivers], which would protect, in the event of war, our whole coast from interior invasion; and even in the wars of other powers, in which we were neutral, they would be found eminently useful, as, by keeping their public ships at a distance from our cities, peace and order in them would be preserved, and the government would be protected from insult.¹

Charleston already had strong fortifications at Fort Moultrie on Sullivan's Island, but the fort's guns could

not reach an enemy ship hugging the southern side of the harbor's main ship channel. Castle Pinckney, a masonry fort on Shutes Folly Island, and Fort Johnson on James Island could prevent shallow-draft watercraft from entering the southern side of the harbor but could not create an effective crossfire with Fort Moultrie to prevent attacking ships from forcing their way through, much as British warships had done in May 1780. Fort Sumter was envisioned as the linchpin of Charleston's harbor defenses, a manufactured island with a five-sided masonry fort that could cover the fire gap between the existing defenses and effectively close the main ship channel into the harbor.²

While Fort Sumter was a valuable harbor defense component, it assumed an even greater importance as a symbol for both the nascent Confederacy and states that remained loyal to the Union in April 1861. U.S. Army major Robert Anderson, commanding the U.S. soldiers manning the fortifications of Charleston Harbor, moved his troops from Fort Moultrie to Fort Sumter on the night of 26 December 1860, six days after South Carolina seceded from the Union. Anderson made the decision to evacuate to Fort Sumter in the face of the increasing likelihood that South Carolina's militia would attempt to seize Fort Moultrie and other U.S. Army fortifications in Charleston by force.³

South Carolina governor Francis Wilkinson Pickens ordered the occupation of Castle Pinckney and Fort Moultrie on 27 December 1860 and the construction of fortifications on Morris and James Islands to surround Fort Sumter beginning in January 1861. The Confederate guns could prevent resupply ships from reaching Fort Sumter, but Fort Sumter's guns could also effectively close Charleston Harbor by firing on ship traffic negotiating the main ship channel. After months of negotiations, the impasse finally ended when Confederate brigadier general P. G. T. Beauregard, commander of the Confederate forces in Charleston, issued his final surrender demand to Ma-

² Patrick M. Hendrix, *A History of Fort Sumter: Building a Civil War Landmark* (Charleston, SC: History Press, 2014), 14.

³ David S. Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler, "Fort Sumter, Bombardment of (12–14 April 1861)," in *Encyclopedia of the American Civil War: A Political, Social, and Military History*, ed. David S. Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000), 756.

¹ "Second Inaugural Address of James Monroe, Monday, March 5, 1821," Inaugural Addresses of the Presidents, 19th Century Documents: 1800–1899, Avalon Project, Lillian Goldman Law Library, Yale Law School, accessed 2 November 2023.

Satan's Kingdom.”⁵ Consequently, whichever military Service captured Charleston would also propel itself above the other in the nation's esteem.

Fox openly admitted his drive to surpass the Army when he told Rear Admiral Samuel F. DuPont in June 1862, “I feel that my duties are two fold; first, to beat our southern friends; second, to beat the Army. We have done it so far and the people acknowledge and give us credit.”⁶ The competition between the Services was fostered through a lack of a joint U.S. military command. President Abraham Lincoln, as commander in chief, was the only person in the U.S. government who could issue orders to the Navy and the Army. The Army could readily win laurels, since the vast number of land battles and operations attracted gallons of newspaper ink. The Navy, conversely, was tasked with the vital but relatively unseen mission to enforce the blockade on the Confederacy and transport troops and supplies. The Service that achieved the greatest share of the glory would be able to command a greater share of the congressional budget.

The Navy Batters at the Gates

Capturing Charleston seemed like the ideal mission for the Navy to steal the Army's thunder. Unlike other major Confederate cities such as Richmond, Virginia, and Atlanta, Georgia, the Navy could capture Charleston as a major component of a joint operation or, conceivably, by conducting a purely naval action by sailing into the harbor and forcing the city to surrender under threat of naval bombardment. The Navy had proven its ability to defeat land-based fortifications when DuPont's fleet pummeled two fortifications at Port Royal, South Carolina, into submission and occupied the town in November 1861, so a naval assault on Charleston did not seem out of the realm of possibility.

Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles ordered Rear Admiral DuPont to begin preparations for a

purely naval operation to seize Charleston in January 1863. Welles, along with Assistant Secretary Fox and President Lincoln, believed that the newly built ironclad warships—including the single-turreted monitors and multigun ships like USS *New Ironsides* (1862–66)—could weather the storm of shot and shell from Charleston's shore defenses and enter the harbor, forcing the city's surrender. Along with their armor, the ships also mounted the newest in naval heavy artillery. The new *Passaic*-class monitors mounted an 11-inch and a 15-inch Dahlgren gun in their revolving turrets, while the *New Ironsides* had 14 11-inch Dahlgren guns along with two 150-pound Parrott rifles and two 50-pound Dahlgren rifles. DuPont's squadron for the planned naval attack against Charleston would be able to bring 31 pieces of heavy naval ordnance to bear on the harbor's defenses.⁷

DuPont, who was skeptical of the ironclad's ability to act with impunity in the face of shore batteries armed with heavy rifled cannon, launched his naval assault against Charleston on 7 April 1863. DuPont's ships faced more than 76 Confederate guns mounted in Forts Moultrie and Sumter and Batteries Gregg and Wagner on Morris Island, although the weight of shot fired by the Confederate guns was less than that of shot fired by DuPont's ships. Moreover, the Confederate defenses extended below the waterline in the form of a rope and log boom placed across the main shipping channel between Forts Moultrie and Sumter strewn with recently invented but highly effective floating mines, known during the Civil War as torpedoes. DuPont's ironclads were heavily damaged during the attack and inflicted little damage on the Confederates' earth and sand fortifications which

⁵ G. V. Fox to S. F. DuPont, 3 June 1862, in *Confidential Correspondence of Gustavus Vasa Fox, Assistant Secretary of the Navy 1861–1865*, vol. 1, ed. Robert Means and Richard Wainright (New York: Devinne Press, 1919), 128, hereafter Fox letter to DuPont, 3 June 1862.

⁶ Fox letter to DuPont, 3 June 1862, 126.

⁷ E. Milby Burton, *The Siege of Charleston, 1861–1865* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1970), 135–37.



Photo by Haas and Peale, courtesy of Civil War Photographs, 1861–65, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, call no. LC-B8156-1 Members of the naval battery at Morris Island, SC, beside their 5-inch, 80-pounder Whitworth rifles in July or August 1863. Two Marines can be seen on the left side of the photograph.

absorbed the explosive force of their shells. The double-turreted ironclad steamer USS *Keokuk* (1863), built with lighter armor than the other ironclads, was riddled with holes from 90-plus hits and ultimately sank near Morris Island. DuPont and the Army commander tasked with occupying Charleston after its capture, Major General David Hunter, were subsequently relieved of command following their failure to capture Charleston and replaced by Brigadier General Quincy A. Gillmore and Rear Admiral John A. Dahlgren.⁸

Combined Operations and a Grueling Siege

Gillmore seemed to be the ideal choice to lead the Union Army's X Corps and head Army operations against Charleston's fortifications. A skilled artilleryman and engineer, he had directed the siege and bombardment that led to the fall of the masonry Fort Pulaski outside Savannah, Georgia, in April 1862. Although Gillmore was not noted for his skill in directing field armies, his skill as an engineer and knowledge of modern heavy artillery and its capabilities against fortifications up to that point in the war made him a sound choice. His political connections through the influential *New-York Tribune* editor Horace Greeley certainly did not hurt his cause.

Dahlgren was not an obvious choice to command the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron in the attack on Charleston. He was a recognized genius with naval guns, having developed the widely used and epony-

⁸ Burton, *The Siege of Charleston, 1861–1865*, 137–45.

mously named Dahlgren boat howitzer and naval gun before the outbreak of the Civil War. However, he had spent most of his career ashore at the Washington Navy Yard and had relatively little experience commanding at sea compared to his peers. His position at the Navy Yard did provide him with access to powerful men, including the technology-fascinated President Lincoln. Dahlgren's friendship with Lincoln eventually bore fruit when Dahlgren was promoted from captain to rear admiral and later received command of the ironclads under Rear Admiral Foote when Welles replaced DuPont as commander of the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron. When Foote died unexpectedly in New York on 26 June 1863, Dahlgren received command of the squadron with the mission to capture Charleston.⁹

Dahlgren and Gillmore renewed their attacks on Charleston, but quickly realized they could not capture the city without working together. Dahlgren could not overcome the Confederate defenses to enter the harbor, and Gillmore could not capture the fortifications surrounding the city without extensive naval support. On 7 July 1863, Dahlgren and Gillmore cooperated on the Union amphibious assault against the Confederate forces entrenched on Morris Island. The plan called for Navy launches armed with Dahlgren boat howitzers to carry Gillmore's infantry from Folly Island across the Folly River and seize the Confederate fortifications on the southern end of Morris Island. Meanwhile, the Army's heavy guns, hidden in camouflaged positions on Folly Island, would open fire on Confederate artillery positions on Morris Island, while Dahlgren's monitors would move in close to place the Confederate positions in a deadly cross-fire.¹⁰

After a few delays, Gillmore launched his assault on Morris Island on 10 July 1863. The Union infantry captured the southern end of the island following an intense land and naval bombardment of the Confederate positions and a short but intense bout of hand-to-hand fighting in the Confederate earth-

works. The Confederate troops fled into the massive Battery Wagner earthwork after suffering more than 300 casualties compared to the Union's 15 killed and 90 wounded. However, the exhausted Union forces failed to launch an immediate attack on the disorganized Confederate forces at Battery Wagner and allowed Confederate general Beauregard to send reinforcements.¹¹

Two subsequent assaults by Gillmore's troops on Battery Wagner, supported by the guns of Dahlgren's ironclads, failed with significant casualties. Gillmore decided that he would have to reduce Battery Wagner through the laborious process of bombarding the Confederate earthworks with his heavy guns and slowly advancing his earthworks forward to the battery's walls. The grueling siege, combined with disease and exposure to the harsh South Carolina summer, caused Gillmore to lose more than 16 percent of his forces while a further 14 percent were hospitalized from disease. Furthermore, several of Gillmore's regiments at Port Royal, South Carolina, were scheduled to muster out soon, forcing him to send the veteran 6th Connecticut Volunteer Infantry from Morris Island to Port Royal. This attrition, combined with Union general-in-chief Major General Henry W. Halleck's injunction that Gillmore could conduct the operation if he did not request forces from other theaters caused Gillmore to question if it would be possible for him to successfully conclude the Morris Island operation.¹²

Dahlgren tried to increase the Navy's commitment to the campaign to ease Gillmore's concerns and, quite possibly, increase the Navy's visibility in the campaign by providing a land element to support the Army on Morris Island. Dahlgren brought the steamer USS *Wabash* (1856–1912) from Port Royal to Charleston and used its 635-man crew to form detachments to relieve crews on the stifling monitors, perform picket boat duty around the squadron, and form a 170-man naval battery equipped with two British 5-inch Whitworth cannons captured from a Confederate blockade runner. He also wrote to Secretary of the

⁹ Craig L. Symonds, *Lincoln and His Admirals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 207, 238–39, 243.

¹⁰ Stephen R. Wise, *Gate of Hell: Campaign for Charleston Harbor, 1863* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1994), 64–68.

¹¹ Wise, *Gate of Hell*, 68–72.

¹² Wise, *Gate of Hell*, 120–21.

Navy Welles to request additional sailors and Marines and to apply political pressure on the Army through the president to send more troops to Morris Island.¹³

Send in the Marines

While pressuring the Army for more troops would take time, Welles embarked quickly on forming a regiment of Marines to send to Dahlgren. Commandant of the Marine Corps Colonel John Harris reported to Welles on 23 July 1863 that by taking Marines from across the barracks and receiving ships on the East Coast, he could provide 400 troops to form a battalion commanded by Major Jacob Zeilin.¹⁴ That same day, Welles ordered Harris to prepare a Marine battalion formed as Harris described in his report “at the earliest possible moment” and prepare them for transport via steam ship to Port Royal.¹⁵ Zeilin left from New York on 31 July with 260 Marines aboard the contracted U.S. Army steamer *SS Arago* (1855), while another 200 Marines from Boston, Massachusetts, embarked on 25 July 1863 aboard the recently commissioned former Confederate blockade runner *USS Aries* (1863) for transportation to Port Royal and ultimately Morris Island. By 6 August 1863, the battalion of 460 Marines had arrived at Morris Island, which Dahlgren decided to combine with Marines from the ships’ detachments of the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron to form a regiment.¹⁶

Dahlgren had high expectations regarding his new regiment of Marines. He issued detailed instructions regarding how the regiment should be organized and equipped to operate alongside the soldiers on Morris Island. This included such instructions as, “The dress of the men should be such as to enable them to execute their duties in this hot climate. . . . The prop-

er protection of the head is to be attended to”; “The white belts on dark clothes offer too good a mark, their color must be changed”; and “It is my wish that the men shall also be accustomed to use charges of buckshot when close action is expected, particularly in an assault.”¹⁷ He also saw them as a core component of his naval strike force, ordering that “there will be a detail of boats from the vessels of the squadron sufficient to land the regiment conveniently. About half crews will be furnished for these boats.”¹⁸ Dahlgren expressed his desire that the regiment be prepared to execute operations as quickly as possible to take advantage of any opportunity. He wrote in his orders regarding the Marine regiment, “The regiment is to be divested of all luggage that can possibly be spared, and always be prepared to move on instant notice; rapidity of movement is one of the greatest elements of military power.”¹⁹

Dahlgren may have envisioned his Marine regiment as a capable strike force, but the reality was that the Marines assembled on Morris Island were a mixed bag of new recruits, Marines accustomed to sea duty, and only a handful of officers and enlisted with serious combat experience on land. The Marine regiment commander, Major Zeilin, had served in combat in California during the Mexican War and had led the Marine battalion at the First Battle of Manassas on 21 July 1861.²⁰ The next senior Marine, Captain Edward McDonald Reynolds, had served in Mexico with the Marine Battalion during the Mexican War and was wounded in the arm when he participated in the cutting-out expedition in Pensacola, Florida, on 13 September 1861 that resulted in the burning of the Confederate privateer *Judah*.²¹

¹³ Wise, *Gate of Hell*, 121.

¹⁴ Col John Harris, “Report of Colonel Commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps of the Effective Men of Different Stations,” in *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion*, ser. 1, vol. 14 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1894–1922), 386, hereafter *O.R.N.*

¹⁵ Gideon Welles, “Order of the Secretary of the Navy to the Colonel Commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps to Send Marines to Port Royal,” *O.R.N.*, ser. 1, vol. 14, 387.

¹⁶ RAdm John A. Dahlgren, “Report of Rear-Admiral Dahlgren, U.S. Navy, Regarding General Matters,” in *O.R.N.*, ser. 1, vol. 14, 428.

¹⁷ Dahlgren, “Report of Rear-Admiral Dahlgren, U.S. Navy, Regarding General Matters,” 429.

¹⁸ Dahlgren, “Report of Rear-Admiral Dahlgren, U.S. Navy, Regarding General Matters,” 429.

¹⁹ Dahlgren, “Report of Rear-Admiral Dahlgren, U.S. Navy, Regarding General Matters,” 429.

²⁰ BGen Jacob Zeilin biographical file, Historical Resources Branch, Marine Corps History Division (MCHD), Quantico, VA.

²¹ Capt Reynolds assumed command of the Marine regiment on Morris Island from Maj Zeilin after Zeilin fell ill and went on to assume command of the Marine Barracks in Portsmouth, NH, shortly before the evacuation of Fort Wagner. Capt Edward McDonald Reynolds biographical file, Historical Resources Branch, MCHD.

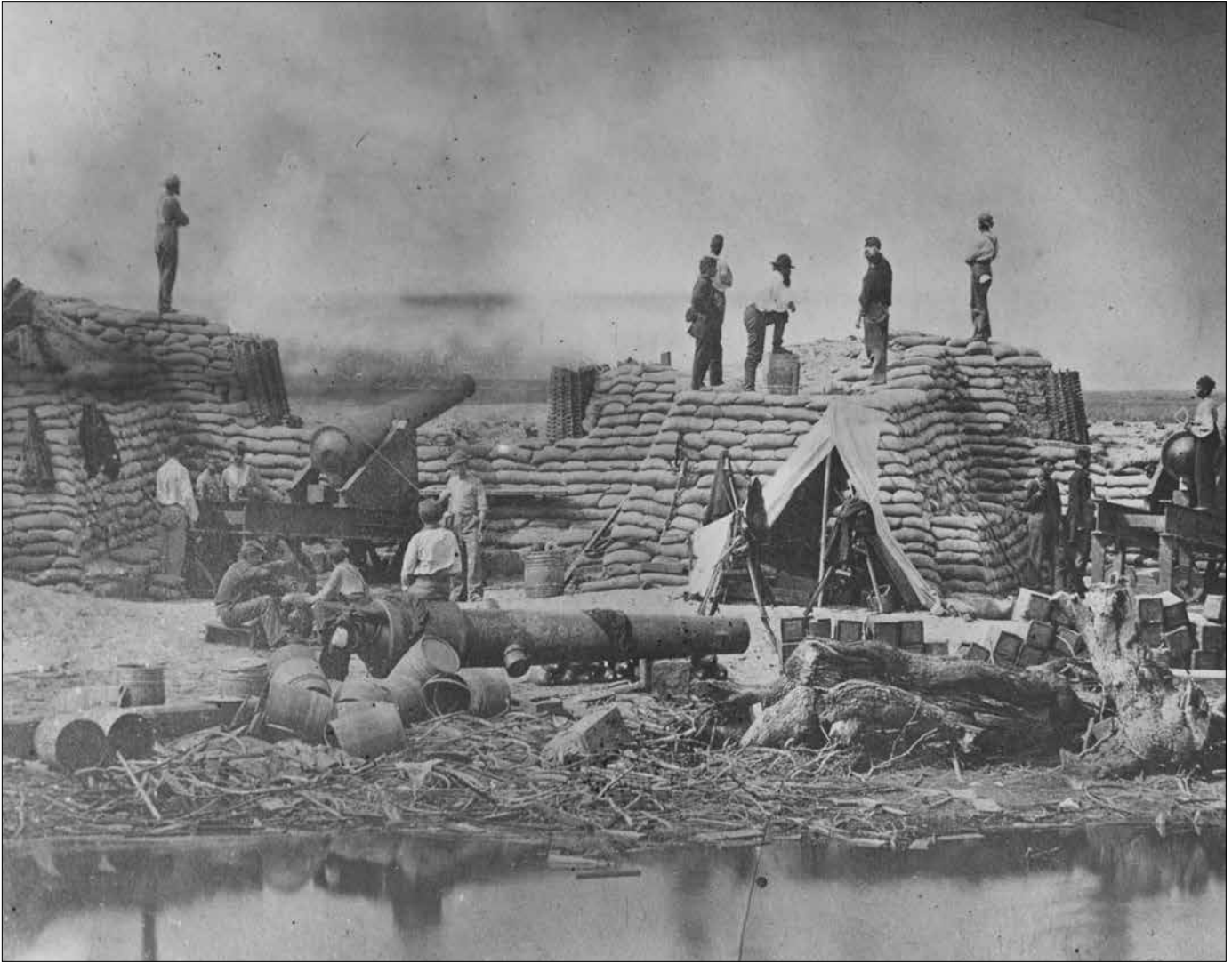


Photo by Haas and Peale, courtesy of *Civil War Photographs, 1861–65*, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, call no. LOT 4166-B, no. 31 Two 100-pound Parrott rifles in Battery Stevens, commanded by 1stLt James Wilson from Battery C, 1st U.S. Artillery, after the fall of Battery Wagner.

A few of the enlisted men had combat experience as well. Private Wilson Siddell, for example, enlisted in the Marine Corps on 18 May 1861 and fought under Major Zeilin at the First Battle of Manassas on 21 July 1861 with only a few weeks of training.²² Privates David Long and Robert B. Scanlin had a similar introduction to service in the Marine Corps, enlisting on 4 June 1861 and 21 June 1861, respectively, and marching to Manassas with the Marine battalion as

well.²³ While these Marines had “seen the elephant,” their combat experience was nearly two years behind them in September 1863.²⁴

²² Wilson Siddell case file, certificate no. 930, Case Files of Approved Pension Applications of Civil War and Later Navy Veterans (Navy Survivors’ Certificates), 1861–1910, publication no. M1469, ID: 580580, Records of the Department of Veterans Affairs, Record Group 15, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), via Fold3.

²³ Marine Barracks Washington muster roll, July 1861, Muster Rolls of the U.S. Marine Corps, 1798–1892, Microfilm Publication T1118, 123 rolls, ID: 922159, Records of the U.S. Marine Corps, Record Group 127, via Ancestry.com; and Robert B. Scanlin case file, Case Files of Approved Pension Applications of Civil War and Later Navy Veterans (Navy Survivors’ Certificates), 1861–1910, publication no. M1279, ID: 561929, NARA, 18, via Fold3.

²⁴ *Seeing the elephant* refers to American Civil War soldier slang for engaging in combat. A soldier who survived their first battle would be said to have “seen the elephant.” The phrase originated from advertising for traveling menageries in the 1830s encouraging people to “come see the elephant,” a rarity in North America, and thus “seeing the elephant” became shorthand for “gaining knowledge of something through actual experience.” Tracy L. Barnett, “Seeing the Elephant,” *Civil War Monitor*, 4 January 2022.

Most of the Marines' active service—outside of duty at the various Marine barracks—up to their arrival in South Carolina had been on board ships as part of Marine detachments. Young Marine officers such as First Lieutenant Charles H. Bradford and Second Lieutenant Robert L. Meade, commissioned in 1861 and 1862, respectively, were tasked with leading Marines in their duties on ships enforcing the blockade or searching for Confederate commerce raiders in the Atlantic. Most of the shipboard Marines' time was occupied with ceremonial duties, weapons training, and maintaining order among the sailors on board. Private Josiah Gregg related that during his cruise on the USS *Vanderbilt* (1862) his primary duties consisted of standing on the quarterdeck in dress uniform, drilling with small arms and naval guns, and target practice.²⁵ The only experiences approximating combat he recorded in his diary involved drunken sailors. He related one story: "Had quite a time with a sailor who was brought off drunk. He was very boisterous and called the First Sergeant and others the foulest names he could think of. Was put in irons but made so much noise that he was brought on deck and gagged and the hose played on him."²⁶ Soon after that incident, Gregg recorded, "The sailors have managed to get liquor aboard somehow which has caused considerable fighting among them and three more were put in the brig."²⁷ Sergeant Miles M. Oviatt, a Medal of Honor recipient, described the monotony of Marine sea duty when he wrote in his diary, "We have become accustomed to the same routine of . . . sea life, it comes almost second nature, and live in kind of lethargy."²⁸ This would have comprised most of the Service experience of orderly Sergeant Jesse Chisholm, one of the most senior Marine noncommissioned officers on Morris Island and a 10-year veteran of the Marine

Corps whose entire career had been spent either in the barracks or performing sea duty.

Major Zeilin recognized that this "lethargy" along with the inexperience of the new recruits in the regiment left the Marines on Morris Island wholly unsuited for the tasks that Dahlgren expected them to perform. Zeilin wrote a long report to Dahlgren on 13 August 1863 to lay out his concerns.

I wish to state that the force of marines, collected at New York from the various posts, the receiving ships and other ships then at home, and now united with the marines of the South Atlantic Squadron for operation ashore on Morris Island, is incompetent for the duty assigned it. . . . The Marine Corps is accustomed to act in small detachments on board of ship and ashore, and opportunities rarely offer to have more than one company together, and therefore when several detachments are united it is absolutely necessary that they should have time to become organized and drilled as a battalion and to know their officers and their duties on a larger scale. Many of these men are raw recruits . . . and until they are exercised for some time under their present officers with whom they are unacquainted, it would be very dangerous to attempt any hazardous operation requiring coolness and promptness on their part; and no such duty they could be called upon to perform requires such perfect discipline and drill as landing under fire. As few of these have ever seen an enemy in any position, they would doubtless fall into great confusion despite the best efforts of their officers.²⁹

²⁵ Pvt Josiah Gregg, *The Diary of a Civil War Marine*, ed. Wesley Moody and Adrenne Sachse (Madison, WI: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2013), 18–19, 38.

²⁶ Gregg, *The Diary of a Civil War Marine*, 42–43.

²⁷ Gregg, *The Diary of a Civil War Marine*, 42–43.

²⁸ Mary P. Livingston, ed., *A Civil War Marine at Sea: The Diary of Medal of Honor Recipient Miles M. Oviatt* (Shippensburg, PA: White Mane Publishing, 1998), 12.

²⁹ Maj Jacob Zeilin, "Report of Major Zeilin, U.S. Marine Corps, Regarding the Incompetency of the Battalion under His Command for the Duty Assigned," *O.R.N.*, ser. 1, vol. 14, 489.



Photo courtesy of Robert L. Meade biographical file, Archives, Marine Corps History Division

An undated, post-Civil War photograph of Col Robert L. Meade. Meade was captured leading Marines during the night attack on Fort Sumter on 8 September 1863.

Zeilin continued in his report: “Blame rests on no one; the exigencies of the service require unusual numbers of men; the old soldiers are mostly at sea, and drafts from shore stations must be filled by new men; men were detailed for this battalion that had not been drilled one week.”³⁰ The men Zeilin described included Private Henry Bradshaw, enlisted on 18 March 1863, and Private Edwin Reynolds, enlisted on 12 June 1863, along with 29 other Marines in the regiment who had enlisted between March and July 1863. They were afforded little time to learn military skills beyond rudimentary individual and small unit drill, mounting guard, and the basic use of small arms.

Combat was not the place for new Marines to learn their trade, and the environment of Morris

Island made it even more difficult. When Zeilin attempted to drill the Marines on the beach, many of them collapsed under the brutally hot August sun. Drilling at night was not a satisfactory solution as the officers could not see well enough to properly conduct the drill evolutions. This left only the few hours around dawn and sunset to conduct training, time that was also needed for general camp duties. Furthermore, the Marines, unaccustomed to living in camp on shore, proved ignorant of basic soldier skills such as cooking or maintaining basic sanitation, leaving the Marines “out of sorts, sick, and intractable.”³¹

The Capture of Battery Wagner and Heavy Guns versus Sumter’s Walls

Events would not wait for the Marines to develop the “perfect discipline and drill” that Zeilin believed they required to serve effectively. Army general in chief Major General Henry Halleck reluctantly sent Gillmore 10,000 additional troops, which arrived on Folly and Morris Islands in the first weeks of August 1863. Half of the reinforcements, 11 regiments, 8 of which had served in the now-disbanded XI Corps of the Army of the Potomac and were veterans of the Battles of Chancellorsville and Gettysburg, were formed into a division under Brigadier General George Henry Gordon. The other 5,000 troops came from Major General John G. Foster’s command in North Carolina, including a brigade of Black soldiers of the 1st, 2d, and 3d North Carolina Volunteer Infantry Regiments, the 55th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment, and the Philadelphia-raised 3d U.S. Colored Infantry Regiment. This brigade joined the Black 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment, veterans of a valiant but ultimately failed attack on Battery Wagner earlier in the campaign. The additional soldiers allowed Gillmore to push his trenches in front of Battery Wagner forward at a faster pace as well as begin a bombardment of Fort Sumter with his heavy artillery.³²

³⁰ Zeilin, “Report of Major Zeilin, U.S. Marine Corps, Regarding the Incompetency of the Battalion under His Command for the Duty Assigned,” 489.

³¹ Zeilin, “Report of Major Zeilin, U.S. Marine Corps, Regarding the Incompetency of the Battalion under His Command for the Duty Assigned,” 489–90.

³² Wise, *Gate of Hell*, 138.

The bombardment of Fort Sumter began at 0500 on 17 August 1863 with two 10-inch mortars, nine 6.4-inch and six 8-inch Parrot rifles, two 5-inch Whitworth cannon manned by sailors and Marines of the naval battery, and a 10-inch Parrot rifle that fired explosive shells weighing nearly 250 pounds. The Navy supported the bombardment with the monitors USS *Patapsco* (1862) and *Passaic* (1862) while wooden gunboats bombarded Battery Wagner with long-range fire to prevent counterfire against Gillmore's batteries. The guns began with solid shot to break apart the masonry walls of Fort Sumter, followed by explosive shells to widen the breaches created. On the first day of the bombardment alone, the Federal guns fired more than 700 projectiles at Fort Sumter. Six days of intense bombardment followed, turning Sumter's gorge wall into a crumbled mass of shattered bricks.³³

Confederate general Beauregard recognized that the devastating bombardment had rendered the fort useless as an artillery fortification. Following a visit to the fort on 22 August 1863, he ordered the removal of most of the remaining guns in Fort Sumter to Fort Moultrie on Sullivan's Island across the main ship channel. Additionally, he ordered the opening of the boom across the channel moved to Sullivan's Island so it could be protected by Fort Moultrie. Although Fort Sumter was no longer useful as a harbor fortification, it still maintained value as an anchor point for the channel obstructions and as a powerful symbol for Charleston's defenders. In light of this, Beauregard decided to garrison Fort Sumter with an infantry battalion to prevent any amphibious landings, despite the fort's battered condition and uselessness as an artillery platform.³⁴

Gillmore, increasingly frustrated with Dahlgren for not bypassing Fort Sumter and entering Charleston Harbor, turned his siege guns onto Battery Wagner. He planned to capture Wagner and Battery Gregg, located on Cummings Point at the northern end of Morris Island, to establish siege batteries to further batter Fort Sumter. As August came to an end, Gill-

more and Dahlgren subjected Battery Wagner to a sustained bombardment with the Army's heavy siege guns, naval guns from the monitors and the USS *New Ironsides* (1862), and mortars. The devastating bombardment was in preparation for a third ground assault on Battery Wagner on 7 September 1863.

Beauregard could see that Battery Wagner was no longer defensible and, anticipating a new Union assault, decided to evacuate the 1,000-plus Confederate troops. Charleston's defenses were still formidable despite the loss of Fort Sumter as an artillery position and the loss of Batteries Wagner and Gregg. The loss of 1,000 badly needed soldiers, however, would have severely affected Beauregard's ability to defend Charleston from further attacks. The Confederates were able to execute an evacuation on the night of 6–7 September 1863 as Gillmore's forces occupied their forward assault positions in front of Battery Wagner. The evacuation went off almost without a hitch, aside from the failed destruction of Battery Wagner's ammunition magazine. Gillmore's forces, along with Zeilin's Marines, occupied the deserted batteries on the morning of 7 September after a bitter 60-day siege.

The Odyssey Begins: Assaulting the Breach at Fort Sumter

With the batteries captured, Fort Sumter appeared ripe for the taking. Admiral Dahlgren quickly sent a surrender demand to the garrison at Fort Sumter on hearing that the batteries had been evacuated. Beauregard responded, "Refuse to surrender Fort Sumter. Admiral Dahlgren must take it and hold it if he can."³⁵ Dahlgren had already decided to attack the fort in the event they refused to surrender. He had telegraphed Gideon Welles on 7 September 1863, notifying him about the evacuation of Batteries Wagner and Gregg and his demand for Fort Sumter's surrender, and concluded his message with, "If [Fort Sumter's response

³³ Wise, *Gate of Hell*, 156–65.

³⁴ Wise, *Gate of Hell*, 161.

³⁵ Ens M. L. Johnson, "Report of Ensign Johnson, U.S. Navy, to Rear-Admiral Dahlgren, U.S. Navy, forwarding memorandum for General Beauregard, C. S. Army, regarding surrender of Fort Sumter," in *O.R.N.*, ser. 1, vol. 14, 548.



Photo by Haas and Peale, courtesy of *Civil War Photographs, 1861–65*, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, call no. LC-B8156-43 A Fort Sumter, photographed on 23 August 1863, following the start of the Union bombardment. The large-caliber rounds from the Union artillery caused the fort's walls to crumble and created a roughly 45-degree ramp leading from the sea into the fort.

is] in the negative, I shall move at once on it and the obstructions. A monitor has already taken position.”³⁶

Dahlgren felt pressure from his superiors and public opinion to do something to capture Charleston as quickly as possible. Dahlgren would undoubtedly have been in agreement with his friend and political ally Assistant Secretary of the Navy Gustavus V. Fox when he wrote to Acting Rear Admiral Samuel Phillips Lee, commander of the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron, regarding Union major general John Adams Dix’s failure to attack from Norfolk toward Richmond in June 1863, “Every rash act of this war has been crowned with success and here is the most glorious opportunity ever afforded, yet Dix contents himself with raids that inflict no injury except upon the

feelings of the enemy.”³⁷ Dahlgren was in Washington during the frustrating campaigns of the Army of the Potomac in 1862 and spring 1863 when an apparent lack of initiative on the part of Army officers handed the Union a string of embarrassing defeats. He felt that momentum was on his side following the capture of Morris Island and that the bombardment of Fort Sumter had rendered it indefensible to an amphibious assault.

However, Dahlgren would have benefited from a pause to consider that a “rash act” was not necessarily synonymous with thoughtfully considered, disciplined initiative. While Major General George B. McClellan’s lack of initiative arguably stymied his campaign on the Virginia peninsula in 1862, Major General John Pope’s “rash act” at Second Manassas that same year resulted in disaster. Major General Ambrose E. Burn-

³⁶ RAdm J. A. Dahlgren, USN telegram to Gideon Welles, Secretary of the Navy, 7 September 1863 (Received 12:25 p.m., 10 September 1863), in *O.R.N.*, ser. 1, vol. 14, 549.

³⁷ Thompson and Wainright, *Confidential Correspondence of Gustavus Vasa Fox, Assistant Secretary of the Navy 1861–1865*, vol. 2, 259.

side's rash decision to cross the Rappahannock River at Fredericksburg in December 1862 in the face of well-entrenched Confederate forces after losing the element of surprise nearly resulted in the destruction of the Army of the Potomac.

Capturing Fort Sumter, in Dahlgren's opinion, was also the only way for his ships to pass the Confederate batteries on Sullivan's Island and enter Charleston Harbor. He later wrote in his autobiography that despite the destruction wrought on Fort Sumter, "The garrison yet held it and if deprived of their heavy cannon could still use their muskets and light artillery as to sweep the water of any boats that might attempt to remove the obstructions."³⁸ A rash act might secure the position and enable Dahlgren's sailors to cut the boom across the main ship channel and allow the ships to pass Sullivan's Island as far from its guns as possible.

Finally, Dahlgren was acutely aware of the public and political criticism that had ousted Rear Admiral DuPont from command of the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron following his failure to capture Charleston earlier that year and the newspaper chatter that seemed to indicate he might be heading for the same fate. He recalled in his autobiography, "For some weeks previous to the capture of Morris [Island] various remarks began to appear in the [public] correspondence depreciative of the naval service in this quarter—which then were utterly incomprehensible to me."³⁹ Dahlgren suspected that General Gillmore was the one responsible, possibly trying to shift the blame for the long siege at Morris Island. A naval assault that captured Fort Sumter would erase the bad press for the Navy and secure Dahlgren in his command.

The operation to capture Fort Sumter began inauspiciously on 8 September 1863 with a breakdown in the relatively cordial operational relationship between Dahlgren and Gillmore. Dahlgren sent a message to Gillmore at 1300 on 8 September 1863 stating

simply, "I will assault Fort Sumter tonight."⁴⁰ Gillmore replied to this message six hours later stating that he also planned a night landing against Fort Sumter and that, "In an operation of this kind there should be one commander to insure [sic] success and prevent mistakes. Will your party join the two regiments that I have designated and let the whole be under the command of the senior officer, or will the two parties confer and act in concert? The former method, I think, is much to be preferred."⁴¹ Dahlgren replied, "I have assembled 500 men and I can not [sic] consent that the commander shall be other than a naval officer. Will you be kind enough to let me know what time you will move and what the watchword will be, to prevent collision?"⁴² Gillmore's response was garbled during transmission, but was subsequently recorded as, "You decline to act in concert with me or allow the senior officer to command the assault on Sumter, but insist that a naval officer must command the party. Why this should be so in assaulting a fortification, I can not [sic] see. . . . We must trust to chance and hope for the best. No matter who gets the fort if we place our flag over it."⁴³

Whether it was a desire to outshine Gillmore or capitalize on the perceived momentum of the capture of the entirety of Morris Island, Dahlgren chose to rush ahead with his plans to conduct a night landing to seize Fort Sumter. On the morning of 8 September 1863, he ordered Commander Thomas H. Stevens, captain of USS *Patapsco*, to organize a flotilla of boats for the attack with volunteers from the squadron's ships, the naval battery on Morris Island, and the Marine regiment. The news of the planned assault was

⁴⁰ Adm John Dahlgren telegram to BGen Quincy A. Gillmore (U.S. Flag-Steamer *Philadelphia*, Off Morris Island, September 8, 1863—1 p.m.), *O.R.N.*, ser. 1, vol. 14, 607.

⁴¹ BGen Quincy A. Gillmore telegram to Adm John Dahlgren (Morris Island, September 8, 1863—7 p.m.), *O.R.N.*, ser. 1, vol. 14, 608.

⁴² Adm John Dahlgren telegram to BGen Quincy A. Gillmore (U.S. Flag-Steamer *Philadelphia*, Off Morris Island, September 8, 1863—8:10 p.m.), *O.R.N.*, ser. 1, vol. 14, 608.

⁴³ BGen Quincy A. Gillmore telegram to Adm John Dahlgren (Morris Island, September 8, 1863), *O.R.N.*, ser. 1, vol. 14, 608–9. Gillmore noted during the compilation of military records after the war that the first 30 words were transmitted from shore to Dahlgren and the subsequent parts of the message were relayed to Navy liaison Lt Preston that same night for delivery to Dahlgren.

³⁸ Peter C. Luebke, ed., *The Autobiography of Rear Admiral John A. Dahlgren* (Washington, DC: Naval History and Heritage Command, Department of the Navy, 2018), 87.

³⁹ Luebke, *The Autobiography of Rear Admiral John A. Dahlgren*, 94.

met with enthusiasm by the young Marine officers on Morris Island. Second Lieutenant Frederick Tomlinson Peet recalled, “Volunteers were called for among our officers, and all the Lieutenants volunteered. Our Captain, Charles G. McCauley [sic], said he would not volunteer, for he knew he would be ordered to command us, and it was so. But one of us had to remain, and [Second Lieutenant Robert L. Meade] and I threw up a cent to see who would go; he won, and I remained with the balance of my Company.”⁴⁴

The young Marine officers might not have been so enthusiastic had they known what awaited them on the two-acre pile of debris in Charleston Harbor. While the sustained bombardment of Fort Sumter had turned the gorge wall into rubble, it had not diminished the fort’s ability to defend itself from an amphibious attack. The artillerymen garrisoning Fort Sumter were withdrawn on 4 September 1863 and replaced by Confederate major Stephen Elliott and 350 soldiers from the 1st Battalion, South Carolina Infantry (known as the Charleston Battalion). Elliott quickly turned the fort into a formidable redoubt, building barricades in the breaches and placing his men on constant alert. While the gorge wall had been turned into a roughly 45-degree ramp, the loose rubble would make it extremely difficult for attackers to scale. Furthermore, the infantrymen were well supplied with Ketcham hand grenades and “fire balls.”⁴⁵ Elliott also coordinated with the heavy gun batteries on Sullivan’s Island, Fort Johnson, and Battery Simkins to support his position in the event of a boat attack by using a red signal rocket to alert them to fire on the waters immediately around the fort. Finally, the four-gun Confederate ironclad CSS *Chicora* (1862)

anchored behind Fort Sumter each night to drive off any attackers with its massive naval guns.⁴⁶

The Confederates’ defensive preparations were also supported by intelligence-gathering. Confederate salvagers had recovered the Union codebooks from the wrecked monitor USS *Keokuk* following DuPont’s assault on Charleston in April 1863 and were able to read signal traffic between Dahlgren’s ships and signal stations on Morris Island. Furthermore, the Confederates had the Union forces under constant observation, so that when boats from Dahlgren’s fleet began assembling at the southern end of Morris Island it became obvious that Dahlgren would soon take General Beauregard up on his challenge to take Fort Sumter if he could. Major Elliott’s infantrymen—highly motivated to defend Fort Sumter as sons of Charleston—were fully prepared and expecting the boat attack on the night of 8 September 1863.⁴⁷

In stark contrast to Elliott’s careful defensive preparations, Dahlgren’s assault plan was rushed and haphazard, perhaps even rash. The Marine volunteers from Morris Island were loaded into boats and assembled along with other boats from the squadron at Dahlgren’s flagship, the USS *Philadelphia* (1861). The officers involved in the assault went on board the flagship for Dahlgren to brief them on the operation. Marine second lieutenant Robert L. Meade recalled,

I went on board the Flag and saw the [admiral] who was enthusiastic of taking Fort Sumter, which was the object of the expedition. He seemed extremely anxious that we should “not let the Army get ahead of us” on any consideration, but gave us no orders whatever in . . . the attack, telling us simply that we would be towed near the fort and that, thereafter, our “own common sense” would tell us how to act.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Frederick Tomlinson Peet, *Personal Experiences in the Civil War* (New York: F. T. Peet, 1905), 85.

⁴⁵ There is some contention among experts on what the “fire balls” were exactly. There is substantial evidence that they were balls of pine resin or pine tar that were to be ignited and thrown down onto wooden boats, forming a sticky napalm-like flaming mass. It is also possible that they were Mason jars filled with lamp oil to act like nineteenth-century Molotov cocktails. Ketcham hand grenades, egg-shaped explosives with fin assemblies and percussion detonators, have been recovered during excavations at Fort Sumter and are on display in the museum occupying the grounds of the fort today.

⁴⁶ Maj Stephen Elliott, CSA, “Detailed Report of Major Elliott, C.S. Army, Commanding Fort Sumter,” *O.R.N.*, ser. 1, vol. 14, 637–38.

⁴⁷ Elliott, “Detailed Report of Major Elliott, C.S. Army, Commanding Fort Sumter,” 638; Burton, *The Siege of Charleston, 1861–1865*, 195; and Wise, *Gate of Hell*, 57.

⁴⁸ Robert L. Meade, *Robert L. Meade Journal, 1863–1864*, Robert L. Meade Collection, COLL/2216, box 6, folder 1, Archives Branch, MCHD, 85–86.

Commander Thomas H. Stevens, assigned to lead the operation by Dahlgren, had several reservations about the haphazard organization of the assault. He recalled many years later, “My judgment opposed the movement on the grounds that we were without reliable knowledge of the internal or external condition of the fort, and of the practicability of scaling the walls, for which no provision had been made; that sufficient time had not been allowed for the proper organization of a force for service of so desperate a character; that the enemy had been fully notified that some demonstration was to be made by the gathering of boats around the flagship in open daylight.”⁴⁹ Stevens claimed after the war that he sought to decline the command, to which Dahlgren replied, “You have only to go and take possession [of Fort Sumter]. You will find nothing but a corporal’s guard in it.”⁵⁰

Regardless of Stevens’s reservations, he formed a plan of attack on the fort. He divided the sailors and Marines into four divisions, with one division under Navy lieutenant Francis J. Higginson making a feint on the northwest angle of the fort while the remainder would make the main assault against the partially destroyed gorge wall. Marine captain Charles G. McCawley, in charge of 106 Marines armed with rifles, was to provide covering fire for the assault groups of sailors armed with pistols and cutlasses. Once the sailors landed, the Marines were to cease firing, land, “and use the bayonet.”⁵¹

The Marines and sailors waited aboard the Navy tug *Daffodil* until approximately 2200, at which point they embarked on the boats. The boats were arranged in a double line, secured to a tow line behind the tug, and waited for the operation to begin. Second Lieutenant Robert L. Meade found himself in the USS *Lodona’s* (1863) cutter with 15 Marines and 4 sailors serving as oarsmen. While the boats waited behind the tug, the watchword “Detroit” was passed from boat to

boat in the event the naval assault ran into Gillmore’s soldiers to prevent fratricide.⁵² The *Daffodil* got underway at 2300, but instead of heading straight toward Fort Sumter, it moved about the harbor in a pattern that was incomprehensible to the men in the boats.⁵³ Commander Stevens explained this unusual series of maneuvers in his report when he wrote that he had sailed about the harbor trying, unsuccessfully, to coordinate support for the landing from the monitors USS *Lehigh* (1863) and *Montauk* (1862).⁵⁴ The Marines and sailors had spent an exhausting day trying to organize the assault, and some, like Lieutenant Meade, took the opportunity to catch a quick nap as the *Daffodil* cruised back and forth.⁵⁵

Caught between the Fire and the Sea

Finally, between midnight and 0100, the *Daffodil* approached to approximately 800 yards from Fort Sumter in preparation for the attack. Lieutenant Meade asserted that the boats were not organized into their divisions prior to attaching to the *Daffodil’s* tow line, a serious organizational misstep. Meade wrote, “Where I was, there was a general ‘Skrimmage’ for Divisions. . . . I pulled around, trying to find even one boat of the 4th Division, my boat having been made fast to the line as it was then forming irrespective of divisions.”⁵⁶ This confusion was exacerbated by the tide, which caused the boats to drift apart even as they attempted to form their assault divisions.⁵⁷ When Lieutenant Higginson’s boat division pulled toward Fort Sumter

⁵² Gillmore later claimed that the 2,000 soldiers he assigned to assault Fort Sumter were unable to embark on the attack due to unfavorable tidal conditions around Morris Island on the night of 8 September 1863. *Robert L. Meade Journal, 1863–1864*, 87.

⁵⁴ Cdr T. H. Stevens, “Report of Commander T. H. Stevens, U.S. Navy, Commanding USS *Patapsco*, Port Royal, 21 September 1863,” *O.R.N.*, ser. 1, vol. 14, 626. The monitors do not appear to have played any significant role in supporting the assault. This might be due to the captains’ hesitancy to maneuver toward Fort Sumter at night after what had happened to the monitor USS *Weehawken* (1862) on 7 September 1863 during its reconnaissance of Fort Sumter. The ship ran aground and was then pummeled severely by Confederate artillery for several hours. Only a lucky shot that exploded an ammunition magazine in Fort Moultrie bought *Weehawken* enough of a reprieve to eventually refloat and escape out of range before it was irreparably damaged.

⁵⁵ Meade, *Robert L. Meade Journal, 1863–1864*, 87.

⁵⁶ Meade, *Robert L. Meade Journal, 1863–1864*, 88.

⁵⁷ McCawley, “Report of Captain Charles G. McCawley, USMC, Marine Battalion, Morris Island, 9 September 1863,” 667.

⁴⁹ RAdm Thomas H. Stevens, “The Boat Attack on Fort Sumter,” in *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, vol. 4, ed. Robert Underwood Johnson and Clarence Clough Buel (New York: Century Company, 1888), 49.

⁵⁰ Stevens, “The Boat Attack on Fort Sumter,” 49.

⁵¹ Capt Charles G. McCawley, “Report of Captain Charles G. McCawley, USMC, Marine Battalion, Morris Island, 9 September 1863,” *O.R.N.*, ser. 1, vol. 14, 623.

to initiate their feint, many of the other confused boat crews followed, mistaking his movement for the main attack on Fort Sumter. Commander Stevens, on seeing this development, ordered the remaining boat divisions to initiate the general assault on the fort.⁵⁸

Captain McCawley found it impossible to organize the Marine boats in the dark and ordered the boats near his own to follow him behind the Navy boats rowing toward Fort Sumter to provide covering fire for the sailors per Stevens's plan. The boats advanced toward the fort from the east, aiming for the northeast point of the gorge wall.⁵⁹ As the boats advanced within a few yards, a sentry from the 1st Battalion, South Carolina Infantry, challenged the boats and then opened fire. The sentry's fire was quickly joined by the rest of the garrison, who commenced a rapid musketry fire on the advancing boats. The garrison also launched a signal rocket, and the presighted guns at Fort Moultrie, Fort Johnson, and Battery Simkins opened fire with grapeshot, cannister, and explosive shells.⁶⁰ The *Chicora* also sailed out from behind the fort and added its naval guns to the violent cannonade. The rapid deluge of shot and shell struck the waters all around the fort, some even impacting Fort Sumter.⁶¹

McCawley ordered his Marines to return fire, and they began firing their rifles as Confederate musket balls blasted through their wooden boats, splashed noisily into the water, or thudded into human flesh. As the Marines and sailors rowed closer to the fort, the Confederates hurled grenades and fireballs along with chunks of blasted masonry to sink or swamp the open boats. Several of the leading Navy boats under Lieutenant Commander Edward P. Williams pressed through the fire and made it to the fort. Williams

quickly realized the precariousness of his position and that friendly fire was striking among his sailors. Williams wrote later, "The boats that held back opened fire with their revolvers, the shot striking among us who were halfway up the walls. Hoping to find a place where we could close with the enemy, I ordered the boats outside to cease firing and land, repeating the order several times. Lieutenants Meade and Bradford of the Marine Corps at once ceased firing and landed."⁶² Second Lieutenant Meade recalled, "I opened fire and kept it up for a short while, when I heard a voice ashore to 'Stop firing and land,' which I did as well as possible, my men suffering from the musketry fire and the bricks, hand grenades, and fire balls thrown from the parapet. Immediately on striking the beach, I gave orders to land and find cover, which the men lost no time in executing."⁶³

The Marines and sailors who reached the fort found themselves confined to the jumbled mass of rubble from the destroyed gorge wall that had come to rest on the gorge face and the 25-and-a-half-foot wide esplanade that ran the length of the gorge wall and was exposed at low tide. However, after reaching the esplanade, they discovered that they were unable to clamber up the pile of rubble, as any attempt was met with either a fall and slide back down, hurled bricks and grenades, or blasts of musket fire. Additionally, the steep angle of the rubble field made it nearly impossible for the men to fire back at their tormentors. The Confederate defenders methodically wrecked the small boats, leaving the more than 100 Marines and sailors who made it to Fort Sumter trapped between the Confederate fire and friendly fire from pistol-wielding sailors still afloat.⁶⁴

Commander Stevens realized that continuing the disorganized attack in the face of such heavy fire would be pointless. He observed in his official report, "The evidences of preparation were so apparent and the impossibility of effecting a general landing, or

⁵⁸ Stevens, "Report of Commander T. H. Stevens, U.S. Navy, Commanding USS *Patapsco*, Port Royal, 21 September 1863," 626.

⁵⁹ Stephen Elliott Jr., "Report of Major Stephen Elliott, Jr., Major, Artillery, Provisional Army of the Confederate States," *O.R.N.*, ser. 1, vol. 14, 636.

⁶⁰ Meade, *Robert L. Meade Journal, 1863–1864*, 89; and McCawley, "Report of Captain Charles G. McCawley, USMC, Marine Battalion, Morris Island, 9 September 1863," 667.

⁶¹ Stephen Elliott Jr., "Detailed Report of Major Elliott, C.S. Army, Commanding Fort Sumter, Headquarters, Fort Sumter, 12 September 1863," *O.R.N.*, ser. 1, vol. 14, 637.

⁶² Edward P. Williams, "Report of Lieutenant Commander E. P. Williams, U.S. Navy, Roxbury, Massachusetts, 27 September 1864," *O.R.N.*, ser. 1, vol. 14, 628.

⁶³ Meade, *Robert L. Meade Journal, 1863–1864*, 89.

⁶⁴ Williams, "Report of Lieutenant Commander E. P. Williams, U.S. Navy, Roxbury, Massachusetts, 27 September 1864," 628.

scaling the walls, so certain that orders were given to withdraw.⁶⁵ The retreat proved just as disorganized as the advance. Captain McCawley had just yelled orders for the boats under his command to land when he saw them turn away from the fort and follow “the crowd of others which were going out.”⁶⁶ McCawley pulled ahead to the lead boat as it approached the *Daffodil* and discovered that it belonged to Commander Stevens. They narrowly avoided a friendly fire incident when the *Daffodil* hailed them and threatened to fire until they were convinced that the boats belonged to Stevens and McCawley.⁶⁷ The scattered boats converged on the *Daffodil* and then returned to Dahlgren’s flagship by 0400 on 9 September 1863.⁶⁸

As the boats regrouped around the *Daffodil*, the Marines and sailors sheltering along Fort Sumter’s esplanade remained trapped between the waters of Charleston Harbor and the unremitting fire of the 1st Battalion, South Carolina Infantry. The “galling” fire prevented the officers from organizing the men, who sheltered in the craters to avoid the showers of grenades, fireballs, and musket fire.⁶⁹ The casualties stacked up in front of the fort: First Lieutenant Bradford was shot in the groin, sailmaker William S. Brayton from the USS *Powhatan* (1850), was shot in the hand and leg, Private Wilson Siddell received a ghastly gunshot wound in the forehead, tearing his flesh and crushing his skull but leaving him still alive.⁷⁰ Private John McIntyre was killed instantly while Sergeant Peter Mulhall; Corporal Black; and Privates Samuel Johnson, Michael Gettings, and Johnathan Mullen received wounds from musket fire or grenade

fragments.⁷¹ Command broke down in the face of the chaos. Meade recalled, “*Pour moi* [For me]—I did not know what to do. I only saw one officer and as I did not know him, I concluded not to report to him—but wait awhile . . . or go in search of [Commander] Stevens or [Captain] McCawley—as things happened, I became a passive spectator of what was going on around me.”⁷² Meade recalled how dire his situation was in a letter to his mother two days after the battle: “I am extremely fortunate in escaping with my life, as it was rather hot in my vicinity. Nearly all the men in my boat were hurt.” Meade was hit in the back by two bricks, saying that they bruised him “but no damage was done by them.”⁷³

Lieutenant Commander Williams became increasingly aware of the futility of his situation, unable to advance but, with their boats destroyed or sinking, unable to retreat. “I would not surrender,” he wrote later, “but some of the men from Lieutenant Bradford’s boat, he having been mortally wounded when landing, surrendered and were ordered [by the Confederates] around to the left, to come into the fort. I stopped these and ordered them under the walls. Soon finding it was only losing my men without gaining anything, on a consultation with the officers, I surrendered and was shown inside the fort.”⁷⁴ The 107 unwounded or wounded but ambulatory Marines and sailors were “ordered to ascend the ‘gorge face’ of the

⁶⁵ Stevens, “Report of Commander T. H. Stevens, U.S. Navy, Commanding USS *Patapsco*, Port Royal, 21 September 1863,” 626.

⁶⁶ McCawley, “Report of Captain Charles G. McCawley, USMC, Marine Battalion, Morris Island, 9 September 1863,” 667.

⁶⁷ McCawley, “Report of Captain Charles G. McCawley, USMC, Marine Battalion, Morris Island, 9 September 1863,” 667.

⁶⁸ McCawley, “Report of Captain Charles G. McCawley, USMC, Marine Battalion, Morris Island, 9 September 1863,” 667; and Stevens, “Report of Commander T. H. Stevens, U.S. Navy, Commanding USS *Patapsco*, Port Royal, 21 September 1863,” 626.

⁶⁹ Meade, *Robert L. Meade Journal, 1863–1864*, 90; and Williams, “Report of Lieutenant Commander E. P. Williams, U.S. Navy, Roxbury, Massachusetts, 27 September 1864,” 628.

⁷⁰ Wilson Siddell case file, certificate no. 930.

⁷¹ The author was unable to determine Corporal Black’s first name from the Marine Corps Muster Rolls or reports after the attack on Fort Sumter, but he is mentioned in multiple sources. Meade, *Robert L. Meade Journal, 1863–1864*, 7. It is difficult to determine the total number of casualties from the small boat attack on Fort Sumter. Maj Stephen Elliott, CSA, reported the Union casualties as 3 killed, 15 wounded, and 127 prisoners. LtCdr Edward P. Williams reported 3 killed at Fort Sumter, 2 mortally wounded, and 107 captured. Dahlgren’s report listed 3 killed and 114 prisoners. Ships within the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron received the wounded and killed boat crews and apparently were not reported in Dahlgren’s official report but can be found in some of the ships’ reports. A good estimate for total Navy and Marine Corps casualties for the operation would be between 134 and 150 killed, mortally wounded, wounded, missing, or captured. Using 400 total participants in the operation, that puts the landing force’s casualty rate at approximately 33.5 percent of the force engaged.

⁷² Meade, *Robert L. Meade Journal, 1863–1864*, 90. The naval officer he encountered was most likely LtCdr Williams.

⁷³ 2dLt Robert L. Meade to his mother, Robert L. Meade Collection, COLL/2216, box 6, folder 1, Archives Branch, MCHD.

⁷⁴ Williams, “Report of Lieutenant Commander E. P. Williams, U.S. Navy, Roxbury, Massachusetts, 27 September 1864,” 628.



Photo by George N. Barnard, 1819–1902, courtesy of Civil War Photographs, 1861–65, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, call no. LC-B811-3052 LOT 4166-C

The gorge wall of Fort Sumter, photographed in 1865. The wooden stakes at the top of the crumbling wall were added following the night attack on 8 September 1863.

parapet, which was accomplished with no little difficulty—the ground up mortar and brick being anything but secure footing—showing us that even had the whole party landed, we would not have been able to accomplish anything.”⁷⁵ The officers surrendered their swords and pistols to Confederate major Elliott.⁷⁶ However, in a last act of defiance, most of the enlisted Marines and sailors threw their weapons and equipment into the waters of the harbor before clambering into the battered fort.⁷⁷

“Treated with Every Kindness by the Officers”: Initial Confinement in Charleston

The Marines and sailors were received by Elliott, his second-in-command, and the Confederate surgeon assigned to the fort. They were “treated with every kindness by the officers,” and the exhausted men slumped to the ground. However, as Meade recalled, they “got no sleep owing to our extremely uncomfortable condition, being wet and covered with mud. I was so saturated with salt water and brick dust that I did not dry for 48 hours.”⁷⁸ The Confederates collected their prisoners in the center of the fort, then moved out onto the esplanade to collect the wounded who could not move. While the Confederates tended to the wounded, the Marines and sailors, after promising not to attempt an escape, were allowed to walk freely about Fort Sumter after first light on 9 September 1863.⁷⁹

Thirty-two Marines entered captivity on the night of 9 September 1863 when the Marines and sailors were loaded aboard a steamer at the temporary dock at Fort Sumter for transport to Charleston. Meade assumed duties as the ranking Marine officer for the mortally wounded First Lieutenant Bradford, with Sergeant Jesse M. Chisolm as the highest-ranking noncommissioned officer. A total of 26 privates, 2 corporals, and 2 sergeants were dutifully recorded as pris-

oners by the Marine battalion commander, Captain Edward McDonald Reynolds.⁸⁰

The prisoners landed at Charleston and were marched under guard toward the city’s notorious Old City Jail. Meade recorded that the guard “marched us a tedious distance to the City Jail. The people of Charleston were in attendance throughout our walk and I must say behaved with all the consideration their swinish propensities admitted of, hooting and cursing us.”⁸¹ The accommodations in the Old City Jail made their reception seem friendly by comparison. Meade wrote later that they were confined in rooms with pine plank floors without furniture and they were forced to use their soggy coats for pillows while enduring the crawling centipedes, cockroaches, and lice that scurried across them in the darkness. The jail ration, a large communal iron pot of “mush,” was served daily at 1500. Fortunately, many of the Marines were able to receive their baggage, including money, through a flag of truce and were able to supplement their rations by purchasing food from outside the jail.⁸²

The wounded prisoners were taken to a hospital, most likely the Marine Hospital since it was next to the Old City Jail, to receive additional treatment for their wounds. Surgeons were able to save Sailmaker Brayton’s wounded hand, but his wounded leg was amputated. Private Siddell’s ghastly head wound required the surgical removal of a “silver dollar-size” portion of his skull at the top of his forehead. He remained in a Charleston hospital for three months before he recovered sufficiently enough for transfer to a prison.⁸³ First Lieutenant Bradford later died from the severe gunshot wound to his groin two weeks after his arrival in Charleston. Meade recorded that Corporal Black also died in the hospital, but Sergeant Peter Mulhall and Privates Samuel Johnson, Michael Gettings, and Johnathan Mullen ultimately recovered.⁸⁴

⁷⁵ Meade, *Robert L. Meade Journal, 1863–1864*, 91.

⁷⁶ Meade, *Robert L. Meade Journal, 1863–1864*, 92.

⁷⁷ Meade, *Robert L. Meade Journal, 1863–1864*, 91; and Elliott, “Detailed Report of Major Elliott, C.S. Army, Commanding Fort Sumter, Headquarters, Fort Sumter, 12 September 1863,” 639.

⁷⁸ Meade, *Robert L. Meade Journal, 1863–1864*, 92–93.

⁷⁹ Meade, *Robert L. Meade Journal, 1863–1864*, 93.

⁸⁰ Capt Edward McDonald Reynolds, “Statement of the Marines Absent from the Marine Battalion following the storming of Fort Sumter,” *O.R.N.*, ser. 1, vol. 14, 622.

⁸¹ Meade, *Robert L. Meade Journal, 1863–1864*, 93.

⁸² Meade, *Robert L. Meade Journal, 1863–1864*, 94.

⁸³ Wilson Siddell case file, certificate no. 930, 28.

⁸⁴ Meade, *Robert L. Meade Journal, 1863–1864*, 7.

The captured Marines received several visitors during their initial incarceration in Charleston, notably Confederate Marine first lieutenant Henry L. Ingraham. Ingraham had resigned his commission as a second lieutenant in the U.S. Marine Corps on 8 March 1861. He accepted a commission in the Confederate Marine Corps and was stationed in Charleston during the fighting there in 1863. His purpose for visiting the Marines in the Old City Jail was most likely to see if any of his former comrades had been captured. They were also visited by a reporter for the *Charleston Courier*, “who came for the purpose of manufacturing lies,” recalled Meade. He continued, “He was assisted by us, we furnishing them to him readymade when the subject was about the nation or fleet lawfully, I hope.” Many other visitors came during the next four days, some to harangue the captives about the futility of the Union cause but most just to get a look at the Yankee prisoners and satisfy their curiosity.⁸⁵

Clams and Tunnels: Inmates of Richland County Jail

The Marines’ stay in the Old City Jail was relatively short. On 13 September 1863, they were loaded on a train and transported to Columbia, South Carolina, and housed in the Richland County Jail. The officers and enlisted were separated into different rooms and the dull routine of life as a prisoner in the jail began. Their day started at 0600, when the Confederate non-commissioned officer of the guard woke the prisoners and led them out to the jail yard for a half hour. After that, they were counted and locked back into their cell to engage in “lounging and card playing until breakfast,” which consisted of scouse—a stew of meat and crumbled hard tack—meal cakes, and scorched cornmeal boiled into an ersatz coffee. The rest of the day was occupied by more card playing, lounging, napping, or reading, with another half hour of yard time at 1030, followed by dinner, more lounging and tobacco use, yard time again at 1630, followed by evening activities, including more lounging and “a little singing.” Bedtime was enforced at 2000, when the

prisoners put on all the clothing they had available to them, wrapped up in a blanket if they had one, and slept fitfully on the plank floor.⁸⁶

The enlisted Marines and their surviving officer, Meade, were held in the Richland County Jail until 13 November 1863. On that date, the enlisted sailors and Marines were loaded onto trains for transportation to Richmond, Virginia. Lieutenant Meade and the naval officers captured at Fort Sumter remained in the Richland County Jail along with Union Army officers and some of the wounded men who had not been released from the hospital in Charleston prior to 13 November.

One advantage of the boring routine was that the confined officers had plenty of time to plan escapes. Meade recorded the first escape on 13 December 1863, when a U.S. Navy officer and an Army officer broke out of the jail and sought out members of the Underground Railroad—an antebellum network used to help escaped enslaved people flee to the north—to make their way to Union lines. Two more officers escaped the following night, also intent on locating the Underground Railroad. The prisoners who remained in the jail were able to conceal their fellow inmates’ escape until 15 December using an unnamed “ingenious, though old, contrivance.”⁸⁷

Confederate Army Captain Rufus D. Senn, the commander of the Richland County Jail’s guard, was incensed when he discovered the four officers had escaped. “Captain Senn complained bitterly of our hard treatment of himself,” recalled Meade, “and in his conversation called us ‘men.’” Senn’s reference to Meade, a Marine officer and member of a distinguished military family, as a *man*—a term reserved for enlisted servicemen—and not as a gentleman made his hackles rise. He wrote,

For devilment’s sake, I corrected him, telling him that all the men had been sent to Richmond—He waxed forth and informed me that he would speak as he pleased, and that he would sub-

⁸⁵ Meade, *Robert L. Meade Journal, 1863–1864*, 95–97.

⁸⁶ Meade, *Robert L. Meade Journal, 1863–1864*, 100–1.

⁸⁷ Meade, *Robert L. Meade Journal, 1863–1864*, 102.

mit to no dictation from me, at which I informed him that . . . if he persisted in refusing us the respect to which we were entitled, that we would use our own pleasure in answering his questions, all we could do as prisoners.⁸⁸

Captain Senn's anger toward Lieutenant Meade appears to have cooled after the last of the four escapees were recaptured on 23 December. Meade's journal entries for the next three months were preoccupied with the packages he received from home, including books to occupy his time and boxes of packaged *quahaugs*, which when opened proved to hold "excellent whiskey" instead of clams. Meade shared his bounty with his fellow officers, remarking that Lieutenant Commander Williams, who had "lost colour in his confinement is again picking it up under the influence of an occasional clam [whiskey]."⁸⁹ The prisoners, at least the officers, seemed to only be limited in the quality of their fare by the packages or funds they received through the mail from home. They also busied themselves with reading and collaborating on an article on an unrecorded subject for future publication.⁹⁰

All the leisure activity masked a more desperate endeavor. On 7 March 1864, Meade wrote, "About 12:00 p.m. I was awakened by [Captain] Senn's coming in our room and saying, 'Gentlemen, I have found your hole.'" The imprisoned officers had been digging a tunnel under the walls of the jail to launch another, greater, escape attempt. Meade recalled, "We were of course greatly astonished, and finding concealment of our little plot no longer necessary gave him all the information he desired relative to the tunnel." The tunnel became a minor tourist attraction, drawing curious guards, local citizens, and even the Richland County Grand Jury.⁹¹ Although the guards did not mete out any severe punishments for the escape attempt, they did decide to consolidate all the prisoners, both of-

ficers and the remaining enlisted, in a common room on the second floor of the jail to prevent any future tunneling efforts.⁹²

The officers and enlisted men remained confined together in the same room, with periodic excursions to the jail yard, for the remainder of their time in the jail. The stress of the close confines was exacerbated by rumors of the resumption of prisoner exchanges. Consequently, when the enlisted men were informed on 9 March 1864 that they would not be allowed to enter the "officer area" of the cell, a faction formed around some of the more disaffected and vocal enlisted to oppose the restriction. The Confederate lieutenant of the guard backed the officers in establishing the restriction and refused to interfere in the matter.⁹³

Conflict between the prisoners and the guards also increased. Meade recorded that he "had a little trouble with one of the sentries in the yard, for which the Lieutenant of the Guard sought me to 'reprimand' me. I gave him my mind on the subject and he left unsatisfied. . . . Our men quite annoying and insolent indirectly."⁹⁴ Captain Senn, apparently seeking to ease the tensions, mediated the disagreement between Meade and the lieutenant of the guard and then granted the prisoners access to the yard for the full day, only making them return to their crowded cell to sleep at night.⁹⁵

Navy lieutenant George C. Remy took the opportunity of the extra yard time to call the sailors and Marines together to discuss their recent inappropriate conduct toward their officers. Three of the men, Meade recorded, "were very insolent to him. . . . Hall and Davis, sailors, and J. W. [Wilson] Siddell, a Marine." He continued, "Siddell, who has been a prime mover among them [the disgruntled enlisted men] was *very* insolent in word and actions, saying when he was told that he would be reported when across the lines that he 'didn't care a d—n, he was not afraid.'" Meade must have been very chagrined at the Marine's behavior since he recorded in his journal, "I shall make

⁸⁸ Robert L. Meade was the son of long-serving U.S. Navy Capt Richard Worsam Meade II and nephew of Army of the Potomac commander MajGen George Meade. Meade, *Robert L. Meade Journal, 1863–1864*, 103.

⁸⁹ Meade, *Robert L. Meade Journal, 1863–1864*, 105–6.

⁹⁰ Meade, *Robert L. Meade Journal, 1863–1864*, 106.

⁹¹ Meade, *Robert L. Meade Journal, 1863–1864*, 107.

⁹² Meade, *Robert L. Meade Journal, 1863–1864*, 107–18.

⁹³ Meade, *Robert L. Meade Journal, 1863–1864*, 108.

⁹⁴ Meade, *Robert L. Meade Journal, 1863–1864*, 109.

⁹⁵ Meade, *Robert L. Meade Journal, 1863–1864*, 110.

a report of him to Colonel Harris [the Commandant of the Marine Corps].”⁹⁶ Siddell might have been due some grace, however, as he was the Marine who was shot in the head and survived during the night attack on Fort Sumter. Postwar testimony by his brother in support of his pension claim recorded that his injury inflicted permanent personality changes and that “he suffers from headache almost constantly, and from nervousness. Exposure to noise and to the sun, or to excitement, causes great suffering and dizziness.”⁹⁷ In contrast, Meade sought to record the privates who maintained their discipline during the confinement. He wrote in his journal that Privates Gettings and Johnson were “orderly and respectful. . . . I will do them a good turn if I can.”

That night, one of the provocateurs moved to set up his bunk in “officer country” and refused to leave when he was ordered. Once again, Captain Senn had to intervene and force the enlisted man back onto his side of the room amid “various insolent remarks about their officers” by the enlisted prisoners. The situation was coming to a head, so Lieutenant Remey spoke to Captain Senn the next morning and singled out a sailor named Jason Davis as the primary instigator of antagonism against the officers. Senn had Davis seized, placed in irons, and confined in solitary confinement for 10 days on bread and water. The exemplary punishment seemed to have the desired effect, as Meade does not record further discord in his journal from that point forward.⁹⁸

The Marines and sailors in the Richland County Jail waited, holding onto the hope of exchange and return to the north, as vicious battles raged around Atlanta, Georgia, and in the Wilderness of Spotsylvania County in Virginia in the spring and summer of 1864. The broken exchange cartel began again in fits and starts, and by September 1864, the Marines and sailors imprisoned in the Richland County Jail were no-

tified that they would be exchanged soon. Meade and his fellow Marines had been exchanged by 19 October 1864. After a brief visit home, the new Commandant of the Marine Corps, Colonel Jacob Zeilin, ordered now-First Lieutenant Meade to report to the Brooklyn Navy Yard to resume his duties as a Marine officer.⁹⁹

Meade went on to serve 41 years in the Marine Corps and retired on 26 December 1903 as a colonel; he was promoted to brigadier general on the retired list in 1905. He served in the Spanish-American War, where he fought in the Battle of Santiago de Cuba while aboard the USS *New York* (ACR 2). In 1899, he embarked for the Philippines to fight in the Philippine Insurrection, and fought at the Battle of Tientsin in China during the Boxer Rebellion on 13–14 July 1900. During his career, the Marines transitioned from a primarily shipboard guard force to an expeditionary force trained in modern infantry tactics and able to fight effectively on land.

Andersonville: Hell on Earth

The Marines who were transported to prison in Richmond, Virginia, in November 1863 had a vastly different experience of captivity than those who remained in the Richland County Jail. The Belle Isle prison stockade in the James River, where the Marines were transferred after a short stay in Libby Prison, was packed with more than 8,000 Union military prisoners in an area built for a maximum of 3,000 prisoners. Although they were supplied with 300 tents, these were not enough to provide shelter for the additional prisoners. Consequently, many prisoners dug holes in the ground for shelter against the elements. This might have been sufficient in a warmer climate, but a lack of blankets and warm clothing combined with inadequate shelter and poor rations led to as many as 14 men a night freezing to death during the winter of 1863–64.¹⁰⁰

Disease in the camp ran rampant, and the large number of prisoners drove the already expensive war-

⁹⁶ Meade, *Robert L. Meade Journal, 1863–1864*, 110, emphasis original but edited. J. W. Siddell is Wilson Siddell, the Marine who suffered the severe gunshot wound to the head at Fort Sumter and had spent three months in a Charleston hospital before he recovered sufficiently to be transported to the Richland County Jail.

⁹⁷ Wilson Siddell case file, certificate no. 930, 61.

⁹⁸ Meade, *Robert L. Meade Journal, 1863–1864*, 111.

⁹⁹ Col Jacob Zeilin, CMC, to Lt R. L. Meade, Robert L. Meade Collection, COLL/2216, box 6, folder 1, Archives Branch, MCHD.

¹⁰⁰ David S. Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler, “Belle Isle,” in *Encyclopedia of the American Civil War: A Political, Social, and Military History*, 207.



Photo by Andrew Jackson Riddle, 1828–97, courtesy of the Liljenquist Family Collection of Civil War Photographs, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, call no. PH-Riddle, no. 2

Union prisoners drawing rations at Andersonville Prison, 17 August 1864. The meager rations lacked important nutrients, causing the Marines imprisoned there, as well as other prisoners, to die from malnutrition or other comorbid diseases.

time food prices in Richmond even higher, reducing the already meager rations provided to the prisoners. By the end of 1863, the average prisoner ration at Belle Isle consisted of a square of corn bread and a thin soup. This inadequate ration was insufficient not only in quantity but nutritional quality, further exacerbating the spread of disease. Additionally, military and political leaders in Richmond feared that the Union penetration to the Rappahannock and Rapidan Rivers during the closing months of 1863 placed the city at risk of a Union cavalry raid that might free thousands of prisoners to run amok. In light of this, the Confederate leaders decided to move the Union prisoners in Richmond farther south beginning in February 1864.¹⁰¹

The Confederates had begun construction on a new prison camp designed to hold up to 10,000 prisoners near Andersonville, Georgia. Officially known as Camp Sumter, but known by its more common and infamous nickname Andersonville, it was located near a rail depot that would simplify prisoner transport to the prison from Richmond. Since the price of lumber had risen beyond the budgeted funds, the Confederate prison administration chose not to construct barracks for the prisoners but instead built an open-air holding area surrounded by a log stockade. The prisoners would be left to their own devices to manufacture crude shelters—known in Union Army slang as *shebangs*—out of scrap wood, blankets, and earth. The Confederate engineers deemed a slow-running stream that meandered across the southern one-third of the camp as sufficient to provide drinking water and car-

¹⁰¹ Heidler and Heidler, “Belle Isle,” 207.

ry away any human waste deposited at the latrine, or “sink,” located downstream from where the drinking water was to be drawn.¹⁰²

The Marines imprisoned at Belle Isle began their journey to Andersonville in March 1864. They were loaded onto boxcars and traveled south on the increasingly dangerous Confederate railroad system. The southern rail industry had limited capacity for construction and maintenance before the war, and the Union blockade further hampered efforts to maintain a safe and efficient rail system. The Marines experienced the decline of the Confederate rail system firsthand when their train derailed. The Marines were bounced around the box car as it jumped the track, and one Marine, Private Robert Scanlin, reported that he seriously injured his left abdominal area when he was thrown into a broken bench during the accident, causing an internal “rupture.”¹⁰³ The Marines eventually made it to Andersonville, only to be met with a hell that made Belle Isle seem like paradise by comparison.

The prison population of Andersonville had grown beyond its maximum capacity by the time the Marines arrived. The sluggish stream proved inadequate to carry away the waste of thousands of men, and the prison kitchens located upstream, along with waste from the guard camp, ensured that the water was already polluted by the time it entered the stockade. Private George Weiser of the 10th New Jersey Volunteer Infantry Regiment recalled the desperate water situation, “The Rebs had a cook house on the outside near the ditch, and much of the dirt from their cook house would get in the water, which made it very bad to drink.”¹⁰⁴ The sink was supposed to provide a contained space for feces and prevent contamination

of the stream from sources inside the prison. However, sick soldiers were often unable to walk across the three acres of muddy ground to reach the sink and would resort to digging holes near their shebangs and defecating into them. The holes would overflow or flood in the rain, causing the contents to “boil over and run down the hill.”¹⁰⁵

The waste attracted millions of flies from the surrounding Georgia farmland, which laid their eggs in the filth. Weiser recalled, “This was the cause of creating millions of maggots, and when we would lay down to sleep hundreds of these maggots would crawl over us. Some of them would crawl in our ears and in our mouths.”¹⁰⁶ The prisoners also carried lice with them from other prisons or Army camps; the parasites thrived in the densely packed prison stockade. Weiser wrote, “The ground or sand seemed to be full of these lice and at any time we could see them crawling on us from off the ground.”¹⁰⁷

As if living in hovels covered in vermin and filth was not bad enough, the prisoners at Andersonville were also poorly fed. The Confederate commissary struggled to supply adequate food as the population of the prison climbed to more than 31,000 prisoners by July 1864. A typical ration was a few ounces of low-quality pork or beef, corn bread, cornmeal or rice, and occasionally molasses in place of the meat ration issued once daily.¹⁰⁸ This fare was invariably issued uncooked or partially cooked, which in a prison bereft of combustible material resulted in many prisoners having to consume their meat raw or undercooked. Additionally, the cornmeal, rice, and meat diet was severely deficient in vitamins and minerals, particularly vitamin C. The abysmal sanitary conditions combined with the meager diet were responsible for the three great killers of Andersonville prisoners: diarrhea, scurvy, and starvation.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰² Alicia Rodriguez, “Andersonville (1864–1865),” in *Encyclopedia of the American Civil War: A Political, Social, and Military History*, 48–49.

¹⁰³ Scanlin case file, 81. The “rupture” appears to have been a tear of the abdominal wall or a hernia.

¹⁰⁴ Pvt George Weiser, “Do You Men Ever Expect to Get Out of This Prison Alive?: Memoirs of George Weiser,” in *Giving up the Ghost: A Collection of Prisoners’ Diaries, Letters and Memoirs*, ed. by William L. Styple et al. (Kearny, NJ: Belle Grove Publishing, 1996), 6. Unfortunately, there are no full first-person accounts left from the Fort Sumter night attack Marines imprisoned at Andersonville. The author relied on other soldiers’ accounts as exemplary of the average prisoner’s experience at Andersonville.

¹⁰⁵ Weiser, “Do You Men Ever Expect to Get Out of This Prison Alive?: Memoirs of George Weiser,” 6.

¹⁰⁶ Weiser, “Do You Men Ever Expect to Get Out of This Prison Alive?: Memoirs of George Weiser,” 6–7.

¹⁰⁷ Weiser, “Do You Men Ever Expect to Get Out of This Prison Alive?: Memoirs of George Weiser,” 7.

¹⁰⁸ Pvt George A. Hitchcock, “Death Is Doing His Share of the Work Faithfully: Diary of George Hitchcock,” in *Giving up the Ghost*, 61.

¹⁰⁹ Rodriguez, “Andersonville (1864–1865),” 49–50.

The Marines who entered Andersonville in March 1864, already weakened by a winter in Belle Isle Prison, perished shortly after their arrival. Among the first to die was Sergeant Jesse Chisholm, who succumbed to diarrhea between 15 and 27 April 1864.¹¹⁰ Chisholm, a 10-year veteran, was quickly followed by Private Edwin Reynolds, who died on 23 April with just 10 months in the Marine Corps.¹¹¹ Meade received news of Chisholm's death on 9 July 1864, by which point 10 of the 25 enlisted Marines imprisoned at Andersonville had succumbed to the effects of scurvy, malnutrition, or diarrhea.

The Marines continued to die through July into August. Private Henry Bradshaw, with just over a year in the Marine Corps, died of starvation on 21 July 1864.¹¹² Private Michael Martin was admitted to the prison hospital on 31 July 1864. The hospital was, in some ways, worse than remaining in the hovels inside the stockade. Patients were lain on the ground with little or no medical attention beyond collecting their bodies when they died and placing them into one of the grave trenches outside of the prison. Private Martin suffered this fate when he died on 5 August 1864 and joined the thousands of other prisoners buried under the red clay soil.¹¹³

Mental anguish also bedeviled the prisoners trapped in Andersonville. The extreme heat, pervasive filth and vermin, lack of shelter and food, and the seemingly random shootings of prisoners who approached too close to the "deadline" combined to drive many men to despair. Private George Weiser wrote, "There were men that had been the bravest of the Country, who had stood before the enemy in the heat of battle and fought until they were wounded or



Photo courtesy of Civil War Photographs, 1861–65, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, call no. LC-B813-6547 A
BGen Quincy A. Gillmore led the U.S. Army forces on Morris Island during the siege of Charleston beginning in June 1863. The photograph was taken before his promotion to major general in July 1863.

captured, but now they are so reduced and starved that their hearts sink, their strength is gone, and they are passing away forever. There is nothing in this pen but famine and danger."¹¹⁴ Union prisoner John Simmons recalled, "The first sight to a new prisoner as he came into the pen caused him at once to be thoroughly disheartened, and I saw many soon after they came in, sit down, and it seemed to me they never rose up again, but sat there moaning and crying until they died; and then they were carried out and thrown in a trench, never to be heard of again by us or by their friends at home."¹¹⁵

Sleep was often impossible due to the lack of bedding and inadequate shelter, but also due to the

¹¹⁰ "Sworn Statement of Robert B. Scanlin regarding the Death of Sergeant Jesse M. Chisholm," in Jesse M. Chisholm case file, Case Files of Approved Pension Applications of Widows and Other Dependents of Navy Veterans, compiled ca. 1861–ca. 1910, 23, via Fold 3; and Dorence Atwater and Clara Barton, *A List of the Union Soldiers Buried at Andersonville* (New York: Tribune Association, 1866), 70.

¹¹¹ Selected Records of the War Department Commissary General of Prisoners Relating to Federal Prisoners of War Confined at Andersonville, GA, 1864–1865, film publication no. M1303, Records of the Commissary General of Prisoners, Record Group 249, NARA, 0419, via Ancestry.com, hereafter Film publication no. M1303.

¹¹² Film publication no. M1303, 0419.

¹¹³ Film publication no. M1303, 0501.

¹¹⁴ Weiser, "Do You Men Ever Expect to Get Out of This Prison Alive?: Memoirs of George Weiser," 13.

¹¹⁵ John Simmons alias John Hall, "That Darkest of All Hours: Memoirs of John Simmons, William W. Jellison, Eli J. Wamsley, Ichabod Preston," in *Giving up the Ghost*, 54.



Photo courtesy of Civil War Photographs, 1861–65, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, call no. LC-B811-3416 [or 3417, if using full-length image] LOT 4182

RAdm John A. Dahlgren posing next to a 50-pound Dahlgren gun aboard USS *Pawnee* (1859), ca. 1865. Dahlgren took command of the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron in June 1863 during the siege of Charleston and ordered the naval assault on Fort Sumter on 8 September 1863.

nightly attacks by “raiders.” The raiders were prisoners who banded together to prey on other prisoners and steal their clothing, food, or money until the camp authorities established a prisoner-led police force and hanged the worst offenders. The men were reduced to filthy, starving wretches concerned only with receiving and consuming their meager rations and then counting the hours until the next ration issue. The only hope they had to cling to was the ever-present

rumors of exchange or parole. The rumors invariably proved false, but the thought of escape or parole was the only thing that sustained many of them as they slowly wasted away from scurvy and diarrhea.¹¹⁶

By September 1864, only 6 of the 25 Marines from the Fort Sumter attack imprisoned at Ander-

¹¹⁶ Sgt William Farrand Keys, “Death Will Soon Be Regarded as Our Best Friend: The Diary of William F. Keys,” in *Giving up the Ghost*, 39.

sonville remained alive. Fortunately for them, Major General William Tecumseh Sherman's march across Georgia following his capture of Atlanta forced the Confederates to begin moving prisoners out of Andersonville to prevent their liberation. Also, the rumors of exchange had finally come true, at least for the Marines captured at Fort Sumter. The survivors were marched, along with other Union prisoners, out of Andersonville and on board a train for transfer to the Florence Stockade in South Carolina, while they awaited their impending release.

One Marine, Private David Long, understandably did not believe that he would actually be exchanged after months of rumors and speculation that came to nothing. The Florence Stockade was another open prison pen, much like Andersonville, and must have surely given Private Long the final motivation he needed to affect his escape. He wrote in a postwar affidavit that he remained in the pen only two hours before escaping. He eluded Confederate search parties for five days before he was recaptured and sent to the Confederate prison in Salisbury, North Carolina, where he remained until the prison was liberated by Union soldiers in March 1865.¹¹⁷ The five other Marines who remained in the Florence Stockade were soon transferred to Richmond, Virginia, for exchange. They received their parole at Varina, Virginia, on 18 October 1864 and returned to the Marine Barracks in Washington, DC, by 20 October.¹¹⁸

Although the six Marines had survived their ordeal, their health was permanently broken. Private Scanlin weighed 167 pounds when he was captured at Fort Sumter and only 62 pounds when he was paroled.¹¹⁹ He remained in a hospital in Washington, DC, until February 1865, when he was discharged and sent to his home in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, by the surgeon at the Marine Barracks, who believed that Scanlin would not live much longer. Scanlin survived, but he suffered from rheumatism, chronic diarrhea, heart disease, and

a hernia on his left side requiring a truss from the injury he sustained in the train derailment for the rest of his life. Like many enlisted Marines during the Civil War, Scanlin's only other occupation had been as a laborer, and his illnesses made it extremely difficult to earn a living. Additionally, he spent much of what money he did earn on doctors and so-called patent medicines in an effort to cure his chronic ailments.¹²⁰

Conclusion: A Fight between Elephants

The night attack on Fort Sumter on 8 September 1863 marked the end of serious Union attempts to take the fort or Charleston Harbor. The Union Army force on Morris Island was reduced as military activity increased in other theaters in 1864, although heavy artillery remained in position and periodically bombarded Fort Sumter until the end of the war. After General Sherman captured Savannah, Georgia, he turned north to ravage South Carolina. Confederate forces evacuated Fort Sumter and Charleston on 18 February 1865 and retreated north toward North Carolina. Ultimately, the U.S. Army had the distinction of raising the U.S. flag at Fort Sumter when Major John A. Hennessy of the 52d Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry Regiment rowed to the abandoned fort on 18 February and raised the regimental flag.¹²¹

The attack did not have any impact on how the Union Navy conducted subsequent amphibious attacks during the war. The same tactic—sailors assaulting a fort with pistols and cutlasses while Marines provide covering fire with muskets—was used again at Fort Fisher in North Carolina in January 1865 with devastating results for the Marines and sailors. If anything, the attack highlighted the limitations of the Civil War-era U.S. Marine Corps to perform duties as a landing force against a defended objective. Marines in small boats lacked the firepower needed to overcome entrenched defenders or the communications to effectively coordinate supporting fire from naval gunboats or battleships. Additionally, their primary func-

¹¹⁷ David Long case file, Case Files of Approved Pension Applications of Civil War and Later Navy Veterans (Navy Survivors' Certificates), 1861–1910, publication no. M1469, ID: 580580, NARA, 7, via Fold3.

¹¹⁸ Scanlin case file, 90.

¹¹⁹ Scanlin case file, 18.

¹²⁰ Scanlin case file, 81.

¹²¹ Burton, *The Siege of Charleston, 1861–1865*, 318–19.

tion as guards aboard ships or at naval bases resulted in a lack of practical experience conducting massed maneuvers as infantry. It would be nearly eighty years before technology and the Marine Corps' doctrine development would allow them to make successful landings against entrenched enemy forces.

The African proverb, "When elephants fight, the grass suffers," is an apt metaphor for the 1863 night attack on Fort Sumter. The rivalry between Secretary of War Edwin Stanton and Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles filtered down to the commanders in their respective Services. Although Dahlgren and Gillmore initially worked well together during the siege of Battery Wagner, their cooperation disappeared as soon as Fort Sumter—a prize that would boost both their own and their Service's prestige—appeared ripe for the taking. The Marines and sailors under Dahlgren's command lacked the training and experience necessary to undertake a complicated night attack on a for-

tified position. Furthermore, Dahlgren's rush to launch the attack practically ensured a disaster given the limited time he provided Commander Stevens to plan and organize his assault force. The failed attack had limited impact on Dahlgren and Gillmore. Gillmore was promoted to major general following the evacuation of Battery Wagner and went on to command the Union Army's X Corps in the Bermuda Hundred area of Virginia, while Dahlgren continued in command of the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron and went on to command the U.S. Navy's South Pacific Squadron for two years after the war. Ultimately, it was the Marines and sailors who would suffer, many paying the ultimate price, for their commanders' thirst for glory and the rivalry between two Services that should have worked together to defeat the enemy of their country rather than pursue self-aggrandizement at the expense of the other.

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